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Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan Books 7-12

Debt of Honor
Executive Orders
Rainbow Six
The Bear and the Dragon
Red Rabbit
The Teeth Of The Tiger

Tom Clancy

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For Mom and Dad

A man's character is his fate

—*Heraclitus*

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Prologue

Sunset, Sunrise

In retrospect, it would seem an odd way to start a war. Only one of the participants knew what was really happening, and even that was a coincidence. The property settlement had been moved up on the calendar due to a death in the attorney's family, and so the attorney was scheduled for a redeye flight, two hours from now, to Hawaii.

It was Mr. Yamata's first property closing on American soil. Though he owned many properties in the continental United States, the actual title transfer had always been handled by other attorneys, invariably American citizens, who had done precisely what they had been paid to do, generally with oversight by one of Mr. Yamata's employees. But not this time. There were several reasons for it. One was that the purchase was personal and not corporate. Another was that it was close, only two hours by private jet from his home. Mr. Yamata had told the settlement attorney that the property would be used for a weekend getaway house. With the astronomical price of real estate in Tokyo, he could buy several hundred acres for the price of a modestly large penthouse apartment in his city of residence. The view from the house he planned to build on the promontory would be breathtaking, a vista of the blue Pacific, other islands of the Marianas Archipelago in the distance, air as clean as any on the face of the earth. For all those reasons Mr. Yamata had offered a princely fee, and done so with a charming smile.

And for one reason more.

The various documents slid clockwise around the circular table, stopping at each chair so that signatures could be affixed at the proper place, marked with yellow Post-it notes, and then it was time for Mr. Yamata to reach into his coat pocket and withdraw an envelope. He took out the check and handed it to the attorney.

"Thank you, sir," the lawyer said in a respectful voice, as Americans always did when money was on the table. It was remarkable how money made them do anything. Until three years before, the purchase of land here by a Japanese citizen would have been illegal, but the right lawyer, and the right case, and the right amount of money had fixed that, too. "The title transfer will be recorded this afternoon."

Yamata looked at the seller with a polite smile and a nod, then he rose and left the building. A car was waiting outside. Yamata got in the front passenger seat and motioned peremptorily for the driver to head off. The settlement was complete, and with it the need for charm.

Like most Pacific islands, Saipan is of volcanic origin. Immediately to the east is the Marianas Trench, a chasm fully seven miles deep where one geological plate dives under another. The result is a collection of towering coneshaped mountains, of which the islands themselves are merely the tips. The Toyota Land Cruiser followed a moderately smooth road north, winding around Mount Achugao and the Mariana Country Club toward Marpi Point. There it stopped.

Yamata alighted from the vehicle, his gaze resting on some farm structures that would soon be erased, but instead of walking to the building site for his new house, he headed toward the rocky edge of the cliff. Though a man in his early sixties, his stride was strong and purposeful as he moved across the uneven field. If it had been a farm, then it had been a poor one, he saw, inhospitable to life. As this place had been, more than once, and from more than one cause.

His face was impassive as he reached the edge of what the locals called Banzai Cliff. An onshore wind was blowing, and he could see and hear the waves marching in their endless ranks to smash against the rocks at the base of the cliff—the same rocks that had smashed the bodies of his parents and siblings after they, and so many others, had jumped off to evade capture by the advancing U.S. Marines. The sight had horrified the Marines, but Mr. Yamata would never appreciate or acknowledge that.

The businessman clapped his hands once and bowed his head, both to call the attention of the lingering spirits to his presence and to show proper obeisance to their influence over his destiny. It was fitting, he thought, that his purchase of this parcel of land now meant that 50.016% of the real estate on Saipan was again in Japanese hands, more than fifty years since his family's death at American hands.

He felt a sudden chill, and ascribed it to the emotion of the moment, or perhaps the nearness of his ancestors' spirits. Though their bodies had been swept away in the endless surf, surely their *kami* had never left this place, and awaited his return. He shuddered, and buttoned his coat. Yes, he'd build here, but only after he'd done what was necessary first.

First, he had to destroy.

It was one of those perfect moments, half a world away. The driver came smoothly back, away from the ball, in a perfect arc, stopped for

the briefest of moments, then accelerated back along the same path, downward now, gaining speed as it fell. The man holding the club shifted his weight from one leg to the other. At the proper moment, his hands turned over as they should, which caused the club head to rotate around the vertical axis, so that when the head hit the ball it was exactly perpendicular to the intended flight path. The sound told the tale—a perfect *tink* (it was a metal-headed driver). That, and the tactile impulse transmitted through the graphite shaft, told the golfer everything he needed to know. He didn't even have to look. The club finished its follow-through path before the man's head turned to track the flight of the ball.

Unfortunately, Ryan wasn't the one holding the club.

Jack shook his head with a rueful grin as he bent to tee up his ball. "Nice hit, Robby."

Rear Admiral (lower half) Robert Jefferson Jackson, USN, held his pose, his aviator's eyes watching the ball start its descent, then bounce on the fairway about two hundred fifty yards away. The bounces carried it another thirty or so. He didn't speak until it stopped, dead center. "I meant to draw it a little."

"Life's a bitch, ain't it?" Ryan observed, as he went through his setup ritual. Knees bent, back fairly straight, head down but not too much, the grip, yes, that's about right. He did everything the club pro had told him the previous week, and the week before that, and the week . . . bringing the club back . . . and down . . .

. . . and it wasn't too bad, just off the fairway to the right, a hundred eighty yards, the best first-tee drive he'd hit in . . . forever. And approximately the same distance with his driver that Robby would have gotten with a firm seven-iron. About the only good news was that it was only 7:45 A.M., and there was nobody around to share his embarrassment.

At least you cleared the water.

"Been playing how long, Jack?"

"Two whole months."

Jackson grinned as he headed down to where the cart was parked. "I started in my second year at Annapolis. I have a head start, boy. Hell, enjoy the day."

There was that. The Greenbrier is set among the mountains of West Virginia. A retreat that dates back to the late eighteenth century, on this October morning the white mass of the main hotel building was framed with yellows and scarlets as the hardwood trees entered their yearly cycle of autumn fire.

"Well, I don't expect to beat you," Ryan allowed as he sat down in the cart.

A turn, a grin. "You won't. Just thank God you're not working

today, Jack. I am."

Neither man was in the vacation business, as much as each needed it, nor was either man currently satisfied with success. For Robby it meant a flag desk in the Pentagon. For Ryan, much to his surprise even now, it had been a return to the business world instead of to the academic slot that he'd wanted—or at least thought he'd wanted—standing there in Saudi Arabia, two and a half years before. Perhaps it was the action, he thought—had he become addicted to it? Jack asked himself, selecting a three-iron. It wouldn't be enough club to make the green, but he hadn't learned fairway woods yet. Yeah, it was the action he craved even more than his occasional escape from it.

"Take your time, and don't try to kill it. The ball's already dead, okay?"

"Yes, sir, Admiral, sir," Jack replied.

"Keep your head down. I'll do the watching."

"All *right,* Robby." The knowledge that Robby would not laugh at him, no matter how bad the shot, was somehow worse than the suspicion that he might. On last reflection, he stood a little straighter before swinging. His reward was a welcome sound:

Swat. The ball was thirty yards away before his head came up to see it, still heading left . . . but already showing a fade back to the right.

"Jack?"

"Yeah," Ryan answered without turning his head.

"Your three-iron," Jackson said, chuckling, his eyes computing the flight path. "Don't change anything. Do it just like that, every time."

Somehow Jack managed to put his iron back in the bag without trying to wrap the shaft around his friend's head. He started laughing when the cart moved again, up the right-side rough toward Robby's ball, the single white spot on the green, even carpet.

"Miss flying?" he asked gently.

Robby looked at him. "You play dirty, too," he observed. But that was just the way things went. He'd finished his last flying job, screened for flag, then been considered for the post of commander of the Naval Aviation Test Center at Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Maryland, where his real title would have been Chief Test Pilot, U.S. Navy. But instead Jackson was working in J-3, the operations directorate for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. War Plans, an odd slot for a warrior in a world where war was becoming a thing of the past. It was more career-enhancing, but far less satisfying than the flying billet he'd really wanted. Jackson tried to shrug it off. He'd done his flying, after all. He'd started in Phantoms and graduated to Tomcats, commanded his squadron, and a carrier air wing, then screened early for flag rank on the basis of a solid and distinguished career during which he'd never put a foot wrong. His next job, if he got it, would be

as commander of a carrier battle group, something that had once seemed to him a goal beyond the grasp of Fortune itself. Now that he was there, he wondered where all the time had gone, and what lay ahead. "What happens when we get old?"

"Some of us take up golf, Rob."

"Or go back to stocks and bonds," Jackson countered. *An eight-iron,* he thought, *a soft one*. Ryan followed him to his ball.

"Merchant banking," Jack proffered. "It's worked out for you, hasn't it?"

That made the aviator—active or not, Robby would always be a pilot to himself and his friends—look up and grin. "Well, you turned my hundred thou' into something special, Sir John." With that, he took his shot. It was one way to get even. The ball landed, bounced, and finally stopped about twenty feet from the pin.

"Enough to buy me lessons?"

"You sure as hell need 'em." Robby paused and allowed his face to change. "A lot of years, Jack. We changed the world." And that was a good thing, wasn't it?

"After a fashion," Jack conceded with a tight smile. Some people called it an end to history, but Ryan's doctorate was in that field, and he had trouble with the thought.

"You really like it, what you're doing now?"

"I'm home every night, usually before six. I get to see all the Little League games in the summer, and most of the soccer games in the fall. And when Sally's ready for her first date, I won't be in some goddamned VC-20B halfway to nowhere for a meeting that doesn't mean much of anything anyway." Jack smiled in a most comfortable way. "And I think I prefer that even to playing good golf."

"Well, that's a good thing, 'cuz I don't even think Arnold Palmer can fix your swing. But I'll try," Robby added, "just because Cathy asked me to."

Jack's pitch was too strong, forcing him to chip back onto the green —badly—where three putts carded him a seven to Robby's par four.

"A golfer who plays like you should swear more," Jackson said on the way to the second tee. Ryan didn't have a chance for a rejoinder.

He had a beeper on his belt, of course. It was a satellite beeper, the kind that could get you almost anywhere. Tunnels under mountains or bodies of water offered some protection, but not much. Jack plucked it off his belt. It was probably the Silicon Alchemy deal, he thought, even though he'd left instructions. Maybe someone had run out of paper clips. He looked at the number on the LCD display.

"I thought your home office was New York," Robby noted. The area code on the display was 202, not the 212 Jack had expected to see.

"It is. I can teleconference most of my work out of Baltimore, but at

least once a week I have to catch the Metroliner up there." Ryan frowned. 757-5000. The White House Signals Office. He checked his watch. It was 7:55 in the morning, and the time announced the urgency of the call more clearly than anything else could. It wasn't exactly a surprise, though, was it? he asked himself. Not with what he'd been reading in the papers every day. The only thing unexpected was the timing. He'd expected the call much sooner. He walked to the cart and the golf bag, where he kept his cellular phone. It was the one thing in the bag, actually, that he knew how to use.

It took only three minutes, as an amused Robby waited in the cart. Yes, he was at The Greenbrier. Yes, he knew that there was an airport not too far from there. Four hours? Less than an hour out and back, no more than an hour at his destination. Back in time for dinner. He'd even have time to finish his round of golf, shower, and change before he left, Jack told himself, folding the phone back up and dropping it in the pocket of the golf bag. That was one advantage of the world's best chauffeur service. The problem was that once they had you, they never liked to let go. The convenience of it was designed only to make it a more comfortable mode of confinement. Jack shook his head as he stood at the tee, and his distraction had a strange effect. The drive up the second fairway landed on the short grass, two hundred ten yards downrange, and Ryan walked back to the cart without a single word, wondering what he'd tell Cathy.

The facility was brand-new and spotless, but there was something obscene about it, the engineer thought. His countrymen hated fire, but they positively loathed the class of object that this room was designed to fabricate. He couldn't shake it off. It was like the buzz of an insect in the room—unlikely, since every molecule of the air in this clean-room had gone through the best filtration system his country could devise. His colleagues' engineering excellence was a source of pride to this man, especially since he was among the best of them. It would be that pride that sustained him, he knew, dismissing the imaginary buzz as he inspected the fabrication machinery. After all, if the Americans could do it, and the Russians, and the English, and the French, and the Chinese, and even the Indians and Pakistanis, then why not them? There was a symmetry to it, after all.

In another part of the building, the special material was being roughly shaped even now. Purchasing agents had spent quite some time acquiring the unique components. There were precious few. Most had been made elsewhere, but some had been made in his country for use abroad. They had been invented for one purpose, then adapted for others, but the possibility had always existed—distant but real—that

the original application beckoned. It had become an institutional joke for the production people in the various corporations, something not to take seriously.

But they'd take it seriously now, the engineer thought. He switched off the lights and pulled the door shut behind him. He had a deadline to meet, and he would start today, after only a few hours of sleep.

Even as often as he'd been here, Ryan had never lost his mystical appreciation for the place, and today's manner of arrival hadn't been contrived to make him look for the ordinary. A discreet call to his hotel had arranged for the drive to the airport. The aircraft had been waiting, of course, a twinprop business bird sitting at the far end of the ramp, ordinary except for the USAF markings and the fact that the flight crew had been dressed in olive-green nomex. Friendly smiles, again of course, deferential. A sergeant to make sure he knew how to use the seat belt, and the perfunctory discussion of safety and emergency procedures. The look-back from the pilot who had a schedule to meet, and off they went, with Ryan wondering where the briefing papers were, and sipping a U.S. Air Force Coca-Cola. Wishing he'd changed into his good suit, and remembering that he had deliberately decided not to do so. Stupid, beneath himself. Flight time of forty-seven minutes, and a direct approach into Andrews. The only thing they left out was the helicopter ride in from Andrews, but that would only have attracted attention. Met by a deferential Air Force major who'd walked him over to a cheap official car and a quiet driver, Ryan settled back in his seat and closed his eyes while the major took the front seat. He tried to nap. He'd seen Suitland Parkway before, and knew the route by heart. Suitland Parkway to I-295, immediately off that and onto I-395, take the Maine Avenue Exit. The time of day, just after lunch, guaranteed rapid progress, and sure enough, the car stopped at the guard shack on West Executive Drive, where the guard, most unusually, just waved them through. The canopied entrance to the White House basement level beckoned, as did a familiar face.

"Hi, Arnie." Jack held his hand out to the President's chief of staff. Arnold van Damm was just too good, and Roger Durling had needed him to help with the transition. Soon enough President Durling had measured his senior staffer against Arnie, and found his own man wanting. He hadn't changed much, Ryan saw. The same L. L. Bean shirts, and the same rough honesty on his face, but Arnie was older and tireder than before. Well, who wasn't? "The last time we talked here, you were kicking me loose," Jack said next, to get a quick read on the situation.

"We all make mistakes, Jack."

Uh-oh. Ryan went instantly on guard, but the handshake pulled him through the door anyway. The Secret Service agents on post had a pass all ready for him, and things went smoothly until he set off the metal detector. Ryan handed over his hotel room key and tried again, hearing yet another ping. The only other metal on his body except for his watch turned out to be his divot tool.

"When did you take up golf?" van Damm asked with a chuckle that matched the expression of the nearest agent.

"Nice to know you haven't been following me around. Two months, and I haven't broken one-ten yet."

The chief of staff waved Ryan to the hidden stairs to the left. "You know why they call it 'golf'?"

"Yeah, because 'shit' was already taken." Ryan stopped on the landing. "What gives, Arnie?"

"I think you know," was all the answer he got.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan!" Special Agent Helen D'Agustino was as pretty as ever, and still part of the Presidential Detail. "Please come with me."

The presidency is not a job calculated to bring youth to a man. Roger Durling had once been a paratrooper who'd climbed hills in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, he was still a jogger, and reportedly liked to play squash to keep fit, but for all that he looked a weary man this afternoon. More to the point, Jack reflected quickly, he'd come straight in to see the President, no waiting in one of the many anterooms, and the smiles on the faces he'd seen on the way in carried a message of their own. Durling rose with a speed intended to show his pleasure at seeing his guest. Or maybe something else.

"How's the brokerage business, Jack?" The handshake that accompanied the question was dry and hard, but with an urgency to it.

"It keeps me busy, Mr. President."

"Not too busy. Golf in West Virginia?" Durling asked, waving Ryan to a seat by the fireplace. "That'll be all," he told the two Secret Service agents who'd followed Ryan in. "Thank you."

"My newest vice, sir," Ryan said, hearing the door close behind him. It was unusual to be so close to the Chief Executive without the protective presence of Secret Service guards, especially since he had been so long out of government service.

Durling took his seat, and leaned back into it. His body language showed vigor, the kind that emanated from the mind rather than the body. It was time to talk business. "I could say I'm sorry to interrupt your vacation, but I won't," the President of the United States told him. "You've had a two-year vacation, Dr. Ryan. It's over now."

Two years. For the first two months of it, he'd done exactly nothing,

pondered a few teaching posts in the sanctity of his study, watched his wife leave early every morning for her medical practice at Johns Hopkins, fixed the kids' school lunches and told himself how wonderful it was to relax. It had taken those two months before he'd admitted to himself that the absence of activity was more stressful than anything he'd ever done. Only three interviews had landed him a job back in the investment business, enabled him to race his wife out of the house each morning, and bitch about the pace—and just maybe prevent himself from going insane. Along the way he'd made some money, but even that, he admitted to himself, had begun to pall. He still hadn't found his place, and wondered if he ever really would.

"Mr. President, the draft ended a lot of years ago," Jack offered with a smile. It was a flippant observation, and one he was ashamed of even as he said it.

"You've said 'no' to your country once." The rebuke put an end to the smiles. Was Durling that stressed-out? Well, he had every right to be, and with the stress had come impatience, which was surprising in a man whose main function for the public was being pleasant and reassuring. But Ryan was not part of the public, was he?

"Sir, I was burned out then. I don't think I would have been—"

"Fine. I've seen your file, all of it," Durling added. "I even know that I might not be here now except for what you did down in Colombia a few years ago. You've served your country well, Dr. Ryan, and now you've had your time off, and you've played the money game some more—rather well, it would seem—and now it's time to come back."

"What post, sir?" Jack asked.

"Down the hall and around the corner. The last few residents haven't distinguished themselves there," Durling noted. Cutter and Elliot had been bad enough. Durling's own National Security Advisor had simply not been up to the task. His name was Tom Loch, and he was on the way out, the morning paper had told Ryan. It would seem that the press had it right for once. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. We need you. I need you."

"Mr. President, that's a very flattering statement, but the truth of the matter is—"

"The truth of the matter is that I have too much of a domestic agenda, and the day only has twenty-four hours, and my administration has fumbled the ball too many times. In the process we have not served the country as well as we should have. I can't say that anywhere but inside this room, but I can and must say it here. State is weak. Defense is weak."

"Fiedler in Treasury is excellent," Ryan allowed. "And if you want advice about State, move Scott Adler up. He's young, but he's very good on process and pretty good on vision."

"Not without good oversight from this building, and I don't have the time for that. I will pass your approbation on to Buzz Fiedler," Durling added with a smile.

"He's a brilliant technician, and that's what you need across the street. If you're going to catch the inflation, for God's sake, do it now —"

"And take the political heat," Durling said. "That's exactly what his orders are. Protect the dollar and hammer inflation down to zero. I think he can do it. The initial signs are promising."

Ryan nodded. "I think you're right." *Okay, get on with it.*

Durling handed over the briefing book. "Read."

"Yes, sir." Jack flipped open the binder's cover, and kept flipping past the usual stiff pages that warned of all manner of legal sanctions for revealing what he was about to read. As usual, the information United States Code protected wasn't all that different from what any citizen could get in *Time*, but it wasn't as well written. His right hand reached out for a coffee cup, annoyingly not the handleless mug he preferred. The White House china was long on elegance but short on practicality. Coming here was always like visiting a particularly rich boss. So many of the appointments were just a little too—

"I know about some of this, but I didn't know it was this . . . interesting," Jack murmured.

"'Interesting'?" Durling replied with an unseen smile. "That's a nice choice of words."

"Mary Pat's the Deputy Director of Operations now?" Ryan looked up to see the curt nod.

"She was in here a month ago to plead her case for upgrading her side of the house. She was very persuasive. Al Trent just got the authorization through committee yesterday."

Jack chuckled. "Agriculture or Interior this time?" That part of CIA's budget was almost never in the open. The Directorate of Operations always got part of its funding through legerdemain.

"Health and Human Services, I think."

"But it'll still be two or three years before—"

"I know." Durling fidgeted in his seat. "Look, Jack, if it mattered to you that much, then why—"

"Sir, if you've read through my file, you know why." *Dear God*, Jack wanted to say, *how much am I expected to*—But he couldn't, not here, not to this man, and so he didn't. Instead he went back into the briefing book, flipping pages, and read as rapidly as comprehension permitted.

"I know, it was a mistake to downplay the human-intelligence side of the house. Trent and Fellows said so. Mrs. Foley said so. You can get overloaded in this office, Jack."

Ryan looked up and almost smiled until he saw the President's face. There was a tiredness around the eyes that Durling was unable to conceal. But then Durling saw the expression on Jack's own face.

"When can you start?" the President of the United States asked.

The engineer was back, flipping on the lights and looking at his machine tools. His supervisory office was almost all glass, and elevated slightly so that he could see all the activity in the shop with no more effort than a raised head. In a few minutes his staff would start arriving, and his presence in the office earlier than any of the team—in a country where showing up two hours early was the norm—would set the proper tone. The first man arrived only ten minutes later, hung up his coat, and headed to the far corner to start the coffee. Not tea, both men thought at the same time. Surprisingly Western. The others arrived in a bunch, both resentful and envious of their colleague, because they all noticed that the chief's office was lit and occupied. A few exercised at their worktables, both to loosen themselves up and to show their devotion. At start-time minus two hours, the chief walked out of his office and called for his team to gather around for the first morning's talk about what they were doing. They all knew, of course, but they had to be told anyway. It took ten minutes, and with that done, they all went to work. And this was not at all a strange way for a war to begin.

Dinner was elegant, served in the enormous high-ceilinged dining room to the sound of piano, violin, and the occasional *ting* of crystal. The table chatter was ordinary, or so it seemed to Jack as he sipped his dinner wine and worked his way through the main course. Sally and little Jack were doing well at school, and Kathleen would turn two in another month, as she toddled around the house at Peregrine Cliff, the dominating and assertive apple of her father's eye, and the terror of her day-care center. Robby and Sissy, childless despite all their efforts, were surrogate aunt and uncle to the Ryan trio, and took as much pride in the brood as Jack and Cathy did. There was a sadness to it, Jack thought, but those were the breaks, and he wondered if Sissy still cried about it when alone in bed, Robby off on a job somewhere. Jack had never had a brother. Robby was closer than a brother could ever have been, and his friend deserved better luck. And Sissy, well, she was just an angel.

"I wonder how the office is doing."

"Probably conjuring up a plan for the invasion of Bangladesh," Jack

said, looking up and reentering the conversation.

"That was last week," Jackson said with a grin.

"How do they manage without us?" Cathy wondered aloud, probably worrying about a patient.

"Well, concert season doesn't start for me until next month," Sissy observed.

"Mmmm," Ryan noted, looking back down at his plate, wondering how he was going to break the news.

"Jack, I know," Cathy finally said. "You're not good at hiding it."

"Who—"

"She asked where you were," Robby said from across the table. "A naval officer can't lie."

"Did you think I'd be mad?" Cathy asked her husband.

"Yes."

"You don't know what he's like," Cathy told the others. "Every morning, gets his paper and grumbles. Every night, catches the news and grumbles. Every Sunday, watches the interview shows and grumbles. Jack," she said quietly, "do you think I could ever stop doing surgery?"

"Probably not, but it's not the same—"

"No, it's not, but it's the same for you. When do you start?" Caroline Ryan asked.

1

Alumni

There was a university somewhere in the Midwest, Jack had once heard on the radio, which had an instrument package designed to go inside a tornado. Each spring, graduate students and a professor or two staked out a likely swath of land, and on spotting a tornado, tried to set the instrument package, called "Toto"—what else?—directly in the path of the onrushing storm. So far they had been unsuccessful. Perhaps they'd just picked the wrong place, Ryan thought, looking out the window to the leafless trees in Lafayette Park. The office of the President's National Security Advisor was surely cyclonic enough for anyone's taste, and, unfortunately, much easier for people to enter.

"You know," Ryan said, leaning back in his chair, "it was supposed to be a lot simpler than this." *And I thought it would be,* he didn't add.

"The world had rules before," Scott Adler pointed out. "Now it doesn't."

"How's the President been doing, Scott?"

"You really want the truth?" Adler asked, meaning, *We are in the White House, remember?* and wondering if there really were tape machines covering this room. "We screwed up the Korean situation, but we lucked out. Thank God we didn't screw up Yugoslavia that badly, because there just isn't any luck to be had in that place. We haven't been handling Russia very well. The whole continent of Africa's a dog's breakfast. About the only thing we've done right lately was the trade treaty—"

"And that doesn't include Japan and China," Ryan finished for him.

"Hey, you and I fixed the Middle East, remember? That's working out fairly nicely."

"Hottest spot right now?" Ryan didn't want praise for that. The "success" had developed some very adverse consequences, and was the prime reason he had left government service.

"Take your pick," Adler suggested. Ryan grunted agreement.

"SecState?"

"Hanson? Politician," replied the career foreign-service officer. And a proud one at that, Jack reminded himself. Adler had started off at State right after graduating number one in his Fletcher School class,

then worked his way up the career ladder through all the drudgery and internal politics that had together claimed his first wife's love and a good deal of his hair. It had to be love of country that kept him going, Jack knew. The son of an Auschwitz survivor, Adler cared about America in a way that few could duplicate. Better still, his love was not blind, even now that his current position was political and not a career rank. Like Ryan, he served at the pleasure of the President, and still he'd had the character to answer Jack's questions honestly.

"Worse than that," Ryan went on for him. "He's a lawyer. They always get in the way."

"The usual prejudice," Adler observed with a smile, then applied some of his own analytical ability. "You have something running, don't you?"

Ryan nodded. "A score to settle. I have two good guys on it now."

* * *

The task combined oil-drilling and mining, to be followed by exquisitely fine finishing work, and it had to be performed on time. The rough holes were almost complete. It had not been easy drilling straight down into the basaltic living rock on the valley even one time, much less ten, each one of the holes fully forty meters deep and ten across. A crew of nine hundred men working in three rotating shifts had actually beaten the official schedule by two weeks, despite the precautions. Six kilometers of rail had been laid from the nearest *Shin-Kansen* line, and for every inch of it the catenary towers normally erected to carry the overhead electrical lines instead were the supports for four linear miles of camouflage netting.

The geological history of this Japanese valley must have been interesting, the construction superintendent thought. You didn't see the sun until an hour or more after it rose, the slope was so steep to the east. No wonder that previous railway engineers had looked at the valley and decided to build elsewhere. The narrow gorge—in places not even ten meters across at its base—had been cut by a river, long since dammed, and what remained was essentially a rock trench, like something left over from a war. *Or in preparation for one*, he thought. It was pretty obvious, after all, despite the fact that he'd never been told anything but to keep his mouth shut about the whole project. The only way out of this place was straight up or sideways. A helicopter could do the former, and a train could do the latter, but to accomplish anything else required tampering with the laws of ballistics, which was a very difficult task indeed.

As he watched, a huge Kowa scoop-loader dumped another

bucketload of crushed rock into a hopper car. It was the last car in the train's "consist," and soon the diesel switch engine would haul its collection of cars out to the mainline, where a standard-gauge electric locomotive would take over.

"Finished," the man told him, pointing down into the hole. At the bottom, a man held the end of a long tape measure. Forty meters exactly. The hole had been measured by laser already, of course, but tradition required that such measurements be tested by the human hand of a skilled worker, and there at the bottom was a middle-aged hard-rock miner whose face beamed with pride. And who had no idea what this project was all about.

"*Hai,*" the superintendent said with a pleased nod, and then a more formal, gracious bow to the man at the bottom, which was dutifully and proudly returned. The next train in would carry an oversized cement mixer. The preassembled sets of rebar were already stacked around this hole—and, indeed, all the others, ready to be lowered. In finishing the first hole, this team had beaten its nearest competitor by perhaps six hours, and its furthest by no more than two days—irregularities in the subsurface rock had been a problem for Hole Number 6, and in truth they'd done well to catch up as closely as they were now. He'd have to speak to them, congratulate them for their Herculean effort, so as to mitigate their shame at being last. Team 6 was his best crew, and it was a pity that they'd been unlucky.

"Three more months, we will make the deadline," the site foreman said confidently.

"When Six is also finished, we will have a party for the men. They have earned it."

"This isn't much fun," Chavez observed.

"Warm, too," Clark agreed. The air-conditioning system on their Range Rover was broken, or perhaps it had died of despair. Fortunately, they had lots of bottled water.

"But it's a dry heat," Ding replied, as though it mattered at a hundred fourteen degrees. One could think in Celsius, instead, but that offered relief only as long as it took to take in another breath. Then you were reminded of the abuse that the superheated air had to be doing to your lungs, no matter how you kept score. He unscrewed the top from a plastic bottle of spring water, which was probably a frigid ninety-five, he estimated. Amazing how cool it tasted under the circumstances.

"Chilldown tonight, all the way to eighty, maybe."

"Good thing I brought my sweater, Mr. C." Chavez paused to wipe off some sweat before looking through the binoculars again. They

were good ones, but they didn't help much, except to give a better view of the shimmering air that roiled like the surface of a stormy, invisible sea. Nothing lived out here except for the occasional vulture, and surely by now they had cleaned off the carcasses of everything that had once made the mistake of being born out here. And he'd once thought the Mojave Desert was bleak, Chavez told himself. At least coyotes lived there.

It never changed, Clark thought. He'd been doing jobs like this one for . . . thirty years? Not quite but close. Jesus, thirty years. He still hadn't had the chance to do it in a place where he could really fit in, but that didn't seem terribly important right now. Their cover was wearing thin. The back of the Rover was jammed with surveying equipment and boxes of rock samples, enough to persuade the local illiterates that there might be an enormous molybdenum deposit out there in that solitary mountain. The locals knew what gold looked like —who didn't?—but the mineral known affectionately to miners as Molly-be-damned was a mystery to the uninitiated in all but its market value, which was considerable. Clark had used the ploy often enough. A geological discovery offered people just the perfect sort of luck to appeal to their invariable greed. They just loved the idea of having something valuable sitting under their feet, and John Clark looked the part of a mining engineer, with his rough and honest face to deliver the good and very confidential news.

He checked his watch. The appointment was in ninety minutes, around sunset, and he'd shown up early, the better to check out the area. It was hot and empty, neither of which came as much of a surprise, and was located twenty miles from the mountain they would be talking about, briefly. There was a crossroads here, two tracks of beaten dirt, one mainly north-south, the other mainly east-west, both of which somehow remained visible despite the blowing sand and grit that ought to have covered up all traces of human presence. Clark didn't understand it. The years-long drought couldn't have helped, but even with occasional rain he had to wonder how the hell anyone had lived here. Yet some people had, and for all he knew, still did, when there was grass for their goats to eat . . . and no men with guns to steal the goats and kill the herdsmen. Mainly the two CIA field officers sat in their car, with the windows open, drank their bottled water, and sweated after they ran out of words to exchange.

The trucks showed up close to dusk. They saw the dust plumes first, like the roostertails of motorboats, yellow in the diminishing light. In such an empty, desperate country, how was it possible that they knew how to make trucks run? Somebody knew how to keep them running, and that seemed very remarkable. Perversely, it meant that all was not lost for this desolate place. If bad men could do it, then good men

could do it as well. And that was the reason for Clark and Chavez to be there, wasn't it?

The first truck was well in advance of the others. It was old, probably a military truck originally, though with all the body damage, the country of origin and the name of the manufacturer were matters of speculation. It circled their Rover at a radius of about a hundred meters, while the eyes of the crew checked them out at a discreet, careful distance, including one man on what looked like a Russian 12.7mm machine gun mounted in the back. "Policemen," their boss called them—once it was "technicals." After a while, they stopped, got out and just stood there, watching the Rover, holding their old, dirty, but probably functional G3 rifles. The men would soon be less important. It was evening, after all, and the caq was out. Chavez watched a man sitting in the shade of his truck a hundred meters away, chewing on the weed.

"Can't the dumb sunzabitches at least smoke it?" the exasperated field officer asked the burning air in the car.

"Bad for the lungs, Ding. You know that." Their appointment for the evening made quite a living for himself by flying it in. In fact, roughly two fifths of the country's gross domestic product went into that trade, supporting a small fleet of aircraft that flew it in from Somalia. The fact offended both Clark and Chavez, but their mission wasn't about personal offense. It was about a long-standing debt. General Mohammed Abdul Corp—his rank had largely been awarded by reporters who didn't know what else to call him—had, once upon a time, been responsible for the deaths of twenty American soldiers. Two years ago, to be exact, far beyond the memory horizon of the media, because after he'd killed the American soldiers, he'd gone back to his main business of killing his own countrymen. It was for the latter cause that Clark and Chavez were nominally in the field, but justice had many shapes and many colors, and it pleased Clark to pursue a parallel agenda. That Corp was also a dealer in narcotics seemed a special gift from a good-humored God.

"Wash up before he gets here?" Ding asked, tenser now, and showing it just a little bit. All four men by the truck just sat there, chewing their caq and staring, their rifles lying across their legs, the heavy machine gun on the back of their truck forgotten now. They were the forward security element, such as it was, for their General.

Clark shook his head. "Waste of time."

"Shit, we've been here six weeks." All for one appointment. Well, that was how it worked, wasn't it?

"I needed to sweat off the five pounds," Clark replied with a tense smile of his own. Probably more than five, he figured. "These things take time to do right."

"I wonder how Patsy is doing in college?" Ding murmured as the next collection of dust plumes grew closer.

Clark didn't respond. It was distantly unseemly that his daughter found his field partner exotic and interesting . . . and charming, Clark admitted to himself. Though Ding was actually shorter than his daughter—Patsy took after her tall and rangy mom—and possessed of a decidedly checkered background, John had to allow for the fact that Chavez had worked as hard as any man he'd ever known to make himself into something that fate had tried very hard to deny him. The lad was thirty-one now. *Lad*? Clark asked himself. Ten years older than his little girl, Patricia Doris Clark. He could have said something about how they lived a rather crummy life in the field, but Ding would have replied that it was not his decision to make, and it wasn't. Sandy hadn't thought so either.

What Clark couldn't shake was the idea that his Patricia, his baby, might be sexually active with—Ding? The father part of him found the idea disturbing, but the rest of him had to admit that he'd had his own youth once. Daughters, he told himself, were God's revenge on you for being a man: you lived in mortal fear that they might accidentally encounter somebody like—yourself at that age. In Patsy's case, the similarity in question was just too striking to accept easily.

"Concentrate on the mission, Ding."

"Roger that, Mr. C." Clark didn't have to turn his head. He could see the smile that had to be poised on his partner's face. He could almost feel it evaporate, too, as more dust plumes appeared through the shimmering air.

"We're gonna get you, motherfucker," Ding breathed, back to business and wearing his mission face again. It wasn't just the dead American soldiers. People like Corp destroyed everything they touched, and this part of the world needed a chance at a future. That chance might have come two years earlier, if the President had listened to his field commanders instead of the U.N. Well, at least he seemed to be learning, which wasn't bad for a President.

The sun was lower, almost gone now, and the temperature was abating. More trucks. Not too many more, they both hoped. Chavez shifted his eyes to the four men a hundred yards away. They were talking back and forth with a little animation, mellow from the caq. Ordinarily it would be dangerous to be around drug-sotted men carrying military weapons, but tonight danger was inverting itself, as it sometimes did. The second truck was clearly visible now, and it came up close. Both CIA officers got out of their vehicle to stretch, then to greet the new visitors, cautiously, of course.

The General's personal guard force of elite "policemen" was no better than the ones who had arrived before, though some of this

group did wear unbuttoned shirts. The first one to come up to them smelled of whiskey, probably pilfered from the General's private stock. That was an affront to Islam, but then so was trafficking in drugs. One of the things Clark admired about the Saudis was their direct and peremptory method for processing that category of criminal.

"Hi." Clark smiled at the man. "I'm John Clark. This is Mr. Chavez. We've been waiting for the General, like you told us."

"What you carry?" the "policeman" asked, surprising Clark with his knowledge of English. John held up his bag of rock samples, while Ding showed his pair of electronic instruments. After a cursory inspection of the vehicle, they were spared even a serious frisking—a pleasant surprise.

Corp arrived next, with his most reliable security force, if you could call it that. They rode in a Russian ZIL-type jeep. The "General" was actually in a Mercedes that had once belonged to a government bureaucrat, before the government of this country had disintegrated. It had seen better times, but was still the best automobile in the country, probably. Corp wore his Sunday best, a khaki shirt outside the whipcord trousers, with something supposed to be rank insignia on the epaulets, and boots that had been polished sometime in the last week. The sun was just under the horizon now. Darkness would fall quickly, and the thin atmosphere of the high desert made for lots of visible stars even now.

The General was a gracious man, at least by his own lights. He walked over briskly, extending his hand. As he took it, Clark wondered what had become of the owner of the Mercedes. Most likely murdered along with the other members of the government. They'd died partly of incompetence, but mostly of barbarism, probably at the hands of the man whose firm and friendly hand he was now shaking.

"Have you completed your survey?" Corp asked, surprising Clark again with his grammar.

"Yes, sir, we have. May I show you?"

"Certainly." Corp followed him to the back of the Rover. Chavez pulled out a survey map and some satellite photos obtained from commercial sources.

"This may be the biggest deposit since the one in Colorado, and the purity is surprising. Right here." Clark extended a steel pointer and tapped it on the map.

"Thirty kilometers from where we are sitting . . ."

Clark smiled. "You know, as long as I've been in this business, it still surprises me how this happens. A couple of billion years ago, a huge bubble of the stuff must have just perked up from the center of the earth." His lecture was lyrical. He'd had lots of practice, and it helped that Clark read books on geology for recreation, borrowing the nicer

phrases for his "pitch."

"Anyway," Ding, said, taking his cue a few minutes later, "the overburden is no problem at all, and we have the location fixed perfectly."

"How can you do that?" Corp asked. His country's maps were products of another and far more casual age.

"With this, sir." Ding handed it over.

"What is it?" the General asked.

"A GPS locator," Chavez explained. "It's how we find our way around, sir. You just push that button there, the rubber one."

Corp did just that, then held the large, thin green-plastic box up and watched the readout. First it gave him the exact time, then started to make its fix, showing that it had lock with one, then three, and finally four orbiting Global Positioning System satellites. "Such an amazing device," he said, though that wasn't the half of it. By pushing the button he had also sent out a radio signal. It was so easy to forget that they were scarcely a hundred miles from the Indian Ocean, and that beyond the visible horizon might be a ship with a flat deck. A largely empty deck at the moment, because the helicopters that lived there had lifted off an hour earlier and were now sitting at a secure site thirty-five miles to the south.

Corp took one more look at the GPS locator before handing it back. "What is the rattle?" he asked as Ding took it.

"Battery pack is loose, sir," Chavez explained with a smile. It was their only handgun, and not a large one. The General ignored the irrelevancy and turned back to Clark.

"How much?" he asked simply.

"Well, determining the exact size of the deposit will require—"

"Money, Mr. Clark."

"Anaconda is prepared to offer you fifty million dollars, sir. We'll pay that in four payments of twelve and a half million dollars, plus ten percent of the gross profit from the mining operations. The advance fee and the continuing income will be paid in U.S. dollars."

"More than that. I know what molybdenum is worth." He'd checked a copy of *The Financial Times* on the way in.

"But it will take two years, closer to three, probably, to commence operations. Then we have to determine the best way to get the ore to the coast. Probably truck, maybe a rail line if the deposit is as big as I think it is. Our up-front costs to develop the operation will be on the order of three hundred million." Even with the labor costs here, Clark didn't have to add.

"I need more money to keep my people happy. You must understand that," Corp said reasonably. Had he been an honorable man, Clark thought, this could have been an interesting negotiation.

Corp wanted the additional up-front money to buy arms in order to reconquer the country that he had once almost owned. The U.N. had displaced him, but not quite thoroughly enough. Relegated to dangerous obscurity in the bush, he had survived the last year by running caq into the cities, such as they were, and he'd made enough from the trade that some thought him to be a danger to the state again, such as it was. With new arms, of course, and control over the country, he would then renegotiate the continuing royalty for the molybdenum. It was a clever ploy, Clark thought, but obvious, having dreamed it up himself to draw the bastard out of his hole.

"Well, yes, we are concerned with the political stability of the region," John allowed, with an insider's smile to show that he knew the score. Americans were known for doing business all over the world, after all, or so Corp and others believed.

Chavez was fiddling with the GPS device, watching the LCD display. At the upper-right corner, a block went from clear to black. Ding coughed from the dust in the air and scratched his nose.

"Okay," Clark said. "You're a serious man, and we understand that. The fifty million can be paid up-front. Swiss account?"

"That is somewhat better," Corp allowed, taking his time. He walked around to the back of the Rover and pointed into the open cargo area. "These are your rock samples?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied with a nod. He handed over a three-pound piece of stone with very high-grade Molly-be-damned ore, though it was from Colorado, not Africa. "Want to show it to your people?"

"What is this?" Corp pointed at two objects in the Rover.

"Our lights, sir." Clark smiled as he took one out. Ding did the same.

"You have a gun in there," Corp saw with amusement, pointing to a bolt-action rifle. Two of his bodyguards drew closer.

"This *is* Africa, sir. I was worried about—"

"Lions?" Corp thought that one pretty good. He turned and spoke to his "policemen," who started laughing amiably at the stupidity of the Americans. "We kill the lions," Corp told them after the laughter settled down. "Nothing lives out here."

Clark, the General thought, took it like a man, standing there, holding his light. It seemed a big light. "What is that for?"

"Well, I don't like the dark very much, and when we camp out, I like to take pictures at night."

"Yeah," Ding confirmed. "These things are really great." He turned and scanned the positions of the General's security detail. There were two groups, one of four, the other of six, plus the two nearby and Corp himself.

"Want me to take pictures of your people for you?" Clark asked

without reaching for his camera.

On cue, Chavez flipped his light on and played it toward the larger of the two distant groups. Clark handled the three men close to the Rover. The "lights" worked like a charm. It took only about three seconds before both CIA officers could turn them off and go to work securing the men's hands.

"Did you think we forgot?" the CIA field officer asked Corp as the roar of rotary-wing aircraft became audible fifteen minutes later. By this time all twelve of Corp's security people were facedown in the dust, their hands bound behind them with the sort of plastic ties policemen use when they run out of cuffs. All the General could do was moan and writhe on the ground in pain. Ding cracked a handful of chemical lights and tossed them around in a circle downwind of the Rover. The first UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter circled carefully, illuminating the ground with lights.

"BIRD-DOG ONE, this is BAG MAN."

"Good evening, BAG MAN, BIRD-DOG ONE has the situation under control. Come on *down!*" Clark chuckled into the radio.

The first chopper down was well outside the lighted area. The Rangers appeared out of the shadows like ghosts, spaced out five meters apart, weapons low and ready.

"Clark?" a loud, very tense voice called.

"Yo!" John called back with a wave. "We got 'im."

A captain of Rangers came in. A young Latino face, smeared with camouflage paint and dressed in desert cammies. He'd been a lieutenant the last time he'd been on the African mainland, and remembered the memorial service for those he'd lost from his platoon. Bringing the Rangers back had been Clark's idea, and it had been easy to arrange. Four more men came in behind Captain Diego Checa. The rest of the squad dispersed to check out the "policemen."

"What about these two?" one asked, pointing to Corp's two personal bodyguards.

"Leave 'em," Ding replied.

"You got it, sir," a spec-4 replied, taking out steel cuffs and securing both pairs of wrists in addition to the plastic ties. Captain Checa cuffed Corp himself. He and a sergeant lifted the man off the ground while Clark and Chavez retrieved their personal gear from the Rover and followed the soldiers to the Blackhawk. One of the Rangers handed Chavez a canteen.

"Oso sends his regards," the staff sergeant said. Ding's head came around.

"What's he doing now?"

"First Sergeants' school. He's pissed that he missed this one. I'm Gomez, Foxtrot, Second of the One-Seventy-Fifth. I was here back

then, too."

"You made that look pretty easy," Checa was telling Clark, a few feet away.

"Six weeks," the senior field officer replied in a studiously casual voice. The rules required such a demeanor. "Four weeks to bum around in the boonies, two weeks to set the meet up, six hours waiting for it to happen, and about ten seconds to take him down."

"Just the way it's supposed to be," Checa observed. He handed over a canteen filled with Gatorade. The Captain's eyes locked on the senior man. Whoever he was, Checa thought at first, he was far too old to play games in the boonies with the gomers. Then he gave Clark's eyes a closer look.

"How the fuck you do this, man?" Gomez demanded of Chavez at the door to the chopper. The other Rangers leaned in close to get the reply.

Ding glanced over at his gear and laughed. "Magic!"

Gomez was annoyed that his question hadn't been answered. "Leaving all these guys out here?"

"Yeah, they're just gomers." Chavez turned to look one last time. Sooner or later one would get his hands free—probably—retrieve a knife, and cut his fellow "policemen" free; then they could worry about the two with steel bracelets. "It's the boss we were after."

Gomez turned to scan the horizon. "Any lions or hyenas out here?" Ding shook his head. *Too bad*, the sergeant thought.

The Rangers were shaking their heads as they strapped into their seats on the helicopter. As soon as they were airborne, Clark donned a headset and waited for the crew chief to set up the radio patch.

"CAPSTONE, this is BIRD DOG," he began.

The eight-hour time difference made it early afternoon in Washington. The UHF radio from the helicopter went to USS *Tripoli*, and then it was uplinked to a satellite. The Signals Office routed the call right into Ryan's desk phone.

"Yes, BIRD DOG, this is CAPSTONE."

Ryan couldn't quite recognize Clark's voice, but the words were readable through the static: "In the bag, no friendlies hurt. Repeat, the duck is in the bag and there are zero friendly casualties."

"I understand, BIRD DOG. Make your delivery as planned."

It was an outrage, really, Jack told himself as he set the phone back. Such operations were better left in the field, but the President had insisted this time. He rose from his desk and headed toward the Oval Office.

"Get'm?" D'Agustino asked as Jack hustled down the corridor.

"You weren't supposed to know."

"The Boss was worried about it," Helen explained quietly.

"Well, he doesn't have to worry anymore."

"That's one score that needed settling. Welcome back, Dr. Ryan."

The past would haunt one other man that day.

"Go on," the psychologist said.

"It was awful," the woman said, staring down at the floor. "It was the only time in my life it ever happened, and . . ." Though her voice droned on in a level, emotionless monotone, it was her appearance that disturbed the elderly woman most of all. Her patient was thirty-five, and should have been slim, petite, and blonde, but instead her face showed the puffiness of compulsive eating and drinking, and her hair was barely presentable. What ought to have been fair skin was merely pale, and reflected light like chalk, in a flat grainy way that even makeup would not have helped very much. Only her diction indicated what the patient once had been, and her voice recounted the events of three years before as though her mind was operating on two levels, one the victim, and the other an observer, wondering in a distant intellectual way if she had participated at all.

"I mean, he's who he is, and I worked for him, and I liked *him* . . ." The voice broke again. The woman swallowed hard and paused a moment before going on. "I mean, I *admire* him, all the things he does, all the things he stands for." She looked up, and it seemed so odd that her eyes were as dry as cellophane, reflecting light from a flat surface devoid of tears. "He's so charming, and caring, and—"

"It's okay, Barbara." As she often did, the psychologist fought the urge to reach out to her patient, but she knew she had to stay aloof, had to hide her own rage at what had happened to this bright and capable woman. It had happened at the hands of a man who used his status and power to draw women toward him as a light drew moths, ever circling his brilliance, spiraling in closer and closer until they were destroyed by it. The pattern was so like life in this city. Since then, Barbara had broken off from two men, each of whom might have been fine partners for what should have been a fine life. This was an intelligent woman, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, with a master's degree in political science and a doctorate in public administration. She was not a wide-eyed secretary or summer intern, and perhaps had been all the more vulnerable because of it, able to become part of the policy team, knowing that she was good enough, if only she would do the one more thing to get her over the top or across the line, or whatever the current euphemism was on the Hill. The problem was, that line could be crossed only in one direction, and

what lay beyond it was not so easily seen from the other side.

"You know, I would have done it anyway," Barbara said in a moment of brutal honesty. "He didn't have to—"

"Do you feel guilty because of that?" Dr. Clarice Golden asked. Barbara Linders nodded. Golden stifled a sigh and spoke gently. "And you think you gave him the—"

"Signals." A nod. "That's what he said, 'You gave me all the signals.' Maybe I did."

"No, you didn't, Barbara. You have to go on now," Clarice ordered gently.

"I just wasn't in the mood. It's not that I wouldn't have done it, another time, another day, maybe, but I wasn't feeling well. I came into the office feeling fine that day, but I was coming down with the flu or something, and after lunch my stomach was queasy, and I thought about going home early, but it was the day we were doing the amendment on the civil-rights legislation that he sponsored, so I took a couple Tylenol for the fever, and about nine we were the only ones left in the office. Civil rights was my area of specialty," Linders explained. "I was sitting on the couch in his office, and he was walking around like he always does when he's formulating his ideas, and he was behind me. I remember his voice got soft and friendly, like, and he said, 'You have the nicest hair, Barbara' out of the blue, like, and I said, 'Thank you.' He asked how I was feeling, and I *told* him I was coming down with something, and he said he'd give me something he used—brandy," she said, talking more quickly now, as though she was hoping to get through this part as rapidly as possible, like a person fast-forwarding a videotape through the commercials. "I didn't see him put anything in the drink. He kept a bottle of Rémy in the credenza behind his desk, and something else, too, I guess. I drank it right down.

"He just stood there, watching me, not even talking, just watching me, like he knew it would happen fast. It was like . . . I don't know. I knew something wasn't right, like you get drunk right away, out of control." Then her voice stopped for fifteen seconds or so, and Dr. Golden watched her—like he had done, she thought. The irony shamed her, but this was business; it was clinical, and it was supposed to help, not hurt. Her patient was seeing it now. You could tell from the eyes, you always could. As though the mind really were a VCR, the scene paraded before her, and Barbara Linders was merely giving commentary on what she saw, not truly relating the dreadful personal experience she herself had undergone. For ten minutes, she described it, without leaving out a single clinical detail, her trained professional mind clicking in as it had to do. It was only at the end that her emotions came back.

"He didn't have to rape me. He could have . . . asked. I would have . . . I mean, another day, the weekend . . . I knew he was married, but I *liked* him, and . . ."

"But he did rape you, Barbara. He drugged you and raped you." This time Dr. Golden reached out and took her hand, because now it was all out in the open. Barbara Linders had articulated the whole awful story, probably for the first time since it had happened. In the intervening period she'd relived bits and pieces, especially the worst part, but this was the first time she'd gone through the event in chronological order, from beginning to end, and the impact of the telling was every bit as traumatic and cathartic as it had to be.

"There has to be more," Golden said after the sobbing stopped.

"There is," Barbara said immediately, hardly surprised that her psychologist could tell. "At least one other woman in the office, Lisa Beringer. She . . . killed herself the next year, drove her car into a bridge support-thing, looked like an accident, she'd been drinking, but in her desk she left a note. I cleaned her desk out . . . and I found it." Then, to Dr. Golden's stunned reaction, Barbara Linders reached into her purse and pulled it out. The "note" was in a blue envelope, six pages of personalized letter paper covered with the tight, neat handwriting of a woman who had made the decision to end her life, but who wanted someone to know why.

Clarice Golden, Ph.D., had seen such notes before, and it was a source of melancholy amazement that people could do such a thing. They always spoke of pain too great to bear, but depressingly often they showed the despairing mind of someone who could have been saved and cured and sent back into a successful life if only she'd had the wit to make a single telephone call or speak to a single close friend. It took only two paragraphs for Golden to see that Lisa Beringer had been just one more needless victim, a woman who had felt alone, fatally so, in an office full of people who would have leaped to her aid.

Mental-health professionals are skilled at hiding their emotions, a talent necessary for obvious reasons. Clarice Golden had been doing this job for just under thirty years, and to her God-given talent had been added a lifetime of professional experience. Especially good at helping the victims of sexual abuse, she displayed compassion, understanding, and support in great quantity and outstanding quality, but while real, it was all a disguise for her true feelings. She loathed sexual predators as much as any police officer, maybe even more. A cop saw the victim's body, saw her bruises and her tears, heard her cries. The psychologist was there longer, probing into the mind for the malignant memories, trying to find a way to expunge them. Rape was a crime against the mind, not the body, and as dreadful as the things

were that the policeman saw, worse still were the hidden injuries whose cure was Clarice Golden's life's work. A gentle, caring person who could never have avenged the crimes physically, she hated these creatures nonetheless.

But this one was a special problem. She maintained a regular working relationship with the sexual-crime units of every police department in a fifty-mile radius, but this crime had happened on federal property, and she'd have to check to see who had jurisdiction. For that she'd talk to her neighbor, Dan Murray of the FBI. And there was one other complication. The criminal in question had been a U.S. senator at the time, and indeed he still had an office in the Capitol Building. But this criminal had changed jobs. No longer a senator from New England, he was now Vice President of the United States.

* * *

ComSubPac had once been as grand a goal as any man might have, but that was one more thing of history. The first great commander had been Vice Admiral Charles Lockwood, and of all the men who'd defeated Japan, only Chester Nimitz and maybe Charles Layton had been more important. It was Lockwood, sitting in this very office on the heights overlooking Pearl Harbor, who had sent out Mush Morton and Dick O'Kane and Gene Fluckey, and the rest of the legends to do battle in their fleet boats. The same office, the same door, and even the same title on the door—Commander, Submarine Force, United States Pacific Fleet—but the rank required for it was lower now. Rear Admiral Bart Mancuso, USN, knew that he'd been lucky to make it this far. That was the good news.

The bad news was that he was essentially the receiver of a dying business. Lockwood had commanded a genuine fleet of submarines and tenders. More recently, Austin Smith had sent his forty or so around the world's largest ocean, but Mancuso was down to nineteen fast-attack boats and six boomers—and all of the latter were alongside, awaiting dismantlement at Bremerton. None would be kept, not even as a museum exhibit of a bygone age, which didn't trouble Mancuso as much as it might have. He'd never liked the missile submarines, never liked their ugly purpose, never liked their boring patrol pattern, never liked the mind-set of their commanders. Raised in fast-attack, Mancuso had always preferred to be where the action is—was, he corrected himself.

Was. It was all over now, or nearly so. The mission of the nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine had changed since Lockwood. Once the hunters of surface ships, whether merchants or men-of-war, they'd

become specialists in the elimination of enemy subs, like fighter aircraft dedicated to the extermination of their foreign cousins. That specialization had narrowed their purpose, focusing their equipment and their training until they'd become supreme at it. Nothing could excel an SSN in the hunting of another.

What nobody had ever expected was that the other side's SSNs would go away. Mancuso had spent his professional life practicing for something he'd hoped would never come, detecting, localizing, closing on, and killing Soviet subs, whether missile boats or other fast-attacks. In fact, he'd achieved something that no other sub skipper had ever dreamed of doing. He'd assisted in the capture of a Russian sub, a feat of arms still among his country's most secret accomplishments—and a capture was better than a kill, wasn't it?—but then the world had changed. He'd played his role in it, and was proud of that. The Soviet Union was no more.

Unfortunately—as he thought of it—so was the Soviet Navy, and without enemy submarines to worry about, his country, as it had done many times in the past, had rewarded its warriors by forgetting them. There was little mission for his boats to do now. The once large and formidable Soviet Navy was essentially a memory. Only the previous week he'd seen satellite photos of the bases at Petropavlovsk and Vladivostok. Every boat the Soviets—Russians!—were known to have had been tied alongside, and on some of the overheads he'd been able to see the orange streaks of rust on the hulls where the black paint had eroded off.

The other possible missions? Hunting merchant traffic was largely a joke—worse, the Orion drivers, with their own huge collection of P-3C aircraft, also designed for submarine hunting, had long since modified their aircraft to carry air-to-surface missiles, and had ten times the speed of any sub, and in the unlikely event that someone wanted to clobber a merchant ship, they could do it better and faster.

The same was true of surface warships——what there were of them. The sad truth, if you could call it that, was that the U.S. Navy, even gutted and downsized as it was, could handle any three other navies in the world in less time than it would take the enemies to assemble their forces and send out a press release of their malicious intent.

And so now what? Even if you won the Super Bowl, there were still teams to play against next season. But in this most serious of human games, victory meant exactly that. There were no enemies left at sea, and few enough on land, and in the way of the new world, the submarine force was the first of many uniformed groups to be without work. The only reason there was a ComSubPac at all was bureaucratic inertia. There was a Com-everything-else-Pac, and the submarine force had to have its senior officer as the social and military equal of the

other communities, Air, Surface, and Service.

Of his nineteen fast-attack boats, only seven were currently at sea. Four were in overhaul status, and the yards were stretching out their work as much as possible to justify their own infrastructure. The rest were alongside their tenders or their piers while the ship-service people found new and interesting things to do, protecting *their* infrastructure and military/civilian identity. Of the seven boats at sea, one was tracking a Chinese nuclear fast-attack boat; those submarines were so noisy that Mancuso hoped the sonarmen's ears weren't being seriously hurt. Stalking them was about as demanding as watching a blind man on an empty parking lot in broad daylight. Two others were doing environmental research, actually tracking midocean whale populations—not for whalers, but for the environmental community. In so doing, his boats had achieved a real march on the tree-huggers. There were more whales out there than expected. Extinction wasn't nearly the threat everyone had once believed it to be, and the various environmental groups were having their own funding problems as a result. All of which was fine with Mancuso. He'd never wanted to kill a whale.

The other four boats were doing workups, mainly practicing against one another. But the environmentalists were taking their own revenge on Submarine Force, United States Pacific Fleet. Having protested the construction and operation of the boats for thirty years, they were now protesting their dismantlement, and more than half of Mancuso's working time was relegated to filing all manner of reports, answers to questions, and detailed explanations of his answers. "Ungrateful bastards," Mancuso grumbled. He was helping out with the whales, wasn't he? The Admiral growled into his coffee mug and flipped open a new folder.

"Good news, Skipper," a voice called without warning.

"Who the hell let you in?"

"I have an understanding with your chief," Ron Jones replied. "He says you're buried by paperwork."

"He ought to know." Mancuso stood to greet his guest. Dr. Jones had problems of his own. The end of the Cold War had hurt defense contractors, too, and Jones had specialized in sonar systems used by submarines. The difference was that Jones had made himself a pile of money first. "So what's the good news?"

"Our new processing software is optimized for listening to our warm-blooded oppressed fellow mammals. *Chicago* just phoned in. They have identified another twenty humpbacks in the Gulf of Alaska. I think I'll get the contract from NOAA. I can afford to buy you lunch now," Jones concluded, settling into a leather chair. He liked Hawaii, and was dressed for it, in casual shirt and no socks to clutter up his

formal Reeboks.

"You ever miss the good old days?" Bart asked with a wry look.

"You mean chasing around the ocean, four hundred feet down, stuck inside a steel pipe two months at a time, smelling like the inside of an oilcan, with a touch of locker room for ambience, eating the same food every week, watching old movies and TV shows on tape, on a TV the size of a sheet of paper, working six on and twelve off, getting maybe five decent hours of sleep a night, and concentrating like a brain surgeon all the time? Yeah, Bart, those were the days." Jones paused and thought for a second. "I miss being young enough to think it was fun. We were pretty good, weren't we?"

"Better 'n average," Mancuso allowed. "What's the deal with the whales?"

"The new software my guys put together is good at picking out their breathing and heartbeats. It turns out to be a nice clear hertz line. When those guys are swimming—well, if you put a stethoscope up against them, your eardrums would probably meet in the middle of your head."

"What was the software really for?"

"Tracking Kilo-class boats, of course." Jones grinned as he looked out the windows at the largely empty naval base. "But I can't say that anymore. We changed a few hundred lines of code and ginned up a new wrapper for the box, and talked to NOAA about it."

Mancuso might have said something about taking that software into the Persian Gulf to track the Kilo-class boats the Iranians owned, but intelligence reported that one of them was missing. The submarine had probably gotten in the way of a supertanker and been squashed, simply crushed against the bottom of that shallow body of water by a tanker whose crew had never even noticed the rumble. In any case, the other Kilos were securely tied to their piers. Or maybe the Iranians had finally heard the old seaman's moniker for submarines and decided not to touch their new naval vessels again—they'd once been known as "pigboats," after all.

"Sure looks empty out there." Jones pointed to what had once been one of the greatest naval facilities ever made. Not a single carrier in view, only two cruisers, half a squadron of destroyers, roughly the same number of frigates, five fleet-support ships. "Who commands Pac Fleet now, a chief?"

"Christ, Ron, let's not give anybody ideas, okay?"

2

Fraternity

"You got him?" President Durling asked.

"Less than half an hour ago," Ryan confirmed, taking his seat.

"Nobody hurt?" That was important to the President. It was important to Ryan, too, but not morbidly so.

"Clark reports no friendly casualties."

"What about the other side?" This question came from Brett Hanson, the current Secretary of State. Choate School and Yale. The government was having a run on Yalies, Ryan thought, but Hanson wasn't as good as the last Eli he'd worked with. Short, thin, and hyper, Hanson was an in-and-out guy whose career had oscillated between government service, consulting, a sideline as a talking head on PBS—where you could exercise real influence—and a lucrative practice in one of the city's pricier firms. He was a specialist in corporate and international law, an area of expertise he'd once used to negotiate multinational business deals. He'd been good at that, Jack knew. Unfortunately he'd come into his cabinet post thinking that the same niceties ought to—worse, did—apply to the business of nation-states.

Ryan took a second or two before replying. "I didn't ask."

"Why?"

Jack could have said any one of several things, but he decided that it was time to establish his position. Therefore, a goad: "Because it wasn't important. The objective, Mr. Secretary, was to apprehend Corp. That was done. In about thirty minutes he will be handed over to the legal authorities, such as they are, in his country, for trial in accordance with their law, before a jury of his peers, or however they do it over there." Ryan hadn't troubled himself to find out.

"That's tantamount to murder."

"It's not my fault his peers don't like him, Mr. Secretary. He's also responsible for the deaths of American soldiers. Had we decided to eliminate him ourselves, even that would not be murder. It would have been a straightforward national-security exercise. Well, in another age it would have been," Ryan allowed. Times *had* changed, and Ryan had to adapt himself to a new reality as well. "Instead, we are acting as good world-citizens by apprehending a dangerous

international criminal and turning him over to the government of his country, which will put him on trial for drug-running, which is a felony in every legal jurisdiction of which I am aware. What happens next is up to the criminal-justice system of his country. That is a country with which we have diplomatic relations and other informal agreements of assistance, and whose laws, therefore, we must respect."

Hanson didn't like it. That was clear from the way he leaned back in his chair. But he would support it in public because he had no choice. The State Department had announced official American support for that government half a dozen times in the previous year. What stung worse for Hanson was being outmaneuvered by this young upstart in front of him.

"They might even have a chance to make it now, Brett," Durling observed gently, putting his own seal of approval on Operation WALKMAN. "And it never happened."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Jack, you were evidently right about this Clark fellow. What do we do about him?"

"I'll leave that to the DCI, sir. Maybe another Intelligence Star for him," Ryan suggested, hoping that Durling would forward it to Langley. If not, maybe a discreet call of his own to Mary Pat. Then it was time for fence-mending, a new skill for Ryan. "Mr. Secretary, in case you didn't know, our people were under orders to use nonlethal force if possible. Beyond that, my only concern is the lives of our people."

"I wish you'd cleared it through my people first," Hanson grumped.

Deep breath, Ryan commanded himself. The mess was of State's making, along with that of Ryan's predecessor. Having entered the country to restore order after it had been destroyed by local warlords —another term used by the media to give a label to common thugs— the powers-that-be had later decided, after the entire mission had gone to hell, that the "warlords" in question had to be part of the "political solution" to the problem. That the problem had been created by the warlords in the first place was conveniently forgotten. It was the circularity of the logic that offended Ryan most of all, who wondered if they taught a logic course at Yale. Probably an elective, he decided. At Boston College it had been mandatory.

"It's done, Brett," Durling said quietly, "and nobody will mourn the passing of Mr. Corp. What's next?" the President asked Ryan.

"The Indians are getting rather frisky. They've increased the operating tempo of their navy, and they're conducting operations around Sri Lanka—"

"They've done that before," SecState cut in.

"Not in this strength, and I don't like the way they've continued their talks with the 'Tamil Tigers,' or whatever the hell those maniacs call themselves now. Conducting extended negotiations with a guerrilla group operating on the soil of a neighbor is not an act of friendship."

This was a new concern for the U.S. government. The two former British colonies had lived as friendly neighbors for a long time, but for years the Tamil people on the island of Sri Lanka had maintained a nasty little insurgency. The Sri Lankans, with relatives on the Indian mainland, had asked for foreign troops to maintain a peace-keeping presence. India had obliged, but what had started in an honorable fashion was now changing. There were rumbles that the Sri Lankan government would soon ask for the Indian soldiers to leave. There were also rumbles that there would be some "technical difficulties" in effecting their removal. Concurrent with that had come word of a conversation between the Indian Foreign Minister and the U.S. Ambassador at a reception in Delhi.

"You know," the Minister had said after a few too many, but probably purposeful drinks, "that body of water to our south is called the *Indian* Ocean, and we have a navy to guard it. With the demise of the former Soviet threat, we wonder why the U.S. Navy seems so determined to maintain a force there."

The U.S. Ambassador was a political appointee—for some reason India had turned into a prestige post, despite the climate—but was also a striking exception to Scott Adler's professional snobbery. The former governor of Pennsylvania had smiled and mumbled something about freedom of the seas, then fired off an encrypted report to Foggy Bottom before going to bed that night. Adler needed to learn that they weren't all dumb.

"We see no indication of an aggressive act in that direction," Hanson said after a moment's reflection.

"The ethnic element is troubling. India can't go north, with the mountains in the way. West is out. The Pakis have nukes, too. East is Bangladesh—why buy trouble? Sri Lanka has real strategic possibilities for them, maybe as a steppingstone."

"To where?" the President asked.

"Australia. Space and resources, not many people in the way, and not much of a military to stop them."

"I just don't see that happening," SecState announced.

"If the Tigers pull something off, I *can* see India increasing its peace-keeping presence. The next step could be annexation, given the right preconditions, and then all of a sudden we have an imperial power playing games a long way from here, and making life somewhat nervous for one of our historical allies." And helping the Tigers to get

something going was both easy and a time-honored tactic. Surrogates could be so useful, couldn't they? "In historical terms such ambitions are most inexpensively stopped early."

"That's why the Navy's in the Indian Ocean," Hanson observed confidently.

"True," Ryan conceded.

"Are we strong enough to deter them from stepping over the line?"

"Yes, Mr. President, at the moment, but I don't like the way our Navy is being stretched. Every carrier we have right now, except for the two in overhaul status, is either deployed or conducting workups preparatory for deployment. We have no strategic reserve worthy of the name." Ryan paused before going on, knowing that he was about to go too far, but doing so anyway: "We've cut back too much, sir. Our people are strung out very thin."

"They are simply not as capable as we think they are. That is a thing of the past," Raizo Yamata said. He was dressed in an elegant silk kimono, and sat on the floor at a traditional low table.

The others around the table looked discreetly at their watches. It was approaching three in the morning, and though this was one of the nicest geisha houses in the city, the hour *was* late. Raizo Yamata was a captivating host, however. A man of great wealth and sagacity, the others thought. Or most of them.

"They've protected us for generations," one man suggested.

"From what? Ourselves?" Yamata demanded coarsely. That was permitted now. Though all around the table were men of the most exquisite good manners, they were all close acquaintances, if not all actually close friends, and all had consumed their personal limit of alcohol. Under these circumstances, the rules of social intercourse altered somewhat. They could all speak bluntly. Words that would ordinarily be deadly insults would now be accepted calmly, then rebutted harshly, and there would be no lingering rancor about it. That, too, was a rule, but as with most rules, it was largely theoretical. Though friendships and relationships would not end because of words here, neither would they be completely forgotten. "How many of us," Yamata went on, "have been victims of these people?"

Yamata hadn't said "barbarians," the other Japanese citizens at the table noted. The reason was the presence of the two other men. One of them. Vice Admiral V. K. Chandraskatta, was a fleet commander of the Indian Navy, currently on leave. The other, Zhang Han San—the name meant "Cold Mountain" and had not been given by his parents—was a senior Chinese diplomat, part of a trade mission to Tokyo. The latter individual was more easily accepted than the former. With his swarthy

skin and sharp features, Chandraskatta was regarded by the others with polite contempt. Though an educated and very bright potential ally, he was even more *gaijin* than the Chinese guest, and the eight *zaibatsu* around the table each imagined that he could smell the man, despite their previous intake of sake, which usually deadened the senses. For this reason, Chandraskatta occupied the place of honor, at Yamata's right hand, and the zaibatsu wondered if the Indian grasped that this supposed honor was merely a sophisticated mark of contempt. Probably not. He was a barbarian, after all, though perhaps a useful one.

"They are not as formidable as they once were, I admit, Yamata-*san*, but I assure you," Chandraskatta said in his best Dartmouth English, "their navy remains quite formidable. Their two carriers in my ocean are enough to give my navy pause."

Yamata turned his head. "You could not defeat them, even with your submarines?"

"No," the Admiral answered honestly, largely unaffected by the evening's drink, and wondering where all this talk was leading. "You must understand that this question is largely a technical exercise—a science experiment, shall we say?" Chandraskatta adjusted the kimono Yamata had given him, to make him a real member of this group, he'd said. "To defeat an enemy fleet, you must get close enough for your weapons to reach his ships. With their surveillance assets, they can monitor our presence and our movements from long distance. Thus they can maintain a covering presence on us from a range of, oh, something like six hundred kilometers. Since we are unable to maintain a corresponding coverage of their location and course, we cannot maneuver them out of place very easily."

"And that's why you haven't moved on Sri Lanka yet?" Tanzan Itagake asked.

"It is one of the considerations." The Admiral nodded.

"How many carriers do they now have?" Itagake went on.

"In their Pacific Fleet? Four. Two in our ocean, two based in Hawaii."

"What of the other two?" Yamata inquired.

"*Kitty Hawk* and *Ranger* are in extended overhaul status, and will not be back at sea for one and three years, respectively. Seventh Fleet currently has all the carriers. First Fleet has none. The U.S. Navy has five other carriers in commission. These are assigned to the Second and Sixth fleets, with one entering overhaul status in six weeks." Chandraskatta smiled. His information was completely up to date, and he wanted his hosts to know that. "I must tell you that as depleted as the U.S. Navy may appear to be, compared to only—what? five years ago? Compared to five years ago, then, they are quite weak, but

compared to any other navy in the world, they are still immensely strong. One of their carriers is the equal of every other aircraft carrier in the world."

"You agree, then, that their aircraft carriers are their most potent weapon?" Yamata asked.

"Of course." Chandraskatta rearranged the things on the table. In the center he put an empty sake bottle. "Imagine that this is the carrier. Draw a thousand-kilometer circle around it. Nothing exists in that circle without the permission of the carrier air group. In fact, by increasing their operating tempo, that radius extends to fifteen hundred kilometers. They can strike somewhat farther than that if they need to, but even at the minimum distance I demonstrated, they can control a vast area of ocean. Take those carriers away, and they are just another frigate navy. The difficult part of the exercise is taking them away," the Admiral concluded, using simple language for the industrialists.

Chandraskatta was correct in assuming that these merchants knew little about military affairs. However, he had underestimated their ability to learn. The Admiral came from a country with a warrior tradition little known outside its own borders. Indians had stopped Alexander the Great, blunted his army, wounded the Macedonian conqueror, perhaps fatally, and put an end to his expansion, an accomplishment the Persians and Egyptians had singularly failed to do. Indian troops had fought alongside Montgomery in the defeat of Rommel—and had crushed the Japanese Army at Imphal, a fact that he had no intention of bringing up, since one of the people at the table had been a private in that army. He wondered what they had in mind, but for the moment was content to enjoy their hospitality and answer their questions, elementary as they were. The tall, handsome flag officer leaned back, wishing for a proper chair and a proper drink. This sake these prissy little merchants served was closer to water than gin, his usual drink of choice.

"But if you can?" Itagake asked.

"As I said," the Admiral replied patiently, "then they are a frigate navy. I grant you, with superb surface ships, but the 'bubble' each ship controls is far smaller. You can protect with a frigate, you cannot *project* power with one." His choice of words, he saw, stopped the conversation for a moment.

One of the others handled the linguistic niceties, and Itagake leaned back with a long "Ahhhh," as though he'd just learned something profound. Chandraskatta regarded the point as exceedingly simple—forgetting for a moment that the profound often was. However, he recognized that something important had just taken place.

What are you thinking about? He would have shed blood, even his

own, to know the answer to that question. Whatever it was, with proper warning, it might even be useful. He would have been surprised to learn that the others around the table were churning over exactly the same thought.

"Sure are burning a lot of oil," the group-operations officer noted as he began his morning brief.

USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* was on a course of zeronine-eight degrees, east by south, two hundred nautical miles southeast of Felidu Atoll. Fleet speed was eighteen knots, and would increase for the commencement of flight operations. The main tactical display in flag plot had been updated forty minutes earlier from the radar of an E-3C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft, and, indeed, the Indian Navy was burning a good deal of Bunker-Charlie, or whatever they used now to drive their ships through the water.

The display before him could easily have been that of a U.S. Navy Carrier Battle Group. The two Indian carriers, *Viraat* and *Vikrant*, were in the center of a circular formation, the pattern for which had been invented by an American named Nimitz almost eighty years earlier. Close-in escorts were *Delhi* and *Mysore*, home-built missile destroyers armed with a SAM system about which information was thin—always a worry to aviators. The second ring was composed of the Indian version of the old Russian Kashin-class destroyers, also SAM-equipped. Most interesting, however, were two other factors.

"Replenishment ships *Rajaba Gan Palan* and *Shakti* have rejoined the battle group after a brief stay in Trivandrum—"

"How long were they in port?" Jackson asked.

"Less than twenty-four hours," Commander Ed Harrison, the group-operations officer, replied. "They cycled them pretty fast, sir."

"So they just went in for a quick fill-up. How much gas do they carry?"

"Bunker fuel, about thirteen thousand tons each, another fifteen hundred each of JP. Sister ship *Deepak* has detached from the battle group and is heading northwest, probably for Trivandrum as well, after conducting un-rep operations yesterday."

"So they're working extra hard to keep their bunkers topped off. Interesting. Go on," Jackson ordered.

"Four submarines are believed to be accompanying the group. We have rough positions on one, and we've lost two roughly here." Harrison's hand drew a rough circle on the display. "The location of number four is unknown, sir. We'll be working on that today."

"Our subs out there?" Jackson asked the group commander.

"*Santa Fe* in close and *Greeneville* holding between us and them.

Cheyenne is in closer to the battle group as gatekeeper," Rear Admiral Mike Dubro replied, sipping his morning coffee.

"Plan for the day, sir," Harrison went on, "is to launch four F/A-18 Echoes with tankers to head east to this point, designated POINT BAUXITE, from which they will turn northwest, approach to within thirty miles of the Indian battle group, loiter for thirty minutes, then return to BAUXITE to tank again and recover after a flight time of four hours, fortyfive minutes." For the four aircraft to do this, eight were needed to provide midair refueling support. One each on the way out and the return leg as well. That accounted for most of *Ike's* tanker assets.

"So we want them to think we're still over that way." Jackson nodded and smiled, without commenting on the wear-and-tear on the air crews that such a mission profile made necessary. "Still tricky, I see, Mike."

"They haven't gotten a line on us yet. We're going to keep it that way, too," Dubro added.

"How are the Bugs loaded?" Robby asked, using the service nickname for the F/A-18 Hornet, "Plastic Bug."

"Four Harpoons each. White ones," Dubro added. In the Navy, exercise missiles were color-coded blue. Warshots were generally painted white. The Harpoons were air-to-surface missiles. Jackson didn't have to ask about the Sidewinder and AMRAAM air-to-air missiles that were part of the Hornet's basic load. "What I want to know is, what the hell are they up to?" the battle-group commander observed quietly.

That was what everyone wanted to know. The Indian battle group—that was what they called it, because that's exactly what it was—had been at sea for eight days now, cruising off the south coast of Sri Lanka. The putative mission for the group was support for the Indian Army's peace-keeping team, whose job was to ameliorate the problem with the Tamil Tigers. Except for one thing: the Tamil Tigers were cosseted on the *northern* part of the island nation, and the Indian fleet was to the south. The Indian two-carrier force was maneuvering constantly to avoid merchant traffic, beyond sight of land, but within air range. Staying clear of the Sri Lankan Navy was an easy task. The largest vessel that country owned might have made a nice motor yacht for a nouveau-riche private citizen, but was no more formidable than that. In short, the Indian Navy was conducting a covert-presence operation far from where it was supposed to be. The presence of fleet-replenishment ships meant that they planned to be there for a while, and also that the Indians were gaining considerable at-sea time to conduct workups. The plain truth was that the Indian Navy was operating exactly as the U.S. Navy had done for generations. Except

that the United States didn't have any ambitions with Sri Lanka.

"Exercising every day?" Robby asked.

"They're being right diligent, sir," Harrison confirmed. "You can expect a pair of Harriers to form up with our Hornets, real friendly, like."

"I don't like it," Dubro observed. "Tell him about last week."

"That was a fun one to watch." Harrison called up the computerized records, which ran at faster-than-normal speed. "Start time for the exercise is about now, sir."

On the playback, Robby watched a destroyer squadron break off the main formation and head southwest, which had happened to be directly toward the *Lincoln* group at the time, causing a lot of attention in the group-operations department. On cue, the Indian destroyers had started moving randomly, then commenced a high-speed run due north. Their radars and radios blacked out, the team had then headed east, moving quickly.

"The DesRon commander knows his stuff. The carrier group evidently expected him to head east and duck under this stationary front. As you can see, their air assets headed that way." That miscue had allowed the destroyers to dart within missile-launch range before the Indian Harriers had leaped from their decks to attack the closing surface group.

In the ten minutes required to watch the computerized playback, Robby knew that he'd just seen a simulated attack on an enemy carrier group, launched by a destroyer team whose willingness to sacrifice their ships and their lives for this hazardous mission had been demonstrated to perfection. More disturbingly, the attack had been successfully carried out. Though the tin cans would probably have been sunk, their missiles, some of them anyway, would have penetrated the carriers' point defenses and crippled their targets. Large, robust ships though aircraft carriers were, it didn't require all that much damage to prevent them from carrying out flight operations. And that was as good as a kill. The Indians had the only carriers in this ocean, except for the Americans, whose presence, Robby knew, was a source of annoyance for them. The purpose of the exercise wasn't to take out their own carriers.

"Get the feeling they don't want us here?" Dubro asked with a wry smile.

"I get the feeling we need better intelligence information on their intentions. We don't have dick at the moment, Mike."

"Why doesn't that surprise me," Dubro observed. "What about their intentions toward Ceylon?" The older name for the nation was more easily remembered.

"Nothing that I know about." As deputy J-3, the planning

directorate for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Robby had access to literally everything generated by the U.S. intelligence community. “But what you just showed me says a lot.”

All you had to do was look at the display, where the water was, where the land was, where the ships were. The Indian Navy was cruising in such a way as to position itself between Sri Lanka and anyone who might approach from the south to come to Sri Lanka. Like the U.S. Navy, for example. It had practiced an attack on such a force. To that end, it was clearly prepared to remain at sea for a long time. If it was an exercise, it was an expensive one. If not? Well, you just couldn’t tell, could you?

“Where are their amphibs?”

“Not close,” Dubro answered. “Aside from that, I don’t know. I don’t have the assets to check, and I don’t have any intel on them. They have a total of sixteen LSTs, and I figure twelve of them can probably operate as a group. Figure they can move a heavy brigade with them, combat-loaded and ready to hit a beach somewhere. There’s a few choice sites on the north coast of that island. We can’t reach them from here, at least not very well. I need more assets, Robby.”

“There aren’t more assets to give, Mike.”

“Two subs. I’m not being greedy. You can see that.” The two SSNs would move to cover the Gulf of Mannar, and that was the most likely invasion area. “I need more intelligence support, too, Rob. You can see why.”

“Yep.” Jackson nodded. “I’ll do what I can. When do I leave?”

“Two hours.” He’d be flying off on an S-3 Viking antisubmarine aircraft. The “Hoover,” as it was known, had good range. That was important. He’d be flying to Singapore, the better to give the impression that Dubro’s battle group was southeast of Sri Lanka, not southwest. Jackson reflected that he would have flown twenty-four thousand miles for what was essentially a half hour’s worth of briefing and the look in the eyes of an experienced carrier aviator. Jackson slid his chair back on the tiled floor as Harrison keyed the display to a smaller scale. It now showed *Abraham Lincoln* heading northeast from Diego Garcia, adding an additional air wing to Dubro’s command. He’d need it. The operational tempo required to cover the Indians—especially to do so deceptively—was putting an incredible strain on men and aircraft. There was just too much ocean in the world for eight working aircraft carriers to handle, and nobody back in Washington understood that. *Enterprise* and *Stennis* were working up to relieve *Ike* and Abe in a few months, and even that meant there would be a time when U.S. presence in this area would be short. The Indians would know that, too. You just couldn’t conceal the return time of the battle groups from the families. The word would get out, and the

Indians would hear it, and what would they be doing then?

"Hi, Clarice." Murray stood up for his luncheon guest. He thought of her as his own Dr. Ruth. Short, a tiny bit overweight, Dr. Golden was in her middle fifties, with twinkling blue eyes and a face that always seemed on the edge of delivering the punch line of a particularly good joke. It was that similarity between them that had fostered their bond. Both were bright, serious professionals, and both had elegant intellectual disguises. Hearty-fellow and hearty-ladywell-met, the life of whatever party they might attend, but under the smiles and the chuckles were keen minds that missed little and collected much. Murray thought of Golden as one hell of a potential cop. Golden had much the same professional evaluation of Murray.

"To what do I owe this honor, ma'am?" Dan asked in his usual courtly voice. The waiter delivered the menus, and she waited pleasantly for him to depart. It was Murray's first clue, and though the smile remained fixed on his face, his eyes focused in a little more sharply on his diminutive lunch guest.

"I need some advice, Mr. Murray," Golden replied, giving another signal. "Who has jurisdiction over a crime committed on federal property?"

"The Bureau, always," Dan answered, leaning back in his seat and checking his service pistol. Business to Murray was enforcing the law, and feeling his handgun in its accustomed place acted as a sort of personal touchstone, a reminder that, elevated and important as the sign on his office door said he was today, he had started out doing bank robberies in the Philadelphia Field Division, and his badge and gun still made him a sworn member of his country's finest police agency.

"Even on Capitol Hill?" Clarice asked.

"Even on Capitol Hill," Murray repeated. Her subsequent silence surprised him. Golden was never reticent about much. You always knew what she was thinking——well, Murray amended, you knew what she wanted you to know. She played her little games, just as he did. "Talk to me, Dr. Golden."

"Rape."

Murray nodded, setting the menu down. "Okay, first of all, please tell me about your patient."

"Female, age thirty-five, single, never married. She was referred to me by her gynecologist, an old friend. She came to me clinically depressed. I've had three sessions with hour."

Only three, Murray thought. Clarice was a witch at this stuff, so perceptive. Jesus, what an interrogator she would have made with her

gentle smile and quiet motherly voice.

"When did it happen?" Names could wait for the moment. Murray would start with the barest facts of the case.

"Three years ago."

The FBI agent—he still preferred "Special Agent" to his official title of Deputy Assistant Director—frowned immediately. "Long time, Clarice. No forensics, I suppose."

"No, it's her word against his—except for one thing." Golden reached into her purse and pulled out photocopies of the Beringer letter, blown up in the copying process. Murray read through the pages slowly while Dr. Golden watched his face for reaction.

"Holy shit," Dan breathed while the waiter hovered twenty feet away, thinking his guests were a reporter and a source, as was hardly uncommon in Washington. "Where's the original?"

"In my office. I was very careful handling it," Golden told him.

That made Murray smile. The monogrammed paper was an immediate help. In addition, paper was especially good at holding fingerprints, especially if kept tucked away in a cool, dry place, as such letters usually were. The Senate aide in question would have been fingerprinted as part of her security-clearance process, which meant the likely author of this document could be positively identified. The papers gave time, place, events, and also announced her desire to die. Sad as it was, it made this document something akin to a dying declaration, therefore, arguably, admissible in federal district court as evidentiary material in a criminal case. The defense attorney would object—they always did—and the objection would be overruled—it always was—and the jury members would hear every word, leaning forward as they always did to catch the voice from the grave. Except in this case it wouldn't be a jury, at least not at first.

Murray didn't like anything about rape cases. As a man and a cop, he viewed that class of criminal with special contempt. It was a smudge on his own manhood that someone could commit such a cowardly, foul act. More professionally disturbing was the troublesome fact that rape cases so often came down to one person's word against another's. Like most investigative cops, Murray distrusted all manner of eyewitness testimony. People were poor observers—it was that simple—and rape victims, crushed by the experience, often made poor witnesses, their testimony further attacked by the defense counsel. Forensic evidence, on the other hand, was something you could prove, it was incontrovertible. Murray loved that sort of evidence.

"Is it enough to begin a criminal investigation?"

Murray looked up and spoke quietly: "Yes, ma'am."

"And who he is—"

"My current job—well, I'm sort of the street-version of the executive assistant to Bill Shaw. You don't know Bill, do you?"

"Only by reputation."

"It's all true," Murray assured her. "We were classmates at Quantico, and we broke in the same way, in the same place, doing the same thing. A crime is a crime, and we're cops, and that's the name of the song, Clarice."

But even as his mouth proclaimed the creed of his agency, his mind was saying, *Holy shit.* There was a great big political dimension to this one. The President didn't need the trouble. Well, who ever needed this sort of thing? For goddamned sure, Barbara Linders and Lisa Beringer didn't need to be raped by someone they'd trusted. But the real bottom line was simple: thirty years earlier, Daniel E. Murray had graduated from the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, had raised his right hand to the sky and sworn an oath to God. There were gray areas. There always would be. A good agent had to use his judgment, know which laws could be bent, and how far. But not this far, and not this law. Bill Shaw was of the same cut. Blessed by fate to occupy a position as apolitical as an office in Washington, D.C., could be, Shaw had built his reputation on integrity, and was too old to change. A case like this would start in his seventh-floor office.

"I have to ask, is this for-real?"

"My best professional judgment is that my patient is telling the truth in every detail."

"Will she testify?"

"Yes."

"Your evaluation of the letter?"

"Also quite genuine, psychologically speaking." Murray already knew that from his own experience, but someone—first he, then other agents, and ultimately a jury—needed to hear it from a pro.

"Now what?" the psychologist asked.

Murray stood, to the surprised disappointment of the hovering waiter. "Now we drive down to headquarters and meet with Bill. We'll get case agents in to set up a file. Bill and I and the case agent will walk across the street to the Department and meet with the Attorney General. After that, I don't know exactly. We've never had one like this—not since the early seventies, anyway—and I'm not sure of procedure just yet. The usual stuff with your patient. Long, tough interviews. We'll talk to Ms. Beringer's family, friends, look for papers, diaries. But that's the technical side. The political side will be touchy." And for that reason, Dan knew, he'd be the man running the case. Another *Holy shit!* crossed his mind, as he remembered the part in the Constitution that would govern the whole procedure. Dr. Golden saw the wavering in his eyes and, rare for her, misread what it meant.

"My patient needs—"

Murray blinked. *So what?* he asked himself. *It's still a crime.*

"I know, Clarice. She needs justice. So does Lisa Beringer. You know what? So does the government of the United States of America."

He didn't look like a computer-software engineer. He wasn't at all scruffy. He wore a pinstriped suit, carried a briefcase. He might have said that it was a disguise required by his clientele and the professional atmosphere of the area, but the simple truth was that he preferred to look neat.

The procedure was just as straightforward as it could be. The client used Stratus mainframes, compact, powerful machines that were easily networked—in fact they were the platform of choice for many bulletin-board services because of their reasonable price and high electronic reliability. There were three of them in the room. "Alpha" and "Beta"—so labeled with white letters on blue plastic boards—were the primaries, and took on the front-line duties on alternate days, with one always backing up the other. The third machine, "Zulu," was the emergency backup, and whenever Zulu was operating, you knew that a service team was either already there or on the way. Another facility, identical in every way except for the number of people around, was across the East River, with a different physical location, different power source, different phone lines, different satellite uplinks. Each building was a high-rise fire-resistant structure with an automatic sprinkler system around the computer room, and a DuPont 1301 system inside of it, the better to eliminate a fire in seconds. Each system-trio had battery backups sufficient to run the hardware for twelve hours. New York safety and environmental codes perversely did not allow the presence of emergency generators in the buildings, an annoyance to the systems engineers who were paid to worry about such things. And worry they did, despite the fact that the duplication, the exquisite redundancies that in a military context were called "defense in depth," would protect against anything and everything that could be imagined.

Well, nearly everything.

On the front service panel of each of the mainframes was an SCSI port. This was an innovation for the new models, an implicit bow to the fact that desktop computers were so powerful that they could upload important information far more easily than the old method of hanging a tape reel.

In this case, the upload terminal was a permanent fixture of the system. Attached to the overall system control panel which controlled Alpha, Beta, and Zulu was a third-generation Power PC, and attached

to it in turn was a Bernoulli removable-disk drive. Colloquially known as a "toaster" because its disk was about the size of a piece of bread, this machine had a gigabyte of storage, far more than was needed for this program.

"Okay?" the engineer asked.

The system controller moved his mouse and selected Zulu from his screen of options. A senior operator behind him confirmed that he'd made the right selection. Alpha and Beta were doing their normal work, and could not be disturbed.

"You're up on Zulu, Chuck."

"Roger that," Chuck replied with a smile. The pinstriped engineer slid the cartridge into the slot and waited for the proper icon to appear on the screen. He clicked on it, opening a new window to reveal the contents of PORTA-1, his name for the cartridge.

The new window had only two items in it: INSTALLER and ELECTRA-CLERK-2.4.0. An automatic antivirus program immediately swept through the new files, and after five seconds pronounced them clean.

"Looking good, Chuck," the sys-con told him. His supervisor nodded concurrence.

"Well, gee, Rick, can I deliver the baby now?"

"Hit it."

Chuck Searls selected the INSTALL icon and doubleclicked it.

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO REPLACE "ELECTRA-CLERK 2.3.1" WITH NEW PROGRAM "ELECTRA-CLERK 2.4.0"?

a box asked him. Searls clicked the "YES" box.

ARE YOU REALLY sure????

another box asked immediately.

"Who put that in?"

"I did," the sys-con answered with a grin.

"Funny." Searls clicked YES again.

The toaster drive started humming. Searls liked systems that you could hear as they ran, the *whip-whip* sounds of the moving heads added to the whir of the rotating disk. The program was only fifty megabytes. The transfer took fewer seconds than were needed for him to open his bottle of spring water and take a sip.

"Well," Searls asked as he slid his chair back from the console, "you want to see if it works?"

He turned to look out. The computer room was walled in with glass

panels, but beyond them he could see New York Harbor. A cruise liner was heading out; medium size, painted white. Heading where? he wondered. Someplace warm, with white sand and blue skies and a nice bright sun all the time. Someplace a hell of a lot different from New York City, he was sure of that. Nobody took a cruise to a place like the Big Apple. How nice to be on that ship, heading away from the blustery winds of fall. How much nicer still not to return on it, Searls thought with a wistful smile. Well, airplanes were faster, and you didn't have to ride them back either.

The sys-con, working on his control console, brought Zulu on-line. At 16:10:00 EST, the backup machine started duplicating the jobs being done by Alpha, and simultaneously backed up by Beta. With one difference. The throughput monitor showed that Zulu was running slightly faster. On a day like this, Zulu normally tended to fall behind, but now it was running so fast that the machine was actually "resting" for a few seconds each minute.

"Smokin', Chuck!" the sys-con observed. Searls drained his water bottle, dropped it in the nearest trash bucket, and walked over.

"Yeah, I cut out about ten thousand lines of code. It wasn't the machines, it was the program. It just took us a while to figure the right paths through the boards. I think we have it now."

"What's different?" the senior controller asked. He knew quite a bit about software design.

"I changed the hierarchy system, how it hands things off from one parallel board to another. Still needs a little work on synchronicity, tally isn't as fast as posting. I think I can beat that in another month or two, cut some fat out of the front end."

The sys-con punched a command for the first benchmark test. It came up at once. "Six percent faster than twopoint-three-point-one. Not too shabby."

"We needed that six percent," the supervisor said, meaning that he needed more. Trades just ran too heavy sometimes, and like everyone in the Depository Trust Company, he lived in fear of falling behind.

"Send me some data at the end of the week and maybe I can deliver a few more points to you," Searls promised.

"Good job, Chuck."

"Thanks, Bud."

"Who else uses this?"

"This version? Nobody. A custom variation runs the machines over at CHIPS."

"Well, you're the man," the supervisor noted generously. He would have been less generous had he thought it through. The supervisor had helped design the entire system. All the redundancies, all the safety systems, the way that tapes were pulled off the machines every

night and driven upstate. He'd worked with a committee to establish every safeguard that was necessary to the business he was in. But the quest for efficiency—and perversely, the quest for security—had created a vulnerability to which he was predictably blind. All the computers used the same software. They had to. Different software in the different computers, like different languages in an office, would have prevented, or at the very least impeded, cross-talk among the individual systems; and that would have been self-defeating. As a result, despite all the safeguards there was a single common point of vulnerability for all six of his machines. They all spoke the same language. They had to. They were the most important, if the least known, link in the American trading business.

Even here, DTC was not blind to the potential hazard. ELECTRA-CLERK 2.4.0 would not be uploaded to Alpha and Beta until it had run for a week on Zulu, and then another week would pass before they were loaded onto the backup site, whose machines were labeled "Charlie," "Delta," and "Tango." That was to ensure that 2.4.0 was both efficient and "crash-worthy," an engineering term that had come into the software field a year earlier. Soon, people would get used to the new software, marvel at its faster speed. All the Stratus machines would speak exactly the same programming language, trade information back and forth in an electronic conversation of ones and zeros, like friends around a card table talking business.

Soon they would all know the same joke. Some would think it a good one, but not anyone at DTC.

3

Collegium

"So, we're agreed?" the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board asked. Those around the table nodded. It wasn't that hard a call. For the second time in the past three months, President Durling had made it known, quietly, through the Secretary of the Treasury, that he would not object to another half-point rise in the Discount Rate. That was the interest rate which the Federal Reserve charged to banks that borrowed money—where else would they borrow such sums, except from the Fed? Any rise in that rate, of course, was passed immediately on to the consumer.

It was a constant balancing act, for the men and women around the polished oak table. They controlled the quantity of money in the American economy. As though by turning the valve that opened or closed the floodgate on an irrigation dam, they could regulate the amount of currency that existed, trying always not to provide too much or too little.

It was more complex than that, of course. Money had little physical reality. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, located less than a mile away, had neither the paper nor the ink to make enough one-dollar bills for what the Fed parceled out every day. "Money" was mainly an electronic expression, a matter of sending a message: *You, First National Bank of Podunk, now have an additional three million dollars which you may lend to Joe's Hardware, or Jeff Brown's Gas-and-Go, or for new homeowners to borrow as mortgage loans to pay back for the next twenty years.* Few of these people were paid in cash—with credit cards there was less for a robber to steal, an employee to embezzle, or most inconveniently of all, a clerk to count, recount, and walk to the local branch of the bank. As a result, what appeared by the magic of computer E-mail or teleprinter message was lent out by written draft, to be repaid later by yet another theoretical expression, usually a check written on a small slip of special paper, often decorated with the picture of a flying eagle or a fishing boat on some lake that didn't exist, because the banks competed for customers and people liked such things.

The power of the people in this room was so stunning that even

they rarely thought about it. By a simple decision, the people around the table had just made everything in America cost more. Every adjustable-rate mortgage for every home, every auto loan, every credit card revolving line, would become more expensive every month. Because of that decision, every business and household in America would have less disposable income to spend on employee benefits or Christmas toys. What began as a press release would reach into every wallet in the nation. Prices would increase on every consumer item from home computers to bubble gum, thus reducing further still everyone's real buying power.

And this was good, the Fed thought. All the statistical indicators said the economy was running a little too hot. There was a real danger of increasing inflation. In fact, there was always inflation to one degree or another, but the interest raise would limit it to tolerable levels. Prices would still go up somewhat, and the increase in the discount rate would make them go up further still.

It was an example of fighting fire with fire. Raising interest rates meant that, at the margin, people would borrow less, which would actually reduce the amount of money in circulation, which would lessen the buying pressure, which would cause prices to stabilize, more or less, and prevent something that all knew to be more harmful than a momentary blip in interest rates.

Like ripples expanding from a stone tossed into a lake, there would be other effects still. The interest on Treasury bills would increase. These were debt instruments of the government itself. People—actually institutions for the most part, like banks and pension funds and investment firms that had to park their clients' money somewhere while waiting for a good opportunity on the stock market—would give money, electronically, to the government for a term varying from three months to thirty years, and in return for the use of that money, the government itself had to pay interest (much of it recouped in taxes, of course). The marginal increase in the Federal-funds rate would raise the interest rate the government had to pay—determined at an auction. Thus the cost of the federal deficit would also increase, forcing the government to pull in more of the domestic money supply, reducing the pool of money available to personal and business loans and further increasing interest rates for the public through market forces over and above what the Fed enforced itself.

Finally, the mere fact that bank and T-Bill rates would increase made the stock market less attractive to investors because the government-guaranteed return was "safer" than the more speculative rate of return anticipated by a company whose products and/or services had to compete in the marketplace.

On Wall Street, individual investors and professional managers who

monitored economic indicators took the evening news (increases in the Fed rate were usually timed for release after the close of the markets) phlegmatically and made the proper notes to "go short on" (sell) their positions in some issues. This would reduce the posted values of numerous stocks, causing the Dow Jones Industrial Average to sink. Actually, it was not an average at all, but the sum of the current market value of thirty blue-chip stocks, with Allied Signal on one end of the alphabet, Woolworth's on the other, and Merck in the middle. It was an indicator whose utility today was mainly that of giving the news media something to report to the public, which for the most part didn't know what it represented anyway. The dip in "the Dow" would make some people nervous, causing more selling, and more decline in the market until others saw opportunity in stock issues that had been depressed farther than they deserved to be. Sensing that the true value of those issues was higher than the market price indicated, they would buy in measured quantities, allowing the Dow (and other market indicators) to increase again until a point of equilibrium was reached, and confidence restored. And all these multifaceted changes were imposed on everyone's individual lives by a handful of people in an ornate boardroom in Washington, D.C., whose names few investment professionals even knew, much less the general public.

The remarkable thing was that everyone accepted the entire process, seemingly as normal as physical laws of nature, despite the fact that it was really as ethereal as a rainbow. The money did not physically exist. Even "real" money was only specially made paper printed with black ink on the front and green on the back. What backed the money was not gold or something of intrinsic value, but rather the collective belief that money *had* value because it *had to have* such value. Thus it was that the monetary system of the United States and every other country in the world was entirely an exercise in psychology, a thing of the mind, and as a result, so was every other aspect of the American economy. If money was simply a matter of communal faith, then so was everything else. What the Federal Reserve had done that afternoon was a measured exercise in first shaking that faith and then allowing it to reestablish itself of its own accord through the minds of those who held it. Holders of that faith included the governors of the Fed, because they truly understood it all —or thought that they did. Individually they might joke that nobody really understood how it all worked, any more than any of them could explain the nature of God, but like theologians constantly trying to determine and communicate the nature of a deity, it was their job to keep things moving, to make the belief-structure real and tangible, never quite acknowledging that it all rested on nothing even as real as

the paper currency they carried with them for the times when the use of a plastic credit card was inconvenient.

They were trusted, in the distant way that people trusted their clergy, to maintain the structure on which worldly faith always depended, proclaiming the reality of something that could not be seen, an edifice whose physical manifestations were found only in buildings of stone and the sober looks of those who worked there. And, they told themselves, it all worked. Didn't it?

In many ways Wall Street was the one part of America in which Japanese citizens, especially those from Tokyo itself, felt most at home. The buildings were so tall as to deny one a look at the sky, the streets so packed that a visitor from another planet might think that yellow cabs and black limousines were the primary form of life here. People moved along the crowded, dirty sidewalks in bustling anonymity, eyes rigidly fixed forward both to show purpose and to avoid even visual contact with others who might be competitors or, more likely, were just in the way. The whole city of New York had taken its demeanor from this place, brusque, rapid, impersonal, tough in form, but not in substance. Its inhabitants told themselves that they were where the action was, and were so fixed on their individual and collective goals that they resented all the others who felt precisely the same way. In that sense it was a perfect world. Everyone felt exactly the same. Nobody gave much of a damn about anyone else. At least, that's the way it appeared. In truth, the people who worked here had spouses and children, interests and hobbies, desires and dreams, just like anybody else, but between the hours of eight in the morning and six in the evening all that was subordinated to the rules of their business. The business, of course, was money, a class of product that knew no place or loyalty. And so it was that on the fiftyeighth floor of Six Columbus Lane, the new headquarters building of the Columbus Group, a changeover was taking place.

The room was breathtaking in every possible aspect. The walls were solid walnut, not veneer, and lovingly maintained by a well-paid team of craftsmen. Two of the walls were polished glass that ran from the carpet to the Celotex ceiling panels, and offered a view of New York Harbor and beyond. The carpet was thick enough to swallow up shoes — and to deliver a nasty static shock, which the people here had learned to tolerate. The conference table was forty feet of red granite, and the chairs around it priced out at nearly two thousand dollars each.

The Columbus Group, founded only eleven years before, had gone from being just one more upstart, to *enfant terrible,* to bright rising

light, to serious player, to among the best in its field, to its current position as a cornerstone of the mutual-funds community. Founded by George Winston, the company now controlled a virtual fleet of fund-management teams. The three primary teams were fittingly called Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria, because when Winston had founded the company, at the age of twenty-nine, he'd just read and been captivated by Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of the New World*, and, marveling at the courage, vision, and sheer *chutzpah* of the restless navigators from Prince Henry's school, he'd decided to chart his own course by their example. Now forty, and rich beyond the dreams of avarice, it was time to leave, to smell the roses, to take his ninety-foot sailing yacht on some extended cruises. In fact, his precise plans were to spend the next few months learning how to sail *Cristobol* as expertly as he did everything else in his life, and then to duplicate the voyages of discovery, one every summer, until he ran out of examples to follow, and then maybe write his own book about it.

He was a man of modest size that his personality seemed to make larger. A fitness fanatic—stress was the prime killer on the Street—Winston positively glowed with the confidence imparted by his superb conditioning. He walked into the already-full conference room with the air of a President-elect entering his headquarters after the conclusion of a successful campaign, his stride fast and sure, his smile courtly and guileless. Pleased with this culmination of his professional life on this day, he even nodded his head to his principal guest.

"Yamata-san, so good to see you again," George Winston said with an extended hand. "You came a long way for this."

"For an event of this importance," the Japanese industrialist replied, "how could I not?"

Winston escorted the smaller man to his seat at the far end of the table before returning toward his own at the head. There were teams of lawyers and investment executives in between—rather like football squads at the line of scrimmage, Winston thought, as he walked the length of the table, guarding his own feelings as he did so.

It was the only way out, damn it, Winston told himself. Nothing else would have worked. The first six years running this place had been the greatest exhilaration of his life. Starting with less than twenty clients, building their money and his reputation at the same time. Working at home, he remembered, his brain racing to outstrip his paces across the room, one computer and one dedicated phone line, worried about feeding his family, blessed by the support of his loving wife despite the fact that she'd been pregnant the first time—with twins, no less, and *still* she'd never missed a chance to express her love and confidence—parlaying his skill and instinct into success. By thirty-

five it had all been done, really. Two floors of a downtown office tower, his own plush office, a team of bright young "rocket scientists" to do the detail work. That was when he'd first thought about getting out.

In building up the funds of his clients, he'd bet his own money, too, of course, until his personal fortune, after taxes, was six hundred fifty-seven million dollars. Basic conservatism would not allow him to leave his money behind, and besides, he was concerned about where the market was heading, and so he was taking it all out, cashing in and switching over to a more conservative manager. It seemed a strange course of action even to himself, but he just didn't want to be *bothered* with this business anymore. Going "conservative" was dull, and would necessarily cast away enormous future opportunities, but, he'd asked himself for years, what was the point? He owned six palatial homes, two personal automobiles at each, a helicopter, he leased a personal jet, *Cristobal* was his principal toy. He had everything he'd ever wanted, and even with conservative portfolio management, his personal wealth would continue to rise faster than the inflation rate because he didn't have the ego to spend even as much as the annualized return would generate. And so he'd parcel it out in fifty-million-dollar blocks, covering every segment of the market through investment colleagues who had not achieved his personal success, but whose integrity and acumen he trusted. The switchover had been under way for three years, very quietly, as he'd searched for a worthy successor for the Columbus Group. Unfortunately, the only one who'd stepped forward was this little bastard.

"Ownership" was the wrong term, of course. The true owners of the group were the individual investors who gave their money to his custody, and that was a trust which Winston never forgot. Even with his decision made, his conscience clawed at him. Those people relied on him and his people, but him most of all, because his was the name on the most important door. The trust of so many people was a heavy burden which he'd borne with skill and pride, but enough was enough. It was time to attend to the needs of his own family, five kids and a faithful wife who were tired of "understanding" why Daddy had to be away so much. The needs of the many. The needs of the few. But the few were closer, weren't they?

Raizo Yamata was putting in much of his personal fortune and quite a bit of the corporate funds of his many industrial operations in order to make good the funds that Winston was taking out. Quiet though Winston might wish it to be, and understandable as his action surely was to anyone with a feel for the business, it would still become cause for comment. Therefore it was necessary that the man replacing him

be willing to put his own money back in. That sort of move would restore any wavering confidence. It would also cement the marriage between the Japanese and American financial systems. While Winston watched, instruments were signed that "enabled" the funds transfer for which international-bank executives had stayed late at their offices in six countries. A man of great personal substance, Raizo Yamata.

Well, Winston corrected himself, great personal liquidity. Since leaving the Wharton School, he'd known a lot of bright, sharp operators, all of them cagey, intelligent people who'd tried to hide their predatory nature behind façades of humor and bonhomie. You soon developed an instinct for them. It was that simple. Perhaps Yamata thought that his heritage made him more unreadable, just as he doubtless thought himself to be smarter than the average bear—or bull in this case, Winston smiled to himself. Maybe, maybe not, he thought, looking down the forty-foot table. Why was there no excitement in the man? The Japanese had emotions, too. Those with whom he'd done business had been affable enough, pleased as any other man to make a big hit on the Street. Get a few drinks into them and they were no different from Americans, really. Oh, a little more reserved, a little shy, perhaps, but always polite, that's what he liked best about them, their fine manners, something that would have been welcome in New Yorkers. That was it, Winston thought. Yamata *was* polite, but it wasn't genuine. It was pro forma with him, and shyness had nothing to do with it. Like a little robot....

No, that wasn't true either, Winston thought, as the papers slid down the table toward him. Yamata's wall was just thicker than the average, the better to conceal what he felt. Why had he built such a wall? It wasn't necessary here, was it? In this room he was among equals; more than that, he was now among partners. He had just signed over his money, placed his personal well-being in the same boat as so many others. By transferring nearly two hundred million dollars, he now owned over one percent of the funds managed by Columbus, which made him the institution's largest single investor. With that status came control of every dollar, share, and option the fund had. It wasn't the largest fleet on the Street by any means, but the Columbus Group was one of the leaders. People looked to Columbus for ideas and trends. Yamata had bought more than a trading house. He now had a real position in the hierarchy of America's money-managers. His name, largely unknown in America until recently, would now be spoken with respect, which was something that ought to have put a smile on his face, Winston thought. But it didn't.

The final sheet of paper got to his chair, slid across by one of his principal subordinates, and, with his signature, about to become

Yamata's. It was just so easy. One signature, a minute quantity of blue ink arranged in a certain way, and with it went eleven years of his life. One signature gave his business over to a man he didn't understand.

Well, I don't have to, do I? He'll try to make money for himself and others, just like I did. Winston took out his pen and signed without looking up. *Why didn't you look first?*

He heard a cork pop out of a champagne bottle and looked up to see the smiles on the faces of his former employees. In consummating the deal he'd become a symbol for them. Forty years old, rich, successful, retired, able to go after the fun dreams now, without having to stick around forever. That was the personal goal of everyone who worked in a place like this. Bright as these people were, few had the guts to give it a try. Even then, most of them failed, Winston reminded himself, but he was the living proof that it could happen. Tough-minded and cynical as these investment professionals were—or pretended to be—at heart they had the same dream, to make the pile and leave, get away from the incredible stress of finding opportunities in reams of paper reports and analyses, make a rep, draw people and their money in, do good things for them and yourself—and *leave.* The pot of gold was *in* the rainbow, and at the end was an exit. A sailboat, a house in Florida, another in the Virgins, another in Aspen . . . sleeping until eight sometimes; playing golf. It was a vision of the future which beckoned strongly.

But why not now?

Dear God, what had he done? Tomorrow morning he'd wake up and not know what to do. Was it possible to turn it off just like that?

A little late for that, George, he told himself, reaching for the offered glass of Moët, taking the obligatory sip. He raised his glass to toast Yamata, for that, too, was obligatory. Then he saw the smile, expected but surprising. It was the smile of a victorious man. Why that? Winston asked himself. He'd paid top dollar. It wasn't the sort of deal in which anyone had "won" or "lost." Winston was taking his money out, Yamata was putting his money in. And yet that smile. It was a jarring note, all the more so because he didn't understand it. His mind raced even as the bubbly wine slid down his throat. If only the smile had been friendly and gracious, but it wasn't. Their eyes met, forty feet apart, in a look that no one else caught, and despite the fact that there had been no battle fought and no victors identified, it was as though a war was being fought.

Why? Instincts. Winston immediately turned his loose. There was just something—what? A nastiness in Yamata. Was he one of those who viewed everything as combat? Winston had been that way once, but grown out of it. Competition was always tough, but civilized. On

the Street everyone competed with everyone else, too, for security, advice, consensus, and competition, which was tough but friendly so long as everyone obeyed the same rules.

You're not in that game, are you? he wanted to ask, too late.

Winston tried a new ploy, interested in the game that had started so unexpectedly. He lifted his glass, and silently toasted his successor while the other people in the room chattered across the table. Yamata reciprocated the gesture, and his mien actually became more arrogant, radiating contempt at the stupidity of the man who had just sold out to him.

You were so good at concealing your feelings before, why not now? You really think you're the cat's ass, that you've done something . . . bigger than I know. What?

Winston looked away, out the windows to the mirror-calm water of the harbor. He was suddenly bored with the game, uninterested in whatever competition that little bastard thought himself to have won. *Hell*, he told himself, *I'm out of here. I've lost nothing. I've gained my freedom. I've got my money. I've got everything. Okay, fine, you can run the house and make your money, and have a seat in any club or restaurant in town, whenever you're here, and tell yourself how important you are, and if you think that's a victory, then it is. But it's not a victory over anyone,* Winston concluded.

It was too bad. Winston had caught everything, as he usually did, identified all the right elements. But for the first time in years, he'd failed to assemble them into the proper scenario. It wasn't his fault. He understood his own game completely, and had merely assumed, wrongly, that it was the only game in town.

Chet Nomuri worked very hard not to be an American citizen. His was the fourth generation of his family in the U.S.—the first of his ancestors had arrived right after the turn of the century and before the "Gentlemen's Agreement" between Japan and America restricting further immigration. It would have insulted him had he thought about it more. Of greater insult was what had happened to his grandparents and great-grandparents despite full U.S. citizenship. His grandfather had leaped at the chance to prove his loyalty to his country, and served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, returning home with two Purple Hearts and mastersergeant stripes only to find that the family business—office supplies—had been sold off for a song and his family sent to an intern camp. With stoic patience, he had started over, built it up with a new and unequivocal name, Veteran's Office Furniture, and made enough money to send his three sons through college and beyond. Chet's own father was a vascular surgeon, a

small, jolly man who'd been born in government captivity, and whose parents, for that reason—and to please *his* grandfather—had maintained some of the traditions, such as language.

Done it pretty well, too, Nomuri thought. He'd overcome his accent problems in a matter of weeks, and now, sitting in the Tokyo bathhouse, everyone around him wondered which prefecture he had come from. Nomuri had identification papers for several. He was a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, perversely on assignment for the U.S. Department of Justice, and completely without the knowledge of the U.S. Department of State. One of the things he had learned from his surgeon father was to fix his eyes forward to the things he could do, not back at things he couldn't change. In this the Nomuri family had bought into America, quietly, undramatically, and successfully, Chet told himself, sitting up to his neck in hot water.

The rules of the bath were perfectly straightforward. You could talk about everything but business, and you could even talk about that, but only the gossip, not the substantive aspects of how you made your money and your deals. Within those loose constraints, seemingly everything was open for discussion in a surprisingly casual forum in this most structured of societies. Nomuri got there at about the same time every day, and had been doing so long enough that the people he met were on a similar schedule, knew him, and were comfortable with him. He already knew everything there was to know about their wives and families, as they did about his—or rather, about the fictional "legend" that he'd built himself and which was now as real to him as the Los Angeles neighborhood in which he'd come to manhood.

"I need a mistress," Kazuo Taoka said, hardly for the first time. "My wife, all she wants to do is watch television since our son is born."

"All they ever do is complain," another salaryman agreed. There was a concurring series of grunts from the other men in the pool.

"A mistress is expensive," Nomuri noted from his corner of the bath, wondering what the wives complained about in their bathing pools. "In money and time."

Of the two, time was the more important. Each of the young executives—well, not really that, but the borderline between what in America would seem a clerkship and a real decision-making post was hazy in Japan—made a good living, but the price for it was to be bound as tightly to his corporation as one of Tennessee Ernie Ford's coal miners. Frequently up before dawn, commuting to work mainly by train from outlying suburbs, they worked in crowded offices, worked hard and late, and went home most often to find wives and children asleep. Despite what he'd learned from TV and research before coming over here, it still came as a shock to Nomuri that the pressures of business might actually be destroying the social fabric of

the country, that the structure of the family itself was damaged. It was all the more surprising because the strength of the Japanese family unit was the only thing that had enabled his own ancestors to succeed in an America where racism had been a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

"Expensive, yes," Taoka agreed morosely, "but where else can a man get what he needs?"

"That is true," another said on the other side of the pool. Well, not really a pool, but too big for a tub. "It costs too much, but what is it worth to be a man?"

"Easier for the bosses," Nomuri said next, wondering where this would lead. He was still early in his assignment, still building the foundation for embarking on his real mission, taking his time, as he'd been ordered to do by Ed and Mary Pat.

"You should see what Yamata-san has going for him," another salaryman observed with a dark chuckle.

"Oh?" Taoka asked.

"He is friendly with Goto," the man went on with a conspiratorial look.

"The politician—ah, yes, of course!"

Nomuri leaned back and closed his eyes, letting the hundred-plus-degree water of the bath envelop him, not wanting to appear interested as his brain turned on its internal tape-recorder. "Politician," he murmured sleepily. "Hmph."

"I had to run some papers to Yamata-san last month, a quiet place not far from here. Papers about the deal he just made today, in fact. Goto was entertaining him. They let me in, I suppose Yamata-san wanted me to have a look. The girl with them . . ." His voice became slightly awed. "Tall and blonde, such fine bosoms."

"Where does one buy an American mistress?" another interjected coarsely.

"And she knew her place," the storyteller went on. "She sat there while Yamata-san went over the papers, waiting patiently. No shame in her at all. Such lovely bosoms," the man concluded.

So the stories about Goto are true, Nomuri thought. *How the hell do people like that make it so far in politics?* the field officer asked himself. Only a second later he reproved himself for the stupidity of the question. Such behavior in politicians dated back to the Trojan War and beyond.

"You cannot stop there," Taoka insisted humorously. The man didn't, elaborating on the scene and earning the rapt attention of the others, who already knew all the relevant information on the wives of all present, and were excited to hear the description of a "new" girl in every clinical detail.

"Who cares about them?" Nomuri asked crossly, with closed eyes. "They're too tall, their feet are too big, their manners are poor, and—"

"Let him tell the story," an excited voice insisted. Nomuri shrugged his submission to the collegial will while his mind recorded every word. The salaryman had an eye for detail, and in less than a minute Nomuri had a full physical description. The report would go through the Station Chief to Langley, because the CIA kept a file on the personal habits of politicians all over the world. There was no such thing as a useless fact, though he was hoping to get information of more immediate use than Goto's sexual proclivities.

The debriefing was held at the Farm, officially known as Camp Peary, a CIA training facility located off of Interstate 64 between Williamsburg and Yorktown, Virginia. Cold drinks were gunned down as rapidly as the cans could be popped open, as both men went over maps and explained the six weeks in-country that had ended so well. Corp, CNN said, was going to begin his trial in the following week. There wasn't much doubt about the outcome. Somewhere back in that equatorial country, somebody had already purchased about fifteen feet of three-quarter-inch manila rope, though both officers wondered where the lumber for the gallows would come from. Probably have to ship it in, Clark thought. They hadn't seen much in the way of trees.

"Well," Mary Patricia Foley said after hearing the final version. "Sounds like a good clean one, guys."

"Thank you, ma'am," Ding replied gallantly. "John sure shovels out a nice line of BS for people."

"That's experience for you," Clark noted with a chuckle. "How's Ed doing?"

"Learning his place," the Deputy Director for Operations replied with an impish grin. Both she and her husband had gone through the Farm together, and Clark had been one of their instructors. Once the best husband-wife team the Agency had, the truth of the matter was that Mary Pat had better instincts for working the field, and Ed was better at planning things out. Under those circumstances, Ed really should have had the senior position, but Mary Pat's appointment had just been too attractive, politically speaking, and in any case they still worked together, effectively co—Deputy Directors, though Ed's actual title was somewhat nebulous. "You two are due some time off, and by the way, you have an official attaboy from the other side of the river." That was not a first for either officer. "John, you know, it's really time for you to come back inside." By which she meant a permanent return to a training slot here in the Virginia Tidewater. The Agency was upsizing its human-intelligence assets—the bureaucratic term for

increasing the number of case officers (known as spies to America's enemies) to be deployed into the field. Mrs. Foley wanted Clark to help train them. After all, he'd done a good job with her and her husband, twenty years before.

"Not unless you want to retire me. I like it out there."

"He's dumb that way, ma'am," Chavez said with a sly grin. "I guess it comes with old age."

Mrs. Foley didn't argue the point. These two were among her best field teams, and she wasn't in that much of a hurry to break up a successful operation. "Fair enough, guys. You're released from the debrief. Oklahoma and Nebraska are on this afternoon."

"How are the kids, MP?" That was her service nickname, though not everybody had the rank to use it.

"Just fine, John. Thanks for asking." Mrs. Foley stood and walked to the door. A helicopter would whisk her back to Langley. She wanted to catch the game, too.

Clark and Chavez traded the look that comes with the conclusion of a job. Operation WALKMAN was now in the books, officially blessed by the Agency, and, in this case, by the White House.

"Miller time, Mr. C."

"I guess you want a ride, eh?"

"If you would be so kind, sir," Ding replied.

John Clark looked his partner over. Yes, he had cleaned himself up. The black hair was cut short and neat, the dark, heavy beard that had blurred his face in Africa was gone. He was even wearing a tie and white shirt under his suit jacket. Clark thought of the outfit as courting clothes, though on further reflection he might have recalled that Ding had once been a soldier, and that soldiers returning from the field liked to scrape off the physical reminders of the rougher aspects of their profession. Well, he could hardly complain that the lad was trying to look presentable, could he? Whatever faults Ding might have, John told himself, he always showed proper respect.

"Come on." Clark's Ford station wagon was parked in its usual place, and after fifteen minutes they pulled into the driveway of his house. Set outside the grounds of Camp Peary, it was an ordinary split-level rancher, emptier now than it had been. Margaret Pamela Clark, his elder daughter, was away at college, Marquette University in her case. Patricia Doris Clark had chosen a school closer to home, William and Mary in nearby Williamsburg, where she was majoring in pre-med. Patsy was at the door, already alerted for the arrival.

"Daddy!" A hug, a kiss, followed by something which had become somewhat more important. "Ding!" Just a hug in this case, Clark saw, not fooled for a moment.

"Hi, Pats." Ding didn't let go of her hand as he came into the house.

4

Activity

"Our requirements are different," the negotiator insisted.

"How is that?" his counterpart asked patiently.

"The steel, the design of the tank, these are unique. I am not an engineer myself, but the people who do the design work tell me this is so, and that their product will be damaged by the substitution of other parts. Now," he went on patiently, "there is also the issue of commonality of the parts. As you know, many of the cars assembled in Kentucky are shipped back to Japan for sale, and in the event of damage or the need for replacement, then the local supply will immediately be available for use. If we were to substitute the American components which you suggest, this would not be the case."

"Seiji, we are talking about a gasoline tank. It is made of—what? Five pieces of galvanized steel, bent and welded together, with a total internal capacity of nineteen gallons. There are no moving parts," the official of the State Department pointed out, interjecting himself into the process and playing his part as he was paid to do. He'd even done a good job of feigning exasperation when he'd used his counterpart's given name.

"Ah, but the steel itself, the formula, the proportions of different materials in the finished alloy, these have been optimized to the precise specifications required by the manufacturer—"

"Which are standardized all over the world."

"Sadly, this is not the case. Our specifications are most exacting, far more so than those of others, and, I regret to say, more exacting than those of the Deerfield Auto Parts Company. For that reason, we must sadly decline your request." Which put an end to this phase of the negotiations. The Japanese negotiator leaned back in his chair, resplendent in his Brooks Brothers suit and Pierre Cardin tie, trying not to gloat too obviously. He had a lot of practice in doing so, and was good at it: it was his deck of cards. Besides, the game was just getting easier, not harder.

"That is most disappointing," the representative of the U.S. Department of Commerce said. He hadn't expected otherwise, of course, and flipped the page to go on to the next item on the agenda

of the Domestic Content Negotiations. It was like a Greek play, he told himself, some cross between a Sophoclean tragedy and a comedy by Aristophanes. You knew exactly what was going to happen before you even started. In this he was right, but in a way he couldn't know.

The meat of the play had been determined months earlier, long before the negotiations had stumbled upon the issue, and in retrospect sober minds would certainly have called it an accident, just one more of the odd coincidences that shape the fate of nations and their leaders. As with most such events, it had begun with a simple error that had occurred despite the most careful of precautions. A bad electrical wire, of all things, had reduced the available current into a dip tank, thus reducing the charge in the hot liquid into which the steel sheets were dipped. That in turn had reduced the galvanizing process, and the steel sheets were in fact given merely a thin patina, while they appeared to be fully coated. The *non*-galvanized sheets were piled up on pallets, wrapped with steel bands for stability, and covered with plastic. The error would be further compounded in the finishing and assembly process.

The plant where it had happened was not part of the assembler. As with American firms, the big auto-assembly companies—which designed the cars and put their trademarks on them—bought most of the components from smaller parts-supply companies. In Japan the relationship between the bigger fish and the smaller ones was both stable and cutthroat: stable insofar as the business between the two sets of companies was generally one of long standing; cutthroat insofar as the demands of the assemblers were dictatorial, for there was always the threat that they would move their business to someone else, though this possibility was rarely raised openly. Only oblique references, usually a kindly comment on the state of affairs at another, smaller firm, a reference to the bright children of the owner of such a firm, or how the representative of the assembler had seen him at a ball game or bathhouse the previous week. The nature of the reference was less important than the content of the message, and that content always came through loud and clear. As a result, the little parts-companies were not the showcases of Japanese heavy industry that other nationalities had come to see and respect on worldwide television. The workers didn't wear company coveralls, didn't eat alongside management in plush cafeterias, didn't work in spotless, superbly organized assembly plants. The pay for these workers was also something other than the highly adequate wage structure of the assembly workers, and though the lifelong employment covenant was becoming fiction even for the elite workers, it had never existed at all

for the others.

At one of the nondescript metal-working shops, the bundles of not-quite-galvanized steel were unwrapped, and the individual sheets fed by hand to cutting machines. There the square sheets were mechanically sliced, and the edges trimmed—the surplus material was gathered and returned to the steel mill for recycling—so that each piece matched the size determined by the design, invariably to tolerances less than a millimeter, even for this fairly crude component which the owner's eyes would probably never behold. The larger cut pieces moved on to another machine for heating and bending, then were welded into an oval cylinder. Immediately thereafter the oval-cut end pieces were matched up and welded into place as well, by a machine process that required only one workman to supervise. Pre-cut holes in one side were matched up with the pipe that would terminate at the filler cap—there was another in the bottom for the line leading to the engine. Before leaving the jobber, the tanks were spray-coated with a wax-and-epoxy-based formula that would protect the steel against rust. The formula was supposed to bond with the steel, creating a firm union of disparate materials that would forever protect the gas tank against corrosion and resultant fuel leakage. An elegant and fairly typical piece of superb Japanese engineering, only in this case it didn't work because of the bad electrical cable at the steel plant. The coating never really attached itself to the steel, though it had sufficient internal stiffness to hold its shape long enough for visual inspection to be performed, and immediately afterwards the gas tanks proceeded by roller-conveyor to the boxing shop at the end of the smallparts plant. There the tanks were tucked into cardboard boxes fabricated by yet another jobber and sent by truck to a warehouse where half of the tanks were placed aboard other trucks for delivery to the assembly plant, and the other half went into identically sized cargo containers which were loaded aboard a ship for transport to the United States. There the tanks would be attached to a nearly identical automobile at a plant owned by the same international conglomerate, though this plant was located in the hills of Kentucky, not the Kwanto Plain outside of Tokyo.

All this had taken place months before the item had come onto the agenda of the Domestic Content Negotiations. Thousands of automobiles had been assembled and shipped with defective fuel tanks, and all had slipped through the usually excellent quality-assurance procedures at the assembly plants separated by six thousand miles of land and sea. In the case of those assembled in Japan, the cars had been loaded aboard some of the ugliest ships ever made, slab-sided auto-carriers which had the riding characteristics of barges as they plodded through the autumnal storms of the North Pacific Ocean.

The sea-salt in the air reached through the ships' ventilation systems to the autos. That wasn't too bad until one of the ships drove through a front, and cold air changed rapidly to warm, and the instant change in relative humidity interacted with that of the air within various fuel tanks, causing salt-heavy moisture to form on the exterior of the steel, inside the defective coating. There the salt immediately started working on the unprotected mild steel of the tank, rusting and weakening the thin metal that contained 92-octane gasoline.

Whatever his other faults, Corp met his death with dignity, Ryan saw. He had just finished watching a tape segment that CNN had judged unsuitable for its regular news broadcast. After a speech whose translation Ryan had on two sheets of paper in his lap, the noose was placed over his head and the trap was sprung. The CNN camera crew focused in on the body as it jerked to a stop, closing an entry on his country's ledger. Mohammed Abdul Corp. Bully, killer, drug-runner. Dead.

"I just hope we haven't created a martyr," Brett Hanson said, breaking the silence in Ryan's office.

"Mr. Secretary," Ryan said, turning his head to see his guest reading through a translation of Corp's last words. "Martyrs all share a single characteristic."

"What's that, Ryan?"

"They're all dead." Jack paused for effect. "This guy didn't die for God or his country. He died for committing crimes. They didn't hang him for killing Americans. They hanged him for killing his own people and for selling narcotics. That's not the stuff martyrs are made of. Case closed," Jack concluded, sticking the unread sheets of paper in his out basket. "Now, what have we learned about India?"

"Diplomatically speaking, nothing."

"Mary Pat?" Jack asked the CIA representative.

"There's a heavy mechanized brigade doing intensive training down south. We have overheads from two days ago. They seem to be exercising as a unit."

"Humint?"

"No assets in place," Mrs. Foley admitted, delivering what had become a CIA mantra. "Sorry, Jack. It'll be years before we can field people everywhere we want."

Ryan grumbled silently. Satellite photos were fine for what they were, but they were merely photographs. Photos only gave you shapes, not thoughts. Ryan needed thoughts. Mary Pat was doing her best to fix that, he remembered.

"According to the Navy, their fleet is very busy, and their pattern of

operations suggests a barrier mission." The satellites *did* show that the Indian Navy's collection of amphibious-warfare ships was assembled in two squadrons. One was at sea, roughly two hundred miles from its base, exercising together as a group. The other was alongside at the same naval base undergoing maintenance, also as a group. The base was distant from the brigade undergoing its own exercises, but there was a rail line from the army base to the naval one. Analysts were now checking the rail yards at both facilities on a daily basis. The satellites were good for that, at least.

"Nothing at all, Brett? We have a pretty good ambassador over there as I recall."

"I don't want him to press too hard. It could damage what influence and access we have," SecState announced. Mrs. Foley tried not to roll her eyes.

"Mr. Secretary," Ryan said patiently, "in view of the fact that we have neither information nor influence at the moment, anything he might develop will be useful. Do you want me to make the call or will you?"

"He works for me, Ryan." Jack waited a few beats before responding to the prod. He hated territorial fights, though they were seemingly the favorite sport in the executive branch of the government.

"He works for the United States of America. Ultimately he works for the President. My job is to tell the President what's going on over there, and I need information. Please turn him loose. He's got a CIA chief working for him. He has three uniformed attachés. I want them all turned loose. The object of the exercise is to classify what looks to the Navy and to me like preparations for a possible invasion of a sovereign country. We want to prevent that."

"I can't believe that India would really do such a thing," Brett Hanson said somewhat archly. "I've had dinner with their Foreign Minister several times, and he never gave me the slightest indication —"

"Okay." Ryan interrupted quietly to ease the pain he was about to inflict. "Fine, Brett. But intentions change, and they did give us the indicator that they want our fleet to go away. I want the information. I am requesting that you turn Ambassador Williams loose to rattle a few bushes. He's smart and I trust his judgment. That's a request on my part. I can ask the President to make it an order. Your call, Mr. Secretary."

Hanson weighed his options, and nodded agreement with as much dignity as he could summon. Ryan had just cleared up a situation in Africa that had gnawed at Roger Durling for two years, and so was the prettiest kid on the block, for the moment. It wasn't every day that a

government employee increased the chances for a President to get himself reelected. The suspicion that CIA had apprehended Corp had already made its way in the media, and was being only mildly denied in the White House pressroom. It was no way to conduct foreign policy, but that issue would be fought on another battlefield.

"Russia," Ryan said next, ending one discussion and beginning another.

The engineer at the Yoshinobu space-launch complex knew he was not the first man to remark on the beauty of evil. Certainly not in his country, where the national mania for craftsmanship had probably begun with the loving attention given to swords, the meter-long *katana* of the samurai. There, the steel was hammered, bent over, hammered again, and bent over again twenty times in a lamination process that resulted in over a million layers of steel made from a single original casting. Such a process required an immense amount of patience from the prospective owner, who would wait patiently even so, displaying a degree of downward-manners for which that period of his country was not famous. Yet so it had been, for the samurai needed his sword, and only a master craftsman could fabricate it.

But not today. Today's samurai—if you could call him that—used the telephone and demanded instant results. Well, he would still have to wait, the engineer thought, as he gazed at the object before him.

In fact, the thing before his eyes was an elaborate lie, but it was the cleverness of the lie, and its sheer engineering beauty that excited his self-admiration. The plug connections on the side of it were fake, but only six people here knew that, and the engineer was the last of them as he headed down the ladder from the top portion of the gantry tower to the next-lower level. From there, they would ride the elevator to the concrete pad, where a bus waited to carry them to the control bunker. Inside the bus, the engineer removed his white-plastic hard-hat and started to relax. Ten minutes later, he was in a comfortable swivel chair, sipping tea. His presence here and on the pad hadn't been necessary, but when you built something, you wanted to see it all the way through, and besides, Yamata-san would have insisted.

The H-11 booster was new. This was only the second test-firing. It was actually based on Soviet technology, one of the last major ICBM designs the Russians had built before their country had come apart, and Yamata-san had purchased the rights to the design for a song (albeit written in hard currency), then turned all the drawings and data over to his own people for modification and improvement. It hadn't been hard. Improved steel for the casing and better electronics

for the guidance system had saved fully 1,200 kilograms of weight, and further improvements in the liquid fuels had taken the performance of the rocket forward by a theoretical 17 percent. It had been a bravura performance by the design team, enough to attract the interest of NASA engineers from America, three of whom were in the bunker to observe. And wasn't *that* a fine joke?

The countdown proceeded according to plan. The gantry came back on its rails. Floodlights bathed the rocket, which sat atop the pad like a monument—but not the kind of monument the Americans thought.

"Hell of a heavy instrument package," a NASA observer noted.

"We want to certify our ability to orbit a heavy payload," one of the missile engineers replied simply.

"Well, here we go...."

The rocket-motor ignition caused the TV screens to flare briefly, until they compensated electronically for the brilliant power of the white flame. The H-11 booster positively leaped upward atop a column of flame and a trail of smoke.

"What did you do with the fuel?" the NASA man asked quietly.

"Better chemistry," his Japanese counterpart replied, watching not the screen but a bank of instruments. "Better quality control, purity of the oxidizer, mainly."

"They never were very good at that," the American agreed.

He just doesn't see what he sees, both engineers told themselves. Yamata-san was correct. It was amazing.

Radar-guided cameras followed the rocket upward into the clear sky. The H-11 climbed vertically for the first thousand feet or so, then curved over in a slow, graceful way, its visual signature diminishing to a white-yellow disk. The flight path became more and more horizontal until the accelerating rocket body was heading almost directly away from the tracking cameras.

"BECO," the NASA man breathed, just at the proper moment. BECO meant booster-engine cutoff, because he was thinking in terms of a space launcher. "And separation ... and second-stage ignition . . ." He got those terms right. One camera tracked the falling first stage, still glowing from residual fuel burnoff as it fell into the sea.

"Going to recover it?" the American asked.

"No."

All heads shifted to telemetric readouts when visual contact was lost. The rocket was still accelerating, exactly on its nominal performance curve, heading southeast. Various electronic displays showed the H-11's progress both numerically and graphically.

"Trajectory's a little high, isn't it?"

"We want a high-low orbit," the project manager explained. "Once we establish that we can orbit the weight, and we can certify the

accuracy of the insertion, the payload will deorbit in a few weeks. We don't wish to add more junk up there."

"Good for you. All the stuff up there, it's becoming a concern for our manned missions." The NASA man paused, then decided to ask a sensitive question. "What's your max payload?"

"Five metric tons, ultimately."

He whistled. "You think you can get that much performance off this bird?" Ten thousand pounds was the magic number. If you could put that much into low-earthorbit, you could then orbit geosynchronous communications satellites. Ten thousand pounds would allow for the satellite itself and the additional rocket motor required to attain the higher altitude. "Your trans-stage must be pretty hot."

The reply was, at first, a smile. "That is a trade secret."

"Well, I guess we'll see in about ninety seconds." The American turned in his chair to watch the digital telemetry. Was it possible they knew something he and his people didn't? He didn't think so, but just to make sure, NASA had an observation camera watching the H-11. The Japanese didn't know that, of course. NASA had tracking facilities all over the world to monitor U.S. space activity, and since they often had nothing to do, they kept track of all manner of things. The ones on Johnston Island and Kwajalein Atoll had originally been set up for SDI testing, and the tracking of Soviet missile launches.

The tracking camera on Johnston Island was called *Amber Ball*, and its crew of six picked up the H-11, having been cued on the launch by a Defense Support Program satellite, which had also been designed and orbited to give notice of Soviet launches. Something from another age, they all told themselves.

"Sure looks like a -19," the senior technician observed to general agreement.

"So does the trajectory," another said after a check of range and flight path.

"Second stage cutoff and separation, trans-stage and payload are loose now . . . getting a small adjustment burn—whoa!"

The screen went white.

* * *

"Signal lost, telemetry signal lost!" a voice called in launch control.

The senior Japanese engineer growled something that sounded like a curse to the NASA representative, whose eyes tracked down to the

graphic-display screen. Signal lost just a few seconds after the trans-stage ignition. That could mean only one thing.

"That's happened to us more than once," the American said sympathetically. The problem was that rocket fuels, especially the liquid fuels always used for the final stage of a space launch, were essentially high explosives. What could go wrong? NASA and the U.S. military had spent over forty years discovering every possible mishap.

The weapons engineer didn't lose his temper as the flight-control officer had, and the American sitting close to him put it down to professionalism, which it was. And the American didn't know that he was a weapons engineer, anyway. In fact, to this point everything had gone exactly according to plan. The trans-stage fuel containers had been loaded with high explosives and had detonated immediately after the separation of the payload package.

The payload was a conical object, one hundred eighty centimeters wide at the base and two hundred six in length. It was made of uranium-238, which would have been surprising and unsettling to the NASA representative. A dense and very hard metal, it also had excellent refractory qualities, meaning that it resisted heat quite well. The same material was used in the payloads of many American space vehicles, but none of them was owned by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Rather, objects of very similar shapes and sizes sat atop the few remaining nuclear-tipped strategic weapons which the United States was dismantling in accordance with a treaty with Russia. More than thirty years earlier, an engineer at AVCO had pointed out that since U_{238} was both an excellent material for withstanding the heat of a ballistic reentry *and* made up the third stage of a thermonuclear device, why not make the body of the RV part of the bomb? That sort of thing had always appealed to an engineer, and the idea had been tested, certified, and since the 1960s become a standard part of the U.S. strategic arsenal.

The payload so recently part of the H-11 booster was an exact engineering mockup of a nuclear warhead, and while *Amber Ball* and other tracking devices were watching the remains of the trans-stage, this cone of uranium fell back to earth. It was not a matter of interest to American cameras, since it was, after all, just an orbit-test payload that had failed to achieve the velocity necessary to circle the earth.

Nor did the Americans know that MV *Takuyo,* sitting halfway between Easter Island and the coast of Peru, was not doing the fishery-research work it was supposed to be doing. Two kilometers to the east of *Takuyo* was a rubber raft, on which sat a GPS locator and a radio. The ship was not equipped with a radar capable of tracking an inbound ballistic target, but the descending RV gave its own announcement in the pre-dawn darkness; glowing white-hot from its

reentry friction, it came down like a meteor, trailing a path of fire right on time and startling the extra lookouts on the flying bridge, who'd been told what to expect but were impressed nonetheless. Heads turned rapidly to follow it down, and the splash was a mere two hundred meters from the raft. Calculations would later determine that the impact point had been exactly two hundred sixty meters from the programmed impact point. It wasn't perfect, and, to the disappointment of some, was fully an order of magnitude worse than that of the Americans' newest missiles, but for the purposes of the test, it was quite sufficient. And better yet, the test had been carried out in front of the whole world and still not been seen. Moments later, the warhead released an inflated balloon to keep it close to the surface. A boat launched from *Takuyo* was already on the way to snag the line so that the RV could be recovered and its instrumented data analyzed.

"It's going to be very hard, isn't it?" Barbara Linders asked.

"Yes, it will." Murray wouldn't lie to her. Over the past two weeks they'd become very close indeed, closer, in fact, than Ms. Linders was with her therapist. In that time, they had discussed every aspect of the assault more than ten times, with tape recordings made of every word, printed transcripts made of the recordings, and every fact crosschecked, even to the extent that photographs of the former senator's office had been checked for the color of the furniture and carpeting. Everything had checked out. Oh, there had been a few discrepancies, but only a few, and all of them minor. The substance of the case was unaffected. But all of that would not change the fact that, yes, it would be very hard.

Murray ran the case, acting as the personal representative of Director Bill Shaw. Under Murray were twenty-eight agents, two of them headquarters-division inspectors, and almost all the rest experienced men in their forties, chosen for their expertise (there were also a half dozen young agents to do legwork errands). The next step would be to meet with a United States Attorney. They'd already chosen the one they wanted, Anne Cooper, twenty-nine, a J.D. from the University of Indiana, who specialized in sexual-assault cases. An elegant woman, tall, black, and ferociously feminist, she had sufficient fervor for such cases that the name of the defendant wouldn't matter to her more than the time of day. That was the easy part.

Then came the hard part. The "defendant" in question was the Vice President of the United States, and the Constitution said that he could not be treated like a normal citizen. In his case, the "grand jury" would be the United States House of Representatives' Committee on the Judiciary. Anne Cooper would work technically *in cooperation with*

the chairman and staffers of the committee, though as a practical matter she'd actually run the case herself, with the committee people "helping" by grandstanding and leaking things to the press.

The firestorm would start, Murray explained slowly and quietly, when the chairman of the committee was informed of what was coming. Then the accusations would become public; the political dimension made it unavoidable. Vice President Edward J. Kealty would indignantly deny all accusations, and his defense team would launch its own investigation of Barbara Linders. They would discover the things that Murray had already heard from her own lips, many of them damaging, and the public would not be told, at first, that rape victims, especially those who did not report their crimes, suffered crushing loss of self-esteem, often manifested by abnormal sexual behavior. (Having learned that sexual activity was the only thing that men wanted of them, they often sought more of it in a futile search for the self-worth ripped away from them by the first attacker.) Barbara Linders had done that, had taken antidepression medications, had skipped through half a dozen jobs and two abortions. That this was a result of her victimization, and not an indication of her unreliability, would have to be established before the committee, because once the matter became public information, she would be unable to defend herself, not allowed to speak openly, while lawyers and investigators on the other side would have every chance to attack her as thoroughly and viciously as, but far more publicly than, Ed Kealty ever had. The media would see to that.

"It's not fair," she said, finally.

"Barbara, it *is* fair. It's necessary," Murray said as gently as he could. "You know why? Because when we impeach that son of a bitch, there won't be any doubts. The trial in the U.S. Senate will be a formality. *Then* we can put him in front of a real federal district-court jury, and then he will be convicted like the criminal he is. It's going to be hard on you, but when he goes to prison, it'll be a lot harder on him. It's the way the system works. It isn't perfect, but it's the best we have. And when it's all over, Barbara, you will have your dignity back, and nobody, ever, will take it away from you again."

"I'm not going to run away anymore, Mr. Murray." She'd come a long way in two weeks. There was metal in her backbone now. Maybe not steel, but it grew stronger every day. He wondered if it would be strong enough. The odds, he figured, were 6—5 and pick 'em.

"Please call me Dan. My friends do."

"What is it you didn't want to say in front of Brett?"

"We have a guy in Japan . . ." Mrs. Foley began, without giving

Chet Nomuri's name. She went on for several minutes.

Her account wasn't exactly a surprise. Ryan had made the suggestion himself several years earlier, right here in the White House to then-President Fowler. Too many American public officials left government service and immediately became lobbyists or consultants to Japanese business groups, or even to the Japanese government itself, invariably for much higher pay than what the American taxpayer provided. The fact was troubling to Ryan. Though not illegal per se, it was, at the least, unseemly. But there was more to it than that. One didn't just change office location for a tenfold increase in income. There had to be a recruitment process, and that process had to have some substance to it. As with every other form of espionage, an agent-recruit needed to provide up-front proof that he could deliver something of value. The only way for that to happen was for those officials who yearned for higher income to give over sensitive information while they were still in government employment. And that was espionage, a felony under Title 18 of U.S. Code. A joint CIA/FBI operation was working quietly to see what it could see. It was called Operation SANDALWOOD, and that's where Nomuri came in.

"So what have we got so far?"

"Nothing on point yet," Mary Pat replied. "But we have learned some interesting things about Hiroshi Goto. He has a few bad habits." She elaborated.

"He doesn't like us very much, does he?"

"He likes female Americans just fine, if you want to call it that."

"It's not something we can use very easily." Ryan leaned back in his chair. It was distasteful, especially for a man whose elder daughter would soon start dating, something that came hard to fathers under the best of circumstances. "There's a lot of lost souls out there, MP, and we can't save them all," Jack said without much conviction in his voice.

"Something smells about this, Jack."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's the recklessness of it. This guy could be their Prime Minister in another couple of weeks. He's got a lot of support from the zaibatsu. The present government is shaky. He ought to be playing statesman, not cocksman, and putting a young girl on display like that . . ."

"Different culture, different rules." Ryan made the mistake of closing tired eyes for a moment, and as he did so his imagination conjured up an image to match Mrs. Foley's words. *She's an American citizen, Jack. They're the people who pay your salary.* The eyes opened back up. "How good's your officer?"

"He's very sharp. He's been in-country for six months."

"Has he recruited anybody yet?"

"No, he's under orders to go slow. You have to over there. Their society has different rules. He's identified a couple unhappy campers, and he's taking his time."

"Yamata and Goto ... but that doesn't make sense, does it? Yamata just took a management interest on the Street, the Columbus Group. George Winston's outfit. I know George."

"The mutual-funds bunch?"

"That's right. He just hung 'em up, and Yamata stepped up to take his place. We're talking big bucks, MP. Hundred-million minimum for the price of admission. So you're telling me that a politician who professes not to like the United States hangs out with an industrialist who just married himself to our financial system. Hell, maybe Yamata is trying to explain the facts of life to the guy."

"What do you know about Mr. Yamata?" she asked.

The question caught Jack short. "Me? Not much, just a name. He runs a big conglomerate. Is he one of your targets?"

"That's right."

Ryan grinned somewhat crookedly. "MP, you sure this is complicated enough? Maybe toss in another element?"

In Nevada, people waited for the sun to set over the mountains before beginning what had been planned as a routine exercise, albeit with some last-minute modifications. The Army warrant officers were all experienced men, and they remained bemused by their first official visit to "Dreamland," as the Air Force people still called their secret facility at Groom Lake. This was the place where you tested stealthy aircraft, and the area was littered with radar and other systems to determine just how stealthy such things really were. With the sun finally gone and the clear sky dark, they manned their aircraft and lifted off for a night's testing. The mission for tonight was to approach the Nellis flight line, to deliver some administrative ordnance, and to return to Groom Lake, all undetected. That would be hard enough.

Jackson, wearing his J-3 hat, was observing the newest entry in the stealth business. The Comanche had some interesting implications in that arena, and more still in special operations, fast becoming the most fashionable part of the Pentagon. The Army said they had a real magic show worth watching, and he was here to watch....

"Guns, guns, guns!" the warrant officer said over the guard channel ninety minutes later. Then on intercom, "God, what a beautiful sight!"

The ramp at Nellis Air Force Base was home to the Air Force's largest fighter wing, today augmented further still with two visiting squadrons for the ongoing Red Flag operation. That gave his Comanche over a hundred targets for its 20-millimeter cannon, and he walked his fire among the even rows of aircraft before turning and exiting the area to the south. The casinos of Las Vegas were in sight as he looped around, making room for the other two Comanches, then it was back down to fifty feet over the uneven sand and a northeasterly heading.

"Getting hit again. Some Eagle jockey keeps sweeping us," the backseater reported.

"Locking up?"

"Sure as hell trying to, and—Jesus—"

An F-15C screeched overhead close enough that the wake turbulence made the Comanche rock a little. Then a voice came up on guard.

"If this was an Echo, I'd have your ass."

"I just knew you Air Force guys were like that. See you at the barn."

"Roger. Out." In the distance at twelve o'clock, the fighter lit off its afterburners in salute.

"Good news, bad news, Sandy," the backseater observed.

Stealthy, but not quite stealthy enough. The low-observable technology built into the Comanche was good enough to defeat a missile-targeting radar, but those damned airborne early-warning birds with their big antennas and signal-processor chips kept getting hits, probably off the rotor disc, the pilot thought. They had to do a little more work on that. The good news was that the F-15C, with a superb missile-tracking radar, couldn't get lockup for his AMRAAMs, and a heat-seeker was a waste of time for all involved, even over a cold desert floor. But the F-15E, with its see-in-the-dark gear, could have blown him away with a 20mm cannon. Something to remember. So, the world was not yet perfect, but Comanche was still the baddest helicopter ever made.

CWO4 Sandy Richter looked up. In the dry, cold desert air he could see the strobe lights of the orbiting E-3A AWACS. Not all that far away. Thirty thousand feet or so, he estimated. Then he had an interesting thought. That Navy guy looked smart enough, and maybe if he presented his idea in the right way, he'd get a chance to try it out....

"I'm getting tired of this," President Durling was saying in his office, diagonally across the West Wing from Ryan's. There had been a couple of good years, but they'd come to a screeching halt in the past

few months. “What was it today?”

“Gas tanks,” Marty Caplan replied. “Deerfield Auto Parts up in Massachusetts just came up with a way to fabricate them into nearly any shape and capacity from standard steel sheets. It’s a robotic process, efficient as hell. They refused to license it to the Japanese—”

“Al Trent’s district?” the President cut in.

“That’s right.”

“Excuse me. Please go on.” Durling reached for some tea. He was having trouble with afternoon coffee now. “Why won’t they license it?”

“It’s one of the companies that almost got destroyed by overseas competition. This one held on to the old management team. They smartened up, hired a few bright young design engineers, and pulled their socks up. They’ve come up with half a dozen important innovations. It just so happens that this is the one that delivers the greatest cost-efficiency. They claim they can make the tanks, box ’em, and ship them to Japan cheaper than the Japanese can make them at home, and that the tanks are also stronger. But we couldn’t even make the other side budge on using them in the plants they have over here. It’s computer chips all over again,” Caplan concluded.

“How is it they can even ship the things over—”

“The ships, Mr. President.” It was Caplan’s turn to interrupt. “Their car carriers come over here full and mainly return completely empty. Loading the things on wouldn’t cost anything at all, and they end up getting delivered right to the company docks. Deerfield even designed a loadunload system that eliminates any possible time penalty.”

“Why didn’t you push on it?”

“I’m surprised he didn’t push,” Christopher Cook observed.

They were in an upscale private home just off Kalorama Road. An expensive area of the District of Columbia, it housed quite a few members of the diplomatic community, along with the rank-and-file members of the Washington community, lobbyists, lawyers, and all the rest who wanted to be close, but not too close, to where the action was, downtown.

“If Deerfield would only license their patent.” Seiji sighed. “We offered them a very fair price.”

“True,” Cook agreed, pouring himself another glass of white wine. He could have said, *But, Seiji, it’s their invention and they want to cash in on it*, but he didn’t. “Why don’t your people—”

It was Seiji Nagumo’s turn to sigh. “Your people were clever. They hired a particularly bright attorney in Japan and got their patent recognized in record time.” He might have added that it offended him

that a citizen of his country could be so mercenary, but that would have been unseemly under the circumstances. “Well, perhaps they will come to see the light of reason.”

“It could be a good point to concede, Seiji. At the very least, sweeten your offer on the licensing agreement.”

“Why, Chris?”

“The President is interested in this one.” Cook paused, seeing that Nagumo didn’t get it yet. He was still new at this. He knew the industrial side, but not the politics yet. “Deerfield is in Al Trent’s congressional district. Trent has a lot of clout on the Hill. He’s chairman of the Intelligence Committee.”

“And?”

“And Trent is a good guy to keep happy.”

Nagumo considered that for a minute or so, sipping his wine and staring out the window. Had he known that fact earlier in the day, he might have sought permission to give in on the point, but he hadn’t and he didn’t. To change now would be an admission of error, and Nagumo didn’t like to do that any more than anyone else in the world. He decided that he’d suggest an improved offer for licensing rights, instead—not knowing that by failing to accept a personal loss of face, he’d bring closer something that he would have tried anything to avoid.

5

Complexity Theory

Things rarely happen for a single reason. Even the cleverest and most skillful manipulators recognize that their real art lies in making use of that which they cannot predict. For Raizo Yamata the knowledge was usually a comfort. He usually knew what to do when the unexpected took place—but not always.

"It has been a troublesome time, that is true, but not the worst we have experienced," one of his guests pronounced. "And we are having our way again, are we not?"

"We've made them back off on computer chips," another pointed out. Heads nodded around the low table.

They just didn't see, Yamata told himself. His country's needs coincided exactly with a new opportunity. There was a new world, and despite America's repeated pronouncements of a new order for that new world, only disorder had replaced what had been three generations of—if not stability, then at least predictability. The symmetry of East and West was now so far back in the history of contemporary minds that it seemed like a distant and unpleasant dream. The Russians were still reeling from their misguided experiment, and so were the Americans, though most of their pain was self-inflicted and had come after the event, the fools. Instead of merely maintaining their power, the Americans had cast it aside at the moment of its ascendancy, as they had so often in their history, and in the dimming of two formerly great powers lay the opportunity for a country that *deserved* to be great.

"These are small things, my friends," Yamata said, graciously leaning across the table to refill cups. "Our national weakness is structural and has not changed in real terms in our lifetime."

"Please explain, Raizo-chan," one of his friendlier peers suggested.

"So long as we lack direct access to resources, so long as we cannot control that access ourselves, so long as we exist as the shopkeeper of other nations, we are vulnerable."

"Ah!" Across the table a man waved a dismissive hand. "I disagree. We are strong in the things that matter."

"And what are those things?" Yamata inquired gently.

“First and most importantly, the diligence of our workers, the skill of our designers ...” The litany went on while Yamata and his other guests listened politely.

“And how long will those things matter if we no longer have resources to use, oil to burn?” one of Yamata’s allies inquired with a litany of his own.

“Nineteen forty-one all over again?”

“No, it will not be that way . . . exactly,” Yamata said, rejoining the conversation. “Then it was possible for them to cut off our oil because we bought almost all of it from them. Today it is more subtle. Back then they had to freeze our assets to prevent us from spending them elsewhere, yes? Today they devalue the dollar relative to the yen, and our assets are trapped there, are they not? Today they trick us into investing our money there, they complain when we do, they cheat us at every turn, they keep what we give to them for their property, and then they steal back what we’ve bought!”

This tack caused heads first to turn and then to nod. Every man in the room had lived through that experience. That one, Yamata saw, had bought Rockefeller Center in New York, had paid double what it was really worth, even in that artificially inflated real-estate market, been tricked and cheated by the American owners. Then the yen had risen relative to the dollar, which meant that the dollar had lost value relative to the yen. If he tried to sell now, everyone knew, it would be a disaster. First, the real-estate market in New York City had dropped of its own accord; second, and as a result, the buildings were worth only half of the dollars that had already been paid; third, the dollars were worth only half the value in yen that they had been in the beginning. He’d be lucky to get back a quarter of what he’d put into the deal. In fact, the rent he was earning barely paid the interest payments on the outstanding debt.

That one there, Yamata thought, had bought a major motion-picture studio, and across the table a rival had done the same. It was all Raizo could do not to laugh at the fools. What had each bought? That was simple. In each case, for a price of billions of dollars, they had purchased three hundred or so hectares of real estate in Los Angeles and a piece of paper that said they now had the ability to make movies. In both cases the previous owners had taken the money and quite openly laughed, and in both cases the previous owners had recently made a quiet offer to buy the property back for a quarter, or less, of what the Japanese businessman had paid—enough to retire the outstanding debt and not a single yen more.

It went on and on. Every time a Japanese company had taken its profits from America and tried to reinvest them back in America, the Americans screamed about how Japan was stealing their country.

Then they overcharged for everything. Then their government policy made sure that the Japanese lost money on everything, *so that* Americans could then buy it all back at cut-rate prices, all the while complaining that those prices were too high. America would rejoice at recovering control of its culture, such as it was, when in reality what had happened was the largest and best concealed robbery in world history.

"Don't you see? They're trying to cripple us, and they are succeeding," Yamata told them in a quiet, reasonable voice.

It was the classic business paradox which all know but all forget. There was even a simple aphorism for it: borrow one dollar and the bank owns you; borrow a million dollars and you own the bank. Japan had bought into the American auto market, for example, at a time when the U.S. auto industry, fat from its huge exclusive clientele, was driving up prices and allowing quality to stagnate while its unionized workers complained about the dehumanizing aspects of their work—the highest-paid jobs in blue-collar America. The Japanese had started in that market at an even lower status than Volkswagen, with small, ugly cars that were not all that well made and contained unimpressive safety features, but that were superior to American designs in one way: they were fuel-efficient.

Three historical accidents had then come to Japan's aid. The American Congress, upset with the "greed" of oil companies who wanted to charge world price for their products, had placed a cap on the wellhead price of domestic crude oil. That had frozen American gasoline prices at the lowest level in the industrial world, discouraged new oil exploration, and encouraged Detroit to make large, heavy, fuel-*in*efficient cars. Then the 1973 war between Israel and the Arab states had placed American drivers in gasoline lines for the first time in thirty years, and the trauma had stunned a country that had deemed itself above such things. Then they'd realized that Detroit only made automobiles that drank gasoline as though through the floodgates of a dam. The "compact" cars that the American manufacturers had started making in the previous decade had almost immediately grown to midsize, were no more fuel-efficient than their larger cousins, and weren't all that well made in any case. Worst of all, the American manufacturers, to a man, had all recently invested money in large-car plants, a fact that had almost been the undoing of Chrysler. This oil shock had not lasted long, but long enough for America to rethink its buying habits, and the domestic companies had not possessed the capital or the engineering flexibility to change rapidly to what unaccustomedly nervous American citizens wanted.

Those citizens had immediately increased purchases of Japanese automobiles, especially in the crucial, trend-setting West Coast

markets, which had had the effect of funding research and development for the Japanese firms, which in turn had hired American styling engineers to make their products more attractive to their growing market and utilized its own engineers to improve such things as safety. Thus, by the second great oil shock of 1979, Toyota, Honda, Datsun (later Nissan), and Subaru were in the right place with the right product. Those were the salad days. The low yen and high dollar had meant that even relatively low prices guaranteed a handsome profit, that their local dealers could add a surcharge of a thousand dollars or more for *allowing* people to purchase these marvelous automobiles—and *that* had given them a large, eager sales force of American citizens.

What had never occurred to any of the men at the table, Yamata knew, was the same thing that had never occurred to the executives of General Motors and the United Auto Workers union. Both had assumed that a happy state of affairs would extend into blissful eternity. Both had forgotten that there was no Divine Right of Businessmen any more than there was a Divine Right of Kings. Japan had learned to exploit a weakness of the American auto industry. In due course, America had learned from its own mistakes, and just as Japanese companies had capitalized on American arrogance, in the same way they almost immediately built—or bought—monuments to their own. Meanwhile the American companies had ruthlessly downsized everything from their automobile designs to their payrolls because they had relearned the economic facts of life even as the Japanese had allowed themselves to forget them. The process went mainly unseen, especially by the players, who were not assisted by the media "analysts" who were too busy looking at trees to discern the shape of the cyclical forest.

To normalize things further, the exchange rate changed—as it had to change with so much money flowing in one direction—but the Japanese industrialists hadn't seen it coming any more clearly than Detroit had noted the approach of its own troubles. The relative value of the yen had gone up, and that of the dollar down, despite the best efforts of Japanese central bankers to keep their own currency weak. With that change went much of the profit margin of the Japanese firms—including the values of properties bought in America that had crashed enough in value to be seen as net losses. And you couldn't transport Rockefeller Center to Tokyo in any case.

It had to be this way. Yamata saw that even if these men did not. Business was a cycle, like riding a wave up and down, and no one had as yet found a way to make the cycle smooth out. Japan was all the more vulnerable to it, since, in serving America, Japanese industry, was really part of the American economy and subject to all of its

vagaries. The Americans would not remain more foolish than the Japanese indefinitely, and with their return to sanity, they would have their advantages of power and resources yet again, and his chance would be gone forever. His country's chance, too, Yamata told himself. That was also important, but it was not the thing that made his eyes burn.

His country could not be great so long as its leaders—not in the government, but here around this table—failed to understand what greatness was. Manufacturing capacity was nothing. The simple act of cutting the shipping lanes to the sources of raw materials could idle every factory in the country, and then the skill and diligence of the Japanese worker would have no greater meaning in the great scheme of things than a Buson haiku. A nation was great because of power, and his country's power was just as artificial as a poem. More to the point, national greatness was not something awarded, but something won; it had to be acknowledged by another great nation that had been taught humility ... or more than one. Greatness came not from a single national asset. It came from many. It came from self-sufficiency in all things—well, in as many things as possible. His companions around the table had to see that before he could act on their behalf and his nation's. It was his mission to raise up his nation and to humble others. It was his destiny and his duty to make these things happen, to be the catalyst for all the energy of others.

But the time was not yet right. He could see that. His allies were many, but there were not enough of them, and those who opposed him were too fixed in their thinking to be persuaded. They saw his point, but not as clearly as he did, and until they changed their way of thinking, he could do no more than what he was doing now, offering counsel, setting the stage. A man of surpassing patience, Yamata-san smiled politely and ground his teeth, with the frustration of the moment.

* * *

"You know, I think I'm starting to get the hang of this place," Ryan said as he took his place in the leather chair to the President's left.

"I said that once," Durling announced. "It cost me three tenths of a point of unemployment, a fight with House Ways and Means, and ten real points of approval rating." Though his voice was grave, he smiled when he said it. "So what's so hot that you're interrupting my lunch?"

Jack didn't make him wait, though his news was important enough to merit a dramatic reply: "We have our agreement with the Russians and Ukrainians on the last of the birds."

"Starting when?" Durling asked, leaning forward over his desk and ignoring his salad.

"How does next Monday grab you?" Ryan asked with a grin. "They went for what Scott said. There've been so many of these START procedures that they want just to kill the last ones quietly and announce that they're gone, once and for all. Our inspectors are already over there, and theirs are over here, and they'll just go and do it."

"I like it," Durling replied.

"Exactly forty years, boss," Ryan said with some passion, "practically my whole life since they deployed the SS-6 and we deployed Atlas, ugly damned things with an ugly damned purpose, and helping to make them go away—well, Mr. President, now I owe you one. It's going to be your mark, sir, but I can tell my grandchildren that I was around when it happened." That Adler's proposal to the Russians and Ukrainians had been Ryan's initiative might end up as a footnote, but probably not.

"Our grandchildren either won't care or they'll ask what the big deal was," Arnie van Damm observed, deadpan.

"True," Ryan conceded. Trust Arnie to put a neutral spin on things.

"Now tell me the bad news," Durling ordered.

"Five billion," Jack said, unsurprised by the hurt expression he got in return. "It's worth it, sir. It really is."

"Tell me why."

"Mr. President, since I was in grammar school our country has lived with the threat of nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers aimed at the United States. Inside of six weeks, the last of them could be gone."

"They're already aimed—"

"Yes, sir, we have ours aimed at the Sargasso Sea, and so do they, an error that you can fix by opening an inspection port and changing a printed-circuit card in the guidance system. To do that takes ten minutes from the moment you open the access door into the missile silo and requires a screwdriver and a flashlight." Actually, that was true only for the Soviet—*Russian!* Ryan corrected himself for the thousandth time—missiles. The remaining American birds took longer to retarget due to their greater sophistication. Such were the vagaries of engineering science.

"All gone, sir, gone forever," Ryan said. "I'm the hard-nosed hawk here, remember? We can sell this to the Hill. It's worth the price and more."

"You make a good case, as always," van Damm announced from his chair.

"Where will OMB find the money, Arnie?" President Durling asked. Now it was Ryan's turn to cringe.

"Defense, where else?"

"Before we get too enthusiastic about that, we've gone too far already."

"What will we save by eliminating our last missiles?" van Damm asked.

"It'll cost us money," Jack replied. "We're already paying an arm and a leg to dismantle the missile subs, and the environmentalists—"

"Those wonderful people," Durling observed.

"—but it's a one-time expense."

Eyes turned to the chief of staff. His political judgment was impeccable. The weathered face weighed the factors and turned to Ryan. "It's worth the hassle. There *will* be a hassle on the Hill, boss," he told the President, "but a year from now you'll be telling the American people how you put an end to the sword of—"

"Damocles," Ryan said.

"Catholic schools." Arnie chuckled. "The sword that's hung over America for a generation. The papers'll like it, and you just know that CNN will make a big deal about it, one of their hour-long special-report gigs, with lots of good pictures and inaccurate commentary."

"Don't like that, Jack?" Durling asked, smiling broadly now.

"Mr. President, I'm not a politician, okay? Isn't it sufficient to the moment that we're dismantling the last two hundred ICBMs in the world?" Well, that wasn't exactly true, was it? *Let's not wax too poetic, Jack. There are still the Chinese, Brits, and French*. But the latter two would fall into line, wouldn't they? And the Chinese could be made to see the light through trade negotiations, and besides, what enemies did they have left to worry about?

"Only if people see and understand, Jack." Durling turned to van Damm. Both of them ignored Jack's not-quitespoken additional concerns. "Get the media office working on this. We do the formal announcement in Moscow, Jack?"

Ryan nodded. "That was the deal, sir." There would be more to it, careful leaks, unconfirmed at first. Congressional briefings to generate more. Quiet calls to various TV networks and trusted reporters who would be in exactly the right places at exactly the right times—difficult because of the ten-hour difference between Moscow and the last American ICBM fields—to record for history the end of the nightmare. The actual elimination process was rather messy, which was why American tree-huggers had such a problem with it. In the case of the Russian birds, the warheads were removed for dismantlement, the missiles drained of their liquid fuels and stripped of valuable and/or classified electronic components, and then one hundred kilograms of high explosives were used to blast open the top of the silo, which in due course would be filled with dirt and leveled

off. The American procedure was different because all the U.S. missiles used solid fuels. In their case, the missile bodies were transported to Utah, where they were opened at both ends; then the rocket motors were ignited and allowed to burn out like the world's largest highway flares, creating clouds of toxic exhaust that might snuff out the lives of some wild birds. In America the silos would also be blasted open—a United States Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled that the national-security implications of the international arms-control treaty superseded four environmental-protection statutes, despite many legal briefs and protests to the contrary. The final blast would be highly dramatic, all the more so because its force would be about one ten-millionth of what the silo had once represented. Some numbers, and some concepts, Jack reflected, were simply too vast to be appreciated—even by people like himself.

The legend of Damocles had to do with a courtier in the circle of King Dionysius of Sicily, who had waxed eloquent on the good fortune of his king. To make a point in the cruel and heavy-handed way of "great" men, Dionysius had invited his courtier, Damocles, to a sumptuous banquet and sat him in a comfortable place directly under a sword, which in turn was suspended from the ceiling by a thread. The purpose was to demonstrate that the King's own good fortune was as tenuous as the safety of his guest.

It was the same with America. Everything it had was still under the nuclear sword, a fact made graphically clear to Ryan in Denver not too long before, and for that reason his personal mission since returning to government service had been to put the end to the tale, once and for all.

"You want to handle the press briefings?"

"Yes, Mr. President," Jack replied, surprised and grateful for Durling's stunning generosity.

" 'Northern Resource Area'?" the Chinese Defense Minister asked. He added dryly, "Interesting way of putting it."

"So what do you think?" Zhang Han San asked from his side of the table. He was fresh from another meeting with Yamata.

"In the abstract, it's strategically possible. I leave the economic estimates to others," the Marshal replied, ever the cautious one despite the quantity of mao-tai he'd consumed this evening.

"The Russians have been employing three Japanese survey firms. Amazing, isn't it? Eastern Siberia has hardly even been explored. Oh, yes, the gold deposits at Kolyma, but the interior itself?" A dismissive wave of the hand. "Such fools, and now they must ask others to do the job for them . . ." The Minister's voice trailed off, and his gaze

returned to Zhang Han San. “And so, what have they found?”

“Our Japanese friends? More oil for starters, they think as big a find as Prudhoe Bay.” He slid a sheet of paper across the table. “Here are the minerals they’ve located in the last nine months.”

“All this?”

“The area is almost as large as all of Western Europe, and all the Soviets ever cared about was a strip around their damned railroads. The fools.” Zhang snorted. “All their economic problems, the solution for them lay right under their feet from the moment they assumed power from the czar. In essence it’s rather like South Africa, a treasure house, but including oil, which the South Africans lack. As you see, nearly all of the strategic minerals, and in such quantities. . . .”

“Do the Russians know?”

“Some of it.” Zhang Han San nodded. “Such a secret is too vast to conceal entirely, but only about half—the items on the list marked with stars are those Moscow knows about.”

“But not these others?”

Zhang smiled. “No.”

Even in a culture where men and women learn to control their feelings, the Minister could not conceal his amazement at the paper in his hands. They didn’t shake, but he used them to place the page flat on the polished table, smoothing it out as though it were a piece of fine silk.

“This could double the wealth of our country.”

“That is conservative,” observed the senior field officer of his country’s intelligence service. Zhang, covered as a diplomat, actually conducted more diplomacy than most of his country’s senior foreign-service officers. It was more of an embarrassment to them than to him. “You need to remember that this is the estimate the Japanese have given us, Comrade Minister. They fully expect access to half of what they discover, and since they will perforce spend most of the development money . . .”

A smile. “Yes, while we take most of the strategic risks. Offensive little people,” the Minister added. Like those with whom Zhang had negotiated in Tokyo, the Minister and the Marshal, who continued to keep his peace, were veterans of the 8th Route Army. They too had memories of war—but not of war with America. He shrugged. “Well, we need them, don’t we?”

“Their weapons are formidable,” the Marshal noted. “But not their numbers.”

“They know that,” Zhang Han San told his hosts. “It is, as my main contact says, a convenient marriage of needs and requirements, but he hopes that it will develop, in his words, into a true and cordial relationship between peoples with a true—”

“Who will be on top?” the Marshal asked, smiling coarsely.

“They will, of course. He thinks,” Zhang Han San added.

“In that case, since they are courting us, it is they who need to make the first overt moves,” the Minister said, defining his country’s policy in a way that would not offend his own superior, a small man with elfin eyes and the sort of determination to make a lion pause. He looked over at the Marshal, who nodded soberly. The man’s capacity for alcohol, both of the others thought, was remarkable.

“As I expected,” Zhang announced with a smile. “Indeed, as they expect, since they anticipate the greatest profit.”

“They are entitled to their illusions.”

“I admire your confidence,” the NASA engineer observed from the viewers’ gallery over the shop floor. He also admired their funding. The government had fronted the money for this industrial conglomerate to acquire the Soviet design and build it. Private industry sure had a lot of muscle here, didn’t it?

“We think we have the trans-stage problem figured out. A faulty valve,” the Japanese designer explained. “We used a Soviet design.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that we used their valve design for the trans-stage fuel tanks. It wasn’t a good one. They tried to do everything there with extremely light weight, but—”

The NASA representative blinked hard. “You mean to tell me that their whole production run of the missile was—”

A knowing look cut the American off. “Yes. At least a third of them would have failed. My people believe that the test missiles were specially engineered, but that the production models were, well, typically Russian.”

“Hmph.” The American’s bags were already packed, and a car was waiting to take him to Narita International for the interminable flight to Chicago. He looked at the production floor of the plant. It was probably what General Dynamics had looked like back in the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War. The boosters were lined up like sausages, fifteen of them in various stages of assembly, side by side, one after the other, while white-coated technicians performed their complicated tasks. “These ten look about done.”

“They are,” the factory manager assured him.

“When’s your next test shot?”

“Next month. We’ve got our first three payloads ready,” the designer replied.

“When you guys get into something, you don’t fool around, do you?”

"It's simply more efficient to do it this way."

"So they're going to go out of here fully assembled?"

A nod. "That's right. We'll pressurize the fuel tanks with inert gas, of course, but one of the nice things about using this design is that they're designed to be moved as intact units. That way you save final-assembly time at the launch point."

"Move them out by truck?"

"No." The Japanese engineer shook his head. "By rail."

"What about the payloads?"

"They're being assembled elsewhere. That's proprietary, I'm afraid."

The other production line did not have foreign visitors. In fact it had few visitors at all despite the fact that it was located in the suburbs of Tokyo. The sign outside the building proclaimed it to be a research-and-development center for a major corporation, and those who lived nearby guessed that it was for computer chips or something similar. The power lines that went into it were not remarkable, since the most power-hungry units were the heating and air-conditioning units that sat in a small enclosure in the back. Traffic in and out was unremarkable as well. There was a modest parking lot with space for perhaps eighty automobiles, and the lot was almost always at least half full. There was a discreet security fence, pretty much like what would have been around any other light-industry facility anywhere in the world, and a security shack at both entrances. Cars and trucks came and went, and that was pretty much that for the casual observer.

Inside was something else. Although the two external security points were staffed by smiling men who politely gave directions to disoriented motorists, inside the building it was something else entirely. Each security desk featured hidden attachments which held German-made P-38 pistols, and the guards here didn't smile much. They didn't know what they were guarding, of course. Some things were just too unusual to be recognized. No one had ever produced a TV documentary on the fabrication of nuclear devices.

The shop floor was fifty meters long by fifteen wide, and there were two evenly spaced rows of machine tools, each of them enclosed with Plexiglas. Each enclosure was individually climate-controlled by a separate ventilation system, as was the room as a whole. The technicians and scientists wore white coveralls and gloves not unlike those required of workers in a computer-chip plant, and indeed when some of them stepped outside for a smoke, passersby took them for exactly that.

In the clean room, roughly shaped plutonium hemispheres came in at one end, were machined into their final shapes at several stages,

and emerged from the other end so polished they looked like glass. Each was then placed in a plastic holder and hand-carried out of the machine shop to the storage room, where each was set on an individual shelf made of steel covered with plastic. Metal contact could not be allowed, because plutonium, in addition to being radioactive, and warm due to its alpha-radiation decay, was a reactive metal, quick to spark on contact with another metal, and actually flammable. Like magnesium and titanium, the metal would burn with gusto, and, once ignited, was the very devil to extinguish. For all that, handling the hemispheres—there were twenty of them—became just one more routine for the engineers. That task had long since been completed.

The harder part was the RV bodies. These were large, hollow, inverted cones, 120 centimeters in height and 50 across at the base, made of uranium-238, a darkly reddish and very hard metal. At just over four hundred kilograms each, the bulky cones had to be precisely machined for absolute dynamic symmetry. Intended to "fly" after a fashion, both through vacuum and, briefly, through air, they had to be perfectly balanced, lest they become unstable in flight. Ensuring that had to everyone's surprise turned out to be the most difficult production task of all. The casting process had been reordered twice, and even now the RV bodies were periodically rotated, similar to the procedure for balancing an automobile tire, but with far more stringent tolerances. The exterior of each of the ten was not as finely machined as the parts that went inside, though they were smooth to the ungloved touch. Inside was something else. Slight but symmetrical irregularities would allow the "physics package"—an American term —to fit in snugly, and, if the moment came—which everyone hoped it would not, of course—the enormous flux of high-energy "fast" neutrons would attack the RV bodies, causing a "fast-fission" reaction, and doubling the energy released by the plutonium, tritium, and lithium deuteride within.

That was the elegant part, the engineers thought, especially those unfamiliar with nuclear physics who had learned the process along the way. The U-238, so dense and hard and difficult to work, was a highly refractory metal. The Americans even used it to make armor for their tanks, it resisted external energy so well. Screeching through the atmosphere at 27,000 kilometers per hour, air friction would have destroyed most materials, but not this one, at least not in the few seconds it took, and at the end of the process, the material would form part of the bomb itself. Elegant, the engineers thought, using that most favored of words in their profession, and that made it worth the time and the trouble. When each body was complete, each was loaded onto a dolly and rolled off to the storage room. Only three remained to be

worked on. This part of the project was two weeks behind schedule, much to everyone's chagrin.

RV Body #8 began the first machining process. If the bomb was detonated, the uranium-238 from which it was made would also create most of the fallout. Well, that was physics.

It was just another accident, perhaps occasioned by the early hour. Ryan arrived at the White House just after seven, about twenty minutes earlier than usual because traffic on U.S. Route 50 happened to be uncommonly smooth all the way in. As a result, he hadn't had time to read through all his early briefing documents, which he bundled under his arm at the west entrance. National Security Advisor or not, Jack still had to pass through the metal detector, and it was there that he bumped into somebody's back. The somebody in question was handing his service pistol to a uniformed Secret Service agent.

"You guys still don't trust the Bureau, eh?" a familiar voice asked the plainclothes supervisory agent.

"*Especially* the Bureau!" was the good-humored retort.

"And I don't blame them a bit," Ryan added. "Check his ankle, too, Mike."

Murray turned after passing through the magnetic portal. "I don't need the backup piece anymore." The Deputy Assistant Director pointed to the papers under Jack's arm. "Is that any way to treat classified documents?"

Murray's humor was automatic. It was just the man's nature to needle an old friend. Then Ryan saw that the Attorney General had just passed through as well, and was looking back in some annoyance. Why was a cabinet member here so early? If it were a national-security matter, Ryan would have known, and criminal affairs were rarely so important as to get the President into his office before the accustomed eight o'clock. And why was Murray accompanying him? Helen D'Agustino was waiting beyond to provide personal escort through the upstairs corridors. Everything about the accidental confrontation lit off Ryan's curiosity.

"The Boss is waiting," Murray said guardedly, reading the look in Jack's eyes.

"Could you stop by on the way out? I've been meaning to call you about something."

"Sure." And Murray walked off without even a friendly inquiry about Cathy and the kids.

Ryan passed through the detector, turned left, and headed up the stairs to his corner office for his morning briefs. They went quickly, and Ryan was settling into his morning routine when his secretary admitted Murray to his office. There was no point in beating around the bush.

"A little early for the A.G. to show up, Dan. Anything I need to know?"

Murray shook his head. "Not yet, sorry."

"Okay," Ryan replied, shifting gears smoothly. "Is it something I *ought* to know?"

"Probably, but the Boss wants it on close-hold, and it doesn't have national-security implications. What did you want to see me about?"

Ryan took a second or two before answering, his mind going at its accustomed speed in such a case. Then he set it aside. He knew that he could trust Murray's word. Most of the time.

"This is code-word stuff," Jack began, then elaborated on what he'd learned from Mary Pat the day before. The FBI agent nodded and listened with a neutral expression.

"It's not exactly new, Jack. Last few years we've been taking a quiet look at indications that young ladies have been—enticed? Hard to phrase this properly. Modeling contracts, that sort of thing. Whoever does the recruiting is very careful. Young women head over there to model, do commercials, that sort of thing, goes on all the time. Some got their American careers started over there. None of the checks we've run have turned up anything, but there are indications that some girls have disappeared. One in particular, as a matter of fact, she fits your man's description. Kimberly something, I don't recall the last name. Her father is a captain in the Seattle police department, and his nextdoor neighbor is SAC of our Seattle office. We've gone through our contacts in the Japanese police agencies, quietly. No luck."

"What does your gut tell you?" Ryan asked.

"Look, Jack, people disappear all the time. Lots of young girls just pack up and leave home to make their way in the world. Call it part feminism, part just wanting to become an independent human being. It happens all the time. This Kimberly-something is twenty, wasn't doing well at school, and just disappeared. There's no evidence to suggest kidnapping, and at twenty you're a free citizen, okay? We have no *right* to launch a criminal investigation. All right, so her dad's a cop, and his neighbor is Bureau, and so we've sniffed around a little. But we haven't turned up anything at all, and that's as far as we can take it without something to indicate that a statute may have been violated. There are no such indicators."

"You mean, a girl over eighteen disappears and you can't—"

"Without evidence of a crime, no, we can't. We don't have the

manpower to track down every person who decides to make his or her own future without telling Mom and Dad about it."

"You didn't answer my initial question, Dan," Jack observed to his guest's discomfort.

"There are people over there who like their women with fair hair and round eyes. There's a disproportionate number of missing girls who're blonde. We had trouble figuring that out at first until an agent started asking their friends if they maybe had their hair color changed recently. Sure enough, the answer was yes, and then she started asking the question regularly. A 'yes' happened in enough cases that it's just unusual. So, yes, I think something may be happening, but we don't have enough to move on," Murray concluded. After a moment he added, "If this case in question has national -security implications . . . well . . ."

"What?" Jack asked.

"Let the Agency check around?"

That was a first for Ryan, hearing from an FBI official that the CIA could investigate something. The Bureau guarded its turf as ferociously as a momma grizzly bear defended her cubs. "Keep going, Dan," Ryan ordered.

"There's a lively sex industry over there. If you look at the porn they like to watch, it's largely American. The nude photos you see in their magazines are mainly of Caucasian females. The nearest country with a supply of such females happens to be us. Our suspicion is that some of these girls aren't just models, but, again, we haven't been able to turn up anything solid enough to pursue it." And the other problem, Murray didn't add, was twofold. If something really were going on, he wasn't sure how much cooperation he'd receive from local authorities, meaning that the girls might disappear forever. If it were not, the nature of the investigation would be leaked and the entire episode would appear in the press as another racist piece of Japan-bashing. "Anyway, it sounds to me like the Agency has an op running over there. My best advice: expand it some. If you want, I can brief some people in on what we know. It isn't much, but we do have some photographs."

"How come you know so much?"

"SAC Seattle is Chuck O'Keefe. I worked under him once. He had me talk to Bill Shaw about it, and Bill okayed a quiet look, but it didn't lead anywhere, and Chuck has enough to keep his division busy as it is."

"I'll talk to Mary Pat. And the other thing?"

"Sorry, pal, but you have to talk to the Boss about that."

Goddamn it! Ryan thought as Murray walked out. Are there always secrets?

6

Looking In, Looking Out

In many ways operating in Japan was highly difficult. There was the racial part of it, of course. Japan was not strictly speaking a homogeneous society; the Ainu people were the original inhabitants of the islands but they mainly lived on Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Home Islands. Still called an aboriginal people, they were also quite isolated from mainstream Japanese society in an explicitly racist way. Similarly Japan had an ethnic-Korean minority whose antecedents had been imported at the turn of the century as cheap labor, much as America had brought in immigrants on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. But unlike America, Japan denied citizenship rights to its immigrants unless they adopted a fully Japanese identity, a fact made all the more odd in that the Japanese people were themselves a mere offshoot of the Korean, a fact proven by DNA research but which was conveniently and somewhat indignantly denied by the better sections of Japanese society. All foreigners were *gaijin,* a word which like most words in the local language had many flavors. Usually translated benignly as meaning just "foreigners," the word had other connotations—like "barbarian," Chet Nomuri thought, with all of the implicit invective that the word had carried when first coined by the Greeks. The irony was that as an American citizen he was *gaijin* himself, despite 100 percent Japanese ethnicity, and while he had grown up quietly resenting the racist policies of the U.S. government that had once caused genuine harm to his family, it had required only a week in the land of his ancestors for him to yearn for a return to Southern California, where the living was smooth and easy.

It was for Chester Nomuri a strange experience, living and "working" here. He'd been carefully screened and interviewed before being assigned to Operation SANDALWOOD. Having joined the Agency soon after graduating UCLA, not quite remembering why he'd done so except for a vague desire for adventure mixed with a family tradition of government service, he'd found somewhat to his surprise that he enjoyed the life. It was remarkably like police work, and Nomuri was a fan of police TV and novels. More than that, it was so

damned *interesting*. He learned new things every day. It was like being in a living history classroom. Perhaps the most important lesson he'd learned, however, was that his great-grandfather had been a wise and insightful man. Nomuri wasn't blind to America's faults, but he preferred life there to life in any of the countries he'd visited, and with that knowledge had come pride in what he was doing, even though he still wasn't quite sure what the hell he was really up to. Of course, neither did his Agency, but Nomuri had never quite understood that, even when they'd told him so at the Farm. How could it be possible, after all? It must have been an inside-the-institution joke.

At the same time, in a dualism he was too young and inexperienced to appreciate fully, Japan could be an easy place in which to operate. That was especially true on the commuter train.

The degree of crowding here was enough to make his skin crawl. He had not been prepared for a country in which population density compelled close contact with all manner of strangers, and, indeed, he'd soon realized that the cultural mania with fastidious personal hygiene and mannerly behavior was simply a by-product of it. People so often rubbed, bumped, or otherwise crushed into contact with others that the absence of politeness would have resulted in street killings to shame the most violent neighborhood in America. A combination of smiling embarrassment at the touches and icy personal isolation made it tolerable to the local citizens, though it was something that still gave Nomuri trouble. "Give the guy some space" had been a catch-phrase at UCLA. Clearly it wasn't here, because there simply wasn't the space to give.

Then there was the way they treated women. Here, on the crowded trains, the standing and sitting salarymen read comic books, called *manga,* the local versions of novels, which were genuinely disturbing. Recently, a favorite of the eighties had been revived, called *Rin-Tin-Tin*. Not the friendly dog from 1950s American television, but a dog with a female mistress, to whom he talked, and with whom he had ... sexual relations. It was not an idea that appealed to him, but there, sitting on his bench seat, was a middle-aged executive, eyes locked on the pages with rapt attention, while a Japanese woman stood right next to him and stared out the train's windows, maybe noticing, maybe not. The war between the sexes in this country certainly had rules different from the ones with which he'd been raised, Nomuri thought. He set it aside. It was not part of his mission, after ail—an idea he would soon find to be wrong.

He never saw the cutout. As he stood there in the third car of the train, close to the rear door, hanging on to an overhead bar and reading a paper, he didn't even notice the insertion of the envelope into the pocket of his overcoat. It was always that way—at the usual

place the coat got just a touch heavier. He'd turned once to look and seen nothing. Damn, he'd joined the right outfit.

Eighteen minutes later the train entered the terminal, and the people emerged from it like a horizontal avalanche, exploding outward into the capacious station. The salaryman ten feet away tucked his "illustrated novel" into his briefcase and walked off to his job, wearing his customarily impassive mien, doubtless concealing thoughts of his own. Nomuri headed his own way, buttoning his coat and wondering what his new instructions were.

* * *

"Does the President know?"

Ryan shook his head. "Not yet."

"You think maybe he ought to?" Mary Pat Foley asked.

"At the proper time."

"I don't like putting officers at risk for—"

"At risk?" Jack asked. "I want him to develop information, not to make a contact, and not to expose himself. I gather from the case notes I've seen so far that all he has to do is make a follow-up question, and unless their locker rooms are different from ours, it shouldn't expose him at all."

"You know what I mean," the Deputy Director (Operations) observed, rubbing her eyes. It had been a long day, and she worried about her field officers. Every good DDO did, and she was a mother who'd once been picked up by the KGB's Second Chief Directorate herself.

Operation SANDALWOOD had started innocently enough, if an intelligence operation on foreign soil could ever be called innocent. The preceding operation had been a joint FBI/CIA show, and had gone very badly indeed: an American citizen had been apprehended by the Japanese police with burglar tools in his possession—along with a diplomatic passport, which in this particular case had been more of a hindrance than a help. It had made the papers in a small way. Fortunately the media hadn't quite grasped what the story was all about. People were buying information. People were selling information. It was often information with "secret" or higher classifications scrawled across the folders, and the net effect was to hurt American interests, such as they were.

"How good is he?" Jack asked.

Mary Pat's face relaxed at little. "Very. The kid's a natural. He's learning to fit in, developing a base of people he can hit for background information. We've set him up with his own office. He's

even turning us a nice profit. His orders are to be very careful," Mrs. Foley pointed out yet again.

"I hear you, MP," Ryan said tiredly. "But if this is for real—"

"I know, Jack. I didn't like what Murray sent over either."

"You believe it?" Ryan asked, wondering about the reaction he'd get.

"Yes, I do, and so does Murray." She paused. "If we develop information on this, then what?"

"Then I go to the President, and probably we extract anyone who wants to be extracted."

"I will *not* risk Nomuri that way!" the DDO insisted, a little too loudly.

"Jesus, Mary Pat, I never expected that you would. Hey, I'm tired, too, okay?"

"So you want me to send in another team, let him just bird-dog it for them?" she asked.

"It's your operation to run, okay? I'll tell you *what* to do, but not *how*. Lighten up, MP." That statement earned the National Security Advisor a crooked smile and a semiapology.

"Sorry, Jack. I keep forgetting you're the new guy on this block."

"The chemicals have various industrial uses," the Russian colonel explained to the American colonel.

"Good for you. All we can do is burn ours, and the smoke'll kill you." The rocket exhaust from the liquid propellants wasn't exactly the Breath of Spring either, of course, but when you got down to it, they *were* industrial chemicals with a variety of other uses.

As they watched, technicians snaked a hose from the standpipe next to the missile *puskatel,* the Russian word for "silo," to a truck that would transport the last of the nitrogen tetroxide to a chemical plant. Below, another fitting on the missile body took another hose that pumped pressurized gas into the top of the oxidizer tank, the better to drive the corrosive chemical out. The top of the missile was blunt. The Americans could see where the warhead "bus" had been attached, but it had already been removed, and was now on another truck, preceded by a pair of BTR-70 infantry fighting vehicles and trailed by three more, on its way to a place where the warheads could be disarmed preparatory to complete disassembly. America was buying the plutonium. The tritium in the warheads would stay in Russia, probably to be sold eventually on the open market to end up on watch and instrument faces. Tritium had a market value of about $50,000 per gram, and the sale of it would turn a tidy profit for the Russians. Perhaps, the American thought, that was the reason that his Russian

colleagues were moving so expeditiously.

This was the first SS-19 silo to be deactivated for the 53rd Strategic Rocket Regiment. It was both like and unlike the American silos being deactivated under Russian inspection. The same mass of reinforced concrete for both, though this one was sited in woods, and the American silos were all on open ground, reflecting different ideas about site security. The climate wasn't all that different. Windier in North Dakota, because of the open spaces. The base temperature was marginally colder in Russia, which balanced out the windchill factor on the prairie. In due course the valve wheel on the pipe was turned, the hose removed, and the truck started up.

"Mind if I look?" the USAF colonel asked.

"Please." The Russian colonel of Strategic Rocket Forces waved to the open hole. He even handed over a large flashlight. Then it was his turn to laugh.

You son of a bitch, Colonel Andrew Malcolm wanted to exclaim. There was a pool of icy water at the bottom of the puskatel. The intelligence estimate had been wrong again. Who would have believed it?

"Backup?" Ding asked.

"You might end up just doing sightseeing," Mrs. Foley told them, almost believing it.

"Fill us in on the mission?" John Clark asked, getting down to business. It was his own fault, after all, since he and Ding had turned into one of the Agency's best field teams. He looked over at Chavez. The kid had come a long way in five years. He had his college degree, and was close to his master's, in international relations no less. Ding's job would probably have put his instructors into cardiac arrest, since their idea of transnational intercourse didn't involve fucking other nations—a joke Domingo Chavez himself had coined on the dusty plains of Africa while reading a history book for one of his seminar groups. He still needed to learn about concealing his emotions. Chavez still retained some of the fiery nature of his background, though Clark wondered how much of it was for show around the Farm and elsewhere. In every organization the individual practitioners had to have a "service reputation." John had his. People spoke about him in whispers, thinking, stupidly, that the nicknames and rumors would never get back to him. And Ding wanted one, too. Well, that was normal.

"Photos?" Chavez asked calmly, then took them from Mrs. Foley's hand. There were six of them. Ding examined each, handing them over one by one to his senior. The junior officer kept his voice even

but allowed his face to show his distaste.

"So if Nomuri turns up a face and a location, then what?" Ding asked.

"You two make contact with her and ask if she would like a free plane ticket home," the DDO replied without adding that there would be an extensive debriefing process. The CIA didn't give out free anythings, really.

"Cover?" John asked.

"We haven't decided yet. Before you head over, we need to work on your language skills."

"Monterey?" Chavez smiled. It was about the most pleasant piece of country in America, especially this time of year.

"Two weeks, total immersion. You fly out this evening. Your teacher will be a guy named Lyalin, Oleg Yurievich. KGB major who came over a while back. He actually ran a network over there, called THISTLE. He's the guy who turned the information that you and Ding used to bug the airliner—"

"Whoa!" Chavez observed. "Without him . . ."

Mrs. Foley nodded, pleased that Ding had made the complete connection that rapidly. "That's right. He's got a very nice house overlooking the water. It turns out he's one hell of a good language teacher, I guess because he had to learn it himself." It had turned into a fine bargain for CIA. After the debriefing process, he'd taken a productive job at the Armed Forces Language School, where his salary was paid by DOD. "Anyway, by the time you're able to order lunch and find the bathroom in the native tongue, we'll have your cover IDs figured out."

Clark smiled and rose, taking the signal that it was time to leave. "Back to work, then."

"Defending America," Ding observed with a smile, leaving the photos on Mrs. Foley's desk and sure that actually having to defend his country was a thing of the past. Clark heard the remark and thought it a joke too, until memories came back that erased the look from his face.

It wasn't their fault. It was just a matter of objective conditions. With four times the population of the United States, and only one third the living space, they had to do something. The people needed jobs, products, a chance to have what everyone else in the world wanted. They could see it on the television sets that seemed to exist even in places where there were no jobs, and, seeing it, demanded a chance to have it. It was that simple. You couldn't say "no" to nine hundred million people.

Certainly not if you were one of them. Vice Admiral V. K. Chandraskatta sat on his leather chair on the flag bridge of the carrier *Viraat*. His obligation, as expressed in his oath of office, was to carry out the orders of his government, but more than that, his duty was to his people. He had to look no further than his own flag bridge to see that: staff officers and ratings, especially the latter, the best his country could produce. They were mainly signalmen and yeomen who'd left whatever life they'd had on the subcontinent to take on this new one, and tried hard to be good at it, because as meager as the pay was, it was preferable to the economic chances they took in a country whose unemployment rate hovered between 20 and 25 percent. Just for his country to be self-sufficient in food had taken—how long? Twentyfive years. And *that* had come only as charity of sorts, the result of Western agroscience whose success still grated on many minds, as though his country, ancient and learned, couldn't make its own destiny. Even successful charity could be a burden on the national soul.

And now what? His country's economy was bouncing back, finally, but it was also hitting limits. India needed additional resources, but most of all needed space, of which there was little to be had. To his country's north was the world's most forbidding mountain range. East was Bangladesh, which had even more problems than India did. West was Pakistan, also overcrowded, and an ancient religious enemy, war with whom could well have the unwanted effect of cutting off his country's oil supply to the Muslim states of the Persian Gulf.

Such bad luck, the Admiral thought, picking up his glasses and surveying his fleet because he had nothing else to do at the moment. If they did nothing, the best his country might hope for was something little better than stagnation. If they turned outward, actively seeking room . . . But the "new world order" said that his country could not. India was denied entry into the race to greatness by those very nations that had run the race and then shut it down lest others catch up.

The proof was right here. His navy was one of the world's most powerful, built and manned and trained at ruinous expense, sailing on one of the world's seven oceans, the only one named for a country, and even here it was secondbest, subordinate to a fraction of the United States Navy. That grated even more. America was the one telling his country what it could and could not do. America, with a history of—what?—scarcely two hundred years. Upstarts. Had they fought Alexander of Macedon or the great Khan? The European "discovery" voyages had been aimed at reaching *his* country, and that land mass discovered by *accident* was now denying greatness and power and justice to the Admiral's ancient land. It was, all in all, a lot to hide behind a face of professional detachment while the rest of his

flag staff bustled about.

"Radar contact, bearing one-three-five, range two hundred kilometers," a talker announced. "Inbound course, speed five hundred knots."

The Admiral turned to his fleet-operations officer and nodded. Captain Mehta lifted a phone and spoke. His fleet was off the normal commercial sea and air routes, and the timing told him what the inbound track would be. Four American fighters, F-18E Hornet attack fighters off one of the American carriers to his southeast. Every day they came, morning and afternoon, and sometimes in the middle of the night to show that they could do that, too, to let him know that the Americans knew his location, and to remind him that he didn't, couldn't know theirs.

A moment later he heard the start-up noise from two of his Harriers. Good aircraft, expensive aircraft, but not a match for the inbound Americans. He'd put four up today, two from *Viraat* and two from *Vikrant*, to intercept the four, probably four, American Hornets, and the pilots would wave and nod in a show of good humor, but it would be a bilateral lie.

"We could light off our SAM systems, show them that we tire of this game," Captain Mehta suggested quietly. The Admiral shook his head.

"No. They know little about our SAM systems, and we will volunteer them nothing." The Indians' precise radar frequencies, pulse width, and repetition rates were not open information, and the American intelligence services had probably never troubled itself to find them out. That meant that the Americans might not be able to jam or spoof his systems—probably they could, but they wouldn't be certain of it, and it was the lack of certainty that would worry them. It wasn't much of a card, but it was the best in Chandraskatta's current hand. The Admiral sipped at his tea, making a show of his imperturbable nature. "No, we will take notice of their approach, meet them in a friendly manner, and let them go on their way."

Mehta nodded and went off without a word to express his building rage. It was to be expected. He was the fleet-operations officer, and his was the task of divining a plan to defeat the American fleet, should that necessity present itself. That such a task was virtually impossible did not relieve Mehta of the duty to carry it out, and it was hardly surprising that the man was showing the strain of his position. Chandraskatta set his cup down, watching the Harriers leap off the ski-jump deck and into the air.

"How are the pilots bearing up?" the Admiral asked his air officer.

"They grow frustrated, but performance thus far is excellent." The answer was delivered with pride, as well it might be. His pilots were superb. The Admiral ate with them often, drawing courage from the

proud faces in the ready rooms. They were fine young men, the equal, man for man, of any fighter pilots in all the world. More to the point, they were eager to show it.

But the entire Indian Navy had only forty-three Harrier FRS 51 fighters. He had but thirty at sea on both *Viraat* and *Vikrant,* and that did not equal the numbers or capability aboard a single American carrier. All because they had entered the race first, won it, and then declared the games closed, Chandraskatta told himself, listening to the chatter of his airmen over an open-voice channel. It simply wasn't fair.

"So, what are you telling me?" Jack asked.

"It was a scam," Robby answered. "Those birds were maintenance-intensive. Guess what? The maintenance hasn't been done in the past couple of years. Andy Malcolm called in on his satellite brick this evening. There was water at the bottom of the hole he looked at today."

"And?"

"I keep forgetting you're a city boy." Robby grinned sheepishly, or rather like the wolf under a fleece coat. "You make a hole in the ground, sooner or later it fills with water, okay? If you have something valuable in the hole, you better keep it pumped out. Water in the bottom of the silo means that they weren't always doing that. It means water vapor, humidity in the hole. And corrosion."

The light bulb went off. "You telling me the birds—"

"Probably wouldn't fly even if they wanted them to. Corrosion is like that. Probably dead birds, because fixing them once they're broke is a very iffy proposition. Anyway"—Jackson tossed the thin file folder at Ryan's desk—"that's the J-3 assessment."

"What about J-2?" Jack asked, referring to the intelligence directorate of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"They never believed it, but I expect they will now if we open enough holes and see the same thing. Me?" Admiral Jackson shrugged. "I figure if Ivan let us see it in number one, we'll find pretty much the same thing everywhere else. They just don't give a good fuck anymore."

Intelligence information comes from many sources, and an "operator" like Jackson was often the best source of all. Unlike intelligence officers whose job it was to evaluate the capabilities of the other side, almost always in a theoretical sense, Jackson was a man whose interest in weapons was making them work, and he'd learned from hard experience that using them was far more demanding than looking at them.

"Remember when we thought they were ten feet tall?"

"I never did, but a little bastard with a gun can still ruin your whole day," Robby reminded his friend. "So how much money have they hustled out of us?"

"Five big ones."

"Good deal, our federal tax money at work. We just paid the Russkies five thousand million dollars to 'deactivate' missiles that couldn't leave the silos unless they set the nukes off *first*. Fabulous call, Dr. Ryan."

"They need the money, Rob."

"So do I, man. Hey, boy, I'm scratching the bottom to get enough JP to keep our planes in the air." It was not often understood that every ship in the fleet and every battalion of tanks in the Army had to live on a budget. Though the commanding officers didn't keep a checkbook per se, each drew on a fixed supply of consumable stores—fuel, weapons, spare parts, even food in the case of warships—that had to last a whole year. It was by no means unknown for a man-of-war to sit several weeks alongside her pier at the end of the fiscal year because there was nothing left to make her run. Such an event meant that somewhere a job was not getting done, a crew was not being trained. The Pentagon was fairly unique as a federal agency, in that it was expected to live on a fixed, often diminishing budget.

"How much thinner do you expect us to be spread?"

"I'll tell him, Rob, okay? The Chairman—"

"Just between you and me, the Chairman thinks operations are something that surgeons do in hospitals. And if you quote me on that, no more golf lessons."

"What is it worth to have the Russians out of the game?" Jack asked, wondering if Robby would calm down a little.

"Not as much as we've lost in cuts. In case you haven't noticed, my Navy is still stretched from hell to breakfast, and we're doing business with forty percent less ships. The ocean didn't get any smaller, okay? The Army's better off, I grant that, but the Air Force isn't, and the Marines are still sucking hind tit, and *they're* still our primary response team for the next time the boys and girls at Foggy Bottom fuck up."

"Preaching to the choir, Rob."

"More to it than just that, Jack. We're stretching the people, too. The fewer the ships, the longer they have to stay out. The longer they stay out, the worse the maintenance bills. It's like the bad old days in the late seventies. We're starting to lose people. Hard to make a man stay away from his wife and kids that long. In flying, we call it the coffin corner. When you lose experienced people, your training bills go up. You lose combat effectiveness no matter which way you go," Robby went on, talking like an admiral now.

"Look, Rob, I gave the same speech a while back on the other side

of the building. I'm doing my best for you," Jack replied, talking like a senior government official. At that point both old friends shared a look.

"We're both old farts."

"It's a long time since we were on the faculty of Canoe U," Ryan allowed. His voice went on almost in a whisper. "Me teaching history, and you prostrating yourself to God every night to heal your leg."

"I should've done more of that. Arthritis in the knee," Robby said. "I have a flight physical in nine months. Guess what?"

"Down-check?"

"The big one." Jackson nodded matter-of-factly. Ryan knew what it really meant. To a man who'd flown fighter planes off carriers for over twenty years, it was the hard realization that age had come. He couldn't play with the boys anymore. You could explain away gray in the hair by citing adverse genes, but a down-check would mean taking off the flight suit, hanging up the helmet, and admitting that he was no longer good enough to do the one thing he'd yearned for since the age of ten, and at which he'd excelled for nearly all of his adult life. The bitterest part would be the memories of the things he'd said as a lieutenant, j.g., about the older pilots of his youth, the hidden smirks, the knowing looks shared with his fellow youngsters, none of whom had ever expected it would come to them.

"Rob, a lot of good guys never get the chance to screen for command of a squadron. They take the twenty-year out at commander's rank and end up flying the night shift for Federal Express."

"And make good money at it, too."

"Have you picked out the casket yet?" That broke the mood. Jackson looked up and grinned.

"Shit. If I can't dance, I can still watch. I'm telling you, pal, you want us to run all these pretty operations we plan in my cubicle, we need help from this side of the river. Mike Dubro is doing a great job hanging paper with one hand, but he and his troops have limits, y'dig?"

"Well, Admiral, I promise you this: when the time comes for you to get your battle group, there will be one for you to drive." It wasn't much of a pledge, but both men knew it was the best he could offer.

She was number five. The remarkable part was—hell, Murray thought in the office six blocks from the White House, it was all remarkable. It was the profile of the investigation that was the most disquieting. He and his team had interviewed several women who had admitted, some shamefacedly, some without overt emotional involvement, and some

with pride and humor, at having bedded Ed Kealty, but there were five for whom the act had not been entirely voluntary. With this woman, the latest, drugs had been an additional factor, and she felt the lonely personal shame, the sense that she alone had fallen into the trap.

"So?" Bill Shaw asked after what had been a long day for him, too.

"So it's a solid case. We now have five known victims, four of whom are living. Two would stand up as rapes in any courtroom I've ever been in. That does not count Lisa Beringer. The other two demonstrate the use of drugs on federal property. Those two are virtually word-for-word, they identify the label on the brandy bottle, the effects, everything."

"Good witnesses?" the FBI Director asked.

"As good as can be expected in this sort of case. It's time to move with it," Murray added. Shaw nodded in understanding. Word would soon begin to leak out. You simply couldn't run a covert investigation for very long, even under the best of circumstances. Some of the people you interviewed would be loyal to the target of the inquiry, and no matter how carefully you phrased the opening questions, they would make the not overly great leap of imagination required to discern the nature of the probe, often because they suspected it themselves. Then those non-witnesses would worry about getting back to the target to warn him, whether from conviction in his innocence or hope of deriving a personal profit. Criminal or not, the Vice President was a man with considerable political power, still able to dole out large and powerful tokens to those who won his favor. In another age, the Bureau might not have gotten this far. The President himself, or even the Attorney General, would have conveyed a quiet warning, and senior staff members would themselves have sought out the victims and offered to make amends of one sort or another, and in many cases it would have worked. The only reason they'd gotten this far, after all, was that the FBI had the permission of the President, the cooperation of the AG, and a different legal and moral climate in which to work.

"As soon as you go to talk to the Chairman . . ."

Murray nodded. "Yeah, might as well have a press conference and lay out our evidence in an organized way." But they couldn't do that, of course. Once the substance of their evidence was given over to political figures—in this case the chairman and ranking minority member of the House Committee on the Judiciary—it would leak immediately. The only real control Murray and his team would possess would be in selecting the time of day. Late enough, and the news would miss the morning papers, incurring the wrath of the editors of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The Bureau

had to play strictly by the rules. It couldn't leak anything because this was a criminal proceeding and the rights of the target had to be guarded as closely as—actually even closer than—those of the victims, lest the eventual trial be tainted.

"We'll do it here, Dan," Shaw said, reaching his decision. "I'll have the AG make the phone call and set the meet. Maybe that'll put the information on close-hold for a little while. What exactly did the President say the other day?"

"He's a standup guy," the Deputy Assistant Director reported, using a form of praise popular in the FBI. "He said, 'A crime's a crime.' " The President had also said to handle the affair in as "black" a way as possible, but that was to be expected.

"Fair enough. I'll let him know what we're doing personally."

Typically, Nomuri went right to work. It was his regular night at this bathhouse with this group of salarymen—he probably had the cleanest job in the Agency. It was also one of the slickest ways of getting information he'd ever stumbled across, and he made it slicker still by standing for a large bottle of sake that now sat, half empty, on the edge of the wooden tub.

"I wish you hadn't told me about that round-eye," Nomuri said with his own eyes closed, sitting in his usual corner and allowing his body to take in the enveloping heat of the water. At one hundred eight degrees, it was hot enough to lower blood pressure and induce euphoria. Added to it was the effect of the alcohol. Many Japanese have a genetic abnormality called "Oriental Flush" in the West, or with greater ethnic sensitivity, "pathological intoxication." It is actually an enzyme disorder, and means that for a relatively low quantity of alcoholic intake, there is a high degree of result. It was, fortunately, a trait which Nomuri's family did not share.

"Why is that?" Kazuo Taoka asked from the opposite corner.

"Because now I cannot get the gaijin witch out of my mind!" Nomuri replied good-naturedly. One of the other effects of the bathhouse was an intimate bonhomie. The man next to the CIA officer rubbed his head roughly and laughed, as did the rest of the group.

"Ah, and now you want to hear more, is it?" Nomuri didn't have to look. The man whose body rubbed on his leaned forward. Surely the rest would do it as well. "You were right, you know. Their feet are too big, and their bosoms also, but their manners . . . well, that they can learn after a fashion."

"You make us wait?" another member of the group asked, feigning a blustery anger.

"Do you not appreciate drama?" There was a merry chorus of

laughs. “Well, yes, it is true that her bosoms are too big for real beauty, but there are sacrifices we all must make in life, and truly I have seen worse deformities ...”

Such a good raconteur, Nomuri thought. He did have a gift for it. In a moment he heard the sound of a cork being pulled, as another man refilled the little cups. Drink was actually prohibited in the bathhouse for health reasons, but, rarely for this country, it was a rule largely ignored. Nomuri reached for his cup, his eyes still closed, and made a great show of forming a mental picture masked by a blissful smile, as additional details slid across the steaming surface of the water. The description became more specific, fitting ever closer to the photograph and to other details he’d been passed on his early-morning train. It was hardly conclusive yet. Any of thousands of girls could fit the description, and Nomuri wasn’t particularly outraged by the event. She’d taken her chances one way or another, but she was an American citizen, and if it were possible to help her, then he would. It seemed a trivial sidebar to his overall assignment, but if nothing else it had caused him to ask a question that would make him appear even more a member of this group of men. It made it more likely, therefore, to get important information out of them at a later date.

“We have no choice,” a man said in another, similar bathhouse, not so far away. “We need your help.”

It wasn’t unexpected, the other five men thought. It was just a matter of who would hit the wall first. Fate had made it this man and his company. That did not lessen his personal disgrace at being forced to ask for help, and the other men felt his pain while outwardly displaying only dispassionate good manners. Indeed, those men who listened felt something else as well: fear. Now that it had happened once, it would be far easier for it to happen again. Who would be next?

Generally there could be no safer form of investment than real estate, real fixed property with physical reality, something you could touch and feel, build, and live on, that others could see and measure. Although there were continuing efforts in Japan to make new fill land, to build new airports, for example, the general rule was as true here as it was elsewhere: it made sense to buy land because the supply of real land was fixed, and because of that the price was not going to drop.

But in Japan that truth had been distorted by unique local conditions. Land-use policy in the country was skewed by the inordinate power of the small holders of farmland, and it was not unusual to see a small patch of land in the midst of a suburban setting allocated to the growing of a quarter hectare of vegetables. Small

already—the entire nation was about the size of California, and populated with roughly half the people of the United States—their country was further crowded by the fact that little of the land was arable, and since arable land also tended to be land on which people could more easily live, the major part of the population was further concentrated into a handful of large, dense cities, where real-estate prices became more precious still. The remarkable result of these seemingly ordinary facts was that the commercial real estate in the city of Tokyo alone had a higher "book" value than that of all the land in America's forty-eight contiguous states. More remarkably still, this absurd fiction was accepted by everyone as though it made sense, when in fact it was every bit as madly artificial as the Dutch Tulip Mania of the seventeenth century.

But as with America, what was a national economy, after all, but a collective belief? Or so everyone had thought for a generation. The frugal Japanese citizens saved a high proportion of their earnings. Those savings went into banks, in such vast quantities that the supply of capital for lending was similarly huge, as a result of which the interest rates for those loans were correspondingly low, which allowed businesses to purchase land and build on it despite prices that anywhere else in the world would have been somewhere between ruinous and impossible. As with any artificial boom, the process had dangerous corollaries. The inflated book value of owned real estate was used as collateral for other loans, and as security for stock portfolios bought on margin, and in the process supposedly intelligent and far-seeing businessmen had in fact constructed an elaborate house of cards whose foundation was the belief that metropolitan Tokyo had more intrinsic value than all of America between Bangor and San Diego. (An additional consequence of this was a view of real-estate value that more than any other factor had persuaded Japanese businessmen that American real-estate, which, after all, looked pretty much the same as that in their own country, *had to be* worth more than what the foolish Americans charged for it.) By the early 1990s had come disquieting thoughts. The precipitous decline of the Japanese stock market had threatened to put calls on the large margin accounts, and made some businessmen think about selling their land holdings to cover their exposures. With that had come the stunning but unsurprising realization that nobody wanted to pay book value for a parcel of land; that although everyone accepted book value in the abstract, actually paying the assumed price was, well, not terribly realistic. The result was that the single card supporting the rest of the house had been quietly removed from the bottom of the structure and awaited only a puff of breeze to cause the entire edifice to collapse—a possibility studiously ignored in the discourse between senior

executives.

Until now.

The men sitting in the tub were friends and associates of many years' standing, and with Kozo Matsuda's quiet and dignified announcement of his company's current cash-flow difficulties, all of them saw collective disaster on a horizon that was suddenly far closer than they had expected only two hours earlier. The bankers present could offer loans, but interest rates were higher now. The industrialists could offer favors, but those would affect the bottom-line profits of their operations, with adverse effects on already-staggering stock prices. Yes, they could save their friend from ruin, along with which, in their society, came personal disgrace that would forever remove him from this intimate group. If they didn't, he would have to take his "best" chance, to put some of his office buildings, quietly, on the market, hoping, quietly, that someone would purchase them at something akin to the assumed value. But that was most unlikely—this they knew; they themselves would not be willing to do it—and if it became known that "book value" was as fictional as the writings of Jules Verne, then they would suffer, too. The bankers would have to admit that the security of their loans, and consequently the security of their depositors' money, was also a hollow fiction. A quantity of "real" money so massive as to be comprehended only as a number would be seen to have vanished as though by some sort of evil magic. For all these reasons, they would do what had to be done, they would help Matsuda and his company, receiving concessions in return, of course, but fronting the money he and his operations needed.

The problem was that although they could do it once, probably twice, and maybe even a third time, events would soon cascade, finding their own precipitous momentum, and there would soon come a time when they could not do what was necessary to support the house of cards. The consequences were not easily contemplated.

All six of the men looked down at the water, unable to meet the eyes of the others, because their society did not easily allow men to communicate fear, and fear is what they all felt. They were responsible, after all. Their corporations were in their own hands, ruled as autocratically as the holdings of a J. P. Morgan. With their control came a lavish lifestyle, immense personal power, and, ultimately, total personal accountability. All the decisions had been theirs, after all, and if those decisions had been faulty, then the responsibility was theirs in a society where public failure was as painful as death.

"Yamata-san is right," one of the bankers said quietly, without moving his body. "I was in error to dispute his view."

Marveling at his courage, and as though in one voice, the others

nodded and whispered, "*Hai.*"

Then another man spoke. "We need to seek his counsel on this matter."

* * *

The factory worked two hectic shifts, so popular was what it turned out. Set in the hills of Kentucky, the single building occupied over a hundred acres and was surrounded in turn by a parking lot for its workers and another for its products, with an area for loading trucks, and another for loading trains, run into the facility by CSX.

The premier new car on American and Japanese markets, the Cresta was named for the toboggan run at St. Moritz, in Switzerland, where a senior Japanese auto executive, somewhat in his cups, had taken up a challenge to try his luck on one of the deceptively simple sleds. He'd rocketed down the track, only to lose control at the treacherous Shuttlecock curve, turned himself into a ballistic object and dislocated his hip in the process. To honor the course that had given him a needed lesson in humility, he'd decided in the local casualty hospital to enshrine his experience in a new car, at that time merely a set of drawings and specifications.

As with nearly everything generated by the Japanese auto industry, the Cresta was a masterpiece of engineering. Popularly priced, its front-wheel drive attached to a sporty and fuel-efficient four-cylinder, sixteen-valve engine, it sat two adults in the front and two or three children quite comfortably in the back, and had become overnight both the *Motor Trend* Car of the Year and the savior of a Japanese manufacturer that had suffered three straight years of declining sales because of Detroit's rebounding efforts to take back the American market. The single most popular car for young adults with families, it came "loaded" with options and was manufactured on both sides of the Pacific to meet a global demand.

This plant, set thirty miles outside Lexington, Kentucky, was state-of-the-art in all respects. The employees earned union wages without having had to join the UAW, and on both attempts to create a union shop, supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, the powerful organization had failed to get even as much as 40 percent of the vote and gone away grumbling at the unaccustomed stupidity of the workers.

As with any such operation, there was an element of unreality to it. Auto parts entered the building at one end, and finished automobiles exited at the other. Some of the parts were even American made, though not as many as the U.S. government would have wished.

Indeed, the factory manager would have preferred more domestic content as well, especially in the winter, when adverse weather on the Pacific could interfere with the delivery of parts—even a one-day delay in arrival time of a single ship could bring some inventories dangerously low, since the plant ran on minimal overhead—and the demand for his Crestas was greater than his ability to manufacture them. The parts arrived mostly by train-loaded containers from ports on both American coasts, were separated by type, and stored in stockrooms adjacent to the portion of the assembly line at which they would be joined with the automobiles. Much of the work was done by robots, but there was no substitute for the skilled hands of a worker with eyes and a brain, and in truth the automated functions were mainly things that people didn't enjoy anyway. The very efficiency of the plant made for the affordable cost of the Cresta, and the busy schedule, with plenty of overtime, made for workers who, with this region's first taste of really well-paying manufacturing jobs, applied themselves as diligently as their Japanese counterparts, and, their Japanese supervisors admitted quietly both to themselves and in internal company memoranda, rather more creatively. Fully a dozen major innovations suggested by workers on this line, just in this year, had been adopted at once in similar factories six thousand miles away. The supervisory personnel themselves greatly enjoyed living in Middle America. The price of their homes and the expanse of land that came with them both came as startling revelations, and after the initial discomfort of being in an alien land, they all began the process of succumbing to local hospitality, joining the local lawyers on the golf links, stopping off at McDonald's for a burger, watching their children play T-Ball with the local kids, often amazed at their welcome after what they'd expected. (The local TV cable system had even added NHK to its service, for the two hundred families who wanted the flavor of something from home.) In the process they also generated a tidy profit for their parent corporation, which, unfortunately, was now trapped into barely breaking even on the Crestas produced in Japan due to the unexpectedly high productivity of the Kentucky plant and the continuing decline of the dollar against the yen. For that reason, additional land was being bought this very week to increase the capacity of the plant by 60 percent. A third shift, while a possibility, would have reduced line maintenance, with a consequent adverse effect on quality control, which was a risk the company was unwilling to run, considering the renewed competition from Detroit.

Early in the line, two workers attached the gasoline tanks to the frames. One, off the line, removed the tank from its shipping carton and set it on a moving track that carried it to the second worker, whose job was to manhandle the light but bulky artifact into place.

Plastic hangers held the tank briefly until the worker made the attachment permanent, and the plastic hangers were then removed before the chassis moved on to the next station.

The cardboard was soggy, the woman in the storage room noted. She held her hand to her nose and smelled sea salt. The container that had held this shipment of gas tanks had been improperly closed, and a stormy sea had invaded it. A good thing, she thought, that the tanks were all weathersealed and galvanized. Perhaps fifteen or twenty of the tanks had been exposed to seawater. She considered mentioning it to the supervisor, but on looking around she couldn't see him. She had the authority on her own to stop the line—traditionally a very rare power for an auto-assembly worker—until the question of the gas tanks was cleared up. Every worker in the plant had that theoretical power, but she was new here, and really needed her supervisor to make the call. Looking around more, she almost stopped the line by her inaction, which caused an abrupt whistle from the line worker. Well, it couldn't be that big a deal, could it? She slid the tank on the track, and, opening the next box, forgot about it. She would never know that she was part of a chain of events that would soon kill one family and wound two others.

Two minutes later the tank was attached to a Cresta chassis, and the not-yet-a-car moved on down the seemingly endless line toward an open door that could not even be seen from this station. In due course the rest of the automobile would be assembled on the steel frame, finally rolling out of the plant as a candy-apple-red car already ordered by a family in Greeneville, Tennessee. The color had been chosen in honor of the wife, Candace Denton, who had just given her husband, Pierce, his first son after two twin daughters three years earlier. It would be the first new car the young couple had ever owned, and was his way of showing her how pleased he was with her love. They really couldn't afford it, but it was about love, not money, and he knew that somehow he'd find a way to make it work. The following day the car was driven onto a semitrailer transporter for the short drive to the dealer in Knoxville. A telex from the assembly plant told the salesman that it was on the way, and he wasted no time calling Mr. Denton to let him know the good news.

They'd need a day for dealer prep, but the car would be delivered, a week late due to the demand for the Cresta, fully inspected, with temporary tags and insurance. And a full tank of gas, sealing a fate already decided by a multiplicity of factors.

7

Catalyst

It didn't help to do it at night. Even the glare of lights—dozens of them—didn't replicate what the sun gave for free. Artificial light made for odd shadows that always seemed to be in the wrong places, and if that weren't bad enough, the men moving around made shadows of their own, pulling the eyes away from their important work.

Each of the SS-19/H-11 "boosters" was encapsulated. The construction plans for the capsule—called a cocoon here—had accompanied the plans for the missiles themselves, more or less as an afterthought; after all, the Japanese corporation had paid for all the plans, and they were in the same drawer, and so they went along. That was fortunate, the supervising engineer thought, because it had not seemed to have occurred to anyone to ask for them.

The SS-19 had been designed as an intercontinental ballistic missile, a weapon of war, and since it had been designed by Russians, it had also been engineered for rough handling by poorly trained conscript soldiers. In this, the engineer admitted, the Russians had showed true genius worthy of emulation. His own countrymen had a tendency to overengineer everything, which often made for a delicacy that had no place in such brutish applications as this. Forced to construct a weapon that could survive adverse human and environmental factors, the Russians had built a transport/ loading container for their "birds" that protected them against everything. In this way the assembly workers could fit all the plugs and fittings at the factory, insert the missile body into its capsule, and ship it off to the field, where all the soldiers had to do was elevate it and then lower it into the silo. Once there, a better-trained crew of three men would attach the external power and telemetry plugs. Though not as simple as loading a cartridge into a rifle, it was by far the most efficient way of installing an ICBM that anyone had ever developed—efficient enough, indeed, that the Americans had copied it for their MX "Peacekeeper" missiles, all of which were now destroyed. The cocoon allowed the missile to be handled without fear, because all the stress points had hard contact with the inside of the structure. It was rather like the exoskeleton of an insect, and was necessary because, as forbidding as the missile

might appear, it was in fact as delicate as the flimsiest tissue. Fittings within the silo accepted the base of the capsule, which allowed it to be rotated to the vertical and then lowered fully into place. The entire operation, bad lighting and all, required ninety minutes—exactly what the Soviet manual had demanded of its people, remarkably enough.

In this case, the silo crew consisted of five men. They attached three power cables along with four hoses that would maintain the gas pressure in the fuel and oxidizer tanks—the bird was not yet fueled, and the internal tanks needed pressure to maintain structural integrity. In the control bunker located six hundred meters away, within the valley's northeastern wall, the control crew of three men noted that the missile's internal systems "spun up" just as they were supposed to. It wasn't the least bit unexpected, but was gratifying even so. With that knowledge, they made a call to the phone located adjacent to the top of the silo, and the work crew waved the train off. The diesel switch engine would deposit the flatcar back on a siding and retrieve the next missile. Two would be emplaced that night, and on each of the four succeeding nights, filling all ten of the silos. The senior personnel marveled at how smoothly it had all gone, though each wondered why it should be so surprising. It was perfectly straightforward work, after all. And strictly speaking, it was, but each also knew that the world would soon be a very different place because of what they had done, and somehow they'd expected the sky to change color or the earth to move at every moment of the project. Neither had happened, and now the question was whether to be disappointed or elated by that turn of events.

"It is our opinion that you should take a harder line with them," Goto said in the sanctity of his host's office.

"But why?" the Prime Minister asked, knowing the answer even so.

"They seek to crush us. They seek to punish us for being efficient, for doing better work, for achieving higher standards than what their own lazy workers are willing to attain." The Leader of the Opposition saved his assertive speaking voice for public utterances. In private with the leader of his country's government, he was unfailingly polite in manner even as he plotted to replace this weak, indecisive man.

"That is not necessarily the case, Goto-san. You know as well as I do that we have of late reasserted our position on rice and automobiles and computer chips. It is we who have won concessions from them, and not the reverse." The Prime Minister wondered what Goto was up to. Part of it he knew, naturally enough. Goto was maneuvering with his usual crude skill to realign the various factions in the Diet. The Prime Minister had a tenuous majority there, and the reason his

government had taken a hard line on trade issues had been to assuage those on the margins of his voting bloc, ordinarily minor players and parties whose alliance of convenience with the government had magnified their power to the point where the tail really could wag the dog, because the tail knew that it held the balance of power. In this the PM had played a dangerous game on the high-wire and without a net. On the one hand he'd have to keep his own diverse political allies happy, and on the other he couldn't offend his nation's most important trading partner. Worst of all, it was a tiring game, especially with people like Goto watching from below and howling at him, hoping that their noise would make him fall.

As though you could do better, the Prime Minister thought, politely refilling Goto's cup with green tea, getting a gracious nod for the gesture.

The more basic problem he understood better than the leader of his parliamentary opposition. Japan was not a democracy in any real sense. Rather like America in the late Nineteenth Century, the government was in fact, if not in law, a kind of official shield for the nation's business. The country was really run by a relative handful of businessmen—the number was under thirty, or even under twenty, depending on how you reckoned it—and despite the fact that those executives and their corporations appeared to be cutthroat competitors, in reality they were all associates, allied in every possible way, co-directorships, banking partnerships, all manner of inter-corporate cooperation agreements. Rare was the parliamentarian who would not listen with the greatest care to a representative of one of the zaibatsu. Rarer still was the Diet member who was graced with a personal audience with one of these men, and in every such case, the elected government official came away exhilarated at his good fortune, for those men were quite effective at providing what every politician needed: funds. Consequently, their word was law. The result was a parliament as thoroughly corrupted as any on earth. Or perhaps "corrupt" was the wrong term, the PM told himself. Subservient, perhaps. The ordinary citizens of the country were often enraged by what they saw, by what a few courageous journalists proclaimed, mostly in terms that, despite appearing to Westerners to be rather weak and fawning, in local context were as damning as anything Emile Zola had ever broadsheeted across Paris. But the ordinary citizens didn't have the effective power that the zaibatsu did, and every attempt to reform the political system had fallen short. As a result, the government of one of the world's most powerful economies had become little more than the official arm of businessmen elected by no one, scarcely even beholden to their own stockholders. They had arranged his own accession to the Prime Ministership, he knew

now . . . perhaps a bone thrown to the common people? he wondered. Had he been *supposed* to fail? Was that the destiny that had been constructed for him? To fail so that a return to normal could then be accepted by the citizens who'd placed their hopes in his hands?

That fear had pushed him into taking positions with America that he knew to be dangerous. And now even that was not enough, was it?

"Many would say that," Goto allowed with the most perfect manners. "And I salute you for your courage. Alas, objective conditions have hurt our country. For example, the relative change of dollar and yen has had devastating effects on our investments abroad, and these could only have been the result of deliberate policy on the part of our esteemed trading partners."

There was something about his delivery, the Prime Minister thought. His words sounded scripted. Scripted by whom? Well, that was obvious enough. The PM wondered if Goto knew that he was in even a poorer position than the man he sought to replace. *Probably not,* but that was scant consolation. If Goto achieved his post, he would be even more in the pawn of his masters, pushed into implementing policies that might or might not be well considered. And unlike himself, Goto might be fool enough to believe that he was actually pursuing policies that were both wise and his own. How long would that illusion last?

It was dangerous to do this so often, Christopher Cook knew. Often? Well, every month or so. Was that often? Cook was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, not an intelligence officer, and hadn't read that manual, assuming there was one.

The hospitality was as impressive as ever, the good food and wine and the exquisite setting, the slow procession through topics of conversation, beginning with the polite and entirely pro forma inquiries as to the state of his family, and his golf game, and his opinion on this or that current social topic. Yes, the weather was unusually pleasant for this time of year—a perennial remark on Seiji's part; fairly enough, since fall and spring in Washington were tolerably pleasant, but the summers were hot and muggy and the winters wet and dank. It was tedious, even to the professional diplomat well versed in meaningless chitchat. Nagumo had been in Washington long enough to run out of original observations to make, and over the past few months had grown repetitive. *Well, why should he be different from any other diplomat in the world?* Cook asked himself, about to be surprised.

"I understand that you have reached an important agreement with the Russians," Seiji Nagumo observed as the dinner dishes were

cleared away.

"What do you mean?" Cook asked, thinking it a continuation of the chitchat.

"We've heard that you are accelerating the elimination of ICBMs," the man went on, sipping his wine.

"You are well informed," Cook observed, impressed, so much so that he missed a signal he'd never received before. "That's a rather sensitive subject."

"Undoubtedly so, but also a wonderful development, is it not?" He raised his glass in a friendly toast. Cook, pleased, did the same.

"It most certainly is," the State Department official agreed. "As you know, it has been a goal of American foreign policy since the late 1940s—back to Bernard Baruch, if memory serves—to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and their attendant danger to the human race. As you well know—"

Nagumo, surprisingly, cut him off. "I know better than you might imagine, Christopher. My grandfather lived in Nagasaki. He was a machinist for the naval base that was once there. He survived the bomb—his wife did not, I regret to tell you—but he was badly burned in the ensuing fire, and I can well remember his scars. The experience hastened his death, I am sorry to say." It was a card skillfully played, all the more so that it was a lie.

"I didn't know, Seiji. I'm sorry," Cook added, meaning it. The purpose of diplomacy, after all, was to prevent war whenever possible, or, failing that, to conclude them as bloodlessly as possible.

"So, as you might imagine, I am quite interested in the final elimination of those horrible things." Nagumo topped off Cook's glass. It was an excellent chardonnay that had gone well with the main course.

"Well, your information is pretty accurate. I'm not briefed in on that stuff, you understand, but I've caught a few things at the lunch room," Cook added, to let his friend know that he dined on the seventh floor of the State Department building, not in the more plebeian cafeteria.

"My interest, I admit, is personal. On the day the last one is destroyed, I plan to have a personal celebration, and to offer prayers to grandfather's spirit, to assure him that he didn't die in vain. Do you have any idea when that day will be, Christopher?"

"Not exactly, no. It's being kept quiet."

"Why is that?" Nagumo asked. "I don't understand."

"Well, I suppose the President wants to make a big deal about it. Every so often Roger likes to spring one on the media, especially with the election year on the horizon."

Seiji nodded. "Ah, yes, I can see that. So it is not really a matter of national security, is it?" he inquired offhandedly.

Cook thought about it for a second before replying. “Well, no, I don’t suppose it is, really. True, it makes us more secure, but the manner in which that takes place is ... well, pretty benign, I guess.”

“In that case, could I ask a favor?”

“What’s that?” Cook asked, lubricated by the wine and the company and the fact that he’d been feeding trade information to Nagumo for months.

“Just as a personal favor, could you find out for me the exact date on which the last missile will be destroyed? You see,” he explained, “the ceremony I will undertake will be quite special, and it requires preparation.”

Cook almost said, *Sorry, Seiji, but that is technically speaking a national-security matter, and I never agreed to give anyone that sort of information.* The hesitation on his face, and the surprise that caused it, overpowered his normal diplomat’s poker face. His mind raced, or tried to in the presence of his friend. Okay, sure, for three and a half years he’d talked over trade issues with Nagumo, occasionally getting information that was useful, stuff he’d used, earning him a promotion to DASS rank, and occasionally, he’d given over information, because . . . because why? Because part of him was bored with the State Department grind and federal salary caps, and once upon a time a former colleague had remarked to him that with all the skills he’d acquired in fifteen years of government service, he really could escape into private industry, become a consultant or lobbyist, and hell, it wasn’t as though he were *spying* on his country or anything, was it? Hell, no, it was just *business*, man.

Was this spying? Cook asked himself. Was it really? The missiles weren’t aimed at Japan and never had been. In fact, if the papers were right, they weren’t aimed at anything except the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and the net effect of their destruction was exactly zero on everyone. Nobody hurt. Nobody really helped, except in budgetary terms, and that was pretty marginal for all concerned. So, no, there wasn’t a national-security element to this, was there? No. So, he could pass that information along, couldn’t he?

“Okay, Seiji. I guess this once, yeah, I can see what I can find out.”

“Thank you, Christopher.” Nagumo smiled. “My ancestors will thank you. It will be a great day for the entire world, my friend, and it deserves proper celebration.” In many sports it was called follow-through. There was no term for it in espionage.

“You know, I think it does, too,” Cook said after a further moment’s contemplation. It never occurred to him to be amazed that the first step over the invisible line that he had himself constructed was as easy as this.

“I am honored,” Yamata said with a great show of humility. “It is a fortunate man who has such wise and thoughtful friends.”

“It is you who honor us,” one of the bankers insisted politely.

“Are we not colleagues? Do we not all serve our country, our people, our culture, with equal devotion? You, Ichiki-san, the temples you’ve restored. Ah!” He waved his hand around the low polished table. “We’ve all done it, asking nothing in return but the chance to help our country, making it great again, and then actually doing it,” Yamata added. “So how may I be of service to my friends this evening?” His face took on a quiet, passive mien, waiting to be told that which he already knew. His closest allies around the table, whose identity was not really known to the other nineteen, were studies of curious anticipation, skilled, as he was, in concealment. But for all that there was tension in the room, an atmosphere so real that you could smell it, like the odor of a foreigner.

Eyes turned almost imperceptibly to Matsuda-san, and many actually thought that his difficulties would come as a surprise to Yamata, even though the request for the meeting must have ignited his curiosity enough to turn loose his formidable investigative assets. The head of one of the world’s largest conglomerates spoke with quiet, if sad, dignity, taking his time, as he had to, explaining that the conditions that had brought about his cash-flow problem had not, of course, been the fault of his management. It was a business that had begun with shipbuilding, branched out into construction, then delved into consumer electronics. Matsuda had ridden to its chairmanship in the mid-1980s and delivered for his stockholders such return as many only dreamed of. Matsuda-san gave the history himself, and Yamata did not show the least impatience. After all, it worked in his favor that all should hear in his words their own corporate success stories, because in seeing the similarity of success, they would also fear a similarity of personal catastrophe. That the cretin had decided to become a major player in Hollywood, pissing away an immense quantity of cash for eighty acres on Melrose Boulevard and a piece of paper that said he could make movies, well, that was his misfortune, was it not?

“The corruption and dishonor of those people is truly astounding,” Matsuda went on in a voice that a Catholic priest might hear in a confessional, causing him to wonder if the sinner was recanting his sins or merely bemoaning his bad luck. In the case at hand, two billion dollars were as thoroughly gone as if burned to cook sausages.

Yamata could have said, “I warned you,” except that he hadn’t, even after his own investment counselors, Americans in this particular instance, had examined the very same deal and warned him off in the

strongest terms. Instead he nodded thoughtfully.

"Clearly you could not have anticipated that, especially after all the assurances you were given, and the wonderfully fair terms you gave in return. It would appear, my friends, that proper business ethics are lost on them." He looked around the table to collect the nods his observation had earned. "Matsuda-san, what reasonable man could say that you were in any way at fault?"

"Many would," he answered, rather courageously, all thought.

"Not I, my friend. Who among us is more honorable, more sagacious? Who among us has served his corporation more diligently?" Raizo Yamata shook his head sorrowfully.

"Of greater concern, my friends, is that a similar fate could await us all," a banker announced quietly, meaning that his bank held the paper on Matsuda's real-estate holdings both in Japan and America, and that the failure of that conglomerate would reduce his reserves to dangerous levels. The problem was that even though he could survive the corporate failure in both real and theoretical terms, it required only the perception that his reserves were weaker than they actually were to bring his institution down, and *that* idea could appear in a newspaper merely through the misunderstanding of a single reporter. The consequences of such a misguided report, or rumor, could begin a run on the bank, and make real what was not. Certainly the money withdrawn would then be deposited elsewhere—there was too much to go under mattresses, after all—in which case it would be lent back by a fellow corporate banker to safeguard his colleague's position, but a second-order crisis, which was quite possible, could bring everything crashing down.

What went unsaid, and for that matter largely unthought, was that the men in this room had brought the crisis upon themselves through ill-considered dealings. It was a crucial blindspot that all shared—or nearly all, Yamata told himself.

"The basic problem is that our country's economic foundation rests not on rock, but on sand," Yamata began, speaking rather like a philosopher. "As weak and foolish as the Americans are, fortune has given them things which we lack. As a result, however clever our people are, we are always at a disadvantage." He had said all of this before, but now, for the first time, they were listening, and it required all of his self-control not to gloat. Rather he dialed back his level of rhetoric even more than he had in previous discourses. He looked over to one of them, who had always disagreed with him before.

"Remember what you said, that our real strengths are the diligence of our workers and the skill of our designers? That was true, my friend. These are strengths, and more than that, they are strengths that the Americans do not have in the abundance which we enjoy, but

because fortune has for reasons of her own smiled on the gaijin, they can checkmate our advantages because they have converted their good fortune into real power, and power is something we lack." Yamata paused, reading his audience once more, watching their eyes and gauging the impassivity there. Even for one born of this culture and reared in its rules, he had to take his gamble now. This was the moment. He was sure of it. "But, really, that is not entirely the case either. They *chose* to take that path, while we have *chosen* not to. And so, now, we must pay the price for that misjudgment. Except for one thing."

"And what is that?" one asked for all the others.

"Now, my friends, fortune smiles on us, and the path to real national greatness is open to us. In our adversity we may, if we choose, find opportunities."

Yamata told himself that he had waited fifteen years for this moment. Then he considered the thought, watching and waiting for a response, and realized that he'd really waited a lifetime for it, since the age of ten, when in February 1944, he alone of his family had boarded the ship that would take him from Saipan to the Home Islands. He could still remember standing at the rail, seeing his mother and father and younger siblings standing there on the dock, Raizo being very brave and managing to hold back his tears, knowing as a child knows that he would see them again, but also knowing that he would not.

They'd killed them all, the Americans, erased his family from the face of the earth, encouraged them to cast their lives away, off the cliffs and into the greedy sea, because Japanese citizens, in uniform or out, were just animals to the Americans. Yamata could remember listening to the radio accounts of the battle, how the "Wild Eagles" of the *Kido Butai* had smashed the American fleet, how the Emperor's invincible soldiers had cast the hated American Marines back into the sea, how they had later slaughtered them in vast numbers in the mountains of the island claimed from the Germans after the First World War, and even then he'd known the futility of having to pretend to believe lies, for lies they had to be, despite the comforting words of his uncle. And soon the radio reports had gone on to other things, the victorious battles over the Americans that crept ever closer to home, the uncomprehending rage he'd known when his vast and powerful country had found herself unable to stop the barbarians, the terror of the bombing, first by day and then by night, burning his country to the ground one city at a time. The orange glow in the night sky, sometimes near, sometimes far, and the lies of his uncle, trying to explain it, and last of all the relief he'd seen on the man's face when all was over. Except that it had never been relief for Raizo Yamata,

not with his family gone, vanished from the face of the earth, and even when he'd seen his first American, a hugely tall figure with red hair and freckles on his milky skin who'd clipped him on the head in the friendly way one might do for a dog, even then he'd known what the enemy looked like.

It wasn't Matsuda who spoke in reply. It couldn't be. It had to be another, one whose corporation was still immensely strong, or apparently so. It also had to be one who had never agreed with him. The rule was as important as it was unspoken, and though eyes didn't turn, thoughts did. The man looked down at his half-empty cup of tea —this was not a night for alcohol—and pondered his own fate. He spoke without looking up, because he was afraid to see the identical look in the eyes arrayed around the black lacquer table.

"How, Yamata-san, would we achieve that which you propose?"

"No shit?" Chavez asked. He spoke in Russian, for you were not supposed to speak English here at Monterey, and he hadn't learned that colloquialism in Japanese yet.

"Fourteen agents," Major Oleg Yurievich Lyalin, KGB (retired), replied, as matter-of-factly as his ego allowed.

"And they never reactivated your net?" Clark asked, wanting to roll his eyes.

"They couldn't." Lyalin smiled and tapped the side of his head. "THISTLE was my creation. It turned out to be my life insurance."

No shit, Clark almost said. That Ryan had gotten him out alive was somewhere to the right of a miracle. Lyalin had been tried for treason with the normal KGB attention to a speedy trial, had been in a death cell, and known the routine as exactly as any man could. Told that his execution date was a week hence, he'd been marched to the prison commandant's office, informed of his right as a Soviet citizen to appeal directly to the President for executive clemency, and invited to draft a handwritten letter to that end. The less sophisticated might have thought the gesture to be genuine. Lyalin had known otherwise. Designed to make the execution easier, after the letter was sealed, he would be led back to his cell, and the executioner would leap from an open door to his right, place a pistol right next to his head and fire. As a result it was not overly surprising that his hand had shaken while holding the ballpoint pen, and that his legs were rubbery as he was led out. The entire ritual had been carried out, and Oleg Yurievich remembered his amazement on actually reaching his basement cell again, there to be told to gather up what belongings he had and to follow a guard, even more amazingly back to the commandant's office, there to meet someone who could only have been an American

citizen, with his smile and his tailored clothes, unaware of KGB's wry valedictory to its traitorous officer.

"I would've pissed my pants," Ding observed, shuddering at the end of the story.

"I was lucky there," Lyalin admitted with a smile. "I'd urinated right before they took me up. My family was waiting for me at Sheremetyevo. It was one of the last PanAm flights."

"Hit the booze pretty hard on the way over?" Clark asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes," Oleg assured him, not adding how he'd shaken and then vomited on the lengthy flight to New York's JFK International Airport, and had insisted on a taxi ride through New York to be sure that the impossible vision of freedom was real.

Chavez refilled his mentor's glass. Lyalin was trying to work his way off hard liquor, and contented himself with Coors Light. "I've been in a few tight places, *tovarich,* but that one must have been really uncomfortable."

"I have retired, as you see. Domingo Estebanovich, where did you learn Russian so well?"

"The kid's got a gift for it, doesn't he?" Clark noted. "Especially the slang."

"Hey, I like to read, okay? And whenever I can I catch Russian TV at the home office and stuff. What's the big deal?" The last sentence slipped out in English. Russian didn't quite have that euphemism.

"The big deal is that you're truly gifted, my young friend," Major Lyalin said, saluting with his glass.

Chavez acknowledged the compliment. He hadn't even had a high-school diploma when he'd sneaked into the U.S. Army, mainly by promising to be a grunt, not a missile technician, but it pleased him that he had indeed raced through George Mason University for his subsequent undergraduate degree, and was now within a dissertation of his master's. He marveled at his luck and wondered how many others from his barrio could have done as well, given an equal smile from Chance.

"So does Mrs. Foley know that you left a network behind?"

"Yes, but all her Japanese speakers must be elsewhere. I don't think they would have tried to reactivate without letting me know. Besides, they will only activate if they are told the right thing."

"Jesus," Clark whispered, also in English, since one only swears in his native tongue. That was a natural consequence of the Agency's deemphasis of human intelligence in favor of electronic bullshit, which was useful but not the be-all and end-all that the paper-pushers thought it to be. Of CIA's total of over *fifteen thousand* employees, somewhere around *four hundred fifty* of them were field officers,

actually out on the street or in the weeds, talking to real people and trying to learn what their thoughts were instead of counting beans from overheads and reading newspaper articles for the rest. "You know, sometimes I wonder how we ever won the fuckin' war."

"America tried very hard not to, but the Soviet Union tried harder." Lyalin paused. "THISTLE was mainly concerned with gathering commercial information. We stole many industrial designs and processes from Japan, and your country's policy is not to use intelligence services for that purpose." Another pause. "Except for one thing."

"What's that, Oleg?" Chavez asked, popping another Coors open.

"There's no real difference, Domingo. Your people—I tried for several months to explain that to them. Business is the government over there. Their parliament and ministries, they are the 'legend,' the *maskirovka* for the business empires."

"In that case there's one government in the world that knows how to make a decent car." Chavez chuckled. He'd given up on buying the Corvette of his dreams—the damned things just cost too much—and settled on a "Z" that was almost as sporty for half the price. And now he'd have to get rid of it, Ding told himself. He had to be more respectable and settled if he were going to marry, didn't he?

"Nyet. You should understand this: the opposition is not what your country thinks it is. Why do you suppose you have such problems negotiating with them? I discovered this fact early on, and KGB understood it readily."

As they had to, Clark told himself, nodding. Communist theory predicted that very "fact," didn't it? Damn, wasn't that a hoot! "How were the pickings?" he asked.

"Excellent," Lyalin assured him. "Their culture, it's so easy for them to take insults, but so hard for them to respond. They conceal much anger. Then, all you need do is show sympathy."

Clark nodded again, this time thinking, *This guy is a real pro.* Fourteen well-placed agents, he still had the names and addresses and phone numbers in his head, and, unsurprisingly, nobody at Langley had followed up on it because of those damned-fool ethics laws foisted on the Agency by lawyers—a breed of government servant that sprouted up like crabgrass everywhere you looked, as though *anything* the Agency did was, strictly speaking, ethical at all. Hell, he and Ding had *kidnapped* Corp, hadn't they? In the interests of justice, to be sure, but if they had brought him to America for trial, instead of leaving him with his own countrymen, some high-priced and highly ethical defense attorney, perhaps even acting pro bono—obstructing justice for free, Clark told himself—would have ranted and raved first before cameras and later before twelve good men (and women) about how

this *patriot* had resisted an invasion of his country, et cetera, et cetera.

"An interesting weakness," Chavez noted judiciously. "People really are the same all over the world, aren't they?"

"Different masks, but the same flesh underneath," Lyalin pronounced, feeling ever more the teacher. The offhand remark was his best lesson of the day.

Of all human lamentations, without doubt the most common is, *If only I had known.* But we can't know, and so days of death and fire so often begin no differently from those of love and warmth. Pierce Denton packed the car for the trip to Nashville. It was not a trivial exercise. Both twin girls had safety seats installed in the back of the Cresta, and in between went the smaller seat for their brand-new brother, Matthew. The twin girls, Jessica and Jeanine, were three and a half years old, having survived the "terrible twos" (or rather, their parents had) and the parallel adventures of learning to walk and talk. Now, dressed in identical short purple dresses and white tights, they allowed Mom and Dad to load them into their seats. Matthew went in after them, restless and whining, but the girls knew that the vibration of the car would soon put him back to sleep, which is what he mostly did anyway, except when nursing from his mother's breasts. It was a big day, off for a weekend at Grandmother's house.

Pierce Denton, twenty-seven, was a police officer in Greeneville, Tennessee's, small municipal department, still attending night school to finish up his college degree, but with no further ambition other than to raise his family and live a comfortable life in the tree-covered mountains, where a man could hunt and fish with friends, attend a friendly community church, and generally live as good a life as any person might desire. His profession was far less stressful than that of colleagues in other places, and he didn't regret that a bit. Greeneville had its share of trouble, as did any American town, but far less than he saw on TV or read about in the professional journals that lay on tables in the station. At quarter after eight in the morning, he backed onto the quiet street and headed off, first toward U.S. Route 11E. He was rested and alert, with his usual two cups of morning coffee already at work, chasing away the cobwebs of a restful night, or as restful as one could be with an infant sleeping in the same bedroom with him and his wife, Candace. Within fifteen minutes he pulled onto Interstate Highway 81, heading south with the morning sun behind him.

Traffic was fairly light this Saturday morning, and unlike most police officers Denton didn't speed, at least not with his family in the car. Rather, he cruised evenly at just under seventy miles per hour,

just enough over the posted limit of sixty-five for the slight thrill of breaking the law just a little. Interstate 81 was typical of the American interstates, wide and smooth even as it snaked southwest through the mountain range that had contained the first westward expansion of European settlers. At New Market, 81 merged with I-40, and Denton merged in with westbound traffic from North Carolina. Soon he would be in Knoxville. Checking his rearview mirror, he saw that both daughters were already lulled into a semiconscious state, and his ears told him that Matthew was the same. To his right, Candy Denton was dozing as well. Their infant son had not yet mastered the skill of sleeping through the night, and that fact took its toll on his wife, who hadn't had as much as six straight hours of sleep since . . . well, since before Matt's birth, actually, the driver told himself. His wife was petite, and her small frame had suffered from the latter stages of pregnancy. Candy's head rested on the right-side window, grabbing what sleep she could before Matthew woke up and announced his renewed hunger, though with a little luck, that might just last until they got to Nashville.

The only hard part of the drive, if you could call it that, was in Knoxville, a medium-sized city mostly on the north side of the Tennessee River. It was large enough to have an inner ring highway, I-640, which Denton avoided, preferring the direct path west.

The weather was warm for a change. The previous six weeks had been one damned snow-and-ice storm after another, and Greeneville had already exhausted its budget for road salt and overtime for the crews. He'd responded to at least fifty minor traffic accidents and two major ones, but mainly he regretted not having gotten the new Cresta to the car wash the previous night. The bright paint was streaked with salt, and he was glad the car came with underbody coating as a "standard option," because his venerable old pickup truck didn't have that, and it was corroding down to junk even as it sat still in their driveway. Beyond that, it seemed a competent little car. A few inches more leg room would have been nice, but it was her car, not his, and she didn't really need the room. The automobile was lighter than his police radio car, and had only half the engine power. That made for somewhat increased vibration, largely dampened out by the rubberized engine mounts but still there. Well, he told himself, that helped the kids to clonk out.

They must have had even more snow here, he saw. Rock salt had accumulated in the center of his lane like a path of sand or something. Shame they had to use so much. Really tore up the cars. But not his, Denton was sure, having read through all the specifications before deciding to surprise Candy with her red Cresta.

The mountains that cut diagonally across this part of America are called the Great Smokies, a name applied, according to local lore, by Dan'l Boone himself. Actually part of a single range that ran from Georgia to Maine and beyond, changing local names almost as often as it changed states, in this area humidity from the numerous lakes and streams combined with atmospheric conditions to generate fog that occurred on a year-round basis.

Will Snyder of Pilot Lines was on overtime, a profitable situation for the union driver. The Fruehauf trailer attached to his Kenworth diesel tractor was filled with rolls of carpeting from a North Carolina mill en route to a distributorship in Memphis for a major sale. An experienced driver, Snyder was perfectly happy to be out on a Saturday, since the pay was better, and besides, football season was over and the grass wasn't growing yet. He fully expected to be home for dinner in any case. Best of all, the roads were fairly clear during this winter weekend, and he was making good time, the driver told himself, negotiating a sweeping turn to the right and down into a valley.

"Uh-oh," he murmured to himself. It was not unusual to see fog here, close to the State Route 95 North exit, the one that headed off to the bomb people at Oak Ridge. There were a couple of trouble spots on I-40, and this was one. "Damned fog."

There were two ways to deal with this. Some braked down slowly for fuel economy, or maybe just because they didn't like going slow. Not Snyder. A professional driver who saw major wrecks on the side of the highway every week, he slowed down immediately, even before visibility dropped below a hundred yards. His big rig took its time stopping, and he knew a driver who'd converted some little Japanese roller-skate into tinfoil, along with its elderly driver, and his time wasn't worth the risk, not at time-and-a-half it wasn't. Smoothly downshifting, he did what he knew to be the smartest thing, and just to be sure, flipped on his running lights.

Pierce Denton turned his head in annoyance. It was another Cresta, the sporty C99 version that they made only in Japan so far, this one black with a red stripe down the side that whizzed past, at eighty or a little over, his trained eye estimated. In Greeneville that would have been a hundred-dollar ticket and a stern lecture from Judge Tom Anders. Where had those two kids come from? He hadn't even noticed their approach in his mirror. Temporary tag. Two young girls, probably one had just got her license and her new car from Daddy to go with it and was taking her friend out to demonstrate what real

freedom was in America, Officer Denton thought, freedom to be a damned fool and get a ticket your first day on the road. But this wasn't his jurisdiction, and that was a job for the state boys. Typical, he thought with a shake of the head. Chattering away, hardly watching the road, but it was better to have them in front than behind.

"Lord," Snyder breathed. Locals, he'd heard in a truck stop once, blamed it on the "crazy people" at Oak Ridge. Whatever the reason, visibility had dropped almost instantly to a mere thirty feet. Not good. He flipped his running lights to the emergency-blinker setting and slowed down more. He'd never done the calculation, but at this weight his tractortrailer rig needed over sixty feet to stop from thirty miles per hour, and that was on a dry road, which this one was not. On the other hand . . . no, he decided, no chances. He lowered his speed to twenty. So it cost him half an hour. Pilots knew about this stretch of 1-40, and they always said it was better to pay the time than to pay off the insurance deductible. With everything in hand, the driver keyed his CB radio to broadcast a warning to his fellow truckers.

It was like being inside a Ping-Pong ball, he told them over Channel 19, and his senses were fully alert, staring ahead into a white mass of water vapor when the hazard was approaching from the rear.

The fog caught them entirely by surprise. Denton's guess had been a correct one. Nora Dunn was exactly eight days past her sixteenth birthday, three days past getting her temporary permit, and forty-nine miles into her sporty new C99. First of all she'd selected a wide, nice piece of road to see how fast it would go, because she was young and her friend Amy Rice had asked. With the compact-disc player going full blast, and trading observations on various male school chums, Nora was hardly watching the road at all, because, after all, it wasn't all that hard to keep a car between the solid line to the right and the dashy one to the left, was it, and besides, there wasn't anybody in the mirror to worry about, and having a car was far better than a date with a new boy, because they always had to drive anyway, for some reason or other, as though a grown woman couldn't handle a car herself.

The look on her face was somewhat startled when visibility went down to not very much—Nora couldn't estimate the exact distance—and she took her foot off the accelerator pedal, allowing the car to

slow down from the previous cruising speed of eighty-four. The road behind was clear, and surely the road ahead would be, too. Her driving teachers had told her everything she needed to know, but as with the lessons of all her other teachers, some she'd heard and some she had not. The important ones would come with experience. Experience, however, was a teacher with whom she was not yet fully acquainted, and whose grading curve was far too steep for the moment at hand.

She did see the running lights on the Fruehauf trailer, but she was new to the road, and the amber spots might have been streetlights, except that most interstate highways didn't have them, a fact she hadn't been driving long enough to learn. It was scarcely a second's additional warning in any case. By the time she saw the gray, square shadow, it was simply too late, and her speed was only down to sixty-five. With the tractor-trailer's speed at twenty, it was roughly the equivalent of hitting a thirty-ton stationary object at fortyfive miles per hour.

It was always a sickening sound. Will Snyder had heard it before, and it reminded him of a truckload of aluminum beer cans being crunched in a compressor, the decidedly unmusical *crump* of a car body's being crushed by speed and mass and laws of physics that he'd learned not in high school but rather by experience.

The jolt to the left-rear corner of the trailer slewed the front end of the forty-foot van body to the right, but fortunately, his low speed allowed him to maintain control enough to get his rig stopped quickly. Looking back and to his left, he saw the remains of that cute new Jap car that his brother wanted to get, and Snyder's first ill-considered thought was that they were just too damned small to be safe, as though it would have mattered under the circumstances. The center- and right-front were shredded, and the frame was clearly bent. A blink and further inspection showed red where clear glass was supposed to be ...

"Oh, my God."

* * *

Amy Rice was already dead, despite the flawless performance of her passenger-side air bag. The speed of the collision had driven her side of the car under the trailer, where the sturdy rear fender, designed to prevent damage to loading docks, had ripped through the coachwork

like a chain saw. Nora Dunn was still alive but unconscious. Her new Cresta C99 was already a total loss, its aluminum engine block split, frame bent sixteen inches out of true, and worst of all, the fuel tank, already damaged by corrosion, was crushed between frame members and leaking.

Snyder saw the leaking gasoline. His engine still running, he quickly maneuvered his truck to the shoulder and jumped out, bringing his light red CO_2 extinguisher. That he didn't quite get there in time saved his life.

"What's the matter, Jeanine?"

"Jessica!" the little girl insisted, wondering why people couldn't tell the difference, not even her father.

"What's the matter, *Jessica,"* her father said with a patient smile.

"He's stinky!" She giggled.

"Okay," Pierce Denton sighed. He looked over to shake his wife's shoulder. That's when he saw the fog, and took his foot off the gas.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Matt did a job."

"Okay . . ." Candace unclipped her seat belt and turned to look in the back.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Candy." He turned too, just at the wrong time. As he did, the car drifted over to the right somewhat, and his eyes tried to observe the highway and the affairs within his wife's new car.

"Shit!" His instinct was to maneuver to the left, but he was too far over to the other side to do that, a fact he knew even before his left hand had turned the wheel all the way. Hitting the brakes didn't help either. The rear wheels locked on the slick road, causing the car to skid sideways into, he saw, another Cresta. His last coherent thought was, *Is it the same one that . . . ?*

Despite the red color, Snyder didn't see it until the collision was inevitable. The trucker was still twenty feet away, jogging in, holding the extinguisher in his arms like a football.

Jesus! Denton didn't have time to say. The first thought was that the

collision wasn't all that bad. He'd seen worse. His wife was rammed by inertia into the crumpling right side, and that wasn't good, but the kids in the back were in safety seats, thank God for that, and—

The final deciding factor in the end of five lives was chemical corrosion. The gas tank, like that in the C99, never properly galvanized, had been exposed to salt on its trans-Pacific voyage, then even more on the steep roads of eastern Tennessee. The weld points on the tank were particularly vulnerable and came loose on impact. Distortion of the frame made the tank drag on the rough concrete surface; the underbody protection, never fully affixed, simply flaked off immediately, and another weak spot in the metal tank sprang open, and the body of the tank itself, made of steel, provided the spark, igniting the gasoline that spread forward, for the moment.

The searing heat of the fireball actually cleared the fog somewhat, creating a flash so bright that oncoming traffic panic-stopped on both sides of the highway. That caused a three-car accident a hundred yards away in the eastbound lanes, but not a serious one, and people leaped from their vehicles to approach. It also caught the fuel leaking from Nora Dunn's car, enveloping her with flames, and killing the girl who, mercifully, would never regain consciousness despite the blazing death that took her to his bosom.

* * *

Will Snyder was close enough that he'd seen all five faces in the oncoming red Cresta. A mother and a baby were the two he'd remember for the rest of his life, the way she was perched between the front seats, holding the little one, her face suddenly turned to see oncoming death, staring right at the truck driver. The instant fire was a horrid surprise, but Snyder, though he stopped jogging, did not halt his approach. The left-rear door of the red Cresta had popped open, and that gave him a chance, for the flames were mostly, if temporarily, on the left side of the wrecked automobile. He darted in with the extinguisher held up like a weapon as the flames came back toward the gas tank under the red Cresta. The damning moment gave him but one brief instant to act, to pick the one child among three who alone might live in the inferno that was already igniting his clothes and burning his face while the driving gloves protected the hands that blasted fire-retarding gas into the rear-seat area. The cooling CO_2 would save his life and one other. He looked amid the

yellow sheets and expanding white vapor for the infant, but it was nowhere to be found, and the little girl in the left seat was screaming with fear and pain, right there, right in front of him. His gloved hands found and released the chrome buckle, and he yanked her clear of the child-safety seat, breaking her arm in the process, then jerking his legs to fling himself clear of the enveloping fire. There was a lingering snowbank just by the guardrail, and he dove into it, putting out his own burning clothing, then he covered the child with the salt-heavy slush to do the same for her, his face stinging with pain that was the barest warning of what would soon follow. He forced himself not to turn. He could hear the screaming behind his back, but to return to the burning car would be suicide, and looking might only force him into it. Instead he looked down at Jessica Denton, her face blackened, her breathing ragged, and prayed that a cop would appear quickly, and with him an ambulance. By the time that happened, fifteen minutes later, both he and the child were deep in shock.

8

Fast-Forwarding

The slow news day and the proximity to a city guaranteed media coverage of some kind, and the number and ages of the victims guaranteed more still. One of the local Knoxville TV stations had an arrangement with CNN, and by noon the story was the lead item on CNN News Hour. A satellite truck gave a young local reporter the opportunity for a global-coverage entry in his portfolio-he didn't want to stay in Knoxville forever—and the clearing fog gave the cameras a full view of the scene.

"Damn," Ryan breathed in his kitchen at home. Jack was taking a rare Saturday off, eating lunch with his family, looking forward to taking them to evening mass at St. Mary's so that he could also enjoy a Sunday morning at home. His eyes took in the scene, and his hands set the sandwich down on the plate.

Three fire trucks had responded, and four ambulances, two of which, ominously, were still there, their crews just standing around. The truck in the background was largely intact, though its bumper was clearly distorted. It was the foreground that told the story, however. Two piles of metal, blackened and distorted by fire. Open doors into a dark, empty interior. A dozen or so state police officers standing around, their posture stiff, their lips tight, not talking, not trading the jokes that ordinarily went with their perspective on auto accidents. Then Jack saw one of them trade a remark with another. Both heads shook and looked down at the pavement, thirty feet behind the reporter who was droning on the way that they always did, saying the same things for the hundredth time in his short career. Fog. High speed. Both gas tanks. Six people dead, four of them kids. This is Bob Wright, reporting from Interstate 40, outside Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Commercial.

Jack returned to his lunch, stifling another comment on the inequity of daily life. There was no reason yet why he should know or do more.

The cars were dripping water now, three hundred air miles away from

the Chesapeake Bay, because the arriving volunteer firemen had felt the need to wet everything down, knowing even then that it was an exercise wasted on the occupants. The forensic photographer shot his three rolls of 200-speed color, catching the open mouths of the victims to prove that they'd died screaming. The senior police officer responding to the scene was Sergeant Thad Nicholson. An experienced highway cop with twenty years of auto accidents behind him, he arrived in time to see the bodies removed. Pierce Denton's service revolver had fallen to the pavement, and that more than anything had identified him as a fellow police officer even before the routine computer check of the tags had made the fact official. Four kids, two little ones and two teens, and two adults. You just never got used to that. It was a personal horror for Sergeant Nicholson. Death was bad enough, but a death such as this, how could God let it happen? Two little children . . . well . . . He did, and that was that. Then it was time to go to work.

Hollywood to the contrary, it was a highly unusual accident. Automobiles did not routinely turn into fireballs under any circumstances, and this one, his trained eyes saw at once, should not have been all that serious. Okay, there was one unavoidable fatality from the crash itself, the girl in the death seat of the first Cresta, who'd been nearly decapitated. But not the rest, there was no obvious reason for them. The first Cresta had rear-ended the truck at . . . forty or fifty miles of differential speed. Both air bags had deployed, and one of them ought to have saved the driver of the first car, he saw. The second car had hit at about a thirty-degree angle to the first. Damned fool of a cop to make a mistake like that, Nicholson thought. But the wife hadn't been belted in ... maybe she'd been attending to the kids in the back and distracted her husband. Such things happened, and nobody could undo it now.

Of the six victims, one had been killed by collision, and the other five by fire. That wasn't supposed to happen. Cars were not supposed to burn, and so Nicholson had his people reactivate a crossover half a mile back on the Interstate so that the three accident vehicles could remain in place for a while. He got on his car radio to order up additional accident investigators from Nashville, and to recommend notifying the local office of the National Transportation Safety Board. As it happened, one of the local employees of that federal agency lived close to Oak Ridge. The engineer, Rebecca Upton, was on the scene thirty minutes after receiving her call. A mechanical engineer and graduate of the nearby University of Tennessee, who'd been studying this morning for her PE exam, she donned her brand-new official coveralls and started crawling around the wreckage while the towtruck operators waited impatiently, even before the backup police

team arrived from Nashville. Twenty-four, petite, and red-haired, she came out from under the once-red Cresta with her freckled skin smudged, and her green eyes teary from the lingering gasoline fumes. Sergeant Nicholson handed over a Styrofoam cup of coffee that he'd gotten from a fireman.

"What do you think, ma'am?" Nicholson asked, wondering if she knew anything. She looked like she did, he thought, and she wasn't afraid to get her clothes dirty, a hopeful sign.

"Both gas tanks." She pointed. "That one was sheared clean off. The other one was crumpled by the impact and failed. How fast was it?"

"The collision, you mean?" Nicholson shook his head. "Not that fast. Ballpark guess, forty to fifty."

"I think you're right. The gas tanks have structural-integrity standards, and this crash shouldn't have exceeded them." She took the proffered handkerchief and wiped her face. "Thanks, Sergeant." She sipped her coffee and looked back at the wrecks, wondering.

"What are you thinking?"

Ms. Upton turned back. "I'm thinking that six people—"

"Five," Nicholson corrected. "The trucker got one kid out."

"Oh—I didn't know. Shouldn't have happened. No good reason for it. It was an under-sixty impact, nothing really unusual about the physical factors. Smart money is there's something wrong with the car design. Where are you taking them?" she asked, feeling very professional now.

"The cars? Nashville. I can hold them at headquarters if you want, ma'am."

She nodded. "Okay, I'll call my boss. We're probably going to make this a federal investigation. Will your people have any problem with that?" She'd never done that before, but knew from her manual that she had the authority to initiate a full NTSB inquiry. Most often known for handling the analysis of aircraft accidents, the National Transportation Safety Board also looked into unusual train and vehicle mishaps and had the authority to require cooperation of every federal agency in the pursuit of hard data.

Nicholson had participated in one similar investigation. He shook his head. "Ma'am, my captain will give you all the cooperation you can handle."

"Thank you." Rebecca Upton almost smiled, but this wasn't the place for it. "Where are the survivors? We'll have to interview them."

"Ambulance took them back to Knoxville. Just a guess, but they probably air-lifted them to Shriners'." That hospital, he knew, had a superb burn unit. "You need anything else, ma'am? We have a highway to clear."

"Please be careful with the cars, we—"

"We'll treat it like criminal evidence, ma'am," Sergeant Nicholson assured the bright little girl, with a fatherly smile.

All in all, Ms. Upton thought, not a bad day. Tough luck for the occupants of the cars—that went without saying, and the reality and horror of their deaths were not lost on her—but this was her job, and her first really worthwhile assignment since joining the Department of Transportation. She walked back to her car, a Nissan hatchback, and stripped off her coveralls, donning in their place her NTSB windbreaker. It wasn't especially warm, but for the first time in her government career, she felt as though she were really part of an important team, doing an important job, and she wanted the whole world to know who she was and what she was doing.

"Hi." Upton turned to see the smiling face of a TV reporter.

"What do you want?" she asked briskly, having decided to act very businesslike and official.

"Anything you can tell us?" He held the microphone low, and his cameraman, while nearby, wasn't turning tape at the moment.

"Only off the record," Becky Upton said after a second's reflection.

"Fair enough."

"Both gas tanks failed. That's what killed those people."

"Is that unusual?"

"Very." She paused. "There's going to be an NTSB investigation. There's no good reason for this to have happened. Okay?"

"You bet." Wright checked his watch. In another ten minutes he'd be live on satellite again, and this time he'd have something new to say, which was always good. The reporter walked away, head down, composing his new remarks for his global audience. What a great development: the National Transportation Safety Board was going to investigate the *Motor Trend* Car of the Year for a potentially lethal safety defect. No good reason for these people to have died. He wondered if his cameraman could get close enough now to see the charred, empty child seats in the back of the other car. Good stuff.

* * *

Ed and Mary Patricia Foley were in their top-floor office at CIA headquarters. Their unusual status had made for some architectural and organizational problems at the Agency. Mary Pat was the one with the title of Deputy Director (Operations), the first female to make that rank in America's lead spy agency. An experienced field officer who had worked her country's best and longest-lived agent-in-place, she was the cowboy half of the best husband-wife team CIA had ever fielded. Her husband, Ed, was less flashy but more careful as a

planner. Their respective talents in tactics and strategy were highly complementary, and though Mary Pat had won the top job, she'd immediately done away with her need for an executive assistant, putting Ed in that office and making him her equal in real terms, if not bureaucratic ones. A new doorway had been cut in the wall so that he could stroll in without passing the executive secretary in the anteroom, and together they managed CIA's diminished collection of case officers. The working relationship was as close as their marriage, with all the compromises that attended the latter, and the result was the smoothest leadership of the Directorate of Operations in years.

"We need to pick a name, honey."

"How about FIREMAN?"

"Not FIRE*FIGHTER?"*

A smile. "They're both men."

"Well, Lyalin says they're doing fine on linguistics."

"Good enough to order lunch and find the bathroom." Mastering the Japanese language was not a trivial intellectual challenge. "How much you want to bet they're speaking it with a Russian accent?"

A light bulb went off in both their minds at about the same time. "Cover identities?"

"Yeah ..." Mary Pat almost laughed. "Do you suppose anyone will mind?"

It was illegal for CIA officers to adopt the cover identity of journalists. American journalists, that is. The rule had recently been redrafted, at Ed's urging, to point out that quite a few of the agents his officers recruited were third-world journalists. Since both the officers assigned to the operation spoke excellent Russian, they could easily be covered as Russian journalists, couldn't they? It was a violation of the spirit of the rule, but not the letter; Ed Foley had his cowboy moments too.

"Oh, yeah," said Mary Pat. "Clark wants to know if we would like him to take a swing at reactivating THISTLE."

"We need to talk to Ryan or the President about that," Ed pointed out, turning conservative again.

But not his wife. "No, we don't. We need to get approval to make use of the network, not to see if it's still there." Her ice-blue eyes twinkled, as they usually did when she was being clever.

"Honey, that's calling it a little close," Ed warned. But that was one of the reasons he loved her. "But I like it. Okay, as long as we're just seeing that the network still exists."

"I was afraid I was going to have to pull rank on you, dear." For which transgressions her husband exacted a wonderful toll.

"Just so you have dinner ready on time, Mary. The orders'll go out Monday."

"Have to stop at the Giant on the way home. We're out of bread."

Congressman Alan Trent of Massachusetts was in Hartford, Connecticut, taking a Saturday off to catch a basketball game between U-Mass and U-Conn, both of whom looked like contenders for the regional championship this year. That didn't absolve him from the need to work, however, and so two staffers were with him, while a third was due in with work. It was more comfortable in the Sheraton hotel adjacent to the Hartford Civic Arena than in his office, and he was lying on the bed with the papers spread around him—rather like Winston Churchill, he thought, but without the champagne nearby. The phone next to his bed rang. He didn't reach for it. He had a staffer for that, and Trent had taught himself to ignore the sound of a ringing phone.

"Al, it's George Wylie, from Deerfield Auto." Wylie was a major contributor to Trent's political campaigns, and the owner of a large business in his district. For both of those reasons, he was able to demand Trent's attention whenever he desired it.

"How the hell did he track me down here?" Trent asked the ceiling as he reached for the phone. "Hey, George, how are you today?"

Trent's two aides watched their boss set his soda down and reach for a pad. The congressman always had a pen in his hand, and a nearby pad of Post-it notes. Seeing him scribble a note to himself wasn't unusual, though the angry look on his face was. Their boss pointed to the TV and said, "CNN!"

The timing turned out to be almost perfect. After the top-of-the-hour commercial and a brief intro, Trent was the next player to see the face of Bob Wright. This time he was on tape, which had been edited. It now showed Rebecca Upton in her NTSB windbreaker and the two crumbled Crestas being hauled aboard the wreckers.

"Shit," Trent's senior staffer observed.

"The gas tanks, eh?" Trent asked over the phone, then listened for a minute or so. "Those motherfuckers," the congressman snarled next. "Thanks for the heads-up, George. I'm on it." He set the phone receiver back in the cradle and sat up straighter in the bed. His right hand pointed to his senior aide.

"Get in touch with the NTSB watch team in Washington. I want to talk to that girl right away. Name, phone, where she is, track her down fast! Next, get the Sec-Trans on the phone." His head went back down to his working correspondence while his staffers got on the phones. Like most members of Congress, Trent essentially time-shared his brain, and he'd long since learned to compartmentalize his time and his passion. He was soon grumbling about an amendment to the

Department of the Interior's authorization for the National Forest Service, and making a few marginal notes with a green pen. That was his second-highest expression of outrage, though his staff saw his red pen poised near a fresh page on a legal pad. The combination of foolscap and a red pen meant that Trent was really exercised about something.

Rebecca Upton was in her Nissan, following the wreckers to Nashville, where she would first supervise the initial storage of the burned-out Crestas and then meet with the head of the local office to begin the procedures for a formal investigation—lots of paperwork, she was sure, and the engineer found it odd that she was not upset at her wrecked weekend. Along with her job came a cellular phone, which she assiduously used only for official business and only when absolutely necessary—she'd been in federal employ for just ten months—which meant in her case that she'd never even reached the basic monthly fee which the company charged the government. The phone had never rung in her car before, and she was startled by the sound when it started warbling next to her.

"Hello?" she said, picking it up, wondering if it were a wrong number.

"Rebecca Upton?"

"That's right. Who is this?"

"Please hold for Congressman Trent," a male voice told her.

"Huh? Who?"

"Hello?" a new voice said.

"Who's this?"

"Are you Rebecca Upton?"

"Yes, I am. Who are you?"

"I'm Alan Trent, Member of Congress from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." Massachusetts, as any elected official from that state would announce at the drop of a hat, was not a mere "state." "I tracked you down through the NTSB watch center. Your supervisor is Michael Zimmer, and his number in Nashville is—"

"Okay, I believe you, sir. What can I do for you?"

"You're investigating a crash on I-40, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to fill me in on what you know."

"Sir," Upton said, slowing her car down so that she could think, "we haven't even really started it yet, and I'm not really in a position to—"

"Young lady, I'm not asking you for conclusions, just for the reason why you are initiating an investigation. I am in a position to help. If you cooperate, I promise you that the Secretary of Transportation will

know what a fine young engineer you are. She's a friend of mine, you see. We worked together in Congress for ten or twelve years."

Oh, Rebecca Upton thought. It was improper, unethical, probably against the rules, and maybe even fattening to reveal information from an ongoing NTSB accident investigation. On the other hand, the investigation hadn't started yet, had it? And Upton wanted to be noticed and promoted as much as the next person. She didn't know that her brief silence was as good as mind-reading to the other person on the cellular circuit, and couldn't see the smile in the Hartford hotel room in any case.

"Sir, it appears to me and to the police who responded to the accident that both gas tanks on both cars failed, causing a fatal fire. There appears on first inspection to be no obvious mechanical reason for the tanks to have done so. Therefore I am going to recommend to my supervisor that we initiate an investigation to determine the cause of the incident."

"*Both* gas tanks leaked?" the voice asked.

"Yes, sir, but it was worse than a leak. Both failed rather badly."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"Not really at this time, no." Upton paused. Would this guy really mention her name to the Secretary? If so ... "Something is not right about this, Mr. Trent. Look, I have a degree in engineering, and I minored in materials science. The speed of the impact does not justify two catastrophic structural failures. There are federal safety standards for the structural integrity of automobiles and their components, and those parameters far exceed the conditions I saw at the accident scene. The police officers I spoke with agree. We need to do some tests to be sure, but that's my gut-call for the moment. I'm sorry, I can't tell you any more for a while."

This kid is going far, Trent told himself in his room at the Hartford Sheraton. "Thank you, Miss Upton. I left my number with your office in Nashville. Please call me when you get in." Trent hung up the phone and thought for a minute or so. To his junior staffer: "Call Sec-Trans and tell her that this Upton kid is very good—no, get her for me, and I'll tell her. Paul, how good is the NTSB lab for doing scientific testing?" he asked, looking and feeling more and more like Churchill, planning the invasion of Europe. Well, Trent told himself, not quite that.

"Not bad at all, but the varsity—"

"Right." Trent selected a free button on his phone and made another call from memory.

“Good afternoon, Congressman,” Bill Shaw said to his speakerphone, looking up at Dan Murray. “By the way, we need to see you next week and—”

“I need some help, Bill.”

“What kind of help is that, sir?” Elected officials were always “sir” or “ma’am” on official business, even for the Director of the FBI. That was especially true if the congressman in question chaired the Intelligence Committee, along with holding a seat on the Judiciary Committee, and another on Ways and Means. Besides which, for all his personal ... eccentricities . . . Trent had always been a good friend and fair critic of the Bureau. But the bottom line was simpler: all three of his committee jobs had impact on the FBI. Shaw listened and took some notes. “The Nashville S-A-C is Bruce Cleary, but we require a formal request for assistance from D-O-T before we can—okay, sure, I’ll await her call. Glad to help. Yes, sir. ’Bye.” Shaw looked up from his desk. “Why the hel is Al Trent worked up over a car wreck in Tennessee?”

“Why are we interested?” Murray asked, more to the point.

“He wants the Lab Division to back up NTSB on forensics. You want to call Bruce and tell him to get his best tech guy on deck? The friggin’ accident just happened this morning and Trent wants results yesterday.”

“Has he ever jerked us around on something before?”

Shaw shook his head. “Never. I suppose we want to be on his good side. He’ll have to sit in on the meeting with the chairman. We’re going to have to discuss Kealty’s security clearance, remember?”

Shaw’s phone buzzed. “Secretary of Transportation on three, Director.”

“That boy,” Murray observed, “is really kicking some serious ass for a Saturday afternoon.” He got out of his chair and headed for a phone on the other side of the room while Director Shaw took the call from the cabinet secretary. “Get me the Nashville office.”

The police impound yard, where wrecked or stolen vehicles were stored, was part of the same facility that serviced State Police cars. Rebecca Upton had never been there before, but the wrecker drivers had, and following them was easy enough. The officer in the gatehouse shouted instructions to the first driver, and the second followed, trailed by the NTSB engineer. They ended up heading to an empty area—or almost empty. There were six cars there—two marked

and four unmarked police radio cars—plus ten or so people, all of them senior by the look of them. One was Upton's boss, and for the first time she was really aware of how serious this affair was becoming.

The service building had three hydraulic lifts. Both Crestas were unloaded outside it, then manhandled inside and onto the steel tracks. Both were hoisted simultaneously, allowing the growing mob of people to walk underneath. Upton was by far the shortest person there, and had to jostle her way in. It was her case after all, or she thought it was. A photographer started shooting film, and she noticed that the man's camera case had "FBI" printed on it in yellow lettering. What the hell?

"Definite structural failure," noted a captain of the State Police, the department's chief of accident investigation. Other heads nodded sagely.

"Who has the best science lab around here?" someone in casual clothing asked.

"Vanderbilt University would be a good place to start," Rebecca announced. "Better yet, Oak Ridge National Laboratory."

"Are you Miss Upton?" the man asked. "I'm Bruce Cleary, FBI."

"Why are you—"

"Ma'am, I just go where they send me." He smiled and went on. "D-O-T has requested our help on the investigation. We have a senior tech from our Laboratory Division flying down from Washington right now." On a D-O-T aircraft, no less, he didn't say. Neither he nor anyone else in his office had ever investigated an auto accident, but the orders came from the Director himself, and that was really all he needed to know.

Ms. Upton suddenly felt herself to be a sapling in a forest of giants, but she, too, had a job to do, and she was the only real expert on the scene. Taking a flashlight from her pocket, she started a detailed examination of the gas tank. Rebecca was surprised when people gave her room. It had already been decided that her name would go on the cover of the report. The involvement of the FBI would be downplayed—an entirely routine case in interagency cooperation, backing up an inquiry initiated by a young, dedicated, bright, *female* NTSB engineer. She would take the lead on the case. Rebecca Upton would get all the credit for the work of the others, because it could not appear that this was a concerted effort toward a predetermined goal, even though that's precisely what it was. She'd also begun this thing, and for delivering political plums this large there had to be a few seeds tossed out for the little people. All the men standing around either knew or had begun to suspect it, though not all of them had begun to grasp what the real issues were. They merely knew that a congressman had

gotten the immediate attention of a cabinet secretary and the director of the government's most powerful independent agency, and that he wanted fast action. It appeared that he'd get it, too. As they looked up at the underside of what only a few hours before had been a family car on the way to Grandma's house, the cause of the disaster seemed as straightforward as a punch in the nose. All that was really needed, the senior FBI representative thought, was scientific analysis of the crumpled gas tank. For that, they'd go to Oak Ridge, whose lab facilities often backed up the FBI. That would require the cooperation of the Department of Energy, but if Al Trent could shake two large trees in less than an hour, how hard would it be for him to shake another?

* * *

Goto was not a hard man to follow, though it could be tiring, Nomuri thought. At sixty, he was a man of commendable vigor and a desire to appear youthful. And he always kept coming here, at least three times per week. This was the tea house that Kazuo had identified—not by name, but closely enough that Nomuri had been able to identify, then confirm it. He'd seen both Goto and Yamata enter here, never together, but never more than a few minutes apart, because it would be unseemly for the latter to make the former wait too much. Yamata always left first, and the other always lingered for at least an hour, but never more than two. Supposition, he told himself: a business meeting followed by R&R, and on the other nights, just the R&R part. As though in some cinematic farce, Goto always came out with a blissful swagger to his stride as he made his way toward the waiting car. Certainly his driver knew—the open door, a bow, then the mischievous grin on his face as he came around to his own door. On every other occasion, Nomuri had followed Goto's car, discreetly and very carefully, twice losing him in the traffic, but on the last two occasions and three others he'd tracked the man all the way to his home, and felt certain that his destination after his trysts was always the same. Okay. Now he would think about the other part of the mission, as he sat in his car and sipped his tea. It took forty minutes.

It was Kimberly Norton. Nomuri had good eyes, and the streetlights were bright enough for him to manage a few quick frames from his camera before exiting the car. He tracked her from the other side of the street, careful not to look directly at her, instead allowing his peripheral vision to keep her in sight. Surveillance and countersurveillance were part of the syllabus at the Farm. It wasn't too hard, and this subject made it easy. Even though she wasn't overly tall

by American standards, she did stand out here, as did her fair hair. In Los Angeles she would have been unremarkable, Nomuri thought, a pretty girl in a sea of pretty girls. There was nothing unusual about her walk—the girl was adapting to local norms, slightly demure, giving way to men, whereas in America the reverse was both true and expected. And though her Western clothing was somewhat distinctive, many people on the street dressed the same way—in fact, traditional garb was in the minority here, he realized with a slight surprise. She turned right, down another street, and Nomuri followed, sixty or seventy yards behind, like he was a goddamned private detective or something. What the hell was this assignment all about? the CIA officer wondered.

"Russians?" Ding asked.

"Free-lance journalists, no less. How's your shorthand?" Clark asked, reading over the telex. Mary Pat was having another attack of the clevers, but truth be told, she was very good at it. He'd long suspected that the Agency had a guy inside the Interfax News Agency in Moscow. Maybe CIA had played a role in setting the outfit up, as it was often the first and best source of political information from Moscow. But this was the first time, so far as he knew, that the Agency had used it for a cover legend. The second page of the op-order got even more interesting. Clark handed it over to Lyalin without comment.

"Bloody about time," the former Russian chuckled. "You will want names, addresses, and phone numbers, yes?"

"That would help, Oleg Yurievich."

"You mean we're going to be in the real spy business?" Chavez asked. It would be his first time ever. Most of the time he and Clark had been paramilitary operators, doing jobs either too dangerous or too unusual for regular field officers.

"It's been a while for me too, Ding. Oleg, I never asked what language you used working your people."

"Always English," Lyalin answered. "I never let on my abilities in Japanese. I often picked up information that way. They thought they could chat right past me."

Cute, Clark thought, *you just stood there with the openmouth-dog look on your face and people never seemed to catch on.* Except that in his case, and Ding's, it would be quite real. Well, the real mission wasn't to play spymaster, was it, and they were prepared enough for what they were supposed to do, John told himself. They would leave on Tuesday for Korea.

* * *

In yet another case of interagency cooperation, a UH-1H helicopter of the Tennessee National Guard lifted Rebecca Upton, three other men, and the gasoline tanks to Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The tanks were wrapped in clear plastic and were strapped into place as though they were passengers themselves.

Oak Ridge's history went back to the early 1940s, when it had been part of the original Manhattan Engineering Project, the cover name for the first atomic-bomb effort. Huge buildings housed the still-operating uranium-separation machinery, though much else had changed including the addition of a helipad.

The Huey circled once to get a read on the wind, then settled in. An armed guard shepherded the party inside, where they found a senior scientist and two lab techs waiting—the Secretary of Energy himself had called them in this Saturday evening.

The scientific side of the case was decided in less than an hour. More time would be required for additional testing. The entire NTSB report would address such issues as the seat belts, the efficacy of the child-safety seats in the Denton car, how the air bags had performed, and so forth, but everyone knew that the important part, the cause of five American deaths, was that the Cresta gas tanks had been made of improperly treated steel that had corroded down to a third of its expected structural strength. The rough draft of that finding was typed up—badly—on a nearby word processor, printed, and faxed to DOT headquarters, adjacent to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington. Though PRELIMINARY FINDING was the header on the two-page memo, the information would be treated as Holy Writ. Most remarkably of all, Rebecca Upton thought, it had all been accomplished in less than sixteen hours. She'd never seen the government move so fast on anything. What a shame that it didn't always do that, she thought as she dozed off in the back of the helicopter during the return flight to Nashville.

Later that night, the University of Massachusetts lost to the University of Connecticut 108-103 in overtime. Though a fanatic follower of basketball, and a graduate of U-Mass, Trent smiled serenely as he walked out into the shopping concourse outside the Hartford Civic Arena. He'd scored in a far bigger game today, he thought—though the game was not what he thought it was.

Arnie van Damm didn't like being awakened early on a Sunday morning, especially on one that he had designated as a day of rest—a day for sleeping till eight or so, reading his papers at the kitchen table like a normal citizen, napping in front of the TV in the afternoon, and generally pretending that he was back in Columbus, Ohio, where the pace of life was a lot easier. His first thought was that there had to be a major national emergency. President Durling wasn't one to abuse his chief of staff, and few had his private number. The voice on the other end caused his eyes to open wide and glare at the far wall of his bedroom.

"Al, this better be good," he growled at quarter of seven. Then he listened for a few minutes. "Okay, wait a minute, okay?" A minute later he was lighting up his computer—even he had to use one in these advanced times—which was linked to the White House. A phone was next to it.

"Okay, Al, I can squeeze you in tomorrow morning at eight-fifteen. Are you sure about all this?" He listened for another couple of minutes, annoyed that Trent had suborned three agencies of the Executive Branch, but he was a Member of Congress, and a powerful one at that, and the exercise of power came as easily to him as swimming did to a duck.

"My question is, will the President back me up?"

"If your information is solid, yes, I expect that he will, Al."

"This is the one, Arnie. I've talked and talked and talked, but this time the bastards have killed people."

"Can you fax me the report?"

"I'm running to catch a plane. I'll have it to you as soon as I get to my office."

So why did you have to call me now? van Damm didn't snarl. "I'll be waiting for it," was what he said. His next considered move was to retrieve the Sunday papers from his front porch. Remarkable, he thought, scanning the front pages. The biggest story of the day, maybe of the year, and nobody had picked up on it yet.

Typical.

Remarkably, except for the normal activity on the fax machine, the remainder of the day went largely according to plan, which allowed the Presidential chief of staff to act like a normal citizen, and not even wonder what the following day might bring. It would keep, he told himself, dozing off on his living-room sofa and missing the Lakers and the Celts from Boston Garden.

9

Power Plays

There were more chits to be called in that Monday, but Trent had quite a few of them out there. The United States House of Representatives would open for business per usual at noon. The chaplain intoned his prayer, surprised to see that the Speaker of the House himself was in his seat instead of someone else, that there were over a hundred members to listen to him instead of the usual six or eight queued to make brief statements for the benefit of the C-SPAN cameras, and that the press gallery was almost half full instead of entirely empty. About the only normal factor was the public gallery, with the customary number of tourists and school kids. The chaplain, unexpectedly intimidated, stumbled through his prayer of the day and departed—or started to. He decided to linger at the door to see what was going on.

"Mr. Speaker!" a voice announced, to the surprise of no one on the floor of the chamber.

The Speaker of the House was already looking that way, having been prepped by a call from the White House. "The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Massachusetts."

Al Trent walked briskly down to the lectern. Once there, he took his time, setting his notes on the tilted wooden platform while three aides set up an easel, making his audience wait, and establishing the dramatic tone of his speech with eloquent silence. Looking down, he began with the required litany:

"Mr. Speaker, I request permission to revise and extend."

"Without objection," the Speaker of the House replied, but not as automatically as usual. The atmosphere was just *different,* a fact clear to everyone but the tourists, and their tour guides found themselves sitting down, which they never did. Fully eighty members of Trent's party were in their seats, along with twenty or so on the other side of the aisle, including every member of the minority leadership who happened to be in Washington that day. And though some of the latter were studies in disinterested posture, the fact that they were here at all was worthy of comment among the reporters, who had also been tipped that something big was happening.

"Mr. Speaker, on Saturday morning, on Interstate Highway 40 between Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee, five American citizens were condemned to a fiery death by the Japanese auto industry." Trent read off the names and ages of the accident victims, and his aide on the floor uncovered the first graphic, a black-and-white photo of the scene. He took his time, allowing people to absorb the image, to imagine what it must have been like for the occupants of the two cars. In the press gallery, copies of his prepared remarks and the photos were now being passed out, and he didn't want to go too fast.

"Mr. Speaker, we must now ask, first, why did these people die, and second, why their deaths are a matter of concern to this house.

"A bright young federal-government engineer, Miss Rebecca Upton, was called to the scene by the local police authorities and immediately determined that the accident was caused by a major safety defect in both of these automobiles, that the lethal fire was in fact caused by the faulty design of the fuel tanks on both cars.

"Mr. Speaker, only a short time ago those very gasoline tanks were the subject of the domestic-content negotiations between the United States and Japan. A superior product, made coincidentally in my own district, was proposed to the Japanese trade representative. The American component is both superior in design and less expensive in manufacture, due to the diligence and intelligence of American workers, but that component was *rejected* by the Japanese trade mission because it failed to meet the supposed *high and demanding* standards of their auto industry!

"Mr. Speaker, those *high* and *demanding* standards burned five American citizens to death in an auto accident which, according to the Tennessee State Police and the National Transportation Safety Board, did not in any way exceed the safety parameters set in America by law for more than fifteen years. This should have been a survivable accident, but one family is nearly wiped out—but for the courage of a union trucker, would be entirely gone—and two other families today weep over the bodies of their young daughters *because* American workers were not *allowed* to supply a *superior* component *even* to the versions of this automobile made right here in America! One of those faulty tanks was transported six thousand miles so that it could be in one of those burned-out cars—so that it could kill a husband and a wife and a three-year-old child, and a newborn infant riding in that automobile!

"Enough is enough, Mr. Speaker! The preliminary finding of the NTSB, confirmed by the scientific staff at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, is that the auto gas tanks on both these cars, one manufactured in Japan and the other assembled right here in Kentucky, failed to meet long-standing D-O-T standards for

automotive safety. As a result, first, the U.S. Department of Transportation has issued an immediate recall notice for all Cresta-type private passenger automobiles ...” Trent paused, looking around. The players in the room knew that there would be more, and they knew it would be a big one.

“Second, I have advised the President of this tragic incident and its larger ramifications. It has been also determined by the Department of Transportation that the same fuel tank for this particular brand of automobile is used in nearly every Japanese private-passenger auto imported into the United States. Accordingly, I am today introducing a bill, HR-12313, which will authorize the President to direct the Departments of Commerce, Justice and of the Treasury top . . .”

“By executive order,” the White House press spokesman was saying in the White House Press Room, “and in the interest of public safety, the President has directed the Bureau of Customs, Department of the Treasury, to inspect all imported Japanese cars at their respective ports of entry for a major safety defect which two days ago resulted in the deaths of five American citizens. Enabling legislation to formalize the President’s statutory authority is being introduced today by the Honorable Alan Trent, Congressman from Massachusetts. The bill will have the full support of the President, and we hope for rapid action, again, in the interest of public safety.

“The technical term for this measure is ‘sectoral reciprocity,’” she went on. “That means that our legislation will mirror-image Japanese trade practices in every detail.” She looked up for questions. Oddly, there were none at the moment.

“Moving on, the President’s trip to Moscow has been scheduled for __”

“Wait a minute,” a reporter asked, looking up, having had a few seconds to digest the opening statement. *“What was that you said?”*

“What gives, boss?” Ryan asked, going over the briefing documents.

“Second page, Jack.”

“Okay.” Jack flipped the page and scanned. “Damn, I saw that on TV the other day.” He looked up. “This is not going to make them happy.”

“Tough cookies,” President Durling replied coldly. “We actually had a good year or two closing the trade gap, but this new guy over there is so beholden to the big shots that we just can’t do business with his people. Enough’s enough. They stop our cars right on the dock and

practically take them apart to make sure they're 'safe,' and then pass on the 'inspection' bill to their consumers."

"I know that, sir, but—"

"But enough's enough." And besides, it would soon be an election year, and the President needed help with his union voters, and with this single stroke he'd set that in granite. It wasn't Jack's bailiwick, and the National Security Advisor knew better than to make an issue of this. "Tell me about Russia and the missiles," Roger Durling said next.

He was saving the real bombshell for last. The FBI was having its meeting with the people from Judiciary the following afternoon. No, Durling thought after a moment's contemplation, he'd have to call Bill Shaw and tell him to hold off. He didn't want two big stories competing on the front pages. Kealty would have to wait for a while. He'd let Ryan know, but the sexual-harassment case would stay black for another week or so.

The timing guaranteed confusion. From a time zone fourteen hours ahead of the United States' EST, phones rang in the darkness of what in Washington was the early morning of the next day.

The irregular nature of the American action, which had bypassed the normal channels within the American government, and therefore had also bypassed the people who gathered information for their country, caught everyone completely unaware. The Japanese ambassador in Washington was in a fashionable restaurant, having lunch with a close friend, and the hour guaranteed that the same was true of the senior staffers at the embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, NW. In the embassy cafeteria, and all over the city, beepers went off commanding an immediate call to their offices, but it was too late. The word was already out on various satellite TV channels, and those people in Japan who kept watch on such things had called their supervisors, and so on up the information chain until various zaibatsu were awakened at an hour certain to draw sharp comments. These men in turn called senior staff members, who were already awake in any case, and told them to call their lobbyists at once. Many of the lobbyists were already at work. For the most part, they had caught the C-SPAN coverage of Al Trent and gone to work on their own initiative, attempting damage control even before they received marching orders from their employers. The reception they got in every office was cool, even from members to whose campaign funds they made regular contributions. But not always.

"Look," said one senator, contemplating the commencement of his own reelection bid, and needing funds, as his visitor well knew, "I'm

not going to the voters and saying that this action is unfair when eight people just burned to death. You have to give it time and let it play out. Be smart about it, okay?"

It was only five people who'd burned to death, the lobbyist thought, but the advice of his current mendicant was sound, or would have been under normal circumstances. The lobbyist was paid over three hundred thousand dollars per year for his expertise—he'd been a senior Senate staffer for ten years before seeing the light—and to be an honest broker of information. He was also paid to purvey campaign funds not-so-honestly on one hand, and to advise his employers what was possible on the other.

"Okay, Senator," he said in an understanding tone. "Please remember, though, that this legislation could cause a trade war, and that would be bad for everyone."

"Events like this have a natural life, and they don't last forever," the Senator replied. That was the general opinion reported back to the various offices by five that afternoon, which translated to seven the following morning in Japan. The error was in overlooking the fact that there had never been an event quite "like this."

Already the phones were ringing in the offices of nearly every member of both houses of Congress. Most expressed outrage at the event on I-40, which was to be expected. There were a few hundred thousand people in America, spread through every state and all four hundred thirty-five congressional districts, who never missed the chance to call their representatives in Washington to express their opinions on everything. Junior staffers took the calls and made note of the time and date, the name and address of every caller—it was often unnecessary to ask, as some callers were identifiable by voice alone. The calls would be cataloged for topic and opinion, become part of every member's morning briefing information, and in most cases just as quickly forgotten.

Other calls went to more senior staff members, and in many cases to the members themselves. These came from local businessmen, mostly manufacturers whose products either competed directly in the marketplace with those from overseas, or, in a smaller number of cases, who had tried to do business in Japan and found the going difficult. These calls were not always heeded, but they were rarely ignored.

It was now a top story again on every news service, having briefly faded into the normal old-news obscurity. For today's newscasts family photographs were shown of the police officer, and his wife, and their three children, and also of Nora Dunn and Amy Rice, followed by a brief taped interview of the heroic truck driver, and distant views of Jessica Denton, orphan, writhing in pain from her burns inside a

laminar room, being treated by nurses who wept as they debrided her charred face and arms. Now lawyers were sitting with all of the involved families, coaching them on what to tell the cameras and preparing dangerously modest statements of their own while visions of contingency fees danced in their heads. News crews asked for the reaction of family members, friends, and neighbors, and in the angry grief of people who had suffered a sudden and bitter loss, others saw either common anger or an opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

But most telling of all was the story of the fuel tank itself. The preliminary NTSB finding had been leaked moments after its existence had been announced on the floor of the House. It was just too good to pass up. The American auto companies supplied their own engineers to explain the scientific side of the matter, each of them noting with barely concealed glee that it was a simple example of poor quality-control on a very simple automobile component, that the Japanese weren't as sharp as everyone thought after all: "Look, Tom, people have been galvanizing steel for over a century," a midlevel Ford engineer explained to NBC "Nightly News." "Garbage cans are made out of this stuff."

"Garbage cans?" the anchor inquired with a blank look, since his were made from plastic.

"They've hammered us on quality control for years, told us that we're not good enough, not safe enough, not careful enough to enter their auto market—and now we see that they're not so smart after all. That's the bottom line, Tom," the engineer went on, feeling his oats. "The gas tanks on those two Crestas had less structural integrity than a garbage can made with 1890s technology. And that's why those five people burned to death."

That incidental remark proved the label for the entire event. The next morning five galvanized steel trash cans were found stacked at the entrance to the Cresta Plant in Kentucky, along with a sign that read, WHY DON'T YOU TRY THESE? A CNN crew picked it up, having been tipped off beforehand, and by noon *that* was their headline story. It was all a matter of perception. It would take weeks to determine what had really gone wrong, but by that time perception and the reactions to it would have long since overtaken reality.

The Master of MV *Nissan Courier* hadn't received any notice at all. His was a surpassingly ugly ship that looked for all the world as though she had begun life as a solid rectangular block of steel, then had its bow scooped out with a large spoon for conversion into something that could move at sea. Top-heavy and cursed with a huge sail area

that often made her the plaything of even the gentlest winds, she required four Moran tugboats to dock at the Dundalk Marine Terminal in the Port of Baltimore. Once the city's first airport, the large, flat expanse was a natural receiving point for automobiles. The ship's captain controlled the complex and tricky evolution of coming alongside, only then to notice that the enormous carpark was unusually full. That was odd, he thought. The last Nissan ship had come in the previous Thursday, and ordinarily the lot should have been half empty by now, making room for his cargo. Looking farther, he saw only three car-trailers waiting to load their own cargo for transport to the nearest distributor; normally they were lined up like taxis at a train station.

"I guess they weren't kidding," the Chesapeake Bay pilot observed. He'd boarded the *Courier* at the Virginia Capes and had caught the TV news on the pilot ship that anchored there. He shook his head and made his way to the accommodation ladder. He'd let the shipping agent give the word to the Master.

The shipping agent did just that, climbing up the ladder, then to the bridge. The storage lot had room for about two hundred additional cars, certainly not more than that, and as yet he had no instructions from the line's management on what to tell the captain to do. Ordinarily the ship would be in port for no more than twenty-four hours, the time required to unload the cars, refuel and revictual the ship for her return journey most of the way across the world, where the same routine would be followed in reverse, this time loading cars into the empty ship for yet another voyage to America. The ships of this fleet were on a boring but remorseless schedule whose dates were as fixed as the stars of the night sky.

"What do you mean?" the Master asked.

"Every car has to be safety inspected." The shipping agent waved toward the terminal. "See for yourself."

The Master did just that, lifting his Nikon binoculars to see agents from the Bureau of Customs, six of them, using a hydraulic jack to lift up a new car so that one of their number could crawl under it for some reason or other while others made notations on various official forms on their clipboards. Certainly they didn't seem to be in much of a hurry. Through the glasses he could see their bodies rock back and forth in what had to be mirth, instead of working as diligently as government employees ought. That was the reason he didn't make the connection with the odd instances on which he'd seen Japanese customs inspectors doing similar but much more stringent inspections of American, German, or Swedish cars on the docks of his home port of Yokohama.

"But we could be here for days!" the Master blurted out.

"Maybe a week," the agent said optimistically.

"But there's only space for one ship here! *Nissan Voyager* is due here in seventy hours."

"I can't help that."

"But my schedule—" There was genuine horror in the Master's voice.

"I can't help that either," the shipping agent observed patiently to a man whose predictable world had just disintegrated.

* * *

"How can we help?" Seiji Nagumo asked.

"What do you mean?" the Commerce Department official replied.

"This terrible incident." And Nagumo was genuinely horrified. Japan's historical construction of wood-and-paper had long since been replaced by more substantial buildings, but its legacy was a deep cultural dread of fire. A citizen who allowed a fire to start on his property and then to spread to the property of another still faced criminal sanctions, not mere civil liability. He felt a very real sense of shame that a product manufactured in his country had caused such a horrid end. "I have not yet had an official communique from my government, but I tell you for myself, this is terrible beyond words. I assure you that we will launch our own investigation."

"It's a little late for that, Seiji. As you will recall, we discussed this very issue—"

"Yes, that is true, I admit it, but you must understand that even if we had reached an agreement, the materials in question would still have been in the pipeline—it would not have made a difference to these people."

It was an altogether pleasant moment for the American trade-negotiator. The deaths in Tennessee, well, that was too bad, but he'd been putting up with this bastard's arrogance for three years now, and the current situation, for all its tragedy, was a sweet one.

"Seiji-san, as I said, it's a little late for that. I suppose we will be happy to have some degree of cooperation from your people, but we have our own job to do. After all, I'm sure you'll understand that the duty to protect the lives and safety of American citizens is properly the job of the American government. Clearly we have been remiss in that duty, and we must make up for our own unfortunate failings."

"What we can do, Robert, is to subsidize the operation. I have been told that our auto manufacturers will themselves hire safety inspectors to clear the vehicles in your ports, and—"

"Seiji, you know that's unacceptable. We can't have government

functions carried out by industry representatives." That wasn't true, and the bureaucrat knew it. It happened all the time.

"In the interest of maintaining our friendly trade relationship, we offer to undertake any unusual expense incurred by your government. We—" Nagumo was stopped by a raised hand.

"Seiji, I have to tell you to stop there. Please—you must understand that what you propose could well be seen as an inducement to corruption under our government-ethics laws." The conversation stopped cold for several seconds.

"Look, Seiji, when the new statute is passed, this will settle out rapidly." And that wouldn't take long. A flood of mail and telegrams from rapidly organized "grass-roots" groups—the United Auto Workers, for one, smelling blood in the water as sharply as any shark—had directed every one of its members to dial up Western Union for precisely that purpose. The Trent Bill was already first in line for hearings on the Hill, and insiders gave the new statute two weeks before it appeared on the President's desk for signature.

"But Trent's bill—"

The Commerce Department official leaned forward on his desk. "Seiji, what's the problem? The Trent Bill will allow the President, with the advice of lawyers here at Commerce, to duplicate your own trade laws. In other words, what we will do is to mirror-image your own laws over here. Now, how can it *possibly* be unfair for America to use your own, fair, trade laws on your products the same way that you use them on ours?"

Nagumo hadn't quite got it until that moment. "But you don't understand, Our laws are designed to fit our culture. Yours is different, and—"

"Yes, Seiji, I know. Your laws are designed to protect your industries against unfair competition. What we will soon be doing is the same thing. Now, that's the bad news. The good news is that whenever you open markets to us, we will automatically do the same for you. The bad news, Seiji, is that we will apply your own law to your own products, and then, my friend, we will see how fair your laws are, by your own standards. Why are you upset? You've been telling me for years how your laws are not a real boundary at all, that it's the fault of American industry that we can't trade with Japan as effectively as you trade with us." He leaned back and smiled. "Okay, now we'll see how accurate your observations were. You're not telling me now that you . . . misled me on things, are you?"

Nagumo would have thought *My God,* had he been a Christian, but his religion was animistic, and his internal reactions were different, though of exactly the same significance. He'd just been called a liar, and the worst part was that the accusation was . . . true.

The Trent Bill, now officially called the Trade Reform Act, was explained to America that very evening, now that the talking heads had used the time to analyze it. Its philosophical simplicity was elegant. Administration spokesmen, and Trent himself on "MacNeil/ Lehrer," explained that the law established a small committee of lawyers and technical-trade experts from the Commerce Department, assisted by international-law authorities from the Department of Justice, who would be empowered to analyze foreign trade laws, to draft American trade regulations that matched their provisions as exactly as possible, and then to recommend them to the Secretary of Commerce, who would advise the President. The President in turn had the authority to activate those regulations by executive order. The order could be voided by a simple majority of both houses of Congress, whose authority on such matters was set in the Constitution —that provision would avoid legal challenge on the grounds of separation of powers. The Trade Reform Act further had a "sunset" provision. In four years from enactment, it would automatically cease to exist unless reenacted by Congress and reapproved by the sitting President—that provision made the TRA appear to be a temporary provision whose sole objective was to establish free international trade once and for all. It was manifestly a lie, but a plausible one, even for those who knew it.

"Now what could be more fair than that?" Trent asked rhetorically on PBS. "All we're doing is to duplicate the laws of other countries. If their laws are fair for American business, then those same laws must also be fair for the industries of other countries. Our Japanese friends"—he smiled—"have been telling us for years that their laws are not discriminatory. Fine. We will use their laws as fairly as they do."

The entertaining part for Trent was in watching the man on the other side of the table squirm. The former Assistant Secretary of State, now earning over a million dollars a year as senior lobbyist for Sony and Mitsubishi, just sat there, his mind racing for something to say that would make sense, and Trent could see it in his face. He didn't have a thing.

"This could be the start of a real trade war—" he began, only to be cut off at the ankles.

"Look, Sam, the Geneva Convention didn't *cause* any wars, did it? It simply applied the same rules of conduct to all sides in a conflict. If you're saying that the use of Japanese regulations in American ports will cause a war, then there already is a war and you've been working for the other side, haven't you?" His rapid-fire retort was met with

five seconds of very awkward silence. There just wasn't an answer to that question.

"Whoa!" Ryan observed, sitting in the family room of his house, at a decent hour for once.

"He's got real killer instinct," Cathy observed, looking up from some medical notes.

"He does," her husband agreed. "Talk about fast. I just got briefed in on this the other day."

"Well, I think they're right. Don't you?" his wife asked.

"I think it's going a little fast." Jack paused. "How good are their docs?"

"Japanese doctors? Not very, by our standards."

"Really?" The Japanese public-health system had been held up for emulation. Everything over there was "free," after all. "How come?"

"They salute too much," Cathy replied, her head back down in her notes. "The professor's always right, that sort of thing. The young ones never learn to do it on their own, and by the time they're old enough to become professors themselves, for the most part they forget how."

"How often are you wrong, O Associate Professor of Ophthalmic Surgery, ma'am?" Jack chuckled.

"Practically never," Cathy replied, looking up, "but I never tell my residents to stop asking why, either. We have three Japanese fellows at Wilmer now. Good clinicians, good technical docs, but not very flexible. I guess it's a cultural thing. We're trying to train them out of it. It's not easy."

"The boss is always right . . ."

"Not always, he isn't." Cathy made a notation for a medication change.

Ryan's head turned, wondering if he'd just learned something important. "How good are they in developing new treatments?"

"Jack, why do you think they come here to train? Why do you suppose we have so many in the university up on Charles Street? Why do you suppose so many of them stay here?"

It was nine in the morning in Tokyo, and a satellite feed brought the American evening news shows into executive offices all over the city. Skilled translators were rendering the conversation into their native tongue. VCRs were making a permanent record for a more thorough analysis later, but what the executives heard was clear enough.

Kozo Matsuda trembled at his desk. He kept his hands in his lap and

out of view so that the others in his office could not see them shake. What he heard in two languages—his English was excellent—was bad enough. What he saw was worse. His corporation was already losing money due to ... irregularities in the world market. Fully a third of his company's products went to the United States, and if that segment of his business were in any way interrupted . . .

The interview was followed by a "focus segment" that showed *Nissan Courier*, still tied up in Baltimore, with her sister ship, *Nissan Voyager,* swinging at anchor in the Chesapeake Bay. Yet another car carrier had just cleared the Virginia Capes, and the first of the trio was not even halfway unloaded yet. The only reason they'd shown those particular ships was Baltimore's convenient proximity to Washington. The same was happening in the Port of Los Angeles, Seattle, and Jacksonville. *As though the cars were being used to transport* drugs, Matsuda thought. Part of his mind was outraged, but more of it was approaching panic. If the Americans were serious, then . . .

No, they couldn't be.

"But what about the possibility of a trade war?" Jim Lehrer asked that Trent person.

"Jim, I've been saying for years that we've been in a trade war with Japan for a generation. What we've just done is to level the playing field for everyone."

"But if this situation goes further, won't American interests be hurt?"

"Jim, what are those interests? Are American business interests worth burning up little children?" Trent shot back at once.

Matsuda cringed when he heard that. The image was just too striking for a man whose earliest childhood memory was of the early morning of March 10, 1945. Not even three years old, his mother carrying him from his house looking back and seeing the towering flames caused by Curtis LeMay's 21st Bomber Command. For years he'd awakened screaming in the night, and for all his adult life he'd been a committed pacifist. He'd studied history, learned how and why the war had begun, how America had pushed his antecedents into a corner from which there had been only a single escape——and that a false one. Perhaps Yamata was right, he thought, perhaps the entire affair had been of America's making. First, force Japan into a war, then crush them in an effort to forestall the natural ascendancy of a nation destined to challenge American power. For all that, he had never been able to understand how the zaibatsu of the time, members of the Black Dragon Society, had not been able to find a clever way out, for wasn't war just too dreadful an option? Wasn't peace, however humiliating, to be preferred to the awful destruction that came with war?

It was different now. Now he was one of them, and now he saw what lay in the abyss of not going to war. Were they so wrong then, he asked himself, no longer hearing the TV or his translator. They'd sought real economic stability for their country: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The history books of his youth had called it all a lie, but was it?

For his country's economy to function, it needed resources, raw materials, but Japan had virtually none except coal, and that polluted the air. Japan needed iron, bauxite, petroleum, needed almost everything to be shipped in, in order to be transformed into finished goods that could be shipped out. They needed cash to pay for the raw materials, and that cash came from the buyers of the finished products. If America, his country's largest and most important trading partner, suddenly stopped trading, that cash flow would stop. Almost sixty *billion* dollars.

There would be various adjustments, of course. Today on the international money markets, the yen would plummet against the dollar and every other hard currency in the world. That would make Japanese products less expensive everywhere—

But Europe would follow suit. He was sure of that. Trade regulations already stiffer than the Americans' would become tougher still, and that trading surplus would also decline, and at the same time the value of the yen would fall all the more. It would take more cash to buy the resources without which his country would enter total collapse. Like falling from a precipice, the downward acceleration would merely grow faster and faster, and the only consolation of the moment was that he would not be there to see the end of it, for long before that happened, this office would no longer be his. He'd be disgraced, with all the rest of his colleagues. Some would choose death, perhaps, but not so many. That was something for TV now, the ancient traditions that had grown from a culture rich in pride but poor in everything else. Life was too comfortable to give it up so easily—or was it? What lay ten years in his country's future? A return to poverty . . . or ... something else?

The decision would partly be his, Matsuda told himself, because the government of his country was really an extension of the collective will of himself and his peers. He looked down at the shaking hands in his lap. He thanked his two employees, and sent them on their way with a gracious nod before he was able to lift his hands to the surface of his desk and reach for a telephone.

* * *

Clark thought of it as a "forever flight," and even though KAL had upgraded them to first-class, it really hadn't helped much; not even the charming Korean flight attendants in lovely traditional dress could make the process much better than it was. He'd seen two of the three movies—on other flights—and the third wasn't all that interesting. The skynews radio channel had held his interest for the forty minutes required to update him on the happenings of the world, but after that it became repetitive, and his memory was too finely trained to need that. The KAL magazine was only good for thirty minutes—even that was a stretch—and he was current on the American news journals. What remained was crushing boredom. At least Ding had his course material to divert him. He was currently reading through the Masseys' classic *Dreadnought,* about how international relations had broken down a century earlier because the various European nations—more properly their leaders—had failed to make the leap of imagination required to keep the peace. Clark remembered having read it soon after publication.

"They just can't make it, can they?" he asked his partner after an hour of reading over his shoulder. Ding read slowly, taking in every word one at a time. Well, it was study material, wasn't it?

"Not real smart, John." Chavez looked up from his pages of notes and stretched, which was easier for his small frame than it was for Clark's. "Professor Alpher wants me to identify three or four crucial fault-points for my thesis, bad decisions, that sort of thing. More to it than that, y'know? What they had to do was, well, like step outside themselves and look back and see what it was all about, but the dumb fucks didn't know how to do that. They couldn't be objective. The other part is, they didn't think anything all the way through. They had all those great tactical ideas, but they never really looked at where things were leading them. You know, I can identify the goofs for the doc, wrap it up real nice just like she wants, but it's gonna be bullshit, John. The problem wasn't the decisions. The problem was the people making them. They just weren't big enough for what they were doing. They just didn't see far enough, and that's what the *peons* were paying them to do, y'know?" Chavez rubbed his eyes, grateful for the distraction. He'd been reading and studying for eleven hours, with only brief breaks for meals and head calls. "I need to run a few miles," he grumped, also weary from the flight.

John checked his watch. "Forty minutes out. We've already started our descent."

"You suppose the big shots are any different today?" Ding asked tiredly.

Clark laughed. "My boy, what's the one thing in life that never changes?"

The young officer smiled. “Yeah, and the other one is, people like us are always caught in the open when they blow it.” He rose and walked to the head to wash his face. Looking in the mirror, he was glad that they’d spend a day at an Agency safe house. He’d need to wash up and shave and unwind before putting on his mission identity. And maybe make some start notes for his thesis.

Clark looked out the window and saw a Korean landscape lit up with the pink, feathery light of a breaking dawn. The lad was turning intellectual on him. That was enough for a weary, eyes-closed grin with his face turned to the plastic window. The kid was smart enough, but what would happen when Ding wrote *the dumb fucks didn’t know how* into his master’s thesis? He was talking about Gladstone and Bismarck, after all. That got him laughing so hard that he started coughing in the airliner-dry air. He opened his eyes to see his partner emerge from the first-class head. Ding almost bumped into one of the flight attendants, and though he smiled politely at her and stepped aside to let her pass, he didn’t track her with his eyes, Clark noticed, didn’t do what men usually did with someone so young and attractive. Clearly his mind was set on another female form.

Damn, this is getting serious.

Murray nearly exploded: “We can’t do that now! God *damn* it, Bill, we’ve got everything lined up, the information’s going to leak sure as hell, and that’s not even fair to Kealty, much less our witnesses.”

“We do work for the President, Dan,” Shaw pointed out. “And the order came directly from him, not even through the AG. Since when did you care about Kealty, anyway?” It was, in fact, the same line Shaw had used on President Durling. Bastard or not, rapist or not, he was entitled to due process of law and a fair crack at defending himself. The FBI was somewhat maniacal on that, but the real reason for their veneration of judicial fair-play was that when you convicted a guy after following all the rules, you knew that you’d nailed the right bastard. It also made the appeals process a lot easier to swallow.

“This accident thing, right?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t want two big stories jockeying on the front page. This trade flap is a pretty big deal, and he says Kealty can wait a week or two. Dan, our Ms. Linders has waited several years, will another couple of weeks—”

“Yes, and you know it,” Murray snapped back. Then he paused. “Sorry, Bill. You know what I mean.” What he meant was simple: he had a case ready to go, and it was time to run with it. On the other hand, you didn’t say no to the President.

“He’s already talked to the people on the Hill. They’ll sit on it.”

“But their staffers won’t.”

10

Seduction

"I agree it's not good," Chris Cook said.

Nagumo was looking down at the rug in the sitting room. He was too stunned at the events of the previous few days even to be angry. It was like discovering that the world was about to end, and that there was nothing he could do about it. Supposedly, he was a middle-level foreign-ministry official who didn't "play" in the high-level negotiations. But that was window-dressing. His task was to set the framework for his country's negotiating positions and, moreover, to gather intelligence information on what America really thought, so that his titular seniors would know exactly what opening positions to take and how far they could press. Nagumo was an intelligence officer in fact if not in name. In that role, his interest in the process was personal and surprisingly emotional. Seiji saw himself as a defender and protector of his country and its people, and also as an honest bridge between his country and America. He wanted Americans to appreciate his people and his culture. He wanted them to partake of its products. He wanted America to see Japan as an equal, a good and wise friend from whom to learn. Americans were a passionate people, so often ignorant of their real needs—as the overly proud and pampered often are. The current American stance on trade, if that was what it seemed to be, was like being slapped by one's own child. Didn't they know they needed Japan and its products? Hadn't he personally trained American trade officials for years?

Cook squirmed in his seat. He, too, was an experienced foreign-service officer, and he could read faces as well as anyone. They were friends, after all, and, more than that, Seiji was his personal passport to a remunerative life *after* government service.

"If it makes you feel any better, it's the thirteenth."

"Hmph?" Nagumo looked up.

"That's the day they blow up the last missiles. The thing you asked about? Remember?"

Nagumo blinked, slow to recall the question he'd posed earlier. "Why then?"

"The President will be in Moscow. They're down to a handful of

missiles now. I don't know the exact number, but it's less than twenty on each side. They're saving the last one for next Friday. Kind of an odd coincidence, but that's how the scheduling worked out. The TV boys have been prepped, but they're keeping it quiet. There'll be cameras at both places, and they're going to simulcast the last two—blowing them up, I mean." Cook paused. "So that ceremony you talked about, the one for your grandfather, that's the day."

"Thank you, Chris." Nagumo stood and walked to the bar to pour himself another drink. He didn't know why the Ministry wanted that information, but it was an order, and he'd pass it along. "Now, my friend, what can we do about this?"

"Not much, Seiji, at least not right away. I told you about the damned gas tanks, remember? I told you Trent was not a guy to tangle with. He's been waiting for an opportunity like this for years. Look, I was on the Hill this afternoon, talking to people. You've never seen mail and telegrams like this one, and goddamned CNN won't let the story go."

"I know." Nagumo nodded. It was like some sort of horror movie. Today's lead story was Jessica Denton. The whole country—along with a lot of the world—was following her recovery. She'd just come off the "grave" list, with her medical condition upgraded to "critical." There were enough flowers outside her laminar room to give the impression of a lavish personal garden. But the second story of the day had been the burial of her parents and siblings, delayed by medical and legal necessities. Hundreds had attended, including every member of Congress from Tennessee. The chairman of the auto company had wanted to attend as well, to pay personal respects and apologize in person to the family, but been warned off for security reasons. He'd offered a sincere apology on behalf of his corporation on TV instead and promised to cover all medical expenses and provide for Jessica's continuing education, pointing out that he also had daughters. Somehow it just hadn't worked. A sincere apology went a long way in Japan, a fact that Boeing had cashed in on when one of their 747s had killed several hundred Japanese citizens, but it wasn't the same in America, a fact Nagumo had vainly communicated to his government. The attorney for the Denton family, a famous and effective litigator, had thanked the chairman for his apology, and noted dryly that responsibility for the deaths was now on the public record, simplifying his case preparation. It was only a question of amount now. It was already whispered that he'd demand a billion dollars.

Deerfield Auto Parts was in negotiation with every Japanese auto assembler, and Nagumo knew that the terms to be offered the Massachusetts company would be generous in the extreme, but he'd also told the Foreign Ministry the American adage about closing the

barn door after the horse had escaped. It would not be damage control at all, but merely a further admission of fault, which was the wrong thing to do in the American legal environment.

The news had taken a while to sink in at home. As horrid as the auto accident had been, it seemed a small thing, and TV commentators on NHK had used the 747 incident to illustrate that accidents did happen, and that America had once inflicted something similar in type but far more ghastly in magnitude on the citizens of that country. But to American eyes the Japanese story had appeared to be justification rather than comparison, and the American citizens who'd backed it up were people known to be on the Japanese payroll. It was all coming apart. Newspapers were printing lists of former government officials who had entered such employment, noting their job experience and former salaries and comparing them with what they were doing now, and for how much. "Mercenary" was the kindest term applied to them. "Traitor" was one more commonly used epithet, especially by organized labor and every member of Congress who faced election.

There was no reasoning with these people.

"What will happen, Chris?"

Cook set his drink down on the table, evaluating his own position and lamenting his remarkably bad timing. He had already begun cutting his strings. Waiting the extra few years for full retirement benefits—he'd done the calculations a few months earlier. Seiji had made it known to him the previous summer that his actual net income would quadruple to start with, and that his employers were great believers in pension planning, and that he wouldn't *lose* his federal retirement investments, would he? And so Cook had started the process. Speaking sharply to the next-higher career official to whom he reported, letting others know that he thought his country's trade policy was being formulated by idiots, in the knowledge that his views would work their way upward. A series of internal memoranda that said the same thing in measured bureaucratese. He had to set things up so that his departure would not be a surprise, and would seem to be based on principle rather than crass lucre. The problem was, in doing so he'd effectively ended his career. He would never be promoted again, and if he remained at State, at best he might find himself posted to an ambassadorship to . . . maybe Sierra Leone, unless they could find a bleaker spot. Equatorial Guinea, perhaps. More bugs.

You're committed, Cook told himself, and so he took a deep breath, and, on reflection, another sip of his drink.

"Seiji, we're going to have to take the long view on this one. TRA"—he couldn't call it the Trade *Reform* Act, not here—"is going to

pass in less than two weeks, and the President's going to sign it. The working groups at Commerce and Justice are already forming up. State will participate also, of course. Cables have gone out to several embassies to get copies of various trade laws around the world—"

"Not just ours?" Nagumo was surprised.

"They're going to compare yours with others from countries with whom our trade relationships are . . . less controversial right now." Cook had to watch his language, after all. He needed this man. "The idea is to give them something to, well, to contrast your country's laws with. Anyway, getting this thing fixed, it's going to take some time, Seiji." Which wasn't an altogether bad thing, Cook reasoned. After all, it made for job security—if and when he crossed over from one employer to another.

"Will you be part of the working group?"

"Probably, yes."

"Your help will be invaluable, Chris," Nagumo said quietly, thinking more rapidly now. "I can help you with interpreting our laws—quietly, of course," he added, seizing at that particular straw.

"I wasn't really planning to stay at Foggy Bottom much longer, Seiji," Cook observed. "We've got our hearts set on a new house, and —"

"Chris, we need you where you are. We need—*I* need your help to mitigate this unfortunate set of circumstances. We have a genuine emergency on our hands, one with serious consequences for both our countries."

"I understand that, but—"

Money, Nagumo thought, *with these people it's always* money*!*

"I can make the proper arrangements," he said, more on annoyed impulse than as a considered thought. Only after he'd spoken did he grasp what he'd done—but then he was interested to see how Cook would react to it.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State just sat there for a moment. He too was so caught up in the events that the real implications of the offer nearly slipped past him. Cook simply nodded without even looking up into Nagumo's eyes.

In retrospect, the first step—the turning over of national-security information—had been a harder one, and the second was so easy that Cook didn't even reflect on the fact that now he was in clear violation of a federal statute. He had just agreed to provide information to a foreign government for money. It seemed such a logical thing to do under the circumstances. They really wanted that house in Potomac, and it wouldn't be long before they'd have to start shopping for colleges.

That morning on the Nikkei Dow would long be remembered. It had taken that long for people to grasp what Seiji Nagumo now knew—that they weren't kidding this time. It wasn't rice all over again, it wasn't computer chips all over again, it wasn't automobiles or their parts, not telecommunications gear or construction contracts or cellular phones. It was, in fact, all of the above, twenty years of pent-up resentment and anger, some justified, some not, but all real and exploding to the surface at a single time. At first the editors in Tokyo just hadn't believed what they'd been told by their people in Washington and New York, and had redrafted the stories to fit their own conclusions until they themselves had thought the information through and come to the stunning realization on their own. The Trade Reform Act, the papers had pontificated only two days earlier, was just one more blip, a joke, *an expression of a few misguided people with a long history of antipathy to our country that will soon run its course*. It was now something else. Today it was *a most unfortunate development whose possibility of enactment into Federal Law cannot now be totally discounted*.

The Japanese language conveys information every bit as well as any other, once you break the code. In America the headlines are far more explicit, but that is merely an indelicate directness of expression typical of the *gaijin.* In Japan one talked more elliptically, but the meaning was there even so, just as clear, just as plain. The millions of Japanese citizens who owned stock read the same papers, saw the same morning news, and reached the same conclusions. On reaching their workplaces, they lifted phones and made their calls.

The Nikkei Dow had once ridden beyond thirty thousand yen of benchmark value. By the early 1990s, it had fallen to half of that, and the aggregate cash cost of the "write-down" was a number larger than the entire U.S. government debt at the time, a fact which had gone virtually unnoticed in the United States—but not by those who had taken their money from banks and placed it in stocks in an attempt to get something more than a 2 percent compounded annualized return. Those people had lost sizable fractions of their life savings and not known whom to blame for it.

Not this time, they all thought. It was time to cash in and put the money back into banks—big, safe, financial institutions that knew how to protect their depositors' funds. Even if they were niggardly in paying interest, you didn't lose anything, did you?

Western reporters would use terms like "avalanche" and "meltdown" to describe what began when the trading computers went on-line. The process appeared to be orderly. The large commercial banks, married as they were to the large corporations, sent the same

depositors' money that came in the front door right out the back door to protect the value of corporate stocks. There was no choice, really. They had to buy up huge portfolios in what turned out to be a vain stand against a racing tide. The Nikkei Dow lost fully a sixth of its net value in one trading day, and though analysts proclaimed confidently that the market was now grossly undervalued and a huge technical adjustment upward was inevitable, people thought in their own homes that if the American legislation really became law, the market for the goods their country made would vanish like the morning fog. The process would not stop, and though none said it, everyone knew it. This was especially clear to the bankers.

On Wall Street, things were different. Various sages bemoaned the interference of government in the marketplace; then they thought about it a little bit. It was plain to see, after all, that if Japanese automobiles had trouble clearing customs, that if the popular Cresta was now cursed with a visual event that few would soon put behind them, then American cars would sell more, and that was good. It was good for Detroit, where the cars were assembled, and for Pittsburgh, where much of the steel was still forged; it was good for all the cities in America (and Canada, and Mexico), where the thousands of components were made. It was good, further, for all the workers who made the parts and assembled the cars, who would have more money to spend in their communities for other things. How good? Well, the majority of the trade imbalance with Japan was accounted for in automobiles. The sunny side of thirty *billion* dollars could well be dumped into the American economy in the next twelve months, and *that*, quite a few market technicians thought after perhaps as much as five seconds' reflection, was just good as hell, wasn't it? Conservatively, thirty billion dollars going into the coffers of various companies, and all of it, one way or another, would show up as profits for American corporations. Even the additional taxes paid would help in lowering the federal deficit, thus lowering demands on the money pool, and lowering the cost of government bonds. The American economy would be twice blessed. Toss in a little *schadenfreude* for their Japanese colleagues, and even before the Street opened for business, people were primed for a big trading day.

They would not be disappointed. The Columbus Group turned out to be especially well set, having a few days earlier purchased options for a huge quantity of auto-related issues, and thus able to take advantage of a hundred-twelve-point upward jolt in the Dow.

In Washington, at the Federal Reserve, there was concern. They were closer to the seat of government power, and had insider information from the Treasury Department on how the mechanics of the Trade Reform Act would run, and it was clear that there would be a temporary shortage of automobiles until Detroit geared up its lines somewhat. Until the American companies could take up the slack, there would be the classic situation of too much money chasing too few cars. That meant an inflationary blip, and so later in the day the Fed would announce a quarter-point increase in the discount rate—just a temporary one, they told people, off the record and not for attribution. The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, however, viewed the entire development as good in the long term. It would be myopic on their part, but then that condition was worldwide at the moment.

* * *

Even before that decision was made, other men were discussing the long term as well. It required the largest hot tub in the bathhouse, which was then closed for the evening to its other well-heeled customers. The regular staff was dismissed. The clients would be served by personal assistants who, it turned out, kept their distance as well. In fact, even the normal ablutions were dispensed with. After the most cursory of greetings, the men removed their jackets and ties and sat around on the floor, unwilling to waste time with the usual preliminaries.

"It will be even worse tomorrow," a banker noted. That was all he had to say.

Yamata looked around the room. It was all he could do not to laugh. The signs had been clear as much as five years before, when the first major auto company had quietly discontinued its lifetime-employment policy. The free ride of Japanese business had actually ended then, for those who had the wit to pay attention. The rest of them had thought all the reverses to be merely temporary "irregularities," their favorite term for it, but their myopia had worked entirely in Yamata's favor. The shock value of what was happening now was his best friend. Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, only a handful of those in the room had seen it for what it was. In the main, those were Yamata-san's closest allies.

Which was not to say that he or they had been immune to the adversity that had taken the national unemployment rate to almost 5

percent, merely that they had mitigated their damage by carefully considered measures. Those measures were enough, however, to make their originators appear to be models of perspicacity.

"There is an adage from the American Revolution," one of their number noted dryly. He had a reputation as something of an intellectual. "From their Benjamin Franklin, I believe. We can either hang together or we will surely hang separately. If we do not stand together now, my friends, we will all be destroyed. One at a time or all at once, it will not matter."

"And our country with us," the banker added, earning Yamata's gratitude.

"Remember when they needed us?" Yamata asked. "They needed our bases to checkmate the Russians, to support the Koreans, to service their ships. Well, my friends, what do they need us for now?"

"Yes, and we need them," Matsuda noted.

"Very good, Kozo," Yamata responded acidly. "We need them so much that we will ruin our national economy, destroy our people and our culture, and reduce our nation to being their vassal—*again!"*

"Yamata-san, there is no time for that," another corporate chairman chided gently. "What you proposed in our last meeting, it was very bold and very dangerous."

"It was I who requested this meeting," Matsuda pointed out with dignity.

"Your pardon, Kozo." Yamata inclined his head by way of apology.

"These are difficult times, Raizo," Matsuda replied, accepting it graciously. Then he added, "I find myself leaning toward your direction."

Yamata took a very deep breath, angry at himself for misreading the man's intent. *Kozo is right. These are difficult times*. "Please, my friend, share your thoughts with us."

"We need the Americans . . . or we need something else." Every head in the room except for one looked down. Yamata read their faces, and taking a moment to control his excitement, he realized that he saw what he wished to see. It wasn't a wish or an illusion. It was really there. "It is a grave thing which we must consider now, a great gamble. And yet it is a gamble which I fear we must undertake."

"Can we really do it?" a very desperate banker asked.

"Yes," Yamata said. "We can do it. There is an element of risk, of course. I do not discount that, but there is much in our favor." He outlined the facts briefly. Surprisingly, there was no opposition to his views this time. There were questions, numerous ones, endless ones, all of which he was prepared to answer, but no one really objected this time. Some had to be concerned, even terrified, but the simple

fact, he realized, was that they were more terrified by what they knew would happen in the morning, and the next, and the next. They saw the end of their way of life, their perks, their personal prestige, and that frightened them worse than anything else. Their country *owed* them for all they had done, for the long climb up the corporate ladders, for all their work and diligence, for all the good decisions they had made. And so the decision was made—not with enthusiasm—but made even so.

Mancuso's first job of the morning was to look over the oporders. *Asheville* and *Charlotte* would have to discontinue their wonderfully useful work, tracking whales in the Gulf of Alaska, to join up for Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS, along with *John Stennis, Enterprise*, and the usual cast of thousands. The exercise had been planned months in advance, of course. It was a fortunate accident that the script for the event was not entirely divorced from what this half of Pac-Fleet was working up for. On the twenty-seventh, two weeks after the conclusion of PARTNERS, *Stennis* and *Big-E* would deploy southwest for the IO, with a single courtesy stop in Singapore, to relieve *Ike* and *Abe*.

"You know, they have us outnumbered now," Commander (Captain selectee) Wally Chambers observed. A few months earlier he'd relinquished command of USS *Key West*, and Mancuso had asked for him to be his operations officer. The transfer from Groton, where Chambers had expected another staff job, to Honolulu had not exactly been a crushing blow to the officer's ego. Ten years earlier, Wally would have been up for a boomer command, or maybe a tender, or maybe a squadron. But the boomers were all gone, there were only three tenders operating, and the squadron billets were filled. That put Chambers in a holding pattern until his "major command" ticket could be punched, and until then Mancuso wanted him back. It was not an uncommon failing of naval officers to dip into their own former wardrooms.

Admiral Mancuso looked up, not so much in surprise as in realization. Wally was right. The Japanese Navy had twenty-eight submarines, conventionally powered boats called SSKs, and he only had nineteen.

"How many are up and running?" Bart asked, wondering what their overhaul/availability cycle was like.

"Twenty-two, according to what I saw yesterday. Hell, Admiral, they're committing *ten* to the exercise, including all the Harushios. From what I gather from Fleet Intel, they're working up real hard for us, too." Chambers leaned back and stroked his mustache. It was new,

because Chambers had a baby face and he thought a commanding officer should look older than twelve. The problem was, it itched.

"Everybody tells me they're pretty good," ComSubPac noted.

"You haven't had a ride yet?" Sub-Ops asked. The Admiral shook his head.

"Scheduled for next summer."

"Well, they better be pretty good," Chambers thought. Five of Mancuso's subs were tasked to the exercise. Three would be in close to the carrier battle group, with *Asheville* and *Charlotte* conducting independent operations, which weren't really independent at all. They'd be playing a game with four Japanese subs five hundred miles northwest of Kure Atoll, pretending to do hunter-killer operations against a submarine-barrier patrol.

The exercise was fairly similar to what they expected to do in the Indian Ocean. The Japanese Navy, essentially a defensive collection of destroyers and frigates and diesel subs, would try to withstand an advance of a two-carrier battle group. Their job was to die gloriously —something the Japanese were historically good at, Mancuso told himself with a wispy smile—but also to try to make a good show of it. They'd be as clever as they could, trying to sneak their tin cans in close enough to launch their Harpoon surface-to-surface missiles, and surely their newer destroyers had a fair chance of surviving. The Kongos especially were fine platforms, the Japanese counterpart to the American Arleigh Burke class, with the Aegis radar/missile system. Expensive ships, they all had battleship names from World War II. The original *Kongo* had fallen prey to an American submarine, *Sealion II,* if Mancuso remembered properly. That was also the name of one of the few new American submarines assigned to Atlantic Fleet. Mancuso didn't have a Seawolf-class under his command yet. In any case, the aviators would have to find a way to deal with an Aegis ship, and that wasn't something they relished, was it?

All in all, it would be a good workup for Seventh Fleet. They'd need it. The Indians were indeed getting frisky. He now had seven of his boats operating with Mike Dubro, and between those and what he had assigned to DATELINE PARTNERS, that was the whole active collection. How the mighty had fallen, ComSubPac told himself. Well, that's what the mighty usually did.

The meet procedure was not unlike the courtship ritual between swans. You showed up at a precise place at a precise time, in this case carrying a newspaper—folded, not rolled—in your left hand, and looked in a shop window at a huge collection of cameras and consumer electronics, just as a Russian would automatically do on his

first trip to Japan, to marvel at the plethora of products available to those who had hard currency to spend. If he were being trailed—possible but most unlikely—it would appear normal. In due course, exactly on time, a person bumped into him.

"Excuse me," the voice said in English, which was also normal, for the person he'd inadvertently nudged was clearly gaijin.

"Quite all right," Clark replied in an accented voice, without looking.

"First time in Japan?"

"No, but my first time in Tokyo."

"Okay, it's all clear." The person bumped him again on the way down the street. Clark waited the requisite four or five minutes before following. It was always so tedious, but necessary. Japan wasn't enemy soil. It wasn't like the jobs he'd done in Leningrad (in Clark's mind that city's name would never change; besides, his Russian accent was from that region) or Moscow, but the safest course of action was to pretend that it was. Just as well that it wasn't, though. There were so many foreigners in this city that the Japanese security service, such as it was, would have gone crazy trying to track them all.

In fact it *was* Clark's first time here, aside from plane changes and stopovers, and that didn't count. The crowding on the street was like nothing he'd ever seen; not even New York was this tight. It also made him uneasy to stand out so much. There is nothing worse for an intelligence officer than *not* to be able to blend in, but his six-one height marked him as someone who didn't belong, visible from a block away to anyone who bothered to look. And so many people looked at him, Clark noted. More surprisingly, people made way for him, especially women, and children positively shrank from his presence as though Godzilla had returned to crush their city. So it was true. He'd heard the stories but never quite believed them. Hairy barbarian. *Funny, I never thought of myself that way*, John told himself, walking into a McDonald's. It was crowded at lunch hour, and after turning his head he had to take a seat with another man. *Mary Pat was right,* he thought. *Nomuri is pretty good.*

"So what's the story?" Clark asked amid the din of the fast-food place.

"Well, I've ID'd her and I've got the building she lives in."

"That's fast work."

"Not very hard. Our friend's security detail doesn't know shit about countersurveillance."

Besides, Clark didn't say, *you look like you belong, right down to the harried and tense look of a salaryman bolting down his lunch so that he can race back to his desk.* Well, that never came hard to a field spook, did it? It wasn't hard to be tense on a field assignment. The difficult

part, which they emphasized at the Farm, was to appear at ease.

"Okay, then all I have to do is get permission for the pickup." Among other things. Nomuri wasn't authorized to know about his work with THISTLE. John wondered if that would change.

"*Sayonara.*" And Nomuri made his exit while Clark attacked his rice ball. *Not bad. The kid's all business*, he thought. His next thought was, *Rice ball at* McDonald's?

The briefing documents on his desk had nothing at all to do with his being the President, but everything to do with his remaining in the office, and for that reason they were always at the top of the pile. The upward move in the approval ratings was . . . very edifying, Durling thought. Of likely voters—and they were the ones who really counted—fully 10 percent more approved of his policies than had done so last week, a numerical improvement that covered both his foreign and domestic performance. All in all, it was about what a fourth-grader might feel on bringing home a particularly good report card to doubtful parents. And that 10 percent was only the beginning, his chief pollster thought, since the implications of the policy changes were taking a little time to sink in. Already the Big Three were speculating publicly about hiring back some of the seven hundred thousand workers laid off in the previous decades, and that was just the assembly workers. Then you had to consider the people in independent parts companies, the tire companies, the glass companies, the battery companies . . . That could start to revitalize the Rust Belt, and the Rust Belt accounted for a lot of electoral votes.

What was obvious, or should have been, was that it wouldn't stop with cars. It couldn't. The United Auto Workers (cars and related parts) looked forward to the restoration of thousands of paying members. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (TVs, even VCRs?) could not be far behind, and there were additional unions that had just begun to consider how large a piece of the pie they might receive. Though simple in concept, the Trade Reform Act represented, like many simple concepts, a wide-ranging alteration in how the United States of America did business. President Durling had thought he'd understood that concept, but soon the phone on his desk would ring. Looking at it, he already knew the voices that he would hear, and it wasn't too great a stretch to imagine what words they would speak, what arguments they would put forth, and what promises they would make. And he would be amenable to accepting the promises.

He'd never really planned to be President of the United States, not as Bob Fowler had planned his entire life toward that goal, not even

allowing the death of his first wife to turn him from that path. Durling's last goal had been the governorship of California, and when he'd been offered the chance for the second place on the Fowler ticket he'd taken it more out of patriotism than anything else. That was not something he'd say even to his closest advisers, because patriotism was passé in the modern political world, but Roger Durling had felt it even so, had remembered that the average citizen had a name and a face, remembered having some of them die under his command in Vietnam, and, in remembering, thought that he had to do his best for them.

But what was the best? he asked himself again, as he had done on uncounted occasions. The Oval Office was a lonely place. It was often filled with all manner of visitors, from a foreign chief of state to a schoolchild who'd won an essay contest, but in due course they all left, and the President was alone again with his duty. The oath he'd taken was so simple as to be devoid of meaning. "Faithfully execute the office of . . . to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend . . ." Fine words, but what did they *mean?* Perhaps Madison and the others had figured that he'd know. Perhaps in 1789 everyone had—it was just understood—but that was more than two hundred years in the past, and somehow they'd neglected to write it down for the guidance of future generations.

Worse still, there were plenty of people ever ready to tell you what they thought the words meant, and when you added up all the advice, 2 plus 2 ended up as 7. Labor and management, consumer and producer, taxpayer and transfer recipient. They all had their needs. They all had their agendas. They all had arguments, and fine lobbyists to make them, and the scary part was that each one made sense in one way or another, enough that many believed that 2 + 2 really did = 7. Until you announced the sum, that is, and then *everybody* said it was too much, that the country couldn't afford the *other* groups' *special* interests.

On top of all of that, if you wanted to accomplish anything at all, you had to *get* here, and having gotten here, to *stay* here, and that meant making promises you had to keep. At least some of them. And somewhere in the process, the country just got lost, and the Constitution with it, and at the end of the day you were preserving, protecting, and defending—*what?*

No wonder I never really wanted this job, Durling told himself, sitting alone, looking down at yet another position paper. It was all an accident, really. Bob had needed to carry California, and Durling had been the key, a young, popular governor of the right party affiliation. But now he was the President of the United States, and the fear was that the job was simply beyond him. The sad truth was that no single

man had the intellectual capacity even to understand all the affairs the President was expected to manage. Economics, for example, perhaps his most important contemporary duty now that the Soviet Union was gone, was a field where its own practitioners couldn't agree on a set of rules that a reasonably intelligent man could comprehend.

Well, at least he understood jobs. It was better for people to have them than not to have them. It was, generally speaking, better for a country to manufacture most of its own goods than to let its money go overseas to pay the workers in another country to make them. That was a principle that he could understand, and better yet, a principle that he could explain to others, and since the people to whom he spoke would be Americans themselves, they would probably agree. It would make organized labor happy. It would also make management happy—and wasn't a policy that made *both* of them happy necessarily a good policy? It had to be, didn't it? Wouldn't it make the economists happy? Moreover, he was convinced that the American worker was as good as any in the world, more than ready to enter into a fair contest with any other, and that was all his policy was really aimed at doing . . . wasn't it?

Durling turned in his expensive swivel chair and peered out the thick windows toward the Washington Monument. It must have been a lot easier for George. Okay, so, yeah, he was the first, and he did have to deal with the Whiskey Rebellion, which in the history books didn't look to have been all that grave, and he had to set the pattern for follow-on presidents. The only taxes collected back then were of the tariff and excise sort—nasty and regressive by current standards, but aimed only at discouraging imports and punishing people for drinking too much. Durling was not really trying to stop foreign trade, just to make it *fair*. All the way back to Nixon, the U.S. government had caved in to those people, first because we'd needed their bases (as though Japan would really have struck an alliance with their ancient enemies!), later because . . . why? Because it had become expedient? Did anyone really know? Well, it would change now, and everyone would know why.

Or rather, Durling corrected himself, they'd think that they knew. Perhaps the more cynical would guess the real reason, and everyone would be partially right.

The Prime Minister's office in Japan's Diet Building—a particularly ugly structure in a city not known for the beauty of its architecture—overlooked a green space, but the man sitting in his own expensive swivel chair didn't care to look out at the moment. Soon enough he would be out there, looking in.

Thirty years, he thought. It could easily have been different. In his late twenties he'd been offered, more than once, a comfortable place in the then-ruling Liberal Democratic Party, with guaranteed upward mobility because even then his intelligence had been manifest, especially to his political enemies. And so they had approached him in the friendliest possible way, appealing to his patriotism and his vision for the future of his country, using that vision, holding it out before his young and idealistic eyes. It would take time, they'd told him, but someday he'd have his chance for this very seat in this very room. Guaranteed. All he had to do was to play ball, become part of the team, join up. . . .

He could still remember his reply, the same every time, delivered in the same tone, with the same words, until finally they'd understood that he wasn't holding out for more and left for the final time, shaking their heads and wondering why.

All he'd really wanted was for Japan to be a democracy in the true sense of the word, not a place run by a single party beholden in turn to a small number of powerful men. Even thirty years earlier the signs of corruption had been clear to anyone with open eyes, but the voters, the ordinary people, conditioned to two thousand years or more of acceptance, had just gone along with it because the roots of real democracy hadn't taken here any more than the roots of a rice plant in the pliable alluvium of a paddy. That was the grandest of all lies, so grand that it was believed by everyone within his country as well as without. The culture of his country hadn't really changed. Oh, yes, there were the cosmetic changes. Women could vote now, but like women in every other country they voted their pocketbooks, just as their men did, and they, like their men, were part of a culture that demanded obeisance of everyone in one way or another. What came down from on high was to be accepted, and because of that his countrymen were easily manipulated.

The bitterest thing of all for the Prime Minister was that he had actually thought he'd be able to change that. His true vision, admitted to none but himself, was to change his country in a real and fundamental way. Somehow it hadn't seemed grandiose at all, back then. In exposing and crushing official corruption he'd wanted to make the people see that those on high were not worthy of what they demanded, that ordinary citizens had the honor and decency and intelligence to choose both their own path for life and a government that responded more directly to their needs.

You actually believed that, fool, he told himself, staring at the telephone. The dreams and idealism of youth died pretty hard after all, didn't they? He'd seen it all then, and it hadn't changed. Only now he knew that it wasn't possible for one man and one generation. Now

he knew that to make change happen he needed economic stability at home, and that stability depended on using the old order, and the old system was corrupt. The real irony was that he'd come into office because of the failings of the old system, but at the same time needed to restore it so that he could then sweep it away. That was what he hadn't quite understood. The old system had pressed the Americans too hard, reaping economic benefits for his country such as the Black Dragons hadn't dreamed of, and when the Americans had reacted, in some ways fairly and well and in others unfairly and meanspirited, the conditions had been created for his own ascendancy. But the voters who'd made it possible for him to put his coalition together expected him to make things better for them, and quickly, and to do that he couldn't easily give more concessions to America that would worsen his own country's economic difficulties, and so he'd tried to stonewall on one hand while dealing on the other, and now he knew that it wasn't possible to do both at the same time. It required the sort of skill which no man had.

And his enemies knew that. They'd known it three years ago when he'd put his coalition together, waiting patiently for him to fail, and his ideals with him. The American actions merely affected the timing, not the ultimate outcome.

Could he fix it even now? By lifting the phone he could place a call through to Roger Durling and make a personal plea to head off the new American law, to undertake rapid negotiations. But that wouldn't work, would it? Durling would lose great face were he to do that, and though America deemed it a uniquely Japanese concept, it was as true for them as it was for him. Even worse, Durling would not believe his sincerity. The well was so poisoned by a generation of previous bad-faith negotiations that there was no reason for the Americans to suppose that things were different now—and, truth be known, he probably could not really deliver in any case. His parliamentary coalition would not survive the concessions he would have to make, because jobs were at stake, and with his national unemployment rate at an all-time high of over 5 percent, he did not have the political strength to risk increasing it further. And so, because he could not survive the political effects of such an offer, something even worse would happen, and he would not survive that either. It was only a question, really, of whether he would destroy his own political career or let someone else do it for him. Which was the greater disgrace? He didn't know.

He did know that he could not bring himself to make the telephone call to his American counterpart. It would have been an exercise in futility, just like his entire career, he now realized. The book was already written. Let someone else provide the final chapter.

11

Sea Change

The Trade Reform Act by now had two hundred bipartisan cosponsors. Committee hearings had been unusually brief, largely because few had the courage to testify against it. Remarkably, a major Washington public-relations firm terminated its contract with a Japanese conglomerate, and since it was a PR firm, put out a press release to that effect announcing the end of a fourteen-year relationship. The combination of the event at Oak Ridge and Al Trent's often-quoted barb at a senior lobbyist had made life most uncomfortable for those in foreign employ who stalked the halls of Congress. Lobbyists didn't impede the bill at all. As a man, they reported back to their employers that the bill simply could not fail passage, that any disabling changes in the bill were quite impossible, and the only possible reaction to it would be to take the long view and ride it out. In time, their friends in Congress would be able to support them again, just not now.

Just not now? The cynical definition of a good politician was the same in Japan as it was in America: a public servant who, once bought, *stayed* bought. The employers thought of all the money contributed to so many campaign funds, the thousand-dollar dinner-plates covered with mediocre food bought by (actually for) American employees of their multinational corporations, the trips to golf courses, the entertainment on fact-finding trips to Japan and elsewhere, the personal contact—and realized that all of it mattered not a bit the one time that it really mattered. America just wasn't like Japan at all. Its legislators didn't feel the obligation to pay back, and the lobbyists, also bought and paid for, told them that it had to be this way. What, then, had they spent all that money *for?*

Take the long view? The long view was all well and good, so long as the immediate prospect was pleasant and uncluttered. Circumstances had permitted Japan the long view for nearly forty years. But today it no longer applied. On Wednesday, the Fourth, the day the Trade Reform Act cleared committee, the Nikkei Dow fell to 12,841 yen, roughly a third of what it had been in recent memory, and the panic in the country was quite real now.

“ ‘Plum blossoms bloom, and pleasure-women buy new scarves in a brothel room.’ ”

The words might have been poetic in Japanese—it was a famous haiku—but it didn’t make a hell of a lot of sense in English, Clark thought. At least not to him, but the effect on the man in front of him was noteworthy. “Oleg Yurievich sends his greetings.”

“It has been a long time,” the man stammered after perhaps five seconds of well-concealed panic.

“Things have been difficult at home,” Clark explained, a slight accent in his voice.

Isamu Kimura was a senior official in the Ministry for International Trade and Industry, MITI, the centerpiece of an enterprise once called “Japan, Inc.” As such he often met with foreigners, especially foreign reporters, and so he had accepted the invitation of Ivan Sergeyevich Klerk, newly arrived in Japan from Moscow, complete with a photographer who was elsewhere shooting pictures.

“It would seem to be a difficult time for your country as well,” Klerk added, wondering what sort of reaction it would get. He had to be a little tough with the guy. It was possible that he’d resist the idea of being reactivated after more than two years of no contacts. If so, KGB policy was to make it clear that once they had their hooks into you, those hooks never went away. It was also CIA policy, of course.

“It’s a nightmare,” Kimura said after a few seconds’ reflection and a deep draft of the sake on the table.

“If you think the Americans are difficult, you should be a Russian. The country in which I grew up, which nurtured and trained me—is no more. Do you realize that I must actually support myself with my Interfax work? I can’t even perform my duties on a full-time basis.” Clark shook his head ruefully and emptied his own cup.

“Your English is excellent.”

The “Russian” nodded politely, taking the remark as surrender on the part of the man across the table. “Thank you. I worked for years in New York, covering the U.N. for *Pravda.* Among other things,” he added.

“Really?” Kimura asked. “What do you know of American business and politics?”

“I specialized in commercial work. The new world’s circumstances allow me to pursue it with even more vigor, and your services are highly valued by my country. We will be able to reward you even more in the future, my friend.”

Kimura shook his head. “I have no time for that now. My office is in a very confused state, for obvious reasons.”

“I understand. This meeting is in the manner of a get-acquainted

session. We have no immediate demands."

"And how is Oleg?" the MITI official asked.

"He has a good life now, a very comfortable position because of the fine work you did for him." Which wasn't a lie at all. Lyalin was alive, and that beat the hell out of a bullet to the head in the basement of KGB Headquarters. This man was the agent who'd given Lyalin the information which had placed them in Mexico. It seemed a shame to Clark that he couldn't thank the man personally for his part in averting a nuclear war. "So tell me, in my reporter identity: how bad is the situation with America? I have a story to file, you see." The answer would surprise him almost as much as the vehemence of its tone.

Isamu Kimura looked down. "It could bring ruin to us."

"Is it really that bad?" "Klerk" asked in surprise, taking out his pad to make notes like a good reporter.

"It will mean a trade war." It was all the man could do to speak that one sentence.

"Well, such a war will do harm to both countries, yes?" Clark had heard that one often enough that he actually believed it.

"We've been saying that for years, but it's a lie. It's really very simple," Kimura went on, assuming that this Russian needed an education in the capitalist facts of life, not knowing that he was an American who did. "We need their market to sell our manufactured goods. Do you know what a trade war means? It means that they stop buying our manufactured goods, and that they keep their money. That money will go into their own industries, which we have trained, after a fashion, to be more efficient. Those industries will grow and prosper by following our example, and in doing so they will regain market share in areas which we have dominated for twenty years. If we lose our market position, we may never get it all back."

"And why is that?" Clark asked, scribbling furiously and finding himself actually quite interested.

"When we entered the American market, the yen had only about a third of the value it has today. That enabled us to be highly competitive in our pricing. Then as we established a place within the American market, achieved brandname recognition, and so forth, we were able to increase our prices while retaining our market share, even expanding it in many areas despite the increasing value of the yen. To accomplish the same thing today would be far more difficult."

Fabulous news, Clark thought behind a studiously passive face. "But will they be able to replace all the things you make for them?"

"Through their own workers? All of them? Probably not, but they don't have to. Last year automobiles and related products accounted for sixty-one percent of our trade with America. The Americans know

how to make cars—what they did not know we have taught them," Kimura said, leaning forward. "In other areas, cameras for example, they are now made elsewhere, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia. The same is true of consumer electronics. Klerk-san, nobody really understands what is happening yet."

"The Americans can really do this much damage to you? Is it possible?" *Damn*, Clark thought, maybe it was.

"It is very possible. My country has not faced such a possibility since 1941." The statement was accidental, but Kimura noted the accuracy of it the instant it escaped his lips.

"I can't put *that* in a news story. It's too alarmist."

Kimura looked up. "That was not meant for a news story. I know your agency has contacts with the Americans. It has to. They are not listening to us now. Perhaps they will listen to you. They push us too far. The zaibatsu are truly desperate. It's happened too fast and gone too far. How would *your* country respond to such an attack on your economy?"

Clark leaned back, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes as a Russian would. The initial contact with Kimura wasn't supposed to have been a substantive intelligence-gathering session, but it had suddenly turned into one. Unprepared for this eventuality, he decided to run with it anyway. The man before him seemed like a prime source, and made more so by his desperation. Moreover, he seemed like a good and dedicated public servant, and if that was somewhat sad, it was also the way the intelligence business worked.

"They did do it to us, in the 1980s. Their arms buildup, their insane plan to put defense systems in space, the reckless brinksmanship game their President Reagan played—did you know that when I was working in New York, I was part of Project RYAN? We thought he planned to strike us. I spent a year looking for such plans." Colonel I. S. Klerk of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service was fully in his cover identity now, speaking as a Russian would, calmly, quietly, almost pedagogically. "But we looked in the wrong place—no, that wasn't it. It was right in front of us all the time and we failed to see it. They forced us to spend more, and they broke our economy in the process. Marshal Ogarkov gave his speech, demanding more of the economy in order to keep up with the Americans, but there was no more to give. To answer your question briefly, Isamu, we had the choice of surrender or war. War was too terrible to contemplate . . . and so, here I am in Japan, representing a new country."

Kimura's next statement was as startling as it was accurate: "But you had less to lose. The Americans don't seem to understand that." He stood, leaving sufficient money on the table to cover the bill. He knew that a Russian could scarcely afford to pay for a meal in Tokyo.

Holy shit, Clark thought, watching the man leave. The meeting had been an open one, and so did not require covert procedures. That meant he could just get up and leave. But he didn't. Isamu Kimura was a very senior gent, the CIA officer told himself, sipping the last of the sake. He had only one layer of career officials over him, and beyond that was a political appointee, who was really a mouthpiece for the career bureaucrats. Like an assistant secretary of state, Kimura had access to everything. He'd proved that once, by helping them in Mexico, where John and Ding had apprehended Ismael Qati and Ibrahim Ghosn. For that reason alone, America owed this man a considerable debt of honor. More to the point, it made him a primo source of high-grade intelligence. CIA could believe almost anything he said. There could have been no planned script for this meeting. His thoughts and fears had to be genuine, and Clark knew at once that they had to get to Langley in a hurry.

It came as no surprise to anyone who really knew him that Goto was a weak man. Though that was a curse of his country's political leadership, it worked now in Yamata's favor.

"I will not become Prime Minister of my country," Hiroshi Goto announced in a manner worthy of a stage actor, "in order to become executor of its economic ruin." His language was that of the Kabuki stage, stylized and poetic. He was a literate man, the industrialist knew. He had long studied history and the arts, and like many politicians he placed a great deal of value in show and rather less in substance. Like many weak men, he made a great ceremony of personal strength and power. That was why he often had this girl Kimberly Norton in the room with him. She was learning, after a fashion, to perform the duties of an important man's mistress. She sat quietly, refilling cups with sake or tea, and waiting patiently for Yamata-san to leave, after which, it was clear, Goto would bed the girl. He doubtless thought this made him more impressive to his guest. He was such a fool, thinking from his testicles rather than his brain. Well, that was all right. Yamata would become his brain.

"That is precisely what we face," Yamata replied bluntly. His eyes traced over the girl, partly in curiosity, partly to let Goto think that he was envious of the man's young mistress. Her eyes showed no comprehension at all. Was she as stupid as he'd been led to believe? She'd certainly been lured over here easily enough. It was a lucrative activity for the Yakuza, and one in which some of his colleagues partook. Setting Goto up with her—indirectly; Yamata didn't view himself as a pimp, and had merely seen to it that the right person had made the right suggestion to this senior political figure—had been a

clever move, though Goto's personal weaknesses had been known to many and easily identified. What was that American euphemism? "Led around by the nose"? It had to mean the same thing that Yamata had done, and a rare case of delicacy of expression for the *gaijin*.

"What can we do about it?" the Leader of the Opposition—for the moment—asked.

"We have two choices." Yamata paused, looking again at the girl, wishing that Goto would dismiss her. This was a highly sensitive matter, after all. Instead, Goto stroked her fair hair, and she smiled. Well, at least Goto hadn't stripped the girl before he'd arrived, Yamata thought, as he had a few weeks ago. Yamata had seen breasts before, even large Caucasian breasts, and it wasn't as though the zaibatsu was in the dark about what Goto did with her.

"She doesn't understand a word," the politician said, laughing.

Kimba-chan smiled, and the expression caught Yamata's eye. There followed a disturbing thought: was she merely reacting politely to her master's laugh or was it something else? How old was this girl? Twenties, probably, but he was not skilled in estimating the age of foreigners. Then he remembered something else: his country occasionally provided female companionship to visiting foreign dignitaries, as Yamata did for businessmen. It was a practice that went far back in history, both to make potential deals more easily struck—a man sated by a skilled courtesan would not often be unpleasant to his companions—and because men frequently loosed their tongues along with their belts. What did Goto talk about with this girl? Whom might she be telling? Suddenly the fact that Yamata had set up the relationship didn't seem so clever at all.

"Please, Hiroshi, indulge me this one time," Yamata said reasonably.

"Oh, very well." He continued in English: "Kimba-chan, my friend and I need to speak in private for a few minutes."

She had the good manners not to object verbally, Yamata saw, but the disappointment in her face was not hidden. Did that mean she was trained not to react, or trained to react as a mindless girl would? And did her dismissal matter? Would Goto relate everything to her? Was he that much under her spell? Yamata didn't know, and not knowing, at this moment, struck him as dangerous.

"I love fucking Americans," Goto said coarsely after the door slid shut behind her. It was strange. For all his cultured language, in this one area he spoke like someone of the streets. It was clearly a great weakness, and for that reason, a worrisome one.

"I am glad to hear that, my friend, for soon you will have the chance to do it some more," Yamata replied, making a few mental notes.

An hour later, Chet Nomuri looked up from his *pachinko* machine to see Yamata emerge. As usual, he had both a driver and another man, this one far more serious-looking, doubtless a bodyguard or security guy of some sort. Nomuri didn't know his name, but the type was pretty obvious. The zaibatsu talked to him, a short remark, and there was no telling what it was. Then all three men got into the car and drove off. Goto emerged ninety minutes later, refreshed as always. At that point Nomuri stopped playing the vertical pinball game and changed location to a place down the block. Thirty minutes more and the Norton girl came out. This time Nomuri was ahead of her, walking, taking the turn, then waiting for her to catch up. *Okay*, he thought five minutes later. He was now certain he knew what building she lived in. She'd purchased something to eat and carried it in. Good.

"Morning, MP." Ryan was just back from his daily briefing to the President. Every morning he sat through thirty or forty minutes of reports from the government's various security agencies, and then presented the data in the Oval Office. This morning he'd told his boss, again, that there was nothing all that troubling on the horizon.

"SANDALWOOD," she said for his opening.

"What about it?" Jack asked, leaning back in his chair.

"I had an idea and ran with it."

"What's that?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"I told Clark and Chavez to reactivate THISTLE, Lyalin's old net in Japan."

Ryan blinked. "You're telling me that nobody ever—"

"He was doing mainly commercial stuff, and we have that Executive Order, remember?"

Jack suppressed a grumble. THISTLE had served America once, and not through commercial espionage. "Okay, so what's happening?"

"This." Mrs. Foley handed over a single printed page, about five hundred single-spaced words once you got past the cover sheet.

Ryan looked up from the first paragraph. " 'Genuine panic in MITI'?"

"That's what the man says. Keep going." Jack picked up a pen, chewing on it.

"Okay, what else?"

"Their government's going to fall, sure as hell. While Clark was talking to this guy, Chavez was talking to another. State ought to pick up on this in another day or so, but it looks like we got it first for a change."

Jack sat forward at that point. It wasn't that much of a surprise. Brett Hanson had warned about this possibility. The State Department was, in fact, the only government agency that was leery of the TRA, though its concerns had stayed within the family, as it were.

"There's more?"

"Well, yeah, there is. We've turned up the missing girl, all right. It appears to be Kimberly Norton, and sure enough, she's the one involved with Goto, and *he's* going to be the next PM," she concluded with a smile.

It wasn't really very funny, of course, though that depended on your perspective, didn't it? America now had something to use on Goto, and Goto looked to be the next Prime Minister. It wasn't an entirely bad thing. . . .

"Keep talking," Ryan ordered.

"We have the choice of offering her a freebie home, or we could—"

"MP, the answer to that is no." Ryan closed his eyes. He'd been thinking about this one. Before, he'd been the one to take the detached view, but he had seen a photograph of the girl, and though he'd tried briefly to retain his detachment, it had lasted only as long as it took to return home and look at his own children. Perhaps it was a weakness, his inability to contemplate the use of people's lives in the furtherance of his country's goals. If so, it was a weakness that his conscience would allow him. Besides: "Does anybody think she can act like a trained spook? Christ's sake, she's a messed-up girl who skipped away from home because she was getting crummy grades at her school."

"Jack, it's my job to float options, remember?" Every government in the world did it, of course, even America, even in these advanced feminist times. They were nice girls, everyone said, usually bright ones, government secretaries, many of them, who were managed through the Secret Service of all places, and made good money serving their government. Ryan had no official knowledge whatever of the operation, and wanted to keep it that way. Had he acquired official knowledge and not spoken out against it, then what sort of man would he be? So many people assumed that high government officials were just moral robots who did the things they had to do for their country without self-doubts, untroubled by conscience. Perhaps it had been true once—possibly it still was for many—but this was a different world, and Jack Ryan was the son of a police officer.

"You're the one who said it first, remember? That girl is an American citizen who probably needs a little help. Let's not turn into something we are not, okay? It's Clark and Chavez on this one?"

"Correct."

"I think we should be careful about it, but to offer the girl a ticket

home. If she says no, then *maybe* we can consider something else, but no screwing around on this one. She gets a fair offer of a ride home."

Ryan looked down at Clark's brief report and read it more carefully. Had it come from someone else, he would not have taken it so seriously, but he knew John Clark, had taken the time to learn everything about him. It would someday make for an enjoyable conversation.

"I'm going to keep this. I think maybe the President needs to read it, too."

"Concur," the DDO replied.

"Anything else like this comes in . . ."

"You'll know," Mary Pat promised.

"Good idea on THISTLE."

"I want Clark to—well, to press maybe a little harder, and see if we develop similar opinions."

"Approved," Ryan said at once. "Push as hard as you want."

Yamata's personal jet was an old Gulfstream G-IV. Though fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks, it could not ordinarily nonstop the 6,740-mile hop from Tokyo to New York. Today was different, his pilot told him. The jet stream over the North Pacific was fully one hundred ninety knots, and they'd have it for several hours. That boosted their ground speed to 782 miles per hour. It would knock two full hours off the normal flight time.

Yamata was glad. The time was important. None of what he had in his mind was written down, so there were no plans to go over. Though weary from long days that had of late stretched into longer weeks, he found that his body was unable to rest. A voracious reader, he could not get interested in any of the material that he kept on his aircraft. He was alone; there was no one with whom to speak. There was nothing at all to do, and it seemed strange to Yamata. His G-IV cruised at forty-one thousand feet, and it was a clear morning below him. He could see the surface of the North Pacific clearly, the endless ranks of waves, some of their crests decorated with white, driven by high surface winds. The immortal sea. For almost all of his life, it had been an American lake, dominated by their navy. Did the sea know that? Did the sea know that it would change?

Change. Yamata grunted to himself. It would start within hours of his arrival in New York.

"This is Bud on final. I have the ball with eight thousand pounds of

fuel," Captain Sanchez announced over his radio circuit. As commander of the air wing for USS *John Stennis* (CVN-74), his F/A-18F would be the first aboard. Strangely, though the most senior aviator aboard, he was new to the Hornet, having spent all of his career in the F-14 Tomcat. Lighter and more agile, and finally with enough fuel capacity to do more than take off, circle the deck once, and return (so it often seemed), he found himself liking the chance to fly alone for a change, after a whole career spent in two-seat aircraft. *Maybe the Air Force pukes had a good idea after all. . . .*

Ahead of him, on the huge flight deck of the new carrier, enlisted men made the proper tension adjustments on the arrestor wires, took the empty weight of his attack fighter, and added the fuel amount he'd called in. It had to be done every time. *Huge flight deck*, he thought, half a mile out. For those standing on the deck it looked huge enough, but for Sanchez it increasingly looked like a matchbook. He cleared his mind of the thought, concentrating on his task. The Hornet buffeted a little coming through the burble of disturbed air caused by the carrier's massive "island" structure, but the pilot's eyes were locked on the "meatball," a red light reflected off a mirror, keeping it nicely centered. Some called Sanchez "Mister Machine," for of his sixteen hundred—odd carrier landings—you logged every one—less than fifty had failed to catch the optimum number-three wire.

Gently, gently, he told himself, easing the stick back with his right hand while the left worked the throttles, watching his sink rate, and . . . yes. He could feel the fighter jerk from catching the wire—number three, he was sure—and slow itself, even though the rush to the edge of the angled deck seemed sure to dump him over the side. The aircraft stopped, seemingly inches from the line where black-topped steel fell off to blue water. Really, it was close to a hundred feet. Sanchez disengaged his tail hook, and allowed the wire to snake back to its proper place. A deck crewman started waving at him, telling him how to get to where he was supposed to go, and the expensive jet aircraft turned into a particularly ungainly land vehicle on the world's most expensive parking lot. Five minutes later, the engines shut down and, tie-down chains in place, Sanchez popped the canopy and climbed down the steel ladder that his brown-jerseyed plane-captain had set in place.

"Welcome aboard, Skipper. Any problems?"

"Nary a one." Sanchez handed over his flight helmet and trotted off to the island. Three minutes after that he was observing the remainder of the landings.

Johnnie Reb was already her semiofficial nickname, since she was named for a long-term U.S. Senator from Mississippi, also a faithful friend of the Navy. The ship even smelled new, Sanchez thought, not

so long out of the yards of Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock. She'd done her trials off the East Coast and sailed around the Horn to Pearl Harbor. Her newest sister, *United States*, would be ready for trials in another year, and yet another was beginning construction. It was good to know that at least one branch of the Navy was still in business—more or less.

The aircraft of his wing came in about ninety seconds apart. Two squadrons, each of twelve F-14 Tomcats, two more with an identical number of F/A-18 Hornets. One medium-attack squadron of ten A-6E Intruders, then the special birds, three E-3C Hawkeye early-warning aircraft, two C-2 CODs, four EA-6B Prowlers . . . and that was all, Sanchez thought, not as pleased as he ought to be.

Johnnie Reb could easily accommodate another twenty aircraft, but a carrier air wing wasn't what it used to be, Sanchez thought, remembering how crowded a carrier had once been. The good news was that it was easier to move aircraft around the deck now. The bad news was that the actual striking power of his wing was barely two-thirds of what it had once been. Worse, naval aviation had fallen on hard times as an institution. The Tomcat design had begun in the 1960s—Sanchez had been contemplating high school then, and wondering when he'd be able to drive a car. The Hornet had first flown as the YF-17 in the early 1970s. The Intruder had started life in the 1950s, about the time Bud had gotten his first two-wheeler. There was not a single new naval aircraft in the pipeline. The Navy had twice flubbed its chance to buy into Stealth technology, first by not buying into the Air Force's F-117 project, then by fielding the A-12 Avenger, which had turned out to be stealthy enough, just unable to fly worth a damn. And so now this fighter pilot, after twenty years of carrier operations, a "comer" being fast-tracked for an early flag—now with the last and best flying command of his career, Sanchez had less power to wield than anyone before him. The same was true of *Enterprise*, fifty miles to the east.

But the carrier was still queen of the sea. Even in her diminished capacity, *Johnnie Reb* had more striking power than both Indian carriers combined, and Sanchez judged that keeping India from getting too aggressive ought not to be overly taxing. A damned good thing that was the only problem on the horizon, too.

"That's it," the Air Boss observed as the last EA-6B caught the number-two wire. "Recovery complete. Your people look pretty good, Bud."

"We have been working at it, Todd." Sanchez rose from his seat and headed below toward his stateroom, where he'd freshen up before meeting first with his squadron commanders, and then with the ops staff to plan the operations for DATELINE PARTNERS. It ought to be a

good workup, Sanchez thought. An Atlantic Fleet sailor for most of his career, it would be his first chance to look at the Japanese Navy, and he wondered what his grandfather would have thought of this. Henry Gabriel "Mike" Sanchez had been the CAG on USS *Wasp* in 1942, taking on the Japanese in the Guadalcanal campaign. He wondered what Big Mike would have thought of the upcoming exercise.

* * *

"Come on, you have to give me something," the lobbyist said. It was a mark of just how grim things were that his employers had told him it was possible they might have to cut back on their expenditures in D.C. That was very unwelcome news. It wasn't just me, the former Congressman from Ohio told himself. He had an office of twenty people to take care of, and they were Americans, too, weren't they? And so he had chosen his target with care. This Senator had problems, a real contender in his primary, and another, equally real opponent in the general election. He needed a larger war chest. That made him amenable to reason, perhaps.

"Roy, I know we've worked together for ten years, but if I vote against TRA, I'm dead, okay? Dead. In the ground, with a wood stake through my heart, back in Chicago teaching bullshit seminars in government operations and selling influence to the highest bidder." *Maybe even ending up like you*, the Senator didn't say. He didn't have to. The message carried quite clearly. It was not a pleasant thought. Almost twelve years on the Hill, and he *liked* it here. He liked the staff, and the life, and the parking privileges, and the free plane rides back to Illinois, and being treated like he was *somebody* everywhere he went. Already he was a member of the "Tuesday-Thursday Club," flying back home every Thursday evening for a very long weekend of speeches to the local Elks and Rotary clubs, to be seen at PTA meetings, cutting ribbons for every new post office building he'd managed to scrounge money for, campaigning already, just as hard as he'd done to get this goddamned job in the first place. It was not pleasant to have to go through *that* again. It would be less pleasant still to do it in the knowledge that it was all a waste of his time. He *had* to vote for TRA. Didn't Roy know that?

"I know that, Ernie. But I need something," the lobbyist persisted. It wasn't like working on the Hill. He had a staff of the same size, but this time it wasn't paid for by taxes. Now he actually had to work for it. "I've always been your friend, right?"

The question wasn't really a question. It was a statement, and it was both an implied threat and a promise. If Senator Greening didn't come

over with *something,* then, maybe, Roy would, quietly at first, have a meeting with one of his opponents. More likely both. Roy, the Senator knew, was quite at ease working both sides of any street. He might well write off Ernest Greening as a lost cause and start currying favor with one or both possible replacements. Seed money, in a manner of speaking, something that would pay off in the long run because the Japs were good at thinking long-term. Everyone knew that. On the other hand, if he coughed up something now . . .

"Look, I can't possibly change my vote," Senator Greening said again.

"What about an amendment? I have an idea that might—"

"No chance, Roy. You've seen how the committees are working on this. Hell, the chairmen are sitting down right now at Bullfeathers, working out the last details. You have to make it clear to your friends that we've been well and truly rolled on this one."

"Anything else?" Roy Newton asked, his personal misery not quite showing. *My God, to have to go back to Cincinnati, practice law again?*

"Well, nothing on point," Greening said, "but there are a few interesting things going on, on the other side."

"What's that?" Newton asked. *Just what I need,* he thought. *Some of the usual damned gossip*. It had been fun while he'd served his six terms, but not—

"Possible impeachment hearings against Ed Kealty."

"You're kidding," the lobbyist breathed, his thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. "Don't tell me, he got caught with his zipper down again?"

"Rape," Greening replied. "No shit, rape. The FBI's been working the case for some time now. You know Dan Murray?"

"Shaw's lapdog?"

The Senator nodded. "That's the one. He briefed House Judiciary, but then this trade flap blew up and the President put it on hold. Kealty himself doesn't know yet, at least not as of last Friday—that's how tight this one is—but my senior legislative aide is engaged to Sam Fellows' chief of staff, and it really is too good to keep quiet, isn't it?"

The old Washington story, Newton thought with a smirk. *If two people know it, it's not a secret.*

"How serious?"

"From what I hear, Ed Kealty's in very deep shit. Murray made his position very clear. He wants to put Eddie-boy behind bars. There's a death involved."

"Lisa Beringer!" If there was anything a politician was good at, it was remembering names.

Greening nodded. "I see your memory hasn't failed you."

Newton almost whistled, but as a former Member, he was supposed

to take such things phlegmatically. “No wonder he wants this one under wraps. The front page isn’t big enough, is it?”

“That is the problem. It wouldn’t affect passage of the bill—well, probably not—but who needs the complications? TRA, the Moscow trip, too. So—smart money, it’s announced when he gets back from Russia.”

“He’s hanging Kealty out.”

“Roger never has liked him. He brought Ed on board for his legislative savvy, remember? The President needed somebody who knew the system. Well, what good will he be now, even if he’s cleared? Also, a major liability for the campaign. It makes good political sense,” Greening pointed out, “to toss him overboard right now, doesn’t it? At least, as soon as the other stuff is taken care of.”

That’s interesting, Newton thought, quiet for a few seconds. *We can’t stop TRA. On the other hand, what if we can curse Durling’s presidency? That could give us a new Administration in one big hurry, and with the right sort of guidance, a new Administration . . .*

“Okay, Ernie, that’s something.”

12

Formalities

There had to be speeches. Worse, there had to be a *lot* of speeches. For something of this magnitude, each of the 435 members from each of the 435 districts had to have his or her time in front of the cameras.

A representative from North Carolina had brought in Will Snyder, his hands still bandaged, and made sure he had a front-row seat in the gallery. That gave her the ability to point to her constituent, praise his courage to the heavens, laud organized labor for the nobility of its unionized members, and introduce a resolution to give Snyder official congressional recognition for his heroic act.

Next, a member from eastern Tennessee rendered a similar panegyric to his state's highway police and the scientific resources of Oak Ridge National Laboratory—there would be many favors handed out as a result of this legislation, and ORNL would get a few more million. The Congressional Budget Office was already estimating the tax revenue to be realized from increased American auto production, and members were salivating over that like Pavlov's dogs for their bell.

A member from Kentucky went to great pains to make it clear that the Cresta was largely an *American*-made automobile, would be even more so with the additional U.S. parts to be included in the design (that had already been settled in a desperate but necessarily unsuccessful accommodation effort by the corporate management), and that he hoped none would blame the workers of his district for the tragedy caused, after all, by non-American parts. The Kentucky Cresta plant, he reminded them, was the most efficient car factory in the world, and a model, he rhapsodized, of the way America and Japan *could* and *should* cooperate! And he would support this bill only because it was a way to make that cooperation more likely. That straddled the fence rather admirably, his fellow members thought.

And so it went. The people who edited *Roll Call*, the local journal that covered the Hill, were wondering if *anyone* would dare to vote against TRA.

“Look,” Roy Newton told his main client. “You’re going to take a beating, okay? Nobody can change that. Call it bad luck if you want, but shit happens.”

It was his tone that surprised the other man. Newton was almost being insolent. He wasn’t apologizing at all for his gross failure to change things, as he was paid to do, as he had promised that he could do when he’d first been hired to lobby for Japan, Inc. It was unseemly for a hireling to speak in this way to his benefactor, but there was no understanding Americans, you gave them money to do a job, and they —

“But there are other things going on, and if you have the patience to take a longer view—” *long view* had already been tried, and Newton was grateful for the fact that his client had good-enough language skills to catch the difference—“there are other options to be considered.”

“And what might those be?” Binichi Murakami asked acidly. He was upset enough to allow his anger to show for once. It was just too much. He’d come to Washington in the hope that he could personally speak out against this disastrous bill, but instead had found himself besieged with reporters whose questions had only made clear the futility of his mission. And for that reason he’d been away from home for weeks, despite all sorts of entreaties to return to Japan for some urgent meetings with his friend Kozo Matsuda.

“Governments change,” Newton replied, explaining on for a minute or so.

“Such a trivial thing as that?”

“You know, someday it’s going to happen in your country. You’re kidding yourself if you think otherwise.” Newton didn’t understand how they could fail to grasp something so obvious. Surely their marketing people told them how many cars were bought in America by women. Not to mention the best lady’s shaver in the world. Hell, one of Murakami’s subsidiaries made it. So much of their marketing effort was aimed at attracting women customers, and yet they pretended that the same factors would never come to be in their own country. It was, Newton thought, a particularly strange blind spot.

“It really could ruin Durling?” The President was clearly getting all sorts of political capital from TRA.

“Sure, if it’s managed properly. He’s holding up a major criminal investigation, isn’t he?”

“No, from what you said, he’s asked to delay it for—”

“For political reasons, Binichi.” Newton did not often first-name his client. The guy didn’t like it. Stuffed shirt. But he paid very well, didn’t he? “Binichi, you don’t want to get caught playing with a

criminal matter, especially for political reasons. *Especially* where the abuse of women is involved. It's an eccentricity of the American political system," he explained patiently.

"We can't meddle with that, can we?" It was an ill-considered question. He'd never quite meddled at this level before, that was all.

"What do you think you pay me for?"

Murakami leaned back and lit up a cigarette. He was the only person allowed to smoke in this office. "How would we go about it?"

"Give me a few days to work on that? For the moment, take the next flight home. You're just hurting yourself by being here, okay?" Newton paused. "You also need to understand, this is the most complicated project I've ever done for you. Dangerous, too," the lobbyist added.

Mercenary! Murakami raged behind eyes that were again impassive and thoughtful. Well, at least he was effective at it.

"One of my colleagues is in New York. I plan to see him and then fly home from New York."

"Fine. Just keep a real low profile, okay?"

Murakami stood and walked to the outer office, where an aide and a bodyguard waited. He was a physically imposing man, tall for a Japanese at five-ten, with jet-black hair and a youthful face that belied his fifty-seven years. He also had a better-than-average track record for doing business in America, which made the current situation all the more offensive to him. He had never purchased less than a hundred million dollars' worth of American products in any year for the past decade, and he had occasionally spoken out, quietly, for allowing America greater access to his country's food market. The son and grandson of farmers, it appalled him that so many of his countrymen would want to do that sort of work. It was so damnably inefficient, after all, and the Americans, for all their laziness, were genuine artists at growing things. What a pity they didn't know how to plant a decent garden, which was Murakami's other passion in life.

The office building was on Sixteenth Street, only a few blocks from the White House, and, stepping out on the sidewalk he could look down and see the imposing building. Not Osaka Castle, but it radiated power.

"You Jap cocksucker!"

Murakami turned to see the face, angry and white, a working-class man by the look of him, and was so startled that he didn't have time to take offense. His bodyguard moved quickly to interpose himself between his boss and the American.

"You're gonna get yours, asshole!" the American said. He started to walk away.

"Wait. What have I done to harm you?" Murakami asked, still too

surprised to be angry.

Had he known America better, the industrialist might have recognized that the man was one of Washington's homeless, and like most of them, a man with a problem. In this case, he was an alcoholic who had lost both his job and his family to drink, and his only contact with reality came from disjointed conversations with people similarly afflicted. Because of that, whatever outrages he held were artificially magnified. His plastic cup was full of an inexpensive beer, and because he remembered once working in the Chrysler assembly plant in Newark, Delaware, he decided that he didn't need the beer as much as he needed to be angry about losing his job, whenever that had been. . . . And so, forgetting that his own difficulties had brought him to this low station in life, he turned and tossed the beer all over the three men in front of him, then moved on without a word, feeling so good about what he'd done that he didn't mind losing his drink.

The bodyguard started to move after him. In Japan he would have been able to hammer the *bakayaro* to the ground. A policeman would be summoned, and this fool would be detained, but the bodyguard knew he was on unfamiliar ground, and held back, then turned to see if perhaps this had been a setup to distract him from a more serious attack. He saw his employer standing erect, his face first frozen in shock, then outrage, as his expensive English-made coat dripped with half a liter of cheap, tasteless American beer. Without a word, Murakami got into the waiting car, which headed off to Washington National Airport. The bodyguard, similarly humiliated, took his seat in the front of the car.

A man who had won everything in his life on merit, who remembered life on a postage-stamp of a vegetable farm, who had studied harder than anyone else to get ahead, to win a place at Tokyo University, who had started at the bottom and worked his way to the top, Murakami had often had his doubts and criticisms of America, but he had deemed himself a fair and rational actor on trade issues. As so often happens in life, however, it was an irrelevancy that would change his mind.

They are barbarians, he told himself, boarding his chartered jet for the flight to New York.

"The Prime Minister is going to fall," Ryan told the President about the same time, a few blocks away.

"How sure are we of that?"

"Sure as we can be," Jack replied, taking his seat. "We have a couple of field officers working on something over there, and that's what they're hearing from people."

"State hasn't said that yet," Durling objected somewhat innocently.

"Mr. President, come on now," Ryan said, holding a folder in his lap. "You know this is going to have some serious ramifications. You know Koga is sitting on a coalition made up of six different factions, and it won't take much to blow that apart on him." *And us*, Jack didn't add.

"Okay. So what?" Durling observed, having had his polling data updated again this very day.

"So the guy most likely to replace him is Hiroshi Goto. He doesn't like us very much. Never has."

"He talks big and tough," the President said, "but the one time I met him he looked like a typical blusterer. Weak, vain, not much substance to him."

"And something else." Ryan filled the President in on one of the spinoffs of Operation SANDALWOOD.

Under other circumstances Roger Durling might have smiled, but he had Ed Kealty sitting less than a hundred feet from him.

"Jack, how hard is it for a guy *not* to fuck around behind his wife's back?"

"Pretty easy in my case," Jack answered. "I'm married to a surgeon, remember?" The President laughed, then turned serious.

"It's something we can use on the son of a bitch, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Ryan didn't have to add, but only with the greatest possible care, that on top of the Oak Ridge incident, it could well ignite a firestorm of public indignation. Niccolò Machiavelli himself had warned against this sort of thing.

"What are we planning to do about this Norton girl?" Durling asked.

"Clark and Chavez—"

"The guys who bagged Corp, right?"

"Yes, sir. They're over there right now. I want them to meet the girl and offer her a free ride home."

"Debrief once she gets back?"

Ryan nodded. "Yes, sir."

Durling smiled. "I like it. Good work."

"Mr. President, we're getting what we want, probably even a little more than what we really wanted," Jack cautioned. "The Chinese general Sun Tzu once wrote that you always leave your enemy a way out—you don't press a beaten enemy too hard."

"In the One-Oh-One, they told us to kill them all and count the bodies." The President grinned. It actually pleased him that Ryan was now secure enough in his position to feel free to offer gratuitous advice. "This is out of your field, Jack. This isn't a national-security matter."

"Yes, sir. I know that. Look, I was in the money business a few

months ago. I do have a little knowledge about international business."

Durling conceded the point with a nod. "Okay, go on. It's not like I've been getting any contrarian advice, and I suppose I ought to hear a little of it."

"We don't want Koga to go down, sir. He's a hell of a lot easier to deal with than Goto will be. Maybe a quiet statement from the Ambassador, something about how TRA gives you authority to act, but—"

The President cut him off. "But I'm not really going to do it?" He shook his head. "You know I can't do that. It would have the effect of cutting Al Trent off at the ankles, and I can't do that. It would look like I was double-dealing the unions, and I can't do *that* either."

"Do you really plan to implement TRA fully?"

"Yes, I do. Only for a few months. I have to shock the bastards, Jack. We *will* have a fair-trade deal, after twenty years of screwing around, but they have to understand that we're serious for once. It's going to be hard on them, but in a few months they're going to be believers, and then they can change their laws a little, and we'll do the same, and things will settle down to a trading system that's completely fair for all parties."

"You really want my opinion?"

Durling nodded again. "That's what I pay you for. You think we're pushing too hard."

"Yes, sir. We don't want Koga to go down, and we have to offer him something juicy if we want to save him. If you want to think long-term on this, you have to consider who you want to do business with."

Durling lifted a memo from his desk. "Brett Hanson told me the same thing, but he's not quite as worried about Koga as you are."

"By this time tomorrow," Ryan promised, "he will be."

"You can't even walk the streets here," Murakami snarled.

Yamata had a whole floor of the Plaza Atheneé reserved for himself and his senior staff. The industrialists were alone in a sitting room, coats and ties off, a bottle of whiskey on the table.

"One never could, Binichi," Yamata replied. "Here we are the *gaijin.* You never seem to remember that."

"Do you know how much business I do here, how much I *buy* here?" the younger man demanded. He could still smell the beer. It had gotten on his shirt, but he was too angry to change clothes. He wanted the reminder of the lesson he'd learned only a few hours earlier.

"And what of myself?" Yamata asked. "Over the last few years I've put six *billion* yen into a trading company here. I finished that only a

short time ago, as you will recall. Now I wonder if I'll ever get it back."

"They wouldn't do *that*."

"Your confidence in these people is touching, and does you credit," his host observed. "When the economy of our country falls into ruin, do you suppose they will let me move here to manage my American interests? In 1941 they froze our assets here."

"This is not 1941."

"No, it is not, Murakami-san. It is far worse today. We had not so far to fall then."

"Please," Chavez said, draining the last of his beer. "In 1941 my grandfather was fighting Fascists outside St. Petersburg—"

"Leningrad, you young pup!" Clark snarled, sitting next to him. "These young ones, they lose all their respect for the past," he explained to their two hosts.

One was a senior public-relations official from Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the other a director of their aircraft division.

"Yes," Seigo Ishii agreed. "You know, members of my family helped design the fighters our Navy used. I once met Saburo Sakai and Minoru Genda."

Ding opened another round of bottles and poured like the good underling he was, dutifully serving his master, Ivan Sergeyevich Klerk. The beer was really pretty good here, especially since their hosts were picking up the tab, Chavez thought, keeping his peace and watching a master at work.

"I know these names," Clark said. "Great warriors, but"—he held up a finger—"they fought against my countrymen. I remember that, too."

"Fifty years," the PR man pointed out. "And your country was also different then."

"That is true, my friends, that is true," Clark admitted, his head lolling to one side. Chavez thought he was overdoing the alcohol stuff.

"Your first time here, yes?"

"Correct."

"Your impressions?" Ishii asked.

"I love your poetry. It is very different from ours. I could write a book on Pushkin, you know. Perhaps someday I will, but a few years ago I started learning about yours. You see, our poetry is intended to convey a whole series of thoughts—often tell a complex story—but yours is far more subtle and delicate, like—how do I say this? Like a flash picture, yes? Perhaps there is one you could explain to me. I can see the picture, but not understand the significance. How does it go?" Clark asked himself drunkenly. "Ah, yes: 'Plum blossoms bloom, and

pleasure-women buy new scarves in a brothel room.' Now," he asked the PR guy, "what is the meaning of that?"

Ding handled the eye contact with Ishii. It was amusing in a way. Confusion at first, then you could just about hear the eyeballs click when the code phrase sliced through his mind like the killing stroke of a rapier. Sasaki's eyes zeroed in on Clark, then noticed that it was Ding who was maintaining eye contact.

That's right. You're back on the payroll, buddy.

"Well, you see, it's the contrast," the PR official explained. "You have the pleasant image of attractive women doing something—oh, feminine, is that the word? Then the end, you see that they are prostitutes, trapped in a—"

"Prison," Ishii said, suddenly sober. "They are trapped into doing something. And suddenly the setting and the picture are not as pleasant as they seem at all."

"Ah, yes," Clark said with a smile. "That is entirely sensible. Thank you." A friendly nod to acknowledge the important lesson.

Goddamn, but Mr. C was smooth, Chavez thought. This spy stuff had its moments. Ding almost felt sorry for Ishii, but if the dumb son of a bitch had betrayed his country before, well, no sense in shedding any tears for him now. The axiom in CIA was simple, if somewhat cruel: once a traitor, always a traitor. The corresponding aphorism in the FBI was even crueler, which was odd. The FBI boys were usually so upright and clean-cut. *Once a cocksucker, always a cocksucker*.

"Is it possible?" Murakami asked.

"Possible? It's child's play."

"But the effects . . . " Yamata's idea had obvious panache, but . . .

"The effects are simple. The damage to their economy will prevent them from building up the industries they need to replace our products. Their consumers will recover from the initial shock and, needing products which their own corporations cannot manufacture, they will again buy them from us." If Binichi thought he was going to get the whole story, that was his problem.

"I think not. You underestimate the Americans' anger at this unfortunate incident. You must also factor in the political dimension —"

"Koga is finished. That is decided," Yamata interrupted coldly.

"Goto?" Murakami asked. It wasn't much of a question. He followed his country's political scene as much as any man.

"Of course."

An angry gesture. "Goto is a fool. Everywhere he walks he's following his penis. I wouldn't trust him to run my father's farm."

"You could say that of any of them. Who really manages our country's affairs? What more could we want in a prime minister, Binichi?" Raizo asked with a jolly laugh.

"They have one like that in their government, too," Murakami noted darkly, pouring himself another generous jolt of Chivas and wondering what Yamata was really talking about. "I've never met the man, but he sounds like a swine."

"Who is that?"

"Kealty, their Vice President. You know, this upstanding President of theirs is covering it up, too."

Yamata leaned back in his chair. "I don't understand."

Murakami filled him in. The whiskey didn't impede his memory a jot, his host noted. Well, though a cautious man, and often an overly generous one in his dealings with foreigners, he was one of Yamata's true peers, and though they often disagreed on things, there was genuine respect between them.

"That is interesting. What will your people do about it?"

"They are *thinking* about it," Binichi replied with an eloquent arch of the eyebrows.

"You trust Americans on something like this? The best of them are *ronin,* and you know what the worst are . . ." Then Yamata-san paused and took a few seconds to consider this information more fully. "My friend, if the Americans can take down Koga . . ."

Murakami lowered his head for a moment. The smell of the thrown beer was stronger than ever. The insolence of that street creature! For that matter, what of the insolence of the President? He could cripple an entire country with his vanity and his clearly feigned anger. Over what? An accident, that was all. Had the company not honorably assumed responsibility? Had it not promised to look after the survivors?

"It is a large and dangerous thing you propose, my friend."

"It is an even more dangerous thing not to do anything."

Murakami thought about it for a moment.

"What would you have me do?"

"The specifics about Kealty and Durling would be welcome."

That required only a few minutes. Murakami made a call, and the information was sent to the secure fax machine in Yamata's suite. Perhaps Raizo would be able to put it to good use, he thought. An hour later his car took him to Kennedy International, where he boarded a JAL flight to Tokyo.

Yamata's other corporate jet was another G-IV. It would be busy. The first flight was to New Delhi. It was only on the ground for two hours

before taking off on an easterly heading.

"Looks like a course change," Fleet-Ops said. "At first we thought they were just doing some extended flight operations, but they've got all their birds up already and—"

Admiral Dubro nodded agreement as he looked down at the Link-11 display in the carrier's Combat Information Center. It was relayed in from an E-2C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft. The circular formation was heading due south at a speed of eighteen knots. The carriers were surrounded by their goalkeeper force of missile-armed destroyers and cruisers, and there was also a screen of picket destroyers well in advance. All their radars were on, which was something new. The Indian ships were both advertising their presence and creating a "bubble" through which no one could pass without their knowledge.

"Looking for us, you suppose?" the Admiral asked.

"If nothing else, they can make us commit to one ops-area or another. We can be southwest of them or southeast, but if they keep coming this way, they split the difference pretty clean, sir."

Maybe they were just tired of being shadowed, Dubro thought. Understandable. They had a respectable fleet, manned with people who had to be well drilled in their duties after the last few months. They'd just topped off their bunkers again, and would have all the fuel they needed to do . . . what?

"Intel?"

"Nothing on their intentions," Commander Harrison replied. "Their amphibs are still tied up. We don't have anything on that brigade J-2 was worried about. Bad weather for overheads the last few days."

"Damn those intel pukes," Dubro growled. CIA depended so much on satellite coverage that everyone pretended the cameras could see through clouds. All they had to do was put a few assets on the ground . . . was he the only one who realized that?

The computer-generated display was on a flat glass plate, a new model just installed on the ship the previous year. Far more detailed than the earlier systems, it gave superb map and chart data on which ship and aircraft locations were electronically overlaid. The beauty of the system was that it showed what you knew in exquisite detail. The problem was that it didn't show anything else, and Dubro needed better data to make his decision.

"They've had a minimum of four aircraft up for the past eight hours, sweeping south. By their operating radius I would estimate that they're carrying air-to-air missiles and aux fuel tanks for max endurance. So call it a strong effort at forward reconnaissance. Their Harriers have that new Black Fox look-down radar, and the Hummers

caught some sniffs of it. They're looking as far as they can, sir. I want permission to pull the Hummer south another hundred miles or so right now, and to have them go a little covert." By which he meant the surveillance aircraft would keep its radar on only some of the time, and would instead track the progress of the Indian fleet passively, from the Indians' own radar emissions.

"No." Admiral Dubro shook his head. "Let's play dumb and complacent for a while." He turned to check the status of his aircraft. He had ample combat power to deal with the threat, but that wasn't the issue. His mission was not to defeat the Indian Navy in battle. It was to intimidate them from doing something which America found displeasing. For that matter, his adversary's mission could not have been to fight the United States Navy—could it? No, that was too crazy. It was barely within the realm of possibility that a very good and very lucky Indian fleet commander could best a very unlucky and very dumb American counterpart, but Dubro had no intention of letting that happen. More likely, just as his mission was mainly bluff, so was theirs. If they could force the American fleet south, then . . . they weren't so dumb after all, were they? The question was how to play the cards he had.

"They're forcing us to commit, Ed. Trying to, anyway." Dubro leaned forward, resting one hand on the map display and tracing around with the other. "They probably think we're southeast. If so, by moving south they can block us better, and they know we'll probably maintain our distance just to keep out of their strike range. On the other hand, if they suspect we are where we really are right now, they can accomplish the same thing, or face us with the option of looping around to the northwest to cover the Gulf of Mannar. But that means coming within range of their land-based air, with their fleet to our south, and our only exit due west. Not bad for an operational concept," the battle-group commander acknowledged. "The group commander still Chandraskatta?"

Fleet-Ops nodded. "That's right, sir. He's back after a little time on the beach. The Brits have the book on the guy. They say he's no dummy."

"I think I'd go along with that for the moment. What sort of intel you suppose they have on us?"

Harrison shrugged. "They know how long we've been here. They have to know how tired we are." Fleet-Ops meant the ships as much as the men. Every ship in the Task Force had matériel problems now. They all carried spare parts, but ships could remain at sea only so long before refit was needed. Corrosion from salt air, the constant movement and pounding of wind and wave, and heavy equipment use meant that ships' systems couldn't last forever. Then there were the

human factors. His men and women were tired now, too long at sea. Increased maintenance duties made them tireder still. The current catchphrase in the military for these combined problems was "leadership challenge," a polite expression meaning that the officers commanding both the ships and the men sometimes didn't know what the hell they were supposed to do.

"You know, Ed, at least the Russians were predictable." Dubro stood erect, looking down and wishing he still smoked his pipe. "Okay, let's call this one in. Tell Washington it looks like they might just be making a move."

"So we meet for the first time."

"It's my pleasure, sir." Chuck Searls, the computer engineer, knew that his three-piece suit and neat haircut had surprised the man. He held out his hand and bobbed his head in what he supposed was a proper greeting for his benefactor.

"My people tell me that you are very skilled."

"You're very kind. I've worked at it for some years, and I suppose I have a few small talents." Searls had read up on Japan.

And very greedy, Yamata thought, *but well-mannered.* He would settle for that. It was, all in all, a fortunate accident. He'd purchased the man's business four years earlier, left current management in place, as was his custom, then discovered that the real brains of the outfit were in this man. Searls was the nearest thing to a wizard that his executive had ever seen, the man had reported to Yamata-san, and though the American's title hadn't changed, his salary had. And then, a few years ago, Searls had remarked that he was tiring of his job . . .

"Everything is prepared?"

"Yes, sir. The initial software upgrade went in months ago. They love it."

"And the—"

"Easter egg, Mr. Yamata. That's what we call it."

Raizo had never encountered the expression. He asked for an explanation and got it—but it meant nothing to him.

"How difficult to implement it?"

"That's the clever part," Searls said. "It keys on two stocks. If General Motors and Merck go through the system at values which I built in, twice and in the same minute, the egg hatches, but only on a Friday, like you said, and only if the five-minute period falls in the proper time-range."

"You mean this thing could happen by accident?" Yamata asked in some surprise.

"Theoretically, yes, but the trigger values for the stocks are well

outside the current trading range, and the odds of having that happen all together by accident are about thirty million to one. That's why I picked this method for hatching the egg. I ran a computer-search of trading patterns and . . ."

Another problem with mercenaries was that they could never stop themselves from telling you how brilliant they were. Even though it was probably true in this case, Yamata found it difficult to sit through the dissertation. He did it anyway. Good manners required it.

"And your personal arrangements?"

Searls merely nodded. The flight to Miami. The connecting flights to Antigua, via Dominica and Grenada, all with different names on the tickets, paid for by different credit cards. He had his new passport, his new identity. On the Caribbean island, there was a certain piece of property. It would take an entire day, but then he'd be there, and he had no plans to leave it, ever.

For his part, Yamata neither knew nor wanted to know what Searls would do. Had this been a screen drama, he would have arranged for the man's life to end, but it would have been dangerous. There was always the chance that there might be more than one egg in the nest, wasn't there? Yes, there had to be. Besides, there was honor to be considered. This entire venture was about honor.

"The second third of the funds will be transferred in the morning. When that happens, I would suggest that you execute your plans." *Ronin,* Yamata thought, but even some of them were faithful after a fashion.

"Members," the Speaker of the House said after Al Trent had concluded his final wrap-up speech, "will cast their votes by electronic device."

On C-SPAN the drone of repeated words was replaced by classical music, Bach's Italian Concerto in this case. Each member had a plastic card—it was like an automatic teller machine, really. The votes were tallied by a simple computer displayed on TV screens all over the world. Two hundred eighteen votes were needed for passage. That number was reached in just under ten minutes. Then came the final rush of additional "aye" votes as members rushed from committee hearings and constituent meetings to enter the chamber, record their votes, and return to whatever they'd been doing.

Through it all, Al Trent stayed on the floor, mainly chatting amiably with a member of the minority leadership, his friend Sam Fellows. It was remarkable how much they agreed on, both thought. They could scarcely have been more different, a gay New England liberal and a Mormon Arizonan conservative.

"This'll teach the little bastards a lesson," Al observed.

"You sure ramrodded the bill through," Sam agreed. Both men wondered what the long-term effects on employment would be in their districts.

Less pleased were the officials of the Japanese Embassy, who called the results in to their Foreign Ministry the moment the music stopped and the Speaker announced, "HR-12313, the Trade Reform Act, is approved."

The bill would go to the Senate next, which, they reported, was a formality. The only people likely to vote against it were those furthest away from reelection. The Foreign Minister got the news from his staff at about nine local time in Tokyo and informed Prime Minister Koga. The latter had already drafted his letter of resignation for the Emperor. Another man might have wept at the destruction of his dreams. The Prime Minister did not. In retrospect, he'd had more real influence as a member of the opposition than in this office. Looking at the morning sun on the well-kept grounds outside his window, he realized that it would be a more pleasant life, after all.

Let Goto deal with this.

"You know, the Japanese make some awfully good stuff that we use at Wilmer," Cathy Ryan observed over dinner. It was time for her to comment on the law, now that it was halfway passed.

"Oh?"

"The diode laser system we use on cataracts, for one. They bought the American company that invented it. Their engineers really know how to support their stuff, too. They're in practically every month with a software upgrade."

"Where's the company located?" Jack asked.

"Someplace in California."

"Then it's an American product, Cathy."

"But not all the parts are," his wife pointed out.

"Look, the law allows for special exceptions to be made for uniquely valuable things that—"

"The government's going to make the rules, right?"

"True," Jack conceded. "Wait a minute. You told me their docs—"

"I never said they were dumb, just that they need to think more creatively. You know," she added, "just like the government does."

"I *told* the President this wasn't all that great an idea. He says the law will be in full force just a few months."

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

13

Winds and Tides

"I've never seen anything like this."

"But your country made thousands of them," the PR director objected.

"That is true," Klerk agreed, "but the factories were not open to the public, and not even to Soviet journalists."

Chavez was doing the photography work, and was putting on quite a show, John Clark noted without a smile, dancing around the workers in their white coveralls and hard hats, turning, twisting, squatting, his Nikon pressed against his face, changing rolls every few minutes, and along the way getting a few hundred frames of the missile production line. They were SS-19 missile bodies, sure as hell. Clark knew the specifications, and had seen enough photos at Langley to know what they looked like—and enough to spot some local modifications. On the Russian models the exterior was usually green. Everything the Soviet Union had built for military use had to be camouflaged, even missiles inside of transport containers sitting in the bottom of concrete silos were the same pea-soup green that they liked to paint on tanks. But not these. The paint had weight, and there was no point in expending fuel to drive the few kilograms of paint to suborbital speed, and so these missile bodies were bright, shiny steel. The fittings and joints looked far more refined than he would have expected on a Russian production line.

"You've modified our original design, haven't you?"

"Correct." The PR guy smiled. "The basic design was excellent. Our engineers were very impressed, but we have different standards, and better materials. You have a good eye, Mr. Klerk. Not too long ago an American NASA engineer made the same observation." The man paused. "What sort of Russian name is Klerk?"

"It's not Russian," Clark said, continuing to scribble his notes. "My grandfather was English, a Communist. His name was Clark. In the 1920s he came to Russia to be part of the new experiment." An embarrassed grin. "I suppose he's disappointed, wherever he is."

"And your colleague?"

"Chekov? He's from the Crimea. The Tartar blood really shows,

doesn't it? So how many of these will you build?"

Chavez was at the top end of the missile body at the end of the line. A few of the assembly workers were casting annoyed glances his way, and he took that to mean that he was doing his job of imitating an intrusive, pain-in-the-ass journalist right. Aside from that the job was pretty easy. The assembly bay of the factory was brightly lit to assist the workers in their tasks, and though he'd used his light meter for show, the camera's own monitoring chip told him that he had all the illumination he needed. This Nikon F-20 was one badass camera. Ding switched rolls. He was using ASA-64 color slide film—Fuji film, of course—because it had better color saturation, whatever that meant.

In due course, Mr. C shook hands with the factory representative and they all headed toward the door. Chavez—Chekov—twisted the lens off the camera body and stowed everything away in his bag. Friendly smiles and bows sent them on their way. Ding slid a CD into the player and turned the sound way up. It made conversation difficult, but John was always a stickler for the rules. And he was right. There was no knowing if someone might have bugged their rental car. Chavez leaned his head over to the right so that he wouldn't have to scream his question.

"John, is it always this easy?"

Clark wanted to smile, but didn't. He'd reactivated yet another member of THISTLE a few hours earlier, who had insisted that he and Ding look at the assembly floor.

"You know, I used to go into Russia, back when you needed more than a passport and American Express."

"Doing what?"

"Mainly getting people out. Sometimes recovering data packs. Couple of times I emplaced cute little gadgets. Talk about lonely, talk about scary." Clark shook his head. Only his wife knew that he colored his hair, just a little, because he didn't like gray there. "You have any idea what we would have paid to get into . . . Plesetsk, I think, is where they made those things, the Chelomei Design Bureau."

"They really wanted us to see that stuff."

"Sure as hell," Clark agreed.

"What do I do with the photos?"

John almost said to toss them, but it *was* data, and they were working on company time. He had to draft and send a story to Interfax to maintain his cover—he wondered if anyone would print it. *Wouldn't that be a gas,* he thought with a shake of the head. All they were doing, really, was circling in a holding pattern, waiting for the word and the opportunity to meet Kimberly Norton. The film and a copy of his story, he decided, would find their way into the diplomatic bag. If nothing else, it was good practice for Ding—and for himself,

Clark admitted.

"Turn that damned noise down," he said, and they switched to Russian. Good language practice.

"I miss the winters at home," Chekov observed.

"I don't," Klerk answered. "Where did you ever acquire the taste for that awful American music?" he asked with a growl.

"Voice of America," came the reply. Then the voice laughed.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich, you have no respect. My ears can't tolerate that damned noise. Don't you have something else to play?"

"Anything would be an improvement," the technician observed to himself, as he adjusted his headphones and shook his head to clear them of the damned *gaijin* noise. Worse still, his own son listened to the same trash.

Despite all the denials that had gone back and forth over the past few weeks, the reality of it was finally plain for all to see. The huge, ugly car-carriers swinging at anchor in several different harbors were silent witnesses on every TV news broadcast on NHK. The Japanese car companies owned a total of a hundred nineteen of them, not counting foreign-flag ships operating under charter that were now heading back to their own home ports. Ships that never stayed still any longer than it took to load another cargo of autos now sat like icebergs, clogging anchorages. There was no sense in loading and dispatching them. Those awaiting pier space in American ports would take weeks to unload. The crews took the opportunity to do programmed maintenance, but they knew that when those make-work tasks were done, they would truly be out of business.

The effect snowballed rapidly. There was little point in manufacturing automobiles that could not be shipped. There was literally no place to keep them. As soon as the huge holding lots at the ports were filled, and the train-cars on their sidetracks, and the lots at the assembly plants, there was simply no choice. Fully a half-dozen TV crews were on hand when the line supervisor at the Nissan plant reached up and pressed a button. That button rang bells all up and down the line. Ordinarily used because of a problem in the assembly process, this time it meant that the line was *stopped*. From the beginning, where the frames were placed on the moving chain-belt, to the end, where a navy-blue car sat with its door open, awaiting a driver to take it out of the building, workers stood still, looking at one another. They'd told themselves that this could never happen. Reality

to them was showing up for work, performing their functions, attaching parts, testing, checking off—very rarely finding a problem—and repeating the processes for endless numbing but well-compensated hours, and at this moment it was as if the world had ceased to rotate. They'd known, after a fashion. The newspapers and TV broadcasts, the rumors that had raced up and down the line far more quickly than the cars ever had, the bulletins from management. Despite all that, they now stood around as if stunned by a hard blow to the face.

On the floor of their national stock exchange, the traders were holding small portable televisions, a new kind from Sony that folded up and fit in the hip pocket. They saw the man ring the bell, saw the workers stop their activities. Worst of all, they saw the looks on their faces. And this was just the beginning, the traders knew. Parts suppliers would stop because the assemblers would cease buying their products. Primary-metals industries would slow down drastically because their main customers were shut down. Electronics companies would slow, with the loss of both domestic and foreign markets. Their country depended absolutely on foreign trade, and America was their primary trading partner, one hundred seventy *billion* dollars of exports to a single country, more than they sold to all of Asia, more than they sold to all of Europe. They imported ninety billion or so from America, but the surplus, the profit side of the ledger, was just over seventy billion American dollars, and that was money their economy needed to function; money that their national economy was designed to use; production capacity that it was designed to meet.

For the blue-collar workers on the television, the world had merely stopped. For the traders, the world had, perhaps, ended, and the look on their faces was not shock but black despair. The period of silence lasted no more than thirty seconds. The whole country had watched the same scene on TV with the same morbid fascination tempered by obstinate disbelief. Then the phone began ringing again. Some of the hands that reached for them shook. The Nikkei Dow would fall again that day, down to a closing value of 6,540 yen, about a fifth of what it had been only a few years before.

The same tape was played as the lead segment on every network news broadcast in the U.S., and in Detroit, even UAW workers who had themselves seen plants close down saw the looks, heard the noise, and remembered their own feelings. Though their sympathy was tempered with the promise of their own renewed employment, it wasn't all that hard to know what their Japanese counterparts felt right now. It was far easier to dislike them when they were working and taking

American jobs. Now they too were victims of forces that few of them really understood.

The reaction on Wall Street was surprising to the unsophisticated. For all its theoretical benefits to the American economy, the Trade Reform Act was now a short-term problem. American corporations too numerous to list depended on Japanese products to some greater or lesser degree, and while American workers and companies could theoretically step in to take up the slack, everyone wondered how serious the TRA provisions were. If they were permanent, that was one thing, and it would make very good sense for investors to put their money in those firms that were well placed to make up the shortfall of needed products. But what if the government was merely using it as a tool to open Japanese markets and the Japanese acted quickly to concede a few points to mitigate the overall damage? In that case, different companies, poised to place their products on Japanese shelves, were a better investment opportunity. The trick was to identify which corporations were in a position to do both, because one or the other could be a big loser, especially with the initial jump the stock market had taken. Certainly, the dollar would appreciate with respect to the yen, but the technicians on the bond market noted that overseas banks had jumped very fast indeed, buying up U.S. Government securities, paying for them with their yen accounts, and clearly betting on a major shift in values from which a short-term profit was certain to take place.

American stock values actually fell on the uncertainty, which surprised many of those who had their money on “the Street.” Those holdings were mainly in mutual-funds accounts, because it was difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of things if you were a small-time holder. It was far safer to let “professionals” manage your money. The result was that there were now more mutual-funds companies than stock issues traded on the New York Stock Exchange, and they were all managed by technicians whose job it was to understand what went on in the most boisterous and least predictable economic marketplace in the world.

The initial slide was just under fifty points before stabilizing, stopped there by public statements from the Big Three auto companies that they were self-sufficient enough, thank you, in most categories of parts to maintain, and even boost, domestic auto production. Despite that, the technicians at the big trading houses scratched their heads and talked things over in their coffee rooms. *Do you have any idea how to deal with this*? The only reason only half the people asked the question was that it was the job of the other half to listen, shake its collective head, and reply, *Hell, no*.

At the Washington headquarters of the Fed, there were other questions, but just as few hard answers. The troublesome specter of inflation was not yet gone, and the current situation was unlikely to banish it further. The most immediate and obvious problem was that there would be—hell, one of the board noted, *already was!*—more purchasing power than there were products to buy. That meant yet another inflationary surge, and though the dollar would undoubtedly climb against the yen, what that really meant was that the yen would free-fall for a while and the dollar would actually fall as well with respect to other world currencies. And they couldn't have that. Another quarter point in the discount rate, they decided, effective immediately on the close of the Exchange. It would confuse the trading markets somewhat, but that was okay because the Fed knew what it was doing.

About the only good news on that score was the sudden surge in the purchase of Treasury notes. Probably Japanese banks, they knew without asking, hedging like hell to protect themselves. A smart move, they all noted. Their respect for their Japanese colleagues was genuine and not affected by the current irregularities which, they all hoped, would soon pass.

"Are we agreed?" Yamata asked.

"We can't stop now," a banker said. He could have gone on to say that they and their entire country were poised on the edge of an abyss so deep that the bottom could not be seen. He didn't have to. They all stood on the same edge, and looking down, they saw not the lacquered table around which they sat, but only an infinity with economic death at the bottom of it.

Heads nodded around the table. There was a long moment of silence, and then Matsuda spoke.

"How did this ever come to pass?"

"It has always been inevitable, my friends," Yamata-san said, a fine edge of sadness in his voice. "Our country is like . . . like a city with no surrounding countryside, like a strong arm without a heart to send it blood. We've told ourselves for years that this is a normal state of affairs—but it is not, and we must remedy the situation or perish."

"It is a great gamble we undertake."

"*Hai.*" It was hard for him not to smile.

It was not yet dawn, and they would sail on the tide. The proceedings went on without much fanfare. A few families came down to the

docks, mainly to drop the crewmen off at their ships from a last night spent ashore.

The names were traditional, as they were with most navies of the world—at least those who'd been around long enough to have tradition. The new Aegis destroyers, *Kongo* and her sisters, bore traditional battleship names, mainly ancient appellations for regions of the nation that built them. That was a recent departure. It would have struck Westerners as an odd nomenclature for ships-of-war, but in keeping with their country's poetic traditions, most names for the combat ships had lyrical meanings, and were largely grouped by class. Destroyers traditionally had names ending in *-kaze,* denoting a kind of wind; *Hatukaze*, for example, meant "Morning Breeze." Submarine names were somewhat more logical. All of those ended in *-ushio,* meaning "tide."

They were in the main handsome ships, spotlessly clean so as not to detract from their workmanlike profiles. One by one they lit off their jet-turbine engines and eased their way off the quays and into the channels. The captains and navigators looked at the shipping that was piling up in Tokyo Bay, but whatever they were thinking, for the moment the merchantmen were merely a hazard to navigation, swinging at their anchors as they were. Below, those sailors not on sea-and-anchor detail mainly stowed gear and saw to their duty stations. Radars were lit up to assist in the departure—hardly necessary since visibility conditions this morning were excellent, but good practice for the crewmen in the various Combat Information Centers. At the direction of combat-systems officers, data links were tested to swap tactical information between ships. In engine-control rooms the "snipes"—an ancient term of disparagement for the traditionally filthy enginemen—sat in comfortable swivel chairs and monitored computer readouts while sipping tea.

The flagship was the new destroyer *Mutsu.* The fishing port of Tateyame was in sight, the last town they would pass before turning sharply to port and heading east.

The submarines were already out there, Rear Admiral Yusuo Sato knew, but the commanders had been briefed in. His was a family with a long tradition of service—better still, a tradition of the sea. His father had commanded a destroyer under Raizo Tanaka, one of the greatest destroyermen who'd ever lived, and his uncle had been one of Yamamoto's "wild eagles," a carrier pilot killed at the Battle of Santa Cruz. The succeeding generation had continued in those footsteps. Yusuo's brother, Torajiro Sato, had flown F-86 fighters for the Air Self-Defense Force, then quit in disgust at the demeaning status of the air arm, and now flew as a senior captain for Japan Air Lines. The man's son, Shiro, had followed in his father's footsteps and was now a very

proud young major, flying fighters on a more permanent basis. Not too bad, Admiral Sato thought, for a family that had no samurai roots. Yusuo's other brother was a banker. Sato was fully briefed on what was to come.

The Admiral stood, opened the watertight door on *Mutsu's* bridge and passed out to the starboard wing. The sailors at work there took a second to acknowledge his presence with dutiful nods, then went back to taking shoresights to update the ship's position. Sato looked aft and noted that the sixteen ships in the column were in a nearly perfect line, separated by a uniform five hundred meters, just becoming visible to the unaided eye in the pink-orange glow of the rising sun toward which they sailed. Surely that was a good omen, the Admiral thought. At the truck of every ship flew the same flag under which his father had served; it had been denied his country's warships for so many years but was restored now, the proud red-on-white sunburst.

"Secure the sea-and-anchor detail," the Captain's voice announced on the speaker system. Already their home port was under the visible horizon, and soon the same would be true of the headlands now on the port quarter.

Sixteen ships, Sato thought. The largest force his country had put to sea as a coherent unit in—fifty years? He had to think about it. Certainly the most powerful, not one vessel more than ten years old, proud, expensive ships with proud, established names. But the one name he'd wanted with him this morning, *Kurushio,* "Black Tide," that of his father's destroyer, which had sunk an American cruiser at the Battle of Tassafaronga, unfortunately belonged to a new submarine, already at sea. The Admiral lowered his binoculars and grunted in mild displeasure. Black Tide. It was a poetically perfect name for a warship, too. A pity it had been wasted on a submarine.

Kurushio and her sisters had left thirty-six hours earlier. The lead ship of a new class, she was running at fifteen knots for her high-speed transit to the exercise area, powered by her large, efficient diesels which now drew air through the snorkel mast. Her crew of ten officers and sixty enlisted men was on a routine watch cycle. An officer of the deck and his junior kept the watch in the sub's control room. An engineering officer was at his post, along with twenty-four ratings. The entire torpedo department was at work in their midships station, doing electronic tests on the fourteen Type 89-Mod C torpedoes and six Harpoon missiles. Otherwise the watch bill was normal, and no one remarked on the single change. The captain, Commander Tamaki Ugaki, was known as a stickler for readiness, and though he drilled his men hard, his was a happy ship because she was always a smart ship.

He was locked in his cabin, and the crew hardly knew he was aboard, the only signs of his presence the thin crack of light under the door and the cigarette smoke that came out the exhaust vent. An intense man, their skipper, the crewmen thought, doubtless working up plans and drills for the upcoming exercise against the American submarines. They'd done well the last time, scoring three first-kills in ten practice encounters. That was as good as anyone might expect. Except for Ugaki, the men joked at their lunch tables. He thought like a true samurai, and didn't want to know about being second best.

Ryan had established a routine in his first month back of spending one day per week at the Pentagon. He'd explained to journalists that his office wasn't supposed to be a cell, after all, and it was just a more efficient use of everyone's time. It hadn't even resulted in a story, as it might have done a few years earlier. The very title of National Security Advisor, everyone knew, was a thing of the past. Though the reporters deemed Ryan a worthy successor to the corner office in the White House, he was such a colorless guy. He was known to avoid the Washington "scene" as though he feared catching leprosy, he showed up for work every day at the same time, did his job in as few hours as circumstances allowed—to his good fortune, it was rarely more than a ten-hour day—and returned to his family as though he were a normal person or something. His background at CIA was still very sketchy, and though his public acts as a private citizen and a government functionary were well known, that was old news. As a result Ryan was able to drive around in the back of his official car and few took great note of it. Everything with the man was just so routine, and Jack worked hard to keep it that way. Reporters rarely took note of a dog that didn't bark. Perhaps they just didn't read enough to know better.

"They're up to something," Robby said as soon as Ryan took his seat in the flag briefing room in the National Military Command Center. The map display made that clear.

"Coming south?"

"Two hundred miles' worth. The fleet commander is V. K. Chandraskatta, graduated Dartmouth Royal Naval College, third in his class, worked his way up. Took the senior course at Newport a few years ago. He was number one in that class," Admiral Jackson went on. "Very nice political connections. He's spent a surprising amount of time away from his fleet lately, commuting back and forth—"

"Where to?" Ryan asked.

"We assume back and forth to New Delhi, but the truth of the matter is that we don't really know. It's the old story, Jack."

Ryan managed not to groan. It was partly an old story, and partly a

very new one. No military officer ever thought himself possessed of enough intelligence information, and never fully trusted the quality of what he did have. In this case, the complaint was true enough: CIA still didn't have any assets on the ground in India. Ryan made a mental note to speak to Brett Hanson about the Ambassador. Again. Psychiatrists called his form of action "passive-aggressive," meaning that he didn't resist but didn't cooperate either. It was a source of constant surprise to Ryan that important grown-ups so often acted like five-year-olds.

"Correlation between his trips ashore and his movements?"

"Nothing obvious," Robby answered with a shake of the head.

"Sigint, comint?" Jack asked, wondering if the National Security Agency, yet another shadow of its former self, had attempted to listen in on the Indian fleet's radio traffic.

"We're getting some stuff via Alice Springs and Diego Garcia, but it's just routine. Ship-movement orders, mostly, nothing with real operational significance."

Jack was tempted to grumble that his country's intelligence services never had what he wanted at the moment, but the real reason for that was simple: the intelligence he did have usually enabled America to prepare, to obviate problems before they became problems. It was the things that got overlooked that developed into crises, and they were overlooked because other things were more important—until the little ones blew up.

"So all we have is what we can infer from their operational patterns."

"And here it is," Robby said, walking to the chart.

"Pushing us off . . ."

"Making Admiral Dubro commit. It's pretty clever, really. The ocean is mighty big, but it can get a lot smaller when there's two fleets moving around it. He hasn't asked for an ROE update yet but it's something we need to start thinking about."

"If they load that brigade onto their amphibs, then what?"

An Army colonel, one of Robby's staff, answered. "Sir, if I were running this, it's real easy. They have troops on the ground already, playing games with the Tamils. That secures the beachhead pretty slick, and the landing is just administrative. Getting ashore as a cohesive unit is the hard part of any invasion, but it looks to me like that's already knocked. Their Third Armored Brigade is a very robust formation. Short version is, the Sri Lankans don't have anything with a prayer of slowing it down, much less stopping it. Next item on the agenda, you gobble up a few airfields and just fly your infantry forces in. They have a lot of people under arms. Sparing fifty thousand infantrymen for this operation would not be much of a stretch for

them.

"I suppose the country could degenerate into a long-term insurgency situation," the Colonel went on, "but the first few months would go to the Indians almost by default, and with their ability to isolate the island with their navy, well, whatever insurgents have a yen to fight things out wouldn't have a source of resupply. Smart money, India wins."

"The hard part's political," Ryan mused. "The U.N. will get pretty excited. . . ."

"But projecting power into that area is a bitch," Robby pointed out. "Sri Lanka doesn't have any traditional allies, unless you count India. They have no religious or ethnic card to play. No resources for us to get hot and bothered about."

Ryan continued the thought: "Front-page news for a few days, but if the Indians are smart about it, they make Ceylon their fifty-first state —"

"More likely their *twenty-sixth* state, sir," the Colonel suggested, "or an adjunct to Tamil Nadu, for ethnic reasons. It might even help the Indians defuse their own difficulties with the Tamils. I'd guess there have been some contacts."

"Thank you." Ryan nodded to the Colonel, who had done his homework. "But the idea is, they integrate the place into their country politically, full civil rights and everything, and all of a sudden it's no story at all anymore. Slick," Ryan observed. "But they need a political excuse before they can move. That excuse has to be a resurgence of the Tamil rebels—which of course they are in a position to foment."

"That'll be our indicator," Jackson agreed. "Before that happens, we need to tell Mike Dubro what he's going to be able to do about it."

And that would not be an easy call, Ryan thought, looking at the chart. Task Group 77.I was heading southwest, keeping its distance from the Indian fleet, but though there was an ocean in which to maneuver, not far to Dubro's west was a long collection of atolls. At the end of it was the American base at Diego Garcia: a matter of some comfort, but not much.

The problem with a bluff was that the other guy might guess it for what it was, and this game was a lot less random than a poker hand. Combat power favored the Americans, but only if they had the will to use it. Geography favored India. America really had no vital interests in the area. The U.S. fleet in the Indian Ocean was basically there to keep an eye on the Persian Gulf, after all, but instability in any region was contagious, and when people got nervous about such things, a destructive synergy took place. The proverbial stitch-in-time was as useful in this arena as any other. That meant making a decision on how far the bluff could be pressed.

"Gets tricky, doesn't it, Rob?" Jack asked with a smile that showed more amusement than he felt.

"It would be helpful if we knew what they were thinking."

"Duly noted, Admiral. I will get people cracking on that."

"And the ROE?"

"The Rules of Engagement remain the same, Robby, until the President says otherwise. If Dubro thinks he's got an inbound attack, he can deal with it. I suppose he's got armed aircraft on the deck."

"On the deck, hell! In the air, Dr. Ryan, sir."

"I'll see if I can get him to let out another foot of lead on the leash," Jack promised.

A phone rang just then. A junior staff officer—a Marine newly promoted to major's rank—grabbed it, and called Ryan over.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"White House Signals, sir," a watch officer replied. "Prime Minister Koga just submitted his resignation. The Ambassador estimates that Goto will be asked to form the new government."

"That was fast. Have the State Department's Japan desk send me what I need. I'll be back in less than two hours." Ryan replaced the phone.

"Koga's gone?" Jackson asked.

"Somebody give you a smart pill this morning, Rob?"

"No, but I can listen in on phone conversations. I hear we're getting unpopular over there."

"It has gone a little fast."

The photos arrived by diplomatic courier. In the old days, the bag would have been opened at the port of entry, but in these kinder and gentler times the long-service government employee got in the official car at Dulles and rode all the way to Foggy Bottom. There the bag was opened in a secure room, and the various articles in the canvas sack were sorted by category and priority and hand-carried to their various destinations. The padded envelope with seven film cassettes was handed over to a CIA employee, who simply walked outside to his car and drove off toward the Fourteenth Street Bridge. Forty minutes later, the cassettes were opened in a photolab designed for microfilm and various other sophisticated systems but readily adapted to items as pedestrian as this.

The technician rather liked "real" film—since it was commercial, it was far easier to work with, and fit standard and user-friendly processing equipment—and had long since stopped looking at the images except to make sure that he'd done his job right. In this case the color saturation told him everything. Fuji film, he thought. Who'd

ever said it was better than Kodak? The slide film was cut, and the individual segments fitted into cardboard holders whose only difference from those any set of parents got to commemorate a toddler's first meeting with Mickey Mouse was that they bore the legend *Top Secret*. These were numbered, bundled together, and put into a box. The box was slid into an envelope and set in the lab's out-bin. Thirty minutes later a secretary came down to collect it.

She walked to the elevator and rode to the fifth floor of the Old Headquarters Building, now almost forty years of age and showing it. The corridors were dingy, and the paint on the drywall panels faded to a neutral, offensive yellow. Here, too, the mighty had fallen, and that was especially true of the Office of Strategic Weapons Research. Once one of CIA's most important subagencies, OSWR was now scratching for a living.

It was staffed with rocket scientists whose job descriptions were actually genuine. Their job was to look at the specifications of foreign-made missiles and decide what their real capabilities were. That meant a lot of theoretical work, and also trips to various government contractors to compare what they had with what our own people knew. Unfortunately, if you could call it that, ICBMs and SLBMs, the bread-and-butter of OSWR, were almost extinct, and the photos on the walls of every office in the section were almost nostalgic in their lack of significance. Now people educated in various areas of physics were having to learn about chemical and biological agents, the mass-destruction weapons of poorer nations. But not today.

Chris Scott, thirty-four, had started in OSWR when it had really meant something. A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, he'd distinguished himself by deducing the performance of the *Soviet* SS-24 two weeks before a highly placed agent had spirited out a copy of the manual for the solid-fueled bird, which had earned for him a pat on the head from the then-Director, William Webster. But the -24s were all gone now, and, his morning briefing material had told him, they were down to *one* SS-19, matched by a single Minuteman-III outside of Minot, North Dakota, both of them awaiting destruction; and he didn't like studying chemistry. As a result, the slides from Japan were something of a blessing.

Scott took his time. He had lots of it. Opening the box, he set the slides in the tray of his viewer and cycled them through, making notes with every one. That took two hours, taking him to lunchtime. The slides were repackaged and locked away when he went to the cafeteria on the first floor. There the topic of discussion was the latest fall from grace of the Washington Redskins and the prospects of the new owner for changing things. People were lingering at lunch now, Scott noticed, and none of the supervisory personnel were making

much of a big deal about it. The main crossbuilding corridor that opened to the building's courtyard was always fuller than it had been in the old days, and people never stopped looking at the big segment of Berlin Wall that had been on display for years. Especially the old hands, it seemed to Scott, who felt himself to be one of those. Well, at least *he* had work to do this day, and that was a welcome change.

Back in his office, Chris Scott closed his drapes and loaded the slides into a projector. He could have selected only those he'd made special notes on, but this was his work for the day—perhaps the whole week if he played his cards right—and he would conduct himself with the usual thoroughness, comparing what he saw with the report from that NASA guy.

"Mind if I join you?" Betsy Fleming stuck her head in the door. She was one of the old hands, soon to be a grandmother, who'd actually started as a secretary at DIA. Self-taught in the fields of photoanalysis and rocket engineering, her experience dated back to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lacking a formal degree, her expertise in this field of work was formidable.

"Sure." Scott didn't mind the intrusion. Betsy was also the office's designated mom.

"Our old friend the SS-19," she observed, taking her seat. "Wow, I like what they did with it."

"Ain't it the truth?" Scott observed, stretching to shake off his postlunch drowsiness.

What had once been quite ugly was now rather beautiful. The missile bodies were polished stainless steel, which allowed a better view of the structure. In the old Russian green, it had looked brutish. Now it looked more like the space launcher it was supposed to be, sleeker somehow, even more impressive in its purposeful bulk.

"NASA says they've saved a whole lot of weight on the body, better materials, that sort of thing," Scott observed. "I really believe it now."

"Shame they couldn't do that with their g'ddamn gas tanks," Mrs. Fleming observed. Scott grunted agreement. He owned a Cresta, and now his wife refused to drive in it until the tank was replaced. Which would be a couple of weeks, his dealer had informed him. The company was actually renting a car for him in their vain effort to curry public goodwill. That had meant getting a new parking sticker, which he would have to scrape off before returning the rental to Avis.

"Do we know who got the shots?" Betsy asked.

"One of ours, all I know." Scott flipped to another slide. "A lot of changes. They almost look cosmetic," he observed.

"How much weight are they supposed to have saved?" He was right, Mrs. Fleming thought. The steel skin showed the circular patterns of the polishing rushes, almost like jeweling on a rifle bolt . . .

"According to NASA, over twelve hundred pounds on the missile body . . ." Another click of the remote.

"Hmph, but not there," Betsy noted.

"That's funny."

The top end of the missile was where the warheads went. The SS-19 was designed to carry a bunch of them. Relatively small and heavy, they were dense objects, and the missile's structure had to account for it. Any intercontinental missile accelerated from the moment its flight began to the moment the engines finally stopped, but the period of greatest acceleration came just before burnout. At that point, with most of the fuel burned off, the rate at which speed increased reached its maximum, in this case about ten gees. At the same time, the structural rigidity lent to the missile body by the quantity of fuel inside its tanks was minimal, and as a result, the structure holding the warheads had to be both sturdy and massive so as to evenly distribute the vastly increased inertial weight of the payloads.

"No, they didn't change that, did they?" Scott looked over at his colleague.

"I wonder why? This bird's supposed to orbit satellites now . . ."

"Heavy ones, they say, communications birds . . ."

"Yeah, but look at that part . . ."

The foundation for the warhead "bus" had to be strong across its entire area. The corresponding foundation for a communications satellite was essentially a thin steel annulus, a flat, sturdy donut that invariably looked too light for its job. This one was more like an unusually heavy wagon wheel. Scott unlocked a file drawer and removed a recent photo of an SS-19 taken by an American officer on the verification team in Russia. He handed it over to Mrs. Fleming without comment.

"Look here. That's the standard structure, just what the Russians designed in, maybe with better steel, better finish. They changed almost everything else, didn't they?" Fleming asked. "Why not this?"

"Looked that way to me. Keeping that must have cost them—what? A hundred pounds, maybe more?"

"That doesn't make sense, Chris. This is the first place you want to save weight. Every kilo you save here is worth four or five on the first stage." Both stood and walked to the screen. "Wait a minute . . ."

"Yeah, this fits the bus. They didn't change it. No mating collar for a satellite. They didn't change it at all." Scott shook his head.

"You suppose they just kept the bus design for their trans-stage?"

"Even if they did, they don't need all this mass at the top end, do they?"

"It's almost like they wanted it to stay the way it was."

"Yeah. I wonder why."

14

Reflections

"Thirty seconds," the assistant director said as the final commercial rolled for the Sunday-morning audience. The entire show had centered on Russia and Europe, which suited Ryan just fine.

"The one question I can't ask." Bob Holtzman chuckled before the tape started rolling again. "What's it like to be the National Security Advisor in a country with no threat to its national security?"

"Relaxing," Ryan answered with a wary look at the three cameras. None had their telltale red lights burning.

"So why the long hours?" Kris Hunter asked in a voice less sharp than her look.

"If I don't show up for work," Jack lied, "people might notice how unimportant I am." Bad news. *They still don't know about India, but they know something's up. Damn.* He wanted to keep it quiet. It was one of those things that public pressure would hurt, not help.

"Four! Three! Two! One!" The assistant director jerked his finger at the moderator, a television journalist named Edward Johnson.

"Dr. Ryan, what does the Administration make of changes in the Japanese cabinet?"

"Well, of course, that's a result of the current difficulties in trade, which is not really in my purview. Basically what we see there is an internal political situation which the Japanese people can quite easily handle without our advice," Jack announced in his earnest-statesman's voice, the one that had taken a few elocution lessons to perfect. Mainly he'd had to learn to speak more slowly.

Kris Hunter leaned forward. "But the leading candidate to take the prime ministership is a long-standing enemy of the United States—"

"That's a *little* strong," Ryan interrupted with a good-natured smile.

"His speeches, his writings, his books are not exactly friendly."

"I suppose," Ryan said with a dismissive wave and a crooked smile. "The difference between discourse among friendly nations and unfriendly ones, oddly enough, is that the former can often be more acrimonious than the latter." *Not bad, Jack . . .*

"You are not concerned?"

"No," Ryan said with a gentle shake of the head. Short answers on a

show like this tended to intimidate reporters, he thought.

"Thank you for coming in this morning, Dr. Ryan."

"A pleasure as always."

Ryan continued to smile until the camera lights blinked off. Then he counted slowly to ten. Then he waited until the other reporters removed their microphones. Then he removed his microphone and stood up and moved away from the working part of the set. And then it was safe to speak. Bob Holtzman followed Jack into the makeup room. The cosmeticians were off drinking coffee, and Ryan took a fistful of HandiWipes and passed the container to Holtzman. Over the mirror was a large slab of wood engraved on which was, IN HERE EVERYTHING IS OFF THE RECORD.

"You know the real reason behind equal rights for women?" Holtzman asked. "It wasn't equal pay, or bras, or any of that crap."

"Right," Jack agreed. "It was forcing them to wear makeup. We deserved everything we got. God, I hate this shit!" he added, wiping the pancake off his forehead. "Makes me feel like a cheap whore."

"That isn't too unusual for a political figure, is it?" Kristyn Hunter asked, taking wipes to do the same.

Jack laughed. "No, but it's kind of impolite for you to say so, ma' am." *Am I a political figure now?* Ryan asked himself. *I suppose I am. How the hell did that happen?*

"Why the fancy footwork on my last question, Jack?" Holtzman asked.

"Bob, if you know it *was* fancy footwork, then you know why." Ryan motioned to the sign over the mirror, then decided to tap it to make sure everyone caught the message.

"I know that when the last government fell, it was us who developed the information on the bribery scandal," Holtzman said. Jack gave him a look but nothing else. Even *no comment* would have been a substantive comment under these circumstances.

"That killed Goto's first chance to become Prime Minister. He was next in line, remember?"

"Well, now he's got another. His patience is rewarded," Ryan observed. "If he can get a coalition together."

"Don't give me that." Hunter leaned toward the mirror to finish cleaning her nose off. "You've read the stuff he's been telling their papers, same as I have. He will get a cabinet formed, and you know what arguments he's been using."

"Talk is cheap, especially for somebody in that business," Jack said. He still hadn't quite made the leap of imagination to include himself "in that business." "Probably just a blip, one more politician with a few too many drinks under his belt who had a bad day at the office or the track—"

"Or the geisha house," Kris Hunter suggested. She finished removing the makeup, then sat on the edge of the counter and lit a cigarette. Kristyn Hunter was an old-fashioned reporter. Though still on the sunny side of fifty, she was a graduate of Columbia's School of Journalism and had just been appointed chief foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. Her voice was as dry as dust. "Two years ago that bastard put a move on me. His language would shock a Marine, and his suggestions were . . . shall we say, eccentric. I presume you have information on his personal habits, Dr. Ryan?"

"Kris, never, ever, not even once will I discuss what personal stuff, if any, we have on foreign officials." Jack paused. "Wait. He doesn't speak English, does he?" Ryan closed his eyes, trying to remember what his briefing documents had said on that point.

"You didn't know? He can when it pleases him, but he doesn't when it doesn't. That day, it didn't. And his translator that day was a female, about twenty-seven. She didn't even blush." Hunter chuckled darkly. "I sure as hell did. What does that tell you, Dr. Ryan?"

Ryan had few doubts about the information that had come out of Operation SANDALWOOD. Despite that, it was very nice to hear this from a completely independent source. "I guess he likes blondes," Jack said lightly.

"So they say. They also say that he has a new one now."

"This is getting serious," Holtzman noted. "Lots of people like to fool around, Kris."

"Goto loves to show people how tough he is. Some of the rumors about Goto are downright ugly." Kris Hunter paused. "I believe them, too."

"Really?" Ryan asked with the utmost innocence. "Woman's intuition?"

"Don't be sexist," Hunter warned, too seriously for the mood of the moment.

Ryan's voice turned earnest. "I'm not. My wife has better instincts for judging people than I do. I guess it helps that she's a doc. Fair enough?"

"Dr. Ryan, I know *you* know. I know the FBI has been looking very discreetly at a few things out in the Seattle area."

"Is that so?"

Kris Hunter wasn't buying. "You don't keep secrets about this sort of thing, not if you have friends in the Bureau like I do, and not if one of the missing girls is the daughter of a police captain whose next-door neighbor is S-A-C of the FBI's Seattle Field Division. Do I need to go on?"

"Then why are you sitting on it?"

Kris Hunter's green eyes blazed at the National Security Advisor.

“I’ll tell you why, Dr. Ryan. I was raped in college. I thought the bastard was going to kill me. I looked at death. You don’t forget that. If this story comes out the wrong way, that girl and maybe others like her could end up dead. You can recover from rape: I did. You can’t recover from death.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said quietly. His eyes and his nod said even more. *Yes, I understand. And you know that I understand.*

“And he’s the next head of that country’s government.” Kris Hunter’s eyes were even more intense now. “He hates us, Dr. Ryan. I’ve interviewed him. He didn’t want me because he found me attractive. He wanted me because he saw me as a blond-and-blue symbol. He’s a rapist. He enjoys hurting people. You don’t forget the look in the eyes once you’ve seen it. He’s got that look. We need to watch out for this guy. You tell the President that.”

“I will,” Ryan said as he headed out the door.

The White House car was waiting just outside. Jack had something to think about as it headed for the Beltway.

“Softball,” the Secret Service agent commented. “Except for after.”

“How long you been doing this, Paul?”

“Fourteen fascinating years,” Paul Robberton said, keeping an eye on things from the front seat. The driver was just a guy from the General Services Administration, but Jack rated a Secret Service bodyguard now.

“Fieldwork?”

“Counterfeiters. Never drew my weapon,” Robberton added. “Had a few fair-sized cases.”

“You can read people?”

Robberton laughed. “In this job, you’d better hope so, Dr. Ryan.”

“Tell me about Kris Hunter.”

“Smart and tough as nails. She’s right: she was sexually assaulted in college, a serial rapist. She testified against the mutt. It was back when lawyers were a little . . . free with how they treated rape victims. You know—did you encourage the rat, stuff like that. It got ugly, but she rode it out and they convicted the bum. He bit the big one in prison, evidently said the wrong thing to an armed robber. Pity,” Robberton concluded dryly.

“Pay attention to what she thinks, you’re telling me.”

“Yes, sir. She would have been a good cop. I know she’s a pretty fair reporter.”

“She’s gathered in a lot of information,” Ryan murmured. Not all of it good, not yet pulled together properly, and colored by her own life experiences, but sure as hell, she had sources. Jack looked at the passing scenery and tried to assemble the incomplete puzzle.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

"The house," Ryan said, drawing a surprised look from Robberton. In this case, "the house" didn't mean "home." "No, wait a minute." Ryan lifted his carphone. Fortunately he knew the number from memory.

"Hello?"

"Ed? Jack Ryan. You guys busy?"

"We are allowed Sunday off, Jack. The Caps play the Bruins this afternoon."

"Ten minutes."

"Fair enough." Ed Foley set the phone back in its place on the wall. "Ryan's coming over," he told his wife. *Damn it.*

Sunday was the one day they allowed themselves to sleep. Mary Pat was still in her housecoat, looking unusually frowzy. Without a word she left the morning paper and walked off toward the bathroom to fix her hair. There was a knock at the door fifteen minutes later.

"Overtime?" Ed asked at the door. Robberton came in with his guest.

"I had to do one of the morning shows." Jack checked his watch. "I'll be on in another twenty minutes or so."

"What gives?" Mary Pat entered the room, looking about normal for an American female on a Sunday morning.

"Business, honey," Ed answered. He led everyone to the basement recreation room.

"SANDALWOOD," Jack said when they got there. He could speak freely here. The house was swept for bugs every week. "Do Clark and Chavez have orders to get the girl out yet?"

"Nobody gave us the execute order," Ed Foley reminded him. "It's just about set up, but—"

"The order is given. Get the girl out now."

"Anything we need to know?" Mary Pat asked.

"I haven't been comfortable with this from the beginning. I think maybe we deliver a little message to her sugar daddy—and we do it early enough to get his attention."

"Yeah," Mr. Foley said. "I read the paper this morning, too. He isn't saying friendly stuff, but we are laying it on them pretty hard, y'know?"

"Sit down, Jack," Mary Pat said. "Can I get you coffee or anything?'

"No, thanks, MP." He looked up after taking a place on a worn couch. "A light just went off. Our friend Goto seems to be an odd duck."

"He does have his quirks," Ed agreed. "Not terribly bright, a lot of bombast once you get through the local brand of rhetoric, but not all

that many ideas. I'm surprised he's getting the chance."

"Why?" Jack asked. The State Department material on Goto had been typically respectful of the foreign statesman.

"Like I said, he's no threat to win the Nobel in physics, okay? He's an *apparatchik*. Worked his way up the way politicos do. I'm sure he's kissed his share of asses along the way—"

"And to make up for that, he has some bad habits with women," MP added. "There's a lot of that over there. Our boy Nomuri sent in a lengthy dispatch on what he's seen." It was the youth and inexperience, the DDO knew. So many field officers on their first major assignment reported everything, as though writing a book or something. It was mainly the product of boredom.

"Over here he couldn't get elected dogcatcher," Ed noted with a chuckle.

Think so? Ryan thought, remembering Edward Kealty. On the other hand, it might just turn out to be something America could use in the right forum and under the right circumstances. Maybe the first time they met, if things went badly, President Durling could make a quiet reference to his former girlfriend, and the implications of his bad habits on Japanese-American relations . . .

"How's THISTLE doing?"

Mary Pat smiled as she rearranged the Sega games on the basement TV. This was where the kids told Mario and all the others what to do. "Two of the old members are gone, one retired and one on overseas assignment, in Malaysia, as I recall. The rest of them are contacted. If we ever want to—"

"Okay, let's think about what we want them to do for us."

"Why?" MP asked. "I don't mind, but why?"

"We're pushing them too hard. I've told the President that, but he's got political reasons for pushing, and he isn't going to stop. What we're doing is going to hurt their economy pretty bad, and now it turns out that their new PM has a real antipathy to us. If they decide to push back, I want to know before it happens."

"What *can* they do?" Ed Foley sat on his son's favorite Nintendo chair.

"I don't know that, either, but I want to find out. Give me a few days to figure out what our priorities are. Damn, I don't have a few days," Jack said next. "I have to prep for the Moscow trip."

"It takes time to set up anyway. We can get our boys the comm gear and stuff."

"Do it," Jack ordered. "Tell 'em they're in the spy business for-real."

"We need presidential authorization for that," Ed warned. Activating a spy network in a friendly country was not a trivial undertaking.

"I can deliver it for you." Ryan was sure that Durling wouldn't object. "And get the girl out, earliest opportunity."

"Debrief her where?" MP asked. "For that matter, what if she says no? You're not telling us to kidnap her, are you?"

Ouch, Jack thought. "No, I don't suppose that's a good idea. They know how to be careful, don't they?"

"Clark does." Mary Pat knew from what he'd taught her and her husband at the Farm, all those years ago: *No matter where you are, it's enemy territory.* It was a good axiom for field spooks, but she'd always wondered where he'd picked it up.

Most of these people should have been at work, Clark thought—but so did they, and that was the problem, wasn't it? He'd seen his share of demonstrations, most of them expressing displeasure with his country. The ones in Iran had been especially unpleasant, knowing that there were Americans in the hands of people who thought "Death to America!" was a perfectly reasonable expression of concern with the foreign policy of his country. He'd been in the field, part of the rescue mission that had failed—the lowest point, Clark told himself, in a lengthy career. Being there to see it all fail, having to scramble out of the country, they were not good memories. This scene brought some of it back.

The American Embassy wasn't taking it too seriously. Business as usual, after a fashion, the Ambassador had all his people inside the embassy building, another example of Frank-Lloyd-Wright-Meets-the-Siegfried-Line design, this one located across from the Ocura Hotel. After all, this was a civilized country, wasn't it? The local police had an adequate guard force outside the fence, and as vociferous as the demonstrators were, they didn't seem the sort to attack the severe-looking cops arrayed around the building. But the people in the street were not kids, not students taking a day off from class—remarkably, the media never reported that so many of those student demonstrations coincided with semester finals, a worldwide phenomenon. In the main, these were people in their thirties and forties, and for that reason the chants weren't quite right. There was a remarkably soft edge on the expressions. Embarrassed to be here, somewhat confused by the event, more hurt than angry, he thought as Chavez snapped his pictures. But there were a lot of them. And there was a lot of hurt. They wanted to blame someone—the inevitable *them*, the *someone else* who always made the bad things happen. That perspective was not uniquely Japanese, was it?

As with everything in Japan, it was a highly organized affair. People, already formed into groups with leaders, had arrived mostly

by crowded commuter trains, boarded buses at the stations, and been dropped off only a few blocks away. *Who chartered the buses?* Clark wondered. *Who printed the signs?* The wording on them was literate, which was odd, he was slow to realize. Though often well schooled in English, Japanese citizens messed up the foreign tongue as much as one might expect, especially on slogans. He'd seen one young man earlier in the day wearing a T-shirt with the legend "Inspire in Paradise," probably an exact representation of something in Japanese, and yet another example of the fact that no language translated precisely into another. But not these signs. The syntax was perfect in every case he saw, better, in fact, than he might have seen in an American demonstration. Wasn't that interesting?

Well, what the hell, he thought. *I'm a journalist, right?*

"Excuse me," John said, touching a middle-aged man on the arm.

"Yes?" The man turned in surprise. He was nicely turned out, wore a dark suit, and his tie was neatly knotted in the collar of his white shirt. There wasn't even much anger on his face, nor any emotion that might have built up from the spirit of the moment. "Who are you?"

"I am a Russian journalist, for the Interfax News Agency," Clark said, showing an ID card marked in Cyrillic.

"Ah." The man smiled and bowed politely. Clark returned the gesture correctly, drawing an approving look for his good manners.

"May I please ask you some questions?"

"Certainly." The man almost seemed relieved to be able to stop shouting. A few questions established that he was thirty-seven, married with one child, a salaryman for an auto company, currently laid off, and very upset with America at the moment—though not at all unhappy with Russia, he added quickly.

He's embarrassed by all this, John thought, thanking the man for his opinion.

"What was that all about?" Chavez asked quietly from behind his camera.

"*Russkiy*," "Klerk" replied sharply.

"*Da, tovarisch*."

"Follow me," "Ivan Sergeyevich" said next, entering the crowd. There was something else odd, he thought, something he wasn't quite getting. Ten meters into the crowd, it was clear. The people at the periphery of the mob were supervisory. The inside was composed of blue-collar workers, more casually dressed, people with less dignity to lose. Here the mood was different. The looks he got were angrier, and though they became more polite when he identified himself as a non-American, the suspicion was real, and the answers to his questions, when he got answers, were less circumspect than he'd received before.

In due course the people moved off, guided by their senior

leadership and shepherded by police to another place, one that had a stage prepared. That was where things changed.

Hiroshi Goto took his time, making them wait a long time even for an environment in which patience was a thoroughly inculcated virtue. He walked to the podium with dignity, noting the presence of his official entourage, arrayed in seats on the back of the stage. The TV cameras were already in place, and it was just a matter of waiting for the crowd to pack in tight. But he waited longer than that, standing there, staring at them, with his inaction forcing them to pack in tighter, and the additional time merely added to the tension.

Clark could feel it now. Perhaps the strangeness of the event was inevitable. These were highly civilized people, members of a society so ordered as to seem alien, whose gentle manners and generous hospitality contrasted starkly with their suspicion of foreigners. Clark's fear started as a distant whisper, a warning that something was changing, though his trained powers of observation caught nothing at all beyond the usual bullshit of politicians all over the world. A man who'd faced combat in Vietnam and even more danger all over the world, he was again a stranger in a strange land, but his age and experience worked against him. Even the angry ones in the middle of the crowd hadn't been all that nasty—and, hell, did you expect a man to be happy when he's been laid off? So it wasn't all that big a deal—was it?

But the whispers grew louder as Goto took a sip of water, still making them wait, waving with his arms to draw his audience in closer, though this portion of the park was already jammed with people. How many? John wondered. Ten thousand? Fifteen? The crowd grew quiet of its own accord now, hardly making any noise at all. A few looks explained it. Those on the periphery were wearing armbands on their suit coats—damn, John swore at himself, that was their uniform of the day. The ordinary workers would automatically defer to those who dressed and acted like supervisors, and the armbands were herding them in closer. Perhaps there was some other sign that hushed them down, but if so Clark missed it.

Goto began talking quietly, which stilled the crowd completely. Heads automatically leaned forward a few inches in an instinctive effort to catch his words.

Damn, I wish we'd had more time to learn the language, both CIA officers thought. Ding was catching on, his superior saw, changing lenses and locking in on individual faces.

"They're getting tense," Chavez noted quietly in Russian as he read the expressions.

Clark could see it from their posture as Goto spoke on. He could catch only a few words, perhaps the odd phrase or two, basically the

meaningless things that all languages had, the rhetorical devices a politician used to express humility and respect for his audience. The first roar of approval from the crowd came as a surprise, and the spectators were so tightly packed that they had to jostle one another to applaud. His gaze shifted to Goto. It was too far. Clark reached into Ding's tote bag, and selected a camera body to which he attached a long lens, the better to read the speaker's face as he accepted the approval of the people, waiting for their applause to subside before he moved on.

Really working the crowd, aren't we?

He tried to hide it, Clark saw, but he was a politician and though they had good acting skills, they fed off their audience even more hungrily than those who worked before cameras for a living. Goto's hand gestures picked up in intensity, and so did his voice.

Only ten or fifteen thousand people here. It's a test, *isn't it? He's experimenting*. Never had Clark felt more a foreigner than now. In so much of the world his features were ordinary, nondescript, seen and forgotten. In Iran, in the Soviet Union, in Berlin, he could fit in. Not here. Not now. Even worse, he wasn't getting it, not all of it, and that worried him.

Goto's voice grew louder. For the first time his fist slammed down on the podium, and the crowd responded with a roar. His diction became more rapid. The crowd was moving inward, and Clark watched the speaker's eyes notice it, welcome it. He wasn't smiling now, but his eyes swept the sea of faces, left and right, fixing occasionally in a single place, probably catching an individual, reading him for reactions, then passing to another to see if he was having the same effect on everyone. He had to be satisfied by what he saw. There was confidence in the voice now. He had them, had them all. By adjusting his speaking pace he could see their breathing change, see their eyes go wide. Clark lowered the camera to scan the crowd and saw the collective movement, the responses to the speaker's words.

Playing with them.

John brought the camera back up, using it like a gunsight. He focused in on the suit-clad bosses on the edges. Their faces were different now, not so much concerned with their duties as the speech. Again he cursed his inadequate language skills, not quite realizing that what he saw was even more important than what he might have understood. The next demonstration from the crowd was more than just loud. It was angry. Faces were . . . illuminated. Goto owned them now as he took them further and further down the path he had selected.

John touched Ding's arm. "Let's back off."

"Why?"

"Because it's getting dangerous here," Clark replied. He got a curious look.

"Nan ja?" Chavez replied in Japanese, smiling behind his camera.

"Turn around and look at the cops," "Klerk" ordered.

Ding did, and caught on instantly. The local police were ordinarily impressive in their demeanor. Perhaps samurai warriors had once had the same confidence. Though polite and professional, there was usually an underlying swagger to the way they moved. They *were* the law here, and knew it. Their uniforms were as severely clean and pressed as any Embassy Marine's, and the handguns that hung on the Sam Browne belts were just a status symbol, never necessary to use. But now these tough cops looked nervous. They shifted on their feet, exchanged looks among themselves. Hands rubbed against blue trousers to wipe off sweat. They sensed it, too, so clearly that nothing needed to be spoken. Some were even listening intently to Goto, but even those men looked worried. Whatever was happening, if it troubled the people who customarily kept the peace on these streets, then it was serious enough.

"Follow me." Clark scanned the area and selected a storefront. It turned out to be a small tailor shop. The CIA officers took their place close to the entrance. The sidewalk was otherwise deserted. Casual strollers had joined the crowd, and the police were drawing in also, spacing themselves evenly in a blue line. The two officers were essentially alone with open space around them, a very unusual state of affairs.

"You reading this the same way I am?" John asked. That he said it in English surprised Chavez.

"He's really working them up, isn't he?" A thoughtful pause. "You're right, Mr. C. It is getting a little tense."

Goto's voice carried clearly over the speaker system. The pitch was high now, almost shrill, and the crowd answered back in the way that crowds do.

"Ever see anything like this before?" It wasn't like the job they'd done in Romania.

A curt nod. "Teheran, 1979."

"I was in fifth grade."

"I was scared shitless," Clark said, remembering. Goto's hands were flying around now. Clark re-aimed the camera, and through the lens the man seemed transformed. He wasn't the same person who'd begun the speech. Only thirty minutes before he'd been tentative. Not now. If this had begun as an experiment, then it was a successful one. The final flourishes seemed stylized, but that was to be expected. His hands went up together, like a football official announcing a

touchdown, but the fists, Clark saw, were clenched tight. Twenty yards away, a cop turned and looked at the two *gaijin.* There was concern on his face.

"Let's look at some coats for a while."

"I'm a thirty-six regular," Chavez replied lightly as he stowed his camera gear.

It turned out to be a nice shop, and it did have coats in Ding's size. It gave them a good excuse to browse. The clerk was attentive and polite, and at John's insistence Chavez ended up purchasing a business suit that fit so well it might have been made for him, dark gray and ordinary, overpriced and identical to what so many salarymen wore. They emerged to see the small park empty. A work crew was dismantling the stage. The TV crews were packing up their lights. All was normal except for a small knot of police officers who surrounded three people sitting on a curb. They were an American TV news crew, one of whom held a handkerchief to his face. Clark decided not to approach. He noted instead that the streets were not terribly littered—then he saw why. A cleanup crew was at work. Everything had been exquisitely planned. The demonstration had been about as spontaneous as the Super Bowl—but the game had gone even better than planned.

"Tell me what you think," Clark ordered as they walked along streets that were turning back to normal.

"You know this stuff better than I do—"

"Look, master's candidate, when I ask a fucking question I expect a fucking answer." Chavez almost stopped at the rebuke, not from insult, but from surprise. He'd never seen his partner rattled before. As a result, his reply was measured and reasoned.

"I think we just saw something important. I think he was playing with them. Last year for one of my courses we saw a Nazi film, a classic study in how demagogues do their thing. A woman directed it, and it reminded me—"

"*Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl," Clark said. "Yeah, it's a classic, all right. By the way, you need a haircut."

"Huh?"

The training was really paying off, Major Sato knew without looking. On command, all four of the F-15 Eagles tripped their brakes and surged forward along the runway at Misawa. They'd flown more than three hundred hours in the past twelve months, a third of that in the past two alone, and now the pilots could risk a formation takeoff that would do an aerial-demonstration team proud. Except his flight of four was not the local version of the Blue Angels. They were members

of the Third Air Wing. Sato had to concentrate, of course, to watch the airspeed indicator in his heads-up display before rotating the aircraft off the concrete. Gear came up on his command, and he knew without looking that his wingman was no more than four meters off his tip. It was dangerous to do it this way, but it was also good for morale. It thrilled the ground crew as much as it impressed the curious driving by on the highway. A thousand feet off the ground, wheels and flaps up, accelerating through four hundred knots, he allowed himself a turn of the head both ways. Sure enough. It was a clear day, the cold air devoid of humidity, still lit by the late-afternoon sun. Sato could see the southernmost Kuriles to his north, once part of his country, stolen by the Russians at the end of the Second World War, and ruggedly mountainous, like Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Home Islands . . . One thing at a time, the Major told himself.

"Come right," he ordered over the radio circuit, bringing the flight to a new course of zero-five-five. They were still climbing, gradually, to save fuel for the exercise.

It was hard to believe that this aircraft design was almost thirty years old. But that was just the shape and the concept. Since the American engineers at McDonnell-Douglas had dreamed it all up, the improvements had been such as to transform everything but the silhouette. Almost everything on Sato's personal bird was Japanese-made, even the engines. Especially the electronics.

There was a steady stream of aircraft in both directions, nearly all of them commercial wide-bodies carrying businessmen to or from Japan, from or to North America, on a well-defined commercial routing that traced down the Kurile chain, past the Kamchatka Peninsula, then on to the Aleutians. If anyone wondered how important his country was, Sato thought in the privacy of his cockpit, this was it. The low-angle sun reflected off the aluminum tail fins of numerous aircraft, and from his current altitude of thirty-seven thousand feet he could see them lined up—like cars on a highway, it seemed, yellow dots preceding white trails of vapor that stretched off into infinity. Then it was time to go to work.

The flight of four split into separated pairs left and right of the airliner track. The training mission for the evening was not complex, but vital nonetheless. Behind them, over a hundred miles to the southwest, an airborne early-warning aircraft was assuming its station just off the northeastern tip of Honshu. That was an E-767. Based on the twin-engine Boeing airliner (as the American E-3A was based on the far older 707 airframe), a rotating dome sat atop the converted wide-body. Just as his F-15J was an improved local version of an American fighter plane, so the E-767 was a vastly improved Japanese interpretation of another American invention. They'd never learn, Sato

thought, his eyes scanning the horizon every few seconds before returning to the forward visual display. They'd invented so much, then given the unfulfilled rights to his countrymen for further perfection. In fact the Americans had played the same game with the Russians, improving every military weapon the latter had ever made, but in their arrogance ignoring the possibility that someone could do the same with their own magical systems. The radar on the E-767 was like nothing aloft. For that reason, the radar on the nose of his Eagle was switched off.

Simple in concept, the overall system was murderously complex in execution. The fighters had to know their precise position in three dimensions, and so did the AEW bird supporting them. Beyond that, radar pulses from the E-767 were precisely timed. The result was mere mathematics. Knowing the position of the transmitter, and their own position, the Eagles could then receive the radar reflections and plot the blips as though the data were generated by their own onboard radar systems. A meld of Soviet-developed bi-static radars and American airborne-radar technology, this system took the idea one step further. The AEW radar was frequency-agile, able to switch instantly from a longwave search mode to a shortwave fire-control mode, and it could actually guide air-to-air missiles fired by the fighters. The radar was also of sufficient size and power that it could, everyone thought, defeat stealth technology.

In only a few minutes it was clear that the system worked. The four air-to-air missiles on his wings were dummies, with no rocket motors. The seekerheads were real, however, and onboard instruments showed that the missiles were tracking inbound and outbound airliners even more clearly than they would have done from the Eagle's own radar. It was a first, a genuinely new piece of military technology. Only a few years earlier, Japan would probably have offered it for sale, almost certainly to America, because this sort of thing had value beyond gold. But the world had changed, and the Americans would probably have not seen the point in spending the money for it. Besides, Japan wasn't about to sell this to anyone. *Not now,* Sato thought. *Especially not now.*

Their hotel was not necessarily an especially good one. Though it catered to foreign visitors, the management recognized that not all *gaijin* were wealthy. The rooms were small, the corridors narrow, the ceilings low, and a breakfast of a glass of juice, a cup of coffee, and one croissant cost only fifty dollars instead of the hundred or so charged elsewhere. As the saying in the U.S. government went, Clark and Chavez were "living off the economy," frugally, as Russians would

have to do. It wasn't all that great a hardship. Crowded and intense as Japan was, it was still far more comfortable than Africa had been, and the food, while strange, was exotic and interesting enough that the novelty hadn't quite worn off yet. Ding might have grumped about the desire for a burger, but to say such a thing, even in Russian, would have broken cover. Returning after an eventful day, Clark inserted the key card in the slot on the door and twisted the knob. He didn't even stop when he felt and removed the small piece of tape on the inside surface of the knob. Inside, he merely held it up to show Ding, then headed to the bathroom to flush it away.

Chavez looked around the room, wondering if it was bugged, wondering if this spook stuff was all it was cracked up to be. It certainly seemed so mysterious. The tape on the doorknob. Somebody wanted a meet. Nomuri. It had to be him. The fieldcraft was clever, Chavez told himself. Whoever had left the marker had just walked down the corridor, and his hand had probably just tapped the knob, a gesture that even a careful observer might have missed. Well, that was the idea.

"I'm going to head out for a drink," "Klerk" announced in Russian. *I'll see what's up.*

"Vanya, you do too much of that." *Fine.* It was his regular routine in any case.

"Some Russian you are," Clark said for the microphones, if any, as he went out the door.

How the hell, Chavez wondered, *am I supposed to get any studying done?* He'd been forced to leave his books in Korea—they were all in English, of course. He couldn't take notes or go over things. *If I have to lose time on my master's*, Ding thought, *I'm going to ask the Agency to reimburse me for the blown courses.*

The bar, half a block away, was most agreeable. The room was dark. The booths were small and separated by solid partitions, and a mirror behind the ranks of liquor bottles made countersurveillance easy. Better yet, the barstools were almost all taken, which forced him to look elsewhere after a show of disappointment. Clark strolled all the way to the back. Nomuri was waiting.

"Taking chances, aren't we?" John said over the music. A waitress came up. He ordered a vodka, neat, specifying a local one to save money.

"Orders from home," Nomuri told him. He stood without another word, clearly offended that a gaijin had taken the seat without asking permission first and left without even a polite bow.

Before the drink arrived, Clark reached under the table, finding a

package taped in place there. In a moment it was in his lap, and would soon find its way inside his waistband behind his back. Clark always bought his working clothes in a full cut——the Russian disguise helped even more—and his shoulders provided ample overhang for hiding things, yet another reason, he thought, to stay in shape.

The drink arrived, and he took his time knocking it back, looking at the bar mirror and searching the reflections for faces that might have appeared in his memory before. It was a never-ending drill, and, tiring as it was, one he'd learned the hard way not to ignore. He checked his watch twice, both times unobtrusively, then a third time immediately before standing, leaving behind just enough cash to pay for the drink. Russians weren't known as big tippers.

The street was busy, even in the late evening. Clark had established the routine nightcap over the past week, and on every other night he would roam the local shops. This evening he selected a bookstore first, one with long, irregular rows. The Japanese were a literate people. The shop always had people in it. He browsed around, selecting a copy of *The Economist*, then wandered more, aimlessly toward the back, where he saw a few men eyeing the manga racks. Taller than they, he stood right behind a few, close but not too close, keeping his hands in front of him, shielded by his back. After five or so minutes he made his way to the front and paid for the magazine, which the clerk politely bagged for him. The next stop was an electronics store, where he looked at some CD players. This time he bumped into two people, each time politely asking their pardon, a phrase which he'd troubled himself to learn before anything else at Monterey. After that he headed back out onto the street and back to the hotel, wondering how much of the preceding fifteen minutes had been a total waste of time. *None of it*, Clark told himself. *Not a single second.*

In the room he tossed Ding the magazine. It drew a look of its own before the younger man spoke. "Don't they have anything in Russian?"

"It's good coverage of the difficulties between this country and America. Read and learn. Improve your language skills."

Great, just fucking great, Chavez thought, reading the words for their real meaning. *We've been activated, for-real.* He'd never finish the master's now, Ding grumped. Maybe they just didn't want to jack his salary up, as CIA regulations specified for a graduate degree.

Clark had other things to do. The package Nomuri had transferred held a computer disk and a device that attached to a laptop. He switched it on, then inserted the disk into the slot. The file he opened contained only three sentences, and seconds after reading it, Clark had erased the disk. Next he started composing what to all intents and

purposes was a news dispatch.

The computer was a Russian-language version of a popular Japanese model, with all the additional Cyrillic letters, and the hard part for Clark was that although he read and spoke Russian like a native, he was used to typing (badly enough) in English. The Russian-style keyboard drove him crazy, and he sometimes wondered if someone would ever pick up on this small chink in his cover armor. It took over an hour to type up the news article, and another thirty to do the more important part. He saved both items to the hard drive, then turned the machine off. Flipping it over, he removed the modem from its modular port and replaced it with the new one Nomuri had brought.

"What time is it in Moscow?" he asked tiredly.

"Same as always, six hours behind us, remember?"

"I'm going to send it to Washington, too."

"Fine," "Chekov" grunted. "I'm sure they'll love it, Ivan Sergeyevich."

Clark attached the phone line to the back of his computer and used the latter to dial up the fiberoptic line to Moscow. Transferring the report took less than a minute. He repeated the operation for the Interfax office in the American capital. It was pretty slick, John thought. The moment before the modem at one end linked up with the modem at the other sounded just like static—which it was. The mating signal was just a rough hiss unless you had a special chip, and he never called anyone but Russian press-agency offices. That the office in Washington might be tapped by the FBI was something else again. Finished, he kept one file and erased the other. Another day done, serving his country. Clark brushed his teeth before collapsing into his single bed.

"That was a fine speech, Goto-san." Yamata poured a generous amount of sake into an exquisite porcelain cup. "You made things so clear."

"Did you see how they responded to me!" The little man was bubbling now, his enthusiasm making his body swell before his host's eyes.

"And tomorrow you will have your cabinet, and the day after you will have a new office, Hiroshi."

"You're certain?"

A nod and a smile that conveyed true respect. "Of course I am. My colleagues and I have spoken with our friends, and they have come to agree with us that you are the only man suited to save our country."

"When will it begin?" Goto asked, suddenly sobered by the words, remembering exactly what his ascension would mean.

"When the people are with us."

"Are you sure we can—"

"Yes, I am sure." Yamata paused. "There is one problem, however."

"What is that?"

"Your lady friend, Hiroshi. If the knowledge becomes public that you have an American mistress, it compromises you. We cannot afford that," Yamata explained patiently. "I hope you will understand."

"Kimba is a most pleasant diversion for me," Goto objected politely.

"I have no doubt of it, but the Prime Minister can have his choice of diversions, and in any case we will be busy in the next month." The amusing part was that he could build up the man on one hand and reduce him on the other, just as easily as he manipulated a child. And yet there was something disturbing about it all. More than one thing. How much had he told the girl? And what to do with her now?

"Poor thing, to send her home now, she will never know happiness again."

"Undoubtedly true, but it must be done, my friend. Let me handle it for you? Better it should be done quietly, discreetly. You are on the television every day now. You cannot be seen to frequent that area as a private citizen would. There is too great a danger."

The man about to be Prime Minister looked down, sipping his drink, so transparently measuring his personal pleasure against his duties to his country, surprising Yamata yet again——but no, not really. Goto was Goto, and he'd been chosen for his elevation as much—more—for his weaknesses than his strengths.

"Hai," he said after reflection. "Please see to it."

"I know what to do," Yamata assured him.

15

A Damned, Foolish Thing

Behind Ryan's desk was a gadget called a STU-6. The acronym probably meant "secure telephone unit," but he had never troubled himself to find out. It was about two feet square, and contained in a nicely made oak cabinet handcrafted by the inmates of a federal prison. Inside were a half dozen green circuit-boards, populated with various chips whose function was to scramble and unscramble telephone signals. Having one of these in the office was one of the better government status symbols.

"Yeah," Jack said, reaching back for the receiver.

"MP here. Something interesting came in. SANDALWOOD," Mrs. Foley said, her voice distinct on the digital line. "Flip on your fax?"

"Go ahead and send it." The STU-6 did that, too, fulfilling the function with a simple phone line that headed to Ryan's facsimile printer. "Did you get the word to them—"

"Yes, we did."

"Okay, wait a minute . . ." Jack took the first page and started reading it. "This is Clark?" he asked.

"Correct. That's why I'm fast-tracking it over to you. You know the guy as well as I do."

"I saw the TV coverage. CNN says their crew got a little roughed up. . . ." Ryan worked his way down the first page.

"Somebody bounced a soda can off the producer's head. Nothing more serious than a headache, but it's the first time anything like that has happened over there—that Ed and I remember, anyway."

"Goddamn it!" Ryan said next.

"I thought you'd like that part."

"Thanks for the heads-up, Mary Pat."

"Glad to help." The line went dead.

Ryan took his time. His temper, he knew, was always his greatest enemy. He decided to give himself a moment to stand and head out of his office to the nearest water cooler, which was tucked in his secretary's office. Foggy Bottom, he'd heard, had once been a nice marsh before some fool had decided to drain it. What a pity the Sierra Club hadn't been around then to force an environmental-impact

statement. They were so good at obstructing things, and didn't much care whether the things they halted were useful or not, and as a result they occasionally did some public good. But not this time, Ryan told himself, sitting back down. Then he lifted the STU-6 and punched the speed-dial button for State.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary," the National Security Advisor said pleasantly. "What's the story about the demonstration outside the Tokyo Embassy yesterday?"

"You saw CNN the same as I did, I'm sure," Hanson replied, as though it were not the function of an American embassy mission to provide better information than any citizen could get with his oatmeal.

"Yes, I did, as a matter of fact, but I would really like to have the opinion of embassy personnel, like maybe the political officer, maybe even the DCM," Ryan said, allowing a little of his irritation to show. Ambassador Chuck Whiting was a recent political appointee, a former senator who had then become a Washington lawyer, and had actually represented some Japanese business interests, but the Deputy Chief of Mission was an experienced man and a Japan specialist who knew the culture.

"Walt decided to keep his people in. He didn't want to provoke anything. I'm not going to fault him for that."

"That may be, but I have in my hand an eyewitness report from an experienced field officer who—"

"I have it, too, Ryan. It looks alarmist to me. Who is this guy?"

"As I said, an experienced field officer."

"Umm-hmm, I see he knows Iran." Ryan could hear the crackle of paper over the phone. "That makes him a spook. I guess that colored his thinking a little. How much experience in Japan?"

"Not much, but—"

"There you are. Alarmist, as I said. You want me to follow up on it, though?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary."

"Okay, I'll call Walt. Anything else? I'm prepping for Moscow, too."

"Please, let's light a fire under them?"

"Fine, Ryan. I'll make sure that gets through. Remember, it's already nighttime over there, okay?"

"Fine." Ryan replaced the phone in its cradle and swore. *Mustn't wake up the Ambassador*. He had several options. Typically, he took the most direct. He lifted his desk phone and punched the button for the President's personal secretary.

"I need to talk to the boss for a few."

"Thirty minutes?"

"That'll be fine, thank you."

The delay was explained by a ceremony in the East Room that Ryan had had on his daily schedule sheet, too, but had forgotten about. It was just too big for the Oval Office, which suited the secretarial staff. Ten TV cameras and a good hundred or so journalists watched as Roger Durling affixed his signature to the Trade Reform Act. The nature of the legislation demanded a number of pens, one for each letter of his name, which made the signing a lengthy and haphazard process. The first went, naturally enough, to Al Trent, who had authored the bill. The rest went to committee chairmen in the House and Senate, and also to selected minority members without whom the bill could not possibly have sailed through Congress as rapidly as it had. There was the usual applause, the usual handshakes, and a new entry was made in the United States Code, Annotated. The Trade Reform Act was now federal law.

One of the TV crews was from NHK. Their faces were glum. Next they would drive to the Commerce Department to interview the legal team that was analyzing Japanese laws and procedures for rapid duplication. It would be an unusually educational experience for the foreign journalists.

Like most senior government officials, Chris Cook had a TV in his office. He watched the signing on C-SPAN and, with it, saw the indefinite postponement of his entry into the "private" sector. It made him uneasy to accept outside payments while still a federal employee. They were going into a safe bank account, but it was illegal, wasn't it? He didn't really mean to break the law. Amity between America and Japan was important to him. It was now breaking down, and unless it could be rapidly restored, his career would stagnate and effectively end despite all the promise it had shown for so many years. And he needed the money. He had a dinner with Seiji scheduled for tonight. They had to discuss ways of making things right again, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State told himself, returning to his work.

On Massachusetts Avenue, Seiji Nagumo was watching the same TV channel and was just as unhappy. Nothing would ever be the same again, he thought. Perhaps the new government . . . no, Goto was a demagogic fool. His posturing and blustering would only make things worse. The sort of action needed was . . . what?

For the first time in his career, Nagumo had no idea what that might be. Diplomacy had failed. Lobbying had failed. Even espionage, if one could call it that, had failed. Espionage? Was that the proper term? Well, technically, yes, he admitted. He was now paying money for information. Cook and others. At least they were well placed, at least he'd been able to warn his government, At least the Foreign Ministry knew that he'd done his best, as much as any man could do—more, really. And he'd keep trying, working through Cook to affect the way the Americans interpreted Japanese laws. But the Americans had a term for it: rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

Reflection only made it worse, and soon the only word for what he felt was anguish. His countrymen would suffer, America, the world. All because of one traffic accident that had killed six inconsequential people. It was madness.

Madness or not, it was how the world worked. A messenger came into his office and handed over a sealed envelope for which Nagumo had to sign. He waited until his office door closed again before he opened it.

The cover sheet told him much. The dispatch was eyes-only. Even the Ambassador would never learn of what he was now reading. The instructions on the next two pages made his hand shake.

Nagumo remembered his history. Franz Ferdinand, June 28, 1914, in the cursed city of Sarajevo, a titled nonentity, a man of such little consequence that no one of importance had troubled himself to attend the funeral, but his murder had been the "damned, foolish thing" to start the first war to span the globe. In this case the inconsequential people had been a police officer and some females.

And on such trivialities, *this* would happen? Nagumo went very pale, but he had no choice in the matter, because his life was driven by the same forces that turned the world on its axis.

Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS began at the scheduled time. Like most such war games, it was a combination of free play and strict rules. The size of the Pacific Ocean made for ample room, and the game would be played between Marcus Island, a Japanese possession, and Midway. The idea was to simulate a conflict between the U.S. Navy and a smaller but modern frigate force, played by the Japanese Navy. The odds were heavily loaded against the latter, but not completely so. Marcus Island—called Minami Tori-shima on their charts—was, for the purposes of the exercise, deemed to be a continental land mass. In fact the atoll consisted of a mere 740 acres, scarcely large enough for a meteorological station, a small fishing colony, and a single runway, from which would fly a trio of P-3C

patrol aircraft. These could be administratively "shot down" by American fighters, but would return to life the next day. The commercial fishermen who also maintained a station on the island to harvest squid, kelp, and the occasional swordfish for their home markets welcomed the increased activity. The airmen had brought a cargo of beer which they would exchange for the fresh catch in what had become a friendly tradition.

Two of the three Orions lifted off before dawn, angling north and south, to search for the American carrier fleet. Their crewmen, aware of the trade problems between the two countries, concentrated on their mission. It was not an unknown mission to the Japanese Navy, after all. Their forefathers had done the same thing two generations before, in Kawasaki H8K2 flying boats—the same contractor that had built these Orions—to search for the marauding carriers commanded in turns by Halsey and Spruance. Many of the tactics they would employ today were based on lessons learned from that earlier conflict. The P-3Cs themselves were Japanese models of an American design that had begun life as turboprop airliners, then matured into rugged, powerful, if somewhat slow maritime patrol aircraft. As with most Japanese military aircraft, the American products had stopped at the basic profile. The power plants had since been developed and improved, giving the Orions a cruising speed boosted to 350 knots. The internal electronics were particularly good, especially the sensors designed to detect emissions from ships and aircraft. That was their mission for the moment, to fly out in large pie-shaped segments, listening for radar and radio signals that would announce the presence of American ships and aircraft. Reconnaissance: Find the enemy. That was the mission, and from press accounts and conversations with family members who worked in their country's economy, thinking of Americans as the enemy didn't even come all that hard.

Aboard *John Stennis*, Captain Sanchez watched the dawn patrol—a term beloved of all fighter pilots—shoot off the cats to establish an outer Combat Air Patrol. With the Tomcats off, next in line to go were the S-3 Vikings, antisubmarine birds with long legs to sweep the area the fleet would transit this day. Last went the Prowlers, the electronic bird-dogs, designed to detect and jam enemy radar signals. It was always exciting to watch from his perch at Pri-Fly. Almost as good as shooting off himself, but he was the CAG, and was supposed to command rather than merely lead his men now. His Alpha Strike force of Hornets was spotted on the deck, loaded with blue practice missiles for the discovery of the enemy battle force, the pilots sitting in their squadron ready rooms, mainly reading magazines or trading jokes

because they were already briefed in on the mission.

Admiral Sato watched his flagship disengage from the oiler *Homana,* one of four supporting his fleet. The captain of the fleet-support ship lofted his cap and waved encouragement. Sato returned the gesture as the oiler put her rudder over to depart the battle force. He now had enough fuel to drive his ships hard. The contest was an interesting one, essentially guile against brute force, not an unusual situation for his country's navy, and for this task he would employ traditional Japanese tactics. His sixteen surface warships were split into three groups, one of eight and two of four, widely separated. Similar to Yamamoto's plan for the Battle of Midway, his operational concept was far more practical now, because with GPS navigation their position was always known, and with satellite communications links they could exchange messages in relative security. The Americans probably expected that he would keep his ships close to his "homeland," but he would not. He would take the issue to the enemy as best he could, since passive defense was not the way of his people, a fact that the Americans had learned and then forgotten, hadn't they? That was an amusing thought.

"Yes, Jack?" The President was in another good mood, flush from signing a new law which, he hoped, would solve a major problem for his country, and by the by make his reelection chances look rosy indeed. It would be a shame to ruin his day, Ryan thought, but his job wasn't political, at least not that kind of political.

"You might want to look at this." He handed the fax sheet over without sitting down.

"Our friend Clark again?" Durling asked, leaning back in his chair and reaching for his reading glasses. He had to use them for normal correspondence, though his speeches and TelePrompTers had large-enough type to protect his presidential vanity.

"I presume State has seen this. What do they say?" the President asked when he finished it.

"Hanson calls it alarmist," Jack reported. "But the ambassador kept his troops inside for the event because he didn't want to cause an 'incident.' This is the only eyewitness report we have aside from the TV people."

"I haven't read the text of his speech yet. I have it here somewhere." Durling gestured at his desk.

"Might be a good idea to do so. I just did."

The President nodded. “And what else? I know there’s more.”

“And I told Mary Pat to activate THISTLE.” He explained briefly what that was.

“You really should get my permission first.”

“That’s what I’m here for, sir. You know a little about Clark. He doesn’t scare easily. THISTLE includes a couple of people in their Foreign Ministry and MITI. I think we want to know what they’re thinking.”

“They’re not enemies,” Durling observed.

“Probably not,” Jack conceded, for the first time allowing for the fact that the proper response wasn’t *certainly not*, a fact the President noted with a raised eyebrow. “We still need to know, sir. That’s my recommendation.”

“Okay. Approved. What else?”

“I also told her to get Kimberly Norton out, soonest. It ought to happen in the next twenty-four hours.”

“Sending Goto a message, are we?”

“That’s part of it. Simpler version is, we know she’s there, and she’s an American citizen and—”

“And I have kids, too. Also approved. Save the piety for church, Jack,” Durling ordered with a smile. “How will it go?”

“If she agrees to come out, they drive her to the airport and fly her to Seoul. They have clothes for her, and a fresh passport, and first-class tickets for her and an escort she’ll meet at the terminal. She changes planes to a KAL flight to New York. We check her into a hotel, settle her down, and debrief. We fly her parents in from Seattle, and explain to them that it’s to be kept quiet. The girl will probably need psychological counseling—I mean, really need it. That will help with the low profile. The FBI will assist on that one. Her father’s a cop. He should play along.” And that was neat and tidy enough for anyone, wasn’t it?

The President gave Ryan a nod. “So then, what do we tell Goto about it?”

“That’s your decision, Mr. President. I would recommend nothing at the moment. Let’s debrief the girl first. Say a week or so, and then the Ambassador will check in for the usual courtesy visit to present your greetings to a new head of government—”

“And ask him politely how his countrymen will react if Mr. Nationalist turned out to be dipping his wick in a round-eye. Then we extend a small olive branch, right?” Durling caught on quickly enough, Jack thought.

“That’s my recommendation, sir.”

“A very small one,” the President noted dryly.

“Just one olive on it for the moment,” Ryan conceded.

"Approved," Durling said again, adding more sharply, "Next are you going to suggest what olive branch to offer?"

"No, sir. Have I pushed too much?" Jack asked, realizing just how far he had gone.

Durling almost apologized for speaking crossly to his National Security Advisor. "You know, Bob was right about you."

"Excuse me?"

"Bob Fowler," Durling said, waving Ryan into a chair. "You ticked me off pretty bad when I brought you in the first time."

"Sir, I was a burn-out then, remember?" Jack did. The nightmares hadn't stopped yet. He saw himself, sitting there in the National Military Command Center, telling people what they had to do, but in the nightmare they couldn't see or hear him, as the Hot Line message kept coming in, taking his country closer and closer to the war he had in fact probably stopped. The full story on that had never been written in the open media. Just as well. Everyone who had been there knew.

"I didn't understand that then. Anyway"—Durling raised his arms to stretch—"when we dropped the ball last summer, Bob and I talked some things over up at Camp David. He recommended you for the job. Surprised?" the President asked with a twisty grin.

"Very," Jack admitted quietly. Arnie van Damm had never told him that story. Ryan wondered why.

"He said you're one levelheaded son of a bitch when the crap hits the fan. He also said you were an opinionated, pushy son of a bitch the rest of the time. Good judge of character, Bob Fowler." Durling gave him a moment to absorb that. "You're a good man in a storm, Jack. Do us both a favor and remember that this is as far as you can act without my approval. You've already had another pissing contest with Brett, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir." Jack bobbed his head like a schoolboy. "Just a little one."

"Don't push so hard. He's my Secretary of State."

"I understand, sir."

"All ready for Moscow?"

"Cathy is really looking forward to it," Ryan answered, pleased with the change of subject and noting that Durling had handled him very well indeed.

"It'll be good to see her again. Anne really likes her. Anything else?"

"Not right now."

"Jack, thanks for the heads-up," Durling said to conclude the meeting on a positive note.

Ryan left the office by the west door, walking past the (Teddy) Roosevelt Room and heading toward his office. Ed Kealty was in again, he saw, working in his office. He wondered when that one would break, realizing that the President, however pleased with the

events of this day, still had that scandal hanging over him. *That sword again,* Jack thought. He had gone a little close to the edge this time, and it was his mission to make the President's job easier, not harder. There was more to it, after all, than foreign entanglements—and politics, something he had tried to keep at arm's length for years, was as real as anything else.

Fowler? Damn.

It would be a safe time to do it, they knew. Goto was giving a speech on TV tonight, his maiden broadcast as Prime Minister, and whatever he said, it guaranteed that he wouldn't be with his young mistress that evening. Perhaps the night's mission would be an interesting and useful counterpoint to what the politician had to say, a reply, of sorts, from America. They both liked that idea.

John Clark and Ding Chavez were walking along the block at the proper time, looking across the crowded street at the nondescript building. They always seemed that way, John thought. Maybe someone would tumble to the idea that a garish façade or an office tower was actually better camouflage, or maybe not. More likely it was boredom talking again. A man came out and removed his sunglasses with his left hand. He smoothed his hair, stroking the back of his head twice with his left hand, then moved off. Nomuri had never ascertained the location of Kim Norton's room. Moving in that close was a risk, but the orders had come to take that risk, and now, having given the signal, he walked off toward where he'd left his car. Ten seconds later Nomuri was lost in the crowded sidewalk, Clark saw. He could do that. He had the right height and looks. So did Ding. With his size, glossy black hair, and complexion, Chavez at a distance could almost blend in here. The haircut he'd imposed on his partner helped even more. From behind he was just another person on the sidewalk. That was useful, Clark told himself, feeling ever more conspicuous, especially at a moment like this.

"Showtime," Ding breathed. Both men crossed the street as unobtrusively as possible.

Clark was dressed as a businessman, but rarely had he felt more naked. Neither he nor Ding had so much as a folding pocket knife. Though both men were well skilled in unarmed combat, both had enough experience to prefer arms—the better to keep one's enemies at a distance.

Luck smiled on them. There was no one in the tiny lobby of the building to note their presence. The two men took the stairs up. Second floor, all the way back, left side.

Nomuri had done his job well. The corridor was empty. Clark had

the lead, and headed quickly down the dimly lit passage. The lock was a simple one. With Ding standing guard, he took out his burglar tools and defeated it, then opened the door quickly. They were already inside before they realized that the mission was a bust.

Kimberly Norton was dead. She lay on a futon, wearing a medium-expensive silk kimono that was bunched just below the knees, exposing her lower legs. Postmortem lividity was beginning to color the underside of her body as gravity drew her blood downward. Soon the top of the body would be the color of ash, and the lower regions would be maroon. Death was so cruel, John thought. It wasn't enough that it stole life. It also stole whatever beauty the victim had once possessed. She'd been pretty—well, that was the point, wasn't it? John checked the body against the photograph, a passing resemblance to his younger daughter, Patsy. He handed the picture to Ding. He wondered if the lad would make the same connection.

"It's her."

"Concur, John," Chavez observed huskily. "It's her." Pause. "Shit," he concluded quietly, examining the face for a long moment that made his face twist with anger. *So*, Clark thought, *he sees it too.*

"Got a camera?"

"Yeah." Ding pulled a compact 35mm out of his pants pocket. "Play cop?"

"That's right."

Clark stooped down to examine the body. It was frustrating. He wasn't a pathologist, and though he had much knowledge of death, more knowledge still was needed to do this right. There . . . in the vein on the top of her foot, a single indentation. Not much more than that. So she'd been on drugs? If so, she'd been a careful user, John thought. She'd always cleaned the needle and . . . He looked around the room. There. A bottle of alcohol and a plastic bag of cotton swabs, and a bag of plastic syringes.

"I don't see any other needle marks."

"They don't always show, man," Chavez observed.

Clark sighed and untied the kimono, opening it. She'd been wearing nothing under it.

"Fuck!" Chavez rasped. There was fluid inside her thighs.

"That's a singularly unsuitable thing to say," Clark whispered back. It was as close as he'd come to losing his temper in many years. "*Take your pictures*."

Ding didn't answer. The camera flashed and whirred away. He recorded the scene as a forensic photographer might have done. Clark then started to rearrange the kimono, uselessly giving the girl back whatever dignity that death and men had failed to rob from her.

"Wait a minute . . . left hand."

Clark examined it. One nail was broken. All the others were medium-long, evenly coated with a neutral polish. He examined the others. There was something under them.

"Scratched somebody?" Clark asked.

"See anyplace she scratched herself, Mr. C?" Ding asked.

"No."

"Then she wasn't alone when it happened, man. Check her ankles again," Chavez said urgently.

On the left one, the foot with the puncture, the underside of the ankle revealed bruises almost concealed by the building lividity. Chavez shot his last frame.

"I thought so."

"Tell me why later. We're out of here," John said, standing.

Within less than a minute they were out the back door, down the meandering alley, and back on a main thoroughfare to wait for their car.

"That was close," Chavez observed as the police car pulled up to Number 18. There was a TV crew fifteen seconds behind.

"Don't you just love it? They're going to tie up everything real nice and neat . . . What is it, Ding?"

"Ain't right, Mr. C. Supposed to look like an OD, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You OD on smack, man, it just stops. Boom, bye-bye. I seen a guy go out like that back in the old days, never got the sticker out of his arm, okay? Heart stops, lungs stop, gone. You don't get up and set the needle down and then lay back down, okay? Bruises on the leg. Somebody stuck her. She was murdered, John. And probably she was raped, too."

"I saw the paraphernalia. All U.S.-made. Nice setup. They close the case, blame the girl and her family, give their own people an object lesson." Clark looked over as the car pulled around the corner. "Good eye, Ding."

"Thanks, boss." Chavez fell silent again, his anger building now that he had nothing to do but think it over. "You know, I'd really like to meet that guy."

"We won't."

Time for a little perverse fantasy: "I know, but I used to be a Ninja, remember? It might be real fun, especially barehanded."

"That just breaks bones, pretty often your own bones."

"I'd like to see his eyes when it happens."

"So put a good scope on the rifle," Clark advised.

"True," Chavez conceded. "What kind of person gets off on that, Mr. C?"

"One sick motherfucker, Domingo. I met a few, once."

Just before they got into the car, Ding's black eyes locked on Clark.

"Maybe I will meet this one personally, John. *El fado* can play tricks. Funny ones."

"Where is she?" Nomuri asked from behind the wheel.

"Drive," Clark told him.

"You should have heard the speech," Chet said, moving up the street and wondering what had gone wrong.

"The girl's dead," Ryan told the President barely two hours later, 1:00 P.M., Washington time.

"Natural causes?" Durling asked.

"Drug overdose, probably not self-administered. They have photos. We ought to have them in thirty-six hours. Our guys just got clear in time. The Japanese police showed up pretty fast."

"Wait a minute. Back up. You're saying murder?"

"That's what our people think, yes, Mr. President."

"Do they know enough to make that evaluation?"

Ryan took his seat and decided that he had to explain a little bit. "Sir, our senior officer knows a few things about the subject, yes."

"That was nicely phrased," the President noted dryly. "I don't want to know any more about that subject, do I?"

"No reason for it right now, sir, no."

"Goto?"

"Possibly one of his people. Actually the best indicator will be how their police report it. If anything they tell us is at variance with what we've learned from our own people, then we'll know that somebody played with the data, and not all that many people have the ability to order changes in police reports." Jack paused for a moment. "Sir, I've had another independent evaluation of the man's character." He went on to repeat Kris Hunter's story.

"You're telling me that you believe he had this young girl killed, and will use his police to cover it up? And you already knew he likes that sort of thing?" Durling flushed. "You wanted me to extend this bastard an olive branch? What the hell's the matter with you?"

Jack took a deep breath. "Okay, yes, Mr. President, I had that coming. The question is, now what do we do?"

Durling's face changed. "You didn't deserve that, sorry."

"Actually I do deserve it, Mr. President. I could have told Mary Pat to get her out some time ago—but I didn't," Ryan observed bleakly. "I didn't see this one coming."

"We never do, Jack. Now what?"

"We can't tell the legal attaché at the embassy because we don't 'know' about this yet, but I think we prep the FBI to check things out

after we're officially notified. I can call Dan Murray about that."

"Shaw's designated hitter?"

Ryan nodded. "Dan and I go back a ways. For the political side, I'm not sure. The transcript of his TV speech just came in. Before you read it, well, you need to know what sort of fellow we're dealing with."

"Tell me, how many common *bastards* like that run countries?"

"You know that better than I do, sir." Jack thought about that for a moment. "It's not entirely a bad thing. People like that are weak, Mr. President. Cowards, when you get down to it. If you have to have enemies, better that they have weaknesses."

He might make a state visit, Durling thought. *We might have to put him up at Blair House, right across the street. Throw a state dinner: we'll walk out into the East Room and make pretty speeches, and toast each other, and shake hands as though we're bosom buddies. Be damned to that!* He lifted the folder with Goto's speech and skimmed through it.

"That son of a bitch! '*America will have to understand* ,' my ass!"

"Anger, Mr. President, isn't an effective way of dealing with problems."

"You're right," Durling admitted. He was silent for a moment, then he smiled in a crooked way. "You're the one with the hot temper, as I recall."

Ryan nodded. "I've been accused of that, yes, sir."

"Well, that's two big ones we have to deal with when we get back from Moscow."

"Three, Mr. President. We need to decide what to do about India and Sri Lanka." Jack could see from the look on Durling's face that the President had allowed himself to forget about that one.

Durling had allowed himself to semiforget another problem as well.

"How much *longer* will I have to wait?" Ms. Linders demanded.

Murray could see her pain even more clearly than he heard it. How did you explain this to people? Already the victim of a vile crime, she'd gotten it out in the open, baring her soul for all manner of strangers. The process hadn't been fun for anyone, but least of all for her. Murray was a skilled and experienced investigator. He knew how to console, encourage, chivvy information out of people. He'd been the first FBI agent to listen to her story, in the process becoming as much a part of her mental-health team as Dr. Golden. After that had come another pair of agents, a man and a woman who specialized more closely in cases of this type. After them had come two separate psychiatrists, whose questioning had necessarily been somewhat adversarial, both to establish finally that her story was true in all details and to give her a taste of the hostility she would encounter.

Along the way, Murray realized, Barbara Linders had become even more of a victim than she'd been before. She'd built her self up, first, to reveal herself to Clarice, then again to do the same with Murray, then again, and yet once more still. Now she looked forward to the worst ordeal of all, for some of the members of the Judiciary Committee were allies of Ed Kealty, and some would take it upon themselves to hammer the witness hard either to curry favor with the cameras or to demonstrate their impartiality and professionalism as lawyers. Barbara knew that. Murray had himself walked her through the expected ordeal, even hitting her with the most awful of questions —always preceded with as gentle a preamble as possible, like, "One of the things you can expect to be asked is—"

It took its toll, and a heavy toll at that. Barbara—they were too close now for him to think of her as Ms. Linders—had shown all the courage one could expect of a crime victim and more besides. But courage was not something one picked out of the air. It was something like a bank account. You could withdraw only so much before it was necessary to stop, to take the time to make new deposits. Just the waiting, the not knowing when she would have to take her seat in the committee room and make her opening statement in front of bright TV lights, the certainty that she would have to bare her soul for the entire world . . . it was like a robber coming into the bank night after night to steal from her hard-won accumulation of inner resolve.

It was hard enough for Murray. He had built his case, had the prosecutor lined up, but he was the one close to her. It was *his* mission, Murray told himself, to show this lady that men were not like Ed Kealty, that a man was as repulsed by such acts as women were. He was her knight-errant. The disgrace and ultimate imprisonment of that criminal was now his mission in life even more than it was hers.

"Barb, you have to hang in there, kid. We're going to get this bastard, but we can't do it the right way unless . . ." He mouthed the words, putting conviction he didn't feel into them. Since when did politics enter into a criminal case? The law had been violated. They had their witnesses, their physical evidence, but now they were stuck in a holding pattern that was as damaging to this victim as any defense lawyer might be.

"It's taking too long!"

"Two more weeks, maybe three, and we go to bat, Barb."

"Look, I *know* something is happening, okay? You think I'm dumb? He's not out making speeches and opening bridges and stuff now, is he? Somebody told him and he's building up his case, isn't he?"

"I think what's happening is that the President is deliberately holding him in close so that when this does break, he won't be able to fall back on a high public profile as a defense. The President is on our

side, Barb. I've briefed him in on this case myself, and he said, 'A criminal is a criminal,' and that's *exactly* what he should have said."

Her eyes came up to meet his. They were moist and desperate. "I'm coming apart, Dan."

"No, Barb, you're not," Murray lied. "You're one tough, smart, brave lady. You're going to come through this. He's the one who's going to come apart." Daniel E. Murray, Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, reached his hand across the table. Barbara Linders took it, squeezing it as a child might with her father, forcing herself to believe and to trust, and it shamed him that she was paying such a price because the President of the United States had to subordinate a criminal case to a question of politics. Perhaps it made sense in the great scheme of things, but for a cop the great scheme of things usually came down to one crime and one victim.

16

Payloads

The final step in arming the H-11/SS-19 missiles necessarily had to await official word from the nation's Prime Minister. In some ways the final payoff was something of a disappointment. They had originally hoped to affix a full complement of warheads, at least six each, to the nose of each bird, but to do that would have meant actually testing the trans-stage bus in flight, and *that* was just a little too dangerous. The covert nature of the project was far more important than the actual number of warheads, those in authority had decided. And they could always correct it at a later date. They'd deliberately left the top end of the Russian design intact for that very reason, and for the moment a total of 10 one-megaton warheads would have to do.

One by one, the individual silos were opened by the support crew, and one by one the oversized RVs were lifted off the flatcar, set in place, then covered with their aerodynamic shrouds. Again the Russian design served their purposes very well indeed. Each such operation took just over an hour, which allowed the entire procedure to be accomplished in a single night by the crew of twenty. The silos were resealed, and it was done; their country was now a nuclear power.

"Amazing," Goto observed.

"Actually very simple," Yamata replied. "The government funded the fabrication and testing of the 'boosters' as part of our space program. The plutonium came from the Monju reactor complex. Designing and building the warheads was child's play. If some Arabs can do a crude warhead in a cave in Lebanon, how hard can it be for our technicians?" In fact, everything but the warhead-fabrication process had been government funded in one way or another, and Yamata was sure that the informal consortium that had done the latter would be compensated as well. Had they not done it all for their country? "We will immediately commence training for the Self-Defense Force personnel to take over from our own people—once you

assign them to us for that purpose, Goto-san."

"But the Americans and the Russians . . . ?"

Yamata snorted. "They are down to one missile each, and those will be officially blown up this week, as we will all see on television. As you know, their missile submarines have been deactivated. Their Trident missiles are already all gone, and the submarines are lined up awaiting dismantlement. A mere ten working ICBMs give us a marked strategic advantage."

"But what if they try to build more?"

"They can't—not very easily," Yamata corrected himself. "The production lines have been closed down, and in accordance with the treaty, the tooling has all been destroyed under international inspection. To start over would take months, and we would find out very quickly. Our next important step is to launch a major naval-construction program"—for which Yamata's yards were ready—"so that our supremacy in the Western Pacific will be unassailable. For the moment, with luck and the help of our friends, we will have enough to see us through. Before they will be able to challenge us, our strategic position will have improved to the point where they will have to accept our position and then treat us as equals."

"So I must now give the order?"

"Yes, Prime Minister," Yamata replied, again explaining to the man his job function.

Goto rubbed his hands together for a moment and looked down at the ornate desk so newly his. Ever the weak man, he temporized. "It is true, my Kimba was a drug addict?"

Yamata nodded soberly, inwardly enraged at the remark. "Very sad, is it not? My own chief of security, Kaneda, found her dead and called the police. It seems that she was very careful about it, but not careful enough."

Goto sighed quietly. "Foolish child. Her father is a policeman, you know. A very stern man, she said. He didn't understand her. I did," Goto said. "She was a kind, gentle spirit. She would have made a fine geisha."

It was amazing how people transformed in death, Yamata thought coldly. That foolish, shameless girl had defied her parents and tried to make her own way in the world, only to find that the world was not tolerant of the unprepared. But because she'd had the ability to give Goto the illusion that he was a man, now she was a kind and gentle spirit.

"Goto-san, can we allow the fate of our nation to be decided by people like that?"

"No." The new Prime Minister lifted his phone. He had to consult a sheet on his desk for the proper number. "Climb Mount Niitaka," he

said when the connection was made, repeating an order that had been given more than fifty years earlier.

In many ways the plane was singular, but in others quite ordinary. The VC-25B was in fact the Air Force's version of the venerable Boeing 747 airliner. A craft with fully thirty years of history in its design, and still in serial production at the plant outside Seattle, it was painted in colors that had been chosen by a politically selected decorator to give the proper impression to foreign countries, whatever that was. Sitting alone on the concrete ramp, it was surrounded by uniformed security personnel "with authorization," in the dry Pentagonese, to use their M 16 rifles far more readily than uniformed guards at most other federal installations. It was a more polite way of saying, "Shoot first and ask questions later."

There was no jetway. People had to climb stairs into the aircraft, just as in the 1950s, but there was still a metal detector, and you still had to check your baggage—this time to Air Force and Secret Service personnel who X-rayed everything and opened much of it for visual inspection.

"I hope you left your Victoria's Secret stuff at home," Jack observed with a chuckle as he hoisted the last bag on the counter.

"You'll find out when we get to Moscow," Professor Ryan replied with an impish wink. It was her first state trip, and everything at Andrews Air Force Base was new for her.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan! We finally meet." Helen D'Agustino came over and extended her hand.

"Cathy, this is the world's prettiest bodyguard," Jack said, introducing the Secret Service agent to his wife.

"I couldn't make the last state dinner," Cathy explained. "There was a seminar up at Harvard."

"Well, this trip ought to be pretty exciting," the Secret Service agent said, taking her leave smoothly to continue her duties.

Not as exciting was my last one, Jack thought, remembering another story that he couldn't relate to anyone.

"Where's she keep her gun?" Cathy asked.

"I've never searched her for it, honey," Jack said with a wink of his own.

"Do we go aboard now?"

"I can go aboard whenever I want," her husband replied. "Color me important." So much the better to board early and show her around, he decided, heading her toward the door. Designed to carry upwards of three hundred passengers in its civilian incarnation, the President's personal 747 (there was another backup aircraft, of course) was

outfitted to hold a third of that number in stately comfort. Jack first showed his wife where they would be sitting, explaining that the pecking order was very clear. The closer you were to the front of the aircraft, the more important you were. The President's accommodations were in the nose, where two couches could convert into beds. The Ryans and the van Damms would be in the next area, twenty feet or so aft in a space that could seat eight, but only five in this case. Joining them would be the President's Director of Communications, a harried and usually frantic former TV executive named Tish Brown, recently divorced. Lesser staff members were sorted aft in diminishing importance until you got to the media, deemed less important still.

"This is the kitchen?" Cathy asked.

"Galley," Jack corrected. It was impressive, as were the meals prepared here, actually *cooked* from fresh ingredients and not reheated as was the way on airliners.

"It's bigger than ours!" she observed, to the amused pleasure of the chief cook, an Air Force master sergeant.

"Not quite, but the chef's better, aren't you, Sarge?"

"I'll turn my back now. You can slug him, ma'am. I won't tell."

Cathy merely laughed at the jibe. "Why isn't he upstairs in the lounge?"

"That's almost all communications gear. The President likes to wander up there to talk to the crew, but the guys who live there are mainly cryppies."

"Cryppies?"

"Communications guys," Jack explained, leading his wife back to their seats. The seats were beige leather, extra wide and extra soft, with recently added swing-up TV screens, personal phones, and other features which Cathy started to catalog, down to the presidential seal on the belt-buckles.

"Now I know what first-class really means."

"It's still an eleven-hour flight, babe," Jack observed, settling in while others boarded. With luck he'd be able to sleep most of the way.

The President's televised departure statement followed its own pattern. The microphone was always set up so that Air Force One loomed in the background, to remind everyone of who he was and to prove it by showing his personal plane. Roy Newton watched more for timing than anything else. Statements like this never amounted to much, and only C-SPAN carried them at all, though the network newsies were always there with cameras in case the airplane blew up on takeoff. Concluding his remarks, Durling took his wife, Anne, by

the arm and walked to the stairs, where a sergeant saluted. At the door of the aircraft, the President and the First Lady turned to give a final wave as though already on the campaign trail—in a very real way this trip was part of that almost-continuous process—then went inside. C-SPAN switched back to the floor of the House, where various junior members were giving brief speeches under special orders. The President would be in the air for eleven hours, Newton knew, more time than he needed.

It was time to go to work.

The ancient adage was true enough, he thought, arranging his notes. If more than one person knew it, it wasn't a secret at all. Even less so if you both knew part of it and also knew who knew the rest, because then you could sit down over dinner and let on that you knew, and the other person would think that you knew it all, and would then tell you the parts you hadn't learned quite yet. The right smiles, nods, grunts, and a few carefully selected words would keep your source going until it was all there in plain sight. Newton supposed it was not terribly different for spies. Perhaps he would have been a good one, but it didn't pay any better than his stint in Congress—not even as well, in fact—and he'd long since decided to apply his talent to something that could make him a decent living,

The rest of the game was a lot easier. You had to select the right person to give the information to, and that choice was made merely by reading the local papers carefully. Every reporter had a hot-button item, something for which he or she had a genuinely passionate interest, and for that reason reporters were no different from anyone else. If you knew what buttons to push, you could manipulate anyone. What a pity it hadn't quite worked with the people in his district, Newton thought, lifting the phone and punching the buttons.

"Libby Holtzman."

"Hi, Libby, this is Roy. How are things?"

"A little slow," she allowed, wondering if her husband, Bob, would get anything good on the Moscow trip with the presidential party.

"How about dinner?" He knew that her husband was away.

"What about?" she asked. She knew it wasn't a tryst or something similarly foolish. Newton was a player, and usually had something interesting to tell.

"It'll be worth your time," he promised. "Jockey Club, seven-thirty?"

"I'll be there."

Newton smiled. It was all fair play, wasn't it? He'd lost his congressional seat on the strength of an accusation about influence-peddling. It hadn't been strong enough to have merited prosecution (someone else had influenced that), but it had been enough, barely, to

persuade 50.7 percent of the voters in that off-year election that someone else should have the chance to represent them. In a presidential-election year, Newton thought, he would almost certainly have eked out a win, but congressional seats once lost are almost never regained.

It could have been much worse. This life wasn't so bad, was it? He'd kept the same house, kept his kids in the same school, then moved them on to good colleges, kept his membership in the same country club. He just had a different constituency now, no ethics laws to trouble his mind about—not that they ever had, really—and it sure as hell paid a lot better, didn't it?

DATELINE PARTNERS was being run out via computer-satellite relay—three of them, in fact. The Japanese Navy was linking all of its data to its fleet-operations center in Yokohama. The U.S. Navy did the same into Fleet-Ops at Pearl Harbor. Both headquarters offices used a third link to swap their own pictures. The umpires who scored the exercise in both locations thus had access to everything, but the individual fleet commanders did not. The purpose of the game was to give both sides realistic battle training, for which reason cheating was not encouraged—"cheating" was a concept by turns foreign and integral with the fighting of wars, of course.

Pacific Fleet's type commanders, the admirals in charge of the surface, air, submarine, and service forces, respectively, watched from their chairs as the game unfolded, each wondering how his underlings would perform.

"Sato's no dummy, is he?" Commander Chambers noted.

"The boy's got some beautiful moves," Dr. Jones opined. A senior contractor with his own "special-access" clearance, he'd been allowed into the center on Mancuso's parole. "But it isn't going to help him up north."

"Oh?" SubPac turned and smiled. "You know something I don't?"

"The sonar departments on *Charlotte* and *Asheville* are damned good, Skipper. My people worked with them to set up the new tracking software, remember?"

"The CO's aren't bad either," Mancuso pointed out.

Jones nodded agreement. "You bet, sir. They know how to listen, just like you did."

"God," Chambers breathed, looking down at the new four-ring shoulder boards and imagining he could feel the added weight. "Admiral, you ever wonder how we would have made it without Jonesy here?"

"We had Chief Laval with us, remember?" Mancuso said.

"Frenchy's son is the lead sonarman on *Asheville*, Mr. Chambers." For Jones, Mancuso would always be "skipper" and Chambers would always be a lieutenant. Neither officer objected. It was one of the rules of the naval service that bonded officers and (in this case, former) enlisted personnel.

"I didn't know that," SubPac admitted.

"Just joined up with her. He was on *Tennessee* before. Very sharp kid, made first-class three years out of his A-school."

"That's faster than you did it," Chambers observed. "Is he that good?"

"Sure as hell. I'm trying to recruit him for my business. He got married last year, has a kid on the way. It shouldn't be too hard to bribe him out into civilian life."

"Thanks a lot, Jonesy," Mancuso growled. "I oughta kick your ass outa here."

"Oh, come on, Skipper. When's the last time we got together for some real fun?" In addition to which, Jones's new whale-hunting software had been incorporated in what was left of the Pacific SOSUS system. "About time for an update."

The fact that both sides had observers in the other's headquarters was something of a complication, largely because there were assets and capabilities in both cases that were not strictly speaking shared. In this case, SOSUS-generated traces that might or might not be the Japanese submarine force northwest of Kure were actually better than what appeared on the main plotting board. The real traces were given to Mancuso and Chambers. Each side had two submarines. Neither American boat showed up on the traces, but the Japanese boats were conventionally powered, and had to go periodically to snorkeling depth in order to run their diesels and recharge their batteries. Though the Japanese submarines had their own version of the American Prairie-Masker systems, Jones's new software had gone a long way to defeat that countermeasure. Mancuso and the rest retired to the SubPac plotting room to examine the newest data.

"Okay, Jonesy, tell me what you see," Mancuso ordered, looking at the paper printouts from the underwater hydrophones that littered the bottom of the Pacific.

The data was displayed both electronically on TV-type displays and on fan-fold paper of the sort once used for computer printouts for more detailed analysis. For work like this, the latter was preferred, and there were two sets. One of them had already been marked up by the oceanographic technicians of the local SOSUS detachment. To make this a double-blind analysis, and to see if Jones still knew how, Mancuso kept separate the set already analyzed by his people.

Still short of forty, Jones had gray already in his thick dark hair,

though he chewed gum now instead of smoking. The intensity was still there, Mancuso saw. Dr. Ron Jones flipped pages like an accountant on the trail of embezzlement, his finger tracing down the vertical lines on which frequencies were recorded.

"We assume that they'll snort every eight hours or so?" he asked.

"That's the smart thing, to keep their batteries fully charged," Chambers agreed with a nod.

"What time are they operating on?" Jones asked. Typically, American submarines at sea adjusted their clocks to Greenwich Mean Time—recently changed to "Universal Time" with the diminution of the Royal Navy, whose power had once allowed the prime meridian to be defined by the British.

"I presume Tokyo," Mancuso replied. "That's us minus five."

"So we start looking for patterns, midnight and even hours their time." There were five of the wide-folded sheets. Jones flipped one complete set at a time, noting the time references in the margins. It took him ten minutes.

"Here's one, and here's another. These two are possible. This one's also possible, but I don't think so. I'll put money down on this one . . . and this one for starters." His fingers tapped on seemingly random lines of dots.

"Wally?"

Chambers turned to the other table and flipped the marked-up sets to the proper time settings. "Jonesy, you fuckin' witch!" he breathed. It had taken a team of skilled technicians—experts all——over two hours to do what Jones had accomplished in a few minutes before their again-incredulous eyes.

The civilian contractor pulled a can of Coke from the nearby cooler and popped it open. "Gentlemen," he asked, "who's the all-time champ?"

That was only part of it, of course. The printouts merely gave bearing to a suspected noise source, but there were several of the bottom-sited SOSUS arrays, and triangulation had already been accomplished, nailing the datum points down to radii of ten to fifteen nautical miles. Even with Jones's improvements in the system, that still left a lot of ocean to search.

The phone rang. It was Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet. Mancuso took the call and made his recommendations for vectoring *Charlotte* and *Asheville* onto the suspected contacts. Jones observed the exchange and nodded approval.

"See what I mean, Skipper? You always did know how to listen."

* * *

Murray had been out discussing a few budgetary matters with the Assistant-Director-in-Charge of the Washington Field Office, therefore missing the phone call. The top-secret dispatch from the White House was tucked away in secure files, and then his secretary had been called out to bring a sick child home from school. As a result, the handwritten message from Ryan had been unconscionably late in coming to his attention.

"The Norton girl," he said, walking into Director Shaw's office.

"Bad?"

"Dead," Murray said, handing the paper over. Shaw scanned it quickly.

"Shit," the FBI Director whispered. "Did she have a prior history of drug use?"

"Not that I recall."

"Word from Tokyo?"

"I haven't checked in with the Leg-At yet. Bad timing for that, Bill."

Shaw nodded, and the thought in his mind was transparent. Ask any FBI agent for the case he bragged about, and it is always kidnapping. It was really how the Bureau had made its name back in the 1930s. The Lindbergh Law had empowered the FBI to assist any local police force as soon as the possibility existed that the victim could have been taken across a state line. With the mere possibility—the victims were rarely actually transported so far—the whole weight and power of America's premier law-enforcement agency descended on the case like a pack of especially hungry wolves. The real mission was always the same: to get the victim back alive, and there the results were excellent. The secondary objective was to apprehend, charge, and try the subjects in question, and there the record, statistically speaking, was better still. They didn't know yet if Kimberly Norton had been a kidnap victim. They did know that she would be coming home dead. That single fact, for any FBI agent, was a professional failure.

"Her father's a cop."

"I remember, Dan."

"I want to go out there and talk it over with O'Keefe." Part of it was because Captain Norton deserved to hear it from other cops, not through the media. Part of it was because the cops on the case *had* to do it, to admit their failure to him. And part of it would be for Murray to take a look at the case file himself, to be sure for himself that all that might have been done, had been done.

"I can probably spare you for a day or two," Shaw replied. "The Linders case is going to wait until the President gets back anyway. Okay, get packed."

“This is better than the Concorde!” Cathy gushed at the Air Force corporal who served dinner. Her husband almost laughed. It wasn’t often that Caroline Ryan’s eyes went quite so wide, but then he was long accustomed to this sort of service, and the food was certainly better than she customarily ate in the Hopkins physicians’ dining room. And there the plates didn’t have gold trim, one of the reasons that Air Force One had so much pilferage.

“Wine for madam?” Ryan lifted the bottle of Russian River chardonnay and poured as his plate came down.

“We don’t drink wine on the chicken farm, you see,” she told the corporal with a small measure of embarrassment.

“Everybody’s this way the first time, Dr. Ryan. If you need anything, please buzz me.” She headed back to the galley.

“See, Cathy, I told you, stick with me.”

“I wondered how you got used to flying,” she noted, tasting the broccoli. “Fresh.”

“The flight crew’s pretty good, too.” He gestured to the wineglasses. Not a ripple.

“The pay isn’t all that great,” Arnie van Damm said from the other side of the compartment, “but the perks ain’t too bad.”

“The blackened redfish isn’t bad at all.”

“Our chef stole the recipe from the Jockey Club. Best Cajun redfish in town,” van Damm explained. “I think he had to trade his potato soup for it. Fair deal,” Arnie judged.

* * *

“He gets the crust just right, doesn’t he?”

One of Washington’s few really excellent restaurants, the Jockey Club was located in the basement of the Ritz Carlton Hotel on Massachusetts Avenue. A quiet, dimly lit establishment, it had for many years been a place for “power” meals of one sort or another.

All the food here is good, Libby Holtzman thought, especially when someone else paid for it. The previous hour had handled all manner of small talk, the usual exchange of information and gossip that was even more important in Washington than most American cities. That was over now. The wine was served, the salad plates gone, and the main course on the table. “So, Roy, what’s the big item?”

“Ed Kealty.” Newton looked up to watch her eyes.

“Don’t tell me, his wife is finally going to leave the rat?”

“He’s probably going to be the one leaving, as a matter of fact.”

“Who’s the unlucky bimbo?” Mrs. Holtzman asked with a wry smile.

“Not what you think, Libby. Ed’s going away.” You always wanted

to make them wait for it.

"Roy, it's eight-thirty, okay?" Libby observed, making her position clear.

"The FBI has a case running on Kealty. Rape. More than one, in fact. One of the victims killed herself."

"Lisa Beringer?" The reason for her suicide had never been adequately explained.

"She left a letter behind. The FBI has it now. They also have several other women who are willing to testify."

"Wow," Libby Holtzman allowed herself to say. She set her fork down. "How solid is this?"

"The man running the case is Dan Murray, Shaw's personal attack dog."

"I know Dan. I also know he won't talk about this." You rarely got an FBI agent to discuss evidentiary matters in a criminal case, certainly not before it was presented. That sort of leak almost always came from an attorney or court clerk. "He doesn't just do things by the book—he *wrote* the book." It was literally true. Murray had helped draft many of the Bureau's official procedures.

"He might, this one time."

"Why, Roy?"

"Because Durling is holding things up. He thinks he needs Kealty for his clout on the Hill. You notice that Eddie-boy has been in the White House a lot lately? Durling spilled it all to him so that he can firm up his defense. At least," Newton said to cover himself, "that's what people are telling me. It does seem a little out of character, doesn't it?"

"Obstruction of justice?"

"That's the legal term, Libby. Technically speaking, well, I'm not quite sure it meets the legal test." Now the hook was well in the water, and the bait worm was wiggling very nicely.

"What if he was just holding it off to keep it from competing with the trade bill?" The fish was giving it a look, but wondering about the shiny, barbed thing behind the worm. . . .

"This one goes back further than that, Libby. They've been sitting on it for quite a while, that's what I hear. It does make a great excuse, though, doesn't it?" It was a very enticing worm, though.

"If you think politics takes precedence over a sexual-assault case. How solid is the case?"

"If it goes in front of a jury, Ed Kealty is going to spend time in a federal penitentiary."

"That solid?" My, what a juicy fat worm it was.

"Like you said, Murray's a good cop."

"Who's the U.S. Attorney on the case?"

"Anne Cooper. She's been full-time on this for weeks." One hell of a good worm, in fact. That barbed, shiny thing wasn't all that dangerous, was it?

Newton took an envelope from his pocket and set it on the tablecloth. "Names, numbers, details, but you didn't get them from me, okay?" The worm appeared to dance in the water, and it was no longer apparent that the hook was the thing really moving.

"What if I can't verify anything?"

"Then there's no story, and my sources are wrong, and I hope you enjoyed dinner." Of course, the worm might just go away.

"Why, Roy? Why you, why the story?" Circling, circling. But how did this worm ever get here?

"I've never liked the guy. You know that. We butted heads on two big irrigation bills, and he killed a defense project in my state. But you really want to know why? I have daughters, Libby. One's a senior at U-Penn. Another one's just starting University of Chicago Law School. They both want to follow in their dad's footsteps, and I don't want my little girls staffing on the Hill with *bastards* like Ed Kealty around." Who really cared how the worm got in the water, anyway?

With a knowing nod, Libby Holtzman took the envelope. It went into her purse without being opened. Amazing how they never noticed the hook until it was too late. Sometimes not even then. The waiter was disappointed when both diners passed on the dessert cart, settling for just a quick espresso before paying the bill.

"Hello?"

"Barbara Linders?" a female voice asked.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Libby Holtzman from the *Post*. I live a few blocks away from you. I'd like to know if I might come over and talk about a few things."

"What things?"

"Ed Kealty, and why they've decided not to prosecute the case."

"They *what?*"

"That's what we're hearing," the voice told her.

"Wait a minute. They warned me about this," Linders said suspiciously, already giving part of the game away.

"They always warn you about something, usually the wrong thing. Remember, I was the one who did the story last year about Congressman Grant and that nasty little thing he had going on in his district office? And I was also the one who nailed that bastard undersecretary in Interior. I keep a close eye on cases like this, Barbara," the voice said, sister-to-sister. It was true. Libby Holtzman had nearly bagged a Pulitzer for her reporting on political sex-abuse

cases.

"How do I know it's really you?"

"You've seen me on TV, right? Ask me over and you'll see. I can be there in five minutes."

"I'm going to call Mr. Murray."

"That's fine. Go ahead and call him, but promise me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"If he tells you the same thing about why they're not doing anything, then we can talk." The voice paused. "In fact, how about I come over right now anyway? If Dan tells you the right thing, we can just have a cup of coffee and do some background stuff for later. Fair enough?"

"Okay . . . I guess that's okay. I have to call Mr. Murray now." Barbara Linders hung up and dialed another number from memory.

"Hi, this is Dan—"

"Mr. Murray!" Barbara said urgently, her faith in the world so badly shaken already.

"—and this is Liz," another voice said, obviously now on tape. "We can't come to the phone right now . . ." both voices said together—

"Where are you when I need you?" Ms. Linders demanded of the recording machine, hanging up in a despairing fury before the humorous recording delivered her to the beep. Was it possible? Could it be true?

This is Washington, her experience told her. *Anything could be true.*

Barbara Linders looked around the room. She'd been in Washington for eleven years. What did she have to show for it? A one-bedroom apartment with prints on the wall. Nice furniture that she used alone. Memories that threatened her sanity. She was so alone, so damned alone with them, and she had to let them go, get them out, strike back at the man who had wrecked her life so thoroughly. And now that would be denied her, too? Was it possible? The most frightening thing of all was that Lisa had felt this way. She knew that from the letter she'd kept, a photocopy of which was still in the jewelry box on her bureau. She'd kept it both as a keepsake of her best friend and to remind herself not to go as dangerously far into despair as Lisa had. Reading that letter a few months ago had persuaded her to open up to her gynecologist, who had in turn referred her to Clarice Golden, starting the process that had led her—where? The door buzzed then, and Barbara went to answer it.

"Hi! Recognize me?" The question was delivered with a warm and sympathetic smile. Libby Holtzman was a tall woman with thick ebony hair that framed a pale face and warm brown eyes.

"Please come in," Barbara said, backing away from the door.

"Did you call Dan?"

"He wasn't home . . . or maybe he just left the machine on," Barbara thought. "You know him?"

"Oh, yes. Dan's an acquaintance," Libby said, heading toward the couch.

"Can I trust him? I mean, *really* trust him."

"Honestly?" Holtzman paused. "Yes. If he were running the case all by himself, yes, you could. Dan's a good man. I mean that."

"But he's not running the case by himself, is he?"

Libby shook her head. "It's too big, too political. The other thing about Murray is, well, he's a very loyal man. He does what he's told. Can I sit down, Barbara?"

"Please." Both sat on the couch.

"You know what the press does? It's our job to keep an eye on things. I like Dan. I admire him. He really is a good cop, an honest cop, and I'll bet you that everything he's done with you, well, he's acted like your big tough brother, hasn't he?"

"Every step of the way," Barbara confirmed. "He's been my best friend in all the world."

"That wasn't a lie. He's one of the good guys. I know his wife, Liz, too. The problem is, not everyone is like Dan, and that's where we come in," Libby told her.

"How do you mean?"

"When somebody tells a guy like Dan what he has to do, mostly they do it. They do it because they have to, because that's what the rules are—and you know something? He hates it, almost as much as you do. My job, Barbara, is to help people like Dan, because I can get the bastards off their backs, too."

"I can't . . . I mean, I just can't—"

Libby reached out and stopped her with a gentle touch on the hand.

"I'm not going to ask you to give me anything on the record, Barbara. That could mess up the criminal case, and you know I want this one to be handled through the system just as much as you do. But can you talk to me off the record?"

"Yes! . . . I think so."

"Do you mind if I record this?" The reporter pulled a small recorder from her purse.

"Who will hear it?"

"The only other person will be my AME—assistant managing editor. We do that to make sure that we have good sources. Except for that, it's like talking to your lawyer or doctor or minister. Those are the rules, and we never break them."

Intellectually speaking, Barbara knew that, but here and now in her apartment, the ethical rules of journalism seemed a thin reed. Libby Holtzman could see it in her eyes.

"If you want, I can just leave, or we can talk without the recorder, but"—a disarming smile—"I hate taking shorthand. You make mistakes that way. If you want to think about it a little while, that's okay, too. You've had enough pressure. I know that. I know what this can be like."

"That's what Dan says, but he *doesn't!* He doesn't *really* ."

Libby Holtzman looked straight into her eyes. She wondered if Murray had seen the same pain and felt it as deeply as she did now. Probably so, she thought, quite honestly, probably in a slightly different way, because he was a man, but he *was* a good cop, and he was probably just as mad about the way the case was going as she now felt.

"Barbara, if you just want to talk about . . . things, that's okay, too. Sometimes we just need a friend to talk to. I don't have to be a reporter all the time."

"Do you know about Lisa?"

"Her death was never really explained, was it?"

"We were best friends, we shared everything . . . and then when he —"

"Are you sure Kealty was involved with that?"

"I'm the one who found the letter, Libby."

"What can you tell me about that?" Holtzman asked, unable to restrain her journalistic focus now.

"I can do better than tell you." Linders rose and disappeared for a moment. She returned with the photocopies and handed them over.

It only took two minutes to read the letter once and then once again. Date, place, method. *A message from beyond the grave,* Libby thought. What was more dangerous than ink on paper?

"For what's on here, and what you know, he could go to prison, Barbara."

"That's what Dan says. He smiles when he says it. He wants it to happen."

"Do you?" Holtzman asked.

"Yes!"

"Then let me help."

17

Strike One

It's called the miracle of modern communications only because nothing modern is supposed to be a curse. In fact, those on the receiving end of such information were often appalled by what they got.

It had been a smooth flight, even by the standards of Air Force One, on which many passengers—mainly the younger and more foolish White House staffers—often refused to buckle their seat belts as a show of . . . something, Ryan thought. The Air Force flight crew was as good as any, he knew, but it hadn't prevented one incident on final at Andrews, where a thunderbolt had blown the nosecone off the aircraft carrying the Secretary of Defense and his wife, rather to everyone's discomfiture. And so he always kept his belt on, albeit loosely, just as the flight crew did.

"Dr. Ryan?" The whisper was accompanied by a shake of his shoulders.

"What is it, Sarge?" There was no sense in grumbling at an innocent NCO.

"Mr. van Damm needs you upstairs, sir."

Jack nodded and moved his seat to the upright position. The sergeant handed him a coffee mug on the way. A clock told him it was nine in the morning, but it didn't say *where* it was nine in the morning, and Ryan could not at the moment remember what zone the clock was set on. It was all theoretical anyway. How many time zones could dance inside an airliner?

The upper deck of the VC-25B contrasted sharply with the lower deck. Instead of plush appointments, the compartment here was lined with military-style electronics gear whose individual boxes had chromed bars for easy removal and replacement. A sizable team of communications specialists was always at work, tapped into every source of information one might imagine: digital radio, TV, and fax, every single channel encrypted. Arnie van Damm stood in the middle of the area, and handed something over. It turned out to be a facsimile copy of the *Washington Post's* late edition, about to hit the street, four thousand miles and six hours away.

VICE PRESIDENT IMPLICATED IN SUICIDE, the four-column headline announced. FIVE WOMEN CHARGE EDWARD KEALTY WITH SEXUAL ABUSE.

"You woke me up for this?" Ryan asked. It was nowhere near his area of responsibility, was it?

"You're named in the story," Arnie told him.

"What?" Jack scanned the piece. " 'National Security Advisor Ryan is one of those briefed in on the affair.' Okay, I guess that's true, isn't it?"

"Keep going."

" 'The White House told the FBI four weeks ago not to present the case to the Judiciary Committee.' That's not true."

"This one's a beautiful combination of what is and what isn't." The Chief of Staff was in an even fouler mood than Ryan.

"Who leaked?"

"I don't know, but Libby Holtzman ran this piece, and her husband is sleeping aft. He likes you. Get him and talk to him."

"Wait a minute, this is something that a little time and truth will settle out, Arnie. The President hasn't done anything wrong that I know about."

"His political enemies can call the delay obstruction of justice."

"Come on." Jack shook his head in disbelief. "No way that would stand up to examination."

"It doesn't have to, damn it. We're talking politics, remember, not facts, and we have *elections* coming up. Talk to Bob Holtzman. Now," van Damm ordered. He didn't do it often with Ryan, but he did have the authority.

"Tell the Boss yet?" Jack asked, folding up his copy.

"We'll let him sleep for a while. Send Tish up on the way, will you?"

"Okay." Ryan headed back down and shook Tish Brown awake, pointed upstairs, then headed aft to a flight attendant—crew member, he corrected himself. "Get Bob Holtzman up here, will you?" Through an open port he could see that it was light outside. Maybe it was nine o'clock where they were going? Yeah, they were scheduled to arrive in Moscow at two in the afternoon, local time. The head cook was sitting in his galley, reading a copy of *Time*. Ryan went in and got his own coffee refill.

"Can't sleep, Dr. Ryan?"

"Not anymore. Duty calls."

"I have rolls baking, if you want."

"Great idea."

"What is it?" Bob Holtzman asked, sticking his head in. Like every man aboard at the moment, he needed a shave. Jack merely handed over the story.

"What gives?"

Holtzman was a fast reader. "Jesus, is this true?"

"How long has Libby been on this one?"

"It's news to me—oh, shit, sorry, Jack."

Ryan nodded with more smile than he felt. "Yeah, I just woke up, too."

"Is it true?"

"This is on background?"

"Agreed."

"The FBI's been running the case for some time now. The dates in Libby's piece are close, and I'd have to check my office logs for the exact ones. I got briefed in right around the time the trade thing blew up because of Kealty's security clearance—what I can tell him, what I can't, you know how that goes, right?"

"Yes, I understand. So what's the status of the case?"

"The chairman and ranking member of Judiciary have been briefed in. So have Al Trent and Sam Fellows on Intelligence. Nobody's putting a stopper on this one, Bob. To the best of my knowledge, the President's played a straight game the whole way. Kealty's going down, and after the impeachment proceedings, if it goes that far—"

"It *has* to go that far," Holtzman pointed out.

"I doubt it." Ryan shook his head. "If he gets a good lawyer, they'll cut some sort of deal. They have to, like it was with Agnew. If he goes through impeachment and then a Senate trial, God help him in front of a jury."

"Makes sense," Holtzman conceded. "You're telling me the meat of the story's wrong."

"Correct. If there's any obstruction going on, I don't know about it, and I *have* been briefed in on this."

"Have you spoken with Kealty?"

"No, nothing substantive. On 'business' stuff I brief his national-security guy and he briefs his boss. I wouldn't be good at that, would I? Two daughters."

"So you know about the facts of the case?"

"Not the specifics, no. I don't need to know. I do know Murray pretty well. If Dan says the case is solid, well, then I figure it is." Ryan finished off the rest of his coffee and reached for a fresh roll. "The President is *not* obstructing this one. It's been delayed so it wouldn't conflict with other things. That's all."

"You're not supposed to do that either, you know," Holtzman pointed out, getting one for himself.

"Goddamn it, Bob! Prosecutors schedule cases, too, don't they? All this is, is scheduling." Holtzman read Jack's face and nodded.

"I'll pass that one along."

It was already too late for proper damage-control. Most of the political players in Washington are early risers. They have their coffee, read their papers in great detail, check their fax machines for additional material, and often take early phone calls, or in a recent development, log onto computer services to check electronic mail, all in an effort to leave their homes with a good feel for the shape the new day will take. In the case of many members, facsimile copies of the late-edition story by Liz Holtzman had brief cover pages indicating that this might be a matter of great personal interest. Different code phrases were used, depending on which PR firm had originated the transmission, but all were the same. The Members in question had been compelled to mute their opposition to TRA. This opportunity, on the other hand, was seen as something of a payback for the earlier transgression. In few cases would the opportunity be missed.

The comments were mainly delivered off the record. “This looks like a very serious matter” was the phrase most often used. “It’s unfortunate that the President saw fit to interfere in a criminal matter” was another favorite. Early calls to Director William Shaw of the FBI were met with “no comment” comments, usually with the additional clarification that the policy of the FBI was to decline comment on any possible criminal case, lest the subsequent legal proceedings be tainted and the rights of the accused compromised. The clarification was rarely if ever conveyed to the public; in that way “no comment” acquired its own very special spin.

The accused in this case awoke in his house on the grounds of the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue, North West, to find his senior aides downstairs and waiting for him.

“Oh, shit,” Ed Kealty observed. It was all he had to say. There was little point in denying the story. His people knew him too well for that. He was a man of an amorous nature, they all rationalized, a trait not uncommon in public life, though he was fairly discreet about it.

“Lisa Beringer,” the Vice President breathed, reading. “Can’t they let the poor girl rest in peace?” He remembered the shock of her death, the way she’d died, slipping off her seat belt and driving into a bridge abutment at ninety miles per hour, how the medical examiner had related the inefficiency of the method. She’d taken several minutes to die, still alive and whimpering when the paramedics had arrived. Such a sweet, nice kid. She just hadn’t understood how things were. She’d wanted too much back from him. Maybe she’d thought that it was different with her. Well, Kealty thought, everybody thought they were different.

“He’s hanging you out to dry,” Kealty’s senior aide observed. The

important part of this, after all, was the political vulnerability of their principal.

"Sure as hell." *That son of a bitch*, the Vice President thought. *After all the things I've done*. "Okay—ideas?"

"Well, of course we deny everything, indignantly at that," his chief of staff began, handing over a sheet of paper. "I have a press release for starters, then we will have a press conference before noon." He'd already called half a dozen former and current female staffers who would stand beside their boss. In every case it was a woman whose bed he had graced with his presence, and who remembered the time with a smile. Great men had flaws, too. In Edward Kealty's case, the flaws were more than balanced by his commitment to the things that mattered.

Kealty read quickly down the page. *The only defense against a completely false accusation is the truth . . . there is no basis in fact whatever to these accusations . . . my public record is well known, as is my support for women's and minority rights . . . I request* ("demand" was the wrong word to use, his personal counsel thought) *an immediate airing of the allegations and the opportunity to defend myself vigorously . . . clearly no coincidence with the upcoming election year . . . regret that such a groundless accusation will affect our great President, Roger Durling—*

"Get that son of a bitch on the phone right now!"

"Bad time for a confrontation, Mr. Vice President. You 'fully expect his support,' remember?"

"Oh, yes, I do, don't I?" That part of the release wouldn't so much be a warning shot across the bow as one aimed right at the bridge, Kealty thought. Either Durling would support him or else risk political meltdown in the primaries.

What else would happen this year? Though too late to catch the morning papers in most of America—too late even for *USA Today*—the Kealty story had been caught by the broadcast media as part of their own pre-show media surveys. For many in the investment community, that meant National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" show, a good program to listen to during the drives from New Jersey and Connecticut because of its repeating two-hour length. "A copyrighted story in this morning's *Washington Post* . . ." The coverage on it began at the top of both hourly segments, with a preamble like a warning bell to get the listener's attention, and though political stories out of Washington were about as common as the local weather report, "rape" and "suicide" were words with unequivocal meaning.

"Shit," a thousand or so voices breathed simultaneously in the same number of expensive automobiles. *What else is going to happen?* The

volatility of the market had not ended yet, and something like this was sure to exert the kind of downward pressure that never really made any economic sense but was so real that everyone knew it would happen, and because of that planned for it, and because of *that* made it even more real in what computer engineers called a feedback loop. The market would drop again today. It had trended down for eleven of the past fourteen days, and though the Dow was replete with bargains by any technical measure, the little guys would make their nervous sell orders, and the mutual funds, driven by calls from more little guys, would do the same, adding institutional momentum to a totally artificial situation. The entire system was called a true democracy, but if it was, then a herd of nervous cattle was a democracy, too.

"Okay, Arnie." President Durling didn't bother asking who had leaked it. He was a sufficiently sophisticated player in the game that he knew it didn't matter. "What do we do?"

"I talked to Bob Holtzman," Ryan told the Boss, prompted by a look from the chief of staff.

"And?"

"And, I think he believed me. Hell, I was telling the truth, wasn't I?" It was a question rather than a rhetorical expression.

"Yes, you were, Jack. Ed's going to have to handle this one himself." The relief on Ryan's face was so obvious as to offend the Chief Executive. "Did you think I was really going to do this?"

"Of course not," Ryan answered at once.

"Who knows?"

"On the airplane?" van Damm asked. "I'm sure Bob spread it around some."

"Well, let's clobber it right now. Tish," Durling said to his communications director, "let's get a release put together. The Judiciary Committee's been briefed in, and I have *not* put any pressure on them at all."

"What do we say about the delay?" Tish Brown asked.

"We decided jointly with the leadership that the matter deserved to have—what?" The President looked up at the ceiling. "It deserved to have a clear field . . ."

"Sufficiently serious—no, it is sufficiently *important* to deserve a Congress undistracted by other considerations?" Ryan offered. *Not bad,* he thought.

"I'll make a politician out of you yet," Durling said with a grudging smile.

"You're not going to say anything directly about the case," van

Damm went on, giving the President advice in the form of an order.

"I know, I know. I can't say anything on the facts of the matter because I can't allow myself to interfere with the proceedings or Kealty's defense, except to say that any citizen is innocent until the facts demonstrate otherwise; America is founded on . . . and all that stuff. Tish, write it up. I'll deliver it on the airplane before we land, and then maybe we can do what we're supposed to be doing. Anything else?" Durling asked.

"Secretary Hanson reports that everything is set up. No surprises," Ryan said, finally getting to his own briefing. "Secretary Fiedler has the monetary-support agreement ready for initialing, too. On that end, sir, it's going to be a nice, smooth visit."

"How reassuring that is," the President observed dryly. "Okay, let me get cleaned up." Air Force One or not, traveling in such close proximity to others was rarely comfortable. Presidential privacy was a tenuous commodity under the best of circumstances, but at least in the White House you had real walls between yourself and others. Not here. An Air Force sergeant strained at his leash to lay out Durling's clothing and shaving things. The man had already spent two hours turning the Presidential shoes from black leather into chrome, and it would have been ungracious to push the guy off. People were so damned eager to show their loyalty. Except for the ones you needed to, Durling thought as he entered the small washroom.

"We got more of 'em."

Sanchez emerged from the head adjacent to CIC to see people gathered around the central plotting table. There were now three groups of the diamond shapes that denoted enemy surface ships. *Charlotte*, moreover, had position on a "V" shape that meant an enemy submarine, and *Asheville* supposedly had a good sniff also. Best of all, the joint patrol line of S-3 Viking ASW aircraft two hundred miles in advance of the battle group had identified what appeared to be a patrol line of other submarines. Two had been caught snorting, one on SOSUS and one by sonobuoys, and, using a line defined by those two positions, two others had been found. Now they even had a predictable interval between boats for the aircraft to concentrate on.

"Sunset tomorrow?" the CAG asked.

"They like the rising sun, don't they? Let's catch 'em at dinner, then."

"Fine with me." Sanchez lifted the phone at his place to alert his wing operations officer.

“Takes long enough,” Jones murmured.

“I seem to remember when you were able to stand watches for a real long time,” Wally Chambers told the civilian.

“I was young and dumb then.” *I smoked, too*, he remembered. Such good things for concentration and alertness. But most submarines didn’t allow people to smoke at all. Amazing that some crews hadn’t mutinied. What was the Navy coming to. “See what I told you about my software?”

“You telling us that even you can be replaced by a computer?”

The contractor’s head turned. “You know, Mr. Chambers, as you get older you have to watch the coffee intake.”

“You two going at it again?” Admiral Mancuso rejoined them after shaving in the nearby head.

“I think Jonesy was planning to hit Banzai Beach this afternoon.” Captain Chambers chuckled, sipping at his decaf. “He’s getting bored with the exercise.”

“They do take a while,” SubPac confirmed.

“Hey, guys, we’re validating my product, aren’t we?”

“If you want some insider information, yeah, I’m going to recommend you get the contract.” Not the least reason for which was that Jones had underbid IBM by a good 20 percent.

“Next step, I just hired two guys from Woods Hole. That never occurred to the suits at Big Blue.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to decode whale talk, now that we can hear it so much better. Greenpeace is going to love us. The submarine mission for the next decade: making the seas safe for our fellow mammals. We can also track those Jap bastards who hunt them.”

“What do you mean?” Chambers asked.

“You want funding? I have an idea that’ll keep it for you.”

“What’s that, Jonesy?” Mancuso asked.

“The Woods Hole guys think they have the alarm calls for three species identified: for humpback, fins, and seis. They got them by listening in with hydrophones while they were hanging out with whalers. I can program that for active—it’s in the freq range we transmit on. So what we can do is have subs trail along with the whalers and broadcast the call, and guess what? The whalers won’t find shit. No whale in his right mind will get within twenty miles of another whale screaming that he’s being mugged. Not much solidarity in the cetacean community.”

“You turning tree-hugger on us?” Chambers wondered. But he thought about it and nodded slowly.

“All those people have to tell their friends in Congress is that we’re

doing good scientific work. Okay? Not that they love us, not that they approve of our power plants, just that we're doing good work. What I'm giving you guys is a mission for the next ten years." Jones was also giving his company work for at least that long, but that was beside the point. Mancuso and the submarine community needed the work. "Besides, I used to enjoy listening to them when we were on *Dallas.* "

"Signal from *Asheville,"* a communications specialist reported from the door. "They have acquired their target."

"Well, they're pretty good," Jones said, looking down at the plot. "But we're still the big kid on the block."

Air Force One floated into the usual soft landing at Sheremetyevo Airport one minute early. There was a collective sigh as the thrust-reversers cut in, slowing the heavy aircraft rapidly. Soon everyone started hearing the click of seat belts coming off.

"What woke you up so early?" Cathy asked her husband.

"Political stuff at home. I guess I can tell you now." Ryan explained on, then remembered he had the fax still folded in his pocket. He handed it over, cautioning his wife that it wasn't all true.

"I always thought he was slimy." She handed it back.

"Oh, don't you remember when he was the Conscience of Congress?" Jack asked quietly.

"Maybe he was, but I never thought he had one of his own."

"Just remember—"

"If anybody asks, I'm a surgeon here to meet with my Russian colleagues and do a little sightseeing." Which was entirely true. The state trip would make considerable demands on Ryan's time in his capacity as a senior Presidential advisor. But it wasn't all that different from a normal family vacation either. Their tastes in sightseeing overlapped, but didn't entirely coincide, and Cathy knew that her husband loathed shopping in any form. It was something odd about men in general and her husband in particular.

The aircraft turned onto the taxiway, and things started to happen. President and Mrs. Durling emerged from their compartment, all ready to present themselves as the embodiment of their country. People remained seated to let them pass, aided by the intimidating presence of both Secret Service and Air Force security people.

"Hell of a job," Ryan breathed, watching the President put on his happy face, and knowing that it was at least partially a lie. He had to do so many things, and make each appear as though it were the only thing he had to do. He had to compartmentalize everything, when on one task to pretend that the others didn't exist. Maybe like Cathy and

her patients. Wasn't that an interesting thought? They heard band music when the door opened, the local version of "Ruffles and Flourishes."

"I guess we can get up now."

The protocol was already established. People hunched at the windows to watch the President reach the bottom of the steps, shake hands with the new Russian President and the U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Republic. The rest of the official party then went down the steps, while the press deplaned from the after door.

It was very different from Ryan's last trip to Moscow. The airport was the same, but the time of day, the weather, and the whole atmosphere could not have been more different. It only took one face to make that clear, that of Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, who stood behind the front rank of dignitaries. In the old days he would not have shown his face at all, but now his blue eyes were aimed right at Ryan, and they twinkled with mirth as Jack led his wife down the stairs and to their place at the bottom.

The initial signs were a little scary, as was not unusual when political factors interfered with economic forces. Organized labor was flexing its muscles, and doing it cleverly for the first time in years. In cars and their associated components alone, it was possible that hundreds of thousands of jobs would be coming back to the fold. The arithmetic was straightforward: nearly ninety billion dollars of products had arrived from overseas in the last year and would now have to be produced domestically. Sitting down with their management counterparts, labor came to the collective decision that the only thing missing was the government's word that TRA would not be a paper tiger, soon to be cast away in the name of international amity. To get that assurance, however, they had to work Congress. So the lobbying was already under way, backed by the realization that the election cycle was coming up. Congress could not do one thing with one hand and something else with the other. Promises were made, and action taken, and for once both crossed party lines. The media were already commenting on how well it was working.

It wasn't just a matter of hiring employees. There would have to be a huge increase in capacity. Old plants and those operating under their capacity would need to be upgraded and so preliminary orders were put in for tooling and materials. The instant surge came as something of a surprise despite all the warnings, because despite their expertise even the most astute observers had not seen the bill for the revolution it really was.

But the blip on the statistical reports was unmistakable. The Federal Reserve kept all manner of measuring criteria on the American economy, and one of them was orders for such things as steel and machine tools. The period during which TRA had traveled through Congress and to the White House had seen a jump so large as to be off the graph paper. Then the governors saw a vast leap in short-term borrowing, largely from auto-related industries that had to finance their purchases from various specialty suppliers. The rise in orders was inflationary, and inflation was already a long-standing concern. The rise in borrowing would deplete the supply of money that could be borrowed. That had to be stopped, and quickly. The governors decided that instead of the quarter-point rise in the discount rate that they had already approved, and word of which had already leaked, the jump would be a full half-point, to be announced at close of business the following day.

Commander Ugaki was in the control room of his submarine, as usual chain-smoking and drinking copious amounts of tea that occasioned hourly trips to his cabin and its private head, not to mention hacking coughs that were exacerbated by the dehumidified air (kept unusually dry to protect onboard electronic systems). He knew they had to be out there, at least one, perhaps two American submarines—*Charlotte* and *Asheville*, his intelligence briefs had told him—but it wasn't the boats he feared. It was the crews. The American submarine force had been reduced drastically in size, but evidently not in quality. He'd expected to detect his adversary for DATELINE PARTNERS hours before. Perhaps, Ugaki told himself, they hadn't even had a sniff of him yet, but he wasn't sure of that, and over the past thirty-six hours he'd come fully to the realization that this was no longer a game, not since he'd received the code phrase "Climb Mount Niitaka." How confident he had been a week earlier, but now he was at sea and underwater. The transition from theory to reality was striking.

"Anything?" he asked his sonar officer, getting a headshake for an answer.

Ordinarily, an American sub on an exercise like this was "augmented," meaning that a sound source was switched on, which increased the amount of radiated noise she put in the water. Done to simulate the task of detecting a *Russian* submarine, it was in one way arrogant and in another way very clever of the Americans. They so rarely played against allies or even their own forces at the level of their true capabilities that they had learned to operate under a handicap—like a runner with weighted shoes. As a result, when they played a game without the handicap, they were formidable indeed.

Well, so am I! Ugaki told himself. Hadn't he grown up tracking Russian subs like the Americans? Hadn't he gotten in close of a Russian Akula? Patience. The true samurai is patient. This was not a task for a merchant, after all.

"It is like tracking whales, isn't it?" Commander Steve Kennedy observed.

"Pretty close," Sonarman 1/c Jacques Yves Laval, Jr., replied quietly, watching his display and rubbing his ears, sweaty from the headphones.

"You feel cheated?"

"My dad got to play the real game. All I ever heard growing up, sir, was what he could tell me about going up north and stalking the big boys on their own turf." Frenchy Laval was a name well known in the submarine community, a great sonarman who had trained other great sonarmen. Now retired as a master chief, his son carried on the tradition.

The hell of it was, tracking whales had turned out to be good training. They were stealthy creatures, not because they sought to avoid detection, but simply because they moved with great efficiency, and the submarines had found that moving in close enough to count and identify the members of individual pods or families was at least diverting if not exactly exciting. For the sonarmen anyway, Kennedy thought. Not much for weapons department. . . .

Laval's eyes focused on the waterfall display. He settled more squarely into his chair and reached for a grease pencil, tapping the third-class next to him.

"Two-seven-zero," he said quietly.

"Yeah."

"What you got, Junior?" the CO asked.

"Just a sniff, sir, on the sixty-hertz line." Thirty seconds later: "Firming up."

Kennedy stood behind the two watch-standers. There were now two dotted lines, one in the sixty-hertz frequency portion of the display, another on a higher-frequency band. The electric motors on the Japanese Harushio-class submarine used sixty-cycle A/C electrical current. An irregular series of dots, yellow on the dark screen, started cascading down in a column under the "60" frequency heading like droplets falling in slow motion from a leaky faucet, hence the appellation "waterfall display." Junior Laval let it grow for a few more seconds to see if it might be random and decided that it was probably not.

"Sir, I think we might want to start a track now. Designate this

contact Sierra-One, possible submerged contact, bearing settling down on two-seven-four, strength is weak."

Kennedy relayed the information to the fire-control tracking party fifteen feet away. Another technician activated the ray-path analyzer, a high-end Hewlett-Packard minicomputer programmed to examine the possible paths through the water that the identified acoustical signal might have followed. Though widely known to exist, the high-speed software for this piece of kit was still one of the Navy's most closely held secrets, a product, Kennedy remembered, of Sonosystems, a Groton-based company run by one of Frenchy Laval's top protégés. The computer chewed on the input data for perhaps a thousand microseconds and displayed its reply.

"Sir, it's direct path. My initial range estimate is between eight and twelve thousand yards."

"Set it up," the approach officer told the petty officer on the fire-control director.

"This one ain't no humpback," Laval reported three minutes later. "I have three lines on the guy now, classify Sierra-One as a definite submarine contact, operating on his electric motors." Junior told himself that Laval *père* had made his rep stalking HEN-class Russian subs, which were about as hard to track as an earthquake. He adjusted his headphones. "Bearing steady at two-seven-four, getting hints of a blade rate on the guy."

"Solution light," the lead fire-controlman reported. "I have a valid solution for tube three on target Sierra-One."

"Left ten-degrees rudder, come to new course one-eight-zero," Kennedy ordered next to get a crossbearing, from which would come a better range-gate on the target, and also data on the sub's course and speed. "Let's slow her down, turns for five knots."

The stalk was always the fun part.

"If you do that, you're cutting your own throat with a dull knife," Anne Quinlan said in her customarily direct way.

Kealty was sitting in his office. Ordinarily the number-two man in any organization would be in charge when number-one was away, but the miracle of modern communications meant that Roger could do everything he needed to do at midnight over Antarctica if he had to. Including putting out a press statement from his aircraft in Moscow that he was hanging his Vice President out to dry.

Kealty's first instinct was to proclaim to the entire world that he knew he had the confidence of his President. That would hint broadly that the news stories were true, and muddy the waters sufficiently to give him room to maneuver, the thing he needed most of all.

“What we need to know, Ed,” his chief of staff pointed out, not for the first time, “is who the hell started this.” That was the one thing the story had left out, clever people that reporters were. She couldn’t ask him how many of the women in his office he’d visited with his charms. For one thing he probably didn’t remember, and for another, the hard part would be identifying those he hadn’t.

“Whoever it was, it was somebody close to Lisa,” another staffer observed. That insight made light bulbs flash inside every head in the office.

“Barbara.”

“Good guess,” the “Chief”—which was how Quinlan liked to be identified—thought. “We need to confirm that, and we need to settle her down some.”

“Woman scorned,” Kealty murmured.

“Ed, I don’t want to hear any of that, okay?” the Chief warned. “When the hell are you going to learn that ‘no’ doesn’t mean ‘maybe later’? Okay, I’ll go see Barbara myself, and maybe we can talk her out of this, but, goddammit, this is the last time, okay?”

18

Easter Egg

"Is this where the dresser was?" Ryan asked.

"I keep forgetting how well informed you are," Golovko observed, just to flatter his guest, since the story was actually widely known.

Jack grinned, still feeling more than a little of Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass. There was a completely ordinary door in the wall now, but until the time of Yuri Andropov, a large wooden clothes cabinet had covered it, for in the time of Beriya and the rest, the entrance to the office of Chairman of the KGB had to be hidden. There was no door off the main corridor, and none visible even in the anteroom. The melodrama of it had to have been absurd, Ryan thought, even to Lavrentiy Beriya, whose morbid fear of assassination—though hardly unreasonable—had dreamed up this obtuse security measure. It hadn't helped him avoid death at the hands of men who'd hated him even more than they'd feared him. Still and all, wasn't it bizarre enough just for the President's National Security Advisor to enter the office of the Chairman of the *Russian* Foreign Intelligence Service? Beriya's ashes must have been stirring up somewhere, Ryan thought, in whatever sewer they'd dropped the urn. He turned to look at his host, his mind imagining the oak bureau still, and halfway wishing they'd kept the old name of KGB, Committee for State Security, just for tradition's sake.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, has the world really changed so much in the past—God, only ten years?"

"Not even that, my friend." Golovko waved Jack to a comfortable leather chair that dated back to the building's previous incarnation as home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company. "And yet we have so far to go."

Business, Jack thought. Well, Sergey had never been bashful about that. Ryan remembered looking into the wrong end of a pistol in this man's hand. But that had all taken place before the so-called end of history.

"I'm doing everything I can, Sergey. We got you the five billion for the missiles. That was a nice scam you ran on us, by the way." Ryan checked his watch. The ceremony was scheduled for the evening. One

Minuteman-III and one SS-19 left—if you didn't count the SS-19s in Japan that had been reconfigured to launch satellites.

"We have many problems, Jack."

"Fewer than a year ago," Ryan observed, wondering what the next request would be. "I know you advise President Grushavoy on more than just intelligence matters. Come on, Sergey, things are getting better. You know that."

"Nobody ever told us that democracy would be so hard."

"It's hard for us, too, pal. We rediscover it every day."

"The frustration is that we know we have everything we need to make our country prosperous. The problem is in making everything work. Yes, I advise my president on many things—"

"Sergey, if you're not one of the best-informed people in your country, I would be very surprised."

"Hmm, yes. Well, we are surveying eastern Siberia, so many things, so many resources. We have to hire Japanese to do it for us, but what they are finding . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You're building up to something, Sergey. What is it?"

"We think they do not tell us everything. We dug up some surveys done in the early thirties. They were in archives in the Ministry of the Interior. A deposit of gadolinium in an unlikely place. At the time there were few uses for that metal, and it was forgotten until some of my people did a detailed search of old data. Gadolinium now has many uses, and one of their survey teams camped within a few kilometers of the deposit. We know it's real. The thirties team brought back samples for assay. But it was not included in their last report."

"And?" Jack asked.

"And I find it curious that they lied to us on this," Golovko observed, taking his time. You didn't build up to a play like this all that quickly.

"How are you paying them for the work?"

"The agreement is that they will assist us in the exploitation of many of the things they find for us. The terms are generous."

"Why would they lie?" Ryan inquired.

Golovko shook his head. "I do not know. It might be important to find out. You are a student of history, are you not?"

It was one of the things that each respected about the other. Ryan might have written off Golovko's concerns as yet another example of Russian paranoia—sometimes he thought that the entire concept had been invented in this country—but that would have been unfair. Russia had fought Japan under the Czar in 1904—1905 and lost, along the way giving the Japanese Navy a landmark victory at the Battle of the Tsushima Strait. That war had gone a long way toward destroying the Romanovs and to elevating Japan to world-power

status, which had led to their involvement in two world wars. It had also inflicted a bleeding sore on the Russian psyche that Stalin had remembered well enough to recover the lost territories. The Japanese had also been involved in post—World War I efforts to topple the Bolsheviks. They'd put a sizable army into Siberia, and hadn't been all that enthusiastic about withdrawing it. The same thing had happened again, in 1938 and 1939, with more serious consequences this time, first at the hands of Marshal Blyukher, and then a guy named Zhukov. Yes, there was much history between Russia and Japan.

"In this day and age, Sergey?" Ryan asked with a wry expression.

"You know, Jack, as bright a chap as you are, you are still an American, and your experience with invasions is far less serious than ours. Are we panicked about this? No, of course not. Is it something worthy of close attention? Yes, Ivan Emmetovich, it is."

He was clearly building up to something, and with all the time he'd taken, it had to be something big, Ryan thought. Time to find out what it was: "Well, Sergey Nikolay' ch, I suppose I can understand your concern, but there isn't very much I can—" Golovko cut him off with a single word.

"THISTLE."

"Lyalin's old network. What about it?"

"You have recently reactivated it." The Chairman of RVS saw that Ryan had the good grace to blink in surprise. A bright, serious man, Ryan, but still not really someone who would have made a good field officer. His emotions were just too open. Perhaps, Sergey thought, he should read a book on Ireland, the better to understand the player in the ancient leather chair. Ryan had strengths and weaknesses, neither of which he completely understood.

"What gives you that idea?" the American asked as innocently as he could, knowing that he'd reacted, again, baited by this clever old pro. He saw Golovko smile at his discomfort and wondered if the liberalization of this country had allowed people to develop a better sense of humor. Before Golovko would just have stared impassively.

"Jack, we are professionals, are we not? I know this. How I know it is my concern."

"I don't know what cards you're holding, my friend, but before you go any further, we need to decide if this is a friendly game or not."

"As you know, the real Japanese counterintelligence agency is the Public Safety Investigation Division of their Justice Ministry." The expositional statement was as clear as it had to be, and was probably truthful. It also defined the terms of the discourse. This was a friendly game. Golovko had just revealed a secret of his own, though not a surprising one.

You had to admire the Russians. Their expertise in the espionage

business was world-class. No, Ryan corrected himself. They *were* the class of the world. What better way to run agents in any foreign country than first to establish a network within the country's counterintelligence services? There was still the lingering suspicion that they had in fact controlled MI-5, Britain's Security Service, for some years, and their deep and thorough penetration of CIA's own internal-security arm was still an embarrassment to America.

"Make your play," Ryan said. *Check to the dealer . . .*

"You have two field officers in Japan covered as Russian journalists. They are reactivating the network. They are very good, and very careful, but one of their contacts is compromised by PSID. That can happen to anyone," Golovko observed fairly. He didn't even gloat, Jack saw. Well, he was too professional for that, and it was a fairly friendly game by most standards. The other side of the statement was as clear as it could be: with a simple gesture Sergey was in a position to burn Clark and Chavez, creating yet another international incident between two countries that had enough problems to settle. That was why Golovko didn't gloat. He didn't have to.

Ryan nodded. "Okay, pal. I just folded. Tell me what you want."

"We would like to know why Japan is lying to us, and anything else that in Mrs. Foley's opinion might be of interest to us. In return we are in a position to protect the network for you." He didn't add, *for the time being.*

"How much do they know?" Jack asked, considering the spoken offer. Golovko was suggesting that Russia cover an American intelligence operation. It was something new, totally unprecedented. They put a very high value on the information that might be developed. High as hell, Jack thought. *Why?*

"Enough to expel them from the country, no more." Golovko opened a drawer and handed over a sheet of paper. "This is all Foleyeva needs to know."

Jack read and pocketed it. "My country has no desire to see any sort of conflict between Russia and Japan."

"Then we are agreed?"

"Yes, Sergey. I will recommend approval of your suggestion."

"As always, Ivan Emmetovich, a pleasure to do business with you."

"Why didn't you activate it yourself?" Ryan asked, wondering how badly rolled he'd been that day.

"Lyalin held out on the information. Clever of him. We didn't have enough time to—persuade? Yes, persuade him to give it over—before we gave him to your custody."

Such a nice turn of phrase, Jack thought. *Persuade.* Well, Golovko had come up under the old system. It was too much to expect that he would have been entirely divorced from it. Jack managed a grin.

"You know, you were great enemies." And with Golovko's single suggestion, Jack thought behind clinically impassive eyes, perhaps now there would be the beginning of something else. Damn, how much crazier would this world get?

It was six hours later in Tokyo, and eight hours earlier in New York. The fourteen-hour differential and the International Dateline created many opportunities for confusion. It was Saturday the fourteenth in some places and Friday in others.

At three in the morning, Chuck Searls left his home for the last time. He'd rented a car the previous day—like many New Yorkers, he had never troubled himself to purchase one—for the drive to La Guardia. The Delta terminal was surprisingly full for the first flight of the day to Atlanta. He'd booked a ticket through one of the city's many travel agencies, and paid cash for the assumed name he would hereafter be using from time to time, which was not the same as the one on the passport he had also acquired a few months ago. Sitting in 2-A, a first-class seat whose wide expanse allowed him to turn slightly and lean his head back, he slept most of the way to Atlanta, where his baggage was transferred to a flight to Miami. There wasn't much, really. Two lightweight suits, some shirts, and other immediate necessities, plus his laptop computer. In Miami he'd board another flight under another name and head southeast to paradise.

George Winston, former head of the Columbus Group, was not a happy man despite the plush surroundings of his home in Aspen. A wrenched knee saw to that. Though he now had the time to indulge his newly discovered passion for skiing, he was a little too inexperienced and perhaps a little too old to use the expert slopes. It hurt like a sonuvabitch. He rose from his bed at three in the morning and limped into the bathroom for another dose of the painkiller the doctor had prescribed. Once there he found that the combination of wakefulness and lingering pain offered little hope of returning to sleep. It was just after five in New York, he thought, about the time he usually got up, always early to get a jump on the late-risers, checking his computer and the *Journal* and other sources of information so that he could be fully prepared for his opening moves on the market.

He missed it, Winston admitted to himself. It was a hell of a thing to say to the face in the mirror. Okay, so he'd worked too hard, alienated himself from his own family, driven himself into a state little different from drug addiction, but getting out was a . . . mistake?

Well, no, not exactly that, he thought, hobbling into his den as quietly as he could manage. It was just that you couldn't empty something and then attempt to fill it with nothing, could you? He couldn't sail his *Cristobol* all the time, not with kids in school. In fact there was only one thing in his life that he'd been able to do all the time, and that had damned near killed him, hadn't it?

Even so . . .

Damn, you couldn't even get the *Journal* out here at a decent hour. And this was civilization? Fortunately, they did have phone lines. Just for old times' sake, he switched on his computer. Winston was wired into nearly every news and financial service there was, and he selected his personal favorite. It was good to do it early in the morning. His wife would yell again if she saw him up to his old tricks, which meant that he was nowhere near as current on the Street as he liked to be, player or not. Well, okay, he had a few hours, and it wasn't as though he'd be riding a helicopter to the top of the mountain at dawn, was it? No skiing at all, the doc had told him firmly. Not for at least a week, and then he'd confine himself to the bunny slopes. It wouldn't look that bad, would it? He'd pretend to be teaching his kids . . . damn!

He'd gotten out too soon. No way he could have known, of course, but in the last few weeks the market had begged aloud for a person with his talents to swoop down and make his moves. He would have moved on steel three weeks ago, made his killing, and then moved on to . . . Silicon Alchemy. Yeah, that was one he would have snapped up in one big hurry. They had invented a new sort of screen for laptop computers, and now with Japan's products under a cloud, the issue had exploded. Who was it who'd quarterbacked the IPO? That Ryan guy, good instincts for the business, pissing away his time in government service now. *What a waste of talent*, Winston told himself, feeling the ache in his leg and trying not to add that he was pissing away his time in the middle of the night at a ski resort he couldn't use for the next week at best.

Everything on the Street seemed so unnecessarily shaky, he thought, checking trend lines on stocks he considered good if stealthy bellwethers. That was one of the tricks, spotting trends and indicators before the others did. One of the tricks? Hell, the *only* trick. How he did it was surprisingly hard to teach. He supposed that it was the same in any field. Some people just did it, and he was one of them. Others tried to do the same by cheating, seeking out information in underhanded ways, or by falsely creating trends that they could then exploit. But that was . . . cheating, wasn't it? And what was the point of making money that way? Beating the others fairly and at their own game, *that* was the real art of trading, and at the end of the day what

he liked to hear was the way others would come up and say, “You son of a bitch!” The tone of the comment made all the difference.

There was no reason for the market to be so unsteady, he thought. People hadn’t thought the things through, that was all.

* * *

The Hornets went off behind the first wave of Tomcats. Sanchez taxied his fighter to the starboard-side bow cat, feeling the towbar that formed part of his nosewheel gear slip into the proper slot on the shuttle. His heavily loaded fighter shuddered at full power as the deck crewmen gave the aircraft a last visual check. Satisfied, the catapult officer made the ready signal, and Sanchez fired off a salute and set his head back on the back of his ejection seat. A moment later, steam power flung him off the bow and into the air. The Hornet settled a bit, a feeling that was never entirely routine, and he climbed into the sky, retracting his landing gear and heading toward the rendezvous point, his wings heavy with fuel tanks and blue practice missiles.

They were trying to be clever, and almost succeeding, but “almost” didn’t really count in this game. Satellite photos had revealed the presence of the three inbound surface groups. Sanchez would lead the Alpha Strike against the big one, eight ships, all tin cans. Two separated pairs of Tomcats would deal with the P-3s they had out; for the first time they’d hunt actively with their search radars instead of being under EMCOM. It would be a single rapier thrust—no, more the descending blow of a big and heavy club. Intermittent sweeps of an E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft determined that the Japanese had not deployed fighters to Marcus, which would have been clever if difficult for them, and in any case they would not have been able to surge enough of them to matter, not against two full carrier air wings. Marcus just wasn’t a big enough island, as Saipan or Guam was. That was his last abstract thought for a while. On Bud’s command via a low-power radio circuit, the formation began to disperse according to its carefully structured plan.

“Hai.” Sato lifted the growler phone on *Mutsu’s* bridge.

“We just detected low-power radio voice traffic. Two signals, bearing one-five-seven, and one-nine-five, respectively.”

“It’s about time,” Sato told his group-operations officer. *I thought they’d never get around to their attack*. In a real-war situation he would do one thing. In this particular case, he’d do another. There was little

point in letting the Americans know the sensitivity of his ELINT gear. "Continue as before."

"Very well. We still have the two airborne radars. They appear to be flying racetrack patterns, no change."

"Thank you." Sato replaced the phone and reached for his tea. His best technicians were working the electronic-intelligence listening gear, and they had tapes collecting the information taken down by every sensor for later study. That was really the important part of this phase of the exercise, to learn all they could about how the U.S. Navy made its deliberate attacks.

"Action stations?" *Mutsu's* captain asked quietly.

"No need," the Admiral replied, staring thoughtfully at the horizon, as he supposed a fighting sailor did.

Aboard Snoopy One, an EA-6B Prowler, the flight crew monitored all radar and radio frequencies. They found and identified six commercial-type search radars, none of them close to the known location of the Japanese formation. They weren't making it much of a contest, everyone thought. Normally these games were a lot more fun.

The captain of the port at Tanapag harbor looked out from his office to see a large car-carrier working her way around the southern tip of Managaha Island. That was a surprise. He ruffled through the papers on his desk to see where the telex was to warn him of her arrival. Oh, yes, there. It must have come in during the night. MV *Orchid Ace* out of Yokohama. Cargo of Toyota Land Cruisers diverted for sale to the local Japanese landowners. Probably a ship that had been scheduled for transit to America. So now the cars would come here and clog the local roads some more. He grumped and lifted his binoculars to give her a look and saw to his surprise another lump on the horizon, large and boxy. Another car carrier? That was odd.

Snoopy One held position and altitude, just under the visual horizon from the "enemy" formation, about one hundred miles away. The electronic warriors in the two backseats had their hands ready on the power switches for the onboard jammers, but the Japanese didn't have any of their radars up, and there was nothing to jam. The pilot allowed herself a look to the southeast and saw a few flashes, yellow glints off the gold-impregnated canopies of the inbound Alpha Strike,

which was now angling down to the deck to stay out of radar coverage as long as possible before popping up to loose their first "salvo" of administrative missiles.

"Tango, tango, tango," Commander Steve Kennedy said into the gertrude, giving the code word for a theoretical or "administrative" torpedo launch. He'd held contact with the Harushio-class for nine hours, taking the time to get acquainted with the contact, and to get his crew used to something more demanding than getting heartbeats on a pregnant humpback. Finally bored with the game, it was time to light up the underwater telephone and, he was sure, scare the bejeebers out of Sierra-One after giving him ample time to counterdetect. He didn't want anyone to say later that he hadn't given the other guy a fair break. Not that this sort of thing was supposed to be fair, but Japan and America were friends, despite the news stuff they'd been getting on the radio for the past few weeks.

"Took his time," Commander Ugaki said. They'd tracked the American 688 for almost forty minutes. So they were good, but not that good. It had been so hard for them to detect *Kurushio* that they'd made their attack as soon as they had a track, and, Ugaki thought, he'd let them have their first shot. So. The CO looked at his own fire-control director and the four red solution lights.

He lifted his own gertrude phone to reply in a voice full of good-natured surprise: "Where did you come from?"

Those crewmen who were in earshot—every man aboard spoke good English—were surprised at the captain's announcement. Ugaki saw the looks. He would brief them in later.

* * *

"Didn't even 'tango' back. I guess he wasn't at GQ." Kennedy keyed the phone again. "As per exercise instructions, we will now pull off and turn on our augmenter." On his command, USS *Asheville* turned right and increased speed to twenty knots. She'd pull away to twenty thousand yards to restart the exercise, giving the "enemy" a better chance at useful training.

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye."

"New contact, designate Sierra-Five, bearing two-eight-zero, twin-screw diesel surface ship, type unknown. Blade rate indicates about eighteen knots," SM/1c Junior Laval announced.

"No classification?"

"Sounds a little, well, little, Cap'n, not the big boomin' sounds of a large merchantman."

"Very well, we'll run a track. Keep me posted."

"Sonar, aye."

It was just too easy, Sanchez thought. The *Enterprise* group was probably having a tougher time with their Kongo-class DDGs up north. He was not pressing it, but holding his extended flight of four at three hundred feet above the calm surface, at a speed of just four hundred knots. Each of the four fighter-attack aircraft of Slugger Flight carried four exercise Harpoon missiles, as did the four trailing in Mauler. He checked his heads-up display for location. Data loaded into his computer only an hour before gave him a probable location for the formation, and his GPS navigation system had brought him right to the programmed place. It was time to check to see how accurate their operational intelligence was.

"Mauler, this is lead, popping up—now!" Sanchez pulled back easily on the stick. "Going active—now!" With the second command he flipped on his search radar.

There they were, big as hell on the display. Sanchez selected the lead ship in the formation and spun up the seeker heads in the otherwise inert missiles hanging from his wings. He got four ready lights. "This is Slugger-Lead. Launch launch launch! Rippling four vampires."

"Two, launching four."

"Three, launch four."

"Four, launching three, one abort on the rail." About par for the course, Sanchez thought, framing a remark for his wing maintenance officer.

In a real attack the aircraft would have angled back down to the surface after firing their missiles so as not to expose themselves. For the purposes of the exercise they descended to two hundred feet and kept heading in to simulate their own missiles. Onboard recorders would take down the radar and tracking data from the Japanese ships in order to evaluate their performance, which so far was not impressive.

Faced with the irksome necessity of allowing women to fly in real combat squadrons off real carriers, the initial compromise had been to put them in electronic-warfare aircraft, hence the Navy's first female squadron commander was Commander Roberta Peach of VAQ-137, "The Rooks." The most senior female carrier aviator, she deemed it her greatest good fortune that *another* naval aviator, female, already had the call sign "Peaches," which allowed her to settle on "Robber," a name she insisted on in the air.

"Getting signals now, Robber," the lead EWO in the back of her Prowler reported. "Lots of sets lighting off."

"Shut 'em back down," she ordered curtly.

"Sure are a lot of 'em . . . targeting a Harm on an SPG-51. Tracking and ready."

"Launching now," Robber said. Shooting was her prerogative as aircraft commander. As long as the SPG-51 missile-illumination radar was up and radiating, the Harm antiradar missile was virtually guaranteed to hit.

Sanchez could see the ships now, gray shapes on the visual horizon. An unpleasant screech in his headphones told him that he was being illuminated with both search and fire-control radar, never a happy bit of news even in an exercise, all the more so that the "enemy" in this case had American-designed SM-2 Standard surface-to-air missiles with whose performance he was quite familiar. It looked like a Hatakaze-class. Two SPG-51C missile radars. Only one single-rail launcher. She could guide only two at a time. His aircraft represented two missiles. The Hornet was a larger target than the Harpoon was, and was not going as low or as fast as the missile did. On the other hand, he had a protective jammer aboard, which evened the equation somewhat. Bud eased his stick to the left. It was against safety rules to fly directly over a ship under circumstances like this, and a few seconds later he passed three hundred yards ahead of the destroyer's bow. At least one of his missiles would have hit, he judged, and that one was only a five-thousand-ton tin can. One Harpoon warhead would ruin her whole day, making his follow-up attack with cluster munitions even more deadly.

"Slugger, this is lead. Form up on me."

"Two—"

"Three—"

"Four," his flight acknowledged.

Another day in the life of a naval aviator, the CAG thought. Now he could look forward to landing, going into CIC, and spending the rest of the next twenty-four hours going over the scores. It just wasn't very

exciting anymore. He'd splashed real airplanes, and anything else wasn't the same. But flying was still flying.

The roar of aircraft overhead was usually exhilarating. Sato watched the last of the gray American fighters climb away, and lifted his binoculars to see their direction. Then he rose and headed below to the CIC.

"Well?" he asked.

"Departure course is as we thought." Fleet-Ops tapped the satellite photo that showed both American battle groups, still heading west, into the prevailing winds, to conduct flight operations. The photo was only two hours old. The radar plot showed the American aircraft heading to the expected point.

"Excellent. My respects to the captain, make course one-five-five, maximum possible speed." In less than a minute, *Mutsu* shuddered with increased engine power and started riding harder through the gentle Pacific swells for her rendezvous with the American battle force. Timing was important.

On the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, a young trader's clerk made a posting error on Merck stock at exactly 11:43:02 Eastern Standard Time. It actually went onto the system and appeared on the board at 23⅛, well off the current value. Thirty seconds later he typed it in again, inputting the same amount. This time he got yelled at. He explained that the damned keyboard was sticky, and unplugged it, switching it for a new one. It happened often enough. People spilled coffee and other things in this untidy place. The correction was inputted at once, and the world returned to normal. In the same minute something similar happened with General Motors stock, and someone made the same excuse. It was safe. The people at her particular kiosk didn't interact all that much with the people who did Merck. Neither had any idea what they were doing, just that they were being paid $50,000 to make an error that would have no effect on the system at all. Had they not done it—they did not know—another pair of individuals had been paid the same amount of money to do the same thing ten minutes later.

In the Stratus mainframe computers at the Depository Trust Company—more properly in the software that resided in them—the entries were noted, and the Easter Egg started to hatch.

The cameras and lights were all set up in St. Vladimir Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace, the traditional room for finalizing treaties and a place that Jack had visited at another time and under very different circumstances. In two separate rooms, the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Republic were having their makeup put on, something that was probably more irksome to the Russian, Ryan was sure. Looking good for the cameras was not a traditional requirement for local political figures. Most of the guests were already seated, but the senior members of both official parties could be more relaxed. Final preparations were just about complete. The crystal glasses were on their trays, and the corks on the champagne bottles were unwrapped, awaiting only the word to be popped off.

"That reminds me. You never did send me any of that Georgian champagne," Jack told Sergey.

"Well, today it can be done, and I can get you a good price."

"You know, before, I would have had to turn it in because of ethics laws."

"Yes, I know that every American official is a potential crook," Golovko noted, checking around to see that everything was done properly.

"You should be a lawyer." Jack saw the lead Secret Service agent come through the door, and headed to his seat. "Some place, isn't it, honey?" he asked his wife.

"The czars knew how to live," she whispered back as the TV lights all came on. In America, all the networks interrupted their regular programming. The timing was a little awkward, with the eleven-hour differential between Moscow and the American West Coast. Then there was Russia, which had at least ten time zones of its own, a result of both sheer size and, in the case of Siberia, proximity to the Arctic Circle. But this was something everyone would want to see.

The two presidents came out, to the applause of the three hundred people present. Roger Durling and Eduard Grushavoy met at the mahogany table and shook hands warmly as only two former enemies could. Durling, the former soldier and paratrooper with Vietnam experience; Grushavoy, also a former soldier, a combat engineer who had been among the first to enter Afghanistan. Trained to hate one another in their youth, now they would put a final end to it all. On this day, they would set aside all the domestic problems that both lived with on every day of the week. For today, the world would change by their hands.

Grushavoy, the host, gestured Durling to his chair, then moved to the microphone.

"Mister President," he said through an interpreter whom he didn't really need, "it is my pleasure to welcome you to Moscow for the first time . . ."

Ryan didn't listen to the speech. It was predictable in every phrase. His eyes fixed on a black plastic box that sat on the table exactly between the chairs of the two chiefs of state. It had two red buttons and a cable that led down to the floor. A pair of TV monitors sat against the near wall, and in the rear of the room, large projection TVs were available for everyone to watch. They showed similar sites.

"Hell of a way to run a railroad," an Army major noted, twenty miles from Minot, North Dakota. He'd just screwed in the last wire. "Okay, circuits are live. Wires are hot." Only one safety switch prevented the explosives from going, and he had his hand on it. He'd already done a personal check of everything, and there was a full company of military police patrolling the area because Friends of the Earth was threatening to protest the event by putting people where the explosives were, and as desirable as it might be just to blow the bastards up, the officer would have to disable the firing circuit if that happened. *Why the* hell, he wondered, *would anybody protest this?* He'd already wasted an hour trying to explain that to his Soviet counterpart.

"So like the steppes here," the man said, shivering in the wind. They both watched a small TV for their cue.

"It's a shame we don't have the politicians around here to give us some hot air." He took his hand off the safety switch. Why couldn't they just get on with it?

The Russian officer knew his American English well enough to laugh at the remark, feeling inside his oversized parka for a surprise he had in waiting for the American.

"Mr. President, the hospitality we have experienced in this great city is proof positive that there should be, can be, and *will* be a friendship between our two peoples—just as strong as our old feelings were, but far more productive. Today, we put an end to war," Durling concluded to warm applause, returning to shake Grushavoy's hand again. Both men sat down. Oddly, now they had to take their orders from an American TV director who held a headset to his face and talked very quickly.

"Now," men said in two languages, "if the audience will turn to the TVs . . ."

"When I was a lieutenant in the pioneers," the Russian President

whispered, “I loved blowing things up.”

Durling grinned, leaning his head in close. Some things were not for microphones. “You know the job I always wanted as a boy—do you have it over here?”

“What is that, Roger?”

“The guy who runs the crane with the big iron ball for knocking buildings down. It *has to be* the best job in the whole world.”

“Especially if you can put your parliamentary opposition in the building first!” It was a point of view that both shared.

“Time,” Durling saw from the director.

Both men put their thumbs on their buttons.

“On three, Ed?” Durling asked.

“Yes, Roger!”

“One,” Durling said.

“Two,” Grushavoy continued.

“Three!” both said, pressing them down.

The two buttons closed a simple electrical circuit that led to a satellite transmitter outside. It took roughly a third of a second for the signal to go up to the satellite and come back down, then another third for the result to retrace the same path, and for a long moment a lot of people thought that something had gone wrong. But it hadn’t.

“Whoa!” the Major observed when a hundred pounds of Composition-Four went off. The noise was impressive, even from half a mile, and there followed the tower of flame from the ignition of the solid-fuel rocket motor. That part of the ceremony had been tricky. They’d had to make sure that the thing would burn from the top only. Otherwise the missile might have tried to fly out of the silo, and *that* would just not have done at all. In fact the whole exercise was unnecessarily complicated and dangerous. The cold wind drove the toxic exhaust smoke to the east, and by the time it got to anything important, it would just be a bad smell, which was pretty much what you could say about the political conditions that had occasioned the existence of the burning rocket motor, wasn’t it? There was a certain awe to it, though. The world’s largest firework, burning backwards for about three minutes before there was nothing left but smoke. A sergeant activated the silo fire-suppression system, which actually worked, rather to the Major’s surprise.

“You know, we had a drawing to see who’d get to do this. I won,” the officer said, getting to his feet.

“I was just ordered to come. I am glad I did. Is it safe now?”

“I think so. Come on, Valentin. We have one more job to do, don’t we?”

Both men got into an HMMWV, the current incarnation of the Army jeep, and the Major started it up, heading for the silo from upwind. Now it was just a hole in the ground, generating steam. A CNN crew followed, still giving a live feed as the vehicle bumped across the uneven prairie. Their vehicle stopped two hundred yards away, somewhat to their annoyance, while the two officers dismounted their vehicle, carrying gas masks against the possibility that there was still enough smoke to be a health concern. There wasn't. Just the nasty smell. The American officer waved the TV crew in and waited for them to get ready. That took two minutes.

"Ready!" the unit director said.

"Are we in agreement that the silo and missile are destroyed?"

"Yes, we are," the Russian replied with a salute. Then he reached behind his back and pulled two crystal glasses from his pockets. "Would you hold these please, Comrade Major?"

Next came a bottle of Georgian champagne. The Russian popped the cork with a wide grin and filled both glasses.

"I teach you Russian tradition now. First you drink," he said. The TV crew loved it.

"I think I know that part." The American downed the champagne. "And now?"

"The glasses may never be used for a lesser purpose. Now you must do as I do." With that the Russian turned and poised himself to hurl his glass into the empty hole. The American laughed and did the same.

"Now!" With that, both glasses disappeared into the last American Minuteman silo. They disappeared in the steam, but both could hear them shatter against the scorched concrete walls.

"Fortunately, I have two more glasses," Valentin said, producing them.

"Son of a bitch," Ryan breathed. It turned out that the American at the Russian silo had had a similar idea, and was now explaining what "Miller time!" meant. Unfortunately, aluminum cans didn't break when thrown.

"Overly theatrical," his wife thought.

"It isn't exactly Shakespeare, but if t'were done when t'were done, then at least it's done, honey." Then they heard the corks popping off amid the sounds of applause.

"Is the five-billion-dollars part true?"

"Yep."

"So, Ivan Emmetovich, we can be truly friends now?" Golovko asked, bringing glasses. "We finally meet, Caroline," he said graciously

to Cathy.

"Sergey and I go way back," Jack explained, taking the glass and toasting his host.

"To the time I had a gun to your head," the Russian observed. Ryan wondered if it were an historical reference . . . or a toast to the event?

"What?" Cathy asked, almost choking on her drink.

"You never told her?"

"Jesus, Sergey!"

"What are you two talking about?"

"Dr. Ryan, once upon a time your husband and I had a . . . professional disagreement that ended up with myself holding a pistol in his face. I never told you, Jack, that the gun wasn't loaded."

"Well, I wasn't going anywhere anyway, was I?"

"What *are* you two talking about? Is this some inside joke?" Cathy demanded.

"Yeah, honey, that's about right. How is Andrey Il'ich doing?"

"He is well. In fact, if you would like to see him, it can be arranged."

Jack nodded. "I'd like that."

"Excuse me, but who exactly are you?"

"Honey," Jack said. "This is Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, Chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service."

"KGB? You know each other?"

"Not KGB, madam. We are much smaller now. Your husband and I have been . . . competitors for years now."

"Okay, and who won?" she asked.

Both men had the same thought, but Golovko said it first: "Both of us, of course. Now, if you will permit, let me introduce you to my wife, Yelena. She is a pediatrician." That was something CIA had never bothered to find out, Jack realized.

He turned to look at the two presidents, enjoying the moment despite being surrounded by newsies. It was the first time he'd actually been to an event like this, but he was sure they weren't always this chummy. Perhaps it was the final release of all that tension, the realization that, yes, Virginia, it really was over. He saw people bringing in yet more champagne. It was pretty good stuff, and he fully intended to have his share of it. CNN would soon tire of the party, but these people would not. All the uniforms, and politicians, and spies, and diplomats. Hell, maybe they would all really be friends.

19

Strike Two, 1-800-RUN

Though the overall timing was fortuitous, the plan for exploiting the chance was exquisite, the product of years of study and modeling and simulation. In fact the operation had already begun when six major commercial banks in Hong Kong started going short on U.S. Treasury bonds. These had been bought a few weeks earlier, part of a complex exchange for yen holdings done as a classic hedge against monetary fluctuations. The banks themselves were about to undergo a trauma—a change in ownership of the very ground upon which they stood—and the two factors made their massive purchases seem an entirely ordinary move to maximize their liquidity and flexibility at the same time. In liquidating the bonds, they were just cashing in, albeit in a large way, on the relative change in values of dollar and yen. They would realize a 17 percent profit from the move, in fact, then buy yen, which, currency experts all over the world were now saying, had reached a hard floor and would soon rebound. Still, two hundred ninety *billion* dollars of U.S. bonds were on the market briefly, and undervalued at that. They were soon snapped up by European banks. The Hong Kong bankers made the proper electronic entries, and the transaction was concluded. Next they wired the fact to Beijing, uneasily happy to show that they had followed orders and demonstrated obeisance to their soon-to-be political masters. So much the better, all thought, that they had taken a profit on the deal.

In Japan the transaction was noted. Fourteen hours off the local time of New York City, still the world's foremost trading center, it was not terribly unusual for Tokyo traders to work hours usually associated with night watchmen, and in any case the wire services that communicated financial information never ceased transmitting data. It would have surprised some people to learn that the people in the trading offices were very senior indeed, and that a special room had been established on the top floor of a major office building during the last week. Called the War Room by its current occupants, it had telephone lines leading to every city in the world with major trading activities and computer displays to show what was happening in all of them.

Other Asian banks went next, repeating the same procedure as in Hong Kong, and the people in the War Room watched their machines. Just after noon, New York time, Friday, which was 2:03 A.M. on Saturday in Tokyo, they saw another three hundred million dollars of U.S. bonds dumped into the market, these at a price even more attractive than that just offered in Hong Kong, and these, also, were rapidly bought by other European bankers for whom the working day and week were just coming to an end. As yet nothing grossly unusual had happened. Only then did the Japanese banks make their move, well covered by the activity of others. The Tokyo banks as well started selling off their U.S. Treasuries, clearly taking action to firm up the yen, it appeared. In the process, however, the entire world's ready surplus-dollar capacity had been used up in a period of minutes. It could be written off as a mere coincidence, but the currency traders—at least those not at lunch in New York—were now alerted to the fact that any further trading on those notes would be unsettling, however unlikely that might be, what with the known strength of the dollar.

* * *

The state dinner was reflective of traditional Russian hospitality, made all the more intense by the fact that it celebrated the end of two generations of nuclear terror. The Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church intoned a long and dignified invocation. Himself twice the victim of political imprisonment, his invitation to rejoice was heartfelt, moving a few to tears, which were soon banished by the start of the feast. There was soup, and caviar, and fowl, and fine beef; and huge quantities of alcohol which, for just this once, everyone felt free to imbibe. The real work of the trip was done. There really were no secrets left to hide. Tomorrow was Saturday, and everyone would have the chance to sleep late.

"You, too, Cathy?" Jack asked. His wife was not normally a heavy drinker, but tonight she was knocking it back.

"This champagne is wonderful." It was her first state dinner overseas. She'd had a good day of her own with local ophthalmic surgeons, and had invited two of the best, full professors both, to come to the Wilmer Institute and acquaint themselves with her specialty area. Cathy was in the running for a Lasker Award for her work with laser surgery, the product of eleven years of clinical research, and the reason she had not accepted a department chairmanship twice offered by University of Virginia. Her big paper announcing the breakthrough would soon be published in *NEJM,* and for her as well, this night and this trip were the culmination of many

things.

"You're going to pay for it tomorrow," her husband warned. Jack was going easier on all the drinks, though he had already exceeded his normal nightly limit, which was one. It was the toasts that would do everyone in, he knew, having been through Russian banquets before. It was just a cultural thing. The Russians could drink most Irishmen under any table, something he'd once learned the hard way, but most of the American party either hadn't learned that lesson or simply didn't care this night. The National Security Advisor shook his head. They'd sure as hell learn it tomorrow morning. The main course arrived just then, and deep red wine filled the glasses.

"Oh, God, my dress is going to split wide open!"

"That should add to the official entertainment," her husband observed, earning a glare from across the table.

"You are far too skinny," Golovko observed, sitting next to her and giving voice to another Russian prejudice.

"So how old are your children?" Yelena Golovko asked. Also thin by Russian standards, she was a professor of pediatrics, and a very pleasant dinner companion.

"An American custom," Jack replied, pulling out his wallet and showing the pictures. "Olivia—I call her Sally. This is little Jack, and this is our newest."

"Your son favors you, but the girls are the image of their mother."

Jack grinned. "A good thing, too."

The great trading firms are just that, but it's a mystery to the average stockholder just how they trade. Wall Street was a vast collection of misnomers, beginning with the street itself, which is the approximate width of a back alley in most American residential areas, and even the sidewalks seem overly narrow for the degree of traffic they serve. When purchase orders came in to a major house, like the largest of them, Merrill Lynch, the traders did not go looking, physically or electronically, for someone willing to sell that particular issue. Rather, every day the company itself bought measured holdings of issues deemed likely to trade, and then awaited consumer interest in them. Buying in fairly large blocks made for some degree of volume discounting, and the sales, generally, were at a somewhat higher price. In this way the trading houses made money on what bookies called a "middle" position, typically about one eighth of a point. A point was a dollar, and thus an eighth of a point was twelve and a half cents. Seemingly a tiny margin of profit for a stock whose share value could be anything up to hundreds of dollars in the case of some blue chips, it was a margin repeated on many issues on a daily basis,

compounded over time to a huge potential profit if things went well. But they didn't always go well, and it was also possible for the houses to lose vast sums in a market that fell more rapidly than their estimates. There were many aphorisms warning of this. On the Hong Kong market, a large and active one, it was said that the market "went up like an escalator and down like an elevator," but the most basic saying was hammered into the mind of every new "rocket scientist" on the huge computer-trading floor of Merrill Lynch headquarters on the Lower West Side: "Never assume that there is a buyer for what you want to sell." But everyone did assume that, of course, because there always was, at least as far back as the collective memory of the firm went, and that was pretty far.

Most of the trading was not to individual investors, however. Since the 1960s, mutual funds had gradually assumed control of the market. Called "institutions" and grouped under that title with banks, insurance companies, and pension-fund managers, there were actually far more such "institutions" than there were stock issues on the New York Stock Exchange, rather like having hunters outnumbering the game, and the institutions controlled pools of money so vast as to defy comprehension. They were so powerful that to a large extent their policies could actually have a large effect on individual issues and even, briefly, the entire market, and in many cases the "institutions" were controlled by a small number of people—in many cases, just one.

The third and largest wave of Treasury-note sales came as a surprise to everyone, but most of all to the Federal Reserve Bank headquarters in Washington, whose staff had noted the Hong Kong and Tokyo transactions, the first with interest, the second with a small degree of alarm. The Eurodollar market had made things right, but that market was now mainly closed. These were more Asian banks, institutions that set their benchmarks not in America, but in Japan, and whose technicians had also noted the dumping and done some phoning around the region. Those calls had ended up in a single room atop an office tower, where very senior banking officials said that they'd been called in from a night's sleep to see a situation that looked quite serious to them, occasioning the second wave of sales, and that they recommended a careful, orderly, but rapid movement of position away from the dollar.

U.S. Treasury notes were the debt instruments of the United States government and also the principal retaining wall for the value of American currency. Regarded for fifty years as the safest investment on the planet, T-Bills gave both American citizens and everyone else the ability to put their capital in a commodity that represented the world's most powerful economy, protected in turn by the world's most powerful military establishment and regulated by a political system

that enshrined rights and opportunities through a Constitution that all admired even though they didn't always quite understand it. Whatever the faults and failings of America—none of them mysteries to sophisticated international investors—since 1945 the United States had been the one place in all the world where money was relatively safe. There was an inherent vitality to America from which all strong things grew. Imperfect as they were, Americans were also the world's most optimistic people, still a young country by the standards of the rest of the world, with all the attributes of vigorous youth. And so, when people had wealth to protect, mixed with uncertainty on how to protect it, most often they bought U.S. Treasury notes. The return wasn't always inviting, but the security was.

But not today. Bankers worldwide saw that Hong Kong and Tokyo had bailed out hard and fast, and the excuse over the trading wires that they were moving their positions from the dollar to the yen just didn't explain it all, especially after a few phone calls were made to inquire why the move had been made. Then the word arrived that more Japanese banks were moving out their bond holdings in a careful, orderly, and rapid movement. With that, bankers throughout Asia started doing the same. The third wave of selling was close to six hundred billion dollars, almost all short-term notes with which the current U.S. administration had chosen to finance its spending deficit.

The dollar was already falling, and with the start of the third wave of selling, all in a period of less than ninety minutes, the drop grew steeper still. In Europe, traders on their way home heard their cellular phones start beeping to call them back. Something unexpected was afoot. Analysts wondered if it had anything to do with the developing sex scandal within the American government. Europeans always wondered at the American fixation with the sexual dalliances of politicians. It was foolish, puritanical, and irrational, but it was also real to the American political scene, and that made it a relevant factor in how they handled American securities. The value of three-month U.S. Treasury notes was already down 19/32 of a point—bond values were expressed in such fractions—and as a result of that the dollar had fallen four cents against the British pound, even more against the Deutschmark, and more still again against the yen.

"What the hell is going own?" one of the Fed's board members asked. The whole board, technically known as the Open Market Committee, was grouped around a single computer screen, watching the trend in a collective mood of disbelief. There was no reason for this chaos that any of them could identify. Okay, sure, there was the flap over Vice President Kealty, but he was the *Vice* President. The stock market had been wavering up and down for some time due to the lingering confusion over the effects of the Trade Reform Act. But

what kind of evil synergy was this? The problem, they knew without discussing, was that they might never really know what was happening. Sometimes there was no real explanation. Sometimes things just happened, like a herd of cattle deciding to stampede for no reason that the drovers ever understood. When the dollar was down a full hundred basis points—meaning one percent of value—they all walked into the sanctity of their boardroom and sat down. The discussion was rapid and decisive. There was a run on the dollar. They had to stop it. Instead of the half-point rise in the Discount Rate they had planned to announce at the end of the working day, they would go to a full point. A strong minority actually proposed more than that, but agreed to the compromise. The announcement would be made immediately. The head of the Fed's public-relations department drafted a statement for the Chairman to read for whatever news cameras would answer the summons, and the statement would go out simultaneously on every wire service.

When brokers returned to their desks from lunch, what had been a fairly calm Friday was something else entirely. Every office had a news board that gave shorthand announcements of national and international events, because such things had effects on the market. The notification that the Fed had jacked up its benchmark rate by a full point shocked most trading rooms to a full fifteen or thirty seconds of silence, punctuated by not a few *Holy shits.* Technical traders modeling on their computer terminals saw that the market was already reacting. A rise in the discount rate was a sure harbinger of a brief dip in the Dow, like dark clouds were of rain. This storm would not be a pleasant one.

The big houses, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, Prudential-Bache, and all the rest, were highly automated, and all were organized along similar lines. In almost every case there was a single large room with banks of computer terminals. The size of the room was invariably dictated by the configuration of the building, and the highly paid technicians were crowded in almost as densely as a Japanese corporate office, except that in the American business centers people weren't allowed to smoke. Few of the men wore their suit jackets, and most of the women wore sneakers.

They were all very bright, though their educational backgrounds might have surprised the casual visitor. Once peopled with products of the Harvard or Wharton business schools, the new crop of "rocket scientists" were just that—largely holders of science degrees, especially mathematics and physics. MIT was the current school of choice, along with a handful of others. The reason was that the trading houses all used computers, and the computers used highly complex mathematical models both to analyze and predict what the

market was doing. The models were based on painstaking historical research that covered the NYSE all the way back to when it was a place under the shade of a buttonwood tree. Teams of historians and mathematicians had plotted every move in the market. These records had been analyzed, compared with all identifiable outside factors, and given their own mathematically drawn measure of reality, and the result was a series of very precise and inhumanly intricate models for how the market had worked, did work, and would work. All of this data, however, was dedicated to the idea that dice *did* have a memory, a concept beloved of casino owners, but false.

You needed to be a mathematical genius, everyone said (especially the mathematical geniuses), to understand how this thing operated. The older hands kept out of the way for the most part. People who had learned business in business schools, or even people who had started as clerks and made their way up the ladder through sheer effort and savvy, had made way for the new generation—not really regretting it. The half-life of a computer jockey was eight years or so. The pace on the floor was killing, and you had to be young and stupid, in addition to being young and brilliant, to survive out there. The older hands who had worked their way up the hard way let the youngsters do the computer-driving, since they themselves had only a passing familiarization with the equipment, and took on the role of supervising, marking trends, setting corporate policy, and generally being the kindly uncle to the youngsters, who regarded the supervisory personnel as old farts to whom you ran in time of trouble.

The result was that nobody was really in charge of anything—except, perhaps, the computer models, and everyone used the same model. They came in slightly different flavors, since the consultants who had generated them had been directed by each trading house to come up with something special, and the result was prosperity for the consultants, who did essentially the same work for each customer but billed each for what they claimed was a unique product.

The result, in military terms, was an operational doctrine both identical and inflexible across the industry. Moreover, it was an operational philosophy that everyone knew and understood only in part.

The Columbus Group, one of the largest mutual-fund fleets, had its own computer models. Controlling billions of dollars, its three main funds, Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria, were able to purchase large blocks of equities at rock-bottom prices, and by those very transactions to affect the price of individual issues. That vast market power was in turn commanded by no more than three individuals, and that trio reported to a fourth man who made all of the really important decisions. The rest of the firm's rocket scientists were paid,

graded, and promoted on their ability to make recommendations to the seniors. They had no real power per se. The word of the boss was law, and everybody accepted that as a matter of course. The boss was invariably a man with his own fortune in the group. Each of his dollars had the same value as the dollar of the smallest investor, of whom there were thousands. It ran the same risks, reaped the same benefits, and occasionally took the same losses as everyone else's dollar. That, really, was the only security built into the entire trading system. The ultimate sin in the brokerage business was to place your own interests before those of your investors. Merely by putting your interests alongside theirs, there came the guarantee that everyone was in it together, and the little guys who had not the barest understanding of how the market worked rested secure in the idea that the big boys who did know were looking after things. It was not unlike the American West in the late nineteenth century, where small cattle ranchers entrusted their diminutive herds to those of the large ranchers for the drive to the railheads.

It was 1:50 P.M. when Columbus made its first move. Calling his top people together, Raizo Yamata's principal lieutenant briefly discussed the sudden run on the dollar. Heads nodded. It was serious. Pinta, the medium-risk fund of the fleet, had a goodly supply of Treasury notes, always a good parking place in which to put cash in anticipation of a better opportunity for later on. The value of these notes was falling. He announced that he was ordering their immediate transfer for Deutschmarks, again the most stable currency in Europe. The Pinta manager nodded, lifted his phone, and gave the order, and another huge transaction was made, the first by an American trader.

"I don't like the way this afternoon is going," the vice-chairman said next. "I want everybody close." Heads nodded again. The storm clouds were coming closer, and the herd was getting restless with the first shafts of lightning. "What bank stocks are vulnerable to a weak dollar?" he asked. He already knew the answer, but it was good form to ask.

"Citibank," the Niña manager replied. He was responsible for the blue-chip fund's management. "We have a ton of their stock."

"Start bailing out," the vice-chairman ordered, using the American idiom. "I don't like the way the banks are exposed."

"All of it?" The manager was surprised. Citibank had just turned in a pretty good quarterly statement.

A serious nod. "All of it."

"But—"

"All of it," the vice-chairman said quietly. "Immediately."

At the Depository Trust Company the accelerated trading activity was noted by the staffers whose job it was to note every transaction. Their purpose was to collate everything at the end of the trading day, to note which buyer had purchased which stock from which seller, and to post the money transfers from and to the appropriate accounts, in effect acting as the automated bookkeeper for the entire equities market. Their screens showed an accelerating pace of activity, but the computers were all running Chuck Searls' Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 software, and the Stratus mainframes were keeping up. There were three outputs off each machine. One line went to the monitor screens. Another went to tape backups. A third went to a paper printout, the ultimate but most inconvenient record-keeping modality. The nature of the interfaces demanded that each output come from a different internal board inside the computers, but they were all the same output, and as a result nobody bothered with the permanent records. After all, there were a total of six machines divided between two separate locations. This system was as secure as people could make it.

Things could have been done differently. Each sale/ purchase order could have been sent out immediately, but that was untidy—the sheer administrative volume would have taxed the abilities of the entire industry. Instead, the purpose of DTC was to bring order out of chaos. At the end of each day, the transactions were organized by trading house, by stock issue, and by client, in a hierarchical way, so that each house would write a limited number of checks—funds transfers were mostly done electronically, but the principle held. This way the houses would both save on administrative expense and generate numerous means by which every player in the game could track and measure its own activity for the purposes of internal audit and further mathematical modeling of the market as a whole. Though seemingly an operation of incomprehensible complexity, the use of computers made it as routine and far more efficient than written entries in a passbook savings account.

"Wow, somebody's dumping on Citibank," the syscon said.

The floor of the New York Stock Exchange was divided into three parts, the largest of which had once been a garage. Construction was under way on a fourth trading room, and local doomsayers were already noting that every time the Exchange had increased its space, something bad had happened. Some of the most rational and hard-nosed business types in all the world, this community of professionals had its own institutional superstitions. The floor was actually a collection of individual firms, each of which had a specialty area and responsibility for a discrete number of issues grouped by type. One

firm might have eight to fifteen pharmaceutical issues, for example. Another managed a similar number of bank stocks. The real function of the NYSE was to provide both liquidity and a benchmark. People could buy and sell stocks anywhere from a lawyer's office to a countryclub dining room. Most of the trading in major stocks happened in New York because . . . it happened in New York, and that was that. The New York Stock Exchange was the oldest. There were also the American Stock Exchange, Amex, and the newer National Association of Securities Dealers Automatic Quotation, whose awkward name was compensated for by a snappy acronym, NASDAQ. The NYSE was the most traditional in organization, and some would say that it had been dragged kicking and screaming into the world of automation. Somewhat haughty and stodgy—they regarded the other markets as the minor leagues and themselves as the majors—it was staffed by professionals who stood for most of the day at their kiosks, watching various displays, buying and selling and, like the trading houses, living off the "middle" or "spread" positions which they anticipated. If the stock market and its investors were the herd, they were the cowboys, and their job was to keep track of things, to set the benchmark prices to which everyone referred, to keep the herd organized and contained, in return for which the best of them made a very good living that compensated for a physical working environment which at best was chaotic and unpleasant, and at its worst really was remarkably close to standing in the way of a stampede.

The first rumblings of that stampede had already started. The sell-off of Treasury notes was duly reported on the floor, and the people there traded nervous looks and headshakes at the unreasonable development. Then they learned that the Fed had responded sharply. The strong statement from the chairman didn't—couldn't—disguise his unease, and would not have mattered in any case. Few people listened to the statement beyond the announcement of a change in the Discount Rate. That was the news. The rest of it was spin control, and investors discounted all of that, preferring to rely on their own analysis.

The sell orders started coming. The floor trader who specialized in bank stocks was stunned by the phone call from Columbus, but that didn't matter. He announced that he had "five hundred Citi at three," meaning five hundred thousand shares of the stock of First National City Bank of New York at eighty-three dollars, two full points under the posted price, clearly a move to get out in a hurry. It was a good, attractive price, but the market hesitated briefly before snapping them up, and then at "two and a half."

Computers also kept track of trading because the traders didn't

entirely trust themselves to stay on top of everything. A person could be on the phone and miss something, after all, and therefore, to a remarkable degree, major institutions were actually managed by computers, or more properly the software that resided on them, which was in turn written by people who established discrete sets of monitoring criteria. The computers didn't understand the market any more than those who programmed them, of course, but they did have instructions: If "A" happens, then do "B." The new generation of programs, generically called "expert systems" (a more attractive term than "artificial intelligence") for their high degree of sophistication, were updated on a daily basis with the status of benchmark issues from which they electronically extrapolated the health of whole segments of the market. Quarterly reports, industry trends, changes in management, were all given numerical values and incorporated in the dynamic databases that the expert systems examined and acted upon, entirely without the judgmental input of human operators.

In this case the large and instant drop in the value of Citibank stock announced to the computers that they should initiate sell orders on other bank stocks. Chemical Bank, which had had a rough time of late, the computers remembered, had also dropped a few points in the last week, and at the three institutions that used the same program, sell orders were issued electronically, dropping that issue an instant point and a half. That move on Chemical Bank stock, linked with the fall of Citibank, attracted the immediate attention of other expert systems with the same operational protocols but different benchmark banks, a fact that guaranteed a rippling effect across the entire industry spectrum. Manufacturers Hanover was the next major bank stock to head down, and now the programs were starting to search their internal protocols for what a fall in bank-stock values indicated as the next defensive move in other key industries.

With the money realized by the Treasury sales, Columbus started buying gold, both in the form of stocks and in gold futures, starting a trend from currency and into precious metals. The sudden jump there went out on the wires as well, and was noted by traders, both human and electronic. In all cases the analysis was pretty much the same: a sell-off of government bonds, plus a sudden jump in the Discount Rate, plus a run on the dollar, plus a building crash in bank stocks, plus a jump in precious metals, all combined to announce a dangerous inflationary predictor. Inflation was always bad for the equities market. You didn't need to have artificial intelligence to grasp that. Neither computer programs nor human traders were panicking yet, but everyone was leaning forward and watching the wires for developing trends, and everyone wanted to be ahead of the trend, the better to protect their own and their clients' investments.

By this time the bond market was seriously rattled. Half a billion dollars, dumped at the right time, had shaken loose another ten. The Eurodollar managers who had been called back to their offices were not really in a fit state to make rational decisions. The days and weeks had been long of late with the international trade situation, and arriving singly back at their offices, each asked the others what the devil was going on, only to learn that a lot of U.S. Treasuries had been sold very short, and that the trend was continuing, now augmented by a large and very astute American institution. But *why*? they all wanted to know. That set them to looking at additional data on the wires, trying to catch up with the information streaming from America. Eyes squinted, heads shook, and these traders, lacking the time to review everything, turned to their own expert systems to make the analyses, because the reasons for the swift movements were simply not obvious enough to be real.

But it didn't really matter why, did it? It had to be real. The Fed had just gone up a full point on the discount rate, and that hadn't happened by accident. For the moment, they decided, in the absence of guidance from their governments and central banks, they would defer buying U.S. Treasuries. They also began immediate examinations of their equity holdings, because stocks looked as though they were going to drop, and drop rapidly.

" . . . between the people of Russia and the people of America," President Grushavoy concluded his toast, the host answering President Durling, the guest, as the protocol for such things went. Glasses were raised and tipped. Ryan allowed a drop or two of the vodka to pass his lips. Even with these thimble glasses, you could get pretty wasted—waiters stood everywhere to replenish them—and the toasting had just begun. He'd never been to a state affair this . . . loose. The entire diplomatic community was here—or at least the ambassadors from all the important countries were present. The Japanese Ambassador in particular seemed jovial, darting from table to table for snippets of conversation.

Secretary of State Brett Hanson stood next, raising his glass and stumbling through a prepared ode to the far-seeing Russian Foreign Ministry, celebrating their cooperation not merely with the United States, but all of Europe. Jack checked his watch: 10:03 local time. He already had three and a half drinks down, and deemed himself to be the most sober person in the room. Cathy was getting a little giggly on him. *That* hadn't happened in a very long time, and he knew that he'd be razzing her about it for years to come.

"Jack, you have no taste for our vodka?" Golovko asked. He also

was hitting it pretty hard, but Sergey appeared to be used to it.

"I don't want to make too much of a fool out of myself," Ryan replied.

"It would be difficult for you to do that, my friend," the Russian observed.

"That's because you're not married to him," Cathy noted with a twinkle in her eye.

"Now wait a minute," a bond specialist said to his computer in New York. His firm managed several large pension funds, which were responsible for the retirement security of over a million union workers. Just back from a normal lunch at his favorite deli, he was offering Treasuries at bargain prices on orders from upstairs, and for the moment they were just sitting out there awaiting a buyer. Why? A cautious order appeared from a French bank, apparently a hedge against inflationary pressure on the franc. That was a mere billion, bid at 1 7/32 off the opening value, the international equivalent of armed robbery. But Columbus, he saw, had bitten the bullet and taken the francs, converting them almost instantly into D-marks in a hedge move of its own. Still digesting his corned-beef sandwich, the man felt his lunch turn into a ball of chilled lead.

"Somebody making a run on the dollar?" he asked the trader next to him.

"Sure looks that way," she answered. In an hour, future options on the dollar had dropped the maximum-allowed limit for a day after having climbed all morning.

"Who?"

"Whoever it is, Citibank just took one in the back. Chemical's sliding, too."

"Some kind of correction?" he wondered.

"Correction *from* what? *To* what?"

"So what do I do? Buy? Sell? Hide?" He had decisions to make. He had the life savings of real people to protect, but the market wasn't acting in a way he understood. Things were going in the shitter, and he didn't know why. In order to do his job properly, he had to know.

* * *

"Still heading west to meet us, *Shoho,"* Fleet Operations told Admiral Sato. "We should have them on radar soon."

"Hai. Thank you, *Issa,"* Sato replied, an edge on his good humor

now. He wanted it that way, wanted his people to see him like that. The Americans had won the exercise, which was hardly a surprise. Nor was it surprising that the crewmen he saw were somewhat depressed as a result. After all the workups and drills, they'd been administratively annihilated, and the resentment they felt, while not terribly professional, was entirely human. *Again*, they thought, the Americans have done it to us *again*. That suited the fleet commander. Their morale was one of the most important considerations in the operation, which, the crewmen didn't know, was not over, but actually about to begin.

The event that had started with T-Bills was now affecting all publicly traded bank issues, enough so that the chairman of Citibank called a press conference to protest against the collapse of his institution's stock, pointing to the most recent earnings statement and demonstrable financial health of one of the country's largest banks. Nobody listened. He would have been better advised to make a few telephone calls to a handful of chosen individuals, but that might not have worked either.

The one banker who could have stopped things that day was giving a speech at a downtown club when his beeper went off. He was Walter Hildebrand, president of the New York branch of the Federal Reserve Bank, and second in importance only to the man who ran the headquarters in Washington. Himself a man of great inherited wealth who had nonetheless started at the bottom of the financial industry (albeit living in a comfortable twelve-room condo as he did so) and earned his way to the top, Hildebrand had also earned his current job, which he viewed as his best opportunity for real public service. A canny financial analyst, he had published a book examining the crash of October 19, 1987, and the role played by his predecessor at the New York Fed, Gerry Lornigan, in saving the market. Having just delivered a speech on the ramifications of the Trade Reform Act, he looked down at his beeper, which unsurprisingly told him to call the office. But the office was only a few blocks away, and he decided to walk back instead of calling, which would have told him to go to the NYSE. It would not have mattered.

Hildebrand walked out of the building by himself. It was a clear, crisp day, a good one to walk off some of his lunch. He hadn't troubled himself to use a bodyguard, as some of his antecedents had, though he did have a pistol-carry permit and sometimes used it.

The streets of lower Manhattan are narrow and busy, populated mostly by delivery trucks and yellow-painted taxicabs that darted from corner to corner like drag racers. The sidewalks were just as

narrow and crowded. Just walking around meant taking a crooked path, with many sidesteps. The clearest path was most often that closest to the curb, and that is what Hildebrand took, moving as rapidly as the circumstances permitted, the faster to get to his office. He didn't note the presence of another man, just behind him, only three feet, in fact, a well-dressed man with dark hair and an ordinary face. It was just a matter of waiting for the right moment, and the nature of the traffic here made it inevitable that the moment would come. That was a relief to the dark-haired man, who didn't want to use his pistol for the contract. He didn't like noise. Noise attracted looks. Looks could be remembered, and though he planned to be on a plane to Europe in just over two hours, there was no such thing as being too careful. So, his head swiveled, watching the traffic ahead and behind, he chose the moment with care.

They were approaching the corner of Rector and Trinity. The traffic light ahead turned green, allowing a two-hundred-foot volume of automobiles to surge forward another two hundred feet. Then the light behind changed as well, releasing the pent-up energy of a corresponding number of vehicles. Some of them were cabs, which raced especially fast because cabs loved to change lanes. One yellow cab jumped off the light and darted to its right. A perfect situation. The dark-haired man increased his pace until he was right behind Hildebrand, and all he had to do was push. The president of the New York Fed tripped on the curb and fell into the street. The cabdriver saw it, and turned the wheel even before he had a chance to swear, but not far enough. For all that, the man in the camel-hair overcoat was lucky. The cab stopped as fast as its newly refurbished brakes allowed, and the impact speed was under twenty miles per hour, enough to catapult Walter Hildebrand about thirty feet into a steel lightpole and break his back. A police officer on the other side of the street responded at once, calling for an ambulance on his portable radio.

The dark-haired man blended back into the crowd and headed for the nearest subway station. He didn't know if the man was dead or not. It wasn't really necessary to kill him, he'd been told, which had seemed odd at the time. Hildebrand was the first banker he'd been told not to kill.

The cop hovering over the fallen businessman noted the beeper's repeated chirping. He'd call the displayed number as soon as the ambulance arrived. His main concern right now was in listening to the cabdriver protest that it wasn't his fault.

The expert systems "knew" that when bank stocks dropped rapidly,

confidence in the banks themselves was invariably badly shaken, and that people would think about moving their money out of the banks that appeared to be threatened. That would force the banks in turn to pressure their borrowers to pay back loans, or, more importantly to the expert systems and their ability to read the market a few minutes faster than everyone else, because banks were turning into investment institutions themselves, to liquidate their own financial holdings to meet the demands of depositors who wanted their deposits back. Banks were typically cautious investors on the equity market, sticking mainly to blue chips and other bank stocks, and so the next dip, the computers thought, would be in the major issues, especially the thirty benchmark stocks that made up the Dow Jones Industrial Average. As always, the imperative was to see the trend first and to move first, thus safeguarding the funds that the big institutions had to protect. Of course, since all the institutions used essentially the same expert systems, they all moved at virtually the same time. With the sight of a single thunderbolt just a little too close to the herd, all of the herd members started moving away from it, in the same direction, slowly at first, but moving.

The men on the floor of the exchange knew it was coming. Mostly people who received programmed-trade orders, they had learned from experience to predict what the computers would do. *Here it comes* was the murmur heard in all three trading rooms, and the very predictability of it should have been an indicator of what was really happening, but it was hard for the cowboys just to stay outside the herd, try to find a way to direct it, turn it, pacify it—and not be engulfed by it. If *that* happened, they stood to lose because a serious downward turn could obliterate the thin margins on which their firms depended.

The head of the NYSE was now on the balcony, looking down, wondering where the hell Walt Hildebrand was. That's all they needed, really. Everybody listened to Walt. He lifted his cellular phone and called his office again, only to hear from Walt's secretary that he hadn't returned to the office from his speech yet. Yes, she *had* beeped him. She really had.

He could see it start. People moved more rapidly on the floor. Everyone was there now, and the sheer volume of noise emanating from the floor was reaching deafening levels. Always a bad sign when people started shouting. The electronic ticker told its own tale. The blue chips, all three-letter acronyms as well known to him as the names of his children, were accounting for more than a third of the notations, and the numbers were trending sharply down. It took a mere twenty minutes for the Dow to drop fifty points, and as awful and precipitous as that was, it came as a relief. Automatically, the

computers at the New York Stock Exchange stopped accepting computer-generated sell orders from their electronic brethren. The fifty-point mark was called a “speed bump.” Set in place after the 1987 crash, its purpose was to slow things down to a human pace. The simple fact that everyone overlooked was that people could take the instructions—they didn’t even bother calling them recommendations anymore—from their computers and forward the sell orders themselves by phone or telex or electronic mail, and all the speed bump accomplished was to add another thirty seconds to the transaction process. Thus, after a hiatus of no more than a minute, the trading pace picked up yet again and the direction was down.

By this time, the panic within the entire financial community was quite real, reflected in a tenseness and a low buzz of conversation in every trading room of every one of the large institutions. Now CNN issued a live special report from its own perch over the floor of the former NYSE garage. The stock ticker on their “Headline News” service told the tale to investors who also liked to keep track of more human events. For others, there was now a real human being to say that the Dow Jones Industrial Average had dropped fifty points in the blink of an eye, and was now down twenty more points, and the downward spiral was not reversing itself. There followed questions from the anchorperson in Atlanta, and resulting speculation on the cause of the event, and the reporter who hadn’t had time to check her sources for information, winged it on her own, and said that there was a worldwide run on the dollar that the Fed had failed to stop. She couldn’t have picked a worse thing to say. Now everyone knew what was happening, after a fashion, and the public got involved in the stampede.

Although investment professionals looked upon the public’s lack of understanding for the investment process with contempt, they failed to recognize the crucial element of similarity they shared with them. The public merely accepted the fact that the Dow going up was good and its going down was bad. It was exactly the same for the traders, who thought they really understood the system. The investment professionals knew far more about the mechanics of the market but had lost track of the foundation of its value. For them, as for the public, reality had become trends, and they often expressed their bets by use of derivatives, which were moving numerical indicators that over the years had become increasingly disconnected from what the individual stock designations truly represented. Stock certificates were not, after all, theoretical expressions, but individual segments of ownership in corporations that had a physical reality. Over time the “rocket scientists” on the floor of this room had forgotten that, and even schooled as they were in mathematical models and trend

analysis, the underlying value of that which they traded was foreign to them—the facts had become more theoretical than the theory that was now breaking down before their eyes. Denied a foundation in what they were doing, lacking an anchor on which to hold fast in the storm sweeping across the room and the whole financial system, they simply did not know what to do, and the few supervisory personnel who did lacked the numbers and the time with which to settle their young traders down.

None of this really made sense at all. The dollar should have been strong and should grow stronger after a few minor rumbles. Citibank had just turned in a good if not spectacular earnings statement, and Chemical Bank was fundamentally healthy as well after some management restructuring, but the stocks on both issues had dropped hard and fast. The computer programs said that the combination of factors meant something very bad, and the *expert systems* were *never* wrong, were they? Their foundation was historically precise, and they saw into the future better than people could. The technical traders believed the models despite the fact that they did not see the reasoning that had led the models to make the recommendations displayed on their computer terminals; in exactly the same way, ordinary citizens now saw the news and knew that something bad was happening without understanding why it was bad, and wondered what the hell to do about it.

The "professionals" were as badly off as the ordinary citizens catching news flashes on TV or radio, or so it seemed. In fact, it was far worse for them. Understanding the mathematical models as well as they did became not an asset, but a liability. To the average citizen what he saw was incomprehensible at first, and as a result, few took any action at all. They watched and waited, or in many cases just shrugged since they had no stocks of their own. In fact they did, but didn't know it. The banks, insurance companies, and pension funds that managed the citizens' money had huge positions in all manner of public issues. Those institutions were all managed by "professionals"—whose education and experience told them that they *had to* panic. And panic they did, beginning a process that the man in the street soon recognized for what it was. That was when the telephone calls from individuals began, and the downslope became steeper for everyone.

What was already frightening became worse. The first calls came from the elderly, people who watched TV during the day and chatted back and forth on the phone, sharing their fears and their shock at what they saw. Many of them had invested their savings in mutual funds because they gave higher yields than bank accounts—which was why banks had gotten into the business as well, to protect their own

profits. The mutual funds were taking huge hits now, and though the hits were limited mainly to the blue chips at the moment, when the calls came in from individual clients to cash in their money and get out, the institutions had to sell off as yet untroubled issues to make up for the losses in others that should have been safe but were not. Essentially, they were throwing away equities that had held their value to this point, for which procedure the timeless aphorism was "to throw good money after bad." It was almost an exact description for what they had to do.

The necessary result was a general run, the drop of every stock issue on every exchange. By three that afternoon, the Dow was down a hundred seventy points. The Standard and Poor's Five Hundred was actually showing worse results, but the NASDAQ Composite Index was the worst of all, as individual investors across America dialed their 1-800 numbers to their mutual funds.

The heads of all the exchanges staged a conference call with the assembled commissioners of the Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington, and for the first confused ten minutes all the voices demanded answers to the same questions that the others were simultaneously asking. Nothing at all was accomplished. The government officials requested information and updates, essentially asking how close the herd was to the edge of the canyon, and how fast it was approaching the abyss, but not contributing a dot to the effort to turn the cattle to safety. The head of the NYSE resisted his instinct to shut down or somehow slow down the trading. In the time they talked—a bare twenty minutes—the Dow dropped another ninety points, having blown through two hundred points of free-fall and now approaching three. After the SEC commissioners broke off to hold their own in-house conference, the exchange heads violated federal guidelines and talked together about taking remedial action, but for all their collective expertise, there was nothing to be done now.

Now individual investors were blinking on "hold" buttons across America. Those whose funds were managed through banks learned something especially disquieting. Yes, their funds were in banks. Yes, those banks were federally insured. But, *no,* the mutual funds the banks managed in order to serve the needs of their depositors were *not* protected by the FDIC. It wasn't merely the interest income that was at risk, but the *principal* as well. The response to that was generally ten or so seconds of silence, and, in not a few cases, people got into their cars and drove to banks to get cash for what other deposits they did have.

The NYSE ticker was now running fourteen minutes late despite the high-speed computers that recorded the changing values of issues. A handful of stocks actually managed to increase, but those were mainly

precious metals. Everything else fell. Now all the major networks were running live feeds from the Street. Now everyone knew. Cummings, Cantor, and Carter, a firm that had been in business for one hundred twenty years, ran out of cash reserves, forcing its chairman to make a frantic call to Merrill Lynch. That placed the chairman of the largest house in a delicate position. The oldest and smartest pro around, he had nearly broken his hand half an hour earlier by pounding on his desk and demanding answers that no one had. Thousands of people bought stock not just through, but also in, his corporation because of its savvy and integrity. The chairman could make a strategic move to protect a fellow bulwark of the entire system against a panic with no foundation to it, or he could refuse, guarding the money of his stockholders. There was no right answer to this one. Failure to help CC&C would—could—take the panic to the next stage and so damage the market that the money he saved by not helping the rival firm would just as soon be lost anyway. Extending help to CC&C might turn into nothing more than a gesture, without stopping anything, and again losing money that belonged to others.

"Holy shit," the chairman breathed, turning to look out the windows. One of the nicknames for the house was "the Thundering Herd." Well, the herd was sure as hell thundering now . . . He measured his responsibility to his stockholders against his responsibility to the whole system upon which they and everyone else depended. The former had to come first. Had to. There was no choice. Thus one of the system's most important players flung the entire financial network over a cliff and into the waiting abyss.

Trading on the floor of the exchange stopped at 3:23 P.M., when the Dow achieved its maximum allowable fall of five hundred points. That figure merely reflected the value of thirty stock issues, and the fall in others well exceeded the benchmark loss of the biggest of the blue chips. The ticker took another thirty minutes to catch up, offering the illusion of further activity while the people on the floor looked at one another, mostly in silence, standing on a wood floor so covered with paper slips as to give the appearance of snow. It was a Friday, they all told themselves. Tomorrow was Saturday. Everyone would be at home. Everyone would have a chance to take a few deep breaths and think. That's all that had to happen, really, just a little thought. None of it made sense. A whole lot of people had been badly hurt, but the market would bounce back, and over time those with the wit and the courage to stand fast would get it all back. *If,* they told themselves, *if everyone used the time intelligently, and if nothing else crazy happened.*

They were almost right.

At the Depository Trust Company, people sat about with ties loose in their collars, and made frequent trips to the restrooms because of all the coffee and soda they'd drunk on this most frantic of afternoons, but there was some blessing to be had. The market had closed early, and so they could start their work early. With the inputs from the major trading centers concluded, the computers switched from one mode of operation to another. The taped recordings of the day's transactions were run through the machines for collation and transmission. It was close to six in the evening when a bell sounded on one of the workstations.

"Rick, I've got a problem here!"

Rick Bernard, the senior system controller, came over and looked at the screen to see the reason for the alert bell.

The last trade they could identify, at exactly noon of that day, was for Atlas Milacron, a machine-tool company flying high with orders from the auto companies, six thousand shares at 48½. Since Atlas was listed on the New York Stock Exchange, its stock was identified by a three-letter acronym, AMN in this case. NASDAQ issues used fourletter groups.

The next notation, immediately after AMN 6000 48½, was AAA 4000 67⅛, and the one under that AAA 9000 51¼. In fact, by scrolling down, all entries made after 12:00:01 showed the same three-letter, meaningless identifier.

"Switch over to Beta," Bernard said. The storage tape on the first backup computer system was opened. "Scroll down."

"Shit!"

In five minutes all six systems had been checked. In every case, every single trade had been recorded as gibberish. There was no readily accessible record for any of the trades made after twelve noon. No trading house, institution, or private investor could know what it had bought or sold, to or from whom, or for how much, and none could therefore know how much money was available for other trades, or for that matter, to purchase groceries over the weekend.

20

Strike Three

The party broke up after midnight. The official entertainment was a sort of ballet-in-the-round. The Bolshoy hadn't lost its magic, and the configuration of the room allowed the guests to see the dancers at much closer hand than had ever been possible, but finally the last hand had been clapped red and hurt from the encores, and it was time for security personnel to help their charges to the door. Nearly everyone had a roll to his or her walk, and sure enough, Ryan saw, he was the most sober person in the room, including his wife.

"What do you think, Daga?" Ryan asked Special Agent Helen D'Agustino. His own bodyguard was getting coats.

"I think, just once, I'd like to be able to party with the principals." Then she shook her head like a parent disappointed with her children.

"Oh, Jack, tomorrow I'm going to feel awful," Cathy reported. The vodka here was just too smooth.

"I told you, honey. Beside," her husband added nastily, "it's *already* tomorrow."

"Excuse me, I have to help with JUMPER." Which was the Secret Service code name for the President, a tribute to his paratrooper days.

Ryan was surprised to see an American in ordinary business attire—the formal dinner had been black-tie, another recent change in the Russian social scene—waiting outside the doors. He led his wife over that way.

"What is it?"

"Dr. Ryan, I need to see the President right away."

"Cathy, could you stay here for a second." To the embassy official: "Follow me."

"Oh, Jack . . ." his wife griped.

"You have it on paper?" Ryan asked, holding his hand out.

"Here, sir." Ryan took the fax sheets and read them while walking across the room.

"Holy shit. Come on." President Durling was still chatting with President Grushavoy when Ryan appeared with the junior man in his wake.

"Some party, Jack," Roger Durling observed pleasantly. Then his

face changed. “Trouble?”

Ryan nodded, adopting his Advisor’s face. “We need Brett and Buzz, Mr. President, right now.”

“There they are.” The SPY-1D radar on *Mutsu* painted the forward edge of the American formation on the raster screen. Rear Admiral—*Shoho*—Sato looked at his operations officer with an impassive expression that meant nothing to the rest of the bridge crew but quite a bit to the Captain—*Issa*—who knew what Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS was really all about. Now it was time to discuss the matter with the destroyer’s commanding officer. The two formations were 140 nautical miles apart and would rendezvous in the late afternoon, the two officers thought, wondering how *Mutsu’s* CO would react to the news. Not that he had much choice in the matter.

Ten minutes later, a *Socho*, or chief petty officer, went out on deck to check out the Mark 68 torpedo launcher on the port side. First opening the inspection hatch on the base of the mount, he ran an electronic diagnostic test on all three “fish” in the three-tube launcher. Satisfied, he secured the hatch, and one by one opened the aft hatches on each individual tube, removing the propeller locks from each Mark 50 torpedo. The *Socho* was a twenty-year veteran of the sea, and completed the task in under ten minutes. Then he lifted his tools and walked over to the starboard side to repeat it for the identical launcher on the other side of his destroyer. He had no idea why he had been ordered to perform the tasks, and hadn’t asked.

Another ten minutes and *Mutsu* went to flight quarters. Modified from her original plans, the destroyer now sported a telescoping hangar that allowed her to embark a single SH-60J antisubmarine helicopter that was also useful for surveillance work. The crew had to be roused from sleep and their aircraft preflighted, which required almost forty minutes, but then it lifted off, first sweeping around the formation, then moving forward, its surface-scanning radar examining the American formation that was still heading west at eighteen knots. The radar picture was downlinked to flagship *Mutsu.*

“These will be the two carriers, three thousand meters apart,” the CO said, tapping the display screen.

“You have your orders, Captain,” Sato said.

“Hai,” Mutsu’s commander replied, keeping his feelings to himself.

“What the hell happened?” Durling asked. They had assembled in a corner, with Russian and American security personnel to keep others

away.

"It looks like there was a major conniption on the Street," Ryan replied, having had the most time to consider the event. It wasn't exactly a penetrating analysis.

"Cause?" Fiedler asked.

"No reason for it that I know about," Jack said, looking around for the coffee he'd ordered. He needed some, and the other three men needed it even more.

"Jack, you have the most recent trading experience," Secretary of the Treasury Fiedler observed.

"Start-ups, IPOs, not really working the Street, Buzz." The National Security Advisor paused, gesturing to the fax sheets. "It's not as though we have a lot to go on. Somebody got nervous on T-Bills, most likely guess right now is that somebody was cashing in on relative changes between the dollar and the yen, and things got a little out of hand."

"A little?" Brett Hanson interjected, just to let people know he was here.

"Look, the Dow took a big fall, down to a hard floor, and there are two days for people to regroup. It's happened before. We're flying back tomorrow night, right?"

"We need to do something now," Fiedler said. "Some sort of statement."

"Something neutral and reassuring," Ryan suggested. "The market's like an airplane. It'll pretty much fly itself if you leave it alone. This has happened before, remember?"

Secretary Bosley Piedter—"Buzz" went back to Little League baseball—was an academic. He'd written books on the American financial system without ever having actually played in it. The good news was that he knew how to take a broad, historical view on economics. His professional reputation was that of an expert on monetary policy. The bad news, Ryan saw now, was that Fiedler had never been a trader, or even thought that much about it, and consequently lacked the confidence that a real player would have had with this situation, which explained why he had immediately asked Ryan for an opinion. Well, that was a good sign, wasn't it? He knew what he didn't know. No wonder everybody said he was smart.

"We put in speed bumps and other safeguards as a result of the last time. This event blew right through them. In less than three hours," SecTreas added uneasily, wondering, as an academic would, why good theoretical measures had failed to work as expected.

"True. It'll be interesting to see why. Remember, Buzz, it *has* happened before."

"Statement," the President said, giving a one-word order.

Fiedler nodded, thinking for a moment before speaking. “Okay, we say that the system is fundamentally sound. We have all manner of automated safeguards. There is no underlying problem with the market or with the American economy. Hell, we’re growing, aren’t we? And TRA is going to generate at least half a million manufacturing jobs in the coming year. That’s a hard number, Mr. President. That’s what I’ll say for now.”

“Defer anything else until we get back?” Durling asked.

“That’s my advice,” Fiedler confirmed. Ryan nodded agreement.

“Okay, get hold of Tish and put it out right away.”

There was an unusual number of charter flights, but Saipan International Airport wasn’t all that busy an airport despite its long runways, and increased business made for increased fees. Besides, it was a weekend. Probably some sort of association, the tower chief thought as the first of the 747s out of Tokyo began its final approach. Of late Saipan had become a much more popular place for Japanese businessmen. A recent court decision had struck down the constitutional provision prohibiting foreign ownership of land and now allowed them to buy up parcels. In fact, the island was more than half foreign-owned now, a source of annoyance to many of the native Chamorros people, but not so great an annoyance as to prevent many of them from taking the money and moving off the land. It was bad enough already. On any given weekend, the number of Japanese on Saipan outnumbered the citizens, and typically treated the owners of the island like . . . natives.

“Must be a bunch going to Guam, too,” the radar operator noted, examining the line of traffic heading farther south.

“Weekend. Golf and fishing,” the senior tower controller observed, looking forward to the end of his shift. The Japs—he didn’t like them very much—were not going to Thailand as much for their sex trips. Too many had come home with nasty gifts from that country. Well, they did spend money here—a lot of it—and for the privilege of doing it for this weekend they’d boarded their jumbo-jets at about two in the morning . . .

The first JAL 747 charter touched down at 0430 local time, slowing and turning at the end of the runway in time for the next one to complete its final approach. Captain Torajiro Sato turned right onto the taxiway and looked around for anything unusual. He didn’t expect it, but on a mission like this—*Mission*? he asked himself. That was a

word he hadn't used since his F-86 days in the Air Self-Defense Force. If he'd stayed, he would have been a *Sho* by now, perhaps even commanding his country's entire Air Force. Wouldn't that have been grand? Instead—instead he'd left that service and started with Japan Air Lines, at the time a place of far greater respect. He'd hated that fact then, and now hoped that it would change for all time. It would be an Air *Force* now, even if someone lesser than he was actually in command.

He was still a fighter pilot at heart. You didn't have much chance to do anything exciting in a 747. He'd been through one serious inflight emergency eight years before, a partial hydraulic failure, and handled it so skillfully that he hadn't bothered telling the passengers. No one outside the flight deck had even noticed. His feat was now a routine part of the simulator training for 747 captains. Beyond that frantic but satisfying moment, he strove for precision. He was something of a legend in an airline known worldwide for its excellence. He could read weather charts like a fortune-teller, pick the precise tar-strip on a runway where his main gear would touch, and had never once been more that three minutes off an arrival time.

Even taxiing on the ground, he drove the monstrous aircraft as though it were a sports car. So it was today, as he approached the jetway, adjusted his power settings, nose-wheel steering, and finally the brakes, to come to a precise stop.

"Good luck, *Nisa,* " he told Lieutenant Colonel Seigo Sasaki, who'd ridden the jump seat in the cockpit for the approach, scanning the ground for the unusual and seeing nothing.

The commander of the special-operations group hustled aft. His men were from the First Airborne Brigade, ordinarily based at Narashino. There were two companies aboard the 747, three hundred eighty men. Their first mission was to assume control of the airport. It would not be difficult, he hoped.

The JAL personnel at the gate had not been briefed for the events of the day, and were surprised to see that all the people leaving the charter flight were men, all about the same age, all carrying identical barrel-bags, and that the first fifty or so had the tops unzipped and their hands inside. A few held clipboards on which were diagrams of the terminal, as it had not been possible to perform a proper rehearsal for the mission. While baggage handlers struggled with the cargo containers out of the bottom of the aircraft, other soldiers headed for the baggage area, and simply walked through EMPLOYEES ONLY signs to start unpacking the heavy weapons. At another jetway, a second airliner arrived.

Colonel Sasaki stood in the middle of the terminal now, looking left and right, watching his teams of ten or fifteen men fan out and, he

saw, doing their job quietly and well.

"Excuse me," a sergeant said pleasantly to a bored and sleepy security guard. The man looked up to see a smile, and down to see that the barrel bag over the man's shoulder was open, and that the hand in it held a pistol. The guard's mouth gaped comically and the private disarmed him without a struggle. In less than two minutes, the other six guards on terminal duty were similarly taken into custody. A lieutenant led a squad to the security office, where three more men were disarmed and handcuffed. All the while continuous if terse radio messages were flowing in to their colonel.

The tower chief turned when the door opened—a guard had handed over the pass card and punched in the entry code on the keypad without the need for much encouragement—to see three men with automatic rifles.

"What the hell—"

"You will continue your duties as before," a captain, or *ichii,* told him. "My English is quite good. Please do not do anything foolish." Then he lifted his radio microphone and spoke in Japanese. The first phase of Operation KABUL was completed thirty seconds early, and entirely without violence.

The second load of soldiers took over airport security. These men were in uniform to make sure that everyone knew what was going on, and they took their places at all entrances and control points, commandeering official vehicles to set additional security points on the access roads into the airport. This wasn't overly hard, as the airport was on the extreme southern part of the island, and all approaches were from the north. The commander of the second detachment relieved Colonel Sasaki. The former would control the arrival of the remaining First Airborne Brigade elements tasked to Operation KABUL. The latter had other tasks to perform.

Three airport buses pulled up to the terminal, and Colonel Sasaki boarded the last after moving around to make sure that all his men were present and properly organized. They drove immediately north, past the Dan Dan Golf Club, which adjoined the airport, then left on Cross Island Road, which took them in sight of Invasion Beach. Saipan is by no means a large island, and it was dark—there were very few streetlights—but that didn't lessen the cold feeling in Sasaki's stomach. He had to run this mission on time and on profile or risk catastrophe. The Colonel checked his watch. The first aircraft would now be landing on Guam, where the possibility of organized resistance was very real. Well, that was the job of First Division. He had his own, and it had to be done before dawn broke.

The word got out very quickly. Rick Bernard placed his first call to the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange to report his problem and to ask for guidance. On the assurance that this was no accident, he made the obvious recommendation and Bernard called the FBI, located close to Wall Street in the Javits Federal Office Building. The senior official here was a deputy director, and he dispatched a team of three agents to the primary DTC office located in midtown.

"What seems to be the problem?" the senior agent asked. The answer required ten minutes of detailed explanation, and was immediately followed by a call direct to the Deputy-Director-in-Charge.

MV Orchid Ace had been alongside long enough to off-load a hundred cars. All of them were Toyota Land Cruisers. Taking down the security shack and its single drowsy guard proved to be another bloodless exercise, which allowed the buses to enter the fenced storage lot. Colonel Sasaki had enough men in the three buses to give each a crew of three, and they all knew what to do. The police substations at Koblerville and on Capitol Hill would be the first places approached, now that his men had the proper transport. His own part of the mission was at the latter site, at the home of the Governor.

It was really a coincidence that Nomuri had spent the night in town. He'd actually given himself an evening off, which happened rarely enough, and he found that recovery from a night on the town was facilitated by a trip to the bathhouse, something his ancestors had gotten right about a thousand years earlier. After washing, he got his towel and headed to the hot tub, where the foggy atmosphere would clear his head better than aspirin could. He would emerge from this civilized institution refreshed, he thought.

"Kazuo," the CIA officer observed. "Why are you here?"

"Overtime," the man replied with a tired smile.

"Yamata-san must be a demanding boss," Nomuri observed, sliding himself slowly into the hot water, not really meaning anything by the remark. The reply made his head turn.

"I have never seen history happen before," Taoka said, rubbing his eyes and moving around a little, feeling the tension bleed from his muscles, but altogether too keyed up to be sleepy after ten hours in the War Room.

"Well, my history for last night was a very nice hostess," Nomuri said with a raised eyebrow. A nice lady of twenty-one years, too, he

didn't add. A very bright young lady, who had many other people contesting for her attention, but Nomuri was far closer to her age, and she enjoyed talking to someone like him. It wasn't all about money, Chet thought, his eyes closed over a smiling face.

"Mine was somewhat more exciting than that."

"Really? I thought you said you were working." Nomuri's eyes opened reluctantly. Kazuo had found something more interesting than sexual fantasy?

"I was."

It was just something about the way he said it. "You know, Kazuo, when you start telling a story, you must finish it."

A laugh and a shake of the head. "I shouldn't, but it will be in the papers in a few hours."

"What's that?"

"The American financial system crashed last night."

"Really? What happened?"

The man's head turned and he spoke the reply very quietly indeed. "I helped do it to them."

It seemed very odd to Nomuri, sitting in a wooden tub filled with 107-degree water, that he felt a chill.

"Wakarémasen." I don't understand.

"It will be clear in a few days. For now, I must go back." The salaryman rose and walked out, very pleased with himself for sharing his role with one friend. What good was a secret, after all, if at least one person didn't know that you had it? A secret could be a grand thing, and one so closely held in a society like this was all the more precious.

What the hell? Nomuri wondered.

"There they are." The lookout pointed, and Admiral Sato raised his binoculars to look. Sure enough, the clear Pacific sky backlit the mast tops of the lead screen ships, FFG-7 frigates by the look at the crosstrees. The radar picture was clear now, a classic circular formation, frigates on the outer ring, destroyers inward of that, then two or three Aegis cruisers not very different from his own flagship. He checked the time. The Americans had just set the morning watch. Though warships always had people on duty, the real work details were synchronized with daylight, and people would now be rousing from their bunks, showering, and heading off for breakfast.

The visual horizon was about twelve nautical miles away. His squadron of four ships was heading east at thirty-two knots, their best possible continuous speed. The Americans were westbound at eighteen.

"Send by blinker light to the formation: Dress ships."

* * *

Saipan's main satellite uplink facility was off Beach Road, close to the Sun Inn Motel, and operated by MTC Micro Telecom. It was an entirely ordinary civilian facility whose main construction concern had been protection against autumnal typhoons that regularly battered the island. Ten soldiers, commanded by a major, walked up to the main door and were able to walk right in, then approach the security guard, who simply had no idea what was happening, and, again, didn't even attempt to reach for his sidearm. The junior officer with the detail was a captain trained in signals and communications. All he had to do was point at the various instruments in the central control room. Phone uplinks to the Pacific satellites that transferred telephone and other links from Saipan to America were shut down, leaving the Japan links up—they went to a different satellite, and were backed up with cable—without interfering with downlinked signals. At this hour it was not overly surprising that no single telephone circuit to America was active at the moment. It would stay that way for quite some time.

"Who are you?" the Governor's wife asked.

"I need to see your husband," Colonel Sasaki replied. "It's an emergency."

The fact of that statement was made immediately clear by the first shot of the evening, caused when the security guard at the legislature building managed to get his pistol out. He didn't get a round off—an eager paratrooper sergeant saw to that—but it was enough to make Sasaki frown angrily and push past the woman. He saw Governor Comacho, walking to the door in his bathrobe.

"What is this?"

"You are my prisoner," Sasaki announced, with three other men in the room now to make it clear that he wasn't a robber. The Colonel found himself embarrassed. He'd never done anything like this before, and though he was a professional soldier, his culture as much as any other frowned upon the invasion of another man's house regardless of the reason. He found himself hoping that the shots he'd just heard hadn't been fatal. His men had such orders.

"What?" Comacho demanded. Sasaki just pointed to the couch.

"You and your wife, please sit down. We have no intention of

harming you."

"What is this?" the man asked, relieved that he and his wife weren't in any immediate danger, probably.

"This island now belongs to my country," Colonel Sasaki explained. It couldn't be so bad, could it? The Governor was over sixty, and could remember when that had been true before.

"A goddamned long way for her to come," Commander Kennedy observed after taking the message. It turned out that the surface contact was the *Muroto,* a cutter from the Japanese Coast Guard that occasionally supported fleet operations, usually as a practice target. A fairly handsome ship, but with the low freeboard typical of Japanese naval vessels, she had a crane installed aft for the recovery of practice torpedoes. It seemed that *Kurushio* had expected the opportunity to get off some practice shots in DATELINE PARTNERS. Hadn't *Asheville* been told about that?

"News to me, Cap'n," the navigator said, flipping through the lengthy op-order for the exercise.

"Wouldn't be the first time the clerks screwed up." Kennedy allowed himself a smile. "Okay, we've killed them enough." He keyed his microphone again. "Very well, Captain, we'll replay the last scenario. Start time twenty minutes from now."

"Thank you, Captain," the reply came on the VHF circuit. "Out."

Kennedy replaced the microphone. "Left ten-degrees rudder, all ahead one third. Make your depth three hundred feet."

The crew in the attack center acknowledged and executed the orders, taking *Asheville* east for five miles. Fifty miles to the west, USS *Charlotte* was doing much the same thing, at exactly the same time.

* * *

The hardest part of Operation KABUL was on Guam. Approaching its hundredth year as an American-flag possession, this was the largest island in the Marianas chain, and possessed a harbor and real U.S. military installations. Only ten years earlier, it would have been impossible. Not so long ago, the now-defunct Strategic Air Command had based nuclear bombers here. The U.S. Navy had maintained a base for missile submarines, and the security obtaining to both would have made anything like this mission a folly. But the nuclear weapons were all gone—the missiles were, anyway. Now Andersen Air Force base, two miles north of Yigo, was really little more than a

commercial airport. It supported trans-Pacific flights by the American Air Force. No aircraft were actually based there any longer except for a single executive jet used by the base commander, itself a leftover from when 13th Air Force had been headquartered on the island. Tanker aircraft that had once been permanently based on Guam were now transient reserve formations that came and went as required. The base commander was a colonel who would soon retire, and he had under him only five hundred men and women, mostly technicians. There were only fifty armed USAF Security Police. It was much the same story at the Navy base whose airfield was now co-located with the Air Force. The Marines who had once maintained security there because of the nuclear weapons stockpile had been replaced by civilian guards, and the harbor was empty of gray hulls. Still, this was the most sensitive part of the overall mission. The airstrips at Andersen would be crucial to the entire operation.

"Pretty ships," Sanchez thought aloud, looking through his binoculars from his chair in Pri-Fly. "Nice tight interval on the formation, too." The four Kongos were on a precise reciprocal heading, about eight miles out, the CAG noted.

"They have the rails lined?" the Air Boss asked. There seemed to be a white line down the sides of all four of the inbound destroyers.

"Rendering honors, yeah, that's nice of them." Sanchez lifted the phone and punched the button for the navigation bridge. "Skipper? CAG here. It seems that our friends are going formal on us."

"Thanks, Bud." The Commanding Officer of *Johnnie Reb* made a call to the battle-group commander on *Enterprise*.

"What?" Ryan said, answering the phone.

"Takeoff in two and a half hours," the President's secretary told him. "Be ready to leave in ninety minutes."

"Wall Street?"

"That's right, Dr. Ryan. He thinks we need to be home a little early. We've informed the Russians. President Grushavoy understands."

"Okay, thanks," Ryan said, not really meaning it. He'd hoped to scoot out to see Narmonov for an hour or so. Then the real fun part came. He reached over and shook his wife awake.

A groan: "Don't even say it."

"You can sleep the rest of it off on the airplane. We have to be packed and ready in an hour and a half."

"What? Why?"

"Leaving early," Jack told her. "Trouble at home. Wall Street had another meltdown."

"Bad?" Cathy opened her eyes, rubbing her forehead and thankful it was still dark outside until she looked at the clock.

"Probably a bad case of indigestion."

"What time is it?"

"Time to get ready to leave."

"We need maneuvering room," Commander Harrison said.

"No dummy is he?" Admiral Dubro asked rhetorically. The opposition, Admiral Chandraskatta, had turned west the night before, probably catching on, finally, that the *Eisenhower/Lincoln* battle force was not where he'd suspected after all. That clearly left a single alternative, and therefore he'd headed west, forcing the Americans against the island chain that India mostly owned. Half of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet was a powerful collection of ships, but their power would be halved again if their location became known. The whole point of Dubro's operations to this point had been to keep the other guy guessing. Well, he'd made his guess. Not a bad one, either.

"What's our fuel state?" Dubro asked, meaning that of his escort ships. The carriers could steam until the food ran out. Their nuclear fuel would not do so for years.

"Everybody's up to ninety percent. Weather's good for the next two days. We can do a speed run if we have to."

"You thinking the same thing I am?"

"He's not letting his aircraft get too close to the Sri Lankan coast. They might show on air-traffic-control radars and people might ask questions. If we head northeast, then east, we can race past Dondra Head at night and curl back around south. Even money nobody sees us."

The Admiral didn't like even-money odds. That meant it was just as likely somebody *would* see the formation, and the Indian Fleet could then turn northeast, forcing either a further move by the Americans away from the coast they might or might not be protecting—or a confrontation. You could play this sort of game only so long, Dubro thought, before somebody asked to see the cards.

"Get us through today without being spotted?"

That one was obvious, too. The formation would send aircraft at the Indians directly from the south, hopefully pulling them south. Harrison presented the scheme for the coming day's air operations.

"Make it so."

Eight bells rang over the ship's 1-MC intercom system. 1600 hours. The afternoon watch was relieved and replaced with the evening watch. Officers and men, and, now, women, moved about to and from their duty stations. *Johnnie Reb's* air wing was standing down, mainly resting and going over results of the now-concluded exercise. The Air Wing's aircraft were about half parked on the flight deck, with the other half struck down in the hangar bay. A few were being worked on, but the maintenance troops were mostly standing down, too, enjoying a pastime the Navy called Steel Beach. It sure was different now, Sanchez thought, looking down at the non-skid-covered steel plates. Now there were women sunning themselves, too, which occasioned the increased use of binoculars by the bridge crew, and had generated yet another administrative problem for his Navy. What varieties of bathing suits were proper for U.S. Navy sailors? Much to the chagrin of some, but the relief of many, the verdict was one-piece suits. But even those could be worth looking at, if properly filled, the CAG thought, returning his glasses to the approaching Japanese formation.

The four destroyers came in fast and sharp, knocking down a good thirty knots, the better to make a proper show for their hosts and erstwhile enemies. The proper signal flags were snapping in the breeze, and white-clad crewmen lined the rails.

"Now hear this," the 1-MC system blared for all to hear. "Attention to port. Man the rails. Stand by to render honors." Those crewmen in presentable uniforms headed to the portside galleries off the flight deck, organized by sections. It was an awkward evolution for a carrier, and required quite a bit of time to set up, especially on a Steel Beach day. Having it done at change of watch made it a little easier. There was a goodly supply of properly uniformed sailors to perform the duty before going to their berthing spaces to change into their tanning outfits.

Sato's last important act of the operation was to send out a satellite transmission with a time check. Downlinked to fleet headquarters, it was immediately rebroadcast on a different circuit. The last chance to stop the operation had passed by. The die was now cast, if not yet thrown. The Admiral left *Mutsu's* CIC and headed back to the bridge, leaving his operations officer in charge while he conned the squadron.

The destroyer came abeam of United States Ships *Enterprise* and *John Stennis,* exactly between the two carriers, less than two thousand meters to each. She was doing thirty knots, with all stations manned

except for the vacancies caused by the people standing at the ships' rails. At the moment that his bridge crossed the invisible line between those of the two American carriers, the sailors on the rails saluted port and starboard in a very precise rendition of courtesy at sea.

* * *

A single whistle from the bosun's pipe over the speakers: "Hand salute . . . Two!" the orders came over the speakers, and the sailors on the galleries of *Johnnie Reb* brought their hands down. Immediately thereafter they were dismissed with three notes from the bosun's mate of the watch.

"Gee, can we go home now?" The Air Boss chuckled. Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS was now fully concluded, and the battle force could return to Pearl Harbor for one more week of upkeep and shore leave before deploying to the 1O. Sanchez decided to stay in the comfortable leather chair and read over some documents while enjoying the breeze. The combined speed of the two intermingled formations made for a rapid passage.

"Whoa!" a lookout said.

The maneuver was German in origin, formally called a *Gefechtskehrtwendung,* "battle turn." On signal-flag hoist, all four destroyers turned sharply to the right, the aftermost ship first. As soon as her bow showed movement, the next ship put her rudder over, and the next, and then the flagship last. It was a move calculated to attract the admiration of the Americans, and something of a surprise in the close space between the two carriers. In a matter of seconds, the Japanese destroyers had smartly reversed course, now heading west at thirty knots, and overtaking the carriers they had only a moment before approached from the other direction. A few people on the bridge crew whistled approval at the ship-handling skills. Already the rails on all four of the Aegis destroyers were cleared.

"Well, that was pretty sharp," Sanchez commented, looking down at his documents again.

USS *John Stennis* was steaming normally, all four of her propellers turning at 70rpm, with Condition-Three set. That meant that all spaces were manned with the exception of the embarked air wing, which had stood down after several days on higher activity. There were lookouts arrayed around the island structure, for the most part looking in their assigned areas of responsibility, though all had sneaked at least one long look at the Japanese ships, because they were, after all, different from the U.S. ships. Some used hand-held 7 x 50 marine binoculars, many of Japanese manufacture. Others leaned on far more massive 20

x 120 “Big Eyes,” spotting binoculars, which were mounted on pedestals all around the bridge.

Admiral Sato was not sitting down in his command chair, though he was holding his binoculars up. It was a pity, really. They were such proud, beautiful ships. Then he remembered that the one to port was *Enterprise*, an ancient name in the United States Navy, and that a ship that had borne the name before this one had tormented his country, escorting Jimmy Doolittle to the Japanese coast, fighting at Midway, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz, and every other major fleet engagement, many times hit, but never severely. The name of an honored enemy, but an enemy. That was the one he’d watch. He had no idea who *John Stennis* had been.

Mutsu had passed well beyond the carriers, almost reaching the trailing plane-guard destroyers before turning, and the overtake now seemed dreadfully slow. The Admiral wore his white gloves, and held his binoculars just below the rail, watching the angle to the carrier change.

“Bearing to Target One is three-five-zero. Target Two bearing now zero-one-zero. Solution light,” the petty officer reported. The *Isso* wondered what was going on and why, most of all wondered how he might live to tell this tale someday, and thought that probably he would not.

“I’ll take it now,” the ops officer said, sliding into the seat. He’d taken the time to acquaint himself with the torpedo director. The order had already been given, and all he’d needed was the light. The officer turned the key in the enable-switch lock, flipped the cover off the button for the portside array, and pressed. Then he did the same for the starboard side.

The three-tube mounts on both sides of the ship snapped violently outboard to an angle of about forty degrees off the centerline. The hemispherical weather covers on all six tubes popped off. Then the “fish” were launched by compressed air, diving into the water, left and right, about ten seconds apart. The propellers were already turning when they were ejected into the sea, and each trailed control wires that connected them to *Mutsu’s* Combat Information Center. The tubes, now empty, rotated back to their standby position.

“Fuck me!” a lookout said on *Johnnie Reb.*

“What was that, Cindy?”

“They just launched a fuckin’ fish!” she said. She was a petite

seaman (*that* term hadn't changed yet) apprentice, only eighteen years old, on her first ship, and was learning profanity to fit in with the saltier members of the crew. Her arm shot out straight. "I saw him launch—there!"

"You sure?" the other nearby lookout asked, swinging his Big Eyes around. Cindy had only hand-helds.

The young woman hesitated. She'd never done anything like this before, and wondered what her chief might do if she were wrong. "Bridge, Lookout Six, the last ship in the Jap line just launched a torpedo!" The way things were set up on the carrier, her announcement was carried over the bridge speakers.

One level down, Bud Sanchez looked up. "What was that?"

"Say again, Look-Six!" the OOD ordered.

"I said I *saw* that Jap destroyer launch a torpedo off her starboard side!"

"This is Look-Five. I didn't see it, sir," a male voice said.

"I fucking saw it!" shouted a very excited young female voice, loudly enough that Sanchez heard this exclamation over the air, rather than on the bridge speakers. He dropped his papers, jumped to his feet, and sprinted out the door to the lookout gallery. The Captain tripped on the steel ladder, ripping his pants and bloodying one knee, and was swearing when he got to the lookouts.

"Talk to me, honey!"

"I saw it, sir, I *really did!"* She didn't even know who Sanchez was, and the silver eagles on his collar made him important enough to frighten her even worse than the idea of inbound weapons, but she had seen it and she was standing her ground.

"I didn't see it, sir," the senior seaman announced.

Sanchez trained his binoculars on the destroyer, now only about two thousand yards away. What . . . ? He next shoved the older seaman off the Big Eyes and trained them in on the quarterdeck of the Japanese flagship. There was the triple-tube launcher, trained in as it should be . . .

. . . but the fronts of the tubes were black, not gray. The weather covers were off . . . Without looking, Captain Rafael Sanchez ripped the phones off the senior lookout.

"Bridge, this is CAG. Torpedoes in the water! Torpedoes inbound from port quarter!" He trained the glasses aft, looking for trails on the surface but seeing none. Not that it mattered. He swore violently and stood back up to look at Seaman-Apprentice Cynthia Smithers. "Right or wrong, sailor, you did just fine," he told her as alarms started sounding all over the ship. Only a second later, a blinker light started flashing at *Johnnie Reb* from the Japanese flagship.

“Warning, warning, we just had a malfunction, we have launched several torpedoes,” *Mutsu’s* CO said into the TBS microphone, shamed by the lie as he listened to the open talk-between-ships FM circuit.

“Enterprise, this is *Fife,* there are torpedoes in the water,” another loud voice proclaimed even more loudly.

“Torpedoes—where?”

“They’re ours. We have a flash fire in CIC,” *Mutsu* announced next. “They may be armed.” *Stennis,* he saw, was turning already, the water boiling at her stern with increased power. It wouldn’t matter, though with luck nobody would be killed.

“What do we do now, sir?” Smithers asked.

“A couple of Hail Marys, maybe,” Sanchez replied darkly. They were ASW torpedoes, weren’t they? Little warheads. They couldn’t really hurt something as big as *Johnnie Reb*, could they? Looking down at the deck, people were up and running now, mainly carrying their sunbathing towels as they raced to their duty stations.

“Sir, I’m supposed to report to Damage Control Party Nine on the hangar deck.”

“No, stay right here,” Sanchez ordered. “You can leave,” he told the other one.

John Stennis was heeling hard to port now. The radical turn to starboard was taking hold and the deck rumbled with the sudden increase of power to her engines. One nice thing about the nuclear-powered carriers. They had horses to burn, but the ship weighed over ninety thousand tons and took her time accelerating. *Enterprise*, less than two miles away, was slower on the trigger, just starting to show turn now. *Oh*, *shit* . . .

“Now hear this, now hear this, stream the Nixie!” the OOD’s voice called over the speakers.

The three Mark 50 antisubmarine torpedoes heading toward *Stennis* were small, smart instruments of destruction designed to punch small, fatal holes into submarine hulls. Their ability to harm a ship of ninety thousand tons was small indeed, but it was possible to choose which sort of damage they would inflict. They were spaced about a hundred meters apart, racing forward at sixty knots, each guided by a thin insulated wire. Their speed advantage over the target and the short range almost guaranteed a hit, and the turn-away maneuver undertaken by the American carrier merely offered the ideal overtake

angle because they were all targeted on the screws. After traveling a thousand yards, the seeker head on the first “fish” went active. The sonar picture it generated was reported back to *Mutsu’s* CIC as a violently bright target of yellow on black, and the officer on the director steered it straight in, with the other two following automatically. The target area grew closer. Eight hundred meters, seven, six . . .

“I have you both,” the officer said. A moment later the sonar picture showed the confused jamming from the American Nixie decoy, which mimicked the ultrasonic frequencies of the torpedo seeker-heads. Another feature built into the new ones had a powerful pulsing magnetic field to trick the under-the-keel influence-exploders the Russians had developed. But the Mark 50 was a contact weapon, and by controlling them with the wire, he could force them to ignore the acoustical interference. It wasn’t fair, wasn’t sporting at all, but then, who ever said war was supposed to be that way? he asked the director, who did not answer.

It was a strange disconnect of sight, sound, and feel. The ship hardly shuddered at all when the first column of water leaped skyward. The noise was unmistakably real, and, coming without warning, it made Sanchez jump on the port-after corner of the island. His initial impression was that it hadn’t been all that bad a deal, that maybe the fish had exploded in *Johnnie Reb’s* wake. He was wrong.

The Japanese version of the Mark 50 had a small warhead, only sixty kilograms, but it was a shaped charge, and the first of them exploded on the boss of number-two propeller, the inboard postside shaft. The shock immediately ripped three of the screw’s five blades off, unbalancing a propeller now turning at a hundred-thirty RPM. The physical forces involved were immense, and tore open the shaft fittings and the skegs that held the entire propulsion system in place. In a moment the aftermost portion of the shaft alley was flooded, and water started entering the ship through her most vulnerable point. What happened forward was even worse.

Like most large warships, *John Stennis* was steam-powered. In her case two nuclear reactors generated power by boiling water directly. That steam went into a heat exchanger where other water was boiled (but not made radioactive as a result) and piped aft to a high-pressure turbine. The steam hit the turbine blades, causing them to turn much like the vanes of a windmill, which is all the turbine really was; the steam was then piped aft to a low-pressure turbine to make use of the residual energy. The turbines had efficient turning rates, far faster than the propeller could attain, however, and to lower the shaft speed

to something the ship could really use, there was a set of reduction gears, essentially a shipboard version of an automobile transmission, located between them. The finely machined barrel-shaped wheels in that bit of marine hardware were the most delicate element of the ship's drivetrain, and the blast energy from the warhead had traveled straight up the shaft, jamming the wheels in a manner that they were not designed to absorb. The added asymmetrical writhing of the unbalanced shaft rapidly completed the destruction of the entire Number Two drivetrain. Sailors were leaping from their feet with the noise even before the second warhead struck, on Number Three.

That explosion was on the outer edge of the starboard-inboard propeller, and the collateral damage took half a blade off Number Four. Damage to Number Three was identical with Number Two. Number Four was luckier. This engine-room crew threw the steam controls to reverse with the first hint of vibration. Poppet valves opened at once, hitting the astern-drive blades and stopping the shaft before the damage got as far as the reduction gears, just in time for the third torpedo to complete the destruction of the starboard-outboard prop.

The All-Stop bell sounded next, and the crewmen in all four turbine rooms initiated the same procedure undertaken moments earlier by the crew on the starboard side. Other alarms were sounding. Damage-control parties raced aft and below to check the flooding, as their carrier glided to a lengthy and crooked halt. One of her rudders was damaged as well.

"What the hell was that all about?" one engineman asked another.

"My God," Sanchez breathed topside. Somehow the damage to *Enterprise,* now two miles away, seemed even worse than that to his ship. Various alarms were still sounding, and below on the navigation bridge, voices were screaming for information so loudly that the need for telephone circuits seemed superfluous. Every ship in the formation was maneuvering radically now. *Fife*, one of the plane-guard 'cans, had reversed course and was getting the hell out of Dodge, her skipper clearly worried about other possible fish in the water. Somehow Sanchez knew there weren't. He'd seen three explosions aft on *Johnnie Reb* and three under *Enterprise*'s stern.

"Smithers, come with me."

"Sir, my battle-station—"

"They can handle it without you, and there's nothing much to look out for now. We're not going much of anywhere for a while. You're going to talk to the Captain."

"Jesus, sir!" The exclamation was not so much profanity as a prayer to be spared that ordeal.

The CAG turned. "Take a deep breath and listen to me: you might

be the only person on this whole goddamned ship who did their job right over the last ten minutes. Follow me, Smithers."

"Shafts two and three are blown away, Skipper," they heard a minute later on the bridge. The ship's CO was standing in the middle of the compartment, looking like a man who'd been involved in a traffic accident. "Shaft four is damaged also . . . shaft one appears okay at the moment."

"Very well," the skipper muttered, then added for himself, "What the hell . . ."

"We took three ASW torps, sir," Sanchez reported. "Seaman Smithers here saw the launch."

"Is that a fact?" The CO looked down at the young seaperson. "Miss, you want to sit over in my chair. When I'm finished keeping my ship afloat I want to talk to you." Then came the hard part. The Captain of USS *John Stennis* turned to his communications officer and started drafting a signal to CincPacFlt. It would bear the prefix NAVY BLUE.

"Conn, Sonar, torpedo in the water, bearing two-eight-zero, sounds like one of their Type 89s," "Junior" Laval reported, not in an overly excited way. Submarines were regularly shot at by friends.

"All ahead flank!" Commander Kennedy ordered. Exercise or not, it was a torpedo, and it wasn't something to feel comfortable about. "Make your depth six hundred feet."

"Six hundred feet, aye," the chief of the boat replied from his station as diving officer. "Ten degrees down-angle on the planes." The helmsman pushed forward on the yoke, angling USS *Asheville* toward the bottom, taking her below the layer.

"Estimated range to the fish?" the Captain asked the tracking party.

"Three thousand yards."

"Conn, Sonar, lost him when we went under the layer. Still pinging in search mode, estimate the torpedo is doing forty or forty-five knots."

"Turn the augmenter off, sir?" the XO asked.

Kennedy was tempted to say yes, the better to get a feel for how good the Japanese torpedo really was. To the best of his knowledge no American sub had yet played against one. It was supposedly the Japanese version of the American Mark 48.

"There it is," Sonar called. "It just came under the layer. Torpedo bearing steady at two-eight-zero, signal strength is approaching acquisition values."

"Right twenty degrees rudder," Kennedy ordered. "Stand by the five-inch room."

"Speed going through thirty knots," a crewman reported as *Asheville*

accelerated.

"Right twenty-degrees rudder, aye, no new course given."

"Very well," Kennedy acknowledged. "Five-inch room, launch decoy now-now-now! Cob, take her up to two hundred!"

"Aye," the chief of the boat replied. "Up ten on the planes!"

"Making it hard?" the executive officer asked.

"No freebies."

A canister was ejected from the decoy-launcher compartment, called the five-inch room for the diameter of the launcher. It immediately started giving off bubbles like an Alka-Seltzer tablet, creating a new, if immobile, sonar target for the torpedo's tracking sonar. The submarine's fast turn created a "knuckle" in the water, the better to confuse the Type 89 fish.

"Through the layer," the technician on the bathythermograph reported.

"Mark your head!" Kennedy said next.

"Coming right through one-nine-zero, my rudder is twenty-right."

"Rudder amidships, steady up on two-zero-zero."

"Rudder amidships, aye, steady up on two-zero-zero."

"All ahead one-third."

"All ahead one-third, aye." The enunciator changed positions, and the submarine slowed down, now back at two hundred feet, over the layer, having left a lovely if false target behind.

"Okay." Kennedy smiled. "Now let's see how smart that fish is."

"Conn, Sonar, the torpedo just went right through the knuckle." The tone of the report was just a little off, Kennedy thought.

"Oh?" the CO went forward a few steps, entering sonar. "Problem?"

"Sir, that fish just went right through the knuckle like it didn't see it."

"Supposed to be a pretty smart unit. You suppose it just ignores decoys like the ADCAP does?"

"Up-Doppler," another sonarman said. "Ping-rate just changed . . . frequency change, it might have us, sir."

"Through the layer? That is clever." It was going a little fast, Kennedy thought, like real combat, even. Was the new Japanese torpedo really that good, had it really just ignored the decoy and the knuckle? "We recording all this?"

"You bet, sir," Sonarman 1/c Laval said, reaching up to tap the tape machine. A new cassette was taking all this in, and another video system was recording the display on the waterfall screens. "There go the motors, just increased speed. Aspect change . . . it's got us, zero aspect on the fish, screw noises just faded." Meaning that the engine noise of the torpedo was now somewhat blocked by the body of the weapon. It was headed straight in.

Kennedy turned his head to the tracking party. “Range to fish?”

“Under two thousand, sir, closing fast now, estimate torpedo speed sixty knots.”

“Two minutes to overtake at this speed.”

“Look at this, sir.” Laval tapped the waterfall display. It showed the track of the torpedo, and also showed the lingering noise of the decoy, still generating bubbles. The Type 89 had drilled right through the center of it.

“What was that?” Laval asked the screen. A large low-frequency noise had just registered on the screen, bearing three-zero-five. “Sounded like an explosion, way off, that was a CZ signal, not direct path.” A convergence-zone signal meant that it was a long way away, more than thirty miles.

Kennedy’s blood turned a little cold at that piece of news. He stuck his head back into the attack center. “Where are *Charlotte* and the other Japanese sub?”

“Northwest, sir, sixty or seventy miles ”

“All ahead flank!” That order just happened automatically. Not even Kennedy knew why he’d given it.

“All ahead flank, aye,” the helmsman acknowledged, turning the enunciator dial. These exercises sure were exciting stuff. Before the engine order was acknowledged, the skipper was on his command phone again:

“Five-inch room, launch two, now-now-now!”

The ultrasonic targeting sonar on a homing torpedo is too high in frequency to be heard by the human ear. Kennedy knew that the energy was hitting his submarine, reflecting off the emptiness within, because the sonar waves stopped at the steel-air boundary, bouncing backward to the emitter that generated them.

It couldn’t be happening. If it were, others would have noted it, wouldn’t they? He looked around. The crew was at battle stations. All watertight doors were closed and dogged down as they would be in combat. *Kurushio* had launched an exercise torpedo, identical to a warshot in everything but the warhead, for which an instrument package was substituted. They were also designed *not* to hit their targets, but to turn away from them, because a metal-to-metal strike could break things, and fixing those things could be expensive.

“It’s still got us, sir.”

But the fish had run *straight through* the knuckle . . .

“Take her down fast!” Kennedy ordered, knowing it was too late for that.

USS *Asheville* dropped her nose, taking a twenty-degree down-angle, back over thirty knots with the renewed acceleration. The decoy room launched yet another bubble canister. The increased speed degraded

sonar performance, but it was clear from the display that the Type 89 had again run straight through the false image of a target and just kept coming.

"Range under five hundred," the tracking part said. One of its members noticed that the Captain was pale and wondered why. Well, nobody likes losing, even in an exercise.

Kennedy thought about maneuvering more as *Asheville* ducked under the layer yet again. It was too close to outrun. It could outturn him, and every attempt to confuse it had failed. He was just out of ideas. He'd had no time to think it all through.

"Jesus!" Laval took his headphones off. The Type 89 was now alongside the submarine's towed-array sonar, and the noise was well off the scale. "Should turn away any second now . . ."

The Captain just stood there, looking around. Was he crazy? Was he the only one who thought—

At the last second, Sonarman 1/c Laval looked aft to his commanding officer. "*Sir, it didn't turn!"*

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Navy Blue

Air Force One lifted off a few minutes sooner than expected, speeded on her way by the early hour. Reporters were already up and moving before the VC-25B reached her cruising altitude, coming forward to ask the President for a statement explaining the premature departure. Cutting short a state trip was something of a panic reaction, wasn't it? Tish Brown handled the journalists, explaining that the unfortunate developments on Wall Street commanded a quick return so that the President could reassure the American people . . . and so forth. For the moment, she went on, it might be a good idea for everyone to catch up on sleep. It was, after all, a fourteen-hour flight back to Washington, with the headwinds that blew across the Atlantic at this time of year, and Roger Durling needed his sleep, too. The ploy worked for several reasons, not the least of which was that the reporters were suffering from too much alcohol and not enough sleep, like everyone else aboard—except the flight crew, all hoped. Besides, there were Secret Service agents and armed Air Force personnel between them and the President's accommodations. Common sense broke out, and everyone returned back to the seating area. Soon things were quieted down, and nearly every passenger aboard was either asleep or feigning it. Those who weren't asleep wished they were.

Johnnie *Reb's* commanding officer was, by federal law, an aviator. The statute went back to the 1930s, and had been drafted to prevent battleship sailors from taking over the new and bumptious branch of the Old Navy. As such, he had more experience flying airplanes than in driving ships, and since he'd never had a command afloat, his knowledge of shipboard systems consisted mainly of things he'd picked up along the way rather than from a matter of systematic study and experience. Fortunately, his chief engineer was a black-shoe destroyer sailor with a command under his belt. The skipper did know, however, that water was supposed to be outside the hull, not

inside.

"How bad, ChEng?"

"Bad, sir." The Commander gestured to the deck plates, still covered with an inch of water that the pumps was gradually sending over the side. At least the holes were sealed now. That had taken three hours. "Shafts two and three are well and truly trashed. Bearings shot, tail shafts twisted and split, reduction gears ground up to junk—no way anybody can fix them. The turbines are okay. The reduction gears took all the shock. Number One shaft's okay. Some shock damage to the aft bearings. That I can fix myself. Number Four screw is damaged, not sure how bad, but we can't turn it without risking the shaft bearings. Starboard rudder is jammed over, but I can deal with that, another hour, maybe, and it'll be 'midships. May have to replace it, depending on how bad it looks. We're down to one shaft. We can make ten, eleven knots, and we can steer, badly."

"Time to fix?"

"Months—four or five is my best guess right now, sir." All of which, the Commander knew, would require him to be here, overseeing the yard crews, essentially rebuilding half the ship's power plant—maybe three quarters. He hadn't fully evaluated the damage to Number Four yet. That was when the Captain really lost his temper. It was about time, the ChEng thought.

"If I could launch an air strike, I'd sink those sunzabitches!" But launching anything on the speed generated by a single shaft was an iffy proposition. Besides, it had been an accident, and the skipper really didn't mean it.

"You have my vote on that one, sir," ChEng assured him, not really meaning it either, because he added: "Maybe they'll be nice enough to pay for the repairs." His reward was a nod.

"We can start moving again?"

"Number One shaft is a little out from shock damage, but I can live with it, yes, sir."

"Okay, get ready to answer bells. I'm taking this overpriced barge back to Pearl."

"Aye aye, sir."

Admiral Mancuso was back in his office, reviewing preliminary data on the exercise when his yeoman came in with a signal sheet.

"Sir, looks like two carriers are in trouble."

"What did they do, collide?" Jones asked, sitting in the corner and reviewing other data.

"Worse," the yeoman told the civilian.

ComSubPac read the dispatch. "Oh, that's just great." Then his

phone rang; it was the secure line that came directly from PacFltOps. "This is Admiral Mancuso."

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Copps at Fleet Communications. I have a submarine emergency beacon, located approximately 31-North, 175-East. We're refining that position now. Code number is for *Asheville*, sir. There is no voice transmission, just the beacon. I am initiating a SUB-MISS /SUBSUNK. The nearest naval aircraft are on the two carriers—"

"Dear God." Not since *Scorpion* had the U.S. Navy lost a sub, and he'd been in high school then. Mancuso shook his head clear. There was work to be done. "Those two carriers are probably out of business, mister."

"Oh?" Oddly enough, Lieutenant Copps hadn't heard that yet.

"Call the P-3s. I have work to do."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mancuso didn't have to look at anything. The water in that part of the Pacific Ocean was three miles deep, and no fleet submarine ever made could survive at a third of that depth. If there were an emergency, and if there were any survivors, any rescue would have to happen within hours, else the cold surface water would kill them.

"Ron, we just got a signal. *Asheville* might be down."

"Down?" That word was not one any submariner wanted to hear, even if it was a gentler expression than *sunk*. "Frenchy's kid . . ."

"And a hundred twenty others."

"What can I do, Skipper?"

"Head over to SOSUS and look at the data."

"Aye aye, sir." Jones hustled out the door while SubPac lifted his phone and started punching buttons. He already knew that it was an exercise in futility. All PacFlt submarines now carried the AN/BST-3 emergency transmitters aboard, set to detach from their ships if they passed through crush depth or if the quartermaster of the watch neglected to wind the unit's clockwork mechanism. The latter possibility, however, was unlikely. Before the explosive bolts went, the BST made the most godawful noise to chide the neglectful enlisted man . . . *Asheville* was almost certainly dead, and yet he had to follow through in the hope of a miracle. Maybe a few crewmen had gotten off.

Despite Mancuso's advice, the carrier group did get the call. A frigate, USS *Gary,* went at once to maximum sustainable speed and sprinted north toward the area of the beacon, responding as required by the laws of man and the sea. In ninety minutes she'd be able to launch her own helicopter for a surface search and further serve as a base for

other helos to continue the rescue operation if necessary. *John Stennis* turned slowly into the wind and managed to launch a single S-3 Viking ASW aircraft, whose onboard instruments were likely to be useful for a surface search. The Viking was overhead in less than an hour. There was nothing to be seen on radar except for a Japanese coast-guard cutter, heading in for the beacon, about ten miles out. Contact was established, and the white cutter verified its notice of the emergency radio and intentions to search for survivors. The Viking circled the transmitter. There was a slick of diesel oil to mark the ship's grave, and a few bits of floating debris, but repeated low passes and four sets of eyes failed to spot anything to be rescued.

The "Navy Blue" prefix on a signal denoted information that would be of interest to the entire fleet, perhaps sensitive in nature, less often highly classified; in this case it was something too big to be kept a secret. Two of Pacific Fleet's four aircraft carriers were out of business for a long time. The other two, *Eisenhower* and *Lincoln*, were in the IO, and were likely to remain there. Ships know few secrets, and even before Admiral Dubro got his copy of the dispatch, word was already filtering through his flagship. No chief swore more vilely than the battle-force commander, who already had enough to worry about. The same response greeted the signals personnel who informed the senior naval officers on Pentagon duty.

Like most intelligence officers in a foreign land in time of danger, Clark and Chavez didn't have a clue. If they had, they would probably have caught the first plane anywhere. Spies have never been popular with anyone, and the Geneva Protocols merely affirmed a rule for time of war, mandating their death as soon after apprehension as was convenient, usually by firing squad.

Peacetime rules were a little more civilized, but generally with the same end result. It wasn't something CIA emphasized in its recruiting interviews. The international rules of espionage allowed for this unhappy fact by giving as many field intelligence officers as possible diplomatic covers, along with which came immunity from harm. Those were called "legal" agents, protected by international treaty as though they really were the diplomats their passports said they were. Clark and Chavez were "illegals," and not so protected—in fact, John Clark had never once been given a "legal" cover. The importance of this became clear when they left their cheap hotel for a meeting with Isamu Kimura.

It was a pleasant afternoon made less so by the looks they got as *gaijin;* no longer a mixture of curiosity and distaste, now there was genuine hostility. The atmosphere had changed materially since their arrival here, though remarkably things immediately became more cordial when they identified themselves as Russians, which prompted Ding to speculate on how they might make their cover identity more obvious to passersby. Unfortunately civilian clothing did not offer that option, and so they had to live with the looks, generally feeling the way a wealthy American might in a high-crime neighborhood.

Kimura was waiting at the agreed-upon place, an inexpensive drinking establishment. He already had a few drinks in him.

"Good afternoon," Clark said pleasantly in English. A beat. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," Kimura said when the drinks came. There were many ways of speaking that phrase. This way indicated that he knew something. "There is a meeting of the ministers today. Goto called it. It's been going on for hours. A friend of mine in the Defense Agency hasn't left his office since Thursday night."

"*Da*—so?"

"You haven't seen it, have you? The way Goto has been speaking about America." The MITI official finished off the last of his drink and raised his hand to order another. Service, typically, was fast.

They could have said that they'd seen the first speech, but instead "Klerk" asked for Kimura's read on the situation.

"I don't know," the man replied, saying the same thing again while his eyes and tone told a somewhat different story. "I've never seen anything like this. The—what is the word?—rhetoric. At my ministry we have been waiting for instructions all week. We need to restart the trade talks with America, to reach an understanding, but we have no instructions. Our people in Washington are doing nothing. Goto has spent most of his time with Defense, constant meetings, and with his zaibatsu friends. It's not the way things are here at all."

"My friend," Clark said with a smile, his drink now untouched after a single sip, "you speak as though there is something serious in the air."

"You don't understand. There is nothing in the air. Whatever is going on, MITI is not a part of it."

"And?"

"MITI is part of *everything* here. My Minister is there now, finally, but he hasn't told us anything." Kimura paused. Didn't these two know anything? "Who do you think makes our foreign policy here? Those dolts in the Foreign Ministry? They report to us. And the Defense Agency, who cares what they think about anything? We are the ones who shape our country's policies. We work with the zaibatsu,

we coordinate, we . . . represent business in our relations with other countries and their markets, we make the position papers for the Prime Minister to give out. That's why I entered the ministry in the first place."

"But not now?" Clark asked.

"Now? Goto is meeting with them himself, and spends the rest of his time with people who don't matter, and only now is my Minister called in—well, yesterday," Kimura corrected himself. "And he's still there."

The man seemed awfully rattled, Chavez told himself, over what seemed to be little more than some bureaucratic turf-fighting. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry was being outmaneuvered by someone else. So?

"You are upset that the industry leaders meet directly with your Prime Minister," he asked.

"So much, and so long, yes. They're supposed to work through us, but Goto has always been Yamata's lapdog." Kimura shrugged. "Perhaps they want to make policy directly now, but how can they do that without us?"

Without me, the man means, Chavez thought with a smile. Dumb-ass bureaucrat. CIA was full of them, too.

It wasn't all the way thought through, but such things never were. Most of the tourists who came to Saipan were Japanese, but not quite all of them. The Pacific island was a good place for a lot of things. One of them was deep-sea fishing, and the waters here were not as crowded as those around Florida and the Gulf of California. Pete Burroughs was sunburned, exhausted, and thoroughly satisfied with an eleven-hour day at sea. It was just the perfect thing, the computer engineer told himself, sitting in the fighting chair and sipping a beer, to get a person over a divorce. He'd spent the first two hours getting offshore, then three hours trolling, then four hours fighting against the biggest goddamned albacore tuna he'd ever seen. The real problem would be convincing his fellow workers that it wasn't a lie. The monster was too big to mount over his mantel, and besides, his ex-had the house and the fireplace. He'd have to settle for a photo, and everyone knew the stories about that, damn it. Blue-screen technology had reached fishermen. For twenty bucks you could have your choice of monster fish hanging from its electronic tail behind you. Now, if he'd caught a shark, he could have taken home the jaw and teeth, but an albacore, magnificent as it was, was just tuna fish. Well, what the hell, his wife hadn't believed his stories about the late nights at work either. The bitch. Good news, bad news. She didn't like fishing either,

but now he could fish all he wanted. Maybe even fish for a new girl. He popped open another beer.

The marina didn't look very busy for a weekend. The main port area was, though, three big commercial ships, ugly ones, he thought, though he didn't know exactly what they were on first sight. His company was in California, though not close to the water, and most of his fishing was of the freshwater sort. This trip had been a life's ambition. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd get something else. For the moment, he looked left at the albacore. Had to be at least seven hundred pounds. Nowhere close to the record, but one hell of a lot bigger than the monster salmon he'd gotten the year before with his trusty Ted Williams spinning rig. The air shook again, spoiling his moment with his fish. The overhead shadow announced another goddamned 747 coming out of the airport. It wouldn't be long before this place was spoiled, too. Hell, it already was. About the only good news was that the Japanese who came here to kick loose and screw Filipina bar girls didn't like to fish much.

The boat's skipper brought them in smartly. His name was Oreza, a retired Master Chief Quartermaster, U.S. Coast Guard. Burroughs left the fighting chair, headed topside, and sat down next to him.

"Get tired of talking to your fish?"

"Don't like drinking alone, either."

Oreza shook his head. "Not when I'm driving."

"Bad habit from the old days?"

The skipper nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I'll buy you one at the club, though. Nice job on the fish. First time, you said?"

"First time in blue water," Burroughs said proudly.

"Coulda fooled me, Mr. Burroughs."

"Pete," the engineer corrected.

"Pete," Oreza confirmed. "Call me Portagee."

"You're not from around here."

"New Bedford, Massachusetts, originally. Winters are too cold. I served here once, long time back. There used to be a Coast Guard station down at Punta Arenas, closed now. The wife and I liked the climate, liked the people, and, hell, the competition statewide for this sort of business is too stiff," Oreza explained. "What the hell, the kids are all grown. So anyway, we ended up coming out here."

"You know how to handle a boat pretty well."

Portagee nodded. "I ought to. I've been doing it thirty-five years, more if you count going out with my pop." He eased to port, coming around Mañagaha Island. "The fishing out of New Bedford's gone to hell, too."

"What are those guys?" Burroughs asked, pointing to the commercial port.

"Car carriers. When I came in this morning they were moving jeeps out of that one." The skipper shrugged. "More goddamned cars. You know, when I came here it was kinda like Cape Cod in the winter. Now it's more like the Cape in the summer. Wall-to-goddamned-wall." Portagee shrugged. More tourists made for more crowding, spoiling the island, but also bringing him more business.

"Expensive place to live?"

"Getting that way," Oreza confirmed. Another 747 flew off the island. "That's funny . . ."

"What?"

"That one didn't come out of the airport."

"What do you mean?"

"That one came out of Kobler. It's an old SAC runway, BUFF field."

"BUFF?"

"Big Ugly Fat Fucker," Portagee explained. "B-52s. There's five or six runways in the islands that can take big birds, dispersal fields from the bad old days," he went on. "Kobler's right next to my old LORAN station. I'm surprised they still keep it up. Hell, I didn't know they did, even."

"I don't understand."

"There used to be a Strategic Air Command base on Guam. You know, nukes, all that big shit? In case the crap hit the fan, they were supposed to disperse off Andersen Air Force Base so one missile couldn't get them all. There's two big-bird runways on Saipan, the airport and Kobler, two more on Tinian, leftovers from World War Two, and two more on Guam."

"They're still good to use?"

"No reason why not." Oreza's head turned. "We don't get many hard-freezes here to rip things up." The next 747 came off Saipan International, and in the clear evening sky they could see yet another coming in from the eastern side of the island.

"This place always this busy?"

"No, most I've ever seen. Goddamned hotels must be packed solid." Another shrug. "Well, that means the hotels'll be interested in buying that fish off ya."

"How much?"

"Enough to cover the charter, Pete. That's one big fish you brought in. But tomorrow you have to get lucky again."

"Hey, you find me another big boy like our friend down there, and I don't care what you charge."

"I love it when people say that." Oreza eased back on the throttles as he approached the marina. He aimed for the main dock. They needed the hoist to get the fish off. The albacore was the third-largest he'd ever brought in, and this Burroughs guy wasn't all that bad a

charter.

"You make a living at this?"

Portagee nodded. "With my retirement pay, yeah, it's not a bad life. Thirty-some years I drove Uncle's boats, and now I get to drive me own—and she's paid for."

Burroughs was looking at the commercial ships now. He lifted the skipper's binoculars. "You mind?"

"Strap around your neck if you don't mind." Amazing that people thought the strap was some sort of decoration.

"Sure." Burroughs did that, adjusting the focus for his eyes and examining *Orchid Ace*. "Ugly damned things . . ."

"Not made to be pretty. Made to carry cars." Oreza started the final turn in.

"That's no car. Looks like some kind of construction thing, bulldozer, like . . ."

"Oh?" Portagee called for his mate, a local kid, to come topside and work the lines. Good kid, fifteen, might try for the Coast Guard and spend a few years learning the trade properly. Oreza was working on that.

"The Army have a base here?"

"Nope. The Air Force and Navy still have some folks down on Guam, but not even much there anymore." There. He killed his throttles, and the *Springer* drifted to a halt, just perfect. Again, Oreza thought, as always taking pleasure from doing a seaman's job just so. A man on the dock turned the crank to swing the hoist over his fantail, giving a thumbs-up when he saw the size of the fish. Watching to see that the boat was tied up properly, Oreza sat back, killed his engines, and thought about the evening's first beer.

"Here, take a look." Burroughs handed the glasses over.

Portagee turned in his chair and readjusted the binoculars to his eyes before training them in on the car carrier down the coast. He knew how the ships were arranged. He'd done safety inspection on them while on shore duty with the Coast Guard. He'd inspected this very ship, in fact, one of the first built-for-the-purpose automobile ferries, designed to carry trucks and other cargo as well as private cars. Some of the decks had a lot of overhead . . .

"What?"

"You know what it is?"

"No." It was a tracked vehicle. It was in shadows because the sun was low in the sky, but the paintwork was definitely dark, and it had a large box of some sort on the back. Then something clicked. It was some kind of missile launcher. He remembered seeing them on TV during the Persian Gulf War, just before his retirement. Oreza stood to get a slightly better angle. There were two others in the parking lot.. .

.

"Oh, okay, I got it, some sort of exercise," Burroughs said, heading down the ladder to the main deck. "See, that's a fighter plane over there. My cousin used to fly it before he went with American. It's an F-15 Eagle, Air Force bird."

Oreza turned the glasses and caught the fighter circling. Sure enough, there were two of them flying in a nice tight military formation, F-15 Eagle fighters, circling the center of the island in a classic display of protection for one's native soil . . . except for one thing. The national emblem on the wings was a solid red circle.

Again, Jones preferred the paper printouts to an electronic display. The latter was better for live-action, but on high-speed playback got the eyes tired too fast, and this was a job that demanded care. Lives might depend on it, he told himself, already thinking that was a lie. Two senior chief oceanographic technicians went through the pages with him. They started with midnight, and had to check carefully. The submarine-exercise area off Kure atoll had been chosen for its proximity to a series of hydrophones, part of the Pacific SOSUS system. The near array was one of the last ever implanted, and was the size of a garage or small house. Actually part of a mega-array, it was electronically linked to another installation fifty nautical miles away, but that one was older, smaller, and less capable. A cable linked them both, leading first to Kure, then to Midway, where there was a satellite uplink to back up the cable that led all the way to Pearl Harbor. The ocean was in fact crisscrossed with such cables. For quite some time during the Cold War, the U.S. Navy had laid almost as much as Bell Telephone, occasionally chartering the latter's ships for the task.

"Okay, there's *Kurushio* snorting," Jones said, circling the black marks in red.

"How the hell did you ever beat Masker?" one of the chiefs asked in surprise.

"Well, it is a good system, but you ever really listen to it?"

"I haven't been at sea in ten years," the senior chief replied.

"When I was on *Dallas,* we played games with *Moosbrugger* for a week, down at AUTEC in the Bahamas."

"The Moose has a big rep."

"And it's a no-shit rep, too. We couldn't hold her, she couldn't hold us, it was a real mother," Jones went on, speaking now not like a civilian contractor with a doctorate, but like the proud sonarman he'd been, and, he realized, still was. "They had a helicopter pilot who was giving us fits, too. Anyway"—he flipped another page—"then I figured

it out. Masker sounds like rain hitting the surface, like a spring shower. Not real noisy, but the freqs are unique, you can get a good cut on 'em. Then I realized all we had to do was see what the topside weather was like. If it's blue sky, and you hear rain bearing zero-two-zero, that's the guy. It was clear yesterday northwest of Kure. I checked with Fleet Weather before I came over."

The senior chief nodded and smiled. "I'll remember that one, sir."

"Okay, we have the Jap here at midnight. Now let's see what else we can find." He flipped forward to the next fan-fold page. Had circumstances been different he might have seen it as a paper Slinky, one of his new son's favorite toys. "That's gotta be *Asheville*, probably sprinting off to restart a scenario. She's wearing a speed screw, isn't she?"

"I don't know."

"I do. I don't think we would have gotten this many hits on her with a patrol screw. Let's plot this out."

"Running a plot, already have some of it," another chief reported. The process was largely computer-aided now. Once it had been a real black art.

"Posit?" Jones looked up.

"Position's right about here, same as the beacon, almost. Sir," the chief said patiently, making a black mark on the plastic-covered wall chart, "we know where she is, I mean, the rescue—"

"Ain't gonna be no rescue." Jones looked up and stole a cigarette from a passing seaman. *There, I finally said it out loud.*

"You can't smoke in here," one of the chiefs said. "We have to go outside—"

"Give me a light and follow me on this," Jones ordered. He flipped another page, checking the 60Hz line. "Nothing . . . nothing. Those diesel boats are pretty good . . . but if they're quiet, they ain't snorting, and if they ain't snorting they ain't going very far . . . *Asheville* sprinted out this way, and probably then she came back in . . ." Another page.

"No rescue, sir?" It had taken fully thirty seconds for the question to be asked.

"How deep's the water?"

"I know that, but the escape trunks . . . I mean, I've seen it, there's three of them."

Jones didn't even look up, taking a puff off his first smoke in years. "Yeah, the mom's hatch, that's what we called it on *Dallas.* 'See, mom, if anything goes wrong, we can get out right there.' Chief, you don't get off one of these things, okay? You don't. That ship is dead, and so's her crew. I want to see why."

"But we already have the crush sounds."

"I know. I also know that two of our carriers had a little accident today." Those sounds were on the SOSUS printouts, too.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything." Another page. At the bottom of it was a large black blotch, the loud sound that marked the death of USS *Asheville* and all—"What the fuck is this?"

"We think it's a double-plot, sir. The bearing's almost the same as the *Asheville* sound, and we think the computer—"

"The time's off, goddamn it, a whole four minutes." He flipped back three pages. "See, that's somebody else."

"Charlotte?"

It was then that Jones felt even colder. His head swam a little from the cigarette, and he remembered why he'd quit. The same signature on the paper, a diesel boat snorting, and, later, a 688-class sprinting. The sounds were so close, nearly identical, and the coincidence of the bearing from the new seafloor array could have made almost anyone think . . .

"Call Admiral Mancuso and find out if *Charlotte* has checked in."

"But—"

"Right now, Senior Chief!"

Dr. Ron Jones stood up and looked around. It was the same as before, almost. The people were the same, doing the same work, displaying the same competence, but something was missing. The thing that wasn't the same was . . . what? The large room had a huge chart of the Pacific Ocean on its back wall. Once that chart had been marked with red silhouettes, the class shapes of Soviet submarines, boomers, and fast-attacks, often with black silhouettes in attendance, to show that Pacific SOSUS was tracking "enemy" subs, quarterbacking American fast-attacks onto them, vectoring P-3C Orion ASW birds in to follow them, and occasionally to pounce on and harry them, to let them know who owned the oceans of the world. Now the marks on the wall chart were of whales, some of them with names, just as with the Russian subs, but these names were things like "Moby and Mabel," to denote a particular pod with a well-known alphapair to track by name. There wasn't an enemy now, and the urgency had gone. They weren't thinking the way he'd once thought, heading "up north" on *Dallas,* tracking people they might one day have to kill. Jones had never really expected *that,* not really-really, but the possibility was something he'd never allowed himself to forget. These men and women, however, had. He could see it, and now he could hear it from the way the chief was talking to SubPac on the phone.

Jones walked across the room and just took the receiver away. "Bart, this is Ron. Has *Charlotte* checked in?"

"We're trying to raise her now."

"I don't think you're going to, Skipper," the civilian said darkly.

"What do you mean?" The reply caught the meaning. The two men had always communicated on a nonverbal level.

"Bart, you better come over here. I'm not kidding, Cap'n."

"Ten minutes," Mancuso promised.

Jones stubbed his smoke out in a metal waste can and returned to the printouts. It was not an easy thing for him now, but he flipped to the pages where he'd stopped. The printouts were made with pencils that were located on metal shuttle-bars, marking received noises in discrete frequency ranges, and the marks were arranged with the low frequencies on the left, and the higher ones on the right. Location within the range columns denoted bearing. The tracks meandered, looking to all the world like aerial photographs of sand dunes in some trackless desert, but if you knew what to look for, every spidery trace and twist had meaning. Jones slowed his analysis, taking in every minute's record of reception and sweeping from left to right, making marks and notes as he went. The chiefs who'd been assisting him stood back now, knowing that a master was at work, that he saw things they should have seen, but had not, and knowing why a man younger than they called an admiral by his first name.

"Attention on deck," some voice called presently, "Submarine Force, Pacific, arriving." Mancuso came in, accompanied by Captain Chambers, his operations officer, and an aide who kept out of the way. The Admiral just looked at Jones's face.

"You raise *Charlotte* yet, Bart?"

"Not."

"Come here."

"What are you telling me, Jonesy?"

Jones took the red pen to the bottom of the page. "There's the crush, that's the hull letting go."

Mancuso nodded, letting out a breath. "I know, Ron."

"Look here. That's high-speed maneuvering—"

"Something goes wrong, you go max power and try to drive her up to the roof," Captain Chambers observed, not seeing it yet, or more probably not wanting to, Jones thought. Well, Mr. Chambers had always been a pretty nice officer to work for.

"But she wasn't heading straight for the roof, Mr. Chambers. Aspect changes, here and here," Jones said, moving the pen upward on the printout page, backwards in time, marking where the width of the traces varied, and the bearings changed subtly. "She was turning, too, at max power on a speed screw. This is probably a decoy signature. And this"—his hand went all the way to the right—"is a fish. Quiet one, but look at the bearing rates. It was turning, too, chasing *Asheville,* and that gives these traces here, all the way back to this

time-point here." Ron circled both traces, and though separated on the paper by fourteen inches, the shallow twists and turns were almost identical. The pen moved again, upwards on the sheet, then shot across to another frequency column. "To a launch transient. Right there."

"Fuck," Chambers breathed.

Mancuso leaned over the paper sheet, next to Jones, and he saw it all now. "And this one?"

"That's probably *Charlotte*, also maneuvering briefly. See, here and here, look like aspect changes on these traces to me. No transients because it was probably too far away, same reason we don't have a track on the fish." Jones moved the pen back to the track of USS *Asheville*. "Here. That Japanese diesel boat launched on her. Here. *Asheville* tried to evade and failed. Here's the first explosion from the torpedo warhead. Engine sounds stop here—she took the hit from aft. Here's the internal bulkheads letting go. Sir, *Asheville* was sunk by a torpedo, probably a Type 89, right about the same time that our two carriers had their little accident."

"It's not possible," Chambers thought.

When Jones turned his head, his eyes looked like the buttons on a doll's face. "Okay, sir, then you tell me what these signals denote." Somebody had to goad him into reality.

"Christ, Ron!"

"Settle down, Wally," ComSubPac said quietly, looking at the data and searching for another plausible interpretation. He had to look, even in the knowledge that there was no other possible conclusion.

"Wasting your time, Skipper." Jones tapped the track of USS *Gary*. "Somebody better tell that frigate that it ain't a rescue she's on. She's sailing in harm's way. There's two SSKs out there with warshots, and they already used them twice." Jones walked to the wall chart. He had to search around for a red marker, lifted it, and drew two circles, both about thirty miles in diameter. "Somewhere here. We'll get a better cut on them when they snort next. Who's the surface track, by the way?"

"Reportedly a coast-guard cutter, one of theirs, heading in for the rescue," SubPac answered.

"We might want to think about killing it," Jones suggested, marking that contact in red also, then setting the pen down. He'd just taken the final step. The surface ship whose position he'd marked was not "she," but rather *it*. An enemy. A target.

"We have to see CINCPAC," Mancuso said.

Jones nodded. "Yes, sir, I think we do."

22

The Global Dimension

The bomb was impressive. It exploded outside the Trincomalee Tradewinds, a new luxury hotel mainly built with Indian money. A few people, none closer than half a block away, would remember the vehicle, a small white delivery truck that had been big enough to contain half a ton of AMFO, an explosive mixture composed of nitrogen-based fertilizer and diesel fuel. It was a concoction easily made up in a bathtub or laundry basin, and in this case sufficient to rip the façade off the ten-story hotel, killing twenty-seven people and injuring another hundred or so in the process. Scarcely had the noise died when a telephone call came in to the local Reuters office.

"The final phase of liberation has begun," the voice said, probably reading the words off a prepared statement, as terrorists often did. "The Tamil Tigers will have their homeland and their autonomy or there will be no peace in Sri Lanka. This is only the beginning of the end of our struggle. We will explode one bomb per day until we achieve our goal." Click.

For more than a hundred years, Reuters had been one of the world's most efficient news services, and the Colombo office was no exception, even on a weekend. In ten minutes the report went out on the wire—a satellite link today—to the agency's London headquarters, where it was instantly relayed across the global news network as a "flash" story.

Many U.S. agencies routinely monitor the news-wire services, including the intelligence services, the FBI, Secret Service, and the Pentagon. This was also true of the White House Signals Office, and so it was that twenty-five minutes after the bomb went off, an Air Force sergeant put his hand on Jack Ryan's shoulder. The National Security Advisor's eyes opened to see a finger pointed topside.

"Flash traffic, sir," the voice whispered.

Ryan nodded sleepily, slipped off his seat belt, and thanked God that he hadn't drunk too much in Moscow. In the dim lights of the cabin everyone else was conked out. To keep from waking his wife it was necessary to step over the table. He almost tripped, but the sergeant grabbed his arm.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No problem, sir." Ryan followed her to the spiral stairs and headed up to the communications area on the upper deck.

"What gives?" He resisted the temptation to ask the time. It would have begged another question: the time in Washington, the time where the plane was now, or the time where the flash traffic had originated. Just another sign of progress, Ryan thought, heading to the thermal printer, you had to ask when "now" was. The communications watch officer was an Air Force first lieutenant, black, slim, and pretty.

"Good morning, Dr. Ryan. The National Security Office said to flag this one for you." She handed over the slippery paper Jack hated. The thermal printers were quiet, though, and this communications room, like all the others, was noisy enough already. Jack read the Reuters dispatch, too new as yet to have any analysis from CIA or elsewhere.

"That's the indicator we were looking for. Okay, let's get a secure phone."

"Some other stuff that's just come in," an airman said, handing over more papers. "The Navy had a bad day."

"Oh?" Ryan sat down in a padded chair and flipped on a reading light. "Oh, shit," he said next. Then he looked up. "Coffee, please, Lieutenant?" The officer sent an enlisted man for a cup.

"First call?"

"NMCC, the senior watch officer." The National Security Advisor checked his watch, did the arithmetic, and decided that he'd gotten about five hours of sleep total. It was not likely that he'd get much more between here, wherever that was, and Washington.

"Line three, Dr. Ryan. Admiral Jackson on the other end."

"This is SWORDSMAN," Ryan said, using his official Secret Service code name. They'd tried to hang GUN-FIGHTER on him, a token of backhanded respect for his earlier life.

"This is SWITCHBOARD. Enjoying the flight, Jack?" It was a constant amazement to Ryan that the secure digital comm links had such high transmission quality. He could recognize his friend's voice, and even his humorous tone. He could also tell that it was somewhat forced.

"These Air Force drivers are pretty good. Maybe you should think about learning from them. Okay, what gives? What are you doing in the shop?"

"Pac Fleet had a little incident a few hours ago."

"So I see. Sri Lanka first," SWORDSMAN ordered.

"Nothing much more than the wire dispatch. We have some still photos, too, and we expect video in a half-hour or so. The consulate in Trincomalee is reporting in now. They confirm the incident. One American citizen injured, they think, just one, and not real serious,

but he's asking to be evac'd soonest. Mike is being painted into a corner. He's going to try an' maneuver out of it when the sun goes down. Our estimate is that our friends are starting to get real frisky. Their amphibs are still alongside, but we've lost track of that brigade. The area they've been using to play games in appears empty. We have overheads three hours old, and the field is empty."

Ryan nodded. He slid the plastic blind off the window by his chair. It was dark outside. There were no lights to be seen below. Either they were over the ocean already or there were clouds down there. All he could see was the blinking strobe on the aircraft's wingtip.

"Any immediate dangers there?"

"Negative," Admiral Jackson thought. "We estimate a week to take positive action, minimum, but we also estimate that positive action is now likely. The folks up the river concur. Jack," Robby added, "Admiral Dubro needs instructions on what he can do about things, and he needs them soon."

"Understood." Ryan was making notes on an Air Force One scratchpad that the journalists hadn't managed to steal yet. "Stand by." He looked up at the Lieutenant. "ETA to Andrews?"

"Seven and a half hours, sir. Winds are pretty stiff. We're approaching the Icelandic coast now."

Jack nodded. "Thank you. Robby, we're seven and a half out. I'll be talking to the Boss before we get in. Start thinking about setting a briefing up two hours after we get in."

"Roger that."

"Okay. Now, what the hell happened to those carriers?"

"Supposedly one of the Jap 'cans had a little malfunction and rippled off her Mark 50s. They caught both CVNs in the ass. *Enterprise* has damage to all four shafts. *Stennis* has three down. They report no fatalities, some minor injuries."

"Robby, how the hell—"

"Hey, SWORDSMAN, I just work here, remember."

"How long?"

"Four to six months to effect repairs, that's what we have now. Wait, stand by, Jack." The voice stopped, but Ryan could hear murmurs and papers shuffling. "Wait a minute—something else just came in."

"Standing by." Ryan sipped his coffee and returned to the task of figuring out what time it was.

"Jack, something bad. We have a SUBMISS/SUBSUNK in Pac Fleet."

"What's that?"

"USS *Asheville,* that's a new 688, her BST-3 just started howling. *Stennis* has launched a bird to check it out, and a 'can's heading up there, too. This ain't good."

"What's the crew? Like a hundred?"

"More, one-twenty, one-thirty. Oh, damn. Last time this happened, I was a mid."

"We had an exercise going with them, didn't we?"

"DATELINE PARTNERS, yes, just ended yesterday. Until a couple hours ago, looked like a good exercise. Things went in the shitter in a hurry . . ." Jackson's voice trailed off. "Another signal. First report, *Stennis* launched a Hoover—"

"What?"

"S-3 Viking, ASW bird. Four-man crew. They report no survivors from the sub. Shit," Jackson added, even though it wasn't exactly a surprise. "Jack, I need to do some work here, okay?"

"Understood. Keep me posted."

"Will do. Out." The line went dead.

Ryan finished off his coffee and dropped the plastic cup into a basket bolted to the floor of the aircraft. There was no point in waking the President just yet. Durling would need his sleep. He was coming home to a financial crisis, a political mess, maybe a brewing war, in the Indian Ocean, and now the situation with Japan would only get worse after this damned-fool accident in the Pacific. Durling was entitled to a little good luck, wasn't he?

By coincidence Oreza's personal car was a white Toyota Land Cruiser, a popular vehicle on the island. He and his charter were walking toward it when two more just like it pulled into the marina's parking lot. Six people got out and walked straight toward them. The former Command Master Chief stopped dead in his tracks. He'd left Saipan just before dawn, having picked Burroughs up at the hotel himself, the better to catch the tuna chasing their own food in the early morning. Though traffic on the way in to the dock had been . . . well, a little busier than usual, the world had held its normal shape.

But not now. Now there were Japanese fighters circling over the island, and now six men in fatigues and pistol belts were walking toward him and his charter. It was like something from a movie, he thought, one of those crazy TV mini-things from when the Russians were real.

"Hello, how was the fishing?" the man asked. He had O-3 rank, Oreza saw, and a parachutist's badge on the left breast pocket. Smiling, just as pleasant and friendly as he could be.

"I bagged one hell of an albacore tuna," Pete Burroughs said, his pride amplified by the four beers he'd drunk on the way in.

A wider smile. "Ah! Can I see it?"

"Sure!" Burroughs reversed his path and led them back to the dock,

where the fish was still hanging head-down from the hoist.

"This is your boat, Captain Oreza?" the soldier asked. Only one other man had followed their captain down. The others stayed behind, watching closely, as though under orders not to be too . . . something, Portagee thought. He also took note of the fact that this officer had troubled himself to learn his name.

"That's right, sir. Interested in a little fishing?" he asked with an innocent smile.

"My grandfather was a fisherman," the *ishii* told them. Portagee nodded and smiled. "So was mine. Family tradition."

"Long tradition?"

Oreza nodded as they got to *Springer*. "More than a hundred years."

"Ah, a fine boat you have. May I look at it?"

"Sure, jump aboard." Portagee went first and waved him over. The sergeant who'd walked down with his captain, he saw, stayed on the dock with Mr. Burroughs, keeping about six feet away from him. There was a pistol in the man's holster, a SIG P220, the standard sidearm of the Japanese military. By this time all kinds of alarm were lighting off in Oreza's brain.

"What does 'Springer' denote?"

"It's a kind of hunting dog."

"Ah, yes, very good." The officer looked around. "What sort of radios do you need for a boat like this. Expensive?"

"I'll show you." Oreza led him into the salon. "Your people make it, sir, NEC, a standard marine VHF and a backup. Here's my GPS nav system, depth finder, fishfinder, radar." He tapped each instrument. They were in fact all Japanese-made, high quality, reasonably priced, and reliable as hell.

"You have guns aboard?"

Click. "Guns? What for?"

"Don't many islanders own guns?"

"Not that I know of." Oreza shook his head. "Anyway, I've never been attacked by a fish. No, I don't have any, even at home."

Clearly the officer was pleased by that news. "Oreza, what sort of name is that?" It sounded native to the Ishii.

"Originally, you mean? Way back, my people come from Portugal."

"Your family here a long time?"

Oreza nodded. "You bet." Five years was a long time, wasn't it? A husband and wife constituted a family, didn't they?

"The radios, VHF you say, short-range?" The man looked around for other instruments, but clearly there were none.

"Mainly line-of-sight, yes, sir."

The captain nodded. "Very good. Thank you. Beautiful boat. You take great pride in it, yes?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Thank you for showing me around. You can go now," the man said finally, not quite knowing how discordant the final sentence was. Oreza escorted him to the dock and watched him leave, rejoining his men without another word.

"What was—"

"Pete, you want to button it for a minute?" The command was delivered in his Master Chief's voice, and had the desired effect. They walked off to Oreza's car, letting the others pull away, marching as soldiers did to a precise one hundred twenty paces per minute, the sergeant a step to his captain's left and half a pace behind, walking exactly in step. By the time the fisherman got to his car it was clear that yet another Toyota Land Cruiser was at the entrance to the marina parking lot, not really doing anything but sitting there, with three men inside, all in uniform.

"Some kind of exercise? War games? What gives?" Burroughs asked once they were in Oreza's car.

"Beats the shit out of me, Pete." He started up and headed out of the lot, turning right to go south on Beach Road. In a few minutes they passed by the commercial docks. Portagee took his time, obeying all rules and limits, and blessing his luck that he had the same model car and color the soldiers used.

Or almost. The vehicles off-loading from *Orchid Ace* now were mainly olive-green. A steady cab-rank of airport buses off-loaded people in uniforms of the same color. They appeared to be going to a central point, then dispersing either to the parked military vehicles or to the ship, perhaps to offload their assigned units.

"What are those big boxy things?"

"It's called MLRS, Multiple-Launch Rocket System." There were six of them now, Oreza saw.

"What's it for?" Burroughs asked.

"Killing people," Portagee replied tersely. As they drove by the access road to the docks, a soldier waved them on vigorously. More trucks, deuce-and-a-halfs. More soldiers, maybe five or six hundred. Oreza continued south. Every major intersection had a Land Cruiser in place, and no less than three soldiers, some with pistol belts, occasionally one with a slung rifle. It took a few minutes to realize that there wasn't a single police car in evidence. He turned left onto Wallace Highway.

"My hotel?"

"How about dinner at my place tonight?" Oreza headed up the hill, past the hospital, finally turning left into his development. Though a man of the sea, he preferred a house on high ground. It also afforded a fine view of the southern part of the island. His was a home of modest

size with lots of windows. His wife, Isabel, was an administrator at the hospital, and the home was close enough that she could walk to work if the mood suited her. The mood this evening was not a happy one. As soon as he pulled into the driveway, his wife was out the door.

"Manni, what's going on?" Her ancestry was like his. Short, round, and dark-complected, now her swarthy skin was pale.

"Let's go inside, okay? Honey, this is Pete Burroughs. We went fishing today." His voice was calm, but his eyes swept around. The landing lights of four aircraft were visible to the east, lined up a few miles apart, approaching the island's two large runways. When the three of them were inside, and the doors shut, the talking could start.

"The phones are out. I tried to call Rachel and I got a recording. The overseas lines are down. When I went to the mall—"

"Soldiers?" Portagee asked his wife.

"Lots of 'em, and they're all—"

"Japs." Master Chief Quartermaster Manuel Oreza, United States Coast Guard, retired, completed the thought.

"Hey, that's not the polite way to—"

"Neither's an invasion, Mr. Burroughs."

"what?"

Oreza lifted the kitchen phone and hit the speed-dial button for his daughter's house in Massachusetts.

"We're sorry, but a cable problem has temporarily interrupted Trans-Pacific service. Our people are working on the problem. Thank you for your patience—"

"My ass!" Oreza told the recording. "Cable, hell, what about the satellite dishes?"

"Can't call out?" Burroughs was slow to catch on, but at least this was something he knew about.

"No, doesn't seem that way."

"Try this." The computer engineer reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellular phone.

"I have one," Isabel said. "It doesn't work either. I mean it's fine for local calls, but—"

"What number?"

"Area code 617," Portagee said, giving the rest of the number.

"Wait, I need the USA prefix."

"It's not going to work," Mrs. Oreza insisted.

"You don't have satellite phones here yet, eh?" Burroughs smiled. "My company just got us all these things. I can download on my laptop, send faxes with it, all that stuff. Here." He handed the phone over. "It's ringing."

The entire system was new, and the first such phone had not yet been sold in the islands yet, a fact that the Japanese military had

troubled itself to learn in the past week, but the service was global, even if the local marketing people hadn't started selling the things here. The signal from the small device went to one of thirty-five satellites in a loworbit constellation to the nearest ground station. Manila was the closest, beating Tokyo by a mere thirty miles, though even one mile would have been enough for the executive programming that ran the system. The Luzon ground station had been in operation for only eight weeks, and immediately relayed the call to another satellite, this one a Hughes bird in geosynchronous orbit over the Pacific, back down to a ground station in California, and from there via fiberoptic to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"Hello?" the voice said, somewhat crossly, since it was 5:00 A.M. in America's Eastern Time Zone.

"Rachel?"

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, honey."

"You okay out there?" his daughter asked urgently.

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to call Mom, but the recording said you had a big storm and the lines were down."

"There wasn't any storm, Rach," Oreza said without much thought on the matter.

"What's the matter, then?"

Jesus, where do I start? Portagee asked himself. What if nobody . . . was that possible?

"Uh, Portagee," Burroughs said.

"What is it?" Oreza asked.

"What's what, Daddy?" his daughter asked also, of course.

"Wait a minute, honey. What is it, Pete?" He put his hand over the receiver.

"You mean like, invasion, like war, taking over, all that stuff?"

Portagee nodded. "Yes, sir, that's what it looks like."

"Turn the phone off, now!" The urgency in his voice was unmistakable. Nobody had thought any of this through yet, and both were coming to terms with it from different directions and at different speeds.

"Honey, I'll be back, okay? We're fine. 'Bye." Oreza thumbed the CLEAR button. "What's the problem, Pete?"

"This isn't some joke, right? You're not doing a number to mess with my head, tourist games and all that stuff, are you?"

"Jesus, I need a beer." Oreza opened the refrigerator and took one out. That it was a Japanese brand did not for the moment matter. He tossed one to his guest. "Pete, this ain't no play-acting, okay? In case you didn't notice, we seen at least a battalion of troops, mechanized

vehicles, fighters. And that asshole on the dock was real interested in the radio on my boat."

"Okay." Burroughs opened his beer and took a long pull. "Let's say this is a no-shitter. You can DF one of those things."

"Dee-eff? What do you mean?" A pause while he dusted off some long-unused memories. "Oh . . . yeah."

It was busy at the headquarters of Commander-in-Chief Pacific. CINCPAC was a Navy command, a tradition that dated back to Admiral Chester Nimitz. At the moment people were scurrying about. They were almost all in uniform. The civilian employees were rarely in on weekends, and with a few exceptions it was too late for them anyway. Mancuso saw the collective mood as he came through security, people looking down with harried frowns, moving quickly the better to avoid the heavy atmosphere of an office in considerable turmoil. Nobody wanted to be caught in the storm.

"Where's Admiral Seaton?" ComSubPac asked the nearest yeoman. The petty officer just pointed to the office suite. Mancuso led the other two in that direction.

"Where the hell have you been?" CINCPAC demanded as they came into his inner office.

"SOSUS, sir. Admiral, you know Captain Chambers, my operations officer. This is Dr. Ron Jones—"

"The sonarman you used to brag on?" Admiral David Seaton allowed himself a pleasant moment. It was brief enough.

"That's right, sir. We were just over at SOSUS checking the data on —"

"No survivors, Bart. Sorry, but the S-3 crew says—" "Sir, they were killed," Jones interrupted, tired of the preliminaries. His statement stopped everything cold.

"What do you mean, Dr. Jones?" CINCPAC asked after perhaps as much as a second.

"I mean *Asheville* and *Charlotte* were torpedoed and sunk by Japanese submarines, sir."

"Now wait a minute, son. You mean *Charlotte*, too?" Seaton's head turned. "Bart, what is this?" SubPac didn't get a chance to answer.

"I can prove it, sir." Jones held up the sheaf of papers under his arm. "I need a table with a light over it."

Mancuso's face was pretty grim. "Sir, Jonesy appears to be right. These were not accidents."

"Gentlemen, I have fifteen Japanese officers in the operations room right now trying to explain how the fire control on their 'cans works and—"

"You have Marines, don't you?" Jones asked coldly. "They carry guns, don't they?"

"Show me what you have." Dave Seaton gestured at his desk.

Jones walked CINCPAC through the printouts, and if Seaton wasn't exactly a perfect audience, he surely was a quiet one. On further examination, the SOSUS traces even showed the surface ships and the Mark 50 antisub torpedoes that had crippled half of PacFlt's carriers. The new array off Kure was really something, Jones thought.

"Look at the time, sir. All of this happened over a period of what? Twenty minutes or so. You have two hundred fifty dead sailors out there, and it wasn't any accident."

Seaton shook his head like a horse shedding troublesome insects. "Wait a minute, I haven't had any word—I mean, the threat board is blank. There aren't any indications at all that—"

"There are now, sir." Jones wasn't letting up at all.

"But—"

"Goddamn it, Admiral!" Jones swore. "Here it is, black and white, okay? There are other copies of this back at the SOSUS building, there's a tape record, and I can show it to you on a fucking TV screen. You want your own experts to go over there, well, shit, they're right here, ain't they?" The contractor pointed to Mancuso and Chambers. "We have been *attacked,* sir."

"What are the chances that this is some sort of mistake?" Seaton asked. His face was as ghostly pale as the cloth of his undress-white uniform shirt.

"Just about zero. I suppose you could wait for them to take an ad out in *The New York Times* if you want additional confirmation." Diplomacy had never been Jones's strongest suit, and he was too angry to consider it anyway.

"Listen, mister—" Seaton began, but then he bit off his words, and instead looked up at his type commander. "Bart?"

"I can't argue with the data, sir. If there were a way to dispute it, Wally or I would have found it. The people at SOSUS concur. It's hard for me to believe, too," Mancuso conceded. "*Charlotte* has failed to check in and—"

"Why didn't her beacon go off?" CINCPAC asked.

"The gadget is located on the sail, aft corner. Some of my skippers weld them down. The fast-attack guys resisted putting them aboard last year, remember? Anyway, the fish could have destroyed the BST or for some reason it didn't deploy properly. We have that noise indicator at *Charlotte*'s approximate location, and she has failed to respond to an emergency order to communicate with us. There is no reason, sir, to assume that she's still alive." And now that Mancuso had said it, it was official. There was one more thing that needed to be

said.

"You're telling me we're at war." The statement was delivered in an eerily quiet voice. ComSubPac nodded.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"I didn't have any warning at all," Seaton objected.

"Yeah, you have to admire their sense of tradition, don't you?" Jones observed, forgetting that the last time there had been ample warning, all of it unheeded.

Pete Burroughs didn't finish his fifth beer of the day. The night had not brought peace. Though the sky was clear and full of stars, brighter lights continued to approach Saipan from the east, taking advantage of the trade winds to ease their approach into the island's two American-built runways. Each jumbo jet had to be carrying at least two hundred soldiers, probably closer to three. They could see the two airfields. Oreza's binoculars were more than adequate to pick out the aircraft and the fuel trucks that scurried about to fill up the arriving jets so that they could rapidly go home to make another shuttle run. It didn't occur to anyone to keep a count until it was a few hours too late.

"Car coming in," Burroughs warned, alerted by the glow of turning lights. Oreza and he retreated to the side of the house, hoping to be invisible in the shadows. The car was another Toyota Land Cruiser, which drove down the lane, reversed direction at the end of the cul-de-sac, and headed back out after having done not very much of anything but look around and perhaps count the cars in the various drive-ways—more likely to see if people were gathered in an inopportune way. "You have any idea what to do?" he asked Oreza when it was gone.

"Hey, I was Coast Guard, remember? This is Navy shit. No, more like Marine shit."

"It sure is deep shit, man. You suppose anybody knows?"

"They gotta. Somebody's gotta," Portagee said, lowering the glasses and heading back into the house. "We can watch from inside our bedroom. We always leave the windows open anyway." The cool evenings here, always fresh and comfortable from the ocean breezes, were yet another reason for his decision to move to Saipan. "What exactly do you do, Pete?"

"Computer industry, several things really. I have a masters in EE. My real specialty area is communications, how computers talk to each other. I've done a little government work. My company does plenty, but mostly on another side of the house." Burroughs looked around the kitchen. Mrs. Oreza had prepared a light dinner, a good one, it

appeared, though it was growing cold.

"You were worried about having people track in on your phone."

"Maybe just being paranoid, but my company makes the chips for scanners that the Army uses for just that purpose."

Oreza sat down and started shoveling some of the stirfry onto his plate. "I don't think anything's paranoid anymore, man."

"I hear ya, Skipper." Burroughs decided to do the same, and looked at the food with approval. "Y'all trying to lose weight?"

Oreza grunted. "We both need to, Izzy and me. She's been taking classes in low-fat stuff."

Burroughs looked around. Though the home had a dining room, like most retired couples (that's how he thought of them, even though they clearly were not), they ate at a small table in their kitchen. The sink and counter were neatly laid out, and the engineer saw the steel mixing and serving bowls. The stainless steel gleamed. Isabel Oreza, too, ran a tight ship, and it was plain enough who was the skipper at home.

"Do I go to work tomorrow?" she asked, her mind drifting, trying to come to terms with the change in local affairs.

"I don't know, honey," her husband replied, his own thoughts stopped cold by the question. What would he do? Go fishing again as though nothing at all had happened?

"Wait a minute," Pete said, still looking at the mixing bowls. He stood, took the two steps needed to reach the kitchen counter, and lifted the largest bowl. It was sixteen inches in diameter and a good five or six inches deep. The bottom was flat, perhaps a three-inch circle, but the rest of it was spherical, almost parabolic in shape. He pulled his sat-phone out of his shirt pocket. He'd never measured the antenna, but now, extending it, he saw it was less than four inches in length. Burroughs looked over at Oreza. "You have a drill?"

"Yeah, why?"

"DF, hell. I got it!"

"You lost me, Pete."

"We drill a hole in the bottom, put the antenna through it. The bowl's made out of steel. It reflects radio waves just like a microwave antenna. Everything goes up. Hell, it might even make the transmitter more efficient."

"You mean like, E.T. phone home?"

"Close enough, Cap'n. What if nobody's phoned home on this one?" Burroughs was still trying to think it through, coming to terms slowly with a very frightening situation. "Invasion" meant "war." War, in this case, was between America and Japan, and however bizarre that possibility was, it was also the only explanation for the things he'd seen that day. If it was a war, then he was an enemy alien. So were his

hosts. But he'd seen Oreza do some very fancy footwork at the marina.

"Let me get my drill. How big a hole you need?" Burroughs handed over the sat-phone. He'd been tempted to toss it through the air, but stopped himself on the realization that it was perhaps his most valuable possession. Oreza checked the diameter of the little button at the end of the slim metal whip and went for his tool kit.

"hello?"

"Rachel? It's Dad."

"You sure you're okay? Can I call you guys now?"

"Honey, we're fine, but there's a problem here." How the hell to explain this? he wondered. Rachel Oreza Chandler was a prosecuting attorney in Boston, actually looking forward to leaving government service and becoming a criminal lawyer in private practice, where the job satisfaction was rarer, but the pay and hours were far better. Approaching thirty, she was now at the stage where she worried about her parents in much the same way they'd once worried about her. There was no sense in worrying Rachel now, he decided. "Could you get a phone number for me?"

"Sure, what number?"

"Coast Guard Headquarters. It's in D.C., at Buzzard's Point. I want the watch center. I'll wait," he told her.

The attorney put one line on hold and dialed D.C. information. In a minute she relayed the number, hearing her father repeat it word for word back to her. "That's right. You sure things are okay? You sound a little tense."

"Mom and I are just fine, honest, baby." She hated it when he called her that, but it was probably too late to change him. Poppa would just never be PC.

"Okay, you say so. I hear that storm was really bad. You have electricity back yet?" she asked, forgetting that there hadn't been a storm at all.

"Not yet, honey, but soon, probably," he lied. "Later, baby."

"Coast Guard Watch Center, Chief Petty Officer Obrecki, this is a nonsecure line," the man said, just as rapidly as possible to prevent the person on the other end from understanding a single word.

"Are you telling me that that fuzzy-cheeked infant who sailed on *Panache* with me made *chief?"* It was good enough to startle the man at the other end, and the reply was comprehensible.

"This is Chief Obrecki. Who's this?"

"Master Chief Oreza," was the answer.

"Well, how the hell are you, Portagee? I heard you retired." The chief of the watch leaned back in his chair. Now that he was a chief himself, he could refer to the man at the other end by his nickname.

"I'm on Saipan. Okay, kid, listen up: put your watch officer on right now."

"What's the matter, Master Chief?"

"No time, okay? Let's do it."

"Fair enough." Obrecki put the call on hold. "Commander, could you pick up on one, ma'am?"

"NMCC, this is Rear Admiral Jackson," Robby said, tired and in a very foul mood. Only reluctantly did he lift the phone, on the recommendation of a youngish Air Force major.

"Admiral, this is Lieutenant Commander Powers, Coast Guard, over at Buzzard's Point. I have a call on the line from Saipan. The caller is a retired Command Master Chief. One of ours."

Damn it, I have a broke carrier division out there, his mind raged. "That's nice, Commander. You want to clue me in fast? It's busy here."

"Sir, he reports a whole lot of Japanese troops on the island of Saipan."

Jackson's eyes came up off the dispatches on his desk. "What?"

"I can patch him over now, sir."

"Okay," Robby said guardedly.

"Who's this?" another voice asked, old and gruff. He sounded like a chief, Robby thought.

"I'm Rear Admiral Jackson, in the National Military Command Center." He didn't have to order a tape on the line. They were all taped.

"Sir, this is Master Chief Quartermaster Manuel Oreza, U.S. Coast Guard, retired, serial number three-two-eight-six-one-four-zero-three-zero. I retired five years ago and moved to Saipan. I operate a fishing boat here. Sir, there are a lot—and I mean a whole goddamned pisspot full—of Japanese troops, uniformed and carrying arms, on this-here rock, right now, sir."

Jackson adjusted his hand on the phone, gesturing for another officer to pick up. "Master Chief, I hope you understand that I find that a little bit hard to believe, okay?"

"Shit, sir, you oughta see it from my side. I am looking out my window right now. I can see down on the airport and Kobler Field. I count a total of six jumbo-jet aircraft, four at the airport and two at Kobler. I observed a pair of F-15 Eagle fighters with meatball markings circling over the island a few hours ago. Question, sir, is

there any sort of joint exercise under way at this time?" the voice asked. It was stone sober, Jackson thought. It sure as hell sounded like a command master chief.

The Air Force major listening fifteen feet away was scribbling notes, though an invitation to Jurassic Park would have seemed somewhat more realistic.

"We just concluded a joint exercise, but Saipan didn't have anything to do with it."

"Sir, then this ain't no fuckin' exercise. There are three car-carrier-type merchant ships tied alongside the dock up the coast from me. One of 'em's named *Orchid Ace*. I have personally observed military-type vehicles, I think MLRS—Mike Lima Romeo Sierra—six of those sitting in the parking lot at the commercial dock area. Admiral, you check with the Coast Guard and pull my package. I did thirty years in CG blue. I ain't dickin' around, sir. Check for yourself, the phone lines to the rock are out. The story is supposedly that we had a big windstorm, took lines down and stuff. Ain't been no windstorm, Admiral. I was out fishing all day, okay? Check with your weather pukes to confirm that one, too. There are Japanese troops on this island, wearing fatigue uniforms and under arms."

"You got a count, Master Chief?"

The best confirmation of this insane tale, Robby thought, was the embarrassed tone of the answer to that question. "No, sir, sorry, I didn't think to count the airplanes. I'd guess three to six arrivals per hour, over the last six hours at least, probably more, but that's just a guess, sir. Wait . . . Kobler, one of the birds is moving, like to take off. It's a 747, but I can't make out the markings."

"Wait. If the phones are out, how are you talking to me?" Oreza explained, giving Jackson a conventional number to call back on. "Okay, Master Chief. I'm going to do some checking here. I'll be back to you in less than an hour. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir, I figure we done our part." The line went dead.

"Major!" Jackson shouted without looking up. When he did that, he saw the man was there.

"Sir, I know he sounded normal and all, but—"

"But call Andersen Air Force Base right now."

"Roger." The young pilot went back to his desk and flipped open his Autovon directory. Thirty seconds later he looked up and shook his head, a curious look on his face.

"Is someone telling me," Jackson asked the ceiling, "that a U.S. Air Force base dropped off the net today and nobody *noticed?*"

"Admiral, CINCPAC on your STU, sir, it's coded as CRITIC traffic." CRITIC was a classification of priority even higher than FLASH, and not a prefix often used, even by a Theater Commander in Chief. *What*

the hell, Jackson thought. *Why not ask?*

"Admiral Seaton, this is Robby Jackson. Are we at war, sir?"

His part in the exercise seemed easy enough, Zhang Han San thought. Just one flight to one place, to talk first with one person, then another, and it had gone even more easily than he'd expected.

Well, he shouldn't have been surprised, he thought, returning to the airport in the back of the embassy car. Korea would be cut off, certainly for a period of months, and perhaps indefinitely. To do anything else would have carried with it great dangers for a country whose military had been downsized and whose next-door neighbor was the nation with the world's largest standing army, and an historical enemy at that. Han hadn't even been forced to bring up that unseemly thought. He'd simply delivered an observation. There seemed to be difficulties between America and Japan. Those difficulties did not pertain directly to the Republic of Korea. Nor would it appear that the Republic had any immediate ability to ameliorate those differences, except perhaps as an honest broker of influence when diplomatic negotiations were undertaken, at which time the good offices of the Republic of Korea would be most welcome indeed by all sides in the dispute, certainly by Japan.

He'd taken no particular pleasure at the discomfort his mild words had given to his hosts. There was much to admire in the Koreans, a fact lost on Japan in their blind racism, Zhang thought. With luck, he might firm up the trading relationship between the PRC and the ROK, and they, too, would profit from the ultimate objective—and why not? The ROKs had no reason to love the Russians, and even less to love the Japanese. They simply had to get over their regrettable friendship with America and become part of a new reality. It was sufficient to the moment that they had indeed seen things his way, and that America's one remaining ally in this part of the world was off the playing field, their president and foreign minister having seen the light of reason. And with luck, the war, such as it was, might already be over for all intents and purposes.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The voice came from the living room, where Mrs. Oreza had left the TV on. "In ten minutes there will be a special announcement. Please stay tuned."

"Manni?"

"I heard it, honey."

"You have a blank tape for your VCR?" Burroughs asked.

23

Catching Up

Robby Jackson's day had started off badly enough. He'd had bad ones before, including a day as a lieutenant commander at Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, in which a jet trainer had decided without any prompting at all to send him and his ejection seat flying through the canopy, breaking his leg in the process and taking him off flight status for months. He'd seen friends die in crashes of one sort or another, and even more often had participated in searches for men whom he'd rarely found alive, more often locating a slick of jet fuel and perhaps a little debris. As a squadron commander and later as a CAG, he'd been the one who'd written the letters to parents and wives, telling them that their man, and most recently, their little girl, had died in the service of their country, each time asking himself what he might have done differently to prevent the necessity of the exercise. The life of a naval aviator was filled with such days.

But this was worse, and the only consolation was that he was deputy J-3, responsible to develop operations and plans for his country's military. Had he been part of J-2, the intelligence boys, his sense of failure would have been complete indeed.

"That's it, sir, Yakota, Misawa, and Kadena are all off the net. Nobody's picking up."

"How many people?" Jackson asked.

"Total, about two thousand, mainly mechanics, radar controllers, loggies, that sort of thing. Maybe an airplane or two in transit, but not many of those. I have people checking now," the Major replied. "How about the Navy?"

"We have people at Andersen on Guam, co-located with your base. The port, too, maybe a thousand people total. It's a lot smaller than it used to be." Jackson lifted his secure phone and punched in the numbers for CINCPAC. "Admiral Seaton? This is Jackson again. Anything else?"

"We can't raise anybody west of Midway, Rob. It's starting to look real."

“How does this thing work?” Oreza asked.

“I hate to say this, but I’m not sure. I didn’t bother reading the manual,” Burroughs admitted. The sat-phone was sitting on the coffee table, its antenna extended through the drill hole in the bottom of the mixing bowl, which was in turn sitting atop two piles of books. “I’m not sure if it broadcasts its position to the satellites periodically or not.” For which reason they felt it necessary to maintain the comical arrangement.

“You turn mine off by putting the antenna back down,” Isabel Oreza observed, causing two male heads to turn. “Or you can just take the batteries out, right?”

“Damn.” Burroughs managed to say it first, but not by much. He lifted the bowl off, put the little antenna back in its hole, then flipped off the battery cover and withdrew the two AAs. The phone was now completely off. “Ma’am, if you want to get into the master’s program at Sanford, use me as a reference, okay?”

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Heads turned in the living room to see a smiling man in green fatigues. His English was letter-perfect. “I am General Tokikichi Arima of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces. Please allow me to explain what has happened today.

“First of all, let me assure you that there is no cause for alarm. There was an unfortunate shooting at the police substation adjacent to your parliament building, but the two police officers who were hurt in the exchange are both doing well in your local hospital. If you have heard rumors of violence or death, those rumors are not true,” the General assured the twenty-nine thousand citizens of Saipan.

“You probably want to know what has happened,” he went on. “Early today, forces under my command began arriving on Saipan and Guam. As you know from your history, and indeed as some of the older citizens on this island well remember, until 1944 the Mariana Islands were possessions of Japan. It may surprise some of you to know that since the court decision several years ago allowing Japanese citizens to purchase real estate in the islands, the majority of the land on Saipan and Guam is owned by my countrymen. You also know of our love and affection for these islands and the people who live here. We have invested billions of dollars here and created a renaissance in the local economy after years of shameful neglect by the American government. Therefore, we’re not really strangers at all, are we?

“You probably also know that there have been great difficulties between Japan and America. Those difficulties have forced my country to rethink our defense priorities. We have, therefore, decided to reestablish our ownership of the Mariana Islands as a purely

defensive measure to safeguard our own shores against possible American action. In other words, it is necessary for us to maintain defense forces here and therefore to bring the Marianas back into our country.

"Now." General Arima smiled. "What does this mean to you, the citizens of Saipan?

"Really, it means nothing at all. All businesses will remain open. We, too, believe in free enterprise. You will continue to manage your own affairs through your own elected officials, with the additional benefit that you will have status as Japan's forty-eighth prefecture, with full parliamentary representation in the Diet. That is something you have not had as an American commonwealth—which is just another word for colony, isn't it? You will have dual citizenship rights. We will respect your culture and your language. Your freedom to travel will not be impeded. Your freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly will be the same as those enjoyed by all Japanese citizens, and totally identical with the civil rights you now enjoy. In short, nothing is going to change in your daily life at all." Another charming smile.

"The truth of the matter is that you will greatly benefit from this change in government. As part of Japan, you will be part of the world's most vibrant and dynamic economy. Even more money will come to your island. You will see prosperity such as you have never dreamed of," Arima assured his audience. "The only changes you will experience will be positive ones. On that you have my word and the word of my government.

"Perhaps you say that such words are easy to speak, and you are correct. Tomorrow you will see people on the streets and roads of Saipan, surveying, taking measurements, and interviewing local citizens. Our first important task will be to improve the roads and highways of your island, something neglected by the Americans. We want your advice on the best way to do this. In fact, we will welcome your help and participation in everything we do.

"Now," Arima said, leaning forward somewhat, "I know that some among you will find these developments unwelcome, and I wish to apologize sincerely for that. We have no desire to harm anyone here, but you must understand that any attack upon one of my men or any Japanese citizen will be treated as a violation of the law. I am also responsible to take certain security measures to protect my troops and to bring this island into compliance with Japanese law.

"All firearms owned by private citizens on Saipan must be surrendered in the next few days. You may bring them into your local police stations. If you have a sales record for the guns, or if you can demonstrate their commercial value, we will pay you the fair cash

value for them. Similarly, we must ask that any owners of 'ham' radios turn them over to us for a short period of time, and, please, not to use them until you do. Again, we will pay in cash the full value of your property, and in the case of the radios, when we return them to you, you may keep the money as a token of our thanks for your cooperation. Aside from that"—another smile—"you will hardly notice that we are here. My troops are under orders to treat everyone on this island as fellow citizens. If you experience or even see a single incident in which a Japanese soldier is impolite to a local citizen, I want you to come to my headquarters and report it. You see, our law applies to us, too.

"For the moment, please go about your normal lives." A number came up on the screen. "If you have any specific questions, please call this number or feel free to come to my headquarters at your parliament building. We will be glad to help you in any way we can. Thank you for listening. Good night."

"This message will be repeated every fifteen minutes on Channel Six, the public-access channel," another voice said.

"Son of a bitch," Oreza breathed.

"I wonder who their ad agency is," Burroughs noted, going to punch the rewind button on the VCR.

"Can we believe it?" Isabel asked.

"Who knows? You have any guns?"

Portagee shook his head. "Nope. I don't even know if this rock has a registration law. Have to be crazy to take on soldiers anyway, right?"

"It makes it a lot easier for them if they don't have to watch their backs." Burroughs started putting the batteries back in his sat-phone. "You have the number for that admiral?"

"Jackson."

"Master Chief Oreza, sir. You got a tape machine running?"

"Yes, I do. What you got?"

"Well, sir, it's officials," Oreza reported dryly. "They just made the announcement on TV. We taped it. I'm turning the tape on now. I'll hold the phone right next to the speaker."

General Tokikichi Arima, Jackson wrote down on a pad. He handed it to an Army sergeant. "Have the intel boys identify this name."

"Yessir." The sergeant vanished in an instant.

"Major!" Robby called next.

"Yes, Admiral?"

"The sound quality is pretty good. Have a copy of the tape run over to the spooks for voice-stress analysis. Next, I want a typed transcript ASAP ready to fax out to half a million places."

"Right."

For the rest of the time, Jackson just listened, an island of calm in a sea of madness, or so it seemed.

"That's it," Oreza told him when it ended. "You want the call-in number, Admiral?"

"Not right now, no. Good job, Master Chief. Anything else to report?"

"The airplanes are still shuttling in. I counted fourteen since we talked last."

"Okay." Robby made the proper notes. "You feel like you're in any particular danger?"

"I don't see people running around with guns, Admiral. You notice they didn't say anything about American nationals on the island?"

"No, I didn't. Good point." *Ouch.*

"I ain't real comfortable about this, sir." Oreza gave him a quick reprise of the incident on his boat.

"I can't say that I blame you, Master Chief. Your country is working on the problem, okay?"

"You say so, Admiral. I'm shutting down for a while."

"Fair enough. Hang in there," Jackson ordered. It was a hollow directive, and both men knew it.

"Roger that. Out."

Robby sat the phone back in the cradle. "Opinions?"

"You mean aside from, 'It's all fuckin' crazy'?" a staff officer inquired.

"It may be crazy to us, but it's sure as hell logical to somebody." There was no sense in clobbering the officer for the statement, Jackson knew. It would take a bit more time before they really came to terms with the situation. "Does anybody *not* believe the information we have now?" He looked around. Seven officers were present, and people weren't selected for duty in the NMCC for their stupidity.

"It may be crazy, sir, but everything keeps coming down the same way. Every post we've tried to link with is off the air. They're all supposed to have duty officers, but nobody's answering the phone. Satellite links are down. We have four Air Force bases and an Army post off the air. It's real, sir." The staffer redeemed herself with the follow-up.

"Anything from State? Any of the spook shops?"

"Nothing," a colonel from J-2 replied. "I can give you a satellite pass over the Marianas in about an hour. I've already told NRO and I-TAC about the tasking and the priority."

"KH-11?"

"Yes, sir, and all the cameras are up. Weather is clear. We'll get good overheads," the intelligence officer assured him.

"No storm in the area yesterday?"

"Negative," another officer said. "Ain't no reason for phone service to be out. They have Trans-Pac cable and satellite uplinks. I called the contractor that operates the dishes. They had no warning at all. They've been sending their own signals to their people, requesting information, no reply."

Jackson nodded. He'd waited this long only to get the confirmation he needed to take the next step.

"Okay, let's get a warning signal drafted, distribution to all the CINCs. Alert SecDef and the Chiefs. I'm calling the President now."

"Dr. Ryan, NMCC on the STU with CRITIC traffic. Admiral Robert Jackson again." The use of "CRITIC" caused heads to turn as Ryan lifted the secure phone.

"Robby, this is Jack. What's happening?" Everyone in the communications room saw the National Security Advisor turn pale. "Robby, are you serious?" He looked at the communications watch officer. "Where are we now?"

"Approaching Goose Bay, Labrador, sir. About three hours out."

"Get Special Agent d'Agustino up here, would you, please?" Ryan took his hand off the phone. "Robby, I need hard copy . . . okay . . . he's still asleep, I think. Give me thirty minutes to get organized here. Call me if you need me."

Jack got out of his chair and made his way to the lav just aft of the flight deck. He managed to avoid looking in the mirror when he washed his hands. The Secret Service agent was waiting for him when he emerged.

"Not much sleep for you, eh?"

"Is the Boss up yet?"

"Sir, he left orders not to do that until we were an hour out. I just checked with the pilot and—"

"Kick him loose, Daga, right now. Then get Secretaries Hanson and Fiedler up. Arnie, too."

"What's the matter, sir?"

"You'll be in there to hear it." Ryan took the roll of fax paper off the secure machine and started reading. He looked up. "I'm not kidding, Daga. Right now."

"Any danger to the President?"

"Let's assume that there is," Jack replied. He thought for a second. "Where's the nearest fighter base, Lieutenant?"

The *what?* on her face was quite obvious. "Sir, there are F-15s at Otis on Cape Cod, and F-16s at Burlington, Vermont. Both are Air National Guard groups tasked to continental air defense."

"You call them and tell them that the President would like to have some friends around ASAP." The nice thing about talking to lieutenants was that they weren't used to asking why an order was given, even when there was no obvious reason for it. The same thing didn't apply to the Secret Service.

"Doc, if you need to do that, then I need to know, too, right now."

"Yeah, Daga, I guess so." Ryan tore off the top section of the thermal fax paper when he got to the second page of the transmission.

"Holy shit," the agent thought aloud, handing it back. "I'll wake the President up. You need to tell the pilot. They do things a little differently at times like this."

"Fair enough. Fifteen minutes, Daga, okay?"

"Yes, sir." She headed down the circular stairs while Jack went forward to the flight deck.

"One-six-zero minutes to go, Dr. Ryan. Has been a long one, hasn't it?" the Colonel at the controls asked pleasantly. The smile faded instantly from his face.

* * *

It was mere chance that took them past the American Embassy. Maybe he'd just wanted to see the flag, Clark thought. It was always a pleasant sight in a foreign land, even if it did fly over a building designed by some bureaucrat with the artistic sense of—

"Somebody's worried about security," Chavez said.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich, I know your English is good. You need not practice it on me."

"Excuse me. The Japanese are concerned with a riot, Vanya? Except for that one incident, there hasn't been much hooliganism . . ." His voice trailed off. There were two squads of fully armed infantrymen arrayed around the building. That seemed very odd indeed. Over here, Ding thought, one or two police officers seemed enough to—

"Yob'tvoyu mat."

Clark was proud of the lad just then. Foul as the imprecation was, it was also just what a Russian would have said. The reason for it was also clear. The guards around the embassy perimeter were looking in as much as they were looking out, and the Marines were nowhere to be seen.

"Ivan Sergeyevich, something seems very odd."

"Indeed it does, Yevgeniy Pavlovich," John Clark said evenly. He didn't let the car slow down, and hoped the troops on the sidewalk wouldn't notice the two gaijin driving by and take down their license number. It might be a good time to change rental cars.

“The name is Arima, first name Tokikichi, sir, Lieutenant General, age fifty-three.” The Army sergeant was an intelligence specialist. “Graduated their National Defense Academy, worked his way up the line as an infantryman, good marks all the way. He’s airborne qualified. Took the senior course at Carlisle Barracks eight years ago, did just fine. ‘Politically astute,’ the form sheet says. Well connected. He’s Commanding General of their Eastern Army, a rough equivalent of a corps organization in the U.S. Army, but not as heavy in corps-level assets, especially artillery. That’s two infantry divisions, First and Twelfth, their First Airborne Brigade, First Engineer Brigade, Second Anti-Air Group, and other administrative attachments.”

The sergeant handed over the folder, complete with a pair of photos. *The enemy has a face now*, Jackson thought. *At least one face.* Jackson examined it for a few seconds and closed the folder back. It was about to go to Condition FRANTIC in the Pentagon. The first of the Joint Chiefs was in the parking lot, and he was the lucky son of a bitch to give them the news, such as it was. Jackson assembled his documents and headed off to the Tank, a pleasant room, actually, located on the outside of the building’s E-Ring.

Chet Nomuri had spent the day meeting at irregular hours with three of his contacts, learning not very much except that something very strange was afoot, though nobody knew what. His best course of action, he decided, was to head back to the bathhouse and hope Kazuo Taoka would turn up. He finally did, by which time Nomuri had spent so much time soaking in the blisteringly hot water that his body felt like pasta that had been in the pot for about a month.

“You must have had a day like I did,” he managed to say with a crooked smile.

“How was yours?” Kazuo asked, his smile tired but enthusiastic.

“There is a pretty girl at a certain bar. Three months I’ve worked on her. We had a vigorous afternoon.” Nomuri reached below the surface of the water, feigning agony in an obvious way. “It may never work again.”

“I wish that American girl was still around,” Taoka said, settling in the tub with a prolonged *Ahhhhh.* “I am ready for someone like her now.”

“She’s gone?” Nomuri asked innocently.

“Dead,” the salaryman said, easily controlling his sense of loss.

“What happened?”

"They were going to send her home. Yamata sent Kaneda, his security man, to tidy things up. But it seems she used narcotics, and she was found dead of an overdose. A great pity," Taoka observed, as if he were describing the demise of a neighbor's cat. "But there are more where she came from."

Nomuri just nodded with weary impassivity, remarking to himself that this was a side of the man he hadn't seen before. Kazuo was a fairly typical Japanese salaryman. He'd joined his company right out of college, starting off in a position little removed from clerkship. After serving five years, he'd been sent off to a business school, which in this country was the intellectual equivalent of Parris Island, with a touch of Buchenwald. There was just something outrageous about how this country operated. He expected that things would be different. It was a foreign land, after all, and every country was different, which was fundamentally a good thing. America was the proof of that. America essentially lived off the diversity that arrived at her shores, each ethnic community adding something to the national pot, creating an often boiling but always creative and lively national mix. But now he truly understood why people came to the U.S., especially people from this country.

Japan demanded much of its citizens—or more properly, its culture did. The boss was always right. A good employee was one who did as he was told. To advance you had to kiss a lot of ass, sing the company song, exercise like somebody in goddamned boot camp every morning, showing up an hour early to show how sincere you were. The amazing part was that anything creative happened here at all. Probably the best of them fought their way to the top despite all this, or perhaps were smart enough to disguise their inner feelings until they got to a position of real authority, but by the time they got there they must have accumulated enough inner rage to make Hitler look like a pansy. Along the way they bled those feelings off with drinking binges and sexual orgies of the sort he'd heard about in this very hot tub. The stories about jaunts to Thailand and Taiwan and most recently the Marianas were especially interesting, stuff that would have made his college chums at UCLA blush. Those things were all symptoms of a society that cultivated psychological repression, whose warm and gentle façade of good manners was like a dam holding back all manner of repressed rage and frustration. That dam occasionally leaked, mostly in an orderly, controlled way, but the strain on the dam was unchanging, and one result of that strain was a way of looking at others, especially *gaijin,* in a manner that insulted Nomuri's American-cultivated egalitarian outlook. It would not be long, he realized, before he started hating this place. That would be unhealthy and unprofessional, the CIA officer thought, remembering the

repeated lessons from the Farm: a good field spook identified closely with the culture he attacked. But he was sliding in the other direction, and the irony was that the deepest reason for his growing antipathy was that his roots sprang from this very country.

"You really want more like her?" Nomuri asked, eyes closed.

"Oh, yes. Fucking Americans will soon be our national sport." Taoka chuckled. "We had a fine time of it the past two days. And I was there to see it all happen," his voice concluded in awe. It had all paid off. Twenty years of toeing the line had brought its reward, to have been there in the War Room, listening to it all, following it all, seeing history written before his eyes. The salaryman had made his mark, and most importantly of all, he'd been noticed. By Yamata-san himself.

"So what great deeds have happened while I was performing my own, eh?" Nomuri asked, opening his eyes and giving off a leering smile.

"We just went to war with America, and we've won!" Taoka proclaimed.

"War? *Nan ja?* We accomplished a takeover of General Motors, did we?"

"A real war, my friend. We crippled their Pacific Fleet and the Marianas Islands are Japanese again."

"My friend, you cannot tolerate too much alcohol," Nomuri thought, really believing what he'd just said to the blowhard.

"I have not had a drink in four days!" Taoka protested. "What I told you is true!"

"Kazuo," Chet said patiently as though to a bright child, "you tell stories with a skill and style better than any man I have ever met. Your descriptions of women make my loins swell as though I were there myself." Nomuri smiled. "But you exaggerate."

"Not this time, my friend, truly," Taoka said, really wanting his friend to believe him, and so he started giving details.

Nomuri had no real military training. Most of his knowledge of such affairs came from reading books and watching movies. His instructions for operating in Japan had nothing to do with gathering information on the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, but rather with trade and foreign-affairs matters. But Kazuo Taoka *was* a fine storyteller, with a keen eye for detail, and it took only three minutes before Nomuri had to close his eyes again, a smile fixed on his lips. Both actions were the result of his training in Yorktown, Virginia, as was that of his memory, which struggled now to record every single word while another part of his consciousness wondered how the hell he was going to get the information out. His other reaction was one that Taoka could neither see nor hear, a quintessential Americanism,

spoken within the confines of the CIA officer's mind: *You mother-fuckers!*

"Okay, JUMPER is up and pretty much put together," Helen d'Agustino said. "JASMINE"—the code name for Anne Durling—"will be in another cabin. SecState and SecTreas are up and having their coffee. Arnie van Damm is probably in better shape than anybody aboard. Showtime. How about the fighters?"

"They'll join up in about twenty minutes. We went with the F-15s out of Otis. Better range, they'll follow us all the way down. I'm really being paranoid on that, ain't I?"

Daga's eyes gave off a coldly professional smile. "You know what I've always liked about you, Dr. Ryan?"

"What's that?"

"I don't have to explain security to you like I do with everybody else. You think just like I do." It was a lot for a Secret Service agent to say. "The President is waiting, sir." She led him down the stairs.

Ryan bumped into his wife on the way forward. Pretty as ever, she was not suffering from the previous night despite her husband's warning, and on seeing Jack she almost made a joke that it was he who'd had the prob—

"What's the matter?"

"Business, Cathy."

"Bad?"

Her husband just nodded and went forward, past a Secret Service agent and an armed Air Force security policeman. The two convertible couches had been made up. President Durling was sitting down in suit pants and white shirt. His tie and jacket were not in evidence at this time. A silver pot of coffee was on the low table. Ryan could see out the windows on both sides of the nose cabin. They were flying a thousand feet or so above fleecy cumulus clouds.

"I hear you've been up all night, Jack," Durling said.

"Since before Iceland, whenever that was, Mr. President," Ryan told him. He hadn't washed, hadn't shaved, and his hair probably looked like Cathy's after a long procedure under a surgical cap. Worse still was the look in his eyes as he prepared to deliver grimmer news than he'd ever spoken.

"You look like hell. What's the problem?"

"Mr. President, based on information received over the last few hours, I believe that the United States of America is at war with Japan."

"What you need is a good chief to run this for you," Jones observed.

"Ron, one more of those, and I'll toss you in the brig, okay? You've thrown enough weight around for one day," Mancuso replied in a weary voice. "Those people were under my command, remember?"

"Have I been that much of a jerk?"

"Yeah, Jonesy, you have." Chambers handled that answer. "Maybe Seaton needed to be brought up short once, but you overdid it big-time. And now we need solutions, not smartass bullshit."

Jones nodded but kept his own counsel. "Very well, sir. What assets do we have?"

"Best estimate, they have eighteen boats deployable. Two are in overhaul status and are probably unavailable for months at least," Chambers replied, doing the enemy first. "With *Charlotte* and *Asheville* out of the game, we have a total of seventeen. Four of those are in yard-overhaul and unavailable. Four more are in bobtail-refits alongside the pier here or in 'Dago. Another four are in the IO. Maybe we can shake those loose, maybe we can't. That leaves five. Three of those are with the carriers for the 'exercise,' one's right down below at the pier. The last one's at sea up in the Gulf of Alaska doing workups. That has a new CO—what, just three weeks since he relieved?"

"Correct." Mancuso nodded. "He's just learning the job."

"Jesus, the cupboard's *that* bare?" Jones was now regretting his comment on having a good chief around. The mighty United States Pacific Fleet, as recently as five years ago the most powerful naval force in the history of civilization, was now a frigate navy.

"Five of us, eighteen of them, and they're all spun-up to speed. They've been running ops for the last couple of months." Chambers looked at the wall chart and frowned. "That's one big fuckin' ocean, Jonesy." It was the way he added the last statement that worried the contractor.

"The four in refits?"

"That order's out. 'Expedite readiness for sea.' And that brings the number to nine, in a couple of weeks, if we're lucky."

"Mr. Chambers, sir?"

Chambers turned back. "Yeah, Petty Officer Jones?"

"Remember when we used to head up north, all alone, tracking four or five of the bad guys at once?"

The operations officer nodded soberly, almost nostalgically. His reply was quiet. "Long time ago, Jonesy. We're dealing with SSKs now, on their home turf and—"

"Did you trade your balls in to get that fourth stripe on your shoulder?" Chambers turned around in an instant rage.

"You listen to me, *boy,* I—" But Ron Jones just snarled back.

" 'I,' hell, *you,* used to be a kickass *officer!* I trusted you to know what to do with the data I gave you, just like I trusted him—" Jones pointed to Admiral Mancuso. "When I sailed with you guys, we were the class of the whole fuckin' world. And if you did your job right as a CO, and if *you*'ve been doing your job right as a type-commander, Bart, then those kids out there still are. Goddamn it! When I tossed my bag down the hatch on *Dallas* the first time, I trusted you guys to know your damned job. Was I wrong, gentlemen? Remember the motto on *Dallas?* 'First in Harm's Way'! What the hell's the matter here?" The question hung in the air for several seconds. Chambers was too angry to take it in. SubPac was not.

"We look that bad?" Mancuso asked.

"Sure as hell, sir. Okay, we took it in the ass from these bastards. Time to start thinking about catchup. We're the varsity, aren't we? Who's better suited to it than we are?"

"Jones, you always did have a big mouth," Chambers said. Then he looked back at the chart. "But I guess maybe it is time to go to work."

A chief petty officer stuck his head in the door. "Sir, *Pasadena* just checked in from down the hill. Ready in all respects to get under way, the CO requests orders."

"How's he loaded?" Mancuso replied, knowing that if he'd really done his job right over the past few days the question would have been unnecessary.

"Twenty-two ADCAPs, six Harpoons, and twelve T-LAM-Cs. They're all warshots," the chief replied. "He's ready to rock, sir."

ComSubPac nodded. "Tell him to stand by for mission orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Good skipper?" Jones asked.

"He got the Battle-E last year," Chamber said. "Tim Parry. He was my XO on *Key West*. He'll do."

"So now all he needs is a job."

Mancuso lifted the secure phone for CINCPAC. "Yeah."

"Signal from State Department," the Air Force communications officer said, entering the room. "The Japanese Ambassador requests an urgent meeting with the President."

"Brett?"

"We see what he has to say," SecState said. Ryan nodded agreement.

"Any chance at all that this is some kind of mistake?" Durling asked.

"We expect some hard intelligence anytime now from a satellite pass over the Marianas. It's dark there, but that won't matter much." Ryan had finished his briefing, and on completion the data he'd

managed to deliver seemed very thin. The baseline truth here was that what had evidently taken place was so wildly beyond the limits of reason that he himself would not be fully satisfied until he saw the overheads himself.

"If it's real, then what?"

"That will take a little time," Ryan admitted. "We want to hear what their ambassador has to say."

"What are they really up to?" Treasury Secretary Fiedler asked.

"Unknown, sir. Just pissing us off, it isn't worth the trouble. We have nukes. They don't. It's all crazy . . ." Ryan said quietly. "It doesn't make any sense at all." Then he remembered that in 1939, Germany's biggest trading partner had been . . . France. History's most often repeated lesson was that logic was not a constant in the behavior of nations. The study of history was not always bilateral. And the lessons learned from history depended on the quality of the student. Worth remembering, Jack thought, because the other guy might forget.

"It's got to be some kind of mistake," Hanson announced. "A couple of accidents. Maybe our two subs collided under the water and maybe we have some excitable people on Saipan. I mean it doesn't make any sense at all."

"I agree, the data does not form any clear picture, but the individual pieces—damn it, I *know* Robby Jackson. I *know* Bart Mancuso."

"Who's that?"

"ComSubPac. He owns all our subs out there. I sailed with him once. Jackson is deputy J-3, and we've been friends since we were both teaching at Annapolis." Lo, these many years ago.

"Okay," Durling said. "You've told us everything you know?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Every word, without any analysis."

"Meaning you don't really have any?" The question stung some, but this was not a time for embroidering. Ryan nodded.

"Correct, Mr. President."

"So for now, we wait. How long to Andrews?"

Fiedler looked out a window. "That's the Chesapeake Bay below us now. We can't be too far out."

"Press at the airport?" he asked Arnie van Damm.

"Just the ones in the back of the plane, sir."

"Ryan?"

"We firm up our information as fast as we can. The services are all on alert."

"What are those fighters doing out there?" Fiedler asked. They were now flying abeam Air Force One, in a tight two-ship element about a mile away, their pilots wondering what this was all about. Ryan wondered if the press would take note of it. Well, how long could this

affair remain a secret?

"My idea, Buzz," Ryan said. Might as well take responsibility for it.

"A little dramatic, don't you think?" SecState inquired.

"We didn't expect to have our fleet attacked either, sir."

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Colonel Evans. We're now approaching Andrews Air Force Base. We all hope you've enjoyed the flight. Please bring your seats back to the upright position and . . ." In the back, the junior White House aides ostentatiously refused to fasten their seat belts. The cabin crew did what they were supposed to do, of course.

Ryan felt the main gear thump down on runway Zero-One Right. For the majority of the people aboard, the press, it was the end. For him it was just the beginning. The first sign was the larger than normal complement of security police waiting at the terminal building, and some especially nervous Secret Service agents. In a way it was a relief to the National Security Advisor. Not everyone thought it was some sort of mistake, but it would be so much better, Ryan thought, if he were wrong, just this once. Otherwise they faced the most complex crisis in his country's history.

24

Running in Place

If there was a worse feeling than this one, Clark didn't know what it might be. Their mission in Japan was supposed to have been easy: evacuate an American citizen who had gotten herself into a tight spot and ascertain the possibility of reactivating an old and somewhat dusty intelligence network.

Well, that was the idea, the officer told himself, heading to his room. Chavez was parking the car. They'd decided to rent a new one, and again the clerk at the counter had changed his expression on learning that their credit card was printed in both Roman and Cyrillic characters. It was an experience so new as to have no precedent at all. Even at the height (or depths) of the Cold War, Russians had treated American citizens with greater deference than their own countrymen, and whether that had resulted from curiosity or not, the privilege of being American had been an important touchstone for a lonely stranger in a foreign and hostile land. Never had Clark felt so frightened, and it was little consolation that Ding Chavez didn't have the experience to realize just how unusual and dangerous their position was.

It was therefore something of a relief to feel the piece of tape on the underside doorknob. Maybe Nomuri could give him some useful information. Clark went in the room only long enough to use the bathroom before heading right back out. He saw Chavez in the lobby and made the appropriate gesture: *Stay put.* Clark noticed with a smile that his junior partner had stopped at a bookstore and purchased a copy of a Russian-language newspaper, which he carried ostentatiously as a kind of defensive measure. Two minutes later, Clark was looking in the window of the camera shop again. There wasn't much street traffic, but enough that he wasn't the only one around. As he stood looking at the latest automated wonder from Nikon, he felt someone bump into him.

"Watch where you're going," a gruff voice said in English and moved on. Clark took a few seconds before heading in the other direction, turning the corner and heading down an alley. A minute later he found a shadowy place and waited. Nomuri was there quickly.

"This is dangerous, kid."

"Why do you think I hit you with that signal?" Nomuri's voice was low and shaky.

It was fieldcraft from a TV series, about as realistic and professional as two kids sneaking a smoke in the boys' room of their junior high. The odd part was that, important as it was, Nomuri's message occupied about one minute. The rest of the time was concerned with procedural matters.

"Okay, number one, no contact at all with your normal rat-line. Even if they're allowed out on the street, you don't know them. You don't go near them. Your contact points are gone, kid, you understand?" Clark's mind was going at light-speed toward nowhere at the moment, but the most immediate priority was survival. You had to be alive in order to accomplish something, and Nomuri, like Chavez and himself, were "illegals," unlikely to receive any sort of clemency after arrest and totally separated from any support from their parent agency.

Chet Nomuri nodded. "That leaves you, sir."

"That's right, and if you lose us, you return to your cover and you don't do anything. Got that? Nothing at all. You're a loyal Japanese citizen, and you stay in your hole."

"But—"

"But nothing, kid. You are under my orders now, and if you violate them, you answer to me!" Clark softened his voice. "Your first priority is always survival. We don't issue suicide pills and we don't expect movie-type bullshit. A dead officer is a dumb officer." *Damn,* Clark thought, had the mission been different from the very beginning, they would have had a routine established—dead——drops, a whole collection of signals, a selection of cutouts—but there wasn't time to do that now, and every second they talked here in the shadows there was the chance that some Tokyoite would let his cat out, see a Japanese national talking to a gaijin, and make note of it. The paranoia curve had risen fast, and would only get steeper.

"Okay, you say so, man."

"And don't forget it. Stick to your regular routine. Don't change anything except maybe to back off some. Fit in. Act like everybody else does. A nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Hammers hurt, boy. Now, here's what I want you to do." Clark went on for a minute. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get lost." Clark headed down the alley, and entered his hotel through the delivery entrance, thankfully unwatched at this time of night. Thank God, he thought, that Tokyo had so little crime. The American equivalent would be locked, or have an alarm, or be

patrolled by an armed guard. Even at war, Tokyo was a safer place than Washington, D.C.

"Why don't you just buy a bottle instead of going out to drink?" "Chekov" asked, not for the first time, when he came back into the room.

"Maybe I should." Which reply made the younger officer's eyes jerk up from his paper and his Russian practice. Clark pointed to the TV, turned it on, and found CNN Headline News, in English.

Now for my next trick. How the hell do I get the word in? he wondered. He didn't dare use the fax machine to America. Even the Washington Interfax office was far too grave a risk, the one in Moscow didn't have the encryption gear needed, and he couldn't go through the Embassy's CIA connection either. There was one set of rules for operating in a friendly country, and another for a hostile one, and nobody had expected the rules that made the rules to change without warning. That he and other CIA officers should have provided forewarning of the event was just one more thing to anger the experienced spy; the congressional hearings on that one were sure to be entertaining if he lived long enough to enjoy them. The only good news was that he had the name of a probable suspect in the murder of Kimberly Norton. That, at least, gave him something to fantasize about, and his mind had little other useful activity to undertake at the moment. At the half-hour it was clear that even CNN didn't know what was going on, and if CNN didn't know, then nobody did. Wasn't that just great, Clark thought. It was like the legend of Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy who always knew what was happening, and who was always ignored. But Clark didn't even have a way of getting the word out . . . did he?

I wonder if . . . ? No. He shook his head. That was too crazy.

"All ahead full," the Commanding Officer of *Eisenhower* said.

"All ahead full, aye," the quartermaster on the enunciator pushed the handles forward. A moment later the inner arrow rotated to the same position. "Sir, engine room answers all ahead full."

"Very well." The CO looked over at Admiral Dubro. "Care to lay any bets, sir?"

The best information, oddly enough, came from sonar. Two of the battle group's escorts had their towed-array sonars, called "tails," streamed, and their data, combined with that of two nuclear submarines to the formation's starboard, indicated that the Indian formation was a good way off to the south. It was one of those odd instances, more common than one might expect, where sonar far outperformed radar, whose electronic waves were limited by the curve

of the earth, while sound waves found their own deep channels. The Indian fleet was over a hundred fifty miles away, and though that was spitting distance for jet attack aircraft, the Indians were looking to their south, not the north, and it further appeared that Admiral Chandraskatta didn't relish night-flight operations and the risks they entailed for his limited collection of Harriers. Well, both men thought, night landings on a carrier weren't exactly fun.

"Better than even," Admiral Dubro replied after a moment's analysis.

"I think you're right."

The formation was blacked out, not an unusual circumstance for warships, all its radars turned off, and the only radios in use were line-of-sight units with burst-transmission capability, which broadcast for hundredths of seconds only. Even satellite sets generated side-lobes that could betray their position, and their covert passage south of Sri Lanka was essential.

"World War Two was like this," the CO went on, giving voice to his nerves. They were depending on the most human of fundamentals. Extra lookouts had been posted, who used both regular binoculars and "night-eye" electronic devices to sweep the horizon for silhouettes and masttops, while others on lower decks looked closer in for the telltale "feather" of a submarine periscope. The Indians had two submarines out on which Dubro did not have even an approximate location. They were probably probing south, too, but if Chandraskatta was really as smart as he feared, he would have left one close in, just as insurance. Maybe. Dubro's deception operation had been a skillful one.

"Admiral?" Dubro's head turned. It was a signalman. "FLASH Traffic from CINCPAC." The petty officer handed over the clipboard and held a red-covered flashlight over the dispatch so that the battle-group commander could read it.

"Did you acknowledge receipt?" the Admiral asked before he started reading.

"No, sir, you left orders to chimp everything down."

"Very good, sailor." Dubro started reading. In a second he was holding both the clipboard and the flashlight. "Son of a bitch!"

Special Agent Robberton would drive Cathy home, and with that notification, Ryan again became a government functionary rather than a human being with a wife and family. It was a short walk to Marine One, its rotor already turning. President and Mrs. Durling, JUMPER and Jasmine, had done the requisite smiles for the cameras and had used the opportunity of the long flight to beg off answering any questions. Ryan trailed behind like some sort of equerry.

"Take an hour to get caught up," Durling said as the helicopter landed on the south lawn of the White House. "When is the Ambassador scheduled in?"

"Eleven-thirty," Brett Hanson replied.

"I want you, Arnie, and Jack there for the meeting."

"Yes, Mr. President," the Secretary of State acknowledged.

The usual photographers were there, but most of the White House reporters whose shouted questions so annoyed everyone were still back at Andrews collecting their bags. Inside the ground-floor entrance was a larger contingent of Secret Service agents than normal. Ryan headed west and was in his office two minutes later, shedding his coat and sitting down at a desk already decorated with call slips. Those he ignored for the moment, as he lifted the phone and dialed CIA.

"DDO, welcome back, Jack," Mary Pat Foley said. Ryan didn't bother asking how she knew it was him. Not that many had her direct line.

"How bad?"

"Our embassy personnel are safe. The embassy has not as yet been entered, and we're destroying everything." Station Tokyo, as all CIA stations had become in the last ten years, was completely electronic now. Destroying files was a question of seconds and left no telltale smoke. "Ought to be done by now." The procedure was straightforward. The various computer disks were erased, reformatted, erased again, then subjected to powerful hand-held magnets. The bad news was that some of the data was irreplaceable, though not so much so as the people who had generated it. There was now a total of three "illegals" in Tokyo, the net human-intelligence assets of the United States in what was—probably—an enemy country.

"What else?"

"They're letting people travel back and forth to their homes, with escort. Actually they're playing it pretty cool," Mrs. Foley said, her surprise not showing. "It's not like Teheran in '79, anyway. For communications they're letting us use satellite links so far, but those are being electronically monitored. The embassy has one STU-6 operating. The rest have been deactivated. We still have TAPDANCE capability, too," she finished, mentioning the random-pad cipher that all embassies now used through the National Security Agency's communications net.

"Other assets?" Ryan asked, hoping that his own secure line was not compromised, but using cover procedure even so.

"Without the legals they're pretty much cut off." The worry in her voice was clear with that answer, along with quite a bit of self-reproach. The Agency still had operations in quite a few countries that

did not absolutely require embassy personnel as part of the loop. But Japan wasn't one of them, and even Mary Pat couldn't make hindsight retroactive.

"Do they even know what's going on?" It was an astute question, the Deputy Director (Operations) thought, and another needle in her flesh.

"Unknown," Mrs. Foley admitted. "They didn't get any word to us. They either do not know or have been compromised." Which was a nicer way of saying arrested.

"Other stations?"

"Jack, we got caught with our knickers down, and that's a fact." For all the grief that it had to cause her, Ryan heard, she was reporting facts like a surgeon on the OR. What a shame that Congress would grill her unmercifully for the intelligence lapse. "I have people in Seoul and Beijing shaking the bushes, but I don't expect anything back from them for hours."

Ryan was rummaging through his pink call sheets. "I have one here, an hour old, from Golovko . . ."

"Hell, call the bastard," Mary Pat said at once. "Let me know what he says."

"Will do." Jack shook his head, remembering what the two men had talked about. "Get down here fast. Bring Ed. I need a gut call on something but not over the phone."

"Be there in thirty," Mrs. Foley said.

Jack spread out several faxes on his desk, and scanned them quickly. The Pentagon's operations people had been faster than the other agencies, but now DIA was checking in, quickly followed by State. The government was awake—nothing like gunfire to accomplish that, Jack thought wryly—but the data was mainly repetitive, different agencies learning the same thing at different times and reporting in as though it were new. He flipped through the call sheets again, and clearly the majority of them would say the same thing. His eyes came back to the one from the chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Jack lifted the phone and made the call, wondering which of the phones on Golovko's desk would ring. He took out a scratch pad, noting the time. The Signals Office would take note of the call, of course, and tape it. but he wanted to keep his own notes.

"Hello, Jack."

"Your private line, Sergey Nikolay'ch?"

"For an old friend, why not?" The Russian paused, ending the joviality for the day. "I presume you know."

"Oh, yeah." Ryan thought for a moment before going on. "We were caught by surprise," he admitted. Jack heard a very Russian grunt of

sympathy.

"So were we. Completely. Do you have any idea what the madmen are up to?" the RVS Chairman asked, his voice a mixture of anger and concern.

"No, I see nothing at the moment that makes any sense at all." And perhaps that was the most worrying part of all.

"What plans do you have?"

"Right now? None," Ryan said. "Their ambassador is due here in less than an hour."

"Splendid timing on his part," the Russian commented. "They've done this to you before, if memory serves."

"And to you," Ryan said, remembering how the Russo-Japanese War had begun. *They do like their surprises.*

"Yes, Ryan, and to us." And *that*, Jack knew, was why Sergey had made the call, and why his voice showed genuine concern. Fear of the unknown wasn't limited to children, after all, was it? "Can you tell me what sort of assets you have in place to deal with the crisis?"

"I'm not sure at the moment, Sergey," Ryan lied. "If your Washington *rezidentura* is up to speed, you know I just got in. I need time to get caught up. Mary Pat is on her way down to my office now."

"Ah," Jack heard over the line. Well, it was an obvious lie he'd told, and Sergey was a wise old pro, wise enough to know. "You were very foolish not to have activated THISTLE sooner, my friend."

"This is an open line, Sergey Nikolay'ch." Which was partially true. The phone call was routed through the American Embassy in Moscow on a secure circuit, but from there on it was a standard commercial line, probably, and therefore subject to possible bugging.

"You need not be overly concerned, Ivan Emmetovich. Do you recall our conversation in my office?"

Oh, yeah. Maybe the Russians really did have the Japanese counterintelligence chief under their control. If so, he was in a position to know if the phone call was secure or not. And if so, there were some other cards in his hand. Nice ones. Was he offering Ryan a peek?

Think fast, Jack, Ryan commanded himself. *Okay, the Russians have another network up and running . . .*

"Sergey, this is important: you did not have any warning?"

"Jack, on my honor as a spy"—Ryan could almost hear the twisted smile that must be framing the answer—"I just had to tell my President that I was caught with my fly unbuttoned, and the embarrassment to me is even greater than what—"

Jack didn't bother listening to the embroidery. *Okay.* The Russians *did* have another spy network operating in Japan, but they had

probably not received any warning either, had they? No, the danger from that sort of double-dealing was just too great. Next fact: their second network was inside the Japanese government itself; had to be if they had PSID penetrated. But THISTLE was mainly a *commercial* spy net—always had been—and Sergey had just told him that the U.S. had been foolish not to have activated it sooner. The novelty of what he knew distracted Jack from a more subtle implication surrounding the admission of fault from Moscow.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I'm short of time here. You are building to something. What is it?"

"I propose cooperation between us. I have the approval of President Grushavoy to make the offer." He didn't say *full* cooperation, Jack noted, but the offer was startling even so.

Never, not ever, not once except in bad movies had KGB and CIA really cooperated on anything important. Sure, the world had changed plenty, but KGB, even in its new incarnation, still worked to penetrate American institutions and remained good at it. That was why you didn't let them in. But he'd just made the offer anyway. Why?

The Russians are scared. Of what?

"I will present that to my President after consulting with Mary Pat." Ryan wasn't yet sure how he would present it. Golovko, however, knew the value of what he'd just laid on the American's desk. It would not require much insight to speculate on the probable reply.

Again, Ryan could hear the smile. "If Foleyeva does not agree, I will be most surprised. I will be in my office for a few more hours."

"So will I. Thanks, Sergey."

"Good day, Dr. Ryan."

"Well, that sounded interesting," Robby Jackson said in the doorway. "Looks like you had a long night, too."

"In an airplane, yet. Coffee?" Jack asked.

The Admiral shook his head. "One more cup and I might shake apart." He came in and sat down.

"Bad?"

"And getting worse. We're still trying to tally how many uniformed people we have in Japan—there are some transients. An hour ago a C-141 landed at Yakota and promptly went off the air. The goddamned thing just headed right in," Robby said. "Maybe a radio problem, more likely they didn't have the gas to go anywhere else. Flight crew of four, maybe five—I forget. State is trying to run a tally for how many businessmen are there. It ought to generate an approximate numbers, but there are tourists to consider also."

"Hostages." Ryan frowned.

The Admiral nodded. "Figure the ten thousand as a floor figure."

"The two subs?"

Jackson shook his head. “Dead, no survivors. *Stennis* has recovered her airplane and is heading for Pearl at about twelve knots. *Enterprise* is trying to make turns on one shaft, and is under tow, she’s making maybe six. Maybe none if the engine damage is as bad as the CO told us. They’ve sent a big salvage tug to help with that. We’ve sent some P-3s to Midway to do antisubmarine patrols. If I were the other side, I’d try to finish them off. *Johnnie Reb* ought to be okay, but *Big-E* is a hell of a ripe target. CINCPAC is worried about that. We’re out of the power-projection business, Jack.”

“Guam?”

“All the Marianas are off the air, except for one thing.” Jackson explained about Oreza. “All he tells us is how bad things are.”

“Recommendations?”

“I have people looking at some ideas, but for starters we need to know if the President wants us to try. Will he?” Robby asked.

“Their ambassador will be here soon.”

“Good of him. You didn’t answer my question, Dr. Ryan.”

“I don’t know the answer yet.”

“There’s a confidence-builder.”

For Captain Bud Sanchez the experience was unique. It was not quite a miracle that he’d recovered the S-3 Viking without incident. The “Hoover” was a docile aircraft floating in, and there had been a whole twenty knots of wind over the deck. Now his entire air wing was back aboard, and his aircraft carrier was running away.

Running away. Not heading into harm’s way, the creed of the United States Navy, but limping back to Pearl. The five squadrons of fighters and attack aircraft on the deck of *John Stennis* just sat there, lined up in neat rows on the flight deck, all ready for combat operations but except in a really dire emergency unable to take off. It was a question of wind and weight. Carriers turned into the wind to launch and recover aircraft, and needed the most powerful engines placed aboard ships to give the greatest possible airflow over the bow. The moving air added to the takeoff impulse generated by the steam catapults to give lift to the aircraft flung into the air. Their ability to take off was directly governed by that airflow, and more significantly from a tactical point of view, the magnitude of the airflow governed the weight they could carry aloft—which meant fuel and weapons. As it was, he could get airplanes off, but without the gas needed to stay aloft long or to hunt across the ocean for targets, and without the weapons needed to engage those targets. He judged that he had the ability to use fighters to defend the fleet against an air threat out to a radius of perhaps a hundred miles. But there was no air threat, and

though they knew the position of the retiring Japanese formations, he did not have the ability to reach them with his attack birds. But then, he didn't have orders to allow him to do it anyway.

Night at sea is supposed to be a beautiful thing, but it was not so this time. The stars and gibbous moon reflected off the calm surface of the ocean, making everyone nervous. There was easily enough light to spot the ships, blackout or not. The only really active aircraft of his wing were the antisubmarine helicopters whose blinking anticollision lights sparkled mainly forward of the carriers, aided also by those of some of *Johnnie Reb*'s escorts. The only good news was that the slow fleet speed made for excellent performance by the sonar systems on the destroyers and frigates, whose large-aperture arrays were streamed out in their wakes. Not too many. The majority of the escorts had lingered behind with *Enterprise*, circling her in two layers like bodyguards for a chief of state, while one of their number, an Aegis cruiser, tried to help her along with a towing wire, increasing her speed of advance to a whole six and a half knots at the moment. Without a good storm over the bow, *Big-E* could not conduct flight operations at all.

Submarines, historically the greatest threat to carriers, might be out there. Pearl Harbor said that they had no contacts at all in the vicinity of the now-divided battle force, but that was an easy thing to say from a shore base. The sonar operators, urged by nervous officers to miss nothing, were instead finding things that weren't there: eddies in the water, echoes of conversing fish, whatever. The nervous state of the formation was manifested by the way a frigate five miles out increased speed and turned sharply left, her sonar undoubtedly pinging away now, probably at nothing more than the excited imagination of a sonarman third-class who might or might not have heard a whale fart. Maybe two farts, Captain Sanchez thought. One of his own Seahawks was hovering low over the surface, dipping her sonar dome to do her own sniffing. *One thousand three hundred miles back to Pearl Harbor*, Sanchez thought. Twelve knots. That came to four and a half days. Every mile of it under the threat of submarine attack.

The other question was: what genius had thought that pulling back from the Western Pacific had been a good idea? Was the United States a global power or not? Projecting power around the world was important, wasn't it? Certainly it *had* been, Sanchez thought, remembering his classes at the War College. Newport had been his last "tour" prior to undertaking the position of Commander, Air Wing. The U.S. Navy had been the balance of power over the entire world for two generations, able to intimidate merely by existing, merely by letting people see the pictures in their updated copies of *Jane's Fighting Ships*. You could never know where those ships were. You could only

count the empty berths in the great naval bases and wonder. Well, there wouldn't be much wondering now. The two biggest graving docks at Pearl Harbor would be full for some time to come, and if the news of the Marianas was correct, America lacked the mobile firepower to take them back, even if Mike Dubro decided to act like Seventh Cavalry and race back home.

"Hello, Chris, thank you for coming."

The Ambassador would arrive at the White House in only a few minutes. The timing was impossible, but whoever in Tokyo was making decisions had not troubled himself with Nagumo's convenience, the embassy official knew. It was awkward for another reason as well. Ordinarily a city that took little note of foreigners, Washington would soon change, and now for the first time, Nagumo was gaijin.

"Seiji, what the hell happened out there?" Cook asked.

Both men belonged to the University Club, a plush establishment located next door to the Russian Embassy and, boasting one of the best gyms in town, a favored place for a good workout and a quick meal. A Japanese commercial business kept a suite of rooms there, and though they would not be able to use this rendezvous again, for the moment it did guarantee anonymity.

"What have they told you, Chris?"

"That one of your navy ships had a little accident. Jesus, Seiji, aren't things bad enough without that sort of mistake? Weren't the goddamned gas tanks bad enough?" Nagumo took a second before responding. In a way it was good news. The overall events were being kept somewhat secret, as he had predicted and the Ambassador had hoped. He was nervous now, though his demeanor didn't show it.

"Chris, it was not an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there was a battle of sorts. I mean that my country feels itself to be very threatened, and that we have taken certain defensive measures to protect ourselves."

Cook just didn't get it. Though he was part of the State Department's Japan specialists, he'd not yet been called in for a full briefing and knew only what he'd caught on his car radio, which was thin enough. It was beyond Chris's imagination, Nagumo saw, to consider that his country could be attacked. After all, the Soviets were gone, weren't they? It was gratifying to Seiji Nagumo. Though appalled at the risks that his country was running and ignorant of the reasons for them, he was a patriot. He loved his country as much as any man. He was also part of its culture. He had orders and

instructions. Within the confines of his own mind he could rage at them, but he'd decided, simply, that he was a soldier of his country, and that was that. And Cook was the real gaijin, not himself. He kept repeating it to himself.

"Chris, our countries are at war, after a fashion. You pushed us too far. Forgive me, I am not pleased by this, you must understand that."

"wait a minute." Chris Cook shook his head as his face twisted into a very quizzical expression. "You mean war? Real war?"

Nagumo nodded slowly, and spoke in a reasonable, regretful tone. "We have occupied the Mariana Islands. Fortunately this was accomplished without loss of life. The brief encounter between our two navies may have been more serious, but not greatly so. Both sides are now withdrawing away from one another, which is a good thing."

"You've killed our people?"

"Yes, I regret to say, some people may have lost their lives on both sides." Nagumo paused and looked down as though unable to meet his friend's eyes. He'd already seen there the emotions he'd expected. "Please, don't blame me for this, Chris," he went on quietly in a voice clearly under very tight control. "But these things have happened. I had no part in it. Nobody asked me for an opinion. You know what I would have said. You know what I would have counseled." Every word was true and Cook knew it.

"Christ, Seiji, what can we do?" The question was a manifestation of his friendship and support, and as such, very predictable. Also predictably, it gave Nagumo the opening he'd expected and needed.

"We have to find a way to keep things under control. I do not want my country destroyed again. We have to stop this and stop it quickly." Which was his country's objective and therefore his own. "There is no room in the world for this . . . this abomination. There are cooler heads in my country. Goto is a fool. There"—Nagumo threw up his hands—"I have said it. He is a fool. Do we allow our countries to do permanent damage to one another because of fools? What of your Congress, what of that Trent maniac with his Trade *Reform* Act. Look what his *reforms* have brought us to!" He was really into it now. Able to veil his inner feelings, like most diplomats, he was now discovering acting talents made all the more effective by the fact that he really believed in what he was saying. He looked up with tears in his eyes. "Chris, if people like us don't get this thing under control—my God, then what? The work of generations, gone. Your country and mine, both badly hurt, people dead, progress thrown away, and for what? Because fools in my country and yours could not work out difficulties on *trade?* Christopher, you must help me stop this. You must!" Mercenary and traitor or not, Christopher Cook was a diplomat, and his professional creed was to eliminate war. He had to respond, and

he did.

"But what can you really do?"

"Chris, you know that my position is really more senior than my post would indicate," Nagumo pointed out. "How else could I have done the things for you to make our friendship what it is?"

Cook nodded. He'd suspected as much.

"I have friends and influence in Tokyo. I need time. I need negotiating space. With those things I can soften our position, give Goto's political opponents something to work with. We have to put that man in the asylum he belongs in—or shoot him yourself. That maniac might destroy my country, Chris! For God's sake, you must help me stop him." The last statement was an entreaty from the heart.

"What the hell can I do, Seiji? I'm just a DASS, remember? A little Indian, and there's a bunch of chiefs."

"You are one of the few people in your State Department who really understand us. They will seek your counsel." A little flattery. Cook nodded.

"Probably. If they're smart," he added. "Scott Adler knows me. We talk."

"If you can tell me what your State Department wants, I can get that information to Tokyo. With luck I can have my people inside the Foreign Ministry propose it first. If we can accomplish that much, then your ideas will appear to be our ideas, and we can more easily accommodate your wishes." It was called *judo,* "the gentle art," and consisted mainly of using an enemy's strength and movements against himself. Nagumo thought he was making a very skillful use of it now. It had to appeal to Cook's vanity that he might be able to manage foreign policy himself through cleverness. It appealed to Nagumo's that he'd thought up this gambit.

Cook's face twisted into disbelief again. "But if we're at war, how the hell will—"

"Goto is not completely mad. We will keep the embassies open as a line of communication. We will offer you a return of the Marianas. I doubt the offer will be completely genuine, but it will be placed on the table as a sign of good faith. There," Seiji said, "I have now betrayed my country." As planned.

"What will be acceptable to your government as an end-game scenario?"

"In my opinion? Full independence for the Northern Marianas; an end to their commonwealth status. For reasons of geography and economics they will fall into our sphere of influence in any case. I think it is a fair compromise. We do own most of the land there," Nagumo reminded his guest. "That is a guess on my part, but a good one."

"What about Guam?"

"As long as it is demilitarized, it remains U.S. territory. Again a guess, but a good one. Time will be necessary for a full resolution of the various issues, but I think we can stop this war before it goes further."

"What if we do not agree?"

"Then many people will die. We are diplomats, Chris. It is our mission in life to prevent that." One more time: "If you can help me, just to let us know what you want us to do so that I can get our side moving in that direction, you and I can end a war, Chris. Please, can you help met?"

"I won't take money for this, Seiji," Cook said by way of a reply.

Amazing. The man had principles after all. So much the better that they were not accompanied by insight.

The Japanese Ambassador arrived, as instructed, at the East Wing entrance. A White House usher opened the door on the stretch Lexus, and the Marine at the door saluted, not having been told not to. He walked in alone, unaccompanied by a bodyguard, and he passed through the metal detectors without incident, then turned west, past a long corridor including, among other things, the entrance to the President's own movie theater. There were portraits of other presidents, sculptures by Frederic Remington, and other reminders of America's frontier history. The walk itself was intended to give the man a sense of the size of the country to which he represented his own. A trio of Secret Service agents escorted him up to the State Floor of the building, an area he knew well, then farther west to the wing from which the United States was administered. The looks, he saw, were not unfriendly, merely correct, but that was quite different from the cordiality he ordinarily received in this building. As a final touch, the meeting was held in the Roosevelt Room. It held the Nobel Prize won by Theodore for negotiating the end of the Russo-Japanese War.

If the mode of arrival was supposed to overawe him, the Ambassador thought, then the final act was counterproductive. The Americans, and others, were known for such foolish theatrics. The Indian Treaty Room in the adjacent Old Executive Office Building had been designed to overawe savages. This one reminded him of his country's first major conflict, which had raised Japan to the ranks of the great nations by the defeat of another member of that club, czarist Russia, a country far less great than she had appeared, internally corrupt, strewn with dissension, given to posturing and bluster. Much like America, in fact, the Ambassador thought. He needed such ideas right now to keep his knees from trembling. President Durling was

standing, and took his hand.

"Mr. Ambassador, you know everyone here. Please be seated."

"Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you for receiving me on such short and urgent notice." He looked around the conference table as Durling went to his seat at the opposite end, nodding to each of them. Brett Hanson, Secretary of State; Arnold van Damm, the Chief of Staff; John Ryan, National Security Advisor. The Secretary of Defense was also in the building, he knew, but not here. How interesting. The Ambassador had served many years in Washington, and knew much of Americans. There was anger in the faces of the men seated; though the President controlled his emotions admirably, just like the security people who stood at the doors, his look was that of a soldier. Hanson's anger was outrage. He could not believe that anyone would be so foolish as to threaten his country in any way—he was like a spoiled child resenting a failing grade on an exam from a fair and scrupulous teacher. Van Damm was a politician, and regarded him as a *gaijin*—a curious little man. Ryan showed the least anger of all, though it was there, indicated more in the way he held his pen than in the fixed stare of his blue cat's eyes. The Ambassador had never dealt with Ryan beyond a few chance encounters at state functions. The same was true of most of the embassy staff, and though his background was well known to all Washington insiders, Ryan was known to be a European specialist and therefore ignorant of Japan. That was good, the Ambassador thought. Were he more knowledgeable, he might be a dangerous enemy.

"Mr. Ambassador, you requested this meeting," Hanson said. "We will let you begin."

Ryan endured the opening statement. It was lengthy and prepared and predictable, what any country would say under these circumstances, added to which was a little national spice. It wasn't their fault; they'd been pushed, treated as lowly vassals despite years of faithful and productive friendship. They, too, regretted this situation. And so forth. It was just diplomatic embroidery, and Jack let his eyes do the work while his ears filtered out the noise.

More interesting was the demeanor of the speaker. Diplomats in friendly circumstances tended to the florid, and in hostile, they droned, as though embarrassed to speak their words. Not this time. The Japanese Ambassador showed overt strength that spoke of pride in his country and her actions. Not quite defiant, but not embarrassed either. Even the German ambassador who'd given word of Hitler's invasion to Molotov had shown grief, Jack remembered.

For his part, the President listened impassively, letting Arnie show the anger and Hanson show the shock, Jack saw. Good for him.

"Mr. Ambassador, war with the United States of America is not a

trivial thing," the Secretary of State said when the opening statement was concluded.

The Ambassador didn't flinch. "It is only a war if you wish it to be. We do not have the desire to destroy your country, but we do have our own security interests." He went on to state his country's position on the Marianas. They'd been Japanese territory before, and now they were again. His country had a right to its own defensive perimeter. And that, he said, was that.

"You do know," Hanson said, "that we have the ability to destroy your country?"

A nod. "Yes, I do. We well remember your use of nuclear weapons on our country."

Jack's eyes opened a little wider at that answer. On his pad he wrote, *nukes?*

"You have something else to say," Durling observed, entering the conversation.

"Mr. President—my country also has nuclear arms."

"Delivered how?" Arnie asked with a snort. Ryan blessed him silently for the question. There were times when an ass had his place.

"My country has a number of nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles. Your own people have seen the assembly plant. You can check with NASA if you wish." The Ambassador read off the name and the dates in a very matter-of-fact way, noting that Ryan took them down like a good functionary. The room became so quiet that he could hear the scratching of the man's pen. More interesting still were the looks on the other faces.

"Do you threaten us?" Durling asked quietly.

The Ambassador looked straight into the man's eyes, twenty feet away. "No, Mr. President, I do not. I merely state a fact. I say again, this is a war only if you wish it so. Yes, we know you can destroy us if you wish, and we cannot destroy you, though we can cause you great harm. Over what, Mr. President? A few small islands that are historically our possessions anyway? They have been Japanese in all but name for years now."

"And the people you killed?" van Damm asked.

"I regret that sincerely. We will of course offer compensation to the families. It is our hope that we can conclude matters. We will not disturb your embassy or its personnel, and we hope that you will grant us the same courtesy, to maintain communications between our governments. Is it so hard," he asked, "to think of us as equals? Why did you feel the need to hurt us? There was a time when a single airplane crash, due to a mistake made by your people at Boeing, killed more of my citizens than the number of American lives lost in the Pacific. Did we scream at you? Did we threaten your economic

security, your very national survival? No. We did not. The time has come for my country to take her place in the world. You've withdrawn from the Western Pacific. We must now look to our own defenses. To do that we need what we need. How can we be sure that, having crippled our nation in economic terms, you will not at some later time seek to destroy us physically?"

"We would never do that!" Hanson objected.

"Easily said, Mr. Secretary. You did it once before, and as you yourself just pointed out, you retain that ability."

"We didn't start that war," van Damm pointed out.

"You did not?" the Ambassador asked. "By cutting off our oil and trade, you faced us with ruin, and a war resulted. Just last month you threw our economy into chaos, and you expected us to do nothing—because we had not the ability to defend ourselves. Well, we do have that ability," the Ambassador said. "Perhaps now we can treat as equals.

"So far as my government is concerned, the conflict is over. We will take no further action against Americans. Your citizens are welcome in my country. We will amend our trade practices to accommodate your laws. This entire incident could be presented to your public as an unfortunate accident, and we can reach an agreement between ourselves on the Marianas. We stand ready to negotiate a settlement that will serve the needs of your country and of mine. That is the position of my government." With that, the Ambassador opened his portfolio and extracted the "note" which the rules of international behavior required. He rose and handed it to the Secretary of State.

"If you require my presence, I stand at your service. Good day." He walked back to the door, past the National Security Advisor, who didn't follow the Ambassador with his eyes as the others did. Ryan had said nothing at all. That might have been disturbing in a Japanese, but not in an American, really. He'd simply had nothing to say. Well, he was a European specialist, wasn't he?

The door closed and Ryan waited another few seconds before speaking.

"Well, that was interesting," Ryan observed, checking his page of notes. "He only told us one thing of real importance."

"What do you mean?" Hanson demanded.

"Nuclear weapons and the delivery systems. The rest was embroidery, really meant for a different audience. We still don't know what they're really doing."

25

All the king's Horses

It hadn't made the media yet, but that was about to change. The FBI was already looking for Chuck Searls. They already knew that it wouldn't be easy, and the truth of the matter is that all they could do, on the basis of what they had, was to question him. The six programmers who'd worked to some greater or lesser extent on the Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 program had all been interviewed, and all of them denied knowledge of what they all referred to as the "Easter Egg," in every case with a mixture of outrage at what had been done and admiration at how. Only three widely separated lines of code, and it had taken all six of them working together twenty-seven hours to find it. Then had come the really bad news: all six of them, plus Searls, had had access to the raw program. They were, after all, the six senior programmers at the firm, and like people with identical security clearances, each could access it whenever he or she wished, up to the very moment that it left the office on the toaster-disk. In addition, while there were records of access, each of them also had the ability to fiddle the coding on the master computer and either erase the access-time reference or mix it with the others. For that matter, the Easter Egg could have been in there for the months it had taken to perfect the program, so finely crafted it was. Finally, one of them admitted quite freely, any of them could have done it. There were no fingerprints on computer programs. Of greater importance for the moment, there was no way of undoing what Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 had done.

What it had done was sufficiently ghastly that the FBI agents on the case were joking grimly that the advent of sealed thermopane windows in Wall Street office buildings was probably saving thousands of lives. The last identifiable trade had been put up at 12:00:00, and beginning at 12:00:01, all the records were gobbledygook. Literally billions—in fact, hundreds of billions of dollars in transactions had disappeared, lost in the computer-tape records of the Depository Trust Company.

The word had not yet gotten out. The event was still a secret, a tactic first suggested by the senior executives of DTC, and so far

approved by both the governors of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the New York Stock Exchange. They'd had to explain the reasons for it to the FBI. In addition to all the money lost in a crash such as had taken place on Friday, there would also have been quite a bit of money made through "puts," the name for derivative trades used by many brokers as hedges, and a means that allowed profit on a *falling* market. In addition, every house kept its own records of trades, and therefore, theoretically, it was possible over time to reconstruct everything that had been erased by the Easter Egg. But if word of the DTC disaster got out, it was possible that unscrupulous or merely desperate traders would fiddle their own records. It was unlikely in the case of the larger houses, but virtually inevitable in the case of smaller ones, and such manipulation would be nearly impossible to prove—a classic case of one person's word against another's, the worst sort of criminal evidence. Even the biggest and most honorable trading houses had their miscreants, either real or potential. There was just too much money involved, further complicated by the ethical duty of traders to safeguard the money of their clients.

For that reason, over two hundred agents had visited the offices and homes of the chief executive officers of every trading establishment within a hundred-mile radius of New York. It was a feat easier than most had feared, since many of the executives were using their weekend as a frantic work period, and in most cases they cooperated, turning over their own computerized records. It was estimated that 80 percent of the trades that had taken place after noon Friday were now in the possession of federal authorities. That was the easy part. The hard part, the agents had just learned, would be to analyze them, to connect the trade made by every house with the corresponding trade of every other. As irony would have it, a programmer from Searls' company had, without prompting, sketched out the minimum requirements for the task: a high-end workstation for every company-set of records, integrated through yet another powerful mainframe no smaller than a Cray Y-MP (there was one at CIA, and three more at NSA, he told them), along with a very slick custom program. There were thousands of traders and institutions, some of whom had executed millions of transactions. The permutations, he'd said to the two agents who were able to keep up with his fast-forward discourse, were probably on the order of ten to the sixteenth power . . . maybe eighteenth. The latter number, he'd had to explain, was a million cubed, a million times a million *times* a million. A very large number. Oh, one other thing: they'd better be damned sure that they had the records of every house and every trade or the whole thing could fall apart. Time required to resolve all the trades? He'd been unwilling to

speculate on that, which didn't please the agents who had to return to their office in the Javits Federal Office Building and explain all this to their boss, who refused even to use his office computer to type letters. The term *Mission: IMPOSSIBLE* came to their minds on the short drive back to their offices.

And yet it had to be done. It wasn't just a matter of stock trades, after all. Each transaction had also held a monetary value, real money that had changed electronic hands, moving from one account to another, and though electronic, the complex flow of money had to be accounted for. Until all of the transactions were resolved, the amount of money in the account of every trading house, every institution, every bank, and ultimately every private citizen in America—even those who did not play the market—could not be known. In addition to paralyzing Wall Street, the entire American banking system was now frozen in place, a conclusion that had been reached about the time that Air Force One had touched down at Andrews Air Force Base.

"Oh, shit," commented the Deputy Director in Charge of the New York Field Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In this he was more articulate than investigators from other federal agencies who were using his northwest-corner office as a conference room. The others mainly just looked at the cheap carpet on the floor and gulped.

The situation had to get worse, and it did. One of the DTC employees told the tale to a neighbor, an attorney, who told someone else, a reporter, who made a few phone calls and drafted a story for *The New York Times*. That flagship paper called the Secretary of the Treasury who, just back from Moscow and not yet briefed on the magnitude of the situation, declined to comment but forgot to ask the *Times* to demur. Before he could correct that mistake, the story was set up to run.

Secretary of the Treasury Bosley Fiedler practically ran through the tunnel connecting the Treasury Building with the White House. Not a man accustomed to strenuous exercise, he was puffing hard when he made it into the Roosevelt Room, just missing the departure of the Japanese Ambassador.

"What is it, Buzz?" President Durling asked.

Fiedler caught his breath and gave a five-minute summary of what he'd just learned via teleconference with New York. "We can't let the markets open," he concluded. "I mean, they *can't* open. Nobody can trade. Nobody knows how much money they have. Nobody knows who owns what. And the banks . . . Mr. President, we have a major problem here. Nothing even remotely like this has ever happened before."

"Buzz, it's just money, right?" Arnie van Damm asked, wondering why it all had to happen in one day after what had been a rather pleasant few months.

"No, it's not just money." Heads turned because Ryan was the one who answered the question. "It's confidence. Buzz here wrote a book about that back when I was working for Merrill Lynch." Perhaps a friendly reference would steady the man down some, he thought.

"Thank you, Jack." Fiedler sat down and sipped a glass of water. "Use the 1929 crash as an example. What was really lost? The answer in monetary terms is, nothing. A lot of investors lost their shirts, and margin calls made it all worse, but what people don't often grasp is that the money they lost was money already given to others."

"I don't understand," Arnie said.

"Nobody really does. It's one of those things that's too simple. In the market people expect complexity, and they forget the forest is made up of individual trees. Every investor who lost money first *gave* his money to another trader, in return for which he received a stock certificate. He traded money for something of value, but that something of value fell, and that's what the crash was. *But* the first guy, the guy who gave the certificate and got the money *before the crash*—notionally he did the smart thing, he didn't lose anything, did he? Therefore the amount of money out in the economy in 1929 *did not change at all.*"

"Money doesn't just evaporate, Arnie," Ryan explained. "It goes from one place to another place. It doesn't just go away. The Federal Reserve Bank controls that." It was clear, however, that van Damm didn't understand.

"But then, why the *hell* did the Great Depression happen?"

"Confidence," Fiedler replied. "A huge number of people really got slammed in '29 because of margin calls. They bought stock while putting up an amount less than the value of the transaction. Today we call that sort of thing leveraging. Then they were unable to cover their exposure when they had to sell off. The banks and other institutions took a huge beating because they had to cover the margins. You ended up with a lot of little people who were left with nothing but debts they couldn't begin to pay back, and banks who were cash-short. Under those circumstances people stop doing things. They're *afraid* to risk what they have left. The people who got out in time and still have money—the ones who have not actually been hurt—they see what the rest of the economy is like and do nothing also, they just sit tight because it simply looks scary out there. *That*'s the problem, Arnie.

"You see, what makes an economy isn't wealth, but the *use* of wealth, all the transactions that occur every day, from the kid who cuts your grass for a buck to a major corporate acquisition. If that

stops, everything stops." Ryan nodded approval to Fiedler. It was a superb little lecture.

"I'm still not sure I get it," the chief of staff said. The President was still listening.

My turn. Ryan shook his head. "Not many people get it. Like Buzz said, it's too simple. You look for activity, not inactivity, as an indication of a trend, but inactivity is the real danger here. If I decide to sit still and do nothing, then my money doesn't circulate. I don't buy things, and the people who make the things I would have bought are out of work. That's a frightening thing to them, and to their neighbors. The neighbors get so scared that they hold on to their money—why spend it when they might need it to eat when they lose *their* jobs, right? And on, and on, and on. We have a real problem here, guys," Jack concluded. "Monday morning the bankers are going to find out that they don't know what they have, either. The banking crisis didn't really start until 1932, well after the stock market came unglued. Not this time."

"How bad?" The President asked this question.

"I don't know," Fiedler replied. "It's never happened before."

" 'I don't know' doesn't cut it, Buzz," Durling said.

"Would you prefer a lie?" the Secretary of the Treasury asked. "We need the chairman of the Fed in here. We're facing a lot of problems. The first big one is a liquidity crisis of unprecedented proportions."

"Not to mention a shooting war," Ryan pointed out for those who might have forgotten.

"Which is the more serious?" President Durling asked.

Ryan thought about it for a second. "In terms of real net harm to our country? We have two submarines sunk, figure about two hundred fifty sailors dead. Two carriers crippled. They can be fixed. The Marianas are under new ownership. Those are all bad things," Jack said in a measured voice, thinking as he spoke. "But they do not genuinely affect our national security because they do not pertain to the real strength of our country. America is a shared idea. We're people who think in a certain way, who believe that they can do the things they want to do. Everything else follows from that. It's confidence, optimism, the one thing that other countries find so strange about us. If you take that away, hell, we're no different from anybody else. The short answer to your question, Mr. President, is that the economic problem is far more dangerous to us than what the Japs just did."

"You surprise me, Jack," Durling said.

"Sir, like Buzz said, would you prefer a lie?"

“What the hell is the problem?” Ron Jones asked. The sun was already up, and USS *Pasadena* was visible, still tied to her pier, the national ensign hanging forlornly in the still air. A fighting ship of the United States Navy was doing nothing at all, and the son of his mentor was dead at the hands of an enemy. Why wasn’t anyone doing something about it?

“She doesn’t have orders,” Mancuso said, “because I don’t have orders, because CINCPAC doesn’t have orders, because National Command Authority hasn’t issued any orders.”

“They awake there?”

“SecDef’s supposed to be in the White House now. The President’s been briefed in by now, probably,” ComSubPac thought.

“But he can’t get his thumb out,” Jones observed.

“He’s the President, Ron. We do what he says.”

“Yeah, like Johnson sent my dad to Vietnam.” Jones turned to look at the wall chart. By the end of the day the Japanese surface ships would be out of range for the carriers, which couldn’t launch strikes anyway. USS *Gary* had concluded her search for survivors, mainly out of fear of lingering Japanese submarines out there, but for all the world looking as though she’d been chased off the site by a Coast Guard cutter. The intelligence they did have was based on satellite information because it hadn’t been thought prudent even to send a P-3C out to shadow the surface force, much less prosecute the submarine contacts. “First out of harm’s way, eh?”

Mancuso decided not to get angry this time. He was a flag officer and paid to think like one. “One thing at a time. Our most important assets at risk are those two carriers. We have to get ‘em in, and we have to get ’em fixed. Wally is planning operations right now. We have to gather intelligence, think it over, and then decide what we can do.”

“And then see if he’ll let us?”

Mancuso nodded. “That’s how the system works.”

“Great.”

The dawn was pleasing indeed. Sitting on the upper deck of the 747, Yamata had taken a window seat on the portside, looking out the window and ignoring the buzz of conversation around him. He had scarcely slept in three days and still the rush of power and elation filled him like a flood. This was the last prescheduled flight in. Mainly administrative personnel, along with some engineers and civilians who would start to put the new government in place. The bureaucrats with that task had been fairly clever in their way. Of course, everyone on Saipan would have a vote, and the elections would be subject to

international scrutiny, a political necessity. There were about twenty-nine thousand local citizens, but that didn't count Japanese, many of whom now owned land, homes, and business enterprises. Nor did it count soldiers, and others staying in hotels. The hotels—the largest were Japanese-owned, of course—would be considered condominiums, and all those in the condo units, residents. As Japanese citizens they each had a vote. The soldiers were citizens as well, and also had the franchise, and since their garrison status was indeterminate, they were also considered residents. Between the soldiers and the civilians, there were thirty-one thousand Japanese on the island, and when elections were held, well, his countrymen were assiduous in making use of their civil rights, weren't they? *International scrutiny,* he thought, staring out to the east, *be damned.*

It was especially pleasing to watch from thirty-seven thousand feet the first muted glow on the horizon, which seemed much like a garnish for a bouquet of still-visible stars. The glow brightened and expanded, from purple to deep red, to pink, to orange, and then the first sliver of the face of the sun, not yet visible on the black sea below, and it was as though the sunrise were for him alone, Yamata thought, long before the lower people got to enjoy and savor it. The aircraft turned slightly to the right, beginning its descent. The downward path through the early-morning air was perfectly timed, seeming to hold the sun in place all the way down, just the yellow-white sliver, preserving the magical moment for several minutes. The sheer glory moved Yamata nearly to tears. He still remembered the faces of his parents, their modest home on Saipan. His father had been a minor and not terribly prosperous merchant, mainly selling trinkets and notions to the soldiers who garrisoned the island. His father had always been very polite to them, Raizo remembered, smiling, bowing, accepting their rough jokes about his polio-shriveled leg. The boy who had watched thought it normal to be deferential to men carrying arms, wearing his nation's uniform. He'd learned different since, of course. They were merely servants. Whether they carried on the samurai tradition or not—the very word *samurai* was a derivation of the verb "to serve," he reminded himself, clearly implying a master, no?—it was they who looked after and protected their betters, and it was their betters who hired them and paid them and told them what to do. It was necessary to treat them with greater respect than they really deserved, but the odd thing was that the higher they went in rank, the better they understood what their place really was.

"We will touch down in five minutes," a colonel told him.

"Dozo." A nod rather than a bow, because he was sitting down, but even so the nod was a measured one, precisely of the sort to acknowledge the service of an underling, showing him both politeness

and superiority in the same pleasant gesture. In time, if this colonel was a good one and gained general's rank, then the nod would change, and if he proceeded further, then someday, if he were lucky, Yamata-san might call his given name in friendship, single him out for a smile and a joke, invite him for a drink, and in his advancement to high command, learn who the master really was. The Colonel probably looked forward to achieving that goal. Yamata buckled his seat belt and smoothed his hair.

Captain Sato was exhausted. He'd just spent far too much time in the air, not merely breaking but shredding the crew-rest rules of his airline, but he, too, could not turn away from his duty. He looked off to the left and saw in the morning sky the blinking strokes of two fighters, probably F-15s, one of them, perhaps, flown by his son, circling to protect the soil of what was once again their country. *Gently,* he told himself. There were soldiers of his country under his care, and they deserved the best. One hand on the throttles, the other on the wheel, he guided the Boeing airliner down an invisible line in the air toward a point his eyes had already selected. On his command to the copilot, the huge flaps went down all the way. Sato eased back on the yoke, bringing up the nose and flaring the aircraft, letting it settle, floating it in until only the screech of rubber told them that they were on the ground.

"You are a poet," the copilot said, once more impressed by the man's skill.

Sato allowed himself a smile as he engaged reverse-thrust. "You taxi in." Then he keyed the cabin intercom.

"Welcome to Japan," he told the passengers.

Yamata didn't shout only because the remark surprised him so. He didn't wait for the aircraft to stop before he unbuckled. The door to the flight deck was right there, and he had to say something.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Yamatat-san?"

"You understand, don't you?"

His nod was that of a proud professional, and in that moment one very much akin to the zaibatsu. "*Hai.*" His reward was a bow of the finest sincerity, and it warmed the pilot's heart to see Yamata-san's respect.

The businessman was not in a hurry, not now. The bureaucrats and administrative soldiers worked their way off the aircraft into waiting buses that would take them to the Hotel Nikko Saipan, a large modern establishment located in the center of the island's west coast, which would be the temporary administrative headquarters for the occupa— for the new government, Yamata corrected himself. It took five minutes for all of them to deplane, after which he made his own way

off to another Toyota Land Cruiser whose driver, this time, was one of his employees who knew what to do without being told, and knew that this was a moment for Yamata to savor in silence.

He scarcely noticed the activity. Though he'd caused it to happen, it was less important than its anticipation had been. Oh, perhaps a brief smile at the sight of the military vehicles, but the fatigue was real now, and his eyes drooped despite an iron will that commanded them to be bright and wide. The driver had planned the route with care, and managed to avoid the major tie-ups. Soon they passed the Marianas Country Club again, and though the sun was up, there were no golfers in evidence. There was no military presence either except for two satellite uplink trucks on the edge of the parking lot, newly painted green after having been appropriated from NHK. No, we mustn't harm the golf course, now without a doubt the most expensive single piece of real estate on the island.

It was right about here, Yamata thought, remembering the shape of the hills. His father's rude little store had been close to the north airfield, and he could remember the A6M Type-Zero fighters, the strutting aviators, and the often overbearing soldiers. Over there had been the sugarcane processing plant of Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha, and he could remember stealing small bits of the cane and chewing on them. And how fair the breezy mornings had been. Soon they were on his land. Yamata shook off the cobwebs by force of will and stepped out of the car, walking north now.

It was the way his father and mother and brother and sister must have come, and he imagined he could see his father, hobbling on his crippled leg, struggling for the dignity that his childhood disease had always denied him. Had he served the soldiers in those last days, bringing them what useful things he had? Had the soldiers in those last days set aside their crude insults at his physical condition and thanked him with the sincerity of men for whom death was now something seen and felt in its approach? Yamata chose to believe both. And they would have come down this draw, their retreat toward death protected by the last rear-guard action of soldiers in their last moment of perfection.

It was called Banzai Cliff by the locals, Suicide Cliff by the less racist. Yamata would have to have his public-relations people work on changing the name to something more respectful. July 9, 1944, the day organized resistance ended. The day the Americans had declared the island of Saipan "secure."

There were actually two cliffs, curved and facing inward as though a theater; the taller of them was two hundred forty meters above the surface of the beckoning sea. There were marble columns to mark the spot, built years earlier by Japanese students, shaped to represent

children kneeling in prayer. It would have been here that they'd approached the edge, holding hands. He could remember his father's strong hands. Would his brother and sister have been afraid? Probably more disoriented than fearful, he thought, after twenty-one days of noise and horror and incomprehension. Mother would have looked at father. A warm, short, round woman whose jolly musical laugh rang again in her son's ears. The soldiers had occasionally been gruff with his father, but never with her. And never with the children. And the last service the soldiers had rendered had been to keep the Americans away from them at that final moment, when they'd stepped off the cliff. Holding hands, Yamata chose to believe, each holding a child in a final loving embrace, proudly refusing to accept captivity at the hands of barbarians, and orphaning their other son. Yamata could close his eyes and see it all, and for the first time the memory and the imagined sight made his body shudder with emotion. He'd never allowed himself anything more than rage before, all the times he'd come here over the years, but now he could truly let the emotions out and weep with pride, for he had repaid his debt of honor to those who had given him birth, and his debt of honor to those who had done them to death. In full.

The driver watched, not knowing but understanding, for he knew the history of this place, and he too was moved to tears as a shaking man of sixty-odd years clapped his hands to call the attention of sleeping relatives. From a hundred meters away, he saw the man's shoulders rack with sobs, and after a time, Yamata lay down on his side, in his business suit, and went to sleep. Perhaps he would dream of them. Perhaps the spirits of whoever it was, the driver thought, would visit him in his sleep and say what things he needed to hear. But the real surprise, the driver thought, was that the old bastard had a soul at all. Perhaps he'd misjudged his boss.

"Damn if they ain't organized," Oreza said to himself, looking through his binoculars, the cheap ones he kept in the house.

The living-room window afforded a view of the airports, and the kitchen gave one of the harbor. *Orchid Ace* was long gone, and another car ferry had taken her berth, *Century Highway No. 5,* her name was, and this one was unloading jeep-type vehicles and trucks. Portagee was fairly strung-out, having forced himself to stay up all night. He'd now done twenty-seven hours without sleep, some of them spent working hard on the ocean west of the island. He was too old for that sort of thing, the master chief knew. Burroughs, younger and smarter, had curled up on the living-room rug and was snoring away.

Oreza wished for a cigarette for the first time in years. They were

good for staying alert. You just needed them at a time like this. They were what a warrior used—at least that's what the World War II movies proclaimed. But this wasn't World War II, and he wasn't a warrior. For all he'd done in his over thirty years in the United States Coast Guard, he'd never fired a shot in anger, even on his one Vietnam tour. Someone else had always been on the gun. He didn't know *how* to fight.

"Up all night?" Isabel asked, dressed for her job. It was Monday on this side of the International Dateline, and a workday. She looked down and saw that the pad of note paper usually kept next to the phone was covered with scribbles and numbers. "Does it matter?"

"I don't know, Izz."

"Want some breakfast?"

"It can't hurt," Pete Burroughs said, stretching as he came into the kitchen. "I think I conked out around three." A moment's consideration. "I feel like . . . hell," he said, in deference to the lady in the room.

"Well, I have to be at my desk in an hour or so," Mrs. Oreza observed, pulling open the refrigerator. Breakfast in this house consisted of a selection of cold cereals and skim milk, Burroughs saw, along with toast made of the bread baked from straw. Toss in a little fruit, he thought, and he could have been back in San Jose. The coffee he could already smell. He found a cup and poured some.

"Somebody really knows how to do this right."

"It's Manni," Isabel said.

Oreza smiled for the first time in hours. "I learned it from my first chief. The right blend, the right proportions, and a pinch of salt."

Probably in the dark of the moon and after sacrificing a goat, Burroughs thought. If so, however, the goat had died for a noble cause. He took a long sip and came over to check Oreza's tally sheet.

"That many?"

"Could be conservative. It's two flying hours from here to Japan. That's four on the round-trip. Let's be generous and say ninety minutes on the ground at each end. Seven-hour cycle. Three and a half trips per airplane per day. Each flight about three hundred, maybe three-fifty soldiers per hop. That means every plane brings in a thousand men. Fifteen airplanes operating over one day, that means a whole division of troops. You suppose the Japs have more than fifteen 747s?" Portagee asked. "Like I said, conservative. Now it's just a matter of bringing their mobile equipment in."

"How many ships for that?"

Another frown. "Not sure. During the Persian Gulf War—I was over there then doing port-security work . . . damn. Depends on what ships you use and how you pack them. I'll be conservative again. Twenty

large merchant hulls just to ferry in the gear. Trucks, jeeps, all kinds of stuff you'd never think of. It's like moving a cityful of people. They need to resupply fuel. This rock doesn't grow enough food; that has to come in by ship, too, and the population of this place just doubled. The water supply might be stretched." Oreza looked down and made a notation on that. "Anyway, they came to stay. That's for damned sure," he said, heading for the table and his Special K, wishing for three eggs up, bacon, white-bread toast with butter, hashbrowns, and all the cholesterol that went with it. Damn turning fifty!

"What about me?" the engineer asked. "I seen you pass for a local. I sure as hell can't."

"Pete, you're my charter, and I'm the captain, okay? I am responsible for your safety. That's the law of the sea, air."

"We're not at sea anymore," Burroughs pointed out.

Oreza was annoyed by the truth of the observation. "My daughter's the lawyer. I try to keep things simple. Eat your breakfast. I need some sleep, and you have to take over the forenoon watch."

"What about me?" Mrs. Oreza asked.

"If you don't show up for work—"

"—somebody will wonder why."

"It'll be nice to know if they told the truth about the cops who got shot," her husband went on. "I've been up all night, Izz. I haven't heard a single shot. Every crossroads seems to be manned, but they're not doing anything to anybody." He paused. "I don't like it either, honey. One way or another we have to deal with it."

"Did you do it, Ed?" Durling asked bluntly, his eyes boring in on his Vice President. He cursed the man for forcing him to deal with one more problem among the multiple crises hanging over his presidency now. But the *Post* piece gave him no choice.

"Why are you hanging me out to dry? Why didn't you at least *warn* me of this?"

The President waved around the Oval Office. "There are a lot of things you can do in here and there are things you can't do. One of them is to interfere with a criminal investination."

"Don't give me that! A lot of people have—"

"Yeah, and they all paid a price for it, too." *It's not my ass that needs to be covered,* Roger Durling didn't say. *I'm not risking mine for yours*. "You didn't answer my question."

"Look, Roger!" Ed Kealty snarled back. The President stopped him with a raised hand and a quiet voice.

"Ed, I have an economy in meltdown. I have dead sailors in the Pacific Ocean. I can't spare the energy for this. I can't spare the

political capital. I can't spare the time. Answer my question," Durling commanded.

The Vice President flushed, his head snapping to the right before he spoke. "All right, I like women. I've never hidden that from anyone. My wife and I have an understanding." His head came back. "But I have *never, NEVER* molested, assaulted, raped, or forced myself on anybody in my whole fucking life. Never. I don't *have* to."

"Lisa Beringer?" Durling said, consulting his notes for the name.

"She was a sweet thing, very bright, very sincere, and she begged me to—well, you can guess. I explained to her that I couldn't. I was up for reelection that year, and besides she was too young. She deserved somebody her age to marry and give her kids and a good life. She took it hard, started drinking—maybe something else, but I don't think so. Anyway, one night she headed off on the Beltway and lost it, Roger. I was there for the funeral. I still talk with her parents. Well," Kealty said, "not lately, I guess."

"She left a note, a letter behind."

"More than one." Kealty reached into his coat pocket and handed two envelopes over. "I'm surprised nobody noticed the date on the one the FBI has. Ten days before her death. This one is a week later, and this one is the day she was killed. My staff found them. I suppose Barbara Linders found the other one. None were ever mailed. I think you'll find some differences between them, all three, as a matter of fact."

"The Linders girl says that you—"

"Drugged her?" Kealty shook his head. "You know about my drinking problem, you knew it when you asked me in. Yeah, I'm an alcoholic, but I had my last drink two years ago." A crooked smile. "My sex life is even better now. Back to Barbara. She was sick that day, the flu. She went to the pharmacy on the Hill and got a prescription, and—"

"How do you know that?"

"Maybe I keep a diary. Maybe I just have a good memory. Either way, I know the date this happened. Maybe one of my staffers checked the records of the pharmacy, and maybe the medication she took had a label on the bottle, one that says don't drink while using these capsules. I didn't know that, Roger. When I have a cold—well, back then, anyway, I used brandy. Hell," Kealty admitted, "I used booze for a lot of things. So I gave some to her, and she became very cooperative. A little too cooperative, I suppose, but I was half in the bag myself, and I figured it was just my well-known charm."

"So what are you telling me? You're not guilty?"

"You want to say I'm an alley cat, can't keep it zipped? Yeah, I guess so. I've been to priests, to doctors, to a clinic once—covering

that up was some task. Finally I went to the head of neuroscience at Harvard Medical School. They think there's a part of the brain that regulates our drives, just a theory, but a good one. It goes along with hyperactivity. I was a hyperactive child. I still don't ever sleep more than six hours a night. Roger, I am all those things, but I am not a rapist."

So there it was, Durling thought. Not a lawyer himself, he had appointed, consulted, and heard enough of them to know what he'd been told. Kealty could defend himself on two grounds: that the evidence against him was more equivocal than the investigators imagined, and that it wasn't really his fault. The President wondered which of the defenses might be true. Neither? One? Both?

"So what are you going to do?" he asked the Vice President, using much the same voice he'd summoned a few hours earlier for the Ambassador from Japan. He was increasingly sympathetic with the man sitting across from him, in spite of himself. What if the guy really was telling the truth? How could he know—and that was what the jury would say, after all, if it got that far; and if a jury would think that, then what would the Judiciary hearings be like? Kealty still had a lot of markers out on the Hill.

"Somehow I just don't think anyone's going to print up DURLING/KEALTY bumper stickers this summer, right?" The question came with a smile of sorts.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," the President confirmed, cold again. This wasn't a time for humor.

"I don't want to hurt you, Roger. I did two days ago. If you'd warned me, I could have told you these things sooner, saved everybody a lot of time and trouble. Including Barbara. I lost track of her. She's very good on civil-rights stuff, a good head on her, and a good heart. It was only that one time, you know. And she stayed in my office afterwards," Kealty pointed out.

"We've covered that, Ed. Tell me what you want."

"I'll go. I'll resign. I don't get prosecuted."

"Not good enough," Durling said in a neutral voice.

"Oh, I'll admit my weaknesses. I'll apologize to you, honorable public servant that you are, for any harm I might have done to your presidency. My lawyers will meet with their lawyers, and we'll negotiate compensation. I leave public life."

"And if that's not good enough?"

"It will be," Kealty said confidently. "I can't be tried in a court until the constitutional issues are resolved. Months, Roger. All the way to summer, probably, maybe all the way to the convention. You can't afford that. I figure the worst-case scenario for you is, the Judiciary Committee sends the bill of impeachment to the floor of the House,

but the House doesn't pass it, or maybe does, narrowly, and then the Senate trial ends up with a hung jury, so to speak. Do you have any idea how many favors I've done there, and in the Senate?" Kealty shook his head. "It's not worth the political risk to you, and it distracts you and Congress from the business of government. You need all the time you have. Hell, you need more than that." Kealty stood and headed toward the door to the President's right, the one that was so perfectly blended into the curved, eggshell-white walls and gold trim. He spoke his final words without turning. "Anyway, it's up to you now."

It angered President Roger Durling that, in the end, the easy way out might be the just way out, as well—but nobody would ever know. They would only know that his final action was politically expedient in a moment of history that demanded political expediency. An economy potentially in ruins, a war just started—he didn't have the time to fool with this. A young woman had died. Others claimed to have been molested. But what if the dead young girl had died for other reasons, and what if the others—*Goddamn it,* he swore in his mind. That was something for a jury to decide. But it had to pass through three separate legal procedures before a jury could decide, and then any defense lawyer with half a brain could say that a fair trial was impossible anyway after C-SPAN had done its level best to tell the whole world every bit of evidence, tainting everything, and denying Kealty his constitutional right to a fair and impartial trial before disinterested jurors. That ruling was likely enough in a Federal district court trial, and even more so on appeal—and would gain the victims nothing. And what if the bastard actually was, technically speaking, innocent of a crime? An open zipper, distasteful though it was, did not constitute a crime.

And neither he nor the country needed the distraction. Roger Durling buzzed his secretary.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Get me the Attorney General."

He'd been wrong, Durling thought. Sure, he could interfere with a criminal investigation. He had to. And it was easy. Damn.

26

Catch-up

"He really said that?" Ed Foley leaned forward. It was easier for Mary Pat to grasp it than for her husband.

"Sure enough, and it's all on his honor as a spy," Jack confirmed, quoting the Russian's words.

"I always did like his sense of humor," the DDO said, getting her first laugh of the day, and probably the last. "He's studied us so hard that he's more American than Russian."

Oh, Jack thought, *that's it*. That explained Ed. The opposite was true of him. A Soviet specialist for nearly all of his career, he was more Russian than American. The realization occasioned his own smile.

"Thoughts?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"Jack, it gives them the ID of the only three humint assets we have on the ground over there. Bad joss, man," Edward Foley said.

"That's a consideration," Mary Patricia Foley agreed. "But there's another consideration. Those three assets are cut off. Unless we can communicate with them, they might as well not be there. Jack, how serious is this situation?"

"We are for all practical purposes at war, MP." Jack had already relayed the gist of the meeting with the Ambassador, including his parting comment.

She nodded. "Okay, they're giving a war. Are we going to come?"

"I don't know," Ryan admitted. "We have dead people out there. We have U.S. territory with another flag flying over it right now. But our ability to respond effectively is severely compromised—and we have this little problem at home. Tomorrow the markets and the banking system are going to have to come to terms with some very unpleasant realities."

"Interesting coincidence," Ed noted. He was too old a hand in the intelligence business to believe in coincidences. "What's going to happen with that stuff, Jack? You know a lot about it."

"I don't have a clue, guys. It's going to be bad, but how bad, and how it's going to be bad . . . nobody's been here before. I suppose the good news is that things can't fall further. The bad news is the mentality that goes with the situation will be like a person trapped in

a burning building. You may be safe where you are, but you can't get out, either."

"What agencies are looking into things?" Ed Foley asked.

"Just about all of them. The Bureau's the lead agency. It has the most available investigators. The SEC is better suited to it, but they don't have the troops for something this big."

"Jack, in a period of less than twenty-four hours, somebody leaked the news on the Vice President"—he was in the Oval Office right now, they all knew—"the market went in the crapper, and we had the attack on Pacific Fleet, and you just told us the most harmful thing to us is this economic thing. If I were you, sir—"

"I see your point," Ryan said, cutting Ed off a moment too soon for a complete picture. He made a few notes, wondering how the hell he'd be able to prove anything, as complex as the market situation was. "Is anybody that smart?"

"Lots of smart people in the world, Jack. Not all of them like us." It was very much like talking with Sergey Nikolay'ch, Ryan thought, and like Golovko, Ed Foley was an experienced pro for whom paranoia was always a way of life and often a tangible reality. "But we have something immediate to consider here."

"These are three good officers," Mary Pat said, taking the ball from her husband. "Nomuri's been doing a fine job sliding himself into their society, taking his time, developing a good network of contacts. Clark and Chavez are as good a team of operators as we have. They have good cover identities and they ought to be pretty safe."

"Except for one thing," Jack added.

"What's that?" Ed Foley asked, cutting his wife off.

"The PSID knows they're working."

"Golovko?" Mary Pat asked. Jack nodded soberly. "That son of a bitch," she went on. "You know, they still are the best in the world." Which was not an altogether pleasant admission from the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"Don't tell me they have the head of Japanese counterintel under their control?" her husband inquired delicately.

"Why not, honey? They do it to everybody else." Which was true. "You know, sometimes I think we ought to hire some of their people just to give lessons." She paused for a second. "We don't have a choice."

"Sergey didn't actually come out and say that, but I don't know how else he could have known. No," Jack agreed with the DDO, "we don't really have any choice at all."

Even Ed saw that now, which was not the same as liking it. "What's the *quid* on this one?"

"They want everything we get out of THISTLE. They're a little

concerned about this situation. They were caught by surprise, too, Sergey tells me."

"But they have another network operating there. He told you that, too," MP observed. "And it has to be a good one, too."

"Giving them the 'take' from THISTLE in return for not being hassled is one thing—and a pretty big thing. This goes too far. Did you think this one all the way through, Jack? It means that they'll actually be running our people for us." Ed didn't like that one at all, but on a moment's additional consideration, it was plain that he didn't see an alternative either.

"Interesting circumstances, but Sergey says he was caught with his drawers down. Go figure." Ryan shrugged, wondering yet again how it was possible for three of the best-informed intelligence professionals in his country *not* to be able to understand what was going on.

"A lie on his part?" Ed wondered. "On the face of it, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

"Neither does lying," Mary Pat said. "Oh, I love these *matryoshka* puzzles. Okay, at least we know there are things we don't know yet. That means we have a lot of things to find out, the quicker the better. If we let RVS run our people . . . it's risky, Jack, but—damn, I don't see that we have a choice."

"I tell him yes?" Jack asked. He had to get the President's approval, too, but that would be easier than getting theirs.

The Foleys traded a look and nodded.

An oceangoing commercial tug was located by a helicopter fifty miles from the *Enterprise* formation, and in a remarkable set of circumstances, the frigate Gary took custody of the barge and dispatched the tug to the carrier, where she could relieve the Aegis cruiser, and, by the way, increase *Big-E*'s speed of advance to nine knots. The tug's skipper contemplated the magnitude of the fee he'd garner under the Lloyd's Open Form salvage contract, which the carrier's CO had signed and ferried back by helicopter. The typical court award was 10 to 15 percent of the value of the property salved. A carrier, an air wing, and six thousand people, the tugboat crew thought. What was 10 percent of three billion dollars? Maybe they'd be generous and settle for five.

It was a mixture of the simple and the complex, as always. There were now P-3C Orion patrol aircraft operating out of Midway to support the retreating battle force. It had taken a full day to reactivate the facilities at the midocean atoll, possible only because there was a team of ornithologists there studying the goonies. The Orions were in turn supported by C-130s of the Hawaiian Air National Guard.

However it had happened, the admiral who still flew his flag on the crippled aircraft carrier could look at a radar picture with four antisubmarine aircraft arrayed around his fleet and start to feel a little safer. His outer ring of escorts were hammering the ocean with their active sonars, and, after an initial period of near panic, finding nothing much to worry about. He'd make Pearl Harbor by Friday evening, and maybe with a little wind could get his aircraft off, further safeguarding them.

The crew was smiling now, Admiral Sato could see, as he headed down the passageway. Only two days before, they'd been embarrassed and shamed by the "mistake" their ship had made. But not now. He'd gone by ship's helicopter to all four of the Kongos personally to deliver the briefings. Two days away from the Marianas, they now knew what they had accomplished. Or at least part of it. The submarine incidents were still guarded information, and for the moment they knew that they had avenged a great wrong to their country, done so in a very clever way, allowing Japan to reclaim land that was historically hers—and without, they thought, taking lives in the process. The initial reaction had been shock. Going to war with America? The Admiral had explained that, no, it was not really a war unless the Americans chose to make an issue of it, which he thought unlikely, but also something, he warned them, for which they had to be prepared. The formation was spread out now, three thousand meters between ships, racing west at maximum sustainable speed. That was using up fuel at a dangerous rate, but there would be a tanker at Guam to refuel them, and Sato wanted to be under his own ASW umbrella as soon as possible. Once at Guam he could consider future operations. The first one had been successful. With luck there would not have to be a second, but if there were, he had many things to consider.

"Contacts?" the Admiral asked, entering the Combat Information Center.

"Everything in the air is squawking commercial," the air-warfare officer replied.

"Military aircraft all carry transponders," Sato reminded him. "And they all work the same way."

"Nothing is approaching us." The formation was on a course deliberately offset from normal commercial air corridors, and on looking at the billboard display, the Admiral could see that traffic was in all those corridors. True, a military-surveillance aircraft could see them from some of the commercial tracks, but the Americans had satellites that were just as good. His intelligence estimates had so far

proved accurate. The only threat that really concerned him was from submarines, and that one was manageable. Submarine-launched Harpoon or Tomahawk missiles were a danger with which he was prepared to deal. Each of the destroyers had her SPY-ID radar up and operating, scanning the surface. Every fire-control director was manned. Any inbound cruise missile would be detected and engaged, first by his American-made (and Japanese-improved) SM-2MR missiles, and behind those weapons were CIWS gatling-gun point-defense systems. They would stop most of the inbound "vampires," the generic term for cruise missiles. A submarine *could* close and engage with torpedoes, and one of the larger warheads could kill any ship in his formation. But they would hear the torpedo coming in, and his ASW helicopters would do their very best to pounce on the attacking sub, deny her the chance to continue the engagement, and just maybe kill her. The Americans didn't have all that many submarines, and their commanders would be correspondingly cautious, especially if he managed to add a third kill to the two already accomplished.

What would the Americans do? Well, what *could* they do now? he asked himself. It was a question he'd asked himself again and again, and he always had the same answer. They'd drawn down too much. They depended on their ability to deter, forgetting that deterrence hinged on the perceived ability to take action if deterrence failed: the same old equation of *don't-want-to* but *can*. Unfortunately for them, the Americans had leaned too much on the former and neglected the latter, and by all the rules Sato knew, by the time they *could* again, their adversary would be able to stop them. The overall strategic plan he'd helped to execute was not new at all—just better-executed than it had been the first time, he thought, standing close to the triple billboard display and watching the radar symbols of commercial aircraft march along their defined pathways, their very action proclaiming that the world was resuming its normal shape without so much as a blip.

The hard part always seemed to come after the decisions were made, Ryan knew. It wasn't making them that wore on the soul so much as having to live with them. Had he done the right things? There was no measure except hindsight, and that always came too late. Worse, hindsight was always negative because you rarely looked back to reconsider things that had gone right. At a certain level, things stopped being clear-cut. You weighed options, and you weighed the factors, but very often you knew that no matter which way you jumped, somebody would be hurt. In those cases the idea was to hurt the least number of people or things, but even then real people were

hurt who would otherwise not be hurt at all, and you were choosing, really, whose lives would be injured—or lost—like a disinterested god-figure from mythology. It was worse still if you knew some of the players, because they had faces your mind could see and voices it could hear. The ability to make such decisions was called moral courage by those who didn't have to do it, and stress by those who did.

And yet he had to do it. He'd undertaken this job in the knowledge that such moments would come. He'd placed Clark and Chavez at risk before in the East African desert, and he vaguely remembered worrying about that, but the mission had come off and after *that* it had seemed like trick-or-treat on Halloween, a wonderfully clever little game played by nation against nation. The fact that a real human being in the person of Mohammed Abdul Corp had lost his life as a result—well, it was easy to say, now, that he'd deserved his fate. Ryan had allowed himself to file that entire memory away in some locked drawer, to be dredged out years later should he ever succumb to the urge to write memoirs. But now the memory was back, removed from the files by the necessity to put the lives of real men at risk again. Jack locked his confidential papers away before heading toward the Oval Office.

"Off to see the boss," he told a Secret Service agent in the north-south corridor.

"SWORDSMAN heading to JUMPER," the agent said into his microphone, for to those who protected everyone in what to them was known as the House, they were as much symbols as men, designations, really, for what their functions were.

But I'm not a symbol, Jack wanted to tell him. *I'm a* man, *with doubts.* He passed four more agents on the way, and saw how they looked at him, the trust and respect, how they *expected* him to know what to do, what to tell the Boss, as though he were somehow greater than they, and only Ryan knew that he wasn't. He'd been foolish enough to accept a job with greater responsibilities than theirs, that's all, greater than he'd ever wanted.

"Not fun, is it?" Durling said when he entered the office.

"Not much." Jack took his seat.

The President read his advisor's face and mind at the same time, and smiled. "Let's see. I'm supposed to tell you to relax, and you're supposed to tell me the same thing, right?"

"Hard to make a correct decision if you're overstressed," Ryan agreed.

"Yeah, except for one thing. If you're not stressed, then it isn't much of a decision, and it's handled at a lower level. The hard ones come here. A lot of people have commented on that," the President said. It

was a remarkably generous observation, Jack realized, for it voluntarily took some of the burden off his shoulders by reminding him that he did, after all, merely *advise* the President. There was greatness in the man at the ancient oak desk. Jack wondered how difficult a burden it was to bear, and if its discovery had come as a surprise—or merely, perhaps, as just one more necessity with which one had to deal.

"Okay, what is it?"

"I need your permission for something." Ryan explained the Golovko offers—the first made in Moscow, and the second only a few hours earlier—and their implications.

"Does this give us a larger picture?" Durling asked.

"Possibly, but we don't have enough to go with."

"And?"

"A decision of this type always goes up to your level," Ryan told him.

"Why do I have to—"

"Sir, it reveals both the identity of intelligence officers and methods of operation. I suppose technically it doesn't have to be your decision, but it is something you should know about."

"You recommend approval." Durling didn't have to ask.

"Yes, sir."

"We can trust the Russians?"

"I didn't say *trust*, Mr. President. What we have here is a confluence of needs and abilities, with a little potential blackmail on the side."

"Run with it," the President said without much in the way of consideration. Perhaps it was a measure of his trust in Ryan, thus returning the burden of responsibility back to his visitor. Durling paused for a few seconds before posing his next question. "What are they up to, Jack?"

"The Japanese? On the face of it, this makes no objective sense at all. What I keep coming back to is, why kill the submarines? Why kill *people?* It just doesn't seem necessary to have crossed that threshold."

"Why do this to their most important trading partner?" Durling added, making the most obvious observation. "We haven't had a chance to think it through, have we?"

Ryan shook his head. "Things have certainly piled up on us. We don't even know the things we don't know yet."

The President cocked his head to the side. "What?"

Jack smiled a little. "That's something my wife likes to say about medicine. You have to know the things you don't know. You have to figure out what the questions are before you can start looking for answers."

"How do we do that?"

"Mary Pat has people out asking questions. We go over all the data we have. We try to infer things from what we know, look for connections. You can tell a lot from what the other guy is trying to do and how he's going about it. My biggest one now, why did they kill the two subs?" Ryan looked past the President, out the window to the Washington Monument, that fixed, firm obelisk of white marble. "They did it in a way that they think will allow us a way out. We can claim it was a collision or something—"

"Do they really expect that we'll just accept the deaths and—"

"They offered us the chance. Maybe they don't expect it, but it's a possibility." Ryan was quiet for perhaps thirty seconds. "No. No, they couldn't misread us that badly."

"Keep thinking out loud," Durling commanded.

"We've cut our fleet too far back—"

"I don't need to hear that now," was the answer, an edge on it.

Ryan nodded and held a hand up. "Too late to worry why or how, I know that. But the important thing is, they know it, too. Everybody knows what we have and don't have, and with the right kind of knowledge and training, you can infer what we can do. Then you structure your operations on a combination of what you can do, and what he can do about it."

"Makes sense. Okay, go on."

"With the demise of the Russian threat, the submarine force is essentially out of business. That's because a submarine is only good for two things, really. Tactically, submarines are good for killing other subs. But strategically, submarines are limited. They cannot control the sea in the same way as surface ships do. They can't project power. They can't ferry troops or goods from one place to another, and that's what sea control really means." Jack snapped his fingers. "But they *can* deny the sea to others, and Japan is an island-nation. So they're afraid of sea-denial." Or, Jack added in his own mind, maybe they just did what they could do. They crippled the carriers because they could not easily do more. Or could they? Damn, it was still too complicated.

"So we could strangle them with submarines?" Durling asked.

"Maybe. We did it once before. We're down to just a few, though, and that makes their countersub task a lot easier. But their ultimate trump against such a move on our part is their nuclear capacity. They counter a strategic threat to them with a strategic threat to us, a dimension they didn't have in 1941. There's something missing, sir." Ryan shook his head, still looking at the monument through the thick, bullet-resistant windows. "There's something big we don't know."

"The why?"

"The why may be it. First I want to know the *what*. What do they want? *What* is their end-game objective?"

"Not why they're doing it?"

Ryan turned his head back to meet the President's eyes. "Sir, the decision to start a war is almost never rational. World War One, kicked off by some fool killing some other fool, events were skillfully manipulated by Leopold something-or-other, 'Poldi,' they called him, the Austrian Foreign Minister. Skilled manipulator, but he didn't factor in the simple fact that his country lacked the power to achieve what he wanted. Germany and Austria-Hungary started the war. They both lost. World War Two, Japan and Germany took on the whole world, never occurred to them that the rest of the world might be stronger. Particularly true of Japan." Ryan went on. "They never really had a plan to defeat us. Hold on that for a moment. The Civil War, started by the South. The South lost. The Franco-Prussian War, started by France. France lost. Almost every war since the Industrial Revolution was initiated by the side which ultimately lost. Q.E.D., going to war is not a rational act. Therefore, the thinking behind it, the *why* isn't necessarily important, because it is probably erroneous to begin with."

"I never thought of that, Jack."

Ryan shrugged. "Some things are too obvious, like Buzz Fiedler said earlier today."

"But if the *why* is not important, then the *what* isn't either, is it?"

"Yes, it is, because if you can discern the objective, if you can figure out what they want, then you can deny it to them. That's how you start to defeat an enemy. And, you know, the other guy gets so interested in what he wants, so fixed on how important it is, that he starts forgetting that somebody else might try to keep him from getting it."

"Like a criminal thinking about hitting a liquor store?" Durling asked, both amused and impressed by Ryan's discourse.

"War is the ultimate criminal act, an armed robbery writ large. And it's always about greed. It's always a nation that wants something another nation has. And you defeat that nation by recognizing what it wants and denying it to them. The seeds of their defeat are usually found in the seeds of their desire."

"Japan, World War Two?"

"They wanted a real empire. Essentially they wanted exactly what the Brits had. They just started a century or two too late. They never planned to defeat us, merely to—" He stopped suddenly, an idea forming. "Merely to achieve their goals and force us to acquiesce. Jesus," Ryan breathed. "That's it! It's the same thing all over again. The same methodology. The same objective?" he wondered aloud.

It's there, the National Security Advisor told himself. *It's all right there.*

If you can find it. If you can find it all.

"But we have a first objective of our own," the President pointed out.

"I know."

George Winston supposed that, like an old fire horse, he had to respond to the bells. His wife and children still in Colorado, he was over Ohio now, sitting in the back of his Gulfstream, looking down at the crab-shape of city lights. Probably Cincinnati, though he hadn't asked the drivers about their route into Newark.

His motivation was partially personal. His own fortune had suffered badly in the events of the previous Friday, drawn down by hundreds of millions. The nature of the event, and the way his money was spread around various institutions, had guaranteed a huge loss, since he'd been vulnerable to every variety of programmed trading system. But it wasn't about money. Okay, he told himself, so I lost two hundred mill'. I have lots more where that came from. It was the damage to the entire system, and above all the damage done to the Columbus Group. His baby had taken a huge hit, and like a father returning to the side of his married daughter in time of crisis, he knew that it would always be his. I *should have been there,* Winston told himself. *I could have seen it and stopped it. At least I could have protected my investors.* The full effects weren't in yet, but it was so bad as to be almost beyond comprehension. Winston had to do something, had to offer his expertise and counsel. Those investors were still his people.

It was an easy ride into Newark. The Gulfstream touched down smoothly and taxied off to the general-aviation terminal, where a car was waiting, and one of his senior former employees. He wasn't wearing a tie, which was unusual for the Wharton School graduate.

Mark Gant hadn't slept in fifty hours, and he leaned against the car for stability because the very earth seemed to move under him, to the accompaniment of a headache best measured on the Richter Scale. For all that, he was glad to be here. If anyone could figure this mess out, it was his former boss. As soon as the private jet stopped, he walked over to stand at the foot of the stairs.

"How bad?" was the first thing George Winston said. There was warmth between the two men, but business came first.

"We don't know yet," Gant replied, leading him to the car.

"Don't know?" The explanation had to wait until they got inside. Gant handed over the first section of the *Times* without comment.

"Is this for real?" A speed-reader, Winston scanned across the opening two columns, turning back to page 21 to finish a story framed by lingerie ads.

Gant's next revelation was that the manager Raizo Yamata had left behind was gone. "He flew back to Japan Friday night. He said to urge Yamata-san to come to New York to help stabilize the situation. Or maybe he wanted to gut himself open in front of his boss. Who the fuck knows?"

"So who the hell's in charge, Mark?"

"Nobody," Gant answered. "Just like everything else here."

"Goddamn it, Mark, *somebody* has to be giving the orders!"

"We don't have any instructions," the executive replied. "I've called the guy. He's not at the office—hey, I left messages, tried his house, Yamata's house, everybody's friggin' house, everybody's friggin' office. Zip-o, George. Everybody's running for cover. Hell, for all I know the dumb fuck took a header off the biggest building in town."

"Okay, I need an office and all the data you have," Winston said.

"*What* data?" Gant demanded. "We don't have shit. The whole system went down, remember?"

"You have the records of our trades, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, I have our tapes—a copy, anyway," Gant corrected himself. "The FBI took the originals."

A brilliant technician, Gant's first love had always been mathematics. Give Mark Gant the right instructions and he could work the market like a skilled cardsharp with a new deck of Bicycles. But like most of the people on the Street, he needed someone else to tell him what the job was. Well, every man had some limitations, and on the plus side of the ledger, Gant was smart, honest, and he knew what his limitations were. He knew when to ask for help. That last quality put him in the top 3 or 4 percent.

So he must have gone to Yamata and his man for guidance . . .

"When all this was going down, what instructions did you have?"

"Instructions?" Gant rubbed his unshaven face and shook his head. "Hell, we busted our ass to stay ahead of it. If DTC gets its shit together, we'll come out with most of our ass intact. I laid a mega-put on GM and made a real killing on gold stocks, and—"

"That's not what I mean."

"He said to run with it. He got us out of the bank stocks in one big hurry, thank God. Damn if he didn't see that one coming first. We were pretty well placed before it all went down. If it hadn't been for all the panic calls—I mean, Jesus, George, it finally happened, y'know? One-eight-hundred-R-U-N. Jesus, if people had just kept their heads." A sigh. "But they didn't, and now, with the DTC fuckup . . . George, I don't know what's going to be opening up tomorrow, man. If this is true, if they can rebuild the house by tomorrow morning, hey, man, I don't know. I just don't," Gant said as they entered the Lincoln Tunnel.

The whole story of Wall Street in one exhausted paragraph, Winston told himself, looking at the glossy tile that made up the interior of the tunnel. Just like the tunnel, in fact. You could see forward and you could see behind, but you couldn't see crap to the sides. You couldn't see outside the limited perspective.

And you had to.

"Mark, I'm still a director of the firm."

"Yes, so?"

"And so are you," Winston pointed out.

"I know that, but—"

"The two of us can call a board meeting. Start making calls," George Winston ordered. "As soon as we're out of this damned hole in the ground."

"For when?" Gant asked.

"For *now*, goddamn it!" Winston swore. "Those who're out of town, I'll send my jet for."

"Most of the guys are in the office." Which was the only good news he'd heard since Friday afternoon, George thought, nodding for his former employee to go on. "I suppose most everyone else is closed."

They cleared the tunnel about then. Winston pulled the cellular phone from its holder and handed it over.

"Start calling." Winston wondered if Gant knew what he was going to request at the meeting. Probably not. A good man in a tunnel, he had never outgrown his limitations.

Why the hell did I ever leave? Winston demanded of himself. It just wasn't safe to leave the American economy in the hands of people who didn't know how it worked.

"Well, that worked," Admiral Dubro said. Fleet speed slowed to twenty knots. They were now two hundred miles due east of Dondra Head. They needed more sea room, but getting this far was success enough. The two carriers angled apart, their respective formations dividing and forming protective rings around the centerpieces, *Abraham Lincoln* and *Dwight D. Eisenhower.* In another hour the formations would be outside of visual contact, and that was good, but the speed run had depleted bunkers, and that was very bad. The nuclear-powered carriers perversely were also tankers of a sort. They carried tons of bunker fuel for their conventionally powered escorts, and were able to refuel them when the need arose. It soon would. The fleet oilers *Yukon* and *Rappahannock* were en route from Diego Garcia with eighty thousand tons of distillate fuel between them, but this game was getting old in a hurry. The possibility of a confrontation compelled Dubro to keep all his ships' bunkers topped off.

Confrontation meant potential battle, and battle always necessitated speed, to go into harm's way, and to get the hell out of it, too.

"Anything from Washington yet?" he asked next.

Commander Harrison shook his head. "No, sir."

"Okay," the battle-force commander said with a dangerous calm. Then he headed off to communications. He'd solved a major operational problem, for the moment, and now it was time to scream at someone.

27

Piling On

Everything was running behind, at maximum speed, largely in circles, getting nowhere at amazing speed. A city both accustomed to and dedicated to the prevention of leaks, Washington and its collection of officials were too busy with four simultaneous crises to respond effectively to any of them. None of that was unusual, a fact that would have been depressing to those who ought to be dealing with it, a digression for which, of course, they didn't have time. The only good news, Ryan thought, is that the biggest story hadn't quite leaked. Yet.

"Scott, who're your best people for Japan?"

Adler was still a smoker or had bought a pack on his way over from Foggy Bottom. It required all of Ryan's diminishing self-control not to ask for one, but neither could he tell his guest not to light up. They all had to deal with stress in their own ways. The fact that Adler's had once been Ryan's was just one more inconvenience in a weekend that had gone to hell faster than he'd thought possible.

"I can put a working group together. Who runs it?"

"You do," Jack answered.

"What will Brett say?"

"He'll say, 'Yes, sir,' when the President tells him," Ryan replied, too tired to be polite.

"They have us by the balls, Jack."

"How many potential hostages?" Ryan asked. It wasn't just the residual military people. There had to be thousands of tourists, businessmen, reporters, students . . .

"We have no way of finding out, Jack. None," Adler admitted. "The good news is that we have no indications of adverse treatment. It's not 1941, at least I don't think so."

"If that starts . . ." Most Americans had forgotten the manner of treatment accorded foreign prisoners. Ryan was not one of them. "Then we start going crazy. They have to know that."

"They know us a lot better than they did back then. So much interaction. Besides, we have tons of their people over here, too."

"Don't forget, Scott, that their culture is fundamentally different from ours. Their religion is different. Their view of man's place in

nature is different. The value they place on human life is different," the National Security Advisor said darkly.

"This isn't a place for racism, Jack," Adler observed narrowly.

"Those are all facts. I didn't say they're inferior to us. I said that we're not going to make the mistake of thinking they're motivated in the same way we are—okay?"

"That's fair, I suppose," the Deputy Secretary of State conceded.

"So I want people who really understand their culture in here to advise me. I want people who think like they do." The trick would be finding space for them, but there were offices downstairs whose occupants could move out, albeit kicking and screaming about how important protocol and political polling were.

"I can find a few," Adler promised.

"What are we hearing from the embassies?"

"Nobody knows much of anything. One interesting development in Korea, though."

"What's that?"

"The defense attaché in Seoul went to see some friends about getting some bases moved up in alert level. They said no. That's the first time the ROKs ever said no to us. I guess their government is still trying to figure all this out."

"It's too early to start that, anyway."

"Are we going to do anything?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know yet." Then his phone buzzed.

"NMCC on the STU, Dr. Ryan."

"Ryan," Jack said, lifting the phone. "Yes, put him through. Shit," he breathed so quietly that Adler hardly caught it. "Admiral, I'll be back to you later today."

"Now what?"

"The Indians," Ryan told him.

"I call the meeting to order," Mark Gant said, tapping the table with his pen. Only two more than half of the seats were filled, but that was a quorum. "George, you have the floor."

The looks on all the faces troubled George Winston. At one level the men and women who determined policy for the Columbus Group were physically exhausted. At another they were panicked. It was the third that caused him the most pain: the degree of hope they showed at his presence, as though he were Jesus come to clean out the temple. It wasn't supposed to be this way. No one man was supposed to have that sort of power. The American economy was too vast. Too many people depended on it. Most of all, it was too complex for one man or even twenty to comprehend it all. That was the problem with the

models that everyone depended on. Sooner or later it came down to trying to gauge and measure and regulate something that simply was. It existed. It worked. It functioned. People needed it, but nobody really knew how it worked. The Marxists' illusion that they did know had been their fundamental flaw. The Soviets had spent three generations trying to command an economy to work instead of just letting it go on its own, and had ended up beggars in the world's richest nation. And it was not so different here. Instead of controlling it, they tried to live off it, but in both cases you had to have the illusion that you understood it. And nobody did, except in the broadest sense.

At the most basic level it all came down to needs and time. People had needs. Food and shelter were the first two of those. So other people grew the food and built the houses. Both required time to do, and since time was the most precious commodity known to man, you had to compensate people for it. Take a car—people needed transportation, too. When you bought a car, you paid people for the time of assembly, for the time required to fabricate all the components; ultimately you were paying miners for the time required to dig the iron ore and bauxite from the ground. That part was simple enough. The complexity began with all of the potential options. You could drive more than one kind of car. Each supplier of goods and services involved in the car had the option to get what he needed from a variety of sources, and since time was precious, the person who used his time most efficiently got a further reward. That was called competition, and competition was a never-ending race of everyone against everyone else. Fundamentally, every business, and in a sense every single person in the American economy, was in competition with every other. Everyone was a worker. Everyone was also a consumer. Everyone provided something for others to use. Everyone selected products and services from the vast menu that the economy offered. That was the basic idea.

The true complexity came from all the possible interactions. Who bought what from whom. Who became more efficient, the better to make use of their time, benefiting both the consumers and themselves at once. With everyone in the game, it was like a huge mob, with everyone talking to everyone else. You simply could not keep track of all the conversations.

And yet Wall Street held the illusion that it could, that its computer models could predict in broad terms what would happen on a daily basis. It was not possible. You could analyze individual companies, get a feel for what they were doing right and wrong. To a limited degree, from one or a few such analyses you could see trends and profit by them. But the use of computers and modeling techniques had gone too

far, extrapolating farther and farther away from baseline reality, and while it had worked, after a fashion, for years, that had only magnified the illusion. With the collapse three days earlier, the illusion was shattered, and now they had nothing to cling to. *Nothing but me,* George Winston thought, reading their faces.

The former president of the Columbus Group knew his limitations. He knew the degree to which he understood the system, and knew roughly where that understanding ended. He knew that nobody could quite make the whole thing work, and that train of thought took him almost as far as he needed to go on this dark night in New York.

"This looks like a place without a leader. Tomorrow, what happens?" he asked, and all the "rocket scientists" averted their eyes from his, looking down at the table, or in some cases sharing a glance with the person who happened to be across it. Only three days before, someone would have spoken, offered an opinion with some greater or lesser degree of confidence. But not now, because nobody knew. Nobody had the first idea. And nobody spoke up.

"You have a president. Is he telling you anything?" Winston asked next. Heads shook.

It was Mark Gant, of course, who posed the question, as Winston had known he would.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is the board of directors which selects our president and managing director, isn't it? We need a leader now."

"George," another man asked. "Are you back?"

"Either that or I'm doing the goddamnedest out-of-body trip you people have ever seen." It wasn't much of a joke, but it did generate smiles, the beginning of a little enthusiasm for something.

"In that case, I submit the motion that we declare the position of president and managing director to be vacant."

"Second."

"There is a motion on the floor," Mark Gant said, rather more strongly. "Those in favor?"

There was a chorus of "ayes."

"Oppose?"

Nothing.

"The motion carries. The presidency of the Columbus Group is now vacant. Is there a further motion from the floor?"

"I nominate George Winston to be our managing director and president," another voice said.

"Second."

"Those in favor?" Gant asked. This vote was identical except in its growing enthusiasm.

"George, welcome back." There was a faint smattering of applause.

"Okay." Winston stood. It was his again. His next comment was

desultory: “Somebody needs to tell Yamata.” He started pacing the room.

“Now, first thing: I want to see everything we have on Friday’s transactions. Before we can start thinking about how to fix the son of a bitch, we need to know how it got broke. It’s going to be a long week, folks, but we have people out there that we have to protect.”

The first task would be hard enough, he knew. Winston didn’t know if anyone could fix it, but they had to start with examining what had gone so badly wrong. He knew he was close to something. He had the itchy feeling that went with the almost-enough information to move on a particular issue. Part of it was instinct, something he both depended on and distrusted until he could make the itch go away with hard facts. There was something else, however, and he didn’t know what it was. He did know that he needed to find it.

Even good news could be ominous. General Arima was spending a good deal of time on TV, and he was doing well at it. The latest news was that any citizen who wanted to leave Saipan would be granted free air fare to Tokyo for later transit back to the States. Mainly what he said was that nothing important had changed.

“My ass,” Pete Burroughs growled at the smiling face on the tube.

“You know, just don’t believe this,” Oreza said, back up after five hours of sleep.

“I do. Check out that knoll southeast of here.”

Portagee rubbed his heavy beard and looked. Half a mile away, on a hilltop recently cleared for another tourist hotel (the island had run out of beach space), about eighty men were setting up a Patriot missile battery. The billboard radars were already erected, and as he watched, the first of four boxy containers was rolled into place.

“So what are we going to do about this?” the engineer asked.

“Hey, I drive boats, remember?”

“You used to wear a uniform, didn’t you?”

“Coast Guard,” Oreza said. “Ain’t never killed nobody. And that stuff”—he pointed to the missile site—“hell, you probably know more about it than I do.”

“They make ’em in Massachusetts. Raytheon, I think. My company makes some chips for it.” Which was the extent of Burroughs’s knowledge. “They’re planning to stay, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.” Oreza got his binoculars and started looking out windows again. He could see six road junctions. All were manned by what looked like ten men or so—a squad; he knew that term—with a mixture of the Toyota Land Cruisers and some jeeps. Though many had holsters on their pistol belts, no long guns were in evidence now,

as though they didn't want to make it look like some South American junta from the old days. Every vehicle that passed—they didn't stop any that he saw—received a friendly wave. *PR*, Oreza thought. *Good PR.*

"Some kind of fuckin' love-in," the master chief said. And that would not have been possible unless they were confident as hell. Even the missile crew on the next hill over, he thought. They weren't rushing. They were doing their jobs in an orderly, professional way, and that was fine, but if you expected to use the things, you moved more snappily. There was a difference between peacetime and wartime activity, however much you said that training was supposed to eliminate the difference between the two. He turned his attention back to the nearest crossroads. The soldiers there were not the least bit tense. They looked and acted like soldiers, but their heads weren't scanning the way they ought to on unfriendly ground.

It might have been good news. No mass arrests and detainments, the usual handmaiden of invasions. No overt display of force beyond mere presence. You would hardly know that they were here, except that they were sure as hell here, Portagee told himself. And they planned to stay. And they didn't think anybody was going to dispute that. And he sure as hell was in no position to change their view on anything.

"Okay, here are the first overheads," Jackson said. "We haven't had much time to go over them, but—"

"But we will," Ryan completed the sentence. "I'm a carded National Intelligence Officer, remember? I can handle the raw."

"Am I cleared for this?" Adler asked.

"You are now." Ryan switched on his desk light, and Robby dialed the combination on his attaché case. "When's the next pass over Japan?"

"Right about now, but there's cloud cover over most of the islands."

"Nuke hunt?" Adler asked. Admiral Jackson handled the answer.

"You bet your ass, sir." He laid out the first photo of Saipan. There were two car-carriers at the quay. The adjacent parking lot was spotted with orderly rows of military vehicles, most of them trucks.

"Best guess?" Ryan asked.

"An augmented division." His pen touched a cluster of vehicles. "This is a Patriot battery. Towed artillery. This looks like a big air-defense radar that's broken down for transport. There's a twelve-hundred-foot hill on this rock. It'll see a good long way, and the visual horizon from up there is a good fifty miles." Another photo. "The airports. Those are five F-15 fighters, and if you look here, we caught

two of their F-3s in the air coming in on final."

"F-3?" Adler asked.

"The production version of the FS-X," Jackson explained. "Fairly capable, but really a reworked F-16. The Eagles are for air defense. This little puppy is a good attack bird."

"We need more passes," Ryan said in a voice suddenly grave. Somehow it was real now. Really real, as he liked to say, metaphysically real. It was no longer the results of analysis or verbal reports. Now he had photographic proof. His country was sure as hell at war.

Jackson nodded. "Mainly we need pros to go over these overheads, but, yeah, we'll be getting four passes a day, weather permitting, and we need to examine every square inch of this rock, and Tinian, and Rota, and Guam, and all the little rocks."

"Jesus, Robby, can we do it?" Jack asked. The question, though posed in the simplest terms, had implications that even he could not yet appreciate. Admiral Jackson was slow to lift his eyes from the overhead photos, and his voice suddenly lost its rage as the naval officer's professional judgment clicked in.

"I don't know yet." He paused, then posed a question of his own. "Will we try?"

"I don't know that, either," the National Security Advisor told him. "Robby?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Before we decide to try, we have to know if we can."

Admiral Jackson nodded. "Aye aye."

He'd been awake most of the night listening to his partner's snoring. What was it about this guy? Chavez asked himself groggily. How the hell could he sleep? Outside, the sun was up, and the overwhelming sounds of Tokyo in the morning beat their way through windows and walls, and still John was sleeping. Well, Ding thought, he was an old guy and maybe he needed his rest. Then the most startling event of their entire stay in the country happened. The phone rang. That caused John's eyes to snap open, but Ding got the phone first.

"Tovarorischiy," a voice said. "All this time in-country and you haven't called me?"

"Who is this?" Chavez asked. As carefully as he'd studied his Russian, hearing it on the phone here and now made the language sound like Martian. It wasn't hard for him to make his voice seem sleepy. It was hard, a moment later, to keep his eyeballs in their sockets.

A jolly laugh that had to be heartfelt echoed down the phone line.

“Yevgeniy Pavlovich, who else would it be? Scrape the stubble from your face and join me for breakfast. I’m downstairs.”

Domingo Chavez felt his heart stop. Not just miss a beat—he would have sworn it stopped until he willed it to start working again, and when it did, it went off at warp-factor-three. “Give us a few minutes.”

“Ivan Sergeyevich had too much to drink again, *da?*” the voice asked with another laugh. “Tell him he grows too old for that foolishness. Very well, I will have some tea and wait.”

All the while Clark’s eyes were fixed on his, or for the first few seconds, anyway. Then they started sweeping the room for dangers that had to be around, so pale his partner’s face had become. Domingo was not one to get frightened easily, John knew, but whatever he’d heard on the phone had almost panicked the kid.

Well. John rose and switched on the TV. If there were danger outside the door, it was too late. The window offered no escape. The corridor outside could well be jammed full of armed police, and his first order of business was to head for the bathroom. Clark looked in the mirror as the water ran from the flushing toilet. Chavez was there before the handle came back up.

“Whoever was on the phone called me ‘Yevgeniy.’ He’s waiting downstairs, he says.”

“What did he sound like?” Clark asked.

“Russian, right accent, right syntax.” The toilet stopped running, and they couldn’t speak anymore for a while.

Shit, Clark thought, looking in the mirror for an answer, but finding only two very confused faces. Well. The intelligence officer started washing up and thinking over possibilities. *Think*. If it had been the Japanese police, would they have bothered to . . .? No. Not likely. Everyone regarded spies as dangerous in addition to being loathsome, a curious legacy of James Bond movies. Intelligence officers were about as likely to start a firefight as they were to sprout wings and fly. Their most important physical skills were running and hiding, but nobody ever seemed to grasp that, and if the local cops were on to them, then . . . then he would have awakened to a pistol in his face. And he hadn’t, had he? *Okay*. No immediate danger. Probably.

Chavez watched in no small amazement as Clark took his time washing his hands and face, shaving carefully, and brushing his teeth before he relinquished the bathroom. He even smiled when he was done, because that expression was necessary to the tone of his voice.

“Yevgeniy Pavlovich, we must appear *kulturny* for our friend, no? It’s been so many months.” Five minutes later they were out the door.

Acting skills are no less important to intelligence officers than to those who work the legitimate theater, for like the stage, in the spy business there are rarely opportunities for retakes. Major Boris Il’ych

Scherenko was the deputy *rezident* of RVS Station Tokyo, awakened four hours earlier by a seemingly innocuous call from the embassy. Covered as Cultural Attaché, he'd most recently been busy arranging the final details for a tour of Japan by the St. Petersburg Ballet. For fifteen years an officer of the First Chief (Foreign) Directorate of the KGB, he now fulfilled the same function for his newer and smaller agency. His job was even more important now, Scherenko thought. Since his nation was far less able to deal with external threats, it needed good intelligence more than ever. Perhaps that was the reason for this lunacy. Or maybe the people in Moscow had gone completely mad. There was no telling. At least the tea was good.

Awaiting him in the embassy had been an enciphered message from Moscow Center——that hadn't changed—with names and detailed descriptions. It made identification easy. Easier than understanding the orders he had.

"Vanya!" Scherenko nearly ran over, seizing the older man's hand for a hearty handshake, but forgoing the kiss that Russians are known for. That was partly to avoid offending Japanese sensibilities and partly because the American might slug him, passionless people that they were. Madness or not, it was a moment to savor. These were two senior CIA officers, and tweaking their noses in public was not without its humor. "It's been so long!"

The younger one, Scherenko saw, was doing his best to conceal his feelings, but not quite well enough. KGB/RVS didn't know anything about him. But his agency did know the name John Clark. It was only a name and a cursory description that could have fit a Caucasian male of any nationality. One hundred eighty-five to one hundred ninety centimeters. Ninety kilos. Dark hair. Fit. To that Scherenko added, blue eyes, a firm grip. Steady nerve. Very steady nerve, the Major thought.

"Indeed it has. How is your family, my friend?"

Add excellent Russian to that, Scherenko thought, catching the accent of St. Petersburg. As he cataloged the physical characteristics of the American, he saw two sets of eyes, one blue, one black, doing the same to him.

"Natalia misses you. Come! I am hungry! Breakfast!" He led the other two back to his corner booth.

"CLARK, JOHN (none?)", the thin file in Moscow was headed. A name so nondescript that other cover names were unknown and perhaps never assigned. Field officer, paramilitary type, believed to perform special covert functions. More than two (2) Intelligence Stars for courage and/ or proficiency in field operations. Brief stint as a Security and Protective Officer, during which time no one had troubled himself to get a photo, Scherenko thought. Typical. Staring at

him across the table now, he saw a man relaxed and at ease with the old friend he'd met for the first time perhaps as much as two minutes earlier. Well, he'd always known that CIA had good people working for them.

"We can talk here," Scherenko said more quietly, sticking to Russian.

"Is that so . . . ?"

"Scherenko, Boris Il'ych, Major, deputy *rezident,* " he said, finally introducing himself. Next he nodded to each of his guests. "You are John Clark—and Domingo Chavez."

"And this is the fucking Twilight Zone," Ding muttered.

" 'Plum blossoms bloom, and pleasure women buy new scarves in a brothel room.' Not exactly Pushkin, is it? Not even Pasternak. Arrogant little barbarians." He'd been in Japan for three years. He'd arrived expecting to find a pleasant, interesting place to do business. He'd come to dislike many aspects of Japanese culture, mainly the assumed local superiority to everything else in the world, particularly offensive to a Russian who felt exactly the same way.

"Would you like to tell us what this is all about, Comrade Major?" Clark asked.

Scherenko spoke calmly now. The humor of the event was now behind them all, not that the Americans had ever appreciated it. "Your Maria Patricia Foleyeva placed a call to our Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, asking for our assistance. I know that you are running another officer here in Tokyo, but not his name. I am further instructed to tell you, Comrade *Klerk,* that your wife and daughters are fine. Your younger daughter made the dean's list at her university again, and is now a good candidate for admission to medical school. If you require further proof of my bonafides, I'm afraid I cannot help you." The Major noted a thin expression of pleasure on the younger man's face and wondered what that was all about.

Well, that settles that, John thought. *Almost.* "Well, Boris, you sure as hell know how to get a man's attention. Now, maybe you can tell us what the hell is going on."

"We didn't see it either," Scherenko began, going over all the high points. It turned out that his data was somewhat better than what Clark had gotten from Chet Nomuri, but did not include quite everything. Intelligence was like that. You never had the full picture, and the parts left out were always important.

"How do you know we can operate safely?"

"You know that I cannot—"

"Boris Il'ych, my life is in your hands. You know I have a wife and two daughters. My life is important to me, and to them," John said reasonably, making himself appear all the more formidable to the pro

across the table. It wasn't about fear. John knew that he was a capable field spook, and Scherenko gave the same impression. "Trust" was a concept both central to and alien from intelligence operations. You had to trust your people, and yet you could never trust them all the way in a business where dualisms were a way of life.

"Your cover works better for you than you think. The Japanese think that you are Russians. Because of that, they will not trouble you. We can see to that," the deputy *rezident* told them confidently.

"For how long?" Clark asked rather astutely, Scherenko thought.

"Yes, there is always that question, isn't there?"

"How do we communicate?" John asked.

"I understand that you require a high-quality telephone circuit." He handed a card under the table. "All of Tokyo is now fiberoptic. We have several similar lines to Moscow. Your special communications gear is being flown there as we speak. I understand it is excellent. I would like to see it," Boris said with a raised eyebrow.

"It's just a ROM chip, man," Chavez told him. "I couldn't even tell you which one it is."

"Clever," Scherenko thought.

"How serious are they?" the younger man asked him.

"They appear to have moved a total of three divisions to the Marianas. Their navy has attacked yours." Scherenko gave what details he knew. "I should tell you that our estimate is that you will face great difficulties in taking your islands back."

"How great?" Clark asked.

The Russian shrugged, not without sympathy. "Moscow believes it unlikely. Your capabilities are almost as puny as ours have become."

And that's why this is happening, Clark decided on the spot. That was why he had a new friend in a foreign land. He'd told Chavez, practically on their first meeting, a quote from Henry Kissinger: "Even paranoids have enemies." He sometimes wondered why the Russians didn't print that on their money, rather like America's *E pluribus unum.* The hell of it was, they had a lot of history to back that one up. And so, for that matter, did America.

"Keep talking."

"We have their government intelligence organs thoroughly penetrated, also their military, but THISTLE is a commercial network, and I gather you have developed better data than I have. I'm not sure what that means." Which wasn't strictly true, but Scherenko was distinguishing between what he knew and what he thought; and, like a good spook, giving voice only to the former for now.

"So we both have a lot of work to do."

Scherenko nodded. "Feel free to come to the chancery."

"Let me know when the communications gear gets to Moscow."

Clark could have gone on, but held back. He wouldn't be completely sure until he got the proper electronic acknowledgment. So strange, he thought, that he needed it, but if Scherenko was telling the truth about his degree of penetration in the Japanese government, then he could have been "flipped" himself. And old habits died especially hard in this business. The one comforting thing was that his interlocutor knew that he was holding back, and didn't appear to mind for the moment.

"I will."

It didn't take many people to crowd the Oval Office. The premier power room in what Ryan still hoped was the world's most powerful nation was smaller than the office he'd occupied during his return to the investment business—and in fact smaller than his corner office in the West Wing, Jack realized for the first time.

They were all tired. Brett Hanson was especially haggard. Only Arnie van Damm looked approximately normal, but, then, Arnie always looked as though he were coming off a bender. Buzz Fiedler looked to be in something close to despair. The Secretary of Defense was the worst of all, however. It was he who had supervised the downsizing of the American military, who had told Congress almost on a weekly basis that our capabilities were far in excess of our needs. Ryan remembered the testimony on TV, the internal memos that dated back several years, the almost desperate objections by the uniformed chiefs of staff which they had faithfully not leaked to the media. It wasn't hard to guess what SecDef was thinking now. This brilliant bureaucrat, so confident in his vision and his judgment, had just run hard into the flat, unforgiving wall called reality.

"The economic problem," President Durling said, much to SecDef's relief.

"The hard part is the banks. They're going to be running scared until we rectify the DTC situation. So many banks now make trades that they don't know what their own reserves are. People are going to try to cash in their mutualfund holdings controlled by those banks. The Fed Chairman has already started jawboning them."

"Saying what?" Jack asked.

"Saying they had an unlimited line of credit. Saying that the money supply will be enough for their needs. Saying that they can loan all the money they want."

"Inflationary," van Damm observed. "That's very dangerous."

"Not really," Ryan said. "In the short term inflation is like a bad cold, you take aspirin and chicken soup for it. What happened Friday is like a heart attack. You treat *that* first. If the banks don't open for

business as usual . . . Confidence is the big issue. Buzz is right."

Not for the first time, Roger Durling blessed the fact that Ryan's first departure from government had taken him back into the financial sector.

"And the markets?" the President asked SecTreas.

"Closed. I've talked to all of the exchanges. Until the DTC records are re-created, there will be no organized trading."

"What does that mean?" Hanson asked. Ryan noticed that the Defense Secretary wasn't saying anything. Ordinarily such a confident guy, too, Jack thought, quick to render an opinion. In other circumstances he would have found the man's newly found reticence very welcome indeed.

"You don't *have* to trade stocks on the floor of the NYSE," Fiedler explained. "You can do it in the countryclub men's room if you want."

"And people will," Ryan added. "Not many, but some."

"Will it matter? What about foreign exchanges?" Durling asked. "They trade our stocks all over the world."

"Not enough liquidity overseas," Fiedler answered. "Oh, there's some, but the New York exchanges make the benchmarks that everybody uses, and without those nobody knows what the values are."

"They have records of the tickers, don't they?" van Damm asked.

"Yes, but the records are compromised, and you don't gamble millions on faulty information. Okay, it's not really a bad thing that the information on DTC leaked. It gives us a cover story that we can use for a day or two," Ryan thought. "People can relate to the fact that a system fault had knocked stuff down. It'll hold them off from a total panic for a while. How long to fix the records?"

"They still don't know," Fiedler admitted. "They're still trying to assemble the records."

"We probably have until Wednesday, then." Ryan rubbed his eyes. He wanted to get up and pace, just get his blood circulating, but only the President did that in the Oval Office.

"I had a conference call with all the exchange heads. They're calling everyone in to work, like for a normal day. They have orders to shuffle around and look busy for the TV cameras."

"Nice idea, Buzz," the President managed to say first. Ryan gave SecTreas a thumbs-up.

"We have to come up with some sort of solution fast," Fiedler went on. "Jack's probably right. By late Wednesday it's a real panic, and I can't tell you what'll happen," he ended soberly. But the news wasn't all that bad for this evening. There was a little breathing space, and there were other breaths to be taken.

"Next," van Damm said, handling this one for the Boss, "Ed Kealty is

going to go quietly. He's working out a deal with Justice. So that political monkey is off our backs. Of course"—the Chief of Staff looked at the President—"then we have to fill that post soon."

"It'll wait," Durling said. "Brett . . . India."

"Ambassador Williams has been hearing some ominous things. The Navy's analysis is probably right. It appears that the Indians may be seriously contemplating a move on Sri Lanka."

"Great timing," Ryan heard, looking down, then he spoke.

"The Navy wants operational instructions. We have a two-carrier battle force maneuvering around. If it's time to bump heads, they need to know what they are free to do." He had to say that because of his promise to Robby Jackson, but he knew what the answer would be. That pot wasn't boiling quite yet.

"We've got a lot on the plate. We'll defer that one for now," the President said. "Brett, have Dave Williams meet with their Prime Minister and make it clear to her that the United States does not look kindly upon aggressive acts anywhere in the world. No bluster. Just a clear statement, and have him wait for a reply."

"We haven't talked to them that way in a long time," Hanson warned.

"It's time to do so now, Brett," Durling pointed out quietly.

"Yes, Mr. President."

And now, Ryan thought, *the one we've all been waiting for*. Eyes turned to the Secretary of Defense. He spoke mechanically, hardly looking up from his notes.

"The two carriers will be back at Pearl Harbor by Friday. There are two graving docks for repairs, but to get the ships fully mission-capable will require months. The two submarines are dead, you know that. The Japanese fleet is retiring back to the Marianas. There has been no additional hostile contact of any kind between fleet units.

"We estimate about three divisions have been airferried to the Marianas. One on Saipan, most of two others on Guam. They have air facilities that we built and maintained . . ." His voice droned on, giving details that Ryan already knew, toward a conclusion that the National Security Advisor already feared.

Everything was too small in size. America's navy was half what it had been only ten years before. There remained the ability to sea-lift only one full division of troops capable of forced-entry assault. Only one, and that required moving all the Atlantic Fleet ships through Panama and recalling others from the oceans of the world as well. To land such troops required support, but the average U.S. Navy frigate had one 3-inch gun. Destroyers and cruisers had but two 5-inch guns each, a far cry from the assembled battleships and cruisers that had been necessary to take the Marianas back in 1944. Carriers, none

immediately available, the closest two in the Indian Ocean, and those together did not match the Japanese air strength on Guam and Saipan today, Ryan thought, for the first time feeling anger over the affair. It had taken him long enough to get over the disbelief, Jack told himself.

"I don't think we can do it," SecDef concluded, and it was a judgment that no one in the room was prepared to dispute. They were too weary for recriminations. President Durling thanked everyone for the advice and headed upstairs for his bedroom, hoping to get a little sleep before facing the media in the morning.

He took the stairs instead of the elevator, thinking along the way as Secret Service agents at the top and bottom of the stairs watched. A shame for his presidency to end this way. Though he'd never really desired it, he'd done his best, and his best, only a few days earlier, hadn't been all that bad.

28

Transmissions

The United 747-400 touched down at Moscow's Scheremetyevo Airport thirty minutes early. The Atlantic jetstream was still blowing hard. A diplomatic courier was first off, helped that way by a flight attendant. He flashed his diplomatic passport at the end of the jetway, where a customs officer pointed him toward an American embassy official who shook his hand and led him down the concourse.

"Come with me. We even have an escort into town." The man smiled at the lunacy of the event.

"I don't know you," the courier said suspiciously, slowing down. Ordinarily his personality and his diplomatic bag were inviolable, but everything about this trip had been unusual, and his curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"There's a laptop computer in your bag. There's yellow tape around it. It's the only thing you're carrying," said the chief of CIA Station Moscow, which was why the courier didn't know him. "The code word for your trip is STEAMROLLER."

"Fair enough." The courier nodded on their way down the terminal corridor. An embassy car was waiting—it was a stretched Lincoln, and looked to be the Ambassador's personal wheels. Next came a lead car which, once off the airport grounds, lit off a rotating light, the quicker to proceed downtown. On the whole it struck the courier as a mistake. Better to have used a Russian car for this. Which raised a couple of bigger questions. Why the hell had he been rousted at zero notice from his home to ferry a goddamned portable computer to Moscow? If everything was so goddamned secret, why were the Russians in on it? And if it were this goddamned important, why wait for a commercial flight? A State Department employee of long standing, he knew that it was foolish to question the logic of government operations. It was just that he was something of an idealist.

The rest of the trip went normally enough, right to the embassy, set in west-central Moscow, by the river. Inside the building, the two men went to the communications room, where the courier opened his bag, handed over its contents, and headed off for a shower and a bed, his questions never to be answered, he was sure.

The rest of the work had been done by Russians at remarkable speed. The phone line to Interfax led in turn to RVS, thence by military fiberoptic line all the way to Vladivostok, where another similar line, laid by Nippon Telephone & Telegraph, led to the Japanese home island of Honshu. The laptop had an internal modem, which was hooked to the newly installed line and switched on. Then it was time to wait, typically, though everything else had been done at the best possible speed.

It was one-thirty when Ryan got home to Peregrine Cliff. He'd dispensed with his GSA driver, instead letting Special Agent Robberton drive him, and he pointed the Secret Service agent toward a guest room before heading to his own bed. Not surprisingly, Cathy was still awake.

"Jack, what's going on?"

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?" he asked as his first dodge. Coming home had been something of a mistake, if a necessary one. He needed fresh clothing more than anything else. A crisis was bad enough. For senior Administration officials to look frazzled and haggard was worse, and the press would surely pick up on it. Worst of all, it was visually obvious. The average Joe seeing the tape on network TV would know, and worried officers made for worried troopers, a lesson Ryan remembered from the Basic Officers' Course at Quantico. And so it was necessary to spend two hours in a car that would better have been spent on the sofa in his office.

Cathy rubbed her eyes in the darkness. "Nothing in the morning. I have to deliver a lecture tomorrow afternoon on how the new laser system works to some foreign visitors."

"From where?"

"Japan and Taiwan. We're licensing the calibration system we developed and—what's wrong?" she asked when her husband's head snapped around.

It's just paranoia, Ryan told himself. *Just a dumb coincidence , nothing more than that. Can't be anything else.* But he left the room without a word. Robberton was undressing when he got to the guest room, his holstered pistol hanging on the bedpost. The explanation took only a few seconds, and Robberton lifted a phone and dialed the Secret Service operations center two blocks from the White House. Ryan hadn't even known that his wife had a code name.

"SURGEON"—well, that was obvious, Ryan thought—"needs a friend tomorrow . . . at Johns Hopkins . . . oh, yeah, she'll be fine. See ya." Robberton hung up. "Good agent, Andrea Price. Single, willowy, brown hair, just joined the detail, eight years on the street. I worked

with her dad when I was a new agent. Thanks for telling me that."

"See you around six-thirty, Paul."

"Yeah." Robberton lay right down, giving every indication of someone who could go to sleep at will. A useful talent, Ryan thought.

"What was *that* all about?" Caroline Ryan demanded when her husband returned to the bedroom. Jack sat down on the bed to explain.

"Cathy, uh, tomorrow at Hopkins, there's going to be somebody with you. Her name is Andrea Price. She's with the Secret Service. And she'll be following you around."

"Why?"

"Cathy, we have several problems now. The Japanese have attacked the U.S. Navy, and have occupied a couple of islands. Now, you can't —"

"They did *what?*"

"You can't tell that to anyone," her husband went on. "Do you understand? You can't tell that to anybody, but since you are going to be with some Japanese people tomorrow, and because of who I am, the Secret Service wants to have somebody around you, just to make totally certain that things are okay." There would be more to it than that. The Secret Service was limited in manpower, and was not the least bit reticent about asking for assistance from local police forces. The Baltimore City Police, which maintained a high-profile presence at Johns Hopkins at all times—the hospital complex was not located in the best of areas—would probably assign a detective to back up Ms. Price.

"Jack, are we in any danger?" Cathy asked, remembering distant times and distant terrors, when she'd been pregnant with little Jack, when the Ulster Liberation Army had invaded their home. She remembered how pleased she'd been, and the shame she'd felt for it, when the last of them had been executed for multiple murder—ending, she'd thought, the worst and most fearful episode of her life.

For his part, Jack realized that it was just one more thing that they hadn't thought through. If America were at war, he was the National Security Advisor to the President, and, yes, that made him a high-value target. And his wife. And his three children. Irrational? What about war was not?

"I don't think so," he replied after a moment's consideration, "but, well, we might want to—we might have some additional houseguests. I don't know. I'll have to ask."

"You said they attacked our navy?"

"Yes, honey, but you can't—"

"That means war, doesn't it?"

"I don't know, honey." He was so exhausted that he was asleep

thirty seconds after hitting the pillow, and his last conscious thought was a recognition that he knew very little of what he needed to know in order to answer his wife's questions, or, for that matter, his own.

Nobody was sleeping in lower Manhattan, at least nobody whom others might think important. It occurred to more than one tired trading executive to observe that they were really earning their money now, but the truth of the matter was that they were accomplishing very little. Proud executives all, they looked around trading rooms filled with computers whose collective value was something only the accounting department knew, and whose current utility was approximately zero. The European markets would soon open. And do what? everyone wondered. There was ordinarily a nightwatch here whose job it was to trade European equities, to keep track of the Eurodollar market, the commodities and metals market, and all the economic activity that occurred on the eastern side of the Atlantic as well as the western. On most days it was like the prologue to a book, a precursor to the real action, interesting but not overly vital except, perhaps, for flavor, because the real substance was decided here in New York City.

But none of that was true today. There was no guessing what would happen this day. Today Europe was the only game in town, and all of the rules had been swept away. The people who manned the computers for this part of the watch cycle were often considered second-string by those who showed up at eight in the morning, which was both untrue and unfair, but in any community there had to be internal competition. This time, as they showed up at their accustomed and ungodly hour, the people who did this regularly noted the presence of front-row executives, and felt a combination of unease and exhilaration. Here was their chance to show their stuff. And here was their chance to screw up, live and in color.

It started exactly at four in the morning, Eastern Standard Time.

"Treasuries." The word was spoken simultaneously in twenty houses as European banks that still had enormous quantities of U.S. T-Bills as a hedge against the struggling European economies and their currencies suddenly felt quite uneasy about holding them. It seemed odd to some that the word had been slow to get out to their European cousins on Friday, but it was always that way, really, and the opening moves, everyone in New York thought, were actually rather cautious. It was soon clear why. There were plenty of "asks," but not many "bids." People were trying to sell Treasury Notes, but the interest in buying them was less enthusiastic. The result was prices that dropped just as fast as European confidence in the dollar.

"This is a steal, down three thirty-seconds already. What can we do?" That question, too, was asked in more than one place, and in each the answer was identical:

"Nothing," a word in every case spoken with disgust. There followed something else, usually a variant of *Fucking Europeans*, depending on the linguistic peculiarities of the senior executives in question. So it had started again, a run on the dollar. And America's biggest weapon for fighting back was out of business because of a computer program everyone had trusted. The No Smoking signs in several of the trading rooms were ignored. They didn't have to worry about ashes in the equipment, did they? They really couldn't use the fucking computers for anything today. It was, one executive snorted to a colleague, a good day for some maintenance on the systems. Fortunately, not everybody felt that way.

"Okay, here's where it started, then?" George Winston asked. Mark Gant ran his finger down the screen display.

"Bank of China, Bank of Hong Kong, Imperial Cathay Bank. They bought these up about four months ago, hedging against the yen, and very successfully, it appears. So, Friday, they dumped them to cash in and bought up a truckload of Japanese treasuries. With the movement that happened here, it looks like they turned twenty-two percent on the overall transaction."

They were the first, Winston saw, and being first in the trend, they cashed in big. That sort of hit was of a magnitude to cause more than a few expensive dinners in Hong Kong, a city well suited to the indulgence.

"Look innocent to you?" he asked Gant with a stifled yawn.

The executive shrugged. He was tired, but having the boss back in the saddle gave everyone new energy. "Innocent, hell! It's a brilliant move. They saw something coming, I suppose, or they were just lucky."

Luck, Winston thought, *there was always that*. Luck was real, something any senior trader would admit over drinks, usually after two or three, the number required to get past the usual "brilliance" bullshit. Sometimes it just felt right, and you did it because of that, and that's all there was to it. If you were lucky, it worked, and if not, you hedged.

"Keep going," he ordered.

"Well, then other banks started doing the same thing." The Columbus Group had some of the most sophisticated computer systems on the Street, able to track any individual issue and category of issues over time, and Gant was a quintessential computer jockey. They next watched the sell-off of other T-Bills by other Asian banks. Interestingly, the Japanese banks were slower off the mark than he

would have expected. It was no disgrace to be a little behind Hong Kong. The Chinese were good at this thing, especially those trained by the Brits, who had largely invented modern central banking and were still pretty slick at it. But the Japs were faster than the Thais, Winston thought, or at least they should have been . . .

It was instinct again, just the gut-call of a guy who knew how to work the Street: "Check Japanese treasuries, Mark."

Gant typed in a command, and the rapid advance in the value of the yen was obvious—so much so, in fact, that they hardly needed to track it via computer. "Is this what you want?"

Winston leaned down, looking at the screen. "Show me what Bank of China did when they cashed in."

"Well, they sold off to the Eurodollar market and bought yen. I mean, it's the obvious play—"

"But look who they bought the yen from," Winston suggested.

"And what they paid for it . . ." Gant turned his head and looked at his boss.

"You know why I was always honest here, Mark? You know why I never screwed around, not ever, not even once, not even when I had an in-the-bank sure thing?" George asked. There was more than one reason, of course, but why confuse the issue? He pressed his fingertip to the screen, actually leaving a fingerprint on the glass. He almost laughed at the symbolism. "That's why."

"That doesn't really mean anything. The Japanese knew they could jack it up some and—" Gant didn't quite get it yet, Winston saw. He needed to hear it in his own terms.

"Find the trend, Mark. Find the trend there." *Well, son of a bitch*, he told himself, heading to the men's room. *The trend is my friend.* Then he thought of something else:

Fuck with my financial market, will you?

It wasn't much consolation. He had given his business over to a predator, Winston realized, and the damage was well and truly done. His investors had trusted him and he had betrayed that trust. Washing his hands, he looked up into the mirror over the sink, seeing the eyes of a man who'd left his post, deserted his people.

But you're back now, by God, and there's a ton of work to be done.

Pasadena had finally sailed, more from embarrassment than anything else, Jones thought. He'd listened to Bart Mancuso's phone conversation with CINCPAC, explaining that the submarine was loaded with weapons and so filled up with food that her passageways were completely covered with cartons of canned goods, enough for sixty days or more at sea. That was a sign of the not-so-good old days,

Jones thought, remembering what the long deployments had been like, and so USS *Pasadena,* warship of the U.S. Navy, was now at sea, heading west at about twenty knots, using a quiet screw, not a speed screw, he thought. Otherwise he might have gotten a hit on her. The submarine had just passed within fifteen nautical miles of a SOSUS emplacement, one of the new ones that could hear the fetal heartbeat of an unborn whale calf. *Pasadena* didn't have orders yet, but she'd be in the right place if and when they came, with her crew running constant drills, leaning down, getting that at-sea feeling that came to you when you needed it. That was something.

Part of him dearly wished to be there, but that was part of his past now.

"I don't see nothin', sir." Jones blinked and looked back at the fan-fold page he'd selected.

"Well, you have to look for other things," Jones said. Only a Marine with a loaded pistol would get him out of SOSUS now. He'd made that clear to Admiral Mancuso, who had in turn made it clear to others. There had been a brief discussion of getting Jones a special commission, perhaps to Commander's rank, but Ron had quashed that idea himself. He'd left the Navy a Sonarman 1/c, and that was as good a rank as he'd ever wanted. Besides, it would not have looked good to the chiefs who really ran this place and had already accepted him as one of their own.

Oceanographic Technician 2/c Mike Boomer had been assigned to Jones as personal assistant. The kid had the makings of a good student, Dr. Jones thought, even if he'd left service in P-3s because of chronic airsickness.

"All these guys are using Prairie-Masker systems when they snort. It sounds like rain on the surface, remember? Rain on the surface is on the thousand-hertz line. So, we look for rain"—Jones slid a weather photo on the table—"where there ain't no rain. Then we look for sixty-hertz hits, little ones, short ones, brief ones, things you might otherwise ignore, that happen to be where the rain is. They use sixty-hertz generators and motors, right? Then we look for transients, just little dots that look like background noise, that are also where the rain is. Like this." He marked the sheet with a red pen, then looked to the station's command master chief, who was leaning over the other side of the table like a curious god.

"I heard stories about you when I was working the Ref-Tra at Dam Neck. I thought they were sea stories."

"Got a smoke?" the only civilian in the room asked. The master chief handed one over. The antismoking signs were gone and the ashtrays were out. SOSUS was at war, and perhaps the rest of PacFlt would soon catch up. *Jesus, I'm home,* Jones told himself. "Well, you

know the difference between a sea story and a fairy tale."

"What's that, sir?" Boomer asked.

"A fairy tale starts, 'Once upon a time,' " Jones said with a smile, marking another 60hz hit on the sheet.

"And a sea story starts, 'No shit,' " the master chief concluded the joke. Except this little fucker really was that good. "I think you have enough to run a plot, Dr. Jones."

"I think we have a track on an SSK, Master Chief."

"Shame we can't prosecute."

Ron nodded slowly. "Yeah, me, too, but now we know we can get hits on the guys. It's still going to be a mother for P-3s to localize them. They're good boats, and that's a fact." They couldn't get too carried away. All SOSUS did was to generate lines of bearing. If more than one hydrophone set got a hit on the same sound source, you could rapidly triangulate bearings into locations, but those locations were circles, not points, and the circles were as much as twenty miles across. It was just physics, neither friend nor enemy. The sounds that most easily traveled long distances were of the lower frequencies, and for any sort of wave, only the higher frequencies gave the best resolution.

"We know where to look the next time he snorts, too. Anyway, you can call Fleet Operations and tell them there's nobody close to the carriers. Here, here, here, surface groups." He made marks on the paper. "Also heading west at good speed, and not being real covert about it. All target-track bearings are opening. It's a complete disengagement. They're not looking for any more trouble."

"Maybe that's good."

Jones crushed out the cigarette. "Yeah, Master Chief, maybe it is, if the flags get their shit together."

The funny part was that things had actually calmed down. Morning TV coverage of the Wall Street crash was clinically precise, and the analysis exquisite, probably better than Americans were getting at home, Clark thought, what with all the economics professors doing the play-by-play, along with a senior banker for color commentary. Perhaps, a newspaper editorialized, America will rethink her stance vis-à-vis Japan. Was it not clear that the two countries genuinely needed each other, especially now, and that a strong Japan served American interests as well as local ones? Prime Minister Goto was quoted in a conciliatory way, though not in front of a camera, in language that was for him decidedly unusual and widely covered for that reason.

"Fucking Twilight Zone," Chavez observed in a quiet moment,

breaking language cover because he just had to. What the hell, he thought, they were under Russian operational control now. What rules did matter now?

"*Russkiy,*" his senior replied tolerantly.

"*Da, tovarisch,*" was the grumbled reply. "Do you have any idea what's going on. Is it a war or not?"

"The rules sure are funny," Clark said, in English, he realized. *It's getting to me, too.*

There were other *gaijin* back on the street, most of them apparently Americans, and the looks they were getting were back to the ordinary suspicion and curiosity, the current hostility level down somewhat from the previous week.

"So what do we do?"

"We try the Interfax number our friend gave us." Clark had his report all typed up. It was the only thing he knew to do, except for keeping his contacts active and fishing for information. Surely Washington knew what he had to tell them, he thought, going back into the hotel. The clerk smiled and bowed, a little more politely this time, as they headed to the elevator. Two minutes later they were in the room. Clark took the laptop from its carry-case, inserted the phone plug in the back, and switched it on. Another minute, and the internal modem dialed the number he'd gotten over breakfast, linking to a line across the Sea of Japan to the Siberian mainland, thence to Moscow, he supposed. He heard the electronic trilling of a ringing phone and waited for linkup.

The station chief had gotten over the cringing associated with having a Russian intelligence officer in the embassy communications room, but he hadn't quite gotten to the whimsy stage yet. The noise from the computer startled him.

"Very clever technique," the visitor said.

"We try."

Anyone who had ever used a modem would recognize the sound, the rasp of running water, or perhaps a floorpolishing brush, just a digital hiss, really, of two electronic units attempting to synchronize themselves so that data could be exchanged. Sometimes it took but a few seconds, sometimes as many as five or even ten. In fact, it only took one second or so with these units, and the remaining hiss was actually the random-appearing digital code of 19,200 characters of information crossing the fiberoptic line per second—first in one direction, then the other. When the real transmission was concluded, formal lockup was achieved, and the guy at the other end sent his twenty column-inches for the day. Just to be on the safe side, the

Russians would make sure that the report would be carried in two papers the next day, on page 3 in both cases. No sense in being too obvious.

Then came the hard part for the CIA station chief. On command, he printed two copies of the same report, one of which went to the RVS officer. Was Mary Pat going through change-of-life or something?

"His Russian is very literary, even classical. Who taught him my language?"

"I honestly don't know," the station chief lied, successfully as it turned out. The hell of it was, the Russian was right. That occasioned a frown.

"Want me to help with the translation?"

Shit. He smiled. "Sure, why not?"

"Ryan." A whole five hours of sleep, Jack grumped, lifting the secure carphone. Well, at least he wasn't doing the driving.

"Mary Pat here. We have something. It'll be on your desk when you get there."

"How good?"

"It's a start," the DDO said. She was very economical in her use of words. Nobody really trusted radiophones, secure or not.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan. I'm Andrea Price." The agent was already dressed in a lab coat, complete with picture-pass clipped to the lapel, which she held up. "My uncle is a doctor, GP in Wisconsin. I think he'd like this." She smiled.

"Do I have anything to worry about?"

"I really don't think so," Agent Price said, still smiling. Protectees didn't like to see worried security personnel, she knew.

"What about my children?"

"There are two agents outside their school, and one more is in the house across from the day-care center for your little one," the agent explained. "Please don't worry. They pay us to be paranoid, and we're almost always wrong, but it's like in your business. You always want to be wrong on the safe side, right?"

"And my visitors?" Cathy asked.

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Yes."

"Get them all Hopkins lab coats, souvenirs, like. I'll eyeball them all when they change." That was pretty clever, Cathy Ryan thought.

"You're carrying a gun?"

"Always," Andrea Price confirmed. "But I've never had to use it, never even took it out for an arrest. Just think of me as a fly on the wall," she said.

More like a falcon, Professor Ryan thought, but at least a tame one.

"How are we supposed to do that, John?" Chavez asked in English. The shower was running. Ding was sitting on the floor, and John on the toilet.

"Well, we seen 'em already, haven't we?" the senior officer pointed out.

"Yeah, in the fuckin' factory!"

"Well, we just have to find out where they went." On the face of it, the statement was reasonable enough. They just had to determine how many and where, and oh, by the way, whether or not there were really nukes riding on the nose. No big deal. All they knew was that they were SS-19-type launchers, the new improved version thereof, and that they'd left the factory by rail. Of course, the country had over twenty-eight thousand kilometers of rail lines. It would have to wait. Intelligence officers often worked banker's hours, and this was one of those cases. Clark decided to get into the shower to clean off before heading for bed. He didn't know what to do, yet, or how to go about it, but worrying himself to death would not improve his chances, and he'd long since learned that he worked better with a full eight hours under his belt, and occasionally had a creative thought while showering. Sooner or later Ding might learn those tricks as well, he thought, seeing the expression on the kid's face.

"Hi, Betsy," Jack said to the lady waiting in his office's anteroom. "You're up early. And who are you?"

"Chris Scott. Betsy and I work together."

Jack waved them into his office, first checking his fax machine to see if Mary Pat had transmitted the information from Clark and Chavez, and, seeing it there, decided it could wait. He knew Betsy Fleming from his CIA days as a self-taught expert on strategic weapons. He supposed Chris Scott was one of the kids recruited from some university with a degree in what Betsy had learned the hard way. At least the younger one was polite about it, saying that he worked *with* Betsy. So had Ryan, once, years ago, while concerned with arms-control negotiations. "Okay, what do we have?"

"Here's what they call the H-11 space booster." Scott opened his case and pulled out some photos. Good ones, Ryan saw at once, made with real film at close range, not the electronic sort shot through a hole in someone's pocket. It wasn't hard to tell the difference, and Ryan immediately recognized an old friend he'd thought dead and decently buried less than a week before.

"Sure as hell, the SS-19. A lot prettier this way, too." Another photo showed a string of them on the assembly building's floor. Jack counted them and grimaced. "What else do I need to know?"

"Here," Betsy said. "Check out the business end."

"Looks normal," Ryan observed.

"That's the point. The nose assembly is normal," Scott pointed out. "Normal for supporting a warhead bus, not for a commo-sat payload. We wrote that up a while back, but nobody paid any attention to it," the technical analyst added. "The rest of the bird's been fully re-engineered. We have estimates for the performance enhancements."

"Short version?"

"Six or seven MIRVs each and a range of just over ten thousand kilometers," Mrs. Fleming replied. "Worst-case, but realistic."

"That's a lot. Has the missile been certified, tested? Have they tested a bus that we know of?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"No data. We have partial stuff on flight tests of the launcher from surveillance in the Pacific, stuff AMBER BALL caught, but it's equivocal on several issues," Scott told him.

"Total birds turned out?"

"Twenty-five we know about. Of those, three have been used up in flight tests, and two are at their launch facility being mated up with orbital payloads. That leaves twenty."

"What payloads?" Ryan asked almost on a whim.

"The NASA guys think they are survey satellites. Real-time-capable photo-sats. So probably they are," Betsy said darkly.

"And so probably they've decided to enter the overhead-intelligence business. Well, that makes sense, doesn't it?" Ryan made a couple of notes. "Okay, the downside, worst-case threat is twenty launchers with seven MIRVs each, for a total of one hundred forty?"

"Correct, Dr. Ryan." Both were professional enough that they didn't editorialize on how bad that threat was. Japan had the theoretical capacity to cut the hearts out of one hundred forty American cities. America could quickly reconstitute the ability to turn their Home Islands into smoke and fire as well, but that wasn't a hell of a lot of consolation, was it? Forty-plus years of MAD, thought to be ended less than seven days before, and now it was back again, Ryan thought. Wasn't that just wonderful?

"Do you know anything about the assets that produced these

photos?"

"Jack," Betsy said in her normal June Cleaver voice, "you know I never ask. But whoever it was, was overt. You can tell that from the photos. These weren't done with a Minox. Somebody covered as a reporter, I bet. Don't worry. I won't tell." Her usual impish smile. She had been around long enough that she knew all the tricks.

"They're obviously high-quality photos," Chris Scott went on, wondering how the hell Betsy had the clout to call this man by his first name. "Slow, small-grain film, like what a reporter uses. They let NASA guys into the factory, too. They wanted us to know."

"Sure as hell." Mrs. Fleming nodded agreement.

And the Russians, Ryan reminded himself. *Why them?* "Anything else?"

"Yeah, this." Scott handed over two more photos. It showed a pair of modified railroad flatcars. One had a crane on it. The other showed the hardpoints for installing another. "They evidently transport by rail instead of truck. I had a guy look at the railcar. It's apparently standard gauge."

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"The width between the rails. Standard gauge is what we use and most of the rest of the world. Most of the railways in Japan are narrow gauge. Funny they didn't copy the road transporters the Russians made for the beast," Scott said. "Maybe their roads are too narrow or maybe they just prefer to do it this way. There's a standard-gauge line from here to Yoshinobu. I was a little surprised by the rigging gear. The cradles in the railcar seem to roughly match the dimensions of the transport cocoon that the Russians designed for the beast. So they copied everything but the transporter. That's all we have, sir."

"Where are you off to next?"

"We're huddling across the river with the guys at NRO," Chris Scott answered.

"Good," Ryan said. He pointed at both of them. "You tell them this one's hotter 'n' hell. I want these things found and found yesterday."

"You know they'll try, Jack. And they may have done us a favor by rolling these things out on rails," Betsy Fleming said as she stood.

Jack organized the photos and asked for another complete set before he dismissed his visitors. Then he checked his watch and called Moscow. Ryan supposed that Sergey was working long hours, too.

"Why the hell," he began, "did you sell them the SS-19 design?"

The reply was harsh. Perhaps Golovko was sleep-deprived as well. "For money, of course. The same reason you sold them Aegis, the F-15, and all—"

Ryan grimaced, mainly at the justice in the retort. "Thanks, pal. I

guess I deserved that. We estimate they have twenty available."

"That would be about right, but we haven't had people visit their factory yet."

"We have," Ryan told him. "Want some pictures?"

"Of course, Ivan Emmetovich."

"They'll be on your desk tomorrow," Jack promised. "I have our estimate. I'd like to hear what your people think." He paused and then went on. "We are worst-casing at seven RVs per missile, for a total of one-forty."

"Enough for both of us," Golovko observed. "Remember when we first met, negotiating to remove those fucking things?" He heard Ryan's snort over the phone. He didn't hear what his colleague was thinking.

The first time I was close to those things, aboard your missile submarine, Red October, *yeah, I remember that. I remember feeling my skin crawl like I was in the presence of Lucifer himself.* He'd never had the least bit of affection for ballistic weapons. Oh, sure, maybe they'd kept the peace for forty years, maybe the thought of them had deterred their owners from the intemperate thoughts that had plagued chiefs of state for all of human history. Or just as likely, mankind had just been lucky, for once. "Jack, this is getting rather serious," Golovko said. "By the way, our officer met with your officers. He reports favorably on them—and thank you, by the way, for the copy of their report. It included data we did not have. Not vitally important, but interesting even so. So tell me, do they know to seek out these rockets?"

"The order went out," Ryan assured him.

"To my people as well, Ivan Emmetovich. We will find them, never fear," Golovko felt the need to add. He had to be thinking the same thing: the only reason the missiles had not been used was that both sides had possessed them, because it was like threatening a mirror. That was no longer true, was it? And so came Ryan's question:

"And then what?" he asked darkly. "What do we do then?"

"Do you not say in your language, 'One thing at a time'?"

Isn't this just great? Now I have a friggin' Russian *trying to cheer me up!*

"Thank you, Sergey Nikolay'ch. Perhaps I deserved that as well."

"So why did we sell Citibank?" George Winston asked.

"Well, he said to look out for banks that were vulnerable to currency fluctuations," Gant replied. "He was right. We got out just in time. Look, see for yourself." The trader typed another instruction into his terminal and was rewarded with a graphic depiction of what First National City Bank stock had done on Friday, and sure enough it had dropped off the table in one big hurry, largely because Columbus,

which had purchased the issue in large quantities over the preceding five weeks, had held quite a bit, and in selling it had shaken faith in the stock badly. “Anyway, that set off an alarm in our program—”

“Mark, Citibank is one of the benchmark stocks in the model, isn’t it?” Winston asked calmly. There was nothing to be gained by leaning on Mark too hard.

“Oh.” His eyes opened a little wider. “Well, yes, it is, isn’t it?”

That was when a very bright light blinked on in Winston’s mind. It was not widely known how the “expert systems” kept track of the market. They worked in several interactive ways, monitoring both the market as a whole and also modeling benchmark stocks more closely, as general indicators of developing market trends. Those were stocks which over time had tracked closely with what everything else was doing, with a bias toward general stability, those that both dropped and rose more slowly than more speculative issues, steady performers. There were two reasons for it, and one glaring mistake. The reasons were that while the market fluctuated every day, even in the most favorable of circumstances, the idea was to not only bag an occasional killing on a high-flyer, but also to hedge your money on safe stocks—not that any stock was truly safe, as Friday had proven—when everything else became unsettled. For those reasons, the benchmark stocks were those that over time had provided safe havens. The mistake was a common one: dice have no memory. Those benchmark stocks were such because the companies they represented had historically good management. Management could change over time. So it was not the stocks that were stable. It was the management, and that was only something from the past, whose currency had to be examined periodically—despite which, those stocks were used to grade trends. And a trend was a trend only *because people thought it was*, and in thinking so, they made it so. Winston had regarded benchmark stocks only as predictors of what the *people* in the market would do, and for him trends were always psychological, predictors of how people would follow an artificial model, not the performance of the model itself. Gant, he realized, didn’t quite see it that way, like so many of the technical traders.

And in selling off Citibank, Columbus had activated a little alarm in its own computer-trading system. And even someone as bright as Mark had forgotten that Citibank was part of the goddamned model!

“Show me other bank stocks,” Winston ordered.

“Well, Chemical went next,” Gant told him, pulling up that track as well. “Then Manny-Hanny, and then others, too. Anyway, we saw it coming, and we jumped into metals and the gold stocks. You know, when the dust settles, it’s going to turn out that we did okay. Not great, but pretty okay,” Gant said, calling up his executive program

for overall transactions, wanting to show something he'd done right. "I took the money from a quick flip on Silicon Alchemy and laid this put on GM and—"

Winston patted him on the shoulder. "Save that for later, Mark. I can see it was a good play."

"Anyway, we were ahead of the trends all the way. Yeah, we got a little hurt when the calls came in and we had to dump a lot of solid things, but that happened to everybody—"

"You don't see it, do you?"

"See what, George?"

"We *were* the trend."

Mark Gant blinked his eyes, and Winston could tell.

He didn't see it.

29

Written Records

The presentation went very well, and at the end of it Cathy Ryan was handed an exquisitely wrapped box by the Professor of Ophthalmic Surgery from Chiba University, who led the Japanese delegation. Unwrapping it, she found a scarf of watered blue silk, embroidered with gold thread. It looked to be more than a hundred years old.

"The blue goes so well with your eyes, Professor Ryan," her colleague said with a smile of genuine admiration. "I fear it is not a sufficiently valuable gift for what I have learned from you today. I have hundreds of diabetic patients at my hospital. With this technique we can hope to restore sight for most of them. A magnificent breakthrough, Professor." He bowed, formally and with clear respect.

"Well, the lasers come from your country," Cathy replied. She wasn't sure what emotion she was supposed to have. The gift was stunning. The man was as sincere as he could be, and his country might be at war with hers. But why wasn't it on the news? If there were a war, why was this foreigner not under arrest? Was she supposed to be gracious to him as a learned colleague or hostile to him as an enemy? What the hell was going on? She looked over at Andrea Price, who just leaned against the back wall and smiled, her arms crossed across her chest.

"And you have taught us how to use them more efficiently. A stunning piece of applied research." The Japanese professor turned to the others and raised his hands. The assembled multitude applauded, and a blushing Caroline Ryan started thinking that she just might get the Lasker statuette for her mantelpiece after all. Everyone shook her hand before leaving for the bus that waited to take them back to the Stouffer's on Pratt Street.

"Can I see it?" Special Agent Price asked after all were gone and the door safely closed. Cathy handed the scarf over. "Lovely. You'll have to buy a new dress to go with it."

"So there never was anything to worry about," Dr. Ryan observed. Interestingly, once she'd gotten fifteen seconds into her lecture, she'd forgotten about it anyway. Wasn't that interesting?

"No, like I told you, I didn't expect anything." Price handed the

scarf back, not without some reluctance. The little professor was right, she thought. It did go nicely with her eyes. "Jack Ryan's wife" was all she'd heard, and then some. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Retinal surgery?" Cathy closed her notebook. "I started off working the front end of the eye, right up to the time little Jack was born. Then I had an idea about how the retina is attached naturally and how we might reattach bad ones. Then we started looking at how to fix blood vessels. Bernie let me run with it, and I got a research grant from NIH to play with, and one thing led to another . . ."

"And now you're the best in the world at this," Price concluded the story.

"Until somebody with better hands comes along and learns how to do it, yes." Cathy smiled. "I suppose I am, for a few more months, anyway."

"So how's the champ?" Bernie Katz asked, entering the room and seeing Price for the first time. The pass on her coat puzzled him. "Do I know you?"

"Andrea Price." The agent gave Katz a quick and thorough visual check before shaking hands. He actually found it flattering until she added, "Secret Service."

"Where were the cops like you when I was a kid?" the surgeon asked gallantly.

"Bernie was one of my first mentors here. He's department chairman now," Cathy explained.

"About to be overtaken in prestige by my colleague. I come bearing good news. I have a spy on the Lasker Committee. You're in the finals, Cathy."

"What's a Lasker?" Price asked.

"There's one step up from a Lasker Prize," Bernie told her. "You have to go to Stockholm to collect it."

"Bernie, I'll never have one of those. A Lasker is hard enough."

"So keep researching, girl!" Katz hugged her and left.

I want it, I want it, I want it! Cathy told herself silently. She didn't have to give voice to the words. It was plain for Special Agent Price to see. Damn, didn't this beat guarding politicians?

"Can I watch one of your procedures?"

"If you want. Anyway, come on." Cathy led her back to her office, not minding her at all now. On the way they walked through the clinic, then one of the labs. In the middle of a corridor, Dr. Ryan stopped dead in her tracks, reached into her pocket, and pulled out a small notebook.

"Did I miss something?" Price asked. She knew she was talking too much, but it took time to learn the habits of your protectees. She also read Cathy Ryan as the type who didn't like being protected, and so

needed to be made comfortable about it.

"You'll have to get used to me," Professor Ryan said, smiling as she scribbled a few notes. "Whenever I have an idea, I write it down right away."

"Don't trust your memory?"

"Never. You can't trust your memory with things that affect live patients. One of the first things they teach you in medical school." Cathy shook her head as she finished up. "Not in this business. Too many opportunities to screw up. If you don't write it down, then it never happened."

That sounded like a good lesson to remember, Andrea Price told herself, following her principal down the corridor. The code name, SURGEON, was perfect for her. Precise, smart, thorough. She might even have made a good agent except for her evident discomfort around guns.

It was already a regular routine, and in many ways that was not new. For a generation, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force had responded to Russian fighter activity out of the forward base at Dolinsk Sokol—at first in cooperation with the USAF—and one of the regular tracks taken by the Soviet Air Force had earned the name "Tokyo Express," probably an unknowing reference to a term invented in 1942 by the United States Marines on Guadalcanal.

For security reasons the E-767s were based with the 6th Air Wing at Komatsu, near Tokyo, but the two F-15Js that operated under the control of the E-767 now aloft over the town of Nemuro at the northeast tip of the island of Hokkaido were actually based on the Home Island at Chitose. These were a hundred miles offshore, and each carried eight missiles, four each of heat-seekers and radar-homers. All were warshots now, requiring only a target.

It was after midnight, local time. The pilots were well rested and alert, comfortably strapped into their ejection seats, their sharp eyes scanning the darkness while fingers made delicate course-corrections on the sticks. Their own targeting radars were switched off, and though their aircraft still flashed with anticollision strobe lights, those were easily switched off should the necessity arise, making them visually nonexistent.

"Eagle One-Five," the digital radio told the element leader, "check out commercial traffic fifty kilometers zero-three-five your position, course two-one-five, angels three-six."

"Roger, Kami," the pilot replied on keying his radio. Kami, the call sign for the orbiting surveillance aircraft, was a word with many meanings, most of them supernatural like "soul" or "spirit." And so

they had rapidly become the modern manifestation of the spirits guarding their country, with the F-15Js as the strong arms that gave power to the will of those spirits. On command, the two fighters came right, climbing on a shallow, fuel-efficient slope for five minutes until they were at thirty-seven thousand feet, cruising outbound from their country at five hundred knots, their radars still off, but now they received a digital feed from the Kami that appeared on their own sets, one more of the new innovations and something the Americans didn't have. The element leader alternated his eyes up and down. A pity, he thought, that the hand-off display didn't integrate with his head-up display. Maybe the next modification would do that.

"There," he said over his low-power radio.

"I have it," his wingman acknowledged.

Both fighters turned to the left now, descending slowly behind what appeared to be an Air Canada 767-ER. Yes, the floodlit tail showed the maple-leaf logo of that airline. Probably the regular transpolar flight out of Toronto International into Narita. The timing was about right. They approached from almost directly astern—not quite exactly, lest an overly quick overtake result in a ramming—and the buffet told them that they were in the wake turbulence of a "heavy," a wide-bodied commercial transport. The flight leader closed until he could see the line of cabin lights, and the huge engine under each wing, and the stubby nose of the Boeing product. He keyed his radio again.

"Kami, Eagle One-Five."

"Eagle."

"Positive identification, Air Canada Seven-Six-Seven Echo Romeo, inbound at indicated course and speed." Interestingly, the drill for the BARCAP—Barrier Combat Air Patrol—was to use English. That was the international language of aviation. All their pilots spoke it, and it worked better for important communications.

"Roger." And on further command, the fighters broke off to their programmed patrol area. The Canadian pilot of the airliner would never know that two armed fighters had closed to within three hundred meters of his aircraft—but then he had no reason to expect that any would, because the world was at peace, at least this part of it.

For their part, the fighter-drivers accepted their new duties phlegmatically along with the modification in their daily patterns of existence. For the indefinite future no less than two fighters would hold this patrol station, with two more back at Chitose at plus-five alert, and another four at plus-thirty. Their wing commander was pressing for permission to increase his alert-status further still, for despite what Tokyo said, their nation *was* at war, and that was what he'd told his people. The Americans were formidable adversaries, he'd said in his first lecture to his pilots and senior ground-staff. Clever

ones, devious, and dangerously aggressive. Worst of all, at their best they were utterly unpredictable, the reverse of the Japanese who, he'd gone on, tended to be highly predictable. Perhaps that was why he'd been posted to this command, the pilots thought. If things went further, the first contact with hostile American forces would be here. He wanted to be ready for it, despite the huge price of money, fuel, and fatigue that attended it. The pilots thoroughly approved. War was a serious business, and though new to it, they didn't shrink from its responsibilities.

The time factor would soon become his greatest frustration, Ryan thought. Tokyo was fourteen hours ahead of Washington. It was dark there now, and the next day, and whatever clever idea he might come up with would have to wait hours until implementation. The same was true in the IO, but at least he had direct comms to Admiral Dubro's battle force. Getting word to Clark and Chavez meant going via Moscow, and then farther either by contact via RVS officer in Tokyo—not something to be done too frequently—or by reverse-modem message whenever Clark lit up his computer for a dispatch to the Interfax News Agency. There would necessarily be a time lag in anything he did, and that could get people killed.

It was about information. It always was, always would be. The real trick was in finding out what was going on. What was the other side doing? What were they thinking?

What is it that they want to accomplish? he asked himself.

War was always about economics, one of the few things that Marx had gotten right. It was just greed, really, as he'd told the President, an armed robbery writ large. At the nation-state level, the terms were couched in terms such as Manifest Destiny or *Lebensraum* or other political slogans to grab the attention and ardor of the masses, but that's what it came down to: *They have it. We want it. Let's get it.*

And yet the Mariana Islands weren't worth it. They were simply not worth the political or economic cost. This affair would ipso facto cost Japan her most lucrative trading partner. There could be no recovery from this, not for years. The market positions so carefully established and exploited since the 1960s would be obliterated by something politely termed public resentment but far more deeply felt than that. For what possible reason could a country so married to the idea of business turn its back on practical considerations?

But war is never rational, Jack. You told the President that yourself.

"So tell me, what the hell are they thinking?" he commanded, instantly regretting the profanity.

They were in a basement conference room. For the first meeting of

the working group, Scott Adler was absent, off with Secretary Hanson. There were two National Intelligence Officers, and four people from State, and they looked as puzzled and bemused as he did, Ryan thought. Wasn't that just great. For several seconds nothing happened. Hardly unexpected, Jack thought. It was always a matter of clinical interest for him when he asked for real opinions from a group of bureaucrats: who would say what?

"They're mad and they're scared." It was Chris Cook, one of the commercial guys from State. He'd done two tours at the embassy in Tokyo, spoke the language passably well, and had run point on several rounds of the trade negotiations, always taking back seat to senior men and women, but usually the guy who did the real work. That was how things were, and Jack remembered resenting that others sometimes got the credit for his ideas. He nodded at the comment, seeing that the others around the table did the same, grateful that someone else had taken the initiative.

"I know why they're mad. Tell me why they're scared."

"Well, hell, they still have the Russians close by, and the Chinese, both still major powers, but we've withdrawn from the Western Pacific, right? In their mind, it leaves them high and dry—and now it looks to them like we've turned on them. That makes us potential enemies, too, doesn't it? Where does that leave them? What real friends do they have?"

"Why take the Marianas?" Jack asked, reminding himself that Japan had not *been* attacked by those countries in historically recent times, but had done so herself to all of them. Cook had made a perhaps unintended point. How did Japan respond to outside threats? By attacking first.

"It gives them defensive depth, bases outside their home islands."

Okay, that makes sense, Jack thought. Satellite photos less than an hour old hung on the wall. There were fighters now on the airstrips at Saipan and Guam, along with E-2C Hawkeye airborne-early-warning birds of the same type that operated off American carriers. That created a defensive barrier that extended twelve hundred miles almost due south from Tokyo. It could be seen as a formidable wall against American attacks, and was in essence a reduced version of Japanese grand strategy in the Second World War. Again Cook had made a sound observation.

"But are we really a threat to them?" he asked.

"We certainly are now," Cook replied.

"Because they forced us to be," one of the NIOs snarled, entering the discussion. Cook leaned across the table at him.

"Why do people start wars? Because they're afraid of something! For Christ's sake, they've gone through more governments in the last

five years than the Italians. The country is politically unstable. They have real economic problems. Until recently their currency's been in trouble. Their stock market's gone down the tubes because of our trade legislation, and we've faced them with financial ruin, and you ask *why* they got a little paranoid? If something like this happened to us, what the hell would we do?" the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State demanded, rather cowing the National Intelligence Officer, Ryan saw.

Good, he thought. A lively discussion was usually helpful, as the hottest fire made the strongest steel.

"My sympathy for the other side is mitigated by the fact that they have invaded U.S. territory and violated the human rights of American citizens." The reply to Cook's tirade struck Ryan as somewhat arch. The response was that of a lead hound on the scent of a crippled fox, able to play with the quarry instead of the other way around for a change. Always a good feeling.

"And we've already put a couple hundred thousand of their citizens out of work. What about their rights?"

"Fuck their rights! Whose side are you on, Cook?"

The DASS just leaned back into his chair and smiled as he slid the knife in. "I thought I was supposed to tell everyone what they're thinking. Isn't that what we're here for? What they're thinking is that we've jerked them around, bashed them, belittled them, and generally let them know that we tolerate them through sufferance and not respect since before I was born. We've never dealt with them as equals, and they think that they deserve better from us, and they don't like it. And you know," Cook went on, "I don't blame them for feeling that way. Okay, so now they've lashed out. That's wrong, and I deplore it, but we need to recognize that they tried to do it in as nonlethal a way as possible, consistent with their strategic goals. That's something we need to consider here, isn't it?"

"The Ambassador says his country is willing to let it stop here," Ryan told them, noting the look in Cook's eyes. Clearly he'd been thinking about the situation, and that was good. "Are they serious?"

He'd asked another tough question again, something that the people around the table didn't much like. Tough questions required definitive answers, and such answers could often be wrong. It was toughest for the NIOs. The National Intelligence Officers were senior people from CIA, DIA, or NSA, usually. One of them was always with the President to give him an opinion in the event of a rapidly evolving crisis. They were supposed to be experts in their fields, and they were, as, for that matter, was Ryan, who'd been an NIO himself. But there was a problem with such people. An NIO was generally a serious, tough-minded man or woman. They didn't fear death, but they *did* fear being

wrong on a hard call. For that reason, even putting a gun to one's head didn't guarantee an unequivocal answer to a tough question. He looked from face to face, seeing that Cook did the same, with contempt on his face.

"Yes, sir, I think it likely that they are. It's also likely that they will offer us something back. They know that they have to let us save face here, too. We can count on it, and that will work in our favor if we choose to negotiate with them."

"Would you recommend that?"

A smile and a nod. "It never hurts you to talk with somebody, no matter what the situation is, does it? I'm a State Department puke, remember? I have to recommend that. I don't know the military side. I don't know if we can contest this thing or not. I presume we can, and that they know we can, and that they know they're gambling, and that they're even more scared than we are. We can use that in our favor."

"What can we press for?" Ryan asked, chewing on his pen.

"Status quo ante," Cook replied at once. "Complete withdrawal from the Marianas, restoration of the islands and their citizens to U.S. rule, reparations to the families of the people killed, punishment of those responsible for their deaths." Even the NIOs nodded at that, Ryan saw. He was already starting to like Cook. He spoke his mind, and what he said had a logic to it.

"What will we get?" Again the answer was plain and simple.

"Less." *Where the hell has Scott Adler been hiding this guy?* Ryan thought. *He speaks my language.* "They have to give us something, but they won't give it all back."

"And if we press?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"If we want it all back, then we may have to fight for it," Cook said. "If you want my opinion, that's dangerous." Ryan excused the facile conclusion. He was, after all, a State Department puke, and part of that culture.

"Will the Ambassador have the clout to negotiate?"

"I think so, yes," Cook said after a moment. "He has a good staff, he's a very senior professional diplomat. He knows Washington and he knows how to play in the bigs. That's why they sent him here."

Jaw, jaw is better than war, war. Jack remembered the words of Winston Churchill. And that was true, especially if the former did not entirely preclude the threat of the latter.

"Okay," Ryan said. "I have some other things that need doing. You guys stay here. I want a position paper. I want options. I want multiple opening positions for both sides. I want end-game scenarios. I want likely responses on their part to *theoretical* military moves on our part. Most of all," he said directly to the NIOs, "I want a feel for their nuclear capacity, and the conditions under which they might feel the

need to make use of it."

"What warning will we have?" The question, surprisingly, came from Cook. The answer, surprisingly, came from the other NIO, who felt the need, now, to show something of what he knew.

"The Cobra Dane radar on Shemya still works. So do the DSPS satellites. We'll get launch warning and impact prediction if it comes to that. Dr. Ryan, have we done anything—"

"The Air Force has air-launched cruise missiles in the stockpile. They would be carried in by B-1 bombers. We also have the option of rearming Tomahawk cruise missiles with W-80 warheads as well for launch by submarines or surface ships. The Russians know that we may exercise that option, and they will not object so long as we keep it quiet."

"That's an escalation," Cook warned. "We want to be careful about that."

"What about their SS-19s?" the second NIO inquired delicately.

"They think they need them. It will not be easy to talk them out of 'em." Cook looked around the table. "We have nuked their country, remember. It's a very sensitive subject, and we're dealing with people motivated by paranoia. I recommend caution on that issue."

"Noted," Ryan said as he stood. "You know what I want, people. Get to work." It felt a little good to be able to give an order like that, but less so to have to do it, and less still in anticipation of the answers he would receive for his questions. But you had to start somewhere.

"Another hard day?" Nomuri asked.

"I thought with Yamata gone it would get easier," Kazuo said. He shook his head, leaning back against the fine wood rim of the tub. "I was wrong."

The others nodded curt agreement at their friend's observation, and they all missed Taoka's sexual stories now. They needed the distraction, but only Nomuri knew why they had ended.

"So what is going on? Now Goto says that we need America. Last week they were our enemies, and now we are friendly again? This is very confusing for a simple person like me," Chet said, rubbing his closed eyes, and wondering what the bait would draw. Developing his rapport with these men had not been easy because they and he were so different, and it was to be expected that he would envy them, and they him. He was an entrepreneur, they thought, who ran his own business, and they the senior salarymen of major corporations. They had security. He had independence. They were expected to be overworked. He marched to his own drum. They had more money. He had less stress. And now they had knowledge, and he did not.

"We have confronted America," one of their number said.

"So I gather. Isn't that highly dangerous?"

"In the short term, yes," Taoka said, letting the blisteringly hot water soothe his stress-knotted muscles. "Though I think we have already won."

"But won *what*, my friend? I feel I have started watching a mystery in the middle of the show, and all I know is that there's a pretty, mysterious girl on the train to Osaka." He referred to a dramatic convention in Japan, mysteries based on how efficiently the nation's trains ran.

"Well, as my boss tells it," another senior aide decided to explain, "it means true independence for our country."

"Aren't we independent already?" Nomuri asked in open puzzlement. "There are hardly any American soldiers here to annoy us anymore."

"And those under guard now," Taoka observed. "You don't understand. Independence means more than politics. It means economic independence, too. It means not going to others for what we need to survive."

"It means the Northern Resource Area, Kazuo," another of their number said, going too far, and knowing it from the way two pairs of eyes opened in warning.

"I wish it would mean shorter days and getting home on time for a change instead of sleeping in a damned coffin-tube two or three nights a week," one of the more alert ones said to alter the course of the conversation.

Taoka grunted. "Yes, how can one get a girl in there?" The guffaws that followed that one were forced, Nomuri, thought.

"You salarymen and your secrets! Ha!" the CIA officer snapped. "I hope you do better with your women." He paused. "Will all this affect my business?" A good idea, he thought, to ask a question like that.

"For the better, I should think," Kazuo said. There was general agreement on that point.

"We must all be patient. There will be hard times before the good ones truly come."

"But they *will* come," another suggested confidently. "The really hard part is behind us."

Not if I can help it, Nomuri didn't tell them. But what the hell did "Northern Resource Area" mean? It was so like the intelligence business that he knew he'd heard something important, quite without knowing what the hell it was all about. Then he had to cover himself with a lengthy discourse on his new relationship with the hostess, to be sure, again, that they would remember this, and not his questions.

It was a shame to have to arrive in the darkness, but that was mere fortune. Half of the fleet had diverted for Guam, which had a far better natural harbor, because all the people in these islands had to see the Japanese Navy—Admiral Sato was weary of the "Self-Defense Force" title. His was a *navy* now, composed of fighting ships and fighting men that had tasted battle, after a fashion, and if historians would later comment that their battle had not been a real one or a fair one, well, what military textbook did *not* cite the value of surprise in offensive operations? None that he knew of, the Admiral told himself, seeing the loom of Mount Takpochao through his binoculars. There was already a powerful radar there, up and operating, his electronics technicians had told him an hour earlier. Yet another important factor in defending what was again his country's native soil.

He was alone on the starboard bridge wing in the predawn gloom. Such an odd term, he thought. Gloom? Not at all. There was a wonderful peace to this, especially when you were alone to keep it to yourself, and your mind started editing the distractions out. Above his head was the faint buzz of electronic gear, like a hive of slumbering bees, and that noise was soon blanked out. There was also the distant hum of the ship's systems, mostly the engines, and airconditioning blowers, he knew, shrugging it off. There were no human noises to trouble him. The captain of *Mutsu* enforced good bridge discipline. The sailors didn't speak unless they had reason to, concentrating on their duties as they were supposed to do. One by one, Admiral Sato eliminated the extraneous noises. That left only the sound of the sea, the wonderful swish of steel hull parting the waves. He looked down to see it, the fan-shaped foam whose white was both brilliant and faint at the same time, and aft the wide swath was a pleasant fluorescent green from the disturbance of phytoplankton, tiny creatures that came to the surface at night for reasons Sato had never troubled himself to understand. Perhaps to enjoy the moon and stars, he told himself with a smile in the darkness. Ahead was the island of Saipan, just a space on the horizon blacker than the darkness itself; it seemed so because it occulted the stars on the western horizon, and a seaman's mind knew that where there were no stars on a clear night, then there had to be land. The lookouts at their stations atop the forward superstructure had seen it long before him, but that didn't lessen the pleasure of his own discovery, and as with sailors of every generation there was something special to a landfall, because every voyage ended with discovery of some sort. And so had this one.

More sounds. First the jerky whirs of electrical motors turning radar systems, then something else. He knew he was late noticing it, off to starboard, a deep rumble, like something tearing, growing rapidly in

intensity until he knew it could only be the roar of an approaching aircraft. He lowered his binoculars and looked off to the right, seeing nothing until his eyes caught movement close aboard, and two dart shapes streaked overhead. *Mutsu* trembled in their wake, giving Admiral Sato a chill followed by a flush of anger. He pulled open the door to the wheelhouse.

"What the hell was that?"

"Two F-3s conducting an attack drill," the officer of the deck replied. "They've been tracking them in CIC for several minutes. We had them illuminated with our missile trackers."

"Will someone tell those 'wild eagles' that flying directly over a ship in the dark risks damage to us, and foolish death to them!"

"But, Admiral—" the OOD tried to say.

"*But* we are a valuable fleet unit and I do not wish one of my ships to have to spend a month in the yard having her mast replaced because some damned fool of an aviator couldn't see us in the dark!"

"*Hai.* I will make the call at once."

Spoiling my morning that way, Sato fumed, going back out to sit in the leather chair and doze off.

Was he the first guy to figure it out? Winston asked himself. Then he asked himself why he should find that surprising. The FBI and the rest were evidently trying to put things back together, and their main effort was probably to defend against fraud. Worse, they were also going over all the records, not just those of the Columbus Group. It had to be a virtual ocean of data, and they would have been unfamiliar with the stuff, and this was a singularly bad time for on-the-job training.

The TV told the story. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank had been on all the morning talk shows, which had to have kept his driver busy in D.C. this day, followed by a strong public statement in the White House Press Room, followed by a lengthy interview on CNN. It was working, after a fashion, and TV showed that as well. A lot of people had shown up at banks before lunch, surprised there to find piles of cash trucked out the previous night to make what in military terms was probably called a show of force. Though the Chairman had evidently jawboned every major banker in the country, the reverse was true of the tellers meeting depositors at their windows: *Oh, you want cash? Well, of course we have all you need.* In not a few cases, by the time people got home they started to feel a new variety of paranoia—*keep all this cash at home?*—and by afternoon some had even begun coming back to redeposit.

That would be Buzz Fiedler's work, too, and a good man he was,

Winston thought, for an academic. The Treasury Secretary was only buying time, and doing so with money, but it was a good tactic, good enough to confuse the public into believing things were not as bad as they appeared.

Serious investors knew better. Things were bad, and the play in the banks was a stopgap measure at best. The Fed was dumping cash into the system. Though a good idea for a day or so, the net effect by the end of the week had to be to weaken the dollar further still, and already American T-Bills were about as popular in the global financial community as plague rats. Worst of all, though Fiedler had prevented a banking panic for the time being, you could hold back a panic only so long, and unless you could restore confidence in a real way, the longer you played stopgap games, the worse would be the renewed panic if those measures failed, for then there would be no stopping it. That was what Winston really expected.

Because the Gordian knot around the throat of the investment system would not soon be untied.

Winston thought he had decoded the likely cause of the event, but along the way he'd learned that there might not be a solution. The sabotage at DTC had been the master stroke. Fundamentally, no single person knew what he owned, what he'd paid for it, when he'd gotten it, or what cash he had left; and the absence of knowledge was metastatic. Individual investors didn't know. Institutions didn't know. The trading houses didn't know. Nobody knew.

How would the real panic start? In short order, pension funds would have to write their monthly checks—but would the banks honor them? The Fed would encourage them to do so, but somewhere along the line there would be one bank that would not, due to troubles of its own—just one, such things always began in a single place, after all—and that would start yet another cascade, and the Fed would have to step in again by boosting the money supply, and *that* could start a hyperinflationary cycle. That was the ultimate nightmare. Winston well remembered the way that inflation had affected the market and the country in the late 1970s, the "malaise" that had indeed been real, the loss of national confidence that had manifested itself with nutcases building cabins in the Northwestern mountains and bad movies about life after the apocalypse. And even then inflation had topped out at what? Thirteen percent or so. Twenty-percent interest rates. A country strangling from nothing more than the loss of confidence that had resulted from gasoline lines and a vacillating president. Those times might well seem nostalgic indeed.

This would be far worse, something not like America at all, something from the Weimar Republic, something from Argentina in the bad old days, or Brazil under military rule. And it wouldn't stop

just with America, would it? Just as in 1929, the ripple effects would spread far, crippling economies across the world, well beyond even Winston's capacity for prediction. He would not be badly hurt personally, George knew. Even the 90-percent diminution of his personal wealth would leave a vast and comfortable sum—he always hedged some of his bets on issues that owned physically real things, like oil or gold; and he had his own gold holdings, real metal bars in vaults, like a miser of old—and since major depressions were ultimately *deflationary*, the relative value of his diverse holdings would actually increase after a time. He knew that he and his family would survive and thrive, but the cost to those less fortunate than himself was economic and social chaos. And he wasn't in the business just for himself, was he? Over time he'd come to think long at night about the little guys who'd seen his TV ads and entrusted him with their savings. It was a magic word, trust. It meant that you had an obligation to the people who gave it to you. It meant that they believed what you said about yourself, and that you had to prove that it was real, not merely to them, but to yourself as well. Because if you failed, then houses were not bought, kids not educated, and the dreams of real people not unlike yourself would die aborning. Bad enough just in America, Winston thought, but this event would—could—affect the entire world.

And he had to know what he'd done. It was not an accident. It had been a well-considered plan, executed with style. *Yamata. That clever son of a bitch,* Winston thought. Perhaps the first Japanese investor he'd ever respected. The first one who'd really understood the game both tactically and strategically. Well, that was sure as hell the case. The look on his face, those dark eyes over the champagne glass. *Why didn't you see it then?* So that was the game after all, wasn't it?

But no. It couldn't be the entire game. A part of it, perhaps, a tactic aimed at something else. What? What could be so important that Raizo Yamata was willing to kiss off his personal fortune, and along the way destroy the very global markets upon which his own corporations and his own national economy depended? That was not something to enter the mind of a businessman, certainly not something to warm the soul of a maven on the Street.

It was strange to have it all figured out and yet not understand the sense of it. Winston looked out the window as the sun set on New York Harbor. He had to tell somebody, and that somebody had to understand what this was all about. Fiedler? Maybe. Better somebody who knew the Street . . . and knew other things, too. But who?

"Are they ours?" All four lay alee in Laolao Bay. One of their number

was tucked alongside an oiler, doubtless taking on fuel.

Oreza shook his head. “Paint’s wrong. The Navy paints its ships darker, bluer, like.”

“They look like serious ships, man.” Burroughs handed the binoculars back.

“Billboard radars, vertical-launch cells for missiles, antisub helicopters. They’re Aegis ‘cans, like our Burke class. They’re serious, all right. Airplanes are afraid of’em.” As Portagee watched, a helicopter lifted off one and headed for the beach.

“Report in?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

Burroughs went into the living room and put the batteries back in his phone. The idea of completely depowering it was probably unnecessary, but it was safe, and neither man was interested in finding out how the Japanese treated spies, for that was what they were. It was also awkward, putting the antenna through the hole in the bottom of the serving bowl and then holding it next to your head, but it did give a certain element of humor to the exercise, and they needed a reason to smile at something.

“NMCC, Admiral Jackson.”

“You have the duty again, sir?”

“Well, Master Chief, I guess we both do. What do you have to report?”

“Four Aegis destroyers offshore, east side of the island. One’s taking fuel on now from a small fleet oiler. They showed up just after dawn. Two more car carriers at the quay, another on the horizon outbound. We counted twenty fighter aircraft a while ago. About half of them are F-15s with twin tails. The other half are single tails, but I don’t know the type. Otherwise nothing new to tell you about.”

Jackson was looking at a satellite photo only an hour old showing four ships in line-ahead formation, and fighters dispersed at both the airfields. He made a note and nodded.

“What’s it like there?” Robby asked. “I mean, they hassling anybody, arrests, that sort of thing?” He heard the voice at the other end snort.

“Negative, sir. Everybody’s just nice as can be. Hell, they’re on TV all the time, the public-access cable channel, telling us how much money they plan to spend here and all the things they’re gonna do for us.” Jackson heard the disgust in the man’s voice.

“Fair enough. I might not always be here. I do have to get a little sleep, but this line is set aside for your exclusive use now, okay?”

“Roger that, Admiral.”

"Play it real cool, Master Chief. No heroic shit, okay?"

"That's kid stuff, sir. I know better," Oreza assured him.

"Then close down, Oreza. Good work." Jackson heard the line go dead before he set his phone down. "Better you than me, man," he added to himself. Then he looked over at the next desk.

"Got it on tape," an Air Force intelligence officer told him. "He confirms the satellite data. I'm inclined to believe that he's still safe."

"Let's keep him that way. I don't want anybody calling out to them without my say-so," Jackson ordered.

"Roge-o, sir." I don't think we can anyway, he didn't add.

"Tough day?" Paul Robberton asked.

"I've had worse," Ryan answered. But this crisis was too new for so confident an evaluation. "Does your wife mind . . .?"

"She's used to having me away, and we'll get a routine figured out in a day or so." The Secret Service agent paused. "How's the Boss doing?"

"As usual he gets the hard parts. We all dump on him, right?" Jack admitted, looking out the window as they turned off Route 50. "He's a good man, Paul."

"So are you, doc. We were all pretty glad to get you back." He paused. "How tough is it?" The Secret Service had the happy circumstance of needing to know almost everything, which was just as well, since they overheard almost everything anyway.

"Didn't they tell you? The Japanese have built nukes. And they have ballistic launchers to deliver them."

Paul's hands tightened on the wheel. "Lovely. But they can't be that crazy."

"On the evening of December 7, 1941, USS *Enterprise* pulled into Pearl Harbor to refuel and rearm. Admiral Bill Halsey was riding the bridge, as usual, and looked at the mess from the morning's strike and said, 'When this war is over, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell.' " Ryan wondered why he'd just said that.

"That's in your book. It must have been a good line for the guys around him."

"I suppose. If they use their nukes, that's what'll happen to them. Yeah, they have to know that," Ryan said, his fatigue catching up with him.

"You need about eight hours, Dr. Ryan, maybe nine," Robberton said judiciously. "It's like with us. Fatigue really messes up your higher-brain functions. The Boss needs you sharp, doc, okay?"

"No argument there. I might even have a drink tonight," Ryan thought aloud.

There was an extra car in the driveway, Jack saw, and a new face that looked out the window as the official car pulled into the parking pad.

"That's Andrea. I already talked with her. Your wife had a good lecture today, by the way. Everything went just fine."

"Good thing we have two guest rooms." Jack chuckled as he walked into the house. The mood was happy enough, and it seemed that Cathy and Agent Price were getting along. The two agents conferred while Ryan ate a light dinner.

"Honey, what's going on?" Cathy asked.

"We're involved in a major crisis with Japan, plus the Wall Street thing."

"But how come—"

"Everything that's happened so far has been at sea. It hasn't broken the news yet, but it will."

"War?"

Jack looked up and nodded. "Maybe."

"But the people at Wilmer today, they were just as nice—you mean they don't know either?"

Ryan nodded. "That's right."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"No, honey, it sure doesn't." The phone rang just then, the regular house phone. Jack was the closest and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Is this Dr. John Ryan?" a voice asked.

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"George Winston. I don't know if you remember, but we met last year at the Harvard Club. I gave a little speech about derivatives. You were at the next table over. By the way, nice job on the Silicon Alchemy IPO."

"Seems like a while ago," Ryan said. "Look, it's kinda busy down here, and—"

"I want to meet with you. It's important," Winston said.

"What about?"

"I'll need fifteen or twenty minutes to explain it. I have my G at Newark. I can be down whenever you say." The voice paused. "Dr. Ryan, I wouldn't be asking unless I thought it was important."

Jack thought about it for a second. George Winston was a serious player. His rep on the Street was enviable: tough, shrewd, honest. And, Ryan remembered, he'd sold control of his fleet to somebody from Japan. Somebody named Yamata—a name that had turned up before.

"Okay, I'll squeeze you in. Call my office tomorrow about eight for a time."

"See you tomorrow then. Thanks for listening." The line went dead.

When he looked over at his wife, she was back at work, transcribing notes from her carry-notebook to her laptop computer, an Apple Powerbook 800.

"I thought you had a secretary for that," he observed with a tolerant smile.

"She can't think about these things when she writes up my notes. I can." Cathy was afraid to relate Bernie's news on the Lasker. She'd picked up several bad habits from her husband. One of them was his Irish-peasant belief in luck, and how you could spoil luck by talking about it. "I had an interesting idea today, just after the lecture."

"And you wrote it right down," her husband observed. Cathy looked up with her usual impish smile.

"Jack, if you don't write it down—"

"Then it never happened."

30

Why Not?

The dawn came up like thunder in this part of the world, or so the poem went. Sure as hell the sun was hot, Admiral Dubro told himself. It was almost as hot as his temper. His demeanor was normally pleasant, but he had simmered in both tropical heat and bureaucratic indifference for long enough. He supposed that the policy weenies and the planning weenies and the political weenies had the same take on things: he and his battle force could dance around here indefinitely without detection, doing their Ghostbusters number and intimidating the Indians without actual contact. A fine game, to be sure, but not an endless one. The idea was to get your battle force in close without detection and then *strike* at the enemy without warning. A nuclear-powered carrier was good at that. You could do it once, twice, even three times if the force commander had it together, but you couldn't do it forever, because the other side had brains, too, and sooner or later a break would go the wrong way.

In this case it wasn't the players who'd goofed. It was the water boy, and it hadn't even been much of an error. As his operations people had reconstructed events, a single Indian Sea Harrier at the very end of its patrol arc had had his look-down radar on and gotten a hit on one of Dubro's oilers, which were now racing northeast to refill his escort ships whose bunkers were nearly two thirds empty after the speed run south of Sri Lanka. An hour later another Harrier, probably stripped of weapons and carrying nothing but fuel tanks, had gotten close enough for a visual. The replenishment-group commander had altered course, but the damage was done. The placement of the two oilers and their two-frigate escort could only have meant that Dubro was now east-by-south of Dondra Head. The Indian fleet had turned at once, satellite photos showed, split into two groups, and headed northeast as well. Dubro had little choice but to allow the oilers to continue on their base course. Covertness or not, his oil-fueled escorts were dangerously close to empty bunkers, and that was a hazard he could not afford. Dubro drank his wake-up coffee while his eyes burned holes in the bulkhead. Commander Harrison sat across from the Admiral's desk, sensibly not saying much of anything until his boss

was ready to speak.

"What's the good word, Ed?"

"We still have them outgunned, sir," the Force Operations Officer replied. "Maybe we need to demonstrate that."

Outgunned? Dubro wondered. Well, yes, that was true, but only two thirds of his aircraft were fully mission-capable now. They'd been away too long from base. They were running out of the stores needed to keep the aircraft operating. In the hangar bay, aircraft sat with inspection hatches open, awaiting parts that the ship no longer had. He was depending on the replenishment ships for those, for the parts flown into Diego Garcia from stateside. Three days after delivery, he'd be back to battery, after a fashion, but his people were tired. Two men had been hurt on the flight deck the day before. Not because they were stupid. Not because they were inexperienced. Because they'd been doing it too damned long, and fatigue was even more dangerous to the mind than to the body, especially in the frenetic environment of a carrier's flight deck. The same was true of everyone in the battle force, from the lowliest striker to . . . himself. The strain of continuous decision-making was starting to tell. And all he could do about that was to switch to decaf.

"How are the pilots?" Mike Dubro asked.

"Sir, they'll do what you tell them to do."

"Okay, we do light patrolling today. I want a pair of Toms up all the time, at least four more on plus-five, fully armed for air-to-air. Fleet course is one-eight-zero, speed of advance twenty-five knots. We link up with the replenishment group and get everyone topped off. Otherwise, we do a stand-down. I want people rested insofar as that is possible. Our friend is going to start hunting tomorrow, and the game is going to get interesting."

"We start going head-to-head?" the ops officer asked.

"Yeah." Dubro nodded. He checked his watch. Nighttime in Washington. The people with brains would be heading for bed now. He'd soon make another demand for instructions, and he wanted the smart ones to pass it along, preferably with a feel for the urgency of his situation. Pay-or-play time was grossly overdue, and all he could be sure of now was that it would come unexpectedly—and after that, Japan? Harrison and his people were already spending half of their time on that.

The tradecraft, again, was of the bad-TV variety, and the only consolation was that maybe the Russians were right. Maybe Scherenko had told them the truth. Maybe they were not in any real danger from the PSID. That seemed a very thin reed to Clark, none of whose

education had encouraged him to trust Russians to do anything pleasant to Americans.

"The wheel may be crooked," he whispered to himself—in English, damn it! In any event, what they'd done was laughably simple. Nomuri had parked his car in the same lease-garage that the hotel maintained for its guests, and now Nomuri had a key to Clark's rental car, and over the left-side visor was a computer disk. This Clark retrieved and handed to Chavez, who slid it into their laptop. An electronic chime announced the activation of the machine as Clark headed out into the traffic. Ding copied the file over to the hard-disk and erased the floppy, which would soon be disposed of. The report was verbose. Chavez read it silently before turning the car radio on, then relayed the high points in whispers over the noise.

"Northern Resource Area?" John asked.

"*Da.* A curious phrase," Ding agreed, thinking. It occurred to him that his diction was better in Russian than English, perhaps because he'd learned English on the street, and Russian in a proper school from a team of people with a genuine love for it. The young intelligence officer dismissed the thought angrily.

Northern Resource Area, he thought. Why did that sound familiar? But they had other things to do, and that was tense enough. Ding found that while he liked the paramilitary end of being a field officer, this spy stuff was not exactly his cup of tea. Too scary, too paranoid.

Isamu Kimura was at the expected meeting site. Fortunately his job allowed him to be in and out a lot, and to sit down with foreigners as a matter of routine. One benefit was that he had an eye for safe places. This one was on the docks, thankfully not overly busy at the moment, but at the same time a location where such a meeting would not be overly out of character. It was also a hard one to bug. There were still harbor sounds to mask quiet conversation.

Clark was even more uneasy, if that were possible. With any covert recruitment there was a period during which open contact was safe, but the safety diminished linearly over time at a rapid but unknown rate, and there were other considerations. Kimura was motivated by—what? Clark didn't know why Oleg Lyalin had been able to recruit him. It wasn't money. The Russians had never paid him anything. It wasn't ideology. Kimura wasn't a Communist in his political creed. Was it ego? Did he think he was worthy of a better post that someone else had taken? Or, most dangerously of all, was he a patriot, the eccentric personal sort who judged what was good for his country in his own mind? Or, as Ding might have observed, was he just fucked up? Not a very elegant turn of phrase, but in Clark's experience not an unknown state of affairs, either. The simple version was that Clark didn't know; worse, any motivation for treason simply justified

betraying your country to another, and there was something in him that refused to feel comfortable with such people. Perhaps cops didn't like dealing with their informants either, John told himself. Small comfort, that.

"What's so important?" Kimura asked, halfway down a vacant quay. The idle ships in Tokyo Bay were clearly visible, and he wondered if the meeting place had been selected for just that reason.

"Your country has nuclear weapons," Clark told him simply.

"What?" First the head turned, then the feet stopped, then a very pale look came over his face.

"That's what your ambassador in Washington told the American president on Saturday. The Americans are in a panic. At least that's what Moscow Center has told us." Clark smiled in a very Russian way. "I must say that you've won my professional admiration to have done it so openly, especially buying our own rockets to be the delivery vehicles. I must also tell you that the government of my country is decidedly displeased by this development."

"The rockets could easily be aimed at us." Chavez added dryly, "They make people nervous."

"I had no idea. Are you sure?" Kimura started walking again, just to get his blood flowing.

"We have a highly placed source in the U.S. government. It is not a mistake." Clark's voice, Ding noted, was coldly businesslike: *Ah, your car has a scratch on the bumper. I know a good man to fix it.*

"So that's why they thought they could get away with it." Kimura didn't have to say any more, and it was plain that a piece of the puzzle had just dropped into place in his mind. He took a few breaths before speaking again: "This is madness."

And those were three of the most welcome words John had heard since calling home from Berlin to hear that his wife had safely delivered their second child. Now it was time for real hardball. He spoke without smiling, fully into his role as a senior Russian intelligence officer, trained by the KGB to be one of the best in the world:

"Yes, my friend. Any time you frighten a major power, that is truly madness. Whoever is playing this game, I hope they know how dangerous it is. Please heed my words, *Gospodin* Kimura. My country is gravely concerned. Do you understand? *Gravely* concerned. You've made fools of us before America and the entire world. You have weapons that can threaten my country as easily as they can threaten America. You have initiated action against the United States, and we do not see a good reason for it. That makes you unpredictable in our eyes, and a country with nuclear-tipped rockets and political instability is not a pleasant prospect. This crisis is going to expand

unless sensible people take proper action. We are not concerned about your commercial disagreements with America, but when the possibility of real war exists, then we are concerned."

Kimura was still pale at the prospect.

"What is your rank, Klerk-san?"

"I am a full colonel of the Seventh Department, Line PR, the First Chief Directorate of the Committee for State Security."

"I thought—"

"Yes, the new name, the new designation, what rubbish," Clark observed with a snort. "Kimura-san, I am an intelligence officer. My job is to protect my country. I'd expected this posting to be a simple, pleasant one, but now I find myself—did I tell you about our Project RYAN?"

"You mentioned it once, but—"

"Upon the election of the American President Reagan—I was a captain then, like Chekov here—our political masters looked at the ideological beliefs of the man and feared that he might actually consider a nuclear strike against our country. We immediately launched a frantic effort to discern what those chances were. We eventually decided that it was a mistake, that Reagan, while he hated the Soviet Union, was not a fool.

"But now," Colonel Klerk went on, "what does my country see? A nation with covertly developed nuclear weapons. A nation that has for no good reason chosen to attack a country that is more business partner than enemy. A nation which more than once has attacked Russia. And so the orders I received sound very much like Project RYAN. Do you understand me now?"

"What do you want?" Kimura asked, already knowing the answer.

"I want to know the location of those rockets. They left the factory by rail. I want to know where they are now."

"How can I possibly—" Clark cut him off with a look.

"How is your concern, my friend. I tell you what I must have." He paused for effect. "Consider this, Isamu: events like this acquire a life of their own. They suddenly come to dominate the men who started them. With nuclear weapons in the equation, the possible consequences—in a way you know about them, and in a way you do not. I do know," Colonel Klerk went on. "I've seen the briefings of what the Americans were once able to do to us, and what we were able to do to them. It was part of Project RYAN, yes? To frighten a major power is a grave and foolish act."

"But if you find out, then what?"

"That I do not know. I do know that my country will feel much safer with the knowledge than without. Those are my orders. Can I force you to help us? No, I cannot. But if you do not help us, then you help

to place your country at risk. Consider that," he said with the coldness of a coroner. Clark shook his hand in an overtly friendly way and walked off.

"Five-point-seven, five-point-six, five-point-eight from the East German judge . . ." Ding breathed when they were far enough away. "Jesus, John, you *are* a Russian."

"You bet your ass, kid." He managed a smile.

Kimura stayed on the dock for a few minutes, looking out across the bay at the dormant ships. Some were car carriers, more were conventional container ships, with seamanlike lines to slice through the waves as they plied their commerce on the seas. This seemingly ordinary aspect of civilization was almost a personal religion for Kimura. Trade drew nations together in need, and in needing one another they ultimately came to find a good reason to keep the peace, however acrimonious their relations might be otherwise. Kimura knew enough history to realize that it didn't always work that way, however.

You are breaking the law, he told himself. *You are disgracing your name and your family. You are dishonoring your friends and co-workers. You are betraying your country.*

But, damn it! *whose* country was he betraying? The *people* selected the members of the Diet, and their elected representatives selected the Prime Minister—but the people really had had no say whatever in this. They, like his ministry, like the members of the Diet, were mere spectators. They were being lied to. His country was at war, and the people didn't really know! His country had troubled itself to build nuclear arms, and the people didn't know. Who had given that order? The government? The government had just changed over—again—and surely the time involved meant . . . what?

Kimura didn't know. He knew the Russian was right, to some extent anyway. The dangers involved were not easily predicted. His country was in such danger as had not existed in his lifetime. His nation was descending into madness, and there were no doctors to diagnose the problem, and the only thing Kimura could be sure of was the fact that it was so far over his head that he didn't know where or how to begin.

But someone must do something. At what point, Kimura asked himself, did a traitor become a patriot, and a patriot a traitor?

He should have been resentful, Cook thought, finally getting to bed. But he wasn't. The day had gone exceptionally well, all things

considered. The others were praying for him to step on his weenie. That was plain enough, especially the two NIOs. They were so damned smart—they thought, Cook told himself with a broad smile at the ceiling. But they didn't know diddly. Did they know they didn't know? Probably not. They always acted superior, but when crunch time came and you hit them with a question—well, then, it was always *on one hand,* sir, followed by *on the other hand,* sir. How the hell could you make policy on that basis?

Cook, on the *other* hand, did know, and the fact that Ryan was aware of it, had instantly elevated him to de facto leadership of the working group, which had been met with both resentment and relief by the others around the table. *Okay*, they were now thinking, *we'll let* him *take the risks*. All in all, he thought he'd managed things rather well. The others would both back him up and distance themselves from him, making their notations on the positions he generated to cover their asses should things go badly, as they secretly hoped, but also staying within the group's overall position to bask in the light of success if things went well. They'd hope for that, too, but not as much, bureaucrats being what they were.

So the preliminaries were done. The opening positions were set. Adler would head the negotiating team. Cook would be his second. The Japanese Ambassador would lead the other side, with Seiji Nagumo as *his* second. The negotiations would follow a pattern as structured and stylized as Kabuki theater. Both sides of the table would posture and the real action would take place during coffee or tea breaks, as the members of the respective teams talked quietly with their counterparts. That would allow Chris and Seiji to trade information, to control the negotiations, and just maybe to keep this damned-fool thing from getting worse than it already was.

They're going to be giving *you money for providing information,* the voice persisted. Well, yes, but Seiji was going to be giving him information, too, and the whole point was to defuse the situation and to save lives! he answered back. The real ultimate purpose of diplomacy was to keep the peace, and that meant saving lives in the global context, like doctors but with greater efficiency, and doctors got paid well, didn't they? Nobody dumped on them for the money they made. That noble profession, in their white coats, as opposed to the cookie-pushers at Foggy Bottom. What made them so special?

It's about restoring the peace, *damn it!* The money didn't matter. That was a *side issue*. And since it *was* a side issue, he deserved it, didn't he? Of course he did, Cook decided, closing his eyes at last.

The engineers were working hard, Sanchez saw, back at his chair in

Pri-Fly. They'd repacked and realigned two bearings on the tailshaft, held their collective breath, and cracked their throttles a little wider on Number One. Eleven knots, edging toward twelve, enough to launch some aircraft for Pearl Harbor, enough to get the COD aboard with a full collection of engineers to head below and help the ChEng make his evaluation of the situation. As one of the senior officers aboard, Sanchez would learn of their evaluation over lunch. He could have flown off to the beach with the first group of fighters, but his place was aboard. *Enterprise* was far behind now, fully covered by P-3s operating out of Midway, and Fleet Intelligence was more and more confident that there were no hostiles about, enough that Sanchez was starting to believe them. Besides, the antisubmarine aircraft had dropped enough sonobuoys to constitute a hazard to navigation.

The crew was up now, and still a little puzzled and angry. They were up because they knew they'd make Pearl early, and were no doubt relieved that whatever danger they feared was diminishing. They were puzzled because they didn't understand what was going on. They were angry because their ship had been injured, and by now they had to know that two submarines had been lost, and though the powers-that-were had worked to conceal the nature of the losses, ships do not keep secrets well. Radiomen took them down, and yeomen delivered them, and stewards overheard what officers said. *Johnnie Reb* had nearly six thousand people aboard, and the facts, as reported, sometimes got lost amid the rumors, but sooner or later the truth got out. The result would be predictable: rage. It was part of the profession of arms. However much the carrier sailors might disparage the bubbleheads on the beach, however great the rivalry, they were brothers (and, now, sisters), comrades to whom loyalty was owed.

But owed how? What would their orders be? Repeated inquiries to CINCPAC had gone unanswered. Mike Dubro's Carrier Group Three had *not* been ordered to make a speed run back to WestPac, and that made no sense at all. Was this a war or not? Sanchez asked the sunset.

"So how did you learn this?" Mogataru Koga asked. Unusually, the former prime minister was dressed in a traditional kimono, now that he was a man of leisure for the first time in thirty years. But he'd taken the call and extended the invitation quickly enough, and listened with intense silence for ten minutes.

Kimura looked down. "I have many contacts, Koga-san. In my post I must."

"As do I. Why have I not been told?"

"Even within the government, the knowledge has been closely held."

"You are not telling me everything." Kimura wondered how Koga could know that, without realizing that a look in the mirror would suffice. All afternoon at his desk, pretending to work, he'd just looked down at the papers in front of him, and now he could not remember a single document. Just the questions. What to do? Whom to tell? Where to go for guidance?

"I have sources of information that I may not reveal, Koga-san." For the moment his host accepted that with a nod.

"So you tell me that we have attacked America, and that we have constructed nuclear weapons?"

A nod. *"Hai."*

"I knew Goto was a fool, but I didn't think him a madman." Koga considered his own words for a moment. "No, he lacks the imagination to be a madman. He's always been Yamata's dog, hasn't he?"

"Raizo Yamata has always been his . . . his—"

"Patron?" Koga asked caustically. "That's the polite term for it." Then he snorted and looked away, and his anger now had a new target. *Exactly what you tried to stop. But you failed to do it, didn't you?*

"Koga often seeks his counsel, yes."

"So. Now what?" he asked a man clearly out of his depth. The answer was entirely predictable.

"I do not know. This matter is beyond me. I am a bureaucrat. I do not make policy. I am afraid for us now, and I don't know what to do."

Koga managed an ironic smile and poured some more tea for his guest. "You could well say the same of me, Kimura-san. But you still have not answered a question for me. I, too, have contacts remaining. I knew of the actions taken against the American Navy last week, after they happened. But I have not heard about the nuclear weapons." Just speaking those two words gave the room a chill for both men, and Kimura marveled that the politician could continue to speak evenly.

"Our ambassador in Washington told the Americans, and a friend at the Foreign Ministry—"

"I too have friends at the Foreign Ministry," Koga said, sipping his tea.

"I cannot say more."

The question was surprisingly gentle. "Have you been speaking with Americans?"

Kimura shook his head. "No."

The day usually started at six, but that didn't make it easy, Jack thought. Paul Robberton had gotten the papers and started the coffee,

Andrea Price turned to also, helping Cathy with the kids. Ryan wondered about that until he saw an additional car parked in the driveway. So the Secret Service thought it was a war. His next step was to call the office, and a minute later his STU-6 started printing the morning faxes. The first item was unclassified but important. The Europeans were trying to dump U.S. T-Bills, and nobody was buying them, still. One such day could be seen as an aberration. Not a second one. Buzz Fiedler and the Fed Chairman would be busy again, and the trader in Ryan worried. It was like the Dutch kid with his thumb in the dike. What happened when he spotted another leak? And even if he could reach it, what about the third?

News from the Pacific was unchanged, but getting more texture. *John Stennis* would make Pearl Harbor early, but *Enterprise* was going to take longer than expected. No evidence of Japanese pursuit. Good. The nuke hunt was under way, but without results, which wasn't surprising. Ryan had never been to Japan, a failing he regretted. His only current knowledge was from overhead photographs. In winter months when the skies over the country were unusually clear, the National Reconnaissance Office had actually used the country (and others) to calibrate its orbiting cameras, and he remembered the elegance of the formal gardens. His other knowledge of the country was from the historical record. But how valid was that knowledge now? History and economics made strange bedfellows, didn't they?

The usual kisses sent Cathy and the kids on their way, and soon enough Jack was in his official car for Washington. The sole consolation was that it was shorter than the former trip to Langley.

"You should be rested, at least," Robberton observed. He would never have talked so much to a political appointee, but somehow he felt far more at ease with this guy. There was no pomposity in Ryan.

"I suppose. The problems are still there."

"Wall Street still number one?"

"Yeah." Ryan looked at the passing countryside after locking the classified documents away. "I'm just starting to realize, this could take the whole world down. The Europeans are trying to sell off their treasuries. Nobody's buying. The market panic might be starting there today. Our liquidity is locked up, and a lot of theirs is in our T-Bills."

"Liquidity means cash, right?" Robberton changed lanes and speeded up. His license plate told the state cops to leave him alone.

"Correct. Nice thing, cash. Good thing to have when you get nervous—and not being able to get it, that *makes* people nervous."

"You like talking 1929, Dr. Ryan? I mean, that bad?"

Jack looked over at his bodyguard. "Possibly. Unless they can untangle the records in New York—it's like having your hands tied in a fight, like being at a card table with no money, if you can't play, you

just stand there. Damn." Ryan shook his head. "It's just never happened before, and traders don't much like that either."

"How can people so smart get so panicked?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did anybody take away? Nobody blew up the mint"—he snorted—"it would have been our case!"

Ryan managed a smile. "You want the whole lecture?"

Paul's hands gestured on the wheel. "My degree's in psychology, not economics." The response surprised him.

"Perfect. That makes it easy."

The same worry occupied Europe. Just short of noon, a conference call for the central bankers of Germany, Britain, and France resulted in little more than multilingual confusion over what to do. The past years of rebuilding the countries of Eastern Europe had placed an enormous strain on the economies of the countries of Western Europe, who were in essence paying the bill for two generations of economic chaos. To hedge against the resulting weakness of their own currencies, they'd bought dollars and American T-Bills. The stunning events in America had occasioned a day of minor activity, all of it down but nothing terribly drastic. That had all changed, however, after the last buyer had purchased the last discounted lot of American Treasuries—for some the numbers were just too good—with money taken from the liquidation of equities. That buyer already thought it had been a mistake and cursed himself for again riding the back of a trend instead of the front. At 10:30 A.M. local time, the Paris market started a precipitous slide, and inside of an hour, European economic commentators were talking about a domino effect, as the same thing happened in every market in every financial center. It was also noted that the central banks were trying the same thing that the American Fed had attempted the previous day. It wasn't that it had been a bad idea. It was just that such ideas only worked once, and European investors weren't buying. They were bailing out. It came as a relief when people started buying up stocks at absurdly low prices, and they were even grateful that the purchases were being made in yen, whose strength had reasserted itself, the only bright light on the international financial scene.

"You mean," Robberton said, opening the basement door to the West Wing. "You mean to tell me that it's *that* screwed up?"

"Paul, you think you're smart?" Jack asked. The question took the

Secret Service man aback a little.

"Yeah, I do. So?"

"So why do you suppose that anybody else is smarter than you are? They're not, Paul," Ryan went on. "They have a different job, but it isn't about brains. It's about education and experience. Those people don't know crap about running a criminal investigation. Neither do I. Every tough job requires brains, Paul. But you can't know them all. Anyway, bottom line, okay? No, they're not any smarter than you, and maybe not *as* smart *as* you. It's just that it's *their* job to run the financial markets, and your job to do something else."

"Jesus," Robberton breathed, dropping Ryan off at his office door. His secretary handed off a fistfizl of phone notes on his way in. One was marked *Urgent!* and Ryan called the number.

"That you, Ryan?"

"Correct, Mr. Winston. You want to see me. When?" Jack asked, opening his briefcase and pulling the classified things out.

"Anytime, starting ninety minutes from now. I have a car waiting downstairs, a Gulfstream with warm motors, a car waiting at D.C. National." His voice said the rest. It was urgent, and no-shit serious. On top of that came Winston's reputation.

"I presume it's about last Friday."

"Correct."

"Why me and not Secretary Fiedler?" Ryan wondered.

"You've worked there. He hasn't. If you want him to sit in on it, fine. He'll get it. I think you'll get it faster. Have you been following the financial news this morning?"

"It sounds like Europe's getting squirrelly on us."

"And it's just going to get worse," Winston said. And he was probably right, Jack knew.

"You know how to fix it?" Ryan could almost hear the head at the other end shake in anger and disgust.

"I wish. But maybe I can tell you what really happened."

"I'll settle for that. Come down as quick as you want," Jack told him. "Tell the driver West Executive Drive. The uniformed guards will be expecting you at the gate."

"Thanks for listening, Dr. Ryan." The line clicked off, and Jack wondered how long it had been since the last time George Winston had said *that* to anyone. Then he got down to his work for the day.

The one good thing was that the railcars used to transport the "H-11" boosters from the assembly plant to wherever were standard gauge. That accounted for only about 8 percent of Japanese trackage and was, moreover, something discernible from satellite photographs. The

Central Intelligence Agency was in the business of accumulating information, most of which would never have any practical use, and most of which, despite all manner of books and movies to the contrary, came from open-source material. It was just a matter of finding a railway map of Japan to see where all the standard-gauge trackage was and starting from there, but there were now over two thousand miles of such trackage, and the weather over Japan was not always clear, and the satellites were not always directly overhead, the better to see into valleys that littered a country composed largely of volcanic mountains.

But it was also a task with which the Agency was familiar. The Russians, with their genius and mania for concealing everything, had taught CIA's analysts the hard way to look for the unlikely spots first of all. An open plain, for example, was a likely spot, easy to approach, easy to build, easy to service, and easy to protect. That was how America had done it in the 1960s, banking incorrectly on the hope that missiles would never become accurate enough to hit such small, rugged point targets. Japan would have learned from that lesson. Therefore, the analysts had to look for the difficult places. Woods, valleys, hills, and the very selectivity of the task ensured that it would require time. Two updated KH-11 photosatellites were in orbit, and one KH-12 radar-imaging satellite. The former could resolve objects down to the size of a cigarette pack. The latter produced a monochrome image of far less resolution, but could see through clouds, and, under favorable circumstances, could actually penetrate the ground, down to as much as ten meters; in fact it had been developed for the purpose of locating otherwise invisible Soviet missile silos and similarly camouflaged installations.

That was the good news. The bad news was that each individual frame of imagery had to be examined by a team of experts, one at a time; that every irregularity or curiosity had to be reexamined and graded; that the time involved despite—indeed, because of—the urgency of the task was immense. Analysts from the CIA, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center (I-TAC) were grouped together for the task, looking for twenty holes in the ground, knowing nothing other than the fact that the individual holes could be no less than five meters across. There could be one large group of twenty, or twenty individual and widely separated holes. The first task, all agreed, was to get new imagery of the whole length of standard-gauge rails. Weather and camera angles impeded some of that task, and now on the third day of the hunt, 20 percent of the needed mapping still remained undone. Already thirty potential sites had been identified for further scrutiny from new passes at slightly different light levels and camera angles which would allow

stereo-optic viewing and additional computer enhancement. People on the analysis team were talking again about the 1991 Scud-hunts. It was not a pleasant memory for them. Though many lessons had been learned, the main one was this: it wasn't really all that hard to hide one or ten or twenty or even a hundred relatively small objects within the borders of a nation-state, even a very open, very flat one. And Japan was neither. Under the circumstances, finding all of them was a nearly impossible task. But they had to try anyway.

It was eleven at night, and his duties to his ancestors were done for the moment. They would never be fully carried out, but the promises to their spirits he'd made so many years before were now accomplished. What had been Japanese soil at the time of his birth was now again Japanese soil. What had been his family's land was now again his family's land. The nation that had humbled his nation and murdered his family had finally been humbled, and would remain so for a long, long time. Long enough to assure his country's position, finally, among the great nations of the world.

In fact, even greater than he'd planned, he noted. All he had to do was look at the financial reports coming into his hotel suite via facsimile printer. The financial panic he'd planned and executed was now moving across the Atlantic. Amazing, he thought, that he hadn't anticipated it. The complex financial maneuvers had left Japanese banks and businesses suddenly cash-rich, and his fellow zaibatsu were seizing the opportunity to buy up European equities for themselves and their companies. They'd increase the national wealth, improve their position in the various European national economies, *and* publicly appear to be springing to the assistance of others. Yamata judged that Japan would bend some efforts to help Europe out of her predicament. His country needed markets after all, and with the sudden increase in Japanese ownership of their private companies, perhaps now European politicians would listen more attentively to their suggestions. Not certain, he thought, but possible. What they would definitely listen to was power. Japan was facing down America. America would never be able to confront his country, not with her economy in turmoil, her military defanged, and her President politically crippled. And it was an election year as well. The finest strategy, Yamata thought, was to sow discord in the house of your enemy. That he had done, taking the one action that had simply not occurred to the bonehead military people who'd led his country down the path of ruin in 1941.

"So," he said to his host. "How may I be of service?"

"Yamata-san, as you know, we will be holding elections for a local

governor." The bureaucrat poured a stiff shot of a fine Scotch whiskey. "You are a landowner, and have been so for some months. You have business interests here. I suggest that you might be a perfect man for the job."

For the first time in years, Raizo Yamata was startled.

In another room in the same hotel an admiral, a major, and a captain of Japan Air Lines held a family reunion.

"So, Yusuo, what will happen next?" Torajiro asked.

"What I think will happen next is that you will return to your normal flight schedule back and forth to America," the Admiral said, finishing his third drink. "If they are as intelligent as I believe them to be, then they will see that the war is already over."

"How long have you been in on this, Uncle?" Shiro inquired with deep respect. Having now learned of what his uncle had done, he was awed by the man's audacity.

"From when I was a *nisa,* supervising construction of my first command in Yamata-san's yards. What is it? Ten years now. He came down to see me, and we had dinner and he asked some theoretical questions. Yamata learns quickly for a civilian," the Admiral opined. "I tell you, I think there is much more to this than meets the eye."

"How so?" Torajiro asked.

Yusuo poured himself another shot. His fleet was safe, and he was entitled to unwind, he thought, especially with his brother and nephew, now that all the stress was behind him. "We've spoken more and more in the past few years, but most of all right before he bought that American financial house. And so, now? My little operation happens the same day that their stock market crashes . . . ? An interesting coincidence, is it not?" His eyes twinkled. "One of my first lessons to him, all those years ago. In 1941 we attacked America's periphery. We attacked the arms but not the head or the heart. A nation can grow new arms, but a heart, or a head, that's far harder. I suppose he listened."

"I've flown over the head part many times," Captain Torajiro Sato noted. One of his two normal runs was to Dulles International Airport. "A squalid city."

"And you shall do so again. If Yamata did what I think, they will need us again, and soon enough," Admiral Sato said confidently.

"Go ahead, let him through," Ryan said over the phone.

"But—"

"But if it makes you feel better, pop it open and look, but if he says not to X-ray it, don't, okay?"

"But we were told just to expect one, and there's two."

"It's okay," Jack told the head uniformed guard at the west entrance. The problem with increased security alerts was that they mainly kept you from getting the work done that was necessary to resolve the crisis. "Send them both up." It took another four minutes by Jack's watch. They probably did pop the back off the guy's portable computer to make sure there wasn't a bomb there. Jack rose from his desk and met them at the anteroom door.

"Sorry about that. Remember the old Broadway song, 'The Secret Service Makes Me Nervous'?" Ryan waved them into his office. He assumed the older one was George Winston. He vaguely remembered the speech at the Harvard Club, but not the face that had delivered it.

"This is Mark Gant. He's my best technical guy, and he wanted to bring his laptop."

"It's easier this way," Gant explained.

"I understand. I use them, too. Please sit down." Jack waved them to chairs. His secretary brought in a coffee tray. When cups were poured, he went on. "I had one of my people track the European markets. Not good."

"That's putting it mildly, Dr. Ryan. We may be watching the beginning of a global panic," Winston began. "I'm not sure where the bottom is."

"So far Buzz is doing okay," Jack replied cautiously. Winston looked up from his cup.

"Ryan, if you're a bullshitter, I've come to the wrong place. I thought you knew the Street. The IPO you did with Silicon Alchemy was nicely crafted—now, was that you or did you take the credit for somebody else's work?"

"There's only two people who talk to me like that. One I'm married to. The other has an office about a hundred feet that way." Jack pointed. Then he grinned. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Winston. Silicon Alchemy was *all* my work. I have ten percent of the stock in my personal portfolio. That's how much I thought of the outfit. If you ask around about my rep, you'll find I'm not a bullshitter."

"Then you know it's today," Winston said, still taking the measure of his host.

Jack bit his lip for a moment and nodded. "Yeah. I told Buzz the same thing Sunday. I don't know how close the investigators are to reconstructing the records. I've been working on something else."

"Okay." Winston wondered what else Ryan might be working on but dismissed the irrelevancy. "I can't tell you how to fix it, but I think

I can show you how it got broke."

Ryan turned for a second to look at his TV. CNN Headline News had just started its thirty-minute cycle with a live shot from the floor of the NYSE. The sound was all the way down, but the commentator was speaking rapidly and her face was not smiling. When he turned back, Gant had his laptop flipped open and was calling up some files.

"How much time do we have for this?" Winston asked.

"Let me worry about that," Jack replied.

31

The How and the What

Treasury Secretary Bosley Fiedler had not allowed himself three consecutive hours of sleep since the return from Moscow, and his stride through the tunnel connecting the Treasury Building with the White House meandered sufficiently to make his bodyguards wonder if he might need a wheelchair soon. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve was hardly in better shape. The two had been conferring, again, in the Secretary's office when the call arrived—*Drop everything and come here*—peremptory even for somebody like Ryan, who frequently short-circuited the workings of the government. Fiedler started talking even before he walked through the open door.

"Jack, in twenty minutes we have a conference call with the central banks of five Euro—who's this?" SecTreas asked, stopping three paces into the room.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm George Winston. I'm president and managing director of—"

"Not anymore. You sold out," Fiedler objected.

"I'm back as of the last rump-board meeting. This is Mark Gant, another of my directors."

"I think we need to listen to what they have to say," Ryan told his two new arrivals. "Mr. Gant, please restart your rain dance."

"Damn it, Jack, I have twenty minutes. Less now," the Secretary of the Treasury said, looking at his watch.

Winston almost snarled, but instead spoke as he would have to another senior trader: "Fiedler, the short version is this: the markets were deliberately taken down by a systematic and highly skillful attack, and I think I can prove that to your satisfaction. Interested?"

The SecTreas blinked very hard. "Why, yes."

"But how . . . ?" the Fed Chairman asked.

"Sit down and we'll show you," Gant said. Ryan made way and the two senior officials took their places on either side of him and his computer. "It started in Hong Kong . . . "

Ryan walked to his desk, dialed the Secretary's office, and told his secretary to route the conference call to his room in the West Wing. A typical executive secretary, she handled the irregularity better than

her boss could ever have done. Gant, Jack saw, was a superb technician, and his second stint at explaining matters was even more efficient than his first. The Secretary and the Chairman were also good listeners who knew the jargon. Questions were not necessary.

"I didn't think something like this was possible," the Chairman said eight minutes into the exposition. Winston handled the response.

"All the safeguards built into the system are designed to prevent accidents and catch crooks. It never occurred to anybody that somebody would pull something like this. Who would deliberately lose so much money?"

"Somebody with bigger fish to fry," Ryan told him.

"What's bigger than—"

Jack cut him off. "Lots of things, Mr. Winston. We'll get to that later." Ryan turned his head. "Buzz?"

"I'll want to confirm this with my own data, but it looks pretty solid." SecTreas looked over at the Chairman.

"You know, I'm not even sure it's a criminal violation."

"Forget that," Winston announced. "The real problem is still here. Crunch time is today. If Europe keeps going down, then we have a global panic. The dollar's in free-fall, the American markets can't operate, most of the world's liquidity is paralyzed, and all the little guys out there are going to catch on as soon as the media figure out what the hell is going down. The only thing that's prevented that to this point is that financial reporters don't know crap about what they cover."

"Otherwise they'd be working for us," Gant said, rejoining the conversation. "Thank God their sources are keeping it zipped for the time being, but I'm surprised it hasn't broken out all the way yet." Just maybe, he thought, the media didn't want to start a panic either.

Ryan's phone rang and he went to answer it. "Buzz, it's your conference call." The Secretary's physical state was apparent when he rose. The man wavered and grabbed the back of a chair to steady himself. The Chairman was only a touch more agile, and if anything both men were yet more shaken by what they had just learned. Fixing something that had broken was a sufficiently difficult task. Fixing something deliberately and maliciously destroyed could hardly be easier. And it had to be fixed, and soon, lest every nation in Europe and North America join the plunge into a deep, dark canyon. The climb out of it would require both years and pain, and that was under the best of political circumstances—the long-term political ramifications of such a vast economic dislocation could not possibly be grasped at this stage, though Ryan was already recoiling from that particular horror.

Winston looked at the National Security Advisor's face, and it wasn't

hard to read his thoughts. His own elation at the discovery was gone now that he'd given the information over to others. There ought to have been something else for him to say: how to fix matters. But all of his intellectual energy had been expended in building his case for the prosecution, as it were. He hadn't had the chance yet to take his analysis any further.

Ryan saw that and nodded with a grim smile of respect. "Good job."

"It's my fault," Winston said, quietly so as not to disturb the conference call proceeding a few feet away. "I should have stayed in."

"I've bailed out once myself, remember?" Ryan got back into a chair. "Hey, we all need a change from time to time. You didn't see this coming. It happens all the time. Especially here."

Winston gestured angrily. "I suppose. Now we can identify the rapist, but how the hell do you get unraped? Once it's happened, it's happened. But those were my investors he fucked. Those people came to *me*. Those people *trusted* me." Ryan admired the summation. That was how people in the business were supposed to think.

"In other words, now what?"

Gant and Winston traded a look. "We haven't figured that one out."

"Well, so far you've outperformed the FBI and SEC. You know, I haven't even bothered checking how my portfolio did."

"Your ten percent of Silicon Alchemy won't hurt you. Long term," Winston said, "new communications gadgets always make out, and they have a couple of honeys."

"Okay, that's settled for now." Fiedler rejoined the group. "All the European markets are shut down, just like we are, until we can get things sorted out."

Winston looked up. "All that means is, there's a hell of a flood, and you're building the levee higher and higher. And if you run out of sandbags before the river runs out of water, then the damage will only be worse when you lose control."

"We're all open to suggestions, Mr. Winston," Fiedler said gently. George's reply matched it in kind.

"Sir, for what it's worth, I think you've done everything right to this point. I just don't see a way out."

"Neither do we," the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board observed.

Ryan stood. "For the moment, gentlemen, I think we need to brief the President."

"What an interesting idea," Yamata said. He knew he'd had too much to drink. He knew that he was basking in the sheer satisfaction of carrying out what had to be the most ambitious financial gambit in

history. He knew that his ego was expanding to its fullest size since—when? Even reaching the chairmanship of his conglomerate hadn't been this satisfactory. He'd crushed a whole nation and had altered the course of his own, and yet he had never even considered public office of any kind. And why not? he asked himself. Because that had always been a place for lesser men.

"For the moment, Yamata-san, Saipan will have a local governor. We will hold internationally supervised elections. We need a candidate," the Foreign Ministry official went on. "It must be someone of stature. It would be helpful if it were a man known and friendly to Goto-san, and a man with local interests. I merely ask that you consider it."

"I will do that." Yamata stood and headed for the door.

Well. He wondered what his father would have thought of that. It would mean stepping down from chairmanship of his corporation . . . but—but what? What corporate worlds had he failed to conquer? Was it not time to move on? To retire honorably, to enter the formal service of his nation. After the local government situation was cleared up . . . then? Then to enter the Diet with great prestige, because the insiders would know, wouldn't they? *Hai*, they would know who had truly served the interests of the nation, who more than the Emperor Meiji himself had brought Japan to the first rank of nations. When had Japan ever had a political leader worthy of her place and her people? Why should he not take the honor due him? It would all require a few years, but he had those years. More than that, he had vision and the courage to make it real. Only his peers in business knew of his greatness now, but that could change, and his family name would be remembered for more than building ships and televisions and all the other things. Not a trademark. A name. A heritage. Would that not make his father proud?

"Yamata?" Roger Durling asked. "Tycoon, right, runs a huge company? I may have bumped into him at some reception or other when I was Vice President."

"Well, that's the guy," Winston said.

"So what are you saying he did?" the President asked.

Mark Gant set up his computer on the President's desk, this time with a Secret Service agent immediately behind him and watching every move, and this time he took it slow because Roger Durling, unlike Ryan, Fiedler, and the Fed Chairman, didn't really understand all the ins and outs. He did prove to be an attentive audience, however, stopping the presentation to ask questions, making a few notes, and three times asking for a repeat of a segment of the

presentation. Finally he looked over to the Secretary of the Treasury.

"Buzz?"

"I want our people to verify the information independently—"

"That won't be hard," Winston told them. "Any one of the big houses will have records almost identical to this. My people can help organize it for you."

"If it's true, Buzz?"

"Then, Mr. President, this situation comes more under Dr. Ryan's purview than mine," SecTreas replied evenly. His relief was tempered with anger at the magnitude of what had been done. The two outsiders in the Oval Office didn't yet understand that.

Ryan's mind was racing. He'd ignored Gant's repeated explanation of the "how" of the event. Though the presentation to the President was clearer and more detailed than the first two times—the man would have made a fine instructor at a business school—the important parts were already fixed in the National Security Advisor's mind. Now he had the how, and the how told him a lot. This plan had been exquisitely planned and executed. The timing of the Wall Street takedown and the carrier/submarine attack had not been an accident. It was therefore a fully integrated plan. Yet it was also a plan which the Russian spy network had not uncovered, and that was the fact that kept repeating itself to him.

Their existing net is inside the Japanese government. It is probably concentrated on their security apparatus. But that net failed to give them strategic warning for the military side of the operation, and Sergey Nikolay'ch hasn't connected Wall Street with the naval action yet.

Break the model, Jack, he told himself. *Break the paradigm* . That's when it became clearer.

"That's why they didn't get it," Ryan said almost to himself. It was like driving through patches of fog; you got into a clear spot followed by another clouded one. "It wasn't really their government at all. It really was Yamata and the others. That's why they want THISTLE back." Nobody else in the room knew what he was talking about.

"What's that?" the President asked. Jack turned his eyes to Winston and Gant, then shook his head. Durling nodded and went on. "So the whole event was one big plan?"

"Yes, sir, but we still don't know it all."

"What do you mean?" Winston asked. "They cripple us, start a worldwide panic, and you say there's *more?"*

"George, how often have you been over there?" Ryan asked, mainly to get information to the others.

"In the last five years? I guess it comes out to an average of about once a month. My grandchildren will be using up the last of my frequent-flyer miles."

"How often have you met with government people over there?"

Winston shrugged. "They're around a lot. But they don't matter very much."

"Why?" the President asked.

"Sir, it's like this: there're maybe twenty or thirty people over there who really run things, okay? Yamata is the biggest fish in that lake. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry is the interface between the big boys in the corporate arena and the government, plus the way they grease the skids themselves with elected officials, and they do a *lot* of that stuff. It's one of the things Yamata liked to show off when we negotiated his takeover of my Group. At one party there were two ministers and a bunch of parliamentary guys, and their noses got real brown, y'know?" Winston reflected that at the time he'd thought it a good demeanor for elected officials. Now he wasn't quite so sure.

"How freely can I speak?" Ryan asked. "We may need their insights."

Durling handled that: "Mr. Winston, how good are you at keeping secrets?"

The investor had himself a good chuckle. "Just so long as you don't call it insider stuff, okay? I've never been hassled by the SEC, and I don't want to start."

"This one'll come under the Espionage Act. We're at war with Japan. They've sunk two of our submarines and crippled two aircraft carriers," Ryan said, and the room changed a lot.

"Are you serious?" Winston asked.

"Two-hundred-and-fifty-dead-sailors serious, the crews of USS *Asheville* and USS *Charlotte*. They've also seized the Mariana Islands. We don't know yet if we can take those islands back. We have upwards of ten thousand American citizens in Japan as potential hostages, plus the population of the islands, plus military personnel in Japanese custody."

"But the media—"

"Haven't caught on yet, remarkably enough," Ryan explained. "Maybe it's just too crazy."

"Oh." Winston got it after another second. "They wreck our economy, and we don't have the political will to . . . has anybody ever tried anything like this before?"

The National Security Advisor shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"But the real danger to us—is this problem here. That son of a bitch," George Winston observed.

"How do we fix it, Mr. Winston?" President Durling asked.

"I don't know. The DTC move was brilliant. The takedown was pretty cute, but Secretary Fiedler here might have smarted his way out

of that with our help," Winston added. "But with no records, everything's paralyzed. I have a brother who's a doctor, and once he told me . . ."

Ryan's eyeballs clicked at that remark, clicked hard enough that he didn't listen to the rest. Why was that important?

"The time estimate came in last night," the Fed Chairman was saying now. "They need a week. But we don't really have a week. This afternoon we're meeting with all the heads of the big houses. We're going to try and . . ."

The problem is that there are no records, Jack thought. *Everything's frozen in place because there are no records to tell people what they own, how much money they . . .*

"Europe is paralyzed, too . . ." Fiedler was talking now, while Ryan stared down at the carpet. Then he looked up:

"If you don't write it down, it never happened." Conversation in the room stopped, and Jack saw that he might as well have said, *The crayon is purple.*

"What?" the Fed Chairman asked.

"My wife—that's what she says. 'If you don't write it down, then it never happened.' " He looked around. They still didn't understand. Which wasn't overly surprising, as he was still developing the thought himself. "She's a doc, too, George, at Hopkins, and she always has this damned little notebook with her, and she's always stopping dead in her tracks to take it out and make a note because she doesn't trust her memory."

"My brother's the same way. He uses one of those electronic things," Winston said. Then his eyeballs went out of focus. "Keep going."

"There are no records, no really official records of any of the transactions, are there?" Jack went on. Fiedler handled the answer.

"No. Depository Trust Company crashed for fair. And as I just said, it'll take—"

"Forget that. We don't have the time, do we?"

That depressed SecTreas again. "No, we can't stop it."

"Sure we can." Ryan looked at Winston. "Can't we?"

President Durling had been covering the snippets of conversation like a spectator at a tennis match, and the stress of the situation had placed a short fuse on his temper. "What the hell are you people talking about?"

Ryan almost had it now. He turned to his President. "Sir, it's simple. We say it never happened. We say that after noon on Friday, the exchanges simply stopped functioning. Now, can we get away with that?" Jack asked. He didn't give anyone a chance to answer, however. "Why not? Why *can't* we get away with it? There are no

records to prove that we're wrong. *Nobody* can prove a single transaction from twelve noon on, can they?"

"With all the money that everyone lost," Winston said, his mind catching up rapidly, "it won't look all that unattractive. You're saying we restart . . . Friday, maybe, Friday at noon . . . just wipe out the intervening week, right?"

"But nobody will buy it," the Fed Chairman observed.

"Wrong." Winston shook his head. "Ryan's got something here. First of all, they *have* to buy it. You can't do a transaction—you can't execute one, I mean, without written records. So nobody can prove that they did anything without waiting for reconstruction of the DTC records. Second, most people went to the cleaners, institutions, banks, everybody, and they'll all want a second chance. Oh, yeah, they'll buy into it, pal. Mark?"

"Step in a time machine and do Friday all over again?" Gant's laugh was grim at first. Then it changed. "Where do we sign up?"

"We can't do that to everything, not all the trades," the Fed Chairman objected.

"No, we can't," Winston agreed. "The international T-Bill transactions were outside our control. But what we can do, sir, is conference with the European banks, show them what's happened, and then together with them—"

Now it was Fiedler: "Yes! They dump yen and buy dollars. Our currency regains its position and theirs falls. The other Asian banks will then think about reversing their positions. The European central banks will play ball, I think."

"You'll have to keep the Discount Rate up," Winston said. "That'll sting us some, but it's one hell of a lot better than the alternative. You keep the rate up so that people stop dumping T-Bills. We want to generate a move away from the yen, just like they did to us. The Europeans will like that because it will limit the Japs' ability to scoop up their equities like they started doing yesterday." Winston got off his chair and started pacing a little as he was wont to do. He didn't know that he was violating a White House protocol, and even the President didn't want to interrupt him, though the two Secret Service agents in the room kept a close eye on the trader. Clearly his mind was racing through the scenario, looking for holes, looking for flaws. It took perhaps two minutes, and everyone waited for his evaluation. Then his head came up. "Dr. Ryan, if you ever decide to become a private citizen again, we need to talk. Gentlemen: this will work. It's just so damned outrageous, but maybe that works in our favor."

"What happens Friday, then?" Jack asked.

Gant spoke up: "The market will drop like a rock."

"What's so damned great about that?" the President demanded.

"Because then, sir," Gant went on, "it'll bounce after about two hundred points, and close . . . ? It'll close down, oh, maybe a hundred, maybe not even that much. The following Monday everybody catches his breath. Some people look for bargains. Most, probably, are still nervous. It drops again, probably ends up pretty stagnant, down another fifty at most. The rest of the week, things settle out. Figure by the following Friday, the market has restabilized down one, maybe one-fifty, from the Friday-noon position. The drop will have to happen because of what the Fed has to do with the Discount Rate, but we're used to that on the Street." Only Winston fully appreciated the irony in the fact that Gant had it almost exactly right. He himself could hardly have done it better. "Bottom line, it's a major hiccup, but no more than that."

"Europe?" Ryan asked.

"It'll be rougher over there because they're not as well organized, but their central banks have somewhat more power," Gant said. "Their governments can also interfere more in the marketplace. That's both a help and a hurt. But the end result is going to be the same. It has to be, unless everyone signs on to the same suicide pact. People in our business don't do that."

Fiedler's turn: "How do we sell it?"

"We get the heads of the major institutions together just as fast as we can," Winston replied. "I can help if you want. They listen to me, too."

"Jack?" the President asked with a turn of the head.

"Yes, sir. And we do it right away."

Roger Durling gave it a few more seconds of thought before turning to the Secret Service agent next to his desk. "Tell the Marines to get my chopper over here. Tell the Air Force to get something warmed up for New York."

Winston. demurred. "Mr. President, I have my own."

Ryan took that one. "George, the Air Force guys are better. Trust me."

Durling rose and shook hands all around before the Secret Service agents conducted the others downstairs and out onto the South Lawn to await the helicopter flight to Andrews. Ryan stayed put.

"Will it really work? Can we really fix it that easily?" The politician in Roger Durling distrusted magic fixes to anything. Ryan saw the doubts and framed his answer appropriately.

"It ought to. They need something up there, and they will surely want it to work. The crucial element is that they have to know that the takedown was a deliberate act. That makes it artificial, and if they believe that it was artificial, then it's easier for everyone to accept an irregular fix to it."

"I guess we'll see. . ." Durling paused. "Now what does that tell us about Japan?"

"It tells us that their government isn't the prime moving force behind this. That's good news and bad news. The good news is that the effort will be poorly organized at some levels, that the Japanese people are disconnected from the effort, and that there may be elements in their government very uncomfortable with the undertaking."

"The bad news?" the President asked.

"We still don't know what their overall objective is. The government is evidently doing what it's told. It has a solid strategic position in WestPac, and we still don't know what to do about it. Most important of all—"

"The nukes." Durling nodded. "That's their trump. We've never been at war against someone with nuclear arms, have we?"

"No, sir. That's a new one, too."

The next transmission from Clark and Chavez went out just after midnight Tokyo time. This time Ding had drafted the article. John had run out of interesting things to say about Japan. Chavez, being younger, did an article that was lighter, about young people and their attitudes. It was just the cover, but you have to work hard on those, and Ding, it turned out, had learned how to write coherently at George Mason University.

"Northern Resource Area?" John asked, typing the question on the computer screen. Then he turned the machine on the coffee table.

I should have seen it sooner. It's in one of the books back at Seoul, mano. Indonesia, belonged to the Dutch back then, was the Southern Resource Area when they kicked off Big Mistake No. 2. Care to guess what the Northern one was?

Clark just took one look and pushed the computer back. "Yevgeniy Pavlovich, go ahead and send it." Ding erased the dialog on the screen and hooked up the modem to the phone. The dispatch went out seconds later. Then the two officers traded a look. It had been a productive day after all.

The timing for once could scarcely have been better: 00:08 in Tokyo was 18:08 in Moscow and 10:08 both at Langley and in the White House, and Jack was just reentering his office after his time at the opposite corner of the West Wing when his STU-6 started warbling.

"Yeah."

"Ed here. We just got something important from our people in-country. The fax is coming over now. A copy's on the way to Sergey, too."

"Okay, standing by." Ryan flipped the proper switch and heard the facsimile printer start to turn out its copy.

Winston wasn't all that easy a man to impress. The VC-20 version of the Gulfstream-III business jet, he saw, was as nicely appointed as his personal aircraft—the seats and carpet were not as plush, but the communications gear was fabulous . . . even enough to make a real techno-weenie like Mark happy, he thought. The two older men took the chance to catch up on sleep while he observed the Air Force crewmen run through their preflight checklist. It really wasn't at all different from what his crewmen did, but Ryan had been right. It somehow made a difference to see military-type insignia on their shoulders. Three minutes later the executive jet was airborne and heading north for New York's La Guardia, with the added benefit that they already had a priority approach set up, which would save fifteen minutes at the top end of the trip. As he listened, the sergeant working the communications bay was arranging an FBI car to meet them at the general-aviation terminal, and evidently the Bureau was now calling everyone who mattered in the markets for a meeting at their own New York headquarters. How remarkable, he thought, to see the government acting in an efficient manner. What a pity they couldn't do that all the time.

Mark Gant was not paying attention to any of that. He was working on his computer, preparing what he called the case for the prosecution. He'd need about twenty minutes to get the exhibits printed up on acetate sheets for an overhead projector, something the FBI ought to be prepared for, they both hoped. From that point on . . . who would deliver the information? *Probably me*, Winston thought. He'd let Fiedler and the Fed Chairman propose the solution, and that was fair. After all, a government guy had come up with it.

Brilliant, George Winston told himself with an admiring chuckle. *Why didn't I think of that? What else . . . ?*

"Mark, make a note. We'll want to fly the European central-bank boys over here to see this. I don't think doing it over a teleconference line will really cut it."

Gant checked his watch. "We'll have to call right after we get in, George, but if we do the timing ought to work out okay. The evening flights into New York—yeah, they'll get in in the morning, and probably we can coordinate everything for a Friday restart."

Winston looked aft. "We'll tell them when we get in. I think they

need to catch some Z's for right now."

Gant nodded agreement. "It's going to work, George. That Ryan guy is pretty smart, isn't he?"

Now was a time to take it slow, Jack told himself. He was almost surprised that his phone hadn't rung yet, but on reflection he realized that Golovko was reading the same report, was looking at the same map on his wall, and was also telling himself to think it through as slowly and carefully as circumstances allowed.

It was starting to make sense. Well, almost. "Northern Resource Area" had to mean Eastern Siberia. The term "Southern Resource Area," as Chavez had stated in his report, had once been the term used by the Japanese government in 1941 to identify the Dutch East Indies, back when their prime strategic objective had been oil, then the principal resource needed for a navy and now the most important resource for any industrialized nation needing power to run its economy. Japan was the world's largest importer of oil despite an earnest effort to switch over to nuclear power for electricity. And Japan had to import so much else; only coal was in natural abundance. Supertankers were largely a Japanese invention, the more efficiently to move oil from the Persian Gulf fields to Japanese terminals. But they needed other things, too, and since she was an island nation, those commodities all had to come by sea, and Japan's navy was small, far too small to secure the sea-lanes.

On the other hand, Eastern Siberia was the world's last unsurveyed territory, and Japan was now conducting the survey, and the sea-lanes from the Eurasian mainland to Japan—*Hell, why not just build a railroad tunnel and do it the easy way?* Ryan asked himself.

Except for one thing. Japan was stretching her abilities to accomplish what she had already done, even with a gravely diminished American military *and* a five-thousand-mile buffer of Pacific waters between the American mainland and her own home islands. Russia's military capacity was even more drastically reduced than America's, but an invasion was more than a political act. It was an act against a people, and the Russians had not lost their pride. The Russians would fight, and they were still far larger than Japan. The Japanese had nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers, and the Russians, like the Americans, did not—but the Russians did have bombers, and fighter-bombers, and cruise missiles, all with nuclear capability, and bases close to Japan, and the political will to make use of them. There would have to be one more element. Jack leaned back, staring at his map. Then he lifted his phone and speed-dialed a direct line.

"Admiral Jackson."

"Robby? Jack. I have a question."

"Shoot."

"You said that one of our attaches in Seoul had a little talk with—"

"Yeah. They told him to sit tight and wait," Jackson reported.

"What *exactly* did the Koreans say?"

"They said . . . wait a minute. It's only half a page, but I have it here. Stand by." Jack heard a drawer open, probably a locked one. "Okay, paraphrasing, that sort of decision is political not military, many considerations to be looked at, concern that the Japanese could close their harbors to trade, concern about invasion, cut off from us, they're hedging. We haven't gone back to them yet," Robby concluded.

"OrBat for their military?" Jack asked. He meant "order of battle," essentially a roster of a nation's military assets.

"I have one around here."

"Short version," Ryan ordered.

"A little larger than Japan's. They've downsized since reunification, but what they retained is high-quality. Mainly U.S. weapons and doctrine. Their air force is pretty good. I've played with them and—"

"If you were an ROK general, how afraid would you be of Japan?"

"I'd be wary," Admiral Jackson replied. "Not afraid, but wary. They don't like Japan very much, remember."

"I know. Send me copies of that attaché report and the ROK OrBat."

"Aye aye." The line clicked off. Ryan called CIA next. Mary Pat still wasn't available, and her husband picked up. Ryan didn't bother with preliminaries.

"Ed, have you had any feedback from Station Seoul?"

"The ROKs seem very nervous. Not much cooperation. We've got a lot of friends in the KCIA, but they're clamming up on us, no political direction as yet."

"Anything different going on over there?"

"Well, yes," Ed Foley answered. "Their air force is getting a little more active. You know they have established a big training area up in the northern part of the country, and sure enough they're running some unscheduled combined-arms exercises. We have some overheads of it."

"Next, Beijing," Ryan said.

"A whole lot of nothing. China is staying out of this one. They say that they want no part of this, they have no interest in this. It doesn't concern them."

"Think about that, Ed," Jack ordered.

"Well, sure, it does concern them . . . oh . . ."

It wasn't quite fair and Ryan knew it. He now had fuller information

than anyone else, and a huge head start on the analysis.

"We just developed some information. I'll have it sent over as soon as it's typed up. I want you down here at two-thirty for a skull session."

"We'll be there," the almost-DDO promised.

And there it was, right on the map. You just needed the right information, and a little time.

Korea was not a country to be intimidated by Japan. The latter country had ruled the former for almost fifty years earlier in the century, and the memories for Koreans were not happy ones. Treated as serfs by their conquerors, to this day there were few quicker ways to get dead than to refer to a Korean citizen as a Jap. The antipathy was real, and with the growing Korean economy and the competition to Japan that it made, the resentment was bilateral. Most fundamental of all was the racial element. Though Korea and Japan were in fact countries of the same genetic identity, the Japanese still regarded Koreans as Hitler had once regarded Poles. The Koreans, moreover, had their own warrior tradition. They'd sent two divisions of troops to Vietnam, had built a formidable military of their own to defend against the now-dead madmen to their north. Once a beaten-down colony of Japan, they were now tough, and very, very proud. So what, then, could have cowed them out of honoring treaty commitments to America?

Not Japan. Korea had little to fear from direct attack, and Japan could hardly use her nuclear weapons on Korea. Wind patterns would transport whatever fallout resulted right back to the country that had sent the weapons.

But immediately to Korea's north was the world's most populous country, with the world's largest standing army, and *that* was enough to frighten the ROKs, as it would frighten anyone.

Japan needed and doubtless wanted direct access to natural resources. It had a superb and fully developed economic base, a highly skilled manpower pool, all manner of high-tech assets. But Japan had a relatively small population in proportion to her economic strength.

China had a vast pool of people, but not as yet highly trained, a rapidly developing economy still somewhat lacking in high technology. And like Japan, China needed better access to resources.

And to the immediate north of both China and Japan was the world's last unexploited treasure house.

Taking the Marianas would prevent or at least hinder the approach of America's principal strategic arm, the U.S. Navy, from approaching the area of interest. The only other way to protect Siberia was from the west, through all of Russia. Meaning that the area was in fact cut off from outside assistance. China had her own nuclear capacity to

deter Russia, and a larger land army to defend the conquest. It was a considerable gamble, to be sure, but with the American and European economies in a shambles, unable to help Russia, yes, it did all make good strategic sense. Global war on the installment plan.

The operational art, moreover, was not new in the least. First cripple the strong enemy, then gobble up the weak one. Exactly the same thing had been attempted in 1941—1942. The Japanese strategic concept had never been to conquer America, but to cripple the larger country so severely that acquiescence to her southern conquests would become a political necessity. Pretty simple stuff, really, Ryan told himself. You just had to break the code. That's when the phone rang. It was his number-four line.

"Hello, Sergey," Ryan said.

"How did you know?" Golovko demanded.

Jack might have answered that the line was set aside for the Russian's direct access, but didn't. "Because you just read the same thing I did."

"Tell me what you think?"

"I think you are their objective, Sergey Nikolay'ch. Probably for next year." Ryan's voice was light, still in the flush of discovery, which was always pleasant despite the nature of the new knowledge.

"Earlier. Autumn, I should imagine. The weather will work more in their favor that way." Then came a lengthy pause. "Can you help us, Ivan Emmetovich? No, wrong question. *Will* you help us?"

"Alliances, like friendships, are always bilateral," Jack pointed out. "You have a president to brief. So do I."

32

Special Report

As an officer who had once hoped to command a ship like this one, Captain Sanchez was glad he'd chosen to remain aboard instead of flying his fighter off to the Naval Air Station at Barbers Point. Six gray tugboats had nudged USS *John Stennis* into the graving dock.

There were over a hundred professional engineers aboard, including fifty new arrivals from Newport News Shipbuilding, all of them below and looking at the power plant. Trucks were lined up on the perimeter of the graving dock, and with them hundreds of sailors and civilian yard employees, like doctors or EMTs, Bud imagined, ready to switch out body parts.

As Captain Sanchez watched, a crane lifted the first brow from its cradle, and another started turning, to lift what looked like a construction trailer, probably to rest on the flight deck. The gate on the dock wasn't even closed yet. Somebody, he saw, was in a hurry.

"Captain Sanchez?"

Bud turned to see a Marine corporal. He handed over a message form after saluting. "You're wanted at CINCPACFLT Operations, sir."

"That's totally crazy," the president of the New York Stock Exchange said, managing to get the first word in.

The big conference room at the FBI's New York office looked remarkably like a courtroom, with seats for a hundred people or more. It was about half empty, and the majority of people present were government employees of one sort or another, mainly FBI and SEC officials who'd been working the takedown case since Friday evening. But the front row was filled entirely with senior traders and institution chairmen.

George had just taken them through his version of the events of the previous week, using an overhead projector to display trends and trades and going slowly because of the fatigue level that had to affect the judgment of everyone trying to understand what he was saying. The Fed Chairman just then entered the room, having made his calls

to Europe. He gave Winston and Fiedler a thumbs-up and took a seat in the back for the moment.

"It may be crazy, but that's what happened."

The NYSE head thought about that. "That's all well and good," he said after a few seconds, meaning that it wasn't well and good at all, and everybody knew it. "But we're still stuck in the middle of a swamp, and the alligators are gathering around us. I don't think we can hold them off much longer." There was general agreement on that point. Everyone in the front row was surprised to see their former colleague smile.

Winston turned to the Secretary of the Treasury. "Buzz, why don't you deliver the good news?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, there is a way out," Fiedler said confidently. His next sixty seconds generated incredulous silence. The traders didn't even have the wit to turn and look at one another. But if they didn't exactly nod with approval, neither did anyone object, even after a seemingly endless period of consideration.

The first to speak, predictably, was the managing director of Cummings, Carter, and Cantor. CCC had died around 3:15 on the previous Friday, caught moving the wrong way, its cash reserves wiped out, and then denied help from Merrill Lynch in a move which, in fairness, the managing director could not really fault.

"Is it legal?" he asked.

"Neither the United States Department of Justice nor the Securities and Exchange Commission will consider your cooperation to be any sort of violation. I will say," Fiedler added, "that any attempt to exploit the situation will be dealt with very severely indeed—but if we all work together, antitrust and other considerations will be set aside in the interests of national security. That is irregular, but it is now on record, and you all heard me say it. Ladies and gentlemen, that is the intention and the word of the United States government."

Well, damn, the assembled multitude thought. Especially the law-enforcement people.

"Well, you all know what happened to us at Triple-C," the director said, looking around, and his natural skepticism was tempered with the beginnings of genuine relief. "I don't have a choice here. I have to buy into this."

"I have something to add." Now the Fed Chairman walked to the front of the room. "I just finished calling the central-bank heads of Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. They're all flying here tonight. We'll get together right here tomorrow morning to set up a system by which they also can cooperate in this effort. We *are* going to stabilize the dollar. We *are* going to fix the T-Bill market. The American banking system will *not* go down on us. I

am going to propose to the Open Market Committee that anyone who holds on to U.S. Treasuries—that is, extends the three-month and six-month notes for one renewal cycle—gets an *extra* fifty basis points as a reward from the U.S. government for helping us through this situation. We will also give the same bonus to anyone who buys T-Bills in the next ten days after the markets reopen."

Smart move, Winston thought. Very *smart move*. That would draw foreign money into America, away from Japan, and really firm up the dollar——–while attacking the yen. The Asian banks that dumped on the dollar would get it in the back of the neck for the move. *So two could play the game, eh?*

"You need legislation for that," a treasuries expert objected.

"We'll get it, we'll have ink on paper by Friday-a-week. For the moment, that is the policy of the Federal Reserve, approved and supported by the President of the United States," the Chairman added.

"They're giving us our life back, people," Winston said, pacing up and down again in front of the wooden rail. "We have been *attacked* by people who wanted to take us down. They wanted to cut our heart out. Well, looks like we have some pretty good doctors here. We're going to be sick for a while, but by the end of next week it's going to be okay."

"Friday noon, eh?" the NYSE asked.

"Correct," Fiedler told him, staring hard now and waiting for a response. The executive gave it another few seconds of thought, then stood.

"You will have the full cooperation of the New York Stock Exchange." And the prestige of the NYSE was enough to overcome any doubts. Full cooperation was inevitable, but speed in the decision cycle was vital, and in ten more seconds the market officials were standing, smiling, and thinking about getting their shops back together.

"There will be no program trading until further notice," Fiedler said. "Those 'expert systems' nearly killed us. Friday is going to be exciting under the best of circumstances. We want people to use their brains, not their Nintendo systems."

"Agreed," NASDAQ said for the rest.

"We need to rethink those things anyway," Merrill Lynch announced thoughtfully.

"We will coordinate through this office. Think things through," the Fed Chairman told them. "If you have ideas on how to make the transition go more smoothly, we want to know about it. We will reconvene at six. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in this together. For the next week or so we are not competitors. We are team members."

"I have about a million individual investors depending on my

house," Winston reminded them. "Some of you have more. Let's not forget that." There was nothing like an appeal to honor. It was a virtue that all craved, even those who lacked it. Fundamentally, honor was itself a debt, a code of behavior, a promise, something inside yourself that you owed to the others who saw it in you. Everyone in this room wanted all the others to look and see a person worthy of respect and trust, and honor. An altogether useful concept, Winston thought, most particularly in time of trouble.

And then there was one, Ryan thought. The way it always seemed to work at this level, you took care of the simple jobs first and saved the really tough ones for last.

The mission now was more to prevent war than to execute it, but the latter would be part of the former.

The control of Eastern Siberia by Japan and China would have the effect of creating a new—what? Axis? Probably not that. Certainly a new world economic powerhouse, a rival to America in all categories of power. It would give Japan and China a huge competitive advantage in economic terms.

That in and of itself was not an evil ambition. But the methods were. The world had once operated by rules as simple as those of any jungle. If you got it first, it was yours—but only if you had the strength to hold it. Not terribly elegant, nor especially fair by contemporary standards, but the rules had been accepted because the stronger nations generally gave citizens political stability in return for loyalty, and that was usually the first step in the growth of a nation. After a while, however, the human need for peace and security had grown into something else—a desire for a stake in the governance of their country. From 1789, the year that America had ratified its Constitution, to 1989, the year that Eastern Europe had fallen, a mere two centuries, something new had come into the collective mind of mankind. It was called by many names—democracy, human rights, selfdetermination—but it was fundamentally a recognition that the human will had its own force, and mainly for good.

The Japanese plan sought to deny that force. But the time for the old rules was past, Jack told himself. The men in this room would have to see to it.

"So," his briefing concluded, "that's the overall situation in the Pacific."

The Cabinet Room was full, except for the seat of the Secretary of the Treasury, whose senior deputy was sitting in. Around the roughly diamond-shaped table were the heads of the various departments of the Executive Branch. Senior members of Congress and the military

had seats against the four walls.

The Secretary of Defense was supposed to speak next. Instead of rising to the lectern as Ryan went back to his place, however, he flipped open his leather folder of notes and scarcely looked up from them.

"I don't know that we can do this," SecDef began, and with those words the men and women of the President's Cabinet shifted uneasily in their chairs.

"The problem is as much technical as anything. We cannot project sufficient power to—"

"Wait a minute," Ryan interrupted. "I want to make a few items clear for everyone, okay?" There were no objections. Even the Defense Secretary seemed relieved that he didn't have to speak.

"Guam is U.S. Territory, has been for almost a century. The people there are our citizens. Japan took the island away from us in 1941, and in 1944 we took it back. People died to do that."

"We think we can get Guam back through negotiations," Secretary Hanson said.

"Glad to hear that," Ryan replied. "What about the rest of the Marianas?"

"My people think it's unlikely that we will get them back through diplomatic means. We'll work on it, of course, but—"

"But *what?*" Jack demanded. There was no immediate answer. "All right, let's make another thing clear. The Northern Marianas were *never* a legal possession of Japan, despite what their ambassador told us. They were a Trust Territory under the League of Nations, and so they were *not* war booty to us when we took them in 1944 along with Guam. In 1947 the United Nations declared them a Trust Territory under the protection of the United States. In 1952 Japan officially renounced all claims to sovereignty to the islands. In 1978, the *people* of the Northern Marianas opted to become a Commonwealth, politically unified with the United States, and they elected their first governor—we took long enough to let them do that, but they did. In 1986 the U.N. decided that we had faithfully fulfilled our responsibilities to those people, and in the same year the people of those islands all got U.S. citizenship. In 1990 the U.N. Security Council closed out the trusteeship for good.

"Do we all have that? The citizens of those islands are *American* citizens, with U.S. passports—not because we made them do it, but because they freely chose to be. That's called self-determination. We brought the idea to those rocks, and the people there must have thought that we were serious about it."

"You can't do what you can't do," Hanson said. "We can negotiate —"

"Negotiate, hell!" Jack snarled back. "Who says we can't?"

SecDef looked up from his notes. "Jack, it could take years to rebuild . . . the things we've deactivated. If you want to blame someone, well, blame me."

"If we can't do it—what's it going to cost?" the Secretary of Health and Human Services asked. "We have things we have to do *here!*"

"So we let a foreign country strip the citizenship rights of Americans because it's *too hard* to defend them?" Ryan asked more quietly. "Then what? What about the next time it happens? Tell me, when did we stop being the United States of America? It's a matter of political will, that's all," the National Security Advisor went on. "Do we have any?"

"Dr. Ryan, we live in a real world," the Secretary of the Interior pointed out. "All those people on those islands, can we put their lives at risk?"

"We used to say that freedom had a greater value than life. We used to say the same thing about our political principles," Ryan replied. "And the result is the world which those principles built. The things we call rights—nobody just *gave* them to us. No, sir. Those ideas are things we fought for. Those are things people died for. The people on those islands are American citizens. Do we owe them anything?"

Secretary Hanson was uncomfortable with this line of thought. So were others, but they deferred to him, grateful to be able to do so. "We can negotiate from a position of strength—but we have to go carefully."

"How carefully?" Ryan asked quietly.

"Damn it, Ryan, we can't risk nuclear attack over a few thousand—"

"Mr. Secretary, what's the magic number, then? A million? Our place in the world is based on a few very simple ideas—and a lot of people lost their lives for those ideas."

"You're talking philosophy," Hanson shot back. "Look, I have my negotiating team together. We'll get Guam back."

"No, sir, we're going to get them *all* back. And I'll tell you why." Ryan leaned forward, looking up and down the table. "If we don't, then we cannot prevent a war between Russia on one side and Japan and China on the other. I think I know the Russians. They will fight for Siberia. They have to. The resources there are their best chance for bootstrapping their country into the next century. That war could go nuclear. Japan and China probably don't think it'll go that far, people, but I'm telling you it will. You know why?

"If we cannot deal with this situation effectively, then who can? The Russians will think they're alone. Our influence with them will be zero, they'll have their backs against a wall, and they'll lash out the only way they can, and the butcher's bill will be like nothing the world has ever seen, and I'm not ready for another dark age.

"So we don't have a choice. You can name any reason you want, but it all comes down to the same thing: we have a debt of honor to the people on those islands who decided that they wanted to be Americans. If we don't defend that principle, we don't defend anything. And nobody will trust us, and nobody will respect us, not even ourselves. If we turn our back on them, then we are not the people we say we are, and everything we've ever done is a lie."

Through it all, President Durling sat quietly in his place, scanning faces, most especially his Secretary of Defense, and behind him, against the wall, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the man SecDef had picked to assist him in the dismantlement of the American military. Both men were looking down, and it was clear that both men were unworthy of the moment. It was also clear that their country could not afford to be.

"How can we do it, Jack?" Roger Durling asked.

"Mr. President, I don't know yet. Before we try, we have to decide if we are going to or not, and that, sir, is your call."

Durling weighed Ryan's words, and weighed the desirability of polling his cabinet for their opinions, but the faces told him something he didn't like. He remembered his time in Vietnam when he'd told his troopers that, yes, it all mattered, even though he knew that it was a lie. He'd never forgotten the looks on their faces, and though it was not widely known, every month or so now, in the dark of night, he'd walk down to the Vietnam Memorial, where he knew the exact location of every name of every man who had died under his command, and he visited those names one by one, to tell them that, yes, it really had mattered somehow, that in the great scheme of events their deaths had contributed to something, and that the world had changed for the better, too late for them, but not too late for their fellow citizens. President Durling thought of one other thing: nobody had ever taken land away from America. Perhaps it all came down to that.

"Brett, you will commence negotiations immediately. Make it clear that the current situation in the Western Pacific is in no way acceptable to the United States government. We will settle for nothing less than a complete restoration of the Mariana Islands to their antebellum condition. Nothing less," Durling repeated.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I want plans and options for the removal of Japanese forces from those islands should negotiations fail," JUMPER told the Secretary of Defense. The latter nodded but his face told the tale. SecDef didn't think it could be done.

Admiral Chandraskatta thought it had taken long enough, but he was patient, and he knew that he could afford to be. *What will happen now?* he wondered.

It could have gone more quickly. He'd been a little slow in his methods and plans, trying to learn the thought patterns of his adversary, Rear Admiral Michael Dubro. He was a clever foe, skilled at maneuvering, and because he was clever, he'd been quick to think that his own foe was stupid. It had been obvious for a week that the American formation lay to the southwest, and by moving south, he'd cajoled Dubro into moving north, then east. Had his assessment been wrong, then the American fleet would still have had to go to the same spot, east of Dondra Head, forcing the fleet oilers to cut the corner. Sooner or later they would pass under the eyes of his air patrols, and, finally, they had. Now all he had to do was follow them, and Dubro couldn't divert them except to the east. And that meant diverting his entire fleet to the east, away from Sri Lanka, opening the way for his navy's amphibious formation to load its cargo of soldiers and armored vehicles. The only alternative was for the Americans to confront his fleet and offer battle.

But they wouldn't do that—would they? No. The only sensible thing for America to do was to recall Dubro and his two carriers to Pearl Harbor, there to await the political decision on whether or not to confront Japan. They had divided their fleet, violating the dictum of Alfred Thayer Mahan, which Chandraskatta had learned at the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island, along with his classmate, Yusuo Sato, not so many years before, and he remembered the theoretical discussions they'd had on walks along the seawall, watching the yachts and wondering how small navies could defeat big ones.

Arriving at Pearl Harbor, Dubro would confer with the intelligence and operations staffs of his Pacific Fleet command and they would do their sums, and then they would see that it probably could not be done. How angry and frustrated they would be, the Indian Admiral thought.

But first he would teach them a lesson. Now he was hunting them. For all their speed and cleverness, they were tied to a fixed point, and sooner or later you just ran out of maneuvering room. Now he could force them away, and allow his country to take her first imperial step. A small one, almost inconsequential in the great game, but a worthy opening move nonetheless because the Americans would withdraw, allowing his country to move, as Japan had moved. By the time America had built its strength back up, it would be too late to change things. It was all about space and time, really. Both worked against a country crippled by internal difficulties and therefore robbed of her

purpose. How clever of the Japanese to see to that.

"It went better than I expected," Durling said. He'd walked over to Ryan's office for the chat, a first for both of them.

"You really think so?" Jack asked in surprise.

"Remember, I inherited most of the cabinet from Bob." The President sat down. "Their focus is domestic. That's been my problem all along."

"You need a new SecDef and a new Chairman," the National Security Advisor observed coldly.

"I know that, but the timing is bad for it." Durling smiled. "It gives you a slightly wider purview, Jack. But I have a question to ask you first."

"I don't know if we can bring it off." Ryan was doodling on his pad.

"We have to take the missiles out of play first."

"Yes, sir, I know that. We'll find them. At least I expect that we will one way or another. The other wild cards are hostages, and our ability to hit the islands. This war, if that's what it is, has different rules. I'm not sure what those rules are yet." Ryan was still working on the public part of the problem. How would the American people react? How would the Japanese?

"You want some input from your commander in chief?" Durling asked.

That was good enough to generate another smile. "You bet."

"I fought in a war where the other side made the rules," Durling observed. "It didn't work out very well."

"Which leads me to a question," Jack said.

"Ask it."

"How far can we go?"

The President considered. "That's too open-ended."

"The enemy command authority is usually a legitimate target of war, but heretofore those people have been in uniform."

"You mean going after the zaibatsu?"

"Yes, sir. Our best information is that they're the ones giving the orders. But they're civilians, and going directly after them could seem like assassination."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Jack." The President stood to leave, having said what he'd come in to say.

"Fair enough." *A slightly wider purview,* Ryan thought. That could mean many things. Mainly it meant that he had the opportunity to run with the ball, but all alone, unprotected. *Well,* Jack thought, *you've done that before*.

“What have we done?” Koga asked. “What have we allowed them to do?”

“It’s so easy for them,” responded a political aide of long standing. He didn’t have to say who *them* was. “We cannot ourselves assert our power, and divided, it’s just so easy for them to push us in any direction they want . . . and over time—” The man shrugged.

“And over time the policy of our country has been decided by twenty or thirty men elected by no one but their own corporate boardrooms. But this far?” Koga asked. “But *this* far?”

“We are where we are. Would you prefer that we deny it?” the man asked.

“And who protects the people now?” the former—that word was bitter indeed—Prime Minister asked, leading with his chin and knowing it.

“Goto, of course.”

“We cannot permit that. You know what he follows.” Koga’s counselor nodded, and would have smiled but for the gravity of the moment. “Tell me,” Mogataru Koga asked. “What is honor? What does it dictate now?”

“Our duty, Prime Minister, is to the people,” replied a man whose friendship with the politician went back to Tokyo University. Then he remembered a quote from a Westerner—Cicero, he thought. “The good of the people is the highest law.”

And that said it all, Koga thought. He wondered if treason always began that way. It was something he’d sleep on, except that he knew that he wouldn’t sleep at all that night. *This morning,* Koga thought with a grunt, checking his watch.

“We’re sure that it has to be standard-gauge track?”

“You can resection the photos we have yourself,” Betsy Fleming told him. They were back in the Pentagon headquarters of the National Reconnaissance Office. “The transporter-car our people saw is standard gauge.”

“Disinformation, maybe?” the NRO analyst asked.

“The diameter of the SS-19 is two-point-eight-two meters,” Chris Scott replied, handing over a fax from Russia. “Throw in another two hundred seventy centimeters for the transport container. I ran the numbers myself. The narrow-gauge track over there would be marginal for an object of that width. Possible, but marginal.”

“You have to figure,” Betsy went on, “that they’re not going to take

too many chances. Besides, the Russians also considered a rail-transport mode for the Mod-4 version, and designed the bird for that, and the Russian rail gauge—"

"Yeah, I forgot that. It is larger than our standard, isn't it?" The analyst nodded. "Okay, that does make the job easier." He turned back to his computer and executed a tasking order that he'd drafted a few hours earlier. For every pass over Japan, the narrow-focus high-resolution cameras would track down along precise coordinates. Interestingly, AMTRAK had the best current information on Japanese railroads, and even now one of their executives was being briefed in on the security rules pertaining to overhead imagery. It was a pretty simple briefing, really. Tell anyone what you see, and figure on a lengthy vacation at Marion, Illinois.

The computer-generated order went to Sunnyvale, California, from there to a military communications satellite, and thence to the two orbiting KH-11 satellites, one of which would overfly Japan in fifty minutes, the other ten minutes after that. All three people wondered how good the Japanese were at camouflaging. The hell of it was, they might never find out. All they could do, really, was wait. They would look at the imagery in real-time as it came in, but unless there were overt signs pointing to what they sought, the real work would be done over hours and days. If they were lucky.

Kurushio was on the surface, never something to make a submarine commander happy. They wouldn't be here long. Fuel was coming aboard through two large-diameter hoses, and other stores, mainly food, were lowered by crane to crewmen waiting on the deck. His navy didn't have a proper submarine tender, Commander Ugaki knew. Mainly they used tank-landing ships for the purpose, but those were fulfilling other purposes now, and he was stuck with a merchantman whose crew was enthusiastic but unfamiliar with the tasks they were now attempting.

His was the last boat into Agana Harbor because he'd been the one farthest away from the Marianas when the occupation had begun. He'd fired only one torpedo, and was gratified to see how well the Type 89 had worked. That was good. The merchantmen didn't have the equipment to reload him properly, but, the captain told himself, he had fifteen more, and four Harpoon missiles, and if the Americans offered him that many targets, so much the better.

Those crewmen not on duty loading stores on the afterdeck were crowded forward, getting some sun as submariners often did—as indeed their captain was doing, bare-chested atop the sail, drinking tea and smiling for everyone to see. His next mission was to patrol the

area west of the Bonins, to intercept any American ship—more likely a submarine—that attempted to close the Home Islands. It promised to be typical submarine duty, Ugaki thought: dull but demanding. He'd have to talk to his crew about how important it was.

"So where's the patrol line?" Jones asked, pushing the envelope again.

"Along 165-East for the moment," Admiral Mancuso said, pointing at the chart. "We're thin, Jonesy. Before I commit them to battle, I want them to get used to the idea. I want the COs to drill their people up. You're never ready enough, Ron. Never."

"True," the civilian conceded. He'd come over with SOSUS printouts to demonstrate that all known submarine contacts were off the screen. Two hydrophone arrays that were operated from the island of Guam were no longer available. Though connected by undersea cable to the rest of the network, they'd evidently been turned off by the monitoring facility on Guam, and nobody at Pearl had yet been able to trick them back on. The good news was that a backup array off Samar in the Philippines was still operating, but it could not detect the Japanese SSKs shown by satellite to be replenishing off Agana. They'd even gotten a good count. Probably, Mancuso thought. The Japanese still painted the hull numbers on the sails, and the satellite cameras could read them. Unless the Japanese, like the Russians and then the Americans, had learned to spoof reconnaissance efforts by playing with the numbers—or simply erased them entirely.

"It would be nice to have a few more fast-attacks, wouldn't it?" Jones observed after a minute's contemplation of the chart.

"Sure would. Maybe if we can get some direction from Washington . . ." His voice trailed off, and Mancuso thought a little more. The location of every sub under his command was marked with a black silhouette, even the ones in overhaul status. Those were marked in white, showing availability dates, which was not much help at the moment. But there were five such silhouettes at Bremerton, weren't there?

The *Special Report* card appeared on all the major TV networks. In every case the hushed voice of an anchorperson told people that their network shows would be interrupted by a speech from the President about the economic crisis with which his administration had been dealing since the weekend. Then came the Presidential Seal. Those who had been following the events were surprised to see the President smiling.

"Good evening.

“My fellow Americans, last week we saw a major event take place in the American financial system.

“I want to begin my report to you by saying that the American economy is strong. Now”—he smiled—“that may seem a strange pronouncement given all that you’ve heard in the media and elsewhere. But let me tell you why that is so. I’ll start off with a question:

“What has changed? American workers are still making cars in Detroit and elsewhere. American workers are still making steel. Kansas farmers have their winter wheat in and are preparing for a new planting season. They’re still making computers in the Silicon Valley. They’re still making tires in Akron. Boeing is still making airplanes. They’re still pumping oil out of the ground in Texas and Alaska. They’re still mining coal in West Virginia. All the things you were doing a week ago, you are still doing. So what has changed?

“What changed was this: some electrons traveled along some copper wires, telephone lines like this one”—the President held up a phone cord and tossed it aside on his desk—“and that’s all,” he went on in the voice of a good, smart neighbor come to the house to offer some kindly advice. “Not one person has lost his life. Not a single business has lost a building. The wealth of our nation is unchanged. Nothing has gone away.

“And yet, my fellow Americans, we have begun to panic—over what?

“In the past four days we have determined that a deliberate attempt was made to tamper with the U.S. financial markets. The United States Department of Justice, with the assistance of some good Americans within those markets, is now building a criminal case against the people responsible for that. I cannot go further at the moment because even your President does not have the right to tamper with the right of any person to a fair and impartial trial. But we do know what happened and we do know that what happened is entirely artificial.

“Now, what are we going to do about it?” Roger Durling asked.

“The financial markets have been closed all week. They will reopen at noon on Friday and . . .”

33

Reversal Points

"It can't possibly work," Kozo Matsuda said over the translation. "Raizo's plan was perfect—better than perfect," he went on, talking as much to himself as the telephone receiver. Before the crash he'd worked in conjunction with a banker associate to use the opportunity to cash in on the T-Bill transactions, which had gone a long way to recapitalizing his troubled conglomerate. It had also made his cash account yen-heavy in the face of international obligations. But that was not a problem, was it? Not with the renewed strength of the yen and corresponding weakness of the American dollar. It might even make sense, he thought, to purchase American interests through intermediaries—a good strategic move once the American equities market resumed its free fall.

"When do the European markets open?" Somehow in the excitement of the moment he couldn't remember.

"London is nine hours behind us. Germany and Holland are eight. Four this afternoon," the man on the other end of the phone said. "Our people have their instructions." And those were clear: to use the renewed power of their national currency to buy as many European equities as possible so that when the financial panic ended, two or three years from now, Japan would be so enmeshed in that multinational economy as to be a totally integral part of it; so vital to their survival that separation would run the renewed danger of financial collapse. And they wouldn't risk that, not after recovery from the worst economic crisis in three generations, and certainly not after Japan had played so important and selfless a part in restoring prosperity to three hundred million Europeans. It was troubling that the Americans suspected a hand in what had taken place, but Yamata-san had assured them all that no records could possibly exist—wasn't that the masterstroke of the entire event, the elimination of records and their replacement with chaos? Businesses could not operate without precise financial records of their transactions, and denied those, they simply stopped. Rebuilding them would require weeks or months, Matsuda was sure, during which time the paralysis would allow Japan—more precisely, his fellow zaibatsu—to cash in, in

addition to the brilliant strategic moves Yamata had executed through their government agencies. The integrated nature of the plan was the reason why all his fellows had signed on to it.

"It really doesn't matter, Kozo. We took Europe down, too, and the only liquidity left in the world is ours."

"Good one, Boss," Ryan said, leaning on the doorframe.

"A long way to go," Durling said, leaving his chair and heading out of the Oval Office before saying anything more. The President and National Security Advisor headed into the White House proper, past the technicians who alone had been allowed in. It wasn't time to face reporters yet.

"It's amazing how philosophical it is," Jack said as they took the elevator to the residential floor.

"Metaphysics, eh? You did go to a Jesuit school, didn't you?"

"Three, actually. What is reality?" Jack asked rhetorically. "Reality to them is electrons and computer screens, and if there's one thing I learned on the Street, it's that they don't know investments worth a damn. Except Yamata, I suppose."

"Well, he did all right, didn't he?" Durling asked.

"He should have left the records alone. If he'd left us in free-fall . . ." Ryan shrugged. "It might just have kept going. It just never occurred to him that we might not play by his rules." And that, Jack told himself, would be the key to everything. The President's speech had been a fine mix of things said and unsaid, and the targeting of the speech had been precise. It had been, in fact, the first PsyOp of a war.

"The press can't stay dumb forever."

"I know." Ryan even knew where the leak would start, and the only reason it hadn't happened already was the FBI. "But we need to keep them dumb just a little longer."

It started cautiously, not really as part of any operational plan at all, but more as a precursor to one. Four B-1B Lancer bombers lifted off from Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, followed by two KC-10 tankers. The combination of latitude and time of year guaranteed darkness. Their bomb bays were fitted with fuel tanks instead of weapons. Each aircraft had a crew of four, pilot and copilot, plus two systems operators.

The Lancer was a sleek aircraft, a bomber equipped with a fighter's stick instead of a more conventional control yoke, and pilots who had flown both said that the B-1B felt and flew like a slightly heavy F-4

Phantom, its greater weight and larger size giving the bomber greater stability and, for now, a smoother ride. For the moment the staggered formation of six flew international route R-220, maintaining the lateral spacing expected of commercial air traffic.

A thousand miles and two hours out, passing Shemya and leaving ground-control radar coverage, the six aircraft turned north briefly. The tankers held steady while the bombers one by one eased underneath to take on fuel, a procedure that lasted about twelve minutes in each case. Finished, the bombers continued southwest while the tankers turned to land at Shemya, where they would refill their own tanks.

The four bombers descended to twenty-five thousand feet, which took them below the regular stream of commercial air traffic and allowed more freedom of maneuver. They continued close to R-220, the westernmost of the commercial flight tracks, skimming down past the Kamchatka Peninsula.

Systems were flipped on in the back. Though designed as a penetrating bomber, the B-1B fulfilled many roles, one of which was electronic intelligence. The body of any military aircraft is studded with small structures that look for all the world like the fins on fish. These objects are invariably antennas of one sort or another, and the graceful fairing has no more sinister purpose than to reduce drag. The Lancer had many of them, designed to gather in radar and other electronic signals and pass them along to internal equipment, which analyzed the data. Some of the work was done in real-time by the flight crew. The idea was for the bomber to monitor hostile radar, the better to allow its crew to avoid detection and deliver its bombs.

At the NOGAL reporting point, about three hundred miles outside the Japanese Air Defense Identification Zone, the bombers split into a patrol line, with roughly fifty miles separating the aircraft, and descended to ten thousand feet. Crewmen rubbed their hands together, pulled their seat belts a little tighter, and started concentrating. Cockpit chatter lessened to that required by the mission, and tape recorders were flipped on. Satellite monitoring told them that the Japanese Air Force had airborne-early-warning aircraft, E-767s, operating almost continuously, and those were the defensive assets that the bomber crews feared most. Flying high, the E-767s could see far. Mobile, they could move to deal with threats with a high degree of efficiency. Worst of all, they invariably operated in conjunction with fighters, and fighters had eyes in them, and behind the eyes were brains, and weapons with brains in them were the most frightening of all.

“Okay, there’s the first one,” one of the systems operators said. It wasn’t really the first. For practice of sorts, they’d calibrated their

equipment on Russian air-defense radars, but for the first time in the collective memory of all sixteen airmen, it wasn't Russian radars and fighters which concerned them. "Low-frequency, fixed, known location."

They were receiving what operators often called "fuzz." The radar in question was under the horizon and too far away to detect their semistealthy aircraft. As you can see a person holding a flashlight long before the light reveals your presence to the holder, so it was with radar. The powerful transmitter was as much a warning beacon to unwanted guests as a lookout for its owners. The location, frequency, pulse-repetition rate, and estimated power of the radar was noted and logged. A display on the electronic-warfare officer's board showed the coverage for that radar. The display was repeated on the pilot's console, with the danger area marked in red. He'd stay well clear of it.

"Next," the EWO said. "Wow, talk about power—this one's airborne. Must be one of their new ones. It's definitely moving south-to-north, now bearing two-zero-two."

"Copy," the pilot acknowledged quietly, his eyes scanning all around the dark sky. The Lancer was really proceeding on autopilot, but his right hand was only inches from the stick, ready to jerk the bomber to the left, dive to the deck, and go to burner. There were fighters somewhere off to his right, probably two F-15s, but they would stay close to E-767s.

"Another one, one-nine-five, just appeared . . . different freq and—stand by," the electronics officer said. "Okay, major frequency change. He's probably in an over-the-horizon mode now."

"Could he have us?" the pilot asked, checking his avoidance screen again. Outside the red keep-out zone was a yellow section that the pilot thought of as the "maybe" zone. They were at most a few minutes away from entering that zone, and "maybe" seemed very worrisome indeed at the moment, nearly three thousand miles from Elmendorf Air Force Base.

"Not sure. It's possible. Recommend we come left," the EWO said judiciously. On that advice, he felt the aircraft bank five degrees. The mission wasn't about taking risks. It was about gathering information, as a gambler would observe a table before taking his seat and putting his chips in play.

* * *

"I think there's somebody out there," one of the E-767 operators said. "Zero-one-five, southerly course. Hard to hold it."

The rotodome atop the E-767 was like few others in the world, and all of them were Japanese. Three of them were operating on the eastern approaches to their country. Transmitting up to three million watts of electrical energy, it had four times the power of anything the Americans had aloft, but the true sophistication of the system lay not in its power but in its mode of delivery. Essentially a smaller version of the SPY radar carried on the Kongo-class destroyers, the array was composed of thousands of solid-state diodes that could scan both electronically and mechanically, and jump in frequency to suit the needs of the moment. For long-range detection, a relatively low frequency was best. However, though the waves curved around the visible horizon somewhat, it was at the cost of poor resolution. The operator was getting a hit on only every third sweep or so. The system software had not yet learned to distinguish clutter from the purposeful activities of a human mind, at least not in all cases, and not, unfortunately, at this frequency setting....

"Are you sure?" the senior controller asked over the intercom line. He'd just called up the display himself and didn't see anything yet.

"Here." The first man moved his cursor and marked the contact when it reappeared. He wished they could improve that software. "Wait! Look here!" He selected another blip and marked it, too. It disappeared almost at once but came back in fifteen seconds. "See, southerly course—speed five hundred knots."

"Excellent." The senior controller activated his radio microphone and reported to his ground station that Japanese air defenses were being probed for the first time. The only surprise, really, was that it had taken them so long. *This is where things get interesting,* he thought, wondering what would happen next, now that the games had begun.

"No more of those Es?" the pilot asked.

"No, just the two. I thought I had a little fuzz a minute ago," the EWO said, "but it faded out." He didn't need to explain that with the sensitivity of his instruments, he was probably getting readings on garage-door openers as well. A moment later another ground radar was plotted. The patrol line angled back west one by one as they passed the coverage of the two E-767s, still on a southwesterly base course, now halfway down the largest home island, Honshu, which was well over three hundred miles to their right. The copilots of each of the four aircraft looked exclusively west now, while the aircraft commanders scanned for possible air traffic to their front. It was tense but routine, not unlike driving through a neighborhood in which one didn't want to live. So long as the lights were all green, you didn't get too worried—but you didn't like the looks your car got.

The crew of the third E-767 was unhappy, and their fighter escorts even more so. Enemy aircraft were looking at their coastline, and even if they were six hundred kilometers out, they still didn't belong in the neighborhood. But they switched their radar systems to standby. Probably EC-135s, they thought, surveillance aircraft, assembling an electronic order of battle for their country. And if the American mission were to gather information, then the smart thing to do was to deny them the information they wanted. And it was easy to do, or so the radar-controller officers told themselves.

We'll go closer in the next time, the aircraft commander told himself. First electronics experts would have to examine the data and try to determine what was and what wasn't safe, betting the lives of fellow Air Force officers with their conclusions. That was a happy thought. The crew relaxed, yawned, and started talking, mainly about the mission and what they had learned. Four and a half hours back to Elmendorf, and a shower, and some mandated crew rest.

The Japanese controllers were still not completely sure that they'd had contacts at all, but that would be determined by examining their onboard tapes. Their patrol patterns returned to their normal monitoring of commercial air traffic, and a few comments were exchanged on why the devil that traffic still continued. The answers were mainly shrugs and raised eyebrows and even more uncertainty than had existed when they'd thought they were tracking contacts. There was just something about looking at a radar screen for more than a few hours. Sooner or later your imagination took over, and the more you thought about it, the worse it got. But that, they knew, was the same for the other side in the game, too.

The central-bank heads were accustomed to VIP treatment. Their flights all arrived at John F. Kennedy International within the same hour. Each was met by a senior diplomat from their respective countries' U.N. delegations, whisked past customs control, and sent to the city in a car with diplomatic tags. The common destination surprised them all, but the Federal Reserve Chairman explained that for convenience the New York FBI office was a better place for

coordination than the local Federal Reserve bank, especially since it was large enough to accommodate the directors of the major trading houses—and since antitrust regulations were being suspended in the interest of American national security. That notification bemused the European visitors. Finally, they thought, America understood the national-security implications of financial matters. It had certainly taken them long enough.

George Winston and Mark Gant began their final briefing on the events of the previous week after an introduction from the Chairman and Secretary Fiedler, and by this time they had the presentation down pat.

"Bloody clever," the head of the Bank of England observed to his German counterpart.

"*Jawohl,*" was the whispered reply.

"How do we prevent something like this from happening again?" one of them wondered aloud.

"Better record-keeping systems for starters," Fiedler replied alertly after something approaching a decent night's sleep. "Aside from that . . . ? It's something we need to study for a while. Of greater interest are the remedial measures which we must now consider."

"The yen must suffer for this," the French banker observed at once. "And we must help you to protect the dollar in order to protect our own currencies."

"Yes." The Fed Chairman nodded at once. "Jean-Jacques, I'm glad you see it the same way we do."

"And to save your equities markets, what will you do?" the head of the Bundesbank asked.

"This is going to sound somewhat crazy, but we think it will work," Secretary Fiedler began, outlining the procedures that President Durling had *not* revealed in his speech and whose execution depended to a large degree on European cooperation. The visitors shared a common look, first of incredulity, then of approval.

Fiedler smiled. "Might I suggest that we coordinate our activities for Friday?"

Nine in the morning was considered an ungodly hour for the commencement of diplomatic negotiations, which helped the situation. The American delegation arrived at the Japanese Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., in private cars, the better to conceal the situation.

The formalities were observed in all particulars. The conference room was large, with a correspondingly large table. The Americans took their places on one side and the Japanese on the other.

Handshakes were exchanged because these were diplomats and such things were to be expected. Tea and coffee were available, but most just poured glasses of ice water into crystal glasses. To the annoyance of the Americans, some of the Japanese smoked. Scott Adler wondered if they did it just to unsettle him, and so to break the ice he requested and got a smoke from the Ambassador's chief aide.

"Thank you for receiving us," he began in a measured voice.

"Welcome, again, to our embassy," the Japanese Ambassador replied with a friendly if wary nod.

"Shall we begin?" Adler asked.

"Please." The Ambassador leaned back in his chair and adopted a relaxed posture to show that he was at ease and that he would listen politely to the impending discourse.

"The United States is gravely concerned with developments in the Western Pacific," Adler began. *Gravely concerned* was the right turn of phrase. When nations are gravely concerned, it usually means that they are contemplating violent action. "As you know, the inhabitants of the Mariana Islands hold American citizenship, and do so because of their own wishes, freely expressed in an election almost twenty years ago. For that reason the United States of America will not under any circumstances accept Japanese occupation of those islands, and we req—no," Adler corrected himself, "we *demand* the return of those islands to U.S. sovereignty forthwith, and the immediate and total removal of Japanese armed forces from the territories in question. We similarly require the immediate release of any and all U.S. citizens held by your government. Failure to comply with these requirements will entail the most serious possible consequences."

Everyone in the room thought the opening position statement was unequivocal. If anything it was a little too strong, the Japanese diplomats thought, even those who deemed their country's actions to be madness.

"I personally regret the tone of your statement," the Ambassador replied, giving Adler a diplomatic slap across the face. "On the substantive issues, we will listen to your position and consider its merit against our own security interests." This was a diplomat's way of saying that Adler would now have to repeat what he had just said—with amplifications. It was an implicit demand for another statement, one that conceded something, in return for which was the implied promise that there might be a concession on the part of his government.

"Perhaps I did not make myself sufficiently clear," Adler said after a sip of water. "Your country has committed an act of war against the United States of America. The consequences of such acts are very grave. We offer your country the opportunity to withdraw from those

acts without further bloodshed."

The other Americans sitting at the table communicated without words and without a look: *Hardball.* There had scarcely been time for the American team to develop its thoughts and approaches, and Adler had gone further than they'd expected.

"Again," the Ambassador said after his own moment of contemplation, "I find your tone personally regrettable. As you know, my country has legitimate security interests, and has been the victim of unfortunate legal actions which can have no effect other than severe damage to our economic and physical security. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter specifically recognizes the right of any sovereign nation to self-defense measures. We have done no more than that." It was a skillful parry, even the Americans thought, and the renewed request for civility suggested a real opening for maneuver.

The initial discussions went on for another ninety minutes, with neither side budging, each merely repeating words, with hardly a change of phrase. Then it was time for a break. Security personnel opened the French doors to the embassy's elegant garden, and everyone went out, ostensibly for fresh air but really for more work. The garden was too large to bug, especially with a brisk wind blowing through the trees.

"So, Chris, we've begun," Seiji Nagumo said, sipping his coffee—he'd chosen it to show how sympathetic he was with the American position; for the same reason, Christopher Cook was drinking tea.

"What did you expect us to say?" the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State asked.

"The opening position is not surprising," Nagumo conceded.

Cook looked away, staring at the wall that enclosed the garden. He spoke quietly. "What will you give up?"

"Guam, definitely, but it must be demilitarized," Nagumo replied in the same voice. "And you?"

"So far, nothing."

"You must give me something to work with, Chris," Nagumo observed.

"There's nothing to offer, except maybe a cessation of hostilities—before they actually start."

"When will that happen?"

"Not anytime soon, thank God. We do have time to work with. Let's make good use of it," Cook urged.

"I'll pass that along. Thank you." Nagumo wandered off to join a member of his delegation. Cook did the same, ending up three minutes later with Scott Adler.

"Guam, demilitarized. That's definite. Maybe more. That's not

definite."

"Interesting," Adler thought. "So you were right on their allowing us to save face. Nice call, Chris."

"What will we offer them back?"

"*Gornisch,*" the Deputy Secretary of State said coldly. He was thinking about his father, and the tattoo on his forearm, and how he'd learned that a 9 was an upside-down 6, and how his father's freedom had been taken away by a country once allied with the owner of this embassy and its lovely if cold garden. It was somewhat unprofessional and Adler knew it. Japan had offered a safe haven during those years to a few lucky European Jews, one of whom had become a cabinet secretary under Jimmy Carter. Perhaps if his father had been one of those fortunate few, his attitude might have been different, but his father hadn't, and his wasn't. "For starters we lean on them hard and see what happens."

"I think that's a mistake," Cook said after a moment.

"Maybe," Adler conceded. "But they made the mistake first."

The military people didn't like it at all. It annoyed the civilians, who had established the site approximately five times as fast as these uniformed boneheads would have managed, not to mention doing it in total secrecy and less expensively.

"It never occurred to you to hide the site?" the Japanese general demanded.

"How could anyone find this?" the senior engineer shot back.

"They have cameras in orbit that can pick up a packet of cigarettes lying on the ground."

"And a whole country to survey." The engineer shrugged. "And we are in the bottom of a valley whose sides are so steep that an inbound ballistic warhead can't possibly hit it without striking those peaks first." The man pointed. "And now they do not even have the missiles they need to do it," he added.

The General had instructions to be patient, and he was, after his initial outburst. It was his site to command now. "The first principle is to deny information to the other side."

"So we hide it, then?" the engineer asked politely.

"Yes."

"Camouflage netting on the catenary towers?" They'd done it during the construction phase.

"If you have them, it's a good beginning. Later we can consider other more permanent measures."

“By train, eh?” The AMTRAK official noted after the completion of his briefing. “Back when I started in the business, I was with the Great Northern, and the Air Force came to us half a dozen times about how to move missiles around by rail. We ended up moving a lot of concrete in for them.”

“So you’ve actually thought this one over a few times?” Betsy Fleming asked.

“Oh, yeah.” The official paused. “Can I see the pictures now?” The goddamned security briefing had taken hours of unnecessary threats, after which he’d been sent back to his hotel to contemplate the forms —and to allow the FBI to run a brief security check, he imagined.

Chris Scott flipped the slide projector on. He and Fleming had already made their own analysis, but the purpose of having an outside consultant was to get a free and fresh opinion. The first shot was of the missile, just to give him a feel for the size of the thing. Then they went to the shot of the train car.

“Okay, it sure looks like a flatcar, longer than most, probably specially made for the load. Steel construction. The Japanese are good at this sort of thing. Good engineers. There’s a crane to lift something. How much does one of these monsters weigh?”

“Figure a hundred tons for the missile itself,” Betsy answered. “Maybe twenty for the transporter-container.”

“That’s pretty heavy for a single object, but not all that big a deal. Well within limits for the car and the roadbed.” He paused for a moment. “I don’t see any obvious electronics connections, just the usual brake lines and stuff. You expect them to launch off the cars?”

“Probably not. You tell us,” Chris Scott said.

“Same thing I told the Air Force twenty-some years ago for the MX. Yeah, you can move them around, but it doesn’t make finding them all that hard unless you assume that you’re going to make a whole lot of railcars that look exactly alike—and even then, like for the mainline on the Northern, you have a fairly simple target. Just a long, thin line, and guess what, our mainline from Minneapolis to Seattle was longer than all the standard-gauge track in their country.”

“So?” Fleming asked.

“So this isn’t a launch car. It’s just a transport car. You didn’t need me to tell you that.”

No, but it is nice to hear it from somebody else, Betsy thought.

“Anything else?”

“The Air Force kept telling me how delicate the damned things are. They don’t like being bumped. At normal operating speeds you’re talking three lateral gees and about a gee and a half of vertical acceleration. That’s not good for the missile. Next problem is

dimensional. That car is about ninety feet long, and the standard flatcar for their railroads is sixty or less. Their railroads are mainly narrow-gauge. Know why?"

"I just assumed that they picked—"

"It's all engineering, okay?" the AMTRAK executive said. "Narrow-gauge track gives you the ability to shoehorn into tighter spots, to take sharper turns, generally to do things smaller. But they went to standard gauge for the *Shin-Kansen* because for greater speed and stability you just need it wider. The length of the cargo and the corresponding length of the car to carry it means that if you turn too tightly, the car overlaps the next track and you run the risk of collision unless you shut down traffic coming the other way every time you move these things. That's why the missile is somewhere off the *Shin-Kansen* line. It has to be. Then next, there's the problem of the cargo. It really messes things up for everybody."

"Keep going," Betsy Fleming said.

"Because the missiles are so delicate, we would have been limited to low speed—it would have wrecked our scheduling and dispatching. We never wanted the job. The money to us would have been okay, but it would probably have hurt us in the long run. The same thing would be true of them, wouldn't it? Even worse. The *Shin-Kansen* line is a high-speed passenger routing. They meet timetables like you wouldn't believe, and they wouldn't much like things that mess them up." He paused. "Best guess? They used those cars to move the things from the factory to someplace else and that's all. I'd bet a lot of money that they did everything at night, too. If I were you I'd hunt around for these cars, and expect to find them in a yard somewhere doing nothing. Then I'd start looking for trackage off the mainline that doesn't go anywhere."

Scott changed slides again. "How well do you know their railroads?"

"I've been over there often enough. That's why they let you draft me."

"Well, tell me what you think of this one." Scott pointed at the screen.

"That's some bitchin" radar," a technician observed. The trailer had been flown up to Elmendorf to support the B-1 mission. The bomber crews were sleeping now, and radar experts, officer- and enlisted-rank, were going over the taped records of the snooper flight.

"Airborne phased array?" a major asked.

"Sure looks that way. Sure as hell isn't the APY-1 we sold them ten years back. We're talking over two million watts, and the way the

signal strength jumps. Know what they've got here? It's a rotating dome, probably a single planar array," the master sergeant said. "So it's rotating, okay. But they can steer it electronically, too."

"Track and scan?"

"Why not? It's frequency-agile. Damn, I wish we had one of these, sir." The sergeant picked up a photo of the aircraft. "This thing is going to be a problem for us. All that power—makes you wonder if they might get a hit. Makes me wonder if they were tracking the 1s, sir."

"From that far out?" The B-1B was not strictly speaking a stealthy aircraft. From nose-on it did have a reduced radar signature. From abeam the radar cross section was considerably larger, though still smaller than any conventional airplane of similar physical dimensions.

"Yes, sir. I need to play with the tapes some."

"What will you look for?"

"The rotodome probably turns at about six rpm. The pulses we're recording ought to be at about that interval. Anything else, and they were steering the beam at us."

"Good one, Sarge. Run it down."

34

All Aboard

Yamata was annoyed to be back in Tokyo. His pattern of operation in thirty years of business had been to provide command guidance, then let a team of subordinates work out the details while he moved on to other strategic issues, and he'd fully expected it to go easier in this case rather than harder. After all, the twenty most senior zaibatsu were his staff now. Not that they thought of themselves that way. Yamata-san smiled to himself. It was a heady thought. Getting the government to dance to his tune had been child's play. Getting these men onboard had taken years of cajolery. But they *were* dancing to his tune, and they just needed the bandmaster around from time to time. And so he'd flown back on a nearly empty airliner to steady down their nerves.

"It's not possible," he told them.

"But he said—"

"Kozo, President Durling can say anything he wishes. I'm telling you that it is not possible for them to rebuild their records in anything less than several weeks. If they attempt to reopen their markets today all that will result is chaos. And chaos," he reminded them, "works in our favor."

"And the Europeans?" Tanzan Itagake asked.

"They will wake up at the end of next week and discover that we have bought their continent," Yamata told them all. "In five years America will be our grocer and Europe will be our boutique. By that time the yen will be the world's most powerful currency. By that time we will have a fully integrated national economy and a powerful continental ally. Both of us will be self-sufficient in all our resource needs. We will no longer have a population that needs to abort its babies to keep from overpopulating our Home Islands. And," he added, "we will have political leadership worthy of our national status. That is our next step, my friends."

Indeed, Binichi Murakami thought behind an impassive face. He remembered that he'd signed on partly as a result of being accosted on the streets of Washington by a drunken beggar. How was it possible that someone as clever as himself could be influenced by petty anger?

But it had happened, and now he was stuck with the rest. The industrialist sipped his sake and kept his peace while Yamata-san waxed rhapsodic about their country's future. He was really talking about his own future, of course, and Murakami wondered how many of the men around the table saw that. Fools. But that was hardly fair, was it? After all, he was one of them.

Major Boris Scherenko had no less than eleven highly placed agents within the Japanese government, one of whom was the deputy head of the PSID, a man he'd compromised some years before while on a sex and gambling trip to Taiwan. He was the best possible person to have under control—it was likely that he would one day graduate to chief of the agency and enable the Tokyo *rezidentura* both to monitor and influence counterintelligence activity throughout the country. What confused the Russian intelligence officer was that none of his agents had been of much help so far.

Then there was the issue of working with the Americans. Given his professional training and experience, it was as if he were heading the welcoming committee for diplomats arriving from Mars. The dispatch from Moscow made it easier to accept. Or somewhat easier. It appeared that the Japanese were planning to rob his country of her most precious potential asset, in conjunction with China, and to use that power base to establish themselves as the world's most powerful nation. And the strangest thing of all was that Scherenko did not think the plan crazy on its face. Then came his tasking orders.

Twenty missiles, he thought. It was one area he'd never targeted for investigation. After all, *Moscow* had sold the things to them. They must have considered the possibility that the missiles could be used for——but, no, of course they hadn't. Scherenko promised himself that he'd sit down with this Clark fellow, an experienced man, and after breaking the ice with a few drinks, inquire delicately if the American's political direction was as obtuse as that which he received, regardless of the government in question. Perhaps the American would have something useful to say. After all, their governments changed every four or eight years. Perhaps they were used to it.

Twenty missiles, he thought. *Six warheads each.* Once it had been normal to think of missiles as things that flew in thousands, and both sides had actually been mad enough to accept it as a strategic fact of life. But now, the possibility of a mere ten or twenty—at whom would they really be aimed? Would the Americans really stand up for their new . . . what? Friends? Allies? Associates? Or were they merely former enemies whose new status had not yet been decided in Washington? Would they help his country against the new/ old

danger? What kept coming back to him was, *twenty missiles times six warheads.* They would be evenly targeted, and surely enough to wreck his country. And if that were true, they would surely be enough to deter America from helping.

Well, then Moscow is right, Scherenko judged. Full cooperation now was the best way to avoid that situation. America wanted a location on the missiles, probably with the intention of destroying them. *And if they don't, we will.*

The Major personally handled three of the agents. His subordinates handled the others, and under his direction messages were prepared for distribution to dead-drops around the city. *What do you know about . . .* How many would answer his call for information? The danger was not so much that the people under his control would not have the information he needed, but that one or more of them would take this opportunity to report in to the government. In asking for something of this magnitude, he ran the risk of giving one of his agents the chance to redeem himself by turning patriot, to reveal the new orders and absolve himself of any guilt. But some risks you had to run. After midnight he took a walk, picking high-traffic areas to place his drops and making the appropriate wake-up signals to alert his people. He hoped that the half of PSID he controlled was the one covering this area. He thought so, but you could never be sure, could you?

Kimura knew he was running risks, but he'd gone beyond that kind of worry now. All he could really hope for was that he was acting as a patriot, and that somehow people would understand and honor that fact after his execution for treason. The other consolation was that he would not die alone.

"I can arrange a meeting with former Prime Minister Koga," he said simply.

Oh, shit, Clark thought at once. *I'm a goddamned* spy, he wanted to reply. *I'm not with the goddamned State Department.* The only good news at the moment was that Chavez didn't react at all. His heart had probably stopped, John told himself. *Like yours just did.*

"To what end?" he asked.

"The situation is grave, is it not? Koga-san has no part in this. He is still a man of political influence. His views should be of interest to your government."

Yeah, you might say that. But Koga was also a politician on the outside, and perhaps willing to trade the lives of some foreigners for an open door back into the government; or just a man who placed country ahead of personal gain—which possibility might cut in just about any direction Clark could imagine.

"Before I can commit to that, I need instructions from my government," John said. It was rarely that he temporized on anything, but this one was well beyond his experience.

"Then I would suggest that you get it. And soon," Kimura added as he stood and left.

"I always wondered if my master's in international relations would come in handy," Chavez observed, staring into his half-consumed drink. "Of course I have to live long enough to get the parchment." *Might be nice to get married, settle down, have kids, maybe even have a real life someday,* he didn't add.

"Good to see you still have a sense of humor, Yevgeniy Pavlovich."

"They're going to tell us to do it. You know that."

"*Da.*" Clark nodded, keeping his cover and now trying to think as a Russian would. Did the KGB manual have a chapter for this? he wondered. The CIA's sure as hell didn't.

As usual the tapes were clearer than the instant analysis of the operators. There had been three, perhaps four—more likely four, given American operational patterns, the intelligence officers opined—aircraft probing Japanese air defenses. Definitely not EC-135s, however. Those aircraft were based on a design almost fifty years old and studded with enough antennas to watch every TV signal in the hemisphere, and would have generated far larger radar returns. Besides, the Americans probably didn't have four such aircraft left. Therefore something else, probably their B-1B bomber, the intelligence people estimated. And the B-1B was a *bomber*, whose purpose was far more sinister than the collection of electronic signals. So the Americans were thinking of Japan as an enemy whose defenses would have to be penetrated for the purpose of delivering death, an idea new to neither side in this war—if war it was, the cooler heads added. But what else could it be? the majority of the analysts asked, setting the tone of the night's missions.

Three E-767s were again up and operating, again with two of them active and one waiting in the ambush role. This time the radars were turned up in power, and the parameters for the signal-processing software were electronically altered to allow for easier tracking of stealthy targets at long range. It was physics they depended on. The size of the antenna combined with the power of the signal and the frequency of the electronic waves made it possible to get hits on almost anything. That was both the good news and the bad news, the operators thought, as they received all manner of signals now. There was one change, however. When they thought they had a weak return from a moving object at long range, they started directing their

fighters in that direction. The Eagles never got within a hundred miles. The return signals always seemed to fade out when the E-767 switched frequency from longwave acquisition to shortwave tracking, and that didn't bode well for the Ku-band needed for actual targeting. It did show them that the Americans were still probing, and that perhaps they knew they were being tracked. And, everyone thought, if nothing else it was good training for the fighters. If this were truly a war, all the participants told themselves, then it was becoming more and more real.

"I don't buy it," the Colonel said.

"Sir, it looks to me like they were tracking you. They were sweeping you at double the rate that I can explain by the rotation of their dome. Their radar is completely electronic. They can steer their beams, and they were steering their beams." The sergeant's voice was reasonable and respectful, even though the officer who'd led the first probe was showing a little too much pride and not quite enough willingness to listen. He'd heard a little of what he was just told, but now he just shrugged it off.

"Okay, maybe they did get a few hits. We were broadside-aspect to them. Next time we'll deploy the patrol line farther out and do a direct penetration. That cuts our RCS by quite a bit. We have to tickle their line to see how they react."

Better you than me, pal, the sergeant thought. He looked out the window. Elmendorf Air Force Base was in Alaska and subject to dreadful winter weather—the worst enemy of any man-made machine. As a result the B-1s were all in hangars, which hid them from the satellite that Japan might or might not have operating. Still, nobody was sure about that.

"Colonel, I'm just a sergeant who diddles with O-scopes, but I'd be careful about that. I don't know enough about this radar to tell you for sure how good it is. My gut tells me it's pretty damned good."

"We'll be careful," the Colonel promised. "Tomorrow night we'll have a better set of tapes for you."

"Roger that, sir." *Better you than me, pal,* he thought again.

USS *Pasadena* had joined the north end of the patrol line west of Midway. It was possible for the submarines to report in with their satellite radios without revealing their positions except to PacFlt SubOps.

"Not much of a line," Jones observed, looking at the chart. He'd just

come over to confer on what SOSUS had on Japanese naval movements, which was at the moment not much. The best news available was that SOSUS, even with Jones's improved tracking software, wasn't getting anything on the line of *Olympia, Helena, Honolulu, Chicago,* and now *Pasadena.* "We used to have more boats than that just to cover the Gap."

"That's all the SSNs we have available, Ron," Chambers replied. "And, yeah, it ain't much. But if they forward-deploy their diesel boats, they'd better be real careful." Washington had given them that much by way of orders. An eastward move of Japanese warships would not be tolerated, and the elimination of one of their submarines would be approved, probably. It was just that the boat holding the contact had to call it in first for political approval. Mancuso and Chambers hadn't told Jones that. There was little sense in dealing with his temper again.

"We have a bunch of SSNs in storage—"

"Seventeen on the West Coast, to be exact," Chambers said. "Minimum six months to reactivate them, not countin' getting the crews spun up."

Mancuso looked up. "Wait a minute. What about my 726s?"

Jones turned. "I thought they were deactivated."

SubPac shook his head. "The environmental people wouldn't let me. They all have caretaker crews aboard."

"All five of them," Chambers said quietly. "*Nevada, Tennessee, West Virginia, Pennsylvania,* and *Maryland.* That's worth calling Washington about, sir."

"Oh, yeah," Jones agreed. The 726-class, more commonly known by the name of the lead ship, *Ohio,* which was now high-quality razor blades, was far slower than the smaller 688-class of fast-attack boats, a lot less maneuverable and ten knots slower, but they were also quiet. More than that, they defined what quiet was.

"Wally, think we can scratch up crews for them?"

"I don't see why not, Admiral. We could have them moving in a week . . . ten days max, *if* we can get the right people."

"Well, that's something I can do." Mancuso lifted the phone for Washington.

The business day started in Central Europe at ten o'clock local time, which was nine o'clock in London, and a dark four o'clock in New York. That made it six in the evening in Tokyo after what had been at first an exciting week, then a dull one, which had allowed people to contemplate their brilliance at the killing they had made.

Currency traders in the Japanese capital were surprised when things

started quite normally. Markets came up on-line much as a business might open its doors for customers waiting outside for a long-awaited sale. It had been announced that it would happen that way. It was just that nobody here had really believed it. As one man they phoned their supervisors for instructions, surprising them with the news from Berlin and the other European centers.

At the New York FBI office, machines wired into the international trading network showed exactly the same display as those on every other continent. The Fed Chairman and Secretary Fiedler watched. Both men had phones to their ears, linked into an encrypted conference line with their European counterparts.

The Bundesbank made the first move, trading five hundred billion yen for the current equivalent in dollars to the Bank of Hong Kong, a very cautious transaction to test the waters. Hong Kong handled it as a matter of course, seeing a marginal advantage in the German mistake. The Bundesbank was foolish enough to expect that the reopening of the New York equities markets would bolster the dollar. The transaction was executed, Fiedler saw. He turned to the Fed Chairman and winked. The next move was by the Swiss, and this one was a *trillion* yen for Hong Kong's remaining holding in U.S. Treasuries. That transaction, too, went through the wires in less than a minute. The next one was more direct. The Bern Commercial Bank took Swiss francs back from a Japanese bank, trading yen holdings for them, another dubious move occasioned by a phone call from the Swiss government.

The opening of European stock markets saw other moves. Banks and other institutions that had made a strategic move to buy up Japanese equities as a counterbalance to Japanese acquisitions in European markets now started selling them off, immediately converting the yen holdings to other currencies. That was when the first alarm light went on in Tokyo. The Europeans' actions might have appeared to be mere profit-taking, but the currency conversions bespoke a belief that the yen was going to fall and fall hard, and it was a Friday night in Tokyo, and their trading floors were closed except for the currency traders and others working the European markets.

"They should be getting nervous now," Fiedler observed.

"I would," Jean-Jacques said in Paris. What nobody quite wanted to say was that the First World Economic War had just begun in earnest. There was an excitement to it, even though it ran contrary to all their instincts and experience.

"You know, I don't have a model to predict this," Gant said, twenty feet away from the two government officials. The European action,

helpful as it was, confounded all computer models and preconceptions.

"Well, pilgrim, that's why we've got brains and guts," George Winston responded deadpan.

"But what are our markets going to do?"

Winston grinned. "Sure as hell we're going to find out in, oh, about seven and a half hours. And you don't even have to shell out for the E-Ticket. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm glad somebody's happy about this."

There were worldwide rules for currency trading. Trading stopped once a currency had fallen a certain amount, but not this time. The floor under the yen was yanked out by every European government, trading didn't stop, and the yen resumed its fall.

"They can't do that!" someone said in Tokyo. But they were doing it, and he reached for a phone, knowing even then what his instructions would be. The yen was being attacked. They had to defend it, and the only way was to trade the foreign-currency holdings they already owned in order to bring the yen holdings back home and out of the playing field of international speculation. Worst of all, there was no reason for this action. The yen was strong, especially against the American dollar. Soon it would replace it as the world's benchmark currency, especially if the American financial markets were foolish enough to reopen later in the day. The Europeans were making a sucker bet of such magnitude as to defy qualification, and since it didn't make sense, all the Japanese traders could do was to apply their own experience to the situation and act accordingly. The irony of the moment would have been delicious, had they been able to appreciate it. Their actions were virtually automatic. Francs, French and Swiss, British pounds, German D-marks, Dutch guilders, and Danish kroner were disbursed in vast quantities to purchase yen, whose relative value, everyone in Tokyo was sure, could only appreciate, especially if the Europeans pegged their currencies to the dollar.

There was an element of nervousness to it, but they did it, acting on the orders of their superiors, who were even now leaving their homes and catching cars or trains to the various commercial office buildings in which world trading was conducted. Equities were traded off in Europe as well, with the local currencies converted to yen. The expectation again was that when the American collapse resumed, the European currencies would fall, and with them the values of stock issues. Then Japan could reacquire even larger quantities of European stocks. The European moves were a sad case of misplaced loyalty, or

confidence, or something, the people in Tokyo thought, but sad or not, it worked in their favor. And that was just fine. By noon London time a massive movement had taken place. Individual investors and smaller institutions, seeing what everyone else had done, had moved in—foolishly, the Japanese knew. Noon London time was seven in the morning on America's East Coast.

"My fellow Americans," President Durling said at exactly 7:05 A.M. on every TV network. "On Wednesday night I told you that today American financial markets are going to reopen . . ."

"Here it goes," Kozo Matsuda said, just back in his office and watching CNN. "He's going to say that they can't, and Europe is going to panic. Splendid," he told his aides, turning back to the TV. The American president was smiling and confident. Well, a politician had to know how to act, the better to lie to his citizens.

"The problems which the market experienced last week came from a deliberate assault on the American economy. Nothing like this has ever happened before, and I am going to walk you through what happened, how it was done, and why it was done. We've spent an entire week accumulating this information, and even now Treasury Secretary Fiedler and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board are in New York, working with the heads of the great American financial institutions to set things aright.

"I am also pleased to report that we have had the time to consult with our friends in Europe, and that our historic allies have chosen to stand with us as faithfully in this time of difficulty as they have in other times.

"So what really happened last Friday?" Roger Durling asked.

Matsuda sat his drink down on his desk when he saw the first chart appear on the screen.

* * *

Jack watched him go through it. The trick as always was to make a complex story simple, and that task had involved two professors of economics, half of Fiedler's personal staff, and a governor of the Securities and Exchange Commission, all working in coordination with the President's best speechwriter. Even so, it took twenty-five minutes, six flip charts, and would require a number of government spokesmen

talking who were even now on background to reporters whose briefings had started at 6:30.

"I told you Wednesday night that nothing—*nothing* of consequence had happened to us. Not one piece of property has been affected. Not one farm has lost anything. Each of you is the same person you were a week ago, with the same abilities, the same home, the same job, the same family and friends. What happened last Friday was an attack not on our country itself, but on our national confidence.

"Our confidence is a harder and tougher target than people realize, and that is something we're going to prove today. "

Most of the people in the trading business were en route to their offices and missed the speech, but their employers had all taped it, and there were also printed copies on every desk and at every computer terminal. The trading day would not start until noon, moreover, and there were strategy sessions to be held everywhere, though nobody really had much idea of what to do. The most obvious response to the situation was indeed so obvious that no one knew whether or not to try it.

"They're doing it to us," Matsuda said, watching his screens. "What can we do to stop it?"

"It depends on what their stock market does," his senior technical trader replied, not knowing what else to say and not knowing what to expect, either.

"Do you think it'll work, Jack?" Durling asked. He had two speeches sitting in folders on his desk, and didn't know which he would be giving in the evening.

The National Security Advisor shrugged. "Don't know. It gives them a way out. Whether or not they make use of it is up to them."

"So now we just get to sit and wait?"

"That's about it, Mr. President."

The second session was held in the State Department. Secretary Hanson huddled with Scott Adler, who then met with his negotiating team and waited. The Japanese delegation arrived at 9:45.

"Good morning," Adler said pleasantly.

"A pleasure to see you again," the Ambassador replied, taking his hand, but not as confidently as on the day before. Not surprisingly, he

had not had time to receive detailed instructions from Tokyo. Adler had halfway expected a request for a postponement of the session, but, no, that would have been too obvious a sign of weakness, and so the Ambassador, a skilled and experienced diplomat, was in the most precarious of diplomatic positions—he was forced to represent his government with nothing more to fall back on than his wits and his knowledge. Adler walked him to his seat, then returned to his side of the table. Since America was the host today, Japan got to speak first. Adler had placed a side bet with the Secretary as to the Ambassador's opening statement.

"First of all it needs to be said that my government objects in the strongest terms to the attack on our currency engineered by the United States . . ."

That's ten bucks you owe me, Mr. Secretary, Adler thought behind an impassive face.

"Mr. Ambassador," he replied, "that is something we could say just as easily. In fact, here is the data which we have developed on the events of last week." Binders appeared on the table and were slid across to the Japanese diplomats. "I need to tell you that we are now conducting an investigation that could well lead to the indictment of Raizo Yamata for wire- and securities fraud."

It was a bold play for a number of reasons. It showed everything that the Americans knew about the attack on Wall Street and pointed to the things yet to be learned. As such, it could have no effect other than to ruin the criminal case against Yamata and his allies, should it come to that. But that was a side issue. Adler had a war to stop, and stop quickly. He'd let the boys and girls at Justice worry about the other stuff.

"It might be better of course for your country to deal with this man and his acts," Adler offered next, giving generous maneuvering room to the Ambassador and his government. "The net effect of his actions, as may be seen today, will be to cause greater hardship to your country than to ours.

"Now, if we may, I should like us to return to the issue of the Mariana Islands."

The one-two punch predictably staggered the Japanese delegation. As was often the case, nearly everything was left unsaid: *We know what you did. We know how you did it. We are prepared to deal with all of it.* The brutally direct method was designed to conceal the real American problem—the inability to make an immediate military counter—but it also provided Japan with the ability to separate her government from the acts of certain of her citizens. And that, Ryan and Adler had decided the previous night, was the best means of achieving a quick and clean end to the situation. To that end, a large

carrot was required.

"The United States seeks little more than a return to normal relations. The immediate evacuation of the Marianas will allow us to consider a more lenient interpretation of the Trade Reform Act. This, also, is something we are willing to place on the table for consideration." It was probably a mistake to hit him with this much, Adler thought, but the alternative was further bloodshed. By the end of the first session of formal negotiations, something remarkable had happened. Neither side had repeated a position. Rather, it had been, in diplomatic terms, a free-form exchange of views, few of them well considered.

"Chris," Adler whispered when he stood. "Find out what they're really thinking."

"Got it," Cook replied. He got himself some coffee and headed out to the terrace, where Nagumo stood on the edge, looking out toward the Lincoln Memorial.

"It's an elegant way out, Seiji," Cook offered.

"You push us too hard," Nagumo said without turning.

"If you want a chance to end this without getting people killed, this is the best one."

"The best for you, perhaps. What of our interests?"

"We'll cut a deal on trade." Cook didn't understand it all. Unschooled in financial matters, he was as yet unaware of what was happening on that front. To him the recovery of the dollar and the protection of the American economy was an isolated act. Nagumo knew different. The attack his country had begun could be balanced only by a counterattack. The effect would not be restoration of the status quo ante, but, rather, serious damage to his own country's economy on top of preexisting damage from the Trade Reform Act. In this, Nagumo knew something that Cook did not: unless America acceded to Japanese demands for some territorial gain, then the war was quite real.

"We need time, Christopher."

"Seiji, there *isn't* time. Look, the media haven't picked up on this yet. That can change at any moment. If the public finds out, there's going to be hell to pay." Because Cook was right, he'd given Nagumo an opening.

"Yes, there may well be, Chris. But I am protected by my diplomatic status and you are not." He didn't need to say more than that.

"Now, wait a minute, Seiji ..."

"My country needs more than what you offer," Nagumo replied coldly.

"We're giving you a way out."

"We must have more." There was no turning back now, was there?

Nagumo wondered if the ambassador knew that yet. Probably not, he judged, from the way the senior diplomat was looking in his direction. It was suddenly clear to him. Yamata and his allies had committed his country to action from which there was no backing away, and he couldn't decide if they'd known it or not when they'd begun. But that didn't matter now. "We must have something," he went on, "to show for our actions."

At about that time, Cook realized how slow he'd been on the uptake. Looking in Nagumo's eyes, he saw it all. Not so much cruelty as resolve. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State thought about the money sitting in a numbered account, and the questions that would be asked, and what possible explanation he might have for it.

It sounded like an old-fashioned school bell when the digital clock turned from 11:59:59 to 12:00:00.

"Thank you, H. G. Wells," a trader breathed, standing on the wooden floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The time machine was in operation. For the first time in his memory, at this hour of the day the floor was clean. Not a single paper slip lay there. The various traders at their kiosks looked around and saw some signs of normality. The ticker had been running for half an hour, showing the same data it had displayed the previous week, really as a way of synchronizing their minds with the new day, and everyone used it as a touchstone, a personal contact with reality that both was and was not.

It was a hell of a speech the President had given five hours earlier. Everyone on the floor had seen it at least once, most of them right here, followed by a pep talk from the head of the NYSE that would have done Knute Rockne proud. They had a mission that day, a mission that was more important than their individual well-being, and one that, if accomplished, would see to their long-term security as well as that of the entire country. They had spent the day reconstructing their activities of the previous Friday, to the point where every trader knew what quantities of which stock he or she held, what every position was. Some even remembered the moves they'd been planning to make, but most of those had been "up" moves rather than "down" ones, and their collective memory would not allow them to follow through on them.

On the other hand, they remembered well the panic of the afternoon seven days before, and, knowing that it had been both artificial and malicious, no one wished to start it afresh. And besides, Europe had signaled its confidence in the dollar in the strongest terms. The bond market was as solidly fixed as though set in granite, and the first moves of the day had been to buy U.S. Treasuries to take

advantage of the stunning deal offered by the Fed Chairman. That move was the best confidence-builder they'd ever seen.

For over ninety seconds by one trader's watch, exactly *nothing* happened on the floor of the exchange. The ticker simply displayed nothing. The phenomenon evoked snorts of disbelief from men whose minds raced to understand it. The little-guy investors, without a clue, were making few calls, and those who did were told by their brokers to sit tight. And for the most part that was what they did. Those who did make sell orders had them handled in-house by their brokerage houses from the reservoir of issues that they had on hand, left over from the previous week. But the big traders weren't doing anything, either. Each of them was waiting for somebody else to do something. The inactivity of merely a minute and a half seemed an eternity to people accustomed to frantic action, and when the first major play happened, it came as a relief.

That first big move of the day, predictably, came from the Columbus Group. It was a massive purchase of Citibank common. Seconds later, Merrill Lynch pushed the button for a similar acquisition of Chemical Bank.

"Yeah," a few voices said on the floor. It made sense, didn't it? Citibank was vulnerable to a fall in the dollar, but the Europeans had seen to it that the dollar was rising in value, and that made First National City Bank a good issue to pick up on. As a result, the first tick of the Dow Jones Industrial Average was *up,* defying every prediction of every computer.

"Yeah, we can do this," another floor trader observed. "I want a hundred Manny-Hanny at six," he announced. That would be the next bank to benefit from the increasing strength of the dollar, and he wanted a supply that he could move out at six and a quarter. The stocks that had led the slide the previous week would now lead a rise, and for the same reasons as before. Mad as it sounded, it made perfect sense, they all realized. And as soon as the rest of the market figured it out, they could all cash in on it.

The news ticker on the wall was up and running, again giving shorthand selections off the wire services. GM, it said, was rehiring twenty thousand workers for its plants around Detroit in anticipation of increased auto sales. The callback would take nine months, the announcement didn't say, and was the result of a call from the Secretaries of Commerce and Labor, but it was enough to excite interest in auto stocks, and that excited interest in machine tools. By 12:05:30, the Dow was up five points. Hardly a hiccup after the five-hundred-point plummet seven days before, but it looked like Everest on a clear day from the floor of the NYSE.

“I don’t believe this,” Mark Gant observed, several blocks away in the Javits Federal Office Building.

“Where the hell is it written down that computers are always right?” George Winston inquired with another forced grin. He had his own worries. Buying up Citibank was not without dangers, but his move, he saw, had the proper effect on the issue. When it had moved up three points, he initiated a slow sell-off to cash in, as other fund managers moved in to follow the trend. Well, that was predictable, wasn’t it? The herd just needed a leader. Show them a trend and wait for them to follow, and if it was contrarian, so much the better.

“First impression—it’s working,” the Fed Chairman told his European colleagues. All the theories said it should, but theories seemed thin at moments like this. Both he and Secretary Fiedler were watching Winston, now leaning back in his chair, chewing on a pen and talking calmly into a phone. They could hear what he was saying. At least his voice was calm, though his body was that of a man in a fight, every muscle tense. But after another five minutes they saw him stretch tense muscles and smile and turn and say something to Gant, who merely shook his head in wonderment as he watched his computer screen do things that it didn’t believe possible.

“Well, how about that,” Ryan said.

“Is it good?” President Durling asked.

“Let’s put it this way: if I were you I’d give your speechwriter a dozen long-stemmed red roses and tell her to plan on working here another four years or so.”

“It’s way too early for that, Jack,” the President replied somewhat crossly.

Ryan nodded. “Yes, sir, I know. What I mean to tell you is, you did it. The markets may—hell, *will* fluctuate the rest of the day, but they’re not going to free-fall like we initially expected. It’s about confidence, Boss. You restored it, and that’s a fact.”

“And the rest of it?”

“They’ve got a chance to back down. We’ll know by the end of the day.”

“And if they don’t?”

The National Security Advisor thought about that. “Then we have to figure a way to fight them without hurting them too badly. We have to find their nukes and we have to settle this thing down before it really gets out of control.”

“Is that possible?”

Ryan pointed to the screen. “We didn’t think this was possible, did we?”

35

Consequences

It happened in Idaho, in a community outside Mountain Home Air Force Base. A staff sergeant based there had flown out to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam to work on the approach-control radars. His wife had delivered a baby a week after his departure, and she attempted to call him that evening to tell him about his new daughter, only to learn that the phones were out due to a storm. Only twenty years old and not well educated, she'd accepted the news with disappointment. The military comm links were busy, an officer had told her, convincingly enough that she'd gone home with tears in her eyes. A day later she'd talked to her mother and surprised her with the news that her husband didn't know about his daughter yet. Even in time of war, her mother thought, such news always got through—and what storm could possibly be worse than fighting a war?

So she called the local TV station and asked for the weatherman, a sagacious man of fifty who was excellent at predicting the tornadoes that churned through the region every spring, and, it was widely thought, saved five or ten lives each year with his instant analysis of which way the funnel clouds moved.

The weatherman in turn was the kind who enjoyed being stopped in the local supermarkets with friendly comments, and took the inquiry as yet another compliment for his professional expertise, and besides, he'd never checked out the Pacific Ocean before. But it was easy enough. He linked into the NOAA satellite system and used a computer to go backwards in time to see what sort of storm had hammered those islands. The time of year was wrong for a typhoon, he knew, but it was the middle of an ocean, and storms happened there all the time.

But not this year and not this time. The satellite photos showed a few wispy clouds, but otherwise fair weather. For a few minutes he wondered if the Pacific Ocean, like Arkansas, was subject to fair-weather gales, but, no, that wasn't likely, since those adiabatic storms resulted mainly from variations in temperature and land elevation, whereas an ocean was both flat and moderate. He checked with a colleague who had been a Navy meteorologist to confirm it, and found

himself left only with a mystery. Thinking that perhaps the information he had was wrong, he consulted his telephone book and dialed 011-671-555-1212, since a directory-assistance call was toll-free. He got a recording that told him that there had been a storm. Except there had *not* been a storm. Was he the first guy to figure that out?

His next move was to walk across the office to the news department. Within minutes an inquiry went out on one of the wire services.

"Ryan."

"Bob Holtzman, Jack. I have a question for you."

"I hope it's not about Wall Street," Jack replied in as unguarded a voice as he could muster.

"No, it's about Guam. Why are the phone lines out?"

"Bob, did you ask the phone company that?" Ryan tried.

"Yeah. They say there was a storm that took a lot of lines down. Except for a couple of things. One, there wasn't any storm. Two, there's an undersea cable *and* a satellite link. Three, a week is a long time. What's going on?" the reporter asked.

"How many people are asking?"

"Right now, just me and a TV station in Little Rock that put a request up on the AP wire. Another thirty minutes and it's going to be a lot more. What gives? Some sort of—"

"Bob, why don't you come on down here," Ryan suggested. *Well, it's not as though you expected this to last forever* , Jack told himself. Then he called Scott Adler's office. *But why couldn't it have waited one more day?*

Yukon was fueling her second set of ships. The urgency of the moment meant that the fleet oiler was taking on two escorts at a time, one on either beam, while her helicopter transferred various parts and other supplies around the formation, about half of them aircraft components to restore *Ike*'s aircraft to full-mission status. The sun would set in another thirty minutes, and the underway-replenishment operations would continue under cover of darkness. Dubro's battle force had darted east, the better to distance itself from the Indian formation, and again had gone to EMCON, with all radars off, and a deceptive placement of their surveillance aircraft. But they'd lost track of the two Indian carriers, and while the Hawkeyes probed cautiously, Dubro sweated.

"Lookouts report unknown aircraft inbound at two-one-five," a

talker called.

The Admiral swore quietly, lifted his binoculars, and turned to the southwest. There. Two Sea Harriers. Playing it smart, too, he saw. They were at five thousand feet or so, tucked into the neat two-plane element used for tactical combat and air shows, flying straight and level, careful not to overfly any ship directly. Before they had passed over the first ring of escorts, a pair of Tomcats were above and behind them, ready to take them out in a matter of seconds if they showed hostile intent. But hostile intent meant loosing a weapon first, and in this day and age a loosed weapon most probably meant a hit, whatever happened to the launch aircraft. The Harriers flew overhead one time only. They seemed to be carrying extra fuel tanks and maybe a reconnaissance pod, but no weapons, this time. Admiral Chandraskatta was no fool, but then Dubro had never made that assumption. His adversary had played a patient game, sticking to his own mission and biding his time, and learning from every trick the Americans had shown him. None of this was of much comfort to the battle-force commander.

"Follow them back?" Commander Harrison asked dispassionately.

Mike Dubro shook his head. "Pull one of the Hummers in close and track by radar."

When the hell would Washington realize he had an imminent confrontation brewing?

"Mr. Ambassador," Scott Adler said, folding up the note an aide had just delivered. "It is likely that in the next twenty-four hours your occupation of the Marianas will become public knowledge. At that point the situation will go beyond our control. You have plenipotentiary powers to resolve this affair . . ."

But he didn't, as Adler had begun to suspect, despite assurances to the contrary. He could also see that he'd pushed the man too hard and too fast. Not that he'd had a choice in the matter. The entire affair had been going on for barely a week. In normal diplomatic practice it took that long just to select the kind of chairs the negotiators sat in. In that respect everything had been doomed from the beginning, but Adler was a professional diplomat for whom hope was never dead. Even now as he concluded his latest statement, he looked into the man's eyes for something he'd be able to report to the White House.

"Throughout our talks we have heard about America's demands, but we have not heard a single word concerning my country's legitimate security interests. Today you have conducted a systematic attack on our financial and economic foundations and—"

Adler leaned forward. "Mr. Ambassador! A week ago your country

did the same thing to us, as the information in front of you demonstrates. A week ago your country conducted an attack on the United States Navy. A week ago your country seized U.S. territory. In equity, sir, you have no place to criticize us for efforts necessary to the restoration of our own economic stability." He paused for a moment, reproving himself for the decidedly undiplomatic language of his outburst, but events had gone beyond such niceties—or they soon would. "We have offered you the opportunity to negotiate in good faith for a mutually acceptable interpretation of the Trade Reform Act. We will accept an apology and reparations for the losses to our Navy. We *require* the immediate evacuation of Japanese military forces from the Mariana Islands."

But things had already gone too far for that, and everyone at the table knew it. There just wasn't time. Adler felt the dreadful weight of inevitability. All his skills were useless now. Other events and other people had taken matters out of his hands, and the Ambassador's hands as well. He saw the same look on the man's face that must have been on his own.

His voice was mechanical. "Before I can respond to that, I must consult with my government. I propose that we adjourn so that consultations may be carried out."

Adler nodded more with sadness than anger. "As you wish, Mr. Ambassador. If you should need us, we will be available."

"My God, you kept all that quiet? *How?"* Holtzman demanded.

"Because you guys were all looking the other way," Jack answered bluntly. "You've always depended too much on us for information anyway." He instantly regretted those words. It had come out as too much of a challenge. *Stress, Jack.*

"But you lied to us about the carriers and you never told us about the submarines at all!"

"We're trying to stop this thing before it gets worse," President Durling said. "We're talking to them over at State right now."

"You've had a busy week," the journalist acknowledged. "Kealty's out?"

The President nodded. "He's talking with the Justice Department and with the victims."

"The big thing was getting the markets put back in place," Ryan said. "That was the real—"

"What do you mean? They've *killed* people!" Holtzman objected.

"Bob, why have you guys been hammering the Wall Street story so hard all week? Damn it, what was really scary about their attack on us was the way they wrecked the financial markets and did their run on

the dollar. We had to fix that first."

Bob Holtzman conceded the point. "How the hell did you pull that one off?"

"God, who would have thunk it?" Mark Gant asked. The bell had just rung to close the abbreviated trading day. The Dow was down four and a quarter points, with four hundred million shares traded. The S&P 500 was actually up a fraction, as was NASDAQ, because the blue-chip companies had suffered more from general nerves than the smaller fry. But the bond market was the best of all, and the dollar was solid. The Japanese yen, on the other hand, had taken a fearful beating against every Western currency.

"The changes in bonds will drop the stock market next week," Winston said, rubbing his face and thanking Providence for his luck. Residual nerves in the market would encourage people to seek out safer places for their money, though the strength of the dollar would swiftly ameliorate that.

"By the end of the week?" Gant wondered. "Maybe. I'm not so sure. A lot of manufacturing stocks are still undervalued."

"Your move on Citibank was brilliant," the Fed Chairman said, taking a place next to the traders.

"They didn't deserve the hit they took last week, and everyone knew it. I was just the first to make the purchase," Winston replied matter-of-factly. "Besides, we came out ahead on the deal." He tried not to be too smug about it. It had just been another exercise in psychology; he'd done something both logical and unexpected to initiate a brief trend, then cashed in on it. Business as usual.

"Any idea how Columbus made out today?" Secretary Fiedler asked.

"Up about ten," Gant replied at once, meaning ten million dollars, a fair day's work under the circumstances. "We'll do better next week."

An FBI agent came over. "Call in from DTC. They're posting everything normally. That part of the system seems to be back to normal."

"What about Chuck Searls?" Winston asked.

"Well, we've taken his apartment completely apart. He had two brochures about New Caledonia, of all places. That's part of France, and we have the French looking for him."

"Want some good advice?"

"Mr. Winston, we always look for advice," the agent replied with a grin. The mood in the room was contagious.

"Look in other directions, too."

"We're checking everything."

“Yeah, Buzz,” the President said, lifting the phone. Ryan, Holtzman, and two Secret Service agents saw JUMPER close his eyes and let out a long breath. He’d been getting reports from Wall Street all afternoon, but it wasn’t official for him until he heard it from Secretary Fiedler. “Thanks, my friend. Please let everybody know that I—good, thanks. See you tonight.” Durling replaced the phone. “Jack, you are a good man in a storm.”

“One storm left.”

“So does that end it?” Holtzman asked, not really understanding what Durling had said. Ryan took the answer.

“We don’t know yet.”

“But—”

“But the incident with the carriers can be written off as an accident, and we won’t know for sure what happened to the submarines until we look at the hulls. They’re in fifteen thousand feet of water,” Jack told him, cringing inwardly for saying such things. But this was war, and war was something you tried to avoid. *If possible,* he reminded himself. “There’s the chance that we can both back away from this, write it off to a misunderstanding, a few people acting without authority, and if they get hammered for it, nobody else dies.”

“And you’re telling me all this?”

“It traps you, doesn’t it?” Jack asked. “If the talks over at State work out, then you have a choice, Bob. You can either help us keep things quiet, or you can have a shooting war on your conscience. Welcome to the club, Mr. Holtzman.”

“Look, Ryan, I can’t—”

“Sure you can. You’ve done it before.” Jack noted that the President sat there and listened, saying nothing. That was partly to distance himself from Ryan’s maneuvering, but another part, perhaps, liked what he saw. And Holtzman was playing along.

“So what does all this mean?” Goto asked.

“It means that they will bluster,” Yamata told him. *It means that our country needs leadership*, he couldn’t say. “They cannot take the islands back. They lack the resources to attack us. They may have patched up their financial markets for now, but Europe and America cannot survive without us indefinitely, and by the time they realize that, we will not need them as we do now. Don’t you see? This has always been about *independence* for us! When we achieve that, everything will change.”

"And for now?"

"Nothing changes. The new American trade laws would have the same effect as hostilities. At least this way we get something for it, and we will have the chance of ruling our own house."

That's what it really came down to, the one thing that nobody but he ever quite saw. His country could make products and sell them, but so long as his country needed markets more than the markets needed his country, trade laws could cripple Japan, and his country would have no recourse at all. Always the Americans. It was always them, forcing an early end to the Russo-Japanese War, denying their imperial ambitions, allowing them to build up their economy, then cutting the legs out from under them, three times now, the same people who'd killed his family. Didn't they see? Now Japan had struck back, and timidity still prevented people from seeing reality. It was all Yamata could manage to rein in his anger at this small and foolish man. But he needed Goto, even though the Prime Minister was too stupid to realize that there was no going back.

"You're sure that they cannot . . . respond to our actions?" Goto asked after a minute or so of contemplation.

"Hiroshi, it is as I have been telling you for months. We cannot fail to win—unless we fail to try."

"Damn, I wish we could use these things to do our surveys." The real magic of overhead imagery lay not in individual photographs, but rather in pairs of photographs, generally taken a few seconds apart from the same camera, then transmitted down to the ground stations at Sunnyvale and Fort Belvoir. Real-time viewing was all well and good to excite the imagination of congressmen privy to such things or to count items in a hurry. For real work, you used prints, set in pairs and viewed through a stereoscope, which worked better than the human eyes for giving precise threedimensionality to the photos. It was almost as good as flying over in a helicopter. *Maybe even better,* the AMTRAK official thought, *because you could go backwards as well as forwards* .

"The satellites cost a lot of money," Betsy Fleming observed.

"Yeah, like our whole budget for a year. This one's interesting." A team of professional photo-interpretation experts was analyzing every frame, of course, but the plain truth of the matter was that CIA and NRO had stopped being interested in the technical aspects of railroad-building decades ago. Tracking individual trains loaded with tanks or missiles was one thing. This was something else.

"How so?"

"The *Shin-Kansen* line is a revenue maker. This spur isn't going to

make much money for them. Maybe they can cut a tunnel up here," he went on, manipulating the photos. "Maybe they can make it into that city—but me, I'd come the other way and save the money on engineering. Of course it could just be a shunt to use for servicing the mainline."

"Huh?"

He didn't even lift his eyes from the stereo-viewer. "A place to stash work cars, snowblowers, that sort of thing. It is well sited for that purpose. Except that there's no such cars there."

The resolution on the photos was just fantastic. They'd been taken close to noon local time, and you could see the sun's glint on the rails of the mainline, and the spur as well. He figured that the width of the rails was about the resolution limit of the cameras, an interesting fact that he couldn't relay to anyone else. The ties were concrete, like the rest of the Bullet Train line, and the quality of the engineering was, well, something he'd envied for a long time. The official looked up reluctantly.

"No way it's a revenue line. The turns are all wrong. You couldn't do thirty miles per hour through there, and the train sets on that line cruise over a hundred. Funny, though, it just disappears."

"Oh?" Betsy asked.

"See for yourself." The executive stood to stretch, giving Mrs. Fleming a place at the viewer. He picked up a large-scale map of the valley and looked to see where things went. "You know, when Hill and Stevens built the Great Northern . . ."

Betsy wasn't interested. "Chris, take a look at this."

Their visitor looked up from the map. "Oh. The truck? I don't know what color they paint their—"

"Not green."

Time usually worked in favor of diplomacy, but not in this case, Adler thought as he entered the White House. He knew the way, and had a Secret Service agent to conduct him in case he got lost. The Deputy Secretary of State was surprised to see a reporter in the Oval Office, even more so when he was allowed to stay.

"You can talk," Ryan told him. Scott Adler took a deep breath and started his report.

"They're not backing down on anything. The Ambassador isn't very comfortable with the situation, and it shows. I don't think he's getting much by way of instructions out of Tokyo, and that worries me. Chris Cook thinks they're willing to let us have Guam back in a demilitarized condition, but they want to keep the rest of the islands. I dangled the TRA at them, but no substantive response." He paused

before going on. “It’s not going to work. We can keep at it for a week or a month, but it’s just not going to happen. Fundamentally they don’t know what they’re into. They see a continuum of engagement between the military and economic sides. They don’t see the firebreak between the two. They don’t see that they’ve crossed over a line, and they don’t see the need to cross back.”

“You’re saying there’s a war happening,” Holtzman observed, to make things clear. It made him feel foolish to ask the question. He didn’t notice the same aura of unreality surrounding everyone else in the room.

Adler nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“What do you suppose?” President Durling asked.

Commander Dutch Claggett had never expected to be in this situation. A fast-track officer since his graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy twenty-three years earlier, his career had come to a screeching halt aboard USS *Maine*, when as executive officer he’d been present for the only loss of an American fleet-ballistic-missile submarine. The irony was that his life’s ambition had been command of a nuclear submarine, but command of *Tennessee* meant nothing at all now. It was just an entry on his first resume when he entered the civilian job market. Her designed mission was to carry Trident-II sea-launched ballistic missiles, but the missiles were gone and the only reason that she still existed at all was because the local environmental movement had protested her dismantlement to Federal District Court, and the judge, a lifelong member of the Sierra Club, had agreed to the arguments, which were again on their way back to the United States Court of Appeals. Claggett had been in command of *Tennessee* for nine months now, but the only time he’d been under way had been to move from one side of the pier to another. Not exactly what he’d had in mind for his career. *It could be worse,* he told himself in the privacy of his cabin. He could have been dead, along with so many of the others from USS *Maine.*

But *Tennessee* was still all his——he didn’t even share her with a second CO—and he was still a naval officer in command of a man-o’-war, technically speaking, and his reduced crew of eighty-five drilled every day because that was the life of the sea, even tied alongside a pier. His reactor plant, known to its operators as Tennessee Power and Light Company, was lit up at least once per week. The sonarmen played acquisition-and-tracking games against audiotapes, and the rest of those aboard operated every shipboard system, down to tinkering with the single Mark 48 torpedo aboard. It had to be this way. The

rest of the crew wasn't being SERB'd, after all, and it was his duty to them to maintain their professional standing should they get the transfers they all wanted to a submarine that actually went to sea.

"Message from SubPac, sir," a yeoman said, handing over a clipboard. Claggett took the board and signed first for receipt.

Report earliest date ready to put to *sea.*

"What the hell?" Commander Claggett asked the bulkhead. Then he realized that the message ought to have come through Group at least, not straight from Pearl. He lifted his phone and dialed SubPac from memory. "Admiral Mancuso, please. *Tennessee* calling."

"Dutch? What's your matériel condition?" Bart Mancuso asked without preamble.

"Everything works, sir. We even had our ORSE two weeks ago, and we maxed it." Claggett referred to the Operational Reactor Safeguards Examination, still the Holy Grail of the Nuclear Navy, even for razor-blade fodder.

"I know. How soon?" Mancuso asked. The bluntness of the question was like something from the past.

"I need to load food and torps, and I need thirty people."

"Where are you weak?"

Claggett thought for a moment. His officers were on the young side, but he didn't mind that, and he had a good collection of senior chiefs. "Nowhere, really. I'm working these people hard."

"Okay, good. Dutch, I'm cutting orders to get you ready to sail ASAP. Group is getting into gear now. I want you moving just as fast as you can. Mission orders are on the way. Be prepared to stay at sea for ninety days."

"Aye aye, sir." Claggett heard the line go dead. A moment later he lifted his phone and called for his department heads and chiefs to meet in the wardroom. The meeting had not yet started when the phone rang again. It was a call from Group asking for Claggett's precise manpower needs.

"Your house has a fine view. Is it for sale?"

Oreza shook his head. "No, it's not," he told the man at the door.

"Perhaps you would think about it. You are a fisherman, yes?"

"Yes, sir, I am. I have a charter boat—"

"Yes, I know." The man looked around, clearly admiring the size and location of what was really a fairly ordinary tract house by American standards. Manuel and Isabel Oreza had bought it five years earlier, just barely beating the real-estate boom on Saipan. "I would pay much for this," the man said.

"But then where would I live?" Portagee asked.

"Over a million American dollars," the man persisted.

Strangely enough, Oreza felt a flash of anger at the offer. He still had a mortgage, after all, and paid the bill every month—actually his wife did, but that was beside the point. The typical American monthly ritual of pulling the ticket out of the book, filling out the check, tucking both in the preprinted envelope, and dropping it in the mail on the first day of the month—the entire procedure was proof to them that they did indeed own their first house after thirty-plus years of being government-service tumbleweeds. The house was *theirs.*

"Sir, this house is mine, okay? I live here. I like it here."

The man was as friendly and polite as he could be, in addition to being a pushy son of a bitch. He handed over a card. "I know. Please excuse my intrusion. I would like to hear from you after you have had a chance to consider my offer." And with that he walked to the next house in the development.

"What the hell?" Oreza whispered, closing the door.

"What was that all about?" Pete Burroughs asked.

"He wants to pay me a million bucks for the house."

"Nice view," Burroughs observed. "On the California coast this would go for a nice price. But not that much. You wouldn't believe what Japanese real-estate prices are."

"A million bucks?" *And that was just his opening offer,* Oreza reminded himself. The man had his Toyota Land Cruiser parked in the cul-de-sac, and was clearly walking from one house to another, seeing what he could buy.

"Oh, he'd turn it over for a lot more, or maybe if he was smart, just rent it."

"But then where would we live?"

"You wouldn't," Burroughs replied. "How much you want to bet they give you a first-class ticket stateside at the settlement. Think about it," the engineer suggested.

"Well, that's interesting," Robby Jackson thought. "Anything else happening?"

"The 'cans we saw before are gone now. Things are settling back down to—hell, they *are* normal now except for all the soldiers around."

"Any trouble?"

"No, sir, nothing. Same food ships coming in, same tankers, same everything. Air traffic has slowed down a lot. The soldiers are sort of dug in, but they're being careful how they do it. Not much visible anymore. There's still a lot of bush country on the island. I guess they're all hid in there. I ain't been goin' lookin', y'know?" Jackson

heard him say.

"That's fine. Just stay cool, Master Chief. Good report. Let me get back to work."

"Okay, Admiral."

Jackson made his notes. He really should have turned this stuff over to somebody else, but Chief Oreza would want a familiar voice on the other end of the circuit, and everything was taped for the intelligence guys anyway.

But he had other things to do, too. The Air Force would be running another probe of Japanese air defenses tonight. The SSN patrol line would move west another hundred miles, and people would gather a lot of intelligence information, mainly from satellites. *Enterprise* would make Pearl Harbor today. There were two complete carrier air wings at Barbers Point Naval Air Station, but no carriers to put them on. The Army's 25th Infantry Division (Light) was still based at Schofield Barracks a few miles away, but there were no ships to put them on, either. The same was true of the First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, California. The last time America had struck at the Mariana Islands, Operation FORAGER, 15 June 1944, he'd troubled himself to find out, there had been 535 ships, 127,571 troops. The combined ships of the entire U.S. Navy and every merchant ship flying the Stars and Stripes did not begin to approach the first number; the Army and Marines combined would have been hard pressed to find enough light-infantry troops to meet the second. Admiral Ray Spruance's Fifth Fleet —which no longer existed—had consisted of no less than *fifteen* fast carriers. PacFlt now had none. Five divisions had been tasked to the mission of retaking the islands, supported by over a thousand tactical aircraft, battleships, cruisers, destroyers....

And you're the lucky son of a bitch who has to come up with a plan to take the Marianas back. With what?

We can't deal with them force-on-force, Jackson told himself. They did hold the islands, and their weapons, mainly American-designed, were formidable. The worst complication was the quantity of civilians. The "natives"—all of them American citizens—numbered almost fifty thousand, most of whom lived on Saipan, and any plan that took many of those lives in the name of liberation would be a weight his conscience was unready to bear. It was a whole new kind of war, with a whole new set of rules, few of which he had figured out yet. But the central issues were the same. The enemy has taken something of ours, and we have to take it back or America was no longer a great power. Jackson hadn't spent his entire adult life in uniform so that he could be around when that bit of history got written. Besides, what would he say to Master Chief Manuel Oreza?

We can't do it force-on-force. America no longer had the ability to

move a large army except from one base to another. There was really no large army to move, and no large navy to move it. There were no useful advance bases to support an invasion. Or were there? America still owned most of the islands in the Western Pacific, and every one had an airstrip of one kind or other. Airplanes flew farther now, and could refuel in midair. Ships could stay at sea almost indefinitely, a skill invented by the U.S. Navy eighty years earlier and made more convenient still by the advent of nuclear power. Most importantly, weapons technology had improved. You didn't need a bludgeon anymore. There were rapiers now. And overhead imagery. *Saipan.* That's where the issue would be decided. Saipan was the key to the island chain. Jackson lifted his phone.

"Ryan."

"Robby. Jack, how free a hand do we have?"

"We can't kill many people. It's not 1945 anymore," the National Security Advisor told him. "And they have nuclear missiles."

"Yeah, well, we're looking for those, so they tell me, and I know that's our first target if we can find them. What if we can't?"

"We have to," Ryan replied. *Have to?* he wondered. His best intelligence estimate was that the command-and-control over those missiles was in the hands of Hiroshi Goto, a man of limited intelligence and genuine antipathy to America. A more fundamental issue was that he had no confidence at all in America's ability to predict the man's actions. What might seem irrational to Ryan could seem reasonable to Goto—and to whoever else he depended upon for advice, probably Raizo Yamata, who had begun the entire business and whose personal motivations were simply unknown. "Robby, we have to take them out of play, and to do that, yeah, you have a free hand. I'll clear that with NCA," he added, meaning National Command Authority, the dry Pentagon term for the President.

"Nukes?" Jackson asked. It was his profession to think in such terms, Ryan knew, however horrid the word and its implications were.

"Rob, we don't want to do that unless there's no choice at all, but you are authorized to consider and plan for the possibility."

"I just had a call from our friend on Saipan. It seems somebody wants to pay top dollar for his house."

"We think they may try to stage elections—a referendum on sovereignty. If they can move people off the island, then, well, it makes them some points, doesn't it?"

"We don't want that to happen, do we?"

"No, we don't. I need a plan, Rob."

"We'll get one for you," the Deputy J-3 promised.

Durling appeared on TV again at nine in the evening, Eastern Time. There were already rumbles out. The TV anchors had followed their stories about developments on Wall Street with confused references to the carrier accident the previous week and to urgent negotiations between Japan and the United States over the Mariana Islands, where, they noted, communications were out following a storm that might never have happened. It was very discomforting for them to say what they didn't know. By this time Washington correspondents were trading information and sources, amazed at having missed something of this magnitude. That amazement translated itself into rage at their own government for concealing something of this dimension. Background briefings that had begun at eight helped to assuage them somewhat. Yes, Wall Street was the big news. Yes, it was more vital to the overall American well-being than some islands that not a few of their number had to be shown on a map. But, no, damn it, the government didn't have the right not to tell the media what was going on. Some of them, though, realized that the First Amendment guaranteed their freedom to find things out, not to demand information from others. Others realized that the Administration was trying to end the affair without bloodshed, which went part of the way to calming them down. But not all of the way.

"My fellow Americans," Durling began for the second time in the day, and it was immediately apparent that, as pleasing as the events of the afternoon had been, the news this evening would be bad. And so it was.

There is something about inevitability that offends human nature. Man is a creature of hope and invention, both of which belie the idea that things cannot be changed. But man is also a creature prone to error, and sometimes that makes inevitable the things that he so often seeks to avoid.

The four B-1B Lancer bombers were five hundred miles offshore now, again spread on a line centered due east of Tokyo. This time they turned directly in, took an exact westerly heading of two-seven-zero degrees, and dropped down to a low-penetration altitude. The electronic-warfare officers aboard each of the aircraft now knew more than they had two nights earlier. Now at least they could ask the right questions. Additional satellite information had fixed the location of every air-defense radar site in the country, and they knew they could beat those. The important part of this night's mission was to get a feel

for the capabilities of the E-767s, and that demanded more circumspection.

The B-1B had been reworked many times since the 1970s. It had actually become slower rather than faster, but it had also become stealthy. Especially from nose-on, the Lancer had the radar cross section—the RCS—of a large bird, as opposed to the B-2A, which had the RCS of a sparrow attempting to hide from a hawk. It also had blazing speed at low-level, always the best way to avoid engagement if attacked, which the crews hoped to avoid. The mission for tonight was to "tickle" the orbiting early-warning aircraft, wait for them to react electronically, and then turn and run back to Elmendorf with better data than what they had already developed, from which a real attack plan could be formulated. The flight crews had forgotten only one thing. The air temperature was 31 degrees Fahrenheit on part of their aircraft and 35 on another.

Kami-Two was flying one hundred miles east of Choshi, following a precise north-south line at four hundred knots. Every fifteen minutes the aircraft reversed course. It had been up on patrol for seven hours, and was due to be relieved at dawn. The crew was tired but alert, not yet quite settled into the numbing routine of their mission.

The real problem was technical, which affected the operators badly. Their radar, sophisticated as it was, did them fewer favors than one might imagine. Designed to make the detection of stealthy aircraft possible, it had achieved its goal, perhaps—they didn't really know yet—through a number of incremental improvements in performance. The radar itself was immensely powerful, and being of solid-state construction, both highly reliable and precise in its operation. Internal improvements included reception gear cooled with liquid nitrogen to boost sensitivity by a factor of four, and signal-processing software that missed little. That was really the problem. The radar displays were TV tubes that showed a computer-generated picture called a raster-scan, rather than the rotating-analog readout known since the invention of radar in the 1930s. The software was tuned to find anything that generated a return, and at the power and sensitivity settings being used now, it was showing things that weren't really there. Migratory birds, for example. The software engineers had programmed in a speed gate to ignore anything slower than one hundred thirty kilometers per hour, else they would have been tracking cars on the highways to their west, but the software took every return signal before deciding whether to show it to the operator, and if anything lay on or beyond that ring a few seconds later, it was plotted as a possible moving aircraft contact. In that way, two

albatrosses a few thousand meters apart became a moving aircraft in the mind of the onboard computer. It was driving the operators mad, and along with them the pilots of the two Eagle fighters that flew thirty kilometers outboard of the surveillance aircraft. The result of the software problem was irritation that had already transformed itself into poor judgment. In addition, with the current sensitivity of the overall system, the still-active streams of commercial aircraft looked for all the world like fleets of bombers, and the only good news was that Kami-One to their north was dealing with them, classifying and handing them off.

"Contact, one-zero-one, four hundred kilometers," a captain on one of the boards said into the intercom. "Altitude three thousand meters . . . descending. Speed five hundred knots."

"Another bird?" the colonel commanding the mission asked crossly.

"Not this one . . . contact is firming up."

* * *

Another aviator with the rank of colonel eased his stick down to take his bomber lower. The autopilot was off now. *In and out,* he told himself, scanning the sky ahead of him.

"There's our friend," one of the EWOs said. "Bearing two-eight-one."

Automatically, both pilot and copilot looked to their right. Unsurprisingly, they saw nothing. The copilot looked back in. At night you wanted to keep an eye on instruments. The lack of good external references meant you ran the risk of vertigo, the loss of spatial orientation, which all aviators feared. They seemed to be approaching some layered clouds. His eyes checked the external temperature gauges. Thirty-five, and that was good. Two or three degrees lower and you ran the risk of icing, and the B-1, like most military aircraft, didn't have deicing equipment. Well, the mission was electronic, not visual, and clouds didn't mean much to radar transmission or reception.

But clouds did mean moisture, and the copilot allowed himself to forget that the temperature gauge was in the nose, and the tail was quite a bit higher. The temperature there was thirty-one, and ice started forming on the bomber's tailfin. It wasn't even enough to cause any degradation in the controls. But it was enough to make a subtle change in the shape of the aircraft, whose radar cross section depended on millimeter tolerances.

“That’s a hard contact,” the Captain said on Kami-Two. He worked his controls to lock on it, transmitting the contact to the Colonel’s own display. “Maybe another one now.”

“I have it.” The contact, he saw, was leveling out and heading straight for Tokyo. It could not possibly be an airliner. No transponder. The base course was wrong. The altitude was wrong. The penetration speed was wrong. It had to be an enemy. With that knowledge, he told his two fighters to head for it.

“I think I can start interrogating it more—”

“No,” the Colonel replied over the IC phones.

The two F-15J fighters had just topped off their tanks and were well sited for the interception. The alpha-numeric symbols on the Kami’s screens showed them close, and aboard the fighters the pilots could see the same display and didn’t have to light off their own targeting radars. With their outbound speed of five hundred knots, and a corresponding speed on the inbound track, it wouldn’t be long.

At the same time a report was downlinked to the regional air-defense headquarters, and soon many people were watching the electronic drama. There were now three inbound aircraft plotted, spaced out as though to deliver an attack. If they were B-1 bombers, everyone knew, they could be carrying real bombs or cruise missiles, and they were well within the launch radius for the latter. That created a problem for the air-defense commander, and the time of day did not make it better. His precise instructions were not yet precise enough, and there was no command guidance he could depend on in Tokyo. But the inbounds were within the Air Defense Identification Zone, and they were probably bombers, and—what? the General asked himself. For now he ordered the fighters to split up, each closing on a separate target. It was going too fast. He should have known better, but you couldn’t plan for everything, and they were bombers, and they were too close, and they were heading in fast.

“Are we getting extra hits?” the aircraft commander asked. He planned to get no closer than one hundred miles to the airborne radar, and he already had his escape procedures in mind.

“Sir, that’s negative. I’m getting a sweep every six seconds, but no electronic steering on us yet.”

“I don’t think they can see us this way,” the pilot thought aloud.

“If they do, we can get out of Dodge in a hurry.” The copilot flexed his fingers nervously and hoped his confidence was not misplaced.

There could be no tally-ho call. The fighters were above the cloud layer. Descending through clouds under these circumstances ran risks. The orders came as something of an anticlimax after all the drills and

preparation, and a long, boring night of patrolling. Kami-Two changed frequencies and began electronic beam-steering on all three of her inbound contacts.

"They're hitting us," the EWO reported at once. "Freq change, pulsing us hard on the Ku-band."

"Probably just saw us." That made sense, didn't it? As soon as they plotted an inbound track, they'd try to firm it up. It gave him a little more time to work with. He'd keep going in for another few minutes, the Colonel thought, just to see what happened.

"He's not turning," the Captain said. He should have turned away immediately, shouldn't he? everyone aboard wondered. There could only be one good reason why he hadn't, and the resulting order was obvious. Kami-two changed frequencies again to fire-control mode, and an Eagle fighter loosed two radar-homing missiles. To the north, another Eagle was still just out of range of its newly assigned target. Its pilot punched burner to change that.

"Lock-up—somebody's locked-up on us!"

"Evading left." The Colonel moved the stick and increased power for a screaming dive down to the wavetops. A series of flares combined with chaff clouds emerged from the bomber's tail. They stopped almost at once in the cold air and hovered nearly motionless. The sophisticated radar aboard the E-767 identified the chaff clouds and automatically ignored them, steering its pencil-thin radar beam on the bomber, which was still moving. All the missile had to do was follow it in. All the years of design work were paying off now, and the onboard controllers commented silently to themselves on the unexpected situation. The system had been designed to protect against Russians, not Americans. How remarkable.

"I can't break lock." The EWO tried active jamming next, but the pencil beam that was hammering the aluminum skin of their Lancer was two million watts of power, and his jammers couldn't begin to deal with it. The aircraft lurched into violent corkscrew maneuvers. They didn't know where the missiles were, and they could only do what the manual said, but the manual, they realized a little late, hadn't anticipated this sort of adversary. When the first missile exploded on contact with the right wing, they were too close to the

water for their ejection seats to be of any help.

The second B-1 was luckier. It took a hit that disabled two engines, but even with half power it was able to depart the Japanese coast too rapidly for the Eagle to catch up, and the flight crew wondered if they would make Shemya before something else important fell off of their hundred-million-dollar aircraft. The rest of the flight retreated as well, hoping that someone could tell them what had gone wrong.

Of greater moment, yet another hostile act had been committed, and four more people were dead, and turning back would now be harder still for both sides in a war without any discernible rules.

36

Consideration

It wasn't that much of a surprise, Ryan told himself, but it would be of little consolation to the families of the four Air Force officers. It ought to have been a simple, safe mission, and the one bleak positive was that sure enough it had learned something. Japan had the world's best air-defense aircraft. They would have to be defeated if they were ever to take out their intercontinental missiles—but taken out the missiles had to be. A considerable pile of documents lay on his desk. NASA reports of the Japanese SS-19. Tracking on the observed test-firings of the birds. Evaluation of the capabilities of the missiles. Guesses about the payloads. They were all guesses, really. He needed more than that, but that was the nature of intelligence information. You never had enough to make an informed decision, and so you had to make an uninformed decision and hope that your hunches were right. It was a relief when the STU-6 rang, distracting him from the task of figuring what he could tell the President about what he didn't know.

"Hi, MP. Anything new?"

"Koga wants to meet with our people," Mrs. Foley replied at once. "Preliminary word is that he's not very pleased with developments. But it's a risk," she added.

It would be so much easier if I didn't know those two, Ryan thought. "Approved," was what he said. "We need all the information we can get. We need to know who's really making the decisions over there."

"It's not the government. Not really. That's what all the data indicates. That's the only plausible reason why the RVS didn't see this coming. So the obvious question is—"

"And the answer to that question is yes, Mary Pat."

"Somebody will have to sign off on that, Jack," the Deputy Director (Operations) said evenly.

"Somebody will," the National Security Advisor promised.

He was the Deputy Assistant Commercial Attaché, a young diplomat, only twenty-five, who rarely got invited to anything important, and

when he was, merely hovered about like a court page from a bygone era, attending his senior, fetching drinks, and generally looking unimportant. He was an intelligence officer, of course, and junior at that job as well. His was the task of making pickups from dead-drops while on his way into the embassy every morning that the proper signals were spotted, as they were this morning, a Sunday in Tokyo. The task was a challenge to his creativity because he had to make the planned seem random, had to do it in a different way every time, but not so different as to seem unusual. It was only his second year as a field intelligence officer, but he was already wondering how the devil people maintained their careers in this business without going mad.

There it was. A soda can—a red Coca-Cola in this case—lying in the gutter between the left-rear wheel of a Nissan sedan and the curb, twenty meters ahead, where it was supposed to be. It could not have been there very long. Someone would have picked it up and deposited it in a nearby receptacle. He admired the neatness of Tokyo and the civic pride it represented. In fact he admired almost everything about these industrious and polite people, but that only made him worry about how intelligent and thorough their counterintelligence service was. Well, he did have a diplomatic cover, and had nothing more to fear than a blemish on a career that he could always change—his cover duties had taught him a lot about business, should he decide to leave the service of his government, he kept telling himself. He walked down the crowded morning sidewalk, bent down, and picked up the soda can. The bottom of the can was hollow, indented for easy stacking, and his hand deftly removed the item taped there, and then he simply dropped the can in the trash container at the end of the block before turning left to head for the embassy. Another important mission done, even if all it had appeared to be was the removal of street litter from this most fastidious of cities. Two years of professional training, he thought, to be a trash collector. Perhaps in a few years he would start recruiting his own agents. At least your hands stayed clean that way.

On entering the embassy he found his way to Major Scherenko's office and handed over what he'd retrieved before heading off to his own desk for a brief morning's work.

Boris Scherenko was as busy as he'd ever expected to be. His assignment was supposed to be a nice, quiet, commercial-spying post, learning industrial techniques that his country might easily duplicate, more a business function than one of pure espionage. The loss of Oleg Lyalin's THISTLE network had been a professional catastrophe that he had labored for some time to correct without great success. The traitor Lyalin had been a master at insinuating himself into business operations while he himself had worked to effect a more conventional

penetration of the Japanese government organs, and his efforts to duplicate the former's achievements had barely begun to bear fruit when his tasking had changed back to something else entirely, a mission as surprising to him as the current situation doubtless was to the Americans who had been so badly stung by their erstwhile allies. Just one more truism that the Americans had allowed themselves to forget. You couldn't trust anyone.

The package just delivered on his desk was at least easy to work with: two frames of thirty-five-millimeter film, black and white, already developed as a photographic negative. It was just a matter of peeling off the gray tape and unfolding it, a task that took some minutes. As sophisticated as his agency was, the actual work of espionage was often as tedious as assembling a child's birthday toys. In this case, he used a pocket knife and a bright light to remove the film, and nearly cut himself in the process. He placed the two frames in cardboard holders, which went one at a time into a slideviewer. The next task was to transcribe the data onto a paper pad, which was just one more exercise in tedium. It was worth it, he saw at once. The data would have to be confirmed through other sources, but the news was good.

"There's your two cars," the AMTRAK executive said. It had been so obvious a place to look that a day had been required to realize it. The two oversized flatcars were at the Yoshinobu launch facility, and beside them were three transporter-containers for the SS-19/H-11 booster, just sitting there in the yard. "This might be another one, sticking out of the building."

"They have to have more than two, don't they?" Chris Scott asked.

"I would," Betsy Fleming replied. "But it could just mean a place to stash the cars. And it's the logical place."

"Here or at the assembly plant," Scott agreed with a nod.

Mainly they were waiting now for nonvisual data. The only KH-12 satellite in orbit was approaching Japan and already programmed to look at one small patch of a valley. The visual information had given them a very useful cue. Another fifty meters of the rail spur had disappeared from view between one KH-11 pass and another. The photos showed the catenary towers ordinarily used for stringing the overhead power lines needed for electrically powered trains, but the towers did not have wires on them. They had possibly been erected to make the spur look normal to commuters who traveled the route in the Bullet Trains, just one more exercise in hiding something in plain sight.

"You know, if they'd just left it alone . . ." the AMTRAK guy said,

looking at the overheads again.

"Yeah," Betsy responded, checking the clock. But they hadn't. Somebody was hanging camouflage netting on the towers, just around the first turn in the valley. The train passengers wouldn't notice, and, given slightly better timing, the three of them wouldn't have either. "If you were doing this, what would you do next?"

"To hide it from you guys? That's easy," the executive said. "I'd park track-repair cars there. That way it would look ordinary as hell, and they have the room for it. They should have done it before. Do people make mistakes like this all the time?"

"It isn't the first," Scott said.

"And now you're waiting for what?" the man asked.

"You'll see."

Launched into orbit eight years earlier by the Space Shuttle Atlantis, the TRW-built KH-12 satellite had actually survived far beyond its programmed life, but as was true of many products made by that company—the Air Force called it "TR-Wonderful"—it just kept on ticking. The radar-reconnaissance satellite was completely out of maneuvering fuel, however, which meant you had to wait for it to get to a particular place and hope that the operating altitude was suitable to what you wanted.

It was a large cylindrical craft, over thirty feet in length, with immense "wings" of solar receptors to power the onboard Ku-band radar. The solar cells had degraded over the years in the intense radiation environment, allowing only a few minutes of operation per revolution. The ground controllers had waited what seemed a long time for this opportunity. The orbital track was northwest-to-southeast, within six degrees of being directly overhead, close enough to see straight down into the valley. They already knew a lot. The geological history of the place was clear. A river now blocked with a hydroelectric dam had cut the gorge deep. It was more canyon than valley at this point, and the steep sides had been the deciding factor in putting the missiles here. The missiles could launch vertically, but incoming warheads would be blocked from hitting them by the mountains to east and west. It didn't make any difference whose warheads they were. The shape and course of the valley would have had the same effect on Russian RVs as Americans'. The final bit of genius was that the valley was hard rock. Each silo had natural armor. For all those reasons, Scott and Fleming had bet much of their professional reputations on the tasking orders for the KH-12.

“Right about now, Betsy,” Scott said, checking the wall clock.

“What exactly will you see?”

“If they’re there, we’ll know it. You follow space technology?” Fleming asked.

“You’re talking to an original Trekkie.”

“Back in the 1980s, NASA orbited a mission, and the first thing they downloaded was a shot of the Nile delta, underground aquifers that feed into the Mediterranean Sea. We mapped them.”

“The same one did the irrigation canals down in Mexico, right, the Mayans, I think. What are you telling me?” the AMTRAK official asked.

“It was our mission, not NASA’s. We were telling the Russians that they couldn’t hide their silos from us. They got the message, too,” Mrs. Fleming explained. Right about then the secure fax machine started chirping. The signal from the KH-12 had been crosslinked to a satellite in geostationary orbit over the Indian Ocean, and from there to the U.S. mainland. Their first read on the signals would be unenhanced, but, they hoped, good enough for a fast check. Scott took the first image off the machine and set it on the table under a bright light, next to a visual print of the same place.

“Tell me what you see.”

“Okay, here’s the mainline . . . oh—this thing picks up the ties. The rails are too small, eh?”

“Correct.” Betsy found the spur line. The concrete rail ties were fifteen centimeters in width, and made for a good, sharp radar return that looked like a line of offset dashes.

“It goes quite a way up the valley, doesn’t it?” The AMTRAK guy’s face was down almost on the paper, tracing with his pen. “Turn, turn. What are these?” he asked, touching the tip to a series of white circles.

Scott placed a small ruler on the sheet. “Betsy?”

“Dense-packed it, too. My, aren’t we clever. It must have cost a fortune to do this.”

“Beautiful work,” Scott breathed. The rail spur curved left and right, and every two hundred meters was a silo, not three meters away from the marching ranks of rail ties. “Somebody really thought this one through.”

“You lost me.”

“Dense-pack,” Mrs. Fleming said. “It means that if you attempt to hit the missile field, the first warhead throws so much debris into the air that the next warhead gets trashed on the way in.”

“It means that you can’t use nuclear weapons to take these boys out—not easily anyway,” Scott went on. “Summarize what you know for me,” he ordered.

"This is a rail line that doesn't make any commercial sense. It doesn't go anywhere, so it can't make money. It's not a service siding, too long for that. It's standard gauge, probably because of the cargo-dimension requirements."

"And they're stringing camouflage netting over it," Betsy finished the evaluation, and was already framing the National Intelligence Estimate they had to draft tonight. "Chris, this is the place."

"But I only count ten. There's ten more we have to find."

It was hard to think of it as an advantage, but the downsizing of the Navy had generated a lot of surplus staff, so finding another thirty-seven people wasn't all that hard. That brought *Tennessee*'s complement to one hundred twenty, thirty-seven short of an Ohio's normal crew size, a figure Dutch Claggett could accept. He didn't need the missile technicians, after all.

His crew would be heavy on senior petty officers, another burden he would bear easily, the CO told himself, standing atop the sail and watching his men load provisions under the glaring lights. The reactor plant was up and running. Even now his engineering officer was conducting drills. Just forward of the sail, a green Mark 48 ADCAP torpedo was sliding backwards down the weapons-loading hatch under the watchful eyes of a chief torpedoman. There were only sixteen of those torpedoes to be had, but he didn't expect to need that many for the mission he anticipated. *Asheville* and *Charlotte.* He'd known men on both, and if Washington got its thumb out, maybe he'd do something about that.

A car pulled up to the brow, and a petty officer got out, carrying a metal briefcase. He made his way aboard, dodging around the crewmen tossing cartons, then down a hatch.

"That's the software upgrade for the sonar systems," Claggett's XO said. "The one they've been tracking whales with."

"How long to upload it?"

"Supposedly just a few minutes."

"I want to be out of here before dawn, X."

"We'll make it. First stop Pearl?"

Claggett nodded, pointing to the other Ohios, also loading men and chow. "And I don't want any of those turkeys beating us there, either."

It wasn't a comfortable feeling, but the sight was worth it. *Johnnie Reb* rested on rows of wooden blocks, and towered above the floor of the dry dock like some sort of immense building. Captain Sanchez had

decided to give things a look, and stood alongside the ship's commanding officer. As they watched, a traveling crane removed the remains of the number-three screw. Workers and engineers in their multicolored hard hats made way, then converged back on the skeg, evaluating the damage. Another crane moved in to begin the removal of number-four tailshaft. It had to be pulled straight out, its inboard extremity already disconnected from the rest of the assembly.

"Bastards," the skipper breathed.

"We can fix her," Sanchez noted quietly.

"Four months. If we're lucky," the Captain added. They just didn't have the parts to do it any faster. The key, unsurprisingly, was the reduction gears. Six complete gear sets would have to be manufactured, and that took time. *Enterprise*'s entire drivetrain was gone, and the efforts to get the ship to safety as quickly as possible had wrecked the one gear set that might have been repairable. Six months for her, *if* the contractor could get spun up in a hurry, and work three-shift weeks to get the job done. The rest of the repairs were straightforward.

"How quick to get number-one shaft back to battery?" Sanchez asked.

The Captain shrugged. "Two-three days, for what that's worth."

Sanchez hesitated before asking the next question. He should have known the answer, and he was afraid it would sound really stupid—oh, what the hell? He had to go off to Barbers Point anyway. And the only dumb questions, he'd told people for years, were the ones you didn't ask.

"Sir, I hate to sound stupid, but how fast will she go on two shafts?"

Ryan found himself wishing that the Flat Earth Society was right. In that case the world could have been a single time zone. As it was, the Marianas were fifteen hours ahead, Japan fourteen, Moscow eight. Western Europe's principal financial markets were five and six ahead, depending on the country. Hawaii was five hours behind. He had contacts in all of those places, and everyone was working on local time, and it was so different in every case that just keeping track of who was probably awake and who was probably asleep occupied much of his thoughts. He grunted to himself in bed, remembering with nostalgia the confusion that always came to him on long flights. Even now people were working in some of those places, none under his control; and he knew he had to sleep if he were going to be able to deal with any of them when the sun returned to where he lived and worked. But sleep wasn't coming, and all he saw was the pine decking that made up his bedroom ceiling.

"Any ideas?" Cathy asked.

Jack grunted. "I wish I'd stuck with merchant banking."

"And then who'd be running things?"

A long breath. "Somebody else."

"Not as well, Jack," his wife suggested.

"True," he admitted to the ceiling.

"How do you think people will react to this?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure how I'm reacting to it," Jack admitted. "It's not supposed to be like this at all. We're in a war that doesn't make any sense. We just got rid of the last nuclear missiles ten days ago, and now they're back, and pointed at us, and we don't have any to point back at them, and if we don't stop this thing fast—I don't know, Cathy."

"Not sleeping doesn't help."

"Thank God, married to a doctor." He managed a smile. "Well, honey, you got us out of one problem anyway."

"How did I do that?"

"By being smart." By using your head all the time, his mind went on. His wife didn't do anything without thinking it through first. She worked pretty slowly by the standards of her profession. Perhaps that was normal for someone pushing the frontiers back, always considering and planning and evaluating—like a good intelligence officer, in fact—and then when everything was ready and you had it all figured out, *zap* with her laser. Yeah, that wasn't a bad way to operate, was it?

"Well, I think they've learned one lesson," Yamata said. A rescue aircraft had recovered two bodies and some floating debris from the American bomber. The bodies would be treated with dignity, it had been decided. The names had already been telexed to Washington via the Japanese Embassy, and in due course the remains would be returned. Showing mercy was the proper thing to do, for many reasons. Someday America and Japan would be friends again, and he didn't want to poison that possibility. It was also bad for business.

"The Ambassador reports that they do not offer us anything," Goto replied after a moment.

"They have not as yet evaluated their position, and ours."

"Will they repair their financial systems?"

Yamata frowned. "Perhaps. But they still have great difficulties. They still need to buy from us, they still need to sell to us—and they cannot strike us effectively, as four of their airmen, possibly eight, just learned to their sorrow." Things had not gone entirely in accord with his plans, but, then, when had things ever really done that? "What we

must do next is to show them that the people who live on Saipan prefer our rule to theirs. Then world opinion will work in our favor, and that will defuse the situation greatly."

And until then, Yamata thought, things were going well. The Americans would not soon again probe his country's mainland. They didn't have the ability to retake the islands, and by the time they did, well, Japan would have a new ally, and perhaps even new political leadership, wouldn't it?

"No, I am not being watched," Koga assured them.

"As a reporter—no, you know better than that, don't you?" Clark asked.

"I know you are an intelligence officer. I know Kimura here has been in contact with you." They were in a comfortable teahouse close to the Ara River. Nearby was the boat-racing course built for the 1964 Olympics. It was also conveniently close to a police station, John reminded himself. Why, he wondered, had he always feared the attention of police officers? Under the circumstances, it seemed the proper thing to nod his understanding of the situation.

"In that case, Koga-san, we are at your mercy."

"I presume your government now knows what is going on. All of it," Koga went on distastefully. "I've spoken with my own contacts as well."

"Siberia," Clark said simply.

"Yes," Koga responded. "That is part of it. Yamata-san's hatred for America is another part, but most of all, it's pure madness."

"The Americans' reaction is not really a matter of my immediate concern, but I can assure you that my country will not meekly submit to an invasion of our soil," John said calmly.

"Even if China is involved?" Kimura asked.

"Especially if China is involved," Chavez said just to let everyone know he was there. "I presume that you study history, as we do."

"I fear for my country. The time for such adventures is long past, but the people who—do you really understand how policy decisions are made here? The will of the people is an irrelevance. I tried to change that. I tried to bring an end to the corruption."

Clark's mind was racing, trying to decide if the man was sincere or not. "We face similar problems, as you have probably heard. The question is, what do we do now?"

The torment on the man's face was clear. "I do not know. I asked for this meeting in the hope that your government will understand that not everyone here is mad."

"You must not think of yourself as a traitor, Koga-san," Clark said

after a moment's consideration. "Truly you are not. What does a man do when he feels that his government is taking incorrect action? And you are correct in your judgment that the possible consequences of this current course of action could well be serious. My country has neither the time nor the energy to waste on conflict, but if it is forced on us, well, then we must react. Now I must ask you a question."

"Yes, I know." Koga looked down at the table. He thought about reaching for his drink, but was too afraid that his hand would shake.

"Will you work with us to prevent this from happening?" *This is something for somebody a hell of a lot more senior than I am,* John told himself, but he was here, and the senior pukes were not.

"Doing what?"

"I lack the seniority to tell you exactly what that might be, but I can convey requests from my government. At the very least we will ask you for information, and perhaps for influence. You are still respected within government circles. You still have friends and allies in the Diet. We will not ask you to compromise those things. They are too valuable to be thrown away."

"I can speak out against this madness. I can—"

"You can do many things, Koga-san, but please, for the sake of your country and mine, please do nothing without first considering the effects you will achieve by taking action." *My next career change,* Clark thought. *Political counselor.* "We are agreed, are we not, that the objective here is to avoid a major war?"

"*Hai*."

"Any fool can start a war," Chavez announced, thanking Providence for his master's courses. "It takes a better man to prevent one, and it takes careful thought."

"I will listen to your counsel. I do not promise you that I will follow it. But I will listen."

Clark nodded. "That is all we can ask." The rest of the meeting was procedural. Another such rendezvous would be too dangerous. Kimura would handle messages from this point on. Clark and Chavez left first, heading back to their hotel by foot. It was a very different affair from dealing with Mohammed Abdul Corp. Koga was honorable, bright, and wanted to do the right thing, even if it entailed treason. But John realized that his words to the man hadn't just been part of the seduction dance. At a certain point, state policy became a matter of conscience, and he was grateful that this man seemed to have one.

"Straight board shut," the chief of the boat announced from his post on the port-forward corner of the attack center. As was normal, the submarine's most senior enlisted man was the diving officer. Every

opening in the ship's hull was closed tight, the red circles on the diving board replaced now with red horizontal dashes. "Pressure in the boat."

"All systems aligned and checked for dive. The compensation is entered. We are rigged for dive," the OOD announced.

"Okay, let's take her down. Dive the ship. Make your depth one hundred feet." Claggett looked around the compartment, first checking the status boards, then checking the men. *Tennessee* hadn't been underwater for more than a year. Neither had her crew, and he looked around for any first-dive nerves as the officer of the deck gave the proper commands for the evolution. It was normal that a few of the younger men shook their heads, reminding themselves that they were submariners, after all, and supposedly used to this. The sounds of escaping air made that clear enough. *Tennessee* took a gentle five-degree down angle at the bow. For the next few minutes the submarine would be checked for trim to see that the ship was properly balanced and that all onboard systems really did work, as all tests and inspections had already made certain. That process required half an hour. Claggett could well have gone faster, and the next time he certainly would, but for the moment it was time to get everyone comfortable again.

"Mr. Shaw, come left to new course two-one-zero."

"Aye, helm, left ten degrees rudder, come to new course two-one-zero." The helmsman responded properly, bringing the submarine to her base course.

"All ahead full," Claggett ordered.

"All ahead full, aye." The full-speed bell would take *Tennessee* to twenty-six knots. There were actually four more knots of speed available with a flank bell. It was a little-known fact that someone had made a mistake with the Ohio-class of boomers. Designed for a maximum speed of just over twenty-six knots, the first full-power trials on the lead boat in the class had topped out at just over twenty-nine, and later models had been marginally faster still. Well, Claggett thought with a smile, the U.S. Navy had never been especially interested in slow ships; they were less likely to dodge out of harm's way.

"So far, so good," Claggett observed to his OOD.

Lieutenant Shaw nodded. Another officer on his way out of the Navy, he'd been tapped as the boat's navigator, and having served with Dutch Claggett before, he'd not objected to coming back one more time. "Speed's coming up nicely, Cap'n."

"We've been saving a lot of neutrons lately."

"What's the mission?"

"Not sure yet, but damned if we aren't the biggest fast-attack

submarine ever made," Claggett observed.

"Time to stream."

"Then do it, Mr. Shaw."

A minute later the submarine's lengthy towed-sonar was allowed to deploy aft, guided into the ship's wake via the starboard-side after diving plane. Even at high speed, the thin-line array immediately began providing data to the sonarmen forward of the attack center. *Tennessee* was at full speed now, diving deeper to eight hundred feet. The increased water pressure eliminated the chance of cavitation coming off her sophisticated screw system. Her natural-circulation reactor plant gave off no pump noise. Her smooth lines created no flow noise at all. Inside, crewmen wore rubber-soled shoes. Turbines were mounted on decks connected to the hull via springs to isolate and decouple propulsion sounds. Designed to radiate no noise at all, and universally referred to even by the fast-attack community as "black holes," the class really was the quietest thing man had ever put to sea. Big, with nowhere near the speed and maneuverability of the smaller attack boats, *Tennessee* and her sisters were still ahead in the most important category of performance. Even whales had a hard time hearing one.

Force-on-force, Robby Jackson thought again. If that's impossible, then what? "Well, if we can't play this like a prizefight, then we play it like a card game," he said to himself, alone in his office. He looked up in surprise, then realized that he'd heard his own words spoken aloud.

It wasn't very professional to be angry, but Rear Admiral Jackson was indulging himself with anger for the moment. The enemy—that was the term he was using now—assumed that he and his colleagues in J-3 could not construct an effective response to their moves. To them it was a matter of space and time and force. Space was measured in thousands of miles. Time was being measured in months and years. Force was being measured in divisions and fleets.

What if they were wrong? Jackson asked himself.

Shemya to Tokyo was two thousand miles. Elmendorf to Tokyo was another thousand. But space *was* time. Time to them was the number of months or years required to rebuild a navy capable of doing what had been done in 1944, but that wasn't in the cards, and therefore was irrelevant. And force wasn't everything you had. Force was what you managed to deliver to the places that needed to be hit. Everything else was wasted energy, wasn't it?

More important still was perception. His adversaries *perceived* that their own limiting factors applied to others as well. They defined the contest in their terms, and if that's how America played the game, then America would lose. So his most important task was to make up

his own set of rules. And so he would, Jackson told himself. That's where he began, on a clear sheet of unlined white paper, with frequent looks at the world map on his wall.

Whoever had run the night watch at CIA was intelligent enough, Ryan thought. Intelligent enough to know that information received at three in the morning could wait until six, which bespoke a degree of judgment rare in the intelligence community, and one for which he was grateful. The Russians had transmitted the dispatch to the Washington *rezidentura,* and from there it had been hand-carried to CIA. Jack wondered what the uniformed guards at CIA had thought when they had let the Russian spooks through the gate. From there the report had been driven to the White House, and the courier had been waiting for Ryan in his anteroom when he came in.

"Sources report a total of nine (9) 'H-11' rockets at Yoshinobu. Another missile is at the assembly plant, being used as an engineering test-bed for a proposed structural upgrade. That leaves ten (10) or eleven (11) rockets unaccounted for, more probably the former, location as yet unknown. Good news, Ivan Emmetovich. I presume your satellite people are quite busy. Ours are as well. Golovko."

"Yes, they are, Sergey Nikolay'ch," Ryan whispered, flipping open the second folder the courier had brought down. "Yes, they are."

Here goes nothing, thought Sanchez.

AirPac was a vice admiral, and in as foul a mood as every other officer at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base. Responsible for every naval aircraft and flight deck from Nevada west, his ought to have been the point command for the war that had begun only a few days earlier, but not only could he not tell his two active carriers in the Indian Ocean what he wanted, he could see his other two carriers, sitting side by side in dry docks. And likely to remain there for months, as a CNN camera crew was now making clear to viewers across the entire world.

"So what is it?" he asked his visitors.

"Do we have plans for visiting WestPac?" Sanchez asked.

"Not anytime soon."

"I can be ready to move in less than ten days," *Johnnie Reb's* CO announced.

"Is that a fact?" AirPac inquired acidly.

"Number-one shaft's okay. If we fix number four, I can do twenty-nine, maybe thirty knots. Probably more. The trials on two shafts had the wheels attached. Eliminate the drag from those, maybe thirty-

two."

"Keep going," the Admiral said.

"Okay, the first mission has to be to eliminate their airplanes, right?" Sanchez said. "For that I don't need Hoovers and 'Truders. *Johnnie Reb* can handle four squadrons of Toms and four more of Plastic Bugs, Robber's det of Queers to do the jamming, plus an extra det of Hummers. And guess what?"

AirPac nodded. "That almost equals their fighter strength on the islands." It was dicey. One carrier deck against two major island bases wasn't exactly . . . but the islands were pretty far apart, weren't they? Japan had other ships out there, and submarines, which is what he feared in particular. "It's a start, maybe."

"We need some other elements," Sanchez agreed. "Anybody going to say no when we ask?"

"Not at this end," the Admiral said after a moment's thought.

The CNN reporter had made her first live feed from atop the edge of the dry dock, and it showed the two nuclear-powered carriers sitting on their blocks, not unlike twin babies in side-by-side cradles. Somebody in CINCPAC's office must have paid a price for letting her in, Ryan thought, because the second feed was from much farther away, the flattops across the harbor but still clearly visible behind her back, as she said much the same things, adding that she had learned from informed sources that it could be as much as six months before *Stennis* and *Enterprise* could again put to sea.

Isn't that just great, Jack grumbled to himself. Her estimate was as good as the one sitting on his desk with *Top* Secret written on the folder in red lettering. Maybe it was even better, since her source was probably a yard worker with real experience in that largest of body and fender shops. She was followed by a learned commentator—this one a retired admiral working at a Washington think-tank-who said that taking the Marianas back would be extremely difficult at best.

The problem with a free press was that it gave out information to everyone, and over the past two decades it had become so good a source of information that his country's own intelligence services used it for all manner of time-critical data. For its part, the public had grown more sophisticated in its demands for news, and the networks had responded by improving both its collection and analysis. Of course, the press had its weaknesses. For real insider information it depended too much on leaks and not enough on shoeleather, especially in Washington, and for analysis it often selected people motivated less by facts than by an agenda. But for things that one could see, the press often worked better than trained intelligence

officers on the government payroll.

The other side depended on it too, Jack thought. Just as he was watching his office TV, so were others, all over the world....

"You look busy," Admiral Jackson said from the door.

"I'm waiting just as fast as I can." Ryan waved him to a seat. "CNN just reported on the carriers."

"Good," Robby replied.

"Good?"

"We can have *Stennis* back to sea in seven to ten days. Old pal of mine, Bud Sanchez, is the CAG aboard her, and he has some ideas I like. So does AirPac."

"A week? Wait a minute." Yet another effect of TV news was that people often believed it over official data, even though in this case the classified report was identical with—

Three were still in Connecticut, and the other three were undergoing tests in Nevada. Everything about them was untraditional. The fabrication plant, for example, was more like a tailor shop than an aircraft factory. The basic material for the airframe arrived in rolls, which were laid out on a long, thin table where computer-driven laser cutters sliced out the proper shapes. Those were then laminated and baked in an oven until the carbon-fiber fabric formed a sandwich stronger than steel, but far lighter—and, unlike steel, transparent to electromagnetic energy. Nearly twenty years of design work had gone into this, and the first pedestrian set of requirements had grown into a book as thick as a multivolume encyclopedia. A typical Pentagon program, it had taken too long and cost too much, but the final product, if not exactly worth the wait, was certainly worth having, even at twenty million dollars per copy, or, as the crews put it, ten million dollars per seat.

The three in Connecticut were sitting in an open-sided shed when the Sikorsky employees arrived. The onboard systems were fully functional, and they had each been flown only just enough by the company test pilots to make sure that they could fly. All the systems had been checked out properly through the onboard diagnostic computer which, of course, had also diagnosed itself. After fueling, the three were wheeled out onto the ramp and flown off just after dark, north to Westover Air Force Base, in western Massachusetts, where they would be loaded in a Galaxy transport of the 327th Military Airlift Squadron for a flight to a place northeast of Las Vegas that wasn't on any official maps, though its existence wasn't much of a secret. Back in Connecticut, three wooden mockups were wheeled into the shed, its open side visible from the residential area and highway

three hundred yards uphill. People would even be seen to work on them all week.

Even if you didn't really know the mission yet, the requirements were pretty much the same. *Tennessee* reduced speed to twenty knots, five hundred miles off the coast.

"Engine room answers all ahead two-thirds, sir."

"Very well," Commander Claggett acknowledged. "Left twenty-degrees rudder, come to new course zero-three-zero." The helmsman repeated that order back, and Claggett's next command was, "Rig ship for ultraquiet."

He already knew the physics of what he was doing, but moved aft to the plotting table anyway, to recheck the ship's turning circle. The Captain, too, had to check everything he did. The sharp course reversal was designed to effect a self-noise check. All over the submarine, unnecessary equipment was switched off, and crewmen not on duty got into their individual bunks as their ship turned. The crew, Claggett noted, was already getting into the swing.

Trailing behind *Tennessee* at the end of a thousand-yard cable was her towed sonar array, itself a thousand feet long. In another minute the submarine was like a dog chasing her own lengthy tail, a bare thousand yards abeam of it, and still doing twenty knots while sonarmen listened on their own systems for noise from their own ship. Claggett's next stop was the sonar room, so that he could watch the displays himself. It was electronic incest of sorts, the best sonar systems ever made trying to locate the quietest ship ever made.

"There we are, sir." The lead sonarman marked his screen with a grease pencil. The Captain tried not to be too disappointed. *Tennessee* was doing twenty knots, and the array was only a thousand yards off for the few seconds required for the pass to be made.

"Nobody's that invisible, sir," Lieutenant Shaw observed.

"Bring her back to base course. We'll try it again at fifteen knots." To the sonar chief: "Put a good man on the tapes. So let's find that rattle aft, shall we?" Ten minutes later *Tennessee* commenced another self-noise check.

"It's all going to be done in the saddle, Jack. As I read this, time works for them, not for us." It wasn't that Admiral Jackson liked it. There didn't appear to be another way, and this war would be come-as-you-are and make up your own rules as you went along.

"You may be right on the political side. They want to stage the

elections soon, and they seem awfully confident—"

"Haven't you heard? They're flying civilians in hand over fist," Jackson told him. "Why do that? I think they're all going to become instant residents, and they're all going to vote *Ja* on the *Anschluss.* Our friends with the phone can see the airport. The inbound flights have slacked off some, but look at the numbers. Probably fifteen thousand troops on the island. They can all vote. Toss in the Japanese tourists already there, and those who've flown in, and that's all she wrote, boy."

The National Security Advisor winced. "That is simple, isn't it?"

"I remember when the Voting Rights Act got passed. It made a big difference in Mississippi when I was a kid. Don't you just love how people can use law to their benefit?"

"It sure is a civilized war, isn't it?" *Nobody ever said they were stupid,* Jack told himself. The results of the election would be bogus, but all they really had to do was muddle things. The use of force required a clear cause. So negotiations were part of the strategy of delay. The other side was still determining the rules of the game. America did not yet have a strategy of action.

"That's what we need to change."

"How?"

Jackson handed over a folder. "Here's the information I need."

Mutsu had satellite communications, which included video that could be uplinked from fleet headquarters at Yokohama. It was a pretty sight, really, Admiral Sato thought, and so good of CNN to give it to him. *Enterprise* with three propellers wrecked, and the fourth visibly damaged. *John Stennis* with two already removed, a third clearly beyond repair; the fourth, unfortunately, seemed to be intact. What was not visible was internal damage. As he watched, one of the huge manganese-bronze propellers was removed from the latter ship, and another crane maneuvered in, probably, the destroyer's engineering officer observed, to withdraw part of the starboard outboard shaft.

"Five months," he said aloud, then heard the reporter's estimate of six, pleasantly the opinion of some unnamed yard worker.

"That's what headquarters thinks."

"They can't defeat us with destroyers and cruisers," *Mutsu's* captain observed. "But will they pull their two carriers out of the Indian Ocean?"

"Not if our friends continue to press them. Besides," Sato went on quietly, "two carriers are not enough, not against a hundred fighters on Guam and Saipan—more if I request it, as I probably will. It's really a political exercise now."

"And their submarines?" the destroyer's CO wondered, very nervous.

"So why can't we?" Jones asked.

"Unrestricted warfare is out," SubPac said.

"It worked before."

"They didn't have nuclear weapons before," Captain Chambers said.

"Oh." There was that, Jones admitted to himself. "Do we have a plan yet?"

"For the moment, keeping them away from us," Mancuso said. It wasn't exactly a mission to thrill Chester Nimitz, but you had to start somewhere. "What do you have for me?"

"I've gotten a couple of hits on snorting subs east of the islands. Nothing good enough to initiate a hunt, but I don't suppose we're sending P-3s in there anyway. The SOSUS troops are up to speed, though. Nothing's going to slip past us." He paused. "One other thing. I got one touch"—a touch was less firm than a hit—"on somebody off the Oregon coast."

"*Tennessee,*" Chambers said. "That's Dutch Claggett. He's due in here zero-two-hundred Friday."

Jones was impressed with himself. "Damn, a hit on an Ohio. How many others?"

"Four more, the last one leaves the pier in about an hour." Mancuso pointed at his wall chart. "I told each one to run over that SOSUS array for a noise check. I knew you'd be around to sniff after them. Don't get too cocky about it. They're doing a speed run into Pearl."

Jones nodded and turned. "Good one, Skipper."

"We haven't completely lost it yet, Dr. Jones."

* * *

"Goddamn it, Chief!" Commander Claggett swore.

"My fault, sir. Sure as hell." He took it like a man. It was a toolbox. It had been found stuck between a seawater pipe and the hull, where minor vibrations off the spring-suspended deck had made the wrenches inside rattle, enough that the submarine-towed sonar had detected the noise. "It isn't one of ours, probably a yard worker left it aboard."

Three other chief petty officers were there to share the experience. It could have happened to anyone. They knew what was coming next, too. Their captain took a deep breath before going on. A good show of

anger was required, even for his chiefs.

"Every inch of the hull from the collision bulkhead to the tailshaft. Every loose nut, every bolt, every screwdriver. If it's layin' on the deck, pick it up. If it's loose, tighten it. No stoppin' till it's done. I want this ship so quiet I can hear the dirty jokes you're thinking about me."

"It'll get done, sir," the Chief of the Boat promised. *Might as well get used to no sleep,* he didn't say, and sure enough—

"You got it, COB, no sleep until this boat makes a tomb look noisy." On reflection, Claggett thought he could have picked a better metaphor.

The CO made his way back forward, reminding himself to thank his sonar chief for isolating the source of the noise. It was better to have found it the first day out, and he had to raise hell about it. Those were the rules. He had to command himself not to smile. The Captain, after all, was *supposed* to be a stern son of a bitch—when he found something wrong, that is, and in a few minutes the chiefs would relay all his wrath on to others and feel the same way about it.

Things had already changed, he saw, as he passed through the reactor spaces. Like doctors in an operating room, the reactor watch sat or stood as their assignments dictated, mainly watching, making a few notes at the proper times. At sea for less than a day, and already Xerox copies of *Think Quiet* were taped to both sides of every watertight door. Those few crewmen he encountered in the passageways made way for him, often with a curt, proud nod. *Yeah, we're pros, too, sir*. Two men were jogging in the missile room, a long and now useless compartment, and Claggett, as service etiquette dictated, made way for them, almost smiling again as he did so.

"Toolbox, right?" the executive officer asked when the CO reentered the Attack Center. "I had that happen to me on *Hampton* after our first refit."

"Yep." Claggett nodded. "Turn of the next watch, we do a fore-and-aft walkdown."

"Could be worse, sir. Once coming out of a yard overhaul, a guy I know had to reenter the dry dock. They found a friggin' extension ladder in the forward ballast tank." Stories like that made submariners shiver.

"Toolbox, sir?" the sonar chief asked.

Now he could smile. Claggett leaned against the doorframe and nodded as he pulled out a five-dollar bill. "Good call, Chief."

"Wasn't all that much." But the chief petty officer pocketed the five anyway. On *Tennessee*, as on a lot of sub–marines, every wrench aboard had its handle dipped in liquid vinyl, which both gave a slightly better grip, especially to a sweaty hand, and also cut way back

on the chance of rattling. “Some yard puke, I bet,” he added with a wink.

“I only pay once,” Claggett observed. “Any new contacts?”

“Single-screw low-speed diesel surface ship bearing three-four-one, way out. It’s a CZ contact, designated Sierra-Thirty. They’re working a plot now, sir.” He paused for a moment, and his mood changed. “Cap’n?”

“What is it, Chief?”

“*Asheville* and *Charlotte*— is it true?”

Commander Claggett nodded again. “That’s what they told me.”

“We’ll even the score, sir.”

Roger Durling lifted the sheet of paper. It was handwritten, which was something the President rarely saw. “This is rather thin, Admiral.”

“Mr. President, you’re not going to authorize a systematic attack on their country, are you?” Jackson asked.

Durling shook his head. “No, that’s more than I want. The mission is to get the Marianas back and to prevent them from carrying through on the second part of their plan.”

Robby took a deep breath. This was what he’d been preparing for.

“There’s a third part, too,” Jackson announced.

The two men with him froze.

“What’s that, Rob?” Ryan asked after a moment.

“We just figured it out, Jack. The Indian task-force commander, Chandraskatta? He went to Newport a while back. Guess who was in the same class.” He paused. “A certain Japanese admiral named Sato.”

Ryan closed his eyes. Why hadn’t somebody turned this up before? “So, three countries with imperial ambitions . . .”

“It looks that way to me, Jack. Remember the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere? Good ideas keep coming back. We need to stop it all,” Jackson said forcefully. “I spent twenty-some years training for a war that nobody wanted to fight—with the Russians. I’d rather train to keep the peace. That means stopping these guys right now.”

“Will this work?” the President asked.

“No guarantees, sir. Jack tells me there’s a diplomatic and political clock on the operation. This isn’t Iraq. Whatever international consensus we have is just with the Europeans, and that’ll evaporate sooner or later.”

“Jack?” Durling asked.

“If we’re going to do it, this is probably the way.”

“Risky.”

“Mr. President, yes, sir, it’s risky,” Robby Jackson agreed. “If you think diplomacy will work to get the Marianas back, fine. I don’t

especially want to kill anybody. But if I were in their shoes, I would not give those islands back. They need them for Phase Two, and if that happens, even if the Russians don't go nuke . . ."

A giant step backwards, Ryan thought. A new alliance of sorts, one that could stretch from the Arctic Circle to Australia. Three countries with nuclear capacity, a huge resource base, massive economies, and the political will to use violence to achieve their ends. The Nineteenth Century all over again, played on a far larger field. Economic competition backed by force, the classic formula for unending war.

"Jack?" the President asked again.

Ryan nodded slowly. "I think we have to. You can pick any reason you want. They all come out the same way."

"Approved."

37

Going Deep

"Normalcy" was the word the various commentators consistently used, usually with adjectives like "eerie" and/or "reassuring" to describe the week's routine. People on the political left were gratified that the government was using diplomatic means to address the crisis, while those on the political right were enraged that the White House was lowkeying everything. Indeed, it was the absence of leadership, and the absence of real policy statements that showed everyone that Roger Durling was a domestic-policy president who didn't have much of a clue on how to handle international crises. Further criticism found its way to the National Security Advisor, John P. Ryan, who, though he had supposedly good credentials in intelligence, had never really established himself as a player in national-security matters per se, and certainly was not taking a very forceful position now. Others found his circumspection admirable. The downsizing of the American military, pundits observed, made effective counteraction extremely difficult at best, and though lights remained on at the Pentagon throughout the nights, there obviously was no way to deal with the situation in the Marianas. As a result, other observers said in front of any TV camera with a red light, the Administration would do its best to appear to remain calm and steady while doing the best it could. Hence the illusion of normalcy to conceal the inherent weakness of the American position.

"You ask us to do nothing?" Golovko asked in exasperation.

"It's our battle to fight. If you move too soon, it alerts China, and it alerts Japan." Besides, Ryan could not add, what *can* you do? The Russian military was in far worse shape than America's. They could move additional aircraft to Eastern Siberia. Moving ground troops to firm up the light-strength formations of border guards could well trigger a Chinese response. "Your satellites are telling you the same thing ours are, Sergey. China isn't mobilizing."

"Yet." The single word had a sting to it.

"Correct. Not yet. And if we play our cards right, that won't happen." Ryan paused. "Any further information on the missiles?"

"We have several sites under surveillance," Golovko reported. "We have confirmed that the rockets at Yoshinobu are being used for civilian purposes. That is probably a cover for military testing, but nothing more than that. My technical people are quite confident."

"Don't you just love how confident they can be," Ryan observed.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" the Chairman of the RVS asked directly.

"Even as we speak, Sergey Nikolay'ch, we are telling them that their occupation of the islands is not acceptable." Jack paused for a breath and reminded himself that like it or not, he had to trust the man. "And if they don't leave on their own, we'll find a way to force them off."

"But *how?"* the man demanded, looking down at the estimates prepared by military experts in the nearby Defense Ministry.

"Ten, fifteen years ago, did you tell your political masters that we were worthy of your fear?"

"As you did of us," Golovko confirmed.

"We are more fortunate now. They don't fear us. They think they've already won. I cannot say more at the moment. Perhaps by tomorrow," Jack thought. "For now, instructions are on the way for you to relay to our people."

"It will be done," Sergey promised.

"My government will honor the wishes of the people on all of the islands," the Ambassador repeated, then added a new provision. "We also may be willing to discuss the difference in status between Guam and the rest of the Mariana Archipelago. American interest in that island does go back nearly a hundred years," he allowed for the first time.

Adler accepted the statement impassively, as the rules of the proceedings required. "Mr. Ambassador, the people of all those islands are American citizens. They are so by their own choice."

"And they will again have the opportunity to express that choice. Is it the position of your government that self-determination is only *allowed* one time?" he asked in reply. "That seems quite odd for a country with a tradition of easy immigration *and* emigration. As I have stated earlier, we will gladly permit dual citizenship for those natives who prefer to keep their American passports. We will compensate them for their property should they decide to leave, and . . ." The rest of his statement was the same.

As often as he had observed or engaged in it, diplomatic exchange, Adler thought, combined the worst aspects of explaining things to a

toddler and talking with a mother-in-law. It was dull. It was tedious. It was exasperating. And it was necessary. A moment earlier, Japan had conceded something. It hadn't been unexpected. Cook had wheedled the information out of Nagumo the previous week, but now it was on the table. That was the good news. The bad news was that he was now expected to offer something in return. The rules of diplomatic exchange were based on compromise. You never got all of what you wanted, and you never gave the other guy all of what he wanted. The problem was that diplomacy assumed that neither side would ever be forced to give away anything of vital interest—and that both sides recognized what those vital interests were. But so often they didn't, and then diplomacy was fated to fail, much to the chagrin of those who falsely believed that wars were always the product of inept diplomats. Much more often they were the result of national interests so incompatible that compromise simply was not possible. And so now the Ambassador expected Adler to give just a little ground.

"Speaking for myself, I am gratified that you acknowledge the unconditional rights of the Guamian people to remain American citizens. I am further pleased to note that your country allows the people of the Northern Marianas to determine their own destiny. Do you assure me that your country will abide by the results of the election?"

"I believe we have made that clear," the Ambassador replied, wondering if he'd just won something or not.

"And the elections will be open to—"

"All residents of the islands, of course. My country believes in universal suffrage, as does yours. In fact," he added, "we will make an additional concession. In Japan the vote comes at age twenty, but for the purposes of this election, we will lower the voting age to eighteen. We want no one to protest that the plebiscite is unfair in any way."

You clever bastard, Adler thought. It made such good sense, too. All the soldiers there could now vote, and the move would look just ducky to international observers. The Deputy Secretary of State nodded as though surprised, then made a note on his pad. Across the table, the Ambassador made a mental note that he'd just scored a point of his own. It had taken long enough.

"It's real simple," the National Security Advisor said. "Will you help us?"

The rules of the meeting were not calculated to make anyone happy. It had begun with an explanation from a Justice Department lawyer of how the Espionage Act, Title 18 United States Code, Section 793E, applied to all American citizens, and how the freedoms of

speech and the press did not extend to violation of that statute.

"You're asking us to help you lie," one of the senior journalists said.

"Exactly right," Ryan responded.

"We have a professional obligation—"

"You're American citizens," Jack reminded them. "So are the people on those islands. My job is not to exercise the rights you're thinking about now. My job is to *guarantee* those rights to you and everyone else in this country. Either you help us or you don't. If you do, then we can do our job more easily, cheaply, and with less bloodshed. If you don't, then some additional people are probably going to get hurt."

"I doubt that Madison and the rest ever intended the American press to help an enemy in time of war," the lady from Justice said.

"We would never do that," the man from NBC protested. "But to take action in the other direction—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I do not have time for a discourse on constitutional law. This is quite literally a matter of life and death. Your government is asking for your help. If you do not give that help, you will sooner or later have to explain to the American people why you did not." Jack wondered if anyone had ever threatened them in this way. Turnabout, he supposed, was fair play, though he didn't expect they would see things quite the same way. It was time for the olive branch. "I will take the heat on this. If you help us out, no one will ever hear it from me."

"Don't give me that. It'll get out," CNN protested.

"Then you will have to explain to the American people that you acted as patriotic citizens."

"I didn't mean it that way, Dr. Ryan!"

"I did," Jack said with a smile. "Think about it. How will it hurt you? Besides, how will it get out? Who else is going to report it?"

The journalists were cynical enough—it was almost a professional requirement—to see the humor, but it was Ryan's earlier statement that had scored. They were in a profound professional quandary, and the natural result was to evade it by thinking in other terms. In this case, business. Failure to act in support of their country, however much they might proclaim principle and professional ethics—well, the people who watched their TV were not as impressed with those high-flying standards as they ought to be. And besides, Ryan wasn't asking all that much. Just one thing, and if they were clever about it, maybe nobody really would notice.

The news executives would have preferred to leave the room and discuss the request in privacy, but no one offered that opportunity, and none of them had the nerve to ask. So they looked at one another, and all five nodded.

You'll pay for this one someday, their eyes told Ryan. It was something he was willing to deal with, he thought.

"Thank you." When they made their way out, Ryan walked toward the Oval Office.

"We got it," he told the President.

"I'm sorry I couldn't back you up on that."

"It's an election year," Jack acknowledged. The Iowa caucuses were two weeks away, then New Hampshire, and though Durling had no opposition in his party, he would on the whole have preferred to be elsewhere. He could also not afford offending the media. But that's why he had a National Security Advisor. Appointed officials were always expendable.

"When this is all over . . ."

"Back to golfing? I need the practice."

That was another thing he liked about him, Durling told himself. Ryan didn't mind telling a joke once in a while, though the circles under his eyes duplicated his own. It was one more reason to thank Bob Fowler for his contrarian advice, and perhaps a reason to lament Ryan's choice of political affiliation.

"He wants to help," Kimura said.

"The best way for him to do that," Clark replied, "is to act normally. He's an honorable man. Your country needs a voice of moderation." It wasn't exactly the instructions he'd expected, and he found himself hoping that Washington knew what the hell it was doing. The orders were coming through Ryan's office, which was some consolation but not all that much. At least his agent-in-place was relieved.

"Thank you. I do not wish to put his life at risk."

"He's too valuable for that. Perhaps America and Japan can reach a diplomatic solution." Clark didn't believe it, but saying such things always made diplomats happy. "In that case, Goto's government will fall, and perhaps Koga-san will regain his former place."

"But from what I hear, Goto will not back down."

"It is also what I hear, but things can change. In any case, that is our request for Koga. Further contact between us is dangerous," "Klerk" went on. "Thank you for your assistance. If we need you again, we will contact you through normal channels."

In gratitude, Kimura paid the bill before leaving.

"That's all, eh?" Ding asked.

"Somebody thinks it's enough, and we have other things to do."

Back in the saddle again, Chavez thought to himself. But at least they had orders, incomprehensible though they might be. It was ten in the morning, local time, and they split up after hitting the street, and

spent the next several hours buying cellular phones, three each of a new digital model, before meeting again. The units were compact and fit into a shirt pocket. Even the packing boxes were small, and neither officer had the least problem concealing them.

Chet Nomuri had already done the same, giving his address as an apartment in Hanamatsu, a preselected cover complete with credit cards and driver's license. Whatever was going on, he had less than thirty days in-country to accomplish it. His next job was to return to the bathhouse one last time before disappearing from the face of the earth.

"One question," Ryan said quietly. The look in his eyes made Trent and Fellows uneasy.

"Are you going to make us wait for it?" Sam asked.

"You know the limitations we face in the Pacific."

Trent stirred in his seat. "If you mean that we don't have the horses to—"

"It depends on which horses we use," Jack said. Both insiders considered that for a moment.

"Gloves off?" Al Trent asked.

Ryan nodded. "All the way off. Will you hassle us about it?"

"Depends on what you mean by that. Tell us," Fellows ordered. Ryan did.

"You're really willing to stick it out that far?" Trent asked.

"We don't have a choice. I suppose it would be nice to fight it out with cavalry charges on the field of honor and all that stuff, but we don't have the horses, remember? The President needs to know if Congress will back him up. Only you people will know the black part. If you support us, then the rest of the people on the Hill will fall in line."

"If it doesn't work?" Fellows wondered.

"Then there's a hanging party for all hands. Including you," Ryan added.

"We'll keep the committee in line," Trent promised. "You're playing a high-risk game, my friend."

"True enough," Jack agreed, thinking of the lives at risk. He knew that Al Trent was talking about the political side, too, but Ryan had commanded himself to set those thoughts aside. He couldn't say so, of course. Trent would have considered it a weakness. It was remarkable how many things they could disagree on. But the important thing was

that Trent's word was good.

"Keep us informed?"

"In accordance with the law," the National Security Advisor replied with a smile. The law required that Congress be notified *after* "black" operations were carried out.

"What about the Executive Order?" An Order dating back to the Ford administration prohibited the country's intelligence agencies from conducting assassinations.

"We have a Finding," Ryan replied. "It doesn't apply in time of hostilities." A Finding was essentially a Presidential decree that the law meant what the President thought it meant. In short, everything that Ryan had proposed was now, technically speaking, legal, so long as Congress agreed. It was a hell of a way to run a railroad, but democracies were like that.

"Then the *i*'s are dotted," Trent observed. Fellows concurred with a nod: "And the t's are crossed." Both congressmen watched their host lift a phone and punch a speeddial button.

"This is Ryan. Get things moving."

* * *

The first move was electronic. Over the outraged protests of CINCPAC, three TV crews set up their cameras on the edge of the side-by-side dry docks now containing *Enterprise* and *John Stennis*.

"We're not allowed to show you the damage to the ships' sterns, but informed sources tell us that it's even worse than it appears to be," the reporters all said, with only minor changes. When the live reports were done, the cameras were moved and more shots made of the carriers, then still more from the other side of the harbor. They were just backgrounders, like file footage, and showed the ships and the yards without any reporters standing in the way. These tapes were turned over to someone else and digitalized for further use.

"Those are two sick ships," Oreza observed tersely. Each one represented more than the aggregate tonnage of the entire U.S. Coast Guard, and the Navy, clever people that they were, had let both of them take a shot in the ass. The retired master chief felt his blood pressure increase.

"How long to get them well?" Burroughs asked.

"Months. Long time. Six months . . . puts us into typhoon season," Portagee realized to his further discomfort. It got worse with

additional consideration. He didn't exactly relish the idea of being on an island assaulted by Marines, either. Here he was, on high ground, within sight of a surface-to-air missile battery that was sure to draw fire. Maybe selling out for a million bucks wasn't so bad an idea after all. With that sort of money he could buy another boat, another house, and do his fishing out of the Florida Keys. "You know, you can fly out of here if you want."

"Oh, what's the hurry?"

Election posters were already being printed and posted. The public-access channel on the island's cable system updated notices every few hours about the plans for Saipan. If anything, the island was even more relaxed now. Japanese tourists were unusually polite, and for the most part the soldiers were unarmed now. Military vehicles were being used for roadwork. Soldiers were visiting schools for friendly introductions. Two new baseball fields had been created, virtually overnight, and a new league started up. There was talk that a couple of Japanese major-league teams would commence spring training on Saipan, for which a stadium would have to be constructed, and maybe, it was whispered now, Saipan would have its own team. Which made sense, Oreza supposed. The island was closer to Tokyo than Kansas City was to New York. It wasn't that the residents were happy with the occupation. It was just that they did not see any salvation, and so like most people in such a spot they learned to live with it. The Japanese were going far out of their way to make it as comfortable a process as possible.

For the first week there had been daily protests. But the Japanese commander, General Arima, had come out to meet every such group, TV cameras all around, and invited the leaders into his office for a chat, often televised live. Then came the more sophisticated responses. Government civilians and businessmen held a lengthy press conference, documenting how much money they had invested in the island, showing in graphic form the difference they'd made for the local economy, and promising to do more. It wasn't so much that they had eliminated resentment as shown tolerance of it, promising at every turn to abide by the results of the elections soon to be held. *We live here, too*, they kept saying. *We live here, too*.

There had to be hope. Two weeks tomorrow, Oreza thought, and all they heard were reports on goddamned negotiations. Since when had America ever negotiated something like this? Maybe that was it. Maybe it was just his country's obvious sign of weakness that gave him a sense of hopelessness. Nobody was fighting back. Tell us that the government is *doing* something, he wanted to say to the Admiral at the other end of the satellite phone. . . .

"Well, what the hell." Oreza walked into the living room, put the

batteries back in the phone, slid the antenna into the bottom of the mixing bowl, and dialed the number.

"Admiral Jackson," he heard.

"Oreza here."

"Anything new to report?"

"Yeah, Admiral. How the elections are going to go."

"I don't understand, Master Chief."

"I see CNN telling us we got two carriers with their legs cut off and people saying we can't do shit, sir. Jesus, Admiral, even when the Argentineans took the goddamned Falklands the Brits said they were coming back. I ain't hearing that. What the hell are we supposed to think?"

Jackson weighed his reply for a few seconds. "I don't need to tell you the rules on talking about operational stuff. Your job's to give me information, remember?"

"All we keep hearing is how they're going to hold elections, okay? The missile site east of us is camouflaged now—"

"I know that. And the search radar on top of Mount Takpochao is operating, and there's about forty fighter aircraft based at the airport and Kobler. We count sixty more at Andersen on Guam. There are eight 'cans cruising east of you, and an oiler group approaching them for an unrep. Anything else you want to know?" Even if Oreza was "compromised," a polite term for being under arrest, which Jackson doubted, this was nothing secret. Everyone knew America had reconnaissance satellites. On the other hand, Oreza needed to know that Jackson was up-to-date and, more importantly, interested. He was slightly ashamed of what he had to say next. "Master Chief, I expected better from a guy like you." The reply made him feel better, though.

"That's what I needed to hear, Admiral."

"Anything new happens, you tell us about it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jackson broke the connection and lifted a recently arrived report on *Johnnie Reb*.

"Soon, Master Chief," he whispered. Then it was time to meet with the people from MacDill Air Force Base, who were, perversely, all wearing Army green. He didn't know that they would remind him of something he'd seen a few months earlier.

The men all had to be Spanish speakers, and look Spanish. Fortunately that wasn't hard. A documents expert flew from Langley to Fort Stewart, Georgia, complete with all the gear he needed, including ten blank passports. For purposes of simplicity, they'd use their real names. First Sergeant Julio Vega sat down in front of the camera,

wearing his best suit.

"Don't smile," the CIA technician told him. "Europeans don't smile for passports."

"Yes, sir." His service nickname was *Oso*, "bear," but only his peers called him that now. To the rest of the Rangers in Foxtrot Company, Second Battalion, 175th Ranger Regiment, his only name was "First Sergeant," and they knew him as an experienced NCO who would back up his captain on the mission for which he'd just volunteered.

"You need better clothes, too."

"Who's buyin'?" Vega asked, grinning now, though the picture would show the dour face he usually reserved for soldiers who failed to meet his standards of behavior. That would not be the case here, he thought. Eight men, all jump-qualified (as all Rangers were), all people who'd seen combat action in one place or another—and unusually for members of the 175th, all men who hadn't shaved their heads down to stubbly Mohawks. Vega remembered another group like this one, and his grin stopped. Not all of them had come out of Colombia alive.

Spanish speakers, he thought as he left the room. Spanish was probably the language in the Marianas. Like most senior Army noncommissioned officers, he had gotten his bachelor's degree in night school, having majored in military history—it had just seemed the right thing to do for one of his profession, and besides, the Army had paid for it. If Spanish were the language on those rocks, then it gave him an additional reason to think in positive terms about the mission. The name of the operation, which he'd overheard in a brief conversation with Captain Diego Checa, also seemed auspicious. It was called Operation ZORRO, which had amused the Captain enough to allow him to confide in his first sergeant. The "real" Zorro had been named Don Diego, hadn't he? He had forgotten the bandit's surname, but his senior NCO had not. *With a name like Vega, how can I turn down a mission like this?* Oso asked himself.

It was a good thing he was in shape, Nomuri thought. Just breathing here was hard enough. Most Western visitors to Japan stayed in the major cities and never realized that the country was every bit as mountainous as Colorado. Tochimoto was a small hill settlement that languished in the winter and expanded in summer as local citizens who grew tired of the crowded sameness of the cities moved into the country to explore. The hamlet, at the end of National Route 140, had essentially pulled in its sidewalks, but Chet was able to find a place to rent a small four-wheel all-terrain cycle, and had told the owner that he just needed a few hours to get away. In return for his money and a

set of keys he'd received a stern warning, albeit polite, about following the trail and being careful, for which he'd graciously thanked the man and gone on his way, following the River Taki—more a nice brook than a river—up into the mountains. After the first hour, and about seven miles, he reckoned, he'd switched off the motor, pulled out his earplugs, and just listened.

Nothing. He hadn't seen a track in the mud and gravel path alongside the cascading stream, nor any sign of occupancy in the handful of rustic summer homes he'd passed along the way, and now, listening, he heard nothing at all but for the wind. There was a ford on his map, two more miles up, and sure enough it was both marked and usable, and allowed him to go east toward Shiraishi-*san*. Like most mountains, it had sides sculpted by time and water into numerous dead-end valleys, and Mount Shiraishi had a particularly nice valley, as yet unmarred by house or cabin. Perhaps Boy Scouts came here in summer to camp and commune with the nature the rest of their country had worked so hard to extinguish. More likely it was just a spot with no minerals valuable enough to justify a road or rail line. It was also one hundred air miles from Tokyo, and for all practical purposes might as easily have been in Antarctica.

Nomuri turned south, and climbed a smooth part of the slope to the crest of the southern ridge. He wanted a further look and listen, and, while he spotted a single half-built dwelling a few miles below, he saw no column of smoke from a wood fire, nor the rising steam from someone's hot tub, and he heard nothing at all that was not of nature. Nomuri spent thirty minutes scanning the area with a pair of compact binoculars, taking his time and making sure, then turned to look north and west, finding the same remarkable absence of human presence. Finally satisfied, he headed back down to the Taki, following the path back to the town.

"We never see anyone now," the rental agent said when Nomuri finally got back, just after sunset. "May I offer you some tea?"

"*Dozo,*" the CIA officer said. He took his tea with a friendly nod. "It's wonderful here."

"You were wise to come this time of year." The man wanted conversation more than anything else. "In the summer the trees are full and beautiful, but the noise from these things"—he gestured at the ranks of cycles—"well, it ruins the peace of the mountain. But it supports me well," the man allowed.

"I must come back again. Things are so hectic at my office. To come here and feel the silence."

"Perhaps you will tell some friends," the man suggested. Clearly he needed the money to sustain him in the off-season.

"Yes, I will certainly do that," Nomuri assured him. A friendly bow

sent him on his way, and the CIA officer started his car for the three-hour drive back to Tokyo, still wondering why the Agency had given him an assignment calculated to make him feel better about his mission.

"Are you guys really comfortable with this?" Jackson asked the people from SOCOM.

"Funny time for second thoughts, Robby," the senior officer observed. "If they're dumb enough to let American civilians roam around their country, well, let's take advantage of it."

"The insertion still worries me," the Air Force representative noted, looking by turns at the air-navigation charts and the satellite photos. "We have a good IP—hell, the navigational references are pretty good—but somebody's gotta take care of those AWACS birds for this to work."

"It's covered," the colonel from Air Combat Command assured him. "We're going to light up the sky for them, and you do have that gap to use." He tapped his pointer on the third chart.

"The helo crews?" Robby asked next.

"They're working on their sims now. If they're lucky they'll get to sleep on the flight over."

The mission-planning simulator was real enough to fool Sandy Richter's inner ears. The device was halfway between his youngest son's new Nintendo VR System and a full-up aircraft simulator, the oversized helmet he wore identical with the one he used in his Comanche, but infinitely more sophisticated. What had begun with a monocle display on the AH-64 Apache was now like an I-MAX-theater view of the world that you wore on your head. It needed to be more sophisticated yet, but it did give him a view of the computer-generated terrain along with all his flight information, and his hands were on the stick and throttle of another virtual-helicopter as he navigated across the water toward approaching bluffs.

"Coming right for the notch," he told his backseater, who was actually sitting beside him, because the simulator didn't require that sort of fidelity. In this artificial world, they saw what they saw regardless of where they were, though the backseater sitting next to him had two additional instruments.

What they saw was the product of six hours of supercomputer time. A set of satellite photographs taken over the last three days had been analyzed, folded, spindled, and mutilated into a three-dimensional

display that looked like a somewhat grainy video.

"Population center to the left."

"Roger, I see it." What he saw was a patch of fluorescent blue which in reality would have been yellow-orange quartz lighting, and out of deference to it he increased altitude from the fifty feet he'd followed for the past two hours. He eased the sidestick over, and the others in the darkened room, who were observing the flight crew, were struck by the way both bodies tilted to deal with the g-forces of a turn that existed only in the computer running the simulation. They might have laughed except that Sandy Richter was not somebody you laughed at.

From the moment he crossed the virtual coast, he climbed up to a crest and ran along it. That was Richter's idea. There were roads and houses in the river valleys that ended at the Sea of Japan. Better, the pilot thought, to stay acoustically covert as much as possible and take his chances with the look-down capability. In a just world he'd be able to deal with that threat on the inbound leg, but this was not exactly a just world.

"Fighters overhead," a female voice warned, just as it would on the real mission.

"Coming down some," Richter replied to the computer voice, slipping down below the ridgeline to the right. "If you can find me fifty feet off the ground, then I lose, honey."

"I hope this stealth shit really works." The initial intelligence reports were very concerned with the radar in the Japanese F-15s. Somehow it had taken down one B-1 and crippled another, and nobody was quite sure how it had happened.

"We're gonna find that one out." What else could the pilot say? In this case the computer decided that the stealth shit really did work. The last hour of the virtual flight was routine terrain-dodging, but strenuous enough that when he landed his Comanche, Richter needed a shower which, he was sure, would not be available where they were going. Though a pair of skis might be useful.

"What if the other guys—"

"Then I suppose we learn to like rice." You couldn't worry about everything. The lights came on, the helmets came off, and Richter found himself sitting in a medium-sized room.

"Successful insertion," the major grading the exercise decided. "You gents ready for a little trip?"

Richter picked up a glass of ice water from the table in the back of the room. "You know, I never really thought I'd drive a snake that far."

"What about the rest of the stuff?" his weapons-operator wanted to know.

"It'll be uploaded when you get there."

“And the way out?” Richter asked. It would have been better had they briefed him in on that one.

“You have a choice of two. Maybe three. We haven’t decided that one yet. It’s being looked at,” the SOCOM officer assured them.

The good news was that they all seemed to have penthouse apartments. That was to be expected, Chavez thought. Rich dudes like these bastards would have the whole top floor of whatever building they picked. It made people like that feel big, he supposed, to be able to look down on everyone else, like people in the L.A. high-rises had looked down on the barrios of his youth. None of them had ever been soldiers, though. You never wanted to skyline yourself that way. Better to be down in the weeds with the mice and the peons. Well, everybody had their limitations, Ding told himself.

It was just a matter, then, of finding a tall spot. That proved easy. Again the pacific nature of the city worked in their favor. They merely picked the proper building, walked in, took the elevator to the top floor, and from there walked to the roof. Chavez set up his camera on a tripod, selected his longest lens, and started shooting. Even doing it all in daylight was no hardship, the instructions had told them, and the weather gods cooperated, giving them a gray, overcast afternoon. He shot ten frames of each building, rewinding and ejecting the film cassettes, which went back into their boxes for labeling. The entire operation took half an hour.

“You get used to trusting the guy?” Chavez asked after they made the pass.

“Ding, I just got used to trusting you,” Clark replied quietly, easing the tension of the moment.

38

The River Rubicon

"So?"

Ryan took his time considering the answer. Adler deserved to know something. There was supposed to be honor in negotiations. You never really told the whole truth, but you weren't supposed to lie either.

"So continue as before," the National Security Advisor said.

"We're doing something." It was not a question.

"We're not sitting on our hands, Scott. They're not going to cave in, are they?"

Adler shook his head. "Probably not."

"Encourage them to rethink their position," Jack suggested. It wasn't very helpful, but it was something to say.

"Cook thinks there are political forces working over there to moderate matters. His counterpart on the other side is giving him encouraging information."

"Scott, we have a couple of CIA officers working over there, covered as Russian journalists. They've been in contact with Koga. He's not very happy with developments. We've told him to act normally. There's no sense in harming the guy, but if . . . best move, have Cook feel the guy out on what the opposition elements in their government really are, and what power they might have. He must *not* reveal who we're in contact with."

"Okay, I'll pass that one along. Otherwise keep the same line?" Adler asked.

"Don't give them anything of substance. Can you dance some?"

"I think so." Adler checked his watch. "It's at our place today. I have to sit down with Brett before it starts."

"Keep me posted."

"Will do," Adler promised.

It was still before dawn at Groom Lake. A pair of C-5B transports taxied to the end of the runway and lifted off. The load was light, only three helicopters each and other equipment, not much for aircraft

designed to carry two tanks. But it would be a long flight for one of them, over five thousand miles, and adverse winds would require two midair refuelings, in turn necessitating a full relief crew for each transport. The additional flight crewmen relegated the passengers to the space aft of the wing box, where the seats were less comfortable.

Richter removed the dividers from the three-seat set and put his earplugs in. As soon as the aircraft lifted off, his hand moved automatically for the pocket of his flight suit where he kept his cigarettes—or had until he'd quit a few months earlier. Damn. How could you go into combat without a smoke? he asked himself, then leaned against a pillow and faded off to sleep. He didn't even feel the buffet of the aircraft as it climbed into the jetstream over the Nevada mountains.

Forward, the flight crew turned north. The sky was dark and would remain so for almost all of the flight. Their most important task would be to stay alert and awake. Automated equipment would handle the navigation, and the hour was such that the red-eye commercial flights were already out of the way and the regular day's business hops had hardly begun. The sky was theirs, such as it was, with broken clouds and bitterly cold air outside the aluminum skin of the aircraft, on their way to the goddamnedest destination the reserve crew had ever considered. The second Galaxy's crew was luckier. It turned southwest, and in less than an hour was over the Pacific Ocean for their shorter flight to Hickam Air Force Base.

USS *Tennessee* entered Pearl Harbor an hour early and proceeded under her own power to an outlying berth, dispensing with the harbor pilot and depending on a single Navy tugboat to bring her alongside. There were no lights, and the evolution was accomplished by the glow of the other lit-up piers of the harbor. The one surprising thing was the presence of a large fuel truck on the quay. The official car and the admiral standing next to it were to be expected, Commander Claggett thought. The gangway was rigged quickly, and ComSubPac hustled across even before the ensign was rigged on the after part of the sail. He saluted that way anyway.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," the CO called from his control station, then headed down the ladder to meet Admiral Mancuso in his own cabin.

"Dutch, I'm glad you managed to get her under way," Mancuso said with a smile tempered by the situation.

"Glad I finally got to dance with the girl," Claggett allowed. "I have all the diesel I need, sir," he added.

"We have to pump out one of your tanks." Large as she was,

Tennessee had more than one fuel bunker for her auxiliary diesel.

"What for, sir?"

"Some JP-5." Mancuso opened his briefcase and pulled out the mission orders. The ink was hardly dry on them. "You're going to start off in the special-ops business." The automatic tendency was for Claggett to ask *Why me?* but he restrained himself. Instead he flipped over the cover page of the orders and started checking his programmed position.

"I might get a little business there, sir," the Captain observed.

"The idea is to stay covert, but the usual rule applies." The usual rule meant that Claggett would always be free to exercise his command judgment.

"Now hear this," the 1-MC announcing system told everyone. "The smoking lamp is out throughout the ship. The smoking lamp is out throughout the ship."

"You let people smoke aboard?" ComSubPac asked. Quite a few of his skippers did not.

"Command judgment, remember?"

Thirty feet away, Ron Jones was in the sonar room, pulling a computer disk out of his pocket.

"We've had the upgrade," the chief told him.

"This one's brand-new." The contractor slipped it into the slot on the backup computer. "I got a hit on you first night out when you ran over the Oregon SOSUS array. Something loose aft?"

"Toolbox. It's gone now. We ran over two more later," the chief pointed out.

"How fast?" Jones asked.

"The second one was just under flank, and we curlicued overtop the thing."

"I got a twitch, nothing more, and that one had the same software I just uploaded for you. You got a quiet boat here, Chief. Walk down?"

"Yeah, the Cap'n tore a few strips off, but there ain't no loose gear aboard now." He paused. "Less'n you count the ends on the toilet-paper rolls."

Jones settled into one of the chairs, and looked around the crowded working space. This was his place. He'd only had a hint of the ship's mission orders—Mancuso had asked his opinion of water conditions and worried if the Japanese might have taken the U.S. Navy's SOSUS station on Honshu intact, and that had been enough, really. She was sure as hell going in harm's way, perhaps the first PacFlt sub to do so. *God, and a boomer, too*, he thought. *Big and slow*. One hand reached out and touched the workstation.

"I know who you are, Dr. Jones," the chief said, reading the man's thoughts. "I know my job, too, okay?"

"The other guy's boats, when they snort—"

"The thousand-hertz line. We have the dash-five tail and all the upgrades. Including yours, I guess." The chief reached for his coffee, and on reflection, poured a mug for his visitor.

"Thank you."

"Asheville and *Charlotte?"*

Jones nodded, looking down at his coffee. "You know Frenchy Laval?"

"He was one of the instructors in my A-School, long time back."

"Frenchy was my chief on *Dallas,* working for Admiral Mancuso. His son was aboard *Asheville*. I knew him. It's personal."

"Gotcha." It was all the chief had to say.

"The United States of America does *not* accept the current situation, Mr. Ambassador. I thought that I'd made that clear," Adler said two hours into the current session. In fact he'd made it clear at least eight times every day since the negotiations had begun.

"Mr. Adler, unless your country wishes to continue this war, which will profit no one at all, all you need do is abide by the elections which we plan to stage—with full international supervision."

Somewhere in California, Adler remembered, was a radio station that for weeks had played every known recorded version of "Louie Louie." Perhaps the State Department could pipe that into the building instead of Muzak. It would have been superb training for this. The Japanese Ambassador was waiting for an American response to his country's gracious offer of returning Guam—as though it had not been taken by force in the first place—and was now showing exasperation that Adler wasn't conceding anything in return for the friendly gesture. Did he have another card to play? If so, he wouldn't set it down until Adler showed him something.

"We are gratified, of course, that your country will agree to international scrutiny of the elections, and pleased also at your pledge to abide by the results, but that does not change the fact that we are talking about sovereign national territory with a population which has *already* freely chosen political association with the United States. Unfortunately, our ability to accept that pledge at face value is degraded by the situation which prompts it."

The Ambassador raised his hands, distressed at the diplomatic version of being called a liar. "How could we make it more clear?"

"By evacuating the islands now, of course," Adler responded. But he'd already made a concession of sorts. By saying that America was not entirely displeased by Japan's promise of elections, he'd given the Ambassador something back. Not much, certainly not as much as he'd

wanted—acceptance of the idea of elections to determine the fate of the islands—but something. Mutual positions were restated one more time each before the morning recess allowed a chance for everyone to stretch.

The terrace was cold and windy, and as before, Adler and the Ambassador withdrew to opposite sides of the topfloor deck which in summer was an outdoor dining area, while their staff members mingled to explore options with which the respective chief negotiators could not appear to be directly involved.

"Not much of a concession," Nagumo observed, sipping his tea.

"You're lucky to get that much, but then, we know that not everyone in your government supports the action you've taken."

"Yes," Seiji replied. "I told you that."

Chris Cook fought the urge to look around for eavesdroppers. It would have been far too theatrical. Instead he sipped at his cup, looking southwest toward the Kennedy Center. "There have been informal contacts."

"With whom?"

"Koga," Cook said quietly. If Adler couldn't play the game properly, then at least he could.

"Ah. Yes, that is the logical person to speak with."

"Seiji, if we play this right, we can both come out of this heroes." Which would be the ideal solution for everyone, wouldn't it?

"What sort of contacts?" Nagumo asked.

"All I know is that it's very irregular. Now, I need to ask you, is Koga leading the opposition you're reporting to?"

"He is one of them, of course," Nagumo replied. It really was the perfect bit of information. The Americans were conceding very little, and now the reason was clear: they hoped that Goto's fragile parliamentary coalition would collapse in the combination of time and uncertainty. And all he had to do was to break the Americans' spirits and thus win his country's position . . . yes, that was elegant. And Chris's prediction on the heroic end-game would be half-right, wouldn't it?

"Are there others?" Cook asked. The reply was predictable and automatic.

"Of course there are, but I don't dare to reveal their names to you." Nagumo was thinking the scenario through now. If the Americans were banking on the political subversion of his country, then it had to mean that their military options were weak. What splendid news that was.

The first KC-10 tanker staged out of Elmendorf, linking up with the

C-5 just east of Nome. It required a few minutes to find air smooth enough for the evolution, and even then it was tricky performing what had to be the most unnatural act known to man, a pair of multi-hundred-ton aircraft linking in midair like mayflies. It was all the more dangerous in that the C-5 pilot couldn't actually see much more than the nose of the tanker and had to fly in close formation for twenty-five minutes. Worst of all, the tail-mounted engine of the three-engine KC-10 threw its jet exhaust directly on the T-shaped tail of the Galaxy, creating a strong and continuous buffet that required constant control corrections. That, the pilot thought, sweating inside his flight suit, is why they pay us so much. Finally the tanks were topped off and the planes broke free, the Galaxy taking a shallow dive while the tanker turned right. Aboard the transport, stomachs settled back down as the flight path took them west across the Bering Strait. Another tanker would soon lift off from Shemya and would also enter Russian air space. Unknown to them, another American aircraft had already done so, leading the secret procession to a place marked on American air-navigation charts as Verino, a town on the Trans-Siberian Railroad that dated back to the turn of the century.

* * *

The new tailshaft was finally in place after what seemed to the skipper the longest and most tedious mechanical repair job he'd ever experienced. Inside the ship's hull, bearings were reseated and seals reinstalled throughout the shaft alley. A hundred men and women were working on that detail. The engineering crew had been working on twenty-hour days, scarcely longer than the shifts that had been demanded and gotten from the civilian yard workers who manned the heavy equipment around the enormous concrete box. The last task would soon be under way. Already the immense traveling gantry started to move a shiny new screw back toward the far end of the shaft. Thirty feet across and precisely balanced, in another two hours it would be fully attached to what would soon be the world's most expensive twin-screw ship.

The CNN report coincided with the local dawn. The shot, Ryan saw, was from across the harbor, with the female reporter holding up her microphone, and a "Live" caption in the lower-right corner of the screen. There was nothing new to report in Pearl Harbor, she said.

"As you can see behind me, USS *Enterprise* and *John Stennis* remain

in dry dock. Two of the most expensive warships ever made now depend on an army of workers to make them whole again, an effort that will require . . .”

“Months,” Ryan said, completing the statement. “Keep telling them that.”

The other network news shows would soon give out the same information, but it was CNN that he was depending on. The source of record for the whole world.

Tennessee was just diving, having passed the sea buoy a few minutes earlier. Two ASW helicopters had followed her out, and a Spruance-class destroyer was also in view, conducting hurried workups and requesting by blinker light that the submarine pass her close aboard for a quick tracking exercise.

Five U.S. Army personnel had come aboard just before sailing. They were assigned space according to rank. The officer, a first lieutenant, got a berth that would have belonged to a missile officer, had the boomer carried any of those. The senior NCO, being an E-7, was titularly a chief petty officer and was given a space in the goat locker. The rest were berthed with the enlisted crewmen. The first order of business was to give them all new shoes with rubber soles along with a briefing on the importance of being quiet.

“Why? What’s the big deal?” the senior NCO asked, looking at his bunk in the chiefs’ spaces and wondering if a coffin would be any more comfortable if he lived long enough for one.

Ba-Wah!

“That’s why,” a chief electrician’s mate replied. He didn’t quite shiver, but added, “I never have gotten used to that sound.”

“Jesus! What the hell was that?”

“That’s an SQS-53 sonar on a tin can. And if you hear it that loud, it means that they know we’re here. The Japs have ’em, too, Sarge.”

“Just ignore it,” the sonar chief said, forward at his duty station. He stood behind a new sonarman, looking at the display. Sure enough, the new software upgrade made Prairie /Masker a lot easier to pick up, especially if you knew there was a blue sky overhead and no reason to suspect a rainstorm pelting the surface.

“He’s got us cold, Chief.”

“Only ‘cause the Cap’n said it was okay for him to track us for a little while. An’ we ain’t giving out any more freebies.”

Verino was just one more former MiG base in an area with scores of

them. Exactly whom the Russians had been worried about was up for grabs. From this place they could have struck at Japan or China, or defended against attacks from either place, depending on who was paranoid and who was pissed at any particular political moment, the pilot thought. He'd never been anywhere close to here before, and even with the changes in relations between the two countries hadn't expected to do much more than maybe make a friendly visit to European Russia, as the U.S. Air Force did periodically. Now there was a Sukhoi-27 interceptor a thousand yards to his two o'clock, with real missiles hanging on the airframe, and probably a whimsical thought or two in the mind of the driver. *My, what a huge target.* The two disparate aircraft had linked up an hour before because there hadn't been time to get a Russian-speaking officer on the mission, and they didn't want to risk English chatter on the air-control frequency. So the transport followed the fighter rather like a sheepdog obediently trailing a terrier.

"Runway in view," the copilot said tiredly. There was the usual low-altitude buffet, increased as the flaps and gear went down, spoiling the airflow. For all that the landing was routine, until just before touchdown the pilot noticed a pair of C-17s on the ramp. So he wasn't the first American aircraft to visit this place. Maybe the two other crews could tell him where to go for some crew-rest.

The JAL 747 lifted off with all its seats full, heading west into the prevailing winds over the Pacific and leaving Canada behind. Captain Sato wasn't quite sure how to feel about everything. He was pleased, as always, to bring so many of his countrymen back home, but he also felt that in a way they were running away from America, and he wasn't so sure he liked that. His son had gotten word to him of the B-1 kills, and if his country could cripple two American aircraft carriers, destroy two of their supposedly invincible submarines, and then also take out one or two of their vaunted strategic bombers, well, then, what did they have to fear from these people? It was just a matter of waiting them out now, he thought. To his right he saw the shape of another 747, this one in the livery of Northwest/KLM, inbound from Japan, doubtless full of American businessmen who were running away. It wasn't that they had anything to fear. Perhaps it was shame, he thought. The idea pleased him, and Sato smiled. The rest of the routing was easy. Four thousand six hundred nautical miles, a flight time of nine and a half hours if he'd read the weather predictions correctly, and his load of three hundred sixty-six passengers would be home to a reborn country, guarded by his son and his brother. They'd come back to North America in due course, standing a little straighter

and looking a little prouder, as would befit people representing his nation, Sato told himself. He regretted that he was no longer part of the military that would cause that renewed pride of place, but he'd made his mistake too long ago to correct it now. So he'd do his small part in the great change in history's shape, driving his bus as skillfully as he could.

The word got to Yamata early in the morning of the day he'd planned to return to Saipan to begin his campaign for the island's governorship. He and his colleagues had gotten the word out through the government agencies. Everything that went to Goto and the Foreign Minister now came directly to them, too. It wasn't all that hard. The country was changing, and it was time for the people who exercised the real power to be treated in accordance with their true worth. In due course it would be clearer to the common people, and by that time they would recognize who really mattered in their country, as the bureaucrats were even now acknowledging somewhat belatedly.

Koga, you traitor, the industrialist thought. It wasn't entirely unexpected. The former Prime Minister had such foolish ideas about the purity of the governmental process, and how you had to seek the approval of common working people, how typical of his outlook that he would feel some foolish nostalgia for something that had never really existed in the first place. *Of course* political figures needed guidance and support from people such as himself. *Of course* it was normal for them to display proper, and dignified, obeisance to their masters. What did they do, really, but work to preserve the prosperity that others, like Yamata and his peers, had worked so hard to achieve for their country? If Japan had depended on her government to provide for the ordinary people, then where would the country have been? But all people like Koga had were ideals that went nowhere. The common people—what did *they* know? What did they *do?* They *knew* and *did* what their betters told them, and in doing that, in acknowledging their state in life and working in their assigned tasks, they had brought a better life to themselves and their country. Wasn't that simple enough?

It wasn't as though it were the classical period, when the country had been run by a hereditary nobility. That system of rule had sufficed for two millennia, but was not suited to the industrial age. Noble bloodlines ran thin with accumulated arrogance. No, his group of peers consisted of men who had earned their place and their power, first by serving others in lowly positions, then by industry and intelligence—and luck, he admitted to himself—risen to exercise

power won on merit. It was they who had made Japan into what she was. They who had led a small island nation from ashes and ruin to industrial preeminence. They, who had humbled one of the world's "great" powers, would soon humble another, and in the process raise their country to the top of the world order, achieving everything that the military boneheads like Tojo had failed to do.

Clearly Koga had no proper function except to get out of the way, or to acquiesce, as Goto had learned to do. But he did neither. And now he was plotting to deny his country the historic opportunity to achieve true greatness. Why? Because it didn't fit his foolish aesthetic of right and wrong—or because it was dangerous, as though true achievement ever came without some danger.

Well, he could not allow that to happen, Yamata told himself, reaching for his phone to call Kaneda. Even Goto might shrink from this. Better to handle this one in-house. He might as well get used to the exercise of personal power.

At the Northrop plant the aircraft had been nicknamed the armadillo. Though its airframe was so smooth that nature might have given its shape to a wandering seabird, the B-2A was not everything it appeared to be. The slate-gray composites that made up its visible surface were only part of the stealth technology built into the aircraft. The inside metal structure was angular and segmented like the eye of an insect, the better to reflect radar energy in a direction away from that of the transmitter it hoped to defeat. The graceful exterior shell was designed mainly to reduce drag, and thus increase range and fuel efficiency. And it all worked.

At Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, the 509th Bomb Group had led a quiet existence for years, going off and doing its training missions with little fanfare. The bombers originally designed for penetrating Soviet air defenses and tracking down mobile intercontinental missiles for selective destruction—never a realistic tasking, as its crewmen knew—*did* have the ability to pass invisibly through almost any defense. Or so people had thought until recently.

"It's big, and it's powerful, and it snuffed a B-1," an officer told the Group operations officer. "We finally figured it out. It's a phased array. It's frequency-agile, and it can operate in a fire-control mode. The one that limped back to Shemya"—it was still there, decorating the island's single runway while technicians worked to repair it enough to return to the Alaskan mainland—"the missile came in from one direction, but the radar pulses came from another."

"Cute," observed Colonel Mike Zacharias. It was instantly clear: the Japanese had taken a Russian idea one technological step further.

Whereas the Soviets had designed fighter aircraft that were effectively controlled from ground stations, Japan had developed a technique by which the fighters would remain totally covert even when launching their missiles. That was a problem even for the B-2, whose stealthing was designed to defeat longwave search radars and high-frequency airborne tracking- and targeting radars. Stealth was technology; it was not quite magic. An airborne radar of such great power and frequency-agility just might get enough of a return off the -2 to make the proposed mission suicidal. Sleek and agile as it was, the B-2 was a bomber, not a fighter, and a huge target for any modern fighter aircraft. "So what's the good news?" Zacharias asked.

"We're going to play some more games with them and try to get a better feel for their capabilities."

"My dad used to do that with SAMs. He ended up getting a lengthy stay in North Vietnam."

"Well, they're working on a Plan B, too," the intelligence officer offered.

"Oh, that's nice," Chavez said.

"Aren't you the one who doesn't like being a spook?" Clark asked, closing his laptop after erasing the mission orders. "I thought you wanted back in to the paramilitary business."

"Me and my big mouth." Ding moved his backside on the park bench.

"Excuse me," a third voice said. Both CIA officers looked up to see a uniformed police officer, a pistol sitting in its holster on his Sam Browne belt.

"Hello," John said with a smile. "A pleasant morning, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," the policeman replied. "Is Tokyo very different from America?"

"It is also very different from Moscow this time of year."

"Moscow?"

Clark reached into his coat and pulled out his passport. "We are Russian journalists."

The cop examined the booklet and handed it back. "Much colder in Moscow this time of year?"

"Much," Clark confirmed with a nod. The officer moved off, having handled his curiosity attack for the day.

"Not so sure, Ivan Sergeyevich," Ding observed when he'd gone. "It can get pretty cold here, too."

"I suppose you can always get another job."

"And miss all this fun?" Both men rose and walked toward their parked car. There was a map in the glove box.

The Russian Air Force personnel at Verino had a natural curiosity of their own, but the Americans weren't helping matters. There were now over a hundred American personnel on their base, barracked in the best accommodations. The three helicopters and two vehicular trailers had been rolled into hangars originally built for MiG-25 fighters. The transport aircraft were too large for that, but had been rolled inside as much as their dimensions allowed, with the tails sticking out in the open, but they could as easily have been mistaken for IL-86s, which occasionally stopped off here. The Russian ground crewmen established a secure perimeter, which denied contact of any sort between the two sets of air-force personnel, a disappointment for the Russians.

The two trailers inside the easternmost hangar were electronically linked with a thick black coaxial cable. Another cable ran outside to a portable satellite link that was similarly guarded.

"Okay, let's rotate it," a sergeant said. A Russian officer was watching—protocol demanded that the Americans let someone in; this one was surely an intelligence officer—as the birdcage image on the computer screen turned about as though on a phonograph. Next the image moved through a vertical axis, as if it were flying over the stick image. "That's got it," the sergeant observed, closing the window on the computer screen and punching UPLOAD to transmit it to the three idle helicopters.

"What did you just do? May I ask?" the Russian inquired.

"Sir, we just taught the computers what to look for." The answer made no sense to the Russian, true though it was.

The activity in the second van was easier to understand. High-quality photos of several tall buildings were scanned and digitalized, their locations programmed in to a tolerance of only a few meters, then compared with other photos taken from a very high angle that had to denote satellite cameras. The officer leaned in close to get a better feel for the sharpness of the imagery, somewhat to the discomfort of the senior American officer—who, however, was under orders to take no action that might offend the Russians in any way.

"It looks like an apartment building, yes?" the Russian asked in genuine curiosity.

"Yes, it does," the American officer replied, his skin crawling despite the hospitality they had all experienced here. Orders or not, it was a major federal felony to show this kind of thing to anyone who lacked the proper clearances, even an American.

"Who lives there?"

"I don't know." *Why can't this guy just go away?*

By evening the rest of the Americans were up and moving. Incomprehensibly with shaggy hair, not like soldiers at all, they started jogging around the perimeter of the main runway. A few Russians joined in, and a race of sorts started, with both groups running in formation. What started off friendly soon became grim. It was soon clear that the Americans were elite troops unaccustomed to being bested in anything, against which the Russians had pride of place and better acclimatization. *Spetznaz,* the Russians were soon gasping to one another, and because it was a dull base with a tough-minded commander, they were in good enough shape that after ten kilometers they managed to hold their own. Afterward, both groups mingled long enough to realize that language barriers prevented much in the way of conversation, though the tension in the visitors was clear enough without words.

"Weird-looking things," Chavez said.

"Just lucky for us that they picked this place." It was security again, John thought, just like the fighters and bombers at Pearl Harbor had all been bunched together to protect against sabotage or some such nonsense because of a bad intelligence estimate. Another factor might have been the convenience of maintenance at a single location, but they hadn't been assigned to this base originally, and so the hangars weren't large enough. As a result, six E-767s were sitting right there in the open, two miles away and easily distinguished by their odd shape. Better yet, the country was just too crowded for the base to be very isolated. The same factors that placed cities in the flat spots also placed airfields there, but the cities had grown up first. There were lightindustrial buildings all around, and the mainly rectangular air base had highways down every side. The next obvious move was to check the trees for wind direction. Northwesterly wind. Landing aircraft would come in from the southeast. Knowing that, they had to find a perch.

Everything was being used now. Low-orbit electronic-intelligence satellites were also gathering signals, fixing the patrol locations of the AEW aircraft, not as well as the ELINT aircraft could, but far more safely. The next step would be to enlist submarines in the job, but that could take time, someone had told them. Not all that many submarines to go around, and those that were left had a job to do. Hardly a revelation. The electronic order of battle was firming up, and though not everything the ELINT techs discovered was good news, at

least they did have the data from which the operations people might formulate some sort of plan or other. For the moment, the locations of the racetrack patterns used by three orbiting E-767s were firmly plotted. They seemed to stay fairly stationary from day to day. The minor daily variations might have had as much to do with local winds as anything else, which made it necessary to downlink information to their ground-control centers. And that was good news, too.

The medium-price hotel was more than they could ordinarily afford, but for all that it lay right under the approach to runway three-two-left of the nearby air base. Perhaps the noise was just so normal to the country that people filtered it out, Chavez thought, remembering the incessant street racket from their hostelry in Tokyo. The back was better, the clerk assured them, but the best he could offer was a corner room. The really offensive noise was at the front of the hotel: the runway terminated only half a kilometer from the front door. It was the takeoffs that really shook things up. Landings were far easier to sleep through.

"I'm not sure I like this," Ding observed when he got to the room.

"Who said we were supposed to?" John moved a chair to the window and took the first watch.

"It's like murder, John."

"Yeah, I suppose it is." The hell of it was, Ding was right, but somebody else had said it wasn't and that's what counted. Sort of.

"No other options?" President Durling asked.

"No, sir, none that I see." It was a first for Ryan. He'd managed to stop a war, after a fashion. He'd terminated a "black" operation that would probably have caused great political harm to his country. Now he was about to initiate one—well, not exactly, he told himself. Somebody else had started this war, but just though it might be, he didn't exactly relish what he was about to do. "They're not going to back off."

"We never saw it coming," Durling said quietly, knowing that it was too late for such thoughts.

"And maybe that's my fault," Ryan replied, feeling that it was his duty to take the blame. After all, national security was his bailiwick. People would die because of what he'd done wrong, and die from whatever things he might do right. For all the power exercised from this room, there really were no choices, were there?

"Will it all work?"

“Sir, that is something we’ll just have to see.”

It turned out to be easier than expected. Three of the ungainly twin-engine aircraft taxied in a line to the end of the runway, where each took its turn to face into the northwest winds, stopping, advancing its engines to full power, backing off to see if the engines would flame out, and when they didn’t, going again to full power, but this time slipping the brakes and accelerating into its takeoff roll. Clark checked his watch and unfolded a road map of Honshu.

All that was required was a phone call. The Boeing Company’s Commercial Airplane Group issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive, called an E-AD, concerning the auto-landing system on its 767 commercial aircraft. A fault of unknown origin had affected the final approach of a TWA airliner on final into St. Louis, and until determination of the nature of the fault, operators were strongly advised to deactivate that feature of the flight-control systems until further notice. The directive went out by electronic mail, telex, and registered mail to all operators of the 767.

39

Eyes First

It came as no particular surprise that the Japanese consulates in Honolulu, San Francisco, New York, and Seattle were closed. FBI agents showed up at all of them simultaneously and explained that they had to be vacated forthwith. After perfunctory protests, which received polite but impassive attention, the diplomatic personnel locked up their buildings and walked off under guard—mainly to protect them against ragtag protesters, in every case watched by local police—into buses that would conduct them to the nearest airport for a flight to Vancouver, B.C. In the case of Honolulu, the bus went close enough to the Pearl Harbor naval base that officials got a last look at the two carriers in their graving docks, and photos were shot from the bus to record the fact. It never occurred to the consulate official who shot the pictures that the FBI personnel at the front of the bus did not interfere with his action. After all, the American media were advertising everything, as they'd been expected to do. The operation, they saw, was handled professionally in every detail. Their bags were X-rayed for weapons and explosives—there was none of that nonsense, of course—but not opened, since these were diplomatic personnel with treaty-guaranteed immunity. America had chartered an airliner for them, a United 737, which lifted off and, again, managed to fly directly over the naval base, allowing the official to shoot another five photos through the double windows from an altitude of five thousand feet. He congratulated himself on his foresight in keeping his camera handy. Then he slept through most of the five-hour flight to Vancouver.

"One and four are good as new, Skipper," the ChEng assured *Johnnie Reb's* CO. "We'll give you thirty, maybe thirty-two knots, whenever you ask."

Two and three, the inboard shafts, were closed off, the hull openings into the skegs welded shut, and with them the top fifteen or so knots of *John Stennis*'s real top speed, but the removal of the

propellers also cut down on drag, allowing a quite respectable max speed that would have to do. The most ticklish procedure had been resetting the number-four drivetrain, which had to be more finely balanced than the wheel of a racing car, lest it destroy itself at max revolutions. The testing had been accomplished the same way, by turning the screw and checking every bearing along the lengthy shaft. Now it was done, and the dry dock could be flooded tonight. The commanding officer walked tiredly up the concrete steps to the top of the immense man-made canyon, and from there the brow. It was quite a climb all the way to his at-sea cabin aft of the bridge, from which he made a telephone call.

It was just about time. Clark looked southeast out the back window of their room. The cold air was clear and dry, with a few light clouds in the distance, still white in the direct sunlight while the ground was beginning to darken with twilight.

"Ready?" he asked.

"You say so, man." Ding's large metal camera case was open on the floor. The contents had cleared customs weeks before, and appeared unremarkable, typical of what a news photographer might take with him, if a somewhat lighter load than most carried. The foam-filled interior included cutout spaces for three camera bodies and a variety of lenses, plus other cavities for photographic lights that also appeared entirely ordinary but were not. The only weapons with them did not appear to be weapons at all, a fact that had also worked well for them in East Africa. Chavez lifted one of them, checking the power meter on the battery pack and deciding not to plug it into the wall. He flipped the switch to standby and heard the thin electronic whistle of the charging capacitors.

"There it is," John said quietly when he saw the incoming lights, not relishing the job any more than his partner. But you weren't supposed to, were you?

The inbound E-767 had turned on its inboard recognition lights while descending through ten thousand feet, and now lowered its landing gear. The outboard landing lights came on next. Five miles out and two thousand feet over the industrial area surrounding the air base, the pilot saw the runway lights and told himself not to relax after the long, boring patrol flight.

"Flaps twenty-five," he said.

"Flaps twenty-five," the copilot acknowledged, reaching for the

control lever that deployed the landing flaps off the rear of the wing surfaces and the slats at the front, which gave the wing needed extra lift and control at the diminishing speed.

"Kami-Three on final, runway in sight," the pilot said, this time over the radio to the approach-control officer who had guided him unnecessarily to this point. The tower responded properly and the pilot tightened his grip slightly on the controls, more thinking the slight control movements than actually moving, adjusting to the low-altitude winds and scanning for possible unnoticed aircraft in the restricted airspace. Most aircraft accidents, he knew, occurred on landing, and that was why the flight crew had to be especially alert at this time.

* * *

"I got it," Chavez said, no emotion at all in his voice as he told his conscience to be still. His country was at war. The people in the airplane wore uniforms, were fair game because of it, and that was that. It was just too damned easy, though he remembered the first time he had killed, which, in retrospect, had also been so easy as to constitute murder. He'd actually felt elation at the time, Chavez remembered with passing shame.

"I want a hot tub and a massage," the copilot said, allowing himself a personal thought as his eyes checked around, two miles out. "All clear to the right. Runway is clear."

The pilot nodded and reached for the throttles with his right hand, easing them back and allowing air friction to slow the aircraft further for its programmed touchdown speed of 145 knots, high because of the extra fuel reserves the Kami aircraft carried. They always flew heavy.

"Two kilometers, everything is normal," the copilot said.

"Now," Chavez whispered. The barrel-like extension of the light was on his shoulder, aimed almost like a rifle, or more properly like an antitank rocket launcher, at the nose of the approaching aircraft. Then his finger came down on the button.

The "magic" they had used in Africa was conceptually nothing more than a souped-up flashlight, but this one had a xenon-arc bulb and put out three million candlepower. The most expensive part of the

assembly was the reflector, a finely machined piece of steel alloy that confined the beam to a diameter of about forty feet at a distance of one mile. One could easily read a newspaper by the illumination provided at that distance, but to look directly into the light, even at that distance, was quite blinding. Designed and issued as a nonlethal weapon, the bulb was shielded for ultraviolet light, which could do permanent damage to the human retina. The thought passed through Ding's mind when he triggered the light. *Nonlethal. Sure*.

* * *

The intensity of the blue-white light seared the pilot's eyes. It was like looking directly at the sun, but worse, and the pain made his hands come off the controls to his face, and he screamed into the intercom phones. The copilot had been looking off-axis to the flash, but the human eye is drawn to light, especially in darkness, and his mind didn't have time to warn him off from the entirely normal reaction. Both airmen were blinded and in pain, with their aircraft eight hundred feet off the ground and a mile from the landing threshold. Both were highly trained men, and highly skilled as well. His eyes still shut from the pain, the pilot's hands reached down to find the yoke and tried to steady it. The copilot did exactly the same thing, but their control movements were not quite the same, and in an instant they were fighting each other rather than the aircraft. They were both also entirely without visual references, and the viciously instant disorientation caused vertigo in both men that was necessarily different. One airman thought their aircraft was veering in one direction, and the other tried to yank the controls to correct a different movement, and with only eight hundred feet of air under them, there wasn't time to decide who was right and the fighting on the yoke only meant that when the stronger of the two got control, his efforts doomed them all. The E-767 rolled ninety degrees to the right, veering north toward empty manufacturing buildings, falling rapidly as it did so. The tower controllers shouted into the radio, but the aviators didn't even hear the warnings. The pilot's last action was to reach for the go-around button on the throttle in a despairing attempt to get his bird safely back in the sky. His hand had hardly found it when his senses told him, a second early, that his life was over. His last thought was that a nuclear bomb had gone off over his country again.

"*Jesucristo,*" Chavez whispered. Just a second, not even that. The nose of the aircraft flared in the dusky sky as though from some sort of explosion, and then the thing had just veered off to the north like a dying bird. He forced himself to look away from the impact area. He just didn't want to see or know where it hit. Not that it mattered. The towering fireball lit up the area as though from a lightning strike. It hit Ding like a punch in the stomach to realize what he'd done, and there came the sudden urge to vomit.

Kami-Five saw it, ten miles out, the sickening flare of yellow on the ground short and right of the airfield that could only mean one thing. Aviators are disciplined people. For the pilot and copilot of the next E-767 there also came a sudden emptiness in the stomach, a tightening of muscles. They wondered which of their squadron mates had just smeared themselves into the ground, which families would receive unwanted visitors, which faces they would no longer see, which voices they would no longer hear, and punished themselves for not paying closer attention to the radio, as though it would have mattered. Instinctively both men checked their cockpit for irregularities. Engines okay. Electronics okay. Hydraulics okay. Whatever had happened to the other one, their aircraft was fine.

"Tower, Five, what happened, over?"

"Five, Tower, Three just went in. We do not know why. Runway is clear."

"Five, roger, continuing approach, runway in sight." He took his hand off the radio button before he could say something else. The two aviators traded a look. Kami-three. Good friends. Gone. Enemy action would have been easier to accept than the ignominy of something as pedestrian as a landing crash, whatever the cause. But for now their heads turned back to the flight path. They had a mission to finish, and twenty-five fellow crewmen aft to deliver safely home despite their sorrow.

"Want me to take it?" John asked.

"My job, man." Ding checked the capacitor charge again, then wiped his face. He clenched his fists to stop the slight trembling he noticed, both ashamed and relieved that he had it. The widely spaced landing lights told him that this was another target, and he was in the service of his country, as they were in the service of theirs, and that was that. But better to do it with a proper weapon, he thought. Perhaps, his mind wandered, the guys who preferred swords had

thought the same thing when faced with the advent of muskets. Chavez shook his head one last time to clear it, and aimed his light through the open window, working his way back from the opening as he lined up on the approaching aircraft. There was a shroud on the front to prevent people outside the room from seeing the flash, but he didn't want to take any more chances than he had to ... ... right about . . . . . now . . .

He punched the button again, and again the silvery aluminum skin around the aircraft's cockpit flared brightly, for just a second or so. Off to the left he could hear the warbling shriek of fire engines, doubtless heading to the site of the first crash. *Not like the fire sirens at home*, he thought irrelevantly. The E-767 didn't do anything at first, and he wondered for a second if he'd done it right. Then the angle of the nose light changed downward, but the airplane didn't turn at all. It just increased its rate of descent. Maybe it would hit them in the hotel room, Chavez thought. It was too late to run away, and maybe God would punish him for killing fifty people. He shook his head and dismantled the light, waiting, finding comfort in concentrating on a mechanical task.

Clark saw it, too, and also knew that there was no purpose in darting from the room. The airplane should be flaring now . . . perhaps the pilot thought so, too. The nose came up, and the Boeing product roared perhaps thirty feet over the roof of the building. John moved to the side windows and saw the wingtip pass over, rotating as it did so. The aircraft started to climb, or attempt to, probably for a go-around, but without enough power, and it stalled halfway down the runway, perhaps five hundred feet in the air, falling off on the port wing and spiraling in for yet another fireball. Neither he nor Ding thanked God for a deliverance that they might not have deserved in any case.

"Pack the light and get your camera," Clark ordered.

"why?"

"We're reporters, remember?" he said, this time in Russian.

Ding's hands were shaking enough that he had trouble disassembling the light, but John didn't move to help him. Everyone needed time to deal with feelings like this. They hadn't killed bad men deserving of death, after all. They had erased the lives of people not unlike themselves, doomed by their oaths of service to someone who didn't merit their loyalty. Chavez finally got a camera out, selected a hundred-millimeter lens for the Nikon F5 body, and followed his boss out the door. The hotel's small lobby was already filled with people, almost all of them Japanese. "Klerk" and "Chekov" walked right through them, running across the highway to the airport's perimeter fence, where the latter started taking pictures. Things were sufficiently

confused that it was ten minutes before a policeman came over.

"What are you doing!" Not so much a question as an accusation.

"We are reporters," "Klerk" replied, handing over his credentials.

"Stop what you are doing!" the cop ordered next.

"Have we broken a law? We were in the hotel across the road when this happened." Ivan Sergeyevich turned, looking down at the policeman. He paused. "Oh! Have the Americans attacked you? Do you want our film?"

"Yes!" the officer said with a sudden realization. He held out his hand, gratified at their instant cooperative response to his official authority.

"Yevgeniy, give the man your film right now."

"Chekov" rewound the roll and ejected it, handing it over.

"Please return to the hotel. We will come for you if we need you."

I bet you will. "Room four-sixteen," Clark told him. "This is a terrible thing. Did anyone survive?"

"I don't know. Please go now," the policeman said, waving them across the road.

"God have mercy on them," Chavez said in English, meaning it.

Two hours later a KH-11 overflew the area, its infrared cameras scanning the entire Tokyo area, among others. The photorecon experts at the National Reconnaissance Office took immediate note of the two smoldering fires and the aircraft parts that littered the area around them. Two E-767s had bitten the dust, they saw with no small degree of satisfaction. They were mainly Air Force personnel and, distant from the human carnage of the scene, all they saw was two dead targets. The imagery was real-timed to several destinations. In the J-3 area of the Pentagon, it was decided that Operation ZORRO'S first act had gone about as they had planned. They would have said as *hoped*, but that might have spoiled the luck. Well, they thought, CIA wasn't quite entirely useless.

It was dark at Pearl Harbor. Flooding the dry dock had required ten hours, which had rushed the time up to and a little beyond what was really safe, but war had different rules on safety. With the gate out of the way, and with the help of two large harbor tugs, *John Stennis* drove out of the dock and, turning, left *Enterprise* behind. The harbor pilot nervously got the ship out in record time, then to be ferried back to shore by helicopter, and before midnight, *Johnnie Reb* was in deep water and away from normal shipping channels, heading west.

The accident-investigation team showed up almost at once from their headquarters in Tokyo. A mixed group consisting of military and civilian personnel, it was the latter element that owned the greater expertise because this was really a civil aircraft modified for military use. The “black box” (actually painted Day-Glo orange) flight recorder from Kami-Five was recovered within a few lucky minutes, though the one from Kami-Three proved harder to find. It was taken back to the Tokyo lab for analysis. The problem for the Japanese military was rather more difficult. Two of their precious ten E-767s were now gone, and another was in its service hangar for overhaul and upgrade of its radar systems. That left seven, and keeping three on constant duty would be impossible. It was simple arithmetic. Each aircraft had to be serviced, and the crews had to rest. Even with nine operational aircraft, keeping three up all the time, with three more down and the other three in standby, was murderously destructive to the men and equipment. There was also the question of aircraft safety. A member of the investigation team discovered the Airworthiness Directive on the 767 and determined that it applied to the model the Japanese had converted to AEW use. Immediately, the autolanding systems were deactivated, and the natural first conclusion from the civilian investigators was that the flight crews, perhaps weary from their long patrol flights, had engaged it for their approaches. The senior uniformed officer was tempted to accept it, except for one thing: few airmen liked automatic-landing systems, and military airmen were the least likely of all to turn their aircraft over to something which operated on microchips and software to safeguard their lives. And yet the body of -Three’s pilot had been found with his hand on the throttle controls. It made little sense, but the evidence pointed that way. A software conflict, perhaps, somewhere in system—a foolish and enraging reason for the loss of two priceless aircraft, even though it was not without precedent in the age of computer-controlled flight. For the moment, the reality of the situation was that they could only maintain a two-aircraft constant patrol, albeit with a third always ready to lift off at an instant’s notice.

Overflying ELINT satellites noted the continued patrol of three E-767s for the moment, and nervous technicians at Air Force Intelligence and the National Security Agency wondered if the Japanese Air Force would try to defy the rules of aircraft operation. They checked their clocks and realized that another six hours would tell the tale, while

satellite passes continued to record and plot the electronic emissions.

Jackson now concerned himself with other satellite information. There were forty-eight fighters believed based on Saipan, and another sixty-four at Guam's former Andersen Air Force Base, whose two wide runways and huge underground fuel-storage tanks had accommodated the arriving aircraft very comfortably indeed. The two islands were about one hundred twenty miles apart. He also had to consider the dispersal facilities that SAC had constructed in the islands during the Cold War. The closed Northwest Guam airfield had two parallel runways, both usable, and there was Agana International in the middle of the island. There was also a commercial airfield on Rota, another abandoned base on Tinian, and Kobler on Saipan in addition to the operating airport. Strangely, the Japanese had ignored all of the secondary facilities except for Kobler Field. In fact, satellite information showed that Tinian was not occupied at all—at least the overhead photos showed no heavy military vehicles. There had to be some light forces there, he reasoned, probably supported by helicopter from Saipan—the islands were separated by only a narrow channel.

One hundred twelve fighters was Admiral Jackson's main consideration. There would be support from E-2 AEW aircraft, plus the usual helicopters that armies took wherever they went. F-15s and F-3s, supported further by SAMs and triple-A. It was a big job for one carrier, even with Bud Sanchez's idea for making the carrier more formidable. The key to it, however, wasn't fighting the enemy's arms. It was to attack his mind, a constant fact of war that people alternately perceived and forgot over the centuries. He hoped he was getting it right. Even then, something else came first.

The police never came back, somewhat to Clark's surprise. Perhaps they'd found the photos useful, but more probably not. In any case, they didn't hang around to find out. Back in their rental car, they took a last look at the charred spot beyond the end of the runway just as the first of three AEW aircraft landed at the base, quite normally to everyone's relief. An hour earlier, he'd noted, two rather than the regular three E-767s had taken off, indicating, he hoped, that their grisly mission had borne fruit of a sort. That fact had already been confirmed by satellite, giving the green light for yet another mission about which neither CIA officer knew anything.

The hard part still was believing it all. The English-language paper they'd bought in the hotel lobby at breakfast had news on its front

page not terribly different than they'd read on their first day in Japan. There were two stories from the Marianas and two items from Washington, but the rest of the front page was mainly economic news, along with an editorial about how the restoration of normal relations with America was to be desired, even at the price of reasonable concessions at the negotiations table. Perhaps the reality of the situation was just too bizarre for people to accept, though a large part of it was the close control of the news. There was still no word, for example, of the nuclear missiles squirreled away somewhere. Somebody was being either very clever or very foolish—or possibly both, depending on how things turned out. John and Ding both came back to the proposition that none of this made the least bit of sense, but that observation would be of little consolation for the families of the people killed on both sides. Even in the madly passionate war over the Falkland Islands, there had been inflammatory rhetoric to excite the masses, but in this case it was as though Clausewitz had been rewritten to say that war was an extension of economics rather than politics, and business, while cutthroat in its way, was still a more civilized form of activity than that engaged in on the political stage. But the truth of the madness was before him. The roads were crowded with people doing their daily routine, albeit with a few stares at the wreckage on the air base, and in the face of a world that seemed to be turning upside down, the ordinary citizen clung to what reality he knew, relegating the part he didn't understand to others, who in turn wondered why nobody else noticed.

Here he was, Clark told himself, a foreign spy, covered with an identity from yet a third country, doing things in contravention of the Geneva protocols of civilized war—*that* was an arcane concept in and of itself. He'd helped kill fifty people not twelve hours before, and yet he was driving a rental car back into the enemy capital, and his only immediate worry was to remember to drive on the left side of the road and avoid collision with all the commuters who thought anything more than a ten-foot space with the car ahead meant that you weren't keeping up with the flow.

All that changed three blocks from their hotel, when Ding spotted a car parked the wrong way with the passenger-side visor turned down. It was a sign that Kimura needed an urgent meet. The emergency nature of the signal came as something of a reassurance that it wasn't all some perverted dream. There was danger in their lives again. At least something was real.

Flight operations had commenced just after dawn. Four complete squadrons of F-14 Tomcats and four more of F/A-18 Hornets were

now aboard, along with four E-3C Hawkeyes. The normal support aircraft were for the moment based on Midway, and the one-carrier task force would for the moment use Pacific Islands as auxiliary support facilities for the cruise west. The first order of business was to practice midair refueling from Air Force tankers that would follow the fleet west as well. As soon as they had passed Midway, a standing combat air patrol of four aircraft was established, though without the usual Hawkeye support. The E-2C made a lot of electronic noise, and the main task of the depleted battle force was to remain stealthy, though in the case of *Johnnie Reb*, that entailed making something invisible that was the size of the side of an island.

Sanchez was down in air-operations. His task was to take what appeared to be a very even battle and make it one-sided. The idea of a fair fight was as foreign to him as to any other person in uniform. One only had to look around to see why. He *knew* the people in this working space. He did not know the airmen on the islands, and that was all he cared about. They might be human beings. They might have wives and kids and houses and cars and every other ordinary thing the men in Navy khaki had, but that didn't matter to the CAG. Sanchez would not order or condone such movie fantasies as wasting ammunition on men in parachutes—people in that condition were too hard to target in any case—but he had to kill their airplanes, and in an age of missiles that most often meant that the driver would probably not get the opportunity to eject. Fortunately, it was hard enough in the modern age to see your target as anything more than a dot that had to be circled by the head-up display of the fire-control system. It made things a lot easier, and if a parachute emerged from the wreckage, well, he didn't mind making a SAR call for a fellow aviator, once the man was incapable of harming one of his own.

* * *

"Koga has disappeared," Kimura told them, his voice urgent and his face pale.

"Arrested?" Clark asked.

"I don't know. Do we have anyone inside your organization?"

John turned very grim. "Do you know what we do to traitors?" Everyone knew. "My country depends on this man, too. We will get to work on it. Now, go."

Chavez watched him walk away before speaking. "A leak?"

"Possibly. Also possible that the guys running the show don't want any extraneous opposition leaders screwing things up for the moment." *Now I'm a political analyst,* John told himself. Well, he was

also a fully accredited reporter from the Interfax News Agency. “What do you say we visit our embassy, Yevgeniy?”

Scherenko was on his way out to a meet of his own when the two people showed up at his office door. Wasn’t this an unusual occurrence, he thought for a brief moment, two CIA officers entering the Russian Embassy for a business meeting with the RVS. Then he wondered what would make them do it.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, and John Clark handled the answer:

“Koga’s vanished.” Major Scherenko sat down, waving his visitors to seats in his office. They didn’t need to be told to close the door. “Is it something that might have happened all on its own,” Clark asked, “or did somebody leak it?”

“I don’t think PSID would have done it. Even on orders from Goto. It’s too political without real evidence. The political situation here is—how well do you know it?”

“Brief us in,” Clark said.

“The government is very confused. Goto has control, but he is not sharing information with many people. His coalition is still thin. Koga is very respected, too much so to be publicly arrested.” *I think*, Scherenko didn’t add. What might have been said with confidence two weeks earlier was a lot more speculative now.

It actually made sense to the Americans. Clark thought for a second before speaking. “You’d better shake the tree, Boris Il’ych. We both need that man.”

“Did you compromise him?” the Russian asked.

“No, not at all. We told him to act as he normally would—and besides, he thinks we’re Russians. I had no instructions other than to check him out, and trying to direct a guy like that is too risky. He’s just as liable to turn superpatriot on us and tell us to shove it. People like that, you just let them do the right thing all by themselves.” Scherenko reflected again that the file in Moscow Center on this man was correct. Clark had all the right instincts for field-intelligence work. He nodded and waited for Clark to go on. “If you have PSID under your control, we need to find out immediately if they have the man.”

“And if they do?”

Clark shrugged. “Then you have to decide if you can get him out. That part of the operation is yours. I can’t make that call for you. But if it’s somebody else who bagged him, then maybe we can do something.”

“I need to talk to Moscow.”

“We figured that. Just remember, Koga’s our best chance for a

political solution to this mess. Next, get the word to Washington."

"It will be done," Scherenko promised. "I need to ask a question—the two aircraft that crashed last night?"

Clark and Chavez were already on the way out the door. It was the younger man who spoke without turning. "A terrible accident, wasn't it?"

"You're insane," Mogataru Koga said.

"I am a patriot," Raizo Yamata replied. "I will make our country truly independent. I will make Japan great again." Their eyes met from opposite ends of the table in Yamata's penthouse apartment. The executive's security people were outside the door. These words were for two men alone.

"You have cast away our most important ally and trading partner. You are bringing economic ruin to us. You've killed people. You've suborned our country's government and our military."

Yamata nodded as though acknowledging a property acquisition. "*Hai*, I have done all these things, and it was not difficult. Tell me, Koga, how hard is it to get a politician to do anything?"

"And your friends, Matsuda and the rest?"

"Everyone needs guidance from time to time." *Almost everyone,* Yamata didn't say. "At the end of this, we will have a fully integrated economy, two firm and powerful allies, and in time we will again have our trade because the rest of the world needs us." Didn't this politician see that? Didn't he understand?

"Do you understand America as poorly as that? Our current difficulties began because a single family was burned alive. They are not the same as us. They think differently. Their religion is different. They have the most violent culture in the world, yet they worship justice. They venerate making money, but their roots are found in ideals. Can't you grasp that? *They will not tolerate* what you have done!" Koga paused. "And your plan for Russia—do you really think that—"

"With China helping us?" Yamata smiled. "The two of us can handle Russia."

"And China will remain our ally?" Koga asked. "We killed twenty million Chinese in the Second World War, and their political leadership has not forgotten."

"They need us, and they know they need us. And together—"

"Yamata-san," Koga said quietly, politely, because it was his nature, "you do not understand politics as well as you understand business. It will be your downfall."

Yamata replied in kind. "And treason will be yours. I know you

have contacts with the Americans."

"Not so. I have not spoken with an American citizen in weeks." An indignant reply would not have carried the power of the matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, in any case, you will be my guest here for the time being," Raizo told him. "We will see how ignorant of political matters I am. In two years I will be Prime Minister, Koga-san. In two years we will be a superpower." Yamata stood. His apartment covered the entire top floor of the forty-story building, and the Olympian view pleased him. The industrialist stood and walked toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, surveying the city which would soon be *his* capital. What a pity that Koga didn't understand how things really worked. But for the moment he had to fly back to Saipan, to begin his political ascendancy. He turned back.

"You will see. You are my guest for the moment. Behave yourself and you will be treated well. Attempt to escape, and your body will be found in pieces on some railroad tracks along with a note apologizing for your political failures."

"You will not have that satisfaction," the former Prime Minister replied coldly.

40

Foxes and Hounds

Scherenko had planned to do the meet himself, but urgent business had prevented him from doing so. It turned out to be just as well. The message, delivered via computer disk, was from his top agent-in-place, the Deputy Director of the PSID. Whatever the man's personal habits, he was a canny political observer, if somewhat verbose in his reports and evaluations. The Japanese military, he said, was not the least displeased by their immediate prospects. Frustrated by years of having been labeled as a "self-defense force" and relegated in the public's mind to getting in the way of Godzilla and other unlikely monsters (usually to their misfortune), they deemed themselves custodians of a proud warrior tradition, and now, finally, with political leadership worthy of their mettle, their command leadership relished the chance to show what they could do. Mainly products of American training and professional education, the senior officers had made their estimate of the situation and announced to everyone who would listen that they could and would win this limited contest—and, the PSID director went on, they thought the chances of conquering Siberia were excellent.

This evaluation and the report from the two CIA officers were relayed to Moscow at once. So there was dissension in the Japanese government, and at least one of its professional departments had a slight grasp on reality. It was gratifying to the Russian, but he also remembered how a German intelligence chief named Canaris had done much the same thing in 1939, and had completely failed to accomplish anything. It was an historical model that he intended to break. The trick with wars was to prevent them from growing large. Scherenko didn't hold with the theory that diplomacy could keep them from starting, but he did believe that good intelligence and decisive action could keep them from going too far—if you had the political will to take the proper action. It worried him, however, that it was Americans who had to show that will.

“It’s called Operation ZORRO, Mr. President,” Robby Jackson said, flipping the cover off the first chart. The Secretaries of State and Defense were there in the Situation Room, along with Ryan and Arnie van Damm. The two cabinet secretaries were ill at ease right now, but then so was the Deputy J-3. Ryan nodded for him to go on.

“The mission is to dislocate the command leadership of the other side by precisely targeting those individuals who—”

“You mean murder them?” Brett Hanson asked. He looked over at SecDef, who didn’t react at all.

“Mr. Secretary, we don’t want to engage their civilian population. That means we cannot attack their economy. We can’t drop bridges in their cities. Their military is too decentralized in location to—”

“We can’t do this,” Hanson interrupted again.

“Mr. Secretary,” Ryan said coolly, “can we at least hear what the plan is before we decide what we should and should not do?”

Hanson nodded gruffly, and Jackson continued his brief. “The pieces,” he concluded, “are largely in place now. We’ve eliminated two of their air-surveillance assets—”

“When did that happen? How did we do it?”

“It happened last night,” Ryan answered. “How we did it is not your concern, sir.”

“Who ordered it?” This question came from President Durling.

“I did, sir. It was well covered, and the operation went off without a hitch.” Durling replied with his eyes that Ryan was pushing his limits again.

“How many people did that kill?” the Secretary of State demanded.

“About fifty, and that’s two hundred or so less than the number of our people whom they killed, Mr. Secretary.”

“Look, we can talk them out of the islands if we just take the time,” SecState said, and now the argument was bilateral, with all the others watching.

“That’s not what Adler says.”

“Chris Cook thinks so, and he’s got a guy inside their delegation.”

Durling watched impassively, again letting his staff people—that’s how he thought of them—handle the debate. For him there were other questions. Politics would again raise its ugly head. If he failed to respond to the crisis effectively, then he was *out*. Someone else would be President then, and that someone else would be faced in the following year at the latest with a wider crisis. Even worse, if the Russian intelligence estimate were correct and if Japan and China made their move on Siberia in the coming autumn, then another, larger crisis would strike during an American election cycle, seriously impeding his country’s ability to deal with it, making everything a political debate, with an economy still trying to recover from a

hundred-billion-dollar trade shortfall.

"If we fail to act now, Mr. Secretary, there's no telling how far this thing might go," Ryan was saying now.

"We can work this out diplomatically," Hanson insisted.

"And if not?" Durling asked.

"Then in due course we can consider a measured military response." SecState's confidence was not reflected in SecDef's expression.

"You have something to add?" the President asked him.

"It will be some time—years—before we can assemble the forces necessary to—"

"We don't *have* years," Ryan snapped.

"No, I don't think that we do," Durling observed. "Admiral, will it work?"

"I think it can, sir. We need a few breaks to come our way, but we got the biggest one last night."

"We don't have the necessary forces to assure success," SecDef said. "The Task Force commander just sent in his estimate and—"

"I've seen it," Jackson said, not quite able to conceal his uneasiness at the truth of the report. "But I know the CAG, Captain Bud Sanchez. Known him for years, and he says he can do it, and I believe him. Mr. President, don't be overly affected by the numbers. It isn't about numbers. It's about fighting a war, and we have more experience in that than they do. It's about psychology, and playing to our strengths rather than theirs. War isn't what it used to be. Used to be you needed huge forces to destroy the enemy's capacity to fight and his ability to coordinate and command his forces. Okay, fifty years ago you needed a lot to do that, but the targets you want to hit are actually very small, and if you can hit those small targets, you accomplish the same thing now as you used to need a million men to do before."

"It's cold-blooded murder," Hanson snarled. "That's what it is."

Jackson turned from his place at the lectern. "Yes, sir, that's exactly what war is, but this way we're not killing some poor nineteen-year-old son of a bitch who joined up because he liked the uniform. We're going to kill the bastard who sent him out to die and doesn't even know his name. With all due respect, sir, I have killed people, and I know exactly what it feels like. Just once, just one time, I'd like a crack at the people who give the orders instead of the poor dumb bastards who're stuck with carrying them out."

Durling almost smiled at that, remembering all the fantasies, and even a TV commercial once, about how different it might be if the president and prime ministers and other senior officials who ordered men off to the field of battle instead met and slugged it out personally.

"You're still going to have to kill a lot of kids," the President said. Admiral Jackson drew back from his angry demeanor before

answering.

"I know that, sir, but with luck, a lot less."

"When do you have to know?"

"The pieces are largely in place now. We can initiate the operation in less than five hours. After that, we're daylight limited. Twenty-four-hour intervals after that."

"Thank you, Admiral Jackson. Could you all excuse me for a few minutes?" The men filed out until Durling had another thought. "Jack? Could you stay a minute?" Ryan turned and sat back down.

"It had to be done, sir. One way or another, if we're going to take those nukes out—"

"I know." The President looked down at his desk. All the briefing papers and maps and charts were spread out. All the order-of-battle documents. At least he'd been spared the casualty estimates, probably at Ryan's direction. After a second they heard the door close.

Ryan spoke first. "Sir, there's one other thing. Former Prime Minister Koga has been arrested—excuse me, we only know that he's kinda disappeared."

"What does that mean? Why didn't you bring that up before?"

"The arrest happened less than twenty-four hours after I told Scott Adler that Koga had been contacted. I didn't even tell him whom he'd been in contact with. Now, that could be a coincidence. Goto and his master just might not want him making political noise while they carry out their operation. It could also mean that there's a leak somewhere."

"Who on our side knows?"

"Ed and Mary Pat at CIA. Me. You. Scott Adler and whomever Scott told."

"But we don't know for sure that there's a leak."

"No, sir, we don't. But it is extremely likely."

"Set it aside for now. What if we don't do anything?"

"Sir, we have to. If we don't, then sometime in the future you can expect a war between Russia on one hand and Japan and China on the other, with us doing God knows what. CIA is still trying to do its estimate, but I don't see how the war can fail to go nuclear. ZORRO may not be the prettiest thing we've ever tried to do, but it's the best chance we have. The diplomatic issues are not important," Ryan went on. "We're playing for much higher stakes now. But if we can kill off the guys who initiated this mess, then we can cause Goto's government to fall. And then we can get things back under some sort of control."

The odd part, Durling realized, was the trade-off concerning which side was pitching which sort of moderation. Hanson and SecDef took the classical diplomatic line—they wanted to take the time to be sure

there was no other option to resolve the crisis through peaceful means, but if diplomacy failed, then the door was opened for a much wider and bloodier conflict. Ryan and Jackson wanted to apply violence at once in the hope of avoiding a wider war later. The hell of it was, either side could be right or wrong, and the only way to know for sure was to read the history books twenty years from now.

"If the plan doesn't work . . ."

"Then we've killed some of our people for nothing," Jack said honestly. "You will pay a fairly high price yourself, sir."

"What about the fleet commander—I mean the guy commanding the carrier group. What about him?"

"If he chokes, the whole thing comes apart."

"Replace him," the President said. "The mission is approved." There was one other item to be discussed. Ryan walked the President through that one, too, before leaving the room and making his phone calls.

The perfect Air Force mission, people in blue uniforms liked to say, was run by a mere captain. This one was commanded locally by a special-operations colonel, but at least he was a man who'd been recently passed over for general's rank, a fact that endeared him to his subordinates, who knew why he'd failed to screen for flag rank. People in spec-ops just didn't fit in with the button-down ideal of senior leadership. They were too . . . eccentric for that.

The final mission brief evolved from data sent by real-time link from Fort Meade, Maryland, to Verino, and the Americans still cringed at the knowledge that Russians were learning all sorts of things about America's ability to gather and analyze electronic data via satellite and other means—after all, the capability had been developed for use against *them.* The exact positions of two operating E-767s were precisely plotted. Visual satellite data had counted fighter aircraft—at least those not in protective shelters——and the orbiting KH-12's last pass had counted airborne aircraft and their positions. The colonel commanding the detachment went over the penetration course that he had personally worked out with the flight crew, and while there were worries, the two young captains who would fly the C-17A transport chewed their gum and nodded final approval. One of them even joked about how it was time a "trash-hauler" got a little respect.

The Russians had their part to play, too. From Vuzhno-Sakalinsk South on the Kamchatka Peninsula, eight MiG-31 interceptors lifted off for

an air-defense exercise, accompanied by an IL-86 Mainstay airborne-early-warning aircraft. Four Sukhoi fighters took off ten minutes later from Sokol to act as aggressors. The Sukhois with long-range fuel tanks headed southeast, remaining well outside Japanese airspace. The controllers in both Japanese E-767s recognized it for what it was: a fairly typical and stylized Russian training exercise. Nevertheless, it *did* involve warplanes, and merited their close attention, all the more so that it was astride the most logical approach route for American aircraft like the B-1s that had so recently "tickled" their air defenses. It had the effect of drawing the E-767s both north and east somewhat, and with them their fighter escorts. The reserve AWACS aircraft was almost ordered aloft, but the groundbased air-defense commander decided sensibly merely to increase his alert state a bit.

The C-17A Globemaster-III was the newest and most expensive air-transport aircraft ever to force its way through the Pentagon's procurement system. Anyone familiar with that procedural nightmare would have preferred flak, because at least bombing missions were designed to succeed, whereas the procurement system seemed most often designed to fail. That it didn't was a tribute of sorts to the ingenuity of the people dedicated to confounding it. No expense had been spared, and a few new ones located for use, but what had resulted was a "trash-hauler" (the term most often used by fighter pilots) with pretensions of the wild life.

This one took off just after local midnight, heading south-southwest as though it were a civil flight to Vladivostok. Just short of that city it took fuel from a KC-135 tanker—the Russian midair refueling system was not compatible with American arrangements—and departed the Asian mainland, now heading due south exactly on the 132nd Meridian.

The Globemaster was the first-ever cargo aircraft designed with special-operations in mind. The normal flight crew of only two was supplemented with two "observer" positions for which modular instrument packages were provided. In this case, both were electronics-warfare officers now keeping tabs on the numerous air-defense radar sites that littered the Russian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese coasts, and directing the flight crew to thread their way through as many null areas as was possible. That soon required a rapid descent and a turn east.

"Don't you just love this?" First Sergeant Vega asked his commander. The Rangers were sitting on fold-down seats in the cargo area, dressed in combat gear that had made them waddle like ducks aboard the aircraft an hour earlier under the watchful eyes of the

loadmaster. It was widely believed within the Army's airborne community that the Air Force awarded points to its flight crews for making their passengers barf, but in this case there would be no complaints. The most dangerous part of the mission was right now, despite their parachutes, something the Air Force crewmen, significantly, didn't bother with. They would be of little use in any case should a stray fighter happen upon their transport at almost any time up to the programmed jump.

Captain Checa just nodded, mainly wishing he were on the ground, where an infantryman belonged, instead of sitting as helpless as an unborn child in the womb of a woman addicted to disco dancing.

Forward, the EWO displays were coloring up. The rectangular TV-type tube displayed a computer memory of every known radar installation on Japan's western coast. It hadn't been hard to input the information, as most of them had been established a generation or two earlier by Americans, back when Japan had been a massive island base for use against the Soviet Union and liable to Russian attack for that reason. The radars had been upgraded along the way, but any picket line had its imperfections, and these had been mostly known to the Americans beforehand, and then reevaluated by ELINT satellites in the last week. The aircraft was heading southeast now, leveling out two hundred feet over the water and tooling along at its maximum low-level speed of three hundred fifty knots. It made for a very bumpy ride, which the flight crew didn't notice, though everyone else did. The pilot wore low-light goggles, and swept his head around the sky while the copilot concentrated on the instruments. The latter crewman was also provided with a head-up display just like that on a fighter. It displayed compass heading, altitude, airspeed, and also gave him a thin green line to indicate the horizon, which he could sometimes see depending on the state of the moon and clouds.

"I have strobes very high at ten o'clock," the pilot reported. Those would be airliners on a standard commercial routing. "Nothing else."

The copilot gave her screen another look. The radar plot was exactly as programmed, with their flight path following a very narrow corridor of black amid radial spikes of red and yellow, which indicated areas covered by defense and air-control radars. The lower they flew, the wider was the black-safe zone, but they were already as low as they could safely fly.

"Fifty miles off the coast."

"Roger," the pilot acknowledged. "How're you doing?" he asked a second later. Low-level penetrations were stressful on everyone, even with a computer-controlled autopilot handling the stick work.

"No prob," she replied. It wasn't exactly true, but it was the thing she was supposed to say. The most dangerous part was right here,

passing the elevated radar site at Aikawa. The weakest part of Japan's low-level defense perimeter, it was a gap between a peninsula and an island. Radars on both beams almost covered the seventy-mile gap, but they were old ones, dating back to the 1970s, and had not been upgraded with the demise of the Communist regime in North Korea. "Easing down," she said next, adjusting the altitude control on the autopilot to seventy feet. Theoretically they could fly safely at fifty over a flat surface, but their aircraft was riding heavy, and now her hand was on the sidestick control, itself another illusion that this was actually a fighter plane. If she saw so much as a fishing boat, she'd have to yank the aircraft to higher altitude for fear of a collision with somebody's masthead.

"Coast in five," one of the electronic-warfare officers announced. "Recommend come right to one-six-five."

"Coming right." The aircraft banked slightly.

There were only a few windows in the cargo area. First Sergeant Vega had one and looked out to see the wingtip of the aircraft dip toward a barely perceived black surface dotted with the occasional whitecap. The sight made him turn back in. He couldn't help things anyway, and if they hit and cartwheeled in, he'd have no time at all to comprehend it. Or so he'd been told once.

"I got the coast," the pilot said, catching the glow of lights first through his goggles. It was time to switch them off and help fly the aircraft. "My airplane."

"Pilot's airplane," the copilot acknowledged, flexing her hand and allowing herself a deep breath.

They crossed the coast between Omi and Ichifuri. As soon as land was visible, the pilot started climbing the aircraft. The automated terrain-avoidance system had three settings. He selected the one labeled *Hard*, which was rough on the airplane and rougher on the passengers, but ultimately safer for all concerned. "What about their AWACS?" he asked the EWOs.

"I've got emissions on one, nine o'clock, very weak. If you keep us in the weeds, we'll be okay."

"Get out the barf bags, guys." To the loadmaster: "Ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," the Air Force sergeant announced in the back. Just then the aircraft lurched up and to the right, dodging around the first coastal mountain. Then it dropped down rapidly again, like a particularly unpleasant amusement-park ride, and Julio Vega remembered once swearing that he'd never subject himself to anything like this again. It was a promise that had been broken many times, but this time, again, there were people on the ground with guns. And they weren't Colombian druggies this time, but a trained professional army.

"Jesus, I hope they give us two minutes of easy ride to walk to the door," he said between gulps.

"Don't count on it," Captain Checa said, just before he used his barf bag. It started a series of such events among the other Rangers.

The trick was to keep mountaintops between them and the radar transmitters. That meant flying in valleys. The Globemaster was slower now, barely two hundred thirty knots of indicated airspeed, and even with flaps and slats extended, and even with a computer-aided flight-control system, it made for a ride that wallowed on one hand and jerked on the other, something that changed from one second to the next. The head-up display now showed the mountainous corridor they were flying, with red warning messages appearing before the eyes of the pilots that the autopilot handled quite well, thank you, but not without leading the two drivers in their front seats to genuine fear. Aviators never really trusted the things, and now two hands were on their stick controllers, almost flinching and taking control away from the computer, but not quite, in what was almost a highly sophisticated game of chicken, with the computer trying in its way to outgut the trained aviators who had to trust the microchips to do things their own reflexes were unable to match. They watched green jagged lines that represented real mountains, ranks of them, fuzzy on the edges from the trees that grew to the tops of most, and for the most part the lines were well above the flight level of their aircraft until the last second, when the nose would jerk upwards and their stomachs would struggle to catch up, and then the aircraft would dive again.

"There's the IP. Five minutes," the pilot called aft.

"*Stand up!*" the loadmaster yelled at his passengers. The aircraft was going down again, and one of the Rangers almost came off the floor of the aircraft when he stood. They moved aft toward the portside passenger door, which was now opened. As they hooked up their static lines, the rear cargo hatch dropped down, and two Air Force enlisted men removed the safety hooks from the palletized cargo that occupied the middle of the sixty-five-foot cargo bay. The Globemaster leveled out one last time, and out the door, Checa and Vega could see the shadowy valley below their aircraft, and a towering mountain to the left of them.

"Five hundred feet," the pilot said over intercom. "Let's get it done."

"Winds look good," the copilot announced, checking the computer that controlled drops. "One minute."

The green light by the passenger door turned on. The loadmaster had a safety belt attached to his waist, standing by the door, blocking the way of the Rangers. He gave them a sideways look.

"You guys be careful down there, y'hear?"

"Sorry about the mess," Captain Checa said. The loadmaster grinned.

"I've cleaned up worse." Besides, he had a private to do that. He gave the area a final check. The Rangers were safely in their places, and nobody was in the way of the cargo's roller-path. The first drop would be done from the front office. "All clear aft," he said over his intercom circuit. The loadmaster stepped away from the door, allowing Checa to take his place, one hand on either side, and his left foot just over the edge.

"Ten seconds," the copilot said forward.

"Roger, ten seconds." The pilot reached for the release switch, flipping off the safety cover and resting his thumb on the toggle.

"Five."

"Five."

"Three—two—one—*now!*"

"Cargo away." The pilot had already flipped it at the proper moment.

Aft, the Rangers saw the pallets slide out through the cavernous door. The aircraft took a major dip at the tail, then snapped back level. A second after that, the green light at the door started blinking.

"Go go go!" the loadmaster screamed over the noise.

Captain Diego Checa, U.S. Army Rangers, became the first American to invade the Japanese mainland when he took his step out the door and fell into the darkness. A second later the static line yanked his chute open, and the black nylon umbrella came to full blossom a bare three hundred feet from the ground. The stiff and often hurtful opening shock came as a considerable relief. Jumping at five hundred feet made the use of a backup chute a useless extravagance. He first looked up and to his right to see that the others were all out, their chutes opening as his had just done. The next order of business was to look down and around. There was the clearing, and he was sure he'd hit it, though he pulled on one riser to spill air from his parachute in the hope of hitting the middle of it and increasing the safety margin that was as much theoretical as real for a night drop. Last of all he released his pack, which fell fifteen feet to the end of a safety line. Its sixty pounds of gear would hit the ground first, lessening his landing shock so long as he didn't land right on the damned thing and break something in the process. Aside from that he barely had time to think before the barely visible valley raced up to greet him. Feet together, knees bent, back straight, roll when you hit, the sudden lung-emptying shock of striking the ground, and then he was on his face, trying to decide if all his bones were intact or not. Seconds later he heard the muted thuds and *oofs* of the rest of the detail as they also made it to earth. Checa allowed himself a full three seconds to decide that he

was more or less in one piece before standing, unclipping his back, and racing to collapse his chute. That task done, he came back, donned his low-light goggles, and assembled his people.

"Everybody okay?"

"Good drop, sir." Vega showed up first with two others in tow. The rest were heading in, all carrying their black chutes.

"Let's get to work, Rangers."

The Globemaster continued almost due south, going "feet-wet" just west of Nomazu, and again hugging the water, kept a mountainous peninsula between itself and the distant E-767s for as long as possible, then turned southwest to distance itself further still from them until, two hundred miles off the coast of Japan, it was safe to climb back to a safe cruising altitude into commercial airline routing G223. The only remaining question was whether the KC-10 tanker that was supposed to meet them would show up and allow them to complete their flight to Kwajalein. Only then could they break radio silence.

The Rangers were able to do it first. The communications sergeant broke out a satellite transmitter, oriented it toward the proper azimuth, and transmitted a five-letter group, waiting for an acknowledgment.

"They're down okay," an Army major told Jackson at his desk in the National Military Command Center.

The real trick is going to be getting them out, the Admiral thought. *But one thing at a time.* He lifted his phone to call the White House.

"Jack, the Rangers are in."

"Good one, Rob. I need you over here," Ryan told him.

"What for? It's busy here and—"

"Now, Robby." The line clicked off.

The next order of business was to get the cargo moved. It had landed within two hundred meters of the nominal location, and the plan had allowed for quite a bit more than that. One by one, pairs of Rangers struggled with empty fuel bladders, carrying them uphill to the treeline that bordered what seemed to be a highlands meadow. With that done, a hose was strung, and twenty thousand pounds of JP-5 pumped from one large rubber bladder into six other, smaller ones arranged in pairs at preselected spots. That operation took an hour,

while four of their number patrolled the immediate area for signs of human presence, but finding nothing but the tracks of a four-wheel cycle, which they'd been told to expect. When the pumping operation was finished, the original fuel bladder was folded and dumped into a hole, then carefully covered up with sod. Next, the solid cargo had to be manhandled into place and covered with camouflage netting. That required another two hours, straining the Rangers to the limit of their conditioning with the combination of heavy work and building stress. Soon the sun would be up, and the area could not look as though there were people here. First Sergeant Vega supervised the cover-up operation. When all was done, the Rangers still outside the treeline walked in single file toward it, with the last man in line working on the grass to reduce the signs of their passage. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. By dawn, at the end of what had been for them a twenty-hour day as unpleasant as anyone could have contrived to make, they were in place, unwelcome guests on the soil of a foreign land, mainly shivering in the cold, unable to light a fire for warmth, eating cold MRE rations.

"Jack, I got work to do over there, damn it," Robby said on his way through the door.

"Not anymore. The President and I talked it over last night."

"What do you mean?"

"Get packed. You're taking over the *Stennis* battle group." Ryan wanted to grin at his friend, but couldn't quite bring himself to that. Not when he was sending his friend into danger. The news stopped Jackson in his tracks.

"You sure?"

"It's decided. The President has signed off on it. CINCPAC knows. Admiral Seaton—"

Robby nodded. "Yeah, I've worked for him before."

"You have two hours. There's a Gulfstream waiting for you at Andrews. We need somebody," the National Security Advisor explained, "who knows the political limits on the mission. Take it right to the edge, Rob, but no further. We have to smart our way through this."

"I understand."

Ryan stood and walked to his friend. "I'm not sure I like doing this . . ."

"It's my job, Jack."

Tennessee arrived at her station off the Japanese coast and finally slowed to her normal patrol speed of five knots. Commander Claggett took a required moment to get a position fix on a rocky outcropping known to sailors as Lot's Wife, then dived his boat below the layer to a depth of six hundred feet. The sonar showed nothing at the moment, odd for the normally busy shipping lanes, but after four and a half days of dangerously high-speed running, it came as a considerable relief to everyone aboard. The Army personnel had adapted well enough and joined sailors for their jogs in the missile room. For the moment, the mission orders were little different from those the boomer had been designed to do: remain undetected, with the additional assignment of gathering whatever information on enemy movements that came her way. It wasn't exactly exciting, but only Claggett knew at the moment how important it was.

The satellite link told Sandy Richter and his colleagues that the mission was a probable "go." It meant more simulator time for all of them while ground crews prepped their Comanches for business. Unfortunately, that meant affixing decidedly unstealthy wing fittings to the side of each aircraft, along with long-range ferry tanks, but he'd known that from the beginning, and nobody had bothered asking how much he liked the idea. There were three scenarios on the sim now, and one by one the flight crews went through them, their bodies gyrating, quite unaware of what they were doing in the real world while their minds and bodies played in the virtual one.

"How the hell do we do that?" Chavez demanded.

Russians would not have questioned the orders in quite that way, Scherenko thought. "I only relay orders from your own agency," he told them. "I also know that Koga's disappearance was not caused by any official agency."

"Yamata, you suppose?" Clark asked. That piece of information narrowed the possibilities somewhat. It also made the impossible merely dangerous.

"A good guess. You know where he lives, yes?"

"We've seen it from a distance," Chavez confirmed.

"Ah, yes—your photos." The Major would have loved to know what those had been about, but it would have been foolish to ask the question, and it was not certain that these two Americans knew the answer in any case. "If you have other assets in-country, I suggest you make use of them. We are making use of ours as well. Koga is

probably the political solution to this crisis."

"If there is one," Ding noted.

"Good to fly with you again, Captain Sato," Yamata said pleasantly. The invitation to the flight deck pleased him. The pilot, he saw, was a patriot, a man of both pride and skill who really understood what was happening. What a pity he'd chosen such a lowly path for his life.

Sato took off his headset and relaxed in his command seat. "This is a pleasant change from the Canadian flights."

"How does that go?"

"I've spoken with a few executives on the way home. They say the Americans are more confused than anything else."

"Yes." Yamata smiled. "They confuse easily."

"Can we hope for a diplomatic settlement to this business, Yamata-san?"

"I think so. They lack the ability to attack us effectively."

"My father commanded a destroyer in the war. My brother—"

"Yes, I know him well, Captain." That remark, he saw, lit up the pilot's eyes with pride.

"And my son is a fighter pilot. He flies the Eagle."

"Well, they have done well so far. They recently killed two American bombers, you know. The Americans tested our air defenses," the industrialist said. "It was they who failed."

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CTF-77

"You're back!" the rental agent said with some pleasure.

Nomuri smiled and nodded. "Yes. I had a particularly good day at the office yesterday. I do not need to tell you how stressful such a 'good' day can be, do I?"

The man grunted agreement. "In the summer my best days are those when I get no sleep. Please excuse how I appear," he added. He'd been working on some of his machines all morning, which for him had begun just after five. The same was true of Nomuri, but for a different reason.

"I understand. I own my own business, too, and who works harder than a man who works for himself, eh?"

"Do you suppose the zaibatsu understand that?"

"Not the ones I've met. Even so, you are fortunate to live in so peaceful an area."

"Not always peaceful. The Air Force must have been playing games last night. A jet flew close by and very low. It woke me up, and I never really got back to sleep afterward." He wiped his hands and poured two cups of tea, offering one to his guest.

"*Dozo,*" Nomuri said graciously. "They are playing very dangerous games now," he went on, wondering what response he'd get.

"It's madness, but who cares what I think? Not the government, surely. All they listen to are the 'great' ones." The equipment owner sipped at his tea and looked around his shop.

"Yes, I am concerned, too. I hope Goto can find a way out of this before things spin completely out of control." Nomuri looked outside. The weather was turning gray and threatening. He heard a decidedly angry grunt.

"Goto? Just one more like all the rest. Others lead him by the nose —or some other part if the rumors about him are correct."

Nomuri chuckled. "Yes, I have heard the stories, too. Still, a man of some vigor, eh?" He paused. "So can I rent another of your cycles today?"

"Take number six." The man pointed. "I just finished servicing it. Pay attention to the weather," he warned. "Snow tonight."

Nomuri held up his backpack. “I want to take some pictures of cloudy mountains for my collection. The peace here is wonderful, and fine for thinking.”

“Only in the winter,” the dealer said, returning to his work.

Nomuri knew the way now, and followed the Taki uphill over a trail crusty from cold and frost. He would have felt a little better about it if the damned four-wheeled cycle had a better muffler. At least the heavy air would help attenuate the sound, or so he hoped, as he headed up the same path he’d taken a few days earlier. In due course he was looking down at the high meadow, seeing nothing out of the ordinary and wondering if—wondering a lot of things. What if the soldiers had run into an ambush? *In that case*, Nomuri told himself, *I’m toast.* But there was no turning back. He settled back into the seat and steered his way down the hillside, stopping as he was supposed to in the middle of the clearing and taking the hood down off his red parka. On closer examination, he saw that some sod had been disturbed, and he saw what might have been a trail of sorts into the woodline. That was when a single figure appeared, waving him up. The CIA officer restarted the cycle and headed that way.

The two soldiers who confronted him didn’t point weapons. They didn’t have to. Their faces were painted and their camouflage uniforms told him everything he needed to know.

“I’m Nomuri,” he said. “The password is Foxtrot.”

“Captain Checa,” the officer replied, extending his hand. “We’ve worked with the Agency before. Are you the guy who picked this spot?”

“No, but I checked it out a couple days ago.”

“Nice place to build a cabin,” Checa thought. “We even saw a few deer, little ones. I hope it isn’t hunting season.” The remark caught Nomuri short. He hadn’t considered that possibility, and didn’t know anything about hunting in Japan. “So what do you have for me?”

“These.” Nomuri took off his backpack and pulled out the cellular phones.

“Are you kiddin’ me?”

“The Japanese military has good stuff for monitoring military communications. Hell, they invented a lot of the technology our people use. But these”—Nomuri grinned—“everybody has ’em, and they’re digitally encrypted, and they cover the whole country. Even here. There’s a repeater tower down on that mountain. Anyway, it’s safer than using your regular comms. The bill’s paid to the end of the month,” he added.

“Be nice to call home and tell my wife that everything’s going fine,” Checa thought aloud.

“I’d be careful about that. Here are the numbers you can call.”

Nomuri handed over a sheet. “That’s one’s mine. That one’s a guy named Clark. That one’s another officer named Chavez—”

“Ding’s over here?” First Sergeant Vega asked.

“You know ’em?”

“We did a job in Africa last fall,” Checa replied. “We get a lot of ‘special’ work. You sure you can tell us their names, man?”

“They have covers. You’re probably better off speaking in Spanish. Not as many people here speak that language. I don’t need to tell you to keep your transmissions short,” Nomuri added. He didn’t. Checa nodded and asked the most important question.

“And getting out?”

Nomuri turned to point, but the terrain feature in question was covered in clouds. “There’s a pass there. Head for it, then downhill to a town called Hirose. I pick you up there, put you on a train to Nagoya, and you fly off to either Taiwan or Korea.”

“Just like that.” The comment wasn’t posed as a question, but the dubious nature of the response was clear anyway.

“There are a couple of hundred thousand foreign businesspeople here. You’re eleven guys from Spain trying to sell wine, remember?”

“I could use some sangria right now, too.” Checa was relieved to see that his CIA contact had been briefed in on the same mission. It didn’t always work out that way. “Now what?”

“You wait for the rest of the mission force to arrive. If something goes wrong, you call me and head out. If I drop out of the net, you call the others. If everything goes to hell, you find another way out. You should have passports, clothes, and—”

“We do.”

“Good.” Nomuri took his camera out of his backpack and started shooting photos of the cloud-shrouded mountains.

“This is CNN, live from Pearl Harbor,” the reporter ended, and a commercial cut in. The intelligence analyst rewound the tape to examine it again. It was both amazing and entirely ordinary that he’d be able to get such vital information so easily. The American media really ran the country, he’d learned over the years, and perhaps more was the pity. The way they’d played up the unfortunate incident in Tennessee had inflamed the entire country into precipitous action, then driven his country into the same, and the only good news was what he saw on the TV screen: two fleet carriers still in their dry docks, with two more still in the Indian Ocean, according to the latest reports from that part of the world, and Pacific Fleet’s other two in Long Beach, also dry-docked and unable to enter service—and that, really, was that, so far as the Marianas were concerned. He had to

formalize his intelligence estimate with a few pages of analytical prose, but what it came down to was that America could sting his country, but her ability to project real power was now a thing of the past. The realization of that meant that there was little likelihood of a serious contest for the immediate future.

Jackson didn't mind being the only passenger in the VC-20B. A man could get used to this sort of treatment, and he had to admit that the Air Force's executive birds were better than the Navy's—in fact the Navy didn't have many, and those were mainly modified P-3 Orions whose turboprop engines provided barely more than half the speed of the twin-engine executive jet. With only a brief refueling stop at Travis Air Force Base, outside San Francisco, he'd made the hop to Hawaii in under nine hours, and it was something to feel good about until on final approach to Hickam he got a good look at the naval base and saw that *Enterprise* was still in the graving dock. The first nuclear-powered carrier and bearer of the U.S. Navy's proudest name would be out of this one. The aesthetic aspect of it was bad enough. More to the point, it would have been far better to have two decks to use instead of one.

"You have your task force, boy," Robby whispered to himself. And it was the one every naval aviator wanted. Task Force 77, titularly the main air arm of Pacific Fleet, and, one carrier or not, it was his, and about to sail in harm's way. Perhaps fifty years earlier there had been an excitement to it. Perhaps when PacFlt's main striking arm had sailed under Bill Halsey or Ray Spruance, the people in command had looked forward to it. The wartime movies said so, and so did the official logs, but how much of that had been mere posturing, Jackson wondered now, contemplating his own command. Did Halsey and Spruance lose sleep with the knowledge that they were sending young men to death, or was the world simply a different place then, where war was considered as natural an event as a polio epidemic—another scourge that was now a thing of the past. To be Commander Task Force 77 was a life's ambition, but he'd never really wanted to fight a war—oh, sure, he admitted to himself, as a new ensign, or even as far as lieutenant's rank, he'd relished the idea of air combat, knowing that as a U.S. naval aviator he was the best in the world, highly trained and exquisitely equipped, and wanting to prove it someday. But over time he'd seen too many friends die in accidents. He'd gotten a kill in the Persian Gulf War, and four more over the Med one clear and starry night, but those last four had been an accident. He'd killed men for no good reason at all, and though he never spoke of it to others, not even his wife, it gnawed at him that he had in effect been tricked into

killing other human beings. Not his fault, just some sort of enforced mistake. But that's what war was for the warriors most of the time, just a huge mistake, and now he had to play his part in another such mistake instead of using TF-77 the way it was supposed to be used, just *to be,* and, merely by being, to prevent wars from happening. The only consolation of the moment was that, again, the mistake, the accident, wasn't of his making.

If wishes were horses, he told himself as the aircraft taxied to a stop. The flight attendant opened the door and tossed Jackson's one bag out to another Air Force sergeant, who walked the Admiral to a helicopter for his next flight, this one to CINCPAC, Admiral Dave Seaton. It was time to don his professional personality. Misused or not, Robby Jackson was a warrior about to assume command of others. He'd examined his doubts and questions, and now it was time to put them away.

"We're going to owe them big-time for this," Durling noted, flipping off the TV with his remote.

The technology had been developed for advertising during baseball games, of all things. An adaptation of the blue-screen systems used in the production of movies, advanced computer systems allowed it to be used in real-time, and thus the background behind the batter at the plate could be made to appear to be an advertisement for a local bank or car dealer when in fact it was just the usual green used at ballparks. In this case, a reporter could make his or her live feed from Pearl Harbor—outside the naval base, of course—and the background was that of two carrier profiles, with birds flying past and the antlike shapes of yard workers moving in the distance, and it looked as real as anything else on the TV screen which, after all, was just a collection of multicolored dots.

"They're Americans," Jack said. And besides, he was the one who'd bullied them into it, again insulating the President from the politically dangerous task. "They're supposed to be on our side. We just had to remind them of that."

"Will it work?" That was the harder question.

"Not for long, but maybe for long enough. It's a good plan we have in place. We need a few breaks, but we've gotten two in the bag already. The important thing is, we're showing them what they expect to see. They expect both carriers to be there, and they expect the media to tell the whole world about it. Intelligence people are no different from anybody else, sir. They have preconceptions, and when they see them in real life, it just reinforces how brilliant they think they are."

"How many people do we have to kill?" the President wanted to know next.

"Enough. We don't know how big the number is, and we're going to try an' keep it as low as possible—but, sir, the mission is—"

"I know. I know about missions, remember?" Durling closed his eyes, remembering Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, half a lifetime before. The mission comes first. It was the only way a lieutenant could think, and now for the first time he realized that a president had to think the same way. It hardly seemed fair.

They didn't see much sun this far north at this time of year, and that suited Colonel Zacharias. The flight from Whiteman to Elmendorf had taken a mere five hours, all of it in darkness because the B-2A flew only in daylight to show itself to people, which was not something for which the aircraft had been conceived. It flew very well indeed, belated proof that Jack Northrop's idea dating back to the 1930s had been correct: an aircraft consisting exclusively of wing surfaces was the most efficient possible aerodynamic shape. It was just that the flight-control systems required for such an aircraft needed computerized flight controls for proper stability, something that had not been available until just before the engineer's death. At least he'd seen the model, if not the actual aircraft itself.

Almost everything about it was efficient. Its shape allowed easy storage—three could fit in a hangar designed for one conventional aircraft. It climbed rather like an elevator, and, able to cruise at high altitude, it drank its fuel in cups rather than gallons, or so the wing commander liked to say.

The shot-up B-1B was about ready to fly back to Elmendorf. It would do so on three engines, not a major problem as the aircraft would be carrying nothing more than fuel and its crew as a payload. There were other aircraft based at Shemya now. Two E-3B AWACS birds dispatched from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma maintained a partial airborne-alert patrol, though this island had power radars of its own, the largest of which was the powerful Cobra Dane missile-detection system built in the 1970s. There was the theoretical possibility that the Japanese could, using tankers, manage a strike against the island, duplicating in length an Israeli mission against the PLO headquarters in North Africa, and though the possibility was remote, it did have to be considered.

Defending against that were the Air Force's only four F-22A Rapier

fighters, the world's first true stealth fighter aircraft, taken from advanced testing at Nellis Air Force Base and dispatched with four senior pilots and their support crews to this base at the edge of the known universe. But the Rapier—known to the pilots by the name the manufacturer, Lockheed, had initially preferred, "Lightning-II"—hadn't been designed for defense, and now, with the sun back down after its brief and fitful appearance, it was time for the original purpose. As always the tanker lifted off first, even before the fighter pilots walked from the briefing hut to their aircraft shelters for the start of the night's work.

* * *

"If he flew out yesterday, why are there lights on?" Chavez asked, looking up at the penthouse apartment.

"Timer on the lights to scare burglars away?" John wondered lightly.

"This ain't L.A., man."

"Then I suppose there's people there, Yevgeniy Pavlovich." He turned the car onto another street.

Okay, we know that Koga wasn't arrested by the local police. We know that Yamata is running this whole show. We know that his security chief, Kaneda, probably killed Kimberly Norton. We know that Yamata is out of town. And we know that his apartment has lights on. . . .

Clark found a place to park the car. Then he and Chavez went walking, first of all circling the block, looking around for patterns and opportunities in a process called reconnaissance that started at the ground level and seemed more patient than it really was.

"A lot we don't know, man," Chavez breathed.

"I thought you wanted to see somebody's eyes, Domingo," John reminded his partner.

He had singularly lifeless eyes, Koga thought, not like a human at all. They were dark and large, but seemingly dry, and they just looked at him—or perhaps they just pointed in his direction and lingered there, the former Prime Minister wondered. Whatever they were, they gave no clue as to what lay behind them. He'd heard about Kiyoshi Kaneda, and the term most often used to describe him was *ronin,* a historical reference to samurai warriors who'd lost their master and couldn't find another, which was deemed a great disgrace in the culture of the time. Such men had turned into bandits, or worse, after they'd lost

contact with the *bushido* code that had for a thousand years sustained the elements of the Japanese population entitled to carry and use weapons. Such men, once they found a new master to serve, became fanatics, Koga remembered, so fearful of returning to their former status that they would do nearly anything to avoid that fate.

It was a foolish reverie, he knew, looking at the man's back as he watched TV. The age of the samurai was past, and along with it the feudal lords who had ruled them, but there the man was, watching a samurai drama on NHK, sipping his tea and taking in every scene. He didn't react at all, as though hypnotized by the highly stylized tale, which was really the Japanese version of American Westerns from the 1950s, highly simplified melodramas of good and evil, except that the heroic figure, always laconic, always invincible, always mysterious, used a sword instead of a six-gun. And this fool Kaneda was devoted to such stories, he'd learned over the past day and a half.

Koga stood and started moving back to the bookcase, and that was all he had to do for the man's head to turn and look. *Watchdog,* Koga thought without looking back as he selected another book to read. And a formidable one, especially with four others about, two sleeping now, one in the kitchen, and one outside the door. He hadn't a chance of escaping, the politician knew. Perhaps a fool, but the sort that a careful man feared.

Who was Kaneda, really? he wondered. A former Yakuza, probably. He didn't show any of the grotesque tattoos that people in that subculture affected, deliberately making themselves different in a culture that demanded conformity—but at the same time demonstrating conformity in a society of outcasts. On the other hand, he just sat there wearing a business suit whose only concession to comfort was the unbuttoned jacket. Even the ronin's posture was rigid as he sat there erect, Koga saw, himself sitting back down with a book but looking over it at his captor. He knew he couldn't fight the man and win—Koga had never troubled himself to learn any of the martial arts that his country had helped develop, and the man was physically formidable. And he was not alone.

He *was* a watchdog. Seemingly impassive, seemingly at rest, he was in fact more like a coiled spring, ready to leap and strike, and civilized only so long as those around him acted in such a way as not to arouse him, and so obvious about it that you just knew that it was madness to offend him. It shamed the politician that he was so easily cowed, but cowed he was, because he was a bright and thoughtful man, unwilling to squander his one chance, if he had that much, in a foolish gesture.

Many of the industrialists had men like this one. Some of them even carried handguns, which was almost unthinkable in Japan, but the right person could make the right sort of approach to the right official,

and a very special permit could be issued, and that possibility didn't so much frighten Koga as revolt him. The sword of a ronin was bad enough, and in this context would merely have been theatrical, but a gun for Koga was pure evil, something that didn't belong in his culture, a coward's weapon. That was what he was dealing with, really. Kaneda was undoubtedly a coward, unable to master his own life, able even to break the law only on orders from others, but with those orders he could do anything. What a dreadful commentary on his country. People like this were used by their masters to strong-arm unions and business competitors. People like Kaneda had assaulted demonstrators, sometimes even in the open, and gotten away with it because the police had looked the other way or managed not to be present, even though reporters and photographers had come to find the scene of the day's interest. People like this and their masters held his country back from true democracy, and the realization was all the more bitter for Koga because he'd known it for years, dedicated his life to changing it, and failed; and so here he was in Yamata's penthouse apartment, under guard, probably to be released someday as the political irrelevance he already was or would soon become, then to watch his country fall totally under the control of a new kind of master—or an old one, he told himself. And not a thing he could do about it, which was why he sat with a book in his hands while Kaneda sat in front of a TV watching some actor perform in a drama whose beginning, middle, and end were all foretold a thousand times, pretending that it was both real and new, when it was neither.

Battles like this one had been fought only in simulation, or perhaps in the Roman arenas of a different age. At both ends were the AEW aircraft, E-767s on the Japanese side and E-3Bs on the American, so far apart that neither really "saw" the other even on the numerous radar screens that both carried, though both monitored the signals of the other on different instruments. In between were the gladiators, because for the third time the Americans were testing the air defenses of Japan, and, again, failing.

The American AWACS aircraft were six hundred miles off Hokkaido, with the F-22A fighters a hundred miles in front of them, "trolling," as the flight leader put it, and the Japanese F-15s were coming out as well, entering the radar coverage of the American surveillance aircraft but not leaving the coverage of their own.

On command, the American fighters split into two elements of two aircraft each. The lead element darted due south, using their ability to supercruise at over nine hundred miles per hour, closing obliquely with the Japanese picket line.

“They’re fast,” a Japanese controller observed. It was hard to hold the contact. The American aircraft was somewhat stealthy, but the size and power of the Kami aircraft’s antenna defeated the low-observable technology again, and the controller started vectoring his Eagles south to cover the probe. Just to make sure that the Americans knew they were being tracked, he selected the appropriate blips with his electronic pointer and ordered the radar to steer its beams on them every few seconds and hold them there. They had to know that they were being followed through every move, that their supposedly radar-defeating technology was not good enough for something new and radical. Just to make it a little more interesting, he switched the frequency of his transmitter to fire-control mode. They were much too far away actually to guide a missile at this range, but even so, it would be one more proof to them that they could be lit up brightly enough for a kill, and that would teach them a lesson of its own. The signal faded a bit at first, almost dropping off entirely, but then the software picked them out of the clutter and firmed up the blip as he jacked up the power down the two azimuths to the American fighters, as fighters they had to be. The B-1, though fast, was not so agile. Yes, this was the best card the Americans had to play, and it was not good enough, and maybe if they learned that, diplomacy would change things once and for all, and the North Pacific Ocean would again be at peace.

* * *

“See how their Eagles move to cover,” the senior American controller observed at his supervisory screen.

“Like they’re tied to the 7s with a string,” his companion noted. He was a fighter pilot just arrived from Langley Air Force Base, headquarters of Air Combat Command, where his job was to develop fighter tactics.

Another plotting board showed that three of the E-767s were up. Two were on advanced picket duty while the third was orbiting in close, just off the coast of Honshu. That was not unexpected. It was, in fact, the predictable thing to do because it was also the smart thing to do, and all three surveillance aircraft had their instruments dialed up to what had to be maximum power, as they had to do to detect stealthy aircraft.

“Now we know why they hit both the Lancers,” the man from Virginia observed. “They can jump to high freqs and illuminate for the

Eagles. Our guys never thought they were being shot at. Cute," he thought.

"Would be nice to have some of those radars," the senior controller agreed.

"But we know how to beat it now." The officer from Langley thought he saw it. The controller wasn't so sure.

"We'll know that in another few hours."

Sandy Richter was even lower than the C-17 had dared to go. He was also slower, at a mere one hundred fifty knots, and already tired from the curious mixture of tension and boredom on the overwater flight. The previous night he and the other two aircraft in his flight had staged to Petrovka West, yet another mothballed MiG base near Vladivostok. There they'd gotten what would surely be their last decent sleep for the next few days, and lifted off at 2200 hours to begin their part in Operation ZORRO. Each aircraft now had wing sponsons attached, and on each were two extra fuel tanks, and while they were needed for the range of this flight, they were decidedly unstealthy even though the tanks themselves had been made out of radar-transparent fiberglass in an effort to improve things a little bit. The pilot was wearing his normal flight gear plus an inflatable life jacket. It was a concession to regulations about flying over water rather than as anything really useful. The water fifty feet below was too cold for long survival. He put the thought aside as best he could, settled into his seat, and concentrated on the flying while the gunner in back handled the instruments.

"Still okay, Sandy." The threat screen was still more black than anything else as they turned east toward Honshu.

"Rog." Behind them at ten-mile intervals, two more Comanches were heading in.

Though small and a mere helicopter, the RAH-66A was in some ways the most sophisticated aircraft in the world. It carried in its composite airframe the two most powerful computers ever taken aloft, and one of them was merely a backup in case the first should break. Their principal task for the moment was to plot the radar coverage that they had to penetrate to compute the relative radar cross-section of their airframe against the known or estimated capabilities of the electronic eyes now sweeping the area. The closer they got to the Japanese mainland, the larger grew the yellow areas of maybe-detect and the red areas of definite-detect.

“Phase Two,” the man from Air Combat Command said quietly aboard the AWACS.

The F-22 fighters all carried jamming gear, the better to accentuate their stealth capabilities, and on command these were switched on.

“Not smart,” the Japanese controller thought. *Good. They must know that we can track them.* His screen was suddenly littered with spots and spokes and flashes as the electronic noise generated by the American fighters muddled his picture. He had two ways of dealing with that. First he increased his power further; that would burn through much of what the Americans were attempting. Next he told the radar to start flipping through frequencies at random. The first measure was more effective than the second, he saw, since the American jammers were also frequency-agile. It was an imperfect measure, but still a troublesome one. The computer software that was doing the actual tracking was based on assumptions. It started with known or estimated positions of the American aircraft, and, knowing their speed range, sought returns that matched their base courses and speeds, just as had happened with the bombers that had once probed his defense line. The problem was that at this power output, he was again detecting birds and air currents, and picking the actual contacts out was becoming increasingly difficult until he punched yet another button that tracked the jamming emissions that were more powerful than the actual returning signals. With that additional check, he reestablished a firm track on both pairs of targets. It had required only ten seconds, and that was fast enough. Just to show the Americans he hadn’t been fooled, he maxed-out his power, flipped briefly to fire-control mode, and zapped all four of the American fighters hard enough that if their electronic systems were not properly shielded, the incoming radar signals would burn some of them out. That would be an interesting kill, he thought, and he remembered how a pair of German Tornado fighters had once been destroyed by flying too close to an FM radio tower. To his disappointment, the Americans simply turned away.

“Somebody just set off some mongo jammers to the northeast.”

“Good, right on time,” Richter replied. A quick look at the threat screen showed that he was within minutes of entering a yellow area. He felt the need to rub his face, but both his hands were busy now. A check of the fuel gauges showed that his pylon-mounted tanks were about empty. “Punching off the wings.”

“Roger—that’ll help.”

Richter flipped the safety cover off the jettison switch. It was a late addition to the Comanche design, but it had finally occurred to someone that if the chopper was supposed to be stealthy, then it might be a good idea to be able to eliminate the unstealthy features in flight. Richter slowed the aircraft briefly and flipped the toggle that ignited explosive bolts, dumping the wings and their tanks into the Sea of Japan.

“Good separation,” the backseater confirmed. The threat screen changed as soon as the items were gone. The computer kept careful track of how stealthy the aircraft was. The Comanche’s nose dipped again, and the aircraft accelerated back to its cruising speed.

“They’re predictable, aren’t they?” the Japanese controller observed to his chief subordinate.

“I think you just proved that. Even better, you just proved to them what we can do.” The two officers traded a look. Both had been worried about the capabilities of the American Rapier fighter, and now both thought they could relax about it. A formidable aircraft, and one their Eagle drivers needed to treat with respect, but not invisible.

“Predictable response,” the American controller said. “And they just showed us something. Call it ten seconds?”

“Thin, but long enough. It’ll work,” the colonel from Langley said, reaching for a coffee. “Now, let’s reinforce that idea.” On the main screen, the F-22s turned back north, and at the edge of the AWACS detection radius, the F-15Js did the same, covering the American maneuver like sailboats in a tacking duel, striving to stay between the American fighters and their priceless E-767s, which the dreadful accidents of a few days before had made even more precious.

Landfall was very welcome indeed. Far more agile than the transport had been the previous night, the Comanche selected a spot completely devoid of human habitation and then started flying down cracks in the mountainous ground, shielded from the distant air-surveillance aircraft by solid rock that even their powerful systems could not penetrate.

“Feet dry,” Richter’s backseater said gratefully. “Forty minutes of fuel remaining.”

"You good at flapping your arms?" the pilot inquired, also relaxed, just a little, to be over dry land. If something went wrong, well, eating rice wasn't all that bad, was it? His helmet display showed the ground in green shadows, and there were no lights about from streetlights or cars or houses, and the worst part of the flight in was over. The actual mission was something he'd managed to set aside. He preferred to worry about only one thing at a time. You lived longer that way.

The final ridgeline appeared just as programmed. Richter slowed the aircraft, circling to figure out the winds as he looked down for the people he'd been briefed to expect. There. Somebody tossed out a green chem-light, and in his low-light vision systems it looked as bright as a full moon.

"ZORRO Lead calling ZORRO Base, over."

"Lead, this is Base. Authentication Golf Mike Zulu, over," the voice replied, giving the okay-code he'd been briefed to expect. Richter hoped the voice didn't have a gun to its head.

"Copy. Out." He spiraled down quickly, flaring his Comanche and settling on what appeared to be an almost-flat spot close to the treeline. As soon as the aircraft touched down, three men appeared from the trees. They were dressed like U.S. Army soldiers, and Richter allowed himself a chance to breathe as he cooled off the engines prior to shutdown. The rotor had not yet completed its final revolution before a hose came out to the aircraft's fuel connection.

"Welcome to Japan. I'm Captain Checa."

"Sandy Richter," the pilot said, climbing out.

"Any problems coming in?"

"Not anymore." *Hell, I* got *here, didn't I?* he wanted to say, still tense from the three-hour marathon to invade the country. Invade? Eleven Rangers and six aviators. *Hey,* he thought, *you're all under arrest!*

"There's number two . . ." Checa observed. "Quiet babies, aren't they?"

"We don't want to advertise, sir." It was perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Comanche. The Sikorsky engineers had long known that most of the noise generated by a helicopter came from the tail rotor's conflict with the main. The one on the RAH-66 was shrouded, and the main rotor had five fairly thick composite blades, resulting in a helicopter with less than a third of the acoustical signature of any other rotary-wing aircraft yet built. And the area wouldn't hurt, Richter thought, looking around. All the trees, the thin mountain air. Not a bad place for the mission, he concluded as the second Comanche settled down on its landing pad, fifty meters away. The men who had fueled his aircraft were already stringing camouflage netting over it, using poles cut from the pine forest.

"Come on, let's get some food in you."

"Real food or MREs?" the chief warrant officer asked.

"You can't have everything, Mr. Richter," Checa told him.

The aviator remembered when Army C-Rations had also included cigarettes. No longer, what with the new healthy Army, and there wasn't much sense in asking a Ranger for a smoke. Damned athletes.

The Rapiers turned away an hour later, convinced, the Japanese air-defense people were sure, that they could not penetrate the Kami-Eagle line that guarded the northeast approaches to the home islands. Even the best American aircraft and best systems could not defeat what they had to face, and that was good. On their screens they watched the contacts fade off, and soon the emissions from the E-3Bs faded as well, heading back to Shemya to report their failure to their masters.

The Americans were realists. Courageous warriors, to be sure—the officers in the E-767s would not make the mistake as their forebears had of thinking that Americans lacked the ardor for real combat operations. That error had been a costly one. But war was a technical exercise, and they had allowed their strength to fall below a line from which recovery was not technically possible. And that was too bad for them.

The Rapiers had to tank on the way back, and didn't use their supercruise ability, because wasting fuel was not purposeful. The weather was again crummy at Shemya, and the fighters rode down under positive ground-control to their safe landings, then taxied off to their hangars, which were more crowded now with the arrival of four F-15E Strike Eagles from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho. They also regarded the mission as a success.

42

Lightning Strikes

"Are you mad?" Scherenko asked.

"Think about it," Clark said, again back in the Russian Embassy. "We want a political solution to this, don't we? Then Koga's our best chance. You told us the government didn't put him in the bag. Who does that leave? He's probably right there." You could even see the building out Scherenko's window, as luck would have it.

"Is it possible?" the Russian asked, worried that the Americans would ask for assistance that he was quite unsuited to provide.

"There's a risk, but it's unlikely he has an army up there. He wouldn't be keeping the guy there unless he wanted to be covert about it. Figure five or six people, max."

"And two of you!" Scherenko insisted.

"Like the man said," Ding offered with a very showy smile, "no big deal."

So the old KGB file was true. Clark was not a real intelligence officer, but a paramilitary type, and the same was true of his arrogant young partner who mostly just sat there, looking out the window.

"I can offer you nothing by way of assistance."

"How about weapons?" Clark asked. "You going to tell me you don't have anything here we can use? What kind of *rezidentura* is this?" Clark knew that the Russian would have to temporize. Too bad that these people weren't trained to take much initiative.

"I need permission before I can do any of that."

Clark nodded, congratulating himself on making a good guess. He opened his laptop computer. "So do we. You get yours. I'll get mine."

Jones stubbed out his cigarette in the Navy-style aluminum ashtray. The pack had been stuck away in a desk drawer, perhaps in anticipation of just such an occasion as this. When a war started, the peacetime rules went out the window. Old habits, especially bad ones, were easy to fall back into—but then that's what war was, too, wasn't it? He could also see that Admiral Mancuso was wavering on the edge

of bumming one, and so he made sure the butt was all the way out.

"What do you have, Ron?"

"You take the time to work this gear and you get results. Boomer and me have been tweaking the data all week. We started on the surface ships." Jones walked to the wall chart. "We've been plotting the position of the 'cans—"

"All the way from—" Captain Chambers interrupted, only to be cut off.

"Yes, sir, all the way from mid-Pac. I've been playing broadband and narrow-band, and checking weather, and I've plotted them." Jones pointed at the silhouettes pinned to the map.

"That's fine, Ron, but we have satellite overheads for that," ComSubPac pointed out.

"So am I right?" the civilian asked.

"Pretty close," Mancuso admitted. Then he pointed to the other shapes pinned to the wall.

"Yeah, that's right, Bart. Once I figured how to track the 'cans, then we started working on the submarines. And guess what? I can still bag the fuckers when they snort. Here's your picket line. We get them about a third of the time by my reckoning, and the bearings are fairly constant."

The wall chart showed six firm contacts. Those silhouettes were within circles between twenty and thirty miles in diameter. Two more were overlaid with question marks.

"That still leaves a few unaccounted for," Chambers noted.

Jones nodded. "True. But I got six for sure, maybe eight. We can't get good cuts off the Japanese coast. Just too far. I'm plotting merchantmen shuttling back and forth to the islands, but that's all," he admitted. "I'm also tracking a big two-screw contact heading west toward the Marshalls, and I kinda noticed that there's an empty dry dock across the way this morning."

"That's secret," Mancuso pointed out with a quiet smile.

"Well, if I were you guys, I'd tell *Stennis* to watch out for this line of SSKs, gentlemen. You might want to let the subs head into the briarpatch first, to clean things out, like."

"We can do that, but I'm worried about the others," Chambers admitted.

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye." Lieutenant Ken Shaw had the midwatch.

"Possible sonar contact bearing zero-six-zero ... probably a submerged contact . . . very faint, sir," the sonar chief reported.

The drill was automatic after all the practice they'd undergone on

the trips from Bremerton and Pearl. The fire-control-tracking party immediately started a plot. A tech on the ray-path analyzer took data directly from the sonar instruments and from that tried to determine the probable range to the target. The computer required only a second.

"That's a direct-path signal, sir. Range is under twenty thousand yards."

Dutch Claggett hadn't really been asleep. In the way of captains, he'd been lying in his bunk, eyes closed, even dreaming something meaningless and confusing about a day fishing on the beach with the fish behind him on the sand and creeping closer to his back, when the call had gone out from sonar. Somehow he'd come completely awake, and was now in the attack center, standing barefoot in his underwear. He checked the room to determine depth, course, and speed, then headed into sonar to get his own look at the instruments.

"Talk to me, Chief."

"Right here on the sixty-hertz line." The chief tapped the screen with his grease pencil. It came and went and came and went, but kept coming back, just a series of dots trickling down the screen, all on the same frequency line. The bearing was changing slowly right to left.

"They've been at sea for more than three weeks . . ." Claggett thought aloud.

"Long time for a diesel boat," the chief agreed. "Maybe heading back in for refueling?"

Claggett leaned in closer, as though proximity to the screen would make a difference. "Could be. Or maybe he's just changing position. Makes sense that they'd have a patrol line offshore. Keep me posted."

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Well?" Claggett asked the tracking party.

"First cut on range is fourteen thousand yards, base course is westerly, speed about six knots."

The contact was easily within range of his ADCAP torpedoes, Claggett saw. But the mission didn't allow him to do anything about it. Wasn't that just great?

"Let's get two weapons warmed up," the Captain said. "When we have a good track on our friend, we evade to the south. If he closes on us, we try to keep out of his way, and we can shoot only if there's no choice." He didn't even have to look around to know what his crewmen thought of that. He could hear the change in how they breathed.

"What do you think?" Mary Pat Foley asked.

"Interesting," Jack said after a moment's contemplation of the fax

from Langley.

"It's a long-ball opportunity." This was the voice of Ed Foley. "But it's one hell of a gamble."

"They're not even sure he's there," Ryan said, rereading the signal. It bore all the marks of something from John Clark. Honest. Decisive. Positive. The man knew how to think on his feet, and though often a guy at the bottom of the food chain, he tended to see the big picture very clearly from down there. "I have to go upstairs with this one, guys."

"Don't trip on the way," MP advised with a smile he could almost hear. She was still a cowgirl on field operations. "I recommend a *Go-Mission* on this one."

"And you, Ed?" Jack asked.

"It's a risk, but sometimes you go with what the guy in the field says. If we want a political resolution for this situation, well, then we have to have a tame political figure to lean on. We need the guy, and this might be our only way to get him out alive." The National Security Advisor could hear the gritted teeth on the other end of the STU-6 circuit. Both the Foleys were true to form. More importantly, they were in agreement.

"I'll be back to you in twenty minutes." Ryan switched over to his regular phone. "I need to see the Boss right now," he told the President's executive secretary.

The sun was rising for yet another hot, windless day. Admiral Dubro realized that he was losing weight. The waistband on his khaki trousers was looser than usual, and he had to reef in his belt a little more. His two carriers were now in regular contact with the Indians. Sometimes they came close enough for a visual, though more often some Harrier's look-down radar just took a snapshot from fifty or so miles away. Worse, his orders were to let them see his ships. Why the *hell* wasn't he heading east for the Straits of Malacca? There was a real war to fight. He'd come to regard the possible Indian invasion of Sri Lanka as a personal insult, but Sri Lanka wasn't U.S. territory, and the Marianas were, and his were the only carriers Dave Seaton had.

Okay, so the approach wouldn't exactly be covert. He had to pass through one of several straits to reenter the Pacific Ocean, all of them about as busy as Times Square at noon. There was even the off-chance of a sub there, but he had ASW ships, and he could pounce on any submarine that tried to hinder his passage. But his orders were to remain in the 10, and to be *seen* doing so.

The word was out among the crew, of course. He hadn't made even a token effort to keep things quiet. It would never have worked in any

case, and his people had a right to know what was going on, in anticipation of entering the fray. They needed to know, to get their backs up, to generate an extra determination before shifting from a peacetime mentality to that of a shooting war—but once you were ready, you had to *do* it. And they weren't.

The result was the same for him as for every other man or woman in the battle force: searing frustration, short temper, and a building rage. The day before, one of his Tomcat drivers had blown *between* two Indian Harriers, with perhaps ten feet of separation, just to show them who knew how to fly and who didn't, and while that had probably put the fear of God into the visitors, it wasn't terribly professional ... even though Mike Dubro could remember what it was like to be a lieutenant, junior grade, and could also imagine himself doing the same thing. That hadn't made the personal dressing-down any easier. He'd had to do it, and had also known afterward that the flight crew in question would go back to their quarters muttering about the dumb old fart on the flag bridge who didn't know what it was like to drive fighter planes, 'cause the Spads he'd grown up with had probably used windup keys to get off the boat . . .

"If they take the first shot, we're going to get hurt," Commander Harrison observed after announcing that *their* dawn patrol had shown up right on schedule.

"If they put an Exocet into us, we'll pipe 'Sweepers, man your brooms,' Ed." It was a lame attempt at humor, but Dubro didn't feel very humorous at the moment.

"Not if they get lucky and catch a JP bunker." Now his operations officer was turning pessimistic. *Not good,* the battle-force commander thought.

"Show 'em we care," Dubro ordered.

A few moments later the screening ships lit off their fire-control radars and locked on to the Indian intruders. Through his binoculars Dubro could see that the nearest Aegis cruiser had white missiles sitting in her launch rails, and then they trained out, as did the target-illumination radars. The message was clear: *Keep away.*

He could have ordered another wrathful dispatch to Pearl Harbor, but Dave Seaton had enough on his plate, and the real decisions were being made in Washington by people who didn't understand the problem.

"Is it worth doing?"

"Yes, sir," Ryan replied, having come to his own conclusion on the walk to the President's office. It meant putting two friends at additional risk, but that was their job, and making the decision was

his—partly anyway. It was easy to say such things, even knowing that because of them he'd sleep badly if at all. "The reasons are obvious."

"And if it fails?"

"Two of our people are in grave danger, but—"

"But that's what they're for?" Durling asked, not entirely kindly.

"They're both friends of mine, Mr. President. If you think I like the idea of—"

"Settle down," the President said. "We have a lot of people at risk, and you know what? *Not* knowing who they are makes it harder instead of easier. I've learned that one the hard way." Roger Durling looked down at his desk, at all the administrative briefing papers and other matters that didn't have the first connection to the crisis in the Pacific but had to be handled nonetheless. The government of the United States of America was a huge business, and he couldn't ignore any of it, no matter how important some area might have suddenly become. Did Ryan understand that?

Jack saw the papers, too. He didn't have to know what they were, exactly. None had classified cover sheets on them. They were the ordinary day-to-day crap that the man had to deal with. The Boss had to time-share his brain with so many tasks. It hardly seemed fair, especially for someone who hadn't exactly gone looking for the job. But that was destiny at work, and Durling had voluntarily undertaken the Vice President's office because his character required service to others, as, indeed, did Ryan's. They really were two of a kind, Jack thought.

"Mr. President, I'm sorry I said that. Yes, sir, I have considered the risks, but also, yes, that is their job. Moreover, it's John's recommendation. His idea, I mean. He's a good field officer, and he knows both the risks and the potential rewards. Mary Pat and Ed agree, and also recommend a Go on this one. The decision necessarily is yours to make, but those are the recommendations."

"Are we grasping at straws?" Durling wanted to know.

"Not a straw, sir. Potentially a very strong branch."

"I hope they're careful about it."

"Oh, this is just great," Chavez observed. The Russian PSM automatic pistol was of .215 caliber, smaller in diameter even than the .22 rimfire that American kids—at least the politically incorrect ones—learned to shoot at Boy Scout camps. It was also the standard sidearm of the Russian military and police forces, which perhaps explained why the Russian criminal element had such contempt for the local cops.

"Well, we do have our secret weapon out in the car," Clark said,

hefting the gun in his hand. At least the silencer improved its balance somewhat. It was renewed proof of something he'd thought for years. Europeans didn't know beans about handguns.

"We're going to need it, too." The Russian Embassy did have a pistol range for its security officers. Chavez clipped a target to the rack and cranked it downrange.

"Take the suppressor off," John said.

"Why?" Ding asked.

"Look at it." Chavez did, and saw that the Russian version was filled with steel wool. "It's only good for five or six shots."

The range did have ear protectors, at least. Clark filled a magazine with eight of the bottle-necked rounds, pointed downrange, and fired off three shots. The gun was quite noisy, its high-powered cartridge driving a tiny bullet at warp speed. He longed for a suppressed .22 automatic. Well, at least it was accurate.

Scherenko watched in silence, angered at the Americans' distaste for his country's weapons and embarrassed because they might well be right. He'd learned to shoot years before, and hadn't shown much aptitude for it. It was a skill rarely used by an intelligence officer, Hollywood movies notwithstanding. But it was clearly not true of the Americans, both of whom were hitting the bull's-eye, five meters away, firing pairs of shots called "double-taps" in the business. Finished, Clark cleared his weapon, reloaded a magazine, and took another, which he filled and slid into a back pocket. Chavez did the same.

"If you ever come to Washington," Ding observed, "we'll show you what we use."

"And the 'secret weapon' you mentioned?" Scherenko asked the senior man.

"It's a secret." Clark headed for the door, with Chavez in his wake. They had all day to wait for their chance, if that was what it was, and get their nerves even more frayed.

It was a characteristically stormy day at Shemya. Sleet driven by a fifty-knot gale pelted the base's single runway and the noise threatened to disturb the sleep of the fighter pilots. Inside the hangars, the eight fighter aircraft were crammed together to protect them from the elements. It was especially necessary for the F-22s, as no one had yet fully determined what damage the elements could do to their smooth surfaces, and thus the radar cross section. This was not the time to find out. The storm's precipitation should pass in a few hours, the weather weenies said, though the gale-force winds could well last another month. Outside, the ground crews worried about the tie-

downs on the tanker and AWACS birds, and struggled around in bulky cold-weather gear to make certain everything was secure.

The other aspects of base-security were handled at the Cobra Dane array. Though it looked like the screen from an old drive-in theater, it was in fact a massive version of the solid-state radar array used by the Japanese E-767s, or for that matter the Aegis cruisers and destroyers in both contending navies. Originally emplaced to monitor Soviet missile tests and later to do SDI research, it was powerful enough to scan thousands of miles into space, and hundreds in the atmosphere. Its electronic probes swept constantly now, searching for intruders, but so far finding only commercial airliners—but those were watched very closely indeed. An F-15E Strike Eagle loaded with air-to-air missiles could be sent aloft in ten minutes if one of them looked the least bit dangerous.

The dreary routine continued through the day. For a brief few hours there was enough gray illumination through the clouds to suggest that the sun might be up, in a theoretical sense, but by the time the pilots were roused, the view out the windows of their quarters might as well have been painted black, for even the runway lights were out, lest they give some unwelcome visitor a visual aid in finding the base through the gloom.

"Questions?"

The operation had been planned rapidly but carefully, and the four lead pilots had taken a hand in it, then tested it the night before, and while there were risks, well, hell, there always were.

"You Eagle jocks think you can handle this?" the most senior Rapier driver asked. He was a lieutenant colonel, which didn't protect him from the reply.

"Don't worry, sir," a major said. "It's such a *nice* ass to look at." Then she blew a kiss.

The Colonel, actually an engineering test pilot pulled away from developmental work under way on the F-22 with the 57th Weapons Wing at Nellis Air Force Base, knew the "old" Air Force only from the movies and stories he'd heard when he'd been a youngster coming up the line, but he took the insult in the spirit in which it had been offered. The Strike Eagles might not be stealthy, but they were pretty damned mean. They were about to engage in a combat mission, and rank didn't matter as much as competence and confidence.

"Okay, people"—once he would have just said *men*—"we're time-critical on this one. Let's get it on."

The tanker crews chuckled to themselves about the fighter-jock mentality, and how the women in the Air Force had really bought into

it. The Major was a dish, one of them thought. Maybe when she grew up she could come and fly United, he observed to the captain who'd be right-seating for him.

"A man could do worse," the Southwest Airlines first officer noted. The tankers got off twenty minutes later, followed by one of the E-3Bs.

The fighters, typically, went off last. The crews all wore their cold-weather nomex flight-suits and made the proper gestures about survival gear, which was really a joke over the North Pacific this time of year, but rules were rules. G-suits went on last of all, uncomfortable and restrictive as they were. One by one, the Rapier drivers walked to their birds, the Eagle crews two-by-two. The colonel who'd lead the mission ostentatiously tore off the Velcro RAPIER patch and replaced it with the counterculture one Lockheed employees had made up, the silhouette of the original P-38 Lightning overlaid with the graceful profile of the company's newest steed, and further decorated with a whiteyellow thunderbolt. Tradition, after all, the Colonel thought, even though he hadn't been born until the last of the twinboom -38s had been sold to the strippers. He did remember building models of the first American long-range fighter, used only one time for their actual designed purpose, for which a driver named Tex Lamphier had won a little immortality. This one would not be terribly different from that day over the northern Solomons.

The fighters had to be towed out into the open, and even before they started engines, every crew member could feel the wind buffeting the fighters. It was the time when the fingers tingle on the controls and the pilots shift around a little in the seats to make everything just so. Then, one by one, the fighters lit off and taxied down to the runway's edge. The lights came back on, blue parallel lines stretching off into the gloom, and the fighters lifted off singly, a minute apart, because paired takeoffs in these weather conditions were too dangerous, and this wasn't a night for unnecessary mistakes. Three minutes later, the two flights of four formed up over the top of the clouds, where the weather was clear, with bright stars and the multicolored aurora to their right, curtains of changing colors, greens and purples as the stellar wind affected charged particles in the upper atmosphere. The curtain effect was both lovely and symbolic to the Lightning pilots.

The first hour was routine, the two quartets of aircraft cruising southwest, their anticollision lights blinking away to give visual warning of the close proximity. Systems checks were performed, instruments monitored, and stomachs settled as they approached the tanker aircraft.

The tanker crews, all reservists who flew airliners in civilian life, had taken care to locate smooth-weather areas, which the fighter

drivers appreciated even though they deemed everyone else second best. It took more than forty minutes to top off everyone's fuel tanks, and then the tankers resumed their orbit, probably so that their crews could catch up on their *Wall Street Journals,* the fighter pilots all thought, heading southwest again.

Things changed now. It was time for business. Their kind.

Sandy Richter drew the mission, of course, because it had been his idea from the start, months before at Nellis Air Force Base. It had worked there, and all he had to figure out was whether it would work here as well. On that he was probably betting his life.

Richter had been in that business since he was seventeen—when he'd lied about his age and gotten away with it, being large and tough. Along the way, he'd corrected his official package, but he was still in his twenty-ninth year of service and soon to retire to a quieter life. All that time, Richter had driven snakes and only snakes. If a helicopter didn't carry weapons, then he wasn't interested. Starting with the AH-1 Huey Cobra, he had in time graduated to the AH-64 Apache and driven it into his second, briefer war in the skies over the Arabian Peninsula. Now with the last bird he would ever fly, he started the engines on the Comanche and began his 6,751st hour of flight, according to the log book.

The twin turboshaft engines spun up normally and the rotor began its rotation. The ersatz ground crew of Rangers were hamming it up with the one fire extinguisher they had. It was about large enough to put out a cigarette, Richter thought crossly as he increased power and lifted off. The thin mountain air had a negative effect on performance, but not that much, and he'd soon be down at sea level anyway. The pilot gave his head the usual shake to make sure the helmet was securely in place and headed eastward, tracing up the wooded slopes of Shiraishi-*san.*

"There they are," the lead F-22 pilot said to himself. The first sign was chirping in his headset, immediately followed by information on his threat receiver: AIR DEFENSE RADAR, AIRBORNE, TYPE J, BEARING 213. Next came data linked over from the E-3B, which had been in place long enough to plot its location. The Sentry wasn't using its radar at all tonight. After all, the Japanese had taught the Americans a lesson the night before, and they needed time to absorb such lessons . . . RANGE TO TARGET 1 456 MILES. Still well under the horizon from the Japanese aircraft, he gave his first vocal command of the mission.

"Lightning Lead to Flight. Split into elements, now!"

Instantly, the two sets of four aircraft divided into pairs, separated by two thousand yards. In both cases the F-22s held the lead, and in both cases the trailing F-15Es tucked in dangerously close to create a radar overlap. The colonel in command flew as straight and level as his practiced skills allowed, and he smiled to himself at the memory of the major's remark. Nice ass, eh? She was the first woman to fly with the Thunderbirds. Strobe lights went off, and he hoped that the low-light gear she was wearing was working properly. The northern E-767 was now four hundred miles away. The fighters cruised in at five hundred knots, altitude thirty-five thousand feet for fuel economy.

The work schedule typical of Japanese executives made the entry less obvious than would have been the case in America. A man was in the lobby, but he was watching TV, and Clark and Chavez walked through as though they knew where they were going, and crime was not a problem in Tokyo anyway. Breathing a little rapidly, they got into an elevator and punched a button, trading a relieved look that soon changed to renewed apprehension. Ding was carrying his briefcase. Clark was not, and both were dressed in their best suits and ties and white shirts, looking for all the world like businesspeople coming in for a late night's conference on something or other. The elevator stopped five floors from the top, a level selected because of the lack of lights in the windows. Clark stuck his head out, knowing that it looked vaguely criminal to do so, but the corridor was empty.

They moved quickly and quietly around the central bearing core of the building, found the fire stairs, and started to climb. They looked for security cameras, and again, thankfully, there were none on this level. Clark checked up and down. No one else was in the stairwell. He continued to head up, looking and listening before every movement.

"Our friends are back," one of the airborne controllers announced over the intercom. "Bearing zero-three-three, range four-two-zero kilometers. One—no, two contacts, close formation, military aircraft inbound, speed five hundred knots," he concluded the announcement rapidly.

"Very well," the senior controller responded evenly, selecting the display for his screen as he switched channels on his command phones. "Any radar activity to the northeast?"

"None," the electronic-countermeasures officer replied at once. "He

could be out there monitoring us, of course."

"Wakarémas."

The next order of business was to release the two fighters orbiting east of the Kami aircraft. Both F-15Js had recently arrived on station, and had nearly full fuel tanks. An additional call ordered two more up from Chitose Air Base. They would need about fifteen minutes to get on station, but that was fine, the senior controller thought. He had the time.

"Lock on to them," he ordered the operator.

"Got us already, do you?" the Colonel asked himself. "Good." He held course and speed, wanting them to get a good feel for his location and activities. The rest was mainly a matter of arithmetic. *Figure the Eagles were now about two hundred miles away, closing speed about a thousand. Six minutes to separation.* He checked his clock and commanded his eyes to sweep the skies for something a little too bright to be a star.

There was a camera on the top level of the stairs. So Yamata was a little paranoid. But even paranoids had enemies, Clark thought, noticing that the body of the camera appeared to be pointed at the next landing. Ten steps to the landing, and ten more to the next, where the door was. He decided to take a moment to think about that. Chavez turned the knob on the door to his right. It didn't appear to be locked. Probably fire codes, Clark thought, acknowledging the information with a nod but getting out his burglar tools anyway.

"Well, what d'ya think?"

"I think I'd rather be somewhere else." Ding had his light in his hand as John took his pistol out and screwed the suppressor in place. "Fast or slow?"

That was the only remaining choice, really. A slow approach, like people on regular business, lost, perhaps . . . no, not this time. Clark held up one finger, took a deep breath and bounded upwards. Four seconds later he twisted the knob at the top landing and flung the door open. John dove to the floor, his pistol out and training in on the target. Ding jumped past him, stood, and aimed his own weapon.

The guard outside the door had been looking the other way when the stairway entrance swung open. He turned in automatic alarm and saw a large man lying sideways on the floor and possibly aiming a gun at him. That caused him to reach for his own as his eyes locked on the potential targets. There was a second man, holding something else that—

At this range the light had almost a physical force. The three million candles of energy turned the entire world into the face of the sun, and then the energy overload invaded the man's central nervous system along the trigeminal nerve, which runs from the back of the eye along the base of the brain, branching out through the neural network that controls the voluntary muscles. The effect, as in Africa, was to overload the guard's nervous system. He fell to the floor like a rag doll, his twitching right hand still grasping a pistol. The light was sufficiently bright that reflection from the whitepainted walls dazzled Chavez slightly, but Clark had remembered to shut his eyes and raced for the double doors, which he drove apart with his shoulder.

One man was in view, just getting up from a chair in front of the TV, his face surprised and alarmed at the unannounced entry. There wasn't time for mercy. Clark brought the gun up in both hands and squeezed twice, both shots entering the man's forehead. John felt Ding's hand on his shoulder, which allowed him to move right, almost running now, down a hallway, looking into each room. *Kitchen,* he thought. *You always found people in the—*

He did. This man was almost his height, and his gun was already out as he moved for the hallway that led to the foyer, calling out a name and a question, but he, too, was a little slow, and his gun was still down, and he met a man with his pistol up and ready. It was the last thing he would ever see. Clark needed another half a minute to check out the rest of the luxury apartment, but found only empty rooms.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich?" he called.

"Vanya, this way!"

Clark moved back left, taking a quick look at both of the men he'd killed as he did so, just to make sure, really. He knew that he'd remember these bodies, as he did all the others, knew that they'd come back to him, and he'd try to explain away their deaths, as he always did.

Koga was sitting there, remarkably pale as Chavez/ Chekov finished checking out the room. The guy in front of the TV hadn't managed to clear the pistol from his shoulder holster—probably an idea he'd gotten from a movie, Clark thought. The things were damned near useless if you needed your weapon in a hurry.

"Clear left," Chavez said, remembering to speak in Russian.

"Clear right." Clark commanded himself to calm down, looking at the guy by the TV, wondering which of the people they'd killed had been responsible for the death of Kim Norton. Well, probably not the one outside.

"Who are you?" Koga demanded with a mixture of shock and anger, not quite remembering that they had met before. Clark took a breath

before answering.

"Koga-san, we are the people who are rescuing you."

"You killed them!" The man pointed with a shaking hand.

"We can speak about that later, perhaps. Will you come with us, please? You are not in danger from us, sir."

Koga wasn't inhuman. Clark admired his concern for the dead men, even though they had clearly not been friends. But it was time to get him the hell out of here.

"Which one was Kaneda?" Chavez asked. The former Prime Minister pointed to the one in the room. Ding walked over for a last look and managed not to say anything before directing his eyes to Clark, his expression one that only the two could possibly understand.

"Vanya, time to leave."

His threat receiver was going slightly nuts. The screen was all reds and yellows, and the female voice was telling him that he'd been detected, but in this case he knew better than the computer did, Richter thought, and it was nice to know that the goddamned things didn't quite get everything right.

Just the flying part was hard enough, and though the Apache might have had the agility for the mission, it was better to be in the RAH-66. His body displayed no obvious tension. Years of practice allowed him to sit comfortably in the armored seat, his right forearm resting on the space provided while his hand worked the sidestick controller. His head traced regularly around the sky, and his eyes automatically compared the real horizon with the one generated by the sensing gear located in the aircraft's nose. The Tokyo skyline was just perfect for what he was doing. The various buildings had to be generating all manner of confusing signals for the radar aircraft he was closing on, and the best of computer systems could not defeat this sort of clutter. Better yet, he had the time to do it right.

The river Tone would take him most of the way he needed to go, and on the south side of the river was a rail line, and on the rail line was a train that would go all the way to Choshi. The train was cruising at over a hundred knots, and he took position right over it, one eye on the train below while another kept track of a moving indicator on his threat-receiver display. He held one hundred feet over the tops of the catenary towers, pacing the train exactly, just over the last car in the "consist."

"That's funny." The operator on Kami-Two noticed a blip, enhanced

by the computer systems, closing in on the position of his aircraft. He keyed the intercom for the senior controller. “Possible low-level inbound,” he reported, highlighting the contact and crossloading it for the crew commander.

“It’s a train,” the man replied at once, comparing the location with a map overlay. The problem with flying these damned things too close to land. The standard discrimination software, originally purchased from the Americans, had been modified, but not in all details. The airborne radar could track anything that moved, but there wasn’t enough computer power in all the world to classify and display all the contacts that would develop from cars and trucks moving on the highways under the aircraft. To de-clutter the screens, nothing going slower than one hundred fifty kilometers per hour was passed through the computer-filtering system, but over land even that was not good enough, not over the country with the world’s finest trains. Just to be sure, the senior officer watched the blip for a few seconds. Yes, it was following the mainline from Tokyo to Choshi. It couldn’t possibly be a jet aircraft. A helicopter, theoretically, could do something like this, but from the weak character of the signal, it was probably just scatter off the metal roof of the train, and probably reflection off the catenary towers.

“Adjust your MTI-discriminator to two hundred,” he ordered his people. It took three seconds for all of them to do that, and sure enough, that moving blip by the Tone and two other more obvious ground contacts disappeared. They had more interesting things to do, since -Two was crossloading the “take” from Kamis Four and Six and then downloading it to the Air Defense HQ just outside Tokyo. The Americans were probing their defenses again, and probably, again, with their advanced F-22s, trying to see if they could defeat the Kamis. Well, this time the reception wouldn’t be quite so friendly. Eight F-15 Eagle interceptors were now up, four under the control of each E-767. If the American fighters came closer, they’d be made to pay for it.

He had to risk one open transmission, and even over an encrypted burst-channel it made the Colonel nervous, but the business entailed risks under the best of circumstances.

“Lightning Lead to flight. Separate in five—four—three—two—one —*Separate!”*

He pulled back on the stick, jerking his fighter up and away from the Strike Eagle that had spent the last half hour in his jetwash. At the same instant his right hand flipped off the radar transponder that he’d had on to boost the return signal the Japanese AEW aircraft had been

taking off his aircraft. Behind and below, the F-15E and its female flight crew would be diving slightly and turning left. The Lightning climbed rapidly, in the process losing almost all of its forward velocity. The Colonel punched burners for rapid acceleration and used the thrust-vector capability of the aircraft to initiate a radical maneuver in the opposite direction, greatly speeding the separation.

The Japanese radar might or might not have gotten some sort of return off his fighter, the Colonel knew, but he knew how the radar system was working now: It was operating at high power and getting all sorts of spurious returns as a result, which the computer system had to classify before presenting them to the system controllers. In essence it did a job no different from that of human operator, albeit more quickly and efficiently, but it was not perfect, as he and the other three Lightnings were about to prove.

"Turning south," the controller reported—unnecessarily, as four separate people were now monitoring the progress of the inbounds. Neither he nor his fellows could know that the computer had noted a few ghostly returns turning north, but these had been weaker than other returns that were not moving rapidly enough to be classified as aircraft. Nor did they mimic the probable flight paths of aircraft. Then things got harder.

"Getting jamming from the inbounds."

* * *

The lead Lightning was now in a nearly vertical climb. There was danger in this, since the flight profile offered the E-767 the least stealthy aspect of the aircraft, but it was also offered no lateral motion to speak of, and so could well appear to be a ghost return, especially in the electronic clutter being generated by the powerful jammers on the Strike Eagles. In less than thirty seconds, the Lightnings tipped over to level flight at an altitude of fifty-five thousand feet. The Colonel was paying very close attention to his threat systems now. If the Japanese had him, they would show it by using their electronic scanning to hammer his fighter with radar energy . . . but they weren't. The stealthy nature of his fighter was enough that he was lost amid the trash-returns. The system caught side lobes now. The E-767 had shifted to its high-frequency fire-control mode, and was *not* targeted on him. Okay. He boosted power to supercruise, and his Lightning accelerated to a thousand miles per hour as the pilot selected fire-control mode for his HUD system.

“One o’clock high. I have him, Sandy,” the backseater reported. “He even has his a/c lights on.”

The train had stopped at a suburban station, and the Comanche had left it behind, cruising now at one hundred twenty knots toward the coastal town. Richter flexed his fingers one last time, looked up, and saw the aircraft’s strobe lights far overhead. He was almost under it now, and good as its radar might be, it wouldn’t be able to look straight down through the body of the airframe itself . . . yes, the center of his threat screen was black now.

“Here we go,” he said over the intercom. He jammed his throttles to the firewall, deliberately overspooling the engines as he pulled back sharply in the sidestick. The Comanche leaped upwards in a spiraling climb. The only real worry here was his engine temperature. They were designed to take abuse, but this would take it to the very limit. A warning indicator appeared in his helmet display, a vertical bar that started growing in height and changing color almost as rapidly as the numbers changed on the altitude display.

“Whoa,” the backseater breathed, then he looked down and selected the weapons display for his screens, the better to utilize his time before going back to scanning outside. “Negative traffic.”

Which figured, Richter thought. They wouldn’t want people cluttering up the air around something as valuable as this target. That was fine. He could see it now, as his helicopter shot through ten thousand feet, climbing like the fighter plane it really was, rotor-driven or not.

He could see it in his targeting display now, still too far away to shoot, but there, a blip in a little box in the center of the head-up display. Time for a check. He activated his missile illumination systems. The F-22 had an LPI radar, meaning that there was a low probability of interception at the other end. That proved optimistic.

“We just took a hit,” the countermeasures officer said. “We just took a high-frequency hit, bearing unknown,” he went on, looking at his instruments for additional data.

“Probably a scatter from us,” the senior controller said, busy now with vectoring his fighters onto the still-inbound contacts.

“No, no, frequency wasn’t right for that.” The officer ran another instrument check, but there was nothing else to support the odd feeling that had just turned his arms cold.

“Engine-heat warning. Engine-heat warning,” the voice was telling

him because he'd ignored the visual display rather blatantly, the onboard computer thought.

"I know, honey," Richter replied.

Over the Nevada desert, he'd managed a zoom-climb to twenty-one thousand feet, so far beyond the normal flight envelope of a helicopter that it had actually frightened him, Richter remembered, but that had been in relatively warm air, and it was colder here. He blazed through twenty thousand feet, still with a respectable climb rate, just as the target changed course, turning away from him. It seemed to be orbiting at about three hundred knots, probably using one engine for propulsion and the other to generate power for its radar. He hadn't been briefed on it, but it seemed reasonable enough. What mattered was that he had seconds to get within range, but the huge turbofan engines on the converted airliner were inviting targets for his Stingers.

"Just in range, Sandy."

"Roger." His left hand selected missiles from his weapons panel. The side doors on the aircraft snapped open. Attached to each of them were three Stinger missiles. With his last vestige of control, he slued the aircraft around, flipped the cover off the trigger switch, and squeezed six times. All of the missiles blazed off their rails, arcing upwards toward the aircraft two miles away. With that, Richter eased way back on the throttles and nosed over, diving and cooling his abused engines, watching the ground while his backseater followed the progress of the missiles.

The first Stinger burned out and fell short. The remaining five did better, and though two of them lost power before reaching the target, four of them found it, three to the right engine and one to the left.

"Hits, multiple hits."

The E-767, at low speed, didn't have much of a chance. The Stingers had small warheads, but the civilian-spec engines on the aircraft were poorly designed to deal with damage. Both immediately lost power, and the one that had actually been powering the aircraft came apart first. Fragments of turbine blades exploded through the safety casing and ripped into the right wing, severing the flight controls and destroying aerodynamic performance. The converted airliner rolled immediately right, and did not recover, its flight crew surprised at the unannounced disaster and quite unable to deal with it. Half of the starboard wing separated from the aircraft almost at once, and on the ground, radar operators saw the alpha-numeric display marking the position of Kami-Two flip to the emergency setting of 7711 and then simply disappear.

"That's a hard kill, Sandy."

"Roger." The Comanche was falling rapidly now, heading toward the clutter of the coast. Engine temps were back to normal, and

Richter hoped he hadn't done them permanent harm. As for the rest, he'd killed people before.

"Kami-Two just dropped off the air," the communications officer reported.

"What?" the senior controller asked, distracted by his intercept mission.

"Garbled call, explosion, something like that, then the data links just dropped off."

"Stand by, I have to vector my Eagles in."

It had to be getting twitchy for the 15-Echoes, the Colonel knew. Their job for the moment was to be bait, to draw the Japanese Eagles out farther over the water while the Lightnings went in behind them to chop down their AEW support and spring the trap. The good news for the moment was that the third E-767 had just gone off the air. So the other side of the mission had happened as planned. That was nice for a change. And so, for the rest . . .

"Two, this is lead, executing, now!" The Colonel flipped his illumination radars on, twenty miles from the orbiting AEW aircraft. Next he opened the weapons-bay doors to give the AMRAAM missiles a chance to see their quarry. Both One and Two had acquisition, and he triggered both off. "Fox-Two, Fox-Two on the North Guy with two Slammers!"

The opening of the weapons bay instantly made the Lightnings about as stealthy as a tall building. Blips appeared on five different screens, along with additional warnings as to the speed and heading of the newly discovered aircraft. The additional word from the countermeasures officer was the final voice of doom.

"We're being illuminated at very close range, bearing zero-two-seven!"

"What? Who is that?" He had problems of his own, with his Eagles about to launch missiles at the incoming Americans. Kami-Six had just switched to fire-control mode, to allow the interceptors to fire in the blind-launch mode, as they'd done with the B-1 bombers. He couldn't stop that now, the senior officer told himself.

The last warning was far too late for counteraction. Just five miles out, the two missiles switched on their own homing radars. They were coming in at Mach-3+, driven by solid-fuel rocket motors toward a huge radar target, and the AIM-120 AMRAAM, known to its users as the Slammer, was one of the new generation of brilliant weapons The pilot finally got the word, listening in to the countermeasures channel.

He rolled his aircraft left, attempting a nearly impossible split-S dive that he knew was a waste of effort because at the last second he saw the yellow glow of rocket exhaust.

"Kill," Lightning Lead whispered to himself. "Lightning Flight, this is lead. North Guy is down."

"Lead, this is Three, South Guy is down," he heard next.

And now, the Colonel thought, using a particularly cruel Air Force euphemism, it was time to kill some baby seals. The four Lightnings were between the Japanese coast and eight F-15J Eagle interceptors. To seaward of them, the F-15E Strike Eagles would be turning back in, lighting off their own radars and loosing their own AMRAAMs. Some would make kills, and the Japanese fighters that survived them would run for home, right into his flight of four.

The ground-control radars couldn't see the aerial combat taking place. It was too far out and below the radar horizon. They did see one aircraft racing for their coast, one of theirs by the transponder code. Then it stopped cold in the air, and the transponder went off. In the air-defense headquarters, data downloaded from the three dead AEW aircraft gave no clues, except for one fact—the war their country had started was now very real and had taken an unexpected turn.

43

Dancing to the Tune

"I know you're not Russians," Koga said, sitting in the back of the car with Chavez while Clark did the driving.

"Why would you think that?" John asked innocently.

"Because Yamata thinks that I have been in contact with Americans. You two are the only gaijin with whom I have spoken since this madness began. What is going on here?" the politician demanded.

"Sir, what is going on right now is that we rescued you from people who wanted you dead."

"Yamata would not be so foolish as that," Koga retorted, not yet recovered from the shock of seeing violence uncontained by the borders of a TV cabinet.

"He has started a war, Koga-san. What is your death against that?" the man in the driver's seat inquired delicately.

"So you are Americans," he persisted.

Oh, what the hell, Clark thought. "Yes, sir, we are."

"Spies?"

"Intelligence officers," Chavez preferred. "The man who was in the room with you—"

"The one *you* killed, you mean? Kaneda?"

"Yes, sir. He murdered an American citizen, a girl named Kimberly Norton, and I am actually rather happy that I took him down."

"Who was she?"

"She was Goto's mistress," Clark explained. "And when she became a political threat to your new Prime Minister, Raizo Yamata decided to have her eliminated. We came to your country just to get her home. That was all," Clark went on, telling what was partially a lie.

"None of this is necessary," Koga said discordantly. "If your Congress had just given me a chance to—"

"Sir, maybe that's right. I don't know if it is or not, but maybe it is," Chavez said. "That doesn't much matter now, does it?"

"Tell me, then, what does matter?"

"Ending this goddamned thing before too many people get hurt," Clark suggested. "I've fought in wars and they are not fun. Lots of young kids get to die before they have the chance to get married and

have kids of their own, and that's bad, okay?" Clark paused before going on. "It's bad for my country, and for damned sure it's going to be worse for yours."

"Yamata thinks—"

"Yamata is a businessman," Chavez said. "Sir, you'd better understand this. He doesn't know what he's started."

"Yes, you Americans are very good at killing. I saw that myself fifteen minutes ago."

"In that case, Mr. Koga, you also saw that we left one man alive."

Clark's angry reply stopped conversation cold for several seconds. Koga was slow to realize that it was true. The one outside the door had been alive when they'd walked over his body, moaning and shuddering as though from electric shocks, but definitely alive.

"Why didn't you . . . ?"

"There was no reason to kill him," Chavez said. "I'm not going to apologize for that Kaneda bastard. He had it coming, and when I came into the room, he was reaching for a weapon, and that's tough cookies, sir. But this isn't a movie. We don't kill people for amusement, and we came in to rescue you because somebody has to end this goddamned war—okay?"

"Even then—even then, what your Congress did . . . how can my country survive economically—"

"Will it be better for anybody if the war goes on?" Clark asked. "If Japan and China kick off against Russia, what happens to you then? Who do you suppose will really pay the price for that mistake? China? I don't think so."

The first word in Washington came via satellite. One of NSA's orbiting "hitchhiker" ELINT birds happened to be overhead to record the termination of signal—that was the NSA term for it—from three AEW aircraft. Other NSA listening posts recorded radio chatter that lasted for several minutes before ending. Analysts were trying to make sense of it now, the report in Ryan's hands told him.

Only one kill, the Colonel told himself. Well, he'd have to be content with that. His wingman had bagged the last of the -15Js. The southern element had gotten three, and the Strike Eagles had gotten the other four when their support had been cut off, leaving them suddenly and unexpectedly vulnerable. Presumably the ZORRO team had gotten the third E-767. On the whole, not a bad night's work, but a long one, he thought, forming his flight of four back up for the rendezvous with the

tanker and the three hours back to Shemya. The hardest part was the enforced radio silence. Some of his people had to be counting coup in a big way, full of themselves in the way of fighter pilots who had done the job and lived to tell the tale, and wanting to talk through it. That would change shortly, he thought, the enforced silence forcing him to think about his first-ever air-to-air kill. Thirty people on the aircraft. Damn, he was supposed to feel *good* about a kill, wasn't he? So why didn't he?

Something interesting had just happened, Dutch Claggett thought. They were still catching bits and pieces of the SSK in their area, but whoever it was, it had turned north and away from them, allowing *Tennessee* to remain on station. In the way of submarines on patrol, he'd come close enough to the surface to put up his ESM antenna and track the Japanese radar aircraft for the past day or so, learning what he could for possible forwarding to others. Electronic-intelligence gathering had been a submarine mission since before his application to Annapolis, and his crew included two electronics techs who showed a real aptitude for it. But they'd had two on the monitoring systems that had just gone—poof! Then they'd caught some radio chatter, excited by the sound of it, and one by one those voices had gone off the air, somewhere to his north.

"You suppose we just got up on the scoreboard, Cap'n?" Lieutenant Shaw asked, expecting the Captain to know, because captains were supposed to know everything, even though they didn't.

"Seems that way."

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye."

"Our friend is snorting again, bearing zero-zero-nine, probable CZ contact," the sonar chief thought.

"I'll start the track," Shaw said, heading aft for the plotting table.

"So what happened?" Durling asked.

"We killed three of their radar aircraft, and the strike force annihilated their fighter patrol." This was not a time, however, for gloating.

"This is the twitchiest part?"

Ryan nodded. "Yes, sir. We need them confused for a while longer, but for now they know something is happening. They know—"

"They know it might be a real war after all. Any word on Koga?"

"Not yet."

It was four in the morning and all three men were showing it. Koga was over the stress period, for the moment, trying to use his head instead of his emotions while his two hosts— that was how he thought of them, rather to his surprise—drove him around and wondered how smart it was to have left the one guard alive outside Yamata's condo. He would be up and moving by now? Would he call the police? Someone else? What would result from the night's adventure?

"How do I know that I can trust you?" Koga asked after a lengthy silence.

Clark's hands squeezed the wheel hard enough to leave fingerprints in the plastic. It was the movies and TV that caused dumbass questions like that. In those media, spies did all manner of complicated things in the hope of outsmarting the equally brilliant adversaries against whom they were pitted. Reality was different. You kept operations as simple as you could because even the simplest things could blow up on you, and if the other guy was so goddamned brilliant, you wouldn't even know who the hell he was; and tricking people into doing the things you wanted them to do was something that only worked if you arranged a single option for the other guy, and even then he'd often as not do something unexpected anyway.

"Sir, we just put our lives at risk for you, but, okay, don't trust us at all. I'm not dumb enough to tell you what to do. I don't know your politics well enough for that. What I'm telling you is very simple. We will be doing things—what all of them are, I do not know anyway, so I can't tell you. We want to end this war with a minimum of violence, but there will be violence. You also want the war to end, right?"

"Of course I want it to end," Koga said, his manners not helped by his fatigue.

"Well, sir, you do whatever you think is best, okay? You see, Mr. Koga, you don't have to trust us, but we sure as hell have to trust you to do what's best for your country and for ours." Clark's comment, exasperated as it was, turned out to be the best thing he could have said.

"Oh." The politician thought that one over. "Yes. That's right, isn't it?"

"Where can we drop you off?"

"Kimura's home," Koga said at once.

"Fine." Clark dredged up the location and turned the car onto Route 122 to head for it. Then he reminded himself that he'd learned one highly important thing this night, and that after getting this guy to a place of relative safety, his top priority was getting *that* information to Washington. The empty streets helped, and though he wished for

coffee to keep himself alert, it was a mere forty minutes to the crowded neighborhood of diminutive tract homes where the MITI official lived. The lights were already on when they pulled up to the house, and they just let Koga out to walk to the door. lsamu Kimura answered the door and took his guest inside with a mouth almost as wide as the entrance to his home.

Who ever said these people didn't show emotion? Clark asked himself.

"Who do you suppose the leaker is?" Ding asked, still in the backseat.

"Good boy—you caught that, too."

"Hey, I'm the only college graduate in the car, Mr. C." Ding opened the computer to draft the dispatch to Langley, again via Moscow.

"They did *what?*" Yamata snarled into the phone.

"This is serious." It was General Arima, and he'd just gotten the word from Tokyo himself. "They smashed our air defenses and just went away afterwards."

"How?" the industrialist demanded. Hadn't they told him that the Kami aircraft were invincible?

"They don't know how yet, but I'm telling you this is very serious. They have the ability to raid the Home Islands now."

Think, Yamata told himself, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. "General, they still cannot invade our islands, can they? They can sting us, but they cannot really hurt us, and as long as we have nuclear weapons . . ."

"Unless they try something else. The Americans are not acting as we have been given to expect."

That remark stung the next Governor of Saipan. Today was supposed to have been the day on which he'd begin his campaign. Well, yes, he'd overestimated the effect his action would have on the American financial markets, but they *had* crippled the American fleet, and they *had* occupied the islands, and America did *not* have the ability to storm even one of the Marianas, and America did not have the political will to launch a nuclear attack on his country. Therefore they were still ahead of the game. Was it to be expected that America would not fight back somewhat? Of course not. Yamata lifted his TV controller and switched it on, catching the beginning of a CNN Headline News broadcast, and there was the American correspondent, standing right on the edge of some dock or other, and there behind her were two American carriers, still in their docks, still unable to do anything.

"What does intelligence tell us about the Indian Ocean?" he asked the General.

"The two American carriers are still there," Arima assured him. "They were seen both visually and on radar yesterday, within four hundred kilometers of Sri Lanka."

"Then they cannot really hurt us, can they?"

"Well, no, really they cannot," the General admitted. "But we must make other arrangements."

"Then I suggest you make them, Arima-san," Yamata replied in a voice so polite as to constitute a stinging insult.

The worst part was not knowing what had happened. The data links from the three dead Kami aircraft had ended with the elimination of -Two. All the rest of their information was inferred rather than actually known. Ground-based monitoring stations had copied the emissions of -Four and -Six and then seen those emissions stop within the same minute. There had been no obvious alarm for any of the three radar aircraft. They'd just stopped transmitting, leaving nothing more behind than floating debris on the rolling ocean. The fighters—well, they did have tapes of the radio conversations. It had taken less than four minutes for that. First the confident, professionally laconic comments of fighter pilots closing on targets, then a series of *What?*s, followed by hurried calls to go active with their radars, more calls that they'd been illuminated. One pilot had reported a hit, then immediately gone off the air—but a hit from *what?* How could the same aircraft that killed the Kamis have gotten the fighters, too? The Americans had only four of their expensive new F-22s. And the Kamis had been tracking those. What evil magic had . . . ? But that was the problem. They didn't know.

The air-defense specialists, and the engineers who had developed the world's finest airborne radar systems, shook their heads, looking down, feeling immense personal disgrace and not knowing why. Of the ten such aircraft built, five were destroyed, and only four others available for service, and all they knew for sure was that they couldn't risk them over water anymore. Orders were also issued to deploy the standby E-2C aircraft that the E-767s had replaced, but those were less capable American designs, and the officers had to accept the fact that somehow the air defenses of their country had been severely compromised.

It was seven in the evening, and Ryan was about to leave for home when the secure fax machine started buzzing. His phone started ringing even before paper appeared.

"Can't you people ever keep secrets?" an accented voice demanded angrily.

"Sergey? What's the problem?"

"Koga is our best chance for terminating hostilities, and someone on your side told the Japanese that he's in contact with you!" Golovko nearly shouted from his home, where it was three in the morning. "Do you want to kill the man?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, will you for Christ's sake settle the hell down?" Jack sat back down in his chair, and by this time he had the page to read. It had come directly from the U.S. Embassy communications people in Moscow, doubtless on orders of a sort from the RVS. "Oh, shit." Pause. "Okay, we got him out of trouble, didn't we?"

"You're penetrated at a high level, Ivan Emmetovich."

"Well, you should know how easy it is to do that."

"We're working to find out who it is, I assure you." The voice was still angry.

Wouldn't that be great? Jack thought behind painfully closed eyes. *The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service testifies in Federal District Court.*

"Not many people know this. I'll get back to you."

"I am so pleased to hear that you restrict sensitive information to such trustworthy people, Jack." The line went dead. Ryan depressed the switch and punched up another number from memory.

"Murray."

"Ryan. Dan, I need you here in a hurry." Jack's next call was to Scott Adler. Then he walked off again toward the President's office. The positive news he had to report, Ryan supposed, was that the other side had used important information clumsily. Yamata again, he was sure, acting like a businessman rather than a professional spook. He hadn't even troubled himself to disguise the information he had, not caring that it would also reveal its source. The man didn't know his limitations. Sooner or later he'd pay dearly for that weakness.

Jackson's last set of orders before heading off to the Pacific had involved ordering twelve B-1B bombers of the 384th Bomb Wing to fly east from their base in southern Kansas, first to Lajes in the Azores, staging on from there toward Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The flight of ten thousand miles took more than a day, and when the aircraft arrived at the base farthest from America of any, the crews were thoroughly exhausted. The three KC-lOs that brought along ground crewmen and support equipment landed soon thereafter, and the entire assembly of people was soon asleep.

“What do you mean?” Yamata demanded. It was a chilling thought. His own home had been invaded. By whom?

“I mean Koga has disappeared and Kaneda is dead. One of your security people is still alive, but all he saw was two or three *gaijin*. They disabled him and he doesn’t even know how.”

“What is being done?”

“It’s being handled as a police matter,” Kazuo Taoka told his boss. “Of course I didn’t tell them about Koga.”

“He must be found, and quickly.” Yamata looked out the window. Luck was still with him. The call, after all, had caught him at home.

“I don’t know—”

“I do. Thank you for the information.” Yamata killed the line, then placed another call.

Murray hurried through White House security, having left his service pistol in his official car. His month had not been any better than the rest of the government’s. He’d blown the Linders case with a rookie mistake. Brandy plus a cold medication, he said to himself yet again, wondering just what Ryan and the President would have to say to him about that. The criminal case had come apart, and his only satisfaction was that at least he had not brought a possibly innocent man to trial and further embarrassed the Bureau. Whether or not Ed Kealty was really guilty of anything was a side issue for the FBI executive. If you couldn’t prove it to a jury, then the defendant was innocent, and that was that. And the man would soon be leaving government service for good. That was something, Murray told himself as a Secret Service agent conducted him not to Ryan’s office, but to the one at the opposite corner of the West Wing.

“Hi, Dan,” Jack said, standing when he came in.

“Mr. President,” Murray said first. He didn’t know the other man in the room.

“Hi, I’m Scott Adler.”

“Hello, sir.” Murray took his hand. Oh, that was the guy running the negotiations with the Japs, he realized.

Some work had already been accomplished. Ryan could not believe that Adler was the leak. The only others who knew were himself, the President, Brett Hanson, Ed and Mary Pat, and perhaps a few secretaries. And Christopher Cook.

“How close are we keeping tabs on Japanese diplomats?” Ryan asked.

“They don’t move around without somebody keeping an eye on

them," Murray assured them. "We're talking espionage?"

"Probably. Something very important leaked out."

"It has to be Cook," Adler said. "It just has to be."

"Okay, there are some things you need to know," the National Security Advisor said. "Less than three hours ago we slam-dunked their air defenses. We think we killed ten or eleven aircraft." He could have gone further, but did not. It was still possible that Adler was the leak, after all, and the next step of Operation ZORRO had to come as a surprise.

"That's going to make them nervous, and they still have nuclear weapons. A bad combination, Jack," the Deputy Secretary of State pointed out.

Nukes? Murray thought. *Jesus.*

"Any changes in their negotiating position?" the President asked.

Adler shook his head. "None, sir. They will offer us Guam back, but they want the rest of the Marianas for themselves. They're not backing off a dot from that, and nothing I've said has shaken them loose."

"Okay." Ryan turned. "Dan, we've been in contact with Mogataru Koga—"

"He's the ex-Prime Minister, right?" Dan asked, wanting to make sure he was up to speed on this. Jack nodded.

"Correct. We have two CIA officers in Japan covered as Russians, and they met with Koga under that cover. But Koga got himself kidnapped by the guy who we think is running the whole show. He told Koga that he knew about contacts with *Americans*."

"It has to be Cook," Adler said again. "Nobody else on the delegation knows, and Chris does my informal contacts with their number-two, Seiji Nagumo." The diplomat paused, then let his anger show. "It's just perfect, isn't it?"

"Espionage investigation?" Murray asked. Significantly, he saw, the President let Ryan handle the answer.

"Fast and quiet, Dan."

"And then?" Adler wanted to know.

"If it's him, we flip the bastard right over." Murray nodded at once on hearing the FBI euphemism.

"What do you mean, Jack?" Durling asked.

"It's a real opportunity. They think they have a good intel source, and they've shown the willingness to use the information from it. Okay," Jack said, "we can use that to our advantage. We give them some juicy information and then we stick it right up their ass."

* * *

The most immediate need was to buttress the air defenses for the Home Islands. That realization caused no small amount of thinking at Japanese defense headquarters, and most uncomfortably, it was based on partial information, not the precise sort of data that had been used to prepare the overall operational plan that the military high command was trying to stick with. The best radar warning systems their country owned were seaborne on the four Kongo-class Aegis destroyers patrolling off the northern Marianas. They were formidable ships with self-contained air-defense systems. Not quite as mobile as the E-767s, they were more powerful, however, and able to take care of themselves. Before dawn, therefore, an order was flashed out for the four-ship squadron to race north to establish a radar-picket line east of the Home Islands. After all, the U.S. Navy wasn't doing anything, and if their country's defenses came back together, there was yet a good chance for a diplomatic solution.

On *Mutsu*, Admiral Sato saw the logic of it when he receipted the signal and gave orders for his ships to go to their maximum sustained speed. Nonetheless, he was concerned. He knew that his SPY radar systems *could* detect stealthy aircraft, something the Americans had demonstrated in tests against their own, and his ships were sufficiently powerful that American aircraft would not lightly engage them. What worried him was that for the first time his country was not acting but *re*acting to American moves. That, he hoped, was temporary.

"That's interesting," Jones observed at once. The traces were only a few minutes old, but there were two of them, probably representing more than two ships in a tight formation, making noise and with a slight northerly bearing change.

"Surface ships, sure as hell," OT2/c Boomer observed. "This looks like pounding—" He stopped when Jones circled another trace in red.

"And that's a blade-rate. Thirty-plus knots, and that means warships in one big hurry." Jones walked over to the phone and called ComSubPac. "Bart? Ron? We have something here. That 'can squadron that's been operating around Pagan,"

"What about it?" Mancuso asked.

"They seem to be doing a speed-run north. We have anybody up waiting for them?" Then Jones remembered several inquiries about the waters around Honshu. Mancuso wasn't telling him everything, as was to be expected for operational matters. The way he evaded the question would be the real answer, the civilian thought.

"Can you plot me a course?"

Bingo. "Give us a little while, an hour maybe? The data is still a little fuzzy, Skipper."

The voice was not overly disappointed at the answer, Jones noted. "Aye, sir. We'll keep you posted."

"Good work, Ron."

Jones replaced the phone and looked around. "Senior Chief? Let's start doing a plot on these traces." Somewhere north, he thought, somebody was waiting. He wondered who it might be, and came up with one answer.

Time was working in the opposite direction now. Hiroshi Goto opened his cabinet meeting at ten in the morning, local time, which was midnight in Washington, where his negotiators were. It was clear that the Americans were making a contest of it, though some in the room thought that it could just be a negotiating ploy, that they had to make some show of force in order to be taken seriously at the negotiating table. Yes, they had stung the air-defense people badly, but that was all. America could not and would not launch systematic attacks against Japan. The risks were too great. Japan had nuclear-tipped missiles, for one thing. For another, Japan had sophisticated air defenses despite the events of the previous night, and then there was simple arithmetic. How many bombers did America have? How many could strike at their country even if there were nothing to stop them? How long would such a bombing campaign take? Did America have the political will for it? The answers to all of these questions were favorable to their country, the cabinet members thought, their eyes still fixed on the ultimate goal, whose shining prize glittered before them, and besides, each man in this room had a patron of sorts to make sure that they took the proper spin on things. Except Goto, they knew, whose patron was elsewhere at the moment.

For the moment, the Ambassador in Washington would object strongly to the American attack on Japan, and note that it was not a helpful act, and that there would be no further concessions until they were stopped. It would be further noted that any attack on the Japanese mainland would be considered an exceedingly grave matter; after all, Japan had not attacked vital American interests directly . . . yet. That threat, behind the thinnest of veils, would surely bring some rationality to the situation.

Goto nodded agreement to the suggestions, wishing that his own patron were about to support him and knowing that Yamata had already bypassed him and spoken with defense officials directly. He'd have to talk to Raizo about that.

"And if they come back?" he asked.

"We'll have our defenses at maximum alert tonight, and when the destroyers arrive on station, they will be as formidable as before. Yes,

they have made their show of force, but they have not as yet so much as flown over our territory."

"We must do more than that," Goto said, recalling his instructions. "We can put more pressure on the Americans by making our ultimate weapons public."

"No!" a minister said at once. "That will cause chaos *here!*"

"It will also cause chaos there," Goto replied, somewhat weakly, the rest of the cabinet thought. Again, they saw, he was voicing the thoughts and orders of someone else. They knew who that was. "It will force them to alter the tone of their negotiations."

"It could easily force them to consider a grave attack on us."

"They have too much to lose," Goto insisted.

"And we do not?" the Minister shot back, wondering just where his loyalty to his patron ended and his loyalty to his countrymen began. "What if they decide to preempt?"

"They cannot. They don't have the weapons to do it. Our missiles have been very carefully located."

"Yes, and our air-defense systems are invincible, too," another minister snorted.

"Perhaps the best thing to do is for our ambassador to suggest that we might reveal that we have the atomic weapons. Perhaps that would be enough," a third minister suggested. There were some nods around the table, and Goto, despite his instructions, agreed to that.

The hardest part was keeping warm, despite all the coldweather gear they had brought along. Richter snuggled himself into the sleeping bag, and allowed himself to be vaguely guilty for the fact that the Rangers had to maintain listening outposts around the rump airfield they'd established on this frigid mountainside. His principal worry was a system failure in one of the three aircraft. Despite all the redundancies built into them, there were several items which, if they broke, could not be fixed. The Rangers knew how to fuel the birds, and how to load weapons, but that was about it. Richter had already decided to let them worry about ground security. If so much as a platoon showed up in this high meadow, they were doomed. The Rangers could kill every intruder, but one radio call could have a battalion here in hours, and there was no surviving that. Special-operations, he thought. They were good so long as they worked, just like everything else you did in uniform, but the current situation had a safety margin so thin that you could see through it. Then there was the issue of getting out, the pilot reminded himself. He might as well have joined the Navy.

“Nice house.”

The rules were different in time of war, Murray told himself. Computers made it easier, a fact that the Bureau had been slow to learn. Assembling his team of young agents, the first task had been to run nothing more sophisticated than a credit check, which gave an address. The house was somewhat upscale, but within the reach, barely, of a supergrade federal employee if he’d saved his pennies over the years. That was something Cook had not done, he saw. The man did all his banking at First Virginia, and the FBI had a man able to break into the bank records, far enough to see that, like most people, Christopher Cook had lived largely from one biweekly paycheck to the next, saving a mere fourteen thousand dollars along the way, probably for the college education of his kids, and that, Murray knew, was on the dumb side of optimistic, what with the cost of American higher education. More to the point, when he’d settled on the new house, the savings had gone untouched. He had a mortgage, but the amount was less than two hundred thousand dollars, and with the hundred-eighty realized from the sale of his previous home, that left a sizable gap that bank records could not explain. Where had the other money come from? A call to a contact at the IRS, proposing a possible case of tax evasion, had turned up other computerized records, enough to show that there was no additional family income to explain it; a check of antecedents showed that the parents of both the Cooks, all deceased, had not left either husband or wife with a windfall. Their cars, a further check showed, were paid for, and while one of them was four years old, another was a Buick that probably had the original smell still inside, and that also had been purchased with cash. What they had was a man living beyond his means, and while the government had often enough failed to make note of that in espionage cases, it had learned a little of late.

“Well?” Murray asked his people.

“It’s not a case yet, but it sure as hell smells like one,” the next-senior agent thought. “We need to visit some banks and get a look at more records.” For which a court order was required, but they already knew which judge to go to for that. The FBI always knew which judges were tame and which were not.

Similar checks, of course, had been run on Scott Adler, who, they found, was divorced, living alone in a Georgetown flat, paying alimony and child support, driving a nice car, but otherwise very normal. Secretary Hanson was quite wealthy from years of practicing law, and a poor subject for attempted bribery. The extensive background checks run on all the subjects for their government offices

and security clearances were reexamined and found to be normal, except for Cook's recent auto and home purchases. Somewhere along the line they'd find a canceled check drawn on some bank or other to explain the easy house settlement. That was one nice thing about banks. They had records on everything, and it was always on some sort of paper, and it always left a trail.

"Okay, we will proceed on the assumption that he's our boy." The Deputy Assistant Director looked around at the bright group of agents who, like him, had neglected to consider the possibility that Barbara Linders had been on a prescription medication that had acted with the brandy Ed Kealty had once kept close at all times. Their collective embarrassment was as great as his own. Not an entirely bad thing, Dan thought. You worked hard to restore your credibility after a goof.

Jackson felt the hard thump of the carrier landing, then the snapping deceleration of the arrestor wire as he was pressed hard into the back-facing passenger seat of the COD. Another odious experience over, he thought. He much preferred to land on a carrier with his own hands on the controls, uncomfortable with trusting his life to some teenage lieutenant, or so they now all looked to the Admiral. He felt the aircraft turn to the right, heading off to an unoccupied portion of the flight deck, and presently a door opened and he hustled out. A deck crewman saluted, pointing him to an open door in the carrier's island structure. The ship's bell was there, and as soon as he got under cover, a Marine saluted, and a bosun's mate worked the striker on the bell, announcing into the 1-MC system, "Task Force Seventy-Seven, arriving."

"Welcome aboard, sir," Bud Sanchez said with a grin, looking very natty in his flight suit. "Captain's on the bridge, sir."

"Then let's get to work."

"How's the leg, Robby?" the CAG asked halfway up the third ladder.

"Stiff as hell after all the sitting." It had taken time. The briefing at Pearl Harbor, the Air Force flight to Eniwetok, then waiting for the C-2A to show up to bring him to his command. Jackson was beyond jet lag, but for all that, eager now, about noon, he thought, according to where the sun was.

"Is the cover story holding?" Sanchez asked next.

"No telling, Bud. Until we get there." Jackson allowed a Marine to open the door to the wheelhouse. His leg really was stiff, just one more reminder that flight operations were over for him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," the CO said, looking up from a sheaf of dispatches.

The roar of afterburners told Jackson that *Johnnie Reb* was

conducting flight operations, and he looked quickly forward to see a Tomcat leap off the port-forward cat. The carrier was about halfway between the Carolines and Wake. The latter island was somewhat closer to the Marianas, and for that reason was not being used for anything. Wake had a fine airfield, still supported by the Air Force. Eniwetok was just a recovery field, known to be such, and therefore made a more covert base for staging aircraft, if a far less convenient one for maintaining them.

"Okay, what's been happening since I left Pearl?" Jackson asked.

"Some good news." The CO handed over one of the dispatches.

"It's definite as hell," Jones said, leaning over the sonar traces.

"They sure are in a hurry," Mancuso agreed, his eyes plotting speed and distance and not liking what they saw, further confirming what Jones suspected.

"Who's waiting for them?"

"Ron, we can't—"

"Sir, I can't be much help to you if I don't know," Jones observed reasonably. "You think I'm a security risk or something?"

Mancuso thought for a few seconds before answering. "*Tennessee*'s lying right overtop the Eshunadaoki Seamount, supporting a special operation that goes off in the next twenty-four hours."

"And the rest of the Ohios?"

"Just off Ulithi Atoll, heading north a little slower now. The SSN force will lead the carrier in. The Ohios are tasked to get inside early." Which all made sense, Jones thought. The boomers were too slow to operate effectively with a carrier task force, which he'd also been tracking on SOSUS, but they were ideal for getting inside a patrol line of SSKs . . . so long as the skippers were smart about it. There was always that consideration.

"The Jap 'cans will be about on top of *Tennessee* right about—"

"I know."

"What else do you have for me?" ComSubPac asked briskly.

Jones led him over to the wall chart. There were now seven SSK-silhouettes circled on the display, with only one "?" -marked. That one, they saw, was in the passage between the northernmost of the Marianas, called Moug, and the Bonins, the most famous of which was Iwo Jima.

"We've been trying to concentrate on this passage," Jones said. "I've gotten a few twitches, but nothing firm enough to plot. If I were them, though, I'd cover that area."

"So would I," Chambers confirmed. One likely move for the Americans would be to put a submarine patrol line astride the Luzon

Strait, to attempt to interdict oil traffic to the Japanese mainland. That was a political decision, however. Pacific Fleet did not yet have authorization to attack Japanese merchantmen, and intelligence reported that at the moment most of the tanker traffic in and out was composed of flag-of-convenience shipping, attacks on which had all sorts of political ramifications. *We couldn't risk offending Liberia*, Mancuso told himself with a grimace. *Could we?*

"Why the speed-run for the 'cans back home?" Jones asked. It was not something that appeared very sensible.

"We hammered their air defenses last night."

"Okay, so they'll scoot west of the Bonins . . . that means I'll lose them soon. Anyway, their speed of advance is thirty-two, and their course is still a little fuzzy, but homeward bound, sure as hell." Jones paused. "We're starting to play with their heads, eh?"

Mancuso allowed himself a smile for once. "Always."

44

from one who knows the score . . .

"Does it have to be this way?" Durling asked.

"We've run the simulation twenty times," Ryan said, flipping through the data yet again. "It's a matter of certainty. Sir, we have to take them all the way out."

The President looked at the satellite overheads again. "We're still not one hundred percent sure, are we?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing is ever that sure, no. Our data looks pretty good—the overheads, I mean. The Russians have developed data, too, and they have as much reason to want to be right as we do. There are ten birds here. They're dug in deep, and the site seems to have been selected deliberately for relative immunity from attack. Those are all positive indicators. This is not a deception operation. The next question is making sure that we can hit them all. And we have to do it quickly."

"Why?"

"Because they're moving ships back toward the coast that are marginally capable of detecting the aircraft."

"No other way?"

"No, Mr. President. If this is going to work, it has to be tonight." And the night, Ryan saw, checking his watch, had already started on the far side of the world.

"We protest in the strongest terms the American attack on our country," the Ambassador began. "We have refrained at all times from doing such things, and we expected a similar courtesy from the United States."

"Mr. Ambassador, I am not consulted on military operations. Have American forces struck your mainland?" Adler asked by way of reply.

"You know quite well what they have done, and you must also know that it is a precursor move to a full attack. It is important that you understand," the diplomat went on, "that such an attack could result in the gravest possible consequences." He let that phrase hang

in the air like a cloud of lethal gas. Adler took a moment before responding.

"I would remind you first of all that we did not begin this conflict. I would further remind you that your country made a deliberate attack to cripple our economy—"

"As you have done!" the Ambassador shot back, showing real anger that might have been a cover for something else.

"Excuse me, sir, but I believe it is my turn to speak." Adler waited patiently for the Ambassador to calm down; it was plain that neither one had gotten a full night's sleep. "I would further remind you that your country has killed American servicemen, and if you expected us to refrain from corresponding moves, then you were possibly mistaken in that expectation."

"We have never attacked vital American interests."

"The freedom and security of American citizens is ultimately my country's *only* vital interest, sir."

The acrimonious change in atmosphere could hardly have been more obvious, as was the reason for it. America was making a move of some sort, and the move would clearly not be a subtle one. The people on both sides of the table, again on the top floor of the State Department, might well have been carved from stone. No one wanted to concede anything, not even a blink, at the formal sessions. Heads might have turned fractionally when the leaders of the respective delegations took their turns to speak, but no more than that. The absence of facial expressions would have done professional gamblers proud—but that was precisely the game being played, even without cards or dice. The discussions never got as far before the first recess as a return to the possession of the Marianas.

"Christ, Scott," Cook said, walking through the doors to the terrace. From the circles under his eyes, the chief negotiator, he saw, had been up most of the night, probably at the White House. The primary season would be driving this mess now. The media were harping on the crippled ships at Pearl Harbor, and TV coverage was also coming from Saipan and Guam now, people speaking with obscured faces and disguised voices—on one hand about how they wanted to be American citizens, and on the other how much they feared being on those islands if a real counterattack developed. The ambivalence was exactly the sort of thing to confuse the public, and opinion polls were divided, though with a majority expressing outrage at what had been done, and a slightly smaller majority expressing the wish for a diplomatic solution. If possible. A plurality of 46 percent, the *Washington Post*/ABC poll had stated this morning, didn't see much hope of that. The wild card, however, was the Japanese possession of nuclear arms, which had been announced by neither country, in both

cases for fear of panicking the respective populations. Everyone in these sessions had really hoped for a peaceful settlement, but much of that hope had just evaporated, and in a period of a mere two hours.

"It's being politically driven now," Adler explained, looking away to let out his own tension with a long breath. "It had to happen, Chris."

"What about their nukes?"

The Deputy Secretary of State shrugged uneasily. "We don't think they're that crazy."

"We don't *think* they are? What genius came up with that assessment?" Cook demanded.

"Ryan, who else?" Adler paused. "He's running this. He thinks the next smart move is to blockade—well, declare a maritime exclusion zone, like the Brits did down at the Falklands. Cut off their oil," Adler explained.

"Nineteen forty-one all over again? I thought that bonehead was a historian! That's what *started* a world war, in case anybody forgot!"

"The threat of it—well, if Koga has the guts to speak out, we think their government'll come apart. So," Scott went on, "find out what the other side—I mean, what sort of strength the opposition really has."

"It's a dangerous game we're playing, man."

"Sure enough," Adler agreed, looking right in the man's eyes.

Cook turned and walked to the other side of the terrace. Before, it had seemed a normal part of the proceedings to Adler, part of the rubric of serious negotiations, and how stupid that had been, for the real proceedings to be handled over coffee and tea and cookies because the real negotiators didn't want to risk making statements that . . . well, those *were* the rules, he reminded himself. And the other side had made very skillful use of them. He watched the two men talk. The Japanese Ambassador looked far more uneasy than his principal subordinate. *What are you really thinking?* Adler would have killed to know that. It was too easy to think of the man as a personal enemy now, which would be a mistake. He was a professional, serving his country as he was paid and sworn to do. Their eyes met briefly, both of them deliberately looking away from Nagumo and Cook, and the professional impassivity broke for a moment, just an instant really, as both men realized that it was war they were talking about, life and death, issues imposed on them by others. It was a strange moment of comradeship as both men wondered how things had broken down so badly and how grossly their professional skills were being misused by others.

"That would be a very foolish move," Nagumo said pleasantly, forcing a smile.

"If you have a pipeline to Koga, you better start using it."

"I have, but it's too soon for that, Christopher. We need *something back*. Don't your people understand that?"

"Durling can't get reelected if he trades away thirty-some-thousand U.S. citizens." It really was that simple. "If it means killing a few thousand of your people, he'll do that. And he probably thinks that threatening your economy directly is a cheap way out."

"That would change if your people knew—"

"And how will your citizens react when they find it out?" Cook knew Japan well enough to understand that the ordinary men and women on the street regarded nuclear arms with revulsion. Interestingly, Americans had come to the same view. Maybe sense was breaking out, the diplomat thought, but not quickly enough, and not in this context.

"They will understand that those weapons are vital to our new interests," Nagumo answered quickly, surprising the American. "But you are right, it is also vital that they never be used, and we must forestall your efforts to strangle our economy. People will die if that happens."

"People are dying now, Seiji, from what your boss said earlier." With that, the two men headed back to their respective leaders.

"Well?" Adler asked.

"He says he's been in contact with Koga."

That part of it was so obvious that the FBI hadn't thought of it, and then nearly had had kittens when he'd suggested it, but Adler knew Cook. He was enjoying his part in this diplomatic effort, enjoying it just a little too much, enjoying the importance he'd acquired. Even now Cook did not know what he had blurted out, just like that. Not quite definite evidence of wrongdoing, but enough to persuade Adler that Cook was almost certainly the leak, and now Cook had probably just leaked something else, though it was something Ryan had thought up. Adler reminded himself that years ago, when Ryan had just been part of an outside group brought in to review CIA procedures, he'd come to high-level attention from his invention of the Canary Trap. Well, it had been sprung again.

The weather this morning was cold enough that the delegations headed back inside a little early for the next set of talks. This one might actually go somewhere, Adler told himself.

* * *

Colonel Michael Zacharias handled the mission briefing. It was routine despite the fact that the B-2s had never fired a shot in anger—actually

dropped a shot, but the principle held. The 509th Bomb Group dated back to 1944, formed under the command of one Colonel Paul Tibbets, U.S. Army Air Force, fittingly, the Colonel thought, at a base in Utah, his own family home. The wing commander, a brigadier, would fly the lead aircraft. The wing XO would fly number two. As deputy commander operations, he would take in number three. His was the most distasteful part of the job, but it was sufficiently important that he'd considered the rules on ethics in war and decided that the mission parameters fell within the confines that lawyers and philosophers had placed upon warriors.

It was bitterly cold at Elmendorf, and vans conveyed the flight crews to the waiting bombers. That night they would fly with crews of three. The B-2 had been designed for a pilot and copilot only, with provision for a third crewman to work defensive systems which, the contractor had promised, the copilot could do, really. But real combat operations always required a safety margin, and even before the Spirits had left Missouri, the additional three hundred pounds of gear had been added along with the additional two hundred or so pounds of electronic-warfare officer.

There was so much that was odd about the aircraft. Traditionally U.S. Air Force birds had tail numbers, but the B-2 didn't *have* a tail, and so it was painted on the door for the nose gear. A penetrating bomber, it flew at high altitude rather than low—though the contract had been altered in mid-design to allow for a low-flight profile—like an airliner for good fuel economy. One of the most expensive aircraft ever built, it combined the wingspan of a DC-10 with near total invisibility. Painted slate gray for hiding in the night sky, it was now the shining hope for ending a war. A bomber, it was hoped that its mission would go as peacefully as possible. Strapping in, it was easier for Zacharias to think of it as a bombing mission.

The four GE engines lit off in turn, the ribbon gauges moving to full idle, already drinking fuel at the same rate as if it were at full power at cruising altitude, while the copilot and EWO checked out their onboard systems and found them good. Then, one at a time, the trio of bombers taxied off the ramp and into the runway.

"They're making it easy," Jackson thought aloud, now in the carrier's Combat Information Center, below the flight deck. His overall operational plan had allowed for the possibility, but he hadn't allowed himself to expect it. His most dangerous adversary was the four Aegis destroyers the Japanese had dispatched to guard the Marianas. The Navy had not yet learned to defeat the radar-missile combination, and he expected the job to cost him aircraft and crews, but sure enough,

America now had the initiative of sorts. The other side was moving to meet his possible actions, and that was always a losing game.

Robby could feel it now. *John Stennis* was moving at full power, heading northwest at thirty knots or so. He checked his watch and wondered if the rest of the operations he'd planned in the Pentagon were going off.

This was a little different. Richter powered up his Comanche as he had the night before, wondering how often he could get away with this, and reminding himself of the axiom in military operations that the same thing rarely worked more than once. A pity that the guy who'd thought this idea up had not known that fact. His last mental lapse was to wonder whether it had been that Navy fighter jock he'd met at Nellis all those months before. Probably not, he judged. That guy was too much of a pro.

Again the Rangers stood by with their dinky little extinguishers, and again they proved unnecessary, and again Richter lifted off without incident, climbing immediately up the slopes of Shuraishi-*san*, east for Tokyo, but this time with two other aircraft behind him.

"He wants to see Durling personally," Adler said. "He said that at the end of the morning session."

"What else?" Ryan asked. Typically, the diplomat had covered his business first.

"Cook's our boy. He told me that his contact has been working with Koga."

"Did you—"

"Yes, I told him what you wanted. What about the Ambassador?"

Ryan checked his watch. The timing had to be so close, and he didn't need this complication, but neither had he expected the other side to cooperate. "Give it ninety minutes. I'll clear it with the Boss."

The electronic-warfare officer also drew the duty of checking out the weapons systems. Able to carry eighty 500-pound bombs, the bomb bays were large enough for only eight of the two-thousand-pound penetrators, and 8 times 3 made 24. It was another exercise in arithmetic that made the final part of the mission necessary, which the carriage of nuclear weapons would have made entirely unnecessary, but the orders didn't contemplate that, and Colonel Zacharias didn't

object. He had a conscience to live with.

"Everything's green, sir," the EWO said. Not too surprising, as every weapon had been checked out personally by a senior weapons officer, a chief master sergeant, and an engineer from the contractor, individually run through a dozen simulations, and then handled like fresh fruit all the way into the bomb bay. They had to be if they wanted to maintain the manufacturer's guaranteed P_k of 95%, though even that wasn't enough for certainty. They needed more aircraft for the mission, but there were no more aircraft to be had, and working three Spirits together was tricky enough.

"Starting to get some fuzz, bearing two-two-five. Looks like an E-2 for starters," the EWO reported. Ten minutes later it was clear that every ground-based radar in the country was lit up to full power. Well, that's why they'd built the thing, all three members of the crew thought.

"Okay, give me a course," Zacharias ordered, checking his own screen.

"One-nine-zero looks good for the moment." The instruments identified every radar by type, and the smartest move was to exploit the oldest of them, happily enough an American design whose characteristics they knew quite well.

Forward of the B-2s, the Lightnings were working again, this time alone and covertly, approaching Hokkaido from the east while the bombers behind took a more southerly course. The exercise was more mental than physical now. One of the E-767s was up, this time well back over land, and probably with fighters in close attendance while the less capable E-2Cs patrolled just offshore. They'd be working the fighter pilots hard now, and sure enough, his threat receiver showed that some Eagles were searchlighting their APG-70 radars around the sky. *Well, time to make them pay for that.* His two-plane element turned slightly right and headed for the two nearest Eagles.

Two were still on the ground, one of them with a scaffolding around the radome. Maybe that was the one undergoing overhaul, Richter thought, approaching cautiously from the west. There were still hills to hide behind, though one of them had a radar on it, a big, powerful air-defense system. His onboard computer plotted a null-area for him, and he flew lower to follow that in. He ended up three miles from the radar site, but below it, and then it was time to do what the Comanche was designed for.

Richter lifted up over the final hilltop, and his Longbow radar swept the area before him. Its computerized memory selected the two E-767s from its library of hostile shapes and lit them up on the weapons display. The touch screen at Richter's left knee showed them as icons numbered 1 and 2 and identified as what they were. The pilot selected Hellfire from his short list of weapons options, the weapons-bay doors opened, and he fired twice. The Hellfire missiles roared off the rails, heading downhill toward the air base, five miles away.

Target Four was an apartment building, happily the top floor. ZORRO-Three had taken a southerly route into the city, and now its pilot slewed his helicopter sideways, worried about being spotted from the ground but wanting to find a window with a light on. There. Not a light, the pilot thought. More like a TV. Good enough in any case. He used the manual-guidance mode to lock on the spot of blue light.

Kozo Matsuda now wondered how he'd gotten into this mess in the first place, but the answer always came up the same. He'd overextended his business, and then been forced to ally himself with Yamata—but where was his friend now? Saipan? Why? They needed him here. The Cabinet was getting nervous, and though Matsuda had his man in that room to do what he was told to do, he'd learned a few hours earlier that the ministers were thinking on their own now, and that wasn't good—but neither were recent developments. The Americans had breached his country's defenses to some extent, a most unwelcome surprise. Didn't they understand that the war had to be ended, the Marianas secured once and for all, and America forced to accept the changes? It seemed that power was the only thing they understood, but while Matsuda and his colleagues had thought that they had the ability to employ power, the Americans weren't intimidated the way they were supposed to be.

What if they . . . what if they don't *cave in?* Yamata-san had assured them all that they had to, but he'd assured them also that he could wreak chaos in their financial system, and somehow the bastards had reversed that more adroitly than one of Mushashi's swordfights, such as he was now watching on late-night TV. There was no way out now. They had to see it through or they would all face a ruin worse than what his . . . faulty judgment had almost inflicted on his conglomerate. Faulty judgment? Matsuda asked himself. Well, yes, but he'd weathered that by allying himself with Yamata, and if his colleague would only return to Tokyo and help them all keep the

government in line, then maybe—

The channel on the TV changed. Odd. Matsuda picked up the controller and changed it back. Then it changed again.

* * *

Fifteen seconds out, the pilot of ZORRO-Three activated the infrared laser used to guide the antitank missile in for terminal flight. His Comanche was in autohover now, allowing him essentially to hand-fly the weapon. It never occurred to him that the infrared beam of the laser was on the same frequency as the simple device his kids used at home to switch from Nickelodeon to the Disney Channel.

Damn the thing! Matsuda flipped the channel back a third time, and still it reverted back to a news broadcast. He hadn't seen this movie in years, and what was wrong with the damned TV? It was even one of his own large-screen models. The industrialist got out of bed and walked over to it, aiming the channel-controller right at the receptor on the front of the TV. And it changed again.

"Bakayaro!" he growled, kneeling down in front of it and changing the channel manually, and yet once more it filipped back to the news. The lights were out in his bedroom, and at the last second Matsuda saw a yellow glow on the screen of the TV. A reflection? Of what? He turned to see a yellow semicircle of flame approaching his window, a second or so before the Hellfire missile struck the steel I-beam just next to his bed.

ZORRO-Three noted the explosion on the top floor of the apartment building, turned abruptly left, and tracked in on the next target. This was really something, the pilot thought, better even than his minor part in Task Force NORMANDY, six years before. He'd never really wanted to be a snakeeater, but here he was, doing their work. The next shot was similar to the first. He had to blink his eyes clear, but he was sure that anyone within twenty meters of the missile hit would not have lived to tell the tale.

The first Hellfire took the plane with crewmen around it. Mercifully it hit the E-767 right on the nose, and the explosion may have spared

some of them, Richter thought. The second missile, like the first guided exclusively by the computer, blew the tail off the other one. Japan was down to two of the things now, both probably aloft somewhere, and he couldn't do anything about that. They wouldn't even come back here, but to make sure of it, Richter turned, selected his cannon, and strafed the air-defense radar site on the way out.

Binichi Murakami was just leaving the building after a lengthy chat with Tanzan Itagake. He would meet with his friends in the Cabinet tomorrow and counsel them to stop this madness before it grew too late. Yes, his country had nuclear missiles, but they had been built in the expectation that their mere existence would be sufficient to prevent their use. Even the thought of revealing their presence on his country's soil—rock, as it turned out—threatened to destroy the political coalition that Goto had in place, and he understood now that you could order political figures only so far before they realized that they did have power of a sort.

A beggar in the street was the thought that kept coming back. But for that, he might not have been swayed by Yamata's arguments. But for that, he tried to tell himself. Then the sky turned white over his head. Murakami's bodyguard was next to him and flung him to the ground next to the car while glass rained on them. The sound of the event had hardly passed before he heard the echoes of another several kilometers away.

"What is this?" he tried to ask, but when he moved, he felt liquid on his face, and it was blood from his employee's arm, slashed open from glass. The man bit his lip and kept his dignity, but he was badly hurt. Murakami helped him into the car and ordered his driver to head for the nearest hospital. As the man nodded at the order, yet another flash appeared in the sky.

"Two more baby seals," the Colonel said quietly to himself. He'd gotten within five miles before launching his Slammers from behind them, and only one of the Eagles had even attempted to evade, that one too late, though the pilot punched out and was now floating to the ground. That was enough for now. He turned his Lightning northeast and headed out at Mach 1.5. His flight of four had slashed a hole in the Hokkaido defenses, and behind them the Japanese Air Force would move aircraft to plug the gap, fulfilling his mission for the night. For years the Colonel had told everyone who would listen that combat wasn't about fairness, and he'd laughed at the cruel

euphemism for a stealthy aircraft in combat against a conventional plane. Killing baby seals. But they weren't seals, and it was the next thing to murder, and the officer raged at the necessity for what he was doing.

The EWO had steered them between two air-defense radars, and within a hundred miles of an orbiting E-2C. There was all manner of radio chatter, terse and excited, from ground stations to fighters, all to their north now. Landfall was over a town named Arai. The B-2A was at forty-three thousand feet, cruising smoothly at just under six hundred knots. Under the first layer of the fabric-based skin, a copper mesh absorbed much of the electronic energy now sweeping over their aircraft. It was part of the stealth design to be found in any high-school physics book. The copper filaments gathered in much of the energy, much like a simple radio antenna, converting it to heat that dissipated in the cold night air. The rest of the signals hit the inner structure, to be deflected elsewhere, or so everyone hoped.

Ryan met the Ambassador and escorted him into the West Wing, further surrounded by five Secret Service agents. The atmosphere was what diplomats called "frank." There was no overt impoliteness, but the atmosphere was tense and minus the usual pleasantries that marked such meetings. No words were exchanged beyond those required, and by the time they entered the Oval Office Jack was mainly worried about what threat, if any, would be delivered at this most inopportune of moments.

"Mr. Ambassador, won't you please take a seat," Durling said.

"Thank you, Mr. President."

Ryan picked one between the visiting diplomat and Roger Durling. It was an automatic action to protect his president, but unnecessary. Two of the agents had come in and would not leave the room. One stood at the door. The other stood directly behind the Ambassador.

"I understand you have something you wish to tell me," Durling observed.

The diplomat's delivery was matter-of-fact. "My government wishes me to inform you that we will soon make public our possession of strategic weapons. We wish to give you fair warning of that."

"That will be seen as an overt threat to our country, Mr. Ambassador," Ryan said, performing his task of shielding the President from the necessity of speaking directly.

"It is only a threat if you make it so."

"You are aware," Jack noted next, "that we too have nuclear arms which can be delivered to your country."

"As you have already done," the Ambassador replied at once. Ryan nodded.

"Yes, in the case of another war begun by your country."

"We keep telling you, this is only a war if you make it so."

"Sir, when you attack American territory and kill American servicemen, that is what makes it a war."

Durling watched the exchange with no more reaction than a tilted head, playing his part as his National Security Advisor played his own. He knew his subordinate well enough now to recognize the tension in him, the way his feet crossed at the bottom of his chair while his hands clasped lightly in his lap, his voice soft and pleasant-sounding despite the nature of the conversation. Bob Fowler had been right all along, more so than either the former President or the current one had realized. *Good man in a storm*, Roger Durling thought yet again, a saying that dated as far back as men had gone to sea. Headstrong and hot-tempered though he sometimes was, in a crisis Ryan settled down rather like a doctor in an operating room. Something he'd learned from his wife? the President wondered, or perhaps something he'd learned because it had been forced upon him in the past ten or twelve years, in and out of government service. Good brains, good instinct, and a cool head when needed. What a shame the man had avoided politics. That thought almost made Durling smile, but this wasn't the place for it. No, Ryan would not be good at politics. He was the sort who sought to handle problems directly. Even his subtlety had a sharp point to it, and he lacked the crucial ability to lie effectively, but for all that, a good man for dealing with a crisis.

"We seek a peaceful conclusion to this episode," the Ambassador was saying now. "We are willing to concede much."

"We require nothing more than a return to status quo ante," Ryan replied, taking a chance that made his shoes turn under him. He hated this, hated taking the point, but now he had to float the ideas that he and the President had discussed, and if something went wrong, it would merely be remembered that it was Ryan who misspoke and not Roger Durling. "And the elimination of your nuclear arms under international inspection."

"You force us to play a very dangerous game."

"The game is of your making, sir." Ryan commanded himself to relax. His right hand was over his left wrist now. He could feel his watch, but didn't dare to look down at it for fear of giving an indication that something time-related was now under way. "You are already in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. You have violated the U.N. Charter, which your government has also signed. You are in

violation of several treaty relationships with the United States of America, and you have launched a war of aggression. Do you expect us to accept all of this, *and* your enslavement of American citizens? Tell me, how will your citizens react when they learn all of this?" The events of the previous night over Northern Japan had not become public yet. They had controlled their media far more thoroughly than Ryan's own play with the American TV networks, but there was a problem with that sort of thing. The truth always got out. Not a bad thing if the truth worked for you, it could be a terrible thing if it did not.

"You must offer us something!" the Ambassador insisted, visibly losing his diplomatic composure. Behind him, the Secret Service agent's hands flexed a little.

"What we offer you is the chance to restore the peace honorably."

"That is nothing!"

"This is more properly a subject for Deputy Secretary Adler and his delegation. You are aware of our position," Ryan said. "If you choose to go public with your nuclear weapons, we cannot stop you from doing so. But I caution you that it would be a grave psychological escalation which neither your country nor ours needs."

The Ambassador looked at Durling now, hoping for a reaction of some sort. lowa and New Hampshire would be happening soon, and this man had to start off well . . . was that the reason for the hard line? the diplomat wondered. His orders from Tokyo commanded him to get some maneuvering room for his country, but the Americans weren't playing, and the culprit for that had to be Ryan.

"Does Dr. Ryan speak for the United States?" His heart skipped a beat when he saw the President shake his head slightly.

"No, Mr. Ambassador. Actually, I speak for the United States." Durling paused for a cruel instant before adding, "But Dr. Ryan speaks for me in this case. Do you have anything else for us?"

"No, Mr. President."

"In that case we will not detain you further. We hope that your government will see that the most profitable way out of this situation is what we propose. The other alternatives do not bear inspection. Good day, sir." Durling didn't stand, though Ryan did, to walk the man out. He was back in two minutes.

"When?" the President asked.

"Anytime."

"This had better work."

The sky was clear below them, though there were some wisps of cirrus clouds at fifty thousand feet. Even so, the Initial Point, called the IP,

was too difficult for the unaided human eye to see. Worse, the other aircraft in the flight of three were quite invisible, though they were programmed to be only four and eight miles ahead, respectively. Mike Zacharias thought of his father, all the missions he'd flown into the most sophisticated defenses of his time, and how he'd lost his professional gamble, just once, and miraculously survived a camp supposed to be a final resting place. This was easier, after a fashion, but also harder, since the B-2 could not maneuver at all except to adjust its position slightly for winds.

"Patriot battery around here, off at two o'clock," the captain on the electronic-warfare board warned. "It just lit off."

Then Zacharias saw why. There were the first flashes on the ground, a few miles ahead. *So the intelligence resorts were right*, the Colonel thought. The Japanese didn't have many Patriots, and they wouldn't put them out here for the fun of it. Just then, looking down, he saw the moving lights of a train just outside the valley they were about to attack.

"Interrogate-one," the pilot ordered. Now it got dangerous.

The LPI radar under the nose of his bomber aimed itself at the piece of ground the satellite-navigation system told it to, instantly fixing the bomber's position with respect to a known ground reference. The aircraft then swept into a right turn and two minutes later it repeated the procedure—

"Missile-launch warning! Patriot is flying now—make that two," the EWO warned.

"That's -Two," Zacharias thought. *Must have caught him with the doors open*. The bomber wasn't stealthy with its bomb bay open, but that only took a few seconds before—

There. He saw the Patriots coming up from behind a hill, far faster than the SA-2s that his father had dodged, not like rockets at all, more like some sort of directed-energy beams, so fast the eye could hardly follow them, so fast he didn't have much chance to think. But the two missiles, only a few hundred meters apart, didn't alter their path at all, blazing toward a fixed point in space, and streaking past his bomber's altitude, exploding like fireworks at about sixty thousand feet. *Okay, this stealth stuff really does work against Patriot, as all the tests said it did.* The operators on the ground must be going crazy, he thought.

"Starting the first run," the pilot announced.

There were ten target points—missile silos, the intelligence data said, and it pleased the Colonel to be eliminating the hateful things, even though the price of that was the lives of other men. There were only three of them, and his bomber, like the others, carried only eight weapons. The total number of weapons carried for the mission was

only twenty-four, with two designated for each silo, and Zacharias's last four for the last target. Two bombs each. Every bomb had a 95 percent probability of hitting within four meters of the aim point, pretty good numbers really, except that this sort of mission had precisely no margin for error. Even the paper probability was less than half a percent chance of a double miss, but that number times ten targets meant a five percent chance that one missile would survive, and that could not be tolerated.

The aircraft was under computer control now, which the pilot could override but would not unless something went badly wrong. The Colonel pulled his hands back from the controls, not touching them lest he interfere with the process that required better control than he could deliver.

"Systems?" he asked over the intercom.

"Nominal," the EWO replied tensely. His eyes were on the GPS navigation system, which was taking its signals from four orbiting nuclear clocks and fixing the aircraft's exact position in three dimensions, along with course and groundspeed and wind-drift figure generated by the bomber's own systems. The information was crossloaded to the bombs, already programmed to know the exact location of their targets. The first bomber had covered targets 1 through 8. The second bomber had covered 3 through 10. His third bomber would take the second shots at 1, 2, 9, and 10. This would theoretically ensure that since no single aircraft handled both shots at one target, an electronic fault would not guarantee the survival of one of the missiles on the ground.

"That Patriot battery is still looking. It seems to be at the entrance to the valley."

Too bad for them, Zacharias thought.

"Bomb doors coming open—now!" the copilot said. The resulting news from the third crewman was instant.

"He's got us-the SAM site has us now," the EWO said as the first weapon fell free. "Lock-on, he has lock-on . . . launch launch launch!"

"It takes a while, remember," Zacharias said, far more coolly than he felt. The second bomb was now out. Then came a new thought—how smart was that battery commander? Had he learned something from his last chance at a bomber? *God, the mission could still fail if he—*

Two seconds later the fourth weapon dropped free, and the bomb doors closed, returning the B-2 Spirit to electronic invisibility.

"It's a stealth bomber, it has to be," the intercept controller said. "Look!"

The large, inviting contact that had suddenly appeared just over

their heads was gone. The big phased-array acquisition radar had announced the target's presence visually and with a tone, and now the screen was blank, but not completely. Now there were four objects descending, just as there had been eight only a minute before. Bombs. The battery commander had felt and heard the impact up-valley from his launch vehicles. The last time, he'd gone for the bombers, wasting two precious missiles; and the two he'd just fired would also go wild . . . but. . .

"Reengage now!" the battery commander shouted at his people.

"They're not guiding on us," the EWO said with more hope than conviction. The tracking radar was searchlighting now, then it steadied down, but not on them.

To make it even less likely, Zacharias turned the aircraft, which was necessary for the second part of the mission anyway. It would take him off track for the programmed path of the missiles and avoid the chance possibility of a skin-skin contact.

"Talk to me!" the pilot ordered.

"They're past us by now—" A thought confirmed by one, then another bright flash of light that lit up the clouds over their heads. Though the three crewmen cringed at the light, there wasn't a sound or even a buffet from the explosions, they must have been so far behind them.

Okay, that's that . . . I hope.

"He's stifl—lock-on-signal!" the EWO shouted. "But—"

"On us?"

"No, something else—I don't know—"

"The bombs. Damn it," Zacharias swore. "He's tracking the bombs!"

There were four of them, the smartest of smart bombs, falling rapidly now, but not so fast as a diving tactical aircraft. Each one knew where it was in space and time and knew where it was supposed to go. Data from the B-2s' onboard navigation systems had told them where they were—the map coordinates, the altitude, the speed and direction of the aircraft, and against that the computers in the bombs themselves had compared the location of their programmed targets. Now, falling, they were connecting the invisible dots in three-dimensional space, and they were most unlikely to miss. But the bombs were not stealthy, because it hadn't occurred to anyone to make them so, and they were also large enough to track.

The Patriot battery still had missiles to shoot, and a site to defend, and though the bomber had disappeared, there *were* four objects on the screen, and the radar could see them. Automatically, the guidance systems tracked in on them as the battery commander swore at himself for not thinking of this sooner. His operator nodded at the command and turned the key that "enabled" the missile systems to operate autonomously, and the computer didn't know or care that the inbound targets were not aircraft. They were moving through the air, they were within its hemisphere of responsibility, and the human operators said, *kill.*

The first of four missiles exploded out of its boxlike container, converting its solid-rocket fuel into a white streak in the night sky. The guidance system was one that tracked targets via the missile itself, and though complex, it was also difficult to jam and exceedingly accurate. The first homed in on its target, relaying its own signals to the ground and receiving tracking instructions from the battery's computers. Had the missile a brain, it would have felt satisfaction as it led the falling target, selecting a point in space and time where both would meet . . .

"Kill!" the operator said, and night turned to day as the second SAM tracked in on the next bomb.

The light on the ground told the tale. Zacharias could see the strobelike flashes reflected off the rocky hillsides, too soon for bomb hits on the ground. So whoever had drawn up the mission parameters hadn't been paranoid after all.

"There's IP Two," the copilot said, recalling the aircraft commander back to the mission.

"Good ground-fix," the EWO said.

Zacharias could see it clearly this time, the wide flat path of deep blue, different from the broken, darker ground of this hill country, and the pale wall that held it back. There were even lights there for the powerhouse.

"Doors coming open now."

The aircraft jumped upwards a few feet when the six weapons fell free. The flight controls adjusted for that, and the bomber turned right again for an easterly course, while the pilot felt better about what he'd been ordered to do.

The battery commander slammed his hand down on his instrument

panel with a hoot of satisfaction. He'd gotten three of the four, and the last explosion, though it had been a miss, might well have knocked the bomb off-target, though he felt the ground shake with its impact on the ground. He lifted his field phone for the missile command bunker.

"Are you all right?" he asked urgently.

"What the hell hit us?" the distant officer demanded. The Patriot commander ignored that foolish question.

"Your missiles?"

"Eight of them are gone—but I think I have two left. I have to call Tokyo for instructions." It was amazing to the officer at the other end, and his immediate thought was to credit the site selection. His silos were drilled into solid rock, which had made a fine armor for his ICBMs after all. What orders would he receive now that the Americans had tried to disarm him and his nation?

I hope they tell you to launch, the SAM officer didn't quite have the courage to say aloud.

The last four bombs from the third B-2 tracked in on the hydroelectric dam at the head of the valley. They were programmed to strike from bottom to top in the reinforced-concrete face of the structure, the timing and placement of the target points no less crucial than those of the weapons that had tracked in on the missile silos. Unseen and unheard by anyone, they came down in a line, barely a hundred feet separating one from another.

The dam was a hundred thirty meters high and almost exactly that thick at its base, the structure narrowing as it rose to a spillway width of only ten meters. Strong, both to withstand the weight of the reservoir it held back and also to withstand the earthquakes that plague Japan, it had generated electricity for more than thirty years.

The first bomb hit seventy meters below the spillway. A heavy weapon with a thick case of hardened steel, it burrowed fifteen meters into the structure before exploding, first ripping a miniature cavern in the concrete, the shock of the event rippling through the immense wall as the second weapon struck, about five meters over the first.

A watchman was there, awakened from a nap by the noise from downvalley, but he'd missed the light show and was wondering what it had been when he saw the first muted flash that seemed to come from inside his dam. He heard the second weapon hit, then the delay of a second or so before the shock almost lifted him off his feet.

“Jesus, did we get them all?” Ryan asked. Contrary to popular belief, and contrary now to his own fervent wishes, the National Reconnaissance Office had never extended realtime capability to the White House. He had to depend on someone else, watching a television in a room at the Pentagon.

“Not sure, sir. They were all close hits—well, I mean, some were, but some of the bombs appeared too premature—”

“What does that mean?”

“They seem to have exploded in midair—three of them, that is, all from the last bomber. We’re trying to isolate in on the individual silos now and—”

“Are there any left intact, damn it?” Ryan demanded. Had the gamble failed?

“One, maybe two, we’re not sure. Stand by, okay?” the analyst asked rather plaintively. “We have another bird overhead in a few minutes.”

The dam might have survived two, but the third hit, twenty meters from the spillway, opened a gap—really, it dislodged a chunk of concrete triangular in shape. The section jerked forward, then stopped, held in place by the immense friction of the man-made rock, and for a second the watchman wondered if the dam might hold. The fourth hit struck in the center of that section and fragmented it. By the time the dust cleared, it had been replaced with fog and vapor as the water started pouring through the thirty-meter gap carved in the dam’s face. That gap grew before the watchman’s eyes, and only then did it occur to him to race for his shack and lift a phone to warn the people downstream. By that time, a river reborn after three decades of enforced sleep was racing down a valley it had carved over hundreds of millennia.

“Well?” the man in Tokyo demanded.

“One missile seems to be fully intact. That’s number nine. Number two—well, there may be some minor damage. I have my people checking them all now. What are my orders?”

“Prepare for a possible launch and stand by.”

“*Hai.*” The line clicked off.

Now what do I do? the watch officer wondered. He was new at this, new at the entire idea of managing nuclear weapons, a job he’d never wanted, but nobody had ever asked him about that. His remembered protocol of orders came quickly to him, and he lifted a phone—just an

ordinary black instrument; there hadn't been time for the theatrics the Americans had affected—for the Prime Minister.

"Yes, what is this?"

"Goto-san, this is the Ministry. There has been an attack on our missiles!"

"What? When?" the Prime Minister demanded. "How bad?"

"One, possibly two missiles are operational. The rest may be destroyed. We're checking them all now." The senior watch officer could hear the rage at the other end of the line.

"How quickly can you get them ready for launch?"

"Several minutes. I have already given the order to bring them to launch status." The officer flipped an order book open to determine the procedures to actually launch the things. He'd been briefed in on it, of course, but now, in the heat of the moment, he felt the need to have it in writing before him as the others in the watch center turned and looked at him in an eerie silence.

"I'm calling my cabinet now!" And the line went dead.

The officer looked around. There was anger in the room, but even more, there was fear. It had happened again, a systematic attack, and now they knew the import of the earlier American actions. Somehow they had learned the location of the camouflaged missiles, and then they had used timed attacks on the Japanese air-defense system to cover what they really wanted to do. So what would they themselves be ordered to do now? Launch a nuclear attack? That was madness. The General thought so, and he could see that the cooler heads in his command center felt the same way.

It was a miracle of sorts. Missile Number Nine's silo was nearly intact. One bomb had exploded a mere six meters away, but the rock around the—no, the officer saw, the bomb hadn't exploded at all. There was a hole in the rocky floor of the valley, but in the light of his flashlight he could see right there, amid the broken rock, the afterpart of something—a fin, perhaps. A dud, he realized, a smart bomb with a faulty fuse. Wasn't that amusing? He raced off next to see Number Two. Running down the valley, he heard some sort of alarm horn and wondered what that was all about. It was a frightening trip, and he marveled at the fact that the Americans hadn't attempted to attack the control bunker. Of the ten missiles in the collection, eight were certainly destroyed. He choked with the fumes of the remaining propellants, but most of that had fireballed into the sky already, leaving behind only noxious gas that the night winds were sweeping away. On reflection he donned a gas mask that covered his face, and, fatally, his ears.

Silo two had taken a single bomb hit—near miss, he corrected himself. This bomb had missed the center target by perhaps twelve meters, and though it had thrown tons of rock about and cracked the concrete liner, all they had to do was sweep off the debris from the access hatch, then go down to see if the missile was intact.

Damn the Americans for this! he raged, lifting his portable radio and calling the control bunker. Strangely, there was no reply. Then he noticed that the ground was shaking, but halfway wondered if it might be his own trembling. Commanding himself to be still, he took a deep breath, but the rumbling didn't stop. An earthquake . . . and what was that howling outside his gas mask? Then he saw it, and there wasn't time to race for the valley walls.

The Patriot crew heard it also, but ignored it. It was the reload crew who got the only warning. Set in the wye of the railroad tracks, they were rigging a launch canister of four more missiles when the white wall exploded out the entrance to the valley. Their shouts went unheard, though one of their number managed to scramble to safety before the hundredfoot wave engulfed the site.

Two hundred miles over his head, an orbiting camera overflew the valley from southwest to northeast, all nine of its cameras following the same rush of water.

45

Line of Battle

"There they go," Jones said. The shuttling pencils on the fan-fold paper showed nearly identical marks, the thin traces on the 1000hz line indicated that Prairie-Masker systems were in use, and similarly faint lower-frequency marks denoted the use of marine diesel engines. There were seven of them, and though the bearings were not showing much change as yet, they soon would. The Japanese submarines were all now at snorting depth, and the time was wrong. They snorted on the hour, usually, typically one hour into a watch cycle, which allowed the officers and men on duty time to get used to the ship after a rest period, and also to do a sonar check before entering their most vulnerable evolution. But it was twenty-five after the hour now, and they'd all started snorting within the same five-minute period, and that meant movement orders. Jones lifted the phone and punched the button for SubPac.

"Jones here."

"What's happening, Ron?"

"Whatever bait you just dropped in the water, sir, they just took after it. I have seven tracks," he reported. "Who's waiting for them?"

"Not on the phone, Ron," Mancuso said. "How are things over there?"

"Pretty much under control," Jones replied, looking around at the chiefs. Good men and women already, and his additional training had put them fully on-line.

"Why don't you bring your data over here, then? You've earned it."

"See you in ten," the contractor said.

"We got 'em," Ryan said.

"How sure are you?" Durling asked.

"Here, sir." Jack put three photos on the President's desk, just couriered over from NRO.

"This is what it looked like yesterday." There was nothing to see, really, except for the Patriot missile battery. The second photo showed

more, and though it was a radar photo in black and white, it had been computer-blended with another visual overhead to give a more precise picture of the missile field. “Okay, this is seventy minutes old,” Ryan said, setting the third one down.

“It’s a lake.” He looked up, surprised even though he’d been briefed.

“The place is under about a hundred feet of water, will be for another few hours,” Jack explained. “Those missiles are dead—”

“Along with how many people?” Durling asked.

“Over a hundred,” the National Security Advisor reported, his enthusiasm for the event instantly gone. “Sir—there wasn’t any way around that.”

The President nodded. “I know. How sure are we that the missiles . . . ?”

“Pre-flood shots showed seven of the holes definitely hit and destroyed. One more probably wrecked, and two unknowns, but definitely with shock damage of some sort. The weather seals on the holes won’t withstand that much water pressure, and ICBMs are too delicate for that sort of treatment. Toss in debris carried downstream from the flooding. The missiles are as dead as we can make them without a nuclear strike of our own, and we managed to do the mission without it.” Jack paused. “It was all Robby Jackson’s plan. Thanks for letting me reward him for it.”

“He’s with the carrier now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, it would seem that he’s the man for the job, wouldn’t it?” the President asked rhetorically, clearly relieved at the evening’s news. “And now?”

“And now, Mr. President, we try to settle this one down once and for all.”

The phone rang just then. Durling lifted it. “Oh. Yes, Tish?”

“There’s an announcement from the Japanese government that they have nuclear weapons and they hope—”

“Not anymore, they don’t,” Durling said, cutting off his communications director. “We’d better make an announcement of our own.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jones said, looking at the wall chart. “You did that one in a big hurry, Bart.”

The line was west of the Marianas. *Nevada* was the northernmost boat. Thirty miles south of her was *West Virginia.* Another thirty and there was *Pennsylvania. Maryland* was the southernmost former missile submarine. The line was ninety miles across, and really extended a theoretical thirty more, fifteen to the north and south of the end-boats,

and they were two hundred miles west of the westward-moving line of Japanese SSKs. They had just arrived in place after the warning from Washington that the word had been leaked somehow or other to the Japanese.

"Something like this happened once before, didn't it?" Jones asked, remembering that these were all battleship names, and more than that, the names of battlewagons caught alongside the quays one morning in December, long before his birth. The original holders of the names had been resurrected from the mud and sent off to take islands back, supporting soldiers and Marines under the command of Jesse Oldendorf, and one dark night in Surigao Strait . . . but it wasn't a time for history lessons.

"What about the 'cans?" Chambers asked.

"We lost them when they went behind the Bonins, sir. Speed and course were fairly constant. They ought to pass over *Tennessee* around midnight, local time, but by that time our carriers—"

"You have the operation all figured out," Mancuso observed.

"Sir, I've been tracking the whole ocean for you. What d'ya expect?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," the President said in the White House Press Room. He was winging it, Ryan saw, just working off some scribbled notes, never something to make the Chief Executive comfortable. "You've just this evening heard an announcement by the Japanese government that they have fabricated and deployed nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles.

"That fact has been known to your government for several weeks now, and the existence of those weapons is the reason for the careful and circumspect way in which the Administration has dealt with the Pacific Crisis. As you can well imagine, that development has weighed heavily on us, and has affected our response to Japanese aggression against U.S. soil and citizens in the Marianas.

"I can now tell you that those missiles have been destroyed. They no longer exist," Durling said in a forceful voice.

"The current situation is this: the Japanese military still hold the Marianas Islands. That is not acceptable to the United States of America. The people living on those islands are American citizens, and American forces will do anything necessary to redeem their freedom and human rights. I repeat: we will do anything necessary to restore those islands to U.S. rule.

"We call tonight on Prime Minister Goto to announce his willingness to evacuate Japanese forces from the Marianas forthwith. Failure to do so will compel us to use whatever force is necessary to remove them.

"That is all I have to say right now. For whatever questions you have on the events of this evening, I turn you over to my National Security Advisor, Dr. John Ryan." The President walked toward the door, ignoring a riot of shouted questions, while a few easels were set up for visual displays. Ryan stood at the lectern, making everyone wait as he told himself to speak slowly and clearly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this was called Operation TIBBETS. First of all let me show you what the targets were." The cover came off the first photo, and for the first time the American people saw just what the nation's reconnaissance satellites were capable of. Ryan lifted his pointer and started identifying the scene for everyone, giving the cameras time to close in on them.

"Holy shit," Manuel Oreza observed. "That's why."

"Looks like a pretty good reason to me," Pete Burroughs observed. Then the screen went blank.

"We're sorry, but a technical problem has temporarily interrupted the CNN satellite feed," a voice told them.

"My ass!" Portagee snarled back.

"They'll come here next, won't they?"

"About fuckin' time, too," Oreza thought.

"Manny, what about that missile thing on the next hill?" his wife wanted to know.

"We're preparing copies of all these photos for you. They should be ready in about an hour or so. Sorry for the delay," Jack told them. "It's been rather a busy time for us.

"Now, the mission was carried out by B-2 bombers based at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri—"

"Staging out of where?" a reporter asked.

"You know we're not going to discuss that," Jack said in reply.

"That's a nuclear-weapons platform," another voice said. "Did we—"

"No. The strike was carried out with precision-guided conventional munitions. Next card, please," Ryan said to the man at the easel. "As you can see here, the valley is largely intact . . ." It was easier than he'd expected, and perhaps better that he'd not had much time to worry about it, and Ryan remembered his first time delivering a briefing in the White House. It had been harder than this one, despite the blaze of TV lights now in his face.

"You destroyed a dam?"

"Yes, we did. It was necessary to be completely certain that these weapons were destroyed and—"

"What about casualties?"

"All of our aircraft are on their way back—might already be there, but I haven't—"

"What about Japanese deaths?" the reporter insisted.

"I don't know about that," Jack replied evenly.

"Do you care?" she demanded, wondering what sort of answer she'd get.

"The mission, ma'am, was to eliminate nuclear arms targeted on the United States by a country that has already attacked U.S. forces. Did we kill Japanese citizens in this attack? Yes, we did. How many? I do not know. Our concern in this case was American lives at risk. I wish you would keep in mind that we didn't start this war. Japan did. When you start a war you take risks. This is one risk they undertook—and in this case they lost. I am the President's National Security Advisor, and my job description is to help President Durling safeguard this country first of all. Is that clear?" Ryan asked. He'd allowed just a little anger to enter his reply, and the indignant look on the reporter's face didn't prevent a few nods from her colleagues.

"What about asking the press to lie in order to—"

"Stop!" Ryan commanded, his face reddening. "Do you wish to place the lives of American servicemen at risk? Why do that? Why the hell would you want to do that?"

"You bullied the networks into—"

"This feed is going worldwide. You do know that, don't you?" Ryan paused to take a breath. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would remind you that most of the people in this room are American citizens. Speaking for myself now"—he was afraid to look to where the President was standing—"you do realize that the President is responsible to the mothers and fathers and wives and children of the people who wear our country's uniform for their safety. Real people are at risk today, and I wish you folks in the press would bear that in mind from time to time."

"Jesus," Tish Brown whispered behind Durling. "Mr. President, it might be a good idea to—"

"No." He shook his head. "Let him go on."

The Press Room became silent. Someone whispered something sharp to the standing journalist, who managed to take her seat, flushing as she did so.

"Dr. Ryan, Bob Holtzman of the *Washington Post,*" he said unnecessarily. "What are the chances of ending this conflict without further violence?"

"Sir, that is entirely up to the Japanese government. The citizens of

the Marianas are, as the President said, *American* citizens, and this country does not allow other nations to change such things. If Japan is willing to withdraw her forces, they may do so in peace. If not, then other operations will take place."

"Thank you, Dr. Ryan," Holtzman said loudly, effectively ending the press conference. Jack hustled toward the door, ignoring the additional questions.

"Nice job," Durling said. "Why don't you go home for some sleep?"

"And what is this?" the customs officer asked.

"My photographic equipment," Chekov replied. He opened the case without an order to do so. It was warm in the terminal, the noon tropical sun beating through the wall of windows and overpowering the air conditioning for the moment. Their newest orders had been easily implemented. The Japanese wanted journalists in the islands, both to check up on the election campaign and to safeguard against American attack by their mere presence in the islands.

The customs officer looked at the cameras, gratified to see that it was all Japanese. "And this?"

"My lighting equipment is Russian," Ding explained in slow English. "We make very fine lights. Perhaps one day we will sell them in your country," he added with a smile.

"Yes, perhaps so," the official said, closing the case and marking it with chalk. "Where will you be staying?"

"We weren't able to make hotel arrangements," "Klerk" replied. "We'll check the local hotels."

Good luck, the official didn't say. This idea had come off half-baked, and every hotel room on Saipan, he was sure, was already filled. Well, that wasn't his problem.

"Can we rent a car?"

"Yes, over that way." The man pointed. The older Russian looked nervous, he thought.

"You're late."

"Well, sorry about that," Oreza replied tersely. "There's nothing new happening at all. Well, maybe the fighters are a little more active, but not much, and they've been pretty busy anyw—"

"You're going to get some company soon," the National Military Command Center told him.

"Who?"

"Two reporters. They have some questions for you," was the answer

because of the renewed concern for Oreza's secure status.

"When?"

"Anytime, probably today. Everything okay with you, Chief?"

Master Chief, you turkey, Portagee didn't say. "Just great. We saw part of the President's speech, and we're a little worried because that missile site is so close to us and—"

"You'll have enough warning. Does your house have a basement?" the voice asked.

"No, it doesn't."

"Well, that's okay. We'll let you know, okay?"

"Sure, sir. Out." *Does your house have a basement?* No. *Well, that's okay.* If it's okay, why did you ask, goddamn it? Oreza deactivated the phone after taking it out of the mixing bowl and walked to the window. Two Eagles were taking off. Such a mechanical thing to watch. Something was happening. He didn't know what. Perhaps their pilots didn't either, but you couldn't tell what they were thinking from looking at their aircraft.

Shiro Sato reefed his F-15J into a right turn to clear the civilian air traffic. If the Americans attacked, they would do it as the attacks on the Home Islands had come, off island bases, supported by tankers, from a long way off. Wake was a possibility, and so were a few other islands. He'd face aircraft not unlike his own. They would have airborne radar support, and so would he. It would be a fair fight unless the bastards brought down their stealth aircraft. Damn the things. Damn their ability to defeat the Kamis! But the Americans had only a few of them, and if they flew in daylight, he'd take his chances. At least there would be no real surprises. There was a huge air-defense radar on Saipan's highest point, and with the squadrons based on Guam, this would be a real fight, he told himself, climbing up to patrol altitude.

"So what's the big deal?" Chavez asked, playing with the map.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Well, take the next left, I think, by Lizama's Mobil." Chavez looked up from the map. There were soldiers everywhere, and they were digging in, something they ought to have done sooner, he thought. "Is that a Patriot battery?"

"Sure looks like one to me." *How the hell am I going to handle this?* Clark asked himself, finding the last turn and heading into the cul-de-sac. The house number was the one he'd memorized. He pulled into

the driveway and got out, heading for the front door.

Oreza had been in the bathroom, finishing a needed shower while Burroughs handled the running count on the aircraft in and out of Kobler when the doorbell rang.

"Who are you?"

"Didn't they tell you?" Clark asked, looking around. Who the hell was this guy?

"Reporters, right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Okay." Burroughs opened the door with a look up and down the street.

"Who are you, anyway? I thought this was the house of—"

"You're dead!" Oreza was standing in the hall, wearing just khaki shorts, his chest a mass of hair as thick as the remaining jungle on the island. The hair looked especially dark now, with the rest of the man's skin turning rapidly to the color of milk. "You're fuckin' dead!"

"Hi, Portagee," Klerk/Clark/Kelly said with a smile. "Long time."

He couldn't make himself move. "I saw you die. I went to the goddamned memorial service. I was *there!*"

"Hey, I know you," Chavez said. "You were on the boat our chopper landed on. What the hell is this? You Agency?"

It was almost too much for Oreza. He didn't remember the little one at all, but the big one, the old one, his age, about, was—couldn't be—was. It wasn't possible. Was it?

"John?" he asked after a few seconds of further incredulity.

It was too much for the man who used to be known as John Kelly. He set his bag down and came over to embrace the man, surprised by the tears in his eyes. "Yeah, Portagee—it's me. How you doin', man?"

"But how—"

"At the memorial service, did they use the line about 'sure and certain hope that the sea will give up its dead'?" He paused, then he had to grin. "Well, it did."

Oreza closed his eyes, thinking back over twenty years. "Those two admirals, right?"

"You got it."

"So—what the hell have you been—"

"CIA, man. They decided they needed somebody who could, well—"

"I remember that part." He really hadn't changed all that much. Older, but the same hair, and the same eyes, warm and open to him as they had always been, Portagee thought, but underneath always the hint of something else, like an animal in a cage, but an animal who knew how to pick the lock whenever he wanted.

"I hear you've been doing okay for a retired coastie."

"Command Master Chief." The man shook his head. The past could wait. "What's going on?"

"Well, we've been out of the loop for a few hours. Anything new that you know?"

"The President was on. They cut him off, but—"

"Did they really have nukes?" Burroughs asked.

" 'Did'?" Ding asked. "We got 'em?"

"That what he said. Who the hell are you, by the way?" Oreza wanted to know.

"Domingo Chavez." The young man extended his hand. "I see you and Mr. C know each other."

"I go by 'Clark' now," John explained. It was odd how good it felt to talk with a man who knew his real name.

"Does he know?"

John shook his head. "Not many people know. Most of them are dead. Admiral Maxwell and Admiral Greer both. Too bad, they saved my ass."

Oreza turned to his other new guest. "Tough luck, kid. It's some fuckin' sea story. You still drink beer, John?"

"Especially if it's free," Chavez confirmed.

"Don't you see? It's finished now!"

"Who else did they get?" Yamata asked.

"Matsuda, Itagake—they got every patron of every minister, all except you and me," Murakami said, not adding that they had nearly gotten him. "Raizo, it is time to put an end to this. Call Goto and tell him to negotiate a peace."

"I will not!" Yamata snarled back.

"Don't you see? Our missiles are destroyed and—"

"And we can make new ones. We have the ability to make more warheads, and we *have* more missiles at Yoshinobu."

"If we attempt that, you know what the Americans will do, you fool!"

"They wouldn't dare."

"You told us that they could not repair the damage you did to their financial systems. You told us that our air defenses were invincible. You told us that they could never strike back at us effectively." Murakami paused for a breath. "You told us all these things—and you were wrong. Now I am the last one to whom you may speak, and I am not listening. *You* tell Goto to make peace!"

"They'll never take these islands back. Never! They do not have the ability."

"Say what you please, Raizo-chan. For my part it is over."

"Find a good place to hide then!" Yamata would have slammed the phone down, but a portable didn't offer that option. "Murderers," he muttered. It had taken most of the morning to assemble the necessary information. Somehow the Americans had struck at his own council of zaibatsu. How? Nobody knew. Somehow they'd penetrated the defenses that every consultant had told him were invincible, even to the point of destroying the intercontinental missiles. "How?" he asked.

"It would seem that we underestimated the quality of their remaining air forces," General Arima replied with a shrug. "It is not the end. We still have options."

"Oh?" *Not everyone was giving up, then?*

"They will not wish to invade these islands. Their ability to perform a proper invasion is severely compromised by their lack of amphibious-assault ships, and even if they managed to put people on the island—to fight amidst so many of their own citizens? No." Arima shook his head. "They will not risk it. They will seek a negotiated peace. There is still a chance—if not for complete success, then for a negotiated peace that leaves our forces largely intact."

Yamata accepted that for what it was, looking out the windows at the island that he wanted to be his. The elections, he thought, could still be won. It was the political will of the Americans that needed attacking, and he still had the ability to do that.

It didn't take long to turn the 747 around, but the surprise to Captain Sato was that the aircraft was half full for the flight back to Narita. Thirty minutes after lift-off, a stewardess reported to him by phone that of the eleven people she'd asked, all but two had said that they had pressing business that required their presence at home. *What pressing business might that be?* he wondered, with his country's international trade for the most part reduced to ships traveling between Japan and China.

"This is not turning out well," his copilot observed an hour out. "Look down there."

It was easy to spot ships from thirty thousand feet, and of late they'd taken to carrying binoculars to identify surface ships. Sato lifted his pair and spotted the distinctive shapes of Aegis destroyers still heading north. On a whim he reached down to flip his radio to a different guard frequency.

"JAL 747 calling *Mutsu,* over."

"Who is this?" a voice instantly replied. "Clear this frequency at once!"

"This is Captain Torajiro Sato. Call your fleet commander!" he

ordered with his own command voice. It took a minute.

"Brother, you shouldn't be doing this," Yusuo chided. Radio silence was as much a formality as a real military necessity. He knew that the Americans had reconnaissance satellites, and besides, his group's SPY radars were all up and radiating. If American snooper aircraft were about, they'd know where his squadron was. It was something he would have considered with confidence a week before, but not now.

"I merely wanted to express our confidence in you and your men. Use us for a practice target," he added.

In *Mutsu's* CIC, the missile techs were already doing exactly that, but it wouldn't do to say so, the Admiral knew. "Good to hear your voice again. Now you must excuse me. I have work to do here."

"Understood, Yusuo. Out." Sato took his finger off the radio switch. "See," he said over the intercom. "They're doing their job and we have to do ours."

The copilot wasn't so sure, but Sato was the captain of the 747, and he kept his peace, concentrating on navigational tasks. Like most Japanese he'd been raised to think of war as something to be avoided as assiduously as plague. The overnight development of a conflict with America, well, it had felt good for a day or so to teach the arrogant gaijin a lesson, but that was fantasy talking, and this was increasingly real. Then the double-barreled notification that his country had fielded nuclear arms—that was madness enough—only immediately to be followed by the American claim that the weapons had been destroyed. This *was* an American aircraft, after all, a Boeing 747-400PIP, five years old but state-of-the-art in every respect, reliable and steady. There was little America had to learn about the building of aircraft, and if this one was as good as he knew it to be, then how much more formidable still were their military aircraft? The aircraft his country's Air Force flew were copies of American designs —except for the AEW 767s he'd heard so much about, first about how invincible they were, and more recently about how there were only a few left. This madness had to stop. Didn't everyone see that? Some must, he thought, else why was his airliner half full of people who didn't want to be on Saipan despite their earlier enthusiasm?

But his captain did not see that at all, did he? the copilot asked himself. Torajiro Sato was sitting there, fixed as stone in the left seat, as though all were normal when plainly it was not.

All he had to do was look down in the afternoon sunlight to see

those destroyers—doing what? They were guarding their country's coast against the possibility of attack. Was that normal?

"Conn, Sonar."

"Conn, aye." Claggett had the conn for the afternoon watch. He wanted the crew to see him at work, and more than that, wanted to keep the feel for conning his boat.

"Possible multiple contacts to the south," the sonar chief reported. "Bearing one-seven-one. Look like surface ships at high speed, sir, getting pounding and a very high blade rate."

That was about right, the CO thought, heading for the sonar room again. He was about to order a track to be plotted, but when he turned to do so, he saw two quartermasters already setting it up, and the ray-path analyzer printing its first cut on the range. His crew was fully drilled in now, and things just happened automatically, but better. They were thinking as well as acting.

"Best guess, they're a ways off, but look at all this," the chief said. It was clearly a real contact. Data was appearing on four different frequency lines. Then the chief held up his phones. "Sounds like a whole bunch of screws turning—a lot of racing and cavitation, has to be multiple ships, traveling in column."

"And our other friend?" Claggett asked.

"The sub? He's gone quiet again, probably just tooling along on batteries at five or less." That contact was a good twenty miles off, just beyond the usual detection range.

"Sir, initial range cut on the new contacts is a hundred-plus-thousand yards, CZ contact," another tech reported.

"Bearing is constant. Not a wiggle. They heading straight for us or close to it. They pounding hard. What are surface conditions like, sir?"

"Waves eight to ten feet, Chief." A hundred thousand yards plus. More than fifty nautical miles, Claggett thought. Those ships were driving hard. Right to him, but he wasn't supposed to shoot. Damn. He took the required three steps back into control. "Right ten-degrees rudder, come to new course two-seven-zero."

Tennessee came about to a westerly heading, the better to give her sonar operators a range for the approaching destroyers. His last piece of operational intelligence had predicted this, and the timing of the information was as accurate as it was unwelcome.

In a more dramatic setting, in front of cameras, the atmosphere might have been different, but although the setting was dramatic in a distant

sense, right now it was merely cold and miserable. Though these men were the most elite of troops, it was far easier to rouse yourself for combat against a person than against unremitting environmental discomfort. The Rangers, in their mainly white camouflage overclothing, moved about as little as possible, and the lack of physical activity merely made them more vulnerable to the cold and to boredom, the soldier's deadliest enemy. And yet that was good, Captain Checa thought. For a single squad of soldiers four thousand miles from the nearest U.S. Army base—and *that* base was Fort Wainwright in Alaska—it was a hell of a lot safer to be bored than to be excited by the stimulus of a combat action without any hope of support. Or something like that. Checa faced the problem common to officers: subject to the same discomfort and misery as his men, he was not allowed to bitch. There was no other officer to bitch to in any case, and to do so in front of the men was bad for morale, even though the men probably would have understood.

"Be nice to get back to Fort Stewart, sir," First Sergeant Vega observed. "Spread on that sunblock and catch some rays on the beach."

"And miss all this beautiful snow and sleet, Oso?" At least the sky was clear now.

"Roge-o, Captain. But I got my fill o' this shit when I was a kid in Chicago." He paused, looking and listening around again. The noise-discipline of the other Rangers was excellent, and you had to look very closely indeed to see where the lookouts were standing.

"Ready for the walk out tonight?"

"Just so's our friend is waiting on the far side of that hill."

"I'm sure he will be," Checa lied.

"Yes, sir. I am, too." *If one could do it, why not two?* Vega thought. "Did all this stuff work?"

The killers in their midst were sleeping in their bags, in holes lined with pine branches and covered with more branches for additional warmth. In addition to guarding the pilots, the Rangers had to keep them healthy, like watching over infants, an odd mission for elite troops, but troops of that sort generally drew the oddest.

"So they say." Checa looked at his watch. "We shake them loose in another two hours."

Vega nodded, hoping that his legs weren't too stiff for the trek south.

The patrol pattern had been set in the mission briefing. The four boomers had thirty-mile sectors, and each sector was divided into three ten-mile segments. Each boat could patrol in the center slot,

leaving the north and south slots empty for everything but weapons. The patrol patterns were left to the judgment of individual skippers, but they worked out the same way. *Pennsylvania* was on a northerly course, trolling along at a mere five knots, just as she'd done for her now-ended deterrence patrols carrying Trident missiles. She was making so little noise that a whale might have come close to a collision, if it were the right time for whales in this part of the Pacific, which it wasn't. Behind her, at the end of a lengthy cable, was her towed-array sonar, and the two-hour north-south cycle allowed it to trail straight out in a line, with about ten minutes or so required for the turns at the end of the cycles to get it straight again for maximum performance.

Pennsylvania was at six hundred feet, the ideal sonar depth given today's water conditions. It was just sunset up on the roof when the first trace appeared on her sonar screens. It started as a series of dots, yellow on the video screen, trickling down slowly with time, and shifting a little to the south in bearing, but not much. Probably, the lead sonarman thought, the target had been running on battery for the past few hours, else he would have caught the louder signals of the diesels used to charge them, but there the contact was, on the expected 60hz line. He reported the contact data to the fire-control tracking party.

Wasn't this something, the sonarman thought. He'd spent his entire career in missile boats, so often tracking contacts which his submarine would maneuver to avoid, even though the boomer fleet prided itself on having the best torpedomen in the fleet. *Pennsylvania* carried only fifteen weapons aboard—there was a shortage of the newest version of the ADCAP torpedo, and it had been decided not to bother carrying anything less capable under the circumstances. It also had three other torpedolike units, called LEMOSSs, for Long-Endurance Mobile Submarine Simulator. The skipper, another lifelong boomer sailor, had briefed the crew on his intended method of attack, and everyone aboard approved. The mission, in fact, was just about ideal. The Japanese had to move through their line. Their operational pattern was such that for them to pass undetected through the Line of Battle, as the skipper had taken to calling it, was most unlikely.

"Now hear this," the Captain said over the 1-MC announcing system —every speaker had been turned down, so that the announcement came as a whisper that the men strained to hear. "We have a probable submerged contact in our kill zone. I am going to conduct the attack just as we briefed it. Battle stations," he concluded in the voice of a man ordering breakfast at HoJo's.

There came sounds so faint that only one experienced sonarman could hear them, and that mostly because he was just forward of the

attack center. The watch had changed there so that only the most experienced men—and one woman, now—would occupy the weapons consoles. Those people too junior for a place on the sub's varsity assembled throughout the boat in damage-control parties. Voices announced to the attack-center talker that each space was fully manned and ready, and then the ship grew as silent as a graveyard on Halloween.

"Contact is firming up nicely," the sonarman said over his phones. "Bearing is changing westerly, bearing to target now zero-seven-five. Getting a faint blade-rate on the contact, estimate contact speed is ten knots."

That made it a definite submarine, not that there was much doubt. The diesel sub had her own towed-array sonar and was doing a sprint-and-drift of her own, alternately going at her top speed, then slowing to detect anything that she might miss with the increased flow noise.

"Tubes one, three, and four are ADCAPs," a weapons technician announced. "Tube two is a LEMOSS."

"Spin 'em all up," the Captain said. Most COs liked to say *warm 'em up,* but otherwise this one was by-the-book.

"Current range estimate is twenty-two thousand yards," the tracking party chief announced.

The sonarman saw something new on his screen, then adjusted his headphones.

"Transient, transient, sounds like hull-popping on Sierra-Ten. Contact is changing depth."

"Going up, I bet," the Captain said a few feet away. *That's about right*, the sonarman thought with a nod of his own. "Let's get the MOSS in the water. Set its course at zero-zero-zero. Keep it quiet for the first ten thousand yards, then up to normal radiating levels."

"Aye, sir." The tech dialed in the proper settings on her programming board, and then the weapons officer checked the instructions and pronounced them correct.

"Ready on two."

"Contact Sierra-Ten is fading somewhat, sir. Probably above the layer now."

"Definite direct-path to Sierra-Ten," the ray-path technician said next. "Definitely not a CZ contact, sir."

"Ready on tube two," the weapons tech reported again.

"Fire two," the CO ordered at once. "Reload another MOSS," he said next.

Pennsylvania shuddered ever so slightly as the LEMOSS was ejected into the sea. The sonar picked it up at once as it angled left, then reversed course, heading north at a mere ten knots. Based on an old Mark 48 torpedo body, the LEMOSS was essentially a huge tank of the

OTTO fuel American “fish” used, plus a small propulsion system and a large sound-transducer that gave out the noise of an engine plant. The noise was the same frequencies as those of a nuclear power plant, but quite a bit louder than those on an Ohio-class. It never seemed to matter to people that the thing was too loud. Attack submarines almost always went for it, even American ones who should have known better. The new model with the new name could move along for over fifteen hours, and it was a shame it had been developed only a few months before the boomers had been fully and finally disarmed.

Now came the time for patience. The Japanese submarine actually slowed a little more, doubtless doing its own final sonar sweep before they lit off the diesels for their speedy passage west. The sonarman tracked the LEMOSS north. The signal was just about to fade out completely before the sound systems turned on, five miles away. Two miles after that, it jumped over the thermocline layer of cold and warm water and the game began in earnest.

“Conn, Sonar, Sierra-Ten just changed speed, change in the blade-rate, slowing down, sir.”

“He has good sonar,” the Captain said, just behind the sonarman. *Pennsylvania* had risen somewhat, floating her sonar tail over the layer for a better look at the contact while the body of the submarine stayed below. He turned and spoke more loudly. “Weapons?”

“One, three, and four are ready for launch, solutions on all of them.”

“Set four for a stalking profile, initial course zero-twozero.”

“Done. Set as ordered, sir. Tube four ready in all respects.”

“Match bearings and shoot,” the Captain ordered from the door of the sonar room, adding, “Reload another ADCAP.”

Pennsylvania shuddered again as the newest version of the venerable Mark 48 torpedo entered the sea, turning northeast and controlled by an insulated wire that streamed out from its tailfin.

This was like an exercise, the sonarman thought, but easier.

“Additional contacts?” the skipper asked, behind him again.

“Not a thing, sir.” The enlisted man waved at his scopes. Only random noise showed, and an additional scope was running diagnostic checks every ten minutes to show that the systems were all functioning properly. It was quite a payoff: after nearly forty years of missile-boat operations, and close to fifty of nuclear-sub ops, the first American sub kill since World War II would come from a boomer supposedly on her way to the scrapyard.

Traveling far more rapidly, the ADCAP torpedo popped over the layer somewhat aft of the contact. It immediately started radiating from its own ultrasonic sonar and fed the picture back along the wire to *Pennsylvania*.

"Hard contact, range three thousand and close to the surface. Lookin' good," sonar said. The same diagnosis came from the weapons petty officer with her identical readout.

"Eat shit and die," the male member of the team whispered, watching the two contact lines close on the display. Sierra Ten went instantly to full speed, diving at first below the layer, but his batteries were probably a little low, and he didn't make more than fifteen knots, while the ADCAP was doing over sixty. The one-sided chase lasted a total of three and a half minutes and ended with a bright splotch on the screen and a noise in the headphones that stung his ears. The rest was epilogue, concluding with a ripping screech of steel being crushed by water pressure.

"That's a kill, sir. I copy a definite kill." Two minutes later, a distant low-frequency to the north suggested that *West Virginia* had achieved the same goal.

"Christopher Cook?" Murray asked.

"That's right."

It *was* a very nice house, the Deputy Assistant Director thought as he pulled out his identification folder. "FBI. We'd like to talk to you about your conversations with Seiji Nagumo. Could you get a coat?"

The sun had a few more hours to go when the Lancers taxied out. Angered by the loss of one of their number not so long before, the crews deemed themselves to be in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, but nobody had troubled himself to ask their opinion, and their job was written down. Their bomb bays taken up with fuel tanks, one by one the bombers raced down the runway and lifted off, turning and climbing to their assembly altitude of twenty thousand feet for the cruise northeast.

It was another goddamned demonstration, Dubro thought, and he wondered how the hell somebody like Robby Jackson could have thought it up, but he, too, had orders, and each of his carriers turned into the wind, fifty miles apart to launch forty aircraft each, and though these were all armed, they were not to take action unless provoked.

46

Detachment

"We're almost empty," the copilot said in a neutral voice, checking the manifest as part of the preflight ritual.

"What is the matter with these people?" Captain Sato growled, looking over the flight plan and checking the weather. That was a short task. It would be cool and clear all the way down, with a huge high-pressure area taking charge of the Western Pacific. Except for some high winds in the vicinity of the Home Islands, it would make for a glassysmooth ride all the way to Saipan, for the thirty-four passengers on the flight. *Thirty-four!* he raged. *In an aircraft built for over three hundred!*

"Captain, we will be leaving those islands soon. You know that." It was clear enough, wasn't it? The people, the average men and women on the street, were no longer so much confused as frightened—or maybe even that wasn't the proper word. He hadn't seen anything like it. They felt—betrayed? The first newspaper editorials had come out to question the course their country had taken, and though the questions asked were mild, the import of them was not. It had all been an illusion. His country had not been prepared for war in a psychological sense any more than a physical one, and the people were suddenly realizing what was actually going on. The whispered reports of the murder—what else could one call it?—of some prominent zaibatsu had left the government in a turmoil. Prime Minister Goto was doing little, not even giving speeches, not even making appearances, lest he have to face questions for which he had no answers. But the faith of his captain, the copilot saw, had not yet been shaken.

"No, we will not! How can you say that? Those islands are ours."

"Time will tell," the copilot observed, returning to his work and letting it go at that. He did have his job to do, rechecking fuel and winds and other technical data necessary for the successful flight of a commercial airliner, all the things the passengers never saw, assuming that the flight crew just showed up and turned it on as though it were a taxicab.

“Enjoy your sleep?”

“You bet, Captain. I dreamed of a hot day and a hot woman.” Richter stood up, and his movements belied his supposed comfort. *I really am too old for this shit,* the chief warrant officer thought. It was just fate and luck—if you could call it that—that had put him on the mission. No one else had as much time on the Comanche as he and his fellow warrants did, and somebody had decided that they had the brains to do it, without some goddamned colonel around to screw things up. And now he could boogie on out of here. He looked up to see a clear sky. Well, could be better. For getting in and getting out, better to have clouds.

“Tanks are topped off.”

“Some coffee would be nice,” he thought aloud.

“Here you go, Mr. Richter.” It was Vega, the first sergeant. “Nice iced coffee, like they serve in the best Florida hotels.”

“Oh, thanks loads, man.” Richter took the metal cup with a chuckle. “Anything new on the way out?”

* * *

This was not good, Claggett thought. The Aegis line had broken up, and now he had one of the goddamned things ten miles away. Worse still, there had been a helicopter in the air not long before, according to his ESM mast, which he’d briefly risked despite the presence of the world’s best surveillance radar. But three Army helicopters were depending on him to be here, and that was that. Nobody had ever told him that harm’s way was a safe place. Not for him. Not for them, either.

“And our other friend?” he asked his sonar chief. The substantive reply was a shake of the head. The words merely confirmed it.

“Off the scope again.”

There were thirty knots of surface wind, which was whipping up the waves somewhat and interfering with sonar performance. Even holding the destroyer was becoming difficult now that it was slowed to a patrol speed of no more than fifteen knots. The submarine off to the north was gone again. Maybe really gone, but it was dangerous to bank on that. Claggett checked his watch. He’d have to decide what to do in less than an hour.

They would be going in blind, but that was an awkward necessity.

Ordinarily they'd gather information with snooper aircraft, but the real effort here was to achieve surprise, and they couldn't compromise that. The carrier task force had avoided commercial air lanes, hidden under clouds, and generally worked very hard to make itself scarce for several days. Jackson felt confident that his presence was a secret, but maintaining it meant depending on spotty submarine reports of electronic activity on the islands, and all these did was to confirm that the enemy had several E-2C aircraft operating, plus a monster air-defense radar. It would be an encounter battle aloft. Well, they'd been training for that over the past two weeks.

"Okay, last check," Oreza heard over the phone. "Kobler is exclusively military aircraft?"

"That is correct, sir. Since the first couple of days, we haven't seen any commercial birds on that runway." He really wanted to ask what the questions were all about, but knew it was a waste of time. Well, maybe an oblique question: "You want us to stay awake tonight?"

"Up to you, Master Chief. Now, can I talk to your guests?"

"John? Phone," Portagee announced, then was struck nearly dumb by the normality of what he'd just said.

"Clark," Kelly said, taking it. "Yes, sir . . . Yes, sir. Will do. Anything else? Okay, out." He hit the kill button. "Whose idea was this friggin' umbrella?"

"Mine," Burroughs said, looking up from the card table. "It works, doesn't it?"

"Sure as hell," John said, returning to the table and tossing a quarter in the pot. "Call."

"Three ladies," the engineer announced.

"Lucky son of a gun, too," Clark said, tossing his in.

"Lucky hell! These sunzabitches ruined the best fishing trip I ever had."

"John, you want I should make some coffee for tonight?"

"He makes the best damned coffee, too." Burroughs collected the pot. He was six dollars ahead.

"Portagee, it has been a while. Sure, go ahead. It's called black-gang coffee, Pete. Old seaman's tradition," Clark explained, also enjoying the pleasant inactivity.

"John?" Ding asked.

"Later, my boy." He picked up the deck and started shuffling adeptly. It would wait.

“Sure you have enough fuel?” Checa asked. The supplies that had been dropped in included auxiliary tanks and wings, but Richter shook his head.

“No prob. Only two hours to the refueling point.”

“Where’s that?” The signal over the satcomm had said nothing more than PROCEED PRIMARY, whatever that meant.

“About two hours away,” the warrant officer said. “Security, Captain, security.”

“You realize we’ve made a little history here.”

“Just so I live to tell somebody about it.” Richter zipped up his flight suit, tucked in his scarf, and climbed aboard. “Clear!”

The Rangers stood by one last time. They knew the extinguishers were worthless, but somebody had insisted on packing them along. One by one the choppers lifted off, their green bodies soon disappearing into the darkness. With that, the Rangers started dumping the remaining equipment into holes dug during the day. That required an hour, and all that remained was their walk to Hirose. Checa lifted his cellular phone and dialed the number he’d memorized.

“Hello?” a voice said in English.

“See you in the morning, I hope?” The question was in Spanish.

“I’ll be there, Señor.”

“Montoya, lead off,” the Captain ordered. They’d keep to the treeline as far as they could. The Rangers clasped weapons so far unused, hoping to keep it that way.

“I recommend two weapons,” Lieutenant Shaw said. “Spread the bearings about ten degrees, converge them in from under the layer, and nail him fore and aft.”

“I like it.” Claggett walked over to the plot for a final examination of the tactical situation. “Set it up.”

“So what gives?” one of the Army sergeants asked at the entrance to the attack center. The trouble with these damned submarines was that you couldn’t just hang around and watch stuff.

“Before we can refuel those helos of yours, we have to make that ’can go away,” a petty officer explained as lightly as he could.

“Is it hard?”

“I guess we’d prefer he was someplace else. It puts us on the surface with—well, somebody’s gonna know there’s somebody around.”

“Worried?”

“Nah,” the sailor lied. Then both men heard the Captain speak.

“Mr. Shaw, let’s go to battle stations torpedo. Firing-point procedures.”

* * *

The Tomcats went off first, one every thirty seconds or so until a full squadron of twelve was aloft. Next went four EA-6B jammers, led by Commander Roberta Peach. Her flight of four broke up into elements of two, one to accompany each of the two probing Tomcat squadrons.

Captain Bud Sanchez had the lead division of four, unwilling to entrust the attack of his air group to anyone else. They were five hundred miles out, heading southwest. In many ways the attack was a repeat of another action in the early days of 1991, but with a few nasty additions occasioned by the few airfields available to the enemy and weeks of careful analysis of operational patterns. The Japanese were very regular in their patrols. It was a natural consequence of the orderliness of military life and for that reason a dangerous trap to fall into. He gave one look back at the formation's sparkling wakes and then focused his mind on the mission.

"Set on one and three."

"Match generated bearings and shoot," Claggett said calmly.

The weapons technician turned his handle all to the left, then back to the right, repeating the exercise for the second tube.

"One and three away, sir."

"One and three running normal," sonar reported an instant later.

"Very well," Claggett acknowledged. He *had* been aboard a submarine and heard those words before, and that shot had missed, to which fact he owed his life. This was tougher. They didn't have as good a feel for the location of the destroyer as they would have liked, but neither did he have much choice in the matter. The two ADCAPs would run slow under the layer for the first six miles before shifting to their highest speed setting, which was seventy-one knots. With luck the target wouldn't have much chance to figure where the fish had come from. "Reload one and three with ADCAPs."

* * *

Timing, as always, was crucial. Jackson left the flag bridge after the fighters got off, and headed below to the combat information center, the better to coordinate an operation already figured out down to the minute. The next part was for his two Spruance destroyers, now thirty

miles south of the carrier group. That made him nervous. The Spruances were his best ASW ships, and though SubPac reported that the enemy sub screen was withdrawing west, hopefully into a trap, he worried about the one SSK that might be left behind to cripple Pacific Fleet's last carrier deck. So many things to worry about, he thought, looking at the sweep hand on the bulkhead-mounted clock.

Precisely at 11:45:00 local time, destroyers *Cushing* and *Ingersoll* turned broadside to the wind and began launching their Tomahawk missiles, signaling this fact by a five-element satellite transmission. A total of forty cruise missiles angled up into the sky, shed their solid-fuel boosters, then angled down for the surface. After the six-minute launch exercise, the destroyers increased speed to rejoin the battle group, wondering what their Tomahawks would accomplish.

"I wonder which one it is?" Sato murmured. They'd passed two already, the Aegis destroyers visible only from their wakes now, the barely visible arrowhead at the front of the spreading V of white foam.

"Call them up again?"

"It will anger my brother, but it must be lonely down there." Again Sato switched his radio setting, then depressed the switch on the wheel.

"JAL 747 Flight calling *Mutsu.*"

Admiral Sato wanted to grumble, but it was a friendly voice. He took the headset from the junior communications officer and closed his thumb on the switch. "Torajiro, if you were an enemy I would have you now."

He checked the radar display—only commercial targets were on the two-meter-square tactical-display screen. The SPY-1D radar showed everything within a hundred-plus miles, and most things out to nearly three hundred. The ship's SH-60J helicopter had just refueled for another antisub sweep, and though he was still at sea in time of war, he could allow himself a joke with his brother, flying up there in the big aluminum tub, doubtless filled with his countrymen.

"Time, sir," Shaw said, checking his electronic stopwatch. Commander Claggett nodded.

"Weps, bring them up and go active."

The proper command went to the torpedoes, now nearly two miles apart on either side of the target. The ADCAP—"additional capability"—version of the Mark 48 had a huge solid-state sonar system built into its twenty-one-inch nose. The unit launched from tube one was slightly closer, and its advanced imaging system acquired the destroyer's hull on the second sweep. Immediately, the torpedo turned right to home in, relaying its display to the launch point as it did so.

"Hydrophone effects, bearing two-three-zero! Enemy torpedo bearing two-three-zero!" a sonar officer shouted. "Its seeker is active!"

Sato's head turned sharply toward the sonar room, and instantly a new item appeared on the tactical display. Damn, he thought, and *Kurushio* said the area was safe. The SSK was only a few miles off.

"Countermeasures!" *Mutsu*'s captain ordered at once. In seconds the destroyer streamed an American-designed Nixie decoy off her fantail. "Launch the helicopter at once!"

"Brother, I am somewhat busy now. Have a good flight. Good-bye for now." The radio circuit went dead.

Captain Sato first wrote off the end of the conversation to the fact that his brother *did* have duties to perform, then before his eyes he saw the destroyer five miles below him turn sharply to the left, with more boiling foam at her stern to indicate a sudden increase in speed.

"Something's wrong here," he breathed over the intercom.

"We got him, sir. One or both," the fire-controlman announced.

"Target is increasing speed and turning to starboard," sonar reported. "Both units are in acquisition and closing. Target isn't pinging anything yet."

"Unit one range to target is now two thousand yards. Unit three is twenty-two hundred out. Both units are tracking nicely, sir." The petty officer's eyes were locked on the weapons display, ready to override a possible mistake made by the automated homing systems. The ADCAP was at this point not unlike a miniature submarine with its own very precise sonar picture, enabling the weapons tech to play vicarious kamikaze, in this case two at once, a skill that nicely complemented his skill on the boat's Nintendo system. The really good news for Claggett was that he wasn't trying a counterdetection, but rather

trying to save his ship first. Well, that was a judgment call, wasn't it?

"There's another one forward of us, bearing one-four-zero!"

"They have us," the Captain said, looking at the display and thinking that probably two submarines had shot at him. Still, he had to try, and ordered a crash turn to port. Top-heavy like her American Aegis cousins, *Mutsu* heeled violently to the right. As soon as the turn was made, the CO ordered full astern, hoping that the torpedo might miss forward.

It couldn't be anything else. Sato was losing sight of the battle, and overrode the autopilot, turning his aircraft into a tight left bank, leaving it to his right-seater to hit the seat belt signs for the passengers. He could see it all in the clear light of a quarter moon. *Mutsu* had executed one radical turn and then twisted into another. There were flashing lights on her stern as the ship's antisub helicopter started turning its rotor, struggling to get off and hunt whatever—yes, it had to be a submarine, Captain Sato thought, a sneaking, cowardly submarine attacking his brother's proud and beautiful destroyer. He was surprised to see the ship slow—to stop almost dead with the astern thrust of her reversible propeller—and wondered why *that* maneuver had been attempted. Wasn't it the same as for aircraft, whose rule was the simple axiom: Speed Is Life . . .

"Major cavitation sounds, maybe a crash-stop, sir," the sonar chief said. The weapons tech didn't give Claggett a chance to react.

"Don't matter. I have him cold on both, sir. Setting three for contact explosion, getting some magnetic interference from—they must use our Nixie, eh?"

"Correct, sailor."

"Well, we know how that puppy works. Unit one is five hundred out, closing fast." The technician cut one of the wires, letting unit one go on its own now, rising to thirty feet and fully autonomous, activating its onboard magnetic field and seeking the metal signature of the target, then finding it, letting it grow and grow . . .

The helicopter just got off, its strobe lights looping away from the now-stationary destroyer. The moment seemed fixed in time when the

ship started turning again, or seemed to, then a violent green flash appeared in the water on both sides of the ship, just forward of the bridge under the vertical launch magazine for her surface-to-air missiles. The knifelike shape of the hull was backlit in an eerie, lethal way. The image fixed in Sato's mind for the quarter second it lasted, and then one or more of the destroyer's SAMs exploded, followed by forty others, and *Mutsu*'s forward half disintegrated. Three seconds later, another explosion took place, and when the white water returned back to the surface, there was little more to be seen than a patch of burning oil. Just like her namesake in Nagasaki harbor in 1943 . . .

"Captain!" The copilot had to wrench the controlwheel level away from the Captain before the Boeing went into a stall. "Captain, we have passengers aboard!"

"That was my brother . . ."

"We have *passengers* aboard, damn you!" Without resistance now, he brought the 747 back to level flight, looking at his gyrocompass for the proper heading. *"Captain!"*

Sato turned his head back into the cockpit, losing sight of his brother's grave as the airliner changed its heading back to the south.

"I am sorry, Captain Sato, but we also have a job we must do." He engaged the autopilot before reaching out to the man. "Are you all right now?"

Sato looked forward into the empty sky. Then he nodded and composed himself. "Yes, I am quite all right. Thank you. Yes. I am quite all right now," he repeated more firmly, required by the rules of his culture to set his personal emotions aside for now. Their father had survived his destroyer command, had moved on to captain a cruiser on which he had died off Samar, the victim of American destroyers and their torpedoes . . . and now again . . .

"What the hell was that?" Commander Ugaki demanded of his sonar officers.

"Torpedoes, two of them, from the south," the junior lieutenant replied. "They've killed *Mutsu.*"

"What from?" was the next angry shout.

"Something undetected, Captain," was the weak reply.

"Come south, turns for eight knots."

"That will take us right through the disturbance from—"

"Yes, I know that."

“Definite kill,” sonar told him. The signature on the sonar screen was definite. “No engine sounds from target bearing, but breakup noises, and this here was one big secondary sexplosion. We got him, sir.”

* * *

Richter crossed over the same town the C-17 had overflown a few days earlier, and though somebody might have heard him, that was less of a concern now. Besides, at night a chopper was a chopper, and there were plenty of them here. He settled his Comanche to a cruising altitude of fifty feet and headed due south, telling himself that, sure, the Navy would be there, and sure, he could land on a ship, and sure, everything was going to go just fine. He was grateful for the tailwind until he saw the waves it was whipping up. Oh, shit . . .

“Mr. Ambassador, the situation has changed, as you know,” Adler said gently. The room had never heard the sound of more than one voice, but somehow it seemed far quieter now.

Seiji Nagumo, sitting next to his senior, noted that the chair next to Adler was occupied by someone else, another Japanese specialist from the fourth floor. Where was Chris Cook? he asked himself as the American negotiator went on. Why was he not here—and what did it mean?

“As we speak, American aircraft are attacking the Marianas. As we speak, American fleet units are engaging your fleet units. I must tell you that we have every reason to believe that our operations will be successful and that we will be able to isolate the Marianas from the rest of the world. The next part of the operation, if it becomes necessary, will be to declare a maritime exclusion zone around your Home Islands. We have no wish to attack your country directly, but it is within our capabilities to cut off your maritime trade in a matter of days.

“Mr. Ambassador, it is time to put an end to this . . .”

“As you see,” the CNN reporter said from her perch next to USS *Enterprise.* Then the camera panned to her right, showing an empty box. “USS *John Stennis* has left her dry dock. We are informed that the carrier is even now launching a strike against the Japanese-held Marianas. We were asked to cooperate with government deception

operations, and after careful consideration, it was decided that CNN is, after all, an *American* news service . . .”

“Bastards!” General Arima breathed, looking at the empty concrete structure, occupied only by puddles and wooden blocks now. Then his phone rang.

When it was certain that the Japanese E-2Cs had them, two Air Force AWACS aircraft flipped their radars on, having staged in from Hawaii, via Dyess on Kwajalein Atoll. In electronic terms it would be an even fight, but the Americans had more aircraft up to make sure it was fair in no other way. Four Japanese Eagles were aloft, and their first instinctive action was to turn northeast toward the intruders, the better to give their comrades standing ground alert time to get aloft and join the air battle before the incoming attack got close enough to catch their comrades on the ground. Simultaneously the ground defenses were warned to expect inbound hostile aircraft.

Sanchez lit off his own targeting radar as he saw the Japanese fighters just over a hundred miles away, heading in to launch their missiles. But they were armed with AMRAAMs, and he was armed with Phoenix, which had about double the range. He and three other aircraft launched two each for a max-range engagement. The eight missiles went into ballistic arcs, heading up to a hundred thousand feet before tipping over at Mach-5 and heading back down, their height giving them the largest possible radar cross section to home on. The Eagles detected the attack and tried to maneuver clear, but seconds later two of the F-15Js were blotted from the sky. The remaining pair kept driving in. The second wave of Phoenixes took care of that.

“What the hell?” Oreza wondered.

The sound of many jet engines starting up interrupted the card game, and all four men in the room went to the windows. Clark remembered to turn all the lights out, and stole the only set of binoculars in the house. The first pair of aircraft blazed off Kobler Field just as he brought them to his eyes. They were single-engine aircraft judging by their afterburner flames.

“What’s happening, John?”

“Nobody told me, really, but it shouldn’t be too hard to figure out.”

Lights were on all over the field. What mattered was getting the fighters off as rapidly as possible. The same thing would be happening on Guam, probably, but Guam was a good ways off, and the two

fighter groups would be engaging the Americans separately, negating the Japanese numerical advantage.

"What are those?"

Commander Peach and her jammers were also at work now. The search radar was powerful, but like all of its type it also transmitted low-frequency waves, and those were easily jammed. The massive collection of false dots both confused their understanding of the developing air action and knocked back their ability to detect the small but unstealthy cruise missiles. Fighters that might have tried to engage them had in fact overrun the inbound targets, giving them a free advance to the island's targets. The search radar atop Mount Takpochao picked them up barely thirty miles out instead of the hoped-for hundred, and was also trying to get a count on the inbound fighters. That gave the three operators on the set a complex task, but they were trained men, and they bent to the demands of the moment, one of their number sounding the alarm to get the island's Patriot missile batteries alerted.

The first part of the operation was going well. The standing Combat Air Patrol had been eliminated without loss, Sanchez saw, wondering if it had been one of his missiles that scored. No one would ever know about that. The next task was to take out the Japanese radar aircraft before the rest of their fighters arrived. To accomplish that, a division of four Tomcats went to burner and rocketed straight for them, rippling off all their missiles for the task.

They were just too brave for their own good, Sanchez saw. The Japanese Hawkeyes should have pulled back, and the defending Eagles should have done the same, but true to the fighter pilot's ethos they'd come out to engage the first wave of raiders instead of waiting. Probably because they thought this was a genuine raid instead of a mere fightersweep. The flanking division of four, called *Blinder Flight,* fulfilled its limited mission of killing the airborne-radar birds, then turned back to *John Stennis* to refuel and rearm. Now the only airborne radar was American. The Japanese came on, trying to blunt the attack that really did not exist, seeking to engage targets whose only goal had been the attention of the outbound interceptors.

It was obvious to the radar operators that the majority of the missiles

were headed for them instead of the airfield. They didn't trade remarks about that. There wasn't time. They watched as the E-2s fell from the sky, too far away for them to guess exactly why, but the remaining AEW aircraft was still on the runway at Kobler as the fighters were racing to get off, and the first of them were approaching the distant American aircraft, which were, surprisingly, not headed in as expected. Guam was on the radio now, requesting information at the same time it announced that its fighters were scrambling off the ground to deal with the attack.

"Two minutes on the cruise missiles," one of the operators said over the interphones.

"Tell Kobler to get its E-2 up immediately," the senior officer in the control van said when he saw that the two already up were gone. Their van was a hundred yards from the radar transmitter, but it hadn't been dug in yet. It had been planned for the coming week.

"Wow!" Chavez observed. They were outside now. Some clever soul had killed the electrical power for their part of the island, which allowed them to step out of the house for a better view of the light show. Half a mile to their east, the first Patriot blew out of its box-launcher. The missile streaked only a few hundred meters up before its thrustvector controls turned it as sharply as a billiard ball off a rail, aiming it down below the visible horizon. Three more followed a few seconds later.

"Cruise missiles coming in." This remark came from Burroughs. "Over to the north, looks like."

"Going for the radar on that hilltop, I bet," Clark thought. There followed a series of flashes that outlined the high ground to their east. The thunder of the explosions they represented took a few seconds more. Additional Patriots went off, and the civilians watched as the battery crew erected another box-launcher on its truck-transporter. They could also see that the process was taking too long.

The first wave of twenty Tomahawks was climbing now. They'd streaked in a bare three meters over the wave tops toward the sheer cliffs of Saipan's eastern coast. Automated weapons, they did not have the ability to avoid or even to detect fire directed at them, and the first ripple of Patriot SAMs did well, with twelve shots generating ten kills, but the remaining ten were climbing now, all targeted on the same spot. Four more of the cruise missiles fell to SAMs, and a fifth lost power and slammed into the cliff face at Laolao Kattan. The SAM

radars lost them at that point, and the battery commanders called a warning to the radar people, but it was far too late to be helpful, and, one by one, five thousand-pound warheads exploded over the top of Mount Takpochao.

"That takes care of that," Clark said when the sound passed. Then he paused to listen. Others were out in the open now, standing around the cul-de-sac neighborhood. Individual hoots joined into a chorus of cheers that drowned out the shouts of the missile crew on the hilltop to the east.

Fighters were still rocketing off Kobler Field below them, generally taking off in pairs, with some singles. The blue flames of their afterburners turned in the sky before blinking off, as the Japanese fighters turned to form up and meet the inbound raid. Last of all, Clark and the others heard the electric-fan sound of the last remaining Hawkeye, heading off last of all despite the advice of the now-dead radar crew.

The island grew silent for a few moments, a strange emptiness to the air as people caught their breath and waited for the second act of the midnight drama.

Only fifty miles offshore, USS *Pasadena* and three other SSNs came to antenna depth and launched six missiles each. Some of them were aimed at Saipan. Four went to Tinian. Two to Rota. The rest skimmed the wave tops for Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.

"Up scope!" Claggett ordered. The search periscope hissed up on hydraulic power. "Hold!" he called as the top of the instrument cleared the water. He turned slowly, looking for lights in the sky. None.

"Okay, the antenna next." Another hiss announced the raising of the UHF whip antenna. The Captain kept his eyes on the scope, still looking around. His right hand waved. There were some fuzzy radar signals from distant transmitters, but nothing able to detect the submarine.

"INDY CARS, this is PIT CREW, over," the communications officer said into a microphone.

“Thank God,” Richter said aloud, keying his microphone. “PIT CREw, this is INDY LEAD, authenticate, over.”

“Foxtrot Whiskey.”

“Charlie Tango,” Richter replied, checking the radio codes on his knee pad. “We are five out, and we sure could use a drink, over.”

“Stand by,” he heard back.

“Surface the ship,” Claggett ordered, lifting the 1-MC. “Now hear this, we’re surfacing the ship, maintain battle stations. Army crews, stand by.”

The proper gear was sitting next to the midships escape trunk and the larger capsule hatch designed to handle the guidance packages for ballistic missiles. One of *Tennessee*’s damage-control parties stood by to pass the gear, and a chief would work the fueling-hose connector hidden in the casing over the missile room.

“What’s that?” INDY-TWO asked over the radio circuit. “Lead, this is Three, chopper to the north. Say again, chopper to the north, big one.”

“Take him out!” Richter ordered at once. There could be no friendly choppers about. He turned and increased altitude for a look of his own. The guy even had his strobes on. “PIT CREW, this is INDY LEAD, there’s chopper traffic up here to the north. What gives, over?”

Claggett didn’t hear that. *Tennessee*’s sail had just broken the surface, and he was standing by the ladder to the top of the sail. Shaw took the microphone.

“That’s probably an ASW helo from the destroyer we just sunk—splash him, splash him *now!*”

“Aerial radar to the north!” an ESM tech called a second later. “Helicopter radar close aboard!”

“Two, take him out now!” Richter relayed the order.

“On the way, Lead,” the second Comanche responded, turning and dipping his nose to increase speed. Whoever it was, that was just too bad. The pilot selected guns. Under his aircraft the 20-millimeter cannon emerged from its canoelike enclosure and turned forward. The target was five miles out and didn’t see the inbound attack chopper.

It was another Sikorsky, Two’s pilot saw, possibly assembled in the

same Connecticut plant as his Comanch', the Navy version of the UH-60, a big target. His chopper blazed directly at it, hoping to get his kill before it could get a radio call out. Not much chance of that, and the pilot cursed himself for not engaging with a Stinger, but it was too late for that now. His helmet pipper locked on to the target and he triggered off fifty rounds, most of which found the nose of the approaching gray helicopter. The results were instant.

"Kill," he announced. "I got him, Lead."

"Roger, what's your fuel state?"

"Thirty minutes," Two replied.

"Circle and keep your eyes open," Lead commanded.

"Roger, Leader." As soon as he got to three hundred feet came another unwelcome surprise. "Lead, Two, radar to the north, system says it's a Navy billboard one."

"Great," Richter snarled, circling the submarine. It was large enough to land on, but it would have been easier if the goddamned thing wasn't rolling around like the beer barrel at an Irish wake. Richter brought his chopper into hover, approaching from straight aft, and lowered his wheels for landing.

"Come left into the wind," Claggett told Lieutenant Shaw. "We have to cut the rolls down for 'em."

"Gotcha, Skipper." Shaw made the necessary orders, and *Tennessee* steadied up on a northwesterly heading.

"Stand by the escape and capsule hatches!" the CO ordered next. As he watched, the helo came down slowly, carefully, and as usual, landing a helicopter aboard a ship reminded him of two porcupines making love. It wasn't lack of willingness; it was just that you couldn't afford any mistakes.

They were lined up like an army of mounted knights now, Sanchez thought, with the Japanese two hundred miles off Saipan's northeast tip, and the Americans a hundred miles beyond. This game had been played out many times by both sides, and often enough in the same war game centers. Both sides had their tracking radars on and searching. Both sides could now see and count the strength of the other. It was just a question of who would make the first move. The Japanese were at the disadvantage and knew it. Their remaining E-2C was not yet in position, and worse than that, they could not be entirely sure who the opposition was. On Sanchez's command, the Tomcats moved off first, going to afterburner and climbing high to

volley off their remaining Phoenix missiles. They fired at a range of fifty miles, and over a hundred of the sophisticated weapons turned into a wave of yellow flames climbing higher still before tipping over while their launch aircraft turned and retreated.

That was the signal for a general melee. The tactical situation had been clear, and then became less so as the Japanese fighters also went to maximum speed to close the Americans, hoping to duck under the Phoenix launch to launch their own fire-and-forget missiles. It was a move that required exquisite timing, which was hard to do without expert quarterbacking from a command-and-control aircraft, for which they had not waited.

It hadn't been possible to train Navy personnel to do it quickly enough, though a party of sailors did hold the wings up as the trained Army ground crewmen attached them to hardpoints on the side of the first Comanche. Then the fuel hoses were snaked to the openings, and the ship's pumps were switched on, filling all the tanks as rapidly as possible. Another Navy crewman tossed Richter a phone on the end of an ordinary wire.

"How did it go, Army?" Dutch Claggett asked.

"Kinda exciting. Y'all got some coffee, like hot maybe?"

"On the way, soldier." Claggett made the necessary call to the galley.

"Who was that chopper from?" Richter asked, looking back at the fueling operations.

"We had to take out a 'can about an hour ago. He was in the way. I guess the helo was from him. Ready to copy your destination?"

"Not Wake?"

"Negative. There's a carrier waiting for you at twenty-five north, one-fifty east. Say again, two-five north, one-five-zero east."

The warrant officer repeated the coordinates back twice, getting an additional confirmation. *A whole carrier to land on? Damn*, Richter thought. "Roger that, and thank you, sir."

"Thanks for splashing the helo, INDY."

A Navy crewman stepped up and banged on the side of the aircraft, giving a thumbs-up sign. He also handed over a *Tennessee* ball cap. Then Richter saw that the breast pocket on his shirt had a bulge in it. Most impolitely, he reached down and plucked out the half-pack of cigarettes. The sailor laughed over the noise and tossed a lighter to go along with it.

"Stand clear!" Richter shouted. The deck crewmen retreated, but then another man jumped out of the hatch with a thermos bottle, which was passed up. With that, the canopy came down and Richter

started his engines back up. Barely a minute later, the Comanche lifted off, making room for -Two as his lead aircraft took an orbit position over the sub. Thirty seconds after that, the pilot was sipping coffee. It was different from the Army brew, far more civilized. A little Hennessey, he thought, and it would be about perfect.

"Sandy, look north!" his backseater said as -Two me down on the deck of the submarine.

Six Eagles fell to the first volley of missiles, with two more damaged and withdrawing, the AWACS controllers said. Sanchez couldn't see, as he was heading away from the advancing enemy fighters, the Tomcats making room now for the Hornets. It was working. The Japanese were pursuing, coming away from their island at high-power settings, driving the Americans away, or so they thought. His threat receiver said that there were enemy missiles in the air now, but they were American-designed missiles, and he knew what they could do.

"What's that?" Oreza wondered.

Just a shadow at first. The airfield lights were still on for some reason or other, and they saw a single white streak crossing the end of Kobler's runway. It banked sharply over the threshold and tracked down the center of the single strip. Then it changed shape, the nose blowing off, and small objects sprinkling down on the concrete. A few exploded. The rest just disappeared, too small to see unless they were moving. Then came another, and another, all doing the same thing, except for one that headed straight for the tower, and blew the top right off of it, and along with it, the fighter wing's radios.

Farther south, the commercial airfield was also lit up still, four 747s sitting at the terminal or elsewhere on the ramp. Nothing seemed to approach the airport. To their east, several more missile launches lit up the Patriot battery, but they'd shot off their first load of missiles, and the crews now had to erect additional box launchers, then connect them to the command van, and that took time. They were getting kills, but not enough.

"Not going for the SAMs," Chavez noted, thinking that they really ought to be under cover for all this, but . . . but nobody else was, as though this were some sort of glorious Fourth of July display.

"Avoiding civilian areas, Ding," Clark replied.

"Nice trick. By the way, what's this Kelly stuff?"

"My real name," the senior officer observed.

"John, how many of the bastards did you kill?" Oreza wanted to

know.

"Huh?" Chavez asked.

"Back when we were both children, your boss here did a little private hunting, drug dealers, as I recall."

"It never happened, Portagee. Honest." John shook his head and grinned. "Well, not that anybody can prove," he added. "I really am dead, you know?"

"In that case you got the right set of initials for the new name, man." Oreza paused. "Now what?"

"Beats me, pal." Oreza wasn't cleared for his new orders, and he didn't know that they were possible anyway. A few seconds later it occurred to someone to switch off the remaining electrical power on the south end of the island.

Mutsu's helicopter had announced the presence of a submarine on the surface, but nothing more. That had caused *Kongo* to launch her Seahawk, now coming south. Two P-3C Orion antisub aircraft were approaching as well, but the helicopter would get in first, carrying two torpedoes. That aircraft was coming in at two hundred feet, without its look-down radar on, but with flashing strobes that looked very bright in Richter's headset.

"Sure is busy here," Richter said. He was at five hundred feet, with a new target just on the horizon. "PIT CREW, this is INDY LEAD, we have another chopper in the neighborhood."

"Splash him!"

"Copy that." Richter increased speed for his intercept. The Navy didn't have any problems making decisions. The closure speed guaranteed a rapid intercept. Richter selected STINGER and fired at five miles. Whoever it was, he didn't expect hostile aircraft in the area, and the cold water under him made a fine contrast background for the heat-seeking missile. The Seahawk spun in, leaving Richter to wonder if there might be survivors. But he didn't have the ability to perform a rescue, and didn't close in to see.

-Two was up now, and took the protective orbit position, allowing the leader to turn for the rendezvous. He gave the submarine a low saluting pass and headed off. He had neither the fuel nor the time to linger.

"You realize we're an aircraft carrier?" Ken Shaw asked, watching the deck crew finishing up refueling for the third and last visitor. "We scored kills and everything."

"Just so we live long enough to be a submarine again," Claggett replied tensely. As he watched, the canopy came down and the crewmen started securing topside. Two minutes later his deck was nearly clear. One of his chiefs tossed extraneous gear over the side, waved to the sail, and disappeared down the capsule hatch.

"Clear the bridge!" Claggett ordered. He took one last look around before keying the microphone one last time. "Take her down."

"We don't have a straight board yet," the Chief of the Boat objected in the attack center.

"You heard the man," the officer of the deck snapped back. With that command the vents were opened and the main ballast tanks flooded. The topside bridge hatch changed a second later from a circle to a dash, and Claggett appeared a moment later, closing the bottom-end hatch to the bridge, making a straight board.

"Rigged for dive. Get us out of here!"

* * *

"That's a submarine," the Lieutenant said. "Diving—venting his tanks."

"Range?"

"I have to go active for that," the sonar officer warned.

"Then do it!" Ugaki hissed.

"What are those flashes?" the copilot wondered. They were just over the horizon to the left of their flight path, no telling the distance, but however far away they were, they were bright, and one turned into a streak that cometed down into the sea. More streaks erupted in the darkness, lines of yellow-white going mainly right-to-left. That made it clear. "Oh."

"Saipan Approach, this is JAL Seven-Oh-Two, two hundred miles out. What is happening, over?" There was no reply.

"Return to Narita?" the copilot asked.

"No! No, we will not do that!" Torajiro Sato replied.

It was a tribute to his professionalism that rage didn't quite overcome his training. He'd already dodged two missiles to this point, and Major Shiro Sato did not panic despite the ill-luck that had befallen his wingman. His radar showed more than twenty targets, just out of

missile range, and though some others of his squadron mates had fired their AMRAAMs, he wouldn't until he had a better chance. He also showed multiple radars tracking his aircraft, but there was no helping that. He jerked his Eagle around the sky, taking hard turns and heavy gees as he closed on burner. What had begun as an organized battle was now a wild melee, with individual fighters entirely on their own, like samurai in the darkness. He turned north now, selecting the nearest blips. The IFF systems automatically interrogated them, and the answer was not what he expected. With that Sato triggered off his fire-and-forget missiles, then turned back sharply to the south. It wasn't at all what he'd hoped for, not a fair fight, skill against skill in a clear sky. This had been a chaotic encounter in darkness, and he simply didn't know who had won or lost. He had to turn and run now. Courage was one thing, but the Americans had drawn them out so that he scarcely had the fuel remaining for his home field. He'd never know if his missiles had scored. Damn.

He increased power one last time, going to burner to disengage, angling right to keep clear of the fighters advancing in from the south. Those were the planes from Guam, probably. He wished them luck.

"TURKEY, this is TURKEY LEAD. Disengage now. I say again, disengage now!" Sanchez was well behind the action now, wishing that he were in his Hornet instead of the larger Tomcat. Acknowledgments came in, and though he'd lost a few aircraft, and though the battle had not been entirely to his liking, he knew that it had been a success. He headed north to clear the area, checking his fuel state. Then he saw strobe lights at his ten o'clock and turned further to investigate.

"Jesus, Bud, it's an airliner," his radar-intercept officer said. "JAL markings." That was obvious from the stylized red crane on the high tailfin.

"Better warn him off." Sanchez turned on his own strobes and closed from the portside. "JAL 747, JAL 747, this is U.S. Navy aircraft to your portside."

"Who are you?" the voice asked over the guard frequency.

"We are a U.S. Navy aircraft. Be advised there is a battle going on here. I suggest you reverse course and head back home. Over."

"I don't have the fuel for that."

"Then you can bingo to Iwo Jima. There's a field there, but watch out for the radio tower southwest of the strip, over."

"Thank you," was the terse reply. "I will continue on my flight plan. Out."

"Dumbass." Sanchez didn't put on the air, though his backseater

fully agreed. In a real war they would have just shot him down, but this wasn't a real war, or so some people had decided. Sanchez would never know the magnitude of his error.

* * *

"Captain, that is very dangerous!"

"Iwo Jima is not lighted. We'll approach from the west and stay clear," Captain Sato said, unmoved by all that he'd heard. He altered course to the west, and the copilot kept his peace on the matter.

"Active sonar to starboard, bearing zero-one-zero, low-frequency, probably a sub." And that was not good news.

"Snapshot!" Claggett ordered at once. He'd drilled his crew mercilessly on this scenario, and the boomers did have the best torpedomen in the fleet.

"Setting up on tube four," the weapons petty officer answered. On command, the torpedo was activated. "Flooding four. Tube four is flooded. Weapon is hot."

"Initial course zero-one-zero," the weapons officer said, checking the plot, which didn't reveal much. "Cut the wires, set to go active at one thousand!"

"Set!"

"Match and shoot!" Claggett ordered.

"Fire four, four away!" The sailor nearly broke the firing handle.

"Range four thousand meters," the sonar officer reported. "Large submerged target, beam aspect. Transient—he's launched!"

"So can we. Fire one, fire two!" Ugaki shouted. "Left full rudder," he added the moment the second tube was clear. "Ahead flank!"

"Torpedo in the water. Two torpedoes in the water, bearing zero-one-zero. Ping-and-listen, the torpedoes are in search mode!" sonar reported.

"Oh, shit. We've been here before," Shaw noted, recalling an awful experience on USS *Maine.* The Army officer aboard and his senior sergeant had just come into the attack center to thank the Captain for his part in the helicopter mission. They stopped cold on the portside,

looking around and seeing the tension in the compartment.

"Six-inch room, launch decoy, now!"

"Launching now." There was slight noise a second later, just a jolt of compressed air.

"We have a MOSS set up?" Claggett asked, even though he'd given orders for exactly that.

"Tube two, sir," the weapons tech replied.

"Warm it up."

"Done, sir."

"Okay." Commander Claggett allowed himself a deep breath and time to think. He didn't have much, but he had some. How smart was that Japanese fish? *Tennessee* was doing ten knots, not having had rudder or speed orders after submerging, and was at three hundred feet of keel depth. Okay.

"Six-inch room, set up a spread of three canisters to launch on my command."

"Standing by, sir."

"Weps, set the MOSS for three hundred feet, circling as tight as you can at this depth. Make it active as soon as it clears the tube."

"Stand by . . . set. Tube is flooded."

"Launch."

"MOSS away, sir."

"Six-inch room, launch now!"

Tennessee shuddered again, with three decoys ejected into the sea along with the torpedo-based lure. The approaching torpedo now had a very attractive false target to track.

"Surface the ship! Emergency surface!"

"Emergency surface, aye," the chief of the boat replied, reaching himself for the air manifold. "Full rise on the planes!"

"Full rise, aye!" the helmsman repeated, pulling back on his control yoke.

"Conn, sonar, the inbound torpedoes are still in ping-and-listen. Our outbound unit is now on continuous pinging. It has a sniff."

"Their fish is like an early -48, troops," Claggett said calmly. His demeanor was a lie, and he knew that, but the crew might not. "Remember the three rules of a -48. It has to be a valid target, it has to be over eight hundred yards, and it has to have a bearing rate. Helm, all stop."

"All stop, aye. Sir, engine room answers all stop."

"Very well, we'll let her coast up now," the Captain said, out of things to say now. He looked over at the Army people and winked. They looked rather pale. Well, that was one advantage of being black, wasn't it? Claggett thought.

Tennessee took a thirty-degree up-angle, killing a lot of her forward

speed as she rose and tumbling several people to the deck, it came so abruptly. Claggett held on to the red-and-white periscope-control wheel to steady himself.

"Depth?"

"Breaking the surface now, sir!" the COB reported. A second later came a rush of exterior noise, and then the submarine crashed sickeningly back down.

"Rig for ultraquiet."

The shaft was stopped now. *Tennessee* wallowed on the surface while three hundred feet down and half a mile aft, the MOSS was circling in and out of the decoy bubbles. He'd done all that he could do. A crewman reached into his pocket for a smoke, then realized that he'd lost his pack topside.

"Our unit is in acquisition!" sonar reported.

"Come right!" Ugaki said, trying to be calm and succeeding, but the American torpedo had run straight through the decoy field . . . just as his had done, he remembered. He looked around his control room. The faces were on him, just as they had been the other time, but this time the other boat had shot first despite his advantage, and he only needed a look at the plot to see that he'd never know if his second submarine attack had succeeded or not.

"I'm sorry," he said to his crew, and a few heads had time to nod at his final, sincere apology to them.

"Hit!" sonar called next.

"Thank you, Sonar," Claggett acknowledged.

"The enemy fish are circling below us, sir . . . they seem to be . . . yeah, they're chasing into the decoy . . . we're getting some pings, but . . ."

"But the early -48s didn't track stationary surface targets, Chief," Claggett said quietly. The two men might have been the only people breathing aboard. Well, maybe Ken Shaw, who was standing at the weapons panel. It only made things worse that you couldn't hear the ultrasonic noise of a torpedo sonar.

"The damned things run forever."

"Yep." Claggett nodded. "Raise the ESM," he added as an afterthought. The sensor mast went up at once, and people cringed at the noise.

"Uh, Captain, there's an airborne radar bearing three-five-one."

"Strength?"

"Low but increasing. Probably a P-3, sir."
"Very well."
It was too much for the Army officer. "We just sit still?"
"That's right."

Sato brought the 747 in largely from memory. There were no runway lights, but he had enough from the moon to see what he was doing, and once again his copilot marveled at the man's skill as the aircraft's landing lights caught reflections from lights on the ground. The landing was slightly to the right of the centerline, but Sato managed a straight run to the end, this time without his usual look over at the junior officer. He was bringing the aircraft right onto the taxiway when there was a flash in the distance.

Major Sato's was the first Eagle back to Kobler, actually having passed two damaged aircraft on his way in. There was activity on the ground, but the only radio chatter was incoherent. He had little choice in any case. His fighter was running on vapors and memory now, all the fuel gauges showing almost nothing. Also without lights, the aviator chose the proper glide-slope and touched down in exactly the right spot. He didn't see the softball-size submunition that his nosegear hit. The fighter's nose collapsed, and the Eagle slid, pinwheeling off the end of the runway. There was just enough vapor in the tanks to start a fire, then an explosion to scatter parts over the Kobler runway. A second Eagle, half a mile behind Sato's, found another bomblet and exploded. The twenty remaining fighters angled away, calling on their radios for instructions. Six of them turned for the commercial field. The rest looked for and approached the large twin runways on Tinian, not knowing that they, too, had been sprinkled with cluster munitions from a series of Tomahawk missiles. Roughly half survived the landing without hitting anything.

Admiral Chandraskatta was in his control room, watching the radar display. He'd have to recall his fighters soon. He didn't like risking his pilots in night operations, but the Americans were up in strength, doing another of their shows of force. And surely they could attack and destroy his fleet if they wished, but now? With a war against Japan under way, would America choose to initiate another combat action? No. His amphibious force was now at sea, and in two days, at

sunset, the time would come.

The B-ls were lower than the flight crews had ever driven them. These were reservists, mostly airline pilots, assigned by a particularly beneficent Pentagon (with the advice of a few senior members of Congress) to a real combat aircraft for the first time in years. For practice bombing missions over land, they had a standard penetration altitude of no less than two hundred feet, more usually three hundred, because even Kansas farms had windmills and people erected radio towers in the damnedest places—but not at sea. Here they were down to fifty feet, and smokin', one pilot observed, nervously entrusting his aircraft to the terrain-avoidance system. His group of eight was heading due south, having turned over Dondra Head. The other four were heading northwest after using a different navigational marker. There was lots of electronic activity ahead, enough to make him nervous, though none of it was on him yet, and he allowed himself the sheer exhilaration of the moment, flying over Mach-1, and doing it so low that his bomber was trailing a different sort of vapor trail, more like an unlimited-class racing boat, and maybe cooking some fish along the way . . .

There.

"Low-level contacts from the north!"

"What?" The Admiral looked up. "Range?"

"Less than twenty kilometers, coming in very fast!"

"Are they missiles?"

"Unknown, Admiral!"

Chandraskatta looked down at his plot. There they were, the opposite direction from the American carrier aircraft. His fighters were not in a position to—

"Inbound aircraft!" a lookout called next.

"Engage?" Captain Mehta asked.

"Shoot first without orders?" Chandraskatta ran for the door, emerging onto the flight deck just in time to see the white lines in the water even before the aircraft causing them.

"Coming up now," the pilot said, aiming himself just at the carrier's bridge. He pulled back on the stick, and when it vanished under his nose, checked his altitude indicator.

"Pull up!" the voice-warning system told him in the usual sexy voice.

"I already did, Marilyn." It sounded like a Marilyn to the TWA pilot. Next he checked his speed. Just under nine hundred knots. Wow. The noise this big mother would make . . .

The sonic boom generated by the huge aircraft was more like a bomb blast, knocking the Admiral off his feet and shattering glass on the wheelhouse well over his head and wrecking other topside gear. Another followed seconds later, and then he heard more still as the massive aircraft buzzed over his fleet. He was slightly disoriented as he stood, and there were glass fragments on the flight deck as he made his way back under cover. Somehow he knew his place was on the bridge.

"Two radars are out," he heard a petty officer say. "*Rajput* reports her SAMs are down."

"Admiral," a communications lieutenant called, holding up a growler phone.

"Who is this?" Chandraskatta asked.

"This is Mike Dubro. The next time we won't be playing. I am authorized to tell you that the U.S. Ambassador is now meeting with your Prime Minister . . ."

"It is in everyone's best interest that your fleet should terminate its operations," the former Governor of Pennsylvania said after the usual introductory pleasantries.

"You may not order us about, you know."

"That was not an order, Madame Prime Minister. It was an observation. I am also authorized to tell you that my government has requested an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council to discuss your apparent intentions to invade Sri Lanka. We will offer to the Security Council the service of the U.S. Navy to safeguard the sovereignty of that country. Please forgive me for speaking bluntly, but my country does not intend to see the sovereignty of that country violated by anyone. As I said, it is in everyone's interest to prevent a clash of arms."

"We have no such intentions," the Prime Minister insisted, taken very aback by the directness of this message after the earlier one she'd

ignored.

"Then we are agreed," Ambassador Williams said pleasantly. "I will communicate that to my government at once."

It took nearly forever, in this case just over half an hour, before the first, then the second torpedo stopped circling, then stopped pinging. Neither found the MOSS a large-enough target to engage, but neither found anything else, either.

"Strength on that P-3 radar?" Claggett asked.

"Approaching detection values, sir."

"Take her down, Mr. Shaw. Let's get below the layer and tool on out of here."

"Aye, Cap'n." Shaw gave the necessary orders. Two minutes later, USS *Tennessee* was underwater, and five minutes after that at six hundred feet, turning southeast at a speed of ten knots. Soon thereafter they heard splashes aft, probably sonobuoys, but it took a long time for a P-3 to generate enough data to launch an attack, and *Tennessee* wasn't going to linger about.

47

Brooms

"Not with a bang but a whimper?" the President asked.

"That's the idea," Ryan said, setting the phone down. Satellite imagery showed that whatever the losses had been in the air battle, the Japanese had lost another fourteen aircraft due to cluster munitions on their airfields. Their principal search radars were gone, and they'd shot off a lot of SAMs. The next obvious step was to isolate the islands entirely from air and sea traffic, and that could be done before the end of the week. The press release was already being prepared if the necessity presented itself.

"We've won," the National Security Advisor said. "It's just a matter of convincing the other side."

"You've done well, Jack," Durling said.

"Sir, if I'd managed to get the job done properly, it never would have started in the first place," Ryan replied after a second's pause. He remembered getting things started along those lines . . . about a week too late to matter. Damn.

"Well, we seem to have done that with India, according to what Dave Williams just cabled in." The President paused. "And what about this?"

"First we worry about concluding hostilities."

"And then?"

"We offer them an honorable way out." Upon elaboration, Jack was pleased to see that the Boss agreed with him.

There would be one more thing, Durling didn't say, but he needed just a little more thinking about it. For the moment it was enough that America looked to be winning this war, and with it he'd won reelection for saving the economy and safeguarding the rights of American citizens. It had been quite an interesting month, the President thought, looking at the other man in the room and wondering what might have come to pass without him. After Ryan left, he placed a telephone call to the Hill.

One other advantage of airborne-radar aircraft was that they made counting coup a lot easier. They could not always show which missile killed which aircraft, but they did show them dropping off the screen.

"*Port Royal* reports recovery complete," a talker said.

"Thank you," Jackson said. He hoped the Army aviators weren't too disappointed to have landed on a cruiser instead of *Johnnie Reb,* but he needed his deck space.

"I count twenty-seven kills," Sanchez said. Three of his own fighters had fallen, with only one of the pilots rescued. The casualties were lighter than expected, though that fact didn't make the letter-writing any easier for the CAG.

"Well, it's not exactly like the Turkey Shoot, but it wasn't bad. Tack on fourteen more from the Tomahawks. That's about half their fighter strength—most of their F-15s—and they only have the one Hummer left. They're on the short end from now on." The battle-force commander went over the other data. A destroyer gone and the rest of their Aegis ships in the wrong place to interfere with the combat action. Eight submarines definitely destroyed. The overall operational concept had been to detach the arms from the body first, just as had been done in the Persian Gulf, and it had proved to be even easier over water than over land. "Bud, if you were commanding the other side, what would you try next?"

"We still can't invade." Sanchez paused. "It's a losing game any way you cut it, but the last time we had to come this way . . ." He looked at his commander.

"There is that. Bud, get a Tom ready for a flight with me in the back."

"Aye aye, sir." Sanchez made his way off.

"You thinking what I—" *Stennis*'s captain asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What do we got to lose, Phil?"

"A pretty good admiral, Rob," he replied quietly.

"Where do you keep your radios in this barge?" Jackson asked with a wink.

"Where have you been?" Goto asked in surprise.

"In hiding, after your patron kidnapped me." Koga walked in without so much as an announcement, took a seat without being bidden, and generally displayed the total lack of manners that proclaimed his renewed power. "What do you have to say for yourself?" the former Prime Minister demanded of his successor.

"You cannot talk to me that way." But even these words were weak.

"How marvelous. You lead our nation to ruin, but you insist on

deference from someone whom your master almost killed. With your knowledge?" Koga asked lightly.

"Certainly not—and who murdered the—"

"Who murdered the criminals? Not I," Koga assured him. "There is a more important question: what are you going to do?"

"Why, I haven't decided that yet." This attempt at a strong statement fell short on several counts.

"You haven't spoken to Yamata yet, you mean."

"I decide things for myself!"

"Excellent. Do so now."

"You cannot order me about."

"And why not? I will soon be back in that seat. You have a choice. Either you will resign your position this morning or this afternoon I will speak in the Diet and request a vote of no-confidence. It is a vote you will not survive. In either case you are finished." Koga stood and started to leave. "I suggest you do so honorably."

* * *

People were lined up in the terminal, standing in line at the counters to get tickets home, Captain Sato saw, as he walked past with a military escort. He was only a young lieutenant, a paratrooper still apparently eager to fight, which was more than could be said for the others in the building. The waiting jeep raced away, heading for the military airfield. The natives were out now, unlike before, carrying signs urging the "Japs" to leave. Some of them ought to be shot for their insolence, Sato thought, still coming to terms with his grief. Ten minutes later, he entered one of Kobler's hangars. Fighters were circling overhead, probably afraid to stray offshore, he thought.

"In here, please," the Lieutenant said.

He walked into the building with consummate dignity, his uniform cap tucked inside his left arm, his back erect, hardly looking at anything, his eyes fixed on the distant wall of the building until the Lieutenant stopped and pulled the rubber sheet off the body.

"Yes, that is my son." He tried not to look, and blessedly the face was not grossly disfigured, possibly protected by the flight helmet while the rest of the body had burned as he sat trapped in his wrecked fighter. But when he closed his eyes he could see his only child writhing in the cockpit, less than an hour after his brother had drowned. Could destiny be so cruel as this? And how was it that those who had served his country had to die, while a mere transporter of civilians was allowed to pass through the American fighters with

contempt?

"The squadron command believes that he shot down an American fighter before coming back," the Lieutenant offered. He'd just made that up, but he had to say something, didn't he?

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I have to return to my aircraft now." No more words were passed on the way back to the airport. The army officer left the man with his grief and his dignity.

Sato was on his flight deck twenty minutes later, the 747 already preflighted, and, he was sure, completely filled with people returning home under the promise of safe passage by the Americans. The ground tractor pushed the Boeing away from the jetway. It was driven by a native, and the gesture he flashed to the cockpit on decoupling from their aircraft was not exactly a friendly one. But the final insult came as he waited for clearance to take off. A fighter came in to land, not a blue Eagle, it was a haze-gray aircraft with NAVY painted on the engine nacelles.

"Nice touch, Bud. Grease job," Jackson said as the canopy came up.

"We aim to please, sir," Sanchez replied nervously. As he taxied off to the right, the welcoming committee, such as it was, all wore green fatigues and carried rifles. When the aircraft stopped, an aluminum extension ladder was laid alongside the aircraft. Jackson climbed out first, and at the bottom of the ladder a field-grade officer saluted him correctly.

"That's a Tomcat," Oreza said, handing over the binoculars. "And that officer ain't no Jap."

"Sure as hell," Clark confirmed, watching the black officer get into a jeep. What effect would this have on his tentative orders? Attractive as it might be to put the arm on Raizo Yamata, even getting close enough to evaluate the possibility—his current instructions—was not a promising undertaking. He had also reported on conditions on Saipan, and that word, he thought, was good. The Japanese troops he'd seen earlier in the day were not the least bit jaunty, though some officers, especially the junior ones, seemed very enthusiastic about their mission, whatever that was right now. It was about what you expected of lieutenants in any army.

The Governor's house, set on the local Capitol Hill next to the

convention center, seemed a pleasant enough structure. Jackson was sweating now. The tropical sun was hot enough, and his nomex flight suit was just too good an insulator. Here a colonel saluted him and led him inside.

Robby knew General Arima on sight, remembering the intelligence file he'd seen in the Pentagon. They were of about the same height and build, he saw. The General saluted. Jackson, bareheaded and under cover, was not allowed to do so under naval regulations. It seemed the proper response not to, anyway. He nodded his head politely, and left it at that.

"General, can we speak in private?"

Arima nodded and led Jackson into what looked like a combination den/office. Robby took a seat, and his host was kind enough to hand over a glass of ice water.

"Your position is . . . ?"

"I am Commander Task Force Seventy-Seven. I gather you are the commander of Japanese forces on Saipan." Robby drank the water down. It annoyed him greatly to be sweating, but there was no helping that.

"Correct."

"In that case, sir, I am here to request your surrender." He hoped the General knew the semantic difference between "request" and "demand," the customary verb for the occasion.

"I am not authorized to do that."

"General, what I'm about to say to you is the position of my government. You may leave the islands in peace. You may take your light weapons with you. Your heavy equipment and aircraft will remain behind for later determination of status. For the moment we require that all Japanese citizens leave the island, pending the restoration of normal relations between our countries."

"I am not authorized to—"

"I'll be saying the same thing on Guam in two hours, and the American Ambassador in Tokyo is now requesting a meeting with your government."

"You do not have the ability to take this one island back, much less all of them."

"That is true," Jackson conceded. "It is also true that we can easily stop all ships from entering or leaving Japanese ports for the indefinite future. We can similarly cut off this island from air and sea traffic."

"That is a threat," Arima pointed out.

"Yes, sir, it is. In due course your country will starve. Its economy will come to a complete halt. That serves no one's purposes." Jackson paused. "Up until this point only military people have suffered. They

pay us to take chances. If it goes any further, then everyone suffers more, but your country most of all. It will also generate additional bad feelings on both sides, when our actions should be to restore normal relations as rapidly as circumstances allow."

"I am not authorized to—"

"General, fifty years ago you could have said that, and it was the custom of your armed forces to fight to the last man. It was also the custom of your armed forces to deal with people in the lands you occupied in a way that even you must find barbaric—I say that because you have behaved honorably in all respects—or so all my information tells me. For that I thank you, sir," Jackson went on, speaking evenly and politely. "This is not the nineteen-forties. I wasn't born before the end of that war, and you were a toddler then. That sort of behavior is a thing of the past. There is no place for it in the world today."

"My troops have behaved properly," Arima confirmed, not knowing what else to say under the circumstances.

"Human life is a precious commodity, General Arima, far too precious to be wasted unnecessarily. We have limited our combat actions to militarily important targets. We have not as yet inflicted harm on the innocent, as you have not. But if this war continues, that will change, and the consequences will be harder on you than on us. There is no honor in that for either side. In any case, I must now fly to Guam. You know how to reach me by radio." Jackson stood.

"I must await orders from my government."

"I understand," Robby replied, thankful that Arima meant that he would follow those orders—from his *government.*

Usually when Al Trent came to the White House it was in the company of Sam Fellows, the ranking minority member of the Select Committee, but not this time, because Sam was in the other party. A member of his party's Senate leadership was there also. The hour made this a political meeting, with most of the White House staffers gone for the day, and a President allowing himself a release from the stress of his office.

"Mr. President, I gather that things have gone well?"

Durling nodded cautiously. "Prime Minister Goto is not yet able to meet with the Ambassador. We're not sure why, but Ambassador Whiting says not to worry. The public mood over there is shifting our way rapidly."

Trent took a drink from the Navy steward who served in the Oval Office. That part of the White House staff must have kept a list of the favored drinks for the important. In Al's case it was vodka and tonic,

Finnish Absolut vodka, a habit begun while a student at Tufts University, forty years earlier.

"Jack said all along that they didn't know what they were getting into."

"Bright boy, Ryan," the senior Senator agreed. "He's done you quite a few favors, Roger." Trent noted with annoyance that this stalwart member of what he liked to call "the upper house" felt the right to first-name the President in private. Typical senator, the House member thought.

"Bob Fowler gave you some good advice," Trent allowed.

The President nodded agreement. "True, and you're the one who put the bug in his ear, Al, aren't you?"

"Guilty." The word was delivered with a laugh.

"Well, I have an idea I want to float on the both of you," Durling said.

Captain Checa's squad of Rangers made the last treeline just after noon, local time, concluding a thoroughly murderous trek through snow and mud. There was a single-lane road below. This part of town must have been some sort of summer resort, the Captain thought. The hotel parking lots were almost entirely empty, though one had a minibus in it. The Captain pulled the cellular phone from his pocket and speed-dialed the proper number.

"Hello?"

"Señor Nomuri?"

"Ah, Diego! I've been waiting for hours. How was your nature hike?" the voice asked with a laugh.

Checa was formulating his answer when the lights on the minibus flashed twice. Ten minutes later all the men were inside, where they found some hot drinks and room to change their clothing. On the drive down the mountain, the CIA officer listened to the radio, and the soldiers could see his demeanor relax as he did so. It would be a while longer before the Rangers did the same.

Captain Sato performed another perfect landing at Narita International Airport, entirely without thinking about it, not even hearing the congratulatory comment of his copilot as he completed the run-out. Outwardly calm, inside the pilot was a vacuum, performing his customary job robotically. The copilot did not interfere, thinking that the mechanics of handling the aircraft would itself be some solace to his captain, and so he watched Sato taxi the

747 right up to the jetway, stopping again with the usual millimetric precision. In less than a minute the doors were opened and passengers clambered off. Through the windows of the terminal they could see a crowd of people waiting at the gate, mainly the wives and children of people who had flown so recently to Saipan in order to establish themselves as . . . citizens, able to vote in the newest Home Island. But not now. Now they were coming home, and families welcomed them as those who might have been lost, now safe again where they belonged. The copilot shook his head at the absurdity of it all, not noticing that Sato's face still hadn't changed at all. Ten minutes later the flight crew left the aircraft. A relief crew would take it back to Saipan in a few hours to continue the exodus of special flights.

Out in the terminal, they saw others waiting at other gates, outwardly nervous from their expressions, though many were devouring afternoon papers just delivered to the airport's many gift shops.

Goto Falls was the headline: *Koga to Form New Government.*

The international gates were rather less full than was the norm. Caucasian businessmen stood about, clearly leaving the country, but now looking about in curiosity, so many of them with little smiles as they scanned the terminal, looking mainly at the flights inbound from Saipan. Their thoughts could hardly have been more obvious, especially the people waiting to board flights eastward.

Sato saw it too. He stopped and looked at a paper dispenser but only needed to see the headline to understand. Then he looked at the foreigners at their gates and muttered, "*Gaijin* . . ." It was the only unnecessary word he'd spoken in two hours, and he said nothing else on the way to his car. Perhaps some sleep would help him, the copilot thought, heading off to his own.

"Aren't we supposed to go back out and—"

"And do what, Ding?" Clark asked, pocketing the car keys after a thirty-minute spin around the southern half of the island. "Sometimes you just let things be. I think this is one of those times, son."

"You saying it's over?" Pete Burroughs asked.

"Well, take a look around."

Fighters were still orbiting overhead. Cleanup crews had just about cleared the debris from the periphery of Kobler Field, but the fighters had not moved over to the international airport, whose runways were busy with civilian airliners. To the east of the housing tract the Patriot crews were also standing alert, but those not in the control vans were standing together in small knots, talking among themselves instead of doing the usual soldierly make-work. Local citizens were

demonstrating now, in some cases loudly, at various sites around the island, and nobody was arresting them. In some cases officers backed up by armed soldiers asked, politely, for the demonstrators to stay away from the troops, and the local people prudently heeded the warnings. On their drive, Clark and Chavez had seen half a dozen such incidents, and in all cases it was the same: the soldiers not angered so much as embarrassed by it all. It wasn't the sign of an army ready to fight a battle, John thought, and more importantly, the officers were keeping their men under tight control. That meant orders from above to keep things cool.

"You think it's over?" Oreza asked.

"If we're lucky, Portagee."

* * *

Prime Minister Koga's first official act after forming a cabinet was to summon Ambassador Charles Whiting. A political appointee whose last four weeks in the country had been very tense and frightening indeed, Whiting noted first of all that the guard detail around the embassy was cut by half. His official car had a police escort to the Diet Building. There were cameras to record his arrival at the VIP entrance, but they were kept well back, and two brand-new ministers conducted him inside.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Whiting."

"Mr. Prime Minister, speaking for myself, I am very pleased to answer your invitation." The two men shook hands, and really that was it, both of them knew, though their conversation had to cover numerous issues.

"You are aware that I had nothing at all to do—"

Whiting just raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir. Yes, I know that, and I assure you that my government knows that. Please, we do not need to establish your goodwill. This meeting," the Ambassador said generously, "is proof positive of that."

"And the position of your government?"

At exactly nine in the morning, Vice President Edward Kealty's car pulled into the underground parking garage of the State Department. Secret Service agents conducted him to the VIP elevator that took him to the seventh floor, where one of Brett Hanson's personal assistants led him to the double doors of the office of the Secretary of State.

"Hello, Ed," Hanson said, standing and coming to meet the man

he'd known in and out of public life for two decades.

"Hi, Brett." Kealty was not downcast. In the past few weeks he'd come to terms with many things. Later today he would make his public statement, apologizing to Barbara Linders and several other people by name. But before that he had to do what the Constitution required. Kealty reached into his coat pocket and handed over an envelope to the Secretary of State. Hanson took it and read the two brief paragraphs that announced Kealty's resignation from his office. There were no further words. The two old friends shook hands and Kealty made his way back out of the building. He would return to the White House, where his personal staff was already collecting his belongings. By evening the office would be ready for a new occupant.

"Jack, Chuck Whiting is delivering our terms, and they're pretty much what you suggested last night."

"You might catch some political heat from that," Ryan observed, inwardly relieved that President Durling was willing to run the risk.

The man behind the ornate desk shook his head. "I don't think so, but if it happens, I can take it. I want orders to go out for our forces to stand down, defensive action only."

"Good."

"It's going to be a long while before things return to normal."

Jack nodded. "Yes, sir, but we can still manage things in as civilized a way as possible. Their citizens were never behind this. Most of the people responsible for it are already dead. We have to make that clear. Want me to handle it?"

"Good idea. Let's talk about that tonight. How about you bring your wife in for dinner? Just a private one for a change," the President suggested with a smile.

"I think Cathy would like that."

Professor Caroline Ryan was just finishing up a procedure. The atmosphere in the operating room was more akin to something in an electronics factory. She didn't even have to wear surgical gloves, and the scrub rules here were nothing like those for conventional surgery. The patient was only mildly sedated while the surgeon hovered over the gunsight-like controls of her laser, searching around for the last bad vessel on the surface of the elderly man's retina. She lined up the crosshairs as carefully as a man taking down a Rocky Mountain sheep from half a mile, and thumbed the control. There was a brief flash of green light and the vein was "welded" shut.

"Mr. Redding, that's it," she said quietly, touching his hand.

"Thank you, doctor," the man said somewhat sleepily.

Cathy Ryan flipped off the power switch on the laser system and got off her stool, stretching as she did so. In the corner of the room, Special Agent Andrea Price, still disguised as a Hopkins faculty member, had watched the entire procedure. The two women went outside to find Professor Bernard Katz, his eyes beaming over his Bismarck mustache.

"Yeah, Bernie?" Cathy said, making her notes for Mr. Redding's chart.

"You have room on the mantel, Cath?" *That* brought her eyes up. Katz handed over a telegram, still the traditional way of delivering such news. "You just bagged a Lasker Award, honey." Katz then delivered a hug that almost made Andrea Price reach for her gun.

"Oh, Bernie!"

"You earned it, doctor. Who knows, maybe you'll get a free trip to Sweden, too. Ten years of work. It's one hell of a clinical breakthrough, Cathy."

Other faculty members came up then, applauding and shaking her hand, and for Caroline Muller Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., it was a moment to match the arrival of a baby. *Well,* she thought, *almost. . . .*

Special Agent Price heard her beeper go off and headed to the nearest phone, taking the message down and returning to her principal.

"Is it really that good?" she finally asked.

"Well, it's about the top American award in medicine," Katz said while Cathy basked in the glow of respect from her colleagues. "You get a nice little copy of a Greek statue, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, I think, the Goddess Nike. Some money, too. But mainly what you get is the knowledge that you really made a difference. She's a great doc."

"Well, the timing is pretty good. I have to get her home and changed," Price confided.

"What for?"

"Dinner in the White House," the agent replied with a wink. "Her husband did a pretty good job, too." Just how good was a secret from nearly everyone, but not from the Service, from whom nothing was secret.

"Ambassador Whiting, I wish to apologize to you, to your government, and to your people for what has happened. I pledge to you that it will not happen again. I also pledge to you that the people responsible will answer to our law," Koga said with great if somewhat stiff dignity.

"Prime Minister, your word is sufficient to me and to my government. We will do the utmost to restore our relationship," the Ambassador promised, deeply moved by the sincerity of his host, and wishing, as many had, that America had not cut his legs out only six weeks earlier. "I will communicate your wishes to my government immediately. I believe that you will find our response to your position is highly favorable."

"I need your help," Yamata said urgently.

"What help is that?" Tracking down Zhang Han San had taken most of the day, and now the man's voice was as cold as his name.

"I can get my jet here, and from here I can fly directly to—"

"That could be viewed as an unfriendly act against two countries. No, I regret that my government cannot allow that." *Fool,* he didn't add. *Don't you know the price for this sort of failure?*

"But you—we are allies!"

"Allies in what?" Zhang inquired. "You are a businessman. I am a government official."

The conversation might have gone on with little point, but then the door to Yamata's office opened and General Tokikichi Arima came in, accompanied by two other officers. They hadn't troubled themselves to talk with the secretary in the anteroom.

"I need to speak with you, Yamata-san," the General said formally.

"I'll get back to you," the industrialist said into the phone. He hung up. He couldn't know that at the other end the official instructed his staff not to put the calls through. It would not have mattered in any case.

"Yes—what is it?" Yamata demanded. The reply was equally cold.

"I am ordered to place you under arrest."

"By whom?"

"By Prime Minister Koga himself."

"The charge?"

"Treason."

Yamata blinked hard. He looked around the room at the other men, now flanking the General. There was no sympathy in their eyes. So there it was. These mindless automatons had orders, but not the wit to understand them. But perhaps they still had honor.

"With your permission, I would like a few moments alone." The meaning of the request was clear.

"My orders," Arima said, "are to return you to Tokyo alive."

"But—"

"I am sorry, Yamata-san, but you are not to avail yourself of that form of escape." With that the General motioned to the junior officer,

who took three steps and handcuffed the businessman. The coldness of the steel startled the industrialist.

"Tokikichi, you can't—"

"I must." It pained the General not to allow his . . . friend? No, they'd not been friends, not really. Even so it pained him not to allow Yamata to end his life by way of atonement, but the orders from the Prime Minister had been explicit on that score, and with that, he led the man from the building, off to the police station adjacent to his soon-to-be-vacated official quarters, where two men would keep an eye on him to prevent any attempt at suicide.

When the phone rang, it surprised everyone that it was *the* phone, and not Burroughs' satellite instrument. Isabel Oreza got it, expecting a call from work or something. Then she turned and called., "Mr. Clark?"

"Thank you." He took it. "Yes?"

"John, Mary Pat. Your mission is over. Come on home."

"Maintain cover?"

"Affirmative. Good job, John. Tell Ding the same thing." The line went dead. The DDO had already violated security in a major way, but the call had taken only a few seconds, and using the civilian line made it even more official than the covert sort could.

"What gives?" Portagee asked.

"We've just been ordered home."

"No shit?" Ding asked. Clark handed the phone over.

"Call the airport. Tell them that we're accredited newsies and we might just get a priority." Clark turned. "Portagee, could you do me a favor and forget you ever saw me?"

The signal was welcome though surprising. *Tennessee* immediately turned due east and increased speed to fifteen knots for the moment, staying deep. In the wardroom, the gathered officers were still joshing their Army guest, as was also happening with the enlisted men.

"We need a broom," the engineering officer said after some deep thought.

"Do we have one aboard?" Lieutenant Shaw asked.

"Every submarine is issued a broom, Mr. Shaw. You've been around long enough to know that," Commander Claggett observed with a wink.

"What are you guys talking about?" the Army officer asked. Were they jerking him around again?

"We took two shots and both were kills," the engineer explained. "That's a clean sweep, and that means when we enter Pearl, we have a broom tied to the number-one periscope. Tradition."

"You squids do the weirdest things," the lone man in green fatigues observed.

"Do we claim the helos?" Shaw asked his CO.

"We shot them down," the ground-pounder objected.

"But they flew off our deck!" the Lieutenant pointed out.

"Jesus!" All this over breakfast. What would the squids do for lunch?

The dinner was informal, up on the bedroom level of the White House, with what passed for a light buffet, albeit one cooked by a staff good enough to upgrade the rating of any restaurant in America.

"I understand congratulations are in order," Roger Durling said.

"Huh?" The National Security Advisor hadn't heard yet.

"Jack, I, uh, got the Lasker," Cathy said from her seat across the table.

"Well, that's two in your family who're the best around," Al Trent observed, saluting with his wineglass.

"And this one's for you, Jack," the President said, lifting his glass. "After all the grief I've gotten on foreign affairs, you've saved me, and you've saved a lot of other things. Well done, *Mister* Dr. Ryan."

Jack nodded at the toast, but this time he knew. He'd been around Washington long enough, finally, to hear the falling sandbag. The trouble was that he didn't know exactly why it was falling toward his head.

"Mr. President, the satisfaction comes from—well, from service, I guess. Thanks for trusting me, and thanks for putting up with me when I—"

"Jack, people like you, well, where would our country be?" Durling turned. "Cathy, do you know everything Jack has done over the years?"

"Jack? Tell me secrets?" She had a good laugh at that.

"Al?"

"Well, Cathy, it's time you learned," Trent observed, much to Jack's discomfort.

"There is one thing I've always wondered about," she said at once. "I mean, you two are so friendly, but the first time you two met several years ago, I—"

"The dinner, the one before Jack flew off to Moscow?" Trent took a sip of the California chardonnay. "That was when he set up the defection of the head of the old KGB."

"What?"

"Tell the story, Al, we have lots of time," Durling urged. His wife, Anne, leaned in to hear this one, too. Trent ended up speaking for twenty minutes, telling more than one old tale in the process despite the look on Jack's face.

"That's the sort of husband you have, Dr. Ryan," the President said when the stories were ended.

Jack looked over at Trent now, a rather intense stare. What was at the end of this?

"Jack, your country needs you for one last thing, and then we'll let you go," the Congressman said.

"What's that?" *Please, not an ambassadorship,* he thought, the usual kiss-off for a senior official.

Durling set his glass down. "Jack, my main job for the next nine months is to get reelected. It might be a tough campaign, and it's going to absorb a lot of my time under the best of circumstances. I need you on the team."

"Sir, I already am—"

"I want you to be my Vice President," Durling said calmly. The room got very quiet then. "The post is vacant as of today, as you know. I'm not sure yet who I want for my second term, and I am not suggesting that you fill the post for more than—what? Not even eleven months. Like Rockefeller did for Gerry Ford. I want somebody whom the public respects, somebody who can run the shop for me when I'm away. I need somebody heavy in foreign affairs. I need somebody who can help me put my foreign-policy team together. And," he added, "I know you want out. You've done enough. And so, after this, you *can't* be called back for a permanent post."

"Wait a minute. I'm not even in your party," Jack managed to say.

"As the Constitution was originally drafted, the Vice President was supposed to be the loser in the general election. James Madison and the others assumed that patriotism would triumph over partisanship. Well, they were wrong," Durling allowed. "But in this case—Jack, I know you. I will not use you in a political sense. No speeches and baby-kissing."

"Never pick up a baby to kiss it," Trent said. "They always puke on you, and somebody always gets a picture. Always kiss the baby in the mom's arms." The good political advice was sufficient to lighten the atmosphere a little.

"Your job will be to get the White House organized, to manage national-security affairs, really to help me strengthen my foreign-policy team. And then I'll let you go and nobody will ever call you back. You'll be a free man, Jack," Durling promised. "Once and for all."

"My God," Cathy said.

"It's what you wanted, too, isn't it?"

Caroline nodded. "Yes, it is. But—but, I don't know anything about politics. I—"

"Lucky you," Anne Durling observed. "You won't have to get stuck with it."

"I have my work and—"

"And you'll still do it. A nice house comes along with the job," the President went on. "And it's temporary." He turned his head. "Well, Jack?"

"What makes you think that I can be confirmed—"

"Leave that to us," Trent said in a way that announced quite clearly that it had already been settled.

"You won't ask me to—"

"My word on it," the President promised. "Your obligation ends next January."

"What about—I mean, that makes me President of the Senate, and in the event of a close vote—"

"I suppose I ought to say that I'll tell you how I want you to vote, and I will, and I hope you'll listen, but I know you'll vote your conscience. I can live with that. As a matter of fact, if you were any other way, I wouldn't be making this offer."

"Besides, nothing on the schedule will be that close," Trent assured him. They'd talked that one over, too, the night before.

"I think we should pay more attention to the military," Jack said.

"If you make your recommendations, I'll incorporate them in the budget. You've taught me a lesson on that, and I may need you to help me hammer it through Congress. Maybe that will be your valedictory."

"They'll listen to you, Jack," Trent assured him.

Jesus, Ryan thought, wishing that he'd gone easier on the wine. Predictably he looked over to his wife. Their eyes met, and she nodded. *You sure?* his eyes asked. She nodded again.

"Mr. President, under the terms of your offer, and just to the end of your term, yes, I will do it."

Roger Durling motioned to a Secret Service agent, letting her know that Tish Brown could make the press release in time for the morning papers.

Oreza allowed himself to board his boat for the first time since Burroughs had landed his albacore. They left the pier at dawn, and by nightfall the engineer was able to conclude his fishing vacation with another sizable game fish before catching a Continental flight to

Honolulu. His return to work would include more than a fish story, but he wouldn't mention the gear that the boat's skipper had dumped over the side as soon as they were out of sight of land. It was a shame to dump the cameras and the expensive lights, but he supposed there was some reason for it.

Clark and Chavez, still covered as Russians, managed to bully their way onto a JAL flight to Narita. On the way aboard they saw a well-dressed man in handcuffs with a military escort, and from twenty feet away, as they moved the man into the first-class cabin, Ding Chavez looked into the eyes of the man who had ordered the death of Kimberly Norton. He briefly wished for his light or a gun, or maybe even a knife, but that was not in the cards. The flight to Japan took just over two boring hours, and both men walked their carry-ons across the international terminal. They had first-class reservations on another JAL flight to Vancouver, and from there they would fly to Washington on an American carrier.

"Good evening," the Captain said first in Japanese, then in English. "This is Captain Sato. We expect this to be a smooth flight, and the winds are good for us. With luck we should be in Vancouver at about seven in the morning, local time." The voice sounded even more mechanical than the cheap ceiling speakers, but pilots liked talking like robots.

"Thank God," Chavez observed quietly in English. He did the mental arithmetic and decided that they'd be in Virginia around nine or ten in the evening.

"About right," Clark thought.

"I want to marry your daughter, Mr. C. I'm going to pop the question when I get back." There, he'd finally said it. The look his offhand remark generated made him cringe.

"Someday you'll know what words like that do to a man, Ding." *My little baby?* he thought, as vulnerable to the moment as any man, perhaps more so.

"Don't want a greaser in the family?"

"No, not that at all. It's more—oh, what the hell, Ding. Easier to spell Chavez than Wojohowitz. If it's okay with her, then I suppose it's okay with me."

That easy? "I expected you to bite my head off."

Clark allowed himself a chuckle. "No, I prefer guns for that sort of thing. I thought you knew that."

“The President could not have made a better selection,” Sam Fellows said on “Good Morning, America.” “I’ve known Jack Ryan for nearly eight years. He’s one of the brightest people in government service. I can tell you now that he is one of the men most responsible for the rapid conclusion of hostilities with Japan, and was also instrumental in the recovery of the financial markets.”

“There have been reports that his work at CIA—”

“You know that I am not free to reveal classified information.” Those leaks would be handled by others, and the proper senators on both sides of the aisle were being briefed in this morning as well. “I can say that Dr. Ryan has served our country with the utmost personal honor. I cannot think of another intelligence official who has earned the trust and respect that Jack Ryan has.”

“But ten years ago—the incident with the terrorists. Have we ever had a Vice President who actually—”

“Killed people?” Fellows shook his head at the reporter. “A lot of Presidents and Vice Presidents have been soldiers. Jack defended his family against a vicious and direct attack, like any American would. I can tell you that out where I live in Arizona, nobody would fault the man for that.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Ryan said, watching his office TV. The first wave of reporters was scheduled to assault him in thirty minutes, and he had to read over briefing materials, plus a sheet of instructions from Tish Brown. Don’t speak too fast. Don’t give a direct answer to any substantive political question.

“I’m just glad to be here,” Ryan said to himself. “I just play them one game at a time. Isn’t that what they tell rookie ballplayers to say?” he wondered aloud.

The 747 touched down even earlier than the pilot had promised, which was fine but wouldn’t help on the connecting flight. The good news for the moment was that the first-class passengers got off first, and better still, a U.S. consular official met Clark and Chavez at the gate, whisking them through customs. Both men had slept on the flight, but their bodies were still out of synch with the local time. An aging Delta L-1011 lifted off two hours later, bound for Dulles International.

Captain Sato remained in his command seat. One problem with international air travel was the sameness of it all. This terminal could have been almost anywhere, except that all of the faces were gaijin. There would be a day-long layover before he flew back, doubtless full again of Japanese executives running away.

And this was the remainder of his life, ferrying people he didn’t

know to places he didn't care about. If only he'd stayed in the Self-Defense Forces—maybe he would have done better, maybe it would have made a difference. He was the best pilot in one of the world's best airlines, and those skills might have . . . but he'd never know, would he, and he'd never make a difference, just one more captain of one more aircraft, flying people to and from a nation that had forfeited its honor. *Well.* He climbed out of his seat, collected his flight charts and other necessary papers, tucked them in his carry-bag and headed out of the aircraft. The gate was empty now, and he was able to walk down the bustling but anonymous terminal. He saw a copy of *USA Today* at a shop and picked it up, scanning the front page, seeing the pictures there. Tonight at nine o'clock? It all came together at that moment, really just an equation of speed and distance.

Sato looked around once more, then headed off to the airport administrative office. He needed a weather map. He already knew the timing.

"One thing I'd like to fix," Jack said, more at ease than ever in the Oval Office.

"What's that?"

"A CIA officer. He needs a pardon."

"What for?" Durling asked, wondering if a sandbag was descending toward his own head.

"Murder," Ryan replied honestly. "As luck would have it, my father worked the case back when I was in college. The people he killed had it coming—"

"Not a good way to look at things. Even if they did."

"They did." The Vice President-designate explained for two or three minutes. The magic word was "drugs," and soon enough the President nodded.

"And since then?"

"One of the best field officers we've ever had. He's the guy who bagged Qati and Ghosn in Mexico City."

"That's the guy?"

"Yes, sir. He deserves to get his name back."

"Okay. I'll call the Attorney General and see if we can do it quietly. Any other favors that you need taken care of?" the President asked. "You know, you're picking this political stuff up pretty fast for an amateur. Nice job with the media this morning, by the way."

Ryan nodded at the compliment. "Admiral Jackson. He did a nice job, too, but I suppose the Navy will take good care of him."

"A little presidential attention never hurt any officer's career. I want to meet him anyway. You're right, though. Flying into the islands to

meet with them was a very astute move."

* * *

"No losses," Chambers said, and a lot of kills. Why didn't he feel good about that?

"The subs that killed *Charlotte* and *Asheville?*" Jones asked.

"We'll ask when the time comes, but probably at least one of them." The judgment was statistical but likely.

"Ron, good job," Mancuso said.

Jones stubbed out his cigarette. Now he'd have to break the habit again. And now, also, he understood what war was, and thanked God that he'd never really had to fight in one. Perhaps it was just something for kids to do. But he'd done his part, and now he knew, and with luck he'd never have to see one happen again. There were always whales to track.

"Thanks, Skipper."

"One of our 747s has mechanical'd rather badly," Sato explained. "It will be out of service for three days. I have to fly to Heathrow to replace the aircraft. Another 747 will replace mine on the Pacific run." With that he turned over the flight plan.

The Canadian air-traffic official scanned it. "Pax?"

"No passengers, no, but I'll need a full load of fuel."

"I expect your airline will pay for that, Captain," the official observed with a smile. He scribbled his approval on the flight plan, keeping one copy for his records, and gave the other back to the pilot. He gave the form a last look. "Southern routing? It's five hundred miles longer."

"I don't like the wind forecast," Sato lied. It wasn't much of a lie. People like this rarely second-guessed pilots on weather calls. This one didn't either.

"Thank you." The bureaucrat went back to his paperwork.

An hour later, Sato was standing under his aircraft. It was at an Air Canada service hangar—the space at the terminal was occupied again by another international carrier. He took his time preflighting the airliner, checking visually for fluid leaks, loose rivets, bad tires, any manner of irregularity—called "hangar rash"—but there was none to be seen. His copilot was already aboard, annoyed at the unscheduled flight they had to make, even though it meant three or four days in London, a city popular with international aircrew. Sato finished his

walk-around and climbed aboard, stopping first at the forward galley.

"All ready?" he asked.

"Preflight checklist complete, standing by for before-start checklist," the man said just before the steak knife entered his chest. His eyes were wide with shock and surprise rather than pain.

"I'm very sorry to do this," Sato told him in a gentle voice. With that he strapped into the left seat and commenced the engine-start sequence. The ground crew was too far away to see into the cockpit, and couldn't know that only one man was alive on the flight deck.

"Vancouver tower, this is JAL ferry flight five-zero-zero, requesting clearance to taxi."

"Five-Zero-Zero Heavy, roger, you are cleared to taxi runway Two-Seven-Left. Winds are two-eight-zero at fifteen."

"Thank you, Vancouver, Five-Zero-Zero Heavy cleared for Two-Seven Left." With that the aircraft started rolling. It took ten minutes to reach the end of the departure runway. Sato had to wait an extra minute because the aircraft ahead of his was another 747, and they generated dangerous wake turbulence. He was about to violate the first rule of flight, the one about keeping your number of takeoffs equal to that for landings, but it was something his countrymen had done before. On clearance from the tower, Sato advanced the throttles to the takeoff power, and the Boeing, empty of everything but fuel, accelerated rapidly down the runway, rotating off before reaching six thousand feet, and immediately turning north to clear the controlled air space around the airport. The lightly loaded airliner positively rocketed to its cruising altitude of thirty-nine thousand feet, at which point fuel efficiency was optimum. His flight plan would take him along the Canadian-U.S. border, departing land just north of the fishing town of Hopedale. Soon after that, he'd be beyond ground-based radar coverage. Four hours, Sato thought, sipping tea while the autopilot flew the aircraft. He said a prayer for the man in the right seat, hoping that the copilot's soul would be at peace, as his now was.

* * *

The Delta flight landed at Dulles only a minute late. Clark and Chavez found that there was a car waiting for them. They took the official Ford and headed down to Interstate-64, while the driver who'd brought it caught a cab.

"What do you suppose will happen to him?"

"Yamata? Prison, maybe worse. Did you get a paper?" Clark asked.

"Yeah." Chavez unfolded it and scanned the front page. "Holy shit!"

"Huh?"

"Looks like Dr. Ryan's getting kicked upstairs." But Chavez had other things to think about for the drive down toward the Virginia Tidewater, like how he was going to ask Patsy the Big Question. What if she said no?

A joint session of Congress is always held in the House chamber due to its larger size, and also, members of the "lower" house noted, because in the Senate seats were reserved, and those bastards didn't let anyone else sit in *their* place. Security was usually good here. The Capitol building had its own police force, which was used to working with the Secret Service. Corridors were closed off with velvet ropes, and the uniformed officers were rather more alert than usual, but it wasn't that big a deal.

The President would travel to the Hill in his official car, which was heavily armored, accompanied by several Chevy Suburbans that were even more heavily protected, and loaded with Secret Service agents carrying enough weapons to fight off a company of Marines. It was rather like a traveling circus, really, and like people in the circus, they were always setting up and taking down. Four agents, for example, humped their Stinger missile containers to the roof, going to the customary spots, scanning the area to see if the trees had grown a little too much—they were trimmed periodically for better visibility. The Secret Service's Counter-Sniper Team took similar perches atop the Capitol and other nearby buildings. The best marksmen in the country, they lifted their custom-crafted 7mm Magnum rifles from foamlined containers and used binoculars to scan the rooftops they didn't occupy. There were few enough of those, as other members of "the detail" took elevators and stairs to the top of every building close to the one JUMPER would be visiting tonight. When darkness fell, light-amplification equipment came out, and the agents drank hot liquids in order to keep alert.

Sato thanked Providence for the timing of the event, and for the TCAS System. Though the transatlantic air routes were never empty, travel between Europe and America was timed to coincide with human sleep patterns, and this time of day was slack for westbound flights. The TCAS sent out interrogation signals, and would alert him to the presence of nearby aircraft. At the moment there was nothing close—his display said CLEAR OF CONFLICT, meaning that there was no traffic within eighty miles. That enabled him to slip into a westbound routing quite easily, tracking down the coast, three hundred miles out.

The pilot checked his time against his memorized flight plan. Again he'd figured the winds exactly right in both directions. His timing had to be exact, because the Americans could be very punctual. At 2030 hours, he turned west. He was tired now, having spent most of the last twenty-four hours in the air. There was rain on the American East Coast, and while that would make for a bumpy ride lower down, he was a pilot and hardly noticed such things. The only real annoyance was all the tea he'd drunk. He really needed to go to the head, but he couldn't leave the flight deck unattended, and there was less than an hour to endure the discomfort.

"Daddy, what does this mean? Do we still go to the same school?" Sally asked from the rear-facing seat in the limousine. Cathy handled the answer. It was a mommy-question.

"Yes, and you'll even have your own driver."

"Neat!" little Jack thought.

Their father was having second thoughts, as he usually did after making an important decision, even though he knew it was too late for that. Cathy looked at his face, read his mind, and smiled at him.

"Jack, it's only a few months, and then . . ."

"Yeah." Her husband nodded. "I can always work on my golf game."

"And you can finally teach. That's what I want you to do. That's what you need to do."

"Not back to the banking business?"

"I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did in that."

"You're an eye-cutter, not a shrink."

"We'll talk about it," Professor Ryan said, adjusting Katie Ryan's dress. It was the eleven-months part that appealed to her. After this post, he'd never come back to government service again. What a fine gift President Durling had given them both.

The official car stopped outside the Longworth House Office Building. There were no crowds there, though some congressional staffers were heading out of the building. Ten Secret Service agents kept an eye on them and everything else, while four more escorted the Ryans into the building. Al Trent was at the corner entrance.

"You want to come with me?"

"Why—"

"After you're confirmed, we walk you in to be sworn, and then you take your seat behind the President, next to the Speaker," Sam Fellows explained. "It was Tish Brown's idea. It'll look good."

"Election-year theatrics," Jack observed coolly.

"What about us?" Cathy asked.

"It's a nice family picture," Al thought.

"I don't know why I'm so darned excited about this," Fellows grumbled in his most good-natured way. "This is going to make November hard for us. I suppose that never occurred to you?"

"Sorry, Sam, no, it didn't," Jack replied with a sheepish grin.

"This hovel was my first office," Trent said, opening the door on the bottom floor to the suite of offices he'd used for ten terms. "I keep it for luck. Please—sit down and relax a little." One of his staffers came in with soft drinks and ice, under the watchful eyes of Ryan's protective detail. Andrea Price started playing with the Ryan kids again. It looked unprofessional but was not. The kids had to be comfortable around her, and she'd already made a good start at that.

President Durling's car arrived without incident. Escorts conveyed him to the Speaker's official office adjacent to the chamber, where he went over his speech again. JASMINE, Mrs. Durling, with her own escorts, took an elevator to the official gallery. By this time the chamber was half-filled. It wasn't accepted for people to be fashionably late, perhaps the only such occasion for members of the Congress. They assembled in little knots of friends for the most part, and walked in by party, the seats divided by a very real if invisible line. The rest of the government would come in later. All nine justices of the Supreme Court, all members of the Cabinet who happened to be in town (two were not), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their beribboned uniforms were led to the front row. Then the heads of independent agencies. Bill Shaw of the FBI. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Finally, under the nervous eyes of security people and the usual gaggle of advance personnel, it was ready, on time, as it always seemed to happen.

The seven networks interrupted their various programming. Anchorpersons appeared to announce that the Presidential Address was about to begin, giving the viewers enough information that they could head off to the kitchen and make their sandwiches without really missing anything.

The Doorkeeper of the House, holder of one of the choicest patronage jobs in the country—a fine salary and no real duties—walked halfway down the aisle and performed his one public function with his customary booming voice:

"Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States."

Roger Durling entered the chamber, striding down the aisle with brief stops to shake hands, his red-leather folder tucked under his arm. It held a paper copy of his speech in the event that the TelePrompTers broke. The applause was deafening and sincere. Even those in the opposition party recognized that Durling had kept his promise to

preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and as powerful a force as politics was, there was also still honor and patriotism in the room, especially at times like this. Durling reached the well, then climbed up to his place on the podium, and it was time for the Speaker of the House to do his ceremonial duty:

"Members of the Congress, I have the distinct privilege, and high honor, to introduce the President of the United States." And the applause began afresh. This time there was the usual contest between the parties to see who could clap and cheer the loudest and the longest.

"Okay, remember what happens—"

"Okay, Al! I go in, the Chief Justice swears me in, and I take my seat. All I have to do is repeat it all back." Ryan sipped a glass of Coke and wiped sweaty hands on his trousers. A Secret Service agent fetched him a towel.

"Washington Center, this is KLM-Six-Five-Niner. We have an onboard emergency, sir." The voice was in clipped aviatorese, the sort of speech that people used when everything was going to hell.

The air-traffic controller outside Washington noted the alpha-numeric icon had just tripled in size on his scope and keyed his own microphone. The display gave course, speed, and altitude. His first impression was that the aircraft was making a rapid descent.

"Six-Five-Niner, this is Washington Center. State your intentions, sir."

"Center, Six-Five-Niner, number-one engine has exploded, engines one and two lost. Structural integrity in doubt. So is controllability. Request radar vector direct Baltimore."

The controller waved sharply to his supervisor, who came over at once.

"Wait a minute. Who is this?" He interrogated the computer and found no "strip" information for KLM-659.

The controller keyed his radio. "Six-Five-Niner, please identify, over." This reply was more urgent.

"Washington Center, this is KLM-Six-Five-Niner, we are 747 charter inbound Orlando, three hundred pax," the voice replied. "Repeating: we have two engines out and structural damage to port wing and fuselage. I am descending one-zero thousand now. Request immediate radar vector direct Baltimore, over!"

"We can't dick around with this," the supervisor thought. "Take

him. Get him down."

"Very well, sir. Six-Five-Niner Heavy. Radar contact. I read you one-four thousand descending and three hundred knots. Recommend left turn two-niner-zero and continue descent and maintain one-zero-thousand."

"Six-Five-Niner, descending one-zero thousand, turning left two-niner-zero," Sato said in reply. English was the language on international air travel, and his was excellent. So far so good. He had more than half of his fuel still aboard, and was barely a hundred miles out, according to his satellite-navigation system.

At Baltimore-Washington International Airport, the fire station located near the main terminal was immediately alerted. Airport employees who ordinarily had other jobs ran or drove to the building, while controllers decided quickly which aircraft they could continue to land before the wounded 747 got close and which they would have to stack. The emergency plan was already written here, as for every major airport. Police and other services were alerted, and literally hundreds of people were snatched away from TV sets.

"I want to tell you the story of an American citizen, the son of a police officer, a former Marine officer crippled in a training accident, a teacher of history, a member of America's financial community, a husband and father, a patriot and public servant, and a genuine American hero," the President said on the TV. Ryan cringed to hear it all, especially when followed by applause. The cameras panned over Secretary of the Treasury Fiedler, who had leaked Jack's role in the Wall Street recovery to a group of financial reporters. Even Brett Hanson was clapping, and rather graciously.

"It's always embarrassing, Jack," Trent said with a laugh.

"Many of you know him, many of you have worked with him. I have spoken today with the members of the Senate." Durling motioned to the Majority and Minority leaders, both of whom smiled and nodded for the C-SPAN cameras. "And with your approval, I wish now to submit the name of John Patrick Ryan to fill the post of Vice President of the United States. I further request the members of the Senate to approve this nomination tonight by voice vote."

“That’s pretty irregular,” a commentator observed while the two senators stood to walk down to the well.

“President Durling has done his homework well on this,” the political expert replied. “Jack Ryan is about as noncontroversial as people can be in this town, and the bipartisan—”

“Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate, and our friends and colleagues of the House,” the Majority Leader began. “It is with great satisfaction that the Minority Leader and I . . .”

“Are we sure this is legal?” Jack wondered aloud.

“The Constitution says that the Senate has to approve you. It doesn’t say how,” Sam Fellows said.

“Baltimore Approach, this is Six-Five-Niner. I have a problem here.”

“Six-Five-Niner Heavy, what is the problem, sir?” the tower controller asked. He could already see part of it on his scope. The inbound 747 hadn’t turned to his most recent command as sharply as he had ordered a minute earlier. The controller wiped his hands together and wondered if they’d be able to get this one down.

“My controls are not responding well . . . not sure I can . . . Baltimore, I see runway lights at my one o’clock . . . I don’t know this area well . . . busy here . . . losing power . . .”

The controller checked the direction vector on his scope, extending it to—

“Six-Five-Niner Heavy, that is Andrews Air Force Base. They have two nice runways. Can you make the turn for Andrews?”

“Six-Five-Niner, I think so, I think so.”

“Stand by.” The controller had a hot line to the Air Force base. “Andrews, do you—”

“We’ve been following it,” the senior officer in that tower said. “Washington Center clued us in. Do you need help?”

“Can you take him?”

“Affirmative.”

“Six-Five-Niner Heavy, Baltimore. I am going to hand you off to Andrews Approach. Recommend turn right three-five-zero . . . can you do that, sir?” the controller asked.

“I think I can, I think I can. The fire’s out, I think, but hydraulics are

bottoming out on me, I think the engine must have . . .”

“KLM-Six-Five-Niner Heavy, this is Andrews Approach Control. Radar Contact. Two-five miles out, heading three-four-zero at four thousand feet descending. Runway Zero-One-Left is clear, and our fire trucks are already moving,” the Air Force captain said. He’d already punched the base panic button, and his trained people were moving out smartly. “Recommend turn right zero-one-zero and continue descent.”

“Six-Five-Niner,” was the only acknowledgment.

The irony of the situation was something Sato would never learn. Though there were numerous fighter aircraft based at Andrews, at Langley Air Force Base, at Patuxent River Naval Air Test Center, and at Oceana NAS, all within a hundred miles of Washington, it had never occurred to anyone to have fighter aircraft aloft over the capital on any other night like this one. His elaborate lies and maneuvers were hardly necessary at all. Sato brought his aircraft around at a painfully slow rate to simulate a crippled jumbo, coached every degree of the way by a very concerned and professional American controller. And that, he thought, was too bad.

“Aye!”

“Opposed?” There was silence after that, followed a moment later by applause. Then the Speaker stood.

“The Doorkeeper of the House will escort the Vice President into the chamber so that he can be properly sworn.”

“That’s your cue. Break a leg,” Trent said, standing and heading for the door. The Secret Service agents fanned out along the corridor, leading the procession to the tunnel connecting this building with the Capitol. Entering it, Ryan looked along the curving structure, painted an awful off-yellow and lined, oddly enough, mostly with pictures done by schoolchildren.

“I don’t see any obvious problem, no smoke or fire.” The tower controller had his binoculars on the incoming aircraft. It was only a mile out now. “No gear, no gear!”

“Six-Five-Niner, your gear is up, say again your gear is up!”

Sato could have replied, but chose not to. It was really all decided now. He advanced his throttles, accelerating his aircraft up from approach speed of one-hundred-sixty knots, holding to his altitude of one thousand feet for the moment. The target was in view now, and all he had to do was turn forty degrees left. On reflection, he lit up his aircraft, displaying the red crane on the rudder fin.

"What the hell is he doing?"

"That's not KLM! Look!" the junior officer pointed. Directly over the field, the 747 banked left, clearly under precise control, all four engines whining with increased power. Then the two looked at each other, knowing exactly what was going to happen, and knowing that there was literally nothing that could be done. Calling the base commander was just a formality that would not affect events at all. They did that anyway, then alerted the First Helicopter Squadron as well. With that, they ran out of options, and turned to watch the drama whose conclusion they'd already guessed. It would take a little over a minute to conclude.

Sato had been to Washington often and done all the usual tourist things, including visiting the Capitol Building more than once. It was a grotesque piece of architecture, he thought again, as it grew larger and larger, and he adjusted his flight path so that he was now roaring right up Pennsylvania Avenue, crossing the Anacostia River.

The sight was sufficiently stunning that it momentarily paralyzed the Secret Service agent standing atop the House Chamber, but it was only a moment, and ultimately meaningless. The man dropped to his knees and flipped the cover off the large plastic box.

"Get JUMPER moving! Now!" the man screamed, taking out the Stinger.

"Let's go!" an agent shouted into his microphone, loudly enough to hurt the ears of the protective detail inside. A simple phrase, for the Secret Service it meant to get the President away from wherever he was. Instantly, agents as finely trained as any NFL backfield started moving even though they had no idea what the danger was. In the gallery over the chamber, the First Lady's detail had a shorter distance to go, and though one of the agents tripped on the step, she was able to grab Anne Durling's arm and start dragging her away.

"What?" Andrea Price was the only one to speak in the tunnel. The rest of the agents around the Ryan family instantly drew their weapons, pistols for the most part, though two of their number pulled out submachine guns. All of them brought their weapons up and scanned the yellow-white corridor for danger, but there was none to be seen.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

On the floor of the chamber, six men raced to the podium, also scanning about with drawn weapons in a moment that millions of television viewers would fix in their minds forever. President Durling looked at his chief agent in genuine puzzlement, only to hear a screamed entreaty to move at once.

The Stinger agent atop the building had his weapon shouldered in record time, and the beeping from the missile tracker told him that he had acquisition. Not a second later he loosed his shot, knowing even then that it didn't matter a damn.

Ding Chavez was sitting on the couch, holding Patsy's hand—the one with the ring now on it—until he saw the people with guns. The soldier he would always be leaned into the TV to look for danger, but seeing none, he knew that it was there even so.

The streak of light startled Sato, and he flinched somewhat from surprise rather than fear, then saw the missile heading for his left-inboard engine. The explosion was surprisingly loud, and alarms told him that the engine was totally destroyed, but he was a mere thousand meters away from the white building. The aircraft dipped and yawed slightly to the left. Sato compensated for it without a thought, adjusting trim and nosing down for the south side of the American house of government. They would all be there. The President, the parliamentarians, all of them. He selected his point of impact just as finely as any routine landing, and his last thought was that if they could kill his family and disgrace his country, then they would pay a very special price for that. His last voluntary act was to select the point of impact, two thirds of the way up the stone steps. That would be just about perfect, he knew . . .

Nearly three hundred tons of aircraft and fuel struck the east face of the building at a speed of three hundred knots. The aircraft disintegrated on impact. No less fragile than a bird, its speed and mass

had already fragmented the columns outside the walls. Next came the building itself. As soon as the wings broke up, the engines, the only really solid objects on the aircraft, shot forward, one of them actually smashing into and beyond the House Chamber. The Capitol has no structural steel within its stone walls, having been built in an age when stone piled on stone was deemed the most longlasting form of construction. The entire east face of the building's southern half was smashed to gravel, which shot westward—but the real damage took a second or two more, barely time for the roof to start falling down on the nine hundred people in the chamber: one hundred tons of jet fuel erupted from shredded fuel tanks, vaporizing from the passage through the stone blocks. A second later it ignited from some spark or other, and an immense fireball engulfed everything inside and outside of the building. The volcanic flames reached out, seeking air and corridors that held it, forcing a pressure wave throughout the building, even into the basement.

The initial impact was enough to drop them all to their knees, and now the Secret Service agents were on the edge of real panic. Ryan's first instinctive move was to grab his youngest daughter, then to push the rest of the family to the floor and cover them with his body. He was barely down when something made him look back, north up the tunnel. The noise came from there, and a second later there was an advancing orange wall of flame. There was not even time to speak. He pushed his wife's head down, and then two more bodies fell on top to cover them. There wasn't time for anything else but to look back at the advancing flames—

—over their heads, the fireball had already exhausted the supply of oxygen. The mushrooming cloud leaped upwards, creating its own ministorm and sucking air and gas out of the building whose occupants it had already killed—

—it stopped, not a hundred feet away, then pulled away as rapidly as it had advanced, and there was an instant hurricane in the tunnel, going the other way. A door was wrenched off its hinges, sliding toward them but missing. His little Katie screamed with terror and pain at all the weight on her. Cathy's eyes were wide, looking at her husband.

"Let's go!" Andrea Price screamed before anyone else, and with that, the agents lifted every member of the family, carrying-dragging them back to the Longworth Building, leaving the two House members to catch up on their own. That required less than a minute, and then Special Agent Price was the first again:

"Mr. President, are you okay?"

"What the hell . . ." Ryan looked around, moving to his kids. Their clothing was disheveled but they seemed otherwise intact. "Cathy?"

"I'm okay, Jack." She checked the children next, as she had once done for him in London. "They're okay, Jack. You?" There was a thundering crash that made the ground shake, and again Katie Ryan screamed.

"Price to Walker," the female agent said into her microphone. "Price to Walker—anybody, check in now!"

"Price, this is LONG RIFLE THREE, it's all gone, man, the dome just went down, too. IS SWORDSMAN okay?"

"What the hell was that?" Sam Fellows gasped from his knees. Price didn't have time even to hear the question.

"Affirmative, affirmative, SWORDSMAN, SURGEON, and—shit, we don't have names for them yet. The kids are—everybody's okay here." Even she knew that was an exaggeration. Air was still racing past them into the tunnel to feed the flames in the Capitol building.

The agents were recovering their composure somewhat now. Their guns were still out, and had so much as a janitor appeared in the corridor right then, his life might have been forfeit, but one by one they breathed deeply and relaxed just a little, at the same time trying to focus in on what they had been trained to do.

"This way!" Price said, leading with her pistol in both hands. "RIFLE THREE, get a car to the southeast corner of Longworth—and do it now!"

"Roger."

"Billy, Frank, take point!" Price commanded next. Jack hadn't thought she was the senior agent on the detail, but the two male agents weren't arguing. They sprinted ahead to the end of the corridor. Trent and Fellows just watched, waving the others on their way.

"Clear!" the one with the Uzi said at the far end of the corridor.

"Are you okay, Mr. President?"

"Wait a minute, what about—"

"JUMPER is dead," Price said simply. The other agents had heard the same radio chatter and had formed a very tight ring around their principal. Ryan had not and was still disoriented and trying to catch up.

"We have a Suburban outside!" Frank called. "Let's go!"

"Okay, sir, the drill is to get you the hell away from here. Please follow me," Andrea Price said, lowering her weapon just a little.

"Wait, now wait a minute, what are you saying? The President, Helen—"

"RIFLE THREE, this is Price. Anybody get out?"

"No chance, Price. No chance," the sniper replied.

"Mr. President, we have to get you to a place of safety. Follow me, please."

It turned out that there were two of the oversized vehicles. Jack was forcibly separated from his family and pushed into the first one.

"What about my family?" he demanded, now seeing the orange pyre that had been the centerpiece of America's government only four minutes earlier. "Oh, my God . . ."

"We'll take them to—to—"

"Take them to the Marine Barracks at Eighth and I streets. I want Marines around them now, okay?" Later, Ryan would remember that his first presidential order was something from his own past.

"Yes, sir." Price keyed her mike. "SURGEON and kids go to Eighth and I. Tell the Marines they're coming!"

His vehicle just headed down New Jersey Avenue, away from the Hill, Ryan saw, and for all their sophisticated training the Secret Service people were mainly trying to clear the area.

"Come around north," Jack told them.

"Sir, the White House—"

"A place with TVs, and right now. I think we need a judge, too." That idea didn't come from reason or analysis, Jack realized. It just came.

The Chevy Suburban headed well west before turning north and looping back toward Union Station. The streets were alive now with police and fire vehicles. Air Force helicopters from Andrews were circling overhead, probably to keep news choppers away. Ryan got out of the car under his own power and walked within his protective ring to the entrance of the building where CNN operated. It was just the closest. More agents were arriving now, enough that Ryan actually felt safe, knowing how foolish that feeling was. He was taken upstairs to a holding room until another agent arrived with someone else a few minutes later.

"This is Judge Peter Johnson, D.C. Federal Court," an agent told Jack.

"Is this what I think?" the judge asked.

"I'm afraid so, sir. I'm not a lawyer. Is this legal?" the President asked.

Again it was Agent Price: "President Coolidge was sworn by his father, a county justice of the peace. It's legal," she assured both men.

A camera came close. Ryan put his hand on the Bible, and the judge went from memory.

"I—state your name, please."

"I, John Patrick Ryan—"

"Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States."

"Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States . . . and will to the best of my ability,

preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God." Jack completed the oath from memory. It was little different, really, from the one he had sworn as a Marine officer, and it meant the same thing.

"You hardly needed me at all," Johnson said quietly. "Congratulations, Mr. President." To both men it seemed an odd thing to say, but Ryan took his hand anyway. "God bless you."

Jack looked around the room. Out the windows he could see the fires on the Hill. Then he turned back to the camera, for beyond it were millions, and like it or not, they were looking back at him, and to him. Ryan took a breath, not knowing that his tie was crooked in his collar.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what happened tonight was an attempt by someone to destroy the government of the United States. They killed President Durling, and I guess they killed most of the Congress—it's too soon, I'm afraid, to be sure of much.

"But I am sure of this: America is much harder to destroy than people are. My dad was a cop, as you heard. He and my mom were killed in a plane crash, but there are still cops. A lot of fine people were killed only a few minutes ago, but America is still here. We've fought another war and won it. We've survived an attack on our economy and we'll survive this too.

"I'm afraid I'm too new at this to say it properly, but what I learned in school is that America is a dream, it's—it's the ideas we all share, it's the things we all believe in, most of all it's things we all do, and how we do them. You can't destroy things like that. Nobody can, no matter how hard they might try, because we are who and what we choose to be. We invented that idea here, and nobody can destroy that either.

"I'm not really sure what I'm going to do right now, except to make sure my wife and children are really safe first, but now I have this job, and I just promised God that I'd do it the best way I can. For now, I ask you all for your prayers and your help. I'll talk to you again when I know a little more. You can turn the camera off now," he concluded. When the light went off, he turned to Special Agent Price.

"Let's get to work."

Tom Clancy

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EXECUTIVE ORDERS

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TO
RONALD WILSON REAGAN,
FORTIETH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:
THE MAN WHO WON THE WAR

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EPILOGUE: PRESS ROOM

In the original hardcover edition of *Without Remorse* are the words of a poem which I found by accident and whose title and author I was unable to identify. I found in them the perfect remembrance for my "little buddy," Kyle Haydock, who succumbed to cancer at the age of eight years and twenty-six days—to me he will never really be gone.

Later I learned that the title of this poem is "Ascension," and that the author who penned these magnificent words is Colleen Hitchcock, a poet of rare talent living in Minnesota. I wish to take this opportunity to commend her work to all students of the lyric phrase. As her words caught and excited my attention, I hope they will have the same effect on others.

The poem reads as follows:

Ascension

And if I go,
while you're still here. . .
Know that I live on,
vibrating to a different measure
-behind a thin veil you cannot see through.
You will not see me,
so you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again,
-both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to its fullest.
And when you need me,
Just whisper my name in your heart,
. . .I will be there.

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Edina, Minnesota 55439
U.S.A.

I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.

JOHN ADAMS, SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
LETTER TO ABIGAIL, NOVEMBER 2, 1800, ON MOVING INTO THE WHITE HOUSE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Again, I needed a lot of help:
Peggy, for some valued insights;
Mike, Dave, John, Janet, Curt, and Pat
at the Johns Hopkins Hospital;
Fred and his pals at the USSS;
Pat, Darrell, and Bill, all repeat offenders at the FBI;
Fred and Sam, men who've honored the uniform with their service;
H. R., Joe, Dan, and Doug, who still do.
America is because of people like this.

PROLOGUE:

STARTING HERE

IT HAD TO BE THE SHOCK of the moment, Ryan thought. He seemed to be two people at the same time. One part of him looked out the window of the lunchroom of CNN's Washington bureau and saw the fires that grew from the remains of the Capitol building—yellow points springing up from an orange glow like some sort of ghastly floral arrangement, representing over a thousand lives that had been snuffed out not an hour earlier. Numbness suppressed grief for the moment, though he knew that would come, too, as pain always followed a hard blow to the face, but not right away. Once more, Death in all its horrid majesty had reached out for him. He'd seen it come, and stop, and withdraw, and the best thing to be said about it was that his children didn't know how close their young lives had come to an early conclusion. To them, it had simply been an accident they didn't understand. They were with their mother now, and they'd feel safe in her company while their father was away somewhere. It was a situation to which both they and he long since had unhappily become accustomed. And so John Patrick Ryan looked at the residue of Death, and one part of him as yet felt nothing.

The other part of him looked at the same sight and knew that he had to *do* something, and though he struggled to be logical, logic wasn't winning, because logic didn't *know* what to do or where to start.

"Mr. President." It was the voice of Special Agent Andrea Price.

"Yes?" Ryan said without turning away from the window. Behind him—he could see the reflections in the window glass—six other Secret Service agents stood with weapons out to keep the others away. There had to be a score of CNN employees outside the door, gathered together partly from professional interest—they were newspeople, after all—but mostly from simple human curiosity at being face-to-face with a moment in history. They were wondering what it looked like to be there, and didn't quite get the fact that such events were the same for everyone. Whether presented with an auto accident or a sudden grave illness, the unprepared human mind just stopped and tried to make sense of the senseless—and the graver the test, the

harder the recovery period. But at least people trained in crisis had procedures to fall back upon.

"Sir, we have to get you to—"

"Where? A place of safety? Where's that?" Jack asked, then quietly reproached himself for the cruelty of the question. At least twenty agents were part of the pyre a mile away, all of them friends of the men and women standing in the lunchroom with their new President. He had no right to transfer his discomfort to them. "My family?" he asked after a moment.

"The Marine Barracks, Eighth and I streets, as you ordered, sir."

Yes, it was good for them to be able to report that they'd carried out orders, Ryan thought with a slow nod. It was also good for him to know that his orders had been carried out. He had done one thing right, anyway. Was that something to build on?

"Sir, if this was part of an organized—"

"It wasn't. They never are, Andrea, are they?" President Ryan asked. He was surprised how tired his voice sounded, and reminded himself that shock and stress were more tiring than the most strenuous exercise. He didn't even seem to have the energy to shake his head and clear it.

"They can be," Special Agent Price pointed out.

Yes, I suppose she's right. "So what's the drill for this?"

"Kneecap," Price replied, meaning the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, a converted 747 kept at Andrews Air Force Base. Jack thought about the suggestion for a moment, then frowned.

"No, I can't run away. I think I have to go back there." President Ryan pointed to the glow. *Yes, that is where I belong, isn't it?*

"No, sir, that's too dangerous."

"That's my place, Andrea."

He's already thinking like a politician, Price thought, disappointed.

Ryan saw the look on her face and knew he'd have to explain. He'd learned something once, perhaps the only thing that applied at this moment, and the thought had appeared in his mind like a flashing highway sign. "It's a leadership function. They taught me that at Quantico. The troops have to see you doing the job. They have to know you're there for them." *And I have to be sure that it's all real, that I actually am the President.*

Was he?

The Secret Service thought so. He'd sworn the oath, spoken the words, invoked the name of God to bless his effort, but it had all been too soon and too fast. Hardly for the first time in his life, John Patrick Ryan closed his eyes and willed himself to awaken from this dream that was just too improbable to be real, and yet when he opened his eyes again the orange glow was still there, and the leaping yellow

flames. He knew he'd spoken the words—he'd even given a little speech, hadn't he? But he could not remember a single word of it now.

Let's get to work, he'd said a minute earlier. He did remember that. An automatic thing to say. Did it mean anything?

Jack Ryan shook his head—it seemed a major accomplishment to do even that—then turned away from the window to look directly at the agents in the room.

"Okay. What's left?"

"Secretaries of Commerce and Interior," Special Agent Price responded, having been updated by her personal radio. "Commerce is in San Francisco. Interior is in New Mexico. They've already been summoned; the Air Force will bring them in. We've lost all the other Cabinet secretaries: Director Shaw, all nine Supreme Court justices, the Joint Chiefs. We're not sure how many members of Congress were absent when it happened."

"Mrs. Durling?"

Price shook her head. "She didn't get out, sir. The kids are at the White House."

Jack nodded bleakly at the additional tragedy, compressed his lips, and closed his eyes at the thought of one more thing he had to do personally. For the children of Roger and Anne Durling, it wasn't a public event. For them it was immediately and tragically simple: Mom and Dad had died, and they were now orphans. Jack had seen them, spoken with them—really nothing more than the smile and the "Hi" that one gave to another man's kids, but they were real children with faces and names—except their surnames were all that was left, and the faces would be contorted with shock and disbelief. They'd be like Jack, trying to blink away a nightmare that would not depart, but for them it'd be all the harder because of their age and vulnerability. "Do they know?"

"Yes, Mr. President," Andrea said. "They were watching TV, and the agents had to tell them. They have grandparents still alive, other family members. We're bringing them in, too." She didn't add that there was a drill for this, that at the Secret Service's operations center a few blocks west of the White House was a security file cabinet with sealed envelopes in which were contingency plans for all manner of obscene possibilities; this was merely one of them.

However, there were hundreds—no, thousands—of children without parents now, not just two. Jack had to set the Durling children aside for the moment. Hard as it was, it was also a relief to close the door on that task for the moment. He looked down at Agent Price again.

"You're telling me I'm the whole government right now?"

"It would seem that way, Mr. President. That's why we—"

"That's why *I* have to do the things I have to do." Jack headed to

the door, startling the Secret Service agents into action by his impulse. There were cameras in the corridor. Ryan walked right past them, the leading wave of two agents clearing the rows of newspeople too shocked themselves to do much more than operate their cameras. Not a single question. That, Jack thought without a smile, was a singular event. It didn't occur to him to wonder what his face looked like. An elevator was waiting, and thirty seconds later, he emerged into the capacious lobby. It had been cleared of people, except for agents, more than half of whom had submachine guns out, and pointed up at the ceiling. They must have come from elsewhere—there were more than he remembered from twenty minutes earlier. Then he saw that Marines stood outside, most of them improperly uniformed, some shivering in their red T-shirts over camouflaged "utility" trousers.

"We wanted the additional security," Price explained. "I asked for the assistance from the barracks."

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. Nobody would think it unseemly for the President of the United States to be surrounded by U.S. Marines at a time like this. They were kids, most of them, their smooth young faces showing no emotion at all—a dangerous state for people carrying weapons—their eyes surveying the parking lot like watchdogs, while tight hands gripped their rifles. A captain stood just outside the door, talking to an agent. When Ryan walked out, the Marine officer braced stiffly and saluted. *So, he thinks it's real, too.* Ryan nodded his acknowledgment and gestured to the nearest HMMWV.

"The Hill," President John Patrick Ryan ordered curtly.

The ride was quicker than he'd expected. Police had cordoned off all the main streets, and the fire trucks were already there, probably a general alarm, for whatever good it might do. The Secret Service Suburban—a cross between a stationwagon and a light truck—led off, its lights flashing and siren screaming, while the protective detail sweated and probably swore under its collective breath at the foolishness of their new "Boss," the in-house term for the President.

The tail of the 747 was remarkably intact—at least the rudder fin was, recognizable, like the fletching of an arrow buried in the side of a dead animal. The surprising part for Ryan was that the fire still burned. The Capitol had been a building of stone, after all, but inside were wooden desks and vast quantities of paper, and God only knew what else that surrendered its substance to heat and oxygen. Aloft were military helicopters, circling like moths, their rotors reflecting the orange light back down at the ground. The red-and-white fire trucks were everywhere, their lights flashing red and white as well, giving additional color to the rising smoke and steam. Firefighters were racing about, and the ground was covered in hoses snaking to every hydrant in sight, bringing water to the pumpers. Many of the

couplings leaked, producing little sprays of water that quickly froze in the cold night air.

The south end of the Capitol building was devastated. One could recognize the steps, but the columns and roof were gone, and the House chamber itself was a crater hidden by the rectangular lip of stones, their white color scorched and blackened with soot. To the north, the dome was down, sections of it recognizable, for it had been built of wrought iron during the Civil War, and several of the pie-slice sections had somehow retained their shape. A majority of the firefighting activity was there, where the center of the building had been. Countless hoses, some on the ground, some directed from the tips of aerial ladders and cherry-picker water towers, sprayed water in the hope of stopping the fire from spreading further, though from Ryan's vantage point there was no telling how successful the effort might be.

But the real story of the scene was the collection of ambulances, several knots of them, their paramedic crews standing with bitter idleness, folding stretchers before them, empty, the skilled crews with nothing to do but look at the white rudder fin with the red crane painted on it, also blackened from the fire, but still hatefully recognizable. Japan Airlines. The war with Japan had ended, everyone thought. But had it? Was this one lone, last act of defiance or revenge? Or just some hideously ironic accident? It hit Jack that the scene was very much like an auto accident, at least in kind if vastly different in scale, and for the trained men and women who'd responded, it was the same story as with so many other calls—too late. Too late to stop the fire in time. Too late to save the lives they were sworn to rescue. Too late to make much of a difference at all.

The HMMWV pulled in close to the southeast corner of the building, just outside the gaggle of fire trucks, and before Ryan could step out, a full squad of Marines had him surrounded again. One of them, the captain, opened the door for the new President.

"So, who's in charge?" Jack asked Agent Price. For the first time he noticed how bitterly cold the night was.

"I guess one of the firemen."

"Let's find him." Jack started walking toward a collection of pumpers. He was already starting to shiver in his light wool suit. The chiefs would be the ones with the white hats, right? And the regular cars, he remembered from his youth in Baltimore. Chiefs didn't ride in trucks. He spotted three red-painted sedans and angled that way.

"Damn it, Mr. President!" Andrea Price fairly screamed at him. Other agents ran to get in front, and the Marines couldn't decide whether to lead the group or to follow. There wasn't an entry in anyone's manual for this, and what rules the Secret Service had, their

Boss had just invalidated. Then one of them had a thought and sprinted off to the nearest ladder truck. He returned with a rubberized turnout coat.

"This'll keep you warm, sir," Special Agent Raman promised, helping Ryan into it, and disguising him as one of the several hundred firefighters roaming around. Special Agent Price gave him an approving wink and nod, the first moment of almost-levity since the 747 had arrived at Capitol Hill. All the better that President Ryan didn't grasp the real reason for the heavy coat, she thought. This moment would be remembered by the protective Detail as the beginning of the management race, the Secret Service vs. the President of the United States, generally a contest of ego against cajolery.

The first chief that Ryan found was talking into a handheld radio and trying to direct his firefighters closer into the flames. A person in civilian clothes was close by, holding a large paper roll flat on the car's hood. Probably plans of the building, Jack thought. Ryan waited a few feet away, while the two men moved hands left and right over the plans and the chief spoke staccato instructions into his radio.

"And, for Christ's sake, be careful with all those loose stones," Chief Paul Magill finished his last command. Then he turned around and rubbed his eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

"This is the President," Price informed him.

Magill's eyes blinked. He took a quick look at the people with guns, then back at Ryan. "This is pretty damned bad," the chief said first.

"Anyone get out?"

Magill shook his head. "Not from this side. Three people on the other side, all beat up. We think they were in the Speaker's cloak room, someplace around there, probably the explosion just shot them through the windows. Two pages and a Secret Service guy, all burned and busted up. We're conducting a search—well, we're trying to, but so far even the people who weren't roasted—they had the oxygen sucked right out of them, asphyxia, you're just as dead." Paul Magill was Ryan's height, but a barrel-chested black man. His hands were mottled with large pale areas that gave testament to a very intimate battle with fire sometime in his professional past. His rugged face showed only sadness now, for fire wasn't a human enemy, just a mindless thing that scarred the fortunate and killed the rest. "We might get lucky. Some people in small rooms, doors closed, like that, sir. There's a million damned rooms in this place, 'cording to these here plans. We might get a couple people out alive. I seen it happen before. But most of'em . . ." Magill just shook his head for a moment. "The line's holding, ought not to spread much more."

"Nobody from the chamber?" Agent Raman asked. He really wanted

to know the name of the agent who'd been blown clear, but it would not have been professional to ask. Magill just shook his head in any case.

"No." He stared off at the diminishing glow, and added, "It would have been real quick." Magill shook his head again.

"I want to see," Jack said impulsively.

"No," Magill replied at once. "Too dangerous. Sir, it's my fire, and my rules, okay?"

"I *have* to see," Ryan said, more quietly. The two pairs of eyes met and communicated. Magill still didn't like it. He saw the people with guns again, and decided, wrongly, that they would support this new President, if that's what he was. Magill hadn't been watching TV when the call had come.

"Ain't gonna be pretty, sir."

• • •

IT WAS JUST after sundown in Hawaii. Rear Admiral Robert Jackson was landing at Barbers Point Naval Air Station. His peripheral vision took note of the well-lit hotels on Oahu's south shore, and a passing thought wondered what it cost to stay in one of them now. He hadn't done it since his early twenties, when two or three naval aviators would share accommodations in order to save money for hitting the bars and impressing the local women with their worldly panache. His Tomcat touched down gently, despite the lengthy ride and three aerial refuelings, because Robby still thought of himself as a fighter pilot, and therefore an artist of sorts. The fighter slowed down properly during its run-out, then turned right onto the taxiway.

"Tomcat Five-Zero-Zero, continue down to the end—"

"I've been here before, miss," Jackson replied with a smile, breaking the rules. But he was an admiral, wasn't he? Fighter pilot *and* admiral. Who cared about rules?

"Five-Zero-Zero, there's a car waiting."

"Thank you." Robby could see it, there by the farthest hangar, along with a sailor waving the usual lighted wands.

"Not bad for an old guy," the backseater noted as he folded up his maps and other unnecessary but gravely important papers.

"Your vote of approval is noted." *I was never this stiff before,* Jackson admitted to himself. He shifted himself in the seat. His butt felt like painful lead. How could all feeling be gone, yet there still be pain? he asked himself with a rueful smile. *Too old,* was how his mind answered the question. Then his leg made its presence known. *Arthritis, damn it.* He'd had to make it an order to get Sanchez to

release the fighter to him. It was too far for a COD to take him from USS *John C. Stennis* back to Pearl, and the orders had been specific enough: *Expedite return*. On that basis he'd borrowed a Tom whose fire-control system was down, and therefore was non-mission-capable anyway. The Air Force had supplied the tankers. So after seven hours of blessed silence, he'd flown half the Pacific in a fighter—doubtless for the last time. Jackson moved again as he turned the fighter toward the parking spot, and was rewarded with a back spasm.

"Is that CINCPAC?" Jackson asked, spotting the whiteclad figure by the blue Navy car.

Admiral David Seaton it was, and not standing erect, but leaning against the car and flipping through messages as Robby cut the engines and opened the canopy. A sailor rolled up a stepladder, the sort used by mechanics, to make Robby's descent easier. Another enlisted man—woman, actually—extracted the arriving admiral's bag from the storage compartment underneath. Somebody was in a hurry.

"Trouble," Seaton said the moment Robby had both boots on the ground.

"I thought we won," Jackson replied, stopping dead still on the hot concrete of the ramp. His brain was tired, too. It would be a few minutes before his thinking ran at the customary speed, though his instincts were telling him that something unusual was afoot.

"The President's dead—and we got a new one." Seaton handed over the clipboard. "Friend of yours. We're back to DEFCON Three for the time being."

"What the hell . . ." Admiral Jackson said, reading the first page of dispatches. Then he looked up. "Jack's the new . . . ?"

"Didn't you know about him becoming VP?"

Jackson shook his head. "I was tied up with other things before I got off the boat this morning. Holy God," Robby concluded with another shake of the head.

Seaton nodded. Ed Kealty resigned because of that sex scandal, the President persuaded Ryan to take the vice presidency until the elections next year, the Congress confirmed him, but before he could enter the chamber well, you can see what happened. Plane hit down center. "The JCSs are all gone. The deputies are stepping in. Mickey Moore"—Army General Michael Moore, the Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs—"has put in a call for all the CINCs to come into D.C., ASAP. We have a KC-10 waiting for us at Hickam."

"Threat board?" Jackson asked. His permanent job, insofar as any uniformed posting was permanent, was Deputy J-3, the number-two planning officer for the Joint Chiefs.

Seaton shrugged. "Theoretically, it's blank. The IO's calmed down. The Japanese are out of the war business—"

Jackson finished the statement: “But America’s never been hit like this before.”

“The plane’s waiting. You can change aboard. Neatness doesn’t count at the moment, Robby.”

AS ALWAYS, THE world was divided by time and space, especially time, she would have thought had she a moment to think, but she rarely did. She was over sixty, her small frame bowed down by years of selfless work, made all the worse because there were so few young ones to give her rest. That wasn’t fair, really. She’d spelled others in her time, and those of generations past had done the same in their time, but not now, not for her. She did her best to put that thought aside. It was unworthy of her, unworthy of her place in the world, and certainly unworthy of her promises, made to God more than forty years before. She now had doubts about those promises, but she’d admitted them to no one, not even her confessor. Her failure to discuss them was more troubling to her conscience even than the doubts were, though she vaguely knew that her priest would speak gently to her about her sin, if that’s what it was—was it? she wondered. Even if it were, yes, he’d speak gently about it. He always did, probably because he had such doubts himself, and both of them were of the age when one looks back and wonders what might have been, despite all the accomplishments of a productive and useful life.

Her sister, every bit as religious as she, had chosen the most common of the vocations and was now a grandmother, and Sister M. Jean Baptiste wondered what that was like. She’d made her choice a long time ago, in a youth she could still remember, and like all such decisions it had been made with poor reflection, however correct the choice itself had been. It had seemed simple enough at the time. They were respected, the ladies in black. In her distant youth she could recall seeing the German occupation troops nod politely to their passing, for even though it was widely suspected that the nuns aided Allied airmen, and maybe even Jews trying to escape, it was also known that the nursing order treated everyone equally and fairly, because God required it. Besides even the Germans wanted their hospital when they were wounded, because you had a better chance there than anywhere else. It was a proud tradition, and even though Pride was a sin, it was one the dark ladies had committed after a fashion, telling themselves that perhaps God didn’t mind, because the tradition was in His Holy Name. And so when the time had been right, she’d made the decision, and that was that. Some had left, but the critical time for her to make such a choice had been difficult, what with the condition of the country after the war, and the need for her

skills, and a world that had not yet changed enough for her to see her options for what they were. So she had thought about leaving, briefly, and put the idea aside, and stayed with her work.

Sister Jean Baptiste was a skilled and experienced nurse. She'd come to this place when it had still belonged to her parent country, and stayed after its status had changed. In that time she'd done her job the same way, with the same skill, despite the tornadic political changes that had gone on around her, no matter that her patients were African or European. But forty years, more than thirty of that in this same place, had taken their toll.

It wasn't that she didn't care anymore. Certainly it wasn't that. It was just that she was almost sixty-five, and that was just too old to be a nurse with too few aides, often as not working fourteen-hour days, with a few hours for prayer tossed in, good for her soul but tiring for everything else. In younger years her body had been robust not to say rugged—and healthy, and more than one of the physicians had called her Sister Rock, but the physicians had gone their way, and she had stayed and stayed and stayed, and even rocks can be worn down. And with fatigue came mistakes.

She knew what to be wary of. You could not be a health-care professional in Africa and not be careful if you wanted to live. Christianity had been trying to establish itself here for centuries, but while it had made some inroads, it might never make others. One of those problems was sexual promiscuity, a local proclivity that had horrified her on her arrival nearly two generations earlier, but was now just . . . normal. But all too often lethally so. Fully a third of the patients in the hospital had what was known locally as "the thin disease" and elsewhere as AIDS. The precautions for that ailment were set in stone, and Sister Jean Baptiste had taught them in courses. The sad truth was that, as with the plagues of old, all that the medical professionals could really do with this modern curse was to protect themselves.

Fortunately with this patient, that was not a concern. The boy was only eight, too young to be sexually active. A handsome boy, well formed and bright, he'd been an honor student at the nearby Catholic school, and an acolyte. Perhaps he'd hear the call someday and become a priest—that was easier for the Africans than the Europeans, since the Church, in quiet deference to African customs, allowed priests down here to marry, a secret that was not widely known through the rest of the world. But the boy was ill. He'd come in only a few hours earlier, at midnight, driven in by his father, a fine man who was a senior official in the local government and had a car of his own. The doctor on call had diagnosed the boy with cerebral malaria, but the entry on the chart wasn't confirmed by the usual laboratory test.

Perhaps the blood sample had gotten lost. Violent headaches, vomiting, shaking of the limbs, disorientation, spiking fever. Cerebral malaria. She hoped *that* wasn't going to break out again. It was treatable, but the problem was getting people *to* treatment.

The rest of the ward was quiet this late at—no, early in the morning, actually—a pleasant time in this part of the world. The air was as cool as it would get in any twenty-four-hour period, and still, and quiet—and so were the patients. The boy's biggest problem at the moment was the fever, and so she pulled back the sheet and sponged him down. It seemed to calm his restless young body, and she took the time to examine him for other symptoms. The doctors were doctors, and she but a nurse—even so, she'd been here for a very long time, and knew what to look for. There wasn't much really, except for an old bandage on his left hand. How had the doctor overlooked that? Sister Jean Baptiste walked back to the nurses' station, where her two aides were dozing. What she was about to do was properly their job, but there was no sense in waking them. She returned to the patient with fresh dressings and disinfectant. You had to be careful with infections down here. Carefully, slowly, she peeled off the bandage, herself blinking with fatigue. A bite, she saw, like one from a small dog . . . or a monkey. That made her blink hard. Those could be dangerous. She ought to have walked back to the station and gotten rubber gloves, but it was forty meters away, and her legs were tired, and the patient was resting, the hand unmoving. She uncapped the disinfectant, then rotated the hand slowly and gently to fully expose the injury. When she shook the bottle with her other hand, a little escaped from around her thumb and it sprinkled on the patient's face. The head came up, and he sneezed in his sleep, the usual cloud of droplets ejected into the air. Sister Jean Baptiste was startled, but didn't stop; she poured the disinfectant on a cotton ball, and carefully swabbed the wound. Next she capped the bottle and set it down, applied the new bandage, and only then did she wipe her face with the back of her hand, without realizing that when her patient had sneezed, his wounded hand in hers had jerked, depositing blood there, and that it had been on her hand as it had swept across her eyes. The gloves, therefore, might not have mattered at all, a fact that would have been of scant comfort even if she had remembered it, three days hence.

SHOULD HAVE STAYED put, Jack told himself. Two paramedics had guided him up a clear corridor on the east steps, along with the gaggle of Marines and agents, all moving upward with guns still out in a scene of grimly obscene humor, no one knowing quite what to do.

They then had encountered a nearly solid line of firefighters and hoses, spraying their water, much of which blew back in everyone's faces in the sort of chill that ran straight into the bones. Here the fire had been smothered by the water fog, and though the hoses continued to wet things down, it was safe for rescue personnel from the ladder companies to creep into the remains of the chamber. One didn't have to be an expert to understand what they found. No lifted heads, no urgent gestures, no shouts. The men—and women, though one couldn't tell at this distance—picked their way carefully, more mindful of their own safety than anything else, because there was plainly no reason to risk one's life on behalf of the dead.

Dear God, he thought. People he knew were here. Not just Americans. Jack could see where a whole section of gallery had fallen down to the well of the chamber. The diplomatic gallery, if he remembered correctly. Various dignitaries and their families, many of whom he'd known, who had come to the Hill for the purpose of seeing him sworn. Did that make their deaths his fault?

He'd left the CNN building because of the need to do something, or that was what he'd told himself. Ryan wasn't so sure now. Just a change of scenery, perhaps? Or was he merely drawn to the scene the same way the people at the perimeter of the Capitol grounds were, standing silently as he was, just looking, as he was, and not doing anything, as he was. The numbness hadn't gone away. He'd come here expecting to find something to see and feel and then to do, but only discovered something else for his soul to shrink from.

"It's cold here, Mr. President. At least get out of this damned spray," Price urged.

"Okay." Ryan nodded and headed back down the steps. The coat, he found, wasn't all that warm. Ryan was shivering again, and he hoped it was merely from the cold.

The cameras had been slow setting up, but they were there now, Ryan saw. The little portable ones—Japanese made, all of them, he noted with a grunt—with their small, powerful lights. Somehow they'd managed to get past the police lines and the fire chiefs. Before each of them stood a reporter—the three he could see were all men—holding a microphone and trying to sound as though he knew more than anyone else did. Several lights were trained his own way, Jack noted. People all over the country and the world were watching him, expecting him to know what to do. How did such people ever adopt the illusion that senior government officials were any brighter than their family physician, or lawyer, or accountant? His mind trekked back to his first week as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, when the institution which he'd served then had similarly assumed that he knew how to command and lead a platoon—and when a

sergeant ten years his senior had come to him with a family problem, expecting the "ell-tee," who lacked both a wife and children, to know what to say to a man who had trouble with both. Today, Jack reminded himself, such a situation was called a "leadership challenge," meaning that you didn't have a clue about what to do next. But there were the cameras, and he had to do something.

Except he still didn't have a clue. He'd come here hoping to find a catalyst for action, only to find increased feelings of helplessness. And maybe a question.

"Arnie van Damm?" He'd need Arnie, sure as hell.

"At the House, sir," Price replied, meaning the White House.

"Okay, let's head over there," Ryan ordered.

"Sir," Price said, after a moment's hesitation, "that's probably not safe. If there was—"

"I can't run away, damn it. I can't fly away on Kneecap. I can't sneak off to Camp David. I can't crawl into some damned hole. Can't you see that?" He was frustrated rather than angry. His right arm pointed to the remains of the Capitol building. "Those people are dead, and I *am* the government for now, God help me, and the government doesn't run away."

"THAT LOOKS LIKE President Ryan there," an anchorman said in his warm, dry studio. "Probably trying to get a handle on rescue operations. Ryan is a man not unaccustomed to crisis, as we all know."

"I've known Ryan for six years," a more senior network analyst opined, studiously not looking at the camera, so as to give the appearance of instructing the more highly paid anchorman who was trying to report on the event. Both had been in the studio to provide commentary for President Durling's speech, and had read all the briefing material on Ryan, whom the analyst didn't really know, though they'd bumped into each other at various dinners during the past few years. "He's a remarkably low-key gentleman, but without question one of the brightest people in government service." Such a statement could not go unchallenged. Tom the anchor leaned forward, half-looking at his colleague, and half at the cameras.

"But, John, he's not a politician. He has no political background or experience. He's a national-security specialist in an age when national security is not the issue it once was," he pontificated.

John the analyst managed to stifle the reply that the statement so richly deserved. Someone else did not.

"Yeah," Chavez grumbled. "And that airplane that took the building out was really a Delta flight that got lost. Jesus!" he concluded.

"It's a great country we serve, Ding, my boy. Where else do people get paid five mill' a year to be stupid?" John Clark decided to finish his beer. There was no sense in driving back to Washington until Mary Pat called. He was a worker bee, after all, and only the top-floor CIA types would be racing around now. And racing around they would be. They wouldn't be accomplishing much, but at times like this you *didn't* really accomplish much of anything, except to look harried and important . . . and to the worker bees, ineffective.

WITH LITTLE TO show the public, the network reran tape of President Durling's speech. The C-SPAN cameras in the chamber had been remotely controlled, and controlroom technicians froze various frames to show the front row of senior government officials, and, again, the roll of the dead was cataloged: All but two of the Cabinet secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, senior agency directors, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Director Bill Shaw of the FBI, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Administrator of NASA, all nine Justices of the Supreme Court. The anchorman's voice listed the names and the positions they'd held, and the tape advanced frame by frame until the moment when the Secret Service agents were shown racing into the chamber, startling President Durling and causing some brief confusion. Heads turned, looking for danger, and perhaps the quicker-minded among them had wondered about the presence of a gunman in the galleries, but then came three frames from a wide-shot camera that showed the blurred displacement of the back wall, followed by blackness. Anchor and commentator were then back on-screen, staring down at their desktop monitors, then back up at each other, and perhaps only now the full enormity of the event finally began to hit them, as it was hitting the new President.

"President Ryan's principal task will be to rebuild the government, if he can," John the analyst said, after a long moment's pause. "My God, so many good men and women . . . dead. . . ." It had also occurred to him that a few years earlier, before becoming the senior network commentator, he would have been in that chamber, along with so many of his professional friends; and for him, also, the event finally broke past the shock, and his hands started quivering below the top of the desk. An experienced pro who did not allow his voice to shake, he nonetheless could not totally control the look on his face, which sagged with sudden, awful grief, and on the screen his face went ashen under the makeup.

"God's judgment," Mahmoud Haji Daryaei muttered over six thousand miles away, lifting the controller and muting the sound to eliminate extraneous twaddle.

God's judgment. That made sense, didn't it? America. The colossus that had thwarted so many, a godless land of godless people, at the pinnacle of her power, winner of yet another contest—now, grievously harmed. How else but by God's will could such a thing happen? And what else could it mean but God's own judgment, and God's own blessing? Blessing on what? he wondered. Well, perhaps that would be clear with reflection.

He'd met Ryan once before, found him spiteful and arrogant—typically American—but not now. The cameras momentarily zoomed in to show a man clutching at his coat, his head turning left and right, mouth slightly open. No, not arrogant now. Stunned, not even aware enough to be frightened. It was a look he'd seen on men's faces before. How interesting.

THE SAME WORDS and the same images were flooding the world now, delivered by satellites to over a billion pairs of eyes that'd been watching the news coverage, or been alerted to the event and had changed channels from morning shows in some countries, lunch and evening shows in others. History had been made, and there was an imperative to watch.

This was particularly true of the powerful, for whom information was the raw material of power. Another man in another place looked at the electronic clock that sat next to the television on his desk and did some simple arithmetic. A horrid day was ending in America, while a morning was well begun where he sat. The window behind his desk showed a wide expanse of paving stones, a huge square, in fact, crisscrossed by people mainly traveling by bicycle, though the number of cars he saw was now substantial, having grown by a factor often over the past few years. But still bicycles were the main mode of transportation, and that wasn't fair, was it?

He'd planned to change that, quickly and decisively in historical terms—and he was a serious student of history only to have his carefully laid plan killed aborning by the Americans. He didn't believe in God, never had and never would, but he did believe in Fate, and Fate was what he saw before his eyes on the phosphor screen of a television set manufactured in Japan. A fickle woman, Fate was, he told himself as he reached for a handleless cup of green tea. Only days before she had favored the Americans with luck, and now, this. . . . So what was the intention of the Lady Fate? His own intentions and needs and will mattered more, the man decided. He reached for his phone, then thought better of it. It would ring soon enough, and others would ask his opinion, and he would have to answer with something, and so it was time to think. He sipped his tea. The heated

water stung his mouth, and that was good. He would have to be alert, and the pain focused his mind inward, where important thoughts always began.

Undone or not, his plan hadn't been a bad one. Poorly executed by his unwitting agents, largely because of the Lady Fate and her momentary largesse to America—but it had been a fine plan, he told himself yet again. He'd have another chance to prove that. Because of the Lady Fate. The thought occasioned a thin smile, and a distant look, as his mind probed the future and liked what it saw. He hoped the phone would not ring for a while, because he had to look further still, and that was best done without interference. It came to him after a moment's further thought that the real objective of his plan had been accomplished, hadn't it? He'd wished America to be crippled, and crippled America now was. Not in the manner he'd chosen, but crippled even so. *Even better?* he asked himself.

Yes.

And so, the game could go on, couldn't it?

It *was* the Lady Fate, toying as she did with the ebb and flow of history. She wasn't a friend or enemy of any man, really—or was she? The man snorted. Maybe she just had a sense of humor.

FOR ANOTHER PERSON, the emotion was anger. Days before had come the humiliation, the bitter humiliation of being told by a foreigner—nothing more than a former provincial governor!—what her sovereign nation must do. She'd been very careful, of course. Everything had been done with great skill. The government itself had not been implicated in anything more than extensive naval exercises on the open sea, which was, of course, free for the passage of all. No threatening notes had been dispatched, no official démarche issued, no position taken, and for their part the Americans hadn't done anything more than—what was their arrogant phrase, "rattle their cage"?—and call for a meeting of the Security Council, at which there was nothing to be said, really, since nothing official had taken place, and her country had made no announcement. What they had done was nothing more than *exercises*, weren't they? *Peaceful* exercises. Of course, those exercises had helped split the American capability against Japan—but she couldn't have known ahead of time, could she? Of course not.

She had the document on her desk at this very moment: the time required to restore the fleet to full capability. But, no, she shook her head, it wouldn't be enough. Neither she nor her country could act alone now. It would take time and friends, and plans, but her country had needs, and it was her job to see to those needs. It was not her job

to accept commands from others, was it?

No.

She also drank tea, from a fine china cup, with sugar and a little milk in the English way, a product of her birth and station and education, all of which, along with patience, had brought her to this office. Of all the people around the world watching the same picture from the same satellite network, she probably understood the best what the opportunity was, how vast and appealing it had to be, all the sweeter that it had come so soon after she'd been dictated to in this very office. By a man who was now dead. It was too good to pass up, wasn't it?

Yes.

"THIS IS SCARY. Mr. C." Domingo Chavez rubbed his eyes—he'd been awake for more hours than his jet-lagged brain could compute—and tried to organize his thoughts. He was sprawled back on the living-room couch, shoeless feet up on the coffee table. The womenfolk in the house were off to bed, one in anticipation of work the next day, and the other with a college exam to face. The latter hadn't figured that there might not be any school tomorrow.

"Tell me why, Ding," John Clark commanded. The time for worrying himself about the relative skills of various TV personalities had passed, and his young partner *was*, after all, pursuing his master's degree in international relations.

Chavez spoke without opening his eyes. "I don't think anything like this has ever happened in peacetime before. The world ain't all that different from what it was last week, John. Last week, it was real complicated. We kinda won that little war we were in, but the world ain't changed much, and we're not any stronger than we were then, are we?"

"Nature abhors a vacuum?" John asked quietly.

"Sum'tim like that." Chavez yawned. "Damned if we ain't got one here and now."

"NOT ACCOMPLISHING VERY much, am I?" Jack asked, in a voice both quiet and bleak. It was hitting him full force now. There was still a glow, though most of what rose into the sky now was steam rather than smoke. What went into the building was the most depressing sight. Body bags. Rubberized fabric with loop handles at the ends, and some sort of zipper in the middle. Lots of them, and some were coming out now, carried by pairs of firefighters, snaking down the

wide steps around the fragments of broken masonry. It had just started, and would not end soon. He hadn't actually seen a body during his few minutes up top. Somehow, seeing the first few bags was worse.

"No, sir," Agent Price said, her face looking the same as his. "This isn't good for you."

"I know." Ryan nodded and looked away.

I don't know what to do, he told himself. *Where's the manual, the training course for this job? Whom do I ask? Where do I go?*

I don't want *this job!* his mind screamed at itself. Ryan reproached himself for the venality of the thought, but he'd come to this newly dreadful place as some sort of leadership demonstration, parading himself before the TV cameras as though he knew what he was about —and that was a lie. Perhaps not a malicious one. Just stupid. *Walk up to the fire chief and ask how it's going, as though anyone with eyes and a second-grade education couldn't figure that one out!*

"I'm open to ideas," Ryan said at last.

Special Agent Andrea Price took a deep breath and fulfilled the fantasy of every special agent of the United States Secret Service all the way back to Pinkerton: "Mr. President, you really need to get your, cr, stuff" she couldn't go *that* far—"together. Some things you can do and some things you can't. You have people working for you. For starters, sir, figure out who they are and let them do their jobs. Then, maybe, you can start doing yours."

"Back to the House?"

"That's where the phones are, Mr. President."

"Who's head of the Detail?"

"It was Andy Walker." Price didn't have to say where he was now. Ryan looked down at her and made his first presidential decision.

"You just got promoted."

Price nodded. "Follow me, sir." It pleased the agent to see that this President, like all the others, could learn to follow orders. Some of the time, anyway. They'd made it all of ten feet before Ryan slipped on a patch of ice and went down, to be picked back up by two agents. It only made him look all the more vulnerable. A still photographer captured the moment, giving *Newsweek* its cover photo for the following week.

"AS YOU SEE, President Ryan is now leaving the Hill in what looks like a military vehicle instead of a Secret Service car. What do you suppose he's up to?" the anchor asked.

"In all fairness to the man," John the commentator said, "it's unlikely that he knows at the moment."

That opinion rang across the globe a third of a second later, to the general agreement of all manner of persons, friends and enemies alike.

SOME THINGS HAVE to be done fast. He didn't know if they were the right things—well, he did, and they weren't—but at a certain level of importance the rules got a little muddled, didn't they? The scion of a political family whose public service went back a couple of generations, he'd been in public life practically since leaving law school, which was another way of saying that he hadn't held a real job in his entire life. Perhaps he had little practical experience in the economy except as its beneficiary—his family's financial managers ran the various trusts and portfolios with sufficient skill that he almost never bothered meeting with them except at tax time. Perhaps he had never practiced law though he'd had a hand in passing literally thousands of them. Perhaps he had never served his country in uniform—though he deemed himself an expert in national security. Perhaps a lot of things militated against doing anything. But he knew government, for that had been his profession for all of his active—not to say "working"—life, and at a time like this, the country needed someone who really knew government. The country needed healing, Ed Kealty thought, and he knew about that.

So, he lifted his phone and made a call. "Cliff, this is Ed . . ."

1

STARTING NOW

THE FBI'S EMERGENCY command center on the fifth floor of the Hoover building is an odd-shaped room, roughly triangular and surprisingly small, with room for only fifteen or so people to bump shoulders. Number sixteen to arrive, tieless and wearing casual clothes, was Deputy Assistant Director Daniel E. Murray. The senior watch officer was his old friend, Inspector Pat O'Day. A large-framed, rugged man who raised beef cattle as a hobby at his northern Virginia home—this "cowboy" had been born and educated in New Hampshire, but his boots were custom-made—O'Day had a phone to his ear, and the room was surprisingly quiet for a crisis room during a real crisis. A curt nod and raised hand acknowledged Murray's entry. The senior agent waited for O'Day to conclude the call.

"What's going on, Pat?"

"I was just on the phone with Andrews. They have tapes of the radar and stuff. I have agents from the Washington Field Office heading there to interview the tower people. National Transportation Safety Board will have people there, too, to assist. Initial word, looks like a Japan Airlines 747 kamikaze'd in. The Andrews people say the pilot declared an emergency as an unscheduled KLM flight and drove straight over their runways, hung a little left, and . . . well . . ." O'Day shrugged. "WFO has people on the Hill now to commence the investigation. I'm assuming this one goes on the books as a terrorist incident, and that gives us jurisdiction."

"Where's the ADIC?" Murray asked, meaning the Assistant Director in Charge of the Bureau's Washington office, quartered at Buzzard's Point on the Potomac River.

"St. Lucia with Angie, taking a vacation. Tough luck for Tony." The inspector grunted. Tony Caruso had gotten away only three days earlier. "Tough day for a lot of people. The body count's going to be huge, Dan, lots worse'n Oklahoma. I've sent out a general alert for forensics experts. Mess like this, we'll have to identify a lot of bodies from DNA. Oh, the TV guys are asking how it's possible for the Air Force to let this happen." A shake of the head accompanied the conclusion. O'Day needed somebody to dump on, and the TV

commentators were the most attractive target of opportunity. There would be others in due course; both hoped the FBI would not be one of them.

"Anything else we know?"

Pat shook his head. "Nope. It's going to take time, Dan."

"Ryan?"

"Was on the Hill, should be on his way to the White House. They caught him on TV. He looks kinda rocky. Our brothers and sisters at USSS are having a really bad night, too. The guy I talked to ten minutes ago almost lost it. We might end up having a jurisdictional conflict over who runs the investigation."

"Great." Murray snorted. "We'll let the AG sort that one—" But there wasn't an Attorney General, and there wasn't a Secretary of the Treasury for him to call.

Inspector O'Day didn't have to run through it. A federal statute empowered the United States Secret Service as lead agency to investigate any attack on the President. But another federal statute gave FBI jurisdiction over terrorism. A local statute for murder also brought the Washington Metropolitan Police in, of course. Toss in the National Transportation Safety Board—until proven otherwise, it could merely be a horrible aircraft accident—and that was just the beginning. Every agency had authority and expertise. The Secret Service, smaller than the FBI, and with fewer resources, did have some superb investigators, and some of the finest technical experts around. NTSB knew more about airplane crashes than anyone in the world. But the Bureau had to be the lead agency for this investigation, didn't it? Murray thought. Except that Director Shaw was dead, and without him to swing the clout club . . .

Jesus, Murray thought. He and Bill went back to the Academy together. They'd worked in the same squad as rookie street agents in riverside Philadelphia, chasing bank robbers . . .

Pat read his face and nodded. "Yeah, Dan, takes time to catch up, doesn't it? We've been gutted like a fish, man." He handed over a sheet from a legal pad with a handwritten list of known dead.

A nuclear strike wouldn't have hurt us this badly, Murray realized as he scanned the names. A developing crisis would have given ample strategic warning, and slowly, quietly, senior people would have left Washington for various places of safety, many of them would have survived—or so the planners went—and after the strike there would have been some sort of functioning government to pick up the pieces. But not now.

RYAN HAD COME to the White House a thousand times, to visit, to

deliver briefings, for meetings important and otherwise, and most recently to work in his own office as National Security Advisor. This was the first time he hadn't had to show ID and walk through the metal detectors—more properly, he did walk straight through one from force of habit, but this time, when the buzzer went off, he just kept walking without even reaching for his keys. The difference in demeanor of the Secret Service agents was striking. Like anyone else, they were comforted by familiar surroundings, and though the entire country had just had another lesson in how illusory "safety" was, the illusion was real enough for trained professionals to feel more at ease within the substance of a lie. Guns were holstered, coats buttoned, and long breaths taken as the entourage came in through the East Entrance.

An inner voice told Jack that this was now his house, but he had no wish to believe it. Presidents liked to call it the People's House, to use the political voice of false modesty to describe a place for which some of them would have willingly run over the bodies of their own children, then say that it wasn't really all that big a thing. If lies could stain the walls, Jack reflected, then this building would have a very different name. But there was greatness here, too, and that was more intimidating than the pettiness of politics. Here James Monroe had promulgated the Monroe Doctrine and propelled his country into the strategic world for the first time. Here Lincoln had held his country together through the sheer force of his own will. Here Teddy Roosevelt had made America a real global player, and sent his Great White Fleet around the world to announce America. Here Teddy's distant cousin had saved his country from internal chaos and despair, with little more than a nasal voice and an up-angled cigarette holder. Here Eisenhower had exercised power so skillfully that hardly anyone had noticed his doing anything at all. Here Kennedy had faced down Khrushchev, and nobody had cared that doing so had covered a multitude of blunders. Here Reagan had plotted the destruction of America's most dangerous enemy, only to be accused of sleeping most of the time. What ultimately counted more—the achievements or the dirty little secrets committed by imperfect men who only briefly stepped beyond their weaknesses? But those brief and halting steps made up the sort of history that lived, while the rest was, mainly, forgotten—except by revisionist historians who just didn't get the fact that people weren't supposed to be perfect.

But it still wasn't his house.

The entrance was a tunnel of sorts, which headed under the East Wing, where the First Lady—until ninety minutes earlier Anne Durling had her offices. By law the First Lady was a private citizen—an odd fiction for someone with a paid staff—but in reality her functions were

often hugely important, however unofficial they might be. The walls here were those of a museum, not a home, as they walked past the small White House theater, where the President could watch movies with a hundred or so close personal friends. There were several sculptures, many by Frederic Remington, and the general motif was supposed to be "pure" American. The paintings were of past presidents, and Ryan's eyes caught them—their lifeless eyes seemed to look down at him with suspicion and doubt. All the men who had gone before, good and bad, whether judged well or poorly by historians, they looked at him—

I'm an historian, Ryan told himself. *I've written a few books. I've judged the actions of others from a safe distance of both time and space. Why didn't he see this? Why didn't he do* that? Now, too late, he knew better. He was *here* now, and from the inside it looked very different. From the outside you could see in, looking around first to catch all the information and analyze it as it passed by, stopping it when you had to, even making it go backward, the better to understand it all, taking your time to get things exactly right.

But from the inside it wasn't that way at all. Here everything came directly at you like a series of onrushing trains, from all directions at once, moving by their own time schedules, leaving you little room to maneuver or reflect. Ryan could sense that already. And the people in the paintings had mainly come to this place with the luxury of time to think about their ascension, with the luxury of trusted advisers, and of good will. Those were benefits he didn't have. To historians, however, they wouldn't matter for much more than a cursory paragraph, or maybe even a whole page, before the writer moved on with pitiless analysis.

Everything he said or did, Jack knew, would be subjected to the 20/20 vision of hindsight—and not just from this moment forward. People would now look into his past for information on his character, his beliefs, his actions good and bad. From the moment the aircraft had struck the Capitol building, he was President, and every breath he'd drawn since would be examined in a new and unforgiving light for generations to come. His daily life would have no privacy, and even in death he would not be safe from scrutiny by people who had no idea what it was like merely to walk into this oversized dwelling-office-museum and know that it was your prison into all eternity. The bars were invisible, perhaps, but even more real because of it.

So many men had lusted for this job, only to find how horrid and frustrating it was. Jack knew *that* from his own historical readings, and from seeing three men at close quarters who'd occupied the Oval Office. At least they had come here with eyes supposedly open, and perhaps they could be blamed for having minds smaller than their

egos. How much the worse for someone who'd never wished for it? And would history judge Ryan more kindly for it? That was worth an ironic snort. No, he'd come to this House at a time when his country *needed,* and if he didn't meet that need, then he'd be cursed for all future time as a failure, even though he'd come to the job only by accident—condemned by a man now dead to do the job which the other man had craved.

For the Secret Service, this was a time to relax a little. Lucky them, Ryan thought, allowing bitterness to creep into his mind, unfair or not. It was their job to protect him and his family. It was his job now to protect them and theirs, and those of millions of others.

"This way, Mr. President." Price turned left into the ground-floor corridor. Here Ryan first saw the White House staff people, standing there to see their new charge, the man whom they would serve to the best of their abilities. Like everyone else, they just stood and looked, without knowing what to say, their eyes evaluating the man and without revealing what they thought, though they would surely exchange views in the privacy of their locker or lunchrooms at the first possible moment. Jack's tie was still crooked in his collar, and he still wore the turnout coat. The water spray that had frozen in his hair and given him an undeserved gray look was melting now. One of the staff members raced out of sight as the entourage continued west. He reappeared a minute later, darting through the security detail and handing Ryan a towel.

"Thank you," Jack said in surprise. He stood still for a moment and started drying his hair. There he saw a photographer running backward and aiming his camera, snapping merrily away. The Secret Service didn't impede him in any way. That, Ryan thought, made him a member of the staff, the official White House photographer whose job it was to memorialize everything. *Great, my own people spy on me!* But it wasn't time to interfere with anything, was it?

"Where are we going, Andrea?" Jack asked as they passed yet more portraits of Presidents and First Ladies, all staring at him . . .

"The Oval Office. I thought . . ."

"Situation Room." Ryan stopped dead, still toweling off. "I'm not ready for that room yet, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. President." At the end of the wide corridor they turned left into a small foyer walled with cheap looking wood latticework, and then right to go outside again, because there wasn't a corridor from the White House into the West Wing. That's why no one had taken his coat, Jack realized.

"Coffee," Jack ordered. At least the food service would be good here. The White House Mess was run by Navy stewards, and his first presidential cup of coffee was poured into an exquisite cup from a

silver pot, by a sailor whose smile was both professional and genuine, and who, like everyone else, was curious about the new Boss. It occurred to Ryan that he was like a creature in the zoo. Interesting, even fascinating—and how would he adapt to the new cage?

Same room, different seat. The President sat in the middle of the table so that aides could assemble on both sides. Ryan picked his place and sat in it naturally enough. It was only a chair, after all. The so-called trappings of power were merely things, and the power itself was an illusion, because such power was always accompanied by obligations that were greater still. You could see and exercise the former. The latter could only be felt. Those obligations came with the air, which suddenly seemed heavy in this windowless room. Jack sipped at his coffee briefly, looking around. The wall clock said 11:14 P.M. He'd been President for . . . what? Ninety minutes? About the time for the drive from his home to . . . his new home . . . depending on traffic.

"Where's Arnie?"

"Right here, Mr. President," Arnold van Damm said as he came through the door. Chief of staff to two Presidents, he would now set an all-time record as chief of staff to a third. His first President had resigned in disgrace. His second was dead. Would the third one be the charm—or did bad things always come in threes? Two adages, equally quoted, and mutually exclusive. Ryan's eyes just bored in on him, asking the question that he couldn't voice: *What do I do now?*

"Good statement on TV, just about right." The chief of staff sat down on the other side of the table. He appeared quiet and competent, as always, and Ryan didn't reflect on the effort such an appearance required of a man who'd lost more friends than Ryan had.

"I'm not even sure what the hell I said," Jack replied, searching his mind for memories that had vanished.

"That's about normal for an ad-lib," van Damm allowed. "It was still pretty good. I always thought your instincts were okay. You're going to need 'em."

"First thing?" Jack asked.

"Banks, stock markets, all federal offices are closed, call it 'til the end of the week—maybe beyond that. We have a state funeral to plan for Roger and Anne. National week of mourning, probably a month for the flags to be at half-staff. We had a bunch of ambassadors in the chamber, too. That means a ton of diplomatic activity on top of everything else. We'll call that housekeeping stuff—I know," van Damm said with a raised hand. "Sorry. You have to call it something."

"Who—"

"We have a Protocol Office here, Jack," van Damm pointed out. "They're already in their cubbyholes and working on this for you. We

have a team of speechwriters; they'll prepare your official statements. The media people will want to see you—what I mean by that is, you have to appear in public. You have to reassure people. You have to instill confidence—"

"When?"

"In time for the morning TV shows at the latest, CNN, all the networks. I'd prefer that we go on camera within the hour, but we don't have to. We can cover that by saying you're busy. You will be," Arnie promised. "You'll have to be briefed on what you can say and what you can't before you go on TV. We'll lay the law down to the newsies on what they may and may not ask, and in a case like this they'll cooperate. Figure you have a week of kind treatment to lean on. That's your press honeymoon, and that's as long as it'll last."

"And then?" Jack asked.

"And then you're the by-God President and you'll have to act like it, Jack," van Damm said bluntly. "You didn't have to take the oath, remember?"

That statement made Ryan's head jerk back as his peripheral vision caught the stony looks on the others in the room—all of them Secret Service at the moment. He was the new Boss, and their eyes weren't so very different now from those in the portraits on the walk in from the East Wing. They *expected* him to do the right thing. They'd support him, protect him from others and from himself, but he had to do the job. They wouldn't let him run away, either. The Secret Service was empowered to protect him from physical danger. Arnie van Damm would try to protect him from political danger. Other staffers would serve and protect, too. The housekeeping staff would feed him, iron his shirts, and fetch coffee. But none of them would allow Ryan to run away, either from his place or his duties.

It was a prison.

But what Arnie had just said was true. He could have refused to take the oath, couldn't—no, Ryan thought, looking down at the polished oak tabletop. Then he would have been damned for all eternity as a coward—worse, he would have been damned in his own mind as the same thing, for he had a conscience that was more harmful an enemy than any outsider. It was his nature to look in the mirror and see not enough there. As good a man as he knew himself to be, he was never good enough, driven by—what? The values he'd learned from his parents, his educators, the Marine Corps, the many people he'd met, the dangers he'd faced? All those abstract values, did he use them, or did they use him? What had brought him to this point? What had made him what he was and what, really, was John Patrick Ryan? He looked up, around the room, wondering what *they* thought he was, but they didn't know, either. He was the President

now, the giver of orders, which they would carry out; the man who made speeches which others would analyze for nuance and correctness; the man who decided what the United States of America would do, then to be judged and criticized by others who never really knew how to do the thing to which they objected. But that wasn't a person; that was a job description. Inside of that had to be a man—or someday soon, a woman—who thought it through and tried to do the right thing. And for Ryan, less than an hour and a half before, the right thing had been to take the oath. And to try to do his best. The judgment of history was ultimately less important than what he'd judge of himself, looking in the mirror every morning at not enough. The real prison was, and would always be, himself.

Damn.

THE FIRE WAS out now, Chief Magill saw. His people would have to be careful. There were always hot spots, places where the fire had died, not from the cooling water but rather from lack of oxygen, and waited for the chance to flare back up, to surprise and kill the unwary. But his people were wary, and those little flares of malevolent life would not be important in the greater scheme of things for this fire site. Hoses were already being rolled, and some of his people were taking their trucks back to their houses. He'd stripped the entire city of apparatus for this fire, and he had to send much of it back, lest a new fire go unanswered, and more people die unnecessarily.

He was surrounded by others now, all wearing one-layer vinyl jackets with large yellow letters to proclaim who they were. There was an FBI contingent, another from Secret Service, the D.C. Metropolitan Police, NTSB, the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and his own fire investigators, all looking for someone to be in charge so that they could claim command themselves. Instead of holding an informal meeting and establishing their own chain of command, they stood mostly in homogeneous little knots, probably waiting for someone else to tell them who was running things. Magill shook his head. He'd seen it before.

The bodies were coming out faster now. For the moment they were being taken to the D.C. Armory, about a mile north of the Hill just off the railroad tracks. Magill didn't envy the identification teams, though he hadn't yet troubled himself to descend into the crater—that's how he thought of it at the moment—to see how badly destroyed things were.

"Chief?" a voice asked behind him. Magill turned.

"Yeah?"

"NTSB. Can we start looking for the flight recorder?" The man pointed to the rudder fin. Though the tail assembly of the aircraft was anything but intact, you could tell what it had once been, and the so-called black box—actually painted Day-Glo orange—would be somewhere in there. The area was actually fairly clean. The rubble had been catapulted westward for the most part, and they might actually have a chance of recovering it quickly.

"Okay." Magill nodded and pointed to a pair of firefighters to accompany the crash team.

"Could you also tell your people as much as possible not to move the aircraft parts around? We need to reconstruct the event, and it helps to leave things pretty much in place."

"The people—the bodies come first," Magill pointed out. The federal official nodded with a grimace. This wasn't fun for anyone.

"I understand." He paused. "If you find the flight crew, please don't move them at all. Call us, and we'll handle it. Okay?"

"How will we know?"

"White shirts, shoulder boards with stripes on them, and they'll be Japanese, probably."

It should have sounded crazy, but it didn't. Magill knew that bodies often did survive airplane crashes in the most incredible outward condition, so intact that only a trained eye could see the signs of fatal injury on first inspection. It often unnerved the civilians who were usually the first to arrive at a scene. It was so strange that the human body seemed more robust than the life it contained. There was a mercy to it, for the survivors were spared the hellish ordeal of identifying a piece of burned, torn meat, but that mercy was balanced by the cruelty of recognizing someone that could not talk back. Magill shook his head and had one of his senior people relay the special order.

The firefighters down below had enough of them already. The first special order, of course, had been to locate and remove the body of President Roger Durling. Everything was secondary to that, and a special ambulance was standing by for his body alone. Even the First Lady, Anne Durling, would have to wait a little for her husband, one last time. A contractor's mobile crane was maneuvering into the far side of the building to lift out the stone cubes that covered the podium area like a battered pile of children's hardwood blocks; in the harsh light it seemed that only the letters and numbers painted on their sides were lacking to make the illusion complete.

PEOPLE WERE STREAMING in to all the government departments, especially the senior officials. It was hardly the usual thing for the VIP

parking slots to fill up at midnight, but this night they did, and the Department of State was no exception. Security personnel were called in as well, for an attack on one government agency was an attack on all, and even though the nature of the attack on the government devalued the advantage of calling in people armed with handguns, it didn't really matter. When A happened, B resulted, because it was written down somewhere that B was what you did. The people with the handguns looked at one another and shook their heads, knowing that they'd be getting overtime pay, which put them one up on the big shots who'd storm in from their places in Chevy Chase and suburban Virginia, race upstairs, and then just chat with one another.

One such person found his parking place in the basement and used his key-card to activate the VIP elevator to the seventh floor. What made him different was that he had a real mission for the evening, albeit one he'd wondered about all the way in from his Great Falls home. It was what he thought of as a gut check, though that term hardly applied here. Yet what else could he do? He owed Ed Kealty everything, his place in Washington society, his career at State, so many other things. The country needed someone like Ed right now. So Ed had told him, making a strong case for the proposition, and what he himself was doing was . . . what? A small voice in the car had called it treason, but, no, that wasn't so, because "treason" was the only crime defined in the Constitution, cited there as giving "aid and comfort" to the enemies of his country, and whatever Ed Kealty was doing, he wasn't doing *that,* was he?

It came down to loyalty. He was Ed Kealty's man, as were many others. The relationship had started at Harvard, with beers and double dates and weekends at his family's house on the water, the good times of a lively youth. He'd been the working-class guest of one of America's great families—why? Because he'd caught Ed's youthful eye. But why that? He didn't know, had never asked, and probably would never find out. That was the way of friendship. It just happened, and only in America could a working-class kid who'd scratched into Harvard on a scholarship get befriended by the great son of a great family. He would have done well on his own, probably. No one but God had given him his native intelligence. No one but his parents had encouraged his development of that gift and taught him manners and . . . values. The thought caused his eyes to close as the elevator doors opened. Values. Well, loyalty was one of those values, wasn't it? Without Ed's patronage he would have topped out, maybe, as a DAS, a *Deputy* Assistant Secretary of State. The first word had long since been expunged from the title painted in gold letters on his office door. In a just world, he would have been in the running for the removal of the next word from the title as well, for wasn't he as good

with foreign policy as anyone else on the seventh floor? Yes, he surely was, and that would not have come to be without his having been Ed Kealty's man. Without the parties where he'd met the other mover-shakers, and talked his way to the top. And the money. He'd never taken a bribe of any sort, but his friend had advised him wisely (the advice having come from his own advisers, but that didn't matter) on investments, allowing him to build up his own financial independence and, by the way, buy a five-thousand-square-foot home in Great Falls, and to put his own son into Harvard, *not* on a scholarship, for Clifton Rutledge III was the son of *somebody* now, not merely the issue of a worker's loins. All the work he might have done entirely on his own would not have brought him to this place, and loyalty was owed, wasn't it?

That made it a little easier for Clifton Rutledge II (actually his birth certificate said Clifton Rutledge, *Junior*, but "Jr." wasn't quite the suffix for a man of his station), Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

The rest was mere timing. The seventh floor was always guarded, all the more so now. But the guards all knew him, and it was merely a matter of looking like he knew what he was doing. Hell, Rutledge told himself, he might just fail, and that could well be the best possible outcome—"Sorry, Ed, it wasn't there. . . ." He wondered if that was an unworthy thought as he stood there by his office door, listening for footsteps that would match in speed the beating of his heart. There would be two guards on the floor now, walking about separately. Security didn't have to be all that tight at a place like this. Nobody got into State without a reason. Even in daytime, when visitors came in, they needed escorts to wherever they were going. At this time of night, things were tighter still. The number of elevators in service was reduced. Key-card access was needed to get all the way to the top floor, and a third guard was always at the elevator banks. So it was just timing. Rutledge checked his watch for several cycles of footsteps, and found that the intervals were regular to within ten seconds. Good. He just had to wait for the next one.

"Hi, Wally."

"Good evening, sir," the guard replied. "Bad night."

"Do us a favor?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Coffee. No secretaries to get the machines going. Could you skip down to the cafeteria and have one of their people bring an urn up here? Have them set it up in the conference room up the hall. We'll be having a meeting in a few minutes."

"Fair enough. Right away?"

"If you could, Wally."

"Be back in five, Mr. Rutledge." The guard strode off with purpose, turned right twenty yards away and disappeared from view.

Rutledge counted to ten and headed the other way. The double doors to the Secretary of State's office were not locked. Rutledge walked right in through the first set, then through the second, turning on the lights as he did so. He had three minutes. Half of him hoped that the document would be locked away in Brett Hanson's office vault. In that case he would surely fail, since only Brett, two of his assistants, and the chief of security had the combination, and *that* did have an anti-tamper alarm on it. But Brett had been a gentleman, and a careless one at that, always so trusting on the one hand and forgetful on the other, the sort who never locked his car or even his house, unless his wife made him. If it were in the open, it would be in one of two places. Rutledge pulled open the center drawer of the desk and found the usual array of pencils and cheap pens (he was always losing them) and paper clips. One minute gone, as Rutledge carefully shuffled through the desk. Nothing. It was almost a relief, until he examined the desktop, and then he nearly laughed. Right there on the blotter, tucked into the leather edging, a plain white envelope addressed to the Secretary of State, but without a stamp. Rutledge took it from its place, holding the envelope by the edges. Unsealed. He moved the flap and extracted the contents. A single sheet of paper, two typed paragraphs. It was at this point that Cliff Rutledge got a chill. The exercise had been theoretical to this point. He could just replace it, forget he'd been here, forget about the phone call, forget about everything. Two minutes.

Would Brett have receipted it? Probably not. Again, he'd been a gentleman about everything. He would not have humiliated Ed that way. Ed had done the honorable thing by resigning, and Brett would have responded honorably, undoubtedly shaken his hand with a sorrowful look, and that would have been that. Two minutes fifteen.

Decision. Rutledge tucked the letter in his jacket pocket, headed for the door, switched off the lights, and returned to the corridor, stopping short of his own office door. There he waited half a minute.

"Hi, George."

"Hello, Mr. Rutledge."

"I just sent Wally down to get coffee for the floor."

"Good idea, sir. Bad night. Is it true that "

"Yeah, afraid so. Brett was probably killed with all the rest."

"Damn."

"Might be a good idea to lock his office up. I just checked the door and—"

"Yes, sir." George Armitage pulled out his key ring and found the proper one. "He's always so—"

"I know." Rutledge nodded.

"You know, two weeks ago I found his vault unlocked. Like, he turned the handle but forgot to spin the dial." A shake of the head. "I guess he never got hisself robbed, eh?"

"That's the problem with security," the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs sympathized. "The big boys never seem to pay attention, right?"

HOW BEAUTIFUL IT was. Who had done it? The question had a cursory answer. The TV reporters, with little else to do, kept telling their cameras to look at the tail fin. He remembered the logo well enough, having long ago participated in an operation that had blown up an aircraft with the red crane on its rudder fin. He almost regretted it now, but envy prevented that. It was a matter of propriety. As one of the world's foremost terrorists—he used the word within his own mind, and in that private place relished the term, though he couldn't use it elsewhere—such an event ought to have been his doing, not the work of some amateur. For that's who it had been. An amateur whose name he would learn in due course, along with everyone else on earth—from television coverage. The irony was striking enough. Since puberty he'd devoted himself to the study and practice of political violence, learning, thinking, planning—and executing such acts, first as a participant, then as a leader/commander. And now what? Some *amateur* had outstripped him, had outstripped the entire clandestine world to which he belonged. It would have been embarrassing except for the beauty of the event.

His trained mind ran over the possibilities, and the analysis came rapidly. A single man. Perhaps two. More likely one. As always, he thought with a tight-lipped nod, one man willing to die, to sacrifice himself for the Cause—whatever Cause he might have served—could be more formidable than an army: In the case at hand, the man in question had possessed special skills and access to special means, both of which had served his purpose well.

That was luck, as was the single-actor aspect to the feat. It was easy for a single man to keep a secret. He grunted. That was the problem he'd always faced. The really hard part was finding the right people, people whom he could trust, who wouldn't boast to or confide in others, who shared his own sense of mission, who had his own discipline, and who were truly willing to risk their lives. That last criterion was the price of entry, once easy enough to establish, but now it was becoming so much harder in a changing world. The well into which he dipped was running dry, and it did no good to deny it. He was running out of the truly devoted.

Always smarter and farther-seeing than his contemporaries, he himself had faced the necessity of participating in three real operations, and though he'd had the steel in his soul to do what had to be done, he didn't crave to repeat it. It was too dangerous, after all. It wasn't that he feared the consequences of his action—it was that a dead terrorist was as dead as his victims, and dead men carried out no more missions. Martyrdom was something he'd been prepared to risk, but nothing he'd ever really sought. He wanted to *win*, after all, to reap the benefits of his action, to be recognized as a winner, liberator, conqueror, to be in the books which future generations would read as something other than a footnote. The successful mission on the TV in his bedroom would be remembered as an awful *thing* by most. Not the act of a man, but something akin to a natural disaster, because, elegant as it was, it served no political purpose. And that was the problem with the mad act of one dedicated martyr. Luck wasn't enough. There had to be a reason, a result. Such a successful act was only so if it led to something else. This manifestly had not. And that was too bad. It wasn't often that—

No, the man reached for his orange juice and sipped it before he allowed his mind to proceed. Wasn't *often?* This had never happened, had it? That was a largely philosophical question. He could say, harkening back to history, that the Assassins had been able to topple or at least decapitate governments, but back then such a task had meant the elimination of a single man, and for all the bravura shown by emissaries of that hilltop fortress, the modern world was far too complex. Kill a president or prime minister—even one of the lingering kings some nations clung to—and there was another to step into the vacant place. As had evidently happened in this case. But this one was different. There was no Cabinet to stand behind the new man, to show solidarity and determination and continuity on their angry faces. If only something else, something larger and more important had been ready when the aircraft had made its fall, then this thing of beauty would have been more beautiful still. That it hadn't could not be changed, but as with all such events, there was much to learn from both its success and failure, and its aftermath, planned or not, was very, very real.

In that sense it was tragic. An opportunity had been wasted. If only he'd known. If only the man who'd flown that airplane to its final destination had let someone know what was planned. But that wasn't the way of martyrs, was it? The fools had to think alone, act alone, and die alone; and in their personal success lay ultimate failure. Or perhaps not. The aftermath was still there. . . .

“MR. PRESIDENT?” A Secret Service agent had picked up the phone. Ordinarily it would have been a Navy yeoman, but the Detail was still a little too shell-shocked to allow just anyone into the Sit Room. “FBI, sir.”

Ryan pulled the phone from its holder under the desktop. “Yes?”

“Dan Murray here.” Jack nearly smiled to hear a familiar voice, and a friendly one at that. He and Murray went back a very long way indeed. At the other end, Murray must have wanted to say *Hi, Jack*, but he wouldn’t—couldn’t be so familiar without being so bidden—and even if Jack had encouraged him, the man would have felt uncomfortable to do so, and would have run the further risk of being thought an ass-kisser within his own organization. One more obstacle to being normal, Jack reflected. Even his friends were now distancing themselves.

“What is it, Dan?”

“Sorry to bother you, but we need guidance on who’s running the investigation. There’s a bunch of people running around on the Hill right now, and—”

“Unity of command,” Jack observed sourly. He didn’t have to ask why Murray was calling him. All those who could have decided this issue at a lower level were dead. “What’s the law say for this?”

“It doesn’t, really,” Murray replied. The discomfort in his voice was clear. He didn’t wish to bother the man who had once been his friend, and might still be, in less official circumstances. But this was business, and business had to be carried out.

“Multiple jurisdictions?”

“To a fare-thee-well,” Murray confirmed with an unseen nod.

“I guess we call it a terrorist incident. We have a tradition of that, you and I, don’t we?” Jack asked.

“That we do, sir.”

Sir, Ryan thought. *Damn it.* But he had another decision to make. Jack scanned the room before replying.

“The Bureau is the lead agency on this. Everybody reports to you. Pick a good man to run things.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dan?”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“Who’s senior over at FBI?”

“The Associate Director is Chuck Floyd. He’s down at Atlanta to give a speech and—” Then there would be the Assistant Directors, all senior to Murray . . .

“I don’t know him. I do know you. You’re acting Director until I say otherwise.” That shook the other side of the connection, Ryan immediately sensed.

"Uh, Jack, I—"

"I liked Shaw, too, Dan. You've got the job."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan replaced the phone and explained what he'd just done.

Price objected first: "Sir, any attack on the President is under the jurisdiction of " Ryan cut her off.

"They have more resources, and somebody has to be in command. I want this one settled as quickly as possible."

"We need a special commission." This was Arnie van Damm.

"Headed by whom?" President Ryan asked. "A member of the Supreme Court? Couple of senators and congressmen? Murray's a pro from way back. Pick a good—whoever's the senior career member of the Department of Justice's Criminal Division will oversee the investigation. Andrea, find me the best investigator in the Service to be Murray's chief assistant. We don't have outsiders to use, do we? We run this from the inside. Let's pick the best people and let them run with it. Like, we act as though we trust the agencies who're supposed to do the work." He paused. "I want this investigation to run fast, okay?"

"Yes, Mr. President." Agent Price bobbed her head, and Ryan caught an approving nod from Arnie van Damm. Maybe he was doing something right, Jack allowed himself to think. The satisfaction was short-lived enough. Against the wall in the far corner was a bank of television sets. All showed essentially the same picture now, and the flash of a photographer's strobe on all four sets caught the President's eyes. He turned to see four iterations of a body bag being carried down the steps of the Capitol building's west wing. It was one more cadaver to identify—large or small, male or female, important or not, one couldn't tell from the rubberized fabric of the bag. There were only the strained, cold, sad faces of the firefighters carrying the damned thing, and that had attracted the attention of a nameless newspaper photographer and his camera and his flash, and so brought their President back to a reality he now, again, shrank from. The TV cameras followed the trio, two living, one dead, down the steps to an ambulance whose open doors revealed a pile of such bags. The one they were carrying was passed across gently, the professionals showing mercy and solicitude to the body which the living world had forsaken. Then they headed back up the steps to get the next one. The Situation Room fell silent as all eyes took in the same picture. A few deep breaths were taken, and eyes were too steely or too shocked as yet for tears as, two by two, they turned away to stare down at the polished oak of the table. A coffee cup scraped and rattled its way from a saucer. The slight noise only made the silence worse, for no one had the words to fill the void.

"What else has to be done now?" Jack asked. It hit him so hard, the fatigue of the moment. The earlier racing of his heart in the face of death and in fear for his family and in agony at the loss was taking its toll on him now. His chest seemed empty, his arms weighed down, as though the sleeves of his coat were made of lead, and suddenly it was an effort just to hold up his head. It was 11:35, after a day that had begun at 4:10 in the morning, filled with interviews about a job he'd held for all of eight minutes before his abrupt promotion. The adrenaline rush which had sustained him was gone, its two-hour duration making him all the more exhausted for its length. He looked around with what seemed an important question:

"Where do I sleep tonight?" Not here, Ryan decided instantly. Not in a dead man's bed on dead man's sheets a few feet from a dead man's kids. He needed to be with his own family. He needed to look at his own children, probably asleep by now, because children slept through anything; then to feel his wife's arms around him, because that was the one constant in Ryan's world, the single thing that he would never allow to change despite the cyclonic events that had assailed a life he had neither courted nor expected.

The Secret Service agents shared a look of mutual puzzlement, before Andrea Price spoke, taking command as was her nature and now her job.

"Marine Barracks? Eighth and I?"

Ryan nodded. "That'll do for now."

Price spoke into her radio microphone, which was pinned to the collar of her suit jacket. "SWORDSMAN is moving. Bring the cars to the West Entrance."

The agents of the Detail rose. As one person they unbuttoned their coats, and as they passed out the door, hands reached for their pistols.

"We'll shake you loose at five," van Damm promised, adding, "Make sure you get the sleep you need." His answer was a brief, empty stare, as Ryan left the room. There a White House usher put a coat on him—whose it was or where it might have come from, Jack didn't think to ask. He climbed into the Chevy Suburban backseat, and it moved off at once, with an identical vehicle in front, and three more behind. Jack could have avoided the sights, but not the sounds, for sirens were still wailing beyond the armored glass, and it would have been cowardice to look away in any case. The fire glow was gone, replaced by the sparkling of lights from scores of emergency vehicles, some moving, most not, on or around the Hill. The police were keeping downtown streets clear, and the presidential motorcade headed rapidly east, ten minutes later arriving at the Marine Barracks. Here everyone was awake now, properly uniformed, and every Marine in sight had a rifle or pistol in evidence. The salutes were crisp.

The home of the commandant of the Marine Corps dated back to the early nineteenth century, one of the few official buildings that hadn't been burned by the British during their visit in 1814. But the commandant was dead. A widower with grown children, he'd lived here alone until this last night. Now a full colonel stood on the porch in pressed utilities with a pistol belt around his waist and a full platoon spread around the house.

"Mr. President, your family is topside and all secure," Colonel Mark Porter reported immediately. "We have a full rifle company deployed on perimeter security, and another one is on the way."

"Media?" Price asked.

"I didn't have any orders about that. My orders were to protect our guests. The only people within two hundred meters are the ones who belong here."

"Thank you, Colonel," Ryan said, not caring about the media, and heading for the door. A sergeant held it open, saluting as a Marine ought, and without thinking, Ryan returned it. Inside, a more senior NCO pointed him up the stairs—this one also saluted, as he was under arms. It was clear to Ryan now that he couldn't go anywhere alone. Price, another agent, and two Marines followed him up the stairs. The second-floor corridor had two Secret Service agents and five more Marines. Finally, at 11:54, he walked into a bedroom to find his wife sitting.

"Hi."

"Jack." Her head turned. "It's all true?"

He nodded, then he hesitated before coming to sit next to Cathy. "The kids?"

"Asleep." A pause. "They don't really know what's going on. I guess that makes four of us," she added.

"Five."

"The President's dead?" Cathy turned to see her husband nod. "I hardly got to know him."

"Good guy. Their kids are at the House. Asleep. I didn't know if I was supposed to do anything. So I came here." Ryan reached for his collar and pulled the tie loose. It seemed to take a considerable effort to do so. Better not to disturb the kids, he decided. It would have been hard to walk that far anyway.

"And now?"

"I have to sleep. They get me up at five."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Jack managed to get out of his clothes, hoping that the new day would contain some of the answers that the night merely concealed.

2

PRE-DAWN

IT WAS TO BE EXPECTED that they'd be as exactly punctual as their electronic watches could make them. It seemed to Ryan that he'd hardly closed his eyes when the gentlest of taps at the door startled him off the pillow. There came the brief moment of confusion normal to the moment of awakening in any place other than one's own bed: *Where am I?* The first organized thought told him that he'd dreamed a lot of things, and maybe—But hard on the heels of that thought was the internal announcement that the worst of the dream was still real. He was in a strange place, and there was no other explanation for it. The tornado had swept him up into a whirling mass of terror and confusion, and then deposited him here, and *here* was neither Kansas nor Oz. About the best thing he could say, after five or ten seconds of orientation, was that he didn't have the expected headache from sleep-deprivation, and that he wasn't quite so tired. He slid out from under the covers. His feet found the floor, and he made his way to the door.

"Okay, I'm up," he told the wooden door. Then he realized that his room didn't have an attached bathroom, and he'd have to open the door. That he did.

"Good morning, Mr. President." A young and rather earnest-looking agent handed him a bathrobe. Again, it was the job of an orderly, but the only Marine he saw in the corridor was wearing a pistol belt. Jack wondered if there had been another turf fight the night before between the Marine Corps and the Secret Service to see who had primacy of place in the protection of their new Commander-in-Chief. Then he realized with a start that the bathrobe was his own.

"We got some things for you last night," the agent explained in a whisper. A second agent handed over Cathy's rather tattered maroon housecoat. So, someone had broken into their home last night—must have, Jack realized, as he hadn't handed over his keys to anyone; *and* defeated the burglar alarm he'd installed a few years earlier. He padded back to the bed and deposited the housecoat there before heading back out. Yet a third agent pointed him down the hall to an unoccupied bedroom. Four suits were hanging on a poster bed, along

with four shirts, all newly pressed by the look of them, along with half a score of ties and everything else. It wasn't so much pathos as desperation, Jack realized. The staff knew, or at least had an idea of what he was going through, and every single thing they could do to make things easier for him was being done with frantic perfection. Someone had even spit-shined his three pair of black shoes to Marine specifications. They'd never looked so good before, Ryan thought, heading for the bathroom—where, of course, he found all of his things, even his usual bar of Zest soap. Next to *that* was the skin-friendly stuff Cathy used. Nobody thought that being President was easy, but he was now surrounded by people who were grimly determined to eliminate every *small* worry he might have.

A warm shower helped loosen his muscles, and clouded the mirror with mist, which made things even better when he shaved. The usual morning mechanics were finished by 5:20, and Ryan made his way down the stairs. Outside, he saw through a window, a phalanx of camouflage-clad Marines stood guard on the quad, their breathing marked by little white puffs. Those inside braced to attention as he passed. Perhaps he and his family had gotten a few hours of sleep, but no one else had. That was something he needed to remember, Jack told himself as the smells drew him to the kitchen.

"Attention on deck!" The voice of the sergeant-major of the Marine Corps was muted in deference to the sleeping children upstairs, and for the first time since dinner the previous night, Ryan managed a smile.

"Settle down, Marines." President Ryan headed toward the coffeepot, but a corporal beat him there. The correct proportions of cream and sugar were added to the mug—again, someone had done some homework—before she handed it across.

"The staff is in the dining room, sir," the sergeant-major told him.

"Thank you." President Ryan headed that way.

They looked the worse for wear, making Jack feel briefly guilty for his shower-fresh face. Then he saw the pile of documents they'd prepared.

"Good morning, Mr. President," Andrea Price said. People started to rise from their chairs. Ryan waved them back down and pointed to Murray.

"Dan," the President began. "What do we know?"

"We found the body of the pilot about two hours ago. Good ID. His name was Sato, as expected. Very experienced airplane driver. We're still looking for the co-pilot." Murray paused. "The pilot's body is being checked for drugs, but finding that would be a surprise. NTSB has the flight recorder—they got that around four, and it's being checked out right now. We've recovered just over two hundred bodies

—”

“President Durling?”

Price handled that one with a shake of the head. “Not yet. That part of the building—well, it’s a mess, and they decided to wait for daylight to do the hard stuff.”

“Survivors?”

“Just the three people who we know to have been inside that part of the building at the time of the crash.”

“Okay.” Ryan shook his head as well. That information was important, but irrelevant. “Anything important that we know?”

Murray consulted his notes. “The aircraft flew out of Vancouver International, B.C. They filed a false flightplan for London Heathrow, headed east, departed Canadian airspace at 7:51 local time. All very routine stuff. We assume that he headed out a little while, reversed course, and headed southeast toward D.C. After that he bluffed his way through air-traffic control.”

“How?”

Murray nodded to someone Ryan didn’t know. “Mr. President, I’m Ed Hutchins, NTSB. It’s not hard. He claimed to be a KLM charter inbound to Orlando. Then he declared an emergency. When there’s an in-flight emergency, our people are trained to get the airplane on the ground ASAP. We were up against a guy who knew all the right buttons to push. There’s no way anyone could have prevented this,” he concluded defensively.

“Only one voice on the tapes,” Murray noted.

“Anyway,” Hutchins continued, “we have tapes of the radar tracks. He simulated an aircraft with control difficulties, asked for an emergency vector to Andrews, and got what he wanted. From Andrews to the Hill is barely a minute’s flying time.”

“One of our people got a Stinger off,” Price said, with somewhat forlorn pride.

Hutchins just shook his head. It was the gesture for this morning in Washington. “Against something that big, might as well have been a spitball.”

“Anything from Japan?”

“They’re in a national state of shock.” This came from Scott Adler, the senior career official in the State Department, and one of Ryan’s friends. “Right after you turned in, we got a call from the Prime Minister. It’s not as though he hasn’t had a bad week himself, though he sounds happy to be back in charge. He wants to come over to apologize personally to us. I told him we’d get back—”

“Tell him yes.”

“You sure, Jack?” Arnie van Damm asked.

“Does anybody think this was a deliberate act?” Ryan countered.

"We don't know," Price responded first.

"No explosives aboard the aircraft," Dan Murray pointed out. "If there had been—"

"I wouldn't be here." Ryan finished his coffee. The corporal refilled it at once. "This is going to come down to one or two nuts, just like they all do."

Hutchins nodded tentative agreement. "Explosives are fairly light. Even a few tons, given the carrying capacity of the 747-400, would not have compromised the mission at all, and the payoff would have been enormous. What we have here is a fairly straightforward crash. The residual damage was done by about half a load of jet fuel—upwards of eighty tons. That was plenty," he concluded. Hutchins had been investigating airplane accidents for almost thirty years.

"It's much too early to draw conclusions," Price warned.

"Scott?"

"If this was—hell," Adler shook his head. "This was not an act by their government. They're frantic over there. The newspapers are calling for the heads of the people who suborned the government in the first place, and Prime Minister Koga was nearly in tears over the phone. Put it this way, if somebody over there planned this, they'll find out for us."

"Their idea of due process isn't quite as stringent as ours," Murray added. "Andrea is right. It is too early to draw conclusions, but all of the indications so far point to a random act, not a planned one." Murray paused for a moment. "For that matter, we know the other side developed nuclear weapons, remember?" Even the coffee turned cold with that remark.

THIS ONE HE found under a bush while moving a ladder from one part of the west face to another. The firefighter had been on duty for seven straight hours. He was numb by now. You can take only so much horror before the mind starts regarding the bodies and pieces as mere things. The remains of a child might have shaken him, or even a particularly pretty female, since this fireman was still young and single, but the body he'd accidentally stepped on wasn't one of those. The torso was headless, and parts of both legs were missing, but it was clearly the body of a man, wearing the shredded remains of a white shirt, with epaulets at the shoulders. Three stripes on each of them, he saw. He wondered what that meant, too tired to do much in the way of thinking. The fireman turned and waved to his lieutenant, who in turn tapped the arm of a woman wearing a vinyl FBI windbreaker.

This agent walked over, sipping at a plastic cup and wishing she could light a cigarette—still too many lingering fumes for that, she

grumbled.

"Just found this one. Funny place, but—"

"Yeah, funny." The agent lifted her camera and snapped a couple of pictures which would have the exact time electronically preserved on the frame. Next she took a pad from her pocket and noted the placement for body number four on her personal list. She hadn't seen many for her particular area of responsibility. Some plastic stakes and yellow tape would further mark the site; she started writing the tag for it. "You can turn him over."

Under the body, they saw, was an irregularly shaped piece of flat glass—or glass-like plastic. The agent snapped another photo, and through the viewfinder things somehow looked more interesting than with the naked eye. A glance up showed a gap in the marble balustrade. Another look around revealed a lot of small metallic objects, which an hour earlier she'd decided were aircraft parts, and which had attracted the attention of an NTSB investigator, who was now conferring with the same firedepartment officer with whom she'd been conferring a minute earlier. The agent had to wave three times to get his attention.

"What is it?" The NTSB investigator was cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief.

The agent pointed. "Check the shirt out."

"Crew," the man said, after putting them back on. "Maybe a driver. What's this?" It was his turn to point.

There was a strange delicacy to it. The white uniform shirt had a hole in it just to the right of the pocket. The hole was surrounded by a red-rust stain. The FBI agent held her flashlight close, and that showed that the stain was dried. The current temperature was just under twenty degrees. The body had been thrown into this harsh environment virtually at the moment of impact, and the blood about the severed neck was frozen, the purple-red color of some horrid plum sherbet. The blood on the shirt, she saw, had dried before having the chance to freeze.

"Don't move the body anymore," she told the fireman. Like most FBI agents, she'd been a local police officer before applying to the federal agency. It was the cold that made her face pale.

"First crash investigation?" the NTSB man asked, seeing her face, and mistaking her pallor.

She nodded. "Yes, it is, but it's not my first murder." With that she switched on her portable radio to call her supervisor. For this body she wanted a crime-scene team and full forensics.

THE TELEGRAMS CAME from every government in the world. Most

were long, and all had to be read—well, at least the ones from important countries. Togo could wait.

"Interior and Commerce are in town and standing by for a Cabinet meeting along with all the deputies," van Damm said while Ryan flipped through the messages, trying to read and listen at the same time. "The Joint Chiefs, all the vices, are assembled, along with all the command CINCs to go over national security—-"

"Threat Board?" Jack asked without looking up. Until the previous day he'd been President Durling's National Security Advisor, and it didn't seem likely that the world had changed too much in twenty-four hours.

Scott Adler handled the answer: "Clear."

"Washington is pretty much shut down," Murray said. "Radio and TV announcements for people to stay home, except for essential services. The D.C. National Guard is out. We need the warm bodies for the Hill, and the D.C. Guard is a military-police brigade. They might actually be useful. Besides, the firemen must be about worn out by now."

"How long before the investigation gives us hard information?" the President asked.

"There's no telling that, Ja—Mister—"

Ryan looked up from the official Belgian telegram. "How long since we've known each other, Dan? I'm not God, okay? If you use my name once in a while, nobody's going to shoot you for it."

It was Murray's turn to smile. "Okay. You can't predict with any major investigation. The breaks just come, sooner or later, but they do come," Dan promised. "We have a good team of investigators out there."

"What do I tell the media?" Jack rubbed his eyes, already tired from reading. Maybe Cathy was right. Maybe he did need glasses, finally. Before him was a printed sheet for his morning TV appearances, which had been selected by lot. CNN at 7:08, CBS at 7:20, NBC at 7:37, ABC at 7:50, Fox at 8:08, all from the Roosevelt Room of the White House, where the cameras were already set up. Someone had decided that a formal speech was too much for him, and not really appropriate to the situation until he had something substantive to deliver. Just a quiet, dignified, and above all, intimate introduction of himself to people reading their papers and drinking their morning coffee.

"Softball questions. That's already taken care of," van Damm assured him. "Answer them. Speak slowly, clearly. Look as relaxed as you can. Nothing dramatic. The people don't expect that. They want to know that somebody's in charge, answering the phones, whatever. They know it's too soon for you to say or do anything decisive."

"Roger's kids?"

"Still asleep, I expect. We have the family members in town. They're at the White House now."

President Ryan nodded without looking up. It was hard to meet the eyes of the people sitting around the breakfast table, especially on things like that. There was a plan for this, too. Movers were already on the way, probably. The Durling family—what was left of it—would be removed from the White House kindly but quickly, because it wasn't their house anymore. The country needed someone else in there, and that someone needed to be as comfortable as possible, and *that* meant eliminating all visible reminders of the previous occupant. It wasn't brutal, Jack realized. It was business. They doubtless had a psychologist standing by to assist the family members with their grief, to "process" them through it as best as medical science allowed. But the country came first. In the unforgiving calculus of life, even so sentimental a nation as the United States of America had to move on. When it came time for Ryan to leave the White House, one way or another, the same thing would happen. There had been a time when an ex-President had walked down the hill to Union Station from his successor's inauguration to get a train ticket home. Now they used movers, and doubtless the family would fly out on Air Force transport, but go the children would, leaving behind schools and such friends as they had made, returning to California and whatever life their family members could reconstruct for them. Business or not, it *was* cold, Ryan thought while staring mindlessly at the Belgian telegram. How much the better for everyone if the aircraft had not fallen on the Capitol building . . .

On top of all that, Jack had rarely been called upon to console the children of a man he knew, and damned sure hadn't ever taken their home away. He shook his head. It wasn't his fault, but it was his job.

The telegram, he saw on returning to it, noted that America had twice helped to save that small country within a space of less than thirty years, then protected it through the NATO alliance, that there was a bond of blood and friendship between America and a nation which most American citizens would have been taxed to locate on a globe. And that was true. Whatever the faults of his country, whatever her imperfections, however unfeeling some of her actions might seem to be, the United States of America had done the right thing more often than not. The world was far the better for it, and that was why business had to be carried out.

INSPECTOR PATRICK O'DAY was grateful for the cold. His investigative career had stretched over almost thirty years, and this

was not his first time in the presence of multiple bodies and their separated parts. His first had been in Mississippi one May, a Sunday school bombed by the Ku Klux Klan, with eleven victims. At least here the cold eliminated the ghastly odor of dead human bodies. He'd never really wanted a high rank in the Bureau—"inspector" was a title with variable importance in the sense of seniority. In his case, much like Dan Murray, O'Day worked as a troubleshooter, often dispatched from Washington to assist on touchy ones. Widely recognized as a superb street agent, he'd been able to stick to real cases, large and small, instead of high-level supervision, which he found boring.

Assistant Director Tony Caruso had gone along another track. He'd been special agent-in-charge of two field offices, risen to head the Bureau's Training Division, then taken over the Washington Field Office, which was sufficiently large to merit "AD" rank for its commander, along with one of the worst office locations in North America. Caruso enjoyed the power, prestige, higher pay, and reserved parking place which his status accorded him, but part of him envied his old friend, Pat, for his often dirty hands.

"What do you figure?" Caruso asked, staring down at the body. They still needed artificial light. The sun was rising, but on the far side of the building.

"You can't take it to court yet, but this guy was dead hours before the bird came down."

Both men watched a gray-haired expert from Headquarters Laboratory Division hover over the body. There were all manner of tests to be carried out. Internal body temperature was one—a computer model allowed for environmental conditions, and while the data would be far less reliable than either senior official would want, anything prior to 9:46 P.M. the previous evening would tell them what they needed to know.

"Knifed in the heart," Caruso said, shivering at the thought. You never really got over the brutality of murder. Whether a single person or a thousand, wrongful death was wrongful death, and the number just told you how many *individual* records had been tied. "We got the pilot."

O'Day nodded. "I heard. Three stripes, makes him the co-pilot, and he was murdered. So maybe it was just one guy."

"What's the crew on one of these?" Caruso asked the NTSB supervisor.

"Two. The earlier ones had a flight engineer, but the new ones don't bother with it. For really long flights they might have a backup pilot, but these birds are pretty automated now, and the engines hardly ever break."

The lab tech stood and waved in the people with the body bag

before joining the others. “You want the early version?”

“You bet,” Caruso replied.

“Definitely dead before the crash took place. No bruising from the crash trauma. The chest wound is relatively old. There should be contusions from the seat belts, but there aren’t, just scrapes and gouges, with damn little blood there. Not enough blood from the severed head. In fact, not enough blood anywhere in the remains right here. Let’s say he was murdered in his seat in the aircraft. The belts hold him in a sitting position. Postmortem lividity drains all the blood down to the lower extremities, and the legs are torn off when the bird hits the building—that’s why there’s so little blood. I got a lot of homework to do, but quick-and-dirty, he was dead three hours at least before the plane got here.” Will Gettys handed over the wallet. “Here’s the guy’s ID. Poor bastard. I guess he wasn’t a part of this at all.”

“What chance you could be wrong on any of that?” O’Day had to ask.

“I’d be real surprised, Pat. An hour or two on time of death—earlier rather than later—yeah, that’s possible. But there’s nowhere near enough blood for this guy to have been alive at time of impact. He was dead before the crash. You can take that to the bank,” Gettys told the other agents, knowing that his career rode on that one, and comfortable with the wager.

“Thank God for that,” Caruso breathed. It did more than make things easier for the investigation. There would be conspiracy theories for the next twenty years, and the Bureau would proceed on its business, checking out every possibility, aided, they were sure, by the Japanese police, but one guy alone had driven this aircraft into the ground, and that made it extremely likely that this *grand mal* assassination, like most of the others, was the work of a single man, demented or not, skilled or not, but in any case alone. Not that everyone would ever believe that.

“Get the information to Murray,” Caruso ordered. “He’s with the President.”

“Yes, sir.” O’Day walked over toward where his diesel pickup was parked. He probably had the only one in town, the inspector thought, with a police light plugged into the cigarette lighter. You didn’t put something like this over a radio, encrypted or not.

• • •

REAR ADMIRAL JACKSON changed into his blue mess jacket about ninety minutes out from Andrews, having managed about six hours of needed sleep after being briefed on things that didn’t really matter

very much. The uniform was the worse for having been packed in his travel bag, not that it would matter all that much, and the navy blue wool hid wrinkles fairly well anyway. His five rows of ribbons and wings of gold attracted the eye, anyway. There must have been an easterly wind this morning, for the KC-10 flew in from Virginia, and a muttered, "Jesus, look at that!" from a few rows aft commanded all in the forward part of the aircraft to crowd at the windows like the tourists they were not. Between the beginnings of dawn and the huge collection of lights on the ground it was plain that the Capitol building, the centerpiece of their country's first city, wasn't the same as it had been. Somehow this was more immediate and real than the pictures many of them had seen on TV before boarding the plane in Hawaii. Five minutes later, the aircraft touched down at Andrews Air Force Base. The senior officers found an aircraft of the Air Force's First Heli Squadron waiting to take them to the Pentagon's pad. This flight, lower and slower, gave them a better look still at the damage to the building.

"Jesus," Dave Seaton said over the intercom. "Did anybody get out of there alive?"

Robby took his time before responding. "I wonder where Jack was when it happened. . . ." He remembered a British Army toast—"Here's to bloody wars and sickly seasons!"—which referred to a couple of sure ways for officers to be promoted into vacant slots. Surely quite a few people would fleet up from this incident, but none really wanted advancement this way, least of all his closest friend, somewhere down there in the wounded city.

THE MARINES LOOKED very twitchy, Inspector O'Day saw. He parked his truck on Eighth Street, S.E. The Marine Barracks were thoroughly barricaded. The curbs were fully blocked with parked cars, the gaps in the buildings doubly so. He dismounted his truck and walked toward an NCO; he was wearing his FBI windbreaker, and carrying his ID in his right hand.

"I have business inside, Sergeant."

"Who with, sir?" the Marine asked, checking the photo against the face.

"Mr. Murray."

"You mind leaving your side arm here with us, sir? Orders," the sergeant explained.

"Sure." O'Day handed over his fanny pack, inside of which was his Smith & Wesson 1076 and two spare magazines. He didn't bother with a backup piece on headquarters duty. "How many people you have around now?"

"Two companies, near enough. There's another one setting up at the White House."

There was no better time to lock the barn door than after the horse got out, Pat knew. It was all the more grim since he was delivering the news that it was all unnecessary, but nobody would really care about that. The sergeant waved to a lieutenant who had nothing better to do —the NCOs ran things like this—than to conduct visitors across the quad. The lieutenant saluted for no more reason than being a Marine.

"Here to see Daniel Murray. He's expecting me."

"Please follow me, sir."

The inner corners of the buildings on the quad had yet another line of Marines, with a third on the quad itself, complete with a heavy machine gun. Two companies amounted to upwards of three hundred rifles. Yeah, President Ryan was fairly safe here, Inspector O'Day thought, unless some other maniac driving an airplane was around. Along the way, a captain wanted to compare the photo on his ID with the face again. It was being overdone. Somebody had to point that out before they started parking tanks on the street.

Murray came out to meet him on the porch. "How good is it?"

"Pretty good," the inspector replied.

"Come on." Murray waved him in, and led his friend into the breakfast room. "This is Inspector O'Day. Pat, I think you know who these people are."

"Good morning. I've been on the Hill, and we found something a little while ago that you need to know," he began, going on for another couple of minutes.

"How solid is it?" Andrea Price asked.

"You know how this works," O'Day responded. "It's preliminary, but it looks pretty solid to me, and we'll have good test data after lunch. The ID's already being run. That may be a little shaky, because we don't have a head to work with, and the hands are all ripped up. We're not saying that we've closed the case. We're saying that we have a preliminary indication that supports other data."

"Can I mention this on TV?" Ryan asked everyone around the table.

"Definitely not," van Damm said. "First, it's not confirmed. Second, it's too soon for anyone to believe it."

Murray and O'Day traded a look. Neither of them was a politician. Arnie van Damm was. For them, information control was about protecting evidence so that a jury saw it clean. For Arnie, information control was about protecting people from things he didn't think they could understand until it was spin-controlled and spoon-fed, one little gulp at a time. Both wondered if Arnie had ever been a father, and if his infant had starved to death waiting for his strained carrots. Both noted next that Ryan gave his chief of staff a long look.

The well known black box really wasn't much more than a tape recorder whose leads trailed off to the cockpit. There they collected data from engine and other flight controls, plus, in this case, the microphones for the flight crew. Japan Airlines was a government-run carrier, and its aircraft had the latest of everything. The flight-data recorder was fully digitized. That made for rapid and clear transcription of the data. First of all, a senior technician made a clean, high-speed copy of the original metallic tape, which was then removed to a vault while he worked on the copy. Someone had thought to have a Japanese speaker standing by.

"This flight data looks like pure vanilla on first inspection. Nothing was broken on the aircraft," an analyst reported, scanning the data on a computer screen. "Nice easy turns, steady on the engines. Textbook flight profile . . . until here"—he tapped the screen–"here he made a radical turn from zero-six-seven to one-niner-six . . . and settles right back down again until his penetration."

"No chatter in the cockpit at all." Another tech ran the voice segment of the tape back and forth, finding only routine traffic between the aircraft and various groundcontrol stations. "I'm going to back it up to the beginning." The tape didn't really have a beginning. Rather it ran on a continuous loop, on this machine, because the 747 7 routinely engaged in long, over-water flights, forty hours long. It took several minutes for him to locate the end of the immediately preceding flight, and here he found the normal exchange of information and commands between two crewmen, and also between the aircraft and the ground, the former in Japanese and the latter in English, the language of international aviation.

That stopped soon after the aircraft had halted at its assigned jetway. There was a full two minutes of blank tape, and then the recording cycle began again when the flightdeck instruments were powered up during the preflight procedures. The Japanese speaker—an Army officer in civilian clothes—was from the National Security Agency.

The sound pickup was excellent. They could hear the clicks of *switches* being thrown, and the background whirs of various instruments, but the loudest sound was the breathing of the co-pilot, whose identity was specified by the track on the recording tape.

"Stop," the Army officer said. "Back it up a little. There's another voice, can't quite. . . Oh, okay. 'All ready, question mark.' Must be the pilot. Yeah, that was a door closing, pilot just came in. 'Preflight checklist complete . . . standing by for before-start checklist. . . .' Oh . . . oh, God. He killed him. Back it up again." The officer, a major, didn't see the FBI agent don a second pair of headphones.

It was a first for both of them. The FBI agent had seen a murder on

a bank video system, but neither he nor the intelligence officer had ever heard one, a grunt from an impact, a gasp of breath that conveyed surprise and pain, a gurgle, maybe an attempt at speech, followed by another voice.

"What's that?" the agent asked.

"Run it again." The officer's face stared at the wall. " 'I am very sorry to do this.' " That was followed by a few more labored breaths, then a long sigh. "Jesus." The second voice came on a different vox channel less than a minute later, to notify the tower that the 747 was starting its engines.

"That's the pilot, Sato," the NTSB analyst said. "The other voice must be the co-pilot."

"Not anymore." The only remaining noise over the copilot's channel was spill-over and background sounds.

"Killed him," the FBI agent agreed. They'd have to run the tape a hundred more times, for themselves and for others, but the conclusion would be the same. Even though the formal investigation would last for several months, the case was effectively closed less than nine hours after it had begun.

THE STREETS OF Washington were eerily empty. Normally at this time of day, Ryan knew all too well from his own experience, the nation's capital was gridlocked with the automobiles of federal employees, lobbyists, members of Congress and their staffers, fifty thousand lawyers and their secretaries, and all the private-industry service workers who supported them all. Not today. With every intersection manned by a radio car of the Metropolitan Police or a camouflage-painted National Guard vehicle, it was more like a holiday weekend, and there was actually more traffic heading away from the Hill than toward it, the curious turned away from their place of interest ten blocks from their intended destination.

The presidential procession headed up Pennsylvania. Jack was back in the Chevy Suburban, and there were still Marines leading and following the collection of Secret Service vehicles. The sun was up now. The sky was mainly clear, and it took a moment to realize that the skyline was wrong.

The 747 hadn't even harmed the trees, Ryan saw. It hadn't wasted its energy on anything but the target. Half a dozen cranes were working now, lifting stone blocks from the crater that had been the House chamber, depositing them onto trucks that were taking them off somewhere. Only a few fire trucks remained. The dramatic part was over for now. The grim part remained.

The rest of the city seemed intact enough at 6:40 A.M. Ryan gave

the Hill a final sideways look through the darkened windows as his vehicle headed downhill on Constitution Avenue. If cars were being turned away, the usual morning collection of joggers was not. Perhaps they'd run to the Mall as part of the normal morning ritual, but there they stopped. Ryan watched their faces, some of which turned to see his vehicle pass before returning their gaze eastward, talking in little knots, pointing and shaking their heads. Jack noticed that the Secret Service agents in the Suburban with him turned to watch them, perhaps expecting one to pull a bazooka from under his sweats.

It was novel to drive so fast in Washington. Partly it was because a rapidly moving target was harder to hit, and partly because Ryan's time was far more valuable now, and not to be wasted. More than anything else it meant that he was speeding toward something he would just as soon have avoided. Only a few days before, he'd accepted Roger Durling's invitation for the vice-presidency, but he'd done so mainly as a means of relieving himself from government service once and for all. That thought evoked a pained look behind closed eyes. Why was it that he'd never been able to run away from anything? Certainly it didn't seem like courage. It actually seemed the reverse. He'd so often been afraid, afraid to say no and have people think him a coward. Afraid to do anything but what his conscience told him, and so often what it had told him had been something he hated to do or was afraid to do, but there wasn't ever an honorable alternative that he could exercise.

"It'll be okay," van Damm told him, seeing the look, and knowing what the new President had to be thinking.

No, it won't, Jack could not reply.

3

SCRUTINY

THE ROOSEVELT ROOM IS named for Teddy, and on the east wall was his Nobel Peace Prize for his "successful" mediation of the Russo-Japanese War. Historians could now say that the effort had only encouraged Japan's imperial ambitions, and so wounded the Russian soul that Stalin—hardly a friend of the Romanov dynasty!—had felt the need to avenge his country's humiliation, but that particular bequest of Alfred Nobel had always been more political than real. The room was used for medium-sized lunches and meetings, and was conveniently close to the Oval Office. Getting there proved to be harder than Jack had expected. The corridors of the White House are narrow for such an important building, and the Secret Service was out in force, though here their firearms were not in evidence. That was a welcome relief. Ryan walked past ten new agents over and above those who had formed his mobile guard force, which evoked a sigh of exasperation from SWORDSMAN. Everything was new and different now, and the protective Detail that in former times had seemed businesslike, sometimes even amusing, was just one more reminder that his life had been traumatically changed.

"Now what?" Jack asked.

"This way." An agent opened a door, and Ryan found the presidential makeup artist. It was an informal arrangement, and the artist, a woman in her fifties, had everything in a large fake-leather case. As often as he'd done TV—rather a lot in his former capacity as National Security Advisor—it was something Jack had never come to love, and it required all of his self-control not to fidget as the liquid base was applied with a foam sponge, followed by powder and hair spray and fussing, all of which was done without a word by a woman who looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

"I liked him, too," Jack told her. Her hands stopped, and their eyes met.

"He was always so nice. He hated this, just like you do, but he never complained, and he usually had a joke to tell. Sometimes I'd do the children just for fun. They liked it, even the boy. They'd play in front of the TV, and the crews would give them tapes and . . ."

"It's okay." Ryan took her hand. Finally he'd met someone on the staff who wasn't all business, and who didn't make him feel like an animal in the zoo. "What's your name?"

"Mary Abbot." Her eyes were running, and she wanted to apologize.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since right before Mr. Carter left." Mrs. Abbot wiped her eyes and steadied down.

"Well, maybe I should ask you for advice," he said gently.

"Oh, no, I don't know anything about that." She managed an embarrassed smile.

"Neither do I. I guess I'll just have to find out." Ryan looked in the mirror. "Finished?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Thank you, Mrs. Abbot."

They sat him in an armed wooden chair. The lights were already set up, which brought the room temperature into the low eighties, or so it felt. A technician clipped a two-headed microphone to his tie with movements as delicate as Mrs. Abbot's, all because there was a Secret Service agent hovering over every member of the crew, with Andrea Price hovering over them all from the doorway. Her eyes were narrow and suspicious, despite the fact that every single piece of gear in the room had been inspected, every visitor scanned continuously by eyes as casually intense and thorough as a surgeon's. One really could make a pistol out of non-metallic composites—the movie was right about that—but pistols were still bulky. The palpable tension of the Detail carried over to the TV crew, who kept their hands in the open, and only moved them slowly. The scrutiny of the Secret Service could rattle almost anyone.

"Two minutes," the producer said, cued by his earpiece. "Just went into commercial."

"Get any sleep last night?" CNN's chief White House correspondent asked. Like everyone else, he wanted a quick and clear read on the new President.

"Not enough," Jack replied, suddenly tense. There were two cameras. He crossed his legs and clasped his hands in his lap in order to avoid nervous movements. How, exactly, was he supposed to appear? Grave? Grief-stricken? Quietly confident? Overwhelmed? It was a little late for that now. Why hadn't he asked Arnie before?

"Thirty seconds," the producer said.

Jack tried to compose himself. His physical posture would keep his body still. *Just answer the questions. You've been doing that long enough.*

"Eight minutes after the hour," the correspondent said directly into the camera behind Jack. "We're here in the White House with President John Ryan.

"Mr. President, it's been a long night, hasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it has," Ryan agreed.

"What can you tell us?"

"Recovery operations are under way, as you know. President Durling's body has not yet been found. The investigation is going on under the coordination of the FBI."

"Have they discovered anything?"

"We'll probably have a few things to say later today, but it's too early right now." Despite the fact that the correspondent had been fully briefed on that issue, Ryan saw the disappointment in his eyes.

"Why the FBI? Isn't the Secret Service empowered to—"

"This is no time for a turf fight. An investigation like this has to go on at once. Therefore, I decided that the FBI would be the lead agency —under the Department of Justice, and with the assistance of other federal agencies. We want answers, we want them fast, and this seems the best way to make that happen."

"It's been reported that you've appointed a new FBI Director."

Jack nodded. "Yes, Barry, I have. For the moment I've asked Daniel E. Murray to step in as acting Director. Dan is a career FBI agent whose last job was special assistant to Director Shaw. We've known each other for many years. Mr. Murray is one of the best cops in government service."

"MURRAY?"

"A policeman, supposed to be an expert on terrorism and espionage," the intelligence officer replied.

"Hmm." He went back to sipping his bittersweet coffee.

"WHAT CAN YOU tell us about preparation for—I I mean, for the next several days?" the correspondent asked next.

"Barry, those plans are still being made. First and foremost, we have to let the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies do their job. There will be more information coming out later today, but it's been a long and difficult night for a lot of people." The correspondent nodded at that, and decided it was time for a human-interest question.

"Where did you and your family sleep? I know it wasn't here."

"The Marine Barracks, at Eighth and I," Ryan answered.

"Oh, *shit*, Boss," Andrea Price muttered, just outside the room. Some media people had found out, but the Service hadn't confirmed it to anyone, and most news organizations had reported that the Ryan family was at "an undisclosed location." Well, they'd be sleeping

somewhere else tonight. And the location would not be disclosed this time. Damn.

"Why there?"

"Well, it had to be somewhere, and that seemed convenient. I was a Marine myself once, Barry," Jack said quietly.

"REMEMBER WHEN WE blew them up?"

"A fine night." The intelligence officer remembered watching through binoculars from the top of the Beirut Holiday Inn. He'd helped set that mission up. The only hard part, really, had been selecting the driver. There was an odd cachet about the American Marines, something seemingly mystical about them that this Ryan's nation clung to. But they died just like any other infidel. He wondered with amusement if there might be a large truck in Washington that one of his people might buy or lease. . . . He set the amusing thought aside. There was work to be done. It wasn't practical, anyway. He'd been to Washington more than once, and the Marine Barracks was one of the places he'd examined. It was too easily defended. Too bad, really. The political significance of the target made it highly attractive.

"NOT SMART," DING observed over his morning coffee.

"Expect him to hide?" Clark asked.

"You know him, Daddy?" Patricia asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Ding and I used to look after him back when we were SPOs. I knew his father, once . . . ," John added without thinking, which was very unusual for him.

"What's he like, Ding?" Patsy asked her fiance, the ring still fresh on her finger.

"Pretty smart," Chavez allowed. "Kinda quiet. Nice guy, always has a kind word. Well, usually."

"He's been tough when he had to be," John observed with an eye to his partner and soon-to-be son-in-law, which thought almost occasioned a chill. Then he saw the look in his daughter's eyes, and the chill became quite real. Damn.

"That's a fact," the junior man agreed.

THE LIGHTS MADE HIM sweat under his makeup, and Ryan fought the urge to scratch the itches on his face. He managed to keep his hands still, but his facial muscles began a series of minor twitches that

he hoped the camera didn't catch.

"I'm afraid I can't say, Barry," he went on, holding his hands tightly together. "It's just too soon to respond substantively to a lot of questions right now. When we're able to give hard answers, we will. Until then, we won't."

"You have a big day ahead," the CNN reporter said sympathetically.

"Barry, we all do."

"Thank you, Mr. President." He waited until the light went off and he heard a voice-over from the Atlanta headquarters before speaking again. "Good one. Thank you."

Van Damm came in then, pushing Andrea Price aside as he did so. Few could touch a Secret Service agent without seriously adverse consequences, much less bustle one, but Arnie was one who could.

"Pretty good. Don't do anything different. Answer the questions. Keep your answers short."

Mrs. Abbot came in next to check Ryan's makeup. A gentle hand touched his forehead while the other adjusted his hair with a small brush. Even for his high-school prom—what *was* her name? Ryan asked himself irrelevantly—neither he nor anyone else had been so fussy about his coarse black hair. Under other circumstances it would have been something to laugh about.

The CBS anchor was a woman in her middle thirties, and proof positive that brains and looks were not mutually exclusive.

"Mr. President, what is left of the government?" she asked after a couple of conventional get-acquainted questions.

"Maria"—Ryan had been instructed to address each reporter by the given name; he didn't know why, but it seemed reasonable enough —"as horrid as the last twelve hours have been for all of us, I want to remind you of a speech President Durling gave a few weeks ago: America is still America. All of the federal executive agencies will be operating today under the leadership of the sitting deputy secretaries, and—"

"But Washington—"

"For reasons of public safety, Washington is pretty well shut down, that is true—" She cut him off again, less from ill manners than from the fact that she only had four minutes to use, and she wanted to use them.

"The troops in the street . . . ?"

"Maria, the D.C. police and fire departments had the roughest night of all. It's been a long, cold night for those people. The Washington, D.C., National Guard has been called out to assist the civilian agencies. That also happens after hurricanes and tornadoes. In fact, that's really a municipal function. The FBI is working with the mayor to get the job done." It was Ryan's longest statement of the morning,

and almost left him breathless, he was wound so tightly. That was when he realized that he was squeezing his hands to the point that his fingers were turning white, and Jack had to make a conscious effort to relax them.

"LOOK AT HIS arms," the Prime Minister observed. "What do we know of this Ryan?"

The chief of her country's intelligence service had a file folder in his lap which he had already memorized, having had the luxury of a working day to familiarize himself with the new chief of state.

"He's a career intelligence officer. You know about the incident in London, and later in the States some years ago—"

"Oh, yes," she noted, sipping her tea and dismissing that bit of history. "So, a spy . . ."

"A well-regarded one. Our Russian friends think very highly of him indeed. So does Century House," said the army general, whose training went back to the British tradition. Like his Prime Minister, he'd been educated at Oxford, and, in his case, Sandhurst. "He is highly intelligent. We have reason to believe that in his capacity as Durling's National Security Advisor he was instrumental in controlling American operations against Japan—"

"And us?" she asked, her eyes locked on the screen. How convenient it was to have communications satellites—and the American networks were all global now. Now you didn't have to spend a whole day in an aircraft to go and see a rival chief of state—and then under controlled circumstances. Now she could see the man under pressure and gauge how he responded to it. Career intelligence officer or not, he didn't look terribly comfortable. Every man had his limitations.

"Undoubtedly, Prime Minister."

"He is less formidable than your information would suggest," she told her adviser. *Tentative, uncomfortable, rattled . . . out of his depth.*

"WHEN DO YOU expect to be able to tell us more about what happened?" Maria asked.

"I really can't say right now. It's just too soon. Some things can't be rushed, I'm afraid," Ryan said. He vaguely grasped that he'd lost control of this interview, short as it was, and wasn't sure why. It never occurred to him that the TV reporters were lined up outside the Roosevelt Room like shoppers in a checkout line, that each one wanted to ask something new and different after the first question or two—and that each wanted to make an impression, not on the new

President, but on the viewers, the unseen people behind the cameras who watched each morning show out of loyalty which the reporters had to strengthen whenever possible. As gravely wounded as the country was, reporting the news was the business which put food on their family tables, and Ryan was just one more subject of that business. That was why Arnie's earlier advice on how they'd been instructed on what questions to ask had been overly optimistic, even coming from an experienced political pro. The only really good news was that the interviews were all time-limited—in this case by local news delivered by the various network affiliates at twenty-five minutes after the hour. Whatever tragedy had struck Washington, people *needed* to know about local weather and traffic in the pursuit of their daily lives, a fact perhaps lost on those inside the D.C. Beltway, though not lost on the local stations across the country. Maria was more gracious than she felt when the director cut her off. She smiled at the camera—

"We'll be back."

—and Ryan had twelve minutes until NBC had at him. The coffee he'd had at breakfast was working on him now, and he needed to find a bathroom, but when he stood, the microphone wire nearly tripped him.

"This way, Mr. President," Price pointed to the left, down the corridor, then right toward the Oval Office, Jack realized too late. He stopped cold on entering the room. It was still someone else's in his mind, but a bathroom was a bathroom, and in this case, it was actually part of a sitting room off the office itself. Here, at least, there was privacy, even from the Praetorian Guard, which followed him like a pack of collies protecting a particularly valuable sheep. Jack didn't know that when there was someone in this particular head, a light on the upper door frame lit up, and that a peephole in the office door allowed the Secret Service to know even that aspect of their President's daily life.

Washing his hands, Ryan looked in the mirror, always a mistake at times like this. The makeup made him appear more youthful than he was, which wasn't so bad, but also phony, the false ruddiness which his skin had never had. He had to fight off the urge to wipe it all off before coming back out to face NBC. This anchor was a black male, and on shaking hands with him, back in the Roosevelt Room, it was of some consolation that his makeup was even more grotesque than his own. Jack was oblivious to the fact that the TV lights so affected the human complexion that to appear normal on a television screen, one had to appear the clown to non-electronic eyes.

"What will you be doing today, Mr. President?" Nathan asked as his fourth question.

"I have another meeting with acting FBI Director Murray—actually we'll be meeting twice a day for a while. I also have a scheduled session with the national security staff, then with some of the surviving members of Congress. This afternoon, we have a Cabinet meeting."

"Funeral arrangements?" The reporter checked off another question from the list in his lap.

Ryan shook his head. "Too soon. I know it's frustrating for all of us, but these things do take time." He didn't say that the White House Protocol Office had fifteen minutes of his afternoon to brief him on what was being planned.

"It was a Japanese airliner, and in fact a government owned carrier. Do we have any reason to suspect—"

Ryan leaned forward at that one: "No, Nathan, we don't. We've had communications with the Japanese government. Prime Minister Koga has promised full cooperation, and we are taking him at his word. I want to emphasize that hostilities with Japan are completely over. What happened was a horrible mistake. That country is working to bring to justice the people who caused that conflict to take place. We don't yet know how everything happened—last night, I mean—but 'don't know' means *don't know*. Until we do, I want to discourage speculation. That can't help anything, but it can hurt, and there's been enough hurt for a while. We have to think about healing now."

"DOMO ARIGATO," MUTTERED the Japanese Prime Minister. It was the first time he'd seen Ryan's face or heard his voice. Both were younger than he'd expected, though he'd been informed of Ryan's particulars earlier in the day. Koga noted the man's tension and unease, but when he had something to say other than an obvious answer to an inane question—why did the Americans tolerate the insolence of their media?—the voice changed somewhat, as did the eyes. The difference was subtle, but Koga was a man accustomed to noting the smallest of nuance. It was one advantage of growing up in Japan, and all the more so for having spent his adult life in politics.

"He was a formidable enemy," a Foreign Ministry official noted quietly. "And in the past he showed himself to be a man of courage."

Koga thought about the papers he'd read two hours earlier. This Ryan had used violence, which the Japanese Prime Minister abhorred. But he had learned from two shadowy Americans who had probably saved his life from his own countrymen that violence had a place, just as surgery did, and Ryan had taken violent action to protect others, suffered in the process, then done so again before returning to peaceful pursuits. Yet again he'd displayed the same dichotomy,

against Koga's country, fighting with skill and ruthlessness, then showing mercy and consideration. A man of courage . . .

"And honor, I think." Koga paused for a moment. So strange that there should already be friendship between two men who had never met, and who had only a week before been at war. "He is samurai."

THE ABC CORRESPONDENT, female and blond, had the name of Joy, which for some reason struck Ryan as utterly inappropriate to the day, but it was probably the name her parents had given her, and that was that. If Maria from CBS had been pretty, Joy was stunning, and perhaps a reason ABC had the top-rated morning show. Her hello handshake was warm and friendly—and something else that almost made Jack's heart stop.

"Good morning, Mr. President," she said softly, in a voice better suited to a dinner party than a morning TV news show.

"Please." Ryan waved her to the chair opposite his.

"Ten minutes before the hour. We're here in the Roosevelt Room of the White House to speak with President John Patrick Ryan," her voice cooed to the camera. "Mr. President, it's been a long and difficult night for our country. What can you tell us?"

Ryan had it down sufficiently pat that the answer came out devoid of conscious thought. His voice was calm and slightly mechanical, and his eyes locked on hers, as he'd been told to do. In this case it wasn't hard to concentrate on her liquid brown eyes, though looking so deeply into them this early in the morning was disconcerting. He hoped it didn't show too much.

"Mr. President, the last few months have been very traumatic for all of us, and last night was only more so. You will be meeting with your national security staff in a few minutes. What are your greatest concerns?"

"Joy, a long time ago an American President said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Our country is as strong today as yesterday—"

"YES, THAT IS true." Daryaei had met Ryan once before. He'd been arrogant and defiant then, in the way of a dog standing before his master, snarling and brave—or seemingly so. But now the master was gone, and here was the dog, eyes fixed on a beautiful but sluttish woman, and it surprised Daryaei that his tongue wasn't out and drooling. Fatigue had something to do with it. Ryan was tired; that was plain to see. What else was he? He was like his country, the

Ayatollah decided. Outwardly strong, perhaps. Ryan was a young man still, broad of shoulder, erect of posture. His eyes were clear, and his voice firm, but when asked of his country's strength, he spoke of fear and the fear of fear. Interesting.

Daryaei knew well enough that strength and power were things of the mind more than the body, a fact as true of nations as of men. America was a mystery to him, as were America's leaders. But how much did he have to know? America was a godless country. That was why this Ryan boy talked of fear. Without God, both the country and the man lacked direction. Some had said that the same was true of Daryaei's country, but if that were true at all, it was for a different reason, he told himself.

Like people all over the world, Daryaei concentrated on Ryan's face and voice. The answer to the first question was obviously mechanical. Whatever America knew about this glorious incident, they weren't telling. Probably they didn't know very much, but that was to be understood. His had been a long day, and Daryaei had used it profitably. He'd called his Foreign Ministry and had the chief of the America desk (actually a whole department in the official building in Tehran) order a paper on the working of the American government. The situation was even better than Daryaei had hoped. They could make no new laws, could levy no new taxes, could spend no new money until such time as their Congress was reconstituted, and that would require time. Almost all of their ministries were headless. This Ryan boy—Daryaei was seventy-two-was the American government, and he was not impressed with what he saw.

The United States of America had thwarted him for years. So much power. Even after reducing its might following the downfall of the Soviet Union—the "lesser Satan"—America could do things possible for no other nation. All it needed was political resolve, and though that was rare enough, the threat of it was ever daunting. Every so often the country would rally behind a single purpose, as had happened not so long before against Iraq, with consequences so startlingly decisive as compared with what little his own country had managed in a shooting war that had lasted nearly a full decade. That was the danger of America. But America was a thinner reed now—or rather, America was, if not quite headless, then nearly so. The strongest body was rendered crippled and useless by an injury to its neck, the more so from one to its head. . . .

Just one man, Daryaei thought, not hearing the words from the television now. The words didn't matter now. Ryan wasn't saying anything of substance, but telling the man half a world away much with his demeanor. The new head of that country had a neck that became the focus of Daryaei's gaze. Its symbolism was clear. The

technical issue, after all, was to complete the separation of head from body, and all that stood between the two was the neck.

"TEN MINUTES TO the next one," Arnie said after Joy left to catch her car to the airport. The Fox reporter was in makeup.

"How am I doing?" Jack disconnected the mike wire before standing this time. He needed to stretch his legs.

"Not bad," van Damm judged, charitably. He might have said something else to a career politician, but a real politico would have had to field really tough questions. It was as though a golfer were playing against his handicap instead of a tour-pro partner, and that was fair, as far as it went. Most important, Ryan needed to have his confidence built up if he were to function at all. The presidency was hard enough at the best of times, and while every holder of that office had wished more than once to be rid of Congress and other agencies and departments as well, it was Ryan who would have to learn how indispensable the whole system of government was—and he'd learn the hard way.

"I have to get used to a lot, don't I?" Jack leaned against the wall outside the Roosevelt Room, looking up and down the corridor.

"You'll learn," the chief of staff promised him.

"Maybe so." Jack smiled, not realizing that the activity of the morning—the recent activity—had given his mind something to shunt aside the other circumstances of the day. Then a Secret Service agent handed him a slip of paper.

HOWEVER UNFAIR IT was to the other families, it was to be understood that the first priority had to be the body of President Durling. No fewer than four mobile cranes had been set up on the west side of the building, operating under the direction of hard-hatted construction foremen standing with a team of skilled workers on the floor of the chamber, much too close for safety, but OSHA wasn't around this morning. The only government inspectors who mattered were Secret Service—the FBI might have had overall jurisdiction, but no one would have stood between them and their own mournful quest. There was a doctor and a team of paramedics standing by as well, on the unlikely chance that someone might have survived despite everything to the contrary. The real trick was coordinating the actions of the cranes, which dipped into the crater—that's how it looked—like a quartet of giraffes drinking from the same water hole, never quite banging together due to the skill of the operators.

"Look here!" The construction supervisor pointed. In the blackened claw of a dead hand was an automatic pistol. It had to be Andy Walker, principal agent of Roger Durling's Detail. The last frame of TV had shown him within feet of his President, racing to spirit him off the podium, but too late to accomplish anything more than his own death in the line of duty.

The next dip of the next crane. A cable was affixed around a block of sandstone, which rose slowly, twirling somewhat with the torsion of the steel cable. The remainder of Walker's body was now visible, along with the trousered legs of someone else. All around both were the splintered and discolored remains of the oak podium, even a few sheets of charred paper. The fire hadn't really reached through the pile of stones in this part of the ruined building. It had burned too rapidly for that.

"Hold it!" The construction man grabbed the arm of the Secret Service agent and wouldn't let him move. "They're not going anywhere. It's not worth getting killed for. Couple of more minutes." He waited for one crane to clear the path for the next, and waved his arms, telling the operator how to come in, where to dip, and when to stop. Two workers slipped a pair of cables around the next stone block, and the foreman twirled his hand in the air. The stone lifted.

"We have JUMPER," the agent said into his microphone. The medical team moved in at once, over the warning shouts of several construction men, but it was plain from twenty feet away that their time was wasted. His left hand held the binder containing his last speech. The falling stones had probably killed him before the fire had reached in far enough to singe his hair. Much of the body was misshapen from crushing, but the suit and the presidential tieclasp and the gold watch on his wrist positively identified President Roger Durling. Everything stopped. The cranes stood still, their diesel engines idling while their operators sipped their coffee or lit up smokes. A team of forensic photographers came in to snap their rolls of film from every possible angle.

They took their time. Elsewhere on the floor of the chamber, National Guardsmen were bagging bodies and carrying them off—they'd taken over this task from the firefighters two hours before—but for a fifty-foot circle, there were only Secret Service, performing their last official duty to JUMPER, as they had called the President in honor of his service as a lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne. It had gone on too long for tears, though for all of the assembled agents those would come again, more than once. When the medics withdrew, when the photographers were satisfied, four agents in SECRET SERVICE windbreakers made their way down over the remaining stone blocks. First they lifted the body of Andy Walker, whose last conscious act

had been to protect his "principal," and lowered it gently into the rubberized bag. The agents held it up so that another pair of their fellows could lift it clear and take it on its way. The next task was President Durling. This proved difficult. The body was askew in death, and the cold had frozen it. One arm was at a right angle to the rest of the body and would not fit into the bag. The agents looked at one another, not knowing what to do about it. The body was evidence and could not be tampered with. Perhaps more important was their horror at hurting a body already dead, and so President Durling went into the bag with the arm outstretched like Captain Ahab's. The four agents carried it out, making their way out of the chamber, around all of the fallen blocks, and then down toward an ambulance waiting for this single purpose. That tipped off the press photographers near and far, who snapped away, or zoomed in their TV cameras to capture the moment.

The moment cut into Ryan's Fox interview, and he watched the scene on the monitor that sat on the table. Somehow in his mind that made it official. Durling really was dead, and now he really was the President, and that was that. The camera in the room caught Ryan's face as it changed, as he remembered how Durling had brought him in, trusted him, leaned on him, guided him. . . .

That was it, Jack realized. He'd always had someone to lean on before. Sure, others had leaned on him, asked his opinion, given him his head in a crisis, but there was always someone to come back to, to tell him he'd done the right thing. He could do that now, but what he'd receive in return would be just opinions, not judgments. The judgments were his now. He'd hear all manner of things. His advisers would be like lawyers, some arguing one way, some arguing another, to tell him how he was both right and wrong at the same time, but when it was all over, the decision was his alone.

President Ryan's hand rubbed his face, heedless of the makeup, which he smeared. He didn't know that what Fox and the other networks were sending out was splitscreened now, since all had access to the pool feed from the Roosevelt Room. His head shook slightly from side to side in the way of a man who had to accept something he didn't like, his face too blank now for sadness. Behind the Capitol steps, the cranes started dipping again.

"Where do we go from here?" the Fox reporter asked. That question wasn't on his list. It was just a human reaction to a human scene. The cut to the Hill had bitten deep into the allotted time for the interview, and for another subject they would have carried over into the next segment, but the rules in the White House were adamantine.

"Quite a lot of work to be done," Ryan answered.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Fourteen minutes after the hour."

Jack watched the light on the TV camera blink off. The originating producer waited a few seconds before waving his hand, and the President detached his microphone and cable. His first press marathon was over. Before leaving the room, he looked more carefully at the cameras. Earlier in his life he'd taught classes in history, and more recently he'd delivered briefings, but all of those had gone to a live audience whose eyes he could see and read, and from their reaction he would adjust his delivery somewhat, speeding up or slowing down, maybe tossing in a little humor if circumstances allowed, or repeating something to make his point clearer. Now his intimate chats would be directed to a *thing*. Something else not to like. Ryan left the room, while all over the world, people evaluated what they'd seen of the new American President. Television commentators would discuss him in fifty or more countries while he found the bathroom again.

"THIS IS THE best thing that's happened to our country since Jefferson." The older man rated himself a serious student of history. He liked Thomas Jefferson for his statement about how a country governed least was governed best, which was about all he knew of the adages from the Sage of Monticello.

"And it took a Jap to do it, looks like." The statement was trailed by an ironic snort. Such an event could even invalidate his closely held racism. Couldn't have that, could he?

They'd been up all night—it was 5:20 local time—watching the TV news coverage, which hadn't stopped. The newsies, they noted, looked even more wasted than this Ryan guy. Time zones did have an advantage. Both had stopped drinking beer around midnight, and had switched to coffee two hours later when they'd both started dozing. Couldn't have that. What they saw, switching through channels downloaded on a large satellite dish outside the cabin, was like some sort of fantastic telethon, except this one wasn't about raising money for crippled children or AIDS victims or nigger schools. This one was fun. All those Washington bastards, must have been burned to a crisp, most of them.

"Bureaucrat barbecue," Peter Holbrook said for the seventeenth time since 11:30, when he'd come up with his summation of the event. He'd always been the creative one in the movement.

"Aw, *shit*, Pete!" gasped Ernest Brown, spilling some of his coffee into his lap. It was *still* funny, enough so that he didn't leap immediately to his feet from the uncomfortable feeling that resulted from his slip.

"Has been a long night," Holbrook allowed, laughing himself. They'd watched President Durling's speech for a couple of reasons. For

one, all of the networks had preempted normal programs, as was usually the case for an important event; but the truth of the matter was that their satellite downlink gave them access to a total of 117 channels, and they didn't even have to switch the set off to avoid input from the government they and their friends despised. The deeper reason was that they cultivated their anger at their government, and usually watched such speeches—both men caught at least an hour a day of C-SPAN-1 and–2—to fuel those feelings, trading barbed comments back and forth every minute of a presidential speech.

"So, who is this Ryan guy, really?" Brown asked, yawning.

"Another 'crat, looks like. A bureaucrat talking bureaucrap."

"Yeah," judged Brown. "With nothing to back him up, Pete."

Holbrook turned and looked at his friend. "It's really som'thin', isn't it?" With that observation he got up and walked to the bookshelves that walled the south side of his den. His copy of the Constitution was a well-thumbed pamphlet edition which he read as often as he could, so as to improve his understanding of the *intent* of the drafters. "You know, Pete, there's nothing in here to cover a situation like this."

"Really?"

Holbrook nodded. "Really."

"No shit." That required some thought, didn't it?

"MURDERED?" PRESIDENT RYAN asked, still wiping the makeup off his face with wet towelettes of the same sort he'd used to clean off baby bottoms. At least it made his face feel clean when he'd finished.

"That's the preliminary indication, both from a cursory examination of the body and from a quick-and-dirty examination of the cockpit tapes." Murray flipped through the notes faxed to him only twenty minutes before.

Ryan leaned back in his chair. Like much else in the Oval Office, it was new. On the credenza behind him, all of Durling's family and personal photos had been removed. The papers on the desk had been taken away for examination by the presidential secretarial staff. What remained or what had been substituted were accoutrements from White House stores. The chair at least was a good one, expensively designed to protect the back of its occupant, and it would soon be substituted for a custom designed chair fitted to his own back by a manufacturer who performed the service for free and—remarkably—without public fanfare. Sooner or later he'd have to work in this place, Jack had decided a few minutes earlier. The secretaries were here, and it wasn't fair to make them trek across the building, up and down stairs. Sleeping in this place was another issue entirely—for the

moment; that, too, had to change, didn't it? So, he thought, staring across the desk at Murray, *murder*.

"Shot?"

Dan shook his head. "Knife right in the heart, only one penetration. The wound looked to our agent to be from a thin blade, like a steak knife. From the cockpit tapes, it appears that it was done prior to takeoff. Looks like we can time-stamp that pretty exactly. From just prior to engine start-up to the moment of impact, the only voice on the tapes is the pilot. His name was Sato, a very experienced command pilot. The Japanese police have gotten a pile of data to us. It would seem that he lost a brother and a son in the war. The brother commanded a destroyer that got sunk with all hands. The son was a fighter pilot who cracked up on landing after a mission. Both on the same day or near enough. So, it was personal. Motive and opportunity, Jack," Murray allowed himself to say, for they were almost alone in the office. Andrea Price was there, too. She didn't quite approve; she had not yet been told exactly how far back the two men went.

"That's pretty fast on the ID," Price observed.

"It has to be firmed up," Murray agreed. "We'll do that with DNA testing just to be sure. The cockpit tape is good enough for voice-print analysis, or so they told our agent. The Canadians have radar tapes tracking the aircraft out of their airspace, so confirming the timing of the event is simple. We have the aircraft firmly ID'd from Guam to Japan to Vancouver, and into the Capitol building. Like they say, it's all over but the shouting. There *will* be a lot of shouting. Mr. President"—Andrea Price felt better this time–"it will be at least two months before we have every lead and tidbit of information nailed down, and I suppose it's possible that we could be wrong, but for all practical purposes, in my opinion and that of our senior agents at the scene, this case is well on its way to being closed."

"What could make you wrong?" Ryan asked.

"Potentially quite a few things, but there are practical considerations. For this to be anything other than the act of a single fanatic—no, that's not fair, is it? One very angry man. Anyway, for this to be a conspiracy, we have to assume detailed planning, and that's hard to support. How would they know the war was going to be lost, how did they know about the joint session—and if it were planned as a war operation, like the NTSB guy said, hell, ten tons of high explosives would have been simple to load aboard."

"Or a nuke," Jack interjected.

"Or a nuke." Murray nodded. "That reminds me: the Air Force attaché is going to see their nuclear-weapons-fabrication facility today. It took the Japanese a couple of days to figure out where it

was. We're having a guy who knows the things flying over there right now." Murray checked his notes. "Dr. Woodrow Lowell—oh, I know him. He runs the shop at Lawrence Livermore. Prime Minister Koga told our ambassador that he wants to hand over the damned things PDQ and get them the hell out of his country."

Ryan turned his chair around. The windows behind him faced the Washington Monument. That obelisk was surrounded by a circle of flagpoles, all of whose flags were at half-staff. But he could see that people were lined up for the elevator ride to the top. Tourists who'd come to D.C. to see the sights. Well, they were getting a bargain of sorts, weren't they? The Oval Office windows, he saw, were incredibly thick, just in case one of those tourists had a sniper rifle tucked under his coat. . . .

"How much of this can we release?" President Ryan asked.

"I'm comfortable with releasing a few things," Murray responded.

"You sure?" Price asked.

"It's not as though we have to protect evidence for a criminal trial. The subject in the case is dead. We'll chase down all the possibilities of co-conspirators, but the evidence we let go today will not compromise that in any way. I'm not exactly a fan of publicizing criminal evidence, but the people out there want to know something, and in a case like this one, you let them have it."

Besides, Price thought, *it makes the Bureau look good*. With that silent observation, at least one government agency started returning to normal.

"Who's running this one at Justice?" she asked instead.

"Pat Martin."

"Oh? Who picked him?" she asked. Ryan turned to see the discourse on this one.

Murray almost blushed. "I guess I did. The President said to pick the best career prosecutor, and that's Pat. He's been head of the Criminal Division for nine months. Before that he ran Espionage. Ex-Bureau. He's a particularly good lawyer, been there almost thirty years. Bill Shaw wanted him to become a judge. He was talking to the AG about it only last week."

"You sure he's good enough?" Jack asked. Price decided to answer.

"We've worked with him, too. He's a real pro, and Dan's right, he's real judge material, tough as hell, but also extremely fair. He handled a mob counterfeiting case my old partner ramrodded in New Orleans."

"Okay, let him decide what to let out. He can start talking to the press right after lunch." Ryan checked his watch. He'd been President for exactly twelve hours.

COLONEL PIERRE ALEXANDRE, U.S. Army, retired, still looked like a soldier, tall and thin and fit, and that didn't bother the dean at all. Dave James immediately liked what he saw as his visitor took his seat, liked him even more for what he'd read in the man's c.v., and more still for what he'd learned over the phone. Colonel Alexandre—"Alex" to his friends, of which he had many—was an expert in infectious disease who'd spent twenty productive years in the employ of his government, divided mainly between Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington and Fort Detrick in Maryland, with numerous field trips sprinkled in. Graduate of West Point and the University of Chicago Medical School, Dr. James saw. Good, his eyes again sweeping over the residency and other professional-experience entries. The list of published articles ran to eight single-spaced pages. Nominated for a couple of important prizes, but not lucky yet. Well, maybe Hopkins could change that. His dark eyes were not especially intense at the moment. By no means an arrogant man, Alexandre knew who and what he was—better yet, knew that Dean James knew.

"I know Gus Lorenz," Dean James said with a smile. "We interned together at Peter Brent Brigham." Which Harvard had since consolidated into Brigham and Women's.

"Brilliant guy," Alexandre agreed in his best Creole drawl. It was generally thought that Gus's work on Lassa and Q fever put him in the running for a Nobel Prize. "And a great doc."

"So, why don't you want to work with him in Atlanta? Gus tells me he wants you pretty bad."

"Dean James—"

"Dave," the Dean said.

"Alex," the colonel responded. There was something to be said for civilian life, after all. Alexandre thought of the dean as a three-star equivalent. Maybe four stars. Johns Hopkins carried a lot of prestige. "Dave, I've worked in a lab damned near all my life. I want to treat patients again. CDC would just be more of the same. Much as I like Gus—we did a lot of work together in Brazil back in 1987; we get along just fine," he assured the dean. "I am *tired* of looking at slides and printouts all the time." And for the same reason he'd turned down one hell of an offer from Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, to head up one of their new labs. Infectious diseases were a coming thing in medicine, and both men hoped that it wasn't too late. Why the *hell*, James wondered, hadn't this guy made general-officer rank? Maybe politics, the dean thought. The Army had that problem, too, just as Hopkins did. But their loss . . .

"I talked about you with Gus last night."

"Oh?" Not that it was surprising. At this level of medicine everyone knew everyone else.

"He says just hire you on the spot—"

"Good of him," Alexandre chuckled.

"—before Harry Tuttle at Yale gets you for his lab."

"You know Harry?" Yep, and everybody knew what everybody else was doing, too.

"Classmates here," the dean explained. "We both dated Wendy. He won. You know, Alex, there isn't much for me to ask you."

"I hope that's good."

"It is. We can start you off as an associate professor working under Ralph Forster. You'll have a lot of lab work—good team to work with. Ralph has put a good shop together in the last ten years. But we're starting to get a lot of clinical referrals. Ralph's getting a little old to travel so much, so you can expect to get around the world some. You'll also be in charge of the clinical side in, oh, six months to get your feet good and wet . . . ?"

The retired colonel nodded thoughtfully. "That's just about right. I need to relearn a few things. Hell, when does learning ever stop?"

"When you become an administrator, if you're not careful."

"Yeah, well, now you know why I hung up the green suit. They wanted me to command up a hospital, you know, punch the ticket. Damn it, I know I'm good in a lab, okay? I'm very good in a lab. But I signed on to treat people once in a while—and to teach some, naturally, but I like to see sick people and send them home healthy. Once upon a time somebody in Chicago told me that's what the job was."

If this was a selling job, Dean James thought, then he'd taken lessons from Olivier. Yale could offer him about the same post, but this one would keep Alexandre close to Fort Detrick, and ninety minutes' flying time to Atlanta, and close to the Chesapeake Bay—in the resume, it said Alexandre liked to fish. Well, that figured, growing up in the Louisiana bayous. In sum total, that was Yale's bad luck. Professor Harold Tuttle was as good as they came, maybe a shade better than Ralph Forster, but in five years or so Ralph would retire, and Alexandre here had the look of a star. More than anything else, Dean James was in the business of recruiting future stars. In another reality, he would have been the G.M. for a winning baseball team. So, that was settled. James closed the folder on his desk.

"Doctor, welcome to the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine."

"Thank you, sir."

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THE REST OF THE DAY WAS a blur. Even while living through it, Ryan knew that he'd never really remember more than snippets. His first experience with computers had been as a student at Boston College. Before the age of personal computing, he'd used the dumbest of dumb terminals—a teletype—to communicate with a mainframe somewhere, along with other BC students, and more still from other local schools. That had been called "time-sharing," just one more term from a bygone age when computers had cost a million or so dollars for performance that now could be duplicated in the average man's watch. But the term still applied to the American presidency, Jack learned, where the ability to pursue a single thought through from beginning to end was the rarest of luxuries, and work consisted of following various intellectual threads from one separate meeting to the next, like keeping track of a whole group of continuing TV series from episode to episode, trying not to confuse one with another, and knowing that avoiding that error was totally impossible.

After dismissing Murray and Price, it had begun in earnest.

Ryan's introduction began with a national-security briefing delivered by one of the national intelligence officers assigned to the White House staff. Here, over a period of twenty-six minutes, he learned what he already knew because of the job he'd held until the previous day. But he had to sit through it anyway, if for no other reason than to get a feel for the man who would be one of his daily briefing team. They were all different. Each one had an individual perspective, and Ryan had to understand the nuances peculiar to the separate voices he'd be hearing.

"So, nothing on the horizon for now?" Jack asked.

"Nothing we see at the National Security Council, Mr. President. You know the potential trouble spots as well as I do, of course, and those change on a day-to-day basis." The man hedged with the grace of someone who'd been dancing to this particular brand of music for years. Ryan's face didn't change, only because he'd seen it before. A real intelligence officer didn't fear death, didn't fear finding his wife in bed with his best friend, didn't fear any of the normal vicissitudes of

life. A national intelligence officer *did* fear being found wrong on anything he said in his official capacity. To avoid that was simple, however: you never took a real stand on any single thing. It was a disease not limited to elected officials, after all. Only the President *had* to take a stand, and it was his good fortune to have such trained experts to supply him with the information he needed, wasn't it?

"Let me tell you something," Ryan said after a few seconds of reflection.

"What is that, sir?" the NIO asked cautiously.

"I don't just want to hear what you know. I also want to hear what you and your people *think*. You are responsible for what you know, but I'll take the heat for acting on what you think. I've been there and done that, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. President." The man allowed himself a smile that masked his terror at the prospect. "I'll pass that along to my people."

"Thank you." Ryan dismissed the man, knowing then and there that he needed a National Security Advisor he could trust, and wondering where he'd get one.

The door opened as though by magic to let the NIO out—a Secret Service agent had done that, having watched through the spy hole for most of the briefing. The next in was a DOD briefing team.

The senior man was a two-star who handed over a plastic card.

"Mr. President, you need to put this in your wallet."

Jack nodded, knowing what it was before his hands touched the orange plastic. It looked like a credit card, but on it was a series of number groups. . . .

"Which one?" Ryan asked.

"You decide, sir."

Ryan did so, reading off the third such group twice. There were two commissioned officers with the general, a colonel and a major, both of whom wrote down the number group he'd selected and read it back to him twice. President Ryan now had the ability to order the release of strategic nuclear weapons.

"Why is this necessary?" he asked. "We trashed the last ballistic weapons last year."

"Mr. President, we still have cruise missiles which can be armed with W-80 warheads, plus B-61 gravity bombs assigned to our bomber fleet. We need your authorization to enable the Permissible Action Links—the PALs—and the idea is that we enable them as early as possible, just in case "

Ryan completed the sentence: "I get taken out early."

You're really important now, Jack, a nasty little voice told him. *Now you can initiate a nuclear attack*. "I hate those goddamned things. Always have."

"You aren't supposed to like them, sir," the general sympathized. "Now, as you know, the Marines have the VMH-1 helicopter squadron that's always ready to get you out of here and to a place of safety at a moment's notice, and . . ."

Ryan listened to the rest while his mind wondered if he should do what Jimmy Carter had done at this point: *Okay, let's see, then. Tell them I want them to pick me up* Now. Which presidential command had turned into a major embarrassment for a lot of Marines. But he couldn't do that now, could he? It would get out that Ryan was a paranoid fool, not someone who wanted to see if the system really worked the way people said it would. Besides, today VMH-1 would definitely be spun up, wouldn't it?

The fourth member of the briefing team was an Army warrant officer in civilian clothes who carried a quite ordinary-looking briefcase known as "the football," inside of which was a binder, inside of which was the attack plan—actually a whole set of them . . .

"Let me see it." Ryan pointed. The warrant hesitated, then unlocked the case and handed over the navy blue binder, which Ryan flipped open.

"Sir, we haven't changed it since—"

The first section, Jack saw, was labeled MAJOR ATTACK OPTION. It showed a map of Japan, many of whose cities were marked with multicolored dots. The legend at the bottom showed what the dots meant in terms of delivered megatonnage; probably another page would quantify the predicted deaths. Ryan opened the binder rings and removed the whole section. "I want these pages burned. I want this MAO eliminated immediately." That merely meant that it would be filed away in some drawer in Pentagon War Plans, and also in Omaha. Things like this never died.

"Sir, we have not yet confirmed that the Japanese have destroyed all of their launchers, nor have we confirmed the neutralization of their weapons. You see—"

"General, that's an order," Ryan said quietly. "I can give them, you know."

The man's back braced to attention. "Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan flipped through the rest of the binder. Despite his previous job, what he found was a revelation. Jack had always avoided too-intimate knowledge of the damned things. He'd never expected them to be used. After the terrorist incident in Denver and all the horror that had swept the surface of the planet in its aftermath, statesmen across continents and political beliefs had indulged themselves in a collective think about the weapons under their control. Even during the shooting war with Japan just ended, Ryan had known that somewhere, some team of experts had concocted a plan for a nuclear

retaliatory strike, but he'd concentrated his efforts at making it unnecessary, and it was a source of considerable pride to the new President that he'd never even contemplated implementing the plan whose summary was still in his left hand. LONG RIFLE, he saw, was the code name. Why did the names have to be like that, virile and exciting, as though for something that one could be proud of?

"What's this one? LIGHT Switch . . . ?"

"Mr. President," the general answered, "that's a method of using an EMP attack. Electromagnetic pulse. If you explode a device at very high altitude, there's nothing—no air, actually—to absorb the initial energy of the detonation and convert it into mechanical energy—no shock wave, that is. As a result all the energy goes out in its original electromagnetic form. The resulting energy surge is murder on power and telephone lines. We always had a bunch of weapons fused for high-altitude burst in our SIOPs for the Soviet Union. Their telephone system was so primitive that it would have been easy to destroy. It's a cheap mission-kill, won't really hurt anybody on the ground."

"I see." Ryan closed the binder and handed it back to the warrant officer, who immediately locked the now lighter document away. "I take it there's nothing going on which is likely to require a nuclear strike of any kind?"

"Correct, Mr. President."

"So, what's the point of having this man sitting outside my office all the time?"

"You can't predict all possible contingencies, can you, sir?" the general asked. It must have been difficult for him to deliver the line with a straight face, Ryan realized, as soon as the shock went away.

"I guess not," a chastised President replied.

THE WHITE HOUSE Protocol Office was headed by a lady named Judy Simmons, who'd been seconded to the White House staff from the State Department four months earlier. Her office in the basement of the building had been busy since just after midnight, when she'd arrived from her home in Burke, Virginia. Her thankless job was to prepare arrangements for what would be the largest state funeral in American history, a task on which over a hundred staff members had already kibitzed, and it was not yet lunchtime.

The list of all the dead still had to be compiled, but from careful examination of the videotapes it was largely known who was in the chamber, and there was biographical information on all of them—married or single, religion, etc.—from which to make the necessary, if preliminary, plans. Whatever was finally decided, Jack would be the master of the grim ceremony, and had to be kept informed of every

step of the planning. A funeral for thousands, Ryan thought, most of whom he hadn't known, for most of whose as yet unrecovered bodies waited wives and husbands and children.

"National Cathedral," he saw, turning the page. The approximate numbers of religious affiliations had been compiled. That would determine the clergy to take the various functions in the ecumenical religious service.

"That's where such ceremonies are usually carried out, Mr. President," a very harried official confirmed. "There will not be room for all of the remains"—she didn't say that one White House staffer had suggested an outdoor memorial service at RFK Stadium in order to accommodate all the victims "but there will be room for the President and Mrs. Durling, plus a representative sampling of the congressional victims. We've contacted eleven foreign governments on the question of the diplomats who were present. We also have a preliminary list of foreign government representatives who will be coming in to attend the ceremony." She handed over that sheet as well.

Ryan scanned it briefly. It meant that after the memorial service he'd be meeting "informally" with numerous chiefs of state to conduct "informal" business. He'd need a briefing page for each meeting, and in addition to whatever they all might ask or want, every one would be checking him out. Jack knew how that worked. All over the world, presidents, prime ministers, and a few lingering dictators would now be reading briefing documents of their own—who was this John Patrick Ryan, and what can we expect of him? He wondered if they had a better idea of the answer than he did. Probably not. Their NIOs wouldn't be all that different from his, after all. And so a raft of them would come over on government jets, partly to show respect for President Durling and the American government, partly to eyeball the new American President, partly for domestic political consumption at home, and partly because it was expected that they should do so. And so this event, horrific as it was for uncounted thousands, was just one more mechanical exercise in the world of politics. Jack wanted to cry out in rage, but what else was there to do? The dead were dead, and all his grief could not bring them back, and the business of his country and others would go on.

"Have Scott Adler go over this, will you?" Somebody would have to determine how much time he should spend with the official visitors, and Ryan wasn't qualified to do that.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"What sort of speeches will I have to deliver?" Jack asked.

"We have our people working on that for you. You should have preliminary drafts by tomorrow afternoon," Mrs. Simmons replied.

President Ryan nodded and slid the papers into his out-pile. When the Chief of Protocol left, a secretary came in—he didn't know this lady's name—with a pile of telegrams, the leftovers from Eighth and I that he hadn't gotten to, plus another sheet of paper that showed his activities for the day, prepared without his input or assistance. He was about to grumble about that when she spoke.

"We have over ten thousand telegrams and e-mails from—well, from citizens," she told him.

"Saying what?"

"Mainly that they're praying for you."

"Oh." Somehow that came as a surprise, and a humbling one at that. But would God listen?

Jack went back to reading the official messages, and the first day went on.

THE COUNTRY HAD essentially come to a halt, even as its new President struggled to come to terms with his new job. Banks and financial markets were closed, as were schools and many businesses. All the television networks had moved their broadcast headquarters to the various Washington bureaus in a haphazard process that had them all working together. A gang of cameras sited around the Hill kept up a continuous feed of recovery operations, while reporters had to keep talking, lest the airwaves be filled with silence. Around eleven that morning, a crane removed the remains of the 747's tail, which was deposited on a large flatbed trailer for transport to a hangar at Andrews Air Force Base. That would be the site for what was called the "crash investigation," for want of a better term, and cameras tracked the vehicle as it threaded its way along the streets. Two of the engines went out shortly thereafter in much the same way.

Various "experts" helped fill the silence, speculating on what had happened and how. This was difficult for everyone involved, as there had been few leaks as yet those who were trying to find out what had happened were too busy to talk with reporters on or off the record, and though the journalists couldn't say it, their most fertile source of leaks lay in ruin before thirty-four cameras. That gave the experts little to say. Witnesses were interviewed for their recollections—there was no tape of the inbound aircraft at all, much to the surprise of everyone. The tail number of the aircraft was known—it could hardly be missed, painted as it was on the wreckage of the aircraft, and that was as easily checked by reporters as by federal authorities. The ownership of the aircraft by Japan Airlines was immediately confirmed, along with the very day the aircraft had rolled out of the Boeing plant near Seattle. Officials of that company submitted to

interviews, and along the way it was determined that the 747-400 (PIP) aircraft weighed just over two hundred tons empty, a number doubled with the mass of fuel, passengers, and baggage it could pull into the air. A pilot with United Airlines who was familiar with the aircraft explained to two of the networks how a pilot could approach Washington and then execute the death dive, while a Delta colleague did the same with the others. Both airmen were mistaken in some of the particulars, none of them important.

"But the Secret Service is armed with antiaircraft missiles, isn't it?" one anchor asked.

"If you've got an eighteen-wheeler heading for you at sixty miles an hour, and you shoot out one of the tires on the trailer, that doesn't stop the truck, does it?" the pilot answered, noting the look of concentrated intelligence on the face of a highly paid journalist who understood little more than what appeared on his TelePrompTer. "Three hundred tons of aircraft doesn't just *stop*, okay?"

"So, there was no way to stop it?" the anchor asked with a twisted face.

"None at all." The pilot could see that the reporter didn't understand, but he couldn't come up with anything to clarify matters further.

The director, in his control room off of Nebraska Avenue, changed cameras to follow a pair of Guardsmen bringing another body down the steps. An assistant director was keeping an eye on that set of cameras, trying to maintain a running tally of the number of bodies removed. It was now known that the bodies of President and Mrs. Durling had been recovered and were at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for autopsy—required by law for wrongful death—and disposition. At network headquarters in New York, every foot of videotape of or about Durling was being organized and spliced for presentation throughout the day. Political colleagues were being sought out and interviewed. Psychologists were taken on to explain how the Durling children could deal with the trauma, and then expanded their horizons to talk about the impact of the event on the country as a whole, and how people could deal with it. About the only thing not examined on the television news was the spiritual aspect; that many of the victims had believed in God and attended church from time to time was not worthy of air time, though the presence of many people in churches was deemed newsworthy enough for three minutes on one network—and then, because each was constantly monitoring the others for ideas, that segment was copied by the others over the next few hours.

IT ALL CAME down to this, really, Jack knew. The numbers only added individual examples, identical to this one in magnitude and horror. He'd avoided it for as much of the day as had been possible, but finally his cowardice had run out.

The Durling kids hovered between the numbness of denial, and terror of a world destroyed before their eyes as they'd watched their father on TV. They'd never see Mom and Dad again. The bodies were far too damaged for the caskets to be open. No last good-byes, no words, just the traumatic removal of the foundation that held up their young lives. And how were children supposed to understand that Mom and Dad weren't just Mom and Dad, but were had been—something else to someone else, and for that reason, their deaths had been necessary to someone who hadn't known or cared about the kids?

Family members had descended on Washington, most of them flown in by the Air Force from California. Equally shocked, they nevertheless, in the presence of children, had to summon from within themselves the strength to make things somewhat easier for the young. And it gave them something to do. The Secret Service agents assigned to JUNIPER and JUNIOR were probably the most traumatized of all. Trained to be ferociously protective of any "principal," the agents who looked after the Durling kids—more than half were women—carried the additional burden of the normal solicitude any human held for any child, and none of them would have hesitated a microsecond to give his or her life to protect the youngsters–in the knowledge that the rest of the Detail would have weapons out and blazing. The men and women of this sub-detail had played with the kids, had bought them Christmas and birthday presents, had helped with homework. Now they were saying good-bye, to the kids, to the parents, and to colleagues. Ryan saw the looks on their faces, and made a mental note to ask Andrea if the Service would assign a psychologist to them.

"No, it didn't hurt." Jack was sitting down so that the kids could look level into his eyes. "It didn't hurt at all."

"Okay," Mark Durling said. The kids were immaculately dressed. One of the family members had thought it important that they be properly turned out to meet their father's successor. Jack heard a gasp of breath, and his peripheral vision caught the face of an agent—this one a man—who was on the edge of losing it. Price grabbed his arm and moved him toward the door, before the kids could take note of it.

"Do we stay here?"

"Yes," Jack assured him. It was a lie, but not the sort to hurt anyone. "And if you need anything, anything at all, you can come and see me, okay?"

The boy nodded, doing his best to be brave, and it was time to leave

him to his family. Ryan squeezed his hand, treating him like the man he ought not to have become for years, for whom the duties of manhood were arriving all too soon. The boy needed to cry, and Ryan thought he needed to do that alone, for now.

Jack walked out the door into the oversized hall of the bedroom level. The agent who'd left, a tall, rugged-looking black man, was sobbing ten feet away. Ryan went over to him.

"You okay?"

"Fuck—sorry—I mean—shit!" the agent shook his head, ashamed at the display of emotion. His father had been lost in an Army training accident at Fort Rucker, Price knew, when he was twelve years old, and Special Agent Tony Wills, who'd played tight end at Grambling before joining the Service, was unusually good with kids. At times like this, strengths often became weaknesses.

"Don't apologize for being human. I lost my mom and dad, too. Same time," Ryan went on, his voice dreamy and uneven with fatigue. "Midway Airport, 737 landed short in snow. But I was all grown up when it happened."

"I know, sir." The agent wiped his eyes and stood erect with a shudder. "I'll be okay."

Ryan patted him on the shoulder and headed for the elevator. To Andrea Price: "Get me the hell out of here."

The Suburban headed north, turning left onto Massachusetts Avenue, which led to the Naval Observatory and the oversized Victorian-gingerbread barn which the country provided for the sitting Vice President. Again, it was guarded by Marines, who let the convoy through. Jack walked into the house. Cathy was waiting at the entry. She only needed one look.

"Tough one?"

All Ryan could do was nod. He held her tight, knowing that his tears would start soon. His eyes caught the knot of agents around the periphery of the entry hall of the house, and it occurred to him that he'd have to get used to them, standing like impassive statues, present in the most private of moments.

I hate this job.

BUT BRIGADIER GENERAL Marion Diggs loved his. Not everyone had stood down. As the Marine Barracks in Washington had gone to a high level of activity, then to be augmented from the sprawling base at Quantico, Virginia, so other organizations remained busy or became busier, for they were people who were not really allowed to sleep anyway—at least not all of them at once. One of these organizations was at Fort Irwin, California. Located in the high Mojave Desert, the

base really did sprawl, over an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. The landscape was bleak enough that ecologists had to struggle to find an ecology there among the scrawny creosote bushes, and over drinks even the most dedicated of that profession would confess to finding the surface of the moon far more interesting. Not that they hadn't made his life miserable, Diggs thought, fingering his binoculars. There was a species of desert tortoise, which was distinguished from a turtle somehow or other (the general didn't have a clue), and which soldiers had to protect. To take care of that, his soldiers had collected all the tortoises they could find and then relocated them to an enclosure large enough that the reptiles probably didn't notice the fence at all. It was known locally as the world's largest turtle bordello. With that out of the way, whatever other wildlife existed at Fort Irwin seemed quite able to look after itself. The occasional coyote appeared and disappeared, and that was that. Besides, coyotes were not endangered.

The visitors were. Fort Irwin was home to the Army's National Training Center. The permanent residents of that establishment were the OpFor, "the opposing force." Originally two battalions, one of armor and the other of mechanized infantry, the OpFor had once styled itself the "32nd Guards Motor Rifle Regiment," a *Soviet* designation, because at its opening in the 1980s, the NTC had been designed to teach the U.S. Army how to fight, survive, and prevail in a battle against the Red Army on the plains of Europe. The soldiers of the "32nd" dressed in Russian-style uniforms, drove Soviet-like equipment (the real Russian vehicles had proved too difficult to maintain, and American gear had been modified to Soviet shapes), employed Russian tactics, and took pride in kicking the hell out of the units that came to play on their turf. It wasn't strictly fair. The OpFor lived here and trained here, and hosted regular units up to fourteen times per year, whereas the visiting team might be lucky to come here once in four years. But nobody had ever said war was fair.

Times had changed with the demise of the Soviet Union, but the mission of the NTC had not. The OpFor had recently been enlarged to three battalions—now called "squadrons," because the unit had assumed the identity of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the Blackhorse Cav—and simulated brigade or larger enemy formations. The only real concession to the new political world was that they didn't call themselves Russians anymore. Now they were "Krasnovians," a word, however, derived from *krasny,* Russian for "red."

General-Lieutenant Gennady Iosefovich Bondarenko knew most of this—the turtle bordello was something on which he'd not been briefed; his initial tour of the base had taken care of that, however—

and was as excited as he had ever been.

"You started in Signal Corps?" Diggs asked. The base commander was terse of speech and efficient of movement, dressed in desert-camouflage fatigues called "chocolate chip" from their pattern. He, too, had been fully briefed, though, like his visitor, he had to pretend that he hadn't been.

"Correct." Bondarenko nodded. "But I kept getting into trouble. First Afghanistan, then when the Mudje raided into Soviet Union. They attacked a defense research facility in Tadzhik when I was visitor there. Brave fighters, but unevenly led. We managed to hold them off," the Russian reported in a studied monotone. Diggs could see the decorations that had resulted; he had commanded a cavalry squadron leading Barry McCaffrey's 24th Mechanized Infantry Division in a wild ride on the American left during Desert Storm, then gone on to command the 10th "Buffalo" ACR, still based in the Negev Desert, as part of America's commitment to Israeli security. Both men were forty-nine. Both had smelled the smoke. Both were on the way up.

"You have country like this at home?" Diggs asked.

"We have every sort of terrain you can imagine. It makes training a challenge, especially today. There," he said. "It's started."

The first group of tanks was rolling now, down a broad, U-shaped pass called the Valley of Death. The sun was setting behind the brown-colored mountains, and darkness came rapidly here. Scuttling around also were the HMMWVs of the observer-controllers, the gods of the NTC, who watched everything and graded what they saw as coldly as Death himself. The NTC was the world's most exciting school. The two generals could have observed the battle back at base headquarters in a place called the Star Wars Room. Every vehicle was wired, transmitting its location, direction of movement, and when the time came, where it was shooting and whether it scored a hit or not. From that data, the computers at Star Wars sent out signals, telling people when they had died, though rarely why. That fact they learned later from the observer-controllers. The generals didn't want to watch computer screens, however Bondarenko's staff officers were doing that, but the place for their general was here. Every battlefield had a smell, and generals had to have the nose for it.

"Your instrumentation is like something from a science novel."

Diggs shrugged. "Not much changed from fifteen years ago. We have more TV cameras on the hilltops now, though." America would be selling much of that technology to the Russians. That was a little hard for Diggs to accept. He'd been too young for Vietnam. His was the first generation of flag officers to have avoided that entanglement. But Diggs had grown up with one reality in his life: fighting the Russians in Germany. A cavalry officer for his entire career, he'd

trained to be in one of the forward-deployed regiments—really, augmented brigades—to make first contact. Diggs could remember a few times when it had seemed pretty damned likely that he'd find his death in the Fulda Gap, facing somebody like the man standing next to him, with whom he'd killed a six-pack the night before over stories of how turtles reproduced.

"In," Bondarenko said with a sly grin. Somehow the Americans thought Russians were humorless. He *had* to correct that misimpression before he left.

Diggs counted ten before his deadpan reply: "Out."

Ten more seconds: "In." Then both started laughing. When first introduced to the favorite base joke, it had taken half a minute for Bondarenko to get it. But the resulting laughter had ended up causing abdominal pain. He recovered control and pointed. "This is the way war should be."

"It gets pretty tense. Wait and see."

"You use *our* tactics!" That was plain from the way the reconnaissance screen deployed across the valley.

Diggs turned. "Why not? They worked for me in Iraq."

The scenario for this night—the first engagement for the training rotation—was a tough one: Red Force in the attack, advance-to-contact, and eliminate the Blue Force reconnaissance screen. The Blue Force in this case was a brigade of the 5th Mechanized Division conducting hasty defense. The overall idea was that this was a very fluid tactical situation. The 11th ACR was simulating a division attack on a newly arrived force one third its theoretical size. It was, really, the best way to welcome people to the desert. Let them eat dirt.

"Let's get moving." Diggs hopped back into his HMMWV, and the driver moved off to a piece of high ground called the Iron Triangle. A short radio message from his senior OC made the American general growl. "God damn it!"

"Problem?"

General Diggs held up a map. "That hill is the most important piece of real estate in the valley, but they didn't see it. Well, they're going to pay for that little misjudgment. Happens every time." Already, the OpFor had people racing for the unoccupied summit.

"To push that far that fast, is it prudent for Blue?"

"General, it sure as hell ain't prudent not to, as you will see."

"WHY HASN'T HE spoken more, appeared in public more?"

The intelligence chief could have said many things. President Ryan was undoubtedly busy. So many things to do. The government of his country was in shambles, and before he could speak, he had to

organize it. He had a state funeral to plan. He had to speak to numerous foreign governments, to give them the usual assurances. He had to secure things, not the least of which was his own personal safety. The American Cabinet, the President's principal advisers, was gone and had to be reconstituted . . . but that was not what he wanted to hear.

"We have been researching this Ryan," was the answer given. Mainly from newspaper stories-a lot of them—faxed from his government's UN mission. "He has made few public speeches before this day, and then only to present the thoughts of his masters. He was an intelligence officer—actually an 'inside' man, an analyst. Evidently a good one, but an inside person."

"So, why did Durling elevate him so?"

"That was in the American papers yesterday. Their government requires a vice-presidential presence. Durling also wanted someone to firm up his international-affairs team, and in this Ryan had some experience. He performed well, remember, in their conflict with Japan."

"An assistant then, not a leader."

"Correct. He has never aspired to high office. Our information is that he agreed to the second post as a caretaker, for less than a year."

"I am not surprised." Daryaei looked at the notes: *assistant* to Vice Admiral James Greer, the DDI/CIA; briefly the *acting* DDI; then *Deputy* Director of Central Intelligence; then National Security *Advisor* to President Durling; finally he'd accepted the *temporary* post of *Vice* President. His impressions of this Ryan person had been correct from the very beginning: a helper. Probably a skilled one, as he himself had skilled assistants, none of whom, however, could assume his own duties. He was not dealing with an equal. Good. "What else?"

"As an intelligence specialist, he will be unusually well informed of foreign affairs. In fact, his knowledge of such things may be the best America has had in recent years, but at the cost of near-ignorance of domestic issues," the briefing officer went on. This tidbit had come from the *New York Times*.

"Ah." And with that bit of information, the planning started. At this point it was merely a mental exercise, but that would soon change.

"SO, HOW ARE things in your army?" Diggs asked. The two generals stood alone atop the principal terrain feature, watching the battle play out below them with low-light viewing gear. As predicted, the 32nd—Bondarenko *had* to think of them that way—had overwhelmed the Blue Force reconnaissance screen, maneuvered to the left, and was now rolling up the "enemy" brigade. With the lack of real casualties, it

was a lovely thing to watch as the blinking yellow "dead" lights lit up one by one. Then he had to answer the question.

"Dreadful. We face the task of rebuilding everything from the ground up."

Diggs turned. "Well, sir, that's where I came in at." At *least you don't have to deal with drugs*, the American thought. He could remember being a new second lieutenant, and afraid to enter barracks without sidearms. If the Russians had made their move in the early 1970s . . . "You really want to use our model?"

"Perhaps." The only thing the Americans got wrong—and right—was that the Red Force allowed tactical initiative for its sub-unit commanders, something the Soviet Army would never have done. But, combined with doctrine developed by the Voroshilov Academy, the results were plain to see. That was something to remember, and Bondarenko had broken rules in his own tactical encounters, which was one reason why he was a living three-star instead of a dead colonel. He was also the newly appointed chief of operations for the Russian Army. "The problem is money, of course."

"I've heard that song before, General." Diggs allowed himself a rueful chuckle.

Bondarenko had a plan for that. He wanted to cut the size of his army by fifty percent, and the money saved would go directly into training the remaining half. The results of such a plan he could see before him. Traditionally, the Soviet Army had depended on mass, but the Americans had proven both here and in Iraq that training was master of the battlefield. As good as their equipment was—he'd get his matériel briefing tomorrow—he envied Diggs his personnel more than anything. Proof of that arrived the moment he formed the thought.

"General?" The new arrival saluted. "Blackhorse! We stripped their knickers right off."

"This is Colonel Al Hamm. He's CO of the 11th. His second tour here. He used to be OpFor operations officer. Don't play cards with him," Diggs warned.

"The general is too kind. Welcome to the desert, General Bondarenko." Hamm extended a large hand.

"Your attack was well executed, Colonel." The Russian examined him.

"Thank you, sir. I have some great kids working for me. Blue Force was overly tentative. We caught them between two chairs," Hamm explained. He looked like a Russian, Bondarenko thought, tall and meaty with a pale, florid complexion surrounding twinkling blue eyes. For this occasion, Hamm was dressed in his old "Russian"-style uniform, complete with a red star on the tanker's beret, and his pistol belt outside the over-long blouse. It didn't quite make the Russian feel

at home, but he appreciated the respect the Americans showed him.

"Diggs, you were right. Blue should have done everything to get here first. But you made them start too far back to make that option seem attractive."

"That's the problem with battlefields," Hamm answered for his boss. "Too much of the time they choose you instead of the other way around. That's lesson number one for the boys of the 5th Mech. If you let anybody else define the terms of the battle, well, it isn't much fun."

5

ARRANGEMENTS

IT TURNED OUT THAT both Sato and his co-pilot had donated blood for purposes of helping casualties in the abortive war with America, and the blessedly small numbers of wounded had never called that blood into use. Located by computer search by the Japanese Red Cross, samples had been obtained by the police and dispatched by messenger to Washington, via Vancouver—Japanese commercial aircraft were, understandably, still not permitted to fly into the United States, even Alaska—and an Air Force VC-20 from there to Washington. The courier was a senior police officer, with the aluminum case handcuffed to his left wrist. A trio of FBI agents met him at Andrews and drove him to the Hoover building at Tenth and Pennsylvania. The FBI's DNA lab took the samples and went to work to compare them with blood and other tissue specimens from the bodies. They already had matches for the blood types, and the results of the tests seemed a foregone conclusion, which would, nonetheless, be treated as though they were the only tenuous clue in a baffling case. Dan Murray, the acting Director, wasn't exactly a slave to "the book" in criminal investigations, but for the purposes of this case, the book was Holy Writ. Backing him up were Tony Caruso, back from his vacation and working around the clock to head up the Bureau's side of the investigation, Pat O'Day in his capacity as roving inspector, and a cast of hundreds, if not quite thousands yet. Murray met the Japanese representative in the Director's conference room. He, too, found it hard to move into Bill Shaw's office right away.

"We are performing our own tests," Chief Inspector Jisaburo Tanaka said, checking his watches—he had decided to wear two, one each for Tokyo and Washington time. "They will be faxed here as soon as they are completed." Then he opened his briefcase again. "Here is our reconstruction of Captain Sato's schedule for the last week, notes of interviews with family members and colleagues, background on his life."

"Fast work. Thank you." Murray took the pages, not quite sure what to do next. It was clear that his visitor wanted to say more. Murray and Tanaka had never met, but the word on his guest was impressive

enough. A skilled and experienced investigator, Tanaka had specialized in political-corruption violations, a specialty that had kept him very busy. Tanaka had the Cromwellian look of such a policeman. His professional life had turned him into a priest of the sort used by the Spanish to burn people at the stake. That made him perfect for this case.

"You will have our total cooperation. In fact, if you wish to send a senior official from your agency to oversee our investigation, I am authorized to tell you that we will welcome it." He paused for a few seconds, looking down before proceeding. "This is a disgrace for my country. The way those people *used* us all . . ." For a representative of a country incorrectly known for its lack of emotional display, Tanaka was a surprise. His hands balled tightly, and his dark eyes burned with anger. From the conference room, both men could look down Pennsylvania Avenue to a Capitol Hill scarred by the crash, still lit in the pre-dawn darkness by the hundreds of work lights.

"The co-pilot was murdered," Murray said. Maybe that would help a little.

"Oh?"

Dan nodded. "Stabbed, and it appears as though that took place prior to the take-off. It appears at the moment that Sato acted alone—at least as far as flying the airplane was concerned." The lab had already determined that the weapon used was a thin-bladed steak knife with a serrated edge, of the sort used on the airline. As long as he'd been in the investigative business, it still amazed Murray what the lab techs could discern.

"I see. That makes sense," Tanaka observed. "The co-pilot's wife is pregnant, with twins, in fact. She is in the hospital now under close observation. What we have learned to date makes him appear to be a devoted husband and a man of no special political interests. My people thought it unlikely that he would end his life in this way."

"Did Sato have any connections with—"

A shake of the head. "None that we have found. He flew one of the conspirators to Saipan, and they spoke briefly. Aside from that, Sato was an international pilot. His friends were his colleagues. He lived quietly in a modest house near Narita International Airport. But his brother was a senior officer in the Maritime Self-Defense Force, and his son was a fighter pilot. Both died during the hostilities."

Murray already knew that. *Motive and opportunity*. He scribbled a note to have the legal attaché in Tokyo take up the offer to participate in the Japanese investigation—but he'd have to get approval from Justice and/or State about that. For damned sure the offer seemed sincere enough. Good.

“LOVE THE TRAFFIC.” Chavez observed. They were coming up I-95, passing the Springfield Mall. Normally at this time of day—it was still dark—the highway was wall-to-wall with bureaucrats and lobbyists. Not today, though John and Ding had been called in, confirming their “essential” status to any who might have doubted it. Clark didn’t respond, and the junior officer continued, “How do you suppose Dr. Ryan is doing?”

John grunted and shrugged. “Probably rolling with the punches. Better him than me.”

“Roge-o, Mr. C. All my friends at George Mason are going to have a fine old time.”

“Think so?”

“John, he’s got a government to rebuild. This will be a textbook case in real life. Ain’t nobody ever done that before,’*mano*. You know what we’re going to find out?”

A nod. “Yeah, if this place really works or not.” Better *him than me*, John thought again. They’d been called in for their mission debriefing on operations in Japan. That was ticklish enough. Clark had been in the business for quite a while, but not long enough to be especially happy about telling others the things he’d done. He and Ding had killed—not for the first time—and now they’d get to describe it in detail to people, most of whom had never even held a gun, much less fired one in anger. Secrecy oaths or not, some of them might talk someday, the least consequence of which would be embarrassing revelations in the press. Somewhere in the middle came sworn testimony before a congressional committee—well, not anytime soon on that, John corrected himself—questioning under oath and the necessity of answering questions from people who didn’t understand any better than the CIA weenies who sat at desks and judged people in the field for a living. The worst case was an actual prosecution, because while the things he had done weren’t exactly illegal, they weren’t exactly legal, either. Somehow the Constitution and the United States Code, Annotated, had never quite reconciled themselves with the activities the government carried out but did not wish to admit in open fora. Though his conscience was clear on that and many other things, his views on tactical morality wouldn’t strike everyone as reasonable. Probably Ryan would understand, though. That was something.

“WHAT’S NEW THIS morning?” Jack asked.

“We expect recovery operations to be completed by this evening,

sir." It was Pat O'Day doing the morning FBI brief. He'd explained that Murray was busy. The inspector passed over a folder with the numbers of bodies recovered. Ryan gave it a quick scan. How the hell was he supposed to eat breakfast with such facts before him? the President wondered. Fortunately, there was just coffee at the moment.

"What else?"

"Things seem to be dropping into place. We've recovered what we think is the body of the co-pilot. He was murdered hours before the crash, leading us to believe that the pilot acted alone. We'll be doing DNA tests on the remains to confirm identities." The inspector flipped through his notes, not trusting to memory to get things right. "Drug and alcohol tests on both bodies proved negative. Analysis of the flight-data recorder, tapes of radio traffic, radar tapes, everything we've managed to pull together, it all leads to the same picture, one guy acting alone. Dan's meeting with a senior Japanese cop right now."

"Next step?"

"It will be a textbook investigation process. We reconstruct everything Sato—that's the pilot's name—did over the last month or so, and take it back from there. Phone records, where he went, whom he saw, friends and associates, diary if any, everything we can get our hands on. The idea is to rebuild the guy completely and determine if he was part of any possible conspiracy. It will take time. It's a fairly exhaustive process."

"Best guess for now?" Jack asked.

"One guy acting alone," O'Day said again, rather more positively this time.

"It's too damned early for any conclusion," Andrea Price objected. O'Day turned.

"It's not a conclusion. Mr. Ryan asked for a best guess. I've been in the investigation business for quite a while. This looks like a fairly elaborate impulse crime. The method of the co-pilot's murder, for example. He didn't even move the body out of the cockpit. He *apologized* to the guy right after he stabbed him, according to the tapes."

"*Elaborate* impulse crime?" Andrea objected.

"Airline pilots are highly organized people," O'Day replied. "Things that would be highly complex for the layman are as natural to them as pulling up your zipper. Most assassinations are carried out by dysfunctional individuals who get lucky. In this case, unfortunately, we had a very capable subject who largely made his own luck. In any event, that's what we have at the moment."

"For this to have been a conspiracy, what would you look for?" Jack asked.

"Sir, successful criminal conspiracies are difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances." Price bristled again, but Inspector O'Day went on: "The problem is human nature. The most normal of us are boastful; we like to share secrets to show how bright we are. Most criminals talk their way right into prison one way or another. Okay, in a case like this we're not talking about your average robber, but the principle holds. To build any sort of conspiracy takes time and talk, and as a result, things leak. Then there's the problem of selecting the . . . 'shooter,' for want of a better term. Such time did not exist. The joint session was set up too late for much in the way of discussions to have taken place. The nature of the co-pilot's murder is very suggestive of a spur-of-the-moment method. A knife is less sure than a gun, and a steak knife isn't a good weapon, too easily bent or broken on a rib."

"How many murders have you handled?" Price asked.

"Enough. I've assisted on plenty of local police cases, especially here in D.C. The Washington Field Office has backed up the D.C. police for years. Anyway, for Sato to have been the 'shooter' in a conspiracy, he would have had to meet with people. We can track his free time, and we'll do that with the Japanese. But to this point there is not a single indicator that way. Quite the contrary, all circumstances point to someone who saw a unique opportunity and made use of it on an impulse."

"What if the pilot wasn't—"

"Ms. Price, the cockpit tapes go back before the takeoff from Vancouver. We've voice-printed everything in our own lab—it's a digital tape and the sound quality is beautiful. The same guy who took off from Narita flew the airplane into the ground here. Now, if it wasn't Sato, then why didn't the co-pilot—they flew together as a team—notice? Conversely, if the pilot and co-pilot were showups, then both were part of the conspiracy from the beginning, then why was the co-pilot murdered prior to takeoff from Vancouver? The Canadians are interviewing the rest of the crew for us, and all the service personnel say that the flight crew was just who they were supposed to be. The DNA-ID process will prove that beyond doubt."

"Inspector, you are very persuasive," Ryan observed.

"Sir, this investigation will be rather involved, what with all the facts that have to be checked out, but the meat of the issue is fairly simple. It's damned hard to fake a crime scene. There's just too many things we can do. Is it theoretically possible to set things up in such a way as to fool our people?" O'Day asked rhetorically. "Yes, sir, maybe it is, but to do that would take months of preparation, and they didn't have months. It really comes down to one thing: the decision to call the joint session happened while that aircraft was over mid-Pacific."

Much as she wanted to, Price couldn't counter that argument. She'd run her own quick investigation on Patrick O'Day. Emil Jacobs had reinstituted the post of roving inspector years before, and collected people who preferred investigation to management. O'Day was an agent for whom running a field division had little appeal. He was part of a small team of experienced investigators who worked out of the Director's office, an unofficial inspectorate which went into the field to keep an eye on things, mainly sensitive cases. He was a good cop who hated desk work, and Price had to concede that he knew how to run an investigation, better yet was someone outside the chain of command who wouldn't ham things up in order to get a promotion. The inspector had driven to the House in a four-by-four pickup—he wore cowboy boots! she noticed—and probably wanted publicity about as much as he wanted the pox. So Assistant Director Tony Caruso, titularly in charge of the investigation, would report to the Department of Justice, but Patrick O'Day would short-circuit the chain to report directly to Murray—who would, in turn, farm O'Day to the President so as to garner personal favor. She'd figured Murray for a sharp operator. Bill Shaw, after all, had used him as personal troubleshooter. And Murray's loyalty would be to the institution of the FBI. A man could have a worse agenda, she admitted to herself. For O'Day it was simpler still. He investigated crimes for a living, and while he appeared to jump too quickly to conclusions, this transplanted cowboy was doing it all by the book. You had to watch the good ol' boys. They were so good at hiding their smarts. But he would never have made the Detail, she consoled herself.

"ENJOY YOUR VACATION?" Mary Pat Foley was either in very early or in very late, Clark saw. It came to him again that of all the senior people in government, President Ryan was probably getting the most sleep, little though that might be. It was a hell of a way to run a railroad. People simply didn't perform well when denied rest for an extended period of time, something he'd learned the hard way in the field, but put a guy into high office, and he immediately forgot that—such pedestrian items as human factors faded into the mist. And then a month later, they wondered how they'd screwed up so bad. But that was usually after they got some poor line-animal killed in the field.

"MP, when the hell is the last time you slept?" Not many people could talk to her that way, but John had been her training officer, once upon a time.

A wan smile. "John, you're not Jewish, and you're not my mother."

Clark looked around. "Where's Ed?"

"On his way back from the Gulf. Conference with the Saudis," she

explained. Though Mrs. Foley technically ranked Mr. Foley, Saudi culture wasn't quite ready to deal with a female King Spook—Queen Spook, John corrected himself with a smile—and Ed was probably better on the conferences anyway.

"Anything I need to know about?"

She shook her head. "Routine. So, Domingo, did you drop the question?"

"You are playing rough this morning," Clark observed before his partner could speak.

Chavez just grinned. The country might be in turmoil, but some things were more important. "Could be worse, Mr. C. I'm not a lawyer, am I?"

"There goes the neighborhood," John grumbled. Then it was time for business. "How's Jack doing?"

"I'm scheduled to see him after lunch, but it wouldn't surprise me if they canceled out. The poor bastard must be buried alive."

"What I saw about how he got roped into this, is what the papers said true?"

"Yes, it is. So, we have a Kelly Girl for President," the Deputy Director (Operations) posed as a multifaceted inside joke. "We're going to do a comprehensive threat assessment. I want you two in on it."

"Why us?" Chavez asked.

"Because I'm tired of having all that done by the Intelligence Directorate. I tell you one thing that's going to happen: we have a President now who understands what we do here. We're going to beef up Operations to the point where I can pick up a phone, ask a question, and get an answer I can understand."

"PLAN BLUE?" Clark asked, and received a welcome nod. "Blue" had been his last function before leaving the CIA's training facility, known as "the Farm," down near the Navy's nuclear-weapons locker at Yorktown, Virginia. Instead of hiring a bunch of Ivy League intellectuals—at least they didn't smoke pipes anymore—he had proposed that the Agency recruit cops, police officers right off the street. Cops, he reasoned, knew about using informants, didn't have to be taught street smarts, and knew about surviving in dangerous areas. All of that would save training dollars, and probably produce better field officers. The proposal had been File-13'd by two successive DDOs, but Mary Pat had known about it from the beginning, and approved the concept. "Can you sell it?"

"John, you're going to help me sell it. Look how well Domingo here has turned out."

"You mean I'm not affirmative action?" Chavez asked.

"No, Ding, that's only with his daughter," Mrs. Foley suggested.

"Ryan will go for it. He isn't very keen on the Director. Anyway, for now I want you two to do your debrief on SANDALWOOD."

"What about our cover?" Clark asked. He didn't have to explain what he meant. Mary Pat had never got her hands dirty in the field—she was espionage, not the paramilitary side of the Operations Directorate—but she understood just fine.

"John, you were acting under presidential orders. That's written down and in the book. Nobody's going to second-guess anything you did, especially with saving Koga. You both have an Intelligence Star coming for that. President Durling wanted to see you and present the medals himself up at Camp David. I suppose Jack will, too."

Whoa, Chavez thought behind unblinking eyes, but nice as that thought was, he'd been thinking about something else on the three-hour drive up from Yorktown. "When's the threat-assessment start?"

"Tomorrow for our side of it. Why?" MP asked.

"Ma'am, I think we're going to be busy."

"I hope you're wrong," she replied, after nodding.

"I HAVE TWO procedures scheduled for today," Cathy said, surveying the breakfast buffet. Since they didn't know what the Ryans liked to have in the morning, the staff had prepared some—actually quite a lot—of everything. Sally and Little Jack thought that was just great—even better, schools were closed. Katie, a recent graduate to real foods, gnawed at a piece of bacon in her hand while contemplating some buttered toast. For children, the immediate has the greatest importance. Sally, now fifteen (going on thirty, her father sometimes lamented), took the longest view of the three, but at the moment that was limited to how her social life would be affected. For all of them, Daddy was still Daddy, whatever job he might hold at the moment. They'd learn different, Jack knew, but one thing at a time.

"We haven't figured that out," her husband replied, selecting scrambled eggs and bacon for his plate. He'd need his energy today.

"Jack, the deal was that I could still do my work, remember?"

"Mrs. Ryan?" It was Andrea Price, still hovering around like a guardian angel, albeit with an automatic pistol. "We're still figuring out the security issues and—"

"My patients need me. Jack, Bernie Katz and Hal Marsh can backstop me on a lot of things, but one of my patients today needs *me*. I have teaching rounds to prep for, too." She checked her watch. "In four hours." Which was true, Ryan didn't have to ask. Professor Caroline Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., was top-gun for driving a laser around a retina. People came from all over the world to watch her work.

"But schools are—" Price stopped, reminding herself that she knew

better.

"Not medical schools. We can't send patients home. I'm sorry. I know how complicated things are for everybody, but I have people who depend on me, too, and I have to be there for them." Cathy looked at the adult faces in the kitchen for a decision that would go her way. The kitchen staff—all sailors—moved in and out like mobile statues, pretending not to hear anything. The Secret Service people adopted a different blank expression, one with more discomfort in it.

The First Lady was supposed to be an unpaid adjunct to her husband. That was a rule which needed changing at some point. Sooner or later, after all, there would be a female President, and *that* would really upset the applecart, a fact well known but studiously ignored to this point in American history. The usual political wife was a woman who appeared at her husband's side with an adoring smile and a few carefully picked words, who endured the tedium of a campaign, and the surprisingly brutal handshakes—certainly Cathy Ryan would not subject her surgeon's hands to *that*, Price thought suddenly. But *this* First Lady actually had a job. More than that, she was a physician with a Lasker Memorial Public Service Award shortly to sit on her mantel (the awards dinner had yet to be held), and if she had learned anything about Cathy Ryan, Price knew that she was dedicated to her profession, not merely to her husband. However admirable that might be, it would be a royal pain in the ass to the Service, Price was sure. Worse yet, the principal agent assigned to *Mrs*. Dr. Ryan was Roy Altman, a tall bruiser of a former paratrooper whom she'd not yet met. That decision had been made for Roy's size as well as his savvy. It never hurt to have one obvious bodyguard close aboard, and since the First Lady appeared to many as a soft target, one of Roy's functions was to make the casual troublemaker think twice on that basis alone. Other members of her Detail would be virtually invisible. One of Altman's other functions was to use his bulk to block bullets, something the agents trained for but didn't dwell on.

Each of the Ryan kids would have to be protected as well, in a sub-detail that routinely split into segments. Katie's had been the hardest to select—because agents had fought for the job. The boss there would be the oldest member of the team, a grandfather named Don Russell. Little Jack would get a youngish male principal who was a serious sports fan, while Sally Ryan drew a female agent just over thirty, single, and hip (Price's term rather than the agent's), wise in the ways of young men and mall-shopping. The idea was to make the family as comfortable as was possible with the necessity of being followed everywhere except the bathroom by people with loaded firearms and radios. It was, in the end, a hopeless task, of course. President Ryan had the background to accept the need for all of this. His family

would learn to endure it.

"Dr. Ryan, when will you have to leave?" Price asked.

"About forty minutes. It depends on traf——"

"Not anymore," Price corrected the First Lady. The day would be bad enough. The idea had been to use the previous day to brief the *Vice* President's family in on all the things that had to be done, but that plan had been shot completely to hell, along with so many other things. Altman was in another room, going over maps. There were three viable land routes to Baltimore: Interstate-95, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, and US Route 1, all of them packed every morning with rush-hour traffic which a Secret Service convoy would disrupt to a fare-thee-well; worse, for any potential assassin, the routes were too predictable, narrowing down as they did on nearing Baltimore. Johns Hopkins Hospital had a helicopter pad atop its pediatrics building, but nobody had yet considered the political fallout that could result from hopping the First Lady to work every day in a Marine Corps VH-60. Maybe that was a viable option now, Price decided. She left the room to confer with Altman, and suddenly the Ryan family was alone, having breakfast as though they were still a normal family.

"My God, Jack," Cathy breathed.

"I know." Instead of talking, they enjoyed the silence for a full minute, both of them looking down at their breakfast, poking things around with forks instead of eating.

"The kids need clothes for the funeral," Cathy said finally.

"Tell Andrea?"

"Okay.

"Do you know when it'll be?"

"I should find out today."

"I'll still be able to work, right?" With Price gone she could allow her concern to show.

Jack looked up. "Yes. Look, I'm going to try my best to keep us as normal as we can, and I know how important your work is. Matter of fact, I haven't had much chance to tell you what **I** think of that prize you just bagged." He smiled. "I'm damned proud of you, babe."

Price came back in. "Dr. Ryan?" she said. And, of course, both heads turned. They could see it on her face. The most basic of issues hadn't been discussed yet. Did they call her *Doctor* Ryan, *Missus* Ryan, or

"Make it easier on everyone, okay? Call me Cathy."

Price couldn't do *that*, but she let it slide for the moment. "Until we figure things out, we'll fly you there. The Marines have a helicopter on the way here."

"Isn't that expensive?" Cathy asked.

"Yes, it is, but we have to figure out procedures and things, and for

the moment this is the easiest thing to do. Also"—a very large man came into the room—"this is Roy Altman. He'll be your principal agent for a while."

"Oh," was all Cathy was able to say at the moment. Six feet three and 220 pounds of Roy Altman came into the room. He had thinning blond hair, pale skin, and a sheepish expression that made him seem embarrassed by his bulk. Like all Secret Service agents, his suit coat was cut a little big to help conceal his service automatic, and in his particular case hiding a machine gun would have been fairly easy. Altman came over to shake her hand, which he did with considerable delicacy.

"Ma'am, you know what my job is. I'll try to keep as much out of the way as possible." Two more people came into the room. Altman introduced them as the rest of her Detail for the day. All of them were temporary. They all had to get along with their principal, and that wasn't all so easy to predict, even with amiable principals, as all the Ryans seemed thus far to be.

Cathy was tempted to ask if all this was really necessary, but she knew better. On the other hand, how would she shepherd this mob around the Maumenee Building? She traded a look with her husband, and reminded herself that they would not be in this unhappy predicament had she not agreed to Jack's elevation to the vice presidency, which had lasted all of—what? Five minutes? Maybe not even that long. Just then came the roar of the Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopter, landing up the hill from the house and creating a mini-blizzard on what had once been the site of a small astronomical observatory. Her husband looked at his watch and realized that the Marines of VMH-1 were indeed operating off a short fuse. How long, he wondered, before the smothering attention drove them all mad?

"THIS SHOT IS *live* from the grounds of the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue," the NBC reporter said, cued by the director. "That looks like one of the Marine helicopters. I suppose the President is going somewhere." The camera zoomed in as the snow cloud settled down somewhat.

"An American Black Hawk, extensively modified," the intelligence officer said. "See there? That's a 'Black Hole' infrared suppression system to protect against ground-to-air missiles that track engine heat."

"How effective?"

"Very, but not against laser-guided weapons," he added. "Nor is it useful against guns." No sooner had the aircraft's main rotor stopped turning than a squad of Marines surrounded it. "I need a map of the

area. Wherever that camera is, a mortar would also be effective. The same is true of the White House grounds, of course." And anybody, they knew, could use a mortar, all the more so with the new laser-guided rounds first developed by the British and soon thereafter copied by the rest of the world. In a way it was the Americans who showed the way. It was their aphorism, after all: *If you can see it, you can hit it. If you can hit it, you can kill it.* And everyone inside of it, whatever "it" might be.

With that thought, a plan began to form. He checked his watch, which had a stop-watch function button, placing his finger there and waiting. The TV director, six thousand miles away, had nothing better to do than keep on that long-lens camera. Presently, a large vehicle approached the helicopter, and four people got out. They walked right to the aircraft, whose crewman held the sliding door open.

"That's Mrs. Ryan," the commentator said. "She's a surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore."

"You suppose she's flying to work?" the reporter asked.

"We'll know in a minute."

Which was about right. The intelligence officer pushed the watch button the moment the door closed. The rotor started turning a few seconds later, building power from the two turbine engines, and then the helicopter lifted off, nose-down as they all did, gaining altitude as it headed off, probably to the north. He checked his watch to see the elapsed time from door-close to liftoff. This aircraft had a military crew, and they would take pride in doing everything the same way every time. More than enough time for a mortar round to travel three times the necessary distance, he judged.

IT WAS HER first time in a helicopter. They had Cathy sit in the jump seat behind and between the two pilots. They didn't tell her why. The Black Hawk's rugged airframe was designed to absorb fully fourteen g's in the event of a crash, and this seat was statistically the safest in the bird. The four-bladed rotor made for a smooth ride, and about the only objection she had to the experience was the cold. No one had yet designed a military aircraft with an efficient heating system. It would have been enjoyable but for the lingering embarrassment, and the fact that the Secret Service agents were scanning out the doors, obviously looking for some sort of danger or other. It was becoming clear that they could take the fun out of anything.

"I GUESS SHE'S commuting to work," the reporter decided. The

camera had tracked the VH-60 until it disappeared into the tree line. It was a rare moment of levity. All of the networks were doing the same thing they'd done after the assassination of John Kennedy. Every single regular show was off the air while the networks devoted every waking hour—twenty-four hours per day now, which had not been the case in 1963 to coverage of the disaster and its aftermath. What that really meant was a bonanza for the cable channels, as had been proven by tracking information through the various ratings services, but the networks had to be responsible, and doing *this* was responsible journalism.

"Well, she *is* a physician, isn't she? It's easy to forget that, despite the disaster that has overtaken our government, outside the Beltway, there are still people who do real work. Babies are being born. Life goes on," the commentator observed pontifically, as was his job.

"And so does the country." The reporter looked directly at the camera for the transition to commercial. He didn't hear the voice from so far away.

"For now."

THE KIDS WERE shepherded away by their bodyguards, and the real work of the day began. Arnie van Damm looked like hell. He was about to hit the wall, Jack decided; the combination of grueling work and grief was about to destroy the man. All well and good that the President should be spared as much as possible, Ryan knew, but not at the cost of wrecking the people upon whom he depended so much.

"Say your piece, Arnie, then disappear for a while and get some rest."

"You know I can't do that—"

"Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"When we've finished here, have somebody drive Arnie home. You will not allow him back in the House until four this afternoon." Ryan shifted his gaze. "Arnie, you will *not* burn out on me. I need you too much."

The chief of staff was too tired to show any gratitude. He handed over a folder. "Here are the plans for the funeral, day after tomorrow."

Ryan flipped open the folder, his demeanor deflated as suddenly as he had exercised another dollop of presidential authority.

Whoever had put the plan together had been clever and sensitive about it. Maybe somewhere there had been a contingency plan for this sort of thing, a question Ryan would never bring himself to ask, but whatever the truth was, someone had done well. Roger and Anne Durling would lie in state in the White House, since the Capitol

Rotunda was not available, and for twenty-four hours people would be allowed to walk through, entering through the front, and exiting from the East Wing. The sadness of the event would be muted for the mourners by later exposure to the Americana and presidential portraits. The Durlings would be taken by hearse to National Cathedral the next morning, along with three members of the Congress, a Jew, a Protestant, and a Catholic, for the interdenominational memorial service. Ryan had two major speeches to give. The text of both was in the back of the folder.

"WHAT'S THAT FOR?" Cathy was wearing a crash helmet with full connections into the helicopter's intercom. She pointed at another aircraft fifty yards to their right rear.

"We always fly with a backup aircraft, ma'am. In case something breaks and we have to land," the pilot explained from the right-front seat, "we don't want to delay you unnecessarily." He didn't say that in the back-up helicopter were four more Secret Service agents with heavier weapons.

"How often does that happen, Colonel?"

"Not since I've been around, ma'am." Nor did he say that one of the Marine Black Hawks had crashed into the Potomac in 1993, killing all hands. Well, it had been a long time. The pilot's eyes were scanning the air constantly. Part of VMH-1's institutional memory was what had seemed to be an attempted ramming over the California home of President Reagan. In fact it had been a screwup by a careless private pilot. After his interview with the Secret Service, the poor bastard had probably given up flying entirely. They were the most humorless people, Colonel Hank Goodman knew from long experience. The air was clear and cold, but pretty smooth. He controlled the stick with his fingertips as they followed I-95 northeast. Baltimore was already in view, and he knew the approach into Hopkins well enough from previous duty at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, whose Navy and Marine helos occasionally helped fly accident victims. Hopkins, he remembered, got the pediatric trauma cases for the state's critical-care system.

The same sobering thought hit Cathy when they flew past the University of Maryland's Shock-Trauma building. This *wasn't* her first flight in a helicopter, was it? It was just that for the other one she'd been unconscious. People had tried to kill her and Sally, and all the people around her were in jeopardy if somebody else made another try—why? Because of who her husband was.

"Mr. Altman?" Cathy heard over the intercom.

"Yeah, Colonel?"

"You called ahead, right?"

"Yes, they know we're coming, Colonel," Altman assured him.

"No, I mean, is the roof checked out for a–60?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this bird is heavier than the one the state troopers use. Is the pad certified for us?" Silence provided the answer. Colonel Goodman looked over at his co-pilot and grimaced. "Okay, we can handle that this one time."

"Clear left."

"Clear right," Goodman replied. He circled once, checking the wind sock on the roof of the building below. Just puffs of wind from the northwest. The descent was gentle, and the colonel kept a close eye on the radio whips to his right. He touched down soft, keeping his rotor turning to prevent the full weight of the aircraft from resting on the reinforced-concrete roof. It probably wasn't necessary, of course. Civil engineers always put more strength into buildings than they actually needed. But Goodman hadn't made the rank of bird-colonel by taking chances for the fun of it. His crew chief moved to pull the door open. The Secret Service agents went first, scanning the building while Goodman kept his hand on the collective, ready to yank up and rocket from the building. Then they helped Mrs. Ryan out, and he could get on with his day.

"When we get back, call this place yourself and get the rating on the roof. Then ask for plans for our files."

"Yes, sir. It just went too fast, sir."

"Tell me about it." He switched to the radio link. "Marine Three, Marine Two."

"Two," the orbiting backup aircraft responded at once.

"On the go." Goodman pulled the collective and angled south off the roof. "She seems nice enough."

"Got nervous just before we landed," the crew chief observed.

"So was I," Goodman said. "*I'll* call them when we get back."

THE SECRET SERVICE *had* called ahead to Dr. Katz, who was waiting inside, along with three Hopkins security officers. Introductions were exchanged. Nametags were passed out, making the three agents ostensible staff members of the medical school, and the day of Associate Professor Caroline M. Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., began.

"How's Mrs. Hart doing?"

"I saw her twenty minutes ago, Cathy. She's actually rather pleased to have the First Lady operating on her." Professor Katz was surprised at Professor Ryan's reaction.

6

EVALUATION

IT TOOK A LOT TO CROWD Andrews Air Force Base, whose expansive concrete ramps looked to be the approximate size of Nebraska, but the security police force there was now patrolling a collection of aircraft as dense and as diverse as the place in Arizona where they kept out-of-work airliners. Moreover, each bird had its own security Detail, all of whom had to be coordinated with the Americans in an atmosphere of institutional distrust, since the security people were all trained to regard everyone in sight with suspicion. There were two Concordes, one British and one French, for sex appeal. The rest were mainly wide-bodies of one sort or another, and most of them liveried in the colors of the nation-flag carrier of their country of origin. Sabena, KLM, and Lufthansa led off the NATO row. SAS handled each of the three Scandinavian countries, each with its own 747. Chiefs of state traveled in style, and not one of the aircraft, large or small, had flown as much as a third full. Greeting them was a task to tax the skills and patience of the combined White House and State Department offices of protocol, and word was sent through the embassies that President Ryan simply didn't have the time to give everyone the attention he or she deserved. But the Air Force honor guard got to meet them all, forming, dismissing, and reforming more than once an hour while the red VIP carpet stayed in place, and one world leader followed another—at times as quickly as one aircraft could be rolled to its parking place and another could taxi to the specified arrival point with band and podium. Speeches were kept brief and somber for the ranks of cameras, and then they were moved off briskly to the waiting ranks of cars.

Moving them into Washington was yet another headache. Every car belonging to the Diplomatic Protection Service was tied up, forming four sets of escorts that hustled in and out of town, convoying the embassy limousines and tying up Suitland Parkway and Interstate 395. The most amazing part, perhaps, was that every president, prime minister, and even the kings and serene princes managed to get delivered to the proper embassy—most of them, fortunately, on Massachusetts Avenue. It proved to be a triumph of improvised

organization in the end.

The embassies themselves handled the quiet private receptions. The statesmen, all in one place, had to meet, of course, to do business or merely to chat. The British Ambassador, the most senior of both the NATO countries and his nation's Commonwealth, would this night host an "informal" dinner for twenty-two national leaders.

"Okay, his gear *is* down this time," the Air Force captain said, as darkness fell on the base.

The tower crew at Andrews was, perversely, the same one which had been on duty on That Night, as people had taken to call it. They watched as the JAL 747 floated in on runway Zero-One Right. The flight crew might have noticed that the remains of a sister aircraft were to be found in a large hangar on the east side of the base—at this moment a truck was delivering the distorted remains of a jet engine, recently extracted from the basement of the Capitol building, but the jetliner completed its rollout, following directions to turn left and taxi behind a vehicle to the proper place for deplaning its passengers. The pilot did notice the cameras, and the crewmen walking from the relative warmth of a building to their equipment for the latest and most interesting arrival. He thought to say something to his co-pilot, but decided not to. Captain Torajiro Sato had been, well, if not a close friend, then a colleague, and a cordial one at that, and the disgrace to his country, his airline, and his profession would be a difficult thing to bear for years. It could only have been worse had Sato been carrying passengers, for protecting them was the first rule of their lives, but even though his culture respected suicide for a purpose as an honorable exercise, and beyond that awarded status to the more dramatic exits from corporeal life, this example of it had shocked and distressed his country more than anything in living memory. The pilot had always worn his uniform with pride. Now he would change out of it at the earliest opportunity, both abroad and at home. The pilot shook off the thought, applied the brakes smoothly, and halted the airliner so that the old-fashioned wheeled stairway was exactly even with the forward door of the Boeing airliner. It was then that he and his co-pilot turned inward to share a look of irony and shame at having performed their job with skill. Instead of sleeping over at the usual mid-level Washington hotel, they would be quartered in officers'accommodations on the base, and, probably, with someone to watch over them. With a gun.

The door of the airliner opened under the gentle ministrations of the senior stewardess. Prime Minister Mogataru Koga, his coat buttoned, and his tie straightened in his collar by a flustered aide, stood in the door briefly, assaulted by a blast of cold February air, and headed down the steps. The Air Force band struck up "Ruffles and Flourishes."

Acting Secretary of State Scott Adler was waiting at the bottom. The two had never met, but both had been fully briefed, Adler rather more quickly, as this was his fourth and most important arrival of the day. Koga looked just like his pictures. The man was grossly ordinary, about five feet six inches in height, of middle age, with a full head of black hair. His dark eyes were neutral—or tried to be, Adler thought on closer examination. There was sadness there. Hardly a surprise, the diplomat thought as he extended his hand.

"Welcome, Mr. Prime Minister."

"Thank you, Mr. Adler." The two men walked to the podium. Adler spoke a few muted words of welcome—this speech, drafted at Foggy Bottom, had taken an hour to get right, which amounted to about a minute to the world. Then Koga came to the microphone.

"First of all, **I** must thank you, Mr. Adler, and thank your country, for allowing me to come today. As surprising as this gesture is, I have come to understand that such things are a tradition in your vast and generous country. I come to represent my country today on a sad but necessary mission. I hope it will be a mission of healing for your country and for mine. I hope that your citizens and ours can see in this tragedy a bridge to a peaceful future." Koga stepped back, and Adler led him off down the red carpet, as the assembled band played *Kimagayo*, the brief anthem of Japan which had actually been written by an English composer a hundred years earlier. The Prime Minister looked at the honor guard and tried to read the young faces, looking for hatred or disgust in them, but finding only impassivity on the way to the waiting car. Adler got in behind him.

"How are you feeling, sir?" SecState asked.

"Well, thank you. I slept on the flight." Koga assumed that the question was a mere pleasantry, then learned that it was not. It had been Ryan's idea, not Adler's, oddly enough, made somewhat more convenient by the time of day. The sun was down below the horizon now, and the sunset would be a brief one, as clouds rolled in from the northwest.

"If you wish, we can see President Ryan on the way to your embassy. The President instructed me to say that if you would prefer not to do so, because of the lengthy flight or other reasons, he will not be offended." Scott was surprised that Koga didn't hesitate an instant.

"I gladly accept this honor."

The acting Secretary of State pulled a portable radio from his coat pocket. "EAGLE to SWORDBASE. Affirmative." Adler had chuckled a few days earlier to learn his Secret Service code-name. "EAGLE" was the English counterpart to his German-Jewish surname.

"SWORDBASE copies affirmative," the encrypted radio crackled back.

"EAGLE, out."

The motorcade speeded up Suitland Parkway. Under other circumstances a news helicopter might have tracked them with a live camera, but Washington airspace was effectively shut down for the moment. Even National Airport was closed, with its flights shunted to Dulles or Baltimore-Washington International. Koga hadn't noticed the driver, who was American. The car turned right off the parkway, then hopped a block to the ramp for I-295, which turned almost immediately into I-395, a bumpy thoroughfare that led across the Anacostia River toward downtown Washington. As it merged with the main roadway, the stretch Lexus in which he was sitting veered to the right. Another identical car took its place as his formed up with three Secret Service Suburbans in a maneuver that took a mere five seconds. The empty streets made the rest of the trip easy, and in but a few minutes, his car turned onto West Executive Drive.

"Here they come, sir," Price said, notified by the uniformed guard at the gatehouse.

Jack walked outside just as the car halted, not sure of the protocol for this—one more thing he'd yet to figure out about his new job. He almost moved to pull open the door himself, but a Marine corporal got there first, yanking the door and saluting like a robot.

"Mr. President," Koga said on standing up.

"Mr. Prime Minister. Please come this way." Ryan gestured with his hand.

Koga had never been to the White House before, and it struck him that had he flown over—what? three months earlier—to discuss the trade problems that had led to a shooting war . . . yet another shameful failure. Then Ryan's demeanor came through the haze. He'd read once that the full ceremonies of a state arrival were not the sign of importance here—well, that was not possible or appropriate in any case, Koga told himself. But Ryan had stood alone at the door, and that must have meant something, the Japanese Prime Minister told himself on the way up the stairs. A minute later, whizzed through the West Wing, he and Ryan were alone in the Oval Office, separated only by a low table and a coffee tray.

"Thank you for this," Koga said simply.

"We had to meet," President Ryan said. "Any other time and we'd have people watching and timing us and trying to read our lips." He poured a cup for his guest and then himself.

"Hai, the press in Tokyo have become much more forward in the past few days." Koga made to lift his cup, but stopped. "Whom do I thank for rescuing me from Yamata?"

Jack looked up. "The decision was made here. The two officers are in the area, if you want to see them again personally."

"If it is convenient." Koga sipped at his cup. He would have preferred tea, but Ryan was doing his best to be a host, and the quality of the gesture impressed his guest. "Thank you for letting me come, President Ryan."

"I tried to talk to Roger about the trade problem, but . . . but I wasn't persuasive enough. Then I worried that something might be happening with Goto, but I didn't move quickly enough, what with the Russian trip and everything. It was all a great big accident, but I suppose war usually is. In any case, it is up to the two of us to heal that wound. I want it done as rapidly as possible."

"The conspirators are all under arrest. They will appear in court for treason," Koga promised.

"That is your affair," the President replied. Which wasn't really true. Japan's legal system was a curious one in which courts often enough violated the country's constitution in favor of broader but unwritten cultural mores, something unthinkable to Americans. Ryan and America expected that the trials would go by the book with no such variations. Koga understood that fully. A reconciliation between America and Japan depended absolutely on that, along with a multitude of other understandings which could not be spoken, at least not at this level. For his own part, Koga had already made sure that the judges selected for the various trials understood what the rules were.

"I never thought it possible that such a thing could happen, and then, that madman Sato . . . My country and my people are shamed by it. I have so much to do, Mr. Ryan."

Jack nodded. "We both do. But it will be done." He paused. "The technical issues can be handled at the ministerial level. Between ourselves, I only wanted to be sure that we understood each other. I will trust your goodwill."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Koga set his cup down to examine the man on the opposite sofa. He was young for such a job, though not the youngest American president. Theodore Roosevelt would probably hold that distinction into eternity. On the lengthy flight from Tokyo he'd read up on John Patrick Ryan. The man had killed with his own hand more than once, had been threatened with his own death and that of his family, and had done other things which his intelligence advisers only speculated about. Examining his face over a brief span of seconds, he tried to understand how such a person could also be a man of peace, but the clues were not there to be seen, and Koga wondered if there was something in the American character that he'd never quite understood. He saw the intelligence and the curiosity, one to measure and the other to probe. He saw fatigue and sadness. His recent days must have been the purest form of hell, Koga was sure.

Somewhere still in this building, probably, were the children of Roger and Anne Durling, and that would be like a physical weight for the man to carry about. It struck the Prime Minister that Ryan, like most Westerners, was not very skilled at concealing his inner thoughts, but that wasn't true, was it? There had to be other things happening behind those blue eyes, and those things were not being advertised. They were not in any way threatening, but they were there. This Ryan *was* samurai, as he'd said in his office a few days earlier, but there was an additional layer of complexity as well. Koga set that aside. It wasn't all that important, and there was something that he had to ask, a personal decision he'd made over mid-Pacific.

"I have a request, if that is permitted."

"What is that, sir?"

"MR. PRESIDENT, this is not a good idea," Price objected a few minutes later.

"Good or not, we're going to do it. Get it organized," Ryan told her.

"Yes, sir." Andrea Price withdrew from the room.

Koga watched the exercise and learned something else. Ryan was a man capable of making decisions and giving orders entirely without histrionics.

The cars were still at the West Entrance, and it was simply a matter of donning coats and getting into them. A total of four Suburbans U-turned in the parking area, heading south, then east toward the Hill. The motorcade this time didn't use sirens and lights, instead proceeding almost in accord with the traffic laws—but not quite. The empty streets made it easy for them to jump lights, and soon enough they turned left onto Capitol Street, and left again toward the building. There were fewer lights now in evidence. The steps had been cleared, allowing an easy climb up once the cars had parked and the Secret Service agents deployed. Ryan led Koga upwards, and presently they were both looking down into the now-empty bowl that had been the House chamber.

The Japanese Prime Minister stood erect at first. He clapped his hands loudly, once, to garner the attention of the spirits who, his religious beliefs told him, would still be here. Then he bowed formally, and said his prayers for them. Ryan was moved to do the same. There were no TV cameras present to record the moment—actually there were still a few network cameras about, but the evening news broadcasts were over, and the instruments stood idle, their crews in the control vans drinking coffee and unaware of what was taking place a hundred yards away. It took only a minute or two in any case. When it was over, an American hand was extended, and a Japanese

hand took it, and two pairs of eyes came to an understanding that ministers and treaties could never really have achieved, and in the harsh February wind, peace was finally and completely made between two countries. Standing ten feet away, Andrea Price was glad that the White House photographer had come along, and the tears she blinked away from her eyes were not from the wind. Then she conducted the two men back down the steps and into separate cars.

"WHY DID THEY overreact so?" the Prime Minister asked, before sipping her sherry.

"Well, as you know I have not been fully briefed," the Prince of Wales replied, first qualifying himself, since he didn't really speak for Her Majesty's Government. "But your naval exercises did have the appearance of a threatening act."

"Sri Lanka must come to terms with the Tamils. They've shown a regrettable reluctance to enter into substantive negotiations, and we were trying to influence them. After all, we have our own troops deployed as peacekeepers, and we don't want them to be held hostage to the overall situation."

"Quite so, but then, why don't you withdraw your peacekeepers as the government requested?"

The Indian Prime Minister sighed tiredly—it had been a long flight for her, too, and under the circumstances a little exasperation was permissible. "Your Royal Highness, if we withdraw our troops and then the situation flares up yet again, we will face difficulties with our own Tamil citizens. This is truly a most unhappy situation. We attempted to help assuage a difficult political impasse, entirely at our own expense, but then the Sri Lankan government finds itself unable to take the remedial action necessary to prevent an embarrassment to my country, and a continuing rebellion in their own. *Then* the Americans interfere without any real cause, and only bolster the intransigence of the Sri Lankans."

"When does their Prime Minister arrive?" the Prince asked. The substantive reply was a shrug, followed by verbiage. "We offered the chance to fly over together so that we might discuss the situation, but he regrettably declined. Tomorrow, I think. If his aircraft doesn't malfunction," she added. That national-flag carrier had all manner of technical problems, not to mention a long-lived security threat.

"If you wish, the ambassador can probably arrange a quiet meeting."

"Perhaps that would not be entirely useless," the Prime Minister allowed. "I also wish the Americans would get the proper spin on things. They've always been so hopeless on our part of the world."

Which was the point of the exercise, the Prince understood. He and President Ryan had been friends for years, and India wanted him to be the intercessor. It would hardly have been the first time for such a mission on his part, but in all such cases the Heir Apparent was constrained to seek guidance from the government, which, in this case, meant the ambassador. Someone in Whitehall had decided that His Royal Highness's friendship with the new American President was more important than a government-to-government contact, and besides, it would make the monarchy look good at a time when such appearances were both useful and necessary. It also gave His Highness an excuse to visit some land in Wyoming which was quietly owned by the Royal Family, or "the Firm," as it was sometimes called by insiders.

"I see," was as substantive a reply as he could make, but Britain had to take a request from India seriously. Once the brightest diadem in a world-spanning crown, that country was still an important trading partner, bloody nuisance though it might frequently be. A direct contact between the two heads of government might be embarrassing. The American harassment of the Indian fleet was not widely publicized, falling as it had toward the end of hostilities between America and Japan, and it was in everyone's interest that things should remain that way. President Ryan had enough on his plate, his old friend knew. The Prince hoped that Jack was getting some rest. For the people in the reception room, sleep was just a defense against jet lag. For Ryan it was necessary fuel, and he'd need plenty for the next two days.

THE LINE WAS endless, the typical cliché. It stretched well beyond the Treasury building, and the far end of it was like the ragged end of a rope, with new people forming up and tightening into the line so that it appeared to generate itself out of air, constantly replenishing as its members moved slowly forward in the cold air. They entered the building in groups of fifty or so, and the opening-closing cycle of the doors was regulated by someone with a watch, or maybe just counting slowly. There was an honor guard, an enlisted member of each uniformed service. The Detail was commanded by an Air Force captain at the moment. They and the caskets stood still while the people shuffled past.

Ryan examined their faces on his office TV just after he came in, again before sunrise, wondering what they thought and why they'd come. Few had actually voted for Roger Durling. He'd been the number-two man on the ticket, after all, and he'd taken over the job only with the resignation of Bob Fowler. But America embraced her

presidents, and in death Roger was the recipient of love and respect that had never seemed all that close to him in life. Some of the mourners turned away from the coffins to look around at the entry hall of a building which many had probably never seen before, using their few seconds of time there strangely to look away from the reason for their having come, then to go down the steps and out the East Entrance, no longer a line, but in groups of friends or family members, or even alone, to leave the city and do their business. Then it was time for him to do the same—more properly, to head back to his family, and study up for the tasks of the following day.

WHY NOT? THEY'D decided on arriving at Dulles. Lucky enough to find a cheap motel at the end of the Metro's Yellow Line, they'd ridden the subway into town, and gotten off at the Farragut Square station, only a few blocks from the White House so that they could take a look. It would be a first for both of them—many firsts, in fact, since neither had ever visited Washington, the cursed city on a minor river that polluted the entire country from which it sucked blood and treasure—these were favored lines of the Mountain Men. Finding the end of the line had taken time, and they'd shuffled along for several hours, with the only good news being that they knew how to dress for cold, which was more than they could say for the East Coast idiots in the line with them, with their thin coats and bare heads. It was all Pete Holbrook and Ernest Brown could do to keep from cracking their jokes about what had happened. Instead they listened to what other people in line said. That turned out to be disappointing. Maybe a lot of them were federal employees, both men thought. There were a few whimpers about how sad it all was, how Roger Durling had been a very nice man, and how attractive his wife had been, and how cute the children were, and how awful it must be for them.

Well, the two members of the Mountain Men had to agree between themselves, yeah, sure enough it was tough on the kids—and who didn't like kids?—but scrambling eggs was probably something mama chicken didn't like to see, right? And how much suffering had their father inflicted on honest citizens who only wanted to have their constitutional right to be left alone by all these useless Washington jerks? But they didn't say that. They kept their mouths mostly shut as the line wended its way along the street. Both knew the story of the Treasury building, which sheltered them from the wind for a while, how Andy Jackson had decided to move it so that he couldn't see the Capitol building from the White House (it was still too dark for them to make out very much), causing the famous and annoying jog in Pennsylvania Avenue—not that *that* mattered anymore, since the

street had been closed in front of the White House. And why? To protect the President from the *citizens!* Couldn't trust the citizens to get too close to the Grand Pooh-Bah. They couldn't say that, of course. It was something the two had discussed on the flight in. There was no telling how many government spy types might be around, especially in the line to the White House, a name for the structure they'd accepted only since it had allegedly been selected by Davy Crockett. Holbrook had recalled that from a movie he'd seen on TV, though he couldn't remember which movie, and ol' Davy was without a doubt their kind of American, a man who'd named his favorite rifle. Yeah.

It wasn't really a bad-looking house, and some good men had lived there. Andy Jackson, who'd told the Supreme Court where to get off. Lincoln, a tough old son of a bitch. What a shame he'd been killed before implementing his plan to ship the niggers back to Africa or Latin America . . . (Both rather liked James Monroe as well for starting that idea by helping to establish Liberia as a place to ship the slaves back to; a pity that nobody had followed up on it.) Teddy Roosevelt, who had a lot of good things going for him, a hunter and outdoorsman and soldier who'd gone a little far in "reforming" the government. Not many since, though, both men judged, but it wasn't the building's fault that it had more recently been occupied by people they didn't like. That was the problem with Washington buildings. The Capitol had once been home to Henry Clay and Dan'l Webster, after all. Patriots, unlike the bunch who'd been roasted by that Jap pilot.

Things got a little bit tense when they turned into the White House grounds, like entering enemy territory. There were guards at the gatehouse of the Secret Service's uniformed division, and inside were Marines. Wasn't that a shame? Marines. Real Americans, even the colored ones, probably, 'cause they went through the training same as the white ones, and probably some of them were patriots, too. Too bad they were niggers, but it couldn't be helped. And all the Marines did what they were told by the 'crats. That made the looks a little hard to take. They were just kids, though, and maybe they'd learn. After all, the Mountain Men had a few ex-military in it. The Marines were shivering in their long coats and white fairy gloves, and finally one of them, a buck sergeant by the stripes, opened the door.

Some house, Holbook and Brown thought, looking up and around the towering foyer. It was easy to see how somebody who lived here might think himself king-shit. You had to watch out for stuff like that. Lincoln had grown up in a log cabin, and Teddy had known life in a tent, hunting up in the mountains, but nowadays whoever lived here was just another damned 'crat. Inside were more Marines, and the honor guard around the two boxes, and most disquieting of all, people in civilian clothes with little plastic curly things that led from their

suit collars to their ears. Secret Service. Federal cops. The face of the enemy, members of the same government department that held the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. That figured. The first instance of citizens' objecting to the government had been about alcohol, the Whiskey Rebellion—which was why the Mountain Men were equivocal in their admiration for George Washington. The more liberal of them remarked that even a good man can have a bad day, and George wasn't a guy to fuck with. Brown and Holbrook didn't look directly at the Secret Service pukes. You had to be careful fucking with them, too.

SPECIAL AGENT PRICE walked into the foyer then. Her principal was safe in his office, and her responsibilities as Detail commander extended throughout the entire building. The procession wasn't a security threat to the House. In terms of security it was just a nuisance. Even if a gang of gunmen had secreted itself in the line, behind the closed doors all around this area were twenty armed agents, many of them with Uzi submachine guns in their fast-action-gun bags, unkindly known as FAG bags. A metal detector hidden in the doorway told a crew from the Technical Security Division whom to look at, and other agents concealed in their hands photos stacked together like a deck of cards, which they shuffled through constantly until every face coming through the door could be compared with known or suspected troublemakers. For the rest they depended on instincts and training, and that came down to people who looked "funny," the usual Americanism for inappropriate demeanor. The problem with that was the cold weather outside. People came in, and a lot of them looked funny. Some stamped their feet a little. Others shoved hands into pockets, or adjusted coats, or shivered, or just looked around oddly—all of which was calculated to attract the attention of somebody on the Detail. On those occasions when the gestures came from one who had pinged the metal detector, an agent would raise his or her hand as though scratching one's nose and speak into a microphone. "Blue coat, male, six feet," for example, would cause four or five heads to turn for a closer look at, in that case, a dentist from Richmond who had just switched his pocket hand warmer from one side to the other. His physical dimensions were checked against threat photos of similarly sized subjects and found not to match—but they watched him anyway, and a hidden TV camera zoomed in to record his face. In a few more extreme cases, an agent would join up with the exiting mourners and follow a subject to a car to catch the tag number. The long-since-deestablished Strategic Air Command had taken as its official motto PEACE is OUR PROFESSION.

For the Secret Service the business was paranoia, the necessity for which was made plain by the two caskets in the White House foyer.

BROWN AND HOLBROOK had their five seconds of direct viewing. Two expensive boxes, doubtless purchased at government expense, and blasphemously, they thought, draped with the Stars and Stripes. Well, maybe not for the wife. After all, the womenfolk were supposed to be loyal to their men, and that couldn't be helped. The flow of the crowd took them to the left, and velvet ropes guided them down the steps. They could feel the change in the others. A collective deep breath, and some sniffles of people wiping their eyes of tears—mainly the womenfolk. The two Mountain Men stayed impassive, as most of the men did. The Remington sculptures on the way out caused both to stop and admire briefly, and then it was back into the open, and the fresh air was a welcome cleansing after the few minutes of federal steam heat. They didn't speak until they were off the grounds and away from others.

"Nice boxes we bought them," Holbrook managed to say first.

"Shame they weren't open." Brown looked around. Nobody was close enough to hear his indiscretion. "They do have kids," Pete pointed out. He headed south so that they could see down Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. And they'll grow up to be 'crats, too." They walked a few more yards. "Damn!"

There was nothing else one could say, except maybe, "Fuck!" Holbrook thought, and he didn't like repeating things Ernie said.

The sun was coming up, and the absence of tall buildings to the east of the Hill meant that the white building was beautifully silhouetted. Though it was the first trip to Washington for both, either man could have done a reasonably accurate sketch of the building from memory, and the *wrongness* of the horizon could not have been more obvious. Pete was glad that Ernie had talked him into coming. Just the sight made all the travel hassles worth it. This time he managed the first collective thought: "Ernie," Holbrook said in awe, "it's inspirational."

"Yeah."

ONE PROBLEM WITH the disease was that the warning signs were equivocal, and her main concern was one of her patients. He was such a nice boy, but—but he was gravely ill, Sister Jean Baptiste saw now that his fever had spiked to 40.4 degrees Celsius, and that was deadly enough, but the other signs were worse. The disorientation had gotten

worse. The vomiting had increased, and now there was blood in it. There were indications of internal bleeding. All that, she knew, could mean one of several things—but the one she worried about was called Ebola Zaire. There were many diseases in the jungle of this country—she still thought of it occasionally as the Belgian Congo—and while the competition for the absolute worst was stiffer than one might imagine, Ebola was at the bottom of that particular pit. She had to draw blood for another test, and this she did with great care, the first sample having been lost somehow or other. The younger staff here weren't as thorough as they ought. . . . His parents held the arm while she drew the blood, her hands fully protected with latex gloves. It went smoothly—the boy was not even semiconscious at the moment. She withdrew the needle and placed it immediately in a plastic box for disposal. The blood vial was safe, but that, too, went into another container. Her immediate concern was the needle. Too many people on staff tried to save money for the hospital by reusing instruments, this despite AIDS and other diseases communicated by blood products. She'd handle this one herself, just to make sure.

She didn't have time to look more at the patient. Leaving the ward, she walked through the breezeway to the next building. The hospital had a long and honorable history, and had been built to allow for local conditions. The many low frame buildings were connected by covered walkways. The laboratory building was only fifty meters away. This facility was blessed; recently the World Health Organization had established a presence here, along with which had come modern equipment and six young physicians—but, alas, no nurses. All were British–or American trained.

Dr. Mohammed Moudi was at the lab bench. Tall, thin, swarthy, he was somewhat cold in his demeanor, but he was proficient. He turned as he saw her approach, and took note of the way she disposed of the needle.

"What is it, Sister?"

"Patient Mkusa. Benedict Mkusa, African male, age eight." She handed the paperwork over. Moudi opened the folder and scanned it. For the nurse—Christian or not, she was a holy woman, and a fine nurse—the symptoms had occurred one at a time. The paper presentation to the physician was far more efficient. Headache, chills, fever, disorientation, agitation, and now signs of an internal bleed. When he looked up his eyes were guarded. If petechia appeared on his skin next . . .

"He's in the general ward?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Move him to the isolation building at once. I'll be over there in half an hour."

“Yes, Doctor.” On the way out she rubbed her forehead. It must have been the heat. You never really got used to it, not if you came from northern Europe. Maybe an aspirin after she saw to her patient.

7

PUBLIC IMAGE

IT STARTED EARLY. WHEN two E-3B Sentry aircraft which had deployed from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma to Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina took off from the latter at 0800 local time and headed north. It had been decided that closing down all the local airports would have been too much. Washington National remained closed—and with no congressmen to race there for a flight to their districts (their special parking lot was well known), it even appeared that the facility might remain that way—and at the other two, Dulles and Baltimore-Washington International, controllers were under very precise instructions. Flights in and out were to avoid a "bubble" more than twenty miles in diameter and centered on the White House. Should any aircraft head toward the "bubble" it would instantly be challenged. If the challenge were ignored, it would soon find a fighter aircraft off its wingtip. If that didn't work, the third stage would be obvious and spectacular. Two flights, each of four F-16 fighters, were orbiting the city in relays at an altitude of eighteen and twenty thousand feet, respectively. The altitude kept the noise down (it also would enable them to tip over and reach supersonic speed almost immediately), but the white contrails made patterns in the blue sky as obvious as those the 8th Air Force had once traced over Germany.

About the same time, the 260th Military Police Brigade of the Washington, D.C., National Guard redeployed to maintain "traffic control." More than a hundred HMMWVs were in side streets, each with a police or FBI vehicle in close attendance, controlling traffic by blocking the streets. An honor guard assembled from all the services lined the streets to be used. There was no telling which of the rifles might be equipped with a full magazine.

Some people had actually expected the security precautions to be kept quiet because armored vehicles had been dispensed with.

There was a total of sixty-one chiefs of state in the city; the day would be security hell for everyone, and the media made sure that everyone would share the experience.

For the last one of these, Jacqueline Kennedy had decided on morning clothes, but thirty-five years had passed, and dark business

suits would now suffice, except for those foreign government officials who wore uniforms of various sorts (the Prince of Wales *was* a commissioned officer), or visitors from tropical countries. Some of them would wear their national garb, and would suffer the consequences in the name of national dignity. Just getting them around town and into the White House was a nightmare. Then came the problem of how to line them up in the procession. Alphabetically by country? Alphabetically by name? By seniority in office would have given undue primacy of place to a few dictators who had come to find for themselves some legitimacy in the diplomatic major leagues—bolstering the status of countries and governments with which America had friendly relations but for which America had little love. They all came to the White House, marching past the coffins after the last of the line of American citizens had been cut off, pausing to pay personal respects, and from there into the East Room, where a platoon of State Department officials struggled to get things organized over coffee and Danish.

Ryan and his family were upstairs, putting the finishing touches on their dark clothes, attended by White House staff members. The children handled it the best, accustomed to having Mom and Dad brush their hair on the way out the door, and amused to see Mom and Dad being treated the same way. Jack was holding a copy of his first speech. It was past time for him to close his eyes and wish everything away. Now he felt like a boxer, overmatched by his opponent but unable to take a dive, taking every punch as best he could and trying not to disgrace himself. Mary Abbot applied the final touches to his hair and locked everything in place with spray, something Ryan had never used voluntarily in his life.

"They're waiting, Mr. President," Arnie said.

"Yeah." Jack handed the speech binder to one of the Secret Service agents. He headed out of the room, followed by Cathy, who held Katie. Sally took Little Jack's hand to follow them into the corridor and down the stairs. President Ryan walked slowly down the square spiral of steps, then turned left to the East Room. As he entered the room, heads turned. Every eye in the room looked at him, but these looks were in no way casual, and few of them were sympathetic. Almost every pair belonged to a chief of state. Those that did not belonged to an ambassador, each of whom would this night draft a report on the new American President. It was Ryan's good fortune that the first to approach him was one who would not need to do anything of the sort.

"Mr. President," said the man in the Royal Navy mess jacket. His ambassador had positioned things nicely. On the whole, London rather liked the new arrangement. The "special relationship" would become

more special, as President Ryan was an (honorary) Knight Commander of the Victorian Order.

"Your Highness." Jack paused, and allowed himself a smile as he shook the offered hand. "Long time since that day in London, pal."

"Indeed."

THE SUN WASN'T as warm as it should have been the wind saw to that—its hard-cast shadows merely making things appear colder. The D.C. police led off with a rank of motorcycles, then three drummers followed by marching soldiers—they were a squad from 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, First Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne, which had once been Roger Durling's own—then the riderless horse, boots reversed in the stirrups, and the gun carriages, side by side for this funeral, husband and wife. Then the lines of cars. The cold air did one other thing. The drums' brutal thunder echoed sharply up and down the man-made canyons. As the procession headed northwest, the soldiers, sailors, and Marines came to present arms, first for the old President, then for the new. Men mainly removed whatever hats they might be wearing (some forgot) for the former.

Brown and Holbrook didn't forget. Durling may just have been another 'crat, but the Flag was the Flag, and it wasn't the Flag's fault that it was draped there. The soldiers strutted up the street, incongruously wearing battledress uniforms with red berets and bloused jump boots because, the radio commentator said, Roger Durling had been one of their own. Before the gun carriage walked two more soldiers, the first carrying the presidential flag, and the second with a framed plaque which contained Durling's combat decorations. The deceased President had won a medal for rescuing a soldier under fire. That former soldier was somewhere in the procession, and had already been interviewed about a dozen times, soberly recounting the day on which a President-to-be had saved his life. A shame he'd gone wrong, the Mountain Men reflected, but more likely he'd been a politician the whole time.

The new President appeared presently, his automobile identifiable by the four Secret Service agents pacing alongside it. This new one was a mystery to the two Mountain Men. They knew what they'd seen on TV and read in the papers. A shooter. He'd actually killed two people, one with a pistol and one with an Uzi. Ex-Marine, even. That excited a little admiration. Other TV coverage, repeated again and again, mainly showed him doing Sunday talk shows and briefings. In most of the former he looked competent. In the latter he often appeared uncomfortable.

Most of the car windows in the procession had the dark plastic coating that prevented people from seeing who rode inside, but not the President's car, of course. His three children sitting ahead of him and facing back from the jump seat, with his wife at his side, President John Ryan was easy to see from the sidewalk.

"WHAT DO WE really know about Mr. Ryan?"

"Not much," the commentator admitted. "His government service has been almost exclusively in CIA. He has the respect of Congress, on both sides of the aisle. He's worked with Alan Trent and Sam Fellows for years—that's one of the reasons both members are still alive. We've all heard the story of the terrorists who attacked him—"

"Like something out of the Wild West," the anchor interjected. "What do you think about having a President who's—"

"Killed people?" the commentator returned the favor. He was tired from days of long duty, and just a little tired of this coiffeured airhead. "Let's see. George Washington was a general. So was Andy Jackson. William Henry Harrison was a soldier. Grant, and most of the post-Civil War presidents. Teddy Roosevelt, of course. Truman was a soldier. Eisenhower. Jack Kennedy was in the Navy, as were Nixon, and Jimmy Carter, *and* George Bush . . ." The impromptu history lesson had the visual effect of a cattle prod.

"But he was selected as Vice President really in a caretaker status, wasn't he, and as payback for his handling of the conflict"—nobody really called it a "war"—"with what turned out to be Japanese business interests." There, the anchor thought, that would put this overaged foreign correspondent in his place. Who ever said that a President was entitled to any honeymoon at all, anyway?

RYAN WANTED TO look over his speech, but he found that he couldn't. It was pretty cold out there. It wasn't exactly warm in the car, but thousands of people stood out there in twenty-nine-degree air, five to ten deep on the sidewalks, and their faces tracked his car as it passed by. They were close enough that he could see their expressions. Many pointed and said things to the people standing next to them—*there he is, there's the new one.* Some waved, small embarrassed gestures from people who were unsure if it was okay to do so, but wanting to do something to show that they cared. More nodded respect, with the tight smile that you saw in a funeral home *hope you'll be okay*. Jack wondered if it was proper to wave back, but decided that it wasn't, bound by some unwritten rule that applied to funerals.

And so he just looked at them, his face, he thought, in a neutral mien, without saying anything because he didn't know what to say, either. Well, he had a speech to handle that, Ryan thought, frustrated with himself.

"NOT A HAPPY camper," Brown whispered to Holbrook. They waited a few minutes for the crowd to loosen up. Not all of the spectators were interested in the procession of foreign dignitaries. You couldn't see into the cars anyway, and keeping track of all the flags that flew on the front bumpers merely started various versions of "Which one is that one?"—often with an incorrect answer. So, like many others, the two Mountain Men shouldered their way back from the curb into a park.

"He ain't got it," Holbrook replied, finally.

"He's just a 'crat. Remember the Peter Principle?" It was a book which, both thought, had been written to explain government workers. In any hierarchy, people tended to rise to their level of incompetence. "I think I like this."

His comrade looked back at the street and the cars and the fluttering little flags. "I think you may be right."

SECURITY AT THE National Cathedral was airtight. In their hearts the Secret Service agents knew that, and knew that no assassin—the idea of professional assassins was largely a creation of Hollywood anyway—would risk his life under these circumstances. Every building with a direct line of sight to the Gothic-style church had several policemen, or soldiers, or USSS special agents atop it, many of them armed with rifles, and their own Counter-Sniper Team armed with the finest of all, $10,000 handmade instruments that could reach more than half a mile and touch someone in the head the team, which won competition shoots with the regularity of the tides, was probably the best collection of marksmen the world had ever seen, and practiced every day to keep that way. Anyone who wanted to do mischief would either know all these things and stay away, or, in the case of an amateur madman, would see the massive defensive arrangements and decide this wasn't a good day to die.

But things were tense anyway, and even as the procession appeared in the distance, agents were hustling around. One of them, exhausted from thirty hours of continuous duty, was drinking coffee when he tripped on the stone steps and spilled the cup. Grumbling, he crushed the plastic foam in his hand, stuffed it in his pocket, and told his lapel-

mounted radio microphone that everything was clear at his post. The coffee froze almost instantly on the shaded granite.

Inside the cathedral, yet another team of agents checked out every shadowed nook one more time before taking their places, allowing protocol officers to make final preparations, referring to seating instructions faxed to them only minutes before and wondering what would go wrong.

The gun carriages came to a halt in front of the building, and the cars came up one at a time to discharge their passengers. Ryan got out, followed by his family, moving to join the Durlings. The kids were still in shock, and maybe that was good, or maybe it was not. Jack didn't know. At times like this, what did a man do? He placed his hand on the son's shoulder while the cars came, dropped off their passengers, and pulled rapidly away. The other official mourners—the senior ones—would form up behind him. Less senior ones would be entering the church now from side entrances, passing through portable metal detectors, while the churchmen and choir, having already done the same, would be taking their places.

Roger must have remembered his service in the 82nd with pride, Jack thought. The soldiers who'd led the procession stacked arms and prepared to do their duty under the supervision of a young captain, assisted by two serious-looking sergeants. They all looked so young, even the sergeants, all with their heads shaved nearly down to stubble under their berets. Then he remembered that his father had served in the rival 101st Airborne more than fifty years before, and had looked just like these kids, though probably with a little more hair, since the bald look hadn't been fashionable in the 1940s. But the same toughness, the same fierce pride, and the same determination to get the job done, whatever it might be. It seemed to take forever. Ryan, like the soldiers, couldn't turn his head. He had to stand at attention as he'd done during his own service in the Marine Corps, though allowing his eyes to scan around. His children turned their heads and shifted on their feet with the cold, while Cathy kept her eyes on them, worrying as her husband did about the exposure to the cold, but caught in a situation where even parental concerns were subordinated to something else. What was it, she wondered, this thing called duty that even orphaned children knew that they had to stand there and just take it?

Finally the last of the official procession alighted from their cars and took their places. Someone gave it a fivecount, and the soldiers moved to the gun carriages, seven to each. The officer in charge of them unscrewed one clamp, then the other, and the caskets were lifted and moved off in robotic side-steps. The soldier holding the presidential flag started up the steps, followed by the caskets. The President's was

in front, led by the captain and followed by the sergeant in charge of the sub-detail.

It wasn't anybody's fault. There were three soldiers on either side, marching to the slow cadence called by the sergeant. They were stiff from standing fifteen minutes at parade rest after a healthy morning walk up Massachusetts Avenue. The middle one on the right slipped on the frozen coffee just as all were taking a step. He slid inward, not outward, and in going down his legs swept away the soldier behind him. The total load was over four hundred pounds of wood, metal, and body, and it all came down on the soldier who'd been first to slip, breaking both his legs in an instant on the granite steps.

A collective gasp came up from the thousands of people watching. Secret Service agents raced in, fearing that a shot might have felled the soldiers. Andrea Price moved in front of Ryan, her hand inside her coat and obviously holding her service automatic, ready to draw it out, while other agents poised to drag the Ryans and the Durlings clear of the area. The soldiers were already moving the casket off their fallen comrade, his face suddenly white with pain.

"Ice," he told the sergeant through clenched teeth. "Slipped." The soldier even had enough self-control to refrain from the profanity that echoed through his mind at the shame and embarrassment of the moment. An agent looked at the step and saw it there, a white-brown mound that reflected light. He made a gesture that told Price she could stand down, which command was instantly radioed out to all the agents in sight:

"Just a slip, just a slip."

Ryan winced to see what had happened. Roger Durling would not have felt it, his mind thought, but the insult to him was an insult to his children, who cringed and snapped their heads away when their father bounced on the stone steps. The son turned back first, taking it all in, the child part of him wondering why the fall hadn't awakened his father. Only hours before he'd risen during the night and walked to the door of his room, wanting to open it, wanting to cross the hall and knock on his parents' door to see if they might be back.

"OH, GOD," the commentator groaned.

The cameras zoomed in as two of the 3rd Regiment soldiers pulled the injured paratrooper clear. The sergeant took his place. The casket was lifted back up in seconds, its polished oak clearly gouged and defaced by the fall.

“OKAY. SOLDIERS,” the sergeant said from his new place. “By the left.”

“Daddy,” whimpered Mark Durling, age nine. “Daddy.” Everyone close by heard it in the silence that had followed the accident. The soldiers bit their lips. The Secret Service agents, already shamed and wounded by the loss of a President, took a second to look down or at one another. Jack instinctively wrapped his arms around the boy, but still didn’t know what the hell he was supposed to say. What else could possibly go wrong? the new President wondered as Mrs. Durling followed her husband up the steps and inside.

“Okay, Mark.” Ryan placed his arm around the youngster’s shoulder and guided him to the door, without thinking about it taking the place of a favored uncle for a few yards. If there were only a way to take away their sorrow, even for a few seconds. The thought was an impossible one, and all it did for Jack was to give him another layer of sadness, as what he added to himself didn’t detract a whit from what the children felt.

It was warmer inside, which was noticed by those less caught up in the emotion of the moment. Fluttering protocol officers took their places. Ryan and his family went to the first pew on the right. The Durling party went opposite them. The caskets sat side by side on catafalques in the sacristy, and beyond them were three more, those of a senator and two members of the House, “representing” one last time. The organ played something Ryan had heard before but didn’t recognize. At least it wasn’t Mozart’s grim Masonic procession with its repeating, brutal chant, about as uplifting as a film of the Holocaust. The clergymen were lined up in front, their faces professionally composed. In front of Ryan, in the slot usually occupied by hymnals, was another copy of his speech.

THE SCENE ON the TV screen was such to make anyone in his chosen profession either ill or excited in a manner beyond sex. If only . . . but such opportunities as this one only happened by accident, never allowing the time to prepare anything. Preparation was everything for a mission like this. Not that it would have been technically hard, and he allowed his mind to consider the method. A mortar, perhaps. You could mount one of those in the back of an ordinary delivery truck such as one might find in any city in the known world. Walk the rounds down the roof of the building, dropping it on the targets. You’d get off at least ten, maybe fifteen or twenty, and though the selection would be random, a target was a target, and terror was terror, and that was his profession.

“Look at them all,” he breathed. The cameras traced along the pews.

Mostly men, some women, sitting in no order that he could discern, some chatting in whispers, most not, with blank expressions as their eyes surveyed the inside of the church. Then the children of the dead American President, a son and a daughter with the beaten look of those who'd been touched by the harsh reality of life. Children bore the burden surprisingly well, didn't they? They'd survive, all the more so that they were no longer of any political significance, and so his interest in them was as clinical as it was pitiless. Then the camera was on Ryan again, closing in on his face and allowing some careful examination.

HE HADN'T SAID good-bye to Roger Durling yet. There hadn't been time for Jack to compose his mind and concentrate on the thought, the week had been so busy, but now he found his eyes staring at just that one coffin. He'd hardly known Anne, and the three others in the sacristy were strangers to him, actually chosen at random for their religious affiliations. But Roger had been a friend. Roger had brought him back from private life, given him an important job, and trusted him to run it, taking Jack's advice most of the time, confiding in him, chiding and disciplining on occasion, but always as a friend. It had been a tough job, all the harder with the conflict that had developed with Japan—even for Jack, now that it was over, it was no longer a "war," because war was a thing of the past. No longer a part of the real world that was progressing beyond such barbarism. Durling and Ryan had gotten through that, and while the former had wanted to move on to finish the job in other ways, he had also recognized that for Ryan the race had ended. And so, as a friend, he'd given Jack a golden bridge back to private life, a capstone on a career of public service that had turned into a trap.

But if he'd offered the job to someone else, where would I have been that night? Jack asked himself. The answer was simple. He would have been in the front row of the House chamber, and now he would have been dead. President Ryan blinked hard at the realization. *Roger had saved his life.* Probably not just his own. Cathy—and maybe the kids—would have been in the gallery, along with Anne Durling. . . . Was life really that fragile as to turn on such small events? Throughout the city at this moment, other bodies lay in other caskets for other ceremonies, most for adults but some for the children of other victims who'd chosen that night to bring their families to the joint session.

Mark Durling was whimpering now. His elder sister, Amy, pulled his head inward to her. Jack turned his head slightly, allowing his peripheral vision to take it in. *They're just kids, dear God, why do kids have to go through this?* The thought hammered home in an instant.

Jack bit his lip and looked down at the floor. There was no one to be a target for his anger. The perpetrator of this crime was dead himself, his body in yet another box in the Washington, D.C., morgue, and some thousands of miles away, such family as the man had left behind bore the additional burden of shame and guilt placed on them. This was why people called all violence senseless. There was nothing to learn from any of this, only the lingering harm of lives lost and lives wrecked—and lives spared for no particular reason other than mere chance. Like cancer or other serious illness, this sort of violence struck with no discernible plan, and no real defense, just one dead man who had decided not to enter alone such afterlife as he believed in. What the hell was anyone supposed to learn from this? Ryan, long a student of human behavior, grimaced and continued to look down, his ears focusing on the sounds of an orphaned child in the hollow echoes of a stone church.

HE'S WEAK. IT was obvious on his face. This supposed man, this *President,* was struggling to hold back tears. Didn't he know that death was part of life? He'd caused death, hadn't he? Didn't he know what death was? Was he only learning now? The other faces did know. One could see that. They were somber, because at a funeral it was expected that one had to be somber, but all life came to an end. Ryan ought to know. He'd faced danger—but that was long ago, he reminded himself, and over time men forget such things. Ryan had had ample cause to forget life's vulnerabilities, protected as he'd been as a government official. It amazed the man how much one could learn from a few seconds' examination of a human face.

That made things easier, didn't it?

SHE WAS FIVE rows back, but was on the aisle, and though the Prime Minister of India could see only the back of President Ryan's head, she, too, was a student of human behavior. A chief of state couldn't act like this. A chief of state was, after all, an actor on the world's most important stage, and you had to learn what to do and how to behave. She'd been going to funerals of various sorts all of her life, because political leaders had associates not always friends—young and old, and one had to show respect by appearing, even for those one had detested. In the latter case, it could be amusing. In her country the dead were so often burned, and then she could tell herself that, perhaps, the body was still alive as it burned. Her eyebrows flickered up and down in private amusement at the thought. *Especially for the*

ones you detested. It was such good practice. To appear saddened. *Yes, we had our differences, but he was always someone to be respected, someone you could work with. someone whose ideas were always worth serious attention.* With practice over the years, you got good enough that the survivors believed the lies—partly because they wanted to believe. You learned to smile just so, and to show grief just so, and to speak just so. You had to. A political leader could rarely allow true feelings to show. True feelings told others what your weaknesses were, and there were always those to use them against you—and so over the years you hid them more and more, until eventually you had few, if any, true feelings left. And that was good, because politics wasn't about feelings.

Clearly this Ryan fellow didn't know that, the Prime Minister of "the world's largest democracy" told herself. As a result, he was showing what he really was, and worse still, for him, he was doing so in front of a third of the world's highest political leaders, people who would see and learn and file their thoughts away for future use. Just as she was doing. Marvelous, she thought, keeping her face somber and sad in honor of someone she'd thoroughly detested. When the organist began the first hymn, she lifted her book, turned the page to the proper number, and sang along with everyone else.

THE RABBI WENT first. Each clergyman was given ten minutes, and each of them was an expert—more properly, each was a genuine scholar in addition to his calling as a man of God. Rabbi Benjamin Fleischman spoke from the Talmud and the Torah. He spoke of duty and honor and faith, of a merciful God. Next came the Reverend Frederick Ralston, the Senate Chaplain—he'd been out of town that night, and so spared of a more restrained participation in the events of the day. A Southern Baptist and distinguished authority on the New Testament, Ralston spoke of Christ's Passion in the garden, of his friend Senator Richard Eastman of Oregon, who lay in the sacristy, universally respected as an honorable member of the Congress, segueing then into praise of the fallen President, a devoted family man, as all knew. . . .

There was no "right" way to handle such things, Ryan thought. Maybe it would be easier if the minister/ priest/rabbi had time to sit with the grieving, but that hadn't happened in this case, and he wondered—

No, this isn't right! Jack told himself. This was theater. It wasn't supposed to be that. There were *kids* sitting a few feet across the aisle to his left, and for them this wasn't theater at all. This was a lot simpler for them. It was *Mom* and *Dad,* ripped out of their lives by a

senseless act, denying them the future that life was supposed to guarantee them, love and guidance, a chance to grow in a normal way into normal people. Mark and Amy were the important ones here, but the lessons of this service, which were supposed to help them, were instead aimed at others. This whole event was a *political* exercise, something to reassure the country, renew people's faith in God and the world and their country, and maybe the people out there behind the twenty-three cameras in the church needed that, but there were people in greater need, the children of Roger and Anne Durling, the grown sons of Dick Eastman, the widow of David Kohn of Rhode Island, and the surviving family of Marissa Henrik of Texas. Those were real people, and their personal grief was being subordinated to the needs of the country. *Well, the country be damned!* Jack thought, suddenly angry at what was happening, and at himself for not grasping it early enough to change things around. The country had needs, but those needs could not be so great as to overshadow the horror fate had inflicted on kids. Who spoke for them? Who spoke to them?

Worst of all for Ryan, a Catholic, Michael Cardinal O'Leary, Archbishop of Washington, was no better. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called . . ." For Mark and Amy, Jack's mind raged, their father wasn't a peacemaker. He was Dad, and Dad was gone, and that wasn't an abstraction. Three distinguished, learned, and very decent members of the clergy were preaching to a nation, but right before them were children who got a few kind words of lip service, and that was all. Somebody had to speak to them, for them, about their parents. Somebody had to try to make things better. It wasn't possible, but someone had to try, damn it! Maybe he was President of the United States. Maybe he had a duty to the millions behind the cameras, but Jack remembered the time his wife and daughter had been in Baltimore's Shock-Trauma Center, hovering between life and death, and that hadn't been a damned abstraction, either. *That* was the problem. *That* was why his family had been attacked. *That* was why all these people had died—because some misguided fanatic had seen them all as abstractions instead of human beings with lives and hopes and dreams—and kids. It was Jack's job to protect a nation. He'd sworn to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and he would do that to the best of his ability. But the purpose of the *Constitution* was pretty simple—to secure the blessings of liberty for *people,* and that included kids. The country he served and the government he was trying to lead were nothing more or less than a mechanism to protect individual people. *That* duty was not an abstraction. The reality of that duty sat ten feet to his left, holding back tears as best they could, and probably failing,

because there was no feeling lonelier than what those kids were suffering right now, while Mike O'Leary spoke to a country instead of a family. The theater had lasted long enough. There came another hymn, and then it was Ryan's turn to rise and walk to the pulpit.

Secret Service agents turned around, again sweeping the nave, because now SWORDSMAN was an ideal target. Getting to the lectern, he saw that Cardinal O'Leary had done as instructed and set the presidential binder on the wooden top. No, Jack decided. No. His hands grasped the sides of the lectern to steady himself. His eyes swept briefly across the assembly, and then looked down on the children of Roger and Anne Durling. The pain in their eyes broke his heart. They'd borne all the burdens placed on them by duties never theirs to carry. They'd been told by some unnamed "friends" to be braver than would have been asked of any Marine at such a time, probably because, "Mom and Dad would want you to." But bearing pain in quiet dignity was not the business of children. That was what adults were supposed to do, as best they could. *Enough*, Jack told himself, *my duty starts here.* The first duty of the strong was ever to protect the weak. His hands squeezed on the polished oak, and the self-inflicted pain helped compose his thoughts.

"Mark, Amy, your father was my friend," he said gently. "It was my honor to work for him and help him as best I could——but you know, he was probably even more help for me. I know you always had to understand that Dad and Mom had important jobs, and didn't always have time for the really important things, but I can tell you that your father did everything he could to spend time with you, because he loved you more than anything in the world, more than being President, more than all the things that came along with that, more than anything—except maybe your Mom. He loved her a lot, too. . . ."

WHAT RUBBISH! YES, one cared for children. Daryaei did, but children grew to adulthood no matter what. Their place was to learn, and to serve, and someday to do the deeds of adults. Until then, they were children, and the world told them what must be. Fate did. Allah did. Allah was merciful, even though life was hard. He had to admit that the Jew had spoken well, citing scripture quoted exactly the same way in their Torah and his Holy Koran. He would have chosen a different passage, but that was a matter of taste, wasn't it? Theology allowed such things. It had all been a wasted exercise, but formal occasions such as this usually were. This Ryan fool was wasting his chance to rally his nation, to appear strong and sure, thus to consolidate his hold on his government. Talking to children at such a time!

HIS POLITICAL HANDLERS must be having a collective heart attack, the Prime Minister thought, and it required all of the self-control learned over a political lifetime to keep her face composed. Then she decided to change her expression to sympathy. After all, he might be watching her, and she was a woman and a mother, after all, and she would be meeting with him later today. She tilted her head slightly to the right, so as to give herself a better view of the scene and the man. He might like that, too. In another minute or so, she'd pull a tissue from her purse to wipe her eyes.

"I wish I'd had the chance to get to know your mom better. Cathy and I were looking forward to that. I wanted Sally and Jack and Katie and you to become friends. Your dad and I talked a little about that. I guess that won't be happening the way we wanted it to." That impromptu thought made Jack's stomach do a flip. They were crying now, because he'd told them without words that now it was okay to cry. Jack couldn't let himself do that. Not for the others. He had to be strong now for them, and so he gripped the lectern harder still until his hands really hurt, and he welcomed the pain for the discipline it imposed on him.

"You probably want to know why this had to happen. I don't know, kids. I wish I did. I wish *somebody* did, so that I could go to that person for the answers. But I've never found that person," Jack went on.

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"JESUS," CLARK MANAGED to say in the grumbly voice that men used to prevent a sob. In his CIA office, as with all senior officials, was a TV set, and every channel was covering this. "Yeah, I've looked once or twice myself, man."

"You know something, John?" Chavez was under more control. It was a man's place to be calm at such times, so that the women and kids could cling to him. Or so his culture told him. Mr. C., on the other hand, was just full of surprises. As always.

"What's that, Domingo?"

"He gets it. We're working for somebody who gets it."

John turned at that. Who'd believe it? Two CIA paramilitary officers, thinking the same thoughts as their President. It was nice to know that he'd read Ryan correctly from the first moment. *Damn, just like his dad.* A pity Fate had denied him the chance to know that Ryan.

He next wondered if Jack would succeed as President. He wasn't acting like one of the others. He was acting like a real person. But why was that so bad? Clark asked himself.

"I WANT YOU to know that you can come to Cathy and me whenever you want. You're not alone. You will *never* be alone. You have your family with you, and now you have my family, too," he promised them from the pulpit. It just got harder. He had to say what he'd just said. Roger was a friend, and you looked after their kids when you had to. He'd done it for Buck Zimmer's family, and now he'd do it for Roger's.

"I want you to be proud of Mom and Dad. Your father was a fine man, a good friend. He worked very hard to make things better for people. It was a big job, and it denied him a lot of time with you, but your father was a big man, and big men do big things. Your mother was always there, too, and she also did big things. Kids, you will always have them in your heart. Remember all the things they told you, all the little things, and the games, and the tricks, and the jokes, all the ways moms and dads show love for their children. You will never lose that. Never," Jack assured them, stretching and hoping for something that could soften the blow Fate had dealt them. He couldn't find anything better. It was time to end it.

"Mark, Amy, God decided He wanted your mom and dad back. He doesn't explain why in ways that are easy for us to understand, and we can't . . . we can't fight it when that happens. We just can't—" Ryan's voice finally cracked.

HOW COURAGEOUS OF the man, Koga thought, to allow his emotions to show. Anyone could have stood up there and spoken the usual political drivel, and most would have—in or from any country—but this Ryan wasn't like that at all. Speaking to the children in this way was brilliant—or so he'd thought at the outset. But it wasn't that at all. Inside the President was a *man*. He wasn't an actor. He didn't care about showing strength and resolve. And Koga knew why. More than anyone else in this church, Koga knew what Ryan was made of. He'd guessed right in his own office a few days before. Ryan was samurai, and even more. He did what he did, not caring what others thought. The Japanese Prime Minister hoped that wasn't a mistake as he watched the President of the United States come down the steps, then approach the Durling children. He embraced them, and the audience watched tears well up on Ryan's face. There were sobs around him in

the chiefs-of-state seating, but he knew that most of those were forced or feigned—or at most brief, fleeting moments of residual humanity, soon to be forgotten. He regretted that he couldn't join in that, but the rules of his culture were stern, all the more so as he bore the shame of one of his citizens having caused this monstrous tragedy. He *had* to play the political game, much as he would have preferred otherwise, and it wasn't so much that Ryan didn't have to play the game as that he didn't care. He wondered if America realized her good fortune.

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"HE DIDN'T USE his prepared speech at all," the anchorman objected. The speech had been distributed to all the news networks, and all the copies had been highlighted and excerpted already so that the reporters could repeat favored passages, so to reinforce the important things the President had to say for the viewing public. Instead the anchor had been forced to take notes, which he did badly, long past his time as a working reporter.

"You're right," the commentator reluctantly agreed. Things just weren't done this way. On his monitor, Ryan was still holding the Durling children, and that was going too long as well. "I guess the President decided that this was an important personal moment for them "

"And it surely is," the anchorman inserted.

"But Mr. Ryan's job is to govern a nation." The commentator shook his head, clearly thinking something he couldn't say quite yet: *not presidential.*

JACK HAD TO let go, finally. There was only hurt in their eyes now. The objective part of his mind thought that was probably good—they had to let it out—but that made it no easier to see, for children of that age weren't supposed to have such things at all. But these children did, and there was nothing to be done for it but to try, somehow, to ease the pain. He looked over at the uncles and aunts who'd accompanied them. They were weeping also, but through their tears he saw a grateful look, and that, at least, told him that he'd done something. Nodding, he turned to return to his seat. Cathy looked at him, and there were tears in her eyes, too, and though she couldn't speak, she gripped his hand. Jack saw one more example of his wife's intelligence. She'd worn no eye makeup to run from her tears. Inwardly, he smiled. He didn't like makeup, and his wife didn't really

need it.

"WHAT DO WE know of her?"

"She's a physician, an eye surgeon, actually, supposed to be a good one." He checked his notes. "The American news media say that she is continuing to work at her profession despite her official duties."

"And their children?"

"There's nothing on that, though . . . I should be able to find out what school they attend." He saw the quizzical look and went on. "If the wife will continue to do her medical work, then I would guess that the children will continue to attend the same schools."

"How do you find that out?"

"Easily. All American news stories can be accessed by computer. Ryan has been the subject of numerous news pieces. I can find out anything I want." In fact he already had, but not information about his family. The modern age had made the life of an intelligence officer so much easier. He already knew Ryan's age, height, weight, color of hair and eyes, and much of his personal habits, favorite food and drink, the golf clubs he belonged to, all manner of trivia, none of which was trivial to a man in his line of work. He didn't have to ask what his boss was thinking. The opportunity which both had missed with all of the chiefs of state at the National Cathedral was gone forever, but it would not be the only one.

WITH ONE FINAL hymn, it was over. The soldiers returned to collect the caskets, and the procession began again in reverse. Mark and Amy collected themselves well, aided by their relatives, and followed their parents. Jack led his family just after them. Katie was mainly bored and glad to be moving. Jack Jr. was sad for the Durling kids. Sally looked worried. He'd have to talk to her about that. Down the aisle he looked closely into a number of faces, distantly surprised that the first four or five rows of them looked not at the caskets, but at him. They never turned it off, did they? His fellow chiefs of state, Jack thought, wondering just what sort of club he'd just entered. A few faces were friendly. The Prince of Wales, who was not a chief of state and therefore placed by protocol behind the others—some of whom were outright thugs, but that could not be helped—gave a friendly nod. Yeah, he would understand, Jack thought. The new President wanted to check his watch, so tired he felt from the events of a day yet young, but he'd been sternly lectured about looking at one's watch, to the point of being advised to take it off. A President didn't need a watch.

There were always people to tell him what came next, just as there were now people searching coat racks, ready to hand Ryan and his family what they needed before going back outside. There was Andrea Price, and other members of the Detail. Outside would be more: a not-so-small army of people with guns and fears, and a car to take him to his next destination, where he would perform more official duties, then be whisked off to the next set, and on, and on.

He couldn't let all this take control of his life. Ryan frowned at the thought. He'd do the work, but he couldn't make the mistake Roger and Anne had made. He thought of the faces he'd seen walking out of the church and knew that it was a club he might be forced to enter but which he would never join. Or so he told himself.

8

CHANGE OF COMMAND

THE PART AT ANDREWS was mercifully short. From the Cathedral, the caskets had traveled in hearses, with the large official party left behind to disperse throughout Embassy Row. Air Force One was waiting on the ramp to take the Durlings back to California one last time. It seemed far more desultory now. There was yet another honor guard to salute the flag-draped coffins, but this was different. The crowd was smaller, composed mostly of Air Force and some other military personnel who had worked directly with the presidential party in one way or another. At the family's request, the actual burial ceremony would be smaller, and limited to relatives only, which was probably better for everybody. And so here at Andrews came the last "Ruffles and Flourishes" and the last "Hail to the Chief." Mark stood at attention, holding his hand over his heart in a gesture sure to be on the cover of all the news magazines. A good kid, doing his best, and being more manly than he would ever know. A scissors lift took the caskets to the cargo door, for at this point that's what the bodies were; mercifully, that part of the transfer was hidden from view. Then it was time. The family walked up the steps into the VC-25 for their last ride. It wouldn't even have the Air Force One call sign anymore, because that label went with the President, and the President wasn't aboard. Ryan watched the aircraft taxi off, then rumble down the runway. TV cameras tracked it until it was a mere dot in the sky. Ryan's eyes did the same. By that time, a flight of F-16s, relieved of their guard duty over Washington, landed one by one. When that was done, Ryan and his family climbed aboard a Marine helicopter to return to the White House. The flight crew smiled and fussed over his children. Little Jack got a unit patch after he buckled in. The mood of the day changed with that. The Marines of VMH-1 had a new family to take care of, and life for them moved on.

Already the White House staff was at work, moving their things in (they'd labored throughout the morning moving the Durlings' things out), changing some furniture, and tonight his family would sleep in the same house first occupied by John Adams. The kids, being kids, looked out the windows as the helicopter began its descent. The

parents, being parents, looked at each other.

Things changed at this point. At a private family funeral, this would have been the wake. The sadness was supposed to be left behind, and the mourners would remember what a great guy Roger was, and then talk about what new things were going on in their lives, how the kids were doing at school, discussions of the baseball offseason trades. It was a way for things to return to normal after a sad and stressful day. And so it was in this case, if on a somewhat broader scale. The White House photographer was waiting there on the South Lawn as the helicopter touched down. The stairs were lowered, and a Marine corporal stood at the bottom of them. President Ryan came out first, getting a salute from the corporal in dress blues, which he automatically returned, so ingrained were the lessons from Quantico, Virginia, more than twenty years before. Cathy came down behind, and then the kids. The Secret Service agents formed a loose corridor which told them where to head. News cameras were off to the west, their left, but no questions were shouted—this time; that would change very quickly, too. Inside the White House, the Ryans were directed to the elevators for a rapid trip to the second, bedroom floor. Van Damm was waiting there.

"Mr. President."

"Do I change, Arnie?" Jack asked, handing his coat to a valet. Ryan stopped cold, if only for a second or two, in surprise at how easy that simple activity was. He was President now, and in small ways he had automatically started to act like one. Somehow that was more remarkable than the duties he'd already undertaken.

"No. Here." The chief of staff handed over a list of the guests already downstairs in the East Room. Jack scanned it, standing there in the middle of the hall. The names weren't so much people as countries, many friendly, many acquaintances, some genuine strangers, and some . . . Even as a former National Security Advisor, he didn't know everything he ought to have known about them. While he read, Cathy hustled the kids off to the bathroom—or started to. An agent from the Detail had to assist in locating them. Ryan walked into his own, checking his hair in the mirror. He managed to comb it himself, without the ministrations of Mrs. Abbot, under van Damm's scrutiny. *Not even safe in here*, the President told himself.

"How long will this go, Arnie?"

"No telling, sir."

Ryan turned. "When we're alone, the name's still Jack, remember? I've been afflicted, not anointed."

"Okay, Jack."

"Kids, too?"

"That'll be a nice touch. . . . Jack, so far, you've been doing well."

"Do I have my speechwriter mad at me?" he asked, checking his tie and leaving the bathroom.

"Your instincts weren't so bad, but next time we can have a speech prepared for that."

Ryan thought about that, handing the list back to van Damm. "You know, just because I'm President doesn't mean I stopped being a person."

"Jack, get used to it, okay? You're not allowed to be 'just a person' anymore. Okay, you've had a few days to get used to the idea. When you walk downstairs, you are the United States of America, *not* just a person. That goes for you, that goes for your wife, and to some degree that goes for your kids." For his revelation, the chief of staff got a poisonous look that may have lasted a second or two. Arnie ignored it. It was just personal, not business. "Ready, Mr. President?"

Jack nodded, wondering if Arnie was right or not, and wondering why the observation had angered him so much. And then wondering again how true it was. You couldn't tell with Arnie. He was and would continue to be a teacher, and as with most skilled teachers, he would occasionally tell lies as harsh exemplars of a deeper truth.

Don Russell appeared in the corridor, leading Katie by the hand. She had a red ribbon in her hair as she broke free and ran to her mother. "Look what Uncle Don did!" At least one member of the Detail was already a member of the family.

"You may want to get them all into the bathroom now, Mrs. Ryan. There are no restrooms on the State Floor."

"None?"

Russell shook his head. "No, ma'am, they sort of forgot when they built the place."

Caroline Ryan grabbed the two youngest and led them off, doing her motherly duty. She returned in a couple of minutes.

"Want me to carry her downstairs for you, ma'am?" Russell asked with a grandfatherly smile. "The stairs are a little tricky in heels. I'll hand her off at the bottom."

"Sure." People started heading for the stairwell, and Andrea Price keyed her microphone.

"SWORDSMAN and party are moving from the residence to the State Floor."

"Roger," another agent responded from downstairs.

They could hear the noise even before making the last turn on the marble steps. Russell set Katie Ryan on the floor next to her mother. The agents faded away, becoming strangely invisible as the Ryans, the First Family, walked into the East Room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a staff member announced, "the President of the United States, Dr. Ryan, and family." Heads turned. There was a

brief wave of applause which quickly faded, but the looks continued. They appeared friendly enough, Jack thought, knowing that not all were. He and Cathy moved a little to the left, and formed the receiving line.

They came mainly one by one, though some of the visiting chiefs of state had brought wives. A protocol officer at Ryan's left whispered the name of each into his ear, making Jack wonder how she knew all of these people by sight. The procession to him wasn't quite as haphazard as it appeared. The ambassadors representing countries whose heads had chosen not to make the trip held back, but even those, standing about in little knots of associates and sipping at their Perrier-with-a-twist, didn't hide their professional curiosity, checking out the new President *and* the way he greeted the men and women who came up to him.

"The Prime Minister of Belgium, M. Arnaud," the protocol officer whispered. The official photographer started clicking away to record every official greeting, and two TV cameras were doing the same, albeit more quietly.

"Your telegram was very gracious, Mr. Prime Minister, and it came at a sensitive moment," Ryan said, wondering if the truth sounded good enough, wondering if Arnaud had even read it—well, of course he had, though he probably hadn't drafted it.

"Your talk to the children was very moving. I'm sure everyone here thinks the same," the P.M. replied, gripping Ryan's hand, testing it for firmness, looking hard and deep into his eyes, and rather pleased with himself for the very skilled mendacity of his greeting. For all that, he had read the telegram and pronounced it fitting, and was gratified at hearing Ryan's reaction to it. Belgium was an ally, and Arnaud had been well briefed by the chief of his country's military-intelligence service, who'd worked with Ryan at several NATO conferences, and always liked the American's read on the Soviets—and now, the Russians. An unknown quantity as a political leader, the gist of the briefing had been, but a bright and capable analyst. Arnaud did his own reading now, first in line mainly by accident, by grip and look and many years of experience in such things. Then he moved on.

"Dr. Ryan, I have heard so much about you." He kissed her hand in a very graceful Continental way. He hadn't been told how attractive the new First Lady was, and how dainty her hands were. Well, she was a surgeon, wasn't she? New to the game and uncomfortable with it, but playing along as she had to.

"Thank you, Prime Minister Arnaud," Cathy replied, informed by her own protocol officer (this one was just behind her) who this gentleman was. The hand business, she thought, was very theatrical . . . but nice.

"Your children are angels."

"How nice of you to say that." And he moved on, to be replaced by the President of Mexico.

News cameras floated around the room, along with fifteen reporters, because this was a working function of sorts. The piano in the room's northeast corner played some light classical—not quite what on the radio was called "easy listening," but close.

"And how long have you known the President?" The question came from the Prime Minister of Kenya, pleased to find a black admiral in the room.

"We go back quite a ways, sir," Robby Jackson replied.

"Robby! Excuse me, *Admiral* Jackson," the Prince of Wales corrected himself.

"Captain." Jackson shook his hand warmly. "It's been a while, sir."

"You two know—ah! Yes!" the Kenyan realized. Then he saw his counterpart from Tanzania and moved off to conduct business, leaving the two alone.

"How is he doing—really, I mean," the Prince asked, vaguely saddening Jackson. But this man had a job. Sent over as a friend in what Robby knew to have been a political decision, he would, on his return to Her Britannic Majesty's embassy, dictate a contact report. It was business. On the other hand, the question deserved an answer. The three of them had "served" together briefly one hot, stormy summer night.

"We had a short meeting with the acting chiefs a couple of days ago. There'll be a working session tomorrow. Jack'll be okay," the J-3 decided he would say. He put some conviction behind it. He had to. Jack was now NCA—National Command Authority—and Jackson's loyalty to him was a matter of law and honor, not mere humanity.

"And your wife?" He looked over to where Sissy Jackson was talking with Sally Ryan.

"Still number two piano for the National Symphony."

"Who's the lead?"

"Miklos Dimitri. Bigger hands," Jackson explained. He decided it would be impolitic to ask any family questions of his own.

"You did well in the Pacific."

"Yeah, well, fortunately we didn't have to kill all that many people." Jackson looked his almost-friend in the eye. "That really stopped being fun, y'know?"

"Can he handle the job, Robby? You know him better than I do."

"Captain, he *has* to handle the job," Jackson answered, looking over at his Commander-in-Chief-friend, and knowing how much Jack detested formal occasions. Watching his new President endure the circulating line, it was impossible to avoid thinking back. "Long way

from teaching history at the Trade School, Your Highness," the admiral observed in a whisper.

For Cathy Ryan, it was more than anything else an exercise in protecting her hand. Oddly she knew the formal occasion drill better than her husband. As a senior physician at Johns Hopkins's Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute, she'd had to deal with numerous formal fund-raisers over the years, essentially a high-class version of begging —most of which occasions Jack had missed, often to her displeasure. So, here she was, again, meeting people she didn't know, would never have the chance to like, and not one of whom would support her research programs.

"The Prime Minister of India," her protocol officer said quietly.

"Hello." The First Lady smiled her greeting, shook the hand, which was blessedly light.

"You must be very proud of your husband."

"I've always been proud of Jack." They were of the same height. The Prime Minister's skin was swarthy, and she squinted her eyes behind her glasses, Cathy saw. She probably needed a prescription change, and she probably got headaches from her out-of-date one. Strange. They had some pretty good doctors in India. Not all of them came to America.

"And such lovely children," she added.

"How nice of you to say that." Cathy smiled again, in an automatic sort of way, to an observation that was as perfunctory as a comment on the clouds in the sky. A closer look at the woman's eyes told Cathy something she didn't like. *She thinks she's better than me*. But why? Because she was a politician and Caroline Ryan a mere surgeon? Would it be different had she chosen to become a lawyer? No, probably not, her mind went on, racing as it sometimes did when a surgical procedure went bad unexpectedly. No, it wasn't that at all. Cathy remembered a night right here in the East Room, facing off with Elizabeth Elliot. It was the same supercilious mind-set: *I'm better than you because of who I am and what I do.* SURGEON—that was her Secret Service code name, which had not displeased her at all, really—looked more deeply into the dark eyes before hers. There was even more to it than that. Cathy let go of her hand as the next big shot came through the mill.

The Prime Minister departed the line and headed for a circulating waiter, from whom she took a glass of juice. It would have been too obvious to do what she really wanted to do. That would come the next day, in New York. For now she looked at one of her fellow Prime Ministers, this one representing the People's Republic of China. She raised her glass a centimeter or so, and nodded without smiling. A smile was unnecessary. Her eyes conveyed the necessary message.

"Is it true they call you SWORDSMAN?" Prince Ali bin Sheik asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, and, yes, it is because of what you gave me," Jack told him. "Thank you for flying over."

"My friend, there is a bond between us." His Royal Highness was not quite a chief of state, but with the current illness of his sovereign, Ali was taking over more and more of the Kingdom's duties. He was now in charge of foreign relations *and* intelligence, the former schooled by Whitehall, the latter by Israel's Mossad, in one of the most ironic and least-known contradictions in a part of the world known for its interlocking non sequiturs. On the whole, Ryan was pleased by that. Though he had much on his plate, Ali was capable.

"You've never met Cathy, have you?"

The Prince shifted his gaze. "No, but I have met your colleague, Dr. Katz. He trained my own eye doctor. Indeed, your husband is a fortunate man, Dr. Ryan."

And the Arabs were supposed to be cold, humorless, and disrespectful of women? Cathy asked herself. Not this guy. Prince Ali took her hand gently.

"Oh, you must have met Bernie when he went over in 1994." Wilmer had helped establish the eye institute in Riyadh, and Bernie had stayed five months to do some clinical instruction.

"He performed surgery on a cousin who was injured in a plane crash. He's back flying. And those are your children over there?"

"Yes, Your Highness." This one went into the card file as a good guy.

"Would you mind if I spoke with them?"

"Please." The Prince nodded and moved off.

Caroline Ryan, he thought, making his mental notes. *Highly intelligent, highly perceptive. Proud. Will be an asset to her husband if he has the wit to make use of her.* What a pity, he thought, that his own culture utilized its women so inefficiently—but he wasn't King yet, might never be, and even if he were to become so, there were limits to the changes he could make under the best of circumstances. His nation still had far to go, though many forgot how breathtakingly far the Kingdom had come in two generations. Even so, there was a bond between him and Ryan, and because of that, a bond between America and the Kingdom. He walked over to the Ryan family, but before he got there he saw what he needed. The children were slightly overwhelmed by everything. The smallest daughter was having the easiest time of it, sipping at a soft drink under the watchful eye of a Secret Service agent, while a few diplomatic wives attempted to talk to her. She was accustomed to being doted on, as so small a child ought to be. The son, older, was the most disoriented, but that was

normal for a lad of his age, no longer a child but not yet a man. The eldest, Olivia to the briefing documents but Sally to her father, was dealing well with the most awkward age of all. What struck Prince Ali was that they were *not* used to all this. Their parents had protected them from Jack's official life. Spoiled as they undoubtedly were in some ways, they did not have the bored, haughty look of other such kids. You could tell much of a man and woman by examining their children. A moment later, he bent down over Katie. Initially she was taken aback by his unusual clothing—Ali had feared frostbite only two hours before—but in a moment his warm smile had her reaching up to touch his beard while Don Russell stood a meter away like a watch-bear. He took the time to catch the agent's eye, and the two traded a quick look. He knew that Cathy Ryan would be watching, too. What better way to befriend people than to show solicitude to their children? But it was more than that, and in his written report to his ministers, he would warn them not to judge Ryan by his somewhat awkward funeral speech. That he was not the usual sort to lead a country didn't mean that he was unfit to do so.

But some were.

Many of them were in this room.

SISTER JEAN BAPTISTE had done her best to ignore it, working through the heat of the day to sunset, trying to deny the discomfort that soon grew into genuine pain, hoping it would fade away, as minor ailments did—always did. She'd come down with malaria virtually her first week in this country, and that disease had never really gone away. At first she'd thought that's what it was, but it wasn't. The fever she'd written off to a typically hot Congo day wasn't that, either. It surprised her that she was afraid. For as often as she'd treated and consoled others, she'd never really understood the fear they had. She knew they were afraid, understood the fact that fear existed, but her response to it was succor and kindness, and prayer. Now for the first time, she was beginning to understand. Because she thought she knew what it was. She'd seen it before. Not often. Most of them never got this far. But Benedict Mkusa had gotten here, for what little good it had done. He would surely be dead by the end of the day, Sister Maria Magdalena had told her after morning mass. As little as three days before she would have sighed—but consoled herself with the thought that there would be another angel in heaven. Not this time. Now she feared that there might be two. Sister Jean Baptiste leaned against the door frame. What had she done wrong? She was a careful nurse. She didn't *make* mistakes. Well.

She had to leave the ward. She did so, walking down the breezeway

to the next building, directly into the lab. Dr. Moudi was, as usual, at his workbench, concentrating as he always did, and didn't hear her walk in. When he turned, rubbing his eyes after twenty minutes on the microscope, he was surprised to see the holy woman with her left sleeve rolled up, a rubber strip tight around her upper arm, and a needle in her antecubital vein. She was on her third 5cc test tube, and discarding that, expertly drew a fourth.

"What is the matter, Sister?"

"Doctor, I think these need to be tested at once. Please, you will wish to put on a fresh pair of gloves."

Moudi walked over to her, staying a meter away while she withdrew the needle from her arm. He looked at her face and eyes—like the women in his home city of Qom, she dressed in a very chaste and proper manner. There was much to admire about these nuns: cheerful, hardworking, and very devoutly in service to their false god—that wasn't strictly true. They were People of the Book, respected by the Prophet, but the Shi'a branch of Islam was somewhat less respectful of such people than . . . no, he would save those thoughts for another time. He could see it in her eyes, even more clearly than the overt symptoms which his trained senses were beginning to discern, he saw what she already knew.

"Please sit down, Sister."

"No—I must—"

"Sister," the physician said more insistently. "You are a patient now. You will please do as I ask, yes?"

"Doctor, I—"

His voice softened. There was no purpose in being harsh, and truly this woman did not deserve such treatment before God. "Sister, with all the care and devotion you have shown to others in this hospital, please, allow this humble visitor to show some of it to you."

Jean Baptiste did as she was told. Dr. Moudi first donned a fresh pair of latex gloves. Then he checked her pulse, 88, her blood pressure, 138/90, and took her temperature, 39—all the numbers were high, the first two because of the third, and because of what she thought it was. It could have been any of a number of ailments, from trivial to fatal, but she'd treated the Mkusa boy, and that luckless child was dying. He left her there, carefully picking up the test tubes and moving them to his laboratory bench.

Moudi had wanted to become a surgeon. The youngest of four sons, all nephews of his country's leader, he'd waited impatiently to grow up, watching his elder brothers march off to war against Iraq. Two of them had died, and the other had come back maimed, later to die by his own despairing hand, and he'd thought to be a surgeon, the better to save the lives of Allah's warriors, so that they could fight another

day in His Holy Cause. That desire had changed, and instead he'd learned about infectious diseases, because there was more than one way to fight for the Cause, and after years of patience, his way was finally appearing.

Minutes later, he walked to the isolation ward. There is an aura to death, Moudi knew. Perhaps the image before him was something of the imagination, but the fact of it was not. As soon as the sister had brought the blood sample, he'd divided it in two, sending one carefully packed test tube by air express to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A., the global center for the analysis of exotic and dangerous agents. The other he'd kept in cold storage to await developments. CDC was as efficient as ever. The telex had arrived hours earlier: Ebola Zaire was the identification, followed by a lengthy set of warnings and instructions which were entirely unnecessary. As was the diagnosis, really. Few things killed like this, and none of them so fast.

It was as if Benedict Mkusa had been cursed by Allah Himself, something Moudi knew not to be true, for Allah was a God of Mercy, who did not deliberately afflict the young and innocent. To say "it was written" was more accurate, but hardly more merciful for the patient or his parents. They sat by the bedside, dressed in protective garb, watching their world die before their eyes. The boy was in pain—horrid agony, really. Parts of his body were already dead and rotting while his heart still tried to pump and his brain to reason. The only other thing that could do this to a human body was a massive exposure to ionizing radiation. The effects were grossly similar. One by one at first, then in pairs, then in groups, then all at once, the internal organs became necrotic. The boy was too weak to vomit now, but blood issued from the other end of his GI tract. Only the eyes were something close to normal, though blood was there as well. Dark, young eyes, sad and not understanding, not comprehending that a life so recently begun was surely ending now, looking to his parents to make things right, as they always had during his eight years. The room stank of blood and sweat and other bodily fluids, and the look on the boy's face became more distant. Even as he lay still he seemed to draw away, and truly Dr. Moudi closed his eyes and whispered a prayer for the boy, who was just a boy, after all, and though not a Muslim, still a religious lad, and a person of the Book unfairly denied access to the words of the Prophet. Allah was merciful above all things, and surely He would show mercy to this boy, taking him safely into Paradise. And better it were done quickly.

If an aura could be black, then this one was. Death enveloped the young patient one centimeter at a time. The painful breaths grew more shallow, the eyes, turned to his parents, stopped moving, and

the agonized twitches of the limbs traveled down the extremities until just the fingers moved, ever so slightly, and presently that stopped.

Sister Maria Magdalena, standing behind and between mother and father, placed a hand on the shoulder of each, and Dr. Moudi moved in closer, setting his stethoscope on the patient's chest. There was some noise, gurgles and faint tears as the necrosis destroyed tissue—a dreadful yet dynamic process, but of the heart there was nothing. He moved the ancient instrument about to be sure, then he looked up.

"He is gone. I am very sorry." He might have added that for Ebola this death had been merciful, or so the books and articles said. This was his first direct experience with the virus, and it had been quite dreadful enough.

The parents took it well. They'd known for more than a day, long enough to accept, short enough that the shock hadn't worn off. They would go and pray, which was entirely proper.

The body of Benedict Mkusa would be burned, and the virus with it. The telex from Atlanta had been very clear on that. Too bad.

RYAN FLEXED HIS hand when the line finally ended. He turned to see his wife massaging hers and taking a deep breath. "Get you something?" Jack asked.

"Something soft. Two procedures tomorrow morning." And they still hadn't come up with a convenient way of getting Cathy to work. "How many of these things will we have to do?" his wife asked.

"I don't know," the President admitted, though he knew that the schedule was set months in advance, and that most of the program would have to be adhered to regardless of his wishes. As each day passed, it amazed him more and more that people sought after this job —the job had so many extraneous duties that it could scarcely be done. But the extraneous duties in a real sense *were* the job. It just went round and round. Then a staffer appeared with soft drinks for the President and First Lady, summoned by another who'd heard what Cathy had said. The paper napkins were monogrammed—stamped, whatever the process was called—with the image of the White House, and under it the words, THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE. Husband and wife both noticed that at the same moment, then allowed their eyes to meet.

"Remember the first time we took Sally to Disney World?" Cathy asked.

Jack knew what his wife meant. Just after their daughter's third birthday, not long before their trip to England . . . and the beginning of a journey which, it seemed, would never end. Sally had fixed on the castle in the center of the Magic Kingdom, always looking to see it no

matter where they were at the time. She'd called it Mickey's House. Well, they had their own castle now. For a while, anyway. But the rent was pretty high. Cathy wandered over to where Robby and Sissy Jackson were speaking with the Prince of Wales. Jack found his chief of staff.

"How's the hand?" Arnie asked.

"No complaints."

"You're lucky you're not campaigning. Lots of people think a friendly handshake is a knuckle-buster—man-to-man and all that. At least these people know better." Van Damm sipped at his Perrier and surveyed the room. The reception was going well. Various chiefs of state and ambassadors and others were engaged in friendly conversation. There were a few discreet laughs at the exchange of jokes and pleasantries. The mood of the day had changed.

"So, how many exams did I pass and fail?" Ryan asked quietly.

"Honest answer? No telling. They all looked for something different. Remember that." And some of them really didn't give a damn, having come for their own domestic political reasons, but even under these circumstances it was impolitic to say so.

"Kinda figured that out on my own, Arnie. Now I circulate, right?"

"Hit India," van Damm advised. "Adler thinks it's important."

"Roger." At least he remembered what she looked like. So many of the faces in the line had turned immediately into blurs, just as happened at an over-large party of any sort. It made Ryan feel like a fraud. Politicians were supposed to have a photographic memory for names and faces. He did not, and wondered if there were some sort of training method to acquire one. Jack handed his glass off to an attendant, wiped his hands with one of the special napkins, and headed off to see India. Russia stopped him first.

"Mr. Ambassador," Jack said. Valeriy Bogdanovich Lermonsov had been through the receiving line, but there hadn't been time then for whatever he wanted to say. They shook hands again anyway. Lermonsov was a career diplomat, popular in the local community of his peers. There was talk that he'd been KGB for years, but that was hardly something Ryan could hold against him.

"My government wishes to ask if an invitation to Moscow could be entertained."

"I have no objection to it, Mr. Ambassador, but we were just over a few months ago and my time has many demands on it right now."

"I have no doubt of that, but my government wishes to discuss several questions of mutual interest." That code phrase made Ryan turn his body fully to face the Russian.

"Oh?"

"I feared that your schedule would be a problem, Mr. President.

Might you then receive a personal representative for a quiet discussion of issues?"

That could only be one person, Jack knew. "Sergey Nikolay'eh?"

"Would you receive him?" the Ambassador persisted.

Ryan had a brief moment of, if not panic, then disquiet. Sergey Golovko was the chairman of the RVS—the reborn, downsized, but still formidable KGB. He also was one of the few people in the Russian government who had both brains and the trust of the current Russian president, Eduard Petravich Grushavoy, himself one of the few men in the world with more problems than Ryan had. Moreover, Grushavoy was keeping Golovko as close as Stalin had kept Beriya, needing a counselor with brains, experience, and muscle. The comparison wasn't strictly fair, but Golovko would not be coming over to deliver a recipe for borscht. "Items of mutual interest" usually meant serious business; coming directly to the President and not working through the State Department was another such indicator, and Lermonsov's persistence made things seem more serious still.

"Sergey's an old friend," Jack said with a friendly smile. *All the way back to when he had a pistol in my face.* "He's always welcome in my house. Let Arnie know about the scheduling?"

"I will do that, Mr. President."

Ryan nodded and moved off. The Prince of Wales had the Indian Prime Minister in a holding pattern, awaiting Ryan's appearance.

"Prime Minister, Your Highness," Ryan said with a nod.

"We thought it important that some matters be clarified."

"What might those be?" the President asked. He had an electrical twitch under his skin, from knowing what had to be coming now.

"The unfortunate incident in the Indian Ocean," the Prime Minister said. "Such misunderstandings."

"I'm—glad to hear that . . ."

EVEN THE ARMS takes days off, and the funeral of a President was one such day. Both Blue Force and OpFor had taken a day to stand down. That included the commanders. General Diggs's house was on a hilltop overlooking a singularly bleak valley, but for all that it was a magnificent sight, and the desert was warm that day from Mexican winds, which allowed a barbecue on his walled and hedged back yard.

"Have you met President Ryan?" Bondarenko asked, sipping an early-afternoon beer.

Diggs shook his head as he flipped the burgers and reached for his special sauce. "Never. Evidently he had a piece of getting the 10th ACR deployed to Israel, but, no. I know Robby Jackson, though. He's J-3 now. Robby speaks very well of him."

"This is American custom, what you do?" The Russian gestured to the charcoal burner.

Diggs looked up. "Learned it from my daddy. Could you pass my beer over, Gennady?" The Russian handed the glass to his host. "I do hate missing training days, but . . ." But he liked a day off as much as the next guy.

"This place you have here is amazing, Marion." Bondarenko turned to survey the valley. The immediate base area looked typically American, with its grid of roads and structures, but beyond that was something else. Scarcely anything grew, just what the Americans called creosote bushes, and they were like some sort of flora from a distant planet. The land here was brown, even the mountains looked lifeless. Yet there was something magnificent about the desert—and it reminded him of a mountaintop in Tajikistan. Maybe that was it.

"So, exactly how did you get those ribbons, General?" Diggs didn't know all the story. His guest shrugged.

"The Mudjeheddin decided to visit my country. It was a secret research facility, since closed down—it's a separate country now, as you know."

Diggs nodded. "I'm a cavalryman, not a high-energy physicist. You can save the secret stuff."

"I defended an apartment building—the home for the scientists and their families. I had a platoon of KGB border guards. The Mudje attacked us in company strength under cover of night and a snowstorm. It was rather exciting for an hour or so," Gennady admitted.

Diggs had seen some of the scars—he'd caught his visitor in the shower the previous day. "How good were they?"

"The Afghans?" Bondarenko grunted. "You did not wish to be captured by them. They were absolutely fearless, but sometimes that worked against them. You could tell which bands had competent leadership and which did not. That one did. They wiped out the other half of the facility, and on my side"—a shrug—"we were bloody lucky. At the end we were fighting on the ground floor of the building. The enemy commander led his people bravely—but I proved to be a better shot."

"Hero of the Soviet Union," Diggs remarked, checking his burgers again. Colonel Hamm was listening, quietly. This was how members of that community measured one another, not so much by what they had done as by how they told the story.

The Russian smiled. "Marion, I had no choice. There was no place to run away, and I knew what they did to captured Russian officers. So, they give me medal and promotion, and then my country—how you say? Evaporate?" There was more to it, of course. Bondarenko had

been in Moscow during the coup, and for the first time in his life faced with making a moral decision, he'd made the right one, attracting the notice of several people who were now highly placed in the government of a new and smaller country.

"How about a country reborn?" Colonel Hamm suggested. "How about, we can be friends now?"

"Da. You speak well, Colonel. And you command well."

"Thank you, sir. Mainly I just sit back and let the regiment run itself." That was a lie that any really good officer understood as a special sort of truth.

"Using Sov—Russian tactical doctrine!" It just seemed so outrageous to the Russian general.

"It works, doesn't it?" Hamm finished his beer.

It would work, Bondarenko promised himself. It would work for his army as it had worked for the American, once he got back and got the political support he needed to rebuild the Russian Army into something it had never been. Even at its fighting peak, driving the Germans back to Berlin, the Red Army had been a heavy, blunt instrument, depending on the shock value of mass more than anything else. He also knew what a role luck had played. His former country had fielded the world's finest tank, the T-34, blessed with a diesel engine designed in France to power dirigibles, a suspension system designed by an American named J. Walter Christie, and a handful of brilliant design innovations from young Russian engineers. That was one of the few instances in the history of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in which his countrymen had managed to turn out a world-class product and in this case it had been the right one at the right time—without which his country would surely have died. But the time was past for his country to depend on luck and mass. In the early 1980s the Americans had come up with the right formula: a small, professional army, carefully selected, exquisitely trained, and lavishly equipped. Colonel Hamm's OpFor, this 11th Cavalry Regiment, was like nothing he'd ever seen. His pre-travel brief had told him what to expect, but that was different from believing it. You had to see it to believe. In the right terrain, that one regiment could take on a division and destroy it in hours. The Blue Force was hardly incompetent, though its commander had declined the chance to come and eat here in order to work with his sub-unit leaders this day, so badly had they been mauled.

So much to learn here, but the most important lesson of all was how the Americans faced their lessons. Senior officers were humiliated regularly, both in the mock battles and afterward in what they called the AAR, "after action review," during which the observer-controller officers analyzed everything that had taken place, reading their notes

off multicolored file cards like hospital pathologists.

"I tell you," Bondarenko said after a few seconds of reflection, "in my army, people would start fistfights during—"

"Oh, we came close to that in the beginning," Diggs assured him. "When they started this place up, commanders got relieved for losing battles, until everybody took a deep breath and realized that it was supposed to be tough here. Pete Taylor is the guy who really got the NTC running right. The OCs had to learn diplomacy, and the Blue Force people had to learn that they were *here* to learn, but I'll tell you, Gennady, there isn't another army in the world that inflicts humiliation on its commanders the way we do."

"That's a fact, sir. I was talking with Sean Connolly the other day—he's CO of the 10th ACR in the Negev Desert," Hamm explained to the Russian. "The Israelis still haven't got it all the way figured out. They still bitch about what the OCs tell 'em."

"We keep installing more cameras over there." Diggs laughed as he started shoveling burgers onto the plate. "And sometimes the Israelis don't believe what happened even after we show them the videotapes."

"Still too much *hoo-uh* over there," Hamm agreed. "Hey, I came here as a squadron commander, and I got my ass handed to me more'n once."

"Gennady, after the Persian Gulf War, 3rd ACR came here for their regular rotation. Now, you remember, they led Barry McCaffrey's 24th Mech—"

"Kicked ass and took names for two hundred twenty miles in four days," Hamm confirmed. Bondarenko nodded. He'd studied that campaign in detail.

"Couple months later, they came here and got the shit kicked outa them. That's the point, General. The training here is *tougher* than combat. There's no unit in the world as smart and fast and tough as Al's Blackhorse Cav—"

"Except your old Buffalo Soldiers, General," Hamm interjected.

Diggs smiled at the reference to the 10th. He was used to Hamm's interruptions anyway. "That's a fact, Al. Anyway, if you can just break even against the OpFor, you're ready to take on anybody in the world, on the wrong side of three-to-one odds, and kick their ass into the next time zone."

Bondarenko nodded, smiling. He was learning fast. The small staff that had come with him was still prowling the base, talking with counterpart officers, and learning, learning, learning. Being on the wrong side of three-to-one odds wasn't the tradition of Russian armies, but that might soon change. The threat to his country was China, and if that battle were ever fought, it would be at the far end of a lengthy

supply line, against a huge conscript army. The only answer to that threat was to duplicate what the Americans had done. Bondarenko's mission was to change the entire military policy of his country. Well, he told himself, he'd come to the right place to learn how.

BULLSHIT. THE PRESIDENT thought behind an understanding smile. It was hard to like India. They called themselves the world's largest democracy, but that wasn't especially true. They talked about the most high-minded principles, but had, when convenient, muscled neighbors, developed nuclear weapons, and in asking America to depart the Indian Ocean—"It is, after all, called the *Indian* Ocean," a former P.M. had told a former American Ambassador—decided that the doctrine of Freedom of the Seas was variably applicable. And for damned sure, they'd been ready to make a move on Sri Lanka. It was just that now, the move having been foiled, they were saying that no such move had ever been planned. But you couldn't look in the eyes of a chief of state and smile, and say, "Bullshit."

It just wasn't done.

Jack listened patiently, sipping at another glass of Perrier fetched for him by a nameless aide. The situation in Sri Lanka was complex, and did, unfortunately, lend itself to misunderstanding, and India regretted that, and there were no hard feelings at all, but wouldn't it be better if both sides stood down. The Indian fleet was withdrawing back to its bases, training complete, and a few ships damaged by the American demonstration, which, the Prime Minister said without so many words, wasn't exactly cricket. Such bullies.

And what does Sri Lanka think of you? Ryan could have asked, but didn't.

"If only you and Ambassador Williams had communicated more clearly on the issue," Ryan observed sadly.

"Such things happen," the Prime Minister replied. "David—frankly, pleasant man though he is, I fear the climate is too hot for one of his age." Which was as close as she could come to telling Ryan to fire the man. Declaring Ambassador Williams persona non grata was far too drastic a step. Ryan tried not to change his expression, but failed. He needed Scott Adler over here, but the acting SecState was somewhere else at the moment.

"I hope you can appreciate the fact that I am really not in a position to make serious changes in the government at the moment." *Drop dead.*

"Please, I wasn't suggesting that. I fully appreciate your situation. My hope was to allay at least one supposed problem, to make your task easier." *Or I could make it harder.*

“Thank you for that, Prime Minister. Perhaps your Ambassador here could discuss things with Scott?”

“I’ll be sure to speak to him on the matter.” She shook Ryan’s hand again and walked away. Jack waited for several seconds before looking at the Prince.

“Your Highness, what do you call it when a high-ranking person lies right in your face?” the President asked with a wry smile.

“Diplomacy.”

9

DISTANT HOWLS

GOLOVKO READ OVER Ambassador Lermonsov's report without sympathy for its subject. Ryan looked "harried and uncomfortable," "somewhat overwhelmed," and "physically tired." Well, that was to be expected. His speech at President Durling's funeral, the diplomatic community agreed—along with the American media, which was straining its capacity for politeness—was not presidential. Well, anyone who knew Ryan knew him to be sentimental, especially when it came to the welfare of children. Golovko could easily forgive that. Russians were much the same. He ought to have done otherwise—Golovko had read over the official, undelivered oration; it was a good one, full of assurances for all listeners—but Ryan had always been what the Americans called a maverick (he'd had to look up the word, discovering that it denoted a wild, untamed horse, which was not far off the mark). That made Ryan both easy and impossible for the Russian to analyze. Ryan was an American, and Americans were and had always been devilishly unpredictable from Golovko's perspective. He'd spent a professional lifetime, first as a field intelligence officer, then as a rapidly climbing staff officer in Moscow, trying to predict what America would do in all manner of situations, and only avoiding failure because he'd never failed to present three possible courses of action in his reports to his superiors.

But at least Ivan Emmetovich Ryan was predictably unpredictable, and Golovko flattered himself to think of Ryan as a friend—perhaps that was going a bit far, but the two men had played the game, most of the time from opposite sides of the field, and for the most part both had played it skillfully and well, Golovko the more experienced professional, Ryan the gifted amateur, blessed by a system more tolerant of mavericks. There was respect between them.

"What are you thinking now, Jack?" Sergey whispered to himself. Right now the new American President was sleeping, of course, fully eight hours behind Moscow, where the sun was only beginning to rise for a short winter day.

Ambassador Lermonsov had not been overly impressed, and Golovko would have to append his own notes to the report lest his

government give *that* evaluation too much credence. Ryan had been far too skilled an enemy to the USSR to be taken lightly under any circumstances. The problem was that Lermonsov had expected Ryan to fit into one mold, and Ivan Emmetovich was not so easily classified. It wasn't so much complexity as a different variety of complexity. Russia didn't have a Ryan—it was not likely that he could have survived in the Soviet environment which still pervaded the Russian Republic, especially in its official bureaucracies. He was easily bored, and his temper, though kept under tight control at most times, was always there. Golovko had seen it bubbling more than once, but only heard of times when it had broken loose. Those stories had percolated out of CIA to ears which reported to Dzerzhinskiy Square. God help him as a head of government.

But that wasn't Golovko's problem.

He had enough of his own. He hadn't entirely relinquished control of the Foreign Intelligence Service President Grushavoy had little reason to trust the agency which had once been the "Sword and Shield of the Party," and wanted someone he could rely upon to keep an eye on that tethered predator; Golovko, of course—and at the same time, Sergey was the principal foreign-policy adviser to the beleaguered Russian President. Russia's internal problems were so manifest as to deny the President the ability to evaluate foreign problems, and *that* meant that for all practical purposes the former spy gave advice that his President almost invariably followed. The chief minister—that's what he was, with or without the title—took the burden seriously. Grushavoy had a domestic hydra to deal with—like the mythical beast of old, every head cut off just gave room for another to grow into its place. Golovko had fewer to deal with, but they made up for it in size. And part of him wished for a return to the old KGB. Only a few years before, it would have been child's play. Lift a phone, speak a few words, and the criminals would have been picked up, and that would have been that not really, but it would have made things more . . . peaceful. More predictable. More orderly. And his country needed order. But the Second Chief Directorate, the "secret police" division of the agency, was gone, spun off into an independent bureau, its powers diminished, and its public respect—fear bordering on outright terror in the not-so-old days—had evaporated. His country had never been under the degree of control expected by the West, but now it was worse. The Russian Republic teetered on the edge of anarchy as her citizens groped for something called democracy. Anarchy was what had brought Lenin to power, for the Russians craved strong rule, scarcely having known anything else, and while Golovko didn't want that—as a senior KGB officer he knew better than any what damage Marxism-Leninism had done to his nation—he desperately needed an

organized country behind him, because the problems within attracted problems without. And so it was that his unofficial post as chief minister for national security was hostage to all manner of difficulties. His were the arms of an injured body, trying to fend off the wolves while it tried to heal.

And so he had little pity for Ryan, whose nation may have taken a severe blow to the head, but was otherwise healthy. However differently it might appear to others, Golovko knew better, and because he did, he would be asking Ryan for help.

China. The Americans had defeated Japan, but the real enemy hadn't *been* Japan. He had a desk covered with overhead photographs just brought down from a reconnaissance satellite. Too many divisions of the People's Liberation Army were exercising in the field. Chinese nuclear-rocket regiments were still at a somewhat increased alert status. His own country had discarded its ballistic weapons—despite the threat from China, the huge resulting development loans from American and European banks had made the gamble look attractive only a few months before. Besides, his country, like America, still had bombers and cruise missiles which could be armed with atomic warheads, and so the disadvantage was far more theoretical than real. If one assumed that the Chinese subscribed to the same theories, that is. The Chinese were in any case maintaining their armed forces at a high state of readiness, and Russia's Far Eastern group of forces was at a historic low. He consoled himself that with Japan taken out of play, the Chinese would not move. Probably not move, he corrected himself. If the Americans were hard to understand, the Chinese might as easily have been aliens from another planet. It was enough to remember that the Chinese had been as far as the Baltic once before. Like most Russians, Golovko had a deep respect for history. There he was, Sergey thought, lying on the snow, a stick in his hand to fight off the wolf while he tried to heal. His arm was still strong enough, and the stick still long enough to keep the fangs away. But what if there came another wolf? A document to the left of the satellite photographs was the first harbinger of that, like a distant howl on the horizon, the sort to make blood chill. Golovko didn't reflect far enough. Lying down on the ground, the horizon could be surprisingly close.

THE AMAZING THING was that it had taken so long. Protecting an important person against assassination is a complex exercise at best, all the more so when that person went out of his way to create enemies. Ruthlessness helps. The ability to snatch people off the street, to make them disappear, was a deterrent of no small value. The further willingness to take away not just a single person, but an entire

family—sometimes an entire extended family—and do the same was more effective still. One selected the people to be "disappeared," an unhappy pseudo-verb that had originated in Argentina, through intelligence. That was a polite term for informers, paid in the coin of the realm or in power, which was better still. They would report conversations for their seditious content, to the point that a mere joke about someone's mustache could entail the sentence of death for its raconteur; and soon enough, because institutions were institutions, informers had quotas to fill, and since the informers were themselves human beings with likes and dislikes, their reports as often as not reflected personal slights or jealousy, because the delegated power of life and death was as corrupting to the small as to the great. Eventually a corrupt system was itself corrupted, and the logic of terror reached its logical conclusion: a humble rabbit, cornered by a fox, has nothing to lose by striking out, and rabbits have teeth, and sometimes the rabbit gets lucky.

Because terror was not enough, there were passive measures as well. The task of assassinating an important man can be made difficult by the simplest of procedures, especially in a despotic state. A few lines of guards to limit approach. Multiple identical cars in which the target might travel—often as many as twenty in this case—denied one the ability to know which car to engage. The life of such a person was busy, and so it was both a convenience and a protective measure to have a double or two, to appear, and give a speech, and take the risk in return for a comfortable life as the staked goat on the public stage.

Next came the selection of the protectors—how did one pick truly reliable fish from a sea of hatred? The obvious answer here was to pick people from one's extended family, then to give them a lifestyle that depended absolutely upon the survival of their leader, and finally to link them so closely with his protection and its necessary ramifications that his death would mean far more than the loss of a highly paid government job. That the guards' lives depended on the guarded one was an effective incentive toward efficiency.

But really it all came down to one thing. A person was invincible only because people thought him to be so, and therefore that person's security was, like all of the important aspects of life, a thing of the mind.

But human motivation is also a thing of the mind, and fear has never been the strongest emotion. Throughout history, people have risked their lives for love, for patriotism, for principle, and for God far more often than fear has made them run away. Upon that fact depends progress.

The colonel had risked his life in so many ways that he could scarcely remember them all, and done that just to be noticed, just to

be asked to be a small part in a larger machine, then to rise within it. He'd taken a long time to get this close to the Mustache. Eight years, in fact. In that time he'd tortured and killed men, women, and children from behind blank and pitiless eyes. He'd raped daughters before their fathers' eyes, mothers before their sons'. He'd committed crimes to damn the souls of a hundred men, because there was no other way. He'd drunk liquor in quantities to impress an infidel in order to defile that law of his religion. All of this he had done in God's name, praying for forgiveness, desperately telling himself that it was written that his life should be so, that, no, he didn't enjoy any of it, that the lives he took were sacrifices necessary to some greater plan, that they would have died in any case, and that in this way their deaths by his hand could serve a Holy Cause. He had to believe in all of that lest he go mad—he'd come close enough in any case, until his fixed purpose passed far beyond the meaning of "obsession," and he became that which he did in every possible way, all with one objective, that he would get close enough and trusted enough for a single second's work, to be followed instantly by his own death.

He knew he had become that which he and everyone around him were trained to fear above all things. All the lectures and the drinking sessions with his peers always came back to the same thing. They spoke of their mission and the dangers of that mission. And *that* always came down to one subject. The lone dedicated assassin, the man willing to throw away his own life like a gambling chip, the patient man who waited his chance, *that* was the enemy whom every protective officer in the world feared, drunk or sober, on duty or off, even in his dreams. And that was the reason for all the tests required to protect the Mustache. To get here, you had to be damned before God and men, because when you got here, you saw what really was.

The Mustache was what he called his target. Not a man at all, an apostate before Allah who desecrated Islam without a thought, a criminal of such magnitude as to deserve a newly designed room in Perdition. From afar the Mustache looked powerful and invincible, but not up close. His bodyguards knew better because they knew all. They saw the doubts and the fears, the petty cruelties inflicted on the undeserving. He'd seen the Mustache murder for amusement, maybe just to see if his Browning pistol worked today. He'd seen him look out the window of one of his white Mercedes autos, spot a young woman, point, give a command, then use the hapless girl for one night. The lucky ones returned home with money and disgrace. The unlucky floated down the Euphrates with their throats cut, not a few by the Mustache himself, if they'd resisted a little too well in the protection of their virtue. But powerful as he was, clever and cunning as he was, heartlessly cruel as he was, no, he was not invincible. And

it was now his time to see Allah.

The Mustache emerged from the building onto the expansive porch, his bodyguards behind him, his right arm outstretched to salute the assembled multitude. The people in the square, hastily assembled, roared their adoration, which fed the Mustache as surely as sunlight fed the flower. And then, from three meters away, the colonel drew his automatic pistol from its leather holster, brought it up in one hand, and fired a single aimed round straight into the back of his target's head. Those in the front of the crowd saw the bullet erupt from their dictator's left eye, and there followed one of those moments in history, the sort when the entire earth seemed to stop its spin, hearts paused, and even the people who'd been screaming their loyalty to a man already dead would remember only silence.

The colonel didn't bother with another shot. He was an expert marksman who practiced with his comrades almost every day, and his open, blank eyes had seen the impact of his round. He didn't turn, and didn't waste time in fruitless efforts at self-defense. There was no point in killing the comrades with whom he'd drunk liquor and raped children. Others would see to that soon enough. He didn't even smile, though it was very funny indeed, wasn't it, that the Mustache had one instant looked at the square full of the people whom he despised for their adoration of himself—then to look Allah in the face and wonder what had happened. That thought had perhaps two seconds to form itself before he felt his body jerk with the impact of the first bullet. There was no pain. He was too focused on his target, now on the flat paving stones of the porch, already a pool of blood draining rapidly from the ruined head. More bullets hit, and it seemed briefly strange that he could feel them yet not the pain of their passage, and in his last seconds he prayed to Allah for forgiveness and understanding, that all his crimes had been committed in the name of God and His Justice. To the last, his ears reported not the sound of the shots, but the lingering cries of the mob, not yet grasping that their leader was dead.

"WHO IS IT?" Ryan checked his clock. *Damn, the extra forty minutes of sleep would have been nice*.

"Mr. President, my name is Major Canon, Marine Corps," the unknown voice announced.

"That's nice, Major, who are you?" Jack blinked his eyes and forgot to be polite, but probably the officer understood.

"Sir, I'm the watch officer in Signals. We have a report with high confidence that the President of Iraq was assassinated about ten minutes ago."

"Source?" Jack asked at once.

"Kuwait and Saudi both, sir. It was on Iraqi TV live, some sort of event, and we have people over there to monitor their TV. We have a tape being uplinked to us right now. The initial word is a pistol right in the head, at close range." The tone of the officer's voice wasn't exactly regretful. *Well, they finally popped that fucker!* Of course, you couldn't exactly say that to the President.

And you needed to figure who "they" was.

"Okay, Major, what's the drill?" The answer came quickly enough. Ryan replaced the phone.

"Now what?" Cathy asked. Jack swung his feet out of bed before answering.

"The President of Iraq was just killed."

His wife almost said, *Good*, but stopped. The death of such a person was not as distant a concept as it had once been. How odd to feel that way about someone who could best serve the world by leaving it.

"Is that important?"

"In about twenty minutes, they'll tell me." Ryan coughed before going on. "What the hell, I used to be competent in those areas. Yeah, it's potentially very important." With that he did what every man in America did in the morning. He headed to the bathroom ahead of his wife. For her part, Cathy lifted the remote and performed the other ordinarily male function of clicking on the bedroom TV, surprised to find that CNN didn't have anything on but reports on which airports were operating behind schedule. Jack had told her a few times just how good the White House Signals Office was.

"Anything?" her husband asked, coming back out.

"Not yet." Then it was her turn.

Jack had to think about where his clothes were, wondering how a President was supposed to dress. He found his robe—moved in from the Naval Observatory after having been moved there from Eighth and I, after having been removed from their home . . . damn—and opened the bedroom door. An agent in the hall handed him three morning papers. "Thanks."

Cathy saw that and stopped cold in her tracks, belatedly realizing that there had been people just outside her bedroom door all night. Her face turned away, forming the sort of smile generated by finding an unexpected mess in the kitchen.

"Jack?"

"Yes, honey?"

"If I kill you in bed some night, will those people with guns get me right away, or will it wait until morning?"

THE REAL WORK was being done at Fort Meade. The video had traveled from one monitoring station on the Kuwait-Iraq border and another in Saudi Arabia, known as PALM BOWL and STORM TRACK, respectively, the latter set up to record all signals out of Baghdad, and the former watching the southeastern part of the country, around Basra. From both places the information traveled by fiber-optic cable to the National Security Agency's deceptively small building in King Khalid Military City (KKMC) and uplinked to a communications satellite, which then shot it back to NSA headquarters. There in the watch room, ten people summoned by one of the junior watch officers huddled around a TV monitor to catch the tape, while the more senior troops, in a separate glass-walled office, sipped their coffee soberly.

"Yes!" an Air Force sergeant observed on seeing the shot, "Nothin' but net!" Several high fives were exchanged. The senior watch officer, who'd already called White House Signals, nodded his more restrained approval and relayed the original signal along the way, and ordered a digital enhancement, which would take a few minutes—only a few frames were all that important, and they had a massive Cray supercomputer to handle that.

RYAN REMARKED QUIETLY that while Cathy was getting the kids ready for school, and herself ready to operate on people's eyes, here he was in Signals watching the instant replay of a murder. His designated national intelligence officer was still at CIA, finishing his morning intake of information, which he would then regurgitate to the President by way of the morning intelligence briefing. The post of National Security Advisor was currently vacant—one more thing to address today.

"Whoa!" Major Canon breathed.

The President nodded, then reverted to his former life as an intelligence officer. "Okay, tell me what we know."

"Sir, we know that somebody got killed, probably the Iraqi President."

"Double?"

Canon nodded, "Could be, but STORM TRACK is now reporting a *lot* of VHF signals that started all of a sudden, police and military nets, and the activity is radiating out from Baghdad." The Marine officer pointed to his computer monitor, which displayed real-time "take" from the NSA's many outposts. "Translations will take a little time, but I do traffic analysis for a living. It looks pretty real, sir. I suppose it could be faked, but I wouldn't—there!"

A translation was coming up, identified as emanating from a military command net. He's dead, he's dead, *stsnd your regiment to and*

be prepared to move into the city imediately—recipient is Replican Gurds Special Operations regiment at Salman Pak—reply is: Yes I will yes I will, who is giving the oders, what are my orders—

"Typos and all," Ryan noted.

"Sir, it's hard for our people to translate and type it at the same time. Usually we clean it up before "

"Relax, Major. I only use three fingers myself. Tell me what you think."

"Sir, I'm only a junior officer here, that's why I draw the midwatch and—"

"If you were stupid, you wouldn't be here."

Canon nodded. "He's deader 'n hell, sir. Iraq needs a new dictator. We have the imagery, we have unusual signal traffic that fits the pattern of an unusual event. That's my estimate." He paused and went on to cover himself, like a good spook. "Unless it's a deliberate exercise to smoke out disloyal people inside his government. That's possible, but unlikely. Not in public like this."

"Kamikaze play?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Something you can only do once, and dangerous the first time."

"Agreed." Ryan walked to the coffee urn—the White House Office of Signals was mainly a military operation, and they made their own. Jack got two cups and came back, handing one to Major Canon, rather to the horror of everyone else in the room. "Fast work. Send a 'thanks' to the guys working this, okay?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Who do I talk to to get things happening around here?"

"We got the phones right here, Mr. President."

"I want Adler in here ASAP, the DCI . . . who else? State and CIA desks for Iraq. DIA estimate of the state of their military. Find out if Prince Ali is still in town. If he is, ask him to please stand by. I want to talk to him this morning if possible. I wonder what else . . . ?" Ryan's voice trailed off.

"CENTCOM, sir. He'll have the best military-intelligence troops down at Tampa, most familiar with the area, I mean."

"Get him up here—no, we'll do that by landline, and we give him time to get briefed in."

"We'll get it all going for you, sir." Ryan patted the officer on the shoulder and headed out of the room. The heavy door closed behind him before Major Charles Canon spoke again. "Hey, NCA knows his shit."

"Is it what I heard?" Price asked, coming up the corridor.

"Do you ever sleep?" Then he thought about it. "I want you in on this."

"Why me, sir, I'm not—"
"You're supposed to know about assassinations, right?"
"Yes, Mr. President."
"Then right now you're more valuable to me than a spook."

THE TIMING COULD have been better. Daryaei had been surprised by the information just delivered. Not in the least bit displeased by it—except maybe the timing. He paused for a moment, whispering a prayer first of thanks to Allah, then for the soul of the unknown assassin assassin? he asked himself. Perhaps "judge" would be a better term for the man, one of many who'd been infiltrated into Iraq ages ago, while the war had still been going on. Most had merely disappeared, probably shot one way or another. The overall mission had been his idea, not nearly dramatic enough for the "professionals" working in his intelligence service. Largely leftovers from the Shah's Savak—trained by the Israelis in the 1960s and 1970s—they were effective, but they were mercenaries at heart however much they might protest their religious fervor and their loyalty to the new regime. They'd proceeded along "conventional" lines for the unconventional mission, trying bribes of various sorts or testing the waters for dissidents, only to fail at every turn, and for years Daryaei had wondered if the target of all that attention might have Allah's perverse blessings somehow or other but that had been the counsel of despair, not of reason and faith, and even Daryaei was subject to human weakness. Surely the Americans had tried for him also, and probably in the same way, trying to identify military commanders who might like to try out the seat of power, trying to initiate a coup d'état such as they had done often enough in other parts of the world. But, no, this target was too skilled for that, and at every turn he'd become more skilled, and so the Americans had failed, and the Israelis, and all the others. *All but me*.

It was tradition, after all, all the way back to antiquity. One man, operating alone, one faithful man who would do whatever was necessary to accomplish his mission. Eleven such men had been dispatched into Iraq for this specific purpose, told to go deep under cover, trained to forget everything they had ever been, entirely without contact or control officers, and all records of their existence destroyed so that even an Iraqi spy in his own agencies could not discover the mission without a name. Within an hour, some of his own cronies would come into this office, praising God and lauding their leader for his wisdom. Perhaps so, but even they didn't know all the things he had done, or all the people he'd dispatched.

THE DIGITIZED RENDITION of the event didn't change much, though now he had a more professional opinion of the options:

"Mr. President, a guy with a Silicon Graphics workstation could fake this," the NIO told him. "You've seen movies, and movie film has much higher resolution than a TV set. You can fake almost anything now."

"Fine, but your job is to tell me what did happen," Ryan pointed out. He'd seen the same few seconds of tape eight times now, and was growing tired of instant replay.

"We can't say with absolute certainty."

Maybe it was the week's sleep deprivation. Maybe it was the stress of the job. Maybe it was the stress of having to face his *second* crisis. Maybe it was the fact that Ryan was himself still a carded national intelligence officer. "Look, I'm going to say this once: Your job isn't to cover your ass. Your job is to cover *mine!"*

"I know that, Mr. President. That's why I'm giving you all the information I have. . .." Ryan didn't have to listen to the rest of the speech. He'd heard it all before, a couple of hundred times. There had even been cases when he'd said similar things himself, but in Jack's case, he'd always hung his hat on one of the options.

"Scott?" Jack asked the acting SecState.

"The son of a bitch is dead as yesterday's fish," Adler replied.

"Disagreement?" President Ryan asked the others in the room. Nobody contradicted the assessment, giving it a sort of blessing. Even the NIO would not *disagree* with the collective opinion. He'd delivered his assessments, after all. Any mistakes now were the Secretary of State's problem. Perfect.

"Who was the shooter?" Andrea Price asked. The answer came from CIA's Iraq-desk officer.

"Unknown. I have people running tapes of previous appearances just to make sure that he's been around before. Look, from all appearances it was a senior member of his protection detail, with the rank of an army colonel, and—"

"And I damned well know everybody on my detail," Price concluded the statement. "So, whoever it was, he belonged there, and that means whoever pulled this off managed to get somebody all the way inside, close enough to make the hit, and committed enough to pay the price for it. It must have taken years." The continuation of the tape—they'd watched that only five times—showed the man crumble after a cavalcade of pistol shots at point-blank range. That struck Agent Price as odd. You damned well wanted to bag such people alive. Dead men still didn't tell any tales, and executions could always be

arranged. Unless he'd been killed by other members of a conspiracy. But how likely was it that more than one assassin had made it that far? Price reflected that she could ask Indira Gandhi that someday. Her whole detail had turned on her one afternoon in a garden. For Price that was the final infamy, killing the person you were sworn to defend. But, then, she hadn't sworn to defend such people as that. One other thing on the tape got her attention: "Did you notice the body language?"

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"The way the gun came up, the way he took the shot, the way he just stood there and watched. Like a golfer, it's called follow-through. He must have waited a long time for the chance. He damned sure thought about it for a long, long time. He must have dreamed about it. He wanted the moment to be perfect. He wanted to see it and enjoy it before he went down." She shook her head slowly. "That was one focused, dedicated killer." Price was actually enjoying herself, chilling though the subject of the meeting was. More than one President had treated the Secret Service agents as if they were furniture, or at best nice pets. It wasn't often that big shots asked their opinion of much more than narrow professional areas, like where a bad guy might be in a particular crowd.

"Keep going," CIA said.

"He must have been from outside, a guy with a totally clean record, no connection at all with anybody who made noise in Baghdad. This wasn't a guy getting even for somebody taking his mother out, okay? It was somebody who worked his way up the system, slow and careful all the way."

"Iran," CIA said. "Best guess, anyway. Religious motivation. No way he'd walk away from the hit, so it had to be somebody who didn't care. That could also mean straight revenge, but Ms. Price is correct: his people were clean in that respect. Anyway, it wasn't the Israelis, wasn't the French. The Brits don't do this anymore. The domestic angle is probably taken out by their vetting procedures. So it wasn't for money. It wasn't for personal or family motives. I think we can discount political ideology. That leaves religion, and *that* means Iran."

"I can't say I'm familiar with all the intelligence side, but from looking at the tape, yeah," Andrea Price agreed. "It's like he was saying a prayer, the way he killed the guy. He just wanted the moment to be perfect. He didn't care about anything else."

"Somebody else to check that out?" Ryan asked.

"FBI, their Behavioral Sciences people are pretty good at reading minds. We work with them all the time," Price responded.

"Good idea," CIA agreed. "We'll rattle the bushes to ID the shooter, but even if we can get good information, it might not mean anything."

"What about the timing?"

"If we can stipulate that the shooter was there for a while—we have enough tapes of public appearances to determine that—then timing is an issue," CIA thought.

"Oh, that's just great," the President opined. "Scott, now what?"

"Bert?" SecState said to his desk officer. Bert Vasco was the State Department senior desk officer for that country. Rather like a specialist in the trading industry, he concentrated his efforts on learning everything he could about one particular country.

"Mr. President, as we all know, Iraq is a majority Shi'a Muslim country ruled by a Sunni minority through the Ba'ath political party. It has always been a concern that the elimination of our friend over there could topple—"

"Tell me what I don't know," Ryan interrupted.

"Mr. President, we simply do not know the strength of any opposition group that may or may not exist. The current regime has been very effective at cutting the weeds down early. A handful of Iraqi political figures has defected to Iran. None are top-quality people, and none ever had the chance to develop a firm political base. There are two radio stations that broadcast from Iran into Iraq. We know the names of the defectors who use those transmitters to talk to their countrymen. But there's no telling how many people listen and pay attention. The regime isn't exactly popular, we know that. We do not know the strength of the opposition, or what sort of organization exists to make use of an opportunity such as this one."

CIA nodded. "Bert's right. Our friend was awfully good at identifying potential enemies and taking them out of play. We tried to help during and after the Persian Gulf War, but all we really managed to do was get people killed. For sure nobody over there trusts us."

Ryan sipped at his coffee and nodded. He'd made his own recommendations back in 1991, and they hadn't been exercised. Well, he'd still been a junior executive then.

"Do we have any options to play?" the President asked next.

"Honestly, no," Vasco answered.

CIA agreed: "No assets in place. What few people we have operating in that country are tasked to coverage of weapons development: nuclear, chemical, and so forth. Nobody on the political side. We actually have more people in Iran looking at the political side. We can rattle those bushes some, but not in Iraq."

Fabulous, Jack thought, a country may or may not go down in one of the most sensitive areas of the world, and the world's most powerful nation could do nothing more than watch television coverage of the event. So much for the power of the American presidency.

"Arnie?"

"Yes, Mr. President," the chief of staff replied.

"We bumped Mary Pat off the schedule a couple days ago. I want her in today if we can work the schedule."

"I'll see what we can do on that, but—"

"But when something like this happens, the President of the United States is supposed to have more than his dick in his hand." Ryan paused. "Is Iran going to make a move?"

10

POLITICS

PRINCE ALI BIN SHEIK HAD been ready to fly home on his personal aircraft, an aging but beautifully appointed Lockheed L-1011, when the call came in from the White House. The Saudi embassy was located close to the Kennedy Center, and the ride correspondingly short in his official limousine, accompanied by a security force almost as large as Ryan's and made up of American Diplomatic Protection Service personnel, plus the Prince's own detail, composed of former members of Britain's Special Air Service. The Saudis, as always, spent a lot of money and bought quality with it. Ali was no stranger to the White House, or to Scott Adler, who met him at the door and conducted him upstairs and east into the Oval Office.

"Mr. President," His Royal Highness said, walking in from the secretaries' room.

"Thank you for coming over on such short notice." Jack shook his hand and waved him to one of the room's two sofas. Some thoughtful person had started a fire in the fireplace. The White House photographer snapped a few shots, and was dismissed. "I imagine you've seen the news this morning."

Ali managed a worried smile. "What does one say? We will not mourn his passing, but the Kingdom has serious concerns."

"Do you know anything we don't?" Ryan asked.

The Prince shook his head. "I was as surprised as everyone else."

The President grimaced. "You know, with all the money we spend on—" His visitor raised a tired hand.

"Yes, I know. I will have the same conversation with my own ministers as soon as my airplane lands back home."

"Iran."

"Undoubtedly."

"Will they move?"

The Oval Office got quiet then, just the crackling of the seasoned oak in the fireplace as the three men, Ryan, Ali, and Adler, traded looks across the coffee table, the tray and cups on it untouched. The issue was, of course, oil. The Persian—sometimes called the *Arabian*—Gulf was a finger of water surrounded by, and in some places sitting

atop, a sea of oil. Most of the world's known supply was there, divided mainly among the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran, along with the smaller United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar. Of these countries, Iran was by far the largest in terms of population. Next came Iraq. The nations of the Arabian Peninsula were richer, but the land atop their liquid wealth had never supported a large population, and there was the rub, first exposed in 1991, when Iraq had invaded Kuwait with all the grace of a schoolyard bully's attack on a smaller child. Ryan had more than once said that aggressive war was little more than an armed robbery writ large, and such had been the case in the Persian Gulf War. Seizing upon a minor territorial dispute and some equally trivial economic issues as an excuse, Saddam Hussein had attempted at a stroke to double his country's inherent wealth, and then threatened to double down his bets yet again by attacking Saudi Arabia—the reason he'd stopped at the Kuwait-Saudi border would now remain forever unexplained. At the most easily understood level, it was about oil and oil's resulting wealth.

But there was more to it than that. Hussein, like a Mafia don, had thought about little more than money and the political power that money generated. Iran was somewhat more farsighted.

All the nations around the Gulf were Islamic, most of them very strictly so. There were the exceptions of Bahrain and Iraq. In the former case, the oil had essentially run out, and that country—really a city-state separated from the Kingdom by a causeway—had evolved into the same function that Nevada exercised for the western United States, a place where the normal rules were set aside, where drinking, gambling, and other pleasures could be indulged a convenient distance from a more restrictive home. In the latter case, Iraq was a secular state which paid scant lip service to the state religion, which largely explained its President's demise after a long and lively career.

But the key to the region was and would always be religion. The Saudi Kingdom was the living heart of Islam. The Prophet had been born there. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina were there, and from that point of origin had grown one of the world's great religious movements. The issue was less about oil than about faith. Saudi Arabia was of the Sunni branch, and Iran of the Shi'a. Ryan had once been briefed on the differences, which had at the time seemed so marginal that he'd made no effort to remember them. That, the President told himself now, was foolish. The differences were large enough to make two important countries into enemies, and that was as large as any difference needed to be. It wasn't about wealth per se. It was about a different sort of power, the sort that grew from the mind and the heart—and from there into something else. Oil and

money just made the struggle more interesting to outsiders.

A lot more interesting. The industrial world depended on that oil. Every state on the Gulf feared Iran for its size, for its large population, and for the religious fervor of its citizens. For the Sunni religious, the fear was about a perceived departure from the true course of Islam. For everyone else, it was about what would happen to them when "heretics" assumed control of the region, because Islam is a comprehensive system of beliefs, spreading out into civil law and politics and every other form of human activity. For Muslims the Word of God was Law Itself. For the West it was continuing their economies. For the Arabs—Iran is *not* an Arab country—it was the most fundamental question of all, a man's place before his God.

"Yes, Mr. President," Prince Ali bin Sheik replied after a moment. "They will move."

His voice was admirably calm, though Ryan knew that inwardly he must be anything but. The Saudis had never wanted Iraq's President to fall. Enemy though he was, apostate though he was, aggressor though he was, he had fulfilled a useful strategic purpose for his neighbors. Iraq had long been a buffer between the Gulf states and Iran. It was a case in which religion played second fiddle to politics, which thereby served religious purposes. By rejecting the Word of Allah, Iraq's majority Shi'a population was taken out of play, and the dual border with Kuwait and the Kingdom was one of mere politics, not religion. But if the Ba'ath Party fell along with its leader, then Iraq might revert to majority religious rule. That would put a Shi'a country on the two borders, and the leader of the Shi'a branch of Islam was Iran.

Iran would move, because Iran had been moving for years. The religion systematized by Mohammed had spread from the Arabian Peninsula to Morocco in the west and the Philippines in the east, and with the evolution of the modern world was represented in every nation on earth. Iran had used its wealth and its large population to become the world's leading Islamic nation, by bringing in Muslim clergy to its own holy city of Qom to study, by financing political movements throughout the Islamic world, and by funneling weapons to Islamic peoples who needed help—the Bosnian Muslims were a case in point, and not the only one.

"Anschluss," Scott Adler thought aloud. Prince Ali just looked over and nodded.

"Do we have any sort of plan to help prevent it?" Jack asked. He knew the answer. No, nobody did. That was the reason the Persian Gulf War had been fought for limited military objectives, and not to overthrow the aggressor. The Saudis, who had from the beginning charted the war's strategic objectives, had never allowed America or her allies even to consider a drive to Baghdad, and this despite the

fact that with Iraq's army deployed in and around Kuwait, the Iraqi capital had been as exposed as a nudist on a beach. Ryan had remarked at the time, watching the talking heads on various TV news shows, that not a single one of the commentators remarked that a textbook campaign would have totally ignored Kuwait, seized Baghdad, and then waited for the Iraqi army to stack arms and surrender. Well, not everyone could read a map.

"Your Highness, what influence can you exercise there?" Ryan inquired next.

"In practical terms? Very little. We will extend the hand of friendship, offer loans—by the end of the week we will ask America and the U.N. to lift sanctions with an eye to improving economic conditions, but . . ."

"Yeah, but," Ryan agreed. "Your Highness, please let us know what information you can develop. America's commitment to the Kingdom's security is unchanged."

Ali nodded. "I will convey that to my government."

"NICE, PROFESSIONAL JOB," Ding observed, catching the enhanced instant replay. " 'Cept for one little thing."

"Yeah, it is nice to collect the paycheck before your will is probated." Clark had once been young enough and angry enough to think in such terms as the shooter whose death he'd just seen repeated, but with age had come circumspection. Now, he'd heard, Mary Pat wanted him to try again for a White House appearance, and he was reading over a few documents. Trying to, anyway.

"John, ever read up on the Assassins?" Chavez asked, killing the TV with the remote.

"I saw the movie," Clark replied without looking up.

"They were pretty serious boys. They had to be. Using swords and knives, well, you have to get pretty close to do the job. Decisively engaged, like we used to say in the 7th Light." Chavez was still short of his master's degree in international relations, but he blessed all the books that Professor Alpher had forced him to read. He waved at the TV. "This guy was like one of them, a two-legged smart bomb—you self-destruct, but you take out the target first. The Assassins were the first terrorist state. I guess the world wasn't ready for the concept back then, but that one little city-state manipulated a whole region just 'cuz they could get one of their troops in close enough to do the job on anybody."

"Thanks for the history lesson, Domingo, but—"

"Think, John. If they could get close to him, they can get close to anybody. Ain't no pension plan in the dictator business, y'know? The

security around him is, like, real, real tight—but somebody got a shooter in close and blew him into the next dimension. That's scary, Mr. C."

John Clark continually had to remind himself that Domingo Chavez was no dummy. He might still speak with an accent—not because he had to, but because it was natural for him to; Chavez, like Clark, had a gift for language—and he might still interlace his speech with terms and grammar remembered from his days as an Army sergeant, but God damn if he wasn't the quickest learner John had ever met. He was even learning to control his temper and passion. When it suited him to, John corrected himself.

"So? Different culture, different motivation, different—"

"John, I'm talking about a capability. The political will to use it, 'mano. And patience. It must have taken years. Sleeper agents I know about. First time I saw a sleeper shooter."

"Could have been a regular guy who just got pissed and—"

"Who was willing to die? I don't think so, John. Why not pop the guy on the way to the latrine at midnight and try to get the hell out of Dodge? No way, Mr. C. Gomer there was making a statement. Wasn't just his, either. He was delivering a message for his boss, too."

Clark looked up from his briefing papers and thought about that one. Another government employee might have dismissed the observation as something out of his purview, but Clark had been suborned into government service as a result of his inability to see limits on his activities. Besides that, he could remember being in Iran, being part of a crowd shouting "Death to America!" at blindfolded captives from the U.S. embassy. More than that, he remembered what members of that crowd had said after Operation Blue Light had gone to shit, and how close it had been—how near the Khomeini government had been to taking out its wrath on Americans and turning an already nasty dispute into a shooting war. Even then, Iranian fingerprints were on all manner of terrorist operations worldwide, and America's failure to address the fact hadn't helped matters.

"Well, Domingo, that's why we need more field officers."

• • •

SURGEON HAD ONE more reason not to like her husband's presidency. She couldn't see him on the way out the door, for one thing. He was in with somebody—well, it had to do with what she'd seen on the morning news, and that was business, and sometimes she'd had to scoot out of the house unexpectedly for a case at

Hopkins. But she didn't like the precedent.

She looked at the motorcade. Nothing else to call it, a total of six Chevy Suburbans. Three were tasked to getting Sally (now code-named SHADOW) and Little Jack (SHORTSTOP) to school. The other three would conduct Katie (SANDBOX) to her day-care center. Partly, Cathy Ryan admitted, that was her fault. She didn't want the children's lives disrupted. She wouldn't countenance changing their schools and friends because of the misfortune that had dropped on their lives. None of this was the kids' fault. She'd been dumb enough to agree to Jack's new post, which had lasted all of five minutes, and as with many things in life, you had to accept the consequences. One consequence was increased travel time to their classes and finger-painting, just to keep friends, but, damn it . . . there was no right answer.

"Good morning, Katie!" It was Don Russell, squatting down for a hug and a kiss from SANDBOX. Cathy had to smile at that. This agent was a godsend. A man with grandchildren of his own, he truly loved kids, especially little ones. He and Katie had hit it right off. Cathy kissed her youngest good-bye, and her bodyguard—it was just outrageous, a child needed a bodyguard! But Cathy remembered her own experiences with terrorists, and she had to accept that, too. Russell lifted SANDBOX into her car seat, strapped her in, and the first set of three vehicles pulled away.

"Bye, Mom." Sally was going through a phase in which she and Mom were friends, and didn't kiss. Cathy accepted that without liking it. It was the same with Little Jack: "See ya, Mom." But John Patrick Ryan Jr. was boy enough to demand a front seat, which he'd get this one time. Both sub-details were augmented due to the manner in which the Ryan family had come to the White House, with a total of twenty agents assigned to protect the children for the time being. That number would come down in a month or so, they'd told her. The kids would ride in normal cars instead of the armored Suburbans. In the case of SURGEON, her helicopter was waiting.

Damn. It was all happening again. She'd been pregnant with Little Jack, then to learn that terrorists were . . . why the *hell* had she ever agreed to this? The greatest indignity of all, she was married to supposedly the world's most powerful man, but he and his family both had to take orders from other people.

"I know, Doc." It was the voice of Roy Altman, *her* principal agent. "Hell of a way to live, isn't it?"

Cathy turned. "You read minds?"

"Part of the job, ma'am, I know—"

"Please, my name is Cathy. Jack and I are both 'Doctor Ryan.' "

Altman nearly blushed. More than one First Lady had taken on royal

airs with the accession of her husband to POTUS, and the children of politicians weren't always fun to guard, but the Ryan family, the Detail members had already agreed, were not at all like the people they usually had to guard. In some ways that was bad news, but it was hard not to like them.

"Here." He handed over a manila folder. It was her caseload for the day.

"Two procedures, then follow-ups," she told him. Well, at least she could do paperwork on the flight. That was convenient, wasn't it?

"I know. We've arranged with Professor Katz to keep us posted—so we can keep up with your schedule," Altman explained.

"Do you do background checks on my patients, too?" Cathy asked, thinking it a joke.

It wasn't. "Yes. Hospital records provide names, birthdays, and Social Security numbers. We run NCIC checks, and checks against our own file of—uh, of people we keep an eye on."

The look that pronouncement generated wasn't exactly friendly, but Altman didn't take it personally. They walked back into the building, then back out a few minutes later to the waiting helicopter. There were news cameras, Cathy saw, to record the event, as Colonel Hank Goodman lit up his engines.

In the operations room for the U.S. Secret Service, a few blocks away, the status board changed. POTUS (President of the United States) was shown by the red LED display as in the White House. FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) was shown as in transit. SHADOW, SHORTSTOP, and SANDBOX were covered on a different board. The same information was relayed by secure digital radio link to Andrea Price, sitting and reading the paper outside the Oval Office. Other agents were already at St. Mary's Catholic School and the Giant Steps Day Care Center, both near Annapolis, and at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The Maryland State Police knew that the Ryan children were rolling along U.S. Route 50, and had additional cars posted along the travel route for an obvious police presence. At the moment, yet another Marine helicopter was following SURGEON'S, and a third, with a team of heavily armed agents aboard, was pacing the three children. Were there a serious assassin out there, then he would see the overt display of force. The agents in the moving vehicles would be at their usual alert state, scanning for cars, filing them away for the chance that the same one would show up a little too much. Unmarked Secret Service cars would maneuver around independently, doing much the same thing while being disguised as ordinary commuters. The Ryans would never really know how much security was arrayed around them, unless they asked, and few ever wanted to know.

A normal day was under way.

THERE WAS NO denying it now. She didn't need Dr. Moudi to tell her. The headaches had worsened, the fatigue had gotten worse. As with young Benedict Mkusa, she'd thought, then hoped it might be a recurrence of her old malaria, the first time she'd ever entertained that sort of thought. But then the pains had come, not in the joints, but in the stomach first of all, and that had been like watching an advancing weather front, the tall white clouds that led a massive, violent storm, and there was nothing for her to do but wait and dread what was approaching, for she knew everything that was to be. Part of her mind still denied it, and another part tried to hide away in prayer and faith, but as with a person at a horror movie, face covered by denying hands, her eyes still peeked sideways to see what was coming, the horror all the worse because of her useless retreat from it.

The nausea was worse, and soon she'd be unable to control it with her will, strong as that was.

She was in one of the hospital's few private rooms. The sun was still bright outside, the sky clear, a beautiful day in the unending African spring-summer season. An IV tree was next to her bed, running sterile saline into her arm, along with some mild analgesics and nutrients to fortify her body, but really it was a waiting game. Sister Jean Baptiste could do little else but wait. Her body was limp with fatigue, and so pained that turning her head to look at the flowers out the window required a minute of effort. The first massive surge of nausea came almost as a surprise, and somehow she managed to grasp the emesis tray. She was still nurse enough and detached enough to see the blood there, even as Maria Magdalena took the tray away from her, to empty it into a special container. Fellow nurse, and fellow nun, she was dressed in sterile garb, wearing rubber gloves and a mask as well, her eyes unable to conceal her sorrow.

"Hello, Sister." It was Dr. Moudi, dressed much the same way, his darker eyes more guarded above the green mask. He checked the chart hanging at the foot of the bed. The temperature reading was only ten minutes old, and still rising. The telex from Atlanta concerning her blood had arrived even more recently, inspiring his immediate walk to the isolation building. Her fair skin had been pale only a few hours earlier. Now it appeared slightly flushed, and dry. Moudi thought they'd work to cool the patient down with alcohol, maybe ice later, to fight the fever. That would be bad for the Sister's dignity. They did indeed dress chastely, as women should, and the hospital gown she now wore was ever demeaning to that virtue. Worse still, however, was the look in her eyes. She knew. But he still had to say it.

"Sister," the physician told her, "your blood has tested positive for Ebola antibodies."

A nod. "I see."

"Then you also know," he added gently, "that twenty percent of the patients survive this disease. You are not without hope. I am a good doctor. Sister Magdalena here is a superb nurse. We will support you as best we can. I am also in contact with some of my colleagues. We will not give up on you. I require that you do not give up on yourself. Talk to your God, good lady. He will surely listen to someone of your virtue." The words came easily, for Moudi was after all a physician, and a good one. He surprised himself by half wishing for her survival.

"Thank you, Doctor."

Moudi turned to the other nun before leaving. "Please keep me informed."

"Of course, Doctor."

Moudi walked out of the room, turning left toward the door, removing his protective garb as he went, and dumping the articles into the proper container. He made a mental note to speak to the administrator to be sure that the necessary precautions were strictly enforced. He wanted this nun to be the last Ebola case in this hospital. Even as he spoke, part of the WHO team was on its way to the Mkusa family, where they would interview the griefstricken parents, along with neighbors and friends, to learn where and how Benedict might have encountered the infection. The best guess was a monkey bite.

But only a guess. There was little known about Ebola Zaire, and most of the unknowns were important. Doubtless it had been around for centuries, or even longer than that, just one more lethal malady in an area replete with them, not recognized as anything more than "jungle fever" by physicians as recently as thirty years before. The focal center of the virus was still a matter of speculation. Many *thought* a monkey carried it, but which monkey no one knew—literally thousands had been trapped or shot in the effort to determine that, with no result. They weren't even sure that it was really a tropical disease—the first properly documented outbreak of this class of fever had actually taken place in Germany. There was a very similar disease in the Philippines.

Ebola appeared and disappeared, like some sort of malignant spirit. There was an apparent periodicity to it. The recognized outbreaks had occurred at eight- to ten-year intervals—again, unexplained and slightly suspect, because Africa was still primitive, and there was ample reason to believe that victims could contract the disease and die from it in but a few days, without the time to seek medical help. The structure of the virus was somewhat understood and its symptoms recognized, but its mechanism was still a mystery. That was troubling

to the medical community, because Ebola Zaire had a mortality rate of roughly eighty percent. Only one in five of its victims survived, and why that happened was just one more entry in the "unknown" column. For all of those reasons, Ebola was perfect.

So perfect that it was one of the most feared organisms known to man. Minute quantities of the virus were in Atlanta, the Pasteur Institute in Paris, and a handful of other institutions, where it was studied under conditions resembling those of a science-fiction novel, the doctors and technicians in virtual space suits. There wasn't even enough known about Ebola to do work on a vaccine. The four known varieties the fourth had been discovered in a bizarre incident in America; but *that* strain, while uniformly lethal to monkeys, incomprehensibly had *no* serious effects on humans—were too different. Even now scientists in Atlanta, some of whom he knew, were peering into electron microscopes to map the structure of this new version, later to compare it with samples of other known strains. That process could take weeks and, probably, as with all previous efforts, would yield only equivocal results.

Until the true focal center of the disease was discovered, it remained an alien virus, something almost from another planet, deadly and mysterious. Perfect.

Patient Zero, Benedict Mkusa was dead, his body incinerated by gasoline, and the virus dead with him. Moudi had a small blood sample, but that wasn't really good enough. Sister Jean Baptiste was something else, however. Moudi thought about it for a moment, then lifted the phone to call the Iranian embassy in Kinshasa. There was work to be done, and more work to prepare. His hand hesitated, the receiver halfway from the desk to his ear. What if God did listen to her prayers? He might, Moudi thought, He just might. She was a woman of great virtue who spent as much of her day in prayer as any Believer in his home city of Qom, whose faith in her God was firm, and who had devoted her life to service of those in need. Those were three of Islam's Five Pillars, to which he could add a fourth—the Christian Lent wasn't so terribly different from the Islamic Ramadan. These were dangerous thoughts, but if Allah heard her prayers, then what he intended to do was not written, and would not happen, and if her prayers were not heard . . . ? Moudi cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder and made the call.

"MR, PRESIDENT, WE can't ignore it anymore."

"Yeah, I know, Arnie."

It came down to a technical issue, oddly enough. The bodies had to be identified positively, because a person wasn't dead until there was

a piece of paper that said so, and until that person was declared dead, if that person had been a senator or congress-person, then his or her post wasn't vacant, and no new person could be selected for it, and Congress was an empty shell. The certificates would be going out today, and within an hour, governors of "the several states" would be calling Ryan for advice or to advise what they would be doing unbidden. At least one governor would today resign his post and be appointed to the United States Senate by his succeeding lieutenant governor in an elegant, if obvious, political payoff, or so the rumors said.

THE VOLUME OF information was stunning, even to someone familiar with the sources. It went back over fourteen years. The timing could scarcely have been better, however, since that was about the time the major newspapers and magazines had gone to electronic media, which was easily cross-loaded to the World Wide Web, and for which the media empires could charge a modest fee for material which otherwise would have been stored in their own musty basements or at most sold to college libraries for practically nothing. The WWW was still a fairly new and untested source of income, but the media had seized it by the throat, since now for the first time news was less volatile than it had been in the past. It was now a ready source for its own reporters, for students, for those with individual curiosity, and for those whose curiosity was more strictly professional. Best of all, the huge number of people doing a keyword search would make it impossible for anyone to check all the inquiries.

He was careful anyway—rather, his people were. The inquiries being made on the Web were all happening in Europe, mainly in London, through brand-new Internet access accounts which would last no longer than the time required to download the data, or which came from academic accounts to which numerous people had access. Keywords RYAN JOHN PATRICK, RYAN JACK, RYAN CAROLINE, RYAN CATHY, RYAN CHILDREN, RYAN FAMILY, and a multitude of others were inputted, and literally thousands of "hits" had resulted. Many were spurious because "Ryan" was not that uncommon a name, but the vetting process was not all that difficult.

The first really interesting clips came when Ryan had been thirty-one and had first come into the public spotlight in London. Even the photos were there, and though they took time to download, they were worth waiting for. Especially the first. That one showed a young man sitting on a street, covered with blood. Well, wasn't that inspirational ? The subject of the photograph actually looked quite dead in it, but he knew that wounded people often appeared that way. Then had

come another set of photos of a wrecked automobile and a small helicopter. In the intervening years the data on Ryan was surprisingly scarce, mainly squibs about his testifying before the American Congress behind closed doors. There were additional hits concerning the end of the Fowler presidency—immediately after the initial confusion it had been reported that Ryan himself had prevented a nuclear-missile launch . . . and Ryan himself had hinted at it to Daryaei . . . but that story had never been officially confirmed, and Ryan himself had never discussed the matter with anyone. That was important. That said something about the man. But that could also be set aside.

His wife. There was ample press coverage on her, too, including in one article the number of her office at her hospital. A skilled surgeon. That was nice—a recent piece said that she'd continue that. Excellent. They knew where to look for her.

The children. The youngest—yes, the youngest used the same day-care center that the oldest had used. There was a photo of that, too. A feature article on Ryan's first White House job had even identified the school the older ones attended. . . .

This was all quite amazing. He'd initiated the research effort in the knowledge that he'd get all or most of this information, but even so, here was in a single day more information than ten people in the field could have gathered—at considerable risk of exposure—in a week. The Americans were so foolish. They practically invited attack. They had no idea of secrecy or security. It was one thing for a leader to appear in public with his family from time to time—everyone did that. It was quite another to let everyone know things that nobody really needed to know.

The document package—it came to over 2,500 pages—would be collated and cross-referenced by his staff. There were no plans to take action on any of it. It was just data. But that could change.

"YOU KNOW, I think I like flying in," Cathy Ryan observed to Roy Altman.

"Oh?"

"Less wear and tear on the nerves than driving myself. I don't suppose that'll last," she added, moving into the food line.

"Probably not." Altman was constantly looking around, but there were two other agents in the room, doing their best to look invisible and failing badly at it. Though Johns Hopkins was an institution with fully 2,400 physicians, it was still a professional village of sorts where nearly everyone knew nearly everyone else, and doctors didn't carry guns. Altman was staying close, the better to learn his principal's

routine, and she didn't seem to mind. He'd been in with her for the two morning procedures, and teacher that she was, Cathy had explained every step of the process in minute detail. This afternoon she'd be doing teaching rounds with a half dozen or so students. It was Altman's first educational experience on the job—at least in something that had value in an area other than politics, a field he'd learned to detest. His next observation was that SURGEON ate like the proverbial bird. She got to the end of the line and paid for her lunch and Altman's, over his brief protest.

"This is my turf, Roy." She looked around, and spotted the man she wanted to lunch with, heading that way with Altman in tow. "Hey, Dave."

Dean James and his guest stood up. "Hi, Cathy! Let me introduce a new faculty member, Pierre Alexandre. Alex, this is Cathy Ryan—"

"The same one who—"

"Please, I'm still a doctor, and—"

"You're the one on the Lasker list, right?" Alexandre stopped her cold with that one. Cathy's smile lit up the room.

"Yes."

"Congratulations, Doctor." He held out his hand. Cathy had to set her tray down to take it. Altman watched with eyes that tried to be neutral, but conveyed something else. "You must be with the Service."

"Yes, sir. Roy Altman."

"Excellent. A lady this lovely and this bright deserves proper protection," Alexandre pronounced. "I just got out of the Army, Mr. Altman. I've seen you guys at Walter Reed. Back when President Fowler's daughter came back from Brazil with a tropical bug, I managed the case."

"Alex is working with Ralph Forster," the dean explained as everyone sat down.

"Infectious diseases," Cathy told her bodyguard.

Alexandre nodded. "Just learning the ropes at the moment. But I have a parking pass, so I guess I really belong."

"I hope you're as good a teacher as Ralph is."

"A great doc," Alexandre agreed. Cathy decided she'd like the newbie. She next wondered about the accent and the southern manners. "Ralph flew down to Atlanta this morning."

"Anything special happening?"

"A possible Ebola case in Zaire, African male, age eight. The e-mail came through this morning."

Cathy's eyes narrowed at that. Though she was in a completely different field of medicine, like all physicians she got *Morbidity and Mortality Report,* and she kept current on everything she could. Medicine is a field in which education never stops. "Just one?"

"Yep." Alexandre nodded. "Seems the kid had a monkey bite on his arm. I've been over there. I deployed out of Detrick for the last mini-outbreak in 1990."

"With Gus Lorenz?" Dean James asked. Alexandre shook his head.

"No, Gus was doing something else then. The team leader was George Westphal."

"Oh, yeah, he—"

"Died," Alex confirmed. "We, uh, kept it quiet, but he got it. I attended him. It wasn't real great to watch."

"What did he do wrong? I didn't know him well," James said, "but Gus told me he was a rising star. UCLA, as I recall."

"George was brilliant, best man on structures I ever met, and he was as careful as any of us, but he got it anyway, and we never figured out how that happened. Anyway, that mini-outbreak killed sixteen people. We had two survivors, both females, both in their early twenties, and nothing remarkable about them that we could ever find. Maybe they were just lucky," Alexandre said, not really believing it. Things like this happened for some reason or other. It was just that he hadn't found it, though it was his job to find it. "In any case, only eighteen total victims, and that *was* lucky. We were over there for six or seven weeks. I took a shotgun into the woods and blew up about a hundred monkeys, trying to find a carrier. No dice. That strain is called Ebola Zaire Mayinga. I imagine right now they're comparing it to what this little kid contracted. Ebola's a slippery little bastard."

"Just one?" Cathy asked.

"That's the word. Method of exposure unknown, as usual."

"Monkey bite?"

"Yeah, but we'll never find the monkey. We never do."

"It's that deadly?" Altman asked, unable to hold back from joining the conversation.

"Sir, the official guess is eighty percent mortality. Put it this way. If you pull your pistol out and shoot me in the chest, right here, right now, my odds are better than beating this little bug." Alexandre buttered his roll and remembered visiting Westphal's widow. It was bad for the appetite. "Probably a lot better, what with the surgeons we have working over in Halstead. You have much better odds with leukemia, much better odds with lymphoma. Somewhat worse odds with AIDS, but that agent gives you ten years. Ebola gives you maybe ten days. That's about as deadly as it gets."

11

MONKEYS

RYAN HAD DONE ALL OF his own writing. He'd published two books on naval history—that now seemed like a previous lifetime summoned to memory on a hypnotist's couch—and uncounted papers for CIA. Each of these he had done himself, once on a typewriter and later on a series of personal computers. He had never enjoyed the writing—it was ever difficult work—but he had enjoyed the solitude of it, alone in his own little intellectual world and safe from any sort of interruption as he formed his thoughts and adjusted their method of presentation until they were as close to perfect as he could achieve. In that way, they were always his thoughts, and there was integrity in the process.

No longer.

The chief speechwriter was Callie Weston, short, petite, dirty blond, and a wizard with words who, like many of the enormous White House staff, had come aboard with President Fowler and never managed to leave.

"You didn't like my speech for the church?" She was also irreverent.

"Honestly, I just decided that I had to say something else." Then Jack realized he was defending himself to someone he scarcely knew.

"I cried." She paused for effect, staring into his eyes with the unblinking gaze of a poisonous snake for several seconds, manifestly sizing him up. "You're different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you have to understand, Mr. President. President Fowler kept me around because I made him sound compassionate—he's rather a cold fish in most things, poor guy. President Durling kept me around because he didn't have anybody better. I bump heads all the time with staffers across the street. They like to edit my work. I don't like being edited by drones. We fight. Arnie protects me a lot because I went to school with his favorite niece—and I'm the best around at what I do—but I'm probably the biggest pain in the ass on your staff. You need to know that." It was a good explanation, but not to the point.

"Why am I different?" Jack asked.

"You say what you really think instead of saying what you think people think they want to hear. It's going to be hard writing for you. I can't dip into the usual well. I have to learn to write the way I used to like to write, not the way I'm paid to write, and I have to learn to write like you talk. It's going to be tough," she told him, already girding herself for the challenge.

"I see." Since Ms. Weston was not an inner-circle staff member, Andrea Price was leaning against the wall (it would have been in a corner, except the Oval Office didn't have one) and observing everything with a poker face—or trying to. Ryan was learning to read her body language. Clearly Price didn't much care for Weston. He wondered why. "Well, what can you turn out in a couple of hours?"

"Sir, that depends on what you want to say," the speechwriter pointed out. Ryan told her in a few brief sentences. She didn't take notes. She merely absorbed it, smiled, and spoke again.

"They're going to destroy you. You know that. Maybe Arnie hasn't told you yet, maybe nobody on the staff has, or ever will, but it's going to happen." That remark jolted Agent Price from her spot on the wall, just enough that her body was standing instead of leaning.

"What makes you think I want to stay here?"

She blinked. "Excuse me. I'm not really used to this."

"This could be an interesting conversation, but I—"

"I read one of your books day before yesterday. You're not very good with words—not very elegant, that's a technical judgment—but you do say things clearly. So I have to dial back my rhetoric style to make it sound like you. Short sentences. Your grammar is good. Catholic schools, I guess. You don't bullshit people. You say it straight." She smiled. "How long for the speech?"

"Call it fifteen minutes."

"I'll be back in three hours," Weston promised, and stood. Ryan nodded, and she walked out of the room. Then the President looked at Agent Price.

"Spit it out," he ordered.

"She's the biggest pain in the ass over there. Last year she *attacked* some junior staffer over something. A guard had to pull her off him."

"Over what?"

"The staffer said some nasty things about one of her speeches, and speculated that her family background was irregular. He left the next day. No loss," Price concluded. "But she's an arrogant prima donna. She shouldn't have said what she did."

"What if she's right?"

"Sir, that's not my business, but any—"

"Is she right?"

"You are different, Mr. President." Price didn't say whether she

thought that was a good or bad thing, and Ryan didn't ask.

The President had other things to do in any case. He lifted his desk phone, and a secretary answered.

"Could you get me George Winston at the Columbus Group?"

"Yes, Mr. President, I'll get him for you." She didn't have that number immediately to mind, and so she lifted another phone for the Signals Office. Down there a Navy petty officer had the number on a Post-It note, and read it off. A moment later he handed the Post-It to the Marine in the next chair over. The Marine fished in her purse, found four quarters, and handed them over to the smirking squid.

"Mr. President, I have Mr. Winston," the intercom phone said.

"George?"

"Yes, sir."

"How fast can you get down here?"

"Jack—Mr. President, I'm trying to put my business back together and—"

"How fast?" Ryan asked more pointedly.

Winston had to think for a second. His Gulfstream crew wasn't standing by for anything today. Getting to Newark Airport . . . "I can catch the next train."

"Let me know which one you're on. I'll have someone waiting for you."

"Okay, but you need to know that I can't—"

"Yes, you can. See you in a few hours." Ryan hung up, then looked up to Price. "Andrea, have an agent and a car meet him at the station."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan decided that it was nice to give orders and have them carried out. A man could get used to this.

"I DON'T LIKE guns!" She said it loudly enough that a few heads turned, though the kids immediately turned back to their blocks and crayons. There was an unusual number of adults around, three of whom had spiraling cords leading to earpieces. Those heads all turned to see a "concerned" (that was the word everyone used in such a case) mother. As head of this detail, Don Russell walked over.

"Hello." He held up his Secret Service ID. "Can I help you?"

"Do you have to be here!"

"Yes, ma'am, we do. Could I have your name, please?"

"Why?" Sheila Walker demanded.

"Well, ma'am, it's nice to know who you're talking to, isn't it?" Russell asked reasonably. It was also nice to get background checks on such people.

“This is Mrs. Walker,” said Mrs. Marlene Daggett, owner-operator of Giant Steps Day Care Center.

“Oh, that’s your little boy over there, Justin, right?” Russell smiled. The four-year-old was building a tower with hardwood blocks, which he would then tip over, to the general amusement of the room.

“I just don’t like guns, and I don’t like them around children.”

“Mrs. Walker, first of all, we’re cops. We know how to carry our firearms safely. Second, our regulations require us to be armed at all times. Third, I wish you would look at it this way: your son is as safe here with us as he’s ever going to be. You’ll never have to worry about having somebody come over and steal a kid off the playground outside, for example.”

“Why does she have to be here?”

Russell smiled reasonably. “Mrs. Walker, Katie over there didn’t become President. Her father did. Isn’t she entitled to a normal kid’s life, just like your Justin?”

“But it’s dangerous and—”

“Not while we’re around, it isn’t,” he assured her. She just turned away.

“Justin!” Her son turned to see his mother holding his jacket. He paused for a second, and with one finger pushed the blocks a fraction of an inch, waiting for the four-foot pile to teeter over like a falling tree.

“Budding engineer,” Russell heard through his earpiece. “I’ll check her tag number.” He nodded to the female agent in the doorway. In twenty minutes they’d have a new dossier to look over. Probably it would just say that Mrs. Walker was a New Age pain in the ass, but if she had a history of mental problems (possible), or a criminal record (unlikely), it would be something to remember. He scanned the room automatically, then shook his head. SANDBOX was a normal kid surrounded by normal kids. At the moment she was crayoning a blank sheet of paper, her face screwed into a look of intense concentration. She’d been through a normal day, a normal lunch, a normal nap, and soon would have an abnormal trip back to a decidedly abnormal home. She hadn’t noticed the discussion he’d just had with Justin’s mother. Well, kids were smart enough to be kids, which was more than one could say for a lot of their parents.

Mrs. Walker guided her son to the family car, a Volvo wagon to no one’s surprise, where she dutifully strapped him into the safety seat in the back. The agent memorized the tag number for processing, knowing that it would turn nothing of real importance, and knowing that they’d run it anyway, because there was always the off chance that...

It all came back just then, the reason why they had to be careful.

Here they were, at Giant Steps, the same day-care center the Ryans had used since SHADOW was a munchkin, just off Ritchie Highway above Annapolis. The bad guys had used the 7-Eleven just across the road to stake out the location, then followed SURGEON in her old Porsche, using a custom van, and on the Route 50 bridge they'd pulled off a sweet little ambush, and later killed a state trooper in their escape. Dr. Ryan had been pregnant with SHORTSTOP then. SANDBOX had been far off into a future yet undreamed of at the time. All of this had a strange effect on Special Agent Marcella Hilton. Unmarried, again—she was twice divorced, with no kids of her own—being around kids had made her heart flutter a little, tough professional that she was. She figured it was part of her hormones, or the way the female brain was wired, or maybe she just liked kids and wished she had one of her own. Whatever it was, the thought that people would deliberately hurt little kids made her blood chill for a brief moment, like a blast of cold wind that came and went.

This place was too vulnerable. And there really were people out there who didn't care a rat's ass about hurting kids. And that 7-Eleven was still there. There were six agents on the SANDBOX detail now. That would be down to three or four in a couple of weeks. The Service wasn't the all-powerful agency people thought it was. Oh, sure, it had a lot of muscle, and investigative clout which few suspected. Alone of the federal police forces, the United States Secret Service could knock on somebody's door and walk in and conduct a "friendly" interview with someone who might represent a threat—an assumption based on evidence which might or might not be usable in a court of law. The purpose of such an interview would be to let the person know that he or she had an eye fixed firmly on him or her, and though that wasn't strictly true—the Service had only about 1,200 agents nationwide—the mere thought of it was enough to scare the hell out of people who'd said the wrong thing into the wrong ear.

But those people weren't the threat. As long as the agents did their job correctly, the casual threat wasn't a deadly one. Those people almost always tipped their hand, and people like her knew what to look for. It was the ones their intelligence division didn't hear about who constituted the real threat. Those *could* be deterred somewhat through a massive show of force, but the massive show was too expensive, too oppressive, too obvious not to attract notice and adverse comment. Even then ---she remembered another event, months after the near death of SURGEON, SHADOW, and the yet unborn SHORTSTOP. *A whole squad*, she thought. It was a case study at the Secret Service Academy at Beltsville. The Ryan house had been used to film a re-creation of the event. Chuck Avery—a good, experienced supervisory agent—and his whole squad taken out. As a

rookie she'd watched the taped analysis of what had gone wrong, and even then she'd chilled at how easy it had been for that team to make a small mistake, that to be compounded by bad luck and bad timing. . . .

"Yeah, I know." She turned to see Don Russell, sipping from a plastic coffee cup while he got some fresh air. Another agent was on post inside.

"Did you know Avery?"

"He was two years ahead of me at the academy. He was smart, and careful, and a damned good shot. He dropped one of the bad guys then, in the dark from thirty yards, two rounds in the chest." A shake of the head. "You don't make little mistakes in this business, Marci."

That is when the second chill came, the one that made you want to reach for your weapon, just to be sure that it was there, to tell yourself that you were ready to get the job done. That's when you remembered, in this case, how cute a little kid could be, and how even if you took the hits you'd make damned sure your last conscious act on the planet would be to put every round through the bastard's X-ring. Then you blinked, and the image went away.

"She's a beautiful little girl, Don."

"I've rarely seen an ugly one," Russell agreed. This was the time when one was supposed to say, *Don't worry*, *we'll take good care of her*. But they didn't say that. They didn't even think it. Instead they looked around at the highway and the trees and the 7-Eleven across Ritchie Highway, wondering what they'd missed, and wondering how much money they could spend on surveillance cameras.

• • •

GEORGE WINSTON WAS used to being met. It was the ultimate perk, really. You got off the airplane—almost always an airplane in his case—and there was somebody to meet you and take you to the car whose driver knew the quickest way to where you were going. No hassles with Hertz and figuring the useless little maps out, and getting lost. It cost a lot of money, but it was worth it, because time was the ultimate commodity, and you were born with only so much to spend, and there was no passbook to tell you the exact amount. The Metroliner pulled into Union Station's track 6. He'd gotten some reading done, and had himself a nice nap between Trenton and Baltimore. A pity the railroad couldn't make money carrying passengers, but you didn't have to buy air to fly in, while it was necessary to build a right-of-way for ground transport. Too bad. He collected his coat and briefcase and headed for the door, tipping the first-class attendant on the way out.

“Mr. Winston?” a man asked.

“That’s right.” The man held up a leather ID holder, identifying himself as a federal agent. He had a partner, Winston noted, standing thirty feet away with his topcoat unbuttoned.

“Follow me, please, sir.” With that they were merely three more busy people heading off to an important meeting.

THERE WERE MANY such dossiers, each of them so large that the data had to be edited so as not to overflow the file cabinets, and it was still more convenient to do it with paper than a computer, because it was hard to get a computer that worked well in his native language. Checking up on the data would not be difficult. For one thing, there would be more press coverage to confirm or alter what he had. For another, he could confirm a lot very simply, merely by having a car drive past a few places once or twice, or by observing roads. There was little danger in that. However careful and thorough the American Secret Service might be, they were not omnipotent. This Ryan fellow had a family, a wife who worked, children who went to school; and Ryan himself had a schedule he had to keep. In their official home they were safe—reasonably so, he corrected himself, since no fixed place was ever truly safe—but that safety did not follow them everywhere, did it?

It was more than anything else a matter of financing and planning. He needed a sponsor.

“HOW MANY DO you need?” the dealer asked.

“How many do you have?” the prospective buyer asked.

“I can get eighty, certainly. Perhaps a hundred,” the dealer thought aloud, sipping at his beer.

“When?”

“A week will suffice?” They were in Nairobi, capital of Kenya, and a major center for this particular trade. “Biological research?”

“Yes, my client’s scientists have a rather interesting project under way.”

“What project might that be?” the dealer asked.

“That I am not at liberty to say,” was the not unexpected answer. Nor would he say who his client was. The dealer didn’t react, and didn’t particularly care. His curiosity was human, not professional. “If your services are satisfactory, we may be back for more.” The usual enticement. The dealer nodded and commenced the substantive bargaining.

"You must understand that this is not an inexpensive undertaking. I must assemble my people. They must find a small population of the creature you desire. There are the problems of capture and transport, export licenses, the usual bureaucratic difficulties." By which he meant bribes. Trade in African green monkeys had picked up in the last few years. Quite a few companies used them for various experimental purposes. That was generally bad for the monkeys, but there were a lot of monkeys. The African green was in no way endangered, and even if they were, the dealer didn't especially care. Animals were a national resource for his country, as oil was for the Arabs, to be marketed for hard currency. He didn't get sentimental about them. They bit and spat, and were generally unpleasant little beggars, "cute" though they might appear to the tourists at Treetops. They also ate the crops tended by the numerous small farmers in the country, and were thoroughly detested for that reason, whatever the game wardens might say.

"These problems are not strictly our concern. Speed is. You will find that we are willing to reward you handsomely in return for reliable service."

"Ah." The dealer finished his beer, and, lifting his hand, snapped his fingers for a refill. He named his price. It included his overhead, pay to the gatherers, the customs people, a policeman or two, and a mid-level government bureaucrat, plus his own net profit, which in the terms of the local economy was actually quite fair, he thought. Not everyone did.

"Agreed," the buyer said without so much as a sip of his soft drink.

It was almost a disappointment. The dealer enjoyed haggling, so much a part of the African marketplace. He'd scarcely begun to depose on how difficult and involved his business was.

"A pleasure doing business with you, sir. Call me in . . . five days?"

The buyer nodded. He finished his drink and took his leave. Ten minutes after that, he made a call, the third such communication to the embassy in the day, and all for the same purpose. Though he didn't know it, yet more such calls had been made in Uganda, Zaire, Tanzania, and Mali.

JACK REMEMBERED HIS first time in the Oval Office, the way you shuffled left to right from the secretaries' room through what turned out to be a molded door set in a curved wall, much in the manner of an eighteenth-century palace, which the White House actually was, if a modest one in the context of the times. You tended to notice the windows first of all, especially on a sunny day. Their thickness made them look green, rather like the glass walls of an aquarium designed

for a very special fish. Next you saw the desk, a large wooden one. It was always intimidating, all the more so if the President was standing there, waiting for you. All this was good, the President thought. It made his current job all the easier.

"George," Ryan said, extending his hand.

"Mr. President," Winston responded pleasantly, ignoring the two Secret Service agents standing immediately behind him, there to grab him if he did something untoward. You didn't have to hear them. The visitor could feel their eyes on the back of his neck, rather like laser beams. He shook Ryan's hand anyway, and managed a crooked smile. Winston didn't know Ryan very well. They'd worked together well during the Japanese conflict. Previously they'd bumped into each other at a handful of minor social functions, and he knew of Ryan's work in the market, discreet but effective. All that time in the intelligence business hadn't been entirely wasted.

"Sit down." Jack waved to one of the couches. "Relax. How was the trip down?"

"The usual." A Navy mess steward appeared seemingly from nowhere and poured two cups of coffee, because it was that time of the day. The coffee, he found, was excellent, and the china exquisite with its gold trim.

"I need you," Ryan said next.

"Sir, look, there was a lot of damage done to my—"

"Country."

"I've never wanted a government job, Jack," Winston replied at once, speaking rapidly.

Ryan didn't even touch his cup. "Why do you think I want you? George, I've been there and done that, okay? More than once. I have to put a team together. I'm going to give a speech tonight. You might like what I'm going to say. Okay, first, I need somebody to run Treasury. Defense is okay for the moment. State's in good hands with Adler. Treasury is first on my list of things that have to be filled with somebody new. I need somebody good. You're it. Are you clean?" Ryan asked abruptly.

"What—bet your ass I am! I made all my money within the rules. Everybody knows that." Winston bristled until he realized that he was expected to.

"Good. I need somebody who has the confidence of the financial community. You do. I need somebody who knows how the system really works. You do. I need somebody who knows what's broke and needs fixing, and what isn't and doesn't. You do. I need somebody who isn't political. You aren't. I need a dispassionate pro—most of all, George, I need somebody who's going to hate his job as much as I hate mine."

"What exactly do you mean by that, Mr. President?"

Ryan leaned back for a second and closed his eyes before going on. "I started working inside when I was thirty-one. I got out once, and I did okay on the Street, but I got sucked back, and here I am." The eyes opened. "Ever since I started with the Agency, I've had to watch how things work on the inside, and guess what? I never did like it. I started on the Street, remember, and I did okay then, too, remember? I figured I'd become an academic after I made my pile. History's my first love, and I thought I'd teach and study and write, figure out how things worked and pass my knowledge along. I almost made it, and maybe things didn't work out that way, exactly, but I've done a lot of studying and learning. So, George, I'm going to put a team together."

"To do what?"

"Your job is to clean up Treasury. You've got monetary and fiscal policy."

"You mean—"

"Yes."

"No political bullshit?" He had to ask that.

"Look, George, I don't know *how* to be a politician, and I don't have time to learn. I never liked the game. I never liked most of the people in it. I just kept trying to serve my country as best I could. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. I didn't have a choice. You remember how it started. People tried to kill me and my family. I didn't want to get sucked in, but God damn it, I learned that *somebody* has to try to get the job done. I'm not going to do it alone anymore, George, and I'm not going to fill all the vacant posts with ticket-punchers who know how to work 'the system,' okay? I want people with ideas in here, not politicians with agendas."

Winston set his cup down, managing not to rattle the saucer as he did so. He was a little surprised that his hand wasn't shaking. The length and breadth of what Ryan proposed was quite a bit more than the job which he'd had every intention of declining. It would mean more than was obvious. He'd have to cut himself off from his friends —well, not really, but it meant that he would not make executive decisions based on what campaign contributions the Street would give the President as a result of the nice things that Treasury did for the trading houses up there. That's the way the game had always been played, and though he'd never been a player, he'd talked often enough with those who were, working the system in the same old way, because that was how things were.

"Shit," he whispered half to himself. "You're serious, aren't you?"

As founder of the Columbus Group, he'd assumed a duty so basic that few ever thought about it, beyond those who actually undertook it—and not always enough of them. Literally millions of people,

directly or indirectly, entrusted their money to him, and that gave him the theoretical ability to be a thief on the cosmic scale. But you couldn't do that. For one thing, it was illegal, and you ran the risk of rather substandard federal housing as a result of it, with very substandard neighbors to boot. But that wasn't the reason you didn't. The reason was that those were people out there, and they trusted you to be honest *and* smart, and so you treated their money the same as you treated your own, or maybe even a little better, because they couldn't gamble the way a rich man did. Every so often you'd get a nice letter from some widow, and that was nice, but it really came from inside. Either you were a man of honor or you were not, and honor, some movie writer had once said, was a man's gift to himself. Not a bad aphorism, Winston told himself. It was also profitable, of course. You did the job in the right way, and chances were that people would reward you for it, but the real satisfaction was playing the game well. The money was merely a result of something more important, because money was transitory, but honor wasn't.

"Tax policy?" Winston asked.

"We need Congress put back together first, remember?" Ryan pointed out. "But, yes."

Winston took a deep breath. "That's a very big job, Ryan."

"You're telling *me* that?" the President demanded ... then grinned.

"It won't make me any friends."

"You also become head of the Secret Service. They'll protect you, won't they, Andrea?"

Agent Price was not used to being pulled into these conversations, but she feared she'd have to get used to it. "Uh, yes, Mr. President."

"Things are just so damned inefficient," Winston observed.

"So fix it," Ryan told him.

"It might be bloody."

"Buy a mop. I want your department cleaned up, streamlined, and run like you want it to make a profit someday. How you do that is your problem. For Defense, I want the same thing. The biggest problem over there is administrative. I need somebody who can run a business and make a profit to cull the bureaucracy out. That's the biggest problem of all, for all the agencies."

"You know Tony Bretano?"

"The TRW guy? He used to run their satellite division. . . ." Ryan remembered his name as a former candidate for a senior Pentagon post, which offer he'd turned down flat. A lot of good people declined such offers. That was the paradigm he had to break.

"Lockheed-Martin is going to steal him away in a couple weeks, at least that's what my sources tell me. That's why Lockheed's stock is nudging up. We have a buy-advisory on it. He gave TRW a fifty-

percent profit increase in two years, not bad for an engineer who isn't supposed to know beans about management. I play golf with him sometimes. You should hear him scream about doing business with the government."

"Tell him I want to see him."

"Lockheed's board is giving him a free hand to—"

"That's the idea, George."

"What about my job, I mean, what you want me to do. The rule is—"

"I know. You'll be acting Secretary until we get things put back together."

Winston nodded. "Okay. I need to bring a few people down with me."

"I'm not going to tell you how to do it. I'm not even going to tell you all the things you have to do. I just want it to get done, George. You just have to tell me ahead of time. I don't want to read about it in the papers first."

"When would I start?"

"The office is empty right now," Ryan told him.

A final hedge: "I have to talk to my family about it."

"You know, George, these government offices have phones and everything." Jack paused. "Look, I know what you are. I know what you do. I might have turned out the same way, but I just never found it . . . satisfactory, I guess, just to make money. Getting start-ups off the ground, that was something different. Okay, managing money is important work. I didn't like it myself, but I never wanted to be a doctor, either. Fine, different strokes and all that. But I *know* you've sat around a lot of tables with beer and pretzels talking about how screwed up this town is. Here's your chance. It will never come again, George. Nobody will ever have an opportunity to be SecTreas without political considerations. Never. You can't turn it down, because you'd never forgive yourself if you did."

Winston wondered how one could be so adroitly cornered in a room with curved walls. "You're learning the political stuff, Jack."

"Andrea, you have a new boss," the President told his principal agent.

For her part, Special Agent Price decided that Callie Weston might be wrong after all.

THE NOTICE THAT there would be a presidential address tonight upset a carefully considered timetable, but only by a day. More of concern was the coordination of that event with another. Timing was everything in politics, as much as in any other field, and they'd spent

a week working on this. It wasn't the usual illusion of experts moving with practiced skill. There had never been practice in this particular exercise. It was all guesses, but they'd all made guesses before, and mostly good ones, else Edward J. Kealty would never have risen as far as he had, but like compulsive gamblers, they never really trusted the table or the other players, and every decision carried with it a lot of ifs.

They even wondered about right and wrong on this one—not the "right and wrong" of a political decision, the considered calculation of who would be pleased and who offended by a sudden stand on the principle du jour, but whether or not the action they were contemplating was objectively correct—honest, *moral!*—and that was a rare moment for the seasoned political operatives. It helped that they'd been lied to, of course. They knew they'd been told lies. They knew *he* knew that *they* knew that he'd lied to them, but that was an understood part of the exercise. To have done otherwise would have violated the rules of the game. They had to be protected so long as they did not break faith with their principal, and being protected from adverse knowledge was part of that covenant.

"So you never really resigned, Ed?" his chief of staff asked. He wanted the lie to be clear, so that he could tell everyone that it was the Lord's truth, to the best of his knowledge.

"I still have the letter," the former Senator and former Vice President, and that was the rub, replied, tapping his jacket pocket. "Brett and I talked things over and we decided that the wording of the letter had to be just so, and what I had with me wasn't quite right. I was going to come back the next day with a new one, dated properly, of course, and it would have been handled quietly—but who would have thought . . . ?"

"You could just, well, forget about it." This part of the dance had to be stepped out in accordance with the music.

"I wish I could," Kealty said after a moment's sincere pause, followed by a concerned, passionate voice. This was good practice for him, too. "But, dear God, the shape the country's in. Ryan's not a bad guy, known him for years. He doesn't know crap about running a government, though."

"There's no law on this, Ed. None. No constitutional guidance at all, and even if there were, no Supreme Court to rule on it." This came from Kealty's chief legal adviser, formerly his senior legislative aide. "It's strictly political. It won't look good," he had to say next. "It won't look—"

"That's the point," the chief of staff noted. "We're doing this for apolitical reasons, to serve the interests of the country. Ed knows he's committing political suicide." To be followed by instant and glorious

resurrection, live on CNN.

Kealty stood and started walking around the room, gesturing as he spoke. “Take politics out of this, damn it! The government’s been *destroyed!* Who’s going to put it back together? Ryan’s a goddamned CIA spook. He knows *nothing* about government operations. We have a Supreme Court to appoint, policy to carry out. We have to get Congress put back together. The country needs leadership, and he doesn’t have a clue on how to do that. I may be digging my own political grave, but somebody has to step up and protect our country.”

Nobody laughed. The odd thing was that it never occurred to them to do so. The staffers, both of whom had been with EJK for twenty years or more, had so lashed themselves to this particular political mast that they had no choice in the matter. This bit of theater was as necessary as the passage of the chorus in Sophocles, or Homer’s invocation of the Muse. The *poetics* of politics had to be observed. It was about the country, and the country’s needs, and Ed’s duty to the country over a generation and a half, because he’d been there and done it for all that time, knew how the system worked, and when it all came down, only a person like he could save it. The government was the country, after all. He’d spent his professional lifetime devoted to that proposition.

They actually believed all that, and no less than the two staffers, Kealty was lashed to the same mast. How much he was responding to his own ambition even he could no longer say, because belief becomes fact after a lifetime of professing it. The country occasionally showed signs of drifting away from his beliefs, but as an evangelist has no choice but to entreat people back to the True Faith, so Kealty had a duty to bring the country back to its philosophical roots, which he’d espoused for five terms in the Senate, and a briefer time as Vice President. He’d been called the Conscience of the Senate for more than fifteen years, so named by the media, which loved him for his views and his faith and his political family.

It would have been well for him to consult the media on this call, as he’d done often enough in the past, briefing them on a bill or amendment, asking their views—the media *loved* for people to ask their opinion on things—or just making sure they came to all the right parties. But not in this case. No, he couldn’t do that. He had to play everything straight. The appearance of currying favor could not be risked, whereas the deliberate avoidance of that maneuver would give the patina of legitimacy to his actions. High-minded. That was the image to project. He’d forgo all of the political tapestry for the first time in his life, and in so doing embroider a new segment. The only thing to consider now was timing. And *that* was something his media contacts could help with.

“WHAT TIME?” RYAN asked.

“Eight-thirty Eastern,” van Damm replied. “There are a couple of specials tonight, sweeps week, and they’ve asked us to accommodate them.”

Ryan might have growled about that, but didn’t. His thoughts showed clearly on his face anyway.

“It means you get a lot of West Coast people on their car radios,” Arnie explained. “We have all five networks, plus CNN and C-SPAN. That’s not a given, you know. It’s a courtesy. They don’t have to let you on at all. They play that card for political speeches—”

“Damn it, Arnie, this *isn’t* political, it’s—”

“Mr. President, get used to it, okay? Every time you take a leak, it’s political. You can’t escape that. Even the absence of politics is a political statement.” Arnie was working very hard to educate his new boss. He listened well, but he didn’t always hear.

“Okay. The FBI says I can release all of this?”

“I talked to Murray twenty minutes ago. It’s okay with him. I have Callie incorporating that in the speech right now.”

SHE COULD HAVE had a better office. As the number-one presidential speechwriter, she could have asked for and gotten a gold-plated personal computer sitting on a desk of Carrara marble. Instead she used a ten-year-old Apple Macintosh Classic, because it was lucky and she didn’t mind the small screen. Her office might have been a closet or storeroom once upon a time, back when the Indian Treaty Room had really been used for Indian treaties. The desk had been made at a federal prison, and while the chair was comfortable, it was thirty years old. The room had high ceilings. That made it easier for her to smoke, in violation of federal and White House rules, which were in her case not enforced. The last time someone had tried to muscle her, a Secret Service agent really had been forced to pull her off the male staffer lest she scratch his eyes out. That she had not been terminated at once was a sign to the rest of the personnel in the Old Executive Office Building. Some staff people could not be touched. Callie Weston was one of those.

There were no windows in her room. She didn’t want them. For her, reality was her computer and the photographs on her walls. One was of her dog, an aging English sheepdog named Holmes (Oliver Wendell, not Sherlock; she admired the prose of the Yankee from Olympus, an accolade she accorded few others). The rest were of political figures,

friends and enemies, and she studied them constantly. Behind her was a small TV and VCR, the former usually tuned to C-SPAN-1 and -2 or CNN, and the latter used to review tapes of speeches written by others and delivered in all manner of places. The political speech, she thought, was the highest form of communication. Shakespeare might have had two or three hours in one of his plays to get his idea across. Hollywood tried the same thing in much the same time. Not her. She had fifteen minutes at the bottom end, and maybe forty-five at the top, and her ideas had to count. They had to sway the average citizen, the seasoned pol, and the most cynical reporter. She studied her subject, and she was studying Ryan now, playing and replaying the few words he'd said on the night of his accession, then the TV spots the next morning. She watched his eyes and his gestures, his tension and intensity, his posture and body language. She liked what she saw in the abstract sense. Ryan was a man she'd trust as an investment adviser, for example. But he had a lot to learn about being a politician, and somebody had to teach him or maybe not? She wondered. Maybe . . . by *not* being a politician. . .

Win or lose, it would be fun. For the first time, fun, not work.

Nobody wanted to admit it, but she was one of the most perceptive of the people working here. Fowler had known that, and so had Durling, which was why they put up with her eccentricities. The senior political staff hated her, treated her as a useful but minor functionary, and seethed at how she could stroll across the street and go right into the Oval Office, because the President trusted her as he trusted few others. That had finally occasioned a comment suggesting that the President had a rather special reason for calling her over, and, after all, people from her part of the country were known to be a little loose when it came to ... She wondered if he'd managed to get it up lately. The agent had pulled her hands off the little prick's face, but he'd been too slow to contain her knee. It hadn't even made the papers. Arnie had explained to him that a return to the Center of Power would be impeded by a charge of sexual misconduct—and then blacklisted him anyway. She liked Arnie.

She liked the speech, too. Four hours instead of the three she'd promised, a lot of effort for twelve minutes and thirty seconds—she tended to write them a little short because presidents had a way of speaking slowly. Most did. Ryan would have to learn that. She typed CONTROL P to print up the speech in Helvetica 14-point, three copies. Some political pukes would look things over and try to make corrections. That wasn't as much a problem now as it had been. When the printer stopped, she collated the pages, stapled them together, and lifted her phone. The topmost speed-dial button went to the proper desk across the street.

"Weston to see the Boss," she told the appointments secretary.
"Come right over."
And with that everything was as it should be.

GOD HAD NOT heard her prayers, Moudi saw. Well, the odds had been against that. Mixing his Islamic faith with scientific knowledge was as much a problem for the doctor as for his Christian and pagan colleagues—the Congo had been exposed to Christianity for over a hundred years, but the old, animistic beliefs still prospered, and that made it easier for Moudi to despise them. It was the old question, if God were a God of mercy, then why did injustice happen? That might have been a good question to discuss with his imam, but for now it was enough that such things did happen, even to the just.

They were called petechiae, a scientific name for blotches of subcutaneous bleeding, which showed up very plainly on her pale north European skin. Just as well that these nuns didn't use mirrors—thought a vanity in their religious universe, and one more thing for Moudi to admire, though he didn't quite understand that particular fixation. Better that she should not see the red blotches on her face. They were unsightly all by themselves, but worse than that, they were the harbingers of death.

Her fever was 40.2 now, and would have been higher still but for the ice in her armpits and behind her neck. Her eyes were listless, her body pulled down with induced fatigue. Those were symptoms of many ailments, but the petechia told him that she was bleeding internally. Ebola was a hemorrhagic fever, one of a group of diseases that broke down tissue at a very basic level, allowing blood to escape everywhere within the body, which could only lead to cardiac arrest from insufficient blood volume. That was the killing mechanism, though how it came about, the medical world had yet to learn. There was no stopping it now. Roughly twenty percent of the victims did survive; somehow their immune systems managed to rally and defeat the viral invader—how that happened was one more unanswered question. That it would not happen in this case was a question asked and answered.

He touched her wrist to take the pulse, and even through his gloves the skin was hot and dry and . . . slack. It was starting already. The technical term was systemic necrosis. The body had already started to die. The liver first, probably. For some reason—not understood—Ebola had a lethal affinity for that organ. Even the survivors had to deal with lingering liver damage. But one didn't live long enough to die from that, because all the organs were dying, some more rapidly than others, but soon all at once.

The pain was as ghastly as it was invisible. Moudi wrote an order to increase the morphine drip. At least they could attenuate the pain, which was good for the patient and a safety measure for the staff. A tortured patient would thrash about, and that was a risk for those around a fever victim with a blood-borne disease and widespread bleeding. As it was, her left arm was restrained to protect the IV needle. Even with that precaution, the IV looked iffy at the moment, and starting another would be both dangerous and difficult to achieve, so degraded was her arterial tissue.

Sister Maria Magdalena was attending her friend, her face covered, but her eyes sad. Moudi looked at her and she at him, surprised to see the sympathy on his face. Moudi had a reputation for coldness.

"Pray with her, Sister. There are things I must do now." And swiftly. He left the room, stripping off his protective garb as he did so and depositing it in the proper containers. All needles used in this building went into special "sharps" containers for certain destruction—the casual African attitude toward those precautions had resulted in the first major Ebola outbreak in 1976. That strain was called Ebola Mayinga, after a nurse who had contracted the virus, probably through carelessness. They'd learned better since, but Africa was still Africa.

Back in his office, he made another call. Things would begin to happen now. He wasn't sure what, exactly, though he'd help determine whatever they were, and he did that by commencing an immediate literature search for something useless.

"I'M GOING TO save you." The remark made Ryan laugh and Price wince. Arnie just turned his head to look at her. The chief of staff took note of the fact that she still didn't dress the part. That was actually a plus-point for the Secret Service, who called the sartorially endowed staffers "peacocks," which was more polite than other things they might have said. Even the secretaries spent more on clothes than Callie Weston did. Arnie just held his hand out. "Here you go."

President Ryan was quietly grateful for the large type. He wouldn't have to wear his glasses, or disgrace himself by telling somebody to increase the size of the printing. Normally a fast reader, he took his time on this document.

"One change?" he said after a moment.

"What's that?" Weston asked suspiciously.

"We have a new SecTreas. George Winston."

"The zillionaire?"

Ryan flipped the first page. "Well, I could have picked a bum off a park bench, but I thought somebody with knowledge of the financial

markets might be a good idea."

"We call them 'homeless people,' Jack," Arnie pointed out.

"Or I could have chosen an academic, but Buzz Fiedler would have been the only one I'd trust," Jack went on soberly, remembering again. A rare academic, Fiedler, a man who knew what he didn't know. Damn. "This is good, Ms. Weston."

Van Damm got to page three. "Callie . . ."

"Arnie, baby, you don't write Olivier for George C. Scott. You write Olivier for Olivier, and Scott for Scott." In her heart, Callie Weston knew that she could hop a flight from Dulles to LAX, rent a car, go to Paramount, and in six months she'd have a house in the Hollywood Hills, a Porsche to drive to her reserved parking place off Melrose Boulevard, *and* that gold-plated computer. But no. All the world might be a stage, but the part she wrote for was the biggest and the brightest. The public might not know who she was, but she knew that her words changed the world.

"So, what am I, exactly?" the President asked, looking up.

"You're different. I told you that."

12

PRESENTATION

THERE WERE FEW ASPECTS of life more predictable, Ryan thought. He'd had a light dinner so that his stomach flutters would not be too painful, and largely ignored his family as he read and reread the speech. He'd made a few penciled changes, almost all of them minor linguistic things to which Callie had not objected, and which she herself modified further. The speech had been transmitted electronically to the secretaries' room off the Oval Office. Callie was a writer, not a typist, and the presidential secretaries could type at a speed that made Ryan gasp to watch. When the final draft was complete, it was printed on paper for the President to hold, while another version was electronically uploaded onto the TelePrompTer. Callie Weston was there to be sure that both versions were exactly the same. It was not unknown for someone to change one from the other at the last minute, but Weston knew about that and guarded her work like a lioness over newborn cubs.

But the predictably awful part came from van Damm: *Jack, this is the most important speech you will ever give. Just relax and do it.*

Gee, thanks, Arnie. The chief of staff was a coach who'd never really played the game, and expert as he was, he just didn't know what it was like to go out on the mound and face the batters.

The cameras were being set up: a primary and a backup, the latter almost never used, both of them with TelePrompTers. The blazing TV lights were in place, and for the period of the speech the President would be silhouetted in his office windows like a deer on a ridgeline, one more thing for the Secret Service to worry about, though they had confidence in the windows, which were spec'd to stop a .50-caliber machine-gun round. The TV crews were all known to the Detail, who checked them out anyway, along with the equipment. Everyone knew it was coming. The evening TV shows had made the necessary announcements, then moved on to other news items. It was all a routine exercise, except to the President, of course, for whom it was all new and vaguely horrifying.

HE'D EXPECTED THE phone to ring, but not at this hour. Only a few had the number of his cellular. It was too dangerous to have a real number for a real, hard-wired phone. The Mossad was still in the business of making people disappear. The newly found peace in the Middle East hadn't changed that, and truly they had reason to dislike him. They'd been particularly clever in killing a colleague through his cellular phone, first disabling it via electronic signal, and then arranging for him to get a substitute . . . with ten grams of high explosive tucked into the plastic. The man's last phone message, or so the story went, had come from the head of the Mossad: "Hello, this is Avi ben Jakob. Listen closely, my friend." At which point the Jew had thumbed the # key. A clever ploy, but good only for a single play.

The trilling note caused his eyes to open with a curse. He'd gone to bed only an hour earlier.

"Yes."

"Call Yousif." And the circuit went dead. As a further security measure, the call had come through several cutouts, and the message itself was too short to give much opportunity to the electronic-intelligence wizards in the employ of his numerous enemies. The final measure was more clever still. He immediately dialed yet another cellular number and repeated the message he'd just heard. A clever enemy who might have tracked the message through the cellular frequencies would probably have deemed him just another cutout. Or maybe not. The security games one had to play in this modern age were a genuine drag on day-to-day life, and one could never know what worked and what did not—until one died of natural causes, which was hardly worth waiting for.

Grumbling all the more, he rose and dressed and walked outside. His car was waiting. The third cutout had been his driver. Together with two guards, they drove to a secure location, a safe house in a safe place. Israel might be at peace, and even the PLO might have become part of a democratically elected regime—was the world totally mad? —but Beirut was still a place where all manner of people could operate. The proper signal was displayed there—it was the pattern of lighted and unlighted windows—showing that it was safe for him to exit the car and enter the building. Or so he'd find out in thirty seconds or so. He was too drowsy to care. Fear became boring after a lifetime of it.

There was the expected cup of coffee, bittersweet and strong, on the plain wooden table. Greetings were exchanged, seats taken, and conversation begun.

"It is late."

"My flight was delayed," his host explained. "We require your

services."

"For what purpose?"

"One might call it diplomacy," was the surprising answer. He went on to explain.

"TEN MINUTES," the President heard.

More makeup. It was 8:20. Ryan was in place. Mary Abbot applied the finishing touches to his hair, which merely increased the feeling that Ryan was an actor instead of a . . . politician? No, not that. He refused to accept the label, no matter what Arnie or any of the others might say. Through the open door to his right, Callie Weston stood by the secretary's desk, giving him a smile and a nod to mask her own unease. She had written a masterpiece—she always felt that way—and now it would be delivered by a rookie. Mrs. Abbot walked around to the front of the desk, occulting some of the TV lights to look at her work from the perspective of the viewer, and pronounced it good. Ryan merely sat there and tried not to fidget, knowing that soon he'd start sweating under the makeup again, and that it would itch like a son of a bitch, and that he couldn't scratch at it no matter what, because Presidents didn't itch or scratch. There were probably people out there who didn't think that Presidents had to use the toilet or shave or maybe even tie their shoes.

"Five minutes, sir. Mike check."

"One, two, three, four, five," Ryan said dutifully.

"Thank you, Mr. President," the director called from the next room.

Ryan had occasionally wondered about this sort of thing. Presidents delivering these official statements—a tradition going back at least as far as FDR and his "fireside chats," which he'd first heard about from his mother—always seemed confident and at ease, and he'd always wondered how they ever managed to bring that off. He felt neither. One more layer of tension for him. The cameras were probably on now, so that the directors could be sure they were working, and somewhere a tape machine was recording the look on his face and the way his hands were playing with the papers in front of him. He wondered if the Secret Service had control of that tape, or whether they trusted the TV people to be honorable about such things . . . surely their own anchorpeople occasionally tipped over their coffee cups or sneezed or snarled at an assistant who messed up right before airtime . . . oh, yes, those taped segments were called bloopers, weren't they . . . ? He was willing to bet, right there, right then, that the Service had a lengthy tape of presidential miscues.

"Two minutes."

Both cameras had TelePrompTers. These were odd contraptions. A

TV set actually hung from the front of each camera, but on those small sets the picture was inverted left-to-right because just above it was a tilted mirror. The camera lens was behind the mirror, shooting through it, while on it the President saw the text of his speech reflected. It was an otherworldly feeling talking to a camera you couldn't really see to millions of people who weren't really there. He'd actually be talking to his speech, as it were. Ryan shook his head as the speech text was fast-tracked, to make sure the scrolling system worked.

"One minute, stand by."

Okay. Ryan adjusted himself in the seat. His posture worried him. Did he plant his arms on the desktop? Did he hold his hands in his lap? He'd been told not to lean back in the chair, because it was both too casual and too arrogant-looking, but Ryan tended to move around a lot, and holding still made his back hurt—or was it something he just imagined? A little late for that now. He noted the fear, the twisting heat in his stomach. He tried to belch, and then stifled it.

"Fifteen seconds."

Fear almost became panic. He couldn't run away now. He had to do the job. This was important. People depended on him. Behind each camera was an operator. There were three Secret Service agents to watch over them. A director-assistant was there as well. They were his only audience, but he could barely make them out, hidden as they were in the glare of the lights, and they wouldn't react anyway. How would he know what his real audience thought?

Oh, shit.

A minute earlier, network anchors had come on to tell people what they already knew. Their evening TV shows would be put back a time for a presidential address. Across the country an indeterminate number of people lifted their controllers to switch to a cable channel as soon as they saw the Great Seal of the President of the United States of America. Ryan took a deep breath, compressed his lips, and looked into the nearer of the two cameras. The red light went on. He counted to two and began.

"Good evening.

"My fellow Americans, I'm taking this time to report to you on what has been happening in Washington for the past week, and to tell you about what will be happening over the next few days.

"First of all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice, assisted by the Secret Service, the National Transportation Safety Board, and other federal agencies, have taken the lead in investigating the circumstances surrounding the tragic deaths of so many of our friends, with praiseworthy assistance from the Japanese national police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Full

information will be released this evening, and will be in your morning papers. For now I will give you the results of the investigation to date.

"The crash of the Japan Airlines 747 into the Capitol building was the deliberate act of one man. His name was Torajiro Sato. He was a senior captain with that airline. We've learned quite a lot about Captain Sato. We know that he lost both a brother and a son during our conflict with his country. Evidently he was unbalanced by this, and decided, on his own, to take his revenge.

"After flying his airliner to Vancouver, Canada, Captain Sato faked a flight order to London, ostensibly to replace a disabled aircraft with his own. Prior to takeoff, Captain Sato murdered his co-pilot in cold blood, a man with whom he had worked for several years. He then continued on entirely alone, the whole time with a dead man strapped in the seat next to him." Ryan paused, his eyes tracking the words on the mirror. His mouth felt like raw cotton as a cue on the TelePrompTer told him to turn the page.

"Okay, how can we be sure of this?

"First, the identities of both Captain Sato and his co-pilot have been verified by the FBI, using DNA testing. Separate tests conducted by the Japanese national police have produced identical results. An independent laboratory checked these tests with their own, and again the results were the same. The possibility of a mistake in these tests is virtually zero.

"The other flight-crew members who remained in Vancouver have been interviewed both by the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and they are certain that Captain Sato was aboard the aircraft. We have similar eyewitness reports from local officials of the Canadian Ministry of Transport, and from American passengers on the flight—more than fifty people have positively identified him. We have Captain Sato's fingerprints on the bogus flight plan. Voice-print analysis of the cockpit tapes also confirms the pilot's identity. There is, therefore, no question of the identity of the flight crew of the aircraft.

"Second, the cockpit tapes from the aircraft's flight recorder give us an exact time for the first murder. We even have the voice of Captain Sato on the tape, apologizing to the man as he killed him. After that time, the only voice on the tapes is that of the pilot. The cockpit tapes have been checked against other recordings of Captain Sato's voice, and also have positively established his identity.

"Third, forensic tests have proven that the co-pilot was dead at least four hours before the crash. This unfortunate man was killed with a knife in the heart. There is no reason to believe that he had anything at all to do with what came later. He was merely the first innocent victim in a monstrous act. He left behind a pregnant wife, and I would ask all of you to think about her loss and remember her and her

children in your prayers.

"The Japanese police have cooperated fully with the FBI, even allowing us full access to their investigation and to conduct our own interviews of witnesses and others. We now have a full record of everything Captain Sato did during the last two weeks of his life, where he ate, when he slept, with whom he talked. We have found no evidence to suggest even the possibility of a criminal conspiracy, or that what this demented man did was part of some larger plan on the part of his government or anyone else. Those investigations will continue until every leaf and stone has been turned, until every possibility, however remote, has been fully checked, but the information we have now would be more than sufficient to convince a jury, and that is why I can give it to you now." Jack paused, allowing himself to lean forward a few inches.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the conflict between our country and Japan is over. Those who caused it will face justice. Prime Minister Koga has personally assured me of that.

"Mr. Koga is a man of honor and courage. I can tell you now for the first time that he was himself kidnapped and nearly murdered by the same criminals who started the conflict between his country and ours. He was rescued from his kidnappers by Americans, assisted by Japanese officials, in a special operation right in downtown Tokyo, and after his rescue he worked at great personal risk to bring an early end to the conflict, and so save his country and ours from further damage. Without his work, many more lives might have been lost, on both sides. I am proud to call Minoru Koga my friend.

"Just a few days ago, minutes after he arrived in our country, the Prime Minister and I met privately, right here in the Oval Office. From here we drove to the Capitol building, and together we prayed there. That's a moment I will never forget.

"I was there, too, when the aircraft struck. I was in the tunnel between the House Office Building and the Capitol, with my wife and children. I saw a wall of flame race toward us, and stop, and pull back. I'll probably never forget that. I wish I could. But I have put those memories aside as best I can.

"Peace between America and Japan is now fully restored. We do not now have, nor did we ever have a dispute with the citizens of that country. I call on all of you to set aside whatever ill feelings you might have toward the Japanese now and for all time to come."

He paused again and watched as the text stopped scrolling. He turned the page on his printed text again.

"Next, we all have a major task before us.

"Ladies and gentlemen, one man, one disturbed and demented individual, thought that he could do fatal damage to our country. He

was wrong. We have buried our dead. We will mourn their loss for a long time to come. But our country lives, and the friends we lost on that horrible night would have it no other way.

"Thomas Jefferson said that the Tree of Liberty often requires blood to grow. Well, the blood has been shed, and now it's time for the tree to grow again. America is a country that looks forward, not backward. None of us can change history. But we can learn from it, building on our past successes, and correcting our mistakes.

"For the moment, I can tell you that our country is safe and secure. Our military is on duty around the world, and our potential enemies know that. Our economy has taken a nasty shock, but survived, and is still the strongest in the world. This is still America. We are still Americans, and our future starts with every new day.

"I have today selected George Winston to be acting Secretary of the Treasury. George heads up a large New York mutual-fund company which he founded. He was instrumental in repairing the damage done to our financial markets. He's a self-made man—as America is a self-made country. I will soon be making other Cabinet appointments, and I will report each of those to you as they are made.

"George cannot become a full Cabinet secretary, however, until we restore the United States Senate, whose members are charged by the Constitution to advise and consent to such appointments. Selecting new senators is the job of the governors of the several states. Starting next week, the governors will pick individuals to fill the posts left vacant." Next came the tricky part. He leaned forward again.

"My fellow Americans—wait, that's a phrase I don't like very much. I never have." Jack shook his head slightly, hoping that it didn't look overly theatrical.

"My name is Jack Ryan. My dad was a cop. I started in government service as a Marine, right after I graduated from Boston College. That didn't last very long. I got hurt in a helicopter crash, and my back didn't get better for years. When I was thirty-one, I got in the way of some terrorists. You've all heard the story, and how it ended, but what you don't know is, that incident is why I reentered government service. I enjoyed my life until that point. I'd made a little money as a stock trader, and then left that business to go back to history, my first love. I taught history—I loved teaching—at the Naval Academy, and I think I would have been content to stay there forever, just as my wife, Cathy, likes nothing more than to practice medicine and look after me and our kids. We would have been perfectly content to live in our house and do our jobs and raise our children. I know I would have.

"But I couldn't do that. When those terrorists attacked my family, I decided that I had to do something to protect my wife and children. I soon learned that it wasn't just us who needed protecting, and that I

had a talent for some things, and so I joined the government and left behind my love for teaching.

"I've served my country—you—for quite a few years now, but I've never been a politician, and as I told George Winston today in this office, I do not have time to learn how to become one. But I have been inside the government for most of my working life, and I have learned a few things about how government is supposed to work.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a time for us to do the usual things in the usual way. We need to do better. We can do better.

"John Kennedy once told us, 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' Those are good words, but we've forgotten them. We need to bring them back. Our country needs all of us.

"I need your help to do my job. If you think I can do it alone, you're wrong. If you think the government can fix itself by itself, you're wrong. If you think the government, fixed or not, can take care of you in every way, you're wrong. It's not supposed to be like that. You men and women out there, you *are* the United States of America. I work for you. My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and I will do that to the best of my ability, but each one of you is on the team as well.

"We need our government to do for us the things we cannot do for ourselves, like providing for the common defense, enforcing the law, responding to disaster. That's what the Constitution says. That document, the one I swore to protect and defend, is a set of rules written by a small group of fairly ordinary men. They weren't even all lawyers, and yet they wrote the most important political document in human history. I want you to think about that. They were fairly ordinary people who did something extraordinary. There's no magic to being in government.

"I need a new Congress to work with me. The Senate will arrive first, because the governors will appoint replacements for the ninety-one men and women we lost last week. The House of Representatives, however, has always been the People's House, and it's *your* job to pick those, in a voting booth, exercising your rights." *Here we go, Jack*.

"Therefore, to you, and to the fifty governors, I have a request. Please, do not send me politicians. We do not have the time to do the things that must be done through that process. I need people who do real things in the real world. I need people who do not want to live in Washington. I need people who will not try to work the system. I need people who will come here at great personal sacrifice to do an important job, and then return home to their normal lives.

"I want engineers who know how things are built. I want physicians who know how to make sick people well. I want cops who know what

it means when your civil rights are violated by a criminal. I want farmers who grow real food on real farms. I want people who know what it's like to have dirty hands, and pay a mortgage bill, and raise kids, and worry about the future. I want people who know they're working for you and not themselves. That's what I want. That's what I need. I think that's what a lot of you want, too.

"Once those people get here, it's your job to keep an eye on them, to make sure they keep their word, to make sure they keep faith with you. This is *your* government. A lot of people have told you that, but I mean it. Tell your governors what you expect of them when they make their appointments to the Senate, and then *you* select the right people for the House. These are the people who decide how much of your money the government takes, and then how it is spent. It's your money, not mine. It's your country. We all work for you.

"For my part, I will pick the best Cabinet people I can find, people who know their business, people who have done real work and produced real results. Each of them will have the same orders from this office: to take charge of his or her department, to establish priorities, and to make every government agency run efficiently. That's a big order, and one which you've all heard before. But this President didn't run an election campaign to get here. I have no one to pay off, no rewards to deliver, no secret promises to keep. I will do my damnedest to execute my duties to the best of my ability. I may not always be right, but when I'm not, it's your job, and that of the people you select to represent you, to tell me about it, and I'll listen to them and to you.

"I will report to you regularly on what is going on, and what your government is doing.

"I want to thank you for listening to me. I will do my job. I need you to do yours.

"Thank you, and good night."

Jack waited and counted to ten before he was sure the cameras were dead. Then he lifted the water glass and tried to drink from it, but his hand was shaking so badly that he nearly spilled it. Ryan stared at it in quiet rage. Why was he shaking now? The tense part was over, wasn't it?

"Hey, you didn't puke or anything," Callie Weston said, suddenly standing next to him.

"Is that good?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. President. Vomiting on national television tends to upset people," the speechwriter answered with a hooting laugh.

Andrea Price fantasized about drawing her automatic at that moment.

Arnie van Damm merely looked worried. He knew that he couldn't

turn Ryan away from his course. The usual strictures that Presidents listened to—*if you want to get reelected, pay attention!*—simply didn't apply. How could he protect someone who didn't care about the only thing that mattered?

"REMEMBER *The Gong Show?"* Ed Kealty asked.

"Who wrote this abortion manual?" his legal aide chimed in. Then all three men in the room returned their attention to the TV set. The picture changed from an external shot of the White House to the network studio.

"Well, that was a most interesting political statement," Tom the anchor observed with the expressionless voice of a poker player. "I see that this time the President stayed with his prepared speech."

"Interesting and dramatic," John the commentator agreed. "This was not your usual presidential speech."

"Why, John, does President Ryan insist so strongly on inexperienced people to assist him in running the government ? Don't we need experienced hands to put the system back together?" Tom asked.

"That's a question many will ask, especially in this town—"

"You bet we will," Kealty's chief of staff observed.

"—and what's most interesting about it is that he must know that, and even if he didn't, Chief of Staff Arnold van Damm, as canny a political operator as this city has ever seen, must have made that very clear to Mr. Ryan."

"What about his first Cabinet appointment, George Winston?"

"Winston heads the Columbus Group, a mutual-fund company which he founded. He's enormously wealthy, as President Ryan told us, a self-made man. Well, we want a Treasury Secretary who knows money and the financial markets, and surely Mr. Winston does, but many will complain—"

"That he's an insider." Kealty smirked.

"—with too many contacts in the system," John went on.

"How do you think official Washington will react to this speech?" Tom asked.

"WHAT OFFICIAL WASHINGTON?" Ryan growled. This was a first. The two books he'd published had been treated generally well by reviewers, but back then you had to wait a few weeks for people to make comments. It was probably a mistake to watch the instant analysis, but it was also impossible to avoid. The hardest part was keeping track of all the TVs that were running at the same time.

"Jack, 'official Washington' is fifty thousand lawyers and lobbyists," Arnie pointed out. "They may not be elected or appointed, but they're official as hell. So is the media."

"So I see," Ryan replied.

"—AND WE NEED experienced professionals to get the system put back together. That's what they'll say, and a lot of people in this town will agree."

"What did you think of his revelation on the war and the crash?"

"What interested me the most was his 'revelation' that Prime Minister Koga was first kidnapped by his own countrymen and then rescued—by Americans. It would be interesting to learn more about that. The President is to be commended for his clear desire to settle things between our country and Japan, and I'd give him high marks for it. A photograph came to us along with the President's speech." The network picture changed, showing Ryan and Koga at the Capitol. "This is a truly moving moment captured by the White House photographer—"

"But the Capitol building is still ruined, John, and just as we need good architects and skilled workers to rebuild it, so, I think, we need something other than amateurs to restore the government." Tom turned to stare right into the camera. "So that was the first official speech from President Ryan. We'll have more news as it develops. Now we return you to our regularly scheduled programming."

"That's our theme, Ed." The chief of staff rose and stretched. "That's what we need to say, and *that's* why you've decided to come back into the political arena, however damaging to your reputation it may be."

"Start making your calls," Edward J. Kealty ordered.

"MR. PRESIDENT." The chief usher presented a silver tray with a drink on it. Ryan took it and sipped his sherry.

"Thanks."

"Mr. President, finally—"

"Mary Pat, how long have we known each other?" It seemed to Ryan that he was always saying this.

"At least ten years," Mrs. Foley replied.

"New presidential rule, executive order, even: after hours, when we're serving drinks, my name is Jack."

"Muy bien, jefe, " Chavez observed, humorously but with a guarded look.

"Iraq?" Ryan asked curtly.

"Quiet but very tense," Mary Pat replied. "We're not hearing much, but what we are getting is that the country's under lock-down. The army is in the streets, and the people are in their homes watching TV. The funeral for our friend will be tomorrow. After that, we don't know yet. We have one fairly well-placed agent in Iran, he's on the political beat. The assassination came as a total surprise, and he's not hearing anything, aside from the expected praise to Allah for taking our friend back."

"Assuming God wants him. It was a beautiful job," Clark said next, speaking from authority. "Fairly typical in a cultural sense. One martyr, sacrificing himself and all that. Getting him inside must have taken years, but our friend Daryaei is a patient sort. Well, you've met him. You tell us, Jack."

"Angriest eyes I ever saw," Ryan said quietly, sipping his drink. "That man knows how to hate."

"He's going to make a move, sure as hell." Clark had a Wild Turkey and water. "The Saudis must be a little tense about this."

"That's putting it mildly," Mary Pat said. "Ed's staying over for a few days, and that's what he's getting. They've increased the readiness state of their military."

"And that's all we've got," President Ryan summarized.

"For all practical purposes, yes. We're getting a lot of SigInt out of Iraq, and what we're getting is predictable. The lid is screwed down tight, but the pot's boiling underneath. It has to be. We've increased coverage with the satellites, of course—"

"Okay, Mary Pat, give me your speech," Jack ordered. He didn't want to hear about satellite photos right now.

"I want to increase my directorate."

"How much?" Then he watched her take a deep breath. It was unusual to see Mary Patricia Foley tense about anything.

"Triple. We have a total of six hundred fifty-seven field officers. I want to jack that number up to two thousand over the next three years." She delivered the words in a rush, watching Ryan's face for a reaction.

"Approved, *if* you can figure a payroll-neutral way to bring it off."

"That's easy, Jack," Clark observed with a chuckle. "Fire two thousand desk weenies, and you still save money."

"They're people with families, John," the President told him.

"The Directorates of Intelligence and Administration are featherbedded all to hell and gone. You've been there. You know that. It's worth doing just to ease the parking situation. Early retirement will handle most of it."

Ryan thought that one over for a second. "I need somebody to swing the axe. MP, can you handle being under Ed again?"

"It's the usual position, Jack," Mrs. Foley replied with a twinkle in her fey blue eyes. "Ed's better at administration than I am, but I was always better in the street."

"Plan Blue?"

Clark answered that. "Yes, sir. I want us to go after cops, young detectives, regular blue-suits. You know why. They're largely pre-trained. They have street smarts."

Ryan nodded. "Okay. Mary Pat, next week I'm going to accept with regret the resignation letter of the DCI and appoint Ed in his place. Have him present me with a plan for increasing the DO and decreasing the DI and DA. I will approve that in due course."

"Great!" Mrs. Foley toasted her Commander-in-Chief with her wineglass.

"There's one other thing. John?"

"Yes, sir?"

"When Roger asked me to step up, I had a request for him."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to issue a presidential pardon for a gentleman named John T. Kelly. That will be done this year. You should have told me that Dad worked your case."

For the first time in a very long time, Clark went pale as a ghost. "How did you know?"

"It was in Jim Greer's personal files. They were sort of conveyed to me a few years ago. My father worked the case, I remember it well. All those women who were murdered. I remember how twisted he was about it, and how happy he was to put it behind him. He never really talked about that one, but I knew how he felt about it." Jack looked down into his drink, swirling the ice around the glass. "If you want a good guess, I think he'd be happy about this, and I think he'd be happy to know you didn't go down with the ship."

"Jesus, Jack . . . I mean . . . Jesus."

"You deserve to have your name back. I can't condone the things you did. I'm not allowed to think that way now, am I? Maybe as a private citizen I could—but you deserve your name back, Mr. Kelly."

"Thank you, sir."

Chavez wondered what it was all about. He remembered that guy on Saipan, the retired Coast Guard chief, and a few words about killing people. Well, he knew Mr. C. didn't faint at the thought, but this story must be a good one.

"Anything else?" Jack asked. "I'd like to get back to my family before all the kids go to bed."

"Plan Blue is approved, then?"

"Yes, it is, MP. As soon as Ed writes up a plan for implementing it."

"I'll have him heading back as soon as they can light up his

airplane," MP promised.

"Fine." Jack rose and headed for the door. His guests did the same.

"Mr. President?" It was Ding Chavez.

Ryan turned. "Yeah?"

"What's going to happen with the primaries?"

"What do you mean?"

"I stopped over at school today, and Dr. Alpher told me that all of the serious candidates in both parties were killed last week, *and* the filing deadlines for all the primaries have passed. Nobody new can file. We have an election year, and nobody's running. The press hasn't said much about that yet."

Even Agent Price blinked at that, but an instant later they all knew that it was true.

"PARIS?"

"Professor Rousseau at the Pasteur Institute thinks he's developed a treatment. It's experimental, but it's the only chance she has."

They spoke in the corridor outside Sister Jean Baptiste's room, both wearing blue-plastic "space suits" and sweating inside of them despite the environmental-control packs that hung on the belts. Their patient was dying, and while that was bad enough, the manner of her protracted death would be horrid beyond words. Benedict Mkusa had been fortunate. For some reason or other, the Ebola had attacked his heart earlier than usual; it had been a rare act of mercy, which allowed the boy to expire much more quickly than usual. This patient wasn't quite so lucky. Blood tests showed that her liver was being attacked, but slowly. Heart enzymes were actually normal. Ebola was advancing within her body at a rapid but uniform rate. Her gastrointestinal system was quite literally coming apart. The resulting bleeding, both from vomiting and diarrhea, was serious, and the pain from it was intense, but the woman's body was fighting back as best it could in a valiant but doomed effort to save itself. The only reward for that struggle would be increasing pain, and already the morphine was losing its battle to stay ahead of the agony.

"But how would we—" She didn't have to go on. Air Afrique had the only regular service to Paris, but neither that carrier nor any other would transport an Ebola patient, for the obvious reasons. All of this suited Dr. Moudi just fine.

"I can arrange transport. I come from a wealthy family. I can have a private jet come in and fly us to Paris. It's easier to take all of the necessary precautions that way."

"I don't know. I'll have to—" Maria Magdalena hesitated.

"I will not lie to you, Sister. She will probably die in any case, but if

there is any chance, it is with Professor Rousseau. I studied under him, and if he says he has something, then he does. Let me call for the aircraft," he insisted.

"I cannot say no to that, but I must—"

"I understand."

THE AIRCRAFT IN question was a Gulfstream G-IV, and it was just landing at Rashid Airfield, located to the east of a wide meandering loop of the River Tigris, known locally as the Nahr Dulah. The registration code near the aircraft's tail denoted Swiss registry, where it was owned by a corporation that traded in various things and paid its taxes on time, which ended official interest on the part of the Swiss government. The flight in had been short and unremarkable, except perhaps for the time of day, and the routing, Beirut to Tehran to Baghdad.

His real name was Ali Badrayn, and while he'd lived and worked under several others names, he'd finally returned to his own because it was Iraqi in origin. His family had left Iraq for the supposed economic opportunity in Jordan, but then been caught up like everyone else in the region's turmoil, a situation not exactly helped by their son's decision to become part of the movement which would put an end to Israel. The threat perceived by the Jordanian king, and his subsequent expulsion of the threatening elements, had ruined Badrayn's family, not that he'd especially cared at the time.

Badrayn cared now, somewhat. The life of a terrorist paled with the accumulating years, and though he was one of the best in that line of work, especially at gathering information, he had little to show for it beyond the undying enmity of the world's most ruthless intelligence service. A little comfort and security would have been welcome. Perhaps this mission would allow that. His Iraqi identity and the activities of his life had garnered him contacts throughout the region. He'd provided information for Iraqi intelligence, and helped finger two people they had wished to eliminate, both successfully. That had given him entree, and that was why he'd come.

The aircraft finished its rollout, and the co-pilot came aft to lower the steps. A car pulled up. He entered it, and it pulled off.

"Peace be with you," he told the other man in the back of the Mercedes.

"Peace?" The general snorted. "The whole world cries out that we have little enough of that." Clearly the man hadn't slept since the death of his president, Badrayn saw. His hands shook from all the coffee he'd drunk, or perhaps from the alcohol he'd used to counteract it. It would not be a pleasant thing to look into the coming week and

wonder if one would live to see the end of it. On the one hand one needed to stay awake. On the other, one needed to escape. This general had a family and children in addition to his mistress. Well, they probably all did. Good.

"Not a happy situation, but things are under control, yes?" The look this question generated was answer enough. About the only good thing that could be said was that had the President merely been wounded, this man would now be dead for failing to detect the assassin. It was a dangerous job, being intelligence chief for a dictator, and one which made many enemies. He'd sold his soul to the devil, and told himself that the debt would never be collected. How could a bright man be such a fool?

"Why are you here?" the general asked.

"To offer you a golden bridge."

13

TO THE MANNER BORN

THERE WERE TANKS IN the streets, and tanks were "sexy" things for the "overhead imagery" people to look at and count. There were three KH-11-class reconnaissance satellites in orbit. One of them, eleven years old, was dying slowly. Long since out of maneuvering fuel, and with one of its solar panels degraded to the point that it could barely power a flashlight, it could still take photos through three of its cameras and relay them to the geosynchronous communications bird over the Indian Ocean. Less than a second later they were downlinked and forwarded to various interpretation offices, one of them at CIA.

"That ought to cut down on pursesnatchings." The analyst checked his watch and added eight hours. Okay, approaching ten A.M. "Lima," or local time. People should have been out on the streets, working, moving around, socializing at the many sidewalk restaurants, drinking the awful local version of coffee. But not today. Not with tanks in the streets. A few individuals were moving around, mainly women by the look of them, probably shopping. A main battle tank was parked about every four blocks on the main thoroughfares—and one at every traffic circle, of which there were many—supported by lighter vehicles on the side streets. Little knots of soldiers stood at every intersection. The photos showed that all of them carried rifles, but couldn't determine rank or discern unit patches.

"Get a count," his supervisor instructed.

"Yes, sir." The analyst didn't grumble. Counting the tanks was something they always did. He'd even type them, mainly by checking the main gun. By doing this they'd be able to determine how many of the tanks regularly counted in their regimental laagers had turned their engines over and moved from one place to another. The information had importance to someone or other, though for the past ten years they'd been doing the same thing, generally to learn that whatever the faults and flaws of the Iraqi military, it did its maintenance well enough to keep the engines running. It was rather less diligent about its gunnery, which they'd learned in the Persian Gulf War, but as the analyst had already noted, you look at a tank and

assume that it works. It was the only prudent course. He hunched down over the viewer and saw that a white car, probably a Mercedes from the shape, was driving up National Route 7. A more detailed look at the photos would have showed it heading toward the Sibaq' al Mansur racetrack, where he would have seen more automobiles of the same type, but he'd been told to count the tanks.

IRAQ'S CLIMATIC VARIATIONS are more striking than in most places in the world. This February morning, with the sun high in the sky, it was barely above freezing, though in the summer 115 degrees Fahrenheit attracted little in the way of notice. The assembled officers, Badrayn saw, were in their winter wool uniforms, with high collars and voluminous gold braid; most of them were smoking, and all of them were worried. His host introduced the visitor to those who didn't know him. He didn't bother wishing peace unto them. They weren't in the mood for the traditional Islamic greeting. These men were surprisingly Western and totally secular in their outlook and demeanor. Like their departed leader, they gave mere lip service to their religion, though at the moment they all wondered if the teachings of eternal damnation for a sinful life were true or not, knowing that some of them would probably find out soon enough. That possibility worried them enough that they had left their offices and come to the racetrack to hear him speak.

The message Badrayn had to deliver was a simple one. This he did.

"How can we believe you?" the army chief asked when he'd finished.

"It is better for everyone this way, is it not?"

"You expect us to abandon our motherland to . . . *him*?" a corps commander demanded, disguising frustration as anger.

"What you decide to do is your concern, General. If you desire to stand and fight for what is yours, the decision is clearly yours as well. I was asked to come here and deliver a message as an honest broker. This I have done," Badrayn replied evenly. There was no sense getting excited about things like this, after all.

"With whom are we supposed to negotiate?" This was the chief of the Iraqi air force.

"You may make your reply to me, but as I have already told you, there really is nothing to negotiate. The offer is a fair one, is it not?" *Generous* would be a better term. In addition to saving their own skins, and the skins of those close to them, they would all emerge from their country wealthy. Their president had salted away huge sums of money, little of which had ever actually been detected and seized. They all had access to travel documents and passports from any

country in the known world. In that particular area the Iraqi intelligence service, assisted by the engraving bureau of its treasury, had long since established its expertise. “You have his word before God that you will not be harassed, wherever you may go.” And that was something they had to take seriously. Badrayn’s sponsor was their enemy. He was as bitter and spiteful as any man on earth. But he was also a man of God, and not one to invoke His name lightly.

“When do you need your reply?” the army chief asked, more politely than the others.

“Tomorrow would be sufficient, or even the day after. Beyond that, I cannot say. My instructions,” Badrayn went on, “go only that far.”

“And the arrangements?”

“You may set them yourselves, within reason.” Badrayn wondered how much more they could possibly expect from him, or his sponsor.

But the decision he demanded was harder than one might imagine. The patriotism of the assembled general officers was not of the usual sort. They loved their country, largely because they controlled it. They had power, genuine life-and-death power, a far greater narcotic than money, and one of the things for which a man would risk his life and his soul. One of their number, many of them thought—hoped—just might pull it off. One of them just might assume the presidency of their country successfully, and together they just might calm things down and continue as before. They’d have to open their nation up somewhat, of course. They’d have to allow U.N. and other inspectors to see everything, but with the death of their leader they’d have the chance to start anew, even though everyone would know that nothing new at all was happening. Such were the rules of the world. A promise here or there, a few remarks about democracy and elections, and their former enemies would fall all over themselves giving them and their nation a chance. A further incentive was the sheer opportunity of it. Not one of them had felt truly secure in years. Everyone knew of colleagues who had died, either at the hands of their dead leader, or under circumstances euphemistically called “mysterious”—helicopter crashes had been a favorite ploy of their fallen and beloved President. Now they had a chance to live lives of power with much greater confidence, and against that was a life of indolence in some foreign place. Each of them already had a life of every luxury a man could imagine—*plus* power. Each could snap his fingers and the people who jumped were not servants but soldiers. . . .

Except for one thing. To stay would be the greatest and most dangerous gamble of their lives. Their country was now under the strictest control they could remember, and there was a reason for it. The people who’d roared their love and affection for the dead one—what did they really think? It hadn’t mattered a week before, but it

mattered now. The soldiers they commanded came from the same human sea. Which of them had the charisma to assume the leadership of the country? Which of them had the keys to the Ba'ath Party? Which of them could rule by the force of will? Because only then could they look into the future, if not without fear, then with a small enough quantity of it that their experience and courage could deal with the chances they would be taking. Each of them, standing at the racetrack, looked around the assembly of brother officers and wondered the same question: *Which one*?

That was the problem, because if there had been one of their number to do it, he would already have been dead, probably in a tragic helicopter mishap. And a dictatorship was not operated by a committee. Strong as they all felt themselves to be, each looked at the others and saw potential weakness. Private jealousies would destroy them. Jockeying and rivalries would, probably, cause such internal turmoil that the iron hand needed to control the people would weaken. And in a few months, probably, it would come apart. They had all seen it happen before, and the ultimate result was foretold in their deaths, standing before a line of their own soldiers, and a wall to their backs.

There was no ethos for these men other than power and its exercise. That sufficed for one man, but not for many. *Many* needed to be unified around something, whether it be the rule imposed by one superior, or a commonly held idea, but it had to be something that imposed a common outlook. No one of them could do the former, and collectively they lacked the latter. Powerful as they each might be, they were also weak in a fundamental way, and as the officers stood there, looking around at one another, they all knew it. At base, they believed in nothing. What they enforced with weapons they could not impose with will. They could command from behind, but not lead from the front. At least most of them were intelligent enough to know it. That was why Badrayn had flown to Baghdad.

He watched their eyes and knew what they were thinking, however impassive their faces might have been. A bold man would have spoken up with confidence, and thus assumed leadership of the group. But the bold ones were long since dead, cut down by one bolder and more ruthless, only to be cut down by the unseen hand of someone more patient and more ruthless still—enough so that he could now make a generous offer. Badrayn knew what the answer had to be, and so did they. The dead Iraqi President had left nothing behind to replace himself, but that was the way of men who believed in nothing except themselves.

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THE PHONE RANG at 6:05 this time. Ryan didn't mind awakening before 7:00. It had been his custom for years, but back then he'd had to drive in to work. Now the job was an elevator ride away, and he'd expected that the time previously spent in a car could now be spent in bed. At least he'd been able to doze in the back of his official car.

"Yes?"

"Mr. President?" Jack was surprised to hear Arnie's voice. Even so, he was tempted to demand who the hell else would pick the phone up.

"What is it?"

"Trouble."

VICE PRESIDENT EDWARD J. Kealty had not slept all night, but one would not have known it from looking at him. Shaved pink, clear of eye, and straight of back, he strode into the CNN building with his wife and his aides, there to be met by a producer who whisked him into an elevator for the trip upstairs. Only the usual pleasantries were exchanged. The career politician just stared forward, as though trying to convince the stainless-steel doors that he knew what he was about. And succeeding.

The preparatory calls had been made over the previous three hours, starting with the head of the network. An old friend, the TV executive had been thunderstruck for the first time in his career. One halfway expected airplane crashes, train wrecks, violent crimes—the routine disasters and sorrows from which the media made its living—but something like this was the occurrence of a lifetime. Two hours earlier, he'd called Arnie van Damm, another old friend, because one had to cover one's bases as a reporter; besides, there was also a love of country in him that he rarely expressed but it was there nonetheless, and the CNN president didn't have a clue where this story would go. He'd called on the network's legal correspondent, a failed trial attorney, who in turn was now on the phone with a professor friend at Georgetown University Law School. Even now, the CNN president called into the green room.

"Are you really sure, Ed?" was all he had to ask.

"I don't have a choice. I wish I didn't have to." Which was the expected answer.

"Your funeral. I'll be watching." And the line went dead. At the far end there was a form of rejoicing. It would be a *hell* of a story, and it was CNN's job to report the news, and that was that.

“ARNIE, IS THIS totally crazy or am I still dreaming?” They were in an upstairs sitting room. Jack had thrown on some casual clothes. Van Damm didn’t have his tie on yet, and his socks were mismatched, Ryan noticed. Worst of all, van Damm looked rattled, and he’d never seen that before.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” Both men turned when the door opened.

“Mr. President?” A fiftyish man came in, properly dressed in a business suit. He was tall and harried-looking. Andrea followed him in. She, too, had been briefed, insofar as that was possible.

“This is Patrick Martin,” Arnie said.

“Criminal Division at Justice, right?” Jack rose to shake hands and waved him to the coffee tray.

“Yes, sir. I’ve been working with Dan Murray on the crash investigation.”

“Pat’s one of our better trial lawyers. He also lectures at George Washington on constitutional law,” the chief of staff explained.

“So, what do you think of all this?” the President asked, his voice still somewhere between whimsy and outright disbelief.

“I think we need to see what he has to say.” The quintessential lawyer’s reply.

“How long at Justice?” Jack asked next, returning to his seat.

“Twenty-three years. Four years in the FBI before that.” Martin poured a cup and decided to stand.

“Here we go,” van Damm observed, unmuting the TV.

“Ladies and gentlemen, with us here in our Washington bureau is Vice President Edward J. Kealty.” CNN’s chief political correspondent also looked as though he’d been dragged from his bed and genuinely shaken. Ryan noted that, of all the people he’d seen that day, Kealty looked the most normal. “Sir, you have something unusual to say.”

“Yes, I do, Barry. I probably need to start by saying that this is the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do in over thirty years of public life.” Kealty’s voice was quiet and restrained, speaking in the tone of an essay by Emerson, slow and clear, and painfully earnest. “As you know, President Durling asked me to resign from my post. The reason for this was a question of my conduct while a senator. Barry, it’s no secret that my personal conduct has not always been as exemplary as it should have been. That’s true of many people in public life, but it’s no excuse, and I do not claim that it is. When Roger and I discussed the situation, we agreed that it would be best for me to resign my office, allowing him to select a new running mate for the elections later this year. It was his further intention to have John Ryan fill my

post as interim Vice President.

"Barry, I was content with that. I've been in public life for a very long time, and the idea of retiring to play with my grandchildren and maybe teach a little bit actually looked pretty attractive. And so I agreed to Roger's request in the interests of—well, really for the good of the country.

"But I never actually resigned."

"Okay," the correspondent said, holding his hands up as though to catch a baseball. "I think we need to be really clear on this, sir. What exactly did happen?"

"Barry, I drove over to the State Department. You see, the Constitution specifies that when the President or Vice President resigns, the resignation is presented to the Secretary of State. I met with Secretary Hanson privately to discuss the issue. I actually had a letter of resignation prepared, but it was in the wrong form, and Brett asked me to redraft it. So I drove back, thinking that I could have it done and resubmitted the following day.

"None of us expected the events of that evening. I was badly shaken by them, as were many. In my case, as you know, well, so many of the friends with whom I'd worked for years were just snuffed out by that brutal and cowardly act. But I never actually resigned my office." Kealty looked down for a moment, biting his lip before going on. "Barry, I would have been content even with that. I gave my word to President Durling, and I had every intention of keeping it.

"But I can't. I just can't," Kealty went on. "Let me explain.

"I've known Jack Ryan for ten years. He's a fine man, a courageous man, and he's served our country honorably, but he is, unfortunately, not the man to heal our country. What he said last night, trying to speak to the American people, proves it. How can we possibly expect our government to work under these circumstances without experienced, capable people to fill the offices left vacant?"

"But he is the President—isn't he?" Barry asked, scarcely believing what he was doing and what he was hearing.

"Barry, he doesn't even know how to do a proper investigation. Look at what he said last night about the plane crash. Hardly a week has passed and already he says he knows what happened. Can anyone believe that?" Kealty asked plaintively. "Can anyone really believe that? Who has oversight over this investigation? Who's actually running it? To whom are they reporting? And to have conclusions in a *week?* How can the American people have confidence in that? When President Kennedy was assassinated, it took months. The investigation was run by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Why? Because we had to be sure, that's why."

"Excuse me, Mr. Vice President, but that really doesn't answer my

question."

"Barry, Ryan was never Vice President, because I never resigned. The post was never vacant, and the Constitution allows only one Vice President. He never even took the oath associated with the office."

"But—"

"You think I want to do this? I don't have a choice. How can we rebuild the Congress and the executive branch with amateurs? Last night Mr. Ryan told the governors of the states to send him people with no experience in government. How can laws be drafted by people who don't know how?

"Barry, I've never committed public suicide before. It's like being one of the people, one of the senators at the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson. I'm looking down into my open political grave, but I have to place the country first. I have to." The camera zoomed in on his face, and the anguish there was manifest. One could almost see tears in his eyes as his voice proclaimed his selfless patriotism.

"He always was good on TV," van Damm noted.

"I do have trouble believing all this," Ryan said after a moment.

"Believe it," Arnie told him. "Mr. Martin? We could use some legal guidance."

"First of all, get someone over to State and check the Secretary's office out."

"FBI?" van Damm asked.

"Yes." Martin nodded. "You won't find anything, but that's how it has to start. Next, check phone logs and notes. Next, we start interviewing people. That's going to be a problem. Secretary Hanson's dead, along with his wife, and President and Mrs. Durling, of course. Those are the people most likely to have knowledge on the facts of the issue. I would expect that we will develop very little hard evidence, and not very much useful circumstantial evidence."

"Roger told me that—" Martin cut him off.

"Hearsay. You're telling me that someone said to you what he was told by somebody else—not much use in any court of law."

"Go on," Arnie said.

"Sir, there really is no constitutional or statutory law on this question."

"And there's no Supreme Court to rule on the issue," Ryan pointed out. To that pregnant pause, he added: "What if he's telling the truth?"

"Mr. President, whether or not he's telling the truth is really beside the point," Martin replied. "Unless we can prove that he's lying, which is unlikely, then he has a case of sorts. By the way, on the issue of the Supreme Court, assuming that you get a new Senate and make your nominations, all of the new Justices would ordinarily have to recuse

themselves because you selected them. That probably leaves no legal solution possible."

"But if there's no law on this issue?" the President—was he?—asked.

"Exactly. This is a beauty," Martin said quietly, trying to think. "Okay, a President or Vice President stops holding office when he or she resigns. Resignation happens when the office holder conveys the instrument of resignation—a letter suffices to the proper official. But the man who accepted the instrument is dead, and we will doubtless find that the instrument is missing. Secretary Hanson probably called the President to inform him of the resignation—"

"He did," van Damm confirmed.

"But President Durling is also dead. His testimony would have had evidentiary value, but that isn't going to happen, either. That puts us back to square one." Martin didn't like what he was doing, and he was having enough trouble trying to talk and think about the law at the same time. This was like a chessboard with no squares, just the pieces arrayed at random.

"But—"

"The phone logs will show there was a call, fine. Secretary Hanson might have said that the letter was poorly worded and would be fixed the following day. This is politics, not law. So long as Durling was President, Kealty had to leave, because—"

"Of the sexual harassment investigation." Arnie was getting it now.

"You got it. His TV statement even covered that, and he did a nice job of neutralizing the issue, didn't he?"

"We're back to where we started," Ryan observed.

"Yes, Mr. President." That elicited a wry smile.

"Nice to know that somebody believes."

INSPECTOR O'DAY AND three other agents from Headquarters Division left their car right in front of the building. When a uniformed guard came over to object, O'Day just flashed his ID and kept on going. He stopped at the main security desk and did the same.

"I want your chief to meet me on the seventh floor in one minute," he told the guard. "I don't care what he's doing. Tell him to come up right now." Then he and his team walked to the elevator bank.

"Uh, Pat, what the hell—"

The other three had been picked more or less at random from the Bureau's Office of Professional Responsibility. That was the FBI's own internal-affairs department. All experienced investigators with supervisory rank, their job was to keep the Bureau clean. One of them had even investigated a former Director. OPR's charter was to respect

nothing but the law, and the surprising thing was that, unlike similar organizations in city police forces, it retained, for the most part, the respect of the street agents.

The lobby guard had called ahead to the guard post on the top floor. It was George Armitage this morning, working a different shift from the previous week.

"FBI," O'Day announced as the elevator door opened. "Where's the Secretary's office?"

"This way, sir." Armitage led them down the corridor.

"Who's been using the office?" the inspector asked.

"We're getting ready to move Mr. Adler in. We've just about got Mr. Hanson's things out and—"

"So people have been going in and out?"

"Yes, sir."

O'Day hadn't expected that it would be much use bringing in the forensics team, but that would be done anyway. If there had ever been an investigation that had to go strictly by the book, this was the one.

"Okay, we need to talk to everyone who's been in or out of the office since the moment Secretary Hanson left it. Every single one, secretaries, janitors, everybody."

"The secretarial staff won't be in for another half hour or so."

"Okay. You want to unlock the door?"

Armitage did so, letting them into the secretaries' room, and then through the next set of doors into the office itself. The FBI agents stopped cold there, the four of them just looking at first. Then one of them took post at the door to the main corridor.

"Thank you, Mr. Armitage," O'Day said, reading the name tag. "Okay, for the moment, we're treating this as a crime scene. Nobody in or out without our permission. We need a room where we can interview people. I'd like you to make a written list of everyone you know to have been in here, with date and time if that's possible."

"Their secretaries will have that."

"We want yours, too." O'Day looked up the corridor and was annoyed. "We asked for your department chief to join us. Where do you suppose he is?"

"He usually doesn't get in until eight or so."

"Could you call him, please? We need to talk to him right now."

"You got it, sir." Armitage wondered what the hell this was all about. He hadn't seen the TV this morning, nor heard what was going on yet. In any case, he didn't care all that much. Fifty-five and looking forward to retirement after thirty-two years of government service, he just wanted to do his job and leave.

"GOOD MOVE, DAN," Martin said into the phone. They were in the Oval Office now. "Back to you." The attorney hung up and turned.

"Murray sent one of his roving inspectors over, Pat O'Day. Good man, troubleshooter. He's being backed up by OPR guys"—Martin explained briefly what that meant—"another smart move. They're apolitical. With that done, Murray has to back away from things."

"Why?" Jack asked, still trying to catch up.

"You appointed him acting Director. I can't be involved much with this, either. You need to select someone to run the investigation. He has to be smart, clean, and not the least bit political. Probably a judge," Martin thought. "Like a Chief Judge of a U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. There's lots of good ones."

"Any ideas?" Arnie asked.

"You have to get that name from somebody else. I can't emphasize enough, this has to be clean in every possible respect. Gentlemen, we're talking about the Constitution of the United States here." Martin paused. He had to explain things. "That's like the Bible for me, okay? For you, too, sure, but I started off as an FBI agent. I worked mainly civil-rights stuff, all those sheet-heads in the South. Civil rights are important, I learned that looking at the bodies of people who died trying to secure those rights for other people they didn't even know. Okay, I left the Bureau, entered the bar, did a little private practice, but I guess I never stopped being a cop, and so I came back in. At Justice, I've worked OC, I've worked espionage, and now I just started running the Criminal Division. This is important stuff to me. You have to do it the right way."

"We will," Ryan told him. "But it would be nice to know how."

That evoked a snort. "Damned if I know. On the substance of the issue, anyway. On the form, it has to appear totally clean, no questions at all. That's impossible, but you have to try anyway. That's the legal side. The political side I leave to you."

"Okay. And the crash investigation?" Ryan was slightly amazed with himself. He'd actually turned away from the investigation to something else. Damn.

This time Martin smiled. "That pissed me off, Mr. President. I don't like having people to tell me how to run a case. If Sato were alive, I could take him into court today. There won't be any surprises. The thing Kealty said about the JFK investigation was pretty disingenuous. You handle one of these cases by running a thorough investigation, not by turning it into a bureaucratic circus. I've been doing that my whole life. This case is pretty simple—big, but simple—and for all practical purposes it's already closed. The real help came from the Mounties. They did a nice job for us, a ton of corroborative evidence, time, place, fingerprints, catching people from the plane to interview.

And the Japanese police—Christ, they're ready to eat nails, they're so angry about what happened. They're talking to all of the surviving conspirators. You, and we, don't want to know their interrogation methods. But their due process is not our problem. I'm ready to defend what you said last night. I'm ready to walk through everything we know."

"Do that, this afternoon," van Damm told him. "I'll make sure you get the press coverage."

"Yes, sir."

"So you can't be part of the Kealty thing?" Jack asked.

"No, sir. You cannot allow the process to be polluted in any way."

"But you can advise me on it?" President Ryan went on. "I need legal counsel of some sort."

"That you do, and, yes, Mr. President, I can do that."

"You know, Martin, at the end of this—"

Ryan cut his chief of staff off cold, even before the attorney could react. "No, Arnie, none of that. God damn it! I will not play that game. Mr. Martin, I like your instincts. We play this one absolutely straight. We get professionals to run it, and we trust them to be pros. I am sick and fucking tired of special prosecutors and special this and special that. If you don't have people you can trust to do the job right, then what the hell are they doing there in the first place?"

Van Damm shifted in his seat. "You're a naïf, Jack."

"Fine, Arnie, and we've been running the government with politically aware people since before I was born, and look where it's gotten us!" Ryan stood to pace around the room. It was a presidential prerogative. "I'm tired of all this. What ever happened to honesty, Arnie? What ever happened to telling the goddamned truth? It's all a fucking game here, and the object of the game isn't to do the right thing, the object of the game is to *stay* here. It's not supposed to be that way! And I'll be *damned* if I'll perpetuate a game I don't like." Jack turned to Pat Martin. "Tell me about that FBI case."

Martin blinked, not knowing why that had come up, but he told the story anyway. "They even made a bad movie about it. Some civil-rights workers got popped by the local Klukkers. Two of them were local cops, too, and the case wasn't going anywhere, so the Bureau got involved under interstate commerce and civil rights statutes. Dan Murray and I were rookies back then. I was in Buffalo at the time. He was in Philly. They brought us down to work with Big Joe Fitzgerald. He was one of Hoover's roving inspectors. I was there when they found the bodies. Nasty," Martin said, remembering the sight and the horrid smell. "All they wanted to do was to get citizens registered to vote, and they got killed for it, and the local cops weren't doing anything about it. It's funny, but when you see that sort of thing, it

isn't abstract anymore. It isn't a document or a case study or a form to fill out. It just gets real as hell when you look at bodies that've been in the ground for two weeks. Those Klukker bastards broke the law and killed fellow citizens who were doing something the Constitution says isn't just okay—it's a *right.* So, we got 'em, and put 'em all away."

"Why, Mr. Martin?" Jack asked. The response was exactly what he expected.

"Because I swore an oath, Mr. President. That's why."

"So did I, Mr. Martin." *And it wasn't to any goddamned game.*

THE CUEING WAS somewhat equivocal. The Iraqi military used hundreds of radio frequencies, mainly FM VHF bands, and the traffic, while unusual for the overall situation, was routine in its content. There were thousands of messages, as many as fifty going at any given moment, and STORM TRACK didn't begin to have enough linguists to keep track of them all, though it had to do just that. The command circuits for senior officers were well known, but these were encrypted, meaning that computers in KKMC had to play with the signals in order to make sense of what sounded like static. Fortunately a number of defectors had come across with examples of the encryption hardware, and others trickled over various borders with daily keying sequences, all to be handsomely rewarded by the Saudis.

The use of radios was more now rather than less. The senior Iraqi officers were probably less concerned with electronic intercepts than with who might be listening in on a telephone line. That simple fact told the senior watch officers a lot, and a document was even now being prepared to go up the ladder to the DCI for delivery to the President.

STORM TRACK looked like most such stations. One huge antenna array, called an Elephant Cage for its circular configuration, both detected and localized signals, while other towering whip antennas handled other tasks. The listening station had been hastily built during the buildup for DESERT STORM as a means of gathering tactical intelligence for allied military units, then to be expanded for continuing interest in the region. The Kuwaitis had funded the sister station, PALM BOWL, for which they were rewarded with a good deal of the "take."

"That's three," a technician said at the latter station, reading off his screen. "Three senior officers heading to the racetrack. A little early in the day to play the ponies, isn't it?"

"A meet?" his lieutenant asked. This was a military station, and the technician, a fifteen-year sergeant, knew quite a bit more about the job than his new boss. At least the elltee was smart enough to ask

questions.

"Sure looks like it, ma'am."

"Why there?"

"Middle of town, not in an official building. If you're out to meet your honey, you don't do it at home, do you?" The screen changed. "Okay, we cracked another one. The Air Force chief is there, too—was, probably. Traffic analysis seems to show that the meet broke up an hour or so ago. I wish we could crack their crypto gear faster . . ."

"content?"

"Just where to go and when, ma'am, nothing substantive, nothing about what they're meeting for."

"When's the funeral, Sergeant?"

"Sunset."

"YES?" RYAN LIFTED the phone. You could pretty much tell how important the call was from the line that was lit. This one was Signals.

"Major Canon, sir. We're getting feed from Saudi. The intel community is trying to make sense of it now. They told me to cue you on that."

"Thank you." Ryan replaced the phone. "You know, it would be nice to have 'em come in one at a time. Something happening in Iraq, but they're not sure what yet," he told his guests. "I guess I have to start paying attention. Anything else I have to do now?"

"Put Secret Service protection on Vice President Kealty," Martin suggested. "He's entitled to it anyway under the law as a former VP—for six months?" the attorney asked Price.

"That's correct."

Martin thought about that. "Did you have any discussions on that issue?"

"No, sir."

"Pity," Martin thought.

14

BLOOD IN THE WATER

ED FOLEY'S EXECUTIVE aircraft was big and ugly, a Lockheed C-141B cargo carrier, known to the fighter community as a "trash hauler," in whose cargo area was a large trailer. The trailer's history was interesting. It had originally been built by the Airstream company as a receiving facility for the Apollo astronauts, though this one was a backup and had never actually been used for that purpose. It allowed senior officials to travel with homelike amenities and was used almost exclusively by senior intelligence officers. This way they could travel in both anonymity and comfort. There were lots of Air Force Starlifters, and from the outside Foley's looked like any other—big, green, and ugly.

It touched down at Andrews just before noon, after an exhausting flight of almost seven thousand miles, seventeen hours, and two aerial refuelings. Foley had traveled with a staff of three, two of them security and protection officers, called SPOs. The ability to shower had improved the attitude of each, and their night's sleep hadn't been interrupted by the signals that had started to arrive a few hours earlier. By the time the cargo lifter stopped rolling and the doors opened, he was refreshed and informed. That didn't happen often enough for the ADDO to regard it as anything short of a miracle. So much the better that his wife was there to greet him with a kiss. It was enough that the Air Force ground crew wondered what the hell this was all about. The flight crew was too tired to care.

"Hi, honey."

"We really need to fly together this way once," her husband observed with a twinkle in his eye. Then he shifted gears in a heartbeat. "What's the word on Iraq?"

"Something's happening. At least nine, probably twenty or so senior officers got together for a quiet little meeting. We don't know what about, but it wasn't to pick the menu for the wake." They got in the back of the car, and she handed over a folder. "You're getting promoted, by the way."

"What?" Ed's head came up from the document package.

"DCI. We're moving with Plan Blue, and Ryan wants you to front it

for the Hill. I stay DDO, and I get to run my shop the way I want to, don't I, honey?" She smiled sweetly. Then she explained the other problem of the day.

CLARK HAD HIS own office at Langley, and his seniority guaranteed him a view of the parking lot and the trees beyond, which beat a windowless cubby. He even shared a pool secretary with four other senior field officers. In many ways Langley was alien country for him. His official job title was that of a training officer down at the Farm. He came to headquarters to deliver reports and get briefed in on new jobs, but he didn't like it here. There was a smell to any headquarters facility. The desk weenies wanted things their way. They didn't want irregularities. They didn't care to work overtime, and miss favorite TV shows as a result. They didn't much like surprises and data that made them rethink stuff. They were the bureaucratic tail in an intelligence agency, but at CIA the tail had become so massive that it wagged the dog without ever moving itself. The phenomenon wasn't exactly unusual, but when things went bad, his was the life at risk in the field, and if he were ever killed out there, he'd turn into one residual memo, to be quickly filed and forgotten by people who did National Intelligence Estimates based often as not on newspaper stories.

"Catch the news this morning, Mr. C.?" Chavez asked lightly on entering the room.

"I got in at five." He held up a folder with PLAN BLUE printed on it. Because he so hated paperwork, when he did it he worked with supreme intensity, the more quickly to be rid of it.

"Then turn your set to CNN." John did, expecting a news story that would surprise his Agency. And that's what he got, but not quite what he'd expected.

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"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, the President."

He had to get out in public fast. Everyone agreed on that. Ryan walked into the press room, stood behind the podium, and looked down at his notes. It was easier than looking out at the room, smaller and shabbier than most parts of the building, built atop the former swimming pool. There were eight rows of six seats each. Every one, he'd seen on the way in, was full.

"Thank you for coming in so early," Jack said in as relaxed a voice as he could manage.

"Recent events in Iraq affect the security of a region which is of vital interest to America and her allies. We note without grief the death of the Iraqi President. As you know, this individual was responsible for the instigation of two wars of aggression, the brutal suppression of that country's Kurdish minority, and the denial of the most fundamental human rights to his own citizens.

"Iraq is a nation which should be prosperous. It has a sizable fraction of the world's petroleum reserves, a respectable industrial base, and a substantial population. All that is lacking in that country is a government which looks after the needs of its citizens. We would hope that the passing of the former leader offers an opportunity for just this." Jack looked up from his notes.

"America therefore extends the hand of friendship to Iraq. We hope that there will be an opportunity to normalize relations, and to put an end once and for all to the hostility between Iraq and its Gulf neighbors. I have directed acting Secretary of State Scott Adler to make contact with the Iraqi government, and to offer the chance of a meeting to discuss matters of mutual interest. In the event that the new regime is willing to address the question of human rights, and to commit to free and fair elections, America is willing to address the question of the removal of economic sanctions, and the rapid restoration of normal diplomatic relations.

"There has been enough enmity. It is unseemly for a region of such natural wealth to be the site of discord, and America is willing to do her part as an honest broker to assist in bringing peace and stability, along with our friends among the Gulf states. We await a favorable reply from Baghdad so that initial contacts might be established." President Ryan folded the paper away.

"That's the end of my official statement. Any questions?" That took about a microsecond.

"Sir, this morning, as you know," the *New York Times* shouted first, "Vice President Edward Kealty claimed that he is the President and you are not. What do you have to say about that?"

"The allegation by Mr. Kealty is groundless and totally without value," Jack replied coldly. "Next question."

Having forsworn the game, Ryan was now condemned to playing it. Nobody in the room was the least bit fooled by his appearance. The announcement he'd just made could as easily have been delivered by his press secretary or the official State Department spokesman. Instead, he was here in front of the lights, looking at the assembled faces, and feeling rather like a lone Christian in a Colosseum full of lions. Well, that's what the Secret Service was for.

"A follow-up—what if he actually didn't resign?" the *Times* insisted over the shouts of others.

"He *did* actually resign. Otherwise, I could not have been appointed. Therefore your question has no meaning."

"But, sir, what if he is telling the truth?"

"He isn't." Ryan took a breath, as Arnie had told him to do, and then went on, saying what Arnie had told him to say. "Mr. Kealty resigned his position at the request of President Durling. You all know the reason. He was under investigation by the FBI for sexual misconduct while he was a senator. The investigation was in the matter of a sexual assault—not to say"—which Ryan then said—"rape of one of his Senate aides. His resignation was part of a ... deal, a plea bargain, I guess, to avoid criminal prosecution." Ryan paused just then, somewhat surprised to see the assembled faces go a little pale. He'd just hurled down a gauntlet, and it made a loud noise on the floor. The next one was even louder. "You know who the President is. Now, shall we get on with the business of the country?"

"What are you doing about this?" ABC asked.

"You mean Kealty or Iraq?" Ryan asked. His tone indicated what the subject ought to be.

"The Kealty question, sir."

"I've asked the FBI to check into it. I expect them to report back to me later today. Aside from that, we have enough things to be done."

"Follow-up—what about what you said to the governors in your speech last night, and what Vice President Kealty said this morning? Do you really want inexperienced people to—"

"Yes, I do. First of all, what people do we have who are experienced in the workings of Congress? The answer is, not very many. We have the few survivors, people fortunate enough to have been elsewhere that night. Aside from that—what? People defeated in the last election? Do you want them back? I want, and I think the country needs, people who know how to do things. The plain truth is that government is by nature inefficient. We can't make it more efficient by selecting people who've always worked in government. The idea the Founding Fathers had was for citizen legislators, not for a permanent ruling class. In that I think I am in agreement with the intentions of the framers of our Constitution. Next?"

"But who will decide the question?" the *Los Angeles Times* asked. It wasn't necessary to say which question.

"The question is decided," Ryan told him. "Thanks for coming. If you will excuse me, I have a lot of work to do today." He picked up his opening statement and walked off to his right.

"Mr. Ryan!" The shout came from a good dozen voices. Ryan walked through the door and around the corner. Arnie was waiting.

"Not bad under the circumstances."

"Except for one thing. Not one of them said 'Mr. President.'"

MOUDI TOOK THE call, which required only a few seconds. With that he walked over to the isolation ward. Outside, he donned protective gear, carefully checking the plastic fabric for leaks. The suit was made by a European company, modeled on the American Racal. The thick plastic was an incongruous powder blue, reinforced with Kevlar fiber. At the back on the web belt hung the ventilation unit. This pumped filtered air into the suit, and did so with a slight overpressure so that a tear would not suck environmental air inside. It wasn't known if Ebola was airborne or not, and nobody wanted to be the first to prove that it was. He opened the door to go inside. Sister Maria Magdalena was there, attending her friend, dressed the same way. Both knew all too well what it meant for a patient to see her attendants dressed in a way that so clearly denoted their fear of what she carried within her.

"Good afternoon, Sister," he said, his gloved hands lifting the chart off the foot of the bed. Temperature 41.4, despite the ice. Pulse rapid at 115. Respiration 24 and shallow. Blood pressure was starting to fall from the internal bleeding. The patient had received a further four units of whole blood—and probably lost at least that much, most of it internally. Her blood chemistry was starting to go berserk. The morphine was as high as he could prescribe without risking respiratory failure. Sister Jean Baptiste was semiconscious—she should have been virtually comatose from the drugs, but the pain was too severe for that.

Maria Magdalena just looked over at him through the plastic of her mask, her eyes beyond sadness into a despair that her religion forbade. Moudi and she had seen all manner of deaths, from malaria, from cancer, from AIDS. But there was nothing so brutally cruel as this. It hit so fast that the patient didn't have the time to prepare, to steel the mind, to fortify the soul with prayer and faith. It was like some sort of traffic accident, shocking but just long enough in duration for the suffering to—if there were a devil in creation, then this was his gift to the world. Physician or not, Moudi put that thought aside. Even the devil had a use.

"The airplane is on the way," he told her.

"What will happen?"

"Professor Rousseau has suggested a dramatic treatment method. We will do a complete blood-replacement procedure. First the blood supply will be removed completely, and the vascular system flushed out with oxygenated saline. Then he proposes to replace the blood supply completely with whole blood in which he has Ebola antibodies. Theoretically, in this way the antibodies will attack the virus systemically and simultaneously."

The nun thought about that. It wasn't quite as radical as many would imagine. The total replacement of a body's blood supply was a procedure dating back to the late 1960s, having been used in the treatment of advanced meningitis. It wasn't a treatment that could be used routinely. It required a heart-lung-bypass machine. But this was her friend, and she was well past thinking of other patients and practicality.

Just then, Jean Baptiste's eyes opened wide. They looked at nothing, unfocused, and the very slackness of the face proclaimed her agony. She might not even have been conscious. It was just that the eyes could not remain closed in severe pain. Moudi looked over at the morphine drip. If pain had been the only consideration, he might well have increased it and taken the risk of killing the patient in the name of mercy. But he couldn't chance it. He had to deliver her alive, and though her fate might be a cruel one, he hadn't chosen it for her.

"I must travel with her," Maria Magdalena said quietly.

Moudi shook his head. "I cannot allow that."

"It is a rule of our order. I cannot allow her to travel unaccompanied by one of us."

"There is a danger, Sister. Moving her is a risk. In the aircraft we will be breathing recirculated air. There is no need to expose you to the risk as well. Her virtue is not in question here." And one death was quite enough for his purposes.

"I have no choice."

Moudi nodded. He hadn't chosen her destiny either, had he? "As you wish."

THE AIRCRAFT LANDED at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport ten miles outside Nairobi and taxied to the cargo terminal. It was an old 707, once part of the Shah's personal fleet, the internal furnishings long since ripped out to reveal a metal deck. The trucks were waiting. The first of them backed up to the rear door, located on the right side, which opened a minute after the chocks secured the wheels in place on the ramp.

There were a hundred fifty cages, in each of them an African green monkey. The black workers all wore protective gloves. The monkeys, as if sensing their fate, were in an evil mode, using every opportunity to bite and scratch at the handlers. They screeched, urinated, and defecated as well, but to little avail.

Inside, the flight crew watched, keeping their distance. They wanted no part of the transfer. These noisy, small, nasty little creatures might not have been designated as unclean by the Koran, but they were clearly unpleasant enough, and after this job was over, they'd have the

aircraft thoroughly washed and disinfected. The transfer took half an hour. The cages were stacked and tied down in place, and the handlers moved off, paid in cash and pleased to be done with the job, and their truck was replaced by a low-slung fuel bowser.

"Excellent," the buyer told the dealer.

"We were lucky. A friend had a large supply ready to go, and his buyer was slow getting the money. In view of this ..."

"Yes, an extra ten percent?"

"That would be sufficient," the dealer said.

"Gladly. You will have the additional check tomorrow morning. Or would you prefer cash?"

Both men turned as the 707 lit off its engines. In minutes it would take off, this flight a short hop to Entebbe, Uganda.

"I DON'T LIKE the smell of this," Bert Vasco said, handing the folder back.

"Explain," Mary Pat commanded.

"I was born in Cuba. Once my dad told me about the night Batista bugged out. The senior generals had a little meeting and started boarding airplanes, quick and quiet, off to where their bank accounts were, and left everybody else holding the bag." Vasco was one of the State Department people who enjoyed working with CIA, probably as a result of his Cuban birth. He understood that diplomacy and intelligence each worked better when working together. Not everyone at Foggy Bottom agreed. That was their problem. They'd never been chased out of their homelands.

"You think that's what's happening here?" Mary Pat asked, beating Ed by half a second.

"That's the morning line from where I sit."

"You feel confident enough to tell the President that?" Ed Foley asked.

"Which one?" Vasco asked. "You should hear what they're saying over at the office. The FBI just took over the seventh floor. That has things a little shook up. Anyway, yes. It's just a guess, but it's a good guess. What we need to know is, who, if anyone, has been talking to them. Nobody on the ground, eh?"

The Foleys both looked down, which answered the question.

"MR. RYAN'S ALLEGATIONS show that he's learned the shabby part of politics faster than the proper ones," Kealty said, in a voice more hurt than angry. "I had honestly expected better of him."

"So, you deny the allegations?" ABC asked.

"Of course I do. It's no secret that I once had an alcohol problem, but I overcame it. And it's no secret that my personal conduct has at times been questionable, but I've changed that, too, with help from my church, and the love of my wife," he added, squeezing her hand as she looked on with soft compassion and ironclad support. "That really has nothing to do with the issue here. We have to place the interests of our country first. Personal animosity has no place in this, Sam. We're supposed to rise above that."

"You bastard," Ryan breathed.

"This is not going to be pleasant," van Damm said.

"How can he win, Arnie?"

"Depends. I'm not sure what game he's playing."

"—could say things about Mr. Ryan, too, but that isn't the sort of thing we need to do now. The country needs stability, not discord. The American people are looking for leadership—experienced, seasoned leadership."

"Arnie, how much has this—"

"I remember when he'd fuck a snake, if somebody held it straight for him. Jack, we can't think about that sort of thing. Remember what Allen Drury said, this is a town in which we deal with people not as they are, but as they are reputed to be. The press likes Ed, always has. They like him. They like his family. They like his social conscience—"

"My ass!" Ryan nearly shouted.

"You listen to me right now. You want to be the President? You're not *allowed* to have a temper. You hold on to that thought, Jack. When the President loses his temper, people die. You've seen how that happens, and the people out there want to know that you are calm and cool and collected *at all times,* got it?"

Ryan swallowed and nodded. Every so often it was good to lose one's temper, and Presidents *were* allowed. But you had to know when, and that was a lesson as yet unlearned. "So what are you telling me?"

"You *are* the President. Act like it. Do your job. Look presidential. What you said at the press conference was okay. Kealty's claim is groundless. You're having the FBI check out his claim, but the claim doesn't matter. You swore the oath, you live here, and that's that. Make him irrelevant and he'll go away. Focus on this thing and you give him legitimacy."

"And the media?"

"Give them a chance, and they'll get things right."

"FLYING HOME TODAY, Ralph?"

Augustus Lorenz and Ralph Forster were of an age, and a profession. Both men had begun their medical careers in the United States Army, one a general surgeon, the other an internist. Assigned to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MAC-V), in the time of President Kennedy, long before the war had heated up, both men had at the same time discovered things in the real world that they'd studied and passed over in *Principles of Internal Medicine.* There were diseases out in the remote sections of the world that killed people. Brought up in urban America, they were old enough to remember the conquest of pneumonia, tuberculosis, and poliomyelitis. Like most men of their generation, they'd thought that infectious diseases were a defeated enemy. In the jungles of a relatively peaceful Vietnam, they'd learned different, occasionally seeing healthy, fit young men, American and Vietnamese soldiers, die before their eyes from bugs they had never learned about and which they could not combat. It wasn't supposed to be that way, they both had decided one night in the Caravelle Bar, and like the idealists and scientists they were, both went back to school and started relearning their profession, and in that process beginning yet another process that would not end in their lifetimes. Forster had wound up at Johns Hopkins, Lorenz at Atlanta, head of the Special Pathogens Branch of the Centers for Disease Control. Along the way they'd flown more miles than some airline captains, and to more exotic places than any photographer for *National Geographic,* almost always in pursuit of something too small to see, and too deadly to ignore.

"I'd better, before the new kid takes my department over."

The Nobel candidate chuckled. "Alex is pretty good. I'm glad he got out of the Army. We did some fishing together down in Brazil, back when they had the . . ." In the hot lab, a technician made a final adjustment on the electron microscope. "There," Lorenz said. "There's our friend."

Some called it the Shepherd's Crook. Lorenz thought it more like an ankh, but that wasn't right, either. It was in any case not a thing of beauty. To both men it was evil incarnate. The vertical, curved strand was called RNA, ribonucleic acid. That contained the genetic code of the virus. At the top was a series of curled protein structures whose function wasn't yet understood, but which probably, both thought, determined how the disease acted. Probably. They didn't know, despite fully twenty years of intensive study.

The damned thing wasn't even alive, but it killed even so. A true living organism had both RNA and DNA, but a virus had only one or the other. It lived, somehow, in a dormant state until it came in contact with a living cell. Once there, it came to murderous life, like some sort of alien monster waiting its chance, able to live and grow

and reproduce only with the help of something else, which it would destroy, and from which it would try to escape, then to find another victim.

Ebola was elegantly simple and microscopically tiny. A hundred thousand of them, lined up head to tail, would scarcely fill out an inch on a ruler. Theoretically one could kill and grow and migrate and kill again. And again. And again.

Medicine's collective memory wasn't as long as either physician would have liked. In 1918, the "Spanish flu," probably a form of pneumonia, had swept the globe in nine months, killing at least twenty million people—probably quite a few more—and some so rapidly that there had been victims who went to sleep healthy and failed to wake up the next day. But while the symptoms of the disease had been fully documented, the state of medical science hadn't yet progressed to the point of understanding the disease itself, as a result of which nobody knew what that outbreak had actually been about—to the point that in the 1970s suspected victims buried in permafrost in Alaska had been exhumed in the hope of finding samples of the organism for study; a good idea that hadn't worked. For the medical community, that disease was largely forgotten, and most assumed that should it reappear, it would be defeated with modern treatment.

Specialists in infectious disease weren't so sure. That disease, like AIDS, like Ebola, was probably a virus, and medicine's success in dealing with viral disease was precisely—

Zero.

Viral diseases could be prevented with vaccines, but once infected, a patient's immune system either won or lost, with the best of physicians standing by and watching. Doctors, as with any other profession, frequently preferred to ignore that which they didn't see and didn't understand. That was the only explanation for the medical community's inexplicably slow recognition of AIDS and its lethal implications. AIDS was another exotic pathogen which Lorenz and Forster studied, and another gift from the jungles of Africa.

"Gus, sometimes I wonder if we'll ever figure these bastards out."

"Sooner or later, Ralph." Lorenz backed away from the microscope—it was, actually, a computer monitor—and wished he could smoke his pipe, a vice he didn't really want to break, though working in a government building made it hard for him to indulge. He thought better with a pipe, Gus told himself. Both men stared at the screen, looking at the curlicue protein structures. "This one is from the kid."

They walked in the footsteps of a handful of giants. Lorenz had written a paper on Walter Reed and William Gorgas, the two Army doctors who had defeated Yellow fever with a combination of systematic investigation and ruthless application of what they had

learned. But learning in this business came so slow and so dear.

"Put up the other one, Kenny."

"Yes, Doctor," the intercom replied. A moment later, a second image came up alongside the first.

"Yep," Forster said. "Looks pretty much the same."

"That's from the nurse. Watch this." Lorenz hit the button on the phone. "Okay, Kenny, now hit the computer." Before their eyes a computer image of both examples appeared. The computer rotated one to match the other, then overlaid them. They matched exactly.

"At least it hasn't mutated."

"Hasn't had much of a chance. Two patients. They've done a good job of isolating. Maybe we were lucky. The kid's parents have been tested. They seem to be clean, or so the telex says. Nothing else from his neighborhood. The WHO team is checking around the area. The usual, monkeys, bats, bugs. So far, nothing. Could just be an anomaly." It was as much a hope as a judgment.

"I'm going to play with this one a little. I've ordered some monkeys. I want to grow this one, get it into some cells, and then, Ralph, I'm going to examine what it does on a minute-by-minute basis. Get the infected cells, and pull a sample out every minute, slice it down, burn it with UV, freeze it in liquid nitrogen, and put it under the scope. I want to look at how the virus RNA gets going. There's a sequencing issue here . . . can't quite say what I'm thinking. The thought's kind of lurking out there on me. Damn." Gus opened his desk drawer, pulled out his pipe, and lit it with a kitchen match. It *was* his office, after all, and he *did* think better with a pipe in his mouth. In the field he said that the smoke kept the bugs away, and besides, he didn't inhale. Out of politeness, he cracked open the window.

The idea for which he had just received funding was more complicated than his brief expression, and both men knew it. The same experimental procedure would have to be repeated a thousand times or more to get a correct read on how the process took place, and that was just the baseline data. Every single sample would have to be examined and mapped. It could take years, but if Lorenz were right, at the end of it, for the first time, would be a blueprint of what a virus did, how its RNA chain affected a living cell.

"We're playing with a similar idea up in Baltimore."

"Oh?"

"Part of the genome project. We're trying to read the complex interactions. The process—*how* this little bastard attacks the cells down at the molecular level. How Ebola replicates without a proper editing function in the genome. There's something to be learned there. But the complexity of the issue is a killer. We have to figure out the questions to ask before we can start looking for answers. And then we

need a computer genius to tell a machine how to analyze it."

Lorenz's eyebrows went up. "How far along are you?"

Forster shrugged. "Chalk on a blackboard."

"Well, when I get my monkeys, I'll let you know what we develop here. If nothing else, the tissue samples ought to shed a little light."

• • •

THE FUNERAL WAS epic, with a ready cast of thousands, howling their loyalty to a dead man and concealing their real thoughts; you could almost feel them looking around and wondering what came next. There was the gun carriage, the soldiers with reversed rifles, the riderless horse, the marching soldiers, all captured off Iraqi TV by STORM TRACK and uplinked to Washington.

"I wish we could see more faces," Vasco said quietly.

"Yeah," the President agreed. Ryan didn't smile but wanted to. He'd never really stop being an intelligence officer. Jack was sure of that. He wanted the data fresh, not massaged and presented to him by others. In this case he got to watch it live, with his color commentators at his side.

In America, a generation earlier, it would have been called a happening. People showed up and acted out because it was an expected thing. A literal sea of people filled the square—it had a name, but nobody seemed to know it—and even those who couldn't see . . . oh, a new camera gave the answer to the question. Big-screen TVs showed everyone what was happening. Jack wondered if they'd do an instant replay. Two lines of generals marched behind the gun carriage, and were keeping step, Ryan saw.

"How much farther you think they'll walk?"

"Hard to say, Mr. President."

"It's Bert, right?" the President asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Bert, I can call in one of my NIOs to tell me he doesn't know."

Vasco blinked, as expected. Then he decided, what the hell? "Eight out often, they bug out."

"Those are betting odds. Tell me why."

"Iraq has nothing to fall back on. You don't run a dictatorship by committee, at least not for long. Not one of those people has the stones to take over on his own. If they stay put and the government changes, it won't change into something nice for them. They'll end up like the Shah's general staff did, backs to a wall, looking at guns. Maybe they'll try to fight it out, but I doubt it. They must have money salted away somewhere. Drinking daiquiris on a beach may not be as

much fun as being a general, but it beats the hell out of looking at flowers from the wrong side. They have families to worry about, too."

"So we should plan on a completely new regime in Iraq?" Jack asked.

Vasco nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Iran?"

"I wouldn't bet against it," Vasco answered, "but we just don't have good enough information to make any kind of prediction. I wish I could tell you more, sir, but you don't pay me to speculate."

"That's good enough for now." Actually it wasn't, but Vasco had given Ryan the best he had. "There's not a thing we can do, is there?" This one was for the Foleys.

"Not really," Ed replied. "I suppose we could get someone over there, maybe fly one of our people up from the Kingdom, but the problem then is, whom does he try to meet? We have no way of knowing who's in command there."

"If anyone," Mary Pat added, looking at the marching men. None of them took the lead.

"WHAT DO YOU mean?" the buyer asked.

"You didn't pay me on time," the dealer explained with a belch after draining his first beer. "I had another buyer."

"I was only two days late," the buyer protested. "There was an administrative problem getting the funds transferred."

"You have the money now?"

"Yes!"

"Then I will find you some monkeys." The dealer lifted his hand, snapped his fingers, and caught the attention of the bar boy. An English planter could not have done it better, in this same bar, fifty years earlier. "It isn't all *that* hard, you know. A week? Less?"

"But CDC wants them at once. The aircraft is already on the way."

"I will do my best. Please explain to your client that if they want their consignment on time, then they should pay their bills on time as well. Thank you," he added for the bar boy. "One for my friend, too, if you please." He could afford that, what with the payment he'd just accepted.

"How long?"

"I told you. A week. Perhaps less." Why was the chap so excited over a few days?

The buyer had no choice, at least not in Kenya. He decided to drink his beer down and speak of other things. Then he'd make a telephone call to Tanzania. After all, the African green monkey was "abundant" throughout Africa. It wasn't as though there were a shortage of the

things, he told himself. Two hours later, he learned something different. There *was* a shortage, though it would last only a few days, as long as it took for the trappers to find a few more troops of the long-tailed pests.

VASCO HANDLED THE translation in addition to his commentary duties. " 'Our wise and beloved leader who has given our country so much . . .' "

"Like population control the hard way," Ed Foley snorted.

The soldiers, all guardsmen, moved the coffin into the prepared tomb, and with that, two decades of Iraqi history passed into the books. More likely a loose-leaf binder, Ryan thought. The big question was, who would write the next chapter?

15

DELIVERIES

SO?" PRESIDENT RYAN asked, after dismissing his latest set of guests.

"The letter, if there ever was one, is missing, sir," Inspector O'Day replied. "The most important bit of information developed to the moment is that Secretary Hanson wasn't all that scrupulous in his document-security procedures. That comes from the State's security chief. He says he counseled the Secretary on several occasions. The people I took over with me are interviewing various people to determine who went in and out of the office. It will go on from there."

"Who's running it?" Ryan remembered that Hanson, good diplomatic technician though he might have been, had never listened all that well to anybody.

"Mr. Murray had designated OPR to continue the investigation independently of his office. That means I'm out, too, because I have reported directly to you in the past. This will be my last direct involvement with the case."

"Strictly by the book?"

"Mr. President, it has to be that way," the inspector said with a nod. "They'll have additional help from the Legal Counsel Division. Those are agents with law degrees who act as in-house legal beagles. They're good troops." O'Day thought for a moment. "Who's been in and out of the Vice President's office?"

"Here, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

Andrea Price answered that one: "Nobody lately. It's been unused since he left. His secretary went with him and—"

"You might want to have someone check the typewriter. If it uses a carbon-tape ribbon—"

"Right!" She almost moved right out of the Oval Office. "Wait. Have your people—"

"I'll make the call," O'Day assured her. "Sorry, Mr. President. I should have thought of that sooner. Please seal the office for us?"

"Done," Price assured him.

THE NOISE WAS unbearable. The monkeys were social animals, who customarily lived in "troops" of up to eighty individuals that populated mainly the margins of forests on the edge of the broad savannas, the easier to come down from their trees and raid the surrounding open land for food. They had learned in the past hundred years to raid farms, which was easier and safer than what Nature had programmed into their behavior, because the humans who operated the farms typically controlled the predators which ate the monkeys. An African green was a tasty morsel for a leopard or hyena, but so was a calf, and farmers had to protect those. What resulted was a curious bit of ecological chaos. To protect livestock, the farmers, legally or not, eliminated the predators. That allowed the monkey population to expand rapidly, and the hungry African greens would then attack the cereal and other crops which fed both the farmers and their livestock. As a complication, the monkeys also ate insects which preyed on the crops as well, leading local ecologists to suggest that eliminating the monkeys was bad for the ecology. For the farmers it was much simpler. If it ate their livestock, it was killed. If it ate their crops, it was killed also. Bugs might not be large enough to see, but monkeys were, and so few farmers objected when the trappers came.

Of the family *cercopithecus,* the African green has yellow whiskers and a gold-green back. It can live to thirty years of age—more likely in comfortable captivity than in the predator-infested wild—and has a lively social life. The troops are made of female families, with male monkeys joining the troops individually for periods of a few weeks or months before moving on. An abundance of females in mating season allows a number of males cooperatively to enjoy the situation, but that was not the case in the aircraft. Rather, the cages were stacked like a truckload of chicken coops on the way to market. Some females *were* in season but totally inaccessible, frustrating the would-be suitors. Males stacked next to the cages of other males hissed, clawed, and spat at their unwilling neighbors, all the more unhappy that their captors had not noted the simple fact that same-sized cages were used to imprison different-sized monkeys—the male African green is fully double the size of the female—and cramping males who could smell that most welcome of natural signals, so near and yet so far. Added to the unfamiliar smells of the aircraft and the absence of food and water, the crowding caused nothing short of a simian riot, and since the issue could not be resolved by combat, all that resulted was a collective screech of rage from hundreds of individuals which far outstripped the sound of the JT-8 engines driving the aircraft east over the Indian Ocean.

Forward, the flight crew had their cabin door firmly shut and their

headphones clamped tightly over their ears. That attenuated the sound, but not the fetid smell which the aircraft's recirculation systems cycled back and forth, both further enraging the cargo and sickening the crew.

The pilot, normally an eloquent man with his invective, had run out of curses and had tired of entreating Allah to expunge these horrid little creatures from the face of the earth. In a zoo, perhaps, he would have pointed to the long-tailed creatures, and his twin sons would have smiled and perhaps tossed some peanuts to their amusing captives. No more. With his tolerance gone, the pilot reached for the emergency oxygen mask and switched the flow on, wishing then he might blow open the cargo doors, depressurize the aircraft and thus both extinguish the monkeys and vent the dreadful smell. He would have felt better had he known what the monkeys knew. Something evil was afoot for them.

BADRAYN MET THEM again in a communications bunker. It didn't give him the sense of security that all the massed concrete might have. The only reason this one still stood was that it was concealed under the falsework of an industrial building—a bookbindery, in fact, which actually turned out a few books. This one and a handful of others had survived the war with America only because the Americans' intelligence had been faulty. Two "smart bombs" had targeted a building directly across the road. You could still see the crater where the Americans had thought this structure to be. There was a lesson in that, Badrayn thought, still waiting. You had to see it, really, to believe it. It wasn't the same to look at a TV screen or hear about it. There were five meters of rebarred concrete over his head. Five meters. It was solid, built under the supervision of well-paid German engineers. You could still see the impression of the plywood sheets which had held the wet concrete in place. Not a crack to be seen—and yet the only reason this place still stood was because the Americans had bombed the wrong side of the street. Such was the power of modern weapons, and though Ali Badrayn had existed in the world of arms and struggle for all of his life, this was the first time he fully appreciated that fact.

They were good hosts. He had a full colonel to look after him. Two sergeants fetched snacks and drinks. He'd watched the funeral on the TV. It was as predictable as one of the American police programs that blanketed the world. You always knew how it would end. The Iraqis, like most people in the region, were a passionate race, particularly when assembled in large numbers and encouraged to make the proper noises. They were easily led and easily moved, and Badrayn knew that

it didn't always matter by whom. Besides, how much of it had been genuine? The informers were still out there to note who didn't cheer or grieve. The security apparatus which had failed the dead President still operated, and everyone knew it. And so little of the emotion which had flowed so freely on the screen and across the broad plazas was real. He chuckled to himself. Like a woman, Badrayn told himself, feigning her moment of supreme pleasure. The question was, would the men who so often took their pleasure without giving it notice the difference?

They arrived singly, lest a pair or small group travel together and discuss things which the entire assembly needed to hear as one. A fine wooden cabinet was opened to reveal bottles and glasses, and the laws of Islam were violated. Badrayn didn't mind. He had a glass of vodka, for which he'd acquired the taste twenty years earlier in Moscow, then the capital of a country now vanished.

They were surprisingly quiet for such powerful men, all the more so for people attending the wake of a man they'd never loved. They sipped their drinks—mainly scotch—and again they mainly looked at one another. On the television, still switched on, the local station was replaying the funeral procession, the announcer extolling the surpassing virtue of the fallen leader. The generals looked on and listened, but the look on their faces was not one of sadness, but fear. Their world had come to an end. They were not moved by the shouts of the citizens or the words of the news commentator. They all knew better.

The last of them arrived. He was the intelligence chief who'd met Badrayn earlier in the day, fresh from having stopped in at his headquarters. The others looked to him, and he answered without the necessity of hearing the question.

"Everything is quiet, my friends."

For now. That terse observation didn't have to be spoken either.

Badrayn could have spoken, but didn't. His was an eloquent voice. Over the years he'd had to motivate many persons, and he knew how, but this was a time when silence was the most powerful statement of all. He merely looked at them, and waited, knowing that his eyes spoke far more loudly than any voice could have done.

"I don't like this," one of them said finally. Not a single face changed. Hardly surprising. None of them liked it. The one who spoke merely affirmed what all thought, and showed himself in doing so to be the weakest of the group.

"How do we know we can trust your master?" the head of the Guards asked.

"He gives you his word in the name of God," Badrayn replied, setting down his glass. "If you wish, a delegation of your number may

fly to see him. In that case, I will remain here as your hostage. But if you wish that, it must be done quickly."

They all knew that, too. The thing they feared was as likely to happen before their possible departure as after. There followed another period of silence. They were scarcely even sipping at their drinks now. Badrayn could read their faces. They all wanted someone else to make a stand, and then that stand could be agreed to or disputed, and in the process the group would reach a collective position with which all would probably abide, though there might be a faction of two or three to consider an alternative course of action. That depended on which of them placed his life on the scales and tried to weigh it against an unknown future. He waited vainly to see who would do that. Finally, one of them spoke.

"I was late marrying," the air force chief said. His twenties and thirties had been the life of a fighter pilot on the ground if not quite in the air. "I have young children." He paused and looked around. "I think we all know the possible—the *likely*—outcome for our families should things

. . . develop unfavorably." It was a dignified gambit, Badrayn thought. They could not be cowardly. They were soldiers, after all.

Daryaei's promise in God's name was not overly convincing to them. It had been a very long time since any of them had visited a mosque for any purpose other than to be photographed there in his simulated devotions, and though it was very different for their enemy, trust in another's religion begins in one's own heart.

"I presume that finances are not at issue here," Badrayn said, both to be sure that it was not, and to make them examine that option themselves. A few heads turned with looks that were close to amusement, and the question was answered. Though official Iraqi accounts had long been frozen, there were other such accounts which had not. The nationality of a bank account was, after all, fungible, all the more so with the size of the account. Each of these men, Badrayn thought, had personal access to nine figures of some hard currency, probably dollars or pounds, and this was not the time to worry about whose money it should have been.

The next question was, Where could they go, and how could they get there safely? Badrayn could see that in their faces, and yet he could do nothing at the moment. The irony of the situation, which only he was in a position to appreciate, was that the enemy whom they feared and whose word they distrusted wished nothing more than to allay their fear and keep his word. But Ali knew him to be a surpassingly patient man. Else he would not have been here at all.

"YOU'RE QUITE SURE?"

"The situation is nearly ideal," Daryaei's visitor told him, explaining further.

Even for a religious man who believed in the Will of God, the confluence of events was just too good to be true, and yet it was or appeared to be so.

"And?"

"And we are proceeding according to the plan."

"Excellent." It wasn't. Daryaei would have much preferred to deal with each in turn, the better to concentrate his formidable intellect on the three developing situations one at a time, but this was not always possible, and perhaps that was the sign. In any case, he had no choice. How strange that he should feel trapped by events resulting from plans he himself had set in motion.

THE HARDEST PART was dealing with his World Health Organization colleagues. That was only possible because the news was good so far. Benedict Mkusa, the "Index Patient" or "Patient Zero," depending on one's favored terminology, was dead, and his body was destroyed. A team of fifteen had scoured the family's neighborhood and found nothing as yet. The critical period had yet to run out—Ebola Zaire had a normal incubation period of four to ten days, though there were extreme cases as brief as two days and as long as nineteen but the only other case was before his eyes. It turned out that Mkusa was a budding naturalist, who spent much of his free time in the bush, and so now there was a search team in the tropical forest, catching rodents and bats and monkeys to make yet another attempt to discover the "host," or carrier of the deadly virus. But above all they hoped that, for once, fortune had smiled on them. The Index Patient had come directly to hospital because of his family status. His parents, educated and affluent, had let health-care professionals treat the boy instead of doing so themselves, and in that they had probably saved their own lives, though even now they were waiting out the incubation period with what had to be stark terror that surpassed even their grief at the loss of a son. Every day they had their blood drawn for the standard IFA and antigen tests, but the tests could be misleading, as some insensitive medico had foolishly told them. Regardless, the WHO team was allowing itself to hope that this outbreak would stop at two patient-victims, and because of that, they were willing to consider what Dr. Moudi proposed to do.

There were objections, of course. The local Zairean physicians wanted to treat her here. There was merit to that. They had more experience with Ebola than anybody, though it had done little good to

anyone, and the WHO team was reluctant for political reasons to insult their colleagues. There had been some unfortunate incidents before, with the natural hauteur of the Europeans resented by the local doctors. There was justice on both sides. The quality of the African doctors was uneven. Some were excellent, some terrible, and some ordinary. The telling argument was that Rousseau in Paris was a genuine hero to the international community, a gifted scientist and a ferociously dedicated clinician who refused to accept the fact that viral diseases could not be treated effectively. Rousseau, in the tradition of Pasteur before him, was determined to break that rule. He'd tried ribavirin and interferon as treatments for Ebola, without positive result. His latest theoretical gambit was dramatic and likely to be ineffective, but it had shown some small promise in monkey studies, and he wanted to try it on a human patient under carefully controlled conditions. Though his proposed method of treatment was anything but practical for real clinical application, you had to start somewhere.

The deciding factor, predictably, was the identity of the patient. Many of the WHO team knew her from the last Ebola outbreak at Kikwit. Sister Jean Baptiste had flown to that town to supervise the local nurses, and doctors no less than others could be moved by familiarity with those under their care. Finally, it was agreed that, yes, Dr. Moudi could transport the patient.

The mechanics of the transfer were difficult enough. They used a truck rather than an ambulance, because a truck would be easier to scrub down afterward. The patient was lifted on a plastic sheet onto a gurney and wheeled out into the corridor. That was cleared of other people, and as Moudi and Sister Maria Magdalena wheeled the patient toward the far door, a group of technicians dressed in plastic "space suits" sprayed the floor and walls, the very air itself, with disinfectant in a smelly man-made chemical fog that trailed the procession like exhaust from an overaged car.

The patient was heavily sedated and firmly restrained. Her body was cocooned to prevent the release of virus-rich bleeding. The plastic sheet under her had been sprayed with the same neutralizing chemicals, so that leaks would immediately find a very adverse environment for the virus particles they carried. As Moudi pushed the gurney from behind, he marveled at his own madness, taking such chances with something as deadly as this. Jean Baptiste's face, at least, was placid from the dangerously high dosage of narcotics, marked though it was with the growing petechia.

They moved outdoors onto the loading dock where supplies arrived at the hospital. The truck was there, its driver seated firmly behind the wheel and not even looking backward at them, except perhaps in the

mirror. The interior of the van body had likewise been sprayed, and with the door closed and the gurney firmly locked in place, it drove off with a police escort, never exceeding thirty kilometers per hour for the short trip to the local airport. That was just as well. The sun was still high, and its heat rapidly turned the truck into a mobile oven, boiling off the protective chemicals into the enclosed space. The smell of the disinfectant came through the suit's filtration system. Fortunately, the doctor was used to it.

The aircraft was waiting. The G-IV had arrived only two hours earlier after a direct flight from Tehran. The interior had been stripped of everything but two seats and a cot. Moudi felt the truck stop and turn and back up. Then the cargo door opened, dazzling them with the sun. Still the nurse, and still a compassionate one, Sister Maria Magdalena used her hand to shield the eyes of her colleague.

There were others there, of course. Two more nuns in protective garb were close by, and a priest, with yet more farther away. All were praying as some other lifted the patient by the plastic sheet and carried her slowly aboard the white-painted business jet. It took five careful minutes before she was firmly strapped in place, and the ground crewmen withdrew. Moudi gave his patient a careful look, checking pulse and blood pressure, the former rapid and the latter still dropping. That worried him. He needed her alive as long as possible. With that done, he waved to the flight crew and strapped into his own seat.

Sitting down, he took the time to look out his window, and Moudi was alarmed to see a TV camera pointed at the aircraft. At least they kept their distance, the doctor thought, as he heard the first engine spool up. Out the other window, he saw the cleanup crew respraying the truck. That was overly theatrical. Ebola, deadly as it was, appeared to be a delicate organism, soon killed by the ultraviolet of direct sunlight, vulnerable also to heat. That was why the search for the host was so frustrating. *Something* carried this dreadful "bug." Ebola could not exist on its own, but whatever it was that provided a comfortable home to the virus, whatever it was that Ebola rewarded for the service by not harming it, whatever the living creature was that haunted the African continent like a shadow, was as yet undiscovered. The physician grunted. Once he'd hoped to discover that host and so make use of it, but that hope had always been in vain. Instead he had something almost as good. He had a living patient whose body was now breeding the pathogen, and while all previous victims of Ebola had been burned, or buried in soil soaked with chemicals, this one would have a very different fate. The aircraft started moving. Moudi checked his seat belt again and wished he could have something to drink.

Forward, the two pilots were wearing flight suits of protective nomex previously sprayed. Their face masks muffled their words, forcing repetition of their request for clearance, but finally the tower got things right, and the Gulfstream began its takeoff roll, rotating swiftly into the clean African sky, and heading north. The first leg of their trip would be 2,551 miles, and would last just over six hours.

Another, nearly identical G-IV had already landed at Benghazi, and now its crew was being briefed on emergency procedures.

"CANNIBALS." HOLBROOK SHOOK his head in temporary disbelief. He'd slept very late, having been up late the night before, watching all manner of talking heads on C-SPAN discuss the confusing situation with Congress after this Ryan guy's speech. Not a bad speech, considering. He'd seen worse. All lies, of course, kind of like a TV show. Even the ones you liked, well, you just knew that they weren't real, funny though they might be in ways intended and not. Some talented man had written the speech, with the purpose of getting just the right points across. The skill of those people was impressive. The Mountain Men had worked for years to develop a speech they could use to get people mobilized to their point of view. Tried and tried, but they just couldn't ever get it right. It wasn't that their beliefs had anything wrong with them, of course. They all knew that. The problem was packaging, and only the government and its ally, Hollywood, could afford the right people to develop the ideas that twisted the minds of the poor dumb bastards who didn't really get it—that was the only possible conclusion.

But now there was discord in the enemy camp.

Ernie Brown, who'd driven over to wake his friend up, muted the TV. "I guess there just isn't enough room for both of them in that there town, Pete."

"You think one will be gone by sundown?" Holbrook asked.

"I wish." The legal commentary they'd just watched on the CNN political hour had been as muddled as a nigger march on Washington to increase welfare. "Well, uh, gee, the Constitution doesn't say what to do in a case like this. I suppose they *could* settle it with forty-fours on Pennsylvania Avenue at sundown," Ernie added with a chuckle.

Pete turned his head and grinned. "Wouldn't that be a sight?"

"Too American." Brown might have added that Ryan *had* actually been in a position like that once, or so the papers and TV said. Well, yeah, it was true. Both vaguely remembered the thing in London, and truth be told, they'd both been proud to see an American showing the Europeans how a gun is used—foreigners didn't know dick about guns, did they? They were as bad as Hollywood. It was a shame Ryan

had gone bad. What he'd said in his speech, that was why he'd entered the government—that's what they *all* said. At least with that Kealty puke, he could fall back on family and stuff. They were all crooks and thieves, and that's just how the guy was brought up, after all. At least he wasn't a hypocrite about it. A high-class gypsy or . . . coyote? Yeah, that was right. Kealty was a lifetime political crook, and he was just being what he was. You couldn't blame a coyote for crooning at the moon; he was just being himself, too. Of course, coyotes were pests. Local ranchers could kill all they wanted . . . Brown tilted his head. "Pete?"

"Yeah, Ernie?" Holbrook reached for the TV controller and was about to unmute it.

"We got a constitutional crisis, right?"

It was Holbrook's turn to look. "Yeah, that's what all the talking heads say."

"And it just got worse, right?"

"The Kealty thing? Sure looks that way." Pete set the controller down. Ernie was having another idea attack.

"What if, um . . ." Brown started and stopped, staring at the silent TV. It took time for his thoughts to form, Holbrook knew, though they were often worth waiting for.

THE 707 LANDED, finally, at Tehran-Mehrabad International Airport, well after midnight. The crew were zombies, having flown almost continuously for the past thirty-six hours, well over the cautious limits of civil aviation, abused all the more by the nature of their cargo, and in so foul a mood from it all that angry words had been traded during the long descent. But the aircraft touched down with a heavy thump, and with that came relief and embarrassment, which each of the three felt as they took a collective sigh. The pilot shook his head and rubbed his face with a tired hand, taxiing south, steering between the blue lights. This airport is also the site of Iranian military and air force headquarters. The aircraft completed its turn, reversing directions and heading for the spacious air force ramp area—though its markings were civil, the 707 actually belonged to the Iranian air force. Trucks were waiting there, the flight crew was glad to see. The aircraft stopped. The engineer switched off the engines. The pilot set the parking brakes. The three men turned inward.

"A long day, my friends," the pilot said by way of apology.

"God willing, a long sleep to follow it," the engineer—he'd been the main target of his captain's temper—replied, accepting it. They were all too weary to sustain an argument in any case, and after a proper rest they wouldn't remember the reasons for it anyway.

They removed their oxygen masks, to be greeted by the thick fetid smell of their cargo, and it was everything they could do not to vomit as the cargo door was opened in the rear. They couldn't leave just yet. The aircraft was well and truly stuffed with cages, and short of climbing out the windows—which was too undignified—they'd have to await their freedom, rather like passengers at any international terminal.

Soldiers did the unloading, a process made all the more difficult by the fact that no one had warned their commander to issue gloves, as the Africans had done. Every cage had a wire handle at the top, but the African greens were every bit as testy as the men up front, clawing and scratching at the hands trying to lift them. Reactions differed among the soldiers. Some slapped at the cages, hoping to cow the monkeys into passivity. The smart ones removed their field jackets and used them as a buffer when they handled the cages. Soon a chain of men was established, and the cages were transferred, one at a time, to a series of trucks.

The procedure was noisy. It was barely fifty degrees in Tehran that night, far below what the monkeys were accustomed to, and that didn't help their collective mood any more than anything else that had happened to them over the past few days. They responded to the newest trauma with screeches and howls that echoed across the ramp. Even people who'd never heard monkeys before would not mistake it for anything else, but that could not be helped. Finally it was done. The cabin door opened, and the crew had a chance to look at what had become of their once-spotless aircraft. It would be weeks before they got the smell out, they were sure, and just scrubbing it down would be an onerous task best not considered at the moment. Together they walked aft, then down the stairs and off to where their cars were parked.

The monkeys headed north in what for them was their third or fourth—and last—journey by truck. It was a short one, up a divided highway, over a cloverleaf interchange built under the reign of the Shah, then west to Hasanabad. Here there was a farm, long since set aside for the same purpose which had occasioned the transport of the monkeys from Africa to Asia. The farm was state-owned, used as an experimental station to test new crops and fertilizers, and it had been hoped that the produce grown here would feed the new arrivals, but it was still winter and nothing was growing at the moment. Instead, several truckloads of dates from the southeastern region of the country had just arrived. The monkeys smelled them as their transport pulled up to the new three-story concrete building that would be their final home. It only agitated them all the more, since they'd had neither food nor water since leaving the continent of their birth, but at least it

gave them the hope of a meal, and a tasty one at that, as a last meal is supposed to be.

THE GULFSTREAM G-IV touched down at Benghazi exactly on its flight plan. It had actually been as pleasant a journey as was possible under the circumstances. Even the normally roiled air over the central Sahara had been calm, making for a smooth ride. Sister Jean Baptiste had remained unconscious for most of the flight, drifting into semi-awareness only a few times, and soon drifting back out again, actually more comfortable than the other four people aboard, whose protective garb prevented even a sip of water.

The doors never opened on the aircraft. Instead fuel trucks pulled up and their drivers dismounted to attach hoses to the caps in the long white wings. Dr. Moudi was still tensely awake. Sister Maria Magdalena was dozing. She was as old as the patient, and had scarcely slept in days, devoted as she was to her colleague. It was too bad, Moudi thought, frowning as he looked out the window. It was unjust. He didn't have it in his heart to hate these people anymore. He'd felt that way once. He'd thought all Westerners were enemies of his country, but these two were not. Their home country was essentially neutral toward his. They were not the animistic pagans of Africa, ignorant and uncaring of the true God. They'd devoted their lives to service in His name, and both had surprised him by showing respect for his personal prayers and devotions. More than anything, he respected their belief that faith was a path to progress rather than acceptance of preordained destiny, an idea not totally congruent with his Islamic beliefs, but not exactly contrary to them either. Maria Magdalena had a rosary in her hands—disinfected—which she used to organize her prayers to Mary, mother of Jesus the prophet, venerated as thoroughly in the Koran as in her own abbreviated scriptures, and as fine a model for women to follow as any woman who had ever lived ...

Moudi snapped his head away from them to look outside. He couldn't allow such thoughts. He had a task, and here were the instruments of that task, one's fate assigned by Allah, and the other's chosen by herself—and that was that. The task was without, not within, not one of his making, a fact made clear when the fuel trucks pulled away and the engines started up again. The flight crew was in a hurry, and so was he, the better to get the troublesome part of his mission behind, and the mechanical part begun. There was reason to rejoice. All those years among pagans, living in tropical heat, not a mosque within miles of his abode. Miserable, often tainted food, always wondering if it was clean or unclean, and never really being

sure. That was behind him. What lay before was service to his God and his country.

Two aircraft, not one, taxied off to the main north-south runway, jostling as they did so on concrete slabs made uneven by the murderous desert heat of summer and the surprising cold of winter nights. The first of them was not Moudi's. That G-IV, outwardly identical in every way but a single digit's difference on the tail code, streaked down the runway and lifted off due north. His aircraft duplicated the takeoff roll, but as soon as the wheels were up, this G-IV turned right for a southeasterly heading toward Sudan, a lonely aircraft in a lonely desert night.

The first turned slightly west, and entered the normal international air corridor for the French coast. In due course, it would pass near the island of Malta, where a radar station existed to serve the needs of the airport at Valetta and also to perform traffic-control duties for the central Mediterranean. The crew of this aircraft were all air force types who customarily flew political and business luminaries from point to point, which was safe, well paid, and boring. Tonight would be different. The co-pilot had his eyes fixed jointly on his knee chart and the GPS navigation system. Two hundred miles short of Malta, at a cruising altitude of 39,000 feet, he took the nod from the pilot and flipped the radar transponder setting to 7711.

"VALETTA APPROACH, VALETTA Approach, this is November-Juliet-Alpha, Mayday, Mayday, Mayday."

The controller at Valetta immediately noted the triple-bogie signature on his scope. It was a quiet watch at the traffic-control center, the normally sparse air traffic to monitor, and this night was as routine as any other—he keyed his microphone at once as his other hand waved for his supervisor.

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, are you declaring an emergency, sir?"

"Valetta, Juliet-Alpha, affirmative. We are medical evacuation flight inbound Paris from Zaire. We just lost number-two engine and we have electrical problems, stand by—"

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, standing by, sir." The scope showed the aircraft's altitude as 390, then 380, then 370. "Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, I show you losing altitude."

The voice in his headphones changed. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Both engines out, both engines out. Attempting restart. This is Juliet-Alpha."

"Your direct penetration course Valetta is three-four-three, say again, direct vector Valetta three-four-three. We are standing by, sir."

A terse, clipped "Roger" was all the controller got back. The altitude

readout was 330 now.

"What's happening?" the supervisor asked.

"He says both engines out, he's dropping rapidly." A computer screen showed the aircraft to be a Gulfstream, and the flight plan was confirmed.

"It glides well," the supervisor offered optimistically; 310, they both saw. The G-IV didn't glide all that well, however.

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta."

Nothing.

"Juliet-Alpha, this is Valetta Approach."

"What else is—" The supervisor checked the screen himself. No other aircraft in the area, and all one could do was watch anyway.

THE BETTER TO simulate the in-flight emergency, the pilot throttled his engines back to idle. The tendency was to ham things up, but they wouldn't. In fact, they'd say nothing else at all. He pushed the yoke farther forward to increase his rate of descent, then turned to port as though angling toward Malta. That should make the tower people feel good, he thought, passing through 25,000 feet. It actually felt good. He'd been a fighter pilot for his country once, and missed the delightful feelings you got from yanking and banking an airplane around the sky. A descent of this speed would have his passengers white-faced and panicking. For the pilot it just felt like what flying was supposed to be.

"HE MUST BE very heavy," the supervisor said.

"Cleared into Paris De Gaulle." The controller shrugged and grimaced. "Just topped off in Benghazi."

"Bad fuel?" The answer was merely another shrug.

It was like watching death on television, all the more horrible that the alpha-numeric blip's altitude digits were clicking down like the symbols on a slot machine.

The supervisor lifted a phone. "Call the Libyans. Ask if they can get a rescue aircraft up. We have an aircraft about to go down in the Gulf of Sidra."

"Valetta Approach, this is USS *Radford,* do you copy, over."

"*Radford,* Valetta."

"WE HAVE YOUR contact on radar. Looks like he's coming down

hard." The voice was that of a junior-grade lieutenant who had the CIC duty this night. *Radford* was an aging Spruance-class destroyer heading for Naples after an exercise with the Egyptian navy. Along the way she had orders to enter the Gulf of Sidra to proclaim freedom-of-navigation rights, an exercise which was almost as old as the ship herself. Once the source of considerable excitement, and two pitched air-sea battles in the 1980s, it was now boringly routine, else *Radford* wouldn't be going it alone. Boring enough that the CIC crewmen were monitoring civilian radio freqs to relieve their torpor. "Contact is eight-zero miles west of us. We are tracking."

"Can you respond to a rescue request?"

"Valetta, I just woke the captain up. Give us a few to get organized here, but we can make a try for it, over."

"Dropping like a rock," the petty officer on the main scope reported. "Better pull out soon, fella."

"Target is a Gulf-Four business jet. We show him one-six-thousand and descending rapidly," Valetta advised.

"Thank you, that's about what we have. We are standing by."

"What gives?" the captain asked, dressed in khaki pants and a T-shirt. The report didn't take long. "Okay, get the rotor heads woke up." Next the commander lifted a growler phone. "Bridge, CIC, captain speaking. All ahead full, come right to new course—"

"Two-seven-five, sir," the radar man advised. "Target is two-seven-five and eighty-three miles."

"New course two-seven-five."

"Aye, sir. Coming right to two-seven-five, all ahead full, aye," the officer of the deck acknowledged. On the bridge the quartermaster of the watch pushed down the direct engine-control handles, dumping additional fuel into the big GE jet-turbines. *Radford* shuddered a bit, then settled at the stern as she began to accelerate up from eighteen knots. The captain looked around the capacious combat information center. The crewmen were alert, a few shaking their heads to come fully awake. The radar-men were adjusting their instruments. On the main scope, the display changed, the better to lock in the descending aircraft.

"Let's go to general quarters," the skipper said next. Might as well get some good training time out of this. In thirty seconds, everyone aboard was startled into consciousness and running to stations.

YOU HAVE TO be careful descending to the ocean surface at night. The pilot of the G-IV kept a close eye on his altitude and rate of descent. The lack of good visual references made it all too easy to slam into the surface, and while that might have made their evening's

mission perfect, it wasn't supposed to be *that* perfect. In another few seconds they'd drop off the Valetta radar scope, and then they could start pulling out of the dive. The only thing that concerned him now was the possible presence of a ship down there, but no wakes were visible before him in the light of a quarter moon.

"I have it," he announced when the aircraft dropped through five thousand feet. He eased back on the yoke. Valetta might note the change in descent rate from his transponder, if they were still getting a signal, but even if they did, they'd assume that after diving to get airflow into his engines, the better to achieve a restart, he was now trying to level out for a controlled landing on the calm sea.

"LOSING HIM," THE controller said. The display on the screen blinked a few times, came back, then went dark.

The supervisor nodded and keyed his microphone. "*Radford,* this is Valetta. Juliet-Alpha has dropped off our screen. Last altitude reading was six thousand and descending, course three-four-three."

"VALETTA, ROGER, WE still have him, now at four thousand, five hundred, rate of descent has slowed down some, course three-four-three," the CIC officer replied. Just six feet away from him, the captain was talking with the commander of *Radford*'s air detachment. It would take more than twenty minutes to get the destroyer's single SH-60B Seahawk helicopter launched. The aircraft was now being pre-flighted prior to being pulled out onto the flight deck. The helicopter pilot turned to look at the radar display.

"Calm seas. If he has half a brain, somebody might just walk away from this. You try to splash down parallel to the ground swells and ride it out. Okay, we're on it, sir." With that, he left the CIC and headed aft.

"Losing him under the horizon," the radar man reported. "Just passed through fifteen hundred. Looks like he's going in."

"Tell Valetta," the captain ordered.

THE G-IV LEVELED out at five hundred feet by the radar altimeter. It was as low as the pilot cared to risk. With that done, he powered the engines back up to cruising power and turned left, south, back toward Libya. He was fully alert now. Flying low was demanding under the best circumstances, and far more so over water at night, but his orders

were clear, though their purpose was not. It went rapidly in any case. At just over three hundred knots, he had forty minutes to the military airfield, at which he'd refuel one more time for a flight out of the area.

RADFORD WENT TO flight quarters five minutes later, altering course slightly to put the wind over the deck from the proper direction. The Seahawk's tactical navigation system copied the needed data from the ship's CIC. It would search a circle of water fifteen miles in diameter in a procedure that would be tedious, time-consuming, and frantic. There were people in the water, and rendering assistance to those in need was the first and oldest law of the sea. As soon as the helicopter lifted off, the destroyer came back left and raced off with all four main engines turning full power, driving the ship at thirty-four knots. By this time the captain had radioed his situation to Naples, requesting additional assistance from any nearby fleet units—there were no American ships in the immediate vicinity, but an Italian frigate was heading south for their area, and even the Libyan air force asked for information.

THE "LOST" G-IV landed just as the U.S. Navy helicopter reached the search area. The crew left the aircraft for refreshments while their business jet was fueled. As they watched, a Russian-made AN-10 "Cub" four-engine transport fired up its engines to participate in the search-and-rescue mission. The Libyans were cooperating now with such things, trying to rejoin the world community, and even their commanders didn't know very much indeed, hardly anything at all—of what had gone on. Just a few phone calls had made the arrangements, and whoever had taken the call and cooperated knew only that two aircraft would be landing to fuel and move on. An hour later, they lifted off again for the three-hour flight to Damascus, Syria. It had been originally thought that they would fly right back to their home base in Switzerland, but the pilot had pointed out that two aircraft of the same ownership flying over the same spot at nearly the same time would cause questions. He turned the aircraft east during the climb-out.

Below to his left, in the Gulf of Sidra, they saw the flashing lights of aircraft, one of them a helicopter, they were surprised to note. People were burning fuel and spending time and all for nothing. That thought amused the pilot as he reached his cruising altitude and relaxed, letting the auto-pilot do the work for the remainder of a long day's flying.

“ARE WE THERE yet?”

Moudi turned his head. He’d just changed the IV bottle for their patient. Inside his plastic helmet his face itched from his growing beard. He saw that Sister Maria Magdalena had the same crawly, unwashed feeling he had. Her first action on waking was to move her hands to her face, stopped short by the clear plastic.

“No, Sister, but soon. Please, rest yourself. I can do this.”

“No, no, you must be very tired, Dr. Moudi.” She started to rise.

“I am younger and better rested,” the physician replied with a raised hand. Next he replaced the morphine bottle with a fresh one. Jean Baptiste was, thankfully, still too heavily drugged to be a problem.

“What time is it?”

“Time for you to rest. You will attend your friend when we arrive, but then other doctors will be able to relieve me. Please, conserve your strength. You will need it.” Which was true enough.

The nun didn’t reply. Accustomed to following the orders of doctors, she turned her head, probably whispered a prayer, and allowed her eyes to close. When he was sure that she was back asleep, he moved forward.

“How much longer?”

“Forty minutes. We’ll land a little early. The winds have been good to us,” the co-pilot answered.

“So, before dawn?”

“Yes.”

“What is her problem?” the pilot asked, not turning, but sufficiently bored that he wanted to hear something new.

“You do not wish to know,” Moudi assured him.

“She will die, this woman?”

“Yes, and the aircraft must be completely disinfected before it is used again.”

“That’s what they told us.” The pilot shrugged, not knowing how frightened he should be of what he was carrying. Moudi did. The plastic sheet under his patient would now contain a pool of infected blood. They’d have to be extremely careful unloading her.

BADRAYN WAS GRATEFUL that he’d avoided alcohol. He was the most conscious man in the room. Ten hours, he thought, looking at his watch. Ten hours they’d talked and disputed like a bunch of old women in a market.

"He will agree to this?" the Guards commander asked.

"It is not unreasonable in the least," Ali replied. Five senior mullahs would fly to Baghdad, offering themselves as hostage to—if not the goodwill, then the good word of their leader. It actually worked out better than the assembled generals knew, not that they really cared. With that settled, the general officers looked at one another, and one by one they nodded.

"We accept," the same general said, speaking for the group. That hundreds of lesser officers would be left behind to face whatever music was in store for them was, after all, a small thing. The lengthy discussion hadn't touched on that subject very much.

"I require a telephone," Badrayn told them next. The intelligence chief led him to a side room. There had always been a direct line to Tehran. Even during hostilities there had been a communications link—that one via microwave tower. The next one was a fiber-optic cable whose transmissions could not be intercepted. Under the watchful eyes of the Iraqi officer he punched the numbers he'd memorized several days earlier.

"This is Yousif. I have news," he told the voice which answered.

"Please wait," was the reply.

• • •

DARYAEI DIDN'T ENJOY being awakened early any more than a normal person, the less so that he'd slept poorly over the last few days. When his bedside phone rang, he blinked his eyes for several rings before reaching to lift it.

"Yes?"

"This is Yousif. It is agreed. Five friends are required."

All praise to Allah, for He is beneficent, Daryaei thought to himself. All the years of war and peace had come to fruition in this moment. No, no, that was premature. There was much yet to be done. But the most difficult thing *was* done now.

"When shall we begin?"

"As quickly as possible."

"Thank you. I will not forget." With that he came fully awake. This morning, the first in many years, he forgot his morning prayers. God would understand that His work must be done quickly.

HOW WEARY SHE must have been, Moudi thought. Both nuns started to wakefulness when the aircraft touched down. There came the usual

jolting as the aircraft slowed, and a watery sound announced the fact that Jean Baptiste had indeed bled out as he'd expected. So, he'd gotten her here alive at least. Her eyes were open, though confused as an infant's as she stared at the curving ceiling of the cabin. Maria Magdalena took a moment to look out the windows, but all she saw was an airport, and those appeared the same all over the world, particularly at night. In due course the aircraft stopped, and the door dropped open.

Again they would travel in a truck. Four people came into the aircraft, all of them dressed in protective plastic. Moudi loosened the straps on his patient, waving the other nun to stay in place. Carefully, the four army medics lifted the sturdy plastic sheet by the corners and moved toward the door. As they did so, Moudi saw something drip onto the flat-folded seat which had served their patient as a bed. He shook it off. The flight crew had their orders, and the orders had been repeated often enough. When the patient was safely on the truck, Moudi and Maria Magdalena walked down the steps as well. Both removed their headgear, allowing themselves to breathe fresh, cool air. He took a canteen from one of the armed party around the aircraft and offered it to her, as he fetched another for himself. Both drained a full liter of water before entering the truck. Both were disoriented by the long flight, she the more so for not knowing where she really was. Moudi saw the 707 which had arrived shortly before with the monkeys, though he didn't know that was the cargo.

"I've never seen Paris—well, except flying through, all these years," she said, looking around before the back flap was dropped, cutting off the view.

A pity you never will.

16

THE IRAQI TRANSFER

A WHOLE LOT OF NOTHING here," the pilot observed. The Seahawk was circling at a thousand feet, scanning the surface with a search radar acute enough to detect wreckage—it was designed to spot a submarine's periscope—but finding not so much as a floating bottle of Perrier. Both also wore low-light goggles, and they should have turned up a slick of jet fuel from the oily shine, but that also was negative.

"Must have hit pretty hard not to leave anything," the co-pilot replied over the intercom.

"Unless we're looking in the wrong spot." The pilot looked down at his tactical navigation system. They were in the right place. They were down to an hour's fuel. Time to start thinking about landing back on *Radford,* which was now combing the search area herself. The searchlights looked theatrical in the pre-dawn darkness, like something out of a World War II movie. A Libyan Cub was circling around, too, trying to be helpful but mainly being a pain in the ass.

"Anything at all?" the controller on *Radford* asked.

"Negative. Nothing, say again nothing, down there that we can see. One hour's worth of gas here, over."

"Copy one hour gas," *Radford* acknowledged.

"Sir, the target's last course was three-four-three, speed two-nine-zero knots, rate of descent three thousand foot per minute. If he ain't in this footprint, I don't know why," a chief operations specialist said, tapping the chart. The captain sipped at his coffee and shrugged. Topside, the fire-and-rescue party was standing by. Two swimmers were in wetsuits, with a boat crew standing by the launch. There was a lookout posted for every set of binoculars aboard, looking for strobe lights or anything else, and sonar was listening for the high-frequency ping of the aircraft's emergency locator. Those instruments were designed to survive a severe impact, were automatically activated when exposed to seawater, and had battery power to operate for several days. *Radford*'s sonar was sensitive enough to detect the damned thing from thirty miles away, and they were right over the impact zone predicted by the radar crew. Neither the ship nor her

crew had ever done a rescue like this, but it was something for which they regularly drilled, and every procedure had been executed as perfectly as the CO could wish.

"USS *Radford,* USS *Radford,* this is Valetta Approach, over."

The captain lifted the microphone. "Valetta, this is *Radford.*"

"Have you located anything, over?"

"Negative, Valetta. Our helo's been all over the area, nothing to report yet." They'd already queried Malta for corrected data on the aircraft's last speed and heading, but it had dropped off the civilian radar even before departing the destroyer's more precise coverage. On both ends of the radio link, men sighed. They all knew how this would play out now. The search would continue for a day, no more, no less, and nothing would be found, and that was that. A telex had already gone to the manufacturer, informing them that one of their aircraft was lost at sea. Gulfstream representatives would fly to Bern to go over maintenance records and other printed data on the aircraft, hoping to garner a clue, and probably finding nothing, and this whole case would go into the "unknown" column in somebody's ledger book. But the game had to be played out, and, hell, it was still good training time for the crew of USS *Radford.* The crew would shrug it off. It wasn't anyone they knew, however desirable and uplifting a successful rescue would have been.

IT WAS PROBABLY the smell that told her what was wrong. The drive from the airport had been brief. It was dark outside still, and when the truck stopped, both doctor and nurse were still suffering from the lengthy time in movement. They arrived, and the first business was to get Sister Jean Baptiste inside. Only then did both of them remove their plastic garb for the last time. Maria Magdalena smoothed her short hair and breathed heavily, finally taking the time to look around, then was surprised at what she saw. Moudi saw the confusion, and led her inside before she could comment on it.

That was when the smell hit them, a familiar African smell from the entry of the monkeys a few hours earlier, decidedly not something one would associate with Paris or a place as clean and orderly as the Pasteur Institute had to be. Next, Maria Magdalena looked around and realized that the signs on the walls were not in French. There was no way she could know what the situation was, there were merely grounds for confusion, to be followed by questions—and then, just as well, it was time, before the questions could be asked. A soldier appeared and took her arm and led her away, too uncomprehending still to say anything. She merely looked over her shoulder at an unshaven man in surgical greens, a sad look on his face giving greater

substance to her confusion.

"What is this? Who is she?" the director of the project asked.

"It is a rule of their religion that they cannot travel alone. To protect their chastity," Moudi explained. "Otherwise I could not have come here with our patient."

"She is still alive?" He hadn't been there for the arrival.

Moudi nodded. "Yes, we should be able to keep her going another three days, maybe four," he thought.

"And the other?"

Moudi dodged: "That is not for me to say."

"We could always have another—"

"No! That would be barbaric," Moudi protested. "Such things are hateful to God."

"And what we plan to do is not?" the director asked. Clearly Moudi had been in the bush for too long. But it wasn't worth fighting over. One fully infected Ebola patient was all they needed. "Get cleaned up and we will go up to see her."

Moudi headed off to the doctors' lounge on the second floor. The facility was actually more private than its Western counterparts, as people in this part of the world had higher standards of body modesty. The plastic suit, he saw with some surprise, had survived the trip without a single tear. He dumped it in a large plastic bin before heading into a shower whose hot water was supplemented with chemicals—he hardly noticed the smell anymore—and there he enjoyed five minutes of sanitary bliss. On the flight he'd wondered if he would ever be clean again. In the shower now, his mind asked a similar question, but more quietly. He emerged to don fresh greens fresh everything, in fact—and to complete his normally fastidious routine. A medical orderly had placed a brand-new suit in the lounge for him, this one a blue American Racal fresh out of its box, which he put on before heading out into the corridor. The director, similarly dressed, was waiting for him, and together they walked down toward the suite of treatment rooms.

There were only four of them, behind sealed, guarded doors. The Iranian army ran this facility. The doctors were military physicians, and the orderlies all men with battlefield experience. Security was tight, as one would expect. Moudi and the director had cleared security on the first floor, however, and the guard at the post touched the buttons to open the doors into the air lock. These opened with a hiss of hydraulics to reveal a second set, and they could see that smoke from the soldier's cigarette was sucked into the secure area. Good. The air system was working properly. Both men had a strange prejudice against their own countrymen. It would have been preferable for this entire facility to have been built by foreign

engineers—Germans were popular in the Middle East for such things—but Iraq had made that mistake to its sorrow. The orderly Germans kept plans of everything they built, as a result of which so many of their projects had been bombed to dust. And so while a lot of the building's hardware had been bought elsewhere, the facility had been constructed locally. Their very lives depended on the exact performance of every subsystem here, but that could not be helped now. The inner doors would not open unless the outer ones were locked tight. That worked. The director activated them, and they proceeded.

Sister Jean Baptiste was in the last room on the right. Three medical orderlies were in with her. They'd already cut off all her clothing, revealing a death in progress. The soldiers were repulsed by what they saw, her condition more terrible than any battlefield injury. Quickly, they cleaned off her body, then covered it, respectful of the woman's modesty as their culture insisted. The director looked at the morphine drip and immediately turned it back by a third.

"We want to keep her alive as long as possible," he explained.

"The pain from this—"

"Cannot be helped," he responded coldly. He thought to reproach Moudi, but stopped himself. He was a physician, too, and knew that it was hard to regard one's patient with harshness. Elderly Caucasian female, he saw, stuporous from the morphine, respiration too slow for his liking. The orderlies attached leads for the electrocardiograph, and he was surprised at how well her heart was working. Good. Blood pressure was low, as expected, and he ordered two units of whole blood to be hung on the IV tree. The more blood the better.

The orderlies were well drilled. Everything that had come in with the patient had already been bagged, then double-bagged. One of their number carried the bundle out of the room and off to the gas-fired incinerator which would leave behind nothing but sterilized ashes. The main issue here was management of the virus. The patient was their culture dish. Previously, such victims had had a few cc's of blood drawn for analysis, and the patient in due course would die, and the body was either burned or sprayed and buried in chemically treated ground. Not this time. He would have in his control, in due course, the largest quantity of the virus ever seen, and from that he would grow more, all virulent, all powerful. He turned.

"So, Moudi, how did she contract it?"

"She was treating the Index Patient."

"The Negro boy?" the director asked, standing in the corner.

Moudi nodded. "Yes."

"What did she do wrong?"

"We never found out. I asked her when she was still lucid. She

never gave the boy an injection, and Sister was always very careful with 'sharps.' She's an experienced nurse," Moudi reported mechanically. He really was too tired to do much of anything but report what he knew, and that, the director thought, was just fine. "She worked with Ebola before, at Kikwit and other places. She taught procedures to staff."

"Aerosol transmission?" the director asked. It was too much to hope for.

"CDC believes that this is the Ebola Mayinga sub-type. You will recall that this strain is named for a nurse who contracted the disease through unknown means."

That statement made the director look hard into Moudi's eyes. "You're quite sure of what you said?"

"I'm not sure of anything at the moment, but I also interviewed staff at the hospital, and all injections were given to the Index Patient by others, not Sister here. So, yes, this may be a case of aerosol transmission."

It was a classic case of good news and bad news. So little was known of Ebola Zaire. It *was* known that the disease could be passed on by blood and other bodily fluids, even by sexual contact—that was almost entirely theoretical, since an Ebola victim was hardly in a position to engage in such practices. It was further believed that the virus fared poorly out of a living host, quick to die in the open. For that reason it was not believed that the disease could be spread through the air in the manner of pneumonia or other common ailments. But at the same time every outbreak of the virus produced cases which could not be explained. The unfortunate nurse Mayinga had given her name to a strain of the disease which had reached out to claim her life through an unknown means. Had she lied about something, or forgotten something, or had she searched her mind and reported the truth, and thus memorialized a sub-type of Ebola which *did* survive in the air long enough to be transmitted as readily as the common cold? If so, that would make the patient before them the carrier of a biological weapon of such power as to make the entire world shake.

Such a possibility also meant that they were quite literally dicing with Death himself. The smallest mistake could be lethal. Without conscious thought, the director looked upward at the air-conditioning vent. The building had been designed with that very contingency in mind. The incoming air was all clean, sucked in through a vent located at the end of two hundred meters of piping. The air exiting from the "hot" areas passed through a single plenum chamber before leaving the building. There it was subjected to blazingly powerful ultraviolet lights, since that frequency of radiation destroyed viruses

with total reliability. The air filters were soaked with chemicals—phenol was one of them to achieve the same end. Only then was it ejected to the outside, where other environmental factors also could be depended upon to deny the disease a chance to survive. The filters—three separate banks of them—were changed with religious precision every twelve hours. The UV lights, five times the number required for the task, were constantly monitored. The Hot Lab was kept at intentionally low ambient air pressure to prevent a leak, and that fact enabled the building to be evaluated for structural integrity. For the rest, he thought, well, that was why they'd all trained so carefully in suit-safety and sharps procedures.

The director, too, was a physician, trained in Paris and London, but it had been years since he'd treated a human patient. Mainly he'd devoted the last decade to molecular biology, most particularly to the study of viruses. He knew as much as any man about them, though that was little enough. He knew how to make them grow, for example, and before him now was a perfect medium, a human being converted by fate into a factory for the deadliest organism known to man. He'd never known her healthy, had never spoken with her, never seen her at work. That was good. Perhaps she had been an effective nurse, as Moudi said, but that was all in the past, and there was little point in getting overly attached to someone who would be dead in three days, four at the most. The longer the better, though, for the factory to do its work, using this human body for its raw material as it turned out its product, turning Allah's finest creation into His most deadly curse.

For the other question, he'd given the order while Moudi had been showering. Sister Maria Magdalena was taken to another cleanup area, issued clothing, and left to herself. There she had showered in privacy, wondering as she did so what was going on—where was she? She was still too confused to be truly afraid, too disoriented to understand. Like Moudi, she showered long, and the procedure did clear her head somewhat, as she tried to form the right questions to pose. She'd find the doctor in a few minutes to ask what was happening. Yes, that's what she would do, Maria Magdalena thought as she dressed. There was a comfortable familiarity to the medical garb, and she still had her rosary, taken into the shower with her. It was a metal one rather than the formal rosary that went along with her religious habit, the same one given to her when she'd taken her final vows more than forty years before. But the metal one was more easily disinfected, and she'd taken the time in the shower to clean it. Outside, dressed, she decided that prayer would be the best preparation for her quest for information, and so she knelt, blessed herself, and began her prayers. She didn't hear the door open behind her.

The soldier from the security force had his orders. He could have

done it a few minutes earlier, but to invade a woman's privacy while nude and bathing would have been a hateful act, and she wasn't going anywhere. It pleased him to see that she was praying, her back to him, plainly comfortable and well practiced with her devotions. This was proper. A condemned criminal was invariably given the chance to speak to Allah; to deny that chance was a grave sin. So much the better, he thought, raising his 9mm automatic. She was speaking to her God now ...

... and now she was doing so more directly. He de-cocked the hammer, holstered his weapon, and called for the two orderlies outside to clean up the mess. He'd killed people before, had participated in firing parties for enemies of the state, and that was duty, sometimes distasteful, but duty nonetheless. This one made him shake his head. This time, he was sure, he'd sent a soul to Allah. How strange to feel good about an execution.

TONY BRETANO HAD flown in on a TRW-owned business jet. It turned out that he hadn't yet decided to accept the offer from the Lockheed-Martin board, and it was pleasing to Ryan that George Winston's information was incorrect. It showed that he wasn't privy to this particular piece of insider information, at least.

"I've said 'no' before, Mr. President."

"Twice." Ryan nodded. "To head ARPA and to be Deputy Secretary for Technology. Your name came up for NRO also, but they never called you about it."

"So I heard," Bretano acknowledged. He was a short man, evidently with short-man complex, judging by his combativeness. He spoke with the accent of someone from Manhattan's Little Italy, despite many years on the West Coast, and that also told Ryan something. He liked to proclaim who and what he was, this despite a pair of degrees from MIT, where he might as easily have adopted a Cambridge accent.

"And you turned the jobs down because it's a great big clusterfuck over there across the river, right?"

"Too much tail and not enough teeth. If I ran my business that way, the stockholders would lynch me. The Defense bureaucracy—"

"So fix it for me," Jack suggested.

"Can't be done."

"Don't give me that, Bretano. Anything man can make, he can unmake. If you don't think you have the stuff to get the job done, fine, tell me that, and you can head back to the coast."

"Wait a minute—"

Ryan cut him off again.

"No, you wait a minute. You saw what I said on TV, and I'm not

going to repeat it. I need to clean up a few things, and I need the right people to do it, and if you don't have it, fine, I'll find somebody tough enough to—"

"Tough?" Bretano nearly came off his seat. "*Tough?* I got news for you, *Mister* President, my papa sold fruit from a cart on the corner. The world didn't give me shit!" Then he stopped short when Ryan laughed, and thought a moment before going on. "Not bad," he said more sedately, in the manner of the corporate chairman he was.

"George Winston says you're feisty. We haven't had a halfway decent SecDef in ten years. Good. When I'm wrong, I need people to tell me so. But I don't think I'm wrong about you."

"What do you want done?"

"When I pick up the phone, I want things to happen. I want to know that if I have to send kids into harm's way, they're properly equipped, properly trained, and properly supported. I want people to be afraid of what we can do. It makes life a lot easier for the State Department," the President explained. "When I was a little kid in east Baltimore and I saw a cop walking up Monument Street, I knew two things. I knew it wasn't a good idea to mess with him, and I also knew I could trust him to help me if I needed it."

"In other words, you want a product that we can deliver whenever we have to."

"Correct."

"We've drawn down a long way," Bretano said warily.

"I want you to work with a good team—you pick it—to draw up a force structure that meets our needs. Then I want you to rebuild the Pentagon to deliver it."

"How much time do I have?"

"I'll give you two weeks on the first part."

"Not long enough."

"Don't give me that. We study things so much I'm surprised the paper all those things are printed on hasn't consumed every tree in the country. Hell, *I* know what the threats are out there, remember? That used to be *my* business. A month ago we were in a shooting war, sucking air because we were out of assets to use. We got lucky. I don't want to depend on luck anymore. I want you to clear out the bureaucracy, so if we need to do something it gets done. In fact, I want things done before we have to do them. If we do the job right, nobody'll be crazy enough to take us on. Question is, are you willing to take it on, Dr. Bretano?"

"It'll be bloody."

"My wife's a doc," Jack told him.

"Half the job's getting good intelligence," Bretano pointed out.

"I know that, too. We've already started on CIA. George ought to be

okay at Treasury. I'm checking out a list of judges to head Justice. I said it all on TV. I'm putting a team together. I want you on it. I made my way on my own, too. You think two people like us would have got this far anywhere else? Payback time, Bretano." Ryan leaned back, pleased with himself for the delivery.

There was no fighting it, the executive knew. "When do I start?"

Ryan checked his watch. "Tomorrow morning suit you?"

THE MAINTENANCE CREW showed up just after dawn. The aircraft had a military guard arrayed around it to keep the curious away, though this airport was already more secure than most of its international counterparts because of the Iranian air force presence. The crew foreman's clipboard told him what had to be done, and the long list of procedures had him curious, but little else. Aircraft of this type always got special treatment, because the people who flew in them deemed themselves the elect of God, or something even higher still. Not that it mattered. He had his procedures, and the advice for extra caution was hardly necessary. His people were always thorough. The aircraft maintenance sheet said that it was time to replace two cockpit instruments, and two replacements were ready, still in the manufacturer's boxes; those would have to be calibrated after installation. Two other members of his crew would refuel the aircraft and change the engine oil. The rest would work on the cabin under the foreman's supervision.

They'd scarcely begun when a captain showed up with fresh orders, predictably ones which contradicted the first set. The seats had to be replaced quickly. The G-IV would be taking off in a few hours for another flight. The officer didn't say where to, and the foreman didn't care to ask. He told his instrument mechanic to hurry with his assigned task. That was fairly easy in the G-IV with its modular instrument arrangement. A truck appeared with the seats that had been taken out two days earlier, and the cleanup crewmen assisted, manhandling them into place before they could properly begin. The foreman wondered why they'd been removed in the first place, but it wasn't his place to ask, and the answer would not have made much sense anyway. A pity everyone was in a hurry. It would have been easier to do the cleaning with so much open space. Instead, the fourteen-seat configuration was quickly reestablished, making the aircraft back into a mini-airliner, albeit a very comfortable one. The replacement seating had been dry-cleaned in the hangar as it always was, the ashtrays emptied and swabbed out. The caterer showed up next with food for the galley, and soon the aircraft was overcrowded with workers, each getting in the other's way, and in the resulting

confusion, work was not done properly, but that was not the foreman's fault. Things just accelerated from there. The new flight crew showed up with their charts and flight plans. They found a mechanic lying half on the pilot's seat and half on the cabin floor, finishing his work on the digital engine instruments. Never patient with mechanics, the pilot merely stood and glared as the man did his work—for his part, the mechanic didn't care at all what pilots thought. He attached the last connector, wriggled his way free, and ran a test program to make sure it was working properly, without so much as a look at the aviators who would be sure to curse him all the louder if he failed to install the electronics properly. He'd not yet left the area when the co-pilot took his place and ran the same test program again. Leaving the aircraft to get out of the way, the mechanic saw the reason for the rush.

Five of them, standing there on the ramp, looking impatient and important as they stared at the white-painted executive jet, excited about something. The mechanic and everyone else on the crew knew them all by name, they appeared so often on TV. All of them nodded deference to the mullahs and speeded their efforts, as a result of which not everything got done. The cleanup crew was called off the aircraft, and limited their efforts to wiping a few surfaces down after getting all the seats reinstalled. The VIP passengers boarded at once, heading to the after portion of the cabin so that they could confer. The flight crew started up, and the Guards force and the trucks hardly had a chance to withdraw before the G-IV taxied off to the end of the runway.

IN DAMASCUS, THE second member of that small executive fleet touched down, to discover that it had orders to return to Tehran at once. The crew swore, but did as they were told, limiting their time on the ground to a scant forty minutes before lifting off again in their turn for the short hop into Iran.

IT WAS A busy time at PALM BOWL. Something was going on. You could tell that by what wasn't going on. Traffic on the encrypted channels used by senior Iraqi generals had peaked and zeroed, then peaked again, and zeroed again. At the moment it was back at zero. Back at KKMC in Saudi Arabia, the computers were grinding through solutions to the chip-controlled scrambling systems used on Iraqi tactical radios. It took time in every case. Encryption technology, once the province only of affluent countries, had, with the advent of

personal computers, become readily available to the humblest citizen in America and other technically advanced countries, and an unexpected spin-off of that fact was the current availability of highly advanced communications-security apparatus to the humblest nations. Now Malaysia had codes nearly as hard to break as Russia's—and so did Iraq, courtesy of Americans who worried about having the FBI read their fictitious e-mail adulteries. The encryption systems on tactical radios were necessarily somewhat simpler, and still breakable, but even that required a Cray computer that had been flown to the Saudi Kingdom years earlier. Another factor was that PALM BOWL was in Kuwait, and had indeed been fully financed by the local government, for which courtesy a return courtesy was required. They got to see the "take" from the NSA station. That was only fair, but the NSA and military-intelligence personnel hadn't been trained to consider what "fair" was. They had their orders, even so.

"They're talking about their families?" a USAF sergeant asked himself aloud. That was new. PALM BOWL had tapped into intimate information on this network before, and learned more than a few things about the personal habits of senior Iraqi generals, along with some crude jokes which alternately did and did not translate well into English, but this was a first.

"Evac," the Chief Master Sergeant next to him observed. "It's a bug-out. Lieutenant!" he called. "Something happening here."

The junior watch officer was working on something else. The radar at Kuwait International Airport was an unusually powerful one, installed since the war, and it operated in two modes, one for the aircraft controllers, and another for the Kuwaiti air force. It could see a good, long way. For the second time in as many days, there was a business jet heading toward Baghdad from Iran. The flight path was identical with the previous trip, and the transponder code was the same. The distance between the two capitals was a mere four hundred miles, just enough distance to make it worthwhile for a business jet to climb up to cruising altitude and so make efficient use of its fuel—and, by the way, touch the fringe of their radar coverage. There would be a circling E-3B AWACS around, too, but that reported directly to KKMC and not to PALM BOWL. It was a matter of professional pride for the uniformed spooks at the ground station to beat the airborne people at their own game, all the more so since most of them were themselves USAF personnel. The lieutenant made a mental note of that information, then walked across the room to where the sergeants were.

"What is it, Chief?" she asked.

The chief master sergeant scrolled his computer screen, showing the translated content of several "cracked" conversations, tapping his

finger on the screen to call attention to the times. “We have some folks getting the hell outa Dodge City, ma’am.” A moment later, a Kuwaiti major slid alongside. Ismael Sabah was distantly related to the royal family, Dartmouth-educated, and rather liked by the American personnel. During the war he’d stayed behind and worked with a resistance group—one of the smart ones. He’d laid low, gathered information on the movement and disposition of Iraqi military units, and gotten it out, mainly using cellular phones which were able to reach into a Saudi civilian network just across the border, and which the Iraqis had been unable to track. Along the way, he’d lost three close family members to the Iraqi terror. He’d learned all manner of lessons from the experience, the least of which was a hatred for the country to his north. A quiet, insightful man in his middle thirties now, he seemed to get smarter every day. Sabah leaned in to scan the translations on the computer screen.

“How do you say, the rats are leaving the ship?”

“You think so, too, sir?” the chief asked, before his lieutenant could.

“To *Iran?*” the American officer asked. “I know it looks that way, but it doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Major Sabah grimaced. “Sending their air force to Iran didn’t make sense either, but the Iranians kept the fighter planes and let the pilots go home. You need to learn more of the local culture, Lieutenant.”

I’ve learned that nothing here makes much sense, she couldn’t say.

“What else do we have?” Sabah asked the sergeant.

“They talk and go quiet and then they talk some more and go quiet. There’s traffic under way now, but KKMC is still trying to crack it.”

“Radar surveillance reports an inbound from Mchrabad to Baghdad, coded as a business jet.”

“Oh? Same one as before?” Sabah asked the American lieutenant.

“Yes, Major.”

“What else? Anything?” The chief master sergeant handled the answer.

“Major, that’s probably what the computers are cooking on right now. Maybe in thirty minutes.”

Sabah lit a cigarette. PALM BOWL was technically a Kuwaiti-owned facility, and smoking was permitted, to the relief of some and the outrage of others. His relatively junior rank did not prevent him from being a fairly senior member of his country’s intelligence service, all the more so that he was modest and businesslike in manner, a useful contrast with his war record, on which he’d lectured in Britain and America.

“Opinions?” he asked, already having formed his own.

“You said it, sir. They’re bugging out,” the chief master sergeant replied.

Major Sabah completed the thought. “In hours or days, Iraq will not have a government, and Iran is assisting in the transition to anarchy.”

“Not good,” the chief breathed.

“The word ‘catastrophe’ comes to mind,” Sabah observed mildly. He shook his head and smiled in a grim sort of way, earning additional admiration from the American spooks.

THE GULFSTREAM LANDED in calm air after the sixty-five-minute flight in from Tehran, timed by Badrayn’s watch. As punctual as Swissair, he noted. Well, that was to be expected. As soon as it stopped, the door dropped open and the five passengers deplaned, to be met with elaborately false courtesy, which they returned in kind. A small convoy of Mercedes sedans spirited them off at once to regal accommodations awaiting them in the city center, where they would, of course, be murdered if things went poorly. Scarcely had their cars pulled off when two generals, their wives, their children, and one bodyguard each emerged from the VIP terminal and walked to the aircraft. They quickly boarded the G-IV. The co-pilot lifted the door back into place, and the engines started up, all in less than ten additional minutes by Badrayn’s Seiko. Just that fast, it taxied off to make the return flight to Mehrabad International. It was something too obvious for the tower personnel to miss. That was the problem with security, Badrayn knew. You really couldn’t keep some things secret, at least not something like this. Better to use a commercial flight, and treat the departing generals as normal passengers on a normal trip, but there were no regular flights between the two countries, and the generals would not have submitted themselves to such plebeian treatment in any case. And so the tower people would know that a special flight had come in and out under unusual circumstances, and so would the terminal employees who’d been required to fawn on the generals and their retinues. For one such flight, that might not be important. But it would matter for the next.

Perhaps that was not overly important in the Great Scheme of Things. There was now no stopping the events he had helped to set in motion, but it offended Ali Badrayn in a professional sense. Better to keep everything he did secret. He shrugged as he walked back to the VIP terminal. No, it didn’t matter, and through his actions he’d won the gratitude of a very powerful man in charge of a very powerful country, and for doing no more than talking, telling people what they already knew, and helping them to make a decision which could not have been avoided, whatever their efforts to the contrary. How curious life was.

“SAME ONE. JEEZ, he wasn’t on the ground very long.” Through a little effort, the radio traffic for that particular aircraft was isolated and playing in the earphones of an Army spec-6 language expert. Though the language of international aviation was English, this aircraft was speaking in Farsi. Probably thought a security measure, it merely highlighted that aircraft, tracked by radar and radio-direction finders. The voice traffic was wholly ordinary except for that, and for the fact that the aircraft hadn’t even been on the ground long enough to refuel. That meant the whole thing was preplanned, which was hardly a surprise under the circumstances, but enlightening even so. Aloft, over the far northwest end of the Persian Gulf, an AWACS was now tracking the aircraft as well. Interest, cued by PALM BOWL, had perked up enough to move the E-3B off its normal patrol station, now escorted by four Saudi F-15 Eagle fighters. Iranian and Iraqi electronic-intelligence troops would take note of this and know that someone was interested in what was going on—and wonder why, because *they* didn’t know. The game was ever a fascinating one, neither side knowing all it wished, and assuming the other side—at the moment there were actually *three* sides in the game—knew too much, when in fact none of the three knew much of anything.

ABOARD THE G-IV, the language was Arabic. The two generals chatted quietly and nervously in the rear, their conversation masked by engine sounds. Their wives just sat, more nervous still, while the various children read books or napped. It was hardest on the bodyguards, who knew that if anything went wrong in Iran they could do nothing but die uselessly. One of these sat in the middle of the cabin and found that his seat was wet, with what he didn’t know, but it was sticky and ... red? Tomato juice or something, probably. Annoyed, he went to the lavatory and washed his hands off, taking a towel back to wipe the seat off. He returned the towel to the lav before he reseated himself, then looked down at the mountains and wondered if he’d live to see another sunrise, not knowing that he’d just limited the number to twenty.

“HERE WE GO,” the chief master sergeant said. “That was the vice-chief of their air force, and the commanding general of Second Iraqi Army Corps—*plus* families,” he added. The decryption had required

just over two hours from the time the scrambled signal had been copied down.

"Expendables?" the USAF lieutenant asked. She was learning, the other spooks thought.

"Relatively so," Major Sabah agreed with a nod. "We need to look for another aircraft lifting off from Mehrabad soon after this one lands."

"Where to, sir?"

"Ah. Lieutenant, that is the question, is it not?"

"Sudan," the chief thought. He'd been in-country for two years, and it was his second tour at PALM BOWL.

"I would not wager against you on that, Sergeant," Sabah observed with a wink. "We should confirm that through the time cycle of the flights out of Baghdad." And he really couldn't make a judgment call on the entire exercise until then, though he already had flagged his own superiors that something unusual was afoot. Soon it would be time for the Americans to do the same.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, a preliminary report was on its way from KKMC to Fort Meade, Maryland, where the vagaries of time landed it in the watch center just after midnight. From the National Security Agency it was cross-decked by fiber-optic cable to Langley, Virginia, into Mercury, the CIA's communications-watch facility, then upstairs to the CIA's Operations Center, room 7-F-27 in the old headquarters building. At every stop, the information was handed over raw, sometimes with the local assessment, but more often without, or if it were, placed at the bottom so that the national intelligence officers in charge of the various watches could make their own assessments, and duplicate the work of others. Mostly this made sense, but in fast-breaking situations it very often did not. The problem was that one couldn't tell the difference in a crisis.

The national intelligence officer in charge of the watch at CIA was Ben Goodley, a fast-riser in the Directorate of Intelligence, recently awarded his NIO card, along with the worst duty schedule because of his lack of seniority. As usual, he showed his good sense by turning to his area-specialist and handing over the printout just as fast as he could read the pages and tear the sheets away from the staple.

"Meltdown," the area-specialist said by the end of page three. Which was not unexpected, but neither was it pleasant.

"Doubts?"

"My boy"—the area specialist had twenty years on his boss—"they ain't going to Tehran to shop."

"SNIE?" Goodley asked, meaning a Special National Intelligence

Estimate, an important official document meant for unusual situations.

"I think so. The Iraqi government is coming down." It wasn't all that much of a surprise.

"Three days?"

"If that much."

Goodley stood. "Okay, let's get it drafted."

17

THE REVIVAL

IT IS TO BE EXPECTED THAT important things never happen at convenient times. Whether the birth of a baby or a national emergency, all such events seem to find the appropriate people asleep or otherwise indisposed. In this case, there was nothing to be done. Ben Goodley determined that CIA had no assets in place to confirm the signal-intelligence take, and interested though his country was in the region, there was no action that could be taken. The public news organizations hadn't twigged to this development, and as was often the case, CIA would play dumb until they did. In doing so, the Central Intelligence Agency would give greater substance to the public belief that the news organizations were as efficient as the government in finding things out. It wasn't always the case, but was more frequently so than Goodley would have preferred.

This SNIE would be a short one. The substance of it didn't require a great deal of pontificating, and the fact of it didn't take long to present. Goodley and his area specialist took half an hour to draft it. A computer printer generated the hard copy for in-house use, and a modem transmitted it via secure lines to interested government agencies. With that done, the men returned to the Operations Center.

GOLOVKO WAS DOING his best to sleep. Aeroflot had just purchased ten new Boeing 777 jetliners for use in its international service to New York, Chicago, and Washington. They were far more comfortable, and reliable, than the Soviet airliners in which he'd traveled for so many years, but he was less than enthralled with the idea of flying so far on two engines, American-made or not, rather than the usual four. The seats, at least, were comfortable here in first class, and the vodka he'd had soon after takeoff was a premium Russian label. The combination had given him five and a half hours of sleep until the usual disorientation of travel clicked in, waking him up over Greenland, while his bodyguard next to him managed to remain in whatever dreamland his profession allowed. Somewhere aft, the stewardesses

were probably sleeping as well as they could in their folding seats.

In previous times, Sergey Nikolayevich knew, it wouldn't have been like this. He would have flown on a special charter with full communications gear, and if something had taken place in the world, he'd be informed just as quickly as the transmission towers outside of Moscow could dot-dash the information out. All the more frustrating was the fact that something was happening. Something had to be. It was always this way, he thought in the noisy darkness. You traveled for an important meeting because you expected something to take place, and then it happened while you were on the move and, if not totally out of touch, then at least denied the chance to confer with your senior aides. Iraq *and* China. Thankfully, there was a wide separation between the two hot spots. Then Golovko reminded himself that there was a wider separation still between Washington and Moscow, one which lasted about as long as an overnight flight on a twin-engine aircraft. With that pleasant realization, he turned slightly and told himself that he'd need all the sleep he could get.

THE HARD PART wasn't getting them out of Iraq. The hard part would be getting them from Iran to Sudan. It had been a long while since flights from Iran had been allowed to overfly the Saudi Kingdom, and the only exceptions were the pilgrimage flights into Mecca during the annual hajj. Instead, the business jet had to skirt around the Arabian Peninsula, then up the Red Sea before turning west to Khartoum, tripling both time and distance on the delivery leg of the process, and the next short flight couldn't begin until the first long one had arrived in Africa, *and* the VIPs had arrived at their hastily prepared quarters, *and* found them satisfactory, *and* made a phone call with the inevitable code word confirming that all was well. It would have been so much easier had it been possible to load them all onto a single airliner for a single Baghdad-Tehran-Khartoum cycle, but that wasn't possible. Neither was it possible to take the far shorter air routing directly from Baghdad to Khartoum through the simple expedient of overflying Jordan. But that meant passing close to Israel, not a prospect to make the Iraqi generals happy. And then there was the secrecy issue, too, to make things inconvenient.

A lesser man than Daryaei would have found it enraging. Instead he stood alone at the window of a closed portion of the main terminal, watching the G-IV stop alongside another, watching the doors open, watching the people scurry down one staircase and immediately onto another, while baggage handlers transferred what few belongings they'd brought along—doubtless jewels and other items of high value and portability, the holy man thought without a smile. It took only a

few minutes, and then the waiting aircraft started moving.

It was foolish, really, to have come down just to see something so pedestrian and tedious as this, but it represented fully two decades of effort, and man of God though he was, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei was still human enough to want to see the fruits of his labor. A lifetime had gone into this, and even so it was a task not even half done. And his time was running out ...

As it was for every man, Daryaei reminded himself, one second, one minute, one hour, one day at a time, the same for all, but somehow it seemed to run faster when one was over seventy years of age. He looked down at his hands, the lines and scars of a lifetime there, some natural, some not. Two of his fingers had been broken while a guest of Savak, the Shah's Israeli-trained security service. He remembered the pain of it. He remembered even better the reckoning with the two men who'd interrogated him. Daryaei hadn't spoken a word. He'd just looked at them, stood there like a statue, as they were taken off to the firing squad. Not very much satisfaction in it, really. They'd been functionaries, doing a job assigned to them by others, without really caring who he was or why they were supposed to hate him. Another mullah had sat with each in turn to pray with them, because to deny anyone a chance to reconcile himself with Allah was a crime—and what did it hurt? They died just as quickly that way as any other. One small step in a lifetime's journey, though theirs had ultimately been far shorter than his.

All the years spent for his single-minded purpose. Khomeini had taken his exile in France, but not Daryaei. He'd remained in the background, coordinating and directing for his leader. Picked up that one time, he'd been let go because he hadn't talked, nor had anyone close to him. That had been the Shah's mistake, one of many. The man had ultimately succumbed to indecision. Too liberal in his policies to make the Islamic clergy happy, too reactionary to please his Western sponsors, trying vainly to find a middle ground in a part of the world where a man had only two choices. Only one, really, Daryaei corrected himself as the Gulfstream jet lifted off. Iraq had tried the other path, away from the Word of God, and what had it profited them? Hussein had started his war with Iran, thinking the latter country weak and leaderless, and achieved nothing. Then he had struck out to the south and accomplished even less, all in the sole quest for temporal power.

It was different for Daryaei. He'd never lost sight of his goal, as Khomeini had not, and though the latter was dead, his task lived on. His objective lay behind him as he faced north, too far to see, but there even so, in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina ... and Jerusalem. He'd been to the first two, but not the third. As a boy,

young and pious, he'd wanted to see the Rock of Abraham, but something, he didn't remember what, had prevented his merchant father from taking him there. Perhaps in time. He'd seen the city of the Prophet's birth, however, and of course made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, more than once despite the political and religious differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He wished to do so again, to pray before the veiled Kaaba. But there was more to it than that, even.

Titular chief of state, he wanted more. Not so much for himself. No, he had a larger task at the bottom of his humble life. Islam stretched from the extreme west of Africa to the extreme east of Asia, not counting the small pockets of the Faith's adherents in the Western Hemisphere, but the religion had not had a single leader and a single purpose for over a thousand years. It caused Daryaei pain that this should be so. There was but one God and one Word, and it must have saddened Allah that His Word was so tragically misunderstood. That was the only possible reason for the failure of all men to grasp the True Faith, and if he could change that, then he could change the world and bring all of mankind to God. But to do that—

The world was the world, an imperfect instrument with imperfect rules for imperfect men, but Allah had made it so, and that was that. Worse, there were those who would oppose everything he did, Believers and un-Believers both, another cause more for sadness than for anger. Daryaei didn't hate the Saudis and the others on the far side of the Persian Gulf. They were not evil men. They were Believers, and despite their differences with him and his country, they'd never be denied access to Mecca. But their way wasn't *the* Way, and that couldn't be helped. They'd grown fat and rich and corrupt, and that had to be changed. Daryaei had to control Mecca in order to reform Islam. To do that meant acquiring worldly power. It meant making enemies. But that wasn't new, and he'd just won his first major battle.

If only it didn't take so long. Daryaei often spoke of patience, but his was the work of a lifetime, and he was seventy-two, and he didn't want to die as his mentor had, with the work not even half done. When there came his moment to face Allah, he wanted to speak of accomplishment, of successfully fulfilling the noblest task any man could have, the reunification of the True Faith. And Daryaei was willing to do much for that goal. He himself didn't even know how much it was that he was willing to undertake, because not all the questions had yet been asked. And because his goal was so pure and bright, and his remaining time so short, he'd never asked himself how deeply he would cross into darkness in order to get there.

Well. He turned away from the window and walked off with his driver to the car. The process had begun.

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PEOPLE IN THE intelligence community are not paid to believe in coincidences, and these particular people had maps and watches to predict them. The unrefueled range of the G-IV was well known, and the distances to be covered were easily computed. The circling AWACS aircraft established a track heading south from Tehran. Transponder settings told them the type of aircraft, along with speed, heading, and altitude, the last being 45,000 feet for maximum fuel efficiency. Timing was checked between one such flight and another. The course told them even more.

"Sudan," Major Sabah confirmed. It could have gone elsewhere. He almost thought that Brunei was a possible option, but, no, that would be too far from Switzerland, and Switzerland was where the money was—had to be.

With that judgment, a satellite signal was sent to America, again to CIA, and this one occasioned waking a senior DO official up merely to say yes to a brief question. The answer was relayed back to PALM BOWL out of courtesy to the Kuwaitis. Then it was just a matter of waiting.

THE CIA HAD a small presence in Khartoum, really just a station chief and a couple of field officers and a secretary whom they shared with the NSA-run signals section. The station chief was a good one, however, who had recruited a number of local citizens to act as agents. It helped that the Sudanese government had little to hide, most of the time, too poor to be of interest as much of anything. In previous times the government had used its geographic location as a ploy to play East against West, garnering cash and weapons and favor out of the bargain, but the USSR had fallen and with it the Great Power Game which had sustained the Third World for two generations. Now the Sudanese had to depend on their own resources, which were slim, and the few crumbs tossed their way by whichever country had transitory need for what little they had. The country's leaders were Islamic, and in proclaiming it as loudly as they could lie —they were no more devout than their Western counterparts they managed to get aid from Libya and Iran and others, in return for which they were expected to make life hard on the pagan animists in the southern part of the country, plus risk a rising Islamic political tide in their own capital, people who knew the real level of devotion of the country's leaders, and wanted to replace them with people who truly believed. On the whole the political leaders of that impoverished

nation thought it was easier to be religious and rich than religious and poor.

What that meant to the American embassy personnel was great unpredictability. Sometimes Khartoum was safe, when the fundamentalist troublemakers were under control. Sometimes it was not, because they were not. At the moment, the former seemed to be the case, and all the American foreign service officers had to worry about were the environmental conditions, which were vile enough to place this post in the bottom ten of global embassy assignments even without a terrorist threat. For the station chief it meant early advancement, though his wife and two children remained home in Virginia, because most of the official American residents didn't feel safe enough to set up their families here. Almost as bad, AIDS was becoming a threat sufficient to deny much in the way of nightlife to them, not to mention the question of getting safe blood in the event of an injury. The embassy had an Army doctor to handle those issues. He worried a lot.

The station chief shook that off. He'd jumped a whole pay grade on taking this assignment. He'd performed well, with one especially well-placed agent in the Sudanese foreign ministry to inform America about everything that country did. That his country didn't do all that much was not important to the desk-sitters at Langley. Better to know everything about nothing than nothing about everything.

He'd handle this one himself. Checking time and distance against his own maps, the station chief had an early lunch and drove off to the airport, only a few miles out of town. Security there was African-casual, and he found a shady spot outside. It was easier to cover the private terminal than the public one, especially with a 500mm lens on his camera. He even had time to make sure he had the aperture right. A buzz on his cellular phone from the NSA people at the embassy confirmed that the inbound aircraft was on final, a fact further verified by the arrival of some official-looking cars. He'd already memorized two photographs faxed to him from Langley. Two senior Iraqi generals, eh? he thought. Well, with the death of their boss, it wasn't all that surprising. The problem with the dictatorship business was that there wasn't much of a retirement plan for any of those near the top of it.

The white business jet floated in with the customary puffs of rubber smoke. He locked the camera on it and shot a few frames of high-speed black-and-white to make sure the motor drive worked. The only worry now was whether the bird would stop in such a way that he could cover the exit with the camera—the bastards could always face the wrong way and spoil the whole thing for him. In that he had little choice. The Gulfstream stopped. The door dropped open, and the

station chief started shooting frames. There was a middle-level official there to do the semi-official greeting. You could tell who was important by who got the hugs and kisses—and from the sweep-around look they gave the area. *Click. Click.* He recognized one face for sure, and the other was a probable hit. The transfer took only a minute or two. The official cars pulled off, and the station chief didn't much care where they were heading at the moment. His agent in the foreign ministry would fill that one in. He shot the remaining eight frames of the aircraft, already being refueled, and decided to wait to see what it would do. Thirty minutes later, it lifted off yet again, and he headed back to the embassy. While one of his junior people handled the developing, he made a call to Langley.

"CONFIRMATION," GOODLEY SAID, approaching the end of his watch. "Two Iraqi generals touched down at Khartoum fifty minutes ago. It's a bug-out."

"Makes the SNIE look pretty good, Ben," the area specialist observed, with a raised eyebrow. "I hope they pay attention to the time stamp on it."

The national intelligence officer managed a smile. "Yeah, well, the next one has to say what it means." The regular analysts, just starting to arrive for a day's work, would fiddle around with that.

"Nothing good." But you didn't need to be a spook to figure that one out.

"Photos coming in," a communications officer called.

THE FIRST CALL had to go to Tehran. Daryaei had told his ambassador to make things as clear as possible. Iran would assume responsibility for all expenses. The best possible accommodations were to be provided, with every level of comfort that the country could arrange. The overall operation would not cost a great amount of money, but the savages in that country were impressed by small sums, and ten million American dollars—a pittance—had already been transferred electronically to ensure that everything went well. A call from the Iranian ambassador confirmed that the first pickup had gone properly and that the aircraft was on its way back.

Good. Now perhaps the Iraqis would begin to trust him. It would have been personally satisfying to have these swine eliminated, and that would not have been difficult to arrange under the circumstances, but he'd given his word, and besides, this wasn't about personal satisfaction. Even as he set the phone down, his air minister was

calling in additional aircraft to expedite the transfer. This was better done quickly.

BADRAYN WAS TRYING to make the same point. The word was going to get out, probably in one day, certainly no more than two. They were leaving people behind who were too senior to survive the coming upheaval, and too junior to merit the solicitude the Iranians were willing to show the generals. Those officers, colonels and brigadiers, would not be overly happy at the prospect of becoming the sacrificial goats necessary to assuage the awakening rage of the mob. This fact was becoming clear, but instead of making them more eager to leave, it emerged as a nonspecific fear that made all the other fears loom larger in the unknown darkness ahead. They stood on the deck of a burning ship off an unfriendly shore, and they didn't know how to swim all that well. But the ship was still afire. He had to make them grasp that.

IT WAS ROUTINE enough by now that Ryan was becoming used to it, at home with it, even comfortable with the discreet knock on the door, more startling in its way than the clock-radio which had begun his days for twenty years. Instead his eyes opened at the muted knock, and he rose, put on his robe, walked the twenty feet from the bed to the door, and got his paper, along with a few sheets of his daily schedule. Next, he headed to the bathroom, and then to the sitting room adjoining the presidential bedroom, while his wife, a few minutes behind him, started her wake-up routine.

Jack missed the normality of merely reading the paper. Though it wasn't nearly as good—usually—as the intelligence documents waiting on the table for him, the *Washington Post* also covered things whose interest was not strictly governmental, and so was fuel for his normal desire to keep abreast of things. But the first order of business was a SNIE, an urgent official document stapled inside a manila folder. Ryan rubbed his eyes before reading it.

Damn. Well, it could have been worse, the President told himself. At least this time they hadn't awakened him to let him know about something he couldn't change. He checked the schedule. Okay, Scott Adler would be in to discuss that one, along with that Vasco guy. Good. Vasco seemed to know his stuff. Who else today? He skimmed down the page. Sergey Golovko? Was that today? Good luck for a change. Brief press conference to announce Tony Bretano's appointment as SecDef, with a list of possible questions to worry

about, and instructions from Arnie—ignore the Kealty question as much as possible. Let Kealty and his allegations die from apathy—*oh, yeah,* that's *a good one-liner!* Jack coughed as he poured some coffee—getting himself the right to do that alone had entailed direct orders; he hoped the Navy mess stewards didn't take it as a personal insult, but Ryan was used to doing *some* things for himself. Under the current arrangement, the stewards set up breakfast in the room and let the Ryans serve themselves, while others hovered in the corridor outside.

"Morning, Jack." Cathy's head appeared in his view. He kissed her lips and smiled.

"Morning, honey."

"Is the world still out there?" she asked, getting her own coffee. That told the President that the First Lady wasn't operating today. She never touched coffee on a surgery day, saying that she couldn't risk the slight tremor that caffeine might impart to her hands when she was carving up somebody's eyeball. The image always made him shudder, even though she mainly operated with lasers now.

"Looks like the Iraqi government is falling."

A female snort. "Didn't that happen last week?"

"That was act one. This is act three." *Or maybe act four.* He wondered what act five would be.

"Important?" Jack also heard the toast go down.

"Could be. What's your day like?"

"Clinic and follow-ups, budget meeting with Bernie."

"Hmph." Jack next started looking at the *Early Bird,* a collection of government-edited clippings from the major papers. Cathy appeared again in his peripheral vision, as she looked at his office schedule.

"Golovko ... ? Didn't I meet him in Moscow—he's the one who joked about having a gun on you!"

"Wasn't a joke," Ryan told his wife. "It really happened."

"Come on!"

"He said later that the gun wasn't loaded." Jack wondered if that was true. Probably, he thought.

"But he was telling the truth?" she asked incredulously.

The President looked up and smiled. Amazing, he thought, that it seemed funny now. "He was very pissed with me at the time. That's when I helped with the defection of the KGB chairman."

She lifted her morning paper. "Jack, I never know when you're kidding or not."

Jack thought about that. The First Lady was, technically, a private citizen. Certainly in Cathy's case, since she was not a political wife but a working physician who had about as much interest in politics as she did in group sex. She was also, therefore, *not* technically the holder of a security clearance, but it was assumed that the President would

confide in his spouse just as any normal person did. Besides, it made sense. Her judgment was every bit as good as his, and unschooled as she might be in international relations, every day she made decisions that directly affected the lives of real people in the most immediate way. If she goofed, they went blind.

"Cathy, I think it's about time to tell you some of the things I've been stuck with over the years, but for now, yeah, Golovko had a pistol to my head once, on one of the runways at Moscow airport, because I helped two very senior Russians skip the country. One of them was his boss at KGB."

That made her look up, and wonder again about the nightmares that had plagued her husband for months, a few years ago. "So where is he now?"

"In the D.C. area, I forget exactly where, Virginia horse country, I think." Jack vaguely remembered hearing that the daughter, Katryn Gerasimov, was engaged to some old-money fox-killer out around Winchester, having changed from one form of nobility to another. Well, the stipend CIA had paid to the family was enough to maintain a very comfortable lifestyle.

Cathy was used to her husband's jokes. Like most men, he would tell amusing little stories whose humor was in their exaggeration—and besides, his ancestry was Irish—but now she marked the fact that his revelation was as casual as a report of the baseball scores. He didn't see her stare at the back of his head. *Yes*, she decided, as the kids entered the room, *I'd like to hear the stories.*

"Daddy!" Katie said, seeing Jack first. "Mommy!" With that the morning routine stopped, or rather changed over to something more immediately important than world news and events. Katie was already in her school clothes, like most small children, able to awaken in a good mood.

"Hi," Sally said, coming next, clearly vexed.

"What's the matter?" Cathy asked her elder daughter.

"All those people out there! You can't even walk around here without people seeing you everywhere!" she grumped, getting a glass of juice off the tray. And she didn't feel like Frosted Flakes this morning. She'd rather have Just Right. But that box was all the way down on the ground floor in the capacious White House kitchen. "It's like living in a hotel, but not as private."

"What exam is it today?" Cathy asked, reading the signals for what they were.

"Math," Sally admitted.

"Did you study?"

"Yes, *Mom.*"

Jack ignored that problem, and instead fixed cereal for Katie, who

liked Frosted Flakes. Little Jack arrived next and turned on the TV, selecting the Cartoon Channel for his morning ration of Road Runner and Coyote, which Katie also approved.

Outside, the day was starting for everyone else. Ryan's personal NIO was putting the finishing touches on his dreaded morning intelligence brief. This President was far too hard to please. The chief usher was in early to supervise some maintenance on the State Floor. In the President's bedroom, the valet was setting out clothes for POTUS and FLOTUS. Cars were waiting to take the children off to school. Maryland State Police officers were already checking out the route to Annapolis. The Marines were warming up their helicopter for the trip to Baltimore—*that* problem had still not been worked out. The entire machine was already in motion.

GUS LORENZ WAS in his office early because of a telephone call from Africa returning his call from Atlanta. Where, he demanded, were his monkeys? His purchasing agent explained from eight time zones away that, because CDC had fumbled getting the money cleared, somebody else had bought up the shipment, and that a new batch had to be obtained from out in the bush. A week, perhaps, he told the American doctor.

Lorenz grumbled. He'd hoped to start his new study this week. He made a note on his desk pad, wondering who the hell would have bought so many African greens just like that. Was Rousseau starting something new in Paris? He'd call the guy a little later, after his morning staff conference. The good news, he saw, was that—oh, that was too bad. The second patient, killed in a plane crash, the telex from WHO said. But there were no new cases reported, and it had been long enough from Number Two that they could say now, rather than hope, that this micro-outbreak was over—probably, maybe, hopefully, Lorenz added with his thoughts. That was good news. It looked like the Ebola Zaire Mayinga strain under the electron microscope, and that was the worst of the sub-types of the virus. It could still be that the host was out there, waiting to infect someone else, but the Ebola host was the most bafflingly elusive quarry since malaria—"bad air," in Italian, which was what people had thought caused it. Maybe, he thought, the host was some rodent that had gotten run over by a truck. He shrugged. It was possible, after all.

With the reduction in her morphine drip, Patient Two was semiconscious at the Hasanabad facility. She was aware enough to

know, and to feel, the pain, but not to understand what was really happening. The pain would have taken over in any case, all the worse because Jean Baptiste knew what every twinge meant. The abdominal pain was the worst, as the disease was destroying her gastrointestinal tract throughout its ten-meter length, quite literally *eating* the delicate tissues designed to convert food into nutrients, and dumping infected blood down toward her rectum.

It felt as though her entire body were being twisted and crushed and burned at the same time. She needed to move, to do *something* to make things different, just to make the pain come briefly from a new direction, and so briefly relieve that which tormented her, but when she tried to move she found that every limb was restrained with Velcro-coated straps. The insult of that was somehow worse than the pain, but when she tried to object it only caused violent nausea that started her gagging. At that indication the blue-coated spaceman rotated the bed—what sort of bed was this? she wondered—which allowed her to vomit into a bucket, and what she saw there was black, dead blood. It distracted her from the pain for a second, but all the distraction told her was that she could not survive, that the disease had gone too far, that her body was dying, and then Sister Jean Baptiste started praying for death, because this could have only one end, and the pain was such that the end needed to come soon, lest she lose her faith in the process. The prospect sprang out into her diminished consciousness like a jack-in-the-box. But this childhood toy had horns and hooves. She needed a priest at hand. She needed where was Maria Magdalena? Was she doomed to die alone? The dying nurse looked at the space suits, hoping to find familiar eyes behind the plastic shields, but though the eyes she saw were sympathetic, they were not familiar. Nor was their language, as two of them came close.

The medic was very careful drawing blood. First he checked to see that the arm was fully restrained, unable to move more than a centimeter. Then he had a comrade hold the arm in his two strong hands, careful himself to keep those hands well away from the needle. With a nod of agreement, the first selected the proper vein and stabbed the needle in. He was lucky this time. The needle went right in on the first try. To the back of the needle-holder he attached a 5cc vacuum tube, which took in blood that was darker than the usual purple. When it was full, he withdrew it, and set it carefully in a plastic box, to be followed by three more. He withdrew the needle next, and placed gauze on the puncture, which wouldn't stop bleeding. The medic released the arm, noting that their brief grasp had discolored the skin badly. A cover was placed on the box, and the first medic walked it out of the room, while the second went to the corner to spray his gloves and arms with dilute iodine. They'd been

fully briefed on how dangerous this duty was, but in the way of normal men they hadn't really believed it, despite all the repetitions and the films and the slides. Both men believed it now, every cursed word, and to a man the army medics wished and prayed for Death to come and spirit this woman off to whatever destination Allah had planned for her. Watching her body disintegrate was bad enough. The thought of following her in this horrid journey was enough to quail the stoutest heart. It was like nothing they'd ever seen. This woman was *melting* from the inside out. As the medic finished cleaning the outside of his suit, he turned, startled by her cry of pain, as if from an infant tortured by the hands of the devil himself. Eyes open, mouth wide, a rasping, liquid cry escaped into the air and penetrated the plastic of his suit.

The blood samples were handled quickly, but under the greatest care, in the Hot Lab up the corridor. Moudi and the project director were in their offices. It wasn't strictly necessary for them to be in the lab for this, and it was easier for them to view the tests without the hindrance of the protective garb.

"So fast, so remarkably fast." The director shook his head in awe.

Moudi nodded. "Yes, it overwhelms the immune system like a tidal wave." The display on the computer screen came off an electron microscope, which showed the field full of the shepherd-staff-configured viruses. A few antibodies were visible on the screen, but they might as well have been individual sheep in a pride of lions for all the good they might do. The blood cells were being attacked and destroyed. Had they been able to take tissue samples of the major organs, they could have found that the spleen was turning into something as hard as a rubber ball, full of little crystals which were like transport capsules for the Ebola virus particles. It would, in fact, have been interesting, and maybe even scientifically useful, to do laparoscopic examination of the abdomen, to see exactly what the disease did to a human patient over measured time intervals, but there was the danger of accelerating the patient's death, which they didn't want to risk.

Samples of her vomitus showed tissue fragments from her upper GI, and those were interesting because they were not merely torn loose, but dead. Large sections of the patient's still-living body had already died, come loose from the living remainder, and been ejected as the corporate organism fought vainly to survive. The infected blood would be centrifuged and deep-frozen for later use. Every drop that came out was useful, and because of that, more blood was dripped into her via rubber IV tubes. A routine heart-enzyme test showed that her heart, unlike that of the Index Patient, was still normal and healthy.

"Strange how the disease varies in its mode of attack," the director

observed, reading the printout.

Moudi just looked away, imagining that he could hear her cries of anguish through the multiple concrete walls of the building. It would have been an act of supreme mercy to walk into the room and push in 20ccs of potassium, or just to turn the morphine drip all the way open and so kill her with respiratory arrest.

"Do you suppose the African boy had a preexisting cardiovascular problem?" his boss asked.

"Perhaps. It wasn't diagnosed if he did."

"Liver function is failing rapidly, as expected." The director scanned the blood-chemistry data slowly. All the numbers were well out of normal ranges, except the heart indicators, and those but barely. "It's a textbook case, Moudi."

"Indeed it is."

"This strain of the virus is even more robust than I'd imagined." He looked up. "You've done well."

Oh, yes.

". . . ANTHONY BRETANO has two doctorates from MIT, Mathematics and Optical Physics. He has an impressive personal record in industry and engineering, and I expect him to be a uniquely effective Secretary of Defense," Ryan said, concluding his statement. "Questions?"

"Sir, Vice President Kealty—"

"*Former* Vice President," Ryan interrupted. "He resigned. Let's get that right."

"But he says he didn't," the *Chicago Tribune* pointed out.

"If he said he had a talk with Elvis, would you believe that?" Ryan asked, hoping that he'd delivered the prepared line properly. He scanned faces for the reaction. Again, all forty-eight seats were filled, with twenty more reporters standing. Jack's scornful remark made them all blink, and a few even allowed themselves a smile. "Go ahead, ask your question."

"*Mister* Kealty has requested a judicial commission to ascertain the facts of the matter. How do you respond to that?"

"The question is being investigated by the FBI, which is the government's principal investigative agency. Whatever the facts are, they have to be established before anyone can make a judgment. But I think we all know what is going to happen. Ed Kealty resigned, and you all know why. Out of respect for the constitutional process, I have directed the FBI to look into the matter, but my own legal advice is absolutely clear. Mr. Kealty can talk all he wants. I have a job to do here. Next question?" Jack asked confidently.

"Mr. President"—Ryan nodded fractionally at hearing the *Miami*

Herald say that—"In your speech the other night, you said that you're not a politician, but you are in a political job. The American people want to know your views on a lot of issues."

"That makes good sense. Like what?" Jack asked.

"Abortion, for one," the *Herald* reporter, a very liberated woman, asked. "What exactly is your position?"

"I don't like it," Ryan answered, speaking the truth before thinking about it. "I'm Catholic, as you probably know, and on that moral issue I think my Church is correct. However, *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land until such time as the Supreme Court might reconsider the ruling, and the President isn't allowed to ignore the rulings of the federal courts. That puts me in a somewhat uncomfortable position, but as President I have to execute my office in accordance with the law. I swore an oath to do that." *Not bad, Jack*, Ryan thought.

"So you do not support the right of a woman to choose?" the *Herald* asked, smelling the blood.

"Choose what?" Ryan asked, still comfortable. "You know, somebody once tried to kill my wife while she was pregnant with our son, and soon thereafter I watched my oldest child lying near death in a hospital. I think life is a very precious commodity. I've learned that lesson the hard way. I'd hope that people would think about that before deciding to have an abortion."

"That doesn't answer the question, sir."

"I can't stop people from doing it. Like it or not, it's the law. The President may not break the law." Wasn't this obvious?

"But in your appointments for the Supreme Court, will you use abortion as a litmus-test issue? Would you like to have *Roe v. Wade* overturned?" Ryan scarcely noticed the cameras changing focus, and the reporters concentrating on their scribbled notes.

"I don't like *Roe v. Wade*, as I said. I think it was a mistake. I'll tell you why. The Supreme Court interjected itself into what should have been a legislative matter. The Constitution doesn't address this issue, and on issues where the Constitution is mute, we have state and federal legislatures to write our laws." This civics lesson was going well. "Now, for the nominations I have to make to the Supreme Court, I will look for the best judges I can find. That's something we will be addressing shortly. The Constitution is sort of the Bible for the United States of America, and the justices of the Supreme Court are the—theologians, I guess, who decide what it means. They aren't supposed to write a new one. They're supposed to figure out what it means. When a change in the Constitution is needed, we have a mechanism to change it, which we've used more than twenty times."

"So, you will select only strict-constructionists who are likely to overturn *Roe.* "

It was like hitting a wall. Ryan paused noticeably before answering. "I hope to pick the best judges I can find. I will not interrogate them on single issues."

The *Boston Globe* leaped to his feet. "Mr. President, what about where the life of the mother is in danger, the Catholic Church—"

"The answer to that is obvious. The life of the mother is the paramount consideration."

"But the Church used to say—"

"I don't speak for the Catholic Church. As I said earlier, I cannot violate the law."

"But you want the law changed," the *Globe* pointed out.

"Yes, I think it would be better for everybody if the matter was returned to the state legislatures. In that way the people's elected representatives can write the laws in accordance with the will of their electorates."

"But then," the *San Francisco Examiner* pointed out, "we'd have a hodgepodge of laws across the country, and in some areas abortion would be illegal."

"Only if the electorate wants it that way. That's how democracy works."

"But what about poor women?"

"It's not for me to say," Ryan replied, feeling the beginnings of anger, and wondering how he'd ever gotten into this mess.

"So, do you support a constitutional amendment against abortion?" the *Atlanta Constitution* demanded.

"No, I don't think that's a constitutional question. I think it is properly a legislative question."

"So," the *New York Times* summarized, "you are personally against abortion on moral and religious grounds, but you will not interfere with women's rights; you plan to appoint conservative justices to the new Supreme Court who will probably overturn *Roe*, but you don't support a constitutional amendment to outlaw freedom of choice." The reporter smiled. "Exactly what *do* you believe in on this issue, sir?"

Ryan shook his head, pursed his lips, and bit off his first version of an answer to the impertinence. "I thought I just made that clear. Shall we go on to something else?"

"Thank you, Mr. President!" a senior reporter called loudly, so advised by the frantic gestures of Arnold van Damm. Ryan left the podium puzzled, walked around the corner, then another until he was out of sight. The chief of staff grabbed the President by the arm, and nearly pushed him against the wall, and this time the Secret Service didn't move a muscle.

"Way to go, Jack, you just pissed off the entire country!"

"What do you mean?" the President replied, thinking, *Huh?*

"I mean you don't pump gas in your car when you're smoking a cigarette, God damn it! Jesus! Don't you know what you just did?" Arnie could see that he didn't. "The pro-choice people now think you're going to take their rights away. The pro-life people think you don't care about their issue. It was just perfect, Jack. You alienated the whole fucking country in five minutes!" Van Damm stormed off, leaving his President outside the Cabinet Room, afraid that he'd really lose his temper if he said anything more.

"What's he talking about?" Ryan asked. The Secret Service agents around him didn't say anything. It wasn't their place—politics—and besides, they were split on the issue as much as the country was.

IT WAS LIKE taking candy from a baby. And after the initial shock, the baby cried pretty loud.

"BUFFALO Six, this is GUIDON Six, over." Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Masterman—"Duke" to his peers—stood atop "Mad Max II," his M1A2 Abrams command tank, microphone in one hand, and binoculars in the other. Before him, spread over about ten square miles in the Negev Training Area, were the Merkava tanks and infantry carriers of the Israeli army's 7th Armored Brigade, all with yellow lights blinking and purple smoke rising from their turrets. The smoke was an Israeli innovation. When tanks were hit in battle, they burned, and when the MILES gear receptors recorded a laser "hit" they set off the marker. But the idea had been for the Israelis to count coup that way on the OpFor. Only four of Masterman's tanks and six of his M3 Bradley Scout tracks were similarly "dead."

"GUIDON, BUFFALO," came the return call from Colonel Sean Magruder, commander of the 10th "Buffalo" Armored Cavalry Regiment.

"I think this one's about concluded, Colonel, over. The fire sack is full."

"Roger that, Duke. Come on down for the AAR. We're going to have one really pissed Israeli in a few minutes." Just as well the radio link was encrypted.

"On the way, sir." Masterman stepped down off the turret as his HMMVW pulled up. His tank crew started back up, heading down toward the squadron laager.

It didn't get much better than this. Masterman felt like a football player allowed to play every day. He commanded 1st "Guidon" Squadron of the 10th ACR. It would have been called a battalion, but the Cav was different, to the yellow facings on their shoulder straps and the red-and-white unit guidons, and if you weren't Cav, you

weren't shit.

"Kickin' some more ass, sir?" his driver asked as his boss lit up a Cuban cigar.

"Lambs to the slaughter, Perkins." Masterman sipped some water from a plastic bottle. A hundred feet over his head, some Israeli F-16 fighters roared past, showing outrage at what had happened below them. Probably a few of them had run afoul of the administrative SAM "launches." Masterman had been especially careful today siting his Stinger-Avenger vehicles, and sure enough, they'd come in just as he'd expected. Tough.

The local "Star Wars Room" was a virtual twin to the original one at Fort Irwin. A somewhat smaller main display screen, and nicer seats, and you could smoke in this one. He entered the building, shaking the dust off his chocolate-chip cammies and striding like Patton into Bastogne. The Israelis were waiting.

Intellectually, they had to know how useful the exercise had been to them. Emotionally, it was something else. The Israeli 7th Armored was as proud an outfit as any in the world. Practically alone, it had stopped an entire Syrian tank corps on the Golan Heights back in 1973, and their current CO had been a lieutenant then who'd taken command of a headless company and fought brilliantly. Not accustomed to failure, he'd just seen the brigade in which he'd practically grown up annihilated, in thirty brutal minutes.

"General," Masterman said, extending his hand to the chastened brigadier. The Israeli hesitated before taking it.

"Not personal, sir, just business," said Lieutenant Colonel Nick Sarto, who commanded the 2nd "Bighorn" Squadron, and who had just played hammer to Masterman's anvil. With the Israeli 7th in the middle.

"Gentlemen, shall we begin?" called the senior observer-controller. As a sop to the Israeli Army, the OC team here was a fifty-fifty mix of experienced American and Israeli officers, and it was hard to determine which group was the more embarrassed.

There was, first, a quick-time replay of the theoretical engagement. The Israeli vehicles in blue marched into the shallow valley to meet GUIDON'S reconnaissance screen, which leapfrogged back rapidly, but not toward the prepared defense positions of the rest of the squadron, instead leading them away at an angle. Thinking it a trap, the Israeli 7th had maneuvered west, so as to loop around and envelop their enemies, only to walk into a solid wall of dug-in tanks, and then to have Bighorn come in from the east much faster than expected—so fast that Doug Mills's 3rd "Dakota" Squadron, the regimental reserve, never had a chance to come into play for the pursuit phase. It was the same old lesson. The Israeli commander had guessed at his enemy's

positions instead of sending his reconnaissance screen to find out.

The Israeli brigadier watched the replay, and it seemed that he deflated like a balloon. The Americans didn't laugh. They'd all been there before, though it was far nicer to be on the winning side.

"Your reconnaissance screen wasn't far forward enough, Benny," the senior Israeli OC said diplomatically.

"Arabs don't fight that way!" Benjamin Eitan replied.

"They're supposed to, sir," Masterman pointed out. "This is standard Soviet doctrine, and that's who trained'em all, remember. Pull 'em into the fire sack and slam the back door. Hell, General, that's exactly what you did with your Centurions back in '73. I read your book on the engagement," the American added. It defused the mood at once. One of the other things the American officers had to exercise here was diplomacy. General Eitan looked sideways and managed something approaching a smile.

"I did, didn't I?"

"Sure as hell. You clobbered that Syrian regiment in forty minutes, as I recall."

"And you, at 73 Easting?" Eitan responded, grateful for the compliment, even though he knew it was a deliberate effort to calm his temper.

It was no accident that Magruder, Masterman, Sarto, and Mills were here. All four had participated in a vicious combat action in the Persian Gulf War, where three troops of the 2nd "Dragoon" Cav had stumbled into an elite Iraqi brigade force under very adverse weather conditions—too bad for the regimental aircraft to participate, even to warn of the enemy's presence—and wiped it out over a period of a few hours. The Israelis knew it, and therefore couldn't complain that the Americans were book soldiers playing theoretical games.

Nor was the result of this "battle" unusual. Eitan was new, only a month in command, and he would learn, as other Israeli officers had learned, that the American training model was more unforgiving than real combat. It was a hard lesson for the Israelis, so hard that nobody really learned it until he'd visited the Negev Training Area, the NTA, and had his head handed to him. If the Israelis had a weakness, it was pride, Colonel Magruder knew. The OpFor's job here, as in California, was to strip that away. A commander's pride got his soldiers dead.

"Okay," the senior American OC said. "What can we learn from this?"

Don't fuck with the Buffalo Soldiers, all three squadron commanders thought, but didn't say. Marion Diggs had reestablished the regiment's gritty reputation in his command tour before moving on to command Fort Irwin. Though the word was still percolating down through the Israeli Defense Forces, the troopers of the 10th had adopted a

confident strut when they went out shopping, and for all the grief they caused the Israeli military on the playing fields of the NTA, they were immensely popular. The 10th ACR, along with two squadrons of F-16 fighters, was America's commitment to Israeli security, all the more so that they trained the Jewish state's ground forces to a level of readiness they hadn't known since the Israeli army had nearly lost its soul in the hills and towns of Lebanon. Eitan would learn, and learn fast. By the end of the training rotation he'd give them trouble. Maybe, the three squadron commanders thought. They weren't in the business of giving freebies.

"I REMEMBER WHEN you told me how delightful democracy was, Mr. President," Golovko said chirpily, as he walked through the door.

"You must have caught me on TV this morning," Ryan managed to reply.

"I remember when such comments would have gotten such people shot." Behind the Russian, Andrea Price heard the comment and wondered how this guy had the chutzpah to twist the President's tail.

"Well, we don't do that here," Jack responded, taking his seat. "That will be all for now, Andrea. Sergey and I are old friends." This was to be a private conversation, not even a secretary present to take notes, though hidden microphones would copy down every word for later transcription. The Russian knew that. The American knew that he knew that, but the symbolism of no other people in the room was a compliment to the visitor, another fact which the American knew the Russian to know as well. Jack wondered how many sets of interlocking wheels he was supposed to keep track of, just for an informal meeting with a foreign representative.

When the door closed behind the agent, Golovko spoke on. "Thank you."

"Hell, we are old friends, aren't we?"

Golovko smiled. "What a superb enemy you were."

"And now . . . ?"

"How is your family adjusting?"

"About as well as I am," Jack admitted, then shifted gears. "You had three hours at the embassy to get caught up."

Golovko nodded; as usual, Ryan was well briefed for this meeting, covert though it was. The Russian embassy was only a few blocks up Sixteenth Street, and he'd walked down to the White House, a simple way to avoid notice in a town where official people traveled in official cars. "I didn't expect things in Iraq to fall so quickly."

"Neither did we. But that's not why you came over, Sergey Nikolay'ch. China?"

"I presume your satellite photos are as clear as ours on the issue. Their military is at an unusually high state of readiness."

"Our people are divided on that," Ryan said. "They might be building up to put some more pressure on Taiwan. They've been building their navy up."

"Their navy isn't ready for combat operations yet. Their army still is, and their rocket forces. Neither is going to cross the Formosa Strait, Mr. President."

That made the reason for his trip clear enough. Jack paused to look out the window at the Washington Monument, surrounded as it was by a circle of flagpoles, rather like a garland. What was it George had said about avoiding entangling foreign alliances? But it had been a far simpler world back then, two months to cross the Atlantic, not six or seven hours....

"If you are asking what I think you are, yes—or should I say, no."

"Could you clarify?"

"America would not look kindly upon an attack by China against Russia. Such a conflict would have very adverse effects upon world stability, and would also impede your progress to full democratic status. America wants to see Russia become a prosperous democracy. We were enemies long enough. We should be friends, and America wants her friends safe and peaceful."

"They hate us, they covet what we have," Golovko went on, not satisfied with America's statement.

"Sergey, the time for nations to steal what they cannot earn is past. It's history, and not to be repeated."

"And if they move on us anyway?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Sergey," the President answered. "The idea is to prevent such actions. If it appears that they are really thinking about a move, we'll counsel them to reconsider. We are keeping an eye on things."

"I don't think you understand them." Another push, Ryan saw. They really were worked up about this.

"Do you think anyone does? Do you think they themselves know what they want?" The two intelligence officers—that was how both men would always think of themselves—shared a look of professional amusement.

"That is the problem," Golovko admitted. "I try to explain to my President that it is difficult to predict the behavior of undecided people. They have capabilities, but so do we, and the calculus of the matter appears different from both sides—and then the personalities come into play. Ivan Emmetovich, those are old men with old ideas. Their personalities are the major consideration here."

"And history, and culture, and economics, and trade—and I haven't

had the chance to look them in the eye yet. I'm weak on that part of the world," Jack reminded his guest. "I spent most of my life trying to figure you people out."

"So you will stand with us?"

Ryan shook his head. "It's too early and too speculative to go that far. We will do everything in our power, however, to prevent a possible conflict between the PRC and Russia. If it happens, you'll go nuclear. I know it. You know it. I think they know it."

"They don't believe it."

"Sergey, nobody's that stupid." Ryan made a mental note to discuss this with Scott Adler, who knew the region far better than he did. It was time to close the book on that issue for the moment, and open another. "Iraq. What are your people saying?"

Golovko grimaced. "We had a network go down three months ago. Twenty people, all shot or hanged—after interrogation, that is. What we have left doesn't tell us much, but it appears that senior generals are preparing to do something."

"Two of them just showed up in the Sudan this morning," Ryan told him. It wasn't often he caught Golovko by surprise.

"So fast?"

Ryan nodded, handing over the photographs from the Khartoum airport. "Yep."

Golovko scanned them, not knowing the faces, but not really needing to. Information passed along at this level was never, ever faked. Even with enemies and former enemies, a nation had to keep its word on some things. He handed the photos back. "Iran, then. We have some people there, but we've heard nothing in the last few days. It's a dangerous environment in which to operate, as you know. We expect that Daryaei had something to do with the assassination, but we have no evidence to support it." He paused. "The implications of this are serious."

"You're telling me that you can't do anything about it, either, then?"

"No, Ivan Emmetovich, we cannot. We have no influence there, and neither do you."

18

LAST PLANE OUT

THE NEXT SHUTTLE FLIGHT got off early. The shell corporation's third and last business jet was recalled from Europe, and with a change of flight crews, was ready three hours early. That meant that the first of the G-IVs could fly to Baghdad, pick up two more generals, and return. Badrayn felt rather like a travel agent or dispatcher in addition to his unusual role as diplomat. He just hoped it wouldn't take too long. It might be dangerous to be a passenger on the last plane, because the last one—well, there was no telling *which* would be the last, was there? The generals didn't grasp that yet. The last one might well be pursued by tracer fire, leaving people on the ground to face the music, and Badrayn knew he would be with them ... in a region where selectivity wasn't an integral part of the justice system. Well, he shrugged, life had risks, and he was being well paid. They'd told him, at least, that there would be another pickup flight in less than three hours, and a fourth five hours beyond that one. But the sum total would be ten or eleven, and that would go for another three days on the current schedule, and three days could be a lifetime.

Beyond the confines of this airport, the Iraqi army was still in the streets, but there would be a change now. Those conscript soldiers, and even the elite guardsmen, would have been out there for several days, settled into a dull and purposeless routine, and *that* was something destructive to soldiers. They'd be shuffling around on their feet, smoking cigarettes, starting to ask questions amongst themselves: *What exactly is going on?* Initially there would be no answers. Their sergeants would tell them to mind their duties, so advised by their company officers, so advised in turn from battalion staffs, and so on all the way up the line ... until somewhere that same question would be repeated, and there would *be* no one farther up the chain of command to tell the questioner to sit down and shut up. At that point the question would rebound back *down* the line. It was something an army could sense, as a thorn in the foot instantly told the brain that something was amiss. And if the thorn was dirty, then an infection would follow that could spread and kill the entire body. The generals were supposed to know such things—but, no, they didn't anymore.

Something very foolish happened to generals, especially in this part of the world. They forgot. It was that simple. They just forgot that the villas and the servants and the cars were not a divine bequest, but a temporal convenience that could disappear as quickly as morning fog. They were still more afraid of Daryaei than of their own people, and that was foolish. It would have merely been annoying to Badrayn, except that his life now depended on theirs.

THE SEAT ON the right side of the cabin was still damp. This time it was occupied by the youngest daughter of the general who had, until minutes before, commanded the 4th Guards Division (Motorized), and who was now conferring with an air force colleague. The child felt the lingering damp on her hand and, puzzled, licked at it, until her mother saw it and sent her off to wash her hands. Then the mother complained to the Iranian steward who rode in the back with this group. He had the child moved, and made a note to have the seat cleaned or replaced at Mehrabad. There was less tension now. The first pair of officers had reported in from Khartoum that all was well. A Sudanese army platoon guarded the large house which they shared, and all appeared to be secure. The generals had already determined that they would make a sizable "contribution" to that country's treasury, to ensure their own safety for the time—hopefully brief—they'd spend in that country before moving on. Their intelligence chief, still back in Baghdad, was on the phone now, calling around to various contacts in various countries to find secure permanent housing for them. Switzerland? They wondered. A cold country in terms of both climate and culture, but a safe one, and for those with money to invest, an anonymous one.

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"WHO OWNS THREE G-IVs over there?"

"The registration of the aircraft is Swiss, Lieutenant," Major Sabah reported, having just learned the fact. From the photos shot at Khartoum he'd gotten the tail number, and that was easily checked on a computer database. He flipped the page to determine the ownership. "A corporately owned jet. They have three of them, and a few smaller turboprops for flying around Europe. We'll have to check further to learn more about the corporation." But somebody would be working on that, and they'd find the obvious. Probably some import-export concern, more a letter-drop than anything else, perhaps with a small

storefront that conducted real, if negligible, business for appearance's sake. The corporation would have a medium-sized account in a commercial bank; it would have a law firm to make sure that it scrupulously obeyed every local rule; its employees would be fully briefed on how to behave—Switzerland was a law-abiding country—and how to keep everything in order; the corporation would vanish into the woodwork, because the Swiss didn't trouble people who deposited money in their banks and kept within their laws. Those who broke the rules severely could find the country as inhospitable as the one the generals were leaving. That was well understood, too.

The pity of it, Sabah thought, was that he knew the first two faces, and probably also knew the faces now in transit. It would have been pleasing to get them before the bar of justice, especially a Kuwaiti bar. They'd been more junior, most of them, when Iraq had invaded his country. They would have participated in the pillaging. Major Sabah remembered prowling the streets, trying to look as inconspicuous and harmless as possible while other Kuwaiti subjects had resisted more actively, which had been brave, but dangerous. Most of them had been caught and killed, along with family members, and though the survivors were now famous and well rewarded, those few had operated on information he'd gathered. The major didn't mind. His family was wealthy enough, and he *liked* being a spook. Even more, he was damned sure his country would never be surprised like that again. He would see to that personally.

In any case, the generals who were leaving were less a concern than the ones who would replace them. That had the major worried.

"WELL, I'M AFRAID it was a pretty weak performance in all respects for Mr. Ryan," Ed Kealty said on the noon news-interview show. "Dr. Bretano is, first of all, an industry official who has long since opted out of public service. I was there when his name came up before, and I was there when he refused to consider a high government position—so that he could stay where he was to make money, I suppose. He's a talented man, evidently a good engineer," Kealty allowed with a tolerant smile, "but a Secretary of Defense, no." A shake of the head emphasized it.

"What did you think of President Ryan's position on abortion, sir?" Barry asked on CNN.

"Barry, that's the problem. He's *not* really the President," Kealty replied in a mild, businesslike tone. "And we need to correct that. His lack of understanding for the public showed clearly in that contradictory and ill-considered statement in the Press Room. *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land. That's all he had to say. It's not necessary

that the President should like the laws, but he has to enforce them. Of course, for any public official not to understand how the American people think on this issue doesn't so much show insensitivity to the rights of women to choose, as simple incompetence. All Ryan had to do was listen to his briefers on what to say, but he didn't even do that. He's a loose cannon," Kealty concluded. "We don't need one of those in the White House."

"But your claim—" A raised hand stopped the correspondent cold.

"It's not a claim, Barry. It's a fact. I never resigned. I never actually left the vice-presidency. Because of that, when Roger Durling died, I became President. What we have to do right now, and Mr. Ryan will do this if he cares about his country, is to form a judicial panel to examine the constitutional issues and decide who the President really is. If Ryan does not do that—well, he's putting himself before the good of the country. Now, I must add that I fully believe that Jack Ryan is acting in good conscience. He's an honorable man, and in the past he's shown himself to be a courageous man. Unfortunately, right now, he's confused, as we saw at the press conference this morning."

"A pat of butter would not melt in his mouth, Jack," van Damm observed, turning the sound down. "You see how good he is at this?"

Ryan nearly came out of his chair. "God damn it, Arnie, that's what I said! I must have said it three or four times—that's the law, and I can't break the law. *That's what I said!"*

"Remember what I told you about keeping your temper under control?" The chief of staff waited for Ryan's color to go back down. He turned the sound back up.

"What's most disturbing, however," Kealty was saying now, "is what Ryan said about his appointments to the Supreme Court. It's pretty clear he wants to turn the clock back on a lot of things. Litmus tests on issues like abortion, appointing only strict-constructionists. It makes you wonder if he wants to overturn affirmative action, and heaven knows what else. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where the sitting President will exercise immense power, particularly in the courts. And Ryan just doesn't know how, Barry. He doesn't, and what we learned today about what he wants to do—well, it's just plain frightening, isn't it?"

"Am I on a different planet, Arnie?" Jack demanded. "I didn't say 'litmus test.' A reporter did. I didn't say 'strict-constructionist.' A reporter did."

"Jack, it isn't what you say. It's what people hear."

"Just how much damage do you think President Ryan could do, then?" Barry asked on the TV. Arnie shook his head in admiration. Kealty had seduced him right out of his shorts, right on live television, and Barry had responded perfectly, framing the question to show that

he still called Ryan the President, but then asking the question in a form that would shake people's faith in him. It was no wonder that Ed was so good with the ladies, was it? And the average viewer would never grasp the subtlety with which he'd pulled Barry's drawers off. What a pro.

"In a situation like this, with the government decapitated? It could take years to fix what he might break," Kealty said with the grave concern of a trusted family physician. "Not because he's an evil person. He certainly is not. But because he simply doesn't know how to execute the office of President of the United States. He just doesn't, Barry."

"We'll be back after these messages from our cable operators," Barry told the camera. Arnie had heard enough, and didn't need to see the commercials. He lifted the controller and clicked the TV off.

"Mr. President, I wasn't worried before, but I'm worried now." He paused for a moment. "Tomorrow you will see some editorials in a few of the major papers agreeing that a judicial commission is necessary, and you'll have no choice but to let it go forward."

"Wait a minute. The law doesn't say that—"

"The law doesn't say anything, remember? And even if it did, there's no Supreme Court to decide. We're in a democracy, Jack. The will of the people will decide who's the President. The will of the people will be swayed by what the media says, and you'll never be as good at working the media as Ed is."

"Look, Arnie, *he* resigned. *I* got confirmed by the Congress as VP, Roger got killed, and *I* became President, and that's the fucking law! And *I* have to abide by the law. I swore an oath to do that, and I will. I never wanted this fucking job, but I've never run away from anything in my life, either, and I'll be damned if I'll run away from this!" There was one other thing. Ryan despised Edward Kealty. Didn't like his political views, didn't like his Harvard hauteur, didn't like his private life, damned sure didn't like his treatment of women. "You know what he is, Arnie?" Ryan snarled.

"Yes, I do. He's a pimp, a hustler, a con man. He has no convictions at all. He's never even practiced law, but he's helped write thousands of them. He's not a doctor, but he's established national health policy. He's been a professional politician his whole life, always on the public payroll. He's never generated a product or a service in the private sector of the economy, but he's spent his life deciding how high the taxes should be, and how that money should be spent. The only black people he ever met as a kid were the maids who picked up his bedroom, but he's a champion of minority rights. He's a hypocrite. He's a charlatan. And he's going to win unless you get your shit together, Mr. President," Arnie said, pouring dry ice over Ryan's fiery

temper. “Because he knows how to play the game, and you don’t.”

THE PATIENT, THE records said, had taken a trip to the Far East back in October, and in Bangkok had indulged himself in the sexual services for which that country was well known. Pierre Alexandre, then a captain assigned to a military hospital in the tropical country, had once indulged in them himself. His conscience didn’t trouble him about it. He’d been young and foolish, as people of that age were supposed to be. But that had been before AIDS. He’d been the guy to tell the patient, male, Caucasian, thirty-six, that he had HIV antibodies in his blood, that he could not have unprotected sex with his wife, and that his wife should have her blood tested at once. Oh, she was pregnant? Immediately, right away. Tomorrow if possible.

Alexandre felt rather like a judge. It wasn’t the first time he’d delivered news like this, and damned sure it wouldn’t be the last, but at least when a judge pronounced a sentence of death it was for a serious crime, and there was an appeals process. This poor bastard was guilty of nothing more than being a man twelve time-zones from home, probably drunk and lonely. Maybe he’d had an argument over the phone with his wife. Maybe she’d been pregnant then, and he wasn’t getting any. Maybe it had just been the exotic locations, and Alex remembered well how seductive those childlike Thai girls could be, and what the hell, who’d ever know? Now a lot of people would, and there was no appeals process. That could change, Dr. Alexandre thought. He had just told the patient that. You couldn’t take their hope away. That’s what oncologists had told their patients for two generations. That hope was real, was true, wasn’t it? There were some smart people working on this one—Alexandre was one of them—and the breakthrough could happen tomorrow, for all he knew. Or it could take a hundred years. The patient, on the form card, had ten.

“You don’t look very happy.”

He looked up. “Dr. Ryan.”

“Dr. Alexandre, and I think you know Roy.” She gestured at the table with her tray. The dining area was packed today. “Mind?”

He got halfway to his feet. “Please.”

“Bad day?”

“E-Strain case,” was all he had to say.

“HIV, Thailand? Over here now?”

“You *do* read *M&M.”* He managed a smile.

“I have to keep up with my residents. E-Strain? You’re sure?” Cathy asked.

“I reran the test myself. He got it in Thailand, business trip, he said. Pregnant wife,” Alex added. Professor Ryan grimaced at the addition.

"Not good."

"AIDS?" Roy Altman asked. The rest of SURGEON'S detail was spread around the room. They would have preferred that she ate in her office, but Dr. Ryan had explained that this was one of the ways in which Hopkins docs kept up with one another, and was for her a regular routine. Today it was infectious disease. Tomorrow pediatrics.

"E-Strain," Alexandre explained with a nod. "America is mostly B-Strain. Same thing in Africa."

"What's the difference?"

Cathy answered. "B-Strain is pretty hard to get. It mainly requires direct contact of blood products. That happens with IV drug users who share needles or through sexual contact, but mainly it's still homosexuals who have tissue lesions either from tearing or more conventional venereal diseases."

"You forgot bad luck, but that's only one percent or so." Alexandre picked up the thread. "It's starting to look as though E-Strain—that cropped up in Thailand—well, that it makes the heterosexual jump a lot more easily than B. It's evidently a heartier version of our old friend."

"Has CDC quantified that yet?" Cathy asked.

"No, they need a few more months, least that's what I heard a couple weeks ago."

"How bad?" Altman asked. Working with SURGEON was turning into an educational experience.

"Ralph Forster went over five years ago to see how bad things were. Know the story, Alex?"

"Not all of it, just the bottom line."

"Ralph flew over on a government ticket, official trip and all that, and first thing happens off the plane, the Thai official meets him at customs, walks him to the car and says, 'Want some girls for tonight?' That's when he knew there was a real problem."

"I believe it," Alex said, remembering when he would have smiled and nodded. This time he managed not to shudder. "The numbers are grim. Mr. Altman, right now, nearly a third of the kids inducted into the Thai army are HIV positive. Mainly E-Strain." The implications of that number were unmistakable.

"A third? A *third* of them?"

"Up from twenty-five percent when Ralph flew over. That's a hard number, okay?"

"But that means—"

"It might mean in fifty years, no more Thailand," Cathy announced in a matter-of-fact voice that masked her inner horror. "When I was going to school here, I thought oncology was the place to be for the supersmart ones"—she pointed for Altman's benefit—"Marty, Bert,

Curt, and Louise, those guys in the corner over there. I didn't think I could take it, take the stress, so I cut up eyeballs and fix 'em. I was wrong. We're going to beat cancer. But these damned viruses, I don't know."

"The solution, Cathy, is in understanding the precise interactions between the gene strings in the virus and the host cell, and it shouldn't be all *that* hard. Viruses are such tiny little sunzabitches. They can only do so many things, not like the interaction of the entire human genome at conception. Once we figure that one out, we can defeat all the little bastards." Alexandre, like most research docs, was an optimist.

"So, researching the human cell?" Altman asked, interested in learning this. Alexandre shook his head.

"A lot smaller than that. We're into the genome now. It's like taking a strange machine apart, every step you're trying to figure what the individual parts do, and sooner or later you got all the parts loose, and you know where they all go, and then you figure out what they all do in a systematic way. That's what we're doing now."

"You know what it's going to come down to?" Cathy suggested with a question, then answered it: "Mathematics."

"That's what Gus says down at Atlanta."

"Math? Wait a minute," Altman objected.

"At the most basic level, the human genetic code is composed of four amino acids, labeled A, C, G and T. How those letters—the acids, I mean—are strung together determines everything," Alex explained. "Different character sequences mean different things and interact in different ways, and probably Gus is right: the interactions are mathematically defined. The genetic code really is a code. It *can* be cracked, and it *can* be understood." *Probably someone will assign a mathematical value to them . . . complex polynomials . . .* he thought. Was that important?

"Just nobody smart enough to do it has come along yet," Cathy Ryan observed. "That's the home-run ball, Roy. Someday, somebody is going to step up to the plate, and put that one over the fence, and it will give us the key to defeating all human diseases. All of them. Every single one. The pot of gold at the end of that rainbow is medical immortality—and who knows, maybe human immortality."

"Put us all out of business, especially you, Cathy. One of the first things they'll edit out of the human genome is myopia, and diabetes and that—"

"It'll unemploy you before it unemploys me, Professor," Cathy said with an impish smile. "I'm a surgeon, remember? I'll still have trauma to fix. But sooner or later, you're going to win your battle."

But would it be in time for this morning's E-Strain patient? Alex

wondered. Probably not. Probably not.

SHE WAS CURSING them now, mainly in French, but Flemish also. The army medics didn't understand either language. Moudi spoke the former well enough to know that, vile as the imprecations were, they were not the product of a lucid mind. The brain was now being affected, and Jean Baptiste was unable to converse even with her God. Her heart was under attack, finally, and that gave the doctor hope that Death would come for her and show some belated mercy for a woman who deserved far more than she had received from life. Maybe delirium was a blessing for her. Maybe her soul was detached from her body. Maybe in not knowing where she was, who she was, what was wrong, the pain didn't touch her anymore, not in the places that mattered. It was an illusion the doctor needed, but if what he saw was mercy, it was a ghastly variety of it.

The patient's face was a mass of rashes now, almost as though she'd been brutally beaten, her pale skin like an opaque window onto misplaced blood. He couldn't decide if her eyes were still working. There was bleeding both on the surface and the interior of each, and if she could still see, it wouldn't last much longer. They'd almost lost her half an hour earlier, occasioning his rush to the treatment room to see her choking on aspirated vomit and the medics trying both to clear her airway and keep their gloves intact. The restraints that held her in place, coated though they were with smooth plastic, had abraded away her skin, causing more bleeding and more pain. The tissues of her vascular system were breaking down as well, and the IV leaked as much out on the bed as went into the arms and legs, all of the fluids as deadly as the most toxic poison. Now the medical corpsmen were truly frightened even of touching the patient, gloves or not, suits or not. Moudi saw that they'd gotten a plastic bucket and filled it with dilute iodine, and as he watched, one of them dipped his gloves into it, shaking them off but not drying them, so that if he touched her there would be a chemical barrier against the pathogens that might leap at him from her body. Such precautions weren't necessary—the gloves were thick—but he could hardly blame the men for their fear. At the turning of the hour, the new shift arrived, and the old one left. One of them looked back on his way out the door, praying with silent lips that Allah would take the woman before he had to come back in eight hours. Outside the room, an Iranian army doctor similarly dressed in plastic would lead the men to the disinfection area, where their suits would be sprayed before they took them off, and then their bodies, while the suits were burned to ashes in the downstairs incinerator. Moudi had no doubts that the procedures would be

followed to the letter—no, they would be exceeded in every detail, and even then the medics would be afraid for days to come.

Had he possessed a deadly weapon right then and there, he might have used it on her, and to hell with the consequences. A large injection of air might have worked a few hours before, causing a fatal embolism, but the breakdown of her vascular system was such that he couldn't even be sure of that. It was her strength that made the ordeal so terrible. Small though she was, she'd worked forty years of long hours, and earned surprisingly good health as a result. The body which had sustained her courageous soul for so long would not give up the battle, futile as it was.

"Come, Moudi, you know better than this," the director said behind him.

"What do you mean?" he asked without turning.

"If she were back in the hospital in Africa, what would be different? Would they not treat her the same way, taking the same measures to sustain her? The blood, and the IV fluids, and everything else. It would be exactly the same. Her religion does not allow euthanasia. If anything, the care here is better," he pointed out, correctly, if coldly, then turned away to check the chart. "Five liters. Excellent."

"We could start—"

"No." The director shook his head. "When her heart stops, we will drain all her blood. We will remove the liver, kidneys and spleen, and then our real work begins."

"Someone should at least pray for her soul."

"You will, Moudi. You are a fine doctor. You care even for an infidel. You may be proud of that. If it were possible to save her, you would have done so. I know that. You know that. She knows that."

"What we are doing, to inflict this on—"

"On unbelievers," the director reminded him. "On those who hate our country and our Faith, who spit upon the words of the Prophet. I will even agree that this is a woman of virtue. Allah will be merciful with her, I am sure. You did not choose her fate. Neither did I." He had to keep Moudi going. The younger man *was* a brilliant physician. If anything, too good. The director for his part thanked Allah that he'd spent the last decade in laboratories, else he might have succumbed to the same human weaknesses.

BADRAYN INSISTED. This time, three generals. Every seat full, and one of them with two small children strapped in together. They understood now. They had to. He'd explained it to them, pointing to the tower, whose controllers had watched every flight in and out, and who *had to know* what was going on by now, and arresting them

would do little good, as their families would miss them, and if their families were picked up, the neighbors would know, wouldn't they?

Well, yes, they had agreed.

Just send a damned airliner next time, he wanted to tell Tehran, but no, someone would have objected, here or there, it didn't matter, because no matter what you said, no matter how sensible it was, somebody would object to it. Whether on the Iranian side or the Iraqi, that didn't matter, either. Either way it would get people killed. It certainly would. There was nothing for him to do but wait now, wait and worry. He could have had a few drinks, but he decided against it. He'd had alcohol more than once. All those years in Lebanon. As Bahrain still was, Lebanon had been, and probably would be again, a place where the strict Islamic rules could be violated, and there he had indulged in Western vice along with everyone else. But not now. He might be close to death and, sinner or not, he was a Muslim, and he would face death in the proper way. And so he drank coffee for the most part, staring out the windows from his seat, next to the phone, telling himself that the caffeine was making his hands shake, and nothing else.

"YOU'RE JACKSON?" Tony Bretano asked. He'd spent the morning with the acting chiefs. Now it was time for the worker bees.

"Yes, sir, J-3. I guess I'm your operations officer," Robby replied, taking his seat and not, for once, carrying a bundle of papers and scurrying around like the White Rabbit.

"How bad is it?"

"Well, we're spread pretty thin. We still have two carrier battle-groups in the IO looking after India and Sri Lanka. We're flying a couple battalions of light infantry to the Marianas to reassert control there and supervise the withdrawal of Japanese personnel. That's mainly political, we don't expect any problems. Our forward-deployed air assets have been recalled to CON US to refit. That aspect of operations against Japan went well."

"You will want me to speed production of the F-22 and restart B-2 production, then? That's what the Air Force said."

"We just proved that Stealth is one hell of a force-multiplier, Mr. Secretary, and that's a fact. We need all of those we can get."

"I agree. What about the rest of the force structure?" Bretano asked.

"We're too damned thin for all the commitments we have. If we had to go to Kuwait again, for example, like we did in 1991, we can't do it. We literally do not have all that force to project anymore. You know what my job is, sir. I have to figure out how to do the things we have to do. Okay, operations against Japan took us as far as we could

go, and—"

"Mickey Moore said a lot of nice things about the plan you put together and executed," the SecDef pointed out.

"General Moore is very kind. Yes, sir, it worked, but we were on a shoestring the whole time, and that's not the way American forces are supposed to go out into harm's way, Mr. Secretary. We're supposed to scare the bejeebers out of people the moment the first private steps off the airplane. I *can* improvise if I have to, but that's not supposed to be my job. Sooner or later, I goof, or somebody goofs, and we end up with dead people in uniform."

"I agree with that, too." Bretano took a bite of his sandwich. "The President's given me a free hand to clean this department out, do things my way. I have two weeks to put the new force requirements together."

"Two weeks, sir?" If Jackson were able to go pale, that would have done it to him.

"Jackson, how long you been in uniform?" the SecDef asked.

"Counting time at the Trade School? Call it thirty years."

"If you can't do it by tomorrow, you're the wrong guy. But I'll give you ten days," Bretano said generously.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm Operations, not Manpower, and—"

"Exactly. In my way of looking at things, Manpower fills the needs that Operations defines. Decisions in a place like this are supposed to be made by the shooters, not the accountants. That's what was wrong at TRW when I moved in. Accountants were telling engineers what they could have to be engineers. No." Bretano shook his head. "That didn't work. If you build things, your engineers decide how the company runs. For a place like this, the shooters decide what they need, and the accountants figure out how to shoehorn it into the budget. There's always a struggle, but the product end of the business makes the decisions."

Well, damn. Jackson managed not to smile. "Parameters?"

"Figure the largest credible threat, the most serious crisis that's likely, not possible, and design me a force structure that can handle it." Even that wasn't good enough, and both men knew it. In the old days there had been the guideline of two and a half wars, that America could deploy to fight two major conflicts, plus a little brush fire somewhere else. Few had ever admitted that this "rule" had always been a fantasy, all the way back to the Eisenhower presidency. Today, as Jackson had just admitted, America lacked the wherewithal to conduct a single major military deployment. The fleet was down to half of what it had been ten years earlier. The Army was down further. The Air Force, ever sheltering behind its high-tech, was formidable, but had still retired nearly half its total strength. The

Marines were still tough and ready, but the Marine Corps was an expeditionary force, able to deploy in the expectation that reinforcements would arrive behind them, and dangerously light in its weapons. The cupboard wasn't exactly bare, but the enforced diet hadn't really done anyone much good.

"Ten days?"

"You've got what I need sitting in a desk drawer right now, don't you?" Planning officers always did, Bretano knew.

"Give me a couple days to polish it up, sir, but, yes, we do."

"Jackson?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary?"

"I kept track of our operations in the Pacific. One of my people at TRW, Skip Tyler, used to be pretty good at this stuff, and we looked over maps and things every day. The operations you put together, they were impressive. War isn't just physical. It's psychological, too, like all life is. You win because you have the best people. Guns and planes count, but brains count more. I'm a good manager, and one hell of a good engineer. I'm not a fighter. I'll listen to what you say, 'cause you and your colleagues know how to fight. I'll stand up for you wherever and whenever I have to. In return for that, I want what you really need, not what you'd like to have. We can't afford that. We can cut bureaucracy. That's Manpower's job, civilian and uniform. I'll lean this place out. At TRW I got rid of a lot of useless bodies. That's an engineering company, and now it's run by engineers. This is a company that does operations, and it ought to be run by operators, people with notches cut in their gun grips. Lean. Mean. Tough. Smart. You get what I'm saying?"

"I think so, sir."

"Ten days. Less if you can. Call me when you're ready."

"CLARK," JOHN SAID, picking up his direct line.

"Holtzman," the voice said. The name made John's eyes go a little wide.

"I suppose I could ask how you got this number, but you'd never reveal your source."

"Good guess," the reporter agreed. "Remember that dinner we had a while back at Esteban's?"

"Vaguely," Clark lied. "It's been a long time." It hadn't actually been a dinner, but the tape machine that had to be on the phone didn't know that.

"I owe you one. How about tonight?"

"I'll get back to you." Clark hung up and stared down at his desk. What the hell was this about?

“COME ON, THAT’S not what Jack said,” van Damm told the *New York Times.*

“That’s what he meant, Arnie,” the reporter responded. “You know it. I know it.”

“I wish you’d go easy on the guy. He’s not a politician,” the chief of staff pointed out.

“Not my fault, Arnie. He’s in the job. He has to follow the rules.”

Arnold van Damm nodded agreement, concealing the anger that had risen in an instant at the correspondent’s casual remark. Inwardly he knew that the reporter was right. That’s how the game was played. But he also knew that the reporter was wrong. Maybe he’d grown too attached to President Ryan, enough so that he’d actually absorbed some of his flaky ideas. The media, exclusively composed of the employees of private businesses—most of them corporations with publicly traded stock—had grown in power to the point that they *decided* what people said. That was bad enough. What was worse, they enjoyed their jobs too much. They could make or break anyone in this town. They made the rules. He who broke them could himself be broken.

Ryan *was* a naif. There was no denying it. In his defense, he’d never sought his current job. He’d come here by accident, having sought nothing more than a final opportunity to serve, and then to leave once and for all, to return to private life. He’d not been elected to his post. But neither had the media, and at least Ryan had the Constitution to define his duties. The media was crossing the line. They were taking sides in a constitutional matter, and they were taking the wrong side.

“Who makes the rules?” Arnie asked.

“They just are,” the *Times* answered.

“Well, the President isn’t going to attack *Roe*. He never said that he would. And he’s not going to pick Justices off park benches, either. He isn’t going to pick liberal activists, and he isn’t going to pick conservative activists, and I think you know that.”

“So Ryan misspoke himself?” The reporter’s casual grin said it all. He’d report this as spin control by a senior administration official, “ ‘clarifying,’ which means correcting, what the President said,” the article would read.

“Not at all. You misunderstood him.”

“It sounded pretty clear to me, Arnie.”

“That’s because you’re used to listening to professional politicians. The President we have now says things straight. Actually I kind of like that,” van Damm went on, lying; it was driving him crazy. “And it might even make life easier for you. You don’t have to check the tea

leaves anymore. All you have to do is take proper notes. Or maybe just judge him by a fair set of rules. We've agreed that he's not a politician, but you're treating him as if he were. Listen to what he's really saying, will you?" Or maybe even look at the videotape, he didn't add. He was skating on the edge now. Talking to the media was like petting a new cat. You never knew when they'd reach up and scratch.

"Come on, Arnie. You're the most loyal guy in this town. Damn, you would have been a great family doctor. We all know that. But Ryan doesn't have a clue. The speech at National Cathedral, that loony speech from the Oval Office. He's about as presidential as the chairman of the Rotary in Bumfuck, Iowa."

"But who decides what's presidential and what isn't?"

"In New York, I do." The reporter smiled again. "For Chicago, you have to ask somebody else."

"He is the President of the United States."

"That's not what Ed Kealty says, and at least Ed *acts* presidential."

"Ed's out. He resigned. Roger took the call from Secretary Hanson, and told me about it. Damn it, *you* reported that yourself."

"But what possible motive could he have for "

"What motive could he have for boffing every skirt that crossed his bow?" the chief of staff demanded. *Great,* he thought, *now I'm losing control of the media!*

"Ed's always been a ladies' man. He's gotten better since he got off the booze. It never affected his duties," the White House correspondent made clear. Like his paper, he was a strong proponent of women's rights. "This one will have to play out."

"What position will the *Times* take?"

"I'll get you a copy of the editorial," the reporter promised.

HE COULDN'T STAND it anymore. He lifted the phone and dialed the six digits while staring out at the darkness. The sun was down now, and clouds were rolling in. It would be a cold, rainy night, leading to a dawn which might or might not take place before his eyes.

"Yes?" a voice said halfway through the first ring.

"Badrayn here. It would be more convenient if the next aircraft were larger."

"We have a 737 standing by, but I need authorization to have it sent."

"I will work on this end."

It was the TV news which had gotten him moving. Even more muted than usual, there had not been a single political story. Not one, in a nation where political commentary often as not displaced the

weather forecasts. Most ominously of all, there was a story about a mosque, an old Shi'a mosque, one that had fallen into disrepair. The story lamented that fact, citing the building's long and honorable history, and ignoring the fact that it had fallen into disrepair because it had once been a meeting place for a group charged, perhaps truthfully, with plotting the demise of Iraq's fallen, beloved, great, and evidently soon-to-be-forgotten political leader. Worst of all, the taped footage had shown five mullahs standing outside the mosque, not even looking directly at the camera, merely gesturing at the faded blue tile on the wall and probably discussing what needed to be done. The five were the same ones who'd flown in to be hostages. But not a single soldier was in sight on the TV screen, and the faces of at least two of the mullahs were well known to Iraqi audiences. Somebody had gotten to the TV station, more precisely to the people who worked there. If the reporters and others wanted to retain their jobs and their heads, it was time to face a new reality. Were the brief few moments on the screen enough for the common folk to see and recognize the visitors' faces—and get the message? Finding out the answer to that question could be dangerous.

But the common people didn't matter. Colonels and majors did. Generals not on the proper list did. Quite soon they'd know. Probably some already did. They'd be on the phone, first calling up the line to see what was going on. Some would hear lies. Some would hear nothing. They'd start thinking. They'd start making contacts. Over the next twelve hours they'd talk among themselves and have to make hard decisions. These were the men who were identified with the dying regime. The ones who couldn't run, who had no place to run to and no money to run with, the ones who had to stay. Their identification with the past regime could be a death sentence—for many, certainly would be so. For others, there was a chance. To survive, they would have to do what criminals all over the world did. They would save their own lives by offering up a larger fish. So it always was. The colonels would overthrow the generals.

Finally, the generals understood.

"There is a 737 standing by. Enough room for all. It can be here in ninety minutes," he told them.

"And they will not kill us at Mehrabad Airport?" the deputy chief of staff of the Iraqi army demanded.

"Would you prefer to die here?" Badrayn asked in reply.

"What if it's all a trap?"

"There is that risk. In that case, the five television personalities will die." Of course they wouldn't. That would have to be the act of troops loyal to generals already dead. That sort of loyalty didn't exist here. They all knew that. The mere act of taking hostages had been an

instinctive gesture, and one already invalidated by someone, perhaps in the media, but maybe the colonel who'd headed the guard force over the Iranian clerics. *He* was supposed to be a trusted intelligence specialist, Badrayn remembered on reflection, a loyal Sunni officer, son of a Ba'ath Party member. That could mean that the Ba'ath Party was already being suborned. It was going too fast now. The mullahs would not have concealed the nature of their mission, would they? But none of that mattered. Killing the hostages would accomplish nothing. The generals were doomed if they stayed here, and martyrdom wasn't exactly offensive to Iranian clerics. It was an integral part of the Shi'a tradition.

No, the decision had already been irreversibly made. These senior commanders hadn't grasped that. They hadn't thought it all the way through.

Well, had they been truly competent officers, they would have been killed ages ago, by their beloved leader.

"Yes," the most senior of them said.

"Thank you. Badrayn lifted the phone and punched the buttons again.

THE DIMENSIONS OF the constitutional crisis in which America has found itself were not apparent until yesterday. Although the issue may seem to be technical, the substance of it is not.

John Patrick Ryan is a man of ability, but whether or not he has the necessary talent to perform his presidential duties has yet to be established. The initial indications are less than promising. Government service is not a job for amateurs. Our country has often enough turned to such people, but always in the past they have been in the minority, able to grow into their duties in an orderly way.

There is nothing orderly about the crisis facing the country. To this point Mr. Ryan has done a proper and careful job of stabilizing the government. His interim appointment to head the FBI, for example, Daniel Murray, is an acceptable choice. Similarly, George Winston is probably a fair interim choice for the Department of the Treasury, though he is politically unschooled. Scott Adler, a highly talented, lifelong foreign service officer, may be the best member of the current cabinet . . . Ryan skipped the next two paragraphs.

Vice President Edward Kealty, whatever his personal failings, knows government, and his middle-of-the-road position on most national issues offers a steady course until elections can select a new administration. But are his claims true?

"Do you care?" Ryan asked the lead editorial for the next day's *Times*.

"They know him. They don't know you," Arnie answered. Then the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Foley for you, Mr. President. He says it's important."

"Okay ... Ed? Putting you on speaker." Jack pushed the proper button and replaced the receiver. "Arnie's listening in."

"It's definite. Iran's making a move, big and fast. I have a TV feed for you if you have the time."

"Roll it." Jack knew how to do that. In this office and others were televisions fed off secure fiber-optic cables to the Pentagon and elsewhere. He pulled the controller from a drawer and turned the set on. The "show" lasted only fifteen seconds, was rerun again, then freeze-framed.

"Who are they?" Jack asked.

Foley read off the names. Ryan had heard two of them before. "Mid- and top-level advisers to Daryaei. They're in Baghdad, and somebody decided to get the word out. Okay, we know senior generals are flying out. Now we have five mullahs talking about rebuilding an important mosque on national TV. Tomorrow they'll be talking louder," the DCI-designate promised.

"Anything from people on the ground?"

"Negative," Ed admitted. "I was talking to station chief Riyadh about sneaking up there for a sit-down, but by the time he gets there, there won't be anyone to sit down with."

"THAT'S A LITTLE big," an officer said aboard the duty AWACS. He read off the alpha-numeric display. "Colonel," the lieutenant called over the command line, "I have what appears to be a 737 charter inbound Mehrabad to Baghdad, course two-two-zero, speed four-five-zero knots, twenty thousand feet. PALM BOWL reports encrypted voice traffic to Baghdad from that track."

Farther aft, the senior officer commanding the aircraft checked his display. The elltee in front was right. The colonel lit up his radio to report to KKMC.

THE REST OF them arrived together. They should have waited longer, Badrayn thought. Better to show up with the aircraft already here, the quicker to—but, no.

It was amusing to see them this way, these powerful men. A week earlier they'd strutted everywhere, sure of their place and their power, their khaki shirts decorated with various ribbons denoting some

heroic service or other. That was unfair. Some *had* led men into battle, once or twice. Maybe one or two of them had actually killed an enemy. Iranian enemies. The same people to whom they would now entrust their safety, because they feared their own countrymen more. So now they stood about in little worried knots, unable to trust even their own bodyguards. Especially them. They had guns and were close, and they would not have been in this fix had bodyguards been trustworthy.

Despite the danger to his own life, Badrayn could not help but be amused by it. He'd spent his entire adult life dedicated to bringing about a moment such as this. How long had he dreamed of seeing senior Israeli officials standing about an airport like this—leaving their own people to an uncertain fate, defeated by his . . . *that* irony was not amusing, was it? Over thirty years, and all he'd accomplished was the destruction of an *Arab* country? Israel still stood. America still protected her, and all he was doing was adjusting the chairs of power around the Persian Gulf.

He was running away no less than they were, Badrayn admitted. Having failed in the mission of his life, he had done this one mercenary job, and then what? At least these generals had money and comfort before them. He had nothing ahead, and only failure behind. With that thought, Ali Badrayn swore, and sat back in his seat, just in time to see a dark shape race across the near runway in its rollout. A bodyguard at the door gestured at the people in the room. Two minutes later, the 737 came back into view. Additional fuel was not needed. The truck-borne stairway headed off, stopping only when the aircraft did. The stairs were in place before the door opened, and the generals, and their families, and one bodyguard each, and for most of them a mistress, hurried out the door into the cold drizzle that had just begun. Badrayn walked out last. Even then he had to wait. The Iraqis had all arrived at the bottom of the stairs in a tight little knot of jostling humanity, forgetting their importance and their dignity as they elbowed their way onto the steps. At the top was a uniformed crew member, smiling a mechanical greeting to people he had every reason to hate. Ali waited until the stairs were clear before heading up, arriving at the small platform and turning to look back. There hadn't really been all that much reason to rush. There were as yet no green trucks approaching with their confused soldiers. Another hour, it turned out, would have been fine. In due course they'd come here and find nothing but an empty lounge. He shook his head and entered the aircraft. The crewman closed the door behind him.

Forward, the flight crew radioed the tower for clearance to taxi, and that came automatically. The tower controllers had made their calls and passed along their information, but without instructions, they just

did their jobs. As they watched, the aircraft made its way to the end of the runway, increased power, and lifted off into the darkness about to descend on their country.

19

RECIPES

"IT'S BEEN A WHILE, MR. Clark."

"Yes, Mr. Holtzman, it has," John agreed. They were in the same booth as before, all the way in the back, close to the jukebox. Esteban's was still a nice family place off Wisconsin Avenue, and still well patronized by nearby Georgetown University. But Clark remembered that he'd never told the reporter what his name was.

"Where's your friend?"

"Busy tonight," Clark replied. Actually Ding had left work early and driven down to Yorktown, and was taking Patsy out to dinner, but the reporter didn't need to know that. It was clear from his face that he already knew too much. "So, what can I do for you?" the field officer asked.

"We had a little deal, you'll recall."

Clark nodded. "I haven't forgotten. That was for five years. Time isn't up yet." The reply wasn't much of a surprise.

"Times change." Holtzman lifted the menu and scanned it. He liked Mexican food, though of late the food didn't seem to like him very much.

"A deal's a deal." Clark didn't look at his menu. He stared straight across the table. His stare was something people often had trouble dealing with.

"The word's out. Katryn is engaged to be married to some fox-chaser out in Winchester."

"I didn't know," Clark admitted. Nor did he especially care.

"Didn't think you would. You're not an SPO anymore. Like it back in the field?"

"If you want me to talk about that, you know I can't—"

"More's the pity. I've been checking up on you for a couple of years now," the reporter told his guest. "You have one hell of a service reputation, and the word is that your partner is a comer. You were the guy in Japan," Holtzman said with a smile. "You rescued Koga."

A scornful look concealed John's real feelings of alarm. "What the hell would give you that idea?"

"I talked with Koga when he was over. Two-man rescue team, he

said. Big guy, little guy. Koga described your eyes—blue, hard, intense, he said, but he also said that you were a reasonable man in your speech. How smart do I have to be to figure that one out?" Holtzman smiled. "Last time we talked, you said I would have made a good spook." The waiter showed up with two beers. "Ever have this before? Pride of Maryland, a new local micro on the Eastern Shore." Then the waiter went away. Clark leaned across the table.

"Look, I respect your ability, and the last time we talked, you played ball, kept your word, and I respect that, too, but I would like you to remember that when I go out in the field, my life rides on—"

"I won't reveal your identity. I don't do that. Three reasons, it's wrong, it's against the law, and I don't want to piss off somebody like you." The reporter sipped his beer. "Someday I'd sure as hell like to do a book about you. If half the stories are true—"

"Fine, get Val Kilmer to play me in the movies."

"Too pretty." Holtzman shook his head with a grin. "Nick Cage has a better stare. Anyway, what this meet is about . . ." He paused. "It was Ryan who got her father out, but I'm not clear on how. You went on the beach and got Katryn and her mother out, took them out by boat to a submarine. I don't know which one, but I know it was one of our nuclear subs. But that's not the story."

"What is?"

"Ryan, like you, the Quiet Hero." Robert Holtzman enjoyed seeing the surprise in Clark's eyes. "I like the guy. I want to help him."

"Why?" John asked, wondering if he could believe his host.

"My wife, Libby, got the goods on Kealty. Published it too soon, and we can't go back to it now. He's scum, even worse than most of the people down there. Not everybody in the business feels that way, but Libby's talked to a couple of his victims. Once upon a time a guy could get away with that, especially if his politics were 'progressive.' Not anymore. Not supposed to, anyway," he corrected himself. "I'm not so sure Ryan's the right guy, either, okay? But he's honest. He'll try to do the right thing, for the right reasons. As Roger Durling liked to say, he's a good man in a storm. I have to sell my editors on that idea."

"How do you do that?"

"I do a story about how he did something really important for his country. Something old enough that it isn't sensitive anymore, and recent enough that people know it's the same guy. Jesus Christ, Clark, he *saved* the Russians! He prevented an internal power play that could have dialed the Cold War back in for another decade. That's a big *fucking* deal—and he *never* told anybody about it. We'll make it clear that Ryan didn't leak this. We'll even approach him before we run it, and you know what he'll say—"

"He'd tell you not to run it," Clark agreed. Then he wondered whom

Holtzman might have talked with. Judge Arthur Moore? Bob Ritter? Would they have talked? Ordinarily he'd be sure the answer to that one was an emphatic no, but now? Now he wasn't so sure. You got to a certain level and people figured breaking the rules was part of some higher duty to the country. John knew about "higher duty" stuff. It had landed him in all manner of trouble, more than once.

"But it's too good a story not to run. It took me years to figure it all out. The public has a right to know what kind of man is sitting in the Oval Office, especially if he's the right man," the reporter went on. Holtzman clearly was a man who could talk a nun right out of her habit.

"Bob, you don't know the half of it." Clark stopped talking an instant later, annoyed with himself for saying that much. This was deep water, and he was trying to swim with a weight belt on. Oh, what the hell . . . "Okay, tell me what you know about Jack."

• • •

IT WAS AGREED that they'd use the same aircraft, and somewhat to the relief of both sides, that they wouldn't stay one unnecessary minute in Iran. There was the problem that the 737 didn't have the range of the smaller G-IVs, however, and it was agreed that the airliner would land in Yemen to refuel. The Iraqis never left the plane at Mehrabad, but when the stairs pulled up, Badrayn did, without a single word of thanks from the people he'd saved. A car was waiting. He didn't look back. The generals were part of his past, and he part of theirs.

The car took him into town. There was just a driver, who took his time negotiating the streets. Traffic wasn't all that dense at this time of night, and the going was easy. Forty minutes later, the car stopped in front of a three-story building. Here there was security. So, Badrayn thought, he was living in Tehran now? He got out of the car on his own. A uniformed security guard compared a photograph with his face and gestured him toward the door. Inside another guard, this one a captain by the three pips at his shoulders, patted him down politely. From there it was upstairs to a conference room. By now it was three in the morning, local time.

He found Daryaei sitting in a comfortable chair reading some papers stapled together at the corner, the quintessential government briefing document instead of the Holy Koran. Well, Daryaei must have had it memorized by now, so long had he studied it.

"Peace be unto you," Ali said.

"And unto you, peace," Daryaei replied, not so mechanically as

Badrayn had expected. The older man rose and came to him for the expected embrace. The face was far more relaxed than he'd expected. Tired, certainly, since it had been a long day or two for the cleric, but old or not, the man was buoyed by the events. "You are well?" he asked solicitously, waving his guest to a chair.

Ali allowed himself a long breath as he took his seat. "I am now. I'd wondered how long the situation in Baghdad would remain stable."

"There was nothing to be gained from discord. My friends tell me that the old mosque is in need of repair."

Badrayn might have said that he didn't know—he didn't—but the reason was that he hadn't seen the inside of a mosque in rather a long time, a fact not calculated to please Daryaei. "There is much to do," he decided to respond.

"Yes, there is." Mahmoud Haji Daryaei returned to his chair, setting the papers aside. "Your services were very valuable. Were there any difficulties?"

Badrayn shook his head. "Not really, no. It's surprising how fearful such men can be, but I was prepared for that. Your proposal was generous. They had no choice but to take it. You will not . . . ?" Ali allowed himself to ask.

He shook his head. "No, they shall go in peace."

And that, if true, was something of a surprise, though Ali didn't allow his face to show it. Daryaei had little reason to love those men. All had played a role in the Iran-Iraq war, and been responsible for the deaths of thousands, a wound still raw on this nation. So many young men had died. The war was one of the reasons why Iran had played no major role in the world for years. But that was about to change, wasn't it?

"So, may I ask what you will do next?"

"Iraq has been a sick country for so long, kept away from the True Faith, wandering in the darkness."

"And strangled by the embargo," Badrayn added, wondering what information this observation would elicit.

"It is time for that to end," Daryaei agreed. Something in his eyes congratulated Ali for the observation. Yes, that was the obvious play, wasn't it? A sop to the West. The embargo would be lifted. Food would then flood the country, and the population would be delighted with the new regime. He would please everybody at once, all the while planning to please no one but himself. And Allah, of course. But Daryaei was one of those who was sure that his policies were inspired by Allah, an idea Badrayn had long since disposed of.

"America will be a problem, as will others closer to you."

"We are examining those issues." This statement was delivered comfortably. Well, that made sense. He must have been thinking

about this move for years, and at a moment like this one he must have felt invincible. That also made sense, Badrayn knew. Daryaei always thought Allah was on his side—*at* his side was more accurate. And perhaps He was, but there was much more to it than that. There had to be if you wanted success. Miracles most often appeared when summoned by preparation. Why not a play to see if he might take a hand in the next miracle, Ali thought.

"I've been looking at the new American leader."

"Oh?" Daryaei's eyes focused a little more tightly.

"It's not difficult, gathering information in the modern age. The American media publishes so much, and it can all be easily accessed now. I have some of my people working on it even now, building a careful dossier." Badrayn kept his voice casual. It wasn't hard. He was bone-tired. "It really is quite remarkable how vulnerable they are now.

"Indeed. Tell me more."

"The key to America is this Ryan fellow. Is that not obvious?"

"THE KEY TO changing America is a constitutional convention," Ernie Brown said, after long days of silent contemplation. Pete Holbrook was flipping the controller on his slide projector. He'd shot three rolls of film of the Capitol building, and a few more of other buildings like the White House, unable completely to avoid being the tourist. He grumbled, seeing that one of the slides was in the caddie upside-down. This idea had gestated long enough, and the result wasn't all that impressive.

"We've talked about that for a long time," Holbrook agreed as he lifted the caddie off the projector. "But how do you—"

"Force it? Easy. If there's no President and no way to select one within the Constitution, then *something* has to happen, doesn't it?"

"Kill the President?" Pete snorted. "*Which* one?"

There was the problem. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Take out Ryan, and Kealty would step in. Take out Kealty, and Ryan was in like Flynn. It would be tough enough now. Both men remembered all the security they'd seen at the White House. Kill either one, and the American SS would put a wall around the one who was left that you'd need a nuke to breach. The Mountain Men didn't have any of those. They preferred traditional American weapons, like rifles. Even those had their limitations. The South Lawn of the White House was thoroughly forested with trees, and, they'd noticed, also shielded by skillfully concealed earthen berms. Just seeing the White House was possible down only one visual avenue, past the fountain at the building itself. The surrounding buildings

were all government-owned, and atop them would always be people with binoculars—and rifles. The American SS were determined to keep the people away from "their" President, the servant of the people, whose guards didn't trust the people at all. But if the man who lived in that house was really one of the people, there would have been no need, would there? Once Teddy Roosevelt had thrown open the doors and shaken hands with ordinary citizens for four whole hours. No way *that* would happen anymore!

"Both at once. The way I figure, Ryan will be the hard target, right?" Brown asked. "I mean, he's *there* where most of the protection is. Kealty has to move around a lot, talking to the newspaper pukes, and he won't be as well protected, will he?"

Holbook replaced the slide caddie. "Okay, that makes sense."

"So, if we figure a way to do Ryan, taking Kealty out will be much easier to do on the fly." Brown took the cellular phone out of his pocket. "Easy to coordinate."

"Keep going."

"It means getting a fix on his schedule, learning his routine, and picking our time."

"Expensive," Holbrook observed, flipping to the next slide. It was one so often taken by so many people, from the top of the Washington Monument, the tiny north window, looking down on the White House. Ernie Brown had taken one, too, and had the print blown up to poster size in the local photo shop. Then he'd stared at it for hours. Then he'd gotten a map and checked the scale. Then he'd done some rough calculations.

"The expensive part's buying the cement truck, and renting a place not too far out of town."

"What?"

"I know what the spot is, Pete. And I know how to bring it off. Just a matter of picking the time."

SHE WOULDN'T LIVE through the night, Moudi decided. Her eyes were open now. What they saw was anyone's guess. Finally, mercifully, she was beyond pain. That happened. He'd seen it before, with cancer patients, mostly, and it was always the harbinger of death. His knowledge of neurology was insufficient to understand the reason for it. Maybe the electro-chemical pathways got overloaded, or maybe there was some editing function in the brain. The body knew what was happening, that the time for battle had ended, and since the nervous system reported pain mainly as a warning system, when the time for warning was past, so was the time for pain. Or maybe it was all his imagination. Possibly her body was simply too damaged to

react to anything. Certainly the intra-ocular bleeding had her blind. The last blood line had fallen out, so damaged were her veins now, and she was bleeding from that point in addition to so many others. Only the morphine drip remained, held in place with tape. The heart was being starved of blood, and trying ever harder to pump what diminished supply it had left, it was exhausting itself.

Jean Baptiste still made noises difficult to hear through the Racal suit—the occasional whimper, and the timing of them made the physician wonder if they might be prayers. They probably were, he decided. Robbed of sanity along with her life, the one thing that remained in her would be the endless hours of prayer, the discipline which had ruled her life, and she'd return to that in her madness because her mind had nowhere else to go. The patient cleared her throat, choking, really, but then murmuring more clearly, and Moudi leaned his head down to listen.

". . .—ther of God, pray for us sinners . . ."

Oh, that one. Yes, it would have to be her favorite prayer.

"Fight no more, lady," Moudi told her. "It is your time. Fight no more."

The eyes changed. Even though she could not see, the head turned and she stared at him. It was a mechanical reflex, the physician knew. Blind or not, years of practice told the muscles what to do. The face instinctively turned to a source of noise, and the eyes—the muscles still worked—focused in the direction of interest.

"Dr. Moudi? Are you there?" The words came slowly, and not all that clearly, but understandable even so.

"Yes, Sister. I am here." He touched her hand automatically, then was dumbfounded. *She was* still *lucid?*

"Thank you for . . . helping me. I will pray for you."

She would. He knew that. He patted her hand again, and with the other increased the morphine drip. Enough was enough. They could put no more blood into her to be polluted with the virus strands. He looked around the room. Both army medics were sitting in the corner, quite content to let the doctor stand with the patient. He walked over to them and pointed to one.

"Tell the director—soon."

"At once." The man was very pleased to leave the room. Moudi counted to ten before speaking to the other.

"Fresh gloves, please." He held up his hands to show that he didn't like touching her either. That medic left, too. Moudi figured he had a minute or so.

The medication tray in the corner had what he needed. He took a 20cc needle from its holder and stuck it into the vial of morphine, pulling in enough to fill the plastic cylinder completely. Then he

returned to the bedside, pulled the plastic sheet back and looked for . . . there. The back of her left hand. He took it in his and slid the needle in, immediately pushing down the plunger.

"To help you sleep," he told her, moving back across the room. He didn't look to see if she responded to his words or not. The needle went into the red-plastic sharps container, and by the time the medic came back with new gloves, everything was as before.

"Here."

Moudi nodded and stripped the overgloves off into their disposal container, replacing them with a new set. Back at the bedside, he watched the blue eyes close for the last time. The EKG display showed her heart rate at just over one-forty, the spiky lines shorter than they should have been, and irregularly spaced. Just a matter of time now. She was probably praying in her sleep, he thought, dreaming prayers. Well, at least he could be sure now that she was in no pain. The morphine would be well into her diminishing blood supply now, the chemical molecules finding their way to the brain, fitting into the receptors, and there releasing dopamine, which would tell the nervous system . . . yes.

Her chest rose and fell with the labored respiration. There was a pause, almost like a hiccup, and the breathing restarted, but irregularly now, and the flow of oxygen to the bloodstream was now diminishing. The heart rate changed, becoming yet more rapid. Then respiration ceased. The heart still didn't stop at once, so strong it was, so valiant, the doctor thought sadly, admiring this undying part of a person already dead, but that couldn't last long, and with a few final traces on the screen, it, too, ceased to function. The EKG machine began making a steady alarm tone. Moudi reached up and shut it off. He turned to see the medics sharing a look of relief.

"So soon?" the director asked, coming into the room and seeing the flat, silent line on the EKG readout.

"The heart. Internal bleeding." Moudi didn't have to say anything else.

"I see. We are ready, then?"

"Correct, Doctor."

The director motioned to the medics, who had one last job to do. One of them bundled up the plastic sheeting to contain drips. The other disconnected the last IV and the electronic EKG leads. This was done expeditiously, and when the former patient was wrapped like a piece of slaughtered meat, the locks on the wheels were kicked loose, and the two soldiers wheeled her out the door. They would return to clean the room so thoroughly as to make sure that nothing could live on the walls, floor, or ceiling.

Moudi and the director followed them to "Post," a room in the same

confined area behind the double doors. Here was an autopsy table made of smooth, cold stainless steel. They wheeled the treatment bed beside it, uncovering the body and rolling it to a facedown position on the steel, while the doctors observed from the corner, each donning surgical gowns over his protective suit—more from habit than necessity; some habits are just that. Next the plastic sheets were lifted, held by the edges to form a U shape that allowed the accumulated blood to be poured into a container. About half a liter, the doctors estimated. The sheets were carefully carried to a large bin. The medics stuffed them in and left the room, wheeling the bin with them, off to the incinerator. Nervous as they were, it didn't appear that they'd spilled a drop anywhere.

"Very well." The director pressed a button and the table elevated from the far end. Out of long-standing professionalism, he touched his fingertips to the left carotid artery to make sure there was no pulse, then to the right, where again there was none. When the body was at a twenty-degree angle, he took a large scalpel and cut both arteries, along with the parallel jugular veins. Blood poured out onto the table, pulled by gravity out of the body, channeled into grooves leading in turn to a drain, and over the next several minutes four liters of blood were captured in a plastic container. The body went pale so quickly, Moudi saw. Moments earlier, the skin had been mottled red and purple. It seemed to fade before his eyes, or perhaps it was just imagination. A laboratory technician came to collect the blood container, which he placed on a small wheeled cart. Nobody wanted to carry something like that, even for a short distance.

"I've never posted an Ebola victim," the director observed. Not that this was a proper postmortem examination. For all the care the director had just shown for the patient's departed humanity, bleeding her out like that, he might have slaughtered a lamb.

They still had to be careful, however. In cases like this, only one pair of hands worked within the surgical field, and Moudi let the director do that, as he made rough, wide incisions. Stainless-steel retractors pulled back the flaps of skin and muscle. Moudi handled those, his eyes locked on the scalpel in the director's gloved hands. In another minute, the left kidney was fully exposed. They waited for the medical corpsmen to return. One of them set a tray on the table next to the cadaver. Moudi was revolted by what he saw next. One effect of the Ebola virus and its disease process was to break down tissue. The exposed kidney was half liquefied, and when the director reached in to remove it, the organ actually broke—pulled itself apart into two pieces like a horrid red-brown pudding. The director clucked at himself with annoyance. He'd known what to expect, but forgotten even so.

"Remarkable what happens to the organs, isn't it?"

"Expect the same from the liver, but the spleen "

"Yes, I know. The spleen will be like a brick. Watch your hands, Moudi," the director warned. He lifted a fresh retractor—the instrument was shaped rather like a scoop—to remove the remaining kidney fragment. This went onto the tray. He nodded, and the medic took it off to the lab. The right kidney went more smoothly. At the director's insistence, after all the muscle and blood vessels were disconnected, both doctors used their hands to remove it, and this one stayed reasonably intact—until it landed on the tray. There the organ deformed and split open. The only good thing about it was that the softness of the tissue would not compromise the integrity of their doubled gloves. That fact didn't prevent both doctors from cringing.

"Here!" The director flicked his hand for the orderlies to approach. "Turn it over."

The medics did so, one grasping the shoulders, and the other the knees, flipping the body over as briskly as they could. That caused blood and some tissue to spatter on their cloth gowns. The orderlies pulled back, keeping as far away as possible.

"I want the liver and spleen, that's all," the director told Moudi, looking up. He turned to the orderlies. "Then you will wrap the body and remove it to the incinerator. This room will then be disinfected thoroughly."

Sister Jean Baptiste's eyes were open, as sightless now as they had been thirty minutes earlier. The doctor took a cloth and covered the face, murmuring a prayer for her soul which the director heard.

"Yes, Moudi, she is doubtless in Paradise. Now, shall we continue?" he asked brusquely. He made the usual Y-shaped incision to open the thorax, deep and crude as before, peeling back the layers quickly, more like a meat-cutter than a physician. What they saw there even shocked the director. "How did she live so long like this . . . ?" the man breathed.

Moudi thought back to his medical-school days, remembering a life-sized plastic model of the human body in his first anatomy class. It was as though someone had taken the model and poured in a bucket of powerful solvent. Every exposed organ was misshapen. The surface tissue layer on most of them was . . . dissolved. The abdomen was a sea of black blood. All they'd put in, Moudi thought ... not even half of it had leaked out. Amazing.

"Suction!" the director commanded. An orderly appeared at his side with a plastic tube leading to a vacuum bottle, and the sound of it was obscene. The process lasted fully ten minutes, with the doctors standing back while the orderly moved the suction tube around, like a maid cleaning a house. Another three liters of contaminated, virus-

rich blood for the lab.

The body was supposed to be a Temple of Life, the Holy Koran taught. Moudi looked down to see one transformed into—what? A factory of death, more surely than the building in which he stood. The director moved back in, and Moudi watched his hands uncover the liver, more carefully than before. Perhaps he'd been spooked by the blood in the abdominal cavity. Again the blood vessels were cut, the connective tissue cut away. The director set his instruments down, and without being so bidden, Moudi reached in to lift out the organ and set it on the tray which, again, an orderly removed.

"I wonder why the spleen behaves so differently?"

DOWNSTAIRS, OTHER MEDICAL orderlies were at work. One by one, the monkey cages were lifted from the orderly piles in the storage room. The African greens had been fed, and they were still recovering from the shock of their travel. That somewhat reduced their ability to scratch and bite and fight the gloved hands moving the cages. But the panic of the animals returned soon enough when they arrived in another room. This part of the operation was being handled ten at a time. Once in the killing room, when the doors were all tightly closed, the monkeys knew. The unlucky ones got to watch as one cage at a time was set on a table. The door to each was opened, and into the cage went a stick with a metal-band loop on the end. The loop went over the head of each monkey and was yanked tight, usually to the faint crackling sound of the broken neck. In every case the animal went taut, then fell limp, usually with the eyes open and outraged at the murder. The same instrument pulled the dead animal out. And when the loop was loosened, the body was tossed to a soldier, who carried it to the next room. The others saw and screeched their rage at the soldiers, but the cages were too small to give them room to dodge. At best one might interpose an arm in the loop, only to have that broken as well. Intelligent enough to see and know and understand what was happening to them, the African greens found it not unlike sitting in a lone tree on the savanna, watching a leopard climb up, and up, and up . . . and there was nothing they could do but screech. The noise was troublesome to the soldiers, but not that troublesome.

In the next room, five teams of medical corpsmen worked at five separate tables. Clamps affixed at the neck and at the base of the tail helped keep the bodies in place. One soldier, using a curved knife, would slice open the back, tracing up the backbone, and then the other would make a perpendicular cut, pulling the hide apart to expose the inner back. The first would then remove the kidneys and hand them to the second, and while the small organs went into a

special container, he would remove the body, tossing it into a plastic trash barrel for later incineration. By the time he returned to pick up his knife, the other team member would have the next monkey corpse fixed in place. It took about four minutes per iteration of the procedure. In ninety minutes, all the African green monkeys were dead. There was some urgency to this. All the raw material for their task was biological, and all subject to biological processes. The slaughtering crew handed off their product through double-doored openings cut into the walls, leading to the Hot Lab.

There things were different. Every man in the large room wore the blue plastic suit. Every motion was slow and careful. They'd been well drilled and well briefed, and what little might have been overlooked in their training had recently been recounted by the medical corpsmen selected by lot to treat the Western woman upstairs, in every dreadful detail. When something was carried from one place to another, an announcement was made, and people made a path.

The blood was in a warming tank, and air bubbled through it. The simian kidneys, two large buckets of them, were taken to a grinding machine—actually not terribly different from the kind of food processor found in gourmet kitchens. This reduced the kidneys to mush, which was moved from one table to another and layered onto trays, along with some liquid nutrients. It struck more than one of the people in the lab that what they were doing was not at all unlike baking a cake or other confection. The blood was poured generously into the trays. About half was used in that way. The rest, divided into plastic containers, went into a deep-freezer cooled by liquid nitrogen. The Hot Lab was kept warm and moist, not at all unlike the jungle. The lights were not overly bright, and shielded to contain whatever ultra-violet radiation the fluorescent might emit. Viruses didn't like UV. They needed the right environment in which to grow, and the kidneys of the African green monkey were just that, along with nutrients, proper temperature, correct humidity, and just a pinch of hate.

"YOU'VE LEARNED SO much?" Daryaei asked.

"It's their media, their newspeople," Badrayn explained.

"They're all spies!" the mullah objected.

"Many think so," Ali said with a smile. "But they aren't, really. They are—how does one explain them? Like medieval heralds. They see what they see and they tell what they see. They are loyal to no one except themselves and their profession. Yes, it is true that they spy, but they spy on *everyone,* their own people most of all. It's mad, I admit, but it's true even so."

"Do they believe in anything?" That was a hard one for his host to grasp.

Another smile. "Nothing that I've ever identified. Oh, yes, the American ones are devoted to Israel, but even that is an exaggeration. It took me years to understand that. Like dogs, they will turn on anyone, bite any hand, no matter how kind. They search and they see and they tell. And so, on this Ryan fellow, I've been able to learn everything—his home, his family, the schools his children attend, the number of the office his wife works in, everything."

"What if some of the information is lies?" Daryaei asked suspiciously. As long as he'd dealt with the West, the nature of their reporters was just too foreign to him to be fully understood.

"It's all easily verified. His wife's workplace, for example. I'm sure there must be some of the faithful on staff at that hospital. It's simply a matter of approaching one and asking a few harmless questions. Their home, well, that will be guarded. The same is true of the children. It's a conundrum for all such people. They must have some protection to move about, but the protection can be seen, and that tells one where they are, and who they are. Given the information I've developed, we even know where to start looking." Badrayn kept his remarks short and simple. It wasn't that Daryaei was a fool he most assuredly was not—just that he was insular. One advantage to all his years in Lebanon was that Ali had been exposed to much and had learned much. Most of all, he'd learned that he needed a sponsor, and in Mahmoud Haji Daryaei he had a prospective one. This man had plans. He needed people. And for one reason or another, he didn't fully trust his own. Badrayn didn't wonder why. Whatever the reason was, it was good fortune, and not to be questioned.

"How well protected are such people?" the mullah asked, his hand playing with his beard. The man hadn't shaved in nearly twenty-four hours.

"Very well indeed," Badrayn replied, noting something odd about the question and filing that fact away. "American police agencies are quite effective. The crime problem in America has nothing to do with their police. They simply don't know what to do after the criminals are caught. As applied to their President . . . ?" Ali leaned back for a stretch. "He will be surrounded by a highly trained group of expert marksmen, well motivated, and utterly faithful." Badrayn added these words to his presentation to see if his interlocutor's eyes changed. Daryaei was weary, and there was such a change. "Otherwise, protection is protection. The procedures are straightforward. You do not need my instruction on that."

"America's vulnerability?"

"It's severe. Their government is in chaos. Again, you know this."

"They are difficult to measure, these Americans . . . ," Daryaei mused.

"Their military might is formidable. Their political will is unpredictable, as someone we both . . . knew found out to his misfortune. It is a mistake to underestimate them. America is like a sleeping lion, to be treated with care and respect."

"How does one defeat a lion?"

That one caught Badrayn short for a second or two. Once on a trip to Tanzania he'd been advising the government on how to deal with insurgents—he'd gone into the bush for a day, driving with a colonel in that country's intelligence service. There he'd spotted a lion, an old one which had nonetheless managed a kill all by himself. Perhaps the wildebeest had been crippled. Then there came into view a troop of hyenas, and seeing that, the Tanzanian colonel had stopped the Soviet-made Zil jeep and handed binoculars to Badrayn, and told him to observe and so learn a lesson about insurgents and their capacities. It was something he'd never forgotten. The lion, he remembered, was a large one, perhaps old, perhaps slowed down from his prime, but still powerful and forbidding to behold, even from two hundred meters away, a creature of undeniable magnificence. The hyenas were smaller, doglike creatures, with their broken-back gait, an odd canter that must have been very efficient. They gathered first in a little group, twenty meters from the lion, which was trying to feed on his kill. And then the hyenas had moved, forming a circle around the lion, and whichever one was directly behind the powerful cat would move in to nip at the hindquarters, and the lion would turn and roar and dart a few meters, and that hyena would withdraw quickly—but even as that happened, another one would advance behind the lion for another nip. Individually, the hyenas would have had no more chance against this king of the grasslands than a man with a knife would have against a soldier armed with a machine gun, but try though he might, the lion could not protect his kill—nor even himself—and in just five minutes the lion was on the defensive, unable even to run properly, because there was always a hyena behind him, nipping at his balls, forcing the lion to run in a way that was pathetically comical, dragging his bottom on the grass as he tried to maneuver. And finally the lion just went away, without a roar, without a backward glance, while the hyenas took the kill, cackling in their odd, laughing barks, as though finding amusement in their usurpation of the greater animal's labor. And so the mighty had been vanquished by the lesser. The lion would get older, and weaker, and someday would be unable to defeat a real hyena attack aimed at his own flesh. Sooner or later, his Tanzanian friend had told him, the hyenas got them all. Badrayn looked at his host's eyes again.

“It can be done.”

20

NEW ADMINISTRATIONS

THERE WERE THIRTY OF them in the East Room—all men, much to his surprise—with their wives. As Jack walked into the reception his eyes scanned the faces. Some pleased him. Some did not. Those who did were as scared as he was. It was the confident, smiling ones who worried the President.

What was the right thing to do with them? Even Arnie didn't know the answer, though he had run through several approaches. Be very strong and intimidate them? Sure, Ryan thought, and tomorrow the papers would say he was trying to be King Jack I. Take it easy? Then he'd be called a wimp who was unable to take his proper leadership position. Ryan was learning to fear the media. It hadn't been all that bad before. As a worker bee, he'd been largely ignored. Even as Durling's National Security Advisor, he'd been thought of as a ventriloquist's dummy. But now the situation was very different, and there was not a single thing he could say that could not, and *would* not, be twisted into whatever the particular listener wanted to say himself. Washington had long since lost the capacity for objectivity. Everything was politics, and politics was ideology, and ideology came down to personal prejudices rather than the quest for truth. Where had all these people been educated that the truth didn't matter to them?

Ryan's problem was that he really didn't *have* a political philosophy per se. He believed in things that worked, that produced the promised results and fixed whatever was broken. Whether those things adhered to one political slant or another was less important than the effects they had. Good ideas worked, even though some of them might seem crazy. Bad ideas didn't, even though some of them seemed sensible as hell. But Washington didn't think that way. Ideologies *were* facts in this city, and if the ideologies didn't work, people would deny it; and if the ones with which they disagreed *did* work, those who'd been opposed would never admit it, because admitting error was more hateful to them than any form of personal misconduct. They'd sooner deny God than deny their ideas. Politics had to be the only arena known to man in which people took great action without caring much

for the realworld consequences, and to which the real world was far less important than whatever fantasy, right, left, or center, they'd brought to this city of marble and lawyers.

Jack looked at the faces, wondering what political baggage they'd brought along with their hanging bags. Maybe it was a weakness that he didn't understand how that all worked, but for his part, he had lived a life in which mistakes got real people killed—and in Cathy's case, made people blind. For Jack, the victims were people with real names and faces. For Cathy, they were those whose faces she had *touched* in an operating room. For political figures, they were abstractions far more distant than their closely held ideas.

"Like being in a zoo," Caroline Ryan, FLOTUS, SURGEON, observed to her husband, behind a charming smile. She'd raced home—the helicopter helped—just in time to change into a new white slinky dress and a gold necklace that Jack had bought her for Christmas . . . a few weeks, he remembered, before the terrorists had tried to kill her on the Route 50 bridge in Annapolis.

"With golden bars," her husband, POTUS, SWORDSMAN, replied, fronting a smile of his own that was as fake as a three-dollar bill.

"So what are we?" she asked as the assembled senators designate applauded their entrance. "Lion and lioness? Bull and cow? Peacock and peahen? Or two lab bunnies waiting to have shampoo poured in our eyes?"

"Depends on who's doing the beholding, baby." Ryan was holding his wife's hand, and together they walked to the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Washington." Ryan had to pause for another round of applause. That was something else he'd have to learn. People applauded the President for damned near anything. Just as well that his bathroom had a door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some three-by-five cards, the way Presidents always kept their speaking points. The cards had been prepared by Callie Weston, and the hand-printing was large enough that he didn't need his reading glasses. Even so he'd come to expect a headache. He had one every day from all the reading.

"Our country has needs, and they're not small ones. You're here for the same reason I am. You've been appointed to fill in. You have jobs which many of you never expected, and which some of you may not have wanted." This was vain flattery, but the sort they wanted to hear —more accurately, which they wanted to be *seen* to hear on the C-SPAN cameras in the corners of the room. There were perhaps three people in the room who were not career politicians, and one of those was a governor who'd done the me-you dance with his lieutenant governor and so come to Washington to fill out the term of a senator from another party. That was a curveball which the papers had only

started writing about. The polarity of the Senate would change as a result of the 747 crash, because the control of thirty-two of America's state houses hadn't quite been in line with the makeup of the Congress.

"That's good," Ryan told them. "There is a long and honorable tradition of citizens in service to their nation that goes back at least as far as Cincinnatus, the Roman citizen who more than once answered his country's call, then returned to his farm and his family and his work. One of our great cities is named in memory of that gentleman," Jack added, nodding to a new senator from Ohio—his home was in Dayton, which was close enough.

"You would not be here if you didn't understand what many of those needs are. But my real message for you, today, is that we must work together. We do not have the time and our *country* does not have the time for us to bicker and fight." He had to pause for applause again. Annoyed by the delay, Ryan managed to look up with an appreciative smile and nod.

"Senators, you will find me an easy man to work with. My door is always open, I know how to answer a phone, and the street goes both ways. I will discuss any issue. I will listen to any point of view. There are no rules other than the Constitution which I have sworn to preserve, protect, and defend.

"The people out where you come from, out there beyond Interstate 495, expect all of us to get the job done. They don't expect us to get reelected. They expect us to work for them to the best of our ability. We work for them. They don't work for us. We have the duty to perform for them. Robert E. Lee once said that 'duty' is the most sublime word in our language. It's even more sublime and even more important now, because none of us has been elected to our offices. We represent the people of a democracy, but in every case we have come here in a way that simply wasn't supposed to happen. How much greater, then, is our personal duty to fulfill our roles in the best possible manner?" More applause.

"There is no higher trust than that which fate has conferred on us. We are not medieval noblemen blessed by birth with high station and great power. We are the servants, not the masters, to those whose consent gives us what power we have. We live in the tradition of giants. Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Calhoun, and so many other members of your house of the Congress must be your models. 'How stands the Union?' Webster is said to ask from his grave. We will determine that. The Union is in our hands. Lincoln called America the last and best hope of mankind, and in the past twenty years America has given truth to that judgment by our sixteenth President. America is still an experiment, a collective idea, a set of rules called the

Constitution to which all of us, within and without the Beltway, give allegiance. What makes us special is that brief document. America isn't a strip of dirt and rock between two oceans. America is an idea and a set of rules we all follow. That's what makes us different, and in holding true to that, we in this room can make sure that the country we pass on to our successors will be the same one entrusted to us, maybe even a little bit improved. And now"—Ryan turned to the Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Judicial Circuit, the nation's most senior appellate judge, up from Richmond —"it's time for you to join the team."

Judge William Staunton came to the microphone. Every senatorial spouse held a Bible, and every senatorial appointee placed his left hand on it, raising the other.

"I—state your name . . ."

As Ryan watched, the new senators were duly sworn. At least it looked solemn enough. The oaths were spoken. A few of the new legislators kissed the Bibles, either from personal religious conviction or because they were close to the cameras. Then they kissed their wives, most of whom beamed. There was a collective intake of breath, and then they all looked around at one another, and the White House staff came into the room with drinks just after the cameras were turned off, because now the real work started. Ryan got himself a glass of Perrier and walked into the middle of the room, smiling despite his fatigue and his unease at performing political duties.

THE PHOTOS CAME in one more time. Security at Khartoum airport had not improved, and this time three American intelligence officers were snapping photos of the people walking down the stairs. Everyone around was surprised that no newspeople had yet twigged to the story. A stream of official cars—probably the entire complement for this poor nation—ferried the visitors away. When the process was complete, the 737 airliner went back east, and the spooks drove off to the embassy. Two others of their number were camped out at the dwellings assigned to the Iraqi generals—this tidbit had come from the station chief's contact in the Sudanese Foreign Ministry. When those photos had been taken, the additional officers also drove back, and in the embassy darkroom the frames were processed, blown up, and faxed off via satellite. At Langley, Bert Vasco identified every face, assisted by a pair of CIA desk officers and a set of mug shots in the CIA files.

"That's it," the State Department officer pronounced. "That's the whole military leadership. But not one civilian out of the Ba'ath Party."

"So we know who the sacrificial goats are." That observation came from Ed Foley.

"Yep," Mary Pat answered with a nod. "And it gives a chance for the senior surviving officers to arrest them, 'process' them, and show loyalty to the new regime. Shit," she concluded. "Too fast." Her station chief in Riyadh was all dressed up with no place to go. The same was true of some Saudi diplomats who'd hastily put together a program of fiscal incentives for the notional new Iraqi regime. It would now be unnecessary.

Ed Foley, the new DCI-designate, shook his head in admiration. "I didn't think they had it in 'em. Killing our friend, sure, but coaxing the leadership out this fast and this smooth, who would've thunk it?"

"You got me there, Mr. Foley," Vasco agreed. "Somebody must have brokered the deal—but who?"

"Get buzzin', worker bees," Ed Foley told the desk officers, with a wry smile. "Everything you can develop, ASAP."

IT LOOKED LIKE some sort of awful stew, the darkened human blood and the red-brown nephritic mush of monkey kidneys, just sitting there, marinating in flat, shallow glass trays under dim lights shielded to keep ultraviolet light from harming the viruses. There wasn't much to do at this point except to monitor the environmental conditions, and simple analog instruments did that. Moudi and the director walked in, wearing their protective garb, to check the sealed culturing chambers for themselves. Two-thirds of Jean Baptiste's blood was now deep-frozen in case something went wrong with their first effort at reproducing the Ebola Mayinga virus. They also checked the room's multi-stage ventilation systems, because now the building was truly a factory of death. The precautions were double-sided. As in this room they strove to give the virus a healthy place to multiply, just outside the door the army medical corpsmen were spraying every square millimeter to make sure that it was the only such place—and so the virus had to be isolated and protected from the disinfectant as well. Thus the air drawn into the culture chambers had to be carefully filtered, lest in their effort to stay alive the people in the building killed that which might kill them if they made another sort of mistake.

"So you really think this version might be airborne?"

"As you know, the Ebola Zaire Mayinga strain is named for a nurse who became infected despite all conventional protective measures. Patient Two"—he had decided it was easier not to speak her name —"was a skilled nurse with Ebola experience; she did not give any injections; and she didn't know how she might have contracted the virus. Therefore, yes, I believe this is possible."

"That would be very useful, Moudi," the director whispered, so faintly that the junior physician had trouble hearing it. He heard it even so. The thought alone was loud enough. "We can test for it," the older man added.

That would be easier on him, Moudi thought. At least he wouldn't know those people by name. He wondered if he was right about the virus. Might Patient Two have made a mistake and forgotten it? But, no, he *had* examined her body for punctures, as had Sister Marin Magdalena, and it wasn't as though she might have licked secretions from the young Benedict Mkusa, was it? So what did that have to mean? It meant that the Mayinga strain survived for a brief period of time in air, and that meant they had a potential weapon such as man had never before encountered, worse than nuclear weapons, worse than chemical weapons. They had a weapon which could reproduce itself and be spread by its own victims, one to another and another until the disease outbreak burned out in due course. It *would* burn out. All the outbreaks did. It had to burn out, didn't it?

Didn't it?

Moudi's hand came up to rub his chin, a contemplative gesture stopped short by the plastic mask. He didn't know the answer to that one. In Zaire and the few other African countries afflicted by this odious disease, the outbreaks, frightening though they were, all did burn out—despite the ideal environmental conditions which protected and sustained the virus strands. But on the other side of that equation was the primitive nature of Zaire, the horrible roads and the absence of efficient transport. The disease killed people before they could get far. Ebola wiped out villages, but did little more. But nobody really knew what would happen in an advanced country. Theoretically, one could infect an aircraft, say an international flight into Kennedy. The travelers would leave one aircraft and fan out into others. Maybe they'd be able to spread the disease through coughs and sneezes immediately, or maybe not. It didn't matter, really. Many of them would fly again in a few days, wondering if they had the flu, and then they'd be able to communicate the virus, and so infect more.

The question of how an epidemic spread was one of time and opportunity more than anything else. The more rapidly it got out from the focal center, and the more rapid the instrumentalities of travel, the farther a disease could spread laterally through a population. There were mathematical models, but they were all theoretical, dependent on a multitude of individual variables, each of which could affect the entire threat equation by at least one order of magnitude. To say the epidemic would die out in time was correct. The question was *how fast?* That would determine the number of people infected before protective measures took effect. One percent invasion of a society, or

ten percent, or fifty percent? America wasn't a provincial society. Everyone interacted with everyone else. A truly airborne virus with a three-day incubation period . . . there was no model for that known to Moudi. The deadliest recent Zaireian outbreak in Kikwit had claimed fewer than three hundred lives, but it had started with one unfortunate woodcutter, then his family, then their neighbors. The trick, then, if you wanted to create a much wider outbreak, was to increase the number of index cases. If you could do that, the initial blossoming of Ebola Zaire Mayinga *America* could be so large as to invalidate conventional control measures. It would spread not from one man and one family, but from hundreds of individuals and families—or thousands? Then the next generational leap could involve hundreds of thousands. About this time, the Americans would realize that something evil was afoot, but there would be time for one more generational leap, and that would be an order of magnitude greater still, perhaps into the millions. At that point, medical facilities would be overwhelmed . . .

. . . and there might be no stopping it at all. Nobody knew the possible consequences of a deliberate mass infection in a highly mobile society. The implications might be truly global. But probably not. Almost certainly not, Moudi judged, looking down at the glass culture trays behind thick wire-glass panels, through the plastic of his mask. The first generation of this disease had come from an unknown host and killed a young boy. The second generation had claimed but a single victim, due to fate and luck and his own competence as a physician. The third generation would grow before his eyes. How far that might spread was undetermined, but it was generations Four, Five, Six, and perhaps even Seven which would determine the fate of an entire country—which happened to be the enemy of his own.

It was easier now. Jean Baptiste had had a face and a voice and a life which had touched his own. He could not make that mistake again. She'd been an infidel, but a righteous one, and she was now with Allah, because Allah was truly merciful. He'd prayed for her soul, and surely Allah would hear his prayers. Few in America or elsewhere could possibly be as righteous as she had been, and he knew well that Americans hated his country and distrusted his religious faith. They might have names and faces, but he didn't see them here and he never would, and they were all ten thousand kilometers away, and it was easy to switch the television off.

"Yes," Moudi agreed. "Testing for it will be easy enough."

"LOOK." GEORGE WINSTON was telling a knot of three new senators, "if the federal government made cars, a Chevy pickup would cost

eighty thousand dollars and have to stop every ten blocks to fill up the tank. You guys know business. So do I. We can do better."

"It is really that bad?" the (alphabetically) senior senator from Connecticut asked.

"I can show you the comparative-productivity numbers. If Detroit ran this way, we'd all be driving Japanese cars," Winston replied, jabbing his finger into the man's chest, and reminding himself to get rid of his Mercedes 500SEL, or at least garage it for a while.

"It's like having one cop car to cover East L.A.," Tony Bretano was saying to five more, two of them from California. "I don't have the forces I need to cover *one* MRC. That's major regional conflict," he explained to the new people and their spouses. "And we're supposed to—on paper, I mean—we're supposed to be able to cover two of them at the same time, plus a peacekeeping mission somewhere else. Okay? Now, what I need at Defense is a chance to reconfigure our forces so that the shooters are the most important, and the rest of the outfit supports them, not the other way around. Accountants and lawyers are useful, but we have enough of them at Treasury and Justice. My side of the government, we're the cops, and I don't have enough cops on the street."

"But how do we pay for that?" Colorado the younger asked. The senior senator from the Rocky Mountain State had been at a fund-raiser in Golden that night.

"The Pentagon isn't a jobs program. We have to remember that. Now, next week I'll have a full assessment of what we need, and then I'm going to come to the Hill, and together we'll figure how to make that happen at the least possible cost."

"See, what did I tell you?" Arnie van Damm said quietly, passing behind Ryan's back. "Let them do it for you. You just stay pleasant."

"What you said was right, Mr. President," the new senator from Ohio professed to believe, sipping a bourbon and water now that the cameras were off. "You know, once in school, I did a little history paper on Cincinnatus, and . . ."

"Well, all we have to do is remember to put the country first," Jack told him.

"How do you manage to do your job and—I mean," the wife of the senior senator from Wisconsin explained, "you still do your surgery?"

"And teaching, which is even more important," Cathy said with a nod, wishing she were upstairs and doing her patient notes. Well, there was the helicopter ride in tomorrow. "I will *never* stop doing my work. I give blind people their sight back. Sometimes I take the bandages off myself, and the look on their faces is the best thing in the world. The best," she repeated.

"Even better than me, honey?" Jack asked, placing his arm around

her shoulder. This might even be working, he thought. Charm them, Arnie and Callie had told him.

THE PROCESS HAD already started. The colonel assigned to guard the five mullahs had followed them into the mosque, where, moved by the moment, he'd worshiped with them. At the conclusion of the devotions, the senior of their number had spoken to him, quietly and politely, touching on a favored passage in the Holy Koran, so as to establish some common ground. It brought to the colonel a memory of his youth and his own father, a devout and honorable man. It was the usual thing in dealing with people, no matter the place or the culture. You got them talking, read their words, and chose the proper path for continuing the conversation. The mullah, a member of the Iranian clergy for over forty years, had counseled people on their faith and on their troubles for all that time, and so it was not hard for him to establish a rapport with his captor, a man supposedly sworn to kill him and his four colleagues should those orders arrive from his superiors. But in picking a man deemed faithful, the departing generals had chosen a little too wisely, because men who display true loyalty are men of thoughts and principles, and such men are ever vulnerable to ideas demonstrably better than those to which they adhere. There could be no real contest. Islam was a religion with a long and honorable history, neither of which attribute attached to the dying regime which the colonel had sworn to uphold.

"It must have been a hard thing, fighting in the swamps," the mullah told him a few minutes later, as the conversation turned to relations between the two Islamic countries.

"War is evil. I never took pleasure in killing," the colonel admitted. It was rather like being a Catholic in the confessional, and all at once the man's eyes teared up, and he related some of the things he'd done over the years. He could see now that while he'd never taken such pleasure, he had hardened his heart to it, finally not distinguishing the innocent from the guilty, the just from the corrupt, and done what he'd been told *because* he'd been told, not because it had been in any way the right thing to do. He saw that now.

"Man falls often, but through the words of the Prophet we may always find our way back to a merciful God. Men are forgetful of their duties, but Allah is never forgetful of His." The mullah touched the officer's arm. "I think your prayers are not finished this day. Together we will pray to Allah, and together we will find peace for your soul."

After that, it had been very easy indeed. On learning that the generals were even now leaving the country, the colonel had two good reasons for cooperating. He had no wish to die. He was quite willing

to follow the will of his God in order to stay alive and serve. In demonstration of his devotion, he assembled two companies of soldiers to meet with the mullahs and get their orders. It was very easy for the soldiers. All they had to do was follow the orders of their officers. To do anything else was a thought that never occurred to any of them.

It was now dawn in Baghdad, and at a score of large houses, doors were kicked in. Some occupants they found awake. Some were drunkenly asleep. Some were packed to leave and trying to figure a place to go and a way to get there. All were a little too late in their understanding of what was going on around them, in a place where a minute's error was the difference between prosperous life and violent death. Few resisted, and the one man who came closest to doing so successfully was cut nearly in half by a twenty-round burst from an AK-47, along with his wife. Mostly they were led barefoot from their homes into waiting trucks, heads down to the sidewalk, knowing the way this particular drama would end for them.

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THESE TACTICAL RADIO nets were not encrypted, and the faint VHF signals were monitored, this time at STORM TRACK, which was closer to Baghdad. Names were spoken, more than once in every case as the pickup teams reported back to their dispatchers, which made life easy for the ELINT teams close to the border and at King Khalid Military City. The watch officers called in their supervisors, and CRITIC-priority dispatches were shot off via satellite.

RYAN HAD JUST walked the last of the new senators to the door when Andrea Price walked up.

"My shoes are killing me, and I have a procedure at—" Cathy stopped talking.

"FLASH Traffic coming in now, sir."

"Iraq?" Jack asked.

"Yes, Mr. President."

The President kissed his wife. "I'll be up in a little while."

Cathy had no choice but to nod and head to the elevator, where one of the ushers was waiting to take the First Couple upstairs. The kids would already be in bed. Their homework was all done, probably in some cases with the help of their bodyguards. Jack turned right, trotted down the stairs, then right again, left to get outside of the

building, then back inside the West Wing and the Situation Room.

"Talk to me," the President commanded.

"It's started," Ed Foley's face said on the wall-mounted TV. And all they could do was watch.

IRAQI NATIONAL TELEVISION greeted a new day and a new reality. This was clear when the newsreaders commenced their daily presentation with an invocation of Allah's name, not for the first time, but never with this degree of fervor. "Gimme that ol' time religion, it's good enough for me—now," observed the chief master sergeant at PALM BOWL, because the transmission was national, and repeated from the transmitters in nearby Basra. He turned and waved. "Major Sabah?"

"Yes, Chief, yes," the Kuwaiti officer replied with a nod as he came over. He hadn't had much in the way of doubt before. His superiors had expressed reservations. They always did, they were never quite as close to the pulse of their enemy as the major was, thinking politics instead of ideas. He checked his watch. They'd be in their offices in two hours after the normal morning routine, and that didn't matter now. Hurrying wouldn't change anything. The dam had broken, and the water would spill out. The time to stop it had passed, assuming that such a chance had ever existed.

The Iraqi military had taken over, the TV news broadcast said. This was announced as though the situation were unique. A council of revolutionary justice had been formed. Those guilty of crimes against the people (a good catchall term which meant very little but was understood by all) were being arrested, and would face the judgment of their countrymen. The nation needed calm most of all, the TV told them. Today would be a national holiday. Only those in essential public-service jobs were expected to go to work. For the rest of the country's citizens, it was advised that they consider this a day of prayer and reconciliation. For the rest of the world, the new regime promised peace. The rest of the world would have all day to think about that.

DARYAEI HAD ALREADY done a good deal of thinking about it. He'd managed three hours of sleep before awakening for morning prayers. He found that as he aged he needed less and less. Perhaps the body understood that, with little time remaining, there was no longer time for rest, though there was for dreams, and he'd dreamed of lions in the early hours of this day. Dead lions. The lion had also been the symbol

of the Shah's regime, and truly Badrayn had been correct. Lions could be killed. The real ones had once been native to Iran—Persia, in the old style—and had been hunted down to extinction in classical times. The symbolic ones, the Pahlavi dynasty, had similarly been eradicated with a combination of patience and ruthlessness. He'd played a role in that. It hadn't always been pretty. He'd ordered and supervised an atrocity, the fire-bombing of a crowded theater filled with people more interested in Western decadence than their Islamic faith. Hundreds had died horribly, but—but it had been necessary, a needed part of the campaign to bring his country and his people back to the True Path, and while he regretted that particular incident, and regularly prayed in atonement for the lives taken, no, he didn't regret it. He was an instrument of the Faith, and the Holy Koran itself told of the need for war, Holy War, in defense of the Faith.

Another gift of Persia (some said India) to the world was the game of chess, which he had learned as a child. The very word for the end of the game, *checkmate,* came from the Persian *shah mat*—"the king is dead"—something he had himself helped to achieve in real life, and while Daryaei had long since stopped playing mere games, he remembered that a good player thought not move by move, but four, or even more, moves ahead. One problem with chess, as with life, was that the next move could sometimes be seen, especially when the other player was skilled—to assume him to be anything else could be dangerous. But by playing ahead, it was far more difficult to see what was coming, until the very end, at which point the opponent could see clearly but, maneuvered out of position, depleted of his players, power, and options, he had no choice but to resign the game. Such had been the case in Iraq until this morning. The other player—actually, many of them—had resigned and run away, and Daryaei had been pleased to allow it. It was even more delicious when the other player could not run, but the point was winning, not satisfaction, and winning meant thinking farther and faster than the other player, so that the next move *was* a surprise, so that the other player was harried and confused, would be forced to take time to react, and in a chess match, as in life, time was limited. It was all a thing of the mind, not the body.

So it was with lions, it would seem. Even one so powerful could be outmaneuvered by lesser creatures if the time and the setting were right, and that was both the lesson and the task of the day. Finished with his prayers, Daryaei called for Badrayn. The younger man was a skilled tactician and gatherer of information. He needed the direction of one schooled in strategy, but with that guidance he would be very useful indeed.

IT HAD BEEN conclusively decided in an hour's conversation with his country's leading experts that the President could do absolutely nothing at all. The next move was simply to wait and watch and see. Any citizen could do it, but America's leading experts could wait and watch and see a little faster than anyone else, or so they told themselves. That would all be done for the President, of course, and so Ryan walked out of the Situation Room, up the steps, and outside to see wet, cold rain falling on the South Lawn beyond the overhang of the walkway. The coming day promised to be blustery, with March arriving, typically, like a lion, then to be replaced by a lamb. Or so the aphorism went. At the moment it just looked gloomy, however nurturing the rain might be to ground recovering from a cold, bitter winter.

"This will finish off the last of the snow," Andrea Price said, surprising herself by speaking unbidden to her principal.

Ryan turned and smiled. "You work harder than I do, Agent Price, and you're a—"

"Girl?" she asked with a weary smile.

"My chauvinism must be showing. I beg your pardon, ma'am. Sorry, I was just wishing for a cigarette. Quit years ago—Cathy bullied me into it. More than once," Jack admitted with good humor. "It can be tough, being married to a doctor."

"It can be tough, being married." Price was wedded to her job, with two failed relationships to prove it. Her problem, if one could call it that, was in possessing the same devotion to duty that only men were supposed to have. It was a simple enough fact, but one which first a lawyer and then an advertising executive had failed to grasp.

"Why do we do it, Andrea?" Ryan asked.

Special Agent Price didn't know, either. The President necessarily was a father figure to her. He was the man supposed to have the answers, but after years on the Detail, she knew better. Her father had always had such answers, or so it had seemed in her youth. Then she'd grown, finished her education, joined the Service, worked her way rapidly up a steep and slippery ladder, and in the process lost her way in life somehow. Now she was at the pinnacle of her profession, alongside the nation's "father," only to learn that life didn't allow people to know what they wanted and needed to know. Her job was hard enough. His was infinitely worse, and maybe it was better for the President to be something other than the decent and honorable gentleman John Patrick Ryan was. Maybe a son of a bitch could survive better here . . .

"No answer?" Ryan smiled at the rain. "I think you're supposed to say that *somebody* has to do it. Jesus, I just tried to seduce thirty new

senators. You know that? Seduce," Jack repeated. "Like they were girls or something, and like I was that kind of guy—and I don't have a fucking clue." The voice stopped cold and the head shook in surprise at what he'd said. "Sorry, excuse me."

"That's okay, Mr. President. I've heard the word before, even from other presidents."

"Who do you talk to?" Jack asked. "Once upon a time, I'd talk to my father, my priest, to James Greer when I worked for him, or Roger, until a few weeks ago. Now they all ask me. You know, they told me at Quantico, at the Basic Officers' School, that command could be lonely. Boy, they weren't kidding. They really weren't kidding."

"You have one hell of a good wife, sir," Price pointed out, envying both of them for that.

"There's always supposed to be somebody smarter than you. The person you go to when you're just not sure. Now they come to me. I'm not smart enough for that." Ryan paused, just then hearing what Price had told him. "You're right, but she's busy enough, and I'm not supposed to burden her with my problems."

Price decided to laugh. "You *are* a chauvinist, Boss."

That snapped his head around. "I beg your pardon, Ms. Price!" Ryan said in a voice that sounded cross until a presidential laugh followed it. "Please don't tell the media I said that."

"Sir, I don't tell reporters where the bathroom is."

The President yawned. "What's tomorrow look like?"

"Well, you're in the office all day. I imagine this Iraq business will wreck your morning. I'll be out early, back in the afternoon. I'm going to do a walk-around tomorrow, to check security arrangements for all the kids. We have a meeting to see if there's a way to get SURGEON to work and back without the helicopter—"

"That is funny, isn't it?" Ryan observed.

"A FLOTUS with a real job is something the system never really allowed for."

"Real job, hell! She makes more money than *I* do, has for ten years, except for when I was back in the market. The papers haven't picked up on that, either. She's a great doc."

His words were meandering, Price saw. He was too tired to think straight. Well, that happened to Presidents, too. Which was why she was around.

"Her patients love her, that's what Roy says. Anyway, I'm going to look over arrangements for all your children—routine, sir, I'm responsible for all of the arrangements for your family. Agent Raman will stand post with you for most of the day. We're moving him up. He's coming along very nicely," Special Agent Price reported.

"The one who got the fire coat to disguise me back on the first

night?" Jack asked.

"You knew?" Price asked in return. The President turned to enter the White House proper. The grin was one of exhaustion, but for all that the blue eyes twinkled at his principal agent.

"I'm not *that* dumb, Andrea."

No, she decided, it wasn't better to have a son of a bitch as POTUS.

21

RELATIONSHIPS

PATRICK O'DAY WAS A widower whose life had changed in a particularly cruel and abrupt way after a late-life marriage. His wife, Deborah, had been a fellow agent in the Laboratory Division, an expert on forensic investigation, which had occasioned a great deal of travel out of headquarters, until one afternoon, flying into Colorado Springs, her aircraft had crashed into the ground for reasons still undetermined. It had been her first field assignment after maternity leave, and she'd left behind a daughter, Megan, aged fourteen weeks.

Megan was two and a half now, and Inspector O'Day was still wrestling with how he should introduce Megan to her mother. He had videotapes and photographs, but were he to point to dyed paper or a phosphor screen and tell his daughter, "That's Mommy," might it make her think that all life was artificial? What effect would it have on her development? It was one more question in the life of a man supposed to find answers. The single fatherhood enforced on him by fate had made him all the more devoted as a father, and this on top of a professional career in which he'd worked no less than six kidnappings all the way to conclusion. Six four, two hundred wiry pounds, he had sacrificed his Zapata mustache to the requirements of Headquarters Division, but tough guy among tough guys, his attention to his daughter would have made his colleagues chuckle. Her hair was blondish and long, and each morning he brushed it to silky smoothness after dressing her in colorful toddler clothes and helping her with her tiny sneaks. For Megan, Daddy was a great big protective bear who towered into the blue sky, and snatched her off the ground like a rocket so that she could wrap her arms around his neck.

"Oof!" Daddy said. "You hug too hard!"

"Did I hurt?" Megan asked in mock alarm. It was part of the morning routine.

A smile. "No, not this time." With that, he walked out of the house and opened the door to his muddy pickup, carefully strapped her into her car seat, and set her lunch box and blanky between them. It was six-thirty, and they were on their way to a new day-care center. O'Day could not start his truck without looking down at Megan, the image of

her mother, a daily realization that always made him bite his lip and close his eyes and shake his head, wondering again why the 737 had rolled and plunged straight into the ground with his wife of sixteen months in seat 18-F.

The new day-care center was more convenient to his route to work, and the people next door loved it for their twin boys. He turned left onto Ritchie Highway, and found the place right across from a 7-Eleven where he could get a pint of coffee for the commute in on U.S. 50. Giant Steps, nice name.

Hell of a way to make a living, Pat thought, parking his truck. Marlene Daggett was always there at six, tending to the children of the bureaucrats who trekked to D.C. every morning. She even came out to meet them for the first arrival.

"Mr. O'Day! And this is Megan!" the teacher announced with stunning enthusiasm for so early an hour. Megan had her doubts, and looked up at her daddy. She turned back in surprise to see something special. "Her name is Megan, too. She's *your* bear, and she's been waiting all day for you."

"Oh." The little girl seized the brown-furred creature and hugged it, name tag and all. "Hello."

Mrs. Daggett looked up in a way that told the FBI agent, *it works every time.* "You have your blanky?"

"Right here, ma'am," O'Day told her, also handing over the forms he'd completed the night before. Megan had no medical problems, no allergies to medicine, milk, or food; yes, in case of a real emergency you can take her to the local hospital; and the inspector's work and pager numbers, and his parents' number, and the number of Deborah's parents, who were damned good grandparents. Giant Steps was well organized. O'Day didn't know how well organized only because there was something Mrs. Daggett wasn't supposed to talk casually about. His identity was being checked out by the Secret Service.

"Well, Miss Megan, I think it's time for us to play and make some new friends." She looked up. "We'll take good care of her."

O'Day got back into his truck with the usual minor pain that attended leaving his daughter behind—anywhere, no matter the time or place—and jumped across the street to the 7-Eleven for his commute coffee. He had a conference scheduled at nine o'clock to go over further developments on the crash investigation—they were down to T-crossing and I-dotting now—followed by a day of administrative garbage which would at least not prevent him from picking his little girl up on time. Forty minutes later, he pulled into FBI Headquarters at Tenth and Pennsylvania. His post as roving inspector gave him a reserved parking place. From there he walked, this morning, to the indoor pistol range.

An expert marksman since Boy Scouts, Pat O'Day had also been a "principal firearms instructor" at several FBI field offices, which meant that he'd been selected by the SAC to supervise weapons training for the other agents—always an important part of a cop's life, even though few ever fired their side arms in anger.

The range was rarely busy this time of day—he got in at 7:25—and the inspector selected two boxes of Federal 10mm hollow-points for his big stainless Smith & Wesson 1076 automatic, along with a couple of standard "Q" targets and a set of ear protectors. The target was a simple white cardboard panel with an outline of the vital parts of a human body. The shape resolved itself into the rough size and configuration of a farmer's steel milk can, with the letter "Q" in the center, about where the heart would be. He attached the target to the spring-clip on the traveler, set the distance for thirty feet, and hit the travel switch. As it moved downrange, he let his thoughts idle, contemplating the sports page and the new Orioles lineup in spring-training camp. The range hardware was programmable. On arriving at its destination, the target turned sideways, and became nearly invisible. Without looking, O'Day dialed the timer to a random setting and continued to look downrange, his hands at his side. Now his thinking changed. There was a Bad Guy there. A serious Bad Guy. Convicted felon, now cornered. A Bad Guy who had told informants that he'd never go back inside, never be taken alive. In his long career, Inspector O'Day had heard that one many times, and whenever possible he'd given the subject the opportunity to keep his word—but they all folded, dropped their gun, wet their pants, or even broke down into tears when confronted by real danger instead of the kind more easily considered over beers or a joint. But not this time. This Bad Guy was serious. He had a hostage. A child, perhaps. Maybe even his own little Megan. The thought made his eyes narrow. A gun to her head. In the movies, the Bad Guy would tell you to drop your weapon, but if you did that, all you were guaranteed was a dead cop *and* a dead hostage, and so you talked to your Bad Guy. You made yourself sound calm and reasonable and conciliatory, and you waited for him to relax, just a little, just enough to move the gun away from the hostage's head. It might take hours, but sooner or later——

—the timer clicked, and the target card turned to face the agent. O'Day's right hand moved in a blur, snatching the pistol from its holster. Simultaneously, his right foot moved backward, his body pivoted and crouched slightly, and the left hand joined the right on the rubber grips when the gun was halfway up. His eyes acquired the gunsights at the bottom of his peripheral vision, and the moment they were aligned with the head of the "Q" target, his finger depressed the trigger twice, Bring so fast that both ejected cartridge cases were in

the air at the same time. It was called a double-tap, and O'Day had practiced it for so many years that the sounds almost blended in the air, and the two-shot echo was just returning from the steel backstop when the empty cases pinged off the concrete floor, but by then there were two holes in the head of the target, less than an inch apart, between and just above where the eyes would be. The target flipped side-on, less than a second after it had turned, rather nicely simulating the fall of the subject to the ground.

Yes.

"I think you got 'em there, Tex."

O'Day turned, startled from his fantasy by a familiar voice. "Morning, Director."

"Hey, Pat." Murray yawned, a set of ear protectors dangling in his left hand. "You're pretty fast. Hostage scenario?"

"I try to train for the worst possible situation."

"Your little girl." Murray nodded. They all did that, because the hostage had to be important enough in your mind. "Well, you got him. Show me again," the Director ordered. He wanted to watch O'Day's technique. There was always something to learn. After the second iteration, there was one ragged hole in the target's notional forehead. It was actually rather intimidating for Murray, though he considered himself an expert marksman. "I need to practice more."

O'Day relaxed his routine now. If you could do it with your first shot of the day—and he'd done it with all four—you still had it figured out. Two minutes and twenty shots later, the target's head was an annulus. Murray, in the next lane, was busy in the standard Jeff Cooper technique, two rapid shots into the chest, followed by a slower aimed round into the head. When both were satisfied that their targets were dead, it was time to contemplate the day.

"Anything new?" the Director asked.

"No, sir. More follow-up interviews on the JAL case are coming in, but nothing startling."

"What about Kealty?"

O'Day shrugged. He was not allowed to interfere with the OPR investigation, but he did get daily summaries. A case of this magnitude had to be reported to somebody, and though supervision of the case was entirely under the purview of OPR, the information developed also went to the Director's office, filtered through his lead roving inspector. "Dan, enough people went in and out of Secretary Hanson's office that anybody could have walked off with the letter, assuming there was one, which, our people think, there probably was. At least Hanson talked to enough people about it—or so those people tell us."

"I think that one will just blow over," Murray observed.

“GOOD MORNING, Mr. President.”

Another day in the routine. The kids were off. Cathy was off. Ryan emerged from his quarters suited and tied—his jacket was buttoned, which was unusual for him, or had been until moving in here—and his shoes shined by one of the valet staff. Except that Jack still couldn’t think of this place as a home. More like a hotel, or the VIP quarters he’d had while traveling on Agency business, albeit far more ornate and with much better service.

“You’re Raman?” the President asked.

“Yes, sir,” Special Agent Aref Raman replied. He was six feet and solidly built, more a weight lifter than a runner, Jack thought, though that might come from the body armor that many of the Detail members wore. Ryan judged his age at middle thirties. Good-looking in a Mediterranean sort of way, with a shy smile and eyes as blue as SURGEON’S. “SWORDSMAN is moving,” he said into his microphone. “To the office.”

“Raman, where’s that from?” Jack asked, on the way to the elevator.

“Mother Lebanese, father Iranian, came over in ’79, when the Shah had his problems. Dad was close to the regime.”

“So what do you think of the Iraq situation?” the President asked.

“Sir, I hardly even speak the language anymore.” The agent smiled. “Now, if you want to ask me about who’s lookin’ good in the NCAA finals, I’m your man.”

“Kentucky,” Ryan said decisively. The White House elevator was old, pre—Art Deco in the interior finishings, with worn black buttons, which the President wasn’t allowed to push. Raman did that for him.

“Oregon’s going all the way. I’m never wrong, sir. Ask the guys. I won the last three pools. Nobody’ll bet against me anymore. The finals will be Oregon and Duke—my school—and Oregon will win by six or eight. Well, maybe less if Maceo Rawlings has a good night,” Raman added.

“What did you study at Duke?”

“Pre-law, but I decided I didn’t want to be a lawyer. Actually I decided that criminals shouldn’t have any rights, and so I figured I’d rather be a cop, and I joined the Service.”

“Married?” Ryan wanted to know the people around him. At one level, it was mere good manners. At another, these people were sworn to defend his life, and he couldn’t treat them like employees.

“Never found the right girl—at least not yet.”

“Muslim?”

“My parents were, but after I saw all the trouble religion caused

them, well"—he grinned—"if you ask around, they'll tell you my religion is ACC basketball. I never miss a Duke game on the TV. Damned shame Oregon's so tough this year. But that's one thing you can't change."

The President chuckled at the truth of that statement. "Aref, you said, your first name?"

"Actually, they call me Jeff. Easier to pronounce," Raman explained as the door opened. The agent positioned himself in the center of the doors, blocking a direct line of sight to POTUS. A member of the Uniform Division was standing there, along with two more of the Detail, all of them known by sight to Raman. With a nod, he walked out, with Ryan in tow, and the group turned west, past the side corridor that led to the bowling alley and the carpenter shops.

"Okay, Jeff, an easy day planned," Ryan told him unnecessarily. The Secret Service knew his daily schedule before he did.

"Easy for us, maybe."

They were waiting for him in the Oval Office. The Foleys, Bert Vasco, Scott Adler, and one other person stood when the President walked in. They'd already been scanned for weapons and nuclear material.

"Ben!" Jack said. He paused to set his early morning papers on the desk, and joined his guests.

"Mr. President," Dr. Ben Goodley replied with a smile.

"Ben's prepared the morning brief," Ed Foley explained.

Since not all of the morning visitors were part of the inner circle, Raman would stay in the room, lest somebody leap across the coffee table and try to strangle the President. A person didn't need a firearm to be lethal. A few weeks of study and practice could turn any reasonably fit person into enough of a martial-arts expert to kill an unwary victim. For that reason, members of the Detail carried not only pistols, but also Asps, police batons made of telescoping steel segments. Raman watched as this Goodley—a carded national intelligence officer—handed out the briefing sheets. Like many members of the Secret Service, he got to hear nearly everything. The "EYES-ONLY PRESIDENT" sticker on a particularly sensitive folder didn't really mean that. There was almost always someone else in the room, and while the Detail members professed even among themselves not to pay any attention to such things, what that really meant was that they didn't discuss them very much. Not hearing and not remembering were something else. Cops were not trained or paid to forget things, much less to ignore them.

In that sense, Raman thought, he was the perfect spy. Trained by the United States of America to be a law enforcement officer, he had performed brilliantly in the field, mainly in counterfeiting cases. He

was a proficient marksman, and a very organized thinker—a trait revealed all the way back in his schooling; he'd graduated from Duke summa cum laude, with nothing less than an A grade on his transcript, plus he'd been a varsity wrestler. It was useful for an investigator to have a good memory, and he did. Photographic, in fact, a talent which had attracted the Detail leadership to him early on, because the agents protecting the President needed to be able to recognize a particular face instantly from the scores of photographs which they carried when the Boss was out pressing flesh. During the Fowler administration, as a junior agent gazetted to the Detail from the St. Louis field office to cover a fundraising dinner, he'd ID'd and detained a suspected presidential stalker who'd turned out to have a .22 automatic in his pocket. Raman had pulled the man from the crowd so quietly and skillfully that the subject's processing into the Missouri state mental-health system had never made the papers, which was just what they tried to achieve. The young agent had "Detail" written all over him, the then-Director of the United States Secret Service had decided on reviewing the case, and so Raman had been transferred over soon after Roger Durling's ascension to the Presidency. As a junior member of the Detail he'd stood boring hours on post, run alongside the Presidential limousine, and gradually worked his way up rather rapidly for a young man. He'd worked the punishing hours without complaints, only commenting from time to time that, as an immigrant, he knew how important America was, and as his distant ancestors might have served Darius the Great as one of the "Immortals," so he relished doing the same for his new country. It was so easy, really, much easier than the task his brother—ethnic, not biological—had performed in Baghdad a short time earlier. Americans, whatever they might say to pollsters, truly loved immigrants in their large and foolish hearts. They knew much, and they were always learning, but one thing they had yet to learn was that you could never look into *another* human heart.

"No assets we can use on the ground," Mary Pat was saying.

"Good intercepts, though," Goodley went on. "NSA is really coming through for us. The whole Ba'ath leadership is in the jug, and I don't think they're going to be coming out, at least not standing up."

"So Iraq is fully decapitated?"

"A military ruling council, colonels and junior generals. Afternoon TV showed them with an Iranian mullah. No accident," Bert Vasco said positively. "The least that comes out of this is a rapprochement with Iran. At most, the two countries merge. We'll know that in a couple of days—two weeks at the outside."

"The Saudis?" Ryan asked.

"They're having kittens, Jack," Ed Foley replied at once. "I talked

with Prince Ali less than an hour ago. They cobbled together an aid package that would just about have paid off *our* national debt in an effort to buy the new Iraqi regime—did it overnight, biggest goddamned letter of credit ever drafted—but nobody's answering the phone. That has 'em shook in Riyadh. Iraq's always been willing to talk business. Not now."

And that would be what frightened all the states on the Arabian Peninsula, Ryan knew. It wasn't well appreciated in the West that the Arabs were businessmen. Not ideologues, not fanatics, not lunatics, but businessmen. Theirs was a maritime trading culture that predated Islam, a fact remembered in America only in remakes of Sinbad the Sailor movies. In that sense they were very like Americans, despite the difference in language, clothing, and religion, and just like Americans they had trouble understanding people who were not willing to do business, to reach an accommodation, to make some sort of exchange. Iran was such a country, changed from the previous state of affairs under the Shah by the Ayatollah Khomeini into a theocracy. *They're not like us* was the universal point of concern for any culture. *They're not like us ANYMORE* would be a very frightening development for Gulf States who'd always known that, despite political differences, there had always been an avenue of commonality and communication.

"Tehran?" Jack asked next. Ben Goodley took the question unto himself.

"Official news broadcasts welcome the development—the routine offers of peace and renewed friendship, but nothing beyond that at this point," Goodley said. "Officially, that is. Unofficially, we're getting all sorts of intercept traffic. People in Baghdad are asking for instructions, and people in Tehran are giving them. For the moment they're saying to let the situation develop apace. The revolutionary courts come next. We're seeing a lot of Islamic clergy on TV, preaching love and freedom and all that nice stuff. When the trials start, and people start backing into walls to pose for rifle-fire, then there's going to be a total vacuum."

"Then Iran takes over, probably, or maybe runs Iraq like a puppet on a string," Vasco said, flipping through the latest set of intercepts. "Goodley may be right. I'm reading this SIGINT stuff for the first time. Excuse me, Mr. President, but I've been concentrating on the political side. This stuff is more revealing than I expected it to be."

"You're saying it means *more* than I think it does?" the NIO asked.

Vasco nodded without looking up. "I think it might. This is not good," the desk officer opined darkly.

"Later today, the Saudis are going to ask us to hold their hand," Secretary Adler pointed out. "What do I tell them?"

Ryan's reply was so automatic that it startled him. "Our

commitment to the Kingdom is unchanged. If they need us, we're there, now and forever." And with two sentences, Jack thought a second later, he had committed the full power and credibility of the United States of America to a non-democratic country seven thousand miles away. Fortunately, Adler made it easier for him.

"I fully agree, Mr. President. We can't do anything else." Everyone else nodded agreement, even Ben Goodley. "We can do that quietly. Prince Ali understands, and he can make the King understand that we're not kidding."

"Next stop," Ed Foley said, "we have to brief Tony Bretano in. He's pretty good, by the way. Knows how to listen," the DCI-designate informed the President. "You plan to do a cabinet meeting about this?"

Ryan shook his head. "No. I think we should play this one cool. America is observing regional developments with interest, but there's nothing for us to get excited about. Scott, you handle the press briefing through your people."

"Right," SecState replied.

"Ben, what do they have you doing at Langley now?"

"Mr. President, they went and made me a senior watch officer for the Operations Center."

"Good briefing," Ryan told the younger man, then turned to the DCI. "Ed, he works for me now. I need an NIO who speaks my language."

"Gee, do I at least get a decent relief pitcher back?" Foley replied with a laugh. "This kid's a good prospect, and I expect to be in the pennant race this fall."

"Nice try, Ed. Ben, your hours just got worse. For now, you can have my old office around the corner. The food's a lot better here," the President promised.

Throughout it all, Aref Raman stood still, leaning against the white-painted walls while his eyes flickered automatically from one visitor to another. He was trained not to trust anyone, with the possible exceptions of the President's wife and kids. No one else. Of course, they all trusted him, including the ones who had trained him not to trust anyone, because everybody had to trust somebody.

It was just a matter of timing, really, and one of the things his American education and professional training had conferred upon him was the patience to wait for the chance to make the proper move. But other events on the other side of the globe were bringing that moment closer. Behind expressionless eyes Raman thought that maybe he needed guidance. His mission was no longer the random event he'd promised to fulfill twenty years earlier. That he could do almost any time, but he was *here* now, and while anyone could kill, and while a

dedicated person could kill almost anyone, only a truly skilled assassin could kill the proper person at the proper moment in pursuit of a larger goal. So deliciously ironic, he thought, that while his mission came from God, every factor in its accomplishment had come directly from the Great Satan himself, embodied in the life of one man who could best serve Allah by departing this life at just the proper moment. Picking the moment would be the hard part, and so after twenty years, Raman decided that he might just have to break cover after all. There was a danger in that, but, he judged, a slight one.

"YOUR OBJECTIVE IS a bold one," Badrayn said calmly. Inwardly he was anything but calm. It was breathtaking.

"The meek do not inherit the earth," Daryaei replied, having for the first time explained his mission in life to someone outside his own inner circle of clerics.

It was a struggle for both of them to act like gamblers around a poker table, while they discussed a plan that would change the shape of the world. For Daryaei it was a concept toward which he'd labored and thought and planned for more than a generation, the culmination of everything he'd ever done in life, the fulfillment of a dream, and such a goal as to put his name aside that of the Prophet himself—if he achieved it. The unification of Islam. That was how he typically expressed it in his inner circle.

Badrayn merely saw the power. The creation of a new superstate centered on the Persian Gulf, a state with immense economic power, a huge population, self-sustaining in every detail and able to expand across Asia and Africa, perhaps fulfilling the wishes of the Prophet Mohammed, though he didn't pretend to know what the founder of his religion would or would not have wished. He left that to men like Daryaei. For Badrayn the game was simply power, and religion or ideology merely defined the team identities. His team was this one because of where he'd been born, and because he'd once looked closely at Marxism and decided it was insufficient to the task.

"It is possible," Badrayn said after a few more seconds of contemplation.

"The historical moment is unique. The Great Satan"—he didn't really like to fall into ideological cant in discussions of statecraft, but sometimes there was no avoiding it—"is weak. The Lesser Satan is destroyed, with its Islamic republics ready to fall into our laps. They need an identity, and what better identity could there be than the Holy Faith?"

And that was entirely true, Badrayn agreed with a silent nod. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its replacement with the so-called

Confederation of Independent States had merely generated a vacuum not yet filled. The southern tier of "republics" were still economically tied to Moscow, rather like a series of carts hitched to a dying horse. They'd always been rebellious, unsettled mini-nations whose religion had set them apart from the atheist empire, and now they were all struggling to establish their own economic identity so that they could once and for all separate themselves from the center of a dead country to which they'd never truly belonged. But they couldn't sustain themselves economically, not in the modern age. They all needed another patron, another guide into the new century. That new leadership had to mean money, and lots of it, plus the unifying banner of religion and culture long denied them by Marxism-Leninism. In return, the republics would provide land and people. And resources.

"The obstacle is America, but you do not need me to tell you that," Badrayn observed unnecessarily. "And America is too large and powerful to destroy."

"I've met this Ryan. But first, you tell me what you think of him."

"He's no fool, and no coward," Badrayn said judiciously. "He has shown physical bravery, and he is well versed in intelligence operations. He is well educated. The Saudis trust him, as do the Israelis." Those two countries mattered at this moment. So did a third: "The Russians know and respect him."

"What else?"

"Do not underestimate him. Do not underestimate America. We have both seen what happens to those who do," Badrayn said.

"But America's current state?"

"What I have seen tells me that President Ryan is working hard to reconstitute the government of his country. It is a huge task, but America is a fundamentally stable country."

"What about the problem in the succession?"

"This I do not understand," Badrayn admitted. "I haven't seen enough news reports to understand the issues."

"I have met Ryan," Daryaei said, finally revealing his own thoughts. "He is an assistant, nothing more. He appears strong, but is not. Were he a man of strength, he would deal with this Kealty directly. The man commits treason, does he not? But this is not important. Ryan is one man. America is one country. Both can be attacked, at the same time, from more than one direction."

"Lion and hyenas," Badrayn noted, then explained himself. Daryaei was so pleased with the idea that he didn't object to his own place in the metaphor.

"Not one great attack, but many small ones?" the cleric asked.

"It has worked before."

"And what of many large ones? Against America, and against Ryan.

For that matter, what if Ryan were to fall? What would happen then, my young friend?"

"Within their system of government, chaos would result. But I would counsel caution. I would also recommend allies. The more hyenas and the more directions, the better to harry the lion. As for attacking Ryan personally," Badrayn went on, wondering why his host had said that, and wondering if it was an error, "the President of the United States is a difficult target, well protected and well informed."

"So I am told," Daryaei replied, behind dark eyes devoid of expression. "What other countries would you recommend as our allies?"

"Have you paid close attention to the conflict between Japan and America?" Badrayn asked. "Did you ever wonder why some large dogs did not bark at all?" It was a funny thing about large dogs. They were always hungry. More than once now, however, Daryaei had talked about Ryan and his protection. One dog was the hungriest of all. It would make for an interesting pack.

"MAYBE IT JUST malfunctioned."

The Gulfstream representatives were sitting in a room with Swiss civil-aviation officials, along with the chief of flight operations of the corporation which owned the jets. His written records showed that the aircraft had been properly maintained by a local firm. All parts had come from the approved suppliers. The Swiss corporation which did the maintenance had ten years of accident-free history behind it, regulated in turn by the same government agency which oversaw the investigation.

"It wouldn't be the first time," the Gulfstream rep agreed. The flight-data recorder was a robust piece of hardware, but they didn't always survive crashes, because every crash was different. A careful search by USS *Radford* had failed to turn up the locator pings. Absent that, the bottom was too deep for an undirected search, and then there was the issue of the Libyans, who didn't want ships poking around their waters. Had the missing aircraft been an airliner, the issue might have been pushed, but a business jet with a crew of two and three reported passengers—one of them with a deadly plague—wasn't important enough. "Without the data, there isn't much to be said. Engine failure was reported, and that could mean bad fuel, bad maintenance—"

"Please!" the maintenance contractor objected.

"I'm speaking theoretically," Gulfstream pointed out. "Or even pilot error of some sort or other. Without hard data, our hands are pretty well tied."

“The pilot had four thousand hours in type. The copilot had over two thousand,” the owner’s representative said for the fifth time this afternoon.

They were all thinking the same thing. The aircraft manufacturer had a superb safety record to defend. There were relatively few airliner manufacturers for the big carriers to choose from, and as important as safety was for them, it was even more so for the builders of business jets, for whom competition was stiffer. The buyers of such corporate toys had long memories, and without hard information to hang their hats on about the few crashes which took place, all they remembered was a missing aircraft with missing passengers.

The maintenance contractor had no wish to be firmly associated with a fatal accident, either. Switzerland had a lot of airfields, and a lot of business aircraft. A bad maintainer could lose business as well, not to mention the trouble from the Swiss government for violating its stringent civil-aviation rules.

The corporate owner had the least to lose in terms of reputation, but *amour propre* would not allow him to assume responsibility without real cause.

And there was no real cause for any of them to take the blame, not without the flight-data recorder. The men looked at one another around the table, thinking the same thought: good people *did* make mistakes, but rarely did they wish to admit them, and never when they didn’t have to. The government representative had gone over the written records and been satisfied that the paperwork was all correct. Beyond that there was nothing any of them could do except talk to the engine manufacturer and try to get a sample of the fuel. The former was easy. The latter was not. In the end, they’d know little more than they knew now. Gulfstream might lose a plane or two in sales. The maintenance contractor would undergo increased government scrutiny. The corporation would have to buy a new jet. To show loyalty, it would be another G-class business jet and with the same maintenance contractor. That would please everybody, even the Swiss government.

BEING A ROVING Inspector paid more than being a street agent, and it was more fun than sitting behind a desk all the time, but Pat O‘Day still chafed at spending most of his day reading over written reports generated by agents or their secretaries. More junior people cross-checked the data for inconsistencies, though he did the same, keeping careful penciled notes on his own yellow pad, which his secretary would collate for his summary reports to Director Murray. Real agents, O’Day believed implicitly, didn’t type. Well, that’s what his

instructors at Quantico would have said, probably. He finished his meetings early down at Buzzard's Point and decided that his office in the Hoover Building didn't need him. The investigation was indeed at the point of diminishing returns. The "new" information was all interviews, every single one of which confirmed information already developed and already verified by voluminous cross-referenced documents.

"I've always hated this part," ADIC Tony Caruso said. It was the point when the United States Attorney had everything he needed to get a conviction, but, being a lawyer, never had enough—as though the best way to convict a hood were to bore the jury to death.

"Not even a sniff of contrary data. This one's in the bag, Tony." The two men had long been friends. "Time for me to get something new and exciting."

"Lucky you. How's Megan?"

"New day-care center, started today. Giant Steps, on Ritchie Highway."

"Same one," Caruso observed. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

"Huh?"

"The Ryan kids—oh, you weren't here back then when those ULA bastards hit it."

"She didn't—the owner of the place didn't say anything about . . . well, I guess she wouldn't, would she?"

"Our brethren are a little tight-assed about that. I imagine the Service gave her a long brief on what she can and cannot say."

"Probably an agent or two helping with the finger painting." O'Day thought for a second. There was a new clerk at the 7-Eleven across the street. He'd remembered thinking when he'd gotten his coffee that the guy was a little too clean-cut for that early in the morning. Hmph. Tomorrow he'd eyeball the guy for a weapon, as the clerk had surely done with him already, and out of professional courtesy he'd show his ID, along with a wink and a nod.

"Kinda overqualified," Caruso agreed. "But what the hell, can't hurt to know there's coverage where your kid is."

"You bet, Tony." O'Day stood. "Anyway, I think I'll go and pick her up."

"Headquarters puke. Eight-hour day," the Assistant Director in Charge of the Washington Field Office grumped.

"You're the one wanted to be a bigshot, Don Antonio."

It was always liberating to leave work. The air smelled fresher on the way out than on the way in. He walked out to his truck, noting that it hadn't been touched or stolen. There was an advantage to dirt and mud. He shed his suit jacket—O'Day rarely bothered with an overcoat—and slipped into his ten-year-old leather one, a Navy-type

flight jacket worn just enough to be comfortable. The tie was disposed of next. Ten minutes later, he was outbound on Route 50 toward Annapolis, just ahead of the bow wave of government commuters, and listening to C&W on the radio. Traffic was especially favorable today, and just before the hourly news he pulled into the Giant Steps parking lot, this time looking for official cars. The Secret Service was fairly clever about that. Like the Bureau, its automobiles were randomly tagged, and they'd even learned not to go with the obvious cheap-body, neutral paint motif that fingered so many unmarked cop cars. He spotted two even so, and confirmed his suspicions by parking next to one and looking down inside to see the radio. That done, he wondered about his own disguise, and decided to see how good *they* were, then realized that if they were halfway competent, they'd already checked out his ID through the documents he'd handed over to Mrs. Daggett that very morning, or more likely even before. There was a considerable professional rivalry between the FBI and the USSS. In fact, the former had been started with a handful of Secret Service agents. But the FBI had also grown much larger, and along the way accumulated far more corporate experience in criminal investigation. Which was not to say the Service wasn't damned good, though as Tony Caruso had truthfully observed, very tight-assed. Well, they were probably the world's foremost baby-sitters.

He walked across the parking lot with his jacket zipped up, and spotted a big guy just inside the door. Would he stay covert? O'Day walked right past him, just another father in to pick up his munchkin. Inside, it was just a matter of checking out the clothes and the earpieces. Yep, two female agents wearing long smocks, and under them would be SigSauer 9mm automatics.

"Daddy!" Megan hooted, leaping to her feet. Next to her was another child of similar age and looks. The inspector headed over, bending down to look at the day's crayoning.

"Excuse me." And he felt light hand pressure through the jacket, on his service automatic.

"You know who I am," he said without turning.

"Oh! I do now." And then O'Day recognized the voice. He turned to see Andrea Price.

"Demoted?" He stood to look her in the face. The two female agents mingled with the kids were also watching him closely, alerted by the bulge under the leather jacket. Not bad, O'Day thought. They'd had to look closely; the bulk of the leather was good concealment. Both had their gun hands off whatever educational task they'd been performing, and the looks in their eyes would appear casual only to the unschooled.

"Sweep. Checking out arrangements for all the kids," she explained.

"This is Katie," Megan said, introducing her new friend. "And that's my daddy."

"Well, hello, Katie." He bent down again to shake her hand, then stood again. "Is she . . . ?"

"SANDBOX, First Toddler of the United States," Price confirmed.

"And one across the street?" Business first.

"Two, relays."

"She looks like her mom," Pat said of Katie Ryan. And just to be polite he pulled out his official ID and tossed it to the nearest female agent, Marcella Hilton.

"You want to be a little careful testing us, okay?" Price asked.

"Your man at the door knew who I was coming in. He looks like he's been around the block."

"Don Russell, and he has, but—"

"But ain't no such thing as 'too careful,' " Inspector O'Day agreed. "Yeah, okay, I admit it, I wanted to see how careful you were. Hey, my little girl's here, too. I guess this place is a target now." *Damn,* he didn't say aloud.

"So do we pass?"

"One across the street, three I can see here. I bet you have three more camped out within a hundred yards, want me to look for the Suburban and the long guns?"

"Look hard. We've got them well concealed." She didn't mention the one in the building he hadn't spotted.

"I bet you do, Agent Price," O'Day agreed, catching the clue and looking around some more. There were two disguised TV cameras that must have gone in recently. That also explained the faint smell of paint, which in turn explained the lack of little hand-prints on the walls. The building was probably wired like a pinball machine. "I must admit, you guys are pretty smooth. Good," he concluded.

"Anything new on the crash?"

Pat shook his head. "Not really. We went over some additional interviews at WFO today. The only inconsistencies are too minor to count for much of anything. The Mounties are doing a hell of a job for us, by the way. So are the Japs. I think they've talked to everybody from Sato's kindergarten teacher on up. They even turned two stewardesses he was playing with on the side. This one's in the bag, Price."

"Andrea," she replied.

"Pat." And they both smiled.

"What do you carry?"

"Smith 1076. Better than that 9mm mouse gun you guys pack." This was delivered with a somewhat superior attitude. O'Day believed in making big holes, to date only in targets, but in people if necessary.

The Secret Service had its own weapons policy, and in that area he was sure the Bureau had better ideas. She didn't bite.

"Do us a favor? Next time you come in, show your ID to the agent out front. Might not always be the same one." She didn't even ask him to leave it in his truck. Damn, there was professional courtesy.

"So, how's he doing?"

"SWORDSMAN?"

"Dan—Director Murray—thinks the world of him. They go back a ways. So do Dan and I."

"Tough job, but you know—Murray's right. I've met worse men. He's smarter than he lets on, too."

"The times I've been around him, he listens well."

"Better than that, he asks questions." They both turned when a kid yelled, swept the room at the same time and in the same way, then turned back to the two little girls, who were sharing crayons for their respective works of art. "Yours and ours seem to get along."

Ours, Pat thought. That said it all. The big old bruiser at the door, Russell, she'd said. He'd be the chief of the sub-detail, and sure as hell that was one experienced agent. They'd have selected younger ones, both women, for inside work, the better to blend in. They'd be good, but not as good as he was. *Ours* was the key word, though. Like lions around their cubs, or just one cub in this case. O'Day wondered how he'd handle this job. It would be boring, just standing post like that, but you couldn't allow yourself to get bored. That would be a fight. He'd done his share of "discreet surveillance" assignments, quite a feat for one of his size, but this would be far worse. Even so, a cop's eye saw the difference between them and the other preschool teachers in the room.

"Andrea, looks to me like your people know their job. Why so many?"

"I know we have this one overmanned." Price tilted her head. "We're still figuring this one out. Hey, we took a big hit on the Hill, y'know? Ain't gonna be any more, not on my watch, not while I run the Detail, and if the press makes noise about it, fuck 'em." She even talked like a real cop.

"Ma'am, that's just fine with me. Well, with your permission, I have to go home and make cheese and macaronis." He looked down. Megan was about finished with her masterpiece. The two little girls were difficult to tell apart, at least for the casual observer. That was distantly worrisome, but that was also the reason the Service was here.

"Where do you practice?" He didn't have to say practice *what.*

"There's a range in the old Post Office building, convenient to the White House. Every week," she told him. "There's not an agent here

who's short of 'expert,' and I'll put Don up against anybody in the world."

"Really." O'Day's eyes sparkled. "One day we'll have to see."

"Your place or mine?" Price asked, with a twinkle of her own.

"MR. PRESIDENT, Mr. Golovko on three." That was the direct line. Sergey Nikolayevich was showing off again.

Jack pushed the button. "Yes, Sergey?"

"Iran."

"I know," the President said.

"How much?" the Russian asked, his bags already packed to go home.

"We'll know in ten days or so for sure."

"Agreed. I offer cooperation."

This was getting to be habit forming, Jack thought, but it was always something to think over first. "I will discuss that with Ed Foley. When will you be back home?"

"Tomorrow."

"Call me then." Amazing that he could speak so efficiently with a former enemy. He'd have to get Congress trained that way, the President thought with a smile. Ryan stood from his desk and headed into the secretaries' room. "How about some munchies before my next appointment—"

"Hello, Mr. President," Price said. "Have a minute?"

Ryan waved her in while his number-two secretary called the mess. "Yes?"

"Just wanted to tell you, I looked over the security arrangements for your children. It's pretty tight." If this was supposed to please POTUS, he didn't show it, Andrea thought. But that was understandable. *Hey, we have enough bodyguards on your children.* What a world it was. Two minutes later, she was talking with Raman, who was ready to head off duty, having arrived in the White House at 5:00 A.M. There was, as usual, nothing to report. It had been a quiet day in the House.

The younger agent walked out to his car and drove off the compound, first showing his pass to the gate guards and waiting for the fortified gate to open—a nine-inch-square post held the leaves in place, and looked strong enough to stop a dump truck. From there he made his way through the concrete barricades on Pennsylvania Avenue—which until fairly recently had been a public street. He turned west and headed toward Georgetown, where he had a loft apartment, but this time he didn't go all the way home. Instead he turned onto Wisconsin Avenue, then right again to park.

It was vaguely amusing that the man should be a rug merchant. So

many Americans thought that Iranians became either terrorists, rug merchants, or impolite physicians. This one had left Persia—but most Americans didn't connect Persian rugs with Iran, as though they were two distinct nations—more than fifteen years before. On his wall was a photograph of his son who, he told those who asked, had been killed in the Iran-Iraq war. That was quite true. He also told those who expressed interest that he hated the government of his former country. That was not true. He was a sleeper agent. He'd never had a single contact with anyone even connected at third hand with Tehran. Maybe he'd been checked out. More likely he had not. He belonged to no association, didn't march, speak out, or otherwise do anything but conduct a prosperous business—like Raman, he didn't even attend a mosque. He had, in fact, never met Raman, and so when the man walked in the front door, his interest only concerned which of his wide selection of handmade rugs the man might want. Instead, after determining that there was no one else in the shop at the moment, his visitor went directly to the counter.

"The picture on the wall. He looks like you. Your son?"

"Yes," the man replied with a sadness which had never left him, promises of Paradise or not. "He was killed in the war. "

"Many lost sons in that conflict. Was he a religious boy?"

"Does it matter now?" the merchant asked, blinking hard.

"It always matters," Raman said, in a voice that was totally casual.

With that, both men went over to the nearer of two rug piles. The dealer flipped a few corners.

"I am in position. I require instructions on timing." Raman didn't have a code name, and the code phrase he'd just exchanged was only known to three men. The dealer didn't know anything beyond that, except to repeat the nine words he'd just heard to someone else, then wait for a reply, and pass that along.

"Would you mind filling out a card for my client list?"

That Raman did, putting down the name and address of a real person. He'd picked the name in the phone book—actually a crisscross directory right in the White House, which had made it easy to select a number that was one digit off his own. A tick mark over the sixth digit told the dealer where to add 1 to 3 to get 4 and so complete the call. It was excellent tradecraft, taught to his Savak instructor by an Israeli more than two decades earlier and not forgotten, just as neither man from the holy city of Qom had forgotten much of anything.

22

TIME ZONES

THE SIZE OF THE EARTH and the location of the trouble spots made for great inconvenience. America was going to sleep when other parts of the world were just waking up to a new day, a situation made even more difficult by the fact that the people eight or nine hours ahead were also the ones making decisions to which the rest of the world had to react. Added to that was the fact that America's vaunted CIA had little in the way of agents or officers to predict what was happening. That left to STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL the duty of reporting mainly what the local press and TV were saying. And so while the U.S. President slept, people struggled to collect and analyze information which, when he saw it, would be late by a working day, and the analysis of which might or might not be accurate. Even then, the best of the spooks in Washington were in the main too senior to be stuck with night duty they had families, after all—and so they also had to be brought up to speed before they could make their own pronouncements, which involved discussion and debate, further delaying presentation of vital national-security information. In military terms it was called "having the initiative"—making the first move, physical, political, or psychological. How much the better if the other side in the race started off a third of a day behind.

Things were slightly better in Moscow, which was only an hour off Tehran time, and in the same time zone with Baghdad, but here for once the RVS, successor to the KGB, was in the same unhappy position as CIA, with nearly all of its networks wiped out in both countries. But for Moscow the problems were also somewhat closer to home, as Sergey Golovko would find out when his aircraft landed at Sheremetyevo.

The largest problem at the moment would be reconciliation. Morning TV in Iraq announced that the new government in Baghdad had informed the United Nations that all international inspection teams were to be given full freedom to visit any facility in the country, entirely without interference—in fact, Iraq requested that the inspections be carried out as rapidly as possible—that full cooperation with any requests would be instantly provided; that the new Baghdad

government was desirous of removing any obstacle to full restoration of their country's international trade. For the moment, the neighboring country of Iran, the announcement said, would begin trucking in foodstuffs in accordance with Islamic ancient guidelines on charity for those in need; this in anticipation of the former nation's willingness to reenter the community of nations. Video copied at PALM BOWL from Basra TV showed the first convoy of trucks carrying wheat down the twisting Shahabad Highway and crossing into Iraqi territory at the foot of the mountains which separated the two countries. Further pictures showed Iraqi border guards removing their obstacles and waving the trucks through, while their Iranian counterparts stood peacefully aside on their side of the border, no weapons in evidence.

At Langley, people ran calculations on the number of trucks, the tonnage of their cargo, and the number of loaves of bread which would result. They concluded that shiploads of wheat would have to be delivered to make more than a symbolic difference. But symbols *were* important, and the ships were even now being loaded, a set of satellite overheads determined. United Nations officials in Geneva, only three hours behind the time, received the Baghdad requests with pleasure and sent immediate orders to their inspection teams, which found Mercedes automobiles waiting for them, to be escorted to the first entries on their inspection lists by wailing police cars. Here they also found TV crews to follow them around, and friendly installation staffs, who professed delight at their newfound ability to tell all they knew and to offer suggestions on how to dismantle, first, a chemical-weapons facility disguised as an insecticide plant. Finally, *Iran* requested a special meeting of the Security Council to consider the lifting of the remaining trade sanctions, something as certain as the rising of the sun, even late, over the American East Coast. Within two weeks, the average Iraqi's diet would increase by at least five hundred calories. The psychological impact wasn't difficult to figure, and the lead country in restoring normality to the oil-rich but isolated nation was its former enemy, Iran—as always, citing religion as the motivating factor in offering aid.

"Tomorrow we will see pictures of bread being distributed for free from mosques," Major Sabah predicted. He could have added the passages from the Koran which would accompany the event, but his American colleagues were not Islamic scholars and would not have grasped the irony terribly well.

"Your estimate, sir?" the senior American officer asked.

"The two countries will unite," Sabah replied soberly. "And soon."

There was no particular need to ask why the surviving Iraqi weapons plants were being exposed. Iran had all it needed.

THERE IS NO such thing as magic. That was merely the word people used to explain something so cleverly done that there was no ready explanation for it, and the simplest technique employed by its practitioners was to distract the audience with one moving and obvious hand (usually in a white glove) while the other was doing something else. So it was with nations as well. While the trucks rolled, and the ships were loaded, and the diplomats were summoned, and America was waking up to figure out what was going on, it was, after all, evening in Tehran.

Badrayn's contacts were as useful as ever, and what he could not do, Daryaei could. The civilian-marked business jet lifted off from Mehrabad and turned east, heading first over Afghanistan, then Pakistan, in a two-hour flight that ended at the obscure city of Rutog near the Pakistani-Indian-Kashmiri border. The city was in the former country's Kunlun Mountains, and home to some of China's Muslim population. The border town had an air force base with some locally manufactured MiG fighters, and a single landing strip, all separate from the city's small regional airport. The location was ideal for everyone's purpose, as it was a bare 600 miles from New Delhi, though perversely the longest flight came from Beijing, nearly two thousand miles away, even though the real estate was Chinese-owned. The three aircraft landed a few minutes apart, soon after local sunset, taxied to the far end of the ramp, and parked. Military vehicles took their occupants to the ready room for the local MiG contingent. The Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei was accustomed to cleaner accommodations and, worse, he could smell the odor of cooked pork, always a part of the Chinese diet but quite nauseating to him. This he put aside. He wasn't the first of the faithful who'd had to treat with pagans and unbelievers.

The Indian Prime Minister was cordial. She'd met Daryaei before at a regional trade conference and found him withdrawn and misanthropic. That, she saw, had not changed very much.

Last to arrive was Zhang Han San, whom the Indian had met as well. He was a rotund, seemingly jolly man until one watched his eyes closely. Even his jokes were told with an aim to learn something of his companions. Of the three, he was the only one whose job was not really known to the others. It was clear, however, that he spoke with authority, and since his country was the most powerful of the three, it was not regarded as an insult that a mere minister-without-portfolio was treating with chiefs of state. The meeting was conducted in English, except for Zhang's dismissal of the general officer who'd handled the greetings.

"Please forgive me for not being here when you arrived. The . . . irregularity in protocol is sincerely regretted." Tea was served, along with some light snacks. There hadn't been time to prepare a proper meal, either.

"Not at all," Daryaei responded. "Speed makes for inconvenience. For myself, I am most grateful for your willingness to meet under such special circumstances." He turned. "And to you, Madam Prime Minister, for joining us. God's blessing on this meeting," he concluded.

"My congratulations on developments in Iraq," Zhang said, wondering if the agenda was now entirely in Daryaei's hands, so skillfully had he posed the fact that he'd convened the assembly. "It must be very satisfying after so many years of discord between your two nations."

Yes, India thought, sipping her tea. *So clever of you to murder the man in such a timely fashion.* "So how may we be of service?" she asked, thus giving Daryaei and Iran the floor, to the impassive annoyance of China.

"You've met this Ryan recently. I am interested in your impressions."

"A small man in a large job," she replied at once. "The speech he gave at the funeral, for example. It would have been better suited to a private family ceremony. For a President, bigger things are expected. At the reception later, he seemed nervous and uneasy, and his wife is arrogant—a physician, you see. They often are."

"I found him the same when we met, some years ago," Daryaei agreed.

"And yet he controls a great country," Zhang observed.

"Does he?" Iran asked. "Is America still great? For where comes the greatness of a nation, except in the strengths of its leaders?" And that, the other two knew at once, was the agenda.

"JESUS," RYAN WHISPERED to himself, "this is a lonely place." The thought kept returning to him, all the more so when alone in this office with its curving walls and molded three-inch doors. He was using his reading glasses all the time now—Cathy's recommendation—but that merely slowed down the headaches. It wasn't as though he were a stranger to reading. Every job he'd held in the past fifteen years had required it, but the continual headaches were something new. Maybe he should talk to Cathy or another doc about it? No. Ryan shook his head. It was just job stress, and he just had to learn to deal with it.

Sure, it's just stress. And cancer is just a disease.

The current task was politics. He was reading over a position paper

prepared by the political staffers across the street in the OEOB. It was a source of amusement, if not consolation, that they didn't know what to advise him. Ryan had never belonged to a political party. He'd always registered himself as an independent, and that had managed to keep him from getting solicitation letters from the organized parties, though he and Cathy had always ticked the box on their tax returns to contribute their one dollar to the government slush fund. But the President was not only supposed to be a member of a party—but also the *leader* of that party. The parties were even more thoroughly decapitated than the three branches of government were. Each of them still had a chairman, neither of whom knew what to do at the moment. For a few days, it had been assumed that Ryan was a member of the same party as Roger Durling, and the truth had only been discovered by the press a few days before, to the collective *oh, shit!* of the Washington establishment. For the ideological mavens of the federal city, it was rather like asking what 2 + 2 equaled, and finding out that the answer was, "Chartreuse." His position paper was predictably chaotic, the product of four or so professional political analysts, and you could tell who had written the different paragraphs, which resolved into a multi-path tug of war. Even his intelligence staff did better than this, Jack told himself, tossing the paper into the out basket and wishing, again, for a cigarette. That was stress talking, too, he knew.

But he still had to go out to the *hustings,* a word whose meaning he'd never learned, and *campaign* for people, or at least give speeches. Or something. The position paper's guidance hadn't exactly been clear on that. Having already shot himself in the foot on the issue of abortion—higher up and more to the centerline, Arnie van Damm had remarked acidly the previous day, to reinforce his earlier lesson—now Ryan would have to make his political stance clear on a multitude of issues: affirmative action at one end of the alphabet, and welfare at the other, with taxes, the environment, and God only knew what else in between. Once he'd decided where he stood on such things, Callie Weston would write a series of speeches for him to deliver from Seattle to Miami and God only knew where else in between. Hawaii and Alaska were left out because they were small states in terms of political importance, and poles apart ideologically, anyway. They would only confuse matters, or so the position paper told him.

"Why can't I just stay here and work, Arnie?" Ryan asked his arriving chief of staff.

"Because out there is work, Mr. President." Van Damm took his seat to commence the latest class in Presidency 101. "Because, as you put it, 'It's a leadership function'—did I get that right?" Arnie asked with a sardonic growl. "And leading means getting out with the troops, or, in

this case, the citizens. Are we clear on that, Mr. President?"

"Are you enjoying this?" Jack closed his eyes and rubbed them under the glasses. He hated the goddamned glasses, too.

"About as much as you are." Which was an altogether fair comment.

"Sorry."

"Most people who come here genuinely like escaping from this museum and meeting real people. Of course, it makes people like Andrea nervous. They'd probably agree with keeping you here all the time. But it already feels like a prison, doesn't it?" Arnie asked.

"Only when I'm awake."

"So get out. Meet people. Tell them what you think, tell them what you want. Hell, they might even listen. They might even tell you what *they* think, and maybe *you* will learn something from it. In any case, you can't *be* President and not do it."

Jack lifted the position paper he'd just finished. "Did you read this thing?"

Arnie nodded. "Yep."

"It's confusing garbage," Ryan said, quite surprised.

"It's a political document. Since when is politics consistent or sensible?" He paused. "The people I've worked with for the last twenty years got this sort of thing with their mother's milk—well, they were probably all bottle babies."

"What?"

"Ask Cathy. It's one of those behavioral theories, that New Age stuff that's supposed to explain everything about everything to everybody everywhere. Politicians are all bottle babies. Mommy never nursed them, and they never bonded properly, felt rejected and all that, and so as compensation they go out and make speeches and tell people in different places the different things they want to hear so that they can get the love and devotion from strangers that their mothers denied them—not to mention the ones like Kealty, who're getting laid all the time. Properly nurtured infants, on the other hand, grow up to become —oh, doctors, I suppose, or maybe rabbis "

"What the *hell!*" the President nearly shouted. His chief of staff just grinned.

"Had you going for a second, didn't I? You know," van Damm went on, "I figured out what we really missed when we set this country up."

"Okay, I'll bite," Jack said, eyes still closed, and finding the humor in the moment. Damn, but Arnie knew how to run a classroom.

"A court jester, make it a Cabinet post. You know, a dwarf—excuse me, a male person with an unusually large degree of vertical challenge —dressed in multicolored tights and the funny hat with bells on it. Give him a little stool in the corner—'course, there isn't a corner here, but what the hell—and every fifteen minutes or so, he's supposed to

jump up on your desk and shake his rattle in your face just to remind you that you have to take a leak every so often, just like the rest of us. Do you get it now, Jack?"

"No," the President admitted.

"You dumbass! This job can be *fun!* Getting out and seeing your citizens is *fun.* Learning what they want is important, but there's also an exhilaration to it. They *want* to love you, Jack. They *want* to support you. They *want* to know what you think. They most of all *want* to know that you're one of them—and you know what? You're the first President in one hell of a long time who really *is!* So get the hell off the bench, tell the air scouts to fire up the Big Blue Bird, and play the damned game." He didn't have to add that the schedule was already set sufficiently in stone that he couldn't back out.

"Not everybody will like what I say and believe, Arnie, and I'll be damned if I'm going to lie to people just to kiss ass or get votes or whatever."

"You expect everybody to love you?" van Damm asked, sardonic again. "Most Presidents will settle for fifty-one percent. Quite a few have had to settle for less. I tore your head off over your abortion statement—why? Because your statement was confused."

"No, it wasn't, I—"

"You going to listen to your teacher or not?"

"Go ahead," the President said.

"Start off, about forty percent of the people vote Democrat. About forty percent vote Republican. Of those eighty percent, most wouldn't change their votes if Adolf Hitler was running against Abe Lincoln—or against FDR, just to cover both sides."

"But why—"

Exasperation: "Why is the sky blue, Jack? It just is, okay? Even if you can explain why, and I suppose there is a reason some astronomer can explain, the sky is blue, and so let's just accept the fact, okay? That leaves twenty percent of the people who swing back one way or another. Maybe they're the true independents, like you. That twenty percent controls the destiny of the country, and if you want things to happen your way, those are the people you have to reach. Now, here's the funny part. Those twenty percent don't especially care what you think." This conclusion was delivered with a wry smile.

"Wait a minute—"

Arnie held up his hand. "You keep interrupting teacher. The hard eighty percent that votes the party line doesn't care much about character. They vote party because they believe in the philosophy of the party—or because Mom and Dad always voted that way; the reason doesn't really matter. It happens. It's a fact. Deal with it. Now, back to the twenty percent that *does* matter. They care less about what

you believe than they do in *you.* There is your advantage, Mr. President. Politically speaking, you have as much place in this office as a three-year-old has in a gun shop, but you have character up the ass. That's what we play on."

Ryan frowned at the "play on" part, but this time kept his peace. He nodded for the chief of staff to go on.

"Just tell the people what you believe. Make it simple. Good ideas are expressed simply and efficiently. Make it consistent. That twenty percent wants to believe that you really do believe in what you say. Jack, do you respect a man who says what he believes, even if you disagree with it?"

"Of course, that's what—"

"A man is supposed to do," Arnie said, completing the thought. "So does the twenty percent. They will respect you and support you even though in some cases they disagree with you. Why? Because they will know that you are a man of your word. And they want the occupant of this office to be a man of character and integrity. Because if things go to shit, you can depend on somebody like that to at least try to do the right thing."

"Oh."

"The rest is packaging. And don't disparage packaging and handling, okay? There's nothing wrong about being intelligent about how you get your ideas across. In the book you wrote about Halsey, *Fighting Sailor*, you chose your words carefully to present your ideas, right?" The President nodded. "So it is with these ideas—hell, these ideas are even more important, and so you have to package them with proportionately greater skill, don't you?" The lesson plan was moving along nicely, the chief of staff thought.

"Arnie, how many of those ideas will you agree with?"

"Not all of them. I think you're wrong on abortion—a woman should have the right to choose. I bet you and I disagree on affirmative action and a passel of other things, but you know, Mr. President, I've never doubted your integrity for one single minute. I can't tell you what to believe, but you know how to listen. I love this country, Jack. My family escaped from Holland, crossed the English Channel in a boat when I was three years old. I can still remember puking my guts out."

"You're Jewish?" Jack asked in surprise. He had no idea what church, if any, Arnie attended.

"No, my father was in the Resistance and got himself fingered by a German plant. We skipped just in time, or he would have been shot, and Mom and I would have ended up in the same camp as Anne Frank. Didn't do the rest of the family much good, though. His name was Willem, and after the war ended, he decided that we'd come over

here, and I grew up hearing about the old country, and how this place was different. It is different. I became what I am to protect the system. What makes America different? The Constitution, I guess. People change, governments change, ideologies change, but the Constitution stays pretty much the same. You and Pat Martin both swore an oath. So did I," van Damm went on. "Except mine was made to me, and my mom and my dad. I don't have to agree with you on all the issues, Jack. I know you'll try to do the right thing. My job, then, is to protect you so that you can. That means you have to listen, and that you'll sometimes have to do things you don't like, but this job you have, Mr. President, has its own rules. You have to follow them," the chief of staff concluded quietly.

"How have I been doing, Arnie?" Ryan asked, absorbing the largest lesson of the week.

"Not bad, but you have to do better. Kealty is still an annoyance rather than a real threat to us. Getting out and looking presidential will further marginalize him. Now, something else. As soon as you go out, go off campus, people are going to start asking you about reelection. So what will you say?"

Ryan shook his head emphatically. "I do not want this job, Arnie. Let somebody else take over when—"

"In that case, you're screwed. Nobody will take you seriously. You will not get the people in Congress you want. You will be crippled and unable to accomplish the things you're thinking about. You will become politically ineffective. America cannot afford that, Mr. President. Foreign governments—those are run by politicians, remember—will not take you seriously, and *that* has national security implications, both immediate and long-term. So what do you say when reporters ask you that question?"

The President felt like a student holding up his hand in third grade. "I haven't decided yet?"

"Correct. You are carrying out your job of reconstituting the government, and that is a question which you will address in due course. I will quietly leak the fact that you're thinking about staying on, that you feel your first duty is to the country, and when reporters ask you about *that*, you will simply repeat your original position. That sends out a message to foreign governments that they will understand and take seriously, and the American people will also understand and respect it. As a practical matter, the presidential primaries for both parties will not select the marginal candidates who didn't get wiped out on the Hill. They'll vote for uncommitted delegations. We might even want you to speak on that issue. I'll talk that one over with Callie." He didn't add that the media would just *love* that prospect. Covering two brokered, wide-open political conventions was a dream

such as few of them had ever dared to consider. Arnie was keeping it as simple as he could. No matter what positions Ryan took, as soon as he took them, no less than forty percent of the people would object to it, and probably more. The funny thing about the twenty percent he kept harping on was that they covered the whole political spectrum—like himself, less concerned with ideology than with character. Some of them would object vociferously, and in that they would be indistinguishable from whichever forty percent grouping shared that particular ideological stance, though at the end of the day they would vote the man. They always did, honest people that they were, placing country before prejudice, but joining in a process that most often honestly selected people who lacked the honor of their electors. Ryan didn't yet grasp the opportunity he held in his hands, and it was probably better that he didn't, for in thinking about it too much—perhaps at all—he would try to control the spin, which he'd never learn to do well. Even honorable men could make mistakes, and Ryan was no different from the rest. That was why people like Arnold van Damm existed, to teach and to guide from the inside and the outside of the system at the same time. He looked at his President, noting the confusion that came along with new thoughts. He was trying to make sense of it, and he'd probably succeed, because he was a good listener and a particularly adept processor of information. He wouldn't see it through to the natural conclusion, however. Only Arnie and maybe Callie Weston were able to look that far into the future. In the past weeks, van Damm had decided that Ryan had the makings of a real President. It would be his job, the chief of staff decided, to make sure that Jack stayed here.

"WE CANNOT DO that," the Indian Prime Minister protested, with the admission: "We only recently had a lesson from the American navy."

"It was a harsh one," Zhang agreed. "But it did no permanent harm. I believe the damage to your ships will be made good in two more weeks." That statement turned India's head around. She'd learned that fact herself only a few days earlier. The repairs were using up a sizable portion of the Indian navy's annual operating budget, which had been her principal concern. It wasn't every day that a foreign country, particularly one which had once been a shooting enemy, revealed its penetration of another's government.

"America is a facade, a giant with a sick heart and a damaged brain," Daryaei said. "You told us yourself, Prime Minister. President Ryan is a small man in a large job. If we make the job larger and harder, then America will lose its ability to interfere with us, for a long enough time that we can achieve our goals. The American

government is paralyzed, and will remain so for some weeks to come. All we need do is to increase the degree of paralysis."

"And how might one do that?" India asked.

"Through the simple means of stretching their commitments while at the same time disturbing their internal stability. On the one hand, mere demonstrations will suffice on your part. On the other, that is my concern. It is better, I think, that you have no knowledge of it."

Had he been able to do so, Zhang would not even have breathed at the moment, the better to control his feelings. It wasn't every day that he met someone more ruthless than himself, and, no, he didn't want to know what Daryaei had in mind. Better for another country to commit an act of war. "Do go on," he said, reaching inside his jacket for a cigarette.

"Each of us represents a country with great abilities and greater needs. China and India have large populations and need both space and resources. I will soon have resources, and the capital that comes with them, and also the ability to control how both are distributed. The United Islamic Republic will become a great power, as you are already great powers. The West has dominated the East for too long." Daryaei looked directly at Zhang. "To our north is a rotting corpse. Many millions of the Faithful are there and require liberation. There are also resources and space which your country needs. These I offer to you, if you will in turn offer the lands of the Faithful to me." Then he looked at the Indian Prime Minister. "To your south lies an empty continent with the space and resources you need. For your cooperation, I think the United Islamic Republic and the People's Republic are willing to offer their protection. From each of you I ask only quiet cooperation without direct risk."

India remarked to herself that she'd heard that one before, but her needs had not changed from before, either. China immediately came up with a means of providing a distraction that offered little in the way of danger. It had happened before. Iran—what *was* this United Islamic Republic . . . oh, of course, Zhang thought. Of course. The UIR would take all the real risks, though it would seem that those were unusually well calculated. He would do his own check of the correlation of forces on his return to Beijing.

"I ask no commitments at this point, obviously. You will need to assure yourselves that I am serious in my abilities and intentions. I do ask that you give full consideration to my proposed—informal—alliance."

"Pakistan," the Prime Minister said, foolishly tipping her hand, Zhang thought.

"Islamabad has been an American puppet for too long, and cannot be trusted," Daryaei replied at once, having thought that one through

already, though he hadn't really expected India to jump so readily. This woman hated America as much as he did. Well, the "lesson" as she'd called it must have injured her pride even more deeply than his diplomats had told him. How typical for a woman to value her pride so highly. And how weak. Excellent. He looked over at Zhang.

"Our arrangements with Pakistan are commercial only, and as such are subject to modification," China observed, equally delighted at India's weakness. It was no one's fault but her own. She'd committed forces to the field—well, the sea—in support of Japan's inefficient attack on America . . . while China had done nothing and risked nothing, and emerged from the "war" unhurt and uninvolved. Even Zhang's most cautious superiors had not objected to his play, failed though it was. And now, again, someone else would take the risks, and India would move in pacifist support, and China would have to do nothing but repeat an earlier policy that seemingly had nothing to do with this new UIR, but was rather a test of a new American President, and that sort of thing happened all the time anyway. Besides, Taiwan was still an annoyance. It was so curious. Iran, motivated by religion of all things. India, motivated by greed and anger. China, on the other hand, thought for the long term, dispassionately, seeking what really mattered, but with circumspection, as always. Iran's goal was self-evident, and if Daryaei was willing to risk war for it, then, why not watch in safety, and hope for his success? But he wouldn't commit his country now. Why appear too eager? India *was* eager, enough so to overlook the obvious: If Daryaei was successful, then Pakistan would make its peace with the new UIR, perhaps even join it, and then India would be isolated and vulnerable. Well, it was dangerous to be a vassal, and all the more so if you had aspirations to graduate to the next level—but without the wherewithal to make it happen. One had to be careful choosing allies. Gratitude among nations was a hothouse flower, easily wilted by exposure to the real world.

The Prime Minister nodded in acknowledgment of her victory over Pakistan, and said no more.

"In that case, my friends, I thank you for graciously agreeing to meet with me, and with your permission, I will take my leave." The three stood. Handshakes were exchanged, and they headed to the door. Minutes after that, Daryaei's aircraft rotated off the bumpy fighter strip. The mullah looked at the coffeepot and decided against it. He wanted a few hours of sleep before morning prayers. But first—

"Your predictions were entirely correct."

"The Russians called these things 'objective conditions.' They are and remain unbelievers, but their formulas for analysis of problems have a certain precision to them," Badrayn explained. "That is why I have learned to assemble information so carefully."

"So I have seen. Your next task will be to sketch in some operations." With that, Daryaei pushed back his seat and closed his eyes, wondering if he would dream again of dead lions.

MUCH AS HE wished for a return to clinical medicine, Pierre Alexandre didn't especially like it, at least this matter of treating people who would not survive. The former Army officer in him figured that defending Bataan had been like this. Doing all you could, firing off your best rounds, but knowing that relief would never come. At the moment, it was three AIDS patients, all homosexual men, all in their thirties, and all with less than a year to live. Alexandre was a fairly religious man, and he didn't approve of the gay lifestyle, but nobody deserved to die like this. And even if they did, he was a physician, not God sitting in judgment. Damn, he thought, walking off the elevator and speaking his patient notes into a mini—tape recorder.

It's part of a doctor's job to compartmentalize his life. The three patients on his unit would still be there tomorrow, and none of them would require emergency attention that night. Putting their problems aside was not cruel. It was just business, and their lives, were they to have any hope at all, would depend on his ability to turn away from their stricken bodies and back to researching the microsized organisms that were attacking them. He handed the tape cassette to his secretary, who'd type up the notes.

"Dr. Lorenz down in Atlanta returned your call returning his call returning your original call," she told him as he passed. As soon as he sat down, he dialed the direct line from memory.

"Yes?"

"Gus? Alex here at Hopkins. Tag," he chuckled, "you're it." He heard a good laugh at the other end of the line. Phone tag could be the biggest pain in the ass.

"How's the fishing, Colonel?"

"Would you believe I haven't had a chance yet? Ralph's working me pretty hard."

"What did you want from me—you did call first, didn't you?" Lorenz wasn't sure anymore, another sign of a man working too hard.

"Yeah, I did, Gus. Ralph tells me you're starting a new look at the Ebola structure—from that mini-break in Zaire, right?"

"Well, I would be, except somebody stole my monkeys," the director of CDC reported sourly. "The replacement shipment is due in here in a day or two, so they tell me."

"You have a break-in?" Alexandre asked. One of the troublesome developments for labs that had experimental animals was that animal-rights fanatics occasionally tried to bust in and "liberate" the animals.

Someday, if everyone wasn't careful, some screwball would walk out with a monkey under his arm and discover it had Lassa fever—or worse. How the hell were physicians supposed to study the goddamned bug without animals—and who'd ever said that a monkey was more important than a human being? The answer to that was simple: in America there were people who believed in damned near anything, and there was a constitutional right to be an ass. Because of that, CDC, Hopkins, and other research labs had armed guards, protecting monkey cages. And even *rat* cages, which really made Alex roll his eyes to the ceiling.

"No, they were highjacked in Africa. Somebody else is playing with them now. Anyway, so it kicks me back a week. What the hell. I've been looking at this little bastard for fifteen years."

"How fresh is the sample?"

"It's off the Index Patient. Positive identification, Ebola Zaire, the Mayinga strain. We have another sample from the only other patient. That one disappeared—"

"What?" Alexandre asked in immediate alarm.

"Lost at sea in a plane crash. They were evidently flying her to Paris to see Rousseau. No further cases, Alex. We dodged the bullet this time for a change," Lorenz assured his younger colleague.

Better, Alexandre thought, *to crunch in a plane crash than bleed out from that little fucker.* He still thought like a soldier, profanity and all. "Okay."

"So, why did you call?"

"Polynomials," Lorenz heard.

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked in Atlanta.

"When you map this one out, let's think about doing a mathematical analysis of the structure."

"I've been playing with that idea for a while. Right now, though, I want to examine the reproduction cycle and—"

"Exactly, Gus, the mathematical nature of the interaction. I was talking to a colleague up here—eye cutter, you believe? She said something interesting. If the amino acids have a quantifiable mathematical value, and they should, then *how* they interact with other codon strings may tell us something." Alexandre paused and heard a match striking. Gus was smoking his pipe in the office again.

"Keep going."

"Still reaching for this one, Gus. What if it's like you've been thinking, it's all an equation? The trick is cracking it, right? How do we do that? Okay, Ralph told me about your time-cycle study. I think you're onto something. If we have the virus RNA mapped, and we have the host DNA mapped, then—"

"Gotcha! The interactions will tell us something about the values of

the elements in the polynomial—”

“And that will tell us a lot about how the little fuck replicates, and just maybe—”

“How to attack it.” A pause, and a loud puff came over the phone line. “Alex, that’s pretty good.”

“You’re the best guy for the job, Gus, and you’re setting up the experiment anyway.”

“Something’s missing, though.”

“Always is.”

“Let me think about that one for a day or so and get back to you. Good one, Alex.”

“Thank you, sir.” Professor Alexandre replaced the phone and figured he’d done his duty of the day for medical science. It wasn’t much, and there *was* an element missing from the suggestion.

23

EXPERIMENTS

IT TOOK SEVERAL DAYS TO get everything in place. President Ryan had to meet with yet another class of new senators—some of the states were a little slow in getting things done, mainly because some of the governors established something akin to search committees to evaluate a list of candidates. That was a surprise to a lot of Washington insiders who'd expected the state executives to do things as they'd always been done to appoint replacements to the upper house just as soon as the bodies were cold—but it turned out that Ryan's speech had mattered a little bit. Eight governors had realized that this situation was unique, and had therefore acted in a different way, earning, on reflection, the praise of their local papers, if not the complete approval of the establishment press.

Jack's first political trip was an experimental one. He rose early, kissed his wife and kids on the way out the door, and boarded the helicopter on the South Lawn just before seven in the morning. Ten minutes later, he left the aircraft to trot up the stairs onto Air Force One, technically known to the Pentagon as a VC-25A, a 747 expensively modified to be the President's personal conveyance. He boarded just as the pilot, a very senior colonel, was making his airline-like preflight announcements. Looking aft, Ryan could see eighty or so reporters belting into their better-than-first-class leather seats—actually some *didn't* strap in, because Air Force One generally rode more smoothly than an ocean liner on calm seas—and when he turned to head forward, he heard, *"And this is a nonsmoking flight!"*

"Who said that?" the President asked.

"One of the TV pukes," Andrea replied. "He thinks it's his airplane."

"In a way, it is," Arnie pointed out. "Remember that."

"That's Tom Donner," Callie Weston added. "The NBC anchor. His personal feces are not odorific, and he uses more hair spray than I do. But part of it's glued on."

"This way, Mr. President." Andrea pointed forward. The President's cabin in Air Force One is in the extreme nose on the main deck, where there are regular, if very plush, seats, plus a pair of couches that fold out into beds for long trips. As the principal agent watched, her

principal strapped in. Passengers could get away with breaking the rules—the USSS wasn't all that concerned with journalists—but not POTUS. When that was done, she waved to an Air Force crewman, who lifted a phone and told the pilot that he could go now. With that, the engines started up. Jack had mostly lost his fear of flying, but this was the part of the flight where he closed his eyes and thought (earlier in his life he'd whispered) a prayer for the collective safety of the people aboard——in the belief that praying merely for yourself might appear selfish to God. About the time that was finished, the takeoff roll began, rather more quickly than was normal on a 747. Lightly loaded, it felt like an airplane instead of a train pulling out of a station.

"Okay," Arnie said, as the nose lifted off. The President studiously did not grip the armrests as he usually did. "This is going to be an easy one. Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, and back home for dinner. The crowds will be friendly, and about as reactionary as you are," he added with a twinkle. "So you don't really have anything to worry about."

Special Agent Price, sitting in the same compartment for the takeoff, hated it when anybody said that. Chief of Staff van Damm—CARPENTER to the Secret Service; Callie Weston was CALLIOPE—was one of the staffers who never quite appreciated the headaches the Service went through. He thought of danger as a political hazard, even after the 747 crash. Remarkable, she thought. A few feet aft, Agent Raman was in an aft-facing seat watching access forward, in case a reporter showed up with a gun instead of a pencil. There were six more agents aboard to keep an eye on everyone, even the uniformed crewmen, and a platoon of them standing by in each of the two destination cities, along with a huge collection of local cops. At Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City, the fuel truck was already under USSS guard, lest someone contaminate the JP to go into the presidential aircraft; it would remain so until well *after* the 747 returned to Andrews. A C-5B Galaxy transport was already in Indianapolis, having ferried the presidential automobiles there. Moving the President around was rather like transporting the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus, except people generally didn't worry about people trying to assassinate the man on the flying trapeze.

Ryan, Agent Price saw, was going over his speech. That was one of his few normal acts. They were almost always nervous about speeches—generally not so much stage fright as concern for the content spin. The thought made Price smile. Ryan wasn't worried about the content, but *was* worried about blowing the delivery. Well, he'd learn, and his good fortune was that Callie Weston, administrative pain in the ass

that she was, wrote one hell of a speech.

"Breakfast?" a steward asked now that the aircraft was leveled off. The President shook his head.

"Not hungry, thanks."

"Get him ham and eggs, toast, and decaf," van Damm ordered.

"Never try to give a speech on an empty stomach," Callie advised. "Trust me."

"And not too much real coffee. Caffeine can make you jumpy. When a President gives a speech," Arnie explained for this morning's lesson, "he's—Callic, help me out here?"

"Nothing dramatic for these two today. You're the smart neighbor coming over because the guy next door wants your advice on something he's been thinking about. Friendly. Reasonable. Quiet. 'Gee, Fred, I really think you might want to do it this way,' " Weston explained with raised eyebrows.

"Kindly family doctor telling a guy to go easy on the greasy food and maybe play an extra round of golf—exercise is supposed to be fun, that sort of thing," the chief of staff explained on. "You do it all the time in real life."

"Just do it this morning in front of four thousand people, right?" Ryan asked.

"And C-SPAN cameras, and it'll be on all the evening network news broadcasts—"

"CNN will be doing it live, too, 'cuz it's your first speech out in the country," Callie added. No sense lying to the man.

Jesus. Jack looked back down at the text of his speech. "You're right, Arnie. Better decaf." He looked up suddenly. "Any smokers aboard?"

It was the way he asked it that made the Air Force steward turn. "Want one, sir?"

The answer was somewhat shameful, but—"Yes."

She handed him a Virginia Slim and lit it with a warm smile. It wasn't every day one got a chance to provide so personal a service to the Commander-in-Chief. Ryan took a puff and looked up.

"If you tell my wife, Sergeant—"

"Our secret, sir." She disappeared aft to get breakfast, her day already made.

THE FLUID WAS surprisingly horrid in color, deep scarlet with a hint of brown. They'd monitored the process with small samples under an electron microscope. The monkey kidneys exposed to the infected blood were composed of discrete and highly specialized cells, and for whatever reason, Ebola loved those cells as a glutton loves his

chocolate mousse. It had been both fascinating and horrifying to watch. The micron-sized virus strands touched the cells, penetrated them—and started to replicate in the warm, rich biosphere. It was like something from a science-fiction movie, but quite real. This virus, like all the others, was only equivocally alive. It could act only with help, and that help had to come from its host, which by providing the means for the virus to activate, also conspired at its own death. The Ebola strands contained only RNA, and for mitosis to take place, both RNA and DNA are required. The kidney cells had both, the virus strands sought them out, and when they were joined, the Ebola started to reproduce. To do that required energy, and that energy was supplied by the kidney cells, which were, of course, completely destroyed in the process. The multiplication process was a microcosm of the disease process in a human community. It started slowly, then accelerated geometrically—the faster it went, the faster it went: 2–4–16–256–65,536—until all of the nutrients were eaten up and only virus strands remained, then went dormant and awaited their next opportunity. People applied all manner of false images to disease. It would lie in wait for its chance; it would kill without mercy; it would seek out victims. All of that was anthropomorphic rubbish, Moudi and his colleague knew. It didn't think. It didn't do anything overly malevolent. All Ebola did was to eat and reproduce and go back to its dormant state. But as a computer is only a collection of electrical switches which can only distinguish between the numerals 1 and 0—but does so more rapidly and efficiently than its human users—so Ebola was supremely well adapted to reproduce so rapidly that the human body's immune system, ordinarily a ruthlessly effective defense mechanism, was simply overwhelmed, as though by an army of carnivorous ants. In that lay Ebola's historic weakness. It was *too* efficient. It killed *too* fast. Its survival mechanism within the human host also tended to kill the host before it could pass the disease along. It was also super-adapted to a specific ecosystem. Ebola didn't survive long in the open, and only then in a jungle environment. For this reason, and since it could not survive in a human host without killing that host in ten days or less, it had also evolved slowly—without taking the next evolutionary step of becoming airborne.

Or so everyone thought. Perhaps "hoped" would be a better word, Moudi reflected. An Ebola variant that could be spread by aerosol would be catastrophically deadly. It was possible they had exactly that. This was the Mayinga strain, as repeated microscopy had established, and *that* strain was suspected to be capable of aerosol transmission, and that was what they had to prove.

Deep-freezing, using liquid nitrogen as the refrigerant, for example, killed most normal human cells. When they froze, the expansion of the

water, which accounted for most of the cellular mass, burst the cell walls, leaving nothing behind but wreckage. Ebola, on the other hand, was too primitive for that to happen. Too much heat could kill it. Ultraviolet light could kill it. Micro-changes in the chemical environment could kill it. But give it a cold, dark place to sleep, and it was content to slumber in peace.

They worked in a glove box. It was a highly controlled and lethally contaminated environment bordered with clear lexan strong enough to stop a pistol bullet. On two sides holes were cut into the sturdy plastic, and riveted at each workstation was a pair of heavy rubber gloves. Moudi withdrew 10cc's of the virus-rich liquid and transferred it to a small container, which he sealed. The sluggishness of the process was less from physical danger than from the awkwardness of the gloves. When the container was sealed, he transferred it from one gloved hand to another, then off to the director, who performed a similar switch, finally moving it into a small airlock. When that door was closed, as indicated by a light which read off a pressure sensor, the small compartment was flooded with disinfectant spray—dilute phenol—and allowed to sit for three minutes, until it was certain that the air and the transfer container were safe to release. Even then no one would touch it with ungloved hands, and despite the safety of the glove box, both physicians also wore full protective gear. The director removed the container, cradling it in both hands for the three-meter walk to the worktable.

For experimental purposes, the aerosol can was of the type used for insect spray, the sort one can place on a floor, activate, and leave to fog a whole room. It had been fully disassembled, cleaned out three times with live steam, and put back together—the plastic parts had been a problem, but that had been figured out a few months earlier. It was a crude device. The production versions would be far more elegant. The only danger here was from the liquid nitrogen, a watery-appearing fluid which, if spilled on the gloves, would freeze them immediately and soon thereafter cause them to fragment like black crystal glass. The director stood aside as Moudi poured the cryogenic liquid around the pressure vessel. Only a few cc's were required for the purpose of the experiment. Next, the Ebola-rich liquid was injected into the stainless-steel inner container, and the top screwed in place. When the cap was sealed, the new container was sprayed with disinfectant, then washed with sterile saline. The smaller transfer container went into a disposal bin for incineration.

"There," the director said. "We are ready."

Inside the spray can, the Ebola was already deep-frozen, but not for long. The nitrogen would boil off relatively rapidly, and the sample would thaw. In that time, the rest of the experiment would be set up.

And in that time, the two physicians would remove their protective clothing and have dinner.

THE COLONEL DRIVING the airplane touched down with consummate skill. It was his first time flying this President, and he had something to prove. The rollout was routine, with the reverse-thrusters slowing the jumbo to auto-speed before the nose came around to the left. Out the windows, Ryan could see hundreds—no, he realized, *thousands*—of people. *All there to see me?* he wondered. *Damn*. In their hands, dangling over the low perimeter fence, were the red, white, and blue colors of the national flag, and when the aircraft finally stopped, those flags came up at one time, as though in a wave. The mobile stairs came to the door, which was opened by the steward—to call her a steward *ess* would have been incorrect—who'd given him a cigarette.

"Want another one?" she whispered.

Ryan grinned. "Maybe later. And thanks, Sarge."

"Break a leg, Mr. President—but not on the stairs, okay?" She got a chuckle as reward.

"All ready for the Boss," Price heard over her radio circuit from the leader of the advance team. With that, she nodded at President Ryan.

"Showtime, Mr. President."

Ryan took a deep breath and stood in the center of the door, looking out into the bright Midwestern sunlight.

The protocol was that he had to walk down first and alone. Barely had he stood in the opening when a cheer went up, and this from people who scarcely knew a thing about him. His coat buttoned, his hair combed down and sprayed into place despite his objections, Jack Ryan walked down the steps, feeling more like a fool than a President until he got to the bottom. There an Air Force chief master sergeant snapped a salute, which Ryan, so imprinted by his brief months in the Marine Corps, returned smartly—and another cheer went up. He looked around to see Secret Service and other Treasury agents deployed around, almost all of them looking outward. The first person to come close was the governor of the state.

"Welcome to Indiana, Mr. President!" He seized Ryan's hand and shook it vigorously. "We're honored to host your first official visit."

They'd laid out everything for this one. A company of the local National Guard was formed up. The band crashed out "Ruffles and Flourishes," immediately followed by "Hail to the Chief," and Ryan felt himself to be a singular fraud. With the governor to his left and half a step behind, Ryan followed the red—what else?—carpet. The assembled soldiers came to present arms, and their ancient regimental standard dipped, though not the Stars and Stripes, of course, which,

an American athlete had once proclaimed, dips to no earthly king or potentate (he'd been an Irish-American unwilling so to honor the King of England at the 1908 Olympiad). Jack moved his right hand over his heart as he passed, a gesture remembered from his youth, and looked at the assembled guardsmen. He was their commander-in-chief now, the President told himself. He could give orders sending them off to the field of battle, and he had to look at their faces. There they were, clean-shaven and young and proud, as he would have been twenty-odd years earlier. They were here for him. And he always had to be there for them. *Yeah,* Jack told himself. *Have to remember that.*

"May I introduce you to some local citizens, sir?" the governor asked, pointing to the fence. Ryan nodded and followed.

"Heads up, pressin' flesh," Andrea called over her radio microphone. For as many times as they'd seen it happen, the agents on presidential Detail detested this above all things. Price would be with POTUS at all times. Raman and three others hovered on both sides of him, their eyes scanning the crowd from behind dark sunglasses, looking for guns, for the wrong expression, for faces memorized from photographs, for anything out of the ordinary.

There were so many of them, Jack thought. None of them had voted for him, and until very recently few had even known his name. Yet they were here. Some, perhaps, state-government employees getting half a day off, but not the ones holding kids, not all of them, and the looks in their eyes stunned the President, who'd never in his life experienced anything even close to this. Hands extended frantically, and he shook all that he could, moving to his left down the line, trying to hear individual voices through the cacophony of screams.

"Welcome to Indiana!"—"How are ya!"—"MISTER PRESIDENT!"—"We trust you!"—"Good job so far!"—"We're with ya!"

Ryan tried to answer back, achieving little more than a repeated thank-you, his mouth mainly open in surprise at the overpowering warmth of the moment, and all directed at him. It was enough to make him overlook the pain in his hand, but finally he had to step away from the fence and wave, to yet another roar of love for the new President.

Damn. If they only knew what a fraud he was, Jack thought, what would they do then? *What the hell am I doing here?* his mind demanded, as he headed for the open door of the presidential limousine.

THERE WERE TEN of them, down in the basement of the building. All were men. Only one was a political prisoner, and his crime was apostasy. The rest were singularly undesirable people, four murderers,

a rapist, two child molesters, and two thieves who were repeat offenders and, under the Koranic law of their nation, subject to removal of their right hands. They were in a single, climate-controlled room, each of them secured to the foot of the bed by leg cuffs. All were condemned to death, except the thieves who were only supposed to be mutilated, and knew it, and wondered why they were here with the rest. Why the others were still alive was a mystery to them, which none questioned but from which none took satisfaction, either. Their diet over the past few weeks had been particularly poor, enough to reduce their physical energy and their level of alertness. One of their number stuck a finger in his mouth to feel his sore and bleeding gums. The finger came out when the door opened.

It was someone in a blue plastic suit, which none of them had seen before. The person—a man, though they could barely make out the face through the plastic mask—set a cylindrical container down on the concrete floor, took off the blue plastic cap, and pressed down on a button. Then he hastily withdrew. Scarcely had the door closed when there came a hiss from the container, and a steamlike fog sprayed up into the room.

One of their number screamed, thinking that it was a poison gas, seizing the thin bedsheet and clasping it over his face. The one closest to the spray was slower-witted and merely watched, and when the cloud came over him, he looked around at it while the others waited for him to die. When he didn't, they were more curious than fearful. After a few minutes, the incident passed into their limited history. The lights were turned off, and they went to sleep.

"Three days to find out," the director said, turning off the TV that fed from the cell. "The spray system appears to work well, proper dispersion. They had a problem with the delay device. On the production version, it has to be good for—what? Five minutes, I think."

Three days, Moudi thought. Seventy-two hours to see what evil they had wrought.

FOR ALL THE money and hype, for all the exquisite planning, Ryan was sitting on a simple folding metal chair, the sort to make a person's rump sore. In front of him was a wooden rail covered with red, white, and blue bunting. Under the bunting was sheet steel supposed to stop a bullet. The podium was similarly armored—steel *and* Kevlar in this case; Kevlar is both stronger and lighter—and would protect nearly all of his body below the shoulders. The university field house—a very large gymnasium, though not the one used for the school's basketball team, already eliminated in the NCAA tournament—was packed "to

the rafters," reporters would probably say, that being the stock phrase for a building with all its seats occupied. Most of the audience were probably students, but it was hard to tell. Ryan was the target of numerous bright lights, and the flood of brilliance denied him the ability to see most of the crowd. They'd arrived via the back door, walking through a smelly locker room because the President took the fast way in and out. The motorcade had come down a highway for most of the way, but in the regular city streets that had occupied maybe a quarter of the distance, there had been people on the sidewalks, waving to him while their governor extolled the virtues of the city and the Hoosier State. Jack had thought to ask the origin of "Hoosier," but decided not to.

The governor was talking again now, succeeding three others. A student, followed by the university president, followed by the mayor of the local town. The President actually tried listening to the speeches, but while on one hand they all said mainly the same thing, on the other little of it was true. It was as though they were speaking of someone else, a theoretical President with generic virtues to deal with the misstated duties. Maybe it was just that the local speechwriters dealt with local issues only, Jack decided. So much the better for them.

". . . my great honor to introduce the President of the United States." The governor turned and gestured. Ryan rose, approached the podium, shook the governor's hand. As he set his speech folder on the top of the podium, he nodded embarrassed appreciation at the crowd he could barely see. In the first few rows, right on the hardwood of the basketball court, were local big shots. In other times and circumstances, they'd be major contributors. In this case, Ryan didn't know. Maybe from both parties, even. Then he remembered that major contributors donated money to *both* parties anyway, to hedge their bets by guaranteeing themselves access to power no matter who was there. They were probably already trying to figure how to donate money to *his* campaign.

"Thank you, Governor, for that introduction." Ryan turned to gesture to the people on the dais with him, naming them from the list on the first page of his speech folder, good friends whom he'd never see again after this first time, whose faces were illuminated by the simple fact that he spoke their names in the correct order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've never been to Indiana before. This is my first visit to the Hoosier State, but after experiencing your welcome, I hope it won't be the last—"

It was as though someone had held up the APPLAUSE sign on a TV show. He'd just spoken the truth, followed by something that might or might not have been a lie, and while they had to know it, they didn't

care a whit. And then Jack Ryan learned something important for the first time.

God, it's like a narcotic, Jack thought, understanding just then why people entered politics. No man could stand here like this, hearing the noise, seeing the faces, and not love the moment. It came through the stage fright, through the overwhelming sense of not belonging. Here he was, before four thousand people, fellow citizens each of them, equal to him before the law, but in their minds he was something else entirely. He was the United States of America. He was their President, but more than that, he was the embodiment of their hopes, their desires, the image of their own nation, and because of that they were willing to love someone they didn't know, to cheer his every word, to hope that for a brief moment they could believe that he'd looked directly into each individual pair of eyes so that the moment would be forever special, never to be forgotten. It was power such as he had never known to exist. This crowd was his to command. *This* was why men devoted their lives to seeking the presidency, to bathe in this moment like a warm ocean wave, a moment of utter perfection.

But why did they think he was so different? What made him special in their minds? Ryan wondered. It was only chance in his case, and in every other instance, it was they who'd done the choosing, they who had elevated the man to the podium, they who by their act had changed the ordinary into something else—and perhaps not even that. It was only perception. Ryan was the same man he'd been a month or a year before. He'd acquired little in the way of new knowledge and less in the way of wisdom. He was the same person with a different job, and while the trappings of the new post were all around him, the person within the protective ring of bodyguards, the person surrounded by a flood of love which he'd never sought, was merely the product of parents, a childhood, an education, and experiences, just as they all were. They thought him different and special and perhaps even great, but that was perception, not reality. The reality of the moment was sweaty hands on the armored podium, a speech written by someone else, and a man who knew that he was out of place, however pleasant the moment might be.

So, what do I do now? the President of the United States asked himself, his mind racing as the current wave of applause diminished. He'd never be what they thought he was. He was a good man, he thought, but not a great one, and the presidency was a job, a post, a government office that came with duties defined by James Madison, and, as with all things in life, a place of transition from one reality to another. The past was something you couldn't change. The future was something you tried to see. The present was where you were, and that's where you had to do your best—and if you were lucky, maybe

you'd be worthy of the moment. It wasn't enough to feel the love. He had to earn it, to make the looks on the assembled faces something other than a lie, for in giving power they also gave responsibility, and in giving love they demanded devotion in return. Chastened, Jack looked at the glass panel that reflected the text of his speech, took a deep breath, and started talking as he'd done as a history instructor in Annapolis.

"I come here today to speak to you about America . . ."

Below the President were five Secret Service agents standing in line, their sunglasses shielding their eyes so that those in the audience could not always tell where they were looking, and also because people without eyes are intimidating at a visceral level. Their hands were clasped in front, and radio earpieces kept them in contact with one another as they scanned the crowd. In the rear of the field house were others, this group scanning with binoculars, because they knew that the love in the building was not uniform, or even that there were some who sought to kill the things they loved. For that reason, the advance team had erected portable metal-detector arches at all the entrances. For that reason Belgian Malinois dogs had sniffed the building for explosives. For that reason they watched everything in the same way an infantryman in a combat zone was careful to examine every shadow.

"... and the strength of America lies not in Washington, but in Indiana, and New Mexico, and in every place Americans live and work, wherever it might be. We in Washington are not America. You are," the President's voice boomed through the PA system—not a good system, the agents thought, but this event had been laid on a little fast. "And we work for you." The audience cheered again anyway.

The TV cameras all fed into vans outside the building, and those had uplink dishes to relay the sound and pictures to satellites. The reporters were mainly in the back today, taking notes despite the fact that they had the full text, along with a written promise that the President really would deliver this one. "The President's speech today," all would say this evening, but it wasn't really the President's speech at all. They knew who'd written it. Callie Weston had already talked to several of their number about it. They read the crowd, an easier task for them because they didn't have the klieg lights in their faces.

". . . is not an opportunity, but a responsibility which we all share, because if America belongs to us all, so then the duty for running our country starts here, not in Washington." More applause.

"Good speech," Tom Donner observed to his commentator /analyst, John Plumber.

"Pretty good delivery, too. I talked to the superintendent of the

Naval Academy. They say he was an excellent teacher once," Plumber replied.

"Good audience for him, mainly kids. And he's not talking major policy issues."

"Getting his feet wet," John agreed. "You have a team working the other segment for tonight, right?"

Donner checked his watch and nodded. "Should be there now."

"SO, DR. RYAN, how do you like being First Lady?" Krystin Matthews asked, with a warm smile.

"I'm still figuring it out." They were talking in Cathy's cubbyhole office overlooking central Baltimore. It had barely enough room for a desk and three chairs (a good one for the doctor, one for the patient, and the other for the spouse or mother of the patient), and with all the cameras and lights in the room, she felt trapped. "You know, I miss cooking for my family."

"You're a surgeon—and your husband expects you to cook, too?" the NBC co-anchor asked, in surprise bordering on outrage.

"I've always loved cooking. It's a good way for me to relax when I get home." *Instead of watching TV,* Professor Caroline Ryan didn't add. She was wearing a new starched lab coat. She'd had to take fifteen minutes with her hair and makeup, and she had patients waiting. "Besides, I'm pretty good at it."

Ah, well, that was different. A cloying smile: "What's the President's favorite meal?"

A smile returned. "That's easy. Steak, baked potato, fresh corn on the cob, and my spinach salad—and I know, the physician in me tells him that it's a little heavy on the cholesterol. Jack's pretty good with a grill. In fact, he's a pretty handy man to have around the house. He doesn't even mind cutting the grass."

"Let me take you back to the night your son was born, that awful night when the terrorists—"

"I haven't forgotten," Cathy said in a quieter voice.

"Your husband has killed people. You're a doctor. How does that make you feel?"

"Jack and Robby—he's Admiral Jackson now—Robby and Sissy are our closest friends," Cathy explained. "Anyway, they did what they had to do, or we would not have survived that night. I don't like violence. I'm a surgeon. Last week I had a trauma case, a man lost his eye as a result of a fistfight in a bar a few blocks from here. But what Jack did is different from what *they* did. My husband fought to protect me and Sally, and Little Jack, who wasn't even born yet."

"You like being a doctor?"

"I love my work. I wouldn't leave it for anything."

"But usually a First Lady—"

"I know what you want to say. I'm not a political wife. I practice medicine. I'm a research scientist, and I work in the best eye institute in the world. I have patients waiting for me now. They need me—and you know, I need them, too. My job is who I am. I'm also a wife and a mother, and I like nearly everything about my life."

"Except this?" Krystin asked, with a smile.

Cathy's blue eyes twinkled. "I really don't have to answer that, do I?" And Matthews knew she had the tagline for the interview.

"What sort of man is your husband?"

"Well, I can't be totally objective, can I? I love him. He's risked his life for me and my children. Whenever I've needed him, he was there. And I do the same for him. That's what love and marriage mean. Jack is smart. He's honest. I guess he's something of a worrier. Sometimes he'll wake up in the middle of the night—at home, I mean—and spend half an hour looking out the windows at the water. I don't think he knows that I know that."

"Does he still do that?"

"Not lately. He's pretty tired when he gets to bed. These are the worst hours he's ever worked."

"His other government posts, at CIA, for example, there are reports that he—"

Cathy stopped that one with a raised hand. "I do not have a security clearance. I don't know, and probably I don't want to know. It's the same with me. I am not allowed to discuss confidential patient information with Jack, or anyone else outside the faculty here."

"We'd like to see you with patients and—" FLOTUS shook her head, stopping the question dead.

"No, this is a hospital, not a TV studio. It's not so much my privacy as that of my patients. To them, I am not the First Lady. To them, I am Dr. Ryan. I'm not a celebrity. I'm a physician and a surgeon. To my students, I'm a professor and teacher."

"And reportedly one of the best in the world at what you do," Matthews added, just to see the reaction.

A smile resulted. "Yes, I've won the Lasker prize, and the respect of my colleagues is a gift that's worth more than money—but you know, that isn't it, either. Sometimes—not very often—but sometimes after a major procedure, I'm the one who takes the bandages off in a darkened room, and we turn the lights up slowly, and I see it. I can see it on the patient's face. I fixed the eyes, and they work again, and the look you see on his or her face—well, nobody's in medicine for the money, at least not here at Hopkins. We're here to make sick people well, and for me to preserve and restore sight, and the look you see

when that job is done is like having God tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Nice job.' That's why I'll never, *never* leave medicine," Cathy Ryan said, almost lyrically, knowing that they'd use this on TV tonight, and hoping that maybe some bright young high-school kid would see her face and hear the words and decide to think about medicine. If she had to put up with this waste of her time, perhaps she could use it to serve her art.

It was a pretty good sequence, Krystin Matthews thought, but with only two minutes and thirty seconds of air time, they would not be able to use it. Better the part about how she hated being First Lady. Everybody was used to hearing doctors talk.

24

ON THE FLY

THE RETURN TO THE AIRplane was quick and efficient. The governor went his way. The people who'd lined the sidewalks were mainly back to their jobs, and those who turned and looked were shoppers who probably wondered what the sirens were all about—or if they knew, were annoyed with the noise. Ryan was able to lean back in the plush leather seats, deflated by the fatigue that comes after a stressful moment.

"So, how'd I do?" he asked, looking out the window as Indiana passed by at seventy miles per hour. He smiled inwardly at the thought of driving this fast in the outskirts of a city without getting a ticket.

"Very well, actually," Callie Weston said first. "You talked like a teacher."

"I *was* a teacher once," the President said. *And with luck, I may be again someday.*

"That's okay for a speech like this, but for others you'll need a little fire," Arnie observed.

"One thing at a time," Callie advised the chief of staff. "You crawl before you walk."

"Same speech in Oklahoma, right?" POTUS asked.

"A few changes, but no big deal. Just remember you're not in Indiana anymore. Sooner State, not Hoosier State. Same line about tornadoes, but football instead of basketball."

"They also lost both senators, but they still have a congressman left, and he'll be on the dais with you," van Damm advised.

"How'd he make it?" Jack asked idly.

"Probably getting laid that night," was the curt answer. "You'll announce a new contract for Tinker Air Force Base. It means about five hundred new jobs, consolidating a few operations at the new location. That'll make the local papers happy."

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BEN GOODLEY DIDN'T know if he was the new National Security Advisor or not. If so, he was rather young for the job, but at least the President he served was well grounded in foreign affairs. That made him more a high-class secretary than an adviser. It was a function he didn't mind. He'd learned much in his brief time at Langley, and had advanced rapidly, becoming one of the youngest men ever to win the coveted NIO card because he knew how to organize information, and because he had the political savvy to grade the important stuff. He especially liked working directly for President Ryan. Goodley knew that he could play it straight with the Boss, and that Jack he still thought of him by that name, though he could no longer use it—would always let him know what he was thinking. It would be another learning experience for Dr. Goodley, and a priceless one for someone whose new life dream was someday becoming DCI on merit and not through politics.

On the wall opposite his desk was the sort of clock that shows the sun position for the entire world. He'd ordered it the very day he'd arrived—and to his surprise it had appeared literally overnight, instead of perking its way through five levels of procurement bureaucracy. He'd heard stories that the White House was one portion of the government that actually did work, and had not believed them the Harvard graduate had been in government service about four years now, and figured he knew what worked and what didn't. The surprise was welcome, and the clock, he'd found from his work in the CIA Operations Center, was an instant reference, better than the array of regular clocks that some places had. Your eye instantly saw where noon was and could automatically grasp what time it was anywhere in the world. More to the point, you instantly knew if something was happening at an unusual hour, and that told you as much as the Signals Intelligence—SIGINT—bulletin. Such as the one that had just come in over his personal fax machine that was connected to his STU-4 secure phone.

The National Security Agency was in the habit of posting periodic summaries of activity across the world. Its own watch center was staffed by senior military people, and while their outlook was more technical and less political than his own, they were not fools. Ben had gotten to know many of them by name in addition to reputation, and had also learned their individual strengths. The USAF colonel who had command of the NSA Watch Center on weekday afternoons didn't bother people with trivia. That was left to lower-level people and lower-level signals. When the colonel put his name on something, it was usually worth reading. And so it was just after noon, Washington time.

Goodley saw that the FLASH concerned Iraq. That was another

thing about the colonel. He didn't go using CRITIC headers for the fun of it, as some did. Ben looked up to check the wall clock. After sundown, local time, a time of relaxation for some, and action for others. The action would be the sort to last all night, the better to get things accomplished without interference, so that the next day would be genuinely new, and genuinely different.

"Oh, boy," Goodley breathed. He read down the page again, then turned his swivel chair and picked up the phone, touching the #3 speed-dial button.

"Director's office," a fiftyish female voice answered.

"Goodley for Foley."

"Please hold, Dr. Goodley." Then: "Hi, Ben."

"Hello, Director." He felt it improper to first-name the DCI. He'd probably go back to work at Langley within the year, and not as a seventh-floor-rank official. "You have what I have?" The page was still warm in his hand from the printer.

"Iraq?"

"Right."

"You must have read it twice, Ben. I just told Bert Vasco to get his ass up here." CIA's own Iraq desk was weak, both thought, while this State guy was very good indeed.

"Looks pretty hot to me."

"Agreed," Ed Foley replied, with an unseen nod. "Jesus, but they're moving fast over there. Give me an hour, maybe ninety minutes."

"I think the President needs to know," Goodley said, with a voice that concealed the urgency he felt. Or so he thought.

"He needs to know more than we can tell him now. Ben?" the DCI added.

"Yes, Director?"

"Jack won't kill you for patience, and we can't do any more than watch it develop anyway. Remember, we can't overload him with information. He doesn't have the time to see it all anymore. What he sees has to be concise. That's your job," Ed Foley explained. "It'll take you a few weeks to figure it out. I'll help," the DCI went on, reminding Goodley how junior he was.

"Okay. I'll be waiting." The line clicked off.

Goodley had about a minute during which he reread the NSA bulletin, and then the phone rang again.

"Dr. Goodley."

"Doctor, this is the President's office," one of the senior secretaries said. "I have a Mr. Golovko on the President's private line. Can you take the call?"

"Yes," he replied, thinking, *Oh, shit.*

"Go ahead, please," she said, clicking off the line.

"This is Ben Goodley."

"This is Golovko. Who are you?"

"I am acting National Security Advisor to the President." *And I know who you are.*

"Goodley?" Ben could hear the voice searching his memory. "Ah, yes, you are national intelligence officer who just learned to shave. My congratulations on your promotion."

The gamesmanship was impressive, though Goodley figured that there was a file on the Russian's desk with everything down to his shoe size. Even Golovko's memory couldn't be that good, and Goodley had been in the White House long enough that the word would have gotten out, and the RVS/KGB would have done its homework.

"Well, somebody has to answer the phones, Minister." Gamesmanship could go two ways. Golovko wasn't really a minister, though he acted as such, and that was technically a secret. It was a weak reply, but it was something. "What can I do for you?"

"You know the arrangement I have with Ivan Emmetovich?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Very well, tell him that a new country is about to be born. It will be called the United Islamic Republic. It will include, for the moment, Iran and Iraq. I rather suspect that it will wish to grow further."

"How reliable is that information, sir?" Better to be polite. It would make the Russian feel bigger.

"Young man, I would not make a report to your President unless I felt it to be reliable, but," he added generously, "I understand you must ask the question. The point of origin for the report does not concern you. The reliability of the source is sufficient for me to pass the information along with my own confidence. There will be more to follow. Do you have similar indications?"

The question froze Goodley's eyeballs in place, staring down at a blank spot on his desk. He had no guidance on this. Yes, he'd learned that President Ryan had discussed cooperation with Golovko, that he'd also discussed the matter with Ed Foley, and that both had decided to go forward with it. But nobody had told him the parameters for giving information back to Moscow, and he didn't have time to call Langley for instructions, else he would appear weak to the Russians, and the Russians didn't want America to appear weak at the moment, and he was the man on the spot, and he had to make a decision. That entire thought process required about a third of a second.

"Yes, Minister, we do. Your timing is excellent. Director Foley and I were just discussing the development."

"Ah, yes, Dr. Goodley, I see that your signals people are as efficient as ever. What a pity that your human sources do not match their performance."

Ben didn't dare to respond at all to the observation, though its accuracy caused his stomach to contract. Goodley had more respect for Jack Ryan than he did for any man, and now he remembered the admiration Jack had often expressed for the man on the other end of the phone. Welcome to the bigs, kid. Don't hang any curveballs. He ought to have said that Foley had called *him.*

"Minister, I will be speaking to President Ryan within the hour, and I will pass your information along. Thank you for your timely call, sir."

"Good day, Dr. Goodley."

United Islamic Republic, Ben read on his desk pad. There had once been a United Arab Republic, an unlikely alliance between Syria and Egypt doomed to failure in two respects. The separated countries had been fundamentally incompatible, and the alliance had been made only to destroy Israel, which had objected to the goal, and done so effectively. More to the point, a United *Islamic* Republic was a religious statement as much as a political one, because Iran was not an Arab nation—as Iraq was—but rather an Aryan one with different ethnic and linguistic roots. Islam was the world's only major religion to condemn in its scripture all forms of racism and proclaim the equality of all men before God, regardless of color—a fact often overlooked by the West. So, Islam was overtly designed to be a unifying force, and this new notional country would play on that fact with its very name. That said a lot, enough that Golovko didn't even need to explain it, and it also said that Golovko felt that he and Ryan were on the same wavelength. Goodley checked the wall clock again. It was nighttime in Moscow, too. Golovko was working late—well, not all *that* late for a senior official. Ben lifted the phone and hit #3 again. It took him less than a minute to summarize the call from Moscow.

"We can believe anything he says—on this issue, anyway. Sergey Nikolay'ch is a pro from way back. I imagine he twisted your tail just a little, right?" the DCI asked.

"Ruffled the fur some," Goodley admitted.

"It's a carryover from old days. They do like their status games. Don't let it bother you, and don't shoot back. Better just to ignore it," Foley explained. "Okay, what's he worried about?"

"A lot of republics with '-stan' at the end," Goodley blurted out, without thinking.

"Concur." This came from another voice.

"Vasco?"

"Yeah, just walked in." And then Goodley had to repeat what he'd told Ed Foley. Probably Mary Pat was there, too. Individually, both were good at what they did. In the same room, thinking together, they were a deadly weapon. It was something you had to see to

understand, Ben knew.

"This looks to me like a big deal," Goodley observed.

"Looks that way to me, too," Vasco said over the speakerphone. "Let us kick a few things around. Be back to you in fifteen or twenty."

"Would you believe Avi ben Jakob is checking in with us?" Ed reported, after a background noise on the line. "They must be having a really tough day."

For the moment it was just irony that the Russians were both the first to check in with America (and that they were doing so at all), and that they were the only ones calling straight into the White House, beating the Israelis on both scores. But the amusement wouldn't last, and all the players knew that. Israel was probably having the worst day of all. Russia was merely having a very bad one. And America was getting to share the experience.

IT WOULD HAVE been uncivilized to deny them a chance at prayer. Cruel though they were, and criminals though they had been, they had to have their chance at prayer, albeit a brief one. Each was in the presence of a learned mullah, who, with firm but not unkind voice, told them of their fates, and cited scripture, and spoke to them of their chance to reconcile with Allah before meeting Him face to face. Every one did—whether they believed in what they did was another issue, and one left for Allah to judge, but the mullahs had done their duty—and then every one was led out into the prison yard.

It was a sort of assembly-line process, carefully timed so that the three clergymen gave each condemned criminal exactly three times the interval required to take each out in his turn, tie him to the post, shoot him, remove the body, and restart the process. It worked out to five minutes per execution and fifteen minutes for prayer.

The commanding general of the 41 st Armored Division was typical, except that his religion was something more than vestigial. His hands were bound in his cell before his imam—the general preferred the Arabic term to the Farsi one—and he was led out by soldiers who a week before would have saluted and trembled at his passage. He'd reconciled himself to his fate, and he would not give the Persian bastards he'd fought in the border swamps the least bit of satisfaction, though inwardly he cursed to God the cowardly superiors who had skipped the country and left him behind. Perhaps he might have killed the President himself and taken over, he thought as his handcuffs were looped to the post. The general took a moment to look back at the wall to gauge how good was the marksmanship of the firing squad. He found strange humor in the fact that it might take him a few extra seconds to die, and he snorted in disgust. Russian-trained

and competent, he'd tried to be an honest soldier—nonpolitical, following his orders faithfully and without question, whatever they might be—and therefore had never been fully trusted by his country's political leadership, and this was his reward for it. A captain came up with a blindfold.

"A cigarette, if you please. You may keep *that* for when you sleep later tonight."

The captain nodded without expression, his emotions already numbed by the ten killings done in the past hour. Shaking a cigarette from his pack, he put it into the man's lips and lit it with a match. That done, he said what he felt he must:

"Salaam alaykum." Peace be unto you.

"I will have more than you, young man. Do your duty. Make sure your pistol is loaded, will you?" The general closed his eyes for a long, pleasurable puff. His doctor had told him only a few days before that it was bad for his health. Wasn't that a joke? He looked back on his career, marveling that he was still alive after what the Americans had done to his division in 1991. Well, he'd avoided death more than once, and that was a race a man could lengthen, but never win, not really. And so it was written. He managed another long puff. An American Winston. He recognized the taste. How did a mere captain ever get a pack of those? The soldiers brought their rifles up to "aim." There was no expression on their faces. Well, killing did that to men, he reflected. What was supposed to be cruel and horrible just became a job that—

The captain came over to the body that was slumped forward, suspended by the nylon rope that looped around the handcuffs. Again, he thought, drawing his 9mm Browning and aiming from a meter away. A final crack put an end to the groans. Then two soldiers cut the rope and dragged the body off. Another soldier replaced the rope on the post. A fourth used a gardener's rake to move the dirt around, not so much to conceal the blood as to mix dirt with it, because blood was slippery to walk on. The next one would be a politician, not a soldier. The soldiers, at least, died with dignity for the most part, as the last one had. Not the civilians. They whimpered and wept and cried out to Allah. And they always wanted the blindfold. It was something of a learning experience for the captain, who'd never done anything like this before.

IT HAD TAKEN a few days to get things organized, but they were all now in separate houses in separate parts of town—and once that had been accomplished, the generals and their entourages had started worrying about it. Separately quartered, they'd all thought, they could

be picked up one by one and jailed preparatory to a return flight to Baghdad, but it wouldn't really have mattered very much. None of the families had more than two bodyguards, and what could they do, really, except to keep beggars away when they went outside? They met frequently—every general had a car assigned—mainly with the purpose of making further travel arrangements. They also bickered over whether they should continue to travel together to a new collective home or begin to go their separate ways. Some argued that it would be both more secure and more cost-effective to buy a large piece of land and build on it, for example. Others were making it clear that now that they were out of Iraq once and for all (two of them had illusions about going back in triumph to reclaim the government, but that was fantasy, as all but those two knew), they would be just as happy not to see some of their number ever again. The petty rivalries among them had long concealed genuine antipathy, which their new circumstances didn't so much exacerbate as liberate. The least of them had personal fortunes of over $40 million—one had nearly $300 million salted away in various Swiss banks—more than enough to live a comfortable life in any country in the world. Most chose Switzerland, always a haven to those with money and a desire to live quietly, though a few looked farther to the east. The Sultan of Brunei wanted some people to reorganize his army, and three of the Iraqi generals thought to apply for the job. The local Sudanese government had also begun informal discussions about using a few as advisers for ongoing military operations against animist minorities in the southern part of that country—the Iraqis had long experience dealing with Kurds.

But the generals had more to worry about than themselves alone. All had brought their families out. Many had brought mistresses, who now lived, to everyone's discomfort, in the homes of their patrons. These were as ignored now as they had been in Baghdad. That would change.

Sudan is mostly a desert country, known for its blistering dry heat. Once a British protectorate, its capital has a hospital catering to foreigners, with a largely English staff. Not the world's best facility, it was better than most in Saharan Africa, staffed mostly with young and somewhat idealistic physicians who'd arrived with romantic ideas about both Africa and their careers (the same thing had been going on for over a hundred years). They learned better, but they did their best and that, for the most part, was pretty good.

The two patients arrived scarcely an hour apart. The young girl came in first, accompanied by her worried mother. She was four years old, Dr. Ian MacGregor learned, and had been a healthy child, except for a mild case of asthma, which, the mother correctly said, ought not

to have been a problem in Khartoum, with its dry air. Where were they from? Iraq? The doctor neither knew nor cared about politics. He was twenty-eight, newly certified for internal medicine, a small man with prematurely receding sandy hair. What mattered was that he'd seen no bulletin concerning that country and a major infectious disease. He and his staff had been alerted about the Ebola blip in Zaire, but it had been only a blip.

The patient's temperature was 38.0, hardly an alarming fever for a child, all the more so in a country where the noon temperature was always at least that high. Blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration were unremarkable. She appeared listless. How long in Khartoum, did you say? Only a few days? Well, it could be merely jet lag. Some people were more sensitive to it than others, MacGregor explained. New surroundings, and so forth, could make a child out of sorts. Maybe a cold or the flu, nothing serious. Sudan has a hot climate, but really a fairly healthy one, you see, not like other parts of Africa. He slipped his hands into rubber gloves, not for any particular need but because his medical training at the University of Edinburgh had drilled it into him that you did it the same way every time, because the one time you forgot, you might end up like Dr. Sinclair—oh, didn't you hear how he caught AIDS from a patient? One such story was generally enough. The patient was not in great distress. Eyes a little puffy. Throat slightly inflamed, but nothing serious. Probably a good night's sleep or two. Nothing to be prescribed. Aspirin for the fever and aches, and if the problem persists, please call me. She's a lovely child. I'm sure she'll be fine. Mother took child away. The doctor decided it was time for a cup of tea. Along the way to the doctor's lounge, he stripped off the latex gloves which had saved his life, and dropped them in the disposal bin.

The other came in thirty minutes later, male, thirtythree, looking rather like a thug, surly and suspicious toward the African staff, but solicitous to the Europeans. Obviously a man who knew Africa, MacGregor thought. Probably an Arab businessman. Do you travel a great deal? Recently? Oh, well, that could be it. You want to be careful drinking the local water, that could explain the stomach discomfort. And he, too, went home with a bottle of aspirin, plus an over-the-counter medication for his GI problems, and presently MacGregor went off duty after one more routine day.

"MR. PRESIDENT? Ben Goodley coming through on the STU," a sergeant told him. Then she showed him how the phones worked up front.

"Yeah, Ben?" Jack said.

"We have reports of a lot of Iraqi big shots getting put up against the wall. I'm faxing the report down to you. The Russians and the Israelis both confirm." And on cue, another Air Force NCO appeared and handed Ryan three sheets of paper. The first one merely said TOP SECRET—PRESIDENT'S EYES ONLY, even though three or four communications types had seen it, and that was just in the airplane, now beginning its descent into Tinker.

"Got it now, let me read it." He took his time, first scanning the report, then going back to the beginning for a slower read. "Okay, who's going to be left?"

"Vasco says nobody worth mentioning. This is the entire Ba'ath Party leadership and all the remaining senior military commanders. That leaves nobody with status behind. Okay, the scary part comes from PALM BOWL, and—"

"Who's this Major Sabah?"

"I called on that myself, sir," Goodley replied. "He's a Kuwaiti spook. Our people say he's pretty swift. Vasco concurs in his assessment. It's going down the track we were afraid of, and it's going real fast."

"Saudi response?" Ryan was jolted by a minor bump as the VC-25A came through some clouds. It looked to be raining outside.

"None yet. They're still talking things over."

"Okay, thanks for the heads-up, Ben. Keep me posted."

"Will do, sir."

Ryan put the phone back in its cradle and frowned.

"Trouble?" Arnie asked.

"Iraq, it's going fast. They're executing people at a brisk clip at the moment." The President handed the pages over to his chief of staff.

There was always a huge sense of unreality to it. The NSA report, as amended and augmented by CIA and others, gave a list of men. Had he been in his office, Ryan would also have looked at photos of men he'd never met, and now never would, because while he was descending into Oklahoma to give a nonpolitical political speech, the lives of the men on that list were ending more likely already had. It was rather like listening to a ballgame on the radio, except in this game real people were being shot. Reality was coming to an end for human beings seven thousand miles away, and Ryan was hearing about it from radio intercepts made even farther away and relayed to him, and it was real, but at the same time not real. There was just something about distance which did that—and his surroundings. *A hundred or so senior Iraqi officials are being shot—want a sandwich before you get off the airplane?* The dualism might have been amusing except for the foreign-policy implications. No, that wasn't true, either. There wasn't anything funny about it at all.

"What are you thinking?" van Damm asked.

"I ought to be back at the office," Ryan replied. "This is important, and I need to keep track of it."

"Wrong!" Arnie said at once with a shake of the head and a pointing finger. "You are not the National Security Advisor anymore. You have people to do that for you. You're the President, and you have a lot of things to do, and they're all important. The President never gets tied down on one issue and he never gets trapped in the Oval Office. The people out there don't want to see that. It means you're not in control. It means events are controlling you. Ask Jimmy Carter about how great his second term was. Hell, this isn't all *that* important."

"It could be," Jack protested, as the aircraft touched down.

"What's important right now is your speech for the Sooner State." He paused before going on. "It isn't just charity that begins at home. It's political power, too. It starts right out there." He pointed out the windows, as Oklahoma slowed to a halt outside.

Ryan looked, but what he saw was the *United Islamic Republic*.

IT HAD ONCE been hard to enter the Soviet Union. There had been a vast organization called the Chief Border Guards Directorate of the Committee for State Security which had patrolled the fences—in some cases minefields and genuine fortifications, as well—with the dual purpose of keeping people both in and out, but these had long since fallen into disrepair, and the main purpose of the border checkpoints today was for the new crop of regional border guards to accept the bribes that came from smugglers who now used large trucks to bring their wares into the nation that had once been ruled with an iron hand in Moscow, but was now a collection of semi-independent republics that were mostly on their own in economic, and because of that, political terms as well. It hadn't been planned that way. When he'd established the country's central-planned economy, Stalin had made a deliberate effort to spread out production sites, so that each segment of the vast empire would depend for vital commodities upon every other, but he'd overlooked the discordant fact that if the entire economy went to pot, then needing something you couldn't get from one source meant that you had to get it from another, and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, smuggling, which had been well controlled under Communist rule, had become a genuine industry of its own. And with wares also came ideas, hard enough to stop, and impossible to tax.

The only thing lacking was a welcoming committee, but that wouldn't have done. The corruption of the border guards went both ways. They might well have told their superiors about things while

sharing the requisite percentage of the loot from their informal tariff collection, and so the representative merely sat in the right seat of the truck while the driver handled business—out the back of the truck in this case, an offer to the guards of a selection of his cargo. They weren't the least bit greedy about it, instead taking little more than they could easily conceal in the back of their personal automobiles. (The only concession to the illegality of the entire business was that it took place at night.) With that, the proper stamps were affixed to the proper documents, and the truck pulled off, heading down the cross-border highway, which was probably the only decently surfaced road in the area. The remaining drive took a little over an hour, and then, entering the large town which had once serviced the caravan trade, the truck stopped briefly and the representative got out and walked to a private automobile to continue his journey, carrying only a small bag with a change of clothes or two.

The president of this semiautonomous republic claimed to be a Muslim, but he was mainly an opportunist, a former senior party official who as a matter of course had denied God regularly to ensure his political advancement and then, with the changing of the political wind, embraced Islam with public enthusiasm and private disinterest. His faith, if one could call it that, was entirely about his secular well-being. There were several passages in the Koran concerning such people, none of them flattering. He lived a comfortable life in a comfortable personal palace which had once quartered the party boss of this former Soviet republic. In that official residence, he drank liquor, fornicated, and ruled his republic with a hand that was by turns too firm and too gentle. Too firmly he controlled the regional economy (with his Communist training, he was hopelessly inept) and too gently he allowed Islam to flourish, so, he thought, to give his people the illusion of personal freedom (and in that he clearly misunderstood the nature of the Islamic Faith he professed to have, for Islamic law was written to apply to the secular as well as the spiritual). Like all presidents before him, he thought himself beloved of his people. It was, the representative knew, a common illusion of fools. In due course, the representative arrived at the modest private home of a friend of the local religious leader. This was a man of simple faith and quiet honor, beloved by all who knew him and disliked by no one, for his was a kindly voice in most things, and his occasional anger was founded on principles that even unbelievers could respect. In his middle fifties, he'd suffered at the hands of the previous regime, but never wavered in the strength of his beliefs. He was perfectly suited to the task at hand, and around him were his closest associates.

There were the usual greetings in God's Holy Name, followed by the

serving of tea, and then it was time for business.

"It is a sad thing," the representative began, "to see the faithful living in such poverty."

"It has always been so, but today we can practice our religion in freedom. My people are coming back to the Faith. Our mosques have been repaired, and every day they are more full. What are material possessions compared to the Faith?" the local leader responded, with the reasonable voice of a teacher.

"So true that is," the representative agreed. "And yet Allah wishes for His Faithful to prosper, does He not?" There was general agreement. Every man in the room was an Islamic scholar, and few prefer poverty to comfort.

"Most of all, my people need schools, proper schools," was the reply. "We need better medical facilities—I grow weary of consoling the parents of a dead child who needed not to have died. We need many things. I do not deny that."

"All these things are easily provided if one has money," the representative pointed out.

"But this has always been a poor land. We have resources, yes, but they have never been properly exploited, and now we have lost the support of the central government—at the very moment when we have the freedom to control our own destiny, while that fool of a president we have gets drunk and abuses women in his palace. If only he were a just man, a faithful man, for then we might bring prosperity to this land," he observed, more in sadness than in anger.

"That, and a little foreign capital," one of the more economically literate of his retinue suggested modestly. Islam has never had a rule against commercial activity. Though it is remembered by the West for spreading by the sword, it had gone east on the ships of traders, much as Christianity had spread through the word and example of its own adherents.

"In Tehran, it is thought that the time has arrived for the faithful to act as the Prophet commands. We have made the error common to unbelievers, of thinking in terms of national greed rather than the needs of all people. My own teacher, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, has preached of the need to return to the foundations of our Faith," the representative said, sipping his tea. He spoke as a teacher himself, his voice quiet. Passion he saved for the public arena. In a closed room, sitting on the floor with men as learned as himself, he, too, spoke only with reason's voice. "We have wealth—such wealth as only Allah could have awarded by His own plan. And now we have the moment as well. You men in this room, you kept the Faith, honored the Word in the face of persecution, while others of us grew rich. It is now our obligation to reward you, to welcome you back into the fold, to share

our bounty with you. This is what my teacher proposes."

"It is good to hear such words," was the cautious reply. That the man was primarily a man of God did not make him naive. He guarded his thoughts with the greatest care—growing up under Communist rule had taught him that—but what he had to be thinking was obvious.

"It is our hope to unite all Islam under one roof, to bring the Faithful together as the Prophet Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, desired. We are different in place, in language, often in color, but in our Faith we are one. We *are* the elect of Allah."

"And so?"

"And so, we wish your republic to join our own so that we may be as one. We will bring you schools and medical assistance for your people. We will help you take control of your own land, so that what we give you will be returned to all many-fold, and we shall be as the brothers Allah intends us to be."

The casual Western observer might have remarked that these men all appeared unsophisticated, due to their less-than-splendid clothing, their simple mode of speech, or merely the fact that they sat on the floor. Such was not exactly the case, and what the visitor from Iran proposed was hardly less startling than an embassy from another planet might have been. There were differences between his nation and this one, between his people and theirs. Language and culture, for starters. They had fought wars over the centuries, there had been banditry and brigandage, this despite the most serious strictures in the Holy Koran about armed conflict between Islamic nations. There was, in fact, virtually no common ground between them at all—except for one. That one might have been called accidental, but the truly Faithful didn't believe in accidents. When Russia, first under the czars and then under Marxism-Leninism, had conquered their land (a lengthy process rather than an event), they'd stripped so much away. Culture, for one. History and heritage; everything but language, a sop to what the Soviets for generations had uneasily called "the nationalities question." They'd brought schooling aimed first at destroying everything and then at rebuilding it in a new and godless mode, until the only unifying force left to the people was their Faith, which they'd tried hard to suppress. And even that was good, they all thought now, because the Faith could never be suppressed, and such attempts only made the truly Faithful more determined. It might even—had to have been a plan from Allah Himself, to show the people that their one salvation could only be the Faith. Now they were coming back to it, to the leaders who had kept the flame alight, and now, all in the room reflected, as their visitor knew they must, Allah Himself had washed away their petty differences so that they could unify as their God

wished. So much the better to do so with the promise of material prosperity, as Charity was one of the Pillars of Islam, and so long denied by people calling themselves faithful to the Holy Word. And now the Soviet Union was dead, and its successor state crippled, and the distant and unloved children of Moscow left largely on their own, all of them governed by an echo of what was gone. If it were not a sign from Allah that this opportunity should present itself, then what was it? they all asked themselves.

They only had to do one thing to bring it all about. And *he* was an unbeliever. And Allah would judge him through their hands.

"AND ALTHOUGH I can't say that I liked the way you treated my Boston College Eagles last October," Ryan said, with a smile, to the assembled NCAA football champions from the University of Oklahoma at Norman, "your tradition of excellence is part of the American soul." Which hadn't been much of a pleasure for the University of Florida in the last Orange Bowl, in a 35—10 blowout.

And the people applauded again. Jack was so pleased by this that he almost forgot the fact that the speech was not really his. His smile, crooked teeth and all, lit up the arena, and he waved his right hand, this time not tentatively. One could tell the difference on the C-SPAN cameras.

"He's a fast learner," Ed Kealty said. He was objective about such matters. His public face was one thing, but politicians are realists, at least in the tactical sense.

"He's very well coached, remember," the former Vice President's chief of staff reminded his boss. "They don't come any better than Arnie. Our initial play got their attention, Ed, and van Damm must have laid the word on Ryan pretty hard and pretty fast."

He didn't have to add that their "play" had gone nowhere fast after that. The newspapers had written their initial editorials, but then reflected a little and backed off—not editorially, since the media rarely admits to error, but the news stories coming from the White House press room, if not praising Ryan, hadn't used the usual assassination buzzwords: *unsure, confused, disorganized,* and the like. No White House with Arnie van Damm in it would ever be disorganized, and the whole Washington establishment knew it.

Ryan's major Cabinet appointments had shaken things up, but then the officials had all started doing the right things. Adler was another insider who'd worked his way to the top; as a junior official he'd briefed in too many foreign-affairs correspondents over the years for them to turn on him—and he never lost a chance to extol Ryan's expertise on foreign policy. George Winston, outsider and plutocrat

though he was, had initiated a "quiet" reexamination of his entire department, and Winston had on his Rolodex the number of every financial editor from Berlin to Tokyo, and was seeking out their views and counsel on his internal study. Most surprising of all was Tony Bretano in the Pentagon. A vociferous outsider for the last ten years, he'd promised the defense-reporting community that he'd clean out the temple or die in the attempt, that the Pentagon *was* wasteful now as they'd always proclaimed, but that he, with the President's approval, was going to do his damnedest to de-corrupt the acquisition process once and for all. It was a singularly uncharming collection of people, Washington outsiders all, but, damn it, they were charming the media in the best possible way, quietly, in the back rooms of power. Most disturbingly of all, the *Washington Post*, an internal spy had told Kealty earlier in the day, was preparing a multipart story about Ryan's history at CIA, and it would be a canonization piece by no less than Bob Holtzman. Holtzman was the quintessential media insider, and for reasons unknown, he liked Ryan personally—and he had one hell of a source inside somewhere. That was the Trojan horse. If the story ran, and if it were picked up around the nation—both likely, since it would increase the prestige both of Holtzman and the *Post*—then his media contacts would back away rapidly; the editorials would counsel him to withdraw his claim for the good of the nation and he'd have no leverage at all, and his political career would end in greater disgrace than he'd accepted only a short time before. Historians who might have overlooked his personal indiscretions would instead focus on his overreaching ambition, and instead of seeing it as an irregularity, would then fold it back into his entire career, questioning everything he'd ever done, seeing him in a different and unfavorable light at every step, saying that the good things he'd done were the irregularities. Kealty wasn't so much looking into his political grave as at eternal damnation.

"You left out Callie," Ed grumped, still watching the speech, listening to the content and paying close attention to the delivery—academic, he thought, fitting for an audience mainly of students, who cheered this Ryan as though he were a football coach or someone of similar irrelevance.

"One of her speeches could make Pee-Wee Herman look presidential," the chief of staff agreed. And that was the greatest danger of all. To win, Ryan just had to *appear* presidential, whether he really was or not—and he *wasn't,* of course, as Kealty kept reminding himself. How could he be?

"I never said he was stupid," Kealty admitted. He had to be objective. This wasn't a game anymore. It was even more than life.

"It's gotta happen soon, Ed."

“I know.” But he had to have something bigger to shoot, Kealty told himself. It was a curious metaphor for someone who’d advocated gun control all of his political life.

25

BLOOMS

THE FARM HAD COME with a barn. It mainly served as a garage now. Ernie Brown had been in the construction business, and had earned a good deal of money, first in the late 1970s as a union plumber, then he'd established his own business in the 1980s to partake in the California building boom. Though a pair of divorces had depleted his funds, the selling of the business had been well timed, and he'd taken the money and run, and bought a sizable parcel of land in an area not yet chic enough to have its property values driven up by Hollywood types. What had resulted was almost a full "section"—a square mile—of privacy. Actually more than that, because the neighboring ranches were dormant at this time of year, the pastures frozen, and the cattle in pens comfortably eating silage. You could go several days without seeing so much as another car on the road, or so it seemed out in Big Sky Country. School buses, they told themselves, didn't count.

A five-ton flatbed truck also had been conveyed with the ranch—a diesel, conveniently enough—along with a buried two-thousand-gallon fuel tank right by the barn. The family that had sold off the ranch and barn and house to the newcomer from California hadn't known that they were giving over title to a bomb factory. The first order of business for Ernie and Pete was to get the old truck started up. That proved to be a forty-minute exercise, because it wasn't just a case of a dead battery, but Pete Holbrook was a competent mechanic, and in due course the truck's engine roared to unmuffled life and showed every sign of remaining with the living. The truck was not licensed, but that wasn't terribly unusual in this area of huge holdings, and their drive of forty miles north to the farm-supplies store was untroubled.

It could hardly have been a better portent of spring for the store. Planting season was coming (there were a lot of wheat farmers around), and here was the first major customer for the virtual mountain of fertilizer just trucked in from the distributor's warehouse in Helena. The men bought four tons, not an unusual quantity, which a propane-powered forklift deposited on the flatbed of the truck, and

they paid cash for it, then drove off with a handshake and a smile.

"This is going to be hard work," Holbrook observed, halfway back.

"That's right, and we're going to do it all ourselves." Brown turned. "Or do you want to bring in somebody who might be an informer?"

"I hear you, Ernie," Pete replied, as a state police car went the other way. The cop didn't even turn his head, chilling though the moment was for the two Mountain Men. "How much more?"

Brown had done the calculations a dozen times. "One more truckload. It's a shame this stuff is so bulky." They'd make the second purchase tomorrow, at a store thirty miles southwest of the ranch. This evening would be busy enough, unloading all this crap inside the barn. A good workout. Why didn't the goddamn farm have a forklift? Holbrook wondered. At least when they refilled the fuel tank, the local oil company would do it. That was some consolation.

IT WAS COLD on the Chinese coast, and that made things easier for the satellites to see a series of thermal blooms at two naval bases. Actually, the "Chinese navy" was the naval service of the People's Liberation Army, so gross a disregard for tradition that Western navies ignored the correct name in favor of custom. The imagery was recorded and cross-linked to the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, where the senior watch officer turned to his intelligence specialist.

"Do the Chinese have an exercise laid on?"

"Not that we know of." The photos showed that twelve ships, all of them alongside, had their engines running, instead of the normal procedure by which they drew electrical power from the dock. A closer look at the photo showed a half-dozen tugboats moving around the harbor, as well. The intel specialist for this watch was Army. He called a naval officer over.

"Sailing some ships," was the obvious analysis.

"Not just doing an engineering exam or something?"

"They wouldn't need tugboats for that. When's the next pass?" the Navy commander asked, meaning a satellite pass, checking the time reference on the photo. It was thirty minutes old.

"Fifty minutes."

"Then it ought to show three or maybe four ships standing out to sea at both bases. That'll make it certain. For right now, two chances out of three, they're laying on a major exercise." He paused. "Any political hoo-rah going on?"

The senior watch officer shook his head. "Nothing."

"Then it's a FleetEx. Maybe somebody decided to check out their readiness." They would learn more with a press release from Beijing,

but that was thirty minutes into a future they couldn't see, paid though they were to do so.

THE DIRECTOR WAS a religious man, as was to be expected, what with the sensitivity of his post. Gifted physician that he had been, and scientist-virologist that he still was, he lived in a country where political reliability was measured by devotion to the Shi'a branch of Islam, and in this there was no doubt. His prayers were always on time, and he scheduled his laboratory work around them. He required the same of his people, for such was his devotion that he went beyond the teachings of Islam without even knowing it, bending such rules as stood in his way as though they were made of rubber, and at the same time telling himself that, no, he never violated the Prophet's Holy Word, or Allah's Will. How could he be doing that? He was helping to bring the world back to the Faith.

The prisoners, the experimental subjects, were all condemned men in one way or another. Even the thieves, lesser criminals, had four times violated the Holy Koran, and they had probably committed other crimes as well, perhaps—probably, he told himself—those worthy of death. Every day they were informed of the time for prayer, and though they knelt and bowed and mouthed the prayers, you could tell by watching them on the TV monitor that they were merely going through the ritual, not truly praying to Allah in the manner prescribed. That made them all apostates and apostasy was a capital crime in their country—even though only one had been convicted of that crime.

That one was of the Baha'i religion, a minority almost stamped out, a belief structure that had evolved *after* Islam. Christians and Jews were at least People of the Book; however misguided their religions, at least they acknowledged the same God of the Universe, of whom Mohammed was the final messenger. The Baha'i had come later, *inventing* something both new and false that relegated them to the status of pagans, denying the True Faith, and earning the wrath of their government. It was fitting that this man was the first to show that the experiment was successful.

It was remarkable that the prisoners were so braindulled by their conditions that the onset of flu symptoms caused no special reaction at first. The medical corpsmen went in, as always in full protective gear, to take blood samples, and one additional benefit of the prisoners' condition was that they were far too cowed to make trouble. All of them had been in prison for some time, subject to a deficient diet which had its own effects on their energy levels, plus a discipline regime so harsh that they didn't dare resist. Even the condemned

prisoners who knew they faced death had no wish to accelerate the process. All meekly submitted to having their blood drawn by exquisitely careful medics. The test tubes were carefully labeled in accordance with the numbers on the beds, and the medics withdrew.

In the lab, it was Patient Three's blood which went under the microscope first. The antibody test was prone to give some false positive readings, and this was too important to risk error. So slides were prepared and placed under the electron microscopes, first set at magnification 20,000 for area search. The fine adjustments for the instruments were handled by exquisitely machined gears, as the slide was moved left and right, up and down, until . . .

"Ah," the director said. He centered the target in the viewing field and increased the magnification to 112,000 . . . and there it was, projected onto the computer monitor in black-and-white display. His culture knew much of shepherding, and the aphorism "Shepherd's Crook" seemed to him a perfect description. Centered was the RNA strand, thin and curved at the bottom, with the protein loops at the top. These were the key to the action of the virus, or so everyone thought. Their precise function was not understood, and that also pleased the director's identity as a bio-war technician. "Moudi," he called.

"Yes, I see it," the younger doctor said, with a slow nod, as he walked to that side of the room. Ebola Zaire Mayinga was in the apostate's blood. He'd just run the antibody test as well, and watched the tiny sample change color. This one was not a false positive.

"Airborne transmission is confirmed."

"Agreed." Moudi's face didn't change. He was not surprised.

"We will wait another day—no, two days for the second phase. And then we will know." For now, he had a report to make.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT IN Beijing caught the American embassy by surprise. It was couched in routine terms. The Chinese navy would be holding a major exercise in the Taiwan Strait. There would be some live firings of surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles on dates yet unspecified (weather considerations had yet to be resolved, the release said). The People's Republic of China government was issuing Notice to Airmen and Notice to Mariner alerts, so that both airlines and shipping companies would be able to adjust their routings accordingly. Other than that, the release said nothing at all, and that was somewhat disturbing to the deputy chief of mission in Beijing. The DCM immediately conferred with his military attaches and the CIA chief of station, none of whom had any insights to offer, except that the release had nothing at all to say about the Republic of China

government on Taiwan. On the one hand, that was good news—there was no complaint about the continued political independence of what Beijing deemed a rebel province. On the other hand, it was bad news—the release did *not* say that this was a routine exercise and not intended to disturb anyone. The notice was just that, with no explanation at all attached to it. The information was dispatched to the NMCC in the Pentagon, to the State Department, and to CIA headquarters at Langley.

DARYAEI HAD TO search his memory for the face that went with the name, and the face he remembered was the wrong one, really, for it was that of a boy from Qom, and the message came from a grown man half a world away. Raman . . . oh, yes, Aref Raman, what a bright lad he'd been. His father had been a dealer in automobiles, Mercedes cars, and had sold them in Tehran to the powerful, a man whose faith had wavered. But his son's had not. His son had not even blinked on learning of the death of his parents, killed by accident, really, at the hands of the Shah's army, for having been on the wrong street at the wrong time, caught up in a civil disturbance in which they'd had no part at all. Together, he and his teacher had prayed for them. Dead by the hands of those they trusted was the lesson from that event, but the lesson had not been a necessary one. Raman had already been a lad of deep faith, offended by the fact that his elder sister had taken up with an American officer, and so disgraced her family and his own name. She, too, had disappeared in the revolution, condemned by an Islamic court for adultery, which left only the son. They could have used him in many ways, but the chosen one had been Daryaei's own doing. Linked up with two elderly people, the new "family" had fled the country with the Raman family wealth and gone first to Europe and then almost immediately thereafter to America. There they had done nothing more than live quietly; Daryaei imagined they were dead by now. The son, selected for the mission because of his early mastery of English, had continued his education and entered government service, performing his duties with all the excellence he'd displayed in the revolution's earliest phases, during which he'd killed two senior officers in the Shah's air force while they drank whiskey in a hotel bar.

Since then, he'd done as he'd been told. Nothing. Blend in. Disappear. Remember your mission, *but do nothing.* It was gratifying for the Ayatollah that he'd judged the boy well, for now he knew from the brief message that the mission was almost fully accomplished.

The word *assassin* is itself derived from *hashshash,* the Arabic word for the narcotic hashish, the tool once used by members of the Nizari

subsect of Islam to give themselves a drug-induced vision of Paradise prior to setting out on missions of murder. In fact, they'd been heretics to Daryaei's way of thinking—and the use of drugs was an abomination. They'd been weak-minded but effective servants of a series of master terrorists such as Hasan and Rashid ad-Din, and, for a time that stretched between two centuries, had served the political balance of power in a region stretching from Syria to Persia. But there was a brilliance in the concept which had fascinated the cleric since learning of it as a boy. To get one faithful agent inside the enemy's camp. It was the task of years, and for that reason a task of faith. Where the Nizaris had failed was that they were heretics, separate from the True Faith, able to recruit a few extremists into their cult, but not the multitude, and so they served a single man and not Allah, and so they needed drugs to fortify themselves, as an unbeliever did with liquor. A brilliant idea flawed. But a brilliant idea nonetheless. Daryaei had merely perfected it, and so now he had a man close, something he'd hoped for but not known. Better yet, he had a man close and waiting for instructions, at the far end of an unknown message path that had never been used, all composed of people who'd gone abroad no more recently than fifteen years ago, an altogether better state of affairs than that which he'd set in place in Iraq, for in America people who might be scrutinized were either arrested or cleared, or if they were watched, only for a little while, until the watchers became bored and went on to other tasks. In some countries when that happened, the watchers became bored, picked up those whom they watched, and frequently killed them.

So it was just timing before Raman completed his mission, and after all these years, he still used his head, unaddled by drugs and trained by the Great Satan himself. The news was too sublime even to occasion a smile.

Then the phone rang. The private one. "Yes?"

"I have good news," the director said, "from the Monkey Farm."

"YOU KNOW, ARNIE, you were right," Jack said, in the breezeway to the West Wing. "It was great to get the hell out of here."

The chief of staff noted the spring in his step, but didn't get overly excited about it. Air Force One had brought the President back in time for a quiet dinner with his family instead of the usual rigors of three or four such speeches, endless hours of schmoozing with major contributors, and the usual four-hour night that resulted—and that, often enough, in the aircraft—followed by a quick shower and a working day artificially extended by the revelries in the hustings. It was remarkable, he thought, that any President was able to do any

work at all. The real duties of the office were difficult enough, and those were almost always subordinated to what was little more than public relations, albeit a necessary function in a democracy, in which the people needed to see the President doing more than sitting at his desk and doing . . . his work. The presidency was a job which one could love without liking it, a phrase seemingly contradictory until you came here and saw it.

"You did just fine," van Damm said. "The stuff on TV was perfect, and the segment NBC ran with your wife was okay, too."

"She didn't like it. She didn't think they used her best line," Ryan reported lightly.

"Could have been a lot worse." *They didn't ask her about abortion,* Arnie thought. To keep that from happening, he'd used up a few large markers with NBC, and made sure that Tom Donner had been treated at least as well as a senator, maybe even a Cabinet member, on the flight the previous day, including a rare taped segment in flight. The following week, Donner would be the first network anchor to have a one-on-one with the President in the upstairs sitting room, and for that there was no agreement on the scope of the questions, meaning that Ryan would have to be briefed for hours to make sure he didn't step on the presidential crank. But for now the chief of staff allowed his President to bask in the afterglow of what had been a pretty good day in the Midwest, whose real mission, aside from getting Ryan out of Washington and so get a feel for what the presidency really was, was to have him look like a President, and further marginalize that bastard Kealty.

The Secret Service people were as upbeat as their President, as they so often drew their mood from POTUS, returning his smiles and nods with spoken greetings of their own: "Good morning, Mr. President!" repeated by four of them as Ryan passed, finding his way to the Oval Office.

"Good morning, Ben," Ryan said cheerily, heading to his desk and falling into the comfortable swivel chair. "Tell me how the world looks."

"We may have a problem. The PRC navy's putting to sea," the acting National Security Advisor said. The Secret Service had just assigned him a code name, CARDSHARP.

"And?" Ryan asked, annoyed that the morning might be spoiled.

"And it looks like a major fleet exercise, and they're saying there will be live-fire missile shoots. No reaction from Taipei yet."

"They don't have elections or anything coming up, do they?" Jack asked.

Goodley shook his head. "No, not for another year. The ROC has continued to spend money with the UN, and they're quietly lobbying a

lot of countries in case they go through with a request for representation, but nothing remarkable about that, either. Taipei is playing its cards close to the vest, and not making any noise to offend the mainland. Their commercial relationship is stable. In short, we have no explanation for the exercise."

"What do we have in the area?"

"One submarine in the Formosa Strait, keeping an eye on a Chinese SSN."

"Carriers?"

"Nothing closer than the Indian Ocean. *Stennis* is back in Pearl for engine repairs, along with *Enterprise,* and they'll be there for a while. The cupboard is still pretty bare." CARDSHARP reminded the President what he had himself said to *his* President only months before.

"What about their army?" the President asked next.

"Again, nothing new. We have higher-than-usual levels of activity, like the Russians said, but that's been going on for a while."

Ryan leaned back in his chair and contemplated a cup of decaf. He'd found on his speechifying trip that his stomach really did feel better that way, and remarked on it to Cathy, who'd merely smiled and said *I told you so!* "Okay, Ben, speculate."

"I talked it over with some China people at State and the Agency," Goodley replied. "Maybe their military is making a political move, interior politics, I mean, increasing their readiness state to let the other people on the Beijing Politburo know that they're still around and still matter. Aside from that, anything else is *pure* speculation, and I'm not supposed to do that here, boss, remember?"

"And 'don't know' means *don't know,* doesn't it?" It was a rhetorical question, and one of Ryan's favored aphorisms.

"You taught me that on the other side of the river, Mr. President," Goodley agreed, but without the expected smile. "You also taught me not to like things I can't explain." The national intelligence officer paused. "They know we'll know, and they know we'll be interested, and they know you're new here, and they know you don't need a hassle. So, why do it?" Goodley asked, also rhetorically.

"Yeah," the President agreed quietly. "Andrea?" he said. Price, as usual, was in the room, pretending not to pay attention.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where's the nearest smoker?" Ryan said it entirely without shame.

"Mr. President, I don't—"

"The hell you don't. I want one."

Price nodded and disappeared into the secretaries' room. She knew the signs as well as anyone. Switching from regular coffee to decaf, and now a smoke. In a way it was surprising that it had taken this

long, and it told her more about the intelligence briefing than the words of Dr. Benjamin Goodley did.

It had to be a woman smoker, the President saw a minute later. Another one of the thin ones. Price even brought a match and an ashtray along with her disapproving look. He wondered if they'd acted the same way with FDR and Eisenhower.

Ryan took his first drag, deep in thought. China had been the silent partner in the conflict—he still couldn't use the word *war*, not even in his own mind—with Japan. At least that was the supposition. It all made sense, and it all fitted together nicely, but there was no proof of the sort to flesh out a SNIE—a Special National Intelligence Estimate—much less present to the media, which often as not required the same degree of reliability as an especially conservative judge. *So* . . . Ryan lifted the phone. "I want Director Murray."

One of the nice things about the presidency was the use of the telephone. "Please hold for the President," a simple phrase spoken by a White House secretary in the same voice one might use for ordering out a pizza, never failed to cause an instant, almost panicked, reaction on the other end of whatever line she might use. It rarely took longer than ten seconds to get the call through. This time it took six.

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Morning, Dan. I need something. What's the name of that Japanese police inspector who came over?"

"Jisaburo Tanaka," Murray replied at once.

"Is he any good?" Jack said next.

"Solid. As good as anybody I have working here. What do you want from him?"

"I presume they're talking a lot with that Yamata guy."

"You may safely assume that a wild bear goes potty in the woods, too, Mr. President," the acting Director of the FBI managed to say without a laugh.

"I want to know about his conversations with China, especially who his contact was."

"That we can do. I'll try to get him right now. Call back to you?"

"No, brief Ben Goodley in, and he'll coordinate with the people down the hall," Ryan said, using an old catch-phrase between the two. "Ben's here now in my old office."

"Yes, sir. Let me do it now. It's heading up to midnight in Tokyo."

"Thanks, Dan. Bye." Jack put the phone back. "Let's start figuring this one out."

"You got it, boss," Goodley promised.

"Anything else happening in the world? Iraq?"

"Same news as yesterday, lots of people executed. The Russians fed us this 'United Islamic Republic' thing, and we all think it likely, but

no overt move yet. That's what I'd planned to do today, and—"

"Okay, then, get to it."

"OKAY, WHAT'S THE drill for this?" Tony Bretano asked.

Robby Jackson didn't especially like doing things on the fly, but that was the job of the newly promoted J-3, Director of Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the previous week, he'd come to like the designate—Secretary of Defense. Bretano was one tough-minded little guy, but his snarl was mainly for show, and concealed a very thoughtful brain able to make quick decisions. And the man was an engineer—he knew what he didn't know, and was quick to ask questions.

"We have *Pasadena*—fast-attack sub—in the strait already doing routine surveillance. We break her off the current job of trailing the PRC SSN and have her move northwest. Next, we move two or three additional boats into the area, assign them operating areas, and let them keep an eye on things. We open a line of communications with Taipei and have them feed us what they see and know. They'll play ball. They always do. Ordinarily, we'd move a carrier a little closer, but this time, well, we don't have one very close, and absent a political threat to Taiwan, it would appear to be an overreaction. We stage electronics-intelligence aircraft over the area out of Anderson Air Force Base in Guam. We're hampered by the lack of a nearby base."

"So, essentially we gather intelligence information and do nothing substantive?" the SecDef asked.

"Gathering intelligence is substantive, sir, but, yes."

Bretano smiled. "I know. I built the satellites you'll be using. What will they tell us?"

"We'll probably get a lot of in-the-clear chatter that'll use up every Mandarin-speaker they have at Fort Meade and tell us not very much about their overall intentions. The operational stuff will be useful—it'll tell us a lot about their capabilities. If I know Admiral Mancuso—COM-SUBPAC—he'll have one or two of his boats play a little fast and loose to see if the Chinese can acquire one and prosecute it, but nothing overt. That's one of our options if we don't like the way this exercise is going."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you really want to put the fear of God in a naval officer, you let him know there's a submarine around which is to say, Mr. Secretary, one appears unexpectedly in the middle of your formation and immediately disappears again. It's a head game, and a nasty one. Our people are good at that, and Bart Mancuso knows how to use his

boats. We couldn't have defeated the Japanese without him," Jackson said positively.

"He's that good?" Mancuso was just a name to the new SecDef.

"None better. He's one of the people you listen to. So's your CINCPAC, Dave Seaton."

"Admiral DeMarco told me—"

"Sir, may I speak freely?" the J-3 asked.

"Jackson, in here that's the only way."

"Bruno DeMarco was made Vice Chief of Naval Operations for a reason."

Bretano got it at once. "Oh, to give speeches and not do anything that can hurt the Navy?" Robby's reply was a nod. "Noted, Admiral Jackson."

"Sir, I don't know much about industry, but there's something you need to learn about this building. There's two kinds of officers in the Pentagon, operators and bureaucrats. Admiral DcMarco has been here for more than half of his career. Mancuso and Seaton are operators, and they try very hard to stay out of this building."

"So have you," Bretano observed.

"I guess I just like the smell of salt air, Mr. Secretary. I'm not polishing my own apple here, sir. You'll decide if you like me or not—what the hell, I'm out of the flying business anyway, and that's what I signed up to do. But, damn it, when Seaton and Mancuso talk, I hope you'll listen."

"What's the matter with you, Robby?" the SecDef asked with sudden concern. He knew a good employee when he saw one.

Jackson shrugged. "Arthritis. Runs in the family. Could be worse, sir. It won't hurt my golf game, and flag officers don't get to fly very much anyway."

"You don't care about getting promoted, do you?" Bretano was about to recommend another star for Jackson.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm the son of a preacher man in Mississippi. I got into Annapolis, flew fighters for twenty years, and I'm still alive to talk about it." All too many of his friends were not, a fact Robby never forgot. "I can retire whenever I want and get a good job. I figure I'm ahead of the game whatever happens. But America's been pretty good to me, and I owe something back. What I owe, sir, is to tell the truth and do my best and screw the consequences."

"So you're not a bureaucrat, either." Bretano wondered what Jackson's degree was in. He sure talked like a competent engineer. He even smiled like one.

"I'd rather play piano in a whorehouse, sir. It's more honest work."

"We're going to get along, Robby. Put a plan together. Let's keep a close eye on the Chinese."

"Actually, I'm just supposed to advise and—"

"Then coordinate with Seaton. I imagine he listens to you, too."

THE UN INSPECTION teams had become so accustomed to frustration that they hardly knew how to deal with satisfaction. The various staffs at the various facilities had given over reams of paper, still photographs, and videotapes, and practically raced the inspectors through the installations, pointing out the important aspects of the workings, and often demonstrating the easiest method of deactivating the more offensive features. There was the minor problem that the difference between a chemical-weapons plant and a factory for insecticide was essentially nil. Nerve gas had been an accidental invention of research into killing bugs (most insecticides are nerve poisons), and what it came down to, really, were the chemical ingredients, called "precursors." Besides which, any country with oil resources and a petrochemical industry routinely produced all manner of specialized products, most of them toxic to humans anyway.

But the game had rules, and one of the rules was that honest people were assumed not to produce forbidden weapons, and overnight Iraq had become an honest member of the world community.

This fact was made clear at the meeting of the United Nations Security Council. The Iraqi ambassador spoke from his seat at the annular table, using charts to show what had already been opened to the inspection teams, and lamenting the fact that he'd been unable to speak the truth before. The other diplomats in the room understood. Many of them lied so much that they scarcely knew what the truth was. And so it was now that they saw truth and didn't recognize the lie behind it.

"In view of the full compliance of my country with all United Nations resolutions, we respectfully request that, in view of the needs of the citizens of my country, the embargo on foodstuffs be lifted as quickly as possible," the ambassador concluded. Even his tone was reasonable now, the other diplomats noted with satisfaction.

"The chair recognizes the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran," said the Chinese ambassador, who currently had the rotating chairmanship for the Security Council.

"No country in this body has greater reason to dislike Iraq. The chemical-weapons plants inspected today manufactured weapons of mass destruction which were then used against the people of my country. At the same time, we feel it is incumbent upon us to recognize the new day that has dawned over our neighbor. The citizens of Iraq have suffered long because of the actions of their former ruler. That ruler is gone, and the new government shows every

sign of reentering the community of nations. In view of that, the Islamic Republic of Iran will support an immediate suspension of the embargo. We will, moreover, initiate an emergency transfer of foodstuffs to bring relief to the Iraqi citizens. Iran proposes that the suspension should be conditional upon Iraq's continued good faith. To that end, we submit Draft Resolution 3659 . . ."

Scott Adler had flown up to New York to take the American seat at the Council. The American ambassador to the UN was an experienced diplomat, but for some situations the proximity of Washington was just too convenient, and this was one. For what little good it did, Adler thought. The Secretary of State had no cards to play at all. Often the cleverest ploy in diplomacy was to do exactly what your adversary requested. That had been the greatest fear in 1991, that Iraq could have simply withdrawn from Kuwait, leaving America and her allies with nothing to do, and preserving the Iraqi military to fight another day. It had been, fortunately, an option just a little too clever for Iraq to exercise. But someone had learned from that. When you demanded that someone should do something or else be denied something that he needed, and then that person did it—well, then you could no longer deny what he wanted, could you?

Adler had been fully briefed on the situation, for all the good it did him. It was rather like sitting at a poker game with three aces after the draw, only to learn that your opponent had a straight flush. Good information didn't always help. The only thing that could delay the proceedings was the turgid pace of the United Nations, and even that had limitations when diplomats had an attack of enthusiasm. Adler could have asked for a postponement of the vote to ensure Iraqi compliance with the long-standing UN demands, but Iran had already handled that by submitting a resolution that specified the temporary and conditional nature of the embargo suspension. They'd also made it very clear that they were going to ship food anyway—in fact already had, via truck, on the theory that doing something illegal in public made it acceptable. The SecState looked over at his ambassador—they'd been friends for years—and caught the ironic wink. The British ambassador was looking down at a pad of penciled doodles. The Russian one was reading dispatches. Nobody was listening, really. They didn't have to. In two hours, the Iranian resolution would pass. Well, it could have been worse. At least he'd have a chance to speak face-to-face with the Chinese ambassador and ask about their naval maneuvers. He knew the answer he'd get, but he wouldn't know if it was the truth or not. Of course. *I'm the Secretary of State of the world's most powerful nation,* Adler thought, *but I'm just a spectator today*.

26

WEEDS

THERE WERE FEW THINGS sadder than a sick child. Sohaila, her name was, Dr. MacGregor remembered. A pretty name, for a pretty, elfin little girl. Her father carried her in his arms. He appeared to be a brutish man—that was MacGregor's first impression, and he'd learned to trust them—but if so, one transformed by concern for his child. His wife was in his wake, along with another Arabic-appearing man wearing a jacket, and behind *him* was an official-looking Sudanese, all of which the physician noted and ignored. They weren't sick. Sohaila was.

"Well, hello again, young lady," he said, with a comforting smile. "You are not feeling at all well, are you? We'll have to see about that, won't we? Come with me," he said to the father.

Clearly these people were important to someone, and they would be treated accordingly. MacGregor led them to an examining room. The father set the little girl down on the table and backed away, letting his wife hold Sohaila's hand. The bodyguards—that's what they had to be—remained outside. The physician touched his hand to the child's forehead. She was burning up—39 at least. Okay. He washed his hands thoroughly and donned gloves, again because this was Africa, and in Africa you took every precaution. His first considered action was to take her temperature via the ear: 39.4. Pulse was rapid but not worrisome for a child. A quick check with a stethoscope confirmed normal heart sounds and no particular problem with the lungs, though her breathing was rapid as well. So far she had a fever, something hardly uncommon with young children, especially those recently arrived into a new environment. He looked up.

"What seems to be the problem with your daughter?" The father answered this time.

"She cannot eat, and her other end—"

"Vomiting and diarrhea?" MacGregor asked, checking her eyes out next. They seemed unremarkable as well.

"Yes, Doctor."

"You've arrived here recently, I believe?" He looked up when the answer was hesitation. "I need to know."

"Correct. From Iraq, just a few days."

"And your daughter has a mild case of asthma, nothing else, no other health problems, correct?"

"That is true, yes. She's had all her shots and such. She's never been ill like this." The mother just nodded. The father clearly had taken over, probably to get the feeling of authority, to make things happen, the physician surmised. It was fine with him.

"Since arriving here, any unusual things to eat? You see," MacGregor explained, "travel can be very unsettling to some people, and children are unusually vulnerable. It could just be the local water."

"I gave her the medicine, but it got worse," the mother said.

"It is not the water," the father said positively. "The house has its own well. The water is good."

As though on cue, Sohaila moaned and turned, vomiting off the examining table and onto the tile floor. It wasn't the right color. There were traces of red and black. Red for new blood, black for old. It wasn't jet lag or bad water. Perhaps an ulcer? Food poisoning? MacGregor blinked and instinctively checked to be sure his hands were gloved. The mother was looking for a paper towel to—

"Don't touch that," he said mildly. He next took the child's blood pressure. It was low, confirming an internal bleed. "Sohaila, I'm afraid you will be spending the night with us so that we can make you well again."

It could have been many things, but the doctor had been in Africa long enough to know that you acted as though it were the worst. The young physician consoled himself with the belief that it couldn't be all *that* bad.

IT WASN'T QUITE like the old days—what was?—but Mancuso enjoyed the work. He'd had a good war—*he* thought of it as a war; his submarines had done exactly what they'd been designed to do. After losing *Asheville* and *Charlotte*—those before the known commencement of hostilities—he'd lost no more. His boats had delivered on every mission assigned, savaging the enemy submarine force in a carefully planned ambush, supporting a brilliant special operation, conducting deep-strike missile launches, and, as always, gathering vital tactical intelligence. His best play, COMSUBPAC judged, had been in recalling the boomers from retirement. They were too big and too unwieldy to be fast-attack boats, but God damn if they hadn't done the job for him. Enough so that they were all down the hill from his headquarters, tied alongside, their crews swaggering around town a bit, with brooms still prominent on their sails. Okay, so he wasn't Charlie Lockwood

exactly, modesty told him. He'd done the job he'd been paid to do. And now he had another.

"So what are they supposed to be up to?" he asked his immediate boss, Admiral Dave Seaton.

"Nobody seems to know." Seaton had come over to look around. Like any good officer, he tried to get the hell out of his office as much as possible, even if it only meant visiting another. "Maybe just a FleetEx, but with a new President, maybe they want to flex their muscles and see what happens." People in uniform did not like such international examinations, since they were usually the ones whose lives were part of the grading procedure.

"I know this guy, boss," Bart said soberly.

"Oh?"

"Not all that well, but you know about *Red October."* Seaton grinned. "Bart, if you ever tell me that story, one of us has to kill the other, and I'm bigger." The story, one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Navy's history, still was not widely known, though the rumors—one could never stop those were many and diverse.

"You need to know, Admiral. You need to know what National Command Authority has hanging between his legs. I've been shipmates with the guy."

That earned Mancuso a hard blink from CINCPAC. "You're kidding."

"Ryan was aboard the boomer with me. Matter of fact, he got aboard before I did." Mancuso closed his eyes, delighted that he could finally tell this sea story and get away with it. Dave Seaton was a theater commander-in-chief, and he had a right to know what sort of man was sending the orders down from Washington.

"I heard he was involved in the operation, even that he got aboard, but I thought that was at Norfolk, when they parked her at the Eight-Ten Dock. I mean, he's a spook, right, an intel weenie . . ."

"Not hardly. He killed a guy—shot him, right in the missile room—before I got aboard. He was on the helm when we clobbered the Alfa. He was scared shitless, but he didn't cave. This President we've got's been there and done that. Anyway, if they want to test our President, my money's on him. Two big brass ones, Dave, that's what he's got hangin'. He may not look like it on TV, but I'll follow that son of a bitch anywhere." Mancuso surprised himself with the conclusion. It was the first time he'd thought it all the way through.

"Good to know," Seaton thought.

"So what's the mission?" SUBPAC asked.

"J-3 wants us to shadow."

"You know Jackson better than I do. What are the parameters?"

"If this is a FleetEx and nothing else, we observe covertly. If things change, we let them know we care. You've got point, Bart. My

cupboard's pretty damned bare."

They had only to look out the windows to see that. *Enterprise* and *John Stennis* were both in drydock. CINCPAC did not have a single carrier to deploy, and wouldn't for two more months. They'd run *Johnnie Reb* on two shafts for the retaking of the Marianas, but now she lay alongside her older sister, with huge holes torched from the flight deck down to the first platform level while new turbines and reduction gears were fabricated. The aircraft carrier was the usual means for the United States Navy to make a show of force. Probably that was part of the Chinese plan, to see how America would react when a substantive reaction was not possible, or so it would appear to some.

"Will you cover for me with DeMarco?" Mancuso asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Bruno's from the old school. He thinks it's bad to get detected. Personally, I think sometimes it can be a good thing. If you want me to rattle John Chinaman's cage, he has to hear the bars shake, doesn't he?"

"I'll write the orders accordingly. How you run it is your business. For the moment, if some 'can skipper talks to his XO about getting laid on the beach, I want it on tape for my collection."

"Dave, that's an order a man can understand. I'll even get you the phone number, sir."

"AND NOT A damned thing we can do," Cliff Rutledge concluded his assessment.

"Gee, Cliff," Scott Adler responded. "I kinda figured that one out for myself." The idea was that subordinates gave you alternatives instead of taking them away—or in this case, telling you what you already knew.

They'd been fairly lucky to this point. Nothing much had gotten out to the media. Washington was still too shell-shocked, the junior people filling senior posts were not yet confident enough to leak information without authorization, and the senior posts President Ryan had filled were remarkably loyal to their Commander-in-Chief, an unexpected benefit of picking outsiders who didn't know from politics. But it couldn't last, especially with something as juicy as a new country about to be born from two enemies, both of whom had shed American blood.

"I suppose we could always just do nothing," Rutledge observed lightly, wondering what the reaction would be. This alternative was distinct from not being able to do anything, a metaphysical subtlety not lost on official Washington.

"Taking that position only encourages developments adverse to our interests," another senior staffer observed crossly.

"As opposed to proclaiming our impotence?" Rutledge replied. "If we say we don't like it, and then we fail to stop it, that's worse than our taking no position at all."

Adler reflected that you could always depend on a Harvard man for good grammar and finely split hairs and, in Rutledge's case, not much more than that. This career foreign service officer had gotten to the seventh floor by never putting a foot wrong, which was another way of saying that he'd never led a dance partner in his life. On the other hand, he was superbly connected—or had been. Cliff had the deadliest disease of a FSO, however. Everything was negotiable. Adler didn't think that way. You had to stand and fight for some things, because if you didn't, the other guy would decide where the battlefield was, and then he had control. The mission of diplomats was to prevent war, a serious business, Adler thought, which one accomplished by knowing where to stand firm and where the limits on negotiation were. For the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy, it was just an unending dance. With someone else leading. Alas, Adler didn't yet have the political capital to fire the man, or maybe make him an ambassador to some harmless post. He himself still had to be confirmed by the new Senate, for example.

"So just call it a regional issue?" another senior diplomat asked. Adler's head turned slowly. Was Rutledge building a consensus?

"No, it is not that," the Secretary of State pronounced, making his stand within his own conference room. "It is a vital security interest of the United States. We have pledged our support to the Saudis."

"Line in the sand?" Cliff asked. "There's no reason to do that yet. Look, let's be sensible about this, okay? Iran and Iraq merge and form this new United Islamic Republic, fine. Then what? It takes them years to get the new country organized. In that time, forces which we know to be under way in Iran weaken the theocratic regime that's been giving us such a royal pain in the butt. This is not a one-way deal, is it? We can expect that from the influence the secular elements in Iraqi society will necessarily have in Iran. If we panic and get pushy, we make life easier for Daryaei and his fanatics. But if we take it easy, then we lessen the imperative for them to stoke up the rhetoric against us. Okay, we can't stop this merger, can we?" Rutledge went on. "So if we can't, what do we do? We think of it as an opportunity to open a dialogue with the new country."

There was a certain logic to the proposal, Adler noted, noting also the tentative nods around the conference table. He knew the proper buzzwords. Opportunity. Dialogue.

"That'll really make the Saudis feel warm and fuzzy," a voice

objected from the far end of the table. It was Bert Vasco, the most junior man here. “Mr. Rutledge, I think you underestimate the situation. Iran managed the assassination—”

“We have no proof of that, do we?”

“And Al Capone was never convicted for Valentine’s Day, but I saw the movie.” Being called into the Oval Office had enlivened the desk officer’s rhetoric. Adler raised an amused eyebrow. “Somebody is orchestrating this, starting with the shooting, continuing with the elimination first of the military high command, and then second with the slaughter of the Ba’ath Party leadership. Next, we have this religious revival now under way. The picture I have of this is one of renewed national and religious identity. *That* will attenuate the moderating influences you referred to. The internal dissent in Iran will be knocked back a full year at least by these developments—and we don’t know what else might be going on. Daryaei’s a plotter, and a good one. He’s patient, dedicated, and one ruthless son of a bitch—”

“Who’s on his last legs,” one of Rutledge’s allies in the room objected.

“Says who?” Vasco shot back. “He’s managed this one pretty sharp.”

“He’s in his seventies.”

“He doesn’t smoke or drink. Every tape we have of him in public, he looks vigorous enough. Underestimating this man is a mistake we’ve made before.”

“He’s out of touch with his own people.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know that. He’s having a good year so far, and everybody likes a winner,” Vasco concluded.

“Bert, maybe you’re just worried about losing your desk when they form the UIR,” someone joked. It was a low blow, aimed by a senior man at a junior, with chuckles around the table to remind him of that. The resulting silence told the Secretary of State that there was a consensus forming, and not the one he wanted. Time to take control again.

“Okay, moving on,” Adler said. “The FBI will be back tomorrow to talk to us about the purloined letter. And guess what they’ll be bringing?”

“Not the Box again,” someone groaned. Nobody noticed the way Rutledge’s head turned.

“Just think of it as a routine test for our security clearances,” SecState told his principal subordinates. Polygraphs weren’t exactly unknown for the senior people here.

“God damn it, Scott,” Cliff said, speaking for the others. “Either we’re trusted or we’re not. I’ve already wasted hours with those people.”

“You know, they never found Nixon’s letter of resignation, either,”

another said.

"Maybe Henry kept it," a third joked.

"Tomorrow. Starting at ten o'clock. Myself included," Adler told them. He thought it a waste of time as well.

HIS SKIN WAS very fair, his eyes gray, and his hair had a reddish tinge, the result, he thought, of an Englishwoman somewhere in his ancestry, or such was the family joke. One advantage was his ability to pass for any Caucasian ethnicity. That he could still do so was the result of his caution. On his few "public" operations, he'd tinted his hair, worn dark glasses, and let his beard grow—that was black—which resulted in jokes within his own community: "Movie star," they said. But many of the jokers were dead, and he was not. Perhaps the Israelis had photos of him one never knew about them, but one did know that they rarely shared information with anyone, even their American patrons, which was foolish. And you couldn't worry about everything, even photographs in some Mossad file cabinet.

He came through Dulles International Airport after the flight from Frankfurt, with the requisite two bags of the serious businessman he was, with nothing more to declare than a liter of Scotch purchased in a German dutyfree store. Purpose of his visit to America? Business and pleasure. Is it safe to move around Washington now? Terrible thing, saw the replay on the TV news, must be a thousand times, dreadful. It is? Really? Things are back to normal now? Good. His rental car was waiting. He drove to a nearby hotel, tired from the long flight. There he purchased a paper, ordered dinner in, and switched on the TV. That done, he plugged his portable computer into the room's phone they all had data jacks now—and accessed the Net to tell Badrayn that he was safely in-country for his reconnaissance mission. A commercial encryption program transformed what was a meaningless code phrase into total gibberish.

"WELCOME ABOARD. My name is Clark," John told the first class of fifteen. He was turned out much better than was his custom, wearing a properly tailored suit, buttondown shirt, and a striped tie. For the moment, he had to impress in one way. Soon he'd do it in another. Getting the first group in had been easier than expected. The CIA, Hollywood notwithstanding, is an agency popular among American citizens, with at least ten applications for every opening, and it was just a matter of doing a computer search of the applications to find fifteen which fit the parameters of Clark's PLAN BLUE. Every one was

a police officer with a college degree, at least four years of service, and an unblemished record which would be further checked by the FBI. For the moment, all were men, probably a mistake, John thought, but for the moment it wasn't important. Seven were white, two black, and one Asian. They were, mainly, from big-city police forces. All were at least bilingual.

"I am a field intelligence officer. Not an 'agent,' not a 'spy,' not an 'operative.' An *officer,"* he explained. "I've been in the business for quite some time. I'm married and I have two children. If any of you have ideas about meeting a sleek blonde and shooting people, you can leave now. This business is mainly dull, especially if you're smart enough to do it right. You're all cops, and therefore you already know how important this job is. We deal with high-level crime, and the job is about getting information so that those major crimes can be stopped before people get killed. We do that by gathering information and passing it on to those who need it. Others look at satellite pictures or try to read the other guy's mail. We do the hard part. We get our information from *people*. Some are good people with good motives. Some are not such good people who want money, who want to get even, or who want to feel important. What these people are doesn't matter. You've all worked informants on the street, and they're not all Mother Teresa, are they? Same thing here. Your informants will often be better educated, more powerful people, but they won't be very different from the ones you've been working with. And just like your street informants, you have to be loyal to them, you have to protect them, and you'll have to wring their scrawny little necks from time to time. If you fuck up, those people die, and in some of the places you'll be working, their wives and children will die, too. If you think I'm kidding on that, you're wrong, people. You will work in countries where due process of law means whatever somebody wants it to mean. You've seen that on television just in the last few days, right?" he asked. Some of the Ba'ath officials shot in Baghdad had made world news telecasts, with the usual warnings about children and the sensitive, who invariably watched anyway. The heads nodded soberly.

"You will, for the most part, *not* be armed in the field. You will survive by your wits. You will sometimes be at risk of your life. I've lost friends in the field, some in places you know about, and some in places you don't. The world may be kinder and gentler now, but not everywhere. You're not going to be going to the nice places, guys," John promised them. In the back of the room, Ding Chavez was struggling hard not to smile. *That little greasy guy is my partner and he's engaged to my little girl.* No sense, Domingo knew, in scaring them all away.

"What's good about the job? Well, what's good about being a cop?

Answer: every bad guy you put away saves lives on the street. In this job, getting the right information to the right people saves lives, too. Lots," Clark emphasized. "When we do the job right, wars *don't* happen.

"Anyway, welcome aboard. I am your supervising teacher. You will find the training here stimulating and difficult. It starts at eight-thirty tomorrow morning." With that John left the podium and walked to the back of the room. Chavez opened the door for him and they walked out into the fresh air.

"Gee, Mr. C., where do I sign up?"

"God damn it, Ding, I had to say *something.*" It had been John's longest oration in some years.

"So, to get these rookies aboard, what did Foley have to do?"

"The RIFs have begun, m'boy. Hell, Ding, we had to get things started, didn't we?"

"I think you should have waited a few weeks. Foley isn't confirmed by the Senate yet. Better to wait," Chavez thought. "But I'm just a junior spook."

"I keep forgetting how smart you've gotten."

"SO WHO THE hell is Zhang Han San?" Ryan asked.

"Somewhere in his fifties, but young looking for his age, ten kilos overweight, five four or so, medium everything, so says our friend," Dan Murray reported from his written notes. "Quiet and thoughtful, and he stiffed Yamata."

"Oh?" Mary Pat Foley said. "How so?"

"Yamata was on Saipan when we got control of things. He placed a call to Beijing, looking to bug out to a safe place. Mr. Zhang reacted as though it were a cold call. 'What deal? We don't have any deal,' " the FBI Director mimicked. "And after that, the calls didn't go through at all. Our Japanese friend regards that as a personal betrayal."

"Sounds as though he's singing like a canary," Ed Foley observed. "Does that strike anybody as suspicious?"

"No," Ryan said. "In World War Two, what Japanese prisoners we took talked plenty."

"The President's right," Murray confirmed. "I asked Tanaka about that myself. He says it's a cultural thing. Yamata wants to take his own life—the honorable way out in their cultural context—but they've got him on suicide watch—not even shoestrings. The resulting disgrace is so great for the guy that he has no particular reason to keep secrets. Hell of an interrogation technique. Anyway, Zhang is supposedly a diplomat—Yamata said he was titularly part of a trade delegation—but State's never heard of him. The Japanese have no

records of the name on any diplomatic list. That makes him a spook, as far as I'm concerned, and so . . ." He looked over at the Foleys.

"I ran the name," Mary Pat said. "Zippo. But who's to say it's a real name?"

"Even if it were," her husband added, "we don't know that much about their intelligence people. If I had to guess"—and he did—"he's political. Why? He cut a deal, a quiet one but a big one. Their military is still on an increased readiness and training regime because of that deal, which is why the Russians are still nervous. Whoever this guy is, best guess, he's a very serious player." Which wasn't exactly an earth-shaking revelation.

"Anything you can do to find out?" Murray inquired delicately.

Mrs. Foley shook her head. "No assets in place, at least nothing we can use for this. We have a good husband-wife team in Hong Kong, setting up a nice little network. We have a couple of assets in Shanghai. In Beijing we have some low-level agents in the defense ministry, but they're long-term prospects and using them on this issue wouldn't accomplish much more than to endanger them. Dan, the problem we have with China is that we don't really know how their government works. It has levels of complexity that we can only guess at. The Politburo members, we know who they are—we think. One of the biggies might be dead now, and we've been fishing for that tidbit for over a month. Even the Russians let us know when they buried people," the DDO noted, as she sipped her wine. Ryan had come to like bringing his closest advisers in for drinks after the close of regular office hours. It hadn't quite occurred to him that he was extending their working day. He was also short-circuiting his own National Security Advisor, but as loyal and clever as Ben Goodley was, Jack Ryan still wanted to hear it directly when he could.

Ed took up the explanation. "You see, sure, we think we know the political varsity over there, but we've never had a real handle on the second-string players. The dynamic is simple when you think about it, but it took us long enough to twig to it. We're talking elderly folks over there. They can't get around all that well. They need mobile eyes and ears, and over the years those gofers have accumulated a lot of power. Who's really calling the shots? We don't know for sure, and without ID'ing people, we can't find out."

"I can dig it, guys." Murray grunted, and reached for his beer. "When I was working OC—organized crime sometimes we ID'd Mafia *capi* by who held the car door open for whom. Hell of a way to do business." It was the friendliest thing the Foleys remembered hearing from the FBI about CIA. "Operational security really isn't all that hard if you think about it a little."

"Makes a good case for PLAN BLUE," Jack said next.

"Well, then you might be pleased to know the first fifteen are in the pipeline even as we speak. John should have given them their welcoming speech a few hours ago," the DCI announced.

Ryan had gone over Foley's reduction-in-force plan for CIA. Ed planned to swing a mean ax, ultimately reducing the Agency budget by $500 million over five years while increasing the field force. It was something to make people on the Hill happy, though with much of CIA's real budget in the black part of federal expenditures, few would ever know. Or maybe not, Jack thought. That was likely to leak.

Leaks. He'd hated them over his entire career. But now they were part of statecraft, weren't they? the President reflected. But what was he supposed to think? That leaks were *okay* now that he was the one doing it or allowing it? Damn. Laws and principles weren't supposed to work that way, were they? What exactly, what idea or ideal or principle or rock was he supposed to hold on to?

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THE BODYGUARD'S NAME was Saleh. He was a physically robust individual, as his work demanded, and, as such, one who tried to deny illness or discomfort of any sort. A man of his station in life simply did not admit to difficulty. But when discomfort didn't go away as he'd expected and as the doctor had told him—Saleh knew that all men were vulnerable to stomach problems—and then he saw blood in the toilet . . . it was that, really. The body isn't supposed to issue blood except from a shaving cut or a bullet wound. Not in any case from moving one's bowels, and it was the sort of indicator certain to shake any man, all the more so a strong and otherwise confident one. Like many, he delayed somewhat, asking himself if it might be a temporary problem that would go away, that the discomfort would peak and abate, as flu symptoms always did. But these kept getting worse, and finally his fear got the better of him. Before dawn he left the villa, taking the car and driving to the hospital. Along the way he had to stop the car to vomit, deliberately not looking to see what he'd left on the street before heading on, his body weakening with every minute, until the walk from the car to the door seemed to take every bit of energy he had. In what passed here for an emergency room, he waited while people searched for his records. It was the smell of hospitals which frightened him, the same disinfectant odor which makes a dog stop dead and strain backward at the leash and whimper and pull away, because the smell is associated with pain, until finally a black nurse called his name, and then he rose, assembled his dignity and composure, and walked into the same examining room he'd visited

before.

THE SECOND GROUP often criminals was little different from the first, except that in this one there was not a condemned apostate. It was easy to dislike them, Moudi thought, looking at the group with their sallow faces and slinking mannerisms. It was their expressions most of all. They looked like criminals, never quite meeting his eyes, glancing this way and that, always, it seemed, searching for a way out, a trick, an angle, something underhanded. The combination of fear and lingering brutality on their faces. They were not just men, and while that seemed to the doctor a puerile observation, it did mark them as different from himself and the people he knew, and therefore as the bearers of lives which were unimportant.

"We have some sick people here," he told them. "You have been assigned to look after them. If you do this job well, you will be trained as hospital aides for work at your prisons. If not, you will be returned to your cells and your sentences. If any of you misbehaves, your punishment will be immediate and severe." They all nodded. They knew about severe treatment. Iranian prisons were not noted for their amenities. Nor, it would seem, for good food. They all had pale skin and rheumy eyes. Well, what solicitude did such people merit? the physician asked himself. Each of them was guilty of known crimes, all of them serious, and what unknown crimes lay in their pasts only the criminals and Allah knew. What pity Moudi felt for them was residual, a result of his medical training, which compelled him to view them as human beings no matter what. That he could overcome. Robbers, thieves, pederasts all, they'd violated the law in a country where law was a thing of God, and if it was stern, it was also fair. If their treatment was harsh by Western standards—Europeans and Americans had the strangest ideas about human rights; what of the rights of the victims of such people?—that was just too bad, Moudi told himself, distancing himself from the people before him. Amnesty International had long since stopped complaining about his country's prisons. Perhaps they could devote their attention to other things, like the treatment of the Faithful in other lands. There was not a Sister Jean Baptiste among them, and she was dead, and that was written, and what remained was to see if their fates had been penned by the same hand in the book of life and death. He nodded to the head guard, who shouted at the new "aides." They even stood insolently, Moudi saw. Well, they'd all see about that.

They'd all been pre-processed, stripped, showered, shaved, disinfected, and dressed in surgical greens with single-digit numbers on the back. They wore cloth slippers. The armed guards led them off

to the air-lock doors, inside of which were the army medics, supplemented by a single armed guard, who kept his distance, a pistol in his gloved hands. Moudi returned to the security room to watch on the TV system. On the black-and-white monitors he watched them pad down the corridor, eyes shifting left and right in curiosity—and doubtless looking for a way out. All the eyes lingered on the guard, who was never less than four meters distant. Along the way, each of the new arrivals was handed a plastic bucket with various simple tools inside—the buckets also were numbered.

They'd all started somewhat at seeing the medics in their protective suits, but shuffled along anyway. It was at the entrance of the treatment room that they stopped. It must have been the smell, or perhaps the sight. Slow to pick up on the situation, one of their number had finally realized that whatever this was—

On the monitor, a medic gestured at the one who froze in the doorway. The man hesitated, then started speaking back. A moment later, he hurled his bucket down at the floor and started shaking his fist, while the others watched to see what would result. Then the security guard appeared out of the corner of the picture, his arm coming up and his pistol extended. At a range of two meters, he fired —so strange to see the shot but not hear it—straight into the criminal's face. The body fell to the tile floor, leaving a pattern of black spots on the gray wall. The nearest medic pointed to one of the prisoners, who immediately retrieved the fallen bucket and went into the room. There would be no more disciplinary trouble with this group. Moudi shifted his gaze to the next monitor.

This one was a color camera. It had to be. It could also be panned and zoomed. Moudi indicated the corner bed, Patient 1. The new arrival with *I* on his back and bucket just stood there at the foot of the bed at first, bucket in his hand, not knowing what he beheld. There was a sound pickup for this room, but it didn't work terribly well because it was a single nondirectional mike, and the security staff had long since turned it down to zero, because the sound was so piteous as to be debilitating to those who listened—moans, whimpers, cries from dying men who in their current state did not appear so sinister. The apostate, predictably, was the worst. He prayed and even tried to comfort those he could reach from his bed. He'd even attempted to lead a few in prayer, but they'd been the wrong prayers, and his roommates were not of the sort to speak to God under the best of circumstances.

Aide 1 continued to stand for a minute or so, looking down at Patient 1, a convicted murderer, his ankle chained to the bed. Moudi took control of the camera and zoomed it in further to see that the shackles had worn away the skin. There was a red stain on the

mattress from it. The man—the *condemned patient,* Moudi corrected himself—was writhing slowly, and then Aide 1 remembered what he'd been told. He donned his plastic gloves, wet his sponge, and rubbed it across the patient's forehead. Moudi backed the camera off. One by one, the others did the same, and the army medics withdrew.

The treatment regime for the patients was not going to be a serious one. There was no point in it, since they'd already fulfilled their purpose in the project. That made life much easier on everyone. No IV lines to run, no needles to stick—and no "sharps" to worry about. In contracting Ebola, they'd confirmed that the Mayinga strain was indeed airborne, and now all that was left was to prove that the virus had not attenuated itself in the reproductive process . . . and that it could be passed on by the same aerosol process which had infected the first grouping of criminals. Most of the new arrivals, he saw, did what they'd been told to do—but badly, crassly, wiping off their charges with quick, ungentle strokes of the sponges. A few seemed genuinely compassionate. Perhaps Allah would notice their charity and show them mercy when the time came, less than ten days from now.

"REPORT CARDS," CATHY said when Jack came into the bedroom.

"Good or bad?" her husband asked.

"See for yourself," his wife suggested.

Uh-oh, the President thought, taking them from her hand. For all that, it wasn't so bad. The attached commentary sheets—every teacher did a short paragraph to supplement the letter grade—noted that the quality of the homework turned in had improved in the past few weeks ... so, the Secret Service agents *were* helping with that, Jack realized. At one level, it was amusing. At another—strangers were doing the father's job, and that thought made his stomach contract a little. The loyalty of the agents merely illustrated something that he was failing to do for his own kids.

"If Sally wants to get into Hopkins, she's going to have to pay more attention to her science courses," Cathy observed.

"She's just a kid." To her father she'd always be the little girl who—

"She's growing up, and guess what? She's interested in a young soccer player. Name of Kenny, and he's way Cool," SURGEON reported. "Also needs a haircut. His is longer than mine."

"Oh, shit," SWORDSMAN replied.

"Surprised it took this long. I started dating when I was—"

"I don't want to hear about it—"

"I married you, didn't I?" Pause. "Mr. President . . ."

Jack turned. "It has been a while."

"Any way we can get to the Lincoln Bedroom?" Cathy asked. Jack looked over and saw a glass on her nightstand. She'd had a drink or two. Tomorrow wouldn't be a surgery day.

"He never slept there, babe. They call it that because—"

"The picture. I know. I asked. I like the bed," she explained with a smile. Cathy set her patient notes down and took off her reading glasses. Then she held her arms up, almost like a toddler soliciting a pickup and a hug. "You know, I've never made love to the most powerful man in the world before—at least not this week."

"What about the timing?" Cathy had never used the pill.

"What *about* the timing?" she replied. And she'd always been as regular as a metronome.

"You don't want another—"

"Maybe I don't especially care."

"You're forty," POTUS objected.

"Well, thank you! That's well short of the record. What are you worried about?"

Jack thought about that for a moment. "Nothing, I guess. Never did get that vasectomy, did I?"

"Nope, you never even talked to Pat about it like you said you would—and if you do it now," FLOTUS went on with a positively wicked grin, "it'll be in *all* the papers. Maybe even on live TV. Arnie might tell you that it'll set a good example for the Zero Population Growth people, and you'll cave on that. Except for the national security implications . . ."

"What?"

"President of the United States has his nuts cut, and they won't respect America anymore, will they?"

Jack almost started laughing, but stopped himself. The Detail people in the corridor might hear and—

"What got into you?"

"Maybe I'm finally getting comfortable with all this—or maybe I just want to get laid," she added.

That's when the phone next to the bed rang. Cathy's face made a noiseless snarl as she reached for it. "Hello? Yes, Dr. Sabo. Mrs. Emory? Okay . . . no, I don't think so ... No, definitely not, I don't care if she's agitated or not, not till tomorrow. Get her something to help her sleep ... whatever it takes. The bandages stay on till I say otherwise, and make sure that's on her chart, she's too good at whining. Yes. Night, Doctor." She replaced the phone and grumbled. "The lens replacement I did the other day. She doesn't like being blindfolded, but if we take the coverings off too soon—"

"Wait a minute, he called—"

"They have our number at Wilmer."

“The direct residence?” That one even bypassed Signals, though it, like all White House lines, was bugged. Or probably was. Ryan hadn’t asked, and probably didn’t want to know.

“They had it for home, didn’t they?” Cathy asked. “Me surgeon, me treat patients, me professor, always on call when me have patients—especially the pain-in-the-ass ones.”

“Interruptions.” Jack lay down next to his wife. “You don’t really want another baby, do you?”

“What I want is to make love to my husband. I can’t be picky about timing anymore, can I?”

“Has it been that bad?” He kissed her gently.

“Yes, but I’m not mad about it. You’re trying very hard. You remind me of my new residents—older, though.” She touched his face and smiled. “If something happens, it happens. I like being a woman.”

“I rather like it myself.”

27

RESULTS

SOME OF THEM HAD DEGREES in psychology. It was a common and favored degree for law-enforcement officers. Some even had advanced degrees, and one member of the Detail had a doctorate, having done his dissertation on the sub-specialty of profiling criminals. All were at the least gifted amateurs in the science of reading minds; Andrea Price was one of these. SURGEON had a spring in her step as she walked out to her helicopter. SWORDSMAN walked her out to the groundfloor door and kissed her good-bye—the kiss was routine, the walk-out and the hand-holding were not, or hadn't been lately. Price shared a glance with two of her agents, and they read one another's minds, as cops can do, and they judged it to be good, except for Raman, who was as smart as the rest of them, but rather more straitlaced. He devoted more passion to sports than anything else, and Price imagined him in front of his TV every night. He probably knew even how to program his VCR. Well, there were many personality types in the Service.

"What's today look like?" POTUS asked, turning away when the Black Hawk lifted off.

"SURGEON is airborne," Andrea heard in her earpiece. "Everything's clear," the overwatch people reported from their perches on the government buildings around the White House. They'd been scanning the perimeter for the last hour, as they did every day. There were the usual people out there, the "regulars," known by sight to the Detail members. These were people who seemed to turn up a lot. Some were just fascinated by the First Family, whichever family it might be. For them, the White House was America's real soap opera, *Dallas* writ large, and the trappings, the mechanics, really, of life in this most famous of dwellings drew them for some reason that Service psychologists struggled to understand, because for the armed agents on the Detail, "regulars" were dangerous by their very existence. And so the snipers on the Old Executive Office Building—OEOB—and Treasury knew them all by sight through their powerful spotting glasses, and knew them all by name, too, because Detail members were out there, too, disguised as street rats or passersby. At one time

or another, the "regulars" had all been trailed to whatever homes they might have, and identified, and investigated, quietly. Those with irregularities were profiled for personality type—they all had a few kinks—and then they'd be carefully scanned by the Detail members who worked outside for weapons—up to and including being bumped into by a "jogger" and expertly groped while being helped to their feet during the embarrassed apology. But that danger was past, for now.

"Didn't you check your schedule last night?" Price asked, distracted from her duties into asking a dumb question.

"No, decided to catch some TV," SWORDSMAN lied, not knowing that they spotted the lie. He didn't even blush, Price saw. For her part, she didn't allow her face to change. Even POTUS was allowed to have a secret or two, or at least the illusion of it.

"Okay, here's my copy." She handed it over. Ryan scanned the first page, which took him to lunch. "SecTreas is on the way in for breakfast right after CARDSHARP."

"What do you guys call George?" Jack asked, entering the West Wing.

"TRADER. He likes that," Andrea reported.

"Just so you pronounce it right." Which wasn't a bad line for 7:50 A.M., POTUS thought. But it was hard to tell. The Detail liked nearly all of his jokes. Maybe they were just being polite?

"Good morning, Mr. President." Goodley stood, as usual, when Jack entered the Oval Office.

"Hi, Ben." Ryan dropped the schedule down on his desk, made a quick scan for important documents, and took his seat. "Go."

"You stole my thunder talking with the crew last night. We have *gornischt* on Mr. Zhang. I could give you the long version, but I imagine you've already heard it." The President nodded for him to go on.

"Okay, developments in the Taiwan Strait. The PRC has fifteen surface ships at sea, two formations, one of six, one of nine. I have compositions if you want, but they're all destroyers and frigates. Deployed in regular squadron groupings, the Pentagon tells us. We have an EC-135 listening in. We have a submarine, *Pasadena,* camped between the two groups, with two more boats en route from central Pacific, timed to arrive in-area in thirty-six and fifty hours, respectively. CINCPAC, Admiral Seaton, is up to speed and tasking out a full surveillance package. His parameters are on Secretary Bretano's desk now. I've discussed it over the phone. Sounds like Seaton knows his business.

"Political side, the ROC government is taking no official notice of the exercise. They put out a press release to that effect, *but* their military is in contact with ours—through CINCPAC. We'll have people

in their listening posts"—Goodley checked his watch—"may be there already. State doesn't think this is a very big deal, but they're watching."

"Overall picture?" Ryan asked.

"Could just be routine, but we wish their timing was a little better. They're not overtly pushing anything."

"And until they do, we don't push back. Okay, we take no official notice of this exercise. Let's keep our deployments quiet. No press releases, no briefings to the media. If we get any questions, it's no big deal."

Goodley nodded. "That's the plan, Mr. President.

"Next, Iraq, again, we have little in the way of direct information. Local TV is on a religious kick. It's all Shi'a. The Iranian clergymen we've been seeing are getting a lot of air time. The TV news coverage is almost entirely religion-based. The anchors are getting rhapsodic. The executions are done. We don't have a full body count, but it's over one hundred. That appears to be over. The Ba'ath leadership is gone for good. The littler fish are in the can. There was some stuff about how merciful the provisional government was to the 'lesser criminals'—that's a quote. The 'mercy' is religiously justified, and it seems that some of the 'lesser criminals' have come back to Jesus excuse me, back to Allah—in one big hurry. There's TV pictures of them sitting with an imam and discussing their misdeeds.

"Next indicator, we're seeing more organized activity within the Iranian military. Troops are training. We're getting intercepts of tactical radio traffic. It's routine, but there's a lot of it. They had an all-nighter at Foggy Bottom to go over all this stuff. The Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Rutledge, set it up. He evidently ran the I and R division pretty ragged." The State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research was the smaller and much poorer cousin to the intelligence community, but in it were a handful of very astute analysts whose diplomatic perspective occasionally gave insights the intelligence community missed.

"Conclusions?" Jack asked. "From the all-nighter, I mean."

"None." *Of course,* Goodley could have added, but didn't. "I'll be talking to them in an hour or so."

"Pay attention to what I and R says. Pay particular attention to—"

"Bert Vasco. Yes," Goodley agreed. "He's all right, but I'll bet the seventh floor is giving him a pain in the ass. I talked to him twenty minutes ago. He says, are you ready, forty-eight hours. Nobody agrees with that. *Nobody,*" CARDSHARP emphasized.

"But . . . ?" Ryan rocked back in his chair.

"But I won't bet against him, boss. I have nothing to support his assessment. Our desk people at CIA don't agree. State won't back him

up—they didn't even give it to me; I got it from Vasco directly, okay? But, you know, I am not going to say he's wrong." Goodley paused, realizing that he was not sounding like every other NIO. "We have to consider this one, boss. Vasco has good instincts, and he's got balls, too."

"We'll know quickly enough. Right or wrong, I agree that he's the best guy over there. Make sure Adler talks to him, and tell Scott I don't want him stomped, regardless of how it turns out."

Ben nodded emphatically as he made a note. "Vasco gets high-level protection. I like that, sir. It might even encourage other people to make a gut call once in a while."

"The Saudis?"

"Nothing from them. Almost like they're catatonic. I think they're afraid to ask for any help until there's a reason for it."

"Call Ali within the hour," the President ordered. "I want his opinion."

"Yes, sir."

"And if he wants to talk to me, at any time, night or day, tell him he's my friend, and I always have time for him."

"And that's the morning news, sir." He rose and stopped. "Who ever decided on CARDSHARP, by the way?"

"We did," Price said from the far end of the room. Her left hand went up to her earpiece. "It's in your file. You evidently played a good game of poker in your frat house."

"I won't ask you what my girlfriends said about me," the acting National Security Advisor said, on his way out the door.

"I didn't know that, Andrea."

"He's even won some money at Atlantic City. Everybody underestimates him 'cause of his age. TRADER just pulled in."

Ryan checked his agenda. Okay, this was about George's appearance before the Senate. The President took a minute to review his morning appointment list, while a Navy mess steward brought in a light breakfast tray.

"Mr. President, the Secretary of the Treasury," Agent Price announced at the side door to the corridor.

"Thank you, we can handle this alone," Ryan said, rising from his desk as George Winston came in.

"Morning, sir," SecTreas said, as the door closed quietly. He was dressed in one of his handmade suits, and was carrying a manila folder. Unlike his President, the Secretary of the Treasury was used to wearing a jacket most of the time. Ryan took his off and dropped it on the desk. Both sat on the twin couches, with the coffee table between them.

"Okay, how are things across the street?" Ryan asked, pouring

himself some coffee, with the caffeine in this morning.

"If I ran my brokerage house like that, the SEC would have my hide on the barn door, my head over the fireplace, and my ass in Leavenworth. I'm going to—hell, I've already started bringing in some of my administrative folks down from New York. There are just too many people over there whose only job is looking at each other and telling them how important they all are. Nobody's *responsible* for anything. Damn it, at Columbus Group, we often make decisions by committee, but we make by-God *decisions* in time for them to matter. There are too many people, Mr. Pres—"

"You can call me Jack, at least in here, George, I—" The door to the secretaries' room opened and the photographer came in with his Nikon. He didn't say anything. He rarely did. He just snapped away, and the rubric was for everyone to pretend he simply wasn't there. It would have been a hell of an assignment for a spy, Ryan thought.

"Fine. Jack, how far can I go?" TRADER asked.

"I already told you that. It's your department to run. Just so you tell me about it first."

"I'm telling you, then. I'm going to cut staff. I'm going to set that department up like a business." He stopped for a second. "And I'm going to rewrite the tax code. God, I didn't know how screwed up it was until two days ago. I had some in-house lawyers come in and—"

"It has to be revenue-neutral. We can't go dicking around with the budget. None of us has the expertise yet, and until the House of Representatives is reconstituted—" The photographer left, having caught the President in a great pose, both hands extended over the coffee tray.

"Playmate of the Month," Winston said, with a hearty laugh. He lifted a croissant and buttered it. "We've run the models. The effect on revenue will be neutral on the basis of raw numbers, Jack, but there will probably be an overall increase in usable funds."

"Are you sure? Don't you need to study all the—"

"No, Jack. I don't need to study anything. I brought Mark Gant in to be my executive assistant. He knows computer modeling better than anybody I've ever met. He spent last week chewing through the—didn't anybody ever tell you? They never *stop* looking at the tax system over there. Study? I pick up the phone, and inside half an hour I'll have a thousand-page document on my desk telling me how things were in 1952, what the tax code *then* did in every segment of the economy—or what people think it did, as opposed to what they thought *then* that it did, or as opposed to what the studies in the 1960s said *they* thought that it did." SecTreas paused for a bite. "Bottom line? Wall Street is far more complex, and uses simpler models, and those models *work*. Why? Because they're simpler. And I'm going to

tell the Senate that in ninety minutes, with your permission."

"You're sure you're right on this, George?" POTUS asked. That was one of the problems, perhaps the largest of all. The President couldn't check everything that was done in his name—even checking one percent would have been an heroic feat—but he was responsible for it all. It was that knowledge that had doomed so many Presidents to micro-managerial failure. "Jack, I'm sure enough to bet my investors' money on it."

Two pairs of eyes met over the table. Each man knew the measure of the other. The President could have said that the welfare of the nation was a matter of greater moment than the few billions of dollars Winston had managed at the Columbus Group, but he didn't. Winston had built his investment house from nothing. Like Ryan, a man of humble origins, he'd created a business in a ferociously competitive environment on the basis of brains and integrity. Money entrusted to him by his clients had to be *more* precious than his own, and because it had always been so, he'd grown rich and powerful, but never forgotten the how and why of it all. The first important public-policy statement to be made by Ryan's administration would ride on Winston's savvy and honor. The President thought it over for a second, and then he nodded.

"Then run with it, TRADER." But then Winston had his misgivings. It was instructive to the President that even so powerful a figure as the Secretary of the Treasury lowered his eyes for a second, and then said something quieter and less positive than his confident assertion of five seconds earlier.

"You know, politically this is going to—"

"What you're going to say to the Senate, George, is it good for the country as a whole?"

"Yes, sir!" An emphatic nod of the head.

"Then don't wimp out on me."

SecTreas wiped his mouth with the monogrammed napkin, and looked down again. "You know, after this is all over and we go back to normal life, we really have to find a way to work together. There aren't many people like us, Ryan."

"Actually there are," the President said, after a moment's reflection. "The problem is that they never come here to work. You know who I learned that from? Cathy," Jack told him. "She fucks up, somebody goes blind, but she can't run away from making the call, can she? Imagine, you fuck up, and somebody loses his sight forever—or dies. The guys who work the emergency room are really on the ragged edge, like when Cathy and Sally went into Shock-Trauma. You blow the call, and somebody is gone forever. Big deal, George, bigger than trading equities like we used to do. Same thing with cops. Same thing

with soldiers. You have to make the call, right now, or something really bad happens. But those kinds of people don't come here to Washington, do they? And mainly that sort of guy goes to the place he—or she—has to be, where the real action is," Ryan said, almost wistfully. "The really good ones go where they're needed, and they always seem to know where that is."

"But the really good ones don't like the bullshit. So they don't come here?" Winston asked, getting his own course in Government 101, and finding Ryan a teacher of note.

"Some do. Adler at State. Another guy over there I've discovered, name of Vasco. But those are the ones who buck the system. The system works against them. Those are the ones we have to identify and protect. Mostly little ones, but what they do isn't little. They keep the system running, and mainly they go unnoticed because they don't care much about being noticed. They care about getting it done, serving the people out there. You know what I'd really like to do?" Ryan asked, for the first time revealing something from the depths of his soul. He hadn't even had the guts to say this to Arnie.

"Yeah, set up a system that really works, a system that recognizes the good ones and gives them what they deserve. You know how hard that is in *any* organization? Hell, it was a struggle at my shop, and Treasury has more janitors than I had trading executives. I'm not even sure where to start a job like that," Winston said. He would be one to grasp the scope of the dream, his President thought.

"Harder than you think, even. The guys who really do the work don't want to be bosses. They want to work. Cathy could be an administrator. They offered her the chair at the University of Virginia Medical School—and that would have been a big deal. But it would have cut her patient time in half, and she likes doing what she does. Someday Bernie Katz at Hopkins is going to retire, and they'll offer his chair to her, and she'll turn *that* down. Probably," Jack thought. "Unless I can talk her out of it."

"Can't be done, Jack." TRADER shook his head. "Hell of an idea, though."

"Grover Cleveland reformed the Civil Service over a hundred years ago," POTUS reminded his breakfast guest. "I know we can't make it perfect, but we *can* make it better. You're already trying—you just told me that. Think about it some."

"I'll do that," SecTreas promised, standing. "But for now, I have another revolution to foment. How many enemies can we afford to make?"

"There's always enemies, George. Jesus had enemies."

HE LIKED THE sobriquet “Movie Star,” and having learned of it fifteen years before, he had also learned to make it work for him. The mission was reconnaissance, and the weapon was charm. He had a choice of accents in his repertoire. Since he had German travel documents, he affected the speech of a person from Frankfurt to go along with German clothing, complete to shoes and wallet, all purchased with money that came from whatever sponsor Ali Badrayn had recently found. The rental-car company had provided him with excellent maps, all spread on the bucket seat next to his. That saved him from memorizing all his routes, which was tiresome, and wasteful of both his time and his photographic memory.

The first stop was St. Mary’s School, located a few miles outside Annapolis. It was a religious school, Roman Catholic, that ran from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade, and had just under six hundred students. That made it a borderline case in terms of economics. The Star would get two or perhaps three passes, made somewhat easier by the fact that the school was on a point of land that had once been a sizable farm which the Catholic Church had talked out of some wealthy family or other. There was only one access road. The school’s land ended at the water, and there was a river on the far side, past the athletic fields. The road had houses on one side, a residential development perhaps thirty years old. The school had eleven buildings, some closely bunched, others more spread out. Movie Star knew the ages of the targets, and from that it was easy enough to guess the buildings where they would spend much, if not all, of their time. The tactical environment was not a favorable one, and became less so when he spotted the protection. The school had plenty of land —at least two hundred hectares—and that made for a sizable defense perimeter, penetrating which had instant risks. He spotted a total of three large, dark vehicles, Chevy Suburbans, which could not have been more obviously the transport for the targets and their protectors. How many? He saw two people standing in the open, but the vehicles would have at least four guards each. The vehicles would be armored, and equipped with heavy weapons. One way in, and one way out. Almost a kilometer out to the main road. What about the water? Movie Star thought, driving to the end. Ah. There was a Coast Guard cutter there, a small one, but it would have a radio, and that made it large enough.

He stopped the car at the cul-de-sac, getting out to look at a house with a for-sale sign in the yard. He retrieved the morning paper from the car, ostentatiously checking the folded page against the number, then looking around some more. He had to be quick about it. The guards would be wary, and though they couldn’t check everything—even the American Secret Service had limits on its time and resources

—he couldn't afford to dawdle. His initial impressions were not at all favorable. Access was limited. So many students—picking out the right two would be difficult. The guards were many and dispersed. That was the bad part. Numbers mattered less than physical space. The most difficult defense to breach was a defense in depth, because depth meant both space *and* time. You could neutralize any number of people in a matter of seconds if you had the proper weapons and they were bunched up. But give them anything more than five seconds, and their training would kick in. The guards would be well-drilled. They'd have plans, some predictable, some not. That Coast Guard boat, for example, could dart into shore and take the targets clear. Or the guards could retreat with their charges to an isolated point and fight it out, and Movie Star had no illusions about their training and dedication. Give them as much as five minutes, and they'd win. They'd call in help from the local police force—which even had helicopters; he'd checked—and the attacking force would be cut off. No, this was not a favored site. He tossed the newspaper back into the car and drove off. On the way out, he looked on the street for a covert vehicle. There were a few vans parked in driveways, none of them with darkened plastic on the windows which might conceal a man with a camera. His peripheral vision confirmed his assessment. This was not a good location. To take these targets, it would be far better to do it on the fly. On the road, more correctly. But not much better. The protection for that would probably be excellent. Kevlar panels. Lexan windows. Special tires. And doubtless overhead protection in the form of helicopters. That didn't even count the unmarked cars and ready access to supplementary police reinforcement.

Okay, Movie Star thought, using in his mind an Americanism that had universal application. Giant Steps Day Care Center and Nursery School, Ritchie Highway above Joyce Lane. Only one target there, but a better one, and probably, Movie Star hoped, a more favorable tactical environment.

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WINSTON HAD BEEN in the business of selling himself and his ideas for more than twenty years. Along with it had come a certain theatrical sense. Better yet, the stage fright went in both directions. Only one of the senators on the committee had previous experience, and he was in the minority party—the polarity of the Senate had changed with the 747 crash, and done so in his ideological favor. As a result, the men and women taking their seats behind the massive oak bench were every bit as nervous as he was. While he took his seat and

set out his papers, a total of six people were piling up huge bound volumes on the next table over. Winston ignored them. The C-SPAN cameras did not.

It soon got better. While the Secretary-designate chatted with Mark Gant, the latter's portable computer open and operating in front of him, the table to their left groaned and crashed, spilling the pile of books to the floor, to the collective gasp of everyone in the room. Winston turned, startled and pleased. His gofers had done exactly what he'd told them, piling the collected volumes of the United States Tax Code right in the middle of the table instead of distributing the load evenly.

"Oh, shit, George," Gant whispered, struggling not to laugh.

"Maybe God really is on our side." He jumped up to see that nobody had been hurt. Nobody had. The first oaken cry of protest had made the people stand back. Now security guards darted in, only to see that nothing, really, had happened. Winston leaned into the microphone.

"Mr. Chairman, sorry about that, but it doesn't really hurt anything. Can we proceed without further delay?"

The chairman gaveled the room to order, without taking his eyes off the disaster. A minute later, George Winston was sworn.

"Do you have an opening statement, Mr. Winston?"

"Sir, I did." SecTreas shook his head and stifled a laugh, though not quite all the way. "I guess I have to apologize to the members of the committee for our little accident. I'd meant that to be an illustration of one of my points, but . . . well . . ." He rearranged his papers and sat more erect in his chair.

"Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is George Winston, and President Ryan has asked me to step away from my business to serve my country in the capacity of Secretary of the Treasury. Let me tell you a little bit about myself . . ."

"WHAT DO WE know about him?" Kealty asked.

"Plenty. He's smart. He's tough. He's pretty honest. And he's richer 'n God." *Even richer than you,* the aide didn't say.

"Ever investigated?"

"Never." His chief of staff shook his head. "Maybe he's skated on thin ice, but—no, Ed, I can't even say that. The book on Winston is that he plays by the rules. His investment group is highly rated for performance and integrity. He had a bad trader working for him eight years ago, and George personally testified against him in court. He also made good the guy's shenanigans out of his own pocket. His own *personal* pocket, that is. Forty million dollars' worth. The crook served five years. He's a good choice for Ryan. He's no politician, but he's

well respected on the Street."

"Shit," Kealty observed.

"MR. CHAIRMAN, THERE are a lot of things that need to be done." Winston set his opening statement aside and continued off the cuff. Or so it seemed. He jerked his left hand to the pile of books. "That broken table over there. That's the U.S. Tax Code. It's a principle of common law that ignorance of the law is not a defense before the bar of justice. But that doesn't make sense anymore. The Treasury Department and the Internal Revenue Service both promulgate and enforce the tax law of our country. Excuse me, those laws are passed by the Congress, as we all know, but mainly they happen because my department submits the proposed set of rules, and the Congress modifies and approves them, and then we enforce them. In many cases, the interpretation of the code you pass is left to people who work for me, and as we all know, the interpretation can be as important as the laws themselves. We have special tax courts to make further rulings—but what we end up with is that pile of printed paper over there, and I would submit to this committee that nobody, not even an experienced member of the bar, can possibly understand it all.

"We even have the absurd situation that when a citizen brings his tax records and return forms into an IRS office for assistance from the people who enforce the law, and those IRS employees make a mistake, then the *citizen* who comes to his government for help is responsible for the mistakes the *government* makes. Now, when I was in the trading business, if I gave my client a bad piece of advice, I had to take the responsibility for it.

"The purpose of taxes is to provide revenue for the country's government so that the government can serve the people. But along the way we've created an entire industry that takes billions of dollars from the public. Why? To explain a tax code that gets more complex every year, a code that the enforcement people themselves do not understand with a sufficient degree of confidence to undertake responsibility for getting it right. You already know, or you should"—they didn't—"the amount of money we spend on enforcing that tax code, and that's not especially productive, either. We're supposed to be working for the people, not confusing them.

"And so, Mr. Chairman, there are some things I hope to be able to accomplish during my term at Treasury, if the committee sees fit to confirm my nomination. First, I want the tax code completely rewritten into something a normal person can understand. I want that tax code to make sense. I want a code with no special breaks. I want the same rules to apply equally to everybody. I am prepared to present

a proposal to do exactly that. I want to work with the committee to make that into law. I want to work with you ladies and gentlemen. I will not let any corporate or any other form of lobbyist into my office to discuss this matter, and here and now, I beseech you to do the same. Mr. Chairman, when we start talking to every Tom, Dick, and Harry who has a little suggestion to take care of a special group with special needs, we end up with that!" Winston pointed to the broken table again. "We're all Americans. We're supposed to work together, and in the long run, tweaking the tax laws of our country for every lobbyist with an office and a clientele ultimately takes *more* money from everybody. The laws of our country are not supposed to be a jobs program for accountants and lawyers in the private sector, and bureaucrats in the public sector. The laws which you pass and which people like me enforce are supposed to serve the needs of the citizens, not the needs of the government.

"Second, I want my department to run efficiently. *Efficiency* is not a word that government knows how to spell, much less implement. That has to change. Well, I can't change this whole city, but I *can* change the department with which the President has entrusted me, and which, I hope, you will let me have. I know how to run a business. The Columbus Group serves literally millions of people, directly and indirectly, and I've borne that burden with pride. I will, in the next few months, submit a budget for a Department of the Treasury that doesn't have so much as one excess position." It was a considerable exaggeration, but nonetheless an impressive one. "This room has heard such claims before, and I will not blame you for taking my words with a ton of salt, but I am a man accustomed to backing up my words with results, and that's going to happen here, too.

"President Ryan had to yell at me to get me to move into Washington. I don't *like* it here, Mr. Chairman," Winston told the committee. He had them now. "I want to do my job and leave. But the job is going to get done, if you let me. That concludes my opening statement."

The most experienced people in the room were the reporters in the second row—the first row had Winston's wife and family. They knew how things were done and how things were said. A cabinet officer was supposed to wax rhapsodic about the honor of being allowed to serve, about the joy of being entrusted with power, about the responsibility that would bear heavily upon him or her.

I don't like it here? The reporters stopped writing their notes and looked up, first at the dais, and then at one another.

MOVIE STAR LIKED what he saw. Though the danger to him was

greater, the risk was balanced. Here there was a main four-lane highway within a few meters of the objective, and that led to an infinite network of side roads. Best of all, you could see almost everything. Directly behind the objective was a clump of woods, dense enough that it could not hold a support vehicle. There had to be one, and where would it be . . . ? Hmm, *there,* he thought. There was one house close enough with an attached garage that actually faced the day-care center and that one . . . yes. Two cars parked right in front of that house—why weren't they parked inside? So probably the Secret Service had made an arrangement with the owners. It was ideal, fifty meters from the demi-school, facing in the right direction. If something untoward happened, the alarm would be issued, and the support vehicle would instantly be manned, the garage door opened, and out it would race like a tank, except that it wasn't a tank.

The problem with security in a case such as this was that you had to set your procedures in stone, and clever as the Secret Service people undoubtedly were, their arrangements had to fit parameters both known and predictable. He checked his watch. How to confirm his suspicions? For starters, he needed a few minutes at rest. Directly across from Giant Steps was a convenience store, and that he'd check, because the enemy would have a person there, maybe more than one. He pulled in, parked the car, and went in, spending a minute or so blundering about.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked. Female, twenty-five—no older than that, but trying to look young. One did that with the cut of the hair and a little makeup, Movie Star knew. He'd used female operatives himself, and that's what he'd told them. Younger people always appear less threatening, especially the females. With a smile of confusion and embarrassment, he walked to the counter.

"I'm looking for your maps," he said.

"Right there under the counter." The clerk pointed with a smile. She was Secret Service. The eyes were too bright for the person to be in such a menial job.

"Ach," he said in disgust, selecting a large book map that would show every residential street in the district county, they called them in America. He lifted it and flipped pages, one eye trained across the street. The children were being led outside to the playground. Four adults with them. Two would have been the normal number. So, at least two—three, he realized, spotting a man in the shadows, hardly moving at all. Large man, 180 centimeters or so, wearing casual clothes. Yes, the playground faced the dwelling with the garage. The watchers *had* to be there. Two more, perhaps three, would be in the dwelling, always watching. This would not exactly be easy, but he *would* know where the opposition was. "How much for the map?"

"Printed right there on the cover."

"Ach, ja, excuse me." He reached into his pocket. "Five dollar, ninety-five," he said to himself, fishing for the change.

"Plus tax." She rang it up on the register. "Are you new to the area?"

"Yes, I am. I am teacher."

"Oh, what do you teach?"

"German," he replied, taking his change, and counting it. "I want to see what houses are like here. Thank you for the map. I have much to do." A curt European nod punctuated the encounter, and he left without a further look across the street. Movie Star had a sudden chill. The clerk had definitely been a police type. She'd be watching him right now, probably taking down his license number, but if she did, and if the Secret Service ran the number, they'd find that his name was Dieter Kolb, a German citizen from Frankfurt, a teacher of English, currently out of the country, and unless they pressed, that cover would be sufficient. He pulled north on Ritchie Highway, turning right at the first opportunity. There was a community college on a hill nearby, and in America those all had parking lots.

It was just a matter of finding a good spot. This was it. The intervening woods would soon fill out with the coming of spring, blocking visual access to Giant Steps. The rear of the house whose garage probably held the Chevy Suburban support vehicle had only a few windows facing in this direction, and those were curtained. The same was true of the preschool itself. Movie Star/Kolb lifted a pair of compact binoculars and scanned. It wasn't easy with all the tree trunks between him and the objective, but thorough as the American Secret Service was, its people weren't perfect. None were. More to the point, Giant Steps was not a favorable location for quartering so important a child, but that wasn't surprising. The Ryan family had sent all of its children here. The teachers were probably excellent, and Ryan and his physician wife probably knew them and were friendly with them, and the news stories he'd copied down from the Internet emphasized the fact that the Ryans wanted to keep their family life intact. Very human. And foolish.

He watched the children cavort on the playground. It seemed to be covered with wood chips. How natural it all was, the little ones cocooned in bulky winter clothes—the temperature was eleven or twelve, he estimated—and running about, some on the monkey bars, others on swings, still more playing in what dirt they could find. The manner of dress told him that these children were well looked after, and they were, after all, children. Except for one. Which one he couldn't tell from this distance—they'd need photos for that, when the time came—but that one wasn't a child at all. That one was a political

statement for someone to make. Who would make the statement, and exactly why the statement would be made didn't concern Movie Star. He'd remain in his perch for several hours, not thinking at all about what might result from his activities. Or might not. He didn't care. He'd write up his memorized notes, draw his detailed maps and diagrams, and forget about it. "Kolb" was years past caring about it all. What had begun with religious fervor for the liberating Holy War of his people had, with the passage of time, become work for which he was paid. If, in the end, something happened which he found politically beneficial, so much the better, but somehow that had never taken place, despite all the hopes and dreams and fiery rhetoric, and what sustained him was the work and his skill at it. How strange, Movie Star thought, that it should have become so, but the passionate ones were mainly dead, victims of their own dedication. His face grimaced at the irony of it. The true believers done in by their own passion, and those who sustained the hope of his people were those who . . . didn't care anymore? Was that true?

"MANY PEOPLE WILL object to the nature of your proposed tax plan. A really fair plan is progressive," the senator went on. Predictably, he was one of the survivors, not one of the new arrivals. He had the mantra down. "Doesn't this place rather a high burden on working Americans?"

"Senator, I understand what you're saying," Winston replied after taking a sip from his water glass. "But what do you mean when you say 'working' Americans? I work. I built my business from the ground up and, believe me, that's work. The First Lady, Cathy Ryan, makes something like four hundred thousand dollars per year—much more than her husband, I might add. Does that mean she doesn't work? I think she does. She's a surgeon. I have a brother who's a physician, and I know the hours he works. True, those two people make more than the average American does, but the marketplace has long since decided that the work they do is more valuable than what some other people do. If you're going blind, a union auto worker can't help you; neither can a lawyer. A physician can. That doesn't mean that the physician doesn't *work,* Senator. It means that the work requires higher qualifications and much longer training, and that as a result the work is more highly compensated. What about a baseball player? That's another category of skilled work, and nobody in this room objects to the salary paid Ken Griffey, Jr., for example. Why? Because he's superb at what he does, one of the—what?—four or five best in the entire world, and he is lavishly compensated for it. Again, that's the marketplace at work.

"In a broader sense, speaking in my capacity as a mere citizen instead of a Secretary-designate, I object strongly to the artificial and mainly false dichotomy that some people in the political arena place between blue-collar and white-collar workers. There is no way to earn an honest living in this country except by providing a product or a service to the public and, generally speaking, the harder and smarter you work, the more money you make. It's just that some people have greater abilities than others. If there is an idle-rich class in America, I think the only place you find them is in the movies. Who in this room, if you had the choice, would not instantly trade places with Ken Griffey or Jack Nicklaus? Don't all of us dream about being that good at something? I do," Winston admitted. "But I can't swing a bat that hard.

"Okay, what about a really talented software engineer? I can't do that, either. What about an inventor? What about an executive who transforms a company from a loser to a profit-maker—remember what Samuel Gompers said? The worst failure of a captain of industry is to fail to show a profit. Why? Because a profitable company is one that does its job well, and only those companies can compensate their workers properly, and at the same time return money to their shareholders—and those are the people who invest their money in the *company* which generated *jobs* for its *workers*.

"Senator, the thing we forget is why we're here and what we're trying to do. The government doesn't provide productive jobs. That's not what we're supposed to do. General Motors and Boeing and Microsoft are the ones who employ workers to turn out products the people need. The job of government is to protect the people, to enforce the law, and to make sure people play by the rules, like the umpires on a ball field. It's not supposed to be our job, I think, to punish people for playing the game well.

"We collect taxes so that the government can perform its functions. But we've gotten away from that. We should collect those taxes in such a way as to do minimum harm to the economy as a whole. Taxes are by their very nature a negative influence, and we can't get away from that, but what we can do is at least structure the tax system in such a way that it does minimum harm, and maybe even encourages people to use their money in such a way as to encourage the overall system to work."

"I know where you're going. You're going to talk about cutting capital-gains taxes, but that benefits only the few, at the cost of—"

"Senator, excuse me for interrupting, but that simply is not true, and you know it's not true," Winston chided brusquely. "Reducing the rate of tax on capital gains means the following: it encourages people to invest their money—no, let me back up a little.

"Let's say I make a thousand dollars. I pay taxes on that money, pay my mortgage, pay for food, pay for the car, and what I have left I invest in, oh, XYZ Computer Company. XYZ takes my money and hires somebody. That person works at his job like I work at mine, and from what work he does—he's making a product which the public likes and buys, right?—the company generates a profit, which the company shares with me. *That* money is taxed as regular income. Then I sell the stock and buy into another company, so that it can hire somebody else. The money realized from selling the stock issue is capital gains. People don't put their money under the mattress anymore," he reminded them, "and we don't want them to. We want them to invest in America, in their fellow citizens.

"Now, I've already paid tax on the money which I invested, right? Okay, then I help give some fellow citizen a job. That job makes something for the public. And for *helping* give a worker a job, and for *helping* that worker make something for the public, I get a modest return. That's good for that worker I helped to hire, and good for the public. Then I move on to do the same thing somewhere else. Why punish me for that? Doesn't it make more sense to *encourage* people to do that? And, remember, we've already taxed that investment money once anyway—in actual practice, more than once.

"That isn't good for the country. It's bad enough that we take so much, but the manner in which we take it is egregiously counterproductive. Why are we here, Senator? We're supposed to be *helping* things along, not hurting. And the net result, remember, is a tax system so complicated that we need to collect billions to administer it—and *that* money is totally wasted. Toss in all the accountants and tax lawyers who make their living off something the public can't understand," SecTreas concluded.

"America isn't about envy. America isn't about class rivalry. We don't *have* a class system in America. Nobody tells an American citizen what they can do. Birth doesn't count for much. Look at the committee members. Son of a farmer, son of a teacher, son of a truck driver, son of a lawyer, you, Senator Nikolides, son of an immigrant. If America was a class-defined society, then how the heck did you people get here?" he demanded. His current questioner was a professional politician, son of another, not to mention an arrogant son of a bitch, Winston thought, and didn't get classified. Everyone he'd just pointed to *kvelled* a little at being singled out for the cameras. "Gentlemen, let's try and make it easier for people to do what we've all done. If we have to skew the system, then let's do it in such a way that it encourages our fellow citizens to help one another. If America has a structural economic problem, it's that we don't generate as many opportunities as we should and can do. The system isn't perfect. Fine,

let's try to fix it some. That's why we're all here."

"But the system must demand that everyone pay their fair share," the senator said, trying to take the floor back.

"What does 'fair' mean? In the dictionary, it means that everyone has to do about the same. Ten percent of a million dollars is still ten times more than ten percent of a hundred thousand dollars, and *twenty* times more than ten percent of fifty thousand. But 'fairness' in the tax code has come to mean that we take all the money we can from successful people and dole it back—and, oh, by the way, those rich people hire lawyers and lobbyists who talk to people in the political arena and get a million special exceptions written into the system so that they don't get totally fleeced—and they don't, and we all know that—and what do we end up with?" Winston waved his hand at the pile of books on the floor of the committee room. "We end up with a jobs program for bureaucrats, and accountants, and lawyers, and lobbyists, and somewhere along the way the taxpaying citizens are just plain forgotten. We don't care that they can't make sense of the system that's supposed to serve them. It's not supposed to be that way." Winston leaned into the microphone. "I'll tell you what I think 'fair' means. I think it means that we all bear the same burden in the same proportion. I think it means that the system not only allows but encourages us to participate in the economy. I think it means that we promulgate simple and comprehensible laws so that people know where they stand. I think 'fair' means that it's a level playing field, and everybody gets the same breaks, and that we don't punish Ken Griffey for hitting home runs. We admire him. We try to emulate him. We try to make more like him. And we keep out of his way."

"Let 'em eat cake?" the chief of staff said.

"We can't say hot dogs, can we?" Kealty asked. Then he smiled broadly. "Finally."

"Finally," another aide agreed.

THE RESULTS WERE *all* equivocal. The FBI polygrapher had been working all morning, and every single set of tracings on the fan-fold paper was iffy. It couldn't be helped. An all-night session, they'd all told him, looking into something important which he wasn't cleared for. That made it the Iran/Iraq situation, of course. He could watch CNN as well as anyone. The men he'd put on the box were all tired and irritable, and some had fluttered badly on telling him their proper names and job descriptions, and the whole exercise had been useless. Probably.

"Did I pass?" Rutledge asked, when he took off the pressurized armband in the manner of someone who'd done this all before.

"Well, I'm sure you've been told before—"

"It's not a pass-or-fail examination process," the Under Secretary of State said tiredly. "Yeah, tell that to somebody who lost his clearance because of a session on the box. I hate the damned things, always have."

It was right up—or down—there with being a dentist, the FBI agent thought, and though he was one of the best around at this particular black art, he'd learned nothing this day that would help the investigation.

"The session you had last night—"

Rutledge cut him off cold. "Can't discuss it, sorry."

"No, I mean, this sort of thing normal here?"

"It will be for a while, probably. Look, you know what it's about, probably." The agent nodded, and the Under Secretary did the same. "Fine. Then you know it's a big deal, and we're going to be burning a lot of midnight oil over it, especially my people. So, lots of coffee and long hours and short tempers." He checked his watch. "My working group gets together in ten minutes. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Thanks for a fun ninety minutes," Rutledge said, heading for the door. It was so easy. You just had to know how the things worked. They wanted relaxed and peaceful subjects to get proper results—the polygraph essentially measured tension induced by awkward questions. So make everybody tense. That was simple enough. And really the Iranians were doing the work. All he had to do was stoke the fires a little. That was good for a smile as he entered the executive washroom.

THERE. MOVIE STAR checked his watch and made a further mental note. Two men walked out of the private dwelling. One of them turned to say something as he closed the door. They walked to the parking lot of Giant Steps, eyes scanning around in a way that identified them as positively as uniforms and rifles. The Chevy Suburban emerged from the private garage. A good hiding place, but a little too obvious to the skilled observer. Two children came out together, one led by a woman, the other by a man . . . yes, the one who'd been in the shadowed doorway when they'd gone out for their afternoon playtime. Large man, formidable one. Two women, one in front, one behind. All the heads turning and scanning. They took the child to a plain car. The Suburban halted in front of the driveway, and the other cars followed it down the highway, with a police car, he saw, fifteen seconds behind.

It would be a difficult task, but not an impossible one, and the

mission had several different outcomes, all acceptable to his patrons. Just as well that he didn't get sentimental about children. He'd been involved in such missions before, and you simply couldn't look at them as children at all. The one who'd been led by the large hand of her bodyguard was what he'd decided before, a political statement to be made by someone else. Allah would not have approved. Movie Star knew that. There was not a religion in the world that sanctioned harm to a child, but religions were not instruments of statecraft, regardless of what Badrayn's current superior might believe. Religions were something for an ideal world, and the world wasn't ideal. And so one might use unusual means to serve religious goals, and that meant . . . something he simply didn't think about. It was business, his business, to see what could be done, rules or not, and Movie Star wasn't the least bit sanctimonious about it, which, he thought, was probably why he was still alive while others were not—and, if he read this properly, still others would not be.

28

. . . BUT A WHIMPER

POLITICIANS RARELY LIKE surprises. Much as they enjoy dropping them on others—mainly other politicians, usually in public, and invariably delivered with all the care and planning of a jungle ambush—they reciprocally detest being on the receiving end. And that was just the political sort, in countries where politics was a fairly civilized business.

In Turkmenistan, things had not gotten that far yet. The Premier—he had a wide variety of titles to choose from, and he liked this one better than "president"—enjoyed everything about his life and his office. As a chieftain of the semi-departed Communist Party, he would have lived under greater personal restrictions than were now the case, and would always be at the end of a telephone line to Moscow, like a brook fish at the end of a long leader. But not now. Moscow no longer had the reach, and he had become too large a fish. He was a vigorous man in his late fifties and, as he liked to joke, a man of the people. The "people" in this case had been an attractive clerk of twenty years who, after an evening of fine dining and a little ethnic dancing (at which he excelled), had entertained him as only a young woman could, and now he was driving back to his official residence under a clear, starry sky, sitting in the right-front seat of his black Mercedes with the sated smile of a man who'd just proven that that's what he was, in the best possible way. Perhaps he'd wangle a promotion for the girl . . . in a few weeks. His was the exercise of, if not absolute power, then surely enough for any man, and with that came near-utter contentment. Popular with his people as an earthy, commonfolk sort of leader, he knew how to act, how to sit with the people, how to grasp a hand or a shoulder, always in front of TV cameras to show that he was one of them. "Cult of personality" was what the former regime had called it, and that's what it was, and that, he knew for sure, was what all politics had to be. His was a great responsibility, and he met that duty, and in return he was owed some things. One of them was this fine German automobile—smuggling that into the country had been an exercise in panache rather than corruption—and another was now returning to her bed with a smile and a sigh. And

life was good. He didn't know he had less than sixty seconds of it left.

He didn't bother with a police escort. His people loved him. He was sure of that, too, and besides it was late. But there was a police car, he saw, at an intersection, its light turning and flashing, blocking the way, just beyond the cross street. A dismounted policeman raised his hand while talking into his radio, hardly even looking at them. The Premier wondered what the problem was. His driver/ bodyguard slowed the Mercedes with an annoyed snort, stopping it right in the intersection and making sure his pistol was readily accessible. Barely had the official car stopped when both of them heard a noise to their right. The Premier turned that way, and scarcely had time for his eyes to go wide before the Zil-157 truck hit him at forty kilometers per hour. The high military-style bumper hit just at the bottom of the door glass, and the official car was thrown ten meters to the left, stopping when it hit the stone walls of an office building. Then it was time for the policeman to walk over, assisted by two others who had appeared from the shadows. The driver was dead from a broken neck. The policemen could see that from the angle of his head, and one of them reached through the shattered windshield to shake it around, just to make sure. But the Premier, to everyone's astonishment, was still moaning, despite his injuries. Due to all the drink, they thought, his body limp and limber. Well, that was easily fixed. The senior cop walked to the truck, flipped open the tool box, took a tire iron, returned, and smashed it against the side of his Premier's head just forward of the ear. That task completed, he tossed the tool back to the truck driver, and the premier of Turkmenistan was dead as the result of an auto accident. Well, then, their country would have to have elections, wouldn't it? That would be something of a first, and it would call for a leader whom the people knew and respected.

"SENATOR, IT'S BEEN a long day," Tony Bretano agreed. "And it's been rather a long couple of weeks for me, learning the ropes and meeting the people, but, you know, management is management, and the Department of Defense has been without it for quite some time. I am especially concerned with the procurement system. It takes too long and costs too much. The problem isn't so much corruption as an attempt to impose a standard of fairness so exacting that—well, as a pedestrian example, if you bought food the way DOD is forced to buy weapons, you'd starve to death in the supermarket while trying to decide between Libby and DelMonte pears. TRW is an engineering company, and to my way of thinking, a very good one. There's no way I could run my company like this. My stockholders would lynch me. We can do better, and I intend to see that we do."

"Mr. Secretary-designate," the senator asked, "how much longer does this have to go on? We just won a war and—"

"Senator, America has the best medical care in the world, but people still die from cancer and heart disease. The best isn't always good enough, is it? But more than that, and more to the point, we can do better for less money. I am not going to come to you with a request for increased overall funding. Acquisition funding will have to be higher, yes. Training and readiness will be higher also. But the real money in defense goes out in personnel costs, and that is where we can make a difference. The whole department is overmanned in the wrong places. That wastes the taxpayers' money. I know. I pay a lot of taxes. We do not utilize our people effectively, and nothing, Senator, is more wasteful than that. I think I can promise you a net reduction of two or three percent. Maybe more if I can get a handle on the acquisition system. For the latter, I need statutory assistance. There's no reason why we have to wait eight to twelve years to field a new airplane. We study things to death. That was once meant to save money, and maybe once it was a good idea, but now we spend more money on studies than we do on real R and D. It's time to stop inventing the wheel every two years. Our citizens work for the money we spend, and we owe it to them to spend it intelligently.

"Most important of all, when America sends her sons and daughters into harm's way, they must be the best-trained, best-supported, best-equipped forces we can put into the field. The fact of the matter is that we can do that and save money also, by making the system work more efficiently." The nice thing about this new crop of senators, Bretano reflected, was they didn't know what was impossible. He would never have gotten away with what he'd just said as recently as a year earlier. Efficiency was a concept foreign to most government agencies, not because there was anything wrong with the people, but because nobody had ever told them to do better. There was much to be said for working at the place that printed the money, but there was much to be said for eating eclairs, too, until your arteries clogged up. If the heart of America were its government, the nation would long since have fallen over dead. Fortunately, his country's heart was elsewhere, and surviving on healthier food.

"But why do we need so much defense in an age when—"

Bretano cut him off again. It was a habit he'd have to break, which he knew even as he did it—but this was too much. "Senator, have you checked the building across the street lately?"

It was amusing to see the way the man's head jerked back, even though the aide to Bretano's left flinched almost as badly. That senator had a vote, both on the committee and on the floor of the Senate chamber, which was still open for business now that they'd

gotten the smoke out of the building. But the point got across to most of the others, and the SecDef was willing to settle for that. In due course, the chairman gaveled the session to a close, and scheduled a vote for the following morning. The senators had already made their votes clear with their praise for Bretano's forthright and positive statement, pledging their desire to work with him in words almost as naive as his own, and with that another day ended on one place, with a new one soon to begin in another.

NO SOONER HAD the UN resolution passed, than the first ship had sailed for the brief steam to the Iraqi port of Bushire, there to be unloaded by the huge vacuum cleanerlike structures, and from that point on, things had gone quickly. For the first morning in many years, there would be bread enough on the breakfast tables of Iraq for everyone. Morning television proclaimed the fact for all—with the predictable live shots of neighborhood bakeries selling off their wares to happy, smiling crowds—and then concluding with word that the new revolutionary government was meeting today to discuss other matters of national importance. These signals were duly copied down at PALM BOWL and STORM TRACK and passed along, but the real news that day came from another source.

Golovko told himself that the Turkoman Premier might well have died in an accident. His personal proclivities were well known to the RVS, and vehicle accidents were hardly unknown in his country or any other—in fact, auto mishaps had been hugely disproportionate in the Soviet Union, especially those associated with drink. But Golovko had never been one to believe in coincidences of any sort, most particularly those which happened in ways and at times inconvenient to his country. It didn't help that he had ample assets in place to diagnose the problem. The Premier was dead. There would be elections. The likely winner was obvious because the departed politician had been wonderfully effective stifling political opposition. And now also, he saw, Iranian military units were forming up for road marches to their west. Two dead chiefs of state, in such a short time, within such a short radius, both in countries bordering Iran . . . no, even if it had been a coincidence, he would not have believed it. With that, Golovko changed hats—the Western aphorism—and lifted his phone.

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USS *PASADENA* WAS positioned between the two PRC surface-action groups, currently operating about nine miles apart. The submarine had a full load of weapons, war shots all, but for all that, it was rather like being the only cop in Times Square at midnight on New Year's, trying to keep track of everything at the same time. Having a loaded gun didn't amount to very much. Every few minutes he deployed his ESM mast to get a feel for the electronic signals being radiated about, and his sonar department also fed data to the tracking party in the after portion of the attack center—as many men as could fit around the chart table were busily keeping tabs on the various contacts. The skipper ordered his boat to go deep, to three hundred feet, just below the layer, so that he could take a few minutes to examine the plot, which had become far too complex for him to keep it all in his head. With the boat steadied up on her new depth, he took the three steps aft to look.

It was a FleetEx, but the type of FleetEx wasn't quite . . . ordinarily one group played the "good guys" against the theoretical "bad guys" in the other group, and you could tell what was what by the way the ships were arrayed. Instead of orienting toward each other, however, both groups were oriented to the east. This was called the "threat axis," meaning the direction from which the enemy was expected to strike. To the east lay the Republic of China, which comprised mainly the island of Taiwan. The senior chief operations specialist supervising the plot was marking up the acetate overlay, and the picture was about as clear as it needed to be.

"Conn, sonar," came the next call.

"Conn, aye," the captain acknowledged, taking the microphone.

"Two new contacts, sir, designate Sierra Twenty and Twenty-one. Both appear to be submerged contacts. Sierra Twenty, bearing three-two-five, direct path and faint . . . stand by . . . okay, looks like a Han-class SSN, good cut on the fifty-Hertz line, plant noise also. Twenty-one, also submerged contact, at three-three-zero, starting to look like a Xia, sir."

"A boomer in a FleetEx?" the senior chief wondered.

"How good's the cut on Twenty-one?"

"Improving now, sir," the sonar chief replied. The entire sonar crew was in their compartment, just forward of the attack center on the starboard side. "Plant noise says Xia to me, Cap'n. The Han is maneuvering south, bearing now three-two-one, getting a blade rate . . . call its speed eighteen knots."

"Sir?" The operations chief made a quick, notional plot. The SSN and the boomer would be behind the northern surface group.

"Anything else, sonar?" the captain asked.

"Sir, getting a little complicated with all these tracks."

"Tell me about it," someone breathed at the tracking table, while making another change.

"Anything to the east?" the CO persisted.

"Sir, easterly we have six contacts, all classified as merchant traffic."

"We got 'em all here, sir," the operations chief confirmed. "Nothing yet from the Taiwan navy."

"That's gonna change," the captain thought aloud.

GENERAL BONDARENKO DIDN'T believe in coincidences, either. More than that, the southern part of the country once known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics held little charm for him. His time in Afghanistan and a frantic night in Tajikistan had seen to that. In the abstract he would not have minded the total divorce of the Russian Republic from the Muslim proto-nations arrayed on his country's southern border, but the real world wasn't abstract.

"So, what do you think is going on?" the general-lieutenant asked.

"Are you briefed in on Iraq?"

"Yes, I am, Comrade Chairman."

"Then you tell me, Gennady Iosefovich," Golovko commanded.

Bondarenko leaned across the map table, and spoke while moving a finger about. "I would say that what concerns you is the possibility that Iran is making a bid for superpower status. In uniting with Iraq, they increase their oil wealth by something like forty percent. Moreover, that would give them contiguous borders with Kuwait and the Saudi kingdom. The conquest of those nations would redouble their wealth-one may safely assume that the lesser nations would fall as well. The objective circumstances here are self-evident," the general went on, speaking in the calm voice of a professional soldier analyzing disaster. "Combined, Iran and Iraq outnumber the combined populations of the other states by a considerable margin—five to one, Comrade Chairman? More? I do not recall exactly, but certainly the manpower advantage is decisive, which would make outright conquest or at least great political influence likely. That alone would give this new United Islamic Republic enormous economic power, the ability to choke off the energy supply to Western Europe and Asia at will.

"Now, Turkmenistan. If this is, as you suspect, not a coincidence, then we see that Iran wishes to move north also, perhaps to absorb Azerbaijan"—his finger traced along the map—"Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, at least part of Kazakhstan. That would triple their population, add a significant resource base to their United Islamic Republic, and next, one assumes, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and we have a new nation stretching from the Red Sea to the Hindu Kush—

nyet, more to the point, from the Red Sea to China, and then our southern border is completely lined with nations hostile to us." Then he looked up.

"This is much worse than I had been led to expect, Scrgcy Nikolay'ch," he concluded soberly. "We know the Chinese covet what we have in the east. This new state threatens *our* southern oil fields in the Transcaucasus—I cannot defend this border. My God, defending against Hitler was child's play compared to this."

Golovko was on the other side of the map table. He'd called Bondarenko for a reason. The senior leadership of his country's military was composed of holdovers from the earlier era—but these were finally dying off, and Gennady Iosefovich was one of the new breed, battle-tested in the misbegotten Afghan War, old enough to know what battle was—perversely, this made him and his peers the superiors of those whom they would soon replace—and young enough that they didn't have the ideological baggage of the former generation, either. Not a pessimist, but an optimist ready to learn from the West, where he'd just spent over a month with the various NATO armies, learning everything he could—especially, it would seem, from the Americans. But Bondarenko was looking down at the map in alarm.

"How long?" the general asked. "How long to establish this new state?"

Golovko shrugged. "Who can say? Three years, perhaps two at the worst. At best, five."

"Give me five years and the ability to rebuild our country's military power, and we can . . . probably . . . no." Bondarenko shook his head. "I can give you no guarantee. The government will not give me the money and resources I require. It can't. We do not have the money to spend."

"And then?" The general looked up, straight into the RVS chairman's eyes.

"And then I would prefer to be the operations officer for the other side. In the east we have mountains to defend, and that is good, but we have only two rail lines for logistical support, and that is *not* so good. In the center, what if they absorb all of Kazakhstan?" He tapped the map. "Look how close that puts them to Moscow. And what about alliances? With Ukraine, perhaps? What about Turkey? What about Syria? All of the Middle East will have to come to terms with this new state . . . we lose, Comrade Chairman. We can threaten to use nuclear arms but what real good does that do us? China can afford the loss of five hundred million, and still outnumber us. Their economy grows strong while ours continues to stagnate. They can afford to buy weapons from the West, or better yet to license the designs to

manufacture their own. Our use of nuclear arms is dangerous, both tactically and strategically, and there is the political dimension which I will leave to you. Militarily, we will be outnumbered in all relevant categories. The enemy will have superiority in terms of arms, manpower, and geographic location. Their ability to cut off the oil supply to the rest of the world limits our hope of securing foreign help —assuming that any Western nation will have such a desire in the first place. What you have shown me is the potential destruction of our country." That he delivered this assessment calmly was the most disturbing fact of all. Bondarenko was not an alarmist. He was merely stating objective fact.

"And to prevent it?"

"We cannot permit the loss of the southern republics, but at the same time, how do we hold them? Take control of Turkmenistan? Fight the guerrilla campaign that would surely result? Our army is in no shape to fight that sort of war—not even one of them, and it won't be just one, will it?" Bondarenko's predecessor had been fired over the failure of the Red Army—the term and the thought died hard—to deal effectively with the Chechens. What should have been a relatively simple effort at pacification had advertised to the world that the Russian army was scarcely a shadow of what it had been only a few years before.

The Soviet Union had operated on the principle of fear, they both knew. Fear of the KGB had kept the citizens in line, and fear of what the Red Army could and would do to any systematic rebellion had prevented large-scale political disturbances. But what happened when the fear went away? The Soviet failure to pacify Afghanistan, that despite the most brutal measures imaginable, had been a signal to the Muslim republics that their fear was misplaced. Now the Soviet Union was gone, and what remained was a mere shadow, and now that shadow could be erased by a brighter sun to the south. Golovko could see it on his visitor's face. Russia didn't have the power she needed. For all the bluster his country could still summon to awe the West—the West still remembered the Warsaw Pact, and the specter of the massive Red Army, ready to march to the Bay of Biscay—other parts of the world knew better. Western Europe and America still remembered the steel fist which they'd seen but never felt. Those who *had* felt it knew at once when the grip lessened. More to the point, they knew the significance of the relaxed grip.

"What will you need?"

"Time and money. Political support to rebuild our military. Help from the West." The general was still staring at the map. It was, he reflected, like being the scion of a powerful capitalist family. The patriarch had died, and he was the heir to a vast fortune—only to

discover that it was gone, leaving only debts. He'd come back from America upbeat, feeling that he'd seen the way, seen the future, found a way to secure his country and do it in the proper way, with a professional army composed of long-service experts, held together by esprit de corps, proud guardians and servants of a free nation, the way the Red Army had been on its march to Berlin. But that would take years to build. As it was . . . if Golovko and the RVS were right, then the best he could hope for was that his nation would rally as it had in 1941, trade space for time, as it had in 1941, and struggle back as it had in 1942—43. The general told himself that no one could see the future; that was a gift given to no man. And perhaps that was just as well, because the past, which all men knew, rarely repeated itself. Russia had been lucky against the fascists. One could not depend upon luck.

One could depend on a cunning and unpredictable adversary. Other people could look at a map the same as he, see the distances and obstacles, discern the correlation of forces, and know that the wild card lay on another sheet of printed paper, on the other side of the globe. The classical formula was first to cripple the strong, then crush the weak, and then, later, confront the strong again in one's own good time. Knowing that, Bondarenko could do nothing about it. He was the weak one. He had his own problems. His nation could not count on friends, only the enemies she had labored so long and so hard to create.

SALEH HAD NEVER known such agony. He'd seen it, and had even inflicted it in his time as part of his country's security service—but not like this, not this bad. It was as though he were now paying for every such episode all at once. His body was racked with pain throughout its entire length. His strength was formidable, his muscles firm, his personal toughness manifest. But not now. Now every gram of his tissue hurt, and when he moved slightly to assuage the hurt, all he accomplished was to move it about to a fractionally different place. The pain was so great as to blot out even the fear which should have attended it.

But not for the doctor. Ian MacGregor was wearing full surgical garb, a mask over his face, and his hands gloved—only his concentration prevented them from shaking. He'd just drawn blood with the greatest care of his life, more than he'd ever exercised with AIDS patients, with two male orderlies clamping the patient's arm while he took the samples. He'd never seen a case of hemorrhagic fever. It had been for him nothing more than an entry in a textbook, or an article in the *Lancet.* Something intellectually interesting, and

distantly frightening, as was cancer, as were other African diseases, but this was here and now.

"Saleh?" the physician asked.

". . . yes." A word, a gasp.

"You came here how? I must know if I am to help you."

There was no mental hesitation, no consideration of secrets or security. He paused only to take a breath, to summon the energy to answer the question. "From Baghdad. Airplane," he added unnecessarily.

"Africa? Have you visited Africa recently?"

"Never before." The head turned left and right not so much as a centimeter, the eyes screwed shut. The patient was trying to be brave, and largely succeeding. "First time Africa." -

"Have you had sexual relations recently? Last week or so," MacGregor clarified. It seemed so cruel a question. One could theoretically get such diseases through sexual contact—maybe a local prostitute? Perhaps there was another case of this at another local hospital and it was being hushed up . . . ?

It took a moment for the man to realize what the man was asking, then another shake. "No, no women in long time." MacGregor could see it on his face: *Never again, not for me ...*

"Have you had any blood lately, been given blood, I mean?"

"No."

"Have you been in contact with anyone who had traveled anywhere?"

"No, only Baghdad, only Baghdad, I am security guard for my general, with him all time, nothing else."

"Thank you. We're going to give you something for the pain. We're going to give you some blood, too, and try to cool you down with ice. I'll be back in a little while." The patient nodded, and the doctor left the room, carrying the blood-filled tubes in his gloved hands. "Bloody hell," MacGregor breathed.

While the nurses and orderlies did their job, MacGregor had his to do. One of the blood samples he split into two, packing both with the greatest care, one for Paris and the Pasteur Institute, and the other for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. They'd go out via air express. The rest went to his lead technician, a competent Sudanese, while the doctor drafted a fax. Possible hemorrhagic fever case, it would read, giving country, city, and hospital—but first . . . he lifted his phone and called his contact in the government health department.

"Here?" the government doctor asked. "In Khartoum? Are you sure? Where is the patient from?"

"That is correct," MacGregor replied. "The patient says that he came

here from Iraq."

"Iraq? Why would this disease come from there? Have you tested for the proper antibodies?" the official demanded.

"The test is being set up right now," the Scot told the African.

"How long?"

"An hour."

"Before you make any notifications, let me come over to see," the official directed.

To supervise, the man meant. MacGregor closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the phone. This putative physician was a government appointee, the son of a longtime minister, and the best that could be said for this professional colleague was that while seated in his plush office he didn't endanger any living patients. MacGregor had to struggle to keep his temper in check. It was the same all over Africa. It was as though the local government were desirous to protect their tourist industry—something Sudan singularly lacked, except for some anthropologists doing digs for primitive man down south, near the Ethiopian border. But it was the same everywhere on this lush continent. The government health departments denied everything, one reason why AIDS was so out of control in central Africa. They'd all denied and denied, and they would keep denying until what percentage of their populations were dead? Ten? Thirty? Fifty? But everyone was afraid to criticize African governments and their bureaucrats. It was so easy to be called a racist—and so, better to keep quiet . . . and let people die.

"Doctor," MacGregor persisted, "I am confident in my diagnosis, and I have a professional duty to—"

"It can wait until I come over," was the casual reply. It was just the African way, MacGregor knew, and there was no sense in fighting it. This battle he could not win. The Sudanese health department could have his visa lifted in minutes, and then who would treat his patients?

"Very well, Doctor. Please come over directly," he urged.

"I have a few things I must do, and then I will come over." That could mean all day, or even longer, and both men knew it. "The patient is isolated?"

"Full precautions are in place," MacGregor assured him.

"You are a fine physician, Ian, and I know I can trust you to see to it that nothing serious will happen." The line clicked off. He'd scarcely replaced the phone receiver when the instrument rang again.

"Yes?"

"Doctor, please come to Twenty-four," a nurse's voice told him.

He was there in three minutes. It was Sohaila. An orderly was carrying out the emesis tray. There was blood in it. She also had come here from Iraq, MacGregor knew. Oh, my God.

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"NONE OF YOU have anything to fear."

The words were somewhat reassuring, though not as much as the members of the Revolutionary Council would have liked. The Iranian mullahs were probably telling the truth, but the colonels and generals around the table had fought against Iran as captains and majors, and one never forgets battlefield enemies.

"We need you to take control of your country's military," the senior one went on. "As a result of your cooperation, you will retain your positions. We require only that you swear your loyalty to your new government in God's name." There would be more to it than that. They'd be watched closely. The officers all knew that. If they put a single foot wrong, they'd be shot for it. But they had nothing in the way of options, except perhaps to be taken out and shot this afternoon. Summary execution was not exactly unknown in either Iran or Iraq, an efficient way of dealing with dissidents, real or imagined, in both countries.

Facing such a thing was so different from one side to the other. On the side of the guns, one saw it as a quick, efficient, and final way of settling things in one's favor. From the other side, it had the abrupt injustice of a helicopter crash—just enough time for your spirit to scream *No!* before the racing earth blotted everything out, the disbelief and outrage of it. Except that in this case, they actually had a choice of sorts. Certain death now, or the chance of death later. The senior surviving officers of the Iraqi military shared furtive looks. They were *not* in control of their country's military. The military, the soldiers, were with the people, or with their company officers. The former was pleased to have a surplus of food to eat for the first time in almost a full decade. The latter was pleased as well to see a new day for their country. The break from the old regime was complete. It was just a bad memory now, and there was no return to it. The men in this room could reestablish control only through the good offices of the former enemies who stood at the end of the table with the serene smiles that went along with winning, that went along with holding the gift of life in their hands like pocket change, easily given and just as easily put away. They offered no choice, really.

The titular leader of the council nodded his submission, followed in seconds by all the others, and with the gesture, the identity of their country faded into history.

From that point on, it was just a matter of making some telephone calls.

THE ONLY SURPRISE was that it didn't happen on television. For once, the listening posts at STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL were beaten by analysts elsewhere. The TV cameras were in place, as would later be seen, but first there was business to be done, and that was recorded on satellite.

The first Iranians across the border were in motorized units which speeded down the highways under radio silence, but it was daylight, and overhead came two KH-11 satellites which cross-linked their signals to communications birds, and from there down to the reception points. The nearest to Washington were at Fort Belvoir.

"Yes," Ryan said, lifting the phone to his ear.

"It's Ben Goodley, Mr. President. It's happening now. Iranian troops are crossing the border without any opposition we can see."

"Announcement?"

"Nothing as yet. It looks like they want to be in control first."

Jack checked the clock on the night table. "Okay, we'll handle it at the morning brief." There was no sense in ruining his sleep. He had people who would work through the night for him, Ryan told himself. He'd done it often enough himself.

"Yes, sir."

Ryan replaced the phone, and was able to go back to sleep. It was one presidential skill he was learning to master. Maybe, he thought, as he faded out again, maybe he'd learn to play golf during a crisis . . . wouldn't that be...

• • •

FITTINGLY, IT WAS one of the pederasts. He'd been looking after a fellow criminal—this one was a murderer—and doing a proper job of it, judging by the videotapes, which had accelerated the process.

Moudi had been careful to tell the medical orderlies to supervise the new caregivers closely. The latter had taken the ordinary precautions, wearing their gloves, washing up carefully, keeping the room clean, mopping up all the fluids. This last task had become increasingly difficult with the advancing disease process in the first group of exposed subjects. Their collective moans came through the sound pickup with enough clarity for him to know what they were going through, especially with the absence of pain medications—a violation of the Muslim rules of mercy, which Moudi set aside. The second group of subjects were doing what they'd been told, but they'd not been issued masks, and that was for a reason.

The pederast was a young man, perhaps early twenties, and he'd been surprisingly attentive to his charge. Whether out of an appreciation for the murderer's pain or just to appear to be worthy of mercy himself, it didn't matter. Moudi zoomed the camera in. The man's skin was flushed and dry, his movements slow and achy. The doctor lifted the phone. A minute later, one of the army medics came into the picture. He spoke briefly with the pederast, then poked the thermometer into his ear before leaving the room and lifting a corridor phone.

"Subject Eight has a temperature of thirty-nine-pointtwo and reports fatigue and aches in his extremities. His eyes are red and puffy," the medic reported brusquely. It was to be expected that the medics would not feel the same degree of empathy for any of the test subjects that they'd felt for Sister Jean Baptiste. Even though the latter had been an infidel, at least she'd been a woman of virtue. That was manifestly not true of the men in the room, and it made things easier for everyone.

"Thank you."

So, it was true, Moudi told himself. The Mayinga strain was indeed airborne. Now it only remained to be seen if it had fully transmitted itself, that this new victim would die from it. When half of the second group showed symptoms, they would be moved across the hall to a treatment room of their own, and the first group—they were all fatally afflicted with the Ebola—would be medically terminated.

The director would be pleased, Moudi knew. The latest step in the experiment had been as successful as those before. It was now increasingly certain that they had a weapon in their hands such as no man had ever wielded. Isn't that wonderful, the physician observed to himself.

THE FLIGHT OUT was always easier on the disposition. Movie Star walked through the metal detector, stopped, had the magic wand waved over him, resulting in the usual embarrassment over his gold Cross pen, and then he walked to the first-class lounge, without even looking around for the policemen who, if they were about, would stop him here and now. But they weren't, and they didn't. His carry-on bag had a leather-bound clipboard in it, but he wouldn't take that out quite yet. The flight was called in due course, and he walked to the jetway, and quickly found his seat in the front of the 747. The flight was only half full, and that made things very convenient. No sooner had the aircraft lifted off than he took out his pad and started recording all the things he'd not wished to commit to paper just yet. As usual, his photographic memory helped, and he worked for three

solid hours until, over mid-Atlantic, he succumbed to the need for sleep. He suspected, correctly, that he'd need it.

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FULL COURT

IT MIGHT BE HIS LAST shot, Kealty knew, again using in his own mind a metaphor denoting firearms. The irony of it never registered. He had more important things to do. The previous evening he had been summoning his remaining press contacts—the reliable ones. Others had, if not exactly backed away, at least maintained a discreet distance in their uncertainty, but for most, it wasn't all that hard to get their attention, and his two-hour midnight meeting had been called on the basis of a few key words and phrases known to excite their professional sensibilities. After that all he had to do was set the rules. This was all on background, not for attribution, not to be quoted. The reporters agreed, of course.

"It's pretty disturbing. The FBI subjected the whole top floor of the State Department to lie-detector tests," he told them. It was something they'd heard about but not yet confirmed. This would count as confirmation. "But more disturbingly, look at the policies we're seeing now. Build up defense under this Bretano guy—a guy who's grown up within the military-industrial complex. He says he wants to eliminate all the safeguards within the procurement system, wants to slash congressional oversight. And George Winston, what does he want to do? Wreck the tax system, make it more regressive, do away with capital-gains entirely—and why? To lay the country's whole tax burden on the middle and working classes and give the big shots a free ride, that's why.

"I never figured Ryan for a professional, for a competent sort of man to occupy the presidency, but I have to tell you, this is not what I expected. He's a reactionary, a radical conservative—I'm not sure what you'd call him."

"Are you sure about the thing at State?" the *New York Times* asked.

Kealty nodded. "Positive, hundred percent. You mean you people haven't—come on, are you doing *your* job?" he asked tiredly. "In the middle of a Mideast crisis, he has the FBI harassing the most senior people we have, trying to accuse them of stealing a letter that was never there."

"And now," Kealty's chief of staff added, seeming to speak out of

turn, "we have the *Washington Post* about to run a canonization piece on Ryan."

"Wait a minute," the *Post* reporter said, straightening his back, "that's Bob Holtzman, not my doing. I *told* my AME that it wasn't a good idea."

"Who's the leak?" Kealty asked.

"I don't have a clue. Bob never lets that out. You know that."

"So what is Ryan doing at CIA? He wants to *triple* the Directorate of Operations the spies. Just what the country needs, right? What is Ryan doing?" Kealty asked rhetorically. "Beefing up defense. Rewriting the tax code to benefit the fat cats. And taking CIA back to the days of the Cold War. We're going back to the 1950s—*why?"* Kealty demanded. *"Why* is he doing all this? What is he thinking about? Am I the only one in this city asking questions? When are you people going to do your job? He's trying to bully Congress, and succeeding, and where is the media? Who's protecting the people out there?"

"What are you saying, Ed?" the *Times* asked.

The gesture of frustration was done with consummate skill. "I'm standing in my own political grave here. I have nothing to gain by this, but I *can't* just stand by and do nothing. Even if Ryan has the entire power of our government behind him, I can't just let him and his cronies try to concentrate all of the power of our government in a few hands, increase their own ability to spy on us, load the tax system in such a way as to further enrich people who've never paid their fair share, reward the defense industry—what's next, trashing the civil rights laws? He's flying his wife to work every day, and you people haven't even remarked that that's never happened before. This is an imperial presidency like Lyndon Johnson never dreamed of, *without* a Congress to do anything about it. You know what we have here now?" Kealty gave them a moment. "King Jack the First. Somebody's supposed to care about that. Why is it that you people don't?"

"What do you know about the Holtzman piece?" the *Boston Globe* wanted to know.

"Ryan has a lively history in CIA. He's killed people."

"James fucking Bond," Kealty's chief of staff said on cue. The Post reporter then had to defend his publication's honor:

"Holtzman doesn't say that. If you mean the time the terrorists came to—"

"No, not that. Holtzman's going to write about the Moscow thing. Ryan didn't even set that up. It was Judge Arthur Moore, when he was DCI. Ryan was the front man. It's bad enough anyway. It interfered with the inner workings of the old Soviet Union, and it never occurred to anyone that *maybe* that wasn't such a great idea—I mean, what the hell, right, screwing around with the government of a country with

ten thousand warheads pointed at us—you know, people, that's called an act of war, like? And why? To rescue their head thug from a purge for stepping over the line *so that* we could crack a spy ring inside CIA. I bet he didn't tell Holtzman that, did he?"

"I haven't seen the story," the *Post* reporter admitted. "I've only heard a few things." It was almost worthy of a smile. Kealty's sources inside the paper were better than those of the senior political reporter. "Okay, you say Ryan has killed people like James Bond. Support that," he said in a flat voice.

"Four years ago, remember the bombs in Colombia, took out some cartel members?" Kealty waited for the nod. "That was a CIA operation. Ryan went to Colombia—and that was *another* act of war, people. That's two that I know about."

It was amusing to Kealty that Ryan was so skillfully conniving at his own destruction. The PLAN BLUE move within CIA was already rippling through the Directorate of Intelligence, many of whose senior people faced either early retirement or the diminution of their bureaucratic empires, and many of those enjoyed walking the corridors of power. It was easy for them to think that they were vital to the security of their country, and thinking that, they had to do something, didn't they? More than that, Ryan had stepped on a lot of bureaucratic toes at Langley, and now it was payback time, all the better that he was a higher target than ever before, that the sources were, after all, merely talking to the former Vice President of the United States—maybe even the real President, they could say—and not to the media, which was, after all, against the law, as opposed to a legitimate discussion of vital national policy.

"How sure of that are you?" the *Globe* asked.

"I have dates. Remember when Admiral James Greer died? He was Ryan's mentor. He probably set up the operation from his deathbed. Ryan didn't attend the funeral. He was in Colombia then. That's a fact, and you can check it," Kealty insisted. "Probably that's why James Cutter committed suicide—"

"I thought that was an accident," the *Times* said. "He was out jogging, and—"

"And he just happened to step in front of a transit bus? Look, I'm not saying that Cutter was murdered. I am saying that he was implicated in the illegal operation that Ryan was running, and he didn't want to face the music. That gave Jack Ryan the chance to cover his tracks. You know," Kealty concluded, "I've underestimated this Ryan fellow. He's as slick an operator as this town has seen since Allen Dulles, maybe Bill Donovan—but the time for that is past. We don't need a CIA with three times as many spies. We don't need to pile more dollars into defense. We don't need to redraft the tax code to

protect the millionaires Ryan hangs out with. For sure we don't need a President who thinks the 1950s were just great. He's doing things to our country which we cannot allow to happen. I don't know"—another gesture of frustration—"maybe I have to go it all alone on this. I'm—I know I risk ruining my reputation for all history, standing up like this ... but, damn it, once I swore an oath to the Constitution of our country ... first time," he went on in a quiet, reflective voice, "when I won my first House seat ... then into the Senate ... and then when Roger asked me to step up and be his Vice President. You know, you don't forget that sort of thing ... an', an', an' maybe I'm not the right guy for this, okay? Yes, I've done some pretty awful things, betrayed my wife, lived in a bottle for so many years. The American people probably deserve somebody better than me to stand up and do what's right ... but I'm all there is, and I can't—I *can't* break faith with the people who sent me to this town, no matter what it costs. Ryan is not the President of the United States. He knows that. Why else is he trying to change so many things so fast? Why is he trying to bully the senior people at State into lying? Why is he playing with abortion rights? Why is he playing with the tax code through this plutocrat Winston? He's trying to buy it. He's going to continue to bully Congress until the fat cats try to have him elected king or something. I mean, who represents the *people* right now?"

"I just don't see him that way, Ed," the *Globe* responded, after a few seconds. "His politics are pretty far to the right, but he comes across as sincere as hell."

"What's the first rule of politics?" the *Times* asked with a chuckle. Then he continued: "I tell you, if this stuff about Russia and Colombia is true ... whoa! It is the '50s, fucking around with other governments that way. We're not supposed to do that anymore, sure as hell not at that level."

"You never got this from us, and you can't reveal the source at Langley." The chief of staff handed out tape cassettes. "But there are enough verifiable facts here to back up everything we've told you."

"It's going to take a couple of days," the *San Francisco Examiner* said, fingering the cassette and looking at his colleagues. The race started now. Every reporter in the room would want to be the first to break the story. That process would start with them playing their tapes in their cars during the drive to their homes, and the one with the shortest drive had the advantage.

"Gentlemen, all I can say is, this is an important story, and you have to apply your best professional conduct to it. It's not for me," Kealty said. "I wish I could pick someone else to do this, someone with a better record—but I can't. Not for me. It's for the country, and that means you have to play it as straight as you can."

"We will, Ed," the *Times* promised. He checked his watch. Almost three in the morning. He'd work all day to make the ten P.M. deadline. In that time he'd have to verify, re-verify, and conference in with his assistant managing editor to make sure that he got the front page, above the fold. The West Coast papers had the advantage—three more hours because of time zones—but he knew how to beat them to the punch. The coffee cups went down on the table, and the journalists rose, tucking their personal mini-tape machines in their jacket pockets, and each holding his personal cassette in the left hand while the right fished for the car keys.

"TALK TO ME, BEN." Jack commanded barely four hours later.

"Still nothing on the local TV, but we've caught microwave stuff transmitted for later broadcast." Goodley paused as Ryan took his seat behind the desk. "Quality is too poor to show you, but we have the audio tracks. Anyway, they spent all day consolidating power. Tomorrow, they go public. Probably the word's out on the street, and the official stuff will be for the rest of the world."

"Smart," the President observed.

"Agreed." Goodley nodded. "New wild card. The Premier of Turkmenistan bit the big one, supposedly an automobile accident. Golovko called me about—just after five, I think to let us know. He ain't a real happy camper at the moment. He thinks that Iraq and Turko-land are part of the same play—"

"Do we have anything to support that?" Ryan asked, tying his necktie. It was a dumb question.

"You kidding, boss? We don't have crap, not even overheads in this case."

Jack looked down at his desktop for a second. "You know, for all the things people say about how powerful CIA is—"

"Hey, I work there, remember? Thank God for CNN. Yeah, I know. Good news, the Russians are telling us at least some of what they know."

"Scared," the President observed.

"Very," the national intelligence officer agreed.

"Okay, we have Iran taking over Iraq. We have a dead leader in Turkmenistan. Analysis?" Jack asked.

"I won't contradict Golovko on this one. He doubtless does have agents in place, and it sounds like he's in the same situation we're in. He can watch and worry, but he doesn't have any real operational possibilities. Maybe it's a coincidence, but spooks aren't supposed to believe in such things. Damned sure Sergey doesn't. He thinks it's all one play. I think that's a definite possibility. I'll be talking to Vasco

about that, too. What he says is shaping up is starting to look a little scary. We'll be hearing from the Saudis today." And Israel could not be far behind, Ryan knew.

"China?" the President asked next. Maybe the other side of the world was a little better. It wasn't.

"Major exercise. Surface and sub-surface combatants, no air yet, but the overheads show the fighter bases are tooling up—"

"Wait a minute—"

"Yes, sir. If it's a planned exercise, why weren't they ready for it? I'll be talking to the Pentagon about that one at eight-thirty. The ambassador had a little talk with a foreign ministry type. Feedback is, no big deal, the ministry didn't even know about it, routine training."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe. Taiwan is still low-keying it, but they'll be sending some ships out today—well, tonight over there. We have assets heading to the area. The Taiwanese are playing ball, full cooperation with our observers in their listening posts. Soon they will ask us what we will do if 'A' or 'B' happens. We need to think about that. The Pentagon says that the PRC doesn't have the assets to launch an invasion, same as back in '96. The ROC air force is stronger now than it was. So, I don't see that this is likely to lead anywhere. Maybe it really is just an exercise. Maybe they want to see how we—you, that is—will react."

"What's Adler think?"

"He says to ignore it. I think he's right. Taiwan is playing low-key. I think we do the same. We move ships, especially subs, but we keep them out of sight. CINCPAC seems to have a handle on it. We let him run it for the time being?"

Ryan nodded. "Through SecDef, yes. Europe?"

"Nice and quiet, ditto our hemisphere, ditto Africa. You know, if the Chinese are just being their usual obnoxious selves, then the only real problem is the Persian Gulf—and the truth of the matter is that we've been there and done that, sir. We've told the Saudis that we're not going to back off of them. That word will get to the other side in due course, and it ought to make the other side stop and think before making any plans to go farther. I don't like the UIR thing, but I think we can deal with it. Iran is fundamentally unstable; the people in that country want more freedom, and when they get a taste, that country will change. We can ride it out."

Ryan smiled and poured himself a cup of decaf. "You're getting very confident, Dr. Goodley."

"You pay me to think. I might as well tell you what's moving around between the ears, boss."

"Okay, get on with your work and keep me posted. I have to figure a way to reconstitute the Supreme Court today." Ryan sipped his

coffee and waited for Arnie to come in. This job wasn't all that tough, was it? Not when you had a good team working for you.

"IT'S ABOUT SEDUCTION," Clark said to the shiny new faces in the auditorium, catching Ding's grin in the back of the room and cringing. The training film they'd just watched had gone over the history of six important cases. There were only five prints of the film, and this one was already being rewound for the walk back to the vault. Two of the cases he'd worked himself. One of the agents had been executed in the basement of 2 Dzerzhinskiy Square after being burned by a KGB mole inside Langley. The other had a small farm in the birch country of northern New Hampshire, probably still wishing that he could go home—but Russia was still Russia, and the narrow view their culture took of high treason wasn't an invention of the previous regime. Such people were forever orphans ... Clark turned the page and continued from his notes.

"You will seek out people with problems. You will sympathize with those problems. The people with whom you will work are not perfect. They will all have beefs. Some of them will come to you. You don't have to love them, but you do have to be loyal to them.

"What do I mean by seduction? Everyone in this room has done it once or twice, right? You listen more than you talk. You nod. You agree. Sure, you're smarter than your boss—I know about him, we have the same sort of jerk in our government. I had a boss like that once myself. It's hard to be an honest man in that kind of government, isn't it? You bet, honor really is important.

"When they say *that,* you know they want money. That's fine," Clark told them. "They never expect as much as they ask for. We have the budget to pay anything they want—but the important thing is getting them on the hook. Once they lose their virginity, people, they can't get it back.

"Your agents, the people you recruit, will get addicted to what they do. It's *fun* to be a spy. Even the most ideologically pure people you recruit will giggle from time to time because they know something nobody else knows.

"They will *all* have something wrong with them. The most idealistic ones are often the worst. They experience guilt. They drink. Some might go to their priest, even—I've had that happen to me. Some break the rules for the first time and figure no rules matter anymore. Those kind will start boffing every girl that crosses their path and taking all sorts of chances.

"Handling agents is an art. You are mother, father, priest, and teacher to them. You have to settle them down. You have to tell them

to look after their families, and look after their own ass, especially the 'good' ideological recruits. They're dependable for a lot of things, but one of them is to get too much into it. A lot of these agents self-destruct. They can turn into crusaders. Few of the crusaders," Clark went on, "died of old age.

"The agent who wants money is often the most reliable. They don't take too many chances. They want out eventually, so they can live the good life in Hollywood and get laid by a starlet or something. Nice thing about agents who work for money—they want to live to spend it. On the other hand, when you need something done in a hurry, when you need somebody to take a risk, you can use a money guy—just be ready to evac him the next day. Sooner or later he'll figure that he's done enough, and demand to be got out.

"What am I telling you? There are no hard and fast rules in this business. You have to use your heads. You have to know about people, how they are, how they act, how they think. You must have genuine empathy with your agents, whether you like them or not. Most you will not like," he promised them. "You saw the film. Every word was real. Three of those cases ended with a dead agent. One ended with a dead officer. Remember that.

"Okay, you now have a break. Mr. Revell will have you in the next class." Clark assembled his notes and walked to the back of the room while the trainees absorbed the lessons in silence.

"Gee, Mr. C., does that mean seduction is okay?" Ding asked.

"Only when you get paid for it, Domingo."

ALL OF GROUP Two was sick now. It was as though they'd all punched in on some sort of time clock. Within ten hours, they'd all complained of fever and aches—flu symptoms. Some knew, Moudi saw, or certainly suspected what had happened to them. Some of them continued to help the sicker subjects to whom they were assigned. Others called for the army medics to complain, or just sat on the floor in the treatment room and did nothing but savor their own illness in fear that they would become what they saw. Again the conditions of their prior imprisonment and diet worked against them. The hungry and debilitated are more easily controlled than the healthy and well fed.

The original group was deteriorating at the expected rate. Their pain grew worse, to the point that their slow writhing lessened because it hurt more to move than to remain still. One seemed very close to death, and Moudi wondered if, as with Benedict Mkusa, this victim's heart was unusually vulnerable to the Ebola Mayinga strain—perhaps this sub-type of the disease had a previously unsuspected

affinity for heart tissue? That would have been interesting to learn in the abstract, but he'd gone well beyond the abstract study of the disease.

"We gain nothing by continuing this phase, Moudi," the director observed, standing beside the younger man and watching the TV monitors. "Next step."

"As you wish." Dr. Moudi lifted the phone and spoke for a minute or so.

It took fifteen minutes to get things moving, and then the medical orderlies entered the picture, taking all of the nine members of the second group out of that room, then across the corridor to a second large treatment room, where, on a different set of monitors, the physicians saw that each was assigned a bed and given a medication which, in but a few minutes, had them all asleep. The medics then returned to the original group. Half of them were asleep anyway, and all the others stuporous, unable to resist. The wakeful ones were killed first, with injections of Dilaudid, a powerful synthetic narcotic into whatever vein was the most convenient. The executions took but a few minutes and were, in the end, merciful. The bodies were loaded one by one onto gurneys for transport to the incinerator. Next the mattresses and bedclothes were bundled for burning, leaving only the metal frames of the beds. These, along with the rest of the room, were sprayed with caustic chemicals. The room would be sealed for several days, then sprayed again, and the collective attention of the facility's staff would transfer to Group Two, nine condemned criminals who had proven, or so it would seem, that Ebola Zaire Mayinga could be transmitted through the air.

THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT official took a whole day to arrive, doubtless delayed, Dr. MacGregor suspected, by a pile of paperwork on his desk, a fine dinner, and a night with whatever woman spiced up his daily life. And probably the paperwork was still there on his desk, the Scot told himself.

At least he knew about the proper precautions. The government doctor barely entered the room at all he had to come an additional, reluctant step so that the door could be closed behind him, but moved no farther than that, standing there, his head tilting and his eyes squinting, the better to observe the patient from two meters away. The lights in the room were turned down so as not to hurt Saleh's eyes. Despite that the discoloration of his skin was obvious. The two hanging units of type-O blood and the morphine drip told the rest, along with the chart, which the government official held in his gloved, trembling hands.

"The antibody tests?" he asked quietly, summoning his official dignity.

"Positive," MacGregor told him.

The first documented Ebola outbreak—no one knew how far back the disease went, how many jungle villages it might have exterminated a hundred years earlier, for example—had gone through the nearest hospital's staff with frightening speed, to the point that the medical personnel had left the facility in panic. And that, perversely, had helped end the outbreak more rapidly than continued treatment might have done—the victims died, and nobody got close enough to them to catch what they had. African medics now knew what precautions to take. Everyone was masked and gloved, and disinfection procedures were ruthlessly enforced. As casual and careless as many African personnel often were, this was one lesson they'd taken to heart, and with that feeling of safety established, they, like medical personnel all over the world, did the best they could.

For this patient, that was very little use. The chart showed that, too.

"From *Iraq?"* the official asked.

Dr. MacGregor nodded. "That is what he told me."

"I must check on that with the proper authorities."

"Doctor, I have a report to make," MacGregor insisted. "This is a possible outbreak and—"

"No." The official shook his head. "Not until we know more. When we make a report, if we do, we must forward all of the necessary information for the alert to be useful."

"But—"

"But this is *my* responsibility, and it is *my* duty to see that the responsibility is properly executed." He pointed the chart to the patient. His hand wasn't shaking now that he had established his power over the case. "Does he have a family? Who can tell us more about him?"

"I don't know."

"Let me check that out," the government doctor said. "Have your people make copies of all records and send them to me at once." With a stern order given, the health department representative felt as though he had done his duty to his profession and his country.

MacGregor nodded his submission. Moments like this made him hate Africa. His country had been here for more than a century. A fellow Scot named Gordon had come to the Sudan, fallen in love with it—was the man mad? MacGregor wondered—and died right in this city 120 years earlier. Then the Sudan had become a British protectorate. A regiment of infantry had been raised from this country, and that regiment had fought bravely and well under British officers. But then Sudan had been returned to the Sudanese—too

quickly, without the time and money spent to create the institutional infrastructure to turn a tribal wasteland into a viable nation. The same story had been told in the same way all over the continent, and the people of Africa were still paying the price for that disservice. It was one more thing neither he nor any other European could speak aloud except with one another—and sometimes not even then—for fear of being called a racist. But if he were a racist, then *why* had he come here?

"You will have them in two hours."

"Very well." The official walked out the door. There the head nurse for the unit would take him to the disinfection area, and for that the official would follow orders like a child under the eye of a stern mother.

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PAT MARTIN CAME in with a well-stuffed briefcase, from which he took fourteen folders, laddering them across the coffee table in alphabetical order. Actually they were labeled *A* to *M,* because President Ryan had specifically asked that he not know the names at first.

"You know, I'd feel a lot better if you hadn't given me all this power," Martin said without looking up.

"Why's that?" Jack asked.

"I'm just a prosecutor, Mr. President. A pretty good one, sure, and now I run the Criminal Division, and that's nice, too, but I'm only—"

"How do you think I feel?" Ryan demanded, then softened his voice. "Nobody since Washington has been stuck with this job, and what makes you think *I* know what I'm supposed to be doing? Hell, I'm not even a lawyer to understand all this stuff without a crib sheet."

Martin looked up with half a smile. "Okay, I deserved that."

But Ryan had set the criteria. Before him was a roster of the senior federal judiciary. Each of the fourteen folders gave the professional history of a judge in the United States Court of Appeals, ranging from one in Boston to another in Seattle. The President had ordered Martin and his people to select judges of no less than ten years' experience, with no less than fifty important written decisions (as distinguished from routine matters like which side won in a liability case), none of which had been overturned by the Supreme Court—or if one or two had been overturned, had been vindicated by a later reversal in Washington.

"This is a good bunch," Martin said.

"Death penalty?"

"The Constitution specifically provides for that, remember. Fifth Amendment," Martin quoted from memory: " 'Nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.' So *with* due process, you can take a person's life, but you can only try him once for it. The Court established the criteria for that in a number of cases in the '70s and '80s—guilt trial followed by penalty trial, with the penalty phase dependent upon 'special' circumstances. All of these judges have upheld that rule—with a few exceptions. *D* here struck down a Mississippi case on the basis of mental incompetence. That was a good call, even though the crime was pretty gruesome—the Supreme Court affirmed it without comment or hearing. Sir, the problem with the system is one that nobody can really fix. It's just the nature of law. A lot of legal principles are based on decisions from unusual cases. There's a dictum that hard cases make for bad law. Like that case in England, remember? Two little kids murder a younger kid. What the hell is a judge supposed to do when the defendants are eight years old, definitely guilty of a brutal murder, but only eight years old? What you do then is, you pray some other judge gets stuck with it. Somehow we all try to make cohesive legal doctrine out of that. It's not really possible, but we do it anyway."

"I figure you picked tough ones, Pat. Did you pick fair ones?" the President asked.

"Remember what I said a minute ago? I don't want this sort of power? I didn't dare do otherwise. *E* here reversed a conviction one of my best people got on a technicality—an issue of admissibility—and when he did it, we were all pretty mad. The issue was entrapment, where the line is. The defendant was guilty as hell, no doubt of it. But Judge ... *E*looked at the arguments and probably made the right call, and that ruling is part of FBI guidelines now."

Jack looked at the folders. It would be a full week's reading. This, as Arnie had told him a few days before, would be his most important act as President. No Chief Executive since Washington had been faced with the necessity of appointing the entire Supreme Court, and even that had been in an age when the national consensus on law had been far firmer and deeper than what existed in America now. Back then "cruel and unusual punishment" had meant the rack and burning at the stake—both of those things that *had* been used in pre-Revolutionary America—but in more recent rulings had been taken to mean the absence of cable television and denial of sex-change operations, or just overcrowding in the prisons. *So fine,* Ryan thought, *the prisons are too crowded, and then why not release dangerous criminals*

on society for fear of being cruel to convicted felons?

Now he had the power to change that. All he had to do was select judges who took as harsh a view on crime as he did, an outlook he'd learned from listening to his father's occasional rant about a particularly vile crime, or an especially bat-brained judge who hadn't ever viewed a crime scene, and therefore never really known what the issues were. And for Ryan there was the personal element. He'd been the subject of attempted murder, as had his wife and children. He *knew* what it was all about, the outrage at facing the fact that there were people who could take a life as easily as buying candy at a drug store, who preyed on others as though they were game animals, and whose actions cried out for retribution. He could remember looking into Sean Miller's eyes more than once and seeing *nothing,* nothing in there at all. No humanity, no empathy, no feelings—not even hatred, so outside the human community he'd taken himself that there was no returning ...

And yet.

Ryan closed his eyes, remembering the moment, a loaded Browning pistol in his grip, his blood boiling in his veins but his hands like ice, the exquisite moment at which he could have ended the life of the man who had so wanted to end his own—and Cathy's, and Sally's, and Little Jack, yet unborn. Looking in his eyes, and finally seeing the fear at last, breaking through the shell of inhumanity ... but how many times had he thanked a merciful God that he'd neglected to cock the hammer on his pistol? He would have done it. He'd wanted to do it more than anything in his life, and he *could* remember pulling the trigger, only to be surprised when it hadn't moved—and then the moment had passed away. Jack could remember killing. The terrorist in London. The one in the boat at the base of his cliff. The cook on the submarine. Surely he'd killed others—that horrible night in Colombia which had given him nightmares for years after. But Sean Miller was different. It hadn't been necessity for Miller. For him it had been justice of a sort, and he'd been there, and he'd been the Law, and, God, how he'd wanted to take that worthless life! But he hadn't. The Law that had ended the life of that terrorist and his colleagues had been well considered, cold and detached ... as it had to be—and for *that* reason he had to select the best possible people to repopulate the Court, because the decisions they would make were not about one enraged man trying at the same time to protect and avenge his family. They would say what the law was for everyone, and that wasn't about personal desires. This thing people called civilization was about something more than one man's passion. It had to be. And it was his duty to make sure that it was, by picking the right people.

"Yeah," Martin said, reading the President's face. "Big deal, isn't it?"

"Wait a minute." Jack rose and walked out the door to the secretaries' room. "Which one of you smokes?" he asked there.

"It's me," said Ellen Sumter. She was of Jack's age, and probably trying to quit, as all smokers of that age at least claimed. Without another question, she handed her President a Virginia Slim—the same as the crewwoman on his airplane, Jack realized-and a butane lighter. The President nodded his thanks and walked back into his office, lighting it. Before he could close the door, Mrs. Sumter raced to follow him with an ashtray taken from her desk drawer.

Sitting down, Ryan took a long drag, eyes on the carpet, which was of the Great Seal of the President of the United States, covered though it was with furniture.

"How the hell," Jack asked quietly, "did anybody ever decide that one man could have this much power? I mean, what I'm doing here —"

"Yes, sir. Kind of like being James Madison, isn't it? You pick the people who decide what the Constitution really means. They're all in their late forties or fifties, and so they'll be there for a while," Martin told him. "Cheer up. At least it's not a game for you. At least you're doing it the right way. You're not picking women because they're women, or blacks because they're black. I gave you a good mix, color, bathrooms, and everything, but all the names have been redacted out —and you won't be able to tell who's who unless you follow cases, which you probably don't. I give you my word, sir, they're all good ones. I spent a lot of time assembling the list for you. Your guidelines helped, and they were good guidelines. For what it's worth, they're all people who think the way you do. People who like power scare me," the attorney said. "Good ones reflect a lot on what they're doing before they do it. Picking real judges who've made some hard calls—well, read their decisions. You'll see how hard they worked at what they did."

Another puff. He tapped the folders. "I don't know the law well enough to understand all the points in there. I don't know crap about the law, except you're not supposed to break it."

Martin grinned at that one: "Not a bad place to start when you think about it." He didn't have to go any further. Not every occupant of this office had thought of things quite that way. Both men knew it, but it wasn't the sort of thing one said to the sitting President.

"I know the things I don't like. I know the things I'd like to see changed, but, God damn it"—Ryan looked up, eyes wide now—"do I have the *right* to make that sort of call?"

"Yes, Mr. President, you do, because the Senate has to look over your shoulder, remember? Maybe they'll disagree on one or two. All these judges have been checked out by the FBI. They're all honest.

They're all smart. None of them ever wanted or expected to make it to the Supreme Court except through a certiori grant. If you can't come up with nine you like, we'll search some more—better then if you have somebody else do it. The head of the Civil Rights Division is also a pretty good man—he's off to my left some, but he's another thinker."

Civil rights, Jack thought. Did he have to make government policy on *that,* too? How was he supposed to know what might be the right way to treat people who might or might not be a little different from everybody else? Sooner or later you lost the ability to be objective, and then your beliefs took over—and were you then making policy based on personal prejudice? How were you supposed to know what was right? Jesus.

Ryan took a last puff and stubbed the cigarette out, rewarded as always by a dizzying buzz from the renewed vice. "Well, I guess I have a lot of reading to do."

"I'd offer you some help, but probably better that you try to do it yourself. That way, nobody pollutes the process—more than I've already done, that is. You want to keep that in mind. I might not be the best guy for this, but you asked me, and that's the best I have."

"I suppose that's all any of us can do, eh?" Ryan observed, staring at the pile of folders.

THE CHIEF OF the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice was a political appointee dating back to President Fowler. Formerly a corporate lawyer and lobbyist—it paid far better than the academic post he'd held before his first political appointment—he'd been politically active since before his admission to law school, and as with so many occupants of official offices he had become, if not his post, then his vision of it. He had a constituency, even though he'd never been elected to anything, and even though his government service had been intermittent, a series of increasingly high posts made possible by his proximity to the power that rested in this city, the power lunches, the parties, the office visits made while representing people he might or might not really care about, because a lawyer had an obligation to serve the interests of his clients—and the clients chose him, not the reverse. One often needed the fees of the few to serve the needs of the many—which was, in fact, his own philosophy of government. Thus he'd unknowingly come to live Ben Jonson's dictum about "speaking to mere contraries, yet all be law." But he'd never lost his passion for civil rights, and he'd never lobbied for anything contrary to that core belief—of course, nobody since the 1960s had lobbied *against* civil rights *per se,* but he told himself that

was important. A white man with stock originating well before the Revolutionary War, he spoke at all the right forums, and from that he'd earned the admiration of people whose political views were the same as his. From that admiration came power, and it was hard to say which aspect of his life influenced the other more. Because of his early work in the Justice Department he'd won the attention of political figures. Because he'd done that work with skill, he'd also earned the attention of a powerful Washington law firm. Leaving the government to enter that firm, he'd used his political contacts to practice his profession more effectively, and from that effectiveness he'd generated additional credibility in the political world, one hand constantly washing the other until he couldn't really discern which hand was which. Along the way the cases he argued had become his identity in a process so gradual and seemingly so logical that he hardly knew what had taken place. He was what he'd argued for over the years.

And that was the problem right now. He knew and admired Patrick Martin as a lesser legal talent who'd advanced at Justice by working exclusively in the courts—never even a proper United States Attorney (those were political appointments, mainly selected by senators for their home states), but rather one of the apolitical professional worker bees who did the real casework while their appointed boss worked on speeches, caseload management, and political ambition. And the fact of the matter was that Martin was a gifted legal tactician, fortyone and one in his formal trials, better yet as a legal administrator guiding young prosecutors. But he didn't know much about politics, the Civil Rights chief thought, and for that reason he was the wrong man to advise President Ryan.

He had the list. One of his people had helped Martin put it together, and his people were loyal, because they knew that the real path to advancement in this city was to move in and out as their chief had done, and their chief could by lifting a phone get them that job at a big firm, and so one of them handed his chief the list, with the names not redacted out.

The chief of the Civil Rights Division had only to read off the fourteen names. He didn't need to call up the paperwork on their cases. He knew them all. This one, at the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, had reversed a lower-court ruling and written a lengthy opinion questioning the constitutionality of affirmative action—too good a discourse, it had persuaded the Supreme Court in a sharply divided 5-4 decision. The case had been a narrow one, and the affirmation of it in Washington had been similarly narrow, but the chief didn't like *any* chips in that particular wall of stone.

That one in New York had affirmed the government's position in another area, but in doing so had limited the applicability of the

principle—and *that* case hadn't gone further, and was law for a large part of the country.

These were the wrong people. Their view of judicial power was too circumscribed. They deferred too much to Congress and the state legislatures. Pat Martin's view of law was different from his own. Martin didn't see that judges were *supposed* to right what was wrong—the two had often debated the issue over lunch in conversations spirited but always good-natured. Martin was a pleasant man, and a sufficiently good debater that he was hard to move off any position, whether he was wrong or not, and while that made him a fine prosecutor he just didn't have the temperament, he just didn't *see* the way things were supposed to be, and he'd picked judges the same way, and the Senate might be dumb enough to consent to the selections, and that *couldn't happen.* For this sort of power, you had to pick people who knew how to exercise it in the proper way.

He really had no choice. He bundled the list into an envelope and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket and made a phone call for lunch with one of his many contacts.

30

PRESS

THEY DID IT FOR THE morning news, so pervasive had become the influence of television. This was how reality was defined, changed, and announced. A new day had surely dawned. The viewer was left in little doubt. There was a new flag hanging behind the announcer, a green field, the color of Islam, with two small gold stars. He started off with an invocation from the Koran, and then went into political matters. There was a new country. It was called the United Islamic Republic. It would be comprised of the former nations of Iran and Iraq. The new nation would be guided by the Islamic principles of peace and brotherhood. There would be an elected parliament called a majlis. Elections, he promised, would be held by the end of the year. In the interim there would be a revolutionary council comprised of political figures from both countries, in proportion to population—which gave Iran the whip hand, the announcer didn't say; he didn't have to.

There was no reason, he went on, for any other country to fear the UIR. The new nation proclaimed its goodwill for all Muslim nations, and all nations who had friendly relations with the former divided segments of the new land. That this statement was contradictory in numerous ways was not explored. The other Gulf nations, all of them Islamic, had *not* actually enjoyed friendly relations with either of the partners. The elimination of the former Iraqi weapons facilities would continue apace so that there would be no question of hostility to the international community. Political prisoners would be freed at once—

"And now they can make room for the new ones," Major Sabah observed at PALM BOWL. "So, it's happened." He didn't have to phone anyone. The TV feed was being viewed all over the Gulf, and in every room with a functioning television the only happy face was the one on the screen—that is, until the scene changed to show spontaneous demonstrations at the various mosques, where people made their morning prayers, and walked outside to display their joy.

“HELLO, ALI,” Jack said. He’d stayed up reading the folders Martin had left, knowing that the call would come, suffering, again, from a headache that he seemed to acquire just from walking into the Oval Office. It was surprising that the Saudis had been so long in authorizing the call from their Prince/Minister-Without-Portfolio. Maybe they’d just hoped to wish it away, a characteristic not exactly unique to that part of the world. “Yes, I’m watching the TV now.” At the bottom of the display, like the captioning for the hearing-impaired, was a dialogue box being typed by intelligence specialists at the National Security Agency. The rhetoric was a little flowery, but the content was clear to everyone in the room. Adler, Vasco, and Goodley had come in as soon as the feed arrived, liberating Ryan from his reading, if not his headache.

“This is very unsettling, if not especially surprising,” the Prince said over the encrypted line.

“There was no stopping it. I know how it looks to you, Your Highness,” the President said tiredly. He could have indulged in coffee, but he did want to get *some* sleep tonight.

“We are going to place our military at a higher state of readiness.”

“Is there anything you want us to do?” Ryan asked.

“For the moment, just to know that your support has not changed.”

“It hasn’t. I’ve told you before. Our security commitment to the Kingdom remains the same. If you want us to do something to demonstrate that, we’re ready to take whatever steps seem reasonable and appropriate. Do you—”

“No, Mr. President, we have no formal requests at this time.” That statement was delivered in a tone that made Jack’s eyes flicker off the speakerphone and to his visitors.

“In that case, might I suggest that you have some of your people discuss options with some of mine?”

“It must be kept quiet. My government has no wish to inflame the situation.”

“We’ll do what we can. You can start talking to Admiral Jackson—he’s J-3 in the—”

“Yes, Mr. President, I met him in the East Room. I will have our working-level people contact him later today.”

“Okay. If you need me, Ali, I’m always at the end of the phone.”

“Thank you, Jack. I hope you will sleep well.” *You’ll* need it. *We all will.* And the line went dead. Ryan killed the button on the phone to make sure.

“Opinions?”

“Ali wants us to do something, but the King hasn’t decided yet,” Adler said.

“They’ll try to establish contacts with the UIR.” Vasco took up the

conversation. “Their first instinct will be to get a dialogue going, try to do a little business. The Saudis will take the lead. Figure Kuwait and the rest of the lesser states will let them handle the contacts, but we’ll be hearing from them soon, probably through channels.”

“We have a good ambassador in Kuwait?” the President asked.

“Will Bach,” Adler said, with an emphatic nod. “Career FSO. Good man. Not real imaginative, but a good plugger, knows the language and culture, lots of friends in their royal family. Good commercial guy. He’s been pretty effective as a middleman between our businesspeople and their government.”

“Good deputy chief of mission to back him up,” Vasco went on, “and the attaches there are tops, all spooks, good ones.”

“Okay, Bert.” Ryan took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Tell me what happens next.”

“The whole south side of the Gulf is scared shitless. This is their nightmare come true.”

Ryan nodded and shifted his gaze. “Ben, I want CIA’s assessment of the UIR’s intentions, and I want you to call Robby and see what kind of options we have. Get Tony Bretano into the loop. He wanted to be SecDef, and I want him to start thinking about the non-admin part of the job.”

“Langley doesn’t have much of a clue,” Adler pointed out. “Not their fault, but that’s how it is.” And so their assessment would present a range of potential options, from theater nuclear war—Iran might have nukes, after all—to the Second Coming, and three or four options in between, each with its theoretical justification. That way, as usual, the President had the chance to choose the wrong one, and it wouldn’t be anyone’s fault but his own.

“Yeah, I know. Scott, let’s see if we can establish some contacts with the UIR, too.”

“Extend the olive branch?”

“You got it,” the President agreed. “Everyone figure they need time to consolidate before they do anything radical?” There were nods with the President’s assessment, but not from everyone.

“Mr. President?” Vasco said.

“Yeah, Bert—by the way, good call. You weren’t exactly right on timing, but damned if you weren’t right enough.”

“Thanks. Mr. President, on the consolidation issue, that’s about people, right?”

“Sure.” Ryan and the rest nodded. Consolidating a government meant little more than that the people got used to the new system of rule and accepted it.

“Sir, if you look at the number of people in Iraq who have to get used to this new government, compare that number to the population

of the Gulf states. It's a big jump in terms of distance and territory, but not in terms of population," Vasco said, reminding them that although Saudi Arabia was larger than all of America east of the Mississippi, it had fewer people than the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

"They're not going to do anything right away," Adler objected.

"They might. Depends on what you mean by 'right away,' Mr. Secretary."

"Iran has too many internal problems," Goodley started to say.

Vasco had come to like presidential access and attention, and decided to seize the floor. "Don't underestimate the religious dimension," he warned. "That is a unifying factor which could erase or at least suppress their internal problems. Their flag says it. The name of the country says it. People all over the world like a winner. Daryaei sure looks like a winner now, doesn't he? One other thing."

"What's that, Bert?" Adler asked.

"You notice the flag? The two stars are pretty small," Vasco said pensively.

"So?" This was Goodley. Ryan looked back at the TV and the announcer. The flag was still there behind him and—

"So, there's plenty of room for more."

IT WAS A moment such as he had dreamed of, but the culmination of such a dream is always better than its contemplation, because now the cheers were real, striking his ears from the outside, not the inside. Mahmoud Haji Daryaei had flown in before dawn, and with the rising of the sun he'd walked into the central mosque, removing his shoes, washing his hands and forearms, because a man was supposed to be clean before his God. Humbly, he'd listened to the incantation from the minaret, calling the faithful to prayer, and this day people didn't roll back over and try to capture a few more hours of sleep. Today they flocked to the mosque from blocks around in a gesture of devotion that moved their visitor to his core. Daryaei took no special place, but he appreciated the singularity of the moment, and tears streamed down his dark, deeply lined cheeks at the overwhelming emotion of the moment. He had fulfilled the first of his tasks. He had fulfilled the wishes of the Prophet Mohammed. He had restored a measure of unity to the Faith, the first step in his holy quest. In the reverent hush following the conclusion of morning prayers, he rose and walked out into the street, and there he was recognized. To the despairing panic of his security guards, he walked along the street, returning the greetings of people at first stupefied and then ecstatic to see the former enemy of their country walking among them as a guest.

There were no cameras to record this. It was not a moment to be

polluted by publicity, and though there was danger, he accepted it. What he was doing would tell him much. It would tell him of the power of his Faith, and the renewed faith of these people, and it would tell him whether or not he had Allah's blessing on his quest, for Daryaei truly was a humble man, doing what he had to do, not for himself, but for his God. Why else, he often asked himself, would he have chosen a life of danger and denial? Soon the sidewalk traffic turned into a crowd, and from a crowd to a mob. People he'd never met appointed themselves to be his guardians, forcing a path for him through the bodies and the cheers as his aged legs made their way while his now-serene dark eyes swept left and right, wondering if danger would come, but finding only joy that reflected his own. He gazed and gestured to the crowd as a grandfather might greet his progeny, not smiling, but composed, accepting their love and respect, and with his benign eyes promising greater things, because great deeds had to be followed by greater ones, and the moment was right.

"SO, WHAT SORT of man is he?" Movie Star asked. His flight to Frankfurt had been followed by one to Athens, and from there to Beirut, and from there to Tehran. He knew Daryaei only by reputation.

"He knows power," Badrayn answered, listening to the demonstrations outside. There was something about peace, he imagined. The war between Iraq and Iran had lasted close to a decade. Children had been sent off to die. Rockets had blasted the cities of both countries. The human cost would never be fully assessed, and though the war had ended years before, now it was truly ended—a thing of the heart rather than of law, perhaps. Or maybe a thing of God's law, which was different from that of man. The resulting euphoria was something he'd once felt himself. But now he knew better. Feelings like that were weapons of statecraft, things to be used. Outside were people who a short time before had chafed at what they had and what they did not have, who questioned the wisdom of their leader, who bridled—as much as one could in so tightly controlled a society as this one was—at the freedoms they lacked. That was gone now, and it would remain gone for—how long? That was the question, and that was why such moments had to be properly used. And Daryaei knew all of those things.

"So," Badrayn said, turning off the outside noise of the faithful, "what have you learned?"

"The most interesting things I learned from watching television. President Ryan is doing well, but he has difficulties. The government is not yet fully functional. The lower house of their parliament has not

yet been replaced—the elections for that will begin to take place next month. Ryan is popular. The Americans love to poll one another," he explained. "They call people on the telephone and ask questions—only a few thousand, often not that many, and from this they report to one another what everyone thinks."

"The result?" Badrayn asked.

"A large majority seems to approve what he is doing—but he isn't really doing anything except to continue. He hasn't even chosen a Vice President yet."

Badrayn knew that, but not the reason. "Why?" he asked.

Movie Star grinned. "I asked that question myself. The full parliament must approve such a thing, and the full parliament has not yet been reestablished. It will not be so for some time. Moreover, there is the problem with the former Vice President, that Kealty fellow, who claims that he is the President—and this Ryan has not imprisoned him. Their legal system doesn't deal with treason effectively."

"And if we were able to kill Ryan ... ?"

Movie Star shook his head. "Very difficult. I took an afternoon to walk around Washington. Security at the palace is very strict. It is not open to public tours. The street in front of the building is closed. I sat on a bench for an hour, reading, and watched for signs around the place. Riflemen on all the buildings. I suppose we would have a chance on one of his official trips, but that would require extensive planning for which we lack the necessary time. And so, that leaves us with—"

"His children," Badrayn observed.

JESUS, I HARDLY see them anymore, Jack thought. He'd just gotten off the elevator, accompanied by Jeff Raman, and checked his watch. Just after midnight. Damn. He'd managed to sit through a hurried dinner with them and Cathy before hustling back downstairs for his reading and meetings, and now ... everyone was asleep.

The upstairs corridor was a lonely place, too wide for the intimacy of a real home. Three agents were in view, "standing post," as they called it, and the warrant officer with "the Football" full of its nuclear codes. It was quiet because of the time of night, and the overall impression was rather like that of an upscale funeral home, not a house with a family in it. No clutter, no toys lying on the rug, no empty glasses in front of a TV. Too neat, too tidy, too cold. Always somebody around. Raman traded looks with the other agents, whose nods meant "Okay, everything clear." *Nobody with guns around,* Ryan thought. *Super.*

The bedrooms were too far apart up here. He turned left, heading for Katie's room first. Opening the door, he saw his youngest, recently graduated from crib to bed, lying on her side, a fuzzy brown teddy bear next to her. She still wore sleepers with feet on them. Jack could remember when Sally had worn the same, and how cute children looked that way, like little packages. But Sally now looked forward to the day she'd buy things from Victoria's Secret, and Little Jack—he had taken to objecting to that label of late—now insisted on boxer shorts because that was the new "in" thing for boys of his age group, and they had to be pulled down low, because the "in" thing was to risk having them fall off. Well, he still had a toddler. Jack approached the bed, and stood there for a minute, just looking at Katie and quietly enjoying the status of fatherhood. He looked around, and again the room was unnaturally neat. Everything was picked up. Not a loose item on the floor. Her clothing for the coming day was neatly laid out on a wooden valet. Even the white socks were folded next to the diminutive sneakers with cartoon animals on them. Was this a way for a child to live? It seemed like a Shirley Temple movie from when his mom and dad were kids—some upper-class thing that he'd always wondered about: *Did people really live that way*?

Not real people, just royalty, and the family of the man sentenced to the presidency. Jack smiled, shook his head, and left the room. Agent Raman closed the door for him, not even letting POTUS do that. Somewhere else in the building, Ryan was sure, an electronic status board showed that the door had been opened and closed, probably sensors told that someone had entered the room, and probably someone had asked over the radio link the Service people used to be told that SWORDSMAN was tucking SANDBOX in.

He stuck his head in Sally's room. His elder daughter was similarly asleep, doubtless dreaming of some boy or other in her class—Kenny or something, wasn't it? Somebody who was way cool. Little Jack's bedroom floor was actually polluted by the presence of a comic book, but his white shirt was pressed and hanging on another valet, and someone had shined his shoes.

Another day shot to hell, the President thought. He turned to his bodyguard. "Night, Jeff."

"Good night, sir," Agent Raman said outside the door to the master bedroom. Ryan nodded his farewell to the man, and Raman waited for the door to shut. Then he looked left and right at the other Detail agents. His right hand brushed against the service pistol under his jacket, and his eyes smiled in a private way, knowing what might so easily have been. Word had not come back. Well, his contact was doubtless being careful, as well he should. Aref Raman had the duty tonight as supervisor for the Detail. He walked up the corridor,

nodding to the agents on post, asked one innocuous question, then headed down the elevator to the State Floor, and outside to get some air, stretch, and look at the perimeter guard posts, where, also, everything was quiet. There were some protesters in Lafayette Park across the street, this time of night huddled together, many of them smoking—exactly what he didn't know but had suspicions. Maybe hashish? he wondered with a cryptic smile. Wouldn't that be funny. Beyond that there were only the traffic sounds, a distant siren to the east, and people standing at their posts, trying to stay alert by talking about basketball, or hockey, or spring training for baseball, eyes sweeping outward, looking for dangers in the shadows of the city. The wrong place to look, Raman thought, turning back to head for the command post.

"IS IT POSSIBLE to kidnap them?"

"The two older ones, no, too inconvenient, too difficult, but the youngest, that is possible. It could be both dangerous and costly," Movie Star warned.

Badrayn nodded. That meant picking especially reliable people. Daryaei had such people. That was obvious from what had taken place in Iraq. He looked over the diagrams in silence for a few minutes while his guest stood to look out the window. The demonstration was still under way. Now they were shouting "Death to America!" The crowds and the cheerleaders who organized them had long experience with that particular mantra. Then his intelligence man came back.

"What exactly," Movie Star asked, "is the mission, Ali?"

"The strategic mission would be to prevent America from interfering with us." Badrayn looked up. Us now meant whatever Daryaei wanted it to mean.

ALL NINE OF them, Moudi saw. He ran the antibody tests himself. He actually did each three times, and the tests were all positive. Every one of them was infected. For the sake of security, they were given drugs and told that they'd be all right—as they would until it was determined that the disease had been transmitted in its full virulence, not attenuated by reproduction in the previous set of hosts. Mainly they were dosed with morphine, the better to keep them quiet and stuporous. So first Benedict Mkusa, then Sister Jean Baptiste, then ten criminals, and now nine more. Twenty-two victims, if one also counted Sister Maria Magdalena. He wondered if Jean Baptiste was still praying for him in Paradise and shook his head.

SOHAILA, DR. MACGREGOR thought, looking over his notes. She was ill, but she had stabilized. Her temperature had abated a whole degree. She was occasionally alert. He'd thought jet lag at first, until there had been blood in her vomit and stool, but that had stopped ... Food poisoning ? That had seemed the likely diagnosis. She'd probably eaten the same things as the rest of her family, but it could have been one bad piece of meat, or maybe she'd done what every child did, and swallowed the wrong thing. It happened literally every week in every doctor's office in the world, and was particularly common among the Western community in Khartoum. But she was from Iraq, too, just as Patient Saleh was. He'd rerun the antibody tests on the latter, and there was no doubt. The bodyguard fellow was gravely ill, and unless his immune system rallied itself—

Children, MacGregor remembered, somewhat startled by the connection, have powerful immune systems, rather more so than adults had. Though every parent knew that every child could come down with a disease and high fever in a matter of hours, the reason was simply that children, as they grew, were exposed to all manner of ailments for the first time. Each organism attacked the child, and in each child the immune system fought back, generating antibodies which would forever defeat that particular enemy (measles, mumps, and all the rest) whenever it again appeared—and rapidly defeating it the first time in nearly all cases, which was why a child could spike a high fever one day and be out playing the next, another characteristic of childhood that first terrified and then vexed parents. The so-called childhood diseases were those *defeated* in childhood. An adult exposed to them for the first time was in far greater distress—mumps could render a healthy man impotent; chicken pox, a childhood annoyance, could *kill* adults; measles had killed off whole peoples. Why? Because for all its apparent frailty, the human child was one of the toughest organisms known to exist. Vaccines for the childhood diseases had been developed not to save the many, but the few who for whatever reason—probably genetic, but that was still being investigated—were unusually vulnerable. Even polio, a devastating neuro-muscular disease, had done permanent harm to only a fraction of its victims—but they were mostly children, and adults protected children with a ferocity usually associated with the animal kingdom—and properly so, MacGregor thought, because the human psyche was programmed to be solicitous to children—which was why so much scientific effort had been devoted to childhood disease over the years.... Where was this line of thought taking him? the doctor wondered. So often his brain went off on its own, as though wandering in a library of thoughts,

searching for the right reference, the right connection ...

Saleh had come from Iraq.

Sohaila had also come from Iraq.

Saleh had Ebola.

Sohaila showed symptoms of flu, or food poisoning, or—

But Ebola initially presented itself as flu ...

"My God," MacGregor breathed. He rose from his desk and his notes and walked to her room. Along the way he got a syringe and some vacuum tubes. There was the usual whining from the child about a needle, but MacGregor had a good touch, and it was all over before she was able to start crying, which problem he left to her mother, who'd slept overnight in the room.

Why didn't I run this test before? the young doctor raged at himself. *Damn.*

"THEY ARE NOT officially here," the foreign ministry official told the health department official. "What exactly is the problem?"

"He seems to have Ebola virus." That got the other man's attention. His eyes blinked hard, and he leaned forward across his desk.

"Are you certain?"

"Quite," the Sudanese physician confirmed with a nod. "I've seen the test data. The doctor on the case is Ian MacGregor, one of our British visitors. He's actually a fine practitioner."

"Has anyone been told?"

"No." The doctor shook his head emphatically. "There is no cause to panic. The patient is fully isolated. The hospital staff know their business. We are supposed to make the proper notifications to the World Health Organization, informing them of the case and—"

"You are certain there is no risk of an epidemic?"

"None. As I said, full isolation procedures are in place. Ebola is a dangerous disease, but we know how to deal with it," the physician answered confidently.

"Then why must you notify the WHO?"

"In these cases, they dispatch a team to oversee the situation, to advise on procedures, and to look for the focal source of the infection so that—"

"This Saleh chap, he didn't catch the disease here, did he?"

"Certainly not. If we had that problem here, I would know of it straightaway," he assured his host.

"So, there is no danger of spreading the disease, and he brought it in with him, so there is no question that there is a public-health danger to our country?"

"Correct."

"I see." The official turned to look out the window. The presence of the former Iraqi officers in Sudan was still a secret, and it was in his country's interest to make sure it stayed that way. Keeping secrets meant keeping secrets from everyone. He turned back. "You will *not* notify the World Health Organization. If the presence of this Iraqi in our country became widely known, it would be a diplomatic embarrassment for us."

"That might be a problem. Dr. MacGregor is young and idealistic and—"

"You tell him. If he objects, I will have someone else speak to him," the official said, with a raised eyebrow. Such warnings, properly delivered, rarely failed to get someone's attention.

"As you wish."

"Will this Saleh fellow survive?"

"Probably not. The mortality rate is roughly eight of ten, and his symptoms are advancing rapidly."

"Any idea how he contracted the disease?"

"None. He denies ever having been in Africa before, but such people do not always speak the truth. I can speak with him further."

"That would be useful."

PRESIDENT EYES CONSERVATIVES FOR THE SUPREME COURT, the headline ran. The White House staff never sleeps, though this privilege is occasionally granted to POTUS. Copies of various papers arrived while the rest of the city slept, and staff workers would take one of the copies and scan it for items of particular interest to the government. Those stories would be clipped, pasted together, and photocopied for the *Early Bird*, an informal publication which allowed the powerful to find out what was happening or at least what the press thought was happening, which was sometimes true, sometimes false, and mainly in between.

"We got a major leak," one of them said, using an X-Acto knife to cut out the story from the *Washington Post*.

"Look like it. Looks like it gets around, too," her counterpart on the *Times* agreed.

An internal Justice Department document lists the judges being reviewed by the Ryan administration for possible nomination to fill the nine vacant seats on the Supreme Court.

Each of the jurists listed is a senior appeals court judge. The list is a highly conservative roster. Not a single judicial appointee from presidents Fowler or Durling is to be found on it.

Ordinarily such nominees are first submitted to a committee of the American Bar Association, but in this case the list was prepared internally

by senior career officials at the Justice Department, overseen by Patrick J. Martin, a career prosecutor and chief of the Criminal Division.

"The press doesn't like this."

"Think that's bad? Check this editorial out. Boy, they really responded fast to this one."

THEY'D NEVER WORKED so hard on anything. The mission had turned into sixteen-hour days, not much beer in the evenings, hasty pre-cooked meals, and only a radio for entertainment. That had to be played loud at the moment. They had lead boiling. The rig was the same as that used by plumbers, a propane tank with a burner on top, like an inverted rocket being static-tested, and atop that was a metal pot filled with lead kept in a liquid state by the roaring flame. A ladle came with the pot and this was dipped, then poured into bullet molds. The latter were .58 caliber, 505-grain, made for muzzle-loading rifles, rather like what the original mountain men had carried west back in the 1820s. These had been ordered from catalogs. There were ten of the molds, with four cavities per mold.

So far, Ernie Brown thought, things were going well, especially on the security side. Fertilizer was not a controlled substance. Neither was diesel fuel. Neither was lead, and every purchase had been made at more than one place, so that no single acquisition was so large as to cause comment.

It was still time-consuming menial labor, but as Pete had remarked, Jim Bridger hadn't come west by helicopter. No, he'd traveled the distance on horseback, doubtless with a packhorse or two, making maybe fifteen or twenty miles per day, then trapping his beaver one at a time, doing everything the hard way, the individual way, occasionally bumping into another of his kind and trading for jugged liquor or tobacco. So what they did was in the tradition of their kind. That was important.

The timing worked out nicely. Pete was doing the ladle work now, and from the time he poured into the first mold-set until he poured the last, the first set hardened enough that, when dipped in water and opened—the twopiece tool was like a pair of pliers—the minié-ball-type projectiles were fully formed and solid. These were tossed into an empty oil drum, and the molds replaced in their holders. Ernie collected the spilled lead and dumped it back in the pot so that none would be wasted.

The only hard part was getting the cement truck, but a search of local papers had found an auction sale for a contractor going out of business, and for a mere $21,000 they'd acquired a three-year-old vehicle with a Mack truck body, only 70,567.1 miles on the odometer,

and in pretty good running shape. They'd driven that down at night, of course, and it was now parked in the barn, sitting twenty feet away, its headlights watching them like a pair of eyes.

The work was menial and repetitive, but even that helped. Hanging on the barn wall was a map of downtown Washington, and as Ernie stirred the lead, he turned to look at it, his brain churning over the flat paper image and his own mental picture. He knew all the distances, and distance was the prime factor. The Secret Service thought it was pretty smart. They'd closed off Pennsylvania Avenue for the very purpose of keeping bombs away from the President's house. Well, hell, weren't they smart. They'd overlooked only one little thing.

"BUT I HAVE TO," MacGregor said. "We're *required* to."

"You will not," the health department official told him. "It is not necessary. The Index Patient brought the disease with him. You have initiated proper containment procedures. The staff are doing their job —you trained them well, Ian," he added to assuage the heat of the moment. "It would be inconvenient for my country for this word to go out. I discussed it with the foreign ministry, and word will *not* go out. Is that clear?"

"But—"

"If you pursue this, we will have to ask you to leave the country."

MacGregor flushed. He had a pale, northern complexion, and his face too easily showed his emotional state. This bastard could and would make another telephone call, and he would have a policeman—so they called them here, though they were decidedly not the civilized, friendly sort he'd known in Edinburgh—come to his house to tell him to pack his things for the ride to the airport. It had happened before to a Londoner who'd lectured a government official a little too harshly about AIDS dangers. And if he left, he'd be leaving patients behind, and that was his vulnerability, as the official knew, and as MacGregor knew that he knew. Young and dedicated, he looked after his patients as a doctor should, and leaving them to another's care wasn't something he could do easily, not here, not when there were just too few really competent physicians for the patient load.

"How is Patient Saleh?"

"I doubt he will survive."

"That is unfortunate, but it cannot be helped. Do we have any idea how this man was exposed to the disease?"

The younger man flushed again. "No, and that's the point!"

"I will speak to him myself."

Bloody hard thing to do from three meters away, MacGregor thought.

But he had other things to think about.

Sohaila had tested positive for antibodies also. But the little girl was getting better. Her temperature was down another half a degree. She'd stopped her GI bleeding. MacGregor had rerun a number of tests, and baselined others. Patient Sohaila's liver function was nearly normal. He was certain she'd survive. Somehow she'd been exposed to Ebola, and somehow she'd defeated it—but without knowing the former, he could only guess at the reason for the latter. Part of him wondered if Sohaila and Saleh had been exposed in the same way—no, not exactly. As formidable as a child's immune defenses were, they were not all *that* much more powerful than a healthy adult's, and Saleh showed no underlying health problems. But the adult was surely dying while the child was going to live. Why?

What other factors had entered into the two cases? There was no Ebola outbreak in Iraq—there had never been such a thing, and in a populous country like that—didn't Iraq have a bio-war program? Could they have had an outbreak and hushed it up? But, no, the government of that country was in turmoil. So said the SkyNews service he had at his apartment, and in such circumstances secrets like this could not be kept. There would be panic.

MacGregor was a doctor, not a detective. The physicians who could do both worked for the World Health Organization, at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, and at CDC in America. Not so much brighter than he as more experienced and differently trained.

Sohaila. He had to manage her case, keep checking her blood. Could she still infect others? MacGregor had to check the literature on that. All he knew for sure was that one immune system was losing and another was winning. If he were to figure anything out, he had to stay on the case. Maybe later he could get the word out, but he had to stay here to accomplish anything.

Besides, before telling anyone, he had gotten the blood samples out to Pasteur and CDC. This strutting bureaucrat didn't know that, and the phone calls, if they came, would come to this hospital and to MacGregor. He *could* get some word out. He could tell them what the political problem was. He could ask some questions, and relay others. He had to submit.

"As you wish, Doctor," he told the official. "You will, of course, follow the necessary procedures."

31

RIPPLES AND WAVES

THE PAYOFF WAS THIS morning, and again President Ryan suffered through the ordeal of makeup and hair spray.

"We should at least have a proper barber chair," Jack observed while Mrs. Abbot did her duty. He'd just learned the day before that the presidential barber came to the Oval Office and did *his* job at the President's swivel chair. That must be a real treat for the Secret Service, he thought, having a man with scissors and a straight razor an inch from his carotid artery. "Okay, Arnie, what do I do with Mr. Donner?"

"Number one, he asks any question he wants. That means you have to think about the answers."

"I do try, Arnie," Ryan observed with a frown.

"Emphasize the fact that you're a citizen and not a politician. It might not matter to Donner, but it will matter to the people who watch the interview tonight," van Damm advised. "Expect a hit on the court thing."

"Who leaked that?" Ryan demanded crossly.

"We'll never know, and trying to find out only makes you look like Nixon."

"Why is it that no matter what I do, somebody—damn," Ryan sighed as Mary Abbot finished with his hair. "I told George Winston that, didn't I?"

"You're learning. If you help some little old lady to cross the street, some feminist will say that it was condescending. If you don't help her, the AARP will say you're insensitive to the needs of the elderly. Throw in every other interest group there is. They all have agendas, Jack, and those agendas are a lot more important to them than you are. The idea is to offend as few people as possible. That's different from offending nobody. Trying to do that offends everybody," the chief of staff explained.

Ryan's eyes went wide. "I got it! I'll say something to piss everybody off—and then they'll all love me."

Arnie wasn't buying: "And every joke you tell will piss somebody off. Why? Humor is always cruel to someone, and some people just

don't have a sense of humor to begin with."

"In other words, there's people out there who *want* to get mad at something, and I'm the highest-profile target."

"You're learning," the chief of staff observed with a grim nod. He was worried about this one.

"WE HAVE MARITIME Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia," Jackson said, touching the proper point on the map.

"How much is there?" Bretano asked.

"We just reconfigured the TOE—"

"What's that?" SecDef asked.

"Table of Organization and Equipment." General Michael Moore was the Army's chief of staff. He'd commanded a brigade of the First Armored Division in the Persian Gulf War. "The load-out is enough for a little better than a brigade, a full-sized heavy Army brigade, along with all the consumables they need for a month's combat operations. Added to that, we have some units set in Saudi Arabia. The equipment is almost all new, M1A2 main battle tanks, Bradleys, MLRS. The new artillery tracks will be shipped out in three months. The Saudis," he added, "have been helping on the funding side. Some of the equipment is technically theirs, supposedly reserve equipment for their army, but we maintain it, and all we have to do is fly our people over to roll it out of the warehouses."

"Who would go first, if they ask for help?"

"Depends," Jackson answered. "Probably the first out would be an ACR—Armored Cavalry Regiment. In a real emergency, we'd airlift the personnel from the 10th ACR in the Negev Desert. That can be done in as little as a single day. For exercises, the 3rd ACR out of Texas or the 2nd out of Louisiana."

"An ACR, Mr. Secretary, is a well-balanced brigadesized formation. Lots of teeth, but not much tail. It can take care of itself, and people will think twice before taking it on," Mickey Moore explained, adding, "Before they can deploy for a lengthy stay, however, they need a combat-support battalion—supply and repair troops."

"We still have a carrier in the Indian Ocean—she's at Diego now with the rest of the battle group to give the crews some shore leave," Jackson went on. Which just about covered that atoll with sailors, but it was something. At least they could have a beer or two, and stretch their legs and play softball. "We have an F-16 wing—well, most of one—in the Negev as well, as part of our commitment to Israeli security. That and the 10th Cav are pretty good. Their continuing mission is to train up the IDF, and it keeps them busy."

"Soldiers love to train, Mr. Secretary. They'd rather do that than

anything," General Moore added.

"I need to get out and see some of this stuff," Bretano observed. "Soon as I get the budget thing worked out—the start of it, anyway. It sounds thin, gentlemen."

"It is, sir," Jackson agreed. "Not enough to fight a war, but probably enough to deter one, if it comes to that."

"WILL THERE BE another war in the Persian Gulf?" Tom Donner asked.

"I see no reason to expect it," the President replied. The hard part was controlling his voice. The answer was wary, but his words had to sound positive and reassuring. It was yet another form of lying, though telling the truth might change the equation. That was the nature of "spin," a game so false and artificial that it became a kind of international reality. Saying what wasn't true in order to serve the truth. Churchill had said it once: in time of war, truth was so precious as to need a bodyguard of lies. But in peacetime?

"But our relations with Iran and Iraq have not been friendly for some time."

"The past is the past, Tom. Nobody can change it, but we can learn from it. There is no good reason for animosity between America and the countries in that region. Why should we be enemies?" the President asked rhetorically.

"So will we be talking to the United Islamic Republic?" Donner asked.

"We are always willing to talk to people, especially in the interest of fostering friendly relations. The Persian Gulf is a region of great importance to the entire world. It is in everyone's interest for that region to remain peaceful and stable. There's been enough war. Iran and Iraq fought for—what?—eight years, at enormous human cost to both countries. Then all the conflicts between Israel and her neighbors. Enough is enough. Now we have a new nation being born. This new country has much work to do. Its citizens have needs, and fortunately they also have the resources to address those needs. We wish them well. If we can help them, we will. America has always been willing to extend the hand of friendship."

There was a brief break, which probably denoted a commercial. The interview would run this evening at nine o'clock. Then Donner turned to his senior colleague, John Plumber, who took the next segment.

"So, how do you like being President?"

Ryan tilted his head and smiled. "I keep telling myself that I wasn't elected, I was sentenced. Honestly? The hours are long, the work is hard, much harder than I ever appreciated, but I've been pretty lucky.

Arnie van Damm is a genius at organization. The staff here at the White House is just outstanding. I've gotten tens of thousands of letters of support from the people outside the Beltway, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them, and to let them know that it really helps."

"Mr. Ryan" Jack supposed that his Ph.D. didn't count anymore —"what things are you going to try and change?" Plumber asked.

"John, that depends on what you mean by 'change.' My foremost task is to keep the government operating. So, not 'change,' but 'restore,' is what I'm trying to do. We still don't really have a Congress yet—not until the House of Representatives is reestablished—and so I cannot submit a budget. I've tried to pick good people to take over the major Cabinet departments. Their job is to run those departments efficiently."

"Your Secretary of the Treasury, George Winston, has been criticized for his rather abrupt desire to change the federal tax code," Plumber said.

"All I can say is that I support Secretary Winston fully. The tax code is unconscionably complicated, and that is fundamentally unfair. What he wants to do will be revenue-neutral. Actually, that may be overly pessimistic. The net effect will be to enhance government revenues because of administrative savings in other areas."

"But there has been a lot of adverse comment about the regressive nature—"

Ryan held up his hand. "Wait a minute, John, one of the problems in this town is that the language used by people has been warped. Charging everyone the same is not regressive. That word means a backward step, charging the poor more than the rich. We will *not* be doing that. When you use that word in the incorrect way, you're misleading people."

"But that's the way people have described the tax system for years." Plumber hadn't had his grammar challenged in years.

"That doesn't make it right," Jack pointed out. "In any case, as I keep saying, I am not a politician, John. I only know how to talk straight. Charging everyone the same tax rate fulfills the dictionary's definition of 'fair.' Come on, John, you know how the game is played. You and Tom make a lot of money—far more than I do—and every year your lawyer and accountant go over everything. You probably have investments that are designed to reduce your tax payments, right? How did those loopholes happen? Easy, lobbyists talked Congress into changing the law a little. Why? Because rich people paid them to do so. So what happens? The supposedly 'progressive' system is manipulated in such a way that the increased rates for the rich don't actually apply, because their lawyers and accountants tell

them how to beat the system, and they *do* beat the system, for a fee. So, the increased rates they pay are a lie, aren't they? Politicians know all this when they pass the laws.

"You see where all this takes us? Nowhere, John. It takes us nowhere. It's a great big game, that's all. Just a game that wastes time, misleads the public, and makes a lot of money for people who work the system—and where does the money come from? The citizens, the people who pay for everything that happens. So George Winston wants to change the system—and we agreed on that—and what happens? The people who play the game and work the system use the same misleading words to make it look as though we're doing something unfair. These insiders are the most dangerous and pernicious special-interest group there is."

"And you don't like that." John smiled.

"Everyjob I've ever had, stock broker, history teacher, everything else, I've had to tell the truth as best I could. I'm not going to stop that now. Maybe some things do need changing, and I'll tell you what one of them is:

"Every parent in America sooner or later tells every child that politics is a dirty business, a rough business, a nasty business. Your dad told you. My dad told me—and we accept that as though it makes sense, as though it's normal and right and proper. But it's *not*, John. For years we've accepted the fact that politics—wait, let's define terms, shall we? The political system is the way we govern the country, pass the laws we all have to follow, levy taxes. These are important things, aren't they? But at the same time we accept people into that system whom we would not willingly invite into our homes, whom we would not trust to baby-sit our children. Does this strike you as just a little odd, John?

"We allow people into the political system who routinely distort facts, who twist laws in order to suit patrons who give them campaign money. Some of whom just plain lie. And we accept this. You people in the media do. You would not accept that sort of behavior in your own profession, would you? Or in medicine, or in science, or in business, or in law enforcement.

"There's something wrong here," the President went on, leaning forward and talking passionately for the first time. "This is our *country* we're talking about, and the standards of behavior we demand of our representatives shouldn't be lower—they should be higher. We should demand intelligence and integrity. That's why I've been giving speeches around the country. John, I'm a registered independent. I don't *have* a party affiliation. I don't have an agenda except for wanting to make things work for everyone. I swore an oath to do that, and I take my oaths seriously. Well, I've learned that this upsets

people, and I'm sorry about that, but I will *not* compromise my beliefs to accommodate every special group with an army of paid lobbyists. I'm here to serve everybody, not just to serve the people who make the most noise and offer the most money."

Plumber didn't show his pleasure at the outburst. "Okay, Mr. President, for starters, then, what about civil rights?"

"The Constitution is color-blind as far as I am concerned. Discrimination against people because of how they look, how they sound, what church they go to, or the country their ancestors came from is against the laws of our country. Those laws will be enforced. We are all supposed to be equal in the eyes of the law, whether we obey them or break them. In the latter case, those people will have the Department of Justice to worry about."

"Isn't that idealistic?"

"What's wrong with idealism?" Ryan asked in return. "At the same time, what about a little common sense once in a while? Instead of a lot of people chiseling for advantages for themselves or whatever small group they represent, why can't we all work together? Aren't we all Americans before we're anything else? Why can't we all try a little harder to work together and find reasonable solutions to problems? This country wasn't set up to have every group at the throat of every other group."

"Some would say that's the way we fight things out to make sure that everyone gets a fair share," Plumber observed.

"And along the way, we corrupt the political system."

They had to stop for the crew to change tapes on their cameras. Jack looked longingly at the door to the secretaries' office, wishing for a smoke. He rubbed his hands together, trying to look relaxed, but though he'd been given the chance to say things he'd wanted to say for years, the opportunity to do so only made him more tense.

"The cameras are off," Tom Donner said, settling back in his seat a little. "Do you really think you can bring *any* of this off?"

"If I don't try, what does that make me?" Jack sighed. "The government's a mess. We all know that. If nobody tries to fix it, then it'll just get worse."

Donner almost felt sympathy for his subject at that point. This Ryan guy's sincerity was manifest, as though his heart were beating right there on the sleeve of his jacket. But he just didn't get it. It wasn't that Ryan was a bad guy. He was just out of his depth, just as everyone else said. Kealty was right, and because he was right, Donner had his job to do.

"Ready," the producer said.

"The Supreme Court," Donner said, taking up the questioning from his colleague. "It's been reported that you are now looking over a list

of prospective justices for submission to the Senate."

"Yes, I am," Ryan replied.

"What can you tell us about them?"

"I instructed the Justice Department to send me a list of experienced appeals-court judges. That's been done. I'm looking over the list now."

"What exactly are you looking for?" Donner asked next.

"I'm looking for good judges. The Supreme Court is our nation's primary custodian of the Constitution. We need people who understand that responsibility, and who will interpret the laws fairly."

"Strict-constructionists?"

"Tom, the Constitution says that the Congress makes the law, the Executive Branch enforces the law, and the courts explain the law. That's called checks and balances."

"But historically the Supreme Court has been an important force for change in our country," Donner said.

"And not all of those changes have been good ones. *Dred Scott* started the Civil War. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a disgrace that set our country back seventy years. Please, you need to remember that as far as the law is concerned, I'm a layman—"

"That's why the American Bar Association routinely goes over judicial appointments. Will you submit your list to the ABA?"

"No." Ryan shook his head. "First, all of these judges have already passed that hurdle in order to get where they are. Second, the ABA is also an interest group, isn't it? Fine, they have a right to look out for the interests of their members, but the Supreme Court is the body of government which decides the law for everybody, and the ABA is the organization of people who use the law to make a living. Isn't it a conflict of interest for the group which makes use of the law to select the people who define the law? It would be in any other field, wouldn't it?"

"Not everyone will see it that way."

"Yes, and the ABA has a big office here in Washington, and it's full of lobbyists," the President agreed. "Tom, my job isn't to serve the interest groups. My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution to the best of my ability. To help me do that, I'm trying to find people who think the same way I do, that the oath means what it says, without any game-playing under the table."

Donner turned. "John?"

"You spent many years at the Central Intelligence Agency," Plumber said.

"Yes, I did," Jack agreed.

"Doing what?" Plumber asked.

"Mainly I worked in the Directorate of Intelligence, going over information that came in through various means, trying to figure out

what it meant, and then passing it on to others. Eventually I headed the Intelligence Directorate, then under President Fowler I became Deputy Director. Then, as you know, I became National Security Advisor to President Durling," Jack answered, trying to steer the talk forward rather than backward.

"Along the way, did you ever go out into the field?" Plumber asked.

"Well, I advised the arms-control negotiations team, and I went off to a lot of conferences," the President replied.

"Mr. Ryan, there are reports that you did more than that, that you participated in operations that resulted in the deaths of, well, the deaths of Soviet citizens."

Jack hesitated for a moment, long enough that he knew the impression he'd be giving to the viewers for this "special." "John, it's been a principle of our government for many years that we never comment on intelligence operations. I will not change that principle."

"The American people have a right and a need to know what sort of man sits in this office," Plumber insisted.

"This administration will never discuss intelligence operations. As far as what sort of person I am, that's the purpose of this interview. Our country has to keep some secrets. So do you, John," Ryan said with a level gaze into the commentator's eyes. "If you reveal sources, you're out of business. If America does the same thing, people get hurt.

"But—"

"The subject is closed, John. Our intelligence services operate under congressional oversight. I've always supported that law, and I will continue to uphold it, and that's it on this subject."

Both reporters blinked pretty hard at that, and surely, Ryan thought, that part of the tape wouldn't make it onto the network tonight.

BADRAYN NEEDED TO select thirty people, and while the number wasn't especially difficult—nor was the required dedication—brains were. He had the contacts. If there was a surplus of anything in the Middle East, it was terrorists, men like himself, if somewhat younger, who had dedicated their lives to the Cause, only to have it wither before their eyes. And that only made their anger and dedication worse—and better, depending on one's point of view. On reflection, he needed only twenty smart ones. The rest just had to be dedicated, with one or two intelligent overseers. They all had to follow orders. They all had to be willing to die, or at least to take the chance. Well, that wasn't much of a problem, either. Hezbollah still had a supply of people willing to strap explosives to their bodies, and there were

others.

It was part of the region's tradition—probably not one that Mohammed would have approved entirely, but Badrayn wasn't particularly religious, and terrorist operations were his business. Historically, Arabs had not been the world's most efficient soldiers. Nomadic tribesmen for most of their history, their military tradition was one of raiding, later quantified as guerrilla tactics, rather than set-piece battle, which was, in fact, an invention of the Greeks, passed along to the Romans and thence to all Western nations. Historically, a single person would step forward to become a sacrifice—in Viking tradition the person was called a "berzerker," and in Japan they'd been part of the special attack corps also known as kamikaze—on the field of battle, to swing his sword gloriously, and take as many of his foes off to be his servants in Paradise as possible. This was especially true in a *jihad,* or "holy war," whose objective was to serve the interests of the Faith. It ultimately proved that Islam, like any religion, could be corrupted by its adherents. For the moment, it meant that Badrayn had a supply of people who would do what he told them to do, his instructions relayed from Daryaei, who would also tell them that this was, indeed, a *jihad* service in which lay their individual keys to a glorious afterlife.

He had his list. He made three telephone calls. The calls were relayed through several cutout chains, and in Lebanon and elsewhere, people made travel plans.

"SO, HOW'D WE do, coach?" Jack asked with a smile.

"The ice got pretty thin, but I guess you didn't get wet," Arnie van Damm said with visible relief. "You hit the interest groups pretty hard."

"Isn't it okay to trash the special interests? Hell, everybody else does!"

"It depends on which groups and which interests, Mr. President. They all have spokespersons, too, and some of them can come across like Mother Teresa after a nicepill—right before they slash your throat with a machete." The chief of staff paused. "Still, you handled yourself pretty well. You didn't say anything they could turn against you too badly. We'll see how they cut it up for tonight, and then what Donner and Plumber say at the end. The last couple of minutes count the most."

THE TUBES ARRIVED in Atlanta in a very secure container called a

“hatbox” because of its shape. It was in its way a highly sophisticated device, designed to hold the most dangerous of materials in total safety, multiple-sealed, and spec’d to survive violent impacts. It was covered with biohazard warning labels and was treated with great respect by the handlers, including the FedEx deliveryman who’d handed it over this morning at 9:14.

The hatbox was taken to a secure lab, where the outside was checked for damage, sprayed with a powerful chemical disinfectant, and then opened under strict containment procedures. The accompanying documents explained why this was necessary. The two blood tubes were suspected to contain viruses which caused hemorrhagic fever. That could mean any of several such diseases from Africa—the indicated continent of origin—all of which were things to be avoided. A technician working in a glove box made the transfer after examining the containers for leaks. There were none he could see, and more disinfectant spray made sure of that. The blood would be tested for antibodies and compared with other samples. The documentation went off to the office of Dr. Lorenz in the Special Pathogens Branch.

“GUS, ALEX,” Dr. Lorenz heard on the phone.

“Still not getting any fishing in?”

“Maybe this weekend. There’s a guy in neurosurgery with a boat, and we have the house pretty well set up, finally.” Dr. Alexandre was looking out the window of his office at east Baltimore. One could see the harbor, which led to the Chesapeake Bay, and there *were* supposed to be rockfish out there.

“What’s happening?” Gus asked, as his secretary came in with a folder.

“Just checking in on the outbreak in Zaire. Anything new?”

“Zip, thank God. We’re out of the critical time. This one burned out in a hurry. We were very—” Lorenz stopped when he opened the folder and scanned the cover sheet. “Wait a minute. Khartoum?” he muttered to himself.

Alexandre waited patiently. Lorenz was a slow, careful reader. An elderly man, rather like Ralph Forster, he took his time with things, which was one of the reasons he was a brilliant experimental scientist. Lorenz rarely took a false step. He thought too much before moving his feet.

“We just had two samples come in from Khartoum. Cover sheet is from a Dr. MacGregor, the English Hospital in Khartoum, two patients, adult male and fouryear-old female, possible hemorrhagic fever. The samples are in the lab now.”

"Khartoum? Sudan?"

"That's what it says," Gus confirmed.

"Long way from the Congo, man."

"Airplanes, Alex, airplanes," Lorenz observed. If there was one thing that frightened epidemiologists, it was international air travel. The cover sheet didn't say much, but it did give phone and fax numbers. "Okay, well, we have to run the tests and see."

"What about the samples from before?"

"Finished the mapping yesterday. Ebola Zaire, Mayinga sub-type, identical with the samples from 1976, down to the last amino acid."

"The airborne one," Alexandre muttered, "the one that got George Westphal."

"That was never established, Alex," Lorenz reminded him.

"George was careful, Gus. You know that. You trained him." Pierre Alexandre rubbed his eyes. Headaches. He needed a new desk light. "Let me know what those samples tell you, okay?"

"Sure. I wouldn't worry too much. Sudan is a crummy environment for this little bastard. Hot, dry, lots of sunlight. The virus wouldn't last two minutes in the open. Anyway, let me talk to my lab chief. I'll see if I can micrograph it myself later today—no, more likely tomorrow morning. I have a staff meeting in an hour."

"Yeah, and I need some lunch. Talk to you tomorrow, Gus." Alexandre—he still thought of himself more as "Colonel" than "Professor"—replaced the phone and walked out, heading off to the cafeteria. He was pleased to find Cathy Ryan in the food line again, along with her bodyguard.

"Hey, Prof."

"How's the bug business?" she asked, with a smile.

"Same-o, same-o. I need a consult, Doctor," he said, selecting a sandwich off the counter.

"I don't do viruses." But she did enough work with AIDS patients whose eye troubles were secondary to their main problem. "What's the problem?"

"Headaches," he said on the way to the cashier.

"Oh?" Cathy turned and took his glasses right off his face. She held them up to the light. "You might try cleaning them once in a while. You're about two diopters of minus, pretty strong astigmatism. How long since you had the prescription checked?" She handed them back with a final look at the encrusted dirt around the lenses, already knowing the answer to her question.

"Oh, three"

"Years. You should know better. Have your secretary call mine and I'll have you checked out. Join us?"

They selected a table by the window, with Roy Altman in tow,

scanning the room, and catching looks from the other detail members doing the same. All clear.

"You know, you might be a good candidate for our new laser technique. We can re-shape your cornea and bring you right down to 20-20," she told him. She'd helped ramrod that program, too.

"Is it safe?" Professor Alexandre asked dubiously.

"The only unsafe procedures I perform are in the kitchen," Professor Ryan replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, ma'am." Alex grinned.

"What's new on your side of the house?"

IT WAS ALL in the editing. Well, mostly in the editing, Tom Donner thought, typing on his office computer. From that he would slide in his own commentary, explaining and clarifying what Ryan had really meant with his seemingly sincere ... seemingly? The word had leaped into his mind of its own accord, startling the reporter. Donner had been in the business for quite a few years, and before his promotion to network anchor, he'd been in Washington. He'd covered them all and knew them all. On his well-stuffed Rolodex was a card with every important name and number in town. Like any good reporter, he was *connected.* He could lift a phone and get through to anyone, because in Washington the rules for dealing with the media were elegantly simple: either you were a source or a target. If you didn't play ball with the media, they would quickly find an enemy of yours who did. In other contexts, the technical term was "blackmail."

Donner's instincts told him that he'd never met anyone like President Ryan before, at least not in public life ... or was that true? The I'm-one-of-you, Everyman stance went at least as far back as Julius Caesar. It was always a ploy, a sham to make voters think that the guy really was like them. But he never was, really. Normal people didn't get this far in any field. Ryan had advanced in CIA by playing office politics just like everyone else—he must have. He'd made enemies and allies, as everyone did, and maneuvered his way up. And the leaks he'd gotten about Ryan's tenure at CIA ... could he use them? Not in the special. Maybe in the news show, which would contain a teaser anyway to make people watch it instead of their usual evening TV fare.

Donner knew he had to be careful on this. You didn't go after a sitting President for the fun of it—well, that wasn't true, was it? Going after a President was the best sort of fun, but there were rules about how you did it. Your information had to be pretty solid. That meant multiple sources, and they had to be good sources. Donner would have to take them to a senior official of his news organization, and people

would hem and haw, and then they'd go over the copy for his story, and then they'd let him run it.

Everyman. But Everyman didn't work for CIA and go into the field to be a spy, did he? Damned sure Ryan was the first spy who'd ever made it to the Oval Office ... was that good?

There were so many blanks in his life. The thing in London. He'd killed there. The terrorists who'd attacked his home—he'd killed at least one of them there, too. This incredible story about stealing a Soviet submarine, during which, his source said, he'd killed a Russian sailor. The other things. Was this the sort of person the American people wanted in the White House?

And yet he tried to come across as ... Everyman. Common sense. This is what the law says. I take my oaths seriously.

It's a lie, Donner thought. *It has to be a lie.*

You're one clever son of a bitch, Ryan, the anchorman thought.

And if it was that he was clever, and if it *was* a lie, then what? Changing the tax system. Changes in the Supreme Court. Changes in the name of efficiency, Secretary Bretano's activities at Defense ... damn.

The next leap of imagination was that CIA and Ryan had had a role in the crash at the Capitol—no, that was too crazy. Ryan was an opportunist. They all were, the people Donner had covered for all of his professional life, all the way back to his first job at the network affiliate in Des Moines, where his work had landed a county commissioner in jail, and so gotten Donner noticed by the network executives at 30 Rock. Political figures. Donner reported on all manner of news from avalanches to warfare, but it was politicians whom he had studied as a profession and a hobby.

They were all the same, really. Right place, right time, and they already had the agenda. If he'd learned anything at all, he'd learned that. Donner looked out his window and lifted his phone with one hand while flipping the Rolodex with the other.

"Ed, this is Tom. Just how good are those sources, and how quickly can I meet them?" He couldn't hear the smile on the other end of the line.

SOHAILA WAS SITTING up now. Such situations provided a relief that never failed to awe the young doctor. Medicine was the most demanding of the professions, MacGregor believed. Every day, to a greater or lesser degree, he diced with Death. He didn't think of himself as a soldier, or a warrior knight on a bloodied charger, at least not in conscious terms, because Death was an enemy who never showed himself—but he was always there, even so. Every patient he

treated had that enemy inside, or hovering about somewhere, and his job as a physician was to discover his hiding place, seek him out, and destroy him, and you saw the victory in the face of the patient, and you savored every one.

Sohaila was still unwell, but that would pass. She was on liquids now, and she was keeping them down. Still weak, she would grow no weaker. Her temperature was down. All her vital signs were either stabilized or heading back to normal. This was a victory. Death wouldn't claim this child. In the normal course of events, she would grow and play and learn and marry and have children of her own.

But it was a victory for which MacGregor could not really take credit, at least not all of it. His care for the child had been merely supportive, not curative. Had it helped? Probably, he told himself. You couldn't know where the line was between what would have happened on its own and what had made a real difference. Medicine would be far easier if its practitioners possessed that degree of sight, but they didn't yet and probably never would. Had he not treated her —well, in this climate, just the heat might have done it, or certainly the dehydration, or maybe some opportunistic secondary infection. People so often expired not from their primary ailment, but from something else that took hold from the general weakening of the body. And so, yes, he *would* claim this victory, better yet that it was the life of a charming and attractive little girl who would in just a short time learn to smile again. MacGregor took her pulse, savoring the touch of the patient as he always did, and the remote contact with a heart that would still be beating a week from now, and as he watched, she fell off to sleep. He gently replaced the hand on the bed and turned.

"Your daughter will recover fully," he told the parents, confirming their hopes and crushing their fears with five quiet words and a warm smile.

The mother gasped as though punched, her mouth open, tears exploding from her eyes as she covered her face with her hands. The father took the news in what he deemed a more manly way, his face impassive—but not his eyes, which relaxed and looked up to the ceiling in relief. Then he seized the doctor's hand, and his dark eyes came back down to bore in on MacGregor's.

"I will not forget," the general told him.

Then it was time to see Saleh, something he'd consciously delayed. MacGregor left the room and walked down the corridor. Outside he changed into a different set of clothing. Inside he saw a defeat. The man was under restraints. The disease had entered his brain. Dementia was yet another symptom of Ebola, and a merciful one. Saleh's eyes were vacant and stared at the water marks on the ceiling. The nurse in

attendance handed him the chart, the news on which was uniformly bad. MacGregor scanned it, grimaced, and wrote an order to increase the morphine drip. Supportive care in this case hadn't mattered a damn. One victory, one loss, and if he'd had the choice of which to save and which to lose, this was how he'd have written the story, for Saleh was grown and had had a life of sorts. That life had but five days to run, and MacGregor could do nothing now to save it, only a few things to make its final passage less gruesome for the patient—and the staff. After five minutes he left the room, stripped off his protective garb, and walked to his office, his face locked in a frown of thought.

Where had it come from? Why would one survive and one die? What didn't he know that he needed to know? The physician poured himself a cup of tea and tried to think past the victory and the defeat in order to find the information that had decided both issues. Same disease, same time. Two very different outcomes. Why?

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RERUNS

I CAN'T GIVE THIS TO YOU, and I can't let you copy any of it, but I can let you look at it." He handed the photo over. He had light cotton gloves on, and he'd already given a pair to Donner. "Fingerprints," he explained quietly.

"Is this what I think it is?" It was a black-and-white photograph, eight-by-ten glossy, but there was no classification stamp on it, at least not on the front. Donner didn't turn it over.

"You really don't want to know, do you?" It was a question and a warning.

"I guess not." Donner nodded, getting the message. He didn't know how the Espionage Act—18 U.S.C. §793E—interacted with his First Amendment rights, but if he didn't know that the photo was classified, then he didn't have to find out.

"That's a Soviet nuclear missile submarine, and that's Jack Ryan on the gangway. You'll notice he's wearing a Navy uniform. This was a CIA operation, run in cooperation with the Navy, and that's what we got out of it." The man handed over a magnifying glass to make sure that the identifications were positive. "We conned the Soviets into thinking she'd exploded and sunk about halfway between Florida and Bermuda. They probably still think that."

"Where is it now?" Donner asked.

"They sank her a year later, off Puerto Rico," the CIA official explained.

"Why there?"

"Deepest Atlantic water close to American territory, about five miles down, so nobody will ever find her, and nobody can even look without us knowing."

"This was back—I remember!" Donner said. "The Russians had a big exercise going and we raised hell about it, and they actually lost a submarine, didn't—"

"Two." Another photo came out of the folder. "See the damage to the submarine's bow? *Red October* rammed and sank another Russian sub off the Carolinas. It's still there. The Navy didn't recover that one, but they sent down robots and stripped a lot of useful things off the

hulk. It was covered as salvage activity on the first one, that sank from a reactor accident. The Russians never found out what happened to the second Alfa."

"And this never leaked?" It was pretty amazing to a man who'd spent years extracting facts from the government, like a dentist with an unwilling patient.

"Ryan knows how to hush things up." Another photo. "That's a body bag. The person inside was a Russian crewman. Ryan killed him—shot him with a pistol. That's how he got his first Intelligence Star. I guess he figured we couldn't risk having him tell—well, isn't too hard to figure, is it?"

"Murder?"

"No." The CIA man wasn't willing to go that far. "The official story is that it was a real shoot-out, that other people got hurt also. That's how the documents read in the file, but . . ."

"Yeah. You have to wonder, don't you?" Donner nodded, staring down at the photos. "Could this possibly be faked?"

"Possibly, yes," he admitted. "But it's not. The other people in the photo: Admiral Dan Foster, he was Chief of Naval Operations back then. This one is Commander Bartolomeo Mancuso. Back then he commanded USS *Dallas.* He was transferred to Red October to facilitate the defection. He's still on active duty, by the way, an admiral now. He commands all the submarines in the Pacific. And that one is Captain Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius of the Soviet navy. He was the captain of *Red October.* They're all still alive. Ramius lives in Jacksonville, Florida, now. He works at the Navy's base at Mayport under the name Mark Ramsey. Consulting contract," he explained. "The usual thing. Got a big stipend from the government, too, but God knows he earned it."

Donner noted the details, and he recognized one of the extraneous faces. Sure as hell this wasn't faked. There were rules for that, too. If somebody lied to a reporter, it wasn't all that hard to make sure the right people found out who had broken the law—worse yet, that person became a target, and the media was in its way a crueler prosecutor than anyone in the Justice Department could ever hope to be. The court system, after all, required due process of law.

"Okay," the journalist said. The first set of photos went back in their folder. Another folder appeared, and from it a photograph.

"Recognize this guy?"

"He was—wait a minute. Gera-something. He was—"

"Nikolay Gerasimov. He was chairman of the old KGB."

"Killed in a plane crash back in—"

Another photo went down. The subject was older, grayer, and looking far more prosperous. "This picture was taken in Winchester,

Virginia, two years ago. Ryan went to Moscow, covered as a technical adviser to the START talks. He got Gerasimov to defect. Nobody's exactly sure how. His wife and daughter got out, too. That op was run directly out of Judge Moore's office. Ryan worked that way a lot. He was never really part of the system. Ryan knows—well, look, in fairness to the guy, he's one hell of a spook, okay? He supposedly worked directly for Jim Greer as part of the DI, not the DO. A cover within a cover. Ryan's never made an operational mistake that I know of, and that's some record. Not too many others can claim that, but one reason for it is he's one ruthless son of a bitch. Effective, yes, but ruthless. He cut through all the bureaucracy whenever he wanted. He does it his way every time, and if you get in his way—well, there's one dead Russian we buried off the Red October, and a whole Alfa crew off the Carolinas, to keep that op a secret. This one, I'm not sure. Nothing in the file, but the file has a lot of blanks. How the wife and daughter got out, it's not in the file. All I have for that are rumors, and they're pretty thin."

"Damn, I wish I'd had this a few hours ago."

"Rolled you, did he?" This question came from Ed Kealty over a speaker phone.

"I know the problem," the CIA official said. "Ryan is slick. I mean, *slick*. He's skated through CIA like Dorothy Hamill at Innsbruck, done it for years. Congress loves him. Why? He comes across as the most straightforward guy this side of Honest Abe. Except he's killed people." The man's name was Paul Webb, and he was a senior official in the Directorate of Intelligence, but not senior enough to prevent his whole unit from ending up on the RIF list. He should have been DDI now, Webb thought, and he would have been except for the way Ryan had gotten James Greer's ear and never let go of it. And so his career had ended as an entry-level supergrade at CIA, and now *that* was being taken away from him. He had his retirement. Nobody could take that away well, if it became known that he'd smuggled these files out of Langley, he'd be in very deep trouble ... or maybe not. What really happened to whistle-blowers, after all? The media protected them pretty well, and he had his time in service, and ... he didn't *like* being part of a reduction-in-force exercise. In another age, though he didn't admit it even to himself, his anger might have prompted him to make contact with—no, not that. Not to an enemy. But the media wasn't an enemy, was it? He told himself that it was not, despite an entire career of thinking otherwise.

"You've been rolled, Tom," Kealty said again over the phone line. "Welcome to the club. *I* don't even know all the stuff he can pull off. Paul, tell him about Colombia."

"There's no file on that one that I can find," Webb admitted.

“Wherever it is—well, there are special files, the ones with date-stamps on them. Like 2050 at the earliest. Nobody sees those.”

“How does *that* happen?” Donner demanded. “I’ve heard that before, but I’ve never been able to confirm—”

“How they keep those off the books? It’s a deal that has to go through Congress, an unwritten part of the oversight process. The Agency goes there with a little problem, asks for special treatment, and if Congress agrees, off the file goes into the special vault—hell, for all I know, the whole thing’s been shredded and turned into compost, but I can give you a few verifiable facts,” Webb concluded with an elegant dangle.

“I’m listening,” Donner replied. And so was his tape recorder.

“How do you suppose the Colombians broke up the Medellin cartel?” Webb asked, drawing Donner in further. It wasn’t all that hard. These people thought they knew about intrigue, Webb thought with a benign smile.

"Well, they had some sort of internal faction fight, a couple of bombs went off and—”

“They were CIA bombs. Somehow—I’m not sure exactly how, we initiated the faction fight. This I do know: Ryan was down there. His mentor at Langley was James Greer—they were like father and son. But when James died, Ryan wasn’t there for the funeral, and he wasn’t at home, and he wasn’t away on CIA business—he’d just come *back* from a NATO conference in Belgium. But then he just dropped off the map, like he’s done any number of times. Soon thereafter the President’s National Security Advisor, Jim Cutter, is *accidentally* run down by a D.C. transit bus on the G.W., right? He didn’t look? He just ran in front of a bus. That’s what the FBI said, but the guy running that was Dan Murray, and what job does he have now? FBI Director, right? It just so happens he and Ryan go back more than ten years. Murray was the ‘special’ guy for both Emil Jacobs *and* Bill Shaw. When the Bureau needed something done quietly, they called in Murray. Before that he was legal attaché in London—that’s a spook post, lots of contacts with the intelligence communities over there; Murray’s the black side of FBI, big time and well connected. And *he* picked Pat Martin to advise Ryan on Supreme Court appointments. Is the picture becoming clear?”

“Wait a minute. I *know* Dan Murray. He’s a tough son of a bitch, but he’s an honest cop—”

“He was in Colombia with Ryan, which is to say, he was off the map at exactly the same time. Okay, remember, I do *not* have the file on this operation, okay? I can’t prove any of this. Look at the sequence of events. Director Jacobs and all the others were killed, and right after that we have bombs going off in Colombia, and a lot of the cartel boys

go to talk it over with God—but a lot of innocent people got killed, too. That's the problem with bombs. Remember how Bob Fowler made an issue of that? So what happens then? Ryan disappears. Murray does, too. I figure they went down to turn the operation off before it got totally out of hand—and then Cutter dies at a very convenient moment. Cutter didn't have the balls for wet work, he probably knew that, and people probably were afraid he'd crack because he just didn't have the nerve. But Ryan sure as hell did—and still does. Murray—well, you kill the FBI Director, and you piss off a very serious organization, and I can't say I disapprove. Those Medellin bastards stepped way over the line, and they did it in an election year, and Ryan was in the right place to play a little catch-up ball, and so somebody issued him a hunting license, and maybe things got a little out of hand—it happens—and so he goes down there to shut it down. Successfully," Webb emphasized. "In fact, the whole operation was a success. The cartel came apart—"

"Another one took its place," Donner objected. Webb nodded with an insider's smile.

"True, and they haven't killed any American officials, have they? Somebody explained to them what the rules are. Again, I will not say that what Ryan did was wrong, except for one little thing."

"What's that?" Donner asked, disappointing Webb, though he was fully caught up in the story now.

"When you deploy military forces into a foreign country, and kill people, it's called an act of war. But, again, Ryan skated. The boy's got some beautiful moves. Jim Greer trained him well. You could drop Ryan in a septic tank and he'll come out smelling like Old Spice."

"So, what's your beef with him?"

"You finally asked," Webb observed. "Jack Ryan is probably the best intelligence operator we've had in thirty years, the best since Allen Dulles, maybe the best since Bill Donovan. *Red October* was a brilliant coup. Getting the chairman of KGB out was even better. The thing in Colombia, well, they twisted the tiger's tail, and they forgot that the tiger has great big claws. Okay," Webb allowed. "Ryan's a king spook—but he needs somebody to tell him what the law is, Tom."

"A guy like this would never get elected," Kealty observed, straining himself to say as little as possible. Three miles away his own chief of staff almost pulled the phone away from him, they were so close to getting the message across. Fortunately, Webb carried on.

"He's done a great job at the Agency. He was even a good adviser for Roger Durling, but that's not the same as being President. Yeah, he rolled you, Mr. Donner. Maybe he rolled Durling—probably not, but who can say? But this guy is rebuilding the whole fucking

government, and he's building it in *his* image, in case you didn't notice. Every appointment he's made, they're all people he's worked with, some for a long time—or they were selected for him by close associates. Murray running the FBI. Do you want Dan Murray in charge of America's most powerful law enforcement agency? You want these two people picking the Supreme Court? Where will he take us?" Webb paused, and sighed. "I hate doing this. He's one of us at Langley, but he isn't supposed to be President, okay? I have an obligation to my country, and my country isn't Jack Ryan." Webb collected the photos and tucked them back in the folders. "I gotta get back. If anyone finds out what I've done, well, look what happened to Jim Cutter . . ."

"Thank you," Donner said. Then he had some decisions to make. His watch said three-fifteen, and he had to make them fast. Driving that decision would be a well-understood fact. There was something in creation even more furious than a woman scorned. It was a reporter who'd discovered that he'd been rolled.

ALL NINE WERE dying. It would take from five to eight days, but they were all doomed, and they all knew it. Their faces stared at the overhead cameras, and they had no illusions now. Their executions would be even crueller than the courts had decided for them. Or so they thought. This group promised to be more dangerous than the first—they just knew more of what was going on—and as a result they were more fully restrained. As Moudi watched, the army medics went in to draw blood samples from the subjects, which would be necessary to confirm and then to quantify the degree of their infection. On their own, the medics had come up with a way to keep the "patients" from struggling during the process—a jerked arm at the wrong moment could make one of the medical corpsmen stab the needle into the wrong body, and so while one man did the sample, the other held a knife across the subject's throat. Doomed though the criminals believed themselves to be, they *were* criminals, and cowards, and therefore unwilling to hasten their deaths. It wasn't good medical technique, but then nobody in the building was practicing good medicine. Moudi watched the process for a few minutes and left the monitoring room.

They'd been overly pessimistic on many things, and one of them was the quantity of virus that would be needed. In the culturing tank, the Ebola had consumed the monkey kidneys and blood with a gusto whose results chilled even the director. Though it happened fundamentally at the molecular level, overall it was like seeing ants going after dead fruit, seeming to come from nowhere and then

covering it, turning it black with their bodies. So it was with the Ebola virus; even though it was too small to see, there were literally trillions of them eating and displacing the tissue offered them as food. What had been one color was now another, and you didn't have to be a physician to know that the contents of the chamber were hateful beyond words. It chilled his blood merely to look at the dreadful "soup." There were liters of it now, and they were growing more, using human blood taken from the Tehran central blood bank.

The director was examining a sample under the electron microscope, comparing it with another. As Moudi approached, he could see the date-stamp labels on each. One was from Jean Baptiste. The other was newly arrived from a "patient" in the second group of nine.

"They're identical, Moudi," he said, turning when the younger man approached.

This was not as much to be expected as one might think. One of the problems with viruses was that, since they were scarcely alive at all, they were actually ill suited for proper reproduction. The RNA strand lacked an "editing function" to ensure that each generation would fully follow in the footsteps of its predecessor. It was a serious adaptive weakness of Ebola, and many other similar organisms. Sooner or later each Ebola outbreak petered out, and this was one of the reasons. The virus itself, maladapted to the human host, became less virulent. And *that* was what made it the ideal biological weapon. It would kill. It would spread. Then it would die before doing too much of the latter. How much it did of the former was a function of the initial distribution. It was both horribly lethal and also self-limiting.

"So, we have at least three generations of stability," Moudi observed.

"And by extrapolation, probably seven to nine." The project director, whatever his perversion of medical science, was a conservative on technical issues. Moudi would have said nine to eleven. Better that the director was right, he admitted to himself, turning away.

On a table at the far wall were twenty cans. Similar to the ones used to infect the first collection of criminals, but slightly modified, they were labeled as economy-size cans of a popular European shaving cream. (The company was actually American-owned, which amused everyone associated with the project.) They'd been exactly what they said, and been bought singly in twelve different cities in five different countries, as the lot numbers inked on their curving bottoms showed. Here in the Monkey House they'd been emptied and carefully disassembled for modification. Each would contain a half liter of the

thinnedout “soup,” plus a neutral-gas propellant (nitrogen, which would not involve any chemical reaction with the “soup” and would not support combustion) and a small quantity of coolant. Another part of the team had already tested the delivery system. There would be no degradation of the Ebola at all for more than nine hours. After that, with the loss of the coolant, the virus particles would start to die in a linear function. At 9 + 8 hours, less than ten percent of the particles would be dead—but those, Moudi told himself, were the weak ones anyway, and probably the particles that would be unlikely to cause illness. At 9 + 16 hours, fifteen percent would be dead. Thereafter, experiments had revealed, every eight hours—for some reason the numbers seemed to track with thirds of days—an additional five percent would die. And so ...

It was simple enough. The travelers would all fly out of Tehran. Flight time to London, seven hours. Flight time to Paris, thirty minutes less. Flight time to Frankfurt, less still. Much of that factor was the time of day, Moudi had learned. In the three cities there would be easy connecting flights. Baggage would not be checked because the travelers would be moving on to another country, and therefore customs inspection wasn’t necessary, and therefore no one would notice the cans of unusually cold shaving cream. About the time the coolant ran out, the travelers would be in their first-class seats, climbing to cruising altitude to their cities of final destination, and there again international air travel worked out nicely. There were direct flights from Europe to New York, to Washington, to Boston, to Philadelphia, to Chicago, to San Francisco, to Los Angeles, to Atlanta, to Dallas, to Orlando, and regular connecting flights to Las Vegas, and Atlantic City—in fact to all of America’s convention cities. The travelers would all fly first class, the quicker to claim their luggage and get through customs. They would have good hotel reservations, and return tickets that took them out from different airports. From time-zero to delivery no more than twenty-four hours would pass, and therefore eighty percent of the Ebola released would be active. After that, it was all random, in Allah’s hands—*no!* Moudi shook his head. He was not the director. He would not apply this act to the will of his God. Whatever it might be, however necessary it was to his country—and a new one at that—he would not defile his religious beliefs by saying or even thinking *that*.

Simple enough? It had been simple once, but then—it was a legacy of sorts. Sister Jean Baptiste, her body long since incinerated . . . instead of leaving children behind as a woman’s body ought, disease was its only physical legacy, and that was an act of such malignance that surely Allah must be offended. But she’d left something else, too, a real legacy. Moudi had once hated all Westerners as unbelievers. In

school he'd learned of the Crusades, and how those supposed soldiers of the prophet Jesus had slaughtered Muslims, as Hitler had later slaughtered Jews, and from that he'd taken the lesson that all Westerners and all Christians were something less than the people of his own Faith, and it was easy to hate such people, easy to write them off as irrelevancies in a world of virtue and belief. But that one woman. What was the West and what was Christianity? The criminals of the eleventh century, or a virtuous woman of the twentieth who denied every human wish she might have had—and for what? To serve the sick, to teach her faith. Always humble, always respectful. She'd never broken her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—Moudi was sure of that—and though those vows and those beliefs might have been false, they hadn't been *that* false. He'd learned from her the same thing that the Prophet had learned. There was but one God. There was but one Book. She had served both with a pure heart, however misguided her religious beliefs might have been.

Not just Sister Jean Baptiste, he reminded himself. *Sister Maria Magdalena, too.* And she had been murdered—and why? Loyalty to her faith, loyalty to her vows, loyalty to her friend, not one of which the Holy Koran found the least bit objectionable.

It would have been so much easier for him had he only worked with black Africans. Their religious beliefs were things the Koran abhorred, since many of them were still pagans in deed if not in word, ignorant of the One God, and he could easily have looked down on them, and not worried at all about Christians—but he had met Jean Baptiste and Maria Magdalena. Why? Why had that happened?

Unfortunately for him it was too late to ask such questions. What was past was past. Moudi walked to the far corner of the room and got himself some coffee. He'd been awake for more than a day, and with fatigue came doubts, and he hoped the drink would chase them away until sleep could come, and with it rest, and with that, perhaps, peace.

"YOU HAVE TO be kidding!" Arnie snarled into the phone.

Tom Donner's voice was as apologetic as it could be. "Maybe it was the metal detectors on the way out. The tape—I mean, it's damaged. You can still see it and hear it just fine, but there's a little noise on the audio track. Not broadcast quality. The whole hour's worth is shot. We can't use it."

"So?" van Damm demanded.

"So, we have a problem, Arnie. The segment is supposed to run at nine."

"So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Is Ryan up to redoing it live? We'll get better share that way," the

anchorman offered.

The President's chief of staff almost said something else. If this had been sweeps week—during which the networks did their best to inflate their audiences in order to get additional commercial fees—he might have accused Donner of having done this deliberately. No, that was a line even *he* couldn't cross. Dealing with the press on this level was rather like being Clyde Beatty in center ring, armed with a bottomless chair and a blank-loaded revolver, holding great jungle cats at bay for the audience, having the upper hand at all times, but knowing that the cats needed to get lucky only once. Instead he just offered silence, forcing Donner to make the next move.

"Look, Arnie, it'll be the same agenda. How often do we give the President a chance to rehearse his lines? And he did fine this morning. John thinks so, too."

"You can't retape?" van Damm asked.

"Arnie, I go on the air in forty minutes, and I'm wrapped till seven-thirty. That gives me thirty minutes to scoot down to the White House, set up and shoot, and get the tape back here, all before nine? You want to lend me one of his helicopters?" He paused. "This way—tell you what. I will say on the air that we goofed on the tape, and that the Boss graciously agreed to go live with us. If that isn't a network blow job, I don't know what is."

Arnold van Damm's alarm lights were all flashing red. The good news was that Jack had handled himself pretty well. Not perfect, but pretty well, especially on the sincerity. Even the controversial stuff, he'd come across as believing what he'd said. Ryan took coaching well, and he learned fast. He hadn't looked as relaxed as he should, but that was okay. Ryan *wasn't* a politician—he'd said that two or three times—and therefore looking a little tense was all right. Focus groups in seven different cities all said that they liked Jack because he acted like one of them. Ryan didn't know that Arnie and the political staff were doing that. *That* little program was as secret as a CIA operation, but Arnie justified it to himself as a reality check on how the President could best project his agenda and his image in order to govern effectively—and no President had ever known all the things done in his name. So, yes, Ryan *did* come across as presidential—not in the normal way, but in *his own* way, and that, the focus groups all agreed, was good, too. And going live, yes, that would *really* look good, and it *would* get a lot more people to flip the channel to NBC, and Arnie wanted the people to get to know Ryan better.

"Okay, Tom, a tentative yes. But I *do* have to ask him."

"Fast, please," Donner replied. "If he cancels out, then we have to jerk around the whole network schedule for tonight, and that could mean *my* ass, okay?"

"Back to you in five," van Damm promised. He killed the button on the phone and hustled out of the room, leaving the receiver on his desk pad.

"On the way to see the Boss," he told the Secret Service agents in the east-west corridor. His stride told them to jump out of his way even before they saw his eyes.

"Yes?" Ryan said. It wasn't often his door opened without warning.

"We have to redo the interview," Arnie said somewhat breathlessly.

Jack shook his head in surprise. "Why? Didn't I have my fly zipped?"

"Mary always checks that. The tape got screwed up, and there isn't time to reshoot. So Donner asked me to ask you if you would do it live at nine o'clock. Same questions and everything—no, no," Arnie said, thinking fast. "What about we get your wife down here, too?"

"Cathy won't like that. Why?" the President asked.

"Really, all she has to do is sit there and smile. It will look good for the people out there. Jack, she has to act like the First Lady occasionally. This should be an easy one. Maybe we can even bring the kids in toward the end—"

"No. My kids stay out of the public eye, period. Cathy and I have talked about that."

"But—"

"No, Arnie, no now, no tomorrow, no in the future, no." Ryan's voice was as final as a death sentence.

The chief of staff figured he couldn't talk Ryan into everything. This would take a little time, but he'd come around eventually. You couldn't be one of the people without letting them meet your kids, but now wasn't the time to press on that one. "Will you ask Cathy?"

Ryan sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"Right, okay, I'll tell Donner that she might be on, but we're not sure yet because of her medical obligations. It'll give him something to think about. It will also take some of the heat off you. That's the First Lady's main job, remember."

"You want to tell her that, Arnie? Remember, she's a surgeon, good with knives."

Van Damm laughed. "I'll tell you what she is. She's a hell of a lady, and she's tougher than either one of us. Ask nicely," he advised.

"Yeah." Right before dinner, Jack thought.

"OKAY, HE'LL DO it. But we want to ask his wife to join us, too."

"Why?"

"Why not?" Arnie asked. "Not sure yet. She isn't back from work," he added, and that was a line that made the reporters smile.

"Okay, Arnie, thanks, I owe you one." Donner turned off the speakerphone.

"You realize that you just lied to the President of the United States," John Plumber observed pensively. Plumber was an older pro than Donner. He wasn't of the Edward R. Murrow generation—quite. Pushing seventy now, he'd been a teenager in World War II, but had gone to Korea as a young reporter, and been foreign correspondent in London, Paris, Bonn, and finally Moscow. Plumber had been ejected from Moscow, and his somewhat left political stance had nonetheless never turned into sympathy with the Soviet Union. But more than that, though he was not of Murrow's generation, he had grown up listening to the immortal CBS correspondent, and he could still close his eyes and hear the gravelly voice which had somehow carried a measure of authority usually associated with the clergy. Maybe it was because Ed had started on the radio, when one's voice was the currency of the profession. He'd certainly known language better than most of his own time, and infinitely better than the semi-literate reporters and newswriters of the current generation. Plumber was something of a scholar in his own right, a devoted student of Elizabethan literature, and he tried to draft his copy and his spontaneous comments with an elegance in keeping with that of the teacher he'd only watched and heard, but never actually met. More than anything else, people had listened to Ed Murrow because of his honor, John Plumber reminded himself. He'd been as tough as any of the later generation of "investigative journalists" that the schools turned out now, but you always knew that Ed Murrow was fair. And you knew that he didn't break the rules. Plumber was of the generation that believed that his profession was supposed to have rules, one of which was you *never* told a lie. You could bend, warp, and twist the truth in order to get information out of someone—that was different—but you *never* told someone something that was deliberately and definitely false. That troubled John Plumber. Ed would never have done that. Not a chance.

"John, he rolled us."

"You think."

"The information I got—well, *what* do you think?" It had been a frantic two hours, with the entire network research staff running down bits of such minor trivia that even two or three of the pieces, put together, didn't amount to much of anything. But they'd *all* checked out, and that was something else entirely.

"I'm not sure, Tom." Plumber rubbed his eyes. "Is Ryan a little out of his depth? Yes, he is. But is he trying pretty hard? Definitely. Is he honest? I think so. Well, as honest as any of them ever can be," he amended himself.

"Then we'll give him the chance to prove it, won't we?" Plumber didn't say anything. Visions of ratings, and maybe even an Emmy, were dancing in the eyes of his junior colleague like sugar plums on Christmas Eve. In any case, Donner was the anchor, and Plumber was the commentator, and Tom had the ear of the front office in New York, which had once been peopled by men of his own generation, but was now entirely populated by people of Donner's, businessmen more than journalists, who saw ratings as the Holy Grail on their quarterly earnings statements. Well, Ryan liked businessmen, didn't he?

"I suppose."

THE HELICOPTER LANDED on the South Lawn pad. The crew chief jerked the door open and jumped out, next helping the First Lady out with a smile. Her portion of the Detail followed, walking up the gentle slope to the south entrance, then to the elevator, where Roy Altman pushed the button for her, since the First Lady wasn't allowed to do that, either.

"SURGEON is in the elevator, heading for the residence," Agent Raman reported from the ground floor.

"Roger," Andrea Price acknowledged upstairs. She'd already had some people from the Technical Security Unit check all the metal detectors the NBC crew had passed on the way out. The TSU chief commented that occasionally they got a little fluky, and the large-format Beta tapes the networks used could easily be damaged—but he didn't think so. Maybe a line surge, she'd asked. No chance, he'd replied, reminding her archly that even the *air* in the White House was checked continuously by his people. Andrea debated discussing that with the chief of staff, but it would have been no use. Damn the reporters anyway. They were the biggest pain in the ass on the campus.

"Hi, Andrea," Cathy said, breezing past her.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan. Dinner is just coming up now."

"Thank you," SURGEON replied on her way into the bedroom. She stopped on entering, seeing that a dress and jewelry were on her valet. Frowning, she kicked off her shoes and got casual clothes for dinner, wondering, as always, if there were cameras hidden somewhere to record the event.

The White House cook, George Butler, was by far her superior. He'd even improved on her spinach salad, adding a pinch of rosemary to the dressing she'd perfected over the years. Cathy kibitzed with him at least once a week, and in turn he showed her how to use the institutional-class appliances. She sometimes wondered how good a cook she might have become had she not opted for medicine. The

executive chef hadn't told her that she had a gift for it, being fearful of patronizing her—SURGEON was a surgeon, after all. Along the way he'd learned the family preferences, and cooking for a toddler, he'd discovered, was a treat, especially when she occasionally came down with her towering bodyguard to search for snacks. Don Russell and she had milk and cookies at least twice a week. SANDBOX had become the darling of the staff.

"Mommy!" Katie Ryan said when Cathy came through the door.

"Hi, honey." SANDBOX got the first hug and kiss. POTUS got the second. The older kids resisted, as always. "Jack, why are my clothes out?"

"We're going to be on TV tonight," SWORDSMAN replied warily.

"Why?"

"The tape from this morning got all farbled up, and they want to do it live at nine, and if you're willing, I want you to be there, too."

"To answer what?"

"About what you'd expect as far as I'm concerned."

"So, what do I do, walk in with a tray of cookies?"

"George makes the *best* cookies!" SANDBOX added to the conversation. The other kids laughed. It broke the tension somewhat.

"You don't *have* to if you don't want, but Arnie thinks it's a good idea."

"Great," Cathy observed. Her head tilted as she looked at her husband. Sometimes she wondered where the puppet strings were, the ones Arnie used to jerk her husband around.

BONDARENKO WAS WORKING late—or early, depending on one's point of view. He'd been at his desk for twenty hours, and since his promotion to general officer he'd learned that life was far better as a colonel. As a colonel he'd gotten out to jog, and even managed to sleep with his wife most of the time. Now—well, he'd always aspired to higher rank. He'd always had ambition, else why would a Signal Corps officer have gone into the Afghan mountains with the Spetznaz? Recognized for his talent, his colonelcy had almost been his undoing, as he'd worked as a close aide for another colonel who'd turned out to be a spy—that fact still boggled him. Misha Filitov a spy for the West? It had shaken his faith in many things, most of all his faith in his country—but then the country had died. The Soviet Union which had raised him and uniformed him and trained him had died one cold December night, to be replaced with something smaller and more . . . comfortable to serve. It was easier to love Mother Russia than a huge polyglot empire. Now it was as though the adopted children had all moved away, and the true children remained, and that made for a

happier family.

But a poorer one. Why hadn't he seen it before? His country's military had been the world's largest and most impressive, or so he had once thought, with its huge masses of men and arms, and its proud history of destroying the German invaders in history's most brutal war. But that military had died in Afghanistan, or if not quite that, then lost its soul and its confidence, as America's had done in Vietnam. But America had recovered, a process his country had yet to begin.

All that money wasted. Wasted on the departed provinces, those ungrateful wretches whom the Union had supported for generations, now gone, taking so much wealth with them, and in some cases turning away to join with others, then, he feared, to turn back as enemies. Just like unfaithful adopted children.

Golovko was right. If that danger was to be stopped, it had to be stopped early. But how? Dealing with a few bandit Chechens had proved difficult enough.

He was operations chief now. In five more years, he'd be commanding general. Bondarenko had no illusions about that. He was the best officer of his age group, and his performance in the field had won him high-level attention, ever the determining factor in the ultimate advancement. He could get that job just in time to fight Russia's last losing battle. Or maybe not. In five years, given funding and a free hand to reshape doctrine and training, he might just convert the Russian army into a force such as it had never been. He would shamelessly use the American model, as the Americans had shamelessly used Soviet tactical doctrine in the Persian Gulf War. But for that to happen he needed a few years of relative peace. If his forces were to be trapped into fighting brushfires all along its southern periphery, he would not have the needed time or funding to save the army.

So what was he supposed to do? He was the operations chief. He was supposed to know. It was his job to know. Except he didn't. Turkmenistan was first. If he didn't stop it there, he never would. On the left side of his desk was a roster of available divisions and brigades, with their supposed states of readiness. On the right side was a map. The two made a poor match.

"YOU HAVE SUCH nice hair," Mary Abbot said.

"I didn't do surgery today," Cathy explained. "The cap always ruins it."

"You've had the same hairstyle for how long?"

"Since we got married."

"Never changed it?" *That* surprised Mrs. Abbot. Cathy just shook her head. She thought that she looked rather like the actress Susannah York—or at least she'd liked the look from a movie she'd seen while in college. And the same was true of Jack, wasn't it? He'd never changed *his* haircut, except when he didn't have the time to get a trim, something else the White House staff took care of, every two weeks. They were far better at managing Jack's life than she'd ever been. They probably just did things and scheduled things instead of asking first, as she had always done. A much more efficient system, Cathy told herself.

She was more nervous than she let on, worse than the first day of medical school, worse than her first surgical procedure, when she'd had to close her eyes and scream inwardly at her hands to keep them from shaking. But at least they'd listened then, and they listened now, too. Okay, she thought, that was the key. This was a surgical procedure, and she was a surgeon, and a surgeon was always in control.

"I think that does it," Mrs. Abbot said.

"Thank you. Do you like working with Jack?"

An insider's smile. "He *hates* makeup. But most men do," she allowed.

"I have a secret for you—so do I."

"I didn't do much," Mary observed at once. "Your skin doesn't need much."

The woman-to-woman observation made Dr. Ryan smile. "Thank you."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Let your hair grow another inch, maybe two. It would complement the shape of your face better."

"That's what Elaine says—she's my hairdresser in Baltimore. I tried it once. The surgical caps make it all scrunchy."

"We can make bigger caps for you. We try to take care of our First Ladies."

"Oh!" *And why didn't* I *think of that?* Cathy asked herself. It had to be cheaper than taking the helicopter to work . . . "Thank you!"

"This way." Mrs. Abbot led FLOTUS to the Oval Office.

Surprisingly, Cathy had been in the room only twice before, and only once to see Jack there. It suddenly struck her as odd. Her bedroom wasn't fifty yards away from her husband's place of work, after all. The desk struck her as grossly old-fashioned, but the office itself was huge and airy compared to hers at Hopkins, even now with the TV lights and cameras set up. Over the mantel opposite the desk was what the Secret Service called the world's most photographed

plant. The furniture was too formal to be comfortable, and the rug with the President's Seal embroidered on it was downright tacky, she thought. But it wasn't a normal office for a normal person.

"Hi, honey." Jack kissed her and handled introductions. "This is Tom Donner and John Plumber."

"Hello." Cathy smiled. "I used to listen to you while fixing dinner."

"Not anymore?" Plumber asked with a smile.

"No TV in the dining room upstairs, and they won't let me fix dinner."

"Doesn't your husband help?" Donner asked.

"Jack in the kitchen? Well, he's okay on a grill, but the kitchen is my territory." She sat down, looking at their eyes. It wasn't easy. The TV lights were already on. She made the extra effort. Plumber she liked. Donner was hiding something. The realization made her blink, and her face changed over to her doctor's look. She had the sudden desire to say something to Jack, but there wasn't—

"One minute," the producer said. Andrea Price, as always, was in the room, standing by the door to the secretaries' space, and the door behind Cathy was open to the corridor. Jeff Raman was there. He was another odd duck, Cathy thought, but the problem with the White House was that everyone treated you like you were Julius Caesar or something. It was so hard just being friendly with people. It seemed that there was always something in the way. Fundamentally, neither Jack nor Cathy was used to having servants. Employees, yes, but not servants. She was popular with her nurses and technicians at Hopkins because she treated them all like the professionals they were, and she was trying to do the same thing here, but for some reason it didn't work quite the same way, and that was bothersome in a distant way.

"Fifteen seconds."

"Are we having fun yet?" Jack whispered.

Why couldn't you just have stayed at Merrill Lynch? Cathy almost said aloud. He would have been a senior VP by now but, no. He would never have been happy. Jack was as driven to do his work as she was to fix people's eyes. In that they were the same.

"Good evening," Donner said to the camera behind the Ryans. "We're here in the Oval Office to speak with President Jack Ryan and the First Lady. As I said on *NBC Nightly News,* a technical glitch damaged the taping we did earlier today. The President has graciously allowed us to come back and talk live." His head turned. "And for that, sir, we thank you."

"Glad to see you again, Tom," the President said, comfortably. He was getting better at concealing his thoughts.

"Also joining us is Mrs. Ryan—"

"Please," Cathy said, with a smile of her own. "It's Dr. Ryan. I

worked pretty hard for that."

"Yes, ma'am," Donner said with a charm that made Cathy think about a bad trauma case rolling off on Monument Street at lunchtime. "You're both doctors, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Donner, Jack in history, and me in ophthalmology."

"And you're a distinguished eye surgeon with the Lasker Public Service Award," he observed, applying his anchorman's charm.

"Well, I've been working in medical research for over fifteen years. At Johns Hopkins we're all clinicians and researchers, too. I work with a wonderful group of people, and, really, the Lasker Prize is more a tribute to them than it is to me. Back fifteen years ago, Professor Bernard Katz encouraged me to look into how we could use lasers to correct various eye problems. I found it interesting, and I've been working in that area ever since, in addition to my normal surgical practice."

"Do you really make more money than your husband?" Donner asked with a grin for the cameras.

"Lots," she confirmed with a chuckle.

"I always said that Cathy was the brains of the outfit," Jack went on, patting his wife's hand. "She's too modest to say that she's just about the best in the world at what she does."

"So, how do you like being First Lady?"

"Do I have to answer?" A charming smile. Then she turned serious. "The way we got here—well, it's not something anyone would wish for, but I guess it's like what I do at the hospital. Sometimes a trauma case comes in, and that person didn't choose to be injured, and we try our best to fix what's wrong. Jack's never turned away from a problem or a challenge in his life."

Then it was time for business. "Mr. President, how do you like *your* job?"

"Well, the hours are pretty long. As much time as I have spent in government service, I don't think I ever really understood how difficult this job is. I am blessed with a very fine staff, and our government has thousands of dedicated workers doing the public's business. That helps a lot."

"As you see it, sir, what is *your* job?" John Plumber asked.

"The oath says to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States," Ryan replied. "We're working to restore the government. We now have the Senate fully in place, and as the several states get on with their elections, we'll soon have a new House of Representatives. I've got most of the Cabinet posts filled—for HHS and Education, we still have the sitting Deputy Secretaries doing a fine job."

"We spoke this morning about events in the Persian Gulf. What are

the problems there as you see them?" It was Plumber again. Ryan was handling himself well, much more relaxed, and Plumber noted the look in his wife's eyes. She was smart.

"The United States wants nothing more than peace and stability in that region. We have every wish to establish friendly relations with the new United Islamic Republic. There's been enough strife there and elsewhere in the world. I'd like to think that we've turned the corner on that. We've made peace—a real peace, not just the absence of war—with the Russians, after generations of turmoil. I want us to build on that. Maybe the world's never been fully at peace, but that is no reason why we can't do it. John, we've come a very long way in the past twenty years. There's a lot more for us to do, but we have a lot of good work to build on."

"We'll be back after this break," Donner told the cameras. He could see that Ryan was pretty pleased with himself. Excellent.

A staffer came in from the back door with water glasses. Everyone had a sip while they waited for the two commercials to run. "You really hate all this, don't you?" he asked Cathy.

"As long as I can do my work, I can live with almost anything, but I do worry about the kids. After this is over, they have to go back to being normal children, and we didn't raise them for all this hoopla." Then everyone was quiet for the rest of the commercial time.

"We're back on the Oval Office with the President and First Lady. Mr. President," Donner asked, "what about the changes you are making?"

"Mainly my job isn't to 'change,' Tom, it's to 'restore.' Along the way we will try to do a few things. I've tried to select my new Cabinet members with an eye toward making the government function more efficiently. As you know, I've been in government service for quite a while, and along the way I've seen numerous examples of inefficiency. The citizens out there pay a lot of money in taxes, and we owe it to them to see that the money is spent wisely—and efficiently. So I've told my Cabinet officers to examine all of the executive departments with an eye to doing the same work for less cost."

"A lot of presidents have said that."

"This one means it," Ryan said seriously.

"But your first major policy act has been to attack the tax system," Donner observed.

"Not 'attack,' Tom. 'Change.' George Winston has my full support. The tax code we have now is totally unfair—and I mean unfair in many ways. People can't understand it, for one. That means that they have to hire people to explain the tax system to them, and it's hard to see how it makes sense for people to pay good money for people to explain how the law takes more of their money away—especially

when the government writes the laws. Why make laws that the people can't understand? Why make laws that are so complicated?" Ryan asked.

"But along the way, your administration's goal is to make the tax system *re*gressive, not *pro*gressive."

"We've been over that," the President replied, and Donner knew he had him then. It was one of Ryan's more obvious weaknesses that he didn't like repeating himself. He really was *not* a politician. They loved to repeat themselves. "Charging everyone the same amount is just as fair as anything can be. Doing so in a way that everyone can understand will actually *save* money for people. Our proposed tax changes will be revenue-neutral. Nobody's getting any special breaks."

"But the tax rates for the rich will fall dramatically."

"That's true, but we'll also eliminate all the breaks that their lobbyists have written into the system. They'll actually end up paying the same, or more probably, a little more than they already do. Secretary Winston has studied that very carefully, and I concur in his judgment."

"Sir, it's hard to see how a thirty percent rate reduction will make them pay more. That's fourth-grade arithmetic."

"Ask your accountant." Ryan smiled. "Or for that matter, look at your own tax returns, if you can figure them out. You know, Tom, I used to be an accountant—I passed the exam before I went into the Marine Corps—and *I* can't even figure the darned things out. The government does not serve the public interest by doing things that the people can't understand. There's been too much of that. I'm going to try to dial it back a bit."

Bingo. To Donner's left, John Plumber grimaced. The director with his selection of camera feeds made sure that one didn't go out. Instead he picked Donner's winning anchorman smile.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. President, because there are many things that the American people would like to know about government operations. Nearly all of your government service has been in the Central Intelligence Agency."

"That's true but, Tom, as I told you this morning, no President has ever spoken about intelligence operations. There's a good reason for that." Ryan was still cool, not knowing what door had just opened.

"But, Mr. President, you have personally been involved in numerous intelligence operations which had important effects on bringing that end to the Cold War. For example, the defection of the Soviet missile submarine *Red October.* You played a personal part in that, didn't you?"

The director, cued ahead of time to the question, had selected the camera zeroed in on Ryan's face just in time to see his eyes go as wide

as doorknobs. He really wasn't all that good at controlling his emotions. "Tom, I—"

"The viewers should know that you played a decisive role in one of the greatest intelligence coups of all time. We got our hands on an intact Soviet ballistic-missile submarine, didn't we?"

"I won't comment on that story." By this time his makeup couldn't hide the pale look. Cathy turned to look at her husband, having felt his hand in hers turn to ice.

"And then less than two years later, you personally arranged the defection of the head of the Russian KGB."

Jack managed to control his face, finally, but his voice was wooden. "Tom, this has to stop. You're making unfounded speculations."

"Mr. President, that individual, Nikolay Gerasimov, formerly of the KGB, now lives with his family in Virginia. The captain of the submarine lives in Florida. It's not a 'story'"—he smiled—"and you know it. Sir, I don't understand your reticence. You played a major role in bringing that peace to the world that you talked about a few minutes ago."

"Tom, let me make this clear. I will not ever discuss intelligence operations in any public forum. Period."

"But the American people have a right to know what sort of man sits in this office." The same thing had been said eleven hours before by John Plumber, who winced inwardly to hear himself quoted in this way, but who could not turn on his own colleague in public.

"Tom, I have served my country to the best of my ability for a number of years, but just as you cannot reveal your news sources, so our intelligence agencies cannot reveal many of the things they do, for fear of getting real people killed."

"But, Mr. President, you have done that. You have killed people."

"Yes, I have, and more than one President has been a soldier or—"

"Wait a minute," Cathy interrupted, and now her eyes were flaring. "I want to say something. Jack joined CIA after our family was attacked by terrorists. If he hadn't done those things back then, none of us would be alive. I was pregnant with our son then, and they tried to kill me and our daughter in my car in Annapolis and—"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Ryan, but we have to take a break now."

"This has to stop, Tom. This has to stop right now," Ryan said forcefully. "When people talk about field operations in the open, real people can get killed. Do you understand that?" The camera lights were off, but the tapes were still rolling.

"Mr. President, the people have a right to know, and it's my job to report the facts. Have I lied about anything?"

"I can't even comment on that, and you know it," Ryan said, having almost snarled an accurate answer. *Temper, Jack, temper,* he reminded

himself. *A President can't have a temper, damned sure not on live TV.* Damn, Marko would never cooperate with the—or would he? He was Lithuanian, and maybe he might like the idea of becoming a national hero, though Jack figured he might just talk him out of such a thing. But Gerasimov was something else. Ryan had disgraced the man, threatened him with death—at the hands of his own countrymen, but that didn't matter to a man like him—and stripped him of all his power. Gerasimov now enjoyed a life far more comfortable than anything he might have enjoyed in the Soviet Union, which he had sought to maintain and rule, but he wasn't the sort of man to enjoy comfort so much as power. Gerasimov had aspired to the sort of position Ryan now enjoyed himself, and would have felt very comfortable in this office or another like it. But those who aspired to power were most often those who misused it, which distinguished him from Jack in one more way. Not that it mattered at the moment. Gerasimov would talk. Sure as hell. And they knew where he was.

So what do I do now?

"We're back in the Oval Office with President and Mrs. Ryan," Donner intoned for anyone who might have forgotten.

"Mr. President, you are an expert in national security and foreign affairs," Plumber said before his colleague could speak. "But our country faces more problems than that. You now have to reestablish the Supreme Court. How do you propose to do that?"

"I asked the Justice Department to send me a list of experienced judges from federal appeals courts. I'm going over that list now, and I hope to make my nominations to the Senate in the next two weeks."

"Normally the American Bar Association assists the government in screening such judges, but evidently that's not being done in this case. May I ask why, sir?"

"Tom, all of the judges on the list have been through that process already, and since then all have sat on the appeals bench for a minimum of ten years."

"The list was assembled by prosecutors?" Donner asked.

"By experienced professionals in the Justice Department. The head of the search group is Patrick Martin, who just took over the Criminal Division. He was assisted by other Justice Department officials, like the head of the Civil Rights Division, for example."

"But they're all prosecutors, or people whose job it is to prosecute cases. Who suggested Mr. Martin to you?"

"It's true that I don't personally know the Department of Justice all that well. Acting FBI Director Murray recommended Mr. Martin to me. He did a good job supervising the investigation of the airplane crash into the Capitol building, and I asked him to assemble the list for me."

"And you and Mr. Murray have been friends for a long time."

"Yes, we have." Ryan nodded.

"On another of those intelligence operations, Mr. Murray accompanied you, didn't he?"

"Excuse me?" Jack asked.

"The CIA operation in Colombia, when you played a role in breaking up the Medellin cartel."

"Tom, I'm going to say this one last time: I will not discuss intelligence operations, real ones or made-up ones, at all—ever. Are we clear on that?"

"Mr. President, that operation resulted in the death of Admiral James Cutter. Sir," Donner went on, a sincerely pained expression on his face, "a lot of stories are coming out now about your tenure at CIA. These stories are going to break, and we really want you to have the chance to set the record straight as rapidly as possible. You were not elected to this office, and you have never been examined in the way that political candidates usually are. The American people want to know the man who sits in this office, sir."

"Tom, the world of intelligence is a secret world. It has to be. Our government has to do many things. Not all of those things can be discussed openly. Everyone has secrets. Every viewer out there has them. You have them. In the case of the government, keeping those secrets is vitally important to the well-being of our country, and also, by the way, to the safety of the lives of the people who do our country's business. Once upon a time the media respected that rule, especially in times of war, but also in other times. I wish you still did."

"But at what point, Mr. President, does secrecy work against our national interests?"

"That's why we have a law that mandates Congress's right to oversee intelligence operations. If it were just the Executive Branch making these decisions, yes, you would have just cause to worry. But it isn't that way. Congress also examines what we do. I have myself reported to Congress on many of these things."

"Was there a secret operation to Colombia? Did you participate in it? Did Daniel Murray accompany you there after the death of then-FBI Director Emil Jacobs?"

"I have nothing to say on that or on any of the other stories you brought up."

And there was another commercial break.

"Why are you doing this?" To everyone's surprise, the question came from Cathy.

"Mrs. Ryan—"

"Dr. Ryan," she said at once.

"Excuse me. Dr. Ryan, these allegations must be laid to rest."

"We've been through this before. Once people tried to break our

marriage up—and that was all lies, too, and"

"Cathy," Jack said quietly. Her head turned toward his.

"I know about that one, Jack, remember?" she whispered.

"No, you don't. Not really."

"That's the problem," Tom Donner pointed out. "These stories will be followed up. The people want to know. The people have a right to know."

Had the world been just, Ryan thought, he would have stood, tossed the microphone to Donner, and asked him to leave his house, but that wasn't possible, and so here he was, supposedly powerful, trapped by circumstance like a criminal in an interrogation room. Then the camera lights came back on.

"Mr. President, I know this is a difficult subject for you."

"Tom, okay, I will say this. As part of my service with CIA, I occasionally had to serve my country in ways that cannot be revealed for a very long time, but at no time have I ever violated the law, and every such activity was fully reported to the appropriate members of the Congress. Let me tell you why I joined CIA.

"I didn't want to. I was a teacher. I taught history at the Naval Academy. I love teaching, and I had time to write a couple of history books, and I like that, too. But then a group of terrorists came after me and my family. There were two very serious attempts to kill us—all of us. You know that. It was all over the media when it happened. I decided then that my place was in the Agency. Why? To protect others against the same sort of dangers. I never liked it all that much, but it was the job I decided I had to do. Now I'm here, and you know what? I don't much like this job, either. I don't like the pressure. I don't like the responsibility. No one person should have this much power. But I *am* here, and I swore an oath to do my best, and I'm doing that."

"But, Mr. President, you are the first person to sit in this office who's never been a political figure. Your views on many things have never been shaped by public opinion, and what is disturbing to a lot of people is that you seem to be leaning on others who have never achieved high office, either. The danger, as some people see it, is that we have a small group of people who lack political experience but who are shaping policy for our country for some time to come. How do you answer that concern?"

"I haven't even *heard* that concern anywhere, Tom."

"Sir, you've also been criticized for spending too much time in this office and not enough out among the people. Could that be a problem?" Now that he'd sunk the hook, Donner could afford to appear plaintive.

"Unfortunately I do have a lot of work to do, and this is where I have to do that work. For the team I've put together, where do I

start?" Jack asked. Next to him, Cathy was seething. Now her hand felt cold in his. "Secretary of State, Scott Adler, a career foreign service officer, son of a Holocaust survivor. I've known Scott for years. He's the best man I know to run State. Treasury, George Winston, a self-made man. He was instrumental in saving our financial system during the conflict with Japan; he has the respect of the financial community, and he's a real thinker. Defense, Anthony Bretano, is a highly successful engineer and businessman who's already making needed reforms at the Pentagon. FBI, Dan Murray, a career cop, and a good one. You know what I'm doing with my choices, Tom? I'm picking pros, people who know the work because they've done it, not political types who just talk about it. If you think that's wrong, well, I'm sorry about that, but I've worked my way up inside the government, and I have more faith in the professionals I've come to know than I do in the political appointees I've seen along the way. And, oh, by the way, how is that different from a politician who selects the people he knows—or, worse, people who contributed to his campaign organization?"

"Some would say that the difference is that ordinarily people selected to high office have much broader experience.

"I would not say that, and I have worked under such people for years. The appointments I've made are all people whose abilities I know. Moreover, a President is supposed to have the right, with the assent of the people's elected representatives, to pick people he can work with."

"But with so much to do, how do you expect to succeed without experienced political guidance? This is a political town."

"Maybe that's the problem," Ryan shot back. "Maybe the political process that we've all studied over the years gets in the way more than it helps. Tom, I didn't ask for this job, okay? The idea, when Roger asked me to be Vice President, was that I serve out the remaining term and leave government service for good. I wanted to go back to teaching. But then that dreadful event happened, and here I am. I am not a politician. I never wanted to be one, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm not a politician now. Am I the best man for this job? Probably not. I am, however, the President of the United States, and I have a job to do, and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability. That's all I can do."

"And that's the last word. Thank you, Mr. President." Jack barely waited for the camera lights to go off a final time before unclipping the microphone from his tie and standing. The two reporters didn't say a word. Cathy glared at them.

"Why did you do that?"

"Excuse me?" Donner replied.

"Why do people like you always attack people like us? What have we done to deserve it? My husband is the most honorable man I know."

"All we do is ask questions."

"Don't give me that! The way you ask them and the questions you choose, you give the answers before anyone has a chance to say anything."

Neither reporter responded to that. The Ryans left without another word. Then Arnie came in.

"Okay," he observed, "who set this up?"

"THEY GUTTED HIM like a fish," Holbrook thought aloud. They were due for some time off, and it was always a good thing to know your enemy.

"This guy's scary," Ernie Brown thought, considering things a little more deeply. "At least, politicians you can depend on to be crooks. This guy, Jesus, he's going to try to we're talking a police state here, Pete."

It was actually a frightening thought for the Mountain Man. He'd always thought that politicians were the worst thing in creation, but suddenly he realized that they were not. Politicians played the power game because they liked it, liked the idea of power and jerking people around because it made them feel big. Ryan was worse. He thought it was *right.*

"God damn," he breathed. "The court he wants to appoint . . ."

"They made him look like a fool, Ernie."

"No, they didn't. Don't you get it? They were playing *their* game."

33

REBOUNDS

THE EDITORIALS WERE ESTABLISHED by front-page stories in every major paper. In the more enterprising of them, there were even photographs of Marko Ramius's house—it turned out that he was away at the moment—and that of the Gerasimov family—he was home, but a security guard managed to persuade people to leave, after getting his own photo shot a few hundred times.

Donner came into work very early, and was actually the most surprised by all of that. Plumber walked into his office five minutes later, holding up the front page of the *New York Times.*

"So who rolled whom, Tom?"

"What do you—"

"That's a little weak," Plumber observed acidly. "I suppose after you walked out of the meeting, Kealty's people had another little kaffeeklatsch. But you've trapped everybody, haven't you? If it ever gets out that your tape wasn't"

"It won't," Donner said. "And all this coverage does is make our interview look better."

"Better to whom?" Plumber demanded on his way out the door. It was early in the day for him, too, and his first irrelevant thought of the day was that Ed Murrow would never have used hair spray.

DR. GUS LORENZ finished his morning staff meeting early. Spring was coming early to Atlanta. The trees and bushes were budding, and soon the air would be filled with the fragrances of all the flowering plants for which the southern city was so famous—and a lot of pollen, Gus thought, which would get his sinuses all stuffed, but it was a fair trade for living in a vibrant and yet gracious southern city. With the meeting done, he donned his white lab coat and headed off to his own special fiefdom in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC ("and P" had never been added to the acronym) was one of the government's crown jewels, an elite agency that was one of the world's important centers of medical research—many would say the

most important. For that reason the center in Atlanta attracted the best of the profession. Some stayed. Some left to teach at the nation's medical schools, but all were forever marked as CDC people, as others might boast of having served their time in the Marine Corps, and for much the same reason. They were the first people their country sent to trouble spots. They were the first to fight diseases, instead of armed enemies, and that cachet engendered an *esprit de corps* which more often than not retained the best of them despite the capped government salaries.

"Morning, Melissa," Lorenz said to his chief lab assistant—she had a master's and was finishing up her doctorate in molecular biology at nearby Emory University, after which she'd get a sizable promotion.

"Good morning, Doctor. Our friend is back," she added.

"Oh?" The specimen was all set up on the microscope. Lorenz took his seat, careful as always to take his time. He checked the paperwork to identify the proper sample against the record he'd had on his desk: 98-3-063A. Yes, the numbers matched. Then it was just a matter of zooming in on the sample . . . and there it was, the Shepherd's Crook.

"You're right. Got the other one set up?"

"Yes, Doctor." The computer screen split into two vertical halves, and next to the first was a specimen from 1976. They weren't quite identical. The curve at the bottom of the RNA chain was seemingly never the same way twice, as snowflakes had almost infinite patterns, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the protein loops at the top, and those were—

"Mayinga strain." He spoke the words matter-offactly.

"I agree," Melissa said from just behind him. She leaned across to type on the keyboard, calling up -063B. "These were a lot harder to isolate, but—"

"Yes, identical again. This one's from the child?"

"A little girl, yes." Both voices were detached. One can only bear so much exposure to sadness before the mind's defense mechanism kicks in, and the samples become samples, disembodied from the people who donated them.

"Okay, I have some calling to do."

THE TWO GROUPS were kept separate for obvious reasons, and in fact neither knew of the existence of the other. Badrayn spoke to one group of twenty. The Movie Star spoke to the second group, composed of nine. For both groups there were similarities of preparation. Iran was a nation-state, with the resources of a nation-state. Its foreign ministry had a passport office, and its treasury had a department of printing and engraving. Both allowed the printing of passports from

any number of countries and the duplication of entry-exit stamps. In fact such documents could be prepared in any number of places, mostly illegally, but this source made for somewhat higher quality without the risk of revealing the place of origin.

The more important of the two missions was, perversely, the safer in terms of actual physical danger—well, depending on how one looked at it. Badrayn could see the looks on their faces. The very idea of what they were doing was the sort of thing to make a person's skin crawl, though in the case of these people, it was merely one more example of the vagaries of human nature. The job, he told them, was simple. Get in. Deliver. Get out. He emphasized that they were completely safe, as long as they followed the procedures on which they would be fully briefed. There would be no contacts on the other side. They needed none, and doing without them just made things safer. Each had a choice of cover stories, and such were the parameters of the mission that having more than one of the group select the same one didn't matter. What did matter was that the stories could be plausibly presented, and so each traveler would pick a field of business activity in which he had some knowledge. Nearly all had a university degree, and those who didn't could talk about trading or machine tools or some field better known to them than any customs official asking questions out of mere boredom.

The Movie Star's group was far more comfortable with their task. He supposed it was some flaw in the character of his culture that this was so. This group was younger and less experienced, and part of it was that the young simply know less of life, and therefore less of death. They were motivated by passion, by a tradition of sacrifice, and by their own hatreds and demons, all of which clouded their judgment in a way that pleased the masters, who always felt free to expend the hatreds and the passions, along with the people who bore them. This briefing was more detailed. Photographs were displayed, along with maps and diagrams, and the group drew closer, the better to see the details. None of them remarked on the character of the target. Life and death was so simple a question to those who didn't know the ultimate answers—or who thought they did, even if they did not—and that was better for all, really. With an answer to the Great Question fixed in their minds, the lesser ones would not even occur to them. The Movie Star had no such illusions. He asked the questions within his own mind, but never answered them. For him the Great Question had become something else. For him it was all a political act, not a matter of religion, and one didn't measure one's destiny by politics. At least not willingly. He looked at their faces, knowing that they were doing exactly that, but without realizing it. They were the best sort of people for the task, really. They thought they knew everything, but in reality

they knew very little, only the physical tasks.

The Movie Star felt rather like a murderer, but it was something he'd done before, at secondhand, anyway. Doing it firsthand was dangerous, and this promised to be the most dangerous such mission in years.

How remarkable that they didn't know better. Each of them inwardly styled himself the stone in Allah's own sling, without reflecting that such stones are by their very nature thrown away. Or maybe not. Perhaps they would be lucky, and for that eventuality he gave them the best data he'd managed to generate, and that data was pretty good. The best time would be afternoon, just before people got out from work, the better to use crowded highways to confuse their pursuers. He himself would go into the field again, he told them, to facilitate their ultimate escape—he didn't tell them, *if it came to that.*

"OKAY, ARNIE, WHAT'S going on?" Ryan asked. It was just as well that Cathy didn't have any procedures scheduled for today. She had seethed all night and was not in a proper mental state to do her normal work. He wasn't feeling much better, but there was neither justice nor much point in snapping at his chief of staff.

"Well, for damned sure there's a leak at CIA, or maybe in the Hill, somebody who knows about some of the things you did."

"Colombia, the only people who know are Fellows and Trent. And they also know that Murray wasn't there not exactly, anyway. The rest of that operation is locked up tight."

"What actually happened?" And need-to-know applied to Arnie now. The President gestured and spoke as one explaining something to a parent:

"There were two operations, SHOWBOAT and RECIPROCITY. One of them involved putting troops into Colombia, the idea was to bird-dog drug flights. Those flights were then splashed—"

"What?"

"Shot down, by the Air Force—well, some were intercepted, the crews arrested and processed quietly. Some other things happened, and then Emil Jacobs got killed, and RECIPROCITY got laid on. We started dropping bombs on places. Things got a little out of hand. Some civilians got killed, and it all started coming apart."

"How much did you know?" van Damm asked.

"I didn't know jack shit until late in the game. Jim Greer was dying then, and I was handling his work, but that was mostly NATO stuff. I was cut out of it until after the bombs started falling—I was in Belgium when that happened. I saw it on TV, would you believe? Cutter was actually running the operation. He suckered Judge Moore

and Bob Ritter into starting it, and then he tried to close it down. That's when things got crazy. Cutter tried to cut off the soldiers—the idea was that they'd just disappear. I found out. I got into Ritter's personal records vault. So I went down into Colombia with the rescue crew, and we got most of them out. It wasn't much fun," Ryan reported. "There was some shooting involved, and I worked one of the guns on the chopper. A crewman, a sergeant named Buck Zimmer, got killed on the last extraction, and I've been looking after his family ever since. Liz Elliot got a hold of that and tried to use it against me a while later."

"There's more to it," Arnie said quietly.

"Oh, yeah. I had to report the operations to the Select Committee, but I didn't want to rip the government apart. So I talked it over with Trent and Fellows, and I came in to see the President. We talked for a while, and then I stepped out of the room, and Sam and Al talked with him for a while. I'm not exactly sure what they agreed on, but—"

"But he threw the election. He dumped his campaign manager and his campaign was for crap the whole way. Christ, Jack, what did you do?" Arnie demanded. His face was pale now, but for political reasons. And all along van Damm had figured that he'd run a brilliant and successful campaign for Bob Fowler, unseating a popular sitting President. And so, a fix had been in? And he'd never found out?

Ryan closed his eyes. He'd just forced himself to relive a dreadful night. "I terminated an operation that was technically legal, but teetering right on the edge. I closed it down quietly. The Colombians never found out. I thought I prevented another Watergate, domestically—and a godawful international incident. Sam and Al signed off on it, the records are sealed until long after we're all dead. Whoever leaked that must have picked up on a couple of rumors and made a few good guesses. What did *I* do? I think I obeyed the law as best I could—no, Arnie, I did *not* break the law. I followed the rules. It wasn't easy, but I did." The eyes opened. "So, Arnie, how will that play in Peoria?"

"Why couldn't you have just reported to Congress and—"

"Think back," the President said. "It wasn't just the one thing, okay? That's when Eastern Europe was coming unglued, the Soviet Union was still there but teetering, some really big things were happening, and if our government had come apart, right then, with everything else happening, hell, it could have been a mess like nobody's ever seen. America couldn't—we would not have been able to help settle Europe down if we'd been pissing around with a domestic scandal. And I was the guy who had to make the call and take the action, *right now, or* those soldiers would have been killed. Think about the box I was in, will you?

"Arnie, I couldn't go to anybody for guidance on that one, okay? Admiral Greer was dead. Moore and Ritter were compromised. The President was up to his eyeballs in it; at the time I thought *he* was running the show through Cutter—he wasn't; he got finessed into it by that incompetent political bastard. I didn't know where to go, so I went to the FBI for help. I couldn't trust *anybody* but Dan Murray and Bill Shaw, and one of our people at Langley on the operational side. Bill—did you know he was a J.D.?—worked me through the law part of it, and Murray helped with the recovery operation. They had an investigation started on Cutter. It was a code-word op, I think they called it ODYSSEY, and they were about to go to a U.S. magistrate for criminal conspiracy, but Cutter killed himself. There was an FBI agent fifty yards behind him when he jumped in front of the bus. You've met him, Pat O'Day. Nobody ever broke the law except for Cutter. The operations themselves were within the Constitution—at least that's what Shaw said."

"But politically. . ."

"Yeah, even I'm not that ignorant. So here I am, Arnie. I didn't break the law. I served my country's interests as best I could under the circumstances, and look what good it's done me."

"Damn. How is it that Bob Fowler never was told?"

"That was Sam and Al. They thought it would have poisoned Fowler's presidency. Besides, I don't really *know* what the two of them said to the President, do I? I never wanted to know, I never found out, and all I have is speculation—pretty good speculation," Ryan admitted, "but that's all."

"Jack, it's not often I don't know what to say."

"Say it anyway," the President ordered.

"It's going to get out. The media has enough now to put some pieces together, and that will force Congress to launch an investigation. What about the other stuff?"

"It's all true," Ryan said. "Yeah, we got our hands on *Red October,* yeah, I got Gerasimov out myself. My idea, my operation, nearly got my ass killed, but there you go. If we hadn't, then Gerasimov was poised to launch his own coup to topple Andrey Narmonov and then there might still be a Warsaw Pact, and the bad old days might never have gone away. So we compromised the bastard, and he didn't have any choices but to get on the airplane. He's still pissed despite all we did to get him set up over here, but I understand his wife and daughter like America just fine."

"Did you kill anybody?" Arnie asked.

"In Moscow, no. In the sub—he was trying to selfdestruct the submarine. He killed one of the ship's officers and shot up two others pretty bad, but I punched his ticket myself—and I had nightmares

about it for years."

In another reality, van Damm thought, his President would be a hero. But reality and public politics had little in common. He noted that Ryan hadn't recounted his story about Bob Fowler and the aborted nuclear launch. The chief of staff had been around for that one, and he knew that three days later, J. Robert Fowler had come nearly apart at the realization at how he'd been saved from mass murder on a Hitlerian scale. There was a line in Hugo's *Les Miserables* that had struck the older man when he'd first read the book in high school: "What evil good can be." Here was another case. Ryan had served his country bravely and well more than once, but not one of the things he'd done would survive public scrutiny. Intelligence, love of country, and courage merely added up to a series of events which anyone could twist out of recognition into scandal. And Ed Kealty knew how to do just that.

"How do we spin-control all this?" the President asked.

"What else do I need to know?"

"The files on *Red October* and Gerasimov are at Langley. The Colombian thing, well, you know what you need to know. I'm not sure even I have the legal right to unseal the records. On the other hand, you want to destabilize Russia? This will do it."

RED OCTOBER, GOLOVKO thought, then he looked up at the high ceiling of his office. "Ivan Emmetovich, you clever bastard. *Zvo tvoyu maht!"*

The curse was spoken in quiet admiration. From the first moment he'd met Ryan, he'd underestimated him, and even with all the contacts, direct and indirect, that had followed, he had to admit, he'd never stopped doing it. So *that* was how he'd compromised Gerasimov! And in so doing, he'd saved Russia, perhaps—but a country was supposed to be saved from within, not without. Some secrets were supposed to be kept forever, because they protected everyone equally. This was such a secret. It would embarrass both countries now. For the Russians, it was the loss of a valuable national asset through high treason—worse still, something their intelligence organs had not discovered, which was quite incredible on reflection, but the cover stories had been good ones, and the loss of two hunter submarines in the same operation had made the affair something that the Soviet navy had every desire to forget—and so they hadn't looked far beyond the cover story.

Sergey Nikolay'ch knew the second part better than the first. Ryan had forestalled a coup d'état. Golovko supposed that Ryan might as easily have told him what was happening and left it to the Soviet

Union's internal organs—but, no. Intelligence services turned everything to their advantage, and Ryan would have been mad not to have done so here. Gerasimov must have sung like a canary—he knew the Western aphorism—and given up everything he'd known; Ames, for one, had been identified that way, he was sure, and Ames had been a virtual diamond mine for KGB.

And you always told yourself that Ivan Emmetovich was a gifted amateur, Golovko thought.

But even his professional admiration was tempered. Russia might soon need help. How could she go for that help to someone who, it would now be known, had tampered with his country's internal politics like a puppeteer? That realization was worth another oath, not spoken in admiration of anything.

PUBLIC WATERWAYS ARE free for the passage of all, and so the Navy couldn't do anything more than prevent the charter boat from getting too close to the Eight-Ten Dock. Soon it was joined by another, then more still, until a total of eleven cameras were pointing at the covered graving dock, now empty with the demise of most of America's missile submarines, and also empty of another which had briefly lived there, not American, or so the story went.

It was possible to access the Navy's personnel records via computer, and some were doing that right now, checking for former crewmen of USS *Dallas.* An early-morning call to COMSUBPAC concerning his tenure as commanding officer of *Dallas* got no farther than his public affairs officer, who was well-schooled in no-commenting sensitive inquiries. Today he'd get more than his fair share. So would others.

"THIS IS RON Jones."

"This is Tom Donner at NBC News."

"That's nice," Jonesy said diffidently. "I watch CNN myself."

"Well, maybe you want to watch our show tonight. I'd like to talk to you about—"

"I read the *Times* this morning. It's delivered up here. No comment," he added.

"But—"

"But, yes, I used to be a submariner, and they call us the Silent Service. Besides, that was a long time ago. I run my own business now. Married, kids, the whole nine yards, y'know?"

"You were lead sonar man aboard USS *Dallas* when—"

"Mr. Donner, I signed a secrecy agreement when I left the Navy. I

don't talk about the things we did, okay?" It was his first encounter with a reporter, and it was living up to everything he'd ever been told to expect.

"Then all you have to do is tell us that it never happened."

"That what never happened?" Jones asked.

"The defection of a Russian sub named Red *October."*

"You know the craziest thing I ever heard as a sonar man?"

"What's that?"

"Elvis." He hung up. Then he called Pearl Harbor.

WITH DAYLIGHT, THE TV trucks rolled through Winchester, Virginia, rather like the Civil War armies that had exchanged possession of the town over forty times.

He didn't actually own the house. It could not even be said that CIA did. The land title was in the name of a paper corporation, in turn owned by a foundation whose directors were obscure, but since real-property ownership in America is a matter of public record, and since all corporations and foundations were also, that data would be run down in less than two days, despite the tag on the files which told the clerks in the county courthouse to be creatively incompetent in finding the documents.

The reporters who showed up had still photos and taped file footage of Nikolay Gerasimov, and long lenses were set up on tripods to aim at the windows, a quarter mile away, past a few grazing horses which made for a nice touch on the story: CIA TREATS RUSSIAN SPYMASTER LIKE VISITING KING.

The two security guards at the house were going ape, calling Langley for instructions, but the CIA's public affairs office—itself rather an odd institution—didn't have a clue on this one, other than falling back on the stance that this was private property (whether or not that was legally correct under the circumstances was something CIA's lawyers were checking out) and that, therefore, the reporters couldn't trespass.

It had been years since he'd had much to laugh about. Sure, there had been the occasional light moment, but this was something so special that he'd never even considered its possibility. He'd always thought himself an expert on America. Gerasimov had run numerous spy operations against the "Main Enemy," as the United States had once been called in the nonexistent country he'd once served, but he admitted to himself that you had to come here and live here for a few years to understand how incomprehensible America was, how nothing made sense, how literally anything could happen, and the madder it was, the more likely it seemed. No imagination was sufficient to

predict what would happen in a day, much less a year. And here was the proof of it.

Poor Ryan, he thought, standing by the window and sipping his coffee. In his country—for him it would always be the Soviet Union—this would never have happened. A few uniformed guards and a hard look would have driven people off, or if the look alone didn't, then there were other options. But not in America, where the media had all the freedom of a wolf in the Siberian pines—he nearly laughed at *that* thought, too. In America, wolves were a protected species. Didn't these fools know that wolves killed people?

"Perhaps they will go away," Maria said, appearing at his side.

"I think not."

"Then we must stay inside until they do," his wife said, terrified at the development.

He shook his head. "No, Maria."

"But what if they send us back?"

"They won't. They can't. One doesn't do that with defectors. It's a rule," he explained. "We never sent Philby, or Burgess, or MacLean back—drunks and degenerates. Oh, no, we protected them, bought them their liquor, and let them diddle with their perversions, because that's the rule." He finished his coffee and walked back to the kitchen to put the cup and saucer in the dishwasher. He looked at it with a grimace. His apartment in Moscow and his dacha in the Lenin Hills—probably renamed since his departure—hadn't had an appliance like that one. He'd had servants to do such things. No more. In America convenience was a substitute for power, and comfort the substitute for status.

Servants. It could all have been his. The status, the servants, the power. The Soviet Union could still have been a great nation, respected and admired across the world. He would have become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He could then have initiated the needed reforms to clear out the corruption and get the country moving again. He would probably have made a full rapprochement with the West, and made a peace, but a peace of equals it would have been, not a total collapse. He'd never been an ideologue, after all, though poor old Alexandrov had thought him so, since Gerasimov had always been a Party man—well, what else could you be in a one-party state? Especially if you knew that destiny had selected you for power.

But, no. Destiny had betrayed him, in the person of John Patrick Ryan, on a cold, snowy Moscow night, sitting, he recalled, in a streetcar barn, sitting in a resting tram. And so now he had comfort and security. His daughter would soon be married to what the Americans called "old money," what other countries called the

nobility, and what he called worthless drones—the very reason the Communist Party had won its revolution. His wife was content with her appliances and her small circle of friends. And his own anger had never died.

Ryan had robbed him of his destiny, of the sheer joy of power and responsibility, of being the arbiter of his nation's path—and then Ryan had taken to himself that same destiny, and the fool didn't know how to make use of it. The real disgrace was to have been done in by such a person. Well, there was one thing to be done, wasn't there? Gerasimov walked into the mud room that led out the back, selected a leather jacket, and walked outside. He thought for a moment. Yes, he'd light a cigarette, and just walk up the driveway to where they were, four hundred meters away. Along the way he would consider how to couch his remarks, and his gratitude to President Ryan. He'd never stopped studying America, and his observations on how the media thought would now stand him in good stead, he thought.

"DID I WAKE you up, Skipper?" Jones asked. It was about four in the morning at Pearl Harbor.

"Not hardly. You know, my PAO is a woman, and she's pregnant. I hope all this crap doesn't put her into early labor." Rear Admiral (Vice Admiral selectee, now) Mancuso was at his desk, and his phone, on his instructions, wasn't ringing without a good reason. An old shipmate was such a reason.

"I got a call from NBC, asking about a little job we did in the Atlantic."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think, Skipper? Zip." In addition to the honor of the situation, there was also the fact that Jones did most of his work with the Navy. "But—"

"Yeah, but somebody is gonna talk. Somebody always does."

"They know too much already. The *Today Show* is doing a live shot from Norfolk, the Eight-Ten Dock. You can guess what they're saying."

Mancuso thought about flipping his office TV on, but it was still too early for the NBC morning news show—no. He did flip it on and selected CNN. They were doing sports now, and the top of the hour was coming.

"Next they might ask about another job we did, the one involving a swimmer."

"Open line, Dr. Jones," COMSUBPAC warned.

"I didn't say where, Skipper. It's just something you'll want to think about."

"Yeah," Mancuso agreed.

"Maybe you can tell me one thing."

"What's that, Ron?"

"What's the big deal? I mean, sure, I won't talk and neither will you, but somebody will, sure as hell. Too good a sea story not to tell. But what's the big deal, Bart? Didn't we do the right thing?"

"I think so," the admiral replied. "But I guess people just like a story."

"You know, I hope Ryan runs. I'll vote for him. Pretty cool stuff, bagging the head of the KGB and—"

"Ron!"

"Skipper, I'm just repeating what they're saying on TV, right? I have no personal knowledge of that at all." *Damn,* Jonesy thought, *what a sea story this one is. And it's all true.*

At the other end of the line the "Breaking News" graphic came up on Mancuso's TV screen.

"YES, I AM Nikolay Gerasimov," the face said on screens all over the world. There were at least twenty reporters clustered on the other side of the stone fence, and the hard part was hearing one of the shouted questions.

"Is it true that you were—"

"Are you—"

"Were you—"

"Is it true that—"

"Silence, please." He held up his hand. It took fifteen seconds or so. "Yes, I was at one time the chairman of KGB. Your President Ryan induced me to defect, and I have lived in America ever since, along with my family."

"How did he get you to defect?" a reporter shouted.

"You must understand that the intelligence business is, as you say, rough. Mr. Ryan plays the game well. At the time there was ongoing power struggle. CIA opposed my faction in favor of Andrey Il'ych Narmonov. So, he came to Moscow under cover of advisor to START talks. He claimed that he wanted to give me information to make the meeting happen, yes?" Gerasimov had decided that downgrading his English skills would make him seem more credible to the cameras and microphones. "Actually, you can say he trap me with accusation that I was going to create, how you say, treason? Not true, but effective, and so I decide to come to America with my family. I come by airplane. My family come by submarine."

"What? Submarine?"

"Yes, was submarine *Dallas."* He paused and smiled rather grimly. "Why are you so hard on President Ryan? He serve his country well. A

master spy," Gerasimov said admiringly.

"WELL, THERE GOES that story." Bob Holtzman muted his television and turned to his managing editor.

"Sorry, Bob." The editor handed the copy back. It was to have run in three days. Holtzman had done a masterful job of assembling his information, and then taken the time to integrate it all into a cohesive and flattering picture of the man whose office was only five blocks from his own. It was about spin, that most favored of Washington words. Somebody had changed the spin, and that was that. Once the initial story went out, it was impossible even for an experienced journalist like Holtzman to change it, especially if his own paper didn't support him.

"Bob," the editor said with a measure of embarrassment, "your take on this is different than mine. What if this guy's a cowboy? I mean, okay, getting the submarine was one thing, Cold War and all that, but tampering with internal Soviet politics—isn't that close to an act of war?"

"That's not what it was really about. He was trying to get an agent out, code name CARDINAL. Gerasimov and Aleksandrov were using that spy case to topple Narmonov and kill off the reforms he was trying to initiate."

"Well, Ryan can say that all day if he wants. That's not how it's going to come across. 'Master spy'? Just what we need to run the country, hmph?"

"Ryan isn't like that, God damn it!" Holtzman swore. "He's a straight shooter right out of—"

"Yeah, he shoots straight, all right. He's killed at least three people. *Killed,* Bob! How the hell did Roger Durling ever get it into his head that this was the right guy to be Vice President. I mean, Ed Kealty isn't much of a prize, but at least—"

"At least he knows how to manipulate us, Ben. He suckered that airhead on TV, and then he suckered the rest of us into following the story his way."

"Well . . ." Ben Saddler ran out of things to say at that point. "It's factual, isn't it?"

"That isn't the same as 'true,' Ben, and you know it."

"This is going to have to be looked into. Ryan looks like a guy who's played fast and loose with everything he's touched. Next, I want this Colombian story run down. Now, can you do it? Your contacts at the Agency are pretty good, but I have to tell you, I worry about your objectivity on this."

"You don't have a choice, Ben. If you want to keep up, it's my story

—course you can always just reword what the *Times* says," Holtzman added, making his editor flush. Life could be tough in the media, too.

"Your story, Bob. Just make sure you deliver. Somebody broke the law, and Ryan's the one who covered everything up and came out smelling like a rose. I want that story." Saddler stood. "I have an editorial to write."

DARYAEI COULD SCARCELY believe it. The timing could scarcely have been better. He was days away from his next goal, and his target was about to descend into the abyss entirely without his help. With his help, of course, the fall would be farther still.

"Is that what it appears to be?"

"It would seem so," Badrayn replied. "I can do some quick research and be back to you in the morning."

"Is it truly possible?" the Ayatollah persisted.

"Remember what I told you about lions and hyenas? For America it is a national sport. It is no trick. They don't do such tricks. However, let me make sure. I have my methods."

"Tomorrow morning, then."

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HE HAD MUCH WORK TO do along those lines anyway. Back in his office, Badrayn activated his desktop computer. This had a high-speed modem and a dedicated fiber-optic telephone line that ran to an Iranian—UIR, now—embassy in Pakistan, and from there another line to London, where he could link into the World Wide Web without fear of a trace. What had once been a fairly simple exercise for police agencies—that's what counterespionage and counterterrorism was, after all was now virtually impossible. Literally millions of people could access all the information mankind had ever developed, and more quickly than one could walk to one's car for a trip to the local library. Badrayn started by hitting press areas, major newspapers from the *Times* in Los Angeles to the *Times* in London, with Washington and New York in between. The major papers all presented much the same basic story—quicker on the Web than in the printed editions, in fact—though the initial editorial comment differed somewhat from one to another. The stories were vague on dates, and he had to remind himself that the mere repetition of the content didn't guarantee accuracy, but it *felt* real. He knew Ryan had been an intelligence officer, knew that the British, the Russians, *and* the Israelis respected him. Surely stories such as these would explain that respect. They also made him slightly uneasy, a fact which would have surprised his master. Ryan was potentially a more formidable adversary than Daryaei appreciated. He knew how to take decisive action in difficult circumstances, and such people were not to be underestimated.

It was just that Ryan was out of his element now, and that was plain from the news coverage. As he changed from one home page to another, a brand-new editorial came up. It called for a congressional inquiry into Ryan's activities at CIA. A statement from the Colombian government asked in clipped diplomatic terms for an explanation of the allegations and *that* would start another firestorm. How would Ryan respond to the charges and the demands? An open question, Badrayn judged. He was an unknown quantity. That was disturbing. He printed up the more important articles and editorials for later use, and then went on with his real business.

There was a dedicated home page for conventions and trade shows in America. Probably for the use of travel agents, he thought. Well, that wasn't far off. Then it was just a matter of selecting them by city. That told him the identity of the convention centers, typically large barnlike buildings. Each of those had a home page as well, to boast of their capabilities. Many showed diagrams and travel directions. All gave phone and fax numbers. These he collected as well until he had twenty-four, a few extra, just in case. One could not send one of his travelers to a ladies' underwear show, for example—although ... he chuckled to himself. Fashion and fabric shows—these would be for the winter season, though summer had not yet come even to Iran. Automobile shows. These, he saw, traced across America as the various car and truck manufacturers showed their wares like a traveling circus . . . so much the better.

Circus, he thought, and punched up another home page—but, no, it was just a few weeks too early in the year for that. Too bad. Too bad indeed! Badrayn groused. Didn't the big circuses travel in private trains? Damn. But that was just bad timing, and bad timing could not be helped. The auto show would have to do.

And all the others.

GROUP TWO'S MEMBERS were all fatally ill now, and it was time to end their suffering. It wasn't so much mercy as efficiency. There was no point at all in risking the lives of the medical corpsmen by treating people condemned to death by law and science both, and so like the first group they were dispatched by large injections of Dilaudid, as Moudi watched the TV. The relief for the medics was visible, even through the cumbersome plastic suits. In just a few minutes all of the test subjects were dead. The same procedures as before would be exercised, and the doctor congratulated himself that they'd worked so well, and no extraneous personnel had been infected. That was mainly because of their ruthlessness. Other places proper hospitals—would not be so lucky, he knew, already mourning the loss of fellow practitioners.

It was a strange truism of life that second thoughts came only when it was too late for them. He could no more stop what was to come than he could stop the turning of the earth.

The medics started loading the infected bodies on the gurneys, and he turned away. He didn't need to see it again. Moudi walked into the lab.

Another set of technicians was now loading the "soup" into containers known as flasks. They had a thousand times more than was needed for the operations, but the nature of the exercise was such that

it was actually easier to make too much than it was to make just enough and, the director had explained offhandedly, one never knew when more might be needed. The flasks were all made of stainless steel, actually a specialized alloy that didn't lose its strength in extreme cold. Each was three-quarters filled and sealed. Then it would be sprayed with a caustic chemical to make certain the outside was clean. Next it would be placed on a cart and rolled to the cold-storage locker in the building's basement, there to be immersed in liquid nitrogen. The Ebola virus particles could stay there for decades, too cold to die, completely inert, waiting for their next exposure to warmth and humidity, and a chance to reproduce and kill. One of the flasks stayed in the lab, sitting in a smaller cryogenic container, about the size of an oil drum but somewhat taller, with an LED display showing the interior temperature.

It was something of a relief that his part in the drama would soon be over. Moudi stood by the door, watching the lesser personnel do their jobs, and probably they felt the same. Soon the twenty spray containers would be filled and removed from the building, and every square centimeter of the building would be rigorously cleaned, marking everything safe again. The director would spend all of his time in his office, and Moudi—well, he couldn't reappear at the WHO, could he? He was dead, after all, killed in the airplane crash just off the Libyan coast. Someone would have to generate a new identity and passport for him before he could travel again, assuming that he ever could. Or perhaps as a security measure—no, even the director wasn't that ruthless, was he?

"HELLO, I'M CALLING for Dr. Ian MacGregor."

"Who's calling, please?"

"This is Dr. Lorenz at CDC Atlanta."

"Wait, please."

Gus had to wait for two minutes, by his watch, long enough to light his pipe and open a window. The younger staffers occasionally chided him about the habit, but he didn't inhale, and it was good for thinking . . .

"This is Dr. MacGregor," a young voice said.

"This is Gus Lorenz in Atlanta."

"Oh! How do you do, Professor?"

"How are your patients doing?" Lorenz asked from seven time zones away. He liked the sound of MacGregor, clearly working a little late. The good ones did a lot of that.

"The male patient isn't doing well at all, I'm afraid. The child, however, is recovering nicely."

"Indeed? Well, we examined the specimens you sent. Both contained the Ebola virus, Mayinga sub-strain."

"You're quite certain?" the younger man asked.

"No doubt about it, Doctor. I ran the tests myself."

"I was afraid of that. I sent another set to Paris, but they haven't got back to me yet."

"I need to know a few things." On his end of the line, Lorenz had a pad out. "Tell me more about your patients."

"There's a problem with that, Professor Lorenz," MacGregor had to say. He didn't know if the line might be bugged, but in a country like Sudan, it was not something he could discount. On the other hand, he had to say something, and so he started picking his way through the facts he could disclose.

• • •

"I SAW YOU on TV last night." Dr. Alexandre had decided to see Cathy Ryan at lunch again for that very reason. He'd taken a liking to her. Who would have expected an eye cutter and laser jockey (for Alex, these were more mechanical specialties than the true medicine he practiced—even that profession had its rivalries, and he felt that way about almost all surgical specialties) to take an interest in genetics? Besides, she probably needed a friendly voice.

"That's nice," Caroline Ryan replied, looking down at her chicken salad as he took his seat. The bodyguard, Alexandre saw, merely looked unhappily tense.

"You did okay."

"Think so?" She looked up, saying evenly: "I wanted to rip his face off."

"Well, that didn't quite come across. You were pretty supportive of your husband. You came across smart."

"What is it with reporters? I mean, why—"

Alex smiled. "Doctor, when a dog urinates on a fire hydrant, he's not committing vandalism. He's just being a dog." Roy Altman nearly choked on his drink.

"Neither one of us ever wanted this, you know?" she said, still unhappy enough to miss the jibe.

Professor Alexandre held his hands up in mock surrender. "Been there, done that, ma'am. Hey, I never wanted to join the Army. They drafted me right out of med school. It turned out all right, making colonel and all. I found an interesting field to keep the brain busy, and it pays the bills, y'know?"

"I don't get paid for this abuse!" Cathy objected, albeit with a smile.

"And your husband doesn't get paid enough," Alex added.

"He never has. Sometimes I wonder why he doesn't just do the job for free, turn the checks back in, just to make the point that he's worth more than they pay him."

"You think he would have made a good doc?"

Her eyes brightened. "I've told him that. Jack would have been a surgeon, I think—no, maybe something else, like what you're in. He's always liked poking around and figuring things out."

"And saying what he thinks."

That almost started a laugh. "Always!"

"Well, guess what? He comes across as a good guy. I've never met him, but I liked what I saw. Sure as hell he's no politician, and maybe that's not a bad thing once in a while. You want to lighten up a little, Doctor? What's the worst thing that can happen? He leaves the job, goes back to whatever he wants to do—teaching, I guess from what he said—and you're still a doc with a Lasker on the wall."

"The worst thing that can happen—"

"You have Mr. Altman here to take care of that, don't you?" Alexandre looked him over. "I imagine you're big enough to stand in the way of the bullet." The Secret Service agent didn't reply, but his look at Alex told the tale. Yes, he'd stop one for his principal. "You guys can't talk about this sort of thing, can you?"

"Yes, sir, we can, if you ask." Altman had wanted to say this all day. He'd seen the TV special, too, and as had often happened before, there was light talk in the Detail this morning about popping a cap on the reporter in question. The Secret Service had a fantasy life, too. "Dr. Ryan, we like your family a lot, and I'm not just saying that to be polite, okay? We don't always like our principals. But we like all of you."

"Hey, Cathy." It was Dean James, passing by with a smile and a wave.

"Hi, Dave." Then she noted a few waves from faculty friends. So, she wasn't as alone as she thought.

"Okay, Cathy, are you married to James Bond or what?" In a different context the question might have set her off, but Alexandre's Creole eyes were twinkling at her.

"I know a little. I got briefed in on some of it when President Durling asked Jack to be Vice President, but I can't—"

He held up his hand. "I know. I still have a security clearance because I still drive up to Fort Detrick once in a while."

"It isn't like the movies. You don't do stuff like that and have a drink, kiss the girl, and drive away. He used to have nightmares and I —well, I'd hug him in his sleep and usually that calmed him down, then when he wakes up, he pretends it never happened at all. I know

some of it, not all. When we were in Moscow last year, a Russian comes up and says that he had a gun to Jack's head once"—Altman's head turned at that one—"but he said it like a joke or something, then he said the gun wasn't loaded. Then we had dinner together, like we were pals or something, and I met his wife—pediatrician, would you believe it? She's a doc and her husband is the head Russian spy and—"

"It does sound a little far-fetched," Dr. Alexandre agreed with a judiciously raised eyebrow, and then a real laugh happened on the other side of the table.

"It's all so crazy," she concluded.

"You want crazy? We have two Ebola cases reported in Sudan." Now that her mood had changed, he could talk about his problems.

"Funny place for that virus to turn up. Did they come in from Zaire?"

"Gus Lorenz is checking that out. I'm waiting for him to get back to me," Professor Alexandre reported. "It can't be a local outbreak."

"Why's that?" Altman asked.

"Worst possible environment," Cathy explained, finally picking at her lunch. "Hot, dry, lots of direct sun. The UV from the sunlight kills it."

"Like a flamethrower," Alex agreed. "And no jungle for a host animal to live in."

"Only two cases?" Cathy asked with a mouthful of salad. At least, Alexandre thought, he'd gotten her to eat. Yep, he still had a good bedside manner, even in a cafeteria.

He nodded. "Adult male and a little girl, that's all I know right now. Gus is supposed to run the tests today, probably already has."

"Damn, that's a nasty little bug. And you still don't know the host."

"Twenty years of looking," Alex confirmed. "Never found one sick animal—well, the host wouldn't be sick, but you know what I mean."

"Like a criminal case, eh?" Altman asked. "Poking around for physical evidence?"

"Pretty much," Alex agreed. "Just we're trying to search a whole country, and we've never figured exactly what we're looking for."

DON RUSSELL WATCHED as the cots went out. After lunch—today it was ham-and-cheese sandwiches on wheat bread, glass of milk, and an apple—the kids all went down for their afternoon nap. An altogether good idea, all the adults thought. Mrs. Daggett was a superb organizer, and the kids all knew the routine. The beds came out of the storage room, and the kids knew their spaces. SANDBOX was getting along well with young Megan O'Day. Both usually dressed in Oshkosh B'gosh outfits decorated with flowers or bunnies—at least a third of

the kids had them; it was a popular label. The only hard part was parading the children into the bathrooms so that no "accidents" happened during the naps some happened anyway, but that was kids for you. It took fifteen minutes, less than before because two of his agents helped. Then the kids were all down in their cots, with their blankets and bears, and the lights went down. Mrs. Daggett and her helpers found chairs to sit in and books to read.

"SANDBOX is sleeping," Russell said, stepping outside for some fresh air.

"Sounds like a winner," the mobile team thought, sitting in the den of the house across the street. Their Chevy Suburban was parked in the family garage. There were three agents there, two of whom were always on watch, seated close to the window which faced Giant Steps. Probably playing cards, ever a good way to pass dead time. Every fifteen minutes—not quite regularly in case someone was watching—Russell or another of the crew would walk around the grounds. TV cameras kept track of traffic on Ritchie Highway. One of the inside people was always positioned to cover the doors in and out of the center. At the moment it was Marcella Hilton; young and pretty, she always had her purse with her. A special purse of a type made for female cops, it had a side pocket she could just reach into for her SigSauer 9mm automatic, and two spare magazines. She was letting her hair grow to something approaching hippie length (he'd had to tell her what a hippie was) to accentuate her "disguise."

He still didn't like it. The place was too easy to approach, too close to the highway with its heavy volume of traffic, and there was a parking lot within plain sight, a perfect spot for notional bad guys to do surveillance. At least reporters had been shooed away. On that one SURGEON had been ruthlessly direct. After an initial spate of stories about Katie Ryan and her friends, the foot had come down hard. Now visiting journalists who called were told, firmly but politely, to stay away. Those who came anyway had to talk to Russell, whose grandfatherly demeanor was saved for the children at Giant Steps. With adults he was simply intimidating, usually donning his Secret Service sunglasses, the better to appear like Schwarzenegger, who was shorter than he by a good three inches.

But his sub-detail had been cut down to six. Three directly on site, and three across the street. The latter trio had shoulder weapons, Uzi submachine guns and a scoped M-16. In another location, six would have been plenty, but not this one, he judged. Unfortunately, any more than that would have made this day-care center appear to be an armed camp, and President Ryan was having trouble enough.

“WHAT’S THE WORD, Gus?” Alexandre asked, back in his office before starting afternoon rounds. One of his AIDS patients had taken a bad turn, and Alex was trying to figure what to do about it.

“ID is confirmed. Ebola Mayinga, same as the two Zairean cases. The male patient isn’t going to make it, but the child is reportedly recovering nicely.”

“Oh? Good. What’s the difference in the cases?”

“Not sure, Alex,” Lorenz replied. “I don’t have much patient information, just first names, Saleh for the male and Sohaila for the child, ages and such.”

“Arabic names, right?” But Sudan was an Islamic country.

“I think so.”

“It would help to know what’s different about the cases.”

“I made that point. The attending physician is an Ian MacGregor, sounds pretty good, University of Edinburgh, I think he said. Anyway, he doesn’t know any differences between them. Neither has any idea how they were exposed. They appeared at the hospital at roughly the same time, in roughly the same shape. Initial presentation was as flu and/or jet lag, he said—”

“Travel from where, then?” Alexandre interrupted.

“I asked. He said he couldn’t say.”

“How come?”

“I asked that, too. He said he couldn’t say that, either, but that it had no apparent connection with the cases.” Lorenz’s tone indicated what he thought of that. Both men knew it had to be local politics, a real problem in Africa, especially with AIDS.

“Nothing more in Zaire?”

“Nothing,” Gus confirmed. “That one’s over. It’s a head-scratcher, Alex. Same disease turned up in two different places, two thousand miles apart, two cases each, two dead, one dying, one apparently recovering. MacGregor has initiated proper containment procedures at his hospital, and it sounds as though he knows his business.” You could almost hear the shrug over the phone.

What the Secret Service guy had said over lunch was right on target, Alexandre thought. It was more detective work than medicine, and this one didn’t make a hell of a lot of sense, like some sort of serial-murder case with no clues. Entertaining in book form, maybe, but not in reality.

“Okay, what *do* we know?”

“We know that Mayinga strain is alive and kicking. Visual inspection is identical. We’re running some analysis on the proteins and sequences, but my gut says it’s a one-to-one match.”

“God damn, what’s the host, Gus? If we could only find that!”

“Thank you for that observation, Doctor.” Gus was annoyed—

enraged—in the same way and for the same reason. But it was an old story for both of them. Well, the older man thought, it had taken a few *thousand* years to figure malaria out. They'd been playing with Ebola for only twenty-five or so. The bug had been around, probably, for at least that long, appearing and disappearing, just like a fictional serial killer. But Ebola didn't have a brain, didn't have a strategy, didn't even move of its own accord. It was super-adapted to something very limited and exceedingly narrow. But they didn't know what. "It's enough to drive a man to drink, isn't it?"

"I imagine a stiff shot of bourbon will kill it, too, Gus. I have patients to see."

"How do you like regular clinical rounds, Alex?" Lorenz missed them, too.

"Good to be a real doc again. I just wish my patients had a little more hope. But that's the job, ain't it?"

"I'll fax you data on the structural analysis on the samples if you want. The good news is that it seems pretty well contained," Lorenz repeated.

"I'd appreciate it. See ya, Gus." Alexandre hung up. *Pretty well contained? That's what we thought before* ... But then his thoughts shifted, as they had to. *White male patient, thirty-four, gay, resistant TB that came out of left field. How do we stabilize him?* He lifted the chart and walked out of his office.

"SO I'M THE wrong guy to help with the court selections?" Pat Martin asked.

"Don't feel too bad," Arnie answered. "We're *all* the wrong guy for everything."

"Except you," the President noted with a smile.

"We all make errors of judgment," van Damm admitted. "I could have left with Bob Fowler, but Roger said he needed me to keep this shop running, and—"

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. "That's how I got here, too. So, Mr. Martin?"

"No laws were broken by any of this." He'd spent the last three hours going over the CIA files and Jack's dictated summary of the Colombian operations. Now one of his secretaries, Ellen Sumter, knew about some rather restricted things—but she was a *presidential* secretary, and besides, Jack had gotten a smoke out of it. "At least not by you. Ritter and Moore could be brought up on failure to fully report their covert activities to the Congress, but their defense would be that the sitting President told them to do it that way, and the Special and Hazardous Operations guidelines appended to the oversight statute give them an arguable defense. I suppose I could get

them indicted, but I wouldn't want to prosecute the case myself," he went on. "They were trying to work on the drug problem, and most jurors wouldn't want to hurt them for doing so, especially since the Medellin cartel came apart partly as a result. The real problem on that one is the international-relations angle. Colombia's going to be pissed, sir, and with very good reason. There are issues of international law and treaties which applied to the activity, but I'm not good enough in that field to render an opinion. From the domestic point of view, it's the Constitution, the supreme law of the land. The President is Commander-in-Chief. The President decides what is or is not in the country's security interest as part of his executive powers. The President can, therefore, take whatever action he deems appropriate to protect those interests—that's what *executive* power means. The brake on that, aside from statutory violations that mainly apply *inside* the country, is found in the checks and balances exercised by the Congress. They can deny funds to prevent something, but that's about all. Even the War Powers Resolution is written in such a way as to let you act first before they try and stop you. You see, the Constitution is flexible on the really important issues. It's designed for reasonable people to work things out in a reasonable way. The elected representatives are supposed to know what the people want, and act accordingly, again, within reasonable limits."

The people who wrote the Constitution, Ryan wondered to himself, *were* they *politicians or something else?*

"And the rest?" the chief of staff asked.

"The CIA operations? Not even close to any sort of violation, but again the problem is one of politics. Speaking for myself—I used to run espionage investigations, remember—Mr. President, what beautiful jobs they were. But the media is going to have a ball," he warned.

Arnie thought that was a pretty good start. His third President didn't have to worry about going to jail. The political stuff came *after* that, which was, for him, a first of sorts.

"Closed hearings or open?" van Damm asked.

"That's political. The main issue there is the international side. Best to kick that one around with State. By the way, you've got me right against the edge here, ethically speaking. Had I discovered a possible violation against you in any of these three cases, I'd be unable to discuss them with you. As it is, my cover is to say that you, Mr. President, asked me for an opinion on the possible criminal violations of others, to which inquiry I must, as a federal official, respond as part of my official duties."

"You know, it would be nice if everybody around me didn't talk like a lawyer all the time," Ryan observed crossly. "I have real problems to

deal with. A new country in the Middle East that doesn't like us, the Chinese making trouble at sea for reasons I don't understand, and I still don't have a Congress."

"This *is* a real problem," Arnie told him. Again.

"I can read." Ryan gestured to the pile of clippings on his desk. He'd just discovered that the media graced him with early drafts of adverse editorials scheduled to run the next day. How nice of them. "I used to think CIA was Alice in Wonderland. That's not even Triple-A ball. Okay, the Supreme Court. I've read over about half of the list. They're all good people. I'll have my selections this time next week."

"ABA is going to raise hell," Arnie said.

"Let 'em. I can't show weakness. I've learned that much last night. What's Kealty going to do?" the President asked next.

"The only thing he can do, weaken you politically, threaten you with scandal, and force you to resign." Arnie held his hand up again. "I'm not saying it makes sense."

"Damned little in this town does, Arnie. That's why I'm trying."

ONE CRUCIAL ELEMENT in the consolidation of the new country was, of course, its military. The former Republican Guards divisions would keep their identity. There had to be a few adjustments in the officer corps. The executions of previous weeks hadn't totally expunged undesirable elements, but in the interest of amity, the new eliminations were made into simple retirements—the departure briefings were forcefully direct: *Step out of line and disappear.* It was not a warning to be disregarded. The departing officers invariably nodded their submission, grateful to be allowed to live.

These units had mainly survived the Persian Gulf War—at least a majority of their personnel had, and the shock of their treatment at American hands had been assuaged by their later campaigns to crush rebellious civilian elements, replacing part of their swagger and much of their bravado. Their equipment had been replaced from stocks and other means, and that would soon be augmented as well.

The convoys moved out of Iran, down the Abadan highway, through border checkpoints already dismantled. They moved under cover of darkness, and with a minimum of radio traffic, but that didn't matter to satellites.

"THREE DIVISIONS, HEAVIES at that," was the instant analysis at I-TAC, the Army's Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, a windowless building located in the Washington Navy Yard. The same

conclusion was rapidly reached at DIA and CIA. A new Order of Battle assessment for the new country was already under way, and though it was not yet complete, the first back-of-the-envelope calculations showed that the UIR had more than double the military power of all the other Gulf states combined. It would probably be worse when all the factors were fully evaluated.

"Headed where, exactly, I wonder," the senior watch officer said aloud as the tapes were rewound.

"Bottom end of Iraq has always been Shi'a, sir," a warrant officer area specialist reminded the colonel.

"And that's the closest part to our friends."

"Roge-o."

MAHMOUD HAJI DARYAEI had much to think about, and he usually tried to do it outside, not inside, a mosque. In this case it was one of the oldest in the former country of Iraq, within sight of the world's oldest city, Ur. A man of his God and his Faith, Daryaei was also a man of history and political reality who told himself that all came together in a unified whole that defined the shape of the world, and that all had to be considered. It was easy in moments of weakness or enthusiasm (the two were the same in his mind) to tell himself that certain things were written by Allah's own immortal hand, but circumspection was also a virtue taught by the Koran, and he found he was able to achieve that most easily by walking outside a holy place, usually in a garden, such as this mosque had.

Civilization had started here. Pagan civilization, to be sure, but all things began somewhere, and it was not the fault of those who had first built this city five thousand years before that God had not yet fully revealed Himself. The faithful who had built this mosque and its garden had also rectified the oversight.

The mosque was in disrepair. He bent down to pick up a piece of tile that had fallen off the wall. It was blue, the color of the ancient city, a color somewhere between that of sky and sea, made by local artisans to the same shade and texture for more than fifty centuries, adopted in turn for temples to pagan statues, palaces of kings, and now a mosque. One could pluck a new one off a building or dig ten meters into the earth to find one over three thousand years old, and the two would be indistinguishable. In that there was such continuity here as at no other place in the world. A kind of peace came from it, especially in the chill of a cloudless midnight, when he alone was walking here, and even his bodyguards were out of sight, knowing their leader's mood.

A waning moon was overhead, and that gave emphasis to the

numberless stars which kept him company. To the west was ancient Ur, once a great city as things had been reckoned, and surely even today it would be a noteworthy sight, with its towering brick walls and its towering ziggurat to whatever false god the people here had worshiped. Caravans would travel in and out of the fortified gates, bringing everything from grain to slaves. The surrounding land would be green with planted fields instead of mere sand, and the air alive with the chatter of merchants and tradesmen. The tale of Eden itself had probably begun not far from here, somewhere in the parallel valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates that emptied into the Persian Gulf. Yes, if humanity were all one vast tree, then the oldest roots were right here, virtually in the center of the country he had just created.

The ancients would have had the same sense of centrality, he was sure. Here are *we,* they would have thought, and out there were . . . *they*, the universal appellation for those who were not part of one's own community. They were dangerous. At first *they* would have been nomadic travelers for whom the idea of a city was incomprehensible. How could one stay in one place and live? Didn't the grass for the goats and sheep run out? On the other hand, what a fine place to raid, they would have thought. That was why the city had sprouted defensive walls, further emphasizing the primacy of place and the dichotomy of we and *they*, the civilized and the uncivilized.

And so it was today, Daryaei knew, Faithful and Infidel. Even within the first category there were differences. He stood in the center of a country which was also the center of the Faith, at least in geographic terms, for Islam had spread west and east. The true center of his religion lay in the direction in which he always prayed, southwest, in Mecca, home of the Ka'aba stone, where the Prophet had taught.

Civilization had begun in Ur, and spread, slowly and fitfully, and in the waves of time, the city had risen and fallen because, he thought, of its false gods, its lack of the single unifying idea which civilization needed.

The continuity of this place told him much about the people. One could almost hear their voices, and they were no different, really, from himself. They'd looked up on quiet nights into the same sky and wondered at the beauty of the same stars. They'd heard the silence, the best of them, just as he did, and used it as a sounding board for their most private thoughts, to consider the Great Questions and find their answers as best they could. But they'd been flawed answers, and that was why the walls had fallen, along with all the civilizations here —but one.

And so, his task was to restore, Daryaei told the stars. As his religion was the final revelation, so his culture would grow from here, down-river from the original Eden. Yes, he'd build his city here. Mecca

would remain a holy city, blessed and pure, not commercialized, not polluted. There was room here for the administrative buildings. A fresh beginning would take place on the site of the oldest beginning, and a great new nation would grow.

But first . . .

Daryaei looked at his hand, old and gnarled, scarred by torture and persecution, but still the hand of a man and the servant of his mind, an imperfect tool, as he himself was an imperfect tool for his God, but a faithful tool even so, able to smite, able to heal. Both would be necessary. He knew the entire Koran by heart—memorization of the entire book was encouraged by his religion—and more than that he was a theologian who could quote a verse to any purpose, some of them contradictory, he admitted to himself, but it was the Will of Allah that mattered more than His words. His words often applied to a specific context. To kill for murder was evil, and the Koranic law on that was harsh indeed. To kill in defense of the Faith was not. Sometimes the difference between the two was clouded, and for that one had the Will of Allah as a guide. Allah wished the Faithful to be under one spiritual roof, and while many had attempted to accomplish that by reason and example, men were weak and some had to be shown more forcefully than others—and perhaps the differences between Sunni and Shi'a *could* be resolved in peace and love, with his hand extended in friendship and both sides giving respectful consideration to the views of the other—Daryaei was willing to go that far in his quest—but first the proper conditions had to be established. Beyond the horizon of Islam were others, and while God's Mercy applied to them as well, after a fashion, it did not apply while they sought to injure the Faith. For those people, his hand was for smiting. There was no avoiding it.

Because they *did* injure the Faith, polluting it with their money and strange ideas, taking the oil away, taking the children away to educate them in corrupt ways. They sought to limit the Faith even as they did business with those who called themselves Faithful. They would resist his efforts to unify Islam. They'd call it economics or politics or something else, but really they knew that a unified Islam would threaten their apostasy and temporal power. They were the worst kind of enemies in that they called themselves friends, and disguised their intentions well enough to be mistaken for such. For Islam to unify, they had to be broken.

There really was no choice for him. He'd come here to be alone and to think, to ask God quietly if there might be another way. But the blue piece of tile had told him of all that had been, the time that had passed, the civilizations that had left nothing behind but imperfect memories and ruined buildings. He had the idea and the faith that

they had all lacked. It was merely a question of applying those ideas, guided by the same Will that had placed the stars in the sky. His God had brought flood and plague and misfortune as tools of the Faith. Mohammed had himself fought wars. And so, reluctantly, he told himself, would he.

35

OPERATIONAL CONCEPT

WHEN MILITARY FORCES move, other forces watch with interest, though what they do about it depends on the instructions of their leaders. The move of Iranian forces into Iraq was entirely administrative. The tanks and other tracked vehicles came by low-hauler trailers, while the trucks rolled on their own wheels. There were the usual problems. A few units took wrong turns, to the embarrassment of their officers and the rage of superiors, but soon enough each of the three divisions had found a new home, in every case co-located with a formerly Iraqi division of the same type. The traumatically enforced downsizing of the Iraqi army had made for almost enough room for the new occupants of the bases, and scarcely had they arrived but the staffs were integrated in corps units, and joint exercises began to acquaint one grouping with the other. Here, too, there were the usual difficulties of language and culture, but both sides used much the same weapons and doctrine; and the staff officers, the same all over the world, worked to hammer out a common ground. This, too, was watched from satellite.

"How much?"

"Call it three corps formations," the briefing officer told Admiral Jackson. "One of two armored divisions, and two of an armored and a heavy mechanized. They're a little light in artillery, but they have all the rolling stock they need. We spotted a bunch of command-and-control vehicles running around in the desert, probably doing unit-movement simulations for a CPX." That was a Command-Post Exercise, a war game for professionals.

"Anything else?" Robby asked.

"The gunnery ranges at this base here, west of Abu Sukayr, are being bulldozed and cleaned up, and the air base just north at Nejef has a few new tenants, MiGs and Sukhois, but on IR their engines are cold."

"Assessment?" This came from Tony Bretano.

"Sir, you can call it anything," the colonel replied. "New country integrating their military, there's going to be a lot of getting-to-know-you stuff. We're surprised by the integrated corps formations. It's

going to pose administrative difficulties, but it might be a good move from the political-psychological side. This way, they're acting like they really are one country."

"Nothing threatening at all?" the SecDef asked.

"Nothing overtly threatening, not at this time."

"How quick could that corps move to the Saudi border?" Jackson asked, to make sure his boss got the real picture.

"Once they're fully fueled and trained up? Call it forty-eight to seventy-two hours. We could do it in less than half the time, but we're trained better."

"Force composition?"

"Total for the three corps, we're talking six heavy divisions, just over fifteen hundred main battle tanks, over twenty-five hundred infantry fighting vehicles, upwards of six hundred tubes—still haven't got a handle on their red team, Admiral. That's artillery, Mr. Secretary," the colonel explained. "Logistically they're on the old Soviet model."

"What's that mean?"

"Their loggies are organic to the divisions. We do that also, but we maintain separate formations to keep our maneuver forces running."

"Reservists for the most part," Jackson told the Secretary. "The Soviet model allows for a more integrated maneuver force, but only for the short term. They can't sustain operations as long as we can, in terms of time or distance."

"The admiral is correct, sir," the briefing officer went on. "In 1990, when the Iraqis jumped into Kuwait, they went about as far as their logistical tail allowed. They had to stop to replenish."

"That's part of it. Tell him the other part," Jackson ordered.

"After a pause of from twelve to twenty-four hours, they *were* ready to move again. The reason they didn't was political."

"I always wondered about that. Could they have taken the Saudi oil fields?"

"Easy," the colonel said. "He must have thought a lot about that in later months," the officer added without sympathy.

"So, we have a threat here?" Bretano was asking simple questions and listening to the answers. Jackson liked that. He knew what he didn't know, and wasn't embarrassed about learning things.

"Yes, sir. These three corps represent a potential striking force about equal in power to what Hussein used. There would be other units involved, but they're just occupying forces. That's the fist right here," the colonel said, tapping the map with his pointer.

"But it's still in their pocket. How long to change that?"

"A few months at minimum to do it right, Mr. Secretary. It depends most of all on their overall political intentions. All of these units are

individually trained up to snuff by local standards. Integrating their corps staffs and organizations is the real task ahead for them."

"Explain," Bretano ordered.

"Sir, I guess you could call it a management team. Everybody has to get to know everybody else so that they can communicate properly, start thinking the same way."

"Maybe it's easier to think of it as a football team, sir." Robby took it further. "You don't just take eleven guys and put them in a huddle together and expect them to perform properly. You have to have everybody reading out of the same playbook, and everybody has to know what everybody else is able to do."

SecDef nodded. "So it's not the hardware we're worried about. It's the people."

"That's right, sir," the colonel said. "I can teach you to drive a tank in a few minutes, but it'll be a while before I want you driving around in my brigade."

"That's why you people must love having a new Secretary come in every few years," Bretano observed with a wry smile.

"Mostly they learn pretty fast."

"So, what do we tell the President?"

THE CHINESE AND Taiwanese navies were keeping their respective distances, as though an invisible line were drawn north-south down the Formosa Strait. The latter kept pacing the former, interposing itself between its island home, but informal rules were established and so far none was being violated.

This was good for the CO of USS *Pasadena,* whose sonar and tracking parties were trying to keep tabs on both sides, all the while hoping that a shooting war wouldn't start with them in the middle. Getting killed by mistake seemed such a tawdry end.

"Torpedo in the water, bearing two-seven-four!" was the next call from the sonar compartment. Heads turned and ears perked up at once.

"Stay cool," the captain ordered quietly. "Sonar, Conn, I need more than that!" That statement was not quiet.

"Same bearing as contact Sierra Four-Two, a Luda IICLASS'can, sir, probably launched from there."

"Four-Two is bearing two-seven-four, range thirty thousand yards," a petty officer in the tracking party interjected at once.

"Sounds like one of their new homers, sir, six blades, turning at high speed, bearing is changing north to south, definite side aspect on the fish."

"Very well," the captain said, allowing himself to stay as calm as he

pretended to be.

"Could be targeted on Sierra-Fifteen, sir." That contact was an old Ming-class submarine, a Chinese copy of the old Russian Romeo-class, a clunker whose design dated from the 1950s which had snorted less than an hour before to recharge batteries. "He's at two-six-one, range about the same." That came from the officer in charge of the tracking party. The senior chief at his left nodded agreement.

The captain closed his eyes and allowed himself a breath. He'd heard the stories about the Good Old Days of the Cold War, when people like Bart Mancuso had gone Up North into the Barents Sea and, occasionally, found themselves right in the middle of a live-fire ShootEx of the Soviet navy—perhaps mistaken for practice targets, even. A fine opportunity to figure out how good Soviet weapons really were, they joked now, sitting in their offices. Now he knew what they'd really felt at the time. Fortunately, his private head was a mere twenty feet away, if it came to that . . .

"Transient, transient, mechanical transient bearing two-six-one, sounds like a noisemaker, probably released by contact Sierra-Fifteen. The torpedo bearing is now two-six-seven, estimated speed four-four knots, bearing continues to change north to south," sonar reported next. "Hold it—*another* torpedo in the water bearing two-fivefive!"

"No contact on that bearing, could be a helo launch," the senior chief said.

He'd have to discuss one of those sea stories with Mancuso when he got back to Pearl, the captain thought.

"Same acoustical signature, sir, another homing fish, drifting north, could also be targeted on Sierra-Fifteen."

"Bracketed the poor bastard." This came from the XO.

"It's dark topside, isn't it?" the captain thought suddenly. Sometimes it was easy to lose track.

"Sure is, sir." From the XO again.

"Have we seen them do night helo ops this week?"

"No, sir. Intel says they don't like to fly off their 'cans at night."

"That just changed, didn't it? Let's see. Raise the ESM mast."

"Raise the ESM, aye." A sailor pulled the proper handle and the reed-thin electronics-sensor antenna hissed up on hydraulic power. *Pasadena* was running at periscope depth, her long sonar "tail" streamed out behind her as the submarine stayed roughly on what they hoped was the borderline between the two enemy fleets. It was the safest place to be until such time as real shooting started.

"Looking for—"

"Got it, sir, a Ku-band emitter at bearing two-fivefour, aircraft type, frequency and pulse-repetition rate like that new French one. Wow, *lots* of radars turning, sir, take a while to classify them."

"French Dauphin helos on some of their frigates, sir," the XO observed.

"Doing night ops," the captain emphasized. That was unexpected. Helicopters were expensive, and landing on tin cans at night was always dicey. The Chinese navy was training up to do something.

THINGS COULD BE slippery in Washington. The nation's capital invariably panics at the report of a single snowflake despite the realization that a blizzard might do little more than fill the potholes in the street, if only people would plow the snow that way. But there was more to it than that. As soldiers once followed flags onto a battlefield, so senior Washington officials follow leaders or ideologies, but near the top it got slippery. A lower- or middle-level bureaucrat might just sit at his post and ignore his sitting department Secretary's identity, but the higher one went, the closer one came to something akin to decision or policy making. In such positions, one actually had to do things, or tell others to do things, from time to time, other than what someone else had already written down. One regularly went in and out of top-floor offices and became identified with whoever might be there, ultimately all the way to the President's office in the West Wing, and though access to the top meant power of a sort, and prestige, and an autographed photo on the office wall to tell *your* visitors how important you were, if something happened to the *other* person in the photo, then the photo and its signature might become a liability rather than an asset. The ultimate risk lay in changing from an insider, always welcome, to an outsider, if not quite *always* shunned, then forced to earn one's way back inside, a prospect not attractive to those who had spent so much time getting there in the first place.

The most obvious defense, of course, was to be *networked* , to have a circle of friends and associates which didn't have to be deep so much as broad, and include people in all parts of the political spectrum. You had to be known by a sufficiently wide number of fellow insiders so that no matter what happened at the very top there was always a safe platform just below, a safety net of sorts. The net was close enough to the top that the people in it had the upward access without the risk of falling off. With care, those at the top positions enjoyed its protection, too, always able to slide in and out of appropriate postings, to and from other offices not too far away—usually less than a mile—to await the next opportunity, and so even though *out*, to remain in the Network, to retain the access, and also rent out that access to those who needed it. In that sense, nothing had changed since the pharaonic court in the ancient Nile city of Thebes, where knowing a nobleman

who had access to Pharaoh gave one a power which translated into both money and the pure joy of being important enough to bow and scrape for profit.

But in Washington as in Thebes, being too close to the wrong leader's court meant you ran the risk of becoming tarnished, especially when the Pharaoh didn't play ball (actually jackals and hounds in the Middle Kingdom) with the system.

And President Ryan didn't. It was as though a foreigner had usurped the throne, not necessarily a bad man, but a *different* man who didn't assemble people from the Establishment. They'd waited patiently for him to come to them, as all Presidents did, to seek their wisdom and counsel, to give access and get it in return, as courtiers had for centuries. They handled things for a busy chief, doling out justice, seeing to it that things were done in the same old way, which had to be the right way, since all of their number agreed with it while serving and being served by it.

But the old system hadn't so much been destroyed as ignored, and that befuddled the thousands of members of the Great Network. They held their cocktail parties and discussed the new President over Perrier and pate, smiling tolerantly at his new ideas and waiting for him to see the light. But it had been quite a while now since that awful night, and it hadn't happened yet. Networked people still working inside as appointees of the Fowler-Durling administration came to the parties and reported that they didn't understand what was going on. Senior lobbyists tried to make appointments through the office of the President, only to be told that the President was extremely tied up, and didn't have time.

Didn't have time?

Didn't have time for *them?*

It was as though Pharaoh had told all the nobles and courtiers to go home and tend their estates up and down the river kingdom, and *that* was no fun—to live in the provinces . . . with the . . . common folk?

Worse, the new Senate, or a large part of it, was following the President's example. Worst of all, many, if not most, were curt with them. A new senator from Indiana was reported to have a kitchen timer on his desk and to twist it to a mere five minutes for lobbyists, and to none at all for people talking to him about the *absurd* ideas for rewriting the tax code. Worst of all, he even lacked the courtesy to have his executive secretary deflect appointment requests. He'd actually *told* the chief of a powerful Washington law firm—a man who'd only wanted to educate the newcomer from Peoria—that he would *not* listen to such people, ever. Told the man himself. In another context it would have been an amusing story. Such people occasionally came to Washington with such purity of purpose as to

justify a white horse, but in due course they would learn that horses were out of date—and in most cases, they were merely doing it for show anyway.

But not this time. The story had spread. First reported in the local D.C. papers with whimsy, it had been picked up in Indianapolis as something genuinely new and decidedly "Hoosier," and then respread through a couple of the news syndicates. This new senator had talked forcefully with his new colleagues, and won a few converts. Not all that many, but enough to be worrisome. Enough to give him a chairmanship of a powerful subcommittee, what was too bully a pulpit for one such as he, especially since he had a flair for the dramatic and an effective, if not exactly nice, turn of phrase that reporters couldn't avoid quoting. Even reporters in the Great Network enjoyed reporting genuinely new things—which was what "news" meant, something everyone mainly forgot.

At the parties, people joked that it was a fad, like hula hoops, amusing to watch and soon to fade, but every so often one of them would worry. The tolerant smile would freeze on his or her face in mid-joke, and they'd wonder if something genuinely new might be happening.

No, nothing genuinely new ever happened here. Everybody knew that. The system had rules, and the rules had to be obeyed.

Even so, a few of them worried at their dinner parties in Georgetown. They had expensive houses to pay off, children to educate, and status to maintain. All had come from somewhere else, and none wanted to go back there.

It was just so outrageous. How did the newcomers expect to find out what they needed to, without lobbyists from the Network to guide and educate them—and didn't *they* represent the people, too? Weren't they paid to do exactly that? Didn't *they* tell the elected representatives—worse, these new ones weren't elected, they were all appointed, many of them by governors who, in their wish to get reelected themselves, had bowed to President Ryan's impassioned but utterly unrealistic televised speech. As though some new religion had broken out.

At the parties in Chevy Chase, many of them worried that the new laws these new senators would pass would be ... laws, just like the ones produced by the system, at least in their power if not in their wisdom. These new people could actually pass new laws without being "helped." That was so genuinely new an idea as to be ... frightening. But only if you really believed it.

And then there were the House races, just about to start around the country, the special elections required to repopulate the People's House, as everyone liked to call it, which was Disneyland for lobbyists, so many meetings all in one convenient complex of

buildings, 435 lawmakers and their staffs within a mere twenty acres. Polling data that had been reported mainly in local papers was now being picked up by the national media in shocked disbelief. There were people running who had never run for anything before; businessmen, community leaders who had never worked the system, lawyers, ministers, even some physicians. Some of them might win as they spewed forth neo-populist-type speeches about supporting the President and "restoring America"—a phrase that had gained wide currency. But America had never died, the Network people told themselves. *They* were still here, weren't they?

It was all Ryan's doing. He'd never been one of them. He'd actually said more than once that he didn't like being President!

Didn't like it?

How could any man "person" to the Network Establishment in the new age of enlightenment—not *like* having the ability to do so much, to pass out so many favors, to be courted and flattered like a king of old?

Didn't like it?

Then he didn't belong, did he?

They knew how to handle that. Someone had already started it. Leaks. Not just from inside. Those were little people with lesser agendas. There was more. There was the big picture, and for that, access still counted, because the Network had many voices, and there were still ears to listen. There would be no plan and no conspiracy *per se*. It would all happen naturally, or as naturally as anything happened here. In fact, it had already begun.

FOR BADRAYN, AGAIN, it was time on his computer. The task, he learned, was time-critical. Such things often were, but the reason was new in this case. The travel time itself had to be minimized, rather than arranged in such a way as to meet a specific deadline or rendezvous. The limiting factor here was the fact that Iran was still something of an outlaw country with surprisingly little in the way of air travel options.

Flights with convenient times were astoundingly limited:

KLM 534 to Amsterdam left just after one A.M., and arrived in Holland at 6:10 A.M. after an intermediary stop;

Lufthansa's nonstop 601 left at 2:55, and got to Frankfurt at 5:50;

Austrian Airlines 774, leaving at 3:40 A.M., arrived in Vienna nonstop at 6:00 A.M.;

Air France 165 left at 5:25 A.M., arrived at Charles de Gaulle at nine A.M.;

British Airways 102 left at six A.M., stopping en route, arriving at

Heathrow at 12:45 P.M.;

Aeroflot 516 left at three A.M. for Moscow, arrived there at 7:10.

Only one nonstop to Rome, no direct flights to Athens, not even a nonstop to Beirut! He could have his people connect through Dubai—remarkably, Emirates Airlines *did* fly out of Tehran into its own international hub, as did Kuwait's flag carrier, but they, he thought, were not a very good idea.

Just a handful of flights to use, all of them easily observed by foreign intelligence services—if they were competent, as he had to assume they were, either they'd have their own people aboard the flights or the cabin staff would be briefed on what to look for and how to report it while the aircraft was still in the air. So, it wasn't just time, was it?

The people he'd selected were good ones; educated for the most part, they knew how to dress respectably, how to carry on a conversation, or at least to deflect one politely—on international flights the easiest thing was to feign the need for sleep, which most often wasn't feigned anyway. But only one mistake, and the consequences could be serious. He'd told them that, and all had listened.

Badrayn had never been given a mission like this one, and the intellectual challenge was noteworthy. Just a handful of really usable flights out, and the one to Moscow wasn't all that attractive. The gateway cities of London, Frankfurt, Paris, Vienna, and Amsterdam would have to do------and one flight each per day. The good news was that all five of them offered a wide choice of connections via American and other flag carriers. So one group would take 601 to Frankfurt, and there, some would disperse through Brussels (Sabena to New York-JFK) and Paris (Air France to Washington-Dulles; Delta to Atlanta; American Airlines to Orlando; United to Chicago) via conveniently timed connecting flights, while others took Lufthansa to Los Angeles. The British Airways team had the most options of all. One would take Concorde Flight 3 into New York. The only trick was getting them through the first series of flights. After that, the whole massive system of international air travel would handle the dispersal.

Still, twenty people, twenty possible mistakes. Operational security was always a worry. He'd spent half his life trying to outfox the Israelis, and while his continued life was some testimony to his success—or lack of total failure, which was somewhat more honest the hoops he'd had to leap through had nearly driven him mad more than once. Well. At least he had the flights figured out. Tomorrow he would brief them in. He checked his watch. Tomorrow wasn't all that far away.

NOT EVERY INSIDER agreed. Every group had its cynics and rebels, some good, some bad, some not even outcasts. Then there was also anger. The Network members, when thwarted by other members in one of their endeavors, often took a philosophical view of the matter —one could always get even later, and still stay friends—but not always. This was especially true of the media members who both were and were not part of it all. They were, in the sense that they did have their own personal relationships and friendships with the government in and out people; they could go to them for information and insights, and stories about their enemies. They were not, in that the insiders never really trusted them, because the media could be used and fooled —most often cajoled, which was easier for one side of the political spectrum than the other. But trust? Not exactly. Or more exactly, not at all.

Some of them even had principles.

"Arnie, we need to talk."

"I think we do," van Damm agreed, recognizing the voice that had come in on *his* direct line.

"Tonight?"

"Sure. Where?"

"My place?"

The chief of staff gave it a few seconds of consideration. "Why not?"

THE DELEGATION CAME just in time for evening prayers. The greetings were cordial and modest on both sides, and then all three of them entered the mosque and performed their daily ritual. Ordinarily, all would have felt purified by their devotions as they walked back out to the garden. But not this time. Only long practice in the concealment of emotions prevented overt displays of tension, but even that told much to all three, and especially to the one.

"Thank you for receiving us," Prince Ali bin Sheik said first of all. He didn't add that it had taken long enough.

"I am pleased to welcome you in peace," Daryaei replied. "It is well that we should pray together." He led them to a table prepared by his security people, where coffee was served, the strong, bitter brew favored in the Middle East. "The blessings of God on this meeting, my friends. How may I be of service?"

"We are here to discuss recent developments," the Royal Prince observed after a sip. His eyes locked in on Daryaei. His Kuwaiti colleague, Mohammed Adman Sabah, his country's foreign minister, remained quiet for the moment.

"What do you wish to know?" Daryaei asked.

"Your intentions," Ali replied bluntly.

The spiritual head of the United Islamic Republic sighed. "There is much work to be done. All the years of war and suffering, all the lives lost to so many causes, the destruction to so much. Even this mosque"—he gestured to the obvious need for repairs—"is a symbol of it all, don't you think?"

"There has been much cause for sorrow," Ali agreed.

"My intentions? To restore. These unhappy people have been through so much. Such sacrifices—and for what? The secular ambitions of a godless man. The injustice of it all cried out to Allah, and Allah answered the cries. And now, perhaps, we can be one prosperous and godly people." The *again* hung unspoken on the end of the statement.

"That is the task of years," the Kuwaiti observed.

"Certainly it is," Daryaei agreed. "But now with the embargo lifted, we have sufficient resources to see to the task, and the will to see it done. There will be a new beginning here."

"In peace," Ali added.

"Certainly in peace," Daryaei agreed seriously.

"May we be of assistance? One of the Pillars of our Faith is charity, after all," Foreign Minister Sabah observed.

A gracious nod. "Your kindness is noted with gratitude, Mohammed Adman. It is well that we should be guided by our Faith rather than worldly influences that have so sadly swept over this region in recent years, but for the moment, as you can see, the task is so vast that we can scarcely begin to determine what things need to be done, and in what order. Perhaps at a later time we might discuss that again."

It wasn't quite a flat rejection of aid, but close. The UIR wasn't interested in doing business, just as Prince Ali had feared.

"At the next meeting of OPEC," Ali offered, "we can discuss the rearrangement of production quotas so that you can share more fairly in the revenue we collect from our clients."

"That would indeed be useful," Daryaei agreed. "We do not ask for all that much. A minor adjustment," he allowed.

"Then on that we are agreed?" Sabah asked.

"Certainly. That is a technical issue which we can delegate to our respective functionaries."

Both visitors nodded, noting to themselves that the allocation of oil production quotas was the most rancorous of issues. If every country produced too much, then the world price would fall, and all would suffer. On the other hand, if production were overly restricted, the price would rise, damaging the economies of their client states, which would then reduce demand and revenues with it. The proper balance

—hard to strike, like all economic issues—was the yearly subject of high-level diplomatic missions, each with its own economic model, no two ever the same, and considerable discord within the mainly Muslim association. This was going far too easily.

“Is there a message you wish to convey to our governments?” Sabah asked next.

“We desire only peace, peace so that we can accomplish our tasks of restoring our societies into one, as Allah intends it to be. There is nothing for you to fear from us.”

"SO WHAT DO you think?” Another training rotation was completed. Present at the final review of operations were some very senior Israeli officers, at least one of whom was a senior spook. Colonel Sean Magruder was a cavalryman, but in a real sense every senior officer was an intelligence consumer, and willing to shop at any source.

“I think the Saudis are very nervous, along with all their neighbors.”

“And you?” Magruder asked. He’d unconsciously adopted the informal and direct mode of address common in the country, especially its military.

Avi ben Jakob, still titularly a military officer—he was wearing a uniform now—was deputy chief of the Mossad. He wondered how far he could go, but with his job title, that was really for him to decide.

“We are not pleased at all by the development.”

“Historically,” Colonel Magruder observed, “Israel has had a working relationship with Iran, even after the Shah fell. That goes all the way back to the Persian Empire. I believe your festival of Purim results from that period. Israeli air force pilots flew missions for the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war and—”

“We had a large number of Jews then in Iran, and that was intended to get them out,” Jakob said quickly.

“And the arms-for-hostages mess that Reagan got into went through here, probably your agency,” Magruder added, just to show that he, too, was a player in the game.

“You are well informed.”

“That’s my job, part of it anyway. Sir, I am not making value judgments here. Getting your people out of Iran back then was, as we say at home, business, and all countries have to do business. I’m just asking what you think of the UIR.”

“We think Daryaei is the most dangerous man in the world.”

Magruder thought of the eyes-only brief he’d had earlier in the day about the Iranian troop movements into Iraq. “I agree.”

He’d come to like the Israelis. That hadn’t always been true. For years, the United States Army had cordially disliked the Jewish state,

along with the other branches of the service, mainly because of the corporate arrogance adopted by the small nation's senior military officers. But the IDF had learned humility in Lebanon, and learned to respect American arms as observers in the Persian Gulf War—after literally months of telling American officers that they needed advice on how to fight first the air war and then the ground war, they'd quickly taken to asking, politely, to look over some of the American plans because there *might* be some few *minor* things worthy of a *little* study.

The descent of the Buffalo Cav into the Negev had changed things some more. America's tragedy in Vietnam had broken another type of arrogance, and from that had grown a new type of professionalism. Under Marion Diggs, first CO of the reborn 10th United States Cavalry, quite a few harsh lessons had been handed out, and while Magruder was continuing that tradition, the Israeli troopers were learning, just as Americans had done at Fort Irwin. After the initial screams and near fistfights, common sense had broken out. Even Benny Eitan, commander of the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade, had rallied from the first set of drubbings to finish his training rotation with a pair of break-evens, and come away thanking his American hosts for the lessons—and promising to kick their asses when he returned the next year. In the central computer in the local Star Wars building, a complex mathematical model said that the performance of the Israeli army had improved by fully forty percent in just a few years, and now that they again had something to be arrogant about, the Israeli officers were showing disarming humility and an almost ruthless desire to learn—ever signs of truly professional soldiers.

And now one of their head spooks wasn't talking about how his forces could handle anything the Islamic world might throw at his country. That was worth a contact report to Washington, Magruder thought.

THE BUSINESS JET once "lost" in the Mediterranean could no longer leave the country. Even using it to ferry the Iraqi generals to Sudan had been a mistake, but a necessary one, and perhaps the odd covert mission was all right as well, but for the most part it had become Daryaei's personal transport, and a useful one, for his time was short, and his new country large. Within two hours of seeing his Sunni visitors off, he was back in Tehran.

"So?"

Badrayn laid out his papers on the desk, showing cities and routes and times. It was mere mechanics. Daryaei looked the plans over with a cursory eye, and while they seemed overly complex, that was not a

major concern for him. He'd seen maps before. He looked up for the explanation that had to come with the paperwork.

"The primary issue is time," Badrayn said. "We want to have each traveler to his destination no more than thirty hours after departure. This one, for example, leaves Tehran at six A.M., and arrives in New York at two A.M. Tehran time, elapsed time twenty hours. The trade show he will attend—it is at the Jacob Javits Center in New York—will be open past ten in the evening. This one departs at 2:55 A.M., and ultimately arrives in Los Angeles twenty-three hours later—early afternoon, local time. His trade show will be open all day. That is the most lengthy in terms of distance and time, and his 'package' will still be more than eighty-five percent effective."

"And security?"

"They are all fully briefed. I have selected intelligent, educated people. All they need do is be pleasant en route. After that, a little caution. Twenty at once, yes, that is troublesome, but those were your orders."

"And the other group?"

"They will go out two days later via similar arrangements," Badrayn reported. "That mission is far more dangerous."

"I am aware of that. Are the people faithful?"

"They are that." Badrayn nodded, knowing that the question really asked if they were fools. "The political risks concern me."

"Why?" The observation didn't surprise Daryaei, but he wanted the reason.

"The obvious question of discovering who sent them, though their travel documents will be properly prepared, and the usual security measures put in place. No, I mean the American political context. An unhappy event to a politician can often create sympathy for him, and from that sympathy can come political support."

"Indeed! It does not make him appear weak?" That was rather much to swallow.

"In our context, yes, but not necessarily in theirs."

Daryaei considered that and compared it with other analyses he'd ordered and reviewed. "I have met Ryan. He is weak. He does *not* deal effectively with his political difficulties. He still has no true government behind him. Between the first mission and the second, we will break him—or at least we will distract him long enough to achieve our next goal. After that is accomplished, America becomes irrelevant."

"Better the first mission only," Badrayn advised.

"We must shake their people. If what you say of their government is true, we will do such harm as they have never known. We will shake their leader, we will shake his confidence, we will shake the

confidence of the people in him."

He had to respond to that carefully. This was a Holy Man with a Holy Mission. He was not fully amenable to reason. And yet there was one other factor which he didn't know about. There had to be. Daryaei was more given to wishes than considered action—no, that wasn't true, was it? He united the two while giving another impression entirely. What the cleric did appreciate was that the American government was still vulnerable, since its lower house of parliament had not yet been replaced, a process just beginning.

"Best of all merely to kill Ryan, if we could. An attack on children will inflame them. Americans are very sentimental about little ones."

"The second mission goes on only after the first is known to be successful?" Daryaei demanded.

"Yes, that is true."

"Then that is sufficient," he said, looking back down at the travel arrangements, and leaving Badrayn to his own thoughts.

There is a third element. There had to be.

"HE SAYS HIS intentions are peaceful."

"So did Hitler, Ali," the President reminded his friend. He checked his watch. It was after midnight in Saudi Arabia. Ali had flown back and conferred with his government before calling Washington, as one would expect. "You know about the troop movement."

"Yes, your people briefed our military earlier today. It will be some time before they are ready to make any threat. Such things take time. Remember, I was once in uniform."

"True, that's what they told me, too." Ryan paused. "Okay, what does the Kingdom propose?"

"We will observe closely. Our military is training. We have your pledge of support. We are concerned, but not overly so."

"We could schedule some joint exercises," Jack offered.

"That might only inflame matters," the Prince replied. The absence of total conviction in his voice was not accidental. He'd probably fielded the idea in council himself and gotten a negative reply.

"Well, I guess you've had a long day. Tell me, how did Daryaei look? I haven't seen the guy since you introduced him to me."

"His health appears good. He looks tired, but he's had a busy time."

"I can relate to that. Ali?"

"Yes, Jack?"

The President stopped then, reminding himself that he was unschooled in diplomatic exchange. "How concerned should I be about all this?"

"What do your people tell you?" the Prince replied.

“About the same as you do, but not all of them. We need to keep this line open, my friend.”

“I understand, Mr. President. Good-bye for now.”

It was an unsatisfactory conclusion to an unsatisfactory call. Ryan replaced the phone and looked around at his empty office. Ali wasn’t saying what he wanted to say because the position of his government was different from what he thought it should be. The same had happened to Jack often enough, and the same rules applied. Ali had to be loyal to that government—hell, it was mainly his own family—but he had allowed himself one slip, and the Prince was too clever to do that sort of thing by mistake. It probably would have been easier before, when Ryan had not been President and both could talk without the worry of making policy with every word. Now Jack was America to those beyond the borders, and governmental officials could talk to him only that way, instead of remembering that he was also a thinking man who needed to explore options before making decisions. Maybe if it hadn’t been over the phone, Jack thought. Maybe face-to-face would have been better. But even Presidents were limited by time and space.

36

TRAVELERS

KLM—ROYAL DUTCH AIRLINES—FLIGHT 534—left the gate on time at 1:10 A.M. The aircraft was full at this hour, full of weary people who stumbled to their seats, strapped in, and accepted pillows and blankets. The more experienced travelers among them waited for the sound of the wheels being retracted, then pushed their seats as far back as they could go, and closed their eyes in the hope of a smooth ride and something akin to real sleep.

Five of Badrayn's men were aboard, two in first class, three in business. They all had baggage in the cargo hold, and a carry-on tucked under the seat in front. All had a minor case of nerves, and all would have had a drink to ameliorate it—religious prohibition or not—but the aircraft had landed in an Islamic airport and would not serve alcohol until it had left United Islamic Republic airspace. To a man, they considered their situation and bowed to circumstance. They'd been well briefed and properly prepared. They'd come through the airport like ordinary travelers, and submitted their carry-ons to X-ray inspection by security personnel who were every bit as careful as their Western counterparts actually more so, since the flights were relatively few, and the local paranoia relatively greater. In every case, the X-ray display had shown a shaving kit, along with papers, books and other sundries.

They were all educated men, many of them having attended the American University of Beirut, some to obtain degrees, the others simply to learn about the enemy. They were dressed neatly, all with ties, loose now in their collars, and their coats hung in the mini-closets throughout the aircraft. Within forty minutes, they, along with the rest of the passengers, were fitfully asleep.

• • •

"SO WHAT'S YOUR take on all this?" van Damm asked.

Holtzman swirled his drink, watching the ice cubes circle around.

“Under different circumstances I might call it a conspiracy, but it’s not. For a guy who says he’s just trying to put things back together, Jack sure is doing a lot of new and crazy things.”

“ ‘Crazy’ is a little strong, Bob.”

“Not for them, it isn’t. Everybody’s saying ‘he isn’t one of us,’ and they’re reacting strongly to his initiatives. Even you have to admit that his tax ideas are a little way off the usual playing field, but that’s the excuse for what’s happening—one of the excuses, anyway. The game’s the same one it always was. A couple of leaks, and the manner of their presentation, that’s what determines how it’s played.”

Arnie had to nod. It was like highway littering. If someone dumped all the trash in the proper barrel, then things were neat, and the task was done in a few seconds. If that same someone tossed it all out the window of a moving car, then you had to spend hours picking it all up. The other side was now dumping the trash haphazardly, and the President was having to use his limited time doing wasteful and unproductive things instead of the real work of driving down the road. The simile was ugly, but apt. Politics was so often less about doing constructive work than about spreading garbage around for others to clean up.

“Who leaked?”

The reporter shrugged. “I can only guess. Somebody in the Agency, probably somebody who’s being RIF’d. You have to admit that building up the spy side of the house looks kind of Neanderthal. How far are they cutting the Intelligence Directorate?”

“More than enough to compensate for the new field people. The idea is to save money overall, better information, more efficient overall performance, that sort of thing. I don’t,” he added, “tell the President how to do intelligence stuff. On that, he really is an expert.”

“I know that. I had my story almost ready to run. I was about to call you for an interview with him when the bubble broke.”

“Oh? And—”

“What was my angle? He’s the most contradictory son of a bitch in this town. In some ways he’s brilliant—but in others? Babe-in-the-woods is charitable.”

“Go on.”

“I like the guy,” Holtzman admitted. “For damned sure, he’s honest—not relatively honest, really honest. I was going to tell it pretty much the way it was. You want to know what has *me* pissed?” He paused for a sip of the bourbon, hesitated again before proceeding, and then spoke with unconcealed anger. “Somebody at the *Post* leaked my story, probably to Ed Kealty. Then Kealty probably arranged a leak to Donner and Plumber.”

“And they used your story to hang him?”

"Pretty much," Holtzman admitted.

Van Damm nearly laughed. He held it back for as long as he could, but it was too delicious to resist: "Welcome to Washington, Bob."

"You know, some of us really do take our professional ethics seriously," the reporter shot back, rather lamely. "It was a good story. I researched the hell out of it. I got my own source in CIA—well, I have several, but I got a new one for this, somebody who really knew the stuff. I took what he gave me, and I back-checked the hell out of it, verified everything I could, wrote the piece stating what I knew and what I thought—careful to explain the difference at all times," he assured his host. "And you know? Ryan comes out looking pretty good. Yeah, sure, sometimes he short-circuits the system, but the guy's never broken the rules far as I can tell. If we ever have a major crisis, that's the guy I want in the Oval Office. But some son of a *bitch* took *my* story, *my* information from *my* sources, and played with it, I don't like that, Arnie. *I* have a public trust, too, and so does my paper, and somebody *fucked* with that." He set his drink down. "Hey, I know what you think about me and my"

"No, you don't," van Damm interrupted.

"But you've always—"

"I'm the chief of staff, Bob. I *have* to be loyal to my boss, and so I have to play the game from my side, but if you think I don't respect the press, you're not as smart as you're supposed to be. We're not always friends. Sometimes we're enemies, but we need you as much as you need us. For Christ's sake, if I didn't respect you, why the hell are you drinking my booze?"

It was either an elegant roll or a truthful statement, Holtzman thought, and Arnie was too skillful a player for him to tell the difference right off. But the smart thing to do was finish the drink, which he did. A pity that his host preferred cheap booze to go along with his L. L. Bean shirts. Arnie didn't know how to dress, either. Or maybe that was a considered part of his mystique. The political game was so intricate as to be a cross between classical metaphysics and experimental science. You could never know it all, and finding out one part as often as not denied you the ability to find out another, equally important part. But that was why it was the best game in town.

"Okay, Arnie, I'll accept that."

"Good of you." Van Damm smiled, and refilled the glass. "So why did you call me?"

"It's almost embarrassing." Another pause. "I will not participate in the public hanging of an innocent man."

"You've done that before," Arnie objected.

"Maybe so, but they were all politicians, and they all had it coming in one way or another. I don't know what—okay, how about I'm not

into child abuse? Ryan deserves a fair chance."

"And you're pissed about losing your story and the Pulitzer that—"

"I have two of them already," Holtzman reminded him. Otherwise, he would have been taken off the story by his managing editor, but internal politics at the *Washington* Post were as vicious as those elsewhere in the city.

"So?"

"So, I need to know about Colombia. I need to know about Jimmy Cutter and how he died."

"Jesus, Bob, you don't know what our ambassador went through down there today."

"Great language for invective, Spanish." A reporter's smile.

"The story can't be told, Bob. It just can't."

"The story *will* be told. It's just a question of who tells it, and that will determine *how* it's told. Arnie, I know enough now to write something, okay?"

As so often happened in Washington at times like this, everyone was trapped by circumstance. Holtzman had a story to write. Doing it the right way would, perhaps, resurrect his original story, put him in the running for another Pulitzer—it was still important to him, previous denials notwithstanding, and Arnie knew it—and tell whoever had leaked his story to Ed Kealty that he or she had better leave the Post before Holtzman nailed that name down and wrecked his or her career with a few well-placed whispers and more than a few dead-end assignments. Arnie was trapped by his duty to protect his President, and the only way to do it was to violate the law and his President's trust. There had to be an easier way, the chief of staff thought, to earn a living. He could have made Holtzman wait for his decision, but that would have been mere theatrics, and both men were past that.

"No notes, no tape recorder."

"Off the record. 'Senior official,' not even 'senior administration official,' " Bob agreed.

"And I can tell you who to confirm it with."

"They know it all?"

"Even more than I do," van Damm told him. "Hell, I just found out about the important part."

A raised eyebrow. "That's nice, and the same rules will apply to them. Who really knows about this?"

"Even the President doesn't know it all. I'm not sure if anybody knows it all."

Holtzman took another sip. It would be his last. Like a doctor in an operating room, he didn't believe in mixing alcohol and work.

FLIGHT 534 TOUCHED down at Istanbul at 2:55 A.M. local time, after a flight of 1,270 miles and three hours, fifteen minutes. The passengers were groggily awake, having been roused by the cabin staff thirty minutes earlier and told to put their seat-backs to the upright position in a series of languages. The landing was smooth, and a few of them raised the plastic shades on the windows to see that they were indeed on the ground at one more anonymous piece of real estate with white runway lights and blue taxiway lights, just like those all over the world. Those getting out stood at the proper time to stumble off into the Turkish night. The rest pushed their seats back for another snooze during the forty-five-minute layover, before the aircraft left yet another gate at 3:40 A.M. for the second half of the trip.

Lufthansa 601 was a European-made Airbus 310 twinjet, roughly the same as the KLM Boeing in size and capacity This one, too, had five travelers aboard, and left its gate at 2:55 for the nonstop flight to Frankfurt. The departure was routine in all details.

"THAT'S SOME STORY, Arnie."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't know the important parts until this week."

"How sure are you of this?" Holtzman asked.

"The pieces all fit." He shrugged again. "I can't say I liked hearing it. I think we would have won the election anyway, but, Jesus, the guy threw it. He tanked on a presidential election, but you know," van Damm said wistfully, "that might have been the most courageous and generous political act of the century. I didn't think he had it in him."

"Does Fowler know?"

"I haven't told him. Maybe I should."

"Wait a minute. Remember how Liz Elliot planted a story on me about Ryan and how—"

"Yes, that all folds into this. Jack went down personally to get those soldiers out. The guy next to him in the chopper was killed, and he's looked after the family ever since. Liz paid for it. She came apart the night the bomb went off in Denver."

"And Jack really did . . . you know that's one story that never came out all the way. Fowler lost it and almost launched a missile at Iran—it was Ryan, wasn't it? He's the one who stopped it." Holtzman looked down at his drink and decided on another sip. "How?"

"He got onto the Hot Line," Arnie replied. "He cut the President off and talked directly with Narmonov, and persuaded him to back things off some. Fowler flipped out and told the Secret Service to go arrest him, but by the time they got to the Pentagon, things *were* calmed down. It worked, thank God."

It took Holtzman a minute or so to absorb that, but again, the story

fit with the fragments he knew. Fowler had resigned two days later, a broken man, but an honorable one who knew that his moral right to govern his country had died with his order to launch a nuclear weapon at an innocent city. And Ryan had also been shaken by the event, badly enough to leave government service at once, until Roger Durling had brought him back in.

"Ryan's broken every rule there is. Almost as if he likes it." But that wasn't fair, was it?

"If he hadn't, we might not be here." The chief of staff poured himself another. Holtzman waved him off. "You see what I mean about the story, Bob? If you tell it all, the country gets hurt."

"But then why did Fowler recommend Ryan to Roger Durling?" the reporter asked. "He couldn't stand the guy and—"

"Whatever his faults, and he has them, Bob Fowler is an honest politician, that's why. No, he doesn't like Ryan personally, maybe it's chemistry, I don't know, but Ryan saved him and he told Roger—what was it? 'Good man in a storm.' That's it," Arnie remembered.

"Shame he doesn't know politics."

"He learns pretty fast. Might surprise you."

"He's going to gut the government if he gets the chance. I can't—I mean, I *do* like the guy personally, but his policies . . ."

"Every time I think I have him figured out, he swerves on me, and then I have to remind myself that he doesn't have an agenda," van Damm said. "He just does the job. I give him papers to read, and he acts on them. He listens to what people tell him—asks good questions, and always listens to the answers—but he makes his own decisions, as though he knows what's right and what's wrong—but the hell of it is, mostly he does. Bob, he's rolled *me!* But that's not it, either. Sometimes I'm not sure what it is with him, you know?"

"A total outsider," Holtzman observed quietly. "But—"

The chief of staff nodded. "Yeah, *but. But* he's being analyzed as though he's an insider with a hidden agenda, and they're playing the insider games as if they apply to him, but they don't."

"So the key to the guy is there's nothing to figure out ... son of a bitch," Bob concluded. "He hates the job, doesn't he?" "Most of the time. You should have been there when he spoke in the Midwest. He got it then. All those people loving him, and he loved them back, and it showed—and it scared the shit out of him. Nothing to figure out? Exactly. Like they say in golf, the hardest thing to do is to hit a straight ball, right? Everybody's looking for curves. There aren't any."

Holtzman snorted. "So, what's the angle if there isn't an angle?"

"Bob, I just try to control the media, remember? Damned if I know how you report this, except to state the facts—you know, like you're *supposed* to do."

That was a lot for the journalist to take. He'd been in Washington for all of his professional life. "And every politician is *supposed* to be like Ryan. But they're not."

"This one is," Arnie shot back.

"How am I supposed to tell my readers that? Who'll believe it?"

"Ain't that the problem?" he breathed. "I've been in politics all my life, and I thought I knew it all. Hell, I *do* know it all. I'm one of the best operators ever was, everybody knows that, and all of a sudden this yahoo comes into the Oval Office and says the emperor's naked, and he's right, and nobody knows what to do about it except to say that he isn't. The system isn't ready for this. The system is only ready for itself."

"And the system will destroy anybody who says different." Holtzman snorted with the thought: If Hans Christian Andersen had written "The Emperor's Clothes" about Washington, then the kid who'd spoken the truth out loud would have been killed on the spot by the assembled crowd of insiders.

"It'll try," Arnie agreed.

"And what are we supposed to do about it?"

"You're the one who said that you don't want to officiate at the hanging of an innocent man, remember?"

"Where's that leave us?"

"Maybe to talk about the unruly mob," Arnie suggested, "or the emperor's corrupt court."

NEXT TO GO was Austrian Airlines 774. It was down to a routine now, and the arrangements were well within the technical parameters. The cans of shaving cream had been filled a bare forty minutes before departure. The proximity of the Monkey House to the airport helped, as did the time of day, and having people race the last few hundred meters to the gate was not unusual anywhere in the world, particularly for flights like this one. The "soup" was sprayed into the bottom of the can, by a plastic valve that was invisible to X-ray examination. The nitrogen went in the top to a separate insulated container located in the center of the cans. The process was clean and safe—for extra but really unnecessary safety, the cans were sprayed and wiped; that was just to make the travelers happy. The cans were quite cold, of course, though not dangerously so. As the liquid nitrogen boiled off, it would vent through a pressure valve into the ambient atmosphere, where it merely joined the air. Though nitrogen is an important element in explosives, by itself it is totally inert, clear, and odorless. Nor would it react chemically with the contents of the cans, and so the pressure-relief valve retained a precise quantity of the

warming gas to act as a safe propellant for the “soup” when the time came.

The filling was done by the medical corpsmen in their protective suits—they refused to work without them, and ordering them otherwise would only have made them nervous and sloppy, and so the director indulged their fears. Two groups of five remained to be done. The cans could really all have been prepared at the same time, Moudi knew, but no unnecessary chances were being taken, a thought that made him stop cold. No unnecessary chances? Sure.

DARYAEI DIDN’T SLEEP that night, which was unusual for him. Though with increasing years he found that he needed less of it, getting off to sleep had never been difficult for him. On a really quiet night, if the winds were right, he could hear the airliners bring their engines to the roar of takeoff power—a distant sound, rather like a waterfall, he sometimes thought, or perhaps an earthquake. Some fundamental sound of nature, distant and foreboding. And now he found himself listening for it, and with his imagination, wondering if he heard it or not.

Had he gone too fast? He was an old man in a country where so many died young. He remembered the diseases of his youth, and later he’d learned their scientific causes, mainly poor water and sanitation, for Iran had been a backward country for most of his lifetime, despite its long history of civilization and power. Then it had been resurrected by oil and the immense riches that had come with it. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shahanshah—*King of kings!* the phrase proclaimed—had begun to raise the country, but made the mistake of moving too fast and making too many enemies. In Iran’s dark age, as in every other such time, secular power had devolved to the Islamic clergy, and in liberating the nation’s peasantry, he’d trod on too many toes, making enemies of people whose power was spiritual and to whom the common folk looked for order in lives made chaotic by change. Even so, the Shah had almost succeeded, but not quite, and *not quite* was as damning a curse as the world produced for those who would be great.

What did such men think? Just as he himself was old, so the Shah had grown old and sick with cancer, and watched the work of a lifetime evaporate in a matter of weeks, his associates executed in a brief orgy of settled scores, bitter at his betrayal by his American friends. Had he thought that he’d gone too far—or not far enough? Daryaei didn’t know, and now he would have liked to know, as he listened for the distant sounds of waterfalls in the still of a Persian night.

To move too fast was a grievous error, which the young learned and

the old knew, but not to move enough, fast enough, far enough, strongly enough, that was what really denied goals to those who would be great. How bitter it must be to lie in bed, without the sleep one needed to think clearly, and wonder and curse oneself for chances missed and chances lost.

Perhaps he knew what the Shah had thought, Daryaei admitted to himself. His own country was drifting again. Even insulated as he was, he knew the signs. It showed up as subtle differences in dress, especially the dress of women. Not much, not quite enough for his true believers to persecute them, for even the true believers had softened their devotion, and there were gray areas into which people could venture to see what might happen. Yes, the people still believed in Islam, and yes, they still believed in him, but, really, the Holy Koran wasn't *that* strict, and their nation was rich, and to grow richer it needed to do business. How could it be a champion of the Faith unless it grew richer, after all? The best and brightest of Iran's young went abroad to be educated, for his country did not possess the schools that the infidel West had—and, for the most part, they came back, educated in skills which his country needed. But they also came back with other things, invisible, doubts and questions, and memories of a freewheeling life in a different society where the pleasures of the flesh were available to the weak, and all men were weak. What if all Khomeini and he had accomplished was to delay what the Shah had started? The people who had come back to Islam in reaction to Pahlavi were now drifting back to the promise of freedom he'd offered them. Didn't they *know*? Didn't they *see?* They could have all the trappings of power and all the blessings of what people called civilization and still remain faithful, still have the spiritual anchor—without which all was nothing.

But to have all that, his country needed to be more than it was, and so he could not afford to be *not quite.* Daryaei had to deliver the things that would show he'd been right all along, that uncompromising faith was the true root of power.

The assassination of the Iraqi leader, the misfortune that had befallen America—these things had to be a sign, didn't they? He'd studied them carefully. Now Iraq and Iran were one, and *that* had been the quest of decades—and at virtually the same instant, America had been crippled. It wasn't just Badrayn who was telling him things. He had his own America experts who knew the workings of that country's government. He knew Ryan from a single important meeting, had seen his eyes, heard the bold but hollow words, and so he knew the measure of the man who might be his principal adversary. He knew that Ryan had not, and by the laws of his country *could* not, have a replacement selected for himself, and so there was

only this moment, and he had to act in it, or else assume for himself the curse of *not quite.*

No, he would not be remembered as another Mohammad Pahlavi. If he did not covet the trappings of power, he lusted for the fact of it. Before his death he would lead all Islam. In a month he would have the oil of the Persian Gulf and the keys to Mecca, secular *and* spiritual power. From that his influence would expand in all directions. In but a few years his country would be a superpower in every way, and he would leave to his successors a legacy such as the world hadn't seen since Alexander, but with the added security that it was founded in the words of God. To achieve that end, to unite Islam, to fulfill the Will of Allah and the words of the Prophet Mohammed, he would do what was needed, and if that meant moving fast, then he would move fast. Overall, the process was a simple one, three simple steps, the third and most difficult of which was already established and nothing could stop, even if Badrayn's plans all failed completely.

Was he moving too fast? Daryaei asked himself for the last time. No, he was moving decisively, with surprise, with calculation, with boldness. That was what history would say.

• • •

"FLYING AT NIGHT is a big deal?" Jack asked.

"Sure is, for them it is," Robby replied. He liked briefing the President this way, late evening in the Oval Office, with a drink. "They've always been more parsimonious with equipment than they are with people. Helicopters—French ones in this case, same model the Coast Guard has a bunch of—cost money, and we haven't seen much in the way of night operations. The operation they're running is heavy on ASW. So maybe they're thinking about dealing with all those Dutch subs the Republic of China bought last year. We're also seeing a lot of combined operations with their air force."

"Conclusion?"

"They're training up for something." The Pentagon's Director of Operations closed his briefing book. "Sir, we—"

"Robby," Ryan said, looking over the new reading glasses Cathy had just gotten him, "if you don't start calling me 'Jack' when we're alone, I'm going to break you back to ensign by executive order."

"We're not alone," Admiral Jackson objected, nodding toward Agent Price.

"Andrea doesn't count—oh, shit, I mean—" Ryan blushed.

"He's right, Admiral, I don't count," she said, with a barely contained laugh. "Mr. President, I've been waiting *weeks* for you to say

that."

Jack looked down at the table and shook his head. "This is no way for a man to live. Now my best friend calls me 'sir,' and I'm being impolite to a lady."

"*Jack,* you are my commander-in-chief," Robby pointed out, with a relaxed grin at his friend's discomfort. "And I'm just a poor sailor man."

First things first, the President thought: "Agent Price?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Pour yourself a drink and sit down."

"Sir, I'm on duty, and regulations—"

"Then make it a light one, but that's an order from your President. Do it!"

She actually hesitated, but then decided that POTUS was trying to make some sort of point. Price poured a large thimbleful of whiskey into the Old Fashioned glass and added a lot of ice and Evian to it. Then she sat next to the J-3. His wife, Sissy, was upstairs in the House with the Ryan family.

"As a practical matter, people, the President needs to relax, and it's easier for me to do that if I don't make ladies stand up, and my friend can call me by my name once in a while. Are we agreed on that?"

"Aye aye," Robby said, still smiling but seeing the logic and desperation of the moment. "Yes, Jack, we are all relaxed now, and we *will* enjoy it." He looked over at Price. "You're here to shoot me if I misbehave, right?"

"Right in the head," she confirmed.

"I prefer missiles myself. Safer," he added.

"You did okay with a shotgun one night, or so the Boss has told me. By the way, thanks."

"Huh?"

"For keeping him alive. We actually like taking care of the Boss, even if he gets too familiar with the hired help."

Jack freshened his drink while they relaxed on the other sofa. Remarkable, he thought. For the first time, there was a genuinely relaxed atmosphere in the office, to the point that two people could joke about him, right in front of him, as though he were a human being instead of POTUS.

"I like this a lot better." The President looked up. "Robby, this gal has been around more crap than we have, listened in on all sorts of things. She has a master's degree, she's smart, but I'm supposed to treat her like she's a knuckle-dragger."

"Well, hell, I'm just a fighter jock with a bad knee."

"And I still don't know what the hell I'm supposed to be. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President?" Getting her to call him by his name was an

impossible goal, Jack knew.

"China, what do you think?"

"I think I'm no expert, but since you ask, I don't know."

"You're expert enough," Robby observed with a grunt. "All the king's horses and all the king's men don't know much, either. The additional subs are arriving," he told the President. "Mancuso wants them on the north-south line between the two navies. I've concurred on that, and the Secretary's signed off on it."

"How's Bretano doing?"

"He knows what he doesn't know, Jack. He listens to us on operational stuff, asks good questions, and listens some more. He wants to start getting out into the field next week, poke around and see the kids at work to educate himself. His managerial skills are downright awesome, but he's swinging a big ax—he's going to, that is. I've seen his draft plan for downsizing the bureaucracy. Whoa," Admiral Jackson concluded, with an eye-roll.

"You have problems with that?" Jack asked.

"No way. It's about fifty years overdue. Ms. Price, I'm an operator," he explained. "I like greasy flight suits and the smell of jet fuel and pulling g's. But us guys at the sharp end always have the desk-sitters after us like a bunch of little dogs at our ankles all the time. Bretano loves engineers and people who do things, but along the way he's learned to hate bureaucrats and cost accountants. My kind of guy."

"Back to China," Ryan said.

"Okay, we still have the electronics-intelligence flights working out of Kadena. We're getting routine training stuff. We do not know what intentions the ChiComs have. CIA isn't giving us much. Signal intelligence is unremarkable. State says that their government says, 'What's the big deal?' And that's it. The Taiwanese navy is big enough to handle the threat, if there is one, unless they get coldcocked. That's not going to happen. They're brighteyed and bushy-tailed, doing their own training ops. A lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing I can make out."

"The Gulf?"

"Well, we're hearing from our people in Israel that they're taking a very close look, but I gather they're not getting much in the way of hard intel. Whatever sources they had were probably with the generals who bugged out to Sudan—aides and such, probably. I got a fax in from Sean Magruder—"

"Who's that?" Ryan asked.

"He's an Army colonel, boss-man of the 10th Cav in the Negev. I met him last year; he's a guy we listen to. 'Most dangerous man in the world,' is what our good pal Avi ben Jakob says of Daryaei. Magruder thought that was insightful enough to pass it along."

"And?"

"And we need to keep an eye on it. It's probably a ways off, but Daryaei has imperial ambitions. The Saudis are playing it wrong. We should have people on the way over now, maybe not many, but some, to show the other side that we're in the game."

"I talked to Ali about that. His government wants to cool it."

"Wrong signal," Jackson observed.

"Agreed." POTUS nodded. "We'll work on that."

"What's the state of the Saudi military?" Price asked.

"Not as good as it ought to be. After the Persian Gulf War, it got fashionable to join their National Guard, and they bought equipment like it was a bunch of Mercedes cars from a wholesaler. For a while they had themselves a fine old time playing soldier, but then they found out that you have to maintain the stuff. They hired people to do that for them. Kinda like squires and knights back in the old days. Ain't the same," Jackson said. "And now they're not training. Oh, sure, they run around in their tanks, and they do their gunnery—the M1 is a fun tank to shoot, and they do a lot of that—but they're not training in units. Knights and squires. Their tradition is guys on horses going after other guys on horses-one-on-one, like in the movies. War ain't like that. War is a great big team working together. Their culture and history are against that model, and they haven't had the chance to learn. Bottom line, they're not as good as they think they are. If the UIR gets its military act together someday and comes south, the Saudis are outgunned and damned sure outmanned."

"How do we fix that?" Ryan asked.

"For starters, get some of our people over there, and some of their people over here, out to the National Training Center for a crash course in reality. I've talked it over with Mary Diggs at the NTC—"

"Mary?"

"General Marion Diggs. 'Mary' goes back to the Point. It's a uniform thing," Robby told Price. "I'd like to fly a Saudi heavy battalion over here and have the OpFor pound them into the sand for a few weeks to get the message across. That's how our people learned. That's how the Israelis learned. And that's how the Saudis are going to have to learn, damned sight easier that way than in a shooting war. Diggs is for it, big time. Give us two or three years, maybe less if we set up a proper training establishment in Saudi, and we can snap their army into shape—except for politics," he added.

POTUS nodded. "Yeah, it'll make the Israelis nervous, and the Saudis have always worried about having too strong a military, for domestic reasons."

"You could tell them the story about the three little pigs. It might not fly with their culture, but the big bad wolf just moved in next door

to them, and they'd better start paying attention before he starts a-huffin' and a-puffin'."

"I hear you, Robby. I'll have Adler and Vasco think that one over." Ryan checked his watch. Another fifteen-hour day. One more drink would have been nice, but as it was, he'd be lucky to get six hours of sleep, and he didn't want to wake up with a larger headache than necessary. He set his drink down and waved for the other two to follow, down the ramp and out the door.

"SWORDSMAN heading to the residence," Andrea spoke into her radio mike. A minute later, they were in the elevator and going up.

"Try not to let the booze show," Jack remarked to his principal agent.

"What *are* we going to do with you?" she asked the ceiling, as the doors opened.

Jack walked out first, leaving the other two behind as he took his jacket off. He hated wearing a jacket all the time.

"Well, now you know," Robby said to the Secret Service agent. She turned to look in his eyes.

"Yeah." Actually she'd known for quite a while, but she kept learning more and more about SwoRDSMAN.

"Take good care of him, Price. When he escapes from this place, I want my friend back."

THE VAGARIES OF winds made the Lufthansa flight first to arrive at the international terminal in Frankfurt, Germany. For the travelers it was like an inverted funnel. The jetway was the narrow part, and on entering the concourse they all spread out, checking the video monitors for their gates. The layovers ranged from one to three hours, and their luggage would be automatically transferred from one aircraft to another—for all the complaints about airport luggage-handlers, 99.9 percent is a passing grade in most human endeavors; and the Germans were notoriously efficient. Customs control points didn't worry them, because none of them were spending any more time in Europe than was necessary. They studiously avoided eye contact, even when three of them entered a coffee shop, and all three, on reflection, decided on decaf. Two walked into the men's rooms for the usual reason, and then looked into the mirrors to check their faces. They'd all shaved just before leaving, but one of them, especially heavilybearded, saw that his jaw was already shadowed. Perhaps he should shave? Not a good idea, he thought, smiling at the mirror. Then he lifted his carry-on bag and walked off to the first-class lounge to wait for the flight to Dallas-Fort Worth.

“LONG DAY?” JACK asked, after everyone had gone home, and just the usual squad of guards patrolled outside.

“Yeah. Grand rounds tomorrow with Bernie. Some procedures the next day, though.” Cathy changed into her nightgown, as tired as her husband was.

“Anything new?”

“Not in my shop. Had lunch with Pierre Alexandre. He’s a new associate professor working under Ralph Forster, ex-Army, pretty smart.”

“Infectious diseases?” Jack vaguely remembered meeting the guy at some function or other. “AIDS and stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Nasty,” Ryan observed, getting into bed.

“They just dodged a bullet. There was a mini-outbreak of Ebola in Zaire,” Cathy said, getting in the other side. “Two deaths. Then two more cases turned up in Sudan, but it doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere.”

“Is that as bad as people say?” Jack turned the light off.

“Eighty percent mortality—pretty bad.” She adjusted the covers and moved toward him. “But enough of that stuff. Sissy says she’s got a concert scheduled for two weeks from now at Kennedy Center. Beethoven’s Fifth, with Fritz Bayerlein conducting, would you believe? Think we can get tickets?” He could sense his wife’s smile in the dark.

“I think I know the theater owner. I’ll see what I can do.” A kiss. A day ended.

“SEE YOU IN the morning, Jeff.” Price went to the right for her car. Raman went to the left for his.

A mind could be dulled by this job, Aref Raman told himself. The sheer mechanics of it, the hours, the watching and waiting and doing nothing—but always being ready.

Hmph. Why should he complain about that? It was the story of his adult life. He drove north, waited for the security gate to open and headed northwest. The empty streets made it go quickly. By the time he got to his home, the bled-off stress of working the Detail in the White House had him nodding, but there were still mechanics.

Unlocking the door, he next turned off the security system, picked up the mail that had come through the slot in the door and scanned it. One bill, and the rest was junk mail offering him the chance of a lifetime to buy things he didn’t need. He hung up his coat, removed

the pistol and holster from his belt, and walked into the kitchen. The light was blinking on the answering machine. There was one message.

"Mr. Sloan," the digital recorder said to him in a voice that was familiar, though he'd only heard it once before, "this is Mr. Alahad. Your rug just came in, and is ready for delivery."

37

DISCHARGES

AMERICA WAS SLEEPING when they boarded their flights in Amsterdam, and London, and Vienna, and Paris. This time no two were on the same aircraft, and the schedules were staggered so that the same customs inspector would not have the chance to open two shaving kits and find the same brand of cream and then wonder about it, however unlikely that might be. The real risk had been in placing so many men on the same flights out of Tehran, but they'd been properly briefed on how to act. While the ever-watchful German police, for example, might have taken note of a gaggle of Middle Eastern men huddling together after arriving on the same flight, airports have always been anonymous places full of semi-confused wandering people, often tired and usually disoriented, and one lonely, aimless traveler looked much like another.

The first to board a transatlantic flight walked onto a Singapore Airlines 747 at Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport. Coded as SQ26, the airliner pulled away at eight-thirty A.M. and got into the air on time, then angled northwest for a great-circle course that would take it over the southern tip of Greenland. The flight would last just under eight hours. The traveler was in a first-class window seat, which he tilted all the way back. It was not even three in the morning in his next destination city, and he preferred sleep to a movie, along with most of the other people in the nose of the aircraft. He had his itinerary memorized, and if his memory failed, with the confusion of long-distance travel, he still had his tickets to remind him of what to do next. For the moment, sleep was enough, and he turned his head on the pillow, soothed by the swish of passing air outside the double windows.

Around him, in the air, were other flights, with other travelers heading for Boston, Philadelphia, Washington-Dulles, Atlanta, Orlando, Dallas-Fort Worth, Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, and Los Angeles, the ten principal gateway cities into America. Each of them had a trade show or convention of some sort underway now. Ten other cities, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Nashville, Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Seattle, Phoenix, Houston, and New Orleans, also had

events, and each was but a brief flight—in two cases, a drive—from the nearest port of entry.

The traveler on SQ26 thought about that as he faded off. The shaving kit was tucked in his carry-on bag under the seat in front of him, carefully insulated and wrapped, and he made certain that his feet didn't touch, much less kick, the bag.

IT WAS APPROACHING noon outside Tehran. The Movie Star watched as his group conducted weapons practice. It was a formality really, designed more for morale than anything else. They all knew how to shoot, having learned and practiced in the Bekaa Valley, and though they weren't using the same weapons they'd have in America, it didn't really matter. A gun was a gun, and targets were targets, and they knew about both. They couldn't simulate everything, of course, but all of them knew how to drive, and they spent hours every day going over the diagram and the models. They would go in during the late afternoon, when parents came in to pick up their children for the daily trip home, when the bodyguards would be tired and bored from a day of watching the children doing childish things. Movie Star had gotten descriptions of several of the "regular" cars, and some were common types which could be rented. The opposition was as trained and experienced as they had to be, but they were not supermen. Some were even women, and for all his exposure to the West, the Movie Star could not take women seriously as adversaries, guns or no guns. But their biggest tactical advantage was that his team was willing to use deadly force with profligate abandon. With over twenty toddlers about, plus the school staff, and probably a few parents in the way as well, the opposition would be greatly hampered. So, no, the initial part of the mission was the easiest. The hard part would be getting away—if things got that far. He had to tell his team that they would get away, and that there was a plan. But really it didn't matter, and in their hearts all of them knew it.

They were all willing to become sacrifices in the unannounced *jihad,* else they would never have joined Hezbollah in the first place. They were also willing to see their victims as sacrifices. But that was just a convenient label. Religion was really nothing more than a façade for what they did and who they were. A true scholar of their religion would have blanched at their purpose, but Islam had many adherents, and among them were many who chose to read the scriptures in unconventional ways, and they too, had their following. What Allah might have thought of their actions was not something they considered very deeply, and the Movie Star didn't trouble himself to think about it at all. For him, it was business, a political statement, a

professional challenge, one more task to occupy his days. Perhaps, too, it was a step toward a larger goal, the achievement of which would mean a life of comfort, and perhaps even some personal power and stability—but in his heart he didn't really believe that, either. At first, yes, he'd thought that Israel might be overthrown, the Jews expunged from the face of the earth, but those careless beliefs of his youth had long since faded. For him, it was all mere process now, and this was one more task. The substance of the task didn't really matter all that much, did it? he asked himself, watching the team's grimly enthusiastic faces, as the men hit the targets. Oh, it seemed to matter to them. But he knew better.

THE DAY BEGAN at five-thirty A.M. for Inspector Patrick O'Day. A clock-radio roused him from his bed, then off to the bathroom for the usual start-up functions, a look in the mirror, and off to the kitchen to get the coffee going. It was the quiet of the day. Most people (the sensible ones) weren't up yet. No traffic on the streets. Even the birds still slumbering on their perches. Outside to get the papers, he could feel the silence and wonder why the world wasn't always this way. Through the trees to the east was the glow of a coming dawn, though the stronger of the stars still burned overhead. Not a single light showing in the rest of the houses in the development. Damn. Was he the only one who had to work such punishing hours?

Back inside, he took ten minutes to scan the morning *Post* and *Sun*. He kept track of the news, especially crime cases. As a roving inspector working directly out of the office of the Director, he never knew from one day to the next when he might be sent off on a case, which often meant calling in a sitter, to the point that he sometimes thought about getting a full-time nanny. He could afford it—the insurance settlement for his wife's death in the plane crash had actually given him a measure of financial independence, though its circumstances seemed altogether blasphemous, but they had offered it and he, on advice of counsel, had taken it. But a nanny? No. It would be a woman, and Megan would think of her as Mommy, and, no, he couldn't have that. Instead, he did the hours and denied himself so that he could be both parents, and no grizzly bear had ever been more protective of a cub. Maybe Megan didn't know the difference. Maybe kids thrived under the care of a mother and bonded firmly to her but could as easily bond to a father. When asked about her mommy by other kids, she explained that Mommy had gone to heaven early—and this is my daddy! Whatever the psychological circumstances, the closeness of the two which seemed so natural to Megan—she'd scarcely had the chance to know anything else—was something that

occasionally brought tears to her father's eyes. The love of a child is ever unconditional, all the more so when there is but one object for it. Inspector O'Day was sometimes grateful for the fact that he hadn't worked a kidnapping in years. Were he to do so today . . . he took a sip of coffee and admitted to himself that he might just find himself searching for an excuse not to bring the subject in. There were always ways. He'd worked on six of those cases as a young agent—kidnapping for money was a very rare crime today; the word had gotten out that it was a losing game, that the full power of the FBI descended on such cases like the wrath of God—and only now did he understand how hateful such crimes were. You had to be a parent, you had to know the feel of tiny arms around your neck to understand the magnitude of such a violation—but then your blood turned to ice, and you didn't so much turn off your emotions as block them out for as long as you had to before letting them free again. He remembered his first squad supervisor, Dominic DiNapoli—"the toughest wop this side of the Gambino family" was the office joke—crying like a baby himself as he carried the living victim of such a crime to see her parents. Only now did he understand how it was just one more sign of Dom's toughness. Yeah. And *that* subject would *never* get out of Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Then it was time to get Megan up. She was curled up in her full-body sleeper, the blue one with Casper the Friendly Ghost on it. She was outgrowing it, he saw. Her little toes were pushing at the plastic feet. They did grow so fast. He tickled her nose, and her eyes opened.

"Daddy!" She sat up, then stood to give him a kiss, and Pat wondered how kids woke up with a smile. No adult ever did. And the day began in earnest with another trip to the bathroom. He noted with pleasure that her training pants were dry. Megan was catching on to sleeping through the night—it had been a struggle for a while—though it seemed a very strange thing to be proud about, he thought. He started to shave, a daily event that utterly fascinated his daughter. Done, he bent down so that she could feel his face and pronounce it, "Okay!"

Dinner this morning was oatmeal with sliced banana and a glass of apple juice, and watching the Disney Channel on the kitchen TV while Daddy returned to his paper. Megan took her bowl and glass to the dishwasher all by herself, a very serious task which she was learning to master. The hard part was getting the bowl into the holder properly. Megan was still working on that. It was harder than doing her own shoes, which had Velcro closures. Mrs. Daggett had told him that Megan was an unusually bright child, one more thing to beam with pride about, followed by the sadness, always, of remembering his wife. Pat told himself that he could see Deborah's face in hers, but the

honest part of the agent occasionally wondered how much of that was a wish and how much fact. At least she seemed to have her mother's brains. Maybe the bright expression was what he saw?

The ride in the truck was routine. The sun was up now, and the traffic still light. Megan was in her safety seat, as usual looking at the other cars with wonderment.

The arrival was routine also. There was the agent working in the 7-Eleven, of course, plus the advance team at Giant Steps. Well, nobody would ever kidnap *his* little girl. At the working level, rivalry between the Bureau and the Service largely disappeared, except for the occasional inside joke or two. He was glad they were there, and they didn't mind having *this* armed man come in. He walked Megan in, and she immediately ran off to hug Mrs. Daggett and put her blanky in her cubby in the back, and her day of learning and play began.

"Hey, Pat," the agent at the door greeted him.

" 'Morning, Norm." Both men enjoyed an early-morning yawn.

"Your schedule's as screwed up as mine," Special Agent Jeffers replied. He was one of the agents who rotated on and off the SANDBOX detail, this morning working as part of the advance team.

"How's the wife?"

"Six more weeks, and then we have to think about shopping for a place like this. Is she as good as she seems?"

"Mrs. Daggett? Ask the President," O'Day joked. "They've sent all their kids here."

"I guess it can't be too bad," the Secret Service man agreed. "What's the story on the Kealty case?"

"Somebody at State is lying. That's what the OPR guys think." He shrugged. "Not sure which. The polygraph data was worthless. Your guys picking up on anything?"

"You know, it's funny. He sends his detail off a lot. He's actually said to them that he doesn't want to put them in a position where they'd have to—"

"Gotcha." Pat nodded. "And they have to play along?"

"No choice. He's meeting with people, but we don't always know who, and we're not allowed to find out what he's doing against SWORDSMAN." A wry shake of the head. "Don't you love it?"

"I like Ryan." His eyes scanned the area, looking for trouble. It was automatic, just like breathing.

"We love the guy," Norm agreed. "We think he's going to make it. Kealty's full of crap. Hey, I worked his detail back when he was V.P., okay? I fuckin' stood post outside the door while he was inside boffin' some cookie or other. Part of the job," he concluded sourly. The two federal agents shared a look. This was an inside story, to be repeated only within the federal law-enforcement community, and while the

Secret Service was paid to protect their principals and keep all the secrets, that didn't mean they liked it.

"I think you're right. So things here okay?"

"Russell wants three more people, but I don't think he's going to get it. Hell, we have three good agents inside, and three doing overwatch next door"—he wasn't revealing anything; O'Day had figured that one out—"and—"

"Yeah, across the street. Russell looks like he knows his stuff."

"Grandpa's the best," Norm offered. "Hell, he's trained half the people in the Service, and you oughta see him shoot. Both hands."

O'Day smiled. "People keep telling me that. One day I'll have to invite him over for a friendly match."

A grin. "Andrea told me. She, uh, pulled your Bureau file—"

"What?"

"Hey, Pat, it's business. We check everybody out. We have a principal in here every day, y'dig?" Norm Jeffers went on. "Besides, she wanted to see your firearms card. I hear you're pretty decent, but I'm telling you, man, you want to play with Russell, bring money, y'hear?"

"That's what makes a horse race, Mr. Jeffers." O'Day loved such challenges, and he'd yet to lose one.

"Bet your white ass, Mr. O'Day." His hand went up. He checked his earpiece, then his watch. "They just started moving. SANDBOX is on the way. Our kid and your kid are real buddies."

"She seems like a great little girl."

"They're all good kids. A couple of rough spots, but that's kids. SHADOW is going to be a handful when she starts dating for real."

"I don't want to hear it!"

Jeffers had a good laugh. "Yeah, I'm hoping ours'll be a boy. My dad—he's a city police captain in Atlanta—he says that daughters are God's punishment on ya for being a man. You live in fear that they'll meet somebody like you were at seventeen."

"Enough! Let me go to work and deal with some criminals." He slapped Jeffers on the shoulder.

"She'll be here when you get back, Pat."

O'Day passed on the usual coffee refill across Ritchie Highway, instead heading south to Route 50. He had to admit that the Service guys knew their stuff. But there was at least one aspect of presidential security that the Bureau was handling. He'd have to talk to the OPR guys this morning—informally, of course.

ONE DIED, ONE went home, and at roughly the same time. It was MacGregor's first Ebola death. He'd seen enough others, heart-attack

failures-to-resuscitate, strokes, cancer, or just old age. More often than not, doctors weren't there, and the job fell on nurses. But he was there for this one. At the end, it wasn't so much peace as exhaustion. Saleh's body had fought as best it could, and his strength had merely extended the struggle and the pain, like a soldier in a hopeless battle. But his strength had given out, finally, and the body collapsed, and waited for death to come. The alarm chirp on the cardiac monitor went off, and there was nothing to do but flip it off. There would be no reviving this patient. IV leads were removed, and the sharps carefully placed in the red-plastic container. Literally everything that had touched the patient would be burned. It wasn't all that remarkable. AIDS and some hepatitis victims were similarly treated as objects of deadly contamination. Just with Ebola, burning the bodies was preferable—and besides, the government had insisted. So, one battle lost.

MacGregor was relieved, somewhat to his shame, as he stripped off the protective suit for the last time, washed thoroughly, then went to see Sohaila. She was still weak, but ready to leave to complete her recovery. The most recent tests showed her blood full of antibodies. Somehow her system had met the enemy and passed the test. There was no active virus in her. She could be hugged. In another country she would have been kept in for further tests, and would have donated a good deal of blood for extensive laboratory studies, but again the local government had said that such things would not take place, that she was to be released from the hospital the first minute that it was safe to do so. MacGregor had hedged on that, but now he was certain that there would be no more complications. The doctor himself lifted her and placed her in the wheelchair.

"When you feel better, will you come back to see me?" he asked, with a warm smile. She nodded. A bright child. Her English was good. A pretty child, with a charming smile despite her fatigue, glad to be going home.

"Doctor?" It was her father. He must have had a military background, so straight of back was he. What he was trying to say was evident on his face, before he could even think the words.

"I did very little. Your daughter is young and strong, and that is what saved her."

"Even so, I will not forget this debt." A firm handshake, and MacGregor remembered Kipling's line about East and West. Whatever this man was—the doctor had his suspicions—there was a commonality among all men.

"She will be weak for another fortnight or so. Let her eat whatever she wants, and best to let her sleep as long as possible."

"It will be as you say," Sohaila's father promised.

"You have my number, here and at home, if you have any questions at all."

"And if you have any difficulties, with the government, for example, please let me know." The measure of the man's gratitude came across. For what it was worth, MacGregor had a protector of sorts. It couldn't hurt, he decided, walking them to the door. Then it was back to his office.

"So," the official said after listening to the report, "everything is stabilized."

"That is correct."

"The staff have been checked?"

"Yes, and we will rerun the tests tomorrow to be sure. Both patient rooms will be fully disinfected today. All contaminated items are being burned right now."

"The body?"

"Also bagged and to be burned, as you directed."

"Excellent. Dr. MacGregor, you have done well, and I thank you for that. Now we can forget that this unhappy incident ever happened."

"But *how* did the Ebola get here?" MacGregor demanded—plaintively, which was as far as he could go.

The official didn't know, and so he spoke confidently: "That does not concern you, and it does not concern me. It will not be repeated. Of that I am certain."

"As you say." After a few more words, MacGregor hung the phone up and stared at the wall. One more fax to CDC, he decided. The government couldn't object to that. He had to tell them that the outbreak, such as it was, was closed out. And that was a relief, too. Better to go back to the normal practice of medicine, and diseases he could defeat.

IT TURNED OUT that Kuwait had been more forthcoming than Saudi on forwarding the substance of the meeting, perhaps because the Kuwaiti government really was a family business, and their establishment happened to be on a very dangerous street corner. Adler handed the transcript over. The President scanned it quickly.

"It reads like, 'Get lost.' "

"You got it," the Secretary of State agreed.

"Either Foreign Minister Sabah edited all the polite stuff out, or what he heard scared him. I'm betting on number two," Bert Vasco decided.

"Ben?" Jack asked.

Dr. Goodley shook his head. "We may have a problem here."

" 'May'?" Vasco asked. "This goes beyond 'may.' "

"Okay, Bert, you're our champ prognosticator for the Persian Gulf," the President observed. "How about another forecast?"

"The culture over there is one of bargaining. There are elaborate verbal rituals for important meetings. 'Hi, how are you?' can take an hour. If we're to believe that such things did not take place, there's a message in their absence. You said it, Mr. President: *Get lost.*" Though it was interesting, Vasco thought, that they'd begun by praying together. Perhaps that was a signal that had meant something to the Saudis but not the Kuwaitis? Even he didn't know every aspect of the local culture.

"Then why are the Saudis low-keying this?"

"You told me that Prince Ali gave you another impression?"

Ryan nodded. "That's right. Go on."

"The Kingdom is a little schizophrenic. They like us, and they trust us as strategic partners, but they also dislike us and distrust us as a culture. It's not even that simple, and it goes round and round, but they're afraid that too much exposure to the West will adversely affect their society. They're highly conservative on what we call social issues, like when our Army was over there in '91, and they requested that Army chaplains remove the religious insignia from their uniforms, and seeing women drive cars and carry guns drove them a little nuts. So, on one hand, they depend on us as guarantor of their security—Prince Ali keeps asking you about that, right?—but on the other hand they worry that in protecting them we might mess up their country. It keeps coming back to religion. They'd probably prefer to make a deal with Daryaei than to have to invite us back to guard their border, and so the majority of their government is going to run down that track in the knowledge that we *will* come in if asked. Kuwait's going to be a different story. If we ask to be allowed to stage an exercise, they'll say 'yes' in a heartbeat, even if the Saudis ask them not to. Good news, Daryaei knows that, and he can't move all that fast. If he starts moving troops south—"

"The Agency will give us warning," Goodley said confidently. "We know what to look for, and they're not sophisticated enough to hide it."

"If we run troops into Kuwait now, it will be perceived as an aggressive act," Adler warned. "Better we should meet with Daryaei first and sound him out."

"Just so we give him the right signal," Vasco put in.

"Oh, we won't make that mistake, and I think he knows that the status of the Gulf countries is a topdrawer item with us. No mixed signals this time." Ambassador April Glaspie had been accused of giving such a signal to Saddam Hussein in the summer of 1990—but she'd denied Hussein's account, and the latter wasn't all that reliable a

source of information. Maybe it had been a linguistic nuance. Most likely of all, he'd heard exactly what he'd wanted to hear and not what had actually been said, a habit frequently shared by heads of state and children.

"How fast can you set it up?" the President asked.

"Pretty fast," the Secretary of State replied.

"Do it," Ryan ordered. "All possible speed. Ben?"

"Yes, sir."

"I talked with Robby Jackson already. Coordinate with him for a plan to get a modest security force rapiddeployed over there. Enough to show that we're interested, not enough to provoke them. Let's also call Kuwait and tell them that we're here if they need us, and that we *can* deploy to their country if they so request. Who's ondeck for this?"

"Twenty-fourth Mech, Fort Stewart, Georgia. I checked," Goodley said, rather proud of himself. "Their second brigade is on rotating alert-status now. Also a brigade of the 82nd at Fort Bragg. With the equipment warehoused in Kuwait, we can do the match-up and be rolling in as little as forty-eight hours. I'd also advise increasing the readiness state of the Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia. That we can do quietly."

"Nice job, Ben. Call the SecDef and tell him I want it done—quietly."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I'll tell Daryaei that we offer a friendly hand to the United Islamic Republic," Adler said. "Also that we're committed to peace and stability in that region, and that means territorial integrity. I wonder what he'll say . . . ?"

Eyes turned to Bert Vasco, who was learning to curse his newly acquired status as resident genius. "He might just have wanted to rattle their cage. I don't think he wants to rattle ours."

"That's your first hedge," Ryan observed.

"Not enough information," Vasco replied. "I don't see that he wants a conflict with us. That happened once, and everybody watched. Yes, he doesn't like us. Yes, he doesn't like the Saudis or any of the other states. But, no, he doesn't want to take us on. Maybe he *could* knock them all off. That's a military call, and I'm just an FSO. But not with us in the game, and he knows it. So, political pressure on Kuwait and the Kingdom, sure. Beyond that, however, I don't see enough to be worried about."

"Yet," the President added.

"Yes, sir, *yet,* Vasco agreed.

"Am I leaning on you too hard, Bert?"

"It's okay, Mr. President. At least you listen to me. It wouldn't hurt for us to generate a Special National Intelligence Estimate of the UIR's

full capabilities and intentions. I need broader access to what the intel community's generating."

Jack turned. "Ben, the SNIE is ordered. Bert's on the team with full access, by my order. You know, guys, giving orders can be fun," the President added, with a smile to break up the tension that the meeting had generated. "This is a potential problem, but not a ball-buster yet, correct?" There were nods. "Okay. Thank you, gentlemen. Let's keep an eye on this one."

SINGAPORE AIRLINES FLIGHT 26 landed five minutes later, coming to the terminal at 10:25 A.M. The first-class passengers, having enjoyed wider, softer seats, now enjoyed quicker access to the entry rigmarole which America inflicts on her visitors. The traveler recovered his two-suiter from the carousel, and with his carry-on slung on his other shoulder, picked a line to stand in, in his hand held his entry card, which declared nothing of interest to the United States government. The truth would not have been pleasing to them in any case.

"Hello," the inspector said, taking the card and scanning it. The passport came next. It seemed an old one, its pages liberally covered with exit and entry stamps. He found a blank page and prepared to make a new mark. "Purpose of your visit to America?"

"Business," the traveler replied. "I am here for the auto show at Javits Center."

"Uh-huh." The inspector had scarcely heard the answer. The stamp was placed and the visitor pointed to another line. There his bags were X-rayed instead of opened. "Anything to declare?"

"No." Simple answers were best. Another inspector looked at the TV display of the bag and saw nothing interesting. The traveler was waved through, and he collected his bags from the conveyor and walked out to where the taxis were.

Amazing, he thought, finding a place in another line, and getting into a cab in less than five minutes. His first concern, being caught at the customs checkpoint, was behind him. For his next, the taxi he was in could not have been pre-selected for him. He'd fumbled with his bags and let a woman go ahead of him in order to keep that from happening. Now he slumped back in his seat and made a show of looking around, while in reality looking to see if there was a car following the cab into town. The prelunchtime traffic was so dense that it hardly seemed possible, all the more so that he was in one of thousands of yellow vehicles, darting in and out of traffic like cattle in a stampede. About the only bad news was that his hotel was sufficiently far from the convention center that he'd need another cab.

Well, that couldn't be helped, and he needed to check in first anyway.

Another thirty minutes and he was in the hotel, in the elevator, going up to the sixth floor, a helpful bellman holding his two-suiter while the traveler retained his carry-on. He tipped the bellman two dollars—he'd been briefed on what to tip; better to give a modest one than to be remembered as one who'd tipped too much or not at all—which was taken with gratitude, but not too much. With his entry tasks complete, the traveler unpacked his suits and shirts, also removing extraneous items from his carry-on. The shaving kit he left in, using what the hotel provided to re-shave his bristly face after a cleansing shower. Despite the tension, he was amazed at how good he felt. He'd been on the go for—what? Twenty-two hours? Something like that. But he'd gotten a lot of sleep, and air travel didn't make him anxious, as it did for so many. He ordered lunch from the room-service menu, then dressed, and slinging his carry-on over his shoulder, walked downstairs and got a cab for the Javits Center. The auto show, he thought. He'd always liked cars.

Behind him in space and time, most of the nineteen others were still in the air. Some were just landing—Boston first, then more in New York, and one at Dulles—to make their own way through customs, testing their knowledge and their luck against the Great Satan, or whatever rubbish Daryaei termed their collective enemy. Satan, after all, had great powers and was worthy of respect. Satan could look in a man's eyes and see his thoughts, almost as Allah could. No, these Americans were functionaries, only dangerous to them if given warning.

"YOU HAVE TO know how to read people," Clark told them. It was a good class. Unlike people in a conventional school, they all wanted to learn. It almost took him back to his own days here at the Farm, at the height of the Cold War, when everyone had wanted to be James Bond and actually believed a little in it despite everything the instructors had said. Most of his classmates had been recent college grads, well educated from books but not yet from life. Most had learned pretty well. Some hadn't, and the flunking grade out in the field could be more than a red mark on a blue book, but mainly it had been less dramatic than what they showed in the movies. Just the realization that it was time for a career change. Clark had higher hopes for this bunch. Maybe they hadn't arrived with degrees in history from Dartmouth or Brown, but they had studied something, somewhere, then learned more on the streets of some big cities. Maybe they even knew that *everything* they learned would be important to them someday.

"Will they lie to us—our agents, I mean?"

"You're from Pittsburgh, Mr. Stone, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You worked confidential informants on the street. They ever lie to you?"

"Sometimes," Stone admitted.

"There's your answer. They will lie about their importance, the danger they're in, damned near anything, depending on how they feel today. You have to know them and know their moods. Stone, did you know when your informants were telling sea stories?"

"Most of the time."

"How did you tell?" Clark asked.

"Whenever they know a little too much, whenever it doesn't fit—"

"You know," their instructor observed with a grin, "you people are so smart that sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here. It's about knowing people. In your careers at the Agency, you will always be running into folks who think they can tell it all from overheads—the satellite knows all and tells all. Not exactly," Clark went on. "Satellites can be fooled, and it's easier than people like to admit. People have their weaknesses, too, ego foremost among them, and there is never a substitute for looking them in the eyes. But the nice thing about working agents in the field is, even their lies will reveal some of the truth to you. Case in point, Moscow, Kutuzovkiy Prospyekt, 1983. This agent we brought out, and he'll be here next week for you to meet. He was having a hard time with his boss and—"

Chavez appeared at the back door and held up a phonemessage form. Clark hurried through the rest of the lesson and handed the class over to his assistant.

"What is it, Ding?" John asked.

"Mary Pat wants us up in D.C. in a hurry, something about an SNIE."

"The United Islamic Republic, I bet."

"Hardly worth taking the message down, Mr. C," Chavez observed. "They want us up in time for dinner. Want me to drive?"

THERE WERE FOUR Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia. They were relatively new ships, built for their purpose, which was to be floating parking garages for military vehicles. A third of those were tanks, mobile artillery, and armored personnel carriers, and the rest were the less dramatic "trains," vehicles pre-loaded with everything from ammunition to rations to water. The ships were painted Navy gray, but with colored bands around their funnels to designate them as part of the National Defense Reserve Fleet, crewed by merchant

sailors whose job was to maintain them. That wasn't overly difficult. Every few months they'd light off the huge diesel engines and sail around for a few hours, just to be absolutely sure everything worked. This evening they got a new message to increase their alert status.

One by one, the engine-room crews went below and fired up the engines. Fuel quantities were verified against written records, and various benchmark tests made to ensure that the ship was ready to sail —which was why they were maintained so lovingly. Testing the engines was not abnormal. Testing all at the same time was, and the collection of monster engines made for a thermal bloom that was obvious to infrared detectors overhead, especially at night.

That came to the attention of Sergey Golovko within thirty minutes of its detection, and like intelligence chiefs all over the world, he assembled a team of specialists to discuss it.

"Where is the American carrier battle group?" he asked first of all. America loved to throw them around the oceans of the world.

"They left the atoll yesterday, heading east."

"Away from the Persian Gulf?"

"Correct. They have exercises scheduled with Australia. It's called SOUTHERN CUP. We have no information to suggest that the exercise is being canceled."

"Then why exercise their troopships?"

The analyst gestured. "It could be an exercise, but the turmoil in the Persian Gulf suggests otherwise."

"Nothing in Washington?" Golovko asked.

"Our friend Ryan continues to navigate the political rapids," the chief of the American political section reported. "Badly."

"Will he survive?"

"Our ambassador believes so, and the *rezident* concurs, but neither thinks he is firmly in command. It's a classic muddle. America has always prided herself on the smooth transition of government power, but their laws did not anticipate such events as we have seen. He cannot move decisively against his political enemy—"

"What Kealty's doing is state treason," Golovko observed, the penalty for which in Russia had always been severe. Even the phrase was enough to lower the temperature of a room.

"Not according to their law, but my legal experts tell me that the issue is sufficiently confused that there will be no clear winner, and in such a case Ryan remains in command because of his position—he got there first."

Golovko nodded, but his expression was decidedly unhappy. *Red October* and the Gerasimov business should never have become public knowledge. He and his government had known the latter, but only suspected the former. On the submarine business, American security

had been superb—so *that* was the card Ryan had played to make Kolya defect. It had to be. It all made sense from the distance of time, and a fine play it had been. Except for one thing: it had become public knowledge in Russia as well, and he was now forbidden to contact Ryan directly until the diplomatic fallout had been determined. America was doing something. He did not yet know what that was, and instead of calling to ask, and perhaps even getting a truthful answer, he'd have to wait for his field officers to discern it on their own. The problem lay in the harm that had been done to the American government, and in Ryan's own habit, learned at CIA, of working with a small number of people instead of playing the entire bureaucracy like a symphony orchestra. Instinct told him that Ryan would be cooperative, he'd trust former enemies to act in collective self-interest, but one thing the traitor Kealty had accomplished—who else could have told the American press those stories!—was to create a political impasse. Politics!

Politics had once been the center of Golovko's life. A party member since the age of eighteen, he'd studied his Lenin and Marx with all the fervor of a theology student, and though the fervor had changed over time to something else, those logical but foolish theories *had* shaped his adult life, until they'd evaporated, leaving him, at least, a profession at which he excelled. He'd been able to rationalize his previous antipathy to America in historical terms, two great powers, two great alliances, two differing philosophies acting in perverse unison to create the last great world conflict. National pride still wished that his nation had won, but the *Rodina* hadn't, and that was that. The important part was that the Cold War was over, and with it the deadly confrontation between America and his country. Now they could actually recognize their common interests, and at times act in cooperation. It had actually happened already. Ivan Emmetovich Ryan had come to him for help in the American conflict with Japan, and together the two countries had accomplished a vital goal—something still secret. Why the hell, Golovko thought, couldn't the traitor Kealty have revealed *that* secret instead of the others? But, no, now his country was embarrassed, and while the newly freed media had as great a field day with this story as the Americans were having—or even more—he was unable to make a simple phone call.

Those ships were turning their engines for a reason. Ryan was doing something or thinking about doing something, and instead of merely asking, he had to be a spy again, working against another spy instead of working with an ally. Well, he had no choice.

"Form a special study group for the Persian Gulf. Everything we have, bring it together as quickly as possible. America will have to react somehow to the developing situation. First, we must determine

what is happening. Second, what America probably knows. Third, what America will do. That general, G. I. Bondarenko, get him involved. He just spent time with their military."

"Immediately, Comrade Chairman," his principal deputy replied for the rest of the meeting. At least *that* hadn't changed!

CONDITIONS, HE THOUGHT, were excellent. Not too hot, not too cold. The Javits Center was right on the river, and that made for relatively high local humidity, and that was good also. He'd be inside, and so there was no concern about ultraviolet radiation harming the contents of his container. For the rest, the theory of what he was doing was not his concern; he'd been briefed on it and would do exactly what he'd been told. Whether or not it worked, well, that was in Allah's hands, wasn't it? The traveler got out of his cab and walked in.

He'd never been in so capacious a building, and there was a little disorientation after he got his visitor's badge and program book, which showed a map of the interior. With that came an index that allowed him to see the location of various exhibits, and with a muted smile he decided that he had hours to accomplish his goal, and would spend the time looking at cars, just like everybody else.

There were lots of them, sparkling like jewels, some on turntables for those too lazy to walk around them, many with scantily clad women gesturing at them as though one might have sexual relations with them—the cars, that is, though some of the women might be possibilities, he thought, watching their faces with concealed amusement. He'd known intellectually that America made millions of cars, and in almost that many shapes and colors. It seemed hugely wasteful—what was a car, after all, except for a method of moving from one place to another, and in the course of use they got damaged and dirty, and the show here was a lie in that it showed them as they would be for less time than it took to drive one home—even in America, as he'd seen in the drive here from his hotel—

But it was a pleasant experience even so. He would have thought of it as shopping, but this was not the souk which he connected with the process, not an alley full of small shops operated by merchants for whom bargaining was as important as the air. No, America was different. Here they prostituted women to sell things for a predetermined price. It wasn't that he was personally against such use of women; the traveler was not married and had the usual carnal desires, but to proclaim it in this way attacked the puritanical modesty of his culture, and so while he never once looked away from the women standing by the cars, he was glad that none of them was from

his part of the world.

All the makes and models. Cadillac had a huge display in the General Motors section. Ford had another area of its own for all of its trademark products. He wandered through the Chrysler section, and then off to the foreign makers. The Japanese section, he saw, was being avoided, doubtless as a result of the American conflict with that country—though above many of the displays were signs proclaiming **MADE IN AMERICA BY AMERICANS!** in three-meter letters to those few who seemed to care. Toyota, Nissan, and the rest would have a bad year, even the sporty Cressida, regardless of where they might be assembled. You could tell that by the lack of people in the area, and with that realization, his interest in Asian cars died. No, he decided, not around here.

European cars were profiting from Japan's misfortune, he saw. Mercedes especially was drawing a huge crowd, especially a new model of their most expensive sports car, painted a glossy midnight black that reflected the overhead lighting like a piece of the clear desert sky. Along the way, the traveler picked up a brochure at every booth from a friendly manufacturer's representative. These he tucked into his carry-on bag so as to make himself look like every other visitor. He found a food booth and got something to eat—it was a hot dog, and he didn't worry if it had pork in it or not; America wasn't an Islamic country, after all, and he didn't have to worry about such things. He spent a good deal of time looking at all-terrain vehicles, first wondering if they'd survive the primitive roads of Lebanon and Iran, and deciding that they probably would. One was based on a military type he'd seen before, and if he'd had a choice, it would have been that one, wide and powerful. He got the entire publicity package for that one, then leaned against a post so that he might read it. Sports cars were for the effete. This was something of substance. What a pity he'd never own one. He checked his watch. Early evening. More visitors were crowding in as work let out and people took the evening to indulge their fantasies. Perfect.

Along the way he'd noted the air conditioning. It would have been better to set his canister in the system itself, but he'd been briefed on that, too. The Legionnaire's disease outbreak years before in Philadelphia had taught Americans about the need for keeping such systems clean; they often used chlorine to treat the condensate water which humidified the recirculating air, and chlorine would kill the virus as surely as a bullet killed a man. Looking up from the color-printed brochure, he noted the huge circular vents. Cool air descended from them, and washed invisibly along the floor. On being heated by the bodies in the room, the warm air would rise back into the returns and go through the system for cooling—and some degree of

disinfection. So he had to pick a spot where the air flow would be his ally, not his enemy, and he considered that, standing there like an interested car shopper. He started wandering more, walking under some of the vents, feeling the gentle, cooling breeze with his skin, evaluating one and another and looking for a good spot to leave his canister. The latter was equally important. The spray period would last for about fifteen seconds. There would be a hissing sound—probably lost in the noise of the crowded building-and a brief fog. The cloud would turn invisible in just a few more seconds; the particulate matter was so small and, being as dense as the surrounding air, would become part of the ambient atmosphere and spread around randomly for at least thirty minutes, perhaps more, depending on the efficiency of the environmental systems in the center. He wanted to expose as many people as possible, consistent with those parameters, and with that renewed thought in his mind, he started wandering again.

It helped that, vast as the auto show was, it did not fill the Javits Center. Every exhibit was constructed of prefabricated parts like those in a business office, and behind many of those were large swatches of cloth, like vertical banners, whose only purpose was to break up the line of sight to empty portions of the building. They were easily accessible, the traveler saw. Nothing was fenced off. You simply ducked around an exhibit. He saw some people holding mini-meetings there, and some circulating maintenance personnel, but little else. The maintenance personnel were a potential problem, though. It wouldn't do to have his canister picked up before it discharged. But such people would be on regular routines, wouldn't they? It was just a matter of discerning the patterns of their movement. Of course. So, he thought, where is the best spot? The show would be open for several more hours. He wanted to pick a perfect place and time, but he'd been briefed not to worry too greatly about that. He took that advice to heart. Better to be covert. That was his primary mission.

The main entrance is . . . there. People entered and left through the same side of the building. Emergency exits were everywhere, all of them properly marked, but with alarm buzzers on them. At the entrance was a bank of airconditioning vents to form a thermal barrier of sorts, and the returns were mainly in the center of the exhibit hall. So the air flow was designed to move inward from the periphery ... and everyone had to come in and out the same way . . . how to make that work for him . . . ? A bank of rest rooms was on that side, with regular traffic back and forth—too dangerous; someone might see the can and pick it up and put it in a trash can. He walked to the other side, fumbling with his program as he did so, bumping into people, and finding himself again at the edge of the General Motors section. Beyond that were Mercedes and BMW, all on the way to the returns,

and there were lots of people in all three areas—plus the downward bloom of the air would wash across part of the entrance/exit. The green banners blocked view of the wall, but there was space under them, open area . . . partially shielded from view. This was it. He walked away, checking his watch and then the program for the show's hours. The program he tucked into the carry-on bag while his other hand unzipped the shaving kit. He circulated around one more time, looking for another likely place, and while he found one, it wasn't as good as the first. Then he made a final check to see if someone might be following him. No, nobody knew he was here, and he wouldn't announce his presence or his mission with a burst from an AK-47 or the crash of a tossed grenade. There was more than one way to be a terrorist, and he regretted not having discovered this one sooner. How much he might have enjoyed setting a canister like this one into a theater in Jerusalem . . . but, no, the time for that would come later, perhaps, once the main enemy of his culture was crippled. He looked at the faces now, these Americans who so hated him and his people. Shuffling around, like cattle, purposeless. And then it was time.

The traveler ducked behind an exhibit, extracted the can and set it on its side on the concrete floor. It was weighted to roll to the proper position, and, lying on its side, it would be harder to see. With that done, he pressed the simple mechanical timer and walked away, back into the exhibition area, turning left to leave the building. He was in a taxi in five minutes, on the way back to his hotel. Before he got there, the timer-spring released the valve, and for fifteen seconds the canister emptied its contents into the air. The noise was lost in the cacophony of the crowd. The vapor cloud dispersed before it could be seen.

IN ATLANTA, IT was the Spring Boat Show. About half of the people there might have serious thoughts of buying a boat, this year or some other. The rest were just dreaming. Let them dream, this traveler thought on the way out.

IN ORLAN DO, IT was recreational vehicles. That was particularly easy. A traveler looked under a Winnebago, as though to check the

chassis, slid his canister there, and left.

IN CHICAGO'S MCCORMICK Center, it was housewares, a vast hall full of every manner of furniture and appliance, and the women who wished to have them.

IN HOUSTON, IT was one of America's greatest horse shows. Many of them were Arabians, he was surprised to note, and the traveler whispered a prayer that the disease didn't hurt those noble creatures, so beloved of Allah.

IN PHOENIX, IT was golf equipment, a game that the traveler didn't know a thing about, though he had several kilos of free literature which he might read on the flight back to the Eastern Hemisphere. He'd found an empty golf bag with a hard-plastic lining that would conceal the canister, set the timer, and dropped it in.

IN SAN FRANCISCO, it was computers, the most crowded show of all that day, with over twenty thousand people in the Moscone Convention Center, so many that this traveler feared he might not get outside to the garden area before the can released its contents. But he did, walking upwind to his hotel, four blocks away, his job complete.

THE RUG SHOP was just closing down when Aref Raman walked in. Mr. Alahad locked the front door and switched off the lights.

"My instructions?"

"You will do nothing without direct orders, but it is important to know if you are able to complete your mission."

"Is that not plain?" Raman asked in irritation. "Why do you think"

"I have my instructions," Alahad said gently.

"I am able. I am ready," the assassin assured his cutout. The decision had been made years before, but it was good to say it out loud to another, here, now.

"You will be told at the proper time. It will be soon."

"The political situation . . ."

"We are aware of that, and we are confident of your devotion. Be at

peace, Aref. Great things are happening. I know not what they are, merely that they are under way, and at the proper time, your act will be the capstone of the Holy Jihad. Mahmoud Haji sends his greetings and his prayers."

"Thank you." Raman inclined his head at word of the distant but powerful blessing. It had been a very long time since he'd heard the man's voice over anything but a television, and then he'd been forced to turn away, lest others see his reaction to it.

"It has been hard for you," Alahad said.

"It has." Raman nodded.

"It will soon be over, my young friend. Come to the back with me. Do you have time?"

"I do."

"It is time for prayer."

38

GRACE PERIOD

I'M NOT AN AREA SPECIAList," Clark objected. He'd been to Iran before.

Ed Foley would have none of that: "You've been on the ground there, and I think you're the one who always talks about how there's no substitute for dirty hands and a good nose."

"He was just laying more of that on the kiddies at the Farm this afternoon," Ding reported with a sly look. "Well, today it was about reading people by lookin' in their eyes, but it's the same thing. Good eye, good nose, good senses." *He* hadn't been to Iran, and they wouldn't send Mr. C. alone, would they?

"You're in, John," Mary Pat Foley said, and since she was the DDO, that was that. "Secretary Adler may be flying over real soon. I want you and Ding to go over as SPOs. Keep him alive, and sniff around, nothing covert or anything. I want your read on what the street feels like. That's all, just a quick recon." It was the sort of thing usually done by watching footage on CNN, but Mary Pat wanted an experienced officer to take the local pulse, and it was her call.

If there were a curse in being a good training officer, it was that the people you trained often got promoted, and remembered their lessons —and worse, who'd taught them. Clark could recall both of the Foleys in his classes at the Farm. From the start, she'd been the cowboy— well, cow*girl*—of the pair, with brilliant instincts, fantastically good Russian skills, and the sort of gift for reading people more often found in a professor of psychiatry . . . but somewhat wanting in caution, trusting a little too much on the baby blues and dumb blonde act to keep her safe. Ed lacked her passion but had the ability to formulate The Big Picture, to take a long view that made sense most of the time. Neither was quite perfect. Together they were a piece of work, and John took pride in having taught them his way. Most of the time.

"Okay. We have anything in the way of assets over there?"

"Nothing useful. Adler wants to eyeball Daryaei and tell him what the rules are. You'll be quartered in the French embassy. The trip is secret. VC-20 to Paris, French transport from there. In and out in a hurry," Mary Pat told them. "But I want you to spend an hour or two

walking around, just to get a feel for things, price of bread, how people dress, you know the drill."

"And we'll have diplomatic passports, so nobody can hassle us," John added wryly. "Yeah, heard that one before. So did everyone else in the embassy back in 1979, remember?"

"Adler's Secretary of State," Ed reminded him.

"I think they know that." *They know he's Jewish, too,* he didn't add.

THE FLIGHT INTO Barstow, California, was how the exercise always started. Buses and trucks rolled up to the airplanes, and the troops came down the stairs for the short drive up the only road into the NTC. General Diggs and Colonel Hamm watched from their parked helicopter as the soldiers formed up. This group was from the North Carolina National Guard, a reinforced brigade. It wasn't often that the Guard came to Fort Irwin, and this one was supposed to be pretty special. Because the state was blessed with very senior senators and congressmen—well, until recently—over the years, the men from Carolina had gotten the very best in modern equipment, and been designated a round-out brigade for one of the Regular Army's armored divisions. Sure enough, they strutted like real soldiers, and their officers had been prepping for a year in anticipation of this training rotation. They'd even managed to get their hands on additional fuel with which they'd trained a few extra weeks. Now the officers formed their men up in regular lines before putting them on the transport, and from a distance of a quarter mile, Diggs and Hamm could see their officers talking to their men over the noise of the arriving aircraft.

"They look proud, boss," Hamm observed.

They heard a distant shout, as a company of tankers told their captain they were ready to kick some ass. A news crew was even out there to immortalize the event for local TV.

"They *are* proud," the general said. "Soldiers should be proud, Colonel."

"Only one thing missing, sir."

"What's that, Al?"

"*Baaaaaaaaa,"* Colonel Hamm said around his cigar. "Lambs to the slaughter." The two officers shared a look. The first mission of the OpFor was to take away that pride. The Blackhorse Cav had never lost so much as a single simulated engagement to anything other than a regular formation—and that rarely enough. Hamm didn't plan to start this month. Two battalions of Abrams tanks, one more of Bradleys, another of artillery, a cavalry company, and a combat-support battalion against his three squadrons of Opposing Force. It hardly

seemed fair. For the visitors.

THEY WERE ALMOST done. The most annoying work of all was mixing the AmFo, which turned out to be a pretty good upper-body workout for the Mountain Men. The proper proportions of the fertilizer (which was mainly an ammonia-based chemical compound) and the diesel fuel came from a book. It struck both men as amusing that plants should like to eat a deadly explosive. The propellant used in artillery rounds was also ammonia-based, and once upon a time, in post-World War I Germany, a chemical plant making fertilizer had exploded and wiped out the neighboring village. The addition of diesel fuel was partly to provide an additional element of chemical energy, but mainly to act as a wetting agent, the better for the internal shock wave to propagate within the explosive mass and hasten the detonation. They used a large tub for the mixing, and an oar, like a canoe's, to stir the mass into the proper consistency (that came from a book also). The result was a large glob of mud-like slurry which formed into blocks of a sort. These they lifted by hand.

It was dirty and smelly and a little dangerous inside the drum of the cement truck. They took turns doing the filling. The access hatch, which was designed to admit semiliquid cement, was just over three feet in diameter. Holbrook had rigged an electric fan to blow fresh air into the drum, because the fumes from the fresh AmFo mix were unpleasant and possibly dangerous—it gave them headaches, which was warning enough. It was the work of over a week, but now the drum was as filled as they needed it to be, about three-quarters, when the last block was nested in with all the rest. Every layer had been somewhat uneven, and the void spaces were filled with a mix that was more liquid and had been handed in by bucket, so that the circular body of the drum was as full as two men working alone could make it. If one could have seen through the steel, it would have looked like a pie chart, the unfilled part a V-shape, facing upwards.

"I think that does it, Pete," Ernie Brown said. "We have about another hundred pounds or so, but—"

"No place for it to go," Holbrook agreed, climbing out. He clambered down the ladder and the two walked outside, sat in lawn chairs and got some fresh air. "Damn, I'm glad *that's* done!"

"You bet." Brown rubbed his face and took a deep breath. His head hurt so badly that he wondered if his face might come off. They'd stay out here for a long while, until they got all those goddamned fumes out of their lungs.

"This has got to be bad for us," Pete said.

"Sure as hell gonna be bad for somebody. Good idea on the bullets,"

he added. There were two oil drums full of them inside, probably too many, but that was okay.

"What's a brownie without some walnuts?" Holbrook asked.

"You bastard!" Brown laughed so hard he nearly came out of the chair. "Oh, Jesus, my head hurts!"

APPROVAL FOR FRENCH cooperation on the meeting came from the Quai d'Orsay with remarkable speed. France had diplomatic interests with every country bordering on the Gulf that connected to all manner of commercial relationships, from tanks to pharmaceuticals. French troops had deployed in the Persian Gulf War to find themselves fighting against French products, but that sort of thing wasn't all that unusual. It made for lots of markets. Approval of the mission was phoned to the American Ambassador at nine in the morning, who telexed Foggy Bottom in less than five minutes, where it was relayed to Secretary Adler while he was still in his bed. Action officers made other notifications, first of all to the 89th Military Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force Base.

Getting the Secretary of State out of town quietly was never the easiest of tasks. People tended to notice empty offices of that magnitude, and so an easy cover story was laid on. Adler was going to consult with European allies on several issues. The French were far better able to control their media, a task which was more than anything else a matter of timing.

"Yeah?" Clark said, lifting the phone at the Marriott closest to Langley.

"It's on for today," the voice said.

A blink. A shake of the head. "Super. Okay, I'm packed." Then he rolled back over for some more sleep. At least there didn't have to be a mission brief for this one. Keep an eye on Adler, take a walk, and come home. There wasn't any real worry about security. If the Iranians—UIR-ians was a phrase he hadn't come to terms with yet—wanted to do something, two men with pistols wouldn't be able to do much about it except hand their weapons over unused, and either locals or Iranian security would keep the hostile peons away. He was going to be there for show, because it was something you did, for some reason or other.

"We goin'?" Chavez asked from the other bed.

"yep."

"*Bueno.*"

DARYAEI CHECKED HIS desk clock, subtracting eight, nine, ten, and eleven hours, and wondering if anything had gone wrong. Second thoughts were the bane of people in his position. You made your decisions and took the action, and only then did you really worry, despite all the planning and thought that might have gone into what you did. There was no royal road to success. You had to take risks, a fact never appreciated by those who merely *thought* about being a chief of state.

No, nothing had gone wrong. He'd received the French Ambassador, a very pleasant unbeliever who spoke the local language so beautifully that Daryaei wondered what it might be like to have him read some of his country's poetry. And a courtly man, ever polite and deferential, he'd posed his secondhand request like a man arranging a marriage of family alliance, his hopeful smile also conveying the wishes of his government. The Americans would not have made the request if they'd had any pre-warning of Badrayn's people and their mission. No, in a case like that, the meeting would have been on neutral ground—Switzerland was always a possibility—for informal but direct contact. In this case, they would send their own Foreign Minister into what they had to consider to be enemy country—and a Jew at that! *Friendly contact, friendly exchange of views, friendly offers of friendly relations,* the Frenchman had said, pitching the meeting, doubtless hoping that if it went well, then France would be remembered as the country that fostered a new friendship—well, maybe a "working relationship"—and if the meeting went badly, then all that would be remembered was that France had tried to be an honest broker. Had Daryaei known about ballet, he would have used it as a visual image for the exchange.

Damn the French, anyway, he thought. *Had their warrior chief Martel not stopped 'Abd-ar-Rahman in 732 at Poitiers, then the whole world might be* . . . but even Allah couldn't change history. Rahman had lost that battle because his men had grown greedy, fallen away from the purity of the Faith. Exposed to the riches of the West, they'd stopped fighting and started looting, and given Martel's forces the chance to re-form and counterattack. Yes, that was the lesson to be remembered. There was always time for looting. You had to win the battle first. First destroy the enemy's forces, and *then* take that which you wanted to take.

He walked from his office into the next room. There on the wall was a map of his new country and its neighbors, and a comfortable seat from which to view it. There came the usual error from looking at maps. Distances were truncated. Everything seemed so close, all the more so after all the lost time of his life. Close enough to reach. Close enough to grasp. Nothing could go wrong now. Not with everything so close.

LEAVING WAS EASIER than arriving. Like most Western countries, America was more concerned with what people might bring in than with what they might take out—and properly so, the first traveler thought, as his passport was processed at JFK. It was 7:05 A.M., and Air France Flight 1, a supersonic Concorde, was waiting to take him part of the way home. He had a huge collection of auto brochures, and a story he'd spent some time concocting should anyone ask about them, but his cover wasn't challenged, or even examined. He was leaving, and that was okay. The passport was duly stamped. The customs agent didn't even ask why he had come one day and left the next. Business travelers were business travelers. Besides, it was early in the morning, and nothing important happened before ten.

The Air France first-class lounge served coffee, but the traveler didn't want any. He was almost done. Only now did his body want to tremble. It was amazing how easily it had gone. Badrayn's mission brief had told them how easy it would be, but he hadn't quite believed it, used, as he was, to dealing with Israeli security with their numberless soldiers and guns. After all the tension he'd felt, like being wrapped tightly with rope, it was all diminishing now. He'd slept poorly in his hotel the previous night, and now he'd get on the aircraft and sleep all the way across. On getting back to Tehran, he'd look at Badrayn and laugh and ask for another such mission. On passing the buffet, he saw a bottle of champagne, and poured himself a glass. It made him sneeze, and it was contrary to his religion, but it was the Western way to celebrate, and indeed he had something to celebrate. Twenty minutes later, his flight was called, and he walked off to the jetway with the others. His only concern now was jet lag. The flight would leave at eight sharp, then arrive in Paris at 5:45 P.M.! From breakfast to dinner without the intervening midday meal. Well, such was the miracle of modern travel.

THEY DROVE SEPARATELY to Andrews, Adler in his official car, Clark and Chavez in the latter's personal auto, and while the Secretary of State was waved through the gate, the CIA officers had to show ID, which at least earned them a salute from the armed airman.

"You really don't like the place, do you?" the junior officer asked.

"Well, Domingo, back when you were taking the training wheels off your bike, I was in Tehran with a cover so thin you could read an insurance policy through it, yelling 'Death to America!' with the gomers and watching our people being paraded around blindfolded by

a bunch of crazy kids with guns. For a while there, I thought they were going to be lined up against a wall and hosed. I knew the station chief. Hell, I recognized him. They had him in the bag, too, gave him a rough time." Just standing there, he remembered, only fifty yards away, not able to do a damned thing . . .

"What were you doing?"

"First time, it was a quick recon for the Agency. Second time, it was to be part of the rescue mission that went tits-up at Desert One. We all thought it was bad luck at the time, but that operation really scared me. Probably better it failed," John concluded. "At least we got them all out alive in the end."

"So, bad memories, you don't like the place?"

Clark shrugged. "Not really. Never figured them out. The Saudis I understand—I like 'em a lot. Once you get through the crust, they make friends for life. Some of the rules are a little funny to us, but that's okay. Kinda like old movies, sense of honor and all that, hospitality," he went on. "Anyway, lots of good experiences there. Not on the other side of the Gulf. Just as soon leave that place alone." Ding parked his car. Both men retrieved their bags as a sergeant came up to them.

"Going to Paris, Sarge," Clark said, holding up his ID again.

"You gentlemen want to come with me?" She waved them toward the VIP terminal. The low, one-story building had been cleared of other distinguished visitors. Scott Adler was on one of the couches, going over some papers.

"Mr. Secretary?"

Adler looked up. "Let me guess, this one is Clark, and this one is Chavez."

"You might even have a future in the intelligence business." John smiled. Handshakes were exchanged.

"Good morning, sir," Chavez said.

"Foley says, with you, my life is in good hands," SecState offered, closing his briefing book.

"He exaggerates." Clark walked a few feet to get a Danish. Was it nerves? John asked himself. Ed and Mary Pat were right. This should be a routine operation, in and out, Hi, how are you, eat shit and die, so long. And he'd been in tighter spots than Tehran in 1979-80—not many, but some. He frowned at the pastry. Something had brought the old feeling back, the creepy-crawly sensation on his skin, like something was blowing on the hairs there, the one that told him to turn around and look real hard at things.

"He also tells me you're on the SNIE team, and I should listen to you," Adler went on. At least he seemed relaxed, Clark saw.

"The Foleys and I go back some," John explained.

"You've been there before?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary." Clark followed with two minutes of explanation that earned a thoughtful nod from the senior official.

"Me, too. I was one of the people the Canadians snuck out. Just showed up a week before. I was out apartmenthunting when they seized the embassy. Missed all the fun," SecState concluded. "Thank God."

"So you know the country some?"

Adler shook his head. "Not really. A few words of the language. I was there to learn up on the place, but it didn't work out, and I branched off into other areas. I want to hear more about your experiences, though."

"I'll do what I can, sir," John told him. Then a young captain came in to say that the flight was ready. A sergeant got Adler's things.

The CIA officers lifted their own bags. In addition to two changes of clothes, they had their sidearms—John preferred his Smith & Wesson; Ding liked the Beretta 40—and compact cameras. You never knew when you might see something useful.

BOB HOLTZMAN HAD a lot to think about, as he sat alone in his office. It was a classic newsman's place of work, the walls glass, which allowed him a modicum of acoustic privacy while also letting him see out into the city room and the reporters there to see in. All he really needed was a cigarette, but you couldn't smoke in the Post building anymore, which would have amused the hell out of Ben Hecht.

Somebody'd got to Tom Donner and John Plumber. It had to be Kealty. Holtzman's views on Kealty were an exact mirror image of his feelings toward Ryan. Kcalty's political ideas, he thought, were pretty good, progressive and sensible. It was just the man who was useless. In another age, his womanizing would have been overlooked, and in fact, Kealty's political career had straddled those ages, the old and the new. Washington was full of women drawn to power like bees to honey—or like flies to something else—and they got used. Mainly they went away sadder and wiser; in the age of abortion on demand, more permanent consequences were a thing of the past. Politicians were so charming by nature that most of the cookies—that euphemism went *way* back—even went away with a smile, hardly realizing how they'd been used. But some got hurt, and Kealty had hurt several. One woman had even committed suicide. Bob's wife, Libby Holtzman, had worked that story, only to see it lost in the shuffle during the brief conflict with Japan, and in the interim the media had decided in some collective way that the story was history, and Kealty had been rehabilitated in everyone's memory. Even

women's groups had looked at his personal behavior, then compared it with his political views, and decided that the balance fell one way and not another. It all offended Holtzman in a distant way. People had to have *some* principles, didn't they?

But this was Washington.

Kealty had got to Donner and Plumber, and must have done so between the taped morning interview and the live evening broadcast. And that meant . . .

"Oh, shit," Holtzman breathed, when the lightbulb flashed on in his head.

That was a story! Better yet, it was a story his managing editor would love. Donner had said on live TV that the morning tape had been damaged. *It had to be a lie*. A reporter who lied directly to the public. There weren't all that many rules in the business of journalism, and most of them were amorphous things that could be bent or skirted. But not that one. The print and TV media didn't get along all that well. They competed for the same audience, and the lesser of the two was winning. *Lesser?* Holtzman asked himself. Of course. TV was flashy, that was all, and maybe a picture was worth a thousand words, but not when the frames were selected with an eye more toward entertainment than information. TV was the girl you looked at. The print media was the one who had your kids.

But how to prove it?

What could be sweeter? He could destroy that peacock, with his perfect suits and his hair spray. He could cast a pall over all television news, and wouldn't that boost circulation ! He could couch it all as a religious ceremony on the altar of Journalistic Integrity. Wrecking careers was part of his business. He'd never broken a fellow reporter before, but there was an anticipatory delight in drumming this one out of the corps.

But what about Plumber? Holtzman knew and respected him. Plumber had come to TV at a different time, when the industry had been trying to gain respectability, and hired journalistic craftsmen on the basis of their professional reputations rather than their movie-star looks. Plumber had to know. And he probably didn't like it.

RYAN COULDN'T *NOT* see the Colombian Ambassador. The latter, he saw, was a career diplomat from the aristocracy, immaculately dressed for a meeting with the American chief of state. The handshake was strong and cordial. The usual pleasantries were exchanged in front of the official photographer, and then it was time to talk business.

"Mr. President," he began formally, "my government has instructed me to inquire about some unusual allegations in your news media."

Jack nodded soberly. “What do you wish to know?”

“It has been reported that some years ago the United States government may have invaded my country. We find this assertion disturbing, not to mention a violation of international law and various treaty relationships between our two democracies.”

“I understand your feelings on the matter. In your position I would feel much the same way. Let me say now that my administration will not countenance such action under any circumstances. On that, sir, you have my personal word, and I trust you will convey it to your government.” Ryan decided to pour the man some coffee. He’d learned that such small personal gestures were vastly powerful in diplomatic exchanges, for reasons he didn’t quite understand, but was quite willing to accept when they worked for him. It worked this time, too, and broke the tension of the moment.

“Thank you,” the ambassador said, lifting his cup.

“I believe it’s even Colombian coffee,” the President offered.

“Regrettably, not our most famous export product,” Pedro Ochoa admitted.

“I don’t blame you for that,” Jack told his visitor.

“Oh?”

“Mr. Ambassador, I am fully aware that your country has paid a bitter price for America’s bad habits. While I was at CIA, yes, I did look over all manner of information concerning the drug trade and the effects it’s had in your part of the world. I had no part at all in initiating any improper activity in your country, but, yes, I did look over a lot of data. I know about the policemen who’ve been killed—my own father was a police officer, as you know—and the judges, and the journalists. I know that Colombia has worked harder and longer than any other country in your region to bring about a true democratic government, and I will say one more thing, sir. I am ashamed at some of the things that have been said in this city about your country. The drug problem does not begin in Colombia, or Ecuador, or Peru. The drug problem starts here, and you are as much a victim as we are—actually more so. It’s American money that’s poisoning your country. It is not you who hurts us. It is we who hurt you.”

Ochoa had expected many things from this meeting, but not this. He set his cup down, and his peripheral vision suddenly reported that they were alone in the room. The bodyguards had withdrawn. There wasn’t even an aide to take notes. This was unusual. More than that, Ryan had just admitted that the stories were true—partly true, anyway.

“Mr. President,” he said, in English learned at home and polished at Princeton, “we have not often heard such words from your country.”

"You're hearing them now, sir." Two very level pairs of eyes crossed the table. "I will not criticize your country unless you deserve it, and on the basis of what I know, such criticism is not deserved. Diminishing the drug trade, most of all, means attacking the demand side, and that will be a priority of this administration. We are now drafting legislation to punish those who *use* drugs, not merely those who sell them. When the Congress is properly reestablished, I will press hard for passage of that legislation. I also wish to establish an informal working group, composed of members of my government and yours, to discuss how we may better assist you in your part of the problem—but always with full respect for your national integrity. America has not always been a good neighbor to you. I can't change the past, but I can try to change the future. Tell me, might your President accept an invitation so that we could discuss this issue face-to-face?" *I want to make up for all this lunacy*.

"I think it likely that he would view such an invitation favorably, with due consideration for time and other duties, of course." Which meant, *damned right he will!*

"Yes, sir, I am myself learning just how demanding such a job can be. Perhaps," Jack added with a smile, "he might give *me* some advice."

"Less than you think." Ambassador Ochoa was wondering how he'd explain this meeting to his government. Clearly, the basis of a deal was on the table. Ryan was offering what could only be seen in South America as an elaborate apology for something that would never be admitted, and whose full revelation could only damage everyone involved. And yet this was not being done for political reasons, was it?

Was it?

"Your proposed legislation, Mr. President, what will you seek to accomplish?"

"We're studying that now. For the most part, believe, people use drugs because it's fun—escape from reality, whatever you might want to call it—it comes down to personal amusement of one sort or another. Our data suggests that at least half of the drugs sold in the country are for recreational users rather than true addicts. I think we should make the use of drugs un-fun, by which I mean some form of punishment for any level of possession or intoxication. Obviously, we do not have the prison space for all the drug users in America, but we do have lots of streets that need sweeping. For recreational users, thirty days—for the first offense—of sweeping streets and collecting garbage in an economically disadvantaged area, wearing distinctive clothing, of course, will take much of the fun out of it. You are Catholic, I believe?"

"Yes, I am, as you are."

Ryan grinned. “Then you know about shame. We learned it in school, didn’t we? It’s a starting place, that’s all it is for the moment. The administrative issues need to be looked at. Justice is also examining some constitutional questions, but those appear to be less troublesome than I expected. I want this to be law by the end of the year. I’ve got three kids, and the drug problem here frightens the hell out of me at the personal level. This isn’t a perfect response to the problem. The truly addicted people need professional help of one sort or another, and we’re now looking at a variety of state and local programs for things that really work—but, hell, if we can kill off recreational use, that’s at least half of the trade, and where I come from, half is a good start.”

“We will watch this process with great interest,” Ambassador Ochoa promised. Cutting the income of the drug traffickers by that much would reduce their ability to buy protection, and help his government do what it had so earnestly tried to do, for the monetary power of the drug trade was a political cancer in the body of his country.

“I regret the circumstances that brought this meeting about, but I am glad that we’ve had a chance to discuss the issues. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for being so forthright. I want you to know that I am always open to any exchange of views. Most of all, I want you and your government to know that I have great respect for the rule of law, and that respect does not stop at our borders. Whatever may have happened in the past, I propose a new beginning, and I will back up my words with action.”

Both men stood, and Ryan took his hand again, and led him outside. There followed a few minutes on the edge of the Rose Garden in front of some TV cameras. The White House Press Office would release a statement about a friendly meeting between the two men. The photos would run on the news to show that it might not be a lie.

“It promises to be a good spring,” Ochoa said, noting the clear sky and warming breezes.

“But summers here can be very unpleasant. Tell me, what’s it like in Bogotá?”

“We are high up. It’s never terribly hot, but the sun can be punishing. This is a fine garden. My wife loves flowers. She’s becoming famous,” the ambassador said. “She’s developed her own new type of rose. Somehow she crossbred yellow and pink and produced something that’s almost golden in color.”

“What does she call it?” Ryan’s entire knowledge of roses was that you had to be careful about the branches, or stalks, or whatever you called the thorny part. But the cameras were rolling.

“In English, it would be ‘Dawn Display.’ All the good names for roses, it seems, have already been taken,” Ochoa noted, with a

friendly smile.

"Perhaps we might have some for the garden here?"

"Maria would be greatly honored, Mr. President."

"Then we have more than one agreement, *señor*." Another handshake.

Ochoa knew the game, too. For the cameras his Latin face broke into the friendliest of diplomatic smiles, but the handshake also had genuine warmth in it. "Dawn Display—for a truly new day between us, Mr. President."

"My word on it." And they took their leave. Ryan walked back into the West Wing. Arnie was waiting inside the door. It was widely known but little acknowledged that the Oval Office was wired like a pinball machine—or more properly, a recording studio.

"You're learning. You're really learning," the chief of staff observed.

"That one was easy, Arnie. We've been fucking those people over for too long. All I had to do was tell the truth. I want that legislation fast-tracked. When will the draft be ready?"

"Couple of weeks. It's going to raise some hell," van Damm warned.

"I don't care," the President replied. "How about we try something that might work instead of spending money for show all the time? We've tried shooting the airplanes down. We've tried murder. We've tried interdiction. We've tried going after pushers. We've exhausted all the other possibilities, and they don't work because there's too much money involved for people not to give it a go. How about we go after the source of the problem for a change? That's where the problem starts, and that's where the money comes from."

"I'm just telling you it's going to be hard."

"What useful thing isn't?" Ryan asked, heading back to his office. Instead of the direct door off the corridor, he went through the secretaries' room. "Ellen?" he said, gesturing to the Oval Office.

"Am I corrupting you?" Mrs. Sumter asked, bringing her cigarettes, to the semi-concealed smiles of the other ladies in the room.

"Cathy might see it that way, but we don't have to tell her, do we?" In the sanctity of his office, the President of the United States lit up a skinny woman's cigarette, celebrating with one addiction an attack on another—and, oh, by the way, having neutralized a potential diplomatic earthquake.

THE LAST OF the travelers left America, strangely enough, from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, via Northwest and KLM flights. Badrayn would sweat it out for hours more. In the interest of security, none of them had so much as a telephone number to call to announce success, warn of failure, or to give to whomever might have

arrested them, tying them to the UIR with something more than their own words. Instead, Badrayn had people at all of the return airports with flight schedules. When the travelers got off their flights in Europe and were visually recognized, *then* calls would be made circuitously, from public phones, using pre-paid and anonymous calling cards.

The successful return of the travelers to Tehran would start the next operation. Sitting in an office there, Badrayn had nothing more to do than look at the clock and worry. He was logged onto the Net via his computer, and had been scanning the news wires, and finding nothing of note. Nothing would be certain until all the travelers got back and made their individual reports. Not even then, really. It would take three or four days, maybe five, before the e-mail lines to CDC would be screaming. Then he'd know.

39

FACE TIME

THE FLIGHT ACROSS THE pond was pleasant. The VC-20B was more a mini-airliner than a business jet, and the Air Force crewmen, who looked to Clark as though they might be old enough to take driving lessons, kept things smooth. The aircraft began its descent into the enveloping darkness of the European night, finally landing at a military airfield west of Paris.

There was no arrival ceremony *per se,* but Adler was an official of ministerial rank, and he had to be met, even on a covert mission. In this case, a high-level official—a civil servant—walked up to the aircraft as soon as the engines wound down. Adler recognized him as the stairs descended.

"Claude!"

"Scott. Congratulations on your promotion, my old friend!" In deference to American tastes, kisses were not exchanged.

Clark and Chavez scanned the area for danger, but all they saw were French troops, or maybe police—they couldn't tell at this distance—standing in a circle, with weapons in evidence. Europeans had a penchant for showing people machine guns, even on city streets. It probably had a salutary effect on street muggings, John thought, but it seemed a little excessive. In any case, they'd expected no special dangers in France, and indeed there were none. Adler and his friend got in an official vehicle. Clark and Chavez got in the chase car. The flight crew would head off for mandated crew rest, which was USAF-talk for having a few with their French colleagues.

"We go to the lounge for a few minutes before your aircraft is ready," a French air force colonel explained. "Perhaps you wish to freshen up?"

"Merci, mon commandant," Ding replied. Yeah, he thought, the Frenchies do know how to make you feel safe.

"Thank you for helping to arrange this," Adler said to his friend. They'd been FSOs together, once in Moscow and once more in Pretoria. Both had specialized in sensitive assignments.

"It is nothing, Scott." Which it wasn't, but diplomats talk like diplomats even when they don't have to. Claude had once helped him

get through a divorce in a uniquely French way, all the while speaking as though conducting treaty negotiations. It was almost a joke between the two. “Our ambassador reports that he will be receptive to the right sort of approach.”

“And what might that be?” SecState asked his colleague. They got out at what appeared to be the base officers club, and a minute later found themselves in a private dining room, with a carafe of fine Beaujolais on the table. “What’s your take on this, Claude? What does Daryaei want?”

The shrug was as much a part of the French character as the wine, which Claude poured. They toasted, and the wine was superb even by the standards of the French diplomatic service. Then came business.

“We’re not sure. We wonder about the death of the Turkoman Premier.”

“You don’t wonder about the death of—”

“I do not believe anyone has doubts about that, Scott, but that is a long-standing business, is it not?”

“Not exactly.” Another sip. “Claude, you’re still the best authority on wine I know. What’s he thinking about?”

“Probably many things. His domestic troubles—you Americans don’t appreciate them as well as you should. His people are restless, less so now that he’s conquered Iraq, but the problem is still there. We feel that he must consolidate before he does anything else. We also feel that the process may turn out to be unsuccessful. We are hopeful, Scott. We are hopeful that the extreme aspects of the regime will moderate over time, perhaps not very much time. It must. It is no longer the eighth century, even in that part of the world.”

Adler took a few seconds to consider that, then nodded thoughtfully. “Hope you’re right. The guy’s always scared me.”

“All men are mortal. He is seventy-two, and he works a hard schedule. In any case, we have to check on him, do we not? If he moves, then we will move, together, as we have done in the past. The Saudis and we have talked on this matter also. They are concerned, but not overly so. Our assessment is the same. We counsel you to keep an open mind.”

Claude might be correct, Adler thought. Daryaei *was* old, and consolidating the rule over a newly acquired country wasn’t exactly a trivial undertaking. More than that, the easiest way to bring a hostile country down, if you have the patience for it, was to be nice to the bastards. A little trade, a few journalists, some CNN, and a couple of G-rated movies, such things could do wonders. If you have the patience. If you had the time. There were plenty of Iranian kids in American universities. That could be the most effective means for America to change the UIR. Problem was, Daryaei had to know that,

too. And so here he was, Scott Adler, Secretary of State, a post he'd never expected to approach, much less have, and he was supposed to know what to do next. But he'd read enough diplomatic history to know better.

"I'll listen to what he has to say, and we're not looking to make any new enemies, Claude. I think you know that."

"D'accord." He topped off Adler's glass. "Unfortunately, you will find none of this in Tehran."

"And two is my limit when I'm working."

"Your flight crew is excellent," Claude assured him. "They fly our own ministers."

"When has your hospitality ever been lacking?"

FOR CLARK AND Chavez it was Perrier, cheaper to buy here, they both imagined, though the lemons probably were not.

"So how are things in Washington?" a French counterpart asked, just killing time, or so it seemed.

"Pretty strange. You know, it's amazing how quiet the country is. Maybe having a lot of the government turned off helps," John said, trying to dodge.

"And this talk of your President and his adventures?"

"Sounds like a lot of movie stuff to me," Ding said, with the open face of honesty.

"Stealing a Russian sub? All by himself? Damn." Clark grinned. "I wonder who made *that* up?"

"But the Russian spy chief," their host objected. "It is he, and he's been on the television."

"Yeah, well, I bet we paid him a ton of money to come across, too."

"Probably wants to do a book and make some more." Chavez laughed. "Sumbitch'll get it, too. Hey, *mon ami,* we're just worker bees, okay?"

It didn't fly any better than a lead glider. Clark looked into their interrogator's eyes and they just clicked. The man was DGSE, and he knew Agency when he saw it.

"Then be careful of the nectar you will find where you are going, my young friend. It is, perhaps, too sweet." It was like the start of a card game. The deck was out, and he was shuffling. Probably just one hand, and maybe a friendly one, but the hand had to be played.

"What do you mean?"

"The man you go to meet, he is dangerous. He has the look of one who sees what we do not."

"You've worked the country?" John asked.

"I have traveled through the country, yes."

"And?" This was Chavez.

"And I have never understood them."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "I know what you're saying."

"An interesting man, your President," the Frenchman said again, and it was pure curiosity, actually an endearing thing to see in the eyes of an intelligence officer.

John looked right in those eyes and decided to thank the man for his warning, one pro to another. "Yeah, he is. He's one of us," Clark assured him.

"And those entertaining stories?"

"I cannot say." Delivered with a smile. *Of course they're true. You think reporters have the wit to make such things up?*

Both men were thinking the same thing, and both men knew it, though neither could speak it aloud: *A shame we cannot get together some evening for a dinner and some stories.* But it just wasn't done.

"On the way back, I will offer you a drink."

"On the way back, I will have it."

Ding just listened and watched. The old bastard still had it, and there were still lessons to learn from how he did it. "Nice to have a friend," he said five minutes later on the way to the French aircraft.

"Better than a friend, a pro. You listen to people like him, Domingo."

NOBODY HAD EVER said that governance was easy, even for those who invoked the word of God for nearly everything. The disappointment, even for Daryaei, who'd been governing Iran for nearly twenty years in one capacity or another, was in all the petty administrative rubbish that reached his desk and took from his time. He'd never grasped that it was almost entirely his fault. His rule was fair by his own reckoning, but harsh by most others. Most violations of the rules mandated death for the miscreant, and even small administrative errors on the part of bureaucrats could entail the end of a career—that degree of mercy depended on the magnitude of the error, of course. A bureaucrat who said no to everything, noting that the law was clear on an issue, whether it was or not, rarely got into trouble. One who broadened the scope of the government's power over the most minor of day-to-day activities was merely adding to the scope of Daryaei's rule. Such decisions came easily and caused little in the way of difficulty to the arbiter in question.

But real life wasn't that simple. Practical questions of commerce, for example, just the way in which the country did business in everything from the sale of melons to the honking of auto horns around a mosque required a certain degree of judgment, because the Holy Koran hadn't

anticipated every situation, and neither had the civil law been based upon it. But to liberalize anything was a major undertaking, because any liberalization of any rule might be seen as a theological error—this in a country where apostasy was a capital crime. And so the lowest-level bureaucrats, when stuck with the necessity of saying yes to a request, from time to time, tended to hem and haw and kick things upstairs, which gave a higher-level official the chance to say no, which came just as easily to them after a career of doing so, but with somewhat greater authority, somewhat greater responsibility, and far more to lose in the event that someone higher still disagreed with the rare and erroneous yes decision. All that meant was that such calls kept perking up the pyramid. In between Daryaei and the bureaucracy was a council of religious leaders (he'd been a member under Khomeini), and a titular parliament, and experienced officials, but, disappointingly to the new UIR's religious leader, the principle held, and he found himself dealing with such weighty issues as the business hours for markets, the price of petrol, and the educational syllabus of grade-school females. The sour expression he'd adopted for such trivial issues merely made his lesser colleagues all the more obsequious in their presentation of the pros and cons, which added an additional measure of gravity to the absurd, while they sought favor for being strict (opposing whatever change was on the table) or for being practical (supporting it). Earning Daryaei's favor was the biggest political game in town, and he inevitably found himself as tied down as an insect in amber by small issues, while he needed all his time to deal with the big ones. The amazing part is that he never understood why people couldn't take *some* initiative, even as he destroyed people on occasion for taking any.

So it was that he landed in Baghdad this evening to meet with local religious leaders. The issue of the day was which mosque in need of repair would get repaired first. It was known that Mahmoud Haji had one personal favorite for his own prayers, another for its architectural beauty, and yet a third for its great historical significance, while the people of the city loved yet another—and wouldn't it be a better idea, politically, to deal with the maintenance needs of that one first, the better to ensure the political stability of the region? After that came a problem with the right of women to drive cars (the previous Iraqi regime had been overly liberal on that!), which was objectionable, but was it not difficult to take away a right already possessed, and what of women who lacked a man (widows, for example) to drive them, and also lacked the money with which to hire one? Should the government look after their needs? Some—physicians for one example, teachers for another—were important to the local society. On the other hand, since Iran and Iraq were now one, the law had to be the same, and so

did one grant a right to Iranian women or deny it to the Iraqi? For these weighty issues and a few others, he had to take an evening flight to Baghdad.

Daryaei, sitting in his private jet, looked over the agenda for the meeting and wanted to scream, but he was too patient a man for that —or so he told himself. He had something important to prepare for, after all. In the morning he'd be meeting with the Jew American foreign minister. His expression, as he looked through the papers, frightened even the flight crew, though Mahmoud Haji didn't notice that, and even if he had, would not have understood why.

Why couldn't people take some *initiative!*

THE JET WAS a Dassault Falcon 900B, about nine years old, similar in basic type and function to the USAF VC-20B twin-jet. The two-man flight crew was a pair of French air force officers, both rather senior for this "charter," and there was also a pair of cabin attendants, both female and as charming as they could be. At least one, Clark figured, was a DGSE spook. Maybe both. He liked the French, especially their intelligence services. As troublesome an ally as France occasionally was, when the French did business in the black world, they damned well did business as well as any and better than most. Fortunately, in the case at hand, aircraft are noisy and hard to bug. Perhaps that explained why one attendant or the other would come back every fifteen minutes or so to ask if they needed anything.

"Anything special we need to know?" John asked, when the latest offer was declined with a smile.

"Not really," Adler replied. "We want to get a feel for the guy, what he's up to. My friend Claude, back at Paris, says that things are not as bad as they look, and his reasoning seems pretty sound. Mainly I'm delivering the usual message."

"Behave yourself," Chavez said, with a smile.

The Secretary of State smiled. "Somewhat more diplomatically, but yes. What's your background, Mr. Chavez?"

Clark liked that one: "You don't want to know where we got him from."

"I just finished my master's thesis," the young spook said proudly. "Get hooded in June."

"Where?"

"George Mason University. Professor Alpher."

That perked Adler's interest. "Really? She used to work for me. What's the thesis on?"

"It's called 'A Study in Conventional Wisdom: Erroneous Diplomatic Maneuvers in Turn-of-the-Century Europe.'"

"The Germans and the Brits?"

Ding nodded. "Mainly, especially the naval races."

"Your conclusion?"

"People couldn't recognize the differences between tactical and strategic goals. The guys supposed to be thinking 'future' were thinking 'right now,' instead. Because they confused politics with statecraft, they ended up in a war that brought down the entire European order, and replaced it with nothing more than scar tissue." It was remarkable, Clark thought, listening to the brief discourse, that Ding's voice changed when discussing his school work.

"And you're an SPO?" SecState asked, with a certain degree of incredulity.

A very Latino grin reappeared. "Used to be. Sorry if I don't drag my knuckles on the ground like I'm supposed to, sir."

"So why did Ed Foley lay you two on me?"

"My fault," Clark said. "They want us to take a little stroll around and get a smell for things."

"Your fault?" Scott asked.

"I was their training officer, once upon a time," John explained, and that changed the complexion of the conversation entirely.

"You're the guys who got Koga out! You're the guys who—"

"Yeah, we were there," Chavez confirmed. SecState was probably cleared for all that. "Lots of fun."

The Secretary of State told himself that he should be offended that he had two field spooks with him—and the younger one's remark about being a knuckle-dragger wasn't that far off. But a master's from George Mason . . .

"You're also the guys who sent that report that Brett Hanson pooh-poohed, the one about Goto. That was good work. In fact, it was excellent work." He'd wondered what these two were doing on the SNIE team for the UIR situation. Now he knew.

"But nobody listened," Chavez pointed out. It may have been a deciding factor in the war with Japan, and a very hairy time for them in that country. But it had also given him some real insight into how diplomacy and statecraft hadn't changed very much since 1905. It was an ill wind that blew no one good.

"I'll listen," Adler promised. "Let me know what your little stroll turns up, okay?"

"Sure will. I guess you have need-to-know on this," John observed, with a raised eyebrow.

Adler turned and waved to one of the attendants, the pretty brunette one whom Clark had tagged as a certain spook. She was just as charming as hell, and drop-dead pretty, but seemed a little too clumsy in the galley to be a full-time flight attendant.

"Yes, Monsieur Minister?"

"How long until we land?"

"Four hours."

"Okay, then, could we have a deck of cards and a bottle of wine?"

"Certainly." She hustled the twelve feet to get them.

"Not supposed to drink on duty, sir," Chavez said.

"You're off-duty until we land," Adler told them. "And I like to play cards before I go into one of these sessions. Good for the nerves. You gentlemen up to a friendly game?"

"Well, Mr. Secretary, if you insist," John replied. Now they'd all get a read on the mission. "A little five-card stud, maybe?"

EVERYBODY KNEW WHERE the line was. No official communiques had been exchanged, at least not between Beijing and Taipei, but it was known and understood even so, because people in uniform tend to be practical and observant. The PRC aircraft never flew closer than ten nautical miles (fifteen kilometers) to a certain north-south line, and the ROC aircraft, recognizing that fact, kept the same distance from the same invisible bit of longitude. On either side of the line, people could do anything they wanted, appear as aggressive as they wished, expend all the ordnance they could afford, and that was agreed to without so much as a single tactical radio message. It was all in the interest of stability. Playing with loaded guns was always dangerous, as much so for nation-states as for children, though the latter were more easily disciplined—the former were too big for that.

America now had four submarines in the Formosa Strait. These were spotted on—under—the invisible line, which was the safest place to be. A further collection of three ships was now at the north end of the passage, a cruiser, USS *Port Royal*, along with destroyers *The Sullivans* and *Chandler*. All were SAM ships, equipped with a total of 250 SM2-MR missiles. Ordinarily, they were tasked to guard a carrier from air attack, but "their" carrier was in Pearl Harbor having her engines replaced. *Port Royal* and *The Sullivans*—named for a family of sailors wiped out on the same ship in 1942—were both Aegis ships with powerful SPY radars, which were now surveilling air activity while the submarines were handling the rest. *Chandler* had a special ELINT team aboard to keep track of voice radio transmissions. Like a cop on the beat, they were not so much there to interfere with anyone's exercises as to let people know that The Law was around, in a friendly sort of way, and as long as they were, things would not get out of hand. At least that was the idea. And if anyone objected to the presence of the American ships, their country would note that the seas were free for the innocent passage of all, and they weren't in anyone's

way, were they? That they were actually part of someone *else's* plan was not immediately apparent to anyone. What happened next confused nearly everyone.

It was dawn in the air, if not yet on the surface, when a flight of four PRC fighters came off the mainland, heading east, followed five minutes later by four more. These were duly tracked by the American ships at the extreme range of their billboard radars. Routine track numbers were assigned, and the computer system followed their progress to the satisfaction of the officers and men in the CIC of *Port Royal.* Until they didn't turn. Then a lieutenant lifted a phone and pushed a button.

"Yes?" a groggy voice answered.

"Captain, Combat, we have a flight of PRC aircraft, probably fighters, about to cross the line, bearing two-one-zero, altitude fifteen thousand, course zero-niner-zero, speed five hundred. There's a flight of four more a few minutes behind."

"On the way." The captain, partially dressed, arrived in the combat information center two minutes later, not in time to see the PRC fighters break the rules, but in time to hear a petty officer report something:

"New track, four or more fighters coming west."

For the purposes of convenience, the computer had been told to assign "enemy" designator-graphics to the mainland fighters and "friendly" symbols to the Taiwanese. (There were also a few American aircraft around from time to time, but these were electronic-intelligence gatherers and well out of harm's way.) At this point, there were two immediately converging flights of four each, about thirty miles apart, but with a closure speed of over a thousand miles per hour. The radar was also tracking six commercial airliners, all on the east side of the line, minding their own business as they skirted the agreed-upon "exercise" areas.

"Raid Six is turning," a sailor reported next. This was the first outbound flight off the mainland, and as the captain watched, the velocity vector turned southward, while the outbound flight off Taiwan bored in on them.

"Illuminators coming on," the chief at the ESM console said. "The ROCs are lighting up Raid Six. Their radars seem to be in tracking mode."

"Maybe that's why they turned," the captain thought.

"Maybe they got lost?" the CIC officer wondered.

"Still dark out. Maybe they just went too far." They didn't know what sort of navigation gear the ChiCom fighters might have had, and driving a single-seat aircraft over the sea at night was not a precise business.

"More airborne radars coming on, easterly direction, probably Raid Seven," the ESM chief said. This was the second flight off the mainland.

"Any electronic activity from Raid Six?" the CIC officer asked.

"Negative, sir." These fighters continued their turn and were now heading west, back for the line, with the ROC F-16s in pursuit. It was at this point that things changed.

"Raid Seven is turning, course now zero-nine-seven."

"That puts them on the -16s . . . and they're illuminating . . .," the lieutenant observed, with the first hint of worry in his voice. "Raid Seven is lighting up the F-16's, radars in tracking mode."

The Republic of China F-16s then turned also. They'd been getting a lot of work. The newer, American-made fighters and their elite pilots comprised only about a third of their fighter force, and were drawing the duty of covering and responding to the flight exercises of their mainland cousins. Leaving Raid Six to return, they necessarily got more interested in the trailing flight, still heading east. The closure rate was still a thousand miles per hour, and both sides had their missile-targeting radars up and running, aimed at each other. That was internationally recognized as an unfriendly act, and one to be avoided for the simple reason that it was the aerial equivalent of aiming a rifle at someone's head.

"Uh-oh," the petty officer on the ESM board said. "Sir, Raid Seven, their radars just shifted to tracking mode." Instead of just searching for targets, the airborne systems were now operating in the manner used to guide air-to-air missiles. What had been merely unfriendly a few seconds ago now became overtly hostile.

The F-16s broke into two pairs—elements—and began maneuvering freely. The outbound PRC fighters did the same. The original flight of four, Raid Six, was now across the line, heading west on what appeared to be a direct line to their airfield.

"Oh, I think I know what's going on here, sir, look how—"

A very small pip appeared on the screen, leaving one of the ROC F-16s—

"Oh, shit," a sailor said. "We have a missile in the air "

"Make that two," his chief said.

Aloft, a pair of American-made AIM-120 missiles were now taking separate paths to separate targets.

"They thought it was an attack. Oh, Christ," the captain said, turning to his communications. "Get me CINCPAC right now!"

It didn't take long. One of the mainland fighters turned into a puff on the screen. Warned, the other jinked hard and dodged its missile at the last second.

Then it turned back. The southern PRC fighter element maneuvered

also, and Raid Six turned radically to the north, its illumination radars now on. Ten seconds later, six more missiles were airborne and tracking targets.

"We got a battle on our hands!" the chief of the watch said. The captain lifted the phone:

"Bridge, combat, general quarters, general quarters!" Then he grabbed the TBS microphone, getting the captains of his two companion ships, both ten miles away, east and west of his cruiser as the alarm gong started sounding on USS *Port Royal.*

"I have it," *The Sullivans* reported. That destroyer was outboard.

"Me, too," *Chandler* chimed in. That one was closer to the island nation, but getting the radar picture from the Aegis ships via data link.

"That's a kill!" Another ChiCom fighter took its hit and headed down to the still-dark surface. Five seconds later, an F-16 died. More crewmen arrived in CIC, taking their battle stations.

"Captain, Raid Six was just trying to simulate—"

"Yeah, I see that now, but we have a train wreck on our hands."

And then, predictably, a missile went wild. These were so small as to be hard for the Aegis radar to track, but a technician boosted power, throwing six million watts of RF energy into the "exercise" area, and the picture became more clear.

"Oh, shit!" a chief said, pointing to the main tactical display. "Captain, look there!"

It was instantly obvious. Someone had loosed what was probably an infra-red-seeking missile, and the hottest target in town was an Air China Airbus 310, with two huge General Electric CF6 turbofans—the same basic engines as those which powered all three of the American warships—which looked like the sun to its single red eye.

"Chief Albertson, get him on guard!" the skipper shouted.

"Air China Six-Six-Six, this is a U.S. Navy warship, you have a missile inbound on you from the northwest, I say again, maneuver immediately, you have a missile tracking you from the northwest!"

"What, what?" But the plane started moving, turning left and descending. Not that it mattered.

The plotted velocity vector of the missile never wavered from the target. There was a hope that it would burn out and fall short, but the missile was going at mach 3, and the Air China flight was already slowed down, commencing its approach to its home field. When the pilot put his nose down, he just made things easier for the missile.

"It's a big airplane," the captain said.

"Only two engines, sir," the weapons officer pointed out.

"That's a hit," a radarman said.

"Get her down, pal, get her down. Oh, fuck," the captain breathed, wanting to turn away. On the display, the 310's blip tripled in size

and flashed the emergency code.

"He's calling Mayday, sir," a radioman said. "Air China flight triple-six is calling Mayday . . . engine and wing damage . . . possible fire aboard."

"Only about fifty miles out," a chief said. "He's vectoring for a direct approach into Taipei."

"Captain, all stations report manned and ready. Condition One is set throughout the ship," the IC man of the watch told the skipper.

"Very well." His eyes were locked on the center of the three radar displays. The fighter engagement, he saw, had ended as quickly as it had started, with three fighters splashed, another possibly damaged, and both sides withdrawing to lick their wounds and figure out what the hell had happened. On the Taiwanese side, another flight of fighters was up and forming just off their coast.

"Captain!" It was the ESM console. "Looks like every radar on every ship just lit off. Sources all over the place, classifying them now."

But that didn't matter, the captain knew. What mattered now was that Airbus 310 was slowing and descending, according to his display.

"CINCPAC Operations, sir." The radio chief pointed.

"This is *Port Royal,* " the captain said, lifting the phone-type receiver for the satellite radio link. "We just had a little air battle here —and a missile went wild and it appears that it hit an airliner inbound from Hong Kong to Taipei. The aircraft is still in the air, but looks to be in trouble. We have two ChiCom MiGs and one ROC F-16 splashed, maybe one more -16 damaged."

"Who started it?" the watch officer asked.

"We think the ROC pilots fired the first missile. It could have been a screwup." He explained on for a few seconds. "I'll upload our radar take as quick as I can."

"Very well. Thank you, Captain. I'll pass that along to the boss. Please keep us informed."

"Will do." The skipper killed the radio link and turned to the IC man of the watch. "Let's get a tape of the battle set up for uplinking to Pearl."

"Aye, sir."

Air China 666 was still heading toward the coast, but the radar track showed the aircraft snaking and yawing around its straight-line course into Taipei. The ELINT team on *Chandler* was now listening in on the radio circuits. English is the language of international aviation, and the pilot in command of the wounded airliner was speaking quickly and clearly, calling ahead for emergency procedures, while he and his co-pilot struggled with their wounded airliner. Only they, really, knew the magnitude of the problem. Everyone else was just a spectator, rooting and praying that he'd keep it together for another

fifteen minutes.

THIS ONE WENT up the line fast. The communications nexus was Admiral David Seaton's office on the hilltop overlooking Pearl Harbor. The senior communications watch officer changed buttons on his phone to call the theater commander-in-chief, who immediately told him to shoot a CRITIC-level flash message to Washington. Seaton next ordered an alert message to the seven American warships in the area —mainly the submarines—to perk their ears up. After that, a message went off to the Americans who were "observing" the exercise in various Republic of China military command posts—these would take time to get delivered. There was still no American embassy in Taipei, and therefore no attaches or CIA personnel to hustle down to the airport to see if the airliner made it in safely or not. At that point, there was nothing to do but wait, in anticipation of the questions that would start arriving from Washington, and which as yet he was in no real position to answer.

"YES?" RYAN SAID, lifting the phone.

"Dr. Goodley for you, sir."

"Okay, put him on." Pause. "Ben, what is it?"

"Trouble off Taiwan, Mr. President; could be a bad one." The National Security Advisor explained on, telling what he knew. It didn't take long.

It was, on the whole, an impressive exercise in communications. The Airbus was still in the air, and the President of the United States knew that there was a problem—and nothing else.

"Okay, keep me posted." Ryan looked down at the desk he was about to leave. "Oh, shit." It was such a pleasure, the power of the presidency. Now he had virtually instant knowledge of something he could do nothing about. Were there Americans on the aircraft? What did it all mean? What was happening?

IT COULD HAVE been worse. Daryaei got back on the aircraft after having been in Baghdad for less than four hours, having dealt with the problems even more tersely than usual, and taking some satisfaction from the fear he'd struck into a few hearts for having bothered him with such trivial matters. His sour stomach contributed to an even more sour expression as he boarded and found his seat, and waved to

the attendant to tell the flight crew to get moving—the sort of wrist-snapping gesture that looked like *off with their heads* to so many. Thirty seconds later, the stairs were up and the engines turning.

"WHERE DID YOU learn this game?" Adler asked.

"In the Navy, Mr. Secretary," Clark answered, collecting the pot. He was ten dollars up now, and it wasn't the money. It was the principle of the thing. He'd just bluffed the Secretary of State out of two bucks. Miller Time.

"I thought sailors were crummy gamblers."

"That's what some people say." Clark smiled, as he piled the quarters up.

"Watch his hands," Chavez advised.

"I *am* watching his hands." The attendant came aft and poured out the rest of the wine. Not even two full glasses for the men, just enough to pass the time. "Excuse me, how much longer?"

"Less than an hour, Monsieur Minister."

"Thank you." Adler smiled at her as she moved back forward.

"King bets, Mr. Secretary," Clark told him.

Chavez checked his hole card. Pair of fives. Nice start. He tossed a quarter into the center of the table after Adler's.

THE EUROPEAN-MADE Airbus 310 had lost its right-side engine to the missile, but that wasn't all. The heat-seeker had come in from the right rear and impacted on the side of the big GE turbofan, with fragments from the explosion ripping into the outboard wing panels. Some of these sliced into a fuel cell—fortunately almost empty—which trailed some burning fuel, panicking those who could look out their windows and see. But that wasn't the frightening part. Fire behind the aircraft couldn't hurt anyone, and the vented fuel tank didn't explode, as it might have done had it been hit as little as ten minutes earlier. The really bad news was the damage to the aircraft's control surfaces.

Forward, the two-man flight crew was as experienced as that of any international airline. The Airbus could fly quite well, thank you, on one engine, and the left-side engine was undamaged, and now turning at full power while the co-pilot shut down the right side of the aircraft and punched the manual controls on the elaborate fire-suppression systems. In seconds, the fire-warning alarms went silent and the co-pilot started breathing again.

"Elevator damage," the pilot reported next, working the controls

and finding that the Airbus wasn't responding as it should.

But the problem wasn't with the flight crew, either. The Airbus actually flew via computer software, a huge executive program that took inputs directly from the airframe as well as from the control movements of the pilots, analyzed them, and then told the control surfaces what to do next. Battle damage was not something the software engineers had anticipated in the design of the aircraft. The program noted the traumatic loss of the engine and decided it was an engine explosion, which it had been taught to think about. The onboard computers evaluated the damage to the aircraft, what control surfaces worked and how well, and adjusted itself to the situation.

"Twenty miles," the co-pilot reported, as the Airbus settled in on its direct-penetration vector. The pilot adjusted his throttle, and the computers—the aircraft actually had seven of them—decided this was all right, and lowered engine power. The aircraft, having burned off most of its fuel, was light. They had all the engine power they needed. The altitude was low enough that depressurization was not an issue. They could steer. They just might make this, they decided. A "helpful" fighter aircraft pulled alongside to look over their damage and tried to call them on the guard frequency, only to be told to keep out of the way, in very irate Mandarin.

The fighter could see skin peeling off the Airbus, and tried to report that, only to be rebuffed. His F-5E backed off to observe, talking to his base all the while.

"Ten miles." Speed was below two hundred knots now, and they tried to lower flaps and slats, but the ones on the right side didn't deploy properly, and the computers, sensing this, didn't deploy them on the left side, either. The landing would have to be overly fast. Both pilots frowned, cursed, and got on with it.

"Gear," the pilot ordered. The co-pilot flipped the levers, and the wheels went down—and locked in place, which was worth a sigh of relief to both drivers. They couldn't tell that both tires on the right side were damaged.

They had the field in view now, and both could see the flashing lights of emergency equipment as they crossed the perimeter fencing, and the Airbus settled. Normal approach speed was about 135 knots. They were coming in at 195. The pilot knew he'd need every available foot of space, and touched down within two hundred meters of the near edge.

The Airbus hit hard, and started rolling, but not for long. The damaged right-side tires lasted about three seconds before they both lost pressure, and one second after that, the metal strut started digging a furrow in the concrete. Both men and computers tried to maintain a straight-line course for the aircraft, but it didn't work. The 310 yawed

to the right. The left-side gear snapped with a cannon-shot report, and the twin-jet bellied out. For a second, it appeared that it might pinwheel onto the grass, but then a wingtip caught, and the plane started turning over. The fuselage broke into three uneven sections. There was a gout of flame when the left wing separated—mercifully, the forward bit of fuselage shot clear, as did the after section, but the middle section stopped almost cold in the middle of the burning jet fuel, and all the efforts of the racing firefighters couldn't change that. It would later be determined that the 127 people killed quickly asphyxiated. Another 104 escaped with varying degrees of injury, including the flight crew. The TV footage would be uplinked within the hour, and a full-blown international incident was now world news.

CLARK FELT A slight chill as his aircraft touched down. Looking out the window, he imagined a certain familiarity, but admitted it was probably imaginary, and besides, all international airports looked pretty much alike in the dark. Forward, the French aviators followed directions, taxiing to the air force terminal for security, instructed to follow another business-type jet which had landed a minute ahead of them.

"Well, we're here," Ding said, with a yawn. He had two watches on, one for local time and one for Washington, and from them he tried to decide what time his body thought it was. Then he looked outside with all the curiosity of a tourist, and suffered the usual disappointment. It might as easily have been Denver from what he could see.

"Excuse me," the brunette attendant said. "They've instructed us to remain in the aircraft while another is serviced first."

"What's a few more minutes?" Secretary Adler thought, as tired as the rest of them.

Chavez looked out the window. "There, he must have gotten in ahead of us."

"Kill the cabin lights, will you?" Clark asked. Then he pointed at his partner.

"Why—" Clark cut the SecState off with a gesture. The attendant did as she was told. Ding took his cue and pulled the camera out of his bag.

"What gives?" Adler asked more quietly, as the lights went off.

"There's a G right in front of us," John replied, taking his own look. "Not many of them around, and he's going to a secure terminal. Let's see if we can tell who it is, okay?"

Spooks had to be spooks, Adler knew. He didn't object. Diplomats gathered information, too, and knowing who had access to such

expensive official transport could tell them something about who really rated in the UIR government. In a few seconds, just as their own wheels were chocked, a parade of cars rolled up to the Gulfstream fifty meters away from them on the Iranian—UIR-ian—air force ramp.

"Somebody important," Ding said.

"How you loaded?"

"ASA 1200, Mr. C.," Chavez replied, selecting the telephoto setting. The whole aircraft fit into the frame. He couldn't zoom any closer. He started shooting as the steps came down.

"Oh," Adler said first. "Well, that shouldn't be much of a surprise."

"Daryaei, isn't it?" Clark asked.

"That's our friend," SecState confirmed.

Hearing this, Chavez got off ten rapid frames, showing the man getting off, to be greeted by some colleagues, who embraced him like a long-lost uncle, then guided him into the car. The vehicles pulled off. Chavez fired off one more, then put the camera back in his bag. They waited another five minutes before they were allowed to de-plane.

"Do I want to know what time it is?" Adler asked, heading for the door.

"Probably not," Clark decided. "I guess we'll get a few hours of rack time before the meeting."

At the bottom of the steps was the French ambassador, with one obvious security guard, and ten more locals. They would travel to the French embassy in two cars, with two Iranian vehicles leading and two more trailing the semi-official procession. Adler went with the ambassador in the first one. Clark and Chavez bundled into the second. They had a driver and another man in the front seat. Both would have to be spooks.

"Welcome to Tehran, my friends," the guy riding shotgun said.

"Merci," Ding replied, with a yawn.

"Sorry to get you up so early," Clark added. This one would probably be the station chief. The people he and Ding had sat with at Paris would have called ahead to let him know that they were probably not State Department security types.

The Frenchman confirmed it. "Not your first time, I am told."

"How long have you been here?" John asked.

"Two years. The car is safe," he added, meaning that it probably wasn't bugged.

"We have a message for you from Washington," the ambassador told Adler in the leading car. Then he relayed what he knew about the Airbus incident at Taipei. "You will be busy when you return home, I'm afraid."

"Oh, Christ!" the Secretary observed. "Just what we need. Any

reaction yet?"

"Nothing I know of. But that will change within hours. You are scheduled to see the Ayatollah Daryaei at ten-thirty, so you have time for some sleep. Your flight back to Paris will leave just after lunch. We will give you all the assistance you request."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador." Adler was too tired to say much else.

"Any idea what happened?" Chavez asked in the trail car.

"We have only what your government has told us to pass along. Evidently there was a brief clash over the Strait of Taiwan, and a missile hit an unintended target."

"Casualties?" Clark said next.

"Unknown at this time," the local DGSE station chief said.

"Kinda hard to hit an airliner without killing somebody." Ding closed his eyes in anticipation of a soft bed at the embassy.

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THE SAME NEWS was given to Daryaei at exactly the same time. He surprised his fellow cleric by taking it without a visible reaction. Mahmoud Haji had long since decided that people who didn't know anything couldn't interfere with much.

FRENCH HOSPITALITY WAS not disgraced even by its transplantation to a place which could hardly have been more different from the City of Light. Inside the compound, three uniformed soldiers collected the Americans' bags, while another man in some sort of livery conducted them to their quarters. The beds were turned down, and there was ice water on the nightstands. Chavez checked his watches again, groaned, and collapsed into the bed. For Clark, sleep came harder. The last time he'd looked at an embassy compound in this city . . . *what was it?* he asked himself. What was bothering him so much about this?

ADMIRAL JACKSON DID the brief, complete with videotape.

"This is the upload from *Port Royal*. We have a similar tape from *The Sullivans,* no real differences, so we'll just use the one," he told those in the Sit Room. He had a wooden pointer and started moving it around the large-screen TV display.

"This is a flight of four fighters, probably Jianjiji Hongzhaji-7s—we call it the B-7 for the obvious reason. Two engines and two seats, performance and capabilities like an old F-4 Phantom. The flight

departs the mainland, and comes out a little too far. There's a no-man's-land right about here that neither side had violated until today. Here's another flight, probably the same aircraft and—"

"You're not sure?" Ben Goodley asked.

"We've ID'd the aircraft from their avionics, their radar emissions. A radar can't directly identify an airplane by type," Robby explained. "You have to deduce types by what they do, or from the electronic signatures of their equipment, okay? Anyway, the lead group is coming east, and crosses the invisible line here." The pointer moved. "Here's a flight of four Taiwanese F-16s with all the bells and whistles. They see the lead PRC group come too far and vector in on them. Then the lead group turns back west. Soon thereafter, right about . . . now, the trailing group lights off their radars, but instead of tracking their own lead group, they're hitting the F-16s."

"What are you saying, Rob?" the President asked.

"What this looks like, the lead group was simulating a dawn attack on the mainland, and the trail group was supposed to defend against the simulated attack. On the surface, it looks like a fairly standard training exercise. The trail group, however, lit up the wrong people, and when they shifted radar modes to the attack setting, one of the Taiwanese pilots must have thought he was under attack and so he pickled off a missile. Then his wingman did the same. Zap! Right here, a B-7 eats a Slammer, but this one evades it—damned lucky for him—and he gets off a missile of his own. Then everybody starts shooting. This F-16 jinks around one but walks right into another—see here, the pilot ejects, and we think he survived. But this element launches four missiles, and one of those acquires this airliner. Must have just barely made it all the way. We've checked the range, and it's actually two miles over what we thought the missile could do. By the time it caught up and hit, the fighters have all turned back, the PRC guys because they were probably bingo-fuel, and the ROC guys because they were Winchester—out of missiles. All in all, it was a fairly sloppy engagement on both sides."

"You're saying it was a goof?" This came from Tony Bretano.

"It certainly looks that way, except for one thing—"

"Why carry live missiles on an exercise?" Ryan said.

"Close, Mr. President. The ROC pilots, sure, they're carrying white ones because they see the whole PRC exercise as a threat—"

"White ones?" It was Bretano again.

"Excuse me, Mr. Secretary. White missiles are war shots. Exercise missiles are usually painted blue. The PRC guys, though, why carry heat-seekers? In situations like this, we usually don't, because you can't turn them off—once they go they're entirely on their own, fire-and-forget, we call it. One other thing. All the birds fired at the F-16s

were radar-homers. This one, the one that went for the airliner, seems to be the *only* heat-seeker that was launched. I don't much like the smell of that."

"Deliberate act?" Jack asked quietly.

"That is a possibility, Mr. President. The whole show looks just like a screwup, classic case. A couple fighter jocks get really hyped on something, you have an instant fur-ball, some people get killed, and we'll never be able to prove otherwise, but if you look at this two-plane element, I think they were aiming for the airliner all along—unless they took it for a ROC fighter, and I don't buy that—"

"Why?"

"It was heading the wrong way all the time," Admiral Jackson answered.

"Buck fever," Secretary Bretano offered.

"Why not engage people heading right for you instead of somebody heading away? Mr. Secretary, I'm a fighter pilot. I don't buy it. If I'm in an unexpected combat situation, first thing I do is identify the threats to me and shoot 'em right in the lips."

"How many deaths?" Jack asked bleakly.

Ben Goodley handled that one: "News reports say over a hundred. There are survivors, but we don't have any kind of count yet. And we should expect that there were some Americans aboard. A lot of business goes on between Hong Kong and Taiwan."

"Options?"

"Before we do anything, Mr. President, we need to know if any of our people are involved. We only have one carrier anywhere close, the *Eisenhower* battle group on the way to Australia for SOUTHERN CUP. But it's a good bet that this won't exactly help things out between Beijing and Taipei."

"We'll need some kind of press release," Arnie told the President.

"We need to know if we lost any citizens first," Ryan said. "If we did . . . well, what do we do, demand an explanation?"

"They'll say it was a mistake," Jackson repeated. "They might even blame the Taiwanese for shooting first and starting it, then disclaim all responsibility."

"But you don't buy it, Robby?"

"No, Jack—excuse me, no, Mr. President, I don't think so. I want to go over the tapes with a few people, to back-check me some. Maybe I'm wrong . . . but I don't think so. Fighter pilots are fighter pilots. The only reason to shoot the guy who's running away instead of the guy who's closing in is because you want to."

"Move the *Ike* group north?" Bretano wondered.

"Get me contingency plans to do just that," the President said.

"That leaves the Indian Ocean uncovered, sir," Jackson pointed out.

"Carl Vinson is most of the way home to Norfolk now. *John Stennis* and *Enterprise* are still in the yard at Pearl, and we do not have a deployable carrier in the Pacific. We're out of carriers on that whole half of the world, and we'll need a month at best to move another one in from LantFleet."

Ryan turned to Ed Foley. "What are the chances this could blow all the way up?"

"Taiwan's going to be pretty unhappy about this. We have shots fired and people dead. National-flag airline clobbered. Countries tend to be protective of those," the DCI observed. "It's possible."

"Intentions?" Goodley asked the DCI.

"If Admiral Jackson is correct—I'm not ready to buy into that yet, by the way," Ed Foley added for Robby's benefit. He got an understanding nod. "Then we have something going on, but what it is, I don't know. Better for everybody if this was an accident. I can't say I like the idea of pulling the carrier out of the Indian Ocean with the developing situation in the Persian Gulf."

"What's the worst thing that can happen between the PRC and Taiwan?" Bretano asked, annoyed that he had to ask the question at all. He was still too new in his job to be as effective as his President needed.

"Mr. Secretary, the People's Republic has nuclear-tipped missiles, enough to turn Formosa into a cinder, but we have reason to believe that the Republic of China has them too and—"

"Roughly twenty," Foley interrupted. "And those F-16s can one-way a couple all the way to Beijing if they want. They can't destroy the People's Republic, but twenty thermonuclear weapons will knock their economy back at least ten years, maybe twenty. The PRC does not want that to happen. They're not crazy, Admiral. Keep it conventional, okay?"

"Very well, sir. The PRC does *not* have the ability to invade Taiwan. They lack the necessary amphibious assets to move large numbers of troops for a forced-entry assault. So what happens if things blow up anyway? Most likely scenario is a nasty air and sea battle, but one that leads to no resolution, since neither side can finish off the other. That also means a shooting war astride one of the world's most important trade routes, with all sorts of adverse diplomatic consequences for all the players. I can't see the purpose in doing this intentionally. Just too destructive to be deliberate policy . . . I think." He shrugged. It didn't make sense, but neither did a deliberate attack on a harmless airliner —and he'd just told his audience that *had* probably been deliberate.

"And we have large trade relationships with both," the President noted. "We want to prevent that, don't we? I'm afraid it's looking like we have to move that carrier, Robby. Let's get some options put

together, and let's *try* to figure out what the hell the PRC might be up to."

CLARK WOKE UP first, feeling quite miserable. But that wasn't allowed under the circumstances. Ten minutes later, he was shaved, dressed, and heading out the door, leaving Chavez in bed. Ding didn't speak the language anyway.

"Morning walk?" It was the guy who'd brought them in from the airport.

"I could use a stretch," John admitted. "And you are?"

"Marcel Lefevre."

"Station chief?" John asked bluntly.

"Actually, I am the commercial attaché," the Frenchman replied—meaning, *yes.* "You mind if I come along?"

"Not at all," Clark replied, surprising his companion as they headed for the door. "Just wanted to take a walk. Any markets around here?"

"Yes, I will show you."

Ten minutes later, they were in a street of commerce. Two Iranian shadows were fifty feet behind them, and obvious about it, though they did nothing more than to observe.

The sounds brought it all back. Clark's Farsi was not all that impressive, especially since it was over fifteen years since he'd practiced it, but though his speech might not have been terribly good, his hearing clicked back in, soon catching the chatter and bargaining as the two Westerners passed stalls on both sides of the street.

"How are food prices?"

"Fairly high," Lefevre answered. "Especially with all the supplies they shipped to Iraq. A few grumbles about that."

There was something lacking, John saw, after a few minutes of contemplation. Passing half a block of food stalls, they were now in another area—gold, always a popular trade item in this part of the world. People were buying and selling. But there wasn't the enthusiasm he remembered from before. He looked at the stalls as he passed, trying to figure what it was.

"Something for your wife?" Lefevre asked.

Clark tried an unconvincing smile. "Oh, you never know. Anniversary coming up soon." He stopped to look at a necklace.

"Where are you from?" the dealer asked.

"America," John replied, also in English. The man had picked out his nationality at once, probably from his clothes, and taken the chance to speak in that language.

"We do not see many Americans here."

"Too bad. In my younger days I traveled here quite a lot." It was

actually rather a nice necklace, and on checking the price tag and doing the mental calculation, the cost was reasonable as hell. And he *did* have an anniversary approaching.

"Perhaps someday that will change," the goldsmith said.

"There are many differences between my country and yours," John observed sadly. Yes, he *could* afford it, and as usual he had plenty of cash with him. One nice thing about American currency was that it was damned near universally accepted.

"Things change," the man said next.

"Things have changed," John agreed. He looked at a slightly more expensive necklace. It wasn't any problem handling them. One thing about Islamic countries, they had a way of discouraging thieves. "There's so little smiling here, and this is a market street."

"You have two men following you."

"Really? Well, I'm not breaking any laws, am I?" Clark asked with some obvious concern.

"No, you are not." But the man was nervous.

"This one," John said, handing it to the goldsmith.

"How will you pay?"

"American dollars, is that okay?"

"Yes, and the price is nine hundred of your dollars."

It required all of his control not to show surprise. Even in a New York wholesale shop, this necklace would have been triple that, and while he wasn't quite prepared to spend that much, haggling was part of the fun of shopping in this part of the world. He'd figured that he could talk the guy down to maybe fifteen hundred, still a considerable bargain. Had he heard the man properly?

"Nine hundred?"

An emphatic finger pointed right at his heart. "Eight hundred, not a dollar less—you wish to ruin me?" he added loudly.

"You bargain hard." Clark adopted a defensive posture for the benefit of the watchers, who were coming closer.

"You are an unbeliever! You expect charity? This is a fine necklace, and I hope you will give it to your honorable wife and not a lesser, debauched woman!"

Clark figured he'd put the man in enough danger. He pulled out his wallet and counted off the bills, handing them over.

"You pay me too much, I am not a thief!" The goldsmith handed one back.

Seven hundred dollars for this?

"Excuse me, I meant no insult," John said, pocketing the necklace, which the man not quite tossed to him without a case.

"We are not all barbarians," the dealer said quietly, abruptly turning his back a split-second later. Clark and Lefevre walked to the

end of the street and headed to the right. They moved quickly, forcing their tail to follow.

"What the hell?" the CIA officer observed. He hadn't expected anything like that to happen.

"Yes. The enthusiasm for the regime has abated somewhat. What you saw is representative. That was nicely done, Monsieur Clark. How long in the Agency?"

"Long enough that I don't like being surprised that much. I believe your word is *merde*. "

"So, is it for your wife?"

John nodded. "Yeah. Will he get into any trouble?"

"Unlikely," Lefevre said. "He may have lost money on the exchange, Clark. An interesting gesture, was it not?"

"Let's get back. I have a Cabinet secretary to wake up." They were back in fifteen minutes. John went right to his room.

"What's the weather like outside, Mr. C.?" Clark reached into his pocket and tossed something across the room. Chavez caught it. "Heavy."

"What do you suppose it costs, Domingo?"

"Looks like twenty-one carat, feels like it too.... coupla grand, easy."

"Would you believe seven hundred?"

"You related to the guy, John?" Chavez asked with a laugh. The laugh stopped. "I thought they didn't like us here?"

"Things change," John said quietly, quoting the goldsmith.

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"HOW BAD WAS it?" Cathy asked.

"One hundred four survivors, it says, some pretty beat up, ninety confirmed dead, about thirty still unaccounted for, meaning they're dead, too, just haven't identified the body parts yet," Jack said, reading the dispatch just brought to the bedroom door by Agent Raman. "Sixteen Americans in the survivor category. Five dead. Nine unknown and presumed dead. Christ, there were forty PRC citizens aboard." He shook his head.

"How come—if they don't get along—"

"Why do they do so much business? They do, and that's a fact, honey. They spit and snarl at each other like alley cats, but they need each other, too."

"What will we do?" his wife asked.

"I don't know yet. We're saving the press release for tomorrow morning, when we have more information. How the hell am I supposed to sleep on a night like this?" the President of the United

States asked. “We have fourteen dead Americans halfway around the world from here. I was supposed to protect them, wasn’t I? I’m not supposed to let people kill our citizens.”

“People die every day, Jack,” the First Lady pointed out.

“Not from air-to-air missiles.” Ryan put the dispatch on his night table and switched off the light, wondering when sleep would come, wondering how the meeting would go in Tehran.

IT STARTED WITH handshakes. A foreign ministry official met them outside the building. The French ambassador handled introductions, and everyone swiftly moved inside, the better to avoid the coverage of a TV camera, though none appeared to be in evidence on the street. Clark and Chavez played their parts, standing close to their principal, but not too close, looking around nervously, as they were supposed to do.

Secretary Adler followed the official, with everyone else in trail. The French ambassador stopped in the anteroom with the others, as Adler and his guide went all the way into the rather modest official office of the UIR’s spiritual leader.

“I welcome you in peace,” Daryaei said, rising from his chair to greet his guest. He spoke through an interpreter. It was a normal ploy for such meetings. It made for greater precision in communications—and also if something went badly wrong, it could be said that the interpreter had made the mistake, which gave both sides a convenient way out. “Allah’s blessing on this meeting.”

“Thank you for receiving me on such short notice,” Adler said, taking his seat.

“You have come far. Your journey was a good one?” Daryaei inquired pleasantly. The entire ritual would be pleasant, or at least the beginning of it.

“It was uneventful,” Adler allowed. He struggled not to yawn or show fatigue. Three cups of strong European coffee helped, though they made his stomach a little jumpy. Diplomats in serious meetings were supposed to act like surgeons in an operating room, and he had long practice in showing none of his emotions, jumpy stomach or not.

“I regret that we cannot show you more of our city. There is so much history and beauty here.” Both men waited for the words to be translated. The translator was thirtyish, male, intense, and, Adler saw . . . afraid of Daryaei? he wondered. He was probably a ministry official, dressed in a suit that needed a little pressing, but the Ayatollah was in robes, emphasizing his national and clerical identity. Mahmoud Haji was grave, but not hostile in demeanor—and, strangely, he seemed totally lacking in curiosity.

"Perhaps the next time I visit."

A friendly nod. "Yes." This was said in English, which reminded Adler that the man understood his visitor's language. Nothing all that unusual in form, SecState noted.

"It has been a long time since there were direct contacts between your country and mine, certainly at this level."

"This is true, but we welcome such contacts. How may I be of service to you, Secretary Adler?"

"If you do not object, I would like to discuss stability in this region."

"Stability?" Daryaei asked innocently. "What do you mean?"

"The establishment of the United Islamic Republic has created the largest country in the region. This is a matter of concern to some."

"I would say that we have improved stability. Was not the Iraqi regime the destabilizing influence? Did not Iraq start two aggressive wars? We certainly did no such thing."

"This is true," Adler agreed.

"Islam is a religion of peace and brotherhood," Daryaei went on, speaking as the teacher he'd been for years. *Probably a tough one*, Adler thought to himself, *with steel under the gentle voice.*

"That is also true, but in the world of men the rules of religion are not always followed by those who call themselves religious," the American pointed out.

"Other countries do not accept the rule of God as we do. Only in the recognition of that rule can men hope to find peace and justice. That means more than saying the words. One must also live the words."

And thank you for the Sunday school lesson, Adler thought, with a respectful nod. *Then why the hell do you support Hezbollah?*

"My country wishes no more than peace in this region—throughout the world, for that matter."

"As is indeed the wish of Allah, as revealed to us through the Prophet."

He was sticking to the script, Adler saw. Once upon a time, President Jimmy Carter had dispatched an emissary to visit this man's boss, Khomeini, at his exile home in France. The Shah had been in deep political trouble then, and the opposition had been sounded out, just to hedge America's bets. The emissary had come home after the meeting to tell his President that Khomeini was a "saint." Carter had accepted the report at face value, and brought about the removal of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, allowing the "saint" to supplant him.

Oops.

The next administration had dealt with the same man and gotten nothing more for it than a scandal and world ridicule.

Ouch.

Those were mistakes Adler was determined not to repeat.

"It is also one of my country's principles that international borders are to be honored. Respect for territorial integrity is the sine qua non of regional and global stability."

"Secretary Adler, all men are brothers, this is the will of Allah. Brothers may quarrel from time to time, but to make war is hateful to God. In any case, I find the substance of your remarks somewhat unsettling. You seem to suggest that we have unfriendly intentions to our neighbors. Why do you say such a thing?"

"Excuse me, I think you misunderstand. I make no such suggestions. I have come merely to discuss mutual concerns."

"Your country and its associates and allies depend on this region for their economic health. We will not do harm to that. You need our oil. We need the things that oil money can buy. Ours is a trading culture. You know that. Our culture is also Islamic, and it is a source of great pain to me that the West seems never to appreciate the substance of our Faith. We are not barbarians, despite what your Jewish friends may say. We have, in fact, no religious quarrel with the Jews. Their patriarch, Abraham, came from this region. They were the first to proclaim the true God, and truly there should be peace between us."

"It pleases me to hear those words. How may we bring this peace about?" Adler asked, wondering when the last time had been that someone had tried to drop a whole olive *tree* on his head.

"With time, and with talk. Perhaps it is better that we should have direct contacts. They, too, are people of trade in addition to being people of faith."

Adler wondered what he meant by that. Direct contacts with Israel. Was it an offer, or a sop to toss at the American government?

"And your Islamic neighbors?"

"We share the Faith. We share oil. We share a culture. We are already one in so many ways."

OUTSIDE, CLARK, CHAVEZ, and the ambassador sat quietly. The office personnel studiously ignored them, after having provided the usual refreshments. The security people stood about, not looking at the visitors, but not looking away from them, either. For Chavez it was a chance to meet a new people. He noted that the setting was old-fashioned, and oddly shabby, as though the building hadn't changed much since the departure of the previous government—a long time ago, he reminded himself—and it wasn't so much that things were run down as that they weren't modern. There was a real tension here, though. That he could feel in the air. An American office staff would have looked at him with curiosity. The six people in this room did not. Why?

Clark had expected that. Being ignored didn't surprise him. He and Ding were here as security troops, and they were just furniture, unworthy of notice. The people here would be trusted aides and underlings, faithful to their boss because they had to be. They had a measure of power because of him. These visitors would either ratify that power in the international sense or threaten it, and while that was important to their individual well-being, they could no more affect it than they could affect the weather, and so they just tuned their visitors out, except for the security pukes, who were trained to view everyone as a threat even though protocol disallowed them from the physical intimidation which they would have preferred to show.

For the ambassador it was one more exercise in diplomacy, conversations in carefully chosen words selected to show little on the one hand, and to uncover much on the other. He could guess at what was being said by both sides. He could even guess at the real meaning of the words. It was their truth that interested him. What *did* Daryaei have planned? The ambassador and his country hoped for peace in the region, and so he and his colleagues had prepped Adler to feel open to that possibility, while at the same time not knowing how this would really go. An interesting man, Daryaei. A man of God who had surely murdered the Iraqi President. A man of peace and justice who ruled his country with an iron hand. A man of mercy who clearly had his own personal staff terrified of him. You had only to look around the room to see that. A modern, Middle Eastern Richelieu? There was a novel thought, the Frenchman joked to himself, behind an impassive face. He'd have to run that idea past his ministry later today. And in with him right now was a brand-new American minister. He allowed for the fact that Adler had a fine reputation as a career diplomat, but was he good enough for *this* task?

"WHY DO WE discuss this? Why should I have territorial ambitions?" Daryaei asked, almost pleasantly, but telegraphing his irritation. "My people desire only peace. There has been too much strife here. For all my life I have studied and taught the Faith, and now, finally, in the closing days of my life, there *is* peace."

"We have no more wish for this region than that, except perhaps to reestablish our friendship with your country."

"On that we should talk further. I thank your country for not hindering the removal of trade sanctions against the former country of Iraq. Perhaps that is a beginning. At the same time, we would prefer that America did not interfere in the internal affairs of our neighbors."

"We are committed to the integrity of Israel," Adler pointed out.

"Israel is not, strictly speaking, a neighbor," Daryaei replied. "But if

Israel can live in peace, then we can also live in peace."

The guy was good, Adler thought. He wasn't revealing very much, just denying everything. He made no policy statements aside from the usual protestations of peaceful intent. Every chief of state did that, though not many invoked the name of God so much. Peace. Peace. Peace.

Except that Adler didn't believe him for an instant on the subject of Israel. If he'd had peaceful intentions, he would have told Jerusalem first, the better to get them on his side for dealing with Washington. Israel had been the unnamed middleman for the arms-for-hostages disaster, and they'd been suckered, too.

"I hope that is a foundation upon which we can build."

"If your country treats my country with respect, then we can talk. Then we can discuss an improvement in relations."

"I will tell my President that."

"Your country, too, has endured much sorrow of late. I wish him the strength to heal your nation's wounds."

"Thank you." Both men stood. Handshakes were exchanged again, and Daryaei conducted Adler to the door.

CLARK NOTED THE way the office staff jumped to their feet. Daryaei conveyed Adler to the outer door, took his hand one more time, and let the man leave with his escorts. Two minutes later, they were in their official cars and on the way directly to the airport.

"I wonder how that went?" John asked nobody in particular. Everyone else wondered the same thing, but not another word was spoken. Thirty minutes later, aided by their official escort, the cars were back at Mehrabad International, and pulling up to the air force part of the facility, where their French jet was waiting.

There had to be a departure ceremony, too. The French ambassador talked with Adler for several minutes, all the while holding his hand in an extended farewell shake. With ample UIR-ian security, there was nothing for Clark and Chavez to do but look around, as they were supposed to do. In plain view were six fighter aircraft, with maintenance people working on them. The mechanics walked in and out of a large hangar that had doubtless been built under the Shah. Ding looked inside, and nobody made a fuss about it. Another airplane was in there, seemingly half disassembled. An engine was sitting on a cart, with another team of people tinkering with it.

"Chicken coops, you believe it?" Chavez asked.

"What's that?" Clark said, looking the other way.

"Check it out, Mr. C."

John turned. Stacked against the far wall of the hangar were rows

of wire cages, about the size of those used for moving poultry. Hundreds of them. Funny thing for an air force base, he thought.

ON THE OTHER side of the airport, the Movie Star watched the last of his team board a flight to Vienna. He happened to gaze across the expansive vista to see the private jets on the far side, with some people and cars close to one of them. He wondered briefly what that was about. Probably some government function. So was what he had planned, of course, but one that would never be acknowledged. The Austrian Airlines flight pulled away from the gate on time, and would head off just behind the business jet, or whatever it was. Then he walked to another gate to board his own flight.

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OPENINGS

MOST AMERICANS WOKE up to learn what their President already knew. Eleven American citizens were dead, with three more unaccounted for, in an airliner disaster on the opposite side of the world. A local TV crew had made it to the airport just in time, having learned of the emergency from a helpful source at the terminal. Their video showed little more than a distant fireball erupting into the sky, followed by some closer shots that were so typical that they, too, might have come from anywhere. Ten fire trucks surrounded the burning wreckage, blasting it with foam and water, both too late to save anyone. Ambulances scurried about. Some people, obvious survivors, wandered in the haze of shock and disorientation. Others, their faces blackened, staggered into the arms of rescue personnel. There were wives without husbands, parents without children, and the sort of chaos that always appeared dramatic but which passed on nothing in the way of explanation, even as it cried out for action of some kind.

The Republic of China's government issued a blistering statement about air piracy, then requested an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council. Beijing issued its own statement minutes later, stating that its aircraft, on a peaceful training exercise, had been attacked entirely without provocation, then returned fire in self-defense. Beijing totally disavowed any involvement in the damage to the airliner, and blamed the entire episode on their rebellious province.

"So, what else have we turned up?" Ryan asked Admiral Jackson at seven-thirty.

"We went over both tapes for about two hours. I brought in a few fighter pilots I've worked with, and a pair of Air Force guys, and we kicked it around some. Number one, the ChiComs—"

"Not supposed to call them that, Robby," the President observed.

"Old habit, sorry. The *gentlemen* of the PRC—hey, they knew we had ships there. The electronic signature of an Aegis ship is like Mount St. Helens with an attitude, okay? And the capabilities of the ships ain't exactly a secret. They've been in service for almost twenty years. So

they knew we were watching, and they knew we'd see everything. Let's keep that one in mind."

"Keep going," Jack told his friend.

"Number two, we have a spook team on the *Chandler,* listening in on radio chatter. We have translated the voice transmissions of the Chinese fighter pilots. Quoting now—this is thirty seconds into the engagement—'I have him, I have him, taking the shot.' Okay, the time stamp on that is exactly the same as the heat-seeker launch on the airliner.

"Number three, every driver I talked to said the same as I did—why shoot at an airliner on the edge of your missile range when you have fighters in your face? Jack, this one smells—real bad, man.

"Unfortunately, we can't prove the voice transmission came from the fighter that launched on the Airbus, but it is my opinion, and that of my pals across the river, that this was a deliberate act. They tried to splash that airliner on purpose," the Pentagon's director of operations concluded. "We're lucky anybody got off at all."

"Admiral," Arnie van Damm asked, "could you take that into a court of law?"

"Sir, I'm not a lawyer. I'm an airplane driver. I don't have to prove things for a living, but I'm telling you, it's a hundred-to-one against that we're wrong on this."

"I can't say this in front of the cameras, though," Ryan said, checking his watch. He'd have to do makeup in a few minutes. "If they did it on purpose—"

"No 'if,' Jack, okay?"

"Damn it, Robby, I heard you the first time!" Ryan snapped. He paused and took a breath. "I can't accuse a sovereign country of an act of war without absolute proof. Next, okay, fine, they *did* do it on purpose, and they did it with the knowledge that we'd know they did. What's that *mean?*"

Jack's national security team had had a long night. Goodley took the lead. "Hard to say, Mr. President."

"Are they making a move on Taiwan?" the President asked.

"They *can't,"* Jackson said, shaking off his Commander-in-Chief's tantrum. "They do not have the physical ability to invade. There is no sign of unusual activity in their ground forces in this area, just the stuff they've been doing in the northwest that has the Russians so annoyed. So from a military point of view the answer is no.

"Airborne invasion?" Ed Foley asked. Robby shook his head.

"They don't have the airlift capacity, and even if they tried, the ROC has enough air-defense assets to turn it into early duck season. They could stage an air-sea battle like I told you last night, but it'll cost them ships and planes—*for what purpose?"* the J-3 asked.

"So did they splash an airliner to test *us?"* POTUS wondered. "That doesn't make sense, either."

"If you say 'me' instead of 'us,' that's a possibility," the DCI said quietly.

"Come on, Director," Goodley objected. "There were two hundred people on that plane, and they must have thought they'd kill them all."

"Let's not be too naive, Ben," Foley observed tolerantly. "They don't share our sentimentality for human life over there, do they?"

"No, but—"

Ryan interrupted: "Okay, hold it. We think this was a deliberate act, but we don't have positive proof, and we have no idea what its purpose might have been—and if we don't, I can't call it a deliberate act, right?" There were nods. "Fine, now in fifteen minutes I have to go down to the Press Room and deliver this statement and then the reporters will ask me questions, and the only answers I can give them will be lies."

"That about sums it up, Mr. President," van Damm confirmed.

"Well, isn't that just *great*," Jack snarled. "And Beijing will know, or at least suspect, that I'm lying."

"Possible, but not certain on that," Ed Foley observed.

"I'm not good at lying," Ryan told them.

"Learn how," the chief of staff advised. "Quickly."

THERE WAS NO talking on the flight from Tehran to Paris. Adler took a comfortable seat in the back, got out a legal pad, and wrote the whole way, using his trained memory to reconstruct the conversation, then added a series of personal observations on everything from Daryaei's physical appearance to the clutter on his desk. After that, he examined the notes for an hour, and started making analytical comments. In the process, he wore down half a dozen pencils. The layover in Paris lasted less than an hour, enough for Adler to spend a little time with Claude again and for his escorts to have a quick drink. Then it was off again in their Air Force VC-20B.

"How'd it go?" John asked.

Adler had to remind himself that Clark was on the SNIE team, and not just a gun-toting SPO.

"First, what did you find out on your walk?"

The senior CIA officer reached in his pocket and handed the Secretary of State a gold necklace.

"Does this mean we're engaged?" Adler asked, with a surprised chuckle.

Clark gestured to his partner. "No, sir. He's engaged."

Now that they were aloft, the cabin crewman who ran the communications panel turned on his equipment. The fax machine started chirping at once.

"... WE HAVE CONFIRMED eleven American deaths, with three more U.S. citizens missing. Four of the American survivors are injured and are being treated in local hospitals. That concludes my opening statement," the President told them.

"Mister President!" thirty voices called at once.

"One at a time, please." Jack pointed to a woman in the front row.

"Beijing claims that Taiwan shot first. Can we confirm that?"

"We are examining some information, but it takes a while to figure these things out, and until such time as we have definitive information, I do not think it proper to draw any conclusions at this time."

"But both sides traded shots, didn't they?" she asked as a follow-up.

"That would seem to be the case, yes."

"So then do we know whose missile hit the Airbus?"

"As I said, we are still examining the data." *Keep it short, Jack,* he told himself. And that wasn't quite a lie, was it? "Yes?" He pointed to another reporter.

"Mr. President, with so many American citizens lost, what action will you be taking to ensure this does not happen again?" At least this one he could answer truthfully.

"We are examining options right now. Beyond that, I have nothing to say, except that we call on both Chinas to step back and think about their actions. The loss of innocent life is in the interest of no country. Military exercises there have been ongoing for some time now, and the resulting tension is not helpful to regional stability."

"So you're asking both countries to suspend their exercises?"

"We're going to ask them to consider that, yes."

"Mr. President," said John Plumber, "this is your first foreign policy crisis and . . ."

Ryan looked down at the elderly reporter and wanted to observe that his first *domestic* crisis had been of *his* making, but you couldn't afford to make enemies of the press, and you could only make friends with them if they liked you—an altogether unlikely possibility, he'd come to understand.

"Mr. Plumber, before you do anything, you have to find out the facts. We're working on that just as hard as we can. I had my national security team in this morning "

"But not Secretary Adler," Plumber pointed out. Good reporter that he was, he'd checked the official cars on West Executive Drive. "Why

wasn't he here?"

"He'll be in later today," Ryan dodged.

"Where is he now?" Plumber persisted.

Ryan just shook his head. "Can we limit this to just one topic? It's a little early in the morning for so many questions, and as you pointed out, I *do* have a situation to deal with, Mr. Plumber."

"And he is your principal foreign policy adviser, sir. Where is he now?"

"Next question," the President said tersely. He got about what he deserved from Barry of CNN:

"Mr. President, a moment ago you said *both* Chinas. Sir, does this signal a change in our China policy, and if so—"

IT WAS JUST after eight in the evening in Beijing, and things were good. He could see it on TV. How strange to watch a political figure so singularly lacking in charm and adroitness, especially an American. Zhang Han San lit a cigarette and congratulated himself. He'd done it again. There had been a danger in staging the "exercise," most particularly the recent air sorties—but then the Republic's aviators had so kindly obliged by shooting first, just as he'd hoped they would, and now there was a crisis which he could control precisely, and end it at any time, merely by recalling his own forces to their bases. He'd force America to react not so much by action as by inaction—and then someone else would take the lead in provoking its new President. He had no idea what Daryaei had in mind. An assassination attempt, perhaps? Something else? All he had to do was watch, as he was doing now, and reap the harvest when the opportunity arose, which it surely would. America couldn't stay lucky forever. Not with this young fool in the White House.

"BARRY, ONE COUNTRY calls itself the People's Republic of China, and the other calls itself the Republic of China. I have to call them something, don't I?" Ryan asked testily. *Oh, shit, have I done it* again?

"Yes, Mr. President, but—"

"But we probably have fourteen American citizens dead, and this is not a time to worry about semantics." *There, take that.*

"What are we going to do?" a female voice demanded.

"First, we're going to try to find out what took place. *Then* we can start thinking about reactions."

"But *why* don't we know yet?"

"Because as much as we would like to know everything that takes

place in the world every minute, it's simply impossible."

"Is that why your administration is radically increasing the size of the CIA?"

"As I have said before, we do not discuss intelligence matters, ever."

"Mr. President, there are published reports that—"

"There are published reports that UFOs land here on a regular basis," Ryan shot back. "Do you believe *that,* too?"

The room actually went quiet for a moment. It wasn't every day that you saw a President lose his temper. They loved it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret the fact that I cannot answer all your questions to your satisfaction. In fact, I am asking some of the same questions myself, but correct answers take time. If I have to wait for the information, so do you," he said, trying to get the news conference back on track.

"Mr. President, a man who looks very much like the former Chairman of the Soviet KGB has appeared on live television and—" The reporter stopped, as he saw Ryan's face glow red under the makeup. He expected another blowup, but it didn't happen. The President's knuckles went ivory-white on the lectern, and he took a breath.

"Please go on with your question, Sam."

"And that gentleman said that he is who he is. Now, sir, the cat is well out of the bag, and I think my question is a legitimate one."

"I haven't heard a question yet, Sam."

"Is he who he says he is?"

"You don't need me to tell you that."

"Mr. President, this event, this . . . operation has great international significance. At some point, intelligence operations, sensitive though they may well be, have a serious effect on our foreign relations. At that point, the American people want to know what such things are all about."

"Sam, I will say this one last time: I will never, not ever, discuss intelligence matters. I am here this morning to inform our citizens of a tragic and so far unexplained incident in which over a hundred people, including fourteen American citizens, have lost their lives. This government will do its utmost to determine what took place, and then to decide upon a proper course of action."

"Very well, Mr. President. Do we have a one-China policy, or a two-China policy?"

"We have made no changes."

"Might a change result from this incident?"

"I will not speculate on something so important as that. And now, with your permission, I have to get back to work."

"Thank you, Mr. President!" Jack heard on his way out the door.

Just around the corner was a well-hidden gun cabinet. POTUS slammed it with his hand hard enough to rattle a few of the Uzis inside.

"God damn it!" he swore on the fifty-yard walk back to his office.

"Mr. President?" Ryan spun around. It was Robby, holding his briefcase. It seemed so out of place for an aviator to be toting one of those.

"I owe you an apology," Jack said, before Robby could get another word out. "Sorry I blew up."

Admiral Jackson popped his friend on the arm. "Next time we play golf, it's a buck a hole, and if you're going to get mad, do it at me, not them, okay? I've seen your temper before, man. Dial it back. A commander can only get pissed in front of the troops for show—leadership technique, we call it—not for real. Yelling at staff is something else. I'm staff," Robby said. "Yell at me."

"Yeah, I know. Keep me posted and—"

"Jack?"

"Yeah, Rob?"

"You're doing fine, just keep it cool."

"I'm not supposed to let people kill Americans, Robby. That's not what I'm here for." His hands balled into fists again.

"Shit happens, Mr. President. If you think you can stop it all, you're just kidding yourself. And I don't have to tell you that. You're not God, Jack, but you are a pretty good guy doing a pretty good job. We'll have more information for you as soon as we can put it together."

"When things settle down, how about another golf lesson?"

"I am yours to command." The two friends shook hands. It wasn't enough for either of them at this moment, but it had to do. Jackson headed for the door, and Ryan turned back toward his office. "Mrs. Sumter!" he called on the way in. Maybe a smoke would help.

"SO WHAT GIVES, Mr. Secretary?" Chavez asked. The three-page fax off the secure satellite link told them everything the President had. He'd let them read it, too.

"I don't know," Adler admitted. "Chavez, that thesis paper you told me about?"

"What about it, sir?"

"You should have waited to write it. Now you know what it's like up here. Like playing dodge ball as a kid, except it ain't a rubber ball we're trying to dodge, is it?" The Secretary of State tucked his notes into his briefcase and waved to the Air Force sergeant who was supposed to look after them. He wasn't as cute as the French attendant

had been.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did Claude leave us anything?"

"A couple of bottles from the Loire Valley," the NCO replied, with a smile.

"You want to uncork one and get some glasses out?"

"Cards?" John Clark asked.

"No, I think I'm going to have a glass or two, and then I'm going to get a little sleep. Looks like I have another trip laid on," SecState told them.

"Beijing." No surprise, John thought.

"It won't be Philadelphia," Scott said, as the bottle and glasses arrived. Thirty minutes later, all three men pushed their seat backs down all the way. The sergeant closed the window shades for them.

This time Clark got some sleep, but Chavez did not. There was truth in what Adler had remarked to him. His thesis had savagely attacked turn-of-the-century statesmen for their inability to see beyond immediate problems. Now Ding did know a little better. It was hard to tell the difference between an immediate tactical problem and a truly strategic one when you were dodging the bullets on a minute-to-minute basis, and history books couldn't fully convey the temper, the *feel* of the times on which they supposedly reported. Not all of it. They also gave the wrong impression of people. Secretary Adler, now snoring in his leather reclining seat, was a career diplomat, Chavez reminded himself, and he'd earned the trust and respect of the President—a man he himself deeply respected. He wasn't stupid. He wasn't venal. But he was merely a man, and men made mistakes . . . and great men made big ones. Someday some historian would write about this trip they'd just taken, but would that historian really know what it had been like and, not knowing, how could he really comment on what had taken place?

What's going on? Ding asked himself. Iran gets real frisky and knocks over Iraq and starts a new country, and just as America is trying to deal with that, something else happens. An event minor in the great scheme of things, perhaps—but you never knew that until it was all over, did you? How could you tell? That was always the problem. Statesmen over the centuries had made mistakes because when you were stuck in the middle of things, you couldn't step outside and take a more detached look. That's what they were paid to do, but it *was* pretty hard, wasn't it? He had just finished his master's thesis, and he'd get hooded later this year, and officially proclaimed an expert in international relations. But that was a lie, Ding thought, settling back into his own seat. A flippant observation he'd once made on another long flight came back to him. All too often international

relations was simply one country fucking another. Domingo Chavez, soon-to-be master in international relations, smiled at the thought, but it wasn't very funny, really. Not when people got killed. Especially not when he and Mr. C. were front-line worker-bees. Something happening in the Middle East. Something else happening with China . . . four thousand miles away, wasn't it? Could those two things be related? What if they were? But how could you tell? Historians assumed that people *could* tell if only they'd been smart enough. But historians didn't have to do the work . . .

"NOT HIS BEST performance," Plumber said, sipping his iced tea.

"Twelve hours, not even that much, to get a handle on something halfway 'round the world, John," Holtzman suggested.

It was a typical Washington restaurant, pseudo-French with cute little tassels on a menu listing overpriced dishes of mediocre quality—but, then, both men were on expense accounts.

"He's supposed to handle himself better," Plumber observed.

"You're complaining that he can't lie effectively?"

"That's one of the things a President is supposed to do—"

"And when we catch him at it ..." Holtzman didn't have to go on.

"Who ever said it was supposed to be an easy job, Bob?"

"Sometimes I wonder if we're really supposed to make the job harder." But Plumber didn't bite.

"Where do you suppose Adler is?" the NBC correspondent wondered aloud.

"That was a good question this morning," the *Post* reporter granted, lifting his glass. "I have somebody looking into that."

"So do we. All Ryan had to do was say he was preparing to meet with the PRC ambassador. That would have covered things nicely."

"But it would have been a lie."

"It would have been the *right* lie. Bob, that's the game. The government tries to do things in secret, and we try to find out. Ryan likes this secrecy stuff a little too much."

"But when we burn him for it, whose agenda are we following?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, John. Ed Kealty leaked all that stuff to you. I don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Everybody knows it." Bob picked at his salad.

"It's all true, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Holtzman admitted. "And there's a lot more."

"Really? Well, I know you had a story working." He didn't add that he was sorry to have scooped the younger man, mainly because he wasn't.

"Even more than I can write about."

"Really?" That got John Plumber's attention. Holtzman was one of the younger generation in relation to the TV correspondent, and one of the older generation for the newest class of reporters—which regarded Plumber as a fuddy-duddy even as they attended his seminars at Columbia University's journalism program.

"Really," Bob assured him.

"Like?"

"Like things that I can't write about," Holtzman repeated. "Not for a long time, anyway. John, I've been on part of this story for years. I know the CIA officer who got Gerasimov's wife and daughter out. We have a little deal. In a couple years he tells me how it was done. The submarine story is true and—"

"I know. I've seen a photograph of Ryan on the boat. Why he doesn't let that one leak is beyond me."

"He doesn't break the rules. Nobody ever explained to him that it's okay to do that—"

"He needs more time with Arnie—"

"As opposed to Ed."

"Kealty knows how the game is played."

"Yes, he does, John, maybe a little too well. You know, there's one thing I've never quite been able to figure out," Bob Holtzman remarked.

"What's that?"

"The game we're in, are we supposed to be spectators, referees, or players?"

"Bob, our job is to report the truth to our readers—well, viewers for me."

"Whose facts, John?" Holtzman asked.

"A FLUSTERED AND angry President Jack Ryan . . ." Jack picked up the remote and muted the CNN reporter who'd zapped him with the China question. "Angry, yes, flustered, n—"

"Also yes," van Damm said. "You bungled the thing on China, and where Adler is—where is he, by the way?"

The President checked his watch. "He should be getting into Andrews in about ninety minutes. Probably over Canada now, I guess. He comes straight here, and then probably off again to China. What the *hell* are they up to?"

"You got me," the chief of staff admitted. "But that's why you have a national security team."

"I know as much as they do, and I don't know shit," Jack breathed, leaning back in his chair. "We've *got* to increase our human-

intelligence capability. The President can't be stuck here all the time not knowing what's going on. I can't make decisions without information, and all we have now are guesses—except for what Robby told us. That's a hard data-point, but it doesn't make sense, because it doesn't fit in with anything else."

"You have to learn to wait, Mr. President. Even if the press doesn't, you do, and you have to learn to focus on what you can do when you can do it. Now," Arnie went on, "we have the first set of House elections coming up next week. We have you scheduled to go out and make speeches. If you want the right kind of people in Congress, then that's what you have to go out and do. I have Callie preparing a couple of speeches for you."

"What's the focus?"

"Tax policy, management improvement, integrity, all your favorites. We'll have the drafts to you tomorrow morning. Time to spend some more time out among the people. Let them love you some, and you can love them back some more." The chief of staff earned himself a wry look. "I've told you before, you can't be trapped in here, and the radios on the airplane work just fine."

"A change of scenery would be nice," POTUS admitted.

"You know what would really be good now?"

"What's that?"

Arnie grinned. "A natural disaster, gives you the chance to fly out and look presidential, meet people, console them and promise federal disaster relief and—"

"God damn it!" It was so loud the secretaries heard it through the three-inch door.

Arnie sighed. "You gotta learn to take a joke, Jack. Put that temper of yours in a box and lock it the hell up. I just set you off for fun, and I'm on *your* side, remember?" Arnie headed back to his office, and the President was alone again.

Yet another lesson in Presidency 101. Jack wondered when they would stop. Sooner or later he'd have to *act* presidential, wouldn't he? But he hadn't quite made it yet. Arnie hadn't said that, exactly, and neither had Robby, but they didn't have to. He still didn't belong. He was doing his best, but his best wasn't good enough—yet, his mind added. Yet? Maybe never. *One thing at a time*, he thought. What every father said to every son, except they never warned you that one at a time was a luxury some people couldn't afford. Fourteen dead Americans on a runway on an island eight thousand miles away, killed on purpose probably, for a purpose he could scarcely guess at, and he was supposed to set that fact aside and get on with other things, like a trip back out to meet the people he was supposed to preserve, protect, and defend, even as he tried to figure out how he'd failed to do so for

fourteen of them. What was it you needed in order to do this job? Turn off dead citizens and fix on other things? You had to be a sociopath to accomplish that, didn't you? Well, no. Others had to—doctors, soldiers, cops. And now him. *And* control his temper, salve his frustration, and focus on something else for the rest of the day.

MOVIE STAR LOOKED down at the sea, six kilometers below, he estimated. To the north he could see an iceberg on the blue-gray surface, glistening in the bright sunlight. Wasn't that remarkable? As often as he'd flown, he'd never seen one of those before. For someone from his part of the world, the sea was strange enough, like a desert, impossible to live on, though a different way. Strange how it looked like the desert in all but color, the surface crinkling in almost-regular parallel lines just like dunes, but uninvitingly. Despite his looks—about which he was quite vain; he liked the smiles he got from flight attendants, for example—almost nothing was inviting to him. The world hated him and his kind, and even those who made use of his services preferred to keep him at arm's length, like a vicious but occasionally useful dog. He grimaced, looking down. Dogs were not favored animals in his culture. And so here he was, back on another airplane, alone, with his people on other aircraft in groups of three, heading to a place where they would be decidedly not welcome, sent from a place where they were scarcely more so.

Success would bring him—what? Intelligence officers would seek to identify and track him, but the Israelis had been doing that for years, and he was still alive. What was he doing this *for?* Movie Star asked himself. It was a little late for that. If he canceled the mission, then he wouldn't be welcome anywhere at all. He was supposed to be fighting for Allah, wasn't he? *Jihad.* A holy war. It was a religious term for a military-religious act, one meant to protect the Faith, but he didn't really believe that anymore, and it was vaguely frightening to have no country, no home, and then . . . no faith? Did he even have *that* anymore? He asked himself, then admitted that if he had to ask—he didn't. He and his kind, at least the ones who survived, became automatons, skilled robots—computers in the modern age. Machines that did things at the bidding of others, to be thrown away when convenient, and below him the surface of the sea or the desert never changed. Yet he had no choice.

Perhaps the people who were sending him on the mission would win, and he would have some sort of reward. He kept telling himself that, after all, even though there was nothing in his living experience to support the belief—and if he'd lost his faith in God, then why was it that he could remain faithful to a profession that even his employers

regarded with distaste?

Children. He'd never married, never fathered one to his knowledge. The women he'd had, perhaps—but, no, they were debauched women, and his religious training had taught him to despise them even as he made use of their bodies, and if they produced offspring, then the children, too, would be cursed. How was it that a man could chase an idea for all his life and then realize that here he was, looking down at the most inhospitable of scenes—a place where neither he nor any man could live—and be more at home here than anyplace else? And so he would assist in the deaths of children. Unbelievers, political expressions, things. But they were not. They were innocent of any guilt at that age, their bodies not yet formed, their minds not yet taught the nature of good and evil.

Movie Star told himself that such thoughts had come to him before, that doubts were normal to men on difficult tasks, and that each previous time he'd set them aside and gotten on with it. If the world had changed, then perhaps—

But the only changes that had taken place were contrary to his lifelong quest, and was it that having killed for nothing, he had to keep killing in the hope of achieving *something?* Where did that path lead? If there were a God and there were a Faith, and there were a Law, then—

Well, he had to believe in something. He checked his watch. Four more hours. He had a mission. He had to believe in that.

THEY CAME BY car instead of helicopter. Helicopters were too visible, and maybe this way nobody would notice. To make things more covert still, the cars came to the East Wing entrance. Adler, Clark, and Chavez walked into the White House the same way Jack had on his first night, hustled along by the Secret Service, and they managed to arrive unseen by the press. The Oval Office was a little crowded. Goodley and the Foleys were there, as well, along with Arnie, of course.

"How's the jet lag, Scott?" Jack asked first, meeting him at the door.

"If it's Tuesday, it must be Washington," the Secretary of State replied.

"It isn't Tuesday," Goodley observed, not getting it.

"Then I guess the jet lag is pretty bad." Adler took his seat and brought out his notes. A Navy mess steward came in with coffee, the fuel of Washington. The arrivals from the UIR all had a cup.

"Tell us about Daryaei," Ryan commanded.

"He looks healthy. A little tired," Adler allowed. "His desk is fairly clean. He spoke quietly, but he's never been one to raise his voice in

public, to the best of my knowledge. Interestingly, he was getting into town about the same time we were."

"Oh?" Ed Foley said, looking up from some of his own notes.

"Yeah, he came in on a business jet, a Gulfstream," Clark reported. "Ding got a few pictures."

"So, he's hopping around some? I guess that makes sense," POTUS observed. Strangely, Ryan could identify with Daryaei's problems. They weren't all that different from his own, though the Iranian's methods could hardly have been more different.

"His staffs afraid of him," Chavez added impulsively. "Like something from an old World War II Nazi movie. The staff in his outer office was pretty wired. If somebody had yelled 'boo,' they would have hit the ceiling."

"I'd agree with that," Adler said, not vexed at the interruption. "His demeanor with me was very old-world, quiet, platitudes, that sort of thing. The fact of the matter is that he said nothing of real significance—maybe good, maybe bad. He's willing to have continued contacts with us. He says he desires peace for everybody. He even hinted at a certain degree of goodwill for Israel. For a lot of the meeting, he lectured me on how peaceful he and his religion are. He emphasized the value of oil and the resulting commercial relationships for all parties involved. He denied having any territorial ambitions. No surprises in any of it."

"Okay," the President said. "What about body language?"

"He appears very confident, very secure. He likes where he is now."

"As well he might." It was Ed Foley again.

Adler nodded. "Agreed. If I had to describe him in one word, it would be 'serene.' "

"When I met him a few years ago," Jack remembered, "he was aggressive, hostile, looking for enemies, that sort of thing."

"None of that earlier today." SecState stopped and asked himself if it was still the same day. Probably, he decided. "Like I said, serene, but then on the way back, Mr. Clark here brought something up."

"What's that?" Goodley asked.

"It set off the metal detector." John pulled the necklace out again, and handed it to the President.

"Get some shopping done?"

"Well, everybody wanted me to do a walkabout," he reminded his audience. "What better place than a market?" Clark went on to report the incident with the goldsmith, while POTUS examined the necklace.

"If he sells these things for seven hundred bucks, maybe we should all get his address. Isolated incident, John?"

"The French station chief was walking with me. He said that this guy was pretty representative."

"So?" van Damm asked.

"So maybe Daryaei doesn't have much to be all that serene about," Scott Adler suggested.

"People like that don't always know what the peasants are thinking," the chief of staff thought.

"That's what brought the Shah down," Ed Foley told him. "And Daryaei is one of the people who made that happen. I don't think it likely that he's forgotten that particular lesson . . . and we know that he's still cracking down on people who step out of line." The DCI turned to look at his field officer. "Good one, John."

"Lefevre—the French spook—told me twice that we don't have a very good feel for the mood in the street over there. Maybe he was shining me on," Clark continued, "but I don't think so."

"We know there's dissent. There always is," Ben Goodley said.

"But we don't know how much." It was Adler again. "On the whole, I think we have a man here who wants to project serenity for a reason. He's had a couple of good months. He's knocked over a major enemy. He has some internal problems whose magnitude we need to evaluate. He's hopping back and forth to Iraq—we saw that. He's tired-looking. Tense staff. I'd say he has a full plate right now. Okay, he told me how he wants peace. I almost buy it. I think he needs time to consolidate. Clark here tells me that food prices are high. That's an inherently rich country, and Daryaei can best quiet things down by playing on his political success and turning that into economic success as quickly as possible. Putting food on the table won't hurt. For the moment, he needs to look in instead of looking out.

"So I think it's possible that we have a window of opportunity here," SecState concluded.

"Extend the open hand of friendship?" Arnie asked.

"I think we keep the contacts quiet and informal for the time being. I can pick somebody to handle the meetings. And then we see what develops."

The President nodded. "Good one, Scott. Now I guess we'd better get you up to speed on China."

"When do I leave?" SecState inquired, with a pained expression.

"You'll have a bigger airplane this time," his President promised him.

41

HYENAS

MOVIE STAR FELT THE main landing gear thump down at Dulles International Airport. The physical sensation didn't exactly end his doubts, but it did announce that it was time to put them aside. He lived in a practical world. The entry routine was—routine, again.

"Back so soon?" the immigration officer asked, flipping to the last entry in the passport.

"Ja, doch." Movie Star replied in his German identity. "Perhaps I get apartment here soon."

"The prices in Washington are kinda steep," the man reported, stamping the booklet yet again. "Have a pleasant stay, sir."

"Thank you."

It wasn't that he had anything to fear. He was carrying nothing illegal, except what was in his head, and he knew that American intelligence had virtually never caused substantive harm to a terrorist group, but this trip was different, even if only he knew it, as he walked alone in the mob of the terminal. As before, no one would meet him. They had a rendezvous to which he would be the last to arrive. He was more valuable than the other members of the team. Again he rented a car, and again he drove toward Washington, checking his mirror, taking the wrong exit deliberately and watching to see if anyone followed as he reversed direction to get back on the proper road. Again as before, the coast was clear. If there were anyone on him, the coverage was so sophisticated that he had no chance at all to survive. He knew how that worked: multiple cars, even a helicopter or two, but such an investment of time and resources only happened if the opposition knew nearly everything—it took time to organize—and that could only mean deep penetration of his group by the American CIA. The Israelis were capable of such a thing, or so everyone in the terrorist movement feared, but over the years a brutally Darwinian process had ended the lives of all the careless men; the Israeli Mossad had never once blanched at the sight of Islamic blood, and had he been discovered by that agency, he would long since have been dead. Or that's what he told himself, still watching his rearview mirror because that was how he stayed alive.

On the other hand, it amused him greatly that this mission would not have been possible without the Israelis. Islamic terrorist groups existed in America, but they had all the hallmarks of amateurs. They were overtly religious. They held meetings in known places. They talked among themselves. They could be seen, spotted, and positively identified as being *different* from the other fish in their adopted sea. And then they wondered how they were caught. *Fools*, Movie Star thought. But they served their purpose. In being visible, they attracted attention, and the American FBI had only so many assets. However formidable the world's intelligence services, they were also human institutions, and humans universally pounded on the nails that stuck up.

Israel had taught him that, after a fashion. Before the fall of the Shah, his own intelligence service, the Savak, had received training from the Israeli Mossad, and not all Savak members had been executed with the arrival of the new Islamic regime. The tradecraft they'd learned had also been taught to those like Movie Star, and the truth of the matter was that it was very easy to understand. The more important the mission, the more caution was required. If you wanted to avoid being spotted, then you had to disappear into your surroundings. In a secular country, do not be obviously devout. In a Christian and Jewish country, do not be Muslim. In a nation that had learned to distrust people from the Middle East, be from somewhere else—or better yet, on occasion, be truthful after a fashion. Yes, I come from *there*, but I am a Christian, or a Baha'i, or a Kurd, or an Armenian, and *they* persecuted my family cruelly, and so I came to America, the land of opportunity, to experience true freedom. And if you followed those simple rules, the opportunity was quite real, for America made it so easy. This country welcomed foreigners with an openness that reminded Movie Star of his own culture's stern law of hospitality.

Here he was in the camp of his enemy, and his doubts faded, as the exhilaration of it increased his heart rate and brought a smile to his face. He was the best at what he did. The Israelis, having trained him at second hand, had never gotten close to him, and if they couldn't, then neither could the Americans. You just had to be careful.

In each team of three there was one man like him, not quite as experienced as he was, but close enough. Able to rent a car and drive safely. To know to be polite and friendly with all he met. If a policeman were to stop him, he knew to be contrite and apologetic, to ask what he'd done wrong, and then ask for directions, because people remembered hostility more clearly than amity. To profess to be a physician or engineer or something else respectable. It was easy if you were careful.

Movie Star reached his first destination, a middle-level hotel on the outskirts of Annapolis, and checked in under his cover name, Dieter Kolb. The Americans were so foolish. Even their police thought that all Muslims were Arabs, never remembering that Iran was an Aryan country—the very same ethnic identity which Hitler had claimed for his nation. He went to his room, and checked his watch. If everything went according to plan, they would meet in two hours. To be sure, he placed a call to the 1-800 numbers for the proper airlines—and inquired about arriving flights. They'd all arrived on time. There might have been a problem with customs, or bad traffic, but the plan had allowed for that. It was a cautious one.

THEY WERE ALREADY on the road for their next stop, which was Atlantic City, New Jersey, where there was a huge convention center. The various new-model and "concept" cars were wrapped in covers to protect their finish, most of them on conventional auto trailers, but a few in covered trailers like those used by racing teams. One of the manufacturer's representatives was going over handwritten comments his company had solicited from people who'd stopped by to look at their products. The man rubbed his eyes. Damned headache, sniffles. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something. Achy, too. That's what you got for standing around all day right under the air-conditioning vent.

THE OFFICIAL TELEGRAM was hardly unexpected. The American Secretary of State requested an official consultation with his government to discuss matters of mutual interest. Zhang knew there was no avoiding this, and all the better to receive him in a friendly way, protesting innocence—and inquiring delicately if the American President had merely misspoken himself or had changed long-standing U.S. policy at his press conference. That side issue alone would tie up Adler for some hours, he imagined. The American would probably offer to be an intermediary between Beijing and Taipei, to shuttle back and forth between the two cities, hoping to calm things down. That would be very useful.

For the moment, the exercises were continuing, albeit with somewhat greater respect for the neutral space between the two sets of forces. The heat was still on, but at the "simmer" setting. The People's Republic, the ambassador had already explained in Washington, had done nothing wrong, had *not* fired the first shot, and had no desire to initiate hostilities. The problem was with the

breakaway province, and if only America would accede to the obvious solution to the problem—there is *one* China—then the matter would be settled, and quickly.

But America had long held to a policy that made sense to none of the countries involved, wanting to be friendly with Beijing *and* Taipei, treating the latter as the lesser nation it was, but unwilling to take that to its logical conclusion. Instead, America said that, yes, there was only one China, but that the one China did not have the right to enforce its rule on the "other" China, which, according to official American policy, didn't actually exist. Such was American consistency. It would be such a pleasure to point this out to Secretary Adler.

"'THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC is pleased to welcome Secretary Adler in the interests of peace and regional stability.' Well, isn't that nice of them," Ryan said, still in his office at nine in the evening, and wondering what TV his kids were watching without him. He handed the message back to Adler.

"You're really sure they did it?" SecState asked Admiral Jackson.

"If I go over it any more, the tape will wear out."

"You know, sometimes people just screw up."

"Sir, this is not one of those times," Robby said, wondering if he'd have to run the videotape *again*. "And they've been exercising their fleet for quite a while now."

"Oh?" Ryan asked.

"To the point that they must be wearing things out by now. They're not as good on maintenance as we are. Besides that, they're using up a lot of fuel. This is the most at-sea time we've ever seen them do. Why are they stringing things out? This shoot-down looks to me like a great excuse to call it a day and head back to port and say they've made their point."

"National pride," Adler suggested. "Face saving."

"Well, since then they've curtailed operations somewhat. Not approaching the line I showed you. The Taiwanese are really at full alert now. Hell, maybe that's it," the J-3 opined. "You don't attack a pissed-off enemy. You let him relax some first."

"Rob, you said that a real attack isn't possible," Ryan said.

"Jack, in the absence of knowledge of their intentions, I have to go by capabilities. They *can* stage a major engagement in the strait, and they will probably come off winners if they do. Maybe that will put sufficient political pressure on Taiwan to force some sort of major concession. They killed people," Jackson reminded the other two. "Sure, the value they place on human life isn't the same as ours, but when you kill people you cross another invisible line—and they know

how *we* feel about that."

"Move the carrier up," Adler said.

"Why, Scott?"

"Mr. President, it gives me a face card to lay on the table. It shows that we're taking this seriously. As Admiral Jackson just told us, we *do* take the loss of life seriously, and they will just have to accept the fact that we don't want and might not *allow* this to go any further."

"What if they press anyway—what if there's another 'accident' that might involve us?"

"Mr. President, that's operations, and that's my business. We'd park *Ike* on the east side of the island. They can't get to her by accident then. They'd have to come through three defense belts to do so, the ROC one over the strait, then Taiwan itself, and then the wall the battle-group commander puts up. I could also spot an Aegis at the bottom end of the strait to give us full radar coverage of the entire passage. If, that is, you order us to move *Ike.* The advantage for Taiwan, well, four squadrons of fighters, plus airborne radar coverage. That should make them feel more secure."

"Which will allow me to play a better game if I shuttle back and forth," the Secretary concluded.

"But that still leaves the IO uncovered. It's been a long time since we did that." Robby kept coming back to that, the other two noticed.

"Nothing else there?" Jack asked. He realized that he should have found out before.

"A cruiser, *Anzio,* two destroyers, plus two frigates guarding an under way-replenishment group based at Diego Garcia. We never leave Diego uncovered by warships, not with the Pre-Positioning Ships there. We have a 688-class sub in the area, too. It's enough to matter, but not enough to project power. Mr. Adler, you understand what a carrier means."

SecState nodded. "People take them seriously. That's why I think we need it off China."

"He makes a good case, Rob. Where is *Ike* now?"

"Between Australia and Sumatra, should be approaching the Sunda Strait. Exercise SOUTHERN CUP is supposed to simulate an Indian attack on their northwest coast. If we move her now, she can get to Formosa in four days plus a couple hours."

"Get her moving that way, Rob, all possible speed."

"Aye aye, sir," Jackson acknowledged, his doubts still visible on his face. He gestured to the phone and, getting a nod, he called the National Military Command Center. "This is Admiral Jackson with orders from National Command Authority. Execute GREYHOUND BLUE. Acknowledge that, Colonel." Robby listened and nodded. "Very well, thank you." Then he turned to his President. "Okay, *Ike* will turn

north in about ten minutes and make a speed run to Taiwan."

"That fast?" Adler allowed himself to be impressed.

"The miracle of modern communications, and we already had alert orders to Admiral Dubro. This won't be a covert move. The battle group will head through several narrows, and people will notice," he warned.

"Press release won't hurt," Adler said. "We've done it before."

"Well, there's your card to play in Beijing and Taipei," Ryan said, having exercised yet another executive order, but distantly concerned that Robby was unhappy about it. The really difficult matter was fuel. A fleet-replenishment group would have to move as well, to refill the bunkers of *Eisenhower's* non-nuclear escort ships.

"Will you let on that we know about the shoot-down?"

Adler shook his head. "No, definitely not. It will be more unsettling to them if they think we don't know."

"Oh?" This came from a somewhat surprised President.

"Then I can decide *when* we 'find out,' Boss, and when that happens, I have another card to play—that way I can make it a big card." He turned. "Admiral, don't overestimate the intelligence of your enemy. Diplomats like me aren't all that savvy on the technical aspects of what you do. That applies to people in foreign countries, too. A lot of our capabilities are unknown to them."

"They have spooks to keep them informed," Jackson objected.

"You think they always listen? Do we?"

The J-3 blinked at that lesson and filed it away for future use.

IT HAPPENED IN a large shopping mall, an American invention that seemed designed for covert operations, with its many entrances, bustling people, and near-perfect anonymity. The first rendezvous wasn't really a meeting at all. Nothing more than eye contact was made, and that not at a distance closer than ten meters, as the groups strolled past one another. Instead, each of the sub-groups performed a count, confirmed identity visually, and then each checked to be sure that there was no surveillance on the others. With that done, they all returned to their hotel accommodations. The real rendezvous would take place tomorrow.

Movie Star was pleased. The sheer audacity of this was very exciting indeed. This wasn't the relatively simple task of getting one bomb-clad fool—*heroic martyr,* he corrected himself—into Israel, and the beauty of it was that had one of his teams been spotted, the enemy couldn't possibly risk ignoring them. You *could* force the opposition into showing its hand, and so much the better to do it at a point in time when none of your people had done anything more than enter the

country with false travel documents.

Doubts be damned, the leader of the operation told himself. There was the sheer beauty of being ready to do something right in the lion's own den, and *that* was what kept him in the business of terrorism. In the lion's own den? He smiled at the cars as he walked across the parking lot. The lion's own *cubs*.

"SO WHAT ARE you doing?" Cathy asked in the dark.

"Scott leaves for China tomorrow morning," Jack answered, lying next to his wife. People said that the President of the United States was the world's most powerful man, but at the end of every day the exercise of that power surely seemed to exhaust him. Even his time at Langley, with an auto commute each way every day, hadn't worn him out as this job did.

"To say what?"

"Try to get them calmed down, defuse the situation."

"You're really sure that they deliberately—"

"Yes. Robby is positive, about as much as you are with a diagnosis," her husband confirmed, staring up at the ceiling.

"And we're going to negotiate with them?" SURGEON asked.

"Have to."

"But—"

"Honey, sometimes—hell, most of the time a nation-state commits murder, they get away with it. I'm supposed to think about 'the big picture,' 'the larger issues,' and all that stuff."

"That's awful," Cathy told him.

"Yes, it sure is. This game you have to play by its own rules. If you mess up, more people suffer. You can't talk to a nation-state the way you talk to a criminal. There are thousands of Americans over there, businessmen and like that. If I get too far out of line, then things might happen to some of them, and then things escalate and get worse," POTUS explained to her.

"What's worse than killing people?" his physician-wife asked.

Jack didn't have an answer. He'd come to accept the fact that he didn't have all the answers for press conferences, or for all the people out there, or even for his own staff sometimes. Now he didn't even have a single answer for his wife's simple and logical question. Most powerful man in the world? Sure. With that thought, another day ended at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

EVEN IMPORTANT PEOPLE got careless, an eventuality made easier

by a little creativity on the part of more careful folk. The National Reconnaissance Office was working hard to keep track of two places. Every pass of the reconsats over the Middle East and now the Formosa Strait resulted in copious numbers of download pictures, literally thousands of images which photo-interpretation specialists had to examine one by one in their new building close to Dulles Airport. It was just one more task that couldn't be done by computer. The readiness state of the UIR military had become the number-one priority item for the American government, as part of the Special National Intelligence Estimate now in preparation on White House orders. That meant the entire attention of the team fell that way, and for the other things, more people were called in to work overtime. These looked continuously at the photos downloaded from over China. If the PRC was going to make a real military move, then it would show in many ways. People's Liberation Army troops would be out training and maintaining their equipment, or loading their tanks onto trains and the parking areas would look different. Aircraft would have weapons hanging from their wings. These were things a satellite photo would reveal. More care was taken to spot ships at sea—that was far harder, since they were not in fixed locations. America still had three photographic satellites aloft, each making two passes per day over the areas of interest, and they were spaced so that there was little "sad time." That made the technicians feel pretty good about things. They had a continuous feed of data with which to firm up their estimates and so do their duty for their President and their country.

But they couldn't watch everything everywhere, and one place they didn't watch was Bombay, western headquarters of the Indian navy. The orbits of the American KH-11 satellites were well defined, as were their schedules. Just after the newest satelite swept over the area, with the other new one on the far side of the world, came a four-hour window, which would end with the overhead passage of the oldest and least reliable of the trio. Happily, it also coincided with a high tide.

Two carriers, their repairs recently completed, and their escorts, slipped their mooring lines and stood out to sea. They would be conducting training exercises in the Arabian Sea, in case anyone noticed and asked about it.

• • •

DAMN. THE COBRA representative woke up, feeling a little feverish. It took him a few seconds to orient himself. Different motel, different city, different room lights. He fumbled for the proper switch, then put

on his glasses, squinting in the uncomfortable light, and spotted his bag. Yeah. Shaving kit. He took that into the bathroom, pulled the paper cover off the glass, and half filled it with water. Then he worked the childproof top on the aspirin bottle, tipped two tablets into his hand and washed them down. He ought not to have had all those beers after dinner, the sales rep told himself, but he'd made a fairly decent deal with a couple of club pros, and beer was always a good lubricant for the golf business. He'd feel better in the morning. A former touring professional who hadn't been quite good enough to make it big, he was now a very successful manufacturer's representative. What the hell, he thought, heading back to his bed. He still had a minus handicap, the pace was easier, and he was making a pretty good living—plus being able to play a new course practically every week, the better to demonstrate his wares. He hoped the aspirin would work. He had an eight-thirty tee time.

STORM TRACK AND PALM BOWL were connected by a fiber-optic communications cable, the better to share information. Another training exercise was under way in the former Iraq and this one wasn't a CPX. The three heavy corps of integrated Iraqi and Iranian units were in the field. Direction-finding radios placed them well away from the Saudi and Kuwaiti borders, and so no special danger was attached to their activities, but the ELINT troops were listening closely to get a feel for the skill level of the commanders who were moving tanks and infantry fighting vehicles across the broad, dry plains southeast of Baghdad.

"Here's good news, Major," the American lieutenant said, handing over a telex. The UIR SNIE had generated something positive for a change.

Two hundred miles northwest of Kuwait, at a spot five miles south of the "berm"—actually a man-made dune—that marked the border between the Kingdom and the UIR, a deuce-and-a-half truck stopped. The crew got out, attached the extension to the launch ramp and fired up their Predator drone. But "drone" was an obsolete term. This mini-aircraft was an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, or UAV, a blue-gray-colored, propeller-driven spy. It took about twenty minutes to attach the wings, run diagnostics on the electronics, and spin up the engine, and then it was launched, the annoying buzz of its engine fading rapidly as it climbed to its operating altitude and headed north.

The product of three decades of research, Predator was fairly stealthy, difficult to detect on radar due to its small size, the inclusion of radar-absorbing material in its design, and the fact that its operating speed was so slow that modern computer-controlled radars,

if they caught it at all, classified it as a bird and erased it from the operator's scope. The paint covering the airframe was the same IR-suppresive product the Navy had taken to using. It was both ugly and prone to provide a sticky home to anything that touched it—the technicians had to brush sand off their baby all the time—but that was balanced by the fact that the color blended in with the sky exceedingly well. Armed only with a TV camera, this one soared up to ten thousand feet, and cruised north under the control of another team at STORM TRACK, the better to keep an eye on the UIR exercises. It was a technical violation of the new country's sovereignty, but two pounds of explosive in the UAV would ensure that if it hit the ground in the wrong place, no one would be able to tell what it was. A directional antenna beamed the "take" from the camera to receivers in the Kingdom.

The fiber-optic data link crossloaded the same signal to PALM BOWL, and when a USAF enlisted woman switched on the room's monitor, they were looking down at a nearly featureless landscape while the Predator was guided to its destination by its operators.

"It'll be good to see if they know what they're doing," the lieutenant observed to Major Sabah.

"Better if we see that they don't," the Kuwaiti officer replied thoughtfully. Other members of his extended family were increasingly concerned. Enough so, the major thought, that their country's military was quietly ramping up to a very high state of readiness. Like the Saudis, the Kuwaiti citizens who'd flocked enthusiastically to man the best equipment that their small but wealthy country could obtain felt that maintenance of their tanks was a task for lesser men, but, unlike their Saudi cousins, they had experience with being on the bottom side of conquest. Many of them had lost family members, and a long memory was characteristic of this part of the world. For that reason, they trained with a will. They weren't yet near the level of the Americans who taught them or the Israelis who held them in distant contempt, Major Sabah knew. His countrymen had first of all learned how to shoot. They'd burned out at least one gun tube per tank in the pure joy of learning that skill, and they had been firing real rounds, not just practice—war shots fly straighter and farther—as they combined a diverting hobby with a national survival skill. Able now to hit their targets, their current task was to learn to maneuver and fight on the move. Again, they couldn't do it well, not yet, but they were learning. The developing crisis put emphasis on their training, and even now his countrymen were leaving their banking, oil, and trading offices to mount their vehicles. An American advisory team would take them into the field again, give them a battle problem, and watch their performance. While it pained the major that his countrymen,

many of them relatives, were not yet ready, it was a source of pride to him that they were making a real effort. Bright as he was, however, it never occurred to him how close his military was to the Israeli model: citizen soldiers learning to fight after the harsh lesson of not having known.

"SWORDSMAN IS AWAKE," Andrea Price heard in her earpiece. They were in the kitchen, the Detail commander with her sub-detail chiefs, standing and sipping coffee around one of the stainless-steel countertops used for preparing food. "Roy?"

"Another routine day," Special Agent Altman said. "She's got three procedures scheduled for the morning, then a lecture to some Spanish docs in the afternoon—University of Barcelona, ten of them, eight males, two females. We checked the names with the Spanish police. They're all clean. No special threats reported against SURGEON. Looks like a normal day at the office."

"Mike?" she asked Special Agent Michael Brennan, principal agent to Little Jack.

"Well, SHORTSTOP has a first-period biology test today and baseball practice after school. Pretty good with a glove, but his batting needs help," the agent added. "Otherwise, same-o same-o."

"Wendy?" Special Agent Gwendolyn Merritt was principal agent for Sally Ryan.

"Chemistry exam for SHADOW in third period today. She's getting very interested in Kenny. Nice kid, needs a haircut and a new tie. She's thinking about going out for the girls' lacrosse team." A few faces winced at that revelation. How do you protect someone being chased by teenagers with sticks?

"What's the family background on Master Kenny again?" Price asked. Even she couldn't remember everything.

"Father and mother both lawyers, tax stuff mainly."

"SHADOW needs better taste," Brennan observed to general amusement around the counter. He was the joker on the crew. "There is a potential threat there, Wendy."

"Huh? What?"

"If POTUS gets the new tax laws passed, they're in the shitter."

Andrea Price made another check mark on her morning list. "Don?"

"Today's routine is the same as usual, Introductory Crayon. I'm still not happy with the setup, Andrea. I want some more people, one more inside, and two more for overwatch on the south side," Don Russell announced. "We're too exposed. We just don't have enough defensive depth there. The outer perimeter is essentially the only one, and I am not comfortable with that."

"SURGEON doesn't want us to overpower the place. You have yourself and two agents inside, three for immediate backup, and one surveillance agent across the road," Price reminded him.

"Andrea, I want three more. We're too exposed there," Russell repeated. His voice was reasonable and professional as ever. "The family has to listen to us on professional questions."

"How about I come over tomorrow afternoon to look things over again?" Price asked. "If I agree, then I go to the Boss."

"Fine." Special Agent Russell nodded.

"Any more problems with Mrs. Walker?"

"Sheila tried to get a petition drive started with the other Giant Steps parents—get SANDBOX out of there, that sort of thing. It turns out that Mrs. Daggett gets a lot of repeat business, and more than half the parents know the Ryans and like 'em. So, that crapped out in a hurry. You know what the only real problem is?"

"What's that, Don?"

He smiled. "At that age—sometimes I turn around and the kids move and when I turn back I can't tell which one SANDBOX is. You know there's only two kinds of haircuts for little girls, and half the mothers there think Oshkosh is the only brand of kid's clothes."

"Don, it's a woman thing," Wendy Merritt observed. "If the First Toddler wears it, it has to be fashionable."

"Probably the same thing with the hair," Andrea added. "By the way, I forgot to tell you, Pat O'Day wants a little match with you," she told the Detail's most senior member.

"The Bureau guy?" Russell's eyes lit up. "Where? When? Tell him to bring money, Andrea." It occurred to Russell that he was due to have some playtime of his own. He hadn't lost a pistol match in seven years—his last bout with the flu.

"We all set?" Price asked her senior agents.

"How's the Boss doing?" Altman asked.

"They're keeping him pretty busy. Cutting into his sleep time."

"Want me to talk to SURGEON about it? She keeps a good eye on him," Roy told her.

"Well—"

"I know how. Gee, Dr. Ryan, is the Boss doing okay? He looked a little tired this morning . . . ," Altman suggested.

The four agents exchanged looks. President-management was their most delicate duty. This President listened to his wife almost as though he were a normal husband. So why not make SURGEON into an ally? All four nodded at once.

"Go with it," Price told him.

“SON OF A BITCH,” Colonel Hamm said inside his command track.

“Surprised you, did they?” General Diggs inquired delicately.

“They have a ringer in there?” the CO of the Blackhorse Cav wanted to know.

“No, but they sprung one on me, Al. They didn’t let anybody know they had IVIS training. Well, that is, I found out last night.”

“Nice guy, sir.”

“Surprises work both ways, Colonel,” Diggs reminded him.

“How the *hell* did they get the funding for that?”

“Their fairy god-senators, I suppose.”

Visiting units didn’t bring their own equipment to Fort Irwin, for the obvious reason that it was too expensive to transport it all back and forth. Instead they mated up with vehicle sets permanent to the base, and those were top-of-the-line. Included in all of them was IVIS, the Inter-Vehicle Information System, a battlefield data link that projected data onto a computer screen inside the tanks and Bradleys. It was something the 11th Cav had been issued for only its own vehicles (their real ones, not the simulated enemy sets) six months earlier. Seemingly a simple system for trading data—it even ordered spare parts automatically when something broke it presented the crew with a comprehensive overview of the battlefield, and converted hard-won reconnaissance information into general knowledge in a matter of seconds. No longer was data on a developing engagement limited to a harried and distracted unit commander. Now sergeants knew everything the colonel did, and information was still the most valuable commodity known to man. The visiting tankers from the Carolina Guard were fully trained up on its use. So were the troopers of the Blackhorse, but their pseudo-Soviet OpFor vehicles didn’t have it.

“Colonel, now we really know how good the system is. It beat you.”

The simulated engagement had been a bloody one. Hamm and his operations officer had contrived a devilish ambush, only to have the Weekend Warriors detect it, avoid it, and enter into a battle of maneuver which had caught the OpFor leaning the wrong way. A daring counterstroke by one of his squadron commanders had almost saved the day, and killed off half of the Blue Force, but it hadn’t been enough. The first night engagement had gone to the good guys, and the Guardsmen were whooping it up as if after an ACC basketball game.

“I’ll know better next time,” Hamm promised.

“Humility is good for the soul,” Marion Diggs said, enjoying the sunrise.

“Death is bad for the body, sir,” the colonel reminded him.

“Baaaaaaaaa,” Diggs said, grinning on the way to his personal

Hummer. Even Al Hamm needed the occasional lesson.

THEY TOOK THEIR time. Movie Star handled the car rentals. He had duplicate IDs, enough to rent four vehicles, three four-door private cars and a U-Haul van. The former had been selected to match vehicles owned by parents who had children at the nursery school. The latter was for their escape—an eventuality which he now thought likely and not merely possible. His men were smarter than he'd appreciated. Driving past the objective in their rented cars, they didn't turn their heads to stare, but allowed their peripheral vision to take in the scene. They already had exact knowledge from the model they'd built, based on data from their leader's photographs. Driving past the site gave them a better full-size, three-dimensional view, and added more substance to their mental image, and to their growing confidence. With that task done, they drove west, turned off Route 50 and proceeded to a lonely farmhouse in southern Anne Arundel County.

The house was owned by a man thought by his neighbors to be a Syrian-born Jew who'd lived in the area for eleven years, but who was a sleeper agent. Over the past few years, he'd made discreet purchases of arms and ammunition, all of them legal, and all made before restrictive laws on some of the weapons had been passed—he could have evaded them anyway. In his coat pocket were airline tickets under a different name and passport. This was the final rendezvous point. They would bring the child here. Then six of them would leave the country at once, all on separate flights, and the remaining three would enter the homeowner's personal car and drive to yet another pre-determined location to await developments. America was a vast country, with many roads. Cellular telephones were difficult to track. They'd give a devil of a time to their pursuers, Movie Star thought. He knew how he'd do things, if it got that far. The team with the child would have one phone. He would have two, one to make brief calls to the American government, and another to call his friends. They would demand much for the life of the child, enough to throw this country into chaos. Perhaps the child might even be set free alive. He wasn't sure about that, but he supposed it was possible.

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PREDATOR/PREY

CIA HAS ITS OWN PHOTO shop, of course. The film shot out the aircraft window by Field Officer Domingo Chavez was tagged by the technician in a manner little different from that used by commercial shops, and then processed on standard equipment. There the routine treatment stopped. The grainy ASA-1200 film produced a poor-quality image, and one couldn't give *that* to the people on the seventh floor. The employees in the photo shop knew about the RIF order, and the best way to avoid being laid off, in this or any other business, was to be indispensable. So the developed roll of film went into a computer-enhancement system. It took only three minutes per frame to convert the images into something that might have been shot by an expert with a Hasselblad under studio conditions. Less than an hour after the film's arrival, the tech produced a set of eight-by-ten glossies that positively identified the airplane passenger as the Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, and provided a shot of his aircraft, so clear and dramatic that the manufacturer might have used it on a sales brochure. The film was put in an envelope and sent off to secure storage. The photos themselves were stored in digital form on tape, their precise identity—date, time of day, location, photographer, and subject—also coded into a computer register for extensive cross-referencing. It was standard procedure. The technician had long since stopped caring about what he developed, though he still did see the occasional frame showing someone on the news in a position that never made the TV screen . . . but not this guy. From what he'd heard about Daryaei, the man probably didn't have much interest in boys or girls, and the dour expression on his face seemed to confirm it. What the hell, he did have nice taste in airplanes, a G-IV, it looked like. Odd, wasn't that a Swiss registration code on the tail, though . . . ?

When the photos went upstairs, one complete set was also set aside for a different kind of analysis. A physician would examine them closely. Some diseases left visible signs, and the Agency always kept an eye on the health of foreign leaders.

"... SECRETARY ADLER will be leaving for Beijing this morning," Ryan told *them*. Arnie had told *him* that, as unpleasant as these news appearances were, being seen on TV doing presidential things was good for him politically—and *that*, Arnie always went on, meant being more effective in the job. The President also remembered hearing from his mom how important it was to go to the dentist twice a year, too, and just as the antiseptic smells of that place were certain to frighten a child, so he had come to loathe the damp of this room. The walls leaked, some of the windows were cracked, and this part of the West Wing of the White House was about as neat and well kept as a high-school locker room, something the citizens couldn't tell from watching TV. Though the area was only a few yards from his own office, nobody really cared much about tidying things up. Reporters were such slobs, the staff claimed, that it wouldn't have mattered much anyway. What the hell, the reporters didn't seem to worry about it.

"Mr. President, have we learned anything more about the airliner incident?"

"It's been announced that the body count is complete. The flight-data recorders have been recovered and—"

"Will we have access to the black-box information?"

Why did they call it the *black* box when it was *orange?* Jack had always wondered about that, but knew he'd never get a sensible answer. "We've asked for that access, and the Republic of China government has promised its full cooperation. They don't have to do that. The aircraft is registered in that country, and the aircraft is made in Europe. But they are being helpful. We acknowledge that with thanks. I should add that none of the Americans who survived the crash itself are in any medical danger—some of the injuries are severe, but not life-threatening."

"Who shot it down?" another reporter asked.

"We're still examining the data, and—"

"Mr. President, the Navy has two Aegis-class ships in that immediate area. You must have a good idea of what happened." This guy had done his homework.

"I really can't comment further on that. Secretary Adler will discuss the incident with the parties concerned. We want, first of all, to make sure that no further loss of life takes place."

"Mr. President, a follow-up: you *must* know more than you're saying. Fourteen Americans were killed in this incident. The American people have a right to know why."

The hell of it was, the man was right. The hell of it also was that Ryan had to evade: "We really do not know exactly what happened

yet. I cannot make a definitive statement until we do." Which was philosophically true, anyway. He knew who'd taken the shot. He didn't know why. Adler had made a good point yesterday on keeping that knowledge close.

"Mr. Adler returned from somewhere yesterday. Why is that a secret?" It was Plumber again, chasing down his question from the previous day.

I'm going to kill Arnie for exposing me this way all the time. "John, the Secretary was engaged in some important consultations. That's all I have to say on the issue."

"He was in the Middle East, wasn't he?"

"Next question?"

"Sir, the Pentagon has announced that the carrier *Eisenhower* is moving into the South China Sea. Did you order that?"

"Yes, I did. We feel that the situation warrants our close attention. We have vital interests in that region. I point out that we are not taking sides in this dispute, but we are going to look after our own interests."

"Will moving the carrier cool things down or heat them up?"

"Obviously, we're not trying to make things worse. We're trying to make them better. It's in the interests of both parties to take a step back and think about what they are doing. Lives have been lost," the President reminded them. "Some of those were American lives. That gives us a direct interest in the matter. The reason we have a government and a military is to look after American interests and to protect the lives of our citizens. The naval forces heading for the region will observe what is happening and conduct routine training operations. That is all."

ZHANG HAN SAN checked his watch again and remarked to himself that it was becoming a fine way to end his working day—the sight of the American President doing exactly what he wanted him to do. Now China had fulfilled her obligations to that Daryaei barbarian. The Indian Ocean was devoid of a major American naval presence for the first time in twenty years. The American foreign minister would leave Washington in another two hours or so. Another eighteen hours to fly to Beijing, and then the platitudes could be exchanged. He'd see what concessions he could wring out of America and the Taiwanese puppet state. Maybe a few good ones, he thought, with the trouble America was sure to face elsewhere....

ADLER WAS IN his office. His bags were packed and in his official car, which would take him to the White House to catch a helicopter to Andrews after a presidential handshake and a brief departure statement which would be as bland as oatmeal. The more dramatic departure would look good on TV, make his mission appear to be a matter of importance, and cause additional wrinkling to his clothes—but the Air Force crew had an ironing board on the plane.

"What do we know?" Under Secretary Rutledge asked of the Secretary's senior staff.

"The missile was shot by a PRC aircraft. That's pretty positive from the Navy's radar tapes. No idea why, though Admiral Jackson is very positive in saying that it was not an accident."

"How was it in Tehran?" another assistant secretary inquired.

"Equivocal. I'll get that written up on the flight and fax it back here." Adler, too, was pressed for time and hadn't had enough to think through his meeting with Daryaei.

"We need that if we're going to be much use on the SNIE," Rutledge pointed out. He really wanted *that* document. With it, Ed Kealty could prove that Ryan was up to his old tricks, playing secret agent man, and even suborning Scott Adler into doing the same. It was out there somewhere, the key to destroying Ryan's political legitimacy. He was dodging and counterpunching well, doubtless due to Arnie van Damm's coaching, but his gaffe yesterday on China policy had sent rumbles throughout the building. Like many people at State, he wished that Taiwan would just go away, and enable America to get on with the business of conducting normal relations with the world's newest superpower.

"One thing at a time, Cliff."

The meeting returned to the China issue. By mutual consent, it was decided that the UIR problem was on the back burner for the next few days.

"Any change in China policy from the White House?" Rutledge asked.

Adler shook his head. "No, the President was just trying to talk his way through things—and, yeah, I know, he shouldn't have called the Republic of China China, but maybe it rattled their cage just a little in Beijing, and I'm not all that displeased about it. They do need to learn about not killing Americans. We have crossed a line here, people. One of the things I have to do is let them know that we take that line seriously."

"Accidents happen," someone observed.

"The Navy says it wasn't an accident."

"Come on, Mr. Secretary," Rutledge groaned. "Why the hell would they do that on purpose?"

"It's our job to find out. Admiral Jackson made a good case for his position. If you're a cop on the street and you have an armed robber in front of you, why shoot the little old lady down the block?"

"Accident, obviously," Rutledge persisted.

"Cliff, there are accidents, and there are accidents. This one killed Americans, and in case anybody in this room forgot, we are supposed to take that seriously."

They weren't used to that sort of reprimand. What was *with* Adler, anyway? The job of the State Department was to maintain the peace, to forestall conflict that killed people in the thousands. Accidents were accidents. They were unfortunate, but they happened, like cancer and heart attacks. State was supposed to deal with the Big Picture.

"THANK YOU, Mr. President." Ryan left the podium, having again survived the slings and arrows of the media. He checked his watch. Damn. He'd missed seeing the kids off to school—again—and hadn't kissed Cathy good-bye, either. Where in the Constitution, he wondered, was it written down that the President wasn't a human being?

On reaching his office, he scanned the printed sheet of his daily schedule. Adler was due over in an hour for the send-off to China. Winston at ten o'clock to go over the details of his administrative changes across the street at Treasury. Arnie and Callie at eleven to go through his speeches for next week. Lunch with Tony Bretano. A meeting after lunch with—who? The Anaheim Mighty Ducks? Ryan shook his head. Oh. They'd won the Stanley Cup, and this would be a photo opportunity for them and for him. He had to talk to Arnie about that political crap. Hmph. Ought to have Ed Foley over for that, Jack smiled to himself. He was a hockey fanatic . . .

"YOU'RE RUNNING LATE," Don Russell said, as Pat O'Day dropped Megan off.

The FBI inspector continued past him, saw to Megan's coat and blanky, then returned. "The power went off last night and reset my clock-radio for me," he explained.

"Big day planned?"

Pat shook his head. "Desk day. I have to finish up a few things—you know the drill." Both did. It was essentially editing and indexing reports, a secretarial function which on sensitive cases was often done by sworn, gun-toting agents.

"I hear you want to have a little contest," Russell said.

"They say you're pretty good."

"Oh, fair, I guess," the Secret Service agent allowed.

"Yeah, I try to keep the shots inside the lines, too."

"Like the SigSauer?"

The FBI agent shook his head. "Smith 1076 stainless."

"The ten-millimeter."

"It makes a bigger hole," O'Day pointed out.

"Nine's always been enough for me," Russell reported. Then both men laughed.

"You hustle pool, too?" the FBI agent asked.

"Not since high school, Pat. Shall we set the amount of the wager?"

"It has to be serious," O'Day thought.

"Case of Samuel Adams?" Russell suggested.

"An honorable bet, sir," the inspector agreed.

"How about at Beltsville?" That was the site of the Secret Service Academy. "The outside range. Indoors is always too artificial."

"Standard combat match?"

"I haven't shot bull's-eye in years. I don't ever expect one of my principals to be attacked by a black dot."

"Tomorrow?" It seemed a good Saturday diversion.

"That's probably a little quick. I can check. I'll know this afternoon."

"Don, you have a deal. And may the best man win." They shook hands.

"The best man will, Pat. He always does." Both men knew who it would be, though one of them would have to be wrong. Both also knew that the other would be a good guy to have at your back, and that the beer would taste pretty good either way when the issue was decided.

THE WEAPONS WEREN'T fully automatic. A good machinist could have changed that, but the sleeper agent wasn't one of those. Movie Star and his people didn't mind all that much. They were trained marksmen and knew that full-auto was only good for three rounds unless you had the arms of a gorilla—after that, the gun jumped up and you were just drilling holes in the sky instead of the target, who just might fire back at you. There was neither time nor space for another round of shooting, but they were familiar with the weapon type, the Chinese knock-off of the Soviet AK-47, itself a development of a German weapon from the 1940s. It fired a short-case 7.62mm cartridge. The magazines held thirty rounds each. The team members used duct tape to double them up, inserting and ejecting the magazines to be sure that everything fit properly. With that task

completed, they resumed their examination of the objective. Each of them knew his place and his task. Each also knew the dangers involved, but they didn't dwell on that. Nor, Movie Star saw, did they dwell on the nature of the mission. They were so dehumanized by their years of activity within the terrorist community that, though this was the first real mission, for most of them, all they really thought about was proving themselves. How they did it, exactly, was less important.

"THEY'RE GOING TO bring up a lot of things," Adler said.

"Think so?" Jack asked.

"You bet. Most-favored nation, copyright disputes, you name it, it'll all come up."

The President grimaced. It seemed obscene to place the copyright protection for Barbra Streisand CDs alongside the deliberate killing of so many people, but—

"Yeah, Jack. They just don't think about stuff the same way we do."

"Reading my mind?"

"I'm a diplomat, remember? You think I just listen to what people say out loud? Hell, we'd never get any negotiations done that way. It's like playing a long low-stakes card game, boring and tense all at the same time."

"I've been thinking about the lives lost . . ."

"I have, too," SecState replied with a nod. "You can't dwell on it—it's a sign of weakness in their context—but I won't forget it, either." That got a rise out of his Commander-in-Chief.

"Why is it, Scott, that we always have to respect their cultural context? Why is it that they never seem to respect ours?" POTUS wanted to know.

"It's always been that way at State."

"That doesn't answer the question," Jack pointed out.

"If we lean too hard on that, Mr. President, it's like being a hostage. Then the other side always knows that they can hang a couple of lives over us and use it to pressure us. It gives them an advantage."

"Only if we allow it. The Chinese need us as much as we need them—more, with the trade surplus. Taking lives is playing rough. We can play rough, too. I've always wondered why we don't."

SecState adjusted his glasses. "Sir, I do not disagree with that, but it has to be thought through very carefully, and we do not have the time to do that now. You're talking a doctrinal change in American policy. You don't shoot from the hip on something that big."

"When you get back, let's get together over a weekend with a few others and see if there are any options. I don't like what we've been

doing on this issue in a moral sense, and I don't like it because it makes us a little too predictable."

"How so?"

"Playing by a given set of rules is all well and good, as long as everybody plays by the same rules, but playing by a known set of rules when the other guy *doesn't* just makes us an easy mark," Ryan speculated. "On the other hand, if somebody else breaks the rules and then we break them, too, maybe in a different way, but break them even so, it gives him something to think about. You want to be predictable to your friends, yes, but what your enemy needs to predict is that messing with you gets him hurt. How hurt he gets, that part we make unpredictable."

"Not without merit, Mr. President. Sounds like a nice subject for a weekend up at Camp David." Both men stopped talking when the helicopter came down on the pad. "There's my driver. Got your statement?"

"Yeah, and about as dramatic as a weather report on a sunny day."

"That's how the game is played, Jack," Adler pointed out. He reflected that Ryan was hearing a lot of that song. No wonder he was bridling at it.

"I've never run across a game where they never change the rules. Baseball went to a designated hitter to liven things up," POTUS remarked casually.

Designated hitter, SecState wondered on his way out the door. *Great choice of words . . .*

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Ryan watched the helicopter lift off. He'd done the handshake for the cameras, made his brief statement for the cameras, looked serious but upbeat for the cameras. Maybe C-SPAN had covered it live, but nobody else would. Were it to be a slow news day—Friday in Washington often was—it might get a minute and a half on one or two of the evening news shows. More likely not. Friday was their day to summarize the week's events, recognize some person or other for doing something or other, and toss in a fluff story.

"Mr. President!" Jack turned to see TRADER, his Secretary of the Treasury, walking over a few minutes early.

"Hi, George."

"That tunnel between here and my building?"

"What about it?"

"I took a look at it this morning. It's a real mess. You have any beefs about cleaning it up?" Winston asked.

"George, that's a Secret Service function, and *you* own them, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, but it does come to your house, and so I thought I ought to ask. Okay, I'll get it taken care of. Might be nice for when it rains."

"How's the tax plan coming?" Ryan asked, on his way to the door. An agent yanked it open and held it for him. Such things still made Jack uncomfortable. A man had to do *some* things for himself.

"We'll have the computer models done next week. I really want the case tight on this one, revenue-neutral, easier on the little guy, fair on the big guy, and I have my people jumping through hoops on the administrative savings. Jesus, Jack, was I wrong about that!"

"What do you mean?" They turned the corner for the Oval Office.

"I thought I was the only guy pissing money away to work the tax code. Everybody does. It's a huge industry. It'll put a lot of people out of work—"

"I'm supposed to be happy about that?"

"They'll all find honest work, except for the lawyers, maybe. And we'll save the taxpayers a few billion dollars by giving them a tax form they can figure out from fourth-grade math. Mr. President, the government doesn't insist that people buy buggy whips, does it?"

Ryan told his secretary to call Arnie in. He'd want a little political guidance on the ramifications of George's plan.

"YES, ADMIRAL?"

"You asked for a report on the *Eisenhower* group," Jackson said, walking to the large wall map and consulting a slip of paper. "They're right here, making good speed." Then Robby's pager started vibrating in his pocket. He pulled it out and checked the number. His eyebrows went up. "Sir, do you mind . . . ?"

"Go ahead," Secretary Bretano said. Jackson took the phone on the other side of the room, dialing five digits. "J-3 here . . . oh? Where are they? Then let's find out, shall we, Commander? Correct." He put the phone back. "That was the NMCC. The NRO reports that the Indian navy's missing—their two carriers, that is."

"What does that mean, Admiral?"

Robby walked back to the map and walked his hand across the blue part west of the Indian subcontinent. "Thirty-six hours since the last time we checked. Figure three hours to clear the port and form up . . . twenty knots times thirty-three is six hundred sixty nautical miles, that's seven hundred sixty statute miles . . . about halfway between their home port and the Horn of Africa." He turned. "Mr. Secretary, they have two carriers, nine escorts, and an UNREP group missing from their piers. The fleet oilers mean they might be planning to stay out for a while. We had no intelligence information to warn us about

this." *As usual,* he didn't add.

"So where exactly are they?"

"That's the point. We don't know. We have some P-3 Orion aircraft based at Diego Garcia. They're going to launch a couple to go looking. We can task some satellite assets to the job also. We need to tell State about this. Maybe the embassy can find out something."

"Fair enough. I'll tell the President in a few minutes. Anything to worry about?"

"Could be they're just putting out after completing repairs—we rattled their cage pretty hard a while back, as you know."

"But now the only two aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean are somebody else's?"

"Yes, sir." *And our nearest one is heading the wrong way*. But at least SecDef was catching on some.

ADLER WAS IN a former Air Force One, an old but solid version of the venerable 707-320B. His official party comprised eight people, with five Air Force stewards to look after them. For the moment, he looked at his watch, computed the travel time—they had to stop for fuel at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska—and decided he'd catch up on his sleep during the last leg. What a shame, he thought, that the government didn't award frequent-flyer miles. He'd be traveling free for the rest of his life. For now, he took out his Tehran notes and started examining them again. He closed his eyes, trying to recall additional details as he relived the experience from his arrival at Mehrabad to the departure, visualizing every single episode. Every few minutes, he opened his eyes, flipped to the page in his notes, and made a few marginal comments. With luck, he'd be able to have them typed up and sent by secure fax to Washington for the SNIE team.

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"DING, MAYBE YOU have another career ahead of you," Mary Pat observed, as she examined the photo through a magnifying glass. Her voice went on in some disappointment. "He looks healthy."

"You suppose being a son of a bitch is good for longevity?" Clark asked.

"Worked for you, Mr. C.," Chavez joked.

"I may have to put up with this for the next thirty years."

"But such handsome grandsons you will have, *jefe.* And bilingual."

"Back to business, shall we?" Mrs. Foley suggested, Friday afternoon

or not.

IT'S NEVER FUN to be ill on an airplane. He wondered what he'd eaten, or maybe he'd picked up something in San Francisco at the computer show, all those damned people around. The executive was an experienced traveler, and his personal "first-aid kit" never left his side. In with his razor and such he found some Tylenol. He washed two down with a glass of wine and decided that he'd just try to sleep it off. With luck, he'd feel better by the time his flight made it into Newark. Sure as hell, he didn't want to drive home feeling like this. He eased the seat all the way back, clicked off the light, and closed his eyes.

IT WAS TIME. The rental cars pulled away from the farmhouse. Each driver knew the route to and from the objective. There were no maps or other written material in their vehicles aside from photos of their prey. If any of them had uneasy feelings about kidnapping a small child, none showed it. Instead, their weapons were loaded and set on safe, and in every case sat on the floor, covered with a blanket or cloth. All wore suits and ties so that if a police car pulled alongside, a look would reveal only three well-groomed men, probably businessmen in nice private cars. The team thought that last part amusing. The Movie Star was a stickler for proper appearance, probably, they all thought, because of his vanity.

PRICE WATCHED THE arrival of the Mighty Ducks with no small amusement. She'd seen it all before. The most powerful of men walked into this place and were turned into children by it. What to her and her colleagues was just part of the scenery, the paintings and so forth, was to others the trappings of ultimate power. And in a way, she admitted to herself, they were right and she was wrong. Anything can become routine after sufficient repetition, whereas the new visitor, seeing everything for the first time, may have seen more clearly. The processing helped make it that way, as they came through the metal detectors under the watchful eyes of members of the USSS Uniformed Division. They'd get a quick walk-around while the President finished his meeting with the SecDef, which was reportedly running very late. The hockey players, bearing gifts for the President—the usual sticks, pucks, and a jersey-sweater with his name on it (actually they had

them for the whole family)—shuffled through the passage from the East Entrance, their eyes sweeping left and right over the decorations on the white-painted walls of what for Andrea was a place of work and for them something else, powerful and special. An interesting dualism, she thought, walking over to Jeff Raman.

"I'm heading over to check out arrangements for SAND-BOX."

"I heard Don was getting a little antsy. Anything I need to know?"

She shook her head. "POTUS isn't planning anything special. Callie Weston will be over later. They changed her slot. Otherwise, everything's routine."

"Fair enough," Raman acknowledged.

"This is Price," she said into her microphone. "Show me in transit to SANDBOX."

"Roger that," the command post replied.

The Detail chief headed out the way the Mighty Ducks had come in, and turned left for her personal vehicle, a Ford Crown Victoria. The vehicle looked ordinary, but wasn't. Under the hood was the biggest standard engine Ford made. There were two cellular phones and a pair of secure radios. The tires had steel disks inside so that were one to be flattened, the car could still drive. Like all members of the Detail, she'd been trained in the Service's special evasive-driving course at Beltsville—it was something they all loved. And in her purse was her SigSauer 9mm automatic, along with two spare clips, plus her lipstick and credit cards.

Price was a fairly ordinary-looking woman. Not as pretty as Helen D'Agustino . . . she sighed at the memory. Andrea and Daga had been close. The latter had helped her through a divorce and gotten her some dates. Good friend, good agent, dead with all the rest that night on the Hill. Daga—nobody in the Service had called her Helen—had been blessed with Mediterranean features that stopped just short of voluptuous, and that had made for a fine disguise. She just hadn't looked at all like a cop. Presidential aide, secretary, or mistress, maybe . . . but Andrea was more ordinary, and so she donned the sunglasses that agents on the Detail adopted. She was no-nonsense, maybe a little strident? They'd said that about her once, back when it had been a novelty for women to join up and carry guns. The system was over that now. Now she was one of the boys, to the point that she laughed at the jokes and told some of her own. Her instant assumption of command on that night with SWORDSMAN, getting his family to safety—she owed Ryan, Andrea knew. He'd made the call because he liked the way she did things. She would never have made Detail chief so rapidly but for his instant decision. Yes, she had the savvy. Yes, she knew the personnel very well. Yes, she genuinely loved the work. But she was young for the responsibility—and female. POTUS didn't seem

to care, however. He hadn't picked her because she was female and it might therefore look good to the voting public. He'd done it because she'd gotten the job done during a tough time. That made it right, and that made SWORDSMAN special. He even asked her questions about things. That was unique.

She didn't have a husband. She didn't have kids, probably never would. Andrea Price wasn't one of those who sought to escape her womanhood in pursuit of a career. She wanted it all, but she hadn't quite managed that. Her career was important—she could think of nothing more vital to her country than what she did—and the good news was that it was so all-encompassing that she rarely had the time to dwell on what was missing . . . a good man to share her bed, and a small voice to call her Mommy. But on drives alone, she did think about it, like now, heading up New York Avenue.

"Not all that liberated at all, are we?" she asked the windshield. But the Service didn't pay her to be liberated. It paid her to look after the First Family. Her personal life was supposed to run on her personal time, though the Service didn't issue her any of that, either.

INSPECTOR O'DAY WAS already on Route 50. Friday was best of all. He'd done his duty for the week. His tie and suit jacket were on the seat next to him, and he was back in his leather bomber jacket and his lucky John Deere ballcap, without which he'd never consider playing golf or going out to hunt. This weekend he had a ton of things to do around the house. Megan would help with many of them. Somehow she knew. Pat didn't fully understand it. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe she just responded to her father's devotion. However it came about, the two were inseparable. At home, she left his side only to sleep, and only then after a major hug and kiss, her little arms tight around his neck. O'Day chuckled to himself.

"Tough guy."

RUSSELL SUPPOSED IT was the grandfather in him. All these little munchkins. They were playing outside now, every one in his or her parka, about half with the hoods up, because little kids liked that for some reason. Serious playtime here. SANDBOX was in the sandbox, along with the O'Day kid who so closely resembled her, and a little boy—the Walker kid, the rather nice young son of that pain in the ass with the Volvo wagon. Agent Hilton was out, too, supervising. Strangely, they could relax more out here. The playground was on the north side of the Giant Steps building, under the direct view of the

support team just across the street. The third member of the team was inside on the phone. She ordinarily worked the back room, where the TV monitors were. The kids knew her as Miss Anne.

Too thin, Russell told himself, even as he watched the toddlers having the purest sort of fun. In the extreme case, somebody could drive by on Ritchie Highway and hose the place. Trying to talk the Ryans out of sending Katie here was a wasted effort, and, sure, they wanted their youngest to be a normal kid. But . . .

But it was all insane, wasn't it? Russell's entire professional life had revolved around the knowledge that there were people who hated the President and everyone around him. Some were truly crazy. Some were something else. He'd studied the psychology of it. He had to, since learning about them helped to predict what to look for, but that wasn't the same as understanding it. These were kids. Even the fucking Mafia, he knew, didn't mess with children. He sometimes envied the FBI for its statutory authority to track down kidnappers. To rescue a child and apprehend the criminal in that sort of case must be a sweet moment indeed, though part of him wondered how hard it was to bring in alive that kind of subject instead of just sending him off to have his Miranda rights read to him by God Himself. That random thought evoked a smile. Or maybe what really happened was better yet. Kidnappers had a *very bad time* in prison. Even hardened robbers couldn't stomach the abusers of children, and so that variety of hood learned a whole new form of recreation in the federal corrections system: survival.

"Russell, Command Post," his earpiece said.

"Russell."

"Price is heading out here like you requested," Special Agent Norm Jeffers said from the house across the street. "Forty minutes, she says."

"Right. Thanks."

"I see the Walker lad is continuing his engineering studies," the voice continued.

"Yeah, maybe he'll do bridges next," Don agreed. The youngster had the second level building on his sand castle, to the rapt admiration of Katie Ryan and Megan O'Day.

"MR. PRESIDENT," THE team captain said, "I hope you'll like this."

Ryan had a good laugh and donned the team jersey for the cameras. The team bunched around him for the shot.

"My CIA Director is a big hockey fan," Jack said.

"Really?" Bob Albertsen asked. He was a very physical defenseman, the terror of his conference for his board checking, but as docile as a

kitten in this setting.

"Yeah, he has a kid who's pretty good, played in the kids' leagues in Russia."

"Then maybe he learned something. Where's he go to school?"

"I'm not sure what colleges they're thinking about. I think they said Eddie wants to study engineering." It was so damned pleasant, Jack thought, to talk about normal things like a normal person to other normal people once in a while.

"Tell them to send the kid to Rensselaer. It's a good tech school up by Albany."

"Why there?"

"Those damned nerds win the college championship every other year. I went to Minnesota, and they cleaned our clock twice in a row. Send me his name and I'll see he gets some stuff. His dad, too, if that's okay, Mr. President."

"I'll do that," the President promised. Six feet away, Agent Raman heard the exchange and nodded.

O'DAY ARRIVED JUST as the kids were trooping back in the side door for bathroom call. This, he knew, was a major undertaking. He pulled his diesel pickup in just after four. He watched the Secret Service agents switch positions. Russell appeared at the front door, his regular post for when the children were inside.

"We got us a match for tomorrow?"

Russell shook his head. "Too quick. Two weeks from tomorrow, two in the afternoon. It'll give you a chance to practice."

"And you won't?" O'Day asked, passing inside. He watched Megan enter the girls' bathroom without seeing her daddy in the room. Well, then. He squatted down outside the door to surprise her when she came out.

MOVIE STAR, TOO, was at his surveillance position in the school parking lot to the northeast. The trees were starting to fill in, he realized. He could see, but his view was somewhat obstructed. Things appeared normal even so, and from this point on, it was in Allah's hands, he told himself, surprised that he used the term for a decidedly ungodly act. As he watched, Car I turned right just north of the day-care center. It would proceed down the street, reverse directions, and head back.

Car 2 was a white Lincoln Town Car, the twin of one belonging to a family with a child here. That family comprised two physicians,

though none of the terrorists knew that. Immediately behind it was a red Chrysler whose twin belonged to the again-pregnant wife of an accountant. As Movie Star watched, both pulled into parking spaces opposite each other, as close to the highway as the parking lot allowed.

PRICE WOULD BE here soon. Russell took note of the cars' arrival, thinking over his arguments for the Detail chief. The afternoon sun reflected off the windshields, preventing him from seeing anything more inside than the outline of the drivers. Both cars were early, but it was a Friday . . .

... the tag numbers . . . ?

... his eyes narrowed slightly as he shook his head, asking himself why he hadn't—

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SOMEONE ELSE HAD. Jeffers lifted his binoculars, scanning the arriving cars as part of his surveillance duties. He didn't even know he had a photographic memory. Remembering things was as natural to him as breathing. He thought everyone could do it.

"Wait, wait, something's wrong here. They're not—" He lifted the radio mike. "Russell, those are not our cars!" It was almost in time.

IN ONE SMOOTH motion, two drivers opened their car doors and swung their legs out, lifting their weapons off the front seats as they did so. In the back of both cars, two pairs of men came up, also armed.

RUSSELL'S RIGHT HAND moved back and down, reaching for his automatic while his left lifted the collar-mounted radio microphone: *"Gun!"*

Inside the building, Inspector O'Day heard something but wasn't sure what, and he was facing the wrong way to see how Agent Marcella Hilton turned away from a child who was asking her a question and shoved her hand into her gun purse.

It was the simplest of code words. An instant later, he heard the same word repeated over his earpiece as Norm Jeffers shouted it from

the command post. The black agent's hand pushed another button, activating a radio link to Washington. *"SANDSTORM SANDSTORM SANDSTORM!"*

LIKE MOST CAREER cops, Special Agent Don Russell had never fired his side arm in anger, but years of training made his every action as automatic as gravity. The first thing he'd seen was the elevated front sight of an AK-47-class automatic rifle. With that, as though a switch had been thrown, he changed from a watchful cop into a guidance system for a firearm. His SigSauer was out now. His left hand was racing to meet his right on the grip of the weapon, as the rest of his body dropped to one knee to lower his profile and give him better control. The man with the rifle would get the first shot off, but it would miss high, Russell's mind reported. Three such rounds did, passing over his head into the door frame as the area exploded with staccato noise. While that was happening, his tritium-coated front sight matched up with the face behind the weapon. Russell depressed the trigger, and from fifteen yards, he fired a round straight into the shooter's left eye.

INSIDE, O'DAY'S OWN instincts were just lighting off when Megan emerged from the bathroom, struggling with the suspender clips on her Oshkosh coveralls. Just then, the agent the kids knew as Miss Anne bolted out of the back room, her pistol in both hands and pointed up.

"Jesus," the FBI inspector had time to say, when Miss Anne bounded right through him like an NFL fullback, knocking him down at his daughter's feet and banging his head against the wall in the process.

ACROSS THE STREET, two agents ran out the front door of the residence, both holding Uzi submachine guns while Jeffers worked the communications inside. He'd already gotten the emergency code word to headquarters. Next he activated the direct drop lines to Barracks J of the Maryland State Police on Rowe Boulevard in Annapolis. There was noise and confusion, but the agents were expertly drilled. Jeffers's function was to make sure that the word got out, then to back up the other two members of his team, already crossing the lawn of the house —

—they never had a chance. From fifty yards away, the shooters from Car 1 dropped both of them with aimed fire. Jeffers watched them go down while he got the word to the state police. He didn't have time for shock. As soon as his information was acknowledged, he lifted his M-16 rifle, flipped off the safety, and moved for the door.

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RUSSELL SHIFTED FIRE. Another shooter made the mistake of standing to get a better shot. He never made it. Two quick rounds exploded his head like a melon, saw the agent, who was not thinking, not feeling, not doing anything but servicing targets as quickly as he could identify them. The enemy rounds were still going over his head. Then he heard a scream. His mind reported that it was Marcella Hilton, and he felt something heavy fall on his back and knock him to the ground. Dear God, it had to be Marcella. Her body—something—was on his legs, and as he rolled to get clear of the obstruction, four men came into view, advancing toward him, now with a clear line of sight to where he was. He fired one round that scored, drilling one of them right through the heart. The man's eyes went wide with the shock of the impact, until a second round took him in the face. It was like he'd always dreamed it would be. The gun was doing all the work. His peripheral vision showed movement to his left—the support group—but no, it was a car, driving across the playground right at them—not the Suburban, something else. He scarcely could tell as his pistol centered on another shooter, but that man went down, shot three times by Anne Pemberton in the doorway behind him. The remaining two—only two, he had a chance—then Annie got one in the chest, then fell forward, and Russell knew he was alone, all alone now, only him between SANDBOX and these motherfuckers.

Don Russell rolled to his right to avoid fire on the ground to his left, shooting as his body turned, getting off two rounds that went wild. Then his Sig locked open on an empty magazine. He had another ready, and instantly he ejected the empty and slapped in a full one, but that took time and he felt a round enter his lower back, the impact like a kick that shook his body, as his right thumb dropped the slide lever and another bullet struck him in the left shoulder, ripping all the way down his torso to exit out his right leg. One more round, but he couldn't get the gun high enough, something wasn't working right, and he hit somebody straight through the kneecap an instant before a series of shots lowered his face to the ground.

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O'DAY WAS JUST trying to get up when two men came through the door, both armed with AKs. He looked around the room, now full of stunned, silent kids. The silence seemed to hang for a long moment, then turn to the shrill screams of toddlers. One of the men had blood all over his leg, and was gritting his teeth in pain and rage.

OUTSIDE, THE THREE men from Car 1 surveyed the carnage. Four men were dead, they saw, as they jumped out of the car, but they'd done for the covering group and—

—the first one out the right-rear door fell facedown. The other two turned around to see a black man in a white shirt with a gray rifle.

"Eat shit and die." His memory would fail him on this occasion. Norman Jeffers would never remember saying that as he shifted to the next target and squeezed off a three-round burst into his head. The third man of the team which had killed his two friends dropped behind the front of his car, but the car was stuck in the middle of the playground with open air to the left and right. "Come on, stick it up and say hi, Charlie," the agent breathed—

and sure enough he did, swinging his weapon around to shoot back at the remaining bodyguard, but not fast enough. His eyes as open and unblinking as an owl's, Jeffers watched the blood cloud fly back as the target disappeared.

"Norm!" It was Paula Michaels, the afternoon surveillance agent from the 7-Eleven across the street, her pistol out and in both hands.

Jeffers dropped to one knee behind the car whose occupants he'd just killed. She joined him, and with the sudden negation of activity, both agents started breathing heavily, their hearts racing, their heads pounding.

"Get a count?" she asked.

"At least one made it inside—"

"Two, I saw two, one hit in the leg. Oh, Jesus, Don, Anne, Marcella —"

"Save it. We got kids in there, Paula. Fuck!"

SO. MOVIE STAR thought, it wasn't going to work out after all. Damn it, he swore silently. He'd *told* them there were *three* people in the house to the north. Why hadn't they waited to kill the third? They could have had the child away from here by now! Well. He shook his

head clear. He'd never fully expected the mission to succeed. He'd warned Badrayn of that—and picked his people accordingly. Now all he had to do was watch to make sure—what? Would they kill the child? That was something they'd discussed. But they might not fulfill their duty before they died.

PRICE HAD BEEN five miles out when the emergency call had come over her radio. In less than two seconds, she'd had the pedal to the floor, and the car accelerating through traffic, the flashing light in place, and siren screaming. Turning north onto Ritchie Highway, she could see cars blocking the road. Immediately, she maneuvered left onto the median, the car side-slipping as it clawed its way across the inward-sloping surface. She arrived a few seconds ahead of the first olive-and-black Maryland State Police radio car.

"Price, is that you?"

"Say who?" she replied.

"Norm Jeffers. I think we have two subjects inside. We have five agents down. Michaels is with me now. I'm sending her around the back."

"There in a second."

"Watch your ass, Andrea," Jeffers warned.

O'DAY SHOOK HIS head. His ears were still ringing and his head sore from the hit on the wall. His daughter was next to him, shielded by his body from the two—terrorists—who were now sweeping their weapons left and right around the room while the children screamed. Mrs. Daggett moved slowly, standing between them and "her" kids, instinctively holding her hands in the open. Around them, all the kids were cowering. There were cries for Mommy—none for Daddy, oddly enough, O'Day realized. And a lot of wet pants.

"MR. PRESIDENT?" RAMAN said, pressing his earpiece in tight. *What the hell was this?*

AT ST. MARY'S, the call of "SANDSTORM" over the radio links had hit the SHADOW/SHORTSTOP details with a thunderbolt. Agents standing outside the classrooms of the Ryan kids slammed in, weapons drawn, to drag their protectees out to the corridor. Questions were

asked, but none answered, as the Detail fell into the pre-set plan for such an event. Both kids entered the same Chevy Suburban, which drove not out to the road but off to a service building across the athletic field. One way in, one way out of this place, and an ambush team might be right out there, disguised as Christ knew what. In Washington, a Marine helicopter spooled up to fly to the school and extract the Ryan children. The second Suburban took position on the field, one hundred fifty yards from where the kids were. The class that had been doing gym outside was chased off, and agents stood behind their kevlar-armored vehicle, heavy weapons out, looking for targets.

"DOC!"

Cathy Ryan looked up from her desk. Roy had never called her that before. He'd never had his pistol out in her presence, either, knowing that she was not fond of firearms. Her reaction was probably instinctive. Cathy's face went as white as her lab coat.

"Is it Jack or—"

"It's Katie. That's all I know, Doc. Please come with me right now."

"No! Not again, not again!" Altman wrapped his arm around SURGEON to guide her out into the corridor. Four more agents were there, weapons out and faces grim. Hospital security people kept out of the way, though uniformed Baltimore City Police made up an outer perimeter, all of them trying to remember to look outward toward a possible threat, not inward toward a mother whose child was in peril.

RYAN STRETCHED OUT his arm, placed his hand against the wall of his office, looked down, and bit his lip for a second before speaking: "Tell me what you know, Jeff."

"Two subjects are in the building. Don Russell is dead, so are four other agents, sir, but we have it contained, okay? Let us do the work," Agent Raman said, touching the extended arm to steady the President.

"Why my kids, Jeff? I'm the one—here. If people get mad, it's supposed to be at me. Why do people like this go after children, tell me that . . ."

"It's a hateful act, Mr. President, hateful to God and man," Raman said, as three more agents came into the Oval Office. What was he doing now? the assassin asked himself. What in hell was he doing? Why had he said *that?*

THEY WERE TALKING in a language he didn't understand. O'Day stayed down, sitting on the floor with his little girl, holding her in his lap with both arms and trying to look as harmless as she did. Dear God, all the years he'd trained for things like this—but never to be inside, never to be *in* the crime scene while the crime happened. Outside, you knew what to do. He knew exactly what was happening. If any Service people were left—probably some, yes, there had to be. Somebody had fired three or four bursts with an M-16—O'Day knew the distinctive chatter of that weapon. No more bad guys had entered. His mind added those facts up. Okay, there were good guys outside. First they'd establish a perimeter to make sure nobody got in or out. Next they'd call in—who? The Service probably had its own SWAT team, but also close by would be the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, with its own choppers to get them here. Almost on cue, he heard a helicopter overhead.

"THIS IS TROOPER three, we're orbiting the area now," a voice said over the radio. "Who's in charge down there?"

"This is Special Agent Price, United States Secret Service. How long you with us, Trooper?" she asked over a state police radio.

"We have gas for ninety minutes, and then another chopper will relieve us. Looking down now, Agent Price," the pilot reported. "I have one individual to the west, looks like a female behind a dead tree, looking into the scene. She one of yours?"

"Michaels, Price," Andrea said over her personal radio system. "Wave to the chopper."

"Just waved at us," Trooper Three reported at once.

"Okay, that's one of mine, covering the back."

"All right. We have no movement around the building, and no other people within a hundred yards. We will continue to orbit and observe until you say otherwise."

"Thank you. Out."

THE MARINE VH-60 landed on the athletic field. Sally and Little Jack were fairly thrown aboard, and Colonel Goodman lifted off at once, heading east toward the water, which, the Coast Guard had told him moments before, was free of unknown craft. He rocketed the Black Hawk to altitude, going north over the water. To his left he could see the shape of a French-made police helicopter orbiting a few miles north of Annapolis. It didn't require much insight to explain it, and behind calm eyes he wished for a couple of squads of recon Marines to

deliver to the site. He'd once heard that criminals who hurt children faced a rough go in prison, but that wasn't half of what Marines would do if they got the chance. His reverie ended there. He didn't even look back to see how the other two kids were doing. He had an aircraft to fly. That was his function. He had to trust others to do theirs.

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THEY WERE LOOKING out the windows now. They were being careful about it. While the wounded one stood leaning against the wall—looked like a kneecap, O'Day saw; good—the other one allowed his eye to peer around the edge. It wasn't too hard to guess what he saw. Sirens announced the arrival of police cars. Okay, they probably had the perimeter forming now. Mrs. Daggett and her three women helpers had the kids in a single bunch on the corner, while the two subjects traded words. Good, that was smart. They weren't doing all that well, O'Day thought. One of them was always sweeping the room with eyes and muzzle, but they hadn't—

Just then one of them reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a photo. He said something else in whatever tongue they spoke. Then he closed the shades. Damn. That would prevent scoped rifles from seeing inside. They were smart enough to know that people might just shoot. Few of the kids here were tall enough to look out and—

The one with the photo held it up again and walked toward the kids. He pointed.

"That one."

Strangely, it was only now, it seemed, that they saw O'Day in the room. The knee-shot one blinked his eyes and aimed the AK right at him. The inspector took his arms from around his daughter's chest and held them up.

"Enough people been hurt, pal," he said. It didn't require all that much effort to make his voice shake. He'd made a mistake, too, holding his Megan that way. That fuck might shoot through her to get to me, he realized, a sudden wave of nausea rippling through his stomach at the thought. Slowly, carefully, he lifted her and moved her off his lap, and onto the floor to his left.

"No!" It was Marlene Daggett's voice.

"Bring her to me!" the man insisted.

Do it, do it, O'Day thought. *Save your resistance for when it counts. It doesn't change anything right now*. But she couldn't hear his thoughts.

"Bring her!" the shooter repeated.

"No!"

The man shot Daggett in the chest from a range of three feet.

“WHAT WAS THAT?” Price snapped. Ambulances were coming up Ritchie Highway now, their whooping sirens different from the monotonal screams of the police cars. Down to her left, state troopers were trying to get the road clear, shunting traffic away from the area while their hands rubbed on their holsters, wishing they were there to help. Their angry gestures conveyed their mental state to the puzzled drivers.

Closer to Giant Steps, those immediately outside heard a renewed wave of screams, little kids in terror, for what reason they could only guess.

THE LEATHER JACKET rode up when you were sitting down like this. If anyone had been behind him, he’d see the holster in the small of his back, the inspector knew. He’d never seen a murder before. He’d investigated his share of them, but to see one . . . a lady who worked with kids. The shock on his face was as real as any man’s, watching life vanish . . . innocent life, his mind added. So he really had no choice.

When he next looked at Marlene Daggett, he wished that he might tell her that her murderers would not be leaving this building alive.

It was miraculous that none of the kids were wounded as yet. All the shooting had gone high, and he realized that had Miss Anne not knocked him down, he might be dead beside his daughter now. There were holes in the wall, and the bullets that had made them would have transited the space he’d been in a second or two before. He looked down a second, to see his hands shaking. His hands knew what they had to do. They knew their task and they didn’t understand why they weren’t doing it, why the mind which commanded them hadn’t yet given them the release. But his hands had to be patient. This was a job of the mind.

The subject lifted Katie Ryan by her arm, wrenching it, making her cry out as he twisted it. O’Day thought about his first supervisor, working that first kidnapping case, Dom DiNapoli, that big, tough guinea who’d wept bringing the child back to her family: “Never forget, they’re *all* our kids.”

They might just as easily have selected Megan, they were so close—and that thought *did* cross from mind to mind as the one with SANDBOX looked at the photo again, and over toward Pat O’Day.

“Who are you?” the voice demanded, while his partner moaned with increasing pain.

"What d'ya mean?" the inspector asked in nervous reply. *Look dumb and scared.*

"Whose child is that?" He pointed at Megan.

"She's mine, okay? I don't know who that one belongs to," the FBI agent lied.

"She is the one we want, she is President's child, yes?"

"How the hell should I know? My wife usually picks Megan up, not me. Do what you gotta do and get the fuck outa here, okay?"

"You inside," a female voice boomed from outside. "This is the United States Secret Service. We want you to come out. You will not be hurt if you do. You have no place to go. Come out where we can see you, and you will not be hurt."

"That's good advice, man," Pat told him. "Nobody's gonna get out of here, you know?"

"You know who this girl is? She is daughter of your President Ryan! They will not dare shoot me!" the subject proclaimed. His English was pretty good, O'Day noted, nodding.

"What about all the other kids, man? That's the only one you want, that's the only other one that matters—hey, why not, you know, like, let some out, eh?"

The man was partly right. The Service guys wouldn't shoot at one target for fear that someone else might be in here, as one surely was, his rifle leveled at Pat's chest. And they were smart enough that they were never less than five feet apart. Shooting them would take two separate moves.

What really scared O'Day was the casual, reflexive way he'd killed Marlene Daggett. They just plain didn't care. You couldn't predict that sort of criminal. You could talk to them, try to calm them down, distract them, but beyond that, there was only one way to deal with them.

"We give them children, they give us car, yes?"

"Hey, that works for me, okay? I think that's just fine. I just want to get my daughter home tonight, y'know?"

"Yes, you take good care of your little one. Sit there."

"No problem." He relaxed his hands, bringing them closer to his chest, right at the top of the zipper on his jacket. Undo that and the leather would hang better, concealing his gun.

"Attention," the voice called again. "We want to talk."

CATHY RYAN JOINED her children in the helicopter. The agents' faces were grim enough. Sally and Jack were coming out of the initial shock and sobbing now, looking to their mother for solace as the Black Hawk leaped into the sky again, heading southwest for

Washington with another in trail. The pilot, she saw, was not taking the usual route, but was instead going directly west, away from where Katie was. That was when SURGEON collapsed into the arms of her kids.

"O'DAY IS IN there," Jeffers told her.

"You sure, Norm?"

"That's his truck. I saw him going in right before this went down."

"Shit," Price swore. "That's probably the shot we heard."

"Yah." Jeffers nodded grimly.

THE PRESIDENT WAS in the Situation Room, the best spot to keep track of things. Perhaps he might have been elsewhere, but he couldn't face his office, and he wasn't President enough to pretend that—

"Jack?" It was Robby Jackson. He came over as his President stood, but they'd been friends much longer than that, and the two shared an embrace. "Been here before, man. It worked out then, too, remember?"

"We have tag numbers off the cars in the parking lot. Three are rentals. We're running them now," Raman said, a phone to his ear. "Should be able to get some kind of ID."

HOW DUMB MIGHT they be? O'Day asked himself. They'd have to be pretty fucking stupid to think they had any chance at all of getting out of here . . . and if they didn't have that hope, then they had nothing to lose . . . not a damned thing . . . and they didn't seem to care about killing. It had happened before, in Israel, Pat remembered. He didn't recall the name or the date, but a couple of terrorists had had a bunch of kids and hosed them before the commandos were able to ...

He'd taught tactics for every possible situation, or so he'd thought, and would have said as recently as twenty minutes before—but to have your only child next to you . . .

They're all *our kids,* Dom's voice told him again.

The unhurt killer had Katie Ryan by the upper arm. She was only whimpering now, exhausted from her earlier screams, almost hanging from his hand as the subject stood there to the left of the wounded one. His right hand held the AK. If he'd had a pistol, he could have held that weapon to her head, but the AK was too lengthy for that.

Ever so slowly, Inspector O'Day moved his hand down, opening the zipper on his jacket.

They started talking back and forth again. The wounded one was in considerable discomfort. At first, the adrenaline rush had blocked it out, but now things were settling down somewhat, and with the release of tension also went the pain-blocking mechanism that protected the body in periods of great stress. He was saying something, but Pat couldn't tell what it was. The other one snarled a reply, gesturing to the door, speaking with passion and frustration. The scary part would come when they came to a decision. They might just shoot the kids. Those outside would probably rush the building if they heard more than a shot or two. They might be fast enough to save some of the kids, but . . .

He started thinking of them as Hurt and Unhurt. They were pumped up but confused, excited but undecided, wanting to live but coming to the realization that they would not . . .

"Hey, uh, guys," Pat said, holding his arms up and moving them to distract them from the open zipper. "Can I say something?"

"What?" Hurt demanded, as Unhurt watched.

"All these kids you have here, it's like too many to cover, right?" he asked, with an emphatic nod to get the idea across. "How about I take my little girl out and some of the others, okay? Make things easier for you, maybe?"

That generated some more jabbering. The idea actually seemed attractive to Unhurt, or so it appeared to O'Day.

"Attention, this is the Secret Service!" the voice called yet again. It sounded like Price, the FBI agent thought. Unhurt was looking toward the door, and his body language was leaning him that way, and to get there he had to pass in front of Hurt.

"Hey, come on, okay, let some of us go, will ya?" O'Day pleaded. "Maybe I can tell them to give you a car or something."

Unhurt waved his rifle in the inspector's direction. "Stand!" he commanded.

"Okay, okay, be cool, all right?" O'Day stood slowly, keeping his hands well away from his body. Would they see his holster if he turned around? The Service people had spotted it the first time he'd come in, and if he fucked this one up, then Megan . . . there was no turning back. There just wasn't.

"You tell them, you tell them they give us car or I kill this one and all the rest!"

"Let me take my daughter with me, okay?"

"No!" Hurt said.

Unhurt said something in his native tongue, looking down at Hurt, his weapon still pointed at the floor while Hurt's was aimed at O'Day's

chest.

"Hey, whatcha got to lose?"

It was almost as though Unhurt said the same thing to his wounded friend, and with that he gave Katie Ryan a yank on the arm. She cried out loudly again as he walked across the room, pushing her ahead of him, blocking Hurt's field of view as he did so. It had taken twenty minutes to achieve. Now he had one second to see if it would work.

The drill was the same for O'Day as it had been for Don Russell. His right hand raced back, whipped inside the jacket, and pulled the pistol out, as he dropped to one knee. The moment Unhurt's body cleared the target, the Smith 1076 loosed two perfect rounds, both of the stainless-steel cases flying in the air, as Hurt became Dead. Unhurt's eyes went wide in surprise, as the children's screams erupted again.

"DROP IT," O'Day bellowed at him.

Unhurt's first reaction was to yank again at Katie Ryan's arm, and at the same time the gun started to move up, as though it were a pistol, but the AK was far too heavy to be used that way. O'Day wanted him alive, but there wasn't the time for chances. His right index finger pushed back on the trigger, then pushed again. The body fell straight down, behind it a red shadow on the white walls of Giant Steps.

Inspector Patrick O'Day jumped across the room, kicking one, then the other rifle free of their dead owners' hands. He gave each body a careful look, and for all the years of practice and instruction he'd given and taken, it still came as a surprise that it all had worked. Only then did his heart start beating again, or so it seemed, as a vacuum filled his chest. His body slumped down for a moment. Then he tensed his muscles and knelt beside the body of Katie Ryan, SANDBOX to the Secret Service, and a *thing* to the people he'd just killed.

"You okay, honey?" he asked. She didn't answer. She was holding her arm and sobbing, but there was no blood on her. "Come on," he said gently, wrapping his arms around a daughter who now would forever be partly his. Next he picked up his Megan and walked to the door.

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"THERE'S SHOOTING IN the building!" a voice said on the desk-mounted speaker. Ryan just froze. The rest of the people in the Sit Room cringed.

"Sounded like a pistol. Do they have pistols?" another voice asked on the same radio circuit.

"Holy shit, look there!"

"Who's that?"

“COMING OUT!” A voice called. “Coming out!”

“HOLD FIRE!” Price called over the loudspeaker. Guns didn’t move away from the door, but hands relaxed a fraction.

“Jesus!” Jeffers said, standing and racing to join him in the doorway.

“Both subjects dead, Mrs. Daggett, too,” O’Day said. “All clear, Norm. All clear.”

“Let me—”

“No!” Katie Ryan screamed.

He had to get out of the way. Pat looked down to see the blood-soaked clothing of three agents of his rival agency. There were at least ten rounds by Don Russell’s body, and an empty magazine. Beyond were four dead criminals. Two, he saw, walking to the perimeter, head shots. He stopped by his pickup. His knees were a little weak now, and he set the kids down, sitting himself on the bumper. A female agent came up. Pat took the Smith from his belt and handed it over without really looking.

“You hurt?” It was Andrea Price.

He shook his head; it took him a moment to speak again. “I might start shaking in a minute.” The agent looked at his two little girls. A state trooper scooped Katie Ryan up, but Megan refused to leave his side. That was when he hugged his daughter to his chest, and the tears began for both of them.

“SANDBOX is safe!” he heard Price say. “SANDBOX is safe and unhurt!”

Price looked around. Backup Service agents hadn’t arrived yet, and most of the law-enforcement personnel on the scene were troopers of the Maryland State Police in their starched khaki shirts. Ten of them formed a ring around SANDBOX, guarding her like a pride of lions.

Jeffers rejoined them. O’Day had never fully appreciated the way time changed in such moments as this. When he looked up, the children were being let out the side door. Paramedics were flooding the area, going to the children first. “Here,” the black agent said, handing over a handkerchief.

“Thanks, Norm.” O’Day wiped his eyes, blew his nose, and stood. “Sorry about that, guys.”

“It’s okay, Pat, you did—”

“Better if I’d’ve taken the last one alive, but couldn’t ... couldn’t take the chance.” He was able to stand now, as he held Megan by the hand. “Oh, damn,” he added.

“I think we should get you out of here,” Andrea observed. “We can do the interviews in a better place than this.”

"Thirsty," O'Day said next. He shook his head again. "Never expected this, Andrea. Kids around. Not supposed to be this way, is it?" Why was he babbling? the inspector asked himself.

"Come on, Pat. You did just fine."

"Wait a minute." The FBI inspector rubbed his face with two large hands, took a deep breath, and looked around the crime scene. Christ, what a mess. Three dead just this side of the playground. That would be Jeffers, he thought, with his M-16. Not bad. But there was one other thing he had to do. By each of the rented cars was a body, each a head shot. Another one, one round in the chest, and one in the head, it looked like. The fourth, he wasn't sure who'd gotten him. Probably one of the girls. Ballistics tests would determine which one, he knew. O'Day walked back toward the front door, to the body of Special Agent Donald Russell. There he turned, looking back at the parking lot. He'd seen his share of crime scenes. He knew the signs, knew how to figure things out. No warning, not a damned bit, maybe a second, no more than that, and he'd stood his ground against six armed subjects and gotten three of them. Inspector Patrick O'Day knelt beside the body. He removed the Sig pistol from Russell's hand, gave it to Price, then took the hand in his own for what seemed a long time.

"See y'around, champ," O'Day whispered, letting go after a few seconds. It was time to leave.

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RETREAT

THE NEAREST CONVENIENT place to land a Marine helicopter was the Naval Academy, and the hard part was finding available Secret Service personnel to ride with SANDBOX. Andrea Price, senior agent on the crime scene as well as Detail chief, had to stay at Giant Steps, so USSS personnel racing to Annapolis were diverted, met the state troopers at the Academy, and took custody of Katie. And so it happened that the first team of federal officers to arrive at the scene were FBI agents from the small Annapolis office, a satellite of the Baltimore Field Division. What orders they needed they took from Price, but for the moment their duties were straightforward, and quite a few more were on the way.

O'Day walked across the street to the house which had been Norm Jeffers' local command post, whose owner, a grandmother, overcame her shock to make coffee. A tape recorder was set up, and the FBI inspector ran through an uninterrupted narrative, really just a long ramble which was actually the best way to get fresh information. Later, they would walk him back through it, probing for additional facts. From where he was sitting, O'Day could see out the window. Ambulance crews were standing by to remove the bodies, but first, photographers had to record the event for posterity.

They couldn't know that Movie Star was still looking down, along with what was now a crowd of several hundred, students and teachers from the community college plus others who'd guessed the nature of the event and wanted to watch. Movie Star had already seen enough, however, and he made his way to his car, picking his way across the parking lot, and then drove north on Ritchie Highway.

"Hey, I gave him a chance. I told him to drop his weapon," O'Day said. "I yelled so loud I'm surprised you didn't hear it outside, Price. But the gun started moving, and I wasn't in a mood to take chances, you know?" His hands were steady now. The immediate shock period was over. Others would come later.

"Any idea who they were?" Price asked, after he'd gone through it the first time.

"They were talking in some language, but I don't know what one.

Wasn't German or Russian—aside from that, I don't know. Foreign languages sound like foreign languages. I couldn't recognize any words or phrases. Their English was pretty good, accented, but again, not sure what the accent was. Physical appearance, Mediterranean. Maybe from the Middle East. Maybe from some other place. Absolutely ruthless. He shot Mrs. Daggett down, not a blink, no emotion—no, that's wrong. He was pissed, very pumped up. No hesitation at all. *Boom,* she's down. Nothing I could have done," the inspector went on. "The other one had his gun on me, and it happened so fast, I didn't really see that happening so fast."

"Pat." Andrea took his hand. "You did great."

THE HELICOPTER LANDED on the White House pad, just south of the ground-floor entrance. Again a ring of agents with weapons was in evidence, as Ryan ran to the aircraft while the rotor was still turning, and nobody tried to stop him. A Marine crewman in a green flight suit pulled the door open and stepped out, which allowed the agents on the helicopter to carry SANDBOX off and hand her off to her father.

Jack cradled her like the baby she no longer was but always would be in his mind, and walked up the slope to the house, where the rest of his family was waiting under cover. News cameras recorded the event, though no reporter got within fifty yards of POTUS. The Secret Service members of the Detail were in a mood to kill; for the first time in the memory of the White House press corps, they looked overly dangerous.

"Mommy!" Katie twisted in her father's arms, reaching for her mother, who took her away from Jack at once. Sally and Little Jack closed in on the pair, leaving their father standing alone. That didn't last for long.

"How you doing?" Arnie van Damm asked quietly.

"Better now, I guess." His face was still ashen, his body limp but still able to stand. "Do we know any more?"

"Look, first thing, how about we get all of you out of here? Up to Camp David. You can calm down there. Security is airtight. It's a good place to relax."

Ryan thought about that. The family hadn't been up there yet, and he'd only been there twice, most recently on a dreadful January day several years before. "Arnie, we don't have clothes or—"

"We can take care of that," the chief of staff assured him.

The President nodded. "Get it set up. Fast," he added. While Cathy took the kids upstairs, Jack headed back out and over to the West Wing. Two minutes later, he was back in the Situation Room. The mood was better there. The initial shock and fear were gone, replaced

with a quiet determination.

"Okay," Ryan said quietly. "What do we know?"

"Is that you, Mr. President?" It was Dan Murray on the table-mounted speakerphone.

"Talk to me, Dan," SWORDSMAN commanded.

"We had a guy inside, one of mine. You know him. Pat O'Day, one of my roving inspectors. His daughter—Megan, I think—goes there, too. He got the drop on the subjects and blew 'em both away. The Secret Service people killed the rest—the total count is nine, two by Pat and the rest by Andrea's people. There are five Service agents dead, plus Mrs. Daggett. No children were wounded, thank God. Price is interviewing Pat right now. I have about ten agents on the scene to assist with the investigation, with a lot of Service people on the way there, too."

"Who runs the investigation?" POTUS asked.

"Two statutes on this one. An attack on you or any member of your family is under the purview of the Secret Service. Terrorism is our bailiwick. I'd give the Service lead on this one, and we'll provide all possible assistance," Murray promised. "No pissin' contest on this one, my word on it. I've already called Justice. Martin will assign us a senior attorney to coordinate the criminal investigation. Jack?" the FBI Director added.

"What, Dan?"

"Get your family put back together. We know how to do this. I know you're the President, but for the next day or two, just be a guy, okay?"

"Good advice, Jack," Admiral Jackson observed.

"Jeff?" Ryan said to Agent Raman. All his friends were saying the same thing. They were probably right.

"Yes, sir?"

"Let's get us the hell out of town."

"Yes, Mr. President." Raman left the room.

"Robby, how about you and Sissy fly up, too. I'll have a helo waiting for you here."

"Anything you say, pal."

"Okay, Dan," Ryan told the speakerphone. "We're going to Camp David. Keep me informed."

"Will do," the FBI Director promised.

THEY HEARD IT on the radio. Brown and Holbrook were heading north on US Route 287 to join Interstate 90-East. The cement truck drove like a pig, even with its multirange gearbox, top-heavy, slow to accelerate, and almost as slow to brake. Maybe the interstate would be

better driving, they hoped. But it did have a decent radio.

"Damn," Brown said, adjusting the dial.

"Kids." Holbrook shook his head. "We have to make sure no kids are around, Ernie."

"I think we can handle that, Pete, assuming we can horse this rig all the way there."

"What do you figure?"

A grunt. "Five days."

DARYAEI TOOK IT well, Badrayn saw, especially with the news that all of them were dead.

"Forgive me for saying so, but I did warn you that—"

"I know. I remember," Mahmoud Haji acknowledged. "The success of this mission was never really necessary, so long as the security arrangements were properly looked after." With that, the cleric looked closely at his guest.

"They all had false travel documents. None had a criminal file anywhere in the world, so far as I know. None had anything to connect him with your country. Had one been taken alive, there was a chance, and I warned you about that, but it appears that none were."

The Ayatollah nodded, and spoke their epitaph: "Yes, they were faithful."

Faithful to what? Badrayn asked himself. Overtly religious political leaders weren't exactly uncommon in this part of the world, but it was tiresome to hear. Now, supposedly, all nine of them were in Paradise. He wondered if Daryaei actually believed that. He probably did; he was probably so sure that he believed that he could speak with God's own voice, or at least had told himself so often that he thought he did. One could do that to himself, Ali knew, just keep repeating any idea enough, and however it had first entered one's mind—for political advantage, personal revenge, greed, any of the baser motivations—after enough repetitions it became an article of faith, as pure in purpose as the words of the Prophet himself. Daryaei was seventy-two, Badrayn reminded himself, a long life of self-denial, focused on something outside himself, continuing on a journey that had begun in his youth with shining purpose toward a holy goal. He was a long way from the beginning now, and very close to the end. Now the goal could be seen so clearly that the purpose itself could be forgotten, couldn't it? That was the trap for all such men. At least he knew better, Badrayn told himself. For him it was just business, devoid of illusions and devoid of hypocrisy.

"And the rest?" Daryaei asked, after a prayer for their souls.

"We will know by Monday, perhaps, certainly by Wednesday," Ali

replied.

"And security for that?"

"Perfect." Badrayn was totally confident. All of the travelers had returned safely, and reported in every case that their missions had been properly carried out. Whatever physical evidence they'd left behind—just the spray cans—would have been collected as trash and carted away. The plague would appear, and there would never be any evidence of how it might have gotten there. And so what had apparently failed today was not a failure at all. This Ryan fellow, relieved though he might be at the rescue of his child, was now a weakened man, as America was a weakened country, and Daryaei had a plan. A good one, Badrayn thought, and for his help in implementing it, his life would change forever now. His days as an international terrorist were a thing of the past. He might have some position in the expanding UIR government—security or intelligence, probably, with a comfortable office and a sizable stipend, able finally to settle down in peace and safety. Daryaei had his dream, and might even achieve it. For Badrayn, the dream was closer still, and he need now not do a thing more to make it a reality. Nine men had died to make it so. That was their misfortune. Were they truly in Paradise for their sacrificial act? Perhaps Allah truly was that merciful, enough to forgive any act done in His Name, mistakenly or not. Perhaps.

It didn't really matter, did it?

THEY TRIED TO make the departure look normal. The kids had changed clothes. Bags were packed and would go out on a later flight. Security looked tighter than usual, but not grossly so. That was mistaken. Atop the Treasury Building to the east and the Old Executive Office Building to the west, the Secret Service people who usually crouched were now standing, showing their full profiles as they scanned the area with their binoculars. Beside each was a man with a rifle. Eight agents were on the south perimeter fence, examining the people who were passing by or had come just to be there after hearing the horrid news, for whatever purpose. Most had probably come because they cared to some degree or another, maybe even to offer a prayer for the Ryans' safety. For those who had some other purpose, the agents watched, and this time, as with all the others, saw nothing unusual.

Jack strapped in, as did the rest of his family. The engines over their heads started whining, and the rotor turning. Inside with them were Agent Raman and another guard, plus the Marine crew chief. The VH-3 helicopter vibrated, then lifted off, climbing rapidly into the westerly wind, first heading toward the OEOB, then south, then

northwest, its curving flight path designed to confuse someone who might be out there with a surface-to-air missile. Light conditions were good enough that such a person would probably be spotted—it takes a few seconds to make a successful launch—and anyway the helicopter was equipped with the newest variant of the Black Hole IR-suppression system, which made Marine One a hard kill. The pilot—it was Colonel Hank Goodman again—knew all this, took the proper protective measures, and did his best to forget about it as he did so.

It was quiet in the back. President Ryan had his thoughts. His wife had hers. The kids looked out the windows, for helicopter flying is one of the greatest thrill rides known to man. Even little Katie twisted in her seat belt to look down, her dreadful afternoon suppressed by the wonder of the moment. Jack turned, and seeing that, he decided that the short attention span of children was as much a blessing as a curse. His own hands were shaking a little now. Fear or rage, he couldn't tell. Cathy just looked bereft, her face slack in the golden light of sunset. Their talk tonight would not be a pleasant one.

Behind them, a Secret Service car had collected Cecilia Jackson from their Fort Myers home. Admiral Jackson and his wife boarded a backup VH-60, along with some carry-on bags, and more substantial luggage for the Ryan family. There were no cameras to record this. The President and First Family were gone, and the cameras with them, while pundits put together their thoughts for the evening news broadcasts, trying to find a deeper significance in the events of the day, coming to conclusions well in advance of the federal officers who only now were allowing the ambulance crews to remove the thirteen bodies from the crime scene. The flashing police lights looked dramatic as TV crews set up to do live broadcasts, one of them from the very spot where Movie Star had observed the burned operation.

He had prepared for this eventuality, of course. He drove north on Ritchie Highway—the traffic wasn't bad at all, considering the police still had the road blocked at Giant Steps—and at Baltimore-Washington International he even had time to turn in his rental car and catch the British Airways 767 for Heathrow. Not first-class this time, he realized. The aircraft was all business class. He didn't smile. He had hoped the kidnapping might actually succeed, though from the beginning he had planned also for its failure. For Movie Star the mission hadn't failed at all. He was still alive, and escaping yet again. Here he was, lifting off, soon to be in another country, and there to disappear completely, even while the American police were trying to establish if there might have been another member of the criminal conspiracy. He decided to have a few glasses of wine, the better to help him sleep after a very stressful day. The thought that it was against his religion made him smile. What aspect of his life wasn't?

SUNSET COMES QUICKLY. By the time they started circling at Camp David, the ground was an undulating shadow punctuated by the stationary lights of private homes and the moving lights of automobiles. The helicopter descended slowly, flared out fifty feet above the ground, then settled vertically for a whisper-soft landing. There were few lights beyond the square landing pad's perimeter. When the crew chief opened the door, Raman and the other agent stepped down first. The President undid his lap belt and walked forward. He stopped just behind the flight crew, tapping the pilot on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Colonel."

"You have a lot of friends, Mr. President. We're here when you need us," Goodman told his Commander-in-Chief.

Jack nodded, went down the steps, and beyond the lights he saw the spectral outlines of Marine riflemen in camouflaged utilities.

"Welcome to Camp David, sir." It was a Marine captain.

Jack turned to help his wife down. Sally led Katie down. Little Jack came out last. It hit Ryan that his son was almost as tall as his mother now. He might have to call his son something else.

Cathy looked around nervously. The captain saw it. "Ma'am, there's sixty Marines out there," he assured her. He didn't have to add what they were there for. He didn't have to tell the President how alert they were.

"Where?" Little Jack asked, looking and seeing nothing.

"Try this." The captain handed over his PVS-7 night-vision goggles. SHORTSTOP held them to his eyes.

"Cool!" His arm reached out, pointing to those he could see. Then he lowered the goggles, and the Marines turned invisible again.

"They're great for spotting deer, and there's a bear that wanders on and off the grounds every so often. We call him Yogi." Captain Larry Overton, USMC, congratulated himself for calming them down, and led them toward the HMMWVs that would transport them to quarters. Yogi, he'd explain later, had a radio collar on so that he wouldn't surprise anybody, least of all a Marine with a loaded rifle.

The quarters at Camp David appeared rustic, and truly were not anywhere near as plush as those in the White House, but could accurately be described as the sort of hideaway a millionaire might set up for himself outside Aspen—in fact, Presidential Quarters are officially known as Aspen Cottage. Maintained by Naval Surface Detachment, Thurmont (Maryland), and guarded by a short company of handpicked Marines, the compound was as remote and secure a location as anything within a hundred miles of Washington could

possibly be. There were Marines at the presidential cabin to let them in, and inside were sailors to guide each to a private bedroom. Outside were twelve additional cottages, and the closer you were to Aspen, of course, the more important you were.

"What's for dinner?" Jack Junior asked.

"Just about anything you want," a Navy chief steward replied.

Jack turned to Cathy. She nodded. This would be a whatever-you-want night. The President took off his jacket and tie. A steward darted up to collect them. "The food is great here, Mr. President," he promised.

"That's a fact, sir," the chief confirmed. "We have a deal with some local folks. Fresh everything, right off the farm. Can I get you something to drink?" he asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a great plan, chief. Cathy?"

"White wine?" she asked, the stress bleeding off her, finally.

"We have a pretty good selection, ma'am. For domestic, how about a Chateau Ste. Michelle reserve chardonnay? It's a 1991 vintage, and about as good as a chardonnay gets."

"You're a Navy chief?" POTUS asked.

"Yes, sir. I used to take care of admirals, but I got promoted, and if I may say so, sir, I do know my wines."

Ryan held up two fingers. The chief nodded and went out the door.

"This is insane," Cathy said after he left.

"Don't knock it." While they waited for drinks, the two big kids agreed on a pizza. Katie wanted a burger and fries. They heard the buzz of another helicopter coming into the pad. Cathy was right, her husband thought. This is insane.

The door reopened, and the chief returned with two bottles and a silver bucket. Another steward followed with glasses.

"Chief, I just meant two glasses."

"Yes, Mr. President, but we have two more guests arriving, Admiral and Mrs. Jackson. Mrs. Jackson likes a good white also, sir." He popped the cork and poured a splash for SURGEON. She nodded.

"Doesn't it have a wonderful nose?" He filled her glass and one other, handing that to the President. Then he withdrew.

"They always told me the Navy had guys like that, but I never believed it."

"Oh, Jack." Cathy turned. The kids were watching TV, all three sitting on the floor, even Sally, who was trying to become an elegant lady. They were retreating into the familiar, while their parents did what parents always did, came to terms with a new reality, in order to buffer their children from the world.

Jack saw the lights of a HMMWV go past to the left. Robby and Sissy would have their own cabin, he imagined. They'd change before

coming over. He turned back and wrapped his arms around his wife from behind. “It’s okay, babe.”

Cathy shook her head. “It’ll never be okay, Jack. It’ll never be okay again. Roy told me, as long as we live, we’ll have bodyguards with us. Everywhere we go, we’ll need protection. Forever,” she said, sipping her wine, not so much angry as resigned, not so much dazed as comprehending something she’d never dreamed. The trappings of power were seductive sometimes. A helicopter to work. People to take care of your clothes, look after the kids, whatever food you wanted as close as the phone, escorts everywhere, fast track into everything.

But the price of it? No big deal. Just every so often somebody might try to murder one of your children. There was no running away from it. It was as though she’d been given a diagnosis of cancer, of the breast, the ovaries, something else. Horrible as it was, you had to do what you had to do. Crying didn’t help, though she’d do a lot of that, SURGEON was sure. Screaming at Jack wouldn’t help—and she wasn’t a screamer anyway, and it wasn’t Jack’s fault, was it? She just had to roll with the punch, like patients at Hopkins did when you told them they had to go see the Oncology Department—*oh, please, don’t worry. They’re the best, the very best, and times have changed, and they really know what they’re doing now*. Her colleagues in the Department of Oncology were the best. And they had a nice new building now. But who really wanted to go there?

And so she and Jack had a nice house of sorts, with a wonderful staff, some of whom were even wine experts, she thought, taking another sip from her glass. *But who really wants to go there?*

SO MANY AGENTS were assigned to the case that they didn’t know what to do yet. They didn’t have enough rough information to generate leads, but that was changing fast. Most of the dead terrorists had been photographed—two of them, shot from behind by Norm Jeffers’ M-16 rifle, didn’t have faces to photograph—and all of the bodies fingerprinted. Blood samples would be taken for DNA records in case that later became useful—a possibility, since identity *could* be confirmed by a genetic match with close relatives. For now they went with the photos. These were transmitted to the Mossad first of all. The terrorists had probably been Islamic, everyone thought, and the Israelis had the best data on them. CIA handled the initial notice, followed by the FBI. Full cooperation was promised at once, personally, by Avi ben Jakob.

All of the bodies were taken to Annapolis for postmortem examination. This was required by law, even in cases where the cause of death was as obvious as an earthquake. The pre-death condition of

each body would be established, plus a full blood-toxicology check to see if any were on drugs.

The clothing of each was removed for full examination at the FBI laboratory in Washington. The brand names were established first of all to determine country of origin. That, and general condition, would determine time of purchase, which could be important. More than that, the technicians now working overtime on a Friday evening would use ordinary Scotch tape to collect loose fibers, and especially pollen particles, which could determine many things, because some plants grew only in limited regions of the world. Such results could take weeks, but with a case such as this, there was no limit on resources. The FBI had a lengthy roster of scientific experts to consult.

Tag numbers for the cars had been transmitted even before O'Day had done his shooting, and already agents were at the car-rental agencies, checking the computerized records.

At Giant Steps, the adult survivors were being interviewed. They mainly confirmed O'Day's reportage. Some of the details were askew, but that was not unexpected. None of the young women recognized the language the terrorists had spoken. The children were subjected to far gentler interrogations, in every case sitting on a parent's lap. Two of the parents were from the Middle East, and it was thought that perhaps the children knew something of foreign languages, but that proved to be a false hope.

The weapons had all been collected, and their serial numbers checked with a computerized database. The date of manufacture was easily established, and the makers' records checked to see which distributor had purchased them, and from there which store had sold them. That trail proved cold indeed. The weapons were old ones, a fact belied by their new condition, which was established by visual inspection of the barrel and bolt mechanisms. They hardly had any wear at all. That tidbit of information went up the line even before they had a purchaser's name.

"DAMN, I WISH Bill was here," Murray said aloud, for the first time in his career feeling inadequate to a task. His division chiefs were arrayed around his conference table. From the first it was certain that this investigation would be a joint venture between the Criminal and Foreign Counter-Intelligence divisions, aided, as always, by Laboratory. Things were moving so rapidly that there wasn't yet a Secret Service official to join them. "Thoughts?"

"Dan, whoever bought these guns has been in-country a long time," FCI said.

"Sleeper." Murray nodded agreement.

“Pat didn’t recognize their language. He would probably have recognized a European one. Has to be the Middle East,” Criminal said. This wasn’t exactly Nobel-class work, but even the FBI had to follow form in what it did. “Well, Western Europe, anyway. I suppose we have to consider the Balkan countries.” There was reluctant agreement around the table.

“How old are those guns again?” the Director asked.

“Eleven years. Long before the ban was passed,” Criminal answered for FCI. “They may have been totally unused until today, virgins, Dan.”

“Somebody’s set up a network that we didn’t know about. Somebody real patient. Whoever the purchaser turns out to be, I think we’ll find that it’s a nicely faked ID, and he’s already flown the coop. It’s a classic intelligence job, Dan,” FCI went on, saying what everybody was thinking. “We’re talking pros here.”

“That’s a little speculative,” the Director objected.

“When’s the last time I was wrong, Danny?” the assistant director asked.

“Not lately. Keep going.”

“Maybe the Lab guys can develop some good forensic stuff”—he nodded to the assistant director for the Laboratory Division—“but even then, what we’re going to end up with won’t be good enough to take into a court, unless we get real lucky and bag either the purchaser, or the other people who had to be involved in this mission.”

“Flight records and passports,” Criminal said. “Two weeks back for starters. Look for repeaters. Somebody reconned the objective. Must have been since Ryan became President. That’s a start.” Sure, he didn’t go on, only about ten million records to check. But that was what cops did.

“Christ, I hope you’re wrong on the sleeper,” Murray said, after a further moment’s reflection.

“So do I, Dan,” FCI replied. “But I’m not. We’ll need time to ID his house, assembly point, whatever, interview his neighbors, check the real-estate records to come up with a cover name and try to proceed from there. He’s probably already gone, but that’s not the scary part, is it? Eleven years at least he’s been here. He was bankrolled. He was trained. He kept the faith all the way to today to help with that mission. All that time, and he still believed enough to help kill kids.”

“He won’t be the only one,” Murray concluded bleakly.

“I don’t think so.”

“WILL YOU COME with me, please?”

"I've seen you before, but—"

"Jeff Raman, sir."

The admiral took his hand. "Robby Jackson."

The agent smiled. "I know that, sir."

It was a pleasant walk, though it would have been more so without the obvious presence of armed men. The mountain air was cool and clear, lots of stars blinking overhead.

"How's he doing?" Robby asked the agent.

"Tough day. A lot of good people dead."

"And some bad ones, too." Jackson would always be a fighter pilot, for whom inflicted death was part of the job description. They turned into the Presidential Quarters.

Both Robby and Sissy were struck by the scene. Not parents themselves—Cecilia's medical problem had not allowed it, despite the best of efforts—they didn't fully understand how it was with kids. The most horrific events, if followed by a parent's hug and other signs of security, were usually set aside. The world, especially for Katie, had resumed its proper shape. But there would be nightmares, too, and those would last for weeks, maybe longer, until the memories faded. Embraces were exchanged, and then also as usual, man paired with man and woman with woman. Robby got himself a glass of wine and followed Jack outside.

"How you doing, Jack?" By unspoken agreement, here and now Ryan wasn't the President.

"The shock comes and goes," he admitted. "It's all come back from before. The bastards can't just come after me—oh, no, they have to go for the soft targets. *Those cowardly fucks!"* Jack cursed as it came back again.

Jackson sipped at his glass. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot to be said right now, but that would change.

"It's my first time here," Robby said, just to say something.

"My first time—would you believe we buried a guy up here?" Jack remarked, remembering. "He was a Russian colonel, an agent we had in their Defense Ministry. Hell of a soldier, hero of the Soviet Union, three or four times, I think, we buried him in his uniform with all the decorations. I read off the citations myself. That's when we got Gerasimov out."

"The KGB head. So, that's true, eh?"

"Yep." Ryan nodded. "And you know about Colombia, and you know about the submarine. How the hell did those newsies find out, though?"

Robby almost laughed aloud, but settled for a chuckle. "Holy God, and I thought my career was eventful."

"You volunteered for yours," Jack observed crossly.

"So did you, my friend."

"Think so?" Ryan went back inside for a refill. He returned with the night-vision goggles and switched them on, scanning the surroundings. "I didn't volunteer for having my family guarded by a company of Marines. There's three of them down there, flak jackets, helmets, and rifles—and why? Because there's people in the world who want to kill us. Why? Because—"

"I'll tell you why. Because you're better than they are, Jack. You stand for things, and they're good things. Because you've got balls, and you don't run away from shit. I don't want to hear this, Jack," Robby told his friend. "Don't give me this 'oh, my God' stuff, okay? I know who you are. I'm a fighter pilot because I chose to be one. You're where you are because you chose, too. Nobody ever said it was supposed to be easy, okay?"

"But—"

"But, my ass, Mr. President. There's people out there who don't like you? Okay, fine. You just figure out how to find them, and then you can ask those Marines out there to go take care of business. You know what they'll say. You may be hated by some, but you're respected and loved by a lot more, and I'm telling you now, there's not one person in our country's uniform who isn't willing to dust *anybody* who fucks with you and your family. It's not just what you are, it's who you are, okay?"

Who am I? SWORDSMAN asked himself. At that moment, one of his weaknesses asserted itself.

"Come on." Ryan walked over to the west. He'd just seen a sudden flare of light, and thirty seconds later, at the corner of another cabin, he found a Navy cook smoking a cigarette. President or not, he wasn't going to be overly proud tonight. "Hello."

"Jesus!" the sailor blurted, snapping to attention and dropping his smoke into the grass. "I mean, hello, Mr. President."

"Wrong the first time, right the second time. Got a smoke?" POTUS asked, entirely without shame, Robby Jackson noted.

"You bet, sir." The cook fished one out and lit it.

"Sailor, if the First Lady sees you do that again, she'll have the Marines shoot you," Jackson warned.

"Admiral Jackson!" Those words made the kid brace again. "I think the Marines work for me. How's dinner coming?"

"Sir, the pizza is being cut right now. Baked it myself, sir. They oughta like it," he promised.

"Settle down. Thanks for the cigarette."

"Anytime, sir." Ryan shook his hand and wandered off with his friend.

"I needed that," Jack admitted, somewhat shamefully, taking a long

drag.

"If I had a place like this, I'd use it a lot. Almost like being at sea," Jackson went on. "Sometimes you go outside, stand on one of the galleries off the flight deck, and just sort of enjoy the sea and the stars. The simple pleasures."

"It's hard to turn it off, isn't it? Even when you went communing with the sea and the stars, you didn't turn it off, not really."

"No," the admiral admitted. "It makes thinking a little easier, makes the atmosphere a little less intense, but you're right. It doesn't really go away." And it didn't now, either.

"Tony said India's navy's gone missing on us."

"Both carriers at sea, with escorts and oilers. We're looking for them."

"What if there's a connection?" Ryan asked.

"With what?"

"The Chinese make trouble in one place, the Indian navy goes to sea again, and *this* happens to me—am I being paranoid?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Probably. Could be the Indians put out when they finished their repairs, and maybe to show us that we didn't teach them all that big a lesson. The China thing, well, it's happened before, and it's not going anywhere, especially after Mike Dubro gets there. I know Mike. He'll have fighters up and poking around. The attempt on Katie? Too early to say, and it's not my field. You have Murray and the rest for that. In any case, they failed, didn't they? Your family's in there, watching TV, and it'll be a long time before somebody tries anything else."

IT WAS BECOMING an all-nighter all over the world. In Tel Aviv, where it was now after four in the morning, Avi ben Jakob had called in his top terrorism experts. Together they went over the photos transmitted from Washington and were comparing them with their own surveillance photographs that had been taken over the years in Lebanon and elsewhere. The problem was that many of their photos showed young men with beards—the simplest method of disguise known to man—and the photos were not of high quality. By the same token, the American-transmitted images were not exactly graduation pictures, either.

"Anything useful?" the director of Mossad asked.

Eyes turned to one of the Mossad's experts, a fortyish woman named Sarah Peled. Behind her back, they called her the witch. She had some special gift for ID'ing people from photographs, and was right just over half the time in cases where other trained intelligence officers threw up their hands in frustration.

"This one." She slid two photos across the table. "This is a definite match."

Ben Jakob looked at the two side by side—and saw nothing to confirm her opinion. He'd asked her many times what keyed her in on such things. Sarah always said it was the eyes, and so Avi took another look, comparing the eyes of one with the eyes of the other photo. All he saw were eyes. He turned the Israeli photo over. The printed data on the back said that he was a suspected Hezbollah member, name unknown, age about twenty in their photo, which was dated six years earlier.

"Any others, Sarah?" he asked.

"No, none at all."

"How confident are you on this one?" one of the counterintelligence people asked, looking at the photos himself now and, like Avi, seeing nothing.

"One hundred percent, Benny. I said 'definite,' didn't I?" Sarah was often testy, especially with unbelieving men at four in the morning.

"How far do we go on this?" another staff member asked.

"Ryan is a friend of our country, and President of the United States. We go as far as we can. I want inquiries to go out. All contacts, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, everywhere."

"SWINE." BONDARENKO RAN a hand through his hair. His tie was long since gone. His watch told him it was Saturday, but he didn't know what that day was anymore.

"Yes," Golovko agreed.

"A black operation—a 'wet' one, you used to call it?" the general asked.

"Wet and incompetent," the RVS chairman said crossly. "But Ivan Emmetovich was lucky, Comrade General. This time."

"Perhaps," Gennady Iosefovich allowed.

"You disagree?"

"The terrorists underestimated their opponents. You will recall that I recently spent time with the American army. Their training is like nothing else in the world, and the training of their presidential guard must be equally as expert. Why is it that people so often underestimate the Americans?" he wondered.

That was a good question, Sergey Nikolay'ch recognized, nodding for the chief of operations to go on.

"America often suffers from a lack of political direction. That is not the same as incompetence. You know what they are like? A vicious dog held on a short leash—and because he cannot break the leash, people delude themselves that they need not fear him, but within the

are of that leash he is invincible, and a leash, Comrade Chairman, is a temporary thing. You know this Ryan fellow."

"I know him well," Golovko agreed.

"And? The stories in their press, are they true?"

"All of them."

"I tell you what I think, Sergey Nikolay'ch. If you regard him as a formidable adversary, and he has that vicious dog on the leash, I would not go far out of my way to offend him. An attack on a child? *His* child?" The general shook his head.

That was it, Golovko realized. They were both tired, but here was a moment of clarity. He'd spent too much time reading over the political reports from Washington, from his own embassy, and directly from the American media. They all said that Ivan Emmetovich ... was that the key? From the beginning he'd called Ryan that, thinking to honor the man with the Russian version of his name and the Russian patronymic. And an honor it was in Golovko's context . . .

"You are thinking what I am thinking, *da?"* the general asked, seeing the man's face and gesturing for him to speak.

"Someone has made a calculation . . ."

"And it is not an accurate one. I think we need to find out who has done so. I think a systematic attack on American interests, an attempt to weaken America, Comrade Chairman, is really an attack against our interests. Why is China doing what she is doing, eh? Why did they force America to change her naval dispositions? And now this? American forces are being stretched, and at the same time a strike at the very heart of the American leader. This is no coincidence. Now we can stand aside and do nothing more than observe, or—"

"There is nothing we can do, and with the revelations in the American press—"

"Comrade Chairman," Bondarenko interrupted. "For seventy years, our country has confused political theory with objective fact, and that was almost our undoing as a nation. There are objective conditions here," he went on, using a phrase beloved of the Soviet military—a reaction, perhaps, to their three generations of political oversight. "I see the patterns of a clever operation, a coordinated operation, but one which has a fatal flaw, and that flaw is a misestimation of the American President. Do you disagree?"

Golovko gave that a few seconds of thought, noting also that Bondarenko might just be seeing something real—but did the Americans? It was so much harder to see something from the inside than the outside. A coordinated operation? Back to Ryan, he told himself.

"No. I made that mistake myself. Ryan appears much less than what he is. The signs are all there, but people don't see them."

“When I was in America, that General Diggs told me the story of the time terrorists attacked Ryan’s house. He took up arms and defeated them, courageously and decisively. From what you say, it appears he is also highly effective as an intelligence officer. His only flaw, if one may call it that, is that he is not politically adept, and politicians invariably take that for weakness. Perhaps it is,” Bondarenko allowed. “But if this is a hostile operation against America, then his political weaknesses are far less important than his other gifts.”

“And?”

“Help the man,” the general urged. “Better that we should be on the winning side, and if we do not help, then we might be on the other. Nobody will attack America directly. We are not so fortunate, Comrade Chairman.” He was almost right.

44

INCUBATION

RYAN AWOKE AT DAWN, wondering why. The quiet. Almost like his home on the Bay. He strained to listen for traffic or other sounds, but there were none. Moving out of the bed was difficult. Cathy had decided to have Katie in with them, and there she was in her pink sleeper, looking angelic as toddlers did, still babies at that age whatever others might say. He had to smile, then made his way to the bathroom. Casual clothes had been set out in the dressing room, and he put them on, with a pair of sneaks and a sweater, to head outside.

The air was brisk, with traces of frost on the boxwoods, and the sky clear. Not bad. Robby was right. This wasn't a bad place to come to. It put a distance between himself and other things, and he needed that right now.

"Morning, sir." It was Captain Overton.

"Not bad duty, is it?"

The young officer nodded. "We do the security. The Navy does the petunias. It's a fair division of labor, Mr. President. Even the Secret Service guys can sleep in here, sir."

Ryan looked around and saw why. There were two armed Marines immediately around the cabin, and three more within fifty yards. And those were just the ones he could see.

"Get you anything, Mr. President?"

"Coffee'll do for a start."

"Follow me, sir."

"Attention on deck!" a sailor shouted a few seconds later, when Ryan went into the cook shed—or whatever they called it here.

"As you were," the President told them. "I thought this was the Presidential Retreat, not boot camp." He picked a seat at the table the staff used. Coffee appeared as if by magic. Then more magic happened.

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Hi, Andrea. When did you get in?"

"Around two, helicopter," she explained.

"Get any sleep?"

"About four hours."

Ryan took a sip. Navy coffee was still Navy coffee. “And?”

“The investigation is under way. The team’s put together. Everybody’s got a seat at the table.” She handed over a folder, which Ryan would get to read before his morning paper. Anne Arundel County and Maryland State Police, Secret Service, FBI, ATF, and all the intelligence agencies were working the case. They were running IDs on the terrorists, but the two whose documents had so far been checked turned out to be non-persons. Their papers were false, probably of European origin. Big surprise. Any competent European criminal, much less a terrorist organization, could procure phony passports. He looked up.

“What about the agents we lost?”

A sigh, a shrug. “They all have families.”

“Let’s get it set up so that I can meet with them . . . should it be all at once or one at a time?”

“Your choice, sir,” Price told him.

“No, it has to be what’s best for them. They’re your people, Andrea. You work that out for me, okay? I owe them my daughter’s life, and I have to do what’s right for them,” POTUS said soberly, remembering why he was in this quiet and peaceful place. “And I presume that they will be properly looked after. Get me the details on that, insurance, pensions, and stuff, okay? I want to look that over.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do we know anything important yet?”

“No, not really. The terrorists who’ve been posted, their dental work definitely isn’t American, that’s it for now.”

Ryan flipped through the papers he had. One preliminary conclusion leaped off the page at him: “Eleven years?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So this is a major operation for somebody—a country.”

“That’s a real possibility.”

“Who else would have the resources?” he asked, and Price reminded herself that he’d been an intelligence officer for a long time.

Agent Raman came in and took his seat. He’d heard that observation, and he and Price traded a look and a nod.

The wall phone rang. Captain Overton walked over to get it. “Yes?” He listened for a few minutes, then turned. “Mr. President, this is Mrs. Foley at CIA.”

The President went to take the call. “Yeah, Mary Pat.” “Sir, we had a call a few minutes ago from Moscow. Our friend Golovko asks if he can be of any assistance. I recommend a ‘yes’ on that.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

“Avi ben Jakob wants to talk to you later today. Earsonly,” the DDO told him.

"About an hour, let me get woke up first."

"Yes, sir.... Jack?"

"Yeah, MP?"

"Thank God about Katie," she said, mother to father, then going on as mother alone: "If we can get a line on this, we will."

"I KNOW YOU'RE our best," Mrs. Foley heard. "We're doing okay right now."

"Good. Ed and I will be in all day." She hung up.

"How's he sound?" Clark asked.

"He'll make it, John."

Chavez rubbed his hand over the night's growth of beard. The three of them plus quite a few others had spent the night reviewing everything CIA had on terrorist groups. "We have to do something about this, guys. This is an act of war." His voice was devoid of accent now, as it tended to be when he got serious enough to call on his education instead of his L.A. origins.

"We don't know much. Hell," the DDO said, "we don't know anything yet."

"Shame he couldn't have taken one alive." This observation, to the surprise of the two others, came from Clark.

"He probably didn't have much of a chance to snap the cuffs on the guy," Ding replied.

"True." Clark lifted the set of crime-scene photos that had been couriered over from the FBI just after midnight. He'd worked the Middle East, and it had been hoped that he might have recognized a face, but he hadn't. Mainly he'd learned that whichever FBI puke had been inside, the gent could shoot as well as he ever had. Lucky man, to have been there, to have had that chance, and to take it.

"Somebody's taking one hell of a big chance," John said.

"That's a fact," Mary Pat agreed automatically, but then they all wondered about it.

The question was not how big the chance was, but rather how big the chance was perceived to be by whoever had tossed the dice. The nine terrorists had all been throwaways, as surely marked for death as the Hezbollah fanatics who'd gone strolling down Israeli streets in clothing made by DuPont—that was the CIA joke about it, though in fact the plastic explosives had probably come from the Skoda Works in the former Czechoslovakia. "Not-so-smart bombs" was the other in-house sobriquet. Had they really believed that they could pull it off? The problem with some of the fanatics was that they didn't weigh things very well . . . maybe they hadn't even cared.

That was also the problem of those who sent them. This mission had

been different, after all. Ordinarily, terrorists boasted widely of what they did, however odious the act, and at CIA and elsewhere they'd waited for fifteen hours for the press release. But it never came, and if it hadn't by now, then it never would. If they didn't make the release, then they didn't want anyone to know. But that was an illusion. Terrorists always proclaimed their acts, but they didn't always appreciate that police agencies could figure things out anyway.

Nation-states knew better, or were supposed to. Okay, fine, the dealers hadn't had anything that could identify their point of origin—or so some might think. But Mary Pat was under no such illusions. The FBI was better than good, good enough that the Secret Service was letting the Bureau handle all of the forensics. And so it was likely that whoever had initiated the mission might actually expect that the story would eventually unravel. Knowing that—probably—they'd gone ahead with it anyway. If this line of speculation were true, then—

"Part of something else?" Clark asked. "Not a standalone. Something else, too."

"Maybe," Mary Pat observed.

"If it is, it's big," Chavez went on for them. "Maybe that's why the Russians called in to us."

"So big . . . so big that even if we figure it out, it won't matter when we do."

"That's pretty big, Mary Pat," Clark said quietly. "What could it be ...?"

"Something permanent, something we can't change after it's done," Domingo offered. His time at George Mason University hadn't been wasted.

Mrs. Foley wished her husband were in on this, but Ed was meeting with Murray right now.

SATURDAYS IN THE spring are often days of dull but hopeful routine, but in just over two hundred homes little was done. Gardens were not planted. Cars were not washed. Garage sales were not attended. Paint cans went unopened. That wasn't counting government employees or news personnel working the big story of the week. Mainly the people suffering from the flu were men. Thirty of them were in hotel rooms. Several even tried to work, attending their trade shows in the new cities. Wiping their faces, blowing their noses, and wishing the aspirin or Tylenol would kick in. Of the last group, most went back to the hotel rooms to relax—no sense in getting the customers sick, was there? In not a single case did anyone seek medical attention. There was the usual winter/spring flu bug circulating around, and everybody got it sooner or later. They weren't that sick, after all, were they?

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NEWS COVERAGE OF the incident at Giant Steps was entirely predictable, starting with camera shots taken from about fifty yards away, and the same words repeated by all of the correspondents, followed by the same words delivered by "experts" in terrorism and/or other fields. One of the networks took the viewer all the way back to Abraham Lincoln for no other reason than that it was otherwise a very slow news day. All of the coverage pointed to the Middle East, though the investigating agencies had declined any comment at all on the event so far, except to cite an FBI agent's heroic interference and the spirited battle put up by the Secret Service bodyguards of little Katie Ryan. Words like "heroic," "dedicated," and "determined" were bandied about with great frequency, leading to the "dramatic conclusion."

Something very simple had gone wrong, Badrayn was certain, though he wouldn't know for sure until his colleague got back to Tehran from London, via Brussels and Vienna, on several different sets of travel documents.

"The President and his family are at the Presidential Retreat at Camp David," the reporter concluded, "to recover from the shock of this dreadful event just north of peaceful Annapolis, Maryland. This is . . ."

"Retreat?" Daryaei asked.

"It means many things in English, first among them is to run away," Badrayn answered, mainly because he was sure that's what his employer would like to hear.

"If he thinks he can run away from me, he is mistaken," the cleric observed in dark amusement, the spirit of the moment getting the better of his discretion.

Badrayn didn't react to the revelation. It was easy at the instant of his realization, since he was looking at the TV and not at his host, but things then became more clear. There was not all that much risk at all, was there? Mahmoud Haji had a way to kill this man, perhaps whenever he wished to do so, and it was all being orchestrated. Could he really do it? But, of course, he already had.

IVIS MADE LIFE hard on the OpFor. Not all that hard. Colonel Hamm and the Blackhorse had won this one, but what only a year before would have been a wipeout of cosmic proportions—Fort Irwin *was* in California, and some linguistic peculiarities were inevitable—had been a narrow victory. War was about information. It was always the lesson

of the National Training Center: Find the enemy. Don't let the enemy find you. Reconnaissance. Reconnaissance. Reconnaissance. The IVIS system, operated by halfway competent people, shot the information out to everyone so fast that the soldiers were leaning in the right direction even before the orders came down. That had nearly negated a maneuver on the OpFor's part, which would have been worthy of Erwin Rommel on his best day, and as he watched the fast-play of the exercise on the big screen in the Star Wars Room, Hamm saw just how close it had been. If one of those Blue Force tank companies had moved just five minutes faster, he would have lost this one, too. The NTC would surely lose its effectiveness if the Good Guys won regularly.

"That was a beautiful move, Hamm," the colonel of the Carolina Guard admitted, reaching in his pocket for a cigar and handing it over. "But we'll whip your ass tomorrow."

Ordinarily, he would have smiled and said, *Sure you will*. But the cracker son of a bitch just might pull it off, and that would take a lot of the fun out of Hamm's life. The colonel of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment would now have to come up with ways of spoofing IVIS. It was something he'd thought about, and had been the subject of a few discussions over beers with his operations officer, but so far they had only agreed that it was no small feat, probably involving dummy vehicles . . . like Rommel had used. He'd have to get funding for those. He walked outside to smoke his cigar. It had been honorably won. He found the Guard colonel there, too.

"For Guardsmen, you're pretty damned good," Hamm had to admit. He'd never said such a thing to a Guard formation before. He rarely said it to anyone at all. Except for one deployment error, the Blue Force plan had been a thing of beauty.

"Thank you for saying that, Colonel. IVIS came as a rude surprise, didn't it?"

"You might say that."

"My people love it. A lot come in on their own time to play on the simulators. Hell, I'm surprised you took us on this one."

"Your reserve was too close in," Hamm told him. "You thought you knew what to exploit. Instead, I caught you out of position to meet my counterattack." It wasn't a revelation. The senior observer/controller had made that lesson clear to the momentarily contrite tank commander.

"I'll try to remember that. Catch the news?"

"Yeah, that sucks," Hamm thought aloud.

"Little kids. I wonder if they award medals to the Secret Service?"

"They have something, I imagine. I can think of worse things to die for." And that's what it was all about. Those five agents had died

doing their jobs, running to the sound of the guns. They must have made some mistakes, but sometimes you didn't have a choice in the matter. All soldiers knew that.

"God rest their brave souls." The man sounded like Robert Edward Lee. It triggered something in Hamm.

"What's the story on you guys? You, Colonel Eddington, you're not supposed—what the hell do you do in real life?" The guy was over fifty, very marginal for an officer in command of a brigade, even in the Guard.

"I'm professor of military history at the University of North Carolina. What's the story? This brigade was supposed to be the round-out for 24th Mech back in 1991, and we came here for workups and got our ass handed to us. Never got to deploy. I was a battalion XO then, Hamm. We wanted to go. Our regimental standards go back to the Revolution. It hurt our pride. We've been waiting to come back here near on ten years, boy, and this IVIS box gives us a fair chance." He was a tall, thin man, and when he turned, he was looking down at the regular officer. "We are going to make use of that chance, son. I know the theory. I been readin' and studyin' on it for over thirty years, and my men ain't'a'gonna roll over and die for you, you he'ah?" When aroused, Nicholas Eddington tended to adopt an accent.

" 'Specially not for Yankees?"

"Damn right!" Then it was time for a laugh. Nick Eddington was a teacher, with a flair for the impromptu dramatic. The voice softened. "I know, if we didn't have IVIS, you'd murder us—"

"Ain't technology wonderful?"

"It almost makes us your equal, and your men are the best. Everybody knows that," Eddington conceded. It was a worthy peace gesture.

"With the hours we keep, kinda hard to get a beer at the club when you need one. Can I offer you one at my home, sir?"

"Lead on, Colonel Hamm."

"What's your area of specialty?" BLACKHORSE SIX asked on the way to his car.

"My dissertation was on the operational art of Nathan Bedford Forrest."

"Oh? I've always admired Buford, myself."

"He only had a couple of days, but they were all good days. He might have won the war for Lincoln at Gettysburg."

"The Spencer carbines gave his troopers the technical edge," Hamm announced. "People overlook that factor."

"Choosing the best ground didn't hurt, and the Spencers helped, but what he did best was to remember his mission," Eddington replied.

"As opposed to Stuart. Jeb definitely had a bad day. I suppose he

was due for one." Hamm opened the car door for his colleague. It would be a few hours before they had to prepare for the next exercise, and Hamm was a serious student of history, especially of the cavalry. This would be an interesting breakfast: beer, eggs, and the Civil War.

THEY BUMPED INTO each other in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven, which was doing a great business in coffee and donuts at the moment.

"Hi, John," Holtzman said, looking at the crime scene from across the street.

"Bob," Plumber acknowledged with a nod. The area was alive with cameras, TV and still, recording the scene for history.

"You're up early for a Saturday—TV guy, too," the *Post* reporter noted with a friendly smile. "What do you make of it?"

"This really is a terrible thing." Plumber was himself a grandfather many times over. "Was it Ma'alot, the one in Israel, back—what? 1975, something like that?" They all seemed to blend together, these terrorist incidents.

Holtzman wasn't sure, either. "I think so. I have somebody checking it back at the office."

"Terrorists make for good stories, but, dear God, we'd be better off without them."

The crime scene was almost pristine. The bodies were gone. The autopsies were complete by now, they both imagined. But everything else was intact, or nearly so. The cars were there, and as the reporters watched, ballistics experts were running strings to simulate shots at mannequins brought in from a local department store, trying to re-create every detail of the event. The black guy in the Secret Service windbreaker was Norman Jeffers, one of the heroes of the day, now demonstrating how he'd come down from the house across the street. Inside was Inspector Patrick O'Day. Some agents were simulating the movements of the terrorists. One man lay on the ground by the front door, aiming a red plastic "play gun" around. In criminal investigations, the dress rehearsals always came after the play.

"His name was Don Russell?" Plumber asked.

"One of the oldest guys in the Service," Holtzman confirmed.

"Damn." Plumber shook his head. "Horatius at the bridge, like something from a movie. 'Heroic' isn't a word we use often, is it?"

"No, that isn't something we're supposed to believe in anymore, is it? We know better. Everybody's got an angle, right?" Holtzman finished off his coffee and dumped the cup in the trash bin. "Imagine, giving up your life to protect other people's kids."

Some reports talked about it in Western terms. "Gunfight at the Kiddy Corral" some local TV reporter had tried out, winning the low-

taste award for last night, and earning his station a few hundred negative calls, confirming to the station manager that his outlet had a solid nighttime viewership. None had been more irate about that than Plumber, Bob Holtzman noted. He still thought it was supposed to mean something, this news business they both shared.

"Any word on Ryan?" Bob asked.

"Just a press release. Callie Weston wrote it, and Arnie delivered it. I can't blame him for taking the family away. He deserves a break from somebody, John."

"Bob, I seem to remember when—"

"Yeah, I know. I got snookered. Elizabeth Elliot fed me a story on Ryan back when he was Deputy at CIA." He turned to look at his older colleague. "It was all a lie. I apologized to him personally. You know what it was really all about?"

"No," Plumber admitted.

"The Colombian mission. He was there, all right. Along the way, some people got killed. One of them was an Air Force sergeant. Ryan looks after the family. He's putting them all through college, all on his own."

"You never printed that," the TV reporter objected.

"No, I didn't. The family—well, they're not public figures, are they? By the time I found out, it was old news. I just didn't think it was newsworthy." That last word was one of the keys to their profession. It was news personnel who decided what got before the public eye and what did not, and in choosing what got out and what didn't, it was they who controlled the news, and decided what, exactly, the public had a right to know. And in so choosing, they could make or break everyone, because not every story started off big enough to notice, especially the political ones.

"Maybe you were wrong."

Holtzman shrugged. "Maybe I was, but I didn't expect Ryan to become President any more than he did. He did an honorable thing—hell, a lot more than honorable. John, there are things about the Colombian story that can't ever see the light of day. I think I know it all now, but I can't write it. It would hurt the country and it wouldn't help anybody at all."

"What did Ryan do, Bob?"

"He prevented an international incident. He saw that the guilty got punished one way or another—"

"Jim Cutter?" Plumber asked, still wondering what Ryan was capable of.

"No, that really was a suicide. Inspector O'Day, the FBI guy who was right there across the street?"

"What about him?"

"He was following Cutter, watched him jump in front of the bus."

"You're sure of this?"

"As sure as I've ever been. Ryan doesn't know that I'm into all this. I have a couple of good sources, and everything matches up with the known facts. Either it's all the truth or it's the cleverest lie I've ever run into. You know what we have in the White House, John?"

"What's that?"

"An honest man. Not 'relatively honest,' not 'hasn't been caught yet.' Honest. I don't think he's ever done a crooked thing in his life."

"He's still a babe in the woods," Plumber replied. It was almost bluster, if not disbelief, because his conscience was starting to make noise.

"Maybe he is. But who ever said we were wolves? No, that's not right. We're supposed to chase after the crooks, but we've been doing it so long and so well that we forgot that there are some people in government who aren't." He looked over at his colleague again. "And so then we play one off against another to get our stories and along the way we got corrupted, too. What do we do about that, John?"

"I know what you're asking. The answer is no."

"In an age of relative values, nice to find an absolute, Mr. Plumber. Even if it is the wrong one," Holtzman added, getting the reaction he'd hoped for.

"Bob, you're good. Very good, in fact, but you can't roll me, okay?" The commentator managed a smile, though. It was an expert attempt, and he had to admire that. Holtzman was a throwback to the days Plumber remembered so fondly.

"What if I can prove I'm right?"

"Then why didn't you write the story?" Plumber demanded. No real reporter could turn away from this one.

"I didn't print it. I never said I didn't write it," Bob corrected his friend.

"Your editor would fire you for—"

"So? Aren't there things you never did, even after you had everything you needed?"

Plumber dodged that one: "You talked about proof."

"Thirty minutes away. But this story can't ever get out."

"How can I trust you on that?"

"How can I trust you, John? What do we put first? Getting the story out, right? What about the country, what about the people? Where does professional responsibility end and public responsibility begin? I didn't run this one because a family lost a father. He left a pregnant wife behind. The government couldn't acknowledge what happened, and so Jack Ryan stepped in himself to make things right. He did it with his own money. He never expected people to find out. So what

was I supposed to do? Expose the family? For what, John? To break a story that hurts the country—no, that hurts one family that doesn't need any more hurt. It could jeopardize the kids' educations. There's plenty of news we can cover without that. But I'm telling you this, John: You've hurt an innocent man, and your friend with the big smile *lied* to the public to do it. We're supposed to care about that."

"So why don't you write *that?*"

Holtzman made him wait a few seconds for the answer. "I'm willing to give you the chance to set things right. That's why. You were there, too. But I have to have your word, John. I'll take yours."

There was more to it than that. There had to be. For Plumber, it was a matter of two professional insults. First, that he'd been steamrolled by his younger associate at NBC, one of the new generation who thought journalism was how you looked in front of a camera. Second, that he'd also been rolled by Ed Kealty—used ... to hurt an innocent man? If nothing else, he had to find out. He had to, otherwise he'd be spending a lot of time looking in mirrors.

The TV commentator took Holtzman's mini—tape recorder from his hand and punched the record button.

"This is John Plumber, it's Saturday, seven-fifty in the morning, and we're standing across the street from the Giant Steps Day Care Center. Robert Holtzman and I are about to leave this location to go somewhere. I have given my word that what we are about to investigate will remain absolutely confidential between us. This tape recording is a permanent record of that promise on my part. John Plumber," he concluded, "NBC News." He clicked it off, then clicked it back on again. "However, if Bob has misrepresented himself to me, all bets are off."

"That's fair," Holtzman agreed, removing the tape cassette from the recorder and pocketing it. The promise had no legal standing at all. Even if it had been a contractual agreement, the First Amendment would probably negate it, but it was a man's word, and both of the reporters knew that something had to hold up, even in the modern age. On the way to Bob's car, Plumber grabbed his field producer.

"We'll be back in an hour or so."

THE PREDATOR WAS circling at just under ten thousand feet. For purposes of convenience, the three UIR army corps were identified as I, II, and III by the intelligence officers at STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL. The UAV was circling I Corps now, a reconstituted Iraqi Republican Guard armored division and a similar division from the former Iranian army, "The Immortals," it was called, harkening back to the personal guard of Xerxes. The deployment was conventional.

The regimental formations were in the classic two-up/one-back disposition, a triangle of sorts, with the third forming the divisional reserve. The two divisions were abreast. Their frontage was surprisingly narrow, however, with each division covering a mere thirty kilometers of linear space, and only a five-kilometer gap between the two.

They were training hard. Every few kilometers were targets, plywood cutouts of tanks. When they came into view, they were shot at. The Predator couldn't tell how good the gunnery was, though most of the targets were knocked over by the time the first echelon of fighting vehicles passed. The vehicles were mainly of Russian/Soviet origin. The heavy ones were T-72 and T-80 main battle tanks made at the huge Chelyabinsk works. The infantry vehicles were BMPs. The tactics were Soviet, too. That was evident from the way they moved. Sub-units were kept under tight control. The huge formations moved with geometric precision, like harvesting machines in a Kansas wheatfield, sweeping across the terrain in regular lines.

"Geez, I've seen the movie," the chief master sergeant observed at the Kuwaiti ELINT station.

"Yes?" Major Sabah asked.

"The Russians—well, the Soviets, used to make movies of this, sir."

"How would you compare the two?" And *that*, the NCO intelligence-specialist thought, was a pretty good question.

"Not much different, Major." He pointed to the lower half of the screen. "See here? The company commander has everything on line, proper distance and interval. Before, the Predator was over the division reconnaissance screen, and that was right out of the book, too. Have you read up on Soviet tactics, Major Sabah?"

"Only as the Iraqis implemented them," the Kuwaiti officer admitted.

"Well, it's pretty close. You hit hard and fast, just go right through your enemy, don't give him a chance to react. You keep your own people under control. It's all mathematics to them."

"And the level of their training?"

"Not bad, sir."

"ELLIOT HAD SURVEILLANCE on Ryan, right over there," Holtzman pointed as he brought the car into the 7-Eleven.

"She was having him followed?"

"Liz hated his guts. I never—well, okay, I did figure it out. It was personal. She really had it in for Ryan, something that happened before Bob Fowler got elected. Enough that she leaked a story that was supposed to hurt his family. Nice, eh?"

Plumber wasn't all that impressed. "That's Washington."

"True, but what about using official government assets for a personal vendetta? That may be real Washington, too, but it's against the law." He switched off the car and motioned for Plumber to get out.

Inside they found a diminutive owner, female, and a bunch of Amerasian kids stocking the shelves on this Saturday morning.

"Hello," Carol Zimmer said. She recognized Holtzman from previous visits to buy bread and milk—and to eyeball the establishment. She had no idea he was a reporter. But she did recognize John Plumber. She pointed. "You on TV!"

"Yes, I am," the commentator admitted with a smile.

The eldest son—his name tag said Laurence—came up with a less friendly look on his face. "Can I help you with something, sir?" His voice was unaccented, his eyes bright and suspicious.

"I'd like to talk to you, if I might," Plumber asked politely.

"About what, sir?"

"You know the President, don't you?"

"Coffee machine's that way, sir. You can see where the doughnuts are." The young man turned his back. His height must have come from his father, Plumber saw, and he had education.

"Wait a minute!" Plumber said.

Laurence turned back. "Why? We have a business to run here. Excuse me."

"Larry, be nice to man."

"Mom, I told you what he did, remember?" When Laurence looked back at the reporters, his eyes told the tale. They wounded Plumber in a way he hadn't known in years.

"Excuse me. Please," the commentator said. "I just want to talk to you. There aren't any cameras with me." "Are you in medical school now, Laurence?" Holtzman asked.

"How did you know that? Who the hell are you?"

"Laurence!" his mother objected.

"Wait a minute, please." Plumber held his hands up. "I just want to talk. No cameras, no recorders. Everything is off the record."

"Oh, sure. You give us your word on that?"

"Laurence!"

"Mom, let me handle this!" the student snapped, then instantly apologized. "Sorry, Mom, but you don't know what this is about."

"I'm just trying to figure out—"

"I saw what you did, Mr. Plumber. Didn't anybody tell you? When you spit on the President, you spit on my father, too! Now, why don't you buy what you need and take a hike." The back turned again.

"I didn't know," John protested. "If I've done something wrong,

then why don't you tell me about it? I promise, you have my word, I will not do anything to hurt you or your family. But if I've done something wrong, please tell me."

"Why you hurt Mr. Ryan?" Carol Zimmer asked. "He good man. He look after us. He—"

"Mom, please. These people don't care about that!" Laurence had to come back and handle this. His mom was just too naive.

"Laurence, my name is Bob Holtzman. I'm with the *Washington Post*. I've known about your family for several years now. I never ran the story because I didn't want to invade your privacy. I know what President Ryan is doing for you. I want John to hear it from you. It will not become public information. If I wanted that to happen, I would have done it myself."

"Why should I trust you?" Laurence Zimmer demanded. "You're reporters." That remark broke through Plumber's demeanor hard and sharp enough to cause physical pain. Had his profession sunk so low as that?

"You're studying to be a doctor?" Plumber asked, starting at square one.

"Second year at Georgetown. I have a brother who's a senior at MIT, and a sister who just started at UVA."

"It's expensive. Too expensive for what you make off this business. I know. I had to educate my kids."

"We all work here. I work weekends."

"You're studying to be a physician. That's an honorable profession," Plumber said. "And when you make mistakes, you try to learn from them. So do I, Laurence."

"You sure talk the talk, Mr. Plumber, but lots of people do that."

"The President helps, doesn't he?"

"If I tell you something off the record, does that mean you can't report it at all?"

"No, actually 'off the record' doesn't quite mean that. But if I tell you, right here and right now, that I will never use it in any way—and there are other people around to back you up—and then I break my word, you can wreck my career. People in my business are allowed to get away with a lot, maybe even too much," Plumber conceded, "but we can't lie." And that was the point, wasn't it?

Laurence looked over to his mother. Her poor English did not denote a poor mind. She nodded to him.

"He was with my dad when he got killed," the youth reported. "He promised Pop that he would look after us. He does, and yeah, he pays for school and stuff, him and his friends at CIA."

"They had some trouble here with some rowdies," Holtzman added. "A guy I know at Langley came over here and—"

"He shouldna done that!" Laurence objected. "Mr. Clar—well, he didn't have to."

"How come you didn't go to Johns Hopkins?" Holtzman asked.

"They accepted me," Laurence told them, hostility still in his voice. "This way I can commute easier, and help out here with the store. Dr. Ryan—Mrs. Ryan, I mean—she didn't know at first, but when she found out, well, 'nother sister starts at the university this fall. Pre-med, like me."

"But why . . . ?" Plumber's voice trailed off.

" 'Cuz maybe that's the kind of guy he is, and you fucked him over."

"Laurence!"

Plumber didn't speak for fifteen seconds or so. He turned to the lady behind the counter. "Mrs. Zimmer, thank you for your time. None of this will ever be repeated. I promise." He turned. "Good luck with your studies, Laurence. Thank you for telling me that. I will not be bothering you anymore."

The two reporters walked back outside, straight to Holtzman's Lexus.

Why should I trust you? You're reporters. The artless words of a student, perhaps, but deeply wounding even so. Because those words had been earned, Plumber told himself.

"What else?" he asked.

"As far as I know they don't even know the circumstances of Buck Zimmer's death, just that he died on duty. Evidently, Carol was pregnant with their youngest when he died. Liz Elliot tried to get a story out that Ryan was fooling around and the baby was his. I got suckered."

A long breath. "Yeah. Me, too."

"So, what are you going to do about it, John?"

He looked up. "I want to confirm a few things."

"The one at MIT is named Peter. Computer science. The one going to Charlottesville, I think her name is Alisha. I don't know the name of the one graduating high school, but I could look that up. I have dates for the purchase of this business. It's a sub-chapter-S corporation. It all tallies with the Colombian mission. Ryan does Christmas for them every year. Cathy, too. I don't know how they'll work that now. Pretty well, probably." Holtzman chuckled. "He's good at keeping secrets."

"And the CIA guy who—"

"I know him. No names. He found out that some punks were annoying Carol. He had a little chat with them. The police have records. I've seen them," Holtzman told him. "He's an interesting guy. He's the one who got Gerasimov's wife and daughter out. Carol thinks he's a great big teddy bear. He's also the guy who rescued Koga. Serious player."

"Give me a day. One day," Plumber said.

"Fair enough." The drive back to Ritchie Highway passed without another word.

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"DR. RYAN?" BOTH heads turned. It was Captain Overton, sticking his head in the door.

"What. is it?" Cathy asked, looking up from a journal article.

"Ma'am, there's something happening that the kids might like to see, with your permission. All of you, if you want."

Two minutes later they were all in the back of a Hummer, heading into the woods, close to the perimeter fence. The vehicle stopped two hundred yards away. The captain and a corporal led them the rest of the way, to within fifty feet.

"Shh," the corporal said to SANDBOX. He held binoculars to her eyes.

"Neat!" Jack Junior thought.

"Will she be scared of us?" Sally asked.

"No, nobody hunts them here, and they're used to the vehicles," Overton told them. "That's Elvira, she's the second-oldest doe here."

She'd given birth only minutes before. Elvira was getting up now, licking the newborn fawn whose eyes were confused by a new world it had no reason to expect.

"Bambi!" Katie Ryan observed, being an expert on the Disney film. It only took minutes, and then the fawn wobbled to its—they couldn't tell the gender yet—feet.

"Okay. Katie?"

"Yes?" she asked, not looking away.

"You get to give her her name," Captain Overton told the toddler. It was a tradition here.

"Miss Marlene," SANDBOX said without hesitation.

45

CONFIRMATION

AS THE SAYING WENT, miles and miles of miles and miles. The road was about as boring as any civil engineer could make, but it hadn't been anyone's fault. So was the land. Brown and Holbrook now knew why the Mountain Men had become Mountain Men. At least there was scenery there. They could have driven faster, but it took time to learn the handling characteristics of this beast, and so they rarely got above fifty. That earned them the poisonous looks of every other driver on 1-90, especially the cowboy-hatted K-Whopper owner-operators who thought the unlimited speed limit in eastern Montana was just great, plus the occasional lawyer—they *had* to be lawyers—in German muscle cars who blazed by their truck as though it were a cattle-feeder.

They also found it was hard work. Both men were pretty tired from all the preparation. All the weeks of effort to set up the truck, mix the explosives, cast the bullets, and then embed them. It had all made for little sleep, and there was nothing like driving a western interstate highway to put a man to sleep. Their first overnight was at a motel in Sheridan, just over the line into Wyoming. Getting that far, their first day driving the damned thing, had almost been their undoing, especially negotiating the split of 1-90 and 1-94 in Billings. They'd known that the cement truck would corner about as well as a hog on ice, but actually experiencing it had exceeded their worst fears. They ended up sleeping past eight that morning.

The motel was actually a truck stop of sorts that catered both to private cars and to interstate freight carriers. The dining room served a hearty breakfast, wolfed down by a lot of rugged-looking independent men, and a few similarly minded women. Breakfast conversation was predictable.

"Gotta be rag-head sunzabitches," opined a big-bellied trucker with tattoos on his beefy forearms.

"Think so?" Ernie Brown asked from down the counter, hoping to get a feel for how these kindred souls felt about things.

"Who *else* would go after younguns? Sunzabitches." The driver returned to his blueberry pancakes.

"If the TV has it right, those two cops got it done," a milk hauler announced. "Five head shots. Whoa!"

"What about the one guy who went down hard, standing up like that against six riflemen! With a *pistol*. Dropped three of them, maybe four. There died a real American lawman." He looked up from his pancakes again. This one had a load of cattle. "He's earned his place in Valhalla, and that's for *damn* sure."

"Hey, they were feds, man," Holbrook said, chewing on his toast. "They ain't heroes. What about—"

"You can stick that one, good buddy," the milk hauler warned. "I don't wanna hear it. There was twenty, thirty children in that place."

Another driver chimed in. "And that black kid, rollin' on in with his -16. Damn, like when I was in the Cav for the Second of Happy Valley. I wouldn't mind buying that boy a beer, maybe shake his hand."

"You were AirCav?" the cattle hauler asked, turning away from his breakfast.

"Charlie, First of the Seventh." He turned to show the oversized patch of the First Air Cavalry Division on his leather jacket.

"Gary Owen, bro'! Delta, Second/Seventh." He stood up from the counter and walked over to take the man's hand. "Where you outa?"

"Seattle. That's mine out there with the machine parts. Heading for St. Louis. Gary Owen. Jesus, nice to hear that one again."

"Every time I drive through here . . ."

"You bet. We got brothers buried out yonder at Little Big Horn. Always say a little prayer for 'em when I come through."

"Shit." The two men shook hands again. "Mike Fallon."

"Tim Yeager."

The two Mountain Men had not just come into the room for breakfast. These were their kind of people. Supposed to be, anyway. Rugged individualists. Federal cops as heroes? What the hell was that all about?

"Boy, we find out who bankrolled this job, I hope that Ryan fella knows what to do 'bout it," machine parts said.

"Ex-Marine," cattle replied. "He ain't one of them. He's one of us. Finally."

"You may be right. Somebody's gotta pay for this one, and I hope we get the right people to do the collectin'."

"Damn right," the milk hauler agreed from his spot on the counter.

"Well." Ernie Brown stood. "Time for us to boogie on down the road."

The others nearby took a cursory look, and that was all, as the truckers returned to their informal opinion poll.

“IF YOU DON’T feel better by tomorrow, you’re going to the doctor, and that’s final!” she said.

“Oh, I’ll be all right.” But that protestation came out as a groan. He wondered if this was Hong Kong flu or something else. Not that he knew the difference. Few people did, and in a real sense that included docs and he did know that. What would they tell him? Rest, liquids, aspirin, which he was already doing. He felt as though he’d been placed in a bag and beaten with baseball bats, and all the traveling didn’t help. Nobody liked traveling. Everyone liked *being* somewhere else, but getting there was always a pain in the . . . everywhere, he grumped. He allowed himself to fade back off to sleep, hoping his wife wouldn’t worry too much. He’d feel better by tomorrow. These things always went away. He had a comfortable bed, and a TV controller. As long as he didn’t move around it didn’t hurt . . . much. It couldn’t get any worse. Then it would get better. It always did.

WHEN PEOPLE GOT to a certain point, their work never really stopped. They could go away, but then the work came to them, found them wherever they might be, and the only issue, really, was how expensive it was to bring the work to them. That was a problem for both Jack Ryan and Robby Jackson.

For Jack it was the speeches Callie Weston had prepared for him—he’d be flying tomorrow, to Tennessee, then to Kansas, then to Colorado, then to California, and finally back to Washington, arriving at three in the morning on what was going to be the biggest special-election day in American history. Just over a third of the House seats vacated by that Sato guy would be selected, with the remainder to be done over the following two weeks. Then he’d have a full Congress to work with, and maybe, just maybe, he could get some real work done. Pure politics loomed in his immediate future. This coming week he’d be going over the detailed plans to streamline two of the government’s most powerful bureaucracies, Defense and Treasury. The rest were in the works, too.

Since he was here with the President, Admiral Jackson was also getting everything developed by the office of J-2, the Pentagon’s chief of intelligence, so that he could conduct the daily around-the-world brief. It took him an hour just to go over the materials.

“What’s happening, Rob?” Jack asked, and instead of a friendly inquiry into how a guy’s week was going, the President was asking the state of the entire planet. The J-3’s eyebrows jerked up.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Pick a spot,” the President suggested.

“Okay, Mike Dubro and the *Ike* group are still heading north to

China, making good time. Good weather and calm seas, they're averaging twenty-five knots. That advances their ETA by a few hours. Exercises continue on the Formosa Strait, but both sides are hugging their coasts now. Looks like maybe the shoot-downs got everybody to calm down a bit. Secretary Adler is supposed to be in there right now, talking to them about things.

"Middle East. We're watching the UIR military run exercises, too. Six heavy divisions, plus attachments and tactical air. Our people on the scene have Predators up and watching pretty closely—"

"Who authorized that?" the President asked.

"I did," Jackson replied.

"Invading another country's airspace?"

"J-2 and I are running this. You want us to know what they're up to and what their capabilities are, don't you?"

"Yes, I need that."

"Good, you tell me what to do, and let me worry about how, all right? It's a stealthy platform. It self-destructs if it goes out of control or the guys directing it don't like something, and it gives us very good real-time data we can't get from satellites, or even from J-STARS, and we don't have one of those over there at the moment. Any other questions, Mr. President?"

"Touché, Admiral. What's the take look like?"

"They're looking better than our initial intelligence assessment led us to expect. Nobody's panicking yet, but this is starting to get our attention."

"What about Turkestan?" Ryan asked.

"They're evidently trying to get elections going, but that's old information, and that's all we know on the political side. The overall situation there is quiet at the moment. Satellites show increased cross-border traffic—mainly trade, the overhead-intelligence guys think, nothing more than that."

"Anybody looking at Iranian—damn, UIR—troop dispositions on the border?"

"I don't know. I can check." Jackson made a note. "Next, we've spotted the Indian navy."

"How?"

"They're not making a secret of anything. I had 'em send a pair of Orions off from Diego Garcia. They spotted our friends from three hundred miles out, electronic emissions. They are about four hundred miles offshore from their base. And, by the way, that places them directly between Diego and the entrance to the Persian Gulf. Our defense attaché will drop in tomorrow to ask what they're up to. They probably won't tell him very much."

"If they don't, I think maybe Ambassador Williams will have to

make a call of his own."

"Good idea. And that's the summary of today's news, unless you want the trivia." Robby tucked his documents away. "What do your speeches look like?"

"The theme is common sense," the President reported.

"In Washington?"

ADLER WAS NOT overly pleased. On arriving in Beijing, he'd learned that the timing wasn't good. His aircraft had gotten in on what had turned out to be a Saturday evening—the date line again, he realized—then he learned that the important ministers were out of town, studiously downplaying the significance of the air battle over the strait, and giving him a chance to recover from jet lag so that he would be up to a serious meeting. Or so they'd said.

"What a pleasure to have you here," the Foreign Minister said, taking the American's hand and guiding him into his private office. Another man was waiting in there. "Do you know Zhang Han San?"

"No, how do you do, Minister?" Adler asked, taking his hand as well. *So, this was what he looked like.*

People took their seats. Adler was alone. In addition to the two PRC ministers, there was an interpreter, a woman in her early thirties.

"Your flight was a pleasant one?" the Foreign Minister inquired.

"Coming to your country is always pleasant, but I do wish the flight were faster," Adler admitted.

"The effects of travel on the body are often difficult, and the body does affect the mind. I trust you have had some time to recover. It is important," the Foreign Minister went on, "that high-level discussions, especially in times of unpleasantness, are not clouded by extraneous complications."

"I am well rested," Adler assured them. He'd gotten plenty of sleep. It was just that he wasn't sure what time it was in whatever location his body thought itself to be. "And the interests of peace and stability compel us to make the occasional sacrifice."

"That is so true."

"Minister, the unfortunate events of the last week have troubled my country," SecState told his hosts.

"Why do those bandits seek to provoke us?" the Foreign Minister asked. "Our forces are conducting exercises, that is all. And they shot down two of our aircraft. The crewmen are all dead. They have families. This is very sad, but I hope you have noted that the People's Republic has not retaliated."

"We have noted this with gratitude."

"The bandits shot first. You also know that."

"We are unclear on that issue. One of the reasons for my coming here is to ascertain the facts," Adler replied.

"Ah."

Had he surprised them? SecState wondered. It was like a card game, though the difference was that you never really knew the value of the cards in your own hand. A flush still beat a straight, but the hole card was always down, even for its owner. In this case, he had lied, but while the other side might suspect the lie, they didn't know for sure, and that affected the game. If they thought he knew, they would say one thing. If they thought he didn't know, they'd say another. In this case, they thought he knew, but they weren't sure. He'd just told them otherwise, which could be a lie or the truth. Advantage, America. Adler had thought about this all the way over.

"You have said publicly that the first shot was taken by the other side. Are you sure of this?"

"Completely," the Foreign Minister assured him.

"Excuse me, but what if the shot were taken by one of your lost pilots? How would we ever know?"

"Our pilots were under strict orders not to fire except in self-defense."

"That is both a reasonable and prudent guide for your personnel. But in the heat of battle—or if not battle, a somewhat tense situation, mistakes do happen. We have the problem ourselves. I find aviators to be impulsive, especially the young, proud ones."

"Is not the same true of the other side as well?" the Foreign Minister asked.

"Certainly," Adler admitted. "That is the problem, isn't it? Which is why," he went on, "it is the business of people like ourselves to ensure that such situations do not arise."

"But they always provoke us. They hope to garner your favor, and we find it troubling that this may have succeeded."

"Excuse me?"

"Your President Ryan spoke of *two* Chinas. There is only one China, Secretary Adler. I'd thought that issue settled a long time ago."

"That was a semantic error on the President's part, a linguistic nuance," Adler replied, dismissing the observation. "The President has many qualities, but he has yet to learn the niceties of diplomatic exchange, and then a foolish reporter seized on the issue. Nothing more than that. There have been no changes in our policies toward this region." But Adler had deliberately *not* said "our policies," and "have been" instead of "are." There were times when he thought that he might have made a fortune for himself by drafting insurance policies.

"Such linguistic errors can be seen as things other than errors," the

Foreign Minister replied.

"Have I not made our position clear on this issue? You will recall that he was responding to a most unfortunate incident in which American lives were lost, and in searching for words to use, he selected words which have one meaning in our language, and another in yours." This was going a lot easier than he'd expected.

"Chinese lives were lost as well."

Zhang, Adler saw, was doing a lot of listening but wasn't uttering a single word. In the Western context, that made him an aide, a technical assistant, there to assist his minister on an issue of law or interpretation. He wasn't so sure that rule applied in this case. More likely, the reverse applied. If Zhang were what the American thought him to be, and if Zhang were smart enough to suspect that the American would be thinking along those lines—then why the hell was he here?

"Yes, and various others, to little purpose and great sorrow. I hope you will understand that our President takes such things seriously."

"Indeed, and I am remiss in not saying sooner that we view with horror the attack on his daughter. I trust you will convey to President Ryan our heartfelt sympathy at this inhuman act, and our pleasure that no harm has come to his child."

"I thank you on his behalf, and I will pass your good wishes along." Twice in a row now the Foreign Minister had temporized. He had an opening. He reminded himself that his interlocutors thought themselves smarter and shrewder than everybody else. "My President is a sentimental man," the Secretary admitted. "It is an American trait. Moreover, he feels strongly about his duty to protect all of our citizens."

"Then you need to speak to the rebels on Taiwan. We believe that it is they who destroyed the airliner."

"But why do such a thing?" Adler asked, ignoring the really surprising part. Was it a slip? Talk to Taiwan. The PRC was asking him to do that?

"To foment this incident, obviously. To play upon your President's personal feelings. To cloud the real issues between the People's Republic and our wayward province."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, we do," the Foreign Minister assured him. "We do not wish to have hostilities. Such things are so wasteful of people and resources, and we have greater concerns for our country. The Taiwan issue will be decided in due course. So long as America does not interfere," he added.

"As I have already told you, Minister, we have made no policy changes. All we wish is the restoration of peace and stability," Adler

said, the obvious import being the indeterminate maintenance of the status quo, which was decidedly *not* part of the People's Republic game plan.

"Then we are agreed."

"You will not object to our naval deployments?"

The Foreign Minister sighed. "The sea is free for the innocent passage of all. It is not our place to give orders to the United States of America, as it is not your place to give orders to the People's Republic. The movement of your forces gives the impression that you will influence local events, and we will make pro forma comments on this. But in the interests of peace," he went on in a voice that was both patient and weary, "we will not object too strongly, especially if it encourages the rebels to cease their foolish provocations."

"It would be useful to know if your naval exercises will end soon. That would be a very favorable gesture."

"The spring maneuvers will continue. They do not threaten anyone, as your increased naval presence will determine quite clearly. We do not ask you to take our word. Let our deeds speak for us. It would be well also if our rebellious cousins reduce their own activities. Perhaps you might speak to them on this?" Twice now? He hadn't misspoken before, then.

"If you request it, yes, I would be pleased to add my voice and that of my country to the quest for peace."

"We value the good offices of the United States, and we trust you to be an honest broker for this occasion, in view of the fact that, regrettably, American lives were lost in this tragic incident."

Secretary Adler yawned. "Oh, excuse me."

"Travel is a curse, is it not?" These words came from Zhang, speaking for the first time.

"It truly can be," Adler agreed. "Please allow me to consult my government. I think our response to your request will be favorable."

"Excellent," the Foreign Minister observed. "We seek to make no precedent here. I hope you understand this, but in view of the singular circumstances here, we welcome your assistance."

"I shall have a reply for you in the morning," Adler promised, rising. "Forgive me for extending your day."

"Such is duty, for all of us."

Scott Adler took his leave, wondering what exactly this bombshell was that had landed on him. He wasn't sure who'd won the card game, and realized that he wasn't even sure what game it had been. It certainly hadn't gone as expected. It seemed like he'd won, and won easily. The other side had been more accommodating than he would have been in their place.

SOME CALLED IT checkbook journalism, but it wasn't new, and it wasn't expensive at the working level. Any experienced reporter had people he could call, people who, for a modest fee, would check things. It wasn't in any way illegal, to ask a favor of a friend, at least not grossly so. The information was rarely sensitive—and in this case was public record. It was just that the offices weren't always open on Sunday.

A mid-level bureaucrat in the office of Maryland's Secretary of State drove into his office in Baltimore, used his card-pass to get to his parking place, then walked in and unlocked the right number of doors until he got to a musty file room. Finding the right cabinet, he pulled open a drawer and found a file. He left a marker in the drawer and carried the file to the nearest copying machine. Copies of all the documents were made in less than a minute, and then he replaced everything. With that task done, he walked back to his car and drove home. He did this often enough that he had a personal fax machine at home, and within ten minutes, the documents had been sent off, then taken to the kitchen and dumped in the trash. For this he would receive five hundred dollars. He got extra for working weekends.

JOHN PLUMBER WAS reading the documents even before the transmission was complete. Sure enough, a Ryan, John P., had established a sub-S corporation at the time Holtzman had told him. Control of that corporation had conveyed to Zimmer, Carol (none), four days later (a weekend had stood in the way), and that corporation now owned a 7-Eleven in southern Maryland. The corporate officers included Zimmer, Laurence; Zimmer, Alisha; and one other child, and the stockholders all shared the same surname. He recognized Ryan's signature on the transfer documents. The legal work had been done by a firm in Washington—a big one, he knew that name, too. There had been some tricky, but entirely legal, maneuvering to make the transaction tax-free for the Zimmer family. There was no further paperwork on that subject. Nothing else was needed, really.

He had other documents as well. Plumber knew the registrar at MIT, and had learned the previous evening, also via fax, that the tuition and housing expenses for Peter Zimmer were paid by a private foundation, the checks issued and signed by a partner in the same law firm that had set up the sub-S corp for the Zimmer family. He even had a transcript for the graduating senior. Sure enough, he was in computer science, and would be staying in Cambridge for his graduate

work in the MIT Media Lab. Aside from mediocre marks in his freshman literature courses—even MIT wanted people to be literate, but evidently Peter Zimmer didn't care for poetry—the kid was straight A.

"So, it's true." Plumber settled back in his swivel chair and examined his conscience. " 'Why should I trust you? You're reporters,' " he repeated to himself.

The problem with his profession was one that its members almost never talked about, just as a wealthy man will not often bemoan low taxes. Back in the 1960s, a man named Sullivan had sued the *New York Times* over defamation of character, and had demonstrated that the newspaper had not been entirely correct in its commentary. But the paper had argued, and the court had agreed, that in the absence of true malice, the mistake was not really culpable, and that the public's interest in learning the goings-on in their nation superseded protection of an individual. It left the door open for suits, technically, and people did still bring action against the media, and sometimes they even won. About as often as Slippery Rock University knocked off Penn State.

That court ruling was necessary, Plumber thought. The First Amendment guaranteed freedom of the press, and the reason for it was that the press was America's first and, in many ways, only guardian of freedom. People lied all the time. Especially people in government, but others, too, and it was the job of the media to get the facts—the *truth*—out to the people, so that they could make their own choices.

But there was a trap built into the hunting license the Supreme Court had issued. The media could destroy people. There was recourse against almost any improper action in American society, but reporters had such protections as those once enjoyed by kings, and, as a practical matter, his profession was above the law. As a practical matter, also, it worked hard to stay that way. To admit error was not only a legal faux pas, for which money might have to be paid. It would also weaken the faith of the public in their profession. And so they never admitted error when they didn't have to, and when they did, the retractions were almost never given the prominence of the initial, incorrect, assertions—the minimum necessary effort defined by lawyers who knew exactly the height of the castle walls they defended. There were occasional exceptions, but everyone knew that exceptions they were.

Plumber had seen his profession change. There was too much arrogance, and too little realization of the fact that the public they served no longer trusted them—and *that* wounded Plumber. He deemed himself worthy of that trust. He deemed himself a professional descendant of Ed Murrow, whose voice *every* American

had learned to trust. And that was how it was supposed to be. But it wasn't, because the profession could not be policed from without, and it would never be trusted again until it was policed from within. Reporters called down every other profession—medicine, law, politics—for failing to meet a level of professional responsibility which they would allow no one to enforce on themselves, and which they themselves would too rarely enforce on their own. *Do as I say, not as I do* was something you couldn't say to a six-year-old, but it had become a ready cant for grown-ups. And if it got any worse, then what?

Plumber considered his situation. He could retire whenever he wanted. Columbia University had more than once invited him in to be an adjunct professor of journalism ... and ethics, because his was a trusted voice, a reasoned voice, an honest voice. An old voice, he added to himself. Maybe the last voice?

But it all came down, really, to one man's conscience, to ideas inculcated by parents long dead, and teachers whose names he had forgotten. He had to be loyal to something. If he were to be loyal to his profession, then he had to be loyal to its foundation. To tell the truth and let the chips fall. He lifted his phone.

"Holtzman," the reporter answered, because it was the business line in his Georgetown home.

"Plumber. I've done some checking. It appears you were right."

"Okay, now what, John?"

"I have to do this myself. I'll give you the exclusive on print coverage."

"That's generous, John. Thank you," Bob acknowledged.

"I still don't like Ryan very much as a President," Plumber added, rather defensively, the other thought. That made sense. He couldn't appear to be doing this to curry favor.

"You know that's not what this is about. That's why I talked to you about it. When?" Bob Holtzman asked.

"Tomorrow night, live."

"How about we sit down and work out a few things? This will be a biggie for the *Post*. Want to share the byline?"

"I might just be looking for another job by tomorrow night," Plumber observed, with a rueful chuckle. "Okay, we'll do that."

"SO, WHAT'S THAT mean?" Jack asked.

"They do not mind anything we're doing. It's almost like they want the carrier there. They have requested that I shuttle back and forth to Taipei—"

"Directly?" The President was astonished. Such direct flights would

give the appearance of legitimacy to the Republic of China government. An American Secretary of State would be shuttling back and forth, and a ministerial official did so only between capitals of sovereign countries. Lesser disputes were left to “special envoys,” who might carry the same power, but nothing approaching the same status.

“Yeah, that kinda surprised me, too,” Adler replied over the encrypted channel. “Next, the dogs that didn’t bark: a cursory objection to your ‘two Chinas’ gaffe at the press conference, and trade never raised its ugly head. They’re being real docile for people who killed a hundred-plus airline passengers.”

“Their naval exercises?”

“They will continue, and they practically invited us to observe how routine they are.”

Admiral Jackson was listening on the speakerphone. “Mr. Secretary? This is Robby Jackson.”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“They staged a crisis, we move a carrier, and now they say they want us around, am I getting this right?”

“That’s correct. They do not know that we know, at least I don’t think they do—but you know, I’m not sure that matters at the moment.”

“Something’s wrong,” the J-3 said immediately. “Big-time wrong.”

“Admiral, I think you might be correct on that one, too.”

“Next move?” Ryan asked.

“I guess I go to Taipei in the morning. I can’t evade this one, can I?”

“Agreed. Keep me informed, Scott.”

“Yes, Mr. President.” The line went dead.

“Jack—no, Mr. President, I just had a big red flashing light go off.”

Ryan grimaced. “I have to go be political tomorrow, too. I fly out at, uh”—he checked his schedule—“leave the House at six-fifty, to speak in Nashville at eight-thirty. We need an assessment on this in one big hurry. Shit. Adler’s over there, I’m on the road, and Ben Goodley isn’t experienced enough for this. I want you there, Rob. If there’s operational ramifications to this, that’s your bailiwick. The Foleys. Arnie on the political side. We need a good China hand from State . . .”

ADLER WAS SETTLING into his bed in the embassy VIP quarters. He went over his notes, trying to figure the angle. People made mistakes at every level. The wide belief that senior officials were canny players was not nearly as true as people thought. They made mistakes. They made slips. They loved to be clever.

“Travel is a curse,” Zhang had said. His only words. Why then, and

why those? It was so obvious that Adler didn't get it then.

• • •

"BEDFORD FORREST, EH?" Diggs said, spreading relish on his hot dog.

"Best cavalry commander we've ever had," Eddington said.

"You'll pardon me, Professor, if I show diminished enthusiasm for the gentleman," the general observed. "The son of a bitch *did* found the Ku Klux Klan."

"I never said the man was politically astute, sir, and I do not defend his personal character, but if we've ever had a better man with a cavalry command, I have not learned his name," Eddington replied.

"He's got us there," Hamm had to admit.

"Stuart was overrated, sometimes petulant, and very lucky. Nathan had the *Fingerspitzengefühl,* knew how to make decisions on the fly, and damned if he made many bad ones. I'm afraid we just have to overlook his other failings."

History discussions among senior Army officers could last for hours, as this one had, and were as learned as those in any university's seminar room. Diggs had come over for a chat with Colonel Hamm, then found himself embroiled in the millionth refighting of the Civil War. Millionth? Diggs wondered. No, a *lot* more than that.

"What about Grierson?" Diggs asked.

"His deep raid was a thing of beauty, but he didn't actually conceive it, remember. Actually, I think his best work was as commander of the 10th."

"Now you're talking, Dr. Eddington."

"See how the boss's eyes just lit up. You—"

"That's right! You had that regiment until a little while ago. Ready and Forward!" the colonel of the Carolina Guard added.

"You even know our regimental motto?" Maybe this guy was a serious historian after all, even if he did admire that racist murderer, Diggs thought.

"Grierson built that regiment from the ground up, mainly illiterate troopers. He had to grow his own NCOs, and they drew every shit job in the Southwest, but they're the ones who defeated the Apaches—and only one damned movie ever made about 'em. I've been thinking about a book on the subject after I retire. He was our first real desert fighter, and he figured things out in a hurry. He knew about deep strike, he knew how to pick his fights, and once he got hold, he didn't let go. I was glad to see that regimental standard come back."

"Colonel Eddington, I take back what I was thinking." Diggs lifted

his beer can in salute. “That’s what the cav is all about.”

46

OUTBREAK

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER to come back Monday morning, but it would have meant getting the kids up too early. As it was, Jack Junior and Sally had to study for tests, and for the moment, Katie needed new arrangements of her own. Camp David had been so different it was very much like returning from a vacation, and coming back was something of a shock. As soon as the Executive Mansion appeared in the windows of the descending helicopter, faces and moods changed. Security was vastly increased. The body count around the perimeter was noticeably different, and that, too, was a reminder of how undesirable this place and the life it contained were for them. Ryan stepped off first, saluted the Marine at the bottom of the stairs then looked up at the south face of the White House. It was like a slap in the face. Welcome back to reality. After seeing his family safely inside, President Ryan headed west for his office.

"Okay, what's happening?" he asked van Damm, who hadn't had much of a weekend himself—but then, nobody was trying to kill him or his family, either.

"The investigation hasn't turned up much of anything yet. Murray says to be patient, things are happening. Best advice, Jack, just keep going with it," the chief of staff advised. "You have a full day tomorrow. The country's mood is for you. There's always an outpouring of sympathy in times like—"

"Arnie, I'm not going out after votes for myself, remember? It's nice that people think better of me after some terrorists attack my daughter, but, you know, I really don't want to look at things in those terms," Jack observed, his anger returning after two days of relief. "If I ever had thoughts about staying in this job, last week cured me."

"Well, yes, but—"

" 'But,' hell! Arnie, when it's all said and done, what will I take away from this place? A place in the history books? By the time that's written, I'll be dead, and I won't be around to care what historians say, will I? I have a friend in the history business who says that all history is really nothing more than the application of ideology to the past—and I won't be around to read it anyway. The only thing I want

to take away from here is my life and the lives of my family. That's all. If somebody else wants the pomp and circumstance of this fucking prison, then let 'em have it. I've learned better. Fine," POTUS said bitterly, his mood totally back in his office now. "I'll do the job, make the speeches, and try to get some useful work done, but it ain't worth it all, Arnie. For goddamned sure it isn't worth having nine terrorists try to kill your daughter. There's only one thing you leave behind on this planet. That's your kids. Everything else, hell, other people just make it up to suit themselves anyway, just like the news."

"It's been a rough couple of days, and—"

"What about the agents who died? What about their families? I had a nice two-day vacation. They sure as hell didn't. I've gotten used enough to this job that I hardly thought about them at all. Over a hundred people worked hard to make sure I forgot about it. And I let them do it! It's important that I don't dwell on such things, right? What am I supposed to concentrate on? 'Duty, Honor, Country'? Anybody who can do that and turn his humanity off doesn't belong here, and that's what this job is turning me into."

"You finished, or do I have to get a box of Kleenex for you?" For one brief moment the President looked ready to punch van Damm. Arnie plunged on. "Those agents died because they chose jobs they thought were important. Soldiers do the same thing. What's with you, anyway, Ryan? How the hell do you think a country happens? You think it's just nice thoughts? You weren't always that stupid. You were a Marine once. You did other stuff for CIA. You had balls then. You have a job. You didn't get drafted, remember? You volunteered for this, whether you admit it or not. You knew it was possible this would happen. And so now you're here. You want to run away, fine—run away. But don't tell me it isn't worth it. Don't tell me it doesn't matter. If people *died* to protect your family, don't you fucking *dare* tell me it doesn't matter!" Van Damm stormed out of the office, without even bothering to close the door behind him.

Ryan didn't know what to do right then. He sat down behind his desk. There were the usual piles of paper, neatly arrayed by a staff that never slept. Here was China. Here was the Middle East. Here was India. Here was advance information on the leading economic indicators. Here were political projections for the 161 House seats to be decided in two days. Here was a report on the terrorist incident. Here was a list of the names of the dead agents, and under each was a list of wives and husbands, parents and children, and in the case of Don Russell, grandchildren. He knew all the faces, but Jack had to admit that he hadn't remembered all the names. They'd died to protect his child, and he didn't even know all the names. Worst of all, he'd allowed himself to be carted away, to indulge himself in yet more

artificial comfort—and forget. But here it all was, on his desk, waiting for him, and it wouldn't go away. And he couldn't run away, either. He stood and walked out the door, heading left for the chief of staff's corner office, passing Secret Service agents who'd heard the exchange, probably traded looks, certainly developed their own thoughts, and now concealed them.

"Arnie?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"I'm sorry."

"OKAY, HONEY," HE groaned. He'd go to see the doctor tomorrow morning. It hadn't gotten better at all. If anything, it had gotten worse. The headaches were punishing, and that despite two extra-strength Tylenol every four hours. If only he could sleep it off, but that was proving hard. Only exhaustion allowed him an hour here and an hour there. Just getting up to use the bathroom required a few minutes of concentrated effort, enough that his wife offered to help, but, no, a man didn't need an escort for that. On the other hand, she was right. He did need to see a doctor. Would have been smarter to do it yesterday, he thought. Then he might have felt better now.

IT HAD BEEN easy for Plumber, at least on the procedural side. The tape-storage vault was the size of a respectable public library, and finding things was easy. There, on the fifth shelf, were three boxed Beta-format cassettes. Plumber took them down, removed the tapes from the boxes, and replaced them with blanks. The three tapes he placed in his briefcase. He was home twenty minutes later. There, for his own convenience, he had a commercial-type Betamax, and he ran the tapes of the first interview, just to make sure, just to confirm the fact that the tapes were undamaged. And they were. These would have to be sent to a secure place.

Next, John Plumber drafted his three-minute commentary piece for the next day's evening news broadcast. It would be a mildly critical piece on the Ryan presidency. He spent an hour on it, since, unlike the current crop of TV reporters, he liked to achieve a certain elegance in his language, a task which came easily to him, as his grammar was correct. This he printed up and read over because he both edited and detected errors more easily on paper than on a computer monitor. Satisfied, he copied the piece over to disk, which would later be used at the studio to generate copy for the TelePrompTer. Next, he composed another commentary piece of the same overall length (it

turned out to be four words shorter), and that he printed also. Plumber spent rather more time with this one. If it were to be his professional swan song, then it had to be done properly, and this reporter, who had drafted quite a few obituaries for others, both admired and not, wanted his own to be just right. Satisfied with the final copy, he printed that up as well, tucking the pages into his briefcase, with the cassettes. This one he would not copy to disk.

"I GUESS THEY'RE finished," the chief master sergeant said.

The take from the Predator showed the tank columns heading back to their laagers, hatches open on the turrets, crewmen visible, mainly smoking. The exercise had gone well for the newly constituted UIR army, and even now they were conducting their road movement in good order.

Major Sabah spent so much time looking over this man's shoulder that they really should have spoken on a more informal basis, he thought. It was all routine. Too routine. He'd expected—hoped—that his country's new neighbor would require much more time to integrate its military forces, but the commonality of weapons and doctrine had worked in their favor. Radio messages copied down here and at STORM TRACK suggested that the exercise was concluded. The TV coverage from the UAV confirmed it, however, and confirmation was important.

"That's funny . . ." the sergeant observed, to his own surprise.

"What is that?" Sabah asked.

"Excuse me, sir." The NCO stood and walked over to a corner cabinet, from which he extracted a map, and brought it back to his workstation. "There's no road there. Look, sir." He unfolded the map, matched the coordinates with those on the screen—the Predator had its own Global Positioning Satellite navigation system and automatically told its operators where it was—and tapped the right section on the paper. "See?"

The Kuwaiti officer looked back and forth from map to screen. On the latter, there was a road, now. But that was easily explained. A column of a hundred tanks would convert almost any surface into a hard-packed highway of sorts, and that had happened here.

But there hadn't been a road there before. The tanks had made it over the last few hours.

"That's a change, Major. The Iraqi army was always road-bound before."

Sabah nodded. It was so obvious that he hadn't seen it. Though native to the desert, and supposedly schooled in traveling there, the Iraqi army in 1991 had connived at its own destruction by sticking

close to roads, because its officers always seemed to get lost when moving cross-country. Not as mad as it sounded—the desert was essentially as featureless as the sea—it had made their movements predictable, never a good thing in a war, and given advancing allied forces free rein to approach from unexpected directions.

That had just changed.

"You suppose they have GPS, too?" the chief master sergeant asked.

"We couldn't expect them to stay stupid forever, could we?"

PRESIDENT RYAN KISSED his wife on the way to the elevator. The kids weren't up yet. One sort of work lay ahead. Another sort lay behind. Today there wasn't time for both, though some efforts would be made. Ben Goodley was waiting on the helicopter.

"Here's the notes from Adler on his Tehran trip." The National Security Advisor passed them over. "Also the write-up from Beijing. The working group is getting together at ten to go over that situation. The SNIE team will be meeting at Langley later today, too."

"Thanks." Jack strapped into his seat and started reading. Arnie and Callie came aboard and took their seats forward of his.

"Any ideas, Mr. President?" Goodley asked.

"Ben, you're supposed to tell me, remember?"

"How about I tell you that it doesn't make much sense?"

"I already know that part. You guard the phones and faxes today. Scott should be in Taipei now. Whatever comes from him, fast-track it to me."

"Yes, sir."

The helicopter lurched aloft. Ryan hardly noticed that. His mind was on the job, crummy though it was. Price and Raman were with him. There would be more agents on the 747, and more still waiting even now in Nashville. The presidency of John Patrick Ryan went on, whether he liked it or not.

• • •

THIS COUNTRY MIGHT be small, might be unimportant, might be a pariah in the international community—not because of anything it had done, except perhaps to prosper, but because of its larger and less prosperous neighbor to the west—but it did have an *elected* government, and that was supposed to count for something in the community of nations, especially those with popularly elected governments themselves. The People's Republic had come to exist by

force of arms—well, most countries did, SecState reminded himself—and had immediately thereafter slaughtered millions of its own citizens (nobody knew how many; nobody was terribly interested in finding out), launched into a revolutionary development program ("the Great Leap Forward"), which had turned out more disastrously than was the norm even for Marxist nations; and launched yet another internal "reform" effort ("the Cultural Revolution") which had come *after* something called the "Hundred Flowers" campaign, whose real purpose had been to smoke out potential dissidents for later elimination at the hands of students whose revolutionary enthusiasm had indeed been revolutionary toward Chinese culture—they'd come close to destroying it entirely, in favor of *The Little Red Book*. Then had come more reform, the supposed changeover from Marxism to something else, another student revolution—this one against the existing political system—arrogantly cut down with tanks and machine guns on global television. Despite all that, the rest of the world was entirely willing to let the People's Republic crush their cousins on Taiwan.

This was called *realpolitik,* Scott Adler thought. Something similar had resulted in an event called the Holocaust, an event his father had survived, with a number tattooed on his forearm to prove it. Even his own country officially had a one-China policy, though the unspoken codicil was that the PRC would not attack the ROC—and if it did, then America might just react. Or might not.

Adler was a career diplomat, a graduate of Cornell and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He loved his country. He was often an instrument of his country's policy, and now found himself to be his country's very voice of international affairs. But what he often had to say was not terribly just, and at moments like this, he wondered if he might himself be doing the same things that had been done sixty years earlier by other Fletcher grads, well-educated and well-meaning, who, after it was all over, wondered how the hell they'd been so blind as not to have seen it coming.

"We have fragments—and actually some rather large pieces from the missile that were lodged in the wing. It is definitely of PRC origin," the ROC Defense Minister said. "We will allow your technical people to look them over and make your own tests to confirm matters."

"Thank you. I will discuss that with my government."

"So." This was the Foreign Minister. "They allow a direct flight from Beijing to Taipei. They do not object privately to the dispatch of an aircraft carrier. They disclaim any responsibility for the Airbus incident. I confess I see no rationale for this behavior."

"I am gratified that they express interest only in the restoration of

regional stability."

"How good of them," Defense said. "After they deliberately upset it."

"This has caused us great economic harm. Again, foreign investors get nervous, and with the flight of their capital, we face some minor embarrassments. Was that their plan, do you suppose?"

"Minister, if that were the case, why did they ask me to fly here directly?"

"Some manner of subterfuge, obviously," the Foreign Minister answered, before Defense could say anything.

"But if so, what for?" Adler wanted to know. Hell, *they* were Chinese. Maybe they could figure it out.

"We are secure here. We know that, even if foreign investors do not. Even so, the situation is not an entirely happy one. It is rather like living in a castle with a moat. Across the moat is a lion. The lion would kill and eat us if he had the chance. He cannot leap the moat, and he knows that, but he keeps trying to do so, even with that knowledge. I hope you can understand our concern."

"I do, sir," SecState assured him. "If the PRC reduces the level of its activity, will you do the same?" Even if they couldn't figure out what the PRC was up to, perhaps they could de-stress the situation anyway.

"In principle, yes. Exactly how, is a technical question for my colleague here. You will not find us unreasonable."

And the entire trip had been staged for that simple statement. Now Adler had to fly back to Beijing to deliver it. Matchmaker, matchmaker . . .

HOPKINS HAD ITS own day-care center, staffed by permanent people and always some students from the university doing lab work for their child-care major. Sally walked in, looked around and was pleased by the multicolored environment. Behind her were four agents, all male, because there weren't any unassigned women. One carried a FAG bag. Nearby was a trio of plainclothes officers of the Baltimore City Police, who exchanged credentials with the USSS to confirm identity, and so another day started for SURGEON and SANDBOX. Katie had enjoyed the helicopter ride. Today she'd make some new friends, but tonight, her mother knew, she'd ask where Miss Marlene was. How did one explain death to a not-yet-three-year-old?

THE CROWD APPLAUDED with something more than the usual warmth. Ryan could feel it. Here he was, not yet three days after an

attempt on the life of his youngest daughter, doing his job for them, showing strength and courage and all that other bullshit, POTUS thought. He'd led off with a prayer for the fallen agents, and Nashville was the Bible Belt, where such things were taken seriously. The rest of the speech had actually been pretty good, the President thought, covered things he really believed in. Common sense. Honesty. Duty. It was just that hearing his own voice speaking words written by somebody else made it seem hollow, and it was hard to keep his mind from wandering so early in the morning.

"Thank you, and God bless America," he concluded. The crowd stood and cheered. The band struck up. Ryan turned away from the armored podium to shake hands again with the local officials, and made his way off the stage, waving as he did so. Arnie was waiting behind the curtain.

"For a phony, you still do pretty good." Ryan didn't have time to respond to that before Andrea came up.

"FLASH-traffic waiting for you on the bird, sir. From Mr. Adler."

"Okay, let's roll. Stay close," he told his principal agent on the way out the back.

"Always," Price assured him.

"Mr. President!" a reporter shouted. There were a bunch of them. He was the loudest this morning. He was one of the NBC team. Ryan turned and stopped. "Will you press Congress for a new gun-control law?"

"What for?"

"The attack on your daughter was—"

Ryan held his hand up. "Okay. As I understand it, the weapons used were of a type already illegal. I don't see how a new law would accomplish much, unfortunately."

"But gun-control advocates say—"

"I know what they say. And now they're using an attack on my little girl, and the deaths of five superb Americans, to advance a political agenda of their own. What do you think of that?" the President asked, turning away.

"WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?"

He described his symptoms. His family physician was an old friend. They even played golf together. It wasn't hard. At the end of every year, the Cobra representative had plenty of demonstrator clubs in nearly mint condition. Most were donated to youth programs or sold to country clubs as rental sticks. But some he could give to his friends, not to mention some Greg Norman autographs.

"Well, you have a temperature, one hundred and three, and that's a

little high. Your BP's one hundred over sixty-five, and that's a little low for you. Your color's rotten—"

"I know, I feel sick."

"You are sick, but I wouldn't worry about it. Probably a flu bug you picked up in some bar, and all the air travel doesn't help much, either—and I've been telling you for years about cutting back on the booze. What happened is you picked something up, and other factors worsened it. Started Friday, right?"

"Thursday night, maybe Friday morning."

"Played a round anyway?"

"Ended up with a snowman for my trouble," he admitted, meaning a score of 80.

"I'd settle for that myself, healthy and stone-sober." The doctor had a handicap of twenty. "You're over fifty and you can't wallow with the pigs at night and expect to soar with the eagles in the morning. Complete rest. A lot of liquids-non-alcoholic. Stay on the Tylenol."

"No prescription?"

The doc shook his head. "Antibiotics don't work on viral infections. Your immune system has to handle those, and it will if you let it. But while you're here, I want to draw some blood. You're overdue for a cholesterol check. I'll send my nurse in. You have somebody here to drive you home?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to drive myself."

"Good. Give it a few days. Cobra can do without you, and the golf courses will still be there when you feel better."

"Thanks." He felt better already. You always did when the doc told you that you weren't going to die.

"HERE YOU GO." Goodley handed the paper over. Few office buildings, even secure government ones, had the communications facilities that were shoehorned into the upper-level lounge area of the VC-25, whose call sign was Air Force One. "Not bad news at all," Ben added.

SWORDSMAN skimmed it once, then sat down to read it more slowly. "Okay, fine, he thinks he can defuse the situation," Ryan noted. "But he still doesn't know what the goddamned situation is."

"Better than nothing."

"Does the working group have this?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Maybe they can make some sense out of it. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Tell the driver it's time to get moving." He looked around. "Where's Arnie?"

“I’M CALLING YOU on a cellular,” Plumber said.

“Fine,” van Damm replied. “I’m on one, too, as a matter of fact.” The instruments on the aircraft were also secure, with STU-4 capability. He didn’t say that. He just needed a retort. John Plumber was no longer on his Christmas card list. Unfortunately, his direct line was still on Plumber’s Rolodex. What a shame he couldn’t change it. And he’d have to tell his secretary *not* to put this guy through anymore, at least not when he was traveling.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“Good, John. Then I don’t have to say what I think.”

“Catch the broadcast tonight. I’ll be on at the end.”

“Why?”

“See for yourself, Arnie. So long.”

The chief of staff thumbed the kill switch on the phone and wondered what Plumber meant. He’d once trusted the man. Hell, he’d once trusted the man’s colleague. He could have told the President about the call, but decided not to. He’d just delivered a pretty good speech, distractions and all, doing well in spite of himself, because the poor son of a bitch really did believe in more than he knew. It wouldn’t be smart to drop something else on him. They’d tape the speech on the flight into California, and if it were fit to view, then he’d show it to POTUS.

“I DIDN’T KNOW there was a flu bug around,” he said, putting his shirt back on. It took time. The auto executive was sore all over.

“There always is. Just it doesn’t always make the news,” the physician replied, looking over the vital signs his nurse had just written down. “And you got it.”

“So?”

“So, take it easy. Don’t go to the office. No sense infecting your whole company. Ride it out. You should be fine by the end of the week.”

• • •

THE SNIE TEAM met at Langley. A ton of new information had come across from the Persian Gulf region, and they were sorting through it in a conference room on the sixth floor. Chavez’s photo of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei had been blown up by the in-house photo lab and was

now hanging on the wall. Maybe somebody would throw darts at it, Ding thought.

"Track toads," the former infantryman snorted, watching the Predator video.

"Kinda big to take on with a rifle, Sundance," Clark observed. "Those things always scared the hell out of me."

"LAWS rocket'll do 'em fine, Mr. C."

"What's the range on a LAWS, Domingo?"

"Four, five hundred meters."

"Those guns shoot two or three kilometers," John pointed out. "Think about it."

"I'm not up on the hardware," Bert Vasco said. He waved at the screen. "What's this mean?"

The answer came from one of CIA's military analysts. "It means the UIR military is in much better shape than we'd expected."

An Army major brought over from the Defense Intelligence Agency didn't dispute that. "I'm fairly impressed. It was a pretty vanilla exercise, nothing really complicated on the maneuver side, but they kept themselves organized for all of it. Nobody got lost—"

"You suppose they're using GPS now?" the CIA analyst asked.

"Anybody who subscribes to *Yachting* magazine can buy the things. The price is down to four hundred bucks, last time I looked," the officer told his civilian counterpart. "It means they can navigate their mobile forces a lot better. More than that, it means their artillery will become a whole lot more effective. If you know where your guns are, where your forward observer is, and where the target is in relation to him, then your first round is going to be pretty much on the money."

"Fourfold increase in performance?"

"Easy," the major replied. "That elderly gent on the wall has a big stick to wave at his neighbors. I imagine he'll let them know about it, too."

"Bert?" Clark asked.

Vasco squirmed in his seat. "I'm starting to worry. This is going faster than I expected. If Daryaei didn't have other things to worry about, I'd be more worried."

"Like?" Chavez asked.

"Like he has a country to consolidate, and he has to know that if he starts rattling sabers, we'll react." The FSO paused. "Sure as hell, he wants to let his neighbors know who the big boy on the block is. How close is he to being able to do something?"

"Militarily?" the civilian analyst asked. He gestured to the guy from DIA.

"If we were not in the picture, now. But we are in the picture."

“I ASK NOW that you will join me in a moment of silence,” Ryan told the audience in Topeka. It was eleven here. That made it noon back home. Next stop Colorado Springs, then Sacramento, then, blessedly, home.

“YOU HAVE TO ask yourself what kind of man we have here,” Kealty said in front of cameras of his own. “Five men and women dead, and he doesn’t see the need for a law to control these guns. It’s just beyond my comprehension how anyone can be as coldly heartless as that. Well, if he doesn’t care about those brave agents, I do. How many Americans will have to die before he sees the need for this? Will he have to actually lose a family member? I’m sorry, I just can’t believe that remark,” the politician went on for the minicam.

“WE CAN ALL remember when people ran for reelection to Congress, and one of the things they told us was, ‘Vote for me, because for every dollar that taxes take from this district, a dollar-twenty comes back.’ Do you remember those claims?” the President asked.

“What they didn’t say was—well, it was actually a lot of things. Number one, who ever said that you depend on the government for money? We don’t vote for Santa Claus, do we? It’s the other way around. The government can’t exist unless *you* give *it* money.

“Number two, are they telling you, ‘Vote for me, ’cause I really stick it to those rotten people in North Dakota’? Aren’t they Americans, too?

“Number three, the real reason this happens is that the government deficit means every district gets more in federal payments than it lost in federal taxes—excuse me, I mean *direct* federal taxes. The ones you can see.

“So they were bragging to you that they were spending more money than they had. If your next-door neighbor told you he was kiting checks drafted on your personal bank, you think maybe you might call the police about it?

“We all know that the government *does* take more than it gives back. They’ve just learned to hide it. The federal budget deficit means that every time you borrow money, it costs more than it should—why? Because the government borrows so much money that it drives up interest rates.

“And so, ladies and gentlemen, every house payment, every car payment, every credit-card bill is also a *tax*. And maybe they give you

a tax break on interest payments. Isn't that nice?" POTUS asked. "Your government gives you a tax break on money you ought not to have to pay in the first place, and then it tells you that you get back more than you pay out." Ryan paused.

"Does anybody out there really believe that? Does anybody really believe it when people say that the United States can't *afford—not* to spend more money than it has? Are these the words of Adam Smith or Lucy Ricardo? I have a degree in economics, and *I Love Lucy* wasn't on the course.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I am not a politician, and I am not here to speak on behalf of any of your local candidates for the vacant seats in the People's House. I am here to ask you to think. You, too, have a duty. The government belongs to you. You don't belong to it. When you go out to vote tomorrow, please take the time to think about what the candidates say and what they stand for. Ask yourself, 'Does this make sense?' and then make the best choice you can—and if you don't like any of them, go to the polls anyway, go into the voting booth, and then go home without giving your vote to anyone, but at least show up. You owe that to your country."

THE HEATING AND air-conditioning van pulled up the driveway, and a pair of men got out and walked up to the porch. One of them knocked.

"Yes?" the lady of the house asked in puzzlement.

"FBI, Mrs. Sminton." He showed his credentials. "Could we come in, please?"

"Why?" the sixty-two-year-old widow asked.

"We'd like you to help us with something, if you might." It had taken longer than expected. The guns used in the SANDBOX case had been traced to a manufacturer, from the manufacturer to a wholesaler, from the wholesaler to a dealer, and from the dealer to a name, and from a name to an address. With the address, the Bureau and Secret Service had gone to a United States District Court judge for a search-and-seizure warrant.

"Please come in."

"Thank you. Mrs. Sminton, do you know the gentleman who lives next door?"

"Mr. Azir, you mean?"

"That's right."

"Not very well. Sometimes I wave."

"Do you know if he's home now?"

"His car's not there," she replied, after looking. The agents already knew that. He owned a blue Oldsmobile wagon with Maryland tags.

Every cop in two hundred miles was looking for it.

"Do you know when the last time was you saw him?"

"Friday, I guess. There were some other cars there, and a truck."

"Okay." The agent reached in his coveralls pocket and pulled out a radio. "Move in, move in. Bird is probably—say again, *probably*—out of the coop."

Before the widow's astonished eyes, a helicopter appeared directly over the house three hundred yards away. Zip lines dropped from both sides, and armed agents slid down them. At the same time, four vehicles converged from both directions on the country road, all of them driving off the road, onto the wide lawn straight toward the dwelling. Ordinarily, things would have gone slower, with some period of discreet surveillance, but the word was out on this one. Front and back doors were kicked in—and thirty seconds later, a siren went off. Mr. Azir, it seemed, had a burglar alarm. Then the radio crackled.

"Clear, building is clear. This is Betz. Search complete, building is clear. Bring in the lab troops." With that, two vans appeared. These proceeded up the driveway, and one of the first things the passengers did was to take samples of the gravel there, plus grass, to match with scrapings from the rented cars left at Giant Steps.

"Mrs. Sminton, could we sit down, please? There are a couple questions we'd like to ask you about Mr. Azir."

"SO?" MURRAY ASKED, arriving in the FBI Command Center.

"No joy," the agent at the console said.

"Damn." It wasn't said with passion. He'd never really expected it. But he expected some important information anyway. The Lab had collected all manner of physical evidence. Gravel samples could match the driveway. Grass and dirt found on the inside offenders and bumpers could link the vehicles to the Azir house. Carpet fibers—maroon wool—on the shoes of the dead terrorists could put them inside the house. Even now, a team of ten agents was beginning the process of discovering exactly who "Mordecai Azir" was. Smart money was that he was about as Jewish as Adolf Eichmann. Nobody was covering that wager.

"Commander Center, this is Betz." Billy Betz was assistant special agent in charge of the Baltimore Field Division, and a former HRT shooter, hence his dramatic descent from the helicopter, leading his men . . . and a woman.

"Billy, this is Dan Murray. What do you have?"

"Would you believe it? A half-empty crate of seven-six-two ball ammo, and the lot numbers match, Director. Living room has a dark

red wool rug. This is our place. Some clothes missing from the master-bedroom closet. I'd say nobody's been here for a couple of days. Location is secure. No booby traps. The lab troops are starting their routine." And all eighty minutes from the time the Baltimore SAC had walked into the Garmatz Federal Courthouse. Not fast enough, but fast.

The forensics experts were a mix of Bureau, Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, a troubled agency whose technical staff was nonetheless excellent. They'd all be shaking the house for hours. Everyone wore gloves. Every surface would be dusted for fingerprints to match with those of the dead terrorists.

"SOME WEEKS AGO you saw me take an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. That's the second time I did that. The first time was as a brand-new Marine second lieutenant, when I graduated from Boston College. Right after that, I read the Constitution, to make sure I knew what it was that I was supposed to be defending.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we often hear politicians saying how they want government to empower you, so that you can do things.

"That's not the way it is," Ryan told them forcefully. "Thomas Jefferson wrote that governments derive their just powers from the *consent* of the governed. That's you. The Constitution is something you should all read. The Constitution of the United States was not written to tell you what to do. The Constitution establishes the relationship among the three branches of government. It tells the government what it may do, and it also tells the government what it may *not* do. The government may *not* restrict your speech. The government may *not* tell you how to pray. The government may *not* do a lot of things. Government is a lot better at taking things away than it is at giving, but most of all, the government does not empower you. You empower the government. Ours is a government of the people. You are *not* people who belong to the government.

"Tomorrow you will not be electing masters, you will be choosing employees, servants of your will, guardians of your rights. We do not tell you what to do. You tell us what to do.

"It is not my job to take your money and give it back. It is my job to take what money I must have to protect and serve you—and to do that job as efficiently as possible. Government service may be an important duty, and a great responsibility, but it is not supposed to be a blessing for those who serve. It is your government servants who are supposed to sacrifice for you, not you who sacrifice for them.

"Last Friday, three good men and two good women lost their lives

in the service of our country. They were there to protect my daughter, Katie. But there were other children there, too, and in protecting one child, you protect all children. People like that do not ask for much more than your respect. They deserve that. They deserve it because they do things that we cannot easily do for ourselves. That's why we hire them. They sign on because they know that service is important, because they care about us, because they *are* us. You and I know that not all government employees are like that. That's not their fault. That's *your* fault. If you do not demand the best, you will not get the best. If you do not give the right measure of power to the right kind of people, then the wrong people will take more power than they need and they will use it the way they want, not the way you want.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that's why your duty tomorrow to elect the right people to serve you is so important. Many of you operate your own businesses and you hire people to work for you. Most of you own your own homes, and sometimes you hire plumbers, electricians, carpenters to do work for you. You try to hire the right people for the work because you pay for that work, and you want it done right. When your child is sick, you try to pick the best physician—and you pay attention to what that doctor does and how well he or she does it. Why? Because there is nothing more important to you than the life of your child.

"America is also your child. America is a country forever young. America needs the right people to look after her. It is *your* job to pick the right people, regardless of party, or race, or gender, or anything other than talent and integrity. I can't and I won't tell you which candidate merits your vote. God gave you a free will. The Constitution is there to protect your right to exercise that will. If you fail to exercise your will intelligently, then you have betrayed yourselves, and neither I nor anyone else can fix that for you.

"Thank you for coming to see me on my first visit to Colorado Springs. Tomorrow is your day. Please use it to hire the right people."

"IN A SERIES OF speeches clearly designed to reach conservative voters, President Ryan is stumping the country on the eve of the House elections, but even as federal officials investigate the vicious terrorist attack on his own daughter, the President flatly *rejected* the idea of improved gun-control laws. We have this report from NBC correspondent Hank Roberts, traveling with the presidential party today." Tom Donner continued looking into the camera until the red light went off.

"I thought he said some pretty good things today," Plumber observed while the tape ran.

"Invoking *I Love Lucy* must have come from Callie Weston on a serious PMS day," Donner observed, flipping through his copy. "Funny, she used to do great speeches for Bob Fowler."

"Did you *read* the speech?"

"John, come on, we don't have to read what he says. We *know* what he's going to say."

"Ten seconds," the director called over their earpieces.

"Nice copy for later, by the way, John." The face broke into the smile at "three."

"A huge federal task force is now investigating Friday's attack on the President's daughter. We have this report from Karen Stabler in Washington."

"I thought you'd like it, Tom," Plumber replied, when the light went dark again. So much the better, he thought. His conscience was clear now.

THE VC-25 LIFTED off on time, and headed north to avoid some adverse weather over northern New Mexico. Arnie van Damm was topside in the communications area. There were enough important-looking boxes to run half the world here, or so it seemed, and hidden in the skin of the aircraft was a satellite dish whose expensive aiming system could track almost anything. At the chief of staff's direction, it was now getting the NBC feed off a Hughes bird.

"WE HAVE THIS closing comment from special correspondent John Plumber." Donner turned graciously. "John."

"Thank you, Tom. The profession of journalism is one I entered many years ago, because I was inspired in my youth. I remember my crystal radio set—those of you old enough might recall how you had to ground them to a pipe," he explained, with a smile. "I remember listening to Ed Murrow in London during the blitz, to Eric Sevareid from the jungles of Burma, to all the founding fathers—giants, really—of our profession. I grew up with pictures in my mind painted by the words of men whom all America could trust to tell the truth to the best of their ability. I decided that finding the truth and communicating it to people was as noble a calling as any to which a man—or woman—could aspire.

"We're not always perfect in this profession. No one is," Plumber went on.

To his right, Donner was looking at the TelePrompTer in puzzlement. This *wasn't* what was rolling in front of the camera lens,

and he realized that, though Plumber had printed pages in front of him, he was giving a *memorized* speech. Imagine that. Just like the old days, apparently.

"I would like to say that I am proud to be in this profession. And I was, once.

"I was on the microphone when Neil Armstrong stepped down on the moon, and on sadder occasions, like the funeral of Jack Kennedy. But to be a professional does not mean merely being there. It means that you have to profess something, to believe in something, to stand *for* something.

"Some weeks ago, we interviewed President Ryan twice in one day. The first interview in the morning was taped, and the second one was done live. The questions were a little different. There's a reason for that. Between the first interview and the second, we were called over to see someone. I will not say who that was right now. I will later. That person gave us information. It was sensitive information aimed at hurting the President, and it looked like a good story at the time. It wasn't, but we didn't know that then. At the time, it seemed as though we had asked the wrong questions. We wanted to ask better ones.

"And so we lied. We lied to the President's chief of staff, Arnold van Damm. We told him that the tape had been damaged somehow. In doing that, we also lied to the President. But worst of all, we lied to you. I have the tapes in my possession. They are not damaged in any way.

"No law was broken. The First Amendment allows us to do almost anything we want, and that's all right, because you people out there are the final judge of what we do and who we are. But one thing we may not do is to break faith with you.

"I have no brief for President Ryan. Speaking personally, I disagree with him on many policy issues. If he should run for reelection, I will probably vote for someone else. But I was part of that lie, and I cannot live with it. Whatever his faults, John Patrick Ryan is an honorable man, and I am not supposed to allow my personal animus for or against anyone or anything to affect my work.

"In this case, I did. I was wrong. I owe an apology to the President, and I owe an apology to you. This might well be the end of my career as a broadcast journalist. If so, I want to leave it as I entered it, telling the truth as best I can.

"Good night, from NBC News." Plumber took a very deep breath as he stared at the camera.

"What the hell was *that* all about?"

Plumber stood before he answered. "If you have to ask that question, Tom—"

The phone on his desk rang—actually, it had a blinking light.

Plumber decided not to answer it, and instead walked to his dressing room. Tom Donner would have to figure it out all by himself.

TWO THOUSAND MILES away, over Rocky Mountain National Park, Arnold van Damm stopped the machine, ejected the tape, and carried it down the circular stairs to the President's compartment in the nose. He saw Ryan going over his next and final speech of the day.

"Jack, I think you will want to see this," the chief of staff told him, with a broad grin.

THERE HAS TO be a first one of everything. This time it happened in Chicago. She'd seen her physician on Saturday afternoon and been told the same as everyone else. Flu. Aspirin. Liquids. Bed rest. But looking in the mirror, she saw some discoloration on her fair skin, and that frightened her even more than the other symptoms she'd had to that point. She called her doctor, but she got only an answering machine, and those blotches could not wait, and so she got in her car and drove to the University of Chicago Medical Center, one of America's finest. She waited in the emergency room for about forty minutes, and when her name was called, she stood and walked toward the desk, but she didn't make it, instead falling to the tile floor in sight of the administrative people. That caused some instant reactions, and a minute later, two orderlies had her on a gurney and were wheeling her back to the treatment area, her paperwork carried behind by one of the admissions people.

The first physician to see her was a young resident most of the way through his first year of post-graduate study in internal medicine, doing his ER rotation and liking it.

"What's the problem?" he asked, as the nursing staff went to work, checking pulse, blood pressure, and respiration.

"Here," the woman from admissions said, handing over the paper forms. The physician scanned them.

"Flu symptoms, looks like, but what's this?"

"Heart rate is one twenty, BP is—wait a minute." The nurse ran it again. "Blood pressure is ninety over fifty?" She looked much too normal for that.

The doctor was unbuttoning the woman's blouse. And there it was. The clarity of the moment made passages from his textbooks leap into his mind. The young resident held up his hands.

"Everybody, stop what you're doing. We may have a major problem here. I want everybody regloved, everybody masked, right now."

“Temp is one-oh-four-point-four,” another nurse said, stepping back from the patient.

“This isn’t flu. We have a major internal bleed, and those are petechiae.” The resident got a mask and changed gloves as he spoke. “Get Dr. Quinn over here.”

A nurse trotted out, while the resident looked again at the admission papers. Might be vomiting blood, darkened stool. Depressed blood pressure, high fever, and subcutaneous bleeding. But this was Chicago, his mind protested. He got a needle.

“Everybody stay clear, okay, nobody get close to my hands and arms,” he said, slipping the needle into the vein, then drawing four 5cc tubes.

“What gives?” Dr. Joe Quinn asked. The resident recited the symptoms, and posed his own question as he moved the blood tubes onto a table.

“What do you think, Joe?”

“If we were somewhere else . . .”

“Yeah. Hemorrhagic fever, if that’s possible.”

“Anybody ask her where she’s been?” Quinn asked.

“No, Doctor,” the admissions clerk replied.

“Cold packs,” the head nurse said, handing over an armload of them. These went under the armpits, under the neck, and elsewhere to bleed off the body’s potentially lethal heat.

“Dilantin?” Quinn wondered.

“She’s not convulsing yet. Hell.” The chief resident took out his surgical scissors and cut off the patient’s bra. There were more petechiae forming on her torso. “We have a very sick lady here. Nurse, call Dr. Klein in infectious disease. He’ll be at home now. Tell him we need him here at once. We have to get her temp down, wake her up, and find out where the hell she’s been.”

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INDEX CASE

MARK KLEIN WAS A FULL professor at the medical school, and therefore a man accustomed to regular working hours. Getting called in at almost nine in the evening wasn't the usual thing for him, but he was a physician, and when called, he went. It was a twenty-minute drive on this Monday night to his reserved parking space. He walked through the security staff with a nod, changed into scrubs, came into the emergency room from the back, and asked the charge nurse where Quinn was.

"Isolation Two, Doctor."

He was there in twenty seconds, and stopped cold when he saw the warning signs posted on the door. Okay, he thought, donning a mask and gloves, then walking in.

"Hi, Joe."

"I don't want to make this call without you, Professor," Quinn said quietly, handing the chart over.

Klein scanned it, then his brain stopped cold, and he started from the beginning, looking up to compare the patient with the data. Female Caucasian, yes, age forty-one, about right, divorced, that was her business, apartment about two miles away, fine, temperature on admission 104.4, pretty damn high, BP, that was awfully low. Petechiae?

"Let me take a look here," Klein said. The patient was coming around. The head was moving a little, and she was making some noise. "What's her temp now?"

"One-oh-two-two, coming down nicely," the admitting resident replied, as Klein pulled the green sheet back. The patient was nude now, and the marks could hardly have been more plain on her otherwise very fair skin. Klein looked at the other doctors.

"Where's she been?"

"We don't know," Quinn admitted. "We looked through her purse. It seems she's an executive with Sears, office over in the tower."

"Have you examined her?"

"Yes, Doctor," Quinn and the younger resident said together.

"Animal bites?" Klein asked.

"None. No evidence of needles, nothing unusual at all. She's clean."

"I'm calling it possible hemorrhagic fever, method of transmission unknown for now. I want her upstairs, total isolation, full precautions. I want this room scrubbed—everything she touched."

"I thought these viruses only passed—"

"Nobody knows, Doctor, and things I can't explain scare me. I've been to Africa. I've seen Lassa and Q fever. Haven't seen Ebola. But what she has looks a hell of a lot like one of those," Klein said, speaking those awful names for the first time.

"But how—"

"When you don't know, it means you don't know," Professor Klein said to the resident. "For infectious diseases, if you do not know the means of transmission, you assume the worst. The worst case is aerosol, and that's how this patient will be handled. Let's get her moved up to my unit. Everybody who's been in contact with her, I want you to scrub down. Like AIDS or hepatitis. Full precautions," he emphasized again. "Where's the blood you drew?"

"Right there." The admitting physician pointed to a red plastic container.

"What's next?" Quinn asked.

"We get a sample off to Atlanta, but I think I'm going to take a look myself." Klein had a superb laboratory in which he worked every day, mainly on AIDS, which was his passion.

"Can I come with you?" Quinn asked. "I go off duty in a few minutes anyway." Monday was usually a quiet day for emergency rooms. Their hectic time was generally weekends.

"Sure."

• • •

"I KNEW HOLTZMAN would come through for me," Arnie said. He was having a drink to celebrate, as the 747 began its descent into Sacramento.

"What?" the President asked.

"Bob's a tough son of a bitch, but he's an honest son of a bitch. That also means that he will honestly burn you at the stake if he thinks you have it coming. Always remember that," the chief of staff advised.

"Donner and Plumber lied," Jack said aloud. "Damn."

"Everybody lies, Jack. Even you. It's a question of context. Some lies are designed to protect the truth. Some lies are designed to conceal it. Some are designed to deny it. And some lies happen because nobody gives a damn."

"And what happened here?"

"A combination, Mr. President. Ed Kealty wanted 'em to ambush you for him, and he suckered them. But I got that treacherous bastard for you. I'll bet that tomorrow there will be a front-page article in the Post exposing Kealty as the guy who suborned two very senior reporters, and the press will turn on him like a pack of wolves." The reporters riding in the back of the plane were already buzzing about it. Arnie had seen to it that the NBC news tape had run on the cabin video system.

"Because he's the one who made them look bad . . ."

"You got it, boss," van Damm confirmed, tossing off the remainder of his drink. He couldn't add that it might not have happened without the attack on Katie Ryan. Even reporters felt sympathy on occasion, which might have been decisive in Plumber's change of heart on the matter. But he was the one who'd made the carefully measured leaks to Bob Holtzman. He decided that he'd have a Secret Service agent find him a good cigar once they got on the ground. He felt like having one right now.

ADLER'S BODY CLOCK was totally confused now. He found that catching cat-naps helped, and it also helped that the message he was delivering was a simple and favorable one. The car stopped. A minor official opened the door for him and bowed curtly. Adler stifled a yawn as he walked into the ministry building.

"So good to see you again," the PRC Foreign Minister said, through his interpreter. Zhang Han San was there again, too, and made his own greeting.

"Your gracious agreement to allow direct flights certainly makes the process easier for me. Thank you for that," SecState replied, taking his seat.

"Just so you understand that these are exceptional circumstances," the Foreign Minister observed.

"Of course."

"What news do you bring us from our wayward cousins?"

"They are entirely willing to match your reductions in activity, with an eye toward reducing tension."

"And their insulting accusations?"

"Minister, that issue never arose. I believe that they are as interested as you in returning to peaceful circumstances."

"How good of them," Zhang commented. "They initiate hostilities, shoot down two of our aircraft, damage one of their own airliners, kill over a hundred people, whether by deliberate act or by incompetence, and then they say that they will match *us* in reducing provocative acts. I hope your government appreciates the forbearance we are showing

here."

"Mr. Minister, peace serves everyone's best interests, does it not? America appreciates the actions of both parties in these informal proceedings. The People's Republic has indeed been gracious in more than one way, and the government in Taiwan is willing to match your actions. What more is required than that?"

"Very little," the Foreign Minister replied. "Merely compensation for the deaths of our four aviators. Each of them left a family behind."

"Their fighters did shoot first," Zhang pointed out.

"That may be true, but the question of the airliner is still undetermined."

"Certainly, *we* had nothing to do that that." This came from the Foreign Minister.

There were few things more boring than negotiations between countries, but there was actually a reason for that. Sudden or surprise moves could force a country into making impromptu decisions. Unexpected pressure caused anger, and anger had no place in high-level discussions and decisions. Therefore, important talks were almost never decisive, but were, rather, evolutionary in nature, which gave each side time to think through its position, and that of the other side, carefully, so to arrive at a final communique with which both sides could be relatively content. Thus the demand for compensation was a violation of the rules. More properly done, this would have been said at the first session, and Adler would have taken it to Taipei and probably presented it as his own suggestion after the Republic of China government had agreed to cooperate in the reduction of tension. But they had already done that, and now the PRC wanted him to take back the request for compensation instead of a formula for local detente. That was an insult to the Taiwanese government, and also a measured insult to the American government for having been used as a stalking horse for another country.

This was all the more true since Adler and the ROC knew who'd killed the airliner, and who had therefore shown contempt for human life—for which the PRC now demanded compensation! And now Adler wondered again how much of what he knew of the incident was known to the PRC. If they knew a lot, then this was definitely a game whose rules had yet to be decoded.

"I think it would be more useful if both sides were to cover their individual losses and needs," Secretary Adler suggested.

"I regret that we cannot accept that. It is a matter of principle, you see. He who commits the improper act must make amends."

"But what if—I do not have any evidence to suggest this, but what if it is determined that the PRC inadvertently damaged the airliner? In such a case your request for compensation might appear unjust."

"That is not possible. We have interviewed our surviving pilots and their reports are unequivocal." Again it was Zhang.

"What precisely do you request?" Adler asked.

"Two hundred thousand dollars for each of the four aviators lost. The money will go to their families, of course," Zhang promised.

"I can present this request to—"

"Excuse me. It is not a request. It is a requirement," the Foreign Minister told Adler.

"I see. I can present your position to them, but I must urge you not to make this a condition of your promise to reduce tension."

"That *is* our position." The Foreign Minister's eyes were quite serene.

"... AND GOD BLESS America," Ryan concluded. The crowd stood and cheered. The band struck up—there had to be a band everywhere he went, Jack supposed—and he made his way off the dais behind a wall of nervous Secret Service agents. Well, the President thought, no gunfire out of the blinding lights this time, either. He stifled another yawn. He'd been on the move for over twelve hours. Four speeches didn't seem to be all that much physical work, but Ryan was learning just how exhausting public speaking could be. You had the shakes every time before getting up there, and though you got over it in a few minutes, the accumulated stress did take its toll. The dinner hadn't helped much. The food had been bland, so carefully chosen to offend no one that it wasn't worth anyone's attention. But it had given him heartburn anyway.

"Okay," Arnie told him, as the presidential party assembled to head out the back door. "For a guy who was ready to chuck it yesterday, you did awfully well."

"Mr. President!" a reporter called.

"Talk to him," Arnie whispered.

"Yes?" Jack said, walking over, to the displeasure of his security force.

"Do you know about what John Plumber said this evening on NBC?" The reporter was ABC, and unlikely to pass on the chance to slam a competing network.

"Yes, I've heard about it," the President replied soberly.

"Do you have any comment?"

"Obviously, I do not like learning about all this, but as far as Mr. Plumber is concerned, that's as gracious an act of moral courage as I've seen in quite a while. He's okay in my book."

"Do you know who it was who—"

"Please, let Mr. Plumber handle that. It's his story, and he knows

how to tell it. Now if you will excuse me, I have a plane to catch."

"Thank you, Mr. President," the ABC reporter said to Ryan's back.

"Just right," Arnie said, with a smile. "We've had a long day, but it's been a good day."

Ryan let out a long breath. "You say so."

"OH, MY GOD," Professor Klein whispered. There it was on the display monitor. The Shepherd's Crook, right out of a medical text. How the hell had it come to Chicago?

"That's Ebola," Dr. Quinn said, adding, "That's not possible."

"How thorough was your physical examination?" the senior man asked again.

"Could have been better, but—no bite marks, no needle marks. Mark, it's *Chicago*. I had *frost* on my windshield the other day."

Professor Klein pressed his hands together, and pushed his gloved fingers up against his nose. Then he stopped the gesture when he realized that he was still wearing a surgical mask. "Keys in her purse?"

"Yes, sir."

"First, we have cops around the ER. Get one, tell him we need a police escort to go to her apartment and allow us to look around. Tell him this woman's life is in danger. Maybe she's got a pet, a tropical plant, something. We have the name of her physician. Get him up, get him in here. We need to find out what he knows about her."

"Treatment?"

"We cool her down, we keep her hydrated, we medicate for pain, but there isn't anything that really works on this. Rousseau in Paris has tried interferon and a few other things, but no luck so far." He frowned at the display again. "How'd she get it? How the hell did she contract this little bastard?"

"CDC?"

"You get the cop up here. I'll get a fax off to Gus Lorenz." Klein checked his watch. Damn.

THE PREDATOR DRONES were back in Saudi, having never been discovered. It was felt that having them circle over a stationary position, like a divisional encampment, was a little too dangerous, however, and now the overhead work was being done by satellites, whose photos downloaded to the National Reconnaissance Office.

"Check this out," one of the night crew said to the guy at the next workstation. "What are these?"

The tanks of the UIR "Immortals" division were grouped in what was essentially a large parking lot, all evenly spaced in long, regular lines so that they could be counted—a stolen tank with a full basic load of shells was a dangerous thing to have on the loose, and all armies took security of the tank laagers seriously. It also made things more convenient for the maintenance personnel to have them all together. Now they were all back, and men were swarming over the tanks and other fighting vehicles, doing the normal maintenance that followed a major exercise. In front of every tank in the first row were two dark lines, each about a meter across, and ten meters long. The man on the screen was ex—Air Force, and more expert on airplanes than land-combat vehicles.

His neighbor only needed one look. "Tracks."

"What?"

"They're rotating the tires, like. Tracks wear out, and you put new ones on. The old ones go into the shop to be worked on, replacing pads and stuff," the former soldier explained. "It's no big deal."

Closer examination showed how it was done. The new tracks were laid in front of the old ones. The old ones were then disconnected, and attached to the new, and the tank, its motor running, simply drove forward, the sprocket wheel pulling the new track in place over the road wheels. It required several men and was hot, heavy work, but it could be done by a well-trained tank crew in about an hour under ideal conditions, which, the ex-soldier explained, these were. Essentially, the tank drove onto the new tracks.

"I never knew how they did that."

"Beats having to jack the sumbitch off the ground."

"What's a track good for?"

"On one of these, cross-country in a desert? Oh, call it a thousand miles, maybe a little less."

SURE ENOUGH, THE two couches in Air Force One's forward cabin folded out to make beds. After dismissing his staff, Ryan hung up his clothes and lay down. Clean sheets and everything, and he was weary enough that he didn't mind being on an airplane. Flight time to Washington was four and a half hours, and then he'd be able to sleep some more in his own bed. Unlike normal red-eye travelers, he might even be able to do some useful work the next day.

In the big cabin, aft, the reporters were doing the same, having decided to leave the issue of Plumber's astounding revelation to the next day. They had no choice in the matter; a story of this magnitude was handled at least at the assistant managing editor level. Many of the print journalists were dreaming about the editorials that would

appear in the papers. The TV reporters were trying not to cringe at what this would mean to their credibility.

In between were the President's staff members. They were all smiles, or nearly so.

"Well, I finally saw his temper," Arnie told Callic Weston. "Big-time."

"And I bet he saw yours, too."

"And mine won." Arnie sipped at his drink. "You know, the way things are going, I think we have a pretty good President here."

"He hates it." Weston had one of her own.

Arnie van Damm didn't care: "Fabulous speeches, Callie."

"There's such an engaging way about how he delivers them," she thought. "Every time, he starts off tight, embarrassed, and then the teacher in him takes over, and he really gets into it. He doesn't even know it, either."

"Honesty. It really does come out, doesn't it?" Arnie paused. "There's going to be a memorial service for the dead agents."

"I'm already thinking about it," Weston assured him. "What are you going to do about Kealty?"

"I'm thinking about *that*. We're going to sink that bastard once and for all."

BADRAYN WAS BACK on his computer, checking the proper Internet sites. Still nothing. In another day he might start worrying, though it wasn't really his problem if nothing happened, was it? Everything he'd done had gone perfectly.

PATIENT ZERO OPENED her eyes, which got everyone's attention. Her temperature was down to 101.6, entirely due to the cold packs that now surrounded her body like a fish in the market. The combination of pain and exhaustion was plain on her face. In that way, she looked like a patient with advanced AIDS, a disease with which the physician was all too familiar.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Klein," the professor told her from behind his mask. "You had us a little worried there for a minute, but things are under control now."

"Hurts," she said.

"I know, and we're going to help you with that, but I need to ask you a few questions. Can you help me with a few things?" Klein asked.

"Okay."

"Have you been doing any traveling lately?"

"What do you mean?" Every word she spoke drew down on her energy reserves.

"Have you been out of the country?"

"No. Flew to Kansas City ... ten days ago, that's all. Day trip," she added.

"Okay." It wasn't. "Have you had any contact with someone who's been out of the country?"

"No." She tried to shake her head. It moved maybe a quarter inch.

"Forgive me, but I have to ask this. Do you have any ongoing sexual relationships at the moment?"

That question shook her. "AIDS?" she gasped, thinking that was the worst thing she might have.

Klein shook his head emphatically. "No, definitely not. Please don't worry about that."

"Divorced," the patient said. "Just a few months. No new . . . men in my life yet."

"Well, as pretty as you are, that'll have to change soon," Klein observed, trying to get a smile out of her. "What do you do at Sears?"

"Housewares, buyer. Just had ... big show ... McCormick Center . . . lots of paperwork, orders and things."

This was going nowhere. Klein tried a few more questions. They led nowhere. He turned and pointed to the nurse.

"Okay, we're going to do something about the pain now," the professor told her. He stepped away so as not to crowd the nurse when she started the morphine on the IV tree. "This will start working in a few seconds, okay? I'll be back soon."

Quinn was waiting out in the hall with a uniformed police officer, a checkerboard band around his cap.

"Doc, what's the story?" the cop asked.

"The patient has something very serious, possibly very contagious. I need to look over her apartment."

"That's not really legal, you know. You're supposed to go to a judge and get—"

"Officer, there's no time for that. We have her keys. We could just break in, but I want you there so that you can say we didn't do anything wrong." And besides, if she had a burglar alarm, it wouldn't do for them to be arrested. "There's no time to waste. This woman is very sick."

"Okay, my car is outside." The cop pointed and the doctors followed.

"Get the fax off to Atlanta?" Quinn asked. Klein shook his head.

"Let's look at her place first." He decided not to wear a coat. It was cold outside, and the temperature would be very inhospitable to the virus in the unlikely event that it had somehow gotten on his scrubs.

Reason told him that there was no real danger here. He'd never encountered Ebola clinically, but he knew as much about it as any man could. It was regrettably normal for people to show up with diseases whose presence they could not explain. Most of the time, careful investigation would reveal how it had been contracted, but not always. Even with AIDS, there was the handful of unexplained cases. But only a handful, and you didn't start with one of those as your Index Case. Professor Klein shivered when he got outside. The temperature was in the low thirties, with a north wind blowing down off Lake Michigan. But that wasn't the reason for his shaking.

PRICE OPENED THE door to the nose cabin. The lights were off except for a few faint indirect ones. The President was lying on his back and snoring loudly enough to be heard over the whining drone of the engines. She had to resist the temptation to tiptoe in and cover him with a blanket. Instead, she smiled and closed the door.

"Maybe there is such a thing as justice, Jeff," she observed to Agent Raman.

"The newsie thing, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Don't bet on it," the other agent said.

They looked around. Finally everyone was asleep, even the chief of staff. Topside, the flight crew was doing their job, along with the other USAF personnel, and it really was like a red-eye flight back to the East Coast, as Air Force One passed over central Illinois. The two agents moved back to their seating area. Three members of the Detail were playing cards, quietly. Others were reading or dozing.

An Air Force sergeant came down the circular steps, holding a folder.

"FLASH-traffic for the Boss," she announced.

"Is it that important? We get into Andrews in about ninety minutes."

"I just take 'em off the fax machine," the sergeant pointed out.

"Okay." Price took the message and headed aft. To where Ben Goodley was. It was his job to be around to tell the President what he needed to know about the important happenings in the world—or, in this case, to evaluate the importance of a message. Price shook the man's shoulder. The national intelligence officer opened one eye.

"Yeah?"

"Do we wake the Boss for this?"

The intelligence specialist scanned it and shook his head. "It can wait. Adler knows what he's doing, and there's a working group at State for this." He turned back into his seat without another word.

“DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING,” Klein told the policeman. “Best for you to stand right by the door, but if you want to follow us around, don’t touch a thing. Wait.” The physician reached into the plastic trash bag he’d brought along, and pulled out a surgical mask in a sterile container. “Put this on, okay?”

“Anything you say, Doc.”

Klein handed over the house key. The police officer opened the door. It turned out that there was an alarm system. The control panel was just inside the door, but not turned on. The two physicians put on their own masks and donned latex gloves. First, they turned on all the lights.

“What are we looking for?” Quinn asked.

Klein was already looking. No cat or dog had come to note their arrival. He saw no bird cages—part of him had hoped for a pet monkey, but somehow he knew that wasn’t in the cards. Ebola didn’t seem to like monkeys very much, anyway. It killed them with all the alacrity it applied to human victims. Plants, then, he thought. Wouldn’t it be odd if Ebola’s host was something other than an animal? That would be a first of sorts.

There were plants, but nothing exotic. They stood in the center of the living room, not touching anything with their gloved hands or even with their green-trousered legs, as they turned around slowly, looking.

“I don’t see anything,” Quinn reported.

“Neither do I. Kitchen.”

There were some more plants there, two that looked like herbs in small pots. Klein didn’t recognize their type and decided to lift them.

“Wait. Here,” Quinn said, opening a drawer and finding freezer bags. The plants went into those bags, which the younger physician sealed carefully. Klein opened the refrigerator. Nothing unusual there. The same was true of the freezer. He’d thought it possible that some exotic food product . . . but, no. Everything the patient ate was typically American.

The bedroom was a bedroom and nothing more. No plants there, they saw.

“Some article of clothing? Leather?” Quinn asked. “Anthrax can—”

“Ebola can’t. It’s too delicate. We know the organism we’re dealing with. It can’t survive in this environment. It just *can’t,”* the professor insisted. They didn’t know much about the little bastard, but one of the things they did at CDC was to establish the environmental parameters, how long the virus could survive in a whole series of conditions. Chicago at this time of year was as inhospitable to that

sort of virus as a blast furnace. Orlando, some place in the South, maybe. But Chicago? "We got nothing," he concluded in frustration.

"Maybe the plants?"

"You know how hard it is to get a plant through customs?"

"I've never tried."

"I have, tried to bring some wild orchids back from Venezuela once . . ." He looked around some more. "There's nothing here, Joe."

"Is her prognosis as bad as—"

"Yeah." A pair of gloved hands rubbed against the scrub pants. Inside the latex rubber, his hands were sweating now. "If we can't determine where it came from . . . if we can't explain it ..." He looked at his younger, taller colleague. "I have to get back. I want to take another look at that structure."

"HELLO," GUS LORENZ said. He checked his clock. What the hell?

"Gus?" the voice asked.

"Yes, who's this?"

"Mark Klein in Chicago."

"Something wrong?" Lorenz asked groggily. The reply opened his eyes all the way.

"I think—no, Gus, I *know* I have an Ebola case up here."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have the crook. I micrographed it myself. It's the Shepherd's Crook, and no mistake, Gus. I wish it were."

"Where's he been?"

"It's a she, and she hasn't been anywhere special." Klein summarized what he knew in less than a minute. "There is no immediately apparent explanation for this."

Lorenz could have objected that this was not possible, but the medical community is an intimate one at its higher levels; he knew Mark Klein was a full professor at one of the world's finest medical schools. "Just one case?"

"They all start with one, Gus," Klein reminded his friend. A thousand miles away, Lorenz swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor.

"Okay. I need a specimen."

"I have a courier on the way to O'Hare now. He'll catch the first flight down. I can e-mail you the micrographs right now."

"Give me about forty minutes to get in."

"Gus?"

"Yes?"

"Is there anything on the treatment side that I don't know? We have a very sick patient here," Klein said, hoping that for once maybe he

wasn't fully up to speed on something in his field.

" 'Fraid not, Mark. Nothing new that I know about."

"Damn. Okay, we'll do what we can here. Call me when you get there. I'm in my office."

Lorenz went into the bathroom and ran some water to splash in his face, proving to himself that this wasn't a dream. No, he thought. Nightmare.

THIS PRESIDENTIAL PERK was one even the press respected. Ryan walked down the steps first, saluted the USAF sergeant at the bottom, and walked the fifty yards to the helicopter. Inside, he promptly buckled his belt and went back to sleep. Fifteen minutes later he was roused from his seat again, walked down another set of stairs, saluted a Marine this time, and headed into the White House. Ten minutes after that, he was in a sleeping place that didn't move.

"Good trip?" Cathy asked, one eye partly open.

"Long one," her husband reported, falling back to sleep.

THE FIRST FLIGHT from Chicago to Atlanta left the gate at 6:15 A.M., Central Time. Before then, Lorenz was in his office, on his computer terminal, dialed into the Internet and on the phone at the same time.

"I'm downloading the image now."

As the older man watched, the micrograph grew from top to bottom, one line at a time, faster than a fax would come out of a machine, and far more detailed.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Gus," Klein said, no hope in his voice at all.

"I think you know better, Mark." He paused as the image finished forming. "That's our friend."

"Where's he been lately?"

"Well, we had a couple of cases in Zaire, and two more reported in Sudan. That's it, as far as I know. Your patient, has she been—"

"No. There aren't any risk factors that I have been able to identify so far. Given the incubation period, she must almost certainly have contracted it here in Chicago. And that's not possible, is it?"

"Sex?" Lorenz asked. He could almost hear the shake of the head over the phone.

"I asked. She says she's not getting any of that. Any reports anyplace else?"

"None, none anywhere. Mark, are you sure of what you've told me?" As insulting as the question was, it had to be asked.

"I wish I weren't. The micrograph I sent is the third one, I wanted

good isolation for it. Her blood is full of it, Gus. Wait a minute." He heard a muffled conversation. "She just came around again. Says she had a tooth extracted a week or so ago. We have the name of her dentist. We'll run that one down. That's all we have here."

"All right, let me get set up for your sample. It's only one case. Let's not get too excited."

RAMAN GOT HOME shortly before dawn. It was just as well that the streets were almost entirely devoid of traffic at this time of day. He was in no condition for safe driving. Arriving home, he followed the usual routine. On his answering machine was another wrong number, the voice of Mr. Alahad.

THE PAIN WAS so severe that it woke him up from the sleep of exhaustion. Just walking the twenty feet around the bed and into the bathroom seemed like a marathon's effort, but he managed to stagger that far. The cramping was terrible, which amazed him, because he hadn't eaten all that much in the past couple of days despite his wife's insistence on chicken soup and toast, but with all the urgency he could suffer, he dropped his shorts and sat down just in time. Simultaneously, his upper GI seemed to explode as well, and the former golf pro doubled over, vomiting on the tiles. There was an instant's embarrassment at having done so unmanly a thing. Then he saw what was there at his feet.

"Honey?" he called weakly. "Help . . ."

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HEMORRHAGE

SIX HOURS OF SLEEP, maybe a little more, was better than nothing. This morning, Cathy got up first, and the father of the First Family came into the breakfast room unshaven, following the smell of coffee.

"When you feel this rotten, you should at least have a hangover to blame it on," the President announced. His morning papers were in the usual place. A Post-it note was affixed to the front page of the *Washington Post*, just over an article bylined to Bob Holtzman and John Plumber. Now, *there* was something to start off his day, Jack told himself.

"That's really sleazy," Sally Ryan said. She'd already heard TV coverage of the controversy. "What finks." She would have said "dicks," a newly favored term among the young ladies at St. Mary's School, but Dad wasn't ready to acknowledge the fact that his Sally was talking like a grown-up.

"Uh-huh," her father replied. The story gave far more detail than was possible in a couple of minutes of air time. And it named Ed Kealty, who had, it seemed—unsurprisingly, but still against the law—a CIA source who had leaked information which, the story explained, had not been entirely truthful and, even worse, had been a deliberate political attack on the President, using the media as an attack dog. Jack snorted. As though that were new. The *Post*'s emphasis was on the gross violation of journalistic integrity. Plumber's recantation of his actions was very sincere, it said. The article said that senior executives at NBC's news division had declined comment, pending their own inquiry. It also said that the *Post* had custody of the tapes, which were entirely undamaged.

The *Washington Times*, he saw, was just as irate but not in quite the same way. There would be a colossal internecine battle in the Washington press corps over this, something, the *Times* editorial observed, that the politicians would clearly watch with amusement.

Well, Ryan told himself, *that ought to keep them off* my *back for a while*.

Next, he opened the manila folder with the secret-tape borders on

it. This document, he saw, was pretty old.

"Bastards," POTUS whispered.

"They really did it to themselves this time," Cathy said, reading her own paper.

"No," SWORDSMAN replied. "China."

IT WASN'T AN epidemic yet, because nobody knew about it. Doctors were already reacting in surprise to telephone calls. Excited, if not frantic, calls to answering services had already awakened over twenty of them across the country. Bloody vomit and diarrhea were reported in every case, but only one to a customer, and there were various medical problems that could explain that. Bleeding ulcers, for example, and many of the calls came from businesspeople for whom stress came with the tie and white shirt. Most were told to drive to the nearest hospital's emergency room, and in nearly all cases the doctor got dressed to meet his or her patient there, or to have a trusted associate do so. Some were instructed to be at the office first thing, usually between eight and nine in the morning, to be the first patient of the day and thus not interfere with the daily schedule.

GUS LORENZ HADN'T felt like being in his office alone, and had called in a few senior staff members to join him at his computer. They noted that his pipe was lit when they came in. One of them might have objected—it was contrary to federal regulations—but she stopped short, looking at the image on the screen.

"Where's this one from?" the epidemiologist asked.

"Chicago."

"*Our* Chicago?"

• • •

PIERRE ALEXANDRE ARRIVED at his office on the eleventh floor of the Ross Building just before eight. His morning routine began with checking his fax machine. Attending physicians with AIDS cases regularly sent him patient information that way. It allowed him to monitor a large number of patients, both to advise treatment options and to increase his own knowledge base. There was only one fax this morning, and it was relatively good news. Merck had just fielded a new drug which the FDA was fast-tracking into clinical trials, and a friend of his at Penn State was reporting some interesting results.

That's when his phone rang.

"Dr. Alexandre."

"This is the ER, sir. Could you come down here? I got a patient here, Caucasian male, thirty-seven. High fever, internal bleeding. I don't know what this is—I mean," the resident said, "I mean, I know what it looks like, but "

"Give me five minutes."

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged.

The internist/virologist/molecular biologist donned his starched lab coat, buttoned it, and headed down toward the emergency room, which was in a separate building on the sprawling Hopkins campus. Even in the military, he'd dressed the same way. The Doctor Look, he called it. Stethoscope in the right-side pocket. Name embroidered onto the left side. A calm expression on his face as he walked into the largely idle ER. Nighttime was the busy period here. There she was, cute as a button . . . putting on a surgical mask, he saw. What could be all that wrong this early on a spring day?

"Good morning, Doctor," he said, in his most charming Creole accent. "What seems to be the problem?" She handed him the chart and started talking while he read.

"His wife brought him in. High fever, some disorientation, BP is low, probable internal bleed, bloody vomit and stool. And there are some marks on his face," she reported. "And I'm not sure enough to say."

"Okay, let's take a look." She sounded like a promising young doc, Alexandre thought pleasantly. She knew what she didn't know, and she'd called for consultation ... but why not one of the internal-medicine guys? the former colonel asked himself, taking another look at her face. He put on mask and gloves and walked past the isolation curtain.

"Good morning, I'm Dr. Alexandre," he said to the patient. The man's eyes were listless, but it was the marks on his cheeks that made Alexandre's breath stop. It was George Westphal's face, come back from more than a decade in Alex's past.

"How did he get here?"

"His personal physician told his wife to drive him in. He has privileges at Hopkins."

"What's he do? News photographer? Diplomat? Something to do with traveling?"

The resident shook her head. "He sells Winnebagos, RVs and like that, dealership over on Pulaski Highway."

Alexandre looked around the area. There were a medical student and two nurses, in addition to the resident who was running the case. All gloved, all masked. Good. She was smart, and now Alex knew why

she was scared.

"Blood?"

"Already taken, Doctor. Doing the cross-match now, and specimens for analysis in your lab."

The professor nodded. "Good. Admit him right now. My unit. I need a container for the tubes. Be careful with all the sharps." A nurse went off to get the things.

"Professor, this looks like—I mean, it can't be, but—"

"It can't be," he agreed. "But it does look that way. Those are petechiae, right out of the book. So we'll treat it like it is for the moment, okay?" The nurse returned with the proper containers. Alexandre took the extra blood specimens. "As soon as you send him upstairs, everybody strip, everybody scrub. There's not that much danger involved, as long as you take the proper precautions. Is his wife around?"

"Yes, Doctor, out in the waiting room."

"Have somebody bring her up to my office. I have to ask her some things. Questions?" There were none. "Then let's get moving."

Dr. Alexandre visually checked the plastic container for the blood and tucked it into the left-side pocket of his lab coat, after determining that it was properly sealed. The calm Doctor's Look was gone, as he walked to the elevator. Looking at the burnished steel of the automatic doors, he told himself that, no, this wasn't possible., Maybe something else. But what? Leukemia had some of the same symptoms, and as dreaded as that diagnosis was, it was preferable to what it looked like to him. The doors opened, and he headed off to his lab.

"Morning, Janet," he said, walking into the hot lab.

"Alex," replied Janet Clemenger, a Ph.D. molecular biologist.

He took the plastic box from his pocket. "I need this done in a hurry. Like, immediately."

"What is it?" She wasn't often told to stop everything she was doing, especially at the start of a working day.

"Looks like hemorrhagic fever. Treat it as level . . . four."

Her eyes went a little wide. "Here?" People were asking the same question all over America, but none of them knew it yet.

"They should be bringing the patient up now. I have to talk to his wife."

She took the container and set it gently on the worktable. "The usual antibody tests?"

"Yes, and please be careful with it, Janet."

"Always," she assured him. Like Alexandre, she worked a lot of AIDS experiments.

Alexandre next went to his office to call Dave James.

"How certain are you?" the dean asked two minutes later.

"Dave, it's just a heads-up for now, but—I've seen it before. Just like it was with George Westphal. I have Jan Clemenger working on it right now. Until further notice, I think we have to take this one seriously. If the lab results are what I expect, I get on the phone to Gus and we declare a for-real alert."

"Well, Ralph gets back from London day after tomorrow. It's your department for the moment, Alex. Keep me posted."

"Roger," the former soldier said. Then it was time to speak to the patient's wife.

In the emergency room, orderlies were scrubbing the floor where the bed had been, overseen by the ER charge nurse. Overhead they could hear the distinctively powerful sound of a Sikorsky helicopter. The First Lady was coming to work.

THE COURIER ARRIVED at CDC, carrying his "hatbox," and handed it over to one of Lorenz's lab technicians. From there everything was fast-tracked. The antibody tests were already set up on the lab benches, and under exquisitely precise handling precautions, a drop of blood was dipped into a small glass tube. The liquid in the tube changed color almost instantly.

"It's Ebola, Doctor," the technician reported. In another room a sample was being set up for the scanning electron microscope. Lorenz walked there, his legs feeling tired for so early in the morning. The instrument was already switched on. It was just a matter of getting things aimed properly before the images appeared on the TV display.

"Take your pick, Gus." This was a senior physician, not a lab tech. As the magnification was adjusted, the picture was instantly clear. This blood sample was alive with the tiny strands. And soon it would be alive with nothing else. "Where's this one from?"

"Chicago," Lorenz answered.

"Welcome to the New World," he told the screen as he worked the fine control to isolate one particular strand for full magnification. "You little son of a bitch."

Next came a closer examination to see if they could subtype it. That would take a while.

"AND SO HE has not traveled out of the country?" Alex was running down his list of stock questions.

"No, no he hasn't," she assured him. "Just to the big RV show. He goes to that every year."

"Ma'm, I have to ask a number of questions, and some of them may seem offensive. Please understand that I have to do this in order to help your husband." She nodded. Alexandre had a quiet way of getting past that problem. "Do you have any reason to suspect that your husband has been seeing other women?"

"No."

"Sorry, I had to ask that. Do you have any exotic pets?"

"Just two Chesapeake Bay retrievers," she replied, surprised at the question.

"Monkeys? Anything from out of the country?"

"No, nothing like that."

This isn't going anywhere. Alex couldn't think of another relevant question. They were supposed to say *yes* to the travel one. "Do you know anybody, family member, friend, whatever, who does a lot of traveling?"

"No—can I see him?"

"Yes, you can, but first we have to get him settled into his room and get some treatment going."

"Is he going to—I mean, he's never been sick at all, he runs and doesn't smoke and doesn't drink much and we've always been careful." And then she started losing control.

"I won't lie to you. Your husband appears to be a very sick man, but your family doctor sent you to the best hospital in the world. I just started here. I spent more than twenty years in the Army, all of that in the area of infectious diseases. So you are in the right place, and I am the right doc." You had to say things like that, empty words though they might be. The one thing you could never, ever, do was take hope away. The phone rang.

"Dr. Alexandre."

"Alex, it's Janet. Antibody test is positive for Ebola. I ran it twice," she told him. "I have the spare tube packaged to go to CDC, and the microscopy will be ready to go in about fifteen minutes."

"Very well. I'll be over for that." He hung up. "Here," he told the patient's wife. "Let me get you out to the waiting room and introduce you to the nurses. We have some very good ones on my unit."

This was not the fun part, even though infectious diseases was not a particularly fun field. In trying to give her hope, he'd probably given her too much. Now she'd listen to him, thinking that he spoke with God's voice, but right now God didn't have any answers, and next he had to explain to her that the nurses would be taking some of her blood for examination, too.

"WHAT GIVES, SCOTT?" Ryan asked across thirteen time zones.

"Well, they sure as hell tossed a wrench into it. Jack?"

"Yes?"

"This guy Zhang, I've met him twice now. He doesn't talk a hell of a lot, but he's a bigger fish than we thought. I think he's the one keeping an eye on the Foreign Minister. He's a player, Mr. President. Tell the Foleys to open a file on the guy and put a big flag on it."

"Will Taipei spring for compensation?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Would you?"

"My instinct would be to tell them where they could shove it, but I'm not supposed to lose my temper, remember?"

"They will listen to the demand, and then they will ask me where the United States of America stands. What do I tell them?"

"For the moment, we stand for renewed peace and stability."

"I can make that last an hour, maybe two hours. Then what?" SecState persisted.

"You know that area better than I do. What's the game, Scott?"

"I don't know. I thought I did, but I don't. First, I kinda hoped it was an accident. Then I thought they might be rattling their cage—Taiwan's, I mean. No, it's not that. They're pushing too hard and in the wrong way for that. Third option, they're doing all this to test you. If so, they're playing very rough—too rough. They don't know you well enough yet, Jack. It's too big a pot for the first hand of the night. Bottom line, I do not know what they're thinking. Without that, I can't tell you how to play it out."

"We know they were behind Japan—Zhang personally was behind that Yamata bastard and—"

"Yes, I know. And they must know that we know, and that's one more reason not to piss us off. There are a lot of chips on the table, Jack," Adler emphasized again. "And I do not see a reason for this."

"Tell Taiwan we're behind them?"

"Okay, if you do that, and it gets out, and the PRC ups the ante, we have thousands—hell, close to a hundred thousand citizens over here, and they're hostages. I won't go into the trade considerations, but that's a big chip in political-economic terms."

"But if we don't back Taiwan up, then they'll think they're on their own and cornered—"

"Yes, sir, and the same thing happens from the other direction. My best suggestion is to ride with it. I deliver the demand, Taipei says no, then I suggest that they suggest the issue is held in abeyance until the issue of the airliner is determined. For that, we call in the U.N. We, that is, the United States, call the question before the Security Council. That strings it out. Sooner or later, their friggin' navy's gotta run out of fuel. We have a carrier group in the neighborhood, and so nothing *can* happen, really."

Ryan frowned. “I won’t say I like it, but run with it. It’ll last a day or two anyway. My instinct is to back up Taiwan and tell the PRC to suck wind.”

“The world isn’t that simple, and you know it,” Adler’s voice told him.

“Ain’t it the truth. Run with what you said, Scott, and keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir.”

ALEX CHECKED HIS watch. Next to the electron microscope was Dr. Clemenger’s notebook. At 10:16, she lifted it, made a time notation, and described how both she and her fellow associate professor confirmed the presence of the Ebola virus. On the other side of the lab, a technician was running a test on blood drawn from the wife of Patient Zero. It was positive for Ebola antibodies. She had it, too, though she didn’t know it yet.

“They have any children?” Janet asked, when the news arrived.

“Two, both away in school.”

“Alex, unless you know something I don’t . . . I hope their insurance is paid up.” Clemenger didn’t quite have the status of an M.D. here, but at moments like this she didn’t mind. Physicians got to know the patients a lot better than the pure scientists did.

“What else can you tell me?”

“I need to map the genes out a little, but look here.” She tapped the screen. “See the way the protein loops are grouped, and this structure down here?” Janet was the lab’s top expert on how viruses were formed.

“Mayinga?” *Christ, that’s what got George* . . . And nobody knew how George had gotten it, and he didn’t know now how this patient . . .

“Too early to be sure. You know what I have to do to run that down, but . . .”

“It fits. No known risk factors for him, maybe not for her, either. Jesus, Janet, if this is airborne.”

“I know, Alex. You call Atlanta or me?”

“I’ll do it.”

“I’ll start picking the little bastard apart,” she promised.

It seemed a long walk from the lab back to his office. His secretary was in now, and noticed his mood.

“DR. LORENZ IS in a meeting now,” another secretary said. That usually put people off. Not this time:

"Break in, if you would, please. Tell him it's Pierre Alexandre at Johns Hopkins, and it's important."

"Yes, Doctor. Please hold." She pressed one button and then another, ringing the line in the conference room down the hall. "Dr. Lorenz, please, it's urgent."

"Yes, Marjorie?"

"I have Dr. Alexandre holding on three. He says it's important, sir."

"Thank you." Gus switched lines. "Talk fast, Alex, we have a developing situation here," he said in an unusually businesslike voice.

"I know. Ebola's made it to this side of the world," Alexandre announced.

"Have you been talking to Mark, too?"

"Mark? Mark who?" the professor asked.

"Wait, wait, back up, Alex. Why did you call here?"

"We have two patients on my unit, and they've both got it, Gus."

"In Baltimore?"

"Yes, now what—where else, Gus?"

"Mark Klein in Chicago has one, female, forty-one. I've already micrographed the blood sample." In two widely separated cities, two world-class experts did exactly the same thing. One pair of eyes looked at a wall in a small office. The other pair looked down a conference table at ten other physicians and scientists. The expressions were exactly the same. "Has either one been to Chicago or Kansas City?"

"Negative," the former colonel said. "When did Klein's case show up?"

"Last night, ten or so. Yours?"

"Just before eight. Husband has all the symptoms. Wife doesn't, but her blood's positive . . . oh, shit, Gus . . ."

"I have to call Detrick next."

"You do that. Keep an eye on the fax machine, Gus," Professor Alexandre advised. "And hope it's all a fucking mistake." But it wasn't, and both knew it now.

"Stay close to the phone. I may want your input."

"You bet." Alex thought about that as he hung up. He had a call to make, too.

"Dave, Alex."

"Well?" the dean asked.

"Husband and wife both positive. Wife is not yet symptomatic. Husband is showing all the classic signs."

"So what's the story, Alex?" the dean asked guardedly.

"Dave, the story is I caught Gus at a staff meeting. They were discussing an Ebola case in Chicago. Mark Klein called it in around midnight, I gather. No commonalties between that one and our Index

Case here. I, uh, think we have a potential epidemic on our hands. We need to alert our emergency people. There might be some very dangerous stuff coming in."

"Epidemic? But—"

"That's my call to make, Dave. CDC is talking to the Army. I know exactly what they're going to say up at Detrick. Six months ago it would have been me making that call, too." Alexandre's other line started ringing. His secretary got it in the outer office. A moment later, her head appeared in the doorway.

"Doctor, that's ER, they say they need you stat." Alex relayed that message to the dean.

"I'll meet you there, Alex," Dave James told him.

"AT THE NEXT call on your machine, you will be free to complete your mission," Mr. Alahad said. "The timing is yours to decide." He didn't have to add that it would be better for him if Raman erased all his messages. To do so would have appeared venal to one who was willing to sacrifice himself. "We will not meet again in this lifetime."

"I must go to my workplace." Raman hesitated. So the order had really come, after a fashion. The two men embraced, and the younger one took his leave.

"CATHY?" SHE LOOKED up to see Bernie Katz's head sticking in her office door.

"Yeah, Bernie?"

"Dave has called a department head meeting in his office at two. I'm leaving for New York to do that conference at Columbia, and Hal's operating this afternoon. Sit in for me?"

"Sure, I'm clear."

"Thanks, Cath." His head vanished again. SURGEON went back to her patient records.

ACTUALLY THE DEAN had told his secretary to call the meeting on his way out the door. David James was in the emergency room. Behind the mask he looked like any other physician.

This patient had nothing at all to do with the other two. Watching from ten feet away in a corner of the ER already set aside for the situation, they watched him vomit into a plastic container. There was ample evidence of blood.

It was the same young resident working this one, too. “No traveling to speak of. Says he was in New York for some stuff. Theater, auto show, regular tourist stuff. What about the first one?”

“Positive for Ebola virus,” Alex told her. That snapped her head around like an owl’s.

“Here?”

“Here. Don’t be too surprised, Doctor. You called me, remember?” He turned to Dean James and raised an eyebrow.

“All department heads in my office at two. I can’t go any faster, Alex. A third of them are operating or seeing patients right now.”

“Ross for this one?” the resident asked. She had a patient to deal with.

“Quick as you can.” Alexandre took the dean by the arm and walked him outside. There, dressed in greens, he lit a cigar, to the surprise of the security guards, who enforced a smoking ban out there.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“You know, there is something to be said for these things.” Alex took a few puffs. “I can tell you what they’re going to say up at Detrick, sure as hell.”

“Go on.”

“Two separate index cases, Dave, a thousand miles apart in distance, and eight hours apart in time. No connection of any kind. No commonalties at all. Think it through,” Pierre Alexandre said, taking another worried puff.

“Not enough data to support it,” James objected.

“I hope I’m wrong. They’re going to be scrambling down in Atlanta. Good people down there. The best. But they don’t look at this sort of the thing the way I do. I wore that green suit a long time. Well”—another puff—“we’re going to see what the best possible supportive care can do. We’re better than anyplace in Africa. So’s Chicago. So are all the other places that are going to phone in, I suppose.”

“Others?” As fine a physician as he was, James still wasn’t getting it.

“The first attempt at biological warfare was undertaken by Alexander the Great. He launched bodies of plague victims into a besieged city with catapults. I don’t know if it worked or not. He took the city anyway, slaughtered all the citizens, and moved on.”

He got it now, Alex could see. The dean was as pale as the new patient inside.

“JEFF?” RAMAN WAS in the local command post going over the coming schedule for POTUS. He had a mission to complete now, and it was time to start doing some planning. Andrea walked over to him.

“We have a trip to Pittsburgh on Friday. You want to hop up there with the advance team? There are a couple local problems that have cropped up at the hotel.”

“Okay. When do I leave?” Agent Raman asked.

“Flight leaves in ninety minutes.” She handed him a ticket. “You get back tomorrow night.”

How much the better, Raman thought, if he might even survive. Were he to structure all the security at one of these events, that might actually be possible. The idea of martyrdom didn’t turn his head all that much, but if survival were possible, then he would opt for that.

“Fair enough,” the assassin replied. He didn’t have to worry about packing. The agents on the Detail always had a bag in the car.

IT TOOK THREE satellite passes before NRO was willing to make its estimate of the situation. All six of the UIR heavy divisions which had participated in the war game were now in a full-maintenance stand-down. Some might say that such a thing was normal. A unit went into a heavy-maintenance cycle after a major training exercise, but six divisions—three heavy corps—at once was a bit much. The data was immediately forwarded to the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments. In the meantime, the Pentagon called the White House.

“Yes, Mr. Secretary,” Ryan said.

“The SNIE isn’t ready yet for the UIR, but we have received ... well, some disturbing information. I’ll let Admiral Jackson present it.”

The President listened, and didn’t need much in the way of analysis, though he wished the Special National Intelligence Estimates were on his desk to give him a better feel for the UIR’s political intentions. “Recommendations?” he asked, when Robby was done.

“I think it’s a good time to get the boats at Diego moving. It never hurts to exercise them. We can move them to within two steaming days of the Gulf without anybody noticing. Next, I recommend that we issue warning orders to XVIII Airborne Corps. That’s the 82nd, 101st, and 24th Mechanized.”

“Will it make noise?” Jack asked.

“No, sir. It’s treated as a practice alert. We do those all the time. All it really does is to get staff officers thinking.”

“Make it so. Keep it quiet.”

“This would be a good time to do a joint training exercise with friendly nations in the region,” J-3 suggested.

“I’ll see about that. Anything else?”

“No, Mr. President,” Bretano replied. “We’ll keep you informed.”

BY NOON, THE fax count at CDC Atlanta was over thirty, from ten different states. These were forwarded to Fort Detrick, Maryland, home of the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases—USAMRIID—the military counterpart to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. As chilling as the data was, it was just a little too chilling for snap judgment. A major staff meeting was called for just after lunch, while the commissioned officers and civilians tried to get their data organized. More senior officers from Walter Reed got in their staff cars for the ride up Interstate-70.

"DR. RYAN?"

"Yes?" Cathy looked up.

"The meeting in Dr. James's office has been moved up," her secretary said. "They want you over there right now."

"I guess I better head over, then." She stood and headed for the door. Roy Altman was standing there.

"Anything I need to know about?" SURGEON'S principal agent asked.

"Something's up. I don't know what it is."

"Where is the dean's office?" He'd never been there before. All of the staff meetings she'd attended recently were in Maumenee.

"That way." She pointed. "Other side of Monument Street in the admin building."

"SURGEON is moving, going north to Monument." The agents just appeared out of nowhere, it seemed. It might have seemed funny except for recent events. "If you don't mind, I'll stand in the room. I'll keep out of the way," Altman assured her.

Cathy nodded. There was no fighting it. He'd hate the dean's office for all the big windows there, she was sure. It was a ten-minute walk over, almost all of it undercover. She headed outdoors to cross the street, wanting a little fresh air. Entering the building, she saw a lot of her friends, either department chairmen or senior staffers standing in as she was doing. The director-level people were always traveling, one reason why she wasn't sure if she ever wanted to be that senior herself. Pierre Alexandre stormed in, wearing greens, carrying a folder, and looking positively grim as he almost bumped into her. A Secret Service agent prevented that.

"Glad you're here, Cathy," he said on the way past. "Them, too."

"Nice to be appreciated," Altman observed to a colleague, as the dean appeared at the door.

"Come in."

One look at the conference room convinced Altman to lower the shades with his own hands. The windows faced a street of anonymous brick houses. A few of the doctors looked on with annoyance, but they knew who he was and didn't object.

"Calling the meeting to order," Dave James said, before everyone was seated. "Alex has something important to tell us."

There was no preamble: "We have five Ebola cases in Ross right now. They all came in today."

Heads turned sharply. Cathy blinked at her seat at the end of the table.

"Students from someplace?" the surgery director asked. "Zaire?"

"One auto dealer and his wife, a boat salesman from Annapolis, three more people. Answering your question, no. No international travel at all. Four of the five are fully symptomatic. The auto dealer's wife shows antibodies, but no symptoms as yet. That's the good news. Our case wasn't the first. CDC has cases reported in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Dallas. That's as of an hour ago. Total reported cases is twenty, and that number doubled between ten and eleven. Probably still going up."

"Jesus Christ," the director of medicine whispered.

"You all know what I did before I got here. Right now I imagine they're having a staff meeting at Fort Detrick. The conclusion from that meeting will be that this is not an accidental outbreak. Somebody has initiated a biological-warfare campaign against our country."

Nobody objected to Alexandre's analysis, Cathy saw. She knew why. The other physicians in the room were so bright that sometimes she wondered if she belonged on the same faculty with them—she had never considered that most of them might harbor the same thoughts. All of them were world experts in their fields, at least four the very best there was. But all of them also spent time as she did, having lunch with a colleague in a different field to exchange information, because, like her, they were all truly fanatical about learning. They all wanted to know everything, and even though they knew that such a thing was impossible, even within one professional field, that didn't stop them from trying. In this case, the suddenly rigid faces concealed the same analytical process.

Ebola was an infectious disease, and such diseases started from a single place. There was always a first victim, called Patient Zero or the Index Case, and it spread from there. No disease just exploded in this way. CDC and USAMRIID, which had to make that conclusion official, would have the duty to assemble, organize, and present information in what was almost a legalistic structure to prove their case. For their medical institution, it was simpler, all the more so because Alex had

commanded one of the divisions at Fort Detrick. Moreover, since there was a plan for everything, Johns Hopkins was one of the institutions tapped to receive cases in the event something like this took place.

"Alex," the director of urology said, "the literature says that Ebola is only spread by large particles of liquid. How could it explode so fast, even at the local level?"

"There's a sub-strain called Mayinga. It's named for a nurse who picked it up and died. The method of her infection was never determined. A colleague of mine, George Westphal, died of the same thing in 1990. We never determined the means of transmission in his case, either. There is thought that this sub-strain may spread by aerosol. It's never been proven one way or the other," Alex explained. "Besides, there are ways to fortify a virus, as you know. You admit some cancer genes into the structure."

"And there's no treatment, nothing experimental even?" Urology asked.

"Rousseau is doing some interesting work at Pasteur, but so far he hasn't produced any positive results."

A physical reaction, ripped down the conference table from one physician to another. They were among the best in the world, and they knew it. They also knew now that it didn't matter against this enemy.

"How about a vaccine?" Medicine asked. "That shouldn't be too hard."

"USAMRIID has been playing with that for about ten years. The first issue is that there seems to be a specificity problem. What works for one sub-strain may not always work with another. Also, the quality-control issue is a killer. Studies I've seen predict a two-percent infection rate from the vaccine itself. Merck thinks they can do better, but trials take time to run."

"Ouch," Surgery commented with a wince. Giving one person out of fifty a disease with an eighty-percent mortality rate—twenty thousand people infected per million doses, of whom roughly sixteen thousand might die from it. Applied to the population of the United States, it could mean three *million* deaths from an attempt to safeguard the population. "Hobson's choice."

"But it's too early to determine the extent of the notional epidemic, and we do not have hard data on the ability of the disease to spread in existing environmental conditions," Urology thought. "So we really aren't sure what measures need to be taken yet."

"Correct." At least it was easy to explain things to these people.

"My people will see it first," Emergency said. "I have to get them warned. We can't risk losing our people unnecessarily."

"Who tells Jack?" Cathy wondered aloud. "He's got to know, and

he's got to know fast."

"Well, that's the job of USAMRIID and the Surgeon General."

"They're not ready to make the call yet. You just said that," Cathy replied. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes."

SURGEON turned to Roy Altman: "Get my helicopter up here stat."

49

REACTION TIME

COLONEL GOODMAN WAS surprised by the call. He was having a late lunch after a check-flight for a spare VH-60 just out of the maintenance shop for engine replacement. The one he used for SURGEON was on the ramp. The three-man crew walked out to it and spooled up the engines, not knowing why the schedule for the day had changed. Ten minutes after the call, he was airborne and heading northeast. Twenty minutes after that, he was circling the landing pad. Well, there was SURGEON, with SANDBOX by her side, and the Secret Service squad . . . and one other he didn't know, wearing a white coat. The colonel checked the wind and began his descent.

The faculty meeting had gone on until five minutes before. Decisions had to be made. Two complete medical floors would be cleared and tooled up for possible Ebola arrivals. The director of emergency medicine was even now assembling his staff for a lecture. Two of Alexandre's people were on the phone to Atlanta, getting updates on the total number of known cases, and announcing that Hopkins had activated its emergency plan for this contingency. It meant that Alex hadn't been able to go to his office and change clothes. Cathy was wearing her lab coat, too, but in her case it was over a normal dress. He'd been wearing greens—his third set of the day—for the meeting, and still was. Cathy told him not to worry about it. They had to wait for the rotor to stop before the Secret Service allowed their protectees to board the aircraft. Alex noted the presence of a backup chopper, circling a mile away, and a third circling closer in. It looked like a police bird, probably for security, he imagined.

Everyone was bundled aboard. Katie—he'd never met her before—got the jump seat behind the pilots, supposedly the safest place on the aircraft. Alexandre hadn't ridden in a Black Hawk in years. The four-point safety belt still worked, though. Cathy snapped hers right in place. Little Katie had to be helped, but she loved her helmet, painted pink, with a bunny on it, doubtless some Marine's idea. Seconds later the rotor started turning.

"This is going a little fast," Alex said over the intercom.

"You really think we should wait?" Cathy replied, keying her

microphone.

"No." And it wouldn't do to say that he wasn't dressed for seeing the President. The aircraft lifted off, climbed about three hundred feet, and turned south.

"Colonel?" Cathy said to the pilot in the right-front seat.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Make it fast," she ordered.

Goodman had never heard SURGEON talk like a surgeon before. It was a voice of command that any Marine would recognize. He dropped the nose and brought the Black Hawk to 160 knots.

"You in a hurry, Colonel?" the backup chopper called.

"The lady is. Bravo routing, direct approach." Next he called to BWI Airport to tell the controllers to hold arrivals and departures until he'd passed overhead. It wouldn't take long. Nobody on the ground really noticed, but two USAir 737s had to go around once, to the annoyance of their passengers. Watching from the jump seat, SANDBOX thought it was pretty neat.

"MR. PRESIDENT?"

"Yes, Andrea?" Ryan looked up.

"Your wife is inbound from Baltimore. She needs to see you about something. I don't know what. About fifteen minutes," Price told him.

"Nothing's wrong?" Jack asked.

"No, no, everybody's fine, sir. SANDBOX is with her," the agent assured him.

"Okay." Ryan went back to the most recent update of the investigation.

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"WELL, IT'S OFFICIALLY a clean shoot, Pat." Murray wanted to tell his inspector that himself. There hadn't been much doubt of that, of course.

"Wish I could have taken the last one alive," O'Day remarked with a grimace.

"You can stow that one. There was no chance, not with kids around. I think we'll probably arrange a little decoration for you."

"We have anything on that Azir guy yet?"

"His driver's license photo and a lot of written records, but aside from that, we'd have a hard time proving he ever existed." It was a classic set of circumstances. Sometime Friday afternoon, "Mordecai

Azir" had driven his car to Baltimore-Washington International Airport and caught a flight to New York-Kennedy. They knew that much from the USAir desk clerk who'd issued him the ticket in that name. Then he'd disappeared, like a cloud of smoke on a windy day. He doubtless had had a virgin set of travel documents. Maybe he'd used them in New York for an international flight. If he'd really been smart, he would have caught a cab to Newark or LaGuardia first, and taken an overseas flight from the former, or maybe a flight to Canada from the latter. Even now agents from the New York office were interviewing people at every airline counter. But nearly every airline in the world came into Kennedy, and the clerks there saw thousands per day. Maybe they would establish what flight he'd taken. If so, he'd be on the moon before they managed that feat.

"Trained spook," Pat O'Day observed. "It's really not all that hard, is it?"

What came back to Murray were the words of his FCI chief. If you could do it once, you could do it more than once. There was every reason to believe that there was a complete espionage—worse, a terrorist—network in his country, sitting tight and waiting for orders . . . to do what? And to avoid detection, all its members really had to do was *nothing*. Samuel Johnson had once remarked that everybody could manage that feat.

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THE HELICOPTER FLARED and landed, rather to the surprise of the newspeople who always kept an eye out. Anything unexpected at the White House was newsworthy. They recognized Cathy Ryan. Her white doctor's coat was unusual, however, and on seeing another person dressed in the same way but wearing greens, the immediate impression was of a medical emergency involving the President. This was actually correct, though a spokesman came over to say that, no, the President was fine, working at his desk; no, he didn't know why Dr. Ryan had come home early.

I'm not dressed for this, Alex thought. The looks of the agents on the way to the West Wing confirmed that, and now a few of *them* wondered if SWORDSMAN might be ill, resulting in a few radio calls that were immediately rebuffed. Cathy led him down the corridor, then tried the wrong door until an agent pointed and opened the one into the Oval Office. They noted that she didn't bother with anger or embarrassment at the mistake. They'd never seen SURGEON so focused.

"Jack, this is Pierre Alexandre," she said without a greeting.

Ryan stood. He didn't have any major appointments for another two hours, and had shed his suit coat. "Hello, Doctor," he said, extending his hand and taking in the manner of his visitor's dress. Then he realized that Cathy had her work coat on as well. "What's going on, Cathy?" he asked his wife.

"Alex?" Nobody had even sat down yet. Two Secret Service agents had followed the physicians in, and the tension in the room was like an alarm bell for them, though they didn't know what was going on, either. Roy Altman was in another room, talking to Price.

"Mr. President, do you know what the Ebola virus is?"

"Africa," Jack said. "Some jungle disease, right? Deadly as hell. I saw a movie—"

"Pretty close," Alexandre confirmed. "It's a negative-strand RNA virus. We don't know where it lives—I mean, we know the place but not the host. That's the animal it lives in," he explained. "And it's a killer, sir. The crude mortality rate is eighty percent."

"Okay," POTUS said, still standing. "Go on."

"It's here now."

"Where?"

"At last count we had five cases at Hopkins. More than twenty countrywide—that number is about three hours old now. Can I use the phone?"

GUS LORENZ WAS alone in his office when the phone rang. "It's Dr. Alexandre again."

"Yes, Alex?"

"Gus, what's the count now?"

"Sixty-seven," the speakerphone replied. Alex was leaning over it.

"Where?"

"Mainly big cities. The reports are coming in mostly from major medical centers. Boston, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, one in Richmond, seven right here in Atlanta, three in Orlando . . ." They could hear a door open and a paper being handled. "Eighty-nine, Alex. They're still coming in."

"Has USAMRIID put the alert out yet?"

"I expect that within the hour. They are having a meeting to determine—"

"Gus, I am in the White House right now. The President is here with me. I want you to tell him what you think," Alexandre commanded, speaking like an Army colonel again.

"What—how did you—Alex, it's not sure yet."

"Either you say it or I will. Better that you do."

"Mr. President?" It was Ellen Sumter at the side door. "I have a

General Pickett on the phone for you, sir. He says it's most urgent."

"Tell him to stand by."

"John's good, but he's a little conservative," Alex observed. "Gus, talk to us!"

"Sir, Mr. President, this appears to be something other than a natural event. It looks very much like a deliberate act."

"Biological warfare?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, Mr. President. Our data isn't yet complete enough for a real conclusion, but naturally occurring epidemics don't start this way, not all over the place."

"Mrs. Sumter, can you put the general on this line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. President?" a new voice asked.

"General, I have a Dr. Lorenz on the line, and next to me is Dr. Alexandre from up the road at Hopkins."

"Hi, Alex."

"Hi, John," Alexandre responded.

"Then you know."

"How confident are you in this estimate?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"We have at least ten focal centers. A disease doesn't get around like that by itself. The data is still coming in, sir. All these cases appearing in twenty-four hours, it's no accident, and it's no natural process. You have Alex there to explain things further. He used to work for me. He's pretty good," Pickett told his commander-in-chief.

"Dr. Lorenz, you concur in this?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Jesus." Jack looked at his wife. "What's next?"

"Sir, we have some options," Pickett replied. "I need to get down to see you."

Ryan turned: "Andrea!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get a chopper up to Fort Detrick, right now!"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I'll be waiting, General. Dr. Lorenz, thank you. Anything else I need to know now?"

"Dr. Alexandre can handle that."

"Very well, I will put Mrs. Sumter on the phone to give you the direct lines to this office." Jack walked to the door. "Get on and give them what they need. Then get Arnie and Ben in here."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Jack walked back to sit on the edge of his desk. He was silent for a moment. In a way, he was now grateful for the failed attack on his daughter. That had hit him with a dreadful immediacy. This one as yet had not, and though intellectually he knew that the ramifications

were far worse, he didn't need the emotional impact for the time being.

"What do I need to know?"

"Most of the important stuff we can't tell you yet. The issues are technical," Alex explained. "How easily the disease spreads, all we have now is anecdotal and unreliable. That's the key issue. If it spreads easily by aerosol—"

"What's that?" POTUS asked.

"Spray, little droplets, like a cough or a sneeze. If it spreads that way, we're in very deep trouble."

"It's not supposed to," Cathy objected. "Jack, this bug is very delicate. It doesn't last in the open for more than—what, Alex, a few seconds?"

"That's the theory, but some strains are more robust than others. Even if it can survive just a few minutes in the open—that's pretty damned bad. If this is a strain we call Mayinga, well, we just don't know how robust it is. But it goes farther than that. Once a person gets it, then they take it home. A house is a pretty benign environment for pathogens. We have heating and air-conditioning to make it that way, and family members are in close contact. They hug. They kiss. They make love. And once somebody has it in their system, they're always pumping the things out."

"Things?"

"Virus particles, Mr. President. The size of these things is measured in microns. They're far smaller than dust particles, smaller than anything you can see."

"You used to work at Detrick?"

"Yes, sir, I was a colonel, head of pathogens. I retired, and Hopkins hired me."

"So you have an idea what General Pickett's plans are, the options, I mean?"

"Yes, sir. That stuff is reevaluated at least once a year. I've sat in on the committee that draws the plans up."

"Sit down, Doctor. I want to hear this."

THE MARITIME PRE-POSITION Ships had just gotten back from an exercise, and what little maintenance had been required was already done. On receiving orders from CIN-CLANTFLT, they initiated engine-start procedures, which mainly meant warming up the fuel and lubricating oils. To the north, the cruiser *Anzio*, plus destroyers *Kidd* and *O'Bannon,* got orders of their own and turned west for a projected rendezvous point. The senior officer present was the skipper of the Aegis cruiser, who wondered how the hell he was supposed to get

those fat merchants into the Persian Gulf without air cover, if it came to that. The United States Navy didn't go anywhere without air cover, and the nearest carrier was *Ike*, 3,000 miles away, with Malaya in the way. On the other hand, it wasn't all that bad to be a mere captain in command of a task force without an admiral to look over his shoulder.

The first of the MPS ships to sortie from the large anchorage was USNS *Bob Hope*, a newly built military-type roll-on/roll-off transport displacing close to 80,000 tons, and carrying 952 vehicles. Her civilian crew had a little tradition for their movements. Oversized speakers blared "Thanks for the Memories" at the naval base as she passed by, just after midnight, followed by four of her sisters. Aboard, they had the full vehicle complement for a reinforced heavy brigade. Passing the reef-marked entrance, the handles were pushed down on the enunciators, demanding twenty-six knots of the big Colt-Pielstick diesels.

THEY WAITED FOR Goodley and van Damm to come in, and then it took ten minutes to bring them up to speed on what was going on. By this time, the enormity of it was sinking into the President's consciousness, and he had to struggle with emotions now in addition to intellect. He noted that Cathy, though she had to be as horrified as he was, was taking everything calmly, at least outwardly so. Well, it was her field, wasn't it?

"I didn't think Ebola could survive outside a jungle," Goodley said.

"It can't, at least not long-term, or it would have traveled around the world by now."

"It kills too fast for that," SURGEON objected.

"Cathy, we've had jet travel for over thirty years now. This little bastard is delicate. That works for us."

"How do we find out who did it?" This came from Arnie.

"We interview all the victims, find out where they've been, and try to narrow the focal centers down to one point if we can. That's an investigative function. Epidemiologists are pretty good at that . . . but this one's a little big," Alexandre added.

"Could the FBI help, Doctor?" van Damm asked.

"Can't hurt."

"I'll get Murray over here," the chief of staff told the President.

"You can't treat it?" POTUS asked.

"No, what happens is the epidemic burns itself out over several generational cycles. What I mean by that—okay, one person gets it. The virus reproduces in them, and then they pass it on to somebody else. Every victim becomes an imperfect host. As the disease reproduces and kills the victim, the victim passes it on to the next one.

But, and here's the good news, Ebola doesn't reproduce efficiently. As it goes through these generational cycles, it becomes less virulent. Most of the survivors in an outbreak happen toward the end, because the virus progressively mutates itself into a less dangerous form. The organism is so primitive that it doesn't do everything well."

"How many cycles before that happens, Alex?" Cathy asked.

He shrugged. "It's empirical. We know the process, but we can't quantify it."

"Lots of unknowns." She grimaced.

"Mr. President?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"The movie you saw?"

"What about it?"

"The budget for that movie is quite a bit more than all the funding for research in virology. Keep that in mind. I guess it isn't sexy enough." Arnie started to say something. Alex cut him off with a raised hand. "I'm not on the government payroll anymore, sir. I don't have any empire to build. My research is privately funded. I'm just stating a fact. What the hell, I guess we can't fund everything."

"If we can't treat it, how do we stop it?" Ryan asked, getting things back on track. His head turned. A shadow crossed the South Lawn, and the roar of a helicopter came through the bulletproof windows.

"AHII," BADRAYN OBSERVED with a smile. The Internet was designed to give access to information, not to conceal it, and from a friend of a friend of a friend who was a medical student at Emory University in Atlanta, he had the password to crack into that medical center's electronic mail. Another keyword eliminated all of the clutter, and there it was. It was 1400 hours on America's east coast, and Emory reported to CDC that it now had six cases of suspected hemorrhagic fever. Better yet, CDC had already replied, and that told him a lot more. Badrayn printed up both letters, and made a telephone call. Now he really had good news to deliver.

RAMAN FELT THE DC-9 thump down in Pittsburgh after a brief flight that had allowed him to sit alone and think through several options. His colleague—brother—in Baghdad had been a little too sacrificial in his attitude, a little too dramatic, and the detail around the Iraqi leader had been pretty large, actually larger than the one on which he himself served. How to do it? The trick was to create as much confusion as possible. Perhaps when Ryan walked into the crowd to

press the flesh. Take the shot, kill one or two of the other agents, then race into the crowd. If he could make it past the first line or two of spectators, all he had to do was hold up his Secret Service TD, better than a gun for getting through things—everyone would think that he was chasing the subject. The key to escaping from an assassination—the USSS had taught him this—was in the first thirty seconds. Survive that, and you have a better-than-even chance of surviving it all. And he would be the one setting all the security arrangements for the Friday trip. How, then, could he get the President to a spot in which he would have that option? Take POTUS. Take Price. Take one other. Then melt into the crowd. Probably better to fire from the hip. Best if the citizens didn't see the gun in his hand until after the shots. Yes, that might work, he thought, taking off the lap belt and standing. There would be a local Treasury agent at the end of the jetway. They'd go right to the hotel whose large dining room would host President Ryan's speech. Raman would have all day and part of tomorrow to think it through, under the very eyes of fellow agents. How challenging.

MAJOR GENERAL JOHN Pickett, it turned out, was a graduate of Yale Medical School, added to which were a pair of doctorates—molecular biology from Harvard, and public health from UCLA. He was a pale, spare man who looked small in his uniform—he hadn't had time to change and was wearing camouflage BDUs—making his parachutist's wings look very out of place. Two colonels came with him, followed by Director Murray of the FBI, who'd raced over from the Hoover Building. The three officers came to attention as they walked in, but now the Oval Office was too small, and the President led them across the hall into the Roosevelt Room. On the way a Secret Service agent handed the general a fax that was still warm from the machine in the secretaries' room.

"Case count is now one hundred thirty-seven, according to Atlanta," Pickett said. "Fifteen cities, fifteen states, coast-to-coast."

"Hi, John," Alexandre said, taking his hand. "I've seen three of them myself."

"Alex, glad to see you, buddy." He looked up. "I guess Alex has briefed everybody in on the baseline stuff?"

"Correct," Ryan said.

"Do you have any immediate questions, Mr. President?"

"You're certain that this is a deliberate act?"

"Bombs do not go off by accident." Pickett unfolded a map. A number of cities were marked with red dots. One of his attending colonels placed three more down: San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Las

Vegas.

"Convention cities. Just how I would have done it," Alexandre breathed. "Looks like Bio-War 95, John."

"Close. That's a wargame we played with the Defense Nuclear Agency. We used anthrax for that one. Alex here was one of our best for planning offensive bio," Pickett told his audience. "He was Red Team commander for this."

"Isn't that against the law?" Cathy said, her face outraged at the revelation.

"Offense and defense are two sides of the same coin, Dr. Ryan," Pickett replied, defending his former subordinate. "We have to think like the bad guys do if we're going to stop them."

"Operational concept?" the President asked. He understood that better than his wife did.

"Biological warfare at the strategic level means starting a chain reaction within your target population. You try to infect as many people as possible—and that's not very many; we're not talking nuclear weapons here. The idea is for the people, the victims, to spread it for you. That's the elegance of bio-warfare. Your victims actually do most of the killing. Any epidemic starts low and ramps up, slowly at first, like a tangential curve, and then it rockets up geometrically. So, if you're using bio in the offensive role, you try to jump-start it by infecting as large a number of people as you can, and you opt for people who travel. Las Vegas is the tip-off. It's a convention city, and sure enough they just had a big one. The conventioneers get infected, get on the airplanes to fly home, and they spread it for you."

"Any chance of discovering how they did it?" Murray asked. He showed his ID so that the general would know who he was.

"Probably a waste of time. The other nice thing about bio weapons is—well, in this case the incubation period is a minimum of three days. Whatever distribution system was used has been picked up, bagged, and trucked off to a landfill. No physical evidence, no proof of who did it to us."

"Save that for later, General. What do we do? I see a lot of states with no infection—"

"That's just for now, Mr. President. There's a three- to ten-day lead time on Ebola. We don't know how far it's gotten already. The only way we can find out is by waiting."

"But we have to initiate CURTAIN CALL, John," Alexandre said. "And we have to do it fast."

MAHMOUD HAJI WAS reading. He had an office adjoining his

bedroom, and actually preferred working here because of the familiar surroundings. He did not enjoy being disturbed here, however, and so his security people were surprised at his response to the telephone call. Twenty minutes later, they let the visitor in, without an escort.

"Has it begun?"

"It has begun." Badrayn handed over the CDC printout. "We will know more tomorrow."

"You have served well," Daryaei told him, dismissing him. When the door was closed, he made a telephone call.

ALAHAD DIDN'T KNOW how circuitous the link to him was, merely that it was an overseas call. He suspected London, but he didn't know and wouldn't ask. The inquiry was entirely routine, except for the time of day—it was evening in England, after business hours. The variety of the rug and the price were the key parts, telling him what he needed to know, in a code long since memorized and never written down. In knowing little, he could reveal little. That part of the tradecraft he did fully understand. His own part came next. Placing the Back in a Few Minutes sign in his window, he walked out, locked the door, and went around the corner, proceeding two blocks to a pay phone. There he made a call to pass on his last order to Aref Raman.

THE MEETINGS HAD started in the Oval Office, were transferred to the Roosevelt Room, and were now all the way down the hall in the Cabinet Room, where more than one image of George Washington could watch the proceedings. The Cabinet secretaries arrived almost together, and their arrival couldn't be a secret. Too many official cars, too many guards, too many faces known to the reporters.

Pat Martin came, representing Justice. Bretano was SecDef, with Admiral Jackson sitting on the wall behind him. (Everyone brought a deputy of some sort, mainly to take notes.) Winston was SecTreas, having walked from across the street. Commerce and Interior were survivors from the Durling presidency, actually having been appointed by Bob Fowler. Most of the rest were of undersecretary rank, holding on from presidential apathy in some cases, and in others because they appeared to know what they were doing. But none of them knew what he was doing now. Ed Foley arrived, summoned by the President despite CIA's previous loss of Cabinet rank. Also present were Arnie van Damm, Ben Goodley, Director Murray, the First Lady, three Army officers, and Dr. Alexandre.

"We will be in order," the President said. "Ladies and gentlemen,

thank you for coming. There's no time for a preamble here. We face a national emergency. The decisions we make here today will have serious effects on our country. In the corner is Major General John Pickett. He's a physician and scientist, and I will now turn the meeting over to him. General, do your brief."

"Thank you, Mr. President. Ladies and gentlemen, I am commanding general at Fort Detrick. Earlier today, we started getting some very disturbing reports . . ."

Ryan tuned the general out. He'd heard it all twice now. Instead he read over the file Pickett had handed him. The folder was bordered in the usual red-and-white-striped tape. The sticker in the center read TOP SECRET - AFFLICTION, rather an appropriate code name for the special-access compartment this one was in, SWORDSMAN thought. Then he opened the folder and started reading OPPLAN CURTAIN CALL. There were four variants of the plan, Jack saw. He turned to Option Four. That was called SOLITARY, and that name, too, was appropriate. Reading through the executive summary chilled him, and Jack found himself turning to look over at George, hanging there on the wall, and wanting to ask, *Now what the hell do I do?* But George wouldn't have understood. He didn't know from airliners and viruses and nuclear weapons, did he?

"How bad is it now?" HHS asked.

"Just over two hundred cases have been reported to CDC as of fifteen minutes ago. I emphasize that these have all appeared in less than twenty-four hours," General Pickett told the Secretary.

"Who did it?" Agriculture asked.

"Set that aside," the President said. "We will address that issue later. What we have to decide now is the best chance we have to contain the epidemic."

"I just can't believe that we can't treat—"

"Believe it," Cathy Ryan said. "You know how many viral diseases we know how to cure?"

"Well, no," HUD admitted.

"None." It constantly amazed her how ignorant some people could be on medical issues.

"Therefore containment is the only option," General Pickett went on.

"How do you contain a whole country?" It was Cliff Rutledge, Assistant Secretary of State for Policy, sitting in for Scott Adler.

"That's the problem we face," President Ryan said. "Thank you, General. I'll take it from here. The only way to contain the epidemic is to shut down all places of assembly—theaters, shopping malls, sports stadia, business offices, everything—and also to shut off all interstate travel. To the best of our information, at least thirty states are so far

untouched by this disease. We would do well to keep it that way. We can accomplish that by preventing all interstate travel until such time as we have a handle on the severity of the disease organism we are facing, and then we can come up with less severe countermeasures."

"Mr. President, that's unconstitutional," Pat Martin said at once.

"Explain," Ryan ordered.

"Travel is a constitutionally protected right. Even inside states, any restriction of travel is a constitutional violation under the Lemuel Penn case—he was a black Army officer who was murdered by the Klan in the sixties. That's a Supreme Court precedent," the head of the Criminal Division reported.

"I understand that I—excuse me, just about everybody in the room—was sworn to uphold the Constitution. But if upholding it means killing off a few million citizens, what have we accomplished?" POTUS asked.

"We can't *do* that!" HUD insisted.

"General, what happens if we don't?" Martin asked, surprising Ryan.

"There is no precise answer. There cannot be, because we do not know the ease of transmission for this virus yet. If it is an aerosol, and there is reason to suspect that it is—well, we've got a hundred computer models we can use. Problem is deciding which one. Worst case? Twenty million deaths. At that point, what happens is that society breaks down. Doctors and nurses flee the hospitals, people lock themselves in their homes, and the epidemic burns out pretty much like the Black Death did in the fourteenth century. Human interactions cease, and because of that the disease stops spreading."

"Twenty million? How bad was the Black Death?" Martin asked, his face somewhat ashen.

"Records are sketchy. There was no real census system back then. Best data is England," Pickett replied. "It depopulated that country by half. The plague lasted about four years. Europe took about one hundred fifty years to return to the 1347 population level."

"Shit," breathed Interior.

"Is it really that dangerous, General?" Martin persisted.

"Potentially yes. The problem, sir, is that if you take no action at all, and then you find out that it is that virulent, then it's just too late."

"I see." Martin turned. "Mr. President, I do not see that we have much of a choice here."

"You just said it was against the law, damn it!" HUD shouted.

"Mr. Secretary, the Constitution is not a suicide pact, and although I think I know how the Supreme Court would rule on this, there has never been a case in point, and it could be argued, and the process would have to deal with it."

"What changed your mind, Pat?" Ryan asked.

"Twenty million reasons, Mr. President."

"If we flout our own laws, then what are we?" Cliff Rutledge asked.

"Alive," Martin answered quietly. "Maybe."

"I am willing to listen to arguments for fifteen minutcs," Ryan said. "Then we have to come to a decision."

It was lively.

"If we violate our own Constitution," Rutledge said, "then nobody in the world can trust us!" HUD and HHS agreed.

"What about the practical considerations?" Agriculture objected. "People have to eat."

"What kind of country are we going to turn over to our children if we—"

"What do we turn over to them if they're dead?" George Winston snapped back at HUD.

"Things like this don't happen today!"

"Mr. Secretary, would you like to come up to my hospital and see, sir?" Alexandre asked from his seat in the corner.

"Thank you," Ryan said, checking his watch. "I am calling the issue on the table."

Defense, Treasury, Justice, and Commerce voted aye. All the rest voted no. Ryan looked at them for a long few seconds.

"The ayes have it," the President said coldly. "Thank you for your support. Director Murray, the FBI will render all assistance required by CDC and USAMRIID to ascertain the focal centers of this epidemic. That has absolute and unconditional priority over any other matter."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Mr. Foley, every intelligence asset we have goes into this. You will also work in conjunction with the medical experts. This came from somewhere, and whoever did it has committed an act of war, using weapons of mass destruction against our country. We need to find out who that was, Ed. All the intelligence agencies will report directly to you. You have statutory authority to coordinate all intelligence activities. Tell the other agencies that you have my order to exercise it."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"Secretary Bretano, I am declaring a state of national emergency. All Reserve and National Guard formations are to be activated immediately and placed under federal command. You have this contingency plan in the Pentagon." Ryan held the CURTAIN CALL folder up. "You will execute Option Four, SOLITARY, at the earliest possible moment."

"I will do that, sir."

Ryan looked down the table at the Secretary of Transportation. "Mr.

Secretary, the air-traffic-control system belongs to you. When you get back to your office, you will order all aircraft in flight to proceed to their destinations and stop there. All aircraft on the ground will remain there, commencing at six o'clock this evening."

"No." SecTrans stood. "Mr. President, I will not do that. I believe it to be an illegal act, and I will not break the law."

"Very well, sir. I will accept your resignation effective immediately. You're the deputy?" Ryan said to the woman sitting behind him.

"Yes, Mr. President, I am."

"Will you execute my order?"

She looked around the room without really knowing what to do. She'd heard it all, but she was a career civil servant, unaccustomed to making a hard call without political coverage.

"I don't like it, either," Ryan said. The room was invaded by the roar of jet engines, an aircraft taking off from Washington National. "What if that airplane's carrying death somewhere? Do we just let it happen?" he asked so quietly she could barely hear.

"I will carry out your order, sir."

"You know, Murray," the former—he wasn't sure yet—SecTrans said, "you could arrest the man right now. He's breaking the law."

"Not today, sir," Murray replied, staring at his President. "Somebody's going to have to decide what the law is first."

"If anyone else in the room feels the need to leave federal service over this issue, I will accept your resignations without prejudice—but *please* think what you are doing. If I'm wrong on this, fine, I'm wrong, and I'll pay the price for that. But if the doctors are right and we do nothing, we've got more blood on our hands than Hitler ever did. I need your help and your support." Ryan stood and walked out of the room as the others struggled to their feet. He moved fast. He had to. He entered the Oval Office, turned right to the presidential sitting room, and barely made it to the bathroom in time. Seconds later, Cathy found him there, flushing down a bowlful of vomit. "Am I doing the right thing?" he asked, still on his knees.

"You've got my vote, Jack," SURGEON told him.

"You look great," van Damm observed, catching POTUS in rather an undignified posture.

"Why didn't you say anything, Arnie?"

"Because you didn't need me to, Mr. President," the chief of staff replied.

General Pickett and the other physicians were waiting when he came back into the office. "Sir, we just had a fax from CDC. There are two cases at Fort Stewart. That's the 24th Mech's home base."

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SPECIAL REPORT

IT STARTED WITH NATIONAL Guard armories. Virtually every city and town in America had one, and in each was a duty sergeant, or perhaps an officer, sitting at a desk to answer the phone. When the phone rang, a voice from the Pentagon spoke a code word that designated an activation order. The duty person in the armory would then alert the unit commander, and more calls were made, branching out like the limbs of a tree, with every recipient detailed to call several others. It usually took an hour or so for everyone to get the word—or nearly everyone, as some were inevitably out of town, traveling for either work or vacation. Senior Guard commanders usually worked directly for the governors of the several states, as the National Guard is a hybrid institution, partly a state militia and partly United States Army (or Air Force, in the case of the Air National Guard, which gave many of the state governors access to state-of-the-art fighter aircraft). These senior Guard officers, surprised by the activation orders, reported the situation to their governors, asking for guidance which the state executives were as yet in no position to give, since mainly they didn't know what was going on yet, either. But at the company and battalion level, officers and men (and women) hurried home from their civilian jobs, citizen soldiers that they were, donned their woodland-pattern BDU fatigues, buffed their boots, and drove to the local armory to form up with their squads and platoons. Once there they were startled to see that they were supposed to draw weapons and, more disturbingly, their MOPP gear. MOPP, for Mission-Oriented Protective Posture, was the chemical-warfare equipment in which they had all trained at one time or another, and which every person in uniform cordially detested. There were the usual jokes and good humor, stories of work, tales of spouses and children, while the officers and senior non-coms met in conference rooms to find out what the hell was going on. They emerged from those brief meetings angry, confused, and for the better informed of them, frightened. Outside the armories, vehicles were fired up. Inside, TV sets were switched on.

IN ATLANTA, THE special agent in charge of the FBI's Atlanta Field Division drove with sirens screaming to CDC, followed by ten more agents. In Washington, a number of CIA and other intelligence officers drove more sedately to the Hoover Building to set up a joint task force. In both cases, the job was to figure out how the epidemic had started and from that to try to determine its point of origin. These people were not all civilians. The Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency were mainly uniformed organizations, and among that grouping grim-faced officers let everyone know that something new in American history had taken place. If this truly were a deliberate attack against the United States of America, then a nation-state had made use of what was delicately termed a "weapon of mass destruction." Then they explained to their civilian counterparts what had been U.S. policy for two generations for responding to such an eventuality.

IT WAS ALL happening too fast, of course, since emergencies are by definition things for which one cannot plan terribly well. That extended to the President himself, who walked into the White House press room, accompanied by General Pickett of USAMRIID. Only thirty minutes earlier the White House had told the major networks that the President had an announcement to make, and that on this occasion, the government would exercise its option to demand airtime instead of requesting it—since the 1920s, the government had adopted the position that it owned the airwaves—thus supplanting all the talk shows and other programming which preceded the evening news. Lead-in commentary told viewers that nobody knew what this was about, but that there had been an emergency Cabinet meeting only minutes before.

"My fellow Americans," President Ryan began, his face in most American homes, and his voice in every car on the road. Those who had become accustomed to their new President took note of the pale face (Mrs. Abbot hadn't had time to do his makeup) and grim voice. The message was grimmer still.

THE CEMENT TRUCK had a radio, of course. It even had a tape and CD player, since, work-vehicle or not, it had been designed for the use of an American citizen. They were in Indiana now, having crossed both the Mississippi River and Illinois earlier in the day on their trek to their nation's capital. Holbrook, who had no use for the words of

any President, hit the scan button, only to find that the same voice was on all the stations. That was sufficiently unusual that he stayed with one of them. Brown, driving the truck, saw that cars and trucks were pulling over—not many at first, but more and more as the speech progressed, their drivers, like himself, leaning down to listen to the radio.

"ACCORDINGLY, BY EXECUTIVE order of the President, your government is taking the following actions:

"One, until further notice, all schools and colleges in the country will be closed.

"Two, all businesses except for those providing essential services—the media, health care, food, law-enforcement, and fire protection—will also be closed until further notice.

"Three, all places of public assembly, theaters, restaurants, bars and the like, will be closed.

"Fourth, all interstate travel is suspended until further notice. This means all commercial air travel, interstate trains and buses, and private-passenger automobiles. Trucks carrying foodstuffs will be allowed to travel under military escort. The same is true of essential supplies, pharmaceuticals and the like.

"Fifth, I have activated the National Guard in all the fifty states and placed it under federal control to maintain public order. A state of martial law is now in force throughout the country.

"We urge our citizens—no, let me speak more informally. Ladies and gentlemen, all that is required for us to weather this crisis is a little common sense. We do not yet know how dangerous this disease is. The measures I have ordered today are precautionary in nature. They seem, and indeed they are, extreme measures. The reason for that, as I have told you, is that this virus is potentially the most deadly organism on the planet, but we do not yet know how dangerous it is. We *do* know that a few simple measures can limit its spread, no matter how deadly it is, and in the interest of public safety, I have ordered those measures. This action is being taken on the best scientific advice available. To protect yourselves, remember how the disease is spread. I have General John Pickett, a senior Army physician and an expert in the field of infectious diseases, to provide medical advice to all of us. General?" Ryan stepped away from the microphone.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" Holbrook shouted. "He can't do that!"

"Think so?" Brown followed an eighteen-wheeler onto the shoulder.

They were a hundred miles from the Indiana-Ohio border. About two hours driving this pig, he thought. No way he'd get there before the local Guard closed the road.

"I think we better find a motel, Pete."

"SO WHAT DO I do?" the FBI agent asked in Chicago.

"Strip. Hang your clothes on the door." There was no time and little spare room for the niceties, and he was, after all, a physician. His guest didn't blush. Dr. Klein decided, on full surgical garb, long-sleeve greens instead of the more popular sort. There were not enough of the plastic space suits to go around, and his staff would use all of those. They had to. They got closer. They handled liquids. They touched the patients. His medical center now had nine symptomatic patients who tested positive. Six of those were married, and of the spouses, four tested positive for Ebola antibodies. The test gave an occasional false-positive reading; even so it was not the least bit pleasant to tell someone—well, he did that often enough with AIDS patients. They were testing children now. That really hurt.

The protective outfit he gave the agent was made of the usual cotton, but the hospital had taken a number of sets and sprayed them with disinfectant, especially the masks. The agent also was given a pair of laboratory glasses, the broad plastic ones known to chemistry students.

"Okay," Klein told the agent. "Don't get close. No closer than six feet, and you should be completely safe. If she vomits or coughs, if she has a convulsion, stay clear. Dealing with that sort of thing is our job, not yours. Even if she dies right in front of you, don't touch anything."

"I understand. You going to lock the office up?" She pointed to the gun hanging with her clothes.

"Yes, I will. And when you're done, give me your notes. I'll run them through the copying machine."

"How come?"

"It uses a very bright light to make copies. The ultraviolet will almost certainly kill any virus particle that might find its way to the paper," Professor Klein explained. Even now in Atlanta, rapid experiments were under way to determine just how robust the Ebola particles were. That would help define the level of precaution that was necessary in hospitals first of all, and perhaps also provide useful guidance for the general population.

"Uh, Doc, why not just let me make the copies?"

"Oh." Klein shook his head. "Yes, I suppose that will work, too, won't it?"

“MR. PRESIDENT.” IT was Barry of CNN. “These steps you’re taking, sir, are they legal?”

“Barry, I do not have the answer to that,” Ryan said, his face tired and drawn. “Whether they’re legal or not, I am convinced that they are necessary.” As he spoke, a White House staffer was passing out surgical masks for the assembled reporters. That was Arnie’s idea. They’d been procured from the nearby George Washington University Hospital.

“But, Mr. President, you can’t break the law. What if you’re wrong?”

“Barry, there’s a fundamental difference between what I do in my job and what you do in yours. If you make a mistake, you can make a retraction. We just saw that, only yesterday, with one of your colleagues, didn’t we? But, Barry, if I make a mistake in a situation like this, how do I retract a death? How do I retract thousands of deaths? I don’t have that luxury, Barry,” the President said. “If it turns out that what I am doing is wrong, then you can have at me all you want. That’s part of my job, too, and I’m getting used to that. Maybe I’m a coward. Maybe I’m just afraid of letting people die for no good reason when I have the power to prevent it.”

“But you don’t really know, do you?”

“No,” Jack admitted, “none of us really knows. This is one of those times when you have to go with your best guess. I wish I could sound more confident, but I can’t, and I won’t lie about it.”

“Who did it, Mr. President?” another reporter asked.

“We don’t know, and for the moment I will not speculate as to the origin of this epidemic.” And that was a lie, Ryan knew even as he was saying it, speaking the lie right after stating that he wouldn’t lie, because the situation demanded that, too. What a crazy fucking world it was.

IT WAS THE worst interview of her life. The woman, she saw, called the Index Case, was attractive, or had been so a day or two previously. Now skin that had so recently qualified as a peaches-and-cream complexion was sallow and mottled with red-purple blotches. Worst of all, she knew. She had to know, the agent thought, hiding behind her mask, holding her felt-tip pen in the rubber gloves (nothing sharp that might penetrate the thin latex), taking her notes, and learning not very much. She had to know that this sort of medical care was not the usual thing, that the medics were afraid to touch her, and that now a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation would not even

approach her bed.

"Aside from the trip to Kansas City?"

"Nothing really," the voice replied, as though from the bottom of a grave. "Working at my desk, getting ready for the fall orders. Went to the housewares show at McCormick Center two days."

There were some more questions, none of which turned up any immediately useful information. The woman in the agent wanted to reach out, touch her hand, provide some measure of comfort and sympathy but no. The agent had just learned the previous week that she was pregnant with her first child. She had custody of two lives now, not just her own, and it was all she could do to keep her hand from shaking.

"Thank you. We'll be back to you," the agent said, rising from her metal chair and moving to the door. Opening it, she pulled her shoulders in so as not to touch the door frame, and proceeded to the next room down the hall for the next interview. Klein was in the corridor, discussing something with another staffer—doc or nurse, the agent couldn't tell.

"How'd it go?" the professor asked.

"What are her chances?" the agent asked.

"Essentially zero," Mark Klein replied. For diseases like this one, Patient Zero was just that.

"COMPENSATION? THEY ASK *us* for compensation!" the Defense Minister demanded before the Foreign Minister could speak.

"Minister, I merely convey the words of others," Adler reminded his hosts.

"We have had two officers from your Air Force examine the missile fragments. Their judgment confirms our own. It is a Pen-Lung-13, their new heat-seeker with the long range, a development of a Russian weapon. It's definite now, in addition to the radar evidence developed from your ships," Defense added. "The shooting of the airliner was a deliberate act. You know that. So do we. So, tell me, Mr. Adler, where does America stand in this dispute?"

"We wish nothing more than the restoration of peace," SecState replied, confirming his own predictions. "I would also point out that the PRC, in allowing my direct flights between their capital and yours, are showing a measure of goodwill."

"Quite so," the Foreign Minister replied. "Or so it might seem to the casual observer, but tell me, Mr. Adler, what do they really want?"

So much, the American Secretary of State told himself, for settling the situation down. These two were as smart as he was, and even more angry. Then that changed.

A secretary knocked, then entered, annoying his boss until they exchanged a few words in Mandarin. A telex was passed over and read. Then another was given directly to the American.

"It seems that there is a serious problem in your country, Mr. Secretary."

THE PRESS CONFERENCE was cut off. Ryan left the room, returned to the Oval Office and sat on the couch with his wife.

"How did it go?"

"Didn't you watch?" Jack asked.

"We were talking over some things," Cathy explained. Then Arnie came in.

"Not bad, boss," the chief of staff opined. "You will have to meet with people from the Senate this evening. I just worked that out with the leadership on both sides. This will make the elections today a little interesting and—"

"Arnie, until further notice we will not discuss politics in this building. Politics is about ideology and theory. We have to deal with cold facts now," SWORDSMAN said.

"You can't get away from it, Jack. Politics *is* real, and if this is the deliberate attack the general here says it is, then it's war, and war *is* a political act. You're leading the government. You have to lead the Congress, and that is a political act. You're not a philosopher king. You're the President of a democratic country," van Damm reminded him.

"All right." Ryan sighed his surrender to the moment. "What else?"

"Bretano called. The plan is being implemented right now. In a few minutes, the air-traffic system tells all the airliners to stop flying. There's probably a lot of chaos in the airports right now."

"I bet." Jack closed his eyes, and rubbed them.

"Sir, you don't have much choice in the matter," General Pickett told the President.

"How do I get back to Hopkins?" Alexandre asked. "I have a department to run and patients to treat."

"I told Bretano that people will be allowed to leave Washington," van Damm informed the others in the room. "The same will be true of all big cities with borders nearby. New York, Philadelphia and like that. We have to let people go home, right?"

Pickett nodded. "Yes, they're safer there. It's unrealistic to assume that the plan will be properly implemented until midnight or so."

Then Cathy spoke: "Alex, I guess you'll come with me. I have to fly up, too."

"What?" Ryan's eyes opened.

"Jack, I'm a doctor, remember?"

"You're an *eye* doctor, Cathy. People can wait to get new glasses," Jack insisted.

"At the staff meeting today, we agreed that everybody has to pitch in. We can't just leave it to the nurses and the kids—the residents—to treat these patients. I'm a clinician. We all have to take our turn on this, honey," SURGEON told her husband.

"No! No, Cathy, it's too dangerous." Jack turned to face her. "I won't let you."

"Jack, all those times you went away, the things you never told me about, the dangerous things, you were doing your job," she said reasonably. "I'm a doctor. I have a job, too."

"It's not all that dangerous, Mr. President," Alexandre put in. "You just have to follow the procedures. I work with AIDS patients every day and—"

"No, God damn it!"

"Because I'm a girl?" Caroline Ryan asked gently. "It worries me some, too, Jack, but I'm a professor at a medical school. I teach students how to be doctors. I teach them what their professional responsibilities are. One of those responsibilities is to be there for your patients. You can't run away from your duties. I can't, either, Jack."

"I'd like to see the procedures you've set up, Alex," Pickett said.

"Glad to have you, John."

Jack continued to look in his wife's face. He knew she was strong, and he'd always known that she sometimes treated patients with contagious diseases—AIDS produced some serious eye complications. He'd just never thought much about it. Now he had to: "What if—"

"It won't. I have to be careful. I think you did it to me again." She kissed him in front of the others. "My husband has the most remarkable timing," she told the audience.

It was too much for Ryan. His hands started to shake a little and his eyes teared up. He blinked them away. "Please, Cathy . . ."

"Would you have listened to me on the way to that submarine, Jack?" She kissed him again and stood.

THERE WAS RESISTANCE, but not all that much. Four governors told their adjutant generals—the usual title for a state's senior National Guard officer—not to obey the presidential order, and three of those wavered until the Secretary of Defense called to make the order clear and personal, threatening them with immediate relief, arrest, and court-martial. Some talked about organizing protests, but that took time, and the green vehicles were already starting to move, their orders modified in many cases, like the Philadelphia Cavalry, one of

the Army's most ancient and revered units, whose members had escorted George Washington to his inauguration more than two centuries earlier, and whose current troopers now headed for the bridges on the Delaware River. Local TV and radio told people that commuters would be allowed to go home without inhibitions until nine that night, and until midnight with identification check. If it was easy, people would be allowed to get home. That happened in most cases, but not all, and motels filled up all across America.

Children, told that schools would be closed for at least a week, greeted the news with enthusiasm, puzzled at the concern and even outright fear their parents displayed.

Pharmacies which sold things like surgical masks ran out of them in a matter of minutes, their clerks mainly not knowing why until someone switched on a radio.

IN PITTSBURGH, STRANGELY, the Secret Service agents going over security arrangements for President Ryan's coming visit were late getting the word. While most on the advance team hustled into the bar to watch the President on TV, Raman broke away to make a phone call. He called his home, waited for the four rings until his answering machine kicked in, then punched the code to access the messages. It was a false one, as before, announcing the arrival of a rug he hadn't ordered and a price he would not have to pay. Raman experienced a slight chill. He was now free to complete his mission at his discretion. That meant soon, as it was expected that he would die in the effort. This he was willing to do, though he thought he might have a chance now, as he walked to the bar. The other three agents stood right by the TV. When someone objected to their blockage of his view, a set of credentials were held up.

"Holy shit!" the senior man from the Pittsburgh office said for the rest. "Now what do we do?"

IT WAS TRICKY with international flights. The word was only now getting to the embassies in Washington. They communicated the nature of the emergency to their governments, but for the European ones, senior officials were at home, many getting into bed when the calls came. These had to get into their offices, have their own meetings, and decide what to do, but the long duration of over-water flights mainly gave time for that. Soon it was decided that all passengers on flights from America would be quarantined—how long, they didn't know yet. Urgent calls to the American Federal Aviation

Administration made arrangements to allow flights to America to sit on the ground, be refueled, and then depart for their points of origin. These aircraft were identified as uncontaminated, their passengers allowed to proceed home, though there would be bureaucratic mistakes along the way.

That the financial markets would be closed was made apparent by an Ebola case which arrived in Northwestern University Medical Center. He was a commodities trader who customarily worked on the raucous floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, and the news was quick to get out. All the exchanges would be closed, and the next worry for the business and financial community was the effect this would have on their activities. But mainly people watched the TV coverage. Every network found its medical expert and gave him or her free rein to explain the problem, usually in too much detail. Cable channels ran science specials on Ebola outbreaks in Zaire, showing just how far flu symptoms might lead. What resulted was a quiet, private sort of panic throughout the nation, people in their homes, inspecting their pantries to see how much food they had, watching TV and worrying as they also struggled to ignore. When neighbors talked, it was at a distance.

THE CASE COUNT reached five hundred just before eight o'clock in Atlanta. It had been a long day for Gus Lorenz, gyrating as he did between his laboratory and his office. There was danger for him and his staff. Fatigue made for errors and accidents. Normally a sedate establishment, one of the world's finest research laboratories, the people there were accustomed to working in a calm, orderly way. Now it was frantic. Blood samples couriered to them had to be tagged and tested, and the results faxed to the hospital of origin. Lorenz struggled throughout the day to reorganize his people and their functions, so as to keep staff on duty around the clock, but also not to overly fatigue anyone. He had to apply that to himself as well, and when he returned to his office to catch a nap, he found someone waiting inside.

"FBI," the man said, holding up his ID folder. It was actually the local SAC, a very senior agent who'd been running his own office over a cellular phone. He was a tall, quiet man, slow to excite. In crisis situations, he told his force of agents, you think first. There was always time to screw things up, and there had to be time to get them right, too.

"What can I do for you?" Lorenz asked, taking his seat.

"Sir, I need you to brief me in. The Bureau is working with a few other agencies to see how this all started. We're interviewing every victim to try and determine where they got sick, and we figure you're

the expert to ask about the overall situation. Where did all this start?"

THE MILITARY DIDN'T know where it had started, but it was rapidly becoming apparent where it had gotten to. Fort Stewart, Georgia, had only been the first. Nearly every Army base was near some big city or other. Fort Stewart was within easy driving distance of Savannah and Atlanta. Fort Hood was close to Dallas—Fort Worth. Fort Campbell an hour from Nashville, where Vanderbilt had already reported cases. The personnel lived mainly in barracks, where they shared common showers and toilet facilities, and at these bases the senior medical officers were quite literally terrified. Naval personnel lived the most closely of all. Their ships were enclosed environments. Those ships at sea were instantly ordered to remain there while the shoreside situation was evaluated. It was soon determined that every major base was at risk, and though some units—mainly infantry and military police—deployed to augment the National Guard, medics kept an eye on every soldier and Marine. Soon they started finding men and women with flu symptoms. These were instantly isolated, put in protective MOPP gear and flown by helicopter to the nearest hospital that was receiving suspected Ebola cases. By midnight it would be clear that, until further notice, the U.S. military was a contaminated instrument. Urgent calls into the National Military Command Center reported which units had found cases, and on that information whole battalions were separated from others and kept that way, the personnel eating combat rations because their mess halls were closed, and thinking about an enemy they couldn't see.

"JESUS, JOIIN," CHAVEZ said in the latter's office.

Clark nodded silently. His wife, Sandy, was an instructor in nursing in a teaching hospital, and her life, he knew, might be at risk. She worked a medical floor. If an infected patient arrived, he would come to her unit, and Sandy would take the lead to show her students how to treat such patients safely.

Safely? he asked himself. Sure. The thought brought back dark memories and the sort of fear he hadn't known in many years. This attack on his country—Clark hadn't been told yet, but he never had learned to believe in coincidences—didn't put him at risk, but it put his wife at risk.

"Who do you suppose did it?" It was a dumb question, and it generated a dumber reply.

"Somebody who doesn't like us a whole hell of a lot," John

answered crossly.

"Sorry." Chavez looked out the window and thought for a few seconds. "It's one hell of a gamble, John."

"If we find out it is ... and operational security on something like this is a motherfucker."

"Roge-o, Mr. C. The people we've been looking at?"

"That's a possibility. Others, too, I suppose." He checked his watch. Director Foley should be back from Washington by now, and they should head up to his office. It took only a couple of minutes.

"Hi, John," the DCI said, looking up from his desk. Mary Pat was there, too.

"Not an accident, is it?" Clark asked.

"No, it's not. We're setting up a joint task force. The FBI is talking to people inside the country. If we get leads, it'll be our job to work outside the borders. You two will stand by to handle that. I'm trying to figure a way now to get people overseas."

"The SNIE?" Ding asked.

"Everything else is on the back burner now. Jack even gave me authority to order NSA and DIA around." Though the DCI by law had the power to do just that, in fact the other large agencies had always been their own independent empires. Until now.

"How are the kids, guys?" Clark asked.

"Home," Mary Pat replied. Queen spook or not, she was still a mother with a mother's concerns. "They say they feel fine."

"Weapons of mass destruction," Chavez said next. He didn't have to say anything more.

"Yeah." The DCI nodded. Somebody either had overlooked or didn't care about the fact that United States policy for years had been explicit on that issue. A nuke was a germ was a gas shell, and the reply to a germ or a gas shell was a nuke, because America had those, and didn't have the others. Foley's desk phone rang. "Yes?" He listened for a few seconds. "Fine, could you send a team here for that? Good, thank you."

"What was that?"

"USAMRIID at Fort Detrick. Okay, they'll be here in an hour. We can send people overseas, but they have to have their blood tested first. The European countries are—well, you can imagine. Shit, you can't take a fucking *dog* into England without leaving him in a kennel for a month to make sure he doesn't have rabies. You'll probably have to be tested on the other side of the pond, too. Flight crew also," the DCI added.

"We're not packed," Clark said.

"Buy what you need over there, John, okay?" Mary Pat paused. "Sorry."

"Do we have any leads to run down?"

"Not yet, but that will change. You can't do something like this without leaving *some* footprints."

"Something's strange here," Chavez observed, looking down the long, narrow top-floor office. "John, remember what I said the other day?"

"No," Clark said. "What do you mean?"

"Some things you can't retaliate about, some things you can't reverse. Hey, if this was a terrorist op—"

"Too big," Mary Pat objected. "Too sophisticated."

"Fine, ma'am, even if it was, hell, we could turn the Bekaa Valley into a parking lot, and send the Marines in to paint the lines after it cools down. That ain't no secret. Same thing's true of a nation-state, isn't it? We ditched the ballistic missiles, but we still have nuclear bombs. We can burn any country down to bedrock, and President Ryan would do it least I wouldn't bet the house against it. I've seen the guy in action, and he ain't no pantywaist."

"So?" the DCl asked. He didn't say that it wasn't that simple. Before Ryan or anyone else initiated a nuclear-release order, the evidence would have to be of the sort to pass scrutiny with the Supreme Court, and he *didn't* think Ryan was the sort to do such a thing under most circumstances.

"So whoever ran this op is thinking one of two things. Either it won't matter if we find out, or we can't respond that way, or ..." There was a third one, wasn't there? It was almost there, but not quite.

"Or they take the President out but then why try for his little girl first?" Mary Pat asked. "That just increases security around him, makes the job harder instead of easier. We have things happening all over. The Chinese thing. The UIR. The Indian navy sneaked out to sea. All the political crap here, and now this Ebola. There's no picture. All these things are unconnected."

"Except they're all making *our* life hard, aren't they?" The room got quiet for a few seconds.

"The boy's got a point," Clark told the other two.

"IT ALWAYS STARTS in Africa," Lorenz said, filling his pipe. "That's where it lives. There was an outbreak in Zaire a few months ago."

"Didn't make the news," the FBI agent said.

"Only two victims, a young boy and a nurse—nursing nun, I think, but she was lost in a plane crash. Then there was a mini-break in Sudan, again two victims, an adult male and a little girl. The man died. The child survived. That was weeks ago, too. We have blood samples from the Index Case. We've been experimenting with that one

for a while now."

"How do you do that?"

"You culture the virus in tissue. Monkey kidneys, as a matter of fact—oh, yeah," he remembered.

"What's that?"

"I put in an order for some African greens. That's the monkey we use. You euthanatize them and extract the kidneys. Somebody got there first, and I had to wait for another order."

"Do you know who it was?"

Lorenz shook his head. "No, never found out. Put me back a week, ten days, that's all."

"Who else would want the monkeys?" the SAC asked.

"Pharmaceutical houses, medical labs, like that."

"Who would I talk to about that?"

"You serious?"

"Yes, sir."

Lorenz shrugged and pulled the card off his Rolodex. "Here."

THE BREAKFAST MEETING had taken a little time to arrange. Ambassador David L. Williams left his car, then was escorted into the Prime Minister's official residence. He was grateful for the time of day. India could be a furnace, and at his age the heat became increasingly oppressive, especially since he had to dress like an Ambassador, instead of a governor of Pennsylvania, where it was okay to look working class. In this country, working class meant even more informal clothing, and that made the upper crust even haughtier with their beloved symbols of status. World's largest democracy they liked to call this place, the retired politician thought. Sure.

The P.M. was already seated at the table. She rose when he entered the room, took his hand and conveyed him to his seat. The china was gold-trimmed, and a liveried servant came in to serve coffee. Breakfast started with melon.

"Thank you for receiving me," Williams said.

"You are always welcome in my house," the P.M. replied graciously. About as much as a snake, the Ambassador knew. The hi-how-are-you chitchat lasted for ten minutes. Spouses were fine. Children were fine. Grandchildren were fine. Yes, it was warming up with the approach of summer. "So what business do we have to discuss?"

"I understand that your navy has sailed."

"Yes, it has, I believe. After the unpleasantness your forces inflicted on us, they had to make repairs. I suppose they are making sure all their machines work," the P.M. replied.

"Just exercises?" Williams asked. "My government merely asks the

question, madam."

"Mr. Ambassador, I remind you that we are a sovereign nation. Our armed forces operate under our law, and you keep reminding us that the sea is free for the innocent passage of all. Are you now telling me that your country wishes to deny us that right?"

"Not at all, Prime Minister. We merely find it curious that you are evidently staging so large an exercise." He didn't add, *with your limited resources.*

"Mr. Ambassador, no one likes to be bullied. Only a few months ago you falsely accused us of harboring aggressive intentions to a neighbor. You threatened our country. You actually staged an attack on our navy and damaged our ships. What have we done to merit such unfriendly acts?" she asked, leaning back in her chair.

Unfriendly acts was not a phrase used lightly, the Ambassador noted, and was not accidentally spoken here.

"Madam, there has been no such act. I would suggest that if there were misperceptions, perhaps they were mutual, and to prevent further such errors, I come here to ask a simple question. America makes no threats. We simply inquire as to the intentions of your naval forces."

"And I have answered. We are conducting exercises." A moment before, Williams noted, she had *supposed* that something was going on. Now she seemed more certain of it. "Nothing more."

"Then my question is answered," Williams commented with a benign smile. Jesus, but she thought she was clever. Williams had grown up in one of America's most complex political environments, the Pennsylvania Democratic party, and had fought his way to the top of it. He'd met people like her before, just less sanctimonious. Lying was such a habit for political figures that they thought they could always get away with it. "Thank you, Prime Minister."

THE ENGAGEMENT WAS a wipeout, the first such in this training rotation. Pretty bad timing, Hamm thought, watching the vehicle returning up the dirt roads. They'd headed into it just after the President's announcement. They were Guardsmen, and they were far from home, and they were worried about their families. That had distracted them badly, since they hadn't had time to let things settle down a little, to call home and make sure things were okay with Mom and Dad, or honey and the kids. And they'd paid for it, but professional soldier that he was, Hamm knew it wasn't fair to mark this one down against the Carolina brigade. This sort of thing wouldn't happen in the field. Realistic as the NTC was, it was still play. Nobody died here except by accident, while at home the real thing might well

be taking place. That wasn't how it was supposed to be with soldiers, was it?

CLARK AND CHAVEZ had their blood drawn by an Army medic who also ran the screening test. They watched it with morbid fascination, especially since the medic wore thick gloves and a mask.

"You're both clean," he told them, with a sigh of his own.

"Thanks, Sarge," Chavez said. It was very real now. His dark Latino eyes were showing something other than relief. Like John, Domingo was putting on his mission face.

With that, they bundled into an official car for the drive to Andrews. The streets in the Washington metropolitan area were unusually empty. It made for a swift passage that didn't assuage the sense of foreboding they both felt. Crossing one of the bridges, they stopped and had to wait for three other vehicles to pass a checkpoint. There was a National Guard Hummer in the middle of the eastbound lanes, and when Clark pulled up, he showed his CIA picture-pass.

"Agency," he told the MP.

"Pass," the Spec-4 replied.

"So, where we going, Mr. C.?"

"Africa, via the Azores."

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INVESTIGATIONS

THE MEETING WITH THE Senate leadership went predictably. Issuing them surgical masks had set the tone of the evening for them—again, van Damm's idea. General Pickett had been to Hopkins to review procedures there, then flown back to give the main part of the briefing. The fifteen senators assembled in the East Room listened gravely, only their eyes showing above the masks.

"I'm not comfortable with your actions, Mr. President," one of them said. Jack couldn't tell which one.

"You think *I* am?" he replied. "If anybody has a better idea, let's hear it. I have to go with the best medical advice. If this thing is as deadly as the general says, then any mistake could kill people in the thousands—even millions. If we err, we have to err on the side of caution."

"But what about civil liberties?" another one demanded.

"Does any of those come before life?" Jack asked. "People, if anyone wants to give me a better option, I will listen—we have one of our experts here to help evaluate it. *But* I will *not* listen to objections that are not based on scientific fact. The Constitution and the law cannot anticipate every eventuality. In cases like this, we're supposed to use our heads—"

"We're supposed to be guided by principle!" It was the civil liberties Senator again.

"Fine, then let's talk about it. If there's a balance between what I have done and whatever else will keep the country moving—*and safe!*—let's find it. I *want* options! *Give me something I can use!*" There followed a silence and a lot of crossed looks. Even that was hard. The senators were spaced out in their seating.

"Why did you have to move so fast?"

"People may be dying, you jackass!" another senator snarled at his good friend and distinguished colleague. He had to be one of the new crop, Jack thought. Someone who didn't know the mantras yet.

"But what if you're wrong?" a voice asked.

"Then you can hold your impeachment trial after the House indicts me," Jack replied. "Then somebody else can make these decisions, and

God help him. Senators, my wife is in Hopkins right now, and she's going to take her turn treating these people. I don't like *that*, either. I would like to have your support. It's lonely standing up by myself like this, but whether you support your President or not, I have to do the best I can. I'll say it one more time: if anybody here has a better idea, let's hear it."

But nobody did, and it wasn't their fault. As little time as he'd had to come to terms with the situation, they'd had less.

THE AIR FORCE had managed tropical uniforms for them out of the Andrews Post Exchange—a medium-sized department store—since their Washington clothes were a little too heavy for a tropical environment. It made for good cover, too. Clark wore the silver eagles of a colonel, and Chavez was a major, complete with silver pilot's wings and ribbons donated by the flight crew of their VC-20B. There were, in fact, two sets of pilots. The backup crew was sleeping in the two most-forward passenger seats.

"Not bad for a retired E-6," Ding noted, though the uniform didn't fit all that well.

"Not bad for a retired E-7, either, and that's 'sir,' to you, Major Chavez."

"Three bags full, sir." It was their only light moment. The military version of the Gulfstream business jet had a ton of communications gear, and a sergeant to run it. The documents coming over the equipment threatened to exhaust the on-board supply of paper as they passed over Cape Verde, inbound to Kinshasa.

"Second stop is Kenya, sir." The communications sergeant was really an intelligence specialist. She read all the inbound traffic. "You have to see a man about some monkeys."

Clark took the page—he was the colonel, after all—and read it, while Chavez figured out how the ribbons went on the blue uniform shirt. He decided he didn't have to be too careful. It wasn't as though the Air Force were really a military service—at least according to the Army in which he'd once served, where it was an article of faith.

"Check this out," John said, handing the page over.

"That's a lead, Mr. C.," Ding observed at once. They traded a look. This was a pure intelligence mission, one of the few on which they'd been dispatched. They were tasked to gather vitally important information for their country, and nothing else. For now. Though they didn't say so, neither would have objected to doing something more. Though both were field officers of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, both were also former combat soldiers (in Clark's case, a former SEAL) who more often than not dropped into the DO's paramilitary side,

where they did things that the pure spooks regarded as a little too exciting. But often satisfying, Chavez told himself. Very satisfying. He was learning to control his temper—in fact, that part of his genetic heritage, as he called it now, had always been under tight control—but it didn't stop him from thinking about finding whoever it was who had attacked his country, and then dealing with him as soldiers did.

"You know him better than I do, John. What's he going to do?"

"Jack?" Clark shrugged. "That depends on what we get for him, Domingo. That's our job, remember?"

"Yes, sir," the younger man said seriously.

THE PRESIDENT DID not sleep well that night, though he told himself, and was told by others, that sleep was a prerequisite to making good decisions—and *that*, everyone emphasized, was his only real function. It was what the citizens expected him to do above all other things. He'd only had about six hours the previous day after an exhausting schedule of travel and speeches, but even so, sleep came hard. His staff and the staffs of many other federal agencies slept less, because, as sweeping as the executive orders were, they had to be implemented in a practical world, and that meant interpretation of the orders in the context of a living nation. A final complication was the fact that there was a problem with the two Chinas, who were thirteen hours ahead of Washington; another potential problem with India, ten hours ahead; and the Persian Gulf, eight hours ahead; in addition to the major crisis in America, which stretched across seven time zones all by itself, if one counted Hawaii—or even more if you added lingering possessions in the Pacific. Lying in bed on the residence floor of the White House, Ryan's mind danced around the globe, finally wondering what part of the world *wasn't* an area of some kind of concern. Around three he gave up the effort and rose, put on casual clothes and headed to the West Wing for the Signals Office, with members of the Detail in tow.

"What's happening?" he asked the senior officer present. It was Major Charles Canon, USMC, who'd been the one to inform him of the Iraqi assassination . . . which had seemed to start everything, he remembered. People started to jump to their feet. Jack waved them back into their seats. "As you were."

"Busy night, sir. Sure you want to be up for all this?" the major asked.

"I don't feel much like sleeping, Major," Ryan replied. The three Service agents behind him made faces behind SWORDSMAN'S back. They knew better even if POTUS didn't.

"Okay, Mr. President, we're linked in now with CDC and USAMRIID

communications lines, so we're copying all their data. On the map there we have all the cases plotted." Canon pointed. Someone had installed a new, large map of the United States mounted on a corkboard. Red pushpins obviously designated Ebola cases. There was a supply of black ones, too, whose import was all too obvious, though none were on the board yet. The pins were mainly clustered in eighteen cities now, with seemingly random singles and pairs spread all over the map. There were still a number of states untouched. Idaho, Alabama, both the Dakotas, even, strangely, Minnesota with its Mayo Clinic, were among the states so far protected by Ryan's executive order—or chance, and how did one tell the difference? There were several computer printouts—the printers were all running now. Ryan picked one up. The victim-patients were listed alphabetically by name, by state, by city, and by occupation. Roughly fifteen percent of them were in the "maintenance custodial" category, and that was the largest statistical grouping other than "sales marketing." This data came from the FBI and CDC, which were working together to study patterns of infection. Another printout showed suspected sites of infection, and that confirmed General Pickett's statement that trade shows had been selected as primary targets.

In all his time at CIA, Ryan had studied all manner of theoretical attacks against his country. Somehow this sort had never made it to his desk. Biological warfare was beyond the pale. He'd spent thousands of hours thinking about nuclear attack. What we had, what they had, what targets, what casualties, the hundreds of possible targeting options selected for political, military, or economic factors, and for each option there was a range of possible outcomes depending on weather, time of year, time of day, and other variables until the result could be addressed only by computers, and even then the likely results were only expressions of probability calculations. He'd hated every moment of that, and rejoiced at the end of the Cold War and its constant, implied threat of megadeaths. He'd even lived through a crisis that might have led that far. The nightmares from that, he remembered ...

The President had never taken a course in government per se, just the usual political-science courses at Boston College in pursuit of his first degree in economics. Mainly he remembered the words of an aristocratic planter, written almost thirty years before his ascension to become the country's third President: "... Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed." That was the mission statement right there. The Constitution he'd sworn to Preserve, Protect, and Defend was itself

designed to preserve, protect, and defend the lives and rights of the people out there, and he wasn't supposed to be here going over lists of names and places and occupations of people, at least eighty percent of whom were going to die. They were entitled to their lives. They were entitled to their liberty. They were entitled to the pursuit—by which Jefferson had meant the *vocation of,* not the chase after—of happiness. Well, somebody was taking lives. Ryan had ordered the suspension of their liberty. Sure as hell not many were happy right now . . .

"Here's actually a little bit of good news, Mr. President." Canon handed over the previous day's election results. It startled Ryan. He'd allowed himself to forget about that. Someone had compiled a list of the winners by profession, and less than half of them were lawyers. Twenty-seven were physicians. Twenty-three were engineers. Nineteen were farmers. Eighteen were teachers. Fourteen were businessmen of one sort or another. Well, that was something, wasn't it? Now he had about a third of a House of Representatives. How to get them to Washington, he wondered. They could not be impeded from that. The Constitution was explicit on that issue. While Pat Martin might argue that the suspension of interstate travel had never been argued before the high court, the Constitution mandated that members of the Congress could not be stopped from coming to a session except on cause of treason . . . ? Something like that. Jack couldn't remember exactly, but he knew that congressional immunity was a big deal.

Then a telex machine started chattering. An Army Spec-5 walked over to it.

"FLASH-traffic from State, from Ambassador Williams in India," he announced.

"Let's see." Ryan walked over, too. It wasn't good news. Neither was the next one from Taipei.

THE PHYSICIANS WERE working four-hour shifts. For every young resident there was a senior staff member. They were largely doing nurses' work, and though they mainly were doing it well, they also knew that it wouldn't matter all that much.

It was Cathy's first time in a space suit. She'd operated on thirty or so AIDS patients for eye complications of their disease, but that hadn't been terribly difficult. You used regular gloves, and the only real worry was the number of hands allowed in the surgical field, and for ophthalmic surgery that wasn't nearly the problem it was for thoracic. You went a little slower, were a little more careful in your movements, but that was it, really. Not now. Now she was in a big, thick plastic bag, wearing a helmet whose clear faceplate often fogged from her breath, looking at patients who were going to die despite the

attention of professor-rank physicians.

But they had to try anyway. She was looking down at the local Index Case, the Winnebago dealer whose wife was in the next room. There were two IVs running, one of fluids and electrolytes and morphine, the other of whole blood, both held rigidly in place so as not to damage the steel-vein interface. The only thing they could do was to support. It had once been thought that interferon might help, but that hadn't worked. Antibiotics didn't touch viral diseases, a fact which was not widely appreciated. There was nothing else, though a hundred people were now examining options in their labs. No one had ever taken the time with Ebola. CDC, the Army, and a few other labs across the world had done some work, but there hadn't been the effort devoted to other diseases that raged through "civilized" countries. In America and Europe research priority went to diseases that killed many, or which attracted a lot of political attention, because the allocation of government research money was a political act, and for private funding it tracked with what rich or prominent person had been unlucky. Myasthenia gravis had killed Aristotle Onassis, and the resultant funding, while not fast enough to help the shipping magnate, had made significant progress almost overnight—largely luck, Dr. Ryan knew, but true even so, and a blessing to other victims. The same principle extended to oncology, where the funding for breast cancer, which attacked roughly one woman in ten, far outstripped research in prostate cancer, which afflicted roughly half of the male population. A huge amount went into childhood cancers, which were statistically quite rare—only twelve cases a year per hundred thousand kids—but what was more valuable than a child? Nobody objected to that; certainly she did not. It came down to minuscule funding for Ebola and other tropical diseases because they didn't have a high profile in the countries which spent the money. That would change now, but not soon enough for the patients filling up the hospital.

The patient started gagging and turned to his right. Cathy grabbed the plastic trash can—emesis trays were too small and tended to spill—and held it for him. Bile and blood, she saw. Black blood. Dead blood. Blood full of the little crystalline "bricks" of Ebola virus. When he was done, she gave him a water container, the sort with a straw that gave a little bit of water from a squeeze. Just enough to wet his mouth.

"Thanks," the patient groaned. His skin was pale except in the places where it was blotched from subcutaneous bleeding. Petechiae. Must be Latin, Cathy thought. A dead language's word to designate the sign of approaching death. He looked at her, and he knew. He had to know. The pain was fighting up against the border of the current

morphine dosage, reaching his consciousness in waves, like the battering of a tide against a seawall.

"How am I doing?" he asked.

"Well, you're pretty sick," Cathy told him. "But you're fighting back very well. If you can hang in there long enough, your immune system can beat this thing down, but you have to hang tough for us." And that wasn't quite a lie.

"I don't know you. You a nurse?"

"No, I'm actually a professor." She smiled at him through the plastic shield.

"Be careful," he told her. "You really don't want this. Trust me." He even managed to smile back in the way that severely afflicted patients did. It nearly tore Cathy's heart from her chest.

"We're being careful. Sorry about the suit." She so needed to touch the man, to show that she really did care, and you couldn't do that through rubber and plastic, damn it!

"Hurts real bad, Doc."

"Lie back. Sleep as much as you can. Let me adjust the morphine for you." She walked to the other side of the bed to increase the drip, waiting a few minutes before his eyes closed. Then she walked back to the bucket and sprayed it with a harsh chemical disinfectant. The container was already soaked in it, to the point that the chemical had impregnated the plastic, and anything alive that fell into it would quickly be extinguished. Spraying the thirty or so cc's that he'd brought up was probably unnecessary, but there was no such thing as too many precautions now. A nurse came in and handed over the printout with the newest blood work. The patient's liver function was nearly off the scale, automatically highlighted by asterisks as though she wouldn't have noticed. Ebola had a nasty affinity for that organ. Other chemical indicators confirmed the start of systemic necrosis. The internal organs had started to die, the tissues to rot, eaten by the tiny virus strands. It was theoretically possible that his immune system could still summon its energy and launch a counterattack, but that was only theory, one chance in several hundred. *Some* patients *did* fight this off. It was in the literature which she and her colleagues had studied over the last twelve hours, and in that case, they were already speculating, if they could isolate the antibodies, they might have something they could use therapeutically.

If—maybe—might—could—possibly.

That wasn't medicine as she knew it. Certainly it wasn't the clean, antiseptic medicine she practiced at Wilmer, fixing eyes, restoring and perfecting sight. She thought again about her decision to enter ophthalmology. One of her professors had pressed her hard to look at oncology. She had the brains, she had the curiosity, she had the gift

for connecting things, he'd told her. But looking down at this sleeping, dying patient, she knew that, no, she didn't have the heart to do this every day. Not to lose so many. So did that make her a failure? Cathy Ryan asked herself. With this patient, she had to admit, yes, it did.

"DAMN," CHAVEZ SAID. "It's like Colombia."

"Or Vietnam," Clark agreed on being greeted with the tropical heat. There was an embassy official, and a representative of the Zaire government. The latter wore a uniform and saluted the arriving "officers," which courtesy John returned.

"This way, if you please, Colonel." The helicopter, it turned out, was French, and the service was excellent. America had dropped a lot of money into this country. It was payback time now.

Clark looked down. Triple-canopy jungle. He'd seen that before, in more than one country. In his youth, he'd been underneath, looking for enemies, and with enemies looking for him—little men in black pajamas or khaki uniforms, carrying AK-47s, people who wanted to take his life. Now he appreciated the fact that there was something down there even smaller, that was not carrying any weapon, and was targeted not merely on him, but at the heart of his country. It seemed so damned unreal. John Clark was a creature of his country. He'd been wounded in combat operations and other, more personal events, and every time was restored quickly to full health. There had been that one time, when he'd rescued an A-6 pilot up some river in North Vietnam whose name he couldn't remember anymore. He'd gotten cut, and the polluted river had infected him, and *that* had been fairly unpleasant, but drugs and time had fixed it. He'd come away from all the experiences with a deeply held belief that his country produced doctors who could fix just about anything—not old age, and not cancer, yet, but they were working on it, and in due course they'd win their battles as he'd won most of his. That was an illusion. He had to admit that now. As he and his country had lost their struggle in a jungle like this one, a thousand feet below the racing helicopter, so now the jungle was reaching out, somehow. No. He shook that off. The jungle wasn't reaching out. People had done that.

THE FOUR RO/RO ships formed up six hundred miles north-northwest of Diego Garcia. They were in a box formation, spaced a thousand yards abeam and a thousand yards fore and aft. The destroyer *O'Bannon* took position five thousand yards dead ahead. *Kidd* was ten thousand yards northeast of the ASW ship, with *Anzio* twenty miles in

advance of the rest. The replenishment group with its two frigates was westbound and would join up around sunset.

It was a good opportunity for an exercise. Six P-3C Orion aircraft were based at Diego Garcia—the number had once been larger—and one of them was patrolling ahead of the mini-convoy, dropping sonobuoys, a complex undertaking for so rapidly moving a formation, and listening for possible submarines. Another Orion was well in advance, tracking the Indian navy's two-carrier battle group from their radar emissions while staying well out of detection range. The lead Orion was not armed with anything but anti-sub weapons at the moment, and its mission was routine surveillance.

"YES, MR. PRESIDENT," the J-3 said. *Why aren't you asleep, Jack?* he couldn't say.

"Robby, did you see this thing from Ambassador Williams?"

"It got my attention," Admiral Jackson confirmed.

David Williams had taken his time drafting the communiqué. That had annoyed people at State, and caused two requests for his report which he had ignored. The former governor was drawing on all of his political savvy to consider the words the Prime Minister had chosen, her tone, her body language—the look in her eyes most of all. There was no substitute for that. Dave Williams had learned that lesson more than once. One thing he hadn't learned was diplomatic verbiage. His report was straightfrom-the-shoulder, and his conclusion was that India was up to something. He further noted that the Ebola crisis in America had not come up. Not a word of sympathy. That, he wrote, was probably a mistake in one sense, and a very deliberate act in another. India should have cared about it, or should have expressed concern even if she didn't. Instead it had been ignored. If asked, the Prime Minister would have said that she hadn't yet been informed, but that would be a lie, Williams added. In the age of CNN, things like that never went unnoticed. Instead, she had harped on being bullied by America, reminded him of the "attack" on her navy not once but twice, and then extended the remark into calling it an "unfriendly act," a phrase used in diplomacy right before a hand descended toward the holster. He concluded that India's naval exercise was not a mistake in either timing or location. The message he'd received was: *In your face!*

"So, what do you think, Rob?"

"I think Ambassador Williams is one shrewd son of a bitch, sir. The only thing he didn't say is something he didn't know: we don't have a carrier there. Now, the Indians haven't been tracking us in any way, but it's public knowledge that *Ike* is heading toward China, and if their

intel officers are halfway competent, they definitely *do* know. Then, *shazam*, they put out to sea. And now, we get this from the Ambassador. Sir—"

"Stow that, Robby," Ryan told him. "You've said that enough for one day."

"Fine. Jack, we have every reason to believe that China and India were working together before. So what happens now? China stages an incident. It gets nastier. We move a carrier. The Indians put to sea. Their fleet is on a direct line between Diego Garcia and the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf heats up."

"And we have a plague," Ryan added. He leaned forward on the cheap desk in Signals. He couldn't sleep, but that didn't mean he was fully awake, either. "Coincidences '?"

"Maybe. Maybe the Indian Prime Minister is pissed at us because we rattled their cage a while back. Maybe she just wants to show us that we can't push her around. Maybe it's petty bullshit, Mr. President. But maybe it ain't."

"Options?"

"We have a surface-action group in the Eastern Med, two Aegis cruisers, a Burke-class 'can, and three figs. The Med's quiet. I suggest that we consider moving that group through Suez to back up the *Anzio* group. I further suggest that we consider moving a carrier from WestLant to the Med. That will take a while, Jack. It's six thousand miles; even with a speed of advance of twenty-five knots that's almost nine days just to get a carrier close. We have more than a third of the world without a carrier handy, and the part that isn't covered is starting to make me nervous. If we have to do something, Jack, I'm not sure we can."

"HELLO, SISTER," CLARK said, taking her hand gently. He hadn't seen a nun in quite a few years.

"Welcome, Colonel Clark. Major." She nodded to Chavez.

"Afternoon, ma'am."

"What brings you to our hospital?" Sister Mary Charles's English was excellent, almost as though she taught it, with a Belgian accent that sounded just like French to the two Americans.

"Sister, we're here to ask about the death of one of your colleagues, Sister Jean Baptiste," Clark told her.

"I see." She waved to the chairs. "Please sit down."

"Thank you, Sister," Clark said politely.

"You are Catholic?" she asked. It was important to her.

"Yes, ma'am, we both are." Chavez nodded agreement with the "colonel."

"Your education?"

"Actually all Catholic schools for me," Clark said, indulging her. "Grade school was the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and Jesuits after that."

"Ah." She smiled, pleased at the news. "I have heard of the sickness that has broken out in your country. This is very sad. And so you are here to ask about poor Benedict Mkusa, Sister Jean, and Sister Maria Magdalena. But I fear we cannot be of much help to you."

"Why is that, Sister?"

"Benedict died and his body was cremated on government order," Sister Mary Charles explained. "Jean was taken ill, yes, but she left for Paris on a medical evacuation flight, you see, to visit the Pasteur Institute. The airplane crashed into the sea, however, and all were lost."

"All?" Clark asked.

"Sister Maria Magdalena flew off also, and Dr. Moudi, of course."

"Who was he?" John inquired next.

"He was part of the World Health Organization mission to this area. Some of his colleagues are in the next building." She pointed.

"Moudi, you said, ma'am?" Chavez asked, taking his notes.

"Yes." She spelled it for him. "Mohammed Moudi. A good doctor," she added. "It was very sad to lose them all."

"Mohammed Moudi, you said. Any idea where he was from?" It was Chavez again.

"Iran—no, that's just changed, hasn't it? He was educated in Europe, a fine young physician, and very respectful of us."

"I see." Clark adjusted himself in his seat. "Could we talk with his colleagues?"

"I THINK THE President's gone much too far," the doctor said on TV. He had to be interviewed in a local affiliate since he was unable to drive from Connecticut to New York this morning.

"Why is that, Bob?" the host asked. He'd come in from his home in New Jersey to the New York studio off Central Park West, just before the bridges and tunnels had been closed, and was sleeping in his office now. Understandably, he wasn't very happy about it.

"Ebola is a nasty one. There's no doubt of that," said the network's medical correspondent. He was a physician who didn't practice, though he spoke the language quite well. He mainly presented medical news, in the morning concentrating on the benefits of jogging and good diet. "But it's never been here, and the reason is that the virus can't survive here. However these people contracted it—and for the moment I will leave speculation on that aside—it *can't* spread very

far. I'm afraid the President's actions are precipitous."

"And unconstitutional," the legal correspondent added. "There's no doubt of that. The President has panicked, and that's not good for the country in medical or legal terms."

"Thanks a bunch, fellas," Ryan said, muting the set.

"We have to work on this," Arnie said.

"How?"

"You fight bad information with good information."

"Super, Arnie, except that proving I did the right thing means people have to die."

"We have a panic to prevent, Mr. President."

So far that hadn't happened, which was remarkable. Timing had helped. The news had mainly hit people in the evening. For the most part, they'd gone home, they had enough food in the pantry to see them through a few days, and the news had shocked enough that there had not been a nationwide raid on supermarkets. Those things would change today, however. In a few hours people would be protesting. The news media would cover that, and some sort of public opinion would form. Arnie was right. He had to do something about it. But what?

"How, Arnie?"

"Jack, I thought you'd never ask."

THE NEXT STOP was the airport. There it was confirmed that, yes, a privately owned, Swiss-registered G-IV business jet had indeed lifted off with a flight plan taking it to Paris via Libya, for refueling. The chief controller had a Xerox copy of the airport records and the aircraft's manifest ready for the visiting Americans. It was a remarkably comprehensive document, since it had to allow for customs control as well. Even the names for the flight crew were on it.

"Well?" Chavez asked.

Clark looked at the officials. "Thank you for your valuable assistance." Then he and Ding headed for the car that would take them to their aircraft.

"Well?" Ding repeated.

"Cool it, partner." The five-minute ride passed in silence. Clark looked out the window. Thunderheads were building. He hated flying in the things.

"No way. We wait a few minutes." The backup pilot was a lieutenant colonel. "We have rules."

Clark tapped the eagles on his epaulets and leaned right into his face. "Me colonel. Me say go, air scout. Right the *fuck* now!"

"Look, Mr. Clark, I know who you are and—"

"Sir," Chavez said, "I'm only an artificial major, but this mission's more important than your rules. Steer around the worst parts, will ya? We have barf bags if we need'em." The pilot glared at them, but moved back into the front office. Chavez turned. "Temper, John."

Clark handed over the paper. "Check the names for the flight crew. They ain't Swiss, and the registration of the aircraft is."

Chavez looked for that. HX-NJA was the registration code. And the names for the flight crew weren't Germanic, Gallic, or Italian.

"Sergeant?" Clark called as the engines started up.

"Yes, sir!" The NCO had seen this man tear the driver a new asshole.

"Fax this to Langley, please. You have the right number to use. Quick as you can, ma'am," he added, since she was a lady, and not just a sergeant. The NCO didn't get it, but didn't mind, either.

"Cinch those belts in tight," the pilot called over the intercom as the VC-20B started to taxi.

IT TOOK THREE tries because of electrical interference from the storm, but the facsimile transmission went through the satellite, downlinked to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and reappeared in Mercury, the Agency's communications nexus. The senior watch officer had his deputy run it to the seventh floor. By that time, Clark was on the phone to him.

"Getting some interference," the watch officer said. Digital satellite radio and all, a thunderstorm was still a thunderstorm.

"It's a little bumpy at the moment. Run the registration number and the names on that manifest. Everything you can get on them."

"Say again."

Clark did. It got through this time.

"Will do. Somebody's got a file on this. Anything else?"

"Back to you later. Out," he heard.

"SO?" DING ASKED, reefing his belt in tighter as the G took a ten-foot drop.

"Those names are in Farsi, Ding—oh, shit." Another major bump. He looked out the window. It was like a huge arena, a cylindrical formation of clouds with lightning all over the place. It wasn't often he looked down at that. "The bastard's doing this on purpose."

But he wasn't. The lieutenant colonel on the controls was scared. Air Force regulations not to mention common sense prohibited what he was doing. The weather radar in the nose showed red twenty

degrees left and right of his projected course to Nairobi. Left looked better. He turned thirty degrees, banking the executive jet like a fighter, searching for a smooth spot as he continued the climb-out. What he found wasn't smooth, but it was better. Ten minutes later the VC-20B broke into sunlight.

One of the spare pilots turned in her front row seat: "Satisfied, Colonel?" she asked.

Clark unbuckled his belt in defiance of the sign and went to the lavatory to splash water in his face. Then he knelt down on the floor next to her and showed her the paper that had just been transmitted. "Can you tell me anything about this?" She only needed one look.

"Oh, yeah," the captain said. "We got a notice on that."

"What?"

"This is essentially the same aircraft. When one breaks, the manufacturer tells everybody about it—I mean, we'd ask anyway, but it's almost automatic. He came out of here, flew north to Libya, landed to refuel, right? Took off right away, practically—medical flight, I think, wasn't it?"

"Correct. Go on."

"He called emergency, said he lost power on one engine, then the other, and went in. Three radars tracked it. Libya, Malta, and a Navy ship, destroyer, I think."

"Anything funny about it, Captain?"

She shrugged. "This is a good airplane. I don't think the military's ever broke one. You just saw how good. A couple of those bumps were two and a half, maybe three gees, and the engines—Jerry, have we ever lost an engine in flight on a -20?"

"Twice, I think. First one there was a defect on the fuel pump—Rolls-Royce sent out a fix on all of those. The other one, it was in November, a few years back. They ate a goose.

"That'll do it every time," she told Clark. "Goose weighs maybe fifteen, twenty pounds. We try to keep clear of them."

"This guy lost both engines, though?"

"They haven't figured out why yet. Maybe bad fuel. That happens, but the engines are isolated units, sir. Separate everything, pumps, electronics, you name it—"

"Except fuel," Jerry said. "That all comes out of one truck."

"What else? What happens when you lose an engine?"

"If you're not careful you can lose control. You get a full shutdown, the aircraft yaws into the dead engine. That changes airflow over the control surfaces. We lost a Lear, a VC-21, that way once. If it catches you in a transition maneuver when it happens, well, then it can get a little bit exciting. But we train for that, and the flight crew on this one, that was in the report. They were both experienced drivers, and

they go in the box—the training simulator—pretty regular. You have to, or they take your insurance away. Anyway, the radar didn't show them maneuvering. So, no, that shouldn't have done it to them. The best guess was bad fuel, but the Libyans said the fuel was okay."

"Unless the crew just totally screwed up," Jerry added. "But even that's hard. I mean, they make these things so you really have to try to break 'em, y'know? I got two thousand hours."

"Two and a half for me," the captain said. "It's safer'n driving a car in D.C., sir. We all love these things."

Clark nodded and went forward.

"Enjoying the ride?" the pilot in command said over his shoulder. His voice wasn't exactly friendly, and he didn't exactly have to worry about insubordination. Not with an "officer" wearing his own ribbons.

"I don't like leaning on people, Colonel. This is very important shit. That's all I can say."

"My wife's a nurse in the base hospital." He didn't have to say more. He was worried about her.

"So's mine, down in Williamsburg." The pilot turned on learning that, and nodded at his passenger.

"No real harm done. Three hours to Nairobi, Colonel."

"WELL, HOW DO *I* get back?" Raman asked over the phone.

"You don't for now," Andrea told him. "Sit tight. Maybe you can help the FBI with the investigation they have running."

"Well, that's just great!"

"Deal with it, Jeff. I don't have time for this," she told her subordinate crossly.

"Sure." He hung up.

That was odd, Andrea thought. Jeff was always one of the cool ones. But who was cool at the moment?

52

SOMETHING OF VALUE

EVER BEEN HERE BEFORE, John?" Chavez asked as their aircraft descended to meet its shadow on the runway.

"Passed through once. Didn't see much more than the terminal." Clark slipped off his belt and stretched. Sunset was descending here, too, and with it *not* the end of a very long day for the two intelligence officers. "Most of what I know comes from books by a guy named Ruark, hunting and stuff."

"You don't hunt—not animals, anyway," Ding added.

"Used to. I still like reading about it. Nice to hunt things that don't shoot back." John turned with part of a smile.

"Not as exciting. Safer, maybe," the junior agent allowed. How dangerous could a lion really be? he wondered.

The rollout took them to the military terminal. Kenya had a small air force, though what it did was a mystery to the visiting CIA/Air Force "officers," and seemed likely to remain so. The aircraft was met, again, by an embassy official, this one the Defense attaché, a black Army officer with the rank of colonel, and a Combat Infantryman's Badge that marked him as a veteran of the Persian Gulf War.

"Colonel Clark, Major Chavez." Then his voice stopped. "Chavez, do I know you?"

"Ninja!" Ding grinned. "You were brigade staff then, First of the Seventh."

"Cold Steel! You're one of the guys who got lost. I guess they found you. Relax, gentlemen, I know where you're from, but our hosts do not," the officer warned.

"Where's the CIB from, Colonel?" the former staff sergeant asked on the walk over to where the cars were.

"I had a battalion of the Big Red One in Iraq. We kicked a few and took a few." Then his mood changed. "So how are things at home?"

"Scary," Ding replied.

"Something to remember, bio-war is mainly a psychological weapon, like the threat of gas was against us back in '91. "

"Maybe so," Clark responded. "It sure as hell's got my attention, Colonel."

"Got mine, too," the Defense attaché admitted. "I got family in Atlanta. CNN says there's cases there."

"Read fast." John handed over the last data sent to them on the airplane. "This ought to be better than what's on TV." Not that *better* was the right word, he thought.

The colonel rated a driver, it seemed. He took the front seat in the embassy car and flipped through the pages.

"No official greeting this time?" Chavez asked.

"Not here. We'll have a cop where we're going. I asked my friends in the ministry to low-profile this one. I have some pretty good contacts around town."

"Good call," Clark said as the car started moving. Getting there only took ten minutes.

The animal dealer had his place of business on the outskirts of the city, conveniently located to the airport and the main highway west into the bush, but not too close to much else. The CIA officers soon discovered why.

"Christ," Chavez observed, getting out of the car.

"Yeah, they're noisy, aren't they? I was here earlier today. He's getting a shipment of greens ready for Atlanta." He opened a briefcase and handed something over. "Here, you'll need this."

"Right." Clark slid the envelope into his clipboard.

"Hello!" the dealer said, coming out of his office. He was a big man and, judging by his gut, knew his way around a case of beer. With him was a uniformed police officer, evidently a senior one. The attaché went to speak with him, and move him aside. The cop didn't seem to object. This infantry colonel, Clark saw, knew how the game was played.

"Howdy," John said, taking his hand. "I'm Colonel Clark. This is Major Chavez."

"You are American Air Force?"

"That's right, sir," Ding replied.

"I love airplanes. What do you fly?"

"All sorts of things," Clark answered. The local businessman was already half in the bag. "We have a few questions, if you don't mind."

"About monkeys? Why are you interested in monkeys? The chief constable didn't explain."

"Is it all that important?" John asked, handing over an envelope. The dealer pocketed it without opening it to count. He'd felt how thick it was.

"Truly it is not, but I do love to watch airplanes. So what can I tell you?" he asked next, his voice friendly and open.

"You sell monkeys," John said.

"Yes, I deal in them. For zoos, for private collectors, and for medical

laboratories. Come, I will show you." He led them toward a three-sided building made of corrugated iron, it looked like. Two trucks were there, and five workers were loading cages onto it, their hands in thick leather gloves.

"We just had an order from your CDC in Atlanta," the dealer explained, "for a hundred greens. They are pretty animals, but very unpleasant. The local farmers hate them."

"Why?" Ding asked, looking at the cages. They were made of steel wire, with handles at the top. From a distance they appeared to be of the size used to transport chickens to market . . . viewed closer, they were a little large for that, but ...

"They ravage crops. They are a pest, like rats, but more clever, and people from America think they are gods or something, the way they complain on how they are used in medical experiments." The dealer laughed. "As though we would run out of them. There are millions. We raid a place, take thirty, and a month later we can come back and take thirty more. The farmers beg us to come and trap them."

"You had a shipment ready for Atlanta earlier this year, but you sold them to someone else, didn't you?" Clark asked. He looked over to his partner, who didn't approach the building. Rather, he separated from Clark and the dealer, and walked on a line away from it. He seemed to be staring at the empty cages. Maybe the smell bothered him. It was pretty thick.

"They did not pay me on time, and another customer came along, and he had his money all ready," the dealer pointed out. "This is a business, Colonel Clark."

John grinned. "Hey, I'm not here from the Better Business Bureau. I just want to know who you sold them to."

"A buyer," the dealer said. "What else do I need to know?"

"Where was he from?" Clark persisted.

"I do not know. He paid me in dollars, but he was probably not an American. He was a quiet fellow," the dealer remembered, "not very friendly. Yes, I know I was late getting the new shipment to Atlanta, but they were late in paying me," he reminded his guest. "You, fortunately, were not."

"They went out by air?"

"Yes, it was an old 707. It was full. They were not just my monkeys. They had gotten them elsewhere, too. You see, the green is so common. It lives all over Africa. Your animal worshippers need not worry about extinction for the green. The gorilla, now, I admit that is something else." Besides, they mainly lived in Uganda and Rwanda, and more was the pity. People paid real money for them.

"Do you have records? The name of the buyer, the manifest, the registration of the airplane?"

"Customs records, you mean." He shook his head. "Sadly, I do not. Perhaps they were lost."

"You have an arrangement with the airport officials," John said with a smile that he didn't feel.

"I have many friends in the government, yes." Another smile, the sly sort that confirmed his arrangement. Well, it wasn't as though there was no such thing as official corruption in America, was it? Clark thought.

"And you don't know where they went, then?"

"No, there I cannot help you. If I could, I would gladly do so," the dealer replied, patting his pocket. Where the envelope was. "I regret to say that my records are incomplete for some of my transactions."

Clark wondered if he could press the man further on this issue. He suspected not. He'd never worked Kenya, though he had worked Angola, briefly, in the 1970s, and Africa was a very informal continent, and cash was the lubricant. He looked over to where the Defense attaché was talking to the chief constable—the title was a holdover from British rule, which he'd read about in one of Ruark's books, and so were the shorts and kneesocks. He was probably confirming that, no, the dealer wasn't a criminal, just creative in his relationships with local authorities who, for a modest fee, looked the other way when asked. And monkeys were hardly a vital national commodity, assuming the dealer was truthful about the numbers of the things. And he probably was. It sounded true. The farmers would probably be just as happy to be rid of the damned things just to make the noise stop. It sounded like a riot in the biggest bar in town on a Friday night. And they were nasty little bastards, reaching and snapping at the gloved hands transferring the cages. What the hell, they were having a bad day. And on getting to CDC Atlanta, it wouldn't get much better, would it? Were they smart enough to know? Damned sure Clark knew. You didn't ship this many to pet stores. But he didn't have enough solicitude to waste on monkeys at the moment.

"Thank you for your help. Perhaps someone will be back to speak with you."

"I regret that I could not tell you more." He was sincere enough about it. For five thousand dollars in cash, he thought he should do more. Not that he'd return any, of course.

The two men walked back toward the car. Chavez joined up, looking pensive, but not saying anything. As they approached, the cop and the attaché shook hands. Then it was time for the Americans to leave. As the car pulled off, John looked back to see the dealer take the envelope from his pocket and extract a few bills to hand over to the friendly chief constable. That made sense, too.

"What did you learn?" the real colonel asked.

"No records," John replied.

"It's the way they do business here. There's an export fee for those things, but the cops and the customs people usually have an—"

"Arrangement," John interrupted with a frown.

"That's the word. Hey, my father came from Mississippi. They used to say down there that one term as county sheriff fixed a guy up for life, y'know?"

"Cages," Ding said suddenly.

"Huh?" Clark asked.

"Didn't you see, John, the cages! We seen 'em before, just like those—in Tehran, in the air force hangar." He'd kept his distance in order to duplicate what he'd seen at Mehrabad. The relative size and proportions were the same. "Chicken coops or cages or whatever in a hangar with fighter planes, remember?"

"Shit!"

"One more indicator, Mr. C. Them coincidences are piling up, 'mano. Where we goin' next?"

"Khartoum."

"I saw the movie."

NEWS COVERAGE CONTINUED, but little else. Every network affiliate became more important as the "name" correspondents were trapped in their base offices of New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and the news devoted a great deal of time to visuals of National Guardsmen on the major interstate highways, blocking the roads physically with Hummers or medium trucks. No one really tried to run the blockades there. Food and medical supply trucks were allowed through, after each was inspected, and in a day or two, the drivers would be tested for Ebola antibodies, and given picture passes to make their way more efficiently. The truckers were playing ball.

It was different for other vehicles and other roads. Though most interstate highway traffic went on the major highways, there was not a state in the Union that didn't have an extensive network of side roads that interconnected with those of neighboring states, and all of these had to be blocked, too. That took time to accomplish, and there were interviews of people who'd gotten across and thought it something of a joke, followed by learned commentary that this proved that the President's order was impossible to implement completely, in addition to being wrong, stupid, and unconstitutional.

"It just isn't possible," one transportation expert said on the morning news.

But that hadn't accounted for the fact that National Guardsmen

lived in the country they guarded, and could read maps. They were also offended by the implied statement that they were fools. By noon on Wednesday there was a vehicle on every country road, crewed by men with rifles and wearing the chemical-protective suits that made them look like men (and women, though that was almost impossible to tell) from Mars.

On the side roads, if not the main ones, there were clashes. Some were mere words—my family is right over there, give a guy a break, okay? Sometimes the rule was enforced with a little common sense, after an identification check and a radio call. In other cases, the enforcement was literal, and here and there words were exchanged, some of them heated, and some of those escalated, and in two cases shots were fired, and in one of them a man was killed. Reported rapidly up the line, it was national news in two hours, and again commentators wondered at the wisdom of the President's order. One of them laid the death on the front steps of the White House.

For the most part, even those most determined to make their way to their cross-border destinations saw the uniformed men with guns and decided that it wasn't worth the risk.

The same applied to international borders. The Canadian military and police closed all border-crossing points. American citizens in Canada were asked to report to the nearest hospital for testing, and there they were detained, in a civilized way. Something similar happened in Europe, though there the treatment differed from one country to another. For the first time, it was the Mexican army which closed America's southern border, in cooperation with U.S. authorities, this time against traffic mainly moving south.

Some local traffic was moving. Supermarkets and convenience stores allowed people in, mainly in small numbers, to purchase necessities. Pharmacies sold out of surgical masks. Many called local hardware and paint dealers to get protective masks made for other uses, and TV coverage helped there by telling people that such masks, sprayed with common household disinfectants, offered better protection against a virus than the Army's chemical gear. But inevitably, some people overdid the spraying, and that resulted in allergic reactions, respiratory difficulties, and a few deaths.

Physicians all across the country were frantically busy. It was rapidly known that the initial presentation of Ebola was similar to flu symptoms, and any doctor could relate that people could *think* themselves into those. Telling the truly sick from the hypochondriac was rapidly becoming the most demanding of medical skills.

Despite it all, however, people dealt with it, watched their televisions, looked at one another, and wondered how much substance there was to the scare.

THAT WAS THE job of CDC and USAMRIID, aided by the FBI. There were now five hundred confirmed cases, each of which had been tied directly or indirectly to eighteen trade shows. That gave them time references. It also identified four other trade shows from which no illnesses had as yet developed. All twenty-two had been visited by agents, all of whom learned that in every case the rubbish from the shows had long since been hauled off. There was some thought that the trash might be picked through, but USAMRIID waved the Bureau off, and said that identifying the distribution system would mean comparing the contents of thousands of tons of material, a task that simply was not possible, and might even be dangerous. The important discovery was the time window. That information was made public at once. Americans who had traveled out of the country prior to the start dates of the trade shows that were known to have been focal centers were not dangerous. That fact was made known to national health services worldwide, most of which tacked on from two days to a full week. From them, the information became global knowledge within a few hours. There was no stopping it, and there was no purpose in keeping the secret, even if it were possible to do so.

"WELL. THAT MEANS we're all safe," General Diggs told his staff at the morning conference. Fort Irwin was one of the most isolated encampments in America. There was only one way in and out, and that road was now blocked by a Bradley.

That wasn't true of other military bases; the problem was global. A senior Army officer from the Pentagon had flown to Germany to hold a conference with V Corps headquarters, and two days later collapsed, in the process infecting a doctor and two nurses. The news had shaken NATO allies, who instantly quarantined American encampments that dated back to the 1940s. The news was also instantly on global TV. What was worse in the Pentagon was that nearly every base had a case, real or suspected. The effect on unit morale was horrific, and that information, also, was impossible to conceal. Transatlantic phone lines burned with worry headed in both directions.

THINGS WERE FRANTIC in Washington, too. The joint task force included members of all the intelligence services, plus FBI and the federal law-enforcement establishment. The President had given them

a lot of power to use, and they intended to use it. The manifest of the lost Gulfstream business jet had started things moving in a new and unexpected direction, but that was the way of investigations.

In Savannah, Georgia, an FBI agent knocked on the door of the president of Gulfstream and handed him a surgical mask. The factory was shut down, as were most American businesses, but that executive order would be bent today. The president called his chief safety officer and told him to head in, along with the firm's senior test pilot. Six FBI agents sat down with them for a lengthy chat. That soon evolved into a conference call. The most important immediate result was the discovery that the lost aircraft's flight recorder hadn't been recovered. *That* resulted in a call to the CO of USS *Radford,* who confirmed that his ship, now in drydock, had tracked the lost aircraft and then had searched for the sonar pings of the black box, but to no avail. The naval officer could not explain that. Gulfstream's chief test pilot explained that if the aircraft hit hard enough, the instrument could break despite its robust design. But it hadn't been going all *that* fast, the *Radford*'s skipper remembered, and no debris had been found, either. As a result of that, the FAA and NTSB were called in and told to produce records instantly.

In Washington—the working group was in the FBI Building—looks were exchanged over the masks everyone was wearing. The FAA part of the team had run down the identity of the flight crew and their qualifications. It turned out that they were both former Iranian air force pilots, trained in America in the late 1970s. From that came photos and fingerprints. Another pair of pilots, flying the same sort of aircraft for the same Swiss corporation, had similar training, and the FBI's legal attaché in Bern made an immediate call to his Swiss colleagues to request assistance in interviewing them.

"Okay," Dan Murray summarized. "We got a sick Belgian nun and a friend with an Iranian doctor. They fly off in a Swiss-registered airplane that disappears without a trace. The airplane belongs to a little trading company the leg-alt will run that down for us pretty fast, but we know the flight crew was Iranian."

"It does seem to be heading in a certain direction, Dan," Ed Foley said. Just then an agent came in with a fax for the CIA Director. "Check this out." He slid it across the table. It wasn't a long message.

"People think they're so fuckin' smart," Murray told the people around the table. He passed the new dispatch around.

"Don't underestimate 'em," Ed Foley warned. "We don't have anything hard yet. The President can't take any action at all on anything until we do." And maybe not even then, his mind went on, as gutted as the military is right now. There was also the thing Chavez had said before flying off. Damn, but that kid was getting smart. Foley

wondered whether to bring that up. There were more pressing matters for now, he decided. He could discuss it with Murray privately.

CHAVEZ DIDN'T FEEL smart as he dozed in his leather seat. It was another three-hour hop to Khartoum, and he was having dreams, fitful ones. He'd done his share of flying as a CIA officer, but even on a plush executive jet with all the bells and whistles, you got tired of it in a hurry. The diminished air pressure meant diminished oxygen, and that made you tired. The air was dry, and that dehydrated you. The noise of the engines made it like sleeping out in the boonies with insects swarming around all the time, always ready to suck your blood, and you could never make the little bastards go away.

Whoever was doing whatever was happening wasn't all that smart. Okay, an airplane had disappeared with five people aboard, but that wasn't necessarily a dead end, was it? HX-NJA, he remembered from the customs document. Hmph. They'd probably kept records because they were shipping out people, rather than monkeys. HX for Switzerland. Why HX? he wondered. "H" for Helvetia, maybe? Wasn't that an old name for Switzerland? Didn't some languages still call it that? He seemed to remember that some did. German, maybe. NJA to identify the individual aircraft. They used letters instead of numbers because it made for more permutations. Even this one had such a code, with an "N" prefix because American aircraft used that letter code. NJA, he thought with his eyes closed. NJA. Ninja. That generated a smile. The sobriquet for his old outfit, 1st Battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment. "We own the night!" Yeah, those were the days, humping the hills at Fort Ord and Hunter-Liggett. But the 7th Infantry Division (Light) had been deestablished, its standards furled and cased for retirement, or maybe later use ... Ninja. That seemed important. Why?

His eyes opened. Chavez stood, stretched, and went forward. There he woke the pilot with whom Clark had had that little tiff. "Colonel?"

"What is it?" Only one eye opened.

"What's one of these things cost?"

"More 'n either one of us can afford." The eye closed back down.

"Seriously."

"Upwards of twenty million dollars, depending on the version and the avionics package. If somebody makes a better business jet, I don't know what it is."

"Thanks." Chavez returned to his seat. There was no sense in trying to fade back out. He felt the nose lower and heard the engines reduce their annoying sound. They were starting their descent into Khartoum. The local CIA station chief would be meeting—excuse me, he thought

to himself. Commercial attaché. Or was it political officer? Whatever. He knew that this city wouldn't be as friendly as the last two.

THE HELICOPTER LANDED at Fort McHenry, close to the statue of Orpheus that someone had decided was appropriate to honor the name of Francis Scott Key, Ryan noted irrelevantly. About as irrelevant as Arnie's idea for a fucking photo opportunity. He had to show he was concerned. Jack wondered about that. Did people think that at times like this the President threw a party? Hadn't Poe written a story like that? "The Mask of the Red Death"? Something like that. But that plague had gotten into the party, hadn't it? The President rubbed his face. *Sleep*. *Have to sleep*. *Thinking crazy shit*. It was like flashbulbs. Your mind got tired and random thoughts blinked into your mind for no apparent reason, and then you had to fight them back, and get your mind going on the important stuff.

The usual Chevy Suburbans were there, but not the presidential limo. Ryan would ride in the obviously armored vehicle. There were cops around, too, looking grim. Well, everybody else did, too. Why not them?

He, too, was wearing a mask, and there were three TV cameras to record the fact. Maybe it was going out live. He didn't know, and scarcely looked at the cameras on the short walk to the cars. They started moving almost at once, up Fort Avenue, then north onto Key Highway. It was ten fast minutes over vacated city streets, heading toward Johns Hopkins, where the President and First Lady would show how concerned they were for other cameras. A leadership function, Arnie had told him, picking a phrase he was sure to recognize as something he had to respect whether he liked it or not. And the hell of it was, Arnie was right. He was the President, and he couldn't isolate himself from the people-whether he could do anything substantive to help them or not, they had to see him being concerned. It was something that did and didn't make sense, all at the same time.

The motorcade pulled into the Wolfe Street entrance. There were soldiers there, Guardsmen of the 175th Infantry Regiment, the Maryland Line. The local commander had decided that all hospitals had to be guarded, and Ryan supposed that was one of the things that did make sense. The Detail was nervous to have men around with loaded rifles, but they were soldiers, and that was that—disarming them might have made the news, after all. They all saluted, masked as they were in their MOPP gear, rifles slung over their shoulders. Nobody had threatened the hospital. Perhaps they were the reason why, or maybe it was just that people were scared. Enough that one cop had remarked to a Service agent that street crime had dropped to

almost nil. Even the drug dealers were nowhere to be seen.

There were not very many people to be seen anywhere at this hour, but all of them were masked, and even the lobby was heavy with the chemical smell that was now the national scent. How much of that was a necessary physical measure, and how much psychological? Jack wondered. But, then, that's what his trip was.

"Hi, Dave," the President said to the dean. He was wearing greens instead of his suit, masked like everyone else, and gloved, too. They didn't shake hands.

"Mr. President, thank you for coming." There were cameras in the lobby—they'd followed him in from outside. Before any of the reporters could shout a request for a statement, Jack pointed, and the dean led the party off. Ryan supposed it would look businesslike. Secret Service agents hustled to get ahead as they walked from the elevator bank to the medical floor. The doors slid open to reveal a busy corridor. Here there was bustle and people.

"What's the score, Dave?"

"We have thirty-four patients admitted here. Total for the area is one hundred forty—well, was the last time I checked. We have all the space we need for now, and all the staff, too. We've released about half of our patients, the ones we could sign out safely. All elective procedures are canceled for now, but there is the usual activity. I mean, babies are being born. People get sick from the normal diseases. Some outpatient treatments have to be continued, epidemic or not."

"Where's Cathy?" Ryan asked, as the next elevator arrived with a single camera whose tape would be pooled with all the networks. The hospital didn't want or need to be crowded with extraneous people, and while media management people had made a little noise, their field personnel weren't all that eager, either. Maybe it was the antiseptic smell. Maybe it affected people the same way it affected dogs taken to the vet. It was the smell of danger for everyone.

"This way. Let's get you suited up." The floor had a doctors' lounge, and one for nurses. Both were being used. The one at the far end was "hot," used for disrobing and decontamination. The near one was supposed to be safe, used for suiting up. There wasn't time or space for all the niceties. The Secret Service agents went in first and saw a woman in bra and panties, picking a plastic suit that was her size. She didn't blush. It was her fourth shift on the unit, and she was beyond that.

"Hang your clothes over there." She pointed. "Oh!" she added, recognizing the President.

"Thank you," Ryan said, taking his shoes off and taking a clothes hanger from Andrea. Price examined the woman briefly. Clearly she wasn't carrying a weapon. "How is it?" Jack asked.

She was the charge nurse for the floor. She didn't turn to answer. "Pretty bad." She paused for a second and then decided she had to turn. "We appreciate the fact that your wife is up here with us."

"I tried to talk her out of it," he admitted to her. He didn't feel the least bit guilty about it, either, and wondered if he should or not.

"So'd my husband." She came over. "Here, the helmet goes on like this." Ryan experienced a brief moment of panic. It was a most unnatural act to put a plastic bag over one's head. The nurse read his face. "Me, too. You get used to it."

Across the room, Dean James was already in his. He also came over to check the President's protective gear.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah." Jack was sweating now, despite the portable air-conditioning pack that hooked on his belt.

The dean turned to the Secret Service personnel. "From here on, I'm the boss," he told them. "I won't let him get into any danger, but we don't have enough suits for you people. If you stay in the corridors, you'll be safe. Don't touch anything. Not the walls, not the floors, nothing. Somebody goes past you with a cart, get out of the way. If you can't get out of the way, walk to the end of the corridor. If you see any kind of plastic container, stay clear of it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." For once, Andrea Price was cowed, POTUS saw. As was he. The psychological impact of this was horrific. Dr. James tapped the President on the shoulder.

"Follow me. I know it's scary, but you are safe in this thing. We all had to get used to it, too, didn't we, Tisha?"

The nurse turned, now fully in hers. "Yes, Doctor."

You could hear your breathing. There was the whir of the A/C pack, but everything else was muted. Ryan felt a frightening sense of confinement as he walked behind the dean.

"Cathy's in here." He opened the door. Ryan entered.

It was a child, a boy, aged eight or so, Jack saw. Two blue-clad figures were ministering to him. From behind he couldn't tell which one was his wife. Dr. James held his hand up, forbidding Ryan from taking another step. One of the two was trying to restart an IV, and there couldn't be any distractions. The child was moaning, writhing on the bed. Ryan couldn't see much of him, but he saw enough for his stomach to turn.

"Hold still now. This will make you feel better." It was Cathy's voice; evidently she was doing the stick. The other two hands were holding the arm in place. "... there. Tape," she added, lifting her hands.

"Good stick, Doctor."

"Thank you." Cathy went to the electronic box that controlled the

morphine and pushed in the right numbers, checking to be sure that the machine started functioning properly. With that done, she turned. "Oh."

"Hi, honey."

"Jack, you don't belong here," SURGEON told him firmly.

"Who does?"

"OKAY. I HAVE a line on this Dr. MacGregor," the station chief told them, driving his red Chevy. His name was Frank Clayton, a graduate of Grambling, whom Clark had seen through the Farm some years earlier.

"Then let's go see him, Frank." Clark checked his watch, did the calculations, and decided that it was two hours after midnight. He grunted. Yeah, that was about right. First stop was the embassy, where they changed clothes. American military uniforms weren't all that welcome here. In fact, the station chief warned, few things American were. Chavez noted that a car followed them in from the airport.

"Don't sweat it. We'll lose him at the embassy. You know, sometimes I wonder if it wasn't a good deal when my folks got kidnapped out of Africa. Don't tell anybody I said that, okay? South Alabama is like heaven on earth compared to this shithole."

He parked the car in the embassy's back lot and took them inside. A minute later one of his people walked out, started the Chevy, and headed right back out. The tail car went with him.

"Shirts," the CIA resident officer said, handing them over. "I suppose you can leave the pants on."

"Have you talked to MacGregor?" Clark asked.

"On the phone a few hours ago. We're going to drive over to where he lives, and he's going to get into the car. I have a nice quiet parking spot picked out for our chat," Clayton told them.

"Any danger to him?"

"I doubt it. The locals are pretty sloppy. If we have anybody tailing us, I know what to do about it."

"Then let's move, buddy," John said. "We're burning moonlight."

MacGregor's quarters weren't all that bad, located in a district favored by Europeans, and, the station chief related, fairly secure. He lifted his cellular phone and dialed the doctor's beeper number—— there was a local paging service. Less than a minute later his door opened, and a figure walked to the car, got in the back, and closed the door a second before it moved off.

"This is rather unusual for me." He was younger than Chavez, John was surprised to note, and eager in rather a shy way. "Who exactly are

you chaps?"

"CIA," Clark told him.

"Indeed!"

"Indeed, Doctor," Clayton said from the front seat. His eyes checked the mirrors. They were clear. Just to make sure, he took the next left, then a right, and then another left. Good.

"Are you allowed to tell people that?" MacGregor asked as the car pulled back onto what passed locally as the main drag. "Do you have to kill me now?"

"Doc, save that for the movies, okay?" Chavez suggested. "Real life ain't like that, and if we told you we were from the State Department, you wouldn't believe us anyway, right?"

"You don't look like diplomats," MacGregor decided.

Clark turned in the front seat. "Sir, thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

"The only reason I did so—well, the local government forced me to disregard normal procedures for my two cases. There's a reason for those procedures, you know."

"Okay, first of all, could you please tell me all you can about them?" John asked, switching on the tape recorder.

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"YOU LOOK TIRED, Cathy." Not that it was all that easy to tell through the plastic mask. Even her body language was disguised.

SURGEON looked over to the wall clock behind the nursing station. She was technically off duty now. She would never learn that Arnie van Damm had called the hospital to make sure the timing went right for this. It would have enraged her, and she was mad enough at the whole world already.

"The kids started arriving this afternoon. Second-generation cases. That one in there must have got it from his father. His name is Timothy. He's in the third grade. His dad's on the next floor up."

"Rest of the family?"

"His mom tested positive. They're admitting her now. He has a big sister. She's clean so far. We have her sitting over in the outpatient building. They set up a holding area there for people who've been exposed but don't test out. Come on. I'll show you around the floor." A minute later they were in Room 1, temporary home of the Index Case.

Ryan thought he must be imagining the smell. There was a dark stain on the bedclothes which two people—nurses, doctors, he couldn't tell—were struggling to change. The man was semiconscious,

and fighting the restraints that held his arms to the bed bars. That had the two medics concerned, but they had to change the sheets first. Those went into a plastic bag.

"They'll get burned," Cathy said, pressing her helmet against her husband's. "We've really dialed up the safety precautions."

"How bad?"

She pointed back to the door and followed Jack into the corridor. Once there, with the door closed behind them, she poked an angry finger into his chest. "Jack, you never, *ever* discuss a patient's prognosis in front of them, unless you know it's good. *Never!*" She paused, and went on without an apology for the outburst: "He's three days into frank symptoms."

"Any chance?"

Her head shook inside the helmet. They walked back up the corridor, stopping in some more rooms where the story was dismally the same.

"Cathy?" It was the dean's voice. "You're off duty. Move," he commanded.

"Where's Alexandre?" Jack asked on the way to the former physicians' lounge.

"He's got the floor upstairs. Dave has taken this one himself. We hoped Ralph Forster would get back and help out, but there aren't any flights." Then she saw the cameras. "What the hell are *they* doing here?"

"Come on." Ryan led his wife into the changing room. The clothing he'd worn to the hospital was bagged somewhere. He put on scrubs, in front of three women and a man who didn't seem all that interested in ogling any of the females. Leaving the room, he headed for the elevator.

"Stop!" a female voice called. "There's a case coming up from ER! Use the stairs." And obediently, the Secret Service Detail did just that. Ryan led his wife down to the main floor, and from there out front, still wearing masks.

"How are you holding up?"

Before she could answer, a voice screamed, *"Mr. President!"* Two Guardsmen got in the way of the reporter and cameraman, but Ryan waved them off. The pair approached under armed scrutiny, uniformed and plainclothes.

"Yes, what is it?" Ryan asked, pulling his mask down. The reporter held the microphone at full arm's length. It would have been comical under other circumstances. Everybody was spooked.

"What are you doing here, sir?"

"Well, I guess it's part of my job to see what's going on, and also I wanted to see how Cathy is doing."

"We know the First Lady is working upstairs. Are you trying to make a statement to the nation—"

"I'm a *doctor!*" Cathy snapped. "We're all taking turns up there. It's my job."

"Is it bad?"

Ryan spoke before she could explode at them. "Look, I know you have to ask that question, but you know the answer. These people are extremely ill, and the docs here, and everyplace else, are doing their best. It's hard on Cathy and her colleagues. It's really hard on the patients and their families."

"Dr. Ryan, is Ebola really as deadly as everyone has been saying?"

She nodded. "It's pretty awful, yes. But we're giving these people the best we got."

"Some have suggested that since the hope for the patients is so bleak, and since their pain is so extreme—"

"What are you saying? Kill them?"

"Well, if they're really suffering as much as everyone reports—"

"I'm not that kind of doctor," she replied, her face flushed. "We're going to save some of these people. From those we save, maybe we can learn to save more, and you don't learn *anything* by giving up. That's why real doctors don't kill patients! What is the matter with you? Those are *people* in there, and my job is fighting for their lives—and don't you dare tell me how to do it!" She stopped when her husband's arm squeezed her shoulder. "Sorry. It's a little tough in there."

"Could you excuse us for a few minutes?" Ryan asked. "We haven't talked since yesterday. You know, we are husband and wife, just like real people."

"Yes, sir." They pulled back, but the camera stayed on them.

"Come here, babe." Jack embraced her for the first time in more than a day.

"We're going to lose them all, Jack. Every one, starting tomorrow or the next day," she whispered. Then she started crying.

"Yeah." He lowered his head on hers. "You know, you're allowed to be human, too, Doctor."

"How do they think we learned anything? Oh, we can't fix it, so let 'em all die with dignity. Give up. That's not what they taught me here."

"I know."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes on his shirt. "Okay, back under control now. I'm off duty for eight hours."

"Where are you sleeping?"

A deep breath. A shudder. "Maumenee. They have some cots set up. Bernie's up in New York, helping out at Columbia. They have a couple

hundred cases there."

"You're pretty tough, Doctor." He smiled down at his wife.

"Jack, if you find out who did this to us ..."

"Working on it," POTUS said.

"KNOW ANY OF these people?" The station chief handed over some photos he'd shot himself. He handed over a flashlight, too.

"That's Saleh! Who was he, exactly? He didn't say and I never found out."

"These are all Iraqis. When the government came down, they flew here. I have a bunch of photos. You're sure of this one?"

"Quite sure, I treated him for over a week. The poor chap died." MacGregor went through some more. "And that looks like Sohaila. She survived, thank God. Lovely child—and that's her father."

"What the hell?" Chavez asked. "Nobody told us that."

"We were at the Farm then, weren't we?"

"Back to being a training officer, John?" Frank Clayton grinned. "Well, I got the word, and so I went out to shoot the pictures. They came in first class, by God, a big ol' G. Here, see?"

Clark looked at it and grunted—it was almost a twin to the one they were using for their round-the-world jaunt. "Nice shots."

"Thank you, sir."

"Let me see that." Chavez took the photo. He held the light right up against it. *"Ninja, "* he whispered. "Fucking *ninja* ..."

"What?"

"John, read those letters off the tail," Ding said quietly.

"HX-NJA ... my God."

"Clayton," Chavez said, "is that cellular phone secure?"

The station chief turned it on and punched in three digits. "It is now. Where do you want to call?"

"Langley."

"MR. PRESIDENT, CAN we talk to you now?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, sure, come on." He needed to walk some, and waved for them to follow. "Maybe I should apologize for Cathy. She's not like that. She's a good doc," SWORDSMAN said tiredly. "They're all pretty stressed out up there. The first thing they teach 'em here, I think it goes *primum non nocere*, 'First of all, do no harm.' It's a pretty good rule. Anyway, my wife's had a couple of hard days in there. But so have all of us."

"It is possible that this was a deliberate act, sir?"

"We're not sure, and I can't talk about that until I have good information one way or the other."

"You've had a busy time, Mr. President." The reporter was local, not part of the Washington scene. He didn't know how to talk to a President, or so others might think. Regardless, this one was going out live on NBC, though even the reporter didn't know that.

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"Sir, can you give us any hope?"

Ryan turned at that. "For the people who're sick, well, the hope comes from the docs and the nurses. They're fine people. You can see that here. They're fighters, warriors. I'm very proud of my wife and what she does. I'm proud of her now. I asked her not to do this. I suppose that's selfish of me, but I said it anyway. Some people tried to kill her once before, you know. I don't mind danger to me, but my wife and kids, no, it's not supposed to happen to them. Not supposed to happen to any of these people. But it did, and now we have to do our best to treat the sick ones and make sure people don't get sick unnecessarily. I know my executive order has upset a lot of people, but I can't live with not doing something that might save lives. I wish there were an easier way, but if there is, nobody's told me about it yet. You see, it's not enough to say, 'No, I don't like that.' Anybody can do that. We need more right now. Look, I'm pretty tired," he said, looking away from the camera. "Can we call it a day for now?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. President."

"Sure." Ryan turned away, walking south, just wandering really, toward the big parking garages. He saw a man smoking a cigarette there, a black man about forty, in defiance of the signs that prohibited the vice within sight of this shrine of medical learning. POTUS walked up to him, heedless of the three agents and two soldiers behind him.

"Got a spare?"

"Sure." The man didn't even look up as he sat on the edge of the brick planter, looking down at the concrete. His left hand held out the pack and a butane lighter at arm's length. By unspoken consent they didn't sit close together.

"Thanks." Ryan sat down about four feet away from the man, reaching to hand the items back.

"You, too, man?"

"What do you mean?"

"My wife's in there, got the sickness. She work with a family, nanny, like. They're all sick. Now she is, too."

"My wife's a doc, she's up there with 'em."

"Ain't gonna matter, man. Ain't gonna matter at all."

"I know." Ryan took a long pull and let it out.

"Won't even let me in, say it too dangerous. Takin' *my* blood, say I

gotta stay close, won't let me smoke, won't let me see her. Sweet Jesus, man, how come?"

"If it was you who was sick, and you knew that you might give it to your wife, what would you do?"

He nodded with angry resignation. "I know. The doctor said that. He's right. I know. But that don't *make* it right." He paused. "Helps to talk."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"The fuckers did this, like they say on TV, somebody did this. Fuckers gotta pay, man."

Ryan didn't know what to say then. Somebody else did. It was Andrea Price:

"Mr. President? I have the DCI for you."

That turned the man's head. He looked at Ryan in the yellow-orange lighting. "You're him."

"Yes, sir," Jack answered quietly.

"You say your wife is workin' up there?"

A nod. A sigh. "Yeah, she's been working here for fifteen years. I came in to see her, and see how it is, how it's going. I'm sorry ..."

"What'd'ya mean?"

"They won't let you in, but they let me in."

He grimaced. "Guess you gotta see, eh? Tough what happened with your little girl last week. She okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. At that age, well, you know how it is."

"Good. Hey, thanks for talking with me."

"Thanks for the smoke," the President said, standing and walking to Agent Price. He took the phone. "Ed, it's Jack."

"Mr. President, we need you back. We have something you need to see," Ed Foley told him. He wondered how he would explain that the evidence was hanging on the wall of a conference room in CIA Headquarters.

"Give me an hour, Ed."

"Yes, sir. We're getting it organized now."

Jack hit the END switch on the phone and handed it back. "Let's move."

53

SNIE

BEFORE FLYING HOME, everyone had to be decontaminated. Hopkins had set up a large room with separation of the sexes this time. The water was hot, and stank of chemicals, but the smell gave Ryan a needed sense of safety. Then he donned a new set of greens. He'd worn them before, when he'd attended the births of his children. Happy connotations. No longer, he thought, as he headed for the Suburban for the drive back to Fort McHenry and the helicopter hop back to the White House. At least the shower had enlivened him. It might even last a few hours, POTUS thought, as the VH-3 lifted off and turned southwest. If he were lucky.

IT WAS THE most lackluster performance in the history of the National Training Center. The troopers of the 11th Cav and the tankers of the Carolina Guard had blundered about for five hours, barely executing the plans that both had set up. The replay in the Star Wars Room showed cases where tanks had been less than a thousand meters apart and in plain sight, yet hadn't exchanged fire. Nothing had worked on either side, and the simulated engagement had not so much ended as stopped by apathetic consent. Just before midnight, the units formed up for the drive back to their respective laagers, and the senior commanders went to General Diggs's home on the hill.

"Hi, Nick," Colonel Hamm said.

"Hi, Al," Colonel Eddington replied, in about the same tone of voice.

"And what the hell was that all about?" Diggs demanded.

"The men are coming a little unglued, sir," the Guardsman replied first. "We're all worried about our people back home. We're safe here. They're in danger there. I can't blame them for being distracted, General. They're human."

"Best thing I can say is that our immediate families seem to be safe here, General," Hamm agreed with his older comrade in arms. "But we all got family back in the world."

"Okay, gentlemen, we've all had a chance to cry in our beer. I don't like this shit, either, y'hear? But *your* job is to lead your people, and that means *lead*, God damn it! In case you two warrior chiefs haven't noticed yet, the whole fuckin' United States Army is tied up in this epidemic—*except us!* You two colonels want to think about that? Maybe get your people thinking about it? Nobody ever told me soldiering was an easy job, and damned sure command isn't, but it is the job we do, and if you gentlemen can't get it done, well, there are others who can."

"Sir, that isn't going to work. Ain't nobody to relieve us with," Hamm pointed out wryly.

"Colonel—"

"The man's right, Diggs," Eddington said. "Some things are too much. There's an enemy out there we can't fight. Our people'll come around once they have a chance to get used to it, maybe get some good news for a change. Come on, General, you know better. You know history. Those are people out there—yes, soldiers, but people first. They're shook. So am I, Diggs."

"I also know that there are no bad regiments, only bad colonels," Diggs retorted, with one of Napoleon's best aphorisms, but he saw that neither man rose to the bait. Jesus, this really was bad.

"HOW WAS IT?" van Damm asked.

"Horrible," Ryan replied. "I saw six or seven people who're going to die. One of 'em's a kid. Cathy says there'll be more of them showing up."

"How's she doing?"

"Pretty stressed, but okay. She really let a reporter have it."

"I know, it was on TV," the chief of staff informed him.

"Already?"

"You were on live." Arnie managed a smile. "You looked great. Concerned. Sincere as hell. You said nice things about your wife. You even apologized for what she said—really good, boss, especially since she looked wonderful. Dedicated. Intense. Just like a doctor is supposed to be."

"Arnie, this isn't theater." Ryan was too tired to be angry. The reviving effects of the shower, disappointingly, had already worn off.

"No, it's leadership. Someday you're going to learn that—shit, maybe not. Just keep goin' like you're goin'," Arnie advised. "You do it without even knowing it, Jack. Don't think about it at all."

NBC SHARED THEIR tape with the whole world. As competitive as the news business was, a consciousness of public responsibility *did* pervade the profession, and the tape of the President's brief conversation went out an hour later on television sets across the globe.

She'd been right from the first instant, the Prime Minister told herself. He was far out of his depth. He couldn't even stand up straight. His words rambled. He let his wife speak for him—and she was frantic, emotional, weak. America's time as a major power was ending, because the country lacked firm leadership. She didn't *know* who had caused this plague to happen, but it was easy to guess. It had to be the UIR. Why else had he called them together in western China? With her fleet at sea guarding the approaches to the Persian Gulf, she was doing her part. She was sure she would be rewarded for it in due course.

"YOUR PRESIDENT IS distracted," Zhang said. "Understandably so."

"Such a great misfortune. You have our deepest sympathy," the Foreign Minister added. The three, plus the translator, had also just seen the tape.

Adler had been slow in getting the news of the epidemic, but he was up to speed now. He had to set it all aside, however. "Shall we proceed?"

"Does our distant province agree to our compensation demand?" the Foreign Minister asked.

"Unfortunately not. They take the position that the entire incident results from your extended maneuvers. Viewed abstractly, that point of view is not entirely without merit," the Secretary of State told them in diplo-speak.

"But the situation is not abstract. We are conducting peaceful exercises. One of their pilots saw fit to attack our aircraft, and in the process another of their foolish aviators destroyed an airliner. Who is to say if it was an accident or not?"

"Not an accident?" Adler asked. "What possible purpose could there be for such a thing?"

"Who can say with these bandits?" the Foreign Minister asked in return, stirring the pot a little more.

ED AND MARY Pat Foley came in together. Ed was carrying a large rolled poster or something, Jack saw as he sat in the Cabinet Room, still wearing greens with HOPKINS stenciled on them. Next came

Murray, with Inspector O'Day in his wake. Ryan stood to go to him.

"I owe you, sorry I didn't get to see you sooner." He took the man's hand.

"That was pretty easy compared to this," Pat said. "And my little girl was there, too. But, yeah, glad I was there. I won't have any nightmares about that shoot." He turned. "Oh, hi, Andrea."

Price smiled for the first time that day. "How's your daughter, Pat?"

"Home with the sitter. They're both okay," he assured her.

"Mr. President?" It was Goodley. "This is pretty hot."

"Okay, then shall we get to work? Who starts?"

"I do," the DCI said. He slid a sheet of paper across the table. "Here."

Ryan took it and scanned it. It was some sort of official form, and the words were all in French. "What's this?"

"It's the immigration and customs clearance form for an airplane. Check the ID box, top-left corner."

"HX-NJA. Okay, so?" SWORDSMAN asked. His chief of staff sat at his side, keeping his peace. He felt the tension that the executives had brought into the room.

The blowup of Chavez's photo at Mehrabad Airport was actually larger than a poster, and had been printed up mainly as a joke. Mary Pat unrolled it, and laid it flat on the table. Two briefcases were used to keep it from rolling back up. "Check the tail," the DDO advised.

"HX-NJA. I don't have time for Agatha Christie, people," the President warned them.

"Mr. President." This was Dan Murray. "Let me walk you through this, but I'll say up front, that photo is something I could take into court and get a conviction with.

"The customs form identifies a business jet, a Gulfstream G-IV belonging to this Swiss-based corporation." A piece of paper went down on the conference table. "Flown by this flight crew." Two photos and fingerprint cards. "It left Zaire with three passengers. Two were nuns, Sister Jean Baptiste and Sister Maria Magdalena. They were both nurses at a Catholic hospital down there. Sister Jean treated Benedict Mkusa, a little boy who contracted Ebola and died of it. Somehow, Sister Jean caught it, too, and the third passenger, Dr. Mohammed Moudi—we don't have a photo of him yet; we're working on it—decided to fly the sick one to Paris for treatment. Sister Maria tagged along, too. Dr. Moudi is an Iranian national working with the WHO. He told the boss-nun that she might have a chance there and said that he could whistle up a private jet to get her there. With me so far?"

"And this is the jet."

"Correct, Mr. President. This is the jet. Except for one thing. This jet

supposedly crashed into the sea after taking off after a refueling stop in Libya. We have a ton of paperwork about that. Except for one thing." He tapped the poster again. "That photo was taken by Domingo Chavez—"

"You know him," Mary Pat put in.

"Go on. When did Ding shoot the frame?"

"Clark and Chavez accompanied Secretary Adler to Tehran, just last week."

"The aircraft was reported lost some time before that. It was even tracked by one of our destroyers when it squawked emergency. No trace was ever found, however," Murray went on. "Ed?"

"When Iraq came apart, Iran allowed the senior military leadership to skip. They all had golden parachutes. Our friend Daryaei let them jump out of the airplane. He *even* provided transport, all right? This started the day after the jet disappeared," Foley told them. "They were flown to Khartoum, in the Sudan. Our station chief there is Frank Clayton, and he drove to the airport and shot these pictures to confirm our intelligence information." The DCI slid them across.

"Looks like the same airplane, but what if somebody just played with the numbers—letters, whatever?" Ryan asked.

"Next indicator," Murray said. "There were two Ebola cases in Khartoum."

"Clark and Chavez talked to the attending physician a few hours ago," Mary Pat added.

"Both the patients flew on this airplane. We have photos of them getting off. So," the FBI Director said, "now, we have an airplane with a sick person aboard. The airplane disappears—*but* it turns up less than twenty-four hours later somewhere else, and two of the passengers come down with the same illness that the nun had. The passengers came from Iraq, via Iran, to the Sudan."

"Who owns the airplane?" Arnie asked.

"It's a corporation. We should have further details in a few hours from the Swiss. But the flight crew is Iranian. We have info on them because they learned how to fly over here," Murray explained. "And, finally, we have our friend Daryaei here on the same airplane. Looks like it's been taken out of international service. Maybe Daryaei is using it to hop around his new country now. So, Mr. President, we have the disease, the airplane, and the owner, all tied up. Tomorrow we'll work with Gulfstream to see if the aircraft has any unique characteristics that we can identify in addition to the registration code. We'll have the Swiss pull info on the ownership and the flight logs for the rest of their fleet.

"We now know who did this, sir," Murray concluded. "This chain of evidence is hard to beat."

"There are more details to flesh out," Mary Pat said. "Background on this Dr. Moudi. Tracking down some monkey shipments—they use monkeys to study the disease. How they staged the faked airplane crash you believe it? The bastards even made an insurance claim."

"Wc're going to suspend this meeting for a moment. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Get Secretary Bretano and Admiral Jackson in here."

"Yes, sir." She left the room.

Ed Foley waited for the door to close behind her. "Uh, Mr. President?"

"Yeah, Ed?"

"There is one other thing. I haven't even told Dan this yet. We now know that the UIR—really, our friend Mahmoud Haji Daryaei—is behind this. Chavez brought something up before we sent him and John off. The other side could well expect us to trace this back to them. Operational security for something like this is almost impossible to achieve." a So?"

"So, two things, Jack. First, whatever they're planning, they may think it's irreversible, and therefore it doesn't matter whether we figure this out or not. Second, let's remember how they knocked off Iraq. They got somebody all the way inside."

Those were two very big thoughts. Ryan started pondering the first one. Dan Murray's head turned to his roving inspector and they traded looks on the second.

"Christ, Ed," the FBI Director said a moment later.

"Think it through, Dan," the DCI said. "We have a President. We have a Senate. We have a third of the House. We do not have a Vice President yet. The presidential succession is still dicey, no really powerful figures, and the top level of the government is still gutted. Toss in this epidemic, which has the whole country tied up in knots. To almost anybody outside, we look weak and vulnerable."

Ryan looked up as Andrea came back in. "Wait a minute. They made a play for Katie. Why do that if they want me out of the way?"

"What's this?" Price asked.

"The other side has demonstrated a frightening capability. One," Foley said, "they got all the way into the Iraqi President's security detail and blew him away. Two, the operation last week was run by a sleeper agent who's been here more than a decade, and in that time did nothing at all, but when he woke up, he cared enough to assist in an attempt on a child."

Murray had to agree with that: "That's occurred to us, too. The Intelligence Division is thinking about it right now."

"Wait a minute," Andrea objected. "I know every person on the Detail. For God's sake, we lost five of them defending SANDBOX!"

"Agent Price," Mary Pat Foley said. "You know how many times CIA's been burned by people we knew all about—people *I* knew. Hell, I lost three agents to one of those fucking moles. I *knew* them, and I *knew* the guy who shopped 'em. Don't tell me about paranoia. We are up against a very capable enemy here. And it only takes one."

Murray whistled as the argument took its full form. His mind had been racing for the past few hours in one direction. Now it had to race in another.

"Mrs. Foley, I "

"Andrea," Inspector O'Day said, "this isn't personal. Take a step back and think about it. If you had the resources of a nation-state, if you were patient, and if you had people who were really motivated, how would you do it?"

"How did they do Iraq?" Ed Foley took up the argument. "Would you have thought that was possible?"

The President looked around the room. *Fabulous, now they're telling me not to trust the Secret Service*.

"It all makes sense if you think like the other guy," Mary Pat told them. "It's part of their tradition, remember ?"

"Okay, but what do we do about it?" Andrea asked, her face openly stunned at the possibility.

"Pat, you have a new assignment," Murray told his subordinate. "With the President's permission, that is."

"Granted," POTUS breathed.

"Rules?" O'Day wanted to know.

"None, none at all," Price told him.

IT WAS APPROACHING noon over the United Islamic Republic. Maintenance was going well on the six heavy divisions based in the south-central part of the country. Nearly all the tracks on the mechanized fighting vehicles had been replaced. A healthy spirit of competition had developed between the former Iraqi divisions and those moved down from Iran. With their vehicles restored to full fighting order, the troopers drew ammunition to bring all of the T-80 tanks and BMP infantry carriers to full basic loads.

The battalion commanders looked over the results of their training exercise with satisfaction. Their newly acquired GPS locators had been like magic, and now the Iraqis understood one of the reasons why the Americans had treated them so harshly in 1991. With GPS one didn't need roads at all. The Arabic culture had long termed the desert a sea, and now they could navigate on it like sailors, moving from point to point with a confidence they had never known before.

Corps and divisional staff officers knew why this was so important.

They had just been issued new maps, and with them a new mission. They also learned that their three-corps mechanized force had a name, the Army of God. By tomorrow, sub-unit commanders would be briefed in on that, and many other things.

IT TOOK AN hour for them to get in. Admiral Jackson had been sleeping in his office, but Secretary Bretano had gone home after a marathon session of reviewing deployments within the country. The White House dress code had been relaxed, they saw. The President, also red-eyed, was wearing doctor clothes.

Dan Murray and Ed Foley repeated their brief.

Jackson took it well: "All right. Now we know what we're up against."

Bretano did not: "This is an overt act of war."

"But we're not the objective," the DCI told him. "It's Saudi Arabia, and all the other Gulf states. It's the only thing that makes sense. He figures that if he takes over those states, we *can't* nuke him—it would turn off the oil for the whole world." The DCI almost had it right, but not quite.

"And he has India and China in his pocket," Robby Jackson went on. "They're just running interference, but it's good interference. *Ike's* in the wrong place. The Indians have their carriers blocking the Straits of Hormuz. We can't get the MPS ships in without air cover. Zap, he moved those three corps down. The Saudis'll fight, but they're outmanned. It's over in a week, maybe less. Not a bad operational concept," the J-3 concluded.

"The bio-attack's pretty clever, too. I think they got more than they bargained for. Almost every base and unit we have is out of business at the moment," SecDef observed, catching up fast on the operational side.

"Mr. President, when I was a boy in Mississippi, I remember the Klukkers used to say, when you see a mad dog, don't kill the poor thing—toss it in somebody's backyard. You know, some sheet-head actually did that to us once, 'cause my pap was real big on getting people registered to vote."

"What did you do, Rob?"

"Pap blew it away with his Fox double," Admiral Jackson replied. "And continued the mission. We have to move fast if we're going to move. Problem is, what with?"

"How long before the MPS ships get to Saudi?"

"Just under three days, but there's somebody in the way. CINCLANT'S cut orders for that surface group to scoot down the Suez, and they can be at the strait in time, but we gotta get those tank-

carriers past the Indians first. Those four boats are escorted by one cruiser, two 'cans, and two frigates, and if we lose them, nearest equipment re-supply's in Savannah, sir."

"What do we have in storage in Saudi?" Ben Goodley asked.

"Enough for a heavy brigade. Same in Kuwait. The third brigade-set is afloat and standing in harm's way."

"Kuwait's first in line," the President said. "What can we get there?"

"If we're balls-to-the-wall, we can fly the 10th ACR out of Israel to mate up with the POMCUS site south of Kuwait City. That we can do in twenty-four hours. The Kuwaitis'll handle transport. They have a quiet understanding with Israel on that. We helped broker it," Robby said. "The plan's called BUFFALO FORWARD."

"Anybody think that's a bad idea?" Jack asked.

"One armored cavalry regiment—I I don't think it's enough to deter them, sir," Goodley said.

"The man's right," the J-3 agreed.

Ryan looked around the table. Knowing was one thing. Being able to act was something else. He *could* order a strategic nuclear attack on Iran. He had B-2A stealth bombers at Whiteman Air Force Base, and with the information he'd been given in the past two hours, getting CiNC-STRIKE to validate the order under the two-man rule would not be a problem. The "Spirits," as the B-2s were called, could be there in less than eighteen hours, and turn that nation into a smoking, poisoned ruin.

But he couldn't do that. Even if he had to, he probably couldn't. Though American Presidents had long been faced with the necessity of telling the world that, yes, we *will* launch our missiles and bombers if we have to, it was a duty Ryan never expected to carry out. Even this attack on his country, the use of weapons of mass destruction—to America the equivalent of nuclear arms—had been the decision of one man, and carried out by a relative handful. Could he flatten whole cities in response, kill the innocent as Daryaei had done, because the other guy had done it first? And live with himself afterward? There had to be something better, some other option. Killing Daryaei was one.

"Ed?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Where are Clark and Chavez right now?"

"Khartoum, still, awaiting instructions."

"Think they can get into Tehran again?"

"Won't be easy, sir." He turned to his wife.

"The Russians have helped us in the past. I can ask. What would their mission be?"

"Find out if they can get in first. We'll figure out the mission in a

little while. Robby?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"The 10th Regiment moves to Kuwait at once."

Jackson took a deep and skeptical breath. "Aye aye, sir."

THERE WAS THE intermediary step of getting the approval of the Kuwaiti government. The Ambassador handled that. It did not prove to be hard. Major Sabah had kept his government informed of developments in their new neighbor to the north, and the satellite photos of the retracking of the UIR tanks turned the trick. With their own military fully activated, the Kuwait government telexed a formal request for America to commence an extended training exercise in the western part of their nation. This moved fast. The rulers of the small nation had fresh memories of earlier mistakes. Their only proviso was that the movement be made secretly, and America did not object. Within four hours, the plush, brand-new airliners of the national airline started lifting off, headed southwest over Saudi Arabia, and later turned north, up the Gulf of Aqaba.

The order was issued by Training and Doctrine Command, which administratively owned the 10th ACR, since it was technically a training establishment. Most other stateside units belonged to Forces Command, FORCECOM. The emergency-deployment order went by CRITIC-priority to Colonel Sean Magruder. He had roughly five thousand personnel to move, and that would require twenty jumbo flights. The roundabout routing made for a distance of 1,300 miles and three hours in each direction, with an hour's turnaround time at both ends. But it had all been thought through, and the diminution of international air travel had made more aircraft available than the plan had anticipated for BUFFALO FORWARD. Even the Israelis cooperated. The pilots of the Kuwaiti jumbos had the singular experience of seeing F-15 fighters with blue Star of David markings flying escort as they came into the big Israeli air base in the Negev.

The first group out comprised senior officers and a security group to supplement the Kuwaiti guard force at the POMCUS site. The site was a group of warehouses containing the complete equipment set of a heavy brigade, which was exactly what the armored cavalry regiment was. The equipment was lovingly maintained by contractors, who were well paid by their Kuwaiti hosts.

The second aircraft had A-Troop, 1st of the 10th. Buses took them through the late-afternoon sun to their vehicles, which in every case started up at once, fully loaded with fuel and ammunition. A troop of the 1st "Guidon" Squadron rolled out under the watchful eyes of their squadron CO, Lieutenant Colonel Duke Masterman. He had family in

the Philadelphia area, and he could add two and two together. Something very bad was happening in his country, and out of a clear sky BUFFALO FORWARD had been activated. That was fine with him, he decided, and his troopers.

Magruder and his staff also watched. He'd even insisted that the command group bring the regimental standard. This was the Cav.

"FOLEYLVA, IS IT that bad?" Golovko asked, meaning the epidemic. They were speaking in Russian. Though his English was nearly perfect, the CIA official spoke his native language with a poetic elegance learned from her grandfather.

"We don't know, Sergey Nikolay'ch, and I have been looking at other things."

"Ivan Emmetovich is bearing up?"

"What do you think? I know you saw the TV interview a few hours ago."

"An interesting man, your President. So easy to underestimate. I did that once myself."

"And Daryaei?"

"Formidable, but an uncultured barbarian." Mary Pat could almost hear the man spit.

"Quite."

"Tell Ivan Emmetovich to think the scenario through, Foleyeva," Golovko suggested. "Yes, we will cooperate," he added, answering a question not yet asked. "Fully."

"*Spasiba*. I will be back to you." Mary Pat looked over at her husband. "You have to love the guy."

"I wish he was on our side," the DCI observed.

"He is, Ed."

THE DOG HAD stopped barking, they noted in STORM TRACK. The three corps they were trying to observe had stopped using their radios around noon. Zero. As sophisticated as their computer-aided ELINT equipment was, nothing was still nothing. It was an obvious sign, and just as often overlooked. The direct lines to Washington burned constantly now. More Saudi officers were coming in, demonstrating the increased alert state of their own military, which was quietly deploying to the field around King Khalid Military City. That was some comfort to the intelligence people in the listening post, but not much. They were far closer to the mouth of the lion. Being spooks, they thought like spooks, and by consensus they decided that the

events in America had somehow started here. Elsewhere, such thoughts engendered a feeling of helplessness; here they had a different effect. The rage was real, and they had a mission to fulfill, exposed position or not.

"OKAY," JACKSON SAID on the conference line, "who *can* we deploy?"

The answer was a brief silence. The Army was half the size it had been less than a decade before. There were two heavy divisions in Europe, V Corps, but they were quarantined by the Germans. The same was true of the two armored divisions at Fort Hood, Texas, and the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Riley, Kansas. Parts of the 82nd at Fort Bragg and the 101st at Fort Campbell *were* deployed to support National Guard units, but the units that had been kept back at their bases had soldiers who'd tested positive for Ebola. The same was true of the two stateside Marine divisions, based at Lejeune in North Carolina and Pendleton in California.

"Look," FORCECOM said. "We got the 11th ACR and a Guard brigade training up at the NTC. That base is totally clean, we can move them out as quick as you can whistle up the airplanes. The rest? Before we can move them, we have to sort everybody out. I don't dare move them before we've tested every soldier for this damned bug, and the kits ain't out everywhere yet."

"He's right," another voice said. Every head on the conference line nodded. The pharmaceutical companies were racing to produce them. Millions of test kits were needed, but only a few tens of thousands were available, and those were being used for targeted people, the ones who showed symptoms, relatives or close associates of known cases, truckers delivering food and medical supplies, and most of all, the medical personnel themselves, who were the most exposed to the virus. Worse still, one "clear" reading wasn't enough. Some people would have to be tested daily for three days or more, because although the test was reliable, the immune systems of potential victims were not. The antibodies could start showing up an hour after a negative test reading. Doctors and hospitals throughout the country were screaming for the kits, and in this case the Army was sucking hind tit.

The UIR is going to throw a war, J-3 thought, *and nobody's going to come.* Robby wondered if some hippie from the sixties might find that amusing.

"How long on that?"

"End of the week, at best," FORCECOM replied. "I have an officer on it."

"I got the 366th Wing at Mountain Home. They're all clean," Air Combat Command reported. "We have the F-16 wing in Israel. My European units are being held hostage, though, all of them."

"Airplanes are nice, Paul," FORCECOM said. "So are ships, but we need soldiers over there in one big fucking hurry."

"Cut warning orders to Fort Irwin," Jackson said. "I'll have the SecDef authorize their release within the hour."

"Done."

"MOSCOW?" CHAVEZ ASKED. "Jesu Cristo, we are getting around."

"Ours is not to reason why."

"Yeah, I know the second part, Mr. C. If we're going to the right place, I'll take that chance."

"Your carriage awaits, gents," Clayton said. "The blue suits are turning the airplane over for you."

"Yeah, that reminds me." Clark pulled the uniform shirt out of the closet. In a minute, he was a colonel again. Five minutes after that, they were off for the airport, soon to leave the Sudan to the ministrations of Frank Clayton and memories of "Chinese" Gordon.

THERE WAS AN aspect of schadenfreude about it. O'Day assembled a team of FBI agents to go over the personnel packets of every Secret Service agent who got close to the President, both the plainclothes and Uniformed Division officers. There were quite a few. Ordinarily some would have been tossed for obvious no-hit indicators—a name like O'Connor, for example—but this case was too important for that, and every file had to be examined in full before it could be set aside. This job he left to others. Another team was examining something not widely known. There was a computerized record of every telephone call made in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Legal in a strict sense, the program, had it extended farther afield, would have excited Big Brother-ish outrage from even the most extreme law-enforcement hawk, but the President lived in Washington, and America had lost Presidents there. It was almost too much to hope for. By definition, a conspirator in the Secret Service would be an expert on security measures. Their target, if there was one, would be one of the boys. He might stand out in professional excellence—you had to, in order to make the Detail—but nothing else. He'd fit in. He'd have a good service reputation. He'd tell jokes, bet on ballgames, have a beer at the local hangout—he'd be just like all the others who would willingly guard the life of the President as courageously as Don Russell had

done, O'Day knew, and part of him hated the rest of him for having to treat them like suspects in a criminal investigation. It wasn't supposed to be this way. But then, what was?

DIGGS CALLED BOTH colonels to his office to give them the news: "We have warning orders to deploy overseas."

"Who?" Eddington asked.

"Both of your units," the general answered.

"Where to, sir?" Hamm asked next.

"Saudi. We've both been there and done that before, Al, and here's your chance, Colonel Eddington."

"Why?" the Guardsman asked.

"They haven't said yet. I have background information coming into the fax machine now. All they told me over the phone was that the UIR is getting frisky. The 10th is mating up with their POMCUS gear right now—"

"BUFFALO FORWARD?" Hamm asked. "No warning?"

"Correct, Al."

"Is this related to the epidemic?" Eddington asked.

Diggs shook his head. "Nobody's told me anything about that."

IT HAD TO be done in Federal District Court in Baltimore. Edward J. Kealty filed a suit naming John Patrick Ryan as defendant. The substance of the complaint was that the former wanted to cross a state line, and the latter wouldn't let him. The filing asked for summary judgment, the vacating of the executive order of the President (strangely, the complaint named Ryan as President of the United States) immediately. Kealty figured that he'd win this one. The Constitution was on his side, and he'd chosen the judge with care.

THE SPECIAL NATIONAL Intelligence Estimate was now complete, and irrelevant. The intentions of the United Islamic Republic were totally clear. The trick now was to do something about them, but that was not, strictly speaking, an intelligence function.

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FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

THEY DIDN'T SEE IT coming, and it did get their attention. By dawn the next day, all three ground squadrons of the 10th Cavalry were fully deployed, while the fourth squadron, composed of attack helicopters, needed one more day to get up to speed. Kuwaiti regular officers—their standing army was still relatively small, with the ranks fleshed out by enthusiastic reservists—greeted their American counterparts with waving swords and embraces in front of the cameras, and serious, quiet conversation in the command tents. For his part, Colonel Magruder arranged for one of his squadrons to assemble in parade formation with standards flying. It was good for everyone's morale, and the fifty-two tanks massed together looked like the fist of an angry god. The UIR intelligence service expected something to happen, but not this, and not this fast.

"What is this?" Daryaei demanded, allowing his deadly rage to show for once. Ordinarily, it was enough that people knew it was hidden there, somewhere.

"It's a sham." After the initial shock, his chief of intelligence had taken the time to get a feel for the reality of the situation. "That is a *regiment*. Each of the six divisions in the Army of God has three—in two cases, four—brigades. And so, we are twenty to their one. Did you expect that the Americans would not respond at all? That is unrealistic. But here we see they have responded. With one regiment, moved in from Israel, and sent in the wrong place. With this they intend to frighten us."

"Go on." The dark eyes softened slightly, merely simmering rather than dangerously hostile.

"America cannot deploy its divisions from Europe. They are contaminated. The same is true of their heavy divisions in America. So we will face the Saudis first of all. It will be a great battle, which we shall win. The rump states will surrender to us, or be crushed—and then Kuwait will stand alone, at the top of the Gulf, with its own forces and this American regiment, and then we shall see about that. They probably expect us to invade Kuwait first. We will not repeat that error, will we?"

"And if they reinforce the Saudis?"

"Again, they have the equipment for but one brigade in the Kingdom. The second is afloat. You talked to India about that, did you not?" It was so normal that he might have predicted it, the chief UIR spook thought behind outwardly cowed eyes. They always got nervous just before things started, as though expecting everyone to follow the script they'd written. The enemy was the enemy. He didn't always cooperate. "And I doubt they have the troops to move. Aircraft, perhaps, but there is no carrier within ten thousand kilometers, and aircraft, though they are an annoyance, can neither take nor hold ground."

"Thank you for making that clear." The old man's mood softened.

"AT LAST WE meet, Comrade Colonel," Golovko said to the CIA officer.

Clark had always wondered if he'd see the inside of KGB headquarters. He'd never quite expected to be offered drinks there in the Chairman's office. Early in the morning or not, he took a slug of the Starka-brand vodka. "Your hospitality is not what I was trained to expect, Comrade Chairman."

"We don't do that here anymore. Lefortovo Prison is more convenient." He paused, set down his glass, and switched back to tea. A drink with the man was mandatory, but it was early in the day. "I must ask. Was it you who brought Madam Gerasimov and the girl out?"

Clark nodded. There was nothing to be gained from lying to the man. "Yes, that was me."

"You are welcome to all three of them, Ivan ... your father's name?"

"Timothy. I am Ivan Timofeyevich, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"Ah." Golovko had a good laugh. "As hard as the Cold War was, my friend, it is good now, at the end of it, to see old enemies. Fifty years from now, when all of us are dead, historians will compare CIA records with ours, and they will decide who won the intelligence war. Have you any idea what they will decide?"

"You forget, I was a foot soldier, not a commander, for most of it."

"Our Major Schcrenko was impressed with you and your young partner here. Your rescue of Koga was impressive. And now we will work together again. Have you been briefed in?"

For Chavez, who'd come to manhood watching Rambo movies, and whose early Army training had taught him to expect going head-to-head with the Soviets at any time, it was an experience which he wanted to ascribe to jet lag, though both CIA officers had noted how empty the corridors were for their passage. There was no sense letting

them see faces they might remember in some other time and some other place.

"No, mainly we've been gathering information."

Golovko hit a button on his desk. "Is Bondarenko here?" A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing a senior Russian general officer.

Both Americans stood. Clark read the medals and gave the man a hard look. Bondarenko did the same. The handshakes exchanged were wary, curious, and strangely warm. They were of an age, raised in one, growing into another.

"Gennady Iosefovich is chief of operations. Ivan Timofeyevich is a CIA spy," the Chairman explained. "As is his quiet young partner. Tell me, Clark, the plague, it comes from Iran?"

"Yes, that is certain."

"Then he is a barbarian, but a clever one. General?"

"Last night you moved your cavalry regiment from Israel to Kuwait," Bondarenko said. "They are fine troops, but the correlation of forces is adverse in the extreme. Your country cannot deploy large numbers of troops for at least two weeks. He will not give you two weeks. We estimate that the heavy divisions southeast of Baghdad will be ready to move in three days, four at the most. One day for the approach march to the border area, and then? Then we will see what their plan is."

"Any thoughts?"

"We have no more intelligence on this than you do," Golovko said. "Regrettably, most of our assets in the area have been shot, and the generals we befriended in the previous Iraqi regime have left the country."

"The high command of the army is Iranian, many were trained in Britain or America under the Shah as junior officers, and they survived the purges," Bondarenko said. "We have dossiers on many of them, and these are being transmitted to the Pentagon."

"That's very cordial of you."

"You bet," Ding observed. "If they dust us off, next they come north."

"Alliances, young man, do not occur for reasons of love, but from mutual interests," Golovko agreed.

"If you cannot deal with this maniac today, then we will have to deal with him in three years," Bondarenko said seriously. "Better today, I think, for all of us."

"We have offered our support to Foleyeva. She has accepted. When you learn your mission, let us know, and we will see what we can do."

SOME WOULD LAST longer than others. Some would last less. The first recorded death happened in Texas, a golf-equipment representative who expired due to heart complications three days after being admitted, one day after his wife entered the hospital with her own symptoms. Doctors interviewing her determined that she'd probably contracted the disease by cleaning up after her husband had vomited in the bathroom, not from any intimate contact, because he'd felt too ill even to kiss her after returning from Phoenix. Though seemingly an insignificant conclusion from obvious data, it was faxed to Atlanta, as the CDC had requested all possible information, however minor it might seem. It certainly seemed minor to the medical team in Dallas. The first death for them was both a relief and a horror. A relief because the man's condition toward the end was both hopeless and agonizing; a horror, because there would be others just as vile, only longer in coming.

The same thing happened six hours later in Baltimore. The Winnebago dealer had a preexisting GI complaint, peptic ulcer disease, which, though controlled by an over-the-counter medication, gave Ebola an easy target. His stomach lining disintegrated, and the patient rapidly bled out while unconscious with his massive dose of painkillers. This, too, came as something of a surprise to the attending physician and nurse. Soon thereafter more deaths started occurring nationwide. The media reported them, and the country's horror deepened. In the first series of cases, the husband died first, with the wife soon to follow. In many similar cases, children would be next.

It was more real for everyone now. For most, the crisis had seemed a distant event. Businesses and schools were closed, and travel was restricted, but the rest of it was a TV event, as things tended to be in Western countries. It was something you saw on a phosphor screen, a moving image augmented by sound, something both real and not. But now the word *death* was being used with some frequency. Photos of the victims appeared on the screens, in some cases home videos, and the moving pictures of people now dead, their private pasts revealed in moments of pleasure and relaxation, followed by the somber words of reporters who were themselves becoming as familiar as family members—it all entered the public consciousness with an immediacy that was as new and different as it was horrid. It was no longer the sort of nightmare from which one awoke. It was one which went on and on, seeming to grow, like the child's dream in which a black cloud entered a room, growing and growing, approaching despite all attempts at evasion, and you knew that if it touched you, you were lost.

Grumbles about the federally imposed travel restrictions died the same day as the golfer in Texas and the recreational vehicle dealer in

Maryland. Interpersonal contact, which had first been cut way back, then started to grow again, was restricted to the family-member level. People lived on telephones now. Long-distance lines were jammed with calls to ascertain the well-being of relatives and friends, to the point that AT&T, MCI, and the rest ran commercial messages requesting that such calls be kept short, and special-access lines were set aside for government and medical use. There was a true national panic now, though it was a quiet, personal one. There were no public demonstrations. Traffic on the streets was virtually nil in the major cities. People even stopped heading for supermarkets, and instead stayed at home, living out of cans or freezers for the time being.

Reporters, still moving around with their mobile cameras, reported on all that, and in doing so, they both increased the degree of tension, and contributed to its solution.

"IT'S WORKING," GENERAL Pickett said over the phone to his former subordinate in Baltimore.

"Where are you, John?" Alexandre asked.

"Dallas. It's working, Colonel. I need you to do something."

"What's that?"

"Stop playing practitioner. You have residents to do that. I have a working group at Walter Reed. Get the hell over there. You're too big an asset on the theoretical side to waste in a Racal suit doing sticks, Alex."

"John, this is my department now, and I have to lead my troops." It was a lesson well remembered from his time in green suits.

"Fine, your people know you care, Colonel. Now you can put the damned rifle down and start thinking like a goddamned *commander*. This battle's not going to be won in hospitals, is it?" Pickett asked more reasonably. "I have transport waiting for you. There should be a Hummer downstairs to bring you into Reed. Want me to reactivate you and make it an order?"

And he could do that, Alexandre knew. "Give me half an hour." The associate professor hung up the phone and looked down the corridor. Another body bag was being carried out of a room by some orderlies in plastic suits. There was a pride in being here. Even though he was losing patients and would lose more, he was here, being a doctor, doing his best, showing his staff that, yes, he was one of them, ministering to the sick, taking his chances in accordance with the oath he'd sworn at the age of twenty-six. When this was over, the entire team would look back on this with a feeling of solidarity. As horrible as it had been, they'd done the job

"Damn," he swore. John Pickett was right. The battle was being

fought here, but it wouldn't be won here. He told his chief assistant that he was heading down to the next floor, which was being run by Dean James.

There was an interesting case there. Female, thirtynine, admitted two days earlier. Her common-law significant other was dying, and she was distraught, and her blood showed Ebola antibodies, and she'd presented the classic flu symptoms, but the disease hadn't gone further. It had, in fact, seemed to stop.

"What gives with this one?" Cathy Ryan was speculating with Dean James.

"Don't knock it, Cath," he responded tiredly.

"I'm not, Dave, but I want to know why. I interviewed her myself. She slept in the same bed with him two days before she brought him in—"

"Did they have sex?" Alex asked, entering the conversation.

"No, Alex, they didn't. I asked that. He didn't feel well enough. I think this one's going to survive." And that was a first for Baltimore.

"We keep her in for at least a week, Cathy."

"I *know* that, Dave, but this is the first one," SURGEON pointed out. "Something's different here. What is it? We have to know!"

"Chart?" Cathy handed it over to Alcxandre.

He scanned it. Temperature down to 100.2, blood work

... not normal, but ... "What does she say, Cathy?" Alexandre asked, flipping back through some pages.

"How she says she feels, you mean? Panicked, frightened to death. Massive headaches, abdominal cramps—I think a lot of that is pure stress. Can't blame her, can we?"

"These values are all improving. Liver function blipped hard, but that stopped last night, and it's coming back ..."

"That's what got my attention. She's fighting it off, Alex," Dr. Ryan said. "First one, I think we're going to win with her. But *why?* What's different? What can we learn from this? What can we apply to other patients?"

That turned the trick for Dr. Alexandre. John Pickett was right. He had to get to Reed.

"Dave, they want me in Washington right now."

"Go," the dean replied at once. "We're covered here. If you can help make sense of this, get yourself down there."

"Cathy, the most likely answer to your question is the simple one. Your ability to fight this thing off is inversely proportional to the number of particles that get into your system. Everybody thinks that just one strand can kill you. That's not true. Nothing's that dangerous. Ebola kills first of all by overpowering the immune system; *then* it goes to work on the organs. If she only got a small number of the little

bastards, then her immune system fought the battle and won. Talk to her some more, Cathy. Every detail of her contact with her husband-whatever in the last week. I'll call you in a couple of hours. How are you guys doing?"

"Alex, if there's some hope in this," Dr. James replied, "then I think we can hack it."

Alexandre went back upstairs for decontamination. First his suit was thoroughly sprayed. Then he disrobed and changed into greens and a mask, took the "clean" elevator down to the lobby, and out the door.

"You Colonel Alexandre?" a sergeant asked.

"Yes."

The NCO saluted. "Follow me, sir. We got a Hummer and a driver for you. You want a jacket, sir? Kinda cool out."

"Thanks." He donned the rubberized chemical-warfare parka. They were so miserable to wear that it would surely keep him warm all the way down. A female Spec-4 was at the wheel. Alexandre got into the uncomfortable seat, buckled the belt, and turned to her. "Go!" Only then did he rethink what he'd told Ryan and James upstairs. His head shook as though to repel an insect. Pickett was right. Maybe.

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"MR. PRESIDENT, PLEASE, let us reexamine the data first. I even called Dr. Alexandre down from Hopkins to work with the group I set up at Reed. It's much too soon for any conclusions. Please, let us do our work."

"Okay, General," Ryan said angrily. "I'll be here. Damn," he swore after hanging up.

"We have other things to do, sir," Goodley pointed out.

"Yeah."

IT WAS STILL dark when it started in the Pacific Time Zone. At least getting the aircraft was easy. Jumbos from most of the major airlines were heading for Barstow, California, their flight crews screened for Ebola antibodies and passed by Army doctors with test kits which were just now coming on line. There were also modifications to the aircraft ventilation systems. At the National Training Center, soldiers were boarding buses. That was normal for the Blue Force, but not for the OpFor, whose families watched the uniformed soldiers leave their homes for the deployment. Little was known except that they were leaving. The destination was a secret for now; the soldiers would learn

it only after lifting off for the sixteen-hour flights. Over ten thousand men and women meant forty flights, leaving at a rate of only four per hour from the rudimentary facilities in the high desert of California. If asked, the local public affairs officers would tell whoever called that the units at Fort Irwin were moving out to assist with the national quarantine. In Washington, a few reporters learned something else.

"THOMAS DONNER?" THE woman in the mask asked.

"That's right," the reporter answered crossly, pulled away from his breakfast table, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

"FBI. Would you come with me, sir? We have to talk to you about some things."

"Am I under arrest?" the TV personality demanded.

"Only if you want to be, Mr. Donner," the agent told him. "But I need you to come with me, right now. You won't need anything special, except your wallet and ID and stuff," she added, handing over a surgical mask in a plastic container.

"Fine. Give me a minute." The door closed, allowing Donner to kiss his wife, get a jacket, and change shoes. He emerged, put the mask on, and followed the agent to her car. "So what is this all about?"

"I'm just the limo service," she said, ending the morning's conversation. If he was too dumb to remember that he was a member of the press pool pre-selected for Pentagon operations, it wasn't her lookout.

"THE BIGGEST MISTAKE the Iraqis made in 1990 was logistics," Admiral Jackson explained, moving his pointer on the map. "Everybody thinks it's about guns and bombs. It isn't. It's about fuel and information. If you have enough fuel to keep moving, and you know what the other guy's doing, chances are you'll win." The slide changed on the screen next to the map. The pointer moved there next. "Here."

The satellite photos were clear. Every tank and BMP laager was accompanied by something else. A large collection of fuel bowsers. Artillery limbers were attached to their trucks. Blowups showed fuel drums attached to the rear decks of the T-80 tanks. Each contained fifty-five gallons of diesel. These greatly increased the tank's vulnerability to damage, but could be dropped off by flipping a switch inside the turret.

"No doubt about it. They're getting ready to move, probably within the week. We have the 10th Cavalry in place in Kuwait. We have the

11th and the First Brigade of the North Carolina National Guard moving now. That's all we can do for the moment. It won't be till Friday at the earliest that we can cut any more units loose from the quarantine."

"And that's public information," Ed Foley added.

"Essentially, we're deploying one division, a very heavy one, but only one," Jackson concluded. "The Kuwait military is fully in the field. The Saudis are spinning up, too."

"And the third brigade depends on getting the MPS ships past the Indian navy," Secretary Bretano pointed out.

"We can't do that," Admiral DeMarco informed them. "We don't have the combat power to fight our way through."

Jackson didn't reply to that. He couldn't. The acting Chief of Naval Operations was his senior, despite what he thought of him.

"Look, Brucie," Mickey Moore said, turning to look right at him, "my boys need those vehicles, or the Carolina Guard is gonna be facing an advancing enemy mechanized force with side arms. You blue-suits been telling us for years how ballsy those Aegis cruisers are. Put up or shut up, okay? By this time tomorrow, I'll have fifteen thousand soldiers at risk."

"Admiral Jackson," the President said. "You're Operations."

"Mr. President, without air cover—"

"Can we do it or can't we?" Ryan demanded.

"No," DeMarco replied. "I won't see ships wasted that way. Not without air cover."

"Robby, I want your best judgment on this," Secretary Bretano said.

"Okay." Jackson took a breath. "They have a total of about forty Harriers. Nice airplanes, but not really high-performance. The escorting force has a total of maybe thirty surface-to-surface missiles. We don't have to worry about a gunfight. *Anzio* currently carries seventy-five SAMs, fifteen Tomahawks, and eight harpoons. *Kidd* has seventy SAMs, and eight Harpoons. *O'Bannon* isn't a SAM ship. She just has point-defense weapons, but she has Harpoons, too. The two frigates that just joined up have about twenty SAMs each. Theoretically, they can fight through."

"It's too dangerous, Jackson! You don't send a surface force against a carrier group by itself, *ever!*"

"What if we shoot first?" Ryan asked. *That* caused heads to turn.

"Mr. President." It was DeMarco again. "We don't do that. We're not even sure that they are hostile."

"The ambassador thinks they are," Bretano told them.

"Admiral DeMarco, that equipment has to be delivered," the President said, his own face coloring up.

"The Air Force is deploying to Saudi now. Two extra days and we

can deal with it, but until then—"

"Admiral, call your relief." Secretary Bretano looked down at his briefing folder. "Your services are not needed here anymore. We don't have two days to bicker."

That was actually a violation of protocol. The Joint Chiefs were presidential appointments, and while they were titularly military advisers to the Secretary of Defense *and* the President, supposedly only the latter could ask one to resign. Admiral DeMarco looked to Ryan's place in the center of the conference table.

"Mr. President, I have to give you my best feel for this."

"Admiral, we have fifteen thousand men standing in harm's way. You can't tell us that the Navy will not support them. You are relieved of duty effective now," the President said. "Good day." The other uniformed Chiefs glanced at one another. This hadn't happened before. "How long before contact with the Indians?" Ryan asked, moving on.

"About twenty-four hours, sir."

"Any way we can provide additional support?"

"There's a submarine there also, loaded with torpedoes and missiles. She's about fifty miles in advance of *Anzio,*" Jackson said, as a stunned admiral and his aide left the room. "We can speed her up. That risks detection, but the Indians aren't all that swift on ASW. She would be an offensive weapon, sir. Submarines can't defend passively. They sink ships."

"I think the Indian Prime Minister and I need to have a little chat," POTUS observed. "After we get through them, then what?"

"Well, then we have to transit the strait and make it up to the unloading ports."

"That I can help you with," the Air Force chief of staff promised. "We'll have the F-16s in-country and in range for that part of the passage. The 366th Wing won't be ready yet, but the boys from Israel will be."

"We're going to need that cover, General," Jackson emphasized.

"Well, God damn, the Navy's asking for help from us Air Scouts," the Air Force said lightly, then turned serious. "We'll kill every rag-head son of a bitch who gets in the air, Robby. Those forty-eight-16-Charlies are locked and cocked. As soon as you're within a hundred miles of the Strait, you have a friend overhead."

"Is it enough?" the President asked.

"Strictly speaking, no. The other side has four hundred top-of-the-line airplanes. When the 366th gets fully set up—in three days, minimum—we'll have eighty fighters for air-to-air, but the Saudis aren't bad. We have AWACS in place. Your tanks will fight under a neutral sky at worst, Mickey." The general checked his watch. "They

should be getting off right about now."

THE FIRST FLIGHT of four F-15C fighter-interceptors rotated aloft together. Twenty minutes later, they formed up with their KC-135R tankers. There were six of them from their own wing, and others would join from the Montana and North and South Dakota Air National Guard, their home states as yet untouched by the epidemic. For most of the way to the Arabian Peninsula, they'd hold position ten miles from the lead commercial aircraft coming out of California. The flight path took them north to the Pole, then over the hump and south toward Russia, continuing over Eastern Europe. West of Cyprus, they would be joined by an Israeli escort, which would convey them as far as Jordan. From there on, the American Eagle fighters would be augmented by Saudi F-15s. They might make the first few arrivals covertly, the planning officers thought in their own commercial transports, but if the other side woke up, then there would be an air battle. The pilots in the lead Eagle flight really didn't mind that very much. There was no extraneous chatter on the radios as they saw dawn to their right. It would be a flight of two dawns. The next one would be to their left.

"OKAY, LADIES AND gentlemen," the public affairs officer told the fifteen assembled journalists. "Here's the scoop. You have been called up for a military deployment. Sergeant Astor is now handing out consent forms. You will please sign them and hand them back."

"What's this?" one of them asked.

"You maybe want to try reading it?" the Marine colonel suggested from behind his mask.

"Blood test," one muttered. "I guess so. But what about the rest?"

"Ma'am, those of you who sign the form will find out more. Those who do not will be driven home." Curiosity won in every case. They all signed.

"Thank you." The colonel examined all the forms. "Now if you will go through the door to your left, some Navy corpsmen are waiting for you."

HE WAS PLEADING his own case. Though a member of the bar for thirty years, Ed Kealty had been in a court of law only as a spectator, though on many occasions he'd stood on the steps of a courthouse to

make a speech or announcement. It was always dramatic, and so was this.

"May it please the court," the former Vice President began, "I stand here to request summary judgment. My right to cross a state line has been violated by the executive order of the President. This is contrary to explicit constitutional guarantees, and also to Supreme Court precedent, to wit, the Lemuel Penn case, in which the Court ruled unanimously . . ."

Pat Martin sat beside the Solicitor General, who would speak for the government. There was a camera from *Court TV* to send the case up and down via satellite into homes across the nation. It was a strange scene. The judge, the court reporter, the bailiff, all the attorneys, the ten reporters, and four spectators were all wearing surgical masks and rubber gloves. All had just seen Ed Kealty make the greatest political miscalculation of his career, though none had grasped it yet. Martin had come in anticipation of that very fact.

"Freedom of travel is central to all of the freedoms established and protected by the Constitution. The President has neither constitutional nor statutory authority to deny this freedom to the citizens, most particularly not by the application of armed force, which has already resulted in the death of a citizen, and the wounding of several others. This is a simple point of law," Kealty was saying, half an hour later, "and on behalf of myself and our fellow citizens, I beg the court to set this illegal order aside." With that, Edward J. Kealty took his place.

"Your Honor," the Solicitor General said, walking to the podium with the TV microphone, "as the complainant tells us, this is a most important case, but not one of great legal complexity at its foundation.

"The government cites Mr. Justice Holmes in the celebrated free speech case where he told us that the suspension of freedoms is permissible when the danger to the country as a whole is both real and present. The Constitution, Your Honor, is not a suicide pact. The crisis which the country faces today is deadly, as press reports have told us, and it is of a nature that the drafters could not have anticipated. In the late eighteenth century, I remind learned counsel, the nature of infectious disease was not yet known. But quarantining of ships at the time was both common and accepted. We have Jefferson's embargo of foreign trade as a precedent, but most of all, Your Honor, we have common sense. We cannot sacrifice our citizens on the altar of legal theory ..."

Martin listened, rubbing his nose under the mask. It smelled as though a barrel of Lysol had been spilled in the room.

IT MIGHT HAVE been comical, but was not, when each of the fifteen

reporters reacted the same way to the blood test. A blink. A sigh of relief. Each one stood and walked to the far side of the room, taking the opportunity to remove his or her mask. When the tests were complete, they were led into another briefing room.

"Okay, we have a bus outside to take you to Andrews. You will receive further information after you take off," the PAO colonel told them.

"Wait a minute!" Tom Donner objected.

"Sir, that was on your consent form, remember?"

"YOU WERE RIGHT, John," Alexandre said. Epidemiology was the medical profession's version of accounting, and as that dull profession was vital to running a business, so the study of diseases and how they spread was actually the mother of modern medicine, when in the 1830s a French physician had determined that people who became ill died or recovered at the same rate whether they were treated or not. That awkward discovery had forced the medical community to study itself, to look for things that worked and things that did not, and along the way changed medicine from a trade into a scientific art.

The devil was always in the details. In this case, it might not be a devil at all, Alex realized.

There were now 3,451 Ebola cases in the country. That included those who had started dying, those who showed frank symptoms, and those who showed antibodies. The number by itself wasn't large. Lower than AIDS deaths, lower by more than two orders of magnitude than cancer and heart disease. The statistical study, aided by FBI interviews and feedback from local physicians all over the country, had established 223 primary cases, all of them infected at trade shows, and all of whom had infected others who had in turn infected more. Though the incoming cases were still on the upslope, the rate was lower than that predicted by preexisting computer models ... and at Hopkins they'd had the first case of someone who showed antibodies, but no symptoms....

"There should have been more primary cases, Alex," Pickett said. "We started seeing that last night. The first one who died, he flew from Phoenix to Dallas. The FBI got the flight records, and University of Texas tested everybody aboard, finished this morning. Only one shows antibodies, and he isn't really symptomatic."

"Risk factors?"

"Gingivitis. Bleeding gums," General Pickett reported.

"It's trying to be an aerosol . . . but . . ."

"That's what I think, Alex. The secondary cases appear to be mostly intimate contact. Hugs, kisses, taking personal care of a loved one. If

we're right, this will peak in three days, and then it'll stop. Along the way we'll start seeing survivors."

"We have one of those at Hopkins. She's got the antibodies, but it didn't get beyond the initial presentation."

"We need to get Gus working on environmental degradation. He should be already."

"Agreed. You call him. I'm doing some follow-ups down here."

THE JUDGE WAS an old friend of Kealty. Martin wasn't exactly sure how he'd fiddled with the docket in this particular district, but that didn't matter now. The two presentations had taken about thirty minutes each. It was, as Kealty had said and the Solicitor General had agreed, a fundamentally simple point of law, though the practical applications of it led into all manner of complexity. It was also a matter of great urgency, as a result of which the judge reappeared from chambers after a mere hour's contemplation. He would read his decision from his notes, and type up a full opinion later in the day.

"The Court," he began, "is cognizant of the grave danger facing the country, and must sympathize with President Ryan's sincerely felt duty to safeguard the lives of Americans in addition to their freedoms.

"However, the Court must acknowledge the fact that the Constitution is, and remains, the supreme law of the land. To violate that legal bulwark is a step that potentially sets a precedent with consequences so grave as to reach beyond the current crisis, and though the President is certainly acting under the best motives, this Court must vacate the executive order, trusting our citizens to act intelligently and prudently in the pursuit of their own safety. So ordered."

"Your Honor." The Solicitor General stood. "The government will and must appeal your ruling immediately to the Fourth Circuit in Richmond. We request a stay until the paperwork can be processed, later today."

"Request is denied. Court is adjourned." The judge stood and left the bench without a further word. The room, of course, erupted.

"What does this mean?" the *Court TV* correspondent—himself a lawyer, who knew what it probably meant—said to Ed Kealty, his microphone extended, as reporters tended to do at the moment.

"It means that so-called President Ryan cannot break the law. I think I have shown here that the rule of law still exists in our country," the politician replied. He was not being overtly smug.

"What does the government say?" the reporter asked the Solicitor General.

"Not very much. We will have papers filed with the Fourth U.S.

Circuit Court of Appeals before Judge Venable has his opinion drafted. The order of the court is not officially binding until it is written up, signed, and properly filed. We'll have our appeal drafted first. The Fourth Circuit will stay the order "

"And if it doesn't?"

Martin took that on. "In that case, sir, the executive order will remain in place in the interest of public safety until the case can be argued in a more structured setting. But there is every reason to believe that the Fourth Circuit will stay the order. Judges are people of reality in addition to being people of the written word. There is one other thing, however."

"Yes?" the reporter asked. Kealty was watching from ten feet away.

"The court has settled another important constitutional issue here. In referring to President Ryan by both his name and the title of his office, the court has settled the succession question raised by former Vice President Kealty. Further, the court said that that order was vacated. Had Mr. Ryan not been the President, the order would have been invalid and never legally binding, and the court could have stated that as well. Instead, the Court acted improperly on point, I believe, but properly in a procedural sense. Thank you. The Solicitor General and I have to get some paperwork done."

It wasn't often you shut reporters up. Shutting political figures up was harder still.

"Now, wait a minute!" Kealty shouted.

"You never were a very good lawyer, Ed," Martin said on his way past.

"I THINK HE'S right," Lorenz said. "Jesus, I sure hope he is."

CDC laboratories had been frantically at work since the beginning, studying how the virus survived in the open. Environmental chambers were set up with differing values of temperature and humidity, and different lightintensity levels, and the data, incomprehensibly, kept telling them the same thing. The disease that had to be spreading by aerosol—wasn't, or at most it was barely doing so. Its survival in the open, even under benign conditions, was measured in minutes.

"I wish I understood the warfare side of this a little better," Lorenz went on after a moment's thought.

"Two-two-three primary cases. That's all. If there were more, we'd know by now. Eighteen confirmed sites, four additional trade shows that generated no hits. Why eighteen and not the other four?" Alex wondered. "What if they did hit all twenty-two, but four didn't work?"

"On the basis of our experimental data, that's a real possibility, Alex." Lorenz was pulling on his pipe. "Our models now predict a total

of eight thousand cases. We're going to get survivors, and the numbers on that will alter the model somewhat. This quarantine stuff has scared the shit out of people. You know, I don't think the travel ban really matters directly, but it scared people enough that they're not interacting enough to—"

"Doctor, that's the third good piece of news today," Alexandre breathed. The first had been the woman at Hopkins. The second was Pickett's analytical data. Now the third was Gus's lab work and the logical conclusion it led to. "John always said that bio-war was more psychological than real."

"John's a smart doc, Alex. So are you, my friend."

"Three days and we'll know."

"Agreed. Rattle some beads, Alex."

"You can reach me through Reed for the time being."

"I'm sleeping in the office, too."

"See ya." Alexandre punched off the speakerphone. Around him were six Army physicians, three from Walter Reed, three from USAMRIID. "Comments?" he asked them.

"Crazy situation," a major observed with an exhausted smile. "It's a psychological weapon, all right. Scares the hell out of everybody. But that works for us, too. And somebody goofed on the other side. I wonder how . . . ?"

Alex thought about that for a moment. Then he lifted the phone and dialed Johns Hopkins. "This is Dr. Alexandre," he told the desk nurse on the medical floor. "I need to talk to Dr. Ryan, it's very important . . . okay, I'll hold." It took a few minutes. "Cathy? Alex here. I need to talk to your husband, and it's better if you're there, too. ... It's damned important," he told her a moment later.

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COMMENCEMENT

TWO HUNDRED FILES meant two hundred birth certificates, two hundred driver's licenses, houses or apartments, sets of credit cards, and all manner of other permutations to be checked out. It was inevitable that once such an investigation started, Special Agent Aref Raman would garner special attention from the three hundred FBI agents assigned to the case. But in fact every Secret Service employee who had regular access to the White House was on the immediate checklist. All across the country (the USSS draws personnel from as wide a field as any other government agency), agents did start with birth certificates and move on, also checking high-school yearbooks for graduation pictures to be compared with ID photos of all the agents. Three agents on the Detail turned out to be immigrants, some of whose exact personal details could not be easily checked. One was French-born, having come to America in his mother's arms. Another hailed from Mexico, having actually come illegally with her parents; she'd later legitimatized her status and distinguished herself as a genius with the Technical Security Division—and a ferociously patriotic member of the team. That left "Jeff" Raman as an agent with some missing documentation, which was reasonably explained by his parents' reported refugee status.

In many ways, it was too easy. It was on his record that he'd been born in Iran and had come to America when his parents had fled the country with the fall of the Shah's regime. Every indicator since showed that he had fully adapted to his new country, even adopting a fanaticism for basketball that was a minor legend in the Service. He almost never lost a wager on a game, and it was a standing joke that professional gamblers consulted him on the line for an important game. He was always one to enjoy a beer with his colleagues. He'd developed an outstanding service reputation as a field agent. He was unmarried. That was not terribly unusual for a federal law enforcement officer. The Secret Service was especially tough on spouses who had to share their loved ones (mainly husbands) with a job far more unforgiving than the most demanding mistress which made divorce more common than marriage. He'd been seen around

with female company, but didn't talk about that much. Insofar as he had a private life, it was a quiet one. It was certain that he'd had no contacts at all with other Iranian-born citizens or aliens, that he was not the least bit religious, that he'd never once brought up Islam in a conversation, except to say, as he'd told the President once, that religion had caused his family so much grief that it was a subject he was just as happy to leave alone.

Inspector O'Day, back at work because Director Murray trusted him with the sensitive cases, was not the least bit impressed with this or any other story. He supervised the investigation. He assumed that the adversary, if he existed, would be an expert, and therefore the most plausible and consistent identity was to him only a potential cover to be examined. Better yet, there were no rules on this one. Agent Price had made that determination herself. He picked the local investigating team himself from Headquarters Division and the Washington Field Office. The best of them he assigned to Aref Raman, now, conveniently, in Pittsburgh.

His apartment in northwest D.C. was modest, but comfortable. It had a burglar alarm, but that was not a problem. The agents selected for the illegal breaking-and-entering included a technical wizard who, after defeating the locks in two minutes, recognized the control panel and punched in the maker's emergency code—he had them all memorized—to deactivate the system. This procedure had once been called a "black bag job," a term which had fallen by the wayside, though the function itself had not quite done so. Now the term "special operation" was used, which could mean anything one wanted it to.

The first two agents in the door called three more into the apartment after the break-in had been effected. They photographed the apartment first of all, looking for possible telltales: seemingly innocent or random objects which, if disturbed in any way, warned the occupant that someone had been inside. These could be devilishly hard things to detect and defeat, but all five of the agents were part of the FBI's Foreign Counterintelligence Division, both trained against and trained by professional spooks. "Shaking" the apartment would take hours of exquisitely tedious effort. They knew that at least five other teams were doing the same thing to other potential subjects.

THE P-3C WAS hovering at the edge of the radar coverage for the Indian ships, keeping low and bumping through the roiled air over the warm surface of the Arabian Sea. They had tracks on thirty emitters from nineteen sources. The powerful, low-frequency search radars were the ones they worried about most, though the threat-receivers

were getting traces of SAM radars as well. Supposedly, the Indians were running exercises, their fleet back at sea after a long stand-down for maintenance. The problem was that such workup exercises were quite indistinguishable from battle readiness. The data being analyzed by the on-board ELINT crew was downlinked to *Anzio* and the rest of the escorts for Task Group COMEDY, as the sailors had taken to calling the four *Bob Hopes* and their escorts.

The group commander was sitting in his cruiser's combat information center. The three large billboard displays (actually rear-projection televisions linked to the Aegis radar-computer system) showed the location of the Indian battle group with a fair degree of precision. He even knew which of the blips were probably the carriers. His task was a complex one. COMEDY was now fully formed. Under way-replenishment ships *Platte* and *Supply* were now attached to the group, along with their escorts *Hawes* and *Carr*, and over the next few hours all of the escorts would take turns alongside to top off their fuel bunkers—for a Navy captain, having too much fuel was like having too much money: impossible. After that, the UNREP ships would be ordered to take position outboard of the leading tank carriers, and the frigates outboard of the trailers. *O'Bannon* would move forward to continue her ASW search—the Indians had two nuclear submarines, and nobody seemed to know where they were at the moment. *Kidd* and *Anzio*, both SAM ships, would back into the formation, providing close air defense. Ordinarily the Aegis cruiser would stand farther out, but not now.

The reason for that came not from his mission orders, but from TV. Every naval vessel in the group had its own satellite-TV receiver; in the modern Navy, the sailors wanted and got their own cable system, and while the crew spent most of their time watching the various movie channels—*Playboy* was always a favorite, sailors being sailors—the group commander was overdosing on CNN, because while his mission orders didn't always give him all the background information he needed for his missions, very often commercial TV did. The crews were tense. The news of events at home could not have been concealed from them in any case, and the images of sick and dying people, blocked interstates, and empty city streets had initially shaken them badly, causing officers and chiefs to sit down with the men on the mess decks to talk things through. Then had come these orders. Things were happening in the Persian Gulf, things were happening at home, and all of a sudden the MPS ships, with their brigade set of combat vehicles, were heading for the Saudi port of Dhahran . . . and the Indian navy was in the way. The crew was quiet now, Captain Greg Kemper of USS *Anzio* saw. His chiefs reported that the "troops" were not laughing and cutting up in the mess rooms, and the constant

simulations on the Aegis combat system in the past few days had conveyed their own message. COMEDY was sailing in harm's way.

Each of the escorting ships had a helicopter. These coordinated with the crack ASW team on *O'Bannon*, namesake of the Navy's golden ship of World War II, a Fletcher-class destroyer which had fought in every major Pacific engagement without a casualty or a scratch; the new one had a gold A on her superstructure, the mark of a submarine-killer of note—at least in simulation. *Kidd's* heritage was less lucky. Named for Admiral Isaac Kidd, who had died aboard USS *Arizona* on the morning of December 7, 1941, she was a member of the "dead-admiral class" of four missile destroyers originally built for the Iranian navy under the Shah, forced on a reluctant President Carter, and then perversely all named for admirals who'd died in losing battles. *Anzio*, in one of the Navy's stranger traditions, was named for a land battle, part of the Italian campaign in 1943, in which a daring invasion had developed into a desperate struggle. Ships of war were actually made for that sort of business, but it was the business of their commanders to see that the desperate part applied to the other guy.

In a real war, that would have been easy. *Anzio* had fifteen Tomahawk missiles aboard, each with a thousand-pound warhead, and nearly in range of the Indian battle group. In an ideal world he'd loose them at just over two hundred miles, based on targeting information from the Orions—his helicopters could do that, too, but the P-3Cs were far more survivable.

"Captain!" It was a petty officer on the ESM board. "We're getting airborne radars. The Orion has some company approaching, looks like two Harriers, distance unknown, constant bearing, signal strength increasing."

"Thank you. It's a free sky until somebody says different," Kemper reminded everybody.

Maybe it was an exercise, but the Indian battle group hadn't moved forty miles in the past day, instead traveling back and forth, east and west, crossing and recrossing its own course track. Exercises were supposed to be more free-form than that. What the situation told the captain of USS *Anzio* was that they'd staked out this piece of ocean as their own. And the Indians just happened to be between where COMEDY was and where it wanted to be.

Nothing was very secret about it, either. Everyone pretended that normal peacetime conditions were in effect. *Anzio* had her SPY-1 radar operating, pumping out millions of watts. The Indians were using theirs as well. It was almost like a game of chicken.

"Captain, we have bogies, we have unknown multiple air contacts bearing zero-seven-zero, range two-one-five miles. No squawk ident, they are not commercial. Designate Raid-One." The symbols came up

on the center screen.

"No emitters on that bearing," ESM reported.

"Very well." The captain crossed his legs in his command chair. In the movies this was where Gary Cooper lit up a smoke.

"Raid-One appears to be four aircraft in formation, speed four-five-zero knots, course two-four-five." Which made them inbounds, though not quite directly at COMEDY.

"Projected CPA?" the captain asked.

"They will pass within twenty miles on their current course, sir," a sailor responded crisply.

"Very well. Okay, people, listen up. I want this place cool and businesslike. You all know the job. When there's reason to be excited, I will be the one to tell you," he told the CIC crew. "Weapons tight." Meaning that peacetime rules still applied, and nothing was actually ready to fire—a situation that could be remedied by turning a few keys.

"*Anzio*, this is Gonzo-Four, over," a voice called on the air-to-surface radio.

"Gonzo-Four, *Anzio*, over."

"Anzio," the aviator reported, "we got two Harriers playing tag with us. One just zipped by at about fifty yards. He's got white ones on the rails." Real missiles hanging under the wings, not pretend ones.

"Doing anything?" the air-control officer asked.

"Negative, just like he's playing a little."

"Tell him to continue the mission," the captain said. "And pretend he doesn't care."

"Aye, sir." The message was relayed.

This sort of thing wasn't all that unusual. Fighter pilots were fighter pilots, the captain knew. They never grew up past the stage of buzzing by girls on their bikes. He directed his attention to Raid-One. Course and speed were unchanged. This wasn't a hostile act. The Indians were letting him know that they knew who was in their neighborhood. That was evident from the appearance of fighters in two places at the same time. It was definitely a game of chicken now.

What to do now? he wondered. *Play tough? Play dumb? Play apathetic?* People so often overlooked the psychological aspect of military operations. Raid-One was now 150 miles out, rapidly approaching the range of his SM-2 MR SAMs.

"What d'ya think, Weps?" he asked his weapons officer.

"I think they're just trying to piss us off."

"Agreed." The captain flipped a mental coin. "Well, they're harassing the Orion. Let 'em know we see 'em," he ordered.

Two seconds later, the SPY search radar jacked up its power to four million watts, sent all of it down one degree of bearing at the inbound

fighters, and increased the "dwell" on the targets, which meant they were being hit almost continuously. It was enough to peg the threat-detection gear they had to have aboard. Inside of twenty miles, it could even start damaging such equipment, depending on how delicate it was. That was called a "zorch," and the captain still had another two million watts of power up his sleeve. The joke was that if you really pissed off an Aegis, you might start producing two-headed kids.

"*Kidd* just went to battle stations, sir," the officer of the deck reported.

"Good training time, isn't it?" Range to Raid-One was just over one hundred miles now. "Weps, light 'em up."

With that command, the ship's four SPG-51 target-illumination radars turned, sending pencil beams of X-band energy at the inbound fighters. These radars told the missiles how to find their targets. The Indian threat gear would pick that up, too. The fighters didn't change course or speed.

"Okay, that means we're not playing rough today. If they were of a mind to do something, they'd be maneuvering now," the captain told his crew. "You know, like turning the corner when you see a cop." Or they had ice water in their veins, which didn't seem likely.

"Going to eyeball the formation?" Weps asked.

"That's what I'd do. Take some pictures, see what's here," Kemper thought.

"A lot of things happening at once, sir."

"Yep," the captain agreed, watching the display. He lifted the growler phone.

"Bridge," the OOD answered.

"Tell your lookouts I want to know what they are. Photos, if possible. How's visibility topside?"

"Surface haze, not bad aloft, sir. I've got men on the Big Eyes now."

"Very well."

"They'll go past us to the north, turn left, and come down our port side," the captain predicted.

"Sir, Gonzo-Four reports a very close pass a few seconds ago," air control said.

"Tell him to stay cool."

"Aye, Cap'n." The situation developed quickly after that. The fighters circled COMEDY twice, never closer than five nautical miles. The Indian Harriers spent another fifteen minutes around the patrolling Orion, then had to return back to their carrier to refuel, and another day at sea continued with no shots fired and no overtly hostile acts, unless you counted the fighter play, and that was pretty routine. When all was settled down, the captain of USS *Anzio* turned to his

communications officer.

"I need to talk to CINCLANT. Oh, Weps?" Kemper added.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want every combat system on this ship fully checked out."

"Sir, we just ran a full check twelve hours—"

"Right now, Weps," he emphasized quietly.

"AND THAT'S GOOD news?" Cathy asked.

"Doctor, that's real simple," Alexandre said in reply. "You watched some people die this morning. You will watch more die tomorrow, and that stinks. But thousands is better than millions, isn't it? I think this epidemic is going to burn out." He didn't add that it was somewhat easier for him. Cathy was an eye cutter. She wasn't used to dealing with death. He was infectious diseases, and he was used to it. Easier? Was that the word? "We'll know in a couple of days from statistical analysis of the cases."

The President nodded silently. Van Damm spoke for him: "What's the count going to be?"

"Less than ten thousand, according to the computer models at Reed and Detrick. Sir, I am not being cavalier about this. I'm saying that ten thousand is better than ten million."

"One death is a tragedy, and a million is a statistic," Ryan said finally.

"Yes, sir. I know that one." The good news didn't make Alexandre all that happy. But how else to tell people that a disaster was better than a catastrophe?

"Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin," SWORDSMAN told them. "He did have a way with words."

"You know who did it," Alex observed.

"What makes you say that?" Jack asked.

"You didn't react normally to what I told you, Mr. President."

"Doctor, I haven't done much of anything normally over the past few months. What does this mean about the no-travel order?"

"It means we leave it in place for at least another week. Our prediction is not carved in stone. The incubation period for the disease is somewhat variable. You don't send the fire trucks home as soon as the last flame disappears. You sit there and watch for another possible flare-up. That will happen here, too. What's worked to this point is that people are frightened to death. Because of that, personal interactions are minimized, and *that*'s how you stop one of these things. We keep 'em that way. The new cases will be very circumscribed. We attack those like we did with smallpox. Identify the cases, test everyone with whom they've had contact, isolate the ones

with antibodies, and see how they do. It's *working*, okay? Whoever did this miscalculated. The disease isn't anywhere near as contagious as they thought—or maybe the whole thing was just a psychological exercise. That's what bio-war is. The great plagues of the past really happened because people didn't know how diseases spread. They didn't know about microbes and fleas and contaminated water. We do. Everybody does, you learn it in health class in school. Hell, that's why we haven't had any medics infected. We've had lots of practice dealing with AIDS and hepatitis. The same precautions that work with those also work with this."

"How do we keep it from happening again?" van Damm asked.

"I told you that already. Funding. Basic research on the genetic side, and more focused work on the diseases we know about. There's no particular reason why we can't develop safe vaccines for Ebola and a lot of others."

"AIDS?" Ryan asked.

"That's a toughie. That virus is an agile little bastard. No attempt for a vaccine has even come close yet. No, on that side, basic genetic research to determine how the biologic mechanism works, and from that to get the immune system to recognize it and kill it—some sort of vaccine; that's what a vaccine is. But how to make it work, well, we haven't figured that one yet. We'd better. In twenty years, we might have to write Africa off. Hey," the Creole said, "I got kin over there, y'know?

"That's one way to keep it from happening again. You, Mr. President, are already working on the other way. Who was it?"

He didn't have to tell anybody how secret it was: "Iran. The Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei and his merry men."

Alexandre reverted to officer in the United States Army: "Sir, you can kill all of them you want, as far as I'm concerned."

IT WAS INTERESTING to see Mehrabad International Airport in daylight. Clark had never experienced Iran as a friendly country. Supposedly, before the fall of the Shah, the people had been friendly enough, but he hadn't made the trip soon enough for that. He'd come in covertly in 1979 and again in 1980, first to develop information for, and then to participate in, the attempt to rescue the hostages. There were no words to describe what it was like to be in a country in a revolutionary condition. His time on the ground in the Soviet Union had been far more comfortable. Enemy or not, Russia had always been a civilized country with lots of rules and citizens who broke them. But Iran had ignited like a dry forest in a lightning storm. "Death to America" had been a chant on everyone's lips, and *that*, he

remembered, was about as scary as things got when you were in the middle of the mob singing *that* song. One little mistake, just contacting an agent who'd been turned, would have been his death, rather a frightening thought to a man with young children, spook or no spook. Locally they shot some criminals, but spies they mostly hanged. It seemed a gratuitously cruel way to take a man's life.

Some things had changed in the intervening years. Some had not. There was still a suspicion of foreigners here at the customs post. The clerk was backed up by armed men, and their job was to prevent the entry of people like him. For the new UIR, as for the previous country, every new face was a potential spy.

"Klerk," he said, handing over his passport, "Ivan Sergeyevich." What the hell, the Russian cover identity had worked before, and he already had it memorized. Better yet, his Russian was letter-perfect. He'd passed as a Soviet citizen before a uniformed official more than once.

"Chekov, Yevgeniy Pavlovich," Chavez told the next clerk over.

They were, again, news correspondents. Rules prohibited CIA officers from covering themselves as *American* reporters, but that didn't apply to the foreign media.

"The purpose of your visit?" the first clerk asked.

"To learn about your new country," Ivan Sergeyevich replied. "It must be very exciting for everyone." For their work in Japan, they'd brought camera gear, and a useful little gadget that looked like, and indeed was, a bright light. Not this time.

"He and I are together," Yevgeniy Pavlovich told his clerk.

The passports were brand-new, though one could not have told it from casual inspection. It was one of the few things Clark and Chavez didn't have to worry about. RVS tradecraft was every bit as good as the former KGB's had been. They made some of the best fake documents in the world. The pages were covered with stamps, many overlapping, and were creased and dog-eared from years of apparent use. An inspector grabbed their bags and opened them. He found clothing, clearly much used, two books, which he flipped through to see if they were pornographic, two cameras of medium quality, their black enamel well-chipped but the lenses new. Each had a carry-on bag with note pads and mini-tape recorders. The inspectors took their time, even after the clerks had done their work, finally passing their country's visitors through with a palpable reluctance.

"*Spasiba*," John said pleasantly, getting his bags and moving off. Over the years, he'd learned not to conceal his relief completely. Normal travelers were intimidated. He had to be, too, lest he stand apart from them. The two CIA officers went outside to catch a cab, standing together in line silently as the rank of taxis ate up the new

arrivals. When they were two back, Chavez dropped his travel bag, and the contents spilled out. He and Clark let two people jump ahead of them in line while he repacked the bag. That almost certainly guaranteed a random cab, unless they were all being driven by spooks.

The trick was to look normal in all respects. Not too stupid. Never too smart. To get disoriented and ask for directions, but not too often. To stay in cheap hotels. And in their particular case, to pray that none of the people who'd seen them during their brief visit to this city crossed their path. The mission was supposed to be a simple one. That was usually the idea. You rarely sent intelligence officers out on complex missions—they'd have the good sense to refuse. The simple ones were hairy enough once you got out there.

"IT'S CALLED TASK Group COMEDY," Robby told him. "They got their doorbell rung this morning." The J-3 explained on for a few minutes.

"Playing rough?" the President asked.

"Evidently, they gave the P-3 a real air show. I've done that myself a few times, back in my young-and-foolish days. They want us to know they're there, and they're not intimidated. The group commander is Greg Kemper. I don't know him, but his rep's pretty good. CINCLANT likes him. He's asking for a ROE change."

"Not yet. Later today."

"Okay. I would not expect a night attack, but remember dawn there is midnight here, sir."

"Arnie, what's the book on the P.M.?"

"She and Ambassador Williams don't exchange Christmas presents," the chief of staff replied. "You met her in the East Room a while back."

"Warning her off risks having her call Daryaei," Ben Goodley reminded them all. "If you confront her, she'll weasel on you."

"And? Robby?"

"If we get past the Indians, but she warns Daryaei? They can try to block the strait. The Med force will turn the corner in a few hours and join up fifty miles off the entrance. We'll have air cover. It could be exciting, but they should make it. Mines are the scary part. The strait there is pretty deep for them. Closer into Dhahran is another story. The longer the UIR's in the dark, the better, but they may already know what COMEDY is made up of."

"Or maybe not," van Damm thought. "If she thinks she can handle it herself, she might just try to show him what kind of balls she has."

THE TRANSFER WAS called Operation CUSTER. All forty aircraft were aloft now, each carrying roughly 250 soldiers in a sky train six thousand miles long. The lead aircraft were now six hours out from Dhahran, leaving Russian airspace and overflying Ukraine.

The F-15 pilots had traded waves with a handful of Russian fighters which had come up to say hello. They were tired now. Their rumps were like painful lead from all the time in the same seat—the airliner pilots behind them could get up and move around; they even had toilets, quite a luxury for a fighter pilot who had an appliance called a relief tube. Arms tightened up. Muscles were sore from staying in the same position. It was to the point that tanking from their KC-135s was becoming difficult, and gradually they came to the opinion that an air-to-air engagement an hour out from their destination might not be much fun at all. Most drank coffee, tried to shift hands on the stick, and stretched as much as they could.

The soldiers were mainly sleeping, still ignorant of the nature of their mission. The airlines had stocked their aircraft normally, and the troops indulged what would be their last chance to have a drink for some time to come. Those who had deployed to Saudi in 1990 and 1991 told their war stories, chief among which was the memory that the Kingdom wasn't a place you went to for the nightlife.

NEITHER WAS INDIANA. Brown and Holbrook had found, at least not now. They had at least been smart enough to get into a motel before the general panic, and here they were trapped. This motel, like the ones they'd used in Wyoming and Nebraska, catered to truckers. It had a large restaurant, the old-fashioned sort with a counter and booths, and now with masked waitresses and customers who didn't group closely together to socialize. Instead, they ate their meals and went back to their rooms, or to sleep in their trucks. There was a daily dance of sorts. The trucks had to be moved, lest staying in the exact same spot damage the tires. Everyone listened to the radio for hourly news broadcasts. The rooms, the restaurant, and even some of the trucks had televisions for further information and distraction. There was boredom, the tense sort familiar to soldiers but not known to the two Mountain Men.

"Goddamned government," a furniture hauler said. He had family two states away.

"I guess they showed us who was boss, eh?" Ernie Brown said, for general consumption.

Later, data would show that not a single interstate trucker had caught the virus. Their existence was too solitary for that. But their working lives depended on movement, both because they earned their living that way and because they had chosen to do so. Sitting still was not in their nature. Being told to sit still was even less so.

"What the hell," another driver added. He couldn't think of anything else to say. "Goddamned glad I got outa Chicago when I did. That news is scary."

"You suppose this all makes sense?" someone asked.

"Since when does the government make sense?" Holbrook griped.

"I hear that," a voice chimed in, and finally the Mountain Men felt at home somewhere. Then, by unspoken consent, it was time for them to leave.

"How the hell much longer will we be stuck here, Pete?" Ernie Brown wanted to know.

"You're askin' me?"

"A WHOLE LOT of nothing," concluded the lead agent. Aref Raman was a little neat for a single man living alone, but not grossly so. One of the FBI agents had noted with surprise that even the man's socks were neatly folded, along with everything else in the bureau drawers. Then one of the group remembered a study of NFL football players. A psychologist had determined after months of study that offensive linemen, whose job was to protect the quarterback, had neat lockers, while defensive linemen, whose job it was to pound the opposing quarterbacks into the turf, were slobs in every respect. It was good for a laugh, and an explanation. Nothing else was found. There was a photo of his parents, both dead. He subscribed to two news magazines, had the full cable options for his two televisions, had no booze in the house, and ate healthy. He had a particular affinity for kosher hot dogs, judging by the freezer. There were no hidden drawers or compartments they would have found them—and nothing the least bit suspicious. That was both good news and bad.

The phone rang. Nobody answered it, because they weren't there, and they had beepers and cellular phones for their own communications needs.

"Hello, this is 536-3040," the recording of Raman's voice said, after the second ring. "Nobody's here to answer the phone right now, but if you leave a message, somebody will get back to you." Followed by a beep, and in this case, a click.

"Wrong number," one of the agents said.

"Pull the messages," the lead agent ordered the technical genius on the team.

Raman owned a digital recording system, and again there was a punch code programmed in by the manufacturer. The agent hit the six digits and another took notes. There were three clicks and a wrong number. Somebody calling for Mr. Sloan, whoever that was.

"Rug? Mr. Alahad?"

"Sounds like the name of a rug dealer," another one said. But when they looked around, there was no such rug in the apartment, just the usual cheap wall-to-wall carpet you found in apartments of this type.

"Wrong number."

"Run the names anyway." It was more habit than anything else. You checked everything. It was like working FCI. You just never knew.

Just then the phone rang again, and all five of the agents turned to stare at the answering machine, as though it were a real witness with a real voice.

SHIT, RAMAN THOUGHT, he'd forgotten to erase the messages from before. There was nothing new. His control officer hadn't called again. It would have been a surprise if he had. With that determined, Raman, sitting in a Pittsburgh hotel room, punched the erase-all code. One nice thing about the new digitals was that, once erased, they were gone forever. That wasn't necessarily true of the ones using tape cassettes.

THE FBI AGENTS took note of that, sharing looks.

"Hey, we all do that." There was general agreement. And everybody got wrong numbers, too. And this was a brother officer. But they'd run the numbers anyway.

SURGEON, TO THE relief of her detail, was sleeping upstairs in the residence. Roy Altman and the rest assigned to guard her had been going crazy with her on the fever ward—their term for it—at Johns Hopkins, as much from the physical danger as for the fact that she had run herself right into the ground. The kids, being kids, had spent the time like most other American children, watching TV and playing under the eyes of their agents, who now worried about seeing the onset of flu symptoms, blessedly absent from the entire campus. SWORDSMAN was in the Situation Room.

"What's the time there?"

"Ten hours ahead, sir."

"Make the call," POTUS ordered.

THE FIRST 747, in United livery, crossed into Saudi airspace a few minutes earlier than expected, due to favorable arctic winds. A more circuitous routing at this point would not have helped very much. Sudan had airports and radars, too, as did Egypt and Jordan, and it was assumed that the UIR had informants somewhere in those countries. The Saudi Air Force, augmented by the F-16Cs which had sneaked in from Israel the previous day as part of BUFFALO FORWARD, stood combat air patrol along the Saudi-UIR border. Two E-3B AWACS were up and turning their rotodomes. The sun was rising now in that part of the world—at least one could see first light from their cruising altitude, though the surface, six miles below, was still black.

"GOOD MORNING, PRIME Minister. This is Jack Ryan," the President said.

"A pleasure to hear your voice. It is late in Washington, is it not?" she asked.

"We both work irregular hours. I imagine your day is just beginning."

"So it is," the voice answered. Ryan had a conventional receiver to his ear. The conversation was on speakerphone as well, and feeding into a digital tape recorder. The CIA had even supplied a voice-stress analyzer. "Mr. President, the troubles in your country, have they improved?"

"We have some hope, but, no, not quite yet."

"Is there any way in which we might be of assistance?" Neither voice showed the least emotion beyond the false amity of people suspicious of each other, and trying to hide it.

"Well, yes, actually, there is."

"Please, then, how may we be of help?"

"Prime Minister, we have some ships heading through the Arabian Sea at the moment," Ryan told her.

"Is that so?" Total neutrality in the voice.

"Yes, ma'am, it is, and you know it is, and I want your personal assurance that your navy, which is also at sea, will not interfere with their passage."

"But why do you ask this? Why should we interfere—for that matter, what is the purpose of your ship movement?"

"Your word on the matter will suffice, Prime Minister," Ryan told

her. His right hand gripped a number 2 lead pencil.

"But, Mr. President, I fail to understand the purpose of this call."

"The purpose of this call is to seek your personal assurance that the Indian navy will not interfere with the peaceful passage of United States Navy ships through the Arabian Sea."

HE WAS SO weak, she thought, repeating himself that way.

"Mr. President, I find your call unsettling. America has never spoken to us about such a matter before. You say you move warships close to my country, but not the purpose for the move. The movement of such vessels without an explanation is not the act of a friend." What if she could make him back down?

WHAT DID I TELL YOU? the note from Ben Goodley read.

"Very well, Prime Minister, for the third time, will you give me your assurance that there will be no interference in this activity?"

"But why are you invading our waters?" she asked again.

"Very well." Ryan paused, and then his voice changed. "Prime Minister, the purpose of the movement does not directly concern your country, but I assure you, those ships will sail on to their destination. Since their mission is one of importance to us, we will not, I repeat not, brook interference of any kind, and I must warn you that should any unidentified ship or aircraft approach our formation, there might be adverse consequences. No, please excuse me, there *will* be such consequences. To avoid that, I give you notice of the passage, and I request your personal assurance to the United States of America that there will be no attack on our ships."

"And now you threaten me? Mr. President, I understand the stress which has come to you of late, but, please, you may not treat sovereign countries in this way."

"Prime Minister, then I will speak very clearly. An overt act of war has been committed against the United States of America. Any interference with, or attack on, any part of our military will be deemed a further act of war, and whatever country commits such an act will face the most serious possible consequences."

"But who has done this to you?"

"Prime Minister, that is not your concern unless you wish it to be. I think in the interests of both your country and mine, it would be well if your navy returned to port forthwith."

"And you blame us, you order us?"

"I began with a request, Prime Minister. You saw fit to evade my

request three times. I regard that as an unfriendly act. And so I have a new question: Is it your desire to be at war with the United States of America?"

"Mr. President—"

"Because if those ships don't move, Prime Minister, you will be." The pencil snapped in Ryan's hand. "I think you may have associated yourself with the wrong friends, Prime Minister. I hope I am incorrect, but if my impression is correct, then your country could well pay dearly for that misjudgment. We have experienced a direct attack on our citizens. It is a particularly cruel and barbaric attack, utilizing weapons of mass destruction." He enunciated these words very clearly. "This is not yet known to our citizens. That will soon change," he told her. "When it does, Prime Minister, those guilty of launching that attack will face our justice. We will not send notes of protest. We will not call a special meeting of the UN Security Council in New York. We will make war, Prime Minister. We will make war with all the power and rage this country and her citizens can muster. Do you now understand what I am saying? Ordinary men, women, and now even children have been murdered within our borders by a foreign power. There has even been an attack upon my own child, Prime Minister. Does your country wish to be associated with those acts? If so, Prime Minister, if you wish to be part of that, then the war commences now."

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DEPLOYMENT

JESUS, JACK, YOU HAD ME convinced," Jackson breathed.

"Our friend in the clergy won't be as easy," the President said. He rubbed his two sweaty hands together. "And we still don't know if she'll keep her word. Okay, Task Group COMEDY is at DEFCON 1. If they think it's hostile, kill it. But for Christ's sake, make sure that commander knows how to use his head."

The Situation Room was quiet now, and President Ryan felt very alone, despite the people assembled around him. Secretary Bretano and the Joint Chiefs were there. Rutledge was there for State. Secretary Winston, because Ryan trusted his judgment. Goodley, because he was fully briefed in on all the intelligence information; plus his chief of staff and the usual bodyguards. They all showed their support, but it really didn't help all that much. He alone had talked to India, because despite all the help and staff and advice, Jack Ryan was now the United States of America, and the country was going to war.

THE MEDIA POOL learned that over the Atlantic Ocean. America expected an attack at any time from the United Islamic Republic into the other Gulf states. They would be there to cover the story. They also learned about the forces being deployed.

"That's all?" one of the more knowledgeable of them asked.

"That's it for the moment," the public affairs officer confirmed. "We hope that the show of force will be sufficient to deter the attack, but if not, it's going to be exciting."

"Exciting ain't the word."

Then the PAO told them why it was happening, and the windowless KC-135 that was taking them to Saudi Arabia became very quiet indeed.

KUWAIT ESSENTIALLY HAD two heavy brigades, complemented by a motorized reconnaissance brigade equipped with antitank weapons

and designed to be a screening force on the border. The two heavy brigades, equipped and trained on the American model, were held back from the border in the usual way so as to be able to move to counter an incursion rather than having to meet the initial attack—possibly in the wrong place. The 10th U.S. Cavalry stood between and slightly behind those two. Overall command was somewhat equivocal. Colonel Magruder was the most senior officer in time of service, and the most experienced tactician, but there were Kuwaitis more senior in rank—all three brigades were commanded by brigadier generals—and it *was* their country. On the other hand, the country was small enough to require only one primary command post, and Magruder was there, both to command his regiment and to advise the Kuwaiti commanders. The latter were both proud and nervous. They were understandably pleased by the strides their small country had made since 1990. No longer the comic-opera force which had disintegrated on the Iraqi invasion—though some sub-units had fought bravely—they had what looked on paper and to the eye like a very capable mechanized force. They were nervous because they were heavily outnumbered, and their mainly reservist soldiers had a long way to go before they met the American training standards to which they aspired. But the one thing they knew was gunnery. Shooting tanks is as enjoyable a pastime as it is a vital one; the empty slots in their formations were explained by the fact that twenty tanks were in the shop for replacement of their main gun tubes. That was being done by civilian contractors while the tank crews paced and waited.

The 10th Cav's helicopters were flying around the country's border, their Longbow radars looking deep into the UIR for movement, and so far seeing nothing of particular note. The Kuwaiti air force was standing a four-plane combat air patrol, with the rest of the force on high alert. Outmanned though they were, this would not be a repeat of 1990. The busiest people were the engineers, who were digging holes for all the tanks so that they could fight hull-down, with only their turrets showing. These were covered with netting to make them invisible from the air.

"And so, Colonel?" the senior Kuwaiti commander asked.

"Nothing wrong with your deployments, General," Magruder replied, scanning the map again. He didn't show everything he felt. Two or three weeks of intensive training would have been a blessing. He'd run one very simple exercise, one of his squadrons against the Kuwaiti 1st Brigade, and even then he'd gone very easy on them. It wasn't the time to break their confidence. They had enthusiasm, and their gunnery was about seventy percent of American standards, but they had a lot to learn about maneuver warfare. Well, it took time to raise an army, and more time to train field officers, and they were

doing their best.

"YOUR HIGHNESS, I need to thank you for your cooperation to this point," Ryan said over the phone. The wall clock in the Sit Room said 2:10.

"Jack, with luck they will see this and not move," Prince Ali bin Sheik replied.

"I wish I could agree with that. It is time for me to tell you something you do not yet know, Ali. Our ambassador will present you with full information later in the day. For the moment, you need to know what your neighbors have been up to. It isn't just about the oil, Your Highness." He went on for five minutes.

"Are you certain of this?"

"The evidence we have will be in your hands in four hours," Ryan promised. "We haven't even told our soldiers yet."

"Might they use these weapons against us?" The natural question. Biological warfare made everyone's skin crawl.

"We don't think so, Ali. Environmental conditions militate against it." That had been checked, too. The weather forecast for the next week was hot, dry, and clear.

"Those who would use such weapons, Mr. President, this is an act of utter barbarism."

"That's why we do not expect them to back down. They can't—"

"Not 'they,' Mr. President. One man. One godless man. When will you speak to your people about this?"

"Soon," Ryan replied.

"Please, Jack, this is not our religion, this is not our faith. Please tell your people that."

"I know that, Your Highness. It isn't about God. It's about power. It always is. I'm afraid I have other things to do."

"As do I. I must see the King."

"Please give him my respects. We stand together, Ali, just like before." With that the line went dead.

"Next, where exactly is Adler right now?"

"Shuttling back to Taiwan," Rutledge answered. Those negotiations were still going on, though their purpose was now rather clear.

"Okay, he has secure comm links on the plane. You brief him in," he told the Under Secretary. "Anything else I need to do right now?"

"Sleep," Admiral Jackson told him. "Let us do the all-nighter, Jack."

"That's a plan." Ryan rose. He wobbled a bit from the stress and lack of sleep. "Wake me up if you need me."

We won't, nobody said.

“WELL,” CAPTAIN KEMPER said, reading the CRITIC message from CINCLANT. “That makes things a lot simpler.” Range to the Indian battle group was now two hundred miles, about eight hours of steaming—still the term they used, though all the combatant ships were now powered by jet-turbine engines. Kemper lifted the phone and flipped a switch to speak on the ship’s 1-MC address system. “Now hear this. This is the captain speaking.

“Task Group COMEDY is now at DefCon 1. That means if anybody gets close, we shoot him. The mission is to deliver our tank-carriers to Saudi Arabia. Our country is flying in the soldiers to drive them in anticipation of an attack on our allies in the region by the new United Islamic Republic.

“In sixteen hours, we will link up with a surface action making a speed-run down from the Med. We will then enter the Persian Gulf to make our delivery. The group will have friendly air cover in the form of Air Force F-16C fighters, but it is to be expected that the UIR—our old Iranian friends—will not be happy with our arrival.

“USS *Anzio* is going to war, people. That is all for now.” He flipped the switch back. “Okay, let’s start running simulations. I want to see everything those bastards might try on us. We will have an updated intelligence estimate here in two hours. For now, let’s see what we can do about aircraft and missile attacks.”

“What about the Indians?” Weps asked.

“We’ll be keeping an eye on them, too.” The main tactical display showed a P-3C Orion passing COMEDY to relieve the aircraft now on station. The battle group was heading east, again recrossing its wake, as it had been doing for some time now.

A KH-11 SATELLITE was just sweeping down, northwest-to-southeast, over the Persian Gulf. Its cameras, having already looked at the three heavy corps of the Army of God, were now photographing the entire Iranian coast, looking for the launch sites of Chinese-made Silkworm missiles. The take from the electronic cameras was cross-linked to a communications satellite over the Indian Ocean, and from there to the Washington area, where technicians still wearing chemically impregnated surgical masks started looking for the airplane-shaped surface-to-surface missiles. The fixed launch sites were well known, but the weapon also could be fired off the back of a large truck, and there were plenty of coastal roads to survey.

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THE FIRST GROUP of four airliners touched down without incident outside Dhahran. There was no arrival ceremony. It was already hot. Spring had come early to the region after the surprisingly cold and wet winter season, and that meant noon temperatures close to 100 degrees, as opposed to the 120 of high summer, but night temperatures down in the forties. It was humid this close to the coast as well.

When the first airliner stopped, the truck-mounted stairs were driven up, and Brigadier General Marion Diggs was the first off. He would be the ground commander for this operation. The virus epidemic still raging in America had also compromised MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, home of Central Command, which had responsibility for this area. The briefing papers he'd seen to this point said that the commander of the 366th Air Combat Wing was also a one-star, but junior to him. It had been a long time since so vital an operation had been turned over to someone as junior as himself, Marion Diggs thought on the way down the steps.

At the bottom was a Saudi three-star. The two men exchanged salutes and entered a car for the ride to the local command post, and an intelligence update. Behind Diggs was the command group of the 11th ACR, and on the other three aircraft, a security group and most of the Second Squadron of the Black Horse. Buses waited to take them to the POMCUS site. It was all rather like the RE-FORGER exercises of the Cold War, which had anticipated a NATO-Warsaw Pact clash requiring American soldiers to get off the airplanes, board their vehicles, and march off to the front. That had never happened except in simulation, but now, again, it was happening, and this time it was for real. Two hours later, 2nd of the Blackhorse was rolling into the open.

"WHAT DO YOU mean?" Daryaei asked.

"There appears to be a major troop movement under way," his intelligence chief told him. "Radar sites in western Iraq have detected commercial aircraft entering Saudi Arabia from Israeli airspace. We also show fighters escorting them and patrolling the border."

"What else?"

"Nothing at the moment, but it would seem likely that America is moving another force into the Kingdom. I am not sure what it could be—certainly, it cannot be very large. Their German-based divisions are under quarantine, and all their home-quartered divisions are in

the same condition. Most of their army is actually deployed for internal security."

"We should attack them anyway," his air force adviser urged.

"I think that would be a mistake," Intelligence said. "It would be an invasion of Saudi airspace, alerting those goatherds too soon. The Americans can at most move one brigade-sized force. There is a second based at Diego Garcia the equipment, that is—but we have no information to suggest that it has moved, and even if it does, we expect that our Indian friends can stop it."

"We trust pagans?" Air Force asked with contempt. That was how Muslims viewed the official religion of the Subcontinent.

"We can trust their antipathy to America. And we can ask them if their fleet has spotted anything. In any case, the Americans can deploy another brigade-sized force. That is all."

"Kill it anyway!"

"That throws away operational security," Intelligence pointed out.

"If they don't know we are coming by now, then they are fools," Air Force objected.

"The Americans have no reason to suspect that we have taken hostile actions against them. To attack their aircraft, if that's what they are, will alert *them* unnecessarily, not just the Saudis. They are probably concerned about our troop movements in Iraq. So they fly in some small reinforcements. We can deal with them when the time comes," Intelligence told them.

"I will call India," Daryaei said, temporizing.

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"NAVIGATION RADARS ONLY . . . make that two air-search, probably from the carriers," the petty officer said. "Their course track is zero-niner-zero, speed about sixteen."

The tactical officer on the Orion, called a tacco, looked down at his chart. The Indian battle group was at the extreme eastern edge of the racetrack pattern they'd been following for the last several days. In less than twenty minutes, they should reverse course to head west. If they turned, things would become exciting. COMEDY was now 120 miles away from the other formation, and his aircraft was feeding constant information to *Anzio* and *Kidd.* Under the wings of the four-engine Lockheed turboprop were four Harpoon missiles. White ones, war shots. The aircraft was now under the tactical command of Captain Kemper on *Anzio*, and on his order they could launch those missiles, two each at the Indian carriers, because they were the long gun of the opposing navy. A few minutes behind would be a swarm of

Tomahawks and more Harpoons headed the same way.

"Are they EMCON'D?" the officer wondered.

"With nav sets emitting?" the sailor replied. "COMEDY must have 'em on their ESM gear by now. Damned sure our guys are lighting up the sky, sir." COMEDY had essentially two choices. Adopt EMCON—for emissions control—turning off their radars to make the other side expend time and fuel searching for them, or simply light everything off, creating an electronic bubble which the other side could easily see, but the penetration of which would be dangerous. *Anzio* had gone with the second option.

"Any airplane chatter?" the tacco asked another crewman.

"Negative, sir, none at all."

"Hmph." As low as the Orion was flying, its presence was probably not known to the Indians, despite their use of air-search gear. He was sorely tempted to pop up and illuminate himself with his own search radar. What were they up to? Might a few ships have broken away from the group, heading west, say, to launch an off-axis missile attack? He couldn't know what they were saying or thinking. All he had were computer-generated course tracks based on radar signals. The computer knew exactly where aircraft was at all times off the Global Positioning Satellite system. From that the bearing to the radar sources enabled calculation of their location and . . .

"Course change?"

"Negative, system shows them still leading zero-niner-zero at sixteen knots. They are passing out of the box now, sir. This is farther east than we've seen them in three days. They are now thirty miles east of COMEDY'S course to the Strait."

"I wonder if they changed their minds about this...."

"YES, OUR FLEET is at sea," the Prime Minister told him.

"Have you seen the American ships?"

The leader of the Indian government was all alone in her office. Her Foreign Minister had been in earlier, and was on his way back at this moment. This phone call had been anticipated, but not hoped for.

The situation had changed. President Ryan, weak though she still thought him to be—who else but a weak man would have threatened a sovereign country so?—had nonetheless frightened her. What if the plague in America had been initiated by Daryaei? She had no evidence that it had, and she would never seek such information out. Her country could never be associated with such an act. Ryan had asked—what was it, four times? five?—for her word that the Indian navy would not hinder the American fleet movement. But only one time had he said *weapons of mass destruction*. That was the deadliest code

phrase in international exchange. All the more so, her Foreign Minister had told her, because America only possessed one kind of such weapons, and for that reason, America regarded biological weapons and chemical weapons *to be* nuclear weapons. That led to another calculation. Aircraft fought aircraft. Ships fought ships. Tanks fought tanks. One answered an attack with the same weapon used by one's enemy. *Full power and rage*, she remembered also. Ryan had overtly suggested that he would take action based on the nature of the supposed attack by the UIR. Nor, finally, did she discount the lunatic attack on his little daughter. She remembered that from the East Room, the reception after the funeral, how Ryan doted on his children. Weak man though he had to be, he was an *angry* weak man, armed with weapons more dangerous than any others.

Daryaei had been foolish to provoke America in that way. Better just to have launched his attack on Saudi and win with conventional arms on the field of battle, and that would have been that. But, no, he had to try to cripple America at home, to provoke them in a way that was the purest form of lunacy—and now she and her government *and her country* could be implicated, the P.M. realized.

She hadn't bargained for any of that. Deploying her fleet was chance enough—and the Chinese, what had they done? Launched an exercise, perhaps damaged that airliner—five thousand kilometers away! What risks were *they* taking? Why, none at all. Daryaei expected much of her country, and with his attack on the very citizens of America, it was too much.

"No," she told him, choosing her words carefully. "Our fleet units have seen American patrol aircraft, but no ships at all. We have heard, as you perhaps have, that an American ship group is transiting Suez, but only warships and nothing more."

"You are sure of this?" Daryaei asked.

"My friend, neither our ships nor our naval aircraft have spotted any American ships in the Arabian Sea at all." The one overflight had been by land-based MiG-23s of the Indian air force. She hadn't lied to her supposed ally. Quite. "The sea is large," she added. "But the Americans are not that clever, are they?"

"Your friendship will not be forgotten," Daryaei promised her.

The Prime Minister replaced the phone, wondering if she'd done the right thing. Well. If the American ships got to the Gulf, she could always say that they hadn't been spotted. That was the truth, wasn't it? Mistakes happened, didn't they?

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“HEADS UP. I got four aircraft lifting off from Gasr Amu,” a captain said aboard the AWACS. The newly-constituted UIR air force had been working up, too, but mainly over what was the central part of the new country, and hard to spot even from the airborne radar platform.

Whoever had timed this wasn’t doing all that badly. The fourth quartet of inbound airliners had just crossed into Saudi airspace, less than two hundred miles from the UIR fighters doing their climb-out. It had been quiet on the air front to this point. Two fighters had been tracked over the last few hours, but those appeared to be check-hops from the mission profiles, probably aircraft that had been fixed for some major or minor defect, then taken up to see if the new widgets worked properly. But this was a flight of four which had taken off in two closely spaced elements. That made them fighters on a mission.

The current air cover for Operation CUSTER in this sector was a flight of four American F-16s, orbiting within twenty miles of the border.

“Kingston Lead, this is Sky-Eye Six, over.”

“Sky, Lead.”

“We have four bandits, zero-three-five your position, angels ten and climbing, course two-niner-zero.” The four American fighters moved west to interpose themselves between the UIR fighters and the inbound airliners.

Aboard the AWACS, a Saudi officer listened in to the radio chatter between the ground radar station controlling the flight of four and the fighters. The UIR fighters, now identified as French-made F-1s, continued to close the border, then turn ten miles short of it, finally tracing only one mile inside. The F-16s did much the same, and the pilots saw each other, and examined one another’s aircraft from four thousand yards apart, through the protective visors of their helmets. The air-to-air missiles were clearly visible under the wings of all the aircraft.

“Y’all want to come over and say hello?” the USAF major leading the F-16s said over guard. There was no response. The next installment of Operation CUSTER proceeded unhindered to Dhahran.

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O’DAY WAS IN early. His sitter, with no classes to worry about, rather enjoyed the thought of all the money that would come in from this, and the most important bit of news for everyone was that not a single case of the new illness had happened within ten miles of his home. Despite the inconvenience, he had slept at home every night—even though on one occasion that had been a mere four hours. He couldn’t

be a daddy if he didn't kiss his little girl at least once a day, even in her sleep. At least the ride into work was easy. He'd gotten a Bureau car. It was faster than his pickup, complete with a flashing light that allowed him to zip through all the checkpoints on the way.

On his desk were the case summaries from the background checks of all the Secret Service personnel. The work in nearly every case had been stultifyingly duplicative. Full background checks had been done on every USSS employee, or else they could not have held the security clearances that were an automatic part of their jobs. Birth certificates, high-school photos, and everything else matched up perfectly. But ten files showed loose ends, and all of those would be run down later in the day. O'Day went over all of them. He kept coming back to one.

Raman was of Iranian birth. But America was a nation of immigrants. The FBI had originally been constructed of Irish-Americans, preferably those educated at Jesuit institutions—Boston College and Holy Cross were the favorites, according to the legend—because J. Edgar Hoover was supposed to have believed that no Irish-American with a Jesuit education could conceivably betray his country. Doubtless, there had been some words about that at the time, and even today, anti-Catholicism was the last of the respectable prejudices. But it was well-known that immigrants so often made the most loyal of citizens, some ferociously so. The military and other security agencies often profited from that. Well, Pat thought, it was easily settled. Just check out the rug thing and let it be. He wondered who Mr. Sloan was. A guy who wanted a rug, probably.

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THERE WAS A quiet to the streets of Tehran. Clark didn't remember them that way from 1979—80. His more recent trip had been different, more like the rest of the region, bustling but not dangerous. Being journalists, they acted like journalists. Clark reentered market areas, talking politely to people about business conditions, the availability of food, what they thought of the unification with Iraq, what their hopes for the future were, and what he got was pure vanilla. Platitudes. The political comments were especially bland, singularly lacking in the passion he remembered from the hostage crisis, when every heart and mind had been turned against the entire outside world—especially America. Death to America. Well, they'd given substance to that wish, John thought. Or someone had. He didn't sense that animus anymore among the people, remembering the strangely cordial jeweler. Probably they just wanted to live, just like everyone else. The apathy reminded him of Soviet citizens in the

1980s. They'd just wanted to get along, just wanted to live a little better, just wanted their society to respond to their needs. There was no revolutionary rage left in them. So why, then, had Daryaei taken his action? How would the people respond to that? The obvious answer was that he'd lost touch, as Great Men so often did. He'd have his coterie of true believers, and a larger number of people willing to ride the bus and enjoy the comfortable seating while everyone else walked and kept out of the way, but that was it. It was fertile ground to recruit agents, to identify those who'd had enough and were willing to talk. What a shame that there was no time to run a proper intelligence operation here. He checked his watch. Time to head back to the hotel. Their first day had been both a waste and part of their cover. Their Russian colleagues would arrive tomorrow.

THE FIRST ORDER of business was to check out the names Sloan and Alahad. That started with a check of the telephone book. Sure enough, there was a Mohammed Alahad. He had an ad in the Yellow Pages. Persian and Oriental Rugs. For some reason, people didn't connect "Persia" with "Iran," a saving grace for a lot of rug merchants. The shop was on Wisconsin Avenue, about a mile from Raman's apartment, which was not in the least way remarkable. Similarly, there was a Mr. Joseph Sloan in the crisscross, whose telephone number was 536-4040, as opposed to Raman's 536-3040. A one-digit goof, which easily explained the wrong number on the Secret Service agent's answering machine.

The next step was pure form. The computer records of telephone calls were run by command. The massive numbers of them took almost a minute to run, even with knowledge of the probable dates ... and there it came up on the agent's screen, a call to 202-536-3040 from 202-459-6777. But that wasn't Alahad's store number, was it? A further check showed -6777 as a pay phone two blocks from the shop. Odd. If he were that close to his shop, why drop a dime—actually a quarter now—to make the call?

Why not make another check? The agent was his squad's techno-genius, with a mustache and a marginal haircut. He'd been something less than a raving success working bank robberies, but had found foreign counterintelligence to his liking. It was like the engineering classes of his college days. You just kept picking at things. He'd also found that the foreign spies he chased thought the same way he did. Toss in his technical prowess

... hmph, in the past month there had *not* been a call from the rug shop to 536-4040. He went back another month. No. How about the other direction? No, 536-4040 had *never* called 457-1100. Now, if he'd

ordered a rug, and those things took time—must have, if the dealer had called to let the guy know it had finally come in ... why hadn't there been a call about it in either direction?

The agent leaned over to the next desk. "Sylvia, want to take a look at this?"

"What is it, Donny?"

THE BLACKHORSE WAS fully on the ground now. Most of them were in their vehicles or attending their aircraft. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment comprised 123 M1A2 Abrams main-battle tanks, 127 M3A4 Bradley scout vehicles, 16 M109A6 Paladin 155mm mobile guns, and 8 M270 Multiple-Launch Rocket System tracks, plus a total of 83 helicopters, 26 of which were AH-54D Apache attack choppers. Those were the shooting platforms. They were supported by hundreds of soft vehicles—mostly trucks to carry fuel, food, and ammunition—plus twenty extras locally called Water Buffaloes, a vital need in this part of the world.

The first order of business was to get everyone away from the POMCUS site. The tracked vehicles were driven onto low-boy trailers for the ride north to Abu Hadriyah, a small town with an airport and the designated assembly point for the 11th Cav. As every vehicle rolled out of its warehouse, it stopped on a pre-selected spot painted red. There the GPS navigation systems were checked against a known reference point. Two of the IVIS boxes were down. One of them announced the fact all by itself, sending a coded radio message to the regiment's support troop, demanding that it be replaced and repaired. The other was completely dead, and the crew had to figure it out for themselves. The large red square helped.

The trailer trucks were driven by Pakistanis, a few hundred of the thousands imported into the Saudi Kingdom to do menial labor. For the Abrams and Bradley crews, it would prove to be exciting, while they worked inside their tracks to make sure that everything was working. With the routine tasks done, drivers, loaders, and commanders stuck their heads out of their hatches, hoping to enjoy the view. What they saw was different from Fort Irwin but not terribly exciting. To the east was an oil pipeline. To the west was a lot of nothing. The crews watched anyway—the view was better than they'd experienced on the flight—except for the gunners, many of whom fought motion-sickness, a common problem for people in that position. It was almost as bad for those who could see. The local truckers, it seemed, were paid by the mile and not the hour. They drove like maniacs.

The Guardsmen were beginning to arrive now. They had nothing to

do at the moment except set up the tents provided for them, drink lots of water, and exercise.

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SUPERVISOR SPECIAL AGENT Hazel Loomis commanded this squad of ten agents. “Sissy” Loomis had been in FCI from the beginning of her career, virtually all of it in Washington. Approaching forty now, she still had the cheerleader look that had served her so well earlier in her time as a street agent. She also had a number of successful cases under her belt.

“This looks a little odd,” Donny Selig told her, laying out his notes on her desk.

It didn’t require much by way of explanation. Phone contacts between intelligence agents never included the words, “I have the microfilm.” The most innocuous of messages were pre-selected to convey the proper information. Which was why they were called “code words.” And it wasn’t that the tradecraft was bad. It was just that if you knew what to look for, it looked like tradecraft. Loomis looked the data over, then looked up.

“Got addresses?”

“You bet, Sis,” Selig told her.

“Then let’s go see Mr. Sloan.” The one bad part about promotion was that being a supervisor denied her the chance to hit the bricks. Not for this one, Loomis told herself.

AT LEAST THE F-15E Strike Eagle had a crew of two, allowing the pilot and weapons-systems operator to engage in conversation for the endless flight. The same was true of the six B-1B bomber crews; the Lancer even had enough area that people could lie down and sleep—not to mention a sit-down toilet. This meant that, unlike the fighter crews, they didn’t have to shower immediately upon reaching Al Kharj, their final destination, south of Riyadh. The 366th Air Combat Wing had three designated “checkered flag” locations throughout the world. These were bases in anticipated trouble spots, with support equipment, fuel, and ordnance facilities maintained by small caretaker crews, who would be augmented by the 366th’s own personnel, mainly flying in by chartered airliners. That included additional flight crews, so that, theoretically, the crew which had flown in from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho could indulge in crew rest, while another relief crew could, theoretically, fly the aircraft off to

battle. Fortunately for all concerned, this wasn't necessary. Thoroughly exhausted airmen (and, now, -women) brought their birds in for landing, taxied off to their shelters, and dismounted, handing their charges over to maintenance personnel. The bomb-bay fuel tanks were removed first of all, and replaced with the appliances made to hold weapons, while the crews went off for long showers and briefings from intelligence officers. Over a period of five hours, the entire 366th combat strength was in Saudi, less one F-16C, which had developed avionics trouble and diverted to Bentwaters Royal Air Force Base in England.

"YES?" THE ELDERLY woman wasn't wearing a surgical mask. Sissy Loomis handed her one. It was the new form of greeting in America.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sloan. FBI," the agent said, holding up her ID.

"Yes?" She wasn't intimidated, but she was surprised.

"Mrs. Sloan, we're conducting an investigation, and we'd like to ask you a few questions. We just need to clear something up. Could you help us, please?"

"I suppose." Mrs. Joseph Sloan was over sixty, dressed neatly, and looked pleasant enough, if somewhat surprised by all this. Inside the apartment the TV was on, tuned to a local station by the sound of it. The weather forecast was running.

"May we come in? This is Agent Don Selig," she said, nodding her head to the techno-weenie. As usual, her friendly smile won the day; Mrs. Sloan didn't even put the mask on.

"Surely." The lady of the house backed away from the door.

It took only a single glance to tell Sissy Loomis that something was not quite right here. For one thing, there was no Persian rug to be seen in the living room—in her experience people didn't just buy one of the things. For another, this apartment was just too neat.

"Excuse me, is your husband in?" The response was immediate, and pained.

"My husband passed away last September," she told the agent.

"Oh, I am sorry, Mrs. Sloan. We didn't know." And with that a fairly routine follow-up changed into something very different indeed.

"He was older than me. Joe was seventy-eight," she said, pointing to a picture on the coffee table of two people a long time ago, one about thirty and one in her late teens.

"Does the name Alahad mean anything to you, Mrs. Sloan?" Loomis asked after sitting down.

"No. Should it?"

"He deals in Persian and Oriental rugs."

"Oh, we don't have any of those. I'm allergic to wool, you see."

57

NIGHT PASSAGE

JACK?" RYAN'S EYES clicked open to see that there was bright sunlight coming through the windows. His watch said it was just after eight in the morning.

"What the hell? Why didn't anybody—"

"You even slept through the alarm," Cathy told him. "Andrea said that Arnie said to let you sleep till about now. I guess I needed it, too," SURGEON added. She'd been in bed for over ten hours before waking at seven. "Dave told me to take the day off," she added.

Jack jolted up and moved at once into the bathroom. When he came back, Cathy, in her housecoat, handed over his briefing papers. The President stood in the center of the room, reading them. Reason told him that if anything serious had happened he would have been awakened—he had slept through the clock-radio alarm before, but he'd never failed to be aroused by a phone. The papers told him that all was, if not exactly well, then relatively stable. Ten minutes after that, he was dressed. He took the time to say hello to his kids, and kiss his wife. Then he headed out.

"SWORDSMAN is moving," Andrea. said into her radio mike. "Sit Room?" she asked POTUS.

"Yeah. Whose idea was it to—"

"Mr. President, that was the chief of staff, but he was right, sir."

Ryan looked at her as she punched the elevator button for the ground floor. "I guess I'm outvoted, then."

The national-security team had clearly been up all night on his behalf. Ryan had coffee waiting at his place. They'd been living on it.

"Okay, what's happening over there?"

"COMEDY is now one hundred thirty miles beyond the Indians—would you believe they resumed their patrol station *behind* us?" Admiral Jackson told his Commander-in-Chief.

"Playing both sides of the street," Ben Goodley concluded.

"It's a good way to get hit by traffic in both directions," Arnie put in.

"Go on."

"Operation CUSTER is just about done. The 366th is also in Saudi,

less one broke fighter that diverted to England. The 11th Cav is rolling out of its storage site to an assembly area. So far," the J-3 said, "so good. The other side sortied some fighters to the border, but we and the Saudis had a blocking force, and nothing happened aside from some mean looks."

"Anybody think they're going to back down?" Ryan asked.

"No." This came from Ed Foley. "They can't, not now."

THE RENDEZVOUS TOOK place fifty miles off Cape Rass al Hadd, the far southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Cruisers *Normandy* and *Yorktown*, destroyer *John Paul Jones*, and frigates *Underwood, Doyle*, and *Nicholas* took a trailing position so that *Platte* and *Supply* could take them alongside after their high-speed run down from Alexandria, to top off their bunkers. Helicopters ferried the captains to *Anzio*, whose captain was senior, for an hour's worth of discussion of the mission. Their destination was Dhahran. To get there they had to drive northwest into the Strait of Hormuz. Getting there would take just over six hours, 2200 hours local time. The strait was twenty miles across and speckled with islands, plus it was one of the most heavily traveled waterways in the world—even now, despite the growing crisis. Supertankers, one of which displaced more water than all of the warships in the now-designated TF-61.1 combined, were merely the bestknown vessels transiting the area. There were also massive container ships wearing the flags of ten nations, and even a multilevel sheep carrier which looked like a big-city parking garage, which was bringing in live mutton from Australia. The smell of it was famous on all the oceans of the world. The strait was covered by radar to establish traffic control—the possibility of a ramming incident between two supertankers didn't bear thinking about—which meant that TF-61.1 would be unlikely to sneak in entirely unnoticed. But they could do a few things. At the narrowest point, the Navy ships would hold to the south, dodging between islands belonging to Oman, and hopefully somewhat obscured by the clutter. Next they'd move south of Abu Musa, past the crowd of oil platforms, again using them for radar cover, and then make a straight run for Dhahran, past the mini-states of Qatar and Bahrain. Opposition, the intelligence officers said, included ships of American, British, Chinese, Russian, and French origin, all of them armed with one sort of missile or another. The most important ships in the group, of course, were totally unarmed. Maintaining their box formation, *Anzio* would lead them, 2,000 yards in front. *Normandy* and *Yorktown* would take position 2,000 yards to starboard, with *Jones* in trail. The two under way-replenishment ships, with *O'Bannon* and all the frigates in close escort, would form a

second, decoy group. Helicopters would be aloft, both to patrol and, with their radar transponders on, to simulate much larger targets. The various COs agreed on the plan and waited for their helicopters to return them to their commands. It was the first time in ages that an American naval formation had stood in harm's way without a carrier in close support. Their bunkers full of fuel, the group formed up as planned, pointed their bows northwest, and bent on twenty-six knots. At 1800 local time, a flight of four F-16 fighters blazed overhead, both to give the Aegis ships a chance to practice fire-control against live targets and also to verify the IFF codes to be used for the night's mission.

MOHAMMED ALAHAD, THEY saw, was just as ordinary as hell. He'd come to America more than fifteen years earlier. He was said to be widowed and childless. He ran a decent and profitable business on one of Washington's nicer shopping streets. He was, in fact, in there right now. Though the CLOSED sign was on the door, they supposed he had nothing better to do but sit in his shop and go over his bills.

One of Loomis's squad went up to the shop and knocked on the door. Alahad came to open it, and a brief conversation ensued, with the expected gestures, and they could figure what was being said. *I'm sorry, but all businesses are closed because of the President's order—Yeah, sure, but I don't have anything to do, and neither do you, right?—Yes, but* it is *an order—Hey, who's gonna know, what' d' ya say?* Finally the agent went in, wearing a surgical mask. He stayed there for ten minutes before coming back out, walking around the corner, and making a radio call from his car.

"It's a rug shop," the agent told Loomis over the encrypted radio channel. "If we want to toss the place, we'll have to wait." There was already a tap on the phone line, but so far there had not been a single call in or out.

The other half of her squad was in Alahad's apartment. There they found a photo of a woman and a child, probably his son, wearing something like a uniform—about fourteen, the agent thought, photographing them with a Polaroid. But again, everything was pure vanilla. It was exactly the way a businessman would live in the Washington area, or an intelligence officer. You just couldn't tell. They had the beginning of a case, but not enough evidence to take to a judge, certainly not enough for a search warrant. Their probable-cause quotient was a little on the thin side. But this was a national-security investigation involving the personal safety of the President, and headquarters *had* told them that there were no rules. They'd already committed two technical violations of the law in invading two

apartments without a warrant, and two more in tapping a couple of phone lines. With all that work accomplished, Loomis and Selig made their way into an apartment building across the street. From the manager, they learned that there was a vacant apartment facing Alahad's storefront. They got the keys to that without any difficulty and set up their surveillance of the front, while two more agents watched the back door. Sissy Loomis then used her cellular phone to call headquarters. Maybe it wasn't enough to take to a judge or a U.S. attorney, but it was enough to talk to another agent about.

ONE OTHER POTENTIAL subject wasn't completely clear yet, O'Day noted. There was Raman, and a black agent whose wife was a Muslim and who was evidently trying to convert her husband—but the agent had discussed it with his comrades, and there was a notation in his file that this agent's marriage, like others in the Service, was on shaky ground.

The phone rang.

"Inspector O'Day."

"Pat? It's Sissy."

"How's Raman looking?" He'd worked three cases with her, all involving Russian spies. The cheerleader had the jaw of a pit bull once she got onto something.

"The message on his phone, the wrong number?"

"Yeah?"

"Our rug merchant was calling a dead person whose wife is allergic to wool," Loomis told him.

Click.

"Keep going, Sis." She read off her notes and the information garnered by the people who'd entered the dealer's apartment.

"This one feels real, Pat. The tradecraft is just too good. Right out of the book. It looks so normal that you don't think about it. But why the pay phone, except that he's worried somebody might have a tap on his phone? Why call a dead man by mistake? And why did the wrong number go to somebody on the Detail?"

"Well, Raman's out of town."

"Keep him there," Loomis advised. They didn't have a case. They were still struggling for probable cause. If they arrested Alahad, he'd have the sense to ask for a lawyer—and what did they have? He'd made a phone call. He wouldn't have to defend the call. He just had to say nothing. His lawyer would say it was all some kind of mistake—Alahad might even have a plausible explanation already prepared; he'd keep that one in his pocket, of course—ask for evidence, and the FBI would have nothing to show.

"That tips our hand, too, doesn't it?"
"Better safe than sorry, Pat."
"I have to take this to Dan. When are you tossing the shop?"
"Tonight."

THE TROOPERS OF the Blackhorse were thoroughly exhausted. Fit and desert-trained soldiers that they were, they'd spent two-thirds of a day in airplanes with dry air, sitting in cramped seats, their personal weapons in the overhead bins—that always got a curious reaction from the stewardesses—and then arrived eleven time zones away in blazing heat. But they did what they had to do.

First came gunnery. The Saudis had established a large shooting range for their own use, with pop-up steel targets as close as three hundred meters and as far as five thousand. Gunners bore-sighted their weapons, then tried them out, using real ammunition instead of practice, then learned that the war shots were far more accurate, the projectiles flying "right through the dot," meaning the circular reticle in the center of their sighting systems. Once off the transport trailers, drivers exercised their mounts to make sure that everything worked properly, but the tanks and Bradleys were in the nearly mint condition promised on the flight over. Radio checks were made so that everyone could talk to everyone else. Then they verified the all-important IVIS data links. The more mundane tasks came last of all. The Saudi-deployed M1A2s did not yet have the newest modification to the vehicle series, pallet-loaded ammunition racks. Instead there was a large steel-wire bustle for personal things, especially water. One by one, the crews cycled their vehicles through the course. The Bradley crews even got to fire a single TOW missile each. Then they entered the reloading area, taking on new ammunition to replace what had been expended on the range.

It was all quiet and businesslike. The Blackhorse, because they trained other soldiers so regularly in the fine art of mechanized death, were utterly desensitized to the routine tasks of soldiering. They had to remind themselves that this was not *their* desert—deserts all look pretty much alike; this one, however, didn't have creosote bushes and coyotes. It did have camels and merchants. The Saudis honored their hospitality laws by providing food and soft drinks in abundance to the troopers, while their senior officers conferred over maps with the region's bitter coffee.

Marion Diggs was not a big man. A cavalryman all of his life, he'd always enjoyed the ability to direct sixty tons of steel with his fingertips, to reach out and touch someone else's vehicle at three miles' distance. Now he was a senior commander, effectively

commanding a division, but with a third of it two hundred miles to the north, and another third aboard some ships which would be running a gauntlet later this evening.

"So what are we really up against, how ready are they?" the general asked.

Satellite photos went down, and the senior American intelligence officer, based at KKMC, went through his mission brief. It took thirty terse minutes, during which Diggs stood. He was very tired of sitting.

"STORM TRACK reports minimal radio traffic," the briefing officer, a colonel, reported. "We need to remember that they're pretty exposed where they are, by the way."

"I have a company moving to cover it," a Saudi officer reported. "They should be in position by morning."

"What's Buffalo doing?" Diggs asked. Another map went down. The Kuwaiti dispositions looked all right to his eye. At least they were not forward-deployed. Just the screening force on the berm, he saw, with the three heavy brigades in position to counter a penetration. He knew Magruder. In fact, he knew all three of the ground squadron commanders. If the UIR hit there first, outnumbered or not, the Blue Force would give the Red one hell of a bloody nose.

"Enemy intentions?" he inquired next.

"Unknown, sir. There are elements to this we do not understand yet. Washington has told us to expect an attack, but not why."

"What the hell?"

"Tonight or tomorrow morning for that, best I can tell you, sir," the intel officer replied. "Oh, we have newsies assigned to us. They flew in a few hours ago. They're in a hotel in Riyadh."

"Marvelous."

"In the absence of knowledge of what they plan to do . . ."

"The objective is plain, is it not?" the senior Saudi commander observed. "Our Shi'ite neighbors have all the desert they need." He tapped the map. "There is our economic center of gravity."

"General?" another voice asked. Diggs turned to his left.

"Colonel Eddington?"

"Center of gravity is political, not military. We might want to keep that in mind, gentlemen," the colonel from Carolina pointed out. "If they want to go for the coastal oil fields, we'll have a lot of strategic warning."

"They do have us outnumbered, Nick. That does give them a certain degree of strategic flexibility. Sir, I see a lot of fuel trucks in these photos," the American general noted.

"They stopped at the Kuwait border the last time because they were out of fuel," the Saudi commander reminded them.

The Saudi army—actually called their National Guard—comprised

five heavy brigades, almost all of it American equipment. Three were deployed south of Kuwait, with one at Ras al Khafji, site of the only invasion of the Kingdom, but right on the water, and nobody expected an attack from the sea. It was not unusual for soldiers to prepare to fight the last war, the American remembered.

For his part, Eddington remembered a quote from Napoleon. When shown a defense plan that had troops evenly spaced on the French border, he'd asked the officer if the idea was to prevent smuggling. That defensive concept had been given the patina of legitimacy by NATO's doctrine of forward defense on the inner German border, but it had never been tested, and if there were ever a place to trade space for time, it was the Saudi desert. Eddington kept his mouth shut on that one. He was junior to Diggs, and the Saudis seemed quite possessive about their territory, as most people were. He and Diggs shared a look. As the 10th Cav was the theater reserve for the Kuwaitis, so the 11th would perform the same function for the Saudis. That might change when his Guardsmen mounted their tracks at Dhahran, but for the moment this deployment would have to do.

One big problem with the situation was the command relationship in place. Diggs was a one-star—one hell of a good one, Eddington knew, but just a brigadier. Had CENTCOM been able to fly over, he would have had the rank status to make firmer suggestions to the Saudis. Evidently, Colonel Magruder of the Buffalo Cav had done something like that, but Diggs's position was just a little ticklish.

"Well, we'll have a couple of days, anyway." The American general turned. "Get additional recon assets in place. If those six divisions fart, I want to know what they had for dinner."

"We'll have Predators going up at sunset," the intel colonel promised.

Eddington walked outside to light a cigar. He needn't have troubled himself, he realized after a few puffs. The Saudis all smoked.

"Well, Nick?" Diggs asked, joining him.

"Beer'd be nice."

"Just empty calories," the general observed.

"Four-to-one odds, and they have the initiative. That's if my people get their gear in time. This could get right interesting, Diggs." Another puff. "Their deployments suck." A phrase acquired from his students, his senior thought. "By the way, what are we calling this?"

"BUFORD, Operation BUFORD. Pick a moniker for your brigade, Nick?"

"How's WOLFPACK grab you? It's the wrong school, but TARHEEL just doesn't sound right. This damned thing's going pretty fast, General."

"One lesson the other side *must* have learned from the last one:

don't give us time to build our forces up."

"True. Well, I have to see after my people."

"Use my chopper," Diggs told him. "I'll be here a while."

"Yes, sir." Eddington turned, saluted, and started walking off. Then he turned. "Diggs?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe we're not as well-trained as Hamm and his boys, but we'll get it done, y'hear?" He saluted again, tossed his cigar, and walked off to the Black Hawk.

NOTHING MOVES AS quietly as a ship. An automobile moving at this speed, a fraction below thirty miles per hour, made noise one could hear for hundreds of yards on a silent night, but for a ship it was the high-frequency *swish* of steel hull cutting through what were at the moment calm seas, and that didn't carry very far at all. Those aboard could feel the vibrations of the engine, or hear the deep sucking breath of the turbine engines, but that was all, and those sounds scarcely carried a hundred yards across the water at night. Just the swish, and behind every ship was a foaming wake, a ghostly shade of green in the water from tiny organisms upset by the pressure wave of their passage, and phosphorescing as some sort of biological protest to the disturbance. To those on the ships, it seemed hellishly bright. On every bridge, the lights were turned down, so that night vision wouldn't be compromised. Navigation lights were turned off, a rules-of-the-road violation in these confined waters. Lookouts used conventional binoculars and light-amplification gear to scan forward. The formation was just now turning the corner, in the narrowest part of the passage.

In every combat information center, people hovered over scopes and charts, talking in whispers lest they somehow be heard. Those who smoked wished they could in the antiseptic spaces, and those who'd quit now wondered why. Something about a health hazard, they remembered as they contemplated surface-to-surface missiles mounted in emplacements about fifteen thousand yards away, each of them with a ton of explosives right behind the seekerhead.

"Coming left, new course two-eight-five," the officer of the deck reported on *Anzio*.

On the main plot, there were over forty "targets," as radar contacts were called, each with a vector showing approximate course and speed. The number of inbounds and outbounds was about the same. Some of them were huge, the radar returns of supertankers being about that of a medium-sized island.

"Well, we've made it this far," Weps said to Captain Kemper.

"Maybe they're asleep."

"Maybe there really is a Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown."

Only navigation radars were turning now. The Iranian /UIR-ians had to have ESM gear over there, but if they were standing a patrol in the Strait of Hormuz, they hadn't spotted it yet. There were unexplained targets. Fishing boats? Smugglers? Somebody in a pleasure craft? There was no telling. Probably the enemy was a little reticent about sending their vessels too far over the centerline of the strait. The Arabs were as territorial as everyone else, Kemper imagined.

The ships were all at battle stations. All combat systems were fully powered up, but on standby. If somebody turned toward them, they would first try to get a visual. If somebody lit them up with a targeting radar, then the ship on the clearest bearing would step up her alert level somewhat and make a few sweeps with the SPY radars to see if there might be an inbound track. But that would be tough. Those missiles all had independent seeker-heads, and the strait was crowded, and a missile just might acquire something unintended. The other side couldn't be all that trigger-happy. They might even end up slaughtering a few thousand sheep, Kemper thought with a smile. As tense as this part of the mission was, the task for the other side wasn't all *that* easy.

"Course change on track four-four, coming left," a quartermaster said.

That one was a surface contact just inside UIR-ian waters, seven miles away and passing aft. Kemper leaned forward. A computer command showed the contact's course-track for the last twenty minutes. It had been moving along at mere steerage speed, about five knots. It was now doing ten, and had turned . . . toward the trailing decoy group. That data was linked to USS *O'Bannon,* whose captain was the senior officer for the group. The range between the two ships was 16,000 yards and closing.

Things got more interesting. *Normandy*'s helicopter closed on the track from behind, keeping low. The pilots saw a green-white bloom as the unknown craft increased power, stirring the water and disturbing more of the organisms which somehow survived all the pollution here. A sudden burst of power meant . . .

"That's a gunboat," the pilot reported over the data link. "He just goosed it. Target has just increased power."

Kemper grimaced. He had a choice now. Do nothing, and maybe nothing would happen. Do nothing, and maybe give the gun/missile boat the first shot at *O'Bannon* and her group. Do something, and risk alerting the other side. But if the enemy craft shot first, the enemy would know something anyway, right? Maybe. Maybe not. It was a

complex set of data for five seconds. He waited five more.

"Target is a missile boat, I see two launchers, target steadying down on course."

"He's got a direct line to *O'Bannon*, sir," Weps reported.

"Radio chatter, I have radio chatter on UHF, bearing zero-one-five."

"Take the shot," Kemper said instantly.

"Shoot!" Weps said over the voice channel to the helo.

"Roger, engaging!"

"Combat, lookout, sir, I have a flash like a missile launch on the port quarter—make that two, sir," a speaker announced.

"Give it a sweep"

"Two more launches, sir."

Shit, Kemper thought. The helo carried only two Penguin antiship missiles. The enemy had gotten the first two off. And he couldn't do anything now. The decoy group was fulfilling its function. It was getting shot at.

"Two vampires inbound—target destroyed," the pilot added, announcing the destruction of the missile boat— confirmed a moment later by the topside lookout. "Say again, two vampires inbound *O'Bannon.*"

"Silkworms are big targets," Weps said.

They watched the mini-battle imperfectly. The navigation-radar display showed *O'Bannon* changing course to port. That would be to unmask her point-defense missile system, located far aft. It would also provide a huge radar target to the inbound missiles. The destroyer did not fire off her decoys for fear that spoofing the inbounds would only divert them to the replenishment ships she was guarding. An automatic decision? Kemper wondered. A considered one? Ballsy either way. The destroyer's illumination radar came on. That meant she was firing her missiles, but the navigation radar couldn't tell. Then at least one of the frigates joined in.

"All kinda flashes aft," the topside lookout said next. "*Wow*, that was a big one! There goes another!" Then five seconds of silence.

"*O'Bannon* to group, we're okay," a voice reported.

For now, Kemper thought.

THE PREDATORS WERE up, three of them, one each for the three corps encamped southwest of Baghdad, motoring through the air at only twice the speed of a tank. None of them got as far as planned. Thirty miles short of their objectives, their look-down thermal cameras showed the glowing shapes of armored vehicles. The Army of God was moving. The feed to STORM TRACK was instantly cross-loaded to KKMC, and from there all over the world.

"Another couple of days would have been nice," Ben Goodley thought aloud.

"How ready are our people?" Ryan turned to the J-3.

"The 10th's ready to rock. The 11th needs at least a day. The other brigade doesn't even have its equipment yet," Jackson replied.

"How long before contact?" the President asked next.

"At least twelve hours, maybe eighteen. Depends on where they're going, exactly."

Jack nodded. "Arnie, has Callie been briefed in on all this?"

"No, not at all."

"Then let's get that done. I have a speech to make."

ALAHAD MUST HAVE gotten bored running a business with no customers, Loomis thought. He left early, walked to where his car was parked, and drove off. Tailing him on such empty streets would probably be fairly easy. A few minutes later, the subject was observed to park his car and enter his apartment building. Then she and Selig walked out of the unit they'd been in, crossed the street, and walked around the back. There were two locks on the door, which caused the junior agent to take ten minutes to defeat them, much to his own annoyance. Then came the alarm system, but that was more easily accomplished. It was an old one with a socket key and a very simple disarming code. Inside they found a few more photos, one, probably, of his son. They checked the Rolodex first, and there was the card for J. Sloan, with the number 536-4040, but no address.

"Tell me what you think," Loomis said.

"I think it's a new card, not dog-eared or anything like that, and I think there's a dot over the first numeral *four*. Tells him which number to change, Sis."

"This guy's a player, Donny."

"I think you're right, and that makes Aref Raman one, too."

But how to prove it?

THE COVER MIGHT or might not have been blown. There was no knowing. Kemper assessed the situation as best he could. Maybe the missile boat had gotten off a broadcast and received permission to fire . . . Maybe the young commander had decided to shoot on his own . . . probably not. Dictatorial countries didn't give much autonomy to their military commanders. If you were the dictator and you started doing that, it was a sure way to find your back to a wall sooner or later. The score to this point was USN 1 and UIR 0. Both groups were

continuing, going southwest now into a widening gulf, still doing twenty-six knots, still surrounded by merchant traffic, and the electronic environment was alive with ship-to-ship chatter wondering what the hell had just happened north of Abu Musa.

Omani patrol boats were out now, and *they* were talking back and forth with somebody, perhaps the UIR, asking what was going on.

In confusion, Kemper decided, there was profit. It was dark out, and identifying ships in darkness was never an easy business.

"When's nautical twilight?"

"Five hours, sir," the quartermaster of the watch replied.

"That's a hundred fifty miles to the good. We continue as before. Let them sort things out if they can." Getting as far as Bahrain without detection would be miracle enough.

THEY LAID IT all out on Inspector O'Day's desk. "It all" amounted to three pages of notes and a couple of Polaroid photographs. The most important-looking tidbit was a printout of the phone records, duplicating Selig's scribbling. That was also the only legal piece of evidence they had.

"Not exactly the thickest pile of proof I've ever seen," Pat noted.

"Hey, Pat, you said to move fast," Loomis reminded him. "They're both dirty. I can't prove it to a jury, but that's enough to start a major investigation, assuming we have the luxury of time, which I don't think we do."

"Correct. Come on," he said, rising. "We have to see the Director."

It wasn't as though Murray weren't busy enough. The FBI wasn't exactly running the epidemiological investigation of all the Ebola cases, but the Bureau's agents were doing a lot of legwork. There was the ongoing, and practically new, case on the attack on Giant Steps, which was both criminal and FCI—and an inter-agency case to boot. And now this, the third "put everything else aside" situation in less than ten days. The inspector waved his way past the secretaries and walked into the Director's office without a knock.

"It's a good thing I wasn't taking a leak," Murray observed.

"I didn't think you'd have time for that. I don't," Pat told him. "There's probably a mole in the Service after all, Dan."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yeah, and oh, shit. I'll let Loomis and Selig walk you through it."

"Can I take this to Andrea Price without getting shot?" the Director asked.

"I think so."

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THE LIGHT OF DAY

IT WASN'T SOMETHING TO celebrate, but for the second day in a row, new Ebola cases had dropped. Of the new cases identified, moreover, about a third were people who tested positive for the antibodies but were asymptomatic. CDC and USAMRIID rechecked the data twice before reporting it to the White House, also cautioning that it was too preliminary to be released to the public. The travel ban, it seemed, and the spinoff effects it was having on interpersonal contacts, was working—but the President couldn't say it was working, because then it would stop working.

The Giant Steps case was also ongoing, mainly a task of the FBI laboratory division. There, electronic microscopes were being used for something other than the identification of Ebola strands, and were narrowing in on pollen and other tiny particles. This was complicated by the fact that the Giant Steps attack had been made in the spring, when the air was full of pollens.

Mordecai Azir, it was now firmly established, was a quintessential unperson who had sprung into existence seemingly for a single purpose and, fulfilling it, had disappeared. But he had left behind photographs, and there were ways of dealing with that, Ryan learned. He wondered if there might be some good news to end the day. There wouldn't be.

"Hi, Dan." He was back in his office. The Situation Room was just one more reminder that his next major order was to send people into combat.

"Mr. President," the FBI Director said, entering with Inspector O'Day and Andrea Price.

"Why do you look so happy?"

And then they told him.

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IT WAS A BRAVE man who awoke the Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji

Daryaei before dawn, and since those around him feared his wrath, it took two hours for them to summon the courage to do so. Not that it would help matters. At four in the morning in Tehran, the phone by the side of his bed rang. Ten minutes after that, he was in the sitting room of his private apartment, his dark, sunken eyes waiting to punish those responsible.

"We have a report that American ships have entered the Gulf," the intelligence chief told him.

"When and where?" the Ayatollah asked quietly.

"It was after midnight at the narrows. One of our missile-patrol boats spotted what it reported to be an American destroyer. It was ordered in to attack by the local naval commander, but we've heard nothing more from the boat."

"That is all?" *You awakened me for* this?

"There was some radio traffic in the area, ships talking back and forth. They talked about several explosions. We have reason to believe that our missile boat was attacked and destroyed by someone, probably an aircraft—but an aircraft from where?"

"We want your permission to commence air operations to sweep the Gulf after dawn. We have never done this without your word," the air force chief pointed out.

"Permission is *given*," Daryaei told them. Well, he *was* awake now, the cleric told himself. "What else?"

"The Army of God is making its approach march to the border area. The operation is proceeding as scheduled." Surely this news would please him, the intelligence chief thought.

Mahmoud Haji nodded. He'd hoped for a decent night's sleep, in anticipation of being up long hours for the next few days, but it was his nature that, once awakened, he could not return to sleep. He looked at his desk clock—he didn't wear a watch—and decided that the day would have to begin.

"Will we surprise them?"

"Somewhat, certainly," Intelligence responded. "The army is under strict orders to maintain radio silence. The American listening posts are very sensitive, but they cannot hear nothing. When they reach Al Busayyah, we must expect detection, but then we will be ready to jump off, and it will be at night."

Daryaei shook his head. "Wait, what did our patrol boat tell us?"

"He reported an American destroyer or frigate, possibly with other ships, but that was all. We will have aircraft up to look in two hours."

"Their transport ships?"

"We don't know," Intelligence admitted. He'd hoped that they were past that.

"Find out!"

The two men took their leave with that order. Daryaei rang his servant for tea. He had another thought just then. All would be settled, or at least solved, when the Raman boy fulfilled his mission. The report was that he was in place, and had received his order. Why, then, hadn't he fulfilled it! the Ayatollah asked himself, with a building anger. He looked at the clock again. It was too early to make a call.

KEMPER HAD GIVEN his crew something akin to a stand-down. The automation of the Aegis ships made that possible, and so, starting two hours after the incident with the gunboat—missile boat, he corrected himself—crewmen were allowed to rotate off their battle stations, to relieve themselves, to get something to eat, and in many cases to pump a little iron. That had lasted an hour, with each officer and man having had fifteen minutes. They were all back now. It was two hours to nautical twilight. They were just under a hundred miles from Qatar, now heading west-northwest, after having dodged behind every island and oil platform that might confuse an enemy radar post. COMEDY had been through the tough part. The Gulf was far wider here. There was sea room to maneuver in and to make full use of his powerful sensors. The radar picture in *Anzio*'s CIC showed a flight of four F-16s twenty miles north of his formation, their IFF codes clear on the display—his people had to be careful about that. It would have been better if there could be an AWACS aloft, but, he had just learned an hour before, all of those were deployed up north. Today, there would be a fight. It would not be the sort of thing Aegis had been designed for, or quite what he'd been trained for, but that was the Navy for you.

The decoy group he ordered south. Their job was done for now. With the sun up, there would be no disguising what COMEDY was and where they were going, he thought.

"HOW SURE OF this are you?" POTUS asked. "Christ, I've been alone with the guy a hundred times!"

"We know," Price assured him. "We know. Sir, it's hard to believe. I've known Jeff on and off—"

"He's the basketball guy. He told me who was going to win the NCAA finals. He was right. His *point spread* was right on."

"Yes, sir." Andrea had to agree with that, too. "Unfortunately, these items are a little hard to explain."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"We can't." Murray took that one. "It's one of those situations where you know, or think you know, but can't prove anything. Pat here had an idea, though."

"Then let's hear it," Ryan ordered. His headache was back. No, that wasn't right. The intervening, brief period without a headache had ended. Bad enough that he'd been told of the vague possibility that the Secret Service was compromised, but now they thought they had proof—no, worse, he corrected himself, not good enough for proof, just more fucking suspicion!—that one of the people trusted to be around him and his family was a potential assassin. Would this never end? But he listened anyway.

"Actually, it's pretty simple," O'Day concluded.

"No!" Price said immediately. "What if—"

"We can control that. There won't be any real danger," the inspector assured everyone.

"Hold it," SWORDSMAN said. "You say you can smoke the guy out?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I actually get to *do* something instead of just sitting here like a goddamned king?"

"Yes, sir," Pat repeated.

"Where do I sign up?" Ryan asked rhetorically. "Let's do it."

"Mr. President—"

"Andrea, you'll be here, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then it's approved," POTUS told her. "He doesn't get *near* my family. I mean that. If he even looks at the elevator, you take him down yourself, Andrea, got that?"

"I understand, Mr. President. West Wing only."

With that, they walked downstairs to the Situation Room, where Arnie and the rest of the national-security team were watching a map display on a large-screen TV.

"OKAY, LET'S LIGHT up the sky," Kemper told the CIC crew. On command, *Anzio* and the other four Aegis ships flipped their SPY radars from standby to full radiated power. There was no percentage in hiding anymore. They were right under a commercial air route designated W-15, and any airline pilot could look down and see the small box of ships. When one did, he'd probably talk about it. The element of surprise had its practical limits.

In a second, the three big screens showed numerous air tracks. This had to be the busiest hunk of airspace outside O'Hare, Kemper thought. The IFF scan showed a flight of four F-16 fighters deployed

northwest of his formation. There were six airliners aloft, and the day had scarcely started. Missile specialists ran practice tracks just to exercise the computers, but really the Aegis system was designed to be one of those supposedly all-powerful things that could sit still one second and raise hell the next. They'd come to the right place to do that.

THE FIRST IRANIAN fighters to head into the sky that day were two aged F-14 Tomcats from Shiraz. The Shah had purchased about eighty of the fighters from Grumman in the 1970s. Ten could still fly, with parts cannibalized from all the others or procured on the world's lively black market in combat-aircraft components. These flew southeast, overland to Bandar Abbas, then they increased speed and darted south to Abu Musa, passing just north of it, with the pilots driving and the backseaters scanning the surface with binoculars. The sun was plainly visible at twenty thousand feet, but on the surface there was still the semidarkness of nautical twilight.

One doesn't see ships from aloft, a fact often lost on both sailors and airmen. In most cases, ships are too small, and the surface of the sea too vast. What one sees, whether from a satellite photo or the unaided human eye, is the wake, a disturbance in the water much like an arrow with an oversized head—the bow and stern waves generated by the ship's passage through the water—and the foaming a straight line caused by the propellers is the arrow's shaft. The eye is drawn to such shapes as naturally as to the body of a woman, and at the apex of the V-shape, there one finds the ship. Or, in this case, many ships. They spotted the decoy group first, from forty miles away. The main body of COMEDY was identified a minute later.

THE PROBLEM FOR the ships was positive identification. Kemper couldn't risk killing an airliner, as USS *Vincennes* had once done. The four F-16s had already turned toward them when the radio call went out. He didn't have anyone aboard who spoke the language well enough to catch what they'd just said.

"Tally-ho," the F-16 flight leader called. "Looks like F-14s." And he knew the Navy didn't have any of those around.

"*Anzio* to STARFIGHTER, weapons free, splash 'em."

"Roger that."

“FLIGHT, LEAD, GO Slammer.” They were too busy looking down instead of looking around. Recon flight, Starfighter Lead figured. Tough. He selected AIM-120 and fired, a fraction before the other three aircraft in his formation did the same. “Fox-One, Fox-One!” And the Battle of Qatar was under way.

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THE UIR TOMCATS were just a little too busy for their own good. Their radar-warning receivers were reporting all manner of emitters at the moment, and the air-to-air radar on the Vipers was just one of many. The leader of the two was trying to get a count of the warships below and talking on his radio at the same time, when a pair of AM-RAAM missiles exploded twenty meters in front of his aging fighter. The second pilot at least looked up in time to see death coming.

“*ANZIO*, STARFIGHTER, SPLASH two, no ’chutes, say again, splash two.”

“Roger that.”

“What a nice way to start the day,” commented a USAF major who’d just spent sixteen months playing against the Israeli air force in the Negev. “Returning to station. Out.”

“I’M NOT SURE that’s a good idea,” van Damm said. The radar picture from *John Paul Jones* had been uplinked from the new ship via satellite to Washington. They were seeing things less than half a second after they really happened.

“Those ships cannot be stopped, sir,” Robby Jackson told the chief of staff. “We can’t take chances.”

“But they can say we shot first and—”

“Wrong, sir. Their missile boat shot first five hours ago,” the J-3 reminded him.

“But they won’t say that.”

“Save it, Arnie,” Ryan said. “My order, remember. The rules of engagement are in place. What now, Robby?”

“Depends on whether the Iranians got the word out. That first kill was easy. The first one usually is,” Jackson said, remembering the ones he’d made in his career, nothing at all like what he’d trained for at Top Gun, but there were no fair-play rules in real combat, were there?

The narrowest part of the passage was just over a hundred miles between Qatar and the Iranian town of Basatin. There was an air base there, and satellite coverage said there were fighters sitting on the ramp.

"HI, JEFF."

"What's happening, Andrea?" Raman asked, adding, "Glad you remembered that you left me up here."

"It's pretty busy with all this fever stuff. We need you back here. Got a car?"

"I think I can steal one from the local office." In fact, he had an official car already.

"Okay," she told him, "come on down. I don't suppose we really need the advance work up there. Your ID will get you through the roadblocks on 1-70. Quick as you can. Things are happening here."

"Give me four hours."

"You have a change of clothes?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You're going to need it. We've set up decontamination procedures here. Everybody has to scrub down before getting into the West Wing. You'll see when you get here," the chief of the Detail told him.

"Fine with me."

ALAHAD WASN'T DOING anything. Bugs planted in his house had determined that he was watching TV, flipping channels from one cable station to another in search of a movie he hadn't seen before, and before going to bed he'd listened to *CNN Headline News*. After that, nothing. The lights were all out, and even the thermal-viewing cameras couldn't see through the curtained windows of his bedroom. The agents doing surveillance drank their coffee from plastic cups and looked on, at nothing, while discussing their worries about the epidemic, just like everyone else in America. The media continued to devote virtually all of its airtime to the story. There was little else. Sports had stopped. Weather continued, but few were outside to notice. Everything else rotated around the Ebola crisis. There were science segments explaining what the virus was and how it spread—actually, how it *might* be spreading, as there was still diverse opinion on that—and the agents with the headphones had listened to the latest installment over Alahad's own TV. It was all nature's revenge, one environmental advocate was preaching. Man had gone into the jungle, cut down trees, killed animals, upset the ecosystem, and now the

ecosystem was getting even. Or something like that.

There was legal analysis of the court case Edward Kealty had brought, but there simply was no enthusiasm for lifting the travel ban. Stories showed airplanes at airports, buses in terminals, trains at stations, and a lot of empty roads. Stories showed people in hotels, and how they were coping. Stories showed how to reuse surgical masks, and told people that this simple safety measure worked almost flawlessly; most people seemed to believe that. But to counter that, most of the stories showed hospitals and, now, body bags. Reports on how the bodies of the dead were being burned ran without showing the flames; that was by mutual consent. The raw data was distasteful enough without the image of its reality. Reporters and medical consultants were starting to comment on the lack of data on the number of cases—which was alarming to many—but hinting that the space in hospitals to deal with the Ebola cases had not expanded—which was comforting to some. The extreme doom-and-gloom-sayers were still distributing their cant, but others said quietly that the data didn't support that view, that the situation might be stabilizing, though in every case they added that it was much too soon to tell.

They were starting to say that people were coping, that some states were totally clean, that many regions within those states that had cases were similarly healthy. And, finally, some people were coming forward to say with some authority that the epidemic had definitely not been a natural event. There was no public opinion on the issue that the media could really measure. People didn't interact enough, share thoughts enough to make informed judgments, but with the beginnings of confidence that the world was *not* going to end came the big question: How had this begun?

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SECRETARY OF STATE Adler was back in his airplane, flying west to the People's Republic. While aloft, and in the Beijing embassy, he had access to the latest news. It had caused rage and, perversely, some degree of satisfaction. It was Zhang who was leading his government in this direction. That was fairly certain, now that they knew India had been involved—again—this time duped by Iran and China. The real question was whether or not the Prime Minister would let her partners know that she'd reneged on her part of the deal. Probably not, Adler thought. She'd outmaneuvered herself again. She seemed able to do that standing still.

But the rage kept coming back. His country had been attacked, and by someone he'd met only a few days before. Diplomacy had failed.

He had failed to stop a conflict—and wasn't that his job? Worse than that, he and his country had been duped. China had maneuvered *him* and a vital naval force out of position. The PRC was now stringing out a crisis they'd made themselves, for the purpose of hurting American interests, and probably for the ultimate purpose of reshaping the world into their own design. They were being clever about it. China had not directly done anything to anyone, except a few air passengers, but had let others take the lead, and the risks that went with them. However this turned out, they would still have their trade, they would still have the respect due a superpower, and influence over American policy, and they planned to maintain all of those things until such time as they made the changes they desired. They'd killed Americans on the Airbus. Through their maneuvers they were helping to kill others, to do real and permanent harm to his country, and doing so entirely without risk, SecState thought quietly, gazing out the window as his aircraft made landfall.

But they didn't know that he knew these things, did they?

THE NEXT ATTACK would be a little more serious. The UIR had a large supply of C-802 missiles, so intelligence said. Made by China Precision Machine Import and Export Corporation, these were similar in type and capabilities to the French Exocet, with a range of about seventy miles. However, again the problem was targeting. There were just too many ships in the Gulf. To get the right destination for their missiles, the Iranians would have to get close enough for the look-down radars on their fighters to brush the edge of COMEDY'S missile envelope.

Well, Kemper decided, he'd have to see about that. *John Paul Jones* increased speed to thirty-two knots and moved north. The new destroyer was stealthy—on a radar set she looked rather like a medium-sized fishing boat—and to accentuate it she turned off all her radars. COMEDY had shown them one look. Now they would show them another. He also radioed Riyadh and screamed for AWACS support. The three cruisers, *Anzio, Normandy,* and *Yorktown,* maintained position close to the cargo ships, and it was now pretty clear to the civilian crews on the *Bob Hopes* that the warships were not there merely for missile defense. Any inbound vampire would have to go through a cruiser to get to them. But there was nothing to be done about that. The civilian seamen were all at their duty stations. Firefighting gear was deployed throughout the cargo decks. Their diesels were pounding out all the continuous power that the manuals allowed.

Aloft, the dawn patrol of F-16s was replaced by another. Weapons

were free, and word was getting out now to the civilian traffic that the air over the Persian Gulf was not a good place to be. It would make everyone's task a lot easier. It was no secret that they were there. Iranian radar had to have them, but there was no helping that at the moment.

"IT APPEARS THAT there are two naval forces in the Gulf," Intelligence told him. "We are not sure of their composition, but it is possible that they are military transport ships."

"And?"

"And two of our fighters have been shot down approaching them," Air Force went on.

"The American ships—some of them are warships of a very modern type. The report from our aircraft said that there are others as well, looking like merchant ships. It is likely that these are tank transports from Diego Garcia—"

"The ones the Indians were supposed to stop!"

"That is probably correct."

What a fool I was to trust that woman! "Sink them!" he ordered, thinking that his wish could become a fact.

RAMAN LIKED TO drive fast. The nearly clear interstate, the dark night, and the powerful Service car allowed him to indulge that pastime, as he tore down Interstate 70 toward Maryland. The number of trucks on the road surprised him. He hadn't known that there were so many vehicles dedicated to moving food and medical supplies. His rotating red light told them to keep out of his way, and also allowed his passage at speeds approaching a hundred miles per hour without interference from the Pennsylvania State Police.

It also gave him time to think. It would have been better for everyone if he'd known beforehand about all the things that were happening. Certainly it would have been better for him. The attack on SANDBOX had not pleased him. She was a child, too young, too innocent to be an enemy—he *knew* her by face and name and sound—and the shock of it had disturbed him, briefly. He didn't quite understand why it had been ordered ... unless to draw the protective circle even more tightly around POTUS, and so make his own mission easier. But that hadn't been necessary, not really. America was not Iraq, which Mahmoud Haji probably didn't fully understand.

The disease attack, that was something else. The manner of its spread was a matter of God's Will. It was distasteful, but that was life.

He remembered the burning of the theater in Tehran. People had died there, too, ordinary people whose mistake had been to watch a movie instead of attending to their devotions. The world was hard, and the only thing that made its burden easier to bear was faith in something larger than oneself. Raman had that faith. The world didn't change its shape by accident. Great events had to be cruel ones, for the most part. The Faith had spread with the help of the sword, despite the Prophet's own admonition that the sword could not make one faithful . . . a dichotomy he did not fully understand, but that, too, was the nature of the world. One man could hardly comprehend it all. For so many things, one had to depend on the guidance of those wiser than oneself, to tell one what had to be done, what was acceptable to Allah, what served His purpose.

That he had not been told things that would have been useful—well, he had to admit, that was a reasonable security measure ... if one accepted the fact that one was not supposed to survive. The realization did not bring a chill along with it. He had accepted that possibility a long time before, and if his distant brother could have fulfilled his mission in Baghdad, then he could fulfill his own in Washington. But he would try to survive if the chance offered itself. There wasn't anything wrong with that, was there?

CLEARLY, THEY WERE still figuring this operation out, Kemper told himself. In 1990-91 there had been the luxury of time to decide things, to allocate assets, to set up communications links and all the rest. But not this time. When he'd called for the AWACS, some Air Force puke had replied, "What, you don't have one? Why didn't you ask?" The commanding officer of USS *Anzio* and Task Force 61.1 hadn't vented his temper at the man. It probably wasn't his fault anyway, and the good news was that they had one now. The timing was good enough, too. Four fighter aircraft, type unknown, were just rotating off the ground at Basatin, ninety miles away.

"COMEDY, this is Sky-Two, we show four inbounds." The data link came up on one of the Aegis screens. His own radar couldn't see that far, because it was well under the horizon. The AWACS showed four blips in two pairs.

"Sky, COMEDY, they're yours. Splash 'em."

"Roger—stand by, four more coming up."

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“HERE’S WHERE IT gets interesting,” Jackson told them in the Sit Room. “Kemper has a missile trap set up outboard of the main formation. If anybody gets past the -16s, we’ll see if it works.”

A THIRD GROUP of four lifted off a minute later. The twelve fighter aircraft climbed to ten thousand feet, then turned south at high speed.

The flight of F-16s couldn’t risk straying too far from COMEDY, but moved to meet the threat in the center of the Gulf under direction from the AWACS. Both sides switched on their targeting radars, the UIR force controlled by ground-based sets, and the USAF teams guided by the E-3B circling a hundred miles behind them. It wasn’t elegant. The -16s, with their longer-ranging missiles, shot first, and turned away as the southbound Iranian interceptors loosed their own and tried to evade. Then the first group of four dived down for the water. Jamming pods went on, aided by powerful shore-based interference, which the Americans hadn’t expected. Three UIR fighters, still heading in, fell to the missile volley, while the Americans outran the return volley, then turned back to reengage. The American flight split into two-plane elements, racing east, then turned again to conduct an anvil attack. But the speeds involved were high, and one Iranian flight was now within fifty miles of COMEDY. That was when they appeared on *Anzio*’s radar.

“Cap’n,” the chief on the ESM board said into his microphone, “I am getting acquisition radar signals, bearing three-five-five. These are detection values, sir. They may have us.”

“Very well.” Kemper reached to turn his key. On *York-town* and *Normandy* the same thing happened. The former was an older version of the cruiser. In her case, four white-painted SM-2 MR came out of the fore and aft magazines onto the launch rails. For *Anzio* and *Normandy* nothing changed visually. Their missiles were in vertical launch cells. The SPY radars were now pumping out six *million* watts of RF energy, and dwelling almost continuously on the inbound fighter-bombers, which were just out of range of the cruisers.

But not out of range for *John Paul Jones,* ten miles to the north of the main body. In the space of three seconds, her main radar went active, and then the first of eight missiles erupted from her launch cells, rocketing skyward on columns of smoke and flame, then changing direction in skidding turns to level out and burn north.

The fighters hadn’t seen *Jones.* Her stealthy profile had not shown as a real target on their scopes, and neither had they noticed the fact that a fourth SPY radar was now tracking them. The series of white smoke trails came as an unpleasant surprise when the pilots looked up from their own radar scopes. But two of them triggered off their C-802s just

in time.

Four seconds out from their targets, the SM-2 missiles received terminal guidance signals from the SPG-62 illumination radars. It was too sudden, too unexpected for them to jink clear. All four fighters were blotted out on massive clouds of yellow and black, but they'd managed to launch six antiship missiles.

"Vampire, vampire! I show inbound missile seekers, bearing three-five-zero."

"Okay, here we go." Kemper turned the key another notch, to the "special-auto" setting. Aegis would now go fully automatic. Topside, the CIWS gatling guns turned to starboard. Everywhere aboard the four warships, sailors listened and tried not to cringe. The merchant crews they guarded simply didn't know to be scared yet.

Aloft, the F-16s closed on the still-intact flight of four. These were also antiship-missile carriers, but they'd looked in the wrong place, probably for the decoy group. The first group had seen a close gaggle of ships. The second hadn't yet, and never would. They'd just turned into the signals of the Aegis radars to their west when the sky filled with down-bound smoke trails. The four scattered. Two exploded in midair. Another was damaged and tried to limp back northwest before he lost power and went in, while a fourth, missed entirely, reefed into a left turn, punched burner, and jettisoned his exterior weapons load. The four Air Force F-16s had splashed six enemy fighters in under four minutes.

Jones got one of the sea-skimmers on the way by, but none of them had locked into her radar return, and the resulting high-speed crossing targets were too difficult to engage. Three of four computer-launched attempts all failed. That left five. The destroyer's combat systems recycled and looked for additional targets.

They'd seen *Jones*'s smoke and wondered what it was, but the first real warning that something was badly wrong came when the near trio of cruisers started launching.

In *Anzio*'s CIC, Kemper decided, as *O'Bannon* had, not to launch his decoy rockets. Three of the inbounds seemed aimed at the after part of the formation, with only two at the lead. His cruiser and *Normandy* concentrated on those. You could feel the launches. The hull shivered when the first two went out. The radar display was changing every second now, showing inbound and outbound tracks. The "vampires" were eight miles away now. At ten miles per minute, that meant less than fifty seconds to engage and destroy. It would seem like a week.

The system was programmed to adopt a fire-control mode appropriate to the moment. It was now doing shoot-shoot-look. Fire one missile, fire another, and then look to see if the target had survived the first two, and merit a third try. His target was exploded

by the first SM-2 and the second SAM self-destructed. *Normandy*'s first missile missed, but the second nicked the C-802, tumbling it into the sea with an explosion they felt through the hull a second later.

Yorktown had an advantage and a disadvantage. Her older system allowed launches directly at the inbound missiles instead of forcing the missiles to turn in flight before they could engage. But she could not launch as fast. She had three targets and fifty seconds to destroy them. The first -802 splashed five miles out, killed by a double hit. The second was now at its terminal height of three meters, ten feet over the flat surface. The next outgoing SM-2 missed high, exploding harmless behind it. The following missile missed as well. The next ripple from the forward launchers obliterated that one three miles out, filling the air with fragments that confused the guidance of the next pair, causing both to explode in the shredded remains of a dead target. Both of the cruiser's launchers swiveled fore and aft and vertical to receive the next set of four SAMs. The last -802 passed through the spray and fragments, heading straight into the cruiser. *Yorktown* got off two more launches, but one faulty missile failed to guide at all, and the other missed. Then the CIWS systems located on the forward and after superstructure turned slightly, as the vampire entered their targeting envelope. Both opened up at eight hundred yards, missing, missing yet again, but then exploding the missile less than two hundred yards off the starboard beam. The five-hundred-pound warhead showered the cruiser with fragments, and parts of the missile body kept coming, striking the ship's foreright SPY radar panel and ripping into the superstructure, killing six sailors and wounding twenty more.

"WOW," SECRETARY BRETANO said. All the theoretical stuff he'd learned in the past weeks was suddenly real.

"Not bad. They've launched fourteen aircraft at us, and they're getting two or three back, that's all," Robby said. "That'll give them something to think about for the next time."

"What about *Yorktown*?" the President asked.

"We have to wait and see."

THEIR HOTEL WAS only half a mile from the Russian embassy, and like good parsimonious journalists, they decided to walk, and left a few minutes before eight. Clark and Chavez had gone a scarce hundred yards when they saw that something was wrong. People were moving listlessly for so early on the start of a working day. Had the

war with the Saudis been announced? John took a turn onto another market street, and there he found people listening to portable radios in their stalls instead of moving their wares onto the shelves.

"Excuse me," John said in Russian-accented Farsi. "Is something the matter?"

"We are at war with America," a fruit vendor said.

"Oh, when did this happen?"

"The radio says they have attacked our airplanes," the fruit seller said next. "Who are you?" he asked.

John pulled out his passport. "We are Russian journalists. Can I ask what you think of this?"

"Haven't we fought enough?" the man asked.

"TOLD YOU. THEY'RE blaming us," Arnie said, reading over the intercept report off Tehran radio. "What will that do to the politics in the region?"

"The sides are pretty much drawn up," Ed Foley said. "You're either on one side or the other. The UIR is the other. Simpler than the last time."

The President checked his watch. It was just past midnight. "When do I go on the air?"

"Noon."

RAMAN HAD TO stop at the Maryland-Pennsylvania line. A good twenty or so trucks were waiting for clearance from the Maryland State Police, with the National Guard in close attendance, and they lined up two by two, completely blocking the road at this point. Ten angry minutes later, he showed his ID. The cop waved him through without a word. Raman turned his light back on and sped off. He turned on the radio, caught an all-news AM station, but missed the top-of-the-hour news summary and had to suffer through all the rest, largely the same thing he'd been hearing all week, until twelve-thirty, when the network news service announced a reported air battle in the Persian Gulf. Neither the White House nor the Pentagon had commented on the alleged incident. Iran claimed to have sunk two American ships and shot down four fighters.

Patriot and zealot that he was, Raman couldn't believe it. The problem with America, and the reason for his mission of sacrifice, was that this poorly organized, idolatrous, and misguided nation was lethally competent in the use of force. Even President Ryan, he had seen, discounted as he was by politicians, had a quiet strength to him.

He didn't shout, didn't bluster, didn't act like most "great" men. He wondered how many people appreciated just how dangerous SWORDSMAN was, for that very reason. Well, that was why he had to kill him, and if that had to come at the cost of his own life, so be it.

TF61.1 TURNED SOUTH behind the Qatar Peninsula without further incident. *Yorktown*'s forward superstructure was badly damaged, the electrical fire having done as much damage as the missile fragments, but with her stern turned to the enemy, that didn't matter. Kemper maneuvered his escorting ships yet again, placing all four behind the tank carriers, but another attack was not forthcoming. The result of the first had stung the enemy too badly. Eight F-15s, four each of the Saudi Air Force and the 366th, orbited overhead. A mixture of Saudi and other escort ships turned up. Mainly mine-hunters, they pinged the bottom in front of COMEDY, looking for danger and finding none. Six huge container ships had been moved off the Dhahran quay to make room for *Bob Hope* and her sisters, and now three tugs each appeared to move them alongside. The four Aegis ships maintained station even sitting still, dropping their anchors fore and aft, mooring five hundred yards off their charges to maintain air defense coverage through the unloading process. The decoy force, having suffered not a single scratch, pulled into Bahrain to await developments.

From the wheelhouse of USS *Anzio*, Captain Gregory Kemper watched as the first brown buses pulled up to the tank-carriers. Through his binoculars, he could see men in "chocolate-chip" fatigues trot to the edge, and watched the stern ramps come down to meet them.

"WE HAVE NO comment at this time," van Damm told the latest reporter to call in. "The President will be making a statement later today. That's all I can say right now."

"But—"

"That's all we have to say right now." The chief of staff killed the line.

PRICE HAD ASSEMBLED all of the Detail agents in the West Wing, and gone through the game plan for what was coming. The same would be repeated for the people in the White House proper, and the reaction there would be pretty much the same, she was certain: shock,

disbelief, and anger bordering on rage.

"Let's all get that out of our systems, shall we? We know what we're going to be doing about it. This is a criminal case, and we'll treat it like a criminal case. Nobody loses control. Nobody gives anything away. Questions?" There were none.

DARYAEI CHECKED HIS clock again. Yes, finally, it was time. He placed a telephone call over a secure line to the UIR embassy in Paris. There, the ambassador placed a call to someone else. That person made a call to London. In all cases, the words exchanged were innocuous. The message was not.

PAST CUMBERLAND, HAGERSTOWN, Frederick, Raman turned south on 1-270 for the last hour's worth into Washington. He was tired, but his hands tingled. He'd see a dawn this morning. Perhaps his last. If so, he hoped it would be a pretty one.

THE NOISE MADE the agents jump. Both checked their watches. First of all, the number calling in came up on an LED display. It was overseas, code 44, which made it from the U.K.

"Yes?" It was the voice of the subject, Mohammed Alahad.

"Sorry to disturb you so early. I call about the threemeter Isfahan, the red one. Has it arrived yet? My customer is very anxious." The voice was accented, but not in quite the right way.

"Not yet," the groggy voice replied. "I have asked my supplier about it."

"Very well, but as I said, my customer is quite anxious."

"I will see what I can do. Good-bye." And the line went dead.

Don Selig lifted his cellular phone, dialed headquarters, and gave them the U.K. number for a quick check.

"Lights just came on," Agent Scott said. "Looks like it woke our boy up. Heads up," she said into her portable radio. "Subject is up and moving."

"Got the lights, Sylvia," another agent assured her.

Five minutes later, he emerged from the front door of the garden-style apartment building. Tracking him was not the least bit easy, but the agents had taken the trouble to locate the four closest public phones and had people close to all of them. It turned out that he picked one at a combination gas station/convenience store. The

computer monitor would tell them what number he called, but through a long-lens camera he was observed to drop in a quarter. The agent on the camera saw him hit 3-6-3 in rapid succession. It was clear a few seconds later, when another tapped phone rang, and was answered by a digital answering machine.

"Mr. Sloan, this is Mr. Alahad. Your rug is in. I don't understand why you do not call me, sir." Click.

"Bingo!" another agent called over the radio net. "That's it. He called Raman's number. Mr. Sloan, we have your rug."

Yet another voice came on. "This is O'Day. Take him down right now!"

It wasn't really all *that* hard. Alahad went into the store to buy a quart of milk, and from there he walked directly back home. He had to use a key to enter his apartment house, and was surprised to find a man and a woman inside.

"FBI," the man said.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Alahad," the woman said, producing handcuffs. No guns were in evidence, but he didn't resist—they rarely did—and if he had, there were two more agents just outside now.

"But why?" he asked.

"Conspiracy to murder the President of the United States," Sylvia Scott said, pushing him against the wall.

"That's not so!"

"Mr. Alahad, you made a mistake. Joseph Sloan died last year. How do you sell a rug to a dead man?" she asked. The man jerked back as though from an electric shock, the agents saw. The clever ones always did when they found out that they had not been so clever at all. They never expected to be caught. The next trick was in exploiting the moment. That would start in a few minutes, when they told him what the penalty was for violating 18 USC § 1751.

THE INSIDE OF USNS *Bob Hope* looked like the parking garage from hell, with vehicles jammed in so closely that a rat would have had a difficult time passing between them. To board a tank, an arriving crew had to walk on the decks of the vehicles, crouching lest they smash their skulls into the overhead, and they found themselves wondering about the sanity of those who'd periodically had to check the vehicles, turning over the engines and working the guns back and forth so that rubber and plastic seals wouldn't dry out.

Assigning crews to tracks and trucks had been an administrative task of no small proportions, but the ship was loaded in such a way as to allow the most important items off first. The Guardsmen arrived as units, with computerized printouts giving them the number and

location of their assigned vehicles, and ship crewmen pointing them to the quickest way out. Less than an hour after the ship tied up, the first M1A2 main-battle tank rolled off the ramp onto the quay to board the same tank transporter used shortly before by a tank of the 11th Cav, and with the same drivers. Unloading would take more than a day, and most of another would be needed to get WOLFPACK Brigade organized.

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THE DAWN PROVED to be a pretty one, Aref Raman saw with satisfaction as he pulled into West Executive Drive. It would be a clear day for his mission. The uniformed guard at the gate waved hello as the security barrier went down. Another car came in behind him, and that one went through as well. It parked two spaces from his spot, and Raman recognized the driver as that FBI guy, O'Day, who'd been so lucky at the day-care center. There was no sense in hating the man. He'd been defending his own child, after all.

"How are you doing?" the FBI inspector asked cordially.

"Just got in from Pittsburgh," Raman replied, hefting his suitcase out of the trunk.

"What the hell were you doing up there?"

"Advance work—but that speech won't be happening, I guess. What are you in for?" Raman was grateful for the distraction. It allowed him to get his mind into the game, as it were.

"The Director and I have something to brief the Boss about. Gotta shower first, though."

"Shower?"

"Disinfec—oh, you haven't been here. A White House staff member is sick with this virus thing. *Everybody* has to shower and disinfect on the way in now. Come on," O'Day said, carrying a briefcase. Both men went through the West Entrance. Both buzzed the metal detectors, but since both were sworn federal officers, nothing was made of the fact that both were carrying side arms. The inspector pointed to the left.

"This is a treat, showing you something in the place," he joked to Raman.

"Been in a lot lately?" The Secret Service agent saw that two offices had been converted into something. One marked MEN and the other WOMEN. Andrea Price came out of one just then, her hair wet, and, he noted as she passed him, smelling of chemicals.

"Hey, Jeff, how was the drive? Pat, how's the hero?" she inquired.

"Hey, no big deal, Price. Just two rag-heads," O'Day said with a grin. He opened the MEN door and went in, and set his briefcase

down.

It had clearly been a rush job, Raman saw. Some minor functionary had had the office, but all the furniture was gone and the floor covered with plastic. A hanging rack was there for clothing. O'Day stripped down and headed into the canvas-enclosed shower.

"These damn chemicals at least wake you up," the FBI inspector reported as the water started. He emerged two minutes later and started toweling off vigorously. "Your turn, Raman."

"Great," the Service agent griped, removing his clothing and showing some of the lingering body modesty of his parent society. O'Day didn't look at him and didn't look away. Didn't do anything except dry off, until Raman was behind the canvas. The agent's service pistol, a SigSauer, had been set atop the clothing rack. O'Day opened his briefcase first. Then he pulled Raman's automatic, ejected the magazine, and quietly worked the action to remove the chambered round.

"How are the roads?" O'Day called.

"Clear, made great time damn, this water stinks!"

"Ain't that the truth!" Raman kept two spare magazines for his pistol. O'Day saw. He put all three in the lid-pocket before unwrapping the four he'd prepared. One he slid into the butt of the Sig. He worked the action one more time to load a round, then replaced it with a new, full magazine, and two more for the agent's belt holder. Finished, he hefted the gun. Weight and balance were exactly the same as before. Everything went back in place as O'Day returned to dressing. He needn't have rushed. Raman evidently needed a shower. Maybe he was purifying himself, the inspector thought coldly.

"Here." O'Day tossed over a towel as he put his shirt on.

"Glad I brought a change." Raman pulled new underwear and socks from his two-suiter.

"I guess it's a rule you have to be all spiffy when you work in with the President, eh?" The FBI agent bent down to tie his shoes. He looked up. "Morning, Director."

"I don't know why I bothered at home," Murray grumped. "Got the paperwork, Pat?"

"Yes, sir. This is something to show him."

"Damned right it is." And Murray doffed his jacket and tie. "White House locker room," he noted. "Morning, Raman."

Both agents completed dressing, made sure their personal weapons were tucked in the right place, then stepped outside.

"Murray and I are going right in," Pat told the other in the corridor. They didn't have to wait long for Murray, and then Price showed up again, just as the FBI Director reemerged. O'Day rubbed his nose to

tell her all was done. She nodded back.

"Jeff, want to take these gentlemen into the office? I have to head to the command post. The Boss is waiting."

"Sure, Andrea. This way," Raman said, leading O'Day. Behind them, Price waited and did not head toward the command post.

In the next level up, Raman saw TV equipment being prepared for installation in the Oval Office. Arnie van Damm buzzed out the corridor entrance, trailed by Callie Weston. President Ryan was at his desk in the usual shirtsleeves, going through a folder. CIA Director Ed Foley was in there, too.

"Enjoy the shower, Dan?" the DCI asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'm losing the rest of my hair, Ed."

"Hi, Jeff," the President said, looking up.

"Good morning, Mr. President," Raman said, taking his usual place against the wall.

"Okay, Dan, what do you guys have for me?" Ryan asked.

"We've broken an Iranian espionage ring. We think it's associated with the attempt on your daughter." While Murray talked, O'Day opened his briefcase and pulled out a folder.

"The Brits turned the connection," Foley started to say. "And the contact here is a guy named Alahad—would you believe the bastard has a business about a mile from here?"

"We have him under surveillance right now," Murray put in. "We're running his phone records."

They were all looking down at the papers on the President's desk and didn't see Raman's face freeze in place. His mind started racing, as though a drug had been injected into his bloodstream. If they were doing that right now . . . There might still be a chance, a slim one, but if not, here was the President, the directors of FBI and CIA, and he could deliver them all to Allah, and if that weren't sacrifice enough . . . Raman unbuttoned his jacket with his left hand. He eased off the spot on the wall he was leaning against and closed his eyes for a quick prayer. Then, in a rapid, smooth movement, his right hand went to his automatic.

Raman was surprised to see the President's eyes move and stare right at him. Well, that wasn't so bad, was it? Ryan should know that his death was coming, and the only shame was he'd never quite understand why.

Ryan flinched as the pistol came out. The reaction was automatic, despite the briefing on what to expect, and the sign from O'Day that it was okay. He dodged anyway, wondering if he could really trust anyone, and saw that Jeff Raman's hands tracked him and pulled back on the trigger like an automaton, no emotion in his eyes at all—

The sound made everyone jump, albeit for different reasons.

Pop.

That was all. Raman's mouth dropped open in disbelief. The weapon was loaded. He could feel the added weight of the live rounds in it, and—

"Put it down," O'Day said calmly, his Smith out and aimed now. An instant later, Murray had his service weapon out.

"We have Alahad in custody already," the Director explained.

Raman had another weapon, a telescoping billy club called an Asp, but the President was fifteen feet away and . . .

"I can put one right through your kneecap if you want," O'Day said coldly.

"You fuckin' traitor!" Andrea said, entering the room with her pistol out, too. "You fuckin' assassin! *On the floor now!"*

"Easy, Price. He's not going anywhere," Pat told her.

But it was Ryan who nearly lost control: "My little girl, my *baby*, you helped plan to murder *her?*" He started around the desk, but Foley stopped him. "No, not this time, Ed!"

"Stop!" the DCI told him. "We have him, Jack. We've got him."

"One way or another, you get on the floor," Pat said, ignoring the others and aiming at Raman's knee. "Drop the weapon and get down."

He was trembling now, fear, rage, all manner of emotions assaulted him, everything but the one he'd expected. He racked the Sig's action and pulled the trigger again. It wasn't even aimed, it was just an act of denial.

"I couldn't use blanks. They don't weigh the same," O'Day explained. "They're real rounds. I just tapped the bullets out and dumped the powder. The primer makes a cute little pop, doesn't it?"

It was as though he'd forgotten to breathe for a minute or so. Raman's body collapsed in on itself. He dropped the pistol to the rug with the Seal of the President on it and fell to his knees. Price came over and pushed him the rest of the way. Murray, for the first time in years, snapped the cuffs on.

"You want to hear about your rights?" the FBI Director asked.

59

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

DIGGS HAD NOT REceived proper mission orders yet and what was even more disturbing, his Operation BUFORD did not really have much of a plan yet, either. The Army trained its commanders to act swiftly and decisively, but as with doctors in hospitals, emergency situations were not as welcome as planned procedures. The general was in continuous contact with the commanders of his two Cavalry regiments, the senior Air Force commander, the one-star who'd brought the 366th over, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, and various intelligence assets, just trying to get a feel for what the enemy was actually doing, and from that to determine what the enemy might be planning—from which he would try to formulate some sort of plan of his own aside from mere ad-hoc reaction.

The orders and rules of engagement arrived on his fax machine around 11:00 Washington time, 16:00 Zulu time, and 19:00 Lima, or local time. Here was the explanation he'd lacked. He relayed it at once to his principal subordinates, and assembled his staff to brief them. The troops, he told the assembled officers, would learn from their Commander-in-Chief. Their officers would have to be with their people when *that* word came down.

Things were busy enough. According to the satellites, the Army of God—as the intelligence people had determined the name to be—was within one hundred miles of the Kuwaiti border, approaching from the west in good order, and following the roads as expected. That made the Saudi deployment look pretty good, since three of their five brigades were covering the approaches to the oil fields.

They still weren't ready. The 366th Wing was in the Kingdom, but it wasn't enough to have the airplanes on the right airfields. A thousand minor details had to be sorted out, and that job wasn't even half done yet. The F-16s from Israel were pretty well spun up, all forty-eight of their single-engine fighters running, and even some kills recorded in the initial skirmishes, but the rest needed another day. Similarly, the 10th Cav was fully ready, but the 11th was not; it was still assembling and moving to its initial deployment area. His third brigade had just started drawing equipment. An army wasn't a collection of weapons.

It was a team composed of people with an idea of what they were supposed to be doing. But picking the time and place for war was usually the job of an aggressor, which was a role his country hadn't practiced very much.

He looked at the three-page fax again. It seemed quite literally explosive in his hands. His planning staff read their copies and were eerily quiet until the 11th's S-3, the regimental operations officer, said it for all of them:

"We're gonna get some."

THREE RUSSIANS HAD recently arrived. Clark and Chavez had to remind themselves that this wasn't some sort of alcohol-induced dream. The two CIA officers were being supported by Russians under mission orders from Langley by way of Moscow. Actually, they had two missions. The Russians had drawn the hard one, and had brought the necessary equipment in the diplomatic pouch for the two Americans to have a try at the easier one. A dispatch had also come from Washington, via Moscow, that all of them read.

"Too fast, John," Ding breathed. Then his mission face came on. "But what the hell."

THE PRESS ROOM was still underpopulated. So many of the regulars were elsewhere, some caught out of town and blocked by the travel ban, others just missing, and nobody quite sure why.

"The President will be making a major speech in one hour," van Damm told them. "Unfortunately, there will be no time to give you advance copies of the speech. Please inform your networks that this is a matter of the highest importance."

"Arnie!" a reporter called, but the chief of staff had already turned his back.

THE REPORTERS IN Saudi knew more than both their friends back in Washington, and they were moving out to join their assigned units. For Tom Donner, it was B-Troop, 1st of the 11th. He was fully outfitted in a desert battle-dress uniform, or BDU, and found the twenty-nine-year-old troop commander standing by his tank.

"Howdy," the captain said, halfway looking up from his map.

"Where do you want me?" Donner asked.

The captain laughed. "Never ask a soldier where he wants a

reporter, sir."

"With you, then?"

"I ride this," the officer responded, nodding at the tank. "I'll put you in one of the Brads."

"I need a camera crew."

"They're already here," the captain told him, pointing. "Over that way. Anything else?"

"Yeah, would you like to know what this is all about?" Donner asked. The journalists had been virtual prisoners in a Riyadh hotel, not even allowed to call home to tell their families where they were—all they'd known was that the reporters had been called up, and their parent corporations had signed agreements not to reveal the purpose of their absences for such deployments. In Donner's case, the network said that he was "on assignment," a difficult thing to explain with the travel ban. But they had been told the overall situation—there'd been no avoiding it—which put them one up on a lot of soldiers.

"We hear that in an hour or so, or that's what the colonel told us." But the young officer was interested now.

"This is something you need to know now. Honest."

"Mr. Donner, I know what you pulled on the President and—"

"If you want to shoot me, do it later. Listen to me, Captain. This is important."

"Say your say, sir."

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THERE SEEMED SOMETHING perverse in being made up at a time like this. It was, as always, Mary Abbot doing the job, wearing her mask, and this time gloves as well, while both TelePrompTers ran their copy. Ryan hadn't had the time or really the inclination to rehearse. Important as the speech was, he only wished to do it once.

"THEY CAN'T DO cross-country," the Saudi general insisted. "They haven't trained for it, and they're still road-bound."

"There is information to suggest otherwise, sir," Diggs said.

"We are ready for them."

"You're never ready enough, General. Nobody is."

IT WAS TENSE but otherwise normal at PALM BOWL. Downloaded satellite photos told them that the UIR forces were still moving, and if

they continued, then they would be met by two Kuwaiti brigades fighting on their own turf, and an American regiment in reserve, and the Saudis ready to provide rapid support. They didn't know how the battle would turn out—the overall numbers weren't favorable—but it wouldn't be like the last time, Major Sabah told himself. It seemed so foolish to him that the allied forces could not strike first. They *knew* what was coming.

"Getting some radio chatter," a technician reported. Outside, the sun was just starting to set. The satellite photos the intelligence officers looked at were four hours old. More would not be available for another two.

STORM TRACK WAS close to the Saudi-UIR border, too far for a mortar round, but not safe from real tube artillery. A company of fourteen Saudi tanks was now arrayed between the listening post and the berm. There also, for the first time in days, they were starting to copy radio transmissions. The signals were scrambled, more like the command sets than the regular tactical radios, which were far too numerous for easy encryption systems. Unable to read them immediately—that was the job of the computers back at KKMC—they did start trying to locate their points of origin. In twenty minutes, they had thirty pointsources. Twenty represented brigade headquarters. Six for the division command posts. Three for the corps commanders, and one for the army command. They seemed to be testing their commo net, the ELINT people decided. They'd have to wait for the computers to unscramble what was being said. The direction-finders had them arrayed on the road to Al Busayyah, still doing their approach march to Kuwait. The radio traffic wasn't all that remarkable. Maybe, most thought, the Army of God needed more practice in march discipline ... though they hadn't done all that badly in their exercise....

With sunset the Predators were launched again, motoring north. They headed to the radio sources first of all. Their cameras turned on ten miles inside the UIR, and the first thing one of them saw was a battery of 203mm towed guns, off their trucks, their limbers spread out, and the tubes pointed south.

"Colonel!" a sergeant called urgently.

Outside, the Saudi tankers had selected hillocks to hide behind and were putting a few crewmen out to act as spotters. The first few had just started to settle into their observation points when the northern horizon flashed orange.

DIGGS WAS STILL discussing deployment patterns when the first message came in:

"Sir, STORM TRACK reports they're taking artillery fire."

"GOOD MORNING, MY fellow Americans," Ryan said to the cameras. His image was being carried worldwide. His voice would be heard even by those without TV sets at hand. In Saudi Arabia, his words went out on AM, FM, and shortwave bands so that every soldier, sailor, and airman would hear what he was about to say. "We have been through much in the past two weeks.

"The first order of business is to tell you of progress we have made with the epidemic which has been inflicted upon our country.

"It was not easy for me to order the imposition of a ban on interstate travel. There are few freedoms more precious than the right to come and go as one pleases, but based on the best medical advice, I felt it necessary to take that action. I can report to you now that it has had the desired effect. New disease cases have been trending down for four days now. Partly that's because of what your government did, but it's more because you have taken the proper measures to protect yourselves. We will give more detailed information later in the day, but for the moment I can tell you that the Ebola epidemic is going to end, probably in the next week. Many of the new cases are people who will definitely survive. America's medical professionals have performed superhuman work to help the afflicted, and to help us understand what has happened, and how best to combat it. This task is not yet complete, but our country will weather this storm, as we have weathered many others.

"A moment ago, I said that the epidemic has been inflicted upon us.

"The arrival of this disease into our country was not an accident. We have been struck with a new and barbaric form of attack. It's called biological warfare. That is something outlawed by international treaty. Biological warfare is designed to terrify and to cripple a nation, rather than to kill it. We've all felt the disgust and horror at what's been happening in our country, the way in which the disease attacks people at random. My own wife, Cathy, has worked around the clock with Ebola victims at her hospital in Baltimore. As you know, I was only there a few days ago to see for myself. I saw the victims, talked with the doctors and nurses, and outside the hospital I sat with a man whose wife was ill.

"I could not tell him then, but I can tell you now, that from the beginning we suspected that this epidemic was a man-made act, and over the last few days, our law-enforcement and intelligence agencies have formulated the proof we needed before I could tell you what you

are about to hear." On TV screens across the world appeared the faces of a young African boy, and a white-clad Belgian nun.

"This disease started some months ago in the country of Zaire," the President went on. He had to walk everyone through it, slowly and carefully, and Ryan found it hard to keep his voice even.

THE SAUDI TANKERS remounted their vehicles at once, fired up the turbine engines, and moved to new locations lest their original points had been spotted. But the fire, they saw, was aimed at STORM TRACK. That made sense, their commander thought. The listening post was a prime intelligence-gathering point. Their job was to protect it, which they could do against tanks and troops, but not against artillery fire. The Saudi captain was a handsome, almost rakish young man of twenty-five. He was also devoutly religious, and therefore mindful of the fact that the Americans were guests of his country, and thus worthy of his protection. He got on his radio to call back to his battalion headquarters, and requested armored personnel carriers—helicopters would have been suicidal—to evacuate the intelligence specialists.

"AND SO, WE HAVE the disease traveling from Africa to Iran. How do we know this?" the President asked. "We know it because the disease traveled back to Africa on this aircraft. Please note the registration code, HX-NJA. This is the same aircraft supposedly lost with Sister Jean Baptistc aboard...."

WE NEED ANOTHER day, damn it! Diggs thought. And the enemy forces were nearly two hundred miles west of where everyone planned to meet them.

"Who's closest?" he asked.

"Fourth Brigade's area," the senior Saudi replied. But that brigade was spread over a front of over a hundred miles. There were some helicopter-reconnaissance assets there, but the attack choppers were also in the wrong place, fifty miles south of Wadi al Batin. The other side wasn't cooperating very well, was it?

DARYAEI WAS SHOCKED to see his photograph on TV. Worse, at least ten percent of the people in his country were seeing this. The

American CNN was not available in the UIR, but the British Sky News service was, and nobody had thought to—

"This is the man behind the biological attack upon our country," Ryan said, with the sort of calm that seemed robotic. "He is the reason several thousand of our citizens have died. Now, I will tell you why he did this, why there was an attack on my daughter, Katie, and why there was an attempt on my own life, right in the Oval Office a few hours ago. I imagine Mr. Daryaei is watching this broadcast, too, right now. Mahmoud Haji," he said, right into the camera's eye, "your man Aref Raman is now in federal custody. Do you really think America is as foolish as that?"

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE in the Blackhorse, Tom Donner was listening—in his case with a pair of headphones off the Bradley's radio. There weren't quite enough to go around, and the crewmen had to share. He watched their faces. They, too, were as blank and expressionless as Ryan's voice had been, until his last sentence of contempt.

"Fuck," one spec-4 said. He was an 11-Delta, a Cavalry scout, and backup gunner for this track.

"My God," Donner managed to say.

Ryan went on: "UIR forces are now poised to invade our ally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Over the past two days, we have moved forces there to stand with our friends.

"There is something very important I must say now. The attack on my daughter, the attempt on my own life, and the barbaric attack on our country was undertaken by people who call themselves Muslims. We must all understand that religion has nothing at all to do with these inhuman acts. Islam is a *religion.* America is a country in which religious liberty is the *first* freedom expressed in our Bill of Rights, even before speech and all the others. Islam is not the enemy of our country or any other. Just as my family was once attacked by people calling themselves Catholics, so these people have twisted and defiled their own religious faith in the name of worldly power, and then hidden behind it like the cowards they are. What God thinks of that, I cannot say. I know that Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, teaches us about a God of love and mercy—and justice.

"Well, there will be justice. If the UIR forces arrayed on the Saudi border move to invade, we will meet them. Our armed forces are in the field even as I speak to you, and now I will speak directly to them:

"Now you know why you have been taken away from your homes and families. Now you know why you must take up arms in the defense of your country. Now you know the nature of your enemy, and the nature of his acts.

"But America does not have a tradition of deliberate attack on the innocent. You will act in accordance with our laws at all times. I must now send you into battle. I wish this were not necessary. I have myself served as a Marine, and I know what it is like to be in a foreign place. But you stand there for your country, and here at home your country stands up for you. You will be in our prayers.

"To our allies in Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and all the Gulf states: America stands again with you to stop aggression and restore the peace. Good luck." Ryan's voice changed then, for the first time allowing his emotions to show. "And good hunting."

The crewmen in B-Troop's command track looked at one another for several seconds before anyone spoke. They even managed to forget the presence of the reporter. The youngest of them, a PFC, looked down at shaking hands and had his say.

"Fuckers gonna pay. Motherfuckers gonna pay for this, guys."

FOUR ARMORED PERSONNEL carriers were racing across the desert at about forty miles per hour. They avoided the beaten-dirt road to STORM TRACK for fear that it would be targeted with artillery fire; that proved to be a sensible precaution. Their first view of their objective was a cloud of smoke and dust drifting away from the antenna farm as fire continued to pour into the site. One of the three buildings appeared to be standing, but on fire, and the Saudi lieutenant leading the scout platoon wondered if anyone could possibly be alive there. To the north he saw a different sort of flash—five miles away, the horizontal tongue of flame from a tank's main gun illuminated the bumps and knolls of a landscape that was not at all as level as it appeared in daylight. A minute after that, the fire on STORM TRACK diminished somewhat, shifting to where the tanks were evidently engaging enemy vehicles invading his country. He thanked Allah that his immediate job had just gotten a little easier while his radio operator called ahead on the track's tactical radio.

The four APCs picked their way through the fallen antennas on the way into the wrecked compound. Then their rear doors opened and the soldier raced out to look around. Thirty men and women worked here. They found nine unhurt people, plus five wounded. The scout platoon took about five minutes searching the wreckage, but no more living people were discovered, and there wasn't time to be fastidious about the dead. The tracks moved out, back toward the battalion CP, where helicopters waited to ferry the Americans out.

IT AMAZED THE Saudi tank commander that surprise had been achieved. He knew that most of his country's forces were two hundred miles to the east. But the enemy was *here* and coming south. They weren't going into Kuwait or after the oil fields at all. That became plain when the first UIR tanks appeared in his thermal viewer, cresting a low spot in the berm, out of gun range because he'd been ordered not to move too close. The young officer really didn't know what to do. Ordinarily, his military worked under fairly tight control, and so he radioed back for instructions. But his battalion commander was busy now, his own command of fifty-four tanks and other vehicles spread over a front of thirty kilometers, all of which was being hit with indirect artillery fire, and much of which was reporting enemy tanks crossing the border, with infantry carriers in support.

The officer decided he had to do something, so he ordered his tanks forward to meet the attack. At three thousand meters, his men opened fire, and the first fourteen shots resulted in eight hits, not bad under the circumstances for part-time soldiers, he thought as he decided to stand and fight right there, and defend his soil against the invader. His fourteen tanks were spread over a line three kilometers long. It was a defensible deployment, but a stationary one, and in the center of his own line he was too fixed on what lay before him. The second volley got another six kills at the long range, but then one of his tanks took a direct hit from an artillery round, which destroyed its engine and started a fire that made its crew bail out, only to be shredded by more of the artillery fire before they could run five meters. He was looking that way and saw them die, four hundred meters away, and he knew that there was a hole in his line now, and he was supposed to do something about that.

His gunner, like the others, was looking for and trying to engage enemy tanks, the T-80s with their domed turrets, when the first flight of antitank missiles zoomed away from the BMP infantry carriers that lay behind them. Those started getting hits, and though they could not penetrate the frontal armor on his tanks, tracks were knocked off, more engines set afire, and fire-control systems damaged. When half his command was burning, it was time to pull back. Four started moving again turning and darting two kilometers south. The captain remained with the other three, and got another tank kill before he started to move. The air was filled with missiles now, and one of them hit the rear of his turret, igniting the ammo-storage box. The vertical flame sucked the air from the open hatch, asphyxiating his crew even as it burned him alive. Leaderless, the company fought on for thirty minutes, falling back again until the three surviving tanks ran south at fifty kilometers per hour, trying to find the battalion command post.

That was no longer there. It had been located by its radio transmissions and pounded by a full brigade of UIR artillery in its unprepared position just as the survivors from STORM TRACK arrived with the scout troop. In the first hour of the Second Persian Gulf War, a thirty-mile rent had been made in the Saudi lines, and there was a direct path to Riyadh. For that, the Army of God had lost half a brigade, a stiff price, but one which they were willing to pay.

THE INITIAL PICTURE wasn't clear. It rarely was. That was the advantage the attacker almost always had, Diggs knew, and the job of the commander was to make order from chaos and use the former to inflict the latter on his enemy. With the destruction of STORM TRACK, his Predator capability was temporarily gone and would have to be reestablished. The 366th had deployed without J-STARS airborne radar capable of tracking the movement of ground troops. Aloft were two E-3B AWACS aircraft, each with four fighters in close attendance. Twenty UIR fighters came up and started going after them. That would be exciting for the Air Force.

But Diggs had his own problems. With the loss of STORM TRACK and its Predator drones, he was largely blind and his first remedial action was to order the 10th Cav's air squadron to probe west. Eddington's words had come back hard to him. The Saudi center of gravity might not be an economic target after all.

"OUR TROOPS ARE inside the Kingdom," Intelligence told him. "They are meeting opposition, but are breaking through. The American spy post has been destroyed."

The news didn't make Daryaei any happier. "How did they know—how did they know?"

The intelligence chief was afraid to ask how *they* knew *what*. So he dodged the issue: "It does not matter. We will be in Riyadh in two days, and then nothing matters."

"What do we know about the sickness in America? Why are not more people ill? How can they have troops to send?"

"This I do not know," Intelligence admitted.

"What *do* you know?"

"It appears that the Americans have one regiment in Kuwait, and another in the Kingdom, with a third taking equipment from the ships—the ones the Indians failed to stop in Dhahran."

"So attack them!" Mahmoud Haji almost shouted. The arrogance of that American, calling him by name in a way that his own people

might have seen and heard . . . and believed?

"Our air force is attacking in the north. That is the place of decision. Any diversion from that is a waste of time," he replied reasonably.

"Missiles, then!"

"I will see."

THE BRIGADIER COMMANDING the Saudi 4th Brigade had been told to expect nothing more than a diversionary attack in his area and to stand ready to launch a counterattack into the UIR right upon the commencement of their massed attack into Kuwait. Like many generals throughout history, he had made the mistake of believing his intelligence a little too much. He had three mechanized battalions, each covering a thirty-mile sector, with a five- to ten-mile gap between them. In an offensive role, it would have been a flexible deployment for harassing the enemy's flank, but the early loss of his middle battalion had split his command in two, leaving him no easy way to command the separated parts. He next compounded the error by moving forward instead of backward. A courageous decision, it overlooked the fact that he had one hundred miles of depth behind him to King Khalid Military City, space in which he could have reorganized for a weighted counterstroke instead of a fragmented impromptu one.

The UIR attack was made on the model perfected by the Soviet army in the 1970s. The initial break-in phase had been composed on a heavy brigade surging forward behind massed artillery fire. The elimination of STORM TRACK had been intended from the beginning. It and PALM BOWL—they even knew the code names—were largely the eyes of their enemy's command structure. Satellites they could do nothing about, but ground-based intelligence-gathering posts were fair game. As expected, the Americans had deployed some assets, but not many, it appeared, and half of those would be day-flying aircraft. As with the Soviets, who had written the book to drive to the Bay of Biscay, the UIR would accept the cost, balancing lives against time to reach their political objective before the full weight of their potential enemies could come to bear. If the Saudis believed that Daryaei wanted their oil more than anything else, so be it, for in Riyadh was the royal family and the government. In doing so, the UIR risked its left flank, but Kuwait-based forces would have to negotiate the terrain of the Wadi al Batin, and then cross two hundred miles of desert just to get to where the Army of God had already been.

The key was speed, and the key to achieving speed was the rapid elimination of the Saudi 4th. The artillery still massed north of the berm tracked in on the urgent radio transmissions, and commenced a

relentless area fire aimed at disrupting communications and cohesion in the units that they fully expected would be used to counter the initial invasion. It was a tactic almost certain to work, so long as they were willing to pay the price. One brigade each had been allocated to the three border battalions.

The 4th Brigade commander also had artillery of his own, but this, he decided, was best used on the center breakthrough, to punish the units with a clear road into the heart of his nation. The support mainly went there, to harass people just passing through rather than the brigades, which were just now making contact with his remaining mechanized forces. With their destruction, he would triple the width of the gap in the Saudi lines.

DIGGS WAS IN the main command post with all of this news coming in, and he realized what was happening to him, after a fashion. He'd done it to the Iraqis in 1991. He'd done it to the Israelis for a couple of years as CO of the Buffalo Cav. And he'd commanded the National Training Center for a time as well. Now he saw what it was like on the other side. Things were happening too fast for the Saudis. They were reacting rather than thinking, seeing the crisis in its magnitude but not its shape, semiparalyzed by the speed of events which, had they been on the other side, would have seemed merely exciting and nothing more.

"Have the 4th pull back about thirty klicks," he said quietly. "You have plenty of room to maneuver in."

"We will stop them right there!" the Saudi commander replied, too automatically.

"General, that is a mistake. You are risking that brigade when you don't have to. You can recover lost ground. You cannot recover lost time and lost men."

But he wasn't listening, and Diggs didn't have enough stars on his collar to speak more insistently. *One more day,* he thought*, one more goddamned day.*

THE HELICOPTERS TOOK their time. M-Troop, 4th of the 10th, was made of six OH-58 Kiowa scout choppers and four AH-64 Apache attack birds, all carrying more extra fuel tanks than weapons. They had warning that enemy fighters were aloft, which prohibited flying very high. Their sensors were sniffing the air for the radar emissions of SAM radars—there had to be some around—while the pilots picked their way from hilltop to hilltop, scanning forward with low-light

viewing systems and Longbow radars. Passing into UIR territory, they spotted the occasional scout vehicle, perhaps a company spread over twenty klicks within sight of the Kuwaiti border, they estimated, but that was all. The next fifty miles revealed much of the same, though the vehicles were heavier. Arriving on the outskirts of Al Busayyah, which the Army of God had been approaching according to satellite-intelligence information, all they really found were tracks in the sand and a few groups of support vehicles, mainly fuel trucks. Destroying them wasn't their mission. Their task was to locate the enemy's main body and determine its axis of advance.

That took another hour of ducking and side-slipping and darting, the helicopters leap-frogging. There were SAM vehicles around here, Russian- and French-made short-range ones that helicopters knew to avoid. One Kiowa-Apache team got close enough to see a column of tanks moving through a gap in the berm in brigade strength, and that was 150 miles from the point they'd left. With that information, the helicopters withdrew, without taking a shot at anything. The next time, they might well come in strength, and there was no sense in warning people about the gap in their air defenses before it could be properly exploited.

THE 4TH BRIGADE'S easternmost battalion stood its ground, and mainly died there. By this time, UIR attack helicopters had joined in, and while the Saudis shot well, the inability to maneuver doomed them. It cost the Army of God another brigade to accomplish this mission, but at the end of it, the gap in Saudi lines was seventy miles wide.

It was different in the west. This battalion, commanded now by a major with the death of his colonel, broke contact and headed southwest with half its strength, then tried to turn east, to get ahead of the advancing attack. Lacking the strength to stand, he stung and moved, in the process accounting for twenty tanks and a number of other vehicles, before running out of fuel, thirty kilometers north of KKMC. The 4th Brigade's support vehicles had gotten lost somewhere. The major radioed for help and wondered if any might arrive.

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IT CAME AS more of a surprise than it should have. A Defense Support System Program satellite over the Indian Ocean spotted the launch bloom. That word went to Sunnyvale, California, and from there to

Dhahran. It had all happened before, but not with missiles launched from Iran. The ships were scarcely half unloaded. The war was only four hours old when the first Scud left its truck-bed launcher, heading south out of the Zagros Mountains.

"Now what?" Ryan asked.

"Now you see why the cruisers are still there," Jackson replied.

RAID WARNING WAS scarcely needed. The three cruisers, plus *Jones,* had their radars sweeping the sky, and they all acquired the inbound ballistic track over a hundred miles out. National Guardsmen waiting their turn to fetch their tracked vehicles watched the fireballs of surface-to-air missiles lance into the sky, leaping after things that only radars could see. The initial launch of three exploded separately in the darkness, and that was that. But the soldiers were now even more motivated to collect their tanks as the triple boom came down from one hundred thousand feet.

On *Anzio,* Captain Kemper watched the track disappear from the display. This was one other thing Aegis should be good at, though sitting still under fire wasn't exactly his idea of fun.

THE OTHER EVENT of the evening was a spirited air battle over the border. The AWACS aircraft had watched what turned out to be twenty-four fighters coming in directly for them in an attempt to deny the allies air coverage. That proved a costly exercise. No attack on the E-3B aircraft was actually accomplished. Instead, the UIR air force continued to demonstrate its ability to lose aircraft to no purpose. But would that matter? The senior American controller on one AWACS remembered an old NATO joke. One Soviet tank general ran into another in Paris and asked, "By the way, who won the air war?" The point of it was that wars were ultimately won or lost on the ground. So it would be here.

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BUFORD

IT WASN'T UNTIL SIX hours after the first artillery barrage that enemy intentions were clear. It took the reports of the helicopter reconnaissance to give an initial picture, but what finally turned the trick was satellite photography that was impossible to discount. The historical precedents flooded into Marion Diggs's mind. When the French high command had got wind of the German Schlieffen Plan prior to World War I, their reaction had been, "So much the better for us!" That assault had barely ground to a halt outside Paris. In 1940, the same high command had greeted initial news of another German attack with smiles—and *that* attack had ended at the Spanish border. The problem was that people tended to wed their ideas more faithfully than their spouses, and the tendency was universal. It was well after midnight, therefore, when the Saudis realized that the main force of their army was in the wrong place, and that their western covering force had been steamrollered by an enemy who was either too smart or too dumb to do what they'd expected him to do. To counter that, they had to fight a battle of maneuver, which they were unprepared for. The UIR sure as hell was driving first to KKMC. There would be a battle for that point on the map, after which the enemy would have the option of turning east toward the Persian Gulf—and the oil—thus trapping allied forces; or continuing south to Riyadh to deliver a political knockout and win the war. All in all, Diggs thought, it wasn't a terribly bad plan. If they could execute it. Their problem was the same as the Saudis', though. They had a plan. They thought it was pretty good, and they, too, thought that *their* enemy would connive at his own destruction. Sooner or later, everyone did, and the key to being on the winning side was knowing what you could do and what you couldn't. This enemy didn't know the *couldn't* part yet. There was no sense in teaching them that too soon.

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IN THE SITUATION Room, Ryan was on the phone with his friend in Riyadh.

"I have the picture, Ali," the President assured him.

"This is serious."

"The sun will be up soon, and you have space to trade for time. It's worked before, Your Highness."

"And what will your forces do?"

"They can't exactly drive home from there, can they?"

"You are that confident?"

"You know what those bastards did to us, Your Highness."

"Why, yes, but—"

"So do our troops, my friend." And then Ryan had a request.

"THIS WAR HAS started badly for allied forces," Tom Donner was saying live on *NBC Nightly News*. "That's what we're hearing, anyway. The combined armies of Iraq and Iran have smashed through Saudi lines west of Kuwait and are driving south. I'm here with the troopers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the Blackhorse. This is Sergeant Bryan Hutchinson of Syracuse, New York. Sergeant, what do you think of this?"

"I guess we're just going to have to see, sir. What I can tell you, B-Troop is ready for anything they got. I wonder if they're ready for us, sir. You come along and watch." And that was all he had to say on the subject.

"As you see, despite the bad news from the battlefield, these soldiers are ready—even eager—for contact."

THE SENIOR SAUDI commander hung up the phone, having just talked with his sovereign. Then he turned to Diggs. "What do you recommend?"

"For starters, I think we should move the 5th and 2nd Brigades southwest."

"That leaves Riyadh uncovered."

"No, sir, actually it doesn't."

"We should counterattack at once!"

"General, we don't have to yet," Diggs told him, staring down at the map. The 10th sure was in an interesting position.... He looked up. "Sir, have you ever heard the story about the old bull and the young bull?" Diggs proceeded to tell one of his favorite jokes, and one which, after a few seconds, had the senior Saudi officers nodding.

“YOU SEE, EVEN the American television says that we are succeeding,” the intelligence chief told his boss.

The general commanding the UIR air force was less sanguine. In the past day, he’d lost thirty fighters, for perhaps two Saudi aircraft in return. His plan to bore in and kill the AWACS aircraft which so tilted the odds in the air had failed, and cost him a gaggle of his best-trained pilots in the process. The good news, for him, was that his enemies lacked the aircraft needed to invade his country and do serious damage. Now more ground forces were moving down from Iran to advance on Kuwait from the north, and with luck all he would have to do would be to cover the advance ground forces, which his people knew how to do, especially in daylight. They’d learn about that course in a few hours.

A TOTAL OF fifteen Scud-type ballistic missiles had been launched at Dhahran. Hitting the COMEDY ships had been a long shot at best, and all of the inbounds had either been intercepted or, in most cases, had fallen harmlessly into the sea during a night of noise and fireworks. The last of the load—mainly trucks at this stage—were rolling off now, and Greg Kemper set his binoculars down, as he watched the line of brown-painted trucks fade into the dawn haze. Where they were heading, he didn’t know. He did know that about five thousand very pissed-off National Guardsmen from North Carolina were ready to do something.

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EDDINGTON WAS ALREADY south of KKMC with his brigade staff. His WOLFPACK force would probably not get there in time to fight a battle. Instead, he had headed them to Al Artawiyah, one of those places which sometimes became important in history because roads led there. He wasn’t sure if that would happen here, though he remembered that Gettysburg had been a place where Bobby Lee hoped to get some shoes for his men. While his staff did their work, the colonel lit a cigar and walked outside, to see two companies of men arriving with their vehicles. He decided to head over that way while the MPs got them scattered into hasty-defense locations. Fighters screamed overhead. American F-15Es, by the look of them. Okay, he thought, the enemy’d had a pretty good twelve hours. Let ’em think that.

"Colonel!" a staff sergeant Bradley commander saluted from his hatch. Eddington climbed up as soon as the vehicle stopped. "Good morning, sir."

"How is everybody?"

"We're just ready as hell, sir. Where are they?" the sergeant asked, taking off his dust-covered goggles.

Eddington pointed. "About a hundred miles that way, coming this way. Tell me about how the troops feel, Sergeant."

"How many can we kill before they make us stop, sir?"

"If it's a tank, kill it. If it's a BMP, kill it. If it's a truck, kill it. If it's south of the berm, and it's holding a weapon, kill it. *But* the rules are serious about killing unresisting people. We don't break those rules. That's important."

"Fair 'nuff, Colonel."

"Don't take any unnecessary chances with prisoners, either."

"No, sir," the track commander promised. "I won't."

GEOMETRY PUT THE Blackhorse first, advancing west from their assembly area toward KKMC. Colonel Hamm had his command advancing on line, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Squadrons lined up south to north, each covering a twenty-mile frontage. The 4th (Aviation) Squadron he kept in his pocket, with just a few helo scouts probing forward while the ground-support elements of their battalion moved to set up an advanced base at a point which his leading troops had not yet reached. Hamm was in his M4 command track—called, naturally enough, the Star Wars (some called it "God") Track—sitting athwartships, which made for motion-sickness, and starting to get that "take" from his advanced units.

The IVIS system was starting to go on-line now in a real tactical environment. The Inter-Vehicle Information System was a data-link network the Army had been playing with for about five years. It had never been tested in combat, and it pleased Al Hamm that he would be the first to prove its worth. His command screens in the M4 got everything. Each single vehicle was both a source and a recipient of information. It began by telling everybody where all friendly units were, which, with GPS location equipment, was accurate to the meter, and that was supposed to prevent blue-on-blue "friendly fire" losses. At the touch of a key, Hamm knew the location of every fighting vehicle he had, plotted on a map which showed all relevant terrain features. In time he would have a similarly accurate picture of enemy dispositions, and with the knowledge of everyone's location came the option to pick his spots. The Saudi 2nd and 5th Brigades were to his northwest, coming down from the Kuwaiti border area. He had about

one hundred miles to move cross-country before he had to worry about making contact, and the four hours of approach march would serve to establish control of his units and make sure that everything was working. He had few doubts of that, but it was a drill he had to perform, because mistakes on the battlefield, however small, were expensive ones.

REMNANTS OF THE Saudi 4th Brigade tried to assemble north of KKMC. They amounted to perhaps two companies of tanks and infantry carriers, most having fought hit-and-run actions during the long desert night. Some had survived from pure luck, others through the brutally Darwinian process that was mobile warfare. The senior surviving officer was a major whose billet had been intelligence, and who had commandeered a tank from an angry NCO. His men had neglected practice on their IVIS gear, preferring gunnery and racing about instead of more structured battle drills. Well, they'd paid for that, the major knew. His first order of business was finding and calling in the scattered fuel trucks his brigade had kept to the rear, so that the surviving twenty-nine tanks and fifteen other tracks could fill up their tanks. Some ammunition trucks were also found, which allowed about half of his heavy vehicles to replenish their storage racks. With that done, he sent the support vehicles to the rear and selected a wadi—a dry riverbed north and west of KKMC as his next defense position. It took another half hour for him to establish reliable contact with his high command and to call for support.

His force was not coherent. The tanks and tracks came from five different battalions. Some crews knew others only casually or not at all, and he was short of officers to command what force he had. With that knowledge came the realization that his job was to command rather than to fight himself. He reluctantly returned the tank to the sergeant who "owned" it, and chose instead an infantry carrier with more radios and fewer distractions. It wasn't a warlike decision, not for a person whose cultural tradition was leading a mob of warriors on horseback with a sword waving in the air, but he'd learned a few hard lessons in the darkness south of the berm, which put him one up on a lot of men who'd died from not learning fast enough.

THE DAY'S FIGHTING began after a pause from both movement and killing that would afterward seem as stylized as the halftime of a football game. The reason the Saudi 4th's survivors had garnered the time and space to reorganize and replenish was that the Army of God

had to do the same. Trailing elements refueled from the bowsers, which had followed the combat units. Then they leapfrogged forward, allowing the fuel trucks to succor the erstwhile advance units. That process took four hours. The brigade and divisional commanders were pleased to this point. They were only ten kilometers behind the plan—plans are always too optimistic—in distance, and an hour in time. The refueling took place almost on schedule as well. They'd smashed the initial opposition, taking more losses than hoped, but crushing their foe in any case. Men were tired, but soldiers were supposed to be tired, too, everyone thought, and the time for refueling allowed most to nap enough to freshen them. With the coming of dawn, the Army of God started its diesel engines and renewed its drive south.

THE FIRST BATTLES this day would be aloft. The allied air forces started taking off in numbers just after four from bases in the southern portion of the Kingdom. The first rank of aircraft were F-15 Eagles, which joined up with three circling E-3B AWACS aircraft lined up east and west of Riyadh. The UIR fighters rose as well, still in the control of ground radar stations inside the former country of Iraq. It began as a sort of dance between two chorus lines. Both sides wanted to know where the other side's SAMs were, information on which had been gathered during the dark hours. Both sides, it was gradually determined, would have a missile belt to hide behind, but in both cases the initial battles would be fought in an electronic no-man's-land. The first move was by a flight of four from the 390th Fighter Squadron, the Wild Boars. Alerted by their control aircraft that a UIR flight had turned east, the Eagles angled west, went to burner, and darted across the empty space, reversing course back toward the sea as they did so. The Americans expected to win, and they did. The UIR fighters—actually, Iranian F-4s left over from the time of the Shah—were caught looking the wrong way. Warned by their ground controllers, they turned back, but their problem was deeper than the tactical situation. They'd expected an engagement pattern in which one side would fire missiles, and the other would evade, then turn back to fire its own in a style of encounter as rigid as a medieval joust. Nobody had told them that this was not how their American enemies were trained.

The Eagles fired first, loosing one AMRAAM each. It was a fire-and-forget missile, which allowed them to retreat after shooting. But they didn't, and instead bored in behind them, following both their doctrine and inclinations after ten hours of contemplating what their President had said on the radio. It was all personal now, and the first team of Eagle drivers kept closing while their missiles tracked in on

the first group of targets. Three of the four targets were destroyed, adversely surprised by the missile American pilots called the Slammer. The fourth evaded, blessed his luck, and turned back to fire off his own weapon, only to see on his radar that there was a fighter fifteen kilometers distant, with a closure rate of nearly two thousand knots. That made him flinch and turn south, a mistake. The Eagle pilot, his wingman half a mile behind, chopped power to slow down and got in a tail-chase position. He wanted an eyeball-kill, and he got it, closing on the enemy's "six," and selecting guns. The other guy was a little slow to catch on this morning. In fifteen more seconds, the F-4 expanded to fill the gunsight . . .

"Fox-Three, Fox-Three for a kill!"

A second flight of Eagles was in the combat area now, going after their own targets. The UIR ground controllers were startled by the speed of the result, and ordered their fighters to point at the oncoming Americans and fire off their radar-guided long-range missiles but even then, the Americans did not run away to evade as expected. Instead, their tactic was to roll ninety degrees to the ground, and maintain an even distance to the launching aircraft. That denied the fighter radars a Doppler, or range-rate change, to their targets, broke radar lock, and sent the missiles into random, unguided courses. Then the Eagles turned in, selected their own missiles, and shot from under ten miles while the UIR fighters were trying to reacquire and fire another volley, again boring in behind them. Warned that more missiles were in the air, the enemy fighters tried to turn and run, but they were too far inside the Slammer envelope, and all four of them were blotted out as well.

"Hey, dude, this is Bronco," a voice taunted over the UIR guard channel. "Send us some more. We're hungry. We wanna shoot 'em *all* down and fuck their ol' ladies!" He switched channels to Sky-One. "Razorback Lead, more business, over?"

"Not in your sector, stand by."

"Roger that." The lieutenant colonel commanding the 390th rolled sideways again, looking down to see the massed tanks moving out from their assembly points, and for the first time in his life he wished that he was air-to-mud instead of air-to-air. Colonel Winters came from New York. There were sick people there, he knew, and here he was at war against those who had caused it, but he'd killed only two aircraft, and just three people so far. "Razorback, Lead, form up on me." Then he checked his fuel state. He'd have to tank soon.

Next in were the Strike Eagles of the 391st, escorted by HARM-equipped F-16s. The smaller, single-seat fighters cruised in with their threat-receivers on, sniffing for mobile SAM launchers. There turned out to be a goodly collection of low-altitude missile vehicles, French

Crotales and old Russian SA-6 Gainfuls, just behind the lead echelons. The Viper drivers jinked down to draw their attention, then fired off their anti-radar missiles to cover the inbound F-15Es. Those were looking for enemy artillery first of all.

THE PREDATORS WERE working on that. Three had crashed with the loss of their ground-control at STORM TRACK, creating a gap in intelligence coverage that had taken hours to rectify. There were only ten left in theater. Four of those were up and flying at eight thousand feet, loitering almost invisibly over the advancing divisions. The UIR forces relied mostly on towed tubes. These were now setting up for the next major attack, lined up behind two mechanized brigades about to make the next leap toward KKMC. One Predator found the six-battery group. The data went to a collection team, then up to the AWACS, and back down to the sixteen Strike Eagles of the 391st.

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THE SAUDI FORMATION waited tensely. Their forty-four fighting vehicles were spread over eight kilometers, as wide as the major commanding them dared, having to balance dispersal against firepower in what he hoped would be at least a delaying action, and maybe a stand. An approaching scream in the sky told him and his men to button up, as eight-inch shells started landing in front of his position. The initial bombardment lasted three minutes, the rounds advancing toward where his vehicles were....

"TIGERS IN HOT!" the strike commander called. The enemy had evidently expected his first attack to go after the leading tanks. That's where the SAMs were, and the Vipers were trying to deal with them. The three flights of four separated, then split into elements of two, coming down to four thousand feet, smoking in at five hundred knots. The gun batteries were lined up nice and neat, in even lines, the cannons spaced about a hundred meters apart, along with their trucks, just like their manual must have said, LTC Steve Berman thought. His weapons-system operator selected cluster munitions and started sprinkling them with bomblets.

"Lookin' good." They had dropped two canisters of BLU-97 combined-effects munitions, a total of over four hundred softball-sized mini-bombs. The first battery was wiped out when the pattern covered

their position. Secondary explosions erupted from the ammo trucks. “Next.” The pilot reefed his fighter into a tight right turn. His wizzo called him back around toward the next battery, then he spotted—

“Triple-A at ten.” That proved to be a ZSU-23 mobile antiaircraft vehicle, whose four guns started sending tracers at their Strike Eagle. “Selecting Mav.”

This death dance lasted just a few seconds. The Eagle evaded fire and got off a Maverick air-to-ground missile, which streaked down to obliterate the gun-track, and then the pilot went after the next battery of howitzers.

It was like Red Flag, the pilot thought in a blink. He’d been here in 1991 as a captain and killed targets, but mainly wasted his time in Scud-hunts. The experience of real combat had never measured up to battle practice in the Nellis Air Force Base weapons range. It did now. The mission was only planned in a general sense. He was looking for targets in real time with look-down radar and mark-one eyeball, and unlike his playtime at Nellis, these guys were shooting back with real bullets. Well, he was dropping real bombs, too. More ground fire started up as he lined his aircraft on the next collection of targets.

IT SEEMED, OF all things, like a cough in the middle of a conversation. There was a final crash of twenty or thirty rounds on the desert a hundred meters in front of his position. Thirty seconds later, ten more fell. Thirty seconds after that, only three. On the horizon, well behind the first row of tanks just appearing, there were dust clouds. Some seconds later, they felt something through their boots, and after that a distant rumble. It became clear in a few seconds. Green-painted fighters appeared, heading due south. They were friendly, he saw from their shape. Then another appeared, trailing smoke, staggering in the sky, then tipping over, and two objects jolted out of it, turning into parachutes that drifted to the ground a kilometer behind his position, as the fighter smashed down separately, making an immense fireball. The major dispatched a vehicle to pick them up, then returned his attention to tanks still out of range—and he had no artillery to call in on them as yet.

WELL, SHIT, THE colonel thought, it was like Red Flag after all, except this night wouldn’t be spent telling lies in the O club and sneaking off to Vegas for a show and some time in a casino. His third pass had run him into fire, and the Eagle was too sick to make it all the way home. He wasn’t even on the ground yet when he saw a

vehicle coming toward him, and he wondered whose it was. A moment later, it looked like an American-made Hummer, fifty meters away when he hit the ground, jolting hard on the packed sand. He popped the release on his chute and pulled his pistol out, but sure enough the vehicle was friendly, with two Saudi soldiers in it. One came over to him while the other took the Hummer to where the wizzo was standing, half a mile away.

"Come, come!" the Saudi private said. A minute later, the Hummer was back with the wizzo, who was holding his knee and grimacing.

"Twisted it bad, boss. Landed on a fuckin' rock," he explained, getting in one of the backseats.

Everything he'd heard about Saudi drivers was true, the colonel learned in a few seconds. It was like being inside a Burt Reynolds movie, as the Hummer bounded its way back to the safety of the wadi, but it was good to see the shapes of friendly vehicles there. The Hummer took him to what had to be the command post. There were still some shells falling forward of their position, but their aim had worsened, now dropping the shells five hundred meters short.

"Who are you?" Lieutenant Colonel Steve Berman asked.

"Major Abdullah." The man even saluted. Berman holstered his pistol and looked around.

"I guess you're the guys we came to support. We took out their artillery pretty good, but some bastard got lucky with his Shilka. Can you get us a chopper?"

"I will try. Are you injured?"

"My wizzo had a bum knee. We could use something to drink, though."

Major Abdullah handed over his canteen. "We have an attack coming in."

"Mind if I watch?" Berman asked.

ONE HUNDRED MILES to the south, Eddington's brigade was still forming. He had one battalion pretty much intact. This he moved twenty miles forward, left and right of the road to KKMC, to screen the rest of his forces as they came up the road from Dhahran. Unhappily, his artillery was the last group to have been off-loaded, and they weren't due for at least another four hours. But that couldn't be helped. As units arrived, he first of all got them to assembly areas where they could top off their fuel tanks. What with getting people off the road, directed to their intermediate destinations, and gassed up, it took about an hour per company to get things organized. His second battalion was just about ready to move. This one he would send west of the road, which would allow the first one to move laterally to the

east, and double his advanced security force. It was so hard to explain to people that fighting battles was more about traffic control than killing people. That, and gathering information. A combat action was like the last act of a massive ballet—most of the time it was just getting the dancers to the right parts of the stage. The two acts—knowing where to send them and then getting them there—were interactive, and Eddington still didn't have a very clear picture. His brigade intelligence group was just setting up and starting to get hard information from Riyadh. Forward, his lead battalion had a reconnaissance screen of HMMWVs and Bradleys ten miles in advance of the main force, all of them hunkered down, their vehicles hidden as best they could be, and the troops on their bellies, scanning forward with binoculars, so far reporting nothing but the occasional wisp of dust well beyond the visible horizon and the rumbles of noise that carried amazingly far. Well, Eddington decided, so much the better. He had time to prepare, and time was the most valuable commodity a soldier could hope for.

"LOBO-SIX, this is WOLFPACK-SIX, over."

"LOBO-SIX copies."

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX-ACTUAL. WHITEFANG is moving out now. They should be on your left in an hour. You may commence your lateral movement when they arrive on line. Over."

"LOBO-SIX-ACTUAL copies, Colonel. Still nothing to see up here. We're in pretty good shape, sir."

"Very well. Keep me informed. Out." Eddington handed the radio phone back.

"Colonel!" It was the major who ran his intelligence section. "We have some information for you."

"Finally!"

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THE ARTILLERY FIRE continued, with a few rounds dropping right in the wadi. It was Colonel Berman's first experience with that, and he found that he didn't like it very much. It also explained why the tanks and tracks were spread out so much, which had struck him as very odd at first. One round went off a hundred meters to the left of the tank behind which he and Major Abdullah were sheltering, thankfully to the far side. They both quite distinctly heard the *ping*s of fragments hitting the brown-painted armor.

"This is not fun," Berman observed, shaking his head to clear the noise of the shell-burst.

"Thank you for dealing with the rest of their guns. It was quite

frightening," Abdullah said, looking through his binoculars. The advancing UIR T-80s were just over three thousand meters away, having not yet spotted his hulldown M1A2s.

"How long have you been in contact?"

"It started just after sunset yesterday. We are all that is left of the 4th Brigade." And that didn't help Berman's confidence at all. Above their heads, the tank's turret made a slight adjustment to the left. There was a short phrase over the major's radio, and he replied with a single word—shouted, however. A second after that, the tank to the left of them jerked backward a foot or so, and a blast of fire erupted from the main gun. It made the artillery round seem like a firecracker in comparison. Against all logic, Berman raised his head. In the distance he saw a column of smoke, and tumbling atop it was a tank turret.

"Jesus!"

"You have a radio I can use?"

"SKY-ONE, THIS is Tiger Lead," an AWACS officer heard on a side channel. "I am on the ground with a Saudi tank group north of KKMC." He gave the position next. "We are in heavy contact here. Got any help you can send us? Over."

"Tiger, can you authenticate?"

"No, God damn it, my fuckin' codes went down with my -15. This is Colonel Steve Berman out of Mountain Home, and I am one very pissed-off aviator right now, Sky. Forty minutes ago, we beat the snot out of some Iraqi artillery, and now we got tanks coming out the ass. You gonna believe me or not, over."

"Sounds American to me," a more senior officer thought.

"And if you look close, their tanks are round on top and pointing south and ours are flat on the top and pointing north, over." That bit of information was followed by the crash of an explosion. "This ground-pounder shit ain't no fun at all," he told them.

"Me too," the first controller decided. "Tiger, stand by. Devil-Lead, this is Sky-One, we have some business for you . . ."

It wasn't supposed to be this way at all, but it was happening even so. There were supposed to be frag—for fragmentary—orders detailing "packages" of tactical aircraft to hunting patches, but there weren't enough aircraft for that, and no time to select their patches, either. Sky-One had a flight of four F-16s waiting for some air-to-mud action, and this seemed as good a time as any.

THE ADVANCING TANKS stopped to trade fire at first, but that was a losing game against the fire-control systems on the American-made Abrams tanks, and these Saudi crews had gotten a post-graduate course in gunnery earlier in the day. The enemy backed off and maneuvered left and right, blowing smoke from their rear decks to obscure the battlefield. More vehicles were left behind, contributing their own black columns to the morning sky as their ammunition racks cooled off. The initial part of the engagement had lasted five minutes and had cost the UIR twenty vehicles that Berman could see, with no losses for the friendlies. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all.

The Vipers came in from the west, hardly visible about four miles downrange, dropping their Mark-82 dumb bombs in the middle of the enemy formation.

"Brilliant!" the English-educated Major Abdullah said. They couldn't tell how many vehicles had died as a result, but now his men knew they were not alone in their engagement. That made a difference.

IF ANYTHING, THE streets of Tehran had become grimmer still. What struck Clark and Chavez (Klerk and Chekov, currently) was the absence of conversation. People moved along without speaking to one another. There was also a sudden shortage of men, as reserves were being called up to trek into their armories, draw weapons, and prepare to move into the war which their new country had halfheartedly announced after President Ryan's preemption.

The Russians had given them the location of Daryaei's home, and their job really was only to look at it—which was easily said, but rather a different task on the streets of the capital city of the country with which you were at war. Especially if you had been in that city shortly before, and seen by members of its security force. The complications were piling up.

The man lived modestly, they saw from two and a half blocks away. It was a three-story building on a middle-class street that displayed no trappings of power at all, except for the obvious presence of guards on the front steps, and a few cars spotted at the corners. Looking closer from two hundred meters away, they could also see that people avoided walking on that side of the street. Popular man, the Ayatollah.

"So, who else lives there?" Klerk asked the Russian *rezident.* He was covered as the embassy's second secretary, and performed many diplomatic functions to maintain his legend.

"Mainly his bodyguards, we believe." They were sitting in a cafe, drinking coffee and studiously not looking directly at the building of their interest. "To either side, we think the buildings have been

vacated. He has his security concerns, this man of God. The people here are increasingly uneasy under his rule—even the enthusiasm of the Iraqi conquest fades now. You can see the mood as well as I, Klerk. These people have been under control for almost a generation. They grow tired of it. And it was clever of your President to announce hostilities before our friend did. The shock value was very effective, I think. I like your President," he added. "So does Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"This building is close enough, Ivan Sergeycvich," Chavez said quietly, calling the kaffeeklatsch back to order. "Two hundred meters, direct line of sight."

"What about collateral damage?" Clark wondered. It required some circumlocutions to make that come out in Russian.

"You Americans are so sentimental about such things," the *rezident* observed. It amused him.

"Comrade Klerk has always had a soft heart," Chekov confirmed.

AT HOLLOMAN AIR Force Base in New Mexico, a total of eight pilots arrived at the base hospital to have their blood checked. The Ebola testing kits were finally coming out in numbers. The first major military deliveries went to the Air Force, which could deploy more power more quickly than the other branches of the service. There had been a few cases in nearby Albuquerque, all being treated at the University of New Mexico Medical Center and two on this very base, a sergeant and his wife, the former dead and the latter dying—the news of it was all over the base, further enraging warriors who already possessed a surfeit of passion. The aviators all checked out clean, and the relief they felt was not ordinary. Now, they knew, they could go out and do something. The ground crews came in next. These also tested negative. All went off to the flight line. Half of the pilots strapped into F-117 Nighthawks. The other half, with the ground crews, boarded KC-10 tanker/transport aircraft for the long flight to Saudi.

Word was coming in over the Air Force's own communications network. The 366th and the F-16s from the Israeli base were doing pretty well, but everyone wanted a piece of this one, and the men and women from Holloman would lead the second wave into the battle zone.

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"IS HE QUITE mad?" the diplomat asked an Iranian colleague. It was

the RVS officers who had the dangerous—or at least most sensitive—part of the intelligence mission.

"You may not speak of our leader in that way," the foreign ministry official replied as they walked down the street.

"Very well, does your learned holy man fully understand what happens when one employs weapons of mass destruction?" the intelligence officer asked delicately. Of course he did not, they both knew. No nation-state had done such a thing in over fifty years.

"He may have miscalculated," the Iranian allowed.

"Indeed." The Russian let it go at that for the moment. He'd been working this mid-level diplomat for over a year. "The world now knows that you have this capability. So clever of him to have flown on the very aircraft that made it possible. He is quite mad. You know that. Your country will be a pariah—"

"Not if we can—"

"No, not if you can. But what if you cannot?" the Russian asked. "Then the entire world will turn against you."

"THIS IS TRUE?" the cleric asked.

"It is quite true," the man from Moscow assured him. "President Ryan is a man of honor. He was our enemy for most of his life, and a dangerous enemy, but now, with peace between us, he turns into a friend. He is well respected by both the Israelis and the Saudis. The Prince Ali bin Sheik and he are very close. That is well known." This meeting was in Ashkhabad, capital of Turkmenistan, disagreeably close to the Iranian border, especially with the former Premier dead in a traffic accident—probably a creative one, Moscow knew—and elections pending. "Ask yourself this: Why did President Ryan say those things about Islam? An attack on his country, an attack on his child, an attack on himself—but does he attack your religion, my friend? No, he does not. Who but an honorable man would say such things?"

The man on the other side of the table nodded. "This is possible. What do you ask of me?"

"A simple question. You are a man of God. Can you condone those acts committed by the UIR?"

Indignation: "The taking of innocent life is hateful to Allah. Everyone knows that."

The Russian nodded. "Then you must decide for yourself which is more important to you, political power, or your faith."

But it wasn't quite that simple: "What do you offer us? I have people who will soon look to me for their welfare. You may not use the Faith as a weapon against the Faithful."

"Increased autonomy, free trade of your goods to the rest of the world, direct flights to foreign lands. We and the Americans will help you to arrange lines of credit with the Islamic states of the Gulf. They do not forget acts of friendship," he assured the next Premier of Turkmenistan.

"How can a man faithful to God do such things?"

"My friend"—he wasn't really, but that was what one said—"how many men start to do something noble and then become corrupted? And then what do they stand for? Perhaps it is a lesson for you to remember. Power is a deadly thing, most deadly of all to those who hold it in their earthly hands. For yourself, you must decide. What sort of leader do you wish to be, and with what other leaders will you associate your country?" Golovko leaned back and sipped at his tea. How wrong his country had been not to understand religion—and yet, how right was the result. This man had clung to his Islamic faith as an anchor against the previous regime, finding in it a continuity of belief and values which the political reality of his youth had lacked. Now that his character, known to all in the land, was carrying him to political power, would he remain what he had been, or would he become something else? He had to recognize that danger now. He hadn't thought it all the way through, Golovko saw. Political figures so rarely did. This one had to do so, and right now, and the chairman of the RVS watched him search his soul—something the Marxist doctrine of his youth had told him did not exist. It turned out to be better that it did.

"Our religion, our Faith, it is a thing of God, not of murder. The Prophet teaches Holy War, yes, but it does not teach us to become our enemies. Unless Mahmoud Haji proves these things are false, I will not stand with him, for all his promises of money. I would like to meet this Ryan, when the time comes."

BY 13:00 LIMA TIME, the picture was firming up nicely. The numbers were still pretty unattractive, Diggs thought, with five concentrated divisions on the move facing four brigade-sized forces, which were still dispersed. But there were things that could be done about that.

The small Saudi blocking force north of KKMC had held for three spectacular hours, but was now being enveloped and had to move, despite the wishes of the Saudi general staff. Diggs didn't even know the kid's name, but hoped to meet him later. With a couple years of proper training, he might really turn into something.

At his "suggestion," King Khalid Military City was being evacuated. The one part about that which hurt was turning off the intelligence assets there. Especially the Predator teams which now had to recall

their birds for their withdrawal to WOLFPACK'S line north of Al Artawiyah. Now that they'd all had time to think about it, the battle was like a huge training exercise at the NTC—three corps instead of battalions to face, but the principle was the same, wasn't it?

The lingering concern was an Iranian heavy division now known to be crossing the swamps west of Basra. The enemy's operational concept did leave one blank spot. In bypassing Kuwait, they had not had a covering force in place, perhaps because they thought it unnecessary, more likely because they didn't want to tip their hand, figuring to patch the hole as they were doing now. Well, every plan had a flaw.

So did the plan he'd put together for Operation BUFORD, probably. But he didn't see it, despite two hours of looking.

"Are we agreed, gentlemen?" he had to ask. Every Saudi officer in the room was still senior to him, but they'd come to see the logic of his proposal. They were going to fuck 'em all, not just a few. The assembled generals nodded. They didn't even complain any more about leaving KKMC to the enemy. They could always rebuild it. "Then Operation BUFORD commences at sundown."

THEY FELL BACK by echelon. A few Saudi mobile guns had appeared and they now fired smoke to obscure the battlefield. As soon as they landed, half of Major Abdullah's vehicles backed off their positions and hurried south. The flanking units were already moving, fending off encirclement attempts which the enemy had adopted, probing expensively for the extreme ends of the Saudi line.

Berman's helicopter had never arrived, and the afternoon of noisy and confusing action—you couldn't see crap down here! he had come to learn—had been instructive. Calling in four more air strikes and seeing the effects on the ground was something he would keep in mind, if the Saudis clawed their way out of the trap the other side was casting about them.

"Come with me, Colonel," Abdullah said, turning to run for his command track, ending the First Battle of KKMC.

61

GRIERSON'S RIDE

THE VIEW ON THE MAP was just awful. It was easy for anyone to see, a lot of long red arrows and short blue ones. The maps on the morning TV shows were not all that different from those in the Situation Room, and commentary—especially "expert" commentary—talked about how American and Saudi forces were badly outnumbered and poorly deployed, with their backs to the sea. But then there was the direct satellite feed.

"We've heard stories of fierce air battles to the northwest," Donner told the camera from "somewhere in Saudi Arabia." "But the troopers of the Blackhorse Regiment have yet to see action. I can't say where I am right now—the fact of the matter is that I just don't know. B-Troop is stopped for refueling now, pouring hundred of gallons into those big M1 Abrams tanks. It's a real fuel-hog, the troopers tell me. But their mood remains the same. These are angry men—*and* women back in the headquarters troop," he added. "I don't know what we will find at the western horizon. I can say that these soldiers are straining at the leash despite all the bad news that has come down from the Saudi high command. The enemy is somewhere out there, driving south in great strength, and soon after sundown, we expect to make contact. This is Tom Donner in the field with the B-Troop, 1st of the Blackhorse," the report concluded.

"His poise isn't bad," Ryan noted. "When does that go on the air?"

Fortunately for all concerned, the television uplinks were over military channels, which were encrypted and controlled. It wasn't time for the UIR to learn exactly who was where. The negative commentary of the "defeat" of the Saudi army *was,* however, going out. That news, leaked in Washington, and studiously not commented on by the Pentagon, was being accepted as gospel. Jack was still worried, however amusing it might have been in the abstract that the media was doing disinformation without even being asked.

"This evening. Maybe sooner," General Mickey Moore replied. "Sunset over there is in three hours."

"Can we do it?" POTUS asked.

"Yes, sir."

WOLFPACK, FIRST BRIGADE, North Carolina National Guard, was fully formed now. Eddington took to a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter for a flyover of his forward units. LOBO, his 1st Battalion Task Force, had its left edge on the road from Al Artawiyah to KKMC. WHITEFANG, the 2nd, was arrayed to the west side of the highway. COYOTE, the 3rd, was in reserve, his maneuver force, leaning to the west, because that's where he thought the possibilities were. His artillery battalion he split into two segments, able to cover the left or right extremes, and both able to cover the center. He lacked air assets and had been unable to get anything more than three Black Hawks for medevac. He also had an intelligence group, a combat-support battalion, medical personnel, MPs, and all the other things organic to a unit of brigade size. Forward of his two frontline battalions was a reconnaissance element whose mission was, first, to report, and second, to take out the enemy's eyes when they appeared. He'd thought of asking the 11th ACR for some of their helicopter assets, but he knew what Hamm had planned for those, and it was a waste of breath to ask. He *would* get the take from their reconnaissance efforts, and that would have to do.

Looking down, he saw that the forward line of M1A2s and Bradleys had all found comfortable spots, mainly behind berms and mini-dunes, where possible just behind high ground, so that at most the top of a turret was visible and mainly not even that. Just the track commander's head and a pair of binoculars would suffice in most cases. The tanks were spaced no less than three hundred meters apart, and mostly more than that. It made them an unattractively diluted target for artillery or air attack. He'd been told not to worry about the latter, but he worried anyway, as much as circumstance allowed. His subordinate commanders knew their jobs as well as reservists could, and the truth of the matter was that the mission was right out of the textbooks written by Guderian and practiced by Rommel and every mounted commander ever since.

THE WITHDRAWAL STARTED with a ten-mile dash at thirty-five miles per hour, enough to outrun artillery fire, and to look like the rout that Berman initially thought it to be—until he remembered that *he* made a practice of leaving enemy fire behind at least fifteen times as fast as these mechanized vehicles were doing. They were riding with top hatches open, and Berman stood to look behind, past the brown-black fountains of exploding artillery shells. He'd never known

what a defensive stand was like. Mainly lonely, he thought. He'd expected bunched vehicles and men, forgetting what he himself did to such things when he spotted them from the air. He saw what had to be fifty columns of smoke, all vehicles blown apart by the Saudi National Guard. Maybe they didn't take training seriously enough—he had heard such things—but this team had stood their ground against a force at least five times as large, and held them for three hours.

Not without cost. He turned forward and counted only fifteen tanks, plus eight infantry tracks. Perhaps there were more he couldn't see in the clouds of dust, he hoped. He looked up, into what he hoped was a friendly sky.

IT WAS. THE score since dawn was forty UIR fighters down, all of them air-to-air, against six American and Saudi losses, all of them ground-to-air. The opposing air force had been unable to overcome the advantage of the allied airborne radar coverage, and the best thing that could be said for their effort was that they had distracted efforts to attack the ground forces, which would otherwise have been totally unimpeded. The ragtag collection of American-, French-, and Russian-made fighter aircraft looked impressive on paper and on the ramp, but less so in the air. But the allied air forces were far less capable at night. Only the small collection of F-15E Strike Eagles was really all—weather capable (night is considered a weather condition). There were about twenty of those, UIR intelligence estimated, and couldn't do all that much harm. The advancing divisions halted right before KKMC, again to refuel and rearm. One more such jump, their commanders thought, and they'd be to Riyadh before the Americans were organized enough to take the field. They still had the initiative, and were halfway to their objective.

PALM BOWL KEPT track of all that, feeding what radio intercepts it was garnering from the southwest, but now facing a new threat to the north from an Iranian armored division. Perhaps the UIR had expected that, with the Kingdom out of the way or at least heavily engaged, the Kuwaitis would be intimidated into inaction. If so, it was wishful thinking. Borders could be crossed in two directions, and Kuwait's government made the correct assumption that doing nothing would only make things worse for them, not better. It turned out to be another case of one more day needed to patch things up, but this time it was the other side which needed the extra time.

The Air Cavalry Squadron, 4th of the 10th, lifted off twenty minutes

after sunset, heading north. There were some light motorized units on border guard duty, soon, they thought, to be relieved by the unit now crossing the Tigris-Euphrates delta. It comprised two battalions of troops in trucks and light armored vehicles. They'd chatted quite a bit on their radios, the commanders moving units back and forth, but strangely unprepared to be invaded by a nation not a tenth the size of their own. For the next hour, all twenty-six of the Buffalo Cav's Apaches would hunt them with cannon and rocket fire, burning a path for Kuwait's own light mechanized brigade, whose reconnaissance vehicles fanned out, searching for and finding the lead elements of Iranian armor. Five kilometers back was a battalion of heavy armor guided by the reconnaissance information, and the first major surprise of the night for the UIR was the sundering of nightfall by twenty tank guns, followed two seconds later by fifteen kills. The next lesson applied was that of confidence. Their first contact with the enemy a successful one, the lead Kuwaiti elements pressed the attack with gusto. It was all coming together for them. The night-vision systems worked. The guns worked. They had an enemy with his back to unsuitable ground and no place to go.

Listening at PALM BOWL, Major Sabah heard the radio calls, again experiencing things at second hand. It turned out that only one brigade of the Iranian 4th Armored Division, mainly a reserve formation, had gotten across, and had driven blithely and unwarned into an advancing armor force. It was, Sabah thought, just about as fair as what had happened to his country on the morning of 1 August 1990. By sunset plus three hours, the only usable access route into southern Iraq was completely blocked, and with it, easy reinforcement of the Army of God. Throughout the night, precision-guided bombs would drop bridges to make certain of that. It was a small battle for his small nation, but a winning one to set the stage for her nation's allies.

The Buffalo Cav was already moving its ground elements due west, while the Air Cav squadron returned to refuel and rearm, leaving a buoyant Kuwaiti army holding the allied rear and spoiling for another battle.

THE UIR I CORPS had been in reserve until this point. One division was the former Iranian 1st Armored, "The Immortals," accompanied by another armored division comprised mainly of surviving Republican Guards officers, and a new class of enlisted men untouched by the 1991 war. II Corps had made the breakthrough at the border and held the lead for the advance to KKMC, though in the course of combat action losing more than a third of its strength. That

task accomplished, it moved left, east, clearing the path for I Corps, as yet untouched except by a few air attacks, and III Corps, similarly untouched. II Corps would now guard the flank of the advancing force against counterstrikes fully expected from the seaward side. All units, following their doctrine, sent out reconnaissance forces as darkness fell.

The lead units, advancing by bounds, skirted around King Khalid Military City, surprised to find no opposition. Emboldened, the commander of the reconnaissance battalion sent units directly into the city, then found it virtually empty of people, most of whom had driven out during the previous day. It seemed logical when he thought about it. The Army of God was advancing, and though it had taken a few heavy blows, nothing the Saudis had could stop it. Satisfied, he pressed south, a little more cautiously now. There had to be some opposition ahead.

EDDINGTON'S MP DETACHMENT had done its job conveying people south and out of the way. He'd seen a few faces, downcast mainly, until they'd gotten a look at what was waiting between KKMC and Al Artawiyah. WOLFPACK couldn't hide everything. Saudi MP units brought up the rear, passing through the recon screen at 21:00 local time. They'd said that there was nothing behind them. They were wrong.

With his soft vehicles in the lead and his fighting tracks guarding the rear with their turrets turned aft, Major Abdullah had thought about making one more stand, but didn't have the combat power to hold much of anything against what he knew had to be behind him. His men were exhausted by twenty-four hours of continuous combat operations, and the worst off were his tank drivers. Their position in the front of their vehicles was so comfortable as to cause them to fall asleep, only to be awakened by the shouts of their tank commanders, or the lurch of heading off the road into a ditch. His additional concern was that he'd expected to make contact with friendly units—battlefields, he'd learned in the past day, were anything but friendly places.

They appeared as white blobs at first on the thermal-imaging scopes, the vehicles straggling down the highway. Eddington, in his command post, knew that there might be some Saudi stragglers downbound, and had warned his recon screen to expect it, but it wasn't until the evening's Predators took to the sky that he was sure. Through the thermal viewers, the distinctive flat top of the M1A2 tanks was clearly visible. This information he relayed to HOOTOWL, his recon detachment, which lessened their tension as the shapeless

thermal blobs on their ground-based viewing systems gradually turned into friendlier profiles. Even then, there was the chance that friendly vehicles had been captured and converted to enemy use.

Troopers cracked chemical-light wands and dropped them on the road. These were spotted and the advancing trucks stopped practically on top of them, even rolling slowly as they were, without lights. A handful of Saudi liaison officers assigned to WOLFPACK verified their identity and waved them south. Major Abdullah, arriving at the screening position ten minutes later, jumped out of his command track, along with Colonel Berman. The American Guardsmen handed over food and water, first of all, quickly followed by GI coffee out of their MRE packs, the sort with triple the normal amount of caffeine.

"They're a ways back, but they're coming," Berman said. "My friend here well, he's had a busy day."

The Saudi major was at the point of collapse, the physical and mental exertions like nothing he'd ever known. He staggered over to the HOOTOWL command post and, over a map, relayed what he knew as coherently as he could.

"We must stop them," he concluded.

"Major, why don't you head on down about ten miles, and you'll see the biggest fuckin' roadblock ever was. Nice job, son," the lawyer from Charlotte told the young man. The major walked off toward his track. "Was it that tough?" he asked Berman when the Saudi was out of earshot.

"I know they killed fifty tanks, and that's just the ones I could see," Berman said, sipping coffee from a metal cup. "A lot more coming, though."

"Really?" the lawyer/lieutenant colonel said. "That suits us just fine. No friendlies back of you?"

Berman shook his head. "No chance."

"You head on down the road now, Berman. Ten miles, and then you watch the show, y'hear?"

They looked like Americans, Berman saw, in their desert BDUs, their faces painted under the German-shaped Fritz helmets. There were red-shielded lights to point at the maps. It was dark out here, about as dark as a clear sky could get, just the stars enabling him to tell the difference between land and sky. A sliver of moon would appear later, but that wouldn't be much. The screen commander had a command HMMWV with lots of radios. Beyond, he could see a single Bradley, a few troops, and little else. But they stood like Americans and they spoke like Americans.

"HOOT-SIX, this is Two-Niner."

"Two-Niner, Six, go," the commander took the radio.

"We have some movement, five miles north of our position. Two

vehicles nosing around right on the horizon."

"Roger, Two-Niner. Keep us informed. Out." He turned to Berman. "Get going, Colonel. We have work to do here."

THERE WAS A flanking screen. That would be the enemy II Corps, Colonel Hamm thought. His forward line of Kiowa scout helicopters was now watching it. The Kiowas—the military version of the Bell 206, the copter most often used in America for reporting on traffic congestion—specialized in hiding, most often behind hills and ridges, with just the top-mounted electronic periscope peering about the terrain while the pilot held his aircraft in hover, seeing but not seen, while the TV systems recorded the event, relaying their "take" back. Hamm had six of them up now, advance scouts for his 4th Squadron, ten miles in front of his ground elements, now lying still thirty miles southeast of KKMC.

While he watched his display in the Star Wars Track, technicians converted the information from the Kiowa scouts into data that could be displayed graphically and distributed to the fighting vehicles in his command. Next came data from the Predator drones. They were up, covering the roads and desert south of the captured city, with one drone over it. The streets, he saw, were full of fuel and supply trucks. It was a convenient place to hide them.

Most important, electronic sensors were now at work. The UIR forces were moving too fast to rely on radio silence. Commanders had to talk back and forth. Those sources were moving, but they were moving predictably now, talking almost all the time, as commanders told subunits where to go and what to do, got information and reported it up the chain. He had two brigade CPs positively identified, and probably a divisional one, too.

Hamm changed display to get the larger picture. Two divisions were moving south from KKMC now. That would be the enemy I Corps, spread on a ten-mile frontage, two divisions moving abreast in columns of brigades, a tank brigade in front, mobile artillery right behind it. II Corps was moving to their left, spread thin to provide flank guard. III Corps appeared to be in reserve. The deployment was conventional and predictable. First contact with WOLFPACK would be in about an hour, and he would hold back until then, allowing I Corps to pass north to south, right to left along his front.

There hadn't been time to prepare the battlefield properly. The Guard troops lacked a full engineer detachment and the antitank mines they might have strewn to dirty up the terrain. There hadn't been time to prepare proper obstacles and traps. They'd scarcely been in place for ten hours, and the full brigade less than that. All they

really had was a fire plan. WOLFPACK could shoot short wherever it wanted, but all deep fire had to be west of the road.

"Pretty good picture here, sir," his S-2 intelligence officer said.

"Send it out." And with that, every fighting vehicle in the Blackhorse had the same digital picture of the enemy that he had. Then Hamm lifted his radio.

"WOLFPACK-SIX, this is BLACKHORSE-SlX."

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX-ACTUAL. Thanks for the data feed, Colonel," Eddington replied over the digital radio. Both units also knew where all the friendlies were. "I'd say initial contact in about an hour."

"Ready to rock, Nick?" Hamm asked.

"Al, it's all I can do to hold my boys back. We are locked and cocked," the Guard commander assured him. "We have visual on their advance screen now."

"You know the drill, Nick. Good luck."

"Blackhorse," Eddington said in parting.

Hamm changed settings on his radio, calling BUFORD-SIX.

"I have the picture, Al," Marion Diggs assured him, a hundred miles back and not liking *that* fact one bit. He was sending men into battle by remote control, and that came hard to a new general officer.

"Okay, sir, we are fully in place. All they have to do is walk in the door."

"Roger, BLACKHORSE. Standing by here. Out."

The most important work was now being done by the Predators. The UAV operators, sited with Hamm's intelligence section, circled their mini-aircraft higher to minimize the chance they might be spotted or heard. Cameras pointed down, counting and checking locations. The Immortals were on the enemy left, and the former Iraqi Guards Division on the right, west of the road. They were moving along steadily, battalions on line and tightly packed for maximum power and shock effect if they encountered opposition, ten miles behind their own reconnaissance screen. Behind the lead brigade was the divisional artillery. This force was divided in two, and as they watched in the intel track, one half halted, spread out, and set up to provide covering fire, while the other half took up and moved forward. Again, that was right out of the book. They would be in place for about ninety minutes. The Predators flew over the line of guns, marking their position from GPS signals. That data went down to the MLRS batteries. Two more Predators were sent along. These were dedicated to getting exact locations on enemy command vehicles.

"WELL, I'M NOT sure when this will go out," Donner told the camera.

“I’m here inside Bravo-Three-Two, number-two scout track in 3rd Platoon of B-Troop. We just got information on where the enemy is. He’s about twenty miles west of us right now. There are at least two divisions moving south on the road from King Khalid Military City. I know now that a brigade of the North Carolina National Guard is in a blocking position. They deployed with the 11th Cavalry Regiment because they were at the National Training Center for routine training.

“The mood here—well, how can I explain this? The troopers of the Blackhorse Regiment, they’re almost like doctors, strange as that may sound. These men are angry at what’s happened to their country, and I’ve talked to them about it, but right now, like doctors waiting for the ambulance to come into the emergency room. It’s quiet in the track. We just heard that we’ll be moving west in a few minutes to the jump-off point.

“I want to add a personal note. Not long ago, as you all know, I violated a rule of my profession. I did something wrong. I was misled, but the fault was mine. I learned earlier today that the President himself requested that I should come here—maybe to get me killed?” Donner adlibbed in an obvious joke. “No, not that. This is the sort of situation that people in the news business live for. I am here where history may soon take place, surrounded by other Americans who have an important job to do, and however this turns out, this is where a reporter belongs. President Ryan, thank you for the chance.

“This is Tom Donner, southeast of KKMC, with B-Troop, 1st Squadron of the Blackhorse.” He lowered the mike. “Got that?”

“Yes, sir,” the Army spec-5 told him. The soldier said something into his own microphone. “Okay, that went up to the satellite, sir.”

“Good one, Tom,” the track commander said, lighting up a cigarette. “Come here. I’ll show you how this IVIS thing works and—” He stopped, holding his helmet with his hand to hear what was coming over the radio. “Start’er up, Stanley,” he told the driver. “It’s showtime.”

HE LET THEM come in. The man commanding the WOLFPACK’S reconnaissance screen was a criminal-defense attorney by profession who’d actually graduated from West Point but later decided on a civilian career. He’d never quite lost the bug, as he thought of it, though he didn’t quite know why. Age forty-five now, he’d been in uniformed service of one sort or another for almost thirty years of drills and exhausting exercise and mind-numbing routine which took away from his time and his family. Now, in the front line of his recon force, he knew why.

The lead scout vehicles were two miles to his front. He estimated two platoons that he could see, a total of ten vehicles spread across three miles, moving three or four at a time in the darkness. Maybe they had low-light gear. He wasn't sure of that, but had to assume that they did. On his thermal systems he could make them out as BRDM-2 scout cars, four-wheeled, equipped with a heavy machine gun or antitank missiles. He saw both versions, but he was especially looking for the one with four radio antennas. That would be the platoon or company commander's vehicle . . .

"Antenna track direct front," a Bradley commander called from four hundred meters to the colonel's right. "Range two-kay meters, moving in now."

The lawyer-officer lifted his head above the abbreviated ridge and scanned the field with his thermal viewer. Now was as good a time as any.

"HOOTOWL, this is Six, party in ten, I say again, party in ten seconds. Four-Three, stand by."

"Four-Three is standing by, SIX." That Bradley would take the first shot in 2nd of KKMC. The gunner selected high-explosive incendiary tracer. A BRDM wasn't tough enough to need the armor-piercing rounds he had in the dual-feed magazine of his Bushmaster cannon. He centered the target in his pipper, and the on-board computer adjusted for the range.

"Eat shit and *die*, " the gunner said into the interphones.

"HOOTOWL, SIX, commence firing, commence firing."

"Fire!" the track commander told the gunner. The spec-4 on the 25mm gun depressed the triggers for a threeround burst. All three tracers made a line across the desert, and all three hit. The command BRDM erupted into a fireball as the vehicle's gas tank—strangely for a Russian-made vehicle, it was not diesel-powered-exploded. "Target!" the commander said instantly, confirming that the gunner had destroyed it. "Traverse left, target *burdum."*

"Identified!" the gunner said when he was locked on.

"Fire!" A second later: "Target! Cease fire, traverse right! Target *burdum,* two o'clock, range fifteen hundred!" The Bradley's gun turret rotated the other way as the enemy vehicles started to react.

"Identified!"

"Fire!" And the third one was dead, ten seconds after the first.

Within a minute, all the BRDMs the screen commander had seen were burning. The brilliant white light made him cringe to see. Then other flashes appeared left and right of his position. Then: "Move out, run 'em down!"

Across ten miles of desert, twenty Bradleys darted from behind their hiding places, going forward, not backward, their turrets traversing

and their gunners hunting for enemy scout vehicles. A short, vicious, running gunfight began, lasting ten minutes and three klicks, with the BRDMs trying to pull back but unable to shoot back effectively. Two Sagger antitank missiles were launched, but both fell short and exploded in the sand when their launch vehicles were killed by Bushmaster fire. Their heavy machine guns weren't powerful enough to punch through the Bradleys' frontal armor. The enemy screen, comprising a total of thirty vehicles, was exterminated by the end of it, and HOOTOWL owned this part of the battlefield.

"WOLFPACK, this is HOOT-SIX-ACTUAL, I think we got'em all. Their lead screen is toast. No casualties," he added. God damn, he thought, those Bradleys can shoot.

"SOME RADIO CHATTER got out, sir," the ELINT trooper next to Eddington reported. "Getting some more now."

"He's calling for artillery fire," a Saudi intelligence officer said quickly.

"HOOT, you may expect some fire shortly," Eddington warned.

"Roger, understand. HOOT is moving forward."

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IT WAS SAFER than staying in place or falling back. On command, the Bradleys and Hummers darted two klicks to the north, looking for the enemy supplementary reconnaissance screen—there had to be some—which would move up now, probably cautiously, on direction of their brigade or divisional commanders. This, the Guard lieutenant colonel knew, would be the reconnaissance battle, the undercard for the main event, with the lightweights duking it out before the heavyweights closed. But there was a difference. He could continue to shape the battlefield for WOLFPACK. He expected to find another company of reconnaissance vehicles, closely followed by a heavy advanced guard of tanks and BMPs. The Bradley had TOW missiles to do the tanks, and the Bushmaster had been designed for the express purpose of killing the infantry carrier they called the *bimp.* Moreover, though the enemy now knew where the Blue Force recon screen was—had been—he would expect it to fall back, not advance.

That was plain two minutes later, when a planned-fire barrage dropped a klick behind the moving Bradleys. The other side was playing it by the book, the old Soviet book. And it wasn't a bad book, but the Americans had read it, too. HOOTOWL pressed on rapidly for

another klick and stopped, finding a convenient line of low ridges, with blobs on the horizon again. The lawyer/colonel lifted his radio to report that.

"BUFORD, THIS IS WOLFPACK, we are in contact, sir," Eddington relayed to Diggs from his CP. "We just clobbered their recon element. Our screening forces now have visual on the advance guard. My intentions are to engage briefly and pull them back and right, southeast. We have enemy artillery fire dropping between the screen and the main body. Over."

"Roger, WOLFPACK." On his command screen, Diggs saw the advancing Bradleys, moving in a fairly even line, but well spread. Then they started spotting movement. The things they saw started appearing as unknown-enemy symbols on the IVIS command system.

It was immensely frustrating to the general in command. He had more knowledge of a developing battle than had ever been possible in the history of warfare. He had the ability now to tell platoons what to do, where to go, whom to shoot—*but he couldn't allow himself to do that.* He'd approved the intentions of Eddington, Hamm, and Magruder, coordinating their plans in space and time, and now as their commander he had to let them do it their way, interfering only if something went wrong or some new and unexpected situation offered itself. The commander of American forces in the Kingdom, he was now a spectator. The black general shook his head in wonderment. He'd known it would be like this. He hadn't known how hard it would hit him.

IT WAS ALMOST time. Hamm had his squadrons advancing abreast, covering only ten kilometers each, but separated by intervals of ten more. In every case, the squadron commanders had opted to have their scout troops in the lead, and their tank companies in reserve. Each troop had nine tanks and thirteen Brads, plus two mortar-carrying M113 tracks. In front of them, now seven kilometers away, were the brigades of UIR II Corps, bloodied by the breakthrough battles north of KKMC, weakened, but probably alert. There was nothing like violent death to get someone's attention. His helicopters and video feed from the Predators had well defined their positions. He knew where they were. They didn't know about him yet probably, he had to admit. Certainly they were trying as hard as he would have done to make sure. His final order was for his helicopters to make one more sweep of the intervening terrain for an enemy outpost line.

Everything else was pretty well locked into place, and fifty miles back, his Apaches started lifting off, along with their Kiowa scouts, for their part in the main event.

THE F-15E STRIKE Eagles were all up north. Two of their number had been lost earlier in the day, including that of the squadron commander. Now, protected by HARM-EQUIPPED F-16s, they were pounding the bridges and causeways across the twin-rivers estuary with smart bombs. They could see tanks on the ground, burning ones west of the swamps and intact ones bunched up to the east. In an exciting hour, every route across was destroyed by repeated hits.

The F-15Cs were over the KKMC area, as always under AWACS control. One group of four stayed high, outside the envelope of the mobile SAMs with the advancing land force. Their job was to watch for UIR fighters who might get in the way of things. The rest were hunting for helicopters belonging to the armored divisions. It didn't carry the prestige of a fighter kill—but a kill was a kill, and was something they could do with near-total impunity. Better still, generals traveled in helicopters, and most of all, those would be part of the UIR reconnaissance effort, and that, the plan said, couldn't be allowed.

Below them, word must have gotten out in a hurry. Only three choppers had been killed during the daylight hours, but with the coming of darkness a number had lifted off, half of them splashed in the first ten minutes. It was so different from the last time. The hunting was pretty easy. The enemy, on the offense, had to offer battle—couldn't hide in shelters, couldn't disperse. That suited the Eagle drivers. One driver, south of KKMC, was vectored by his AWACS, located a chopper on his look-down radar, selected AIM-120, and triggered the missile off in seconds. He watched the missile all the way in, spotting the fireball that jerked left and splattered widely on the ground. Part of him thought it a needless waste of a perfectly good Slammer. But a kill was a kill. That would be the last chopper kill of the evening. The pilots heard from their E-3B Sentry control aircraft that friendly choppers were now entering the battle area, and weapons went tight on the Eagles.

LESS THAN HALF of his Bradley gunners had ever fired TOW missiles for real, though all had done so hundreds of times in simulation. HOOTOWL waited for the advance guard to get just within the margins. It was tricky. The supplementary recon screen was closer

still. The Bradleys engaged them first, and this gunfight was a little more two-sided. Two BRDMs were actually behind the American scout line. Both turned at once. One nearly drove over a HMMWV, hosing it with its machine gun before a Bradley blew it apart. The armored vehicle raced to the site, finding one wounded survivor from the three-man crew on the Hummer. The infantrymen tended to him while the driver got up on a berm and the gunner elevated his TOW launcher.

The leading group of tanks was shooting now, seeking out the flashes of the Bradley guns, activating their own night-vision systems, and again there was a brief, vicious battle over the barren, unlit ground. One Bradley was hit and exploded, killing all aboard. The rest got off one or two missiles each, collecting twenty tanks in reply before their commander called them back, and just escaping the artillery barrage called in by the enemy tank commander on their positions. HOOTOWL left behind that one Bradley, and two Hummers, and the first American ground casualties of the Second Persian Gulf War. These were reported up the line.

IT WAS RIGHT after lunch in Washington. The President had eaten lightly, and the word came into the Situation Room just after he'd finished, still able to look down at the gold-trimmed plate, the crust of bread from his sandwich, and the chips he'd not eaten. The news of the deaths hit him hard, harder, somehow, than the casualties on USS *Yorktown* or the six missing aviators—*missing* didn't necessarily mean *dead*, did it? he allowed himself to think. These men certainly were. National Guardsmen, he'd learned. Citizen soldiers most often used to help people after floods or hurricanes . . .

"Mr. President, would you have gone over there for this mission?" General Moore asked, even before Robby Jackson could speak. "If you were twenty-something again, a Marine lieutenant, and they told you to go, you'd go, right?"

"I suppose—no, no, I'd go. I'd have to."

"So did they, sir," Mickey Moore told him.

"That's the job, Jack," Robby said quietly. "That's what they pay us for."

"Yeah." And he had to admit that it was what they paid him for, too.

THE FOUR F-117 Nighthawks landed at Al Kharj, rolling out and taxiing to shelters. The transports carrying the spare pilots and ground

crews were right behind. Intelligence officers down from Riyadh met the latter group, taking the spare pilots aside for their first mission briefing in a war which was just now getting started in a big way.

THE MAJOR GENERAL in charge of the Immortals Division was in his command vehicle, trying to make sense of things. It had been a quite satisfactory war to this point. II Corps had done its job, blasting open the hole, allowing the main force to shoot through, and until an hour before, the picture had been both clear and pleasing. Yes, there were Saudi forces heading southwest for him, but they were the best part of a day away. By then, he'd be on the outskirts of their capital, and there were other plans for them as well. At dawn, II Corps would jump east from its covering position on his left, feinting toward the oil fields. That should give the Saudis second thoughts. Certainly it would give him another day in which, with luck, he'd get some, maybe all of the Saudi government. Maybe even the royal family—or, if they fled, as they might well do, then the Kingdom would be leaderless, and then his country would have won the war.

It had been costly to this point. II Corps had paid the price of half its combat power to deliver the Army of God this far, but victory had never been cheaply bought. Nor would it be the case here. His forward screen had disappeared right off the radio net. One call of contact with unknown forces, a request for artillery support, then nothing. He knew that a Saudi force was somewhere ahead of him. He knew it was the remains of the 4th Brigade, which II Corps had almost but not quite immolated. He knew it had fought hard north of KKMC and then pulled back ... it had probably been ordered to hold so that the city could be evacuated . . . it was probably still strong enough to chew up his reconnaissance force. He didn't know where the American cavalry regiment was . . . probably to his cast. He knew that there might be another American brigade somewhere, probably also to his east. He wished for helicopters, but he'd just lost one to American fighters, along with his chief intelligence officer. So much for the air support he'd been promised. The only friendly fighter he'd seen all day had been a smoking hole in the ground just east of KKMC. But though Americans could annoy him, they couldn't stop him, and if he got to Riyadh on time, then he could send troops to cover most of the Saudi airfields and preempt that threat. So the key to the operation, as his Corps and Army command had told him, was to press on with all possible speed. With that decision made, he ordered his lead brigade to advance as scheduled, with his advance guard playing the reconnaissance role. They'd just reported contact and a battle, losses taken and inflicted on an enemy as yet unidentified, but who had

withdrawn after a brief firefight. Probably that Saudi force, he decided, doing its best to sting and run, and he'd run it down after sunrise. He gave the orders, informed his staff of his intentions, and left the command post to drive forward, wanting to see things at the front, as a good general should, while the staff radioed orders to subordinate commanders.

THERE WERE SOME screening elements, the Kiowas reported. Not many. They'd probably been badly shot up on the drive south, Colonel Hamm thought. He directed one of his squadrons to maneuver left to avoid, and told his air commander to detail an Apache to deal with that one in a few minutes. One of the others could be bypassed easily. The third was directly in the path of 3rd Squadron, and that was just too bad. The position of the BRDMs was marked on the IVIS screens, along with most of UIR's battered II Corps.

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SO WERE THE Immortals. Eddington saw that the advance guard, with the leading elements of the main force close behind, was just entering gun range of his tanks, advancing at about twenty kilometers per hour. He called Hamm.

"Five minutes from *now.* Good luck, Al."

"You, too, Nick," Eddington heard.

IT WAS CALLED synchronicity. Thirty miles apart, several groups of Paladin mobile guns elevated their tubes and pointed them to spots picked by Predator drones and ELINT intercepts. The cannoneers of the new age punched the proper coordinates into their computers so that the widely separated weapons could fire to the same point. Eyes were on clocks now, watching the digital numbers change, one second at a time, marching toward 22:30:00 Lima time, 19:30:00 Zulu, 14:30:00 Washington.

It was much the same in the Multiple-Launch Rocket System tracks. There the troops made sure their compartments were sealed, locked their suspension to stabilize the vehicles during the launch cycle, and then closed down windshield shutters. The exhaust from their rockets could be lethal.

South of KKMC, the Carolina Guard tankers watched the advancing white blobs. Gunners thumbed their laser range-finders. The lead

screening elements were now 2,500 meters distant, and the follow-on line of the main body a thousand behind them, mixed tanks and BMPs.

Southeast of KKMC, the Blackhorse was advancing at fifteen kph now, toward a line of targets on a ridge four thousand meters west.

It wasn't perfect. B-Troop, 1st of the 11th, stumbled right into an unsuspected BRDM position and opened fire on its own, starting fireballs into the air, turning eyes, and alerting people a few seconds too soon, but in the end that didn't matter, as the digital numbers kept changing at the same pace, either fast or slow, depending on the perceptions of the onlookers.

Eddington timed it to the second. Unable to smoke throughout the evening, for fear of making a glow that would show up on somebody's night viewer, he opened his Zippo and flicked it as 59 changed to 00. A little bit of light wouldn't matter . . . now.

THE ARTILLERY WENT first, already ordered to time its fire to the second. The most spectacular were the MLRS rockets, twelve from each launcher, rippling out less than two seconds apart, their flaming motors illuminating the exhaust smoke as they streaked into a sky no longer dark. By 22:30:30, nearly two hundred of the M77 free-flight rockets were in the air. By that time, the mobile guns were being reloaded, their lanyards pulled, the guns discharged, and now their breeches open for the next set of rounds.

The night was clear, and the light show could not be missed by anyone within a hundred miles. Fighter pilots aloft to the northeast saw the rockets fly, and looked closely at their course. They didn't want to be in the same sky with the things.

Iraqi officers in the advancing Guards Armored Division saw them first, coming up from the south, and next they saw that all were angling west of the north-south road from KKMC to Al Artawiyah. Many of them had seen the same sight as lieutenants and captains, and knew exactly what they meant. Steel rain was coming. Some were paralyzed by the sight. Others shouted orders for men to get cover, close their hatches, and ride it out.

That wasn't possible for the divisional artillerymen. Most of their guns were towed, and most of the gunners were in the open, ammunition trucks standing by for the fire mission that had to be coming. They saw the rocket motors burn out, noted their direction, and there was little to be done but wait. Men dived to the ground, usually scattering first, holding their helmets in place and praying that the damned things were heading somewhere else.

The rockets tipped over on apogee, heading back to the ground. At

several thousand feet, a timer blew open the noses, and each projectile released 644 submunitions, each weighing half a pound, which made for 7,728 for each of the launchers employed. All were targeted at the Guards Division's artillery. That was their longest-reaching weapon, and Eddington wanted it out of play immediately. As was the practice in the U.S. Army, MLRS was the unit commander's personal shotgun. A few of the Iraqi gunners looked up. They couldn't see or hear them coming, but come they did.

From a distance, it looked like sparklers on the ground, or maybe firecrackers at Chinese New Year, dancing and exploding in celebration. It was noisy death for those on the ground, as a total of over seventy *thousand* of the munitions exploded over an area of about two hundred acres. Trucks caught fire and exploded in flame. Propellant charges lit off in secondary explosions, but most of all the artillerymen were slaughtered, over eighty percent of them killed or wounded by the first volley. There would be two more. Back of WOLFPACK'S center, the launch vehicles scuttled back to their resupply trucks. Just before getting there, the expended "six-pack" launch cells were ejected and new ones hoisted into place with rigging equipment. It took about five minutes to accomplish the reload.

It was faster for the 155mm guns. These, too, were gunning for their enemy counterparts, and their rounds were every bit as accurate as the rockets. It was the most mechanistic of military activities. The gun did the killing and the people served the gun. They couldn't see their work, and in this case didn't even have a forward-observer to tell them how they were doing, but they'd learned that with GPS doing the aiming, it didn't matter—and if things went as planned, they would later see the results of their deadly work.

Perversely, those with direct views of the advancing enemy fired last, the tankers waiting for the word, delivered as company commanders fired first for their units.

For all its lethality, the fire-control system for the Abrams tank is one of the simplest mechanisms ever placed in the hands of soldiers, and even easier to use than the million-dollar crew-training simulators. The gunners each had assigned sectors, and the initial rounds fired by the company commanders had been HEAT—high-explosive antitank—rounds, which made a distinctive visual signature. Tanks were assigned areas left or right of those first kills. The thermal-imaging viewing systems keyed on heat, infrared radiation. Their targets were warmer than the desert landscape at night and announced their presence as clearly as lightbulbs. Each gunner was told what area to pick from, and each selected an advancing T-80. Centering the target in the sight, the laser buttons were depressed. The beam went out to the target and reflected back. The return signal

told the ballistic computer the target's distance, speed, and direction of movement. Other sensors told it the outside temperature, the temperature of the ammunition, atmospheric density, wind direction and speed, the condition of the gun (hot ones droop), and how many shells had been fired through the tube to this point in its career. The computer digested this and other information, processed it, and when finished, flashed a white rectangle in the gunsight to tell the gunner the system was on target. Then it was just a matter of his closing his index fingers on the yoke's twin triggers. The tank lurched, the breech surged back, the muzzle flash blinded the sight momentarily, and the "sabot" rounds streaked downrange at more than a mile a second. The projectiles were like overly thick arrows, less than the length of a man's arm, and two inches in diameter, with stubby fins on the tail that burned from air friction in their brief flight, and trailing tracers for the tank commander to watch the "silver bullets" all the way in.

The targets were Russian-made T-80s, old tanks with old design histories. They were much smaller than their American adversaries, mainly due to their inadequate engine power, and their diminished size had made for a number of design compromises. There was a fuel tank in the front, the line for which went along the turret ring. Gun rounds were fitted in slots that nested in the rear fuel tank, so that their ammunition was surrounded by diesel fuel. Finally, to save on turret space, the loader had been replaced by an automated loading system, which in addition to being slower than a man, also required that a live round be in the open in the turret at all times. It might not have made all that much of a difference in any case, but it did make for spectacular kills.

The second T-80 to die took a "silver bullet" at the base of the turret. The incoming round obliterated the fuel line first of all, and in the process of crashing through the armor created a lethal shower of fragments moving at over a thousand meters per second in the cramped confines, caroming off the inner surface and chopping the crewmen to bits; at the same time the ready round ignited on its tray and other rounds exploded in their racks. The crew was already dead when the ammunition exploded, also setting off the fuel and creating an explosion which blew the heavy turret fifty feet straight up in what the Army called a "catastrophic kill." Fifteen others died the same way in the space of three seconds. The Immortals Division's advance guard evaporated in ten more, and the only resistance they were able to offer was that the pyres of their vehicles obscured the battlefield.

Fire shifted at once to the main body, three battalions advancing on line, now just over three thousand meters away, a total of just over a hundred fifty advancing toward a battalion of fifty-four.

The commanders of the Iranian tanks were mainly still out of their

turrets, the better to see, despite their having seen the rockets lifting off several miles downrange. They next saw a linear ripple of white and orange three kilometers in the distance, followed by explosions to their direct front. The quicker of the officers and conscripted tank commanders ordered their gunners to get rounds off at the muzzle flashes, and no less than ten did shoot, but they hadn't had time to gauge the range, and all their rounds fell short. The Iranian crews were drilled in what to do, and they hadn't as yet had time for fear to replace shock. Some started reload cycles, while others worked their range finders to get off properly aimed rounds, but then the horizon turned orange again, and what followed scarcely gave them the time to take note of the change of color in the sky.

The next volley of fifty-four main-gun rounds found forty-four marks, ten of the T-80s being double-targeted. This was less than twenty seconds into the engagement.

"Find one still moving," one E-6 tank commander said to his gunner. The battlefield was lighting up now, and the fireballs interfered with the thermal viewers. There. The gunner got his laser range—3,650m—the box came up, and he fired. The sights blanked, then came back, and he could see the tracer of his round arcing flat across the desert, all the way in

"Target!" the commander said. "Shift fire."

"Identified—got one!"

"Fire!" the commander ordered.

"On the way!" The gunner fired his third round of the half-minute, and three seconds later, another T-80 turret became a ballistic object.

Just that fast, the tank phase of the battle was over.

The Bradleys were engaging the advancing BMPs, their Bushmaster cannons reaching out. It was slower for them, the range more difficult for their lighter guns, but the result was just as final.

THE COMMANDER OF the Immortals was just approaching the trail elements of the lead brigade when he saw the rockets fly. Telling his driver to pull over, he stood and turned in his command vehicle and saw the secondary explosions of his divisional artillery array, when, turning back forward, he saw the second volley of Eddington's tanks. Forty percent of his combat power had disappeared in less than a minute. Even before the shock hit him, he knew that he'd walked into an ambush—but of what?

THE MLRS ROCKETS which had robbed the Immortals of their

artillery had come from the east, not the south. It was Hamm's gift to the National Guardsmen, who were unable to go after the Iranian guns themselves with the existing fire plan. Blackhorse's MLRS had done that, then shifted fire to make way for the regiment's Apache attack helicopters, which were striking deep, actually beyond the 11 Corps units now being engaged by the three ground squadrons.

The division of labor on this battlefield had been determined in principle the previous day, and developments had not changed anyone's thoughts. Artillery would initially target artillery. Tanks would target tanks. The helicopters were out to kill commanders. The Immortals Division CP had stopped twenty minutes earlier. Ten minutes before the first rocket launch, Apache-Kiowa teams looped around from the north, approaching from the rear and heading for the places from which the radio signals were emitting. First would come the division-level targets, followed by the brigades.

The Immortals' staff was just coming to terms with the incoming signals. Some officers requested confirmation or clarification, information needed before they could react properly to the situation. That was the problem with command posts. They were the institutional brains of the units they commanded, and the people who made up the decision process had to be together to function.

From six kilometers away, the collection of vehicles was obvious. Four SAM-shooters were oriented south, and there was a ring of AAA guns, too. Those went first. The Apaches of P-(Attack)-Troop stopped in place, picking a spot with nothing dangerous around, and hovering at about a hundred feet. Front-seated gunners, all of them young warrant officers, used optical equipment to zoom in, selected the first group of targets, and selected Hellfire laser-guided missiles. The first launch was made by surprise, but an Iranian soldier saw the flash, and shouted to a gun crew, which slewed its guns around and started shooting before the missiles were all the way on. What followed was a madhouse. The targeted Apache dodged left, accelerating sideways at fifty knots to throw them off, but also ruining the aim of the startled gunner, who had to shoot again, as the first missile went wide. The other AH-64s were not hampered, and of their six launches, five hit. In another minute, the antiair problem was neutralized, and the attack choppers closed. They could see people running now, out and away from the command tracks. Some soldiers in the command security group started firing their rifles into the sky, and there was more structured activity from machine-gunners, but surprise was on the other side. The gunners fired 2.75-inch rockets to blanket the area, Hellfires to eliminate the few remaining armored vehicles, and then shifted to their 30mm cannon. In display of their rage, they closed in now, like the oversized insects they appeared to be, buzzing and

slipping from side to side while the gunners looked for people the heavier weapons had missed. There was noplace to hide on the flat terrain, and the human bodies glowed on the dark, colder surface, and the gunners hunted them down in groups, in pairs, and finally one by one, sweeping across the site like harvesters. In their pre-mission discussion on the flight line, it had been decided that, unlike in 1991, helicopters would not accept surrender in this war, and the 30mm projectiles had explosive tips. P-Troop—they called themselves the Predators—lingered for ten minutes before they were satisfied that every single vehicle was destroyed and every moving body dead before they twisted in the sky, dipped their noses, and headed back east for their rearm points.

THE PREMATURE ATTACK on II Corps's reconnaissance element had started one part of this battle a little too early, and alerted a reasonably intact tank company sooner than intended, but the enemy tanks were still white blobs on a black background, and less than four thousand meters away.

"Battlestars engage," B-Troop's commander ordered, firing off his first round, soon to be followed by eight more. Six hit, even at this extreme range, and the attack by the Blackhorse on II Corps began even before the first MLRS volley. The next volley was delivered on the move, and five more tanks exploded, their return rounds falling short. It was a little harder to hit this way. Though the gun was stabilized, hitting a bump could throw the aim off, and misses were expected, if not exactly welcomed.

B-Troop's tanks were spaced fully half a kilometer apart, and each had a hunting zone exactly that wide, and the farther they went, the more targets appeared. The Bradley scout vehicles hung back a hundred yards or so, and their gunners looked for infantry who might wield antitank weapons. II Corps's two divisions were spread across twenty miles of linear space and about eight miles of depth, so said the IVIS gear. In ten minutes, B-Troop chopped its way through a battalion diminished by the Saudis and now erased by the Americans. The bonus came ten minutes later, when they spotted a battery of artillery setting up. The Bradleys got those, sweeping the area with their 25mm cannon and adding to the fireballs that gave the lie to the sunset only four hours old.

"DAMN." EDDINGTON MERELY spoke the word, without any emphasis at all. He had been called forward by his battalion

commanders and was now standing up in his HMMWV.

"You believe less than five minutes?" LOBO-SIX asked. He'd heard the amazement himself over his battalion net: "Is that all?" more than one sergeant had asked aloud. It was crummy radio discipline, but everyone was thinking the same thing.

But there was more to do than admire the work. Eddington lifted his radio handset and called for his brigade S-2.

"What's Predator tell us?"

"We have two more brigades still southbound, but they slowed some, sir. They're roughly nine klicks north of your line on the near one, and twelve on the far one."

"Put me through to BUFORD," WOLFPACK-SIX ordered.

THE GENERAL WAS still in the same place, with death before and behind. Scarcely ten minutes had passed. Three tanks and twelve BMPs had run backward, stopping at a depression and holding position while they waited for instructions. There were men coming back now, too, some wounded, most not. He could not scream at them. If anything, the shock of the moment was harder on him than it was on them.

He'd already tried contacting his divisional command post, but gotten only static in return, and for all his experience in uniform, his time in command, the schools he'd attended, and the exercises he'd won and lost—nothing had prepared him for this.

But he still had more than half a division to command. Two of his brigades were still fully intact, and he hadn't come here to lose. He ordered his driver to turn and head back. To the surviving elements of the lead brigade went orders to hold until further word. He had to maneuver. He'd run into a nightmare, but it couldn't be everywhere.

"WHAT DO YOU propose, Eddington?"

"General Diggs, I want to move my people north. We just ate up two tank brigades easier'n a plate full of grits. The enemy's artillery is largely destroyed, sir, and I have a clear field in front of me."

"Okay, take your time and watch your flanks. I'll notify BLACKHORSE."

"Roger that, sir. We'll be moving in twenty."

They'd thought about this possibility, of course. There was even a sketch plan on the maps. LOBO would shift and extend right. WHITEFANG would go straight north, straddling the road, and the so far unengaged Battalion Task Force COYOTE would take the left,

echeloned to be able to sweep in from the rough terrain to the west. From their new positions, the brigade would grind north to phaselines spaced ten kilometers apart. They'd have to move slowly because of the darkness, the unfamiliar ground, and the fact that it was only half a plan, but the activation code word was NATHAN, and the first phase-line was MANASSAS. Eddington hoped Diggs wouldn't mind.

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX to all sixes. Code word is NATHAN. I repeat, we are activating Plan NATHAN in two-zero minutes. Acknowledge," he ordered.

All three battalion commanders chimed in seconds later.

DIGGS HAD KEPT him in the loop, and the picture, such as it was, was up on the command screen in the M4 God Track. Colonel Magruder wasn't all that surprised at the initial results, except maybe that the Guardsmen had done so well. Rather more surprising was the progress the 10th had made. Advancing at a steady thirty kilometers per hour, he was well into the former Iraq, and ready to turn south. This he did at 0200L. His helicopter squadron left behind to cover the Kuwaitis, he felt a little naked at the moment, but it was still dark and would be for another four hours. By then he'd be back in Saudi. BUFFALO-SIX judged that he had the best cavalry mission of all. Here he was, deep into enemy territory, and deeper still in his rear. Just like what Colonel John Grierson had done to Johnny Reb, and what he and the Buffalo Soldiers had done to the Apaches. He ordered his units to spread wide. Reconnaissance said there wasn't much out here to get in the way, that the enemy's main strength was deep in the Kingdom. Well, he didn't think it would get much deeper, and all he had to do was slam the door behind.

DONNER WAS STANDING up in the top hatch of the scout track, behind the turret, with his Army cameraman next to him. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. He'd gotten the assault on the gun battery on tape, though he didn't think the tape would be all that usable, what with all the bouncing and bumping. All around him was destruction. Behind to the southeast were at least a hundred burned-out tanks, trucks, and other things he didn't recognize, and it had all happened in less than an hour. He lurched forward, striking his face on the hatch rim when the Bradley stopped.

"Get security out!" the track commander shouted. "We're gonna be here for a bit."

The Bradleys were arrayed in a circle, about a mile north of the

wrecked UIR guns. There was nothing moving around them, which the gunner made sure of by traversing his turret around. The rear hatch opened, and two men jumped out, first looking and then running, rifles in hand.

"Come here," the sergeant said, holding his hand out. Donner took it and climbed to the vehicle's roof. "Want a smoke?"

Donner shook his head. "Gave it up."

"Yeah? Well, those folks'll stop smoking in a day or two," he said, gesturing to the mess a mile back. The sergeant thought that was a pretty good one. He lifted binoculars to his eyes and looked around, confirming what the gunsights said.

"What do you think of this?" the reporter asked, tapping his cameraman.

"I think this is what they pay me for, and it all works."

"What are we stopped for?"

"We'll get some fuel in half an hour, and we need to replenish ammo." He put the glasses down.

"We need fuel? We haven't been moving that much."

"Well, the colonel thinks tomorrow might be kinda busy, too." He turned. "What do *you* think, Tom?"

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READY AND FORWARD!

WHAT PEOPLE CALL "THE initiative," whether in war or any other field of human activity, is never anything more or less than a psychological advantage. It combines one side's feeling that they are winning with the other side's feeling that something has gone wrong —that they must now prepare for and respond to the actions of their enemy instead of preparing their own offensive action. Couched in terms of "momentum" or "ascendancy," it really always comes down to who is doing what to whom, and a sudden change in that equation will have a stronger effect than that of a gradual buildup to the same set of circumstances. The expected, when replaced by the unexpected, lingers for a time, lingers in the mind, since it is easier, for a while, to deny rather than to adapt, and that just makes things harder for those who are being done *to*. For the doers, there are other tasks.

For the American forces in contact, there came a brief, unwelcome, but necessary pause. It should have been easiest of all for Colonel Nick Eddington of WOLFPACK, but it wasn't. His force of National Guard troops had done little more than stay in place for their first battle, which had allowed the enemy to come into their kill box, an ambush fifteen miles wide by fifteen deep. Except for the brigade's reconnaissance screen, the men from Carolina had hardly moved at all. But now that had to change, and Eddington was reminded of the fact that though he was after a fashion a ballet master, the things performing the maneuvering were tanks, ponderous and clumsy, moving in the dark across unfamiliar ground.

Technology helped. He had radios to tell his people when and where to go, and the IVIS system to tell them how. Task Force LOBO started by backing off the reverseslope positions that had served them so well only forty minutes earlier, turning south and heading through preselected navigational way points to destinations less than ten kilometers south of their initial fighting positions. In the process, the augmented battalion diluted itself, spread itself more thinly than it had been, a feat made possible because the battalion staff was able to program the move electronically and transmit their intentions to sub-unit commanders, who, assigned areas of responsibility, were able to

subdivide them almost automatically, until every single vehicle knew its destination to the meter. The initial delay of twenty minutes from notification that Plan NATHAN was about to be activated allowed that selection process to begin. The lateral shift required an hour, with the vehicles moving across what appeared to be vacant land at the speed of commuters in a particularly congested rush hour. Even so, it worked, and an hour from the time the movement was started, it had been completed. WOLFPACK, now covering well over twenty miles of lateral space, wheeled, turned north, and started moving out at ten kilometers per hour, with recon teams darting forward faster still to take position five klicks in advance of the main body. That was well short of what the book said the interval should be. Eddington had to be mindful of the fact that he was maneuvering a large force of part-time soldiers whose dependence on their electronic technology was a little too great for his total comfort. He'd keep his force of three fighting battalions under tight control until contact was established and the overall picture was clear.

IT SURPRISED TOM Donner that the support vehicles, nearly all of them robust-looking trucks, were able to follow the fighting units as quickly as they did. Somehow he hadn't understood how important this was, accustomed as he was to hitting one particular gas station once or twice a week. Here the service personnel had to be as mobile as their customers, and that, he realized, was a major task. The fuel trucks set up. The Bradleys and battle tanks came to them two at a time, then went back to their perimeter posts, where ammunition was dropped off other trucks for the track crewmen to load up. Every Bradley, he learned, had a Sears socket wrench, in nearly every case bought out of the gunner's salary, to facilitate reloading of the Bushmaster magazine. It worked better than the tool designed for the purpose. That was probably worth a little story, he thought with a distant smile.

The troop commander, now in his command HMMWV instead of his M1A2, raced about from track to track to ascertain the condition of each vehicle and crew. He saved Three-Two for the last.

"Mr. Donner, you doing okay, sir?"

The reporter sipped at coffee brewed up by the Bradley's driver, and nodded. "Is it always like this?" he asked the young officer.

"First time for me, sir. Pretty much like training, though."

"What do you *think* about all this?" the journalist asked. "I mean, back there, you and your people, well, *killed* a lot of the enemy."

The captain thought about that briefly. "Sir, you ever cover tornadoes and hurricanes and stuff?"

"Yes."

"And people get their lives all messed up, and you ask them what it's like, right?"

"That's my job."

"Same with us. These guys made war on us. We're making war back. If they don't like it, well, maybe next time they'll think more about it. Sir, I got an uncle in Texas—uncle and an aunt, actually. Used to be a golf pro, he taught me how to play, then went to work for Cobra—the club company, okay? Right before we left Fort Irwin, my mom called and told me they both died of that Ebola shit, sir. You *really* want to know what we think of this?" asked an officer who'd killed five tanks this night. "Saddle up, Mr. Donner. The Blackhorse will be rolling in ten. You can expect contact right before dawn, sir." There was a dull flash on the horizon, followed a minute or so later by the rumble of distant thunder. "I guess the Apaches are starting early."

Fifteen miles to the northwest, II Corps's command post had just been destroyed.

The plan was evolving. First Squadron would pivot and drive north through remaining II Corps units. Third Squadron would come south through lighter opposition, massing the regiment for the first attack into the enemy III Corps's left flank. Ten miles away, Hamm was moving his artillery to facilitate the destruction of the remains of II Corps, whose commanders his helicopter squadron had just eliminated.

EDDINGTON REMINDED HIMSELF again that he had to keep it simple. Despite all his years of study and the name he'd assigned to his counterstroke, he *wasn't* Nathan Bedford Forrest, and this battlefield *wasn't* small enough for him to ad-lib his maneuvers, as that racist genius had done so often in the War of the Northern Aggression.

HOOTOWL was spread especially thin now, with the brigade's front almost doubled in the last ninety minutes, and that was slowing them down. Probably not a bad thing, the colonel thought. He had to be patient. The enemy force couldn't maneuver too far east for fear of running into the left of Blackhorse—assuming they knew it was there, he thought—and the ground to the west was too choppy to allow easy movement. They'd tried the middle and gotten pounded for it. So the logical move for the enemy I Corps was to try a limited envelopment maneuver, probably weighted to the east. Incoming pictures from the Predator drones started to confirm that.

THE COMMANDER OF the Immortals no longer had a proper command post to use, and so he absorbed what was left of the command post from the vanished 1st Brigade, having also learned that he had to keep moving at all times. The first order of business for him had been to reestablish contact with I Corps command, which had proved somewhat difficult, as that CP had been on the move when he'd walked into the American—it had to be American—ambush along the road to Al Artawiyah. Now I Corps was setting up again, and probably talking a lot to Army command. He broke in, got the three-star, a fellow Iranian, and told what he could as rapidly as possible.

"There cannot be more than a single brigade," his immediate superior assured him. "What will you do?"

"I shall mass my remaining forces and strike from both flanks before dawn," the divisional commander replied. It wasn't as though he had much choice in the matter, and both senior officers knew it. I Corps couldn't retreat, because the government which had ordered it to march would not countenance that. Staying still meant waiting for the Saudi forces storming down from the Kuwaiti border. The task, then, was to regain the initiative by overpowering the American blocking force by maneuver and shock effect. That was what tanks were designed to do, and he had more than four hundred still under his command.

"Approved. I will dispatch you my corps artillery. Guards Armored on your right will do the same. Accomplish your breakthrough," his fellow Iranian told him. "Then we will drive to Riyadh by dusk."

Very well, the Immortals commander thought. He ordered his 2nd Brigade to slow its advance, allowing 3rd to catch up, concentrate, and maneuver east. To his west, the Iraqis would be doing much the same in mirror image. Second would advance to contact, fix the enemy flank, and 3rd would sweep around, taking them in the rear. The center he would leave empty.

"THEY'VE STOPPED. THE lead brigade has stopped. They're eight klicks north," the brigade S-2 said. "HOOT should have visual on them in a few minutes to confirm." That explained what one of the enemy forces to his front was doing. The western group was somewhat farther back, not stopped, but moving slowly forward, evidently waiting for orders or some change in their dispositions. His opponent and his people were taking time to think.

Eddington couldn't allow that.

The only real problem with MLRS was that it had a minimum range

far less convenient than the maximum. For the second mission that night, the rocket vehicles, which hadn't really moved at all, locked their suspensions in place and elevated their launcher boxes, again aimed by electronic information only. Again the night was disturbed by the streaks of rocket trails, though this time on much lower trajectories. Tube artillery did the same, with both forces dividing their attention between the advance brigades left and right of the highway.

The purpose was more psychological than real. The mini-bomblets of the MLRS rockets would not *kill* a tank. A lucky fall atop a rear deck might disable a diesel engine, and the sides of the BMP infantry carriers could sometimes be penetrated by a nearby detonation, but these were chance events. The real effect was to make the enemy button up, to limit their ability to see, and with the falling steel rain, limit their ability to think. Officers who'd leaped from their command tanks to confer had to run back, some of them killed or wounded by the sudden barrage. Sitting safely in stationary vehicles, they heard the ping sound of fragments bounding off their armor, and peered out their vision systems to see if the artillery barrage presaged a proper attack. The less numerous 155mm artillery rounds were a greater danger, all the more so since the American gun rounds were not bursting in the air, but were "common" shells that hit the ground first. The laws of probability guaranteed that some of the vehicles would be hit—and some were, erupting into fireballs as the rest of 2nd Brigade was forced to hold in place, ordered to do so while 3rd moved up to their left. Unable to move and, with the loss of their own divisional artillery, unable to respond in kind, they could do nothing but cringe and stay alert, look out of their vehicles, and watch the shells and bomblets fall.

B-TROOP, 1ST of the 11th, moved out on schedule, spreading out and traveling due north, with the Bradley scouts in the lead and the "Battlestar" tanks half a klick behind, ready to respond to a report of contact. It provided a strange revelation to Donner. An intelligent man, and even an outdoorsman of sorts who enjoyed backpacking with his family on the Appalachian Trail, he spent as much time as he could looking out of the Bradley, and didn't have a clue as to what was really going on. He finally overcame his embarrassment and got on the interphones to ask the track commander how *he* knew, and was called forward, where he crammed himself as a third man in a space designed for two—more like one and a half, the reporter thought.

"We're here," the staff sergeant told him, touching his finger to the IVIS screen. "We're going that way. 'Cording to this, there's nobody

around to bother us, but we're looking out for that. The enemy"—he changed the display somewhat—"is here, and we're along this line."

"How far?"

"About twelve klicks and we should start to see 'cm."

"How good is this information?" Donner asked.

"It got us this far, Tom," the track commander pointed out.

The pattern of movement was annoying, and reminded the reporter of stop-and-go traffic on a Friday afternoon. The armored vehicles would dart—never faster than twenty miles per hour—from one terrain feature to another, scan ahead, then move some more. The sergeant explained that they'd move in a steadier manner on better ground, but that this part of the Saudi desert was marked by hillocks and ridges and dips that people might hide behind. The Brads were in a platoon, but actually seemed to move in pairs. Every M3 had a "wingman," a term borrowed from the Air Force.

"What if there's somebody out there?"

"Then he'll probably try to shoot at us," the staff sergeant explained. All this time, the gunner was traversing his turret left and right, searching for the glow of a warm body on the chilled ground. They could actually see better at night, Donner learned, which was why Americans had adopted the darkness as their preferred hunting time. "Stanley, come left and stop behind that bump," he ordered the driver. "If I was a grunt, I'd like that place over to the right. We'll cover Chuck as he comes around it." The turret rotated and sighted in on a larger bump, while the Bradley's wingman drove past. "Okay, Stanley, move out."

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THE ARMY OF God command section had proved devilishly hard to pin down, but now Hamm had two heloscout troops detailed to that single mission, and his electronic-intelligence section had just set up again, colocated with 2nd Squadron's headquarters troop. They'd taken to calling their target the enchilada. Locate it, and disorganize the entire enemy force. Saudi intelligence officers attached to the ELINT tracks were listening to signals. The UIR forces had encrypted radios for the senior commanders, but those were good only for talking to other people with the same equipment, and with the gradual degradation of the enemy radio network, sooner or later the enchilada would have to start talking in the clear. One Corps and two divisional command posts had been hit, two of those almost totally destroyed and the other badly disrupted. Moreover, they knew roughly where III Corps was, and Army would have to start talking to

that formation, since it was the only one so far not engaged except by a few air strikes. They didn't have to read the messages, nice though that would have been. They knew the frequency ranges for the high-command circuit, and a few minutes of traffic would enable them to localize it enough for M- and N-helicopter-scout troops to dart in and start ruining their whole morning.

It sounded like static, but digitally encrypted radios usually did. The ELINT officer, a first lieutenant, loved eavesdropping, but missed his jamming gear, which had been overlooked in the POMCUS equipment sets, probably, he thought, because that was supposed to be an Air Force mission. There was an art to this. His troopers, all military-intelligence specialists, had to tell the difference between real atmospheric static and manmade static as they swept the frequencies.

"Bingo!" One said. "Bearing three-zero-five, hissin' like a snake." It was too loud to be atmospheric noise, random though it might have sounded.

"How good?" the officer asked.

"Ninety percent, elltee." A second vehicle, slaved electronically to the first, was a klick away, providing a baseline for triangulation . . . "There." The location came up on the computer screen. The lieutenant lifted a radio for the 4th Squadron command post.

"ANGEL-SIX, this is PEEPER, we may have a posit for the enchilada...."

M-Troop's four Apaches and six Kiowas were but twenty klicks away from the position, conducting a visual search. A minute later, they turned south.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING!" Mahmoud Haji demanded. He hated using this phone-radio lash-up, and just getting in contact with his own army commander had proved difficult enough.

"We have encountered opposition south of King Khalid Military City. We are dealing with it."

"Ask him the nature of the opposition," Intelligence advised his leader.

"Perhaps your guest could tell *me* that," the general on the other side of the conversation suggested. "We're still working to find out."

"The Americans cannot have more than two brigades in theater!" the man insisted. "One more brigade-equivalent in Kuwait, but that is all!"

"Is that so? Well, I have lost more than a division in strength in the last three hours, and I still don't know what I'm facing here. Two Corps has been badly mauled. One Corps has run into something and is continuing the attack now. Three Corps is so far untouched. I can

continue the attack to Riyadh, but I need more information on what I'm facing." The commanding general, a man of sixty years, was not a fool, and he still felt that he could win. He still had about four divisions' worth of combat power. It was just a matter of directing it properly. He actually felt lucky that air attacks from American and Saudi forces had been so light. He'd learned a few other lessons fast. The disappearance of three command sections had made him cautious, at least for his own safety. He was now a full kilometer from the radio transmitters attached to his armored command vehicle, a BMP-1KSh, his handset at the end of a lengthy spool of commo wire. He himself was surrounded by a squad of soldiers, who did their best not to listen to the excitement in their commander's voice.

"DAMN, LOOK AT all those SAM tracks," a Kiowa observer said over the radio, from eight klicks north. His pilot made the call while the observer did a count.

"MARAUDER-LEAD, this is MASCOT-THREE. I think we have the enchilada."

"THREE, LEAD, go," was the terse reply.

"Six *bimps,* ten trucks, five SAM tracks, two radar tracks, and three ZSU-23s in a wadi. Recommend approach from the west, say again, approach from the west." It was far too much defensive firepower to be much of anything other than the Army of God's mobile command section. The SAM launchers were all French Crotales, and those little fuckers were scary, MASCOT-THREE knew. But they should have picked a different spot. This was one of those situations where you were better in the open, or even on high ground, so that your SAM radars could see better.

"THREE, LEAD, can you illuminate?"

"Affirmative. Tell us when. Radar tracks first."

The Apache leader, a captain, was hugging the ground to the west, creeping forward at thirty knots now, coming up on what he thought was a ridgeline that would tip over into the wadi. Slowly, slowly, letting his own mast sensor do the looking. The pilot flew the airplane like a kid learning to parallel-park, while the gunner manned the sensors.

"Hold it right there, sir," the gunner advised from his front seat.

"THREE, LEAD, start the music," the pilot called.

The Kiowa lit up its laser-illuminator, an invisible infrared beam that aimed first at the far radar track. It was actually a wheeled vehicle, but nobody was being particular. On notification that the target was lit up, the Apache tilted its nose up and loosed first one Hellfire, then another five seconds later.

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THE GENERAL HEARD the shouted warning from a thousand meters away. Only one of the radar vehicles was actually transmitting, and that intermittently as an electronic-security measure. It was radiating now, and caught the inbound missile. One of the launcher trucks rotated its four-tube mount and fired, but the Crotale lost lock when the Hellfire angled down and went harmlessly ballistic. The radar vehicle blew apart a moment later, and the second one six seconds after that. The commanding general of the Army of God stopped talking then, and ignored the incoming conversation from Tehran. There was quite literally nothing for him to do but crouch down, which his bodyguards made him do.

ALL FOUR APACHES of the troop were hovering in a semicircle now, waiting for their troop commander to ripple off his Hellfires. This he did, about five seconds apart, letting the Kiowa guide them in, switching from target to target. Next came the SAM-launcher vehicles, followed by the Russian-made gun tracks. Then there was nothing left to protect the BMP command tracks.

IT WAS UTTERLY heartless, the general saw. Men tried shooting back, but at first there was nothing to shoot at. Some people looked. Others pointed. Only a few ran. Most stayed and tried to fight. The missiles seemed to come from the west. He could see the yellow-white glow of rocket motors racing through the darkness like fireflies, but he couldn't see anything shooting them, and one after another the air defense vehicles were destroyed, then the BMPs, then the trucks. It took less than two minutes, and only then did the helicopters begin to appear. The security detachment for his mobile command post was a company of picked infantrymen. They fought back with heavy machine-gun fire and shoulder-launched rockets, but the ghostly shapes of the helicopters were too far away. The man-portable missiles couldn't seem to find them. His men tried, but then the tracers lanced out, reaching for them like beams of light into an area now bright with vehicle fires. A squad here, a section there, a pair there. The men tried to run, but the helicopters closed in, firing from only a few hundred meters away, herding them in a cruel, remorseless game. The radio handset was dead in his hand, but he still held it, watching.

“LEAD, TWO, I got a bunch to the east,” a pilot told the Apache commander.

“Get ’em,” the flight leader ordered, and one of the attack choppers ducked south around the remains of the command post.

NOTHING TO DO. No place to flee. Three of his men shouldered their weapons and fired. Others tried to run, but there was no running and no hiding. Whoever flew those aircraft were killing everything they saw. Americans. Had to be. Angry at what they’d been told. Might even be true, the general thought, and if—

“HOW D’YA SAY *tough shit* in rag-head?” the gunner asked, taking his time to make sure he got every one.

“I think they got the message,” the pilot said, turning the chopper around and scanning for additional targets.

“ANGEL-SIX, ANGEL-SIX, this is MARAUDER-SIX-ACTUAL. This sure looked like a CP, and it’s toast now,” the troop commander called. “We are RTB for bullets and gas. Out.”

“WELL, GET HIM back!” Daryaei shouted at the communications officer on the line. The intelligence chief in the room didn’t say anything, suspecting that they’d never talk to the army commander again in this lifetime. The worst part was not knowing why. His intelligence assessment on arriving American units had been correct. He was sure of that. How could so few do so much harm . . . ?

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“THEY HAD A pair of brigades—regiments, whatever—there, didn’t they?” Ryan asked, getting the latest upload from the battlefield onto his projection TV in the Sit Room.

“Yep.” General Moore nodded. He noted with some pleasure that even Admiral Jackson was pretty quiet. “Not anymore, Mr. President. Jesus, those Guardsmen are doing just fine.”

“Sir,” Ed Foley said, “just how far do you want to take this?”

“Do we have any doubts at all that it was Daryaei personally who made all these decisions?” It was, Ryan thought, a dumb question.

Why else had he told the citizens that? But he had to ask the question, and the others in the Sit Room knew why.

"None," the DCI replied.

"Then we take it all the way, Ed. Will the Russians play?"

"Yes, sir, I think they will."

Jack thought of the plague now dying out in America. Thousands of the innocent had already died, with more yet to follow. He thought of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen at risk under his distant command. He found himself thinking, even, of the UIR troops who'd followed the wrong banner and wrong ideas because they hadn't had the chance to select their country or its leader, and were now paying the price for that mistake of birthplace. If they were not completely innocent, then neither were they completely guilty, because for the most part soldiers merely did what they were told. He also found himself remembering the look in his wife's eyes when Katie had arrived by helicopter on the South Lawn. There were times when he was allowed to be a man, just like other men, except for the power he held in his hands.

"Find out," the President said coldly.

IT WAS A sunny morning in Beijing, and Adler knew more than the other people in the discussion. It hadn't been much of a detailed dispatch, just the high points, which he'd shown to the Defense attaché, and the Army colonel had told him to trust every word. But the information wasn't widely known. The TV reports had to come out over military communications nets, and because of the time of day in most of America, those hadn't reported much beyond the commencement of combat action. If the PRC was in cahoots with the UIR, they might yet believe that their distant friends held the upper hand. It was worth a try, SecState thought, sure that POTUS would back him up.

"Mr. Secretary, welcome again," the Foreign Minister said graciously. And again, Zhang was there, silent and enigmatic as he tried always to be.

"Thank you." Adler took his regular seat. It wasn't as comfortable as the one in Taipei.

"These new developments—can it be true?" his official host asked.

"That is the public position of my President and my country," the Secretary of State replied. Thus it had to be true.

"Do you have sufficient forces to protect your interests in that region?"

"Minister, I am not a military expert, and I cannot comment on that," Adler replied. That was entirely true, but a man in a position of strength would probably have said something else.

"It would be a great misfortune if you cannot," Zhang observed.

It might have been fun to inquire about the PRC's position on the matter, but the answer would have been neutral and meaningless. Nor would they have said anything about the presence of the *Eisenhower* battle group, now flying patrols over the "international waters" of the Formosa Strait. The trick was to make them say anything at all.

"The world situation occasionally requires reexamination of one's position on many things, and one must sometimes think carefully about one's friendships," Adler tried. It lay on the table for half a minute.

"We have been friends since your President Nixon first courageously came here," the Foreign Minister said after reflection. "And we remain so, despite the occasional misunderstanding."

"That is good to hear, Minister. We have a saying about friendship in time of need." Okay, think about that one. Maybe the news reports are true. Maybe your friend Daryaei will succeed. The bait dangled for another fifteen seconds.

"Really, our only area of permanent discord is America's position on what your President inadvertently called the 'two Chinas.' If only this could be regularized . . . ," the Minister mused.

"Well, as I told you, the President was trying to express himself to reporters in a confusing situation."

"And we are to disregard it?"

"America continues to feel that a peaceful solution to this provincial dispute serves the interests of all parties." That was status quo ante, a position established by a strong, confident America whom China would not challenge openly.

"Peace is always preferable to conflict," Zhang said. "But how long must we show such great forbearance? These recent events have only served to illustrate the central problem."

A very small push, Adler noted: "I understand your frustration, but we all know that patience is the most valuable of virtues."

"At some point, patience becomes indulgence." The Foreign Minister reached for his tea. "A helpful word from America would be most gratefully received."

"You ask that we alter our policy somewhat?" SecState wondered if Zhang would speak again after altering the course of the conversation ever so slightly.

"Merely that you see the logic of the situation. It would make the friendship of our two nations far more substantial, and it is, after all, a minor issue to countries such as ours."

"I see," Adler replied. And he did. It was certain now. He congratulated himself for making them tip their hand. The next call on this would have to be made in Washington, assuming they had the

time there for something other than a shooting war.

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THE 10TH ACR crossed back into Saudi territory at 0330L. The Buffalo Cav was now spread in a line thirty miles across. In another hour, they would be astride the UIR army's supply line, having gotten here without any notice. The force was moving faster now, almost thirty miles in an hour. His lead elements had found a few patrol and internal-security units in UIR territory, mainly single vehicles which had been dispatched immediately upon sighting. There would be more now, as soon as they hit the next road. It would be MP units at first—whatever the enemy called them—used for traffic control. There had to be a lot of fuel rolling down the road to KKMC, and that was the first mission of the Buffalo Soldiers.

SECOND BRIGADE OF the Immortals had been under fire for nearly an hour, when orders came to go forward, and the armored vehicles of the former Iranian armored division moved with a will. The two-star in command was in back of the flanking 3rd Brigade now, listening rather than talking, wondering about and thankful for the absence of American air power. Corps artillery had arrived and set up without firing to reveal its presence. They might not last long, but he wanted the benefit of their presence. The opposing force could hardly be as much as a full brigade on this side of the highway, and he had double that—and even if he did face a complete brigade, then his Iraqi comrades on the far side would loop around to support him, as he would for them if he found a clear field. Over the radio, on the move in order to prevent being attacked by artillery or helicopters, he exhorted his commanders to press the attack, as he followed on in an open-topped command vehicle. Now, if his enemy would just sit still in the positions they'd held successfully for the first attack, he would see about things....

LOBO PASSED PHASE-LINE MANASSAS twenty minutes late, to the quiet anger of Colonel Eddington, who thought that he'd allowed ample time for the maneuver. But that damned criminal lawyer a redundancy, he'd joked more than once—commanding HOOTOWL was well forward again, covering the right while his battalion XO took the left, calling fire but not taking any shots of his own.

"WOLFPACK-SIX, this is HOOT-SIX, over."

"SIX-ACTUAL, HOOT," Eddington replied.

"They're coming on, sir, two brigades on line, packed in pretty close, advancing over phase-line HIGHPOINT right now."

"How close are you, Colonel?"

"Three thousand. I am pulling my people back now." They had designated safe-travel lanes for that. HOOT hoped that everybody remembered where they were. The redeployment would take them east, to screen the right edge of the flanking battalion task force.

"Okay, clear the field, counselor."

"Roger that, Professor Eddington. HOOTOWL is flying," the misplaced lawyer replied. "Out." In a minute he told his driver to see how fast he could go in the dark. It was something the NASCAR fan was just as pleased as hell to demonstrate.

The same report arrived four minutes later from the left. His one brigade was facing four. It was time to narrow those odds some. His artillery battalion shifted fire. His tank and Bradley commanders started sweeping the horizon for movement, and the three mechanized battalions started rolling forward to meet their enemy on the move. Company and platoon commanders checked their lines for proper interval. The battalion commander was in his own command tank on the left side of the line. The S-3 operations officer backed up the right. As usual, the Bradleys were slightly back on the fifty-four Abrams tanks, their mission to sweep the field for infantry and support vehicles.

The falling artillery was common shell, and now VT proximity, to make life very hard on tanks with open hatches and people dumb enough to be in the open. Nobody thought of armored knights. The battlefield was too dispersed for that. It was more like a naval battle fought on a sandy, rocky sea which was every bit as hostile to human life as the conventional kind, and about to become more so. Eddington stayed with WHITEFANG, which was essentially an advancing reserve force, as it became clear that the enemy was advancing on both flanks, and leaving the center with a screening force, if anything.

"Contact," a platoon leader called on his company net. "I have enemy armored vehicles at five thousand meters." He checked his IVIS display to confirm, again, that there were no friendlies out there. Good. HOOTOWL was clear. There was only a Red Force to his front.

THE MOON WAS up now, less than a quarter of a waning moon, but it lit up the land enough for the lead Immortals to see movement on their visible horizon. The men of 2nd Brigade, furious at the pounding they'd taken in their wait to advance, were loaded up. Some of them

had laser range-finders, which showed targets at nearly double their effective range. That word, too, went up the line, and back down came orders to increase speed, the quicker to close the distance and get out of the indirect fire that had to stop soon. Gunners centered on targets that were still too far away, in anticipation of that changing in two minutes or less. They felt their mounts speed up, heard the words of their tank commanders to stand by. There were enough targets to count now, and the opposing numbers were not impressive. They had the advantage. They must have, the Immortals all thought.

But why were the Americans advancing toward them?

"COMMENCE FIRING AT four thousand meters," the company commander told his crews. The Abrams tanks were spread nearly five hundred meters apart in two staggered lines, covering a lot of ground for one mounted battalion. The TCs mainly kept their heads up and out of the vehicles for the approach phase, then ducked down to activate their own fire-control systems.

"I'm on one," one gunner told his TC. "T-80, identified, range forty-two-fifty."

"Setting?" the tank commander asked, just to make sure.

"Set on Sabot. Loader, all silver bullets till I say different."

"I hear you, gunner. Just don't miss any."

"Forty-one," the gunner breathed. He waited for another fifteen seconds and became the first in his company to fire, and to kill. The sixty-two-ton tank staggered with the shot, then kept moving.

"Target, cease fire, target tank at eleven," the TC said over the interphones.

The loader stomped his boot down on the pedal, opened the ammo doors, and yanked out another "silver bullet" round, then turned in a graceful move, first to guide, then to slam the mainly plastic round into the breech.

"Up!" he called.

"Identified!" the gunner told the TC.

"Fire!"

"On the way!" A pause. The tracer flew true. "Right through the dot!"

Commander: "Target! Cease fire! Traverse right, target tank at one."

Loader: "Up!"

Gunner: "Identified!"

Commander: "Fire!"

"On the waaaaay!" the gunner said, squeezing off his third shot in eleven seconds.

It wasn't like reality, the battalion commander saw, really too busy

watching to take his own shots. It was like an advancing wave. First the lead rank of T-80s blew up, just a handful of misses that were corrected five seconds later, as the second rank of enemy vehicles started to go. They started to return fire. The flashes looked like the Hoffman simulation charges he'd so recently seen at the NTC, and turned out to be just as harmless. Enemy rounds were marked with their own tracers, and all of their first volley fell short. Some of the T-80s got off a second shot. None got off a third.

"Jesus, sir, give me a target!" his gunner called.

"Pick one."

"Bimp, " the gunner said, mainly to himself. He fired off a high-explosive round, and got a kill at just over four thousand meters, but as before, the battle was over in less than a minute. The American line advanced. Some of the BMPs launched missiles, but now they were being engaged by tanks and Bradleys. Vehicles exploded, filling the sky with fire and smoke. Now individual men were visible, mainly running, some turning to fire or trying to deploy. The tank gunners, with nothing large left to shoot, switched to the coaxial machine guns. The Bradleys pulled up level with the tanks, and they did the serious hunting.

The lead line of tanks passed through the smoking wreckage of the Immortals division less than four minutes after the first volley. Turrets traversed left and right, looking for targets. Tank commanders had their heads back up, hands on their top-mounted heavy machine guns. Where fire originated, it was returned, and at first there was a race to see who could kill the most, because there is an excitement, a *rush* to battle unknown to those who have never felt it, the feeling of godlike power, the ability to make a life-and-death decision and then enforce it at the touch of a finger. More than that, these Guardsmen knew why they were here, knew what they had been sent to avenge. In some, that rage lasted for some minutes, as the vehicles rolled forward, grinding along at less than ten miles per hour, like farm tractors or harvesting combines, collecting life and converting it to death, looking like something from the dawn of time, utterly inhuman, utterly heartless.

But then it began to stop. It stopped being duty. It stopped being revenge. It stopped being the fun they'd expected it to be. It became murder, and one by one, the men on the weapons realized what they themselves were supposed to be and what they might become if they didn't turn away from this. It wasn't like being an aviator, hundreds of meters away, shooting at shapes that moved comically in their aiming systems and were never really human beings at all. These men were closer. They could see the faces and the wounds now, and the harmless backs of people running away. Even those fools who still

shot back attracted pity from the gunners who dispatched them, but soon the futility of it was clear to everyone, and soldiers who'd arrived in the desert with rage grew sick at what the rage had become. The guns gradually fell silent, by common consent rather than order, as resistance stopped, and with it the need to kill. Battalion Task Force LOBO rolled completely through the smoking ruin of two heavy brigades, searching for targets worthy of professional attention, rather than personal, from which they had to turn away.

THERE WAS NOTHING left to be done. The general stood and walked away from his command vehicle, beckoning for the crew to do the same. On his order, they put their weapons down and stood on high ground to wait. They didn't have to wait long. The sun was rising. The first glow of orange was to the east, announcing a new day far different from the old.

THE FIRST CONVOY rolled right in front of them, thirty fuel trucks, driving at a good clip, and the drivers must have taken the south-moving vehicles for those of their own army. The Bradley gunners of I-Troop, 3rd of the 10th, took care of that with a series of shots that ignited the first five trucks. The rest of them halted, two of them turning over and exploding on their own when their drivers rolled them into ditches in their haste to escape. The Bradley crews mainly let the people get clear, plinked the trucks with high-explosive rounds, and kept moving south past the bewildered drivers, who just stood there and watched them pass.

IT WAS A Bradley that found him. The vehicle pulled to within fifty meters before stopping. The general who, twelve hours before, had commanded a virtually intact armored division didn't move or resist. He stood quite still, as four infantrymen appeared from the back of the M2A4, advancing with rifles out, while their track covered his detail with even more authority.

"On the ground!" the corporal called.

"I will tell my men. I speak English. They do not," the general said, then kept his word. His soldiers went facedown. He continued to stand, perhaps hoping that he could die.

"Get those hands up, partner." This corporal was a police officer in civilian life. The officer—he didn't know what kind yet, but the

uniform was too spiffy for a grunt—complied. The corporal next handed his rifle off and drew a pistol, walked in, and held it to the man's head while he searched him expertly. "Okay, you can get down now. If you play smart, nobody gets hurt. Please tell your men that. We will kill them if we have to, but we ain't going to murder anybody, okay?"

"I will tell them."

WITH THE COMING of daylight, Eddington got back into the helicopter he'd borrowed, and flew to survey the battlefield. It was soon plain that his brigade had crushed two complete divisions. He ordered his screen forward to scout ahead for the pursuit phase that had to come next, then called Diggs for instructions on what he was supposed to do with prisoners. Before anyone figured that out, a chopper arrived from Riyadh with a television crew.

EVEN BEFORE THE pictures got out, the rumors did, as they always do in countries lacking a free press. A telephone call arrived in the home of a Russian embassy official. It came just before seven, and awakened him, but he was out of his house in minutes and driving his car through quiet streets to the rendezvous point with a man who, he thought, was finally crossing the line to become an agent of the RVS.

The Russian spent ten extra minutes checking his back, but anyone following him this morning would have to be invisible, and he imagined that a lot of the Ayatollah's security forces had been called up.

"Yes?" he said on meeting the man. There wasn't much time for formalities.

"You are right. Our army was—defeated last night. They called me in at three for an opinion of American intentions, and I heard it all. We cannot even talk with our units. The army commander simply vanished. The Foreign Ministry is in a panic."

"As well it might be," the diplomat thought. "I should tell you that the Turkoman leader has—"

"We know. He called Daryaei last night to ask if the plague story was true."

"And what did your leader say?"

"He said that it was an infidel lie—what do you expect?" The official paused. "He was not entirely persuasive. Whatever you said to the man, he is neutralized. India has betrayed us—I learned about that, too. China does not yet know."

"If you expect *them* to stand with you, you have violated your religion's laws on the consumption of alcohol. Of course, my government stands with America as well. You are quite alone," the Russian told him. "I need some information."

"What information?"

"The location of the germ factory. I need that today."

"The experimental farm north of the airport."

That easy? the Russian thought. "How can you be sure?"

"The equipment was bought from the Germans and the French. I was in the commercial section then. If you wish to confirm, it should be easy. How many farms have guards in uniform?" the man asked helplessly.

The Russian nodded. "I will see about that. There are other problems. Your country will soon be fully—by which I mean *completely*—at war with America. My country may be able to offer her good offices to negotiate a settlement of some kind. If you whisper the right word into the right ear, our ambassador is at your disposal, and then you will have done the world a service."

"That is simple. By noon we will be looking for a way out of this."

"There is no way out for your government. None," the RVS officer emphasized.

63

THE RYAN DOCTRINE

WARS USUALLY BEGIN AT exact moments in time, but most often end neither cleanly nor precisely. Daylight found the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in command of yet another battlefield, having completed the destruction of one of UIR II Corps's divisions. The other division was now facing the Saudi 2nd Brigade, which was attacking from the rising sun while the American unit halted again to refuel and rearm in preparation for the continued attack on III Corps, still not decisively engaged.

But that was already changing. Those two divisions now had the full and undivided attention of all tactical aircraft in theater. First their air defense assets were targeted. Every radar which switched on drew the attention of **HARM H**igh-speed **A**nti-**R**adiation **M**issile—equipped F-16s, and in two hours the skies were friendly to American and Saudi pilots. UIR fighters made an effort to strike down from their home bases to defend their beleaguered ground forces, but none made it past the radarfighter screen set up well beyond the location of the forces they had been dispatched to support. They lost over sixty aircraft in the futile attempt. It was easier for them to lash out at the Kuwaiti brigades which had so impudently invaded their vastly larger and more powerful neighbor. The small air force of that country was on its own for most of the day, and the battle had little strategic relevance. The routes across the swamps were cut and would take days to repair. The resulting air battle was more a display of mutual anger than anything else, and here, too, the Kuwaiti forces held the day, not spectacularly so, but giving three kills for every one they absorbed. For a small country learning the martial arts, it was a battle that men would talk of for years, the magnitude of their deeds growing with every recounting. Yet all the deaths on this day would be useless, lives wasted in mere punctuation of a decision already reached.

Over III Corps, with the SAMs taken out, attention turned to more structured murder. There were over six hundred tanks on the ground, another eight hundred infantry carriers, more than two hundred pieces of towed and self-propelled artillery, several thousand trucks,

and thirty thousand men, all of them well inside a foreign nation and trying to escape. The F-15E Strike Eagles circled at about 15,000 feet, almost loitering on low power settings, while the weapons-systems operators selected targets one by one for laser-guided bombs. The air was clear, the sun was bright, and the battlefield was flat. It was far easier than any exercise in the Nellis bombing range. Lower down in different hunting patches, F-16s joined in with Maverick and conventional bombs. Before noon, III Corps's three-star commander, correctly thinking himself the senior ground officer, ordered a general retreat, gathered up the support trucks laagered in KKMC, and tried to get his units out in something resembling order. Bombs falling on him from above, the Saudi 5th Brigade approaching from the east, and an American force closing on his rear, he turned northwest, hoping to cross back into friendly territory at the same point he had entered. On the ground, his vehicles used smoke to obscure themselves as best they could, which somewhat frustrated the allied aviators, who did not, however, come down low to press their attacks, since the UTR forces might have shot back with some effect. That gave the commander hope that he might make it back with something like two-thirds of his strength. Fuel was not a concern. The combined fuel trucks for the entire Army of God were with his corps now.

DIGGS STOPPED OFF first to see Eddington's brigade. He'd seen the sights and smelled the smells before. Tanks could burn for a surprisingly long time, as much as two days, from all the fuel and ammunition they carried, and the stink of diesel oil and chemical propellants served to mask the revolting stench of burning human flesh. Armed enemies were always things to be killed, but dead ones soon enough became objects of pity, especially slaughtered as they had been. But only a few, in relative terms, had died by the guns of the men from Carolina. Many more had surrendered. Those had to be gathered, disarmed, counted, and set to work, mainly in disposing of the bodies of their fallen comrades. It was a fact as old as warfare, and the lesson for the defeated was always the same: *This is why you don't want to mess with us again.*

"Now what?" Eddington asked, a cigar in his teeth. The victors suffered through many mood swings on the battlefield. Arriving in confusion and haste, facing the unknown with concealed fear, entering battle with determination—and, in their case, with such wrath as they had never felt—winning with exhilaration, and then feeling horror at the carnage and pity for the vanquished. The cycle changed anew. Most of the mechanized units had reorganized over the last few hours, and were ready to move again, while their own MPs and arriving

Saudi units took possession of the prisoners gathered by the line units.

"Just sit tight," Diggs replied, to Eddington's disappointment and relief. "The remains are running hard. You'd never catch them, and we don't have orders to invade."

"They just came at us in the same old way," the Guard colonel said, remembering Wellington. "And we stopped them in the same old way. What a terrible business."

"Bobby Lee, remember, Chancellorsville?"

"Oh, yeah. He was right, too. Those couple of hours, Diggs, getting things set up, maneuvering my battalions, getting the information, acting on it." He shook his head. "I never knew anything could feel like that . . . but now . . ."

" 'It is good that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it.' Funny thing is, you forget sometimes. Those poor bastards," the general said, watching fifty men being herded off to trucks for the ride back to the rear. "Clean up, Colonel. Get your units put back together. There may be orders to move, but I don't think so."

"Three Corps?"

"Ain't goin' far, Nick. We're 'keepin' up the skeer' and we're running them right into the 10th."

"So you know Bedford Forrest after all." It was one of the Confederate officer's most important aphorisms. *Keep up the skeer:* never give a fleeing enemy the chance to rest; harry him, punish him, force him into additional errors, run him into the ground. Even if it really didn't matter anymore.

"My doctoral dissertation was on Hitler as a political manipulator. I didn't much like him, either." Diggs smiled and saluted. "You and your people did just fine, Nick. Glad to have you on this trip."

"Wouldn't have missed it, sir."

THE VEHICLE HAD diplomatic tags, but the driver and passenger knew that such things had not always been respected in Tehran. Things changed in a country at war, and you could often spot previously clandestine facilities by the fact that they got more guards in time of trouble instead of remaining the same. The latter would have been far smarter, but everyone did it. The car halted. The driver lifted binoculars. The passenger lifted a camera. Sure enough, the experimental farm had armed men around the research building, and that wasn't the normal sort of thing, was it? It was just that easy. The car turned in the road and headed back to the embassy.

THEY WERE GETTING only stragglers. The Blackhorse was in full pursuit now, and this tail chase was proving to be a long one. American vehicles were better and generally faster than those they were pursuing, but it was easier to run than to chase. Pursuers had to be a little careful about possible ambushes, and the lust to kill more of the enemy was muted by the concern at dying in a war already won. Enemy disorder had allowed the 11th to pull in tight, and the right-flank units were now in radio contact with the advancing Saudis, who were just now finishing off the last few battalions of II Corps and thinking about engaging III in a final decisive battle.

"Target tank," one TC said. "Ten o'clock, forty-one hundred."

"Identified," the gunner said as the Abrams halted to make the shot easier.

"Hold fire," the TC said suddenly. "They're bailing out. Give 'em a few seconds."

"Right." The gunner could see it, too. The T-80's main gun was pointed away, in any case. They waited for the crew to make a hundred meters or so.

"Okay, take it."

"On the way." The breech recoiled, the tank jolted, and the round flew. Three seconds later, one more tank turret blew straight up. "Jack-in-the-box."

"Target. Cease fire. Driver, move out," the TC ordered. That made the twelfth kill for their tank. The crew wondered what the unit record would be, while the TC made a position notation for the three-man enemy crew on his IVIS box, which automatically told the regimental security detail where to pick them up. The advancing cavalrymen gave them a wide berth. Unlikely though it was, one of them might shoot or do something stupid, and they had neither the time nor the inclination to waste ammunition. One more battle to fight, unless the other side got some brains and just called it a day.

"COMMENTS?" POTUS ASKED.

"Sir, it sets a precedent," Cliff Rutledge replied.

"That's the idea," Ryan said. They were getting the battlefield video first, unedited. It included the usual horrors, body parts of those ripped to shreds by high explosives, whole bodies of those whose deaths had come from some mysterious cause, a hand reaching out of a personnel carrier whose interior still smoked, some poor bastard who'd almost gotten out, but not quite. There had to be something about carrying a mini-cam that just drew people to that sort of thing. The dead were dead, and the dead were all victims in one way or another—more than one way, Ryan thought. These soldiers of two

previously separate countries and one overlapping culture had died at the hands of armed Americans, but they'd been sent to death by a man whose orders they'd had to follow, who had miscalculated, and who had been willing to use their lives as tokens, gambling chips, quarters in a big slot machine whose arm he'd yanked to see what would result. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Power carried responsibility. Jack knew that he would hand-write a letter to the family of every dead American, just as George Bush had done in 1991. The letters would serve two purposes. They would, perhaps, be some measure of comfort to the families of the lost. They would, certainly, remind the man who had ordered them to the field that the dead had once been living. He wondered what their faces had been like. Probably no different from the Guardsmen who'd formed that honor guard at Indianapolis, the day of his first public appearance. They looked the same, but each human life was individual, the most valuable possession of its owner, and Ryan had played a part in stripping it away, and though he knew it had been necessary, it was also necessary for him, now and for as long as he sat in this building, to remember that they were more than just faces. And that, he told himself, is the difference. I know about my responsibility. *He* doesn't know about *his. He* still lived with the illusion that people were responsible to him, and not the reverse.

"It's political dynamite, Mr. President," van Damm said.

"So?"

"There is a legal problem," Pat Martin told them. "It violates the executive order that President Ford put in place."

"I know about that one," Ryan responded. "But who decides the executive orders?"

"The Chief Executive, sir," Martin answered.

"Draft me a new one."

"WHAT IS THAT smell?" Back at the Indiana motel, the truck drivers were out for the morning dance of moving the trucks around to protect the tires. They were sick of this place by now, and heartily wished the travel ban would be lifted soon. One driver had just exercised his Mack, and parked it back next to the cement truck. Spring was turning warm, and the metal bodies of the trucks turned the interiors into ovens. In the case of the cement truck, it was having an effect its owners hadn't thought about. "You got a fuel leak?" he asked Holbrook, then bent down to look. "No, your tank's okay."

"Maybe somebody had a little spill over at the pumps," the Mountain Man suggested.

"Don't think so. They just hosed it down a while ago. We better find

this. I seen a KW burn once 'cuz some mechanic fucked up. Killed the driver, that was on I-40 back in '85. Hell of a mess." He continued to walk around. "You got a leak somewhere, ol' buddy. Let's check your fuel pump," he said next, turning the locks on the hood panels.

"Hey, uh, wait a minute—I mean—"

"Don't sweat it, pard, I know how to fix the things. I save a good five grand a year doing my own work." The hood went up, and the trucker looked inside, reached to shake a few hoses, then felt the fuel-line connectors. "Okay, they're all right." Next he looked at the line to the injectors. One nut was a little loose, but that was just the lock, and he twisted that back in place. There wasn't anything unusual. He bent down again to look underneath. "Nothin' drippin'. Damn," he concluded, standing back up. Next he checked the wind. Maybe the smell was coming from . . . no. He could smell breakfast cooking in the restaurant, his next stop of the day. The smell was coming from right here . . . something else, too, not just diesel, now that he thought about it.

"What's the problem, Coots?" another driver asked, walking over.

"Smell that?" And both men stood there, sniffing the air like woodchucks.

"Somebody got a bad tank?"

"Not that I can see." The first one looked at Holbrook. "Look, I don't want to be unneighborly, but I'm an owner-operator, and I get nervous about my rig, y'know? Would you mind moving your truck over there? And I'd have somebody give the engine a look, okay?"

"Hey, sure, no problem, don't mind a bit." Holbrook remounted his truck, started it, and drove it slowly off, turning to park in a fairly vacant part of the lot. The other two watched him do it.

"The goddamned smell went away, didn't it, Coots?"

"That is a sick truck."

"Fuck 'im. About time for the news. Come on." The other driver waved.

"Whoa!" they heard on entering the restaurant. The TV was tuned to CNN. The scene looked like something from the special-effects department of a major studio. Nothing like that ever was real. But this was.

"Colonel, what happened last night?"

"Well, Barry, the enemy came in on us twice. The first time," Eddington explained, holding a cigar in his extended hand, "we sat on that ridge back there. The second time, we were advancing, and so were they, and we met right about here . . ." The camera turned to show two tanks heading up the road, past where the colonel was giving his lecture.

"I bet those fuckers are fun to drive," Coots said.

"I bet they're fun to shoot." The scene changed again. The reporter's familiar, handsome face was covered with dust, with the bags of exhaustion under his eyes.

"This is Tom Donner, with the press team assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. How can I describe the night we had? I've been riding with this Bradley crew, and our vehicle and the rest of B-Troop have gone through—I don't know how many of the enemy in the past twelve hours. It was *War of the Worlds* in Saudi Arabia last night, and we were the Martians.

"The UIR forces—the ones we faced were a mix of Iraqis and Iranians—fought back, or tried to, but nothing they did . . ."

"Shit, wish they'd've sent my unit," a highway patrolman said, taking his usual seat for his beginning-of-watch coffee. He'd gotten to know some of the drivers.

"Smoky, you have those in the Ohio Guard?" Coots asked.

"Yeah, my unit's armored cavalry. Those boys from Carolina had a big night. Jesus." The cop shook his head, and in the mirror noticed a man walking in from the parking lot.

"Enemy forces are in full flight now. You've just had a report from the National Guard force that defeated two complete armored divisions—"

"That many! Wow," the cop observed, sipping his coffee.

"—the Blackhorse has annihilated another. It was like watching a movie. It was like watching a football game between the NFL and the Pop Warner League."

"Welcome to the bigs, you bastards," Coots told the TV screen.

"Hey, is that your cement truck?" the cop asked, turning.

"Yes, sir," Holbrook answered, stopping on the way to join his friend for breakfast.

"Make sure it don't blow the hell up on you," Coots said, not turning his head.

"What the hell is a cement truck from Montana doing here?" the cop asked lightly. "Huh?" he added to Coots.

"He's got some kinda fuel problem. We asked him to move the rig. Thanks, by the way," he added. "Don't mean to be unneighborly, buddy."

"It's all right. I'll have it checked for sure."

"Why all the way from Montana?" the cop inquired again.

"Well, uh, we bought it there, and bringing it east for our business, y'know?"

"Hmmm." Attention returned to the TV.

"Yes, they were coming south, and we drove right into them!" a Kuwaiti officer was telling another reporter now. He patted the gun tube of his tank with the affection he might have shown a prize

stallion, a little man who'd grown about a foot in the last day or so, along with his country.

"Any word on when we can get back to work, Smoky?" Coots asked the cop.

The highway patrolman shook his head. "You know as much as I do. When I leave here, I go up to the line to play roadblock some more."

"Yeah, all that good ticket money you're losin', Smoky Bear!" a driver commented with a chuckle.

"I didn't notice the tags. Why the hell drive a cement truck in from Montana?" Coots wondered. Those guys just didn't fit in.

"Maybe he got it cheap," the cop thought, finishing his coffee. "I don't have anything on the sheet about a hot one. Damn, I wonder if anyone ever stole one of those?"

"Not that I heard of—zap!" Coots said. The current shot was of smart bombs. "At least it can't hurt much."

"Y'all have a good one," the cop said on the way out. He entered his Chevy patrol car and headed back to the highway, then decided to give the cement truck a look. Might as well run the tag, he thought. Maybe it was hot. Then he smelled it, too, and to the cop it wasn't the diesel ... ammonia . . . ? It was a smell he'd always associated with ice cream, having once worked a summer in a plant which made it . . . and also with the smell of propellant in his National Guard cavalry unit. His curiosity aroused, he drove back to the cafe. "Excuse me, gentlemen, is that your truck parked over on the edge?" "Yeah, why?" Brown asked. "We do something wrong?"

It was his hands that betrayed him. The cop saw them twitch. Something was definitely not right. "Would you gentlemen come with me, please?"

"Wait a minute, what's the beef here?"

"No beef. I just want to know what that smell is. Fair enough?"

"We're going to have it looked at."

"You're going to have it looked at right now, gentlemen." He gestured. "If you would, please?"

The cop followed them out, got back into his car, and drove behind them as they walked to the truck. They were talking back and forth. Something just wasn't right. His fellow highway cops were not terribly busy at the moment, and on instinct he called another car for backup, and told his headquarters to run the truck tag. That done, he got out and looked up at the truck again.

"You want to turn it over?"

"Okay, sure." Brown got in and cranked the engine, which was noisy enough.

"What is going on here?" the cop asked Holbrook. "Could I see some identification, please?"

"Hey, I don't understand what the beef is."

"No beef, sir, but I do want to see your ID."

Pete Holbrook pulled out his wallet as another police car arrived. Brown saw it, too, looked down to see Holbrook's wallet in his hand, and the cop's hand on the butt of his pistol. It was just the way cops stood, but Brown didn't think of that. Neither Mountain Man had a gun handy. They had them in their room, but hadn't thought to carry them to breakfast. The policeman took Pete's driver's license, then walked back to his car, lifting the microphone—

"The tag is clean, not in the computer as hot," the lady at the station informed him.

"Thank you." He tossed the mike back inside and walked back to Peter Holbrook, twirling the license in his hand—

Brown saw a cop with his friend, another cop, they'd just talked on the radio—

The highway patrolman looked up in surprise as the truck jerked forward. He yelled and pointed for the man to stop. The second car moved to block him, and then the cement truck did stop. That did it. Something was just not right.

"Out!" he shouted, his pistol in his hands now. The second officer took control of Holbrook, not having a clue what this was all about. Brown stepped down, and felt his collar grabbed and himself thrust against the body of the truck. "What is the matter with you?" the cop demanded. It would take hours to find out, and then a very interesting time at the truck stop.

THERE WAS NOTHING for him to do but scream, and that, uncharacteristically, he did. The video was undeniable. There was an instant respectability to global TV, and he couldn't stop it from going out. The affluent in his country had their own satellite dishes, and so did many others, including little neighborhood groups. What would he do now? Order them turned off?

"Why aren't they attacking?" Daryaei demanded.

"The Army commander and all corps commanders are off the air. We have some contact with two of our divisions only. One brigade reported it is heading north with enemy forces in pursuit."

"And?"

"And our forces have been defeated," Intelligence said.

"But how?"

"Does that matter?"

THEY CAME ON north. Buffalo came on south. UIR III Corps didn't know what lay ahead. The discovery took place in midafternoon. Masterman's 1st Squadron had so far eliminated a hundred or so fuel and other trucks, more than the other two battalions. The only question now was how much resistance the enemy would display. From air coverage, he knew exactly where the advancing force was, in what strength and concentration, and in what direction. It was much easier than the last time he'd seen action.

A-Troop was screening in advance, with B and C three klicks back, and the tank company in reserve. As fearful a pounding as their UIR forces were taking, he decided not to use his own artillery yet. No sense warning them that tanks were close by. With contact less than ten minutes away, he shifted A-Troop to the right. Unlike the first—and only previous—battle in his career, Duke Masterman wouldn't really see this one. Instead, he listened to it on the radio.

A-Troop engaged at extreme range with both gun tubes and TOW missiles, and crumpled the first ragged line of vehicles. The troop commander estimated at least battalion strength as he engaged them from their left-front, approaching obliquely in the planned opening maneuver. This UIR division was Iraqi in origin and recoiled the other way, without realizing that it was being herded right into two more cavalry troops.

"This is GULDON-SIX. Punch left, say again punch left," Masterman ordered from his command track. B and C turned to the east, sprinted about three kilometers, then wheeled back. At about the same time, Masterman let his artillery fire into the enemy's second echelon. There was no surprise to lose now, and it was time to hurt the enemy in every possible way. In another few minutes, it was clear that he was engaging at least a brigade with the 1st Squadron of the Buffalo, but the numbers didn't matter any more now than they had during the night.

For one last time, there was a mechanistic horror. The gun flashes were less brilliant in the light of day, and tanks drove through the dust of their own shots as they advanced. As planned, the enemy force recoiled again from the devastating effects of B- and C-Troop, turning back, hoping to find a gap between the first attacking force and the second. What they found were fourteen M1A2s of the squadron's tank company, spaced two hundred meters apart like a breakwater. As before, first the tanks were destroyed, then the mechanized infantry carriers, as GUIDON rolled into the enemy formation. Then it stopped. Vehicles not yet engaged stopped moving. Crews hopped out and ran away from them. It was the same, Masterman heard, all the way west on the line. Surprised, running, their exit blocked, the soldiers lucky enough to see what was rolling toward them in time decided that

resistance was surely fatal, and the Third (and last) Battle of KKMC stopped thirty minutes after it had begun.

It wasn't quite that easy for the invaders. Advancing Saudi forces, finally in heavy contact, fought a deliberate battle, grinding their way through another brigade, this one Iranian and therefore getting more attention than an Arab unit might have, but by sunset, all six of the UIR divisions that had entered their country were destroyed. Sub-units with some lingering fight in them were ordered to surrender by senior officers, before enemies on three sides could enforce a more final decision.

The biggest administrative headache, as before, was the prisoners, all the worse with the additional confusion of nightfall. That problem would last for at least a day, commanders reported. Fortunately, in most cases the UIR soldiers had water and rations of their own. They were moved away from their equipment and placed under guard, but this far from home, there was little danger of their striking across the desert on foot.

CLARK AND CHAVEZ left the Russian embassy an hour after nightfall. In the back of their car was a large suitcase whose contents would not appear overly dangerous to anyone, and was in fact largely in keeping with their journalistic cover. The mission, they decided, was slightly crazy, but while that troubled the senior member of the team somewhat, it had Ding rather juiced. The premise of it seemed incredible, however, and that had to be verified. The drive to the alley behind the coffee shop was uneventful. The security perimeter around Daryaei's home stopped short of their destination. The coffee shop was closed, what with the blackout conditions imposed on a city half at war and half at peace—streetlights were off, and windows draped, but cars were allowed to drive about with lights, and domestic electricity was evidently on. That worked to their benefit. The door lock was easily defeated in the unlit alley. Chavez eased the door open and looked inside. Clark followed, lugging the case, and both men went inside, closing the door behind them. They were already on the second floor when they heard noises. A family lived here. It turned out to be a husband and wife in their fifties, proprietors of the eating place, watching television. Had the mission been properly planned, he knew, they would have established that sooner. Oh, well.

"Hello," Clark said quietly. "Please do not make any noise."

"What—"

"We will not hurt you," John said as Ding looked around for—yes, electric cords would do just fine. "Please lie down on the floor."

"Who—"

"We will let you go when we leave," Clark went on in literate Farsi. "But if you resist, we must hurt you."

They were too terrified to resist the two men who had appeared like thieves in their home. Clark used the light cords to tie their arms, then their ankles. Chavez laid them on their sides, first getting the woman some water before he gagged her.

"Make sure they can breathe," Clark said, in English this time. He checked all the knots, pleased that he remembered his basic seamanship skills from thirty years before. Satisfied, they went upstairs.

The truly crazy part was the communications lash-up. Chavez opened the case and started taking things out. The roof of the building was flat, and had a clear line of sight to another such building three blocks away. For that reason, they had to keep low. First of all, Ding set up the mini-dish. The tripod for it was heavy, with spiked feet to secure it to the roof. Next he had to turn it, to get the buzzing chirp of the carrier signal from the proper satellite. That done, he twisted the clamp to lock the dish in place. Then came the camera. This, too, had a tripod. Chavez set that up, screwed the camera in place, and aimed it, switching it on and pointing it at the center of the three buildings that held their interest. Then the cable from the camera went into the transmitter/power-supply box, which they left in the opened suitcase.

"It's running, John."

The odd part was that they had an up-link, but not a down-link. They could download signals from the satellite, but there wasn't a separate audio channel for them to use. For that they needed additional equipment, which they didn't have.

"THERE IT IS," Robby Jackson reported from the National Military Command Center.

"That's the one," Mary Pat Foley confirmed, looking at the same picture. She dialed a phone number to the American embassy in Moscow, from there to the Russian Foreign Ministry, from there to the Russian embassy in Tehran, and from there by the digital phone in John's hand. "Do you hear me, Ivan?" she asked in Russian. "It's Foleyeva." It took a very long second for the reply to come through.

• • •

"AH, MARIA, HOW good to hear your voice." *Thank God for the phone company,* John thought to himself, letting out a long breath. *Even the*

one here.

"I have your picture here on my desk," she said next.

"I was so much younger then."

"HE'S IN PLACE and everything's cool," the DDO said.

"Okay." Jackson lifted another phone. "It's a go. I repeat, it's a go. Acknowledge."

"Operation BOOTH is go," Diggs confirmed from Riyadh.

THE IRANIAN AIR defense system was about as tense as it could be. Though no attack at all had been launched into their territory, the radar operators were keeping a close eye on things. They watched several aircraft patrolling the Saudi and Qatari coasts, mainly running parallel, not even pushing toward the center of the waterway.

BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE and BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-TWO completed refueling from their tankers within seconds of each other. It wasn't often that Stealth fighters operated in unison. They were, in fact, designed to operate entirely alone. But not this time. Both separated from the KC-10s and turned north for a flight of about one hour, albeit with a thousand feet of vertical separation. The tanker crews remained on station, and used the time to refuel the standing fighter patrol on the Saudi coast, exactly routine for night operations. Fifty miles away, an AWACS tracked everything—or almost. The E-3B couldn't detect an F-117, either.

"WE KEEP MEETING like this," the President said to the makeup woman, with forced good humor.

"You look very tired," Mary Abbot told him.

"I am pretty tired," Ryan admitted.

"Your hands are shaking."

"Lack of sleep." This was a lie.

CALLIE WESTON WAS typing alterations to the speech directly into the electronic memory of the TelePrompTer. Even the TV technicians were not allowed to see the content of this one, and in a way she was

surprised that she herself was. She finished, scanning the whole thing for typos, which, she'd learned over the years, could be very disconcerting to Presidents on live TV.

SOME OF THEM were smoking, Clark saw, the guards outside. Poor discipline, but maybe it did serve to keep people awake.

"John, you ever think that this job is maybe just a little too exciting?"

"Gotta take a leak?" It was the usual reaction, even for them.

"Yeah."

"Me, too." It was something that never made the James Bond movies. "Hmph. I didn't know that." Clark pressed the earpiece in, hearing a normal voice, as opposed to one of a known announcer, say that the President would be on in two minutes. Maybe some network director, he thought. With that, the last two items came out of the suitcase.

"MY FELLOW AMERICANS, I am here to give you an updated report on the situation in the Middle East," the President said without preamble.

"Approximately four hours ago, organized resistance ceased among the forces of the United Islamic Republic which invaded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi, Kuwaiti, and American forces, working together, have destroyed six divisions in a battle which raged through a night and a day.

"I can now tell you that our country dispatched the 10th and 11th Cavalry regiments, plus the First Brigade of the North Carolina National Guard, and the 366th Wing from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho. A massive battle was fought south of King Khalid Military City. You have already seen some of the details on TV. The final UIR units attempted to flee the battlefield to the north, but they were cut off, and after a brief engagement, they began to surrender. Ground combat in the area has, *for the moment,* concluded.

"I say 'for the moment,' because this war is unlike any most of us have known in the past fifty years. An attack was made directly upon our citizens, on our soil. It was an attack deliberately made upon civilians. It was an attack made using a weapon of mass destruction. The violations of international law are too numerous to list," the President went on, "but it would be wrong to say that this attack was made by the people of the United Islamic Republic upon America.

"Peoples do not make war. The decision to start a war is most often

made by one man. They used to be kings, or princes, or barbarian chiefs, but throughout history it's usually one man who decides, and never is the decision to start a war of aggression the result of a democratic process.

"We Americans have no quarrel with the people of the former Iran and Iraq. Their religion may be different from ours, but we are a country which protects freedom of religion. Their languages may be different, but America has welcomed people of many languages. If America has proven anything to the world, it is that all men are the same, and given the same freedom and the same opportunity, they will all prosper to the limit only of their own abilities.

"In the last twenty-four hours, we killed at least ten thousand soldiers of the UIR. Probably many more. We do not know now and probably never will know the total number of *enemy* deaths, and we need to remind ourselves that they did not choose their fates. Those fates were chosen for them by others, and ultimately by one person." Ryan clasped his hands together theatrically. It seemed a very awkward gesture to all who watched.

• • •

"THERE IT GOES," Chavez said, his face to the camera's small eyepiece screen, which was now showing the download from the orbiting satellite. "Start the music."

Clark thumbed the laser transmitter, careful to see that it was on the invisible infra-red setting. A check through his eyepiece put the dot on the building's cornice—or parapet, he couldn't remember the difference. Whatever, there was a guard standing there, his foot on the structure.

DIGGS IN RIYADH: "Final check."

"BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE," he heard in reply

"TWO-FIVE-TWO."

"THROUGHOUT HISTORY, KINGS and princes have made war at their whim, sending people off to die. To the kings, they were just peasants, and the wars were just grabs for power and riches, a kind of entertainment, and if people died, nobody much cared, and when it was all over, for the most part the kings were still kings, whether they won or lost, because they were above it all. All the way into this

century, it was assumed that a chief of state had a *right* to make war. At Nuremberg, after the Second World War, we changed that rule by trying and executing some of those responsible. But getting to that point, arresting the criminals, as it were, cost the lives of twenty million Russians, six million Jews, so many lives lost that historians don't even know...." Ryan looked up to see Andrea Price wave to him. She didn't smile. It was not a smiling matter. But she gave the signal anyway.

THE GROUND-BASED laser was only insurance. They could have gone in without it, but picking out exactly the right house in the city would have been difficult, and they wanted to limit collateral damage. This way, also, the aircraft could drop their weapons from higher altitude. Simple ballistics would guarantee a drop to within a hundred yards, and the improved optics systems on the guidance packages cut that figure to one. Exactly on time, both BANDIT aircraft ("Bandit" was the semi-official call sign for the pilots of the Black Jets) opened their bomb-bay doors. Each aircraft carried a single five-hundred-pound weapon, the smallest that could take a PAVEWAY guidance package. These hung from a trapeze while the seeker heads looked for a modulated laser signal. Both acquired the laser dot, and so informed the pilots, who executed the release. Then they both did something neither had ever done before on a Stealth mission.

"BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE, bomb away!"

"TWO-FIVE-TWO, bomb gone!"

"EVERY IDEA IN the history of man, good or bad, has started in a single human mind, and wars begin because one mind thinks it profitable to kill and steal. This time, it's happened to us in a particularly cruel way. This time, we can be exactly sure who did it—and more."

WORLDWIDE, IN EVERY country with a satellite dish and TV cable, in over a billion homes, the picture changed from the Oval Office of the White House to a three-story building on a city street. Most viewers thought it some mad error, something from a movie, a bad connection —

A HANDFUL KNEW different, even before the President went on. Daryaei, too, was watching the President's speech, as much from pure curiosity as political advantage. What sort of man was this Ryan, really? he'd wondered so long. Too late, he found out.

"THIS IS WHERE he lives, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, the man who attacked our country with disease, the man who attacked my child, the man who tried to attack me, the man who sent his army on a mission of conquest that turned into a mission of death. He is a man who has defiled his religion and the laws of men and nations, and now, Mr. Daryaei, here is the reply of the United States of America."

THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE stopped, and a second or two later, so did translations all over the world, replaced only by silence, as eyes watched an ordinary black-and-white picture of a quite ordinary building—and yet everyone knew that something extraordinary was about to happen. Those looking very closely saw a light go on in a window, and the front door open, but no one would ever know the identity of the person who might have been attempting to leave, because both weapons fell true, struck the roof of the building, and went off a hundredth of a second later.

THE NOISE WAS awful. The passing pressure wave was worse. Both men watched, ignoring the danger. The echoes were punctuated by the tinkle of glass from half a mile around.

"You okay?" Ding asked.

"Yeah. Time to boogie, partner."

"Fuckin' A, Mr. C."

They got down to the bedroom level as quickly as possible. Chavez cut most of the way through the cords with a pocket knife. He figured it would take them about five minutes to work themselves free. The alleys allowed them to drive from the area, and keep out of the way of emergency vehicles, which screamed their way to the remains of the three buildings. Half an hour later, they were back in the safety of the Russian embassy. Vodka was offered. Vodka was drunk. Chavez had never experienced so bad a case of the shakes. Clark had. The vodka helped.

“TO THE PEOPLE of the United Islamic Republic, the United States of America says this:

“First, we know the exact location of the germ-warfare factory. We have asked for and received the help of the Russian Federation. They are neutrals in our dispute, but they have knowledge of this type of weapon. A team of technical experts is now on its way to Tehran. They will land, and you will take them immediately to the facility to supervise its neutralization. They will be accompanied by journalists for an independent verification of the facts. If this does not happen, then twelve hours from now we will destroy the site with a low-yield nuclear bomb to be delivered by a Stealth aircraft. Do not make the mistake of thinking that I am unwilling to give that order. The United States of America will not tolerate the existence of that facility and its inhuman weapons. The twelve-hour period starts now.

“Second, your prisoners will be treated in full accordance with international convention, and also the stern and admirable laws of hospitality which are part of your Islamic faith. Your prisoners will be returned as soon as you deliver to the United States the living bodies of every single person who had a role in preparing and delivering those weapons to our country, and those behind the attack on my daughter. On that there will be no compromise.

“Third, we will give your country a week to comply with this requirement. If you do not, then America will declare and wage unlimited war. You have seen what we can do, what we have done. I assure you that, if we have to, we can do more still. The choice is yours to make. Choose wisely.

“Finally, and I say this to all nations who may wish us ill, the United States of America will not tolerate attacks on our country, our possessions, or our citizens. From this day forward, whoever executes or orders such an attack, no matter who you are, no matter where you might hide, no matter how long it may take, we will come for you. I have sworn an oath before God to execute my duties as President. That I will do. To those who wish to be our friends, you will find no more faithful friend than we. To those who would be our enemies, remember that we can be faithful at that, too.

“My fellow Americans, it has been a hard time for us, for some of our allies, and for our enemies as well. We have defeated aggression. We have punished the person most guilty for the cruel deaths in our land, and we will have a reckoning also with those who followed his orders, but for the rest, let us now recall the words of President Abraham Lincoln:

“ ‘With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds . . . to do all which

may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.'

"Thank you, and good day."

EPILOGUE:

PRESS ROOM

" . . . AND FINALLY, I AM SUBMITTING to the Senate the name of Dr. Pierre Alexandre to fill the post of Surgeon General. Dr. Alexandre, after a distinguished career in the United States Army Medical Corps, then joined the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine as an associate professor in the area of infectious disease. He was very helpful to me during the Ebola outbreak. Dr. Alexandre is a brilliant clinician and researcher who will initiate and oversee several new programs, including basic research in rare infectious diseases, and will also head up a new federal oversight commission to coordinate AIDS research. This will not be bureaucratic," the President said, "there's enough of that. The idea here is to set up a new system by which physicians and other research scientists can more easily exchange research data. It is my hope that the Senate will see quickly to confirmation of his appointment.

"That concludes my opening statement." Jack pointed. "Yes, Helen?"

"Mr. President, your opening remarks on China—"

"I thought I made that clear. We have had private discussions with the Republic of China and concluded that the restoration of full diplomatic relations is in the best interests of both our countries. It is not the policy of the United States to discourage countries with freely elected governments. The Republic of China is such a country, and merits our full respect and recognition."

"But what will mainland China think of this?"

"What they think is their affair. We are both sovereign nations. So is Taiwan, and it's time we stopped pretending otherwise."

"Does this have anything to do with the shoot-down of the airliner?"

"That matter is still under investigation. Next?" Ryan pointed.

"Mr. President, the new Iranian provisional government is reportedly seeking to establish full diplomatic relations with our country. Will we entertain that request?"

"Yes, we certainly will," Jack replied. "If there's a better way to turn an enemy into a friend than by open discussion and trade, I don't

know what it is. They have been very cooperative, and we still have an embassy building there, but I suppose we'll have to change the lock on the front door." There was general laughter. "Yes, Tom. Nice tan, by the way. Welcome home."

"Mr. President, thank you. Regarding the destruction of the germ-warfare lab outside Tehran, the only journalists who ever got in there were those two Russians that their embassy drafted for the purpose. How can we be sure—"

"Tom, the Russian experts who supervised the neutralization of the facility were indeed experts. We have video of their procedures from the reporters, and both I and my consultants on this matter are fully satisfied. Ed?"

"Mr. President, the prisoner exchange is now concluded. How will we respond to Iranian and Iraqi requests for credit?"

"Secretaries Adler and Winston will be flying to London next week to discuss this with representatives of both governments."

"Sir, a follow-up, will this mean preferential prices for imported oil, and if so, for how long?"

"Ed, those are subjects for negotiation, but I suppose they will offer us something in return for the credit approval they desire. The exact details will have to be worked out, and we have two very good men to handle that for us."

"What about good women?" a female reporter asked.

"We have a lot of those around, Denise, including yourself. In case you haven't heard, Special Agent Andrea Price"—POTUS gestured toward the door at his right—"has accepted a proposal of marriage. It will be a mixed marriage, however, as her fiancé, Inspector Patrick O'Day, is a special agent in the FBI. I wish them the very best, even if it means I may need a new bodyguard. Yes, Barry," he said, pointing to the senior CNN reporter.

"So the big question that nobody has asked yet today, Mr. President—"

Ryan held up his hand. "There is so much—so many things yet to be done just to get the government fully functional again after all we've been through—"

"Sir, we're not going to let you off the hook."

A smile. A sigh. A nod. A surrender. "The answer to your question, Barry, is, yes, I will."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

It is now the moment when by common consent we pause to become conscious of our national life and to rejoice in it, to recall what our country has done for each of us, and to ask ourselves what we can do for our country in return.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

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TOM CLANCY

BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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RAINBOW SIX

TOM CLANCY

BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. The events described here are imaginary; the settings and characters are fictitious and not intended to represent specific places or living persons.

RAINBOW SIX

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FOR ALEXANDRA MARIA *lux mea mundi*

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EPILOGUE

There are no compacts between lions and men, and wolves and lambs have no concord.

—HOMER

PROLOGUE

SETTING UP

John Clark had more time in airplanes than most licensed pilots, and he knew the statistics as well as any of them, but he still didn't like the idea of crossing the ocean on a twin-engine airliner. Four was the right number of engines, he thought, because losing one meant losing only 25 percent of the aircraft's available power, whereas on this United 777, it meant losing *half.* Maybe the presence of his wife, one daughter, and a son-in-law made him a little itchier than usual. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't itchy at all, not about flying anyway. It was just a lingering . . . what? he asked himself. Next to him, in the window seat Sandy was immersed in the mystery she'd started the day before, while he was trying to concentrate on the current issue of *The Economist,* and wondering what was putting the cold-air feeling on the back of his neck. He started to look around the cabin for a sign of danger but abruptly stopped himself. There wasn't anything wrong that he could see, and he didn't want to seem like a nervous flyer to the cabin crew. He sipped at his glass of white wine, shook his shoulders, and went back to the article on how peaceful the new world was.

Right. He grimaced. Well, yes, he had to admit that things were a hell of a lot better than they'd been for nearly all of his life. No more swimming out of a submarine to do a collection on a Russian beach, or flying into Tehran to do something the Iranians wouldn't like much, or swimming up a fetid river in North Vietnam to rescue a downed aviator. Someday maybe Bob Holtzman would talk him into a book on his career. Problem was, who'd believe it—and would CIA ever allow him to tell his tales except on his own deathbed? He was not in a hurry for that, not with a grandchild on the way. Damn. He grimaced, unwilling to contemplate that development. Patsy must have caught a silver bullet on their wedding night, and Ding glowed more about it than she did. John looked back to business class—the curtain wasn't in place yet—and there they were, holding hands while the stewardess did the safety lecture. *If the airplane hit the water at 400 knots, reach under your seat for the life preserver and inflate it by pulling . . .* he'd heard that one before. The bright yellow life jackets would make it

somewhat easier for search aircraft to find the crash site, and that was about all they were good for.

Clark looked around the cabin again. He still felt that draft on his neck. Why? The flight attendant made the rounds, removing his wineglass as the aircraft taxied out to the end of the runway. Her last stop was by Alistair over on the left side of the first-class cabin. Clark caught his eye and got a funny look back as the Brit put his seat back in the upright position. Him, too? Wasn't that something? Neither of the two had ever been accused of nervousness.

Alistair Stanley had been a major in the Special Air Service before being permanently seconded to the Secret Intelligence Service. His position had been much like John's—the one you called in to take care of business when the gentler people in the field division got a little too skittish. Al and John had hit it off right away on a job in Romania eight years before, and the American was pleased to be working with him again on a more regular basis, even if they were both too old now for the fun stuff. Administration wasn't exactly John's idea of what his job should be, but he had to admit he wasn't twenty anymore . . . or thirty . . . or even forty. A little old to run down alleys and jump over walls. . . . Ding had said that to him only a week before in John's office at Langley, rather more respectfully than usual, since he was trying to make a logical point to the grandfather-presumptive of his first child. What the hell, Clark told himself, it was remarkable enough that he was still alive to gripe about being old—no, not old, old*er*. Not to mention he was respectable now as Director of the new agency. Director. A polite term for a REMF. But you didn't say no to the President, especially if he happened to be your friend.

The engine sounds increased. The airliner started moving. The usual sensation came, like being pressed back into the seat of a sports car jumping off a red light, but with more authority. Sandy, who hardly traveled at all, didn't look up from the book. It must have been pretty good, though John never bothered reading mysteries. He never could figure them out, and they made him feel stupid, despite the fact that in his professional life he'd picked his way through real mysteries more than once. A little voice in his head said *rotate,* and the floor came up under his feet. The body of the aircraft followed the nose into the sky, and the flight began properly, the wheels rising up into the wells. Instantly, those around him lowered their seats to get some sleep on the way to London Heathrow. John lowered his, too, but not as far. He wanted dinner first.

"On our way, honey," Sandy said, taking a second away from the book.

"I hope you like it over there."

"I have three cookbooks for after I figure this one out."

John smiled. “Who done it?”

“Not sure yet, but probably the wife.”

“Yeah, divorce lawyers are so expensive.”

Sandy chuckled and went back to the story as the stews got up from their seats to resume drink service. Clark finished *The Economist* and started *Sports Illustrated.* Damn, he’d be missing the end of the football season. That was one thing he’d always tried to keep track of, even off on a mission. The Bears were coming back, and he’d grown up with Papa Bear George Halas and the Monsters of the Midway—had often wondered if he might have made it as a pro himself. He’d been a pretty good linebacker in high school, and Indiana University had shown some interest in him (also for his swimming). Then he’d decided to forgo college and join the Navy, as his father had before him, though Clark had become a SEAL, rather than a skimmer-sailor on a tin can . . .

“Mr. Clark?” The stew delivered the dinner menu. “Mrs. Clark?”

One nice thing about first class. The flight crew pretended you had a name. John had gotten an automatic upgrade—he had frequent-flyer miles up the yingyang, and from now on he’d mainly fly British Airways, which had a very comfortable understanding with the British government.

The menu, he saw, was pretty good, as it usually was on international flights, and so was the wine list . . . but he decided to ask for bottled water instead of wine, thank you. Hmph. He grumbled to himself, settled back, and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. These damned flights always seemed overheated to him.

The captain got on next, interrupting all the personal movies on their mini-screens. They were taking a southerly routing to take advantage of the jet stream. That, Captain Will Garnet explained, would cut their time to Heathrow by forty minutes. He didn’t say that it would also make for a few bumps. Airlines tried to conserve fuel, and forty-five minutes’ worth would put a gold star in his copybook . . . well, maybe just a silver one . . .

The usual sensations. The aircraft tilted, more to the right than the left, as it crossed over the ocean at Sea Isle City in New Jersey for the three-thousand-mile flight to the next landfall, somewhere on the Irish coast, which they’d reach in about five and a half hours, John thought. He had to sleep for some of that time. At least the captain didn’t bother them with the usual tour-director crap—*we are now at forty thousand feet, that’s almost eight miles to fall if the wings come off and* . . . They started serving dinner. They’d be doing the same aft in tourist class, with the drink and dinner carts blocking the aisles.

It started on the left side of the aircraft. The man was dressed properly, wearing a jacket—that was what got John’s attention. Most

people took them off as soon as they sat down but—

—it was a Browning automatic, with a flat-black finish that said "military" to Clark, and, less than a second later, to Alistair Stanley. A moment later, two more men appeared on the right side, walking right next to Clark's seat.

"Oh, shit," he said so quietly that only Sandy heard him. She turned and looked, but before she could do or say anything, he grabbed her hand. That was enough to keep her quiet, but not quite enough to keep the lady across the aisle from screaming—well, almost screaming. The woman with her covered her mouth with a hand and stifled most of it. The stewardess looked at the two men in front of her in total disbelief. This hadn't happened in years. How could it be happening now?

Clark was asking much the same question, followed by another: Why the hell had he packed his sidearm in his carry-on and stowed it in the overhead? What was the point of having a gun on an airplane, you idiot, if you couldn't get to it? What a dumbass rookie mistake! He only had to look to his left to see the same expression on Alistair's face. Two of the most experienced pros in the business, their guns less than four feet away, but they might as well be in the luggage stored below. . . .

"John . . ."

"Just relax, Sandy," her husband replied quietly. More easily said than done, as he well knew.

John sat back, keeping his head still, but turned away from the window and toward the cabin. His eyes moved free. Three of them. One, probably the leader, was taking a stew forward, where she unlocked the door to the flight deck. John watched the two of them go through and close the door behind them. Okay, now Captain William Garnet would find out what was going on. Hopefully he would be a pro, and he'd be trained to say *yes, sir—no, sir—threebags-full, sir* to anybody who came forward with a gun. At best he'd be Air Force–or Navy-trained, and therefore he'd know better than to do anything stupid, like trying to be a goddamned hero. His mission would be to get the airplane on the ground, somewhere, anywhere, because it was a hell of a lot harder to kill three hundred people in an airplane when it was sitting still on the ramp with the wheels chocked.

Three of them, one forward in the flight deck. He'd stay there to keep an eye on the drivers and to use the radio to tell whomever he wanted to talk to what his demands were. Two more in first class, standing there, forward, where they could see down both aisles of the aircraft.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. I've got the seat-belt sign on. There's a little chop in the air. Please stay in your

seats for the time being. I'll be back to you in a few minutes. Thank you."

Good, John thought, catching Alistair's eye. The captain sounded cool, and the bad guys weren't acting crazy— yet. The people in back probably didn't know anything was wrong—yet. Also good. People might panic . . . well, no, not necessarily, but so much the better for everyone if nobody knew there was anything to panic about.

Three of them. Only three? Might there be a backup guy, disguised as a passenger? That was the one who controlled the bomb, if there was a bomb, and a bomb was the worst thing there could be. A pistol bullet might punch a hole in the skin of the aircraft, forcing a rapid descent, and that would fill some barf bags and cause some soiled underwear, but nobody died from that. A bomb would kill everyone aboard, probably . . . better than even money, Clark judged, and he hadn't gotten old by taking that sort of chance when he didn't have to. Maybe just let the airplane go to wherever the hell these three wanted to go, and let negotiations start, by which time people would know that there were another three very special people inside. Word would be going out now. The bad guys would have gotten onto the company radio frequency and passed along the bad news of the day, and the Director of Security for United—Clark knew him, Pete Fleming, former Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI—would call his former agency and get *that* ball rolling, to include notification of CIA and State, the FBI Hostage Rescue Team in Quantico, and Little Willie Byron's Delta Force down at Fort Bragg. Pete would also pass along the passenger list, with three of them circled in red, and *that* would get Willie a little nervous, plus making the troops at Langley and Foggy Bottom wonder about a security leak—John dismissed that. This was a random event that would just make people spin wheels in the Operations Room in Langley's Old Headquarters Building. Probably.

It was time to move a little. Clark turned his head very slowly, toward Domingo Chavez, just twenty feet away. When eye contact was established, he touched the tip of his nose, as though to make an itch go away. Chavez did the same . . . and Ding was still wearing his jacket. He was more used to hot weather, John thought, and probably felt cold on the airplane. Good. He'd still have his Beretta .45 on . . . probably . . . Ding preferred the small of his back, though, and that was awkward for a guy strapped into an airliner seat. Even so, Chavez knew what was going down, and had the good sense to do nothing about it . . . yet. How might Ding react with his pregnant wife sitting next to him? Domingo was smart and as cool under pressure as Clark could ever ask, but under that he was still Latino, a man of no small passion—even John Clark, experienced as he was, saw flaws in others

that were perfectly natural to himself. He had *his* wife sitting next to him, and Sandy was frightened, and Sandy wasn't supposed to be frightened about her own safety. . . . It was her husband's self-assigned job to make certain of that. . . .

One of the bad guys was going over the passenger list. Well, that would tell John if there had been a security leak of some sort. But if there were, he couldn't do anything about it. Not yet. Not until he knew what was going on. Sometimes you just had to sit and take it and—

The guy at the head of the left-side aisle started moving, and fifteen feet later, he was looking down at the woman in the window seat next to Alistair.

"Who are you?" he demanded in Spanish.

The lady replied with a name John didn't catch—it was a Spanish name, but from twenty feet away he couldn't hear it clearly enough to identify it, mainly because her reply had been quiet, polite . . . cultured, he thought. Diplomat's wife, maybe? Alistair was leaning back in his seat, staring with wide blue eyes up at the guy with the gun and trying a little too hard not to show fear.

A scream came from the back of the aircraft. "Gun, that's a gun!" a man's voice shouted—

Shit, John thought. Now everybody would know. The right-aisle guy knocked on the cockpit door and stuck his head in to announce this good news.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . this is Captain Garnet . . . I, uh, am instructed to tell you that we are deviating from our flight plan. . . . We, uh, have some guests aboard who have told me to fly to Lajes in the Azores. They say that they have no desire to hurt anyone, but they are armed, and First Officer Renford and I are going to do exactly what they say. Please remain calm, stay in your seats, and just try to keep things under control. I will be back to you later." Good news. He had to be military trained; his voice was as cool as the smoke off dry ice. Good.

Lajes in the Azores, Clark thought. Former U.S. Navy base . . . still active? Maybe just caretakered for long overwater flights flying there —as a stop and refueling point for somewhere else? Well, the left-side guy had spoken in Spanish, and been replied to in Spanish. Probably not Middle Eastern bad guys. Spanish speakers . . . Basques? That was still perking over in Spain. The woman, who was she? Clark looked over. Everyone was looking around now, and it was safe for him to do so. Early fifties, well turned out. The Spanish ambassador to Washington was male. Might this be his wife?

The left-side man shifted his gaze a seat. "Who are you?"

"Alistair Stanley" was the reply. There was no sense in Alistair's

lying, Clark knew. They were traveling openly. Nobody knew about their agency. They hadn't even started it up yet. Shit, Clark thought. "I'm British," he added in a quaky voice. "My passport's in my bag up in the—" He reached up and had his hand slapped down by the bad guy's gun.

Nice play, John thought, even if it hadn't worked. He might have gotten the bag down, produced the passport, and then had his gun in his lap. Bad luck that the gunman had believed him. That was the problem with accents. But Alistair was up to speed. The three wolves didn't know that the sheep herd had three dogs in it. Big ones.

Willie would be on the phone now. Delta kept an advance team on round-the-clock standby, and they'd be prepping for a possible deployment now. Colonel Byron would be with them. Little Willie was that kind of soldier. He had an XO and staff to follow things up while he led from the front. A lot of wheels were spinning now. All John and his friends really had to do was sit tight . . . so long as the bad guys kept their cool.

More Spanish from the left side. "Where is your husband ?" he demanded. He was pretty mad. Made sense, John thought. Ambassadors are good targets. But so were their wives. She was too sharp-looking to be the wife of just a diplomat, and Washington had to be a premier post. Senior guy, probably aristocracy. Spain still had that. High-profile target, the better to put pressure on the Spanish government.

Blown mission was the next thought. They wanted him, not her, and they would not be happy about that. *Bad intelligence, guys,* Clark thought, looking at their faces and seeing their anger. *Even happens to me once in a while.* Yeah, he thought, like about half the fucking time in a good year. The two he could see were talking to each other . . . quietly, but the body language said it all. They were pissed. So, he had three (or more?) angry terrorists with guns on a two-engine airplane over the North Atlantic at night. Could have been worse, John told himself. Somehow. Yeah, they might have had Semtex jackets with Primacord trim.

They were late twenties, Clark thought. Old enough to be technically competent, but young enough to need adult supervision. Little operational experience, and not enough judgment. They'd think they knew it all, think they were real clever. That was the problem with death. Trained soldiers knew the reality of it better than terrorists did. These three would want to succeed, and wouldn't really consider the alternative. Maybe a rogue mission. The Basque separatists hadn't ever messed with foreign nationals, had they? Not Americans anyway, but this was an *American* airliner, and that was a big black line to step over. Rogue mission? Probably. Bad news.

You wanted a degree of predictability in situations like this. Even terrorism had rules. There was almost a liturgy to it, steps everyone had to take before something really bad happened, which gave the good guys a chance to talk to the bad guys. Get a negotiator down to establish rapport with them, negotiate the little stuff at first—*come on, let the children and their mothers off, okay? No big deal, and it looks bad for you and your group on TV, right?* Get them started giving things up. Then the old people—who wants to whack grandma and grandpa? Then the food, maybe with some Valium mixed in with it, while the response team's intel group started spiking the aircraft with microphones and miniature lenses whose fiber-optic cables fed to TV cameras.

Idiots, Clark thought. This play just didn't work. It was almost as bad as kidnapping a child for money. Cops were just too good at tracking those fools, and Little Willie was sure as hell boarding a USAF transport at Pope Air Force Base right now. If they really landed at Lajes, the process would start real soon, and the only variable was how many good guys would bite the big one before the bad guys got to do the same. Clark had worked with Colonel Byron's boys and girls. If they came into the aircraft, at least three people would not be leaving it alive. Problem was, how much company would they have in the hereafter ? Hitting an airliner was like having a shoot-out in a grammar school, just more crowded.

They were talking more, up front, paying little attention to anything else, the rest of the aircraft. In one sense, that was logical. The front office was the most important part, but you always wanted to keep an eye on the rest. You never knew who might be aboard. Sky marshals were long in the past, but cops traveled by air, and some of them carried guns . . . well, maybe not on international flights, but you didn't get to retire from the terrorist business by being dumb. It was hard enough to survive if you were smart. Amateurs. Rogue mission. Bad intelligence. Anger and frustration. This was getting worse. One of them balled his left hand into a fist and shook it at the entire adverse world they'd found aboard.

Great, John thought. He turned in the seat, again catching Ding's eye and shaking his head side to side ever so slightly. His reply was a raised eyebrow. Domingo knew how to speak proper English when he had to.

It was as though the air changed then, and not for the better. Number 2 went forward again into the cockpit and stayed for several minutes, while John and Alistair watched the one on the left side, staring down the aisle. After two minutes of frustrated attention, he switched sides as though in a spasm, and looked aft, leaning his head forward as though to shorten the distance, peering down the aisle

while his face bounced between expressions of power and impotence. Then, just as quickly, he headed back to port, pausing only to look at the cockpit door in anger.

There's only the three of them, John told himself then, just as #2 reappeared from the front office. Number 3 was too hyped. Probably just the three? he wondered. Think through it, Clark told himself. If so, that really made them amateurs. *The Gong Show* might be an amusing thought in another context, but not at 500 knots, 37,000 feet over the North Atlantic. If they could just be cool about everything, let the driver get the twin-engine beast on the ground, maybe some common sense would break out. But they wouldn't be very cool, would they?

Instead of taking his post to cover the right-side aisle, #2 went back to #3 and they spoke in raspy whispers which Clark understood in context if not content. It was when #2 pointed to the cockpit door that things became worst of all—

—*nobody's really in charge,* John decided. That was just great, three free-agents with guns in a friggin' airplane. It was time to start being afraid. Clark was not a stranger to fear. He'd been in too many tight places for that, but in every other case he'd had an element of control over the situation—or if not that, at least over his own actions, such as the ability to run away, which was a far more comforting thought now than he'd ever realized. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Number 2 headed aft to look at the woman sitting next to Alistair. He just stood there for a few seconds, staring at her, then looking at Alistair, who looked back in a subdued way.

"Yes?" the Brit said finally, in his most cultured accent.

"Who are you?" Number 2 demanded.

"I told your friend, old man, Alistair Stanley. I have my passport in my carry-on bag if you wish to see it." The voice was just brittle enough to simulate a frightened man holding it together.

"Yes, show it to me!"

"Of course, sir." In elegantly slow movements, the former SAS major slipped out of his seat belt, stood, opened the overhead bin, and extracted his black carry-on bag. "May I?" he asked. Number 2 replied with a nod.

Alistair unzipped the side compartment and pulled the passport out, handed it over, then sat down, his trembling hands holding the bag in his lap.

Number 2 looked at the passport and tossed it back into the Brit's lap while John watched. Then he said something in Spanish to the woman in 4A. "Where is your husband?" it sounded like. The woman replied in the same cultured tones that she'd used just a few minutes earlier, and #2 stormed away to speak with #3 again. Alistair let out

a long breath and looked around the cabin, as though for security, finally catching John's eye. There was no movement from his hands or face, but even so John knew what he was thinking. Al was not happy with this situation either, and more to the point, he'd seen both #2 and #3 close up, looked right in their eyes. John had to factor that into his thought processes. Alistair Stanley was worried, too. The slightly junior officer reached up as though to brush his hair back, and one finger tapped the skull above the ear twice. It might even be worse than he'd feared.

Clark reached his hand forward, enough to shield it from the two in the front of the cabin, and held up three fingers. Al nodded half an inch or so and turned away for a few seconds, allowing John to digest the message. He agreed that there were only three of them. John nodded with appreciation at the confirmation.

How much the better had they been smart terrorists, but the smart ones didn't try stuff like this anymore. The odds were just too long, as the Israelis had proven in Uganda, and the Germans in Somalia. You were safe doing this only so long as the aircraft was in the air, and they couldn't stay up forever, and when they landed the entire civilized world could come crashing in on them with the speed of a thunderbolt and the power of a Kansas tornado—and the real problem was that not all that many people truly wanted to die before turning thirty. And those who did used bombs. So, the smart ones did other things. For that reason they were more dangerous adversaries, but they were also predictable. They didn't kill people for recreation, and they didn't get frustrated early on because they planned their opening moves with skill.

These three were dumb. They had acted on bad intelligence, hadn't had an intel team in place to give them a final mission check, to tell them that their primary target hadn't made the flight, and so here they were, committed to a dumb mission that was already blown, contemplating death or life-long imprisonment . . . for nothing. The only good news, if you could call it that, was that their imprisonment would be in America.

But they didn't want to contemplate life in a steel cage any more than they wished to face death in the next few days—*but* soon they'd start to realize that there was no third alternative. And that the guns in their hands were the only power they had, and that they might as well start using them to get their way . . .

. . . and for John Clark, the choice was whether or not to wait for that to start. . . .

No. He couldn't just sit here and wait for them to start killing people.

Okay. He watched the two for another minute or so, the way they

looked at each other while trying to cover both aisles, as he figured out how to do it. With both the dumb ones and the smart ones, the simple plans were usually the best.

It took five minutes more until #2 decided to talk some more with #3. When he did, John turned enough to catch Ding's eye, swiping one finger across his upper lip, as though to stroke a mustache he'd never grown. Chavez cocked his head as though to reply *you sure?* but took the sign. He loosened his seat belt and reached behind his back with his left hand, bringing his pistol out before the alarmed eyes of his six-week wife. Domingo touched her right hand with his to reassure her, covered the Beretta with a napkin in his lap, adopted a neutral expression, and waited for his senior to make the play.

"You!" Number 2 called from forward.

"Yes?" Clark replied, looking studiously forward.

"Sit still!" The man's English wasn't bad. Well, European schools had good language programs.

"Hey, look, I, uh, had a few drinks, and—well, you know, how about it? *Por favor,"* John added sheepishly.

"No, you will stay in your seat!"

"Hey, whatcha gonna do, shoot a guy who needs to take a leak? I don't know what your problem is, okay, but I gotta go, okay? Please?"

Number 2 and #3 traded an oh-shit look that just confirmed their amateur status one last time. The two stews, strapped in their seats forward, looked very worried indeed but didn't say anything. John pressed the issue by unbuckling his seat belt and starting to stand.

Number 2 raced aft then, gun in front, stopping just short of pressing it against John's chest. Sandy's eyes were wide now. She'd never seen her husband do anything the least bit dangerous, but she knew this wasn't the husband who had slept next to her for twenty-five years—and if not that one, then he had to be the other Clark, the one she knew about but had never seen.

"Look, I go there, I take a leak, and I come back, okay? Hell, you wanna watch," he said, his voice slurred now from the half glass of wine he'd drunk alongside the terminal. "That's okay, too, but please don't make me wet my pants, okay?"

What turned the trick was Clark's size. He was just under six-two, and his forearms, visible with the rolled-up sleeves, were powerful. Number 3 was smaller by four inches and thirty pounds, but he had a gun, and making bigger people do one's wishes is always a treat for bullies. So #2 gripped John by the left arm, spun him around and pushed him roughly aft toward the right-side lavatory. John cowered and went, his hands above his head.

"Hey, *gracias, amigo,* okay?" Clark opened the door. Dumb as ever, #2 actually allowed him to close it. For his part, John did what he'd

asked permission to do, then washed his hands and took a brief look in the mirror.

Hey, Snake, you still got it? he asked himself, without so much as a breath.

Okay, let's find out.

John slid the locking bar loose, and pulled the folding door open with a grateful and thoroughly cowed look on his face.

"Hey, uh, thanks, y'know."

"Back to your seat."

"Wait, let me get you a cuppa coffee, okay, I—" John took a step aft, and #2 was dumb enough to follow in order to cover him, then reached for Clark's shoulder and turned him around.

"Buenas noces," Ding said quietly from less than ten feet away, his gun up and aimed at the side of #2's head. The man's eyes caught the blue steel that had to be a gun, and the distraction was just right. John's right hand came around, his forearm snapping up, and the back of his fist catching the terrorist in the right temple. The blow was enough to stun.

"How you loaded?"

"Low-velocity," Ding whispered back. "We're on an airplane, 'mano," he reminded his director.

"Stay loose," John commanded quietly, getting a nod.

"Miguel!" Number 3 called loudly.

Clark moved to the left side, pausing on the way to get a cup of coffee from the machine, complete with saucer and spoon. He then reappeared in the left-side aisle and moved forward.

"He said to bring you this. Thank you for allowing me to use the bathroom," John said, in a shaky but grateful voice. "Here is your coffee, sir."

"Miguel!" Number 3 called again.

"He went back that way. Here's your coffee. I'm supposed to sit down now, okay?" John took a few steps forward and stopped, hoping that this amateur would continue to act like one.

He did, coming toward him. John cowered a little, and allowed the cup and saucer to shake in his hand, and just as #3 reached him, looking over to the right side of the aircraft for his colleague, Clark dropped both of them on the floor and dove down to get them, about half a step behind Alistair's seat. Number 3 automatically bent down as well. It would be his last mistake for the evening.

John's hands grabbed the pistol and twisted it around and up into its owner's belly. It might have gone off, but Alistair's own Browning Hi-Power crashed down on the back of the man's neck, just below the skull, and #3 went limp as Raggedy Andy.

"You impatient bugger," Stanley rasped. "Bloody good acting,

though." Then he turned, pointed to the nearest stewardess, and snapped his fingers. She came out of her seat like a shot, fairly running aft to them. "Rope, cord, anything to tie them up, quickly!"

John collected the pistol and immediately removed the magazine, then jacked the action to eject the remaining round. In two more seconds, he'd field-stripped the weapon and tossed the pieces at the feet of Alistair's traveling companion, whose brown eyes were wide and shocked.

"Sky marshals, ma'am. Please be at ease," Clark explained.

A few seconds after that, Ding appeared, dragging #2 with him. The stewardess returned with a spool of twine.

"Ding, front office!" John ordered.

"Roge-o, Mr. C." Chavez moved forward, his Beretta in both hands, and stood by the cockpit door. On the floor, Clark did the wrapping. His hands remembered the sailor knots from thirty years earlier. Amazing, he thought, tying them off as tight as he could. If their hands turned black, too damned bad.

"One more, John," Stanley breathed.

"You want to keep an eye on our two friends."

"A pleasure. Do be careful, lots of electronics up there."

"Tell me about it."

John walked forward, still unarmed. His junior was still at the door, pistol aimed upward in both hands, eyes on the door.

"How we doing, Domingo?"

"Oh, I was thinking about the green salad and the veal, and the wine list ain't half bad. Ain't a real good place to start a gunfight, John. Let's invite him aft."

It made good tactical sense. Number 1 would be facing aft, and if his gun went off, the bullet was unlikely to damage the aircraft, though the people in Row 1 might not like it all that much. John hopped aft to retrieve the cup and saucer.

"You!" Clark gestured to the other stewardess. "Call the cockpit and tell the pilot to tell our friend that Miguel needs him. Then stand right here. When the door opens, if he asks you anything, just point over to me. Okay?"

She was cute, forty, and pretty cool. She did exactly as she was told, lifting the phone and passing along the message.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and #1 looked out. The stewardess was the only person he could see at first. She pointed to John.

"Coffee?"

It only confused him, and he took a step aft toward the large man with the cup. His pistol was aimed down at the floor.

"Hello," Ding said from his left, placing his pistol right against his

head.

Another moment's confusion. He just wasn't prepared. Number 1 hesitated, and his hand didn't start to move yet.

"Drop the gun!" Chavez said.

"It is best that you do what he says," John added, in his educated Spanish. "Or my friend will kill you."

His eyes darted automatically around the cabin, looking for his colleagues, but they were nowhere to be seen. The confusion on his face only increased. John took a step toward him, reached for the gun, and took it from an unresisting hand. This he placed in his waistband, then dropped the man to the floor to frisk him while Ding's gun rested at the back of the terrorist's neck. Aft, Stanley started doing the same with his two.

"Two magazines . . . nothing else." John waved to the first stew, who came up with the twine.

"Fools," Chavez snarled in Spanish. Then he looked at his boss. "John, you think that was maybe just a little precipitous ?"

"No." Then he stood and walked into the cockpit. "Captain?"

"Who the hell are you?" The flight crew hadn't seen or heard a thing from aft.

"Where's the nearest military airfield?"

"RCAF Gander," the copilot—Renford, wasn't it?—replied immediately.

"Well, let's go there. Cap'n, the airplane is yours again. We have all three of them tied up."

"Who are you?" Will Garnet asked again rather forcefully, his own tension not yet bled off.

"Just a guy who wanted to help out," John replied, with a blank look, and the message got through. Garnet was ex-Air Force. "Can I use your radio, sir?"

The captain pointed to the fold-down jump-seat, and showed him how to use the radio.

"This is United Flight Niner-Two-Zero," Clark said. "Who am I talking to, over?"

"This is Special Agent Carney of the FBI. Who are you?"

"Carney, call the director, and tell him Rainbow Six is on the line. Situation is under control. Zero casualties. We're heading for Gander, and we need the Mounties. Over."

"Rainbow?"

"Just like it sounds, Agent Carney. I repeat, the situation is under control. The three hijackers are in custody. I'll stand by to talk to your director."

"Yes, sir," replied a very surprised voice.

Clark looked down to see his hands shaking a little now that it was

over. Well, that had happened once or twice before. The aircraft banked to the left while the pilot was talking on the radio, presumably to Gander.

"Niner-Two-Zero, Niner-Two-Zero, this is Agent Carney again."

"Carney, this is Rainbow." Clark paused. "Captain, is this radio link secure?"

"It's encrypted, yes."

John almost swore at himself for violating radio discipline. "Okay, Carney, what's happening?"

"Stand by for the Director." There was a click and a brief crackle. "John?" a new voice asked.

"Yes, Dan."

"What gives?"

"Three of them, Spanish-speaking, not real smart. We took them down."

"Alive?"

"That's affirmative," Clark confirmed. "I told the pilot to head for RCAF Gander. We're due there in—"

"Niner-zero minutes," the copilot said.

"Hour and a half," John went on. "You want to have the Mounties show up to collect our bad boys, and call Andrews. We need transport on to London."

He didn't have to explain why. What ought to have been a simple commercial flight of three officers and two wives had blown their identities, and there was little damned sense in having them hang around for everyone aboard to see their faces—most would just want to buy them drinks, but that wasn't a good idea. All the effort they'd gone to, to make Rainbow both effective and secret, had been blown by three dumbass Spaniards—or whatever they were. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police would figure that one out before handing them over to the American FBI.

"Okay, John, let me get moving on that. I'll call René and have him get things organized. Anything else you need?"

"Yeah, send me a few hours of sleep, will ya?"

"Anything you want, pal," the FBI Director replied with a chuckle, and the line went dead. Clark took the headset off and hung it on the hook.

"Who the hell are you?" the captain demanded again. The initial explanation hadn't been totally satisfactory.

"Sir, my friends and I are air marshals who just happened to be aboard. Is that clear, sir?"

"I suppose," Garnet said. "Glad you made it. The one who was up here was a little loose, if you know what I mean. We were damned worried there for a while."

Clark nodded with a knowing smile. “Yeah, so was I.”

They’d been doing it for some time. The powder-blue vans—there were four of them—circulated throughout New York City, picking up homeless people and shuttling them to the dry-out centers run by the corporation. The quiet, kindly operation had made local television over a year ago, and garnered the corporation a few dozen friendly letters, then slid back down below the horizon, as such things tended to do. It was approaching midnight, and with dropping autumn temperatures, the vans were out, collecting the homeless throughout central and lower Manhattan. They didn’t do it the way the police once had. The people they helped weren’t compelled to get aboard. The volunteers from the corporation asked, politely, if they wanted a clean bed for the night, free of charge, and absent the religious complications typical of most “missions,” as they were traditionally called. Those who declined the offer were given blankets, used ones donated by corporate employees who were home sleeping or watching TV at the moment—participation in the program was voluntary for the staff as well—but still warm, and waterproofed. Some of the homeless preferred to stay out, deeming it to be some sort of freedom. More did not. Even habitual drunkards liked beds and showers. Presently there were ten of them in the van, and that was all it could hold for this trip. They were helped aboard, sat down, and seat-belted into their places for safety purposes.

None of them knew that this was the *fifth* of the four vans operating in lower Manhattan, though they found out something was a little different as soon as it started moving. The attendant leaned back from the front seat and handed out bottles of Gallo burgundy, an inexpensive California red, but a better wine than they were used to drinking, and to which something had been added.

By the time they reached their destination, all were asleep or at least stuporous. Those who were able to move were helped from one truck into the back of another, strapped down in their litter beds, and allowed to fall asleep. The rest were carried and strapped down by two pairs of men. With that task done, the first van was driven off to be cleaned out—they used steam to make sure that whatever residue might be left was sterilized and blasted out of the van. The second truck headed uptown on the West Side Highway, caught the curling ramp for the George Washington Bridge, and crossed the Hudson River. From there it headed north through the northeast corner of New Jersey, then back into New York State.

It turned out that Colonel William Lytle Byron was already in the air in a USAF KC-10 on a course track almost identical to, and only an

hour behind, the United 777. It altered course northward for Gander as well. The former P-3 base had to wake up a few personnel to handle the inbound jumbos, but that was the least of it.

The three failed hijackers were blindfolded, hog-tied, and laid on the floor just forward of the front row of first-class seats, which John, Ding, and Alistair appropriated. Coffee was served, and the other passengers kept away from that part of the aircraft.

"I rather admire the Ethiopians' approach to situations like this," Stanley observed. He was sipping tea.

"What's that?" Chavez asked tiredly.

"Some years ago they had a hijacking attempt on their national flag carrier. There happened to be security chaps aboard, and they got control of the situation. Then they strapped their charges in first-class seats, wrapped towels around their necks to protect the upholstery, and cut their throats, right there on the aircraft. And you know—"

"Gotcha," Ding observed. *Nobody* had messed with that airline since. "Simple, but effective."

"Quite." He set his cup down. "I hope this sort of thing doesn't happen *too* often."

The three officers looked out the windows to see the runway lights just before the 777 thumped down at RCAF Gander. There was a muted series of cheers and a smattering of applause from aft. The airliner slowed and then taxied off to the military facilities, where it stopped. The front-right door was opened, and a scissors-lift truck moved to it, slowly and carefully.

John, Ding, and Alistair unsnapped their seat belts and moved toward the door, keeping an eye on the three hijackers as they did so. The first aboard the aircraft was a RCAF officer with a pistol belt and white lanyard, followed by three men in civilian clothes who had to be cops.

"You're Mr. Clark?" the officer asked.

"That's right." John pointed. "There's your three—suspects, I think the term is." He smiled tiredly at that. The cops moved to deal with them.

"Alternate transport is on the way, about an hour out," the Canadian officer told him.

"Thank you." The three moved to collect their carry-on baggage, and in two cases, their wives. Patsy was asleep and had to be awakened. Sandy had gotten back into her book. Two minutes later, all five of them were on the ground, shuffling into one of the RCAF cars. As soon as they pulled away, the aircraft started moving again, taxiing to the civilian terminal so that the passengers could get off and stretch while the 777 was serviced and refueled.

"How do we get to England?" Ding asked, after getting his wife

bedded down in the unused ready room.

"Your Air Force is sending a VC-20. There will be people at Heathrow to collect your bags. There's a Colonel Byron coming for your three prisoners," the senior cop explained.

"Here are their weapons." Stanley handed over three airsick bags with the disassembled pistols inside. "Browning M-1935s, military finish. No explosives. They really were bloody amateurs. Basques, I think. They seem to have been after the Spanish ambassador to Washington. His wife was in the seat next to mine. Señora Constanza de Monterosa—the wine family. They bottle the most marvelous clarets and Madeiras. I think you will find that this was an unauthorized operation."

"And who exactly are you?" the cop asked. Clark handled it.

"We can't answer that. You're sending the hijackers right back?"

"Ottawa has instructed us to do that under the Hijacking Treaty. Look, I have to say something to the press."

"Tell them that three American law enforcement officers happened to be aboard and helped to subdue the idiots," John told him.

"Yeah, that's close enough," Chavez agreed with a grin. "First arrest I ever made, John. Damn, I forgot to give them their rights," he added. He was weary enough to think that enormously funny.

They were beyond filthy, the receiving team saw. That was no particular surprise. Neither was the fact that they smelled bad enough to gag a skunk. That would have to wait. The litters were carried off the truck into the building, ten miles west of Binghamton, New York, in the hill country of central New York State. In the clean room, all ten were sprayed in the face from a squeeze bottle much like that used to clean windows. It was done one at a time to all of them, then half were given injections into the arm. Both groups of five got steel bracelets, numbered 1 to 10. Those with even numbers got the injections. The odd-numbered control group did not. With this task done, the ten homeless were carried off to the bunk room to sleep off the wine and the drugs. The truck which had delivered them was already gone, heading west for Illinois and a return to its regular duties. The driver hadn't even known what he'd done, except to drive.

CHAPTER 1

MEMO

The VC-20B flight was somewhat lacking in amenities—the food consisted of sandwiches and an undistinguished wine—but the seats were comfortable and the ride smooth enough that everyone slept until the wheels and flaps came down at RAF Northholt, a military airfield just west of London. As the USAF G-IV taxied to the ramp, John remarked on the age of the buildings.

"Spitfire base from the Battle of Britain," Stanley explained, stretching in his seat. "We let private business jets use it as well."

"We'll be back and forth outta here a lot, then," Ding surmised at once, rubbing his eyes and wishing for coffee. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight, local—Zulu time, too, isn't it?"

"Quite," Alistair confirmed, with a sleepy grunt.

Just then the rain started, making for a proper welcome to British soil. It was a hundred-yard walk to the reception building, where a British official stamped their passports and officially welcomed them to his country before going back to his breakfast tea and newspaper.

Three cars waited outside, all of them black Daimler limousines, which headed off the base, then west, and south for Hereford. This was proof that he was a civilian bureaucrat, Clark told himself in the lead car. Otherwise they'd have used helicopters. But Britain wasn't entirely devoid of civilization. They stopped at a roadside McDonald's for Egg McMuffins and coffee. Sandy snorted at the cholesterol intake. She'd been chiding John about it for months. Then she thought about the previous night.

"John?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Who were they?"

"Who, the guys on the airplane?" He looked over and got a nod. "Not sure, probably Basque separatists. It looked like they were after the Spanish ambassador, but they screwed up big-time. He wasn't aboard, just his wife."

"They were trying to hijack the airplane?"

"Yep, they sure were."

"Isn't that scary?"

John nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, it is. Well, would have been scarier if they were competent, but they weren’t.” An inner smile. *Boy, did they ever pick the wrong flight!* But he couldn’t laugh about it now, not with his wife sitting next to him, on the wrong side of the road—a fact that had him looking up in some irritation. It felt very wrong to be on the left side of the road, driving along at . . . eighty miles per hour? *Damn.* Didn’t they have speed limits here?

“What’ll happen to them?” Sandy persisted.

“There’s an international treaty. The Canadians will ship them back to the States for trial—Federal Court. They’ll be tried, convicted, and imprisoned for air piracy. They’ll be behind bars for a long time.” And they were lucky at that, Clark didn’t add. Spain might well have been a little more unpleasant about it.

“First time in a long time something like that happened.”

“Yep.” Her husband agreed. You had to be a real dolt to hijack airplanes, but dolts, it appeared, were not yet an endangered species. That was why he was the Six of an organization called Rainbow.

There is good news and there is bad news, the memo he’d written had begun. As usual, it wasn’t couched in bureaucratese; it was a language Clark had never quite learned despite his thirty years in CIA.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and other nation states with political positions adverse to American and Western interests, the likelihood of a major international confrontation is at an all-time low. This, clearly, is the best of good news.

But along with that we must face the fact that there remain many experienced and trained international terrorists still roaming the world, some with lingering contacts with national intelligence agencies—plus the fact that some nations, while not desirous of a direct confrontation with American or other Western nations, could still make use of the remaining terrorist “free agents” for more narrow political goals.

If anything, this problem is very likely to grow, since under the previous world situation, the major nation states placed firm limits on terrorist activity—these limits enforced by controlled access to weapons, funding, training, and safehavens.

It seems likely that the current world situation will invert the previous “understanding” enjoyed by the major countries. The price *of support, weapons, training, and safehavens might well become actual terrorist activity, not the ideological purity previously demanded by sponsoring nation states.*

The most obvious solution to this—probably—increasing problem will be a new multinational counterterrorist team. I propose the code name Rainbow. I further propose that the organization be based in the United Kingdom. The reasons for this are simple:

- *The U.K. currently owns and operates the Special Air Service, the world's foremost—that is, most experienced—special-operations agency.*
- *London is the world's most accessible city in terms of commercial air travel—in addition to which the SAS has a very cordial relationship with British Airways.*
- *The legal environment is particularly advantageous, due to press restrictions possible under British law but not American.*
- *The long-standing "special relationship" between American and British governmental agencies.*

For all of these reasons, the proposed special-operations team, composed of U.S., U.K., and selected NATO personnel, with full support from national-intelligence services, coordinated at site. . . .

And he'd sold it, Clark told himself with a wispy smile. It had helped that both Ed and Mary Pat Foley had backed him up in the Oval Office, along with General Mickey Moore and selected others. The new agency, Rainbow, was blacker than black, its American funding directed through the Department of the Interior by Capitol Hill, then through the Pentagon's Office of Special Projects, with no connection whatsoever to the intelligence community. Fewer than a hundred people in Washington knew that Rainbow existed. A far smaller number would have been better, but that was about the best that could be expected.

The chain of command was a little baroque. No avoiding that. The British influence would be hard to shake—fully half of the field personnel were Brits, and nearly that many of the intel weenies, but Clark was the boss. That constituted a major concession from his hosts, John knew. Alistair Stanley would be his executive officer, and John didn't have a problem with that. Stanley was tough, and better yet, one of the smartest special-operations guys he'd ever met—he knew when to hold, when to fold, and when to play the cards. About the only bad news was that he, Clark, was now a REMF—worse, a *suit.* He'd have an office and two secretaries instead of going out to run with the big dogs. Well, he had to admit to himself, that had to come sooner or later, didn't it?

Shit. He wouldn't run with the dogs, but he would play with them. He *had* to do that, didn't he, to show the troops that he was worthy of his command. He would be a *colonel,* not a general, Clark told himself. He'd be with the troops as much as possible, running, shooting, and talking things over.

Meanwhile, *I'm a captain,* Ding was telling himself in the next car behind, while eagerly taking in the countryside. He'd only been through Britain for layovers at Heathrow or Gatwick, and never seen the land, which was as green as an Irish postcard. He'd be under John,

Mr. C, leading one of the strike teams, and in effective rank, that made him a captain, which was about the best rank to have in the Army, high enough that the NCOs respected you as worthy of command, and low enough that you weren't a staff puke and you played with the troops. He saw Patsy was dozing next to him. The pregnancy was taking it out of her, and doing so in unpredictable ways. Sometimes she bubbled with activity. Other times, she just vegetated. Well, she was carrying a new little Chavez in her belly, and that made everything okay—better than okay. A miracle. Almost as great as the miracle that here he was back doing what he'd originally been trained for—to be a soldier. Better yet, something of a free agent. The bad news was that he was subject to more than one government—suits that spoke multiple languages—but that couldn't be helped, and he'd volunteered for this to stay with Mr. C. Someone had to look after the boss.

The airplane had surprised him quite a bit. Mr. C hadn't had his weapon handy—what the hell, Ding thought, you bother to get a permit that allows you to carry a weapon on a civilian airliner (about the hardest thing you can wish to have) and then you stash your weapon where you can't get at it? *Santa Maria!* even John Clark was getting old. Must have been the first operational mistake he'd made in a long time, and then he'd tried to cover it by going cowboy on the takedown. Well, it had been nicely done. Smooth and cool. But overly fast, Ding thought, overly fast. He held Patsy's hand. She was sleeping a lot now. The little guy was sapping her strength. Ding leaned over to kiss her lightly on the cheek, softly enough that she didn't stir. He caught the driver's eye in the mirror and stared back with a poker expression. Was the guy just a driver or a team member? He'd find out soon enough, Chavez decided.

Security was tougher than Ding had expected. For the moment Rainbow HQ was at Hereford, headquarters of the British Army's 22nd Special Air Service Regiment. In fact, security was even tougher than it looked, because a man holding a weapon just looked like a man holding a weapon—from a distance you couldn't tell the difference between a rent-a-cop and a trained expert. On eyeballing one close, Ding decided these guys were the latter. They just had different eyes. The man who looked into his car earned himself a thoughtful nod, which was dutifully returned as he waved the car forward. The base looked like any other—the signs were different as was some of the spelling, but the buildings had closely trimmed lawns, and things just looked neater than in civilian areas. His car ended up in officer country, by a modest but trim house, complete with a parking pad for a car Ding and Patsy didn't have yet. He noticed that John's car kept

going another couple of blocks toward a larger house—well, colonels lived better than captains, and you couldn't beat the rent in any case. Ding opened the door, twisted out of the car, and headed for the trunk—excuse me, he thought, *boot*—to get their luggage moved in. Then came the first big surprise of this day.

"Major Chavez?" a voice asked.

"Uh, yeah?" Ding said, turning. *Major?* he wondered.

"I'm Corporal Weldon. I'm your batman." The corporal was much taller than Ding's five-feet-seven, and beefy-looking. The man bustled past his assigned officer and manhandled the bags out of the trunk/boot, leaving Chavez with nothing more to do or say than, "Thanks, Corporal."

"Follow me, sir." Ding and Patsy did that, too.

Three hundred meters away, it was much the same for John and Sandy, though their staff was a sergeant and a corporal, the latter female, blond, and pretty in the paleskinned English way. Sandy's first impression of the kitchen was that British refrigerators were tiny, and that cooking in here would be something of an exercise in contortion. She was a little slow to catch on—a result of the air travel—that she'd touch an implement in this room only at the sufferance of Corporal Anne Fairway. The house wasn't quite as large as their home in Virginia, but would be quite sufficient.

"Where's the local hospital?"

"About six kilometers away, mum." Fairway hadn't been briefed in on the fact that Sandy Clark was a highly trained ER nurse and would be taking a position in the hospital.

John checked out his study. The most impressive piece of furniture was the liquor cabinet—well stocked, he saw, with Scotches and gins. He'd have to figure a way to get some decent bourbons. The computer was in place, tempested, he was sure, to make sure that people couldn't park a few hundred yards away and read what he was typing. Of course, getting that close would be a feat. The perimeter guards had struck John as competent. While his batman and–woman got his clothes squared away, John hopped into the shower. This would be a day of work for him. Twenty minutes later, wearing a blue pin-stripe suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie, he appeared at the front door, where an official car waited to whisk him off to his headquarters building.

"Have fun, honey," Sandy said, with a kiss.

"You bet."

"Good morning, sir," his driver said. Clark shook his hand and learned that his name was Ivor Rogers, and that he was a sergeant. The bulge at his right hip probably made him an MP. Damn, John thought, the Brits take their security seriously. But, then, this was the

home of the SAS, probably not the most favorite unit of terrorists both inside and outside the UK. And the real professionals, the truly dangerous ones, were careful, thorough people. *Just like me,* John Clark told himself.

"We have to be careful. Extremely careful every step of the way." That was no particular surprise to the others, was it? The good news was that they understood about caution. Most were scientists, and many of them routinely trafficked in dangerous substances, Level-3 and up, and so caution was part of their way of looking at the world. And that, he decided, was good. It was also good that they understood, really understood the importance of the task at hand. A holy quest, they all thought—knew—it to be. After all, they were dealing in human life, the taking thereof, and there were those who didn't understand their quest and never would. Well, that was to be expected, since it was their lives that would be forfeited. It was too bad, but it couldn't be helped.

With that, the meeting broke up, later than usual, and people left, to walk out to the parking lot, where some—fools, he thought—would ride bicycles home, catch a few hours of sleep, and then bike back to the office. At least they were True Believers, if not overly practical ones—and, hell, they rode *airplanes* on long trips, didn't they? Well, the movement had room for people of differing views. The whole point was to create a big-tent movement. He walked out to his own vehicle, a very practical Hummer, the civilian version of the military's beloved HMMWV. He flipped on the radio, heard Respighi's *The Pines of Rome,* and realized that he'd miss NPR and its devotion to classical music. Well, some things couldn't be helped.

It turned out that his office was less than two miles from his house, in a two-story brick building surrounded by workers. Another soldier was at the front door, a pistol tucked away in a white canvas holster. He snapped to and saluted when Clark got within ten feet.

"Good morning—*Sahr!"*

John was sufficiently startled that he returned the salute, as though crossing onto the quarter-deck of a ship. "Morning, soldier," John replied, almost sheepishly, and thinking he'd have to learn the kid's name. The door he managed to open for himself, to find Stanley inside, reading a document and looking up with a smile.

"The building won't be finished for another week or so, John. It was unused for some years, rather old, I'm afraid, and they've only been working on it for six weeks. Come, I'll take you to your office."

And again Clark followed, somewhat sheepishly, turning right and heading down the corridor to the end office—which was, it turned

out, all finished.

"The building dates back to 1947," Alistair said, opening the door. There John saw two secretaries, both in their late thirties, and probably cleared higher than he was. Their names were Alice Foorgate and Helen Montgomery. They stood when the Boss came in, and introduced themselves with warm and charming smiles. Stanley's XO office was adjacent to Clark's, which contained a huge desk, a comfortable chair, and the same kind of computer as in John's CIA office—tempested here, too, so that people couldn't monitor it electronically. There was even a liquor cabinet in the far right corner, doubtless a British custom.

John took a breath before trying out the swivel chair and decided to doff his jacket first. Sitting in a chair with a suit coat on was something he'd never really learned to enjoy. That was something a "suit" did, and being a "suit" wasn't John's idea of fun. He waved Alistair to the seat opposite the desk.

"Where are we?"

"Two teams fully formed. Chavez will have one. The other will be commanded by Peter Covington—just got his majority. Father was colonel of the 22nd some years ago, retired as a Brigadier. Marvelous lad. Ten men per team, as agreed. The technical staff is coming together nicely. We have an Israeli chap on that, David Peled—surprised they let us have him. He's a bloody genius with electronics and surveillance systems—"

"And he'll report back to Avi ben Jakob every day."

A smile. "Naturally." Neither office was under any illusions about the ultimate loyalty of the troops assigned to Rainbow. But, were they not capable of such loyalty, what good would they be? "David's worked with SAS on and off for a decade. He's quite amazing, contacts with every electronics corporation from San Jose to Taiwan."

"And the shooters?"

"Top drawer, John. As good as any I've ever worked with." Which was saying something.

"Intel?"

"All excellent. The chief of that section is Bill Tawney, a 'Six' man for thirty years, supported by Dr. Paul Bellow—Temple University, Philadelphia, was a professor there until your FBI seconded him. Bloody smart chap. Mind-reader, he's been all over the world. Your chaps lent him to the Italians for the Moro job, but he refused to take an assignment to Argentina the next year. Principled, also, or so it would seem. He flies in tomorrow."

Just then Mrs. Foorgate came in with a tray, tea for Stanley, coffee for Clark. "Staff meeting starts in ten minutes, sir," she told John.

"Thanks, Alice." *Sir,* he thought. Clark wasn't used to being

addressed like that. Yet another sign he was a "suit." Damn. He waited until the heavy soundproofed door closed to ask his next question. "Al, what's my status here?"

"General officer—brigadier at least, maybe a two-star. I seem to be a colonel—chief of staff, you see," Stanley said, sipping his tea. "John, you know that there must be protocol," he went on reasonably.

"Al, you know what I really am—was, I mean?"

"You were a navy chief boatswain's mate, I believe, with the Navy Cross, Silver Star with a repeat cluster. Bronze star with Combat-V and three repeats, and three Purple Hearts. And all that's before the Agency took you in and gave you no less than four Intelligence Stars." Stanley said all this from memory. "Brigadier's the least we can do, old man. Rescuing Koga and taking Daryei out were bloody brilliant jobs, in case I never told you. We do know a little bit about you, and your young Chavez—the lad has enormous potential, if he's as good as I've heard. Of course, he'll need it. His team is composed of some real stars."

"Yo, Ding!" a familiar voice called. Chavez looked to his left in genuine surprise.

"Oso! You son of a bitch! What the hell are you doing here?" Both men embraced.

"The Rangers were getting boring, so I shipped up to Bragg for a tour with Delta, and then this came up on the scope and I went after it. You're the boss for Team Two?" First Sergeant (E-8) Julio Vega asked.

"Sorta-kinda," Ding replied, shaking the hand of an old friend and comrade. "Ain't lost no weight, man, Jesu Christo, Oso, you *eat* barbells?"

"Gotta keep fit, sir," replied a man for whom a hundred morning push-ups didn't generate a drop of sweat. His uniform blouse showed a Combat Infantryman's Badge and the silver "ice-cream cone" of a master parachutist. "You're looking good, man, keeping up your running, eh?"

"Yeah, well, running away is an ability I want to keep, if you know what I mean."

"Roge-o." Vega laughed. "Come on, I'll intro you to the team. We got some good troops, Ding."

Team Two, Rainbow, had its own building—brick, single-story, and fairly large, with a desk for every man, and a secretary named Katherine Moony they'd all share, young and pretty enough, Ding noticed, to attract the interest of any unattached member of his team. Team Two was composed exclusively of NCOs, mainly senior ones, four Americans, four Brits, a German, and a Frenchman. He only

needed one look to see that all were fit as hell—enough so that Ding instantly worried about his own condition. He had to lead them, and that meant being as good as or better than all of them in every single thing the team would have to do.

Sergeant Louis Loiselle was the nearest. Short and dark-haired, he was a former member of French parachute forces and had been detailed to DGSE some years before. Loiselle was vanilla, a utility infielder, good in everything but a nonspecialist specialist—like all of the men, a weapons expert, and, his file said, a brilliant marksman with pistol and rifle. He had an easy, relaxed smile with a good deal of confidence behind it.

Feldwebel Dieter Weber was next, also a paratrooper and a graduate of the German army's *Bergführer* or Mountain Leader school, one of the physically toughest schools in any army in the world. He looked it. Blondhaired and fair-skinned, he might have been on an SS recruiting poster sixty years earlier. His English, Ding learned at once, was better than his own. He could have passed for American—or English. Weber had come to Rainbow from the German GSG-9 team, which was part of the former Border Guards, the Federal Republic's counterterror team.

"Major, we have heard much about you," Weber said from his six-three height. A little tall, Ding thought. Too large a target. He shook hands like a German. One quick grab, vertical jerk, and let go, with a nice squeeze in the middle. His blue eyes were interesting, cold as ice, interrogating Ding from the first. The eyes were usually found behind a rifle. Weber was one of the team's two long-riflemen.

SFC Homer Johnston was the other. A mountaineer from Idaho, he'd taken his first deer at the age of nine. He and Weber were friendly competitors. Average-looking in all respects, Johnston was clearly a runner rather than an iron-pumper at his six-feet-nothing, one-sixty. He'd started off in the 101st Air-Mobile at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and rapidly worked his way into the Army's black world. "Major, nice to meet you, sir." He was a former Green Beret and Delta member, like Chavez's friend, Oso Vega.

The shooters, as Ding thought of them, the guys who went into the buildings to do business, were Americans and Brits. Steve Lincoln, Paddy Connolly, Scotty McTyler, and Eddie Price were from the SAS. They'd all been there and done that in Northern Ireland and a few other places. Mike Pierce, Hank Patterson, and George Tomlinson mainly had not, because the American Delta Force didn't have the experience of the SAS. It was also true, Ding reminded himself, that Delta, SAS, GSG-9, and other crack international teams cross-trained to the point that they might as well have married one another's sisters. Every one of them was taller than "Major" Chavez. Every one was

tough. Every one was smart, and with this realization came an oddly deflating feeling that, despite his own field experience, he'd have to earn the respect of his team and earn it fast.

"Who's senior?"

"That's me, sir," Eddie Price said. He was the oldest of the team, forty-one, and a former color sergeant in the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, since spot-promoted to sergeant major. Like the rest in the bullpen, he was wearing nonuniform clothes, though they were all wearing the *same* nonuniform things, without badges of rank.

"Okay, Price, have we done our PT today?"

"No, Major, we waited for you to lead us out," Sergeant Major Price replied, with a smile that was ten percent manners and ninety percent challenge.

Chavez smiled back. "Yeah, well, I'm a little stiff from the flight, but maybe we can loosen that up for me. Where do I change?" Ding asked, hoping his last two weeks of five-mile daily runs would prove to be enough—and he *was* slightly wasted by the flight.

"Follow me, sir."

• • •

"My name's Clark, and I suppose I'm the boss here," John said from the head of the conference table. "You all know the mission, and you've all asked to be part of Rainbow. Questions?"

That startled them, John saw. Good. Some continued to stare at him. Most looked down at the scratch pads in front of them.

"Okay, to answer some of the obvious ones, our operational doctrine ought to be little different from the organizations you came from. We will establish that in training, which commences tomorrow. We are supposed to be operational right now," John warned them. "That means the phone could ring in a minute, and we will have to respond. Are we able to?"

"No," Alistair Stanley responded for the rest of the senior staff. "That's unrealistic, John. We need, I would estimate, three weeks."

"I understand that—but the real world is not as accommodating as we would like it to be. Things that need doing—do them, and quickly. I will start running simulations on Monday next. People, I am not a hard man to work with. I've been in the field, and I know what happens out there. I don't expect perfection, but I *do* expect that we will always work for it. If we screw a mission up, that means that people who deserve to live will not live. That is going to happen. You know it. I know it. *But* we will avoid mistakes as much as possible, and we will learn the proper lessons from every one we make.

Counterterrorism is a Darwinian world. The dumb ones are already dead, and the people out there we have to worry about are those who've learned a lot of lessons. So have we, and we're probably ahead of the game, tactically speaking, but we have to run hard to stay there. We will run hard.

"Anyway," he went on, "intelligence, what's ready and what's not?"

Bill Tawney was John's age, plus one or two, John estimated, with brown, thinning hair and an unlit pipe in his mouth. A "Six" man—meaning he was a former (well, current) member of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, he was a field spook who'd come inside after ten years working the streets behind the Curtain. "Our communications links are up and running. We have liaison personnel to all friendly services either here or in the corresponding capitals."

"How good are they?"

"Fair," Tawney allowed. John wondered how much of that was Brit understatement. One of his most important but most subtle tasks would be to decode what every member of his staff said when he or she spoke, a task made all the more difficult by linguistic and cultural differences. On inspection, Tawney looked like a real pro, his brown eyes calm and businesslike. His file said that he'd worked directly with SAS for the past five years. Given SAS's record in the field, he hadn't stiffed them with bad intel very often, if at all. Good.

"David?" he asked next. David Peled, the Israeli chief of his technical branch, looked very Catholic, rather like something from an El Greco painting, a Dominican priest, perhaps, from the fifteenth century, tall, skinny, hollow of cheek and dark of hair (short), with a certain intensity of eye. Well, he'd worked a long time for Avi ben Jakob, whom Clark knew, if not well then well enough. Peled would be here for two reasons, to serve as a senior Rainbow staffer, thus winning allies and prestige for his parent intelligence service, the Israeli Mossad, and also to learn what he could and feed it back to his boss.

"I am putting together a good staff," David said, setting his tea down. "I need three to five weeks to assemble all the equipment I need."

"Faster," Clark responded at once.

David shook his head. "Not possible. Much of our electronics items can be purchased off the shelf, as it were, but some will have to be custom-made. The orders are all placed," he assured his boss, "with high-priority flags—from the usual vendors. TRW, IDI, Marconi, you know who they are. But they can't do miracles, even for us. Three to five weeks for some crucial items."

"SAS are willing to hire anything important to us," Stanley assured Clark from his end of the table.

"For training purposes?" Clark asked, annoyed that he hadn't found out the answer to the question already.

"Perhaps."

Ding cut the run off at three miles, which they'd done in twenty minutes. Good time, he thought, somewhat winded, until he turned to see his ten men about as fresh as they'd been at the beginning, one or two with a sly smile for his neighbors at their wimpy new leader.

Damn.

The run had ended at the weapons range, where targets and arms were ready. Here Chavez had made his own change in his team's selection. A longtime Beretta aficionado, he'd decided that his men would use the recent .45 Beretta as their personal sidearms, along with the Hechler & Koch MP-10 submachine gun, the new version of the venerable MP-5, chambered instead for the 10-mm Smith & Wesson cartridge developed in the 1980s for the American FBI. Without saying anything, Ding picked up his weapon, donned his ear-protectors, and started going for the silhouette targets, set five meters away. *There,* he saw, all eight holes in the head. But Dieter Weber, next to him, had grouped his shots in one ragged hole, and Paddy Connolly had made what appeared to be one not-soragged hole less than an inch across, all between the target's eyes, without touching the eyes themselves. Like most American shooters, Chavez had believed that Europeans didn't know pistols worth a damn. Evidently, training corrected that, he saw.

Next, people picked up their H&Ks, which just about anyone could shoot well because of the superb diopter sights. Ding walked along the firing line, watching his people engage pop-up steel plates the size and shape of human heads. Driven up by compressed air, they fell back down instantly with a metallic *clang.* Ding ended up behind First Sergeant Vega, who finished his magazine and turned.

"Told you they were good, Ding."

"How long they been here?"

"Oh, 'bout a week. Used to running five miles, sir," Julio added with a smile. "Remember the summer camp we went to in Colorado?"

Most important of all, Ding thought, was the steady aim despite the run, which was supposed to get people pumped up, and simulate the stress of a real combat situation. But these bastards were as steady as fucking bronze statues. Formerly a squad leader in the Seventh Light Infantry Division, he'd once been one of the toughest, fittest, and most effective soldiers in his country's uniform, which was why John Clark had tapped him for a job in the Agency—and in *that* capacity he'd pulled off some tense and tough missions in the field. It had been a very long time indeed since Domingo Chavez had felt the least bit

inadequate about anything. But now quiet voices were speaking into his ear.

"Who's the toughest?" he asked Vega.

"Weber. I heard stories about the German mountain school. Well, they be true, 'mano. Dieter isn't entirely human. Good in hand-to-hand, good pistol, damned good with a rifle, and I think he could run a deer down if he had to, then rip it apart barehanded." Chavez had to remind himself that being called "good" in a combat skill by a graduate of Ranger school *and* Fort Bragg's special-operations schools wasn't quite the same as from a guy in a corner bar. Julio was about as tough as they came.

"The smartest?"

"Connolly. All those SAS guys are tops. Us Americans have to play a little catchup ball. But we will," Vega assured him. "Don't sweat it, Ding. You'll keep up with us, after a week or so. Just like it was in Colorado."

Chavez didn't really want to be reminded of that job. Too many friends lost in the mountains of Colombia, doing a job that their country had never acknowledged. Watching his men finish off their training rounds told him much about them. If anyone had missed a single shot, he failed to notice it. Every man fired off exactly a hundred rounds, the standard daily regimen for men who fired five hundred per working week on routine training, as opposed to more carefully directed drill. That would start tomorrow.

• • •

"Okay," John concluded, "we'll have a staff meeting every morning at eight-fifteen for routine matters, and a more formal one every Friday afternoon. My door is always open—including the one at home. People, if you need me, there's a phone next to my shower. Now, I want to get out and see the shooters. Anything else? Good. We stand adjourned." Everyone stood and shuffled out the door. Stanley remained.

"That went well," Alistair observed, pouring himself another cup of tea. "Especially for one not accustomed to bureaucratic life."

"Shows, eh?" Clark asked with a grin.

"One can learn anything, John."

"I hope so."

"When's morning PT around here?"

"Oh-six-forty-five. You plan to run and sweat with the lads?"

"I plan to try," Clark answered.

"You're too old, John. Some of those chaps run marathons for

recreation, and you're closer to sixty than to fifty."

"Al, I can't command those people without trying, and you know that."

"Quite," Stanley admitted.

They awoke late, one at a time, over a period of about an hour. For the most part they just lay there in bed, some of them shuffling off to the bathroom, where they also found aspirin and Tylenol for the headaches they all had, along with showers, which half of them decided to take and the other half to forgo. In the adjoining room was a breakfast buffet that surprised them, with pans full of scrambled eggs, pancakes, sausage and bacon. Some of them even remembered how to use napkins, the people in the monitoring room saw.

They met their captor after they'd had a chance to eat breakfast. He offered all of them clean clothes, after they got cleaned up.

"What is this place?" asked the one known to the staff only as #4. It sure as hell wasn't any Bowery mission he was familiar with.

"My company is undertaking a study," the host said from behind a tightly fitting mask. "You gentlemen will be part of that study. You will be staying with us for a while. During that time, you will have clean beds, clean clothes, good food, good medical care, *and"*—he pulled a wall panel back—"whatever you want to drink." In a wall alcove which the guests remarkably had not yet discovered were three shelves of every manner of wine, beer, and spirit that could be purchased at the local liquor store, with glasses, water, mixes, and ice.

"You mean we can't leave?" Number 7 asked.

"We would prefer that you stay," the host said, somewhat evasively. He pointed to the liquor cabinet, his eyes smiling around the mask. "Anyone care for a morning eye-opener?"

It turned out that it wasn't too early in the morning for any of them, and that the expensive bourbons and ryes were the first and hardest hit. The additional drug in the alcohol was quite tasteless, and the guests all headed back to their alcove beds. Next to each was a TV set. Two more decided to make use of the showers. Three even shaved, emerging from the bathroom looking quite human. For the time being.

In the monitoring room half a building away, Dr. Archer manipulated the various TV cameras to get close-ups on every "guest."

"They're all pretty much on profile," she observed. "Their blood work ought to be a disaster."

"Oh, yeah, Barb," Dr. Killgore agreed. "Number Three looks especially unwell. You suppose we can get him slightly cleaned up before . . . ?"

"I think we should try," Barbara Archer, M.D., thought. "We can't

monkey with the test criteria too much, can we?"

"Yeah, and it'd be bad for morale if we let one die too soon," Killgore went on.

" 'What a piece of work is man,' " Archer quoted, with a snort.

"Not all of us, Barb." A chuckle. "Surprised they didn't find a woman or two for the group."

"I'm not," replied the feminist Dr. Archer, to the amusement of the more cynical Killgore. But it wasn't worth getting all worked up over. He looked away from the battery of TV screens, and picked up the memo from corporate headquarters. Their guests were to be treated as guests—fed, cleaned up, and offered all the drink they could put away consistent with the continuance of their bodily functions. It was slightly worrisome to the epidemiologist that all their guest-test-subjects were seriously impaired street alcoholics. The advantage of using them, of course, was that they wouldn't be missed, even by what might have passed for friends. Few had any family members who would even know where to look for them. Fewer still would have any who would be surprised by the inability to locate them. And none, Killgore judged, had so much as one who would notify proper authorities on the inability to find them—and even if *that* happened, would the New York City Police care? Not likely.

No, all their "guests" were people written off by their society, less aggressively but just as finally as Hitler had written off his Jews, though with somewhat more justice, Archer and Killgore both thought. What a piece of work was man? These examples of the self-designated godlike species were of less use than the laboratory animals they were now replacing. And they were also far less appealing to Archer, who had feelings for rabbits and even rats. Killgore found that amusing. He didn't much care about them either, at least not as individual animals. It was the species as a whole that mattered, wasn't it? And as far as the "guests" were concerned, well, they weren't even good examples of the substandard humans whom the species didn't need. Killgore was. So was Archer, her goofy political-sexual views notwithstanding. With that decided, Killgore returned to making a few notes and doing his paperwork. Tomorrow they'd do the physical examinations. That would be fun, he was sure.

CHAPTER 2

SADDLING UP

The first two weeks started off pleasantly enough. Chavez was now running five miles without any discomfort, doing the requisite number of push-ups with his team, and shooting better, as well as about half of them, but not as well as Connolly and the American Hank Patterson, both of whom must have been born with pistols in their cribs or something, Ding decided after firing three hundred rounds per day to try to equal them. Maybe a gunsmith could play with his weapon. The SAS based here had a regimental armorer who might have trained with Sam Colt himself, or so he'd heard. A little lighter and smoother on the trigger, perhaps. But that was mere pride talking. Pistols were secondary weapons. With their H&K MP-10s, every man could put three quick aimed rounds in a head at fifty meters about as fast as his mind could form the thought. These people were awesome, the best soldiers he'd ever met—or heard about, Ding admitted to himself, sitting at his desk and doing some hated paperwork. He grunted. Was there anyone in the world who didn't hate paperwork?

The team spent a surprising amount of time sitting at their desks and reading, mainly intelligence stuff—which terrorist was thought to be where, according to some intelligence agency or police department or money-grubbing informer. In fact the data they pored over was nearly useless, but since it was the best they had, they pored over it anyway as a way of breaking the routine. Included were photos of the world's surviving terrorists. Carlos the Jackal, now in his fifties, and now settled into a French maximum-security prison, was the one they'd all wanted. The photos of him were computer-manipulated to simulate his current-age appearance, which they then compared with real-life photos from the French. The team members spent time memorizing all of them, because some dark night in some unknown place, a flash of light might reveal one of these faces, and you'd have *that long* to decide whether or not to double-tap the head in question —and if you had the chance to bag another Carlos ll'ych Ramirez Sanchez, you wanted to take it, 'cuz then, Ding's mind went on, you'd never be able to buy a beer in a cop or special-ops bar again anywhere in the world, you'd be so famous. The real hell of it was, this pile of

trash on his desk wasn't really trash after all. If they ever bagged the next Carlos, it would be because some local cop, in São Paolo, Brazil, or Bumfuck, Bosnia, or wherever, heard something from some informant or other, then went to the proper house and took a look, and then had his brain go *click* from all the flyers that filled cophouses around the world, and then it would be up to the street savvy of that cop to see if he might arrest the bastard on the spot—or, if the situation looked a little too tense, to report back to his lieutenant, and just maybe a special team like Ding's Team-2 would deploy quietly, and take the fucker down, the easy way or the hard way, in front of whatever spouse or kids there might be, ignorant of daddy's former career . . . and then it would make CNN with quite a splash. . . .

That was the problem with working at a desk. You started daydreaming. Chavez, simulated major, checked his watch and rose, headed out into the bullpen, and handed off his pile of trash to Miss Moony. He was about to ask if everyone was ready, but they must have been, because the only other person to ask was halfway to the door. On the way, he drew his pistol and belt. The next stop was what the Brits called a robing room, except there were no robes, but instead coal-black fatigue clothes, complete with body armor.

Team-2 was all there, mostly dressed a few minutes early for the day's exercise. They were all loose, relaxed, smiling, and joking quietly. When all had their gear on, they went to the arms room to draw their SMGs. Each put the double-looped sling over his head, then checked to see that the magazine was full, sliding each into the proper port on the bottom of the weapon, and working the bolt back to the safe position, then snugging the weapon to make sure that each fitted to the differing specifications of each individual shooter.

The exercises had been endless, or as much so as two weeks could make them. There were six basic scenarios, all of which could be played out in various environments. The one they hated most was inside the body of a commercial aircraft. The only good thing about that was the confinement forced on the bad guys—they wouldn't be going anywhere. The rest was entirely bad. Lots of civilians in the fire arcs, good concealment for the bad guys—and if one of them really did have a bomb strapped to his body—they almost always claimed to—well, then all he had to have was the balls to pull the string or close the switch, and then, if the bastard was halfway competent, everyone aboard was toast. Fortunately, few people chose death in that way. But Ding and his people couldn't think like that. Much of the time terrorists seemed to fear capture more than death—so your shooting had to be fast *and* perfect, and the team had to hit the aircraft like a Kansas tornado at midnight, with your flash-bangs especially important to stun the bastards into combat-ineffectiveness so that the

double-taps were aimed at nonmoving heads, and hope to God that the civilians you were trying to rescue didn't stand up and block the shooting range that the fuselage of the Boeing or Airbus had suddenly become.

"Team-2, we ready?" Chavez asked.

"Yes, sir!" came the chorused reply.

With that, Ding led them outside and ran them half a mile to the shooting house, a hard run, not the fast jog of daily exercises. Johnston and Weber were already on the scene, on opposite corners of the rectangular structure.

"Command to Rifle Two-Two," Ding said into his helmet-mounted microphone, "anything to report?"

"Negative, Two-Six. Nothing at all," Weber reported.

"Rifle Two-One?"

"Six," Johnston replied, "I saw a curtain move, but nothing else. Instruments show four to six voices inside, speaking English. Nothing else to report."

"Roger," Ding responded, the remainder of his team concealed behind a truck. He took a final look at the layout of the inside of the building. The raid had been fully briefed. The shooters knew the inside of the structure well enough to see it with their eyes closed. With that knowledge, Ding waved for the team to move.

Paddy Connolly took the lead, racing to the door. Just as he got there, he let go of his H&K and let it dangle on the sling while he pulled the Primacord from the fannypack hanging down from his body armor. He stuck the explosive to the door frame by its adhesive and pushed the blasting cap into the top-right corner. A second later, he moved right ten feet, holding the detonator control up in his left hand, while his right grabbed the pistol grip of his SMG and brought it up to point at the sky.

Okay, Ding thought. Time to move. "Let's go!" he shouted at the team.

As the first of them bolted around the truck, Connolly thumbed the switch, and the door frame disintegrated, sending the door flying inward. The first shooter, Sergeant Mike Pierce, was less than a second behind it, disappearing into the smoking hole with Chavez right behind him.

The inside was dark, the only light coming through the shattered doorway. Pierce scanned the room, found it empty, and then lodged himself by the doorway into the next room. Ding ran into that first, leading his team—

—there they were, four targets and four hostages—

Chavez brought his MP-10 up and fired two silenced rounds into the left-most target's head. He saw the rounds hit, dead-center in the

head, right between the bluepainted eyes, then traversed right to see that Steve Lincoln had gotten his man just as planned. In less than a second, the overhead lights came on. It was all over, elapsed time from the Primacord explosion, seven seconds. Eight seconds had been programmed for the exercise. Ding safed his weapon.

"Goddamnit, John!" he said to the Rainbow commander.

Clark stood, smiling at the target to his left, less than two feet away, the two holes drilled well enough to ensure certain, instant death. He wasn't wearing any protective gear. Neither was Stanley, at the far end of the line, also trying to show off, though Mrs. Foorgate and Mrs. Montgomery were, in their center seats. The presence of the women surprised Chavez until he reminded himself that they were team members, too, and probably eager to show that they, too, belonged with the boys. He had to admire their spirit, if not their good sense.

"Seven seconds. That'll do, I guess. Five would be better," John observed, but the dimensions of the building pretty much determined the speed with which the team could cover the distance. He walked across, checking all the targets. McTyler's target showed one hole only, though its irregular shape proved that he'd fired both rounds as per the exercise parameters. Any one of these men would have earned a secure place in 3rd SOG, and every one was as good as he'd ever been, John Clark thought to himself. Well, training methods had improved markedly since his time in Vietnam, hadn't they? He helped Helen Montgomery to her feet. She seemed just a little shaky. Hardly a surprise. Being on the receiving end of bullets wasn't exactly what secretaries were paid for.

"You okay?" John asked.

"Oh, quite, thank you. It *was* rather exciting. My first time, you see."

"My third," Alice Foorgate said, rising herself. "It's always exciting," she added with a smile.

For me, too, Clark thought. Confident as he'd been with Ding and his men, still, looking down the barrel of a light machine gun and seeing the flashes made one's blood turn slightly cool. And the lack of body armor wasn't all that smart, though he justified it by telling himself he'd had to see better in order to watch for any mistakes. He'd seen nothing major, however. They were damned good.

"Excellent," Stanley said from his end of the dais. He pointed "You —uh—"

"Patterson, sir," the sergeant said. "I know, I kinda tripped coming through." He turned to see that a fragment of the door frame had been blasted through the entrance to the shooting room, and he'd almost stumbled on it.

"You recovered nicely, Sergeant Patterson. I see it didn't affect your aim at all."

"No, sir," Hank Patterson agreed, not quite smiling.

The team leader walked up to Clark, safing his weapon on the way.

"Mark us down fully mission-capable, Mr. C," Chavez said with a confident smile. "Tell the bad guys they better watch their asses. How'd Team-1 do?"

"Two-tenths of a second faster," John replied, glad to see the diminutive leader of–2 deflate a little. "And thanks."

"What for?"

"For not wasting your father-in-law." John clapped him on the shoulder and walked out of the room.

"Okay, people," Ding said to his team, "let's police up the brass and head back for the critique." No fewer than six TV cameras had recorded the mission. Stanley would be going over it frame by frame. That would be followed by a few pints at the 22nd's Regimental NCO club. The Brits, Ding had learned over the previous two weeks, took their beer seriously, and Scotty McTyler could throw darts about as well as Homer Johnston could shoot a rifle. It was something of a breach of protocol that Ding, a simulated major, hoisted pints with his men, all sergeants. He had explained that away by noting that he'd been a humble staff sergeant squad leader himself before disappearing into the maw of the Central Intelligence Agency, and he regaled them with stories of his former life in the Ninjas—stories that the others listened to with a mixture of respect and amusement. As good as the 7th Infantry Division had been, it wasn't *this* good. Even Domingo would admit to that after a few pints of John Courage.

"Okay, Al, what do you think?" John asked. The liquor cabinet in his office was open, a single-malt Scotch for Stanley, while Clark sipped at a Wild Turkey.

"The lads?" He shrugged. "Technically very competent. Marksmanship is just about right, physical fitness is fine. They respond well to obstacles and the unexpected, and, well, they didn't kill us with stray rounds, did they?"

"But?" Clark asked with a quizzical look.

"But one doesn't know until the real thing happens. Oh, yes, they're as good as SAS, but the best of them *are* former SAS. . . ."

Old-world pessimism, John Clark thought. That was the problem with Europeans. No optimism, too often they looked for things that would go wrong instead of right.

"Chavez?"

"Superb lad," Stanley admitted. "Almost as good as Peter Covington."

"Agreed," Clark admitted, the slight on his son-in-law notwithstanding. But Covington had been at Hereford for seven years.

Another couple of months and Ding would be there. He was pretty close already. It was already down to how many hours of sleep one or the other had had the night before, and pretty soon it would be down to what one or the other had eaten for breakfast. All in all, John told himself, he had the right people, trained to the right edge. Now all he had to do was keep them there. Training. Training. Training.

Neither knew that it had already started.

"So, Dmitriy," the man said.

"Yes?" Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov replied, twirling his vodka around in the glass.

"Where and how do we begin?" the man asked.

They'd met by a fortunate accident, both thought, albeit for very different reasons. It had happened in Paris, at some sidewalk café, tables right next to each other, where one had noted that the other was Russian, and wanted to ask a few simple questions about business in Russia. Popov, a former KGB official, RIF'ed and scouting around for opportunities for entering the world of capitalism, had quickly determined that this American had a great deal of money, and was therefore worthy of stroking. He had answered the questions openly and clearly, leading the American to deduce his former occupation rapidly—the language skills (Popov was highly fluent in English, French, and Czech) had been a giveaway, as had Popov's knowledge of Washington, D.C. Popov was clearly not a diplomat, being too open and forthright in his opinions, which factor had terminated his promotion in the former Soviet KGB at the rank of Colonel—he still thought himself worthy of general's stars. As usual, one thing had led to another, first the exchange of business cards, then a trip to America, first class on Air France, as a security consultant, and a series of meetings that had moved ever so subtly in a direction that came more as a surprise to the Russian than the American. Popov had impressed the American with his knowledge of safety issues on the streets of foreign cities, then the discussion had moved into very different areas of expertise.

"How do you know all this?" the American had asked in his New York office.

The response had been a broad grin, after three double vodkas. "I know these people, of course. Come, you must know what I did before leaving the service of my country."

"You actually worked with terrorists?" he'd asked, surprised, and thinking about this bit of information, even back then.

It was necessary for Popov to explain in the proper ideological context: "You must remember that to us they were not terrorists at all. They were fellow believers in world peace and Marxism-Leninism,

fellow soldiers in the struggle for human freedom—and, truth be told, useful fools, all too willing to sacrifice their lives in return for a little support of one sort or another."

"Really?" the American asked again, in surprise. "I would have thought that they were motivated by something important—"

"Oh, they are," Popov assured him, "but idealists are foolish people, are they not?"

"Some are," his host admitted, nodding for his guest to go on.

"They believe all the rhetoric, all the promises. Don't you see? I, too, was a Party member. I said the words, filled out the bluebook answers, attended the meetings, paid my Party dues. I did all I had to do, but, really, I was KGB. I traveled abroad. I *saw* what life was like in the West. I much preferred to travel abroad on, ah, 'business' than to work at Number Two Dzerzhinsky Square. Better food, better clothes, better everything. Unlike these foolish youths, I knew what the truth was," he concluded, saluting with his half-full glass.

"So, what are they doing now?"

"Hiding," Popov answered. "For the most part, hiding. Some may have jobs of one sort or another—probably menial ones, I would imagine, despite the university education most of them have."

"I wonder . . ." A sleepy look reflected the man's own imbibing, so skillfully delivered that Popov wondered if it were genuine or not.

"Wonder what?"

"If one could still contact them . . ."

"Most certainly, if there were a reason for it. My contacts"—he tapped his temple—"well, such things do not evaporate." *Where was this going?*

"Well, Dmitriy, you know, even attack dogs have their uses, and every so often, well"—an embarrassed smile—"you know . . ."

In that moment, Popov wondered if all the movies were true. Did American business executives *really* plot murder against commercial rivals and such? It seemed quite mad . . . but maybe the movies were not entirely groundless. . . .

"Tell me," the American went on, "did you actually work with those people—you know, plan some of the jobs they did?"

"Plan? No," the Russian replied, with a shake of the head. "I provided some assistance, yes, under the direction of my government. Most often I acted as a courier of sorts." It had not been a favored assignment; essentially he'd been a mailman tasked to delivering special messages to those perverse children, but it was duty he'd drawn due to his superb field skills and his ability to reason with nearly anyone on nearly any topic, since the contacts were so difficult to handle once they'd decided to do something. Popov had been a spook, to use the Western vernacular, a really excellent field

intelligence officer who'd never, to the best of his knowledge, been identified by any Western counterintelligence service. Otherwise, his entry into America at JFK International Airport would hardly have been so uneventful.

"So, you actually know how to get in touch with those people, eh?"

"Yes, I do," Popov assured his host.

"Remarkable." The American stood. "Well, how about some dinner?"

By the end of dinner, Popov was earning $100,000 per year as a special consultant, wondering where this new job would lead and not really caring. One hundred thousand dollars was a good deal of money for a man whose tastes were actually rather sophisticated and needed proper support.

It was ten months later now, and the vodka was still good, in the glass with two ice cubes. "Where and how? . . ." Popov whispered. It amused him where he was now, and what he was doing. Life was so very strange, the paths you took, and where they led you. After all, he'd just been in Paris that afternoon, killing time and waiting for a meet with a former "colleague" in DGSE. "When is decided, then?"

"Yes, you have the date, Dmitriy."

"I know whom to see and whom to call to arrange the meeting."

"You have to do it face-to-face?" the American asked, rather stupidly, Popov thought.

A gentle laugh. "My dear friend, yes, face-to-face. One does not arrange such a thing with a fax."

"That's a risk."

"Only a small one. The meet will be in a safe place. No one will take my photograph, and they know me only by a password and codename, and, of course, the currency."

"How much?"

Popov shrugged. "Oh, shall we say five hundred thousand dollars? In cash, of course, American dollars, Deutschmarks, Swiss francs, that will depend on what our . . . our friends prefer," he added, just to make things clear.

The host scribbled a quick note and handed the paper across. "That's what you need to get the money." And with that, things began. Morals were always variable things, depending on the culture, experiences, and principles of individual men and women. In Dmitriy's case, his parent culture had few hard-and-fast rules, his experiences were to make use of that fact, and his main principle was to earn a living—

"You know that this carries a certain degree of danger for me, and, as you know, my salary—"

"Your salary just doubled, Dmitriy."

A smile. “Excellent.” A good beginning. Even the Russian Mafia didn’t advance people as quickly as this.

Three times a week they practiced zip-lining from a platform, sixty feet down to the ground. Once a week or so they did it for-real, out of a British Army helicopter. Chavez didn’t like it much. Airborne school was one of the few things he’d avoided in his Army service—which was rather odd, he thought, looking back. He’d done Ranger school as an E-4, but for one reason or other, Fort Benning hadn’t happened.

This was the next best or worst thing. His feet rested on the skids as the chopper approached the drop-site. His gloved hands held the rope, a hundred feet long in case the pilot misjudged something. Nobody trusted pilots very much, though one’s life so often depended on them, and this one seemed pretty good. A little bit of a cowboy—the final part of the simulated insertion took them through a gap in some trees, and the top leaves brushed Ding’s uniform, gently to be sure, but in his position, any touch was decidedly unwelcome. Then the nose came up on a powerful dynamic-braking maneuver. Chavez’s legs went tight, and when the nose came back down, he kicked himself free of the skid and dropped. The tricky part was stopping the descent just short of the ground—and getting there quickly enough so as not to present yourself as a dangling target . . . done, and his feet hit the ground. He tossed the rope free, snatched up his H&K in both hands, and headed off toward the objective, having survived his fourteenth zip-line deployment, the third from a chopper.

There was a delightfully joyous aspect to this job, he told himself as he ran along. He was being a physical soldier again, something he’d once learned to love and that his CIA duties had mainly denied him. Chavez was a man who liked to sweat, who enjoyed the physical exertion of soldiering in the field, and most of all loved being with others who shared his likes. It was hard. It was dangerous: every member of the team had suffered a minor injury or other in the past month—except Weber, who seemed to be made of steel—and sooner or later, the statistics said, someone would have a major one, most probably a broken leg from zip-lining. Delta at Fort Bragg rarely had a complete team fully mission-capable, due to training accidents and injuries. But hard training made for easy combat. So ran the motto of every competent army in the world. An exaggeration, but not a big one. Looking back from his place of cover and concealment, Chavez saw that Team-2 was all down and moving—even Vega, remarkably enough. With Oso’s upper-body bulk, Chavez always worried about his ankles. Weber and Johnston were darting to their programmed perches, each carrying his custom-made scope-sighted rifle. Helmet-mounted radios were working, hissing with the digitized encryption

system so that only team members could understand what was being said . . . Ding turned and saw that everyone was in his pre-briefed position, ready for his next move-command . . .

The Communications Room was on the second floor of the building whose renovations had just been completed. It had the usual number of teletype machines for the various world news services, plus TV sets for CNN, and Sky News, and a few other broadcasts. These were overseen by people the Brits called "minders," who were overseen in turn by a career intelligence officer. The one on this shift was an American from the National Security Agency, an Air Force major who usually dressed in civilian clothes that didn't disguise his nationality or the nature of his training at all.

Major Sam Bennett had acclimated himself to the environment. His wife and son weren't all that keen on the local TV, but they found the climate agreeable, and there were several decent golf courses within easy driving distance. He jogged three miles every morning to let the local collection of snake-eaters know he wasn't a total wimp, and he was looking forward to a little bird-shooting in a few weeks. Otherwise, the duty here was pretty easy. General Clark—that's how everyone seemed to think of him—seemed a decent boss. He liked it clean and fast, which was precisely how Bennett liked to deliver it. Not a screamer, either. Bennett had worked for a few of those in his twelve years of uniformed service. And Bill Tawney, the British intelligence team boss, was about the best Bennett had ever seen—quiet, thoughtful, and smart. Bennett had shared a few pints of beer with him over the past weeks, while talking shop in the Hereford Officers' Club.

But duty like this was boring most of the time. He'd worked the basement Watch Center at NSA, a large, low-ceiling room of standard office sheep-pens, with minitelevisions and computer printers that gave the room a constant low buzz of noise that could drive a man crazy on the long nights of keeping track of the whole fucking world. At least the Brits didn't believe in caging all the worker bees. It was easy for him to get up and walk around. The crew was young here. Only Tawney was over fifty, and Bennett liked that, too.

"Major!" a voice called from one of the news printers. "We have a hostage case in Switzerland."

"What service?" Bennett asked on the way over.

"Agence France-Press. It's a bank, a bloody bank," the corporal reported, as Bennett came close enough to read—but couldn't, since he didn't know French. The corporal could and translated on the fly. Bennett lifted a phone and pushed a button.

"Mr. Tawney, we have an incident in Bern, unknown number of

criminals have seized the central branch of the Bern Commercial Bank. There are some civilians trapped inside."

"What else, Major?"

"Nothing at the moment. Evidently the police are there."

"Very well, thank you, Major Bennett." Tawney killed the line and pulled open a desk drawer, to find and open a very special book. Ah, yes, he knew that one. Then he dialed the British Embassy in Geneva. "Mr. Gordon, please," he told the operator.

"Gordon," a voice said a few seconds later.

"Dennis, this is Bill Tawney."

"Bill, haven't heard from you in quite a while. What can I do for you?" the voice asked pleasantly.

"Bern Commercial Bank, main branch. There seems to be a hostage situation there. I want you to evaluate the situation and report back to me."

"What's our interest, Bill?" the man asked.

"We have an . . . an understanding with the Swiss government. If their police are unable to handle it, we may have to provide some technical assistance. Who in the embassy liases with the local police?"

"Tony Armitage, used to be Scotland Yard. Good man for financial crimes and such."

"Take him with you," Tawney ordered. "Report back directly to me as soon as you have something." Tawney gave his number.

"Very well." It was a dull afternoon in Geneva anyway. "It will be a few hours."

And it will probably end up as nothing, they both knew. "I'll be here. Thank you, Dennis." With that, Tawney left his office and went upstairs to watch TV.

Behind the Rainbow Headquarters building were four large satellite dishes trained on communications satellites hovering over the equator. A simple check told them which channel of which bird carried Swiss television satellite broadcasts—as with most countries, it was easier to go up and back to a satellite than to use coaxial land-lines. Soon they were getting a direct newsfeed from the local station. Only one camera was set up at the moment. It showed the outside of an institutional building—the Swiss tended to design banks rather like urban castles, though with a distinctly Germanic flavor to make them appear powerful and forbidding. The voice was that of a reporter talking to his station, not to the public. A linguist stood by to translate.

" 'No, I have no idea. The police haven't talked to us yet,' " the translator said in a dull monotone. Then a new voice came on the line. "Cameraman," the translator said. "Sounds like a cameraman—there's something—"

—with that the camera zoomed in, catching a shape, a human shape wearing something over his head, a mask of sorts—

"What kind of gun is that?" Bennett asked.

"Czech Model 58," Tawney said at once. "So it would seem. Bloody good man on the camera."

" 'What did he say?' That was the studio to the reporter," the translator went on, hardly looking at the picture on the TV screen. " 'Don't know, couldn't hear with all the noise out here. He shouted something, didn't hear it.' Oh, good: 'How many people?' 'Not sure, the *Wachtmeister* said over twenty inside, bank customers and employees. Just me and my cameraman here outside, and about fifteen police officers that I can see.' 'More on the way, I imagine,' reply from the station." With that the audio line went quiet. The camera switched off, and shuffling on the audio line told them that the cameraman was moving to a different location, which was confirmed when the picture came back a minute later from a very different angle.

"What gives, Bill?" Tawney and Bennett turned to see Clark standing there behind them. "I came over to talk to you, but your secretary said you had a developing situation up here."

"We may," the Intelligence section chief replied. "I have the 'Six' station in Geneva sending two men over now to evaluate it. We do have that arrangement with the Swiss government, should they decide to invoke it. Bennett, is this going out on commercial TV yet?"

Bennett shook his head. "No, sir. For the moment they're keeping it quiet."

"Good," Tawney thought. "Who's the go-team now, John?"

"Team-2, Chavez and Price. They're just finishing up a little exercise right now. How long before you think we declare an alert?"

"We could start now," Bill answered, even though it was probably nothing more than a bank robbery gone bad. They had those in Switzerland, didn't they?

Clark pulled a mini-radio from his pocket and thumbed it on. "Chavez, this is Clark. You and Price report to communications right now."

"On the way, Six" was the reply.

"I wonder what this is about," Ding observed to his command sergeant major. Eddie Price, he'd learned in the past three weeks, was as good a soldier as he was ever likely to meet: cool, smart, quiet, with plenty of field experience.

"I expect we'll find out, sir," Price responded. Officers felt the need to talk a lot, he knew. Proof of that came at once.

"How long you been in, Eddie?"

"Nearly thirty years, sir. I enlisted as a boy soldier—age fifteen, you see. Parachute Regiment," he went on, just to avoid the next question. "Came over to SAS when I was twenty-four, been here ever since."

"Well, Sar Major, I'm glad to have you with me," Chavez said, getting in the car for the drive to the Headquarters Building.

"Thank you, sir," the sergeant major replied. A decent chap, this Chavez, he thought, perhaps even a good commander, though that remained to be seen. He could have asked his own questions, but, no, that wasn't done, was it? Good as he was, Price didn't know much about the American military yet.

You oughta be an officer, Eddie, Ding didn't say. In America this guy would have been ripped from his unit, kicking and screaming or not, and shipped off to OCS, probably with a college degree purchased by the Army along the way. Different culture, different rules, Chavez told himself. Well, it gave him a damned good squad sergeant to back him up. Ten minutes later, he parked in the back lot and walked into the building, following directions up to Communications.

"Hey, Mr. C, what gives?"

"Domingo, there's a chance we may have a job for you and your team. Bern, Switzerland. Bank robbery gone bad, hostage situation. All we know now." Clark pointed both of them at the TV screens. Chavez and Price stole swivel chairs and moved them close.

If nothing else, it was good as a practice alert. The preplanned mechanisms were now moving. On the first floor, tickets had already been arranged on no fewer than four flights from Gatwick to Switzerland, and two helicopters were on the way to Hereford to ferry his men to the airport with their equipment. British Airways had been alerted to accept sealed cargo—inspecting it for the international flight would just have gotten people excited. If the alert went further, Team-2 members would change into civilian clothes, complete with ties and suit jackets. Clark thought that a little excessive. Making soldiers look like bankers was no easy task, was it?

"Not much happening now," Tawney said. "Sam, can you roll the tapes from earlier?"

"Yes, sir." Major Bennett keyed one up and hit the play button on the remote.

"Czech 58," Price said immediately. "No faces?"

"Nope, that's the only thing we have on the subjects," Bennett replied.

"Odd weapon for robbers," the sergeant major noted. Chavez turned his head. That was one of the things he had yet to learn about Europe. Okay, hoods here didn't use assault rifles.

"That's what I thought," Tawney said.

"Terrorist weapon?" Chavez asked his squad XO.

"Yes, sir. The Czechs gave away a lot of them. Quite compact, you see. Only twenty-five inches long, manufactured by the Uhersky Broad works. Seven-point-six-two /thirty-nine Soviet cartridge. Fully automatic, selector switch. Odd thing for a Swiss bandit to use," Price said once more for emphasis.

"Why?" Clark asked.

"They make far better weapons in Switzerland, sir, for their territorials—their citizen soldiers stow them in their closets, you see. Should not be all that difficult to steal several."

The building shook then with the sound of helicopters landing not too far away. Clark checked his watch and nodded approval at the timing.

"What do we know about the neighborhood?" Chavez asked.

"Working on that now, old boy," Tawney answered. "So far, just what the TV feed shows."

The TV screen showed an ordinary street, devoid of vehicular traffic at the moment because the local police had diverted cars and buses away from the bank. Otherwise, they saw ordinary masonry buildings bordering an ordinary city street. Chavez looked over at Price, whose eyes were locked on the pictures they were getting—two now, because another Swiss TV station had dispatched a camera team there, and both signals were being pirated off the satellite. The translator continued to relay the remarks of the camera crews and reporters on the scene to their respective stations. They said very little, about half of it small-talk that could have been spoken from one desk to another in an office setting. One camera or the other occasionally caught the movement of a curtain, but that was all.

"The police are probably trying to establish communications with our friends on a telephone, talk to them, reason with them, the usual drill," Price said, realizing that he had more practical experience with this sort of thing than anyone else in the room. They knew the theory, but theory wasn't always enough. "We shall know in half an hour if this is a mission for us or not."

"How good are the Swiss cops?" Chavez asked Price.

"Very good indeed, sir, but not a great deal of experience with a serious hostage event—"

"That's why we have an understanding with them," Tawney put in.

"Yes, sir." Price leaned back, reached into his pocket, and took out his pipe. "Anyone object?"

Clark shook his head. "No health Nazis here, Sergeant Major. What do you mean by a 'serious' hostage event?"

"Committed criminals, terrorists." Price shrugged. "Chaps stupid enough to put their lives behind the chips on the gaming table. The sort who kill hostages to show their resolve." *The sort we go in after*

and kill, Price didn't have to add.

It was an awful lot of brain-power to be sitting around doing nothing, John Clark thought, especially Bill Tawney. But if you had no information, it was difficult to make pontifical pronouncements. All eyes were locked on the TV screens, which showed little, and Clark found himself missing the inane drivel that one expected of TV reporters, filling silence with empty words. About the only interesting thing was when they said that they were trying to talk to the local cops, but that the cops weren't saying anything, except that they were trying to establish contact with the bad guys, so far unsuccessfully. That had to be a lie, but the police were supposed to lie to the media and the public in cases like this—because any halfway competent terrorist would have a TV set with him, and would have somebody watching it. You could catch a lot by watching TV, else Clark and his senior people would not be watching it either, would they?

The protocol on this was both simple and complex. Rainbow had an understanding with the Swiss government. If the local police couldn't handle it, they'd bump it up to the canton—state—level, which would then decide whether or not to bump it one more step to the central national government, whose ministerial-level people could then make the Rainbow call. That entire mechanism had been established months before as part of the mandate of the agency that Clark now headed. The "help" call would come through the British Foreign Office in Whitehall, on the bank of the Thames in central London. It seemed like a hell of a lot of bureaucracy to John, but there was no avoiding it, and he was grateful that there was not an additional level or two. Once the call was made, things got easier, at least in the administrative sense. But until the call was made, the Swiss would tell them nothing.

One hour into the TV vigil, Chavez left to put Team-2 on alert. The troops, he saw, took it calmly, readying gear that needed to be seen to, which was not very much. The TV feed was routed to their individual desktop sets, and the men settled back in their swivel chairs to watch quietly as their boss went back to Communications, while the helicopters sat idle on the pad outside Team-2's area. Team-1 went on standby alert as well, in case the helicopters taking–2 to Gatwick crashed. The procedures had been completely thought through—except, John thought, by the terrorists.

On the TV screen, police milled about, some at the ready, most just standing and watching. Trained police or not, they were little trained for a situation like this, and the Swiss, while they had considered such an event—everyone in the civilized world had—had taken it no more seriously than, say, the cops in Boulder, Colorado. This had never happened before in Bern, and until it did, it would not be part of the

local police department's corporate culture. The facts were too stark for Clark and the rest to discount. The German police—as competent as any in the world—had thoroughly blown the hostage rescue at Fürstenfeldbrück, not because they had been bad cops, but because it had been their first time, and as a result some Israeli athletes hadn't made it home from the 1972 Munich Olympiad. The whole world had learned from that, but how much had they learned? Clark and the rest all wondered at the same time.

The TV screens showed very little for another half hour beyond an empty city street, but then a senior police officer walked into the open, holding a cellular phone. His body language was placid at first, but it started to change, and then he held the cell phone close to his ear, seeming to lean into it. His free hand came up about then, placatingly, as though in a face-to-face conversation.

"Something's wrong," Dr. Paul Bellow observed, which was hardly a surprise to the others, especially Eddie Price, who tensed in his chair, but said nothing as he puffed on his pipe. Negotiating with people like those controlling the bank was its own little art form, and it was one this police superintendent—whatever his rank was—had yet to learn. Bad news, the sergeant major thought, for one or more of the bank customers.

" 'Was that a shot?' " the translator said, relaying the words of one of the reporters on the scene.

"Oh, shit," Chavez observed quietly. The situation had just escalated.

Less than a minute later, one of the bank's glass doors opened, and a man in civilian clothes dragged a body onto the sidewalk. It seemed to be a man, but his head, as both the cameras zoomed in on the scene from different angles, was a red mass. The civilian got the body all the way outside and froze the moment he set it down.

Move right, go to your right, Chavez thought as loudly as he could from so far away. Somehow the thought must have gotten there, for the unnamed man in his gray overcoat stood stock-still for several seconds, looking down, and then—furtively, he thought—went to the right.

" 'Somebody's shouting from inside the bank,' " the translator relayed.

But whatever the voice had shouted, it hadn't been the right thing. The civilian dove to his right, away from the double glass doors of the bank and below the level of the plate-glass bank windows. He was now on the sidewalk, with three feet of granite block over his head, invisible from the interior of the building.

"Good move, old man," Tawney observed quietly. "Now, we'll see if the police can get you into the clear."

One of the cameras shifted to the senior cop, who'd wandered into the middle of the street with his cell phone, and was now waving frantically for the civilian to get down. Brave or foolish, they couldn't tell, but the cop then walked slowly back to the line of police cars—astonishingly, without being shot for his troubles. The cameras shifted back to the escaped civilian. Police had edged to the side of the bank building, waving for the man to crawl, keep low, to where they were standing. The uniformed cops had submachine guns out. Their body language was tense and frustrated. One of the police faces looked to the body on the sidewalk, and the men in Hereford could easily translate his thoughts.

"Mr. Tawney, a call for you on Line Four," the intercom called. The intelligence chief walked to a phone and punched the proper button.

"Tawney . . . ah, yes, Dennis . . ."

"Whoever they are, they've just murdered a chap."

"We just watched it. We're pirating the TV feed." Which meant that Gordon's trip to Bern was a waste of time—but no, it wasn't, was it? "You have that Armitage chap with you?"

"Yes, Bill, he's going over to talk to their police now."

"Excellent. I will hold for him."

As though on cue, a camera showed a man in civilian clothes walking to the senior cop on the scene. He pulled out an ID folder, spoke briefly with the police commander, and walked away, disappearing around the corner.

"This is Tony Armitage, who's this?"

"Bill Tawney."

"Well, if you know Dennis, I expect you're a 'Six' chap. What can I do for you, sir?"

"What did the police tell you?" Tawney hit the speaker switch on the phone.

"He's out of his depth by several meters or so. Said he's sending it up to the canton for advice."

"Mr. C?" Chavez said from his chair.

"Tell the choppers to spool up, Ding, you're off to Gatwick. Hold there for further instructions."

"Roger that, Mr. C. Team-2 is moving."

Chavez walked down the stairs with Price behind him, then jumped into their car, which had them at Team-2's building in under three minutes.

"People, if you're watching the *telly,* you know what's happening. Saddle up, we're choppering to Gatwick." They'd just headed out the door when a brave Swiss cop managed to get the civilian to safety. The TV showed the civilian being hustled to a car, which sped off at once. Again the body language was the important thing. The

assembled police, who had been standing around casually, were standing differently now, mainly crouched behind the cover of their automobiles, their hands fingering their weapons, tense but still unsure of what they ought to do.

"It's going out live on TV now," Bennett reported. "Sky News will have it on in a few."

"I guess that figures," Clark said. "Where's Stanley?"

"He's at Gatwick now," Tawney said. Clark nodded. Stanley would deploy with Team-2 as field commander. Dr. Paul Bellow was gone as well. He'd chopper out with Chavez and advise him and Stanley on the psychological aspects of the tactical situation. Nothing to be done now but order coffee and solid food, which Clark did, taking a chair and sitting in front of the TVs.

CHAPTER 3

GNOMES AND GUNS

The helicopter ride was twenty-five minutes exactly, and deposited Team-2 and its attachments in the general-aviation portion of the international airport. Two vans waited, and Chavez watched his men load their gear into one of them for movement to the British Airways terminal. There, some cops, who were also waiting, supervised the van's handling into a cargo container—which would be first off the flight when the plane arrived at Bern.

But first they had to wait for the go-mission order. Chavez pulled out his cellular phone, flipped it open, and thumbed speed-dial number one.

"Clark," the voice said after the encryption software clicked through.

"Ding here, John. The call come from Whitehall yet?"

"Still waiting, Domingo. We expect it shortly. The canton bumped it upstairs. Their Justice Minister is considering it now."

"Well, tell the worthy gentleman that this flight leaves the gate in two-zero minutes, and the next one after that is ninety minutes, 'less you want us to travel Swissair. One of those in forty minutes, and another in an hour fifteen."

"I hear you, Ding. We have to hold."

Chavez swore in Spanish. He knew it. He didn't have to like it. "Roger, Six, Team-2 is holding on the ramp at Gatwick."

"Roger that, Team-2, Rainbow Six, out."

Chavez closed his phone and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "Okay, people," he said to his men over the shriek of jet engines, "we hold here for the go-ahead." The troops nodded, as eager to get it going as their boss, but just as powerless to make it happen. The British team members had been there before and took it better than the Americans and the others.

• • •

“Bill, tell Whitehall that we have twenty minutes to get them off the ground, after that over an hour delay.”

Tawney nodded and went to a phone in the corner to call his contact in the Foreign Ministry. From there it went to the British Ambassador in Geneva, who’d been told that the SAS was offering special mission assistance of a technical nature. It was an odd case where the Swiss Foreign Minister knew more than the man making the offer. But, remarkably, the word came back in fifteen minutes : *“Ja.”*

“We have mission approval, John,” Tawney reported, much to his own surprise.

“Right.” Clark flipped open his own phone and hit the speed-dial #2 button.

“Chavez,” a voice said over considerable background noise.

“We have a go-mission,” Clark said. “Acknowledge.”

“Team-2 copies go-mission. Team-2 is moving.”

“That’s affirmative. Good luck, Domingo.”

“Thank you, Mr. C.”

Chavez turned to his people and pumped his arm up and down in the speed-it-up gesture known to armies all over the world. They got into their designated van for the drive across the Gatwick ramp. It stopped at the cargo gate for their flight, where Chavez waved a cop close, and let Eddie Price pass the word to load the special cargo onto the Boeing 757. That done, the van advanced another fifty yards to the stairs outside the end of the jetway, and Team-2 jumped out and headed up the stairs. At the top, the control-booth door was held open by another police constable, and from there they walked normally aboard the aircraft and handed over their tickets to the stewardess, who pointed them to their first-class seats.

The last man aboard was Tim Noonan, the team’s technical wizard. Not a wizened techno-nerd, Noonan had played defensive back at Stanford before joining the FBI, and took weapons training with the team just to fit in. Six feet, two hundred pounds, he was larger than most of Ding’s shooters but, he’d be the first to admit, was not as tough. Still, he was a better-than-fair shot with pistol and MP-10, and was learning to speak the language. Dr. Bellow settled into his window seat with a book extracted from his carry-on bag. It was a volume on sociopathy by a professor at Harvard under whom he’d trained some years before. The rest of the team members just leaned back, skimming through the onboard magazines. Chavez looked around and saw that his team didn’t seem tense at all, and was both amazed at the fact, and slightly ashamed that he was so pumped up. The airline captain made his announcements, and the Boeing backed away from the gate, then taxied out to the runway. Five minutes later,

the aircraft rotated off the ground, and Team-2 was on its way to its first mission.

"In the air," Tawney reported. "The airline expects a smooth flight and an on-time arrival in . . . an hour fifteen minutes."

"Great," Clark observed. The TV coverage had settled down. Both Swiss stations were broadcasting continuous coverage now, complete with thoughts from the reporters at the scene. That was about as useful as an NFL pre-game show, though police spokesmen were speaking to the press now. No, they didn't know who was inside. Yes, they'd spoken to them. Yes, negotiations were ongoing. No, they couldn't really say any more than that. Yes, they'd keep the press apprised of developments.

Like hell, John thought. The same coverage was reported on Sky News, and soon CNN and Fox networks were carrying brief stories about it, including, of course, the dumping of the first victim and the escape of the one who'd dragged the body out.

"Nasty business, John," Tawney said over his tea.

Clark nodded. "I suppose they always are, Bill."

"Quite."

Peter Covington came in then, stole a swivel chair and moved it next to the two senior men. His face was locked in neutral, though he had to be pissed, Clark thought, that his team wasn't going. But the team-availability rotation was set in stone here, as it had to be.

"Thoughts, Peter?" Clark asked.

"They're not awfully bright. They killed that poor sod very early in the affair, didn't they?"

"Keep going," John said, reminding all of them that he was new in this business.

"When you kill a hostage, you cross a large, thick line, sir. Once across it, one cannot easily go backward, can one?"

"So, you try to avoid it?"

"I would. It makes it too difficult for the other side to make concessions, and you bloody need the concessions if you want to get away—unless you know something the opposition does not. Unlikely in a situation like this."

"They'll ask for a way out . . . helicopter?"

"Probably." Covington nodded. "To an airport, commercial aircraft waiting, international crew—but to *where?* Libya, perhaps, but will Libya allow them in? Where else might they go? Russia? I think not. The Bekaa Valley in Lebanon is still possible, but commercial aircraft don't land there. About the only sensible thing they've done is to protect their identities from the police. Would you care to wager that the hostage who got out has not seen their faces?" Covington shook

his head.

"They're not amateurs," Clark objected. "Their weapons point to some measure of training and professionalism."

That earned John a nod. "True, sir, but not awfully bright. I would not be overly surprised to learn that they'd actually stolen some currency, like common robbers. Trained terrorists, perhaps, but not good ones."

And what's a "good" terrorist? John wondered. Doubtless a term of art he'd have to learn.

The BA flight touched down two minutes early, then taxied to the gate. Ding had spent the flight talking to Dr. Bellow. The psychology of this business was the biggest blank spot in his copybook, and one he'd have to learn to fill in—and soon. This wasn't like being a soldier—the psychology of that job was handled at the general-officer level most of the time, the figuring out of what the other guy was going to do with his maneuver battalions. This was squad-level combat, but with all sorts of interesting new elements, Ding thought, flipping his seat belt off before the aircraft stopped moving. But it still came down to the least common denominator—steel on target.

Chavez stood and stretched, then headed aft to the doorway, his game-face now on all the way. Out the jetway, between two ordinary civilians who probably thought him a businessman, with his suit and tie. Maybe he'd buy a nicer suit in London, he thought idly, exiting the jetway, the better to fit the disguise he and his men had to adopt when traveling. There was a chauffeur sort of man standing out there holding a sign with the proper name on it. Chavez walked up to him.

"Waiting for us?"

"Yes, sir. Come with me?"

Team-2 followed him down the anonymous concourse, then turned into what seemed a conference room that had another door. In it was a uniformed police officer, a senior one, judging by the braid on his blue blouse.

"You are . . ." he said.

"Chavez." Ding stuck his hand out. "Domingo Chavez."

"Spanish?" the cop asked in considerable surprise.

"American. And you, sir?"

"Roebling, Marius," the man replied, when all the team was in the room and the door closed. "Come with me, please." Roebling opened the far door, which led outside to some stairs. A minute later, they were in a minibus heading past the park aircraft, then out onto a highway. Ding looked back to see another truck, doubtless carrying their gear.

"Okay, what can you tell me?"

"Nothing new since the first murder. We are speaking with them over the telephone. No names, no identities. They've demanded transport to this airport and a flight out of the country, no destination revealed to us as of yet."

"Okay, what did the guy who got away tell you?"

"There are four of them, they speak German, he says they sound as though it is their primary language, idiomatic, pronunciation, and so forth. They are armed with Czech weapons, and it would seem they are not reluctant to make use of them."

"Yes, sir. How long to get there, and will my men be able to change into their gear?"

Roebling nodded. "It is arranged, Major Chavez."

"Thank you, sir."

"Can I speak with the man who got out?" Dr. Bellow asked.

"My orders are to give you full cooperation—within reason, of course."

Chavez wondered what that qualification meant, but decided he'd find out in due course. He couldn't blame the man for being unhappy to have a team of foreigners come to his country to enforce the law. But these were the proverbial pros from Dover, and that was that—his own government had said so. It also occurred to Ding that the credibility of Rainbow now rested on his shoulders. It would be a hell of a thing to embarrass his father-in-law and his team and his country. He turned to look at his people. Eddie Price, perhaps reading his mind, gave a discreet thumbs-up. *Well,* Chavez thought, *at least one of us thinks we're ready.* It was different in the field, something he'd learned in the jungles and mountains of Colombia years before, and the closer you got to the firing line, the more different it got. Out here there were no laser systems to tell you who'd been killed. Real red blood would announce that. But his people were trained and experienced, especially Sergeant Major Edward Price.

All Ding had to do was lead them into battle.

There was a secondary school a block from the bank. The minibus and truck pulled up to it, and Team-2 walked into the gymnasium area, which was secured by ten or so uniformed cops. The men changed into their gear in a locker room, and walked back into the gym, to find Roebling with an additional garment for them to wear. These were pullovers, black like their assault gear. POLIZEI was printed on them, front and back, in gold lettering rather than the usual bright yellow. A Swiss affectation? Chavez thought, without the smile that should have gone with the observation.

"Thanks," Chavez told him. It was a useful subterfuge. With that done, the men and their gear reboarded the minibus for the remainder

of their drive. This put them around the corner from the bank, invisible both to the terrorists and the TV news cameras. The long-riflemen, Johnston and Weber, were walked to pre-selected perches, one overlooking the rear of the bank building, the other diagonally facing the front. Both men settled in, unfolded the bipod legs on their gunstocks, and started surveying the target building.

Their rifles were as individual as the shooters. Weber had a Walther WA2000, chambered for the .300 Winchester Magnum cartridge. Johnston's was custom made, chambered for the slightly smaller but faster 7-mm Remington Magnum. In both cases, the sharpshooters first of all determined the range to target and dialed it into their telescopic sights, then lay down on the foam mattresses they'd brought. Their immediate mission was to observe, gather information, and report.

Dr. Bellow felt very strange in his black uniform, complete with body armor and POLIZEI pullover, but it would help prevent his identification by a medical colleague who caught this event on TV. Noonan, similarly dressed, set up his computer—an Apple PowerBook—and started looking over the building blueprints so that he could input them into his system. The local cops had been efficient as hell. Over a period of thirty minutes, he had a complete electronic map of the target building. Everything but the vault combination, he thought with a smile. Then he erected a whip antenna and transmitted the imagery to the other three computers the team had brought along.

Chavez, Price, and Bellow walked to the senior Swiss policeman on the scene. Greetings were exchanged, hands shaken. Price set up his computer and put in a CD-ROM disk with photos of every known and photographed terrorist in the world.

The man who'd dragged the body out was one Hans Richter, a German national from Bonn who banked here for his Swiss-based trading business.

"Did you see their faces?" Price asked.

"Yes." A shaky nod. Herr Richter'd had a very bad day to this point. Price selected known German terrorists and started flashing photos.

"Ja, ja, that one. He is the leader."

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"Ernst Model, formerly of Baader-Meinhof, disappeared in 1989, whereabouts unknown." Price scrolled down. "Four suspected operations to date. Three were bloody failures. Nearly captured in Hamburg, 1987, killed two policemen to make his escape. Communist-trained, last suspected to be in Lebanon, that sighting report is thin—very thin, it would seem. Kidnapping was his specialty. Okay." Price scrolled down some more.

"That one . . . possibly."

"Erwin Guttenach, also Baader-Meinhof, last spotted 1992 in Cologne. Robbed a bank, background also kidnapping and murder—oh, yes, he's the chappie who kidnapped and killed a board member of BMW in 1986. Kept the ransom . . . four million D-marks. Greedy bugger," Price added.

Bellow looked over his shoulder, thinking as fast as he could. "What did he say to you on the phone?"

"We have a tape," the cop replied.

"Excellent! But I require a translator."

"Doc, a profile on Ernst Model, quick as you can." Chavez turned. "Noonan, can we get some coverage on the bank?"

"No problem," the tech man replied.

"Roebling?" Chavez said next.

"Yes, Major?"

"Will the TV crews cooperate? We have to assume the subjects inside have a TV with them."

"They will cooperate," the senior Swiss cop replied with confidence.

"Okay, people, let's move," Chavez ordered. Noonan went off to his bag of tricks. Bellow headed around the corner with Herr Richter and another Swiss cop to handle the translation. That left Chavez and Price alone.

"Eddie, am I missing anything?"

"No, Major," Sergeant Major Price replied.

"Okay, number one, my name is Ding. Number two, you have more experience in this than I do. If you have something to say, I want to hear it *right now,* got it? We ain't in no fuckin' wardroom here. I need your brains, Eddie."

"Very well, sir—Ding." Price managed a smile. His commander was working out rather nicely. "So far, so good. We have the subjects contained, good perimeter. We need plans of the building and information on what's happening inside—Noonan's job, and he seems a competent chappie. And we need an idea of what the opposition is thinking—Dr. Bellow's job, and he is excellent. What's the plan if the opposition just starts shooting out of hand?"

"Tell Louis, two flash-bangs at the front door, toss four more inside, and we blow in like a tornado."

"Our body armor—"

"Won't stop a seven-six-two Russian. I know," Chavez agreed. "Nobody ever said it was safe, Eddie. When we know a little more, we can figure a real assault plan." Chavez clapped him on the shoulder. "Move, Eddie."

"Yes, sir." Price moved off to join the rest of the team.

Popov hadn't known that the Swiss police had such a well-trained

counterterrorist squad. As he watched, the commander was crouching close to the front of the bank building, and another, his second-in-command, probably, was heading around the corner to the rest of the team. They were speaking with the escaped hostage—someone had walked him out of sight. Yes, these Swiss police were well trained and well-equipped. H&K weapons, it appeared. The usual for this sort of thing. For his own part, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov stood in the crowd of onlookers. His first impression of Model and his little team of three others had been correct. The German's IQ was little more than room temperature—he'd even wanted a discussion of Marxism-Leninism with his visitor! The fool. Not even a young fool. Model was into his forties now and couldn't use youthful exuberance as an excuse for his ideological fixation. But not entirely impractical. Ernst had wanted to see the money, $600,000 in D-marks. Popov smiled, remembering where it had been stashed. It was unlikely that Ernst would ever see it again. Killing the hostage so early—foolish, but not unexpected. He was the sort who'd want to show his resolve and ideological purity, as though anyone cared about that today! Popov grunted to himself and lit a cigar, leaning back against yet another bank building to relax and observe the exercise, his hat pulled down and collar turned up, ostensibly to protect himself from the gathering evening chill, but also to obscure his face. One couldn't be too careful—a fact lost on Ernst Model and his three *Kameraden.*

Dr. Bellow finished his review of the taped phone conversations and the known facts about Ernst Johannes Model. The man was a sociopath with a distinct tendency for violence. Suspected in seven murders personally committed and a few more in the company of others. Guttenach, a less bright individual of the same ilk, and two others, unknown. Richter, the escapee, had told them, unsurprisingly, that Model had killed the first victim himself, shooting him in the back of his head from close range and ordering Richter to drag him out. So, both the shooting and the demonstration of its reality to the police had been ill-considered . . . it all fit the same worrisome profile. Bellow keyed his radio.

"Bellow for Chavez."

"Yeah, doc, this is Ding."

"I have a preliminary profile on the subjects."

"Shoot—Team, you listening?" There followed an immediate cacophony of overlapping responses. "Yeah, Ding." "Copying, leader." *"Ja."* And the rest. "Okay, doc, lay it out," Chavez ordered.

"First, this is not a well-planned operation. That fits the profile for the suspected leader, Ernst Model, German national, age forty-one, formerly of the Baader-Meinhof organization. Tends to be impetuous,

very quick to use violence when cornered or frustrated. If he threatens to kill someone, we have to believe he's not kidding. His current mental state is very, repeat, *very* dangerous. He knows he has a blown operation. He knows that his likelihood of success is slim. His hostages are his only assets, and he will regard them as expendable assets. Do *not* expect Stockholm Syndrome to set in with this case, people. Model is too sociopathic for that. Neither would I expect negotiations to be very useful. I think that it is very likely that an assault resolution will be necessary tonight or tomorrow."

"Anything else?" Chavez asked.

"Not at this time," Dr. Bellow replied. "I will monitor further developments with the local cops."

Noonan had taken his time selecting the proper tools, and now he was creeping along the outside wall of the bank building, below the level of the windows. At every one of them, he raised his head slowly and carefully to see if the interior curtains allowed any view of the inside. The second one did, and there Noonan affixed a tiny viewing system. This was a lens, roughly the shape of a cobra's head, but only a few millimeters across, which led by fiber-optic cable to a TV camera set in his black bag around the corner. He placed another at the lower corner of the bank's glass door, then worked his way back, crawling feet first, slowly and laboriously, to a place where he could stand. That done, he walked all the way around the block to repeat the procedure from the other side of the building, where he was able to make three placements, one again on the door, and two on windows whose curtains were a touch shorter than they ought to have been. He also placed microphones in order to pick up whatever sound might be available. The large plate-glass windows ought to resonate nicely, he thought, though this would apply to extraneous exterior sounds as well as to those originating inside the building.

All the while, the Swiss TV crews were speaking with the senior on-site policeman, who spent a great deal of time saying that the terrorists were serious—he'd been coached by Dr. Bellow to speak of them with respect. They were probably watching television inside, and building up their self-esteem worked for the team's purposes at the moment. In any case, it denied the terrorists knowledge of what Tim Noonan had done on the outside.

"Okay," the techie said in his place on a side street. All the video displays were up and running. They showed little. The size of the lenses didn't make for good imagery, despite the enhancement program built into his computer. "Here's one shooter . . . and another." They were within ten meters of the front of the building. The rest of the people visible were sitting on the white marble floor,

in the center for easy coverage. “The guy said four, right?”

“Yeah,” Chavez answered. “But not how many hostages, not exactly anyway.”

“Okay, this is a bad guy, I think, behind the teller-places . . . hmph, looks like he’s checking the cash drawers . . . and that’s a bag of some sort. You figure they visited the vault?”

Chavez turned. “Eddie?”

“Greed,” Price agreed. “Well, why not? It *is* a bank, after all.”

“Okay.” Noonan switched displays on the computer screen. “I got blueprints of the building, and this is the layout.”

“Teller cages, vault, toilets.” Price traced his finger over the screen. “Back door. Seems simple enough. Access to the upper floors?”

“Here,” Noonan said. “Actually outside the bank itself, but the basement is accessible to them here, stairs down, and a separate exit to the alley in back.”

“Ceiling construction?” Chavez asked.

“Rebarred concrete slab, forty centimeters thick. That’s solid as hell. Same with the walls and floor. This building was made to last.” So, there would be no explosives-forced entry through walls, floor, or ceiling.

“So, we can go in the front door or the back door, and that’s it. And that puts number four bad guy at the back door.” Chavez keyed his radio. “Chavez for Rifle Two-Two.”

“Ja, Weber here.”

“Any windows in the back, anything in the door, peephole, anything like that, Dieter?”

“Negative. It appears to be a heavy steel door, nothing in it that I can see,” the sniper said, tracing his telescopic sight over the target yet again, and again finding nothing but blank painted steel.

“Okay, Eddie, we blow the rear door with Primacord, three men in that way. Second later, we blow the front glass doors, toss flash-bangs, and move in when they’re looking the wrong way. Two and two through the front. You and me go left. Louis and George go right.”

“Are they wearing body armor?” Price asked.

“Nothing that Herr Richter saw,” Noonan responded, “and nothing visible here—but there ain’t no head-protection anyway, right?” It would be nothing more than a ten-meter shot, an easy distance for the H&K shoulder weapons.

“Quite.” Price nodded. “Who leads the rear-entry team?”

“Scotty, I think. Paddy does the explosives.” Connolly was the best man on the team for that, and both men knew it. Chavez made an important mental note that the subteams had to be more firmly established. To this point he’d kept all his people in the same drawer. That he would have to change as soon as they got back to Hereford.

"Vega?"

"Oso backs us up, but I don't think we'll have much use for him on this trip." Julio Vega had become their heavy-machine gunner, slinging a laser-sighted M-60 7.62-mm machine gun for really serious work, but there wasn't much use for that now—and wouldn't be, unless everything went totally to hell.

"Noonan, send this picture to Scotty."

"Right." He moved the mouse-pointer and started transmitting everything to the team's various computers.

"The question now is when." Ding checked his watch. "Back to the doc."

"Yes, sir."

Bellow had spent his time with Herr Richter. Three stiff shots had calmed him down nicely. Even his English had improved markedly. Bellow was walking him through the event for the sixth time when Chavez and Price showed up again.

"His eyes, they are blue, like ice. Like ice," Richter repeated. "He is not a man like most men. He should be in a cage, with the animals at the zoo." The businessman shuddered involuntarily.

"Does he have an accent?" Price asked.

"Mixed. Something of Hamburg, but something of Bavaria, too. The others, all Bavarian accents."

"The Bundes Kriminal Amt will find that useful, Ding," Price observed. The BKA was the German counterpart to the American FBI. "Why not have the local police check the area for a car with German license plates—from Bavaria? Perhaps there's a driver about."

"Good one." Chavez left and ran over to the Swiss cops, whose chief got on his radio at once. Probably a dry hole, Chavez thought. But you didn't know until you drilled it. They had to have come here one way or another. Another mental note. Check for that on every job.

Roebling came over next, carrying his cell phone. "It is time," he said, "to speak with them again."

"Yo, Tim," Chavez said over his radio. "Come to the rally point."

Noonan was there in under a minute. Chavez pointed him to Roebling's phone. Noonan took it, popped the back off, and attached a small green circuit board with a thin wire hanging from it. Then he pulled a cell phone from a thigh pocket and handed it over to Chavez. "There. You'll hear everything they say."

"Anything happening inside?"

"They're walking around a little more, a little agitated, maybe. Two of them were talking face-to-face a few minutes ago. Didn't look real happy about things from their gestures."

"Okay. Everybody up to speed on the interior?"

"How about audio?"

The techie shook his head. "Too much background noise. The building has a noisy heating system—oil-fired hot water, sounds like—that's playing hell with the window mikes. Not getting anything useful, Ding."

"Okay, keep us posted."

"You bet." Noonan made his way back to his gear.

"Eddie?"

"Were I to make a wager, I'd say we have to storm the place before dawn. Our friend will begin losing control soon."

"Doc?" Ding asked.

"That's likely," Bellow agreed with a nod, taking note of Price's practical experience.

Chavez frowned mightily at that one. Trained as he was, he wasn't really all that eager to take this one on. He'd seen the interior pictures. There had to be twenty, perhaps thirty, people inside, with three people in their immediate vicinity holding fully automatic weapons. If one of them decided *fuck it* and went rock-and-roll on his Czech machine gun, a lot of those people wouldn't make it home to the wife and kiddies. It was called the responsibility of command, and while it wasn't the first time Chavez had experienced it, the burden never really got any lighter—because the price of failure never got any smaller.

"Chavez!" It was Dr. Bellow.

"Yeah, doc," Ding said, heading over toward him with Price in attendance.

"Model's getting aggressive. He says he'll kill a hostage in thirty minutes unless we get him a car to a helicopter pad a few blocks from here, and from there to the airport. After that, he kills a hostage every fifteen minutes. He says he has enough to last more than a few hours. He's reading off a list of the important ones now. A professor of surgery at the local medical school, an off-duty policeman, a big-time lawyer . . . well, he's not kidding, Ding. Thirty minutes from—okay, he shoots the first one at eight-thirty."

"What are the cops saying back?"

"What I told them to say, it takes time to arrange all of that, give us a hostage or two to show good faith—but that's what prompted the threat for eight-thirty. Ernst is coming a little unglued."

"Is he serious?" Chavez asked, just to make sure he understood.

"Yeah, he sounds serious as hell. He's losing control, very unhappy with how things turned out. He's barely rational now. He's not kidding about killing somebody. Like a spoiled kid with nothing under the tree on Christmas morning, Ding. There's no stabilizing influence in there to help him out. He feels very lonely."

"Super." Ding keyed his radio. Not unexpectedly, the decision had just been made by somebody else. "Team, this is Chavez. Stand to. I say again, stand to."

He'd been trained in what to expect. One ploy was to deliver the car—it'd be too small for all the hostages, and you could take the bad guys down on the way out with aimed rifle fire. But he had only two snipers, and their rifle bullets would blast through a terrorist's head with enough leftover energy to waste two of three people beyond him. SMG or pistol fire was much the same story. Four bad guys was too many for that play. No, he had to take his team in, while the hostages were still sitting down on the floor, below the line of fire. These bastards weren't even rational enough to want food which he might drug—or maybe they were smart enough to know about the Valium-flavored pizza.

It took several minutes. Chavez and Price crawled to the door from the left. Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson did the same from the other side. At the rear, Paddy Connolly attached a double thickness of Primacord to the door frame, inserted the detonator, and stood away, with Scotty McTyler and Hank Patterson nearby.

"Rear team in place, Leader," Scotty told them over the radio.

"Roger that. Front team is in place," Chavez replied quietly into his radio transmitter.

"Okay, Ding," Noonan's voice came over the command circuit, "TV One shows a guy brandishing a rifle, walking around the hostages on the floor. If I had to bet, I'd say it's our friend Ernst. One more behind him, and a third to the right side by the second wood desk. Hold, he's on the phone now . . . okay, he's talking to the cops, saying he's getting ready to pick a hostage to whack. He's going to give out his name first. Nice of him," Noonan concluded.

"Okay, people, it's gonna go down just like the exercises," Ding told his troops. "We are weapons-free at this time. Stand by." He looked up to see Loiselle and Tomlinson trade a look and a gesture. Louis would lead, with George behind. It would be the same for Chavez, letting Price take the lead with his commander immediately behind.

"Ding, he just grabbed a guy, standing him up—on the phone again, they're going to whack the doctor first, Professor Mario Donatello. Okay, I have it all on Camera Two, he's got the guy stood up. I think it's show time," Noonan concluded.

"Are we ready? Rear team, check in."

"Ready here," Connolly replied over the radio. Chavez could see Loiselle and Tomlinson. Both nodded curtly and adjusted their hands on their MP-10s.

"Chavez to team, we are ready to rock. Stand by. Stand by. Paddy, hit it!" Ding ordered loudly. The last thing he could do was cringe in

expectation of the blast of noise sure to come.

The intervening second seemed to last for hours, and then the mass of the building was in the way. They heard it even so, a loud metallic *crash* that shook the whole world. Price and Loiselle had placed their flash-bangs at the brass lower lining of the door, and punched the switches on them as soon as they heard the first detonation. Instantly the glass doors disintegrated into thousands of fragments, which mainly flew into the granite and marble lobby of the bank in front of a blinding white light and end-of-the-world noise. Price, already standing at the edge of the door, darted in, with Chavez right behind, and going to his left as he entered.

Ernst Model was right there, his weapon's muzzle pressed to the back of Dr. Donatello's head. He'd turned to look at the back of the room when the first explosion had happened, and, as planned, the second one, with its immense noise and blinding flash of magnesium powder, had disoriented him. The physician captive had reacted, too, dropping away from the gunman behind him with his hands over his head, and giving the intruders a blessedly clear shot. Price had his MP-10 up and aimed, and depressed the trigger for a quick and final three-round burst into the center of Ernst Model's face.

Chavez, immediately behind him, spotted another gunman, standing and shaking his head as though to clear it. He was facing away, but he still held his weapon, and the rules were the rules. Chavez double-tapped his head as well. Between the suppressors integral with the gun-barrels and the ringing from the flash-bangs, the report of the weapons was almost nil. Chavez traversed his weapon right, to see that the third terrorist was already on the floor, a pool of red streaming from what had been a head less than two seconds before.

"Clear!" Chavez shouted.

"Clear!" "Clear!" "Clear!" the others agreed. Loiselle raced to the back of the building, with Tomlinson behind him. Before they'd gotten there, the black-clad figures of McTyler and Patterson appeared, their weapons immediately pointing up at the ceiling: *"Clear!"*

Chavez moved farther left to the teller cages, leaping over the barrier to check there for additional people. None. "Clear here! Secure the area!"

One of the hostages started to rise, only to be pushed back down to the floor by George Tomlinson. One by one, they were frisked by the team members while another covered them with loaded weapons—they couldn't be sure which was a sheep and which a goat at this point. By this time, some Swiss cops were entering the bank. The frisked hostages were pushed in that direction, a shocked and stunned bunch of citizens, still disoriented by what had happened, some bleeding from the head or ears from the flash-bangs and flying glass.

Loiselle and Tomlinson picked up the weapons dropped by their victims, cleared each of them, and slung them over their shoulders. Only then, and only gradually, did they start to relax.

"What about the back door?" Ding asked Paddy Connolly.

"Come and see," the former SAS soldier suggested, leading Ding to the back room. It was a bloody mess. Perhaps the subject had been resting his head against the door frame. It seemed a logical explanation for the fact that no head was immediately visible, and only one shoulder on the corpse, which had been flung against an interior partition, the Czech M-58 rifle still grasped tightly in its remaining hand. The double thickness of Primacord had been a little too powerful . . . but Ding couldn't say that. A steel door and a stout steel frame had demanded it.

"Okay, Paddy, nice one."

"Thank you, sir." The smile of a pro who'd gotten the job well and truly done.

There were cheers on the street outside as the hostages came out. So, Popov thought, the terrorists he'd recruited were dead fools now. No real surprise there. The Swiss counterterror team had handled the job well, as one would expect of Swiss policemen. One of them came outside and lit a pipe—how very Swiss! Popov thought. The bugger probably climbs mountains for personal entertainment, too. Perhaps he was the leader. A hostage came up to him.

"Danke schön, danke schön!" the bank director said to Eddie Price.

"Bitte sehr, Herr Direktor," the Brit answered, just about exhausting his knowledge of the German language. He pointed the man off to where the Bern police had the other hostages. They probably needed a loo more than anything else, he thought, as Chavez came out.

"How'd we do, Eddie?"

"Rather well, I should say." A puff on his pipe. "An easy job, really. They were proper wallies, picking this bank and acting as they did." He shook his head and took another puff. The IRA were far more formidable than this. Bloody Germans.

Ding didn't ask what a "wally" was, much less a proper one. With that decided, he pulled his cell phone out and hit speed-dial.

"Clark."

"Chavez.

"Did you catch it on TV, Mr. C?"

"Getting the replay now, Domingo."

"We got all four, down for the count. No hostages hurt, except for the one they whacked earlier today. No casualties on the team. So, boss, what do we do now?"

"Fly on home for the debrief, lad. Six, out."

"Bloody good," Major Peter Covington said. The TV showed the team gathering up their equipment for the next thirty or so minutes, then they disappeared around the corner. "Your Chavez does seem to know his business—and so much the better his first test was an easy one. Confidence builder."

They looked over at the computer-generated picture that Noonan had uploaded to them on his cellular phone system. Covington had predicted how the take-down would go, and made no mistakes.

"Any traditions I need to know about?" John asked, settling down, finally, and hugely relieved that there were no unnecessary casualties.

"We take them to the club for a few pints, of course." Covington was surprised that Clark didn't know about that one.

Popov was in his car, trying to navigate the streets of Bern before police vehicles blocked everything on their way back to their stations. Left there . . . two traffic lights, right, then through the square and . . . there! Excellent, even a place for him to park. He left his rented Audi on the street right across from the half-baked safe house Model had set up. Defeating the lock was child's play. Upstairs, to the back, where the lock was just as easily dealt with.

"Wer sind sie?" a voice asked.

"Dmitriy," Popov replied honestly, one hand in his coat pocket. "Have you been watching the television?"

"Yes, what went wrong?" the voice asked in German, seriously downcast.

"It does not matter now. It is time to leave, my young friend."

"But my friends—"

"Are dead, and you cannot help them." He saw the boy in the dark, perhaps twenty years of age, and a devoted friend of the departed fool, Ernst Model. A homosexual relationship, perhaps? If so, it would make things easier for Popov, who had no love for men of that orientation. "Come, get your things. We must leave and leave quickly." There, there it was, the black-leather-clad suitcase with the D-marks inside. The lad—what was his name? Fabian something? Turned his back and went to get his parka, which the Germans called a *Joppe.* He never turned back. Popov's silenced pistol came up and fired once, then again, quite unnecessarily, from three meters away. Making sure the boy was indeed dead, he lifted the suitcase, opened it to verify the contents, and then walked out the door, crossed the street, and drove to his downtown hotel. He had a noon flight back to New York. Before that he had to open a bank account in a city well suited for the task.

The team was quiet on the trip back, having caught the last flight back to England—this one to Heathrow rather than Gatwick. Chavez availed himself of a glass of white wine, again sitting next to Dr. Bellow, who did the same.

"So, how'd we do, doc?"

"Why don't you tell me, Mr. Chavez," Bellow responded.

"For me, the stress is bleeding off. No shakes this time," Ding replied, surprised at the fact that his hand was steady.

" 'Shakes' are entirely normal—the release of stress energy. The body has trouble letting it go and returning to normal. But training attenuates that. And so does a drink," the physician observed, sipping his own glass of a nice French offering.

"Anything we might have done differently?"

"I don't think so. Perhaps if we'd gotten involved earlier, we might have prevented or at least postponed the murder of the first hostage, but that's never really under our control." Bellow shrugged. "No, what I'm curious about is the motivation of the terrorists in this case."

"How so?"

"They acted in an ideological way, but their demands were—not ideological. I understand they robbed the bank along the way."

"Correct." He and Loiselle had looked at a canvas bag on the bank's floor. It had been full of notes, perhaps twenty-five pounds of money. That seemed to Chavez an odd way to count money, but it was all he had. Followup work by the Swiss police would count it up. The after-action stuff was an intelligence function, supervised by Bill Tawney. "So . . . were they just robbers?"

"Not sure." Bellow finished off his glass, holding it up then for the stewardess to see and refill. "It doesn't seem to make much sense at the moment, but that's not exactly unknown in cases like this. Model was not a very good terrorist. Too much show, and not enough go. Poorly planned, poorly executed."

"Vicious bastard," Chavez observed.

"Sociopathic personality—more like a criminal than a terrorist. Those—the good ones, I mean—are usually more judicious."

"What the hell is a good terrorist?"

"He's a businessman whose business is killing people to make a political point . . . almost like advertising. They serve a larger purpose, at least in their own minds. They believe in something, but not like kids in catechism class, more like reasoned adults in Bible study. Crummy simile, I suppose, but it's the best I have at the moment. Long day, Mr. Chavez," Dr. Bellow concluded, while the stew topped off his glass.

Ding checked his watch. "Sure enough, doc." And the next part, Bellow didn't have to tell him, was the need for some sleep. Chavez

hit the button to run his seat back and was unconscious in two minutes.

CHAPTER 4

AAR

Chavez and most of the rest of Team-2 woke up when the airliner touched down at Heathrow. The taxi to the gate seemed to last forever, and then they were met by police, who escorted them to the helo-pad for the flight back to Hereford. On the way through the terminal, Chavez caught the headline on an evening tabloid saying that Swiss police had dealt with a robbery-terrorist incident in the Bern Commercial Bank. It was somewhat unsatisfying that others got the credit for his successful mission, but that was the whole point of Rainbow, he reminded himself, and they'd probably get a nice thank-you letter from the Swiss government—which would end up in the confidential file cabinet. The two military choppers landed on their pad, and vans took the troops to their building. It was after eleven at night now, and all the men were tired after a day that had started with the usual PT and ended with real mission stress.

It wasn't rest time yet, though. On entering the building, they found all the swivel chairs in the bullpen arranged in a circle, with a large-screen TV to one side. Clark, Stanley, and Covington were there. It was time for the afteraction review, or AAR.

"Okay, people," Clark said, as soon as they'd sat down. "Good job. All the bad guys are gone, and no good-guy casualties as part of the action. Okay, what did we do wrong?"

Paddy Connolly stood. "I used too much explosives on the rear door. Had there been a hostage immediately inside, he would have been killed," the sergeant said honestly. "I assumed that the door frame was stouter than it actually was." Then he shrugged. "I do not know how to correct for that."

John thought about that. Connolly was having an attack of over-scrupulous honesty, one sure mark of a good man. He nodded and let it go. "Neither do I. What else?"

It was Tomlinson who spoke next, without standing. "Sir, we need to work on a better way to get used to the flash-bangs. I was pretty wasted when I went through the door. Good thing Louis took the first shot on the inside. Not sure I could have."

"How about inside?"

"They worked pretty well on the subjects. The one I saw," Tomlinson said, "was out of it."

"Could we have taken him alive?" Clark had to ask.

"No, *mon general."* This was Sergeant Louis Loiselle, speaking emphatically. "He had his rifle in hand, and it was pointing in the direction of the hostages." There would be no talk about shooting a gun out of a terrorist's hands. The assumption was that the terrorist had more than one weapon, and the backup was frequently a fragmentation grenade. Loiselle's three-round burst into the target's head was exactly on policy for Rainbow.

"Agreed. Louis, how did you deal with the flash-bangs? You were closer than George was."

"I have a wife," the Frenchman replied with a smile. "She screams at me all the time. Actually," he said, when the tired chuckles subsided, "I had my hand over one ear, the other pressed against my shoulder, and my eyes closed. I also controlled the detonation," he added. Unlike Tomlinson and the rest, he could anticipate the noise and the flash, which seemed a minor advantage, but a decisive one.

"Any other problems going in?" John asked.

"The usual," Price said. "Lots of glass on the floor, hinders one's footing—maybe softer soles on our boots? That would also make our steps quieter."

Clark nodded, and saw that Stanley made a note.

"Any problems shooting?"

"No." This was Chavez. "The interior was lighted, and so we didn't need our NVGs. The bad guys were standing up like good targets. The shots were easy." Price and Loiselle nodded agreement.

"Riflemen?" Clark asked.

"Couldn't see shit from my perch," Johnston said.

"Neither could I," Weber said. His English was eerily perfect.

"Ding, you sent Price in first. Why?" This was Stanley.

"Eddie's a better shot, and he has more experience. I trust him a little more than I trust myself—for now," Chavez added. "It seemed to be a simple mission all the way around. Everyone had the interior layout, and it was an easy one. I split the objective into three areas of responsibility. Two I could see. The third only had one subject in it—that was something of a guess on my part, but all of our information supported it. We had to move in fast because the principal subject, Model, was about to kill a hostage. I saw no reason to allow him to do that," Chavez concluded.

"Anyone take issue with that?" John asked the assembled group.

"There will be times when one might have to allow a terrorist to kill a hostage," Dr. Bellow said soberly. "It will not be pleasant, but it will occasionally be necessary."

"Okay, doc, any observations?"

"John, we need to follow the police investigation of these subjects. Were they terrorists or robbers? We don't know. I think we need to find out. We were not able to conduct any negotiations. In this case it probably did not matter, but in the future it will. We need more translators to work with. My language skills are not up to what we need, and I need translators who speak my language, good at nuance and stuff." Clark saw Stanley make a note of that, too. Then he checked his watch.

"Okay. We'll go over the videotapes tomorrow morning. For now, good job, people. Dismissed."

Team-2 walked outside into a night that was starting to fog up. Some looked in the direction of the NCO Club, but none headed that way. Chavez walked toward his house. On opening the door, he found Patsy sitting up in front of the TV.

"Hi, honey," Ding told his wife.

"You okay?"

Chavez managed a smile, lifting his hands and turning around. "No holes or scratches anywhere."

"It was you on the TV—in Switzerland, I mean?"

"You know I'm not supposed to say."

"Ding, I've known what Daddy does since I was twelve," Dr. Patricia Chavez, M.D., pointed out. "You know, Secret Agent Man, just like you."

There was no sense in concealment, was there? "Well, Patsy, yeah, that was me and my team."

"Who were they—the bad guys, I mean?"

"Maybe terrorists, maybe bank robbers. Not sure," Chavez said, stripping off his shirt on the way to the bedroom.

Patsy followed him inside. "The TV said they were all killed."

"Yep." He took his slacks off and hung them in the closet. "No choice. They were about to kill a hostage when it went down. So . . . we had to go in and stop that from happening."

"I'm not sure if I like that."

He looked up at his wife. "I *am* sure. I don't like it. Remember that guy when you were in medical school, the leg that got amputated, and you assisted in the surgery? You didn't like it, did you?"

"No, not at all." It had been an auto accident, and the leg just too mangled to save.

"That's life, Patsy. You don't like all the things you have to do." With that, Chavez sat down on the bed and tossed his socks at the open-top hamper. *Secret Agent Man,* he thought. *Supposed to have a vodka martini, shaken not stirred, now, but the movies never showed the hero going to bed to get* sleep, *did they? But who wants to get laid right*

after killing somebody? That was worth an ironic chuckle, and he lay back on top of the covers. *Bond. James Bond. Sure.* As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw again the sight-picture from the bank, and relived the moment, bringing his MP-10 to bear, lining up the sights on whoever the hell it was—Guttenach was his name, wasn't it? He realized he hadn't checked. Seeing the head right there in the ringed sight, and squeezing off the burst as routinely as zipping his pants after taking a leak. Puff puff puff. That fast, that quiet with the suppressor on the gun, and *zap,* whoever the hell he was, was dead as yesterday's fish. He and his three friends hadn't had much of a chance—in fact, they'd had no chance at all.

But the guy they'd murdered earlier hadn't had a chance, either, Chavez reminded himself. Some poor unlucky bastard who'd happened to be in the bank, making a deposit, or talking to a loan officer, or maybe just getting change for a haircut. *Save your sympathy for that one,* Ding told himself. And the doctor Model had been ready to kill was now in his home, probably, with his wife and family, probably half-wasted on booze, or maybe a sedative, probably going through a really bad case of the shakes, probably thinking about spending some time with a shrink friend to help get him through the delayed stress. Probably feeling pretty fucking awful. But you had to be alive to feel something, and that beat the shit out of having his wife and kids sitting in the living room of their house outside Bern, crying their eyes out and asking why daddy wasn't around anymore.

Yeah. He'd taken a life, but he'd redeemed another. With that thought, he revisited the sight-picture, remembering now the sight of the first round hitting the asshole just forward of the ear, knowing then that he was dead, even before rounds #2 and #3 hit, in a circle of less than two inches across, blowing his brains ten feet the other way, and the body going down like a sack of beans. The way the man's gun had hit the floor, muzzle angled up, and thankfully it hadn't gone off and hurt anyone, and the head shots hadn't caused his fingers to spasm closed and pull the trigger from the grave—a real hazard, he'd learned in training. But still it was unsatisfactory. Better to get them alive and pick their brains for what they knew, and why they acted the way they did. That way you could learn stuff you could use the next time—or, just maybe—go after someone else, the bastard who gave the orders, and fill his ass with ten-millimeter hollowpoints.

The mission hadn't been perfect, Chavez had to admit to himself, but, ordered in to save a life, he'd saved that life. And that, he decided, would have to do for now. A moment later he felt the bed move as his wife lay beside him. He reached over for her hand, which she moved immediately to her belly. So, the little Chavez was doing some more laps. That, Ding decided, was worth a kiss, which he rolled

over to deliver.

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Popov, too, was settled into his bed, having knocked back four stiff vodkas while watching the local television news, followed by an editorial panegyric to the efficiency of the local police. As yet they weren't giving out the identity of the robbers—that was how the crime was being reported, somewhat to Popov's disappointment, though on reflection he didn't know why. He'd established his bona fides for his employer . . . and pocketed a considerable sum of money in the bargain. A few more performances like this one and he could live like a king in Russia, or a prince in many other countries. He could know for himself the comfort he'd so often seen and envied while he was a field intelligence officer with the former KGB, wondering then how the hell his country could ever defeat nations which spent billions on amusement in addition to billions more on military hardware, all of which was better than anything his nation had produced—else why would he have so often been tasked to discovering their technical secrets? That was how he'd worked during the last few years of the Cold War, knowing even then who would win and who would lose.

But defection had never been an option. What was the point in selling out his country for a minor stipend and an ordinary job in the West? Freedom? That was the word the West still pretended to worship. What was the good of being able to wander around at liberty when you didn't have a proper automobile in which to do it? Or a good hotel in which to sleep when one got there? Or the money to buy the food and drink one needed to enjoy life properly ? No, his first trip to the West as an "illegal" field officer without a diplomatic cover had been to London, where he'd spent much of his time counting the expensive cars, and the efficient black taxis one took when too lazy to walk—his important movement had been in the "tube," which was convenient, anonymous, and cheap. But "cheap" was a virtue for which he had little affection. No, capitalism had the singular virtue of rewarding people who had chosen the correct parents, or had been lucky in business. Rewarding them with luxury, convenience, and comfort undreamed of by the czars themselves. And *that* was what Popov had instantly craved, and wondered even then how he might get it. A nice expensive car—a Mercedes was the one he'd always desired—and a proper large flat close to good restaurants, and money to travel to places where the sand was warm and the sky blue, the better to attract women to his side, as Henry Ford must have done, he was sure. What was the point of having that sort of power without the

will to use it?

Well, Popov told himself, he was closer than ever to realizing it. All he had to do was set up a few more jobs like this one in Bern. If his employer was willing to pay that much money for fools—well, a fool and his money were soon parted; a Western aphorism he found delightfully appropriate. And Dmitriy Arkadeyevich was no fool. With that satisfied thought, he lifted his remote and turned his TV off. Tomorrow, wake up, breakfast, make his bank deposit, and then take a cab to the airport for the Swissair flight to New York. First class. Of course.

"Well, Al?" Clark asked over a pint of dark British beer. They were sitting in the rear-corner booth.

"Your Chavez is all he was reported to be. Clever of him to let Price take the lead. He doesn't let ego get in the way. I like that in a young officer. His timing was right. His division of the floor plan was right, and his shots were bang on. He'll do. So will the team. So much the better that the first time out was an easy one. This Model chappie wasn't a rocket scientist, as you say."

"Vicious bastard."

Stanley nodded. "Quite. The German terrorists frequently were. We should get a nice letter from the BKA about this one, as well."

"Lessons learned?"

"Dr. Bellow's was the best. We need more and better translators if we're to get him involved in negotiations. I'll get to work on that tomorrow. Century House ought to have people we can use. Oh, yes, that Noonan lad—"

"A late addition. He was a techie with the FBI. They used him on the Hostage Rescue Team for technical backup. Sworn agent, knows how to shoot, with some investigative experience," Clark explained. "Good all-around man to have with us."

"Nice job planting his video-surveillance equipment. I've looked at the videotapes already. They're not bad. On the whole, John, full marks for Team-2." Stanley saluted with his jar of John Courage.

"Nice to see that everything works, Al."

"Until the next one."

A long breath. "Yeah." Most of the success, Clark knew, was due to the British. He'd made use of their support systems, and their men had actually led the takedown—two-thirds of it. Louis Loiselle was every bit as good as the French had claimed. The little bastard could shoot like Davy Crockett with an attitude, and was about as excitable as a rock. Well, the French had their own terrorist experiences, and once upon a time Clark had gone out into the field with them. So, this one would go into the records as a successful mission. Rainbow was now

certified. And so, Clark knew, was he.

The Society of Cincinnatus owned a large house on Massachusetts Avenue that was frequently used for the semiofficial dinners that were so vital a part of the Washington social scene, and allowed the mighty to cross paths and validate their status over drinks and small talk. The new President made that somewhat difficult, of course, with his . . . eccentric approach to government, but no person could really change that much in this city, and the new crop in Congress needed to learn how Washington Really Worked. It was no different from other places around America, of course, and to many of them the gatherings at this former dwelling of somebody rich and important was merely the new version of the country club dinners where they'd learned the rules of polite-power society.

Carol Brightling was one of the new important people. A divorcée for over ten years who'd never remarried, she had no less than three doctorates, from Harvard, Cal-Tech, and the University of Illinois, thus covering both coasts and three important states, which was an important accomplishment in this city, as that guaranteed her the instant attention, if not the automatic affection, of six senators and a larger number of representatives, all of whom had votes and committees.

"Catch the news," the junior senator from Illinois asked her over a glass of white wine.

"What do you mean?"

"Switzerland. Either a terrorist thing or a bank robbery. Nice takedown by the Swiss cops."

"Boys and their guns," Brightling observed dismissively.

"It made for good TV."

"So does football," Brightling noted, with a gentle, nasty smile.

"True. Why isn't the President supporting you on Global Warming?" the senator asked next, wondering how to crack her demeanor.

"Well, he isn't *not* supporting me. The President thinks we need some additional science on the issue."

"And you don't?"

"Honestly, no, I think we have all the science we need. The top-down and bottom-up data are pretty clear. But the President isn't convinced himself, and does not feel comfortable with taking measures that affect the economy until he is personally sure." *I have to work on him some more,* she didn't add.

"Are you happy with that?"

"I see his point," the Science Advisor replied, surprising the senator from the Land of Lincoln. So, he thought, everyone who worked in the White House toed the line with this president. Carol Brightling had

been a surprise appointment to the White House staff, her politics very different from the President's, respected as she was in the scientific community for her environmental views. It had been an adroit political move, probably engineered by Chief of Staff Arnold van Damm, arguably the most skillful political operator in this city of maneuvering, and had secured for the President the (qualified) support of the environmental movement, which had turned into a political force of no small magnitude in Washington.

"Does it bother you that the President is out in South Dakota slaughtering geese?" the senator asked with a chuckle, as a waiter replaced his drink.

"Homo sapiens is a predator," Brightling replied, scanning the room for others.

"But only the men?"

A smile. "Yes, we women are far more peaceful."

"Oh, that's your ex-husband over there in the corner, isn't it?" the senator asked, surprised at the change in her face when he said it.

"Yes." The voice neutral, showing no emotion, as she turned to face in another direction. Having spotted him, she needed to do no more. Both knew the rules. No closer than thirty feet, no lengthy eye contact, and certainly no words.

"I had the chance to put money into Horizon Corporation two years ago. I've kicked myself quite a few times since."

"Yes, John has made quite a pile for himself."

And well after their divorce, so she didn't get a nickel out of it. Probably not a good topic for conversation, the senator thought at once. He was new at the job, and not the best at politic conversation.

"Yes, he's done well, twisting science the way he has."

"You don't approve?"

"Restructuring DNA in plants and animals—no. Nature has evolved without our assistance for two billion years at least. I doubt that it needs help from us."

" 'There are some things man is not meant to know'?" the senator asked with a chuckle. His professional background was in contracting, in gouging holes in the ground and erecting something that nature didn't want there, though his sensitivity on environmental issues, Dr. Brightling thought, had itself evolved from his love of Washington and his desire to remain here in a position of power. It was called Potomac Fever, a disease easily caught and less easily cured.

"The problem, Senator Hawking, is that nature is both complex and subtle. When we change things, we cannot easily predict the ramifications of the changes. It's called the Law of Unintended Consequences, something with which the Congress is familiar, isn't it?"

"You mean—"

"I mean that the reason we have a federal law about environmental impact statements is that it's far easier to mess things up than it is to get them right. In the case of recombinant DNA, we can more easily change the genetic code than we can evaluate the effects those changes will cause a century from now. That sort of power is one that should be used with the greatest possible care. Not everyone seems to grasp that simple fact."

Which point was difficult to argue with, the senator had to concede gracefully. Brightling would be making that case before his committee in another week. Had that been the thing that had broken up the marriage of John and Carol Brightling? How very sad. With that observation, the senator made his excuses and headed off to join his wife.

"There's nothing new in that point of view." John Brightling's doctorate in molecular biology came from the University of Virginia, along with his M.D. "It started with a guy named Ned Ludd a few centuries ago. He was afraid that the Industrial Revolution would put an end to the cottage-industry economy in England. And he was right. That economic model was wrecked. But what replaced it was better for the consumer, and that's why we call it *progress!"* Not surprisingly, John Brightling, a billionaire heading for number two, was holding court before a small crowd of admirers.

"But the complexity—" One of the audience started to object.

"Happens every day—every second, in fact. And so do the things we're trying to conquer. Cancer, for example. No, madam, are you willing to put an end to our work if it means no cure for breast cancer? That disease strikes five percent of the human population worldwide. Cancer is a *genetic* disease. The key to curing it is in the human genome. And my company is going to find that key! Aging is the same thing. Salk's team at La Jolla found the kill-me gene more than fifteen years ago. If we can find a way to turn it off, then human immortality can be real. Madam, does the idea of living forever in a body of twenty-five years' maturity appeal to you?"

"But what about overcrowding?" The congresswoman's objection was somewhat quieter than her first. It was too vast a thought, too surprisingly posed, to allow an immediate objection.

"One thing at a time. The invention of DDT killed off huge quantities of disease-bearing insects, and *that* increased populations all over the world, didn't it? Okay, we are a little more crowded now, but who wants to bring the anopheles mosquito back? Is malaria a reasonable method of population control? Nobody here wants to bring war back, right? We used to use that, too, to control populations. We

got over it, didn't we? Hell, controlling populations is no big deal. It's called birth control, and the advanced countries have already learned how to do it, and the backward countries can, too, *if* they have a good reason for doing so. It might take a generation or so," John Brightling mused, "but is there anyone here who would not want to be twenty-five again—*with* all the things we've learned along the way, of course. It damned well appeals to me!" he went on with a warm smile. With sky-high salaries and promises of stock options, his company had assembled an incredible team of talent to look at that particular gene. The profits that would accrue from its control could hardly be estimated, and the U.S. patent was good for seventeen years! Human immortality, the new Holy Grail for the medical community—and for the first time, it was something for serious investigation, not a topic of pulp science-fiction stories.

"You think you can do it?" another congresswoman—this one from San Francisco—asked. Women of all sorts found themselves drawn to this man. Money, power, good looks, and good manners made it inevitable.

John Brightling smiled broadly. "Ask me in five years. We know the gene. We need to learn how to turn it off. There's a whole lot of basic science in there we have to uncover, and along the way we hope to discover a lot of very useful things. It's like setting off with Magellan. We aren't sure what we're going to find, but we know it'll all be interesting." No one pointed out that Magellan hadn't made it home from that particular trip.

"And profitable?" a new senator from Wyoming asked.

"That's how our society works, isn't it? We pay people for doing useful work. Is this area useful enough?"

"If you bring it off, I suppose it is." This senator was himself a physician, a family practitioner who knew the basics but was well over his head on the deep-scientific side. The concept, the objective of Horizon Corporation, was well beyond breathtaking, but he would not bet against them. They'd done too well developing cancer drugs and synthetic antibiotics, and were the leading private company in the Human Genome Project, a global effort to decode the basics of human life. Himself a genius, John Brightling had found it easy to attract others like himself to his company. He had more charisma than a hundred politicians, and unlike the latter, the senator had to admit to himself, he really had something to back up the showmanship. It had once been called "the right stuff" for pilots. With his movie-star looks, ready smile, superb listening ability, and dazzlingly analytical mind, Dr. John Brightling had the knack. He could make anyone near him feel interesting—and the bastard could *teach,* could apply his lessons to everyone nearby. Simple ones for the unschooled and highly

sophisticated ones for the specialists in his field, at the top of which he reigned supreme. Oh, he had a few peers. Pat Reily at Harvard-Mass General. Aaron Bernstein at Johns Hopkins. Jacques Elisé at Pasteur. Maybe Paul Ging at U.C. Berkeley. But that was it. What a fine clinician Brightling might have made, the senator-M.D. thought, but, no, he was too good to be wasted on people with the latest version of the flu.

About the only thing in which he'd failed was his marriage. Well, Carol Brightling was also pretty smart, but more political than scientific, and perhaps her ego, capacious as everyone in this city knew it to be, had quailed before the greater intellectual gifts of her husband. Only room in town for one of us, the doctor from Wyoming thought, with an inner smile. That happened often enough in real life, not just on old movies. And Brightling, John, seemed to be doing better in that respect than Brightling, Carol. At the former's elbow was a very pretty redhead drinking in his every word, while the latter had come alone, and would be leaving alone for her apartment in Georgetown. Well, the senator-M.D. thought, that's life.

Immortality. Damn, all the pronghorns he might take, the doctor from Cody thought on, heading over to his wife. Dinner was about to start. The chicken had finished the vulcanization process.

The Valium helped. It wasn't actually Valium, Killgore knew. That drug had become something of a generic name for mild sedatives, and this one had been developed by SmithKline, with a different trade name, with the added benefit that it made a good mix with alcohol. For street people who were often as contentious and territorial as junkyard dogs, this group of ten was remarkably sedate. The large quantities of good booze helped. The high-end bourbons seemed the most popular libations, drunk from cheap glasses with ice, along with various mixers for those who didn't care to drink it neat. Most didn't, to Killgore's surprise.

The physicals had gone well. They were all healthy-sick people, outwardly fairly vigorous, but inwardly all with physical problems ranging from diabetes to liver failure. One was definitely suffering from prostate cancer—his PSA was off the top of the chart—but that wouldn't matter in this particular test, would it? Another was HIV+, but not yet symptomatic, and so that didn't matter either. He'd probably gotten it from drug use, but strangely, liquor seemed all he needed to keep himself regulated here. How interesting.

Killgore didn't have to be here, and it troubled his conscience to look at them so much, but they were *his* lab rats, and he was supposed to keep an eye on them, and so he did, behind the mirror, while he did his paperwork and listened to Bach on his portable CD player.

Three were—claimed to be—Vietnam veterans. So they'd killed their share of Asians—"gooks" was the word they'd used in the interview—before coming apart and ending up as street drunks. Well, *homeless people* was the current term society used for them, somewhat more dignified than *bums,* the term Killgore vaguely remembered his mother using. Not the best example of humanity he'd ever seen. Yet the Project had managed to change them quite a bit. All bathed regularly now and dressed in clean clothes and watched TV. Some even read books from time to time—Killgore had thought that providing a library, while cheap, was an outrageously foolish waste of time and money. But always they drank, and the drinking relegated each of the ten to perhaps six hours of full consciousness per day. And the Valium calmed them further, limiting any altercations that his security staff would have to break up. Two of them were always on duty in the next room over, also watching the group of ten. Microphones buried in the ceiling allowed them to listen in to the disjointed conversations. One of the group was something of an authority on baseball and talked about Mantle and Maris all the time to whoever would listen. Enough of them talked about sex that Killgore wondered if he should send the snatch team back out to get some female "homeless" subjects for the experiment—he would tell Barb Archer that. After all, they needed to know if gender had an effect on the experiment. She'd *have* to buy into that one, wouldn't she? And there'd be none of the sisterly solidarity with them. There couldn't be, even from the feminazi who joined him in running this experiment. Her ideology was too pure for that. Killgore turned when there came a knock at the door.

"Hey, doc." It was Benny, one of the security guys.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Falling asleep," Benjamin Farmer replied. "The kids are playing pretty nice."

"Yeah, they sure are." It was *so* easy. Most had to be prodded a little to leave the room and go out to the courtyard for an hour of walking around every afternoon. But they had to be kept fit—which was to say, to simulate the amount of exercise they got on a normal day in Manhattan, staggering from one dreary corner to another.

"Damn, doc, I never knew *anybody* could put it away the way these guys do! I mean, I had to bring in a whole case of Grand-Dad today, and there's only two bottles left."

"That their favorite?" Killgore asked. He hadn't paid much attention to that.

"Seems to be, sir. I'm a Jack Daniel's man myself—but with me, maybe two a night, say, for Monday Night Football, if it's a good game. I don't drink *water* the way the kids drink hard booze." A chuckle from the ex-Marine who ran the night security shift. A good

man, Farmer. He did a lot of things with injured animals at the company's rural shelter. He was also the one who'd taken to calling the test subjects *the kids.* It had caught on with the security staff and from them to the others. Killgore chuckled. You had to call them something, and lab rats just wasn't respectful enough. After all, they were human beings, after a fashion, all the more valuable for their place in this test. He turned to see one of them—#6—pour himself another drink, wander back to his bed, and lie down to watch some TV before he passed out. He wondered what the poor bastard would dream about. Some did, and talked loudly in their sleep. Something to interest a psychiatrist, perhaps, or someone doing sleep studies. They *all* snored, to the point that when all were asleep it sounded like an old steam-powered railroad yard in there.

Choo-choo, Killgore thought, looking back down at his last bit of paperwork. Ten more minutes, and he could head home. Too late to put his kids to bed. Too bad. Well, in due course they would awaken to a new day and a new world, and wouldn't that be some present to give them, however heavy and nasty the price for it might be. Hmph, the physician thought, I could use a drink myself.

"The future has never been so bright as this," John Brightling told his audience, his demeanor even more charismatic after two glasses of a select California Chardonnay. "The bio-sciences are pushing back frontiers we didn't even know existed fifteen years ago. A hundred years of basic research are coming to bloom even as we speak. We're building on the work of Pasteur, Ehrlich, Salk, Sabin, and so many others. We see so far today because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

"Well," John Brightling went on, "it's been a long climb, but the top of the mountain is in sight, and we *will* get there in the next few years."

"He's smooth," Liz Murray observed to her husband.

"Very," FBI Director Dan Murray whispered back. "Smart, too. Jimmy Hicks says he's the top guy in the world."

"What's he running for?"

"God, from what he said earlier."

"Needs to grow a beard then."

Director Murray nearly choked at that, then he was saved by the vibrating of his cellular phone. He discreetly left his seat to walk into the building's large marble foyer. On flipping his phone open, it took fifteen seconds for the encryption system to synchronize with the base station calling him—which told him that it was FBI Headquarters.

"Murray."

"Director, this is Gordon Sinclair in the Watch Center. So far the

Swiss have struck out on ID-ing the other two. Prints are on their way to the BKA so they can take a look." But if they hadn't been printed somewhere along the line, that, too, would be a dry hole, and it would take a while to identify Model's two pals.

"No additional casualties on the takedown?"

"No, sir, all four bad guys down for the count. All hostages safe and evacuated. They should all be back home now. Oh, Tim Noonan deployed on this operation, electronics weenie for one of the go-teams."

"So, Rainbow works, eh?"

"It did this time, Director," Sinclair judged.

"Make sure they send us the write-up on how the operation went down."

"Yes, sir. I already e-mailed them about that." Less than thirty people in the Bureau knew about Rainbow, though quite a few would be making guesses. Especially those HRT members who'd taken note of the fact that Tim Noonan, a third-generation agent, had dropped off the face of the earth. "How's dinner going?"

"I prefer Wendy's. More of the basic food groups. Anything else?"

"The OC case in New Orleans is close to going down, Billy Betz says. Three or four more days. Aside from that, nothing important happening."

"Thanks, Gordy." Murray thumbed the END button on his phone and pocketed it, then returned to the dining room after a look and a wave at two members of his protective detail. Thirty seconds later, he slid back into his seat, with a muted thump from his holstered Smith & Wesson automatic against the wood.

"Anything important?" Liz asked.

A shake of the head. "Routine."

The affair broke up less than forty minutes after Brightling finished his speech and collected his award plaque. He held court yet again, albeit with a smaller group of fans this time, while drifting toward the door, outside of which waited his car. It was only five minutes to the Hay-Adams Hotel, across Lafayette Park from the White House. He had a corner suite on the top floor, and the hotel staff had thoughtfully left him a bottle of the house white in an ice bucket next to the bed, for his companion had come along. It was sad, Dr. John Brightling thought, removing the cork. He'd miss things like this, really miss them. But he had made the decision long before—not knowing when he'd started off that it could possibly work. Now he thought that it would, and the things he'd miss were ultimately of far less value than the things he'd get. And for the moment, he thought, looking at Jessica's pale skin and stunning figure, he'd get something else that was pretty nice.

It was different for Dr. Carol Brightling. Despite her White House job, she drove her own car without even a bodyguard to her apartment off Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown, her only companion there a calico cat named Jiggs, who, at least, came to the door to meet her, rubbing his body along her panty-hosed leg the moment the door was closed, and purring to show his pleasure at her arrival. He followed her into the bedroom, watching her change in the way of cats, interested and detached at the same time, and knowing what came next. Dressed only in a short robe, Carol Brightling walked into the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and got a treat, which she bent down to feed to Jiggs from her hand. Then she got herself a glass of ice water from the refrigerator door, and drank it down with two aspirin. It had all been her idea. She knew that all too well. But after so many years, it was still as hard as it had been at first. She'd given up so much more. She'd gotten the job she'd craved—somewhat to her surprise, as things had turned out, but she had the office in the right building, and now played a role in making policy on the issues that were important to her. Important policy on important topics. But was it worth it?

Yes! She had to think that, and, truly, she believed it, but the price, the price of it, was often so hard to bear. She bent down to lift up Jiggs, cradling him like the child she'd never had and walking to the bedroom where, again, he'd be the only one to share it with her. Well, a cat was far more faithful than a man could ever be. She'd learned that lesson over the years. In a few seconds, the robe was on the chair next to the bed, and she under the covers, with Jiggs atop them and between her legs. She hoped sleep would come a little more quickly tonight than it usually did. But she knew it would not, for her mind would not stop thinking about what was happening in another bed less than three miles away.

CHAPTER 5

RAMIFICATIONS

Daily PT started at 0630 and concluded with the five-mile run, timed to last exactly forty minutes. This morning it ended at thirty-eight, and Chavez wondered if he and his team had an additional spring in their step from the successful mission. If so, was that good or bad? Killing fellow human beings wasn't supposed to make you feel good, was it? A deep thought for a foggy English morning.

By the end of the run, everyone had a good sweat, which the hot showers took care of. Oddly, hygiene was a little more complicated for his team than for uniformed soldiers. Nearly everyone had longer hair than their respective armies permitted, so that they could look like grown-up, if somewhat shabby, businessmen when they donned their coats and ties for their first-class flights to wherever. Ding's hair was the shortest, since at CIA he'd tried to keep it not too different from his time as staff sergeant in the Ninjas. It would have to grow for at least another month before it would be shaggy enough. He grunted at that thought, then stepped out of the shower. As Team-2 leader, he rated his own private facility, and he took the time to admire his body, always an object of pride for Domingo Chavez. Yeah, the exercise that had been so tough the first week had paid off. He hadn't been much tougher than this in Ranger School at Fort Benning—and he'd been, what? Twenty-one then, just an E-4 and one of the smallest men in the class. It was something of an annoyance to Ding that, tall and rangy like her mom, Patsy had half an inch on him. But Patsy only wore flats, which kept it respectable—and nobody messed with him. Like his boss, he had the look of a man with whom one did not trifle. Especially this morning, he thought, while toweling off. He'd zapped a guy the previous night, just as fast and automatic an action as zipping his zipper. Tough shit, Herr Guttenach.

Back home, Patsy was already dressed in her greens. She was on an OB/GYN rotation at the moment, scheduled to perform—well, to assist on—a Cesarean section this morning at the local hospital where she was completing what in America would have been her year of internship. Next would be her pediatric rotation, which struck both of them as totally appropriate. Already on the table for him was bacon

and eggs—the eggs in England seemed to have brighter yolks. He wondered if they fed their chickens differently here.

"I wish you'd eat better," Patsy observed, again.

Domingo laughed, reaching for his morning paper, the *Daily Telegraph.* "Honey, my cholesterol is one-three-zero, my resting heart-rate is fifty-six. I am a lean, mean fighting machine, doctor!"

"But what about ten years from now?" Patricia Chavez, M.D., asked.

"I'll have ten complete physicals between now and then, and I will adjust my lifestyle according to how those work out," Domingo Chavez, Master of Science (International Relations), answered, buttering his toast. The bread in this country, he'd learned over the past six weeks, was just fabulous. Why did people knock English food? "Hell, Patsy, look at your dad. That old bastard is still in great shape." Though he hadn't run this morning—and at his best was hard-pressed to finish the five miles at the pace Team-2 set. Well, he was well over fifty. His shooting, however, hadn't suffered very much at all. John had worked to make that clear to the go-team members. One of the best pistoleros Chavez had ever seen, and better still with a sniper rifle. He was dead-level with Weber and Johnston out to 400 meters. Despite the suit he wore to work, Rainbow Six was on everyone's don't-fuck-with list.

The front page had a story on the previous day's events in Bern. Ding raced through it and found most of the details right. Remarkable. The *Telegraph*'s correspondent must have had good contacts with the cops . . . whom he gave credit for the takedown. Well, that was okay. Rainbow was supposed to remain black. No comment from the Ministry of Defense on whether the SAS had provided support to the Swiss police. That was a little weak. A flat "no" would have been better . . . but were that to be said, then a "no comment" spoken at some other time would be taken as a "yes." So, yeah, that probably made sense. Politics was not a skill he'd acquired yet, at least not on the instinctive level. Dealing with the media frightened him more than facing loaded weapons—he had training for the latter but not for the former. His next grimace came when he realized that while CIA had an office of public affairs, Rainbow sure as hell didn't. Well, in this business it probably didn't pay to advertise. About that time, Patsy put on her jacket and headed for the door. Ding hurried after her to deliver the goodbye kiss, watched his wife walk to the family car, and hoped she did better driving on the left side of the road than he did. It made him slightly nuts and required steady concentration. The really crazy part was that the gearshift was on the wrong side of the car, but the pedals were the same as in American autos. It made Chavez a little schizophrenic, driving left-handed and right-footed. The worst part was the traffic circles the Brits seemed to like better than real

interchanges. Ding kept wanting to turn right instead of left. It would be a hell of a stupid way to get killed. Ten minutes later, dressed in his day uniform, Chavez walked over to the Team-2 building for the second AAR.

Popov tucked his passbook in his coat pocket. The Swiss banker hadn't even blinked at seeing the suitcase full of cash. A remarkable machine had counted the bills, like mechanical fingers riffling through a deck of playing cards, even checking the denominations as it did the counting. It had taken a total of forty-five minutes to get things fully arranged. The number on the account was his old KGB service number, and tucked in the passbook was the banker's business card, complete with his Internet address for making wire transfers—the proper code-phrase had been agreed upon and written into his bank file. The topic of Model's failed adventure of the previous day hadn't come up. Popov figured he'd read the press reports in the *International Herald Tribune,* which he'd get at the airport.

His passport was American. The company had arranged to get him resident-alien status, and he was on his way to citizenship, which he found amusing, as he still had his Russian Federation passport, and two others from his previous career—with different names but the same photo—which he could still use if needed. Those were stashed in his travel briefcase, in a small compartment that only a very careful customs examiner would ever find, and then only if told ahead of time that there was something strange about the incoming traveler.

Two hours before his flight was scheduled to depart, he turned in his rental car, rode the bus to the international terminal, went through the usual rigmarole of checking in, and headed off to the first-class lounge for coffee and a croissant.

Bill Henriksen was a news junkie of the first order. On waking up, early as always, he immediately flipped his TV to CNN, often flipping to Fox News with his remote while he did his morning treadmill routine, frequently with a paper on the reading board as well. The front page of the *New York Times* covered the event in Bern, as did Fox News—oddly, CNN talked about it but didn't show much. Fox did, using the feed from Swiss television, which allowed him to watch what could be seen of the takedown. Pure vanilla, Henriksen thought. Flash-bangs on the front doors—made the cameraman jump and go slightly off-target, as usual when they were that close—shooters in right behind them. No sounds of gunfire—they used suppressed weapons. In five seconds, it was all over. So, the Swiss had a properly trained SWAT team. No real surprise there, though he hadn't really known about it. A few minutes later, one guy came out and lit a pipe.

Whoever that was, probably the team commander, he had a little style, Henriksen thought, checking the mileage on the treadmill. The team dressed as such people usually did, in coalgray fatigues, with Kevlar body armor. Uniformed cops went in to get the hostages out after about the right amount of time. Yeah, nicely and smoothly done—another way of saying that the criminals/terrorists—the news wasn't clear on whether they were just robbers or political types—weren't real smart. Well, whoever said they were? They'd have to choose better ones the next time if this thing were going to work. The phone would ring in a few minutes, he was sure, summoning him to do a brief TV spot. A nuisance but a necessary one.

That happened when he was in the shower. He'd long since had a phone installed just outside the door.

"Yeah."

"Mr. Henriksen?"

"Yeah, who's this?" The voice wasn't familiar.

"Bob Smith at Fox News New York. Have you seen coverage of the incident in Switzerland?"

"Yeah, matter of fact I just saw it on your network."

"Any chance you could come in and give us some commentary?"

"What time?" Henriksen asked, knowing the response, and what his answer would be.

"Just after eight, if you could."

He even checked his watch, an automatic and wasted gesture that nobody saw. "Yeah, I can do that. How long will I be on this time?"

"Probably four minutes or so."

"Okay, I'll be down there in about an hour."

"Thank you, sir. The guard will be told to expect you."

"Okay, see you in an hour." The kid must be new, Henriksen thought, not to know that he was a regular commentator—why else would his name have been in the Fox rolodex?—and that the security guards all knew him by sight. A quick cup of coffee and a bagel got him out the door, into his Porsche 911, and across the George Washington Bridge to Manhattan.

Dr. Carol Brightling awoke, patted Jiggs on the top of his head, and stepped into the shower. Ten minutes later, a towel wrapped around her head, she opened the door and got the morning papers. The coffee machine had already made its two cups of Mountain-Grown Folger's, and in the refrigerator was the plastic box full of melon sections. Next she switched on the radio to catch the morning edition of *All Things Considered,* beginning her news fix, which started here and would go on through most of the day. Her job in the White House was mainly reading . . . and today she had to meet with that bozo from the

Department of Energy who still thought it important to build H-bombs, which she would advise the President against, which advice he would probably decline without direct comment to her.

Why the hell had she been taken in by this administration? Carol wondered. The answer was simple and obvious : politics. This president had tried valiantly to avoid such entanglements in his year and a half of holding office. And she was female, whereas the President's team of insiders was almost entirely male, which had caused some comment in the media and elsewhere, which had befuddled the President in his political innocence, which had amused the press even more and given them a further tool to use, which had worked, after a fashion. And so she had been offered the appointment, and taken it, with the office in the Old Executive Office Building instead of the White House itself, with a secretary and an assistant, and a parking place on West Executive Drive for her fuel-efficient six-year-old Honda—the *only* Japanese-made car on that particular block, which *nobody* had said anything about, of course, since she was female, and she'd forgotten more about Washington politics than the President would ever learn. That was astounding when she thought about it, though she warned herself that the President was a notoriously quick learner. But not a good listener, at least as far as she was concerned.

The media let him get away with it. The lesson of that was that the media was nobody's friend. Lacking convictions of its own, it just published what people said, and so she had to speak, off the record, on deep background, or just casually, to various reporters. Some, those who covered the Environment regularly, at least understood the language, and for the most part could be trusted to write their pieces the proper way, but they always included the other side's rubbish science—*yes, maybe your position has merit, but the science isn't firm enough yet and the computer models are* not *accurate enough to justify this sort of action,* the other side said. As a result of which, the public's opinion—as measured in polls—had stagnated, or even reversed a little bit. The President was anything but an Environmental President, but the bastard was getting away with it—at the same time using Carol Brightling as political camouflage, or even political *cover!* That appalled her . . . or would have under other circumstances. But here she was, Dr. Brightling thought, zipping up her skirt before donning the suit-jacket, a senior advisor to the President of the United States. *That* meant she saw him a couple of times per week. It meant that he *read* her position papers and policy recommendations. It meant that she had *access* to the media's top-drawer people, free to pursue her own agenda . . . within reason.

But she was the one who paid the price. Always, it was she, Carol

thought, reaching down to scratch Jiggs's ears as she made her way to the door. The cat would pass the day doing whatever it was that he did, mainly sleeping in the sun on the windowsill, probably waiting for his mistress to come home and feed him his Frisky treat. Not for the first time, she thought about stopping by a pet store and getting Jiggs a live mouse to play with and eat. A fascinating process to watch, predator and prey, playing their parts . . . the way the world was supposed to be; the way it had been for unnumbered centuries until the last two or so. Until Man had started changing everything, she thought, starting the car, looking at the cobblestoned street—still real cobbles for this traditional Georgetown address, with streetcar tracks still there, too—and brick buildings which had covered up what had probably been a pretty hardwood forest less than two hundred years before. It was even worse across the river, where only Theodore Roosevelt Island was still in its pristine state—and that was interfered with by the screech of jet engines. A minute later, she was on M Street, then around the circle onto Pennsylvania Avenue. She was ahead of the daily rush-hour traffic, as usual, heading the mile or so down the wide, straight street before she could turn right and find her parking place—they weren't reserved *per se,* but everyone had his or her own, and hers was forty yards from the West Entrance—and as a regular, she didn't have to submit to the dog search. The Secret Service used Belgian Malinois dogs—like brown German shepherds—keen of nose and quick of brain, to sniff at cars for explosives. Her White House pass got her into the compound, then up the steps into the OEOB, and right to her office. It was a cubbyhole, really, but larger than those of her secretary and assistant. On her desk was the *Early Bird,* with its clips of articles from various national newspapers deemed important to those who worked in this building, along with her copy of *Science Weekly, Science,* and, today, *Scientific American,* plus several medical journals. The environmental publications would arrive two days later. She hadn't yet sat down when her secretary, Margot Evans, came in with the codeword folder on nuclear-weapons policy, which she'd have to review before giving the President advice that he'd reject. The annoying part of that, of course, was that she'd have to think to produce the position paper that the President would not think about before rejecting. But she couldn't give him an excuse to accept, with great public reluctance, her resignation—rarely did anyone at this level ask to leave *per se,* though the local media had the mantras down and fully understood. Why not take it a step further than usual, and recommend the closure of the dirty reactor at Hanford, Washington? The only American reactor of the same design as Chernobyl—less a power reactor than one designed to produce plutonium—Pu^{239}—for nuclear weapons, the worst gadget the mind

of warlike *men* had ever produced. There were new problems with Hanford, new leaks from the storage tanks there, discovered before the leakage could pollute ground water, but still a threat to the environment, expensive to fix. The chemical mix in those tanks was horribly corrosive, *and* lethally toxic, *and* radioactive . . . and the President wouldn't listen to that bit of sound advice either.

The science of her objections to Hanford was real, even Red Lowell worried about it—but *he* wanted a *new* Hanford built! Even this President wouldn't countenance that!

With that reassuring thought, Dr. Brightling poured herself a cup of coffee and started reading the *Early Bird,* while her mind pondered how she'd draft her doomed recommendation to the President.

"So, Mr. Henriksen, who were they?" the morning anchor asked.

"We don't know much beyond the name of the purported leader, Ernst Model. Model was once part of the Baader-Meinhof gang, the notorious German communist terrorist group from the '70s and '80s. He dropped out of sight about ten years ago. It will be interesting to learn exactly where he's been hiding out."

"Did you have a file on him during your time with the FBI Hostage Rescue Team?"

A smile to accompany the terse reply. "Oh, yeah. I know the face, but Mr. Model will now transfer to the inactive files."

"So, was this a terrorist incident or just a bank robbery?"

"No telling as yet from press reports, but I would not entirely discount robbery as a motive. One of the things people forget about terrorists is that they have to eat, too, and you need money to do that. There is ample precedent for supposedly political criminals to break the law just to make money to support themselves. Right here in America, the CSA—the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord, as they called themselves—robbed banks to support themselves. Baader-Meinhof in Germany used kidnappings to extort money from their victims' corporate and family ties."

"So, to you they're just criminals?"

A nod, and a serious expression. "Terrorism is a crime. That's dogma at the FBI, where I came up. And these four who got killed yesterday in Switzerland were criminals. Unfortunately for them, the Swiss police have assembled and trained what appears to be an excellent, professional special-operations team."

"How would you rate the takedown?"

"Pretty good. The TV coverage shows no errors at all. All the hostages were rescued, and the criminals all were killed. That's par for the course in an incident like this. In the abstract, you would like to take the criminals down alive if possible, but it is not always possible

—the lives of the hostages have absolute priority in a case like this one."

"But the terrorists, don't they have rights—"

"As a matter of principle, yes, they do have the same rights as other criminals. We teach that at the FBI, too, and the best thing you can do as a law enforcement officer in a case like this one is to arrest them, put them in front of a judge and jury, and convict them, *but* remember that the hostages are innocent victims, and their lives are at risk *because of* the criminals' actions. Therefore, you try to give them a chance to surrender—really, you try to disarm them if you can.

"But very often you do not have that luxury," Henriksen went on. "Based on what I saw on TV from this incident, the Swiss police team acted no differently than what we were trained to do at Quantico. You only use deadly force when necessary—but when it's necessary, you do use it."

"But who decides when it's necessary?"

"The commander on the scene makes that decision, based on his training, experience, and expertise." *Then,* Henriksen didn't go on, *people like you second-guess the hell out of him for the next couple of weeks.*

"Your company trains local police forces in SWAT tactics, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. We have numerous veterans of the FBI HRT, Delta Force, and other 'special' organizations, and we could use this Swiss operation as a textbook example of how it's done," Henriksen said—because his was an international corporation, which trained foreign police forces as well, and being nice to the Swiss wouldn't hurt his bottom line one bit.

"Well, Mr. Henriksen, thanks for joining us this morning. International terrorism expert William Henriksen, CEO of Global Security, Inc., an international consulting firm. It's twenty-four minutes after the hour." In the studio, Henriksen kept his calm, professional face on until five seconds after the light on the nearest camera went out. At his corporate headquarters, they would have already taped this interview to add to the vast library of such things. GSI was known over most of the world, and their introductory tape included snippets from many such interviews. The floor director walked him off the set to the makeup room, where the powder was removed, then let him walk himself out to where his car was parked.

That had gone well, he thought, going through the mental checklist. He'd have to find out who'd trained the Swiss. He made a mental note to have one of his contacts chase that one down. If it were a private company, that was serious competition, though it was probably the Swiss army—perhaps even a military formation disguised as

policemen—maybe with some technical assistance from the German GSG-9. A couple of phone calls should run that one down.

Popov's four-engine Airbus A-340 touched down on time at JFK International. You could always trust the Swiss to do everything on time. The police team had probably even had a schedule for the previous night's activities, he thought whimsically. His first-class seat was close to the door, which allowed him to be the third passenger out, then off to claim his bags and go through the ordeal of U.S. Customs. America, he'd long since learned, was the most difficult country to enter as a foreigner—though with his minimal baggage and nothing-to-declare entry, the process was somewhat easier this time. The customs clerks were kind and waved him right through to the cabstand, where, for the usual exorbitant fee, he engaged a Pakistani driver to take him into town, making him wonder idly if the cabbies had a deal with the customs people. But he was on an expense account—meaning he had to get a receipt—and, besides, he had ensured that day that he could afford such things without one, hadn't he? He smiled as he gazed at the passing urban sprawl. It got thicker and thicker on the way to Manhattan.

The cab dropped him off at his apartment house. The flat was paid for by his employer, which made it a tax-deductible business expense for them—Popov was learning about American tax law—and free for him. He spent a few minutes dumping his dirty laundry and hanging up his good clothes before heading downstairs and having the doorman flag a cab. From there it was another fifteen minutes to the office.

"So, how did it go?" the boss asked. There was an odd buzz in the office, designed to interfere with any listening devices that a corporate rival might place. Corporate espionage was a major factor in the life of this man's company, and the defenses against it were at least as good as those the KGB had used. And Popov had once believed that governments had the best of everything. That was certainly *not* true in America.

"It went much as I expected. They were foolish—really rather amateurish, despite all the training we gave them back in the eighties. I told them to feel free to rob the bank as cover for the real mission—"

"Which was?"

"To be killed," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied at once. "At least, that is what I understood your intentions to be, sir." His words occasioned a smile of a sort Popov wasn't used to. He made a note to check the stock value of the bank. Had the intention of this "mission" been to affect the standing of the bank? That didn't seem very likely, but though he didn't *need* to know why he was doing these things, his

natural curiosity had been aroused. This man was treating him like a mercenary, and though Popov knew that was precisely what he'd become since leaving the service of his country, it was vaguely and distantly annoying to his sense of professionalism. "Will you require further such services?"

"What happened to the money?" the boss wanted to know.

A diffident reply: "I'm sure the Swiss will find a use for it." Certainly his banker would. "Surely you did not expect me to recover it?"

A shake of the boss's head. "No, not really, and it was a trivial sum anyway."

Popov nodded his understanding. *Trivial sum?* No Soviet-employed agent had ever gotten so much in a single payment—the KGB had always been niggardly in its payments to those whom it gave money, regardless of the importance of the information that had earned it—nor had the KGB ever been so casual in disposing of cash in any amount. Every single ruble had to be accounted for, else the bean-counters at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square would bring down the devil's own wrath on the field officer who'd been so lax in his operations! The next thing he wondered about was how his employer had laundered the cash. In America if you deposited or withdrew so little as ten *thousand* dollars in cash, the bank was required to make a written record of it. It was supposedly an inconvenience for drug dealers, but they managed to work with it nevertheless. Did other countries have similar rules? Popov didn't know. Switzerland did not, he was sure, but that many banknotes didn't just materialize in a bank's vaults, did they? Somehow his boss had handled that, and done it well, Popov reminded himself. Perhaps Ernst Model had been an amateur, but this man was not. Something to keep in mind, the former spy told himself in large, red, mental letters.

There followed a few seconds of silence. Then: "Yes, I will require another operation."

"What, exactly?" Popov asked, and got the answer immediately. "Ah." A nod. He even used the correct word: *operation.* How very strange. Dmitriy wondered if he'd be well advised to check up on his employer, to find out more about him. After all, his own life was now in pawn to him—and the reverse was true as well, of course, but the other man's life was not an immediate concern to Popov. How hard would it be? To one who owned a computer and a modem, it was no longer difficult at all . . . if one had the time. For now, it was clear, he'd have but one night in his apartment before traveling overseas again. Well, it was an easy cure for jet lag.

They looked like robots, Chavez saw, peering around a computer-generated corner. The hostages, too, but in this case the hostages were

computer-generated children, all girls in red-and-white striped dresses or jumpers—Ding couldn't decide which. It was clearly a psychological effect programmed into the system by whoever had set up the parameters for the program, called SWAT 6.3.2. Some California-based outfit had first produced this for Delta Force under a DOD contract overseen by RAND Corporation.

It was expensive to use, mainly because of the electronic suit he wore. It was the same weight as the usual black mission suit—lead sheets sewn into the fabric had seen to that—and everything down to the gloves was filled with copper wires and sensors that told the computer—an old Cray YMP—exactly what his body was doing, and in turn projected a computer-generated image into the goggles he wore. Dr. Bellow gave the commentary, playing the roles of bad-guy leader and good-guy advisor in this particular game. Ding turned his head and saw Eddie Price right behind him and Hank Patterson and Steve Lincoln across the way at the other simulated corner—robotic figures with numbers on them to let him know who was who.

Chavez pumped his right arm up and down three times, calling for flash-bangs, then peered around the corner one more time—

—at his chair, Clark saw the black line appear on the white corner, then hit the 7 key on his computer keyboard—

—bad-guy #4 trained his weapon on the gaggle of schoolgirls —"Steve! Now!" Chavez ordered.

Lincoln pulled the pin on the flash-bang. It was essentially a grenade simulator, heavy in explosive charge to produce noise and magnesium powder for a blinding flash—simulated for the computer program—and designed to blind and disorient through the ear-shattering blast, which was loud enough to upset the inner ear's mechanism for balance. That sound, though not quite as bad, came through their earphones as well, along with the white-out of their VR goggles. It still made them jump.

The echo hadn't even started to fade when Chavez dived into the room, weapon up and zeroing in on Terrorist #1, the supposed enemy leader. Here the computer system was faulty, Chavez thought. The European members of his team didn't shoot the way the Americans did. They pushed their weapons forward against the double-looped sling, actually extending their H&Ks before firing them. Chavez and the Americans tended to tuck them in close against the shoulder. Ding got his first burst off before his body hit the floor, but the computer system didn't always score this as a hit—which pissed Ding off greatly. He didn't *ever* miss, as a guy named Guttenach had discovered on finding St. Peter in front of him without much in the way of warning. Hitting the floor, Chavez rolled, repeated the burst, and swung the MP-10 for another target. His earphones produced the too-loud report

of the shots (the SWAT 6.3.2 program for some reason didn't allow for suppressed weapons). To his right, Steve Lincoln and Hank Patterson were in the room and shooting at the six terrorists. Their short, controlled bursts rang in his ears, and in his VR goggles, heads exploded into red clouds quite satisfactorily—

—but bad guy #5 depressed his trigger, not at the rescuers, but rather at the hostages, which started going down until at least three of the Rainbow shooters took him out at once—

—"Clear!" Chavez shouted, jumping to his feet and going to the images of the bad guys. One, the computer said, was still residually alive, albeit bleeding from the head. Ding kicked his weapon loose, but by that time #4's shade had stopped moving.

"Clear!" "Clear!" shouted his team members.

"Exercise concluded," Clark's voice told them. Ding and his men removed their Virtual Reality goggles to find a room about double the size of a basketball court, and entirely absent of objects, empty as a high-school gym at midnight. It took a little getting used to. The simulation had been of terrorists who'd taken a kids' school—evidently a girls' school, for greater psychological effect.

"How many did we lose?" Chavez asked the ceiling.

"Six killed and three wounded, the computer says." Clark entered the room.

"What went wrong?" Ding asked, suspecting he knew what the answer was.

"I spotted you looking around the corner, boy," Rainbow Six answered. "That alerted the bad guys."

"Shit," Chavez responded. "That's a program glitch. In real life I'd use the mirror rig, or take this Kevlar hat off, but the program doesn't let us. The flash-bangs would have gone in clean."

"Maybe," John Clark allowed. "But your score on this one is a B-minus."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. C," the Team-2 leader groused. "Next you gonna say our shooting was off?"

"Yours was, the machine says."

"God *damn* it, John! The program doesn't simulate marksmanship worth a damn, and I will *not* train my people to shoot in a way the machine likes instead'a doing it the way that puts steel on target!"

"Settle down, Domingo. I know your troops can shoot. Okay, follow me. Let's watch the replay."

"Chavez, why did you take this way in?" Stanley asked when everyone was seated.

"This doorway is wider, and it gives a better field of fire—"

"For *both* sides," Stanley observed.

"Battlefields are like that," Ding countered. "But when you have

surprise and speed going for you, that advantage conveys also. I put my backup team on the back door, but the configuration of the building didn't allow them to participate in the takedown. Noonan had the building spiked. We had good coverage of the bad guys, and I timed the assault to catch them all in the gym—"

"With all six guns colocated with the hostages."

"Better that than to have to go looking for them. Maybe one of them could flip a grenade around a corner and kill a bunch of the Barbie dolls. No, sir, I thought about coming in from the back, or doing a two-axis assault, but the distances and timing factors didn't look good to me. Are you saying I'm wrong, sir?"

"In this case, yes."

Bullshit, Chavez thought. "Okay, show me what you think."

It was as much a matter of personal style as right and wrong, and Alistair Stanley had been there and done that as much as any man in the world, Ding knew. So he watched and listened. Clark, he saw, did much the same.

"I don't like it," Noonan said, after Stanley concluded his presentation. "It's too easy to put a noisemaker on the doorknob. The damned things only cost ten bucks or so. You can buy one in any airport gift shop—people use them on hotel doors in case somebody tries to come in uninvited. We had a case in the Bureau when a subject used one—nearly blew the whole mission on us, but the flash-bang on the outside window covered the noise pretty well."

"And what if your spikes didn't give us positions on all the subjects?"

"But they did, sir," Noonan countered. "We had time to track them." In fact the training exercise had compressed the time by a factor of ten, but that was normal for the computer simulations. "This computer stuff is great for planning the takedowns, but it falls a little flat on other stuff. I think we did it pretty well." His concluding sentence also announced the fact that Noonan wanted to be a full member of Team-2, not just their techno-weenie, Ding thought. Tim had been spending a lot of time in the shooting range, and was now the equal of any member of the team. Well, he'd worked the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team under Gus Werner. He had the credentials to join the varsity. Werner had been considered for the Six job on Rainbow. But then, so had Stanley.

"Okay," Clark said next, "let's roll the tape."

That was the nastiest surprise of all. Terrorist #2, the computer said, had taken his head shot and spun around with his finger depressed on the trigger of his AK-74, and one of his rounds had neatly transfixed Chavez's head. Ding was dead, according to the Cray computer, because the theoretical bullet had gone under the brim of

his Kevlar helmet and transited right through his brain. The shock of it to Chavez had surprising magnitude. A random event generated by the computer program, it was also quite real, because real life did include such random events. They'd talked about getting Lexan visors for their helmets, which might or might not stop a bullet, but had decided against it because of the distortion it would impose on their sight, and therefore their shooting . . . maybe we need to re-think that one, Chavez told himself. The bottom line of the computer's opinion was simple: if it was possible, then it *could* happen, and if it could, sooner or later, it *would,* and somebody on the team would have to drive to a house on post and tell a wife that she'd just become a widow. Because of a random event—bad luck. A hell of a thing to tell somebody who'd just lost a husband. Cause of death, bad luck. Chavez shivered a little at the thought. How would Patsy take it? Then he shook it off. It was a very low order of probability, mathematically right down there with being hit by lightning on a golf course or being wasted in a plane crash, and life *was* risk, and you avoided the risks only by being dead. Or something like that. He turned his head to look at Eddie Price.

"Unforgiving things, dice," the sergeant major observed with a wry smile. "But I got the chappie who killed you, Ding."

"Thanks, Eddie. Makes me feel a lot better. Shoot faster next time?"

"I shall make a point of it, sir," Price promised.

"Cheer up, Ding," Stanley observed, noting the exchange. "Could have been worse. I've yet to see anyone seriously harmed by an electron."

And you're supposed to learn from training exercises, Ding added for himself. But learn what from this one? Shit happens? Something to think about, he supposed, and in any case, Team-2 was now on standby, with Peter Covington's Team-1 on the ready line. Tomorrow they'd do some more shooting, aimed at getting the shots off a little faster, maybe. Problem was, there just wasn't any room for improvement—not much anyway—and pushing too hard might have the effect of dulling the sharp edge already achieved. Ding felt as though he were the head coach of a particularly good football team. The players were all excellent, and hard-working . . . just not quite perfect. But how much of that could be corrected by training, and how much merely reflected the fact that the other side played to win, too? The first job had been too easy. Model and his bunch had cried aloud to be killed. It wouldn't always be that easy.

CHAPTER 6

TRUE BELIEVERS

The problem was environmental tolerance. They knew the baseline organism was as effective as it needed to be. It was just so delicate. Exposed to air, it died far too easily. They weren't sure why, exactly. It might have been temperature or humidity, or too much oxygen—that element so essential to life was a great killer of life at the molecular level—and the uncertainty had been a great annoyance until a member of the team had come up with a solution. They'd used genetic-engineering technology to graft cancer genes into the organism. Specifically, they'd used genetic material from colon cancer, one of the more robust strains, and the results had been striking. The new organism was only a third of a micron larger and far stronger. The proof was on the electron microscope's TV screen. The tiny strands had been exposed to room air and room light for ten hours before being reintroduced into the culture dish, and already, the technician saw, the minute strands were active, using their RNA to multiply after eating, replicating themselves into millions more little strands, which had only one purpose—to eat tissue. In this case it was kidney tissue, though liver was just as vulnerable. The technician—who had a medical degree from Yale—made the proper written notations, and then, because it was her project, she got to name it. She blessed the course in comparative religion she'd taken twenty years before. You couldn't just call it anything, could you?

Shiva, she thought. Yes, the most complex and interesting of the Hindu gods, by turns the Destroyer and the Restorer, who controlled poison meant to destroy mankind, and one of whose consorts was Kali, the goddess of death herself. Shiva. *Perfect.* The tech made the proper notations, including her recommended name for the organism. There would be one more test, one more technological hurdle to hop before all was ready for execution. Execution, she thought, a proper word for the project. On rather a grand scale.

For her next task, she took a sample of Shiva, sealed in a stainless-steel container, and walked out of her lab, an eighth of a mile down the corridor, and into another.

"Hi, Maggie," the head of that lab said in greeting. "Got something

for me?"

"Hey, Steve." She handed the container over. "This is the one."

"What are we calling it?" Steve took the container and set it on a countertop.

"Shiva, I think."

"Sounds ominous," Steve observed with a smile.

"Oh, it is," Maggie promised him. Steve was another M.D., Ph.D., both of his degrees from Duke University, and the company's best man on vaccines. For this project he'd been pulled off AIDS work that had begun to show some promise.

"So, the colon cancer genes worked like you predicted?"

"Ten hours in the open, it shows good UV tolerance. Not too sure about direct sunlight, though."

"Two hours of that is all we need," Steve reminded her. And really one hour was plenty, as they both knew. "What about the atomization system?"

"Still have to try it," she admitted, "but it won't be a problem." Both knew that was the truth. The organism should easily tolerate passage through the spray nozzles for the fogging system—which would be checked in one of the big environmental chambers. Doing it outside would be better still, of course, but if Shiva was as robust as Maggie seemed to think, it was a risk better not run.

"Okay, then. Thanks, Maggie." Steve turned his back, and inserted the container into one of the glove-boxes to open it, in order to begin his work on the vaccine. Much of the work was already done. The baseline agent here was well-known, and the government had funded his company's vaccine work after the big scare the year before, and Steve was known far and wide as one of the best around for generating, capturing, and replicating antibodies to excite a person's immune system. He vaguely regretted the termination of his AIDS work. Steve thought that he might have stumbled across a method of generating broad-spectrum antibodies to combat that agile little bastard—maybe a 20 percent change, he judged, plus the added benefit of leading down a new scientific pathway, the sort of thing to make a man famous . . . maybe even good enough for a flight to Stockholm in ten years or so. But in ten years, it wouldn't matter, would it? Not hardly, the scientist told himself. He turned to look out the triple-windows of his lab. A pretty sunset. Soon the night creatures would come out. Bats would chase insects. Owls would hunt mice and voles. Cats would leave their houses to prowl on their own missions of hunger. He had a set of night-vision goggles that he often used to observe the creatures doing work not so very different from his own. But for now he turned back to his worktable, pulled out his computer keyboard, and made some notations for his new project. Many used

notebooks for this, but the Project allowed only computers for record-keeping, and all the notes were electronically encrypted. If it was good enough for Bill Gates, then it was good enough for him. The simple ways were not always best. That explained why he was here, part of the newly named Shiva Project, didn't it?

They needed guys with guns, but they were hard to find—at least the right ones, with the right attitudes—and the task was made more difficult by government activities with similar, but divergent aims. It helped them keep away from the more obvious kooks, though.

"Damn, it's pretty out here," Mark observed.

His host snorted. "There's a new house right the other side of that ridge line. On a calm day, I can see the smoke from their chimney."

Mark had to laugh. "There goes the neighborhood. You and Dan'l Boone, eh?"

Foster adopted a somewhat sheepish look. "Yeah, well, it *is* a good five miles."

"But you know, you're right. Imagine what it looked like before the white man came here. No roads 'cept for the riverbanks and deer trails, and the hunting must have been pretty spectacular."

"Good enough you didn't have to work that hard to eat, I imagine." Foster gestured at the fireplace wall of his log cabin, covered with hunting trophies, not all of them legal, but here in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains, there weren't all that many cops, and Foster kept pretty much to himself.

"It's our birthright."

"Supposed to be," Foster agreed. "Something worth fighting for."

"How hard?" Mark asked, admiring the trophies. The grizzly bear rug was especially impressive—and probably illegal as hell.

Foster poured some more bourbon for his guest. "I don't know what it's like back East, but out here, if you fight—you fight. All the way, boy. Put one right 'tween the running lights, generally calms your adversary down a mite."

"But then you have to dispose of the body," Mark said, sipping his drink. The man bought only cheap whiskey. Well, he probably couldn't afford the good stuff.

A laugh: "Ever hear of a backhoe? How 'bout a nice fire?"

It was believed by some in this part of the state that Foster had killed a fish-and-game cop. As a result, he was leery of local police—and the highway patrol people didn't like him to go a mile over the limit. But though the car had been found—burned out, forty miles away—the body of the missing officer had not, and that was that. There weren't many people around to be witnesses in this part of the state, even with a new house five miles away. Mark sipped his

bourbon and leaned back in the leather chair. “Nice to be part of nature, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. It surely is. Sometimes I think I kinda understand the Indians, y’know?”

“Know any?”

“Oh, sure. Charlie Grayson, he’s a Nez Percé, hunting guide, got my horse off o’ him. I do that, too, to make some cash sometimes, mainly take a horse into the high country, really, meet people who get it. And the elk are pretty thick up there.”

“What about bear?”

“Enough,” Foster replied. “Mainly blacks, but some grizz’.”

“What do you use? Bow?”

A good-natured shake of the head. “No, I admire the Indians, but I ain’t one myself. Depends on what I’m hunting, and what country I’m doing it in. Bolt-action .300 Winchester Mag mainly, but in close country, a semiauto slug shotgun. Nothing like drillin’ three-quarter-inch holes when you gotta, y’know?”

“Handload?”

“Of course. It’s a lot more personal that way. Gotta show respect for the game, you know, keep the gods of the mountains happy.”

Foster smiled at the phrase, in just the right sleepy way, Mark saw. In every civilized man was a pagan waiting to come out, who really believed in the gods of the mountains, and in appeasing the spirits of the dead game. And so did he, really, despite his technical education.

“So, what do you do, Mark?”

“Molecular biochemistry, Ph.D., in fact.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Oh, figuring out how life happens. Like how does a bear smell so well,” he went on, lying. “It can be interesting, but my real life is coming out to places like this, hunting, meeting people who really understand the game better than I do. Guys like you,” Mark concluded, with a salute of his glass. “What about you?”

“Ah, well, retired now. I made some of my own. Would you believe geologist for an oil company?”

“Where’d you work?”

“All over the world. I had a good nose for it, and the oil companies paid me a lot for finding the right stuff, y’know? But I had to give it up. Got to the point—well, you fly a lot, right?”

“I get around,” Mark confirmed with a nod.

“The brown smudge,” Foster said next.

“Huh?”

“Come on, you see it all over the damned world. Up around thirty thousand feet, that brown smudge. Complex hydrocarbons, mainly from passenger jets. One day I was flying back from Paris—connecting

flight from Brunei, I came the wrong way 'round 'cuz I wanted to stop off in Europe and meet a friend. Anyway, there I was, in a fuckin' 747, over the middle of the fucking Atlantic Ocean, like four hours from land, y'know? First-class window seat, sitting there drinking my drink, lookin' out the window, and there it was, the smudge—that goddamned brown shit, and I realized that I was helpin' make it happen, dirtyin' up the whole fuckin' atmosphere.

"Anyway," Foster went on, "that was the moment of my . . . conversion, I guess you'd call it. I tendered my resignation the next week, took my stock options, cashed in half a mil worth, and bought this place. So, now, I hunt and fish, do a little guide work in the fall, read a lot, wrote a little book about what oil products do to the environment, and that's about it."

It was the book that had attracted Mark's attention, of course. The brown-smudge story was in its poorly written preface. Foster was a believer, but not a screwball. His house had electricity and phone service. Mark saw his high-end Gateway computer on the floor next to his desk. Even satellite TV, plus the usual Chevy pickup truck with a gun-rack in the back window . . . and a diesel-powered backhoe. So, maybe he believed, but he wasn't too crazy about it. That was good, Mark thought. He just had to be crazy enough. Foster was. Killing the fish-and-game cop was proof of that.

Foster returned the friendly stare. He'd met guys like this during his time in Exxon. A suit, but a clever one, the kind who didn't mind getting his hands dirty. Molecular biochemistry. They hadn't had that major at the Colorado School of Mines, but Foster also subscribed to *Science News,* and knew what it was all about. A meddler with life . . . but, strangely, one who understood about the deer and elk. Well, the world was a complex place. Just then, his visitor saw the Lucite block on the coffee table. Mark picked it up.

"What's this?"

Foster grinned over his drink. "What's it look like?"

"Well, it's either iron pyrite or it's—"

"Ain't iron. I do know my rocks, sir."

"Gold? Where from?"

"Found it in my stream, 'bout three hundred yards over yonder." Foster pointed.

"That's a fair-sized nugget."

"Five and a half ounces. About two thousand dollars. You know, people—white people—been living right on this ranch on this spot for over a hundred years, but nobody ever saw that in the creek. One day I'll have to backtrack up, see if it's a good formation. Ought to be, that's quartz on the bottom of the big one. Quartz-and-gold formations tend to be pretty rich, 'cuz of the way the stuff bubbled up from the

earth's core. This area's fairly volcanic, all the hot springs and stuff," he reminded his guest. "We even get the occasional earth tremor."

"So, you might own your own gold mine?"

A good laugh. "Yep. Ironic, ain't it? I paid the going rate for grazing land—not even that much 'cuz o' the hills. The last guy to ranch around here bitched that his cattle lost every pound they gained grazin' by climbing up to where the grass was."

"How rich?"

A shrug. "No tellin', but if I showed that to some guys I went to school with, well, some folks would invest ten or twenty million finding out. Like I said, it's a quartz formation. People gamble big-time on those. Price of gold is depressed, but if it comes out of the ground pretty pure—well, it's a shitload more valuable than coal, y'know?"

"So, why don't you? . . ."

" 'Cuz I don't need it, and it's an ugly process to watch. Worse 'n drilling oil, even. You can pretty much clean that up. But a mine—no way. Never goes away. The tailing don't go away. The arsenic gets into the ground water and takes forever to leach out. Anyway, it's a pretty coupla rocks in the plastic, and if I ever need the money, well, I know what to do."

"How often you check the creek?"

"When I fish—brown trout here, see?" He pointed to a big one hanging on the log wall. "Every third or fourth time, I find another one. Actually, I figure the deposit must have been uncovered fairly recently, else folks would have spotted it a long time ago. Hell, maybe I should track it down, see where it starts, but I'd just be tempting myself. Why bother?" Foster concluded. "I might have a weak moment and go against my principles. Anyway, not like it's gonna run away, is it?"

Mark grunted. "Guess not. Got any more of these?"

"Sure." Foster rose and pulled open a desk drawer. He tossed a leather pouch over. Mark caught it, surprised by the weight, almost ten pounds. He pulled the drawstring and extracted a nugget. About the size of a half-dollar, half gold, half quartz, all the more beautiful for the imperfection.

"You married?" Foster asked.

"Yeah. Wife, two kids."

"Keep it, then. Make a pendant out of it, give it to her for her birthday or something."

"I can't do that. This is worth a couple of thousand dollars."

Foster waved his hand. "Shit, just takin' up space in my desk. Why not make somebody happy with it? 'Sides, you understand, Mark. I think you really do."

Yep, Mark thought, this was a recruit. “What if I told you there was a way to make that brown smudge go away? . . .”

A quizzical look. “You talking about some organism to eat it or something?”

Mark looked up. “No, not exactly . . .” How much could he tell him now? He’d have to be very careful. It was only their first meeting.

“Getting the aircraft is your business. Where to fly it, that we can help with,” Popov assured his host.

“Where?” the host asked.

“The key is to become lost to air-traffic-control radar and also to travel far enough that fighter aircraft cannot track you, as you know. Then if you can land in a friendly place, and dispose of the flight crew upon reaching your destination, repainting the aircraft is no great task. It can be destroyed later, even dismantled for sale of the important parts, the engines and such. They can easily disappear into the international black market, with the change of a few identity plates,” Popov explained. “This has happened more than once, as you know. Western intelligence and police agencies do not advertise the fact, of course.”

“The world is awash with radar systems,” the host objected.

“True,” Popov conceded, “but air-traffic radars do not see aircraft. They see the return signals from aircraft radar transponders. Only military radars see the aircraft themselves, and what African country has a proper air-defense network? Also, with the addition of a simple jammer to the aircraft’s radio systems, you can further reduce the ability of anyone to track you. Your escape is not a problem, *if* you get as far as an international airport, my friend. That,” he reminded them, “is the difficult part. Once you disappear over Africa—well, that is your choice then. Your country of destination can be selected for ideological purity or for a monetary exchange. Your choice. I recommend the former, but the latter is possible,” Popov concluded. Africa was not yet a hotbed of international law and integrity, but it did have hundreds of airports capable of servicing jetliners.

“A pity about Ernst,” the host said quietly.

“Ernst was a fool!” his lady friend countered with an angry gesture. “He should have robbed a smaller bank. All the way in the middle of Bern. He was trying to make a statement,” Petra Dortmund sneered. Popov had known her only by reputation until today. She might have been pretty, even beautiful, once, but now her once-blond hair was dyed brown, and her thin face was severe, the cheeks sunken and hollow, the eyes rimmed in dark circles. She was almost unrecognizable, which explained why European police hadn’t snatched her up yet, along with her longtime lover, Hans Fürchtner.

Fürchtner had gone the other way. He was a good thirty kilos overweight, his thick dark hair had either fallen out or been shaved, and the beard was gone. He looked like a banker now, fat and happy, no longer the driven, serious, committed communist he'd been in the '70s and'80s—at least not visibly so. They lived in a decent house in the mountains south of Munich. What neighbors they had thought them to be artists—both of them painted, a hobby unknown to their country's police. They even sold the occasional work in small galleries, which was enough to feed them, though not to maintain their lifestyle.

They must have missed the safe houses in the old DDR and Czechoslovakia, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought. Just get off the aircraft and get taken away by car to comfortable if not quite lavish quarters, leave there to shop in the "special" stores maintained for the local Party elite, get visited frequently by serious, quiet intelligence officers who would feed them information with which to plan their next operation. Fürchtner and Dortmund had accomplished several decent operations, the best being the kidnapping and interrogation of an American sergeant who serviced nuclear artillery shells—this mission had been assigned them by the Soviet GRU. Much had been learned from that, most of it still useful, as the sergeant had been an expert on the American PAL—permissible action link—safety systems. His body had later been discovered in the snowy mid-winter mountains of southern Bavaria, apparently the result of a nasty traffic accident. Or so GRU thought, based on the reports of its agents within the NATO high command.

"So, what is it that you want to learn?" she asked.

"Electronic access codes to the international trading system."

"So, you, too, are a common thief now?" Hans asked, before Petra could sneer.

"A very uncommon thief, my sponsor is. If we are to restore a socialist, *progressive* alternative to capitalism, we need both funding and to instill a certain lack of confidence in the capitalist nervous system, do we not?" Popov paused for a second. "You know who I am. You know where I worked. Do you think I have forgotten my Motherland? Do you think I have forsaken my beliefs? My father fought at Stalingrad and Kursk. He knew what it was to be pushed back, to suffer defeat—and yet not give up, ever!" Popov said heatedly. "Why do you think I risk my life here? The counterrevolutionaries in Moscow would not look kindly upon my mission . . . but they are not the only political force in Mother Russia!"

"Ahhh," Petra Dortmund observed. Her face turned serious. "So, you think all is not lost?"

"Did you ever think the forward march of humanity would be absent of setbacks? It is true we lost our way. I saw it myself in KGB,

the corruption in high places. That is what defeated us—not the West! I saw it myself as a captain, Brezhnev's daughter—looting the Winter Palace for her wedding reception. As though she were the Grand Duchess Anastasia herself! It was my function in KGB to learn from the West, learn their plans and secrets, but our *Kameraden* learned only their corruption. Well, we have learned that lesson, in more ways than one, my friends. You are a communist or you are not. You believe or you do not. You act in accordance with those beliefs or you do not."

"You ask us to give up much," Hans Fürchtner pointed out.

"You will be properly provided for. My sponsor—"

"Who is that?" Petra asked.

"This you may not know," Popov replied quietly. "You suppose that *you* take risks here? What about me? As for my sponsor, no, you may not know his identity. Operational security is paramount. You are supposed to know these things," he reminded them. They took the mild rebuke well, as he'd expected. These two fools were true believers, as Ernst Model had been, though they were somewhat brighter and far more vicious, as that luckless American sergeant had learned, probably staring with disbelief into the still-lovely blue eyes of Petra Dortmund as she'd used the hammer on his various body parts.

"So, Iosef Andreyevich," Hans said—they knew Popov by one of his many cover names, in this case I. A. Serov. "When do you wish us to act?"

"As quickly as possible. I will call you in a week, to see if you are indeed willing to take this mission and—"

"We are willing," Petra assured him. "We need to make our plans."

"Then I shall call you in a week for your schedule. I will need four days to activate my part of the operation. An additional concern, the mission depends on the placement of the American navy carrier in the Mediterranean. You may not execute the mission if it is in the western Mediterranean, because in such a case their aircraft might track your flight. We wish this mission to succeed, my friends." Then they negotiated the price. It didn't prove hard. Hans and Petra knew Popov from the old days and actually trusted him personally to make the delivery.

Ten minutes later, Popov shook hands and took his leave, this time driving a rented BMW south toward the Austrian border. The road was clear and smooth, the scenery beautiful, and Dmitriy Arkadeyevich wondered again about his hosts. The one bit of truth he'd given them was that his father was indeed a veteran of the Stalingrad and Kursk campaign, and had told his son much about his life as a tank commander in the Great Patriotic War. There was

something odd about the Germans, he'd learned from his professional experience in the Committee for State Security. Give them a man on a horse, and they'd follow him to the death. It seemed that the Germans craved someone or something to follow. How very strange. But it served his purposes, and those of his sponsor, and if these Germans wanted to follow a red horse—a *dead* red horse, Popov reminded himself with a smile and a grunt—well, that was their misfortune. The only really innocent people involved were the bankers whom they would attempt to kidnap. But at least they wouldn't be subjected to torture, as that black American sergeant had been. Popov doubted that Hans and Petra would get that far, though the capabilities of the Austrian police and military were largely unknown to him. He'd find out, he was sure, one way or another.

It was odd the way it worked. Team-1 was now the Go-Team, ready to depart Hereford at a moment's notice while Chavez's Team-2 stood down, but it was the latter that was running complex exercises while the former did little but morning PT and routine marksmanship training. Technically, they were worried about a training accident that could hurt or even cripple a team member, thus breaking up a field team at a delicate moment.

Master Chief Machinist's Mate Miguel Chin belonged to Peter Covington's team. A former U.S. Navy SEAL, he'd been taken from Norfolk-based SEAL Team Six for Rainbow. The son of a Latino mother and a Chinese father, he, like Chavez, had grown up in East L.A. Ding spotted him smoking a cigar outside the Team-1 building and walked over.

"Hey, Chief," Chavez said from ten feet away.

"Master Chief," Chin corrected. "Like being a CSM in the army, sir."

"Name's Ding, 'mano."

"Mike." Chin extended a hand. Chin's face could have passed for damned near anything. He was an iron-pumper like Oso Vega, and his rep was of a guy who'd been around the block about a hundred times. Expert with all types of weapons, his handshake announced his further ability to tear a man's head right off his shoulders.

"Those are bad for you," Chavez noted.

"So's what we do for a livin', Ding. What part of L.A.?"

Ding told him.

"No kiddin'? Hell, I grew up half a mile from there. You were *Banditos* country."

"Don't tell me—"

The master chief nodded. *"Piscadores,* till I grew out of it. A judge suggested that I might like enlisting better 'n jail, and so I tried for the Marines, but they didn't want me. Pussies," Chin commented, spitting

some tobacco off his cigar. “So, went through Great Lakes, they made me a machinist . . . but then I heard about the SEALs, an’, well, ain’t a bad life, y’know? You’re Agency, I hear.”

“Started off as an Eleven-Bravo. Took a little trip to South America that went totally to shit, but I met our Six on the job and he kinda recruited me. Never looked back.”

“Agency send you to school?”

“George Mason, just got my master’s. International relations,” Chavez replied with a nod. “You?”

“Yeah, shows, I guess. Psychology, just a bachelor’s, Old Dominion University. The doc on the team, Bellow. Smart son of a bitch. Mind-reader. I got three of his books at my place.”

“How’s Covington to work for?”

“Good. He’s been there before. Listens good. Thoughtful kinda guy. Good team here, but as usual, not a hell of a lot to do. Liked your takedown at the bank, Chavez. Fast and clean.” Chin blew smoke into the sky.

“Well, thank you, Master Chief.”

“Chavez!” Peter Covington came out the door just then. “Trying to steal my number-one?”

“Just found out we grew up a few blocks apart, Peter.”

“Indeed? That’s remarkable,” the Team-1 commander said.

“Harry’s aggravated his ankle some this morning. No big deal, he’s chewing some aspirin,” Chin told his boss. “He banged it up two weeks ago zip-lining down from the helo,” he added for Ding’s benefit.

Damn training accidents, the chief didn’t have to add. That was the problem with this sort of work, they all knew. The Rainbow members had been selected for many reasons, not the least of which was their brutally competitive nature. Every man deemed himself to be in competition with every other, and each one of them pushed himself to the limit in everything. It made for injuries and training accidents—and the miracle was that they’d yet to place one of the team into the base hospital. It was sure to happen soon. The Rainbow members could no more turn that aspect of their personalities off than they could stop breathing. Olympic team members hardly had a tougher outlook on what they did. Either you were the very best, or you were nothing. And so every man could run a mile within thirty or forty seconds of the world record, wearing boots instead of track shoes. It did make sense in the abstract. Half a second could easily be the difference between life and death in a combat situation—worse, not the death of one of their own, but of an innocent party, a hostage, the person whom they were sworn to protect and rescue. But the really ironic part was that the Go-Team was not allowed heavy training for fear of a training accident, and so their skills degraded slightly over

time—in this case, the two weeks of being stood-to. Three more days to go for Covington's Team-1, and then, Chavez knew, it would be his turn.

"I hear you don't like the SWAT program," Chin said next.

"Not all that much. It's good for planning movement and stuff, but not so good for the takedowns."

"We've been using it for years," Covington said. "Much better than it used to be."

"I'd prefer live targets and MILES gear," Chavez persisted. He referred to the training system the U.S. military often used, in which every soldier had laser-receivers mounted on his body.

"Not as good at close range as at long," Peter informed his colleague.

"Oh, never used it that way," Ding had to admit. "But as a practical matter, once we get close, it's decided. Our people don't miss many targets."

"True," Covington conceded. Just then came the *crack* of a sniper rifle. Rainbow's long-riflemen were practicing over on the thousand-yard range, competing to see who could fire the smallest group. The current leader was Homer Johnston, Ding's Rifle Two-One, an eighth of an inch better than Sam Houston, Covington's leading longrifleman, at five hundred yards—at which range either could put ten consecutive shots inside a two-inch circle, which was considerably smaller than the human head both men practiced exploding with their hollow-point match rounds. The fact of the matter was that two misses from any of the Rainbow shooters in a given week of drills was remarkable, and usually explained by tripping on something in the shooting house. The riflemen had yet to miss *anything,* of course. The problem with their mission wasn't shooting. It was getting in close enough—more than that, making a well-timed decision to move and take down the subjects, for which they most often depended on Dr. Paul Bellow. The shooting part, which they practiced daily, was the tensest part, to be sure, but also technically and operationally the easiest. It seemed perverse in that respect, but theirs was a perverse business.

"Anything on the threat board?" Covington asked.

"I was just heading over, but I doubt it, Peter." Whatever bad guys were still thinking about making mischief somewhere in Europe had seen TV coverage of the Bern bank, and that would have calmed them down some, both team leaders thought.

"Very good, Ding. I have some paperwork to do," Covington said, heading back inside his building. On that cue, Chin tossed his cigar into the smokers' bucket and did the same.

Chavez continued his walk to the headquarters building, returning

the salute of the door guard as he went inside. The Brits sure saluted funny, he thought. Once inside, he found Major Bennett at his desk.

"Hey, Sam,"

"Good morning, Ding. Coffee?" The Air Force officer gestured to his urn.

"No, thanks. Anything happening anywhere?"

A shake of the head. "Quiet day. Not even much in the way of crime."

Bennett's primary sources for normal criminal activity were the teleprinters for the various European news services. Experience showed that the services notified those who were interested about illegal activity more quickly than the official channels, which generally sent information via secure fax from the American or British embassies across Europe. With that input source quiet, Bennett was working on his computerized list of known terrorists, shifting through the photos and written summaries of what was positively known about these people (generally not much) and what was suspected (not much more).

"What's this? Who's that?" Ding asked, pointing at the computer.

"A new toy we're using. Got it from the FBI. It ages the subject photos. This one is Petra Dortmund. We only have two photos of her, both almost fifteen years old. So, I'm aging her by fifteen years, playing with hair color, too. Nice thing about women—no beards," Bennett observed with a chuckle. "And they're usually too vain to pork up, like our pal Carlos did. This one, check out the eyes."

"Not a girl I'd try to pick up in a bar," Chavez observed.

"Probably a bad lay anyway, Domingo," Clark said from behind. "That's impressive stuff, Sam."

"Yes, sir. Just set it up this morning. Noonan got it for me from Headquarters Division Technical Services. They invented it to help ID kidnap victims years after they disappeared. It's been pretty useful for that. Then somebody figured that if it worked on children growing up, why not try it on grown-up hoods. Helped 'em find a top-ten bank robber earlier this year. Anyhow, here's what Fräulein Dortmund probably looks like now."

"What's the name of her significant other?"

"Hans Fürchtner." Bennett played with his computer mouse to bring up that photo. "Christ, this must be his high-school yearbook pictorial." Then he scanned the words accompanying the photo. "Okay, likes to drink beer . . . so, let's give him another fifteen pounds." In seconds, the photo changed. "Mustache . . . beard . . ." And then there were four photos for this one.

"These two must get along just great," Chavez noted, remembering his file on the pair. "Assuming they're still together." That started a

thought moving, and Chavez walked over to Dr. Bellow's office.

"Hey, doc."

Bellow looked up from his computer. "Good morning, Ding. What can I do for you?"

"We were just looking at photos of two bad guys, Petra von Dortmund and Hans Fürchtner. I got a question for you."

"Shoot," Bellow replied.

"How likely are people like that to stay together?"

Bellow blinked a little, then leaned back in his chair. "Not a bad question at all. Those two . . . I did the evaluation for their active files. . . . They're probably still together. Their political ideology is probably a unifying factor, an important part of their commitment to each other. Their belief system is what brought them together in the first place, and in a psychological sense they took their wedding vows when they acted out on it—their terrorist jobs. As I recall, they are suspected to have kidnapped and killed a soldier, among other things, and activity like that creates a strong interpersonal bond."

"But most of the people, you say, are sociopaths," Ding objected. "And sociopaths don't—"

"Been reading my books?" Bellow asked with a smile. "Ever hear the one about how when two people marry they become as one?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So in a case like this, it's real. They *are* sociopaths, but ideology gives their deviance an ethos—and *that* makes it important. Because of that, sharing the ideology makes them one, and their sociopathic tendencies merge. For those two, I would suspect a fairly stable married relationship. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that they were formally married, in fact, but probably not in a church," he added with a smile.

"Stable marriage . . . kids?"

Bellow nodded. "Possible. Abortion is illegal in Germany—the Western part, I think, still. Would they choose to have kids? . . . That's a good question. I need to think about that."

"I need to learn more about these people. How they think, how they see the world, that sort of thing."

Bellow smiled again, rose from his chair, and walked to his bookcase. He took one of his own books and tossed it to Chavez. "Try that for starters. It's a text at the FBI academy, and it got me over here a few years ago to lecture to the SAS. I guess it got me into this business."

"Thanks, doc." Chavez hefted the book for weight and headed out the door. *The Enraged Outlook: Inside the Terrorist Mind* was the title. It wouldn't hurt to understand them a little better, though he figured the best thing about the inside of a terrorist's mind was a 185-grain 10-

mm hollow-point bullet entering at high speed.

Popov could not give them a phone number to call. It would have been grossly unprofessional. Even a cellular phone whose ownership had been carefully concealed would give police agencies a paper—even deadlier today, an electronic—trail that they could run down, much to his potential embarrassment. And so he called them every few days at their number. They didn't know how that was handled, though there were ways to step a long-distance call through multiple instruments.

"I have the money. Are you prepared?"

"Hans is there now, checking things out," Petra replied. "I expect we can be ready in forty-eight hours. What of your end?"

"All is in readiness. I will call you in two days," he said, breaking the connection. He walked out of the phone booth at Charles De Gaulle International Airport and headed toward the taxi stand, carrying his attaché case, which was largely full of hundred D-mark banknotes. He found himself impatient for the currency change in Europe. The equivalent amount of euros would be much easier to obtain than the multiple currencies of Europe.

CHAPTER 7

FINANCE

It was unusual for a European to work out of his home, but Ostermann did. It was large, a former baronial *schloss* (translated as "castle," though in this case "palace" would have been more accurate) thirty kilometers outside Vienna. Erwin Ostermann liked the *schloss;* it was totally in keeping with his stature in the financial community. It was a dwelling of six thousand square meters divided into three floors, on a thousand hectares of land, most of which was the side of a mountain steep enough to afford his own skiing slopes. In the summer, he allowed local farmers to graze their sheep and goats there . . . not unlike what the peasants once indentured to the *schloss* had done for the *Herr,* to keep the grass down to a reasonable height. Well, it was far more democratic now, wasn't it? It even gave him a break on the complex taxes put in place by the leftwing government of his country, and more to the point, it looked good.

His personal car was a Mercedes stretch—two of them, in fact—and a Porsche when he felt adventurous enough to drive himself to the nearby village for drinks and dinner in the outstanding *Gasthaus* there. He was a tall man, one meter eighty-six centimeters, with regal gray hair and a trim, fit figure that looked good on the back of one of his Arabian horses—you couldn't live in a home such as this one without horses, of course. Or when holding a business conference in a suit made in Italy or on London's Savile Row. His office, on the second floor had been the spacious library of the original owner and eight of his descendants, but it was now aglow with computer displays linked to the world's financial markets and arrayed on the credenza behind a desk.

After a light breakfast, he headed upstairs to his office, where three employees, two female and one male, kept him supplied with coffee, breakfast pastry, and information. The room was large and suitable for entertaining a group of twenty or so. The walnut-paneled walls were covered with bookshelves filled with books that had been conveyed with the *schloss,* and whose titles Ostermann had never troubled himself to examine. He read the financial papers rather than literature, and in his spare time caught movies in a private screening

room in the basement—a former wine-cellar converted to the purpose. All in all, he was a man who lived a comfortable and private life in the most comfortable and private of surroundings. On his desk when he sat down was a list of people to visit him today. Three bankers and two traders like himself, the former to discuss loans for a new business he was underwriting, and the latter to seek his counsel on market trends. It fed Ostermann's already sizable ego to be consulted on such things, and he welcomed all manner of guests.

Popov stepped off his airliner and walked onto the concourse alone, like any other businessman, carrying his attaché case with its combination lock, and not a single piece of metal inside, lest some magnetometer operator ask him to open it and so reveal the paper currency inside—terrorists had really ruined air travel for everyone, the former KGB officer thought to himself. Were someone to make the baggage-scanners more sophisticated, enough to count money inside carry-on baggage, for example, it would further put a dent in the business affairs of many people, including himself. Traveling by train was *so* boring.

Their tradecraft was good. Hans was at his designated location, sitting there, reading *Der Spiegel* and wearing the agreed-upon brown leather jacket, and he saw Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, carrying his black attaché case in his left hand, striding down the concourse with all the other business travelers. Fürchtner finished his coffee and left to follow him, trailing Popov by about twenty meters, angling off to the left so that they took different exits, crossing over to the parking garage by different walkways. Popov allowed his head to turn left and right, caught Hans on the first sweep and observed how he moved. The man had to be tense, Popov knew. Betrayal was how most of the people like Fürchtner got caught, and though Dmitriy was known and trusted by them, you could *only* be betrayed by someone whom you trusted, a fact known to every covert operator in the world. And though they knew Popov both by sight and reputation, they couldn't read minds—which, of course, worked quite well for Popov in this case. He allowed himself a quiet smile as he walked into the parking garage, turned left, stopped as though disoriented, and then looked around for any overt signs that *he* was being followed before finding his bearings and moving on his way. Fürchtner's car proved to be in a distant corner on the first level, a blue Volkswagen Golf.

"Guten Tag," he said, on sitting in the right-front seat.

"Good morning, Herr Popov," Fürchtner replied in English. It was American in character and almost without accent. He must have watched a lot of television, Dmitriy thought.

The Russian dialed the combinations into the locks of the case,

opened the lid, and placed it in his host's lap. "You should find everything in order."

"Bulky," the man observed.

"It is a sizable sum," Popov agreed.

Just then suspicion appeared in Fürchtner's eyes. That surprised the Russian, until he thought about it for a moment. The KGB had never been lavish in their payments to their agents, but in this attaché case was enough cash to enable two people to live comfortably in any of several African countries for a period of some years. Hans was just realizing that, Dmitriy saw, and while part of the German was content just to take the money, the smart portion of his brain suddenly wondered where the money had come from. Better not to wait for the question, Dmitriy thought.

"Ah, yes," Popov said quietly. "As you know, many of my colleagues have outwardly turned capitalist in order to survive in my country's new political environment. But we are still the Sword and Shield of the Party, my young friend. That has not changed. It is ironic, I grant you, that now we are better able to compensate our friends for their services. It turns out to be less expensive than maintaining the safe houses which you once enjoyed. I personally find that amusing. In any case, here is your payment, in cash, in advance, in the amount you specified."

"Danke," Hans Fürchtner observed, staring down into the attaché case's ten centimeters of depth. Then he hefted the case. "It's heavy."

"True," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich agreed. "But it could be worse. I might have paid you in gold," he joked, to lighten the moment, then decided to make his own play. "Too heavy to carry on the mission?"

"It *is* a complication, Iosef Andreyevich."

"Well, I can hold the money for you and come to you to deliver it upon the completion of your mission. That is your choice, though I do not recommend it."

"Why is that?" Hans asked.

"Honestly, it makes me nervous to travel with so much cash. The West, well, what if I am robbed? This money is *my* responsibility," he replied theatrically.

Fürchtner found that very amusing. "Here, in Österreich, robbed on the street? My friend, these capitalist sheep are very closely regulated."

"Besides, I do not even know where you will be going, and I really do not need to know—at this time, anyway."

"The Central African Republic is our ultimate destination. We have a friend there who graduated Patrice Lumumba University back in the sixties. He trades in arms to progressive elements. He will put us up for a while, until Petra and I can find suitable housing."

They were either very brave or very foolish to go to that country, Popov thought. Not so long before it had been called the Central African Empire, and had been ruled by "Emperor Bokassa I," a former colonel in the French colonial army, which had once garrisoned this small, poor nation. Bokassa had killed his way to the top, as had so many African chiefs of state, before dying, remarkably enough, of natural causes—so the papers said, anyway; you could never really be sure, could you? The country he'd left behind, a small diamond producer, was somewhat better off economically than was the norm on the dark continent, though not by much. But then, who was to say that Hans and Petra would ever get there?

"Well, my friend, it is your decision," Popov said, patting the attaché case still open in Fürchtner's lap.

The German considered that for half a minute or so. "I have seen the money," he concluded, to his guest's utter delight. Fürchtner lifted a thousand-note packet of the cash and riffled it like a deck of cards before putting it back. Next he scribbled a note and placed it inside the case. "There is the name. We will be with him starting . . . late tomorrow, I imagine. All is ready on your end?"

"The American aircraft carrier is in the eastern Mediterranean. Libya will allow your aircraft to pass without interference, but will not allow overflights of any NATO aircraft following you. Instead, their air force will provide the coverage and will lose you due to adverse weather conditions. I will advise you not to use more violence than is necessary. Press and diplomatic pressure has more strength today than it once did."

"We have thought that one through," Hans assured his guest.

Popov wondered briefly about that. But he'd be surprised if they even boarded an aircraft, much less got it to Africa. The problem with "missions" like this one was that no matter how carefully most of its parts had been considered, this chain was decidedly no stronger than its weakest link, and the strength of *that* link was all too often determined by others, or by chance, which was even worse. Hans and Petra were believers in their political philosophy, and like earlier people who'd believed so much in their religious faith so as to take the most absurd of chances, they would pretend to plan this "mission" through with their limited resources—and when you got down to it, their only resource was their willingness to apply violence to the world; and lots of people had that—and substitute hope for expectations, belief for knowledge. They would accept random chance, one of their deadliest enemies, as a neutral element, when a true professional would have sought to eliminate it entirely.

And so their belief structure was really a blindfold, or perhaps a set of blinkers, which denied the two Germans the ability to look

objectively at a world that had passed them by, and to which they were unwilling to adapt. But for Popov the real meaning of this was their willingness to let him hold the money. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had adapted himself quite well to changing circumstances.

"Are you sure, my young friend?"

"Ja, I am sure." Fürchtner closed the case, reset the locks, and passed it over to Popov's lap. The Russian accepted the responsibility with proper gravity.

"I will guard this carefully." *All the way to my bank in Bern.* Then he extended his hand. "Good luck, and please be careful."

"Danke. We will get you the information you require."

"My employer needs that badly, Hans. We depend on you." Dmitriy left the car and walked back in the direction of the terminal, where he'd get a taxi to his hotel. He wondered when Hans and Petra would make their move. Perhaps today? Were they *that* precipitous? No, he thought, they would say that they were that *professional.* The young fools.

Sergeant First Class Homer Johnston extracted the bolt from his rifle, which he lifted to examine the bore. The ten shots had dirtied it some, but not much, and there was no erosion damage that he could see in the throat forward of the chamber. None was to be expected until he'd fired a thousand or so rounds, and he'd only put five hundred forty through it to this point. Still, in another week or so he'd have to start using a fiber-optic instrument to check, because the 7-mm Remington Magnum cartridge did develop high temperatures when fired, and the excessive heat burned up barrels a little faster than he would have preferred. In a few months, he'd have to replace the barrel, a tedious and fairly difficult exercise even for a skilled armorer, which he was. The difficulty was in matching the barrel perfectly with the receiver, which would then require fifty or so rounds on the known-distance range to make sure that it delivered its rounds as accurately as it was intended to do. But that was in the future. Johnston sprayed a moderate amount of Break-Free onto the cleaning patch and ran it through the barrel, back to front. The patch came out dirty. He removed it from the cleaning rod, then put a new one on the tip, and repeated the motion six times until the last patch came through totally clean. A final clean patch dried the bore of the select-grade Hart barrel, though the Break-Free cleaning solvent left a thin—not much more than a molecule's thickness—coating of silicon on the steel, which protected against corrosion without altering the microscopic tolerances of the barrel. Finished and satisfied, he replaced the bolt, closing it on an empty chamber with the final act of pulling the trigger, which de-cocked the rifle as it dropped the bolt into proper

position.

He loved the rifle, though somewhat surprisingly he hadn't named it. Built by the same technicians who made sniper rifles for the United States Secret Service, it was a 7-mm Remington Magnum caliber, with a Remington match-quality receiver, a select-grade Hart barrel, and Leupold ten-power Gold Ring telescopic sight, all married to an ugly Kevlar stock—wood would have been much prettier, but wood warped over time, whereas Kevlar was dead, chemically inert, unaffected by moisture or time. Johnston had just proven, again, that his rifle could fire at about one quarter of a minute of angle's accuracy, meaning that he could fire three consecutive rounds inside the diameter of a nickel at one hundred yards. Someday somebody might design a laser weapon, Johnston thought, and maybe that could improve on the accuracy of this handmade rifle. But nothing else could. At a range of one thousand yards, he could put three consecutive rounds into a circle of four inches—that required more than a rifle. That meant gauging the wind for speed and direction to compensate for drift-deflection. It also meant controlling his breathing and the way his finger touched the two-and-a-half-pound double-set trigger. His cleanup tasks done, Johnston lifted the rifle and carried it to its place in the gun vault, which was climate-controlled, and nestled it where it belonged before going back to the bullpen. The target he'd shot was on his desk.

Homer Johnston lifted it. He'd shot three rounds at 400 meters, three at 500, two at 700, and his last two at 900. All ten were inside the head-shape of the silhouette target, meaning that all ten would have been instantly fatal to a human target. He shot only cartridges that he'd loaded himself: Sierra 175-grain hollow-point boat-tailed match bullets traveling in front of 63.5 grains of IMR 4350 smokeless powder seemed to be the best combination for that particular rifle, taking 1.7 seconds to reach a target 1,000 yards downrange. That was an awfully long time, especially against a moving target, Sergeant Johnston thought, but it couldn't be helped. A hand came down on his shoulder.

"Homer," a familiar voice said.

"Yeah, Dieter," Johnston said, without looking up from the target. He was in the zone, all the way in. Shame it wasn't hunting season.

"You did better than me today. The wind was good for you." It was Weber's favorite excuse. He knew guns pretty well for a European, Homer thought, but guns were American things, and that was that.

"I keep telling you, that semiautomatic action doesn't headspace properly." Both of Weber's 900-meter rounds were marginal. They would have incapacitated the target, but not definitely killed it, even though they scored as hits. Johnston was the best rifle in Rainbow,

even better than Houston, by about half a cunt hair on a good day, Homer admitted to himself.

"I like to get my second round off more quickly than you," Weber pointed out. And that was the end of the argument. Soldiers were as loyal to their firearms as they were to their religions. The German was far better in rate of fire with his golliwog Walther sniper rifle, but that weapon didn't have the inherent accuracy of a bolt-action and also fired a less-speedy cartridge. The two riflemen had debated the point over many a beer already, and neither would ever move the other.

In any case, Weber patted his holster. "Some pistol, Homer?"

"Yeah." Johnston stood. "Why not?" Handguns were not serious weapons for serious work, but they were fun, and the rounds were free here. Weber had him faded in handguns by about one percent or so. On the way to the range, they passed Chavez, Price and the rest, coming out with their MP-10s, joking with one another as they passed. Evidently everyone had had a good morning on the range.

"Ach," Weber snorted, "anyone can shoot at five meters!"

"Morning, Robert," Homer said to the rangemaster. "Want to set up some Qs for us?"

"Quite so, Sergeant Johnston," Dave Woods replied, grabbing two of the American-style targets—called "Q targets" for the letter Q in the middle, about where the heart would be. Then he got a third for himself. A lavishly mustached color sergeant in the British Army military police regiment, he was pretty damned good with a 9-mm Browning. The targets motored down to the ten-meter line and turned sideways while the three sergeants donned their ear-protectors. Woods was, technically, a pistol instructor, but the quality of the men at Hereford made that a dull job, and as a result he himself fired close to a thousand rounds per week, perfecting his own skills. He was known to shoot with the men of Rainbow, and to challenge them to friendly competition, which, to the dismay of the shooters, was almost a break-even proposition. Woods was a traditionalist and held his pistol in one hand, as Weber did, though Johnston preferred the two-hand Weaver stance. The targets turned without warning, and three handguns came up to address them.

The home of Erwin Ostermann was magnificent, Hans Fürchtner thought for the tenth time, just the sort of thing for an arrogant class-enemy. Their research into the target hadn't revealed any aristocratic lineage for the current owner of this *schloss,* but he doubtless thought of himself in those terms. For now, Hans thought, as he turned onto the two-kilometer driveway of brown gravel and drove past the manicured gardens and bushes arranged with geometric precision by workers who were at the moment nowhere to be seen. Pulling up close

to the palace, he stopped the rented Mercedes and turned right, as though looking for a parking place. Coming around the rear of the building, he saw the Sikorsky S-76B helicopter they'd be using later, sitting on the usual asphalt pad with a yellow circle painted on it. Good. Fürchtner continued the circuit around the *schloss* and parked in front, about fifty meters from the main entrance.

"Are you ready, Petra?"

"Ja" was her terse, tense reply. It had been years since either had run an operation, and the immediate reality of it was different from the planning they'd spent a week to accomplish, going over charts and diagrams. There were things they did not yet know for certain, like the exact number of servants in the building. They started walking to the front door when a delivery truck came up, arriving there just as they did. The truck doors opened, and two men got out, both carrying large boxes in their arms. One waved to Hans and Petra to go up the stone steps, which they did. Hans hit the button, and a moment later the door opened.

"Guten Tag," Hans said. "We have an appointment with Herr Ostermann."

"Your name?"

"Bauer," Fürchtner said. "Hans Bauer."

"Flower delivery," one of the other two men said.

"Please come in. I will call Herr Ostermann," the butler—whatever he was—said.

"Danke," Fürchtner replied, waving for Petra to precede him through the ornate door. The deliverymen came in behind, carrying their boxes. The butler closed the door, then turned to walk left toward a phone. He lifted it and started to punch a button. Then he stopped.

"Why don't you take us upstairs?" Petra asked. There was a pistol in her hand aimed right into his face.

"What is this?"

"This," Petra Dortmund replied with a warm smile, "is my appointment." It was a Walther P-38 automatic pistol.

The butler swallowed hard as he saw the deliverymen open their boxes and reveal light submachine guns, which they loaded in front of him. Then one of them opened the front door and waved. In seconds, two more young men entered, both similarly armed.

Fürchtner ignored the new arrivals, and took a few steps to look around. They were in the large entrance foyer, its high, four-meter walls covered with artwork. Late Renaissance, he thought, noteworthy artists, but not true masters, large paintings of domestic scenes in gilt frames, which were in their way more impressive than the paintings themselves. The floor was white marble with black-diamond inserts at

the joins, the furniture also largely gilt and French-looking. More to the point, there were no other servants in view, though he could hear a distant vacuum cleaner working. Fürchtner pointed to the two most recent arrivals and pointed them west on the first floor. The kitchen was that way, and there would doubtless be people there to control.

"Where is Herr Ostermann?" Petra asked next.

"He is not here, he—"

This occasioned a movement of her pistol, right against his mouth. "His automobiles and helicopter are here. Now, tell us where he is."

"In the library, upstairs."

"Gut. Take us there," she ordered. The butler looked into her eyes for the first time and found them far more intimidating than the pistol in her hand. He nodded and turned toward the main staircase.

This, too, was gilt, with a rich red carpet held in place with brass bars, sweeping on an elegant curve to the right as they climbed to the second floor. Ostermann was a wealthy man, a quintessential capitalist who'd made his fortune trading shares in various industrial concerns, never taking ownership in one, a string-puller, Petra Dortmund thought, a *Spinne,* a spider, and this was the center of his web, and they'd entered it of their own accord, and here the spider would learn a few things about webs and traps.

More paintings on the staircase, she saw, far larger than anything she'd ever done, paintings of men, probably the men who'd built and lived in this massive edifice, this monument to greed and exploitation . . . she already hated its owner who lived so well, so opulently, so publicly proclaiming that he was better than everyone else while he built up his wealth and exploited the ordinary workers. At the top of the staircase was a huge oil portrait of the Emperor Franz Josef himself, the last of his wretched line, who'd died just a few years before the even more hated Romanovs. The butler, this worker for the evil one, turned right, leading them down a wide hall into a doorless room. Three people were there, a man and two women, better dressed than the butler, all working away at computers.

"This is Herr Bauer," the butler said in a shaky voice. "He wishes to see Herr Ostermann."

"You have an appointment?" the senior secretary asked.

"You will take us in *now,"* Petra announced. Then the gun came into view, and the three people in the anteroom stopped what they were doing and looked at the intruders with open mouths and pale faces.

Ostermann's home was several hundred years old, but not entirely a thing of the past. The male secretary—in America he would have been called an executive assistant—was named Gerhardt Dengler. Under the edge of his desk was an alarm button. He thumbed this hard and long while he stared at the visitors. The wire led to the *schloss*'s

central alarm panel, and from there to the alarm company. Twenty kilometers away, the employees at the central station responded to the buzzer and flashing light by immediately calling the office of the *Staatspolizei.* Then one of them called the *schloss* for confirmation.

"May I answer it?" Gerhardt asked Petra, who seemed to him to be in charge. He got a nod and lifted the receiver.

"Herr Ostermann's office."

"Hier ist Traudl," the alarm company's secretary said.

"Guten Tag, Traudl. Hier ist Gerhardt," the executive assistant said. "Have you called about the horse?" That was the phrase for serious trouble, called a duress code.

"Yes, when is the foal due?" she asked, carrying on to protect the man on the other end, should someone be listening in on the line.

"A few more weeks, still. We will tell you when the time comes," he told her brusquely, staring at Petra and her pistol.

"Danke, Gerhardt. *Auf Wiederhören."* With that, she hung up and waved to her watch supervisor.

"It is about the horses," he explained to Petra. "We have a mare in foal and—"

"Silence," Petra said quietly, waving for Hans to approach the double doors into Ostermann's office. So far, she thought, so good. There was even some cause for amusement. Ostermann was right through those double doors, doing the work he did as though things were entirely normal, when they decidedly were not. Well, now it was time for him to find out. She pointed to the executive assistant. "Your name is? . . ."

"Dengler," the man replied. "Gerhardt Dengler."

"Take us in, Herr Dengler," she suggested, in a strangely childlike voice.

Gerhardt rose from his desk and walked slowly to the double doors, head down, his movements wooden, as though his knees were artificial. Guns did that to people, Dortmund and Fürchtner knew. The secretary turned the knobs and pushed, revealing Ostermann's office.

The desk was huge, gilt like everything else in the building, and sat on a huge red wool rug. Erwin Ostermann had his back to them, head down examining some computer display or other.

"Herr Ostermann?" Dengler said.

"Yes, Gerhardt?" was the reply, delivered in an even voice, and when there was no response, the man turned in his swivel chair—

—"What is this?" he asked, his blue eyes going very wide when he saw the visitors, and then wider still when he saw the guns. "Who—"

"We are commanders of the Red Workers' Faction," Fürchtner

informed the trader. “And you are our prisoner.”

“But—what is this?”

“You and we will be taking a trip. If you behave yourself, you will come to no harm. If you do not, you and others will be killed. Is that clear?” Petra asked. To make sure it was, she again aimed her pistol at Dengler’s head.

What followed then could have been scripted in a movie. Ostermann’s head snapped left and right, looking for something, probably help of some sort, which was not to be seen. Then he looked back at Hans and Petra and his face contorted itself into shock and disbelief. *This* could not be happening to *him.* Not *here,* not in *his own office.* Next came the outraged denial of the facts he could see before him . . . and then, finally, came fear. The process lasted five or six seconds. It was always the same. She’d seen it before, and realized that she’d forgotten how pleasurable it was to behold. Ostermann’s hands balled into fists on the leather surface of his desk, then relaxed as his body realized how powerless it was. Trembling would start soon, depending on how much courage he might have. Petra didn’t anticipate a great deal of that. He looked tall, even sitting down, thin—regal, even, in his white shirt with the starched collar and striped tie. The suit was clearly expensive, Italian silk, probably, finely tailored just for him. Under the desk would be custom-made shoes, polished by a servant. Behind him she could see lines of data marching upward on the computer screens. Here Ostermann was, in the center of his web, and scarcely a minute before he’d been totally at ease, feeling himself invincible, master of his fate, moving money around the world, adding to his fortune. Well, no more of that for a while—probably forever, though Petra had no intention of telling him that until the last possible second, the better to see the shock and terror on his regal face just before the eyes went blank and empty.

She had forgotten how it was, Petra realized, the sheer joy of the power she held in her hands. How had she ever gone so long without exercising it?

The first police car to arrive on the scene had been only five kilometers away on getting the radio call. Reversing direction and racing to the *schloss* had only taken three minutes, and now it parked behind a tree, almost totally concealed from the house.

“I see a car and a delivery truck,” the officer told his station chief, a captain. “No movement. Nothing else to be seen at the moment.”

“Very well,” the captain replied. “Take no action of any kind, and report any new developments to me at once. I will be there in a few minutes.”

“Understood. *Ende.”*

The captain replaced the microphone. He was driving to the scene himself, alone in his Audi radio car. He'd met Ostermann once, at some official function in Vienna. Just a shake of the hand and a few cursory words, but he knew what the man looked like, and knew his reputation as a wealthy, civic-minded individual who was an especially faithful supporter of the opera . . . and the children's hospital, wasn't he? . . . Yes, that had been the reason for the reception at the city hall. Ostermann was a widower, had lost his first wife to ovarian cancer five years earlier. Now, it was said, he had a new interest in his life named Ursel von Prinze, a lovely dark-haired woman from an old family. That was the odd thing about Ostermann. He lived like a member of the nobility, but he'd come from humble roots. His father had been . . . an engineer, engine-driver actually, in the state railway, wasn't it? Yes, that was right. And so some of the old noble families had looked down on him, and to take care of that he'd bought social respectability with his charity work and his attendance at the opera. Despite the grandeur of his home, he lived fairly modestly. Little in the way of lavish entertaining. A quiet, modestly dignified man, and a very intelligent one, so they said of him. But now, his alarm company said, he had intruders in the house, Captain Willi Altmark told himself, taking the last turn and seeing the *schloss.* As often as he'd noticed it in passing, he had to remind himself now of the physical circumstances. A huge structure . . . perhaps four hundred meters of clear grass lawn between it and the nearest trees. Not good. Approaching the house covertly would be extremely difficult. He pulled his Audi close to the marked police car on the scene, and got out carrying a pair of binoculars.

"Captain," the first officer said by way of greeting.

"Have you seen anything?"

"No movement of any kind. Not even a curtain."

Altmark took a minute to sweep his binoculars over the building, then lifted the radio mike to tell all units en route to come quietly and slowly so as not to alert the criminals inside. Then he got a radio call from his superior, asking for his assessment of the situation.

"This may be a job for the military," Captain Altmark responded. "We know nothing at the moment. I can see an automobile and a truck. Nothing else. No gardeners out. Nothing. But I can only see two walls, and nothing behind the main house. I will get a perimeter set up as soon as additional units arrive."

"Ja. Make certain that no one can see us," the commissioner told the captain, quite unnecessarily.

"Yes, of course."

Inside, Ostermann had yet to rise from his chair. He took a moment to

close his eyes, thanking God that Ursel was in London at the moment, having flown there in the private jet to do some shopping and meet with English friends. He'd hoped to join her there the following day, and now he wondered if he'd ever see his fiancée again. Twice he'd been approached by security consultants, an Austrian and a Brit. Both had lectured him on the implicit dangers of being so publicly rich, and told him how for a modest sum, less than £500,000 per year, he could greatly improve his personal security. The Britisher had explained that his people were all veterans of the SAS; the Austrian had employed Germans formerly of GSG-9. But he hadn't seen the need for employing gun-carrying commandos who would hover over him everywhere he went as though he were a chief of state, taking up space and just sitting there like—like bodyguards, Ostermann told himself. As a trader in stocks, commodities, and international currencies he'd had his share of missed opportunities, but this one . . .

"What do you want of me?"

"We want your personal access codes to the international trading network," Fürchtner told him. Hans was surprised to see the look of puzzlement on Ostermann's face.

"What do you mean?"

"The computer-access codes which tell you what is going on."

"But those are public already. Anyone can have them," Ostermann objected.

"Yes, certainly they are. That is why everyone has a house like this one." Petra managed an amused sneer.

"Herr Ostermann," Fürchtner said patiently. "We know there is a special network for people such as you, so that you can take advantage of special market conditions and profit by them. You think us fools?"

The fear that transformed the trader's face amused his two office guests. Yes, they knew what they weren't supposed to know, and they knew they could force him to give over the information. His thoughts were plain on his face.

Oh, my God, they think I have access to something that does not exist, and I will never be able to persuade them otherwise.

"We know how people like you operate," Petra assured him, immediately confirming his fear. "How you capitalists share information and manipulate your 'free' markets for your own greedy ends. Well, you will share that with us—or you will die, along with your lackeys." She waved her pistol at the outer office.

"I see." Ostermann's face was now as pale as his white Turnbull and Asser shirt. He looked out to the anteroom. He could see Gerhardt Dengler there, his hands on the top of his desk. Wasn't there an alarm system there? Ostermann couldn't remember now, so rapidly was his

mind running through the data-avalanche that had so brutally interrupted his day.

The first order of police business was to check the license-plate numbers of the vehicles parked close to the house. The automobile, they learned at once, was a rental. The truck tags had been stolen two days before. A detective team would go to the car-rental agency immediately to see what they might learn there. The next call was made to one of Herr Ostermann's business associates. The police needed to know how many domestic and clerical employees might be in the building along with the owner. That, Captain Altmark imagined, would take about an hour. He now had three additional police cars under his command. One of these looped around the property so that the two officers could park and approach from the rear on foot. Twenty minutes after arriving on the scene, he had a perimeter forming. The first thing he learned was that Ostermann owned a helicopter, sitting there behind the house. It was an American-made Sikorsky S-76B, capable of carrying a crew of two and a maximum of thirteen passengers—that information gave him the maximum number of hostages to be moved and criminals to move them. The helicopter landing pad was two hundred meters from the house. Altmark fixed on that. The criminals would almost certainly want to use the helicopter as their getaway vehicle. Unfortunately, the landing pad was a good three hundred meters from the treeline. This meant that some really good riflemen were needed, but his preset response team had them.

Soon after getting the information on the helicopter, one of his people turned up the flight crew, one at home, one at Schwechat International Airport doing some paperwork with the manufacturer's representative for an aircraft modification. Good, Willi Altmark thought, the helicopter wasn't going anywhere just yet. But by then the fact that Erwin Ostermann's house had been attacked had perked up to the senior levels of government, and then he received a very surprising radio call from the head of the *Staatspolizei.*

They barely made the flight—more precisely, the flight hadn't been delayed on their account. Chavez tightened his seat belt as the 737 pulled back from the jetway, and went over the preliminary briefing documents with Eddie Price. They'd just rolled off the tarmac when Price mated his portable computer with the aircraft's phone system. That brought up a diagram on his screen, with the caption "Schloss Ostermann."

"So, who is this guy?" Chavez asked.

"Coming in now, sir," Price replied. "A money-lender, it would appear, rather a wealthy one, friend of the prime minister of his country. I guess that explains matters so far as we are concerned."

"Yeah," Chavez agreed. *Two in a row for Team-2* was what he thought. A little over an hour's flight time to Vienna, he thought next, checking his watch. One such incident was happenstance, Chavez told himself, but terrorist incidents weren't supposed to happen so closely together, were they? Not that there was a rulebook out there, of course, and even if there were such a thing, these people would have violated it. Still . . . but there was no time for such thoughts. Instead, Chavez examined the information coming into Price's laptop and started wondering how he'd deal with this new situation. Farther aft, his team occupied a block of economy seats and spent their time reading paperback books, hardly talking at all about the upcoming job, since they knew nothing to talk about except where they were going.

"Bloody large perimeter for us to cover," Price observed, after a few minutes.

"Any information on the opposition?" Ding asked, then wondered how it was that he was adopting Britspeak. *Opposition?* He should have said *bad guys.*

"None," Eddie replied. "No identification, no word on their numbers."

"Great," the leader of Team-2 observed, still staring sideways at the screen.

The phones were trapped. Altmark had seen to that early on. Incoming calls were given busy signals, and outgoing calls would be recorded at the central telephone exchange—but there had been none, which suggested to Captain Altmark that the criminals were all inside, since they were not seeking external help. That could have meant they were using cellular phones, of course, and he didn't have the equipment to intercept those, though he did have similar traps on Ostermann's three known cellular accounts.

The *Staatspolizei* now had thirty officers on the scene and a tight perimeter fully formed and punctuated by a four-wheel armored vehicle, hidden in the trees. They'd stopped one delivery truck from coming in with some overnight express mail, but no other vehicles had attempted to enter the property. For one so wealthy, Ostermann did indeed lead a quiet and unassuming life, the captain thought. He'd expected a constant parade of vehicles.

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"Hans?"

"Yes, Petra?"

"The phones have not rung. We've been here for some time, but the phones have not rung."

"Most of my work is on computer," Ostermann said, having noted the same discrepancy himself. Had Gerhardt gotten the word out? If he had done so, was that good? He had no way of knowing. Ostermann had long joked about how cutthroat his profession was, how every step he took had danger, because others out there would try to rob him blind if they ever got the chance . . . but not one of them had ever threatened his life, nor had any ever pointed a loaded gun at him or a member of his staff. Ostermann used his remaining capacity for objectivity to realize that this was a new and dangerous aspect to the world that he'd never seriously considered, about which he knew very little, and against which he had nothing in the way of defenses. His only useful talent at the moment was his ability to read faces and the minds behind them, and though he'd never encountered anyone even vaguely close to the man and woman in his office now, he saw enough to be more afraid than he'd ever been before. The man, and even more the woman, were willing to kill him without any pangs of conscience whatsoever, no more emotion than he showed when picking up a million dollars of American T-bills. Didn't they know that his life had worth? Didn't they know that—

—no, Erwin Ostermann realized, they did not. They didn't know, and they didn't care. Worst of all, what they thought they did know wasn't true, and he would be hard-pressed indeed to persuade them otherwise.

Then, finally, a phone rang. The woman gestured for him to answer it.

"Hier ist Ostermann," he said on picking up the receiver. His male visitor did the same on another extension.

"Herr Ostermann, I am Captain Wilhelm Altmark of the *Staatspolizei.* You have guests there, I understand."

"Yes, I do, Captain," Ostermann replied.

"Could I speak with them, please?" Ostermann merely looked at Hans Fürchtner.

"You took your time, Altmark," Hans said. "Tell me, how did you find out?"

"I will not ask you about your secrets if you do not ask me about mine," the captain replied cooly. "I would like to know who you are and what you wish."

"I am Commander Wolfgang of the Red Workers' Faction."

"And what is it you want?"

"We want the release of several of our friends from various prisons, and transport to Schwechat International. We require an airliner with a range of more than five thousand kilometers and an international flight crew for a destination which we will make known when we board the aircraft. If we do not have these things by midnight, we will begin to kill some of our . . . our guests here in *Schloss Ostermann."*

"I see. Do you have a list of the prisoners whose release you require?"

Hans put one hand over the receiver and held the other out. "Petra, the list." She walked over and handed it to him. Neither seriously expected any cooperation on this issue, but it was part of the game, and the rules had to be followed. They'd decided on the way in that they'd have to kill one hostage certainly, more probably two, before they got the ride to the airport. The man, Gerhardt Dengler, would be killed first, Hans thought, then one of the women secretaries. Neither he nor Petra really wanted to kill any of the domestic help since they were genuine workers, not capitalist lackeys like the office staff. "Yes, here is the list, Captain Altmark . . ."

"Okay," Price said, "we have a list of people we're expected to liberate for our friends." He turned the computer so that Chavez could see it.

"The usual suspects. Does this tell us anything, Eddie?"

Price shook his head. "Probably not. You can get these names from a newspaper."

"So, why do they do it?"

"Dr. Bellow will explain that they have to, to show solidarity with their compatriots, when in fact they are all sociopaths who don't care a rip for anyone but themselves." Price shrugged. "Cricket has rules. So does terrorism and—" Just then the captain of the airliner interrupted the revelation, and told everyone to put the seat backs up and tray tables away in preparation for landing.

"Showtime soon, Eddie."

"Indeed, Ding."

"So, this is just solidarity bullshit?" Ding asked, tapping the screen.

"Most likely, yes." With that, Price disconnected the phone line from his computer, saved his files, and shut the laptop down. Twelve rows aft, Tim Noonan did the same. All the Team-2 members started putting on their game faces as the British Airways 737 flared to land in Vienna. Someone had called ahead to someone else. The airliner taxied very rapidly indeed to its assigned jetway, and out his window Chavez could see a baggage truck with cops standing next to it waiting alongside the terminal.

It was not an invisible event. A tower controller noted the arrival, having already noted a few minutes before that a Sabena flight scheduled in a slot ahead of the British aircraft had been given an unnecessary go-around order, and that a very senior police officer was in the tower, expressing interest in the British Airways flight. Then there was a second and very unnecessary baggage train with two police cars close by the A-4 jetway. What was this? he wondered. It required no great effort on his part to keep watch to learn more. He even had a pair of Zeiss binoculars.

The stewardess hadn't received instructions to get Team-2 off more quickly than anyone else, but she suspected there was something odd about them. They'd arrived without having been on her computerized manifest, and they were politer than the average business travelers. Their appearances were unremarkable, except all looked very fit, and all had arrived together in a single bunch, and headed to their seats in an unusually organized way. She had a job to do, however, as she opened the door into the jetway where, she saw, a uniformed policeman was waiting. He didn't smile or speak as she allowed the already-standing passengers to make their way off. Three from first class stopped just outside the aircraft, conferred with the policeman, then went out the door to the service stairs, which led directly to the tarmac. Being a serious fan of thriller and mystery novels, it was worth a look, she thought, to see who else went that way. The total was thirteen, and the number included all of the late-arriving passengers. She looked at their faces, most of which gave her a smile on the way out. Handsome faces, for the most part . . . more than that, manly ones, with expressions that radiated confidence, and something else, something conservative and guarded.

"Au revoir, madam," the last one said as he passed, with a very Gallic evaluative sweep of her figure and a charming smile.

"Christ, Louis," an American voice observed on the way out the side door. "You don't ever turn it off, do you?"

"Is it a crime to look at a pretty woman, George?" Loiselle asked, with a wink.

"Suppose not. Maybe we'll catch her on the flip-side," Sergeant Tomlinson conceded. She was pretty, but Tomlinson was married with four kids. Louis Loiselle never turned it off. Maybe it came along with being French, the American thought. At the bottom, the rest of the team was waiting. Noonan and Steve Lincoln were supervising the baggage transfer.

Three minutes later, Team-2 was in a pair of vans heading off the flight line with a police escort. This was noted by the tower controller,

whose brother was a police reporter for a local paper. The cop who'd come to the tower departed without more than a *danke* to the controllers.

Twenty minutes later, the vans stopped outside the main entrance to *Schloss Ostermann.* Chavez walked over to the senior officer.

"Hello, I am Major Chavez. This is Dr. Bellow, and Sergeant Major Price," he said, surprised to receive a salute from—

"Captain Wilhelm Altmark," the man said.

"What do we know?"

"We know there are two criminals inside, probably more, but the number is unknown. You know what their demands are?"

"Airplane to somewhere was the last I heard. Midnight deadline?"

"Correct, no changes in the past hour."

"Anything else. How will we get them to the airport?" Ding asked.

"Herr Ostermann has a private helicopter and pad about two hundred meters behind the house."

"Flight crew?"

"We have them over there." Altmark pointed. "Our friends have not yet asked for the flight, but that seems the most likely method of making the transfer."

"Who's been speaking with them?" Dr. Bellow asked from behind the shorter Chavez.

"I have," Altmark replied.

"Okay, we need to talk, Captain."

Chevez headed over to a van where he could change along with the rest of the team. For this night's mission—the sun was just setting—they wore not black but mottled green coveralls over their body armor. Weapons were issued and loaded, then selector switches went to the SAFE position. Ten minutes later, the team was outside and at the edge of the treeline, everyone with binoculars, checking out the building.

"I guess this here's the right side of the tracks," Homer Johnston observed. "Lotsa windows, Dieter."

"Ja," the German sniper agreed.

"Where you want us, boss?" Homer asked Chavez.

"Far side, both sides, cross fire on the chopper pad. Right now, people, and when you're set up, give me radio calls to check in. You know the drill."

"Everything we see, we call to you, *Herr Major,"* Weber confirmed. Both snipers got their locked rifle cases and headed off to where the local cops had their cars.

"Do we have a layout of the house?" Chavez asked Altmark.

"Layout?" the Austrian cop asked.

"Diagram, map, blueprints," Ding explained.

"Ach, yes, here." Altmark led them to his car. Blueprints were spread on the hood. "Here, as you see, forty-six rooms, not counting the basements."

"Christ," Chavez reacted at once. "More than one basement?"

"Three. Two under the west wing—wine cellar and cold-storage. East wing basement is unused. The doors down to it may be sealed. No basement under the center portion. The *Schloss* was built in the late eighteenth century. Exterior walls and some interior ones are stone."

"Christ, it's a frickin' castle," Ding observed.

"That is what the word *Schloss* means, *Herr Major,"* Altmark informed him.

"Doc?"

Bellow came over. "From what Captain Altmark tells me, they've been pretty businesslike to this point. No hysterical threats. They gave a deadline of midnight for movement to the airport, else they say they will start killing hostages. Their language is German, with a German accent, you said, Captain?"

Altmark nodded. *"Ja,* they are German, not Austrian. We have only one name, Herr Wolfgang—that is generally a Christian name, not a surname in our language, and we have no known criminal-terrorist by that name or pseudonym. Also, he said they are of the Red Workers' Faction, but we have no word on that organization either."

Neither did Rainbow. "So, we don't know very much?" Chavez asked Bellow.

"Not much at all, Ding. Okay," the psychiatrist went on, "what does that mean? It means they are planning to survive this one. It means they're serious businessmen in this game. If they threaten to do something, they will try to do it. They haven't killed anyone yet, and that also means they're pretty smart. No other demands made to this point. They will be coming, probably soon—"

"How do you know that?" Altmark asked. The absence of demands to this point had surprised him.

"When it gets dark, they'll be talking with us more. See how they haven't turned any lights on inside the building?"

"Yes, and what does that mean?"

"It means they think the darkness is their friend, and that means they will try to make use of it. Also, the midnight deadline. When it gets dark, we'll be closer to that."

"Full moon tonight," Price observed. "And not much cloud cover."

"Yeah," Ding noted in some discomfort when he looked up at the sky. "Captain, do you have searchlights we can use?"

"The fire department will have them," Altmark said.

"Could you please order them brought here?"

"Ja . . . Herr Doktor?"

"Yes?" Bellow said.

"They said that if they do not have those things done by midnight they will begin to kill hostages. Do you—"

"Yes, Captain, we have to take that threat very seriously. As I said, these folks are acting like serious people, well-trained and well-disciplined. We can make that work for us."

"How?" Altmark asked. Ding answered.

"We give them what they want, we let them think that they are in control . . . until it is time for us to take control. We feed their pride and their egos while we have to, and then, later, we stop doing it at a time that suits us."

Ostermann's house staff was feeding the terrorists' bodies and their egos. Sandwiches had been made under the supervision of Fürchtner's team and brought around by deeply frightened staff members. Predictably, Ostermann's employees were not in a mood to eat, though their guests were.

Things had gone well to this point, Hans and Petra thought. They had their primary hostage under tight control, and his lackeys were now in the same room, with easy access to Ostermann's personal bathroom—hostages needed such access, and there was no sense in denying it to them. Otherwise, it stripped them of their dignity and made them desperate. That was inadvisable. Desperate people did foolish things, and what Hans and Petra needed at the moment was control over their every action.

Gerhardt Dengler sat in a visitor's chair directly across the desk from his employer. He knew he'd gotten the police to respond, and, like his boss, he was now wondering if that was a good or a bad thing. In another two years, he would have been ready to strike out on his own, probably with Ostermann's blessing. He'd learned much from his boss, the way a general's aide learns at the right hand of the senior officer. Though he'd been able to pursue his own destiny much more quickly and surely than a junior officer . . . what did he owe this man? What was required by this situation? Dengler was no more suited to this than Herr Ostermann was, but Dengler was younger, fitter . . .

One of the secretaries was weeping silently, the tears trickling down her cheeks from fear and from the rage of having her comfortable life upset so cruelly. What was wrong with these two that they thought they could invade the lives of ordinary people and threaten them with death? And what could she do about it? The answer to that was . . . nothing. She was skilled at routing calls, processing voluminous paperwork, keeping track of Herr Ostermann's money so ably that she

was probably the best-paid secretary in the country—because Herr Ostermann was a generous boss, always with a kind word for his staff. He'd helped her and her husband—a stonemason—with their investments, to the point that they would soon be millionaires in their own right. She'd been with him long before his first wife had died of cancer, had watched him suffer through that, unable to help him do anything to ease the horrible pain, and then she'd rejoiced at his discovery of Ursel von Prinze, who'd allowed Herr Ostermann to smile again. . . .

Who were these people who stared at them as though they were objects, with guns in their hands like something from a movie . . . except that she and Gerhardt and the others were the bit players now. They couldn't go to the kitchen to fetch beer and pretzels. They could only live the drama to its end. And so she wept quietly at her powerlessness, to the contempt of Petra Dortmund.

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Homer Johnston was in his ghillie suit, a complex overalltype garment made of rags sewn into place on a gridded matrix, whose purpose was to make him appear to be a bush or a pile of leaves or compost, anything but a person with a rifle. The rifle was set up on its bipod, the hinged flaps on the front and back lenses of his telescopic sight flipped up. He'd picked a good place to the east of the helicopter pad that would allow him to cover the entire distance between the helicopter and the house. His laser rangefinder announced that he was 216 meters from a door on the back of the house and 147 meters from the front-left door of the helicopter. He was lying prone in a dry spot on the beautiful lawn, in the lengthening shadows close to the treeline, and the air brought to him the smell of horses, which reminded him of his childhood in the American northwest. Okay. He thumbed his radio microphone.

"Lead, Rifle Two-One."

"Rifle Two-One, Lead."

"In place and set up. I show no movement in the house at this time."

"Rifle Two-Two, in place and set up, I also see no movement," Sergeant Weber reported from his spot, two hundred fifty-six meters from Johnston. Johnston turned to see Dieter's location. His German counterpart had selected a good spot.

"Achtung," a voice called behind him. Johnston turned to see an Austrian cop approaching, not quite crawling on the grass. *"Hier,"* the man said, handing over some photos and withdrawing rapidly.

Johnston looked at them. Good, shots of the hostages . . . but none of the bad guys. Well, at least he'd know whom *not* to shoot. With that, he backed off the rifle and lifted his green-coated military binoculars and began scanning the house slowly and regularly, left to right and back again. "Dieter?" he said over his direct radio link.

"Yes, Homer?"

"They get you the photos?"

"Yes, I have them."

"No lights inside . . ."

"Ja, our friends are being clever."

"I figure about half an hour until we have to go NVG."

"I agree, Homer."

Johnston grunted and turned to check the bag he'd carried in along with his rifle case and $10,000 rifle. Then he returned to scanning the building, patiently, like staking out a mountain deer trail for a big muley . . . a happy thought for the lifelong hunter . . . the taste of venison, especially cooked in the field over an open wood fire . . . some coffee from the blue, steel enamel pot . . . and the talking that came after a successful hunt . . . *Well, you can't eat what you shoot here, Homer,* the sergeant told himself, settling back into his patient routine. One hand reached into a pocket for some beef jerky to chew.

Eddie Price lit his pipe on the far side of the dwelling. Not as big as Kensington Palace, but prettier, he thought. The thought disturbed him. It was something they'd talked about during his time in the SAS. What if terrorists—usually they thought of the Irish PIRA or INLA—attacked one of the Royal residences . . . or the Palace of Westminster. The SAS had walked through all of the buildings in question at one time or another, just to get a feel for the layout, the security systems, and the problems involved—especially after that lunatic had cracked his way into Buckingham Palace in the 1980s, walking into the Queen's own bedchamber. He still had chills about that!

The brief reverie faded. He had the *Schloss Ostermann* to worry about, Price remembered, scanning over the blueprints again.

"Bloody nightmare on the inside, Ding," Price finally said.

"That's the truth. All wood floors, probably creak, lots of places for the bad guys to hide and snipe at us. We'd need a chopper to do this right." But they didn't have a helicopter. That was something to talk with Clark about. Rainbow hadn't been fully thought through. Too fast on too many things. Not so much that they needed a helicopter as some good chopper crews trained in more than one type of aircraft, because when they deployed in the field, there was no telling what machines would be used by their host nation. Chavez turned: "Doc?"

Bellow came over. "Yes, Ding?"

"I'm starting to think about letting them out, walk to the helicopter behind the house, and taking them down that way rather than forcing our way in."

"A little early for that, isn't it?"

Chavez nodded. "Yeah, it is, but we don't want to lose a hostage, and come midnight, you said, we have to take that threat seriously."

"We can delay it some, maybe. My job to do that, over the phone."

"I understand, but if we make a move, I want it to be in the dark. That means tonight. I can't plan on having you talk them into surrender, unless you're thinking different? . . ."

"Possible, but unlikely," Bellow had to agree. He couldn't even speak confidently about delaying the threatened midnight kill.

"Next, we have to see if we can spike the building."

"I'm here," Noonan said. "Tall order, man."

"Can you do it?"

"I can probably get close unobserved, but there's over a hundred windows, and how the hell can I get to the ones on the second and third floors? Unless I do a dangle from a chopper and come down on the roof . . ." And that meant making sure that the local TV people, who'd show up as predictably as vultures over a dying cow, turned their cameras off and kept them off, which then ran the risk of alerting the terrorists when the TV reporters stopped showing the building of interest. And how could they fail to note that a helicopter had flown thirty feet over the roof of the building, and might there be a bad guy on the roof, already keeping watch?

"This is getting complicated," Chavez observed quietly.

"Dark and cold enough for the thermal viewers to start working," Noonan said helpfully.

"Yeah." Chavez picked up his radio mike. "Team, Lead, go thermal. Say again, break out the thermals." Then he turned. "What about cell phones?"

Noonan could do little more than shrug. There were now something like three hundred civilians gathered around, well back from the Ostermann property and controlled by local police, but most of them had a view of the house and the grounds, and if one of them had a cell phone and someone inside did as well, all that unknown person outside had to do was dial his buds on the inside to tell them what was going down. The miracles of modern communication worked both ways. There were over five hundred cellular frequencies, and the gear to cover them all was not part of Rainbow's regular kit. No terrorist or criminal operation had yet used that technique, to the best of their knowledge, but they couldn't all be dumb and stay dumb, could they? Chavez looked over at the *Schloss* and thought again that they'd have to get the bad guys outside for this to work properly. Problem with

that, he didn't know how many bad guys he'd have to deal with, and he had no way of finding out without spiking the building to gather additional information—which was a dubious undertaking for all the other reasons he'd just considered.

"Tim, make a note for when we get back about dealing with cellular phones and radios outside the objective. Captain Altmark!"

"Yes, Major Chavez?"

"The lights, are they here yet?"

"Just arrived, *ja,* we have three sets." Altmark pointed. Price and Chavez went over to look. They saw three trucks with attachments that looked for all the world like the lights one might see around a high-school football field. Meant to help fight a major fire, they could be erected and powered by the trucks that carried them. Chavez told Altmark where he wanted them and returned to the team's assembly point.

The thermal viewers relied on difference in temperature to make an image. The evening was cooling down rapidly, and with it the stone walls of the house. Already the windows were glowing more brightly than the walls, because the house was heated, and the old-style full-length windows in the building's many doors were poorly insulated, despite the large drapes that hung just inside each one. Dieter Weber made the first spot.

"Lead, Rifle Two-Two, I have a thermal target first floor, fourth window from the west, looking around the curtains at the outside."

"Okay! That one's in the kitchen." It was the voice of Hank Patterson, who was hovering over the blueprints. "That's number one! Can you tell me anything else, Dieter?"

"Negative, just a shape," the German sniper replied. "No, wait . . . tall, probably a man."

"This is Pierce, I have one, first floor, east side, second window from east wall."

"Captain Altmark?"

"Ja?"

"Could you call Ostermann's office, please? We want to know if he's there." Because if he were, there would be one or two bad guys in with him.

"Ostermann office," a woman's voice answered.

"This is Captain Altmark. Who is this?"

"This is Commander Gertrude of the Red Workers' Faction."

"Excuse me, I was expecting to speak to Commander Wolfgang."

"Wait," Petra's voice told him.

"Hier ist Wolfgang."

"Hier ist Altmark. We have not heard from you in a long time."

"What news do you have for us?"

"No news, but we do have a request, Herr Commander."

"Yes, what is it?"

"As a sign of good faith," Altmark said, with Dr. Bellow listening in, a translator next to him. "We request that you release two of your hostages, from the domestic staff perhaps."

"Wofür? So they can help you identify us?"

• • •

"Lead, Lincoln here, I have a target, northwest corner window, tall, probably male."

"That's three plus two," Chavez observed, as Patterson placed a yellow circle sticker on that part of the prints.

The woman who'd answered the phone had remained on the line as well. "You have three hours until we send you a hostage, *tot,"* she emphasized. "You have any further requests? We require a pilot for Herr Ostermann's helicopter before midnight, and an airliner waiting at the airport. Otherwise, we will kill a hostage to show that we are quite serious, and then thereafter, at regular intervals. Do you understand?"

"Please, we respect your seriousness here," Altmark assured her. "We are looking for the flight crew now, and we have discussions underway with Austrian Airlines for the aircraft. These things take time, you know."

"You always say that, people like you. We have told you what *we* require. If you do not meet those requirements, then their blood is on your hands. *Ende,"* the voice said, and the line went dead.

Captain Altmark was both surprised and discomforted by the cold decisiveness on the other end of the phone and by the abrupt termination of the call. He looked up at Paul Bellow as he replaced the receiver. *"Herr Doktor?"*

"The woman is the dangerous one. They're both smart. They've definitely thought this one through, and they *will* kill a hostage to make their point, sure as hell."

"Man-and-woman team," Price was saying over the phone. "German, ages . . . late thirties, early forties as a guess. Maybe older. Bloody serious," he added for Bill Tawney.

"Thanks, Eddie, stand by," came the reply. Price could hear the fingers tapping on the keyboard.

"Okay, lad, I have three possible teams for you. Uploading them now."

"Thank you, sir." Price opened his laptop again. "Ding?"

"Yeah?"

"Intelligence coming in."

"We have at least five terrs in there, boss," Patterson said, moving his finger around the prints. "Too quick for them to move around. Here, here, here, and two upstairs here. The placement makes sense. They probably have portable radios, too. The house is too big for them to communicate by shouting around at each other."

Noonan heard that and went off to his radio-intercept equipment. If their friends were using hand-held radios, then their frequency range was well known, determined by international treaty in fact, probably not the military sets the team used, and probably not encrypted. In seconds he had his computerized scanner set up and working off multiple antennas, which would allow him to triangulate on sources inside the house. These were coupled into his laptop computer, already overlaid with a diagram of the *Schloss.* Three spear-carriers was about right, Noonan thought. Two was too few. Three was close to the right number, though the truck in front of the building could have easily held more. Two plus three, two plus four, two plus five? But they'd all be planning to leave, and the helicopter wasn't all that big. That made the total terrorist count at five to seven. A guess, and they couldn't go with a guess—well, they'd prefer not to—but it was a starting place. So many guesses. What if they were not using portable radios? What if they used cell phones? What if a lot of things, Noonan thought. You had to start somewhere, gather all the information you could, and then act on it. The problem with people like this was that they always decided the pace of the event. For all their stupidity and their criminal intent, which Noonan regarded as a weakness, they *did* control the pace, they decided when things happened. The team could alter it a little by cajolery—that was Dr. Bellow's part—but when you got down to it, well, the bad guys were the only ones willing to do murder, and that was a card that made a noise when it came down on the table. There were ten hostages inside, Ostermann, his three business assistants, and six people who looked after the house and grounds. Every one of them had a life and a family and the expectation to keep both. Team-2's job was to make sure that happened. But the bad guys still controlled too much, and this special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation didn't like that very much. Not for the first time, he wished he was one of the shooters, able, in due course, to go in and execute the takedown. But, good as

he was at weapons and the physical side, he was better trained on the technical aspects of the mission. That was his area of personal expertise, and he served the mission best by sticking with his instruments. He didn't, however, have to like it.

"So, what's the score, Ding?"

"Not all that good, Mr. C." Chavez turned to survey the building again. "Very difficult to approach the building because of the open ground, therefore difficult to spike and get tactical intelligence. We have two primary and probably three secondary subjects who seem professional and serious. I'm thinking in terms of letting them out to go to the helicopter and taking them down then. Snipers in place. But with the number of subjects, this might not be real pretty, John."

Clark looked at the display in his command center. He had continuous comm links with Team-2, including their computer displays. As before, Peter Covington was beside him to kibitz. "Might as well be a moated bloody castle," the British officer had observed earlier. He'd also noted the need for helicopter pilots as a permanent part of the team.

"One other thing," Chavez said. "Noonan says we need jamming gear for the cell phone freaks. We have a few hundred civilians around, and if one has a shoe phone, he can talk to our friends inside, tell them what we're doing. No way in hell we can prevent that without jamming gear. Write that one down, Mr. C."

"Noted, Domingo," Clark replied, looking over at David Peled, his chief technical officer.

"I can take care of that in a few days," Peled told his boss. Mossad had the right sort of equipment. Probably so did some American agencies. He'd find out in a hurry. Noonan, David told himself, was very good for a former policeman.

"Okay, Ding, you are released to execute at discretion. Good luck, my boy."

"Gee, thanks, Dad" was the ironic reply. "Team-2, out." Chavez killed the radio and tossed the microphone back at the box. "Price!" he called.

"Yes, sir." The Sergeant Major materialized at his side.

"We have discretionary release," the leader told his XO.

"Marvelous, Major Chavez. What do you propose, sir?"

The situation had to be unfavorable, Ding told himself, if Price had reverted back to sirring him.

"Well, let's see what we got in the way of assets, Eddie."

Klaus Rosenthal was Ostermann's head gardener, and at seventy-one the oldest member of the domestic staff. His wife was at home, he was sure, in her bed with a nurse in close attendance handling her medications, and worrying about him he was sure, and that worry could be dangerous to her. Hilda Rosenthal had a progressive heart condition that had invalided her over the past three years. The state medical system had provided the necessary care for her, and Herr Ostermann had assisted as well, sending a friend of his, a full professor from Vienna's Algemeine Krankenhaus, to oversee the case, and a new drug-therapy treatment had actually improved Hilda's condition somewhat, but the fear she'd be feeling for him now certainly would not help, and that thought was driving Klaus mad. He was in the kitchen along with the rest of the domestic staff. He'd been inside getting a glass of water when they'd arrived—had he been outside he might well have escaped and raised the alarm and so helped to aid his employer, who'd been so considerate to all his staff, and Hilda! But luck had been against that when these swine had stormed into the kitchen with their weapons showing. Young ones, late twenties, the close one, whose name Rosenthal didn't know, was either a Berliner or from West Prussia, judging by his accent, and he'd recently been a skinhead, or so it appeared from the uniform-length stubble on his hatless head. A product of the DDR, the now-defunct East Germany. One of the new Nazis who'd grown out of that fallen communist nation. Rosenthal had met the old ones at Belzec concentration camp as a boy, and though he'd managed to survive that experience, the return of the terror of having one's life continue only at the whim of a madman with cruel piglike eyes . . . Rosenthal closed his eyes. He still had the nightmares that went along with the five-digit number tattooed on his forearm. Once a month he still awoke on sweaty sheets after reliving the former reality of watching people march into a building from which no one ever emerged alive . . . and always in the nightmare someone with a cruel young SS face beckons to him to follow them in there, too, because he needs a shower. *Oh, no,* he protests in the dream, *Hauptsturmführer Brandt needs me in the metalworking shop. Not today, Jude,* the young SS noncom says, with that ghastly smile, *Komm jetzt zum Brausebad.* Every time he walks as bidden, for what else could one do, right to the door—and then every time he awakes, damp with perspiration, and sure that had he not awakened, he would not have awakened at all, just like all the people he'd watched march that way . . .

There are many kinds of fear, and Klaus Rosenthal had the worst of all. His was the certainty that he would die at the hands of one of *them,* the bad Germans, the ones who simply didn't recognize or care about the humanity of others, and there was no comfort in the

certainty of it.

And that kind wasn't all gone, wasn't all dead yet. One was right in his field of view, looking back at him, his machine gun in his hands, looking at Rosenthal and the others in the kitchen like *Objekte,* mere objects. The other staff members, all Christians, had never experienced this, but Klaus Rosenthal had, and he knew what to expect—and knew that it was a certainty. His nightmare was real, risen from the past to fulfill his destiny, and then also kill Hilda, for her heart would not survive—and what could he do about it? Before, the first time, he'd been an orphaned boy apprenticed to a jeweler, where he'd learned to make fine metal items, which trade had saved his life—which trade he'd never followed afterward, so horrid were the memories associated with it. Instead he found the peace of working in the soil, making living things grow pretty and healthy. He had the gift; Ostermann had recognized it and told him that he had a job for life at this *Schloss.* But that gift didn't matter to this Nazi with stubbly hair and a gun in his hands.

Ding supervised the placement of the lights. Captain Altmark walked with him to each truck, then they both told the driver exactly where to go. When the light trucks were in place, and their light masts raised, Chavez returned to his team and sketched out the plan. It was after 11 now. It was amazing how fast time went when you needed more of it.

The helicopter crew was there, mostly sitting still, drinking coffee like good aviators, and wondering what the hell came next. It turned out that the copilot had a passing resemblance to Eddie Price, which Ding decided to make use of as a final backup part of his plan.

At 11:20, he ordered the lights switched on. The front and both sides of the *schloss* were bathed in yellow-white light, but not the back, which projected a triangular shadow all the way to the helicopter and beyond into the trees.

"Oso," Chavez said, "get over to Dieter and set up close to there."

"Roger, 'mano." First Sergeant Vega hoisted his M-60 onto his shoulder and made his way through the woods.

Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson had the hardest part. They were dressed in their night greens. The coveralls over their black "ninja suits" looked like graph paper, light green background crosshatched in darker green lines, making blocks perhaps an eighth inch square. Some of the blocks were filled with the same dark green in random, squared-off patternless patterns. The idea dated back to World War II Luftwaffe night fighters whose designers had decided that the night was dark enough, and that black-painted fighter aircraft were easier to spot because they were darker than the night itself.

These coveralls worked in principle and in exercises. Now they'd see if they worked in the real world. The blazing lights would help; aimed at and somewhat over the *Schloss,* they'd serve to create an artificial well of darkness into which the green suits should disappear. They'd drilled it at Hereford often enough, but never with real lives at risk. That fact notwithstanding, Tomlinson and Loiselle moved out from different directions, keeping inside the triangular shadow all the way in. It took them twenty minutes of crawling.

"So, Altmark," Hans Fürchtner said at 11:45, "are the arrangements set, or must we kill one of our hostages in a few minutes?"

"Please, do not do that, Herr Wolfgang. We have the helicopter crew on the way now, and we are working with the airline to get the aircraft released to us and ready for the flight. It is more difficult than you imagine to do these things."

"In fifteen minutes we shall see how difficult it is, Herr Altmark." And the line went dead.

Bellow didn't need a translator. The tone was enough. "He will do it," the psychiatrist told Altmark and Chavez. "The deadline is for real."

"Get the flight crew out," Ding ordered at once. Three minutes later, a marked police car approached the helicopter. Two men got out and entered the Sikorsky as the car drove away. Two minutes after that, the rotor started turning. Then Chavez keyed his command microphone.

"Team, this is Lead. Stand-to. I repeat, stand-to."

"Excellent," Fürchtner said. He could barely see the turning rotor, but the blinking flying lights told the tale. "So, we begin. Herr Ostermann, stand up!"

Petra Dortmund made her way downstairs ahead of the important hostages. She frowned, wondering if she should be disappointed that they'd not killed this Dengler person to show their resolve. That time could come later when they started the serious interrogation aboard the airliner—and maybe Dengler knew all that Ostermann did. If so, killing him might be a tactical mistake. She activated her radio and called the rest of her people. They were assembling in the foyer as she came down the main staircase, along with the six hostages from the kitchen. No, she decided at the door, it would be better to kill a female hostage. That would have a greater impact on the police forces outside, all the more so if she were killed by another woman. . . .

"Are you ready?" Petra asked, receiving nods from the other four of her crew. "It will go as we planned," she told them. These people were disappointing ideologically, despite their having grown up and been

educated in a proper socialist country—three of them even had military training, which had included political indoctrination. But they knew their jobs, and had carried them out to this point. She could ask for little more. The house staff was coming in from the kitchen area.

One of the cooks was having trouble walking, and that annoyed the stubble-headed swine, Rosenthal saw, as he stopped by the main food-preparation table. They were taking him, he knew, taking him to die, and as in his nightmare he was doing *nothing!* The realization came to him so suddenly as to cause a crippling wave of headachelike pain. His body twisted left, and he saw the table—and on it a small paring knife. His head snapped forward, saw the terrorists looking at Maria, the cook. In that moment, he made his decision, and snapped up the knife, tucking it up his right sleeve. Perhaps fate would give him a chance. If so, Klaus Rosenthal promised himself, this time he'd take it.

"Team-2, this is Lead," Chavez said over the radio links. "We should have them start to come out shortly. Everybody check in." He listened to two double clicks first of all, from Loiselle and Tomlinson close to the *Schloss,* then the names.

"Rifle Two-One," Homer Johnston said. His night-vision system was now attached to his telescopic sight and trained rigidly on the building's main rear doors, as the rifleman commanded his breathing into a regular pattern.

"Rifle Two-Two," Weber called in a second later.

"Oso," Vega reported. He licked his lips as he brought his weapon up to his shoulder, his face covered with camouflage paint.

"Connolly."

"Lincoln."

"McTyler."

"Patterson."

"Pierce." They all reported from their spots on the grass.

"Price," the sergeant major reported from the left-side front seat of the helicopter.

"Okay, team, we are weapons-free. Normal rules of engagement in effect. Stay sharp, people," Chavez added unnecessarily. It was hard for the commander to stop talking in such a case. His position was eighty yards away from the helicopter, marginal range for his MP-10, with his NVGs aimed at the building.

"Door opening," Weber reported a fraction before Johnston.

"I have movement," Rifle Two-One confirmed.

"Captain Altmark, this is Chavez, kill the TV feed now," Ding ordered on his secondary radio.

"Ja, I understand," the police captain replied. He turned and shouted an order at the TV director. The cameras would stay on but would not broadcast, and the tapes from this point on were considered classified information. The signal going out on the airways now merely showed talking heads.

"Door open now," Johnston said from his sniper perch. "I see one hostage, looks like a male cook, and a subject, female, dark hair, holding a pistol." Sergeant Johnston commanded himself to relax, taking his finger off the double-set triggers of his rifle. He couldn't shoot now without a direct order from Ding, and that order would not come in such a situation. "Second hostage in view, it's Little Man," he said, meaning Dengler. Ostermann was Big Man, and the female secretaries were Blondie and Brownie, so named for their hair color. They didn't have photos for the domestic staff, hence no names for them. Known bad guys were "subjects."

They hesitated at the door, Johnston saw. Had to be a scary time for them, though how scary it was they would not and could not know. Too fucking bad, he thought, centering the crosshair reticle on her face from over two hundred yards away—which distance was the equivalent of ten feet for the rifleman. "Come on out, honey," he breathed. "We have something real special for you and your friends. Dieter?" he asked, keying his radio.

"On target, Homer," Rifle Two-Two replied. "We know this face, I think . . . I cannot recall the name. Leader, Rifle Two-Two—"

"Rifle Two, Lead."

"The female subject, we have seen her face recently. She is older now, but I know this face. Baader-Meinhof, Red Army Faction, one of those, I think, works with a man. Marxist, experienced terrorist, murderer . . . killed an American soldier, I think." None of which was particularly breaking news, but a known face was a known face.

Price broke in, thinking about the computer-morphing program they'd played with earlier in the week. "Petra Dortmund, perhaps?"

"Ja! That is the one! And her partner is Hans Fürchtner," Weber replied. *"Komm raus, Petra,"* he went on in his native language. *"Komm mir, Liebchen."*

Something was bothering her. It turned out to be difficult just to walk out of the *Schloss* onto the open rear lawn, though she could plainly see the helicopter with its blinking lights and turning rotor. She took a step or started to, her foot not wanting to make the move out and downward onto the granite steps, her blue eyes screwed up, because the trees east and west of the *Schloss* were lit so brightly by the lights on the far side of the house, with the shadow stretching out to the helicopter like a black finger, and maybe the thing that discomforted

her was the deathlike image before her. Then she shook her head, disposing of the thought as some undignified superstition. She yanked at her two hostages and made her way down the six steps to the grass, then outward toward the waiting aircraft.

"You sure of the ID, Dieter?" Chavez asked.

"Ja, yes, I am, sir. Petra Dortmund."

Next to Chavez, Dr. Bellow queried the name on his laptop. "Age forty-four, ex-Baader-Meinhof, very ideological, and the word on her is that she's ruthless as hell. That's ten-year-old information. Looks like it hasn't changed very much. Partner was one Hans Fürchtner. They're supposed to be married, in love, whatever, and very compatible personalities. They're killers, Ding."

"For the moment, they are," Chavez responded, watching the three figures cross the grass.

"She has a grenade in one hand, looks like a frag," Homer Johnston said next. "Left hand, say again left."

"Confirmed," Weber chimed in. "I see the hand grenade. Pin is in. I repeat, pin is in."

"Great!" Eddie Price snarled over the radio. *Fürstenfeldbrück all bloody over again,* he thought, strapped into the helicopter, which would be holding the grenade and the fool who might pull the bloody pin. "This is Price. Just one grenade?"

"I only see the one," Johnston replied, "no bulges in her pockets or anything, Eddie. Pistol in her right hand, grenade in her left."

"I agree," Weber said.

"She's right-handed," Bellow told them over his radio circuit, after checking the known data on Petra Dortmund. "Subject Dortmund is right-handed."

Which explains why the pistol is there and the grenade in her left, Price told himself. It also meant that if she decided to throw the grenade properly, she'd have to switch hands. Some good news, he thought. Maybe it's been a long time since she played with one of the damned things. Maybe she was even afraid of things that went *bang,* his mind added hopefully. Some people just carried the damned things for visual effect. He could see her now, walking at an even pace toward the helicopter.

"Male subject in view—Fürchtner," Johnston said over the radio. "He has Big Man with him . . . and Brownie also, I think."

"Agree," Weber said, staring through his ten-power sight. "Subject Fürchtner, Big Man, and Brownie are in sight. Fürchtner appears to be armed with pistol only. Starting down the steps now. Another subject at the door, armed with submachine gun, two hostages with him."

"They're being smart," Chavez observed. "Coming in groups. Our pal started down when his babe was halfway . . . we'll see if the rest do that . . ." Okay, Ding thought. Four, maybe five, groups traversing the open ground. Clever bastards, but not clever enough . . . maybe.

As they approached the chopper, Price got out and opened both side doors for loading. He'd already stashed his pistol in the map pocket of the left-side copilot's door. He gave the pilot a look.

"Just act normally. The situation is under control."

"If you say so, Englishman," the pilot responded, with a rough, tense voice.

"The aircraft does not leave the ground under any circumstances. Do you understand?" They'd covered that before, but repetition of instructions was the way you survived in a situation like this.

"Yes. If they force me, I will roll it to your side and scream malfunction."

Bloody decent of you, Price thought. He was wearing a blue shirt with wings pinned on above the breast pocket and a name tag that announced his name as Tony. A wireless earpiece gave him the radio link to the rest of the team, along with a microphone chip inside his collar.

"Sixty meters away, not a very attractive woman, is she?" he asked his teammates.

"Brush your hair if you can hear me," Chavez told him from his position. A moment later, he saw Price's left hand go up nervously to push his hair back from his eyes. "Okay, Eddie. Stay cool, man."

"Armed subject at the door with three hostages," Weber called. "No, no, two armed subjects with three hostages. Hostage Blondie is with this one. Old man and middle-aged woman, all dressed as servants."

"At least one more bad guy," Ding breathed, and at least three more hostages to come. "Helicopter can't carry all of them . . ." What were they planning to do with the extras? he wondered. Kill them?

"I see two more armed subjects and three hostages inside the back door," Johnston reported.

"That's all the hostages," Noonan said. "Total of six subjects, then. How are they armed, Rifle One?"

"Submachine guns, look like Uzis or the Czech copy of it. They are leaning toward the door now."

"Okay, I got it," Chavez said, holding his own binoculars. "Riflemen, take aim on subject Dortmund."

"On target," Weber managed to say first. Johnston swiveled to take aim a fraction of a second later, and then he froze still.

The human eye is especially sensitive to movement at night. When Johnston moved clockwise to adjust the aim of his rifle, Petra Dortmund thought she might have seen something. It stopped her in

her tracks, though she didn't know what it was that had stopped her. She stared right at Johnston, but the ghillie suit just looked like a clump of something, grass, leaves, or dirt, she couldn't tell in the semidarkness of green light reflecting off the pine trees. There was no man-shape to it, and the outline of the rifle was lost in the clutter well over a hundred meters away from her. Even so, she continued to look, without moving her gun hand, a look of curiosity on her face, not even visible alarm. Through Johnston's gunsight, the sergeant's open left eye could see the red strobe flashes from the helicopter's flying lights blinking on the ground around him while the right eye saw the crosshair reticle centered just above and between Petra Dortmund's eyes. His finger was on the trigger now, just barely enough to feel it there, about as much as one could do with so light a trigger pull. The moment lasted into several seconds, and his peripheral vision watched her gun hand most of all. If it moved too much, then . . .

But it didn't. She resumed walking to the helicopter, to Johnston's relief, not knowing that two sniper rifles followed her head every centimeter of the way. The next important part came when she got to the chopper. If she went around the right side, Johnston would lose her, leaving her to Weber's rifle alone. If she went left, then Dieter would lose her to his rifle alone. She seemed to be favoring . . . yes, Dortmund walked to the left side of the aircraft.

"Rifle Two-Two off target," Weber reported at once. "I have no shot at this time."

"On target, Rifle Two-One is on target," Johnston assured Chavez. *Hmm, let Little Man in first, honey,* he thought as loudly as he could.

Petra Dortmund did just that, pushing Dengler in the left-side door ahead of her, probably figuring to sit in the middle herself, so as to be less vulnerable to a shot from outside. A good theoretical call, Homer Johnston thought, but off the mark in this case. *Tough luck, bitch.*

The comfort of the familiar surroundings of the helicopter was lost on Gerhard Dengler at the moment. He strapped himself in under the aim of Petra's pistol, commanding himself to relax and be brave, as men did at such a time. Then he looked forward and felt hope. The pilot was the usual man, but the copilot was not. Whoever he was, he was fiddling with instruments as the flight crew did, but it wasn't him, though the shape of head and hair color were much the same, and both wore the white shirts with blue epaulets that private pilots tended to adopt as their uniforms. Their eyes met, and Dengler looked down and out of the aircraft, afraid that he'd give something away.

Good man, Eddie Price thought. His pistol was in the map pocket in the left-side door of the aircraft, well-hidden under a pile of flight charts, but easy to reach with his left hand. He'd get it, then turn quickly, bring it up and fire if it came to that. Hidden in his left ear,

the radio receiver, which looked like a hearing aid if one saw it, kept him posted, though it was a little hard to hear over the engine and rotor sounds of the Sikorsky. Now Petra's pistol was aimed at himself, or the pilot, as she moved it back and forth.

"Riflemen, do you have your targets?" Chavez asked.

"Rifle Two-One, affirmative, target in sight."

"Rifle Two-Two, negative, I have something in the way. Recommend switch to subject Fürchtner."

"Okay, Rifle Two-Two, switch to Fürchtner. Rifle Two-One, Dortmund is all yours."

"Roger that, lead," Johnston confirmed. "Rifle Two-One has subject Dortmund all dialed in." The sergeant reshot the range with his laser. One hundred forty-four meters. At this range, his bullet would drop less than an inch from the muzzle, and his "battle-sight" setting of two hundred fifty meters was a little high. He altered his crosshairs hold to just below the target's left eye. Physics would do the rest. His rifle had target-type double-set triggers. Pulling the rear trigger reduced the break-pull on the front one to a hard wish, and he was already making that wish. The helicopter would not be allowed to take off. Of more immediate concern, they couldn't allow the subjects to close the left-side door. His 7-mm match bullet would probably penetrate the polycarbonate window in the door, but the passage would deflect his round unpredictably, maybe causing a miss, perhaps causing the death or wounding of a hostage. He couldn't let that happen.

Chavez was well out of the action now, commanding instead of leading, something he'd practiced but didn't like very much. It was easier to be there with a gun in your hands than to stand back and tell people what to do by remote control. But he had no choice. Okay, he thought, we have Number One in the chopper and a gun on her. Number Two was in the open, two-thirds of the way to the chopper, and a gun on him. Two more bad guys were approaching the halfway point, with Mike Pierce and Steve Lincoln within forty meters, and the last two subjects still in the house, with Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson in the bushes right and left of them. Unless the bad guys had set up overwatch in the house, one or more additional subjects to come out after the rest had made it to the chopper . . . very unlikely, Chavez decided, and in any case all the hostages were either in the open or soon would be—and rescuing them was the mission, not necessarily killing the bad guys, he reminded himself. It wasn't a game and it wasn't a sport, and his plan, already briefed to Team-2's members, was holding up. The key to it now was the final team of subjects.

Rosenthal saw the snipers. It was to be expected, though it had

occurred to no one. He was the head gardener. The lawn was his, and the odd piles of material left and right of the helicopter were things that didn't belong, things that he would have known about. He'd seen the TV shows and movies. This was a terrorist incident, and the police would respond somehow. Men with guns would be out there, and there were two *things* on his lawn that hadn't been there in the morning. His eyes lingered on Weber's position, then fixed on it. There was his salvation or his death. There was no telling now, and that fact caused his stomach to contract into a tight, acid-laden ball.

"Here they come," George Tomlinson announced, when he saw two legs step out of the house . . . women's legs, followed by a man's, then two more sets of women's . . . and then a man's. "One subject and two hostages out. Two more hostages to go . . ."

Fürchtner was almost there, heading to the right side of the helicopter, to the comfort of Dieter Weber. But then he stopped, seeing inside the open right-side door to where Gerhardt Dengler was sitting, and decided to go to the other side.

"Okay, Team, stand by," Chavez ordered, trying to keep all four groups juggled in the same control, sweeping his binoculars over the field. As soon as the last were in the open . . .

"You, get inside, facing back." Fürchtner pushed Brownie toward the aircraft.

"Off target, Rifle Two-Two is off the subject," Weber announced rather loudly over the radio circuit.

"Re-target on the next group," Chavez ordered.

"Done," Weber said. "I'm on the lead subject, group three."

"Rifle Two-One, report!"

"Rifle Two-One tight on Subject Dortmund," Homer Johnston replied at once.

"Ready here!" Loiselle reported next from the bushes at the back of the house. "We have the fourth group now."

Chavez took a deep breath. All the bad guys were now in the open, and now it was time:

"Okay, Lead to team, *execute, execute, execute!"*

Loiselle and Tomlinson were already tensed to stand, and both fairly leaped to their feet invisibly, seven meters behind their targets, who were looking the wrong way and never had a clue what was going on behind them. Both soldiers lined up their tritium-lit sights on their

targets. Both were pushing-dragging women, and both were taller than their hostages, which made things easy. Both MP-10 submachine guns were set on three-round burst, and both sergeants fired at the same instant. There was no immediate sound. Their weapons were fully suppressed by the design in which the barrel and silencer were integrated, and the range was too close to miss. Two separate heads were blown apart by multiple impacts of large hollow-point bullets, and both bodies dropped limp to the lush green grass almost as quickly as the cartridge cases ejected by the weapons that had killed them.

"This is George. Two subjects dead!" Tomlinson called over the radio, as he started running to the hostages who were still walking toward the helicopter.

Homer Johnston was starting to cringe as a shape entered his field of view. It seemed to be a female body from the pale silk blouse, but his sight picture was not obscured yet, and with his crosshair reticle set just below Petra Dortmund's left eye, his right index finger pushed gently back on the set-trigger. The rifle roared, sending a meter-long muzzle flash into the still night air—

—she'd just seen two pale flashes in the direction of the house, but she didn't have time to react when the bullet struck the orbit just above her left eye. The bullet drove through the thickest part of her skull. It passed a few more centimeters and then the bullet fragmented into over a hundred tiny pieces, ripping her brain tissue to mush, which then exploded out the back of her skull in an expanding red-pink cloud that splashed over Gerhardt Dengler's face—

—Johnston worked the bolt, swiveling his rifle for another target; he'd seen the bullet dispatch the first.

Eddie Price saw the flash, and his hands were already moving from the *execute* command heard half a second earlier. He pulled his pistol from the map pocket and dove out the helicopter's autolike door, aiming it one-handed at Hans Fürchtner's head, firing one round just below his left eye, which expanded and exploded out the top of his head. A second round followed, higher, and actually not a well-aimed shot, but Fürchtner was already dead, falling to the ground, his hand still holding Erwin Ostermann's upper arm, and pulling him down somewhat until the fingers came loose.

That left two. Steve Lincoln took careful aim from a kneeling position, then stopped as his target passed behind the head of an elderly man wearing a vest. "Shit," Lincoln managed to say.

Weber got the other one, whose head exploded like a melon from the impact of the rifle bullet.

Rosenthal saw the head burst apart like something in a horror movie, but the large stubbly head next to his was still there, eyes suddenly wide open, and a machine gun still in his hand—and nobody was shooting at this one, standing next to him. Then Stubble-Head's eyes met his, and there was fear/hate/shock there, and Rosenthal's stomach turned to sudden ice, all time stopped around him. The paring knife came out of his sleeve and into his hand, which he swung wildly, catching the back of Stubble-Head's left hand. Stubble-Head's eyes went wider as the elderly man jumped aside, and his one hand went slack on the forestock of his weapon.

That cleared the way for Steve Lincoln, who fired a second three-round burst, which arrived simultaneously with a second rifle bullet from Weber's semiautomatic sniper rifle, and this one's head seemed to disappear.

"Clear!" Price called. "Clear aircraft!"

"Clear house!" Tomlinson announced.

"Clear middle!" Lincoln said last of all.

At the house, Loiselle and Tomlinson raced to their set of hostages and dragged them east, away from the house, lest there be a surviving terrorist inside to fire at them.

Mike Pierce did the same, with Steve Lincoln covering and assisting.

It was easier for Eddie Price, who first of all kicked the gun from Fürchtner's dead hand and made a quick survey of his target's wrecked head. Then he jumped into the helicopter to make sure that Johnston's first round had worked. He needed only to see the massive red splash on the rear bulkhead to know that Petra Dortmund was in whatever place terrorists went to. Then he carefully removed the hand grenade from her rigid left hand, checked to make sure the cotter pin was still in place, and pocketed it. Last of all, he took the pistol from her right hand, engaged the safety and tossed that.

"Mein Herrgott!" the pilot gasped, looking back.

Gerhardt Dengler looked dead as well, his face fairly covered on its left side with a mask of dripping red, his open eyes looking like doorknobs. The sight shook Price for a moment, until he saw the eyes blink, but the mouth was wide open, and the man seemed not to be breathing. Price reached down to flip off the belt buckle, then let Johnston pull the man clear of the aircraft. Little Man made it one step before falling to his knees. Johnston poured his canteen over the man's face to rinse off the blood. Then he unloaded his rifle and set it on the ground.

"Nice work, Eddie," he told Price.

"And that was a bloody good shot, Homer."

Sergeant Johnston shrugged. "I was afraid the gal would get in the way. Another couple of seconds and I wouldn't've had shit. Anyway, Eddie, nice work coming out of the aircraft and doing him before I could get number two off."

"You had a shot on him?" Price asked, safing and holstering his pistol.

"Waste of time. I saw his brains come out from your first."

The cops were swarming in now, plus a covey of ambulances with blinking blue lights. Captain Altmark arrived at the helicopter, with Chavez at his side. Experienced cop that he was, the mess inside the Sikorsky made him back away in silence.

"It's never pretty," Homer Johnston observed. He'd already had his look. The rifle and bullet had performed as programmed. Beyond that, it was his fourth sniper kill, and if people wanted to break the law and hurt the innocent, it was their problem, not his. One more trophy he couldn't hang on the wall with the muley and elk heads he'd collected over the years.

Price walked toward the middle group, fishing in his pocket for his curved briar pipe, which he lit with a kitchen match, his never-changing ritual for a mission completed.

Mike Pierce was assisting the hostages, all sitting for the moment while Steve Lincoln stood over them, his MP-10 out and ready for another target. But then a gaggle of Austrian police exploded out the back door, telling him that there were no terrorists left inside the building. With that, he safed his weapon and slung it over his shoulder. Lincoln came up to the elderly gent.

"Well done, sir," he told Klaus Rosenthal.

"What?"

"Using the knife on his hand. Well done."

"Oh, yeah," Pierce said, looking down at the mess on the grass. There was a deep cut on the back of its left hand. "You did that, sir?"

"Ja" was all Rosenthal was able to say, and that took three breaths.

"Well, sir, good for you." Pierce reached down to shake his hand. It hadn't really mattered very much, but resistance by a hostage was rare enough, and it had clearly been a gutsy move by the old gent.

"Amerikaner?"

"Shhh." Sergeant Pierce held a finger up to his lips. "Please don't tell anyone, sir."

Price arrived then, puffing on his pipe. Between Weber's sniper rifle and someone's MP-10 burst, this subject's head was virtually gone. "Bloody hell," the sergeant major observed.

"Steve's bird," Pierce reported. "I didn't have a clear shot this time.

Good one, Steve," he added.

"Thank you, Mike," Sergeant Lincoln replied, surveying the area. "Total of six?"

"Correct," Eddie answered, heading off toward the house. "Stand by here."

"Easy shots, both of 'em," Tomlinson said in his turn, surrounded by Austrian cops.

"Too tall to hide," Loiselle confirmed. He felt like having a smoke, though he'd quit two years before. His hostages were being led off now, leaving the two terrorists on the lush green grass, which their blood, he thought, would fertilize. Blood was good fertilizer, wasn't it? Such a fine house. A pity they'd not have the chance to examine it.

Twenty minutes later, Team-2 was back at the assembly point, changing out of their tactical clothes, packing their weapons and other gear for the ride back to the airport. The TV lights and cameras were running, but rather far away. The team was relaxing now, the stress bleeding off with the successful completion of their mission. Price puffed on his pipe outside the van, then tapped it out on the heel of his boot before boarding it.

CHAPTER 8

COVERAGE

The television coverage was out before Team-2 flew into Heathrow. Fortunately, the video of the event was hampered by the *Schloss*'s great size and the fact that the *Staatspolizei* kept the cameras well away from events, and on the wrong side of the building. About the only decent shot was of a team member lighting a pipe, followed by Captain Wilhelm Altmark's summary of events for the assembled reporters. A special and heretofore secret team of his country's federal police had dealt efficiently with the incident at Schloss Ostermann, he said, rescuing all of the hostages—no, unfortunately, no criminals had been arrested. All of this was taped for later use by Bill Tawney's staff off Austrian State Television, Sky News, and every other European news service that made use of the story. Though the British Sky News service had managed to get its own camera to Vienna, the only difference between its coverage and that of the locals was the angle. Even the various learned commentaries were essentially the same: specially trained and equipped police unit; probably with members of Austria's military; decisive action to resolve the incident with no injuries to the innocent victims; score one more, they didn't quite say, for the good guys. The bad guys' identities weren't put out with the initial reports. Tracking them down would be a police function, and the results would be fed to Tawney's intelligence section, along with the debriefs of the victims.

It had been a very long day for the Team-2 members, all of whom went home to sleep on arrival back at Hereford, with notification from Chavez that they'd dispense with morning PT the next day. There wasn't even time for a congratulatory set of beers in the local NCO Club—which in any case was closed by the time they got home.

On the flight home, Chavez noted to Dr. Bellow that despite the fitness of his people the fatigue factor was pretty high—more so than on their occasional night exercises. Bellow replied that stress was the ultimate fatigue generator, and that the team members were not immune to stress, no matter what their training or fitness. That evidently included himself, since after making the pronouncement, Bellow turned and slipped off to sleep, leaving Chavez to do the same

after a glass of red Spanish wine.

It was the lead news story in Austria, of course. Popov caught the first bit of it live in a *Gasthaus,* then more in his hotel room. He sipped orange schnapps while he applied his keen, professional eye to the screen. These anti-terror groups all looked pretty much the same, but that was to be expected, since they all trained to do the same thing and worked out of the same international manual—first promulgated by the English with their Special Air Service commandos, then followed by the German GSG-9, and then the rest of Europe, followed by the Americans—down to the black clothing, which struck Popov as theatrical, but they all had to wear something, and black made more sense than white clothing, didn't it? Of more immediate interest, there in the room with him was the leather attaché case filled with D-mark banknotes, which he would take to Bern the following day for deposit in his account before flying back to New York. It was remarkable, he thought as he switched the TV off and pulled the bedclothes up, two simple jobs, and he now had just over one million American dollars in his numbered and anonymous account. Whatever his employers wanted him to accomplish for them, he was being well compensated for it, and they didn't seem overly concerned by the expense. So much the better that the money went to a good cause, the Russian thought.

"Thank God," George Winston noted. "Hell, I know that guy. Erwin's good people," the Secretary of the Treasury said on his way out of the White House, where the cabinet meeting had run very long.

"Who did the takedown?"

"Well—" That caught him short. He wasn't supposed to say, and wasn't supposed to know. "What did the news say?"

"Local cops, Vienna police SWAT team, I guess."

"Well, I suppose they learned up on how to do it," Sec-Treas opined, heading toward his car with his Secret Service detail.

"The *Austrians?* Who'd they learn it from?"

"Somebody who knows how, I guess," Winston replied, getting into the car.

"So, what's the big deal about it?" Carol Brightling asked the Secretary of the Interior. To her it looked like another case of boys and their toys.

"Nothing, really," the Secretary replied, her own protective detail guiding her to the door of her official car. "Just that what they showed on TV, it was a pretty good job of rescuing all those people. I've been to Austria a few times, and the cops didn't strike me as all that great. Maybe I'm wrong. But George acts like he knows more than he's telling."

"Oh, that's right, Jean, he's 'inner cabinet,' " Dr. Brightling observed. It was something those in the "outer cabinet" didn't like. Of course, Carol Brightling wasn't technically in the cabinet at all. She had a seat against the wall instead of around the table, there only in case the issues of the meeting required a scientific opinion, which they hadn't today. Good news and bad news. She got to listen in on everything, and she took her notes on all that happened in the ornate, stuffy room that overlooked the Rose Garden, while the President controlled the agenda and the pace—badly in today's case, she thought. Tax policy had taken over an hour, and they'd never gotten to use of national forests, which came under the Department of the Interior, which issue had been postponed to the next meeting, a week away.

She didn't have a protective detail, either, not even an office in the White House itself. Previous Presidential Science Advisors had been in the West Wing, but she'd been moved to the Old Executive Office Building. It was a larger and more comfortable office, with a window, which her basement office in the White House would not have had, but though the OEOB was considered part of the White House for administrative and security purposes, it didn't have quite the prestige, and prestige was what it was all about if you were part of the White House staff. Even under this President, who worked pretty hard to treat everyone the same and who wasn't into the status bullshit—there was no avoiding it at this level of government. And so, Carol Brightling clung to her right to have lunch in the White House Mess with the Big Boys and Big Girls of the Administration, and grumbled that to see the President except at his request, she had to go through the Chief of Staff and the appointments secretary to get a few minutes of His Valuable Time. As though she'd ever wasted it.

A Secret Service agent opened the door for her with a respectful nod and smile, and she walked into this surpassingly ugly building, then turned right to her office, which at least overlooked the White House. She handed her notes to her (male, of course) secretary on the way in for transcription, then sat down at her desk, finding there a new pile of papers to be read and acted upon. She opened her desk drawer and got herself a starlight mint to suck on as she attacked the pile. Then on reflection she lifted her TV controller and turned her office television to CNN for a look at what was happening around the world. It was the top of the hour, and the lead story was the thing in Vienna.

God, what a house was her first thought. Like a king's palace, a huge waste of resources for one man, or even one large family, to use as a private residence. What was it Winston had said of the owner? Good people? Sure. All good people lived like wastrels, glomming up precious resources like that. Another goddamned plutocrat, stock

trader, currency speculator, however he earned the money to buy a place like that—and then terrorists had invaded his privacy. Well, gee, she thought, I wonder why they picked him. No sense attacking a sheep farmer or truck driver. Terrorists went after the moneyed people, or the supposedly important ones, because going for ordinary folks had little in the way of a political point, and these were, after all, political acts. But they hadn't been as bright as they ought to have been. Whoever had picked them had . . . picked them to fail? Was *that* possible? She supposed that it was. It was a *political* act, after all, and such things could have all manner of real purposes. That brought a smile, as the reporter described the attack by the local police SWAT team—unfortunately not shown, because the local cops hadn't wanted cameras and reporters in the way—then the release of the hostages, shown in closeup to let people share the experience. They'd been so close to death, only to be released, saved by the local cops, who'd really only restored to them their programmed time of death, because everything died, sooner or later. That was Nature's plan, and you couldn't fight Nature . . . though you could help her along, couldn't you? The reporter went on to say that this had been the second terrorist incident in Europe over the last couple of months, both of them failures due to adroit police action. Carol remembered the attempted robbery in Bern, another botch . . . a creative one? She might have to find that out, though in this case a failure was as useful as—no, *more* useful than—a success, for the people who were planning things. That thought brought a smile. Yes. It was more useful than a success, wasn't it? And with that she looked down at a fax from Friends of the Earth, who had her direct number and frequently sent her what they thought was important information.

She leaned back in her comfortable high-backed chair to read it over twice. A good bunch of people with the right ideas, though few listened to them.

"Dr. Brightling?" Her secretary stuck his head in the door.

"Yes, Roy?"

"You still want me to show you those faxes—like the one you're reading, I mean?" Roy Gibbons asked.

"Oh, yes."

"But those people are card-carrying nuts."

"Not really. I like some of the things they do," Carol replied, tossing the fax in her trash can. She'd save their idea for some future date.

"Fair enough, doc." The head disappeared back into the outer office.

The next thing in her pile was pretty important, a report of procedures for shutting down nuclear power reactors, and the subsequent safety of the shut-down reactor systems: how long before environmental factors might attack and corrode the internal items,

and what environmental damage could result from it. Yes, this was very important stuff, and fortunately the index appended to it showed data on individual reactors across the country. She popped another starlight mint into her mouth and leaned forward, setting the papers flat on the desktop so that she could stare straight down at them for reading purposes.

"This seems to work," Steve said quietly.

"How many strands fit inside?" Maggie asked.

"Anywhere from three to ten."

"And how large is the overall package?"

"Six microns. Would you believe it? The packaging is white in color, so it reflects light pretty well, especially UV radiation, and in a water-spray environment, it's just about invisible." The individual capsules couldn't be seen with the naked eye, and only barely with an optical microscope. Better still, their weight was such that they'd float in air about the same as dust particles, as readily breathable as secondhand smoke in a singles bar. Once in the body, the coating would dissolve, and allow release of the Shiva strands into the lungs or the upper GI, where they could go to work.

"Water soluble?" Maggie asked.

"Slowly, but faster if there's anything biologically active in the water, like the trace hydrochloric acid in saliva, for example. Wow, we could have really made money from the Iraqis with this one, kiddo—or anybody who wants to play bio-war in the real world."

Their company had invented the technology, working on an NIH grant designed to develop an easier way than needles to deliver vaccines. Needles required semiskilled use. The new technique used electrophoresis to wrap insignificantly tiny quantities of protective gel around even smaller amounts of airborne bioactive agents. That would allow people to ingest vaccines with a simple drink rather than the more commonly used method of inoculation. If they ever fielded a working AIDS vaccine, this would be the method of choice for administering it in Africa, where countries lacked the infrastructure to do much of anything. Steve had just proven that the same technology could be used to deliver active virus with the same degree of safety and reliability. Or almost proven it.

"How do we proof-test it?" Maggie asked.

"Monkeys. How we fixed for monkeys in the lab?"

"Lots," she assured him. This would be an important step. They'd give it to a few monkeys, then see how well it spread through the laboratory population. They'd use rhesus monkeys. Their blood was so similar to humans'.

Subject Four was the first, as expected. He was fifty-three years old and his liver function was so far off the scale as to qualify him for a high place on the transplant list at the University of Pittsburgh. His skin had a yellowish cast in the best of circumstances, but that didn't stop him from hitting the booze harder than any of their test subjects. His name, he said, was Chester something, Dr. John Killgore remembered. Chester's brain function was about the lowest in the group as well. He watched TV a lot, rarely talked to anyone, never even read comic books, which were popular with the rest, as were TV cartoons—watching the Cartoon Channel was among their most popular pastimes.

They were all in hog heaven, John Killgore had noted. All the booze and fast food and warmth that they could want, and most of them were even learning to use the showers. From time to time, a few would ask what the deal was here, but their inquiries were never pressed beyond the pro-forma answer they got from the doctors and security guards.

But with Chester, they had to take action now. Killgore entered the room and called his name. Subject Four rose from his bunk and came over, clearly feeling miserable.

"Not feeling good, Chester?" Killgore asked from behind his mask.

"Stomach, can't keep stuff down, feel crummy all over," Four replied.

"Well, come along with me and we'll see what we can do about that, okay?"

"You say so, doc," Chester replied, augmenting the agreement with a loud belch.

Outside the door, they put him in a wheelchair. It was only fifty yards to the clinical side of the installation. Two orderlies lifted Number Four into a bed, and restrained him into it with Velcro ties. Then one of them took a blood sample. Ten minutes later, Killgore tested it for Shiva antibodies, and the sample turned blue, as expected. Chester, Subject Number Four, had less than a week to live—not as much as the six to twelve months to which his alcoholism had already limited him, but not really all that much of a reduction, was it? Killgore went back inside to start an IV into his arm, and to calm Chester down, he hung a morphine drip that soon had him unconscious and even smiling slightly. Good. Number Four would soon die, but he would do so in relative peace. More than anything else, Dr. Killgore wanted to keep the process orderly.

He checked his watch when he got back to his office/ viewing room. His hours were long ones. It was almost like being a real physician again. He hadn't practiced clinical medicine since his residency, but he read all the right journals and knew the techniques, and besides,

his current crop of patient/victims wouldn't know the difference anyway. Tough luck, Chester, but it's a tough world out there, Steve thought, going back to his notes. Chester's early response to the virus had been a little unsettling—only half the time programmed—but it had been brought about by his grossly reduced liver function. It couldn't be helped. Some people would get hit sooner than others because of differing physical vulnerabilities. So the outbreak would start unevenly. It shouldn't matter in the eventual effects, though it would alert people sooner than he hoped it would. That would cause a run on the vaccines Steve Berg and his shop were developing. "A" would be widely distributed after the rush to manufacture it. "B" would be more closely held, assuming that he and his team could indeed get it ready for use. "A" would go out to everybody, while "B" would go only to those people who were supposed to survive, people who understood what it was all about, or who would accept their survival and get on with things with the rest of the crew.

Killgore shook his head. There was a lot of stuff left to be done, and as usual, not enough time to do it.

Clark and Stanley went over the takedown immediately upon their arrival in the morning, along with Peter Covington, still sweaty from his morning workout with Team-1. Chavez and his people would just be waking up after their long day on the European mainland.

"It was a bloody awful tactical situation. And Chavez is right," Major Covington went on. "We need our own helicopter crews. Yesterday's mission cried out for that, but we didn't have what we needed. That's why he had to execute a poor plan and depend on luck to accomplish it."

"He could have asked their army for help," Stanley pointed out.

"Sir, we both know that one doesn't commit to an important tactical move with a helicopter crew one doesn't know and with whom one has not worked," Covington observed, in his best Sandhurst grammar. "We need to look at this issue immediately."

"True," Stanley agreed, looking over at Clark.

"Not part of the TO and E, but I see the point," Rainbow Six conceded. How the hell had they overlooked this requirement? He asked himself. "Okay, first let's figure all the chopper types we're likely to see, and then find out if we can get some drivers who're current in most of them."

"Ideally, I'd love to have a Night Stalker—but we'd have to take it with us everywhere we go, and that means—what? A C-5 or a C-17 transport aircraft assigned to us at all times?" Stanley observed.

Clark nodded. The Night Stalker version of the McDonnell-Douglas AH-6 Loach had been invented for Task Force 160, now redesignated

the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—SOAR—based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. They were probably the wildest and craziest bunch of aviators in the world, who worked on the sly with brother aviators from selected other countries—Britain and Israel were the two most often allowed into the 160 compound at Campbell. In a real sense, getting the choppers and flight crews assigned to Rainbow would be the easy part. The hard part would be getting the fixed-wing transport needed to move the chopper to where they needed it. It'd be about as hard to hide as an elephant in a schoolyard. With Night Stalker they'd have all manner of surveillance gear, a special silent rotor—*and Santa on his fucking sleigh with eight tiny reindeer,* Clark's mind went on. It would never happen, despite all the drag he had in Washington and London.

"Okay, I'll call Washington for authorization to get some aviators on the team. Any problem getting some aircraft here for them to play with?"

"Shouldn't be," Stanley replied.

John checked his watch. He'd have to wait until 9:00 A.M. Washington time—2:00 P.M. in England—to make his pitch via the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, which was the routing agency for Rainbow's American funding. He wondered how Ed Foley would react—more to the point, he needed Ed to be an enthusiastic advocate. Well, that ought not to be too hard. Ed knew field operations, after a fashion, and was loyal to the people at the sharp end. Better yet, Clark was asking after they'd had a major success, and that usually worked a lot better than a plea for help after a failure.

"Okay, we'll continue this with the team debrief." Clark stood and went to his office. Helen Montgomery had the usual pile of papers on his desk, somewhat higher than usual, as this one included the expected thank-you telegrams from the Austrians. The one from the Justice Minister was particularly flowery.

"Thank you, sir," John breathed, setting that one aside.

The amazing part of this job was all the admin stuff. As the commander of Rainbow, Clark had to keep track of when and how money came in and was spent, and he had to defend such things as the number of gun rounds his people fired every week. He did his best to slough much of this off on Alistair Stanley and Mrs. Montgomery, but a lot of it still landed on his desk. He had long experience as a government employee, and at CIA he'd had to report in endless detail on every field operation he'd ever run to keep the desk weenies happy. But this was well beyond that, and it accounted for *his* time on the firing range, as he found shooting a good means of stress relief, especially if he imagined the images of his bureaucratic tormentors in the center of the Q-targets he perforated with .45-caliber bullets.

Justifying a budget was something new and foreign. If it wasn't important, why fund it at all, and if it was important, why quibble over a few thousand bucks' worth of bullets? It was the bureaucratic mentality, of course, all those people who sat at their desks and felt that the world would collapse around them if they didn't have all their papers initialed, signed, stamped, and properly filed, and if that inconvenienced others, too bad. So he, John Terrence Clark, CIA field officer for more than thirty years, a quiet legend in his agency, was stuck at his expensive desk, behind a closed door, working on paperwork that any self-respecting accountant would have rejected, on top of which he had to supervise and pass judgment on real stuff, which was both more interesting and far more to the point.

And it wasn't as though his budget was all that much to worry about. Less than fifty people, total, scarcely three million dollars in payroll expense, since everyone was paid the usual military rate, plus the fact that Rainbow picked up everyone's housing expense out of its multigovernment funding. One inequity was that the American soldiers were better paid than their European counterparts. That bothered John a little, but there was nothing he could do about it, and with housing costs picked up—the housing at Hereford wasn't lavish, but it was comfortable—nobody had any trouble living. The morale of the troops was excellent. He'd expected that. They were elite troopers, and that sort invariably had a good attitude, especially since they trained almost every day, and soldiers loved to train almost as much as they loved to do the things they trained for.

There would be a little discord. Chavez's Team-2 had drawn both field missions, as a result of which they'd swagger a little more, to the jealous annoyance of Peter Covington's Team-1, which was slightly ahead on the team/team competition of PT and shooting. Not even a cat's whisker of difference, but people like this, as competitive as any athletes could ever be, worked damned hard for that fifth of a percentage point, and it really came down to who'd had what for breakfast on the mornings of the competitive exercises, or maybe what they'd dreamed about during the night. Well, that degree of competition was healthy for the team as a whole. And decidedly unhealthy for those against whom his people deployed.

Bill Tawney was at his desk as well, going over the known information on the terrorists of the night before. The Austrians had begun their inquiries with the German Federal Police Office—the Bundes Kriminal Amt—even before the takedown. The identities of Hans Fürchtner and Petra Dortmund had been confirmed by fingerprints. The BKA investigators would jump onto the case hard that day. For starters, they'd trace the IDs of the people who'd rented the car that had been

driven to the Ostermann home, and search for the house in Germany —probably Germany, Tawney reminded himself—that they'd lived in. The other four would probably be harder. Fingerprints had already been taken and were being compared on the computer scanning systems that everyone had now. Tawney agreed with the initial assessment of the Austrians that the four spear-carriers had probably been from the former East Germany, which seemed to be turning out all manner of political aberrants: converts from communism who were now discovering the joys of nazism, lingering true believers in the previous political-economic model, and just plain thugs who were a major annoyance to the regular German police forces.

But this had to be political. Fürchtner and Dortmund were—*had been,* Bill corrected himself—real, believing communists all their lives. They'd been raised in the former West Germany to middle-class families, the way a whole generation of terrorists had, striving all their active lives for socialist perfection or some such illusion. And so they had raided the home of a high-end capitalist . . . seeking what?

Tawney lifted a set of faxes from Vienna. Erwin Ostermann had told the police during his three-hour debrief that they'd sought his "special inside codes" to the international trading system. Were there such things? Probably not, Tawney judged—why not make sure? He lifted his phone and dialed the number of an old friend, Martin Cooper, a former "Six" man who now worked in Lloyd's ugly building in London's financial district.

"Cooper," a voice said.

"Martin, this is Bill Tawney. How are you this rainy morning?"

"Quite well, Bill, and you—what are you doing now?"

"Still taking the Queen's shilling, old man. New job, very hush-hush, I'm afraid."

"What can I do to help you, old man?"

"Rather a stupid question, actually. Are there any insider channels in the international trading system? Special codes and such things?"

"I bloody wish there were, Bill. Make our job here much easier," replied the former station chief for Mexico City and a few other minor posts for the British Secret Intelligence Service. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Not sure, but the subject just came up."

"Well, people at this level do have personal relationships and often trade information, but I take it you mean something rather more structured, an insider-network marketplace sort of thing?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"If so, they've all kept it a secret from me and the people I work with, old man. International conspiracies?" Cooper snorted. "And this is a chatty mob, you know. Everyone's into everyone else's business."

"No such thing, then?"

"Not to my knowledge, Bill. It's the sort of thing the uninformed believe in, of course, but it doesn't exist, unless that's the mob who assassinated John Kennedy," Cooper added with a chuckle.

"Much what I'd thought, Martin, but I needed to tick that box. Thanks, my friend."

"Bill, you have any idea on who might have attacked that Ostermann chap in Vienna?"

"Not really. You know him?"

"My boss does. I've met him once. Seems a decent bloke, and bloody smart as well."

"Really all I know is what I saw on the telly this morning." It wasn't entirely a lie, and Martin would understand in any case, Tawney knew.

"Well, whoever did the rescue, my hat is off to them. Smells like SAS to me."

"Really? Well, that wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

"Suppose not. Good hearing from you, Bill. How about dinner sometime?"

"Love to. I'll call you next time I'm in London."

"Excellent. Cheers."

Tawney replaced the phone. It seemed that Martin had landed on his feet after being let go from "Six," which had reduced its size with the diminution of the Cold War. Well, that was to be expected. *The sort of thing the uninformed believe in,* Tawney thought. Yes, that fit. Fürchtner and Dortmund were communists, and would not have trusted or believed in the open market. In their universe, people could only get wealthy by cheating, exploiting, and conspiring with others of the same ilk. And what did that mean? . . .

Why had they attacked the home of Erwin Ostermann? You couldn't rob such a man. He didn't keep his money in cash or gold bars. It was all electronic, theoretical money, really, that existed in computer memories and traveled across telephone wires, and that was difficult to steal, wasn't it?

No, what a man like Ostermann had was *information,* the ultimate source of power, ethereal though it was. Were Dortmund and Fürchtner willing to kill for that? It appeared so, but were the two dead terrorists the sort of people who could make use of such information? No, they couldn't have been, because then they would have known that the thing they'd sought didn't exist.

Somebody hired them, Tawney thought. Somebody had sent them out on their mission. But who?

And to what purpose? Which was even a better question, and one from which he could perhaps learn the answer to the first.

Back up, he told himself. If someone had hired them for a job, who could it have been? Clearly someone connected to the old terror network, someone who'd know where they were and whom they'd known and trusted to some degree, enough to risk their lives. But Fürchtner and Dortmund had been ideologically pure communists. Their acquaintances would be the same, and they would certainly not have trusted or taken orders from anyone of a different political shade. And how else could this notional person have known where and how to contact them, win their confidence, and send them off on a mission of death, chasing after something that didn't really exist? . . .

A superior officer? Tawney wondered, stretching his mind for more information than he really had. Someone of the same political bent or beliefs, able to order them, or at least to motivate them to do something dangerous.

He needed more information, and he'd use his SIS and police contacts to get every scrap he could from the Austrian/German investigation. For starters, he called Whitehall to make sure he got full translations of all the hostage interviews. Tawney had been an intelligence officer for a long time, and something had gotten his nose to twitch.

"Ding, I didn't like your takedown plan," Clark said in the big conference room.

"I didn't either, Mr. C, but without a chopper, didn't have much choice, did I?" Chavez replied with an air of self-righteousness. "But that's not the thing that really scares me."

"What is?" John asked.

"Noonan brought this one up. Every time we go into a place, there are people around—the public, reporters, TV crews, all of that. What if one of them has a cell phone and calls the bad guys inside to tell them what's happening? Real simple, isn't it? We're fucked and so are some hostages."

"We should be able to deal with that," Tim Noonan told them. "It's the way a cell phone works. It broadcasts a signal to tell the local cell that it's there and it's on, so that the computer systems can route an incoming call to it. Okay, we can get instrumentation to read that, and maybe to block the signal path—maybe even clone the bad guys' phone, trap the incoming call and bag the bastards outside, maybe even flip 'em, right? But I need that software, and I need it now."

"David?" Clark turned to Dave Peled, their Israeli techno-genius.

"It can be done. I expect the technology exists already at NSA or elsewhere."

"What about Israel?" Noonan asked pointedly.

"Well . . . yes, we have such things."

"Get them," Clark ordered. "Want me to call Avi personally?"

"That would help."

"Okay, I need the name and specifications of the equipment. How hard to train the operators?"

"Not very," Peled conceded. "Tim can do it easily."

Thank you for that vote of confidence, Special Agent Noonan thought, without a smile.

"Back to the takedown," Clark commanded. "Ding, what were you thinking?"

Chavez leaned forward in his chair. He wasn't just defending himself; he was defending his team. "Mainly that I didn't want to lose a hostage, John. Doc told us we had to take those two seriously, and we had a hard deadline coming up. Okay, the mission as I understand it is *not* to lose a hostage. So, when they made it clear they wanted the chopper for transport, it was just a matter of giving it to them, with a little extra put in. Dieter and Homer did their jobs perfectly. So did Eddie and the rest of the shooters. The dangerous part was getting Louis and George up to the house so they could take down the last bunch. They did a nice ninja job getting there unseen," Chavez went on, gesturing to Loiselle and Tomlinson. "That was the most dangerous part of the mission. We had them in a light-well and the camo stuff worked. If the bad guys had been using NVGs, that would have been a problem, but the additional illumination off the trees—from the lights the cops brought in, I mean—would have interfered with that. NVGs flare a lot if you throw light their way. It was a gamble," Ding admitted, "but it was a gamble that looked better than having a hostage whacked right in front of us while we were jerking off at the assembly point. That's the mission, Mr. C, and I was the commander on the scene. I made the call." He didn't add that his call had worked.

"I see. Well, good shooting from everybody, and Loiselle and Tomlinson did very well to get close undetected," Alistair Stanley said from his place, opposite Clark's. "Even so—"

"Even so, we need helicopters for a case like this one. How the hell did we overlook that requirement?" Chavez demanded.

"My fault, Domingo," Clark admitted. "I'm going to call in on that today."

"Just so we get it fixed, man." Ding stretched in his seat. "My troops got it done, John. Crummy setup, but we got it done. Next time, be better if things went a little smoother," he conceded. "But when the doc tells me that the bad guys will really kill somebody, that tells me I have to take decisive action, doesn't it?"

"Depending on the situation, yes," Stanley answered the question.

"Al, what does *that* mean?" Chavez asked sharply. "We need better mission guidelines. I need to have it spelled out. When can I allow a hostage to get killed? Does the age or sex of the hostage enter into the equation? What if somebody takes over a kindergarten or a hospital maternity ward? You can't expect us to disregard human factors like that. Okay, I understand that you can't plan for every possibility, and as the commanders on the scene, Peter and I have to exercise judgment, but my default position is to prevent the death of a hostage if I can do it. If that means taking risks—well, it's a probability measured against a certainty, isn't it? In a case like that, you take the risk, don't you?"

"Dr. Bellow," Clark asked, "how confident were you in your evaluation of the terrorists' state of mind?"

"Very. They were experienced. They'd thought through a lot of the mission, and in my opinion they were dead serious about killing hostages to show us their resolve," the psychiatrist replied.

"Then or now?"

"Both," Bellow said confidently. "These two were political sociopaths. Human life doesn't mean much to that sort of personality. Just poker chips to toss around the table."

"Okay, but what if they'd spotted Loiselle and Tomlinson coming in?"

"They would probably have killed a hostage and that would have frozen the situation for a few minutes."

"And my backup plan in that case was to rush the house from the east side and shoot our way in as quickly as possible," Chavez went on. "The better way is to zip-line down from some choppers and hit the place like a Kansas tornado. That's dangerous, too," he conceded. "But the people we're dealing with ain't the most reasonable folks in the world, are they?"

The senior team members didn't like this sort of discussion, since it reminded them that as good as the Rainbow troopers were, they weren't gods or supermen. They'd now had two incidents, both of them resolved without a civilian casualty. That made for mental complacency on the command side, further exacerbated by the fact that Team-2 had done a picture-perfect takedown under adverse tactical circumstances. They trained their men to be supermen, Olympic-perfect physical specimens, supremely trained in the use of firearms and explosives, and most of all, mentally prepared for the rapid destruction of human life.

The Team-2 members sitting around the table looked at Clark with neutral expressions, taking it all in with remarkable equanimity because they'd known last night that the plan was flawed and dangerous, but they'd brought it off anyway, and they were

understandably proud of themselves for having done the difficult and saved their hostages. But Clark was questioning the capabilities of their team leader, and they didn't like that either. For the former SAS members among them, the reply to all this was simple, their old regimental motto: Who Dares, Wins. They'd dared and won. And the score for them was Christians ten, Lions nil, which wasn't a bad score at all. About the only unhappy member of the team was First Sergeant Julio Vega. "Oso" carried the machine gun, which had yet to come into play. The long-riflemen, Vega saw, were feeling pretty good about themselves, as were the light-weapons guys. But those were the breaks. He'd been there, a few meters from Weber, ready to cover if a bad guy had gotten lucky and managed to run away, firing his weapon. He'd have cut him in half with his M-60—his pistol work in the base range was one of the best. There was killing going on, and he wasn't getting to play. The religious part of Vega reproached the rest of him for thinking that way, which caused a few grumbles and chuckles when he was alone.

"So, where does that leave us?" Chavez asked. "What are our operational guidelines in the case where a hostage is likely to get killed by the bad guys?"

"The mission remains saving the hostages, where practicable," Clark replied, after a few seconds' thought.

"And the team leader on the scene decides what's practicable and what isn't?"

"Correct," Rainbow Six confirmed.

"So, we're right back where we started, John," Ding pointed out. "And that means that Peter and I get all the responsibility, and all the criticism if somebody else doesn't like what we've done." He paused. "I understand the responsibility that comes along with being in command in the field, but it would be nice to have something a little firmer to fall back on, y'know? Mistakes will happen out there sooner or later. We know it. We don't like it, but we know it. Anyway, I'm telling you here and now, John, I see the mission as the preservation of innocent life, and that's the side I'm going to come down on."

"I agree with Chavez," Peter Covington said. "That must be our default position."

"I never said it wasn't," Clark said, suddenly becoming angry. The problem was that there could well be situations in which it was not possible to save a life—but training for such a situation was somewhere between extremely difficult and damned near impossible, because all the terrorist incidents they'd have to deal with in the field would be as different as the terrorists and the sites they selected. So, he *had to* trust Chavez and Covington. Beyond that, he could set up training scenarios that forced them to think and act, in the hope that

the practice would stand them in good stead in the field. It had been a lot easier as a field officer in the CIA, Clark thought. There he had always had the initiative, had almost always chosen the time and place of action to suit himself. Rainbow, however, was always *re*active, responding to the initiative of others. That simple fact was why he had to train his people so hard, so that their expertise could correct the tactical inequity. And that had worked twice. But would it continue to work?

So, for starters, John decided, from now on a more senior Rainbow member would always accompany the teams into the field to provide support, someone the team leaders could lean against. Of course, they wouldn't like the oversight right there at their shoulders, but that couldn't be helped. With that thought he dismissed the meeting, and called Al Stanley into his office, where he presented his idea.

"Fine with me, John. But who are the seniors who got out?"

"You and me, for starters."

"Very well. Makes sense—what with all the fitness and shooting training we subject ourselves to. Domingo and Peter might find it all a bit overpowering, however."

"They both know how to follow orders—and they'll come to us for advice when it's needed. Everybody does. I sure did, whenever the opportunity offered itself." Which hadn't been very damned often, though John remembered wishing for it often enough.

"I agree with your proposal, John," Stanley said. "Shall we write it up for the order book?"

Clark nodded. "Today."

CHAPTER 9

STALKERS

"I can do that, John," the Director of Central Intelligence said. "It means talking to the Pentagon, however."

"Today if possible, Ed. We really need this. I was remiss in not considering the need earlier. Seriously remiss," Clark added humbly.

"It happens," DCI Foley observed. "Okay, let me make some calls and get back to you." He broke the connection and thought for a few seconds, then flipped through his rolodex, and found the number of CINC-SNAKE, as the post was laughingly called. Commander in Chief, Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base outside Tampa, Florida, was the boss of all the "snake-eaters," the special-operations people from whom Rainbow had drawn its American personnel. General Sam Wilson was the man behind the desk, not a place he was especially comfortable. He'd started off as an enlisted man who'd opted for airborne and ranger training, then moved into Special Forces, which he'd left to get his college degree in history at North Carolina State University, then returned to the Army as a second lieutenant and worked his way up the ladder rapidly. A youthful fifty-three, he had four shiny stars on his shoulders now and was in charge of a unified multiservice command that included members from each of the armed services, all of whom knew how to cook snake over an open fire.

"Hi, Ed," the general said, on getting the call over his secure phone. "What's happening at Langley?" The special-operations community was very close with CIA, and often provided intelligence to it or the muscle to run a difficult operation in the field.

"I have a request from Rainbow," the DCI told him.

"Again? They've already raided my units, you know."

"They've put 'em to good use. That was their takedown in Austria yesterday."

"Looked good on TV," Sam Wilson admitted. "Will I get additional information?" By which he meant information on who the bad guys had been.

"The whole package when it's available, Sam," Foley promised.

"Okay, what does your boy need?"

"Aviators, helicopter crews."

"You know how long it takes to train those people, Ed? Jesus, they're expensive to maintain, too."

"I know that, Sam," the voice assured him from Langley. "The Brits have to put up, too. You know Clark. He wouldn't ask 'less he needed it."

Wilson had to admit that, yes, he knew John Clark, who'd once saved a wrecked mission and, in the process, a bunch of soldiers, a long time and several presidents ago. Ex-Navy SEAL, the Agency said of him, with a solid collection of medals and a lot of accomplishments. And this Rainbow group had two successful operations under its belt.

"Okay, Ed, how many?"

"One really good one for now."

It was the "for now" part that worried Wilson. But—"Okay, I'll be back to you later today."

"Thanks, Sam." One nice thing about Wilson, Foley knew, was that he didn't screw around on time issues. For him "right now" meant right the hell now.

Chester wasn't going to make it even as far as Killgore had thought. His liver function tests were heading downhill faster than anything he'd ever seen—or read about in the medical literature. The man's skin was yellow now, like a pale lemon, and slack over his flaccid musculature. Respiration was already a little worrisome, too, partly because of the large dose of morphine he was getting to keep him unconscious or at least stuporous. Both Killgore and Barbara Archer had wanted to treat him as aggressively as possible, to see if there were really a treatment modality that might work on Shiva, but the fact of the matter was that Chester's underlying medical conditions were so serious that no treatment regimen could overcome both those problems *and* the Shiva.

"Two days," Killgore said. "Maybe less."

"I'm afraid you're right," Dr. Archer agreed. She had all manner of ideas for handling this, from conventional—and almost certainly useless—antibiotics to Interleukin-2, which some thought might have clinical applications to such a case. Of course, modern medicine had yet to defeat any viral disease, but some thought that buttressing the body's immune system from one direction might have the effect of helping it in another, and there were a lot of powerful new synthetic antibiotics on the market now. Sooner or later, someone would find a magic bullet for viral diseases. But not yet: "Potassium?" she asked, after considering the prospects for the patient and the negligible value of treating him at all. Killgore shrugged agreement.

"I suppose. You can do it if you want." Killgore waved to the

medication cabinet in the corner.

Dr. Archer walked over, tore a 40cc disposable syringe out of its paper and plastic container, then inserted the needle in a glass vial of potassium-and-water solution, and filled the needle by pulling back on the plunger. Then she returned to the bed and inserted the needle into the medication drip, pushing the plunger now to give the patient a hard bolus of the lethal chemical. It took a few seconds, longer than if she had done the injection straight into a major vein, but Archer didn't want to touch the patient any more than necessary, even with gloves. It didn't really matter that much. Chester's breathing within the clear plastic oxygen mask seemed to hesitate, then restart, then hesitate again, then become ragged and irregular for six or eight breaths. Then . . . it stopped. The chest settled into itself and didn't rise. His eyes had been semi-open, like those of a man in shallow sleep or shock, aimed in her direction but not really focused. Now they closed for the last time. Dr. Archer took her stethoscope and held it on the alcoholic's chest. There was no sound at all. Archer stood up, took off her stethoscope, and pocketed it.

So long, Chester, Killgore thought.

"Okay," she said matter-of-factly. "Any symptoms with the others?"

"None yet. Antibody tests are positive, however," Killgore replied. "Another week or so before we see frank symptoms, I expect."

"We need a set of healthy test subjects," Barbara Archer said. "These people are too—too sick to be proper benchmarks for Shiva."

"That means some risks."

"I know that," Archer assured him. "And you know we need better test subjects."

"Yes, but the risks are serious," Killgore observed.

"And I know *that,"* Archer replied.

"Okay, Barb, run it up the line. I won't object. You want to take care of Chester? I have to run over to see Steve."

"Fine." She walked to the wall, picked up the phone, and punched three digits onto the keypad to get the disposal people.

For his part, Killgore went into the changing area. He stopped in the decontamination chamber first of all, pushed the large square red button, and waited for the machinery to spray him down from all directions with the fog-solution of antiseptics that were known to be immediately and totally lethal to the Shiva virus. Then he went through the door into the changing room itself, where he removed the blue plastic suit, tossed it into the bin for further and more dramatic decontamination—it wasn't really needed, but the people in the lab felt better about it then—then dressed in surgical greens. On the way out, he put on a white lab coat. The next stop was Steve Berg's shop. Neither he nor Barb Archer had said it out loud yet, but everyone

would feel better if they had a working vaccine for Shiva.

"Hey, John," Berg said, when his colleague came in.

" 'Morning, Steve," Killgore responded in greeting. "How're the vaccines coming?"

"Well, we have 'A' and 'B' working now." Berg gestured to the monkey cages on the other side of the glass. " 'A' batch has the yellow stickers. 'B' is the blue, and the control group is red."

Killgore looked. There were twenty of each, for a total of sixty rhesus monkeys. Cute little devils. "Too bad," he observed.

"I don't like it, either, but that's how it's done, my friend." Neither man owned a fur coat.

"When do you expect results?"

"Oh, five to seven days for the 'A' group. Nine to fourteen for the control group. And the 'B' group—well, we have hopes for them, of course. How's it going on your side of the house?"

"Lost one today."

"This fast?" Berg asked, finding it disturbing.

"His liver was off the chart to begin with. That's something we haven't considered fully enough. There will be people out there with an unusually high degree of vulnerability to our little friend."

"They could be canaries, man," Berg worried, thinking of the songbirds used to warn miners about bad air. "And we learned how to deal with that two years ago, remember?"

"I know." In a real sense, that was where the entire idea had come from. But they could do it better than the foreigners had. "What's the difference in time between humans and our little furry friends?"

"Well, I didn't aerosol any of these, remember. This is a vaccine test, not an infection test."

"Okay, I think you need to set up an aerosol control test. I hear you have an improved packing method."

"Maggie wants me to do that. Okay. We have plenty of monkeys. I can set it up in two days, a full-up test of the notional delivery system."

"With and without vaccines?"

"I can do that." Berg nodded. *You should have set it up already, idiot,* Killgore didn't say to his colleague. Berg was smart, but he couldn't see very far beyond the limits of his microscopes. Well, nobody was perfect, even here. "I don't go out of my way to kill things, John," Berg wanted to make clear to his physician colleague.

"I understand, Steve, but for every one we kill in proofing Shiva, we'll save a few hundred thousand in the wild, remember? And you take good care of them while they're here," he added. The test animals here lived an idyllic life, in comfortable cages, or even in large communal areas where the food was abundant and the water clear.

The monkeys had a lot of room, with pseudotrees to climb, air temperature like that of their native Africa, and no predators to threaten them. As in human prisons, the condemned got hearty meals to go along with their constitutional rights. But people like Steve Berg still didn't like it, important and indispensable as it was to the overall goal. Killgore wondered if his friend wept at night for the cute little brown-eyed creatures. Certainly Berg wasn't all that concerned with Chester—except that he might represent a canary, of course. That could indeed ruin anything, but that was also why Berg was developing "A" vaccine.

"Yeah," Berg admitted. "I still feel shitty about it, though."

"You should see my side of the house," Killgore observed.

"I suppose," Steve Berg responded diffidently.

The overnight flight had come out of Raleigh-Durham International Airport in North Carolina, an hour's drive from Fort Bragg. The Boeing 757 touched down in an overcast drizzle to begin a taxi process almost as long as the flight itself, or so it often seemed to the passengers, as they finally came to the US Airways gate in Heathrow's Terminal 3.

Chavez and Clark had come up together to meet him. They were dressed in civilian clothes, and Domingo held a card with "MALLOY" printed on it. The fourth man off was dressed in Marine Class-As, complete to his Sam Browne belt, gold wings, and four and a half rows of ribbons on the olive-colored uniform blouse. His blue-gray eyes saw the card and came to it as he half-dragged his canvas bag with him.

"Nice to be met," Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Malloy observed. "Who are you guys?"

"John Clark."

"Domingo Chavez." Handshakes were exchanged. "Any more bags?" Ding asked.

"This is all I had time to pack. Lead on, people," Colonel Malloy replied.

"Need a hand with that?" Chavez asked a man about six inches taller and forty pounds heavier than himself.

"I got it," the Marine assured him. "Where we going?"

"Chopper is waiting for us. Car's this way." Clark headed through a side door, then down some steps to a waiting car. The driver took Malloy's bag and tossed it in the "boot" for the half-mile drive to a waiting British army Puma helicopter.

Malloy looked around. It was a crummy day to fly, the ceiling about fifteen hundred feet, and the drizzle getting a little harder, but he was not a white-knuckle flyer. They loaded into the back of the helicopter. He watched the flight crew run through the start-up procedure

professionally, reading off their printed checklist, just as he did it. With the rotor turning, they got on the radio for clearance to lift off. That took several minutes. It was a busy time at Heathrow, with lots of international flights arriving to deliver business people to their work of the day. Finally, the Puma lifted off, climbed to altitude, and headed off in an undetermined direction to wherever the hell he was going. At that point, Malloy got on the intercom.

"Can anybody tell me what the hell this is all about?"

"What did they tell you?"

"Pack enough underwear for a week," Malloy replied, with a twinkle in his eye.

"There's a nice department store a few miles from the base."

"Hereford?"

"Good guess," Chavez responded. "Been there?"

"Lots of times. I recognized that crossroads down there from other flights. Okay, what's the story?"

"You're going to be working with us, probably," Clark told him.

"Who's 'us,' sir?"

"We're called Rainbow, and we don't exist."

"Vienna?" Malloy said through the intercom. The way they both blinked was answer enough. "Okay, that looked a little slick for cops. What's the makeup of the team?"

"NATO, mainly Americans and Brits, but others, too, plus an Israeli," John told him.

"And you set this up without any rotorheads?"

"Okay, goddamnit, I blew it, okay?" Clark observed. "I'm new at this command stuff."

"What's that on your forearm, Clark? Oh, what rank are you?"

John pulled back on his jacket, exposing the red seal tattoo. "I'm a simulated two-star. Ding here is a simulated major."

The marine examined the tattoo briefly. "I've heard of those, but never seen any. Third Special Operations Group, wasn't it? I knew a guy who worked with them."

"Who's that?"

"Dutch Voort, retired about five-six years ago as a full-bird."

"Dutch Voort! Shit, haven't heard that name in a while," Clark replied at once. "I got shot down with him once."

"You and a bunch of others. Great aviator, but his luck was kinda uneven."

"How's your luck, Colonel?" Chavez asked.

"Excellent, sonny, excellent," Malloy assured him. "And you can call me Bear."

It fit, both men decided of their visitor. He was Clark's height, six-one, and bulky, as though he pumped barbells for fun and drank his

share of beer afterward. Chavez thought of his friend Julio Vega, another lover of free weights. Clark read over the medals. The DFC had two repeat clusters on it, as did the Silver Star. The shooting iron also proclaimed that Malloy was an expert marksman. Marines liked to shoot for entertainment and to prove that like all other Marines they were riflemen. In Malloy's case, a Distinguished Rifleman, which was as high as the awards went. But no Vietnam ribbons, Clark saw. Well, he would have been too young for that, which was another way for Clark to realize how old he'd grown. He also saw that Malloy was about the right age for a half-colonel, whereas someone with all those decorations should have made it younger. Had Malloy been passed over for full-bird colonel? One problem with special operations was that it often put one off the best career track. Special attention was often required to make sure such people got the promotions they merited—which wasn't a problem for enlisted men, but frequently a big one for commissioned officers.

"I started off in search-and-rescue, then I shipped over to Recon Marines, you know, get 'em in, get 'em out. You gotta have a nice touch. I guess I do."

"What are you current in?"

"H-60, Hueys, of course, and H-53s. I bet you don't have any of those, right?"

" 'Fraid not," Chavez said, immediately and obviously disappointed.

"Air Force 24th Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall has the MH-60K and MH-53. I am up to speed on both if you ever borrow them. They're part of 1st Special Operations Wing, and they're based both here and in Germany, last time I checked."

"No shit?" Clark asked.

"No shit, Simulated General, sir. I know the wing commander, Stanislas Dubrovnik, Stan the Man. Great helo driver. He's been around the block a few dozen times if you ever need a friend in a hurry."

"I'll keep that in mind. What else you know how to fly?"

"The Night Stalker, of course, but not many of them around. None based over here that I know of." The Puma turned then, circling, then flaring to settle into the Hereford pad. Malloy watched the pilot's stick work and decided he was competent, at least for straight-and-level stuff. "I'm not technically current on the MH-47 Chinook—we're only allowed to stay officially current on three types—technically I'm not current on Hueys either, but I was fucking born in a Huey, if you know what I mean, General. And I can handle the MH-47 if I have to."

"The name's John, Mr. Bear," Clark said, with a smile. He knew a pro when he saw one.

"I'm Ding. Once upon a time I was an 11-Bravo, but then the

Agency kidnapped my ass. His fault," Chavez said. "John and I been working together a while."

"I suppose you can't tell me the good stuff, then. Kinda surprised I never met you guys before. I've delivered a few spooks here and there from time to time, if you know what I mean."

"Bring your package?" Clark asked, meaning his personnel file.

Malloy patted his bag. "Yes, sir, and very creative writing it is, if I do say so." The helicopter settled down. The crew chief jumped out to pull the sliding doors open. Malloy grabbed his bag, stepped down, and walked to the Rover parked just off the pad. There the driver, a corporal, took Malloy's bag and tossed it in the back. British hospitality, Malloy saw, hadn't changed very much. He returned the salute and got in the rear. The rain was picking up. English weather, the colonel thought, hadn't changed much either. Miserable place to fly helicopters, but not too bad if you wanted to get real close without being seen, and that wasn't too awful, was it? The Rover jeep took them to what looked like a headquarters building instead of his guest housing. Whoever they were, they were in a hurry.

"Nice office, John," he said, looking around on the inside. "I guess you really are a simulated two-star."

"I'm the boss," Clark admitted, "and that's enough. Sit down. Coffee?"

"Always," Malloy confirmed, taking a cup a moment later. "Thanks."

"How many hours?" Clark asked next.

"Total? Sixty-seven-forty-two last time I added it up. Thirty-one hundred of that is special operations. And, oh, about five hundred combat time."

"That much?"

"Grenada, Lebanon, Somalia, couple of other places—and the Gulf War. I fished four fast-mover drivers out and brought them back alive during that little fracas. One of them was a little exciting," Malloy allowed, "but I had some help overhead to smooth things out. You know, the job's pretty boring if you do it right."

"I'll have to buy you a pint, Bear," Clark said. "I've always been nice to the SAR guys."

"And I never turn down a free beer. The Brits in your team, ex-SAS?"

"Mainly. Worked with 'em before?"

"Exercises, here and over at Bragg. They are okay troops, right up there with Force Recon and my pals at Bragg." This was meant to be generous, Clark knew, though the local Brits might take slight umbrage at being compared to anyone. "Anyway, I suppose you need a delivery boy, right?"

"Something like that. Ding, let's run Mr. Bear through the last field operation."

"Roge-o, Mr. C." Chavez unrolled the big photo of the Schloss Ostermann on Clark's conference table and started his brief, as Stanley and Covington came in to join the conference.

"Yeah," Malloy said when the explanation ended. "You really did need somebody like me for that one, guys." He paused. "Best thing would be a long-rope deployment to put three or four on the roof . . . right about . . . here." He tapped the photo. "Nice flat roof to make it easy."

"That's about what I was thinking. Not as easy as a zip-line, but probably safer," Chavez agreed.

"Yeah, it's easy if you know what you're doing. Your boys will have to learn to land with soft feet, of course, but nice to have three or four people inside the castle when you need 'em. From how good the takedown went, I imagine your people know how to shoot and stuff."

"Fairly well," Covington allowed, in a neutral voice.

Clark was taking a quick rifle through Malloy's personnel file, while Chavez presented his successful mission. Married to Frances née Hutchins Malloy, he saw, two daughters, ten and eight. Wife was a civilian nurse working for the Navy. Well, that was easy to fix. Sandy could set that up at her hospital pretty easy. LTC Dan Malloy, USMC, was definitely a keeper.

For his part, Malloy was intrigued. Whoever these people were, they had serious horsepower. His orders to fly to England had come directly from the office of CINC-SNAKE himself, "Big Sam" Wilson, and the people he'd met so far looked fairly serious. The small one, Chavez, he thought, was one competent little fucker, the way he'd walked him through the Vienna job, and, from examining the overhead photo, his team must have been pretty good, too, especially the two who'd crept up to the house to take the last bunch of bad guys in the back. Invisibility was a pretty cool gig if you could bring it off, but a fucking disaster if you blew it. The good news, he reflected, was that the bad guys weren't all that good at their fieldcraft. Not trained like his Marines were. That deficiency almost canceled out their viciousness—but not quite. Like most people in uniform, Malloy despised terrorists as cowardly sub-human animals who merited only violent and immediate death.

Chavez next took him to his team's own building, where Malloy met his troops, shook hands, and evaluated what he saw there. Yeah, they were serious, as were Covington's Team-1 people in the next building over. Some people just had the look, the relaxed intensity that made them evaluate everyone they met, and decide at once if the person was a threat. It wasn't that they liked killing and maiming, just that it

was their job, and that job spilled over into how they viewed the world. Malloy they evaluated as a potential friend, a man worthy of their trust and respect, and that warmed the Marine aviator. He'd be the guy whom they had to trust to get them where they needed to be, quickly, stealthily, and safely—and then get them out in the same way. The remaining tour of the training base was pure vanilla to one schooled in the business. The usual buildings, simulated airplane interiors, three real railroad passenger cars, and the other things they practiced to storm; the weapons range with the pop-up targets (he'd have to play there himself to prove that he was good enough to be here, Malloy knew, since every special-ops guy was and had to be a shooter, just as every Marine was a rifleman). By noon they were back in Clark's headquarters building.

"Well, Mr. Bear, what do you think?" Rainbow Six asked.

Malloy smiled as he sat down. "I think I'm seriously jet lagged. And I think you have a nice team here. So, you want me?"

Clark nodded. "I think we do, yes."

"Start tomorrow morning?"

"Flying what?"

"I called that Air Force bunch you told us about. They're going to lend us an MH-60 for you to play with."

"Neighborly of them." That meant to Malloy that he'd have to prove that he was a good driver. The prospect didn't trouble him greatly. "What about my family? Is this TAD or what?"

"No, it's a permanent duty station for you. They'll come over on the usual government package."

"Fair 'nuf. Will we be getting work here?"

"We've had two field operations so far, Bern and Vienna. There's no telling how busy we'll be with for-real operations, but you'll find the training regimen is pretty busy here."

"Suits me, John."

"You want to work with us?"

The question surprised Malloy. "This is a volunteer outfit?"

Clark nodded. "Every one of us."

"Well, how about that. Okay," Malloy said. "You can sign me up."

"May I ask a question?" Popov asked in New York.

"Sure," the boss said, suspecting what it would be.

"What is the purpose of all this?"

"You really do not need to know at this time" was the expected reply to the expected question.

Popov nodded his submission/agreement to the answer. "As you say, sir, but you are spending a goodly amount of money for no return that I can determine." Popov raised the money question deliberately,

to see how his employer would react.

The reaction was genuine boredom: "The money is not important."

And though the response was not unexpected, it was nonetheless surprising to Popov. For all of his professional life in the Soviet KGB, he'd paid out money in niggardly amounts to people who'd risked their lives and their freedom for it, frequently expecting far more than they'd ever gotten, because often enough the material and information given *was* worth far more than they'd been paid for it. But this man had already paid out more than Popov had distributed in over fifteen years of field operations—for nothing, for two dismal failures. And yet, there was no disappointment on his face, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw. What the hell was this all about?

"What went wrong in this case?" the boss asked.

Popov shrugged. "They were willing, but they made the mistake of underestimating the skill of the police response. It was quite skillful indeed," he assured his employer. "More so than I expected, but not that great a surprise. Many police agencies across the world have highly trained counterterror groups."

"It was the Austrian police? . . ."

"So the news media said. I did not press my investigation further. Should I have done so?"

A shake of the head. "No, just idle curiosity on my part."

So, you don't care if these operations succeed or fail, Popov thought. *Then,* why *the hell do you fund them?* There was no logic to this. None at all. That would have been—*should* have been—troubling to Popov, yet it was not seriously so. He was becoming rich on these failures. He knew who was funding the operations, and had all the evidence—the cash—he needed to prove it. So, this man could not turn on him. If anything, he must fear his employee, mustn't he? Popov had contacts in the terrorist community and could as easily turn them against the man who procured the cash, couldn't he? It would be a natural fear for this man to hold, Dmitriy reflected.

Or was it? What, if anything, did this man fear? He was funding murder—well, attempted murder in the last case. He was a man of immense wealth and power, and such men feared losing those things more than they feared death. It kept coming down to the same thing, the former KGB officer told himself: What the hell was this all about? Why was he plotting the deaths of people, and asking Popov to—was he doing this to kill off the world's remaining terrorists? Did *that* make sense? Using Popov as a stalking horse, an *agent provocateur,* to draw them out and be dealt with by the various countries' highly trained counterterror teams? Dmitriy decided that he'd do a little research on his employer. It ought not to be too hard, and the New York Public Library was only two kilometers distant on Fifth Avenue.

"What sort of people were they?"

"Whom do you mean?" Popov asked.

"Dortmund and Fürchtner," the boss clarified.

"Fools. They still believed in Marxism-Leninism. Clever in their way, intelligent in the technical sense, but their political judgment was faulty. They were unable to change when their world changed. That is dangerous. They failed to evolve, and for that they died." It wasn't much of an epitaph, Popov knew. They'd grown up studying the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and all the rest—the same people whose words Popov had studied through his youth, but even as a boy Popov had known better, and his world travels as a KGB officer had merely reinforced his distrust for the words of those nineteenth century academicians. His first flight on an American-made airliner, chatting in a friendly way with the people next to him, had taught him so much. But Hans and Petra—well, they'd grown up within the capitalist system, sampled all of its wares and benefits, and nevertheless decided that theirs was a system bereft of something that they needed. Perhaps in a way they'd been as he had been, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, just dissatisfied, wanting to be part of something better—but, no, he'd always wanted something better for himself, whereas they'd always wanted to bring others to Paradise, to lead and rule as good communists. And to reach that utopian vision, they'd been willing to walk through a sea of innocent blood. Fools. His employer, he saw, accepted his more abbreviated version of their lost lives and moved on.

"Stay in the city for a few days. I will call you when I need you."

"As you say, sir." Popov stood and left the office and caught the next elevator to street level. Once there, he decided to walk south to the library with the lions in front. The exercise might clear his head, and he still had a little thinking to do. "When I need you" could mean another mission, and soon.

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"Erwin? George. How are you, my friend?"

"It has been an eventful week," Ostermann admitted. His personal physician had him on tranquilizers, which, he thought, didn't work very well. His mind still remembered the fear. Better yet, Ursel had come home, arriving even before the rescue mission, and that night—he'd gotten to bed just after four in the morning, she'd come to bed with him, just to hold him, and in her arms he'd shaken and wept from the sheer terror that he'd been able to control right up to the moment that the man Fürchtner had died less than a meter to his left.

There was blood and other tissue particles on his clothing. They'd had to be taken off for cleaning. Dengler had had the worst time of all, and wouldn't be at work for at least a week, the doctors said. For his part, Ostermann knew that he'd be calling that Britisher who'd come to him with the security proposal, especially after hearing the voices of his rescuers.

"Well, I can't tell you how pleased I am that you got through it okay, Erwin."

"Thank you, George," he said to the American Treasury Secretary. "Do you appreciate your bodyguards more today than last week?"

"You bet. I expect that business in that line of work will be picking up soon."

"An investment opportunity?" Ostermann asked with a forlorn chuckle.

"I didn't mean *that,"* Winston replied with an almost-laugh. It was good to laugh about it, wasn't it?

"George?"

"Yeah?"

"They were not Austrian, not what the television and newspapers said—and they told me not to reveal this, but you can know this. They were Americans and British."

"I know, Erwin, I know who they are, but that's all I can say."

"I owe them my life. How can I repay such a debt?"

"That's what they are paid to do, my friend. It's their job."

"Vielleicht, but it was *my* life they saved, and those of my employees. I have a personal debt to pay them. Is there any way I might do something for them?"

"I don't know," George Winston admitted.

"Could you find out? If you 'know about' them, could you find out? They have children, do they not? I can pay for their education, set up a fund of some sort, could I not?"

"Probably not, Erwin, but I can look into it," the Sec-Treas said, making a note on his desk. This would be a real pain in the ass for some security people, but there might well be a way, through some D.C. law firm, probably, to double-blind it. It pleased Winston that Erwin wanted to do this. *Noblesse oblige* was not entirely dead. "So, you sure you're okay, pal?"

"Thanks to them, yes, George, I am."

"Great. Thanks. Good to hear your voice, pal. See you next time I come over to Europe."

"Indeed, George. Have a good day."

"You, too. Bye." Winston switched buttons on his phone. Might as well check into this right away. "Mary, could you get me Ed Foley over at the CIA?"

CHAPTER 10

DIGGERS

Popov hadn't done this in ages, but he remembered how. His employer had been written about more than many politicians—which was only just, Popov thought, as this man did far more important and interesting things for his country and the world—but these articles were mainly about business, which didn't help Popov much beyond a further appreciation of the man's wealth and influence. There was little about his personal life, except that he'd been divorced. A pity of sorts. His former wife seemed both attractive and intelligent, judging by the photos and the appended information on her. Maybe two such intelligent people had difficulty staying together. If so, that was too bad for the woman, the Russian thought. Maybe few American men liked having intellectual equals under their roof. It was altogether too intimidating for the weak ones—and only a weak man would be troubled by it, the Russian thought.

But there was nothing to connect the man with terrorists or terrorism. He'd never been attacked himself, not even a simple street crime, according to the *New York Times.* Such things did not always make the news, of course. Perhaps an incident that had never seen the light of day. But if it had been so major as to change the course of his life—it would had to have become known, wouldn't it?

Probably. Almost certainly, he thought. But *almost* was a troubling qualifier for a career intelligence officer. This was a man of business. A genius both in his scientific field and in running a major corporation. There, it seemed, was where his passions went. There were many photos of the man with women, rarely the same one twice, while attending various charity or social functions—all nice women, to be sure, Popov noted, like fine trophies, to be used and mounted on the wall in the appropriate empty space, while he searched after another. So, what sort of man was he working for?

Popov had to admit that he really didn't know, which was more than troubling. His life was now in pawn to a man whose motivations he didn't understand. In not knowing, he could not evaluate the operational dangers that attached to himself as a result. Should the purpose be discerned by others, and his employer discovered and

arrested, then he, Popov, was in danger of arrest on serious charges. Well, the former KGB officer thought, as he returned the last of the periodicals to the clerk, there was an easy solution to that. He'd always have a bag packed, and two false identities ready to be used. Then, at the first sign of trouble, he'd get to an international airport and be off to Europe as quickly as possible, there to disappear and make use of the cash he'd banked. He already had enough to ensure a comfortable life for a few years, perhaps longer if he could find a really good investment counselor. Disappearing off the face of the earth wasn't all that hard for one with proper training, he told himself, walking back out on Fifth Avenue. All you needed was fifteen or twenty minutes of warning.... Now how could he be sure to get that? . . .

The German federal police were as efficient as ever, Bill Tawney saw. All six of the terrorists had been identified within forty-eight hours, and while detailed interviews of their friends, neighbors, and acquaintances were still underway, the police already knew quite a lot and had forwarded it to the Austrians, from there to the British Embassy in Vienna, and from there to Hereford. The package included a photo and blueprints of the home owned by Fürchtner and Dortmund. One of the couple, Tawney saw, had been a painter of moderate talent. The report said that they'd sold paintings at a local gallery, signed, of course, with a pseudonym. Perhaps they'd become more valuable now, the Six man thought idly, turning the page. They'd had a computer there, but the documents on it were not very useful. One of them, probably Fürchtner, the German investigators thought, had written long political diatribes, appended but not yet translated—Dr. Bellow would probably want to read them, Tawney thought. Other than that, there was little remarkable. Books, many of them political in character, most of them printed and purchased in the former DDR. A nice TV and stereo system, and plenty of records and CDs of classical music. A decent middle-class car, properly maintained, and insured through a local company, under their cover names, Siegfried and Hanna Kolb. They'd had no really close friends in their neighborhood, had kept largely to themselves, and every public aspect of their lives had been *in Ordnung,* thus arousing no comment of any kind. And yet, Tawney thought, they'd sat there like coiled springs . . . awaiting what?

What had turned them loose? The German police had no explanation for that. A neighbor reported that a car had visited their house a few weeks before—but who had come and to what purpose, no one knew. The tag number of the car had never been noted, nor the make, though the interview transcript said that it had been a

German-made car, probably white or at least light in color. Tawney couldn't evaluate the importance of that. It might have been a buyer for a painting, an insurance agent—or the person who had brought them out of cover and back into their former lives as radical left-wing terrorists.

It was not the least bit unusual for this career intelligence officer to conclude that there was nothing he could conclude, on the basis of the information he had. He told his secretary to forward Fürchtner's writings to a translator for later analysis by both himself and Dr. Bellow, and that was about as far as he could go. Something had roused the two German terrorists from their professional sleep, but he didn't know what. The German federal police could conceivably stumble across the answer, but Tawney doubted it. Fürchtner and Dortmund had figured out how to live unobtrusively in a nation whose police were pretty good at finding people. Someone they'd known and trusted had come to them and persuaded them to set off on a mission. Whoever it had been had known how to contact them, which meant that there was some sort of terror network still in existence. The Germans had figured that out, and a notation on their preliminary report recommended further investigation through paid informants—which might or might not work. Tawney had devoted a few years of his life to cracking into the Irish terrorist groups, and he'd had a few minor successes, magnified at the time by their rarity. But there had long since been a Darwinian selection process in the terrorist world. The dumb ones died, and the smart ones survived, and after nearly thirty years of being chased by increasingly clever police agencies, the surviving terrorists were themselves very clever indeed—and the best of them had been trained at Moscow Centre itself by KGB officers . . . was that an investigative option? Tawney wondered. The new Russians had cooperated somewhat . . . but not very much in the area of terrorism, perhaps because of embarrassment over their former involvement with such people . . . or maybe because the records had been destroyed, which the Russians frequently claimed, and Tawney never quite believed. People like that destroyed nothing. The Soviets had developed the world's foremost bureaucracy, and bureaucrats simply *couldn't* destroy records. In any case, seeking cooperation from the Russians on such an item as this was too far above his level of authority, though he could write up a request, and it might even percolate a level or two up the chain before being quashed by some senior civil servant in the Foreign Office. He decided that he'd try it anyway. It gave him something to do, and it would at least tell the people at Century House, a few blocks across the Thames from the Palace of Westminster, that he was still alive and working.

Tawney slid all the papers, including his notes, back into the thick

manila folder before turning to work on the foredoomed request. He could only conclude now that there still was a terror network, and that someone known to its members still had the keys to that nasty little kingdom. Well, maybe the Germans would learn more, and maybe the data would find its way to his desk. If it did, Tawney wondered, would John Clark and Alistair Stanley be able to arrange a strike of their own against them? No, more likely that was a job for the police of whatever nation or city was involved, and that would probably be enough. You didn't have to be all that clever to bag one. The French had proven that with Carlos, after all.

• • •

Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez was not a happy man, but the cell in the Le Sante prison was not calculated to make him so. Once the most feared terrorist in the world, he'd killed men with his own hand, and done it as casually as zipping his fly. He'd once had every police and intelligence service in the world on his trail, and laughed at them all from the security of his safe houses in the former Eastern Europe. There, he'd read press speculation on who he really was and for whom he'd really worked, along with KGB documents on what the foreign services were doing to catch him . . . until Eastern Europe had fallen, and with it the nation-state support for his revolutionary acts. And so he'd ended up in Sudan, where he'd decided to take his situation a little more seriously. Some cosmetic surgery had been in order, and so he'd gone to a trusted physician for the surgery, submitted to the general anesthesia——and awakened aboard a French business jet, strapped down to a stretcher, with a Frenchman saying, *"Bonjour, Monsieur Chacal,"* with the beaming smile of a hunter who'd just captured the most dangerous of tigers with a loop of string. Tried, finally, for the murder of a cowardly informant and two French counterintelligence officers in 1975, he'd defended himself with panache, he thought, not that it mattered except to his own capacious ego. He'd proclaimed himself a "professional revolutionary" to a nation that had had its own revolution two hundred years before, and didn't feel the need for another.

But the worst part of it was being tried as a . . . criminal, as though his work hadn't had any political consequences. He'd tried hard to set that aside, but the prosecutor hadn't let go, his voice dripping with contempt in his summation—actually worse than that, because he'd been so matter-of-fact in the presentation of his evidence, saving his contempt for later. Sanchez had kept his dignity intact throughout, but inwardly he'd felt the pain of a trapped animal, and had to call on

his courage to keep his mien neutral at all times. And the ultimate result had hardly been a surprise.

The prison had already been a hundred years old on the day of his birth, and was built along the lines of a medieval dungeon. His small cell had but a single window, and he was not tall enough to see out the bottom of it. The guards, however, had a camera and watched him with it twenty-four hours a day, like a very special animal in a very special cage. He was as alone as a man could be, allowed no contact with other prisoners, and allowed out of his cage only once per day for an hour of "exercise" in a bleak prison yard. He could expect little more for the remainder of his life, Carlos knew, and his courage quailed at that. The worst thing was the boredom. He had books to read, but nowhere to walk beyond the few square meters of his cage—and worst of all, the whole world knew that the Jackal was caged forever and could therefore be forgotten.

Forgotten? The entire world had once feared his name. That was the most hurtful part of all.

He made a mental note to contact his lawyer. Those conversations were still privileged and private, and his lawyer knew a few names to call.

"Starting up," Malloy said. Both turbo-shaft engines came to life, and presently the four-bladed rotor started turning.

"Crummy day," Lieutenant Harrison observed over the intercom.

"Been over here long?" Malloy asked.

"Just a few weeks, sir."

"Well, sonny, now you know why the Brits won the Battle of Britain. Nobody else can fly in this shit." The Marine looked around. Nothing else was up today. The ceiling was less than a thousand feet, and the rain was coming down pretty hard. Malloy checked the trouble-board again. All the aircraft systems were in the green.

"Roge-o, Colonel. Sir, how many hours in the Night Hawk?"

"Oh, about seven hundred. I like the Pave Low's capabilities a little better, but this one does like to fly. About time for us to see that, sonny." Malloy pulled up on the collective, and the Night Hawk lifted off, a little unevenly in the gusting thirty-knot winds. "Y'all okay back there?"

"Got my barf bag," Clark replied, to Ding's amusement. "You know a guy named Paul Johns?"

"Air Force colonel, down at Eglin? He retired about five years ago."

"That's the man. How good is he?" Clark asked, mainly to get a feel for Malloy.

"None better in a helo, 'specially a Pave Low. He just talked to the airplane, and it listened to him real nice. You know him, Harrison?"

"Only by reputation, sir," the copilot replied from the left seat.

"Little guy, good golfer, too. Does consulting now, and works on the side with Sikorsky. We see him up at Bragg periodically. Okay, baby, let's see what you got." Malloy reefed the chopper into a tight left turn. "Humph, nothing handles like a -60. Damn, I love these things. Okay, Clark, what's the mission here?"

"The range building, simulate a zip-line deployment."

"Covert or assault?"

"Assault," John told him.

"That's easy. Any particular spot?"

"Southeast corner, if you can."

"Okay, here we go." Malloy shoved the cyclic left and forward, dropping the helo like a fast elevator, darting for the range building like a falcon after a pheasant—and like a falcon, pulling up sharply at the right spot, transitioning into hover so quickly that the copilot in the left seat turned to look in amazement at how fast he'd brought it off. "How's that, Clark?"

"Not too bad," Rainbow Six allowed.

Next Malloy applied power to get the hell out of Dodge City—almost, but not quite, as though he hadn't stopped over the building at all. "I can improve that once I get used to your people, how fast they get out and stuff, but a long-line deployment is usually better, as you know."

"As long as you don't blow the depth perception and run us right into the friggin' wall," Chavez observed. That remark earned him a turned head and a pained expression.

"My boy, we do try to avoid that. Ain't nobody does the rocking chair maneuver better 'n me, people."

"It's hard to get right," Clark observed.

"Yes, it is," Malloy agreed, "but I know how to play the piano, too."

The man was not lacking in confidence, they saw. Even the lieutenant in the left seat thought he was a little overpowering, but he was taking it all in anyway, especially watching how Malloy used the collective to control power as well as lift. Twenty minutes later, they were back on the ground.

"And that's about how it's done, people," Malloy told them, when the rotor stopped turning. "Now, when do we start real training?"

"Tomorrow soon enough?" Clark asked.

"Works for me, General, sir. Next question, do we practice on the Night Hawk, or do I have to get used to flying something else?"

"We haven't worked that out yet," John admitted.

"Well, that does have a bearing on this stuff, y'know. Every chopper has a different feel, and that matters on how I do my deliveries," Malloy pointed out. "I'm at my best on one of those. I'm nearly as

good with a Huey, but that one's noisy in close and hard to be covert with. Others, well, I have to get used to them. Takes a few hours of yankin' and bankin' before I feel completely comfortable." Not to mention learning where all the controls were, Malloy didn't add, since no two aircraft in the entire world had all the dials, gauges, and controls in the same places, something aviators had bitched about since the Wright Brothers. "If we deploy, I'm risking lives, mine and others, every time I lift off. I'd prefer to keep those risks to a minimum. I'm a cautious guy, y'know?"

"I'll work on that today," Clark promised.

"You do that." Malloy nodded, and walked off to the locker/ready room.

Popov had himself a fine dinner in an Italian restaurant half a block from his apartment building, enjoyed the crisp weather in the city, and puffed on a Montecristo cigar after he got back to his flat. There was still work to do. He'd obtained videotapes of the news coverage of both of the terrorist incidents he'd instigated and wanted to study them. In both cases, the reporters spoke German—the Swiss kind, then Austrian—which he spoke like a native (of Germany). He sat in an easy chair with the remote control in his hand, occasionally rewinding to catch something odd of passing interest, studying the tapes closely, his trained mind memorizing every detail. The most interesting parts, of course, were those showing the assault teams who'd finally resolved both incidents with decisive action. The quality of the pictures was poor. Television simply didn't make for high-quality imagery, especially in bad lighting conditions and from two hundred meters away. With the first tape, that of the Bern case, there was no more than ninety seconds of pre-action pictures of the assault team—this part had not been broadcast during the attack, only afterward. The men moved professionally, in a way that somehow reminded the Russian of the ballet, so strangely delicate and stylized were the movements of the men in the black clothing, as they crept in from left and right . . . and then came the blindingly swift action punctuated by jerky camera movements when the explosives went off—that always made the cameramen jump. No sound of gunfire. So their firearms were silenced. It was done so that the victims could not learn from the sound where the shots had come from—but it had not really been a matter of importance in this case, since the terrorist/criminals had been dead before the information could have done them any good. But that was how it was done. This business was as programmed as any professional sport, with the rules of play enforced by deadly might. The mission over in seconds, the assault team came out, and the Bern city police went in to sort out the mess. The people in black acted

unremarkably, he saw, like disciplined soldiers on a battlefield. No congratulatory handshakes or other demonstrations. No, they were too well-trained for that. No one even did so much as light a cigarette . . . ah, one did seem to light a pipe. What followed was the usual brainless commentary from the local news commentators, talking about this elite police unit and how it had saved all the lives of those inside, *und soweiter,* Popov thought, rising to switch tapes.

The Vienna mission, he saw, had even poorer TV coverage, due to the physical conditions of the chap's house. Quite a nice one, actually. The Romanovs might have had such a fine country house. Here the police had ruthlessly controlled the TV coverage, which was perfectly sensible, Popov thought, but not overly helpful to him. The taped coverage showed the front of the country house with boring regularity, punctuated by the monotonous words of the TV reporter repeating the same things endlessly, telling his viewers that he was unable to speak very much with the police on the scene. The tape did show the movement of vehicles, and showed the arrival of what had to be the Austrian assault team. Interestingly, they appeared to be dressed in civilian clothing upon their arrival, and changed soon thereafter into their battle dress . . . it looked green for this team . . . no, he realized, green overgarments over black regular dress. Did that mean anything? The Austrians had two men with scope-sighted rifles who rapidly disappeared into cars, which must have taken them behind the *Schloss.* The assault-team leader, not a very large man, much like the one Popov thought had headed the team in Bern, was seen from a great distance going over papers—the map/diagram/plans of the house and grounds, no doubt. Then, shortly before midnight, all of them had disappeared, leaving Popov to look at a tape of the dwelling illuminated by huge light standards, accompanied by more idiotic speculation by a singularly ill-informed TV journalist. . . . and then, just after midnight, came the distant *pop* of a rifle, followed by two more *pops,* silence, and then frantic activity by the uniformed police in the camera's field of view. Twenty of them raced into the front door carrying light machine guns. The reporter had then talked about a sudden burst of activity, which the thickest of viewers would have seen for themselves, followed by more nothing-at-all, and then the announcement that all the hostages were alive, and all the criminals dead. Another passage of time, and the green-and-black-clad assault team appeared again. As with Bern, there were no overt signs of self-congratulation. One of the assault team seemed to be puffing on a pipe, as he walked to the van that had brought them to the scene and stowed his weapons, while another of them conferred briefly with a civilian-clothed policeman, probably the Captain Altmark who'd had field command of the incident. The two must have known each other,

their exchange of words was so brief before the paramilitary police team departed the scene, just as at Bern. Yes, both of the counterterror units trained from exactly the same book, Popov told himself again.

Later press coverage spoke of the skill of the special police unit. That had happened in Bern, too, but it was surprising in neither case, since reporters also spoke the same drivel, regardless of language or nationality. The words used in the statement by the police were almost identical. Well, someone had trained both teams, perhaps the same agency. Perhaps the German GSG-9 group, which, with British help, had ended the airplane incident at Mogadishu over twenty years before, had trained the forces of countries that shared their language. Certainly the thoroughness of the training and the coldness of demeanor of the assault teams struck Popov as very German. They'd acted like machines both before and after the attacks, arriving and leaving like ghosts, with nothing left behind but the bodies of the terrorists. Efficient people, the Germans, and the Germanic policemen whom they trained. Popov, a Russian by birth and culture, had little love for the nation that had once killed so many of his countrymen, but he could respect them and their work, and the people they killed were no loss to the world. Even when he'd helped to train them as an active-duty officer of the Soviet KGB, he'd not cared much for them, nor had anyone else in his agency. They were, if not exactly the useful fools Lenin had once spoken about, then trained attack dogs to be unleashed when needed, but never really trusted by those who semicontrolled them. And they'd never really been all that efficient. About the only thing they'd really accomplished was to force airports to install metal detectors, inconveniencing travelers all over the world. Certainly they'd made life hard on the Israelis, but what, really, did that country matter on the world stage? And even then, what had happened? If you forced countries to adapt to adverse circumstances, it happened swiftly. So, now, El Al, the Israeli airline, was the safest and most secure in the world, and policemen the world over were better briefed on whom to watch and to examine closely—and if everything else failed, then the policemen had special counterterror units like those who'd settled things in Bern and Vienna. Trained by Germans to kill like Germans. Any other terrorists he sent out to do evil work would have to deal with such people. Too bad, Popov thought, turning his TV back to a cable channel while the last tape rewound. He hadn't learned much of anything from reviewing the tapes, but he was a trained intelligence officer, and therefore a thorough man. He poured himself an Absolut vodka to drink neat—he missed the superior Starka brand he would have had in Russia—and allowed his mind to churn over the information while he watched a movie on the TV screen.

“Yes, General, I know,” Clark said into the phone at 1:05 the next afternoon, damning time zones as he did so.

“That comes out of *my* budget, too,” General Wilson pointed out. First, CINC-SNAKE thought, they ask for a man, then they ask for hardware, and *now,* they are asking for funding, too.

“I can try to help with that through Ed Foley, sir, but the fact of the matter is that we need the asset to train with. You did send us a pretty good man,” Clark added, hoping to assuage Wilson’s renowned temper.

It didn’t help much. “Yes, I know he’s good. That’s why he was working for me in the first goddamned place.”

This guy’s getting ecumenical in his old age, John told himself. *Now he’s praising a Marine*—rather unusual for an *Army* snake-eater and former commander of XVIII Airborne Corps.

“General—sir, you know we’ve had a couple of jobs already, and with all due modesty, my people handled them both pretty damned well. I have to fight for my people, don’t I?”

And *that* calmed Wilson down. They were both commanders, they both had jobs to do, and people to command—and defend.

“Clark, I understand your position. I really do. But I can’t train my people on assets that you’ve taken away.”

“How about we call it time-sharing?” John offered, as a further olive branch.

“It still wears out a perfectly good Night Hawk.”

“It also trains up the crews for you. At the end of this, you may just have a primo helicopter crew to bring down to Bragg to work with your people—and the training expense for your operation is just about nothing, sir.” And that, he thought, was a pretty good play.

At MacDill Air Force Base, Wilson told himself that this was a losing proposition. Rainbow was a bulletproof operation, and everyone knew it. This Clark guy had sold it first of all to CIA, then to the President himself—and sure enough, they’d had two deployments, and both had worked out, though the second one had been pretty dicey. But Clark, clever as he was, and good commander that he seemed to be, hadn’t learned how to run a unit in the modern military world, where half the time was spent managing money like some goddamned white-socked accountant, instead of leading from the front and training with the troops. That’s what really rankled Sam Wilson, young for a four-star, a professional *soldier* who wanted to *soldier,* something that high command pretty well precluded, despite his fitness and desire. Most annoying of all, this Rainbow unit promised to steal a lot of his own business. The Special Operations Command had commitments all over the world, but the international nature of Rainbow meant that there

was now somebody else in the same line of work, whose politically neutral nature was supposed to make their use a lot more palatable to countries that might need special services. Clark might just put him out of business in a real sense, and Wilson didn't like that at all.

But, really, he had no choice in the matter, did he?

"Okay, Clark, you can use the aircraft *so long as* the parent unit is able to part with it, and *so long as* its use by you does not interfere with training and readiness with that parent unit. Clear?"

"Yes, sir, that is clear," John Clark acknowledged.

"I need to come over to see your little circus," Wilson said next.

"I'd like that a lot, General."

"We'll see," Wilson grumbled, breaking the connection.

"Tough son of a bitch," John breathed.

"Quite," Stanley agreed. "We are poaching on his patch, after all."

"It's our patch now, Al."

"Yes, it is, but you mustn't expect him to like that fact."

"And he's younger and tougher than me?"

"A few years younger, and I personally would not wish to cross swords with the gentleman." Stanley smiled. "The war appears to be over, John, and you appear to have won."

Clark managed a smile and a chuckle. "Yeah, Al, but it's easier to go into the field and kill people."

"Quite."

"What's Peter's team doing?"

"Long-line practice."

"Let's go and watch," John said, glad to have an excuse to leave his desk.

"I want to get out of this place," he told his attorney.

"I understand that, my friend," the lawyer replied, with a look around the room. It was the law in France, as in America, that conversations between clients and attorneys were privileged, and could not be recorded or used in any way by the state, but neither man really trusted the French to abide by that law, especially since DGSE, the French intelligence service, had been so instrumental in bringing Il'ych to justice. The DGSE was not known for its willingness to abide by the rules of civilized international behavior, as people as diverse as international terrorists and Greenpeace had learned to their sorrow.

Well, there were other people talking in this room, and there were no obvious shotgun microphones here—and the two had not taken the seats offered by the prison guards, opting instead for one closer to the windows because, they'd said, they wanted the natural light. Of course, every booth could easily be wired.

"I must tell you that the circumstances of your conviction do not lend themselves to an easy appeal," the lawyer advised. This wasn't exactly news to his client.

"I am aware of that. I need you to make a telephone call."

"To whom?"

The Jackal gave him a name and a number. "Tell him that it is my wish to be released."

"I cannot be part of a criminal act."

"I am aware of that as well," Sanchez observed coldly. "Tell him also that the rewards will be great."

It was suspected, but not widely known for certain, that Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez had a goodly sum of money squirreled away as a result of his operations while a free man. This had come mainly as a result of his attack on the OPEC ministers in Austria almost twenty years earlier, which explained why he and his group had been so careful not to kill anyone really important, despite the political flap that would have caused—all the better for him to gain notice and acclaim at the time. Business was business, even for his sort of people. And *someone* had paid his own legal bills, the attorney thought.

"What else do you expect me to tell him?"

"That is all. If he has an immediate reply, you will convey it to me," the Jackal told him. There was still an intensity to his eyes, something cold and distant—but even so, right there looking deep into his interlocutor and telling him what must be.

For his part, the attorney asked himself again why he'd taken on this client. He had a long history of championing radical causes, from which notoriety he'd gained a wide and lucrative criminal practice. There was an attendant element of danger involved, of course. He'd recently handled three major drug cases, and lost all three, and those clients hadn't liked the idea of spending twenty or more years in prison and had expressed their displeasure to him recently. Might they arrange to have him killed? It had happened a few times in America and elsewhere. It was a more distant possibility here, the lawyer thought, though he'd made no promises to those clients except to do his best for them. It was the same with Carlos the Jackal. After his conviction, the lawyer had come into the case to look at the possibilities of an appeal, and made it, and lost—predictably. The French high courts held little clemency for a man who'd done murder on the soil of France, then essentially boasted of it. Now the man had changed his mind and decided petulantly that he didn't enjoy prison life. The lawyer knew that he'd pass along the message, as he had to, but did that make him part of a criminal act?

No, he decided. Telling an acquaintance of his client that the latter wanted out of prison—well, who would not wish to be liberated? And

the message was equivocal, it held many possible meanings. Help on another appeal, revelation of new, exculpatory evidence, anything at all. And besides, whatever Sanchez asked him to do here was privileged information, wasn't it?

"I will pass along your message," he promised his client.

"Merci."

It was a beautiful thing to watch, even in the dark. The MH-60K Night Hawk helicopter came in at about thirty miles per hour, almost two hundred feet over the ground, approaching the range building from the south, into the wind, traveling smoothly, not at all like a tactical deployment maneuver. But under the helicopter was a dark nylon rope, about one hundred fifty feet long, barely visible with the best of NVGs, and at the end of it were Peter Covington, Mike Chin, and another Team-1 member, dangling free below the black Sikorsky in their black ninja suits. The helicopter proceeded in so evenly and smoothly, as though on tracks, until the nose of the aircraft crossed the building's wall. Then the nose came up, and the aircraft flared, slowing rapidly. Below the aircraft, the people attached to the rope swept forward, as though on a child's swing, and then, at the limit of the arc, they swung backward. The backward swing froze them still in the air, their rearward velocity almost exactly matching the remaining forward motion of the helicopter, and then they were on the roof, almost as though they'd stepped off a stationary object. Instantly, Covington and his men unclipped their quick-release attachments and dropped down. The negligible speed difference between their feet and the stationary roof made for no noise at all. Scarcely had this been done when the helicopter nosed down, resuming its forward flight, and anyone on the ground would scarcely have known that the aircraft had done anything but fly at a steady pace over the building. And at night, it was nearly invisible, even with night-vision goggles.

"Bloody good," Al Stanley breathed. "Not a bloody sound."

"He is as good as he says," Clark observed.

As though hearing the remarks, Malloy brought the helicopter around, flashing a thumbs-up out the window to the men on the ground as he headed off to orbit the area for the remainder of the simulation. In a real situation, the orbit would be in case he was needed to do an emergency evacuation—and even more so, to get the people on the ground used to having a helicopter overhead, to make his presence as much a part of the landscape as the trees, so he'd disappear into the normal background of the night, no more remarkable than the song of nightingales despite the danger inherent from his presence. It surprised everyone in the business that you could get away with this, but it was just an application of human nature to

the world of special operations. If a tank had driven into the parking lot, after a day or two it would be just another car. Covington's trio of shooters circulated about the roof for a few minutes, then disappeared down ladders into the interior and emerged a few seconds later from the front door.

"Okay, Bear, this is Six, exercise concluded. Back to the bird farm, Colonel, over."

"Roger, Six, Bear is RTB. Out" was the terse reply, and the Night Hawk broke off from the orbit and headed down to the helo pad.

"What do you think?" Stanley asked Major Covington.

"Bloody good. Like stepping off the train to the platform. Malloy knows what he's about. Master Chief?"

"Put him on the payroll, sir," Master Chief Chin confirmed. "That's a guy we can work with."

• • •

"The aircraft is nicely set up," Malloy said twenty minutes later, in the club. He was wearing his green Nomex flight suit, with a yellow scarf around his neck, like a good aviator, though it struck Clark as odd.

"What's with the necktie?"

"Oh, this? It's the A-10 scarf. One of the guys I rescued in Kuwait gave it to me. I figure it's lucky, and I've always kinda liked the Warthog as an airplane. So, I wear it on missions."

"How hard is it to do that transition maneuver?" Covington asked.

"Your timing has to be pretty good, and you have to read the wind. You know what helps me prepare for it?"

"Tell me," Clark said.

"Piano playing." Malloy sipped at his pint of bitter and grinned. "Don't ask me why, but I always fly better after I've played some. Maybe something to do with getting the fingers loose. Anyway, that chopper they lent us is set up just right. Control cables have the right tension, throttles are just so. That Air Force ground crew—well, I have to meet 'em and buy 'em all a round. They really know how to prepare a chopper. Good team of mechanics."

"They are that," First Lieutenant Harrison agreed. He belonged to 1st Special Operations Wing, and technically, therefore, he was responsible for the helicopter, though now he was very pleased to have so fine a teacher as Malloy.

"That's half the battle of flying helos, getting the bird dialed in just so," Malloy went on. "That one, you can just sweet talk to her, and she listens real nice."

"Like a good rifle," Chin observed.

"Roger that, Master Chief," Malloy said, saluting with his beer. "So, what can you guys tell me about your first two missions?"

"Christians 10, Lions 1," Stanley replied.

"Who'd you lose?"

"That was the Bern job. The hostage was killed before we were on the scene."

"Eager beavers?"

"Something like that." Clark nodded. "They weren't real swift, crossing the line like that. I sorta thought they were just bank robbers, but later investigation turned up the terrorist connection. Of course, maybe they just wanted some cash. Dr. Bellow never really decided what they were all about."

"Any way you look at it, they're just hoods, murderers, whatever you want to call 'em," Malloy said. "I helped train the FBI chopper pilots, spent a few weeks at Quantico with the Hostage Rescue Team. They kinda indoctrinated me on the psychological side. It can be pretty interesting. This Dr. Bellow, is it Paul Bellow, the guy who wrote the three books?"

"Same guy."

"He's pretty smart."

"That's the idea, Colonel Malloy," Stanley said, waving for another round.

"But the thing is, you know, there's only one thing you really need to know about them," Malloy said, reverting back to identity as a colonel of the United States Marine Corps.

"How to whack them," Master Chief Chin agreed.

The Turtle Inn Bar and Lounge was something of a fixture on Columbus Avenue, between Sixty-eighth and Sixty-ninth, well known and well patronized by locals and tourists. The music was loud, but not too loud, and the area was lighted, but not very well. The booze was a little more expensive than the norm, but the added price was for the atmosphere, which, the owner would have said, was priceless.

"So." The man sipped at his rum and coke. "You live around here?"

"Just moving in," she answered, sipping her own drink. "Looking for a job."

"What d'ya do?"

"Legal secretary."

A laugh. "Lots of room for that here. We got more lawyers 'n we got taxi drivers. Where'd you say you were from?"

"Des Moines, Iowa. Ever been there?"

"No, local boy," the man replied, lying. He'd been born in Los Angeles thirty years before. "I'm an accountant with Peat Marwick." That was a lie, too.

But a singles bar was a place for lies, as everyone knew. The woman was twenty-three or so, just out of secretarial school, brown hair and eyes, and needed to lose about fifteen pounds, though she was attractive enough if you liked them short. The three drinks she'd already consumed to show that she was a burgeoning Big Apple sophisticate had her pretty mellow.

"Been here before?" he asked.

"No, first time, what about you?"

"Last few months, nice place to meet people." Another lie, but they came easily in a place like this.

"Music's a little loud," she said.

"Well, other places it's a lot worse. You live close?"

"Three blocks north. Got a little studio apartment, subleasing it. Rent control in the building. My stuff gets here in another week."

"So, you're not really moved in yet?"

"Right."

"Well, welcome to New York . . . ?"

"Anne Pretloe."

"Kirk Maclean." They shook hands, and he held hers a little longer than necessary so that she'd get a feel for his skin, a necessary precondition to casual affection, which he needed to generate. In another few minutes, they were dancing, which mainly meant bumping into people in the dark. He was turning on the charm, and she was smiling up at his six-foot height. Under other circumstances, this could have developed into something, Kirk thought. But not tonight.

The bar closed after two in the morning, and he walked her out. She was quite drunk now from a total of seven drinks barely diluted by bar peanuts and pretzel nuggets. He'd carefully nursed his three, and eaten a lot of peanuts. "So," he asked out on the sidewalk, "let me drive you, okay?"

"It's only three blocks."

"Annie, it's late, and this is New York; okay? You need to learn where you can go and where you can't. Come on," he concluded, pulling her hand and leading her around the corner. His BMW was parked halfway to Broadway. He gallantly held the door open, shut it behind her, then walked around to get in himself.

"You must do okay," Anne Pretloe noted, surveying the car.

"Yeah, well, lots of people like to dodge taxes, y'know?" He started the car and moved out onto the cross street, actually in the wrong direction, though she was a little too much in her cups to appreciate that. He turned left on Broadway and spotted the blue van, parked in a quiet spot. Half a block away, he flashed his lights, whereupon he slowed the car, and pushed the button to lower both the driver-side

and passenger windows.

"Hey," he said, "I know this guy."

"Huh?" Pretloe replied, somewhat confused about where they were and where they were going. It was too late for her to do much in any case.

"Yo, Kirk," the man in coveralls said, leaning down to the open passenger window.

"Hey, buddy," Maclean replied, giving a thumbs-up.

The man in coveralls leaned in and produced a small aerosol can from his sleeve. Then he depressed the red plastic button and gave Anne Pretloe a blast of ether right in the face. Her eyes popped open for a second of shock and surprise. She turned to look at Kirk for a long lingering second or so, and then her body went slack.

"Be careful with the drugs, man, she's got a lot of booze in her."

"No problem." The man banged the side of the truck and another man appeared. This one looked up and down the street for a police car, then helped open the passenger door, lifted Anne Pretloe, and carried her limp form through the rear door of the van, where she joined another young woman picked up by another company employee earlier that night. With that, Maclean drove off, letting the night air blow the stink of the ether out of the car as he headed right, onto the West Side Highway and north to the George Washington Bridge. Okay, that made two he'd bagged, and the others should have gotten a total of six more by now. Another three, and they could end this most dangerous part of the operation.

CHAPTER 11

INFRASTRUCTURE

The lawyer made the call, and unsurprisingly found that it developed into a luncheon in a restaurant where a man of forty or so asked a few simple questions, then left before the dessert cart was wheeled up to the table. That ended his involvement with whatever would happen. He paid the check with cash and walked back to his office haunted by the question—what had he done, what might he have started? The answer for both, he told himself forcefully, was that he didn't know. It was the intellectual equivalent of a shower after a sweaty day's work, and though ultimately not as satisfying, he was a lawyer, and accustomed to the vicissitudes of life.

His interlocutor left the restaurant and caught the Métro, changing trains three times before settling on the one that ran near his home, close to a park known for the prostitutes who stood about, peddling their multivalued wares for passersby in automobiles. If there were anywhere an indictment of the capitalist system, it was here, he thought, though the tradition went further back than the onset of the current economic system. The women had all the gaiety of serial killers, as they stood there in their abbreviated clothing made to be removed as rapidly as possible, so as to save time. He turned away, and headed to his flat, where, with luck, others would be waiting for him. And luck, it turned out, was with him. One of his guests had even made coffee.

"This is where it has to stop," Carol Brightling said, even though she knew it wouldn't.

"Sure, doc," her guest said, sipping OEOB coffee. "But how the hell do you sell it to *him?"*

The map was spread on her coffee table: East of Alaska's Prudhoe Bay was a piece of tundra, over a thousand square miles of it, and geologists for British Petroleum and Atlantic Richfield—the two companies that had largely exploited the Alaskan North Slope, built the pipeline, and therefore helped cause the *Exxon Valdez* disaster—had made their public pronouncement. This oilfield, called AARM, was at least double the size of the North Slope. The report, still

semiclassified in the industrial sense, had come to the White House a week earlier, with confirming data from the United States Geological Survey, a federal agency tasked to the same sort of work, along with the opinion of the geologists that the field extended farther east, across the Canadian border—and exactly how far it extended they could only guess, because the Canadians had not yet begun *their* survey. The conclusion of the executive summary posited the possibility that the entire field could rival the one in Saudi Arabia, although it was far harder to transport oil from it—*except for the fact,* the report went on, that the Trans-Alaska pipeline had already been built, and the new fields would only need a few hundred miles of extension on the existing pipeline, which, the summary concluded arrogantly, had produced a negligible environmental impact.

"Except for that damned tanker incident," Dr. Brightling observed into her morning coffee. Which had killed thousands of innocent wild birds and hundreds of sea otters, and had sullied several hundred square miles of pristine seacoast.

"This will be a catastrophe if Congress lets it go forward. My God, Carol, the caribou, the birds, all the predators. There are polar bears there, and browns, and barren-ground grizzly, and this environment is as delicate as a newborn infant. We *can't* allow the oil companies to go in there!"

"I *know,* Kevin," the President's Science Advisor responded, with an emphatic nod—

"The damage might *never* be repaired. The permafrost—there's *nothing* more delicate on the face of the planet," the president of the Sierra Club said, with further, repetitive emphasis. "We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our children—we owe it to the *planet.* This bill has to be *killed!* I don't care what it takes, this bill must *die!* You *must* convince the President to withdraw any *semblance* of support for it. We cannot allow this environmental *rape* to take place."

"Kevin, we have to be smart about how we do this. The President sees this as a balance-of-payments issue. Domestic oil doesn't force us to spend our money buying oil from other countries. Worse, he believes the oil companies when they say they drill and transport the oil without doing great environmental damage, and that they can fix what damage they do *accidentally."*

"That's horseshit, and you know it, Carol." Kevin Mayflower spat out his contempt for the oil companies. Their goddamned pipeline is a bleeding scar on the face of Alaska, an ugly, jagged steel line crossing the most beautiful land on the face of the earth, an affront to Nature Herself—and what for? So that people could drive motor vehicles, which further polluted the planet merely because lazy people didn't want to walk to work or ride bicycles or horses. (Mayflower didn't

reflect on the fact that he'd flown to Washington to deliver his plea instead of riding one of his Appaloosa horses across the country, and that his rented car had been parked on West Executive Drive.) Everything the oil companies touched, they ruined, he thought. They made it dirty. They sullied the very earth itself, removing what they thought of as a precious resource here, there, and everywhere, whether it was oil or coal, gashing the earth, or poking holes into it, sometimes spilling their liquid treasure because they didn't know and didn't care about the sanctity of the planet, which belonged to everyone, and which needed proper stewardship. The stewardship, of course, required proper guidance, and that was the job of the Sierra Club and similar groups, to tell the people how important the earth was, and how they *must* respect and treat it. The good news was that the President's Science Advisor *did* understand, and that she *did* work in the White House Compound, and *did* have access to the President.

"Carol, I want you to walk across the street, go into the Oval Office, and *tell* him what has to be done."

"Kevin, it's not that easy."

"Why the hell not? He's not that much of a *dunce,* is he?"

"He occasionally has a different point of view, and the oil companies are being very clever about this. Look at their proposal," she said, tapping the report on the table. "They promise to indemnify the entire operation, to put up a *billion-dollar* bond in case something goes wrong—for God's sake, Kevin, they even offer to let the Sierra Club be on the council to oversee their environmental protection programs!"

"And be outnumbered there by their own cronies! Be damned if they'll co-opt us that way!" Mayflower snarled. "I won't let anyone from my office be a part of this rape, and *that's* final!"

"And if you say that out loud, the oil companies will call you an extremist, and marginalize the whole environmental movement—and you can't afford to let that happen, Kevin!"

"The *hell* I can't. You have to stand and fight for something, Carol. *Here* is where we stand and fight. We let those polluting bastards drill oil in Prudhoe Bay, but that's *it!"*

"What will the rest of your board say about this?" Dr. Brightling asked.

"They'll goddamned well say what I goddamned *tell* them to say!"

"No, Kevin, they won't." Carol leaned back and rubbed her eyes. She'd read the entire report the previous night, and the sad truth was that the oil companies had gotten pretty damned smart about dealing with environmental issues. It was plain business sense. The *Exxon Valdez* had cost them a *ton* of money, in addition to the bad public relations. Three pages had been devoted to the changes in tanker

safety procedures. Now, ships leaving the huge oil terminal at Valdez, Alaska, were escorted by tugs all the way to the open sea. A total of twenty pollution-control vessels were on constant standby, with a further number in reserve. The navigation systems on every tanker had been upgraded to beyond what nuclear submarines carried; the navigation officers were compelled to test their skills on simulators every six months. It was all hugely expensive, but far less so than another serious spill. A series of commercials proclaimed all of these facts on television—worst of all, the high-end intellectual cable/satellite channels, History, Learning, Discovery, and A&E, for whom the oil companies were also sponsoring new shows on wildlife in the Arctic, never touched upon what the companies did, but there were plenty of pictures of caribou and other animals traversing under the elevated portions of the pipeline. They were getting their message out very skillfully indeed, even to members of the Sierra Club's board, Brightling thought.

What they didn't say, and what both she and Mayflower knew, was that once the oil was safely out of the ground, safely transported through the monster pipeline, safely conveyed over the sea by the newly double-hulled supertankers, *then* it just became more air pollution, out the tailpipes of cars and trucks and the smokestacks of electric-power stations. So it really was all a joke, and that joke included Kevin's bitching about hurting the permafrost. At most, what would be seriously damaged? Ten or twenty acres, probably, and the oil companies would make more commercials about how they cleaned *that* up, as though the polluting end-use of the oil was not an issue at all!

Because to the ignorant Joe Six-pack, sitting there in front of his TV, watching football games, it *wasn't* an issue, was it? There were a hundred or so million motor vehicles in the United States, and a larger number across the world, and they *all* polluted the air, and *that* was the real issue. How did one stop that from poisoning the planet?

Well, there were ways, weren't there? she reflected.

"Kevin, I'll do my best," she promised. "I will advise the President not to support this bill."

The bill was S-1768, submitted and sponsored by both Alaskan senators, whom the oil companies had bought long before, which would authorize the Department of the Interior to auction off the drilling rights into the AAMP area. The money involved would be huge, both for the federal government and for the state of Alaska. Even the Native American tribes up there would look the other way. The money they got from the oil would buy them lots of snowmobiles with which to chase and shoot the caribou, and motorboats to fish and kill the odd whale, which was part of their racial and cultural

heritage. Snowmobiles weren't needed in the modern age of plastic-wrapped USDA Choice Iowa beef, but the Native Americans clung to the end-result of their traditions, if not the traditional methods. It was a depressing truth that even these people had set aside their history and their very gods in homage to a new age of mechanistic worship to oil and its products. Both the Alaskan senators would bring down tribal elders to testify in favor of S-1768, and they would be listened to, since who more than Native Americans knew what it was like to live in harmony with nature? Only today they did it with Ski-Do snowmobiles, Johnson outboard motors, and Winchester hunting rifles.... She sighed at the madness of it all.

"Will he listen?" Mayflower asked, getting back to business. Even environmentalists had to live in the real world of politics.

"Honest answer? Probably not," Carol Brightling admitted quietly.

"You know," Kevin observed in a low voice. "There are times when I understand John Wilkes Booth."

"Kevin, I didn't hear that, and you didn't say it. Not here. Not in this building."

"Damn it, Carol, you know how I feel. And you know I'm right. How the hell are we supposed to protect the planet if the idiots who run the world don't give a *fuck* about the world we live on?"

"What are you going to say? That *Homo sapiens* is a parasitic species that hurts the earth and the ecosystem? That we don't belong here?"

"A lot of us don't, and that's a fact."

"Maybe so, but what do you do about it?"

"I don't know," Mayflower had to admit.

Some of us know, Carol Brightling thought, looking up into his sad eyes. *But are you ready for that one, Kevin?* She thought he was, but recruitment was always a troublesome step, even for true believers like Kevin Mayflower. . . .

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Construction was about ninety percent complete. There were twenty whole sections around the site, twenty one-square-mile blocks of land, mainly flat, a slight roll to it, with a four-lane paved road leading north to Interstate 70, which was still covered with trucks heading in and out. The last two miles of the highway were set up without a median strip, the rebarred concrete paving a full thirty inches deep, as though it had been built to land airplanes on, the construction superintendent had observed, big ones, even. The road led into an equally sturdy and massively wide parking lot. He didn't care enough about it, though, to mention it at his country club in Salina.

The buildings were fairly pedestrian, except for their environmental-control systems, which were so state-of-the-art that the Navy could have used them on nuclear submarines. It was all part of the company's leading-edge posture on its systems, the chairman had told him on his last visit. They had a tradition of doing everything ahead of everyone else, and besides, the nature of their work required careful attention to every little squiggly detail. You didn't make vaccines in the open. But even the worker housing and offices had the same systems, the super thought, and that was odd, to say the least. Every building had a basement—it was a sensible thing to build here in tornado country, but few ever bothered with it, partly out of sloth, and partly from the fact that the ground was not all that easy to dig here, the famous Kansas hardpan whose top was scratched to grow wheat. That was the other interesting part. They'd continue to farm most of the area. The winter wheat was already in, and two miles away was the farm-operations center, down its own over-wide two-lane road, outfitted with the newest and best farm equipment he'd ever seen, even in an area where growing wheat was essentially an art form.

Three hundred million dollars, total, was going into this project. The buildings were huge—you could convert them to living space for five or six thousand people, the super thought. The office building had classrooms for continuing education. The site had its own power plant, along with a huge fuel-tank farm, whose tanks were semiburied in deference to local weather conditions, and connected by their own pipeline to a filling point just off I-70 at Kanopolis. Despite the local lake, there were no fewer than ten twelve-inch artesian wells drilled well down into—and *past*—the Cherokee Aquifer that local farmers used to water their fields. Hell, that was enough water to supply a small city. But the company was footing the bill, and he was getting his usual percentage of the total job cost to bring it in on time, with a substantial bonus for coming in early, which he was determined to earn. It had been twenty-five months to this point, with two more to go. And he'd make it, the super thought, and he'd get that bonus, after which he'd take the family to Disney World for two weeks of Mickey and golf on the wonderful courses there, which he needed in order to get his game back in shape after two years of seven-day weeks.

But the bonus meant he wouldn't need to work again for a couple of years. He specialized in large jobs. He'd done two skyscrapers in New York, an oil refinery in Delaware, an amusement park in Ohio, and two huge housing projects elsewhere, earning a reputation for bringing things in early and under budget—not a bad rep for someone in his business. He parked his Jeep Cherokee, and checked notes for the things remaining this afternoon. Yeah, the window-seal tests in

Building One. He used his cell phone to call ahead, and headed off, across the landing strip, as he called it, where the access roads came together. He remembered his time as an engineer in the Air Force. Two miles long, and almost a yard thick, yeah, you could land a 747 on this road if you wanted. Well, the company had a fleet of its own Gulfstream business jets, and why not land them here instead of the dinky little airfield at Ellsworth? And if they ever bought a jumbo, he chuckled, they could do that here, too. Three minutes later, he was parked just outside of One. This building *was* complete, three weeks early, and the last thing to be done was the environmental checks. Fine. He walked in through the revolving door—an unusually heavy, robust one, which was immediately locked upon his entry.

"Okay, we ready, Gil?"

"We are now, Mr. Hollister."

"Run her up, then," Charlie Hollister ordered.

Gil Trains was the supervisor of all the environmental systems at the project. Ex-Navy, and something of a control freak, he punched the wall-mounted controls himself. There was no noise associated with the pressurization—the systems were too far away for that—but the effect was almost immediate. On the walk over to Gil, Hollister felt it in his ears, like driving down a mountain road, your ears *click*ed, and you had to work your jaw around to equalize the pressure, which was announced by another *click*.

"How's it holding?"

"So far, so good," Trains replied. "Zero-point-seven-five PSI overpressure, holding steady." His eyes were on the gauges mounted in this control station. "You know what this is like, Charlie?"

"Nope," the superintendent admitted.

"Testing watertight integrity on a submarine. Same method, we overpressure a compartment."

"Really? It's all reminded me of stuff I did in Europe at fighter bases."

"What's that?" Gil asked.

"Overpressurizing pilots' quarters to keep gas out."

"Oh yeah? Well, I guess it works both ways. Pressure is holding nicely."

Damned well ought to, Hollister thought, *with all the hell we went through to make sure every fucking window was sealed with vinyl gaskets.* Not that there were all that many windows. That had struck him as pretty odd. The views here were pretty nice. Why shut them out?

The building was spec'd for a full 1.3 pounds of overpressure. They'd told him it was tornado protection, and that sorta-kinda made sense, along with the increased efficiency of the HVAC systems that came along with the seals. But it could also make for sick-building

syndrome. Buildings with overly good environmental isolation kept flu germs in, and helped colds spread like a goddamned prairie fire. Well, that had to be part of the idea, too. The company worked on drugs and vaccines and stuff, and that meant that this place was like a germ-warfare factory, didn't it? So, it made sense to keep stuff in—and keep stuff out, right? Ten minutes later they were sure. Instruments all over the building confirmed that the overpressurization systems worked—on the first trial. The guys who'd done the windows and doors had earned all that extra pay for getting it right.

"Looks pretty good. Gil, I have to run over to the uplink center." The complex also had a lavish collection of satellite-communications systems.

"Use the air lock." Trains pointed.

"See you later," the super said on his way out.

"Sure thing, Charlie."

It wasn't pleasant. They now had eleven people, healthy ones, eight women and three men—segregated by gender, of course—and eleven was actually one more than they'd planned, but after kidnapping them you couldn't very well give them back. Their clothing had been taken away—in some cases it had been removed while they'd been unconscious—and replaced with tops and bottoms that were rather like prison garb, if made of somewhat better material. No undergarments were permitted—imprisoned women had actually used bras to hang themselves on occasion, and that couldn't be allowed here. Slippers for shoes, and the food was heavily laced with Valium, which helped to calm people down somewhat, but not completely. It wouldn't have been very smart to drug them that much, since the depression of all their bodily systems might skew the test, and they couldn't allow that either.

"What is all this?" the woman demanded of Dr. Archer.

"It's a medical test," Barbara replied, filling out the form. "You volunteered for it, remember? We're paying you for this, and after it's over you can go back home."

"When did I do that?"

"Last week," Dr. Archer told her.

"I don't remember."

"Well, you did. We have your signature on the consent form. And we're taking good care of you, aren't we?"

"I feel dopey all the time."

"That's normal," Dr. Archer assured her. "It's nothing to worry about."

She—Subject F4—was a legal secretary. Three of the women subjects were that, which was mildly troubling to Dr. Archer. What if

the lawyers they worked for called the police? Letters of resignation had been sent, with the signatures expertly forged, and plausible explanations for the supposed event included in the text of the letters. Maybe it would hold up. In any case, the kidnappings had been expertly done, and nobody here would talk to anybody about it, would they?

Subject F4 was nude, and sitting in a comfortable cloth-covered chair. Fairly attractive, though she needed to lose about ten pounds, Archer thought. The physical examination had revealed nothing unusual. Blood pressure was normal. Blood chemistry showed slightly elevated cholesterol, but nothing to worry about. She appeared to be a normal, healthy, twenty-six-year-old female. The interview for her medical history was similarly unremarkable. She was not a virgin, of course, having had twelve lovers over the nine years of her sexual activity. One abortion carried out at age twenty by her gynecologist, after which she'd practiced safe sex. She had a current love interest, but he was out of town for a few weeks on business, and she suspected that he had another woman in his life anyway.

"Okay, that about does it, Mary." Archer stood and smiled. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"Can I get dressed now?"

"First there's something we want you to do. Please walk through the green door. There's a fogging system in there. You'll find it feels nice and cool. Your clothes will be on the other side. You can get dressed there."

"Okay." Subject F4 rose and did as she was told. Inside the sealed room was—nothing, really. She stood there in drugged puzzlement for a few seconds, noting that it was hot in there, over ninety degrees, but then invisible spray ports in the wall sent out a mist . . . fog, something like that, which cooled her down instantly and comfortably for about ten seconds. Then the fog stopped, and the far door clicked open. As promised, there was a dressing room there, and she donned her green jamms, then walked out into the corridor, where a security guard waved her to the door at the far end—he never got closer than ten feet—back to the dormitory, where lunch was waiting. Meals were pretty good here, and after meals she always felt like a nap.

"Feeling bad, Pete?" Dr. Killgore asked in a different part of the building.

"Must be the flu or something. I feel beat-up all over, and I can't keep anything down." Even the booze, he didn't say, though that was especially disconcerting for the alcoholic. Booze was the one thing he could always keep down.

"Okay, let's give it a look, then." Killgore stood, donning a mask

and putting on latex gloves for his examination. “Gotta take a blood sample, okay?”

“Sure, doc.”

Killgore did that very carefully indeed, giving him the usual stick inside the elbow, and filling four five-cc test tubes. Next he checked Pete’s eyes, mouth, and did the normal prodding, which drew a reaction over the subject’s liver—

“Ouch! That hurts, doc.”

“Oh? Doesn’t feel very different from before, Pete. How’s it hurt?” he asked, feeling the liver, which, as in most alcoholics, felt like a soft brick.

“Like you just stabbed me with a knife, doc. Real sore there.”

“Sorry, Pete. How about here?” the physician asked, probing lower with both hands.

“Not as sharp, but it hurts a little. Somethin’ I ate, maybe?”

“Could be. I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Killgore replied. Okay, this one was symptomatic, a few days earlier than expected, but small irregularities were to be expected. Pete was one of the healthier subjects, but alcoholics were never really what one could call healthy. So, Pete would be Number 2. *Bad luck, Pete,* Killgore thought. “Let me give you something to take the edge off.”

The doctor turned and pulled open a drawer on the wall cabinet. Five milligrams, he thought, filling the plastic syringe to the right line, then turning and sticking the vein on the back of the hand.

“Oooh!” Pete said a few seconds later. “Oooh . . . that feels okay. Lot better, doc. Thanks.” The rheumy eyes went wide, then relaxed.

Heroin was a superb analgesic, and best of all, it gave its recipient a dazzling rush in the first few seconds, then reduced him to a comfortable stupor for the next few hours. So, Pete would feel just fine for a while. Killgore helped him stand, then sent him back. Next he took the blood samples off for testing. In thirty minutes, he was sure. The antibody tests still showed positive, and microscopic examination showed what the antibodies were fighting against . . . and losing to.

Only two years earlier, people had tried to infect America with the natural version of this bug, this “shepherd’s crook,” some called it. It had been somewhat modified in the genetic-engineering lab with the addition of cancer DNA to make this negative-strand RNA virus more robust, but that was really like putting a raincoat on the bug. The best news of all was that the genetic engineering had more than tripled the latency period. Once thought to be four to ten days, now it was almost a month. Maggie really knew her stuff, and she’d even picked the right name for it. Shiva was one nasty little son of a bitch. It had killed Chester—well, the potassium had done that, but Chester had been doomed—and it was now starting to kill Pete. There would be no

merciful help for this one. Pete would be allowed to live until the disease took his life. His physical condition was close enough to normal that they'd work to see what good supportive care could do to fight off the effects of the Ebola-Shiva. Probably nothing, but they had to establish that. Nine remaining primary test subjects, and then eleven more on the other side of the building—they would be the real test. They were all healthy, or so the company thought. They'd be testing both the method of primary transmission and the viability of Shiva as a plague agent, plus the utility of the vaccines Steve Berg had isolated the previous week.

That concluded Killgore's work for the day. He made his way outside. The evening air was chilly and clean and pure—well, as pure as it could be in this part of the world. There were a hundred million cars in the country, all spewing their complex hydrocarbons into the atmosphere. Killgore wondered if he'd be able to tell the difference in two or three years, when all that stopped. In the glow of the building lights, he saw the flapping of bats. Cool, he thought, one rarely saw bats. They must be chasing insects, and he wished his ears could hear the ultrasonic sounds they projected like radar to locate the bugs and intercept them.

There would be birds up there, too. Owls especially, magnificent raptors of the night, flying with soft, quiet feathers, finding their way into barns, where they'd catch mice, eat and digest them, and then regurgitate the bones of their prey in compact little capsules. Killgore felt far more kinship for the wild predators than he did for the prey animals. But that was to be expected, wasn't it? He *did* have kinship with the predators, those wild, magnificent things that killed without conscience, because Mother Nature had no conscience at all. It gave life with one hand, and took it back with the other. The ageless process of life, that had made the earth what it was. Men had tried so hard and so long to change it, but other men now would change it back, quickly and dramatically, and he'd be there to see it. He wouldn't see all the scars fade from the land, and that was too bad, but, he judged, he'd live long enough to see the important things change. Pollution would stop almost completely. The animals would no longer be fettered and poisoned. The sky would clear, and the land would soon be covered with life, as Nature intended, with him and his colleagues to see the magnificence of the transformation. And if the price was high, then the prize it earned was worth it. The earth belonged to those who appreciated and understood her. He was even using one of Nature's methods to take possession—albeit with a little human help. If humans could use their science and arts to harm the world, then other humans could use them to fix it. Chester and Pete would not have understood, but then, they'd never understood much

of anything, had they?

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"There will be thousands of Frenchmen there," Juan said. "And half of them will be children. If we wish to liberate our colleagues, the impact must be a strong one. This should be strong enough."

"Where will we go afterwards?" René asked.

"The Bekaa Valley is still available, and from there, wherever we wish. I have good contacts in Syria, still, and there are always options."

"It's a four-hour flight, and there is always an American aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean."

"They will not attack an aircraft filled with children," Esteban pointed out. "They might even give us an escort," he added with a smile.

"It is only twelve kilometers to the airport," Andre reminded them, "a fine multilane highway."

"So, then, we must plan the mission in every detail. Esteban, you will get yourself a job there. You, too, Andre. We must pick our places, then select the time and the day."

"We'll need more men. At least ten more."

"That is a problem. Where can we get ten reliable men?" Juan asked.

"*Sicarios* can be hired. We need only promise them the right amount of money," Esteban pointed out.

"They must be faithful men," René told them forcefully.

"They will be faithful enough," the Basque told them. "I know where to go for them."

They were all bearded. It was the easiest disguise to adopt, and though the national police in their countries had pictures of them, the pictures were all of young, shaven men. A passerby might have thought them to be artists, the way they looked, and the way they all leaned inward on the table to speak with intense whispers. They were all dressed moderately well, though not expensively so. Perhaps they were arguing over some political issue, the waiter thought from his station ten meters away, or some confidential business matter. He couldn't know that he was right on both counts. A few minutes later, he watched them shake hands and depart in different directions, having left cash to pay the bill, and, the waiter discovered, a niggardly tip. Artists, he thought. They were notoriously cheap bastards.

“But this is an environmental disaster waiting to happen!” Carol Brightling insisted.

“Carol,” the chief of staff replied. “It’s about our balance of payments. It will save America something like fifty billion dollars, and we need that. On the environmental side, I know what your concerns are, but the president of Atlantic Richfield has promised me personally that this will be a clean operation. They’ve learned a lot in the past twenty years, on the engineering side and the public relations side, about cleaning up their act, haven’t they?”

“Have you ever been there?” the President’s science advisor asked.

“Nope.” He shook his head. “I’ve flown over Alaska, but that’s it.”

“You would think differently if you’d ever seen the place, trust me.”

“They strip-mine coal in Ohio. I’ve seen that. And I’ve seen them cover it back up and plant grass and trees. Hell, one of those strip mines—in two years they’re going to have the PGA championship on the golf course that they built there! It’s *cleaned up,* Carol. They know how now, and they know it makes good sense to do it, economically *and* politically. So, no, Carol, the President will *not* withdraw his support for this drilling project. It makes economic sense for the country.” *And who really cares a rat’s ass for land that only a few hundred people have ever seen?* he didn’t add.

“I have to talk to him personally about it,” the science advisor insisted.

“No.” The chief of staff shook his head emphatically. “That’s not going to happen. Not on this issue. All you’d accomplish is to undercut your position, and that isn’t smart, Carol.”

“But I *promised!”*

“Promised whom?”

“The Sierra Club.”

“Carol, the Sierra Club isn’t part of this administration. And we get their letters. I’ve read them. They’re turning into an extremist organization on issues like this. Anybody can say ‘do nothing,’ and that’s about all they’re saying since this Mayflower guy took it over.”

“Kevin is a good man and a very smart one.”

“You couldn’t prove that by me, Carol,” the chief of staff snorted. “He’s a Luddite.”

“Goddamnit, Arnie, not everyone who disagrees with you is an extremist, okay?”

“That one is. The Sierra Club’s going to self-destruct if they keep him on top of the masthead. Anyway.” The chief of staff checked his schedule. “I have work to do. Your position on this issue, Dr. Brightling, is to support the Administration. That means *you* personally *support* the drilling bill for AAMP. There is only one position in this building, and that position is what the President says it

is. That's the price you pay for working as an advisor to the President, Carol. You get to influence policy, but once that policy is promulgated, you support it, whether you believe it or not. You will say publicly that you think that drilling that oil is a good thing for America and for the environment. Do you understand that?"

"No, Arnie, I won't!" Brightling insisted.

"Carol, you will. And you will do it convincingly, in such a way as to make the more moderate environmental groups see the logic of the situation. If, that is, you like working here."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, Carol, I am not threatening you. I am explaining to you how the rules work here. Because you have to play by the rules, just like I do, and just like everyone else does. If you work here you must be loyal to the President. If you are not loyal, then you cannot work here. You knew those rules when you came onboard, and you knew you had to live by them. Okay, now it's time for a gut check. Carol, will you live by the rules or won't you?"

Her face was red under the makeup. She hadn't learned to conceal her anger, the chief of staff saw, and that was too bad. You couldn't afford to get angry over minor bullshit items, not at this level of government. And this was a minor bullshit item. When you found something as valuable as several billion barrels of oil in a place that belonged to you, you drilled into the ground to get it out. It was as simple as that—and it was simpler still if the oil companies promised not to hurt anything as a result. It would remain that simple as long as the voters drove automobiles. "Well, Carol?" he asked.

"Yes, Arnie, I know the rules, and I will live by the rules," she confirmed at last.

"Good. I want you to prepare a statement this afternoon for release next week. I want to see it today. The usual stuff, the science of it, the safety of the engineering measures, that sort of thing. Thanks for coming over, Carol," he said in dismissal.

Dr. Brightling stood and moved to the door. She hesitated there, wanting to turn and tell Arnie what he could do with his statement . . . but she kept moving into the corridor in the West Wing, turned north, and went down the stairs for the street level. Two Secret Service agents noted the look on her face and wondered what had rained on her parade that morning—or maybe had turned a hail-storm loose on it. She walked across the street with an unusually stiff gait, then up the steps into the OEOB. In her office, she turned on her Gateway computer and called up her word-processing program, wanting to put her fist through the glass screen rather than type on the keyboard.

To be ordered around by that *man!* Who didn't know *anything* about

science, and didn't *care* about environmental policy. All Arnie cared about was politics, and politics was the most artificial damned thing in the world!

But then, finally, she calmed down, took a deep breath, and began drafting her defense of something that, after all, would never happen, would it?

No, she told herself. It would never happen.

CHAPTER 12

WILD CARDS

The theme park had learned well from its more famous model. It had taken care to hire away a dozen senior executives, their lavish salary increases paid for by the park's Persian Gulf financial backers, who had already exceeded their fiscal expectations and looked forward to recouping their total investment in less than six years instead of the programmed eight and a half.

Those investments had been considerable, since they determined not merely to emulate the American corporation, but to exceed it in every respect. The castle in *their* park was made of stone, not mere fiberglass. The main street was actually three thoroughfares, each adapted to three separate national themes. The circular railroad was of standard gauge and used two real steam locomotives, and there was talk of extending the line to the international airport, which the Spanish authorities had been so kind as to modernize in order to support the theme park—as well they might: the park provided twenty-eight thousand fulltime and ten thousand more part-time or seasonal jobs. The ride attractions were spectacular, most of them custom designed and built in Switzerland, and some of them adventurous enough to make a fighter pilot go pale. In addition, it had a Science World section, with a moonwalk attraction that had impressed NASA, an underwater walk-through mega-aquarium, and pavilions from every major industry in Europe—the one from Airbus Industrie was particularly impressive, allowing children (and adults) to pilot simulated versions of its aircraft.

There were characters in costumes—gnomes, trolls, and all manner of mythical creatures from European history, plus Roman legionnaires to fight barbarians—and the usual marketing areas where guests could buy replicas of everything the park had to offer.

One of the smartest things the investors had done was to build their theme park in Spain rather than France. The climate here, while hotter, was also sunny and dry most of the year, which made for full-year-round operations. Guests flew in from all over Europe, or took the trains, or came down on bus tours to stay at the large, comfortable hotels, which were designed for three different levels of expense and

grandeur, from one that might have been decorated by César Ritz down to several with more basic amenities. Guests at all of them shared the same physical environment, warm and dry, and could take time off to bathe in the many pools surrounded by white-sand beaches, or to play on one of the two existing golf courses—three more were under construction, and one of them would soon be part of the European Professional Tour. There was also a busy casino, something no other theme park had tried. All in all, Worldpark, as it was called, had been an instant and sensational success, and it rarely had fewer than ten thousand guests, and frequently more than fifty thousand.

A thoroughly modern facility, it was controlled by six regional and one master command center, and every attraction, ride, and food outlet was monitored by computers and TV cameras.

Mike Dennis was the operations director. He'd been hired away from Orlando, and while he missed the friendly managerial atmosphere there, the building and then running of Worldpark had been the challenge he'd waited for all his life. A man with three kids, *this* was his baby, Dennis told himself, looking out the battlements of the tower. His office and command center was in the castle keep, the tall tower in the twelfth-century fortress they'd built. Maybe the Duke of Aquitaine had enjoyed a place like this, but he'd used only swords and spears, not computers and helicopters, and as wealthy as his grace had been back in the twelfth century, he hadn't handled money in this quantity—Worldpark took in ten *million* dollars in cash alone on a good day, and far more than that from plastic. Every day a cash truck with a heavy police escort left the park for the nearest bank.

Like its model in Florida, Worldpark was a multistory structure. Under the main concourses was a subterranean city where the support services operated, and the cast members changed into costumes and ate their lunches, and where he was able to get people and things from place to place quickly and unseen by the guests in the sunlight. Running it was the equivalent of being mayor of a not-so-small city—harder, actually, since he had to make sure that everything worked all the time, and that the cost of operations was always less than the city's income. That he did his job well, actually about 2.1 percent better than his own pre-opening projections, meant that he had a sizable salary, and that he'd earned the $1,000,000 bonus that had been delivered to him only five weeks earlier. Now, if only his kids could get used to the local schools....

Even as an object of hatred, it was breathtaking. It *was* a city, Andre saw, the construction of which had cost billions. He'd lived through the indoctrination process in the local "Worldpark University,"

learned the absurd ethos of the place, learned to smile at everything and everybody. He'd been assigned, fortuitously, to the security department, the notional Worldpark *Policia,* which meant that he wore a light blue shirt and dark blue trousers with a vertical blue stripe, carried a whistle and a portable radio, and spent most of his time telling people where the restrooms were, because Worldpark needed a police force about as much as a ship needed wheels. He'd gotten this job because he was fluent in three languages, French, Spanish, and English, and thus could be helpful to the majority of the visitors —"guests"—to this new Spanish city, all of whom needed to urinate from time to time, and most of whom, evidently, lacked the wit to notice the hundreds of signs (graphic rather than lettered) that told them where to go when the need became overwhelming.

Esteban, Andre saw, was in his usual place, selling his helium-filled balloons. Bread and circuses, they both thought. The vast sums expended to build this place—and for what purpose? To give the children of the poor and working classes a brief few hours of laughter before they returned to their dreary homes? To seduce their parents into spending their money for mere amusement? Really, the purpose of the place was to enrich further the Arab investors who'd been persuaded to spend so much of their oil money here, building this fantasy city. Breathtaking, perhaps, but still an object of contempt, this icon of the unreal, this opiate for the masses of workers who had not the sense to see it for what it was. Well, that was the task of the revolutionary elite.

Andre walked about, seemingly in an aimless way, but actually in accordance with plans, both his and the park's. He was being paid to look around and make arrangements while he smiled and told parents where their little darlings could relieve themselves.

"This will do it," Noonan said, walking into the morning meeting.

"What's 'this'?" Clark asked.

Noonan held up a computer floppy disk. "It's just a hundred lines of code, not counting the installation stuff. The cells—the phone cells, I mean—all use the same computer program to operate. When we get to a place, I just insert this in their drives and upload the software. Unless you dial in the right prefix to make a call—7-7-7, to be exact—the cell will respond that the number you're calling is busy. So, we can block any cellular calls into our subjects from some helpful soul outside and also prevent them from getting out."

"How many spare copies do you have?" Stanley asked.

"Thirty," Noonan answered. "We can get the local cops to install them. I have instructions printed up in six languages." *Not bad, eh?* Noonan wanted to say. He'd gone through a contact at the National

Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, to get it. Pretty good for just over a week's effort. "It's called Cellcop, and it'll work anywhere in the world."

"Good one, Tim." Clark made a note. "Okay, how are the teams?"

"Sam Houston's down with a sprained knee," Peter Covington told Clark. "Hurt it coming down a zip-line. He can still deploy, but he won't be running for a few days."

"Team-2's fully mission-capable, John," Chavez announced. "George Tomlinson is a little slowed down with his Achilles tendon, but no big deal."

Clark grunted and nodded, making a further note. Training was so hard here that the occasional injury was inevitable—and John well remembered the aphorism that drills were supposed to be bloodless combat, and combat supposed to be bloody drills. It was fundamentally a good thing that his troops worked as hard in practice as they did in the real thing—it said a lot for their morale, and just as much for their professionalism, that they took every aspect of life in Rainbow that seriously. Since Sam Houston was a long-rifleman, he really was about seventy percent mission-capable, and George Tomlinson, strained tendon and all, was still doing his morning runs, gutting it out as an elite trooper should.

"Intel?" John turned to Bill Tawney.

"Nothing special to report," the Secret Intelligence Service officer replied. "We know that there are terrorists still alive, and the various police forces are still doing their investigations to dig them out, but it's not an easy job, and nothing promising appears to be underway, but . . ." But one couldn't predict a break in a case. Everyone around the table knew that. This very evening someone of the class of Carlos himself could be pulled over for running a stop sign and be recognized by some rookie cop and snapped up, but you couldn't plan for random events. There were still over a hundred known terrorists living somewhere in Europe probably, just like Ernst Model and Hans Fürchtner, but they'd learned a not-very-hard lesson about keeping a low profile, adopting a simple disguise, and keeping out of trouble. They had to make some greater or lesser mistake to be noticed, and the ones who made dumb mistakes were long since dead or imprisoned.

"How about cooperation with the local police agencies?" Alistair Stanley asked.

"We keep speaking with them, and the Bern and Vienna missions have been very good press for us. Wherever something happens, we can expect to be summoned swiftly."

"Mobility?" John asked next.

"That's me, I guess," Lieutenant Colonel Malloy responded. "It's

working out well with the 1st Special Operations Wing. They're letting me keep the Night Hawk for the time being, and I've got enough time on the British Puma that I'm current in it. If we have to go, I'm ready to go. I can get MC-130 tanker support if I need it for a long deployment, but as a practical matter I can be just about anywhere in Europe in eight hours in my Sikorsky, with or without tanker support. Operational side, I'm comfortable with things. The troops here are as good as any I've seen, and we work well together. The only thing that worries me is the lack of a medical team."

"We've thought about that. Dr. Bellow is our doc, and you're up to speed on trauma, right, doc?" Clark asked.

"Fairly well, but I'm not as good as a real trauma surgeon. Also, when we deploy, we can get local paramedics to help out from police and fire services on the scene."

"We did it better at Fort Bragg," Malloy observed. "I know all our shooters are trained in emergency-response care, but a properly trained medical corpsman is a nice thing to have around. Doctor Bellow's only got two hands," the pilot noted. "And he can only be in one place at a time."

"When we deploy," Stanley said, "we do a routine call-up to the nearest local casualty hospital. So far we've had good cooperation."

"Okay, guys, but I'm the one who has to transport the wounded. I've been doing it for a long time, and I think we could do it a little better. I recommend a drill for that. We should practice it regularly."

That wasn't a bad idea, Clark thought. "Duly noted, Malloy. Al, let's do that in the next few days."

"Agreed," Stanley responded with a nod.

"The hard part is simulating injuries," Dr. Bellow told them. "There's just no substitute for the real thing, but we can't put our people in the emergency room. It's too time-wasteful, and they won't see the right kind of injuries there."

"We've had this problem for years," Peter Covington said. "You can teach the procedures, but practical experience is too difficult to come by—"

"Yeah, unless we move the outfit to Detroit," Chavez quipped. "Look, guys, we all know the right first-aid stuff, and Doctor Bellow *is* a doc. There's only so much we have time to train for, and the primary mission is paramount, isn't it? We get there and do the job, and that minimizes the number of wounds, doesn't it?" Except to the bad guys, he didn't add, and nobody really cared about them, and you couldn't treat three 10-mm bullets in the head, even at Walter Reed. "I like the idea of training to evac wounded. Fine, we can do that, and practice first-aid stuff, but can we realistically go farther than that? I don't see how."

"Comments?" Clark asked. He didn't see much past that, either.

"Chavez is correct . . . but you're never fully prepared or fully trained," Malloy pointed out. "No matter how much you work, the bad guys always find a way to dump something new on you. Anyway, in Delta we deploy with a full medical-response team, trained corpsmen—experts, used to trauma care. Maybe we can't afford to do that here, but that's how we did it at Fort Bragg."

"We'll just have to depend on local support for that," Clark said, closing the issue. "This place can't afford to grow that much. I don't have the funding."

And that's the magic word in this business, Malloy didn't have to add. The meeting broke up a few minutes later, and with it the working day ended. Dan Malloy had grown accustomed to the local tradition of closing out a day at the club, where the beer was good and the company cordial. Ten minutes later, he was hoisting ajar with Chavez. This little greaser, he thought, really had his shit together.

"That call you made in Vienna was pretty good, Ding."

"Thanks, Dan." Chavez took a sip. "Didn't have much of a choice, though. Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do."

"Yep, that's a fact," the Marine agreed.

"You think we're thin on the medical side . . . so do I, but so far that hasn't been a problem."

"So far you've been lucky, my boy."

"Yeah, I know. We haven't been up against any crazy ones yet."

"They're out there, the real sociopathic personalities, the ones who don't care a rat's ass about anything at all. Well, truth is, I haven't seen any of them either except on TV. I keep coming back to the Ma'alot thing, in Israel twenty-plus years ago. Those fuckers wasted little kids just to show how tough they were—and remember what happened a while back with the President's little girl. She was damned lucky that FBI guy was there. I wouldn't mind buying that guy a beer."

"Good shooting," Chavez agreed. "Better yet, good timing. I read up on how he handled it—talking to them and all, being patient, waiting to make his move, then taking it when he got it."

"He lectured at Bragg, but I was traveling that day. Saw the tape. The boys said he can shoot a pistol as well as anybody on the team—but better yet, he was smart."

"Smart counts," Chavez agreed, finishing his beer. "I gotta go fix dinner."

"Say again?"

"My wife's a doc, gets home in an hour or so, and it's my turn to do dinner."

A raised eyebrow: "Nice to see you're properly trained, Chavez."

"I am secure in my masculinity," Domingo assured the aviator and

headed for the door.

Andre worked late that night. Worldpark stayed open until 2300 hours, and the shops remained open longer than that, because even so huge a place as Worldpark couldn't waste the chance to earn a few extra copper coins from the masses for the cheap, worthless souvenirs they sold, to be clutched in the greedy hands of little children, often nearly asleep in the arms of their weary parents. He watched the process impassively, the way so many people waited until the very last ride on the mechanical contrivances, and only then, with the chains in place and after the good-bye waves of the ride operators, did they finally turn and shuffle their way to the gates, taking every opportunity to stop and enter the shops, where the clerks smiled tiredly and were as helpful as they'd been taught to be at the Worldpark University. And then when, finally, all had left, the shops were closed, and the registers emptied, and under the eyes of Andre and his fellow security staff, the cash was taken off to the counting room. It wasn't, strictly speaking, part of his current job, but he tagged along anyway, following the three clerks from the Matador shop, out onto the main street, then into an alleyway, through some blank wooden doors, and down the steps to the underground, the concrete corridors that bustled with electric carts and employees during the day, now empty except for employees heading to dressing rooms to change into their street clothes. The counting room was in the very center, almost under the castle itself. There the cash was handed over, each bag labeled for its point of origin. The coins were dumped into a bin, where they were separated by nationality and denomination and counted, wrapped, and labeled for transport to the bank. The paper currency, already bundled by currency and denomination was . . . weighed. The first time he'd seen it, it had amazed him, but delicate scales actually weighed it—there, one point zero-six-one-five kilos of hundred-mark German notes. Two point six-three-seven-zero kilos of five-pound British ones. The corresponding amount was flashed on the electronic screen, and the notes were whisked off for wrapping. Here the security officers carried weapons, Astra pistols, because the total amount of the currency for the day was —the master tally display said £11,567,309.35 . . . all used cash, the very best sort, in all denominations. It all fit into six large canvas bags that were placed on a four-wheeled cart for transport out the back of the underground into an armored car with a police escort for transport to the central branch of the local bank, still open this time of day for a deposit of this magnitude. Eleven million British pounds in cash—this place took in billions per year in *cash,* Andre thought tiredly.

"Excuse me," he said to his security supervisor. "Have I broken any

rules by coming here?"

A chuckle: "No, everyone comes down sooner or later to see. That's why the windows are here."

"Is it not dangerous?"

"I think not. The windows are thick, as you see, and security inside the counting room is very strict."

"Mon dieu, all that money—what if someone should try to steal it?"

"The truck is armored, and it has a police escort, two cars, four men each, all heavily armed." And those would be only the obvious watchers, Andre thought. There would be others, not so close, and not so obvious, but equally well armed. "We were initially concerned that the Basque terrorists might try to steal the money—this much cash could finance their operations for years—but the threat has not developed, and besides, you know what becomes of all this cash?"

"Why not fly the money to the bank on a helicopter?" Andre asked.

The security supervisor yawned. "Too expensive."

"So, what becomes of the cash?"

"Much of it comes right back to us, of course."

"Oh." Andre thought for a moment. "Yes, it must, mustn't it?"

Worldpark was largely a cash business, because so many people still preferred to pay for things that way, despite the advent of credit cards, which the park was just as pleased to use, and despite the ability of guests to charge everything to their hotel-room accounts—instructions for which were printed on every plastic card-key in the language of the individual guest.

"I wager we use the same five-pound British note fifteen times before it's too worn and has to be sent to London for destruction and replacement."

"I see," Andre said with a nod. "So, we deposit, and then we withdraw from our own account just to make change for our guests. How much cash do we keep on hand, then?"

"For change purposes?" A shrug. "Oh, two or three million at minimum—British pounds, that is. To keep track of it all, we have those computers." He pointed.

"Amazing place," Andre observed, actually meaning it. He nodded at his supervisor and headed off to punch his time card and change. It had been a good day. His wanderings had confirmed his previous observations of the park. He now knew how to plan the mission, and how to accomplish it. Next he had to bring in his colleagues and show them the plan, after which came the execution. Forty minutes later, he was in his flat, drinking some Burgundy and thinking everything through. He'd been the plans and operations officer for Action Directe for over a decade—he'd planned and executed a total of eleven murders. This mission, however, would be by far the grandest of all,

perhaps the culmination of his career, and he had to think it all through. Affixed to the wall of his flat was a map of Worldpark, and his eyes wandered over it, back and forth. Way-in, way-out. Possible routes of access by the police. Ways to counter them. Where to place his own security personnel. Where to take the hostages. Where to keep them. How to get everyone out. Andre kept going over it, again and again, looking for weaknesses, looking for mistakes. The Spanish national police, the Guardia Civil, would respond to this mission. They were to be taken with respect, despite their comical hats. They'd been fighting the Basques for a generation, and they'd learned. They doubtless had an arrangement with Worldpark already, because this was too obvious a target for terr—for progressive elements, Andre corrected himself. Police were not to be taken lightly. They'd almost killed or arrested him twice in France, but both of those occasions were because he'd made obvious mistakes, and he'd learned from both of them. No, not this time. He'd keep them at bay this time by his choice of hostages, and by showing his willingness to use them to his political ends, and as tough as the Guardia Civil might be, they would quail before that demonstration of resolve, because tough as they were, they were vulnerable to bourgeois sentimentality, just as all like them were. It was the purity of his purpose that gave him the edge, and he'd hold on to that, and he *would* achieve his objective, or many would die, and neither the government of Spain nor France could stand up to that. The plan was nearly ready. He lifted his phone and made an international call.

Pete came back early in the evening. His face was pale now, and he was even more listless, but also uncomfortable, judging from the pained way in which he moved.

"How you feeling?" Dr. Killgore asked cheerily.

"Stomach is real bad, doc, right here," Pete said, pointing with his finger.

"Still bothering you, eh? Well, okay, why don't you lie down here and we'll check you out," the physician said, donning mask and gloves. The physical examination was cursory, but unnecessary for all that. Pete, like Chester before him, was dying, though he didn't know it yet. The heroin had done a good job of suppressing his discomfort, removing the pain and replacing it with chemical nirvana. Killgore carefully took another blood sample for later microscopy.

"Well, partner, I think we just have to wait this one out. But let me give you a shot to ease the pain, okay?"

"Sure thing, doc. The last one worked pretty good."

Killgore filled another plastic syringe and injected the heroin into the same vein as before. He watched Pete's brown eyes go wide with

the initial rush, then droop as the pain went away, to be replaced with a lethargy so deep that he could almost have done major surgery on the spot without getting a rise from the poor bastard.

"How are the rest of the guys, Pete?"

"Okay, but Charlie is bitching about his stomach, something he ate, I guess."

"Oh, yeah? Maybe I'll see him, too," Killgore thought. *So, number three will be in here tomorrow, probably.* The timing was just about right. After Chester's earlier-than-expected symptoms, the rest of the group was right on the predicted timeline. Good.

More telephone calls were made, and by early morning, people rented cars with false IDs, drove in pairs or singly south from France to Spain, and were waved through the cursory border checkpoints, usually with a friendly smile. Various travel agents made the necessary reservations at park hotels, all mid-level, and linked to the park by monorail or train, the stations right in the shop-filled hotel lobbies, so that the guests wouldn't get lost.

The highways to the park were wide and comfortable to drive on, and the signs easy to follow even for those who didn't speak Spanish. About the only hazards were the huge tourist buses, which moved along at over 150 kilometers per hour, like land-bound ocean liners, their windows full of people, many of them children who waved down at the drivers of the passenger cars. The drivers waved back with smiles of their own, and allowed the buses to plow on, exceeding the speed limit as though it were their right to do so, which the car drivers didn't want to risk. They had plenty of time. They'd planned their mission that way.

Tomlinson reached down to his left leg and grimaced. Chavez dropped back from the morning run to make sure he was okay.

"Still hurts?"

"Like a son of a bitch," Sergeant Tomlinson confirmed.

"So go easier on it, you dumb bastard. The Achilles is a bad thing to hurt."

"Just found that one out, Ding." Tomlinson slowed down to a walk, still favoring the left leg after running over two miles on it. His breathing was far heavier than usual, but pain was always a bad thing for the endurance.

"See Doc Bellow?"

"Yeah, but ain't nothing he can do 'cept let it heal, he says."

"So, let it heal. That's an order, George. No more running until it stops hurting so much. 'Kay?"

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Tomlinson agreed. "I can still deploy if you need

me."

"I know that, George. See you in the shooting house."

"Right." Tomlinson watched his leader speed up to rejoin the rest of Team-2. It hurt his pride that he wasn't keeping up. He'd never allowed any sort of injury to slow him down—in Delta Force he'd kept up with the training despite two broken ribs, hadn't even told the medics about it for fear of being thought a pussy by the rest of his team. But while you could conceal and gut out bad ribs, a stretched tendon was something you couldn't run on—the pain was just so bad that the leg stopped working right, and it was hard to stand up straight. Damn, the soldier thought, can't let the rest of the team down. He'd never been second-best in anything in his life, back to Little League baseball, where he'd played shortstop. But today instead of running the rest of the way, he walked, trying to maintain a military one-hundred-twenty steps per minute, and even *that* hurt, but not enough to make him stop. Team-1 was out running also, and they went past him, even Sam Houston with his bad knee, limping as he ran past with a wave. The pride in this unit was really something. Tomlinson had been a special-ops trooper for six years, a former Green Beret drafted into Delta, now almost a college graduate with a major in psychology—that was the field special-ops people tended to adopt for some reason or other—and was trying to figure out how to complete his studies in England, where the universities worked differently, and where it was a little unusual for enlisted soldiers to have parchment degrees. But in Delta they often sat around and talked about the terrorists they were supposed to deal with, what made them tick, because in understanding that came the ability to predict their actions and weaknesses—the easier to kill them, which was the job, after all. Strangely, he'd never done a takedown in the field before coming here, and stranger still, the experience hadn't been at all different from training. You played as you practiced, the sergeant thought, just like they'd told him every step of the way since basic training at Fort Knox eleven years before. Damn, his lower leg was still on fire, but less so than it had been in the run. Well, the doc had told him at least a week, more likely two, before he'd be fully mission-capable again, all because he'd hit a curb the wrong way, not looking, like a damned fool. At least Houston had an excuse for his knee. Zip-lining could be dangerous, and everybody slipped once in a while—in his case landing on a rock, which must have hurt like a bastard.... But Sam wasn't a quitter either, Tomlinson told himself, hobbling forward toward the shooting house.

"Okay, this is a live-fire exercise," Chavez told Team-2. "The scenario is five bad guys, eight hostages. The bad guys are armed with handguns and SMGs. Two of the hostages are kids, two girls, ages

seven and nine. Other hostages are all females, mothers. The bad guys hit a day-care center, and it's time to do the takedown. Noonan has predicted the location of the bad guys like this." Chavez pointed to the blackboard. "Tim, how good's your data?"

"Seventy percent, no better than that. They're moving around some. But the hostages are all here in this corner." His pointer tapped the blackboard.

"Okay. Paddy, you got the explosives. Pair off as normal. Louis and George go in first, covering the left side. Eddie and I go in right behind with the center. Scotty and Oso in last, covering the right. Questions?"

There were none. The team members examined the blackboard diagram. The room was straightforward, or as much as it could be.

"Then let's do it," Ding told them. The team filed out, wearing their ninja suits.

"Your leg, George, how is it?" Loiselle asked Tomlinson.

"We'll just have to see, I guess. But my hands are okay," the sergeant said, holding his MP-10 up.

"Bien." Loiselle nodded. The two were semipermanently paired together, and worked well as a miniteam, almost to the point that one of them could read the other's mind in the field, and both had the gift for moving unseen. That was difficult to teach—instinctive hunters just knew it somehow, and the good ones practiced it incessantly.

Two minutes later, they were on the outside of the shooting house. Connolly set the Primacord around the door. This aspect of training kept the base carpenters pretty busy, Chavez thought. It took only thirty seconds before Connolly backed off, waving his hand, thumb up, to indicate he'd connected the wires to the detonator box.

"Team-2, this is Lead," they all heard over their radio earpieces. "Stand-to and stand by. Paddy, three . . . two . . . one . . . *MARK!"*

Clark, as usual, jumped when the *ka-BOOM!* sounded. A former demolitions expert himself, he knew that Connolly was his superior, with an almost magical touch for the stuff, but he knew also that no demo expert in the world ever used too little on a job. The door flew across the room and slammed into the far wall, fast enough to cause injury to anyone it hit, though probably not fatally. John covered his ears with his hands and shut his eyes because next through was a flash-bang that attacked his ears and eyes like an exploding sun. He had the timing down perfectly, as he opened back up to see the shooters come in.

Tomlinson ignored the protests from his leg, and followed Loiselle in with his weapon up. That's when the first surprise hit the shooters; this exercise was to be a tricky one. No hostages and no bad guys on the left. Both men went to the far wall, turning right to cover that

side.

Chavez and Price were already in, scanning their area of responsibility, and also seeing nothing. Then Vega and McTyler had the same experience on the right side of the room. The mission was not going as briefed, as sometimes happened.

Chavez saw there were no bad guys or hostages in view, and that there was but one door, open, into another room. “Paddy, flash-bangs, now!” he ordered over his radio, while Clark watched from the corner wearing his white observer’s shirt and body armor. Connolly had come through behind Vega and McTyler, two flash-bangs in his hands. One, then another, sailed through the door, and again the building shook. Chavez and Price took the lead this time. Alistair Stanley was in there in his white don’t-shoot-at-me garb while Clark stayed in the front room. The latter heard the suppressed chatter of the weapons, followed by shouts of “Clear!” “Clear!” “Clear!”

On entering the shooting room, John saw all the targets perforated in the heads, as before. Ding and Eddie were with the hostages, covering them with their armored bodies, weapons trained on the cardboard targets, which in real life would be on the floor and bleeding explosively from their shattered skulls.

“Excellent,” Stanley pronounced. “Good improvisation. You, Tomlinson, you were slow, but your shooting was bloody perfect. You, too, Vega.”

“Okay, people, let’s head over to the office to see the instant replay,” John told them, heading outside and still shaking his head to clear his ears from the insult of the flash-bangs. He’d have to get ear protectors and goggles if he did much more of this, lest his hearing be permanently damaged—even though he felt it his duty to experience the real thing to be able to appreciate how everything worked. He grabbed Stanley on the walk over.

“Fast enough, Al?”

“Yes.” Stanley nodded. “The flash-bangs give us, oh, three to five seconds of incapacitation, and another fifteen or so of subnormal performance. Chavez adapted well. The hostages would all have survived, probably. John, our lads are right on the crest of the wave. They cannot get any better. Tomlinson, bad leg and all, didn’t lose more than half a step, if that much, and our little Frenchman moves like a bloody mongoose. Even Vega, big as he is, isn’t the least bit oafish. John, these lads are as good as any team I’ve ever seen.”

“I agree, but—”

“But still so much is in the hands of our adversaries. Yes, I know, but God help the bastards when we come for them.”

CHAPTER 13

AMUSEMENT

Popov was still trying to learn more about his employer, but finding nothing to enlighten himself. The combination of the New York Public Library and the Internet had turned up reams of information, but nothing that gave the slightest clue as to why he'd employed the former KGB officer to dig up terrorists and turn them loose upon the world. It was as likely that a child would conspire a murder plot against a loving parent. It wasn't the morality of the event that troubled him. Morality had little place in intelligence operations. As a trainee at the KGB academy outside Moscow, the subject had never come up, except insofar as he and his classmates had always been given to understand that the State Was *Never* Wrong. "You will occasionally be ordered to do things you may find personally upsetting," Colonel Romanov had said once. "Such things will be done, because the reasons, unknown to you or not, will always be proper ones. You *do* have the right to question something for tactical reasons—as the officer in the field, *how* you do the mission will generally be your affair. But to refuse an assignment is not acceptable." And that had been that. Neither Popov nor his classmates had even made notes on the issue. It was understood that orders were orders. And so, once he accepted employment, Popov had done the jobs assigned . . . . . but as a servant of the Soviet Union he'd always known the overall mission, which was to get vital information to his country, because his country needed the information either for itself or to assist others whose actions would be of real benefit to his country. Even dealing with Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez, Popov had thought at the time, had served some special interest. He knew better now, of course. Terrorists were like wild dogs or rabid wolves that one tossed into someone's back garden just to create a stir, and, yes, perhaps that had been strategically useful—or had been thought so by his masters, in the service of a state now dead and gone. But, no, the missions had not really been useful, had they? And as good as KGB had once been—he still thought them the best espionage agency the world had ever seen—it had ultimately been a failure. The Party for which the Committee for State Security had been the Sword and

Shield was no more. The Sword had not slain the Party's enemies, and the Shield had not protected against the West's various weapons. And so, had his superiors really known what they'd needed to do?

Probably not, Popov admitted to himself, and because of that, perhaps *every* mission he'd been assigned had been to some greater or lesser degree a fool's errand. The realization would have been a bitter one, except that his training and experience were paying off now with a lavish salary, not to mention the two suitcases of cash he'd managed to steal—but for doing *what?* Getting terrorists killed off by European police forces? He could just as easily, if not so profitably, have fingered them to the police and allowed them to be arrested, tried, and imprisoned like the criminal scum they were, which would actually have been far more satisfying. A tiger in a cage, pacing back and forth behind his bars and waiting for his daily five kilos of chilled horsemeat, was far more entertaining than one stuffed in a museum, and just as helpless. He was some sort of Judas goat, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, but if so, serving what sort of abattoir?

The money was good. Several more missions like the first two and he could take his money, his false identity papers, and vanish from the face of the earth. He could lie on some beach, drinking tasty beverages and watching pretty girls in skimpy bathing suits or—what? Popov didn't know exactly what sort of retirement he could stomach, but he was certain he could find something. Maybe use his talents to trade in stocks and bonds like a real capitalist, and thus spend his time enriching himself further. Perhaps that, he mused, sipping his morning coffee and staring out the window, looking south toward Wall Street. But he wasn't quite ready for that life yet, and until he was, the fact that he didn't know the nature of his missions' purpose was troublesome. In not knowing, he couldn't evaluate all the dangers to himself. But for all his skill, experience, and professional training, he hadn't a clue as to why his employer wanted him to let the tigers from their cages, out in the open where the hunters were waiting. What a pity, Popov thought, that he couldn't just ask. The answer might even be amusing.

Check-in at the hotel was handled with mechanical precision. The reception desk was huge, and crowded with computers that raced electronically to get the guests checked in, the quicker to get them spending money in the park itself. Juan took his card-key and nodded his thanks at the pretty female clerk, then hoisted his bags and headed off to his room, grateful that there were no metal detectors here. The walk was a short one, and the elevators unusually large, to accommodate people in wheelchairs, he imagined. Five minutes later, he was in his room, unpacking. He'd just about finished when a knock

came at the door.

"Bonjour." It was René. The Frenchman came in and sat on the bed, stretching as he did so. "Are you ready, my friend?" he asked in Spanish.

"Sí," the Basque replied. He didn't look especially Spanish. His hair was on the red side of strawberry blond, his features handsome, and his beard neatly trimmed. Never arrested by the Spanish police, he was bright, careful, but thoroughly dedicated, with two car-bombings and a separate murder to his credit. This, René knew, would be Juan's boldest mission, but he looked ready enough, tense, a little edgy perhaps, but coiled like a spring and prepared to play his role. René, too, had done this sort of thing before, most often murders right on crowded streets; he'd walk right up to his target, fire a suppressed pistol, and just walk on normally, which was the best way to do it, since you were almost never identified—people never saw the pistol, and rarely noticed a person walking normally down the Champs-Élysées. And so, you just changed your clothes and switched on the television to see the press coverage of your work. Action Directe had been largely, but not quite completely, broken up by the French police. The captured men had kept faith with their at-large comrades, hadn't fingered or betrayed them, despite all the pressure and the promises of their uniformed countrymen—and perhaps some of them would be released as a result of this mission, though the main objective was to release their comrade Carlos. It would not be easy to get him out of Le Sante, René thought, rising to look out the window at the train station used by people going to the park, but—he saw the children there, waiting for their ride in—there were some things that no government, however brutal, could overlook.

Two buildings away, Jean-Paul was looking out at the same scene and contemplating much the same thoughts. He'd never married and had rarely even enjoyed a proper love affair. He knew now, at forty-three, that this had created a hole in his life and his character, an abnormality that he'd tried to fill with political ideology, with his beliefs in principles and his vision of a radiant socialist future for his country and for Europe and ultimately for the whole world. But a niggling part of his character told him that his dreams were mere illusions, and that reality was before him, three floors down and a hundred meters west, in the distant faces of children waiting to board the steam train to the park, and—but, no, such thoughts were aberrations. Jean-Paul and his friends *knew* the rightness of their cause and their beliefs. They'd discussed them at the greatest length over the years and concluded that their path was the right one. They'd shared their frustration that so few understood—but someday they *would* understand, someday they *would* see the path of justice that socialism

offered the entire world, *would* understand that the road to the radiant future had to be paved by the revolutionary elite who understood the meaning and force of history . . . and they wouldn't make the mistakes the Russians had made, those backward peasants in that over-large, foolish nation. And so he was able to look down on the assembled people, as they tightened up at the platform while the steam whistle announced the coming of the train, and see . . . things. Even the children were not people, really, but political statements to be made by others, people like himself who understood how the world actually worked, or how it should work. Would work, he promised himself. Someday.

Mike Dennis always took his lunch outside, a habit he'd formed in Florida. One thing he liked about Worldpark was that you could have a drink here, in his case a nice red Spanish wine, which he sipped from a plastic cup as he watched how people circulated, and looked for goofs of one kind or another. He found no obvious ones. The walkways had been laid out after careful and thorough planning, using computer simulations.

The rides here were the things that drew people most of all, and so the walkways had been planned to lead people to the more spectacular of them. The big expensive ones *were* pretty spectacular. His own kids loved to ride them, especially the Dive Bomber, a top-hanging coaster that looked fit to make a fighter pilot lose his lunch, next to which was the Time Machine, a virtual-reality ride that accommodated ninety-six guests per seven-minute cycle—any longer and some patrons could get violently ill, tests had shown. Out of that and it was time for some ice cream or a drink, and there were concessions planted right there to answer the cravings. Farther away was Pepe's, an excellent sit-down restaurant specializing in Catalonian cuisine—you didn't put restaurants too close to the rides. Such attractions were not complementary, since watching the Dive Bomber didn't exactly heighten the appetite, and for adults, neither did riding it. There was a science and an art to setting up and operating theme parks like this one, and Mike Dennis was one of the handful of people in the world who knew how it was done, which explained his enormous salary and the quiet smile that went with his sips of wine, as he watched *his* guests enjoy the place. If this was work, then it was the best job in the world. Even the astronauts who rode the space shuttle didn't have this sort of satisfaction. He got to play with his toy every day. They were lucky to fly twice in a year.

His lunch completed, Dennis rose and walked back toward his office on Strada España, the Spanish Main Street, the central spoke on the partial wheel. It was another fine day at Worldpark, the weather clear,

the temperature twenty-one Celsius, the air dry and pure. The rain in Spain did not, in his experience, stay mainly in the plain. The local climate was much like California's, which, he reflected, went just fine with the Spanish language of the majority of his employees. On the way, he passed one of the park security people. *Andre,* the name tag said, and the language tag on the other shirt pocket said he spoke Spanish, French, and English. Good, Dennis thought. They didn't have enough people like that.

The meeting place was prearranged. The Dive Bomber ride used as its symbol the German Ju-87 Stuka, complete to the Iron Cross insignia on the wings and fuselage, though the swastika on the tail had been thoughtfully deleted. It ought to have greatly offended Spanish sensibilities, Andre thought. Did no one remember Guernica, that first serious expression of Nazi *Grausamkeit,* when thousands of Spanish citizens had been massacred? Was historical appreciation that shallow here? Evidently it was. The children and adults in line frequently reached out to touch the half-scale model of the Nazi aircraft that had dived on both soldiers and civilians with its "Trumpet of Jericho" siren. The siren was replicated as part of the ride itself, though on the hundred-fifty-meter first hill, the screams of the riders as often as not drowned it out, followed by the compressed-air explosion and fountain of water at the bottom when the cars pulled out through simulated flak bursts for the climbing loop into the second hill after dropping a bomb on a simulated ship. Was he the only person in Europe who found the symbology here horrid and bestial?

Evidently so. People raced off the ride to rejoin the line to ride it again, except for those who bumbled off to recover their equilibrium, sometimes sweating, and twice, he'd seen, to vomit. A cleanup man with a mop and bucket stood by for that—not the choicest job in Worldpark. The medical-aid post was a few meters farther away, for those who needed it. Andre shook his head. It served the bastards right to feel ill after choosing to ride that hated symbol of fascism.

Jean-Paul, René, and Juan appeared almost together close to the entrance of the Time Machine, all sipping soft drinks. They and the five others were marked by the hats they'd bought at the entrance kiosk. Andre nodded to them, rubbing his nose as planned. René came over to him.

"Where is the men's room?" he asked in English.

"Follow the signs," Andre pointed. "I get off at eighteen hours. Dinner as planned?"

"Yes."

"All are ready?"

"Entirely ready, my friend."

"Then I will see you at dinner." Andre nodded and walked off, continuing his patrol as he was paid to do, while his comrades walked about, some taking the time to enjoy the rides, he imagined. The park would be even busier tomorrow, he'd been told at the morning briefing session. Another nine-thousand-plus would be checking into the hotels tonight or tomorrow morning in preparation for the bank-holiday weekend in this part of Europe, for Good Friday. The park was set up for mobs of people, and his fellow security personnel had told him all manner of amusing stories about the things that happened here. Four months earlier, a woman had delivered twins in the medical post twenty minutes after riding the Dive Bomber, much to her husband's surprise and the delight of Dr. Weiler—the children had been awarded lifetime passes to Worldpark on the spot, which had made the local TV news, part of the park's genius for public relations. Maybe she'd named the boy Troll, Andre snorted, as he spotted one ahead. The Trolls were short-leg /massive-head costumes worn by petite females, he'd learned on coming to work. You could tell by the skinny legs that fit in to the huge feet-shoes they wore. There was even a water supply in the costume to make the monstrous lips drool . . . and over there was a Roman legionnaire dueling comically with a Germanic barbarian. One of them would alternately run from the other, usually to the applause of the people sitting down to watch the spectacle. He turned to walk over to the German *Strasse,* and was greeted by the oom-pah music of a marching band—why didn't they play the *Horst Wessel Lied?* Andre wondered. It would have gone well with the damned green Stuka. Why not dress the band in SS black, maybe have compulsory shower baths for some of the guests—wasn't *that* part of European history, too? *Damn this place!* Andre thought. The symbology was designed to incur the rage of anyone with the most rudimentary political awareness. But, no, the masses had no memory, no more than they had any understanding of political and economic history. He was glad they'd chosen this place to make their political statement. Maybe *this* would get the idiots to think, just a little bit, perhaps, about the shape of the world. The mis-shape, Andre corrected himself, allowing himself a very un-Worldpark frown at the sunny day and smiling crowds.

There, he told himself. *That* was the spot. The children loved it. There was a crowd of them there even now, dragging, pulling the hands of their parents, dressed in their shorts and sneakers, many wearing hats, with helium-filled balloons tied to their little wrists. And there was a special one, a little girl in a wheelchair, wearing the Special Wish button that told every ride attendant to allow her on without the need to stand in line. A sick one, Dutch from the style of her parents' dress, Andre thought, probably dying from cancer, sent

here by some charity or other modeled on the American Make-A-Wish Foundation, which paid for the parents to bring their dying whelp here for one first and last chance to see the Trolls and other cartoon characters, their rights licensed to Worldpark for sale and other exploitation. How brightly their sick little eyes shone here, Andre saw, on their quick road to the grave, and how solicitous the staff was to them, as though *that* mattered to anyone, this bourgeois sentimentality upon which the entire park was founded. Well. They'd see about all that, wouldn't they? If there were ever a place to make a political statement, to bring the attention of all Europe and all the world to what really mattered, this was it.

• • •

Ding finished his first pint of beer. He'd have only one more. It was a rule that no one had written down and that no one had actually enforced, but by common agreement nobody on the teams had more than two at a time while the teams were on-call, as they almost always were—and besides, two pints of Brit beer were quite a lot, really. Anyway, all the members of Team-2 were home having dinner with their families. Rainbow was an unusual outfit in that sense. *Every* soldier was married, with a wife and at least one kid. The marriages even appeared to be stable. John didn't know if that was a mark of special-operations troopers, but these two-legged tigers who worked for him were pussycats at home, and the dichotomy was both amazing and amusing to him.

Sandy served the main course, a fine roast beef. John rose to get the carving knife so that he could do his duty. Patsy looked at the huge hunk of dead steer and thought briefly about mad-cow disease, but decided that her mother had cooked the meat thoroughly. Besides, she liked good roast beef, cholesterol and all, and her mom was the world's champ at making gravy.

"How's it going at the hospital?" Sandy asked her physician daughter.

"OB is pretty routine. We haven't had a single hard one in the last couple of weeks. I've kinda hoped for a placenta previa, maybe even a placenta abrupta to see if we have the drill down, but—"

"Don't wish for those, Patsy. I've seen them happen in the ER. *Total* panic, and the OB better have his act together, or things can go to hell in a New York minute. Dead mother *and* a dead child."

"Ever see that happen, Mom?"

"No, but I've seen it come close to that twice in Williamsburg. Remember Dr. O'Connor?"

"Tall, skinny guy, right?"

"Yeah." Sandy nodded. "Thank God he was on duty for the second one. The resident came unglued, but Jimmy came in and took over. I was sure we'd lose that one."

"Well, if you know what you're doing—"

"If you know what you're doing, it's still tense. Routine is fine with me. I've done ER duty too long," Sandy Clark went on. "I love a quiet night when I can get caught up on my reading."

"Voice of experience," John Clark observed, serving the meat.

"Makes sense to me," Domingo Chavez agreed, stroking his wife's arm. "How's the little guy?"

"Kicking up a storm right now," Patsy replied, moving her husband's hand to her belly. It never failed, she saw. The way his eyes changed when he felt it. Always a warm, passionate boy, Ding just about melted when he felt the movement in her womb.

"Baby," he said quietly.

"Yeah." She smiled.

"Well, no nasty surprises when the time comes, okay?" Chavez said next. "I want everything to go routinely. This is exciting enough. Don't want to faint or anything."

"Right!" Patsy laughed. *"You? Faint? My commando?"*

"You never know, honey," her father observed, taking his seat. "I've seen tough guys fold before."

"Not this one, Mr. C," Domingo noted with a raised eyebrow.

"More like a fireman," Sandy said from her seat. "The way you guys just hang around 'til something happens."

"That's true," Domingo agreed. "And if the fire never starts, it's okay with us."

"You really mean that?" Patsy asked.

"Yes, honey," her husband told her. "Going out isn't fun. We've been lucky so far. We haven't lost a hostage."

"But that'll change," Rainbow Six told his subordinate.

"Not if I have anything to say about it, John."

"Ding," Patsy said, looking up from her food. "Have you—I mean ... I mean, have you actually—"

The look answered the question, though the words were "Let's not talk about that."

"We don't carve notches in our guns, Pats," John told his daughter. "Bad form, you see."

"Noonan came over today," Chavez went on. "Says he's got a new toy to look at."

"What's it cost?" John asked first of all.

"Not much, he says, not much at all. Delta just started looking at it."

"What's it do?"

"It finds people."

"Huh? Is this classified?"

"Commercial product, and, no, it's not classified at all. But it finds people."

"How?"

"Tracks the human heart up to five hundred meters away."

"What?" Patsy asked. "How's it do that?"

"Not sure, but Noonan says the guys at Fort Bragg are going nuts—I mean, *real* enthusiastic about it. It's called 'Lifeguard' or something like that. Anyway, he asked the headquarters snake people to send us a demo team."

"We'll see," John said, buttering his roll. "Great bread, Sandy."

"It's that little bakery on Millstone Road. Isn't the bread wonderful over here?"

"And everybody knocks Brit food," John agreed. "The idiots. Just what I was raised with."

"All this red meat," Patsy worried aloud.

"My cholesterol is under one-seventy, honey," Ding reminded her. "Lower than yours. I guess it's all that good exercise."

"Wait until you get older," John groused. He was nudging two hundred for the first time in his life, exercise and all.

"No hurry here." Ding chuckled. "Sandy, you are still one of the best cooks around."

"Thanks, Ding."

"Just so our brains don't rot from eating this English cow." A Spanish grin. "Well, this is safer than zip-lining out of the Night Hawk. George and Sam are still hurtin'. Maybe we ought to try different gloves."

"Same ones the SAS uses. I checked."

"Yeah, I know. I talked it over with Eddie, day 'fore yesterday. He says we have to expect training accidents, and Homer says that Delta loses a guy a year, dead, in training accidents."

"What?" Alarm from Patsy.

"And Noonan says the FBI lost a guy once, zipping down from a Huey. Hand just slipped. Oops." Team-2 Lead shrugged.

"Only security against that is more training," John agreed.

"Well, my guys are right at the proper edge. Now I have to figure a way to keep them right there without breaking it."

"That's the hard part, Domingo."

"I s'pose." Chavez finished his plate.

"What do you mean, the edge?" Patsy asked.

"Honey, I mean Team-2 is lean and mean. We always were, but I don't see us getting any better than we are now. Same with Peter's bunch. Except for the two injuries, there isn't room for any

improvement I can see—'specially with Malloy on the team now. Damn, he knows how to drive a chopper."

"Ready to kill people? . . ." Patsy asked dubiously. It was hard for her to be a physician, dedicated to saving life, and yet be married to a man whose purpose often seemed to be the taking of it—and Ding *had* killed someone, else he wouldn't have suggested that she not think about it. How could he do that, and still turn to mush when he felt the baby inside her? It was a lot for her to understand, much as she loved her diminutive husband with the olive skin and flashing white smile.

"No, honey, ready to rescue people," he corrected her. "That's the job."

"But how sure can we be that they will let them out?" Esteban asked.

"What choice will they have?" Jean-Paul replied. He poured the carafe of wine into the empty glasses.

"I agree," Andre said. "What choice will they have? We can disgrace them before the world. And they are cowards, are they not, with their bourgeois sentimentality? They have no strength, not as we do."

"Others have made the mistake of believing that," Esteban said, not so much playing devil's advocate as voicing worries that they all had to have, to one extent or another. And Esteban had always been a worrier.

"There has never been a situation like this. The Guardia Civil is effective, but not trained for a situation like this one. Policemen," Andre snorted. "That is all. I do not think they will arrest any of us, will they?" That remark earned him a few smirks. It was true. They *were* mere policemen, accustomed to dealing with petty thieves, not dedicated political soldiers, men with the proper arms and training and dedication. "Did you change your mind?"

Esteban bristled. "Of course not, comrade. I simply counsel objectivity when we evaluate the mission. A soldier of the revolution must not allow himself to be carried away by mere enthusiasm." Which was a good cover for his fears, the others thought. They all had them, the proof of which was their denial of that fact.

"We'll get Il'ych out," René announced. "Unless Paris is willing to bury a hundred children. That they will not do. And some children will get to fly to Lebanon and back as a result. On that we are agreed, are we not?" He looked around the table and saw all nine heads nod. *"Bien.* Only the children need foul their underpants for this, my friends. Not us." That turned the nods into smiles, and two discreet laughs, as the waiters circulated around the restaurant. René waved for some more wine. The selection was good here, better than he could expect in an Islamic country for the next few years, as he dodged DGSE's field intelligence officers, hopefully with more success

than Carlos had enjoyed. Well, their identities would never be known. Carlos had taught the world of terrorism an important lesson. It did *not* pay to advertise. He scratched his beard. It itched, but in that itching was his personal safety for the next few years. "So, Andre, who comes tomorrow?"

"Thompson CSF is sending six hundred employees and their families here, a company outing for one of their departments. It could not be better," the security guard told them. Thompson was a major French arms manufacturer. Some of the workers, and therefore their children, would be known and important to the French government. French, and politically important—no, it could not get much better than that. "They will be moving about as a group. I have their itinerary. They come to the castle at noon for lunch and a show. That is our moment, my friends." Plus one other little addition Andre had decided on earlier in the day. They were always around somewhere, especially at the shows.

"D'accord?" René asked the people around the table, and again he got his nods. Their eyes were stronger now. Doubts would be set aside. The mission lay before them. The decision to undertake it was far behind. The waiter arrived with two new carafes, and the wine was poured around. The ten men savored their drinks, knowing they might be the last for a very long time, and in the alcohol they found their resolve.

"Don't you just love it?" Chavez asked. "Only Hollywood. They hold their weapons like they're knives or something, and then they hit a squirrel in the left nut at twenty yards. Damn, I wish *I* could do that!"

"Practice, Domingo," John suggested with a chuckle. On the TV screen, the bad guy flew about four yards backward, as though he'd been hit with an anti-tank rocket instead of a mere 9-mm pistol round. "I wonder where you buy those."

"We can't afford them, O great accounting expert!"

John almost spilled his remaining beer at that one. The movie ended a few minutes later. The hero got the girl. The bad guys were all dead. The hero left his parent agency in disgust at their corruption and stupidity and walked off into the sunset, content at his unemployment. Yeah, Clark thought, that was Hollywood. With that comfortable thought, the evening broke up. Ding and Patsy went home to sleep, while John and Sandy did the same.

It was all a big movie set, Andre told himself, walking into the park an hour before it opened to the guests already piling up at the main gate. How very American, despite all the effort that had gone into building the place as a European park. The whole idea behind it, of course, was

American, that fool Walt Disney with his talking mice and children's tales that had stolen so much money from the masses. Religion was no longer the opiate of the people. No, today it was escapism, to depart from the dull day-to-day reality they all lived and all hated, but which they couldn't see for what it was, the bourgeois fools. Who led them here? Their children with their shrill little demands to see the Trolls and the other characters from Japanese cartoons, or to ride the hated Nazi Stuka. Even Russians, those who'd gotten enough money out of their shattered economy to throw it away here, even *Russians* rode the Stuka! Andre shook his head in amazement. Perhaps the children didn't have the education or memory to appreciate the obscenity, but surely their *parents* did! But they came here anyway.

"Andre?"

The park policeman turned to see Mike Dennis, the chief executive officer of Worldpark, looking at him.

"Yes, Monsieur Dennis?"

"The name's Mike, remember?" The executive tapped his plastic name tag. And, yes, it was a park rule that everyone called everyone else by his Christian name—something else doubtless learned from the Americans.

"Yes, Mike, excuse me."

"You okay, Andre? You looked a little upset about something."

"I did? No . . . *Mike,* no, I am fine. Just a long night for me."

"Okay." Dennis patted him on the shoulder. "Busy day planned. How long you been with us?"

"Two weeks."

"Like it here?"

"It is a unique place to work."

"That's the idea, Andre. Have a good one."

"Yes, Mike." He watched the American boss walk quickly away, toward the castle and his office. *Damned Americans,* they expected everyone to be happy all the time, else something must be wrong, and if something went wrong, it had to be fixed. Well, Andre told himself, something *was* wrong, and it *would* be fixed this very day. But Mike wouldn't like that very much, would he?

One kilometer away, Jean-Paul transferred his weapons from his suitcase to his backpack. He'd ordered room service to bring breakfast in, a big American breakfast, he'd decided, since it might have to stand him in good stead for most of this day, and probably part of another. Elsewhere in this hotel and other hotels in the same complex, the others would be doing the same. His Uzi submachine gun had a total of ten loaded magazines, with six more spares for his 9-mm pistol, and three fragmentation hand grenades in addition to his radio. It made for a heavy backpack, but he wouldn't be carrying it all day.

Jean-Paul checked his watch and took one final look at his room. All the toiletries were recently bought. He'd wiped all of them with a damp cloth to make sure he left no fingerprints behind, then the table and desktops, and finally his breakfast dishes and silverware. He didn't know if the French police might have his prints on file somewhere, but if so, he didn't want to give them another set, and if not, why make it easy for them to start a file? He wore long khaki trousers and a short-sleeve shirt, plus the stupid white hat he'd bought the previous day. It would mark him as just one more guest in this absurd place, totally harmless. With all that done, he picked up his backpack and walked out the door, taking a final pause to wipe the doorknob both inside and outside before walking to the elevator bank. He pressed the DOWN button with a knuckle instead of a fingertip, and in a few seconds was on his way out the hotel door and walking casually to the train station, where his room key-card was his passport to the Worldpark Transportation System. He took off the backpack to sit down and found himself joined in the compartment by a German, also carrying a backpack, with his wife and two children. The backpack bumped loudly when the man set it on the seat next to him.

"My Minicam," the man explained, in English, oddly enough.

"I, also. Heavy things to carry about, aren't they?"

"Ah, yes, but this way we will have much to remember from our day in the park."

"Yes, you will," Jean-Paul said in reply. The whistle blew, and the train lurched forward. The Frenchman checked his pocket for his park ticket. He actually had three more days of paid entry into the theme park. Not that he'd need it. In fact, nobody in the area would.

"What the hell?" John mumbled, reading the fax on the top of his pile. "Scholarship fund?" And who had violated security? George Winston, Secretary of the Treasury? What the hell? "Alice?" he called.

"Yes, Mr. Clark," Mrs. Foorgate said on coming into his office. "I rather thought that would cause a stir. It seems that Mr. Ostermann feels it necessary to reward the team for rescuing him."

"What's the law on this?" John asked next.

"I haven't a clue, sir."

"How do we find out?"

"A solicitor, I imagine."

"Do we have a lawyer on retainer?"

"Not to my knowledge. And you will probably need one, a Briton and an American as well."

"Super," Rainbow Six observed. "Could you ask Alistair to come in?"

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 14

SWORD OF THE LEGION

The company outing for Thompson CSF had been planned for some months. The three hundred children had been working overtime to get a week ahead in their schoolwork, and the event had business implications as well. Thompson was installing computerized control systems in the park—it was part of the company's transition from being mainly a military-products producer to a more generalized electronics-engineering firm—and here their military experience helped. The new control systems, with which Worldpark management could monitor activities throughout the establishment, were a linear development of data-transfer systems developed for NATO ground forces. They were multilingual, user-friendly gadgets that transmitted their data through ether-space rather than over copper land-lines, which saved a few million francs, and Thompson had brought the systems in on time and on budget, which was a skill that they, like many defense contractors all over the globe, were struggling to learn.

In recognition of the successful fulfillment of the contract to a high-profile commercial customer, senior Thompson management had cooperated with Worldpark to arrange this company picnic. Everyone in the group, children included, wore red T-shirts with the company logo on the front, and for the moment they were mainly together, moving toward the center of the park in a group escorted by six of the park Trolls, who were dancing their way to the castle with their absurdly large bare-feet shoes and hairy head-bodies. The group was further escorted by legionnaires, two wolfskin-wearing *signifers* bearing cohort standards, and the one lion-skinned *aquilifer,* carrying the gold eagle, the hallowed emblem of the VI *Legio Victrix,* now quartered at Worldpark, Spain, as its antecedent had been under the Emperor Tiberius in 20 A.D. The park employees tasked to be part of the resident legion had developed their own esprit, and took to their marching with a will, their Spanish-made *spatha* swords scabbarded awkwardly, but accurately, high up on their right sides, and their shields carried in their left hands. They moved in a group as proudly as their notional *Victrix* or "victorious" legion had once done twenty centuries before—their predecessors once the first and only line of

defense for the Roman colony that this part of Spain had been.

About the only thing the group didn't have was a coterie of people leading them with flags, which was mainly a Japanese affectation, anyway. After the first day's ceremonies, the Thompson people would wander off on their own, and enjoy their four days here as normal tourists.

Mike Dennis watched the procession on his office TV monitors while he gathered his notes. The Roman soldiers were a signature item for his theme park, and, for some reason or other, had proven to be wildly popular, enough so that he'd recently increased their number from fifty to over a hundred and established a trio of centurions to command them. You could spot them by the sideways plumes on their helmets instead of the fore-and-aft on the helms of the ordinary legionnaires. The guys in the outfit had taken to real sword practice, and it was rumored that some of the swords actually had edges, which Dennis hadn't bothered to verify and which he'd have to put a stop to if he did. But anything that was good for employee morale was good for the park, and it was his practice to let his people run their departments with minimal interference from his command center in the castle. He used his computer mouse to zoom in on the approaching mob. They were about twenty minutes early, and that was . . . oh, yeah, it was Francisco de la Cruz leading the parade. Francisco was a retired sergeant in the Spanish army's paratroops, and the guy just grooved to leading parades and such, didn't he? Tough-looking old bastard, over fifty, with burly arms and so heavy a beard —Worldpark allowed mustaches but not beards for its employees— that he had to shave twice a day. The little kids found him intimidating, but Francisco had a way of scooping them up like a bearish grandfather and putting them instantly at ease—the kids especially liked playing with his red horsehair plume. Dennis made a mental note to have lunch with Francisco sometime soon. He ran his little department well, and deserved some attention from topside.

Dennis pulled the manila folder from his action tray. He had to give a welcoming speech to the Thompson guests, to be followed by music from one of the park's roving bands and a parade of the Trolls, then dinner in the castle restaurant. He checked his watch and rose, heading for the corridor that led to a disguised passage with a "secret" door into the castle courtyard. The architects for this place had been handed a blank check, and they'd utilized the Gulf oil money well, though the castle wasn't totally authentic. It had fire escapes, sprinklers, and structural steel, not just blocks piled up and mortared together.

"Mike?" a voice called. The park manager turned.

"Yeah, Pete?"

"Telephone, it's the chairman calling."

The executive turned and hustled back to his office, still clutching his prepared speech.

Francisco—Pancho to his friends—de la Cruz was not a tall man, only five-seven, but wide across the chest, and his pillarlike legs made the ground shake when he marched, stiff-legged, as an historian had told him was the custom of the legions. His iron helmet was heavy, and he could feel the flopping of the plume atop it. His left arm held the large and heavy *scutum,* the shield of the legionnaire that reached almost from neck to ankles, made of glue-laminated wood, but with a heavy iron boss in the center in the image of the Medusa, and metal edges. The Romans, he'd long since learned, had been tough soldiers to march into battle with this heavy gear—almost sixty pounds of it at full load with food and mess kit, about what he'd marched with as a soldier in the field. The park had duplicated all of it, though the quality of the metal was surely better than that which had been produced in the blacksmith shops of the Roman empire. Six young boys had formed up on him, emulating his heavy-footed march. De la Cruz liked that. His own sons were now in the Spanish army, following in their father's footsteps, just as these French boys were now doing. For de la Cruz the world was in its proper shape.

Only a few meters away, it was getting that way as well for Jean-Paul, René, and Esteban, the last of them with a cloud of balloons affixed to his wrist, selling one even now. The others were all wearing their white Worldpark hats, all getting into position around the crowd. None of the terrorists were wearing the red Thompson shirts, though doing so would not have been all that difficult. Instead, they wore black Worldpark shirts to go with the hats, and all but Esteban and Andre were also wearing backpacks, like so many other visitors to Worldpark.

The Trolls had everyone in place a few minutes early, they all saw. The adults were joking among themselves, and the children pointing and laughing, their faces illuminated with joy that would soon change to something else, some racing around the taller adults, playing games of hide-and-seek within the crowd . . . and two were in wheelchairs—no, Esteban saw, they were not part of the Thompson group. They wore their special-access buttons, but not the red shirts.

Andre saw those guests, too. One was the little dying Dutch girl from the previous day and one other . . . English by the look of his father, pushing the wheelchair up to the castle and through the crowd. Yes, they'd want both of those. So much the better that these two weren't French, wasn't it?

Dennis had sat down at his desk. The call required detailed

information that he'd had to call up on his computer. Yes, quarterly park revenues were 4.1 percent over projections.... Yes, the slow season had turned out to be somewhat less slow than they'd expected. Unusually favorable weather, Dennis explained, was the explanation, and one couldn't count on that, but things were going smoothly, except for some computer problems on two of the rides. Yes, they had some software engineers in the back-lot area working on that right now.... Yes, that was warranty coverage from the manufacturer, and the manufacturer's representatives were being entirely cooperative—well, they should, as they were bidding on two more mega-rides whose designs would make the entire world take a breathless step back, Dennis told the chairman, who hadn't seen the proposals yet, and would on his next trip to Spain in three weeks. They'd be doing TV shows about conception and design on these two, Dennis promised the chairman, especially for the American cable-channel market, and wouldn't it be something if they increased their draw of American patrons—stealing guests from the Disney empire, which had invented the theme park. The Saudi chairman, who'd initially invested in Worldpark because his children loved to ride things that he had trouble even looking at, was enthusiastic about the proposed new attractions, enough so that he didn't ask about them, willing to be surprised by Dennis when the time came.

"What the hell?" Dennis said over the phone, looking up when he heard it.

Everyone jumped at the noise, the shattering staccato of Jean-Paul's submachine gun, firing a long burst up into the air. In the castle courtyard, people turned and cringed instinctively at the same time, as they first saw the one bearded man aiming upward and swinging his weapon, which ejected a brief shower of brass cases into the air. Being untrained civilians, they did little for the first few seconds but look in shock, without even time to show real fear yet——and when they turned to see the shooter in their midst—those around him drawing instinctively away instead of trying to grab him—and the others withdrawing their weapons from their backpacks, at first just bringing them out without firing—waiting a beat or so—

Francisco de la Cruz was standing behind one of the others, and saw the weapon coming out even before the first one fired. His brain recognized the unfriendly yet familiar shape of an Israeli Uzi nine-millimeter submachine gun, and his eyes locked on it, reporting direction and distance, and that this was something that didn't belong in his park. The shock of the moment lasted only that long, and then his twenty-plus years of uniformed service flashed into his consciousness, and two meters behind that bearded criminal, he started moving.

Claude's eyes caught the movement, and he turned to see—what was this? A man wearing Roman armor and the strangest of headgear was moving toward him. He turned to face the threat and—

—Centurion de la Cruz acted on some sort of soldierly instinct that had transformed itself in time and place from the era to which his uniform belonged to where he was this noon. His right hand pulled the *spatha* from its scabbard high up on his right side, and the shield came up, its center iron boss aimed at the muzzle of the Uzi as the sword came straight in the air. He'd had this sword custom-made by a distant cousin in Toledo. It was formed of laminated carbon steel, just as the sword of El Cid had once been, and it had an edge fit to shave with, and he was suddenly a soldier again, and for the first time in his career, he had an armed enemy before him and a weapon in his hand, and the distance was less than two meters now, and gun or not, he was going to—

—Claude fired off a quick burst, just as he had learned so many times, into the center of mass of his advancing target, but that happened to be the three-centimeter-thick iron boss of the *scutum,* and the bullets deflected off it, fragmenting as they did so—

—de la Cruz felt the impact of the fragments peppering his left arm, but the stings of insects would have felt worse as he closed, and his right sword-arm came left, then right, slashing in a way the *spatha* was not designed for, but the razor's edge in the last twenty centimeters near the point did the rest, catching the *cabron*'s upper arm and laying it open just below the end of the short sleeve, and for the first time in his life, Centurion Francisco de la Cruz drew blood in anger—

—Claude felt the pain. His right arm moved, and his finger depressed the trigger, and the long burst hit the oncoming shield low and right of the boss. Three bullets hit de la Cruz's left leg, all below the knee, through the metal greaves, one of them breaking the tibia, causing the centurion to scream in pain as he went down, his second, lethal slash of the sword missing the man's throat by a whisker. His brain commanded his legs to act, but he had only one working leg at the moment, and the other failed him utterly, causing the former paratrooper to fall to the left and forward—

Mike Dennis ran to the window instead of using the TV monitors. Others were watching those, and the take from the various cameras was being recorded automatically in a bank of VCRs elsewhere in the park. His eyes saw, and though his brain didn't believe, it was there, and impossible as it was, it had to be real. A number of people with guns were surrounding the sea of red shirts, and they herded them now, like sheepdogs, inward and toward the castle courtyard. Dennis turned:

"Security lockdown, security lockdown *now!"* he called to the man

on the master control board, and with a mouse click the castle's doors were all dead-bolted.

"Call the police!" Dennis ordered next. That was also pre-programmed. An alarm system fired off a signal to the nearest police barracks. It was the robbery-alert signal, but that would be sufficient for the moment. Dennis next lifted a desk phone and punched in the police number from the sticker on his phone. The one emergency contingency they'd planned for was a robbery of their cash room, and since that would necessarily be a major crime committed by a number of armed criminals, the park's internal response to the signal was also pre-programmed. All park rides would be stopped at once, all attractions closed, and shortly people would be instructed to return to their hotel rooms, or to the parking lot, because the park was closing due to an unexpected emergency . . . The noise of the machine guns would have carried a long way, Dennis thought, and the park guests would understand the urgency of the moment.

This was the amusing part, Andre thought. He donned a spare white hat from one of his comrades and took the gun that Jean-Paul had packed for him. A few meters away, Esteban cut the balloons loose from his hand, and they soared into the air as he, too, took up his weapon.

The children were not as overtly frightened as their parents were, perhaps thinking that this also was one of the magic things to be expected at the park, though the noise hurt their little ears and had made them jump. But fear is contagious, and the children quickly saw that emotion in their parents' eyes, and one by one they held tight to hands and legs, looking about at the adults who were moving quickly now, around the red-shirted crowd, holding things that looked like . . . guns, the boys recognized the shape from their own toys, which these clearly were not.

René was in command. He moved toward the castle entrance, clear of the nine others who were holding the crowd in place. Looking around, he could see others outside the perimeter of his group, looking in, many crouching down now, hiding, taking what cover there was. Many of them were taking pictures, some with television cameras, and some of those would be zooming in to catch his face, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"Two!" he called. "Select our guests!"

"Two" was Jean-Paul. He approached a knot of people roughly, and first of all grabbed the arm of a four-year-old French girl.

"No!" her mother screamed. Jean-Paul pointed his weapon at her, and she cringed but stood her ground, holding both shoulders of the child.

"Very well," "Two" told her, lowering his aim. "I will shoot her, then." In less than a second, the muzzle of his Uzi was against the little girl's light-brown hair. That made the mother scream all the louder, but she pulled her hands back from her child.

"Walk over there," Jean-Paul told the child firmly, pointing to Juan. The little girl did so, looking back with an open mouth at her stunned mother, while the armed man selected more children.

Andre was doing the same on the other side of the crowd. He went first of all to the little Dutch child. Anna, her special-access name tag read. Without a word, he pushed Anna's father away from the wheelchair and shoved it off toward the castle.

"My child is ill," the father protested in English.

"Yes, I can see that," Andre replied in the same language, moving off to select another sick child. What fine hostages these two would make.

"You bloody swine!" this one's mother snarled at him. For her trouble she was clubbed by the extended stock of Andre's Uzi, which broke her nose and bathed her face in blood.

"Mummy!" a little boy screamed, as Andre one-handed his chair up the ramp to the castle. The child turned in his chair to see his mother collapse. A park employee, a street-sweeper, knelt down to assist her, but all she did was scream louder for her son: *"Tommy!"*

To her screams were soon added those of forty sets of parents, all of them wearing the red T-shirts of the Thompson company. The small crowd withdrew into the castle, leaving the rest to stand there, stunned, for several seconds before they moved off, slowly and jerkily, down to Strada España.

"Shit, they're coming here," Mike Dennis saw, still talking on the phone to the captain commanding the local Guardia Civil barracks.

"Get clear," the captain told him immediately. "If there is a way for you to leave the area, make use of it now! We need you and your people to assist us. Leave now!"

"But, goddamnit, these people are my responsibility."

"Yes, they are, and you can take that responsibility outside. *Now!"* the captain ordered him. *"Leave!"*

Dennis replaced the phone, turning then to look at the fifteen-person duty staff in the command center. "People, everybody, follow me. We're heading for the backup command center. Right now," he emphasized.

The castle, real as it appeared, wasn't real. It had been built with the modern conveniences of elevators and fire stairwells. The former were probably compromised, Dennis thought, but one of the latter descended straight down to the underground. He walked to that fire door and opened it, waving for his employees to head that way. This

they did, most with enthusiasm for escaping this suddenly dangerous place. The last tossed him keys on the way through, and when Dennis left, he locked this door behind him, then raced down the four levels of square-spiral stairs. Another minute and he was in the underground, which was crowded with employees and guests hustled out of harm's way by Trolls, Legionnaires, and other uniformed park personnel. A gaggle of park-security people were there, but none of them were armed with anything more dangerous than a radio. There *were* guns in the counting room, but they were under lock, and only a few of the Worldpark employees were trained and authorized to use them, and Dennis didn't want shots to be fired here. Besides, he had other things to do. The alternate Worldpark command post was actually outside the park grounds, just at the end of the underground. He ran there, following his other command personnel north toward the exit that led to the employees' parking lot. That required about five minutes, and Dennis darted in the door to see that the alternate command post was double-manned now. His own alternate desk was vacant, and the phone already linked to the Guardia Civil.

"Are you safe?" the captain asked.

"For now, I guess," Dennis responded. He keyed up his castle office on his monitor.

"This way," Andre told them. The door was locked, however. He backed off and fired his pistol at the doorknob, which bent from the impact, but remained locked, movies to the contrary. Then René tried his Uzi, which wrecked that portion of the door and allowed him to pull it open. Andre led them upstairs, then kicked in the door to the command center—empty. He swore foully at that discovery.

"I see them!" Dennis said into the phone. "One man—two—six men with guns—Jesus, they have kids with them!" One of them walked up to a surveillance camera, pointed his pistol, and the picture vanished.

"How many men with guns?" the captain asked.

"At least six, maybe ten, maybe more. They have taken children hostage. You get that? They've got kids with them."

"I understand, Señor Dennis. I must leave you now and coordinate a response. Please stand by."

"Yeah." Dennis worked other camera controls to see what was happening in his park. "Shit," he swore with a rage that was now replacing shock. Then he called his chairman to make his report, wondering what the hell he would say when the Saudi prince asked what the hell was going on—a terrorist assault on an *amusement park?*

In his office, Captain Dario Gassman called Madrid to make his first report of the incident. He had a crisis plan for his barracks, and that

was being implemented now by his policemen. Ten cars and sixteen men were now racing down the divided highway from various directions and various patrol areas, merely knowing that Plan W had been implemented. Their first mission was to establish a perimeter, with orders to let no one in or out—the last part of which would soon prove to be utterly impossible. In Madrid other things were happening while Captain Gassman walked to his car for the drive to Worldpark. It was a thirty-minute drive for him, even with lights and siren, and the drive gave him the chance to think in relative peace, despite the noise from under the hood. He had sixteen men there or on the way, but if there were ten armed criminals at Worldpark, that would not be enough, not even enough to establish an inner and outer perimeter. How many more men would he need? Would he have to call up the national response team formed a few years ago by the Guardia Civil? Probably yes. What sort of criminals would hit Worldpark at this time of day? The best time for a robbery was at closing time, even though that was what he and his men had anticipated and trained for—because *that* was the time all the money was ready, bundled and wrapped in canvas bags for transfer to the bank, and guarded by park personnel and sometimes his own . . . that was the time of highest vulnerability. But no, whoever this was, they had chosen the middle of the day, and they'd taken hostages—children, Gassman reminded himself. So, were they robbers or something else? What sort of criminals were they? What if they were terrorists . . . they had taken hostages . . . children . . . Basque terrorists? Damn, what then?

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But things were already leaving Gassman's hands. The senior Thompson executive was on his cell phone, talking with his corporate headquarters, a call quickly bucked up to his own chairman, caught in a sidewalk café having a pleasant lunch that the call aborted instantly. This executive called the Defense Minister, and that got things rolling very rapidly indeed. The report from the Thompson manager on the scene had been concise and unequivocal. The Defense Minister called him directly and had his secretary take all the notes they needed. These were typed up and faxed to both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, and the latter called his Spanish counterpart with an urgent request for confirmation. It was already a political exercise, and in the Defense Ministry another phone call was made.

"Yes, this is John Clark," Rainbow Six said into the phone. "Yes, sir.

Where is that exactly . . . I see . . . how many? Okay. Please send us whatever additional information you receive.... No, sir, we cannot move until the host government makes the request. Thank you, Minister." Clark changed buttons on his phone. "Al, get in here. We have some more business coming in." Next he made the same request of Bill Tawney, Bellow, Chavez, and Covington.

The Thompson executive still in Worldpark assembled his people at a food stand and polled them. A former tank officer in the French army, he worked hard and quickly to bring order from chaos. Those employees who still had their children, he set aside. Those who did not, he counted, and determined that thirty-three children were missing, along with one or maybe two children in wheelchairs. The parents were predictably frantic, but he got and kept them under control, then called his chairman again to amplify his initial report on the situation. After that he got some paper on which to compile a list of names and ages, keeping his own emotions under control as best he could and thanking God that his own children were too old to have made this trip. With that done, he took his people away from the castle, found a park employee and asked where he might find phones and fax machines. They were all escorted through a wooden swinging door, into a well-disguised service building and down into the underground, then walked to the alternate park command post, where they met Mike Dennis, still holding the folder with his welcoming speech for the Thompson group and trying to make some sense of things.

Gassman arrived just then, in time to see the fax machine transmitting a list of the known hostages to Paris. Not a minute later, the French Defense Minister called. It turned out that he knew the senior Thompson executive, Colonel Robert Gamelin, who'd headed the development team for the LeClerc battle tank's second-generation fire-control system a few years before.

"How many?"

"Thirty-three from our group, perhaps a few more, but the terrorists seem to have selected our children quite deliberately, Monsieur Minister. This is a job for the Legion," Colonel Gamelin said forcefully, meaning the Foreign Legion's special-operations team.

"I will see, Colonel." The connection broke.

"I am Captain Gassman," the guy in the strange hat said to Gamelin.

"Bloody hell, I took the family there last year," Peter Covington said. "You could use up a whole fucking battalion retaking the place. It's a

bloody nightmare, lots of buildings, lots of space, multilevel. I think it even has an underground service area."

"Maps, diagrams?" Clark asked Mrs. Foorgate.

"I'll see," his secretary replied, leaving the conference room.

"What do we know?" Chavez asked.

"Not much, but the French are pretty worked up, and they're requesting that the Spanish let us in and—"

"This just arrived," Alice Foorgate said, handing over a fax and leaving again.

"List of hostages—Jesus, they're all kids, ages four to eleven . . . thirty-three of them . . . holy shit," Clark breathed, looking it over, then handing it to Alistair Stanley.

"Both teams, if we deploy," the Scotsman said immediately.

"Yeah." Clark nodded. "Looks that way." Then the phone beeped.

"Phone call for Mr. Tawney," a female voice announced on the speaker.

"This is Tawney," the intel chief said on picking up the receiver. "Yes, Roger . . . yes, we know, we got a call from—oh, I see. Very well. Let me get some things done here, Roger. Thank you." Tawney hung up. "The Spanish government have requested through the British embassy in Madrid that we deploy at once."

"Okay, people," John said, standing. "Saddle up. Christ, that was a fast call."

Chavez and Covington ran from the room to head for their respective team buildings. Then Clark's phone rang again. "Yeah?" He listened for several minutes. "Okay, that works for me. Thank you, sir."

"What was that, John?"

"MOD just requested an MC-130 from the First Special Ops Wing. They're chopping it to us, along with Malloy's helo. Evidently, there's a military airfield about twenty clicks from where we're going, and Whitehall is trying to get us cleared into it." And better yet, he didn't have to add, the Hercules transport could lift them right out of Hereford. "How fast can we get moving?"

"Less than an hour," Stanley replied after a second's consideration.

"Good, 'cuz that Herky Bird will be here in forty minutes or less. The crew's heading out to it right now."

"Listen up people," Chavez was saying half a click away as he walked into the team's bay. "We got a job. Boots and saddles, people. Shag it."

They started moving at once for the equipment lockers before Sergeant Patterson raised the obvious objection: "Ding, Team-1's the go-team. What gives?"

"Looks like they need us both for this ride, Hank. Everybody goes

today."

"Fair 'nuff." Patterson headed off to his locker.

Their gear was already packed, always set up that way as a matter of routine. The mil-spec plastic containers were wheeled to the door even before the truck arrived to load them up.

Colonel Gamelin got the word before Captain Gassman did. The French Defense Minister called him directly to announce that a special-operations team was flying down at the request of the Spanish government, and would be there in three hours or less. He relayed this information to his people, somewhat to the chagrin of the Spanish police official, who then called his own minister in Madrid to inform him of what was happening, and it turned out that the minister was just getting the word from his own Foreign Ministry. Additional police were on the way, and their orders were to take no action beyond the establishment of a perimeter. Gassman's reaction to being whipsawed was predictable disorientation, but he had his orders. Now with thirty of his cops on the scene or on the way, he ordered a third of them to move inward, slowly and carefully, toward the castle on the surface, while two more did the same in the underground, with their weapons holstered or on safe, and with orders not to fire under any circumstances, an instruction more easily given than followed.

Things had come well to this point, René thought, and the park command center was better than anything he'd hoped for. He was learning to use the computer system to select TV cameras that seemed to cover the entire grounds, from the parking lots to the waiting areas for the various rides. The pictures were in black and white, and once a venue was selected he could zoom and pan the camera to find anything he wished. There were twenty monitors set on the walls of the office, each of them linked by a computer terminal to at least five cameras. Nobody would get close to the castle without his knowledge. Excellent.

In the secretaries' room just through the door, Andre had the children sitting on the floor in one tight little knot, except for the two in their wheelchairs, whom he'd placed against the wall. The children were uniformly wide-eyed and frightened-looking, as well they might be, and at the moment they were quiet, which suited him. He'd slung his submachine gun over his shoulder. It wasn't needed at the moment, was it?

"You will stay still," he told them in French, then backed to the door into the command center. "One," he called.

"Yes, Nine," René answered.

"Things are under control here. Time to make a call?"

"Yes," One agreed. He took his seat and picked up a phone, then examined the buttons, and finding a likely one, he pressed it.

"Yes?"

"Who is this?"

"I am Mike Dennis. I am managing director of the park."

"Bien, I am One, and I am now in command of your Worldpark."

"Okay, Mr. One. What do you want?"

"You have the police here?"

"Yes, they are here now."

"Good. I will speak with their commander then."

"Captain?" Dennis waved. Gassman took the three steps to his desk.

"I am Captain Dario Gassman of the Guardia Civil."

"I am One. I am in command. You know that I have taken over thirty hostages, yes?"

"Sí, I am aware of this," the captain replied, keeping his voice as calm as circumstances allowed. He'd read books and had training on talking with hostage-holding terrorists, and now wished that he'd had a lot more of it. "Do you have a request for me?"

"I do not make requests. I will give you orders to be carried out at once, and have you relay orders to others. Do you understand?" René asked in English.

"Sí, comprendo."

"All of our hostages are French. You will establish a line of communication with the French embassy in Madrid. My orders are for them. Please keep in mind that none of our hostages are citizens of your country. This affair is between us and the French. Do you understand that?"

"Señor One, the safety of those children is my responsibility. This is Spanish soil."

"Be that as it may," One replied, "you will open a telephone link to the French embassy at once. Let me know when it is done."

"I must first of all relay your request to my superiors. I will get back to you when I have my instructions from them."

"Quickly," René told him, before hanging up.

It was noisy in the back. The four Allison engines screamed, as they accelerated the MC-130 down the runway, then the aircraft rotated abruptly, jumping into the sky for its flight to Spain. Clark and Stanley were in the communications compartment forward, listening as best they could with their heavily insulated headphones to information coming to them, disjointed and fragmentary as usual. The voice promised maps and plans when they got there, but there was no additional information on the number or identity of the terrorists—they were working on that, the voice told them. Just then, a fax

arrived from Paris via the American 1st Spec-Operations Wing headquarters, which had secure communications equipment currently linked to Hereford. It was just another list of the hostages, and this time Clark took the time to read the names, and part of his mind tried to conjure up faces to go with them, knowing he'd be wrong in every case, but doing it even so. Thirty-three children sitting in an amusement-park castle surrounded by men with guns, number at least six, maybe ten, maybe more; they were still trying to develop that information. Shit, John thought. He knew that some things couldn't be hurried, but nothing in this business ever went fast enough, even when you were doing it all yourself.

Aft the men slipped off their seat belts and started suiting up in their black Nomex, saying little to one another while the two team leaders went forward to find out what they could. Back ten minutes later to dress themselves, Chavez and Covington tilted their heads in the typical what-the-hell expression that their troopers recognized as news that was something other than good. The team leaders told their men what little they knew, and the expressions were transferred to the shooters, along with neutral thoughts. Kids as hostages. Over thirty of them probably, and maybe more, held by an unknown number of terrorists, nationality and motivation still unknown. As a practical matter, they knew nothing about how they'd be used, except that they were going somewhere to do something, which they'd find out about once they got there. The men settled back into their seats, re-buckled their belts, and said little. Most closed their eyes and affected trying to sleep, but mainly they didn't sleep, merely sat with eyes closed, seeking and sometimes finding an hour's peace amid the screeching noise of the turboprop engines.

"I require your fax machine number," One said to the French ambassador, speaking in his native language instead of English.

"Very well" was the reply, followed by the number.

"We are sending you a list of political prisoners whose release we require. They will be released immediately and flown here on an Air France airliner. Then my people, our guests, and I will board the aircraft and fly with them to a destination that I will give to the pilot of our aircraft after we board it. I advise you to accede to our demands rapidly. We have little patience, and if our demands are not met, we will be forced to kill some of our hostages."

"I will forward your request to Paris," the ambassador said.

"Good, and be sure to tell them that we are not in a patient mood."

"Oui, I will do that as well," the diplomat promised. The line went dead and he looked at his immediate staff, the deputy chief of mission, his military attaché, and the DGSE station chief. The ambassador was

a businessman who had been awarded this embassy as a political favor, since the proximity of Paris and Madrid did not require a seasoned member of the diplomatic service for the post. “Well?”

“We will look at the list,” the DGSE man answered. A second later, the fax machine chirped, and a few seconds after that, the curled paper emerged. The intelligence officer took it, scanned it, and handed it over. “Not good,” he announced for the others in the room.

“The Jackal?” the DCM said. “They will never—”

“ ‘Never’ is a long time, my friend,” the spook told the diplomat. “I hope these commandos know their business.”

“What do you know about them?”

“Nothing, not a single thing.”

“How long?” Esteban asked René.

“They will take time,” One replied. “Some will be real, and some will be creative on their part. Remember that their strategy is to lengthen the process as much as possible, to tire us, to wear us down, to weaken our resolve. Against that we have the ability to force the issue by killing a hostage. That is not a step to be taken lightly. We have selected our hostages for their psychological impact, and we will need to consider their use carefully. But above all, we must control the pace of events. For now, we will let them take their time while we consolidate our position.” René walked to the corner to see how Claude was doing. There was a nasty gash on his upper arm from that fool of a Roman soldier, the only thing that had gone wrong. He was sitting on the floor, holding a bandage over it, but the wound was still bleeding. Claude would need stitches to close it properly. It was bad luck, but not that serious, except to Claude, who was still in considerable pain from the wound.

Hector Weiler was the park physician, a general surgeon trained at the University of Barcelona who spent most of his time putting Band-Aids on skinned knees and elbows, though there was a photo on his wall of the twins he’d delivered once upon a time after a pregnant woman had been foolish enough to ride the Dive Bomber—there was now a very emphatic sign at the entrance warning against that. For all that, he was a skilled young doctor who’d done his share of work in his medical school’s emergency room, and so this wasn’t his first gunshot victim. Francisco was a lucky man. At least six shots had been fired at him, and though the first three had merely resulted in fragment-peppering on his left arm, one of the second bursts had hurt his leg badly. A broken tibia would take a long time to heal for a man of his years, but at least it was broken fairly high up. A break lower down could take six months to heal, if ever.

"I could have killed him," the centurion groused through the anesthesia. "I could have taken his head off, but I missed!"

"Not with the first one," Weiler observed, seeing the red crust on the sword that now lay atop his *scutum* in the corner of the treatment room.

"Tell me about him," Captain Gassman ordered.

"Forties, early forties," de la Cruz said. "My height plus ten or twelve centimeters, lightly built. Brown hair, brown beard, some speckles of gray in it. Dark eyes. Uzi machine gun. White hat," the former sergeant reported, biting off his words. The anesthesia he'd been given was not enough for all the pain, but he had to tell what he knew, and accepted the discomfort as the physician worked to get the leg set. "There were others. I saw four others, maybe more."

"We think ten or so," Gassman said. "Did he say anything?"

De la Cruz shook his head. "Nothing I heard."

"Who are they?" the surgeon asked, not looking up from his work.

"We think they are French, but we are not sure," the captain of the Guardia Civil answered.

It was hardest of all for Colonel Malloy. Crossing the English Channel, he headed south-southwest at a steady cruising speed of 150 knots. He'd stop at a French military airfield outside Bordeaux for refueling, since he lacked the external fuel tanks used for ferrying the Night Hawk long distances. Like nearly all helicopters, the Night Hawk didn't have an autopilot, forcing Malloy and Lieutenant Harrison to hand-fly the aircraft all the way. It made for stiffness since the helicopter wasn't the most comfortable aircraft in the world to sit in, but both were used to it and used to grumbling about it as they switched off the controls every twenty minutes or so. Three hours to get where they were going. In the back was their crew chief, Sergeant Jack Nance, now just sitting and looking out the plastic windows as they crossed over the French coast, cruising at two thousand feet over a fishing port filled with boats.

"This got laid on in a hurry," Harrison remarked over the intercom.

"Yeah, well, I guess Rainbow lives on a short fuse."

"You know anything about what's happening?"

"Not a clue, son." The helmeted head shook left and right briefly. "You know, I haven't been to Spain since I deployed on *Tarawa* back in . . . 1985, I think. I remember a great restaurant in Cádiz, though . . . wonder if it's still there. . . ." And with that the crew lapsed back into silence, the chopper nose down and pulling south under its four-bladed rotor while Malloy checked the digital navigation display every few seconds.

"Diminishing returns," Clark observed, checking the latest fax. There was nothing new on it, just data already sent being rearranged by some helpful intelligence officer somewhere. He left Alistair Stanley to handle that, and walked aft.

There they were, the Rainbow team, almost all of them looking as if asleep, but probably just chimped down, as he'd done with 3rd SOG more than a generation before, just pretending to sleep, eyes closed and powering their minds and bodies down, because it made no sense to think about things you didn't know jack shit about, and tension sapped the strength even when your muscles were idle. So, your defense against it was to make your body turn off. These men were smart and professional enough to know that the stress would come in its own good time, and there was no point in welcoming it too soon. In that moment John Clark, long before a Chief SEAL, U.S. Navy, was struck with the honor he held, commanding such men as these. The thought had surprising impact, just standing there and watching them do nothing, because that's what the best people did at a time like this one, because they understood what the mission was, because they knew how to handle that mission, every step of the way. Now they were heading out on a job about which they'd been told nothing, but it had to be something serious because never had teams -1 and -2 *both* gone out. And yet they treated it like another routine training mission. They didn't make men better than these, and his two leaders, Chavez and Covington, had trained them to a razor's edge of perfection.

And somewhere ahead were terrorists holding children hostage. Well, the job wouldn't be an easy one, and it was far too soon for him to speculate on how it would play out, but John knew anyway that it was better to be here on this noisy Herky Bird than it would be in that theme park still a half an hour ahead, for soon his men would open their eyes and shuffle out, bringing their boxed combat gear with them. Looking at them, John Clark saw Death before his eyes, and Death, here and now, was his to command.

Tim Noonan was sitting in the right-side forward corner of the cargo area, playing with his computer, with David Peled at his side. Clark went over to them and asked what they were doing.

"This hasn't made the newswire services yet," Noonan told him. "I wonder why."

"That'll change in a hurry," Clark predicted.

"Ten minutes, less," the Israeli said. "Who's meeting us?"

"Spanish army and their national police, I just heard. We've been authorized to land . . . twenty-five minutes," he told them, checking his watch.

"There, Agence France-Press just started a flash," Noonan said, reading it over for possible new information. "Thirty or so French kids

taken hostage by unknown terrorists—nothing else except where they are. This isn't going to be fun, John," the former FBI agent observed. "Thirty-plus hostages in a crowded environment. When I was with Hostage Rescue, we sweated this sort of scenario. Ten bad guys?" he asked.

"That's about what they think, but it isn't confirmed yet."

"Shitty chemistry on this one, boss." Noonan shook his head in worry. He was dressed like the shooters, in black Nomex and body armor, with his holstered Beretta on his right hip, because he still preferred to think of himself as a shooter rather than a tech-weenie, and his shooting, practiced at Hereford with the team members, was right on the line . . . and children were in danger, Clark reflected, and child-in-danger was perhaps the strongest of all human drives, further reinforced by Noonan's time in the Bureau, which regarded child crimes as the lowest of the low. David Peled took a more distant view, sitting there in civilian clothing and staring at the computer screen like an accountant examining a business spreadsheet.

"John!" Stanley called, heading aft with a new fax. "Here's what they're asking for."

"Anybody we know?"

"Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez is at the top of the list."

"Carlos?" Peled looked up. "Someone really wants that *schmuck?"*

"Everybody's got friends." Dr. Bellow sat down and took the fax, scanning it before handing it over to Clark.

"Okay, doc, what do we know?"

"We're dealing with ideological ones again, just like Vienna, but they have a definite fixed objective, and these 'political' prisoners . . . I know these two, from Action Directe, the rest are just names to me —"

"I got it," Noonan said, calling up his roster of known terrorists and inputting the names off the fax. "Okay, six Action Directe, eight Basques, one PFLP currently held in France. Not a long list."

"But a definite one," Bellow observed. "They know what they want, and if they have children as hostages, they really want them out. The selection of hostages is designed to put additional political pressure on the French government." That wasn't exactly a surprising opinion, and the psychiatrist knew it. "Question is, will the French government deal at all?"

"They have, in the past, bargained quietly, off the stage," Peled told them. "Our friends may know this."

"Kids," Clark breathed.

"The nightmare scenario," Noonan said with a nod. "But who has the stones to whack a kid?"

"We'll have to talk with them to see," Bellow responded. He

checked his watch and grunted. “Next time, a faster airplane.”

“Be cool, doc,” Clark told him, knowing that Paul Bellow would have the toughest job from the moment they landed and got to the objective. He had to read their minds, evaluate the terrorists’ resolve, and hardest of all, predict their actions, and he, like the rest of the Rainbow team, didn’t know anything of consequence yet. Like the rest of the team, he was like a sprinter in the starting blocks, poised to go, but having to wait for the gun to fire. But unlike the others, he was not a shooter. He could not hope for the emotional release they would have if they went into action, for which he quietly envied the soldiers. *Children,* Paul Bellow thought. He had to figure a way to reason with people he didn’t know, in order to protect the lives of children. How much rope would the French and Spanish governments let him have? He knew that he’d need some rope to play with, though how much depended on the mental state of the terrorists. They’d deliberately chosen children, and French children at that, to maximize the pressure on the government in Paris . . . and that had been a considered act . . . which forced him to think that they’d be willing to kill a child despite all the taboos associated with such an act in any normal human mind. Paul Bellow had written and lectured the world over on people like this, but somewhere deep inside his own mind he wondered if he truly understood the mentality of the terrorist, so divorced was it from his own supremely rational outlook on reality. He could simulate their thinking, perhaps, but did he truly understand it? That was not a question he wanted to pose to himself right now, with plugs stuffed in his ears to protect his hearing and his equilibrium from the punishing noise of the MC-130’s engines. And so he, too, sat back and closed his eyes and commanded his mind into a neutral setting, seeking a respite from the stress sure to come in less than an hour.

Clark saw what Bellow did, and understood it for what it was, but that option didn’t exist for Rainbow Six, for his was the ultimate responsibility of command, and what he saw before his eyes were the faces he’d made up to go with the names on the fax sheet he held in his hand. Which ones would live? Which would not? That responsibility rested on shoulders not half so strong as they appeared.

Kids.

“They have not gotten back to me yet,” Captain Gassman said into the telephone, having initiated the call himself.

“I have not yet given you a deadline,” One replied. “I would like to think that Paris values our goodwill. If that is not the case, then they will soon learn to respect our resolve. Make that clear to them,” René concluded, setting the phone down and breaking the contact.

And so much for calling them to establish a dialogue, Gassman said to

himself. That was one of the things he was supposed to do, his training classes and all the books had told him. Establish some sort of dialogue and rapport with the criminals, even a degree of trust that he could then exploit to his benefit, get some of the hostages released in return for food or other considerations, erode their resolve, with the ultimate aim of resolving the crime without loss of innocent life—or criminal life for that matter. A real win for him meant bringing them all before the bar of justice, where a robed judge would pronounce them guilty and sentence them to a lengthy term as guests of the Spanish government, there to rot like the trash they were.... But the first step was to get them talking back and forth with him, something that this One person didn't feel the need to do. This man felt comfortably in command of the situation . . . as well he might, the police captain told himself. With children sitting in front of his guns. Then another phone rang.

"They have landed, and are unloading now."

"How long?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Half an hour," Colonel Tomas Nuncio told Clark, as the car started rolling. Nuncio had come by helicopter from Madrid. Behind him, three trucks of the Spanish army were loading up the equipment off the plane and would soon start down the same road with his people aboard.

"What do we know?"

"Thirty-five hostages. Thirty-three of them are French children—"

"I've seen the list. Who are the other two?"

Nuncio looked down in distaste. "They seem to be sick children in the park as part of a special program, the ones sent here—you started it in America, how do you say . . ."

"Make-A-Wish?" John asked.

"Yes, that is it. A girl from Holland and a boy from England, both in wheelchairs, both reportedly quite ill. Not French like the others. I find that strange. All the rest are children of workers for Thompson, the defense equipment company. The leader of that group called on his own to his corporate headquarters, and from there the news went high up in the French government, explaining the rapid response. I have orders to offer you all the assistance my people can provide."

"Thank you, Colonel Nuncio. How many people do you have on the scene now?"

"Thirty-eight, with more coming. We have an inner perimeter established and traffic control."

"Reporters, what about them?"

"We are stopping them at the main gate to the park. I will not give

these swine a chance to speak to the public," Colonel Nuncio promised. He'd already lived up to what John expected of the Guardia Civil. The hat was something out of another century, but the cop's blue eyes were ready for the next one, cold and hard as he drove his radio car out onto the interstate-type highway. A sign said that Worldpark was but fifteen kilometers away, and the car was moving very fast now.

Julio Vega tossed the last Team-2 box aboard the five-ton truck and pulled himself aboard. His teammates were all there in the back, with Ding Chavez taking the right-front seat of the truck next to the driver, as commanders tended to do. Eyes were all open now and heads perked up, checking out the surrounding terrain even though it had no relevance to the mission. Even commandos could act like tourists.

"Colonel, what sort of surveillance systems are we up against?"

"What do you mean?" Nuncio asked in reply.

"The park, does it have TV cameras spread around? If it does," Clark said, "I want us to avoid them."

"I will call ahead to see."

"Well?" Mike Dennis asked his chief technician.

"The back way in, no cameras there until they approach the employee parking lot. I can turn that one off from here."

"Do it." Dennis got on Captain Gassman's radio to give directions for the approaching vehicles. He checked his watch as he did so. The first shots had been fired three and a half hours before. It only felt like a lifetime. Giving the directions, he walked to the office coffee urn, found it empty, and cursed as a result.

Colonel Nuncio took the last exit before the one that went into the park, instead breaking off onto a two-lane blacktop road and slowing down. Presently they encountered a police car whose occupant, standing alongside it, waved them through. Two minutes more, and they were parked outside what appeared to be a tunnel with a steel door sitting partially open. Nuncio popped open his door, and Clark did the same, then walked quickly into the entrance.

"Your Spanish is very literate, Señor Clark. But I cannot place your accent."

"Indianapolis," John replied. It would probably be the last light moment of the day. "How are the bad guys talking to you?"

"What language, you mean? English so far."

And *that* was the first good break of the day. For all his expertise,

Dr. Bellow's language skills were not good, and he would take point as soon as his car arrived, in about five minutes.

The park's alternate command center was a mere twenty meters inside the tunnel. The door was guarded by yet another Civil Guard, who opened it and saluted Colonel Nuncio.

"Colonel." It was another cop, John saw.

"Señor Clark, this is Captain Gassman." Handshakes were exchanged.

"Howdy. I am John Clark. My team is a few minutes out. Can you please update me on what's happening?"

Gassman waved him to the conference table in the middle of the room whose walls were lined with TV cameras and other electronic gear whose nature was not immediately apparent. A large map/diagram of the park was laid out.

"The criminals are all here," Gassman said, tapping the castle in the middle of the park. "We believe there to be ten of them, and thirty-five hostages, all children. I have spoken with them several times. My contact is a man, probably a Frenchman, calling himself One. The conversations have come to nothing, but we have a copy of their demands—a dozen convicted terrorists, mainly in French custody, but some in Spanish prisons as well."

Clark nodded. He had all this already, but the diagram of the park was new. He was first of all examining sight-lines, what could be seen and what could not. "What about where they are, blueprints, I mean."

"Here," a park engineer said, sliding the castle blueprints on the table. "Windows here, here, here, and here. Stairs and elevators as marked." Clark referenced them against the map. "They have stair access to the roof, and that's forty meters above street level. They have good line of sight everywhere, down all the streets."

"If I want to keep an eye on things, what's the best place?"

"That's easy. The Dive Bomber ride, top of the first hill. You're damned near a hundred fifty meters high there."

"That's nearly five hundred feet," Clark said, with some measure of incredulity.

"Biggest 'coaster in the world, sir," the engineer confirmed. "People come from all over to ride this one. The ride sits in a slight depression, about ten meters, but the rest of it's pretty damned tall. If you want to perch somebody, that's the spot."

"Good. Can you get from here to there unseen?"

"The underground, but there're TV cameras in it—" He traced his hand over the map. "Here, here, here, and another one there. Better to walk on the surface, but dodging all the cameras won't be easy."

"Can you turn them off?"

"We can override the primary command center from here, yes—

hell, if necessary, I can send people out to pull the wires."

"But if we do that, it might annoy our friends in the castle," John noted. "Okay, we need to think that one through before we do anything. For the moment," Clark told Nuncio and Gassman, "I want to keep them in the dark on who's here and what we're doing. We don't give them anything for free, okay?"

Both cops nodded agreement, and John saw in their eyes a desperate sort of respect. Proud and professional as they were, they had to feel some relief at having him and his team on the scene to take charge of the situation, and also to take over the responsibility for it. They could get credit for supporting a successful rescue operation, and they could also stand back and say that whatever went wrong wasn't their fault. The bureaucratic mind was part and parcel of every government employee in the known world.

"Hey, John."

Clark turned. It was Chavez, with Covington right behind him. Both team leaders strode in, wearing their black assault gear now, and looking to the others in the room like angels of death. They came to the conference table and started looking at the diagrams.

"Domingo, this is Colonel Nuncio and Captain Gassman."

"Good day," Ding said in his Los Angeles Spanish, shaking hands. Covington did the same, speaking his own language.

"Sniper perch here?" Ding asked at once, tapping the Dive Bomber. "I saw the thing from the parking lot. Some ride. Can I get Homer there unobserved?"

"We're working on that right now."

Noonan came in next, his backpack full of electronics gear. "Okay, this looks pretty good for our purposes," he observed, checking all the TV screens out.

"Our friends have a duplicate facility here."

"Oops," Noonan said. "Okay, first, I want to shut down the cell phone nodes."

"What?" Nuncio asked. "Why?"

"In case our friends have a pal outside with a cell phone to tell them what we're doing, sir," Clark answered.

"Ah. Can I help?"

Noonan handled the answer. "Have your people go to each node and have the technicians insert these disks into their computers. There are printed instructions with each."

"Filipe!" Nuncio turned and snapped his fingers. A moment later his man had the disks and orders, leaving the room with them.

"How deep underground are we?" Noonan asked next.

"No more than five meters."

"Rebarred concrete overhead?"

"Correct," the park engineer said.

"Okay, John, our portable radios should work fine." Then teams -1 and -2 entered the command center. They crowded around the conference table.

"Bad guys and hostages here," John told them.

"How many?" Eddie Price asked.

"Thirty-five hostages, all kids, two of them in wheelchairs. Those are the two who are not French."

"Who's been talking to them?" This was Dr. Bellow.

"I have," Captain Gassman answered. Bellow grabbed him and walked him to the corner for a quiet chat.

"First of all, overwatch," Chavez said. "We need to get Homer to the top of that ride . . . unseen . . . How do we do that?"

"There's people moving around on the TV screens," Johnston said, turning to look. "Who are they?"

"Park people," Mike Dennis said. "We have them moving around to make sure all our guests are out." It was the routine shutdown procedure, albeit many hours off in time.

"Get me some coveralls . . . but I still have to pack my rifle. You have mechanics here?"

"Only about a thousand," the park manager replied.

"Okay, then that's what I am, toolbox and all. You have the rides running?"

"No, they're all shut down."

"The more things moving, the more they have to watch," Sergeant Johnston told his boss.

"I like it," Chavez agreed, looking up at Clark.

"So do I. Mr. Dennis, turn them all on, if you would, please."

"They have to be started up individually. We can turn them off from here by killing the power, but we can't turn them on from this position."

"Then get your people out to do it. Sergeant Johnston will go with your man to the 'coaster. Homer, set up there. Your mission is to gather information and get it to us. Take the rifle and get zeroed."

"How high will I be?"

"About one hundred forty meters above the ground."

The sniper reached in his pocket for a calculator and switched it on to make sure it worked. "Fair enough. Where do I change?"

"This way." The engineer led him out the door and across the hall to an employee dressing room.

"A perch on the other side?" Covington asked.

"Here's a good one," Dennis answered. "The virtual reality building. Not anywhere near as high, but direct line of sight to the castle."

"I'll put Houston there," Covington said. "His leg's still bothering

him."

"Okay, two sniper-observers plus the TV cameras give us pretty good visual coverage of the castle," Clark said.

"I need to take a leader's recon to figure the rest out," Chavez said. "I need a diagram with the camera positions marked on it. So does Peter."

"When's Malloy get here?" Covington asked.

"Another hour or so. He'll have to gas up when he lands. After that, endurance on the chopper is about four hours, figure thirty minutes' cycle time when he touches down."

"How far can the cameras see, Mr. Dennis?"

"They cover the parking lot this way pretty good, but not the other side. They could do better with people on top of the castle."

"What do we know about their equipment?"

"Just the guns. We have that on tape."

"I want to see those," Noonan put in. "Right now, if possible."

Things started moving then. Chavez and Covington got their park maps—they used the same ones sold to park guests, with the camera positions hand-marked with black sticky-dots stolen from a secretary. An electric cart—actually a golf cart—met them out in the corridor and whisked them outside, then back into the park on a surface road. Covington navigated from the map, avoiding camera positions as they made their way along the back-lot areas of Worldpark.

Noonan ran the three videotapes that showed the terrorists own takedown operation. "Ten of 'em, all right, all male, most of them are bearded, all wearing white hats when they executed their attack. Two look like park employees. We have any information on them?"

"Working on it," Dennis replied.

"You fingerprint them?" Noonan asked, getting a negative head-shake as an answer. "How about photographs?"

"Yes, we all have photo-ID passes to get in." Dennis held up his.

"That's something. Let's get that off to the French police PDQ."

"Mark!" Dennis waved to his personnel boss.

"We should have gotten uniforms," Covington said topside.

"Yeah, haste makes waste, doesn't it, Peter?" Chavez was peering around a corner, smelling the food from the concession stand. It made him a little hungry. "Getting in there's going to be fun, man."

"Quite," Covington agreed.

The castle certainly looked real enough, over fifty meters square and about the same in height. Mainly it was empty space, the blueprints had told them, but there were both a staircase and elevator to the flat roof, and sooner or later the bad guys would put someone there, if they had half a brain amongst them. Well, that was the job for the snipers. Homer Johnston and Sam Houston would have fairly

easy direct shots, four hundred meters from one side and a mere one-sixty or so from the other.

"How big do those windows look to you?"

"Big enough, Ding."

"Yeah, I think so, too." And already a plan was coming together in the two minds. "I hope Malloy is well rested."

Sergeant Homer Johnston, now wearing park coveralls over his ninja suit, popped out of the ground fifty meters from the Dive Bomber. The ride was even more intimidating this close. He walked toward it, escorted by a park employee who was also a ride operator for this attraction.

"I can take you to the top and stop the car there."

"Great." It sure looked like a long way to climb, even though there were regular steps heading up. They walked under the canopied entrance, past the crowd-control bars, and Johnston sat in the lead seat on the right side, his gun case on the seat next to his. "Go," he told the operator. The ride up the first hill was slow—deliberately so, designed that way to scare the bejeebers out of the riders, and that gave Johnston another insight into the mind of a terrorist, he thought with a wry smile. The gang of ten three-seat cars stopped just at the crest. Johnston wriggled out, taking his gun case with him. This he set in an equipment bay, opening it to extract a rubber mat, and a ghillie blanket to drape over himself. Last came his rifle and binoculars. He took his time, setting the mat down—the decking here was perforated steel, and lying there would soon become uncomfortable. He deployed the blanket atop his prone frame. It was essentially a light fishing net covered with green plastic leaves, whose purpose was to break up his outline. Then he set up his rifle on its bipod, and took out his green-plastic-coated binoculars. His personal radio microphone dangled in front of his lips.

"Rifle Two-One to command."

"This is Six," Clark responded.

"Rifle Two-One in place, Six. I have a good perch here. I can see the whole roof of the castle and the doors to the elevator and stairwell. Good line of sight to the back, too. Not a bad spot, sir."

"Good. Keep us posted."

"Roger that, boss. Out." Sergeant Johnston propped himself up on his elbows and watched the area through his 7×50 binoculars. The sun was warm. He'd have to get used to that. Johnston thought for a moment and reached for his canteen. Just then the car he'd ridden up wheeled forward and then dropped from sight. He heard the steel overhead wheels roll along the metal tubing and wondered what it was like to ride the damned thing. Probably right up there with skydiving, something he knew how to do, but didn't much care for,

airborne-ranger training or not. There was something nice about having your fucking feet on the fucking ground, and you couldn't shoot a rifle while falling through the air at a hundred-thirty knots, could you? He directed his binoculars at a window . . . they were flat on the bottom but curved into a point at the top, like in a real castle, and made of clear glass segments held together with leaded strips. Maybe hard to shoot through, he thought, though getting a shot at this angle would not be easy . . . no, if he got a shot, he'd have to take it on someone outside. That would be easy. He got behind the rifle scope and punched the laser-rangefinder button, selecting the middle of the courtyard as his point of aim. Then he punched a few numbers into his calculator to allow for the vertical drop, came up with an adjusted range setting, and turned the elevation knob on the scope the right number of clicks. The direct line of sight was three hundred eighty-nine meters. Nice and close if he had to take a shot.

"Yes, Minister," Dr. Bellow said. He was sitting in a comfortable chair —Mike Dennis's—and staring at the wall. There was now a pair of photographs for him to stare at—they were unknowns, because Tim Noonan didn't have them in his computer, and neither the French nor the Spanish police had turned either into a name with a history attached. Both had apartments a few miles away, and both were being thoroughly tossed now, and phone records checked as well, to see where they'd called.

"They want this Jackal fellow out, do they?" the French Minister of Justice asked.

"Along with some others, but he would seem to be their primary objective, yes."

"My government will *not* negotiate with these creatures!" the Minister insisted.

"Yes, sir, I understand that. Giving over the prisoners is generally not an option, but every situation is different, and I need to know what leeway, if any, you will give me as a negotiating position. That could include taking this Sanchez guy out of prison and bringing him here as . . . well, as bait for the criminals we have surrounded here."

"Do you recommend that?" the Minister asked.

"I am not sure yet. I haven't spoken with them, and until I do I cannot get a feel for what they're all about. For the moment, I must assume that we are dealing with serious, dedicated people who are willing to kill hostages."

"Children?"

"Yes, Minister, we must consider that a real threat," the doctor told him. That generated a silence that lasted for a full ten seconds by the wall clock Bellow was staring at.

"I must consider this. I will call you later."

"Thank you, sir." Bellow hung up the phone and looked up at Clark.

"So?"

"So, they don't know what to do. Neither do I yet. Look, John, we're up against a number of unknowns here. We do not know much about the terrorists. No religious motivation, they're not Islamic fundamentalists. So I can't use religion or God or ethics against them. If they're ideological Marxists, they're going to be ruthless bastards. So far they haven't been really communicative. If I can't talk to them, I got bupkis."

"Okay, so, what's our play?"

"Put 'em in the dark for starters."

Clark turned: "Mr. Dennis?"

"Yes?"

"Can we cut the electricity to the castle?"

"Yes," the park engineer answered for his boss.

"Do it, doc?" John asked Bellow, getting a nod. "Okay, pull the plug now."

"Fair enough." The engineer sat at a computer terminal and worked the mouse to select the power-control program. In a few seconds, he isolated the castle and clicked the button to turn their electricity off.

"Let's see how long this takes," Bellow said quietly.

It took five seconds. Dennis's phone rang.

"Yes?" the park manager said into the speakerphone.

"Why did you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. The lights went off."

Dr. Bellow leaned over the speaker. "I am Dr. Bellow. Who am I talking to?"

"I am One. I am in control of Worldpark. Who are you?"

"My name is Paul Bellow, and I have been asked to speak with you."

"Ah, you are the negotiator, then. Excellent. Turn the lights back on immediately."

"Before we do that," Bellow said calmly, "I would like to know who you are. You have my name. I do not have yours."

"I told you that. I am One. You will call me Mr. One," the voice replied evenly, devoid of excitement or anger.

"Okay, Mr. One, if you insist, you can call me Paul."

"Turn the electricity back on, Paul."

"In return for which you will do what, Mr. One?"

"In return for which I will abstain from killing a child—for the moment," the voice added coldly.

"You do not sound like a barbarian, Mr. One, and the taking of a child's life is a barbaric act—and also one calculated to make your

position more difficult, not less so."

"Paul, I have told you what I require. Do it immediately." And then the line went dead.

"Oh, shit," Bellow breathed. "He knows the playbook."

"Bad?"

Bellow nodded. "Bad. He knows what we're going to try to do, on my side, I mean."

"Andre," René called from his desk. "Select a child."

He'd already done that, and pointed to the little Dutch girl, Anna, in her wheelchair, wearing her special-access button. René nodded his approval. So, the other side had a physician talking to him. The name Paul Bellow meant nothing to him, but the man would be a Spanish psychiatrist, probably one experienced or at least trained in negotiations. His job would be to weaken their resolve, ultimately to get them to surrender and so condemn themselves to life in prison. Well, he'd have to see about that. René checked his watch and decided to wait ten minutes.

Malloy eased back on the cyclic control, flaring his helicopter for landing where the fuel truck was parked. There were five soldiers there, one of them waving orange-plastic wands. In another few seconds, the Night Hawk touched down. Malloy killed the engines, and watched the rotor slow as Sergeant Nance opened the side door and hopped out.

"Time for some crew rest?" Lieutenant Harrison asked over the intercom.

"Right," Malloy snorted, opening his door to climb down. He walked to what looked like an officer standing a few yards away, answering his salute when he got there to shake hands. Malloy had an urgent request to make.

"The trick will be to get close enough," Covington said.

"Yeah." Chavez nodded. They'd circulated carefully to the other side of the castle now. They could hear the Dive Bomber ride running behind them. There was a good forty meters of open ground all around the castle, doubtless planned by the main architect of the park to give the structure primacy of place. It did that, but it didn't give Ding and Peter much to work with. Both men took their time, examining everything from the little man-made streams to the bridges over them. They could see the windows into the command center where the terrorists were, and the line of sight was just too damned good, even before they considered the task of racing up the interior

stairs—and those were probably covered by men with guns.

"They don't make it easy for us, do they?" Covington observed.

"Well, that's not their job, is it?"

"How's the recon going?" Clark asked over the encrypted radio circuit.

"Pretty well done, Mr. C," Chavez replied. "Malloy in yet?"

"Just landed."

"Good, 'cuz we're gonna need him if we gotta go in."

"Two groups, up and down," Covington added. "But we need something to tell us about that room."

The Spanish officer, an army major, nodded instant agreement and waved to some people in the helicopter hangar. They trotted over, got their orders, and trotted back. With that done, Malloy headed to the hangar, too. He needed a men's room. Sergeant Nance, he saw, was heading back with two thermos jugs. Good man, the Marine thought, he knew how important coffee was at a time like this.

"That camera is dead. They shot it out," Dennis said. "We have a tape of him doing it."

"Show me," Noonan commanded.

The layout of the room was not unlike this one, Tim Noonan saw in the fifty seconds of tape they had. The children had been herded to the corner opposite the camera. Maybe they'd even stay there. It was not much, but it was something. "Anything else? Audio systems in the room, a microphone or something?"

"No," Dennis replied. "We have phones for that."

"Yeah." The FBI agent nodded resignedly. "I have to figure a way to spike it, then." Just then the phone rang.

"Yes, this is Paul," Bellow said instantly.

"Hello, Paul, this is One. The lights remain out. I told you to restore power. It has not been done. I tell you again, do it immediately."

"Working on that, but the police here are fumbling around some."

"And there is no one from the park there to assist you? I am not a fool, Paul. I say it one last time, turn the electricity back on immediately."

"Mr. One, we're working on it. Please be a little patient with us, okay?" Bellow's face was sweating now. It started quite suddenly, and though he knew why, he hoped that he was wrong.

"Andre," René said, doing so mistakenly before he killed the phone line.

The former park security guard walked over to the corner. "Hello,

Anna. I think it is time for you to go back to your mother."

"Oh?" the child asked. She had china-blue eyes and light brown hair, nearly blond in fact, though her skin had the pale, delicate look of parchment. It was very sad. Andre walked behind the chair, taking the handles in his hands and wheeling her to the door. "Let's go outside, *mon petit chou,"* he said as they went through the door.

The elevator outside had a default setting. Even without electricity it could go down on battery power. Andre pushed the chair inside, flipped off the red emergency-stop switch, and pressed the 1 button. The doors closed slowly, and the elevator went down. A minute later, the doors opened again. The castle had a wide walk-through corridor that allowed people to transit from one part of Worldpark to another, and a mosaic that covered the arching walls. There was also a pleasant westerly breeze, and the Frenchman wheeled Anna right into it.

"What's this?" Noonan asked, looking at one of the video monitors. "John, we got somebody coming out."

"Command, this is Rifle Two-One, I see a guy pushing a wheelchair with a kid in it, coming out the west side of the castle." Johnston set his binoculars down and got on his rifle, centering the crosshairs on the man's temple, his finger lightly touching the set-trigger. "Rifle Two-One is on target, on the guy, on target now."

"Weapons tight" was the reply from Clark. "I repeat, weapons are tight. Acknowledge."

"Roger, Six, weapons tight." Sergeant Johnston took his finger out of the trigger guard. What was happening here?

"Bugger," Covington said. They were only forty meters away. He and Chavez had an easy direct line of sight. The little girl looked ill in addition to being scared; she was slumped to her left in the chair, trying to look up and back at the man pushing her. He was about forty, they both thought, a mustache but no beard, average-normal in height, weight, and build, with dark eyes that displayed nothing. The park was so quiet now, so empty of people, that they could hear the scrape of the rubber tires on the stone courtyard.

"Where is Momma?" Anna asked in English she'd learned in school.

"You will see her in a moment," Nine promised. He wheeled her around the curving entrance to the castle. It circled around a statue, took a gentle upward and clockwise turn, then led down to the courtyard. He stopped the chair in the middle of the path. It was about five meters wide, and evenly paved.

Andre looked around. There had to be policemen out here, but he saw nothing moving at all, except for the cars on the Dive Bomber, which he didn't have to look at to see. The familiar noise was enough. It really was too bad. Nine reached into his belt, took out his pistol,

and—

"—Gun, he's got a pistol out!" Homer Johnston reported urgently. "Oh, fuck, he's gonna—"

—The gun fired into Anna's back, driving straight through her heart. A gout of blood appeared on the flat child chest, and her head dropped forward. The man pushed the wheelchair just then, and it rolled down the curving path, caroming off the stone wall and making it all the way into the flat courtyard, where it finally stopped.

Covington drew his Beretta and started to bring it up. It would not have been an easy shot, but he had nine rounds in his pistol, and that was enough, but—

"Weapons tight!" the radio earpiece thundered. "Weapons tight! Do not fire," Clark ordered them.

"Fuck!" Chavez rasped next to Peter Covington.

"Yes," the Englishman agreed. "Quite." He holstered his pistol, watching the man turn and walk back into the shelter of the stone castle.

"I'm on target, Rifle Two-One is on target!" Johnston's voice told them all.

"Do *not* fire. This is Six, weapons are tight, goddamnit!"

• • •

"Fuck!" Clark snarled in the command center. He slammed his fist on the table. "Fuck!" Then the phone rang.

"Yes?" Bellow said, sitting next to the Rainbow commander.

"You had your warning. Turn the electricity back on, or we will kill another," One said.

CHAPTER 15

WHITE HATS

"There was nothing we could have done, John. Not a thing," Bellow said, giving voice to words that the others didn't have the courage to say.

"Now what?" Clark asked.

"Now I guess we turn the electricity back on."

As they watched the TV monitors, three men raced to the child. Two wore the *tricornio* of the Guardia Civil. The third was Dr. Hector Weiler.

Chavez and Covington watched the same thing from a closer perspective. Weiler wore a white lab coat, the global uniform for physicians, and his race to reach the child ended abruptly as he touched the warm but still body. The slump of his shoulders told the tale, even from fifty meters away. The bullet had gone straight through her heart. The doctor said something to the cops, and one of them wheeled the chair down and out of the courtyard, turning to go past the two Rainbow members.

"Hold it, doc," Chavez called, walking over to look. In this moment Ding remembered that his own wife held a new life in her belly, even now probably moving and kicking while Patsy was sitting in their living room, watching TV or reading a book. The little girl's face was at peace now, as though asleep, and he could not hold his hand back from touching her soft hair. "What's the story, doc?"

"She was quite ill, probably terminal. I will have a file on her back at my office. When these children come here, I get a summary of their condition should an emergency arise." The physician bit his lip and looked up. "She was probably dying, but not yet dead, not yet completely without hope." Weiler was the son of a Spanish mother and a German father who'd emigrated to Spain after the Second World War. He'd studied hard to become a physician and surgeon, and this act, this murder of a child, was the negation of all that. Someone had decided to make all his training and study worthless. He'd never known rage, quiet and sad though it was, but now he did. "Will you kill them?"

Chavez looked up. There were no tears in his eyes. Perhaps they'd come later, Domingo Chavez thought, his hand still on the child's head. Her hair wasn't very long, and he didn't know that it had grown back after her last chemotherapy protocol. He did know that she was supposed to be alive, and that in watching her death, he had failed to do that which he'd dedicated his life to doing. *"Sí,"* he told the doctor. "We will kill them. Peter?" He waved at his colleague, and together they accompanied the others to the doctor's office. They walked over slowly. There was no reason to go fast now.

"That'll do," Malloy thought, surveying the still-wet paint on the side of the Night Hawk. POLICIA, the lettering said. "Ready, Harrison?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant Nance, time to move."

"Yessir." The crew chief hopped in, buckled his safety belt, and watched the pilot go through the startup sequence. "All clear aft," he said over the intercom, after leaning out to check. "Tail rotor is clear, Colonel."

"Then I guess it's time to fly." Malloy applied power and lifted the Night Hawk into the sky. Then he keyed his tactical radio. "Rainbow, this is the Bear, over."

"Bear, this is Rainbow Six, reading you five by five, over."

"Bear's in the air, sir, be there in seven minutes."

"Roger, please orbit the area until we tell you otherwise."

"Roger that, sir. I'll notify when we commence the orbit. Out." There was no particular hurry. Malloy dipped the nose and headed into the gathering darkness. The sun was almost down now, and the park lights in the distance were all coming on.

"Who is this?" Chavez asked.

"Francisco de la Cruz," the man replied. His leg was bandaged, and he looked to be in pain.

"Ah, yes, we saw you on the videotape," Covington said. He saw the sword and shield in the corner and turned to nod his respect at the seated man. Peter lifted the *spatha* and hefted it briefly. At close range it would be formidable as hell, not the equal of his MP-10, but probably a very satisfying weapon for all that.

"A child? They kill a child?" de la Cruz asked.

Dr. Weiler was at his file cabinet. "Anna Groot, age ten and a half," he said, reading over the documents that had preceded the little one. "Metastatic osteosarcoma, terminally ill. . . . Six weeks left, her doctor says here. Osteo, that is a bad one." Against the wall, the two Spanish cops lifted the body from the chair and laid it tenderly on the examining table, then covered it with a sheet. One looked close to tears, blocked only by the cold rage that made his hands tremble.

"John must feel pretty shitty about now," Chavez said.

"He had to do it, Ding. It wasn't the right time to take action—"

"I know that, Peter! But how the fuck do we tell *her* that?" A pause. "Doc, you have any coffee around here?"

"There." Weiler pointed.

Chavez walked to the urn and poured some into a foam cup. "Up and down, sandwich 'em?"

Covington nodded. "Yes, I think so."

Chavez emptied the cup and tossed it into a wastebasket. "Okay, let's get set up." They left the office without another word and made their way in the shadows back to the underground, thence to the alternate command center.

"Rifle Two-One, anything happening?" Clark was asking when they walked in.

"Negative, Six, nothing except shadows on the windows. They haven't put a guy on the roof yet. That's a little strange."

"They're pretty confident in their TV coverage," Noonan thought. He had the blueprints of the castle in front of him. "Okay, we are assuming that our friends are all in here . . . but there's a dozen other rooms on three levels."

"This is Bear," a voice said over the speaker Noonan had set up. "I am orbiting now. What do I need to know, over?"

"Bear, this is Six," Clark replied. "The subjects are all in the castle. There's a command-and-control center on the second floor. Best guess, everybody's there right now. Also, be advised the subjects have killed a hostage—a little girl," John added.

In the helicopter, Malloy's head didn't move at the news. "Roger, okay, Six, we will orbit and observe. Be advised we have all our deployment gear aboard, over."

"Roger that. Out." Clark took his hand off the transmit button.

The men were quiet, but their looks were intense, Chavez saw. Too professional for an overt display—nobody was playing with a personal weapon, or anything as Hollywood as that—yet their faces were like stone, only their eyes moving back and forth over the diagrams or flickering back and forth to the TV monitors. It must have been very hard on Homer Johnston, Ding thought. He'd been on the fucker when he shot the kid. Homer had kids, and he could have transported the subject into the next dimension as easily as blinking his eyes.... But no, that would not have been smart, and they were paid to be smart. The men hadn't been ready for even an improvised assault, and anything that smacked of improvisation would only get more children killed. And that wasn't the mission, either. Then a phone rang. Bellow got it, hitting the speaker button.

"Yes?" the doctor said.

"We regret the incident with the child, but she was soon to die anyway. Now, when will our friends be released?"

"Paris hasn't gotten back to us yet," Bellow replied.

"Then, I regret to say, there will be another incident shortly."

"Look, Mr. One, I cannot force Paris to do anything. We are talking, negotiating with government officials, and they take time to reach decisions. Governments never move fast, do they?"

"Then I will help them. Tell Paris that unless the aircraft bringing our friends is ready for us to board it in one hour, we will kill a hostage, and then another every hour until our demands are met," the voice said, entirely without emotional emphasis.

"That is unreasonable. Listen to me: even if they brought all of them out of their prisons *now,* it would take at least two hours to get them here. Your wishes cannot make an airplane fly faster, can they?"

That generated a thoughtful pause. "Yes, that is true. Very well, we will commence the shooting of hostages in three hours from now . . . no, I will start the countdown on the hour. That gives you an additional twelve minutes. I will be generous. Do you understand?"

"Yes, you say that you will kill another child at twenty-two hundred hours, and another one every hour after that."

"Correct. Make sure that Paris understands." And the line went dead.

"Well?" Clark asked.

"John, you don't need me here for this. It's pretty damned clear that they'll do it. They killed the first one to show us who's the boss. They plan to succeed, and they don't care what it takes for them to do so. The concession he just made may be the last one we're going to get."

"What is that?" Esteban asked. He walked to the window to see. "Helicopter!"

"Oh?" René went there also. The windows were so small that he had to move the Basque aside. "Yes, I see the police have them. Large one," he added with a shrug. "This is not a surprise." But—"José, get up to the roof with a radio, and keep us informed."

One of the other Basques nodded and headed for the fire stairwell. The elevator would have worked fine, but he didn't want to be inconvenienced by another power shutoff.

"Command, Rifle Two-One," Johnston called a minute later.

"Rifle Two-One, this is Six."

"I got a guy on the castle roof, one man, armed with what looks like a Uzi, and he's got a brick, too. Just one, nobody else is joining up at this time."

"Roger that, Rifle Two-One."

"This isn't the guy who whacked the kid," the sergeant added.

"Okay, good, thank you."

"Rifle Three has him, too . . . just walked over to my side. He's circulating around . . . yeah, looking over the edge, looking down."

"John?" It was Major Covington.

"Yes, Peter?"

"We're not showing them enough."

"What do you mean?"

"Give them something to look at. Policemen, an inner perimeter. If they don't see something, they're going to wonder what's going on that they cannot see."

"Good idea," Noonan said.

Clark liked it. "Colonel?"

"Yes," Nuncio replied. He leaned over the table. "I propose two men, here, two more here . . . here . . . here."

"Yes, sir, please make that happen right away."

"René," Andre called from in front of a TV screen. He pointed. "Look."

There were two Guardia cops moving slowly and trying to be covert as they approached up Strada España to a place fifty meters from the castle. René nodded and picked up his radio. "Three!"

"Yes, One."

"Police approaching the castle. Keep an eye on them."

"I will do that, One," Esteban promised.

"Okay, they're using radios," Noonan said, checking his scanner. "Citizen-band walkie-talkies, regular commercial ones, set on channel sixteen. Pure vanilla."

"No names, just numbers?" Chavez asked.

"So far. Our point of contact calls himself One, and this guy is Three. Okay, does that tell us anything?"

"Radio games," Dr. Bellow said. "Right out of the playbook. They're trying to keep their identities secret from us, but that's also in the playbook." The two photo-ID pictures had long since been sent to France for identification, but both the police and intelligence agencies had come up dry.

"Okay, will the French deal?"

A shake of the head. "I don't think so. The Minister, when I told him about the Dutch girl, he just grunted and said Carlos stays in the jug no matter what—and he expects us to resolve the situation successfully, and if we can't, his country has a team of his own to send down."

"So, we've gotta have a plan in place and ready to go—by twenty-two hundred."

"Unless you want to see them kill another hostage, yes," Bellow said. "They're denying me my ability to guide their behavior. They know how the game is played."

"Professionals?"

Bellow shrugged. "Might as well be. They know what I'm going to try, and if they know it ahead of time, then they know how to maneuver clear."

"No way to mitigate their behavior?" Clark asked, wanting it clear.

"I can try, but probably not. The ideological ones, the ones who have a clear idea of what they want—well, they're hard to reason with. They have no ethical base to play with, no morality in the usual sense, nothing I can use against them. No conscience."

"Yeah, we saw that, I guess. Okay." John stood up straight and turned to look at his two team leaders. "You got two hours to plan it, and one more to set it up. We go at twenty-two hundred hours."

"We need to know more about what's happening inside," Covington told Clark.

"Noonan, what can you do?"

The FBI agent looked down at the blueprints, then over at the TV monitors. "I need to change," he said, heading over to his equipment case and pulling out the green-on-green night gear. The best news he'd seen so far was that the castle windows made for two blind spots. Better yet, they could control the lights that bled energy into both of them. He walked over to the park engineer next. "Can you switch off these lights along here?"

"Sure. When?"

"When the guy on the roof is looking the other way. And I need somebody to back me up," Noonan added.

"I can do that," First Sergeant Vega said, stepping forward.

The children were whining. It had started two hours earlier and only gotten worse. They wanted food—something adults would probably not have asked for, since adults would be far too frightened to eat, but children were different somehow. They also needed to use the restroom quite a bit, and fortunately there were two bathrooms adjacent to the control room, and René's people didn't stop them from going—the restrooms had no windows or phones or anything to make escape or communication possible, and it wasn't worth the aggravation to have the children soiling their pants. The children didn't talk directly to any of his people, but the whining was real and growing. Well-behaved kids, else it would be worse, René told himself, with an ironic smile. He looked at the wall clock.

"Three, this is One."

"Yes, One," came the reply.

"What do you see?"

"Eight policemen, four pairs, watching us, but doing nothing but watching."

"Good." And he set the radio down.

"Log that," Noonan said. He'd checked the wall clock. It was about fifteen minutes since the last radio conversation. He was in his night costume now, the two-shade greens they'd used in Vienna. His Beretta .45 automatic, with suppressor, was in a special, large shoulder holster over his body armor, and he had a backpack slung over one shoulder. "Vega, ready to take a little walk?"

"You betcha," Oso replied, glad at last to be doing *something* on a deployment. As much as he liked being responsible for the team's heavy machine gun, he'd never gotten to use it, and, he thought, probably never would. The biggest man on the team, his hobby was pumping iron, and he had a chest about the dimensions of a halfkeg of beer. Vega followed Noonan out the door, then outside.

"Ladder?" the first sergeant asked.

"Tool and paint shop fifty yards from where we're going. I asked. They have what we need."

"Fair 'nuff," Oso replied.

It was a fast walk, dodging through a few open areas visible to the fixed cameras, and the shop they headed for had no sign on it at all. Noonan slipped the ground-bolted door and walked in. None of the doors, remarkably enough, were locked. Vega pulled a thirty-foot extension ladder off its wall brackets. "This ought to do."

"Yeah." They went outside. Movement would now be trickier. "Noonan to command."

"Six here."

"Start doing the cameras, John."

In the command center, Clark pointed to the park engineer. There was danger here, but not much, they hoped. The castle command center, like this one, had only eight TV monitors, which were hard-wired into over forty cameras. You could have the computer simply flip through them in an automatic sequence, or select cameras for special use. With a mouse-click, one camera was disabled. If the terrorists were using the automatic sequence, as seemed likely, they probably would not notice that one camera's take was missing during the flip-through. They had to get through the visual coverage of two of them, and the park engineer was ready to flip them off and on as needed. The moment a hand appeared in camera twenty-three's field of view, the engineer flipped it off.

"Okay, twenty-three is off, Noonan."

"We're moving," Noonan said. The first walk took them twenty

meters, and they stopped behind a concession stand. “Okay, we’re at the popcorn building.”

The engineer flipped twenty-three back on, and then turned off twenty-one.

“Twenty-one is off,” Clark reported next. “Rifle Two-One, where’s the guy on the roof?”

“West side, just lit up a smoke, not looking down over the edge anymore. Staying still at the moment,” Sergeant Johnston reported.

“Noonan, you are clear to move.”

“Moving now,” the FBI agent replied. He and Vega double-timed it across the stone slabs, their rubber-soled boots keeping their steps quiet. At the side of the castle was a dirt strip about two meters wide, and some large boxwoods. Carefully, Noonan and Vega angled the ladder up, setting it behind a bush. Vega pulled the rope to extend the top portion, stopping it just under the window. Then he got between the ladder and the building, grabbed the treads and held them tight, pulling the ladder against the rough stone blocks.

“Watch your ass, Tim,” Oso whispered.

“Always.” Noonan went up quickly for the first ten feet, then slowed to a vertical crawl. *Patience,* Tim told himself. *Plenty of time to do this.* It was the sort of lie that men tell themselves.

“Okay,” Clark heard. “He’s going up the ladder now. The roof guy is still on the opposite side, fat, dumb, and happy.”

“Bear, this is Six, over,” John said, getting another idea.

“Bear copies, Six.”

“Play around a little on the west side, just to draw some attention, over.”

“Roger that.”

Malloy stopped his endless circling, leveled out, and then eased toward the castle. The Night Hawk was a relatively quiet aircraft for a helicopter, but the guy on the roof turned to watch closely, the colonel saw through his night-vision goggles. He stopped his approach at about two hundred meters. He wanted to get their attention, not to spook them. The roof sentry’s cigarette blazed brightly in the goggles. It moved to his lips, then away, then back, staying there.

“Say hello, sweetie,” Malloy said over the intercom. “Jesus, if I was in a Night Stalker, I could spray your ass into the next time zone.”

“You fly the Stalker? What’s it like?”

“If she could cook, I’d fucking marry her. Sweetest chopper ever made,” Malloy said, holding hover. “Six, Bear, I have the bastard’s attention.”

“Noonan, Six, we’ve frozen the roof sentry for you. He’s on the opposite side from you.”

Good, Noonan didn’t say. He took off his Kevlar helmet and edged his face to the window. It was made of irregular segments held in place by lead strips, just like in the castles of old. The glass wasn’t as good as float-plate, but it was transparent. *Okay.* He reached into his backpack and pulled a fiber-optic cable with the same cobra-head arrangement he’d used in Bern.

“Noonan to Command, you getting this?”

“That’s affirmative.” It was the voice of David Peled. The picture he saw was distorted, but you quickly got used to that. It showed four adults, but more important, it showed a crowd of children sitting on the floor in the corner, close to two doors with labels—the toilets, Peled realized. That worked. That worked pretty well. “Looks good, Timothy. Looks very good.”

“Okay.” Noonan glued the tiny instrument in place and headed down the ladder. His heart was racing faster than it ever did on the morning three-mile run. At the bottom, he and Vega both hugged the wall.

The cigarette flew off the roof, and the sentry got tired of looking at the chopper, Johnston saw.

“Our friend’s moving east on the castle roof. Noonan, he’s coming your way.”

Malloy thought of maneuvering to draw the attention back, but that was too dangerous a play. He turned the helicopter sideways and continued his circling, but closer in, his eyes locked on the castle roof. There wasn’t much else he could do except to draw his service pistol and fire, but at this range it would be hard enough to hit the castle. And killing people wasn’t his job, unfortunately, Malloy told himself. There were times when he found the idea rather appealing.

“The helicopter annoys me,” the voice on the phone said.

“Pity,” Dr. Bellow replied, wondering what response it would get. “But police do what police do.”

“News from Paris?”

“Regrettably not yet, but we hope to hear something soon. There is still time.” Bellow’s voice adopted a quiet intensity that he hoped would be taken for desperation.

“Time and tide wait for no man,” One said, and hung up.

“What’s that mean?” John asked.

"It means he's playing by the rules. He hasn't objected to the cops he can see on the TV, either. He knows the things he has to put up with." Bellow sipped his coffee. "He's very confident. He figures he's in a safe place, and he's holding the cards, and if he has to kill a few more kids, that's okay, because it'll get him what he wants."

"Killing children." Clark shook his head. "I didn't think—hell, I'm supposed to know better, right?"

"It's a very strong taboo, maybe the strongest," Dr. Bellow agreed. "The way they killed that little girl, though . . . there was no hesitation, just like shooting a paper target. Ideological," the psychiatrist went on. "They've subordinated everything to their belief system. That makes them rational, but only within that system. Our friend Mr. One has chosen his objective, and he'll stick to it."

The remote TV system, the park engineer saw, was really something. The objective lens now affixed to the castle window was less than two millimeters across at its widest point, and even if noticed, would be mistaken for a drop of paint or some flaw in the window glass. The quality of the image wasn't very good, but it showed where people were, and the more you looked at it, the more you understood what initially appeared to be a black-and-white photograph of clutter. He could count six adults now, and with a seventh atop the castle, that left only three unaccounted for—and were all the children in view? It was harder with them. All their shirts were the same color, and the red translated into a very neutral gray on the black-and-white picture. There was the one in a wheelchair, but the rest blended together in the out-of-focus image. The commandos, he could see, were worried about that.

"He's heading back west again," Johnston reported. "Okay, he's at the west side now."

"Let's go," Noonan told Vega.

"The ladder?" They'd taken it down and laid it behind the bushes on its side.

"Leave it." Noonan ran off in a crouch, reaching the concession structure in a few seconds. "Noonan to Command, time to do the cameras again."

"It's off," the engineer told Clark.

"Camera twenty-one is down. Get moving, Tim."

Noonan popped Vega on the shoulder and ran another thirty meters. "Okay, take down twenty-three."

"Done," the park engineer said.

"Move," Clark commanded.

Fifteen seconds later, they were in a safe position. Noonan leaned

against a building wall and took a long breath. “Thanks, Julio.”

“Any time, man,” Vega replied. “Just so the camera gadget works.”

“It will,” the FBI agent promised, and with that they headed back to the underground command post.

“Blow the windows? Can we do that, Paddy?” Chavez was asking when they got there.

Connolly was wishing for a cigarette. He’d quit years before—it was too hard on the daily runs to indulge—but at times like this it seemed to help the concentration. “Six windows . . . three or four minutes each . . . no, I think not, sir. I can give you two—if we have the time.”

“How sturdy are the windows?” Clark asked “Dennis?”

“Metal frames set into the stone,” the park manager said with a shrug.

“Wait.” The engineer turned a page on the castle blueprints, then two more, and then a finger traced down the written portion on the right side. “Here’s the specs . . . they’re held in by grouting only. You should be able to kick them in, I think.”

The “I think” part was not as reassuring as Ding would have preferred, but how strong could a window frame be with a two-hundred-pound man swinging into it with two boots leading the way?

“What about flash-bangs, Paddy?”

“We can do that,” Connolly answered. “It will not do the frames any good at all, sir.”

“Okay.” Chavez leaned over the plans. “You’ll have time to blow two windows—this one and this one.” He tapped the prints. “We’ll use flash-bangs on the other four and swing in a second later. Eddie here, me here, Louis here. George, how’s the leg?”

“Marginal,” Sergeant Tomlinson replied with painful honesty. He’d have to kick through a window, swing in, drop to a concrete floor, then come up shooting . . . and the lives of children were at stake. No, he couldn’t risk it, could he? “Better somebody else, Ding.”

“Oso, think you can do it?” Chavez asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Vega replied, trying not to smile. “You bet, Ding.”

“Okay, Scotty here, and Mike take these two. What’s the exact distance from the roof?”

That was on the blueprints. “Sixteen meters exactly from the level of the roof. Add another seventy centimeters to allow for the battlements.”

“The ropes can do that easily,” Eddie Price decided. The plan was coming together. He and Ding would have as their primary mission getting between the kids and the bad guys, shooting as they went. Vega, Loiselle, McTyler, and Pierce would be primarily tasked to killing the subjects in the castle’s command room, but that would be finally decided only when they entered the room. Covington’s Team-1

would race up the stairs from the underground, to intercept any subjects who ran out, and to back up Team-2 if something went wrong on their assault.

Sergeant Major Price and Chavez looked over the blueprints again, measuring distances to be covered and the time in which to do it. It looked possible, even probable, that they could carry it off. Ding looked up at the others.

"Comments?"

Noonan turned to look at the picture from the fiber-optic gear he'd installed. "They seem to be mainly at the control panels. Two guys keeping an eye on the children, but they're not worried about them—makes sense, they're just kids, not adults able to start real resistance . . . but . . . it only takes one of these bastards to turn and hose them, man."

"Yeah." Ding nodded. There was no denying or avoiding that fact. "Well, we have to shoot fast, people. Any way to string them out?"

Bellow thought about that. "If I tell them the plane's on the way . . . that's a risk. If they think we're lying to them, well, they could start taking it out on the hostages, but the upside is, if they think it's about time to head for the airport, probably Mr. One will send a couple of his troops down to the underground—that's the most likely way for them to leave the area, I think. Then, if we can play some more with the surveillance cameras, and get a guy in close—"

"Yeah, pop them right away," Clark said. "Peter?"

"Get us within twenty meters and it's a piece of cake. Plus, we kill the lights right before we hit. Disorient the bastards," Covington added.

"There's emergency lights in the stairwells," Mike Dennis said. "They click on when the power goes down—shit, there's two in the command center, too."

"Where?" Chavez asked.

"The left—I mean the northeast corner and the southwest one. The regular kind, two lights, like car headlights, they run off a battery."

"Okay, no NVGs when we go in, I guess, but we'll still kill the lights right before we hit, just to distract them. Anything else? Peter?" Ding asked.

Major Covington nodded. "It ought to work."

Clark observed and listened, forced to let his principal subordinates do all the planning and talking, leaving him only able to comment if they made a mistake, and they hadn't done that. Most of all, he wanted to lift an MP-10 and go in with the shooters, but he couldn't do that, and inwardly he swore at the fact. Commanding just wasn't as satisfying as leading.

"We need medics standing by in case the bad guys get lucky," John

said to Colonel Nuncio.

"We have paramedics outside the park now—"

"Dr. Weiler is pretty good," Mike Dennis said. "He's had trauma training. We insisted on that in case we have something bad happen here."

"Okay, we'll have him stand-to when the time comes. Dr. Bellow, tell Mr. One that the French have caved, and their friends will be here.... What do you think?"

"Ten-twenty or so. If they agree to that, it's a concession, but the kind that will calm them down—should, anyway."

"Make the call, doc," John Clark ordered.

"Yes?" René said.

"Sanchez is being released from Le Sante prison in about twenty minutes. Six of the others, too, but there's a problem on the last three. I'm not sure what that is. They'll be taken to De Gaulle International Airport and flown here on an Air France Airbus 340. We think they'll be here by twenty-two-forty. Is that acceptable? How will we get you and the hostages to them for the flight out?" Bellow asked.

"A bus, I think. You will bring the bus right to the castle. We will take ten or so of the children with us, and leave the rest here as a show of good faith on our part. Tell the police that we know how to move the children without giving them a chance to do something foolish, and any treachery will have severe consequences."

"We do not want any more children harmed," Bellow assured him.

"If you do as you are told, that will not be necessary, but understand," René went on firmly, "if you do anything foolish, then the courtyard will run red with blood. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, One, I understand," the voice replied.

René set the phone down and stood. "My friends, Il'ych is coming. The French have granted our demands."

"He looks like a happy camper," Noonan said, eyes locked on the black-and-white picture. The one who had to be Mr. One was standing now, walking toward another of the subjects, and they appeared to shake hands on the fuzzy picture.

"They're not going to lie down and take a nap," Bellow warned. "If anything, they're going to be more alert now."

"Yeah, I know," Chavez assured him. *But if we do our job right, it doesn't matter how alert they are.*

Malloy headed back to the airfield for refueling, which took half an hour. While there he heard what was going to happen in another

hour. In the back of the Night Hawk, Sergeant Nance set up the ropes, set to fifty feet length exactly, and hooked them into eyebolts on the chopper's floor. Like the pilots, Nance, too, had a pistol holstered on his left side. He never expected to use it, and was only a mediocre shot, but it made him feel like part of the team, and that was important to him. He supervised the refueling, capped the tank, and told Colonel Malloy the bird was ready.

Malloy pulled up on the collective, brought the Night Hawk into the air, then pushed the cyclic forward to return to Worldpark. From this point on, their flight routine would be changing. On arriving over the park, the Night Hawk didn't circle. Instead it flew directly over the castle every few minutes, then drew off into the distance, his anticollision strobe lights flashing as he moved around the park grounds, seemingly at random, bored with the orbiting he'd done before.

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"Okay, people, let's move," Chavez told his team. Those directly involved in the rescue operation headed out into the underground corridor, then out to where the Spanish army truck stood. They boarded it, and it drove off, looping around into the massive parking lot.

Dieter Weber selected a sniper perch opposite Sergeant Johnston's position, on top of the flat roof of a theater building where kids viewed cartoons, only a hundred twenty meters from the castle's east side. Once there, he unrolled his foam mat, set up his rifle on the bipod, and started training his ten-power scope over the castle's windows.

"Rifle Two-Two in position," he reported to Clark.

"Very well, report as necessary, Al?" Clark said, looking up.

Stanley looked grim. "A sodding lot of guns, and a lot of children."

"Yeah, I know. Anything else we could try?"

Stanley shook his head. "It's a good plan. If we try outside, we give them too much maneuvering space, and they will feel safer in this castle building. No, Peter and Ding have a good plan, but there's no such bloody thing as a perfect one."

"Yeah," John said. "I want to be there, too. This command stuff sucks the big one."

Alistair Stanley grunted. "Quite."

The parking lot lights all went off at once. The truck, also with lights

out, stopped next to a light standard. Chavez and his team jumped out. Ten seconds later, the Night Hawk came in, touching down with the rotor still turning fast. The side doors opened, and the shooters clambered aboard and sat down on the floor. Sergeant Nance closed one door, then the other.

"All aboard, Colonel."

Without a word, Malloy pulled the collective and climbed back into the sky, mindful of the light standards, which could have wrecked the whole mission. It took only four seconds to clear them, and he banked the aircraft to head back toward the park.

"A/C lights off," Malloy told Lieutenant Harrison.

"Lights off," the copilot confirmed.

"We ready?" Ding asked his men in the back.

"Goddamn right, we are," Mike Pierce said back. *Fucking murderers,* he didn't add. But every man on the bird was thinking that. Weapons were slung tight across their chests, and they had their zip-lining gloves on. Three of the men were pulling them tight on their hands, a show of some tension on their part that went along with the grim faces.

"Where is the aircraft?" One asked.

"About an hour and ten minutes out," Dr. Bellow replied. "When do you want your bus?"

"Exactly forty minutes before the aircraft lands. It will then be refueled while we board it."

"Where are you going?" Bellow asked next.

"We will tell the pilot when we get aboard."

"Okay, we have the bus coming now. It will be here in about fifteen minutes. Where do you want it to come?"

"Right to the castle, past the Dive Bomber ride."

"Okay, I will tell them to do that," Bellow promised.

"Merci." The phone went dead again.

"Smart," Noonan observed. "They'll have two surveillance cameras on the bus all the way in, so we can't use it to screen a rescue team. And they probably plan to use the mountaineer technique to get the hostages aboard." *Tough shit,* he didn't add.

"Bear, this is Six," Clark called on the radio.

"Bear copies, Six, over."

"We execute in five minutes."

"Roger that, we party in five."

Malloy turned in his seat. Chavez had heard the call and nodded, holding up one hand, fingers spread.

"Rainbow, this is Six. Stand-to, repeat stand-to. We commence the

operation in five minutes."

• • •

In the underground, Peter Covington led three of his men east toward the castle stairwells, while the park engineer selectively killed off the surveillance cameras. His explosives man set a small charge on the fire door at the bottom and nodded at his boss.

"Team-1 is ready."

"Rifle Two-One is ready and on target," Johnston said.

"Rifle Two-Two is ready, but no target at this time," Weber told Clark.

"Three, this is One," the scanner crackled in the command room.

"Yes, One," the man atop the castle replied.

"Anything happening?"

"No, One, the police are staying where they are. And the helicopter is flying around somewhere, but not doing anything."

"The bus should be here in fifteen minutes. Stay alert."

"I will," Three promised.

"Okay," Noonan said. "That's a time-stamp. Mr. One calls Mr. Three about every fifteen minutes. Never more than eighteen, never less than twelve. So—"

"Yeah." Clark nodded. "Move it up?"

"Why not," Stanley said.

"Rainbow, this is Six. Move in and execute. Say again, *execute now!"*

Aboard the Night Hawk, Sergeant Nance moved left and right, sliding the side doors open. He gave a thumbs-up to the shooters that they returned, each man hooking up his zip-line rope to D-rings on their belts. All of them turned inward, getting up on the balls of their feet so that their backsides were now dangling outside the helicopter.

"Sergeant Nance, I will flash you when we're in place."

"Roger, sir," the crew chief replied, crouching in the now-empty middle of the passenger area, his arms reaching to the men on both sides.

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"Andre, go down and look at the courtyard," René ordered. His man moved at once, holding his Uzi in both hands.

“Somebody just left the room,” Noonan said.

“Rainbow, this is Six, one subject has left the command center.”

Eight, Chavez thought. *Eight subjects to take down.* The other two would go to the long-riflemen.

The last two hundred meters were the hard ones, Malloy thought. His hands tingled on the cyclic control stick, and as many times as he’d done this, this one was not a rehearsal. *Okay . . .* He dropped his nose, heading toward the castle, and without the anticollision lights, the aircraft would only be a shadow, slightly darker than the night—better yet, the four-bladed rotor made a sound that was nondirectional. Someone could hear it, but locating the source was difficult, and he needed that to last only a few more seconds.

“Rifle Two-One, stand by.”

“Rifle Two-One is on target, Six,” Johnston reported. His breathing regularized, and his elbows moved slightly, so that only bone, not muscle, was in contact with the mat under him. The mere passage of blood through his arteries could throw his aim off. His crosshairs were locked just forward of the sentry’s ear. “On target,” he repeated.

“Fire,” the earpiece told him.

Say good night, Gracie, a small voice in his mind whispered. His finger pushed back gently on the set trigger, which snapped cleanly, and a gout of white flame exploded from the muzzle of the rifle. The flash obscured the sight picture for a brief moment, then cleared in time for him to see the bullet impact. There was a slight puff of gray-looking vapor from the far side of the head, and the body dropped straight down like a puppet with cut strings. No one inside would hear the shot, not through thick windows and stone walls from over three hundred meters away.

“Rifle Two-One. Target is down. Target is down. Center head,” Johnston reported.

“That’s a kill,” Lieutenant Harrison breathed over the intercom. From the helicopter’s perspective, the destruction of the sentry’s head looked quite spectacular. It was the first death he’d ever seen, and it struck him as something in a movie, not something real. The target hadn’t been a living being to him, and now it would never be.

“Yep,” Malloy agreed, easing back on the cyclic. “Sergeant Nance—*now!”*

In the back, Nance pushed outward. The helicopter was still slowing, nose up now, as Malloy performed the rocking-chair

maneuver to perfection.

Chavez pushed off with his feet, and went down the zip-line. It took less than two seconds of not-quite free-fall before he applied tension to the line to slow his descent, and his black, rubber-soled boots came down lightly on the flat roof. He immediately loosed his rope, and turned to watch his people do the same. Eddie Price ran over to the sentry's body, kicked the head over with his boot, and turned, making a thumbs-up for his boss.

"Six, this is Team-2 Lead. On the roof. The sentry is dead," he said into his microphone. "Proceeding now." With that, Chavez turned to his people, waving his arms to the roof's periphery. The Night Hawk was gone into the darkness, having hardly appeared to have stopped at all.

The castle roof was surrounded by the battlements associated with such places, vertical rectangles of stone behind which archers could shelter while loosing their arrows at attackers. Each man had one such shelter assigned, and they counted them off with their fingers, so that every man went to the right one. For this night, the men looped their rappelling ropes around them, then stepped into the gaps. When all of them were set up, they held up their hands. Chavez did the same, then dropped his as he kicked off the roof and slid down the rope to a point a meter to the right of a window, using his feet to stand off the wall. Paddy Connolly came down on the other side, reached to apply his Primacord around the edges, and inserted a radio-detonator on one edge. Then Paddy moved to his left, swinging on the rope as though it were a jungle vine to do the same to one other. Other team members took flash-bang grenades and held them in their hands.

"Two-Lead to Six—lights!"

In the command center, the engineer again isolated the power to the castle and shut it off.

Outside the windows, Team-2 saw the windows go dark, and then a second or two later the wall-mounted emergency lights came on, just like miniature auto headlights, not enough to light the room up properly. The TV monitors they were watching went dark as well.

"Merde," René said, sitting and reaching for a phone. If they wanted to play more games, then he could—he thought he saw some movement outside the window and looked more closely—

"Team-2, this is lead. Five seconds . . . five . . . four . . . three—" At "three," the men holding the flash-bangs pulled the pins and set them right next to the windows, then turned aside. "—. . . two . . . one . . . *fire!"*

Sergeant Connolly pressed his button, and two windows were sundered from the wall by explosives. A fraction of a second later, three more windows were blown in by a wall of noise and blazing

light. They flew across the room in a shower of glass and lead fragments, missing the children in the corner by three meters.

Next to Chavez, Sergeant Major Price tossed in another flash-bang, which exploded the moment it touched the floor. Then Chavez pushed outward from the wall, swinging into the room through the window, his MP-10 up and in both hands. He hit the floor badly, falling backward, unable to control his balance, then felt Price's feet land on his left arm. Chavez rolled and jolted to his feet, then moved to the kids. They were screaming with alarm, covering their faces and ears from the abuse of the flash-bangs. But he couldn't worry about them just yet.

Price landed better, moved right as well, but turned to scan the room. There. It was a bearded one, holding an Uzi. Price extended his MP-10 to the limit of the sling and fired a three-round burst right into his face from three meters away. The force of the bullet impacts belied the suppressed noise of the shots.

Oso Vega had kicked his window loose on leg-power alone, and landed right on top of a subject, rather to the surprise of both, but Vega was ready for surprises, and the terrorist was not. Oso's left hand slammed out, seemingly of its own accord, and hit him in the face with enough force to split it open into a bloody mess that a burst of three 10-mm rounds only made worse.

René was sitting at his desk, the phone in his hand, and his pistol on the tabletop before him. He was reaching for it when Pierce fired into the side of his head from six feet away.

In the far corner, Chavez and Price skidded to a stop, their bodies between the terrorists and the hostages. Ding came to one knee, his weapon up while his eyes scanned for targets, as he listened to the suppressed chatter of his men's weapons. The semidarkness of the room was alive now with moving shadows. Loiselle found himself behind a subject, close enough to touch him with the muzzle of his submachine gun. This he did. It made the shot an easy one, but sprayed blood and brains all over the room.

One in the corner got his Uzi up, and his finger went down on the trigger, spraying in the direction of the children. Chavez and Price both engaged him, then McTyler as well, and the terrorist went down in a crumpled mass.

Another had opened a door and raced through it, splattered by bullet fragments from a shooter whose aim was off and hit the door. This one ran down, away from the shooting, turning one corner, then another—and tried to stop when he saw a black shape on the steps.

It was Peter Covington, leading his team up. Covington had heard the noise of his steps and taken aim, then fired when the surprised-looking face entered his sights. Then he resumed his race topside, with

four men behind him.

That left three in the room. Two hid behind desks, one holding his Uzi up and firing blindly. Mike Pierce jumped over the desk, twisting in midair as he did so, and shot him three times in the side and back. Then Pierce landed, turned back and fired another burst into the back of his head. The other one under a desk was shot in the back by Paddy Connolly. The one who was left stood, blazing away wildly with his weapon, only to be taken down by no fewer than four team members.

Just then the door opened, and Covington came in. Vega was circulating about, kicking the weapons away from every body, and after five seconds shouted: *"Clear!"*

"Clear!" Pierce agreed.

Andre was outside, in the open and all alone. He turned to look up at the castle.

"Dieter!" Homer Johnston called.

"Yes!"

"Can you take his weapon out?"

The German somehow read the American's mind. The answer was an exquisitely aimed shot that struck Andre's submachine gun just above the trigger guard. The impact of the .300 Winchester Magnum bullet blasted through the rough, stamped metal and broke the gun nearly in half. From his perch four hundred meters away, Johnston took careful aim, and fired his second round of the engagement. It would forever be regarded as a very bad shot. Half a second later, the 7-mm bullet struck the subject six inches below the sternum.

For Andre, it seemed like a murderously hard punch. Already the match bullet had fragmented, ripping his liver and spleen as it continued its passage, exiting his body above the left kidney. Then, following the shock of the initial impact, came a wave of pain. An instant later, his screech ripped across the 100 acres of Worldpark.

"Check this out," Chavez said in the command center. His body armor had two holes in the torso. They wouldn't have been fatal, but they would have hurt. "Thank God for DuPont, eh?"

"Miller Time!" Vega said with a broad grin.

"Command, this is Chavez. Mission accomplished. The kids—uh oh, we got one kid hurt here, looks like a scratch on the arm, the rest of 'em are all okay. Subjects all down for the count, Mr. C. You can turn the lights back on."

As Ding watched, Oso Vega leaned down and picked up a little girl. "Hello, *querida.* Let's find your *mamacita,* eh?"

"Rainbow!" Mike Pierce exulted. "Tell 'em there's a new sheriff in town, people!"

"Bloody right, Mike!" Eddie Price reached into his pocket and pulled out his pipe and a pouch of good Cavendish tobacco.

There were things to be done. Vega, Pierce, and Loiselle collected the weapons, safed them, and stacked them on a desk. McTyler and Connolly checked out the restrooms and other adjacent doors for additional terrorists, finding none. Scotty waved to the door.

"Okay, let's get the kids out," Ding told his people. "Peter, lead us out!"

Covington had his team open the fire door and man the stairway, one man on each landing. Vega took the lead, holding the five-year-old with his left arm while his right continued to hold his MP-10. A minute later, they were outside.

Chavez stayed behind, looking at the wall with Eddie Price. There were seven holes in the corner where the kids had been, but all the rounds were high, into the drywall paneling. "Lucky," Chavez said.

"Somewhat," Sergeant Major Price agreed. "That's the one we both engaged, Ding. He was just firing, not aiming—and maybe at us, not them, I think."

"Good job, Eddie."

"Indeed," Price agreed. With that they both walked outside, leaving the bodies behind for the police to collect.

"Command, this is Bear, what's happening, over."

"Mission accomplished, no friendlies hurt. Well done, Bear," Clark told him.

"Roger and thank you, sir. Bear is RTB. Out. I need to take a piss," the Marine told his copilot, as he horsed the Night Hawk west for the airfield.

Homer Johnston fairly ran down the steps of the Dive Bomber ride, carrying his rifle and nearly tripping three times on the way down. Then he ran the few hundred meters to the castle. There was a doctor there, wearing a white coat and looking down at the man Johnston had shot.

"How is he?" the sergeant asked when he got there. It was pretty clear. The man's hands were holding his belly, and were covered with blood that looked strangely black in the courtyard lighting.

"He will not survive," Dr. Weiler said. Maybe if they were in a hospital operating room right now, he'd have a slim chance, but he was bleeding out through the lacerated spleen, and his liver was probably destroyed as well.... And so, no, absent a liver transplant, he had no chance at all, and all Weiler could do was give him morphine for the pain. He reached into his bag for a syringe.

"That's the one shot the little girl," Johnston told the doctor. "I

guess my aim was a little off," he went on, looking down into the open eyes and the grimacing face that let loose another moaning scream. If he'd been a deer or an elk, Johnston would have finished him off with a pistol round in the head or neck, but you weren't supposed to do that with human targets. *Die slow, you fuck,* he didn't say aloud. It disappointed Johnston that the doctor gave him a pain injection, but physicians were sworn to their duty, as he was to his.

"Pretty low," Chavez said, coming up to the last living terrorist.

"Guess I slapped the trigger a little hard," the rifleman responded.

Chavez looked straight in his eyes. "Yeah, right. Get your gear."

"In a minute." The target's eyes went soft when the drug entered his bloodstream, but the hands still grabbed at the wound, and there was a puddle of blood spreading from under his back. Finally, the eyes looked up at Johnston one last time.

"Good night, Gracie," the rifleman said quietly. Ten seconds later, he was able to turn away and head back to the Dive Bomber to retrieve the rest of his gear.

There were a lot of soiled underpants in the medical office, and a lot of kids still wide-eyed in shock, having lived through a nightmare that all would relive for years to come. The Rainbow troopers fussed over them. One bandaged the only wound, a scratch really, on a young boy.

Centurion de la Cruz was still there, having refused evacuation. The troops in black stripped off their body armor and set it against the wall, and he saw on their uniform jackets the jump wings of paratroopers, American, British, and German, along with the satisfied look of soldiers who'd gotten the job done.

"Who are you?" he asked in Spanish.

"I'm sorry, I can't say," Chavez replied. "But I saw what you did on the videotape. You did well, Sergeant."

"So did you, ah? . . ."

"Chavez. Domingo Chavez."

"American?"

"Sí."

"The children, were any hurt?"

"Just the one over there."

"And the—criminals?"

"They will break no more laws, *amigo.* None at all," Team-2 Lead told him quietly.

"Bueno." De la Cruz reached up to take his hand. "It was hard?"

"It is always hard, but we train for the hard things, and my men are __"

"They have the look," de la Cruz agreed.

"So do you." Chavez turned. "Hey, guys, here's the one who took

'em on with a sword."

"Oh, yeah?" Mike Pierce came over. "I finished that one off for you. Ballsy move, man." Pierce took his hand and shook it. The rest of the troopers did the same.

"I must—I must—" De la Cruz stood and hobbled out the door. He came back in five minutes later, following John Clark, and holding—

"What the hell is that?" Chavez asked.

"The eagle of the legion, VI *Legio Victrix,"* the centurion told them, holding it in one hand. "The victorious legion. *Señor* Dennis, *con permiso?"*

"Yes, Francisco," the park manager said with a serious nod.

"With the respect of my legion, *Señor* Chavez. Keep this in a place of honor."

Ding took it. The damned thing must have weighed twenty pounds, plated as it was with gold. It would be a fit trophy for the club at Hereford. "We will do that, my friend," he promised the former sergeant, with a look at John Clark.

The stress was bleeding off now, to be followed as usual by elation and fatigue. The troopers looked at the kids they'd saved, still quiet and cowed by the night, but soon to be reunited with their parents. They heard the sound of a bus outside. Steve Lincoln opened the door, and watched the grown-ups leap out of it. He waved them through the door, and the shouts of joy filled the room.

"Time to leave," John said. He, too, walked over to shake hands with de la Cruz as the troops filed out.

Out in the open, Eddie Price had his own drill to complete. His pipe now filled, he took a kitchen match from his pocket and struck it on the stone wall of the medical office, lighting the curved briar pipe for a long, victorious puff as parents pushed in, and others pushed out, holding their children, many weeping at their deliverance.

Colonel Gamelin was standing by the bus and came over. "You are the Legion?" he asked.

Louis Loiselle handled the answer. "In a way, monsieur," he said in French. He looked up to see a surveillance camera pointed directly at the door, probably to record the event, the parents filing out with their kids, many pausing to shake hands with the Rainbow troopers. Then Clark led them off, back to the castle, and into the underground. On the way the Guardia Civil cops saluted, the gestures returned by the special-ops troopers.

CHAPTER 16

DISCOVERY

The successful conclusion of the Worldpark operation turned out to be a problem for some, and one of them was Colonel Tomas Nuncio, the senior officer of the Guardia Civil on the scene. Assumed by the local media to be the officer in command of the operation, he was immediately besieged with requests for details of the operation, along with videotapes for the TV reporters. So successful had he been in isolating the theme park from press coverage that his superiors in Madrid themselves had little idea what had taken place, and this also weighed on his decision. So the colonel decided to release Worldpark's own video coverage, deeming this to be the most innocuous footage possible, as it showed very little. The most dramatic part had been the descent of the shooting team from the helicopter to the castle roof, and then from the roof of the castle to the control-room windows, and that, Nuncio decided, was pure vanilla, lasting a mere four minutes, the time required for Paddy Connolly to place his line charges on the window frames and move aside to detonate them. Nothing of the shooting inside the room had been taped, because the terrorists had themselves wrecked the surveillance camera inside the facility. The elimination of the castle-roof sentry had been taped, but was not released due to the gruesome nature of his head wound, and the same was true of the killing of the last of them, the one named Andre who had killed the little Dutch girl—which scene had also been recorded, but was withheld for the same reason. The rest was all let go. The distance of the cameras from the actual scene of action prevented the recognition, or even the sight of the faces of the rescue team, merely their jaunty steps outside, many of them carrying the rescued children—that, he decided, could harm or offend no one, least of all the special-operations team from England, who now had one of the *tricornio* hats from his force to go along with the eagle of Worldpark's notional VI Legion as a souvenir of their successful mission.

And so, the black-and-white video was released to CNN, Sky News, and other interested news agencies for broadcast around the world, to give substance to the commentary of various reporters who'd assembled at Worldpark's main gate, there to comment at great and

erroneous length about the expertise of the Guardia Civil's special-action team dispatched from Madrid to resolve this hateful episode at one of the world's great theme parks.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov saw it in his New York apartment, as he smoked a cigar and sipped a vodka neat while his VCR taped it for later detailed examination. The assault phase, he saw, was both expert and expected in all details. The flashes of light from the explosives used were dramatic and singularly useless for showing him anything, and the parade of the rescuers as predictable as the dawn, their springy steps, their slung weapons, and their arms full of small children. Well, such men would naturally feel elation at the successful conclusion of such a mission, and the trailing footage showed them walking off to a building, where there must have been a physician to take care of the one child who'd sustained a minor injury during the operation, as the reporters said. Then, later, the troops had come outside, and one of them had swiped an arm against the stone wall of the building, lighting a match, which he used . . .

. . . to light a pipe . . .

To light a pipe, Popov saw. He was surprised at his own reaction to that. He blinked hard, leaning forward in his seat. The camera didn't zoom in, but the soldier/policeman in question was clearly smoking a curved pipe, puffing the smoke out every few seconds as he spoke with his comrades . . . doing nothing dramatic, just talking unrecorded words calmly, as such men did after a successful mission, doubtless discussing who had done what, what had gone according to plan and what had not. It might as easily have been in a club or bar, for trained men always spoke the same way in those circumstances, whether they were soldiers or doctors or football players, after the stress of the job was concluded, and the lessons-learned phase began. It was the usual mark of professionals, Popov knew. Then the picture changed, back to the face of some American reporter who blathered on until the break for the next commercial, to be followed, the anchorman said, by some political development or other in Washington. With that, Popov rewound the tape, ejected it, and then reached for a different tape. He inserted it into the VCR, then fast-forwarded to the end of the incident in Bern, through the takedown phase and into the aftermath where . . . yes, a man had lit a pipe. He'd remembered that from watching from across the street, hadn't he?

Then he got the tape of the press coverage from the Vienna incident, and . . . yes, at the end a man had lit a pipe. In every case it was a man of about one hundred eighty centimeters in height, making much the same gesture with the match, holding the pipe in exactly the same way, gesturing to another with it in exactly the same manner,

the way men did with pipes . . .

". . . ahh, *nichevo,"* the intelligence officer said to himself in the expensive high-rise apartment. He spent another half an hour, cueing and rerunning the tapes. The clothing was the same in every case. The man the same size, the same gestures and body language, the same weapons slung the same way, the same *everything,* the former KGB officer saw. And that meant the same man . . . in three separate countries.

But this man was not Swiss, not Austrian, and not Spanish. Next Popov backed off his deductive thoughts, searching for other facts he could discern from the visual information he had there. There were other people visible in all the tapes. The pipe smoker was often attended by another man, shorter than he, to whom the pipe smoker appeared to speak with some degree of friendly deference. There was another around, a large, muscular one who in two of the tapes carried a heavy machine gun, but in the third, carrying a child, did not. So, he had two and maybe a third man on the tapes who had appeared in Bern, Vienna, and Spain. In every case, the reporters had credited the rescue to local police, but no, that wasn't the truth, was it? So, who were these people who arrived with the speed and decisiveness of a thunderbolt—in *three* different countries . . . twice to conclude operations that he had initiated, and once to settle one begun by others—and who they had been, he didn't know nor especially care. The reporters said that they'd demanded the release of his old friend, the Jackal. What fools. The French would as soon toss Napoleon's corpse from Les Invalides as give up that murderer. Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez, named with Lenin's own patronymic by his communist father. Popov shook that thought off. He'd just discovered something of great importance. Somewhere in Europe was a special-operations team that crossed international borders as easily as a businessman flying in an airliner, that had freedom to operate in different countries, that displaced and did the work of local police . . . and did it well, expertly . . . and this operation would not hurt them, would it? Their prestige and international acceptability would only grow from the rescue of the children at Worldpark . . .

"Nichevo," he whispered to himself again. He'd learned something of great importance this night, and to celebrate he poured himself another vodka. Now he had to follow it up. How? He'd think that one over, sleeping on the thought, trusting his trained brain to come up with something.

They were nearly home already. The MC-130 had picked them up and flown the now relaxed team back to Hereford, their weapons re-packed in the plastic carrying cases, their demeanor not the least bit

tense. Some of the men were cutting up. Others were explaining what they'd done to team members who'd not had the chance to participate directly. Mike Pierce, Clark saw, was especially animated in his conversation with his neighbor. He was now the Rainbow kill-leader. Homer Johnston was chatting with Weber—they'd come to some sort of deal, something agreed between them. Weber had taken a beautiful but out-of-policy shot to disable the terrorist's Uzi, allowing Johnston to—of course, John told himself, he didn't just want to kill the bastard who'd murdered the little girl. He'd wanted to *hurt* the little prick, to send him off to hell with a special, personal message. He'd have to talk to Sergeant Johnston about that. It was outside of Rainbow policy. It was unprofessional. Just killing the bastards was enough. You could always trust God to handle the special treatment. But—well, John told himself he could understand that, couldn't he? There had once been that little bastard called Billy to whom he'd given a very special interrogation in a recompression chamber, and though he remembered it with a measure of pain and shame, at the time he'd felt it justified . . . and he'd gotten the information he'd needed at the time, hadn't he? Even so, he'd have to talk with Homer, advise him never to do such a thing again. And Homer would listen, John knew. He'd exorcised the demons once, and once, usually, was enough. It must have been hard for him to sit at his rifle, watching the murder of a child, the power to avenge her instantly right there in his skilled hands, and yet do nothing. *Could* you *have done that, John?* Clark asked himself, not really knowing what the answer was in his current, exhausted state. He felt the wheels thump down on the Hereford runway, and the props roar into reverse pitch to slow the aircraft.

Well, John thought, his idea, his concept for Rainbow was working out rather well, wasn't it? Three deployments, three clean missions. Two hostages killed, one before his team deployed to Bern, the other just barely after their arrival in the park, neither one the result of negligence or mistake on the part of his men. Their mission performance had been as nearly perfect as anything he'd ever seen. Even his fellow animals of 3rd SOG in Vietnam hadn't been this good, and *that* was something he'd *never* expected to say or even think. The thought came suddenly, and just as unexpectedly came the near-need for tears, that he might have the honor to command such warriors as these, to send them out and bring them back as they were now, smiling as they stood, hoisting their gear on their shoulders and walking to the open rear cargo door on the Herky Bird, behind which waited their trucks. His men.

"The bar is open!" Clark called to them, when he stood.

"A little late, John," Alistair observed.

"If the door's locked, we'll have Paddy blow it," Clark insisted, with

a vicious grin.

Stanley considered that and nodded. “Quite so, the lads have earned a pint or two each.” Besides which, he knew how to pick locks.

They walked into the club still wearing their ninja suits, and found the barman waiting. There were a few others in the club as well, mainly SAS troopers sipping at their last-call pints. Several of them applauded when the Rainbow team came in, which warmed the room. John walked to the bar, leading his men and ordering beer for all.

“I do love this stuff,” Mike Pierce said a minute later, taking his Guinness and sipping through the thin layer of foam.

“Two, Mike?” Clark asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “The one at the desk, he was on the phone. Tap-tap,” Pierce said, touching two fingers to the side of his head. “Then another one, shooting from behind a desk. I jumped over and gave him three on the fly. Landed, rolled, and three more in the back of the head. So long, Charlie. Then one more, got a piece of him, along with Ding and Eddie. Ain’t supposed to like this part of the job. I know that—but, Jesus, it felt good to take those fuckers down. Killin’ kids, man. Not good. Well, they ain’t gonna be doing any more of that, sir. Not with the new sheriff in town.”

“Well, nice going, Mr. Marshal,” John replied, with a raised-glass salute. There’d be no nightmares about this one, Clark thought, sipping his own dark beer. He looked around. In the corner, Weber and Johnston were talking, the latter with his hand on the former’s shoulder, doubtless thanking him for the fine shot to disable the murderer’s Uzi. Clark walked over and stood next to the two sergeants.

“I know, boss,” Homer said, without being told anything. “Never again, but goddamn, it felt good.”

“Like you said, never again, Homer.”

“Yes, sir. Slapped the trigger a little hard,” Johnston said, to cover his ass in an official sense.

“Bullshit,” Rainbow Six observed. “I’ll accept it—just this once. And you, Dieter, nice shot, but—”

“Nie wieder. Herr General. I know, sir.” The German nodded his submission to the moment. “Homer, *Junge,* the look on his face when you hit him. *Ach,* that was something to see, my friend. Good for the one on the castle roof, too.”

“Easy shot,” Johnston said dismissively. “He was standing still. Zap. Easier ’n throwing darts, pal.”

Clark patted both on the shoulder and wandered over to Chavez and Price.

“Did you have to land on my arm?” Ding complained lightly.

“So, next time, come through the window straight, not at an angle.”

"Right." Chavez took a long sip of the Guinness.

"How'd it go?" John asked them.

"Aside from being hit twice, not bad," Chavez replied. "I have to get a new vest, though." Once hit, the vests were considered to be ruined for further use. This one would go back to the manufacturer for study to see how it had performed. "Which one was that, you think, Eddie?"

"The last one, I think, the one who just stood and sprayed at the children."

"Well, that was the plan, for us to stop those rounds, and that one went down hard. You, me, Mike, and Oso, I think, took him apart." Whatever cop had recovered that body would need a blotter and a freezer bag to collect the spilled brains.

"That we did," Price agreed as Julio came over.

"Hey, that was okay, guys!" First Sergeant Vega told them, pleased to have finally participated in a field operation.

"Since when do we punch our targets?" Chavez asked.

Vega looked a little embarrassed. "Instinct, he was so close. You know, probably could have taken him alive, but—well, nobody ever told me to do that, y'know?"

"That's cool, Oso. That wasn't part of the mission, not with a room full of kids."

Vega nodded. "What I figured, and the shot was pretty automatic, too, just playin' like we practice, man. Anyway, that one went down real good, *jefe."*

"Any problem on the window?" Price wanted to know.

Vega shook his head. "Nah, gave it a good kick, and it moved just fine. Bumped a shoulder coming through the frame, but no problems there. I was pretty pumped. But you know, you shoulda had me cover the kids. I'm bigger, I woulda stopped more bullets."

Chavez didn't say that he'd worried about Vega's agility—wrongly, as it had turned out. An important lesson learned. Bulky as Oso was, he moved lightly on his feet, far more so than Ding had expected. The bear could dance pretty well, though at 225 pounds, he was a little large for a tutu.

"Fine operation," Bill Tawney said, joining the group.

"Anything develop?"

"We have a possible identification on one of them, the chap who killed the child. The French ran the photo through some police informants, and they think it might be an Andre Herr, Parisian by birth, thought to be a stringer for Action Directe once upon a time, but nothing definite. More information is on the way, they say. The whole set of photos and fingerprints from Spain is on its way to Paris now for follow-up investigation. Not all of the photos will be very useful, I am told."

"Yeah, well, a burst of hollowpoints will rearrange a guy's face, man," Chavez observed with a chuckle. "Not a hell of a lot we can do about that."

"So, who initiated the operation?" Clark asked.

Tawney shrugged. "Not a clue at this point. That's for the French police to investigate."

"Would be nice to know. We've had three incidents since we got here. Isn't that a lot?" Chavez asked, suddenly very serious.

"It is," the intelligence officer agreed. "It would not have been ten or fifteen years ago, but things had quieted down recently." Another shrug. "Could be mere coincidence, or perhaps copycatting, but—"

"Copycat? I shouldn't think so, sir," Eddie Price observed. "We've given bloody little encouragement to any terr' who has ambitions, and today's operation ought to have a further calming effect on those people."

"That makes sense to me," Ding agreed. "Like Mike Pierce said, there's a new sheriff in town, and the word on the street ought to be 'don't fuck with him' even if people think we're just local cops with an attitude. Take it a step further, Mr. C."

"Go public?" Clark shook his head. "That's never been part of the plan, Domingo."

"Well, if the mission's to take the bastards down in the field, that's one thing. If the mission is to make these bastards think twice about raising hell—to stop terrorist incidents from happening at all—then it's another thing entirely. The idea of a new sheriff in town might just take the starch out of their backs and put them back to washing cars, or whatever the hell they do when they're not being bad. Deterrence, we call it, when nation-states do it. Will it work on a terrorist mentality? Something to talk with Doc Bellow about, John," Chavez concluded.

And again Chavez had surprised him, Clark realized. Three straight successes, all of them covered on the TV news, might well have an effect on the surviving terrorists in Europe or elsewhere with lingering ambitions, mightn't it? And that *was* something to talk to Paul Bellow about. But it was much too soon for anyone on the team to be that optimistic . . . probably, John told himself with a thoughtful sip. The party was just beginning to break up. It had been a very long day for the Rainbow troopers, and one by one they set their glasses down on the bar, which ought to have closed some time before, and headed for the door for the walk to their homes. Another day and another mission had ended. Yet another day had already begun, and in only a few hours, they'd be awakened to run and exercise and begin another day of routine training.

“Were you planning to leave us?” the jailer asked Inmate Sanchez in a voice dripping with irony.

“What do you mean?” Carlos responded.

“Some colleagues of yours misbehaved yesterday,” the prison guard responded, tossing a copy of *Le Figaro* through the door. “They will not do so again.”

The photo on the front page was taken off the Worldpark video, the quality miserably poor, but clear enough to show a soldier dressed in black carrying a child, and the first paragraph of the story told the tale. Carlos scanned it, sitting on his prison bed to read the piece in detail, then felt a depth of black despair that he’d not thought possible. Someone had heard his plea, he realized, and it had come to nothing. Life in this stone cage beckoned as he looked up to the sun coming in the single window. Life. It would be a long one, probably a healthy one, and certainly a bleak one. His hands crumpled the paper when he’d finished the article. Damn the Spanish police. Damn the world.

“Yes, I saw it on the news last night,” he said into the phone as he shaved.

“I need to see you. I have something to show you, sir,” Popov’s voice said, just after seven in the morning.

The man thought about that. Popov was a clever bastard who’d done his jobs without much in the way of questions . . . and there was little in the way of a paper trail, certainly nothing his lawyers couldn’t handle if it came to that, and it wouldn’t. There were ways of dealing with Popov, too, if it came to that.

“Okay, be there at eight-fifteen.”

“Yes, sir,” the Russian said, hanging up.

Pete was in real agony now, Killgore saw. It was time to move him. This he ordered at once, and two orderlies came in dressed in upgraded protective gear to load the wino onto a gurney for transport to the clinical side. Killgore followed them and his patient. The clinical side was essentially a duplication of the room in which the street bums had lounged and drunk their booze, waiting unknowingly for the onset of symptoms. He now had them all, to the point that booze and moderate doses of morphine no longer handled the pain. The orderlies loaded Pete onto a bed, next to which was an electronically operated “Christmas tree” medication dispenser. Killgore handled the stick, and got the IV plugged into Pete’s major vein. Then he keyed the electronic box, and seconds later, the patient relaxed with a large bolus of medication. The eyes went sleepy and the body relaxed while the Shiva continued to eat him alive from the

inside out. Another IV would be set up to feed him with nutrients to keep his body going, along with various drugs to see if any of them had an unexpectedly beneficial effect on the Shiva. They had a whole roomful of such drugs, ranging from antibiotics—which were expected to be useless against this viral infection—to Interleukin-2 and a newly developed -3a, which, some thought, might help, plus tailored Shiva antibodies taken from experimental animals. None were expected to work, but all had to be tested to make sure they didn't, lest there be a surprise out there when the epidemic spread. Vaccine-B was expected to work, and that was being tested now with the new control group of people kidnapped from Manhattan bars, along with the notional Vaccine-A, whose purpose was rather different from -B. The nanocapsules developed on the other side of the house would come in very handy indeed.

As was being demonstrated even as he had the thought, looking down at Pete's dying body. Subject F4, Mary Bannister, felt sick to her stomach, just a mild queasiness at this point, but didn't think much of it. That sort of thing happened, and she didn't feel all that bad, some antacids would probably help, and those she got from her medicine cabinet, which was pretty well stocked with over-the-counter medications. Other than that, she felt pretty mellow, as she smiled at herself in the mirror and liked what she saw, a youngish, attractive woman wearing pink silk jammies. With that thought, she walked out of her room, her hair glossy and a spring in her step. Chip was in the sitting room, reading a magazine slowly on the couch, and she made straight for him and sat down beside him.

"Hi, Chip." She smiled.

"Hi, Mary." He smiled back, reaching to touch her hand.

"I upped the Valium in her breakfast," Barbara Archer said in the control room, zooming the camera in. "Along with the other one." The other one was an inhibition reducer.

"You look nice today," Chip told her, his words imperfectly captured by the hidden shotgun microphone.

"Thank you." Another smile.

"She looks pretty dreamy."

"She ought to be," Barbara observed coldly. "There's enough in her to make a nun shuck her habit and get it on."

"What about him?"

"Oh, yeah—didn't give him any steroids." Dr. Archer had a little chuckle at that.

In proof of which, Chip leaned over to kiss Mary on the lips. They were alone in the sitting room.

"How's her blood work look, Barb?"

"Loaded with antibodies, and starting to get some small bricks. She ought to be symptomatic in another few days."

"Eat, drink, and be merry, people, for next week, you die," the other physician told the TV screen.

"Too bad," Dr. Archer agreed. She showed the emotion one might display on seeing a dead dog at the side of the road.

"Nice figure," the man said, as the pajama tops came off. "I haven't seen an X-rated movie in a long time, Barb." A videotape was running, of course. The experimental protocol was set in stone. Everything had to be recorded so that the staff could monitor the entire test program. *Nice tits,* he thought, about the same time Chip did, right before he caressed them on the screen.

"She was fairly inhibited when she got here. The tranquilizers really work, depressing them that way." Another clinical observation. Things progressed rapidly from that point on. Both doctors sipped their coffee as they watched. Tranquilizers or not, the baser human instincts charged forward, and within five minutes Chip and Mary were humping madly away, with the usual sound effects, though the picture, blessedly, wasn't all that clear. A few minutes later, they were lying side by side on the thick shag rug, kissing tiredly and contentedly, his hand stroking her breasts, his eyes closed, his breathing deep and regular as he rolled onto his back.

"Well, Barb, if nothing else, we have a pretty good weekend getaway for couples here," the man observed with a sly grin. "How long do you figure on his blood work?"

"Three or four days until he starts showing antibodies, probably." Chip hadn't been exposed in the shower as Mary had.

"What about the vaccine testers?"

"Five with -A. We have three left as uncontaminated controls for -B testing."

"Oh? Who are we letting live?"

"M2, M3, and F9," Dr. Archer replied. "They seem to have proper attitudes. One's a member of the Sierra Club, would you believe? The others like it outdoors, and they should be okay with what we're doing."

"Political criteria for scientific tests—what *are* we coming to?" the man asked with another chuckle.

"Well, if they're going to live, they might as well be people we can get along with," Archer observed.

"True." A nod. "How confident are you with -B?"

"Very. I expect it to be about ninety-seven percent effective, perhaps a little better," she added conservatively.

"But not a hundred?"

"No, Shiva's a little too nasty for that," Archer told him. "The

animal testing is a little crude, I admit, but the results follow the computer model almost exactly, well within the testing-error criteria. Steve's been pretty good on that side."

"Berg's pretty smart," the other doctor agreed. Then he shifted in his chair. "You know, Barb, what we're doing here isn't exactly—"

"I know that," she assured him. "But we all knew that coming in."

"True." He nodded submission, annoyed at himself for the second thoughts. Well, his family would survive, and they all shared his love of the world and its many sorts of inhabitants. Still, these two people on the TV, they were *humans,* just like himself, and he'd just peeped in on them like some sort of pervert. Oh, yeah, they'd only done it because both were loaded with drugs fed to them through their food or in pill form, but they were both sentenced to death and—

"Relax, will you?" Archer said, looking at his face and reading his mind. "At least they're getting a little love, aren't they? That's a hell of a lot more than the rest of the world'll get—"

"I won't have to watch *them."* Being a voyeur wasn't his idea of fun, and he'd told himself often enough that he wouldn't have to watch what he'd be helping to start.

"No, but we'll know about it. It'll be on the TV news, won't it? But then it *will* be too late, and if *they* find out, their last conscious act will be to come after us. That's the part that has me worried."

"The Project enclave in Kansas is pretty damned secure, Barb," the man assured her. "The one in Brazil's even more so." Which was where he'd be going eventually. The rain forest had always fascinated him.

"Could be better," Barbara Archer thought.

"The world isn't a laboratory, doctor, remember?" Wasn't *that* what the whole Shiva project was about, for Christ's sake? Christ? he wondered. Well, another idea that had to be set aside. He wasn't cynical enough to invoke the name of God into what they were doing. Nature, perhaps, which wasn't *quite* the same thing, he thought.

"Good morning, Dmitriy," he said, coming into his office early.

"Good morning, sir," the intelligence officer said, rising to his feet as his employer entered the anteroom. It was a European custom, harkening back to royalty, and one that had somehow conveyed itself to the Marxist state that had nurtured and trained the Russian now living in New York.

"What do you have for me?" the boss asked, unlocking his office door and going in.

"Something very interesting," Popov said. "How important it is I am not certain. You can better judge that than I can."

"Okay, let's see it." He sat down and turned in his swivel chair to

flip on his office coffee machine.

Popov went to the far wall, and slid back the panel that covered the electronics equipment in the woodwork. He retrieved the remote control and keyed up the large-screen TV and VCR. Then he inserted a videocassette.

"This is the news coverage of Bern," he told his employer. The tape only ran for thirty seconds before he stopped it, ejected the cassette, and inserted another. "Vienna," he said then, hitting the PLAY button. Another segment, which ran less than a minute. This he also ejected. "Last night at the park in Spain." This one he also played. This segment lasted just over a minute before he stopped it.

"Yes?" the man said, when it was all over.

"What did you see, sir?"

"Some guys smoking—the same guy, you're saying?"

"Correct. In all three incidents, the same man, or so it would appear."

"Go on," his employer told Popov.

"The same special-operations group responded to and terminated all three incidents. That is very interesting."

"Why?"

Popov took a patient breath. This man may have been a genius in some areas, but in others he was a babe in the woods. "Sir, the same team responded to incidents in *three* separate countries, with *three* separate national police forces, and in all *three* cases, this special team took over from those *three* separate national police agencies and dealt with the situation. In other words, there is now some special internationally credited team of special-operations troops—I would expect them to be military rather than policemen—currently operating in Europe. Such a group has never been admitted to in the open press. It is, therefore, a 'black' group, highly secret. I can speculate that it is a NATO team of some sort, but that is only speculation. Now," Popov went on, "I have some questions for you."

"Okay." The boss nodded.

"Did you know of this team? Did you know they existed?"

A shake of the head. "No." Then he turned to pour a cup of coffee.

"Is it possible for you to find out some things about them?"

A shrug. "Maybe. Why is it important?"

"That depends on another question—why are you paying me to incite terrorists to do things?" Popov asked.

"You do not have a need to know that, Dmitriy."

"Yes, sir, I do have such a need. One cannot stage operations against sophisticated opposition without having some idea of the overall objective. It simply cannot be done, sir. Moreover, you have applied significant assets to these operations. There must be a point. I need to

know what it is." The unspoken part, which got through the words, was that he wanted to know, and in due course, he might well figure it out, whether he was told or not.

It also occurred to his employer that his existence was somewhat in pawn to this Russian ex-spook. He could deny everything the man might say in an open public forum, and he even had the ability to make the man disappear, an option less attractive than it appeared outside of a movie script, since Popov might well have told others, or even left a written record.

The bank accounts from which Popov had drawn the funds he'd distributed were thoroughly laundered, of course, but there *was* a trail of sorts that a very clever and thorough investigator *might* be able to trace back closely enough to him to cause some minor concern. The problem with electronic banking was that there was always a trail of electrons, and bank records were both time-stamped and amount-specific, enough to make some connection appear to exist. That could be an embarrassment of large or small order. Worse, it wasn't something he could easily afford, but a hindrance to the larger mission now under way in places as diverse as New York, Kansas, and Brazil. And Australia, of course, which was the whole point of what he was doing.

"Dmitriy, will you let me think about that?"

"Yes, sir. Of course. I merely say that if you want me to do my job effectively, I need to know more. Surely you have other people in your confidence. Show these tapes to those people and see if they think the information is significant." Popov stood. "Call me when you need me, sir."

"Thanks for the information." He waited for the door to close, then dialed a number from memory. The phone rang four times before it was answered:

"Hi," a voice said in the earpiece. "You've reached the home of Bill Henriksen. Sorry, I can't make it to the phone right now. Why don't you try my office."

"Damn," the executive said. Then he had an idea, and picked up the remote for his TV. CBS, no, NBC, no . . .

"But to kill a sick child," the host said on ABC's *Good Morning, America.*

"Charlie, a long time ago, a guy named Lenin said that the purpose of terrorism was to terrorize. That's who they are, and that's what they do. It's still a dangerous world out there, maybe even more so today that there are no nation-states who, though they used to support terrorists, actually imposed some restraints on their behavior. Those restraints are gone now," Henriksen said. "This group reportedly wanted their old friend Carlos the Jackal released from prison. Well, it

didn't work, but it's worth noting that they cared enough to try a classic terrorist mission, to secure the release of one of their own. Fortunately, the mission failed, thanks to the Spanish police."

"How would you evaluate the police performance?"

"Pretty good. They all train out of the same playbook, of course, and the best of them cross-train at Fort Bragg or at Hereford in England, and other places, Germany and Israel, for example."

"But one hostage was murdered."

"Charlie, you can't stop them all," the expert said sadly. "You can be ten feet away with a loaded weapon in your hands, and sometimes you can't take action, because to do so would only get more hostages killed. I'm as sickened by that murder as you are, my friend, but these people won't be doing any more of that."

"Well, thanks for coming in. Bill Henriksen, president of Global Security and a consultant to ABC on terrorism. It's forty-six minutes after the hour." Cut to commercial.

In his desk he had Bill's beeper number. This he called, keying in his private line. Four minutes later, the phone rang.

"Yeah, John, what is it?" There was street noise on the cellular phone. Henriksen must have been outside the ABC studio, just off Central Park West, probably walking to his car.

"Bill, I need to see you in my office ASAP. Can you come right down?"

"Sure. Give me twenty minutes."

Henriksen had a clicker to get into the building's garage, and access to one of the reserved spaces. He walked into the office eighteen minutes after the call.

"What gives?"

"Caught you on TV this morning."

"They always call me in on this stuff," Henriksen said. "Great job taking the bastards down, least from what the TV footage showed. I'll get the rest of it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I have the right contacts. The video they released was edited down quite a bit. My people'll get all the tapes from the Spanish—it isn't classified in any way—for analysis."

"Watch this," John told him, flipping his office TV to the VCR and running the released tape of Worldpark. Then he had to rise and switch to the cassette of Vienna. Thirty seconds of that and then Bern. "So, what do you think?"

"The same team on all three?" Henriksen wondered aloud. "Sure does look like it—but who the hell are they?"

"You know who Popov is, right?"

Bill nodded. "Yeah, the KGB guy you found. Is he the guy who

twigged to this?"

"Yep." A nod. "Less than an hour ago, he was in here to show me these tapes. It worries him. Does it worry you?"

The former FBI agent grimaced. "Not sure. I'd want to know more about them first."

"Can you find out?"

This time he shrugged. "I can talk to some contacts, rattle a few bushes. Thing is, if there is a really black special-ops team out there, I should have known about it already. I mean, I've got the contacts throughout the business. What about you?"

"I can probably try a few things, quietly. Probably mask it as plain curiosity."

"Okay, I can check around. What else did Popov say to you?"

"He wants to know why I'm having him do the things."

"That's the problem with spooks. They like to know things. I mean, he's thinking, what if he starts a mission and one of the subjects gets taken alive. Very often they sing like fucking canaries once they're in custody, John. If one fingers him, he could be in the shitter. Unlikely, I admit, but possible, and spooks are trained to be cautious."

"What if we have to take him out?"

Another grimace. "You want to be careful doing that, in case he's left a package with a friend somewhere. No telling if he has, but I'd have to assume he's done it. Like I said, they're trained to be cautious. This operation is not without its dangers, John. We knew that going in. How close are we to having the technical—"

"Very close. The test program is moving along nicely. Another month or so and we'll know all we need to know."

"Well, all I have to do is get the contract for Sydney. I'm flying down tomorrow. These incidents won't hurt."

"Who will you be working with?"

"The Aussies have their own SAS. It's supposed to be small—pretty well-trained, but short on the newest hardware. That's the hook I plan to use. I got what they need, at cost," Henriksen emphasized. "Run that tape again, the one of the Spanish job," he said.

John rose from his desk, inserted the tape, and rewound it back to the beginning of the released TV coverage. It showed the assault team zip-lining down from the helicopter.

"Shit, I missed that!" the expert admitted.

"What?"

"We need to have the tape enhanced, but that doesn't look like a police chopper. It's a Sikorsky H-60."

"So?"

"So, the -60 has never been certified for civilian use. See how it's got POLICE painted on the side? That's a civilian application. It isn't a

police chopper, John. It's military . . . and if this is a refueling probe," he said, pointing, "then it's a special-ops bird. *That* means U.S. Air Force, man. That also tells us where these people are based—"

"Where?"

"England. The Air Force has a special-ops wing based in Europe, part in Germany, part in England . . . MH-60K, I think the designation of the chopper is, made for combat search-and-rescue and getting people into special places to do special things. Hey, your friend Popov is right. There *is* a special bunch of people handling these things, and they've got American support at least, maybe a lot more. Thing is, who the hell are they?"

"It's important?"

"Potentially, yes. What if the Aussies call them in to help out on the job I'm trying to get, John? That could screw up the whole thing."

"You rattle your bushes. I'll rattle mine."

"Right."

CHAPTER 17

BUSHES

Pete now had six friends in the treatment center. Only two of the subjects felt well enough now to remain in the open bay with the TV cartoons and the whiskey, and Killgore figured they'd be in here by the end of the week, so full was their blood with Shiva antibodies. It was odd how the disease attacked different people in such different ways, but everyone had a different immune system. That was why some people got cancer, and others did not despite smoking and other methods of self-abuse.

Aside from that, it was going easier than he'd expected. He supposed it was due to the high doses of morphine that had all of them pretty well zonked out. It was a relatively new discovery in medicine that there really wasn't a maximum safe dosage of painkillers. If the patient still felt pain, you could give more until it went away. Dose levels that would cause respiratory arrest in healthy people were perfectly safe for those in great pain, and that made his job far easier. Every drug-dispensing machine had a button the subjects could hit if they needed it, and so they were medicating themselves into peaceful oblivion, which also made things safer for the staffs, who didn't have to do all that many sticks. They hung nutrients on the trees, checked to make sure the IVs were secure, and avoided touching the subjects as much as possible. Later today, they'd all get injected with Vaccine-B, which was supposed to safeguard them against Shiva with a high degree of reliability—Steve Berg said 98 to 99 percent. They all knew that wasn't the same as 100 percent, though, and so the protective measures would be continued.

Agreeably, there was little sympathy for the subjects. Picking winos off the street had been a good call. The next set of test subjects would appear more sympathetic, but everyone in this side of the building had been fully briefed. Much of what they did might be distasteful, but it would still be done.

• • •

“You know, sometimes I think the Earth First people are right,” Kevin Mayflower said in the Palm restaurant.

“Oh? How so?” Carol Brightling asked.

The president of the Sierra Club looked into his wine. “We destroy everything we touch. The shores, the tidal wetlands, the forests—look at what ‘civilization’ has done to them all. Oh, sure, we preserve some areas—and that’s what? A hot three percent, maybe? Big fucking deal. We’re poisoning everything, including ourselves. The ozone problem is really getting worse, according to the new NASA study.”

“Yeah, but did you hear about the proposed fix?” the President’s science advisor asked.

“Fix? How?”

She grimaced. “Well, you get a bunch of jumbo jets, fill them up with ozone, fly them out of Australia, and release ozone at high altitude to patch it up. I have that proposal on my desk right now.”

“And?”

“And it’s like doing abortions at half-time in a football game, with instant replay and color commentary. No way it can possibly work. We have to let the planet heal herself—but we won’t, of course.”

“Any more good news?”

“Oh, yeah, the CO_2 issue. There’s a guy up at Harvard who says if we dump iron filings into the Indian Ocean, we can encourage the growth of phytoplankton, and that will fix the CO_2 problem almost overnight. The math looks pretty good. All these geniuses who say they can fix the planet, like she needs fixing—instead of leaving her the hell alone.”

“And the President says what?” Mayflower asked.

“He says for me to tell him if it’ll work or not, and if it looks like it’s going to work, then test it to make sure, then try it for real. He hasn’t got a clue, and he doesn’t listen.” She didn’t add that she had to follow his orders whether she liked them or not.

“Well, maybe our friends at Earth First are right, Carol. Maybe we are a parasitic species on the face of the earth, and maybe we’re going to destroy the whole damned planet before we’re done.”

“Rachel Carson come to life, eh?” she asked.

“Look, you know the science as well as I do—maybe better. We’re doing things like—like the Alvarez Event that took the dinosaurs out, except we’re doing it willfully. It took how long for the planet to recover from that?”

“Alvarez? The planet *didn’t* recover, Kevin,” Carol Brightling pointed out. “It jump-started mammals—*us,* remember? The preexisting ecological order never returned. Something new happened, and that took a couple of million years just to stabilize.” Must have been something to see, she told herself. To watch something like that

in progress, what a scientific and personal blessing it must have been, but there'd probably been nobody back then to appreciate it. Unlike today.

"Well, in a few more years we'll get to see the first part of it, won't we? How many more species will we kill off this year, and if the ozone situation keeps getting worse—my God, Carol, why don't people get it? Don't they *see* what's happening? Don't they *care?"*

"Kevin, no, they don't see, and, no, they don't care. Look around." The restaurant was filled with important people wearing important-looking clothes, doubtless discussing important things over their important dinners, none of which had a thing to do with the planetary crisis that hung quite literally over all their heads. If the ozone layer really evaporated, as it might, well, they'd start using sunblock just to walk the streets, and maybe that would protect them enough . . . but what of the natural species, the birds, the lizards, all the creatures on the planet who had no such option? The studies suggested that their eyes would be seared by the unblocked ultraviolet radiation, which would kill them off, and so the entire global ecosystem would rapidly come apart. "Do you think any of these people know about it—or give a damn if they do?"

"I suppose not." He sipped down some more of his white wine. "Well, we keep plugging away, don't we?"

"It's funny," she went on. "Not too long ago we fought wars, which kept the population down enough that we couldn't damage the planet all that much—but now peace is breaking out all over, and we're advancing our industrial capacity, and so, peace is destroying us a lot more efficiently than war ever did. Ironic, isn't it?"

"And modern medicine. The anopheles mosquito was pretty good at keeping the numbers down—you know that Washington was once a malarial swamp, diplomats deemed it a hazardous-duty post! So then we invented DDT. Good for controlling mosquitoes, but tough on the peregrine falcon. We never get it right. Never," Mayflower concluded.

"What if? . . ." she asked wistfully.

"What if what, Carol?"

"What if nature came up with something to knock the human population back?"

"The Gaea Hypothesis?" That made him smile. The idea was that the earth was itself a thinking, self-correcting organism that found ways to regulate the numerous living species that populated the planet. "Even if that's valid—and I hope it is, really—I'm afraid that we humans move too fast for Gaea to deal with us and our work. No, Carol, we've created a suicide pact, and we're going to take down everything else with us, and a hundred years from now, when the human population worldwide is down to a million or so people, they'll

know what went wrong and read the books and look at the videotapes of the paradise we once had, and they'll curse our names—and maybe, if they're lucky, they'll learn from it when they crawl back up from the slime. Maybe. I doubt it. Even if they try to learn, they'll worry more about building nuclear-power reactors so they can use their electric toothbrushes. Rachel was right. There will be a Silent Spring someday, but then it'll be too late." He picked at his salad, wondering what chemicals were in the lettuce and tomatoes. Some, he was sure. This time of year, the lettuce came up from Mexico, where farmers did all sorts of things to their crops, and maybe the kitchen help had washed it off, but maybe not, and so here he was, eating an expensive lunch and poisoning himself as surely as he was watching the whole planet being poisoned. His quietly despairing look told the tale.

He was ready to be recruited, Carol Brightling thought. It was time. And he'd bring some good people with him, and they'd have room for them in Kansas and Brazil. Half an hour later, she took her leave, and headed back to the White House for the weekly cabinet meeting.

"Hey, Bill," Gus said from his office in the Hoover Building. "What's happening?"

"Catch the TV this morning?" Henriksen asked.

"You mean the thing in Spain?" Werner asked.

"Yep."

"Sure did. I saw you on the tube, too."

"My genius act." He chuckled. "Well, it's good for business, you know?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. Anyway, what about it?"

"That wasn't the Spanish cops, Gus. I know how they train. Not their style, man. So, who was it, Delta, SAS, HRT?"

Gus Werner's eyes narrowed. Now Assistant Director of the FBI, he'd once been the special agent in charge of the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team. Promoted out, he'd been Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta field division, and now was the AD in charge of the new Terrorism Division. Bill Henriksen had once worked for him, then left the Bureau to start his own consulting company, but once FBI always FBI, and so now, Bill was fishing for information.

"I really can't talk much about that one, buddy."

"Oh?"

"Oh? Yes. Can't discuss," Werner said tersely.

"Classification issues?"

"Something like that," Werner allowed.

A chuckle: "Well, that tells me something, eh?"

"No, Bill, it doesn't tell you anything at all. Hey, man, I can't break the rules, you know."

"You always were a straight shooter," Henriksen agreed. "Well, whoever they are, glad they're on our side. The takedown looked pretty good on TV."

"That it did." Werner had the complete set of tapes, transmitted via encrypted satellite channel from the U.S. Embassy in Madrid to the National Security Agency, and from there to FBI headquarters. He'd seen the whole thing, and expected to have more data that afternoon.

"Tell them one thing, though, if you get a chance."

"What's that, Bill?" was the noncommittal response.

"If they want to look like the local cops, they ought not use a USAF helicopter. I'm not stupid, Gus. The reporters might not catch it, but it was pretty obvious to somebody with half a brain, wasn't it?"

Oops, Werner thought. He'd actually allowed that one to slip through his mental cracks, but Bill had never been a dummy, and he wondered how the news media had failed to notice it.

"Oh?"

"Don't give me that, Gus. It was a Sikorsky Model 60 chopper. We used to play with them when we went down to Fort Bragg to play, remember? We liked it better than the Hueys they issued us, but it ain't civilian-certified, and so they wouldn't let you buy one," he reminded his former boss.

"I'll pass that one along," Werner promised. "Anybody else catch on to that?"

"Not that I know of, and I didn't say anything about it on ABC this morning, did I?"

"No, you didn't. Thanks."

"So, can you tell me anything about these folks?"

"Sorry, man, but no. It's codeword stuff, and truth is," Werner lied, "I don't know all that much myself." *Bullshit,* he almost heard over the phone line. It was weak. If there were a special counterterror group, and if America had a piece of it, sure as hell the top FBI expert in the field would have to know something about it. Henriksen would know that without being told. But, damn it, rules were rules, and there was no way a private contractor would be let into the classification compartment called Rainbow, and Bill knew what the rules were, too.

"Yeah, Gus, sure," came the mocking reply. "Anyway, they're pretty good, but Spanish isn't their primary language, and they have access to American aircraft. Tell them they ought to be a little more careful."

"I'll do that," Werner promised, making a note.

"Black project," Henriksen told himself, after hanging up. "I wonder where the funding comes from? . . ." Whoever those people were, they had FBI connections, in addition to DOD. What else could he figure? How about where they were based? . . . To do that . . . yes, it was possible, wasn't it? All he needed was a start time for the three

incidents, then figure when it was the cowboys showed up, and from that he could make a pretty good guess as to their point of origin. Airliners traveled at about five hundred knots, and that made the travel distance . . .

. . . *has to be England,* Henriksen decided. It was the only location that made sense. The Brits had all the infrastructure in place, and security at Hereford was pretty good—he'd been there and trained with the SAS while part of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, working for Gus. Okay, he'd confirm it from written records on the Bern and Vienna incidents. His staff covered all counterterror operations as a normal part of doing business . . . and he could call contacts in Switzerland and Austria to find out a few things. That ought not to be hard. He checked his watch. Better to call right away, since they were six hours ahead. He flipped through his rolodex and placed a call on his private line.

Black project, eh? he asked himself. He'd see about that.

The cabinet meeting ended early. The President's congressional agenda was moving along nicely, which made things easy for everyone. They'd taken just two votes—actually, mere polls of the cabinet members, since the President had the only real vote, as he'd made clear a few times, Carol reminded herself. The meeting broke up, and people headed out of the building.

"Hi, George," Dr. Brightling greeted the Secretary of the Treasury.

"Hey, Carol, the trees hugging back yet?" he asked with a smile.

"Always," she laughed in reply to this ignorant plutocrat. "Catch the TV this morning?"

"What about?"

"The thing in Spain—"

"Oh, yeah, Worldpark. What about it?"

"Who were those masked men?"

"Carol, if you have to ask, then you're not cleared into it."

"I don't want their phone number, George," she replied, allowing him to hold open the door for her. "And I *am* cleared for just about everything, remember?"

SecTreas had to admit that this was true. The President's Science Advisor was cleared into all manner of classified programs, including weapons, nuclear and otherwise, and she oversaw the crown jewel secrets of communications security as a routine part of her duties. She really was entitled to know about this if she asked. He just wished she hadn't asked. Too many people knew about Rainbow as it was. He sighed.

"We set it up a few months ago. It's black, okay? Special operations group, multinational, works out of someplace in England, mainly

Americans and Brits, but others, too. The idea came from an Agency guy the Boss likes—and so far they seem to be batting a thousand, don't they?"

"Well, rescuing those kids was something special. I hope they get a pat on the head for it."

A chuckle. "Depend on it. The Boss sent off his own message this morning."

"What's it called?"

"Sure you want to know?" George asked.

"What's in a name?"

"True." SecTreas nodded. "It's called Rainbow. Because of the multinational nature."

"Well, whoever they are, they scored some points last night. You know, I really ought to get briefed in on stuff like this. I *can* help, you know," she pointed out.

"So, tell the Boss you want in."

"I'm kinda on his shit list now, remember?"

"Yeah, so dial back on your environmental stuff, will you? Hell, we all like green grass and tweety birds. But we can't have Tweety Bird telling us how to run the country, can we?"

"George, these really are important scientific issues I have to deal with," Carol Brightling pointed out.

"You say so, doc. But if you dial the rhetoric back some, maybe people will listen a little better. Just a helpful hint," the Secretary of the Treasury suggested, as he opened his car door for the two-block ride back to his department.

"Thanks, George, I'll think about it," she promised. He waved at her as his driver pulled off.

"Rainbow," Brightling said to herself as she walked across West Executive Drive. Was it worth taking it a step further? The funny part about dealing with classification issues was that if you were inside, then you were inside. . . . Reaching her office, she inserted the plastic key into her STU-4 secure telephone and dialed up CIA on the Director's private line.

"Yeah?" a male voice answered.

"Ed, this is Carol Brightling."

"Hi. How'd the cabinet meeting go?"

"Smooth, like always. I have a question for you."

"What's that, Carol?" the DCI asked.

"It's about Rainbow. That was some operation they ran in Spain last night."

"Are you in on that?" Ed asked.

"How else would I know the name, Ed? I know one of your people set it up. Can't remember the name, the guy the President likes so

much."

"Yeah, John Clark. He was my training officer once, long time ago. Solid citizen. He's been there and done that even more than Mary Pat and I have. Anyway, what's your interest?"

"The new tactical-radio encryption systems NSA is playing with. Do they have it yet?"

"I don't know," the DCI admitted. "Are they ready for prime time yet?"

"Should be in another month. E-Systems will be the manufacturer, and I thought they ought to be fast-tracked into Rainbow. I mean, they're out there at the sharp end. They ought to get it first."

On the other end of the line, the Director of Central Intelligence reminded himself that he should pay more attention to the work done at the National Security Agency. He'd allowed himself to forget, moreover, that Brightling had the "black card" clearance that admitted her into that Holy of Holies at Fort Meade.

"Not a bad idea. Who do I talk to about that?"

"Admiral McConnell, I suppose. It's his agency. Anyway, just a friendly suggestion. If this Rainbow team is so hot, they ought to have the best toys."

"Okay, I'll look into it. Thanks, Carol."

"Anytime, Ed, and maybe get me fully briefed into the program someday, eh?"

"Yeah, I can do that. I can send a guy down to get you the information you need."

"Okay, whenever it's convenient. See you."

"Bye, Carol." The secure line was broken. Carol smiled at the phone. Ed would never question her about the issue, would he? She'd known the name, said nice things about the team, and offered to help, just like a loyal bureaucrat should. And she even had the name of the team leader now. John Clark. Ed's own training officer, once upon a time. It was so easy to get the information you needed if you spoke the right language. Well, that's why she'd gone after this job, frustrations and all.

One of his people did the math and estimated the travel times, and the answer came up England, just as he'd suspected. The triangle of time for both Bern and Vienna both apexed at London, or somewhere close to it. That made sense, Henriksen told himself. British Airways went everywhere, and it had always had a cordial relationship with the British government. So, whoever it was, the group had to be based . . . Hereford, almost certainly there. It was probably multinational . . . that would make it more politically acceptable to other countries. So, it would be American and British, maybe other nationalities as well,

with access to American hardware like that Sikorsky helicopter. Gus Werner knew about it—might it have some FBI people in the team? Probably, Henriksen thought. The Hostage Rescue Team was essentially a police organization, but since its mission was counterterrorism, it practiced and played with other such organizations around the world, even though those were mainly military. The mission was pretty much the same, and therefore the people on the mission were fairly interchangeable—and the FBI HRT members were as good as anyone else in the world. So probably, someone from HRT, perhaps even someone he knew, was on the team. It would have been useful to find out who, but for now, that was too much of a stretch.

The important thing at the moment was that this national counterterror outfit was a potential danger. What if they deployed to Melbourne? Would that hurt anything? It surely wouldn't help, especially if there was an FBI agent on the team. He'd spent fifteen years in the Bureau, and Henriksen was under no illusions about those men and women. They had eyes that could see and brains that could think, and they looked into everything. And so, his strategy to raise the world's consciousness of the terrorist threat, and so help himself get the Melbourne job, might have gone an unplanned step further. Damn. But the Law of Unintended Consequences could hit anyone, couldn't it? That's why he was in the loop, because it was his job to deal with the unintended things. And so here he was, still in the intelligence-gathering mode. He needed to learn more. The really bad news was that he had to fly off to Australia in less than a day, and would himself be unable to do any more gathering. Well. He'd have dinner tonight with his boss to pass along what he knew, and maybe that ex-KGB guy on the payroll could take it a little further. Damned sure he'd performed pretty well to this point. A pipe smoker. It never ceased to amaze Henriksen how such little things could break open a case. You just had to keep your head up and eyes open.

"The Interleukin isn't doing anything," John Killgore said, looking away from the monitor. The screen of the electron microscope was clear. The Shiva strands were reproducing merrily away, devouring healthy tissue in the process.

"So?" Dr. Archer asked.

"So, that's the only treatment option I was worried about: -3a is an exciting new development, but Shiva just laughs at it and moves on. This is one scary little mother of a bug, Barb."

"And the subjects?"

"I was just in there. Pete's a goner, so are the rest. The Shiva's eating them up. They all have major internal bleeds, and nothing is

stopping the tissue breakdown. I've tried everything in the book. These poor bastards wouldn't be getting better treatment at Hopkins, Harvard, or the Mayo Clinic, and they're all going to die. Now," he allowed, "there will be some whose immune systems can deal with it, but that's going to be pretty damned rare."

"How rare?" she asked the epidemiologist.

"Less than one in a thousand, probably, maybe one in ten thousand. Even the pneumonic variant of plague doesn't kill everybody," he reminded her. That was about the most lethal disease on the planet, and allowed only one in ten thousand to survive. Some people, she knew, had immune systems that killed everything that didn't belong. Those were the ones who lived to a hundred years of age or so. It had nothing to do with smoking, not smoking, having a drink in the morning, or any of the other rubbish they published in the papers as the secret of living forever. It was all in the genes. Some were better than others. It was that simple.

"Well, that's not really something to worry about, is it?"

"World population is between five and six billion now. That's a little more than five times ten to the ninth people, subtract four orders from that and you have something on the order of five times ten to the fifth survivors. Figure a few hundred thousand who might not like us very much."

"Spread all over the world," Barbara told him. "Not organized, needing leadership and scientific knowledge to help them survive. How will they even connect? The only eight hundred people surviving in New York? And what about the diseases that come with all those deaths? The best immune system in the world can't protect you against them."

"True," Killgore conceded. Then he smiled. "We're even improving the breed, aren't we?"

Dr. Archer saw the humor of that. "Yes, John, we are. So, Vaccine-B is ready?"

He nodded. "Yes, I had my injection a few hours ago. Ready for yours?"

"And -A?"

"In the freezer, ready for mass production as soon as people need it. We'll be able to turn it out in thousand-liter lots per week when we have to. Enough to cover the planet," he told her. "Steve Berg and I worked that out yesterday."

"Can anybody else—"

"No way. Not even Merck can move that fast—and even if they did, they'd have to use our formula, wouldn't they?"

That was the ultimate hook. If the plan to spread Shiva around the globe didn't work as well as hoped, then the entire world would be

given Vaccine-A, which Antigen Laboratories, a division of The Horizon Corp., just happened to be working on as part of its corporate effort to help the Third World, where all the hemorrhagic fevers lived. A fortunate accident, albeit one already known in the medical literature. Both John Killgore and Steve Berg had published papers on these diseases, which had been made quite high-profile by the big scare America and the world had gone through not so long before. So, the medical world knew that Horizon/Antigen was working in this area, and wouldn't be surprised to learn that there was a vaccine in the works. They'd even test the vaccines in laboratories and find that, sure enough, the liquid had all manner of antibodies. But they'd be the wrong antibodies, and the live-virus vaccine would be a death sentence to anyone who had it enter his system. The time from injection to onset of frank symptoms was programmed at four to six weeks, and, again, the only survivors would be those lucky souls from the deepest end of the gene pool. One hundred such people out of a million would survive. Maybe less. Ebola-Shiva was one nasty little bastard of a bug, three years in the making, and how odd, Killgore thought, that it had been *that* easy to construct. Well, that was science for you. Gene manipulation was a new field, and those things were unpredictable. The sad part, maybe, was that the same people in the same lab were charging along a new and unexpected path—human longevity— and reportedly making real progress. Well, so much the better. An extended life to appreciate the new world that Shiva would bring about.

And the breakthroughs wouldn't stop. Many on the select list to receive Vaccine-B were scientists. Some of them wouldn't like the news, when they were told, but they'd have little choice, and being scientists, they'd soon get back to their work.

Not everyone in the Project approved. Some of the radical ones actually said that bringing physicians along was contrary to the nature of the mission—because medicine didn't allow nature to take her course. Sure, Killgore snorted to himself. Fine, they'd let those idiots have their babies in farm fields after a morning's plowing or hunter-gathering, and soon enough those ideologues would breed themselves out. He planned to study and enjoy nature, but he'd do so wearing shoes and a jacket to keep the chill out. He planned to remain an educated man, not revert to the naked ape. His mind wandered. . . . There'd be a division of labor, of course. Farmers to grow the food and tend the cattle they'd eat—or hunters to shoot the buffalo, whose meat was healthier, lower in cholesterol. The buffalo should come back pretty fast, he thought. Wheat would continue to grow wild in the Great Plains, and they'd grow fat and healthy, especially since their predators had been so ruthlessly hunted down that they'd be slower to

catch up. Domestic cattle would thrive also, but they'd ultimately be edged out by the buffalo, a much hardier breed better suited to free life. Killgore wanted to see that, see the vast herds that had once covered the West. He wanted to see Africa, too.

That meant that the Project needed airplanes and pilots. Horizon already had its own collection of G-V business jets, capable of spanning most of the world, and so they'd also need small teams of people to manage and maintain a few airports—Zambia, for instance. He wanted to see Africa wild and free. That would take perhaps ten years to come about, Killgore estimated, and it wasn't all that big a deal. AIDS was killing off that continent at a nasty pace, and Shiva would only make it go faster, and so the Dark Continent would again be free of man, and he'd be able to go there and observe nature in all her glory . . . and maybe shoot a lion to make a rug for his home in Kansas? Some of the people in the Project would raise pure fucking hell over that, but what was one lion more or less? The Project would be saving hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps millions, free to roam and hunt in their prides. What a beautiful New World it would be, once you eliminated the parasitic species that was working so hard to destroy it.

A beeper went off. He turned to look at the control panel. "It's Ernie, M5—looks like cardiac arrest," he said.

"What are you going to do?" Barbara Archer asked.

Killgore stood. "Make sure he's dead." He bent down to select a camera for the big monitor on his desk. "Here, you can watch."

Two minutes later, he appeared on the screen. An orderly was already there, but did little more than watch. She saw Killgore check the man's pulse, then check his eyes. Despite having the -B vaccine, Killgore used gloves and a mask. Well, that made sense. Then he stood back up and switched off the monitoring equipment. The orderly detached the IV lines and covered the body with a sheet. Killgore pointed to the door, and soon the orderly wheeled the gurney out, heading off for the incinerator. Killgore took the time to look at other subjects, and even appeared to speak with one before leaving the screen for good.

"I figured that," he said, returning to the control room without his protective gear. "Ernie's heart wasn't all that good, and Shiva went right after it. Wendell's going to be next, M2. Maybe tomorrow morning. Liver function's off the chart, and he's bleeding out big-time in the upper GI."

"What about the control group?"

"Mary, F4, two more days she's going to be in frank symptoms."

"So the delivery system works?" Archer asked.

"Like a charm." Killgore nodded, getting some coffee before he sat

back down. “It’s all going to work, Barb, and the computer projections look better than our requirement parameters. Six months from initiation, the world is going to be a very different place,” he promised her.

“I still worry about those six months, John. If anybody figures out what’s happened—their last conscious act will be to try and kill us all.”

“That’s why we have guns, Barb.”

“It’s called ‘Rainbow,’ ” he told them, having gotten the best information of the day. “It’s based in England. It was set up by a CIA guy named John Clark, and he’s evidently the boss of the outfit.”

“That makes sense,” said Henriksen. “Multinational, right?”

“I think so,” John Brightling confirmed.

“Yes,” Dmitriy Popov said, picking at his Caesar salad. “That is all sensible, some sort of NATO unit, I imagine, based at Hereford?”

“Correct,” said Henriksen. “By the way, nice job figuring out who they were.”

Popov shrugged. “It was simple, really. I ought to have made the guess sooner. My question now, what do you want me to do about it?”

“I think we need to learn more,” Henriksen said, with a glance at his boss. “A lot more.”

“How do you do that?” Brightling asked.

“It is not difficult,” Popov assured him. “Once you know where to look—that is most of the battle. Once you know that, you merely go there and look. And I already have one name, do I not?”

“You want to take it?” John asked the Russian.

“Certainly.” *If you pay me to do so.* “There are dangers, but—”

“What kind of dangers?”

“I once worked in England. There is the possibility that they have a photograph of me, under a different name, but I do not think that likely.”

“Can you fake the accent?” Henriksen asked.

“Most certainly, old boy,” Popov replied with a grin. “You were FBI once?”

A nod. “Yep.”

“Then you know how it is done. A week, I think.”

“Okay,” Brightling said. “Fly over tomorrow.”

“Travel documents?” Henriksen asked.

“I have several sets, all current, and all perfect,” the intelligence officer assured him.

It was nice to have a pro on the payroll, Henriksen thought to himself. “Well, I have an early flight, and I haven’t packed yet, guys. See you next week when I get back.”

“Easy on the jet lag, Bill,” John advised.
The former FBI agent laughed. “You got a drug that works on that?”

CHAPTER 18

LOOKS

Popov boarded the morning Concorde flight. He'd never flown the Concorde before, and found the interior of the aircraft cramped, though the legroom was all right. He settled into seat 4-C. Meanwhile, at another terminal, Bill Henriksen was in a first-class seat in an American DC-10 for his trip to Los Angeles.

William Henriksen, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov thought. Formerly of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, and an expert on counterterrorism, president of an international security-consulting company now headed off to Australia to seek a consulting contract for the next Olympics. . . . How did *that* factor into what Popov had been doing for John Brightling's Horizon Corporation? What, exactly, was he doing—more properly, what idea was he serving? What task? He was certainly being paid top dollar—he hadn't even raised the money issue over dinner, because he was sure he'd get whatever he asked for. He was thinking in terms of $250,000 for this job alone, even though it held few dangers, aside from driving an automobile in British traffic. $250,000? Maybe more, Popov told himself. After all, this mission seemed pretty important to them.

How did an expert on the mission side of terrorism and an expert on counterterrorism factor into the same plan? Why had they so rapidly seized on his discovery that there was a new international counterterror organization? It was important to them—but *why?* What the hell were they up to? He shook his head. He was so smart, yet he didn't have a clue. And he wanted to know, now more than ever.

Again, it was the not-knowing that worried him. Worried? Yes, he was worried now. The KGB had never encouraged curiosity, but even they knew that you had to tell intelligent people something, and so with mission orders had usually come some kind of explanation—and at the least he'd always known that he was serving the interests of his country. Whatever information he'd gathered, whatever foreign national he'd recruited, it had all been aimed at making his nation more secure, more knowledgeable, more strong. That the entire effort had failed was not his fault. The KGB had never failed the State. It had been the State that had failed the KGB. He'd been part of the world's

finest intelligence service, and he remained proud of its abilities and his own.

But he didn't know what he was doing now. He was supposed to gather information, and it was quite easy for him, but he still didn't know why. The things he'd learned at dinner the night before had merely opened another door into another mystery. It seemed so like some Hollywood movie of conspiracy or some detective book whose ending he could not yet discern. He'd take the money and do the job, but for the first time he was uneasy, and the feeling was not a pleasant one, as the aircraft raced down the runway and took off into the rising sun for London Heathrow.

"Any progress, Bill?"

Tawney leaned back in his chair. "Not much. The Spanish have identified two of the terrorists as Basque separatists, and the French think they have a line on another of their citizens at the park, but that's all. I suppose we could ask Carlos for some information, but it's rather doubtful that he'd cooperate—and who's to say that he even knew the buggers in the first place?"

"True." Clark took a seat. "You know, Ding's right. One of these incidents was probably to be expected, but three all in the brief time we've been here seems like a lot. Is it possible that somebody is setting them loose somehow, Bill?"

"I suppose it's possible, but who would do it—and *why* would he do it?" Tawney asked.

"Back up. Stay with the 'who' part first. Who has the ability?"

"Someone who had access to them back in the seventies and eighties—that means someone well inside the movement or someone who controlled them, 'influenced' them, from the outside. That would mean a KGB type. Notionally this chap would be known to them, would have means to contact them, and thus the ability to activate them."

"All three groups have been heavily ideological. . . ."

"That's why the contact would have to be former—or maybe active?—KGB. He'd have to be someone they trust—more than that, a person with the kind of authority they would recognize and respect." Tawney sipped at his tea. "That has to mean an intelligence officer, perhaps a fairly senior one with whom they'd worked back in the old days, someone who interfaced with them for their training and support in the old East Bloc."

"German, Czech, Russian?"

"Russian," Tawney said. "Remember that KGB let the other Bloc countries support them only under their close direction—the standoff nature of the arrangement was always paper-thin, John. It was meant

more for their own comfort than for anyone else's. 'Progressive elements,' and all that rubbish. They were usually trained outside of Moscow, and then quartered in safe houses in Eastern Europe, mainly East Germany. We got a good deal of material from the old East German Stasi when the DDR collapsed. I have some colleagues at Century House going back over the information right now. That will take time. It was, unfortunately, never computerized or even properly cross-referenced. Funding problems," Tawney explained.

"Why not go straight to KGB? Hell, I've met Golovko."

Tawney didn't know that. "You're kidding."

"How do you think Ding and I got into Iran so quick with a Russian cover? You think CIA can pull off an operation that fast? I wish, Bill. No, Golovko set it up, and Ding and I were in his office before we flew down."

"Well, then, if you can, why not give it a try?"

"I'd have to get authorization from Langley."

"Will Sergey actually cooperate?"

"Not sure," John admitted. "Even money at best. But before I do such a thing, I'd need a good idea of exactly what I want. It can't be a fishing expedition. It has to be well directed."

"I can see what we might have on the name of an intelligence officer who worked with them. . . . Problem is, it won't be a real name, will it?"

Clark nodded. "Probably not. You know, we have to try harder to get one of these people alive. Kinda hard to interrogate a corpse."

"That opportunity hasn't presented itself yet," Tawney pointed out.

"Maybe," Clark thought. And even if you got one alive, who was to say that he'd know what was needed? But you had to start somewhere.

"Bern was a bank robbery. Vienna was an attempted kidnapping, and from what Herr Ostermann said, the subjects were after something that doesn't exist—private, insider computer codes into the international trading system. The most recent incident was something right out of the seventies."

"Okay, two out of three were about money," Clark agreed. "But the terrorists in both those cases were supposed to be ideological, right?"

"Correct."

"Why the interest in money? In the first one, okay, maybe it was a straight robbery. But the second one was more sophisticated—well, both sophisticated and dumb,'cuz they were after something that doesn't exist, but as ideological operators they would not have known that. Bill, *somebody* told them to go after it. They didn't start that one by themselves, did they?"

"I agree, your supposition is likely," the spook said. "Very likely,

perhaps."

"So, in that case we have two ideological operators, technically fairly competent, but going after something that doesn't really exist. The combination of operational cleverness and objective stupidity just seems to cry out to us, doesn't it?"

"But what of Worldpark?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe Carlos knows something they need. Maybe he has a stash somewhere that they want, or information, or contact numbers, maybe even cash—there's no telling, is there?"

"And I think it unlikely that he can be persuaded to cooperate with us."

Clark grunted. "Damned skippy."

"What I can do is talk with the chaps at 'Five,' too. Perhaps this Russian shadow fellow worked with the PIRA. Let me do some nosing around, John."

"Okay, Bill, and I'll talk things over with Langley." Clark stood, wandered out of the room, and headed back to his own, still groping for the idea he needed before he could do something useful.

It didn't start well, and Popov nearly laughed about it. On reaching his rental car he opened the left-side door instead of the right side. But he figured it out in as few seconds as it took him to load his luggage into the trunk—boot—and get in the driver's side. From that point he opened the map book he'd purchased in the terminal and made his way away from Heathrow's Terminal Four onto the motorway that would lead him to Hereford.

"So, how does this thing work, Tim?"

Noonan moved his hand away, but the pointer stayed right on Chavez. "Damn, this is slick. It's supposed to track the electromagnetic field generated by the human heart. It's a unique low-frequency signal . . . doesn't even get confused by gorillas and animals. . . ."

The gadget looked like a ray-gun pistol from a '30s science-fiction movie, with a slim antenna wire out the front and a pistol grip underneath. It swung on a frictionless bearing, drawn to the signal it received. Noonan moved away from Chavez and Covington, and headed for the wall. There was a secretary sitting right . . . there. The gadget locked on her. As he walked, it stayed pointed at her, through the blank wall.

"It's like a bloody divining rod," Peter observed, no small amount of wonder in his voice. "Like finding water. . . ."

"Does look that way, doesn't it? Damn, no wonder the Army wants this baby. Forget about being ambushed. This thing's supposed to find people underground, behind trees, in the rain—whenever they're

there, this thing'll pick them up."

Chavez thought about that. He thought especially about his operation in Colombia so many years before, walking point in the weeds, looking and listening for people who might have worried his ten-man team. Now this thing replaced all the skills he'd learned in the 7th Light. As a defensive tool, it could put the ninjas out of business. As an offensive tool, it could tell you where the bad guys were long before you could see or hear them, and allow you to get close enough to . . .

"What's it for—what's the manufacturer say, I mean?"

"Search and rescue—firemen in a burning building, avalanche victims, lots of things, Ding. As a counter-intruder tool, this puppy's going to be hard to beat. They've been playing with it at Fort Bragg for a couple of weeks. The Delta Guys have fallen in love with it. Still a little hard to use, and it can't tell range yet, but all they have to do is modify the antenna for greater gain, then link two of the detectors with GPS, and triangulate. . . . The ultimate range this thing can achieve hasn't been determined yet. They say this one can lock onto a person at five hundred meters."

"Bloody hell," Covington observed. But the instrument still looked like some sort of an expensive small-boy's toy.

"What good will it be for us? It can't tell a hostage from a terrorist," Chavez pointed out.

"Ding, you never know, do you? Damned sure it can tell you where the bad guys are *not,"* Noonan pointed out. He'd be playing with this thing all day, getting a feel for how to use it effectively. He hadn't felt like a kid with a new toy in quite a while, but this gadget was so new and so unexpected that it should have arrived under a decorated pine tree.

The Brown Stallion was the name of the pub right next door to his motel. It was only half a kilometer from the main gate at Hereford, and seemed like a good place to start, and better yet to have a beer. Popov ordered a pint of Guinness and sipped at it, surveying the room. A television was on, carrying a soccer match—live or taped, he couldn't tell at the moment—between Manchester United and Rangers from up in Scotland, and that attracted the attention of the pub's patrons, and the barman, as it turned out. Popov watched as well, sipping at his pint and listening to the chitchat around the room. He was trained to be patient, and knew from experience that patience was usually rewarded in the business of intelligence, all the more so in this culture, where people came to their regular pub every night to chat with their friends, and Popov had unusually good hearing.

The football game ended in a 1–1 tie around the time Popov

ordered a second pint.

"Tie, bloody tie," one man observed at the bar seat next to Popov's.

"That's sport for you, Tommy. At least the chaps down the road never tie, and never bloody lose."

"How are the Yanks fitting in, Frank?"

"Good bunch, that lot, very polite. I had to fix the sink for one of the houses today. The wife is very nice indeed, tried to give me a tip. Amazing people, the Americans. Think they have to give you money for everything." The plumber finished off his pint of lager and called for another.

"You work on the base?" Popov asked.

"Yes, have for twelve years, plumbing and such."

"Good lot of men, the SAS. I like how they sort the IRA buggers out," the Russian offered, in his best British blue-collar accent.

"That they do," the plumber agreed.

"So, some Americans are based there now, eh?"

"Yes, about ten of them, and their families." He laughed. "One of the wives nearly killed me in her car last week, driving on the wrong side of the bloody road. You do have to be careful around them, especially in your car."

"I may know one of them, chap name of Clark, I think," Popov offered as a somewhat dangerous ploy.

"Oh? He's the boss. Wife's a nurse in the local hospital. Haven't met him, but they say he's a very serious chappie—must be to command that lot. Scariest people I've ever met, not the sort you'd like to find in a dark alley—very polite of course, but you only have to look at them to know. Always out running and such, keeping fit, practicing with their weapons, looking dangerous as bloody lions."

"Were they involved in the show down in Spain last week?"

"Well, they don't tell us any of that, see, but"—the man smiled—"I saw a Hercules fly out of the airstrip the very day it happened, and they were back in their club late that night, Andy told me, looking very chuffed with themselves, he said. Good lads, dealing with those bastards."

"Oh, yes. What sort of swine would kill a sick child? *Bahst'ds,"* Popov went on.

"Yes, indeed. Wish I could have seen them. Carpenter I work with, George Wilton, sees them practice their shooting from time to time. George says they're like something from a film, magical stuff, he says."

"Were you a soldier?"

"Long time ago, Queen's Regiment, made corporal. That's how I got this job." He sipped at his beer while the TV screen changed over to cricket, a game for which Popov had no understanding at all. "You?"

Popov shook his head. “No, never. Thought about it, but decided not to.”

“Not a bad life, really, for a few years anyway,” the plumber said, reaching for the bar peanuts.

Popov drained his glass and paid the bill. It had been a pretty good night for him, and he didn’t want to press his luck. So, the wife of John Clark was a nurse at the local hospital, eh? He’d have to check that out.

“Yeah, Patsy, I did,” Ding told his wife, reading the morning paper a few hours late. Press coverage on the Worldpark job was still on page one, though below the fold this time. Fortunately, nobody in the media had a clue yet about Rainbow, he saw. The reporters had bought the story about the well-trained special-action group of the Spanish Civil Guard.

“Ding, I—well, you know, I—”

“Yeah, baby, I know. You’re a doc, and your job is saving lives. So’s mine, remember? They had thirty-some kids in there, and they murdered one . . . I didn’t tell you. I was less than a hundred feet away when they did it. I saw that little girl die, Pats. Worst damned thing I ever saw, and I couldn’t do a damned thing about it,” he said darkly. He’d have dreams about that for a few more weeks, Chavez knew.

“Oh?” She turned her head. “Why?”

“’Cuz we didn’t—I mean we couldn’t, because there was still a bunch of others inside with guns on them, and we’d just got there, and we weren’t ready to hit the bastards yet, and they wanted to show us how serious and dedicated they were—and that’s how people like that show their resolve, I suppose. They kill a hostage so we’ll know how tough they are.” Ding set his paper down, thinking about it. He’d been brought up with a particular code of honor even before the United States Army had taught him the Code of Arms: you never, *ever* hurt an innocent person. To do so forever placed you beyond the pale, irredeemably cursed among men as a murderer, unworthy to wear a uniform or accept a salute. But these terrorists seemed to revel in it. What the hell was wrong with them? He’d read all of Paul Bellow’s books, but somehow the message had not gotten through. Bright as he was, his mind could not make that intellectual leap. Well, maybe all you really needed to know about these people was how to put steel on target. That always worked, didn’t it?

“What’s with them?”

“Hell, baby, I don’t know. Dr. Bellow says they believe in their ideas so much that they can step away from their humanity, but I—I just don’t get it. I can’t see myself doing that. Okay, sure, I’ve dropped the

hammer on people, but never for kicks, and never for abstract ideas. There has to be a good reason for it, something that my society says is important, or because somebody broke the law that we're all supposed to follow. It's not nice, and it's not fun, but it is important, and that's why we do it. Your father's the same way."

"You really like Daddy," Patsy Chavez, M.D., observed.

"He's a good man. He's done a lot for me, and we've had some interesting times in the field. He's smart, smarter than the people at CIA ever knew—well, maybe Mary Pat knew. She really gets it, though she's something of a cowgirl."

"Who? Mary who?"

"Mary Patricia Foley. She's DO, head of the field spooks at the Agency. Great gal, in her mid-forties now, really knows her stuff. Good boss, looks out for us worker bees."

"Are you still in the CIA, Ding?" Patsy Clark Chavez asked.

"Technically yes." Her husband nodded. "Not sure how the administrative chain works, but as long as the checks keep coming"—he smiled—"I'm not going to worry about it. So, how's life at the hospital?"

"Well, Mom's doing fine. She's charge nurse for her shift in the ER now, and I'm rotating to ER, too, next week."

"Deliver enough babies?" Ding asked.

"Just one more this year, Domingo," Patsy replied, patting her belly. "Have to start the classes soon, assuming you're going to be there."

"Honey, I *will* be there," he assured her. "You ain't having my kid without my help."

"Daddy was never there. I don't think it was allowed back then. Prepared childbirth wasn't fashionable yet."

"Who wants to read magazines at a time like that?" Chavez shook his head. "Well, I guess times change, eh? Baby, I *will* be there, unless some terrorist jerk gets us called out of town, and then he better watch his ass, 'cuz this boy's going to be seriously pissed if that happens."

"I know I can depend on you." She sat down next to him, and as usual he took her hand and kissed it. "Boy or girl?"

"Didn't get the sonogram, remember? If it's a boy—"

"He'll be a spook, like his father and grandfather," Ding observed with a twinkle. "We'll start him on languages real early."

"What if he wants to be something else?"

"He won't," Domingo Chavez assured her. "He'll see what fine men his antecedents are, and want to emulate them. It's a Latino thing, babe"—he kissed her with a smile—"following in the honorable footsteps of your father." He couldn't say that he hadn't done so himself. His father had died at too early an age for his son to be

properly imprinted. Just as well. Domingo's father, Esteban Chavez, had driven a delivery truck. Too dull, Domingo thought.

"What about the Irish? I thought it was their 'thing,' too."

"Pretty much." Chavez grinned. "That's why there are so many paddies in the FBI."

"Remember Bill Henriksen?" Augustus Werner asked Dan Murray.

"Used to work for you on HRT, bit of a nut, wasn't he?"

"Well, he was heavily into the environmental stuff, hugging trees and all that crap, but he knew the job at Quantico. He laid a good one on me for Rainbow."

"Oh?" The FBI Director looked up and instantly focused at the use of the codeword.

"In Spain they were using an Air Force chopper. The media hasn't caught on to it, but it's there on the videotapes if anyone cares to notice. Bill said it wasn't real bright. He's got a point."

"Maybe," the FBI Director allowed. "But as a practical matter—"

"I know, Dan, there are the practical considerations, but it *is* a real problem."

"Yeah, well, Clark's thinking about maybe going a little public on Rainbow. One of his people brought it up, he tells me. If you want to deter terrorism, you might want to let the word get out there's a new sheriff in town, he said. Anyway, he hasn't made any decision for an official recommendation to the Agency, but evidently he's kicking the idea around."

"Interesting," Gus Werner said. "I can see the point, especially after three successful operations. Hey, if I were one of those idiots, I'd think twice before having the Wrath of God descend on me. But they don't think like normal people, do they?"

"Not exactly, but deterrence is deterrence, and John has me thinking about it now. We could leak the data at several levels, let the word out that there's a secret multinational counterterror team now operating." Murray paused. "Not take them black to white, but maybe black to gray."

"What will the Agency say?" Werner asked.

"Probably no, with an exclamation point behind it," the Director admitted. "But like I said, John has me thinking about it a little."

"I can see his point, Dan. If the world knows about it, maybe people will think twice, but then people will start to ask questions, and reporters show up, and pretty soon you have people's faces on the front page of *USA Today,* along with articles about how they screwed up on a job, written by somebody who can't even put a clip in a gun the right way."

"They can put a D-Notice on stories in England," Murray reminded

him. “At least they won’t make the local papers.”

“Fine, so then they come out in the *Washington Post,* and *nobody* reads that, right?” Werner snorted. And he well knew the problems that the FBI’s HRT had gotten into with Waco and Ruby Ridge after his tenure as commander of the unit. The media had screwed up the reporting of events in both cases—as usual, he thought, but that was the media for you. “How many people are into Rainbow?”

“About a hundred . . . pretty big number for a black outfit. I mean, their security hasn’t been broken yet that we know of, but—”

“But as Bill Henriksen said, anybody who knows the difference ’tween a Huey and a Black Hawk knows that there was something odd about the Worldpark job. Hard to keep secrets, isn’t it?”

“Sure as hell, Gus. Anyway, give the idea some thought, will you?”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Yeah, also from Clark—does anybody think three terrorist incidents since Rainbow set up is a big number? Might somebody be activating cells of bad guys and turning them loose? If so, who, and if so, what for?”

“Christ, Dan, we get our European intelligence from *them,* remember? Who’s the guy they have working the spook side?”

“Bill Tawney’s his chief analyst. ‘Six’ guy, pretty good as a matter of fact—I know him from when I was the legal attaché in London a few years ago. He doesn’t know, either. They’re wondering if some old KGB guy or something like that might be traveling around, telling the sleeping vampires to wake up and suck some blood.”

Werner considered that for about half a second or so before speaking. “If so, he hasn’t been a raving success. The operations have some of the earmarks of professionalism, but not enough of it to matter. Hell, Dan, you know the drill. If the bad guys are in the same place for more than an hour, we descend on them and take them out the instant they screw up. Professional terrorists or not, they are *not* well-trained people, they don’t have anything like our resources, and they surrender the initiative to us sooner or later. All we need to know is where they are, remember? After that, the thunderbolt is in our hands.”

“Yeah, and you have zapped a few, Gus. And that’s why we need better intelligence, to zap them before they show up on the radarscope of their own accord.”

“Well, one thing I can’t do is their intel for them. They’re closer to the sources than we are,” Werner said, “and I bet they don’t send us everything they have anyway.”

“They can’t. Too much of it to fax back and forth.”

“Okay, yes, three hard incidents looks like a lot, but we can’t tell if it’s just coincidence or part of a plan unless we have people to ask.

Like a live terrorist. Clark's boys haven't taken anyone alive yet, have they?"

"Nope," Murray agreed. "That's not part of their mission statement."

"So tell them that if they want hard intel, they have to have somebody with a live brain and a mouth after the shooting stops." But Werner knew that that wasn't easy under the best of circumstances. Just as taking tigers alive was far harder than taking them dead, it was difficult to capture someone possessing a loaded submachine gun and the will to use it. Even the HRT shooters, who were trained to bring them in alive in order to toss them in front of a Federal District Court judge for proper sentencing and caging at Marion, Illinois, hadn't done well in that area. And Rainbow was made up of soldiers for whom the niceties of law were somewhat foreign. The Hague Convention established rules for war that were looser than anything found in the United States Constitution. You couldn't kill prisoners, but you had to capture them alive before they *were* prisoners, and that was something armies generally didn't emphasize.

"Does our friend Mr. Clark require any more guidance from us?" Werner asked.

"Hey, he's on our side, remember?"

"He's a good guy, yes. Hell, Dan, I met with him while they were setting Rainbow up, and I let him have one of our best troops in Timmy Noonan, *and* I'll grant you he's done a great job—three of them so far. But he's *not* one of us, Dan. He doesn't think like a cop, but if he wants better intel, that's what he has to do. Tell him that, will ya?"

"I will, Gus," Murray promised. Then they moved on to other things.

"So what are we supposed to do?" Stanley asked. "Shoot the bloody guns out of their hands? That only happens in the cinema, John."

"Weber did exactly that, remember?"

"Yes, and that was against policy, and we damned well can't encourage it," Alistair replied.

"Come on, Al, if we want better intelligence information, we have to capture some alive, don't we?"

"Fine, *if possible,* which it rarely will be, John. Bloody rarely."

"I know," Rainbow Six conceded. "But can we at least get the boys to think about it?"

"It's possible, but to make that sort of decision on the fly is difficult at best."

"We need the intel, Al," Clark persisted.

"True, but not at the cost of death or injury to one of our men."

"All things in life are a compromise of some sort," Rainbow Six

observed. “Would you like to have some hard intelligence information on these people?”

“Of course, but—”

“ ‘But,’ my ass. If we need it, let’s figure a way to get it,” Clark persisted.

“We’re not police constables, John. That is *not* part of our mission.”

“Then we’re going to change the mission. If it becomes *possible* to take a subject alive, then we’ll give it a try. You can always shoot ’em in the head if it’s not. The guy Homer took with that gut shot. We *could* have taken him alive, Al. He wasn’t a direct threat to anyone. Okay, he deserved it, and he was standing out in the open with a weapon, and our training said *kill,* and sure enough, Johnston took the shot, and decided to make a statement of his own because he wanted to—but it would have been just as easy to take out his kneecap, in which case we’d have somebody to talk to now, and maybe he would have sung like most of them do, and *then* maybe we’d know something we’d sure as hell *like* to know now, wouldn’t we?”

“Quite so, John,” Stanley conceded. Arguing with Clark wasn’t easy. He’d come to Rainbow with the reputation of a CIA knuckle-dragger, but that’s not what he was at all, the Brit reminded himself.

“We just don’t know enough, and I don’t like not knowing enough about the environment. I think Ding’s right. Somebody’s setting these bastards loose. If we can figure out a little about that, then maybe we can locate the guy and have the local cops put the bag on him wherever he is, and then maybe we can have a friendly little chat and maybe the ultimate result will be fewer incidents to go out and take risks on.” The ultimate goal of Rainbow was an odd one, after all: to train for missions that rarely—if ever—came, to be the fire department in a town with no fires.

“Very well, John. We should talk with Peter and Domingo about it first of all, I think.”

“Tomorrow morning, then.” Clark stood from his desk. “How about a beer at the club?”

“Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, I haven’t seen you in quite some time,” the man said.

“Four years,” Popov confirmed. They were in London, at a pub three blocks from the Russian Embassy. He’d taken the train here just on the off chance that one of his former colleagues might show up, and so one had, Ivan Petrovich Kirilenko. Ivan Petrovich had been a rising star, a few years younger than Popov, a skilled field officer who’d made full colonel at the age of thirty-eight. Now, he was probably—

“You are the *rezident* for Station London now?”

“I am not allowed to say such things, Dmitriy.” Kirilenko smiled and

nodded even so. He'd come very far and very fast in a downsized agency of the Russian government, and was doubtless still actively pursuing political and other intelligence, or rather, had a goodly staff of people to do it for him. Russia was worried about NATO expansion; the alliance once so threatening to the Soviet Union was now advancing eastward toward his country's borders, and some in Moscow worried, as they were paid to worry, that this could be the precursor to an attack on the Motherland. Kirilenko knew this was rubbish, as did Popov, but even so he was paid to make sure of it, and the new *rezident* was doing his job as instructed. "So, what are *you* doing now?"

"I am not permitted to say." Which was the obvious reply. It could mean anything, but in the context of their former organization, it meant that Popov was still a player of some sort. What sort, Kirilenko didn't know, though he'd heard that Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had been RIF'd from the organization. That had been a surprise to him. Popov still enjoyed an excellent service reputation as a field spook. "I am living between worlds now, Vanya. I work for a commercial business, but I perform other duties as well," he allowed. The truth was so often a useful tool, in the service of lies.

"You did not appear here by accident," Kirilenko pointed out.

"True. I hoped to see a colleague here." The pub was too close to the Embassy on Palace Green, Kensington, for serious work, but it was a comfortable place, for casual meets, and besides, Kirilenko believed his status as *rezident* to be entirely secret. Showing up in a place like this enhanced that. No real spook, everybody knew, would take the chance. "I need some help with something."

"What might that be?" the intelligence officer asked, over a sip of bitter.

"A report on a CIA officer who is probably known to us."

"The name?"

"John Clark."

"Why?"

"He is now, I believe, the leader of a black operation based here in England. I would like to offer the information I have on the man in return for whatever information you might have. I can perhaps add a few things to that dossier. I believe my information will be of interest," Popov concluded mildly. In context, it was a large promise.

"John Clark," Kirilenko repeated. "I will see what I can do for you. You have my number?"

Popov slipped a piece of paper on the bar unseen. "Here is my number. No. Do you have a card?"

"Certainly." The Russian pocketed the scrap of paper and pulled out his wallet and handed the card over. I. P. Kirilenko, it said, Third

Secretary, Russian Embassy, London. 0181-946-0001, with -9009 as the fax number. Popov pocketed the card. “Well, I must get back. Good to see you, Dmitriy.” The *rezident* set his glass down and walked out onto the street.

* * *

“Get the picture?” one “Five” man said to the other on the way out the door, about forty seconds behind their surveillance target.

“Well, not good enough for the National Portrait Gallery, but . . .” The problem with covert cameras was that the lenses were too small to make a really good photo. They were usually good enough for identification purposes, however, and he’d gotten eleven exposures, which, combined with computer-enhancement, should be entirely adequate. Kirilenko, they knew, thought his cover to be adequate. He didn’t and couldn’t know that “Five,” once called MI-5, and now officially called the Security Service, had its own source inside the Russian Embassy. The Great Game was still ongoing in London and elsewhere, new world order or not. They hadn’t caught Kirilenko in a compromising act yet, but he was the *rezident,* after all, and therefore not given to such action. But you tracked such people anyway, because you knew who they were, and sooner or later, you got something on them, or from them. Like the chap he’d just had a beer with. Not a regular for this pub—they knew who they were. No name. Just some photos that would be compared with the library of photos at “Five’s” new headquarters building, Thames House, right on the river near Lambeth Bridge.

Popov stepped outside, turned left, and walked past Kensington Palace to catch a cab to the train station. Now, if only Kirilenko could get him something of use. He should be able to. He’d offered something juicy in return.

CHAPTER 19

SEARCHING

Three of the winos died that day, all from internal bleeds in the upper GI. Killgore went down to check them. Two had died in the same hour, the third five hours later, and the morphine had helped them expire either unconscious or in a painless, merciful stupor. That left five out of the original ten, and none of them would see the end of the week. Shiva was every bit as deadly as they'd hoped, and, it would seem, just as communicable as Maggie had promised. Finally, the delivery system worked. That was proven by Mary Bannister, Subject F4, who'd just moved into the treatment center with the onset of frank symptoms. So, the Shiva Project was fully successful to this point. Everything was nominal to the test parameters and the experimental predictions.

"How bad is the pain?" he asked his doomed patient.

"Cramping, pretty bad," she replied. "Like flu, plus something else."

"Well, you do have a moderate fever. Any idea where you may have caught it? I mean, there *is* a new strain of flu out of Hong Kong, and looks like you have it."

"Maybe at work . . . before I came here. Can't remember. I'm going to be okay, right?" The concern had fought its way through the Valium-impregnated food she got every day.

"I think so." Killgore smiled around his surgical mask. "This one can be dangerous, but only to infants and the elderly, and you're not either one of those, are you?"

"I guess not." She smiled, too, at the reassurance from the physician, which was always comforting.

"Okay, what we're going to do is get an IV started to keep you properly hydrated. And we'll work on the discomfort a little with a little morphine drip, okay?"

"You're the doctor," Subject F4 replied.

"Okay, hold your arm still. I have to make a stick, and it will hurt a little bit . . . there," he said, on doing it. "How was that?"

"Not too bad."

"Okay." Killgore punched in the activation number on the Christmas tree. The morphine drip started instantly. About ten seconds later, it

got into the patient's bloodstream.

"Ohhhh, oh yes," she said, eyes closed when the initial rush of the drug hit her system. Killgore had never experienced it himself, but he imagined it to be almost a sexual feeling, the way the narcotic soothed her entire body. The tension in her musculature all went away at once. You could see the body relax. Her mouth changed most of all, from tension to the slackness of sleep. It was too bad, really. F4 wasn't exactly beautiful, but she was pretty in her way, and judging from what he'd watched on the control-room TV monitor, she was a sexual treat for her partners, even though that had been caused by the tranquilizers. But, good lay or not, she would be dead in five to seven days, despite the best efforts he and his people would render. On the tree was a small drip-bottle of Interleukin-3a, recently developed by SmithKline's excellent collection of research scientists for cancer treatment—it had also shown some promise in countering viruses, which was unique in the world of medicine. Somehow it encouraged the body's immune system, though through a mechanism that was not yet understood. It would be the most likely treatment for Shiva victims once the disease became widespread, and he had to confirm that it wouldn't work. That had been the case with the winos, but they also needed to test it in fundamentally healthy patients, male and female, just to make sure. Too bad for her, he thought, since she had a face and a name to go along with her number. It would also be too bad for millions—actually billions—of others. But it would be easier with them. He might see their faces on TV, but TV wasn't real, was it? Just dots on a phosphor screen.

The idea was simple enough. A rat was a pig was a dog, was a boy—woman in this case. All had an equal right to life. They'd done extensive testing of Shiva on monkeys, for whom it had proved universally lethal, and he'd watched all those tests, and shared the pain of the subsentient animals who felt pain as real as what F4 felt, though in the case of the monkeys morphine hadn't been possible, and he'd *hated* that—hated inflicting pain on innocent creatures with whom he could not talk and to whom he could not explain things. And though it was justifiable in the big-picture sense—they would be saving millions, billions of animals from the depredations of humans—to see an animal suffer was a lot for him and his colleagues to bear, for they all empathized with all creatures great and small, and more for the small, the innocent, and the helpless than for the larger two-legged creatures who cared not a whim about them. As F4 probably did not, though they'd never asked. Why confuse the issue, after all? He looked down again. F4 was already stuporous from the narcotic he'd administered. At least she, unlike the experimental monkeys, was not in pain. That was merciful of them, wasn't it?

"What black operation is that?" the desk officer asked over the secure phone link.

"I have no idea, but he is a serious man, remember? A colonel of the *Innostrannoye Upravleniye,* you will recall, Division Four, Directorate S."

"Ah, yes, I know him. He spent much time at Fensterwalde and Karlovy Vary. He was RIF'd along with all those people. What is he doing now?"

"I do not know, but he offers us information on this Clark in return for some of our data. I recommend that we make the trade, Vasily Borissovich."

"Clark is a name known to us. He has met personally with Sergey Nikolay'ch," the desk officer told the *rezident.* "He's a senior field officer, principally a paramilitary type, but also an instructor at the CIA Academy in Virginia. He is known to be close to Mary Patricia Foleyeva and her husband. It is also said that he has the ear of the American President. Yes, I think we would be interested in his current activities."

The phone they spoke over was the Russian version of the American STU-3, the technology having been stolen about three years before by a team working for Directorate T of the First Chief Directorate. The internal microchips, which had been slavishly copied, scrambled the incoming and outgoing signals with a 128-bit encryption system whose key changed every hour, and changed further with the individual users whose personal codes were part of the insertable plastic keys they used. The STU system had defied the Russians' best efforts to crack it, even with exact knowledge of the internal workings of the system hardware, and they assumed that the Americans had the same problems—after all, for centuries Russia had produced the world's best mathematicians, and the best of them hadn't even come up with a theoretical model for cracking the scrambling system.

But the Americans had, with the revolutionary application of quantum theory to communications security, a decryption system so complex that only a handful of the "Directorate Z" people at the National Security Agency actually understood it. But they didn't have to. They had the world's most powerful supercomputers to do the real work. These were located in the basement of the sprawling NSA headquarters building, a dungeonlike area whose roof was held up with naked steel I-beams because it had been excavated for just this purpose. The star machine there was one made by a company gone bankrupt, the Super-Connector from Thinking Machines, Inc., of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The machine, custom-built for NSA, had sat largely unused for six years, because nobody had come up with a

way to program it efficiently, but the advent of quantum theory had changed that, too, and the monster machine was now cranking merrily away while its operators wondered who they could find to make the next generation of this complex machine.

All manner of signals came into Fort Meade, from all over the world, and one such source included GCHQ, Britain's General Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, NSA's sister service in England. The British knew what phones were whose in the Russian Embassy—they hadn't changed the numbers, even with the demise of the USSR—and this one was on the desk of the *rezident*. The sound quality wasn't good enough for a voice-print, since the Russian version of the STU system digitized signals less efficiently than the American version, but once the encryption was defeated, the words were easily recognizable. The decrypted signal was cross-loaded to yet another computer, which translated the Russian conversation to English with a fair degree of reliability. Since the signal was from the London *rezident* to Moscow, it was placed on the top of the electronic pile, and cracked, translated, and printed less than an hour after it had been made. That done, it was transmitted to Cheltenham immediately, and at Fort Meade routed to a signals officer whose job it was to send intercepts to the people interested in the content. In this case, it was routed straight to the Director of Central Intelligence and, because it evidently discussed the identity of a field spook, to the Deputy Director (Operations), since all the field spooks worked for her. The former was a busier person than the latter, but that didn't matter, since the latter was married to the former.

"Ed?" his wife's voice said.

"Yeah, honey?" Foley replied.

"Somebody's trying to ID John Clark over in U.K."

Ed Foley's eyes went fully open at that news. "Really? Who?"

"The station chief in London talked with his desk officer in Moscow, and we intercepted it. The message ought to be in your IN pile, Eddie."

"Okay." Foley lifted the pile and leafed through it. "Got it. Hmmm," he said over the phone. "The guy who wants the information, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov, former Colonel in—a terrorism guy, eh? I thought they were all RIF'd . . . Okay, they were, at least he was."

"Yeah, Eddie, a terrorism guy is interested in Rainbow Six. Isn't that interesting?"

"I'd say so. Get this out to John?"

"Bet your sweet little tushie," the DO replied at once.

"Anything on Popov?"

"I ran the name through the computer. Zip," his wife responded. "I'm starting a new file on the name. Maybe the Brits have

something."

"Want me to call Basil about it?" the DCI asked.

"Let's see what we develop first. Get the fax off to John right away, though."

"It'll go out soon as I get the cover note done," Mary Pat Foley promised.

"Hockey game tonight." The Washington Capitals were closing in on the playoffs, and tonight was a grudge match with the Flyers.

"I haven't forgotten. Later, honey-bunny."

"Bill," John said over the office phone forty minutes later. "You want to come into my office?"

"On the way, John." He walked through the door in about two minutes. "What's the news?"

"Check this out, pal." Clark handed over the four pages of transcript.

"Bloody hell," the intelligence officer said, as soon as he got to page two. "Popov, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Doesn't ring a bell—oh, I see, they don't know the name at Langley either. Well, one cannot know them all. Call Century House about it?"

"I think we cross-index our files with yours, but it can't hurt. It would appear that Ding was right on this one. How much you want to bet that this is our guy? Who's your best friend in the Security Service?"

"Cyril Holt," Tawney said at once. "Deputy Director. I've known Cyril back to Rugby. He was a year behind me there. Outstanding chap." He didn't have to explain to Clark that old school ties were still a major part of British culture.

"Want to get him into this?"

"Bloody right, John."

"Okay, let's make the call. If we decide to go public, I want us to make the decision, not the fucking Russians."

"They know your name, then?"

"More than that. I've met Chairman Golovko. He's the guy who got Ding and me into Tehran last year. I've run a couple of cooperative operations with 'em, Bill. They know everything down to my dick size."

Tawney didn't react. He was learning how Americans talked, and it was often very entertaining. "You know, John, we ought not to get too excited about this information."

"Bill, you've been in the field as much as I have, maybe a little more. If this doesn't make your nose twitch, get something to clean your sinuses out, will you?" Clark paused for a second. "We got somebody who knows me by name, and is hinting that he can tell the

Russians what I'm doing now. He's gotta know, man. He picked the London *rezident* to tell, not the one in Caracas. A terrorism guy, maybe a guy who knows names and numbers, and we've had three incidents since we got here, and we've agreed that's a lot for so short a time, and now this guy comes up on the scope, asking about me. Bill, I think it's time to get a *little* excited, okay?"

"Quite so, John. I'll get Cyril on the phone." Tawney left the room.

"Fuck," John breathed, when the door closed. That was the problem with black operations. Sooner or later, some bastard flipped the light switch, and it was generally somebody you didn't even want in the room. How the hell has this one leaked? His face darkened as he looked down at his desk, acquiring an expression that those who knew it considered very dangerous indeed.

"Shit," Director Murray said at his desk in FBI Headquarters.

"Yeah, Dan, that about covers it," Ed Foley agreed from his seventh-floor office in Langley. "How the hell did this leak?"

"Beats the hell out of me, man. You have anything on this Popov that I don't know about?"

"I can check with Intelligence and Terrorism divisions, but we cross-deck everything to you. What about the Brits?"

"If I know John, he's already on the phone to 'Five' and 'Six.' His intel guy is Bill Tawney, and Bill's top-drawer in any outfit. Know him?"

"Rings a vague bell, but I can't put a face on it. What's Basil think of him?"

"Says he's one of his best analysts, and was a primo field-spook until a few years ago. He's got a good nose," the DCI told Murray.

"How big a threat is this?"

"Can't tell yet. The Russians know John pretty well from Tokyo and Tehran. Golovko knows him personally—called me about the Tehran job to compliment him on the job he and Chavez pulled off. I gather they hit it off, but this is business, not personal, y'know?"

"I hear you, Don Corleone. Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, there's a leak somewhere. I haven't got a clue yet where it might be. The only talk I've heard about Rainbow has been people with codeword clearance. They're supposed to know about keeping their mouths shut."

"Right." Murray snorted. The only people able to leak stuff like this were the people you trusted, people who'd passed a serious background check done by special agents of the FBI. Only a trusted and checked-out person could really betray his country, and unfortunately the FBI hadn't yet learned to look inside a person's brain and heart. And what if it had been an inadvertent leak? You

could interview the person who'd done it, and even he or she couldn't reply that it had happened. Security and counterespionage were two of the hardest tasks in the known universe. Thank God, he thought, for the cryppies at NSA, as always the most trusted and productive of his country's intelligence services.

"Bill, we have a two-man team on Kirilenko almost continuously. They just photographed him having a pint with a chap at his usual pub last night," Cyril Holt told his "Six" colleague.

"That may well be our man," Tawney said.

"Quite possible. I need to see your intercepts. Want me to drive out?"

"Yes, as quickly as you can."

"Fine. Give me two hours, old man. I still have a few things on my desk to attend to."

"Excellent."

The good news was that they knew this phone was secure in two different ways. The STU-4 encryption system could be beaten, but only by technology that only the Americans had—or so they thought. Better still, the phone lines used were computer-generated. One advantage to the fact that the British telephone system was essentially owned by the government was that the computers controlling the switching systems could randomize the routings and deny anyone the chance to tap into a call, unless there was a hard-wire connection at the point of origin or reception. For that bit of security, they relied on technicians who checked the lines on a monthly basis—unless one of them was working for someone else as well, Tawney reminded himself. You couldn't prevent everything, and while maintaining telephone silence could deny information to a potential enemy, it also had the effect of stopping the transfer of information within the government—thus causing that institution to grind to an immediate, smoking halt.

"Go ahead, say it," Clark told Chavez.

"Easy, Mr. C, not like I predicted the outcome of the next World Series. It was pretty obvious stuff."

"Maybe so, Domingo, but you still said it first."

Chavez nodded. "Problem is, what the hell do we do about it? John, if he knows your name, he either already knows or can easily find out your location—and that means us. Hell, all he needs is a pal in the phone company, and he starts staking us out. Probably has a photo of you, or a description. Then he gets a tag number and starts following you around."

"We should be so lucky. I know about countersurveillance, and I

have a shoe-phone everywhere I go. I'd *love* for somebody to try that on me. I'd have you and some of your boys come out to the country, do a pick-and-roll, bag the fucker, and then we could have a friendly little chat with him." That generated a thin smile. John Clark knew how to extract information from people, though his techniques for doing so didn't exactly fit guidelines given to the average police departments.

"I suppose, John. But for now there's not a damned thing we can do 'cept to keep our eyes open and wait for someone else to generate some information for us."

"I've never been a target like this before. I don't like it."

"I hear you, man, but we live in an imperfect world. What's Bill Tawney say?"

"He has a 'Five' guy coming out later today."

"Well, they're the pros from Dover on this. Let 'em do their thing," Ding advised. He knew it was good advice—indeed, the only possible advice—and knew that John knew that, and he also knew that John would hate it. His boss liked doing things himself, not waiting for others to do things for him. If Mr. C had a weakness, that was it. He could be patient while working, but not while waiting for things to happen beyond his purview. Well, nobody was perfect.

"Yeah, I know" was the reply. "How are your troops?"

"Riding the crest of the wave, man, right in the curl and looking down the pipeline. I have never seen morale this good, John. The Worldpark job just lit everybody up. I think we can conquer the whole world if the bad guys line up properly."

"The eagle looks pretty good in the club, doesn't it?"

"Bet your sweet ass, Mr. C. Ain't no nightmares from this one . . . well, except for the little girl. That wasn't fun to watch, even if she was dying anyway, you know? But we got the bastards, and Mr. Carlos is still in his cage. I don't figure anybody else is going to try to spring his sorry ass."

"And he knows it, the French tell me."

Chavez stood. "Good. I gotta get back. Keep me in the loop on this, okay?"

"Sure will, Domingo," Rainbow Six promised.

"So what sort of work do you do?" the plumber asked.

"I sell plumbing supplies," Popov said. "Wrenches and so forth, wholesale to distributors and retailers."

"Indeed. Anything useful?"

"Rigid pipe wrenches, the American brand. They're the best in the world, and they have a lifetime guarantee. If one breaks, we replace it free, even twenty years from now. Various other things as well, but

Rigid wrenches are my best product."

"Really? I've heard about them, but I've never used them."

"The adjustment mechanism is a little steadier than the English Stilson spanner. Other than that, the only real advantage is the replacement policy. You know, I've been selling these things for . . . what? Fourteen years, I think. I've had one break from all the thousands I've sold."

"Hmph. I broke a wrench last year," the plumber said.

"Anything unusual about work on the base?"

"Not really. Plumbing is plumbing. Some of the things I work on are rather old—the watercoolers, for example. Getting parts for the bloody things can be troublesome, and they can't make the decision to get new ones. Bloody government bureaucrats. They must spend thousands a week for bullets for their bloody machine guns, but purchase some new watercoolers that people will use every day? Not bloody likely!" The man had a good laugh and sipped at his lager.

"What sort of people are they?"

"The SAS team? Good blokes, very polite chaps. They make no trouble for me and my mates at all."

"What about the Americans?" Popov asked. "I've never really known any, but you hear stories about how they do things their own way and—"

"Not in my experience. Well, I mean, only lately have we had any at the base, but the two or three I've worked for are just like our chaps—and remember I told you, they try to tip us! Bloody Yanks! But friendly chaps. Most of them have kids, and the children are lovely. Learning to play proper football now, some of them. So, what are you doing around here?"

"Meeting with the local ironmongers, trying to get them to carry my brands of tools, and also the local distributor."

"Lee and Dopkin?" The plumber shook his head. "Both are old buggers, they won't change very much. You'll do better with the little shops than with them, I'm afraid."

"Well, how about your shop? Can I sell *you* some of my tools?"

"I don't have much of a budget—but, well, I'll look at your wrenches."

"When can I come in?"

"Security, mate, is rather tight here. I doubt they'll allow me to drive you onto the base . . . but, well, I could bring you in with me—say, tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'd like that. When?"

"Tomorrow afternoon? I could pick you up here."

"Yes," Popov said. "I'd like that."

"Excellent. We can have a ploughman's lunch here and then I'll take

you in myself."

"I'll be here at noon," Popov promised. "With my tools."

Cyril Holt was over fifty, and had the tired look of a senior British civil servant. Well dressed in a finely tailored suit and an expensive tie —clothing over there, Clark knew, was excellent, but not exactly cheap—he shook hands all around and took his seat in John's office.

"So," Holt said. "I gather we have a problem here."

"You've read the intercept?"

"Yes." Holt nodded. "Good work by your NSA chaps." He didn't have to add that it was good work by his chaps as well, identifying the line used by the *rezident*.

"Tell me about Kirilenko," Clark said.

"Competent chap. He has a staff of eleven field officers, and perhaps a few other off-the-books helpers to do pickups and such. Those are all 'legals' with diplomatic cover. He has illegals as well who report to him, of course. We know two of them, both covered as businessmen who do real business in addition to espionage. We've been building up this book for some time. In any case, Vanya is a competent, capable chap. He's covered as the embassy's third secretary, does his diplomatic duties like a genuine diplomat, and is well liked by the people with whom he comes into contact. Bright, witty, good chap to have a pint with. Drinks beer more than vodka, oddly enough. He seems to like it in London. Married, two children, no bad habits that have come to our attention. His wife doesn't work at all, but we haven't seen anything covert on her part. Just a housewife, so far as we can discern. Also well liked in the diplomatic community." Holt passed across photographs of both. "Now," he went on, "just yesterday our friend was having a friendly pint in his favorite pub. It's a few blocks from the embassy in Kensington, close to the palace—the embassy dates back to the Czars, just like the one you have in Washington—and this pub is rather upscale. Here's the enhanced photo of the chap he had his beer with." Another photo was passed across.

The face, Clark and Tawney saw, was grossly ordinary. The man had brown hair and eyes, regular features, and was about as distinctive as a steel garbage can in an alley. In the photo, he was dressed in jacket and tie. The expression on his face was unremarkable. They might have been discussing football, the weather, or how to kill someone they both didn't like—there was no telling.

"I don't suppose he has a regular seat?" Tawney asked.

"No, usually sits at the bar, but sometimes in a booth, and rarely in the same seat twice in a row. We've thought about placing a bug," Holt told them, "but it's technically difficult, it would let the publican

know we're up to something, and it's very doubtful that we'd get anything useful from it. His English is superb, by the way. The publican seems to think he's a Briton from the North Country."

"Does he know you're following him?" Tawney asked, before Clark could.

Holt shook his head. "Hard to say, but we do not think so. The surveillance teams switch off, and they're some of my best people. They go to this pub regularly, even when he's not there, in case he has a chap of his own there to do countersurveillance. The buildings in the area allow us to track him fairly easily by camera. We've seen a few possible brush-passes, but you both know the drill on that. We all bump into people on a crowded sidewalk, don't we? They're not all brush-passes. That's why we teach our field officers to do it. Especially when the streets are crowded, you can have a dozen cameras on your subject and not see it being done."

Clark and Tawney both nodded at that. The brush-pass had probably been around as long as spies had. You walked down a street and at most you pretended to bump into someone. In the process, his hand delivered something into yours, or dropped it in your pocket, and with minimal practice it was virtually invisible even to people watching for it. To be successful, only one of the parties had to wear something distinctive, and that could be a carnation in your buttonhole, the color of a necktie or the way one carried a newspaper, or sunglasses, or any number of other markers known only to the participants in the mini-operation. It was the simplest of examples of field-craft, the easiest to use, and for that reason the curse of counterespionage agencies.

But if he did a pass to this Popov guy, they had a photograph of the bastard. Maybe had it, he reminded himself. There was no guarantee that the guy he'd drunk with yesterday was the right fellow. Maybe Kirilenko was swift enough that he'd go to a pub and strike up a conversation with some other patron just to piss the "Five" people off and give them another randomly selected person to check out. Doing that required personnel and time, neither of which the Security Service had in infinite quantities. Espionage and counterespionage remained the best damned game in town, and even the players themselves never really knew what the score was.

"So, you'll increase your coverage of Kirilenko?" Bill Tawney asked.

"Yes." Holt nodded. "But do remember we're up against a highly skilled player. There are no guarantees."

"I know that, Mr. Holt. I've been in the field, and the Second Chief Directorate never got their hands on me," Clark told the visitor from the Security Service. "So anything at all on Popov?"

He shook his head. "That name is not in our files. It's possible, I

suppose, that we have him under another name. Perhaps he's been in contact with our PIRA friends—that actually seems likely, if he's a terrorism specialist. There were many such contacts. We've got informers inside the PIRA, and I'm thinking about showing the photograph to some of them. But that's something we have to do carefully. Some of our informers are doubles. Our Irish friends have their own counterespionage operations, remember?"

"I've never worked directly against them," John said next. "How good are they?"

"Bloody good," Holt assured him, catching a nod also from Bill Tawney. "They're highly dedicated, and superbly organized, but now the organization's fragmenting somewhat. Obviously, some of them do not want peace to break out. Our good friend Gerry Adams is by profession a publican, and if the Troubles come to an end, and he fails to get himself elected to high public office, as he clearly hopes, then his fallback job is rather lower in prestige than the position he now holds—but the majority of them seem willing to terminate their operations, declare victory, and give peace a chance. That has helped our informer-recruiting somewhat, but there are elements of the PIRA who are more militant today than they were ten years ago. It's a cause for concern," Holt told them.

"Same story in the Bekaa Valley," Clark agreed. What did you do when Satan came to Jesus? Some would never want to stop fighting sin, and if that meant creating some sin themselves, well, that was just the cost of doing business, wasn't it? "They just don't want to let go."

"That is a problem. And I need not tell you that one of the main targets of those chaps is right here. The SAS is not exactly beloved of the PIRA."

That wasn't news either. The British Special Air Service commandos had gone into the field often enough to "sort out" IRA members who had made the two serious mistakes of breaking the law and being known. John thought it a mistake to use soldiers to perform what was essentially a police function—but then he had to admit that Rainbow was tasked to that exact mission, in a manner of speaking. But the SAS had done things that in some contexts could be called premeditated murder. Britain, much as it resembled America in so many ways, was a different country with different laws and very different rules in some areas. So security at Hereford was tight, because someday ten or so bad guys might appear with AK-47s and an attitude, and his people, like many of the resident SAS troops, had families, and terrorists didn't always respect the rights of noncombatants, did they? Not hardly.

The decision had come with unusual speed from Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square, and a courier was now on his way. Kirilenko was surprised to get the coded message. The courier was flying Aeroflot to Heathrow with a diplomatic bag, which was inviolable so long as the courier kept it in his possession—countries had been known to steal them for their contents, which were often uncoded, but couriers knew about that, and played by a strict set of rules—if they had to visit the can, so did the bag. And so with their diplomatic passports they breezed through control points and went off to the waiting cars that were always there, carrying the usually canvas bags often full of valuable secrets past the eyes of people who would trade their daughters' virtue for one look.

So it happened here. The courier arrived on the evening flight from Moscow's Sheremetyevo International, was waved through customs, and hopped into the waiting car driven by an embassy employee. From there it was a mere forty minutes through rush-hour traffic to Kensington, and from there to Kirilenko's office. The manila envelope was sealed with wax to ensure that it hadn't been tampered with. The *rezident* thanked the courier for this and two other packages and went to work. It was late enough that he'd have to pass on his usual pint of bitter tonight. It was an annoyance to him. He honestly enjoyed the atmosphere of his favorite pub. There was nothing like it in Moscow, or any of the other countries he'd served in. So now, in his hands was the complete dossier on Clark, John T., senior CIA field officer. It ran to twenty single-spaced pages, plus three photographs. He took the time to read the package over. It was impressive. According to this, in his first and only meeting with Chairman Golovko, he'd admitted to smuggling the wife and daughter of former KGB Chairman Gerasimov right out of the country . . . using a *submarine* to do it? So, the story he'd read in the Western media was true? It was like something from Hollywood. Then later he'd operated in Romania around the time of Nicolae Ceauçescu's downfall, then in cooperation with Station Tokyo he'd rescued the Japanese prime minister, and again with Russian assistance participated in the elimination of Mamoud Haji Daryaei? "Believed to have the ear of the American president," the analysis page pronounced—and well he should! Kirilenko thought. Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko himself had added his thoughts to the file. A highly competent field officer, an independent thinker, known to take his own initiative on operations, and believed never to have put a foot wrong . . . training officer at the CIA Academy in Yorktown, Virginia, believed to have trained both Edward and Mary Patricia Foley,

respectively the Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director for Operations. This was one formidable officer, Kirilenko thought. He'd impressed Golovko himself, and few enough Russians accomplished that.

So, now, he was in England somewhere, doing something covert, and his parent agency wanted to know about it, because you tried very hard to keep track of such people. The *rezident* took the paper scrap from his wallet. It looked like a cellular phone number. He had several of those in his desk drawers, all cloned from existing accounts, because it kept his signals people busy, cost the embassy no money, and was very secure. Tapping into a known cellular account was difficult, but absent the electronic codes, it was just one more signal in a city awash in them.

Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had the same thing. In every city in the world were people who cloned phones and sold them illegally on the street. London was no exception.

"Yes?" a distant voice said.

"Dmitriy, this is Vanya."

"Yes?"

"I have the package you requested. I will require payment in the terms we agreed upon."

"It will be done," Popov promised. "Where can we make the exchange?"

That was easy. Kirilenko proposed the time, place, and method.

"Agreed." And the connection broke after a mere seventy seconds. Perhaps Popov had been RIF'd, but he still knew about communications discipline.

CHAPTER 20

CONTACTS

She knew she was sick. She wasn't sure how much, but Mary Bannister knew that she didn't feel well. And through the drugs, part of her worried that it might be serious. She'd never been in a hospital, except once to the local emergency room for a sprained ankle that her father worried might be broken, but now she was in a hospital-type bed with an IV tree next to her, and a clear plastic line that ran down into the inside of her right arm, and just the sight of it frightened her, despite the drugs going into her system. She wondered what they were giving her. Dr. Killgore had said fluids to keep her hydrated and some other stuff, hadn't he? She shook her head, trying to get the cobwebs loose enough to remember. Well, why not find out? She swung her legs to the right and stood, badly and shakily, then bent down to look at the items hanging on the tree. She had trouble making her eyes focus, and bent closer, only to find that the markings on the tag-tapes were coded in a way she didn't understand. Subject F4 stood back up and tried to frown in frustration but didn't quite make it. She looked around the treatment room. Another bed was on the far side of what appeared to be a brick partition about five feet high, but it was unoccupied. There was a TV, off at the moment, hanging on the far wall. The floor was tile, and cold on her bare feet. The door was wood, and had a latch rather than a knob—it was a standard hospital door, but she didn't know that. No phone anywhere. Didn't hospitals have phones in the room? Was she *in* a hospital? It looked and seemed like one, but she knew that her brain was working more slowly than usual, though she didn't know how she knew. It was as if she'd had too much to drink. Besides feeling ill, she felt vulnerable not in total command of herself. It was time to do *something,* though exactly what she wasn't sure. She stood there for a brief time to consider it, then took the tree in her right hand and started walking for the door. Fortunately, the electronic control unit on the tree was battery-powered and not plugged into the wall. It rolled easily on the rubber wheels.

The door, it turned out, was unlocked. She pulled it open, stuck her head out, and looked around the door frame into the corridor. Empty.

She walked out, still dragging the IV tree behind her. She saw no nurses' station at either end, but did not find that remarkable. Subject F4 headed to her right, pushing the IV tree ahead of her now, looking for—something, she wasn't sure what. She managed a frown and tried other doors, but while they opened, they revealed only darkened rooms, most of them smelling of disinfectant until she got to the very end. This door was labeled T-9, and behind it she found something different. No beds here, but a desk with a computer whose monitor screen was on, meaning that the computer was powered up. She walked in and leaned over the desk. It was an IBM-compatible, and she knew how to work those. It even had a modem, she saw. Well, then, she could do—what?

It took another couple of minutes to decide. She could get a message off to her father, couldn't she?

Fifty feet and one floor away, Ben Farmer got himself a mug of coffee and sat back down into his swivel chair after a quick trip to the men's room. He picked up the copy of *Bio-Watch* he'd been reading. It was three in the morning, and all was quiet on his end of the building.

> DADDY, I'M NOT SURE WHERE I AM. THEY SAY I SIGNED A FORM ALLOW THEM TO SIGN ME IN FOR SOME MEDICAL TESTS, SOME NEW DRUG OR SOMETHING BUT I FEEL PRETTY CRUMMY NOW, AND IM NOT SUREW WHY. THEY HAVE BE HOOKEDUP TO A MEDICAION THING THATS PLUGGED INTOMY ARM, FEEL PRETTY CRUMMY AND I—

Farmer finished the article on global warming, and then checked the TV display. The computer flipped through the operating cameras, showing all the sickies in their beds—

—except one. Huh? he thought, waiting for the cameras to flip back, having missed the code number for the one with the empty bed. It took about a minute. Oh, shit, T-4 was missing. That was the girl, wasn't it? Subject F4, Mary something. Oh, shit, where had she gone to? He activated the direct controls and checked the corridor. Nobody there, either. Nobody had tried to go through the doors into the rest of the complex. They were both locked and alarmed. Where the hell were the docs? The one on duty now was a woman, Lani something, the other staff all disliked her 'cause she was an arrogant, obnoxious bitch. Evidently, Killgore didn't like her either, 'cause she always had the night duty. Palachek, that was her last name. Farmer wondered vaguely what nationality that was as he lifted the microphone for the PA system.

"Dr. Palacheck, Dr. Palachek, please call security," he said over the speaker system. It took about three minutes before his phone rang.

"This is Dr. Palachek. What is it?"

"Subject F4 has taken a walk. I can't spot her on the surveillance cameras."

"On the way. Call Dr. Killgore."

"Yes, Doctor." Farmer called that number from memory.

"Yeah?" came the familiar voice.

"Sir, it's Ben Farmer. F4 has disappeared from her room. We're looking for her now."

"Okay, call me back when you find her." And the phone went dead. Killgore wasn't all that excited. You might be able to walk around for a while, but you couldn't leave the building without someone seeing you.

It was still rush hour in London. Ivan Petrovich Kirilenko had an apartment close to the embassy, which allowed him to walk to work. The sidewalks were crowded with rapidly moving people on their way to their own jobs—the Brits are a polite people, but Londoners tend to race along—and he got to the agreed-upon corner at exactly 8:20 A.M. He carried his copy of the *Daily Telegraph,* a conservative morning newspaper, in his left hand as he stopped at the corner, waiting for the light to change.

The switch was expertly done. No words were exchanged, just a double bump on the elbow to tell him to slacken his grip, to allow one *Telegraph* to be changed for another. It was done below the waist, hidden from the casual view of those around him, and low enough to be hidden by the crowd from cameras that might be looking down from the rooftops around the busy corner. It was all the *rezident* could do not to smile. The exercise of field-craft was always a pleasure for him. Despite his currently high rank, he enjoyed the day-to-day business of espionage, just to prove to himself that he could still do it as well as the youngsters working under him. A few seconds later, the light changed, and a man in a tan coat angled away from him, walking briskly forward with his morning paper. It was two more blocks to the embassy. He walked through the iron gate, into the building, past security, and up to his second-floor office. There, his coat hung on the hook on the back of his door, he sat down and opened the paper on his desk.

So, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had kept his word. There were two sheets of unlined white paper liberally covered with handwritten commentary. CIA Field Officer John Clark was now in Hereford, England, and was now the commander of a new multinational counterterrorist group known as "Rainbow," composed of ten to twenty men selected from English, American, and perhaps some other nationalities. It was a black operation, known only to a handful of highly placed people. His wife was a nurse working at the local public

hospital. His team was well regarded by the local civilians who worked on the SAS base. Rainbow had been on three missions, Bern, Vienna, and Worldpark, where, in every case, it had dealt with the terrorists—Kirilenko noted that Popov had avoided use of the previous term of art, "progressive elements"—efficiently, quickly, and under the cover of local police agencies. The Rainbow team had access to American hardware, which had been used in Spain, as was clear from television coverage of the event, which he recommended that the embassy get hold of. Through the Defense Attaché would probably be best, Popov noted.

On the whole a useful, concise, and informative report, the *rezident* thought, and a fair trade for what he'd exchanged on the street corner.

"Well, see anything this morning?" Cyril Holt asked the head of the surveillance group.

"No," the other "Five" man replied. "He was carrying the usual paper in the usual hand, but the pavement was crowded. There could have been a switch, but if there was, we didn't see it. And we are dealing with a professional, sir," the chief of the surveillance section reminded the Deputy Director of the Security Service.

Popov, his brown wide-brimmed hat in his lap, was sitting in the train on the way back to Hereford, seemingly reading the newspaper, but in fact leafing through the photocopies of the single-spaced pages relayed from Moscow. Kirilenko was as good as his word, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw with pleasure. As a good *rezident* should be. And so, now, here he was, sitting alone in the first-class carriage of the inter-city train out of Paddington Station, learning more about this John Clark chap, and impressed with what he saw. His former agency in Moscow had paid quite a bit of attention to him. There were three photographs, one of them quite good that appeared to have been shot in the office of the RVS chairman himself in Moscow. They'd even taken the time to learn about his family. Two daughters, one still in college in America, and one a physician now married to one Domingo Chavez—*another* CIA field officer! Popov saw, in his middle thirties. Domingo Estebanovich, who'd also met Golovko, and was evidently partnered with the older officer. Both were paramilitary officers . . . might this Chavez be in England, too? A physician, so that was easily checked. Clark and his diminutive partner were officially described as formidable and experienced field-intelligence officers, both spoke Russian in a manner described as literate and cultured—graduates of the U.S. military's language school at Monterey, California, no doubt. Chavez, the report went on, had an undergraduate and a master's degree in International Relations from George Mason University

outside of Washington, doubtless paid for by CIA. So, neither he nor Clark was merely a strong back. Both were educated as well. And the younger one was married to a physician.

Their known and confirmed field operations—*nichevo!* Popov thought. Two really impressive ones done with Russian assistance, *plus* the exfiltration of Gerasimov's wife and daughter ten years before, along with several others suspected but not confirmed . . . "Formidable" was the right word for both of them. Himself a field-intelligence officer for over twenty years, he knew what to be impressed with. Clark had to be a star at Langley, and Chavez was evidently his protégé, following in the wide, deep footsteps of his . . . father-in-law . . . Wasn't *that* interesting?

They found her at three-forty, still typing away on the computer, slowly and badly. Ben Farmer opened the door and saw, first, the IV tree, then the back on the hospital gown.

"Well, hello," the security guard said, not unkindly. "Taking a little walk, eh?"

"I wanted to tell Daddy where I was," Mary Bannister replied.

"Oh, really. By e-mail?"

"That's right," she answered pleasantly.

"Well, how about we get you back to your room now, okay?"

"I guess," she agreed tiredly. Farmer helped her to her feet and walked her out into the corridor, gently, his hand around her waist. It was a short walk, and he opened the door into Treatment 4, got her in bed, and pulled the blanket up. He dimmed the lights before leaving, then found Dr. Palachek walking the halls.

"We may have a problem, Doc."

Lani Palachek didn't like being called "doc," but didn't make an issue of it now. "What's the problem?"

"I found her on the computer in T-9. She says she e-mailed her father."

"What?" That popped the doc's eyes open, Farmer saw.

"That's what she said."

Oh, shit! the doctor thought. "What does she know?"

"Probably not much. None of them know where they are." And even looking out the windows wouldn't help. The scenery showed only wooded hills, not even a parking lot whose auto license plates might give a clue. That part of the operation had been carefully thought through.

"Any way to recover the letter she sent?"

"If we get her password and the server she logged into, maybe," Farmer replied. He was fully checked out on computers. Just about everyone in the company was. "I can try that when we wake her up—

say, in about four hours?"

"Any way to un-send it?"

Farmer shook his head. "I doubt it. Not many of them work that way. We don't have AOL software on the systems, just Eudora, and if you execute the IMMEDIATE-SEND command, it's all-the-way gone, Doc. That goes right into the Net, and once it's there—oh, well."

"Killgore is going to freak."

"Yes, ma'am," the former Marine said. "Maybe we need to codeword access to the 'puters." He didn't add that he'd been off the monitors for a while, and that it was all his fault. Well, he hadn't been briefed on this contingency, and why the hell didn't they lock the rooms they wanted to keep people out of? Or just locked the subjects in their rooms? The winos from the first group of test subjects had spoiled them. None of those street bums had had the ability to use a computer, nor the desire to do much of anything, and it hadn't occurred to anyone that the current group of experimental animals might. Oops. Well, he'd seen bigger mistakes than that happen before. The good news, however, was that there was no way they could know where they were, nor anything about the name of the company that owned the facility. Without those things, what could F4 have told anyone? Nothing of value, Farmer was sure. But she was right about one thing, Farmer knew. Dr. John Killgore was going to be seriously pissed.

The English ploughman's lunch was a national institution. Bread, cheese, lettuce, baby tom*ah*toes, chutney, and some meat—turkey in this case—along with a beer, of course. Popov had found it to be agreeable on his first trip to Britain. He'd taken the time to remove his tie and change into more casual clothes, in order to appear a working-class type.

"Well, hello," the plumber said as he sat down. His name was Edward Miles. A tall, powerfully built man with tattoos on his arm—a British affectation, especially for men in uniform, Popov knew. "Started ahead of me, I see."

"How did the morning go?"

"The usual. Fixed a water-heater in one of the houses, for a French chap, in fact, part of the new team. His wife is a smasher," Miles reported. "Only saw a picture of him. A sergeant in the French army, it would seem."

"Really?" Popov took a bite of his open-face sandwich.

"Yes, have to go back this afternoon to finish up. Then I have a watercooler to fix in the headquarters building. Bloody things, must be fifty years old. I may have to make the part I need to repair the damned thing. Impossible to get them. The maker went out of

business a dog's age ago." Miles started on his own lunch, expertly dividing the various ingredients and then piling them on the freshly made bread.

"Government institutions are all the same," Popov told him.

"That's a fact!" Miles agreed. "And my helper called in sick. Sick my *ahss,"* the plumber said. "No rest for the bloody wicked."

"Well, perhaps my tools can help," Popov offered. They continued talking about sports until lunch was finished, then both stood and walked to Miles's truck, a small blue van with government tags. The Russian tossed his collection of tools in the back. The plumber started it up, pulled onto the road, and headed for the main gate of the Hereford base. The security guard waved them through without a close look.

"See, you just need to know the right bloke to get in here." Miles laughed at his conquest of base security, which, the sign said, was on BLACK status, the lowest alert state. "I suppose the IRA chaps have calmed down quite a bit, and it would never have been a good idea to come here, not against these chaps, like tweaking a lion's nose—bad job, that," he went on.

"I suppose that's so. All I know about the SAS is what I see on the telly. They certainly look like a dangerous lot."

"That's the bloody truth," Miles confirmed. "All you need do is to look at them, the way they walk and such. They know they're lions. And this new lot, they're exactly the same, maybe even better, some folks say. They've had three jobs, or so I understand, and they've all been on the telly. They sorted that mob out at Worldpark for fair, didn't they?"

The base engineer's building was so typical of its type that the ones in the former Soviet Union could hardly have been different. The paint was peeling, and the parking area lumpy and fragmented. The double doors into the back had locks on them, of the type a child could have picked with a hairpin, Popov thought, but, then, the most dangerous weapon in there would have been a screwdriver. Miles parked his truck and waved for Popov to follow him. Inside was also as expected: a cheap desk for the plumber to do his paperwork on, a well-worn swivel chair whose stuffing was visible through the cracked vinyl on the seat, and a pegboard hung with tools, few of which could have been younger than five years, judging by the chipped paint on the forged steel.

"Do they let you purchase new tools?" Popov asked, just to stay in character.

"I have to make a request, with justification, to the chief of the physical-plant department. He's usually a decent bloke about it, and I don't ask for things I don't need." Miles pulled a Post-it note from his

desk. “They want that watercooler fixed today. Why can’t they just drink Coca-Cola?” he wondered aloud. “Well, want to come along?”

“Why not?” Popov stood and followed him out the door. Five minutes later, he regretted it. An armed soldier was outside the entrance to headquarters—and then he realized that this *was* the headquarters for Rainbow. Inside would be Clark, Ivan Timofeyevich, himself.

Miles parked the truck, got out, walked to the rear door, and opened it, pulling out his toolbox.

“I’ll need a small pipe wrench,” he told Popov, who opened the canvas sack he’d brought, and extracted a brand-new twelve-inch Rigid wrench.

“Will this do?”

“Perfect.” Miles waved him along. “Good afternoon, Corp,” he said to the soldier, who nodded politely in reply, but said nothing.

For his part, Popov was more than surprised. In Russia the security would have been much tighter. But this was England, and the plumber was doubtless known to the guard. With that, he was inside, trying not to look around too obviously, and exercising all of his self-control not to appear nervous. Miles immediately set to work, unscrewing the front, setting the cover aside, and peering back into the guts of the watercooler. He held his hand out for the small wrench, which Popov handed to him.

“Nice feel for the adjustment . . . but it’s brand-new, so that’s to be expected . . .” He tightened on a pipe and gave the wrench a twist. “Come on, now . . . there.” He pulled the pipe out and inspected it by holding it up to a light. “Ah, well, *that* I can fix. Bloody miracle,” he added. He slid back on his knees and looked in his toolbox. “The pipe is merely clogged up. Look, must be thirty years of sediment in there.” He handed it over.

Popov made a show of looking through the pipe, but saw nothing at all, the metal tube was so packed with—sediment, he guessed from what Miles had said. Then the plumber took it back and inserted a small screwdriver, jammed it like the ramrod of a musket to clear it out, then switched ends to do the same from the other direction.

“So, we’re going to get clean water for our coffee?” a voice asked.

“I expect so, sir,” Miles replied.

Popov looked up and managed to keep his heart beating. It was Clark, Ivan Timofeyevich, as the KGB file had identified him. Tall, middle fifties, smiling down at the two workmen, dressed in suit and tie, which somehow looked uncomfortable on him. He nodded politely at the man, and looked back down to his tools while thinking as loudly as he could, *Go away!*

“There, that should do it,” Miles said, reaching to put the pipe back

inside, then taking the wrench from Popov to screw it into place. In another moment he stood and turned the plastic handle. The water that came out was dirty. “We just need to keep this open for five minutes or so, sir, to allow the pipe to flush itself out.”

“Fair enough. Thanks,” the American said, then walked off.

“A pleasure, sir,” Miles said to the disappearing back. “That was the boss, Mr. Clark.”

“Really? Polite enough.”

“Yes, decent bloke.” Miles stood and flipped the plastic lever. The water coming out of the spigot was clouded at first, but after a few minutes it appeared totally clear. “Well, that’s one job done. It’s a nice wrench,” Miles said, handing it back. “What do they cost?”

“This one—it’s yours.”

“Well, thank you, my friend.” Miles smiled on his way out the door and past the corporal of the British Army’s military police.

Next they rode around the base. Popov asked where Clark lived, and Miles obliged by taking a left turn and heading off to the senior officers’ quarters.

“Not a bad house, is it?”

“It looks comfortable enough.” It was made of brown brick, with what appeared to be a slate roof, and about a hundred square meters, and a garden in the back.

“I put the plumbing in that one myself,” Miles told him, “back when it was renovated. Ah, that must be the missus.”

A woman came out dressed in a nurse’s uniform, walked to the car, and got in. Popov looked and recorded the image.

“They have a daughter who’s a doctor at the same hospital the mum works at,” Miles told him. “Bun in the oven for that one. I think she’s married to one of the soldiers. Looks just like her mum, tall, blond, and pretty—smasher, really.”

“Where do they live?”

“Oh, over that way, I think,” Miles replied, waving vaguely to the west. “Officer housing, like this one, but smaller.”

“So, what can you offer us?” the police superintendent asked.

Bill Henriksen liked the Australians. They came right to the point. They were sitting in Canberra, Australia’s capital, with the country’s most senior cop and some people in military uniforms.

“Well, first of all, you know my background.” He’d already made sure that his FBI experience and the reputation of his company were well known. “You know that I work with the FBI, and sometimes even with Delta at Fort Bragg. Therefore I have contacts, good ones, and perhaps in some ways better than your own,” he said, risking a small boast.

"Our own SAS are excellent," the chief told him.

"I know it," Bill responded, with a nod and a smile. "We worked together several times when I was in the Hostage Rescue Team, in Perth twice, Quantico and Fort Bragg once each, back when Brigadier Philip Stocker was the boss. What's he do now, by the way?"

"Retired three years ago," the chief answered.

"Well, Phil knows me. Good man, one of the best I ever met," Henriksen pronounced. "Anyway, what do I bring to the party? I work with all the hardware suppliers. I can connect you with H&K for the new MP-10 that our guys like—it was developed for an FBI requirement, because we decided the nine millimeter wasn't powerful enough. However, the new Smith & Wesson ten-millimeter cartridge is—it's a whole new world for the H&K weapon. But anyone can get guns for you. I also do business with E-Systems, Collins, Fredericks-Anders, Micro-Systems, Halliday, Inc., and all the other electronics companies. I know what's happening in communications and surveillance equipment. Your SAS is weak in that area, according to my contacts. I can help fix that, and I can get you good prices for the equipment you need. In addition, my people can help train you up on the new equipment. I have a team of former Delta and HRT people. Mostly NCOs, including the regimental sergeant major from the Special Operations Training Center at Bragg, Dick Voss. He's the best in the world, and he works for me now."

"I've met him," the Aussie SAS major noted. "Yes, he's very good indeed."

"So, what can I do for you?" Henriksen asked. "Well, you've all seen the upsurge of terrorist activity in Europe, and that's a threat you need to take seriously for the Olympics. Your SAS people don't need any advice from me or anyone else on tactics, but what my company can do is to get you state-of-the-art electronics gear for surveillance and communication. I know all the people who custom-make the gear our guys use, and that's stuff your people want to have. I know that—they have to want it. Well, I can help you get exactly what you need, and train your troops up on it. There's no other company in the world with our expertise."

The reply was silence. Henriksen could read their minds, however. The terrorism they'd watched on TV, just like everyone else had, had perked up their ears. It must have. People in this line of work worried for a living, always searched for threats, real and imagined. The Olympic games were a catch of immense prestige for their nation, and also the most prestigious terrorist target on the planet, which the German police had learned the hard way at Munich in 1972. In many ways the Palestinian attack had been the kick-off of the world terrorist game, and as a result the Israeli team was *always* a little better looked-

after than any other national collection of athletes, and invariably had some of their own military's commandos tucked in with the wrestlers, generally with the knowledge of the host nation's security people. *Nobody* wanted Munich to happen again.

The recent terrorism incidents in Europe had lit up awareness across the world, but nowhere more seriously than in Australia, a nation with great sensitivity to crime— not long ago, a madman had shot to death a number of innocent people, including children, which had resulted in the outlawing of guns throughout the country by the parliamentarians in this very city.

"What do you know about the European incidents?" the Aussie SAS officer asked.

Henriksen affected a sensitive look. "Much of what I know is, well, off-the-record, if you know what I mean."

"We all have security clearances," the cop told him.

"Okay, but you see, the problem is, I am *not* cleared into this stuff, exactly, and—oh, what the hell. The team doing the takedowns is called 'Rainbow.' It's a black operation composed mainly of Americans and Brits, but some other NATO nationalities tossed in, too. They're based in U.K., at Hereford. Their commander is an American CIA type, guy name of John Clark. He's a serious dude, guys, and so's his outfit. Their three known operations went down smooth as a baby's ass. They have access to American equipment—helicopters and such—and they evidently have diplomatic agreements in place to operate all over Europe, when the countries with problems invite them in. Has your government talked to anyone about them?"

"We're aware of it," the chief cop replied. "What you said is correct in all details. In honesty, I didn't know the name of the commander. Anything else you can tell us about him?"

"I've never met the man. Only know him by reputation. He's a very senior field officer, close to the DCI, and I gather that our president knows him personally as well. So, you would expect him to have a very good intelligence staff and, well, his operational people have shown what they can do, haven't they?"

"Bloody right," the major observed. "The Worldpark job was as good a bit of sorting out as I have ever seen, even better than the Iranian Embassy job in London, way back when."

"You could have handled it about the same way," Henriksen observed generously, and meaning it. The Australian Special Air Service was based on the British model, and while it didn't seem to get much work, the times he'd exercised with them during his FBI career had left him in little doubt as to their abilities. "Which squadron, Major?"

"First Saber," the young officer replied.

"I remember Major Bob Fremont and—"

"He's our colonel now," the major informed him.

"Really? I have to keep better track. That's one kick-ass officer. He and Gus Werner got along very well." Henriksen paused. "Anyway, that's what I bring to the party, guys. My people and I all speak the language. We have all the contacts we need on the operational side and the industrial side. We have access to all the newest hardware. And we can be down here to assist your people in three or four days from the moment you say 'come.' "

There were no additional questions. The top cop seemed properly impressed, and the SAS major even more so.

"Thanks very much indeed for coming," the policeman said, standing. It was hard not to like the Aussies, and their country was still largely in a pristine state. A forbidding desert, most of it, into which camels had been admitted, the only place outside Arabia where they'd done well. He'd read somewhere that Jefferson Davis, of all people, had tried to get them to breed in the American Southwest, but it hadn't worked out, probably because the initial population had been too small to survive. He couldn't decide if that was bad luck or not. The animals weren't native to either country, and interfering with nature's plan was usually a bad thing to do. On the other hand, horses and burros weren't native, either, and he liked the idea of wild horses, so long as they were properly controlled by predators.

No, he reminded himself, Australia wasn't really pristine, was it? Dingoes, the wild dogs of the Outback, had also been introduced, and they'd killed off or crowded out the marsupial animals that belonged there. The thought made him vaguely sad. There were relatively few people here, but even that small number had still managed to upset the ecostructure. Maybe that was a sign that man simply couldn't be trusted anywhere, he thought, even a few of them in a whole continental landmass. And so, the Project was needed here as well.

It was a pity he didn't have more time. He wanted to see the Great Barrier Reef. An avid skin diver, he'd never made it down here with flippers and wet suit to see that most magnificent exemplar of natural beauty. Well, maybe someday, in a few years, it would be easier, Bill thought, as he looked across the table at his hosts. He couldn't think of them as fellow human beings, could he? They were competitors, rivals for the ownership of the planet, but unlike himself they were poor stewards. Not all of them, perhaps. Maybe some loved nature as much as he did, but, unfortunately, there wasn't time to identify them, and so they had to be lumped together as enemies, and for that, they'd have to pay the price. A pity.

Skip Bannister had been worried for some time. He hadn't wanted his

daughter to go off to New York in the first place. It was a long way from Gary, Indiana. Sure, the papers said that crime was down in that dreadful city on the Hudson, but it was still too damned big and too damned anonymous for real people to live in—especially single girls. For him, Mary would always be his little girl, remembered forever as a pink, wet, noisy package in his arms, delivered by a mother who'd died six years later, a daughter who'd grown up needing dollhouses to be built, a series of bicycles to be assembled, clothes to be bought, an education provided for, and then, finally, to his great discomfort, the little bird had finally grown her feathers and flown from the nest—for New York City, a hateful, crowded place full of hateful, obnoxious people. But he'd kept his peace on that, as he'd done when Mary had dated boys he hadn't been all that crazy about, because Mary had been as strong-willed as all girls her age tended to be. Off to make her fortune, meet Mr. Right, or something like that.

But then she'd disappeared, and Skip Bannister had had no idea what to do. It had started when she hadn't called for five straight days. So, he'd called her New York number and let the phone ring for several minutes. Maybe she'd been out on a date or perhaps working late. He would have tried her work number, but she'd never gotten around to giving it to him. He'd indulged her all through her life—maybe a mistake, he thought now, or maybe not—as single fathers tended to do.

But now she was gone. He'd kept calling that number at all hours of day and night, but the phone had just kept ringing, and after a week of it he'd gotten worried. Another few days and he'd gotten worried enough to call the police to make a missing-person's report. That had been a very disagreeable event. The officer he'd finally gotten had asked all manner of questions about his daughter's previous conduct, and explained patiently after twenty minutes that, you know, young women did this sort of thing all the time, and they almost always turned up safe somewhere, hey, you know, it's just part of growing up, proving to themselves that they're their own persons. And so, somewhere in New York was a paper file or a computer entry on one Bannister, Mary Eileen, female, missing, whom the NYPD didn't even regard as important enough for them to send an officer to her apartment on the Upper West Side to check things out. Skip Bannister had done that himself, driving in only to find a "super" who asked him if he was going to take his daughter's stuff out, because he hadn't seen her in weeks, and the rent would soon be due . . .

At that point Skip—James Thomas—Bannister had panicked and gone to the local police precinct station to make a report in person and demand further action, and learned that he'd come to the wrong place, but, yes, they could take down a missing-person's report there,

too. And there, from a fiftyish police detective, he'd heard exactly the same thing he'd listened to over the phone. Look, it's only been a few weeks. No dead female of your daughter's description has turned up—so, she's probably alive and healthy somewhere, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of these cases turn out to be a girl who just wanted to spread her wings some and fly on her own, y'know?

Not his Mary, James T. "Skip" Bannister had replied to a calm and unlistening policeman. Sir, they all say that, and in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases—no, you know, it's actually higher than that—that's how it turns out, and I'm sorry but we don't have the manpower to investigate all of these cases. Sorry, but that's just how this sort of thing works. So, why not just go home and wait for the phone to ring?

That he'd done, and driven all the way back to Gary in a rage that grew out of his panic, arriving, finally, to find six messages on his answering machine, and he'd run through them quickly, hoping to—but not finding one from his missing daughter.

Like most Americans, James Thomas Bannister owned a personal computer, and while he'd bought it on a whim and not really used it all that much, this day, like every other, he turned it on and logged onto the Net to check his e-mail. And finally, this morning, he saw a letter in the IN box from his daughter. He moved his mouse, clicking on the letter, which sprang into life on his RGB monitor and—

—now he was truly panicked.

She didn't know where she was? Medical experiments? Most frightening of all, the letter was disjointed and poorly written. Mary had always gotten good marks in school. Her handwriting was always neat and easy to read. Her letters had been like reading stories in the morning paper, loving, of course, and clear, concise, easy to read. This could have been written by a three-year-old, Skip Bannister thought. Not even typed neatly, and his daughter knew how to type well—she'd gotten an "A" in that class.

What to do now? His little girl was missing. . . . And now his gut told him that his daughter was in danger. His stomach compressed into a knot just below his sternum. His heart speeded up. His face broke out in beads of sweat. He closed his eyes, thinking as hard as he could. Then he picked up his phone book. On the first page were the emergency numbers, from which he selected one and dialed it.

"FBI," the female voice said. "How can I help you?"

CHAPTER 21

STAGES

The last of the winos had outlasted all predictions, but it had only prolonged the inevitable. This one was named Henry, a black man of forty-six years who only appeared to be twenty years older. A veteran, he'd told everyone who'd listen, and a man with a considerable thirst, which had not, miraculously, done a great deal of liver damage. And his immune system had done a valiant job of fighting off Shiva. He was probably from the deep part of the gene pool, Dr. Killgore thought, for what little good it had done him. It would have been useful to take a history from him, to find out how long his parents had lived, but he was too far gone by the time they'd realized it. But now, the printout of his blood work said, he was surely doomed. His liver had finally succumbed to the Shiva strands, and his blood chemistry was off the chart in every category that mattered. In a way, it was too bad. The doctor still living in Killgore somehow wanted patients to survive. Maybe it was sportsmanship, he thought, heading down to the patient's room.

"How are we doing, Henry?" the doctor asked.

"Shitty, Doc, just shitty. Feels like my belly is coming apart inside out."

"You can feel it?" Killgore asked. That was a surprise. He was getting nearly twelve milligrams of morphine a day now—a lethal dose for a healthy man, but the really sick ones could somehow take a lot more of the drug.

"Some," Henry replied, grimacing.

"Well, let me fix that for you, okay?" The physician extracted a 50cc needle from his pocket, along with a vial of Dilaudid. Two to four milligrams was a strong dose for a normal person. He decided to go to forty, just to be sure. Henry had suffered enough. He filled the syringe, flicked the plastic body with a fingernail to take care of the little air bubble, then inserted it in the IV line, and pushed the plunger down quickly.

"Ah," Henry had time to say as the dazzling rush hit him. And just that fast, his face went still, eyes wide open, pupils dilated in the last pleasure he would ever know. Ten seconds later, Killgore touched the

right carotid artery. There was nothing happening there, and Henry's breathing had stopped at once. Just to be completely sure, Killgore took his stethoscope from his pocket and touched it to Henry's chest. Sure enough, the heart had stopped.

"Nice fight, partner," the doctor told the body. Then he unhooked the IV line, switched off the electronic drug monitor system, and tossed the sheet over the face. So, that was the end of the winos. Most of them had checked out early, except for Henry. The bastard was a fighter to the end, defying all predictions. Killgore wondered if they might have tried one of the vaccines on him—"B" would almost certainly have saved him, but then they'd just have a healthy wino on their hands, and the Project wasn't aimed at saving that sort of person. What use was he to anyone, really? Except maybe a liquor-store owner. Killgore left the room, waving to an orderly as he did so. In fifteen minutes, Henry would be ashes floating in the air, his chemicals useful to some grass and trees as fertilizer when they fell back to earth, which was about as much a contribution as a person like that could hope to make.

Then it was time to see Mary, F4, in her room.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied sleepily. Whatever discomfort she ought to be feeling was well submerged in the morphine drip.

"You took a little walk last night?" Killgore asked, checking her pulse. It was 92, strong and regular still. Well, she wasn't really into serious symptoms yet, though she'd never last as long as Henry had.

"Wanted to tell Daddy that I was okay," she explained.

"Think he's worried?"

"I haven't talked to him since I got here, and, I thought . . ." She dozed off.

"Yeah, sure, you thought," Dr. Killgore said to the unconscious form, "and we'll make sure that doesn't happen again." He changed the programming on the IV monitor, increasing the morphine drip by 50 percent. That should keep her in the bed.

Ten minutes later he was outside, walking north to where . . . there it was, and he saw Ben Farmer's pickup truck parked in the usual place. The inside of the building smelled of birds, as well it might, though it looked more like a horse barn. Every door was barred too closely for an arm to reach in—or for a bird to get out. He walked down the row of doors until he found Farmer in with one of his favorites.

"Working overtime?" Killgore asked.

"A little," the security man agreed. "Come on, Festus," he said next. The barn owl flapped its wings angrily then lifted off for the six-foot trip to Farmer's gloved arm. "I think you're all fixed, my friend."

"Doesn't look very friendly," the physician observed.

"Owls are hard to work with sometimes, and Festus has a mean side," the former Marine told him, walking the owl back to its perch and leaving him there. Then he slipped out of the door. "Not the smartest raptors, owls. Hard as hell to train. Not even going to try with him."

"Just release him?"

"Yeah. End of the week, I think." Farmer nodded. "It's been two months, but his wing's all healed now. I 'spect he's ready to go back out and find hisself a barn full o' mice to eat."

"Was that the one hit by the car?"

"No, that's Niccolo, the great horned owl. No, Festus, I think he probably flew into a power line. Wasn't looking the right way, I guess. Both his eyes seem to work just fine. But birds screw up, too, just like people. Anyway, I fixed his broke wing—did a good job of it, if I do say so myself." Farmer allowed himself a satisfied smile. "But ol' Festus ain't very grateful about it."

"Ben, you ought to be a doctor, you're so good at this. Were you a medic in the Marines?"

"Just a grunt. Marines get their medics from the Navy, Doc." Farmer took off his thick leather gauntlet and flexed his fingers before putting it back on. "You here about Mary?"

"What happened?"

"Truth? I was off taking a leak, sat back down reading my magazine, and when I looked up, she wasn't there. I figure she was loose for, oh, ten minutes before I put the call out. I screwed up, Doc, and that's a fact," he admitted.

"No real harm done, I think."

"Yeah, well, how about me moving that computer to a room with a lock on the door, eh?" He walked to the end of the room, opened another door. "Hey, Baron," the man said next. A moment later, the Harris hawk jumped onto the offered leather arm. "Yeah, that's my buddy. You're ready to go back outside, too, ain't you? Find yourself some juicy rabbits, maybe?"

There was a real nobility to these birds, Killgore thought. Their eyes were sharp and clear, their motions powerful and redolent of purpose, and while that purpose might seem cruel to their prey, that was Nature at work, wasn't it? These raptors kept the balance in place, winnowing out the slow, the crippled, and the stupid—but more than that, the birds of prey were just plain noble in the way they soared upward and looked down on the world that lay beneath them and decided who would live and who would die. Much as he and his fellow team members were doing, Killgore thought, though human eyes lacked the hardness he saw here. He had to smile at Baron, who

was soon to be released into the wild, soon to soar on the thermals above Kansas. . . .

"Will I be able to do this when we're out in the Project?" Farmer asked, setting Baron back on his wooden perch.

"What do you mean, Ben?"

"Well, Doc, some people say that I won't be able to keep birds once we're out there, 'cuz it interferes, like. Hell, I take good care of my birds—you know, captive raptors live two, three times as long as the ones in the wild, and, yeah, I know that upsets things a little bit, but, damn it—"

"Ben, it's not big enough to worry about. I understand you and the hawks, okay? I like 'em, too."

"Nature's own smart bomb, Doc. I love to watch 'em work. And when they get hurt, I know how to fix 'em."

"You're very good at that. All your birds look healthy."

"Oughta be. I feed 'em good. I live-trap mice for 'em. They like their meals warm, y'know?" He walked back to his worktable, took his gauntlet off, and hung it on the hook. "Anyway, that's my work for the morning."

"Okay, get on home, Ben. I'll see that the computer room is secured. Let's not have any more subjects taking any walks."

"Yes, sir. How's Henry doing?" Farmer asked, fishing in his pocket for his car keys.

"Henry checked out."

"I didn't figure he had much time left. So, no more of the winos, eh?" He saw the shake of Killgore's head. "Well, too bad for him. Tough bastard, wasn't he?"

"Sure was, Ben, but that's the way it goes."

"Sure 'nuff, Doc. Shame we can't just lay the body out for the buzzards. They have to eat, too, but it is kinda gross to watch how they do it." He opened the door. "See you tonight, Doc."

Killgore followed him out, killing the lights. No, they couldn't deny Ben Farmer the right to keep his birds. Falconry was the real sport of kings, and from it you could learn so much about birds, how they hunted, how they lived. They'd fit into Nature's Great Plan. The problem was that the Project had some really radical people in it, like the ones who objected to having physicians, because they interfered with Nature—curing *people* of disease was interference, allowed them to multiply too fast and upset the balance again. Yeah, sure. Maybe in a hundred years, more like two hundred, they might have Kansas fully repopulated—but not all of them would remain in Kansas, would they? No, they'd spread out to study the mountains, the wetlands, the rain forests, the African savanna, and then they'd return to Kansas to report what they'd learned, to show their videotapes of Nature in

action. Killgore looked forward to that. Like most Project members he devoured the Discovery Channel on his cable system. There was so *much* to learn, so *much* to understand, because he, like many, wanted to get the whole thing, to understand Nature in Her entirety. That was a tall order, of course, maybe an unrealistic one, but if he didn't make it, then his children would. Or their children, who'd be raised and educated to appreciate Nature in all her glory. They'd travel about, field scientists all. He wondered what the ones who went to the dead cities would think. . . . It'd probably be a good idea to make them go, so that they'd understand how many mistakes man had made and learn not to repeat them. Maybe he'd lead some of those field trips himself. New York would be the big one, the really impressive don't-do-this lesson. It would take a thousand years, maybe more, before the buildings collapsed from rusting structural steel and lack of maintenance. . . . The stone parts would never go away, but relatively soon, maybe ten years or so, deer would return to Central Park.

The vultures would do just fine for some time. Lots of bodies to eat . . . or maybe not. At first the corpses would be buried in the normal civilized way, but in a few weeks those systems would be overwhelmed, and then people would die, probably in their own beds and then—rats, of course. The coming year would be a banner one for rats. The only thing was: Rats depended on people to thrive. They lived on garbage and the output of civilization, a fairly specialized parasite, and this coming year they'd have a gut-filling worldwide feast and then—what? What would happen to the rat population? Dogs and cats would live off them, probably, gradually reaching a balance of some sort, but without millions of people to produce garbage for the rats to eat, their numbers would decline over the next five or ten years. That would be an interesting study for one of the field teams. How quickly would the rat population trend down, and how far down might it go?

Too many of the people in the Project concerned themselves with the great animals. Everyone loved wolves and cougars, noble beautiful animals so harshly slaughtered by men because of their depredation of domestic animals. And they'd do just fine once the trapping and poisoning stopped. But what of the lesser predators? What about the rats? Nobody seemed to care about them, but they were part of the system, too. You couldn't apply aesthetics to the study of Nature, could you? If you did, then how could you justify killing Mary Bannister, Subject F4? She was an attractive, bright, pleasant woman, after all, not very like Chester, or Pete, or Henry, not offensive to behold as they had been . . . but like them, a person who didn't understand Nature, didn't appreciate her beauty, didn't see her place in the great system of life, and was therefore unworthy to participate.

Too bad for her. Too bad for all the test subjects, but the planet was dying, and had to be saved, and there was only one way to do it, because too many others had no more understanding of the system than the lower animals who were an unknowing part of the system itself. Only man could hope to understand the great balance. Only man had the responsibility to sustain that balance, and if that meant the reduction of his own species, well, everything had its price. The greatest and finest irony of all was that it required a huge sacrifice, and that the sacrifice came from man's own scientific advances. Without the instrumentalities that threatened to kill the planet, the ability to save it would not have existed. Well, of such irony was reality made, the epidemiologist told himself.

The Project would save Nature Herself, and the Project was made of relatively few people, less than a thousand, plus those who had been selected to survive and continue the effort, the unknowing ones whose lives would not be forfeit to the crimes committed in their names. Most would never understand the cause for their survival—that they were the wife or child or close relative of a Project member, or had skills that the Project needed: airplane pilots, mechanics, farmers, communication specialists, and the like. Someday they might figure it out—that was inevitable, of course. Some people talked, and others listened. When the listeners figured it out, they would probably be horrified, but then it would be far too late for them to do anything about it. There was a wonderful inevitability to it all. Oh, there would be some things he'd miss. The theater, the good restaurants in New York, for example, but surely there would be some good cooks in the Project—certainly there would be wonderful raw materials for them to work with. The Project's installation in Kansas would grow all the grain they needed, and there would be cattle as well, until the buffalo spread out.

The Project would support itself by hunting for much of its meat. Needless to say, some members objected to that—they objected to killing anything, but cooler and wiser heads had prevailed on that issue. Man was both a predator *and* a toolmaker, and so guns were okay, too. A far more merciful way to kill game, and man had to eat, too. And so, in a few years men would saddle up their horses and ride out to shoot a few buffalo, butcher them, and bring back the healthy low-fat meat. And deer, and pronghorn antelope, and elk.

Cereals and vegetables would be grown by the farmers. They'd all eat well, and live in harmony with Nature—guns weren't all that great an advancement on bows and arrows, were they?—and they'd be able to study the natural world in relative peace.

It was a beautiful future to look forward to, though the initial four to eight months would be pretty dreadful. The stuff that'd be on TV,

and the radio, and the newspapers—while they lasted—would be horrible, but again, everything had a price. Humanity as the dominant force on the planet had to die, to be replaced by Nature herself, with just enough of the right people to observe and appreciate what she was and what she did.

"Dr. Chavez, please," Popov told the operator at the hospital.

"Wait, please," the female voice replied. It took seventy seconds.

"Dr. Chavez," another female voice said.

"Oh, sorry, I have the wrong number," Popov said, and cradled the phone. Excellent, both Clark's wife and daughter worked at the hospital, just as he'd been told. That confirmed that this Domingo Chavez was over in Hereford as well. So, he knew both the chief of this Rainbow group, and one of its senior staff members. Chavez probably was one of those. Maybe the chief of intelligence for the group? No, Popov thought, he was too junior for that. That would be a Brit, a senior man from MI-6, someone known to the continental services. Chavez was evidently a paramilitary officer, just as his mentor was. That meant that Chavez was probably a soldier type, maybe a field leader? A supposition on his part, but a likely one. A young officer, physically fit by reports. Too junior for much of anything else. Yes, that made sense.

Popov had stolen a base map from Miles, and had marked the location of Clark's home on it. From that he could easily deduce the route his wife took to the local hospital, and figuring out her hours would not be terribly difficult. It had been a good week for the intelligence officer, and now it was time to leave. He packed his clothes and walked to his rented car, then drove to the lobby to check out. At London-Heathrow, a ticket was waiting for the 747 flight back to New York's JFK International. He had some time, so he rested in the British Airways first-class lounge, always a comfortable place, with the wine—even champagne—bottles set out in the open. He indulged himself, then sat on one of the comfortable couches and picked up a complimentary newspaper, but instead of reading, he started going over the things he'd learned and wondering what use his employer would wish to make of it. There was no telling at the moment, but Popov's instincts made him think about telephone numbers he had in Ireland.

"Yes, this is Henriksen," he said into the hotel phone.

"This is Bob Aukland," the voice said. He was the senior cop at the meeting, Bill remembered. "I have good news for you."

"Oh? What might that be, sir?"

"The name's Bob, old man. We spoke with the Minister, and he

agrees that we should award Global Security the consulting contract for the Olympics."

"Thank you, sir."

"So, could you come down in the morning to work out the details with me?"

"Okay, good. When can I go out to the facility?"

"I'll fly you down myself tomorrow afternoon."

"Excellent, Bob. Thank you for listening to me. What about your SAS people?"

"They'll be at the stadium as well."

"Great. I look forward to working with them," Henriksen told them.

"They want to see that new communications equipment you told them about."

"E-Systems has just started manufacturing it for our Delta people. Six ounces per unit, real-time 128-bit encryption, X-band frequency, side-band, burst-transmission. Damned near impossible to intercept, and highly reliable."

"For what do we deserve this honor, Ed?" Clark asked.

"You have a fairy godmother at the White House. The first thirty sets go to you. Ought to be there in two days," the DCI told Rainbow Six.

"Who at the White House?"

"Carol Brightling, Presidential Science Advisor. She's into the cryppie gear, and after the Worldpark job she called me to suggest you get these new radios."

"She's not cleared into us, Ed," Clark remembered. "At least, I don't remember her name on the list."

"Well, somebody must have told her something, John. When she called, she knew the codeword, and she *is* cleared into damned near everything, remember. Nuclear weapons, and all the commo stuff."

"The President doesn't like her, or so I hear. . . ."

"Yeah, she's a radical tree-hugger, I know. But she's pretty smart, too, and getting you this gear was a good call on her part. I talked to Sam Wilson down at Snake Headquarters, and his people have signed off on it with enthusiasm. Jam-proof, encrypted, digital clarity, and light as a feather." As well it ought to be, at seven thousand dollars per set, but that included the R&D costs, Foley reminded himself. He wondered if it might be something his field officers could use for covert operations.

"Okay, two days, you said?"

"Yep. Regular trash-haul out of Dover to RAF Mildenhall, and a truck from there, I guess. Oh, one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Tell Noonan that his letter about that people-finder gadget has generated results. The company's sending a new unit for him to play with—four of them, as a matter of fact. Improved antenna and GPS locator, too. What is that thing, anyway?"

"I've only seen it once. It seems to track people from their heartbeats."

"Oh, how's it do that?" Foley asked.

"Damned if I know, Ed, but I've seen it track people through blank walls. Noonan's going nuts over it. He said it needed improvements, though."

"Well, DKL—that's the company—must have listened. Four new sets are in the same shipment with a request for your evaluation of the upgrade."

"Okay, I'll pass that along to Tim."

"Any further word on the terrorists you got in Spain?"

"We're faxing it over later today. They've ID'd six of them now. Mainly suspected Basques, the Spanish figured out. The French have largely struck out, just two probables—well, one of them's fairly certain. And still no clue on who might be sending these people out of the dugout after us."

"Russian," Foley said. "A KGB RIF, I bet."

"I won't disagree with that, seeing how that guy showed up in London—we think—but the 'Five' guys haven't turned up anything else."

"Who's working the case at 'Five'?"

"Holt, Cyril Holt," Clark answered.

"Oh, okay, I know Cyril. Good man. You can believe what he tells you."

"That's nice, but right now I believe it when he says he doesn't have jackshit. I've been toying with the idea of calling Sergey Nikolay'ch myself and asking for a little help."

"I don't think so, John. That'll have to go through me, remember? I like Sergey, too, but not on this one. Too open-ended."

"That leaves us dead in the water, Ed. I do not like the fact that there's some Russkie around who knows my name and my current job."

Foley had to nod at that. No field officer liked the idea of being known to anyone at all, and Clark had ample reason to worry about it, with his family sharing his current duty station. He'd never taken Sandy into the field to use them as cover on a job, as some field officers had done in their careers. No officer had ever lost a spouse that way, but a few had been roughed up, and it was now contrary to CIA policy. More than that, John had lived his entire professional life as an unperson, a ghost seen by few, recognized by none, and known

only to those on his own side. He would no more wish to change that than to change his sex, but his anonymity had been changed, and it upset him. Well, the Russians knew him and knew about him, and that had been his own doing in Japan and Iran; he must have known then that his actions would have consequences.

"John, they know you. Hell, Golovko knows you personally, and it figures they'd be interested in you, right?"

"I know, Ed, but—damn it!"

"John, I understand, but you're high-profile now, and there's no evading that fact. So, just sit tight, do your job, and let us rattle some bushes to find out what's happening, okay?"

"I guess, Ed" was the resigned reply.

"If I turn anything, I'll be on the phone to you immediately."

"Aye aye, sir," Clark replied, using the naval term that had been part of his life a long time ago. Now he reserved it for things he really didn't like.

The Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Gary, Indiana, FBI field office was a serious black man named Chuck Ussery. Forty-four, a recent arrival in this office, he'd been in the Bureau for seventeen years, and before that a police officer in Chicago. Skip Bannister's call had rapidly been routed to his desk, and inside five minutes he'd told the man to drive to the office at once. Twenty-five minutes later, the man came in. Five-eleven, stocky, fifty-five or so, and profoundly frightened, the agent saw. First of all he got the man sat down and offered him coffee, which was refused. Then came the questions, routine at first. Then the questions got a lot more directed.

"Mr. Bannister, do you have the e-mail you told me about?"

James Bannister pulled the sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it across.

Three paragraphs, Ussery saw, disjointed and ungrammatical. Confused. His first impression was . . .

"Mr. Bannister, do you have any reason to suspect that your daughter has ever used drugs of any kind?"

"Not my Mary!" was the immediate reply. "No way. Okay, she likes to drink beer and wine, but no drugs, not my little girl, not ever!"

Ussery held up his hands. "Please, I understand how you feel. I've worked kidnappings before and—"

"You think she's been kidnapped?" Skip Bannister asked, now faced with the confirmation of his greatest fear. That was far worse than the suggestion that his daughter was a doper.

"Based on this letter, yes, I think it's a possibility, and we will treat this case as a kidnapping investigation." Ussery lifted his phone. "Send Pat O'Connor in, will you?" he told his secretary.

Supervisory Special Agent Patrick D. O'Connor was one of the Gary office's squad supervisors. Thirty-eight, red-haired, fair-skinned, and very fit, O'Connor headed the office kidnapping squad. "Yeah, Chuck?" he said coming in.

"This is Mr. James Bannister. He has a missing daughter, age twenty-one, disappeared in New York about a month ago. Yesterday he got this on his e-mail." Ussery handed it over.

O'Connor scanned it and nodded. "Okay, Chuck."

"Pat, it's your case. Run with it."

"You bet, Chuck. Mr. Bannister, would you come with me, please?"

"Pat runs these cases for us," Ussery explained. "He will take charge of it, and report to me on a daily basis. Mr. Bannister, the FBI treats kidnappings as major felonies. This will be a top-priority case until we clear it. Ten men, Pat?"

"For starters, yes, more in New York. Sir," he said to their guest, "we all have kids. We know how you feel. If there's a way to locate your daughter for you, we'll find it. Now I need to ask you a bunch of questions so that we can get started, okay?"

"Yeah." The man stood and followed O'Connor out into the office bay. He'd be there for the next three hours, telling everything he knew about his daughter and her life in New York to this and other agents. First of all he handed over a recent photograph, a good one as it turned out. O'Connor looked at it. He'd keep it for the case file. O'Connor and his squad hadn't worked a kidnapping in several years. It was a crime the FBI had essentially extinguished in the United States—kidnapping for money, in any case. There was just no percentage in it. The FBI *always* solved them, came down on the perps like the Wrath of God. Today's kidnappings were generally of children, and, parental kidnappings aside, were almost always by sexual deviants who most often used them for personal gratification, and often as not killed them thereafter. If anything, that merely increased the FBI's institutional rage. The Bannister Case, as it was already being called, would have the highest priority in manpower and resources in every office it might touch. Pending cases against organized crime families would be set aside for this one. That was just part of the FBI's institutional ethos.

Four hours after Skip Bannister's arrival in the Gary office, two agents from the New York field division in the Jacob Javits Building downtown knocked on the door of the superintendent of Mary Bannister's dingy apartment building. The super gave them the key and told them where the apartment was. The two agents entered and commenced their search, looking first of all for notes, photographs, correspondence, anything that might help. They'd been there an hour

when a NYPD detective showed up, summoned by the FBI office to assist. There were 30,000 policemen in the city, and for a kidnapping, they could all be called upon to assist in the investigation and canvassing.

"Got a picture?" the detective asked.

"Here." The lead agent handed over the one faxed from Gary.

"You know, I got a call a few weeks ago from somebody in Des Moines, girl's name was . . . Pretloe, I think. Yeah, Anne Pretloe, mid-twenties, legal secretary. Lived a few blocks from here. Just up and disappeared. Didn't show up for work—just vanished. Roughly the same age and sex, guys," the detective pointed out. "Connection, maybe?"

"Been checking Jane Does?" the junior agent asked. He didn't have to go further. Their instant thought was the obvious one: Was there a serial killer operating in New York City? That sort of criminal nearly always went after women between eighteen and thirty years of age, as selective a predator as there was anywhere in nature.

"Yeah, but nothing that fit the Pretloe girl's description, or this one for that matter." He handed the photo back. "This case is a head-scratcher. Find anything?"

"Not yet," the senior agent replied. "Diary, but nothing useful in it. No photos of men. Just clothes, cosmetics, normal stuff for a girl this age."

"Prints?"

A nod. "That's next. We have our guy on the way now." But they all knew that this was a thin reed, after the apartment had been vacant for a month. The oils that made fingerprints evaporated over time, though there was some hope here, in a climate-controlled and sealed apartment.

"This one's not going to be easy," the NYPD detective observed next.

"They never are," the senior FBI agent replied.

"What if there's more than two?" the other FBI agent asked.

"Lots of people turn up missing in this town," the detective said. "But I'll run a computer check."

Subject F5 was a hot little number, Killgore saw. And she liked Chip, too. That wasn't very good news for Chip Smitton, who hadn't been exposed to Shiva by injection, vaccine testing, or the fogging system. No, he'd been exposed by sexual contact only, and now his blood was showing antibodies, too. So, that means of transmission worked also, and better yet, it worked female-to-male, not just male-to-female. Shiva was everything they'd hoped it would be.

It was distasteful to watch people making love. Not the least bit

arousing for him, playing voyeur. Anne Pretloe, F5, was within two days of symptoms, judging by her blood work, eating, drinking, and being very merry right before his eyes on the black-and-white monitor. Well, the tranquilizers had lowered every subject's resistance to loose behavior, and there was no telling what she was like in real life, though she certainly knew the techniques well enough.

Strangely, Killgore had never paid attention to this sort of thing in animal tests. Rats, he imagined, came into season, and when they did, the boy rats and girl rats must have gotten it on, but somehow he'd never noticed. He respected rats as a life-form, but didn't find their sexual congress the least bit interesting, whereas here, he had to admit to himself, he *did* find his eyes returning to the screen every few seconds. Well, Pretloe, Subject F5, was the cutest of the bunch, and if he'd found her in a singles bar, he might have offered her a drink and said hello and . . . let things develop. But she was doomed, too, as doomed as white, bred-for-the-purpose lab rats. Those cute little pink-eyed creatures were used all over the world because they were genetically identical, and so test results in one country would match the test results generated anywhere else in the world. They probably didn't have the wherewithal to survive in the wild, and that was too bad. But their white color would work against them—cats and dogs would spot them far more easily, and that was not a good thing in the wild, was it? And they were an artificial species anyway, not part of Nature's plan, but a work of Man, and therefore unworthy of continuance. A pity they were cute, but that was a subjective, not objective, observation, and Killgore had long since learned to differentiate between the two. After all, Pretloe, F5, was cute, too, and his pity for her was a lingering atavistic attitude on his part, unworthy of a Project member. But that got him thinking as he watched Chip Smitton screw Anne Pretloe. This was the kind of thing Hitler might have done with Jews, saved a small number of them as human lab rats, maybe as crash-test dummies for auto-safety tests. . . . So, did that make *him* a Nazi? Killgore thought. They were using F5 and M7 as such . . . but, no, they didn't discriminate on race or creed, or gender, did they? There were no politics involved, really—well, maybe, depending on how one defined the term, not in the way *he* defined the term. This was science, after all. The whole Project was *about* science and love of Nature. Project members included all races and categories of people, though not much in the way of religions, unless you considered love of Nature to be a religion . . . which in a way it was, the doctor told himself. Yes, surely it was.

What they were doing on his TV screen was natural, or nearly so—as it *had* been largely instigated by mood depressants—but the mechanics certainly were. So were their instincts, he to spread his

seed as far as possible, and she to receive his seed—and *his own,* Killgore's mind went on, to be a predator, and through his depredations to decide which members of that species would live and which would not.

These two would not live, attractive as both were . . . like the lab rats with their cute white hair and cute pink eyes and twitching white whiskers. Well, none of them would be around much longer, would they? It was aesthetically troubling, but a valid choice in view of the future that they all beheld.

CHAPTER 22

COUNTERMEASURES

"So, nothing else from our Russian friend?"Bill Tawney asked.

"Nothing," Cyril Holt confirmed. "Tapes of Kirilenko show that he walks to work the same way every day and at exactly the same time, when the streets are crowded, stops in his pub for a pint four nights out of five, and bumps into all manner of people. But all it takes is a minor attempt at disguise and a little knowledge of trade-craft to outfox us, unless we really tighten our coverage, and there's too great a chance that Ivan Petrovich would notice it and simply upgrade his own efforts to remain covert. It's a chance we'd prefer not to take."

"Quite so," Tawney had to agree, despite his disappointment. "Nothing from other sources?"

"Other sources" meant whomever the Security Service might have working for them inside the Russian Embassy. There almost had to be someone there, but Holt would not discuss it over a telephone line, encrypted or not, because if there was one thing you had to protect in this business, it was the identity of your sources. Not protecting them could get them killed.

"No, Bill, nothing. Vanya hasn't spoken over his phone line to Moscow on this subject. Nor has he used his secure fax line. Whatever discussions developed from this incident, well, we do not have even a confirmed face, just that chap in the pub, and that might well have been nothing. Three months ago, I had one of my chaps strike up a conversation with him at the pub, and they talked about football—he's a serious fan, and he knows the game quite well, and never even revealed his nationality. His accent is bloody perfect. So that chap in the photo might well be nothing at all, just another coincidence. Kirilenko is a professional, Bill. He doesn't make many mistakes. Whatever information came out of this was doubtless written up and couriered off."

"So we probably have a KGB RIF prowling around London still, probably with whatever information Moscow has on our Mr. Clark, and doing what, we do not know."

"Correct, Bill," Holt agreed. "I can't say that I like it either, but there you are."

"What have you turned up on KGB-PIRA contacts?"

"We have a few things. One photo of someone else from a meeting in Dublin eight years ago, and oral reports of other contacts, with physical description. Some might be the chap in the photo, but the written descriptions fit about a third of male humanity, and we're leery of showing the photos around quite yet." Tawney didn't need to be told why. It was well within the realm of possibility that some of Holt's informants were indeed double-agents, and showing them the photos of the man in the pub might well do nothing more than alert the target of the investigation to the fact that someone knew who he was. That would cause *him* to become more cautious, perhaps change his appearance, and the net result would be to make things worse instead of better. This *was* the most complex of games, Tawney reminded himself. And what if the whole thing was nothing more than curiosity on the part of the Russians, merely keeping track of a known intelligence officer on the other side? Hell, *everyone* did that. It was just a normal part of doing business.

The bottom line was that they knew what they didn't know—no, Tawney thought. They didn't even know that much. They knew *that* they didn't know something, but they didn't even know what it was that they wanted to find out. What was the significance of this blip of information that had appeared on the scope?

"What's this for?" Henriksen asked innocently.

"A fog-cooling system. We got it from your chaps," Aukland said.

"Huh? I don't understand," the American replied.

"One of our engineers saw it in—Arizona, I think. It sprays a very fine water mist. The tiny droplets absorb heat energy and evaporate into the atmosphere, has the same effect as air-conditioning, but with a negligible energy expenditure."

"Ahh," Bill Henriksen said, doing his best to act surprised. "How widely distributed is the system?"

"Just the tunnels and concourses. The architect wanted to put it all over the stadium, but people objected, said it would interfere with cameras and such," Aukland answered, "too much like a real fog."

"Okay, I think I need to look at that."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, it's a hell of a good way to deliver a chemical agent, isn't it?" The question took the police official seriously aback.

"Well . . . yes, I suppose it would be."

"Good. I have a guy in the company, former officer in the U.S. Army Chemical Corps, expert on this sort of thing, degree from MIT. I'll have him check it out ASAP."

"Yes, that is a good idea, Bill. Thank you," Aukland said, kicking

himself for not thinking of that on his own. Well, he was hiring expertise, wasn't he? And this Yank certainly seemed to be an expert.

"Does it get that hot here?"

"Oh, yes, quite. We expect temperatures in the nineties—Fahrenheit, that is. We're supposed to think in Celsius nowadays, but I never did learn that."

"Yeah, me neither," Henriksen noted.

"Anyway, the architect said that this was an inexpensive way to cool the spectators down, and quite reasonable to install. It feeds off the fire-sprinkler system. Doesn't even use much water for what it does. It's been installed for over a year. We test it periodically. American company, can't recall the name at the moment."

Cool-Spray of Phoenix, Arizona, Henriksen thought. He had the plans for the system in the file cabinet in his office. It would play a crucial role in the Project's plans, and had been seen as a godsend from the first moment. Here was the place. Soon would come the time.

"Heard anything more from the Brits?"

"We have an inquiry in, but no reply yet," Aukland answered. "It is a very hush-hush project, evidently."

Henriksen nodded. "Politics, always gets in the way." And with luck it would stay that way.

"Quite," Aukland agreed, with a nod.

Detective Lieutenant Mario d'Allessandro punched up his computer and accessed the NYPD central-records file. Sure enough, Mary Bannister was in there, as was Anne Pretloe. Then he set up a search routine, picking gender WOMEN, age eighteen to thirty for starters, and picking the RUN icon with his mouse. The system generated forty-six names, all of which he saved to a file he created for the purpose. The system didn't have photos built in. He'd have to access the paper files for those. He de-selected ten names from Queens and Richmond boroughs for the moment, saving for the moment only Manhattan missing girls. That came down to twenty-one. Next he de-selected African-American women, because if they were dealing with a serial killer, such criminals usually selected clones as victims—the most famous of them, Theodore Bundy, had almost exclusively picked women who parted their hair down the middle, for instance. Bannister and Pretloe were white, single, reasonably attractive, ages twenty-one and twenty-four, and dark-haired. So, eighteen to thirty should be a good straddle, he thought, and he further de-selected the names that didn't fit that model.

Next he opened the department's Jane Doe file, to look up the recovered bodies of murder victims who had not yet been identified. He already knew all of these cases from his regular work. Two fit the

search parameters, but neither was Bannister or Pretloe. So this was, for the moment, a dry hole. That was both good and bad news. The two missing women were not definitely dead, and that was the good news. But their bodies could have been cleverly disposed of—the Jersey marshes were nearby, and that area had been a prime dumping site for bodies since the turn of the century.

Next he printed up his list of missing women. He'd want to examine all the paper files, including the photos, with the two FBI agents. Both Pretloe and Bannister had brown hair of roughly the same length, and maybe that was enough of a commonality for a serial killer—but, no, Bannister was still alive, or so the e-mail letter suggested . . . unless the serial killer was the kind of sick person who wanted to taunt the families of his victims. D'Allessandro had never come across one of those before, but serial killers were seriously sick bastards, and you could never really predict the things they might do for personal amusement. If one of those fucks were loose in New York, then it wasn't just the FBI who'd want his ass. Good thing the state of New York finally had a death-penalty statute . . .

"Yes, I've seen him," Popov told his boss.

"Really?" John Brightling asked. "How close?"

"About as close as we are, sir," the Russian replied. "It was not intentional, but it happened. He's a large, powerful man. His wife is a nurse at the local community hospital, and his daughter is a medical doctor, married to one of the other team members, working at the same hospital. She is Dr. Patricia Chavez. Her husband is Domingo Chavez, also a CIA field officer, now assigned to this Rainbow group, probably as a commando leader. Both Clark and Chavez are CIA field officers. Clark was involved in the rescue of the former KGB chairman's wife and daughter from Soviet territory some years ago—you'll recall the story made the press recently. Well, Clark was the officer who got them out. He was also involved in the conflict with Japan, and the death of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei in Iran. He and Chavez are highly experienced and very capable intelligence officers. It would be very dangerous to underestimate either of them," Popov concluded.

"Okay, what does that tell us?"

"It tells us that Rainbow is what it appears to be, a multinational counterterror group whose activities spread all across Europe. Spain is a NATO member, but Austria and Switzerland are not, you will recall. Could they expand their operations to other countries? Certainly, yes. They are a very serious threat to any terrorist operation. It is not," Popov went on, "an organization I would like to have in the field against me. Their expertise in actual 'combat' operations we have seen

on television. Behind that will be excellent technical and intelligence support as well. The one cannot exist without the other."

"Okay. So we know about them. Is it possible that they know about us?" Dr. Brightling asked.

"Possible, but unlikely," Popov thought. "If that were the case, then you would have agents of your FBI in here to arrest you—and me—for criminal conspiracy. I am not being tracked or followed—well, I do not think that I am. I know what to look for, and I have seen nothing of the sort, but, I must also admit, it is possible that a very careful and expert effort could probably follow me without my noticing it. That is difficult—I have been trained in countersurveillance—but theoretically possible."

That shook his employer somewhat, Popov saw. He'd just made an admission that he was not perfect. His former supervisors in KGB would have known it beforehand and accepted it as a normal risk of the intelligence trade . . . but those people never had to worry about being arrested and losing their billions of dollars of personal worth.

"What are the risks?"

"If you mean what methods can be used against you? . . ." He got a nod. "That means that your telephones could be tapped, and—"

"My phones are encrypted. The system is supposed to be break-proof. My consultants on that tell me—"

Popov cut him off with a raised hand. "Sir, do you really think that your government allows the manufacture of encryption systems that it cannot itself break?" he asked, as though explaining something to a child. "The National Security Agency at Fort Meade has some of the brightest mathematicians in the world, and the world's most powerful computers, and if you ever wonder how hard they work, you need only look at the parking lots."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If the parking lots are filled at seven in the evening, that means they are hard at work on something. Everyone has a car in your country, and parking lots are generally too large to be enclosed and protected from even casual view. It's an easy way for an intelligence officer to see how active one of your government agencies is." And if you were *really* interested, you found out a few names and addresses, so as to know the car types and tag numbers. The KGB had tracked the head of NSA's "Z" group—the people tasked both to crack and to create encryption systems and codes—that way for over a decade, and the reborn RVS was doubtless doing the same. Popov shook his head. "No, I would not trust a commercially available encoding system. I have my doubts about the systems used by the Russian government. Your people are very clever at cracking cipher systems. They've been so for over sixty years, well before World War Two, and they are

allied with the British, who also have a tradition of excellence in that area of expertise. Has no one told you this?" Popov asked in surprise.

"Well . . . no, I've been told that this system I have here could not be broken because it is a 128-bit—"

"Ah, yes, the STU-3 standard. That system has been around in your government for about twenty years. Your people have changed to STU-4. Do you think they made that change merely because they wanted to spend money, Dr. Brightling? Or might there have been another reason? When I was in the field for KGB, I only used one-time pads. That is an encryption system only used one time, composed of random transpositions. It cannot be broken, but it is tedious to use. To send a single message that way could take hours. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to use for verbal communications. Your government has a system called TAP-DANCE, which is similar in concept, but we never managed to copy it."

"So, you mean people could be listening in on every phone call I make?"

Popov nodded. "Of course. Why do you suppose all of our substantive conversations have been made face-to-face?" Now he was really shaken, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw. The genius *was* a babe-in-the-woods. "Now, perhaps, is the time for you to tell me why I have undertaken these missions for you?"

"Yes, Minister . . . excellent . . . thank you," Bob Aukland said into his cellular phone. He thumbed the END button and put the phone back in his pocket, then turned to Bill Henriksen. "Good news. We'll have that Rainbow group down to consult on our security as well."

"Oh?" Bill observed. "Well, I guess it can't hurt all that much."

"Nose a little out of joint?" the cop asked.

"Not really," Henriksen lied. "I probably know a few of them, and they know me."

"And your fee will remain the same, Bill," the Aussie said. They headed off to his car, and from there they'd drive to a pub for a few pints before he drove the American off to the airport.

Oh, shit, the American thought. Once more the Law of Unintended Consequences had risen up to bite him in the ass. His mind went briefly into overdrive, but then persuaded itself that it didn't really matter all that much as long as he did his job right. It might even help, he told himself, almost believing it.

He couldn't tell Popov, Brightling knew. He trusted him in many ways —hell, what Popov knew could put him in federal prison, even on death row—but to tell him what this was really all about? No, he couldn't risk that. He didn't know Popov's views on the Environment

and Nature. So he couldn't predict the Russian's reaction to the project. Popov was dangerous to him in many ways, like a falcon trained to the fist, but still a free agent, willing to kill a quail or a rabbit, perhaps, but never entirely his, always able to fly off and reclaim his previous free life . . . and if he was free to do that, he was also free to give information to others. Not for the first time, Brightling thought about having Bill Henriksen take care of this potential problem. He'd know how. Surely, the former FBI agent knew how to investigate a murder, and thus how to befuddle the investigators as well, and this little problem would go away.

Assets, Brightling thought next. What other things could he do to make his position and his Project more secure ? If this Rainbow was a problem, would it be possible to strike at it directly? To destroy it at best, or at worst, distract it, force it to focus in another direction?

"I have to think that one through first, Dmitriy," he said finally.

Popov nodded soberly, wondering what thoughts had gone through his employer's mind in the fifteen seconds he'd taken to consider the question. Now it was his turn to be concerned. He'd just informed John Brightling of the operational dangers involved in using him, Popov, to set up the terrorist incidents, and especially of the flaws in his communications security. The latter, especially, had frightened the man. Perhaps he ought to have warned him earlier, but somehow the subject had never arisen, and Dmitriy Arkadeyevich now realized that it had been a serious error on his part. Well, perhaps not that great an error. Operational security was not all that bad. Only two people knew what was happening . . . well, probably that Henriksen fellow as well. But Bill Henriksen was former FBI, and if he were an informer, then they'd all be in jail now. The FBI would have all the evidence it needed for a major felony investigation and trial, and would not allow things to proceed any further unless there were some vast criminal conspiracy yet to be uncovered—

—but how much larger would it have to be than conspiracy to commit murder? Moreover, they would have to know what the conspiracy was, else they would have no reason to hold off on their arrests. No, security here was good. And though the American government had the technical ability to decode Brightling's supposedly secure phone lines, even to tap them required a court order, and evidence was needed for that, and that evidence would itself be sufficient to put several people in death-row cages. Including me, Popov reminded himself.

What was going on here? the Russian demanded. He'd just thought it through enough to realize something. Whatever his employer was doing, it was *larger* than mass murder. What the *hell* could *that* be? Most worrisome of all, Popov had undertaken the missions in the hope

—a realized hope, to be sure—of making a good deal of money off the job. He now had over a million dollars in his Bern bank account. Enough for him to return to Mother Russia and live very well indeed . . . but not enough for what he really wanted. So strange to discover that a "million," that magic word to describe a magic number, was something that, once you had it . . . wasn't magical at all. It was just a number from which you had to subtract to buy the things you wanted. A million American dollars wasn't enough to buy the home he wanted, the car he wanted, the food he wanted, and then have enough left over to sustain the lifestyle he craved for the remainder of his life—except, probably, in Russia, where he did not, unfortunately, wish to live. To visit, yes; to stay, no. And so Dmitriy was trapped, too.

Trapped into what, he didn't know. And so here he was, sitting across the desk from someone who, like himself, was also busily trying to think things through, but neither of them knew where to go just yet. One of them knew what was happening and the other did not—but the other one knew how to *make* things happen, and his employer did not. It was an interesting and somewhat elegant impasse.

And so they just sat there for a minute or so, each regarding the other, and if not *not* knowing what to say, then unwilling to take the risk of saying what they needed to. Finally, Brightling broke the silence.

"I really need to think this situation through. Give me a day or so to do that?"

"Certainly." Popov stood, shook hands, and walked out of the office. A player for most of his adult life in that most interesting and fascinating of games, he realized now that he was in a new game, with new parameters. He'd taken possession of a vast sum of money—but an amount that his employer had regarded as trivial. He was involved in an operation whose import was larger than that of mass murder. That was not entirely new to him, Popov realized on reflection. He'd once served a nation called by its ultimately victorious enemy the Evil Empire, and *that* cold war had been greater in size than mass murder. But Brightling was not a nation-state, and however huge his resources might be, they were minuscule in comparison with those of any advanced country. The great question remained—what the hell was this man trying to achieve? And why did he need the services of Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov to achieve it?

Henriksen caught the Qantas flight for Los Angeles. He had the better part of a day ahead of him in his first-class seat, a good deal of time to consider what he knew.

The plan for the Olympics was essentially in the bag. The fogging system was in place, which was just plain perfect for the Project's

purposes. He'd have one of his men check out the system, and thereby get himself in place for the delivery part on the last day. It was that simple. He had the consulting contract needed to make it all happen. But now this Rainbow bunch would be down there as well. How intrusive might they be? Damn, there was just no telling on that one. Worst case, it was possible that something small could toss a wrench into the works. It so often happened that way. He knew that from his time in the FBI. A random police patrol, a man on foot or in a radio-car could wander by and cause a well-planned robbery to stop. Or in the investigation phase, the unexpectedly sharp memory of a random passerby, or a casual remark made by a subject to a friend, could come to the right investigator and blow a case wide open. Boom, that simple—it had happened a million times. And the breaks always went to the other side, didn't they?

And so, from his perspective, he knew he had to eliminate the chance for such random events. He'd been so close to it. The operational concept had been brilliant—it had mainly been his from the beginning; John Brightling had merely funded it. Getting the terrorists to operate in Europe had raised the international consciousness about the threat, and *that* had allowed him and his company to get the contract to oversee the security for the Olympics. But then this damned Rainbow team had appeared, and handled three major incidents—and what asshole had instigated the third one? he demanded of himself—so well that now the Australians had asked *them* to come down for a look. And if they came down, they'd stay and keep looking, and if *that* happened, they might be there for the games, and if they wondered about chemical weapons, then they might spot the perfect delivery system for them and—

A lot of ifs, Henriksen told himself. A lot of ifs. A lot of things had to go wrong for the Project to be thwarted. There was comfort in that thought. Maybe he could meet with the Rainbow people and direct them away from the threat. After all, he had a chemical weapons expert on the payroll, and they probably did not, and that gave him the edge, didn't it? With a little cleverness, his man could do his job right in front of them and not even be seen to have done it. That's what planning was for, wasn't it?

Relax, he told himself, as the stewardess came around with drinks, and he had another glass of wine. *Relax.* But, no, he couldn't do that. He had too much experience as an investigator to accept the mere chance of random interference without consideration of the possible consequences. If his man were stopped, even by accident, then it was also possible that the entire Project could be uncovered. And *that* would mean more than failure. It would mean lifelong imprisonment at best, which was not something he was prepared to accept. No, he

was committed to the Project for more than one reason. It was his task to save the world first of all—and second, he wanted to be around to enjoy what he'd had a hand in saving.

And so, risks of any type and any magnitude were unacceptable. He had to come up with a way to eliminate them. The key to that was the Russian, Popov. He wondered what that spook had discovered on his trip to England. With the right information, he could devise a plan to deal with that Rainbow bunch directly. Wouldn't that be interesting? He settled back into his seat and chose a movie to semiwatch, to disguise what he was doing. Yes, he decided ten minutes later, with the right people and the right assets, it could work.

Popov was eating dinner alone in a disreputable-looking restaurant at the southern end of Manhattan. The food was reportedly good, but the place looked as though rats cleaned up the floor at night. But the vodka here was superb, and as usual, a few drinks helped him think abstractly.

What did he know about John Brightling? Well, the man was a scientific genius and also very impressive in his business skills. He'd been married some years ago to another bright person, now the presidential science advisor, but the marriage had ended badly, and now his employer flitted from bed to bed, one of the most eligible bachelors in America—and with the financial statement to prove it—with his photo frequently in the society pages, which must have been the cause of some discomfort to his former wife.

He had good connections in the community of people admitted into classified matters. This Rainbow group was evidently "black," but he'd gotten its name and the name of its commander in a day. Just one day, Popov reminded himself. That was beyond impressive. It was startling. How the hell had he accomplished that?

And he was into an operation whose implications were more serious than mass murder. That was where his mind came to a befuddled halt once again. It was like walking down a busy street and then coming up against a blank wall. What could a businessman be doing that was more serious than *that?* More serious than the risk of losing his freedom, even the death penalty? If it were greater than mass murder, then did the plan contemplate even larger murder? But to serve *what* end? To start a war, perhaps, but he was not a chief of state, and could not, therefore, start a war. Was Brightling a spy, feeding vital national-security-class information to a foreign government—but in return for *what?* How could anyone, government or not, bribe a billionaire? No, money was out. What did that leave?

There was a classic acronym for the reasons for making treason against your native land: MICE. Money, Ideology, Conscience, and

Ego. Money was out. Brightling had too much of that. Ideology was always the best motivation for a traitor/spy—people would risk their lives far more readily for their closely held beliefs than for filthy lucre—but what ideology did this man have? Popov didn't know. Next came Conscience. But Conscience against *what?* What wrong was he trying to right? There could hardly be one, could there? That left Ego. Well, Brightling had a capacious ego, but ego assumed the motive of revenge against some more powerful person or institution that had wronged him. Who could possibly have hurt billionaire John Brightling, so much that his material success was not a sufficient salve against the wound? Popov waved to the waiter for another vodka. He'd be taking a cab home tonight.

No, Money was out. So was Ego. That left Ideology and Conscience. What beliefs or what wrong could motivate a man to do murder on a large scale? In the former case, Brightling was not a religious fanatic. In the latter, he had no overt dissatisfaction with his country. And so while Money and Ego could readily be dismissed, Ideology and Conscience were almost as unlikely, and Popov did not dismiss them only because—why? he asked himself. Because he only had four possible motivations, unless Brightling was a total madman, and he wasn't that, was he?

No, Popov told himself. His employer was not mentally unbalanced. He was thoughtful in his every action, and though his perspective, especially on the issue of money, was very different from his own—well, he had so much that such a difference in outlook was understandable; it was just a matter of perspective, and to him a million dollars was like pocket change to Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Could he then be some sort of madman who . . . like a chief of state, a new Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler or Josef Vissarionovich Stalin—but, no, he was not a chief of state, had no aspirations for such a thing, and only those men could entertain that form of madness.

In his career in the KGB, Popov had dealt with all manner of curiosities. He'd played the game against world-class adversaries and never once been caught, never once failed in an assignment. As a result, he considered himself a clever sort. That made the current impasse all the more frustrating. He had over a million dollars in a Bern bank. He had the prospect of more in due course. He'd set up two terrorist missions that had accomplished their goal—had they? His employer evidently thought so, despite the abject tactical failure of both. But he knew even less now, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself. The more he delved into it, the less he knew. And the less he knew, the unhappier he became. He'd asked his employer more than once the reason for his activities, but Brightling wasn't telling. It had to be something vast . . . but what the devil was it?

They practiced the breathing exercises. Ding found it amusing, but he was also persuaded that it was necessary. Tall and rangy though Patsy was, she was not the athlete he'd become to lead Team-2, and so she had to practice how to breathe to make the baby come more easily, and practice did make perfect. And so they sat on the floor of their house, both with their legs spread, huffing and puffing as though to destroy the home of a mythical pig, and it was all he could do not to laugh.

"Deep, cleansing breath," Domingo said, after timing the notional contraction. Then he reached for her hand and bent forward to kiss it. "How we doing, Pats?"

"I'm ready, Ding. I just want it to happen and be over."

"Worried?"

"Well," Patsy Clark Chavez, M.D., replied, "I know it's going to hurt some, and I'd just as soon have it behind me, y'know?"

"Yeah." Ding nodded. The anticipation of unpleasant things was usually worse than their realization, at least on the physical side. He knew that from experience, but she didn't yet. Maybe that was why second deliveries were almost always easier than the first. You knew what to expect, knew that though it was uncomfortable you'd make it through, and have a baby at the end of it. That was the key to the whole thing for Domingo. To be a *father!* To have a child, to begin the greatest of all adventures, raising a new life, doing the best you could, making some mistakes, but learning from all of them, and ultimately presenting to society a new, responsible citizen to carry on. That, he was sure, was what it meant to be a man. Oh, sure, carrying a gun and doing his job was important, too, since he was now a guardian of society, a righter of wrongs, a protector of the innocent, one of the forces of order from which came civilization itself, but this was his chance to be personally involved in what civilization really was, the raising of kids in the right way, educating and guiding them to do the Right Thing, even at three in the morning and half asleep. Maybe the kid would be a spook/soldier like him, or maybe even better, a physician like Pats, an important and good part of society, serving others. Those things could only happen if he and Pats did the job right, and that responsibility was the greatest that any person could undertake. Domingo looked forward to it, lusted to hold his child in his arms, to kiss and cuddle, to change diapers and clean bottoms. He'd already assembled the crib, decorated the walls of the nursery with pink and blue bunnies, and bought toys to distract the little beast, and though all of these things seemed incongruous with his regular life, both he and the men of Rainbow knew different, for all of them had children as well, and for them the covenant was exactly the

same. Eddie Price had a boy of fourteen years, somewhat rebellious and decidedly headstrong—probably just as his father had once been—but also bright enough to question everything to seek his own answers, which he would find in due course, just as his father had done. The kid had "soldier" written all over him, Ding thought . . . but with luck he'd go to school first and become an officer, as Price should have done, and would have done in America. Here the system was different, though, and so he'd become a superb command sergeant major, Ding's most trusted subordinate, always ready to offer his thoughts, and then execute his orders perfectly. Yes, there was much to look forward to, Ding told himself, still holding Patsy's hand in his own.

"Scared?"

"Not scared, a little nervous," Patsy admitted.

"Honey, if it were all that hard, how come there's so many people in the world?"

"Spoken like a man," Dr. Patricia Chavez noted. "It's easy for you to say. You don't have to do it."

"I'll be there to help," her husband promised.

"You better be!"

CHAPTER 23

OVERWATCH

Henriksen arrived at JFK International with his body feeling as though it had been shredded, spindled, and mutilated before being tossed into a wastepaper basket, but that was to be expected. He'd flown literally halfway around the globe in about a day, and his internal body-clock was confused and angry and punishing. For the next week or so, he'd find himself awake and asleep at random times, but that was all right. The right pills and a few drinks would help him rest when rest was needed. An employee was waiting for him at the end of the jetway, took his carry-on without a word, and led off to the baggage-claim area, where, blessedly, his two-suiter was the fifth bag on the carousel, which allowed them to scoot out of the terminal and onto the highway to New York City.

"How was the trip?"

"We got the contract," Henriksen told his man, who was not part of the Project.

"Good," the man said, not knowing how good it was, and how bad it would be for himself.

Henriksen buckled his seat belt and leaned back to catch a few winks on the way in, ending further conversation.

"So, what do we got?" the FBI agent asked.

"Nothing so far," d'Allessandro replied. "I have one other possible missing girl, same area for her apartment, similar looks, age, and so forth, disappeared around the same time as your Miss Bannister. Name is Anne Pretloe, legal secretary, just vanished off the face of the earth."

"Jane Does?" the other federal officer asked.

"Nothing that matches. Guys, we have to face the possibility that we have a serial killer loose in the area—"

"But why did this e-mail message come out?"

"How does it match with other e-mails Miss Bannister sent to her dad?" the NYPD detective asked.

"Not very well," the senior FBI agent admitted. "The one he initially brought into the Gary office looks as though—well, it smells to me

like drugs, y'know?"

"Agreed," d'Allessandro said. "You have others?"

"Here." The agent handed over six printouts faxed to the New York office. The detective scanned them. They were all perfectly grammatical, and organized, with no misspelling on any of them.

"What if she didn't send it? What if somebody else did?"

"The serial killer?" the junior FBI agent asked. Then he thought about it, and his face mirrored what he thought. "He'd have to be a real sick one, Mario."

"Yeah, well, serial killers aren't Eagle Scouts, are they?"

"Tormenting the families? Have we ever had one like that?" the senior man wondered.

"Not that I know of, Tom, but, like the man said . . ."

"Shit," observed the senior agent, Tom Sullivan.

"Call Behavioral Sciences in on this one?" the junior agent, Frank Chatham, asked.

Sullivan nodded. "Yeah, let's do that. I'll call Pat O'Connor about it. Next step here, I think we get some flyers printed up with the photo of Mary Bannister and start passing them out on the West Side. Mario, can you get us some cooperation from your people?"

"No problem," d'Allessandro replied. "If this is what it looks like, I want the fuck before he starts going for some sort of record. Not in my town, guys," the detective concluded.

"Going to try the Interleukin again?" Barbara Archer asked.

"Yeah." Killgore nodded. "-3a is supposed to enhance the immune system, but they're not sure how. I'm not either, but if it has any effect, we need to know about it."

"What about lung complications?" One of the problems with Interleukin was that it attacked lung tissue, also for unknown reasons, and could be dangerous to smokers and others with respiratory problems.

Another nod. "Yeah, I know, just like -2, but F4 isn't a smoker, and I want to make sure that -3a doesn't do anything to compromise Shiva. We can't take that chance, Barb."

"Agreed," Dr. Archer observed. Like Killgore, she didn't think that this new version of Interleukin was the least bit helpful, but that had to be confirmed. "What about Interferon?"

"The French have been trying that on hemorrhagic fever for the last five years, but no results at all. We can hang that, too, but it's going to be a dry hole, Barb."

"Let's try it on F4 anyway," she suggested.

"Fair enough." Killgore made a notation on the chart and left the room. A minute later he appeared on the TV monitor.

"Hi, Mary, how are we feeling this morning? Any better?"

"No." She shook her head. "Stomach still hurts pretty bad."

"Oh, really? Let's see what we can do about that." This case was proceeding rapidly. Killgore wondered if she had a genetic abnormality in her upper GI, maybe some vulnerability to peptic ulcer disease? . . . If so, then the Shiva was going to rip her apart in a hurry. He increased the morphine dosage rate on the machine next to her bed. "Okay, now we're going to give you a couple of new medications. These ought to fix you up in two or three days, okay?"

"Are these the ones I signed up for?" F4 asked weakly.

"Yes, that's right," Killgore replied, hanging the Interferon and Interleukin-3a on the medication tree. "These ought to make you feel a lot better," he promised with a smile. It was so odd, talking to his lab rats. Well, as he'd told himself many times, a rat was a pig was a dog was a . . . girl, in this case. There wasn't really all that much of a difference, was there? *No,* he told himself this afternoon. Her body relaxed with the increased morphine dose, and her eyes became unfocused. Well, that *was* one difference, wasn't it? They didn't give rats sedatives or narcotics to ease their pain. It wasn't that they didn't want to, just that there was no practical way to ease their discomfort. It had never pleased him to see those cute pink eyes change from bright to dull, reflecting the pain. Well, in this case, at least, the dullness mirrored a respite from the pain.

The information was very interesting, Henriksen thought, and this Russian was pretty good at developing it. He would have made a good agent for the Foreign Counterintelligence Division . . . but then, that's just what he had been, in a way, only working for the other side, of course. And with the information, he recalled his idea, from the Qantas flight.

"Dmitriy," Bill asked, "do you have contacts in Ireland?"

Popov nodded. "Yes, several of them."

Henriksen looked over at Dr. Brightling for approval and got a nod. "How would they like to get even with the SAS?"

"That has been discussed many times, but it is not practical. It is like sending a bank robber into a guarded bank—no, that is not right. It is like sending a robber into the government agency which prints the money. There are too many defensive assets to make the mission practical."

"But they actually wouldn't be going to Hereford, would they? What if we could draw them out into the open, and then stage our own little surprise for them? . . ." Henriksen explained on.

It was a very interesting idea, Popov thought. But: "It is still a very dangerous mission."

"Very well. What is the current condition of the IRA?"

Popov leaned back in his chair. "They are badly split. There are now several factions. Some want peace. Some want the disorders to continue. The reasons are both ideological and personal to the faction members. Ideological insofar as they truly believe in their political objective of overturning both the British rule in Northern Ireland and the Republican government in Dublin, and establishing a 'progressive socialist' government. As an objective, it's far too ambitious for a practical world, yet they believe in it and hold to it. They are committed Marxists—actually more Maoist than Marxist, but that is not important to us at the moment."

"And the personal side?" Brightling asked.

"When one is a revolutionary, it is not merely a matter of belief, but also a matter of perception by the public. To many people a revolutionary is a romantic character, a person who believes in a vision of the future and is willing to risk his life for it. From that comes his social status. Those who know such people often respect them. Therefore, to lose that status injures the former revolutionary. He must now work for a living, drive a truck or whatever he is capable of—"

"Like what happened to you when the KGB RIF'd you, in other words," Henriksen offered.

Popov had to nod at that. "In a way, yes. As a field officer of State Security, I had status and importance enjoyed by few others in the Soviet Union, and losing that was more significant to me than the loss of my modest salary. It will be the same for these Irish Marxists. And so they have two reasons for wanting the disorders to continue: their political ideological beliefs, and their need for personal recognition as something more than ordinary worker-citizens."

"Do you know such people?" Henriksen asked pointedly.

"Yes, I can probably identify some. I met many in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, where they trained with other 'progressive elements.' And I have traveled to Ireland on occasion to deliver messages and money to support their activities. Those operations tied up large segments of the British Army, you see, and were, therefore, worthy of Soviet support as a distraction to a large NATO enemy." Popov ended his discourse, looking at the other two men in the room. "What would you have them do?"

"It's not so much a question of what as of how," Bill told the Russian. "You know, when I was in the Bureau, we used to say that the IRA was composed of the best terrorists in the world, dedicated, smart, and utterly vicious."

"I would agree with that assessment. They were superbly organized, ideologically sound, and willing to undertake nearly anything if it had

a real political impact."

"How would they view this mission?"

"What mission is that?" Dmitriy asked, and then Bill explained his basic mission concept. The Russian listened politely and thoughtfully before responding: "That would appeal to them, but the scope and the dangers are very large."

"What would they require to cooperate?"

"Money and other support, weapons, explosives, the things they need to carry on their operations. The current faction-fighting has probably had the effect of disrupting their logistical organization. That's doubtless how the peace faction is trying to control the continued-violence faction, simply by restricting their access to weapons. Without that, they cannot take physical action, and cannot therefore enhance their own prestige. So, if you offer them the wherewithal to conduct operations, they will listen seriously to your plan."

"Money?"

"Money allows one to purchase things. The factions with which we would deal have probably been cut off from regular funding sources."

"Which are?" Brightling asked.

"Drinking clubs, and what you call the 'protection racket,' yes?"

"That's right," Henriksen confirmed with a nod. "That's how they get their money, and that source is probably well controlled by the peace factions."

"So, then, how much do you think, Dmitriy?" John Brightling asked.

"Several million dollars, I should say, at the least, that is."

"You'll have to be very careful laundering it," Bill warned their boss. "I can help."

"Call it five million? . . ."

"That should be enough," Popov said, after a moment's reflection, "plus the psychological attraction of bearding the lion so close to his own den. But I can offer no promises. These people make their own decisions, for their own reasons."

"How quickly could you arrange the meeting?"

"Two days, perhaps three, after I arrive in Ireland," Popov answered.

"Get your tickets," Brightling told him decisively.

"One of them did some talking before he deployed," Tawney said. "His name was René. Before he set off to Spain, he chatted with a girlfriend. She had an attack of conscience and came in on her own. The French interviewed her yesterday."

"And?" Clark asked.

"And the purpose of the mission was to free Carlos, but he said

nothing to her about their being assigned the mission by anyone. In fact he said little, though the interview did develop the name of another participant in the mission, or so our French colleagues think. They're running that name down now. The woman in question—well, he and she had been friends, lovers, for some time, and evidently he confided in her. She came to the police on her own because of the dead Dutch child. The Paris papers have made a big show of that, and it evidently troubled her conscience. She told the police that she tried to talk him out of the job—not sure that I believe that—and that he told her that he'd think about it. Evidently he didn't follow through on that, but the French are now wondering if someone might have opted out. They're sweeping up the usual suspects for a chat. Perhaps they'll turn up something," Tawney concluded hopefully.

"That's all?" Clark asked.

"It's quite a lot, really," Peter Covington observed. "It's rather more than we had yesterday, and it allows our French friends to pursue additional leads."

"Maybe," Chavez allowed. "But *why* did they go out? Who's turning these bastards loose?"

"Anything from the other two incidents?" Clark asked.

"Not a bloody peep," Tawney replied. "The Germans have rattled every bush. Cars were seen going in and out of the Fürchtner/Dortmund house, but she was an artist, and they might well have been buyers of her paintings. In any case, no vehicle descriptions, much less license-plate numbers. That is dead, unless someone else walks into a police station and makes a statement."

"Known associates?" Covington asked.

"All interviewed by the BKA, with no results. Hans and Petra were never known for talking. The same was true of Model and Guttenach." Tawney waved his hands in frustration.

"It's out there, John," Chavez said. "I can feel it."

"I agree," Covington said with a nod. "But the trick's getting our hands on it."

Clark frowned mightily, but he knew the drill, too, from his time in the field. You wanted information to develop, but merely wanting it never made it happen. Things like that just came to you when they decided to come. It was that simple, and that maddening, especially when you knew it was there and you knew that you needed it. With one small bit of information, Rainbow could turn some national police force loose and sweep up the person or persons they wanted and grill them over a slow fire until they got what they needed. The French or the Germans would be best—neither of them had the legal restrictions that the Americans and Brits had placed on their police forces. But that wasn't a good way to think, and the FBI usually got people to

spill their guts, even though they treated all criminals with white kid gloves. Even terrorists, once caught, usually told what they knew—well, not the Irish, John remembered. Some of those bastards wouldn't say "boo," not even their own names. Well, there were ways of handling that level of recalcitrance. It was just a matter of speaking to them outside of police view, putting the fear of God, and of pain, into them. That usually worked—had *always* worked in John Clark's experience. But first you needed somebody to talk to. That was the hard part.

As a field officer of the CIA he'd often enough been in distant, uncomfortable places on a mission, then had the mission aborted—or just as bad, postponed—because some vital bit of information had been missing or lost. He'd seen three men and one woman die for that reason, in four different places, all of them behind the Iron Curtain. Four people, all of whose faces he'd known, lost, judicially murdered by their parent countries. Their struggle against tyranny had ultimately been successful, but they hadn't lived to see it or enjoy the fruits of their courage, and it was part of Clark's conscience that he remembered every single one of them—and because of that he'd grown to hate the people who'd had the information he'd needed but had not been able to get out in time. So it was now. Ding was right. *Somebody* was calling these animals out of their lairs, and he wanted that somebody. Finding him or her would give them all manner of names and telephone numbers and addresses for the European police agencies to sweep up into one big bag, and so end much of the terrorism that still hung over Europe like a cloud. And *that* would be a hell of a lot better than sending his troopers out into the field with loaded guns.

Popov packed his bags. He was getting quite expert at this, the Russian told himself, and had learned to pack his shirts without their coming out of the bag wrinkled, which he'd never learned as a KGB officer. Well, the shirts were more expensive now, and he'd learned to take better care of them. The suitcases, however, reflected his previous occupation, and included some special pockets and compartments in which he could keep his "alternate" travel documents. These he kept with him at all times now. Should the whole project collapse of its own weight, he wanted to be able to disappear without a trace, and his three unused sets of documents should help in that. In the final extreme, he could access his Bern bank account and disappear back into Russia, though he had other plans for his future—

—but he worried that greed might be clouding his judgment. Five million dollars. If he could bank that to himself, then he'd have the

resources he needed to live in comfort forever, in virtually any place of his choosing, especially if he invested it wisely. But how could he defraud the IRA out of the money detailed to them? Well, that might easily come to him. Then his eyes closed and he asked himself about greed. Was it indeed clouding his operational judgment? Was he taking an unnecessary chance, led along by his wish to have this huge amount of money? It was hard to be objective about one's own motivations. And it was hard to be a free man now, not just one of thousands of field officers in the Committee for State Security, having to justify every single dollar, pound, or ruble he spent to the accountants at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square, the most humorless people in a singularly humorless agency.

Greed, Popov thought, worrying about it. He had to set that whole issue aside. He had to go forward as the professional he'd always been, careful and circumspect at every turn, lest he be caught by enemy counterintelligence services or even by the people with whom he would be meeting. The Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army was as ruthless as any terrorist organization in the world. Though its members could be jolly fellows over a drink—in their drinking they so closely resembled Russians—they killed their enemies, inside and outside their organization, with as little compunction as medical testers with their laboratory rats. Yet they could also be loyal to a fault. In that they were predictable, and that was good for Popov. And he knew how to deal with them. He'd done so often enough in the past, both in Ireland and the Bekaa Valley. He just couldn't let them discern his desire to bank the money earmarked to them, could he?

The packing done, Popov took his bags to the elevator, then down to the street level, where the apartment house's doorman flagged him a cab for La Guardia, where he'd board the shuttle for Boston's Logan International, and there to catch the Aer Lingus flight to Dublin. If nothing else, his work for Brightling had gotten him a lot of frequent-flyer miles, though with too many different airlines to be of real help. But they always flew him first-class, which KGB had never done, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought with a suppressed smile in the backseat of the cab. All he had to do, he reminded himself, was deal honestly with the PIRA. If the opportunity came to steal their money, then he'd take it. But he already knew one thing: they'd jump at the proposed operation. It was too good to pass up, and if nothing else, the PIRA had *élan*.

Special Agent Patrick O'Connor looked over the information faxed from New York. The trouble with kidnapping investigations was time. No investigation ever ran quickly enough, but it was worse with

kidnappings, because you knew that somewhere was a real person whose life depended upon your ability to get the information and act upon it before the kidnapper decided to end his nasty little game, kill the current hostage, and go grab another. Grab another? Yes, probably, because there had been no ransom demand, and that meant that whoever had snatched Mary Bannister off the street wasn't willing to sell her back. No, he'd be using her as a toy, almost certainly for sexual gratification, until he tired of her, and then, probably, he'd kill her. And so, O'Connor thought himself to be in a race, albeit on a track he couldn't see, and running against a stopwatch hidden in the hand of another. He had a list of Ms. Bannister's local friends and associates, and he had his men and women out talking to them, hoping to turn up a name or a phone number that would lead them on to the next step in the investigation . . . but probably not, he thought. No, this case was all happening in New York. This young woman had gone there to seek her fortune in the bright city lights, like so many others. And many of them did find what they were seeking, which was why they went, but this one, from the outskirts of Gary, Indiana, had gone there without knowing what it was like in a big city, and lacked the self-protective skills one needed in a city of eight million . . .

. . . and she was probably already dead, O'Connor admitted quietly to himself, killed by whatever monster had snatched her off the street. There was not a damned thing he could do about it except to identify, arrest, and convict the creep, which would save others, but wouldn't be worth a damn to the victim whose name titled the case file on his desk. Well, that was one of the problems of being a cop. You couldn't save them all. But you did try to avenge them all, and that was something, the agent told himself, as he rose to get his coat for the drive home.

Chavez sipped his Guinness and looked around the club. The Eagle of the Legion had been hung on the wall opposite the bar, and people already went over to touch the wooden staff in respect. Three of his Team-2 people were at a table, drinking their brews and chatting about something or other with two of Peter Covington's troops. The TV was on—snooker championships? Chavez wondered. That was a national event? Which changed into news and weather.

More El Niño stuff, Ding saw with a snort. Once it had just been called *weather,* but then some damned oceanographer had discovered that the warm/cold water mix off the coast of South America changed every few years, and that when it happened the world's climate changed a little bit here and there, and the media had latched onto it, delighted, so it seemed, to have another label to put on things they

lacked the education to understand. Now they said that the current rendition of the "El Niño Effect" was unusually hot weather in Australia.

"Mr. C, you're old enough to remember. What did they say before this crap?"

"They called it unusually hot, cold, or seasonable weather, tried to tell you if it was going to be hot, cold, sunny, or rainy the next day, and then they told you about the baseball scores." With rather less accuracy on the weather side, Clark didn't say. "How's Patsy doing?"

"Another couple of weeks, John. She's holding up pretty well, but she bitches about how big her belly's gotten to be." He checked his watch. "Ought to be home in another thirty minutes. Same shift with Sandy."

"Sleeping okay?" John went on.

"Yeah, a little restless when the little *hombre* rolls around, but she's getting all she needs. Be cool, John. I'm taking good care of her. Looking forward to being a grandpa?"

Clark sipped at his third pint of the evening. "One more milestone on the road to death, I suppose." Then he chuckled. "Yeah, Domingo, I am looking forward to it." *I'll spoil the shit out of this little bastard, and then just hand him back when he cries.* "Ready to be a pop?"

"I think I can handle it, John. How hard can it be? You did it."

Clark ignored the implicit challenge. "We're going to be sending a team down to Australia in a few weeks."

"What for?" Chavez asked.

"The Aussies are a little worried about the Olympics, and we look pretty sexy 'cause of all the missions we've had. So, they want some of us to come on down and look over things with their SAS."

"Their guys any good?"

Clark nodded. "So I am told, but never hurts to get an outside opinion, does it?"

"Who's going down?"

"I haven't decided yet. They already have a consulting company, Global Security, Ltd., run by a former FBI guy. Noonan knows him. Henriksen, something like that."

"Have they ever had a terrorist incident down there?" Domingo asked next.

"Nothing major that I can remember, but, well, you don't remember Munich in 1972, do you?"

Chavez shook his head. "Just what I've read about it. The German cops really screwed the pooch on that mission."

"Yeah, I guess. Nobody ever told them that they'd have to face people like that. Well, now we all know, right? That's how GSG-9 got started, and they're pretty good."

"Like the *Titanic,* eh? Ships have enough lifeboats because she didn't?"

John nodded agreement. "That's how it works. It takes a hard lesson to make people learn, son." John set his empty glass down.

"Okay, but how come the bad guys never learn?" Chavez asked, finishing off his second of the evening. "We've delivered some tough lessons, haven't we? But you think we can fold up the tents? Not hardly, Mr. C. They're still out there, John, and they're not retiring, are they? They ain't learned shit."

"Well, I'd sure as hell learn from it. Maybe they're just dumber than we are. Ask Bellow about it," Clark suggested.

"I think I will."

Popov was fading off to sleep. The ocean below the Aer Lingus 747 was dark now, and his mind was well forward of the aircraft, trying to remember faces and voices from the past, wondering if perhaps his contact had turned informer to the British Security Service, and would doom him to identification and possible arrest. Probably not. They'd seemed very dedicated to their cause—but you could never be sure. People turned traitor for all manner of reasons. Popov knew that well. He'd helped more than his share of people do just that, changing their loyalties, betraying their countries, often for small amounts of cash. How much the easier to turn against an atheist foreigner who'd given them equivocal support? What if his contacts had come to see the futility of their cause? Ireland would not turn into a Marxist country, for all their wishes. The list of such nations was very thin now, though across the world academics still clung to the words and ideas of Marx and Engels and even Lenin. Fools. There were even those who said that Communism had been tried in the wrong country—that Russia had been far too backward to make those wonderful ideas work.

That was enough to bring an ironic smile and a shake of the head. He'd once been part of the organization called the Sword and Shield of the Party. He'd been through the Academy, had sat through all the political classes, learned the answers to the inevitable examination questions and been clever enough to write down exactly what his instructors wanted to hear, thus ensuring high marks and the respect of his mentors—few of whom had believed in that drivel any more than he had, but none of whom had found within themselves the courage to speak their real thoughts. It was amazing how long the lies had lasted, and truly Popov could remember his surprise when the red flag had been pulled down from its pole atop the Kremlin's Spasskaya Gate. Nothing, it seemed, lived longer than a perverse idea.

CHAPTER 24

CUSTOMS

One of the differences between Europe and America was that the former's countries truly welcomed foreigners, while America, for all her hospitality, made entering the country remarkably inconvenient. Certainly the Irish erected no barriers, Popov saw, as his passport was stamped and he collected his luggage for an "inspection" so cursory that the inspector probably hadn't noticed if the person carrying it was male or female. With that, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich walked outside and flagged a cab for his hotel. His reservation gave him a one-bedroom suite overlooking a major thoroughfare, and he immediately undressed to catch a few more hours of sleep before making his first call. His last thought before closing his eyes on this sunny morning was that he hoped the contact number hadn't been changed, or compromised. If the latter, then he'd have to do some explaining to the local police, but he had a cover story, if necessary. While it wasn't perfect, it would be good enough to protect a person who'd committed no crimes in the Republic of Ireland.

"Airborne, Airborne, have you heard?" Vega sang, as they began the final mile. "We're gonna jump from the big-ass bird!"

It surprised Chavez that as bulky as First Sergeant Julio Vega was, he never seemed to suffer from it on the runs. He was a good thirty pounds heavier than any other Team-2 member. Any bigger across the chest and he'd have to get his fatigue shirts custom-made, but despite the ample body, his legs and wind hadn't failed him yet. And so, today, he was taking his turn leading the morning run. . . . In another four minutes they could see the stop line, which they all welcomed, though none of them would admit it.

"Quick time—*march!"* Vega called, as he crossed the yellow line, and everyone slowed to the usual one-hundred-twenty steps per minute. "Left, left, your left your right your left!" Another half minute and: "Detail . . . *halt!"* And everyone stopped. There was a cough or two from those who'd had a pint or two too many the night before, but nothing more than that.

Chavez walked to the command position in front of the two lines of

troopers. “Fall out,” he ordered, allowing Team-2 to walk to their building for a shower, having stretched and exercised all their muscles for the day. Later today they’d have another run through the shooting house for a live-fire exercise. It would be boring in content, since they’d already tried just about every possible permutation of hostages and bad guys. Their shooting was just about perfect. Their physical condition *was* perfect, and their morale was so high that they seemed bored. They were so confident in their abilities, they’d demonstrated them so convincingly in the field, firing real bullets into real targets. Even his time with the 7th Light Infantry Division had not given him such confidence in his people. They’d gotten to the point that the British SAS troopers, who had a long, proud history of their own, and who’d initially looked upon the Rainbow teams with a great degree of skepticism, now welcomed them into the club and even admitted they had things to learn from them. And *that* was quite a stretch, since the SAS had been the acknowledged world masters at special operations.

A few minutes later, showered and dressed, Chavez came out to the squad bay, where his people were at their individual desks, going over intelligence information from Bill Tawney and his crew, and checking out photos, many of them massaged by the computer systems to allow for the years since they’d originally been taken. The systems seemed to get better on a daily basis as the software evolved. A picture taken from an angle was now manipulated by the computer into a straight-on portrait shot, and his men studied them as they might examine photos of their own children, along with whatever information they had of who was suspected to be where, with what known or suspected associates, and so forth. It seemed a waste of time to Chavez, but you couldn’t run and shoot all day, and knowing the faces wasn’t a total waste of time. They *had* identified Fürchtner and Dortmund that way on their Vienna deployment, hadn’t they?

Sergeant Major Price was going over budget stuff, which he’d toss onto Ding’s desk for later examination, so that his boss could justify expenditures, and then maybe request some new training funds for some new idea or other. Tim Noonan was working away with his new electronic toys, and Clark was always, so it seemed, fighting money battles with CIA and other American agencies. That struck Chavez as a total waste of effort. Rainbow had been pretty bulletproof from the very beginning—Presidential sponsorship never hurt—and their missions hadn’t exactly diminished the credibility from which their funding derived. In another two hours, they’d go to the range for their daily expenditure of one hundred rounds of pistol and SMG ammunition, followed by the live-five exercise . . . another routine day. For “routine,” Ding often substituted “boring,” but that couldn’t be helped, and it was a hell of a lot less boring than it had been on

field missions for CIA, most of which time had been spent sitting down waiting for a meet and/or filling out forms to describe the field operation for the Langley bureaucrats who demanded full documentation of everything that happened in the field because—because that was one of the rules. Rules at best enforced by people who'd been out there and done that a generation before and thought they still knew all about it, and at worst by people who didn't have a clue, and were all the more demanding for that very reason. But the government, which tossed away billions of dollars every day, could often be so niggardly over a thousand or so, and nothing Chavez could do would ever change that.

Colonel Malloy now had his own office in the headquarters building, since it had been decided that he was a Rainbow division commander. A staff-grade officer in the United States Marine Corps, he was accustomed to such nonsense, and he thought about hanging a dartboard on the wall for amusement when he wasn't working. Work for him was driving his chopper—which, he reminded himself, he didn't really have, since the one assigned to him was, at the moment, down for maintenance. Some widget was being replaced with a new and improved widget that would enhance his ability to do something of which he was not yet fully informed, but which, he was sure, would be important, especially to the civilian contractor, which had conceived of, designed, and manufactured the new and improved widget.

It could have been worse. His wife and kids liked it here, and Malloy liked it, as well. His was a skill position rather than a dangerous one. There was little hazard in being a helicopter pilot in a special-operations outfit. The only thing that worried him was hitting power lines, since Rainbow mainly deployed to operations in built-up areas, and in the past twenty years more helicopters had been lost to electrical power lines than to all known antiaircraft weapons around the world. His MH-60K didn't have cable cutters, and he'd written a scathing memo on that fact to the commander of the 24th Special Operations Squadron, who had replied contritely with six photocopies of memos he'd dispatched to his parent-unit commander on the same issue. He'd explained further on that some expert in the Pentagon was considering the modification to the existing aircraft—which, Malloy thought, was the subject of a consulting contract worth probably $300,000 or so to some Beltway Bandit whose conclusion would be, *Yes, that's a good idea,* couched in about four hundred pages of stultifying bureaucratic prose, which nobody would ever read but which would be enshrined in some archive or other for all time. The modification would cost all of three thousand dollars in parts and

labor—the labor part would be the time of a sergeant who worked full-time for the Air Force anyway, whether actually working or sitting in his squad bay reading *Playboy*—but the rules were, unfortunately, the rules. And who knew, maybe in a year the Night Hawks would have the cable cutters.

Malloy grimaced and wished for his darts. He didn't need to see the intelligence information. The faces of known or suspected terrorists were of no use to him. He never got close enough to see them. That was the job of the shooters, and division commander or not he was merely their chauffeur. Well, it could have been worse. At least he was able to wear his "bag," or flight suit, at his desk, almost as though this were a proper organization of aviators. He got to fly four days or so out of seven, and that wasn't bad, and after this assignment, his detailer had hinted, he might go on to command of VMH-1, and maybe fly the president around. It would be dull, but career-enhancing. It surely hadn't hurt his old friend, Colonel Hank Goodman, who had just appeared on the star list, a fairly rare achievement for a rotor-head, since naval aviation, which was mainly helicopter drivers, was run, and run ruthlessly, by fast-movers in their jet-powered fixed-wing fighter bombers. Well, they all had prettier scarves. To amuse himself before lunch, Malloy pulled out his manual for the MH-60K and started to memorize additional information on engine performance, the kind of thing usually done by an engineering officer or maybe his crew chief, Sergeant Jack Nance.

The initial meeting took place in a public park. Popov had checked the telephone book and called the number for one Patrick X. Murphy just before noon.

"Hello, this is Joseph Andrews. I'm trying to find Mr. Yates," he'd said.

That statement was followed by silence, as the man on the other end of the phone had searched his memory for the codephrase. It was an old one, but after ten seconds or so, he'd fished it out.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Andrews. We haven't heard from you in some time."

"I just arrived in Dublin this morning, and I'm looking forward to seeing him. How quickly can we get together?"

"How about one this afternoon?" And then had come the instructions.

So, here he was now, wearing his raincoat and wide-brimmed fedora hat, carrying a copy of the *Irish Times* in his right hand, and sitting on a particular bench close to an oak tree. He used the downtime to read the paper and catch up on what was happening in the world—it wasn't very different from what he'd seen on CNN the previous day in New York … international news had gotten so dull

since the demise of the Soviet Union, and he wondered how the editors of major newspapers had learned to deal with it. Well, people in Rwanda and Burundi were still slaughtering one another with obscene gusto, and the Irish were wondering aloud if soldiers from their army might be sent down as peacekeepers. Wasn't that odd? Popov thought. They'd proven singularly unable to keep the peace at home, so why, then, send them elsewhere to do it?

"Joe!" a happy voice said out of his field of vision. He looked up to see a fortyish man with a beaming smile.

"Patrick!" Popov responded, standing, going over to shake hands. "It's been a long time." Very long, as he'd never met this particular chap before, though they exchanged greetings like old friends. With that, they walked off to O'Connell Street, where a car was waiting. Popov and his new friend got in the back, and the driver took off at once, not speeding, but checking his rearview mirror carefully as he took several random turns. "Patrick" in the back looked up for helicopters. Well, Dmitriy thought, these PIRA soldiers hadn't lived to their current ages by being careless. For his part, Popov just sat back and relaxed. He might have closed his eyes, but that would have been overly patronizing to his hosts. Instead, he just stared forward. It was not his first time in Dublin, but except for a few obvious landmarks, he remembered little of the city. His current companions would not have believed that, since intelligence officers were supposed to have trained, photographic memories—which was true, but only to a point. It took forty minutes of weaving through the city until they came to a commercial building and looped around into an alley. There the car stopped, and they got out to enter a door in a blank brick wall.

"Iosef Andreyevich," a voice said calmly in the darkness. Then a face appeared.

"Sean, it has been a long time." Popov stepped forward, extending his hand.

"Eleven years and six months, to be exact," Sean Grady agreed, taking the hand and shaking it warmly.

"Your trade-craft remains excellent." Popov smiled. "I have no idea where we are."

"Well, one must be careful, Iosef." Grady waved. "Come this way, if you would."

Grady directed him to a small room with a table and a few chairs. There was tea brewing. The Irish hadn't lost their sense of hospitality, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw, removing his coat and dumping it on an armchair. Then he sat down.

"What can we do for you?" Grady asked. He was nearing fifty, Popov saw, but the eyes retained their youth and their dedicated look, narrow, overtly without passion, but intense as ever.

"Before we get to that, how are things going for you, Sean?"

"They could be better," Grady admitted. "Some of our former colleagues in Ulster have committed themselves to surrendering to the British Crown. Unfortunately, there are many who share those leanings, but we are working to persuade others to a more realistic point of view."

"Thank you," Popov said to the one who gave him a cup of tea. He took a sip before speaking. "Sean, you know, from the first time we met in Lebanon, I have respected your commitment to your ideals. I am surprised that so many others have wavered."

"It's been a long war, Iosef, and I suppose that not everyone can maintain his dedication. And more is the pity, my friend." Again his voice was singularly devoid of emotion. His face wasn't so much cruel as blank. He would have made a superb field intelligence officer, the Russian thought. He gave away nothing, not even the satisfaction he occasionally felt when he accomplished a mission. He'd probably showed as little passion when he'd tortured and murdered two British SAS commandos who'd made the mistake of letting down their guard just once. Such things had not happened often, but Sean Grady had achieved that most difficult of goals twice—at the cost, truth be told, of a bloody vendetta between the British Army's most elite unit and Grady's own cell of the PIRA. The SAS had killed no fewer than eight of his closest associates, and on one other occasion some seven years before they'd missed Grady only because his car had broken down on the way to a meeting—a meeting crashed by the SAS, who had killed three senior PIRA officials there. Sean Grady was a marked man, and Popov was certain that the British Security Service had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds in their attempt to track him down and target him for another commando raid. This, like intelligence operations, was a very dangerous game for all the players, but most of all for the revolutionaries themselves. And now his own leadership was selling out, or so Grady must have thought. This man would never make peace with the British. He believed too firmly in his vision of the world, warped though it was. Josef Vissarionovich Stalin had possessed a face like this one, and the same single-mindedness of purpose, and the same total inability to compromise on strategic issues.

"There is a new counter-terror team operating in England now," Dmitriy told him.

"Oh?" Grady hadn't known that, and the revelation surprised him.

"Yes. It is called Rainbow. It is a joint effort of the British and Americans, and it was they who handled the jobs at Worldpark, Vienna, and Bern. They have not yet been committed to this particular mission, but that is only, I think, a matter of time."

"What do you know about this new group?"

"Quite a lot." Popov handed over his written summary.

"Hereford," Grady observed. "We've been there to look, but it is not a place one can easily attack."

"Yes, I know that, Sean, but there are additional vulnerabilities, and with proper planning, we think it possible to strike a hard blow on this Rainbow group. You see, both the wife and daughter of the group commander, this American, John Clark, work at the nearby community hospital. They would be the bait for the mission—"

"Bait?" Grady asked.

"Yes, Sean." And then Popov went on to describe the mission concept. Grady, as ever, didn't react, but two of his people did, shifting in their chairs and trading looks while waiting for their commander to speak. This he finally did, rather formally.

"Colonel Serov, you propose that we undertake a major risk."

Dmitriy nodded. "Yes, that is true, and it is for you to decide if the risk is worth the rewards." Popov didn't have to remind the IRA chieftain that he'd helped them in the past—in a minor way to be sure, but these were not people to forget assistance—but neither did he have to point out that this mission, if successful, would not only catapult Grady to the forefront of IRA commanders, but also, perhaps, poison the peace process between the British government and the "official" faction of the PIRA. To be the man who humbled the SAS and other special-operations teams on their own turf would win him such prestige as no Irish revolutionary had enjoyed since 1920. That was always the weakness of such people, Popov knew. Their dedication to ideology made them hostage to their egos, to their vision, not only of their political objectives, but of themselves.

"Iosef Andreyevich, unfortunately, we do not have the resources to consider such a mission as this."

"I understand that. What resources do you require, Sean?"

"More than you can offer." From his own experience, and from speaking with others in the community of world terrorists, Grady knew how tight the KGB was with its cash. But that only set him up for the next surprise.

"Five million American dollars, in a numbered and codeword-controlled Swiss account," Popov said evenly, and this time he saw emotion on Grady's face. The eyes blinked. The mouth opened slightly, as though to voice an objection, but then he restored his self-control.

"Six," Grady said, just to take control of the agenda.

That suited Popov just fine. "Very well, then, I suppose I can offer as much as six million. How quickly will you need it?"

"How quickly can you deliver it?"

"A week, I think. How long for you to plan the operation?"

Grady thought for a few seconds. "Two weeks." He already knew much of the area around Hereford. That he had not been able to conduct an attack in earlier days hadn't prevented him from thinking—dreaming—about it, and gathering the needed intelligence. He had also tried to gather information on SAS operations, but had found that the SAS didn't talk very much, even afterward, except within their own community. A few covert photographs had been generated, but they hadn't proven very useful in the field. No, what they'd needed and hadn't had in previous years was a combination of people willing to undertake a huge risk and the resources to obtain the items the mission would require.

"One other thing," Grady said.

"Yes?"

"How good are your contacts with drug dealers?" Grady asked.

Popov allowed himself to be shocked, though he didn't react visibly. Grady wanted drugs to sell? That was a huge change in the PIRA's ethos. In earlier years, the Provos had made a point of killing or kneecapping drug dealers as a means of showing that they were worthy of community support. So, this had changed, too?

"I have some indirect contacts, I suppose. What would you require?"

"Cocaine, a large quantity of it, preferably pure."

"To sell here?"

"Yes. Money is money, Iosef," Grady pointed out. "And we need a continuing income to maintain operations."

"I make no promises, but I will see what I can do."

"Very well. Let me know about the money. When it is available to us, I will let you know if the mission can be carried out, and when we might be able to do it."

"Weapons?"

"That is not a concern," Grady assured him.

"I need a telephone number to call."

Grady nodded, took a pad from the table, and wrote it out for him. It was clearly a cellular phone. The Russian pocketed the note. "That should be good for another few weeks. Is that sufficient to your needs?"

"Yes, it is." Popov stood. There was nothing else to be said. Popov was led out of the building and back to the car he had arrived in. The meeting had gone well, Dmitriy told himself on the drive back to his hotel.

"Sean, this is a suicide mission!" Roddy Sands warned back in the warehouse.

"Not if we control the situation, Roddy," Grady replied. "And we

can do that if we have the proper resources. We'll have to be careful, and very quick, but we can do it." *And when we do,* Grady didn't have to go on, *then the entire movement will see who really represents the people of Ireland.* "We'll need fifteen men or so. We can get the right fifteen men, Roddy." Then Grady stood and walked out the other door in the room and got his own car for the drive to his safe house. There he had work to do, the sort of work he always did alone.

Henriksen was assembling his team. He figured ten men total, all experienced, and all briefed in on the Project. Foremost among them would be Lieutenant Colonel Wilson Gearing, formerly of the United States Army Chemical Corps. A genuine expert on chemical weapons, he would be the deliveryman. The rest would consult with the local security forces, and tell them things they already knew, establishing and enforcing the international rule that an Expert Was Somebody From Out Of Town. The Australian SAS would listen politely to everything his people said, and maybe even learn a thing or two, especially when his people brought down the new radio gear from E-Systems and Dick Voss trained the Aussies up on them. The new radios for special-operations troops and SWAT cops were a thing of beauty. After that, they'd merely strut around with special ID to get them through all the security checkpoints, and even onto the track-and-field grounds of the huge stadium. They'd be able to watch the Olympics close up, which would be an interesting fringe benny for his people, some of whom, he was sure, were real sports fans who would enjoy seeing the last Olympics.

He selected his best people, and then had the corporation's travel agent set up the flights and accommodations—the latter through the Australian police, which had reserved a block of hotel suites close to the stadium for their own use throughout the Olympic games. Henriksen wondered if there would be media attention for his company. Ordinarily, he would have insisted on it, just as advertising, but not this time, he decided. There wasn't much point in advertising his company anymore, was there?

So, this project was done. Hollister looked over the buildings, the roads, parking lots, and the ersatz airplane runway whose construction he'd supervised here in the Kansas plains. The final stuff had been the usual confusion of niggling little details, but all the subcontractors had responded well to his browbeating, especially since their contracts all had incentive clauses as well.

The company car pulled up to his four-by-four and stopped, and then Hollister was surprised. The guy who got out was the big boss, John Brightling himself. He'd never met the chairman of the

corporation, though he knew the name, and had seen the face on TV once or twice. He must have flown in this very morning on one of his corporate jets, and the construction superintendent was somewhat disappointed that he hadn't used the approach road, which could have easily accommodated the Gulfstream.

"Mr. Hollister, I presume?"

"Yes, sir." He took the extended hand and shook it. "It's all done, as of today, sir."

"You beat your promise by two and a half weeks," Brightling observed.

"Well, the weather helped us out some. I can't take credit for that."

Brightling laughed. "I would."

"The toughest part was the environmental systems. That's the most demanding set of specifications I've ever seen. What's the big deal, Dr. Brightling?"

"Well, some of the things we work with demand full isolation—Level Four, we call it in the business. Hot Lab stuff, and we have to treat it very carefully, as you might imagine. Federal rules on that we have to follow."

"But the whole building?" Hollister asked. It had been like building a ship or an aircraft. Rarely was any large structure designed to be completely airtight. But this one was, which had forced them to do air-pressure tests when each module had been completed, and driven his window contractors slightly crazy.

"Well, we just wanted it done our way."

"Your building, Doc," Hollister allowed. That one specification had added five million dollars of labor costs to the project, all of it to the window contractor, whose workers had hated the detail work, though not the extra pay to do it. The old Boeing plant down the road at Wichita had hardly been called upon to do such finely finished work. "You picked a pretty setting for it, though."

"Didn't we, though?" All around, the land was covered with a swaying green carpet of wheat, just about a quarter way into its growing cycle. There were some farm machines visible, fertilizing and weeding the crop. Maybe not as pretty as a golf course, but a lot more practical. The complex even had its own large institutional bakery to bake its own bread, maybe from the wheat grown right here on the campus? Hollister wondered. Why hadn't he thought about that one before? The farms that had been bought along with the land even included a feedlot for fattening up cattle, and other land used for truck-farm vegetables. This whole complex could be self-sustaining if somebody ever wanted it to be. Well, maybe they just wanted it to fit in with the area. This part of Kansas was all farms, and though the steel-and-glass buildings of the project didn't exactly look like barns

and equipment sheds, their surroundings somehow muted their invasiveness. And besides, you could hardly see them from the interstate highway to the north, and only from a few public roads closer than that, and the gatehouses for limiting access were stout buildings, almost like pillboxes—to protect against tornadoes, the specifications had said, and sure enough no tornado could hurt them—hell, even some loony farmer with a .50-caliber machine gun couldn't hurt those security huts.

"So, you've earned your bonus. The money will be in your account by the close of business tomorrow," Dr. John Brightling promised.

"Suits me, sir." Hollister fished in his pocket and pulled out the master key, the one that would open any door in the complex. It was a little ceremony he always performed when he finished a project. He handed it over. "Well, sir, it's your building complex now."

Brightling looked at the electronic key and smiled. This was the last major hurdle for the Project. This would be the home of nearly all of his people. A similar but much smaller structure in Brazil had been finished two months earlier, but that one barely accommodated a hundred people. This one could house three thousand—somewhat crowded, but comfortably even so—for some months, and that was about right. After the first couple of months, he could sustain his medical research efforts here with his best people—most of them *not* briefed in on the Project, but worthy of life even so—because that work was heading in some unexpectedly promising directions. So promising that he wondered how long he himself might live here. Fifty years? A hundred? A thousand, perhaps? Who could say now?

Olympus, he'd call it, Brightling decided on the spot. The home of the gods, for that was exactly what he expected it to be. From here they could watch the world, study it, enjoy it, *appreciate* it. He would use the call-sign OLYMPUS-1 on his portable radio. From here he'd be able to fly all over the world with picked companions, to observe and learn how the ecology was supposed to work. For twenty years or so, they'd be able to use communications satellites—no telling how long they'd last, and after that they'd be stuck with long-wire radio systems. That was an inconvenience for the future, but launching his own replacement satellites was just too difficult in terms of manpower and resources, and besides, satellite launchers polluted like nothing else humankind had ever invented.

Brightling wondered how long his people would choose to live here. Some would scatter quickly, probably drive all over America, setting up their own enclaves, reporting back by satellite at first. Others would go to Africa—that seemed likely to be the most popular destination. Still others to Brazil and the rain forest study area. Perhaps some of the primitive tribes down there would be spared the

Shiva exposure, and his people would study them as well and how Primitive Man lived in a pristine physical environment, living in full harmony with Nature. They'd study them as they were, a unique species worthy of protection—and too backward to be a danger to the environment. Might some African tribes survive as well? His people didn't think so. The African countries allowed their primitives to interface too readily with city folk, and the cities would be the focal centers of death for every nation on earth—especially when Vaccine-A was distributed. Thousands of liters of it would be produced, flown all over the world, and then distributed, ostensibly to preserve life, but really to take it … slowly, of course.

Progress was going well. Back at his corporate headquarters the fictional documentation for -A was already fully formulated. It had been supposedly tested on over a thousand monkeys who were then exposed to Shiva, and only two of them had become symptomatic, and only one of those had died over the nineteen-month trial that existed only on paper and computer memories. They hadn't yet approached the FDA for human trials, because that wasn't necessary—but when Shiva started appearing all over the world, Horizon Corporation would announce that it had been working quietly on hemorrhagic fever vaccines ever since the Iranian attack on America, and faced with a global emergency and a fully documented treatment modality, the FDA would have no choice but to approve human use, and so officially bless the Project's goal of global human extermination. Not so much the elimination, John Brightling thought more precisely, as the culling back of the most dangerous species on the planet, which would allow Nature to restore Herself, with just enough human stewards to watch and study and appreciate the process. In a thousand or so years, there might be a million or so humans, but that was a small number in the great scheme of things, and the people would be properly educated to understand and respect nature instead of destroying her. The goal of the Project wasn't to end the world. It was to build a new one, a new world in the shape that Nature Herself intended. On that he would put his own name for all eternity. John Brightling, the man who saved the planet.

Brightling looked at the key in his hand, then got back into his car. The driver took him to the main entrance, and there he used the key, surprised and miffed to see that the door was unlocked. Well, there were still people going in and out. He took the elevator to his office-apartment atop the main building. That door, he saw, *was* locked as it was supposed to be, and he opened it with a kind of one-person ceremony, and walked into the seat of Olympus's chief god. No, that wasn't right. Insofar as there was a god, it was Nature. From his office windows, he could see out over the plains of Kansas, the swaying

young wheat . . . it was so beautiful. Almost enough to bring tears to his eyes. Nature. She could be cruel to individuals, but individuals didn't matter. Despite all the warnings, humankind hadn't learned that.

Well, learn it they would, the way Nature taught all Her lessons. The hard way.

Pat O'Connor made his daily report to the ASAC in the evening. Coatless, he slid into the chair opposite Ussery's desk with his folder in hand. It was already fairly thick.

"Bannister case," Chuck Ussery said. "Anything shaking loose yet, Pat?"

"Nothing," the supervisory special agent replied. "We've interviewed fourteen friends in the Gary area. None of them had any idea what Mary was doing in New York. Only six of them even knew she was there, and she never discussed jobs or boyfriends, if any, with them. So, nothing at all has happened here."

"New York?" the ASAC asked next.

"Two agents on the case there, Tom Sullivan and Frank Chatham. They've established contact with a NYPD detective lieutenant named d'Allessandro. Forensics has been through her apartment—nothing. Latent prints are all hers, not even a maid. Neighbors in the building knew her by sight, but no real friendships established, and therefore no known associates. The New York idea is to print up some flyers and pass them out via the NYPD. The local detective is worried there might be a serial killer loose. He has another missing female, same age, roughly the same appearance and area of residence, fell off the world about the same time."

"Behavioral Sciences?" Ussery asked at once.

O'Connor nodded. "They've looked over the facts we have to date. They wonder if the e-mail was sent by the victim or maybe by a serial killer who wants to fuck over the family. Style differences on the message that Mr. Bannister brought in—well, we both saw that it appeared to have been written by a different person, or someone on drugs, but she was evidently not a drug user. And we can't trace the e-mail back anywhere. It went into an anonymous-remailer system. That sort of thing is designed to protect the originator of electronic mail, I guess so people can swap porno over the Net. I talked with Eddie Morales in Baltimore. He's the technical wizard in Innocent Images"—that was an ongoing FBI project to track down, arrest, and imprison those who swapped kiddie porn over their computers—"and Bert said they're playing with some technical fixes. They have a hacker on the payroll who thinks he can come up with a way to crack through the anonymity feature, but he's not there yet, and the local U.S. Attorney

isn't sure it's legal anyway."

"Shit." Ussery thought of that legal opinion. Kiddie porn was one of the Bureau's pet hates, and Innocent Images had turned into a high-priority nationwide investigation, run from the Baltimore Field Division.

O'Connor nodded. "That's exactly what Bert said, Chuck."

"So, nothing happening yet?"

"Nothing worthwhile. We have a few more of Mary's friends to interview—five are set up for tomorrow, but if anything breaks loose, my bet's on New York. Somebody must have known her. Somebody must have dated her. But not here, Chuck. She left Gary and didn't look back."

Ussery frowned, but there was no fault to be found with O'Connor's investigative procedures, and there was a total of twelve agents working the Bannister case. Such cases ran and broke at their own speed. If James Bannister called, as he did every day, he'd just have to tell him that the Bureau was still working on it, then ask him for any additional friends he might have forgotten to list for the Gary team of agents.

CHAPTER 25

SUNRISE

"You didn't stay very long, sir," the immigration inspector observed, looking at Popov's passport.

"A quick business meeting," the Russian said, in his best American accent. "I'll be back again soon." He smiled at the functionary.

"Well, do hurry back, sir." Another stamp on the well-worn passport, and Popov headed into the first-class lounge.

Grady would do it. He was sure of that. The challenge was too great for one of his ego to walk away, and the same was true of the reward. Six million dollars was more than the IRA had ever seen in one lump sum, even when Libya's Muammar Qaddafi had bankrolled them in the early 1980s. The funding of terrorist organizations was always a practical problem. The Russians had historically given them some arms, but more valuably to the IRA, places to train, and operational intelligence against the British security services, but never very much money. The Soviet Union had never possessed a very large quantity of foreign exchange, and mainly used it to purchase technology with military applications. Besides, it had turned out, the elderly married couple they'd used as couriers to the West, delivering cash to Soviet agents in America and Canada, had been under FBI control almost the entire time! Popov had to shake his head. Excellent as the KGB had been, the FBI was just as good. It had a long-standing institutional brilliance at false-flag operations, which, in the case of the couriers, had compromised a large number of sensitive operations run by the "Active Measures" people in KGB's Service A. The Americans had had the good sense not to burn the operations, but rather use them as expanding resources in order to gain a systematic picture of what KGB was doing—targets and objectives—and so learn what the Russians *hadn't* already penetrated.

He shook his head again, as he walked off to the gate. And he was still in the dark, wasn't he? The questions continued to swarm: Exactly *what* was he doing? *What* did Brightling want? *Why* attack this Rainbow group?

Chavez decided to set his MP-10 submachine gun aside today and

concentrate instead on his Beretta .45. He hadn't missed a shot with the Heckler & Koch weapon in weeks—in this context, a "miss" meant not hitting within an inch of the ideal bullet placement, between and slightly above the eyes on the silhouette target. The H&K's diopter sights were so perfectly designed that if you could see the target through the sights, you hit the target. It was that simple.

But pistols were not that simple, and he needed the practice. He drew the weapon from the green Gore-Tex holster and brought it up fast, his left hand joining the right on the grip as his right foot took half a step back, and he turned his body, adopting the Weaver stance that he'd been taught years before at The Farm in the Virginia Tidewater. His eyes looked down, off the target, acquiring the pistol's sights as it came up to eye level, and when it did, his right index finger pulled back evenly on the trigger—

—not quite evenly enough. The shot would have shattered the target's jaw, and maybe severed a major blood vessel, but it would not have been instantly fatal. The second shot, delivered about half a second later, would have been. Ding grunted, annoyed with himself. He dropped the hammer with the safety-decock lever and reholstered the pistol. *Again.* He looked down, away from the target, then looked up. There he was, a terrorist with his weapon to the head of a child. Like lightning, the Beretta came up again, the sights matched up and Chavez pulled back his finger. Better. That one would have gone through the bastard's left eye, and the second round, again half a second later, made the first between-the-eyes hole into a cute little figure-eight.

"Excellent double-tap, Mr. Chavez."

Ding turned to see Dave Woods, the range master.

"Yeah, my first was wide and low," Ding admitted. That it would have blown half the bastard's face right off was not good enough.

"Less wrist, more finger," Woods advised. "And let me see your grip again." Ding did that. "Ah, yes, I see." His hands adjusted Chavez's left hand somewhat. "More like that, sir."

Shit, Ding thought. Was it that simple? By moving two fingers less than a quarter of an inch, the pistol slipped into a position as though the grip had been custom-shaped for his hands. He tried it a few times, then reholstered again and executed his version of a quick-draw. This time, the first round was dead between the eyes of the target seven meters away, and the second right beside it.

"Excellent," Woods said.

"How long you been teaching, Sergeant Major?"

"Quite some time, sir. Nine years here at Hereford."

"How come you never joined up with SAS?"

"Bad knee. Hurt it back in 1986, jumping down off a Warrior. I

can't run more than two miles without its stiffening up on me, you see." The red mustache was waxed into two rather magnificent points, and the gray eyes sparkled. This son of a bitch could have taught shooting to Doc Holliday, Chavez knew at that moment. "Do carry on, sir." The range master walked off.

"Well, shit," Chavez breathed to himself. He executed four more quick-draws. *More finger, less wrist, lower the left hand a skosh on the grip . . . bingo . . .* In three more minutes there was a two-inch hole right in the middle of the instant-incapacitation part of the target. He'd have to remember this little lesson, Ding told himself.

Tim Noonan was in the next lane over, using his own Beretta, shooting slower than Chavez, and not quite as tight in his groups, but *all* of his rounds would have driven through the bottom of the brain, and right into the stem, where instant kills happened, because that was where the spinal cord entered the brain. Finally, both ran out of ammunition. Chavez took off his ear-protectors and tapped Noonan on the shoulder.

"A little slow today," the technical expert observed, with a frown.

"Yeah, well, you dropped the fucker. You were HRT, right?"

"Yeah, but not really a shooter. I did the tech side for them, too. Well, okay, I shot with them regularly, but not quite good enough for the varsity. Never got as fast as I wanted to be. Maybe I have slow nerves." Noonan grinned as he field-stripped his pistol for cleaning.

"So how's that people-finder working out?"

"The damned thing is fucking magic, Ding. Give me another week and I'll have the new one figured out. There's a parabolic attachment for the antenna, looks like something out of *Star Trek,* I guess, but goddamn, does it find people." He wiped the parts off and sprayed Break-Free on them for cleaning and lubrication. "That Woods guy's a pretty good coach, isn't he?"

"Yeah, well, he just fixed a little problem for me," Ding said, taking the spray can to start cleaning his own service automatic.

"The head guy at the FBI Academy when I was there did wonders for me, too. Just how your hands match up on the butt, I guess. And a steady finger." Noonan ran a patch through the barrel, eyeballed it, and reassembled his pistol. "You know, the best part about being over here is, we're about the only people who get to carry guns."

"I understand civilians can't own handguns over here, eh?"

"Yeah, they changed the law a few years ago. I'm sure it'll help reduce crime," Noonan observed. "They started their gun-control laws back in the '20s, to control the IRA. Worked like a charm, didn't it?" The FBI agent laughed. "Oh, well, they never wrote down a Constitution like we did."

"You carry all the time?"

"Hell, yes!" Noonan looked up. "Hey, Ding, I'm a cop, y'dig? I feel naked without a friend on my belt. Even when I was working Lab Division in Headquarters, reserved parking space and all, man, I *never* walked around D.C. without a weapon."

"Ever have to use it?"

Tim shook his head. "No, not many agents do, but it's part of the mystique, you know?" He looked back at his target. "Some skills you just like to have, man."

"Yeah, same for the rest of us." It was a fillip of British law that the Rainbow members *were* authorized to carry weapons everywhere they went, on the argument that as counterterror people they were always on duty. It was a right Chavez hadn't exercised very much, but Noonan had a point. As Chavez watched, he slapped a full magazine into the reassembled and cleaned handgun, dropped the lever to close the slide, then after safing the weapon, ejected the magazine to slide one more round into it. The gun went back into his hip holster, along with two more full magazines in covered pockets on the outside. Well, it was part of being a cop, wasn't it?

"Later, Tim."

"See you around, Ding."

Many people can't do it, but some people simply remember faces. It's a particularly useful skill for bartenders, because people will come back to establishments where the guy at the bar remembers your favorite drink. This was true at New York's Turtle Inn Bar and Lounge, on Columbus Avenue. The foot patrolman came in just after the bar opened at noon and called, "Hey, Bob."

"Hi, Jeff, coffee?"

"Yeah," the young cop said, watching the bartender get some Starbuck's from the urn. Unusually for a bar, this place served good coffee, since that was the yuppie thing in this part of town. One sugar and some cream, and he passed the cup over.

Jeff had been on this beat for just under two years, long enough that he knew most of the business owners, and most of them knew him and his habits. He was an honest cop, but never one to turn down free food or drink, especially good donuts, the American cop's favorite food.

"So, what's shakin'?" Bob asked.

"Looking for a missin' girl," Jeff replied. "Know this face?" He handed the printed flyer over.

"Yeah, Annie something, likes Kendall Jackson Reserve Chardonnay. Used to be a regular. Haven't seen her in a while, though."

"How about this one?" The second flyer went across the bar. Bob looked at it for a second or two.

"Mary . . . Mary Bannister. I remember that, 'cuz it's like the thing on a set of steps, like you know? Haven't seen her in a while, either."

The patrolman could hardly believe his luck. "What do you know about them?"

"Wait a minute, you said they're missing, like kidnapped or something?"

"That's right, man." Jeff sipped his coffee. "FBI is on this one." He tapped the Bannister photo. "The other one we turned."

"Well, I'll be damned. Don't know much about them. Used to see 'em both here couple days a week, they dance and stuff, you know, like single girls do, trolling for guys."

"Okay, tell you what, some people will be in here to talk to you about 'em. Think about it, will ya?" The cop had to consider the possibility that Bob was the one who'd made them disappear, but there were chances you had to take in an investigation, and that likelihood was pretty damned slim. Like many New York waiters and bartenders, this guy was an aspiring actor, which probably explained his memory.

"Yeah, sure, Jeff. Damn, kidnapped, eh? Don't hear very much about that stuff anymore. Shit," he concluded.

"Eight million stories in the Naked City, man. Later," the patrolman said, heading for the door. He felt as though he'd done a major portion of his day's work, and as soon as he got outside, he used his epaulet-mounted radio microphone to call the newly developed information into his precinct house.

Grady's face was known in the U.K., but not the red beard and glasses, which, he hoped, would obscure his visage enough to reduce the chance of being spotted by an alert police constable. In any case, the police presence wasn't as heavy here as in London. The gate into the base at Hereford was just as he'd remembered it, and from there it wasn't a long drive to the community hospital, where he examined the roads, shoulders, and parking areas and found them to his liking, as he shot six rolls of film with his Nikon. The plan that started building in his mind was simple, as all good plans were. The roads seemed to work in his favor, as did the open ground. As always, surprise would be his primary weapon. He'd need that, since the operation was so close to the U.K.'s best and most dangerous military organization, but the distances told him the time factor. Probably forty minutes on the outside, thirty on the inside to make the plan work. Fifteen men, but he could get fifteen good men. The other resources money could purchase, Grady thought, as he sat in the hospital parking lot. Yes, this could and would work. The only question was daylight or nighttime. The latter was the usual answer, but he'd learned the hard

way that counter-terror teams loved the night, because their night-vision equipment made the time of day indistinguishable in a tactical sense—and people like Grady were not trained to operate as well in the dark. It had given the police an enormous advantage recently at Vienna, Bern, and Worldpark. So, why *not* try it in broad daylight? he wondered. It was something to discuss with his friends, Grady concluded, as he restarted the car and headed back toward Gatwick.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about it since Jeff showed me the pictures," the bartender said. His name was Bob Johnson. He was now dressed for the evening, in a white tuxedo shirt, black cummerbund, and bowtie.

"You know this woman?"

"Yeah." He nodded positively. "Mary Bannister. The other one is Anne Pretloe. They used to be regulars here. Seemed nice enough. They danced and flirted with the men. This place gets pretty busy at night, 'specially on weekends. They used to come in around eight or so, then leave at eleven or eleven-thirty."

"Alone?"

"When they left? Most of the time, but not always. Annie had a guy she liked. His name's Hank, don't know the last name. White, brown hair, brown eyes, about my size, growing a gut, but not really overweight. I think he's a lawyer. He'll probably be in tonight. He's pretty regular here. Then there was another guy . . . maybe the last time I saw her here . . . what the hell's his name . . . ?" Johnson looked down at the bar. "Kurt, Kirk, something like that. Now that I think of it, I saw Mary dancing with him, too, once or twice. White guy, tall, good-lookin', haven't seen him in a while, liked whiskey sours made with Jim Beam, good tipper." A bartender always remembered good and bad tippers. "He was a hunter."

"Huh?" Agent Sullivan asked.

"Huntin' for babes, man. That's why guys come to a place like this, you know?"

This guy was a godsend, Sullivan and Chatham thought. "But you haven't seen him in a while?"

"The guy Kurt? No, couple of weeks at least, maybe more."

"Any chance that you could help us put a picture together?"

"You mean the artists' sketch thing, like in the papers?" Johnson asked them.

"That's right," Chatham confirmed.

"I suppose I can try. Some of the gals who come in here might know him, too. I think Marissa knew him. She's a regular, in here nearly every night, shows up around seven, seven-thirty."

"I guess we're going to be here awhile," Sullivan thought aloud,

checking his watch.

It was midnight at RAF Mildenhall. Malloy lifted the Night Hawk off the ramp and set off west for Hereford. The controls felt just as tight and crisp as ever, and the new widget worked. It turned out to be a fuel-gauge widget, digitized to tell him with numbers rather than a needle how much fuel he had. The switch also toggled back and forth between gallons (U.S., not Imperial) and pounds. Not a bad idea, he thought. The night was relatively clear, which was unusual for this part of the world, but there was no moon, and he had opted to use his night-vision goggles. These turned darkness into greenish twilight, and though they reduced his visual acuity from 20/20 down to about 20/40, that was still a major improvement on being totally blind in the dark. He kept the aircraft at three hundred feet, to avoid power lines, which scared the hell out of him, as they did all experienced helicopter pilots. There were no troops in the back, only Sergeant Nance, who still wore his pistol in order to feel more warriorlike—side arms were authorized for special-operations troops, even those who had little likelihood of ever using them. Malloy kept his Beretta M9 in his flight bag rather than a shoulder holster, which he found melodramatic, especially for a Marine.

"Chopper down there at the hospital pad," Lieutenant Harrison said, seeing it as they angled past for the base. "Turnin' and blinkin'."

"Got it," Malloy confirmed. They'd pass well clear even if the guy lifted off right now. "Nothing else at our level," he added, checking aloft for the blinking lights of airliners heading in and out of Heathrow and Luton. You never stopped scanning if you wanted to live. If he got command of VHM-1 at Anacostia Naval Air Station in D.C., the traffic at Reagan National Airport meant that he'd be flying routinely through very crowded air space, and though he respected commercial airline pilots, he trusted them less than he trusted his own abilities—which, he knew, was exactly how they viewed him and everybody in green flight suits. To be a pilot for a living, you had to think of yourself as the very best, though in Malloy's case he knew this to be true. And this kid Harrison showed some real promise, if he stayed in uniform instead of ending up a traffic reporter in West Bumfuck, Wherever. Finally, the landing pad at Hereford came into view, and Malloy headed for it. Five minutes and he'd be on the ground, cooling the turboshaft engines down, and twenty minutes after that, in his bed.

"Yes, he will do it," Popov said. They were in a corner booth, and the background music made it a secure place to talk. "He has not confirmed it, but he will."

"Who is he?" Henriksen asked.

"Sean Grady. Do you know the name?"

"PIRA . . . worked in Londonderry mainly, didn't he?"

"For the most part, yes. He captured three SAS people and . . . disposed of them. Two separate incidents. The SAS then targeted him on three separate missions. Once they came very close to getting him, and they eliminated ten or so of his closest associates. He then cleaned out some suspected informers in his unit. He's quite ruthless," Popov assured his associates.

"That's true," Henriksen assured Brightling. "I remember reading what he did to the SAS guys he caught. Wasn't very pretty. Grady's a nasty little fucker. Does he have enough people to make this attempt?"

"I think yes," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied. "And he held us up for money. I offered five, and he demanded six, plus drugs."

"Drugs?" Henriksen was surprised.

"Wait, I thought the IRA didn't approve of drug trafficking," Brightling objected.

"We live in a practical world. The IRA worked for years to eliminate drug dealers throughout Ireland—mainly kneecappings, to make the action very public. That was a psychological and political move on his part. Perhaps now he entertains the idea as a continuing source of income for his operations," Dmitriy explained. The morality of the issue didn't seem very important to anyone at the table.

"Yeah, well, I suppose we can entertain that request," Brightling said, with a small measure of distaste. "Kneecappings? What does that mean?"

"You take a pistol," Bill explained, "and place it behind the knee, then you fire forward. It blows the kneecap to smithereens. Painful, and permanently crippling. It's how they used to deal with informers and other people they didn't like. The Protestant terrorists preferred a Black and Decker drill for the same purpose. It puts the word out on the street that you are not to be messed with," Henriksen concluded.

"Ouch," the physician in Brightling commented.

"That's why they're called terrorists," Henriksen pointed out. "These days, they just kill them. Grady has a reputation for ruthlessness, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does," Popov confirmed. "There's no doubt that he will undertake this mission. He likes the concept and your suggestion for how it should be set up, Bill. There is also his ego, which is large." Popov took a sip of his wine. "He wants to take the lead in the IRA politically, and that will mean doing something dramatic."

"That's the Irish for you—the land of sad loves and happy wars."

"Will he succeed?" Brightling asked.

"The concept is a clever one. But remember that to him success

means elimination of the primary targets, the two women, and then a few of the reaction team of soldiers. After that, he will doubtless flee the area and try to return to Ireland and safety. Just surviving an operation of this type is successful enough for his political purposes. To fight a full military action would be madness for him, and Grady is not a madman," Dmitriy told them, not really sure he believed it. Weren't all revolutionaries mad? It was difficult to understand people who let visions take control of their lives. Those who'd succeeded, Lenin, Mao, and Gandhi in this century, were the ones who'd used their visions effectively, of course—but even then, which of the three had really succeeded? The Soviet Union had fallen, the People's Republic of China would eventually succumb to the same political-economic realities that had doomed the USSR, and India was still an economic disaster that somehow managed to hover in stagnation. By that model, Ireland was more surely doomed by the possible success of the IRA than it was by its economic marriage to Britain. At least Cuba had the tropical sun to keep it warm. To survive, with no natural resources to speak of, Ireland needed a close economic tie to someone, and the closest was the U.K. But that was off the dinner topic.

"So, you expect him to try a hit-and-run," Bill asked. Dmitriy nodded. "Nothing else makes tactical sense. He hopes to live long enough to utilize the money we've offered him. Assuming you will approve the increase he requires."

"What's another million or so?" Henriksen asked, with a suppressed grin.

So both of them regarded such a large sum as trivial, Popov saw, and again he was struck in the face with the fact that they were planning something monstrous—but what?

"How do they want it? Cash?" Brightling asked.

"No, I told them it would be deposited in a numbered Swiss account. I can arrange that."

"I have enough already laundered," Bill told his employer. "We could set that up tomorrow if you want."

"And that means I fly to Switzerland again," Dmitriy observed sourly.

"Getting tired of flying?"

"I have traveled a great deal, Dr. Brightling." Popov sighed openly. He was jet-lagged, and it showed for once.

"John."

"John." Popov nodded, seeing some actual affection in his boss for the first time, somewhat to his surprise.

"I understand, Dmitriy," Henriksen said. "The Australia trip was a pain in the ass for me."

"What was it like to grow up in Russia?" Brightling asked.

"Harder than America. There was more violence in the schools. No serious crime," Popov explained. "But lots of fights between the boys, for example. Dominance fights, as boys will. The authorities usually looked the other way."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Moscow. My father was also an officer in State Security. I was educated in Moscow State University."

"What major?"

"Language and economics." The former had proven very useful. The latter had been totally valueless, since the Marxist idea of economics had not exactly proven to be an effective one.

"Ever get out of the city? You know, like Boy Scouts do here, that sort of stuff?"

Popov smiled, wondering where this was going, and why they were asking it. But he played along. "One of my happiest memories of childhood. I was in the Young Pioneers. We traveled out to a state farm and worked there for a month, helping with the harvest, living with nature, as you Americans say." And then, at age fourteen, he'd met his first love, Yelena Ivanovna. He wondered where she was now. He succumbed to a brief attack of nostalgia, as he remembered her feel in the darkness, his first conquest . . .

Brightling noted the distant smile and took it for what he wanted it to be. "You liked that, eh?"

Clearly they didn't want to hear that story. "Oh, yes. I have often wondered what it was like to live out there in a place like that, the sun on your back all the time, working in the soil. My father and I used to walk into the woods, hunting for mushrooms—that was a common pastime for Soviet citizens in the sixties, walking in the woods." Unlike most Russians, they'd driven there in his father's official car, but as a boy he'd liked the woods as a place of adventure and romanticism, as all boys do, and enjoyed the time with his father as well.

"Any game in the woods there?" Bill Henriksen asked.

"One would see birds, of course, many kinds, and occasionally elk—you call them moose here, I think—but rarely. State hunters were always killing them. Wolves are their main target. They hunt them from helicopters. We Russians do not like wolves as you do here in America. Too many folk tales of rabid ones killing people, you see. Mostly lies, I expect."

Brightling nodded. "Same thing here. Wolves are just big wild dogs, you can train them as pets if you want. Some people do that."

"Wolves are cool," Bill added. He'd often thought about making one a pet, but you needed a lot of land for that. Maybe when the Project was fulfilled.

What the hell was *this* all about? Dmitriy wondered, still playing along. “I always wanted to see a bear, but there are none of them left in the Moscow area. I saw them only at the zoo. I loved bears,” he added, lying. They’d always frightened the hell out of him. You heard scores of bear stories as a child in Russia, few of them friendly, though not as antinature as the wolf stories. Large dogs? Wolves *killed* people in the steppes. The farmers and peasants hated the damned things and welcomed the state hunters with their helicopters and machine guns, the better to hunt them down and slaughter them.

“Well, John and I are Nature Lovers,” Bill explained, waving to the waiter for another bottle of wine. “Always have been. All the way back to Boy Scouts—like your Young Pioneers, I suppose.”

“The state was not kind to nature in the Soviet Union. Much worse than the problems you’ve had here in America. Americans have come to Russia to survey the damage and suggest ways to fix the problems of pollution and such.” Especially in the Caspian Sea, where pollution had killed off most of the sturgeon, and with it the fish eggs known as caviar, which had for so long been a prime means of earning foreign currency for the USSR.

“Yes, that was criminal,” Brightling agreed soberly. “But it’s a global problem. People don’t respect nature the way they should,” Brightling went on for several minutes, delivering what had to be a brief canned lecture, to which Dmitriy listened politely.

“That is a great political movement in America, is it not?”

“Not as powerful as many would like,” Bill observed. “But it’s important to some of us.”

“Such a movement would be useful in Russia. It is a pity that so much has been destroyed for no purpose,” Popov responded, meaning some of it. The state should conserve resources for proper exploitation, not simply destroy them because the local political hacks didn’t know how to use them properly. But then the USSR had been so horridly inefficient in everything it did—well, except espionage, Popov corrected himself. America had done well, he thought. The cities were far cleaner than their Russian counterparts, even here in New York, and you only needed to drive an hour from any city to see green grass and tidy productive farms. But the greater question was: why had a conversation that had begun with the discussion of a terrorist incident drifted into this? Had he done anything to invite it? No, his employer had abruptly steered it in this direction. It had not been an accident. That meant they were sounding him out—but on what? This nature drivel? He sipped at his wine and stared at his dinner companions. “You know, I’ve never really had a chance to see America. I would like very much to see the national parks. What is the one with the geysers? Gold stone? Something like that?”

"Yellowstone, it's in Wyoming. Maybe the prettiest place in America," Henriksen told the Russian.

"Nope, Yosemite," Brightling countered. "In California. That's the prettiest valley in the whole world. Overrun with goddamned tourists now, of course, but that'll change."

"Same story at Yellowstone, John, and, yeah, that'll change, too. Someday," Bill Henriksen concluded.

They seemed pretty positive about the things that would change. But the American state parks were run by the federal government for all citizens, weren't they? They had to be, because they were tax-supported. No limited access for the elite here. Equality for all—something he'd been taught in Soviet schools, except here they actually lived it. One more reason, Dmitriy thought, why one country had fallen, and the other had grown stronger.

"What do you mean 'that'll change'?" Popov asked.

"Oh, the idea is to lessen the impact of people on the areas. It's a good idea, but some other things have to happen first," Brightling replied.

"Yeah, John, just one or two," Henriksen agreed, with a chuckle. Then he decided that this feeling-out process had gone far enough. "Anyway, Dmitriy, how will we know when Grady wants to go forward?"

"I will call him. He left me a mobile-phone number which I can use at certain times of the day."

"Trustful soul."

"For me, yes. We have been friends since the 1980s, back when he was in the Bekaa Valley. And besides, the phone is mobile, probably bought with a false credit card by someone else entirely. These things are very useful to intelligence officers. They are difficult to track unless you have very sophisticated equipment. America has them, and so does England, but other nations, no, not very many of them."

"Well, call him as soon as you think proper. We want this one to run, don't we, John?"

"Yes," Dr. Brightling said definitively. "Bill, set up the money for the transfer tomorrow. Dmitriy, go ahead and set up the bank account."

"Yes, John," Popov replied, as the dessert cart approached the table.

Grady, they saw, was excited about this mission. It was approaching two in the Dublin morning. The photos had been developed by a friend of the movement, and six of them blown up. The large ones were pinned to the wall. The small ones lay in appropriate places on a map unfolded on the worktable.

"They will approach from here, right up this road. Only one place

for them to park their vehicles, isn't there?"

"Agreed," Rodney Sands said, checking angles.

"Okay, Roddy, then we do this . . ." Grady outlined the plan.

"How do we communicate?"

"Cellular phones. Every group will have one, and we'll select speed-dial settings so that we can trade information rapidly and efficiently."

"Weapons?" Danny McCorley asked.

"We have plenty of those, lad. They will respond with five men, perhaps as many as ten, but no more than that. They've never deployed more than ten or eleven men to a mission, even in Spain. We've counted them on the TV tapes, haven't we? Fifteen of us, ten of them, and surprise works for us in both phases."

The Barry twins, Peter and Sam, looked skeptical at first, but if the mission was run quickly . . . if it ran according to the schedule . . . yes, it was possible.

"What about the women?" Timothy O'Neil asked.

"What about them?" Grady asked. "They are our primary targets."

"A pregnant woman, Sean . . . it will not look good politically."

"They are Americans, and their husbands are our enemies, and they are bait for getting them close. We will not kill them at once, and if circumstances permit, they might well be left alive to mourn their loss, lad," Grady added, just to assuage the conscience of the younger man. Timmy wasn't a coward, but he did have some lingering bourgeois sentimentality.

O'Neil nodded submission. Grady wasn't a man to cross, and was in any case their leader. "I lead the group into the hospital, then?"

Grady nodded. "Yes. Roddy and I will remain outside with the covering group."

"Very well, Sean," Timmy agreed, committing himself to the mission now and forever.

CHAPTER 26

CONCLUSIONS

One problem with an investigation like this was that you risked alerting the subject, but that couldn't always be helped. Agents Sullivan and Chatham circulated around the bar until nearly midnight, finding two women who knew Mary Bannister, and one who knew Anne Pretloe. In the case of the former, they got the name of a man with whom Bannister had been seen dancing—a bar regular who hadn't shown up that night, but whose address they'd get rapidly enough from his telephone number, which was known, it seemed, to quite a few of the women here. By midnight they were ready to leave, somewhat annoyed to have spent so much time in a lively bar drinking nothing more potent than Coca-Cola, but with a few new leads to run down. It was so far a typical case. Special Agent Sullivan thought of it like walking through a supermarket looking for dinner, picking over the shelves randomly, selecting things to eat, never knowing how the selections would turn out in the kitchen.

" 'Morning, baby," Ding said, before he rolled out of bed, as always starting his day off with a kiss.

"Hi, Ding." Patsy tried to roll over, but it was difficult, almost as much as sleeping on her back, unable to move with her belly full of child. It couldn't come soon enough, Patricia Clark Chavez thought, despite the discomfort the delivery was sure to inflict upon her. She felt his hand slide over the stretched skin of what had once been a flat, trim abdomen.

"How's the little guy?"

"Waking up, feels like," she answered with a distant smile, wondering what he or she would look like. Ding was convinced it had to be a boy. It seemed he would accept no other possibility. Must be a Latino thing, she figured. A physician, she knew different. Whatever it was, however, it would almost certainly be healthy. The little thing inside her had been active since she'd felt the first "bloop," as she called it, at three months. "There he goes," she reported, when he/she turned over inside the sea of amniotic fluid.

Domingo Chavez felt it on the palm of his hand, smiled, and leaned

down to kiss his wife again before heading to the bathroom. “Love ya, Pats,” he said on the way. As usual, the world was in its proper shape. On the way to the bathroom, he sneaked a look at the nursery, with the colored critters on the wall, and the crib all ready for use. Soon, he told himself. Just about any time, the OB had said, adding that first babies were usually late, however. Fifteen minutes later, he was in his morning sweats and on his way out the door, some coffee in him but nothing else, since he didn’t like to eat breakfast before exercising. His car took the short drive to the Team-2 building, where everyone else was arriving.

“Hey, Eddie,” Chavez said to Price in greeting.

“Good morning, Major,” the sergeant major called in return. Five minutes later, the team was out on the grass, all dressed in their morning workout gear. This morning Sergeant Mike Pierce, still the team’s kill leader, led the routine. The stretching and strength exercises took fifteen minutes, and then came the morning run.

“Airborne rangers jump from planes,” Pierce called, and then the remainder of the team chorused:

“They ain’t got no goddamned brains!”

The traditional chant made perfectly good sense to Chavez, who’d been through Ranger School at Fort Benning, but not Jump School. It made far better sense, he thought, to come to battle in a helicopter rather than as skeet for the bastards on the ground to shoot at, a perfect target, unable to shoot back. The very idea frightened him. But he was the only member of Team-2 who’d never jumped, and that made him a “fucking leg,” or straight-legged infantryman, not one of the anointed people with the silver ice-cream cone badge. Strange that he’d never heard any of his people josh him about it, he thought, passing the first mile post on the track. Pierce was a gifted runner, and was setting a fast pace, maybe trying to get somebody to fall out. But no one would do that, and everyone knew it. At home, Ding thought, Patsy was getting herself ready for work in the hospital emergency room. She was leaning toward specialization in ER medicine at the moment, which meant getting a general surgery certification. Funny that she hadn’t selected her area of medical specialty yet. She certainly had the brains to do nearly anything, and her smallish hands would be perfect for surgery. She often practiced dexterity by playing with a deck of cards, and over the past few months she’d become expert at dealing seconds. She’d showed him what she was doing and how, but even then, watching closely, he couldn’t see her do it, which had amazed and annoyed her husband. Her motor-control nerves must be incredible, Domingo thought proudly, pounding into the third mile of the run. This was when you began to feel it, because in mile three your legs were thinking that they’d gone pretty far already, and

maybe slowing down would be nice. At least that was true for Ding. Two members of the team ran marathons, and as far as he'd been able to tell, those two, Loiselle and Weber, respectively the smallest and largest members of the team, *never* got tired. The German especially, graduate of the Bundeswehr mountain warfare school, and holder of the Bergermeister badge, was about the toughest son of a bitch he'd ever met—and Chavez thought of himself as a tough little son of a bitch. Loiselle was just like a little damned rabbit, moving along with grace and invisible power.

Ten more minutes, Chavez thought, his legs starting to complain to him, but not allowing any of it to show, his face set in a calm, determined mien, almost bored as his feet pounded on the cinders of the track. Team-1 was running, too, opposite them on the track, and fortunately neither team raced the other. They did record their times for the run, but direct competition would have forced all of the Rainbow troopers into a destructive regimen that would only produce injuries—and enough of those happened from routine training, though Team-2 was fully mission-capable at the moment, with all injuries healed.

"Detail . . . quick-time, march!" Pierce finally called, as they completed the morning jaunt. Another fifty meters and they halted.

"Well, people, good morning. I hope you all enjoyed waking up for another day of safeguarding the world from the bad guys," Pierce told them, sweat on his smiling face. "Major Chavez," he said next, walking back to his usual place in the ranks.

"Okay, gentlemen, that was a good workout. Thank you, Sergeant Pierce, for leading the run this morning. Showers and breakfast, troops. Fall out." With that command the two ranks of five each disintegrated, the men heading off to their building to shower off the sweat. A few of them worked legs or arms a little for some exercise-induced cricks. The endorphins had kicked in, the body's own reward for exertion, creating the "runner's high," as some called it, which would mellow in a few minutes to the wonderful sense of well-being that they'd enjoy for the rest of the morning. Already they were chatting back and forth about various things, professional and not.

An English breakfast was much the same as an American one: bacon, eggs, toast, coffee—English breakfast tea for some—fuel for the coming day. Some of the troopers ate light, and some ate heavy, in accordance with their personal metabolic rates. By this time, all were in their day uniforms, ready to head off to their desks. Tim Noonan would be giving a lecture today on communications security. The new radios from E-Systems hardly needed the introduction, but Noonan wanted them to know everything about them, including how the encryption systems worked. Now the team members could talk back

and forth, and anyone trying to listen in would hear only the hiss of static. The same had been true before, but the new portable radios, with their headsets and reed-thin microphones that hung out in front of their faces, were a great technical improvement, Noonan had told Chavez. Then Bill Tawney would brief them on any new developments in the intelligence and investigations on their three field deployments. After that came the before-lunch trip to the range for marksmanship practice, but today no live-fire/ live-target exercise. Instead they'd practice long-rope deployments from Malloy's helicopter.

It promised to be a full, if routine, day for Rainbow. Chavez almost added "boring" to the description, but he knew that John worked hard to vary the routine, and, besides, you practiced the fundamentals, because they were, well, fundamental to getting the job done, the things you held on to when the tactical situation went to shit and you didn't have the time to think about what to do. By this time, every Team-2 member knew how every other member thought, and so, on exercises where the actual scenario was different from the tactical intelligence they'd been given going in, somehow the team members just adapted, sometimes without words, every trooper knowing what his partner and the others in the team would do, as if they'd communicated by telepathy. That was the reward for the intensive, intellectually boring training. Team-2, and Peter Covington's Team-1, had evolved into living, thinking organisms whose parts just acted properly—and seemed to do so automatically. When Chavez thought about it, he found it remarkable, but on training exercises, it seemed as natural as breathing. Like Mike Pierce leaping over the desk in Worldpark. That hadn't been part of the training regimen, but he'd done it, and done it perfectly, and the only thing wrong was that his first burst hadn't taken his subject in the head, but instead had stitched down his back—causing wounds that would have been rapidly fatal—then followed it with a second burst that had blown the bastard's head apart. Boom. Zap. Splatter. And the other team members had trusted Pierce to cover his sector, and then, after cleansing it of opposition, to assist with others. Like the fingers of his hand, Chavez thought, able to form into a deadly fist, but also able to do separate tasks, because each finger had a brain. And they were all his men. That was the best part of all.

Getting the weapons was the easiest part. It struck outsiders as comical—Irishmen with guns were like squirrels with nuts, always stashing them, and sometimes forgetting where the hell they'd been stashed. For a generation, people had shipped arms to the IRA, and the IRA had cached them, mainly burying them for the coming time when the entire Irish nation would rise up under Provo leadership and

engage the English invaders, driving them forever from the sacred soil of Ireland . . . or something like that, Grady thought. He'd personally buried over three thousand weapons, most of them Russian-made AKMS assault rifles, like this stash in a farm field in County Tipperary. He'd buried this shipment forty meters west of a large oak tree, over the hill from the farmhouse. They were two meters—six feet—down, deep enough that the farmer's tractor wouldn't hurt or accidentally unearth them, and shallow enough that getting them took only an hour's spadework. There were a hundred of them, delivered in 1984 by a helpful soul he'd first met in Lebanon, along with pre-loaded plastic magazines, twenty per rifle. It was all in a series of boxes, the weapons and the ammunition wrapped in greased paper, the way the Russians did it, to protect them against moisture. Most of the wrappings were still intact, Grady saw, as he selected carefully. He removed twenty weapons, tearing open each one's paper to check for rust or corrosion, working the bolts back and forth, and in every case finding that the packing grease was intact, the same as when the weapons had left the factory at Kazan. The AKMS was the updated version of the AK-47, and these were the folding-stock version, which were much easier to conceal than the full-size military shoulder weapon. More to the point, this was the weapon his people had trained on in Lebanon. It was easy to use, reliable, and concealable. Those characteristics made it perfect for the purpose intended. The fifteen he took, along with three hundred thirty-round magazines, were loaded into the back of the truck, and then it was time to refill the hole. After three hours, the truck was on its way to yet another farm, this one on the seacoast of County Cork, where there lived a farmer with whom Sean Grady had an arrangement.

Sullivan and Chatham were in the office before seven in the morning, beating the traffic and finding decent parking places for once. The first order of business was to use a computerized crisscross directory to track down the names and addresses from the phone numbers. That was quick. Next up was to meet with the three men who were reported to have known Mary Bannister and Anne Pretloe and interview them. It was possible that one of them was a serial killer or kidnapper. If the first, he would probably be a very clever and circumspect criminal. A serial killer was a hunter of human beings. The smart ones acted strangely like soldiers, first scouting out their victims, discerning their habits and weaknesses, and then moving in to use them as entertaining toys until the fun faded, and it was time to kill them. The homicide aspects of a serial killer's activities were not, strictly speaking, in the purview of the FBI, but the kidnapping was, if the killer had moved his victims across state lines, and since there was

a state line only a few hundred yards from Manhattan, that was enough to allow the agents to look into it. They'd have to ask their questions carefully, and remember that a serial killer almost always had an elegant disguise, the better to win the trust of his victims. He'd be kind, maybe handsome, friendly, and totally nonthreatening—until it was too late, and at that point his victim was doomed. He was, both agents knew, the most dangerous of criminals.

Subject F4 was progressing rapidly. Neither the Interferon nor the Interleukin-3a had touched her Shiva strands, which were replicating with gusto, and in her case attacking her liver with ferocious speed. The same was true of her pancreas, which was disintegrating, causing a serious internal bleed. Strange, Dr. Killgore thought. The Shiva had taken its time to assert itself, but then once it had started affecting the test subject's body, it had gone to town, eating away like a glutton at a feast. Mary Bannister, he decided, had about five days left.

M7, Chip Smitton, was little better off. His immune system was doing its best, but Shiva was just too malignant for him, working more slowly than in F4, but just as inexorably.

F5, Anne Pretloe, was from the deep end of the gene pool. He'd bothered to take full medical histories of all the current crop of test subjects. Bannister had a family history of cancer—breast cancer had claimed her mother and grandmother, and he saw that Shiva was working rapidly in her. Might there be a correlation between vulnerability to cancer and infectious disease? Could that indicate that cancer was fundamentally a disease of the immune system, as many physician-scientists suspected? It was the stuff of a paper for the *New England Journal of Medicine,* might get himself some additional standing in his community—but he didn't have the time, and anyway, by the time he published, there'd be few to read it. Well, it would be something to talk about in Kansas, because they'd still be practicing medicine there, and still working on the Immortality Project. Most of Horizon's best medical researchers were not really part of the Project, but they couldn't kill *them,* could they? And so, like many others, they'd find themselves beneficiaries of the Project's largesse. They would be allowing far more people than necessary to live—oh, sure, they needed the genetic diversity, and why not pick smart people who'd eventually understand why the Project had done what it had? And even if they didn't, what choice would they have but to live? All of them were earmarked for the -B vaccine Steve Berg had developed along with the lethal -A variant. In any case, his speculation had scientific value, even though it was singularly useless for the test subjects who now filled every available room in the treatment area. Killgore gathered his notes and started rounds, beginning with F4,

Mary Bannister.

Only the heavy morphine dose made life tolerable for her. The dosage might have killed a healthy person, and would have been enough to delight the most hardened IV-drug user.

"How are we feeling this morning?" the doctor asked brightly.

"Tired . . . weak . . . crummy," Mary Bannister replied.

"How's the pain, Mary?"

"It's there, but not so bad . . . mainly my stomach." Her face was deathly pale from the internal bleeding, and the petechiae were sufficiently prominent on her face that she couldn't be allowed to use a mirror, lest the sight panic her. They wanted all the subjects to die comfortably. It would be far less trouble for everyone that way—a kindness not shown to other test subjects, Killgore thought. It wasn't fair, but it was practical. The lower animals they tested didn't have the capacity to make trouble, and there were no useful data on how to medicate them against pain. Maybe he'd develop some in Kansas. That would be a worthy use of his abilities, he thought, as he made another upward adjustment in F4's morphine drip . . . just enough to . . . yes, make her stuporous. He could show her the mercy he would have liked to have shown rhesus monkeys. Would they do animal experimentation in Kansas? There would be practical difficulties. Getting the animals to the labs would be very difficult in the absence of international air-freight service, and then there was the aesthetic issue. Many of the project members would not approve, and they had a point. But, damn it, it was *hard* to develop drugs and treatment modalities without *some* animal testing. Yes, Killgore thought, leaving one treatment room for another, it was tough on the conscience, but scientific progress had a price, and they *were* saving literally millions of animals, weren't they? They'd needed thousands of animals to develop Shiva, and nobody had really objected to that. Another subject for discussion at the staff conference, he decided, entering M7's room.

"How are we feeling, Chip?" he asked.

They collectively thanked Providence for the lack of Garda in this part of County Cork. There was little crime, after all, and therefore little reason for them. The Irish national police were as efficient as their British colleagues, and their intelligence section unfortunately cooperated with the "Five" people in London, but neither service had managed to find Sean Grady—at least not after he'd identified and eliminated the informers in his cell. Both of them had vanished from the face of the earth and fed the salmon, or whatever fish liked the taste of informer flesh. Grady remembered the looks on their faces as they protested their innocence right up until the moment they'd been

thrown into the sea, fifteen miles offshore, with iron weights on their legs. Protested their innocence? Then why had the SAS never troubled his cell again after three serious attempts to eliminate them all? Innocence be damned.

They had half-filled a delightful provincial pub called The Foggy Dew, named after a favored rebel song, after several hours of weapons practice on the isolated coastal farm, which was too far from civilization for people to hear the distinctive chatter of automatic-weapons fire. It had required a few magazines each for his men to reassert their expertise with the AKMS assault rifles, but shoulder weapons were easily mastered, and that one more easily than most. Now they talked about nonbusiness matters, just a bunch of friends having a few pints. Most watched the football game on the wall-hung telly. Grady did the same, but with his brain in neutral, letting it slide over the next mission, examining and reexamining the scene in his mind, thinking about how quickly the British or this new Rainbow group might arrive. The direction of their approach was obvious. He had that all planned for, and the more he went over his operational concept, the better he seemed to like it. He might well lose some people, but that was the cost of doing business for the revolutionary, and looking around the pub at his people, he knew that they accepted the risks just as readily as he did.

He checked his watch, subtracted five hours, and reached into his pocket to turn on his cell phone. He did this three times per day, never leaving it on for more than ten minutes at a time, as a security measure. He had to be careful. Only that knowledge—and some luck, he admitted to himself—had allowed him to carry on the war this long. Two minutes later, it rang. Grady rose from his seat and walked outside to take the call.

"Hello."

"Sean, this is Joe."

"Hello, Joe," Grady said pleasantly. "How are things in Switzerland?"

"Actually, I'm in New York at the moment. I just wanted to tell you that the business thing we talked about, the financing, it's done," Popov told him.

"Excellent. What of the other matter, Joe?"

"I'll be bringing that myself. I'll be over in two days. I'm flying into Shannon on my business jet. I should get in about six-thirty in the morning."

"I shall be there to see you," Grady promised.

"Okay, my friend. I will see you then."

"Good-bye, Joe."

"Bye, Sean." And the line went dead. Grady thumbed off the power

and replaced the phone in his pocket. If anyone had overheard it—not likely, since he could see all the way to the horizon, and there were no parked trucks in evidence . . . and, besides, if anyone knew where he was, they would have come after him and his men with a platoon of soldiers and/or police—all they would have heard was a business chat, brief, cryptic, and to the point. He went back inside.

"Who was it, Sean?" Roddy Sands asked.

"That was Joe," Grady replied. "He's done what we asked. So, I suppose we get to move forward as well."

"Indeed." Roddy hoisted his pint glass in salute.

The Security Service, once called MI (Military Intelligence) 5, had lived for more than a generation with two high-profile missions. One was to keep track of Soviet penetration agents within the British government—a regrettably busy mission, since the KGB and its antecedents had more than once penetrated British security. At one point, they'd almost gotten their agent-in-place Kim Philby in charge of "Five," thus nearly giving the Soviets control of the British counterintelligence service, a miscue that still sent a collective shiver throughout "Five." The second mission was the penetration of the Irish Republican Army and other Irish terrorist groups, the better to identify their leaders and eliminate them, for this war was fought by the old rules. Sometimes, police were called in to make arrests, and other times, SAS commandos were deployed to handle things more directly. The differences in technique had resulted from the inability of Her Majesty's Government to decide if the "Irish Problem" was a matter of crime or national security—the result of that indecision had been the lengthening of "The Troubles" by at least a decade, in the view of the American FBI.

But the employees of "Five" didn't have the ability to make policy. That was done by elected officials, who often as not failed to listen to the trained experts who'd spent their lives handling such matters. Without the ability to make or affect policy, they soldiered on, assembling and maintaining voluminous records of known and suspected IRA operatives for eventual action by other government agencies.

This was done mainly by recruiting informers. Informing on one's comrades was another old Irish tradition, and one that the British had long exploited for their own ends. They speculated on its origins. Part of it, they all thought, was religion. The IRA regarded itself as the protector of *Catholic* Irishmen, and with that identification came a price: the rules and ethics of Catholicism often spilled over into the hearts and minds of people who killed in the name of their religious affiliation. One of the things that spilled over was guilt. On the one

hand, guilt was an inevitable result of their revolutionary activity, and on the other hand, it was the one thing they could not afford to entertain in their own consciences.

"Five" had a thick file on Sean Grady, as they did for many others. Grady's was special, though, since they'd once had a particularly well-placed informer in his unit who had, unfortunately, disappeared, doubtless murdered by him. They knew that Grady had given up kneecapping early on and chosen murder as a more permanent way of dealing with security leaks, and one that never left bodies about for the police to find. "Five" had twenty-three informants currently working in various PIRA units. Four were women of looser morality than was usual in Ireland. The other nineteen were men who'd been recruited one way or another—though three of them didn't know that they were sharing secrets with British agents. The Security Service did its collective best to protect them, and more than a few had been taken to England after their usefulness had been exhausted, then flown to Canada, usually, for a new, safer life. But in the main "Five" treated them as assets to be milked for as long as possible, because the majority of them were people who'd killed or assisted others in killing, and that made them both criminals and traitors, whose consciences had been just a little too late to encourage much in the way of sympathy from the case officers who "worked" them.

Grady, the current file said, had fallen off the face of the earth. It was possible, some supposed, that he'd been killed by a rival, but probably not, as that bit of news would have percolated through the PIRA leadership. Grady was respected even by his factional enemies in the Movement as a True Believer in the Cause and an effective operator who had killed more than his fair share of cops and soldiers in Londonderry. And the Security Service still wanted him for the three SAS troopers he'd somehow captured, tortured, and killed. Those bodies had been recovered, and the collective rage in SAS hadn't gone away, for the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment never forgave and never forgot such things. Killing, perhaps, but never torture.

Cyril Holt, Deputy Director of the Security Service, was doing his quarterly review of the major case files, and stopped when he got to Grady's. He'd disappeared from the scope entirely. If he'd died, Holt would have heard about it. It was also possible that he'd given up the fight, seen that his parent organization was finally ready to negotiate some sort of peace, and decided to play along by terminating his operations. But Holt and his people didn't believe that either. The psychological profile that had been drawn up by the chief of psychiatry at Guy's Hospital in London said that he'd be one of the last to set the gun down and look for a peaceful occupation.

The third possibility was that he was still lurking out there, maybe

in Ulster, maybe in the Republic . . . more probably the latter, because "Five" had most of its informants in the North. Holt looked at the photos of Grady and his collection of twenty or so PIRA "soldiers," for whom there were also files. None of the pictures were very good despite the computer enhancement. He had to assume he was still active, leading his militant PIRA faction somehow, planning operations that might or might not come off, but meanwhile keeping a low profile with the cover identities he had to have generated. All he could do was keep a watch on them. Holt made a brief notation, closed the file, placed it on his out pile and selected another. By the following day, the notations would be placed into the "Five" computer, which was slowly supplanting the paper files, but which Holt didn't like to use. He preferred files he could hold in his hands.

"That quickly?" Popov asked.

"Why not?" Brightling responded.

"As you say, sir. And the cocaine?" he added distastefully.

"The suitcase is packed. Ten pounds in medically pure compounding condition from our own stores. The bag will be on the plane."

Popov didn't like the idea of transporting drugs at all. It wasn't a case of sudden morality, but simply concern about customs officials and luggage-sniffing dogs. Brightling saw the worry on his face, and smiled.

"Relax, Dmitriy. If there is any problem, you're transporting the stuff to our subsidiary in Dublin. You'll have documents to that effect. Just try to make sure you don't need to use them. It could be embarrassing."

"As you say." Popov allowed himself to be relieved. He'd be flying a chartered Gulfstream V private business jet this time, because bringing the drugs through a real airport on a real international flight was just a little too dangerous. European countries tended to give casual treatment to arriving Americans, whose main objective was to spend their dollars, not cause trouble, but everyone had dogs now, because every country in the world worried about narcotics.

"Tonight?"

Brightling nodded and checked his watch. "The plane'll be at Teterboro Airport. Be there at six."

Popov left and caught a cab back to his apartment. Packing wasn't difficult but thinking was. Brightling was violating the most rudimentary security considerations here. Chartering a private business jet linked his corporation with Popov for the first time, as did the protective documentation attached to the cocaine. There was no effort to cut Popov loose from his employer. Perhaps that meant that Brightling didn't trust his employee's loyalty, didn't trust that if

arrested he would keep his mouth shut . . . but, no, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought. If he wasn't trusted, then the mission would not be undertaken. Popov had always been the link between Brightling and the terrorists.

So, the Russian thought, *he* does *trust me.* But he was also violating security . . . and that could only mean that in Brightling's mind security didn't matter. Why—*how* could it not matter? Perhaps Brightling planned to have him eliminated? That was a possibility, but he didn't think so. Brightling was ruthless, but not sufficiently clever—rather, too clever. He would have to consider the possibility that Popov had left a written record somewhere, that his death would trigger the unveiling of his own part in the exploits. So he could discount that, the Russian thought.

Then what?

The former intelligence officer looked in the mirror at a face that still didn't know what it needed to know. From the beginning, he'd been seduced by money. He'd turned into a hired agent of sorts, motivated by personal gain—the "M" of MICE—but was working for someone for whom money had no importance. Even CIA, rich as it had always been, measured the money it gave out to its agents. The American intelligence service paid a hundred times better than its Russian counterpart, but even *that* had to be justified, because CIA had accountants who ruled the field officers as the Czar's courtiers and bureaucrats had once ruled over the smallest village. Popov knew from his research that Horizon Corporation had a huge amount of money, but one did not become wealthy from profligacy. In a capitalist society, one became wealthy by cleverness, perhaps ruthlessness, but not by stupidity, and throwing money about as Brightling did was stupid.

So, what is it? Dmitriy wondered, moving away from the mirror and packing his bag.

Whatever he's planning, whatever his reason for these terrorist incidents—is close at hand?

That did make a little sense. You concealed as long as you had to, but when you no longer had to, then you didn't waste the effort. It was an amateur's move, though. An amateur, even a gifted one like Brightling, didn't know, hadn't learned from bitter institutional experience that you *never* broke tradecraft, even *after* an operation had been successfully concluded, because even then your enemy might find things out that he could use against you in your next one . . .

. . . *unless there is not to be a next one?* Dmitriy thought, as he selected his underwear. *Is this the last operation to be run? No,* he corrected himself, *is this the last operation which* I *need to run?*

He ran through it again. The operations had grown in magnitude,

until now he was transporting *cocaine* to make a terrorist happy, *after* helping transfer *six million* dollars! To make the drug smuggling easier, he would have documentation to justify the drug shipment from one branch of a major corporation to another, tying himself and the drugs to Brightling's company. Perhaps his false ID would hold up if the police showed interest in him—well, they would almost certainly hold up, unless the Garda had a direct line into MI-5, which was not likely, and neither was it likely that the British Security Service had his cover name, or even a photo, good or bad—and besides, he'd changed his haircut ages ago.

No, Popov decided as he finished packing, the only thing that made sense was that this was the last operation. Brightling would be closing things down. To Popov that meant that this was his last chance to cash in. And so he found himself hoping that Grady and his band of murderers would come to as shabby an end as all the others in Bern and Vienna—and even Spain, though he'd had no part in that one. He had the number and control code for the new Swiss account, and in that was enough money to support him for the rest of his life. All he needed to happen was for the Rainbow team to kill them off, and then he could disappear forever. With that hopeful thought in his mind, Popov went outside and flagged a cab to take him to Teterboro Airport.

He'd think about it all the way across the Atlantic.

CHAPTER 27

TRANSFER AGENTS

"It really is a waste of time," Barbara Archer said at her seat in the conference room. "F4 is dead, just her heart's still beating. We've tried everything. Nothing stops Shiva. Not a damned thing."

"Except the -B vaccine antibodies," Killgore noted.

"Except them," Archer agreed. "But nothing else works, does it?"

There was agreement around the table. They had literally tried every treatment modality known to medicine, including things merely speculated upon at CDC, USAMRIID, and the Pasteur Institute in Paris. They'd even tried every antibiotic in the arsenal from penicillin to Keflex, and two new synthetics under experimentation by Merck and Horizon. The use of the antibiotics had merely been t-crossing and i-dotting, since not one of them helped viral infections, but in desperate times people tried desperate measures, and perhaps something new and unexpected might have happened—

—but not with Shiva. This new and improved version of Ebola hemorrhagic fever, genetically engineered to be hardier than the naturally produced version that still haunted the Congo River Valley, was as close to 100 percent fatal and 100 percent resistant to treatment as anything known to medical science, and absent a landmark breakthrough in infectious-disease treatment, nothing would help those exposed to it. Many would suffer exposure from the initial release, and the rest would get it from the -A vaccine Steve Berg had developed, and through both modalities, Shiva would sweep across the world like a slow-developing storm. Inside of six months, the people left alive would fall into three categories. First, those who hadn't been exposed in any way. There would be few of them, since every nation on earth would gobble up supplies of the -A vaccine and inject their citizens with it, because the first Shiva victims would horrify any human with access to a television. The second group would be those rarest of people whose immune systems were sufficient to protect them from Shiva. The lab had yet to discover any such individuals, but some would inevitably be out there—happily, most of those would probably die from the collapse of social services in the cities and towns of the world, mainly from starvation or from

the panicked lawlessness sure to accompany the plague or from the ordinary bacterial diseases that accompanied large numbers of unburied dead.

The third group would be the few thousand people in Kansas. Project Lifeboat, as they thought of it. That group would be composed of active Project members—just a few hundred of them—and their families, and other selected scientists protected by Berg's -B vaccine. The Kansas facility was large, isolated, and protected by large quantities of weapons, should any unwelcome visitors approach.

Six months, they thought. Twenty-seven weeks. That's what the computer projections told them. Some areas would go faster than others. The models suggested that Africa would go last of all, because they'd be the last to get the -A vaccine distributed, and because of the poor infrastructure for delivering vital services. Europe would go down first, with its socialized medical-care systems and pliant citizens sure to show up for their shots when summoned, then America, then, in due course, the rest of the world.

"The whole world, just like that," Killgore observed, looking out the windows at the New York/New Jersey border area, with its rolling hills and green deciduous trees. The great farms on the plains that ran from Canada to Texas would go fallow, though some would grow wild wheat for centuries to come. The bison would expand rapidly from their enclaves in Yellowstone and private game farms, and with them the wolves and barren-ground grizzly bear, and the birds, and the coyotes and the prairie dogs. Nature would restore Her balance very quickly, the computer models told them; in less than five years, the entire earth would be transformed.

"Yes, John," Barb Archer agreed. "But we're not there yet. What do we do with the test subjects?"

Killgore knew what she'd be suggesting. Archer hated clinical medicine. "F4 first?"

"It's a waste of air to keep her breathing, and we all know it. They're all in pain, and we're not learning anything except that Shiva is lethal—and we already knew that. Plus, we're going to be moving out west in a few weeks, and why keep them alive that long? We're not moving them out with us, are we?"

"Well, no," another physician admitted.

"Okay, I am tired of wasting my time as a clinician for dead people. I move that we do what we have to do, and be done with it."

"Second," agreed another scientist at the table.

"In favor?" Killgore asked, counting the hands. "Opposed." Only two of those. "The ayes have it. Okay. Barbara and I will take care of it—today, Barb?"

"Why wait, John?" Archer inquired tiredly.

“Kirk Maclean?” Agent Sullivan asked.

“That’s right,” the man said from behind the door.

“FBI.” Sullivan held up his ID. “Can we talk to you?”

“About what?” The usual alarm, the agents saw.

“Do we have to stand in the hall to talk?” Sullivan asked reasonably.

“Oh, okay, sure, come in.” Maclean stepped back and opened the door to let them in, then led them into his living room. The TV was on, some cable movie, the agents saw. Kung fu and guns mostly, it appeared.

“I’m Tom Sullivan, and this is Frank Chatham. We’re looking into the disappearance of two women,” the senior agent said, after sitting down. “We’re hoping that you might be able to help us.”

“Sure—you mean, like they were kidnapped or something?” the man asked.

“That is a possibility. Their names are Anne Pretloe and Mary Bannister. Some people have told us that you might have known one or both of them,” Chatham said next.

They watched Maclean close his eyes, then look off to the window for a few seconds. “From the Turtle Inn, maybe?”

“Is that where you met them?”

“Hey, guys, I meet a lot of girls, y’know? That’s a good place for it, with the music and all. Got pictures?”

“Here.” Chatham handed them across.

“Okay, yeah, I remember Annie—never learned her last name,” he explained. “Legal secretary, isn’t she?”

“That’s correct,” Sullivan confirmed. “How well did you know her?”

“We danced some, talked some, had a few drinks, but I never dated her.”

“Ever leave the bar with her, take a walk, anything like that?”

“I think I walked her home once. Her apartment was just a few blocks away, right? . . . Yeah,” he remembered after a few seconds. “Half a block off Columbus Avenue. I walked her home—but, hey, I didn’t go inside—I mean we never—I mean, I didn’t, well—you know, I never did have sex with her.” He appeared embarrassed.

“Do you know if she had any other friends?” Chatham asked, taking interview notes.

“Yeah, there was a guy she was tight with, Jim something. Accountant, I think. I don’t know how tight they were, but when the two of them were at the bar, they’d usually have drinks together. The other one, I remember the face, but not the name. Maybe we talked some, but I don’t remember much. Hey, you know, it’s a singles bar, and you meet lotsa people, and sometimes you connect, but mainly you don’t.”

"Phone numbers?"

"Not from these two. I have two from other gals I met there. Want 'em?" Maclean asked.

"Did they know Mary Bannister or Anne Pretloe?" Sullivan asked.

"Maybe. The women connect better than the men do, y'know, little cliques, like, checking us out—like the guys do, but they're better organized, like, y'know?"

There were more questions, about half an hour's worth, some repeated a few times, which Maclean didn't seem to mind, as some did. Finally they asked if they could look around the apartment. They had no legal right to do this, but oddly, even criminals often allowed it, and more than one of them had been caught because they'd had evidence out in plain view. In this case the agents would be looking for periodicals with photographs of deviant sex practices or even personal photographs of such behavior. But when Maclean led them about, the only photos they saw were of animals and periodicals about nature and conservation—some of them from groups the FBI deemed to be extremist—and all manner of outdoors gear.

"Hiker?" Chatham asked.

"Love it in the backcountry," Maclean confirmed. "What I need is a gal who likes it, too, but you don't find many of those in this town."

"Guess not." Sullivan handed over his card. "If you think of anything, please call me right away. My home number's on the back. Thanks for your help."

"Not sure I helped very much," the man observed.

"Every little bit, as they say. See you," Sullivan said, shaking his hand.

Maclean closed the door behind them and let out a long breath. How the *fuck* had they gotten his name and address? The questions were everything he would have expected, and he'd thought about the answers often enough—but a long time ago, he told himself. Why now? Were the cops dumb, or slow, or what?

"Whole lot of nothing," Chatham said, as they got to their car.

"Well, maybe the women he gave us can tell us something."

"I doubt it. I talked to the second one last night at the bar."

"Go back to her. Ask her what she thinks of Maclean," Sullivan suggested.

"Okay, Tom. That I can do. You get any vibes off the guy? I didn't," Chatham said.

Sullivan shook his head. "No, but I haven't learned to read minds yet."

Chatham nodded. "Right."

It was time, and there was no point in delaying it. Barbara Archer unlocked the medication cabinet with her keys and took out ten ampoules of potassium-saline solution. These went into her pockets. Outside F4's treatment room, she filled a 50cc syringe, then opened the door.

"Hello." Mainly a groan from the patient, who was lying in bed and watching the wall-mounted TV listlessly.

"Hello, Mary. How are we feeling?" Archer suddenly wondered why it was that physicians asked how *we* were feeling. An odd linguistic nuance, she told herself, learned in medical school, probably, maybe to establish solidarity with the patient—which hardly existed in this case. One of her first summer jobs in college had been working at a dog pound. The animals had been given seven days, and if nobody claimed them, they were euthanized—*murdered,* as she thought of it, mainly with heavy doses of phenobarbital. The injection always went into the left foreleg, she remembered, and the dogs just went to sleep in five seconds or so. She'd always cried afterward—it had always been done on Tuesday, right before lunch, she recalled, and she'd never eaten lunch afterward, sometimes not even supper if she'd been forced to terminate a particularly cute dog. They'd lined them up on stainless-steel treatment tables, and another employee had held them still to make the murders easier. She'd always talk soothingly to the dogs, to lessen their fear and so give them an easier death. Archer bit her lip, feeling rather like Adolf Eichmann must have—well, should have, anyway.

"Pretty rotten," Mary Bannister replied finally.

"Well, this will help," Archer promised, pulling the syringe out and thumbing off the plastic safety cover from the needle. She took the three steps to the left side of the bed, reached for F4's arm, and held it still, then pushed the needle into the vein inside the elbow. Then she looked into F4's eyes and slid the plunger in.

Mary's eyes went wide. The potassium solution seared the veins as it moved through them. Her right hand flew to the upper left arm, and then, a second later, to her upper chest, as the burning sensation moved rapidly to her heart. The potassium stopped the heart at once. The EKG machine next to the bed had shown fairly normal sinus rhythm, but now the moving line jumped once and went totally flat, setting off the alarm beeper. Somehow Mary's eyes remained open, for the brain has enough oxygen for up to a minute's activity even after the heart stops delivering blood. There was shock there. F4 couldn't speak, couldn't object, because her breathing had stopped along with

her heart, but she looked straight into Archer's eyes . . . rather as the dog had done, the doctor thought, though the dog's eyes had never seemed to accuse her as these two did. Archer returned the look, no emotion at all in her face, unlike her time at the pound. Then, in less than a minute, F4's eyes closed, and then she was dead. One down. Nine more to go, before Dr. Archer could go to her car and drive home. She hoped her VCR had worked properly. She'd wanted to tape the Discovery Channel's show on the wolves in Yellowstone, but figuring the damned machine out sometimes drove her crazy.

Thirty minutes later, the bodies were wrapped in plastic and wheeled to the incinerator. It was a special model designed for medical applications, the destruction of disposable biological material such as fetuses or amputated limbs. Fueled by natural gas, it reached an extremely high temperature, even destroying tooth fillings, and converted all to an ash so fine that prevailing winds lifted it into the stratosphere, and then carried it out to sea. The treatment rooms would be scrubbed down so that there would be no lingering Shiva presence, and for the first time in months the facility would have no virus strands actively looking for hosts to feed upon and kill. The Project members would be pleased by that, Archer thought on her drive home. Shiva was a useful tool for their objective, but sufficiently creepy that they'd all be glad when it was gone.

Popov managed five hours of sleep on the trip across and was awakened when the flight attendant shook his shoulder twenty minutes out of Shannon. The former seaplane facility where Pan American's Boeing-made clippers had landed before flying on to Southampton—and where the airline had invented Irish coffee to help the passengers wake up—was on the West Coast of Ireland, surrounded by farms and green wetlands that seemed to glisten in the light of dawn. Popov washed up in the lavatory, and retook his seat for the arrival. The touchdown was smooth, and the roll-out brief as the aircraft approached the general aviation terminal, where a few other business jets sat, similar to the G-V that Horizon Corporation had chartered for him. Barely had it stopped when a dingy official car approached the aircraft, and a man in uniform got out to jump up the stairs. The pilot waved the man to the back.

"Welcome to Shannon, sir," the immigration official said. "May I see your passport, please?"

"Here." Popov handed it across.

The bureaucrat thumbed through it. "Ah, you've been here recently. The purpose of your trip, sir?"

"Business. Pharmaceuticals," the Russian added, in case the immigration official wanted to open his bags.

"Mm-hmm," the man responded, without a shred of interest. He stamped the passport and handed it back. "Anything to declare?"

"Not really."

"Very well. Have a pleasant time, sir." The smile was as mechanical as his movement forward, then he left to go down the steps to his car.

Popov didn't so much sigh in relief as grumble at his tension, which had clearly been wasted. Who would charter such an aircraft for $100,000 to smuggle drugs, after all? Something else to learn about capitalism, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself. If you had enough money to travel like a prince, then you *couldn't* be outside the law. Amazing, he thought. He put on his overcoat and walked out of the aircraft, where a black Jaguar was waiting, his bags already loaded into the boot.

"Mr. Serov?" the driver asked, holding the door open. There was enough noise out here that he didn't have to worry about being overheard.

"That's right. Off to see Sean?"

"Yes, sir."

Popov nodded and got into the back. A minute later, they were heading off the airport grounds. The country roads were like those in England, narrower than those in America—and he was still driving on the wrong side of the road. How strange, Popov thought. If the Irish didn't like the English, then why did they emulate their driving patterns?

The ride took half an hour, and ended in a farmhouse well off the main roads. Two cars were there and a van, with one man standing outside to keep watch. Popov recognized him. It was Roddy Sands, the cautious one of this unit.

Dmitriy got out and looked at him, without shaking hands. He took the black drug-filled suitcase from the boot and walked in.

"Good morning, Iosef," Grady said in greeting. "How was your flight?"

"Comfortable." Popov handed the bag over. "This is what you requested, Sean."

The tone of voice was clear in its meaning. Grady looked his guest in the eye, a little embarrassment on his face. "I don't like it, either, but one must have money to support operations, and this is a means of getting it." The ten pounds of cocaine had a variable value. It had cost Horizon Corporation a mere $25,000, having bought it on the market that was open to drug companies. Diluted, on the street, it would be worth five hundred times that. Such was another aspect of capitalism, Popov thought, dismissing it now that the transfer had been made. Then he handed over a slip of paper.

"That is the account number and activation code for the secure

account in Switzerland. You can only make withdrawals on Monday and Wednesday as an added security measure. The account has in it six million dollars of United States currency. The amount in the account can be checked at any time," Popov told him.

"A pleasure to do business with you, as always, Joe," Sean said, allowing himself a rare smile. He'd never had so much as a tenth of that much money under his control, for all his twenty-plus years as a professional revolutionary. Well, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, they weren't businessmen, were they?

"When will you move?"

"Very soon. We've checked out the objective, and our plan is a thing of beauty, my friend. We will sting them, Iosef Andreyevich," Grady promised. "We will hurt them badly."

"I will need to know when, exactly. There are things I must do as well," Popov told him.

That stopped him, Dmitriy saw. The issue here was operational security. An outsider wanted to know things that only insiders should have knowledge of. Two sets of eyes stared at each other for a few seconds. But the Irishman relented. Once he verified that the money was in place, then his trust in the Russian was confirmed—and delivery of the ten pounds of white powder was proof of the fact in and of itself—assuming that he wasn't arrested by the Garda later this day. But Popov wasn't that sort, was he?

"The day after tomorrow. The operation will commence at one in the afternoon, exactly."

"So soon?"

Grady was pleased that the Russian had underestimated him. "Why delay? We have everything we need, now that the money is in place."

"As you say, Sean. Do you require anything else of me?"

"No."

"Then I will be off, with your permission."

This time they shook hands. "Daniel will drive you—to Dublin?"

"Correct, the airport there."

"Tell him, and he will take you."

"Thank you, Sean—and good luck. Perhaps we will meet afterwards," Dmitriy added.

"I would like that."

Popov gave him a last look—sure that it would be the last, despite what he'd just said. Grady's eyes were animated now, thinking about a revolutionary demonstration that would be the capstone of his career. There was a cruelty there that Popov had not noted before. Like Fürchtner and Dortmund, this was a predatory animal rather than a human being, and, as much experience as he'd had with such people, Popov found himself troubled by it. He was supposed to be skilled at

reading minds, but in this one he saw only emptiness, only the absence of human feelings, replaced by ideology that led him—where? Did Grady know? Probably not. He thought himself on the path to some Radiant Future—the term most favored by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—but the light that beckoned him was far more distant than he realized, and its bright glow hid the holes in the road immediately before him. And truly, Popov thought on, were he ever to achieve that which he wanted, then he'd be a disaster as a ruler of men, like those he resembled—Stalin, Mao, and the rest—so divorced from the common man's outlook as to be an alien, for whom life and death were mere tools to achieve his vision, not something of humanity at all. Of all the things Karl Marx had given the world, surely that outlook was the worst. Sean Grady had replaced his humanity and emotions with a geometrically precise model of what the world should be—and he was too wedded to that vision to take note of the fact that it had failed wherever it had been tried. His pursuit was one after a chimera, a creature not real, never quite within reach, but drawing him onward to his own destruction—and as many others as he might kill first. And his eyes sparkled now in his enthusiasm for the chase. His ideological soundness denied him the ability to see the world as it really was—as even the Russians had come to see, finally, after seventy years of following the same chimera. Sparkling eyes serving a blind master, how strange, the Russian thought, turning to leave.

"Okay, Peter, you have the duty," Chavez told his Team-1 counterpart. As of now Team-1 was the go-team, and Team-2 was on standby/standdown, and back into the more intensive training regimen.

"As you say, Ding," Covington replied. "But nothing seems to be happening anywhere."

The intelligence that had been passed on to them from the various national agencies was actually rather encouraging. Informants who'd chatted with known or suspected terrorists—mostly the latter, since the more active ones would have been arrested—reported back that the Worldpark incident had chilled the atmosphere considerably, especially since the French had finally published the names and photos of the known terrorists who'd been killed in Spain, and one of them, it had turned out, had been a revered and respected former member of Action Directe, with six known murders to his credit and something of a reputation as an expert operator. His public destruction had rumbled through the community, along with greatly increased respect for the Spanish police, which was basking institutionally in the glow of Rainbow's deeds, to the great discomfort of Basque terrorists, who, Spanish sources reported, were also

somewhat chastened by the loss of some of their most respected members.

If this was true, Bill Tawney's summary document suggested, then Rainbow was indeed having the effect that had been hoped for when it had been formed. Maybe this meant that they wouldn't have to move into the field and kill people as frequently to prove their mettle.

But there was still nothing to suggest why there had been three such incidents so close in time, or who, if anyone, might have instigated them. The British Secret Intelligence Service's analysis section called it random, pointing out that Switzerland, Germany, and Spain were different countries, and that it was unlikely that anyone had contacts in the underground groups in all three of them. Two of them, perhaps, but not all three. It also suggested that contacts be made with former East Bloc intelligence services, to check out what was happening with certain retired members. It might even be worth buying their information for the going price, which was rather high now that the former intelligence officers had to make a real living in the real world —but not as high as the cost of an incident in which people got hurt. Tawney had highlighted that when he passed it on to John Clark, and the latter had discussed it with Langley again, only to be rebuffed again, which had Rainbow Six grumbling all week about the REMFs at CIA headquarters. Tawney thought about suggesting it to the London headquarters of "Six" on his own hook, but without the positive endorsement of CIA, it would have been wasted effort.

On the other hand, Rainbow *did* seem to be working. Even Clark admitted that, unhappy though he continued to be, he was a "suit" working behind a desk and sending younger men off to do the exciting stuff. For much of his career as an intelligence officer, John had grumbled at oversight from above. Now that he was doing it, he thought that maybe he understood it a little better. Being in command might be rewarding, but it could never be much fun for someone who'd been out in the weeds, dodging the fire and involved in the things that happened out at the sharp end. The idea that he knew how it was done and could therefore tell people how to do it was as unpopular a stance for him to take as it had been . . . for him to accept, as recently as five years earlier. Life was a trap, Clark told himself, and the only way out of the trap wasn't much fun either. So, he donned his suitcoat every morning and grumbled at the effect age had on his life, just like every other man of his age did across the planet. Where had his youth gone? How had he lost it?

Popov arrived at Dublin Airport before lunch. There he purchased a ticket to Gatwick for the hour's flight back to England. He found himself missing the G-V business jet. A very convenient way to travel,

liberating from the bustle of the airports. It rode every bit as well as a jumbo jet—but he'd never have enough money to permit him to indulge himself that much, and so he struck the thought from his mind. He'd have to settle for mere first-class travel, the Russian grumbled to himself, sipping some wine as the 737 climbed to cruising altitude. Now, again, he had some thinking to do, and he'd found that the solitary time in the first-class cabin of an aircraft helped.

Did he want Grady to succeed? More to the point, did his employer want Grady to succeed? It hadn't seemed so for Bern and Vienna, but was this a different matter? Maybe Henriksen thought so. He'd given Popov that impression in their discussions. Was there a difference? If so, what was it?

Henriksen was former FBI. Perhaps that explained it. Like Popov, he wouldn't court failure in anything. Or did he really want this Rainbow group damaged to the point that it couldn't—couldn't what? Interfere with some operation?

Again the brick wall, and again Popov struck his head against it. He'd started two terrorist operations, and the only purpose for them he could discern was to raise the international consciousness about terrorism. Henriksen had an international consulting company in that area, and Henriksen wanted the consciousness raised so that he could win contracts—but on the surface it seemed an expensive and inefficient way of doing it, Popov reflected. Certainly the money to be gained from the contracts won would be less than the money Popov had already expended—or pocketed. And again he reminded himself that the money had come from John Brightling and his Horizon Corporation—perhaps from Brightling himself—*not* Henriksen's Global Security, Inc. So, the two companies were related in their objectives, but not in their financial support.

Therefore, Popov thought, sipping his French Chablis, the operation is entirely Brightling's doing, with Henriksen as a support service, providing expertise and advice—

—*but,* one objective was to get Henriksen the consulting contract for the Sydney Olympics, to start in only a few weeks. That had been very important to *both* Brightling *and* Henriksen. Therefore, Henriksen was doing something of great importance to Brightling, doubtless in support of the latter's goal, whatever the hell that was.

But what did Brightling and his company do? Horizon Corporation and all of its numerous international subsidiaries were in the business of medical research. The company manufactured medicines, and spent a huge amount of money every year to invent new ones. It was a world leader in the field of medical research. It had Nobel Prize winners working in its labs, and, his Internet research had determined, it was working in some very exciting areas of potential medical

advancement. Popov shook his head again. What did genetic engineering and pharmaceutical manufacturing have to do with terrorism?

The lightbulb that went off over the Irish Sea reminded him that only a relatively few months before, America had been attacked with biological warfare. It had killed about five thousand people, and incurred the lethal wrath of the United States and her president. The dossier he'd been given said that the chief of this Rainbow group, Clark, and his son-in-law, Chavez, had played a quiet but very dramatic role in concluding that bloody little war.

Bio-war, Popov thought. It had given the entire world a reason to shudder. In the event it had proven to be an ineffective weapon of statecraft—especially since America had reacted with her customary speed and furious effectiveness on the battlefields of Saudi Arabia. As a result, no nation-state today dared even to contemplate an attack on America. Its armed forces strode the world like a frontier sheriff in a Western movie, respected and, more to the point, feared for their lethal capabilities.

Popov finished his wine, and fingered the empty glass in his hand as he looked down at the approaching green coastline of England. Bio-war. It had made the whole world shiver in fear and disgust. Horizon Corporation was deeply into cutting-edge research in medical science. So, surely, Brightling's business could well be involved with biological-warfare research—but to what possible end? Besides, it was a mere *corporation,* not a nation-state. It had no foreign policy. It had nothing to gain from warlike activities. Corporations didn't make war, except, perhaps, on other corporations. They might try to steal trade secrets, but actually shed blood? Of course not. Again, Popov told himself, he had merely found a blank hard wall to smash his head against.

"Okay," Sergeant Major Dick Voss told them. "First of all, the sound quality of these digital radios is so good that you can recognize voices just like a regular conversation in a living room. Second, the radios are coded so that if you have two different teams operating in the field, one team comes in the left ear, and the other team comes in the right ear. That's to keep the commander from getting too confused," he explained, to the amusement of the Australian NCOs. "This gives you more positive control of your operations, and it keeps everybody informed on what's going on. The more you people know, the more effective you will be in the field. You can adjust volume on this dial here—" He showed them the knob on the microphone root.

"What's the range?" a senior Aussie NCO asked.

"Up to ten miles, or fifteen thousand meters, a little longer if you

have line of sight. After that, it breaks up some. The batteries are rechargeable, and every set comes with two spares. The batteries will hold their charge for about six months in the spare holders you have, but we recommend recharging them every week. No big deal, the charger comes with every set, and it has a universal plug set. It'll fit into a wall socket here, or anyplace else in the world. You just play with the little fucker until you get the right plug pattern here—" He demonstrated. Most of the people in the room looked at theirs for a few seconds. "Okay, people, let's put them on and try them out. Power on /off switch is here. . . ."

"Fifteen kilometers, eh?" Malloy asked.

"Right," Noonan said. "This way you can listen to what we're doing on the ground, instead of waiting to be told. It fits inside your aircraft headset and shouldn't interfere much with what you need to get over your intercom. This little switch can be attached, and the control button goes down your sleeve into your hand, so you can flip it on or off. It also has a listen-only mode. That's the third position here."

"Slick," Sergeant Nance observed. "Be nice to know what's happening on the ground."

"Damned right. If you ground-pounders need an evac, I'll be halfway in before you make the call. I like it," Colonel Malloy noted. "I guess we'll keep it, Tim."

"It's still experimental. E-Systems says there may be a few bugs in it, but nobody's found them yet. The encryption system is state-of-the-art 128-bit continuous, synchronized off the master set, but hierarchicalized so that if a set goes down, another automatically takes that function over. The boys and girls at Fort Meade can probably crack it, but only twelve hours after you use it."

"Any problem with being inside an aircraft—interference with any of the onboard systems?" Lieutenant Harrison asked.

"Not that we know of. It's been tested on Night Hawks and Stalkers at Fort Bragg, no problems discovered."

"Let's check that one out," Malloy said at once. He'd learned not to trust electronics—and besides, it was a perfectly good excuse to take their Night Hawk off the ground. "Sergeant Nance, head out to the bird."

"You bet, Colonel." The sergeant stood and moved toward the door.

"Tim, you stay here. We'll try it inside and outside, and get a range check, too."

Thirty minutes later, the Night Hawk was circling around Hereford.

"How's this, Noonan?"

"Loud and clear, Bear."

"Okay, good, we're about, oh, eleven clicks out, and you are coming

through like Rush Limbaugh across the street. These digital radios work nice, don't they?"

"Yep." Noonan got in his car, and confirmed that the metal cage around him had no effect on performance. It turned out that the radios continued to work at over eighteen kilometers, or eleven miles, which wasn't bad, they thought, for something with a battery the size of two quarters and an antenna half again the length of a toothpick. "This'll make your long-rope deployments go smoother, Bear."

"How so, Noonan?"

"Well, the guys on the end of the rope'll be able to tell you when you're a little high or low."

"Noonan," came the irate reply, "what do you think depth perception is for?"

"Roger that, Bear," the FBI agent laughed.

CHAPTER 28

BROAD DAYLIGHT

The money made it far easier. Instead of stealing trucks, they could buy them with cashier's checks drawn from an account set up by a person with false identification papers, who'd also been wearing a disguise at the time. The trucks were large Swedish-made Volvo commercial vehicles, straight or nonarticulated trucks with canvas covers over the load area that proclaimed the names of nonexistent businesses.

The trucks came across the Irish Sea to Liverpool on commercial ferries, their interiors laden with cardboard cartons for refrigerators, and passed through British customs with no trouble, and from there it was just a matter of driving within the legal limit on the motorways. The trucks traveled in close formation through the West Country, and arrived near Hereford just before dusk. There, at a prearranged point, they all parked. The drivers dismounted at the local equivalent of a truck stop and headed for a pub.

Sean Grady and Roddy Sands had flown in the same day. They'd passed through customs/immigration control at Gatwick with false papers that had stood the test of time on numerous previous occasions, and again proved to their satisfaction that British immigration officers were blind as well as deaf and dumb. Both of them rented cars with false credit cards and drove west to Hereford, also along preplanned routes, and arrived at the same pub soon before the arriving trucks.

"Any problems?" Grady asked the Barry twins.

"None," Sam replied, accompanied by a nod from Peter. As always, the members of his unit made a show of sangfroid, despite the pre-mission jitters they all had to have. Soon everyone was there, and two groups, one of seven and one of eight, sat in booths, sipping their Guinness and chatting quietly, their presence not a matter of interest to pub regulars.

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“They work pretty good,” Malloy told Noonan, over a pint in the club. “E-Systems, eh?”

“Pretty good outfit. We used a lot of their hardware at HRT.”

The Marine nodded. “Yeah, same thing in Special Operations Command. But I still prefer things with control wires and cables.”

“Well, yeah, Colonel, sir, but kinda hard to do two paper cups and string out of a chopper, ain’t it?”

“I ain’t that backward, Tim.” But it was good enough for a grin. “And I ain’t never needed help doing a long-wire deployment.”

“You are pretty good at it.” Noonan sipped at his beer. “How long you been flying choppers?”

“Twenty years—twenty-one come next October. You know, it’s the last real flying left. The new fast-movers, hell, computers take a vote on whether they like what you’re doing ’fore they decide to do it for you. I play with computers, games and e-mail and such, but damned if I’ll *ever* let them fly for me.” It was an empty boast, or nearly so, Noonan thought. Sooner or later, that form of progress would come to rotary-wing aircraft, too, and the drivers would bitch, but then they’d accept it as they had to, and move on, and probably be safer and more effective as a result. “Waiting for a letter from my detailer right now,” the colonel added.

“Oh? What for?”

“I’m in the running for CO of VMH-1.”

“Flying the president around?”

Malloy nodded. “Hank Goodman’s got the job now, but he made star and so they’re moving him up to something else. And somebody, I guess, heard that I’m pretty good with a stick.”

“Not too shabby,” Noonan said.

“Boring, though, straight and level all the time, no fun stuff,” the Marine allowed, with a show of false distaste. Flying in VMH-1 was an honor for a captain, and command of it was the Corps’ way of showing confidence in his abilities. “I ought to know in another two weeks. Be nice to see some Redskins games in person again.”

“What’s up for tomorrow?”

“Right before lunch, practice low-level insertion, paperwork in the afternoon. I have to do a ton of it for the Air Force. Well, they own the damned aircraft, and they are nice about maintaining it and giving me a good flight crew. I bet airliner pilots don’t have to do this, though.” Those lucky bastards just had to fly, though their brand of flying was about as exciting as a paint-drying race, or maybe a grass-growing marathon.

Chavez hadn’t yet gotten used to British humor, and as a result the series television on the local stations mainly bored him. He did have

cable service, however, and that included The History Channel, which had become his favorite, if not Patsy's.

"Just one, Ding," she told him. Now that she was close to delivery time, she wanted her husband sober at all times, and that meant only one beer per night.

"Yes, honey." It was so easy for women to push men around, Domingo thought, looking at the nearly empty glass and feeling like another. It was great to sip beer in the club and discuss business matters in a comfortable, informal setting, and generally bond with his people—but right now he was going no farther than fifty feet from his wife, except when he had to, and she had his beeper number when they were apart. The baby had dropped, whatever that meant—well, he knew it meant that delivery was imminent, but not what "dropped" signified. And now it meant that he could only have one beer per night, though he could be stone sober with three . . . maybe even four. . . .

They sat in side-by-side easy chairs. Ding was trying both to watch TV and read intelligence documents. It was something he seemed able to do, to the amazed annoyance of his wife, who was reading a medical journal and making some marginal notes on the glossy paper.

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It wasn't terribly different at the Clark home, though here a movie cassette was tucked into the VCR and was playing away.

"Anything new at the office?" Sandy asked.

At the office, John thought. She hadn't said that when he'd come back from out in the field. No, then it had been "Are you okay?" Always asked with a tinge of concern, because, though he'd never—well, almost never—told her about the things he did in the field, Sandy knew that it was a little different from sitting at a desk. So, this was just one more confirmation that he was a REMF. *Thanks, honey,* he thought. "No, not really," he said. "How about the hospital?"

"A car accident right after lunch. Nothing major."

"How's Patsy doing?"

"She'll be a pretty good doc when she learns to relax a little more. But, well, I've been doing ER for twenty-some years, right? She knows more than I do in the theoretical area, but she needs to learn the practical side a little better. But, you know, she's coming along pretty well."

"Ever think you might have been a doc?" her husband asked.

"I suppose I could have, but—wasn't the right time back then, was it?"

"How about the baby?"

That made Sandy smile. "Just like I was, impatient. You get to that point and you just want it to happen and be done with it."

"Any worries?"

"No, Dr. Reynolds is pretty good, and Patsy is doing just fine. I'm just not sure I'm ready to be a grandma yet," Sandy added with a laugh.

"I know what you mean, babe. Any time, eh?"

"The baby dropped yesterday. That means he's pretty ready."

" 'He'?" John asked.

"That's what everybody seems to think, but we'll find out when it pops out."

John grumbled. Domingo had insisted that it *had to be* a son, handsome as his father was—and bilingual, *jefe,* he'd always added with that sly Latino grin. Well, he could have gotten worse as a son-in-law. Ding was smart, about the fastest learner he'd ever stumbled across, having risen from young staff sergeant 11-Bravo light-infantryman, U.S. Army, to a respected field intelligence officer in CIA, with a master's degree from George Mason University . . . and now he occasionally mused about going another two years for his Ph.D. Maybe from Oxford, Ding had speculated earlier in the week, if he could arrange the off-time to make it possible. Wouldn't that be a kick in the ass—an East L.A. Chicano with a hood from Oxford University! He might end up DCI someday, and *then* he would really be intolerable. John chuckled, sipped his Guinness, and returned his attention to the television.

Popov told himself that he had to watch. He was in London again, checked into a medium-class hotel made from a bunch of row houses strung together and renovated. This one he had to see. It would be a first for a terrorist operation. They had a real plan, albeit suggested by Bill Henriksen, but Grady had jumped on the idea, and it certainly seemed a tactically sound concept, as long as they knew when to end it and run away. In any case, Dmitriy wanted to see it happen, the better to know if he could then call the bank and recode the money into his own account and then . . . disappear from the face of the earth whenever he wished. It hadn't occurred to Grady that there were at least *two* people who could access the funds transferred. Perhaps Sean was a trusting soul, Popov thought, odd as that proposition sounded. He'd accepted the contact from his former KGB friend readily, and though he'd posed two major tests, the money and the cocaine, once they'd been delivered he'd stood right up to take the action promised. That was remarkable, now that Popov allowed himself to think about it. But he'd take his rented Jaguar saloon car to go and watch. It ought

not to be overly hard, he thought, nor overly dangerous if he did it right. With that thought he tossed off his last Stolichnaya of the night and flipped off the light.

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They woke up at the same time that morning. Domingo and Patricia in one home, and John and Sandra in another, opened their eyes at 5:30 when their alarms went off, and both couples adjusted their routine to the schedule of the day. The women had to be at the local hospital at 6:45 for the beginning of their 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. day shift in the emergency room, and so in both homes, the womenfolk got the bathroom first, while the men padded into the kitchen to feed the coffee machine and flip it on, then collect the morning papers from the front step, and turn the radios on to the BBC for the morning news. Twenty minutes later, the bathrooms and newspapers were exchanged, and fifteen minutes after that, the two couples sat down in the kitchen for breakfasts—though in Domingo's case, just a second cup of coffee, as he customarily breakfasted with his people after morning PT. In the Clark home, Sandy was experimenting with fried tomatoes, a local delicacy that she was trying to learn, but which her husband utterly rejected on principle as an American citizen. By 6:20, it was time for the women to dress in their respective uniforms, and for the men to do the same, and soon thereafter all left their homes to begin their different daily activities.

Clark didn't work out with the teams. He was, he'd finally admitted to himself, too old to sustain the full grind, but he showed up at roughly the same place and did roughly the same daily exercise. It wasn't very different from his time as a SEAL, though without the lengthy swim—there was a pool here, but it wasn't large enough to suit him. Instead, he ran for three miles. The teams did five, though . . . and, he admitted shamefully to himself, at a faster pace. For a man of his years, John Clark knew himself to be in superb physical shape, but keeping himself there got harder every day, and the next major milestone on his personal road to death had the number sixty on it. It seemed so very odd that he was no longer the young piss-and-vinegar guy he'd been when he'd married Sandy. It seemed as if someone had robbed him of something, but if it had happened, he'd never noticed it. It was just that one day he'd looked around and found himself different from what he'd thought himself to be. Not an agreeable surprise at all, he told himself, finishing his three miles, sweating over

sore legs and needing his second shower of the day.

On the walk to headquarters, he saw Alistair Stanley setting out for his own morning exercise routine. Al was younger than he by five years and probably still had the illusion of youth. They'd become good friends. Stanley had the instincts, especially for intelligence information, and was an effective field operator in his oddly laid-back British way. Like a spiderhole, John thought, Stanley didn't appear to be much of anything until you looked at his eyes, and even then you had to know what to look for. Good-looking, rakish sort, blond hair still and a toothy smile, but like John he'd killed in the field, and like John he didn't have nightmares about it. In truth he had better instincts as a commander than Clark did, the latter admitted to himself—but only to himself. Both men were still as competitive as they'd been in their twenties, and neither gave praise away for free.

Finished with his shower, Clark walked to his office, sat down at his desk, and went over the morning paperwork, cursing it quietly for the time it required, and all the thought that had to go into such wasteful items as budgeting. Right in his desk drawer was his Beretta .45, proof that he wasn't just one more civil servant, but today he wouldn't have time to walk over to the range to practice the martial skills that had made him the commander of Rainbow—a position that ironically denied him the ability to prove he belonged. Mrs. Foorgate arrived just after eight, looked into her boss's office, and saw the frown she always saw when he was doing administrative work, as opposed to going over intelligence information or operational matters, which at least he appeared to find interesting. She came in to start his coffee machine, got the usual morning greeting-grunt, then returned to her desk, and checked the secure fax machine for anything that might have to go to the boss at once. There was nothing. Another day had started at Hereford.

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Grady and his people were awake as well. They went through their breakfast routine of tea and eggs and bacon and toast, for the typical Irish breakfast was little different from the English. In fact, the countries were little different in any of their fundamental habits, a fact Grady and his people did not reflect upon. Both were polite societies, and extremely hospitable to visitors. Citizens in both countries smiled at one another, worked fairly hard at their jobs, largely watched the same TV, read the same sports pages, and played mainly the same sports, which in both countries were true national passions—and drank similar quantities of similar beers in pubs that could have easily

been in one nation as another, down to the painted signs and names that identified them.

But they attended different churches, and had different accents—seemingly so similar to outsiders—that sounded totally different to each of them. An ear for such things remained an important part of daily life, but global television was changing that slowly. A visitor from fifty years earlier would have noted the many Americanisms that had crept into the common language, but the process had been so gradual that those living through it took little note of the fact. It was a situation common to countries with revolutionary movements. The differences were small to outside observers, but all the more magnified to those who advocated change, to the point that Grady and his people saw English similarities merely as camouflage that made their operations convenient, not as commonalties that might have drawn their nations closer. People with whom they might have shared a pint and a discussion of a particularly good football match were as alien to them as men from Mars, and therefore easy to kill. They were things, not "mates," and as crazy as that might have appeared to an objective third party, it was sufficiently inculcated into them that they took no more note of it than they did of the air on this clear, blue morning, as they moved to their trucks and cars, preparing for the day's mission.

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At 10:30 A.M. Chavez and his team moved to the indoor range for marksmanship practice. Dave Woods was there, and had set the boxes of ammunition in the proper places for the Team-2 members. As before, Chavez decided to work on his pistol rather than the easier-to-use MP-10, which anyone with two functioning eyes and one working trigger finger could shoot well. As a result, he turned in the 10mm ammunition and swapped it for two boxes of .45ACP, U.S.-made Federal "Hydra-Shok" premium ammo, with a huge hollowpoint in which one could nearly mix a drink, or so it seemed when you looked into them.

Lieutenant Colonel Malloy and his flight crew, Lieutenant Harrison and Sergeant Nance, walked in just as Team-2 started. They were armed with the standard American-military-issue Beretta M9, and fired full-metal jacket 9-mm rounds as required by the Hague Convention—America had never signed the international treaty detailing what was proper and what was not on the battlefield, but America lived by the rules anyway. The special-operations people of

Rainbow used different, more effective ammo, on the principle that they were not *on* a battlefield, but were, rather, engaging *criminals* who did not merit the solicitude accorded better-organized and -uniformed enemies. Anyone who thought about the issue found it slightly mad, but they knew that there was no hard-and-fast rule requiring the world to make sense, and shot the rounds they were issued. In the case of the Rainbow troopers, it was no less than a hundred rounds per day. Malloy and his crew got to shoot perhaps fifty rounds per week, but they weren't supposed to be shooters, and their presence here was merely a matter of courtesy. As it happened, Malloy was an excellent shot, though he fired his pistol one-handed in the manner once taught by the U.S. military. Harrison and Nance used the more modern Weaver stance, both hands on the weapons. Malloy also missed the .45 of his youth, but the American armed services had gone to the smaller-diameter round to make the NATO countries happy, even though it made much smaller holes in the people whom you were supposed to shoot.

The girl was named Fiona. She was just about to turn five years old and had fallen off a swing at her day-care center. The wood chips there had scratched her skin, but it was also feared that she might have broken the radius in her left forearm. Sandy Clark held the arm while the child cried. Very slowly and carefully, she manipulated it, and the intensity of the child's tears didn't change. This wasn't broken . . . well, possibly a very minor green-stick fracture, but probably not even that.

"Let's get an X ray," Patsy said, handing over a grape sucker to the kid. It worked as well in England as it did in America. The tears stopped as she used her good right arm and teeth to rip off the plastic, then stuck the thing into her cute little mouth. Sandy used wetted gauze to clean off the arm. No need for stitches, just a few nasty scrapes that she'd paint with antiseptic and cover with two large Band-Aids.

This ER wasn't as busy as its American counterparts. For one thing, it was in the country, and there was less opportunity for a major injury—they'd had a farmer the previous week who'd come close to ripping his arm off with a farm implement, but Sandy and Patsy had been off-duty then. There were fewer severe auto accidents than in a comparable American area, because the Brits, despite their narrow roads and looser speed limits, seemed to drive more safely than Americans, a fact that had both of the American medics scratching their heads. All in all, duty here was fairly civilized. The hospital was overstaffed by American standards, and that made everyone's workload on the easy side of reasonable, somewhat to the surprise of

both Americans. Ten minutes later, Patsy looked over the X ray and saw that the bones of Fiona's forearm were just fine. Thirty minutes after that, she was on her way back to day care, where it was time for lunch. Patsy sat down at her desk and went back to reading the latest issue of *The Lancet,* while her mother returned to her stand-up desk and chatted with a colleague. Both perversely wished for more work to do, though that meant pain for someone they didn't know. Sandy Clark remarked to her English friend that she hadn't seen a gunshot wound in her whole time in England. In her Williamsburg, Virginia, hospital they'd been almost a daily occurrence, a fact that somewhat horrified her colleagues but was just part of the landscape for an American ER nurse.

Hereford wasn't exactly a sleepy community, but the vehicular traffic didn't make it a bustling metropolis either. Grady was in his rented car, following the trucks to the objective, and going more slowly than usual, here in the far-left lane, because he'd anticipated thicker traffic and therefore a longer trip in terms of time. He could have moved off at a faster clip, and therefore started the mission earlier, but he was a methodical sort, and once his plan was drafted, he tended to stick to it almost slavishly. That way, everyone knew what had to happen and when, which made operational sense. For the unexpected, every team member carried a cellular phone with speed-dial settings for every other member. Sean figured they were almost as good as the tactical radios the soldiers carried.

There was the hospital. It sat at the bottom of a shallow slope. The parking lot didn't seem to be very crowded. Maybe there weren't many patients in their beds, or maybe the visitors were off having lunch before coming back to see their loved ones.

Dmitriy pulled his rental car over to the side of the through-road and stopped. He was half a kilometer or so from the hospital, and from the top of this hill, he could see two sides, the front and the side entrance for the hospital's emergency room. He switched the motor off after lowering the power windows and waited to see what would happen next. On the backseat he had an inexpensive set of 7×35 binoculars purchased at an airport shop, and he decided to get them out. Next to him on the seat was his cellular phone, should he need it. He saw three heavy trucks pull up and stop close to the hospital in positions far nearer than his, but, like his spot, able to cover the front and the emergency side entrance.

It was then that Popov had a random thought. Why not call that Clark fellow at Hereford and warn him of what was to happen? *He,* Popov, didn't want these people to survive the afternoon, did he? If

they didn't, then he'd have that five-million-plus American dollars, and *then* he could disappear from the face of the earth. The islands of the Caribbean appealed to him; he'd gone over some travel brochures. They'd have some British amenities—honest police, pubs, cordial people—plus a quiet, unhurried life, yet were close enough to America that he could travel there to manage his funds in whatever investment scheme he opted for . . .

But . . . no. There was the off chance that Grady would get away from this one, and he didn't want to risk being hunted by that intense and vicious Irishman. No, it was better that he let this play out without his interference, and so he sat in the car, binoculars in his lap, listening to classical music on one of the regular BBC radio stations.

Grady got out of his Jaguar. He opened the boot, withdrew his parcel, and pocketed the keys. Timothy O'Neil dismounted his vehicle—he'd chosen a small van—and stood still, waiting for the other five men to join him. This they did after a few minutes. Timmy lifted his cell phone and thumbed the number-one speed-dial setting. A hundred yards away, Grady's phone started chirping.

"Yes?"

"We are ready here, Sean."

"Go on, then. We're ready here as well. Good luck, lad."

"Very well, we are moving in now."

O'Neil was wearing the brown coveralls of a package deliveryman. He walked toward the hospital's side entrance carrying a large cardboard box, followed by four other men in civilian clothes carrying boxes similar in size, but not in color.

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Popov looked into his rearview mirror in annoyance. A police car was pulling over to the side of the road, and a few seconds later, a constable got out and walked to his car.

"Having a problem, sir?" the cop asked.

"Oh, no, not really—that is, I called the rental company, and they're sending someone out, you see."

"What went wrong?" the policeman asked.

"Not sure. The motor started running badly, and I thought it a good idea to pull over and shut it off. Anyway," the Russian repeated, "I called into the company, and they're sending someone to sort it out."

"Ah, very good, then." The police constable stretched, and it seemed as though he'd pulled over as much to get some fresh air as to render

assistance to a stranded motorist. The timing, Popov thought, could have been better.

"Can I help you?" the desk clerk said.

"I have a delivery for Dr. Chavez, and Nurse"—he looked down at the slip of paper on the box, which seemed to him a clever bit of acting—"Clark. Are they in this afternoon?" Timmy O'Neil asked.

"I'll fetch them," the clerk said helpfully, heading back into the work area.

The IRA soldier's hand slid along the inside of the lid, ready to flip the box open. He turned and nodded to the other four, who waited politely in line behind him. O'Neil thumbed his nose, and one of them —his name was Jimmy Carr—walked back outside. There was a police car there, a Range Rover, white with an orange stripe down the side. The policeman inside was eating a sandwich, taking lunch at a convenient place, in what American cops sometimes called "cooping," just killing time when nothing was going on. He saw the man standing outside the casualty-receive entrance holding what looked like a flower box. Several others had just gone inside holding similar boxes, but this was a hospital, and people gave flowers to those inside of them . . . Even so . . . the man with the large white box was staring at his police automobile, as people often did. The cop looked back at him, mainly in curiosity, though his cop instincts were beginning to light up.

"I'm Dr. Chavez," Patsy said. She was almost as tall as he was, O'Neil saw, and very pregnant beneath her starched white lab coat. "You have something for me?"

"Yes, doctor, I do." Then another woman approached, and the resemblance was striking from the first moment he saw the two of them. They had to be mother and daughter . . . and that meant that it was time.

O'Neil flipped the top off the box and instantly extracted the AKMS rifle. He was looking down at it and missed the wide-eyed shock on the faces of the two women in front of him. His right hand withdrew one of the magazines and slapped it home into the weapon. Then he changed hands and let his right hand take hold of the pistol grip while his left slapped the bolt back into the battery position. The entire exercise hadn't lasted two seconds.

Patsy and Sandy froze, as people usually did when suddenly confronted with weapons. Their eyes were wide and faces shocked. To their left, someone screamed. Behind this deliveryman, three others now held identical weapons, and faced outward, aiming at the others in the reception area, and a routine day in the Emergency Room

changed to something very different.

Outside, Carr popped open his box, smiling as he aimed it at the police car only twenty feet away.

The engine was running, and the cop's first instinct was to get clear and report in. His left hand slipped the selector into reverse, and his foot slammed down on the accelerator, causing the car to jolt backward.

Carr's response was automatic. The weapon up, bolt back, he aimed and pulled the trigger, firing fifteen rounds into the automobile's windscreen. The result was immediate. The Rover had been moving backward in a fairly straight line, but the moment the bullets started hitting, it swerved right, and ended up against the brick wall of the hospital. There it stopped, the pressure off the accelerator now. Carr sprinted over and looked inside to see that there was one less police constable in the world, and that, to him, was no great loss.

"What's that?" It was the helpful roadside cop rather than Popov who asked the rhetorical question. It was rhetorical because automatic-weapons fire is not something to be mistaken for anything else. His head turned, and he saw the police car—an identical twin to his own—scream backward, then stop, and then a man walked up to it, looked, and walked away. "Bloody hell!"

Dmitriy Arkadeyevich sat still, now watching the cop who'd come to his unneeded assistance. The man ran back to his vehicle, reached inside and pulled out a radio microphone. Popov couldn't hear what was said, but, then, he didn't need to.

"We've got them, Sean," O'Neil's voice told him. Grady acknowledged the information, thumbed the end button and speed-dialed Peter Barry's cell phone.

"Yes?"

"Timothy has them. The situation appears to be under control."

"Okay." And this call ended. Then Sean speed-dialed yet another number. "Hello, this is Patrick Casey. We have seized the Hereford community hospital. We are currently holding as hostages Dr. Chavez and Nurse Clark, plus numerous others. We will release our hostages if our demands are met. If they are not met, then it will be necessary for us to kill hostages until such time as you see the error of your ways. We require the release of all political prisoners held in Albany and Parkhurst prisons on the Isle of Wight. When they are released and seen to be released on the television, we will leave this area. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," the desk sergeant replied. He didn't, but he had a tape of this call, and he'd forward the information to someone who would understand.

Carr took the casualty-receiving entrance; the Barry twins, Peter and Sam, walked through the inside of the building to the main entrance. Here things were somewhat chaotic. Carr's initial fusillade hadn't been heard clearly here, and most of the people had turned their heads to the rough direction of the noise, and on seeing nothing, had turned back to attend to their business. The hospital's security guard, a man of fifty-five who was wearing something that looked like a police uniform, was heading for the door into the hospital proper when he saw the twins coming toward him with weapons in hand. The retired policeman managed to say, "What's all this?"—the usual words of a British constable—before a jerk of one rifle muzzle convinced him to raise his hands and shut up. Sam grabbed his collar and shoved him back into the main lobby. There, people saw the weapons. Some screamed. A few made for the doors, and all of them got outside without being fired upon, since the Barry twins had enough to do already.

The police constable's radio call from the side of the road generated a greater response than Grady's phone call, especially with the report that a constable had been shot and probably killed in his car. The first reaction of the local superintendent was to summon all of his mobile units to the general area of the hospital. Only about half of them had firearms, and those were mainly Smith & Wesson revolvers—not nearly enough to deal with the reported use of machine guns. The death of the constable was established when an officer who had been parked near the hospital failed to report in, despite numerous calls over the police radio.

Every police station in the world has preset responses for various emergencies. This one had a folder labeled "Terrorism," and the superintendent pulled it out, even though he had the contents memorized, just to make sure he didn't forget anything. The top emergency number went to a desk in the Home Office, and he reported what little he knew to the senior civil servant there, adding that he was working to get more information and would report back.

The Home Office headquarters building, close to Buckingham Palace, housed the bureaucrats who had oversight over nearly every aspect of life in the British Isles. That included law enforcement, and in that building, too, was a procedures folder, which was pulled from its slot. In this one was a new page and a new number.

“Four-two-double-three,” Alice Foorgate said, on picking up the phone. This was the line used exclusively for important voice traffic.

“Mr. Clark, please.”

“Yes. Wait, please.”

“Mr. Clark, a call on double-three,” she said into the intercom.

“This is John Clark,” Rainbox Six said, lifting the receiver.

“This is Frederick Callaway at the Home Office. We have a possible emergency situation,” the civil servant said.

“Okay, where is it?”

“Just up the road from you, I’m afraid, the Hereford hospital. The voice which called in identified itself as Patrick Casey. That is a codename that the PIRA use to designate their operations.”

“Hereford Hospital?” John asked, his hand suddenly cold on the phone.

“That is correct.”

“Hold for a second. I want to get one of my people on this line.” John put his hand over the receiver. “Alice! Get Alistair on this one right now!”

“Yes, John?”

“Mr. Callaway, this is Alistair Stanley, my second-in-command. Please repeat what you just told me.”

He did so, then added, “The voice identified two hostages by name, a Nurse Clark, and a Dr. Chavez.”

“Oh, shit,” John breathed.

“I’ll get Peter’s team moving, John,” Stanley said.

“Right. Anything else, Mr. Callaway?”

“That is all we have now. The local police superintendent is attempting to gather more information at this time.”

“Okay, thank you. You can reach me at this number if you need me.” Clark replaced the receiver in its cradle. “Fuck,” he said quietly.

His mind was racing. Whoever had scouted out Rainbow had done so for a reason, and those two names had not been an accident. This was a direct challenge to him and his people—and they were using his wife and daughter as a weapon. His next thought was that he would have to pass command over to Al Stanley, and the next—that his wife and daughter were in mortal danger . . . and he was helpless.

“Christ,” Major Peter Covington muttered over his phone. “Yes, sir. Let me get moving here.” He stood and walked into his squad bay. “Attention, we have some business. Everyone get ready to move immediately.”

Team-1’s members stood and headed to their lockers. It didn’t seem like a drill, but they handled it as though it were. Master Chief Mike

Chin was the first to be suited up. He came to see his boss, who was just putting on his body armor.

"What gives, skipper?"

"PIRA, local hospital, holding Clark's and Ding's wives as hostages."

"What's that?" Chin asked, blinking his eyes hard.

"You heard me, Mike."

"Oh, shit. Okay." Chin went back into the squad bay. "Saddle up, people, this ain't no fuckin' drill."

Malloy had just sprinted to his Night Hawk. Sergeant Nance was already there, pulling red-flagged safety pins from their plug points and holding them up for the pilot to confirm the count.

"Looking good, let's start 'er up, Lieutenant."

"Turning one," Harrison confirmed, as Sergeant Nance reboarded the aircraft and strapped on his move-around safety belt, then shifted to the left-side door to check the tail of the Night Hawk.

"Tail rotor is clear, Colonel."

Malloy acknowledged that information as he watched his engine instruments spooling up. Then he keyed his radio again. "Command, this is Bear, we are turnin' and burnin'. What do you want us to do, over?"

"Bear, this is Five," Stanley's voice came back, to Malloy's surprise. "Lift off and orbit the local hospital. That is the site of the current incident."

"Say again, Five, over."

"Bear, we have subjects holding the local hospital. They are holding Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Chavez as hostages. They've identified both of them by name. Your orders are to lift off and orbit the hospital."

"Roger, copy that. Bear is lifting off now." His left hand pulled the collective, climbing the Sikorsky into the sky.

"Did I hear that right, Colonel?" Harrison asked.

"You must have. Fuck," the Marine observed. Somebody was grabbing the tiger by the balls, Malloy thought. He looked down to see a pair of trucks speeding off the base, heading in the same direction as he. That would be Covington and Team-1, he thought. With a little more reflection, he took the Night Hawk to four thousand feet, called the local air-traffic-control center to tell them what he was doing, and got a transponder code so that they could track him properly.

There were four police vehicles there now, blocking the access to the hospital parking lots but doing nothing else, Popov saw through his binoculars. The constables inside were just looking, all standing outside their cars, two of them holding revolvers but not pointing them at anything but the ground.

In one truck, Covington relayed the information he had. In the other,

Chin did it. The troopers were as shocked as they had ever allowed themselves to be, having considered themselves and their families to be *ipso facto* immune to this sort of thing because nobody had *ever* been foolish enough to try something like this. You might walk up to a lion cage and prod him with a stick, but not when there weren't any bars between you and him. And you never ever messed with the lion's cubs, did you? Not if you wanted to be alive at sundown. This was family for all of them. Attacking the wife of the Rainbow commander was a slap in all their faces, an act of incomprehensible arrogance—and Chavez's wife was pregnant. She represented two innocent lives, both of them belonging to one of the people with whom they exercised every morning and with whom they had the occasional pint in the evening, a fellow soldier, one of their team. They all flipped on their radios and sat back, holding their individual weapons, allowing their thoughts to wander, but not very far.

"Al, I have to let you run this operation," John said, standing by his desk and preparing to leave. Dr. Bellow was in the room, along with Bill Tawney.

"I understand, John. You know how good Peter and his team are."

A long breath. "Yeah." There wasn't much of anything else to say right then.

Stanley turned to the others. "Bill?"

"They used the right codename. 'Patrick Casey' is not known to the press. It's a name they use to let us know that their operation is real—usually used with bomb threats and such. Paul?"

"Identifying your wife and daughter is a direct challenge to us. They're telling us that they know about Rainbow, that they know who we are, and, of course, who *you* are, John. They're announcing their expertise and their willingness to go all the way." The psychiatrist shook his head. "But if they're really PIRA, that means they're Catholic. I can work on that. Let's get me out there and establish contact, shall we?"

Tim Noonan was already in his personal car, his tactical gear in the back. At least this was easy for him. There were two cell-phone nodes in the Hereford area, and he'd been to both of them while experimenting with his lock-out software. He drove to the farther of the two first. It was a fairly typical setup, the usual candelabra tower standing in a fenced enclosure with a truck-type trailer—called a caravan over here, he remembered. A car was parked just outside. Noonan pulled alongside and hopped out without bothering to lock it up. Ten seconds later, he pulled open the door to the caravan.

"What's this?" the technician inside asked.

"I'm from Hereford. We're taking this cell off-line right now."

"Says who?"

"Says me!" Noonan turned so that the guy could see the holstered pistol on his hip. "Call your boss. He knows who I am and what I do." And with no further talk, Noonan walked to the master-power panel and flipped the breaker, killing transmissions from the tower. Then he sat in front of the computer control system and inserted the floppy disk he'd carried in his shirt pocket. Two mouse clicks and forty seconds later the system was modified. Only a number with a 777 prefix would be accepted now.

The technician didn't have a clue, but did have the good sense not to dispute the matter with a man carrying a gun.

"Anybody at the other one—on the other side of town?" Noonan asked.

"No, that would be me if there's a problem—but there isn't."

"Keys." Noonan held his hand out.

"I can't do that. I mean, I do not have authorization to—"

"Call your boss right now," the FBI agent suggested, handing him the land-line receiver.

Covington jumped out of the truck near where some commercial trucks were parked. The police had established a perimeter to keep the curious at bay. He trotted over to what appeared to be the senior cop at the site.

• • •

"There they are," Sean Grady said over his phone to Timmy O'Neil. "Sure, and they responded quickly. Ever so formidable they look," he added. "How are things inside?"

"Too many people for us to control properly, Sean. I have the twins in the main lobby, Jimmy here with me, and Daniel is patrolling upstairs."

"What of your hostages?"

"The women, you mean? They're sitting on the floor. The young one is very pregnant, Sean. She could have it today, looks like."

"Try to avoid that, lad," Grady advised, with a smile. Things were going according to his plan, and the clock was running. The bloody soldiers had even parked their trucks within twenty meters of his own. It could scarcely have been better.

Houston's first name wasn't really Sam—his mother had named him

Mortimer, after a favored uncle—but the current moniker had been laid on him during boot camp at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, eleven years before, and he hadn't objected. His sniper rifle was still in its boxy carrying case to safeguard it from shock, and he was looking around for a good perch. Where he was standing wasn't bad, the sergeant thought. He was ready for whatever the day offered. His rifle was a virtual twin to that used by his friend Homer Johnston, and his marksmanship was just as good, too—a little better, he'd quickly tell anyone who asked. The same was true of Rifle One-Two, Sergeant First Class Fred Franklin, formerly an instructor at the Army's marksmanship training unit at Fort Benning and a deadly shot out to a mile with his huge MacMillan .50 bolt-action rifle.

"What d'ya think, Sam?"

"I like it here, Freddy. How about you go to that knoll past the helo pad?"

"Looks good to me. Later." Franklin hoisted the case onto his shoulder and headed off that way.

• • •

"Those people scare me," Roddy Sands admitted over the phone.

"I know, but one of them is close enough to take out at once, Roddy. You take that job, lad."

"I will, Sean," Sands agreed from inside the cargo area of the big Volvo truck.

Noonan, now with the keys to the other site, was back in his car and heading that way. The drive would take twenty minutes—no, more, he realized. Traffic was backing up on this "A"-class road, and though he had a gun on his hip, and even police identification, his car didn't have a siren and gumball machine—an oversight he himself had never considered, to his sudden and immediate rage. How the fuck had they forgotten that? He *was* a cop, wasn't he? He pulled to the shoulder, turned on his emergency flashers, and started leaning on the horn as he sped past the stopped cars.

Chavez didn't react much. Instead of looking angry or fearful, he just turned inward on himself. A small man, his body seemed to shrink even further before Clark's eyes. "Okay," he said finally, his mouth dry. "What are we doing about it?"

"Team-1 is there now, or should be. Al is running the operation. We're spectators."

"Head over?"

Clark wavered, which was unusual for him. The best thing to do, one part of his mind told him quietly, was to sit still, stay in his office and wait, rather than drive over and torture himself with knowledge that he couldn't do anything about. His decision to let Stanley run the operation was the correct one. He couldn't allow his actions to be affected by personal emotions. There were more lives at stake than his wife's and daughter's, and Stanley was a pro who'd do the right thing without being told. On the other hand, to stay here and simply listen to a phone or radio account was far worse. So he walked back to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out his Beretta .45 automatic. This he clipped to his belt at his right hip. Chavez, he saw, had his side arm as well.

"Let's go."

"Wait." Chavez lifted Clark's desk phone and called the Team-2 building.

"Sergeant Major Price," the voice answered.

"Eddie, this is Ding. John and I are going to drive over there. You're in command of Team-2."

"Yes, sir, I understand. Major Covington and his lads are as good as we are, sir, and Team-2 is suited up and ready to deploy."

"Okay, I have my radio with me."

"Good luck, sir."

"Thanks, Eddie." Chavez hung up. "Let's get going, John."

For this ride, Clark had a driver, but he had the same problem with traffic that Noonan was having, and adopted the same solution, speeding down the hard shoulder with his horn blowing and lights blinking. What should have been a ten-minute drive turned into double that.

"Who is this?"

"This is Superintendent Fergus Macleash," the cop on the other end of the phone circuit responded. "And you are?"

"Patrick Casey will do for now," Grady answered smugly. "Have you spoken with the Home Office yet?"

"Yes, Mr. Casey, I have." Macleash looked at Stanley and Bellow, as he stood at his command post, half a mile from the hospital, and listened to the speaker phone.

"When will they release the prisoners, as we demanded?"

"Mr. Casey, most of the senior people are out of the office having lunch at the moment. Mainly, the chaps in London I spoke to are trying to track them down and get them into the office. I haven't spoken with anyone in a position of authority yet, you see."

"I suggest that you tell London to get them in quickly. I am not by

nature a patient man."

"I need your assurance that no one has been hurt," Macleash tried next.

"Except for one of your constables, no, no one has been hurt—yet. That will change if you take action against us, and it will also change if you and your friends in London make us wait too long. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do understand what you just said."

"You have two hours until we begin eliminating hostages. We have a goodly supply, you know."

"You understand, if you injure a hostage, that will change matters greatly, Mr. Casey. My ability to negotiate on your behalf will be greatly reduced if you cross that line."

"That is your problem, not mine" was the cold reply. "I have over a hundred people here, including the wife and daughter of your chief counterterrorist official. They will be the first to suffer for your inaction. You now have one hour and fifty-eight minutes to begin the release of every political prisoner in Albany and Parkhurst prisons. I suggest you get moving on that immediately. Good-bye." And the line went dead.

"He's talking tough," Dr. Bellow observed. "Sounds like a mature voice, in his forties, and he's confirmed that he knows who Mrs. Clark and Dr. Chavez are. We're up against a professional, and one with unusually good intelligence. Where could he have gotten it?"

Bill Tawney looked down at the ground. "Unknown, Doctor. We had indications that people were looking into our existence, but this is disquieting."

"Okay, next time he calls, I talk to him," Bellow said. "I'll see if I can calm him down some."

"Peter, this is Stanley," Rainbow Five called over his tactical radio.

"Covington here."

"What have you done to this point?"

"I have both riflemen deployed for overwatch and intelligence gathering, but I'm keeping the rest close. I'm waiting now for a building diagram. We have as yet no firm estimate of the number of subjects or hostages inside." The voice hesitated before going on. "I recommend that we consider bringing Team-2 in. This is a large building to cover with only eight men, should we have to move in."

Stanley nodded. "Very well, Peter. I will make the call."

"How we looking on gas?" Malloy asked, looking down as he orbited the hospital.

"A good three and a half hours, Colonel," Lieutenant Harrison answered.

Malloy turned to look into the cargo bay area of the Night Hawk. Sergeant Nance had the zip-line ropes out and hooked into the eyebolts on the floor of the aircraft. That work done, he sat in the jump seat between and behind the pilot/copilot seats, his pistol clearly visible in his shoulder holster, listening in on the tactical radio like everyone else.

"Well, we're going to be here for a while," the Marine said.

"Sir, what do you think about—"

"I think I don't like it at all, Lieutenant. Aside from that, we're better off not thinking very much." And that was a bullshit answer, as everyone aboard the Night Hawk knew. You might as well tell the world to stop turning as to tell men in this situation to stop thinking. Malloy was looking down at the hospital, figuring approach angles for a long-wire or zip-line deployment. It didn't appear all that difficult to accomplish, should it become necessary.

The panoramic view afforded from flying above it all was useful. Malloy could see everything. Cars were parked everywhere, and some trucks were close to the hospital. The police cars were visible from their flashing blue lights, and they had traffic pretty well stopped—and elsewhere the roads were clogged, at least those leading *to* the hospital. As usually happened, the roads leading away were wide open. A TV truck appeared, as though by magic, setting up half a mile or so from the hospital, on the hilltop where some other vehicles were stopped, probably rubbernecking, the Marine thought. It always happened, like vultures circling a carcass at Twentynine Palms. Very distasteful, and very human.

Popov turned when he heard the white TV truck stop, not ten meters from the rear bumper of his rented Jaguar. It had a satellite dish on the roof, and the vehicle had scarcely halted when men stepped out. One climbed the ladder affixed to the side and elevated the oddly angular dish. Another hoisted a Minicam, and yet another, evidently the reporter, appeared, wearing a jacket and tie. He chatted briefly with one of the others, then turned, looking down the hill. Popov ignored them.

Finally, Noonan said to himself, pulling off the road at the other cell site. He parked his car, got out, and reached for the keys the technician had given him. Three minutes later, he uploaded his spoofing software. Then he donned his tactical radio set.

"Noonan to Stanley, over."

"This is Stanley."

"Okay, Al, I just cut off the other cell. Cell phones ought to be down now for this entire area."

"Very good, Tim. Come this way now."

"Roger, on the way." The FBI agent adjusted the headset, hanging the microphone exactly in front of his mouth and pushing the earpiece all the way in as he reentered his car and started off back toward the hospital. *Okay, you bastards,* he thought, *try using your fucking phones now.*

As usual in emergency situations, Popov noted, you couldn't tell what was happening. At least fifteen police vehicles were visible along with the two army trucks from the Hereford base. His binoculars didn't allow him to recognize any faces, but he'd seen only one of them close-up, and that was the chief of the unit, and he'd be in some command post or other rather than visible in the open, assuming that he was here at all, the intelligence officer reminded himself.

Two men carrying long cases, probably riflemen, had walked away from the camouflage-painted trucks, but they were nowhere to be seen now, though . . . yes, he saw, using his binoculars again, there was one, just a jump of green that hadn't been there before. How clever. He'd be a sniper, using his telescopic sight to look into windows and gather information, which he'd then radio to his commander. There was another one of them around somewhere as well, but Popov couldn't see him.

"Rifle One-Two to Command," Fred Franklin called in.

"One-Two, this is Command," Covington responded.

"In position, sir, looking down, but I don't see anything at all in the windows on the ground level. Some movement of the curtains on the third floor, like people peeking out, but nothing else."

"Roger, thank you, continue your surveillance."

"Roger that. Rifle One-Two, out." Several seconds later, Houston reported similar news. Both men were in perches, with their ghillie suits disguising their positions.

"Finally," Covington said. A police car had just arrived, its occupant delivering blueprints of the hospital. Peter's gratitude died in a moment, when he looked at the first two pages. There were scores of rooms, most of them on the upper levels, in any of which a man with a gun could hide and have to be winkled out—worse, all of those rooms were probably occupied with real people, sick ones, whom a flash-bang might startle enough to kill. Now that he had the knowledge, its only immediate benefit was to show him just how difficult his mission would be.

“Sean?”

Grady turned. “Yes, Roddy?”

“There they are,” Sands pointed out. The black-clad soldiers were standing behind their army trucks, only a few meters from the trucks the Irishmen had driven to the site.

“I only count six, lad,” Grady said. “We’re hoping for ten or so.”

“It is a poor time to become greedy, Sean.”

Grady thought about that for a second, then checked his watch. He’d allotted forty-five to sixty minutes for this mission. Any more, he thought, would give the other side too much time to get organized. They were within ten minutes of the lower limit. So far, things had gone according to plan. Traffic would be blocked on the roads, but only into the hospital, not away from it. He had his three large trucks, the van, and two private cars, all within fifty meters of where he was standing. The crucial part of the job was yet to begin, but his people all knew what to do. Roddy was right. It was time to wrap everything up and make his dash. Grady nodded at his subordinate, pulled out his cell phone, and hit the speed-dial button for Timothy O’Neil.

But it didn’t work. Lifting the phone to his ear, all he heard was the fast-busy signal that announced that the call hadn’t gone through properly. Annoyed, he thumbed end and redialed . . . and got the same result.

“What’s this? . . .” he said, trying a third time. “Roddy, give me your phone.”

Sands offered it, and Grady took it. They were all identical in make, and all had been identically programmed. He thumbed the same speed-dial command, and again got only the fast-busy response. More confused than angry, Grady nonetheless had a sudden empty feeling in his stomach. He’d planned for many things, but not for this. For the mission to work, he had to coordinate his three groups. They all knew what they were to do, but not when, not until he told them that it was time.

“Bloody . . .” Grady said quietly, rather to the surprise of Roddy Sands. Next Grady simply tried calling a mobile operator, but the same fast-busy signal resulted. “The bloody phones have stopped working.”

“We haven’t heard from him in a while,” Bellow observed.

“He hasn’t given us a phone number yet.”

“Try this.” Tawney handed over a handwritten list of numbers in the hospital. Bellow selected the main ER number and dialed it on his cell phone, making sure to start with the 777 prefix. It rang for half a minute before it was picked up.

“Yes?” It was an Irish-sounding voice, but a different one.

"I need to talk to Mr. Casey," the psychiatrist said, putting the call on speaker.

"He's not here right now" was the reply.

"Could you get him, please? I need to tell him something."

"Wait," the voice answered.

Bellow killed the microphone on the portable phone. "Different voice. Not the same guy. Where's Casey?"

"Some other place in the hospital, I imagine," Stanley offered, but the answer was dissatisfying to him when no voice came back on the phone line for several minutes.

Noonan had to explain who he was to two separate police checkpoints, but now the hospital was in sight. He called ahead on his radio, told Covington that he was five minutes away, and learned that nothing had changed.

Clark and Chavez dismounted their vehicle fifty yards from the green trucks that had brought Team-1 to the site. Team-2 was now on its way, also in another green-painted British Army truck, with a police escort to speed their way through the traffic. Chavez was holding a collection of photographs of known PIRA terrorists that he'd snatched off the intelligence desk. The hard part, Ding found, was to keep his hands from shaking—whether from fear or rage, he couldn't tell—and it required all the training he'd ever had to keep his mind on business rather than worrying about his wife and mother-in-law . . . and his unborn son. Only by looking down at the photos instead of up at the country was this possible, for in his hands he had faces to seek and kill, but the green grass around the hospital was merely empty landscape where there was danger. At times like this, the manly thing was to suck it in and pretend that you had it under control, but Chavez was learning now that while being brave for yourself was easy enough, facing danger to someone you loved was a very different situation, one in which courage didn't matter a damn, and all you could do was . . . nothing. You were a spectator, and nothing more, watching a contest of sorts in which lives dear to you were at grave risk, but in which you could not participate. All he could do was watch, and trust to the professionalism of Covington's Team-1. One part of his mind told him that Peter and his boys were as good as he and his own people were, and that if a rescue could be done, they would surely do it—but that wasn't the same as being there yourself, taking charge, and making the right things happen yourself. Sometime later today, Chavez thought, he would again hold his wife in his arms —or she and their unborn child would be taken forever from him. His hands gripped the computer-generated photographs, bending the edges, and his only comfort was in the weight of the pistol that hung

in the hip-holster tucked into the waistband of his trousers. It was a familiar feeling, but one, his mind told him, which was useless at the moment, and likely to remain so.

"So, what do I call you?" Bellow asked, when the phone line became active again.

"You can call me Timothy."

"Okay," the doctor said agreeably, "I'm Paul."

"You're an American," O'Neil observed.

"That's right. And so are the hostages you're holding, Dr. Chavez and Mrs. Clark."

"So?"

"So, I thought your enemies were the Brits, not us Americans. You know that those two ladies are mother and daughter, don't you?" He had to know it, Bellow knew, and for that reason he could point it out as though giving away information.

"Yes," the voice replied.

"Did you know that they are both Catholic, just like you?"

"No."

"Well, they are," Bellow assured him. "You can ask. Mrs. Clark's maiden name is O'Toole, as a matter of fact. She is an Irish-Catholic American citizen. What makes her your enemy, Timothy?"

"She's—her husband is—I mean—"

"He's also an Irish-Catholic American, and to the best of my knowledge he has never taken action of any kind against you or the people in your organization. That's why I have trouble understanding why you are threatening their lives."

"Her husband is the head of this Rainbow mob, and they kill people for the British government."

"No, actually, they do not. Rainbow is actually a NATO establishment. The last time we went out, we had to rescue thirty children. I was there, too. The people holding them murdered one of the kids, a little Dutch girl named Anna. She was dying, Timothy. She had cancer, but those people weren't very patient about it. One of them shot her in the back and killed her. You've probably seen it on TV. Not the sort of thing a religious person would do—not the sort of thing a Catholic would do, murdering a little girl like that. And Dr. Chavez is pregnant. I'm sure you can see that. If you harm her, what about her child? Not just a murder if you do that, Timothy. You're also aborting her unborn child. I know what the Catholic Church says about that. So do you. So does the government in the Republic of Ireland. Please, Timothy, will you please think about what you've threatened to do? These are real people, not abstractions, and the baby in Dr. Chavez's womb is also a real person, too. Anyway, I have

something to tell Mr. Casey. Have you found him yet?" the psychiatrist asked.

"I—no, no, he can't come to the phone now."

"Okay, I have to go now. If I call this number again, will you be there to answer it?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll call back when I have some news for you." Bellow punched the kill switch. "Good news. Different person, younger, not as sure of himself. I have something I can use on this one. He really *is* Catholic, or at least he thinks of himself that way. That means conscience and rules. I can work on this one," he concluded soberly but with confidence.

"But where is the other one?" Stanley asked. "Unless . . ."

"Huh?" Tawney asked.

"Unless he's not in there at all."

"Huh?" the doctor asked.

"Unless he's not bloody there. He called *us* before, but he hasn't talked to us in quite a while. Shouldn't he be doing so?"

Bellow nodded. "I would have expected that, yes."

"But Noonan has chopped the cell phones," Stanley pointed out. He switched on his tactical radio. "This is Command. Look around for someone trying to use a cellular telephone. We may have two groups of subjects here. Acknowledge."

"Command, this is Covington, roger."

"Fuck!" Malloy snarled in his circling helicopter.

"Take her down some?" Harrison asked.

The Marine shook his head. "No, up here they might not even notice us. Let's stay covert for a while."

"What the hell?" Chavez observed, looking at his father-in-law.

"Inside-outside?" John speculated.

Grady was at the point of losing his temper. He'd tried a total of seven times to make a call with his cell phone, only to find the same infuriating fast-busy response. He had a virtually perfect tactical situation, but lacked the ability to coordinate his teams. There they were, those Rainbow people, standing in a bunch not a hundred meters from the two Volvo trucks. This couldn't last, though. The local police would surely start securing the area soon. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty, perhaps as many as two hundred people now, standing in little knots within three hundred meters of the hospital. The time was right. The targets were there.

Noonan crested the hill and started driving down to where the team was, wondering what the hell he'd be able to do. Bugging the building, his usual job, meant getting close. But it was broad daylight, and getting close would be a mother of a task, probably beyond the range of possibility until nightfall. Well, at least he'd taken care of his primary function. He'd denied the enemy the chance to use cell phones—if they'd tried to, which he didn't know. He slowed the car for his approach, and saw Peter Covington in the distance conferring with his black-clad shooters.

Chavez and Clark were doing much the same thing, standing still a few yards from Clark's official car.

"The perimeter needs firming up," Ding said. Where had all these vehicles come from? Probably people who happened to be in the area when the shooting started. There was the usual goddamned TV van, its satellite dish erected, and what appeared to be a reporter speaking in front of a handheld Minicam. So, Chavez thought, now the danger to his family was a goddamned spectator sport.

Grady had to make a decision, and he had to make it now. If he wanted to achieve his goal and make his escape, it had to be now. His gun-containing parcel was sitting on the ground next to his rental car. He left it on the ground with Roddy Sands and walked to the farthest of the Volvo commercial trucks.

"Sean," a voice called from the cargo area, "the bloody phones don't work."

"I know. We begin in five minutes. Watch for the others, and then carry on as planned."

"Okay, Sean," the voice replied. To punctuate it, Grady heard the cocking of the weapons inside as he walked to the next, delivering the same message. Then the third. There were three men in each of the trucks. The canvas covers over the cargo areas had holes cut in them, like the battlements of a castle, and those inside had opened them slightly and were now looking at the soldiers less than a hundred meters away. Grady made his way back to his Jaguar. When he got there he checked his watch. He looked at Roddy Sands and nodded.

Team-2's truck was starting down the hill to the hospital. Noonan's car was directly in front of it now.

Popov was watching the whole area with his binoculars. A third military truck came into view. He looked at it and saw more men

sitting in the back, probably reinforcements for the people already outside the hospital. He returned his attention to the area that already had soldiers. Closer examination showed . . . was that John Clark? he wondered. Standing away from the others. Well, if his wife were a hostage now, that made sense to let another—he had to have a second-in-command for his organization—command the operation. So, he'd just be standing there now, looking tense in his suit.

"Excuse me." Popov turned to see a reporter and a cameraman, and closed his eyes in a silent curse.

"Yes?"

"Could you give us your impressions of what is happening here? First of all, your name, and what causes you to be here."

"Well, I—my name—my name is Jack Smith," Popov said, in his best London accent. "And I was out here in the country—birding, you see. I was out here to enjoy nature, it's a nice day, you see, and—"

"Mr. Smith, have you any idea what is happening down there?"

"No, no, not really." He didn't take his eyes away from the binoculars, not wanting to give them a look at his face. *Nichevo!* There was Sean Grady, standing with Roddy Sands. Had he believed in God, he would have invoked His name at that moment, seeing what they were doing, and knowing exactly what they were thinking in this flashpoint in time.

Grady bent down and opened his parcel, removing the AKMS assault-rifle from it. Then he slapped in the magazine, extended the folding stock, and in one smooth motion stood to straight and brought it to his shoulder. A second later he took aim and fired into the group of black-clad soldiers. A second after that, the men in the trucks did the same.

There was no warning at all. Bullets hit the side of the truck behind which they'd been sheltering, but before Team-1 had the time to react, the bullets came in on their bodies. Four men dropped in the first two seconds. By that time, the rest had jumped away and down, their eyes looking around for the source of the fire.

Noonan saw them crumple, and it took a second or so of shock for him to realize what was happening. Then he spoke into his tactical radio: "Warning, warning, Team-1 is under fire from the rear!" At the same time his eyes were searching for the source—it had to be right there, in that big truck. The FBI agent floored his accelerator and dashed that way, his right hand reaching for his pistol.

Master Chief Mike Chin was down with a bullet in each upper leg. The suddenness only made the pain worse. He'd been totally unprepared for this, and the pain paralyzed him for several seconds, until training reasserted itself, and he tried to crawl to cover. "Chin is hit, Chin is hit," he gasped over the radio, then turned to see another Team-1 member down, blood gushing from the side of his head.

Sergeant Houston's head snapped off his scope, and turned right with the sudden and unexpected noise of automatic-weapons fire. *What the hell?* He saw what appeared to be the muzzle of a rifle sticking out the side of one of the trucks, and he swung his rifle up and off the ground to the right to try to acquire a target.

Roddy Sands saw the movement. The sniper was where he remembered, but covered as he was in his camouflage blanket, it was hard to track in on him. The movement fixed that, and the shot was only about a hundred fifty meters. Holding low and left, he pulled the trigger and held it down, walking his rounds through the shape on the side of the hill, firing long, then pulling back down to hit at it again.

Houston got one round off, but it went wild as a bullet penetrated his right shoulder, blasting right through his body armor, which was sufficient to stop a pistol round but not a bullet from a rifle. Neither courage nor muscle strength could make broken bones work. The impact made his body collapse, and a second later, Houston knew that his right arm would not work at all. On instinct he rolled to his left, while his left hand tried to reach across his body for his service pistol, while he announced over the radio that he was hit as well.

It was easier for Fred Franklin. Too far away for easy fire from one of the terrorists' weapons, he was also well concealed under his blanket. It took him a few seconds to realize what was going on, but the screams and groans over his radio earpiece told him that some team members had been badly hurt. He swept his scope sight over the area, and saw one gun muzzle sticking out the side of a truck. Franklin flipped off his safety, took aim, and loosed his first .50-caliber round of the fight. The muzzle blast of his own weapon shattered the local silence. The big MacMillan sniper rifle fired the same cartridge as the .50-caliber heavy machine gun, sending a two-ounce bullet off at 2,700 feet per second, covering the distance in less than a third of a second and drilling a half-inch hole into the soft side of the truck, but there was no telling if it hit a target or not. He swept the rifle left, looking for another target. He passed over another big truck, and saw

the holes in the cover, but nothing inside of them. More to the left—there, there was a guy holding a rifle and firing—off to where Sam was. Sergeant First Class Fred Franklin worked his bolt, loaded a second round, and took careful aim.

Roddy Sands was sure he'd hit his target, and was now trying to kill it. To his left, Sean was already back in his car, starting it for the getaway that had to begin in less than two minutes.

Grady heard the engine catch and turned to look back at his most trusted subordinate. He'd just gotten all the way around when the bullet hit, just at the base of Sands's skull. The huge .50 bullet exploded the head like a can of soup, and for all his experience as a terrorist, Grady had never seen anything like it. It seemed that only the jaw remained, as the body fell out of view, and Team-1 got its first kill of the day.

Noonan stopped his car inches from the third of the trucks. He dove out the right-side driver's door, and heard the distinctive chatter of Kalashnikov-type weapons. Those had to be enemies, and they had to be close. He held his Beretta pistol in both hands, looked for a second at the back of the truck and wondered how to—yes! There was a ladder-handle fixture on the rear door. He slipped a booted foot into it and climbed up, finding a canvas cover roped into place. He forced his pistol into his waistband and withdrew his K-Bar combat knife, slashing at the rope loops, getting a corner free. He lifted it with his left hand, looked inside and saw three men, facing left and doing aimed fire with their weapons. Okay. It never occurred to him to say or shout anything to them. Leaning in, his left hand holding the canvas clear, he aimed with his right hand. The first round was double-action, and his finger pulled the trigger slowly, and the head nearest to him snapped to its right, and the body fell. The others were too distracted by the noise of their own weapons to hear the report of the pistol. Noonan instantly adjusted his grip on the pistol and fired off a second round into the next head. The third man felt the body hit his, and turned to look. The brown eyes went wide. He jerked away from the side of the truck and brought his rifle to his left, but not quickly enough. Noonan fired two rounds into the chest, then brought his pistol down from recoil and fired his third right through the man's nose. It exited through his brain stem, by which time the man was dead. Noonan looked hard at all three targets, and, sure they were dead, jumped back off the truck and headed forward to the next. He paused to slap in a fresh magazine, while a distant part of his mind remarked on the fact that Timothy Noonan was on autopilot, moving almost without conscious thought.

Grady floored his car, hitting the horn as he did so. That was the signal for the others to get clear. That included the men inside the hospital, whom he'd been unable to alert with his cell phone.

"Jesus Christ!" O'Neil announced when the first rounds were fired. "Why the bloody hell didn't he—"

"Too late to worry, Timmy," Sam Barry told him, waving to his brother and running for the door. Jimmy Carr was there, and the final member of the inside team joined up ten seconds later, emerging from the door to the fire stairs.

"Time to go, lads," O'Neil told them. He looked at the two main hostages and thought to wave to them, but the pregnant one would only slow them down, and there were thirty meters to his van. The plan had come apart, though he didn't know why, and it was time to get the hell out of here.

The third military truck stopped a few yards behind Noonan's personal car. Eddie Price jumped out first, his MP-10 up in his hands, then crouched, looking around to identify the noise. Whatever it was, it was happening too bloody fast, and there was no plan. He'd been trained for this as an ordinary infantryman, but that had been twenty years ago. Now he was a special-operations soldier, and supposed to know every step before he took it. Mike Pierce came down next to him.

"What the fuck's happening, Eddie?"

Just then, they saw Noonan jump down from the Volvo truck and swap out magazines on his pistol. The FBI agent saw them, and waved them forward.

"I suppose we follow him," Price said. Louis Loiselle appeared at Pierce's side and the two started off. Paddy Connolly caught up, reaching into his fanny pack for a flash-bang.

O'Neil and his four ran out the emergency-room entrance and made it all the way to their van without being spotted or engaged. He'd left the keys in, and had the vehicle moving before the others had a chance to close all the doors.

"Warning, warning," Franklin called over the radio. "We have bad guys in a brown van leaving the hospital, looks like four of them." Then he swiveled his rifle and took aim just aft of the left-front tire and fired.

The heavy bullet ripped through the fender as though it were a sheet

of newspaper, then slammed into the iron block of the six-cylinder engine. It penetrated one cylinder, causing the piston to jam instantly, stopping the engine just as fast. The van swerved left with the sudden loss of engine power, almost tipping over to the right, but then slamming down and righting itself.

O'Neil screamed a curse and tried to restart the engine at once, with no result at all. The starter motor couldn't turn the jammed crankshaft. O'Neil didn't know why, but this vehicle was fully dead, and he was stuck in the open.

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Franklin saw the result of his shot with some satisfaction and jacked in another round. This one was aimed at the driver's head. He centered his sight reticle and squeezed, but at the same moment the head moved, and the shot missed. That was something Fred Franklin had never done. He looked on in stunned surprise for a moment, then reloaded.

O'Neil was cut on the face by glass fragments. The bullet hadn't missed him by more than two inches, but the shock of it propelled him out of the driver's seat into the cargo area of the van. There he froze, without a clue as to what to do next.

Homer Johnston and Dieter Weber still had their rifles in the carrying cases, and since it didn't appear that either would have much chance to make use of them, right now they were moving with pistols only. In the rear of their team, they watched Eddie Price slash a hole in the rear cover of the second Volvo truck. Paddy Connolly pulled the pin on a flash-bang and tossed it inside. Two seconds later, the explosion of the pyro charge blew the canvas cover completely off the truck. Pierce and Loiselle jumped up, weapons ready in their hands, but the three men inside were stunned unconscious from the blast. Pierce jumped all the way in to disarm them, tossed their weapons clear of the truck, and kneeled over them.

In each of the three Volvo trucks, one of the armed men was also to be the driver. In the foremost of the three, this one was named Paul Murphy, and from the beginning he'd divided his time between shooting and watching Sean Grady's Jaguar. He saw that the car was moving and dropped his weapon to take the driver's seat and start the diesel engine. Looking up, he saw what had to be the body of Roddy

Sands—but it appeared to be headless. What had happened? Sean's right arm came out of the window, waving in a circling motion for the truck to follow. Murphy slipped the truck into gear and pulled off to follow. He turned left to see the brown van Tim O'Neil had driven stopped cold in the hospital parking lot. His first instinct was to go down there and pick his comrades up, but the turn would have been difficult, and Sean was still waving, and so he followed his leader. In the back, one of his shooters lifted the rear flap and looked to see the other trucks, his AKMS rifle in his hands, but neither was moving, and there were men in black clothing there—

—One of those was Sergeant Scotty McTyler, and he had his MP-10 up and aimed. He fired a three-round burst at the face in the distance, and had the satisfaction to see a puff of pink before it dropped out of sight.

"Command, McTyler, we have a truck leaving the area with subjects aboard!" McTyler loosed another few rounds, but without visible effect, and turned away, looking for something else to do.

Popov had never seen a battle before, but that was what he watched now. It seemed chaotic, with people darting around seemingly without purpose. The people in black—well, three were down at the truck from the initial gunfire, and others were moving, apparently in pursuit of the Jaguar, virtually identical with his, and the truck, now exiting the parking lot. Not three meters away, the TV reporter was speaking rapidly into his microphone, while his cameraman had his instrument locked on the events down the hill. Popov was sure it was exciting viewing for everybody in their sitting rooms. He was also sure that it was time for him to leave.

The Russian got back into his car, started the engine, and moved off, with a spray of gravel for the reporter in his wake.

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"I got 'em. Bear's got 'em," Malloy reported, lowering his collective control to drop down to a thousand feet or so, his aviator's eyes locked on the two moving vehicles. "Anybody in command of this disaster?" the Marine asked next.

"Mr. C?" Ding asked.

"Bear, this is Six. I am in command now." Clark and Chavez sprinted back to Clark's official car, where both jumped in, and the

driver, unbidden, started in pursuit. He was a corporal of military police in the British Army, and had never been part of the Rainbow team, which he'd always resented somewhat. But not now.

It wasn't much of a challenge. The Volvo truck was powerful, but no competition for the V-8 Jaguar racing up behind it.

Paul Murphy checked his mirror and was instantly confused. Coming up to join him was a Jaguar visually identical to the—he looked, yes, Sean was there, up in front of him. Then who was this? He turned to yell at the people in the back, but on looking, saw that one was down and clearly dead, a pool of blood sliding greasily across the steel floor of the truck. The other was just holding on.

"This is Price. Where is everyone? Where are the subjects?"

"Price, this is Rifle One-Two. I think we have one or more subjects in the brown van outside the hospital. I took the motor out with my rifle. They ain't going nowhere, Eddie."

"Okay." Price looked around. The local situation might even be under control or heading that way. He felt as though he'd been awakened by a tornado and was now looking at his wrecked farm and trying to make sense of what had taken place. One deep breath, and the responsibility of command asserted itself: "Connolly and Lincoln, go right. Tomlinson and Vega, down the hill to the left. Patterson, come with me. McTyler and Pierce, guard the prisoners. Weber and Johnston, get down to Team-1 and see how they are. *Move!"* he concluded.

"Price, this is Chavez," his radio announced next.

"Yes, Ding."

"What's the situation?"

"We have two or three prisoners, a van with an unknown number of subjects in it, and Christ knows what else. I am trying to find out now. Out." And that concluded the conversation.

"Game face, Domingo," Clark said, sitting in the left-front seat of the Jaguar.

"I fuckin' hear you, John!" Chavez snarled back.

"Corporal—Mole, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the driver said, without moving his eyes a millimeter.

"Okay, Corporal, get us up on his right side. We're going to shoot out his right-front tire. Let's try not to eat the fucking truck when that happens."

"Very good, sir" was the cool reply. "Here we go."

The Jag leaped forward, and in twenty seconds was alongside the

Volvo diesel truck. Clark and Chavez lowered their windows. They were doing over seventy miles per hour now, as they leaned out of their speeding automobile.

A hundred meters ahead, Sean Grady was in a state of rage and shock. What the devil had gone wrong? The first burst from his people's weapons had surely killed a number of his black-clad enemies, but after that—what? He'd formulated a good plan, and his people had executed it well at first—but the goddamned phones! What had gone wrong with those? That had ruined everything. But now things were back under some semblance of control. He was ten minutes away from the shopping area where he'd park and leave the car, disappear into the crowd of people, then walk to another parking lot, get in another rental car, and drive off to Liverpool for the ferry ride home. He would get out of this, and so would the lads in the truck behind him—he looked in the mirror. What the hell was that?

Corporal Mole had done well, first maneuvering to the truck's left, then slowing and darting to the right. That caught the driver by surprise.

In the backseat, Chavez saw the face of the man. Very fair-skinned and red-haired, a real Paddy, Domingo thought, extending his pistol and aiming at the right-front wheel.

"Now!" John called from the front seat. In that instant, their driver swerved to the left.

Paul Murphy saw the auto jump at him and instinctively swerved hard to avoid it. Then he heard gunfire.

Clark and Chavez fired several times each, and it was only a few feet of distance to the black rubber of the tire. Their bullets all hit home just outside the rim of the wheel, and the nearly-half-inch holes deflated the tire rapidly. Scarcely had the Jaguar pulled forward when the truck swerved back to the right. The driver tried to brake and slow, but that instinctive reaction only made things worse for him. The Volvo truck dipped to the right, and then the uneven braking made it worse still, and the right-side front-wheel rim dug into the pavement. This made the truck try to stop hard, and the body flipped over, landed on its right side, and slid forward at over sixty miles per hour. Strong as the body of the truck was, it hadn't been designed for this, and when the roll continued, the truck body started coming apart.

Corporal Mole cringed to see his rearview mirror filled with the sideways truck body, but it got no closer, and he swerved left to make sure it didn't overtake him. He allowed the car to slow now, watching the mirror as the Volvo truck rolled like a child's toy, shedding pieces

as it did so.

"Jesuchristo!" Ding gasped, turning to watch. What could only have been a human body was tossed clear, and he saw it slide up the blacktop and pinwheel slowly as it proceeded forward at the same speed as the wrecked truck.

"Stop the car!" Clark ordered.

Mole did better than that, coming to a stop, then backing up to within a few meters of the wrecked truck. Chavez jumped out first, pistol in both hands and advancing toward the vehicle. "Bear, this is Chavez, you there?"

"Bear copies," came the reply.

"See if you can get the car, will ya? This truck's history, man."

"Roger that, Bear is in pursuit."

"Colonel?" Sergeant Nance said over the intercom.

"Yeah?"

"You see how they did that?"

"Yeah—think you can do the same?" Malloy asked.

"Got my pistol, sir."

"Well, then it's air-to-mud time, people." The Marine dropped the collective again and brought the Night Hawk to a hundred feet over the road. He was behind and down-sun from the car he was following. Unless the bastard was looking out the sunroof, he had no way of knowing the chopper was there.

"Road sign!" Harrison called, pulling back on the cyclic to dodge over the highway sign telling of the next exit on the motorway.

"Okay, Harrison, you do the road. I do the car. Yank it hard if you have to, son."

"Roger that, Colonel."

"Okay, Sergeant Nance, here we go." Malloy checked his speed indicator. He was doing eighty-five in the right outside lane. The guy in the Jag was leaning on the pedal pretty hard, but the Night Hawk had a lot more available power. It was not unlike flying formation with another aircraft, though Malloy had never done it with a car before. He closed to about a hundred feet. "Right side, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." Nance slid the door back and knelt on the aluminum floor, his Beretta 9-mm in both hands. "Ready, Colonel. Let's do it!"

"Ready to tank," Malloy acknowledged, taking one more look at the road. Damn, it was like catching the refueling hose of a Herky Bird, but slower and a hell of a lot lower . . .

Grady bit his lip, seeing that the truck was no longer there, but behind him the road was clear, and ahead as well at the moment, and it was a mere five minutes to safety. He allowed himself a relaxing breath,

flexed his fingers on the wheel, and blessed the workers who'd built this fine fast car for him. Just then his peripheral vision caught something black on his left. He turned an inch to look—what the hell —

"Got him!" Nance said, seeing the driver through the leftrear passenger-door window and bringing his pistol up. He let it wait, while Colonel Malloy edged another few feet and then—

—resting his left arm on his knee, Nance thumbed back the hammer and fired. The gun jumped in his hand. He brought it down and kept pulling the trigger. It wasn't like on the range at all. He was jerking the gun badly despite his every effort to hold it steady, but on the fourth round, he saw his target jerk to the right.

The glass was shattering all around him. Grady didn't react well. He could have slammed on the brakes, and that would have caused the helicopter to overshoot, but the situation was too far outside anything he'd ever experienced. He actually tried to speed up, but the Jaguar didn't have all that much acceleration left. Then his left shoulder exploded in fire. Grady's upper chest cringed from nerve response. His right hand moved down, causing the car to swerve in that direction, right into the steel guardrail.

Malloy pulled on the collective, having seen at least one good hit. In seconds, the Night Hawk was at three hundred feet, and the Marine turned to the right and looked down to see a wrecked and smoking car stationary in the middle of the road.

"Down to collect him?" the copilot asked.

"Bet your sweet ass, son," Malloy told Harrison. Then he looked for his own flight bag. His Beretta was in there. Harrison handled the landing, bringing the Sikorsky to a rest fifty feet from the car. Malloy turned the lock on his seat-belt buckle and turned to exit the aircraft. Nance jumped out first, ducking under the turning rotor as he ran to the car's right side. Malloy was two seconds behind him.

"Careful, Sergeant!" Malloy screamed, slowing his advance on the left side. The window was gone except for a few shards still in the frame, and he could see the man inside, still breathing but not doing much else behind the deployed air bag. The far window was gone as well. Nance reached into it, found the handle and pulled it open. It turned out that the driver hadn't been using his seat belt. The body came out easily. And there on the backseat, Malloy saw, was a Russian-made rifle. The Marine pulled it out and safed it, before walking to the other side of the car.

"Shit," Nance said in no small amazement. "He's still alive!" How had he managed not to kill the bastard from twelve feet away? the sergeant wondered.

Back at the hospital, Timothy O'Neil was still in his van wondering what to do. He thought he knew what had happened to the engine. There was a three-quarter-inch hole in the window on the left-side door, and how it had managed to miss his head was something he didn't know. He saw that one of the Volvo trucks and Sean Grady's rented Jaguar were nowhere to be seen. Had Sean abandoned him and his men? It had happened too fast and totally without warning. Why hadn't Sean called to warn him of what he did? How had the plan come apart? But the answers to those questions were of less import than the fact that he was in a van, sitting in a parking lot, with enemies around him. That he had to change.

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"Lieber Gott," Weber said to himself, seeing the wounds. One Team-1 member was surely dead, having taken a round in the side of his head. Four others right here were hit, three of them in the chest. Weber knew first aid, but he didn't need to know much medicine to know that two of them needed immediate and expert attention. One of those was Alistair Stanley.

"This is Weber. We need medical help here at once!" he called over his tactical radio. "Rainbow Five is down!"

"Oh, shit," Homer Johnston said next to him. "You're not foolin', man. Command, this is Rifle Two-One, we need medics and we need them right the fuck now!"

Price heard all that. He was now thirty yards from the van, Sergeant Hank Patterson at his side, trying to approach without being seen. To his left he could see the imposing bulk of Julio Vega, along with Tomlinson. Off to the right he could see the face of Steve Lincoln. Paddy Connolly would be right with him.

"Team-2, this is Price. We have subjects in the van. I do not know if we have any inside the building. Vega and Tomlinson, get inside and check—and be bloody careful about it!"

"Vega here. Roger that, Eddie. Moving now."

Oso reversed directions, heading for the main entrance with Tomlinson in support, while the other four kept an eye on that damned little brown truck. The two sergeants approached the front

door slowly, peering around corners to look in the windows, and seeing only a small mob of very confused people. First Sergeant Vega poked a finger into his own chest and pointed inside. Tomlinson nodded. Now Vega moved quickly, entering the main lobby and sweeping his eyes all around. Two people screamed to see another man with a gun, despite the difference in his appearance. He held up his left hand.

"Easy, folks, I'm one of the good guys. Does anybody know where the bad guys are?" The answer to this question was mainly confusion, but two people pointed to the rear of the building, in the direction of the emergency room, and that made sense. Vega advanced to the double doors leading that way and called on his radio. "Lobby is clear. Come on, George." Then: "Command, this is Vega."

"Vega, this is Price."

"Hospital lobby is clear, Eddie. Got maybe twenty civilians here to get looked after, okay?"

"I have no people to send you, Oso. We're all busy out here. Weber reports we have some serious casualties."

"This is Franklin. I copy. I can move in now if you need me."

"Franklin, Price, move in to the west. I repeat, move in from the west."

"Franklin is moving in to the west," the rifleman replied. "Moving in now."

"His pitchin' career's over," Nance said, loading the body into the Night Hawk.

"Sure as hell, if he's a lefty. Back to the hospital, I guess," Malloy strapped into the chopper and took the controls. Inside a minute, they were airborne and heading east for the hospital. In the back, Nance strapped their prisoner down tight.

It was a hell of a mess. The driver was dead, Chavez saw, crushed between the large wheel and the back of his seat from when the truck had slammed into the guardrail, his eyes and mouth open, blood coming out the latter. The body tossed out of the back was dead as well, with two bullet holes in the face. That left a guy with two broken legs, and horrible scrapes on his face, whose pain was masked by his unconsciousness.

"Bear, this is Six," Clark said.

"Bear copies."

"Can you pick us up? We have an injured subject here, and I want to get back and see what the hell's going on."

"Wait one and I'll be there. Be advised we have a wounded subject aboard, too."

"Roger that, Bear." Clark looked west. The Night Hawk was in plain view, and he saw it alter course and come straight for his position.

Chavez and Mole pulled the body onto the roadway. It seemed horrible that his legs were at such obviously wrong angles, but he was a terrorist, and got little in the way of solicitude.

"Back into the hospital?" one of the men asked O'Neil.

"But then we're trapped!" Sam Barry objected.

"We're bloody trapped here!" Jimmy Carr pointed out. "We need to move. Now!"

O'Neil thought that made sense. "Okay, okay. I'll pull the door, and you lads run back to the entrance. Ready?" They nodded, cradling their weapons. "Now!" he rasped, pulling the sliding door open.

"Shit!" Price observed from a football field away. "Subjects running back into the hospital. I counted five."

"Confirm five of them," another voice agreed on the radio circuit.

Vega and Tomlinson were most of the way to the emergency room now, close enough to see the people there but not the double glass doors that led outside. They heard more screams. Vega took off his Kevlar helmet and peeked around the corner. Oh, shit, he thought, seeing one guy with an AKMS. That one was looking around inside the building—and behind him was half the body of someone looking outward. Oso nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand came down on his shoulder. He turned. It was Franklin, without his monster rifle, holding only his Beretta pistol.

"I just heard, five bad guys there?"

"That's what the man said," Vega confirmed. He waved Sergeant Tomlinson to the other side of the corridor. "You stick with me, Fred."

"Roge-o, Oso. Wish you had your M-60 now?"

"Fuckin' A, man." As good as the German MP-10 was, it felt like a toy in his hands.

Vega took another look. There was Ding's wife, standing now, looking over to where the bad guys were, pregnant as hell in her white coat. He and Chavez went back nearly ten years. He couldn't let anything happen to her. He backed off the corner and tried waving his arm at her.

Patsy Clark Chavez, M.D., saw the motion out of the corner of her eye

and turned to see a soldier dressed all in black. He was waving to her, and when she turned the waves beckoned her to him, which struck her as a good idea. Slowly, she started moving to her right.

"You, stop!" Jimmy Carr called angrily. Then he started moving toward her. Unseen to his left, Sergeant George Tomlinson edged his face and gun muzzle around the corner. Vega's waves merely grew more frantic, and Patsy kept moving his way. Carr stepped toward her, bringing his rifle up—

—as soon as he came into view, Tomlinson took aim, and seeing the weapon aimed at Ding's wife, he depressed the trigger gently, loosing a three-round burst.

The silence of it was somehow worse than the loudest noise. Patsy turned to look at the guy with the gun when his head exploded—but there was no noise other than the brushlike sound of a properly suppressed weapon, and the wet-mess noise of his destroyed cranium. The body—the face was sprayed away, and the back of his head erupted in a cloud of red—then it just fell straight down, and the loudest sound was the clatter of the rifle hitting the floor, loosed from the dead hands.

"Come here!" Vega shouted, and she did what she was told, ducking and running toward him.

Oso grabbed her arm and swung her around like a doll, knocking her off her feet and sending her sliding across the tile floor. Sergeant Franklin scooped her up and ran down the corridor, carrying her like a toy. In the main lobby he found the hospital security guard, and left her with him, then ran back.

"Franklin to Command. Dr. Chavez is safe. We got her to the main lobby. Get some people there, will ya? Let's get these fucking civilians evacuated fast, okay?"

"Price to Team. Where is everyone? Where are the subjects?"

"Price, this is Vega, we are down to four subjects. George just dropped one. They are in the emergency room. Mrs. Clark is probably still there. We hear noises, there are civilians in there. We have their escape route closed. I have Tomlinson and Franklin here. Fred's only got a pistol. Unknown number of hostages, but as far as I can tell we're down to four bad guys, over."

"I've got to get down there," Dr. Bellow said. He was badly shaken. People had been shot within a few feet of him. Alistair Stanley was down with a chest wound, and at least one other Rainbow trooper was dead, along with three additional wounded, one of those serious-looking.

"That way." Price pointed to the front of the hospital. A Team-1 member appeared, and headed that way as well. It was Geoff Bates,

one of Covington's shooters from the SAS, fully armed, though he hadn't taken so much as a single shot yet today. He and Bellow moved quickly.

Somehow Carr had died without notice. O'Neil turned and saw him there, his body like the stem for a huge red flower of blood on the dingy tile floor. It was only getting worse. He had four armed men, but he couldn't see around the corner twenty feet away, and surely there were armed SAS soldiers there, and he had no escape. He had eight other people nearby, and these he could use as hostages, perhaps, but the danger of that game was dramatically obvious. *No escape,* his mind told him, but his emotions said something else. He had weapons, and his enemies were nearby, and he was supposed to kill them, and if he had to die, he'd damned well die for The Cause, the idea to which he'd dedicated his life, the idea for which he'd told himself a thousand times he was willing to die. Well, here he was now, and death was close, not something to be considered in his bed, waiting for sleep to come, or drinking beer in a pub, discussing the loss of some dedicated comrades, the brave talk they all spoke when bravery wasn't needed. It all came down to this. Now danger was here, and it was time to see if his bravery was a thing of words or a thing of the belly, and his emotions wanted to show the whole bloody world that he was a man of his word and his beliefs . . . but part of him wanted to escape back to Ireland, and not die this day in an English hospital.

Sandy Clark watched him from fifteen feet away. He was a handsome man, and probably a brave one—for a criminal, her mind added. She remembered John telling her more than once that bravery was a far more common thing than cowardice, and that the reason for it was shame. People went into danger not alone, but with their friends, and you didn't want to appear weak in front of them, and so from the fear of cowardice came the most insane of acts, the successful ones later celebrated as great heroism. It had struck her as the worst sort of cynicism on John's part . . . and yet her husband was not a cynical man. Could it therefore be the truth?

In this case, it was a man in his early thirties, holding a weapon in his hands and looking as though he didn't have a friend in the world—

—but the mother in her told Sandy that her daughter was probably safe now, along with her grandchild. The dead one had called after her, but now he was messily dead on the hospital floor, and so Patsy had probably gotten away. That was the best information of the day, and she closed her eyes to whisper a prayer of thanks.

“Hey, Doc,” Vega said in greeting.

“Where are they?”

Vega pointed. “Around this corner. Four of them, we think. George dropped one for the count.”

“Talk to them yet?”

Oso shook his head. “No.”

“Okay.” Bellow took a deep breath. “This is Paul,” he called loudly. “Is Timothy there?”

“Yes,” came the reply.

“Are you okay?—not wounded or anything, I mean,” the psychiatrist asked.

O’Neil wiped some blood from his face—the glass fragments in the van had made some minor cuts. “We’re all fine. Who are you?”

“I’m a physician. My name is Paul Bellow. What’s yours?”

“Timothy will do for now.”

“Okay, fine. Timothy, uh, you need to think about your situation, okay?”

“I know what that is,” O’Neil responded, an edge on his voice.

Outside, things were gradually becoming organized. Ambulances were on the scene, plus medical orderlies from the British Army. The wounded were being moved now, to the base hospital at Hereford where surgeons were waiting to treat them, and coming in were SAS soldiers, thirty of them, to assist the Rainbow troopers. Colonel Malloy’s helicopter set down on the pad at the base, and the two prisoners were taken to the military hospital for treatment.

“Tim, you will not be getting away from here. I think you know that,” Bellow observed, in as gentle a voice as he could manage.

“I can kill hostages if you don’t let me leave,” O’Neil countered.

“Yes, you can do that, and then we can come in on you and try to stop that from happening, but in either case, you will not be getting away. But what do you gain by murdering people, Tim?”

“The freedom of my country!”

“That is happening already, isn’t it?” Bellow asked. “There are peace accords, Tim. And Tim, tell me, what country ever began on a foundation of the murder of innocent people? What will your countrymen think if you murder your hostages?”

“We are freedom fighters!”

“Okay, fine, you are revolutionary soldiers,” the doctor agreed. “But soldiers, real soldiers, don’t murder people. Okay, fine, earlier today you and your friends shot it out with soldiers, and that’s not murder.

But killing unarmed people *is* murder, Tim. I think you know that. Those people in there with you, are any of them armed? Do any of them wear uniforms?"

"So what? They are the enemy of my country!"

"What makes them enemies, Tim? Where they were born? Have any of them tried to hurt you? Have any of them hurt your country? Why don't you ask them?" he suggested next.

O'Neil shook his head. The purpose of this was to make him surrender. He knew that. He looked around at his comrades. It was hard for all of them to meet the eyes of the others. They were trapped, and all of them knew it. Their resistance was a thing of the mind rather than of arms, and all of their minds held doubts to which they had as yet not given voice, but the doubts were there, and they all knew it.

"We want a bus to take us away!"

"Take you away to where?" the doctor asked.

"Just get us the bloody bus!" O'Neil screamed.

"Okay, I can talk to people about that, but they have to know where the bus is going to, so that the police can clear the roads for you," Bellow observed reasonably. It was just a matter of time now. Tim—it would have been useful to know if he'd been truthful in giving out his real name, though Bellow was confident that he had indeed done that—wasn't talking about killing, hadn't actually threatened it, hadn't given a deadline or tossed out a body yet. He wasn't a killer, at least not a murderer. He thought of himself as a soldier, and that was different from a criminal, to terrorists a very important difference. He didn't fear death, though he did fear failure, and he feared almost as much being remembered as a killer of the innocent. To kill soldiers was one thing. To murder ordinary women and children was something else. It was an old story for terrorists. The most vulnerable part of any person was his self-image. Those who cared what others thought of them, those who looked in mirrors when they shaved, those people could be worked. It was just a matter of time. They were different from the real fanatics. You could wear this sort down. "Oh, Tim?"

"Yes?"

"Could you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Could you let me make sure the hostages are okay? That's something I have to do to keep my boss happy. Can I come around to see?"

O'Neil hesitated.

"Tim, come on, okay? You have the things you have to do, and I have the things I have to do, okay? I'm a physician. I don't carry a gun

or anything. You have nothing to be afraid of." Telling them that they had nothing to fear, and thus suggesting that they were unnecessarily afraid, was usually a good card to play. There followed the usual hesitation, confirming that they were indeed afraid—and that meant Tim was rational, and that was good news for Rainbow's psychiatrist.

"No, Tim, don't!" Peter Barry urged. "Give them nothing."

"But how will we get out of here, get the bus, if we don't cooperate on something?" O'Neil looked around at the other three. Sam Barry nodded. So did Dan McCorley.

"All right," O'Neil called. "Come back to us."

"Thank you," Bellow called. He looked at Vega, the senior soldier present.

"Watch your ass, doc," the first sergeant suggested. To go unarmed into the lair of armed bad guys was, he thought, not very bright. He'd never thought that the doc had such stuff in him.

"Always," Paul Bellow assured him. Then he took a deep breath and walked the ten feet to the corner, and turned, disappearing from the view of the Rainbow troopers.

It always struck Bellow as strange, to the point of being comical, that the difference between safety and danger was a distance of a few feet and the turning of one corner. Yet he looked up with genuine interest. He'd rarely met a criminal under these circumstances. So much the better that they were armed and he was not. They would need the comfortable feelings that came with the perception of power to balance the fact that, armed or not, they were in a cage from which there was no escape.

"You're hurt," Bellow said on seeing Timothy's face.

"It's nothing, just a few scratches."

"Why not have somebody work on it for you?"

"It's nothing," Tim O'Neil said again.

"Okay, it's your face," Bellow said, looking and counting four of them, all armed with the same sort of weapon, AKMS, his memory told him. Only then did he count the hostages. He recognized Sandy Clark. There were seven others, all very frightened, by the look of them, but that was to be expected. "So, what exactly do you want?"

"We want a bus, and we want it quickly," O'Neil replied.

"Okay, I can work on that, but it'll take time to get things organized, and we'll need something in return."

"What's that?" Timothy asked.

"Some hostages to be released," the psychiatrist answered.

"No, we only have eight."

"Look, Tim, when I deal with the people I have to go to—to get the bus you want, okay?—I have to offer them something, or why else should they give me anything to give you?" Bellow asked reasonably. "It's how the game is played, Tim. The game has rules. Come on, you know that. You trade some of what you have for some of what you want."

"So?"

"So, as a sign of good faith, you give me a couple hostages—women and kids, usually, because that looks better." Bellow looked again. Four women, four men. It would be good to get Sandy Clark out.

"And then?"

"And then I tell my superiors that you want a bus and that you've shown good faith. I have to represent you to them, right?"

"Ah, and you're on our side?" another man asked. Bellow looked and saw that he was a twin, with a brother standing only a few feet away. Twin terrorists. Wasn't that interesting?

"No, I won't say that. Look, I am not going to insult your intelligence. You people know the fix you're in. But if you want to get things, you have to deal for them. That's the rule, and it's a rule I didn't make. I have to be the go-between. That means I represent you to my bosses, and I represent my bosses to you. If you need time to think it over, fine, I won't be far away, but the faster you move on things, the faster I can move. I need you guys to think about that, okay?"

"Get the bus," Timothy said.

"In return for what?" Paul asked.

"Two women." O'Neil turned. "That one and that one."

"Can they come out with me?" Bellow saw that Timothy had actually indicated Sandy Clark. This kid, O'Neil, was overwhelmed by the circumstances, and that was probably good, too.

"Yes, but get us that bloody bus!"

"I'll do my best," Bellow promised, gesturing at the two women to follow him back around the corner.

"Welcome back, Doc," Vega said quietly. "Hey, great!" he added on seeing the two women. "Howdy, Mrs. Clark. I'm Julio Vega."

"Mom!" Patsy Chavez ran from her place of safety and embraced her mother. Then a pair of recently arrived SAS troopers took all of the women away.

"Vega to Command," Oso called.

"Price to Vega."

"Tell Six his wife and daughter are both safe."

• • •

John was back in a truck, heading to the hospital to take charge of the operation, with Domingo Chavez next to him. Both heard the radio call. In both cases, the heads dropped for a brief moment of relief. But there were six more hostages.

"Okay, this is Clark, what's happening now?"

In the hospital, Vega gave his radio set to Dr. Bellow.

"John? This is Paul."

"Yeah, Doc, what's happening now?"

"Give me a couple hours and I can give them to you, John. They know they're trapped. It's just a matter of talking them through. There's four of them now, all in their thirties, all armed. They now have six hostages. But I've spoken with their leader, and I can work with this kid, John."

"Okay, Doc, we'll be there in ten minutes. What are they asking for?"

"The usual," Bellow answered. "They want a bus to somewhere."

John thought about that. Make them come outside, and he had riflemen to handle the problem. Four shots, child's play. "Do we deliver?"

"Not yet. We'll let this one simmer a little."

"Okay, Doc, that's your call. When I get there, you can fill me in more. See you soon. Out."

"Okay." Bellow handed the radio back to First Sergeant Vega. This soldier had a diagram of the ground floor pinned to the wall.

"The hostages are here," Bellow said. "Subjects are here and here. Two of them are twins, by the way, all male Caucs in their thirties, all carrying that folding-stock version of the AK-47."

Vega nodded. " 'Kay. If we have to move on them . . ."

"You won't, at least I don't think so. Their leader isn't a murderer, well, he doesn't want to be."

"You say so, Doc," Vega observed dubiously. But the good news was that they could flip a handful of flash-bangs around the corner and move in right behind them, bagging all four of the fuckers . . . but at the risk of losing a hostage, which was to be avoided if possible. Oso hadn't appreciated how ballsy this doctor was, walking up to four armed bad guys and talking to them—and getting Mrs. Clark released just like that. Damn. He turned to look at the six SAS guys who'd arrived, dressed in black like his people, and ready to rock if it came to that. Paddy Connolly was outside the building with his bag of tricks. The position was isolated, and the situation was pretty much

under control. For the first time in an hour, First Sergeant Vega was allowing himself to relax a little.

"Well, hello, Sean," Bill Tawney said, recognizing the face at the Hereford base hospital. "Having a difficult day, are we?"

Grady's shoulder had been immobilized and would require surgery. It turned out that he'd taken a pair of 9-mm bullets in it, one of which had shattered the top of his left humerus, the long bone of the upper arm. It was a painful injury despite the medication given to him ten minutes before. His face turned to see an Englishman in a tie. Grady naturally enough took him for a policeman, and didn't say anything.

"You picked the wrong patch to play in today, my boy," Tawney said next. "For your information, you are now in the Hereford base military hospital. We will talk later, Sean." For the moment, an orthopedic surgeon had work to do, to repair the injured arm. Tawney watched an army nurse medicate him for the coming procedure. Then he went to a different room to speak to the one rescued from the wrecked truck.

This would be a merry day for all involved, the "Six" man thought. The motorway was closed with the two car smashes, and there were enough police constables about to blacken the landscape with their uniforms, plus the SAS and Rainbow people. Soon to be added were a joint mob of "Five" and "Six" people en route from London, all of whom would be claiming jurisdiction, and that would be quite a mess, since there was a written agreement between the U.S. and U.K. governments on the status of Rainbow, which hadn't been drafted with this situation in mind, but which guaranteed that the CIA Station Chief London would soon be here as well to officiate. Tawney figured he'd be the ringmaster for this particular circus—and that maybe a whip, chair, and pistol might be needed.

Tawney tempered his good humor with the knowledge that two Rainbow troopers were dead, with four more wounded and being treated in this same hospital. People he vaguely knew, whose faces had been familiar, two of which he'd never see again, but the profit of that was Sean Grady, one of the most extreme PIRA members, now beginning what would surely be a lifetime of custody by Her Majesty's Government. He would have a wealth of good information, and his job would be to start extracting it.

"Where's the bloody bus?"

"Tim, I've talked to my superiors, and they're thinking about it."

"What's to think about?" O'Neil demanded.

"You know the answer to that, Tim. We're dealing with government bureaucrats, and they never take action without covering their own

backsides first."

"Paul, I have six hostages here and I can—"

"Yes, you can, but you really can't, can you? Timothy, if you do *that,* then the soldiers outside come storming in here, and that ends the situation, and you will be remembered forever as a killer of innocent people, a murderer. You want that, Tim? Do you really want that?" Bellow paused. "What about your families? Hell, what about how your political movement is perceived? Killing these people is a hard thing to justify, isn't it? You're not Muslim extremists, are you? You're Christians, remember? Christians aren't supposed to do things like that. Anyway, that threat is useful as a threat, but it's not very useful as a tool. You can't do that, Tim. It would only result in your death and your political damnation. Oh, by the way, we have Sean Grady in custody," Bellow added, with careful timing.

"What?" That, he saw, shook Timothy.

"He was captured trying to escape. He was shot in the process, but he'll survive. They're operating on him right now."

It was like pricking a large balloon, the psychiatrist saw. He'd just let some air out of his antagonist. This was how it was done, a little at a time. Too fast and he might react violently, but wear them down bit by bit, and they were yours. Bellow had written a book on the subject. First establish physical control, which meant containment. Then establish information control. Then feed them information, bit by precious bit, in a manner as carefully orchestrated as a Broadway musical. Then you had them.

"You will release Sean to us. He goes on the bus with us!"

"Timothy, he's on an operating table right now, and he's going to be there for hours. If they even attempted to move him now, the results could be lethal—they could kill the man, Tim. So, much as you might want it, that's just not possible. It can't happen. I'm sorry about that, but nobody can change it."

His leader was a prisoner now? Tim O'Neil thought. Sean was captured? Strangely that seemed worse than his own situation. Even if he were in prison, Sean might come up with a way of freeing him, but with Sean on the Isle of Wight . . . all was lost, wasn't it? But—

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Tim, in a situation like this, I can't lie. I'd just screw up. It's too hard to be a good liar, and if you caught me in a lie, you'd never believe me again, and that would end my usefulness to my bosses and to you, too, wouldn't it?" Again the voice of quiet reason.

"You said you're a doctor?"

"That's right." Bellow nodded.

"Where do you practice?"

"Mainly here now, but I did my residency at Harvard. I've worked

at four different places, and taught some."

"So, your job is to get people like me to surrender, isn't it?" Anger, finally, at the obvious.

Bellow shook his head. "No, I think of my job as keeping people alive. I'm a physician, Tim. I am not allowed to kill people or to help others to kill people. I swore an oath on that one a long time ago. You have guns. Other people around that corner have guns. I don't want any of you to get killed. There's been enough of that today, hasn't there? Tim, do you enjoy killing people?"

"Why—no, of course not, who does?"

"Well, some do," Bellow told him, deciding to build up his ego a little. "We call them sociopathic personalities, but you're not one of them. You're a soldier. You fight for something you believe in. So do the people back there." Bellow waved to where the Rainbow people were. "They respect you, and I hope you respect them. Soldiers don't murder people. Criminals do that, and a soldier isn't a criminal." In addition to being true, this was an important thought to communicate to his interlocutor. All the more so because a terrorist was also a romantic, and to be considered a common criminal was psychologically very wounding to them. He'd just built up their self-images in order to steer them away from something he didn't want them to do. They were soldiers, not criminals, and they had to act like soldiers, not criminals.

"Dr. Bellow?" a voice called from around the corner. "Phone call, sir."

"Tim, can I go get it?" Always ask permission to do something. Give them the illusion of being in command of the situation.

"Yeah." O'Neil waved him away. Bellow walked back to where the soldiers were.

He saw John Clark standing there. Together they walked fifty feet into another part of the hospital.

"Thanks for getting my wife and little girl out, Paul."

Bellow shrugged. "It was mainly luck. He's a little overwhelmed by all this, and he's not thinking very well. They want a bus."

"You told me before," Clark reminded him. "Do we give it to 'em?"

"We won't have to do that. I'm in a poker game, John, and I'm holding a straight flush. Unless something screws up really bad, we have this one under control."

"Noonan's outside, and he has a mike on the window. I listened in on the last part. Pretty good, doctor."

"Thanks." Bellow rubbed his face. The tension was real for him, but he could only show it here. In with Timothy he had to be cool as ice, like a friendly and respected teacher. "What's the story on the other prisoners?"

"No change. The Grady guy is being operated on—it'll take a few hours, they say. The other one's unconscious still, and we don't have a name or ID on him anyway."

"Grady's the leader?"

"We think so, that's what the intel tells us."

"So he can tell us a lot. You want me there when he comes out of the OR," Paul told Rainbow Six.

"You need to finish up here first."

"I know. I'm going back." Clark patted him on the shoulder and Bellow walked back to see the terrorists.

"Well?" Timothy asked.

"Well, they haven't decided on the bus yet. Sorry," Bellow added in a downcast voice. "I thought I had them convinced, but they can't get their asses in gear."

"You tell them that if they don't, we'll—"

"No, you won't, Tim. You know that. I know that. *They* know that."

"Then why send the bus?" O'Neil asked, close to losing control now.

"Because *I* told them that you're serious, and they have to take your threat seriously. If they don't believe you'll do it, they have to remember that you might, and if you do, then *they* look bad to their bosses." Timothy shook his head at that convoluted logic, looking more puzzled than angry now. "Trust me," Paul Bellow went on. "I've done this before, and I know how it works. It's easier negotiating with soldiers like you than with those damned bureaucrats. People like you can make decisions. People like that run away from doing it. They don't care much about getting people killed, but they do care about looking bad in the newspapers."

Then something good happened. Tim reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. A sure sign of stress and an attempt to control it.

"Hazardous to your health, boy," Clark observed, looking at the TV picture Noonan had established. The assault plan was completely ready. Connolly had line charges set on the windows, both to open an entry path and to distract the terrorists. Vega, Tomlinson, and Bates, from Team-1, would toss flash-bangs at the same time and dart into the room to take the bad guys down with aimed fire. The only downside to that, as always, was that one of them could turn and hose the hostages as his last conscious act, or even by accident, which was just as lethal. From the sound of it, Bellow was doing okay. If these subjects had any brains at all, they'd know it was time to call it a day, but John reminded himself that he'd never contemplated life in prison before, at least not this immediately, and he imagined it wasn't a fun thought. He now had a surfeit of soldierly talent at his disposal. The

SAS guys who'd arrived had chopped to his operational command, though their own colonel had come as well to kibitz in the hospital's main lobby.

"Tough day for all of us, isn't it, Tim?" the psychiatrist asked.

"Could have been a better one," Timothy O'Neil agreed.

"You know how this one will end, don't you?" Bellow offered, like a nice fly to a brook trout, wondering if he'd rise to it.

"Yes, doctor, I do." He paused. "I haven't even fired my rifle today. I haven't killed anyone. Jimmy did," he went on, gesturing to the body on the floor, "but not any of us."

Bingo! Bellow thought. "That counts for something, Tim. As a matter of fact, it counts for a lot. You know, the war will be over soon. They're going to make peace finally, and when that happens, well, there's going to be an amnesty for most of the fighters. So you have some hope. You all do," Paul told the other three, who were watching and listening . . . and wavering, as their leader was. They had to know that all was lost. Surrounded, their leader captured, this could only end in one of two ways, with their deaths or their imprisonment. Escape was not a practical possibility, and they knew that the attempt to move their hostages to a bus would only expose them to certain death in a new and different way.

"Tim?"

"Yes?" He looked up from his smoke.

"If you set your weapons down on the floor, you have my word that you will not be hurt in any way."

"And go to prison?" Defiance and anger in the reply.

"Timothy, you can get out of prison someday. You cannot get out of *death.* Please think about that. For God's sake, I'm a physician," Bellow reminded him. "I don't like seeing people die."

Timothy O'Neil turned to look at his comrades. All eyes were downcast. Even the Barry twins showed no particular defiance.

"Guys, if you haven't hurt anyone today, then, yes, you will go to prison, but someday you'll have a good chance to get out when the amnesty is promulgated. Otherwise, you die for nothing at all. Not for your country. They don't make heroes out of people who kill civilians," he reminded them once again. Keep repeating, Bellow thought. Keep drumming it in. "Killing soldiers, yes, that's something soldiers do, but not murdering innocent people. You will die for nothing at all—or you will live, and be free again someday. It's up to you, guys. You have the guns. But there isn't going to be a bus. You will not escape, and you have six people you can kill, sure, but what does that get for you, except a trip to hell? Call it a day, Timothy," he concluded, wondering if some Catholic nun in grade school had

addressed him that way.

It wasn't quite that easy for Tim O'Neil. The idea of imprisonment in a cage with common criminals, having his family come to visit him there like an animal in a zoo, gave him chills . . . but he'd known that this was a possibility for years, and though he preferred the mental image of heroic death, a blazing gun in his hand firing at the enemies of his country, this American doctor had spoken the truth. There was no glory in murdering six English civilians. No songs would be written and sung about this exploit, no pints hoisted to his name in the pubs of Ulster . . . and what was left to him was inglorious death . . . life, in prison or not, was preferable to that sort of death.

Timothy Dennis O'Neil turned to look at his fellow PIRA soldiers and saw the same expression that they saw on his face. Without a spoken agreement, they all nodded. O'Neil safed his rifle and set it on the floor. The others did the same.

Bellow walked over to them to shake their hands.

"Six to Vega, move in now!" Clark called, seeing the picture on the small black-and-white screen.

Oso Vega moved quickly around the corner, his MP-10 up in his hands. There they were, standing with the doc. Tomlinson and Bates pushed them, not too roughly, against the wall. The former covered them while the latter patted them down. Seconds later, two uniformed policemen came in with handcuffs and, to the amazement of the soldiers, read them their legal rights. And just that easily and quietly, this day's fighting was over.

CHAPTER 29

RECOVERY

The day hadn't ended for Dr. Bellow. Without so much as a drink of water for his dry throat, he hopped into a green-painted British Army truck for the trip back to Hereford. It hadn't ended for those left behind either.

"Hey, baby," Ding said. He'd finally found his wife outside the hospital, surrounded by a ring of SAS troopers.

Patsy ran the ten steps to him and hugged her husband as tightly as her swollen abdomen allowed.

"You okay?"

She nodded, tears in her eyes. "You?"

"I'm fine. It was a little exciting there for a while—and we have some people down, but everything's under control now."

"One of them—somebody killed him, and—"

"I know. He was pointing a weapon at you, and that's why he got himself killed." Chavez reminded himself that he owed Sergeant Tomlinson a beer for that bit of shooting—in fact, he owed him a lot more than that, but in the community of warriors, this was how such debts were paid. But for now, just holding Patsy in his arms was as far as his thinking went. Tears welled up in his eyes. Ding blinked them away. That wasn't part of his *machismo* self-image. He wondered what damage this day's events might have had on his wife. She was a healer, not a killer, and yet she'd seen traumatic death so close at hand. Those IRA bastards! he thought. They'd invaded *his* life, and attacked noncombatants, and killed some of his team members. Somebody had fed them information on how to do it. Somewhere there was an information leak, a bad one, and finding it would be their first priority.

"How's the little guy?" Chavez asked his wife.

"Feels okay, Ding. Really. I'm okay," Patsy assured him.

"Okay, baby, I have to go do some things now. You're going home." He pointed to an SAS trooper and waved him over. "Take her back to the base, okay?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied. Together they walked her to the

parking lot. Sandy Clark was there with John, also hugging and holding hands, and the smart move seemed to be to take them both to John's quarters. An officer from the SAS volunteered, as did a sergeant to ride shotgun, which in this case was not a rhetorical phrase. As usual, once the horse had escaped from the barn, the door would be locked and guarded. But that was a universal human tendency, and in another minute both women were being driven off, a police escort with them as well.

"Where to, Mr. C?" Chavez asked.

"Our friends were taken to the base hospital. Paul is there already. He wants to interview Grady—the leader—when he comes out of surgery. I think we want to be there for that."

"Roger that, John. Let's get moving."

Popov was most of the way back to London, listening to his car radio. Whoever was briefing the media knew and talked too much. Then he heard that the leader of the IRA raiders had been captured, and Dmitriy's blood turned to ice. If they had Grady, then they had the man who knew who he was, knew his cover name, knew about the money transfer, knew too damned much. It wasn't time for panic, but it was damned sure time for action.

Popov checked his watch. The banks were still open. He lifted his cell phone and called Bern. In a minute, he had the correct bank officer on the line and gave him the account number, which the officer called up on his computer. Then Popov gave him the transaction code, and ordered the funds transferred into another account. The officer didn't even express his disappointment that so much money was being removed. Well, the bank had plenty of deposits, didn't it? The Russian was now richer by over five million dollars, but poorer in that the enemy might soon have his cover name and physical description. Popov had to get out of the country. He took the exit to Heathrow and ended up at Terminal Four. Ten minutes later, having returned his rental car, he went in and got the last first-class ticket on a British Airways flight to Chicago. He had to hurry to catch the flight, but made it aboard, where a pretty stewardess conveyed him to his seat, and soon thereafter the 747 left the gate.

"That was quite a mess," John Brightling observed, muting the TV in his office. Hereford would lead every TV newscast in the world.

"They were unlucky," Henriksen replied. "But those commandos are pretty good, and if you give them a break, they'll use it. What the hell, four or five of them went down. Nobody's ever pulled that off against a force like this one."

Brightling knew that Bill's heart was divided on the mission. He had

to have at least some sympathy with the people he'd helped to attack. "Fallout?"

"Well, if they got the leader alive, they're going to sweat him, but these IRA guys don't sing. I mean, they *never* sing. The only pipeline they could possibly have to us is Dmitriy, and he's a pro. He's moving right now, probably on an airplane to somewhere if I know him. He's got all sorts of false travel documents, credit cards, IDs. So, he's probably safe. John, the KGB knew how to train its people, trust me."

"If they should get him, would he talk?" Brightling asked.

"That's a risk. Yes, he might well spill his guts," Henriksen had to admit. "If he gets back, I'll debrief him on the hazards involved. . . ."

"Would it be a good idea to . . . well . . . eliminate him?"

The question embarrassed his boss, Henriksen saw, as he prepared a careful and honest answer: "Strictly speaking, yes, but there are dangers in that, John. He's a pro. He probably has a mailbox somewhere." Seeing Brightling's confusion, he explained, "You guard against the possibility of being killed by writing everything down and putting it in a safe place. If you don't access the box every month or so, the information inside gets distributed according to a prearranged plan. You have a lawyer do that for you. *That* is a big risk to us, okay? Dead or alive, he can burn us, and in this case, it's more dangerous if he's dead." Henriksen paused. "No, we want him alive—and under our control, John."

"Okay, you handle it, Bill." Brightling leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. They were too close now to run unnecessary risks. Okay, the Russian would be handled, put under wraps. It might even save Popov's life—hell, he thought, it *would* save his life, wouldn't it? He hoped that the Russian would be properly appreciative. Brightling had to be properly appreciative, too. This Rainbow bunch was crippled now, or at least badly hurt. It had to be. Popov had fulfilled two missions, he'd helped raise the world's consciousness about terrorism, and thus gotten Global Security its contract with the Sydney Olympics, and then he'd helped sting this new counterterror bunch, hopefully enough to take them out of play. The operation was now fully in place and awaited only the right time for activation.

So close, Brightling thought. It was probably normal to have the jitters at moments like this. Confidence was a thing of distance. The farther away you were, the easier it was to think yourself invincible, but then you got close and the dangers grew with their proximity. But that didn't change anything, did it? No, not really. The plan *was* perfect. They just had to execute it.

Sean Grady came out of surgery at just after eight in the evening, following three and a half hours on the table. The orthopod who'd

worked on him was first-rate, Bellow saw. The humerus was fixed in place with a cobalt-steel pin that would be permanent and large enough that in the unlikely event that Grady ever entered an international airport in the future, he'd probably set off the metal detector while stark naked. Luckily for him the brachial plexus had not been damaged by the two bullets that had entered his body, and so he'd suffer no permanent loss of use of his arm. The secondary damage to his chest was minor. He'd recover fully, the British Army surgeon concluded, and so could enjoy full physical health during the lifelong prison term that surely awaited him.

The surgery had been performed under full general anesthesia, of course, using nitrous oxide, just as in American hospitals, coupled with the lingering effects of the barbiturates that had been used to begin his sedation. Bellow sat by the bed in the hospital's recovery room, watching the bio-monitors and waiting for him to awaken. It would not be an event so much as a process, probably a lengthy one.

There were police around now, both in uniform and out, watching with him. Clark and Chavez were there, too, standing and staring at the man who'd so brazenly attacked their men—and their women, Bellow reminded himself. Chavez especially had eyes like flint—hard, dark, and cold, though his face appeared placid enough. He thought he knew the senior Rainbow people pretty well. They were clearly professionals, and in the case of Clark and Chavez, people who'd lived in the black world and done some very black things, most of which he didn't and would never know about. But Bellow knew that both men were people of order, like police officers in many ways, keepers of the rules. Maybe they broke them sometimes, but it was only to sustain them. They were romantics, just as the terrorists were, but the difference was in their choice of cause. Their purpose was to protect. Grady's was to upset, and in the difference of mission was the difference between the men. It was that simple to them. Now, however angry they might feel at this sleeping man, they would not cause him physical harm. They'd leave his punishment to the society that Grady had so viciously attacked and whose rules they were sworn to protect, if not always uphold.

"Any time now," Bellow said. Grady's vital signs were all coming up. The body moved a little as his brain started to come back to wakefulness, just minor flexes here and there. It would find that some parts were not responding as they should, then focus on them to see what the limitations were, looking for pain but not finding it yet. Now the head started turning, slowly, left and right, and soon . . .

The eyelids fluttered, also slowly. Bellow consulted the list of IDs that others had drawn up and hoped that the British police and the guys from "Five" had provided him with good data.

"Sean?" he said. "Sean, are you awake?"

"Who? . . ."

"It's me, it's Jimmy Carr, Sean. You back with us now, Sean?"

"Where . . . am . . . I?" the voice croaked.

"University Hospital, Dublin, Sean. Dr. McCaskey just finished fixing your shoulder up. You're in the recovery room. You're going to be okay, Sean. But, my God, getting you here was the devil's own work. Does it hurt, your shoulder, Sean?"

"No, no hurt now, Jimmy. How many? . . ."

"How many of us? Ten, ten of us got away. They're off in the safe houses now, lad."

"Good." The eyes opened, and saw someone wearing a surgical mask and cap, but he couldn't focus well, and the image was a blur. The room . . . yes, it was a hospital . . . the ceiling, rectangular tiles held in a metal rack . . . the lighting, fluorescent. His throat was dry and a little sore from the intubation, but it didn't matter. He was living inside a dream, and none of this was actually happening. He was floating on a white, awkward cloud, but at least Jimmy Carr was here.

"Roddy, where's Roddy?"

"Roddy's dead, Sean," Bellow answered. "Sorry, but he didn't make it."

"Oh, damn . . ." Grady breathed. "Not Roddy . . ."

"Sean, we need some information, we need it quickly."

"What . . . information?"

"The chap who got us the information, we need to contact him, but we don't know how to find him."

"Iosef, you mean?"

Bingo, Paul Bellow thought. "Yes, Sean, Iosef, we need to get in touch with him . . ."

"The money? I have that in my wallet, lad."

Oh, Clark thought, turning. Bill Tawney had all of Grady's personal possessions sitting on a portable table. In the wallet, he saw, were two hundred and ten British pounds, one hundred seventy Irish pounds, and several slips of paper. On one yellow Post-it note were two numbers, six digits each, with no explanation. A Swiss or other numbered account? the spook wondered.

"How do we access it, Sean? We need to do that at once, you see, my friend."

"Swiss Commercial Bank in Bern . . . call . . . account number and control number in . . . in my wallet."

"Good, thank you, Sean . . . and Iosef, what's the rest of his name . . . how do we get in touch with him, Sean? Please, we need to do that right away, Sean." Bellow's false Irish accent wasn't good enough to

pass muster with a drunk, but Grady's current condition was far beyond anything alcohol could do to the human mind.

"Don't . . . know. He contacts us, remember. Iosef Andreyevich contacts me through Robert . . . through the network . . . never gave me a way to contact him."

"His last name, Sean, what is it, you never told me."

"Serov, Iosef Andreyevich Serov . . . Russian . . . KGB chap . . . Bekaa Valley . . . years ago."

"Well, he gave us good information on this Rainbow mob, didn't he, Sean?"

"How many did we . . . how many . . . ?"

"Ten, Sean, we killed ten of them, and we got away, but you were shot on the escape in your Jaguar, remember? But we hurt them, Sean, we hurt them badly," Bellow assured him.

"Good . . . good . . . hurt them . . . kill them . . . kill them all," Grady whispered from his gurney.

"Not quite, asshole," Chavez observed quietly, from a few feet away.

"Did we get the two women? . . . Jimmy, did we get them?"

"Oh, yes, Sean, I shot them myself. Now, Sean, this Russian chap. I need to know more about him."

"Iosef? Good man, KGB, got the money and the drugs for us. Lots of money . . . six million . . . six . . . and the cocaine," Grady added for the TV Minicam that sat on a tripod next to the bed. "Got it for us, at Shannon, remember? Flew in on the little jet, the money and the drugs from America . . . well, think it was America . . . must have been . . . the way he talks now, American accent like the television, funny thing for a Russian, Jimmy . . ."

"Iosef Andreyevich Serov?"

The figure on the bed tried to nod. "That's how they do names, Jimmy. Joseph, son of Andrew."

"What does he look like, Sean?"

"Tall as me . . . brown hair, eyes . . . round face, speaks many languages . . . Bekaa Valley . . . nineteen eighty six . . . good man, helped us a lot . . ."

"How we doing, Bill?" Clark whispered to Tawney.

"Well, none of this can be used in court, but—"

"Fuck the courts, Bill! How good is this? Does it match with anything?"

"The name Serov doesn't ring a bell, but I can check with our files. We can run these numbers down, and there will be a paper trail of some sort, but"—he checked his watch—"it will have to wait until tomorrow."

Clark nodded. "Hell of an interrogation method."

"Never seen this before. Yes, it is."

Just then Grady's eyes opened more. He saw the others around the bed, and his face twisted into a question. "Who are you?" he asked groggily, finding a strange face in this dream.

"My name is Clark, John Clark, Sean."

The eyes went wide for a second. "But you're . . ."

"That's right, pal. That's who I am. And thanks for spilling your guts. We got all of you, Sean. All fifteen dead or captured. I hope you like it here in England, boy. You're going to be here a long, long time. Why don't you go back to sleep now, lad?" he asked with grossly overdone courtesy. *I've killed better men than you, punk,* he thought, behind a supposedly impassive mien that in fact proclaimed his feelings.

Dr. Bellow pocketed his tape recorder and his notes. It rarely failed. The twilight state following general anesthesia made any mind vulnerable to suggestion. That was why people with high security clearances never went to the hospital without someone from their parent agencies nearby. In this case he'd had ten minutes or so to dive deep inside and come back out with information. It could never be used in a court of law, but then, Rainbow wasn't composed of cops.

"Malloy got him, eh?" Clark asked on his way to the door.

"Actually it was Sergeant Nance," Chavez answered.

"We have to get him something nice for this job," Rainbox Six observed. "We owe him for this. We got a name now, Domingo. A Russian name."

"Not a good one, it's gotta be a cover name."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, John, don't you recognize it? Serov, former chairman of KGB, back in the '60s, I think, fired a long time ago because he screwed something up."

Clark nodded. It wouldn't be the name on the guy's real passport, and that was too bad, but it was a name, and names could be tracked. They walked out of the hospital into the cool British evening. John's car was waiting, with Corporal Mole looking rather pleased with himself. He'd get a nice ribbon for the day's work and probably a very nice letter from this American pseudo-general. John and Ding got in, and the car drove to the base stockade, where the others were being kept for the time being, because the local jail wasn't secure enough. Inside, they were guided to an interrogation room. Timothy O'Neil was waiting there, handcuffed to a chair.

"Hello," John said. "My name is Clark. This is Domingo Chavez."

The prisoner just stared at them.

"You were sent here to murder our wives," John went on. That didn't make him so much as blink either. "But you fucked it all up. There were fifteen of you. There are six now. The rest won't be doing

much of anything. You know, people like you make me ashamed to be Irish. Jesus, kid, you're not even an *effective* criminal. By the way, Clark is just my working name. Before that, it was John Kelly, and my wife's maiden name was O'Toole. So, now you IRA pukes are killing Irish-Catholic Americans, eh? It's not going to look good in the papers, punk."

"Not to mention selling coke, all that coke the Russian brought in," Chavez added.

"Drugs? We don't—"

"Sure you do. Sean Grady just told us everything, sang like a fucking canary. We have the number of the Swiss bank account, and this Russian guy—"

"Serov," Chavez added helpfully, "Iosef Andreyevich Serov, Sean's old pal from the Bekaa Valley."

"I have nothing to say." Which was more than O'Neil had planned to say. Sean Grady talked. Sean? That was not possible—but where else could they have gotten that information? Was the world totally mad?

" 'Mano," Ding continued, "that was *my* wife you wanted to kill, and she's got *my* baby in her belly. You think you're going to be around much longer? John, this guy ever going to get out of prison?"

"Not anytime soon, Domingo."

"Well, Timmy, let me tell you something. Where I come from, you mess with a man's lady, there's a price that has to be paid. And it ain't no little price. And where I come from, you *never, ever* mess with a man's kids. The price for that's even worse, you little fuck. Little fuck?" Chavez wondered. "No, I think we can fix that, John. I can fix him so he ain't never gonna fuck anything." From the scabbard on his belt, Ding extracted a Marine-type K-Bar fighting knife. The blade was black except for the gleaming quarter-inch edge.

"Not sure that's a good idea, Ding," Clark objected weakly.

"Why not? Feels pretty good to me right now, man." Chavez got out of his chair and walked up to O'Neil. Then he lowered his knife hand to the chair. "Ain't hard to do, man, just *flick,* and we can start your sex-change operation. I ain't a doc, you understand, but I know the first part of the procedure, y'know?" Ding bent down to press his nose against O'Neil's. "Man, you don't *ever, EVER* mess with a Latino's lady! Do you hear me?"

Timothy O'Neil had had a bad enough day to this point. He looked in the eyes of this Spanish man, heard the accent, and knew that this was not an Englishman, not even an American of the type he thought he knew.

"I've done this before, man. Mainly I kill with guns, but I've taken bastards down with a knife once or twice. It's funny how they squirm

—but I ain't gonna kill you, boy. I'm just gonna make you a girl." The knife moved tight up against the crotch of the man cuffed to the chair.

"Back it off, Domingo!" Clark ordered.

"Fuck you, John! That's my *wife* he wanted to hurt, man. Well, I'm gonna fix this little fuck so he never hurts no more girls, 'mano." Chavez turned to look at the prisoner again. "I'm gonna watch your eyes when I cut it all off, Timmy. I want to see your face when you start to turn into a girl."

O'Neil blinked, as he looked deep into the dark, Spanish eyes. He saw the rage there, hot and passionate—but as bad as that was, so was the reason for it. He and his mates had planned to kidnap and maybe kill a pregnant woman, and there was shame in that, and for that reason there was justice in the fury before his face.

"It wasn't like that!" O'Neil gasped. "We didn't—we didn't—"

"Didn't have the chance to rape her, eh? Well, ain't that a big fuckin' deal?" Chavez observed.

"No, no, not rape—never, nobody in the unit ever did that, we're not—"

"You're fucking scum, Timmy—but soon you're just gonna be scum, 'cuz ain't no more fuckin' in your future." The knife moved a little. "This is gonna be fun, John. Like the guy we did in Libya two years ago, remember?"

"Jesus, Ding, I still have nightmares about that one," Clark acknowledged, looking away. "I'm telling you, Domingo, don't do it!"

"Fuck you, John." His free hand reached to loosen O'Neil's belt, then the button at the top of his slacks. Then he reached inside. "Well, shit, ain't much to cut off. Hardly any dick here at all."

"O'Neil, if you have anything to tell us, better say it now. I can't control this kid. I've seen him like this before and—"

"Too much talk, John. Shit, Grady spilled his guts anyway. What does this one know that we need? I'm gonna cut it all off and feed it to one of the guard dogs. They like fresh meat."

"Domingo, we are civilized people and we don't—"

"Civilized? My ass, John, he wanted to kill my wife and my baby!"

O'Neil's eyes popped again. "No, no, we never intended to—"

"Sure, asshole," Chavez taunted. "You had those fucking guns 'cuz you wanted to win their hearts and minds, right? Woman-killer, baby-killer." Chavez spat.

"I didn't kill anybody, didn't even fire my rifle. I—"

"Great, so you're incompetent. You think you deserve to have a dick just 'cuz you're fucking incompetent?"

"Who's this Russian guy?" Clark asked.

"Sean's friend, Serov, Iosef Serov. He got the money and the drugs —"

"Drugs? Christ, John, they're fucking druggies, too!"

"Where's the money?" John persisted.

"Swiss bank, numbered account. Iosef set it up, six million dollars—and—and, Sean asked him to bring us ten kilos of cocaine to sell for the money, we need the money to continue operations."

"Where are the drugs, Tim?" Clark demanded next.

"Farm—farmhouse." O'Neil gave them a town and road description that went into Chavez's pocketed taperecorder.

"This Serov guy, what's he look like?" And he got that, too.

Chavez backed off and let his visible temper subside. Then he smiled. "Okay, John, let's talk to the others. Thanks, Timmy. You can keep your dick, 'mano."

It was late afternoon over Canada's Quebec province. The sun reflected off the hundreds of lakes, some of them still covered with ice. Popov had been sleepless for the entire flight, the only wakeful passenger in first class. Again and again his mind went over the same data. If the British had captured Grady, then they had his primary cover name, which was in his travel documents. Well, he'd dispose of them that very day. They had a physical description, but he looked not the least bit remarkable. Grady had the number of the Swiss account that Dmitriy had set up, but he'd already transferred the funds to another account, one not traceable to him. It was theoretically possible that the opposition could pursue the information Grady was sure to give them—Popov had no illusions about that—perhaps even secure a set of fingerprints from . . . no, that was too unlikely to be considered a danger, and no Western intelligence service would have anything to cross-match. No Western service even knew anything about him—if they had, he would have been arrested long before.

So, what did that leave? A name that would soon evaporate, a description that fitted a million other men, and a bank account number for a defunct account. In short, very little. He did need to check out, though, very quickly, the procedures by which Swiss banks transferred funds, and whether that process was protected by the anonymity laws that protected the accounts themselves. Even that—the Swiss were not paragons of integrity, were they? No, there would be an arrangement between the banks and the police. There had to be, even if the only purpose was to enable the Swiss police to lie effectively to other national police forces. But the second account was truly a shadow one. He'd set it up through an attorney who didn't have the ability to betray him, because they'd only met over the telephone. So, there was no path from the information Grady had to where he was now, and that was good. He'd have to think very

carefully about *ever* accessing the 5.7 million dollars in the second account, but there might well be a way to do it. Through another attorney, perhaps, in Liechtenstein, where banking laws were even stricter than in Switzerland? He'd have to look into it. An American attorney could guide him in the necessary procedures, also under total anonymity.

You're safe, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, Popov told himself. Safe and rich, but it was time to stop taking risks. He'd initiate no more field operations for John Brightling. Once he got into O'Hare, he'd catch the next flight to New York, get back to his apartment, report in to Brightling, and then look for an elegant escape route. Would Brightling let him go?

He'd have to, Popov told himself. He and Henriksen were the only men on the planet who could link the executive to mass murder. He might think about killing me, but Henriksen would warn him not to. Henriksen was also a professional, and he knew the rules of the game. Popov had kept a diary, which was in a safe place, the vault of a law firm in New York, with carefully written handling instructions. So, no, that was not a real danger, so long as his "friends" knew the rules—and Popov would remind them, just in case.

Why go back to New York at all? Why not simply disappear? It was tempting . . . but, no. If nothing else, he had to tell Brightling and Henriksen to leave him alone from now on and explain why it was in their interest to do so. Besides, Brightling had an unusually good source in the American government and Popov could use that person's information as additional protection. You never had too much protection.

With all that decided, Popov finally allowed himself to relax. Another ninety minutes to Chicago. Below him was a vast world, with plenty of room to disappear in, and now he had the money for it. It had all been worth it.

"Okay, what do we have?" John asked his senior executives.

"This name, Iosef Serov. It's not on our computer in London," said Cyril Holt of the Security Service. "What about CIA?"

Clark shook his head. "We have two guys named Serov on the books. One's dead. The other one's in his late sixties and retired in Moscow. What about the description?"

"Well, it fits this chap." Holt passed a photo across the table.

"I've seen this one before."

"He's the chap who met with Ivan Kirilenko in London some weeks ago. That fits the rest of the puzzle, John. We believe he was involved in the leak of information on your organization, as you will recall. For him, then, to show up with Grady—well, it does fit, almost too well,

as a matter of fact."

"Any way to press this?"

"We *can* go to the RVS—both we and CIA have relatively good relations with Sergey Golovko, and perhaps they can assist us. I will lobby very hard for that," Holt promised.

"What else?"

"These numbers," Bill Tawney put in. "One is probably a bank account identification number, and the other is probably the control-activation code number. We'll have their police look into it for us. That will tell us something, if the money hasn't been laundered, of course, and if the account is still active, which it ought to be."

"The weapons," the senior cop present told them, "judging by the serial numbers, are of Soviet origin, from the factory in Kazan. They're fairly old, at least ten years, but none of them had ever been fired before today. On the drug issue, I forwarded the information to Dennis Maguire—he's chief of the Garda. It will be on the telly in the morning. They found and seized ten pounds of pure cocaine—by 'pure' I mean medicinal quality, almost as though it had been purchased from a pharmaceutical house. The street value is enormous. Millions," the chief superintendent told them. "It was found in a semiabandoned farmhouse on the Irish West Coast."

"We have identification on three of the six prisoners. One has not yet been able to talk to us because of his injuries. Oh, they were using cellular phones to communicate, like walkie-talkies. Your Noonan chap did very well indeed to close the phone cells down. God only knows how many lives that saved," Holt told them.

At the far end of the table, Chavez nodded and shivered at the news. If they'd been able to coordinate their actions . . . Jesus. It would not have been a good day for the good guys. What they'd had was bad enough. There would be funerals. People would have to put on their Class-A uniforms and line up and fire off the guns . . . and then they'd have to replace the men who were gone. Not far away, Mike Chin was in a bed, a cast on one of his wounded legs because a bone was broken. Team-1 was out of business for at least a month, even as well as they'd fought back. Noonan had come through big-time, having killed three of them with his pistol, along with Franklin, who'd just about decapitated one with his big MacMillan .50, then used his monster rifle to kill the little brown truck and keep the five terrorists in it from getting away. Chavez was looking down at the conference table and shaking his head when his beeper went off. He lifted it and saw that it was his home number. He rose from his seat and called on the wall phone.

"Yeah, honey?"

"Ding, you want to come over here. It's started," Patsy told him

calmly. Ding's response was a sudden flip of his heart.

"On the way, baby." Ding hung up. "John, I gotta get home. Patsy says it's started."

"Okay, Domingo." Clark managed a smile, finally. "Give her a kiss for me."

"Roge-o, Mr. C." And Chavez headed for the door.

"The timing on this thing is never good, is it?" Tawney observed.

"Well, at least something good is happening today." John rubbed his eyes. He even accepted the idea of becoming a grandfather. It beat the hell out of losing people, a fact that had yet to hammer all the way into his consciousness. His people. Two of them, dead. Several more wounded. His people.

"Okay," Clark went on. "What about the information leak? People, we've been set up and hit. What are we going to do about it?"

"Hello, Ed, it's Carol," the President's Science Advisor said.

"Hi, Dr. Brightling. What can I do for you?"

"What the hell happened in England today? Was it our people—our Rainbow team, I mean?"

"Yes, Carol, it was."

"How did they do? The TV wasn't very clear, and—"

"Two dead, four or so wounded," the DCI answered. "Nine terrorists dead, six captured, including their leader."

"The radios we got to them, how'd they work?"

"Not sure. I haven't seen the after-action report yet, but I know the main thing they're going to want to know."

"What's that, Ed?"

"Who spilled the beans. They knew John's name, his wife and daughter's names, identities, and place of work. They had good intel, and John isn't very happy about that."

"The family members, are they okay?"

"Yeah, no civilians hurt, thank God. Hell, Carol, I *know* Sandy and Patricia. There's going to be some serious fallout over this one."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not sure yet, but I won't forget you asked."

"Yeah, well, I want to know if those radio gadgets worked. I told the guys at E-Systems to get them out pronto, 'cuz these guys are important. Gee, I hope they helped some."

"I'll find out, Carol," the DCI promised.

"Okay, you know where to reach me."

"Okay, thanks for the call."

CHAPTER 30

VISTAS

It was everything he'd expected—not knowing what to expect—and more, and at the end of it Domingo Chavez held his son in his hands.

"Well," he said, looking down at the new life that would be his to guard, educate, and in time present to the world. After a second that seemed to last into weeks, he handed the newborn to his wife.

Patsy's face was bathed in perspiration, and weary from the five-hour ordeal of delivery, but already, as such things went, the pain was forgotten. The goal had been achieved, and she held her child. The package was pink, hairless, and noisy, the last part assuaged by the proximity of Patsy's left breast, as John Conor Chavez got his first meal. But Patsy was exhausted, and in due course a nurse removed the child to the nursery. Then Ding kissed his wife and walked alongside her bed as she was wheeled to her room. She was already asleep when they arrived. He kissed her one last time and walked outside. His car took him back onto the Hereford base, and then to the official home of Rainbox Six.

"Yeah?" John said, opening the door.

Chavez just handed over a cigar with a blue ring. "John Conor Chavez, seven pounds eleven ounces. Patsy's doing fine, gran-pop," Ding said, with a subdued grin. After all, Patsy had done the hard part.

There are moments to make the strongest of men weep, and this was one of them. The two men embraced. "Well," John said, after a minute or so, reaching into the pocket of his bathrobe for a handkerchief with which he rubbed his eyes. "Who's he look like?"

"Winston Churchill," Domingo replied with a laugh. "Hell, John, I've never been able to figure that one out, but John Conor Chavez is a confusing enough name, isn't it? The little bastard has a lot of heritage behind him. I'll start him off on karate and guns about age five . . . maybe six," Ding mused.

"Better golf and baseball, but he's your kid, Domingo. Come on in."

"Well?" Sandy demanded, and Chavez gave the news for the second time while his boss lit up his Cuban cigar. He despised smoking, and Sandy, a nurse, hardly approved of the vice, but on this one occasion,

both relented. Mrs. Clark gave Ding a hug. “John Conor?”

“You knew?” John Terrence Clark asked.

Sandy nodded. “Patsy told me last week.”

“It was supposed to be a secret,” the new father objected.

“I’m her *mother,* Ding!” Sandy explained. “Breakfast?”

The men checked their watches. It was just after four in the morning, close enough, they all agreed.

“You know, John, this is pretty profound,” Chavez said. His father-in-law noted how Domingo switched in and out of accents depending on the nature of the conversation. The previous day, interrogating the PIRA prisoners he’d been pure Los Angeles gang kid, his speech redolent with Spanish accent and street euphemisms. But in his reflective moments, he reverted to a man with a university master’s degree, with no accent at all. “I’m a papa. I’ve got a son.” Followed by a slow, satisfied, and somewhat awestruck grin. “Wow.”

“The great adventure, Domingo,” John agreed, while his wife got the bacon going. He poured the coffee.

“Huh?”

“Building a complete person. That’s the great adventure, sonny boy, and if you don’t do it right, what the hell good are you?”

“Well, you guys’ve done okay.”

“Thanks, Domingo,” Sandy said from the stove. “We worked at it pretty hard.”

“More her than me,” John said. “I was away so damned much, playing field-spook. Missed three Christmases, goddamnit. You never forgive yourself for that,” he explained. “That’s the magic morning, and you’re supposed to be there.”

“Doing what?”

“Russia twice, Iran once—getting assets out every time. Two worked, but one came apart on me. Lost that one, and he didn’t make it. Russians have never been real forgiving on state treason. He bit the big one four months later, poor bastard. Not a good Christmas,” Clark concluded, remembering just how bleak that had been, seeing the KGB scoop the man up not fifty meters from where he’d been standing, seeing the face turned to him, the look of despair on the doomed face, having to turn away to make his own escape down the pipeline he’d set up for two, knowing there was nothing else he might have done, but feeling like shit about it anyway. Then, finally, he’d had to explain to Ed Foley what had happened—only to learn later that the agent had been burned—“shopped” was the euphemism—by a KGB mole inside CIA’s own headquarters building. And *that* fuck was still alive in a federal prison, with cable TV and central heating.

“It’s history, John,” Chavez told him, understanding the look. They’d deployed on similar missions, but the Clark-Chavez team had

never failed, though some of their missions had been on the insane side of hairy. “You know the funny part about this?”

“What’s that?” John asked, wondering if it would be the same feeling he’d had.

“I know I’m gonna die now. Someday, I mean. The little guy, he’s gotta outlive me. If he doesn’t, then I’ve screwed it up. Can’t let that happen, can I? JC is my responsibility. While he grows up, I grow old, and by the time he’s my age, hell, I’ll be in my *sixties.* Jesus, I never *planned* to be old, y’know?”

Clark chuckled. “Yeah, neither did I. Relax, kid. Now I’m a”—he almost said “fucking,” but Sandy didn’t like that particular epithet —“goddamned *grand*father. I never planned on that, either.”

“It’s not so bad, John,” Sandy observed, cracking open the eggs. “We can spoil him and hand him back. And we will.”

It hadn’t happened that way with their kids, at least not on John’s side of the family. His mother was long dead from cancer, and his father from a heart attack on the job, while rescuing some children from a dwelling fire in Indianapolis, back in the late 1960s. John wondered if they knew that their son had grown up, and then grown old, and was now a grandfather. There was no telling, was there? Mortality and its attendant issues were normal at times like this, he supposed. The great continuity of life. What would John Conor Chavez become? Rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief? That was mainly Domingo and Patsy’s job, and he had to trust them to do it properly, and they probably would. He knew his daughter and knew Ding almost as well. From the first time he’d seen the kid, in the mountains of Colorado, he’d known that this boy had something special in him, and the younger man had grown, blossoming like a flower in a particularly tough garden. Domingo Chavez was a younger version of himself, a man of honor and courage, Clark told himself, and therefore he’d be a worthy father, as he’d proven to be a worthy husband. The great continuity of life, John told himself again, sipping his coffee and puffing on the cigar, and if it was yet one more milestone on the road to death, then so be it. He’d had an interesting life, and a life that had mattered to others, as had Domingo, and as they all hoped would, John Conor. And what the hell, Clark thought, his life wasn’t over yet, was it?

Getting a flight to New York had proven more difficult than expected. They were all fully booked, but finally Popov had managed to get himself a coach seat in the back of an old United 727. He disliked the tight fit, but the flight was short. At La Guardia, he headed for a cab, on the way out checking his inside coat pocket and finding the travel documents that had gotten him across the Atlantic. They had served

him well, but they had to go. Emerging into the evening air, he surreptitiously dumped them into a trash container before walking to the cabstand. He was a weary man. His day had started just after midnight, American East Coast time, and he hadn't managed much sleep on the transatlantic flight, and his body was—how did the Americans put it?—running on empty. Maybe that explained the break with fieldcraft.

Thirty minutes later, Popov was within blocks of his downtown apartment, when the waste-disposal crew circulated past the United Airlines terminal to change the trash bags. The routine was mechanical and fairly strenuous physical labor for the mostly Puerto Rican work crew. One at a time, they lifted the metal tops off the cans and reached in to remove the heavy-gauge plastic garbage bags, then turned to dump them into wheeled containers that would later be tipped into trucks for transport to a landfill on Staten Island. The routine was good upperbody exercise, and most of the men carried portable radios to help themselves deal with the boredom of the work.

One can, fifty yards from the cabstand, didn't sit properly in its holder. When the cleanup man lifted the bag, it caught on a metallic edge and ripped, spilling its contents onto the concrete sidewalk. That generated a quiet curse from the worker, who now had to bend down and pick up a bunch of objects with his gloved hands. He was halfway through when he saw the crimson cardboard cover of what appeared to be a British passport. People didn't throw those things away, did they? He flipped it open and saw two credit cards inside, stamped with the same name on the passport. Serov, he saw, an unusual name. He dropped the whole package into the thigh pocket of his coveralls. He'd bring it by the lost-and-found. It wasn't the first time he'd discovered valuable stuff in the trash. Once he'd even recovered a fully loaded 9-mm pistol!

By this time Popov was in his apartment, too tired even to unpack his bags. Instead he merely undressed and collapsed on the bed without even a vodka to help him off to sleep. By reflex, he turned on the TV and caught yet another story about the Hereford shoot-out. The TV was—*govno,* shit, he thought. There was the TV truck whose reporter had come close and tried to interview him. They hadn't used it, but there he was, in profile, from twenty feet away, while the reporter gave a stand-up. All the more reason to clear out now, he thought, as he drifted off. He didn't even have the energy to switch the TV off, and he slept with it on, the recurring stories entering his mind and giving him confused and unpleasant dreams throughout the night.

The passport, credit cards, and a few other items of apparent value

arrived at the waste-disposal company's Staten Island office—actually a trailer that had been towed to the spot—after the close of regular business hours. The trash collector tossed it on the correct desk and punched his time card on the way out for his drive back to Queens and his usual late dinner.

Tom Sullivan had worked late, and was now in the bar the FBI agents frequented, a block from the Jacob Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan. His partner Frank Chatham was there, too, and the two agents sat in a booth, sipping at their Sam Adams beers.

"Anything happening on your end?" Sullivan asked. He'd been in court all day, waiting to testify in a fraud case, but had never gotten to the witness stand because of procedural delays.

"I talked with two girls today. They both say they know Kirk Maclean, but neither one actually dated him," Chatham replied. "Looks like another dry hole. I mean, he *was* cooperative, wasn't he?"

"Any other names associated with the missing girls?"

Chatham shook his head. "Nope. They both said they saw him talking to the missing one and he walked one out once, like he told us, but nothing special about it. Just the usual singles bar scene. Nothing that contradicts anything he said. Neither one likes Maclean very much. They say he comes on to girls, asks some questions, and usually leaves them."

"What kind of questions?"

"The usual—name, address, work, family stuff. Same stuff we ask, Tom."

"The two girls you talked to today," Sullivan asked thoughtfully. "Where they from?"

"One's a New Yorker, one's from across the river in Jersey."

"Bannister and Pretloe are from out of town," Sullivan pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. So?"

"So, if you're a serial killer, it's easier to take down victims with no close family members, isn't it?"

"Part of the selection process? That's a stretch, Tom."

"Maybe, but what else we got?" The answer was, not very much. The flyers handed out by the NYPD had turned up fifteen people who'd said they recognized the faces, but they were unable to provide any useful information. "I agree, Maclean was cooperative, but if he approaches girls, dumps those who grew up near here and have family here, *then* walks our victim home, hell, it's more than we have on anyone else."

"Go back to talk to him?"

Sullivan nodded. "Yeah." It was just routine procedure. Kirk Maclean hadn't struck either agent as a potential serial killer—but that

was the best-disguised form of criminal, both had learned in the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia. They also knew that the dullest of routine investigative work broke far more cases than the miracles so beloved of mystery novels. Real police work was boring, mind-dulling repetition, and those who stuck with it won. Usually.

It was strange that morning at Hereford. On the one hand, Team-2 was somewhat cowed by what had happened the day before. The loss of comrades did that to any unit. But on the other hand, their boss was now a father, and that was always the best thing to happen to a man. On the way to morning PT, a somewhat strung-out Team-2 Leader, who'd had no sleep at all the night before, had his hand shaken by every member of the team, invariably with a brief word of congratulations and a knowing smile, since all of them were fathers already, even those younger than their boss. Morning PT was abbreviated, in acknowledgment of his physical condition, and after the run, Eddie Price suggested to Chavez that he might as well drive home for a few hours of sleep, since he'd be of little use to anyone in his current condition. This Chavez did, crashing and burning past noon, and wakening with a screaming headache.

As did Dmitriy Popov. It hardly seemed fair, since he'd had little to drink the day before. He supposed it was his body's revenge on him for all the travel abuse on top of a long and exciting day west of London. He awoke to CNN on his bedroom TV, and padded off to the bathroom for the usual morning routine, plus some aspirin, then to the kitchen to make coffee. In two hours, he'd showered and dressed, unpacked his bags, and hung up the clothes he'd taken to Europe. The wrinkles would stretch out in a day or two, he thought. Then it was time for him to catch a cab for midtown.

On Staten Island, the lost-and-found person was a secretary who had this as one of her additional duties, and hated it. The items dropped on her desk were always smelly, sometimes enough to make her gag. Today was no exception, and she found herself wondering why people had to place such noxious items in the trash instead of—what? she never thought to wonder. Keep them in their pockets? The crimson passport was no exception. Joseph A. Serov. The photo was of a man about fifty, she thought, and about as remarkable to look at as a McDonald's hamburger. But it *was* a passport and two credit cards and it belonged to somebody. She lifted the phone book from her desk and called the British Consulate in Manhattan, told the operator what it was about, and got the passport control officer as a result. She didn't

know that the passport control office had for generations been the semisecret cover job for field officers of the Secret Intelligence Service. After a brief conversation, a company truck that was headed for Manhattan anyway dropped off the envelope at the consulate, where the door guard called to the proper office, and a secretary came down to collect it. This she dropped on the desk of her boss, Peter Williams.

Williams really was a spook of sorts, a young man on his first field assignment outside his own country. It was typically a safe, comfortable job, in a major city of an allied country, and he did work a few agents, all of them diplomats working at the United Nations. From them, he sought and sometimes got low-level diplomatic intelligence, which was forwarded to Whitehall to be examined and considered by equally low-level bureaucrats in the Foreign Office.

This smelly passport was unusual. Though his job was supposed to handle things like this, in fact he most often arranged substitute passports for people who'd somehow lost them in New York, which was not exactly a rare occurrence, though invariably an embarrassing one for the people who needed the replacements. The procedure was for Williams to fax the identification number on the document to London to identify the owner properly, and then call him or her at home, hoping to get a family member or employee who would know where the passport holder might be.

But in this case, Williams got a telephone call from Whitehall barely thirty minutes after sending the information.

"Peter?"

"Yes, Burt?"

"This passport, Joseph Serov—rather strange thing just happened."

"What's that?"

"The address we have for the chap is a mortuary, and the telephone number is to the same place. They've never heard of Joseph Serov, alive or dead."

"Oh? A false passport?" Williams lifted it from his desk blotter. If it were a fake, it was a damned good one. So was something interesting happening for a change?

"No, the computer has the passport number and name in it, but this Serov chap doesn't live where he claims to live. I think it's a matter of false papers. The records show that he is a naturalized subject. Want us to run that down, as well?"

Williams wondered about that. He'd seen false papers before, and been trained on how to obtain them for himself at the SIS training academy. Well, why not? Maybe he'd uncover a spy or something. "Yes, Burt, could you do that for me?"

"Call you tomorrow," the Foreign Office official promised.

For his part, Peter Williams lit up his computer and sent an e-mail

to London, just one more routine day for a young and very junior intelligence officer on his first posting abroad. New York was much like London, expensive, impersonal, and full of culture, but sadly lacking in the good manners of his hometown.

Serov, he thought, a Russian name, but you could find them everywhere. Quite a few in London. Even more in New York City, where so many of the cabdrivers were right off the boat or plane from Mother Russia and knew neither the English language nor where to find the landmarks of New York. Lost British passport, Russian name.

Three thousand four hundred miles away, the name "Serov" had been input onto the SIS computer system. The name had already been run for possible hits and nothing of value had been found, but the executive program had many names and phrases, and it scanned for all of them. The name "Serov" was enough—it had also been entered spelled as Seroff and Serof—and when the e-mail from New York arrived, the computer seized upon and directed the message to a desk officer. Knowing that Iosef was the Russian version of Joseph, and since the passport description gave an age in the proper range, he flagged the message and forwarded it to the computer terminal of the person who had originated the enquiry on one Serov, Iosef Andreyevich.

In due course, that message appeared as e-mail on the desktop computer of Bill Tawney. Bloody useful things, computers, Tawney thought, as he printed up the message. New York. That was interesting. He called the number of the Consulate and got Peter Williams.

"This passport from the Serov chap, anything else you can tell me?" he asked, after establishing his credentials.

"Well, yes, there are two credit cards that were inside it, a MasterCard and a Visa, both platinum." Which, he didn't have to add, meant that they had relatively large credit limits.

"Very well. I want you to send me the photo and the credit-card numbers over secure lines immediately." Tawney gave him the correct numbers to call.

"Yes, sir. I'll do that at once," Williams replied earnestly, wondering what this was all about. And who the devil was William Tawney? Whoever it was, he was working late, since England was five hours ahead of New York, and Peter Williams was already wondering what he'd have for dinner.

"John?"

"Yeah, Bill?" Clark replied tiredly, looking up from his desk and wondering if he'd get to see his grandson that day.

"Our friend Serov has turned up," the SIS man said next. That got a reaction. Clark's eyes narrowed at once.

"Oh? Where?"

"New York. A British passport was found in a dustbin at La Guardia Airport, along with two credit cards. Well," he amended his report, "the passport and credit cards were in the name of one Joseph A. Serov."

"Run the cards to see if—"

"I called the legal attaché in your embassy in London to have the accounts run, yes. Should have some information within the hour. Could be a break for us, John," Tawney added, with a hopeful voice.

"Who's handling it in the U.S.?"

"Gus Werner, assistant director, Terrorism Division. Ever met him?"

Clark shook his head. "No, but I know the name."

"I know Gus. Good chap."

The FBI has cordial relationships with all manner of businesses. Visa and MasterCard were no exceptions. An FBI agent called the headquarters of both companies from his desk in the Hoover Building, and gave the card numbers to the chiefs of security of both companies. Both were former FBI agents themselves—the FBI sends many retired agents off to such positions, which creates a large and diverse old-boy network—and both of them queried their computers and came up with account information, including name, address, credit history, and most important of all, recent charges. The British Airways flight from London Heathrow to Chicago O'Hare leaped off the screen—actually the faxed page—at the agent's desk in Washington.

"Yeah?" Gus Werner said, when the young agent came into his office.

"He caught a flight from London to Chicago late yesterday, and then a flight from Chicago to New York, about the last one, got a back-room ticket on standby. Must have dumped the ID right after he got in. Here." The agent handed over the charge records and the flight information. Werner scanned the pages.

"No shit," the former chief of the Hostage Rescue Team observed quietly. "This looks like a hit, Johnny."

"Yes, sir," replied the young agent, fresh in from the Oklahoma City field division. "But it leaves one thing out—how he got to Europe this time. Everything else is documented, and there's a flight from Dublin to London, but nothing from here to Ireland," Special Agent James Washington told his boss.

"Maybe he's got American Express. Call and find out," Werner ordered the junior man.

"Will do," Washington promised.

"Who do I call on this?" Werner asked.

"Right here, sir." Washington pointed to the number on the covering sheet.

"Oh, good, I've met him. Thanks, Jimmy." Werner lifted his phone and dialed the international number. "Mr. Tawney, please," he told the operator. "It's Gus Werner calling from FBI Headquarters in Washington."

"Hello, Gus. That was very fast of you," Tawney said, half in his overcoat and hoping to get home.

"The wonders of the computer age, Bill. I have a possible hit on this Serov guy. He flew from Heathrow to Chicago yesterday. The flight was about three hours after the fracas you had at Hereford. I have a rental car, a hotel bill, and a flight from Chicago to New York City after he got here."

"Address?"

"We're not that lucky. Post office box in lower Manhattan," the Assistant Director told his counterpart. "Bill, how hot is this?"

"Gus, it's bloody hot. Sean Grady gave us the name, and one of the other prisoners confirmed it. This Serov chap delivered a large sum of money and ten pounds of cocaine shortly before the attack. We're working with the Swiss to track the money right now. And now it appears that this chap is based in America. Very interesting."

"No shit. We're going to have to track this mutt down if we can," Werner thought aloud. There was ample jurisdiction for the investigation he was about to open. American laws on terrorism reached across the world and had draconian penalties attached to them. And so did drug laws.

"You'll try?" Tawney asked.

"You bet your ass on that one, Bill," Werner replied positively. "I'm starting the case file myself. The hunt is on for Mr. Serov."

"Excellent. Thank you, Gus."

Werner consulted his computer for a codeword. This case would be important and classified, and the codeword on the file would read . . . no, not that one. He told the machine to pick another. Yes. PREFECT, a word he remembered from his Jesuit high school in St. Louis.

"Mr. Werner?" his secretary called. "Mr. Henriksen on line three."

"Hey, Bill," Werner said, picking up the phone.

"Cute little guy, isn't he?" Chavez asked.

John Conor Chavez was in his plastic crib-tray, sleeping peacefully at the moment. The name card in the slot on the front established his

identity, helped somewhat by an armed policeman in the nursery. There would be another on the maternity floor, and an SAS team of three soldiers on the hospital grounds—they were harder to identify, as they didn't have military haircuts. It was, again, the horse-gone-lock-the-door mentality, but Chavez didn't mind that people were around to protect his wife and child.

"Most of 'em are," John Clark agreed, remembering what Patsy and Maggie had been like at that age—only yesterday, it so often seemed. Like most men, John always thought of his children as infants, never able to forget the first time he'd held them in their hospital receiving blankets. And so now, again, he basked in the warm glow, knowing exactly how Ding felt, proud and a little intimidated by the responsibility that attended fatherhood. Well, that was how it was supposed to be. *Takes after his mother,* John thought next, which meant after *his* side of the family, which, he thought, was good. But John wondered, with an ironic smile, if the little guy was dreaming in Spanish, and if he learned Spanish growing up, well, what was the harm in being bilingual? Then his beeper went off. John grumbled as he lifted it from his belt. Bill Tawney's number. He pulled his shoe-phone from his pants pocket and dialed the number. It took five seconds for the encryption systems to synchronize.

"Yeah, Bill?"

"Good news. John, your FBI are tracking down this Serov chap. I spoke with Gus Werner half an hour ago. They've established that he took a flight from Heathrow to Chicago yesterday, then on to New York. That's the address for his credit cards. The FBI are moving very quickly on this one."

The next step was checking for a driver's license, and that came up dry, which meant they were also denied a photograph of the subject. The FBI agents checking it out in Albany were disappointed, but not especially surprised. The next step, for the next day, was to interview the postal employees at the station with the P.O. box.

• • •

"So, Dmitriy, you got back here in a hurry," Brightling observed.

"It seemed a good idea," Popov replied. "The mission was a mistake. The Rainbow soldiers are too good for such an attack on them. Sean's people did well. Their planning struck me as excellent, but the enemy was far too proficient. The skill of these people is remarkable, as we saw before."

"Well, the attack must have shaken them up," his employer observed.

"Perhaps," Popov allowed. Just then, Henriksen walked in.

"Bad news," he announced.

"What's that?"

"Dmitriy, you goofed up some, son."

"Oh? How did I do that?" the Russian asked, no small amount of irony in his voice.

"Not sure, but they know there was a Russian involved in cueing the attack on Rainbow, and the FBI is working the case now. They may know you're here."

"That is not possible," Popov objected. "Well . . . yes, they have Grady, and perhaps he talked . . . yes, he did know that I flew in from America, or he could have figured that out, and he knows the cover name I used, but that identity is gone—destroyed."

"Maybe so, but I was just on the phone with Gus Werner. I asked him about the Hereford incident, if there was anything I needed to know. He told me they've started a case looking for a Russian name, that they had reason to believe a Russian, possibly based in America, had been in contact with the PIRA. That means they know the name, Dmitriy, and that means they'll be tracking down names on airline passenger lists. Don't underestimate the FBI, pal," Henriksen warned.

"I do not," Popov replied, now slightly worried, but only slightly. It would not be all that easy to check every transatlantic flight, even in the age of computers. He also decided that his next set of false ID papers would be in the name of Jones, Smith, Brown, or Johnson, not that of a disgraced KGB chairman from the 1950s. The Serov ID name had been a joke on his part. Not a good one, he decided now. Joseph Andrew Brown, that would be the next one, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov thought, sitting there in the top-floor office.

"Is this a danger to us?" Brightling asked.

"If they find our friend here," Henriksen replied.

Brightling nodded and thought quickly. "Dmitriy, have you ever been to Kansas?"

"Hello, Mr. Maclean," Tom Sullivan said.

"Oh, hi. Want to talk to me some more?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," Frank Chatham told him.

"Okay, come on in," Maclean said, opening the door all the way, walking back to his living room, and telling himself to be cool. He sat down and muted his TV. "So, what do you want to know?"

"Anyone else you remember who might have been close to Mary Bannister?" The two agents saw Maclean frown, then shake his head.

"Nobody I can put a name on. I mean, you know, it's a singles bar,

and people bump into each other and talk, and make friends and stuff, y'know?" He thought for a second more. "Maybe one guy, but I don't know his name . . . tall guy, 'bout my age, sandy hair, big guy, like he works out and stuff . . . but I don't know his name, sorry. Mary danced with him and had drinks with him, I think, but aside from that, hey, it's too dark and crowded in there."

"And you walked her home just that one time?"

" 'Fraid so. We talked and joked some, but we never really hit it off. Just casual. I never, uh, made a move on her, if you know what I mean. Never got that far, like. Yeah, sure, I walked her home, but didn't even go in the building, didn't kiss her good night, even, just shook hands." He saw Chatham taking notes. Was this what he'd told them before? He thought so, but it was hard to remember with two federal cops in his living room. The hell of it was he *didn't* remember much about her. He'd selected her, loaded her into the truck, but that was all. He had no idea where she was now, though he imagined she was probably dead. Maclean knew what that part of the project was all about, and *that* made him a kidnapper and accessory to murder, two things he didn't exactly plan to give to these two FBI guys. New York had a death penalty statute now, and for all he knew so did the federal government. Unconsciously, he licked his lips and rubbed his hands on his slacks as he leaned back on the couch. Then he stood and faced toward the kitchen. "Can I get you guys anything?"

"No, thanks, but you go right ahead," Sullivan said. He'd just seen something he hadn't noticed in their first interview. Tension. Was it the occasional flips people got talking to FBI agents, or was this guy trying to conceal something? They watched Maclean build a drink and come back.

"How would you describe Mary Bannister?" Sullivan asked.

"Pretty, but no knockout. Nice, personable—I mean, pleasant, sense of humor, sense of fun about her. Out-oftown girl in the big city for the first time—I mean, she's just a girl, y'know?"

"But nobody really close to her, you said?"

"Not that I know of, but I didn't know her that well. What do other people say?"

"Well, people from the bar said you were pretty friendly with her . . ."

"Maybe, yeah, but not *that* friendly. I mean, it never went anywhere. I never even kissed her." He was repeating himself now, as he sipped at his bourbon and water. "Wish I did, but I didn't," he added.

"Who at the bar *are* you close to?" Chatham asked.

"Hey, that's kinda private, isn't it?" Kirk objected.

"Well, you know how it goes. We're trying to get a feel for the

place, how it works, that sort of thing."

"Well, I don't kiss and tell, okay? Not my thing."

"I can't blame you for that," Sullivan observed with a smile, "but it is kinda unusual for the singles bar crowd."

"Oh, sure, there's guys there who put notches on their guns, but that's not my style."

"So, Mary Bannister disappeared, and you didn't notice?"

"Maybe, but I didn't think much about it. It's a transient community, y'know? People come in and out, and some you never see again. They just disappear, like."

"Ever call her?"

Maclean frowned. "No, I don't remember that she gave me her number. I suppose she was in the book, but, no, I never called her."

"Just walked her home only that one time?"

"Right, just that one time," Maclean confirmed, taking another pull on his drink and wishing these two inquisitors out of his home. Did they—could they know something? Why had they come back? Well, there was nothing in his apartment to confirm that he knew *any* female from the Turtle Inn. Well, just some phone numbers, but not so much as a loose sock from the women he'd occasionally brought here. "I mean, you guys looked around the first time you were here," Maclean volunteered.

"No big deal. We always ask to do that. It's just routine," Sullivan told their suspect. "Well, we have another appointment in a few minutes up the street. Thanks for letting us talk to you. You still have my card?"

"Yeah, in the kitchen, stuck on the refrigerator."

"Okay. Look, this case is kinda hard for us. Please think it over and if you come up with anything—anything at all, please call me, okay?"

"Sure will." Maclean stood and walked them to the door, then came back to his drink and took another swallow.

"He's nervous," Chatham said, out on the street.

"Sure as hell. We have enough to do a background check on him?"

"No problem," Chatham replied.

"Tomorrow morning," the senior agent said.

It was his second trip to Teterboro Airport, in New Jersey, across the river from Manhattan, but this time it was a different aircraft, with HORIZON CORP. painted on the rudder fin. Dmitriy played along, figuring that he could escape from any place in the United States, and knowing that Henriksen would warn Brightling not to try anything drastic. There was an element of anxiety to the trip, but no greater than his curiosity, and so Popov settled into his seat on the left side

and waited for the aircraft to start its engines and taxi out. There was even a flight attendant, a pretty one, to give him a shot of Finlandia vodka, which he sipped as the Gulfstream V started rolling. Kansas, he thought, a state of wheat fields and tornadoes, less than three hours away.

"Mr. Henriksen?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Kirk Maclean."

"Anything wrong?" Henriksen asked, alerted by the tone of his voice.

CHAPTER 31

MOVEMENT

The darkness hid the landscape. Popov stepped off the aircraft, and found a large military-type automobile waiting for him. Then he noticed the lines painted on the pavement and wondered if he'd landed on an airport runway or a country road of some sort. But, no, in the distance was a huge building, partially lit. More curious than ever, Dmitriy got into the vehicle and headed off toward it. His eyes gradually got accustomed to the darkness. The surrounding land seemed very flat, with only gentle rolls visible. Behind him he saw a fuel truck had pulled up to the business jet, perhaps to send it back to New Jersey. Well, they were expensive, and doubtless Brightling and his people wanted it back where he could use it. Popov didn't know that Horizon Corporation owned many of them; their number just increased by three from the factory outside Savannah, Georgia. He was still jet-lagged, he found on entering the building. A uniformed security guard walked him to the elevator and then to his fourth-floor room, which was not unlike a medium-decent hotel room, complete with cooking facilities and a refrigerator. There was a TV and VCR, and all the tapes in the adjacent storage cupboard were—nature tapes, he saw. Lions, bears, moose, spawning salmon. Not a single feature film. The magazines on the bedside table were similarly nature oriented. How odd. But there was also a complete bar, including Absolut vodka, which was almost as good as the Russian kind he preferred. He poured himself a drink and switched on the TV to CNN.

Henriksen was being overly cautious, Dmitriy thought. What could the FBI possibly have on him? A name? From that they could perhaps develop—what? Credit cards, if they were very lucky, and from that his travel records, but none of them would have evidentiary value in any court of law. No, unless Sean Grady positively identified him as a conduit of information and funds, he was totally safe, and Popov thought he could depend on Grady not to cooperate with the British. He hated them too much to be cooperative. It was just a matter of crawling back into his hole and pulling it in after himself—an Americanism he admired. The money he'd stashed in the secondary Swiss account *might* be discoverable, but there were ways to handle

that—attorneys were so useful as an institution, he'd learned. Working through them was better than all the KGB fieldcraft combined.

No, if there was any danger to him, it was to be found in his employer, who might not know the rules of the game—but even if he didn't, Henriksen would help, and so Dmitriy relaxed and sipped his drink. He'd explore this place tomorrow, and from the way he was treated, he'd know—

—no, there was an even easier way. He lifted his phone, hit 9 to get an outside line, then dialed his apartment in New York. The call went through. The phone rang four times before his answering machine clicked in. So, he had phone access to the outside. That meant he was safe, but he was no closer to understanding what was going on than he'd been during that first meeting in France, chatting with the American businessman and regaling him with tales of a former KGB field intelligence officer. Now here he was, in *Kansas,* USA, drinking vodka and watching television, with over six million American dollars in two numbered accounts in Switzerland. He'd reached one goal. Next he had to meet another. What the hell was this adventure all about? Would he find out here? He hoped so.

The airplanes were crammed with people, all of them inbound to Kingsford Smith International Airport outside Sydney. Many of them landed on the runway, which stuck out like a finger into Botany Bay, so famous as the landing point for criminals and other English rejects sent halfway round the world on wooden sailing ships to start a new country, which, to the disbelief of those who'd dispatched them, they'd done remarkably well. Many of the passengers on the inbound flights were young, fit athletes, the pride and pick of the countries that had sent them dressed in uniform clothing that proclaimed their nations of origin. Most were tourists, people with ticket-and accommodation packages expensively bought from travel agents or given as gifts from political figures in their home countries. Many carried miniature flags. The few business passengers had listened to all manner of enthusiastic predictions for national glory at the Olympic games, which would start in the next few days.

On arriving, the athletes were treated like visiting royalty and conveyed to buses that would take them up Highway 64 to the city, and thence to the Olympic Village, which had been expensively built by the Australian government to house them. They could see the magnificent stadium nearby, and the athletes looked and wondered if they'd find personal glory there.

"So, Colonel, what do you think?"

"It's one hell of a stadium, and that's a fact," Colonel Wilson

Gearing, U.S. Army Chemical Corps, retired, replied. “But it sure gets hot here in the summer, pal.”

“It’s that El Niño business again. The ocean currents off South America have changed again, and that’s associated with unusually hot temperatures here. It’ll be in the mid-thirties—nineties to you, I suppose—for the whole Olympiad.”

“Well, I hope this fogging system works, ’cuz if it doesn’t, you’ll have a lot of heat-stroke cases here, pal.”

“It works,” the Aussie cop told him. “It’s fully tested.”

“Can I take a look at it now? Bill Henriksen wants me to see if it could be used as a chemical-agent delivery system by the bad guys.”

“Certainly. This way.” They were there in five minutes. The water-input piping was contained in its own locked room. The cop had the key for this, and took the colonel inside.

“Oh, you chlorinate the water here?” Gearing asked in semisurprise. The water came in from the Sydney city water system, didn’t it?

“Yes, we don’t want to spread any germs on our guests, do we?”

“Not exactly,” Colonel Gearing agreed, looking at the plastic chlorine container that hung on the distribution piping beyond the actual pumps. Water was filtered through that before it went into the fogging nozzles that hung in all the concourses and ramps to the stadium bowl itself. The system would have to be flushed with unchlorinated water before delivery would work, but that was easily accomplished, and the false chlorine container in his hotel room was an exact twin of this one. The contents even looked like chlorine, almost, though the nano-capsules actually contained something called Shiva. Gearing thought about that behind blank brown eyes. He’d been a chemical weapons expert his whole professional life, having worked at the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and Dugway Proving Ground in Utah—but, well, this wasn’t really chemical warfare. It was bio-war, a sister science of the one he’d studied for over twenty uniformed years. “Is the door guarded?” he asked.

“No, but it is alarmed, and it takes some minutes to play with the system, as you can see. The alarm system reports to the command post, and we have an ample reaction force there.”

“How ample?” the retired colonel asked next.

“Twenty SAS members, plus twenty police constables, are there at all times, plus ten more SAS circulating in pairs around the stadium. The people at the CP are armed with automatic weapons. The ones on patrol with pistols and radios. There is also a supplementary reaction force a kilometer distant with light armored vehicles and heavy weapons, platoon strength. Beyond that, a battalion of infantry twenty kilometers away, with helicopters and other support.”

“Sounds good to me,” Colonel Gearing said. “Can you give me the

alarm code for this facility?"

They didn't even hesitate. He was a former staff-grade army officer, after all, and a senior member of the consulting team for security at the Olympic Games. "One-One-Three-Three-Six-Six," the senior cop told him. Gearing wrote it down, then punched the numbers into the keypad, which armed and then disarmed the system. He'd be able to switch out the chlorine canister very quickly. The system was designed for rapid servicing. This would work just fine, just like the model they'd set up in Kansas, on which he and his people had practiced for several days. They'd gotten the swap-out time down to fourteen seconds. Anything under twenty meant that nobody would notice anything remiss in the fog-cooling system, because residual pressure would maintain the fogging stream.

For the first time, Gearing saw the place where he'd be doing it, and that generated a slight chill in his blood. Planning was one thing. Seeing where it would happen for real was something else. This was the place. Here he would start a global plague that would take lives in numbers far too great to tally, and which in the end would leave alive only the elect. It would save the planet—at a ghastly price, to be sure, but he'd been committed to this mission for years. He'd seen what man could do to harm things. He'd been a young lieutenant at Dugway Proving Grounds when they'd had the well-publicized accident with GB, a persistent nerve agent that had blown too far and slaughtered a few hundred sheep—and neurotoxins were not a pretty death, even for sheep. The news media hadn't even bothered to talk about the wild game that had died a similar, ugly death, everything from insects to antelope. It had shaken him that his own organization, the United States Army, could make so grave an error to cause such pain. The things he'd learned later had been worse. The binary agents he'd worked on for years—an effort to manufacture "safe" poisons for battlefield use . . . the crazy part was that it had all begun in Germany as insecticide research in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the chemicals used to kill off insects were nerve agents, simple ones that attacked and destroyed the rudimentary nervous systems in ants and beetles, but those German chemists had stumbled upon some of the deadliest chemical compounds ever formulated. So much of Gearing's career had been spent with the intelligence community, evaluating information about possible chemical-warfare plants in countries not trusted to have such things.

But the problem with chemical weapons had always been their distribution—how to spread them evenly across a battlefield, thus exposing enemy soldiers efficiently. That the same chemicals would travel downrange and kill innocent civilians had been the dirty secret that the organizations and the governments that ruled them had

always ignored. And they didn't even consider the wildlife that would also be exterminated in vast quantities—and worse still, the genetic damage those agents caused, because marginal doses of nerve gas, below the exposure needed to kill, invaded the very DNA of the victim, ensuring mutations that would last for generations. Gearing had spent his life knowing these things, and he supposed that it had desensitized him to the taking of life in large quantities.

This wasn't quite the same thing. He would not be spreading organophosphate chemical poisons, but rather tiny virus particles. And the people walking through the cooling fog in the concourses and ramps to the stadium bowl would breathe them in, and their body chemistry would break down the nano-capsules, allowing the Shiva strands to go to work … slowly, of course … and they'd go home to spread the Shiva farther, and in four to six weeks after the ending of the Sydney Olympics, the plague would erupt worldwide, and a global panic would ensue. Then Horizon Corporation would announce that it had an experimental "A" vaccine that had worked in animals and primates—and was safe for human usage—ready for mass production, and so it would be mass-produced and distributed worldwide, and four to six weeks after injection, those people, too, would develop the Shiva symptoms, and with luck the world would be depopulated down to a fractional percentage of the current population. Disorders would break out, killing many of the people blessed by Nature with highly effective immune systems, and in six months or so, there would be just a few left, well organized and well equipped, safe in Kansas and Brazil, and in six months more they would be the inheritors of a world returning to its natural state. This wouldn't be like Dugway, a purposeless accident. This would be a considered act by a man who'd contemplated mass murder for all of his professional life, but who'd only helped kill innocent animals … He turned to look at his hosts.

"What's the extended weather forecast?"

"Hot and dry, old boy. I hope the athletes are fit. They'll need to be."

"Well, then, this fogging system will be a lifesaver," Gearing observed. "Just so the wrong people don't fool with it. With your permission, I'll have my people keep an eye on this thing."

"Fine," the senior cop agreed. The American was really fixated on this fogging system, but he'd been a gas soldier, and maybe that explained it.

Popov hadn't closed his shades the previous evening, and so the dawn awoke him rather abruptly. He opened his eyes, then squinted them in pain as the sun rose over the Kansas plains. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom, he found, had Tylenol and aspirin, and there were

coffee grounds for the machine in the kitchen area, but nothing of value in the refrigerator. So he showered and had his coffee, then went out of the room looking for food. He found a cafeteria—a huge one—almost entirely empty of patrons, though there were a few people near the food tables, and there he went, got breakfast and sat alone, as he looked at the others in the cavernous room. Mainly people in their thirties and forties, he thought, professional-looking, some wearing white laboratory coats.

"Mr. Popov?" a voice said. Dmitriy turned.

"Yes?"

"I'm David Dawson, chief of security here. I have a badge for you to wear"—he handed over a white plastic shield that pinned to his shirt—"and I'm supposed to show you around today. Welcome to Kansas."

"Thank you." Popov pinned the badge on. It even had his picture on it, the Russian saw.

"You want to wear that at all times, so that people know you belong here," Dawson explained helpfully.

"Yes, I understand." So this place was pass-controlled, and it had a director of site security. How interesting.

"How was your flight in last night?"

"Pleasant and uneventful," Popov replied, sipping his second coffee of the morning. "So, what is this place?"

"Well, Horizon set it up as a research facility. You know what the company does, right?"

"Yes." Popov nodded. "Medicines and biological research, a world leader."

"Well, this is another research-and-development facility for their work. It was just finished recently. We're bringing people in now. It will soon be the company's main facility."

"Why here in the middle of nothing?" Popov asked, looking around at the mainly empty cafeteria.

"Well, for starters, it's centrally located. You can be anywhere in the country in less than three hours. And nobody's around to bother us. It's a secure facility, too. Horizon does lots of work that requires protection, you see."

"Industrial espionage?"

Dawson nodded. "That's right. We worry about that."

"Will I be able to look around, see the grounds and such?"

"I'll drive you around myself. Mr. Henriksen told me to extend you the hospitality of the facility. Go ahead and finish your breakfast. I have a few things I have to do. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Good, thank you," Popov said, watching him walk out of the room. This would be useful. There was a strange, institutional quality to this place, almost like a secure government facility . . . like a *Russian*

facility, Popov thought. It seemed to have no soul at all, no character, no human dimension that he could identify. Even KGB would have hung a photo of Lenin on the huge, bare, white walls to give the place *some* human scale. There was a wall of tinted windows, which allowed him to see out to what appeared to be wheat fields and a road, but nothing else. It was almost like being on a ship at sea, he thought, unlike anything he'd ever experienced. The former KGB officer worked through his breakfast, all of his instincts on alert, hoping to learn more, and as quickly as he could.

"Domingo, I need you to take this one," John said.

"It's a long way to go, John, and I just became a daddy," Chavez objected.

"Sorry, pal, but Covington is down. So's Chin. I'm going to send you and four men. It's an easy job, Ding. The Aussies know their stuff, but they asked us to come down and give it a look—and the reason for that is the expert way you handled your field assignments, okay?"

"When do I leave?"

"Tonight, 747 out of Heathrow." Clark held up the ticket envelope.

"Great," Chavez grumbled.

"Hey, at least you were there for the delivery, pop."

"I suppose. What if something crops up while we're away?" Chavez tried as a weak final argument.

"We can scratch a team together, but you really think somebody's going to yank our chain anytime soon? After we bagged those IRA pukes? I don't," Clark concluded.

"What about the Russian guy, Serov?"

"The FBI's on it, trying to run him down in New York. They've assigned a bunch of agents to it."

One of them was Tom Sullivan. He was currently in the post office. Box 1453 at this station belonged to the mysterious Mr. Serov. It had some junk mail in it, and a Visa bill, but no one had opened the box in at least nine days, judging by the dates on the envelopes, and none of the clerks professed to know what the owner of Box 1453 looked like, though one thought he didn't pick up his mail very often. He'd given a street address when obtaining the box, but that address, it turned out, was to an Italian bakery several blocks away, and the phone number was a dud, evidently made up for the purpose.

"Sure as hell, this guy's a spook," Sullivan thought aloud, wondering why the Foreign Counterintelligence group hadn't picked up the case.

"Sure wiggles like one," Chatham agreed. And their assignment ended right there. They had no evidence of a crime for the subject,

and not enough manpower to assign an agent to watch the P.O. box around the clock.

• • •

Security was good here, Popov thought, as he rode around in another of the military-type vehicles that Dawson called a Hummer. The first thing about security was to have defensive depth. That they had. It was ten kilometers at least before you approached a property line.

"It used to be a number of large farms, but Horizon bought them all out a few years ago and started building the research lab. It took a while, but it's finished now."

"You still grow wheat here?"

"Yeah, the facility itself doesn't use all that much of the land, and we try to keep the rest of it the way it was. Hell, we grow almost enough wheat for all the people at the lab, got our own elevators an' all over that way." He pointed to the north.

Popov looked that way and saw the massive concrete structures some distance away. It was amazing how large America was, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, and this part seemed so flat, not unlike the Russian steppes. The land had some dips and rises, but all they seemed to do was emphasize the lack of a real hill anywhere. The Hummer went north, and eventually crossed a rail line that evidently led to the grain silos—elevators, Dawson had called them? Elevators? Why that word? Farther north and he could barely make out traffic moving on a distant highway.

"That's the northern border," Dawson explained, as they passed into nonfarm land.

"What's that?"

"Oh, that's our little herd of pronghorn antelopes." Dawson turned the wheel slightly to go closer. The Hummer bumped over the grassy land.

"They're pretty animals."

"That they are, and very fast. We call 'em the speedgoat. Not a true antelope at all, genetically closer to goats. Those babies can run at forty miles an hour, and do it for damned near an hour. They also have superb eyesight."

"Difficult to hunt, I imagine. Do you hunt?"

"They are, and I'm not. I'm a vegan."

"What?"

"Vegetarian. I don't eat meat or other animal products," Dawson said somewhat proudly. Even his belt was made of canvas rather than leather.

"Why is that, David?" Popov asked. He'd never come across anyone like him before.

"Oh, just a choice I made. I don't approve of killing animals for food or any other reason"—he turned—"not everybody agrees with me, not even here at the Project, but I'm not the only one who thinks that way. Nature is something to be respected, not exploited."

"So, you don't buy your wife a fur coat," Popov said, with a smile. He had heard about those fanatics.

"Not hardly!" Dawson laughed.

"I've never hunted," Popov said next, wondering what response he'd get. "I never saw the sense in it, and in Russia they've nearly exterminated most game animals."

"So I understand. That's very sad, but they'll come back someday," Dawson pronounced.

"How, with all the state hunters working to kill them?" That institution hadn't ended even with the demise of Communist rule.

Dawson's face took on a curious expression, one Popov had seen many times before at KGB. The man knew something he was unwilling to say right now, though what he knew was important somehow. "Oh, there's ways, pal. There's ways."

The driving tour required an hour and a half, at the end of which Popov was mightily impressed with the size of the facility. The approach road to the building complex *was* an airport, he saw, with electronic instruments to guide airplanes in and traffic lights to warn autos off when flight operations were in progress. He asked Dawson about it.

"Yeah, it is kinda obvious, isn't it? You can get a G in and out of here pretty easy. They say you can bring in real commercial jets, too, medium-sized ones, but I've never seen that done."

"Dr. Brightling spent a lot of money to build this establishment."

"That he did," Dawson agreed. "But it's worth it, trust me." He drove up the highway/runway to the lab building and stopped. "Come with me."

Popov followed without asking why. He'd never appreciated the power of a major American corporation. This could and should have been a government facility, with all the land and the huge building complex. The hotel building in which he'd spent the night could probably hold thousands of people—and *why* build such a place here? Was Brightling going to move his entire corporation here, all his employees? So far from major cities, airports, all the things that civilization offered. Why here? Except, of course, for security. It was also far from large police agencies, from news media and reporters. For the purposes of security, this facility might as easily have been on the moon.

The lab building was also larger than it needed to be, Dmitriy thought, but unlike the others, it appeared to be functioning at the moment. Inside was a desk, and a receptionist who knew David Dawson. The two men proceeded unimpeded to the elevators, then up to the fourth floor, and right to an office.

"Hi, Doc," Dawson said. "This is Dmitriy. Dr. Brightling sent him to us last night. He's going to be here awhile," the security chief added.

"I got the fax." The physician stood and extended his hand to Popov. "Hi, I'm John Killgore. Follow me." And the two of them went through a side door into an examining room, while Dawson waited outside. Killgore told Popov to disrobe down to his underwear, and proceeded to give him a physical examination, taking blood pressure, checking eyes and ears and reflexes, prodding his belly to make sure that the liver was nonpalpable, and finally taking four test tubes of blood for further examination. Popov submitted to it all without objection, somewhat bemused by the whole thing, and slightly intimidated by the physician, as most people were. Finally, Killgore pulled a vial from the medicine cabinet and stuck a disposable syringe into it.

"What's this?" Dmitriy Arkadeyevich asked.

"Just a booster shot," Killgore explained, setting the vial down.

Popov picked it up and looked at the label, which read **"B-2100** 11-21-00" and nothing else. Then he winced when the needle went into his upper arm. He'd never enjoyed getting shots.

"There, that's done," Killgore said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow about the blood work." With that done, he pointed his patient to the hook his clothing hung on. It was a pity, Killgore thought, that the patient couldn't be appreciative for having his life saved.

"He might as well not exist," Special Agent Sullivan told his boss. "Maybe somebody comes in to check his mail, but not in the past nine or ten days."

"What can we do about that?"

"If you want, we can put a camera and motion sensor inside the box, like the FCI guys do to cover dead-drops. We can do it, but it costs money and manpower to keep an agent or two close if the alarm goes off. Is this case that important?"

"Yes, it is now," the Assistant Special Agent in charge of the New York field division told his subordinate. "Gus Werner started this one off, and he's keeping a personal eye on the case file. So, talk to the FCI guys and get them to help you cover the P.O. box."

Sullivan nodded and concealed his surprise. "Okay, will do."

"Next, what about the Bannister case?"

"That's not going anywhere at the moment. The closest thing to a

hit we've gotten to this point is the second interview with this Kirk Maclean guy. He acted a little antsy. Maybe just nerves on his part, maybe something else—we have nothing on him and the missing victim, except that they had drinks and talked together at this bar uptown. We ran a background on him. Nothing much to report. Makes a good living for Horizon Corporation—he's a biochemist by profession, graduated University of Delaware, master's degree, working toward a doctorate at Columbia. Belongs to some conservation groups, including Earth First and the Sierra Club, gets their periodicals. His main hobby is backpacking. He has twenty-two grand in the bank, and he pays his bills on time. His neighbors say he's quiet and withdrawn, doesn't make many friends in the building. No known girlfriends. He says he knew Mary Bannister casually, walked her home once, no sexual involvement, and that's it, he says."

"Anything else?" the ASAC asked.

"The flyers the NYPD handed out haven't developed into anything yet. I can't say that I'm very hopeful at this point."

"What's next, then?"

Sullivan shrugged. "In a few more days we're going back to Maclean to interview him again. Like I said, he looked a little bit hinky, but not enough to justify coverage on him."

"I talked to this Lieutenant d'Allessandro. He's thinking there might be a serial killer working that part of town."

"Maybe so. There's another girl missing, Anne Pretloe's her name, but nothing's turning on that one either. Nothing for us to work with. We'll keep scratching away at it," Sullivan promised. "If one of them's out there, sooner or later he'll make a mistake." But until he did, more young women would continue to disappear into that particular black hole, and the combined forces of the NYPD and the FBI couldn't do much to stop it. "I've never worked a case like this before."

"I have," the ASAC said. "The Green River killer in Seattle. We put a ton of resources on that one, but we never caught the mutt, and the killings just stopped. Maybe he got picked up for burglary or robbing a liquor store, and maybe he's sitting it out in a Washington State prison, waiting to get paroled so he can take down some more hookers. We have a great profile on how his brain works, but that's it, and we don't know what brain the profile fits. These cases are real head-scratchers."

Kirk Maclean was having lunch just then, sitting in one of the hundreds of New York delicatessens, eating egg salad and drinking a cream soda.

"So?" Henriksen asked.

"So, they came back to talk to me again, asking the same fuckin'

questions over and over, like they expect me to change my story."

"Did you?" the former FBI agent asked.

"No, there's only one story I'm going to tell, and that's the one I prepared in advance. How did you know that they might come to me like this?" Maclean asked.

"I used to be FBI. I've worked cases, and I know how the Bureau operates. They are very easy to underestimate, and then they appear—no, then *you* appear on the scope, and they start looking, and mainly they don't stop looking until they find something," Henriksen said, as a further warning to this kid.

"So, where are they now?" Maclean asked. "The girls, I mean."

"You don't need to know that, Kirk. Remember that. You do not need to know."

"Okay." Maclean nodded his submission. "Now what?"

"They'll come to see you again. They've probably done a background check on you and—"

"What's that mean?"

"Talk to your neighbors, coworkers, check your credit history, your car, whether you have tickets, any criminal convictions, look for anything that suggests that you could be a bad guy," Henriksen explained.

"There isn't anything like that on me," Kirk said.

"I know." Henriksen had done the same sort of check himself. There was no sense in having somebody with a criminal past out breaking the law in the name of the Project. The only black mark against him was Maclean's membership in Earth First, which was regarded by the Bureau almost as a terrorist—well, extremist—organization. But all Maclean did with that bunch was to read their monthly newsletter. They had a lot of good ideas, and there was talk in the Project about getting some of them injected with the "B" vaccine, but they had too many members whose ideas of protecting the planet were limited to driving nails into trees, so that the buzz saws would break. That sort of thing only chopped up workers in sawmills and raised the ire of the ignorant public without teaching them anything useful. That was the problem with terrorists, Henriksen had known for years. Their actions never matched their aspirations. Well, they weren't smart enough to develop the resources they needed to be effective. You had to live in the economic eco-structure to achieve that, and they just couldn't compete on that battlefield. Ideology was never enough. You needed brains and adaptability, too. To be one of the elect, you had to be worthy. Kirk Maclean wasn't really worthy, but he was part of the team. And now he was rattled by the attention of the FBI. All he had to do was stick to his story. But he was shook up, and that meant he couldn't be trusted. So, they'd have to do something about it.

"Get your stuff packed. We'll move you out to the Project tonight." What the hell, it would be starting soon anyway. Very soon, in fact.

"Good," Maclean responded, finishing his egg salad. Henriksen was eating pastrami, he saw. Not a vegan. Well, maybe someday.

Artwork was finally going up on some of the blank walls. So, Popov thought, the facility wasn't to be entirely soulless. It was nature paintings—mountains, forests, and animals. Some of the pictures were quite good, but most of them were ordinary, the kind of thing you found on the walls of cheap motels. How strange, the Russian thought, that with all the money they'd spent to build this monstrous facility in the middle of nowhere, that the artwork was second-rate. Well, taste was taste, and Brightling was a technocrat, and doubtless uneducated in the finer aspects of life. In ancient times he would have been a druid, Dmitriy thought, a bearded man in a long white robe who worshiped trees and animals and sacrificed virgins on stone altars to his pagan beliefs. There were better things to do with virgins. There was such a strange mixture of the old and the new in this man—and his company. The director of security was a "vegan," who never ate meat? What rubbish! Horizon Corporation was a world leader in several vital new technological areas, but it was peopled by madmen of such primitive and strange beliefs. He supposed it was an American affectation. Such a huge country, the brilliant coexisting with the mad. Brightling was a genius, but he'd hired Popov to initiate terrorist incidents—

—and then he'd brought Popov here. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought about that as he chewed his dinner. *Why here?* What was so special about this place?

Now he could understand why Brightling had shrugged off the amount he'd transferred to the terrorists. Horizon Corporation had spent more paving one of the access roads than all the money Popov had taken from the corporate coffers and translated into his own. But this place *was* important. You could see that in every detail, down to the revolving doors that kept the air inside—every doorway he'd seen was like some sort of air lock, and made him think of a spacecraft. Not a single dollar had been spared to make this facility perfect. But perfect for what?

Popov shook his head and sipped at his tea. The quality of the food was excellent. The quality of *everything* was excellent, except the absurdly pedestrian artwork. There was, therefore, not a single mistake here. Brightling was not the sort of man to compromise on anything, was he? Therefore, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself, everything here *was* deliberate, and everything fit into a pattern, from which he could discern the purpose of the building and the man who'd

erected it. He'd allowed himself to be beguiled this day with his tour —and his physical examination? What the *hell* was *that* all about? The doctor had given him an injection. A "booster" he'd called it. But what for? Against what?

Outside this shrine to technology was a mere farm, and outside that, wild animals, which his driver of the day had seemed to worship.

Druids, he thought. In his time as a field officer in England he'd taken the time to read books and learn about the culture of the English, played the tourist, even traveled to Stonehenge and other places, in the hope of understanding the people better. Ultimately, though, he found that history was history, and though highly interesting, no more logical there than in the Soviet Union—where history had mainly been lies concocted to fit the ideological pattern of Marxism-Leninism.

Druids had been pagans, their culture based on the gods supposed to live in trees and rocks, and to which human lives had been sacrificed. That had doubtless been a measure exercised by the druid priesthood to maintain their control over the peasants … and the nobility, too, in fact, as all religions tended to do. In return for offering some hope and certainty for the greatest mysteries of life—what happened after death, why the rain fell when it did, how the world had come to be—they extracted their price of earthly power, which was to tell everyone how to live. It had probably been a way for people of intellectual gifts but ignoble birth to achieve the power associated with the nobility. But it had always been about power—earthly power. And like the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the druid priesthood had probably believed that which they said and that which they enforced because—they had to believe it. It had been the source of their power, and you had to believe in that.

But these people here weren't primitives, were they? They were mainly scientists, some of them world leaders in their fields. Horizon Corporation was a collection of geniuses, wasn't it? How *else* had Brightling accumulated so much money?

Popov frowned as he piled his plates back on the tray, then walked off to deposit them on the collection table. This was oddly like the KGB cafeteria at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square. Good food and anonymity. Finished, he made his way back to his room, still in the dark as to what the hell had taken place in his life over the past months. Druids? How could people of science be like that? Vegans? How could people of good sense *not* want to eat meat? What was so special about the gray-brown antelopes that lived on the margins of the property? And that man, he was the director of security here, and therefore he was supposedly a man with the highest personal trust. A

fucking vegetarian in a land that produced beef in quantities the rest of the world could only dream about.

What the hell was that shot for? Popov wondered again as he flipped on the television. “Booster”? Against what? Why had he been examined at all? The deeper he went, the more information he found, the more perplexing the puzzle became.

But whatever this was all about, it had to be commensurate in scope to the investment Brightling and his company had made—and that was vast! And whatever it was about, it didn’t shrink at causing the death of people unknown and clearly unimportant to John Brightling. But what possible pattern did all of that fit?

Popov admitted yet again that he still didn’t have a clue. Had he reported on this adventure to his KGB superiors, they would have thought him slightly mad, but they would have ordered him to pursue the case further until he had some sort of conclusion to present, and because he was KGB-trained, he could no more stop pursuing the facts to their conclusion than he could stop breathing.

At least the first-class seats were comfortable, Chavez told himself. The flight would be a long one—about as long as a flight could be, since the destination was 10,500 miles away, and the whole planet was only 24,000 miles around. British Airways Flight 9 would be leaving at 10:15 P.M., go eleven and three quarters hours to Bangkok, lay over for an hour and a half, then another eight hours and fifty minutes to Sydney, by which time, Ding thought, he’d be about ready to pull out his pistol and shoot the flight crew. All this, plus not having his wife and son handy, just because the fucking Aussies wanted him to hold their hand during the track meet. He’d arrive at 5:20 A.M. *two* days from now due to the vagaries of the equator and the International Dateline, with his body clock probably more scrambled than the eggs he had for breakfast. But there was nothing he could do about it, and at least BA had stopped smoking on their flights—those people who did smoke would probably be going totally nuts, but that wasn’t his problem. He had four books and six magazines to pass the time, plus a private TV screen for movies, and decided that he had to make the best of it. The flight attendants closed the doors, the engines started, and the captain came on the intercom to welcome them aboard their home for the next day—or two days, depending on how you looked at it.

CHAPTER 32

BLOOD WORK

"Was that a good idea?" Brightling asked.

"I think so. Kirk was on the travel list anyway. We can have his coworkers tell anybody who asks that he was called out of town on company business," Henriksen said.

"What if the FBI agents go back to see him?"

"Then he's out of town, and they'll just have to wait," Henriksen answered. "Investigations like this last for months, but there won't be months, will there?"

Brightling nodded. "I suppose. How's Dmitriy doing out there?"

"Dave Dawson says he's doing okay, asking a lot of touristy questions, but that's all. He had his physical from Johnny Killgore, and he's gotten his 'B' shot."

"I hope he likes being alive. From what he said, he might turn out to be our kind of people, you know?"

"I'm not so sure about that, but he doesn't know squat, and by the time he finds out, it'll be too late anyway. Wil Gearing is in place, and he says everything's going according to plan, John. Three more weeks, and then it'll all be under way. So, it's time to start moving our people to Kansas."

"Too bad. The longevity project's really looking good at the moment."

"Oh?"

"Well, it's pretty hard to predict breakthroughs, but the research threads all look very interesting at the moment, Bill."

"So we might have lived forever? . . ." Henriksen asked, with a wry smile. For all the time he'd been associated with Brightling and Horizon Corporation, he had trouble believing such predictions. The company had caused some genuine medical miracles, but this was just too much to credit.

"I can think of worse things to happen. I'm going to make sure that whole team gets the 'B' shot," Brightling said.

"Well, take the whole team out there and put 'em to work in Kansas, for crying out loud," Bill suggested. "What about the rest of the company?"

Brightling didn't like that question, didn't like the fact that more than half of the Horizon employees would be treated like the rest of humanity—left to die at best, or to be murdered by the "A" vaccine at worst. John Brightling, M.D., Ph.D., had some lingering morality, part of which was loyalty to the people who worked for him—which was why Dmitriy Popov was in Kansas with the "B"-class antibodies in his system. So, even the Big Boss wasn't entirely comfortable with what he was doing, Henriksen saw. Well, that was conscience for you. Shakespeare had written about the phenomenon.

"That's already decided," Brightling said, after a second's discomfort. He'd be saving those who were part of the Project, and those whose scientific knowledge would be useful in the future. Accountants, lawyers, and secretaries, by and large, would not be saved. That he'd be saving about five thousand people—as many as the Kansas and Brazil facilities could hold—was quite a stretch, especially considering that only a small fraction of those people knew what the Project was all about. Had he been a Marxist, Brightling would have thought or even said aloud that the world needed an intellectual elite to make it into the New World, but he didn't really think in those terms. He truly did believe that he was saving the planet, and though the cost of doing so was murderously high, it was a goal worth pursuing, though part of him hoped that he'd be able to live through the transition period without taking his own life from the guilt factor that was sure to assault him.

It was easier for Henriksen. What people were doing to the world was a crime. Those who did it, supported it, or did nothing to stop it, were criminals. His job was to make them stop. It was the only way. And at the end of it the innocent would be safe, as would Nature. In any case, the men and the instruments of the Project were now in place. Wil Gearing was confident that he could accomplish his mission, so skillfully had Global Security insinuated itself into the security plan for the Sydney Olympics, with the help of Popov and his ginned-up operations in Europe. So, the Project would go forward, and that was that, and a year from now the planet would be transformed. Henriksen's only concern was how many people would survive the plague. The scientific members of the Project had discussed it to endless length. Most would die from starvation or other causes, and few would have the capacity to organize themselves enough to determine why the Project members had also survived and then take action against them. Most natural survivors would be invited into the protection of the elect, and the smart ones would accept that protection. The others—who cared? Henriksen had also set up the security systems at the Kansas facility. There were heavy weapons there, enough to handle rioting farmers with Shiva symptoms, he was

sure.

The most likely result of the plague would be a rapid breakdown of society. Even the military would rapidly come apart, but the Kansas facility was a good distance from the nearest military base, and the soldiers based at Fort Riley would be sent to the cities first to maintain order until they, too, came down with symptoms. Then they'd be treated by the military doctors—for what little good it would do—and by the time unit cohesion broke down, it would be far too late for even the soldiers to take any organized action. So, it would be a twitchy time, but one that would pass rapidly, and so long as the Project people in Kansas kept quiet, they ought not to suffer organized attack. Hell, all they had to do was to let the world believe that people were dying there, too, maybe dig a few graves and toss bags into them for the cameras—better yet, burn them in the open—and they could frighten people away from another focal center of the plague. No, they'd considered this one for years. The Project would succeed. It had to. Who else would save the planet?

The cafeteria theme today was Italian, and Popov was pleased to see that the cooks here were not "vegans." The lasagna had meat in it. Coming out with his tray and glass of Chianti, he spotted Dr. Killgore eating alone and decided to walk over that way.

"Ah, hello, Mr. Popov."

"Good day, Doctor. How did my blood work turn out?"

"Fine. Your cholesterol is slightly elevated, and the HDL/LDL ratio is a little off, but I wouldn't get very upset about it. A little exercise should fix it nicely. Your PSA is fine—"

"What's that?"

"Prostate-Specific Antibody, a check for prostate cancer. All men should check that out when they turn fifty or so. Yours is fine. I should have told you yesterday, but I got piled up. Sorry about that—but there was nothing important to tell you, and that's a case where no news really is good news, Mr. Popov."

"My name is Dmitriy," the Russian said, extending his hand.

"John," the doctor replied, taking it. "Ivan to you, I guess."

"And I see you are not a vegan," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich observed, gesturing to Killgore's food.

"Oh? What? Me? No, Dmitriy, I'm not one of those. *Homo sapiens* is an omnivore. Our teeth are not those of vegetarians. The enamel isn't thick enough. That's sort of a political movement, the vegans. Some of them won't even wear leather shoes because leather's an animal product." Killgore ate half a meatball to show what he thought of that. "I even like hunting."

"Oh? Where does one do that here?"

"Not on the Project grounds. We have rules about that, but in due course I'll be able to hunt deer, elk, buffalo, birds, everything I want," Killgore said, looking out the huge windows.

"Buffalo? I thought they were extinct," Popov said, remembering something he'd heard or read long before.

"Not really. They came close a hundred years ago, but enough survived to thrive at Yellowstone National Park and in private collections. Some people even breed them with domestic cattle, and the meat's pretty good. It's called beefalo. You can buy it in some stores around here."

"A buffalo can breed with a cow?" Popov asked.

"Sure. The animals are very close, genetically speaking, and cross-breeding is actually pretty easy. The hard part," Killgore explained with a grin, "is that a domestic bull is intimidated by a bison cow, and has trouble performing his duty, as it were. They fix that by raising them together from infancy, so the bull is used to them by the time he's big enough to do the deed."

"What about horses? I would have expected horses in a place like this."

"Oh, we have them, mainly quarter horses and some Appaloosas. The barn is down in the southwest part of the property. You ride, Dmitriy?"

"No, but I have seen many Western movies. When Dawson drove me around, I expected to see cowboys herding cattle carrying Colt pistols on their belts."

Killgore had a good chuckle at that. "I guess you're a city boy. Well, so was I once, but I've come to love it out here, especially on horseback. Like to go for a ride?"

"I've never sat on a horse," Popov admitted, intrigued by the invitation. This doctor was an open man, and perhaps a trusting one. He could get information from this man, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought.

"Well, we have a nice gentle quarter horse mare—Buttermilk, would you believe?" Killgore paused. "Damn, it's nice to be out here."

"You are a recent arrival?"

"Just last week. I used to be in the Binghamton lab, northwest of New York City," he explained.

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a physician—epidemiologist, as a matter of fact. I'm supposed to be an expert on how diseases riffle through populations. But I do a lot of clinical stuff, too, and so I'm one of the designated family practitioners. Like a GP in the old days. I know a little bit about everything, but I'm not really an expert in any field—except epidemiology, and that's more like being an accountant than a doc,

really."

"I have a sister who is a physician," Popov tried.

"Oh? Where?"

"In Moscow. She's a pediatrician. She graduated Moscow State University in the 1970s. Her name is Maria Arkadeyevna. I am Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Our father was Arkady, you see."

"Was he a doctor, too?" Killgore asked.

Popov shook his head. "No, he was like me, a spy—an intelligence officer for State Security." Popov dropped that in to see how Killgore would react. He figured he didn't need to keep it a secret out here—and it could be useful. You give something to get something . . .

"You were KGB? No shit?" the doctor asked, impressed.

"Yes, I was, but with the changes in my country, KGB diminished in size, and I was, how you say, laid off?"

"What did you do with KGB? Can you say?"

It was as though he'd just admitted to being a sports star, Popov saw. "I was an intelligence officer. I gathered information, and I was a conduit for people in whom KGB had interest."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, I met with certain people and groups to discuss . . . matters of mutual interest," he replied coyly.

"Like who?"

"I am not supposed to say. Your Dr. Brightling knows. That is why he hired me, in fact."

"But you're part of the Project now, right?"

"I do not know what that means—John sent me here, but he didn't say why."

"Oh, I see. Well, you'll be here for a while, Dmitriy." That had been obvious from the fax the physician had received from New York. This Popov guy *was* now part of the Project, whether he wanted to be or not. He'd had his "B" shot, after all.

The Russian tried to recover control of the conversation: "I've heard that before, project—what project? What exactly are you doing here?"

For the first time, Killgore looked uncomfortable. "Well, John will brief you in on that when he gets out here, Dmitriy. So, how was dinner?"

"The food is good, for institutional food," Popov replied, wondering what mine he'd just stepped on. He'd been close to something important. His instincts told him that very clearly indeed. He'd asked a direct question of someone who supposed that he'd already known the answer, and his lack of specific knowledge had surprised Killgore.

"Yeah, we have some good people here in food services." Killgore finished his bread. "So, want to take a ride in the country?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

"Meet me here tomorrow morning, say about seven, and I'll show you around the right way." Killgore walked away, wondering what the Russian was here for. Well, if John Brightling had personally recruited him, he had to be important to the Project—but if that were true, how the hell could he not know what the Project was all about? Should he ask someone? But if so, whom?

They knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Sullivan and Chatham waited a few minutes—they might have caught the guy on the toilet or in the shower—but there was no response. They took the elevator downstairs, found the doorman, and identified themselves.

"Any idea where Mr. Maclean is?"

"He left earlier today, carrying a few bags like he was going somewhere, but I don't know where."

"Cab to the airport?" Chatham asked.

The doorman shook his head. "No, a car came for him and headed off west." He pointed that way, in case they didn't know where west was.

"Did he do anything about his mail?"

Another headshake: "No."

"Okay, thanks," Sullivan said, heading off to where their Bureau car was parked. "Business trip? Vacation?"

"We can call his office tomorrow to find out. It's not like he's a real suspect yet, is it, Tom?"

"I suppose not," Sullivan responded. "Let's head off to the bar and try the photos on some more people."

"Right," Chatham agreed reluctantly. This case was taking away his TV time at home, which was bad enough. It was also going nowhere at the moment, which was worse.

• • •

Clark awoke to the noise and had to think for a second or so to remember that Patsy had moved in with them so as not to be alone, and to have her mother's help with JC, as they were calling him. This time he decided to get up, too, despite the early hour. Sandy was already up, her maternal instincts ignited by the sound of a crying baby. John arrived in time to see his wife hand his newly re-diapered grandson to his daughter, who sat somewhat bleary-eyed in a rocking chair purchased for the purpose, her nightie open and exposing her breast. John turned away in mild embarrassment and looked instead at his similarly nightieclad wife, who smiled benignly at the picture

before her.

He was a cute little guy, Clark thought. He peeked back. JC's mouth was locked onto the offered nipple and started sucking—maybe the only instinct human children were born with, the mother-child bond that men simply could not replicate at this stage in a child's life. What a precious thing life was. Just days before, John Conor Chavez had been a fetus, a *thing* living inside his mother—and whether or not he'd been a living thing depended on what one thought of abortion, and that, to John Clark, was a matter of some controversy. He had killed in his life, not frequently, but not as seldom as he would have preferred, either. He told himself at such times that the people whose lives he took had deserved their fates, either because of actions or their associations. He'd also been largely an instrument of his country at those times, and hence able to lay off whatever guilt he might have felt on a larger identity. But now, seeing JC, he had to remind himself that every life he'd taken had started like this one had—helpless, totally dependent on the care of his mother, later growing into a manhood determined both by his own actions and the influence of others, and only then becoming a force for good or evil. How did *that* happen? What twisted a person to evil? Choice? Destiny? Luck, good or bad? What had twisted his own life to the good—and was his life a servant of the good? Just one more of the damned-fool things that entered your head at oh-dark-thirty. Well, he told himself, he was sure that he'd never hurt a baby during that life, however violent parts of it had been. And he never would. No, he'd only harmed people who had harmed others first, or threatened to do so, and who had to be stopped from doing so because the others he protected, either immediately or distantly, had rights as well, and he protected them and those from harm, and that settled the thoughts for the moment.

He took a step toward the pair, reached down to touch the little feet, and got no reaction, because JC had his priorities lined up properly at the moment. Food. And the antibodies that came with breast milk to keep him healthy. In time, his eyes would recognize faces and his little face would smile, and he'd learn to sit up, then crawl, then walk, and finally speak, and so begin to join the world of men. Ding would be a good father and a good model for his grandson to emulate, Clark was sure, especially with Patsy there to be a check on his father's adverse tendencies. Clark smiled and walked back to bed, trying to remember exactly where Chavez the Elder was at the moment, and leaving the women's work to the women of the house.

It was hours later when the dawn again awoke Popov in his motel-like room. He'd fallen quickly into a routine, first turning on his coffeemaker, then going into the bathroom to shower and shave, then

coming out ten minutes later to switch on CNN. The lead story was about the Olympics. The world had become so dull. He remembered his first field assignment to London, as in his hotel he'd watched CNN comment and report on East-West differences, the movement of armies and the growth of suspicion between the political groups that had defined the world of his youth. He especially remembered the strategic issues so often misreported by journalists, both print and electronic: MIRVs and missiles, and throw weight, and ABM systems that had supposedly threatened to upset the balance of power. All things of the past now, Popov told himself. For him, it was as though a mountain range had disappeared. The shape of the world had changed virtually overnight, the things he'd believed to be immutable had indeed mutated into something he'd never believed possible. The global war he'd feared, along with his agency and his nation, was now no more likely than a life-ending meteor from the heavens.

It was time to learn more. Popov dressed and headed down to the cafeteria, where he found Dr. Killgore eating breakfast, just as promised.

"Good morning, John," the Russian said, taking his seat across the table from the epidemiologist.

"Morning, Dmitriy. Ready for your ride?"

"Yes, I think I am. You said the horse was gentle?"

"That's why they call her Buttermilk, eight-year-old quarter horse mare. She won't hurt you."

"Quarter horse? What does that mean?"

"It means they only race a quarter mile, but, you know, one of the richest horse races in the world is for that distance, down in Texas. I forget what they call it, but the purse is huge. Well, one more institution we won't be seeing much more of," Killgore went on, buttering his toast.

"Excuse me?" Popov asked.

"Hmph? Oh, nothing important, Dmitriy." And it wasn't. The horses would survive for the most part, returning to the wild to see if they could make it after centuries of being adapted to human care. He supposed their instincts, genetically encoded in their DNA, would save most of them. And someday Project members and/or their progeny would capture them, break them, and ride them on their way to enjoy Nature and Her ways. The working horses, quarters and Appaloosas, should do well. Thoroughbreds he was less sure of, super-adapted as they were to do one thing—run in a circle as fast as their physiology would allow—and little else. Well, that was their misfortune, and Darwin's laws were harsh, though also fair in their way. Killgore finished his breakfast and stood. "Ready?"

"Yes, John." Popov followed him to the doors. Outside, Killgore had

his own Hummer, which he drove to the southwest in the clear, bright morning. Ten minutes later they were at the horse barns. He took a saddle from the tack room and walked down to a stall whose door had BUTTERMILK engraved on the pine. He opened it and walked in, quickly saddled the horse, and handed Popov the reins.

"Just walk her outside. She won't bite or kick or anything. She's very docile, Dmitriy."

"If you say so, John," the Russian observed dubiously. He was wearing sneakers rather than boots, and wondered if that was important or not. The horse looked at him with her huge brown eyes, revealing nothing as to what, if anything, she thought of this new human who was leading her outside. Dmitriy walked to the barn's large door, and the horse followed quietly into the clear morning air. A few minutes later, Killgore appeared, astride his horse, a gelding, so it appeared.

"You know how to get on?" the physician asked.

Popov figured he'd seen enough Western movies. He stuck his left foot into the stirrups and climbed up, swinging his right leg over and finding the opposite stirrup.

"Good. Now just hold the reins like this and click your tongue, like this." Killgore demonstrated. Popov did the same, and the horse, dumb as she appeared to be, started walking forward. Some of this must be instinctive on his part, the Russian thought. He was doing things—apparently the right things—almost without instruction. Wasn't that remarkable?

"There you go, Dmitriy," the doctor said approvingly. "This is how it's supposed to be, man. A pretty morning, a horse 'tween your legs, and lots of country to cover."

"But no pistol." Popov observed with a chuckle.

Killgore did the same. "Well, no Indians or rustlers here to kill, pal. Come on." Killgore's legs thumped in on his mount, making him move a little faster, and Buttermilk did the same. Popov got his body into a rhythm similar to that of Buttermilk's and kept pace with him.

It was magnificent, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, and now he understood the ethos of all those bad movies he'd seen. There *was* something fundamental and manly about this, though he lacked a proper hat as well as a sixgun. He reached into his pocket and took out his sunglasses, looked around at the rolling land and somehow felt himself to be a part of it all.

"John, I must thank you. I have never done this before. It is wonderful," he said sincerely.

"It's Nature, man. It's the way things were always supposed to be. Come on, Mystic," he said to his mount, speeding up a little more, looking back to see that Popov could handle the increased pace.

It wasn't easy to synchronize his body movements in pace with the horse, but gradually Popov managed it, and soon pulled up alongside.

"So, this is how Americans settled the West?"

Killgore nodded. "Yep. Once this was covered with buffalo, three or four great herds, as far as the eye could see . . .

"Hunters did it, did it all in a period of about ten years, using single-shot Sharps buffalo guns mainly. They killed them for the hides to make blankets and stuff, for the meat—sometimes they killed 'em just for the tongues. Slaughtered 'em like Hitler did with the Jews." Killgore shook his head. "One of the greatest crimes America ever committed, Dmitriy, just killed 'em just 'cause they were in the way. But they'll be coming back," he added, wondering how long it would take. Fifty years—he'd have a fair chance of seeing it then. Maybe a hundred years? They'd be letting the wolves and barren-grounds grizzly come back, too, but predators would come back slower. They didn't breed as rapidly as their prey animals. He wanted to see the prairie again as it had once been. So did many other Project members, and some of them wanted to live in tepees, like the Indians had done. But that, he thought, was a little bit extreme—political ideas taking the place of common sense.

"Hey, John!" a voice called from a few hundred yards behind. Both men turned to see a figure galloping up to them. In a minute or so, he was recognizable.

"Kirk! When did you get out here?"

"Flew in last night," Maclean answered. He stopped his horse and shook hands with Killgore. "What about you?"

"Last week, with the Binghamton crew. We closed that operation down and figured it was time to pull up stakes."

"All of them?" Maclean asked in a way that got Popov's attention. All of who?

"Yep." Killgore nodded soberly.

"Schedule work out?" Maclean asked next, dismissing whatever it was that had upset him before.

"Almost perfectly on the projections. We, uh, helped the last ones along."

"Oh." Maclean looked down for a second, feeling bad, briefly, for the women he'd recruited. But only briefly. "So it's moving forward?"

"Yes, it is, Kirk. The Olympics start day after tomorrow, and then . . ."

"Yeah. Then it starts for real."

"Hello," Popov said, after a second. It was as though Killgore had forgotten he was there.

"Oh, sorry, Dmitriy. Kirk Maclean, this is Dmitriy Popov. John sent him out to us a couple days ago."

"Howdy, Dmitriy." Handshakes were exchanged. "Russian?" Maclean asked.

"Yes." A nod. "I work directly for Dr. Brightling. And you?"

"I'm a small part of the Project," Maclean admitted.

"Kirk's a biochemist and environmental engineer," Killgore explained. "Also so good-looking that we had him do another little thing for us," he teased. "But that's over now. So, what broke you loose so early, Kirk?"

"Remember Mary Bannister?"

"Yeah, what about her?"

"The FBI asked me if I knew her. I kicked it around with Henriksen, and he decided to send me out a little early. I take it she's . . ."

Killgore nodded matter-of-factly. "Yeah, last week."

"So 'A' works?"

"Yes, it does. And so does 'B.' "

"That's good. I got my 'B' shot already."

Popov thought back to his injection at Killgore's hands. There had been a capital B on the vial label, hadn't there? And what was this about the FBI? These two were talking freely, but it was like a foreign language—no, it was the speech of insiders, using internal words and phrases as engineers and physicians did, well, as intelligence officers did as well. It was part of Popov's fieldcraft to remember whatever was said in front of him, however distant from his understanding, and he took it all in, despite his befuddled expression.

Killgore led his horse off again. "First time out, Kirk?"

"First time on a horse in months. I had a deal with a guy in New York City, but I never really had time to do it enough. My legs and ass are gonna be sore tomorrow, John." The bio-engineer laughed.

"Yeah, but it's a good kind of sore." Killgore laughed as well. He'd had a horse back in Binghamton, and he hoped that the family that kept it for him would let him out when the time came, so that Stormy would be able to feed himself. . . but then Stormy was a gelding, and therefore biologically irrelevant to the entire world except as a consumer of grass. Too bad, the physician thought. He'd been a fine riding horse.

Maclean stood in his stirrups, looking around. He could turn and look back at the Project buildings, but before him, and to left and right, little more than rolling prairie. Someday they'd have to burn down all the houses and farm buildings. They just cluttered the view.

"Look out, John," he said, seeing some danger forward and pointing at the holes.

"What is this?" Popov asked.

"Prairie dogs," Killgore said, letting his horse slow to a slow walk. "Wild rodents, they dig holes and make underground cities, called

prairie-dog towns. If a horse steps into one, well, it's bad for the horse. But if they walk slow, they can avoid the holes."

"Rodents? Why don't you deal with them? Shoot them, poison them? If they can hurt a horse, then—"

"Dmitriy, they're part of Nature, okay? They *belong* here, even more than we do," Maclean explained.

"But a horse is—" *Expensive,* he thought, as the doctor cut him off.

"Not part of Nature, not really," Killgore went on. "I love 'em, too, but strictly speaking, they don't belong out here either."

"The hawks and other raptors will come back and control the prairie dogs," Maclean said. "No chicken farmers will be hurting them anymore. Man, I love watching them work."

"You bet. They're nature's own smart bomb," Killgore agreed. "That was the real sport of kings, training a hawk to hunt off your fist for you. I might do some of that myself in a few years. I always liked the gyrfalcon."

"The all-white one. Yeah, noble bird, that one," Maclean observed.

They think this area will be greatly changed in a few years, Popov thought. *But* what *could make that happen?*

"So, tell me," the Russian asked. "How will this all look in five years?"

"Much better," Killgore said. "Some buffalo will be back. We might even have to keep them away from our wheat."

"Herd 'em with the Hummers?" Maclean wondered.

"Or helicopters, maybe," the physician speculated. "We'll have a few of those to measure the populations. Mark Holtz is talking about going to Yellowstone and capturing a few, then trucking them down here to help jump-start the herd. You know Mark?"

Maclean shook his head. "No, never met him."

"He's a big-picture thinker on the ecological side, but he's not into interfering with Nature. Just helping Her along some."

"What are we going to do about the dogs?" Kirk asked, meaning domestic pets suddenly released into nature, where they'd become feral, killers of game.

"We'll just have to see," Killgore said. "Most won't be big enough to hurt mature animals, and a lot will be neutered, so they won't breed. Maybe we'll have to shoot some. Ought not to be too hard."

"Some won't like that. You know the score—we're not supposed to do anything but watch. I don't buy that. If we've screwed up the ecosystem, we ought to be able to fix the parts we broke, some of them anyway."

"I agree. We'll have to vote on that, though. Hell, I want to hunt, and they're going to have to vote on *that,* too," Killgore announced with a distasteful grimace.

“No shit? What about Jim Bridger? Except for trapping beaver, what did he do that was so damned wrong?”

“Vegans, they’re extremists, Kirk. Their way or the highway, y’know?”

“Oh, fuck ’em. Tell ’em we’re not designed to be herbivores, for Christ’s sake. That’s just pure science.” The prairie-dog town was a small one, they saw, as they passed the last of the dirt bull’s-eye’d holes.

“And what will your neighbors think of all this?” Popov asked, with a lighthearted smile. What the hell *were* these people talking about?

“What neighbors?” Killgore asked.

What *neighbors?* And it wasn’t that which bothered Popov. It was that the reply was rhetorical in nature. But then the doctor changed the subject. “Sure is a nice morning for a ride.”

What neighbors? Popov thought again. They could see the roofs of farmhouses and buildings not ten kilometers away, well lit by the morning sun. *What did they mean,* what *neighbors?* They spoke of a radiant future with wild animals everywhere, but not of people. Did they plan to purchase all the nearby farms? Even Horizon Corporation didn’t have that much money, did it? This was a settled, civilized area. The farms nearby were large prosperous ones owned by people of comfortable private means. Where would they go? Why would they leave? And yet again, the question leaped into Popov’s mind.

What is this all about?

CHAPTER 33

THE GAMES BEGIN

Chavez did his best not to stumble off the aircraft, somewhat amazed that the cabin crew looked so chipper. Well, they had practice, and maybe they'd adapted to jet lag better than he ever had. Like every other civilian he saw, he smacked his lips to deal with the sour taste and squinted his eyes and headed for the door with the eagerness of a man being released from a maximum-security prison. Maybe traveling great distances by ship wasn't so bad after all.

"Major Chavez?" a voice asked in an Australian accent.

"Yeah?" Chavez managed to say, looking at the guy in civilian clothes.

"G'day, I'm *Leftenant* Colonel Frank Wilkerson, Australian Special Air Service." He held out his hand.

"Howdy." Chavez managed to grab the hand and shake it. "These are my men, Sergeants Johnston, Pierce, Tomlinson, and Special Agent Tim Noonan of the FBI—he's our technical support." More handshakes were exchanged all around.

"Welcome to Australia, gentlemen. Follow me, if you please." The colonel waved for them to follow.

It took fifteen minutes to collect all the gear. That included a half dozen large mil-spec plastic containers that were loaded into a minibus. Ten minutes later, they were off the airport grounds and heading for Motorway 64 for the trip into Sydney.

"So, how was the flight?" Colonel Wilkerson asked, turning in his front seat to look at them.

"Long," Chavez said, looking around. The sun was rising—it was just short of 6:00 A.M.—while the arriving Rainbow troopers were all wondering if it was actually supposed to be setting according to their body clocks. They all hoped a shower and some coffee would help.

"Pig of a flight, all the way out from London," the colonel sympathized.

"That it is," Chavez agreed for his men.

"When do the games start?" Mike Pierce asked.

"Tomorrow," Wilkerson replied. "We've got most of the athletes settled into their quarters, and our security teams are fully manned

and trained up. We expect no difficulties at all. The intelligence threat board is quite blank. The people we have watching the airport report nothing, and we have photos and descriptions of all known international terrorists. Not as many as there used to be, largely thanks to your group," the SAS colonel added, with a friendly, professional smile.

"Yeah, well, we try to do our part, Colonel," George Tomlinson observed, while rubbing his face.

"The chaps who attacked you directly, they were IRA, as the media said?"

"Yeah," Chavez answered. "Splinter group. But they were well briefed. Somebody gave them primo intelligence information. They had their civilian targets identified by name and occupation—that included my wife and mother-in-law, and—"

"I hadn't heard *that,"* the Aussie said, with wide-open eyes.

"Well, it wasn't fun. And we lost two people killed, and four wounded, including Peter Covington. He's my counterpart, commanding Team-1," Ding explained. "Like I said, wasn't fun. Tim here turned out to have saved the day," he went on, pointing at Noonan.

"How so?" Wilkerson asked the FBI agent, who looked slightly embarrassed.

"I have a system for shutting down cellular phone communications. Turns out the bad guys were using them to coordinate their movements," the FBI agent explained. "We denied them that ability, and it interfered with their plans. Then Ding and the rest of the guys came in and messed them up some more. We were very, very lucky, Colonel."

"So, you're FBI. You know Gus Werner, I expect?"

"Oh, yeah. Gus and I go back a ways. He's the new AD for terrorism—new division the Bureau's set up. You've been to Quantico, I suppose."

"Just a few months ago, in fact, exercising with your Hostage Rescue Team and Colonel Byron's Delta group. Good lads, all of them." The driver turned off the interstate-type highway, taking an exit that seemed to head into downtown Sydney. Traffic was light. It was still too early for people to be very active, aside from milkmen and paperboys. The minibus pulled up to an upscale hotel, whose bell staff was awake, even at this ungodly hour.

"We have an arrangement with this one," Wilkerson explained. "The Global Security people are here, too."

"Who?" Ding asked.

"Global Security, they have the consulting contract. Mr. Noonan, you probably know their chief, Bill Henriksen."

"Bill the tree-hugger?" Noonan managed a strangled laugh. "Oh, yeah, I know him."

"Tree-hugger?"

"Colonel, Bill was a senior guy in Hostage Rescue a few years ago. Competent guy, but he's one of those nutty environmentalist types. Hugs trees and bunny rabbits. Worries about the ozone layer, all that crap," Noonan explained.

"I didn't know that about him. We do worry about the ozone down here, you know. One must use sunblock on the beaches and such. Might be serious in a few years, so they say."

"Maybe so," Tim allowed with a yawn. "I'm not a surfer."

The door was pulled open by a hotel employee and the men stumbled out. Colonel Wilkerson must have called ahead, Ding thought a minute later, as they were fast tracked to their rooms—nice ones—for wake-up showers, followed by big breakfasts with *lots* of coffee. As dreadful as the jet lag was, the best way for them to handle it was to gut their way through the first day, try to get a decent night's sleep, and so synchronize themselves in a single day. At least that was the theory, Ding thought, toweling off in front of the bathroom mirror and seeing that he looked almost as messed up as he felt. Soon after that, wearing casual clothes, he showed up in the hotel coffee shop.

"You know, Colonel, if somebody made a narcotic that worked on jet lag, he'd die richer 'n hell."

"Quite. I've been through it as well, Major."

"Call me Ding. My given name's Domingo, but I go by Ding."

"What's your background?" Wilkerson asked.

"Started off as an infantryman, but then into CIA, and now this. I don't know about this simulated-major stuff. I'm Team-2 commander for Rainbow, and I guess that'll have to do."

"You Rainbow chaps have been busy."

"That's a fact, Colonel," Ding agreed, shaking his head as the waiter came with a pot of coffee. Ding wondered if anyone had the Army type of coffee, the sort with triple the usual amount of caffeine. It would have come in handy right now. That and a nice morning workout might have helped a lot. In addition to the fatigue, his body was rebelling against the full day of confinement on the 747. The damned airplane was big enough for a few laps, but somehow the designers had left out the running track. Then came the slightly guilty feeling for the poor bastards who'd made the hop in tourist. They must really be suffering, Ding was sure. Well, at least it had been quick. A ship would have taken a whole month—of palatial comfort, lots of exercise opportunities, and good food. Life was full of trade-offs, wasn't it?

"You were in on the Worldpark job?"

"Yeah." Ding nodded. "My team did the assault on the castle. I was a hot hundred feet away when that bastard killed the little girl. That really wasn't fun, Colonel."

"Frank."

"Thanks. Yeah, Frank, that was pretty damned bad. But we got that bastard—which is to say, Homer Johnston did. He's one of my long rifles."

"From the TV coverage we saw, that wasn't a particularly good shot."

"Homer wanted to make a little statement," Chavez explained, with a raised eyebrow. "He won't be doing it again."

Wilkerson figured that one out instantly. "Oh, yes, quite. Any children, Ding?"

"Just became a father a few days ago. A son."

"Congratulations. We'll have to have a beer for that, later today perhaps."

"Frank, one beer and you might just have to carry my ass back here." Ding yawned, and felt embarrassment at the state of his body right then and there. "Anyway, why did you want us down here? Everybody says you guys are pretty good."

"Never hurts to get a second opinion, Ding. My lads *are* well trained, but we haven't had all that much practical experience. And we need some new hardware. Those new radios that E-Systems make, and that Global Security got for us, they're bloody marvelous. What other magic tools might you have?"

"Noonan's got something that'll knock your eyes out, Frank. I hardly believe it myself, but I don't think it'll be worth a damn down here. Too many people around. But you'll find it interesting. I promise you that."

"What's that?"

"Tim calls it the 'Tricorder'—you know the gadget Mr. Spock used all the time in *Star Trek.* It finds people like radar finds airplanes."

"How's it do that?"

"He'll tell you. Something about the electrical field around a human heart."

"I've never heard of that."

"It's new," Chavez explained. "Little company in the States called DKL, I think. That little fucker is magic, the way it works. Little Willie at Fort Bragg's in love with it."

"Colonel Byron?"

"He's the man. You said you've worked with him recently?"

"Oh, yes, splendid chap."

Chavez had a chuckle at that one. "He doesn't like Rainbow all that much. We stole some of his best people, you see."

"And gave them practical work to do."

"True," Chavez agreed, sipping his coffee. The rest of the team appeared then, dressed as their commander was, in semimilitary casual clothes. Sauntering into the coffee shop, they spotted their boss and came over.

It was about four in the afternoon in Kansas. The morning ride had left Popov sore in unusual places. His hips especially protested the way they'd been used earlier in the day, his upper legs held out at an unusual angle. But it was a pleasant memory for all that.

There was nothing for Popov to do here. He had no assigned work, and by lunch he'd run out of things he could conveniently explore. That left television as a diversion, but TV was not one of his favorite things. A bright man, he was easily bored, and he hated boredom. CNN kept repeating the same stories on the Olympics, and while he'd always enjoyed watching that international competition, it hadn't started yet. So, he wandered the corridors of the hotel, and looked out the huge window-wall at the surrounding countryside. Another ride tomorrow morning, he thought, at least it got him outside into pleasant surroundings. After over an hour's wandering, he headed down to the cafeteria.

"Oh, hello, Dmitriy," Kirk Maclean said, just ahead of him in the line. Maclean wasn't a vegan either, the Russian saw. His plate had a large slice of ham on it. Popov remarked on that.

"Like I said this morning, we're not designed to be vegetarians," Maclean pointed out with a grin.

"How do you know that is true?"

"Teeth mainly," Maclean replied. "Herbivores chew grass and stuff, and there's a lot of dirt and grit in that kind of food, and that wears the teeth down like sandpaper. So they need teeth with very thick enamel so they won't wear out in a few years. The enamel on human teeth is a lot thinner than what you find on a cow. So either we're adapted to washing the dirt off our food first, or we're designed to eat meat for most of our protein intake. I don't think we adapted that fast to running water in the kitchen, y'know?" Kirk asked with a grin. The two men headed off to the same table. "What do you do for John?" he asked after they'd sat down.

"Dr. Brightling, you mean?"

"Yeah, you said you work directly for him."

"I used to be KGB." Might as well try it on him, too.

"Oh, you spy for us, then?" Maclean asked, cutting up his ham slice.

Popov shook his head. "Not exactly. I established contact with people in whom Dr. Brightling had interest and asked them to perform certain functions which he wished them to do."

"Oh? For what?" Maclean asked.

"I am not sure that I am allowed to say."

"Secret stuff, eh? Well, there's a lot of that here, man. Have you been briefed in on the Project?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps I am part of it, but I haven't been told exactly what the purpose of all this is. Do you know?"

"Oh, sure. I've been in it almost from the beginning. It's really something, man. It's got some real nasty parts, but," he added with a cold look in his eyes, "you don't make an omelet without breaking some eggs, right?"

Lenin said that, Popov remembered. In the 1920s, when asked about the destructive violence being done in the name of Soviet Revolution. The observation had become famous, especially in KGB, when occasionally someone objected to particularly cruel field operations—like what Popov had done, interfacing with terrorists, who typically acted in the most grossly inhuman manner and . . . recently, under his guidance. But what sort of omelet was this man helping to make?

"We're gonna change the world, Dmitriy," Maclean said.

"How so, Kirk?"

"Wait and see, man. Remember how it was this morning out riding?"

"Yes, it was very pleasant."

"Imagine the whole world like that" was as far as Maclean was willing to go.

"But how would you make that happen . . . where would all the farmers go?" Popov asked, truly puzzled.

"Just think of 'em as eggs, man," Maclean answered, with a smile, and Dmitriy's blood suddenly turned cold, though he didn't understand why. His mind couldn't make the jump, much as he wanted it to do so. It was like being a field officer again, trying to discern enemy intentions on an important field assignment, and knowing some, perhaps much, of the necessary information, but not enough to paint the entire picture in his own mind. But the frightening part was that these Project people spoke of human life as the German fascists had once done. *But they're only Jews.* He looked up at the noise and saw another aircraft landing on the approach road. Behind it in the distance, a number of automobiles were halted off the road/runway, waiting to drive to the building. There were more people in the cafeteria now, he saw, nearly double the number from the previous day. So, Horizon Corporation was bringing its people here. Why? Was this part of the Project? Was it merely the activation of this expensive research facility? The pieces of the puzzle were all before him, Popov knew, but the manner in which they fit was as mysterious as ever.

"Hey, Dmitriy!" Killgore said, as he joined them. "A little sore, maybe?"

"Somewhat," Popov admitted, "but I do not regret it. Could we do it again?"

"Sure. It's part of my morning routine here. Want to join me that way?"

"Yes, thank you, that is very kind."

"Seven A.M., right here, pal," Killgore responded with a smile. "You, too, Kirk?"

"You bet. Tomorrow I have to drive out and get some new boots. Is there a good store around here for outdoors stuff?"

"Half an hour away, U.S. Cavalry outlet. You go east two exits on the interstate," Dr. Killgore advised.

"Great. I want to get 'em before all the new arrivals strip the stores of the good outdoors stuff."

"Makes sense," Killgore thought, then turned. "So, Dmitriy, what's it like being a spy?"

"It is often very frustrating work," Popov replied truthfully.

"Wow, this is some facility," Ding observed. The stadium was huge, easily large enough to seat a hundred thousand people. But it would be hot here, damned hot, like being inside a huge concrete wok. Well, there were plenty of concessions in the concourses, and surely there'd be people circulating with Cokes and other cold drinks. And just off the stadium grounds were all manner of pubs for those who preferred beer. The lush grass floor of the stadium bowl was nearly empty at the moment, with just a few groundskeepers manicuring a few parts. Most of the track and-field events would be here. The oval Tartan track was marked for the various distance and hurdle races, and there were the pits for the jumping events. A monster scoreboard and Jumbotron sat on the far end so that people could see instant replays of the important events, and Ding felt himself getting a little excited. He'd never been present for an Olympic competition, and he was himself enough of an athlete to appreciate the degree of dedication and skill that went into this sort of thing. The crazy part was that as good as his own people were, they were not the equal of the athletes—most of them little kids, to Ding's way of thinking—who'd be marching in here tomorrow. Even his shooters probably wouldn't win the pistol or rifle events. His men were generalists, trained to do many things, and the Olympic athletes were the ultimate specialists, trained to do a single thing supremely well. It had about as much relevance to life in the real world as a professional baseball game, but it would be a beautiful thing to watch for all that.

"Yes, we've spent a good deal of money to make it so," Frank

Wilkerson agreed.

"Where do you keep your reaction force?" Chavez asked. His host gestured and turned.

"This way."

"Hey, that feels good," Chavez said, entering the fine water fog.

"Yes, it does. It reduces the apparent temperature about fifteen degrees. I expect a lot of people will be coming here during the competition to cool down, and as you see, we have televisions to allow them to keep current on the goings-on."

"That'll come in handy, Frank. What about the athletes?"

"We have a similar arrangement in their access tunnels, and also the main tunnel they will use to march in, but out on the field, they'll just have to sweat."

"God help the marathon runners," Chavez said.

"Quite," Wilkerson agreed. "We will have medical people out there at various points. The extended weather forecast is for clear and hot weather, I'm afraid. But we have ample first-aid kiosks spotted about the various stadia. The velodrome will be another place where it's sorely needed."

"Gatorade," Chavez observed after a second.

"What?"

"It's a sports drink, water and lots of electrolytes to keep you from getting heatstroke."

"Ah, yes, we have something similar here. Salt tablets as well. Buckets of the things."

A few minutes later, they were in the security area. Chavez saw the Australian SAS troops lounging in air conditioned comfort, their own TVs handy so that they could watch the games—and other sets to keep an eye on choke points. Wilkerson handled the introductions, after which most of the troops came over for a handshake and a "G'day," all delivered with the open friendliness that all Aussies seemed to have. His sergeants started chatting with the Aussie ones, and respect was soon flowing back and forth. The trained men saw themselves in the others, and their international fraternity was an elite one.

The facility was filling rapidly. He'd been alone on the fourth floor the first day, Popov reflected, but not now. At least six of the nearby rooms were occupied, and looking outside he could see that the parking lot was filling up with private cars that had been driven in that day. He figured it was a two- or three-day drive from New York, and so the order to bring people out had been given recently—but where were the moving vans? Did the people intend to live here indefinitely? The hotel building was comfortable—for a hotel, but that was not the same as comfort in a place of permanent residence. Those

people with small children might quickly go mad with their little ones in such close proximity all the time. He saw a young couple talking with another, and caught part of the conversation as he walked past. They were evidently excited about the wild game they'd seen driving in. Yes, deer and such animals were pretty, Popov thought in mute agreement, but hardly worth so animated a conversation on the subject. Weren't these trained scientists who worked for Horizon Corporation? They spoke like Young Pioneers out of Moscow for the first time, goggling at the wonders of a state farm. Better to see the grand opera house in Vienna or Paris, the former KGB officer thought, as he entered his room. But then he had another thought. These people were all lovers of nature. Perhaps he would examine their interests himself. Weren't there videotapes in his room? . . . Yes, he found them and slipped one into his VCR, hitting the PLAY button and switching on his TV.

Ah, he saw, the ozone layer, something people in the West seemed remarkably exercised about. Popov thought he would begin to show concern when the Antarctic penguins who lived under the ozone hole started dying of sunburn. But he watched and listened anyway. It turned out that the tape had been produced by some group called Earth First, and the content, he soon saw, was as polemic in content as anything ever produced by the USSR's staterun film companies. These people were indeed very exercised about the subject, calling for the end of various industrial chemicals—and how would air-conditioning work without them? Give up air-conditioning to save penguins from too much ultraviolet radiation? What was this rubbish?

That tape lasted fifty-two minutes by his watch. The next one he selected, produced by the same group, was concerned with dams. It started off by castigating the "environmental criminals" who'd commissioned and built Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. But that was a *power* dam, wasn't it? Didn't people need electricity? Wasn't the electricity generated by power dams the cleanest there was? Wasn't this very videotape produced in Hollywood using the very electricity that this dam produced? Who were these people—

—and why were their tapes here in his hotel room? Popov wondered. Druids? The word came to him again. Sacrificers of virgins, worshipers of trees—if that, then they'd come to a strange place. There were precious few trees to be seen on the wheat-covered plains of western Kansas.

Druids? Worshipers of nature? He let the tape rewind and checked out some of the periodicals and found one published by this Earth First group.

What sort of name was that? Earth First—ahead of what? Its articles screamed in outrage over various insults to the planet. Well, strip

mining was an ugly thing, he had to admit. The planet was supposed to be beautiful and appreciated. He enjoyed the sight of a green forest as much as the next man, and the same was true of the purple rock of treeless mountains. If there were a God, then He was a fine artist, but . . . what was this?

Humankind, the second article said, was a parasitic species on the surface of the planet, destroying rather than nurturing. People had killed off numerous species of animals and plants, and in doing so, people had forfeited their right to be here . . . he read on into the polemic.

This was errant rubbish, Popov thought. Did a gazelle faced with an attacking lion call for the police or a lawyer to plead his right to be alive? Did a salmon swimming upstream to spawn protest against the jaws of the bear that plucked it from the water and then stripped it apart to feed its own needs? Was a cow the equal of a man? In whose eyes?

It had been a matter of almost religious faith in the Soviet Union that as formidable and as rich as Americans were, they were mad, cultureless, unpredictable people. They were greedy, they stole wealth from others, and they exploited such people for their own selfish gain. He'd learned the falsehood of that propaganda on his first field assignment abroad, but he'd also learned that the Western Europeans, as well, thought Americans to be slightly mad—and if this Earth First group were representative of America, then surely they were right. But Britain had people who spray-painted those who wore fur coats. Mink had a right to live, they said. A mink? It was a well-insulated rodent, a tubular rat with a fine coat of fur. This *rodent* had a right to be alive? Under whose law?

That very morning they'd objected to his suggestion to kill the—what was it? Prairie dogs, yet another tubular rat, and one whose holes could break the legs of the horses they rode—but what was it they'd said? They *belonged* there, and the horses and people did not? Why such solicitude for a *rat?* The noble animals, the hawks and bears, the deer, and those strange-looking antelope, they were pretty, but *rats?* He'd had similar talks with Brightling and Henriksen, who also seemed unusually loving of the things that lived and crawled outside. He wondered how they felt about mosquitoes and fire ants.

Was this druidic rubbish the key to his large question? Popov thought about it, and decided that he needed an education, if only to assure himself that he hadn't entered the employ of a madman . . . not a madman, only a mass murderer? . . . That was not a comforting thought at the moment.

"So how was the flight?"

"About what you'd expect, a whole fucking day trapped in a 747," Ding groused over the phone.

"Well, at least it was first class," Clark observed.

"Great, next time you can have the pleasure, John. How're Patsy and JC?" Chavez asked, getting on to the important stuff.

"They're just fine. The grandpa stuff isn't all that bad." Clark could have said that he hadn't changed a single diaper yet. Sandy had seized on the ancillary baby-in-the house duties with utter ruthlessness, allowing her husband to only hold the little guy. He supposed that such instincts were strong in women, and didn't want to interfere with her self-assumed rice bowl. "He's a cute little guy, Domingo. You done good, kid."

"Gee, thanks, Dad" was the ironic reply from ten thousand miles away. "Patsy?"

"She's doing fine, but not getting a hell of a lot of sleep. JC only sleeps about three hours at a stretch at the moment. But that'll change by the time you get back. Want to talk to her?" John asked next.

"What do you think, Mr. C?"

"Okay, hold on. Patsy!" he called. "It's Domingo."

"Hey, baby," Chavez said in his hotel room.

"How are you, Ding? How was the flight out?"

"Long, but no big deal," he lied. One doesn't show weakness before one's own wife. "They're treating us pretty nice, but it's hot here. I forgot what hot weather is like."

"Will you be there for the opening?"

"Oh, yeah, Pats, we all have security passes, courtesy of the Aussies. How's JC?"

"Wonderful" was the inevitable reply. "He's so beautiful. He doesn't cry much. It's pretty wonderful to have him, y'know?"

"How are you sleeping, baby?"

"Well, I get a few hours here and there. No big deal. Internship was a lot worse."

"Well, let your mom help you out, okay?"

"She does," Patsy assured her husband.

"Okay, I need to talk to your dad again—business stuff. Love ya, baby."

"Love you, too, Ding."

"Domingo, I think you're going to be okay as a son-in-law," the male voice said three seconds later. "I've never seen Patricia smile so much, and I guess that's your doing."

"Gee, thanks, Pop," Chavez replied, checking his U.K. watch. It was just after seven in the morning there, whereas in Sydney it was four in the hot afternoon.

"Okay, how are things there?" Clark asked.

"Good," Chavez told Rainbow Six. "Our point of contact is a short colonel named Frank Wilkerson. Solid troop. His people are pretty good, well trained, confident, nice and loose. Their relationship with the police is excellent. Their reaction plans look good to me—short version, John, they don't need us here any more than they need a few more kangaroos in the outback I flew over this morning."

"So, what the hell, enjoy the games." Bitch as he might, Chavez and his people were getting about ten grand worth of free holiday, Clark thought, and that wasn't exactly a prison sentence.

"It's a waste of our time, John," Chavez told his boss.

"Yeah, well, you never know, do you, Domingo?"

"I suppose," Chavez had to agree. They'd just spent several months proving that you never really knew.

"Your people okay?"

"Yeah, they're treating us pretty nice. Good hotel rooms, close enough to walk to the stadium, but we have official cars for that. So, I guess we're just paid tourists, eh?"

"Yep, like I said, Ding, enjoy the games."

"How's Peter doing?"

"Bouncing back okay, but he'll be out of business for at least a month, more like six weeks. The docs here are okay. Chin's legs are going to be a pain in the ass. Figure two and a half months for him to get back in harness."

"He must be pissed."

"Oh, he is."

"What about our prisoners?"

"Police are interrogating them now," Clark answered. "We're hearing more about this Russian guy, but nothing we can really use yet. The Irish cops are trying to ID the cocaine by manufacturer—it's medical quality, from a real drug company. Ten pounds of pure coke. Street value would buy a friggin' airliner. The Garda is worried that it might be the start of a trend, the IRA splinter groups getting into drugs big-time, but that's not our problem."

"This Russian guy—Serov, right?—he's the guy who gave them the intel on us?"

"That's affirmative, Domingo, but where he got it we don't know, and our Irish guests aren't giving us anything more than what we already have—probably all they know. Grady isn't talking at all. And his lawyer's bitching about how we interrogated him in the recovery room."

"Well, isn't that just a case of tough shit?"

"I hear you, Ding," Clark chuckled. It wasn't as though they'd be using the information in a trial. There was even a videotape of Grady's

leaving the scene from the BBC news crew that had turned up at Hereford. Sean Grady would be imprisoned for a term defined by "the Queen's pleasure," which meant life plus forever, unless the European Union treaty interfered with it. Timothy O'Neil and the people who'd surrendered with him *might* get out around the time they turned sixty, Bill Tawney had told him the previous day. "Anything else?"

"Nope, everything's looking good here, John. I'll report in the same time tomorrow."

"Roger that, Domingo."

"Kiss Patsy for me."

"I'll even manage a hug if you want."

"Yeah, thanks, Grandpa," Ding agreed with a smile.

"Bye," he heard, and the line went dead.

"Not a bad time to be away from home, boss," Mike Pierce observed from a few feet away. "The first two weeks can be a real pain in the ass. This way, by the time you get back home, the little guy'll be sleeping four, five hours. Maybe more if you're really lucky," predicted the father of three sons.

"Mike, you see any problems here?"

"Like you told Six, the Aussies have it under control. They look like good people, man. Us bein' here's a waste of time, but what the hell, we get to see the Olympics."

"I suppose so. Any questions?"

"Do we carry?" Pierce asked.

"Pistols only, and casual clothes. Your security pass will take care of that. We pair off, you with me, and George with Homer. We take our tactical radios, too, but that's all."

"Yes, sir. Works for me. How's the jet lag?"

"How's it with you, Mike?"

"Like I been put in a bag and beat with a baseball bat." Pierce grinned. "But it'll be better tomorrow. Shit, I'd hate to think that gutting it through today won't help some tomorrow. Hey, tomorrow morning, we can work out with the Aussies, do our running on the Olympic track. Pretty cool, eh?"

"I like it."

"Yeah, it would be nice to meet up with some of those pussy athletes, see how fast they can run with weapons and body armor." At his best and fully outfitted, Pierce could run a mile in thirty seconds over four minutes, but he'd never broken the four-minute mark, even in running shoes and shorts. Louis Loiselle claimed to have done it once, and Chavez believed him. The diminutive Frenchman was the right size for a distance runner. Pierce was too big in height and across the shoulders. A Great Dane rather than a greyhound.

"Be cool, Mike. We have to protect them from the bad guys. That

tells us who the best men are," Chavez observed through the jet lag.

"Roge-o, sir." Pierce would remember that one.

Popov awoke for no particular reason he could see, except that—yes, another Gulfstream jet had just landed. He imagined that these were the really important ones for this project thing. The junior ones, or those with families, either drove out or flew commercial. The business jet sat there in the lights, the stairs deployed from their bay in the aircraft, and people walked out to the waiting cars that swiftly drove away from the aircraft and toward the hotel building. Popov wondered who it was, but he was too far away to recognize faces. He'd probably see them in the cafeteria in the morning. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich got a drink of water from the bathroom and returned to his bed. This facility was filling up rapidly, though he still didn't know why.

Colonel Wilson Gearing was in his hotel room only a few floors above the Rainbow troops. His large bags were in the closet, and his clothing hung. The maids and other staff who serviced his room hadn't touched anything, merely checked the closet and proceeded to make up the beds and scrub the bathroom. They hadn't checked inside the bags—Gearing had telltales on them to make sure of that—inside one of which was a plastic canister with "Chlorine" painted on it. It was outwardly identical with the one on the fogging system at the Olympic stadium—it had, in fact, been purchased from the same company that had installed the fogging system, cleaned out and refilled with the nano-capsules. He also had the tools he needed to swap one out, and had practiced the skill in Kansas, where an identical installation was to be found. He could close his eyes and see himself doing it, time and again, to keep the downtime for the fogging system to a minimum. He thought about the contents of the container. Never had so much potential death been so tightly contained. Far more so than in a nuclear device, because unlike one of those, the danger here could replicate itself many times instead of merely detonating once. The way the fogging system worked, it would take about thirty minutes for the nano-capsules to get into the entire fogging system. Both computer models and actual mechanical tests proved that the capsules would get everywhere in the pipes, and spray out the fogging nozzles, invisible in the gentle, cooling mist. People walking through the tunnels leading to the stadium proper and in the concourses would breathe it in, an average of two hundred or so nano-capsules in four minutes of breathing, and that was well above the calculated mean lethal dose. The capsules would enter through the lungs, be transported into the blood, and there the capsules would dissolve, releasing the Shiva. The

engineered virus strands would travel in the bloodstreams of the spectators and the athletes, soon find the liver and kidneys, the organs for which they had the greatest affinity, and begin the slow process of multiplication. All this had been established at Binghamton Lab on the "normal" test subjects. Then it was just a matter of weeks until the Shiva had multiplied enough to do its work. Along the way, people would pass on the Shiva through kisses and sexual contact, through coughs and sneezes. This, too, had been proven at the Binghamton Lab. Starting in about four weeks, people would think themselves mildly ill. Some would see their personal physicians, and be diagnosed as flu victims, told to take aspirin, drink fluids, and rest in front of the TV. They would do this, and feel better—because seeing a doctor usually did that for people—for a day or so. But they would not be getting better. Sooner or later, they'd develop the internal bleeds that Shiva ultimately caused, and then, about five weeks after the initial release of the nano-capsules, some doctor would run an antibody test and be aghast to learn that something like the famous and feared Ebola fever was back. A good epidemiology program might identify the Sydney Olympics as the focal center, but tens of thousands of people would have come and gone. This was a perfect venue for distributing Shiva, something the Project's senior members had determined years before—even before the attempted plague launched by Iran against America, which had predictably failed because the virus hadn't been the right one, and the method of delivery too haphazard. No, this plan was perfection itself. Every nation on earth sent athletes and judges to the Olympic games, and all of them would walk through the cooling fog in this hot stadium, lingering there to shed excess body heat, breathe deeply, and relax in this cool place. Then they'd all return to their homes, from America to Argentina, from Russia to Rwanda, there to spread the Shiva and start the initial panic.

Then came Phase Two. Horizon Corporation would manufacture and distribute the "A" vaccine, turn it out in thousand-liter lots, and send it all over the world by express flights to nations whose public-health-service physicians and nurses would be sure to inject every citizen they could find. Phase Two would finish the job begun with the global panic that was sure to result from Phase One. Four to six weeks after being injected, the "A" recipients would start to become ill. So, three weeks from today, Gearing thought, plus six weeks or so, plus two weeks, plus another six, plus a final two. A total of nineteen weeks, not even half a year, not even a full baseball season, and well over ninety-nine percent of the people on the earth would be dead. And the planet would be saved. No more slaughtering of sheep from a chemical-weapons release. No more extinction of species by

thoughtless man. The ozone hole would soon heal itself. Nature would flourish once more. And he'd be there to see it, to enjoy and appreciate it all, along with his friends and colleagues in the Project. They'd save the planet and raise their children to respect it, love it, cherish it. The world would again be green and beautiful.

His feelings were not completely unambiguous. He could look out the windows and see people walking on the streets of Sydney, and it caused him pain to think of what would be happening to all of them. But he'd seen much pain. The sheep at Dugway. The monkeys and pigs and other test animals at Edgewood Arsenal. They, too, felt great pain. They, too, had a right to live, and people had disregarded both self-evident facts. The people down there didn't use shampoo unless it had been tested on the eyes of laboratory rabbits, held stock-still in cruel little cages, there to suffer without words, without expression at all to most people, who didn't understand animals, and cared less about them than they cared for how their burgers were cooked at the local McDonald's. They were helping to destroy the earth because they didn't care. Because they didn't care, they didn't even try to see what was important, and because they didn't appreciate what was important . . . they would die. They were a species that had endangered itself, and so would reap the whirlwind of its own ignorance. They were not like himself, Gearing thought. They didn't see. And under the cruel but fair laws of Charles Darwin, that left them at a comparative disadvantage. And so, as one animal replaced another, so he and his kind would replace them and theirs. He was only the instrument of natural selection, after all.

The jet lag was mainly gone, Chavez thought. The morning workout had been delicious in its sweat and endorphin-reduced pain, especially the run on the Olympic track. He and Mike Pierce had pushed hard on that, not timing it, but going as hard as they could, and on the run both had looked up at the empty stands and imagined the cheers they'd get had they been trained athletes. Then had come the showers and the grins, one soldier to another, at what they'd done, then dressing into their casual clothing, their pistols hidden under their shirts, their tactical radios jammed into pockets, and their security passes looped around their necks.

Later, the trumpets had blared, and the team of the first nation in the parade, Greece, marched out the tunnel at the far end, to the thundering cheers of the spectators in their seats, and the Sydney Olympiad had begun. Chavez told himself that as a security officer he was supposed to watch the crowd, but he found that he couldn't, without some specific danger to look at. The proud young athletes marched almost as well as soldiers, as they followed their flags and

their judges on the oval track. It must have been a proud moment for them, Ding thought, to represent your homeland before all the other nations of the world. Each of them would have trained for months and years to earn this honor, to accept the cheers and hope himself to be worthy of the moment. Well, it wasn't the sort of thing you got to do as a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, nor a Team-2 commander of Rainbow. This was pure sport, pure competition, and if it didn't really apply to the real world, then what did that hurt? Every event would be a form of activity taken down to its essence—and most of them were really military in nature. Running—the most important martial skill was the ability to run toward battle or away from it. The javelin—a lance to throw at one's enemies. The shot put and discus—other missile weapons. The pole vault—to get one over a wall and into the enemy camp. The long jump—to get over a hole that the enemy had dug in the battlefield. These were all soldierly skills from antiquity, and the modern Games had gun sports, pistol and rifle, as well. The modern pentathlon was based on the skills needed by a military courier in the late nineteenth century—riding, running, and shooting his way to his destination, to tell his commander what he needed to know in order to command his troops effectively.

These men and women were warriors of a sort, here to win glory for themselves and their flags, to vanquish foes without bloodshed, to win a pure victory on the purest field of honor. That, Chavez thought, was a worthy goal for anyone, but he was too old and unfit to compete here. Unfit? he wondered. Well, not for one his age, and he was probably fitter than some of these people walking on the oval track, but not enough to win a single event. He felt his Beretta pistol under his shirt. That, and his ability to use it, made him fit to defend these kids against any who might wish to harm them, and that, Domingo Chavez decided, would have to do.

"Pretty cool, boss," Pierce observed, watching the Greeks pass where they were standing.

"Yeah, Mike, it sure as hell is."

CHAPTER 34

THE GAMES CONTINUE

As happens in all aspects of life, things settled into a routine. Chavez and his people spent most of their time with Colonel Wilkerson's people, mainly sitting in the reaction-force center and watching the games on television, but also wandering to the various venues, supposedly to eyeball security matters up close, but in reality to see the various competitive events even closer. Sometimes they even wandered onto the event field by virtue of their go-anywhere passes. The Aussies, Ding learned, were ferociously dedicated sports fans, and wonderfully hospitable. In his off-duty time, he picked a neighborhood pub to hang out in, where the beer was good and the atmosphere friendly. On learning that he was an American, his "mates" would often as not buy a beer for him and ask questions while watching sports events on the wall-hung televisions. About the only thing he didn't like was the cigarette smoke, for the Australian culture had not yet totally condemned the vice, but no place was perfect.

Each morning he and his people worked out with Colonel Wilkerson and his men, and they found that in *this* Olympic competition there was little difference between Australian and American special-operations troopers. One morning they went off to the Olympic pistol range, borrowing Olympic-style handguns—.22 automatics that seemed like toys compared to the .45s the Rainbow soldiers ordinarily packed—then saw that the target and scoring systems were very difficult indeed, if not especially related to combat shooting in the real world. For all his practice and expertise, Chavez decided that with luck he could have made the team from Mali. Certainly not the American or Russian teams, whose shooters were utterly inhuman in their ability to punch holes in the skinny silhouette targets that flipped full-face and sideways on computer-controlled hangers. But these paper targets didn't shoot back, he told himself, and that *did* make something of a difference. Besides, success in his form of shooting was to make a real person dead, not to hit a quarter-sized target on a black paper target card. That made a difference, too, Ding and Mike Pierce thought aloud with their Aussie counterparts. What they did could never be an Olympic sport, unless somebody brought back the

gladiatorial games of Rome, and that wouldn't be happening. Besides, what they did for their living wasn't a sport at all, was it? Neither was it a form of mass entertainment in the kinder and gentler modern world. Part of Chavez admitted that he wondered what the games in classical Rome's Flavian Amphitheater had been like to watch, but it wasn't something he could say aloud, lest people take him for an utter barbarian. *Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!* It wasn't exactly the Super Bowl, was it? And so, "Major" Domingo Chavez, along with sergeants Mike Pierce, Homer Johnston, and George Tomlinson, and Special Agent Tim Noonan, got to watch the games for free, sometimes with "official" jackets to give them the cover of anonymity.

The same was true, rather more distantly, of Dmitriy Popov, who stayed in his room to watch the Olympics on TV. He found the games a distraction from the questions that were running their own laps inside his brain. The Russian national team, naturally enough his favorite, was doing well, though the Australians were making a fine showing as hosts, especially in swimming, which seemed to be their national passion. The problem was in the vastly different time zones. When Popov was watching events live, it was necessarily an ungodly hour in Kansas, which made him somewhat bleary-eyed for his morning horseback rides with Maclean and Killgore—those had become a very pleasant morning diversion.

This morning was like the previous ten, with a cool westerly breeze, the rising orange sun casting strange but lovely light on the waving fields of grass and wheat. Buttermilk now recognized him, and awarded the Russian with oddly endearing signs of affection, which he in turn rewarded with sugar cubes or, as today, an apple taken from the morning breakfast buffet, which the mare crunched down rapidly from his hand. He had learned to saddle his own horse, which he now did quickly, leading Buttermilk outside to join the others and mounting up in the corral.

"Morning, Dmitriy," Maclean said.

"Good morning, Kirk," Popov replied pleasantly. In another few minutes, they were riding off, to the south this time, toward one of the wheat fields, at a rather more rapid pace than his first such ride.

"So, what's it like to be an intelligence agent?" Killgore asked, half a mile from the barn.

"We are called intelligence officers, actually," Popov said to correct the first Hollywood-generated misimpression. "Truthfully, it is mainly boring work. You spend much of your time waiting for a meeting, or filling out forms for submission to your headquarters, or the *rezidentura.* There is some danger—but only of being arrested, not

shot. It has become a civilized business. Captured intelligence officers are exchanged, usually after a brief period of imprisonment. That never happened to me, of course. I was well trained." And lucky, he didn't add.

"So, no James Bond stuff, you never killed anybody, nothing like that?" Kirk Maclean asked.

"Good heavens, no," Popov replied, with a laugh. "You have others do that sort of thing for you, surrogates, when you need it done. And that is quite rare."

"How rare?"

"Today? Almost never I should think. At KGB, our job was to get information and pass it upwards to our government—more like reporters, like your Associated Press, than anything else. And much of the information we gathered was from open sources, newspapers, magazines, television. Your CNN is perhaps the best, most used source of information in the world."

"But what sort of information *did* you gather?"

"Mainly diplomatic or political intelligence, trying to discern intentions. Others went after technical intelligence—how fast an airplane flies or how far a cannon shoots—but that was never my specialty area, you see. I was what you call here a people person. I met with various people and delivered messages and such, then brought the answers back to my station."

"What kind of people?"

Popov wondered about how he should answer, and decided on the truth: "Terrorists, that was what you would call them."

"Oh? Like which ones?"

"Mainly European, but some in the Middle East as well. I have language skills, and I can speak easily with people from various lands."

"Was it hard?" Dr. Killgore asked.

"Not really. We had similar political beliefs, and my country provided them with weapons, training, access to some facilities in the Eastern Bloc. I was as much a travel agent as anything else, and occasionally I would suggest targets for them to attack—as payment for our assistance, you see."

"Did you give them money?" Maclean this time.

"Yes, but not much money. The Soviet Union had only limited hard-currency reserves, and we never paid our agents very much. At least I did not," Popov said.

"So, you sent terrorists out on missions to kill people?" This was from Killgore.

Popov nodded. "Yes. That was often my job. That was," he added, "why Dr. Brightling hired me."

"Oh?" Maclean asked.

Dmitriy wondered how far he could take this one. "Yes, he asked me to do similar things for Horizon Corporation."

"You're the guy who ramrodded the stuff in Europe?"

"I contacted various people and made suggestions which they carried out, yes, and so, yes, I do have some blood on my second hands, I suppose, but one cannot take such matters too seriously, can one? It is business, and it has been *my* business for some time."

"Well, that's a good thing for you, Dmitriy. That's why you're here," Maclean told him. "John is pretty loyal to his people. You must have done okay."

Popov shrugged. "Perhaps so. He never told me why he wanted these things done, but I gather it was to help his friend Henriksen get the consulting contract for the Sydney Olympics that I've been watching on TV."

"That's right," Killgore confirmed. "That was very important to us." *Might as well watch,* the epidemiologist thought, *they'll be the last ones.*

"But why?"

They hesitated at the direct question. The physician and the engineer looked at each other. Then Killgore spoke.

"Dmitriy, what do you think of the environment?"

"What do you mean? Out here? It is beautiful. You've taught me much with these morning rides, my friends," the Russian answered, choosing his words carefully. "The sky and the air, and the beautiful fields of grass and wheat. I have never appreciated how beautiful the world can be. I suppose that's because I grew up in Moscow." Which had been a hideously filthy city, but they didn't know that.

"Yeah, well, it's not all this way."

"I know that, John. In Russia—well, the State didn't care as you Americans do. They nearly killed all life in the Caspian Sea—where caviar comes from—from chemical poisoning. And there is a place just east of the Urals where our original atomic-bomb research created a wasteland. I haven't seen it, but I have heard of it. The highway signs there tell you to drive very fast to be through the zone of dangerous radiation as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, well, if we're not careful, we might just kill the whole planet," Maclean observed next.

"That would be a crime, like the Hitlerites," Popov said next. "It is *nekulturny,* the work of uncivilized barbarians. In my room, the tapes and the magazines make this clear."

"What do you think of killing people, Dmitriy?" Killgore asked then.

"That depends on who they are. There are many people who deserve to die for one reason or another. But Western culture has this strange notion that taking life is almost always wrong—you Americans

cannot even kill your criminals, murderers and such, without jumping through hoops, as you say here. I find that very curious."

"What about crimes against Nature?" Killgore said, staring off into the distance.

"I do not understand."

"Well, things that hurt the whole planet, killing off whole living species, polluting the land and the sea. What about that?"

"Kirk, that is also a barbaric act, and it should be punished severely. But how do you identify the criminals? Is it the industrialist who gives the order and makes the profit from it? Or is it the worker who takes his wages and does what he is told?"

"What did they say at Nuremberg?" Killgore said next.

"The war-crimes trial, you mean? It was decided that following orders is not a defense." Not a concept he'd been taught to consider in the KGB Academy, where he'd learned that the State Was Always Right.

"Right," the epidemiologist agreed. "But you know, nobody ever went after Harry Truman for bombing Hiroshima."

Because he won, *you fool,* Popov didn't reply. "Do you ask if this was a crime? No, it was not, because he ended a greater evil, and the sacrifice of those people was necessary to restore the peace."

"What about saving the planet?"

"I do not understand."

"If the planet was dying, what would one have to do—what would be *right* to do, to save it?"

This discussion had all the ideological and philosophical purity of a classroom discussion of the Marxist dialectic at Moscow State University—and about as much relevance to the real world. Kill the whole planet? That was not possible. A full-blown nuclear war, yes, maybe *that* could have such an effect, but *that* was no longer possible. The world had changed, and America was the nation that had made it happen. Didn't these two druids see the wonder of that? More than once, the world had been *close* to loosing nuclear weapons, but today that was a thing of the past.

"I have never considered that question, my friends."

"We have," Maclean responded. "Dmitriy, there are people and forces at work today that could easily kill off everything here. Somebody has to stop that from happening, but how do you do it?"

"You do not mean simply political action, do you?" the former KGB spook observed.

"No, it's too late for that, and not enough people would listen anyway." Killgore turned his horse to the right and the others followed. "I'm afraid you have to take more drastic measures."

"What's that? Kill the whole world population?" Dmitriy

Arkadeyevich asked, with hidden humor. But the reply to the rhetorical question was the same look in two sets of eyes. The look didn't make his blood go cold, but it did get his brain moving off in a new and unexpected direction. These were *fascisti.* Worse than that, *fascisti* with an ethos in which they believed. But were they willing to take action on their beliefs? Could anyone take action like that? Even the worst of the Stalinists—no, they'd never been madmen, just political romantics.

Just then an aircraft's noise disturbed the morning. It was one of Horizon's fleet of G's, lifting off from the complex's runway, climbing up and turning right, looping around to the east—for New York, probably, to bring more of the "project" people in? Probably. The complex was about 80 percent full now, Popov reflected. The rate of arrivals had slowed, but people were still coming, most by private car. The cafeteria was almost full at lunch- and dinnertime, and the lights burned late in the laboratory and other work buildings. But what were those people doing?

Horizon Corporation, Popov reminded himself, was a biotech company, specializing in medicines and medical treatments, Killgore was a physician, and Maclean an engineer specializing in environmental matters. Both were druids, both nature-worshipers, the new kind of paganism spawned in the West. John Brightling seemed to be one as well, judging by that conversation they'd had in New York. That, then, was the ethos of these people *and* their company. Dmitriy thought about the printed matter in his room. Humans were a *parasitic* species doing more harm than good to the earth, and these two had just talked about sentencing the harmful people to death—then made it clear that they thought of *everyone* as harmful. What were they going to do, kill everyone? What rubbish. The door leading to the answer had opened further. His brain was moving far more quickly than Buttermilk was, but still not fast enough.

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Then a shadow crossed the ground, and Popov looked up.

"What is that?"

"Red-tail hawk," Maclean answered, after a look. "Cruising for some breakfast."

As they watched, the raptor climbed to five hundred feet or so, then spread his wings to ride the thermal air currents, his head down, examining the surface of the land for an unwary rodent through his impossibly sharp eyes. By unspoken consent the three men stopped their horses to watch. It took several minutes and then it was both beautiful and terrible to behold. The hawk folded its wings back and dropped rapidly, then flapped to accelerate like a feathered bullet, then spread its wings wide, nosing up, its yellow talons leading the

descent now—

"Yes!" Maclean hooted.

Like a child stomping on an anthill, the hawk used its talons to kill its prey, twisting and crushing, then, holding the limp tubular body in them, flapped laboriously into the sky, heading off to the north to its nest or home, or whatever you called it, Popov thought. The prairie dog it killed had enjoyed no chance, Dmitriy thought, but nature was like that, as were people. No soldier willingly gave his foe a fair chance on any battlefield. It was neither safe nor intelligent to do so. You struck with total fury and as little warning as possible, the better to take his life quickly and easily—and safely—and if he lacked the wit to protect himself properly, well, that was his problem, not yours. In the case of the hawk, it had swooped down from above and down-sun, not even its shadow warning the prairie dog sitting at the entrance to its home, and killed without pity. The hawk had to eat, he supposed. Perhaps it had young to feed, or maybe it was just hunting for its own needs. In either case, the prairie dog hung limp in its claws, like an empty brown sock, soon to be ripped apart and eaten by its killer.

"Damn, I love watching that," Maclean said.

"It is cruel, but beautiful," Popov said.

"Mother Nature is like that, pal. Cruel but beautiful." Killgore watched the hawk vanish in the distance. "That was something to see."

"I have to capture one and train it," Maclean announced. "Train it to kill off my fist."

"Are the prairie dogs endangered?"

"No, no way," Killgore answered. "Predators can control their numbers, but never entirely eliminate them. Nature maintains a balance."

"How do men fit into that balance?" Popov asked.

"They don't," Kirk Maclean answered. "People just screw it up, 'cuz they're too dumb to see what works and what doesn't. And they don't care about the harm they do. That's the problem."

"And what is the solution?" Dmitriy asked. Killgore turned to look him right in the eyes.

"Why, we are."

"Ed, the cover name must be one he's used for a long time," Clark argued. "The IRA guys hadn't seen him in years, but that's the name they knew him by."

"Makes sense," Ed Foley had to admit over the phone. "So, you really want to talk to him, eh?"

"Well, it's no big thing, Ed. He just turned people loose to kill my

wife, daughter, and grandson, you know? And they *did* kill two of *my* men. Now, do I have permission to contact him or not?" Rainbow Six demanded from his desk.

In his seventh-floor office atop CIA Headquarters, Director of Central Intelligence Edward Foley uncharacteristically wavered. If he let Clark do it, and Clark got what he wanted, reciprocity rules would then apply. Sergey Nikolay'ch would someday call CIA and request information of a delicate nature, and he, Foley, would have to provide it, else the veneer of amity within the international intelligence community would crumble away. But Foley could not predict what the Russians would ask about, and both sides were still spying on each other, and so the friendly rules of modern life in the spook business both did and did not apply. You pretended that they did, but you remembered and acted as though they did not. Such contacts were rare, and Golovko had been very helpful twice in real-world operations. And he'd never requested a return favor, perhaps because the operations had been of direct or indirect benefit to his own country. But Sergey wasn't one to forget a debt and—

"I know what you're thinking, Ed, but I've lost people because of this guy, and I want his ass, and Sergey can help us identify the fuck."

"What if he's still inside?" Foley temporized.

"Do you believe that?" Clark snorted.

"Well, no, I think we're past that."

"So do I, Ed. So, if he's a friend, let's ask him a friendly question. Maybe we'll get a friendly answer. The *quid pro quo* on this could be to let Russian special-operations people train a few weeks with us. That's a price I'm willing to pay."

It was ultimately a futile exercise to argue with John, who'd been the training officer to him and his wife, Mary Pat, now Deputy Director (Operations). "Okay, John, it's approved. Who handles the contact?"

"I have his number," Clark assured the DCI.

"Then call it, John. Approved," the DCI concluded, not without reluctance. "Anything else?"

"No, sir, and thank you. How are Mary Pat and the kids?"

"They're fine. How's your grandson?"

"Not too bad at all. Patsy is doing fine, and Sandy's taken over the job with JC."

"JC?"

"John Conor Chavez," Clark clarified.

That was a complex name, Foley thought, without saying so. "Well, okay. Go ahead, John. See ya."

"Thanks, Ed. Bye." Clark switched buttons on his phone. "Bill, we got approval."

"Excellent," Tawney replied. "When will you call?"

"How's right now grab you?"

"Set things up properly," Tawney warned.

"Fear not." Clark killed that line and punched another button. That one activated a cassette-tape recorder before he punched yet another and dialed Moscow.

"Six-Six-Zero," a female voice answered in Russian.

"I need to speak personally with Sergey Nikolayevich. Please tell him that this is Ivan Timofeyevich calling," Clark said in his most literate Russian.

"Da," the secretary replied, wondering how this person had gotten the Chairman's direct line.

"Clark!" a man's voice boomed onto the line. "You are well there in England?" And already it started. The Chairman of the reconfigured Russian foreign-intelligence service wanted him to know that he knew where he was and what he was doing, and it wouldn't do to ask how he'd found out.

"I find the climate agreeable, Chairman Golovko."

"This new unit you head has been rather busy. The attack on your wife and daughter—they are well?"

"It was rather unpleasant, but yes, thank you, they are quite well." The conversation was in Russian, a language Clark spoke like a native of Leningrad—St. Petersburg, John corrected himself. That was another old habit that died hard. "And I am now a grandfather."

"Indeed, Vanya? Congratulations! That is splendid news. I was not pleased to learn of the attack on you," Golovko went on sincerely. Russians have always been very sentimental people, especially where small children are concerned.

"Neither was I," Clark said next. "But it worked out, as we say. I captured one of the bastards myself."

"That I did not know, Vanya," the Chairman went on—lying or not, John couldn't tell. "So, what is the purpose of your call?"

"I need your assistance with a name."

"What name is that?"

"It is a cover identity: Serov, Iosef Andreyevich. The officer in question—former officer, I should think—works with progressive elements in the West. We have reason to believe he has instigated operations in which people were killed, including the attack on my people here in Hereford."

"We had nothing at all to do with that, Vanya," Golovko said at once, in a very serious voice.

"I have no reason to think that you did, Sergey, but a man with this name, and identified as a Russian national, handed over money and drugs to the Irish terrorists. He was known to the Irishmen from years

of experience, including in the Bekaa Valley. So, I think he was KGB at one time. I also have a physical description," Clark said, and gave it.

" 'Serov,' you said. That's an odd—"

"Da, I know that."

"This is important to you?"

"Sergey, in addition to killing two of my people, this operation threatened my wife and daughter directly. Yes, my friend, this is very important to me."

In Moscow, Golovko wondered about that. He knew Clark, having met him eighteen months before. A field officer of unusual talent and amazing luck, John Clark had been a dangerous enemy, a quintessential professional intelligence officer, along with his younger colleague, Domingo Estebanovich Chavez, if he remembered right. And Golovko knew that his daughter was married to this Chavez boy —he'd just found that out, in fact. Someone had given that information to Kirilenko in London, though he couldn't remember who.

But if it were a Russian, a former *chekist* no less, who was stirring up the terrorist pot, well, that was not good news for his country. Should he cooperate? the Chairman asked himself. What was the upside and what might be the downside? If he agreed now, he'd have to follow through on it, else CIA and other Western services might not cooperate with him. Was it in his country's interest? Was it in his institution's interest?

"I will see what I can do, Vanya, but I can make no promises," Clark heard. Okay, that meant he was thinking about it at least.

"I would deem it a personal favor, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"I understand. Allow me to see what information I can find."

"Very well. Good day, my friend."

"Dosvidaniya."

Clark punched out the tape and put it in his desk drawer. "Okay, pal, let's see if you can deliver."

• • •

The computer system in the Russian intelligence service was not as advanced as its Western counterparts, but the technical differences were mainly lost on human users, whose brains moved at slower speed than even the most backward computer. Golovko had learned to make use of it because he didn't always like to have people doing things for him, and in a minute he had a screenful of data tracked down by the cover name.

POPOV, DMITRIY ARKADEYEVICH, the screen read, giving service number, date of birth, and time of employment. He'd retired as a colonel near the end of the first big RIF that had cut the former KGB by nearly a third. Good evaluations by his superiors, Golovko saw, but he'd specialized in a field in which the agency no longer had great interest. Virtually everyone in that sub-department had been terminated, pensioned off in a land where pensions could feed one for perhaps as much as five days out of a month. Well, there wasn't much he could do about that, Golovko told himself. It was hard enough to get enough funding out of the Duma to keep his downsized agency operating, despite the fact that the downsized nation needed it more than ever before . . . and this Clark had performed two services that had benefited his nation, Golovko reminded himself—in addition, of course, to previous actions that had caused the Soviet Union no small harm . . . but again, those acts had helped elevate himself to the chairmanship of his agency.

Yes, he had to help. It would be a good bargaining chip to acquire for later requests to be made of the Americans. Moreover, Clark had dealt honorably with him, Sergey reminded himself, and it was distantly troubling to him that a former KGB officer had helped attack the man's family—attacks on non-combatants were forbidden in the intelligence business. Oh, occasionally the wife of a CIA officer might have been slightly roughed up in the old days of the East-West Cold War, but serious harm? Never. In addition to being *nekulturny,* it would only have started vendettas that would only have interfered with the conduct of real business, the gathering of information. From the 1950s on, the business of intelligence had become a civilized, predictable one. Predictability was always the one thing the Russians had wanted from the West, and that had to go both ways. Clark was predictable.

With that decision made, Golovko printed up the information on his screen.

"So?" Clark asked Bill Tawney.

"The Swiss were a little slow. It turns out that the account number Grady gave us was real enough—"

"Was?" John said, thinking that he could hear the bad news "but" coming.

"Well, actually it's still an active account. It began with about six million U.S. dollars deposited, then several hundred thousand withdrawn—and then, the very day of the attack at the hospital, all but a hundred thousand was withdrawn and redeposited elsewhere, another account in yet another bank."

"Where?"

"They say they cannot tell us."

"Oh, well, you tell their fucking Justice Minister that the next time he needs our help, we'll fuckin' let the terrorists kill off their citizens!" Clark snarled.

"They do have laws, John," Tawney pointed out. "What if this chap had an attorney do the transfer? The attorney-client privilege applies, and no country can break that barrier. The Swiss *do* have laws that govern funds thought to have been generated by criminal means, but we have no proof of that, do we? I suppose we could gin something up to get around the law, but that will take time, old man."

"Shit," Clark observed. Then he thought for a second. "The Russian?"

Tawney nodded sagely. "Yes, that makes sense, doesn't it? He set them up a numbered account, and when they were taken out, he still had the necessary numbers, didn't he?"

"Fuck, so he sets them up and rips them off."

"Quite," Tawney observed. "Grady said six million dollars in the hospital, and the Swiss confirm that number. He needs a few hundred thousand to purchase the trucks and other vehicles they used—we have records on that from the police investigation—and left the rest in place, and then this Russian chap decided they have no further use of the funds. Well, why not?" the intelligence officer asked. "Russians *are* notoriously greedy people, you know."

"The Russian giveth, and the Russian taketh away. He gave them the intel on us, too."

"I would not wager against that, John," Tawney agreed.

"Okay, let's back up some," John proposed, putting his temper back in its box. "This Russian appears, gives them intelligence information on us, funds the operation from somewhere—sure as hell not Russia, because, A, they have no reason to undertake such an operation and, B, they don't have that much money to toss around. First question: where did the money—"

"And the drugs, John. Don't forget that."

"Okay, and the drugs—come *from?"*

"Easier to track the drugs, perhaps. The Garda say that the cocaine was medical quality, which means that it came *from* a drug company. Cocaine is closely controlled in every nation in the world. Ten pounds is a large quantity, enough to fill a fairly large suitcase—cocaine is about as dense as tobacco. So the bulk of the shipment would be the equivalent of ten pounds of cigarettes. Say the size of a large suitcase. That's a bloody large quantity of drugs, John, and it would leave a gap in someone's controlled and guarded warehouse, wherever it might be."

"You're thinking it all originated in America?" Clark asked.

"For a starting point, yes. The world's largest pharmaceutical houses are there and here in Britain. I can get our chaps started checking out Distillers, Limited, and the others for missing cocaine. I expect your American DEA can attempt to do the same."

"I'll call the FBI about that," Clark said at once. "So, Bill, what *do* we know?"

"We will assume that Grady and O'Neil were telling us the truth about this Serov chap. We have a former—presumably former—KGB officer who instigated the Hereford attack. Essentially he hired them to do it, like mercenaries, with a payment of cash and drugs. When the attack failed, he simply confiscated the money for his own ends, and on that I still presume that he kept it for himself. The Russian will not have such private means—well, I suppose it could be the Russian Mafia, all those former KGB chaps who are now discovering free enterprise, but I see no reason why they should target us. We here at Rainbow are not a threat to them in any way, are we?"

"No," Clark agreed.

"So, we have a large quantity of drugs and six million American dollars, delivered by a Russian. I am assuming for the moment that the operation originated in America, because of the drugs and the quantity of the money."

"Why?"

"I cannot justify that, John. Perhaps it's my nose telling me that."

"How did he get to Ireland?" John asked, agreeing to trust Tawney's nose.

"We don't know that. He must have flown into Dublin—yes, I know, with such a large quantity of drugs, that is not a prudent thing to do. We need to ask our friends about that."

"Tell the cops that's important. We can get a flight number and point of origin from that."

"Quite." Tawney made a note.

"What else are we missing?"

"I'm going to have my chaps at 'Six' check for the names of KGB officers who are known to have worked with terrorist groups. We have a rough physical description which may be of some use for the purposes of elimination. But I think our best hope is the ten pounds of drugs."

Clark nodded. "Okay, I'll call the Bureau on that one."

"*Ten pounds,* eh?"

"That's right, Dan, and doctor-quality pure. That's a real shitload of coke, man, and there ought to be a blank spot in somebody's warehouse."

"I'll call DEA and have them take a quick look," the FBI Director

promised. “Anything shaking on your end?”

“We’re giving the tree a kick, Dan,” John told him. “For the moment we’re proceeding on the assumption that the operation initiated in America.” He explained on to tell Murray why this was so.

“This Russian guy, Serov, you said, former KGB, formerly a go-between for terrorists. There weren’t all that many of those, and we have some information on the specialty.”

“Bill’s having ‘Six’ look at it, too, and I’ve already kicked it around with Ed Foley. I talked to Sergey Golovko about it as well.”

“You really think he’ll help?” Director Murray asked.

“The worst thing he can say is no, Dan, and that’s where we are already,” Rainbow Six pointed out.

“True,” Dan conceded. “Anything else we can do on this end?”

“If I come up with anything I’ll let you know, pal.”

“Okay, John. Been watching the Olympics?”

“Yeah, I actually have a team there.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, Ding Chavez and some men. The Aussies wanted us down to observe their security operations. He says they’re pretty good.”

“Free trip to the Olympics, not a bad gig,” the FBI director observed.

“I guess so, Dan. Anyway, let us know if you turn anything, will ya?”

“You bet, John. See you later, pal.”

“Yeah. Bye, Dan.”

Clark replaced the secure phone and leaned back in his chair, wondering what he might be missing. He was checking everything he had thought of, every loose end, hoping that somewhere someone might come up with another seemingly innocent factoid that might lead to another. He’d never quite appreciated how hard it was to be a cop investigating a major crime. The color of the damned car the bad guys drove was or could be important, and you had to remember to ask that question, too. But it was something for which he was not trained, and he had to trust the cops to do their jobs.

They were doing that. In London, the police sat Timothy O’Neil down in the usual interrogation room. Tea was offered and accepted.

It wasn’t easy for O’Neil. He wanted to say nothing at all, but with the shock of the information given him by the police that could only have originated with Sean Grady, his faith and his resolve had been shaken, and as a result he *had* said a few things, and that was a process that once begun could not be taken back.

“This Russian chap, Serov, you told us his name was,” the detective inspector began. “He flew into Ireland?”

"It's a long swim, mate," O'Neil replied as a joke.

"Yes, and a difficult drive," the police inspector agreed. "How did he fly in?"

The answer to that was silence. That was disappointing, but not unexpected.

"I can tell you something you don't know, Tim," the inspector offered, to jump-start the conversation.

"What might that be?"

"This Serov bloke set you up a numbered Swiss account for all the money he brought in. Well, we just learned from the Swiss that he cleaned it out."

"What?"

"The day of your operation, someone called the bank and transferred nearly all the money out. So, your Russian friend gave with one hand, and took away with the other. Here"—the inspector handed a sheet of paper across—"this is the account number, and this is the activation number to do transfers. Six million dollars, less what you chaps spent to buy the trucks and such. He transferred it out, to his own personal account, I'll wager. You chaps picked the wrong friend, Tim."

"That bloody fucking thief!" O'Neil was outraged.

"Yes, Tim, I know. You've never been one of those. But this Serov chappie is, and that's a fact, my boy."

O'Neil swore something at odds with his Catholicism. He recognized the account number, knew that Sean had written it down, and was reasonably certain that this cop wasn't lying to him about what had happened with it.

"He flew into Shannon on a private business jet. I do not know where from."

"Really?"

"Probably because of the drugs he brought in with him. They don't search plutocrats, do they? Bloody nobility, they act like."

"What kind of aircraft, do you know?"

O'Neil shook his head. "It had two engines and the tail was shaped like a T, but no, I do not know the name of the bloody thing."

"And how did he get to the meeting?"

"We had a car meet him."

"Who drove the car?" the inspector asked next.

"I will not give you names. I've told you that."

"Forgive me, Tim, but I must ask. You know that," the cop apologized. He'd worked hard winning this terrorist's confidence. "Sean trusted this Serov chap. That was evidently a mistake. The funds were transferred out two hours after your operation began. We rather suspect he was somewhere close, to watch, and when he saw how

things were going, he simply robbed you. Russians are greedy buggers," the cop sympathized. His eyes didn't show his pleasure at the new information developed. The room was bugged, of course, and already the Police of the Metropolis were on the phone to Ireland.

The Irish national police force, called the Garda, had almost always cooperated with their British counterparts, and this time was no exception. The senior local Gardai drove at once to Shannon to check for flight records—as far as he was concerned, all he wanted to know was how ten pounds of illegal drugs had entered his country. That tactical mistake by the IRA had only enraged the local cops, some of whom did have their tribal sympathies with the revolutionary movement to the north. But those sympathies stopped well short of drug-trafficking, which they, like most cops in the world, regarded as the dirtiest of crimes.

The flight-operations office at Shannon had paper records of every flight that arrived or departed from the complex, and with the date, the assistant operations manager found the right sheet in under three minutes. Yes, a Gulfstream business jet had arrived early in the morning, refueled, and departed soon after. The documents showed the tail number and the names of the flight crew. More to the point, it showed that the aircraft was registered in the United States to a large charter company. From this office, the Irish police officer went to immigration/customs control, where he found that one Joseph Serov had indeed cleared customs on the morning indicated. The Gardai took a photocopy of all relevant documents back to his station, where they were faxed immediately to Garda headquarters in Dublin, and then on to London, and from there to Washington, D.C.

"Damn," Dan Murray said at his desk. "It *did* start here, eh?"

"Looks that way," said Chuck Baker, the assistant director in charge of the criminal division.

"Run this one down, Chuck."

"You bet, Dan. This one's getting pretty deep."

Thirty minutes later, a pair of FBI agents arrived at the office of the charter company at the Teterboro, New Jersey, airport. There they soon ascertained that the aircraft had been chartered by one Joseph Serov, who'd paid for the charter with a certified check drawn on an account at Citibank that was in his name. No, they didn't have a photo of the client. The flight crew was elsewhere on another flight, but as soon as they came back they would cooperate with the FBI, of course.

From there the agents, plus some photocopied documents, went to

the bank branch where Serov kept his account, and there learned that nobody at the branch had ever met the man. His address, they found, was the same damned post-office box that had dead-ended the search for his credit card records.

By this time, the FBI had a copy of Serov's passport photo—but those were often valueless for the purposes of identification, intended more, Director Murray thought, to identify the body of a plane-crash victim than to facilitate the search for a living human being.

But the case file was growing, and for the first time Murray felt optimistic. They were gradually turning up data on this subject, and sooner or later they'd find where he'd slipped up—trained KGB officer or not—because everyone did, and once you appeared on the FBI's collective radarscope, nine thousand skilled investigators started looking, and they wouldn't stop looking until told to stop. Photo, bank account, credit card records . . . the next step would be to find out how the money had gotten into his account. He had to have an employer and/or sponsor, and that person or entity could be squeezed for additional information. It was now just a matter of time, and Murray thought they had all the time they needed to run this mutt down. It wasn't often that they bagged a trained spook. They were the most elusive of game, and for that reason all the more pleasing when you could hang the head of one over the mantelpiece. Terrorism and drug-trafficking. This would be a juicy case to give to a United States Attorney.

"Hello," Popov said.

"Howdy," the man replied. "You're not from here."

"Dmitriy Popov," the Russian said, extending his hand.

"Foster Hunnicutt," the American said, taking it. "What do you do here?"

Popov smiled. "Here, I do nothing at all, though I am learning to ride a horse. I work directly for Dr. Brightling."

"Who—oh, the big boss of this place?"

"Yes, that is correct. And you?"

"I'm a hunter and guide," the man from Montana replied.

"Good, and you are not a vegan?"

Hunnicutt thought that was pretty good. "Not exactly. I like red meat as much as the next man. But I prefer elk to this mystery meat," he went on, looking down with some distaste for what was on his plate.

"Elk?"

"Wapiti, biggest damned deer you're ever gonna see. A good one's got maybe four, five hundred pounds of good meat in him. Nice rack, too."

"Rack?"

"The antlers, horns on the head. I'm partial to bear meat, too."

"That'll piss off a lot of the folks here," Dr. Killgore observed, working into his pasta salad.

"Look, man, hunting is the first form of conservation. If somebody don't take care of the critters, there ain't nothing to hunt. You know, like Teddy Roosevelt and Yellowstone National Park. If you want to understand game, I mean *really* understand them, you better be a hunter."

"No arguments here," the epidemiologist said.

"Maybe I'm not a bunny-hugger. Maybe I kill game, but, goddamnit, I eat what I kill. I don't kill things just to watch 'em die—well," he added, "not game animals anyway. But there's a lot of ignorant-ass people I wouldn't mind popping."

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Maclean asked with a smile.

"You bet. Too many people fucking up the place with electric toothbrushes and cars and ugly-ass houses."

"I brought Foster into the Project," Mark Waterhouse replied. He'd known Maclean for years.

"All briefed in?" Killgore asked.

"Yes, sir, and it's all fine with me. You know, I always wondered what it was like to be Jim Bridger or Jedediah Smith. Maybe now I can find out, give it a few years."

"About five," Maclean said, "according to our computer projections."

"Bridger? Smith?" Popov asked.

"They were Mountain Men," Hunnicutt told the Russian. "They were the first white men to see the West, and they were legends, explorers, hunters, Indian fighters."

"Yeah, it's a shame about the Indians."

"Maybe so," Hunnicutt allowed.

"When did you get in?" Maclean asked Waterhouse.

"We drove in today," Mark replied. "The place is about full up now, isn't it?" He didn't like the crowding.

"That it is," Killgore confirmed. He didn't, either. "But it's still nice outside. You ride, Mr. Hunnicutt?"

"How else does a man hunt in the West? I don't use no SUV, man."

"So, you're a hunting guide?"

"Yeah." Hunnicutt nodded. "I used to be a geologist for the oil companies, but I kissed that off a long time ago. I got tired of helping to kill the planet, y'know?"

Another tree-worshiping druid, Popov thought. It wasn't especially surprising, though this one struck him as verbose and a little bombastic.

"But then," the hunter went on, "well, I figured out what was important." He explained for a few minutes about the Brown Smudge. "And I took my money and hung it up, like. Always liked hunting and stuff, and so I built me a cabin in the mountains—bought an old cattle ranch—and took to hunting full-time."

"Oh, you can do that? Hunt full-time, I mean?" Killgore asked.

"That depends. A fish-and-game cop hassled me about it . . . but, well, he stopped hassling me."

Popov caught a wink from Waterhouse to Killgore when this primitive said that, and in a second he knew that this Hunnicutt person had killed a police officer and gotten away with it. What sort of people did this "project" recruit?

"Anyway, we all ride in the morning. Want to join us?"

"You bet! I never turn that down."

"I have learned to enjoy it myself," Popov put in.

"Dmitriy, you must have some Cossack in you." Killgore laughed. "Anyway, Foster, show up here for breakfast a little before seven, and we can go out together."

"Deal," Hunnicutt confirmed.

Popov stood. "With your permission, the Olympic equestrian events start in ten minutes."

"Dmitriy, don't start thinking about jumping fences. You're not *that* good yet!" Maclean told him.

"I can watch it done, can I not?" the Russian said, walking away.

"So, what's he do here?" Hunnicutt asked, when Popov was gone.

"Like he said, nothing here, exactly, but he helped get the Project going in one important way."

"Oh?" the hunter asked. "How's that?"

"All those terrorist incidents in Europe, remember them?"

"Yeah, the counterterror groups really worked good to shut those bastards down. Damned nice shooting, some of it. Dmitriy was part of that?"

"He got the missions started, all of 'em," Maclean said.

"Damn," Mark Waterhouse observed. "So, he helped Bill get the contract for the Olympics?"

"Yep, and without that, how the hell would we get the Shiva delivered?"

"Good man," Waterhouse decided, sipping his California Chardonnay. He'd miss it, he thought, after the Project activated. Well, there were plenty of liquor warehouses around the country. He would not outlive their stocks, he was sure.

CHAPTER 35

MARATHON

It had become so enjoyable that Popov was waking up early, in order to relish it more. This day he woke up just after first light, and admired the orange-rose glow on the eastern horizon that presaged the actual dawn. He'd never ridden a horse before coming to the Kansas facility, and he'd found that there was something fundamentally pleasing and manly about it, to have a large, powerful animal between one's legs, and to command it with nothing more than a gentle tug on the leather reins, or even the clucking sound one made with one's tongue. It offered a much better perspective than walking, and was just . . . pleasing to him at a sub-intellectual level.

And so he was in the cafeteria early, picking his breakfast food—plus a fresh red apple for Buttermilk—just as the kitchen staff set it out. The day promised to be fine and clear again. The wheat farmers were probably as pleased as he was with the weather, the intelligence officer thought. There had been enough rain to water the crops, and plenty of sun to ripen them. The American wheat farmers had to be the most productive in all the world, Popov reflected. With this fine land and their incredible mobile equipment, that was little surprise, he thought, lifting his tray and walking to the accustomed table. He was halfway through his scrambled eggs when Killgore and the new one, Hunnicutt, approached.

"Morning, Dmitriy," the tall hunter said in greeting.

Popov had to swallow before replying. "Good morning, Foster."

"What did you think of the riding last night?"

"The Englishman who won the gold medal was marvelous, but so was his horse."

"They pick good ones," Hunnicutt observed, heading off to get his breakfast and returning in a few minutes. "So, you were a spy, eh?"

"Intelligence officer. Yes, that was my job for the Soviet Union."

"Working with terrorists, John tells me."

"That is also true. I had my assignments, and of course I had to carry them out."

"No problem with me on that, Dmitriy. Ain't none of those folks ever bothered me or anybody I know. Hell, I worked in Libya once for

Royal Dutch Shell. Found 'em a nice little field, too, and the Libyans I worked with were okay people." Like Popov, Hunnicutt had piled up eggs and bacon. He needed a lot of food to support his frame, Dmitriy imagined. "So what do you think of Kansas?"

"Like Russia in many ways, the broad horizons, and vast farms—though yours are far more efficient. So few people growing so much grain."

"Yeah, we're counting on that to keep us in bread," Hunnicutt agreed, stuffing his face. "We have enough land here to grow plenty, and all the equipment we need. I may be into that myself."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, well, everybody's going to be assigned Project work to do. Makes sense, we all gotta pull together in the beginning anyway, but I'm really looking forward to getting me some buffalo. I even bought myself a real buffalo gun."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a company in Montana, Shiloh Arms, that makes replicas of the real buffalo rifles. Bought me one a month ago—Sharps .40-90—and it shoots like a son of a bitch," the hunter reported.

"Some of the people here will not approve," Popov said, thinking of the vegans, clearly the most extreme of the druidic elements.

"Yeah, well, those people, if they think they can live in harmony with nature without guns, they better read up on Lewis and Clark. A grizzly bear don't know about this friend-of-nature stuff. He just knows what he can kill and eat, and what he can't. Sometimes you just gotta remind him what he can't. Same thing with wolves."

"Oh, come on, Foster," Killgore said, sitting to join his friends. "There has *never* been a confirmed case of wolves killing people in America."

Hunnicutt thought that was especially dumb. "Oh? Well, it's kinda hard to bitch about something if a wolf shits you out his ass. Dead men tell no tales, Doc. What about Russia, Dmitriy? What about wolves there?"

"The farmers hate them, have always hated them, but the state hunters pursue them with helicopters and machine guns. That is not sporting, as you say, is it?"

"Not hardly," Hunnicutt agreed. "You treat game with respect. It's *their* land, not yours, and you have to play by the rules. That's how you learn about them, how they live, how they think. That's why we have the Boone and Crockett rules for big-game hunting. That's why I go in on horseback, and I pack 'em out on horseback. You have to play fair with game. But not with people, of course," he added with a wink.

"Our vegan friends don't understand about hunting," Killgore told them sadly. "I suppose they think they can eat grass and just take

pictures of the life-forms."

"That's bullshit," Hunnicutt told them. "Death is part of the process of life, and we're the top predator, and the critters out there know it. Besides, ain't nothing tastes better than elk over an open fire, guys. That's one taste I'll never lose, and be damned if I'll ever give it up. If those extremists want to eat rabbit food, fine, but anybody tells me I can't eat meat, well, there used to be a fish-and-game cop who tried to tell me when I could hunt and when I couldn't." Hunnicutt smiled cruelly. "Well, he don't bother anybody no more. Goddamnit, *I* know the way the world's supposed to work."

You killed a policeman over this business? Popov couldn't ask. *Nekulturny barbarian.* He could just as easily have bought his meat in a supermarket. A druid with a gun, surely that was an unusually dangerous sort. He finished his breakfast and walked outside. Soon the others followed, and Hunnicutt pulled a cigar from the saddlebags he was carrying and lit it as they walked to Killgore's Hummer.

"You have to smoke in the car?" the doctor complained, as soon as he saw the thing.

"I'll hold it out the fuckin' window, John. Christ, you a secondhand-smoke Nazi, too?" the hunter demanded. Then he bent to the logic of the moment and lowered the window, holding the cigar outside for the ride to the horse barn. It didn't take long. Popov saddled the affable Buttermilk, fed her the apple from the cafeteria food line and took her outside, mounted the mare and looked around the green-amber sea that surrounded the facility. Hunni-cutt came out on a horse Dmitriy had never seen, a blanket Appaloosa stallion that he took to be the hunter's own. On a closer look—

"Is that a pistol?" Popov asked.

"It's an M-1873 Colt's Single-Action Army Revolver," Foster replied, lifting it from the equally authentic Three-persons holster. "The gun that won the West. Dmitriy, I never go riding without a friend," he said with a self-satisfied smile.

"Forty-five?" the Russian asked. He'd seen them in movies, but never in real life.

"No, it's a .44-40. Caliber forty-four, with forty grains of black powder. Back a hundred years ago, you used the same cartridge in your handgun and your rifle. Cheaper that way," he explained. "And the bullet'll kill just about anything you want. Maybe not a buffalo," he allowed, "but damned sure a deer—"

"Or a man?"

"You bet. This is just about the deadliest cartridge ever made, Dmitriy." Hunnicutt replaced the revolver in the leather holster. "Now, this holster isn't authentic, really. It's called a Threepersons, named for Billy Threepersons, I think. He was a U.S. Marshal back in

the old days—he was a Native American, too, and quite a lawman, so the story goes. Anyway, he invented the holster late in the nineteenth century. Easier to quick-draw out of this one, see?" Foster demonstrated. It impressed Popov to see it in real life after so many movies. The American hunter even wore a wide-brim Western hat. Popov found himself liking the man despite his bombast.

"Come on, Jeremiah," Hunnicutt said, as the other two entered the corral, and with that he led them off.

"Your horse?" Popov asked.

"Oh, yeah, bought him off a Nez Percé Indian pal. Eight years old, just about right for me." Foster smiled as they walked out the gate, a man fully in his element, Popov thought.

The rides had become somewhat repetitive. Even here there was only so much land to walk and examine, but the simple pleasure of it hadn't changed. The four men went north this morning, slowly through the prairie-dog town, then close to the interstate highway with its heavy truck traffic.

"Where is the nearest town?" Popov asked.

"That way"—Killgore pointed—"about five miles. Not much of a town."

"Does it have an airport?"

"Little one for private planes only," the doctor replied. "You go east about twenty miles, there's another town with a regional airport for puddle-jumpers, so you can get to Kansas City, from there you can fly anywhere."

"But we'll be using our own runways for the Gs, right?"

"Yep," Killgore confirmed. "The new ones can hop all the way to Johannesburg from right here."

"No shit?" Hunnicutt asked. "You mean, like, we could go hunting in Africa if we want?"

"Yeah, Foster, but packing back the elephant on a horse might be a little tough." The epidemiologist laughed.

"Well, maybe just the ivory," the hunter replied, doing the same. "I was thinking lion and leopard, John."

"Africans like to eat the lion's gonads. You see, the lion is the most virile of all the animals," Killgore told them.

"How's that?"

"Once upon a time, a nature-film crew watched two males servicing a female who was in season. They *averaged* once every ten minutes for a day and a half between 'em. So, the individual males were going three times an hour for thirty-six hours. Better than *I* ever did." There was another laugh that the men all shared. "Anyway, some African tribes still believe that when you eat a body part off something you killed, you inherit the attribute of that part. So, they like to eat lion

balls."

"Does it work?" Maclean asked.

Killgore liked that. "If it did, wouldn't be many male lions left in the world, Kirk."

"You got that one right, John!" And there was more general laughter that dawn.

Popov wasn't as amused by this discussion as his companions. He looked off at the highway, and saw a Greyhound bus pass by at about seventy miles per hour—but then it slowed and stopped at an odd little square building. "What's that?" he asked.

"Bus stop for the intercity buses," Mark Waterhouse replied. "They have them out here in the boonies. You sit there and wait, then you wave for the bus to stop, like the old flag stops for trains."

"Ah." Dmitriy filed that one away as he turned his horse to the east. The hawk, he saw, the one that lived around here, was up and flying again, looking down for one of those tubular rodents to eat for its own breakfast. He watched, but evidently the hawk didn't see one. They rode for another hour, then headed back. Popov ended up next to Hunnicutt.

"You been riding how long?"

"Hardly more than a week," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich answered.

"You're doing okay for a tenderfoot," Foster told him in a friendly voice.

"I want to do it more, so that I can ride better at a faster pace."

"Well, how about tonight, just 'fore sundown, say?"

"Thank you, Foster, yes, I would like that. Just after dinner, shall we say?"

"Sure. Meet me around six-thirty at the corral."

"Thank you. I will do that," Popov promised. A night ride, under the stars, yes, that should be very pleasant.

"I got an idea," Chatham said when he got to work in the Javits Building.

"What's that?"

"This Russian guy, Serov. We got a passport photo, right?"

"Yeah," Sullivan agreed.

"Let's try the flyers again. His bank, it's probably within walking distance of his apartment, right?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? I like it," Special Agent Tom Sullivan said with some enthusiasm. "Let's see how fast we can get that done."

"Hey, Chuck," the voice said over the phone.

"Good morning—afternoon for you, I suppose, John."

"Yeah, just finished lunch," Clark said. "Any luck with this Serov investigation?"

"Nothing yet," the assistant director for the criminal division answered. "These things don't happen overnight, but they do happen. I have the New York field division looking for this mutt. If he's in town, we'll find him," Baker promised. "It might take a while, but we will."

"Sooner is better than later," Rainbow Six pointed out.

"I know. It always is, but stuff like this doesn't happen overnight." Baker knew that he was being kicked in the ass, lest he allow this hunt to become a low-priority item. That would not happen, but this Clark guy was CIA, and he didn't know what it was like to be a cop. "We'll find the guy for you, John. If he's over here, that is. You have the British cops looking, too?"

"Oh, yeah. Thing is, we don't know how many identities he might have."

"In his place, how many would you have?"

"Three or four, probably, and they'd be similar so they're easy for me to remember. This guy's a trained spook. So, he probably has a number of 'legends' that he can change into about as easy as he changes shirts."

"I know, John. I've worked Foreign Counterintelligence before. They are elusive game, but we know how to hunt 'em. Are you sweating any more stuff out of your terrorists?"

"They don't talk all that much," the voice replied. "The cops here can't interrogate very effectively."

So, are we supposed to roast them over a slow fire? Baker didn't ask. The FBI operated under the rules established by the U.S. Constitution. He figured that CIA most often did not, and like most FBI types he found that somewhat distasteful. He'd never met Clark, and knew him only by reputation. Director Murray respected him, but had his reservations. Clark had once tortured subjects, Murray had hinted once, and that, for the FBI, was beyond the pale, however effective it might be. The Constitution said "no" on that issue, and that was that, even for kidnappers, even though that was one class of criminal that deserved it in the eyes of every special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Trust the Brit cops. They're damned good, John, and they have a lot of experience with IRA types. They know how to talk to them."

"You say so, Chuck," the voice responded somewhat dubiously. "Okay, anything else we get comes right to your desk."

"Good. Talk to you later if we get anything here, John."

"Right, see ya."

Baker wondered if he should visit the bathroom to wash his hands

after that conversation. He'd been briefed into Rainbow and its recent activities, and while he admired the military way of doing things—like many FBI agents, he'd been a Marine officer, recruited right out of the Quantico Marine Base into the Bureau—it differed in several important areas from the Bureau's way of doing things. . . like not violating the law. This John Clark was a hardcase son of a bitch, a former Agency guy who'd done some spooky things, Dan Murray had told him, with a mixture of admiration and disapproval. But, what the hell, they were on the same side, sort of, and this Russian subject had probably initiated an operation that had gone after Clark's own family. That added a personal element to the case, and Baker had to respect that.

Chavez turned in after another long day of watching athletes run and sweat. It had been an interesting couple of weeks, and though he sorely missed Patsy and JC, whom he'd hardly had a chance to meet, he couldn't deny that he was enjoying himself. But soon it would be over. Sports reporters were tallying up the medals—America had done quite well, and the Aussies had done spectacularly well, especially in swimming events—in anticipation of announcing which nation had "won" the games. Three more days and they'd run the Marathon, traditionally the last Olympic event, followed soon thereafter by the closing ceremonies and the dousing of the flame. Already the runners were walking and/or driving along the course, to learn the hills and turns. They didn't want to get lost, though that would hardly be possible, as the route would be lined with screaming fans every step of the way. And they were working out, running in the training/practice area of the Olympic Village, not so much so as to tire themselves out, but just enough to keep their muscles and lungs ready for the murderous exertion of this longest of footraces. Chavez considered himself to be in shape, but he'd never run a twenty-plus-mile course. Soldiers had to know how to run, but not *that* far, and running that distance on paved roads had to be pure murder on the feet and ankles, despite the cushioned soles of modern running shoes. Yeah, those bastards had to be in real shape, Ding thought, lying down in his bed.

From the opening-day ceremonies, when the Olympic flame had been lit, through today, the games had been wonderfully managed and run, as if the entire national soul and strength of Australia had been devoted to one task—as America had once decided to go to the moon. Everything was superbly organized, and that was further proof that his presence here was a total waste of time. Security hadn't had even a hint of a problem. The Aussie cops were friendly, competent, and numerous, and the Australian SAS backing them up were nearly as good as his own troopers, well supported and advised by the Global

Security people who'd gotten them the same tactical radios that Rainbow used. That company looked like a good vendor to use, and he thought he might recommend that John talk to them along those lines. It never hurt to have an outside opinion.

About the only bad news was the weather, which had been sultry-hot for the entire Olympiad. That had kept the medics busy at their heatstroke kiosks. Nobody had died yet, but about a hundred people had been hospitalized, and thirty times that many treated and released by the firemen paramedics and Australian army medical orderlies. That didn't count the people who just sat down on the curb and tried to cool off without getting any proper medical assistance. He didn't mind the heat all that much—Chavez had never been afraid of sweat—but he also paced himself, and, like everyone else in the Olympic stadium, was grateful for that fogging system. The TV guys had even done a story about it, which was good news for the American company that had designed and installed it. They were even talking about a version for golf courses in Texas and elsewhere, where it got about this hot. Traveling from ninety-five degrees to an apparent temperature of eighty or so was a pleasant sensation indeed, not unlike a shower, and the concourses were often crowded with people in the afternoons, escaping from the blazing sunshine.

Chavez's last thought of the night was that he would not have minded having the sunblock concession. There were signs everywhere telling people to be mindful of the hole in the ozone layer, and he knew that sun-caused skin cancer wasn't a pleasant death. So, Chavez and his men liberally slathered the stuff on every morning just like everyone else. Well, a few more days and they'd go back to Britain, where their tans would be noted by the pastypale Englishmen, and the weather would be a good twenty degrees cooler on what the Brits called a "hot" day. Anything over seventy-five over there and people started dropping dead in the street—which made Ding wonder about the old song that claimed only "mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun." They must have been a lot tougher back then, Chavez thought, falling off to sleep.

Popov saddled Buttermilk at about six that evening. The sun wasn't setting yet, but that was less than an hour away, and his horse, having rested and eaten all day, was not the least bit averse to his attention—besides, he'd given Buttermilk another apple, and the mare seemed to relish them as a man might enjoy his first glass of beer after a long working day.

Jeremiah, Hunnicutt's horse, was smaller than Buttermilk, but appeared more powerful. An odd-looking animal, his light gray coat was covered from hindquarters to neck with an almost perfectly

square matlike mark of deep charcoal, hence the name "blanket Appaloosa," the Russian imagined. Foster Hunnicutt showed up, hoisting his large Western-style saddle on his shoulder, and tossing it atop the blanket, then reaching under to cinch the straps in. His last act, Popov saw, was to strap on his Colt pistol. Then he slid his left foot into the left-side stirrup and climbed aboard. Jeremiah, the stallion, must have liked to be ridden. It was as though the animal transformed himself with this new weight on his back. The head came up proudly, and the ears swiveled around, waiting for the command of its rider. That was a clucking sound, and the stallion moved out into the corral alongside Popov and Buttermilk.

"He is a fine horse, Foster."

"Best I've ever had," the hunter agreed. "The App's a great all-around critter. They come from the Nez Percé Indian tribe. The Nez Percé captured the original Western horses—they were the ones who escaped from the Spanish conquistadors, and bred out in the wild. Well, the Nez Percé learned how to breed them back to the Arabian roots of the Spanish breed, and came out with these." Hunnicutt reached down to pat his horse's neck with rough affection, which the animal seemed to like. "The Appaloosa's the best horse there is, if you ask me. Smart, steady, healthy breed, not dizzy like the Arabians are, and damned pretty, I think. They aren't the best at any one thing, but they're damned good in all things. Great all-around mount. Jeremiah here's a great hunting and tracking horse. We've spent a lot of time in the high country after elk. He even found my gold for me."

"Excuse me? Gold?"

Hunnicutt laughed. "My spread up in Montana. It used to be part of a cattle ranch, but the mountains are too steep for the cows. Anyway, there's a stream coming down from the mountain. I was letting Jeremiah drink one afternoon, and I saw something shiny, okay?" Hunnicutt stretched. "It was gold, a big hunk of gold and quartz—that's the best geological formation for gold, Dmitriy. Anyway, I figure I got a fair-sized deposit on my land. How big? There's no tellin', and it doesn't matter much anyway."

"Not matter?" Popov turned in the saddle to look at his companion. "Foster, for the last ten thousand years men have killed one another over gold."

"Not anymore, Dmitriy. That's going to end—forever, probably."

"But how? Why?" Popov demanded.

"Don't you know about the Project?"

"A little, but not enough to understand what you just said."

What the hell, the hunter thought. "Dmitriy, human life on the planet is going to come to a screeching halt, boy."

"But—"

"They didn't tell you?"

"No, Foster, not that part. Can you tell me?"

What the hell, Hunnicutt thought again. The Olympics were almost over. Why not? This Russkie understood about Nature, knew about riding, and he damned sure worked for John Brightling in a very sensitive capacity.

"It's called Shiva," he began, and went on for several minutes.

For Popov it was a time to put his professional face back on. His emotions were neutralized while he listened. He even managed a smile which masked his inner horror.

"But how do you distribute it?"

"Well, you see, John has a company that also works for him. Global Security—the boss man's a guy named Henriksen."

"Ah, yes, I know him. He was in your FBI."

"Oh? I knew he was a cop, but not a fed. Anyway, they got the consulting contract with the Aussies for the Olympics, and one of Bill's people will be spreading the Shiva. Something to do with the air-conditioning system at the stadium, they tell me. They're going to spread it on the last day, see, and the closing ceremonies. The next day everyone flies home, and then, like, thousands of people all take the bug home with them."

"But what protects us?"

"You got a shot when you came here, right?"

"Yes, Killgore said it was a booster for something."

"Oh, it was, Dmitriy. It's a booster, all right. It's the vaccine that protects you against Shiva. I got it, too. That's the 'B' vaccine, pal. There's another one, they tell me, the 'A' vaccine, but that one's not the one you want to get." Hunnicutt explained on.

"How do you know all this?" Popov asked.

"Well, you see, in case people figure this out, I'm one of the guys who helped set up the perimeter security system here. So, they told me why the Project *needs* perimeter security. It's pretty serious shit, man. If anyone were to find out about what was done, hell, they might even nuke us, y'know?" Foster pointed out with a grin. "Not many people really understand about saving the planet. I mean, we do this now, or in about twenty years, hell, *everything* and *everybody* dies. Not just the people. The animals, too. We can't let that happen, can we?"

"I see your point. Yes, that does make sense," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich agreed, without choking on his words.

Hunnicutt nodded with some satisfaction. "I figured you'd get it, man. So, those terrorist things you got started, well, they were very pretty important. Without getting everybody all hot and bothered about international terrorism, Bill Hendriksen might not have got his people in place to do their little job. So," Hunnicutt said as he fished a

cigar out of his pocket, “thanks, Dmitriy. You were really an important part for this here Project.”

“Thank you, Foster,” Popov responded. *Is this possible?* he wondered. “How certain are you that this will work?”

“It oughta work. I asked that question, too. They let me in on some of the planning, ’cuz I’m a scientist—I was a pretty good geologist once, trust me. I know a lot of stuff. The disease is a real mother. The real key to that was the genetic engineering done on the original Ebola. Hell, you remember how scary that was a year and a half ago, right?”

Popov nodded. “Oh, yes. I was in Russia then, and it was very frightening indeed.” Even more frightening had been the response of the American president, he reminded himself.

“Well, they—the real Project scientists—learned a lot from that. The key to this is the ‘A’ vaccine. The original outbreak may kill a few million people, but that’s mainly psychological. The vaccine that Horizon’s going to market is a live-virus vaccine, like the Sabin polio vaccine. But they’ve tuned it, like. It doesn’t stop Shiva, man. It *spreads* Shiva. Takes a month to six weeks for the symptoms to show. They proved that in the lab.”

“How?”

“Well, Kirk was part of that. He kidnapped some folks off the street, and they tested the Shiva and the vaccines on them. Everything worked, even the first-phase delivery system that’s set up to use in Sydney.”

“It is a big thing, to change the face of the world,” Popov thought aloud, looking north to where the interstate highway was.

“Gotta be done, man. If we don’t—well, you can kiss all this good-bye, Dmitriy. I can’t let that happen.”

“It’s a terrible thing to do, but I see the logic of your position. Brightling is a genius, to see this, to find a way of solving the problem, and then to have the courage to act.” Popov hoped his voice wasn’t too patronizing, but this man Hunnicutt was a technocrat, not one who understood people.

“Yep,” Hunnicutt said around the cigar, as he lit it with a kitchen match. He blew the match out, then held it until it was cold before letting it fall to the ground, lest it start a prairie fire. “Brilliant scientist, and he *gets it,* you know? Thank God, he has the resources to make all this happen. Setting all this up must have cost near onto a billion dollars—hell, just this place, not counting the one in Brazil.”

“Brazil?”

“There’s a smaller version of the complex down there, somewhere west of Manaus, I think. I never been there. The rain forest doesn’t interest me that much. I’m an open-country sort of guy,” Hunnicutt

explained. “Now, the African veldt, the plains there, that’s something else. Well, I guess I’ll get to see it, and hunt it.”

“Yes, I would like to see that, to see the wildlife, how it lives and thrives in the sun,” Popov agreed, coming to his own decision.

“Yep. Gonna get me a lion or two there with my H&H .375.” Hunnicutt clucked and got Jeremiah to go faster, an easy canter that Popov tried to duplicate. He’d done this pace before, but now he found that he had trouble synchronizing with Buttermilk’s rather easy motions. He had to switch his mind back into his body to make that happen, but he managed it, catching up with the hunter.

“So, you will transform this country to the Old West, eh?” The interstate was about two miles off. The trucks were passing by swiftly, their trailers lit in amber lights. There would be intercity buses, too, similarly lit, he hoped.

“That’s one of the things we’re going to do.”

“And you’ll carry your pistol everywhere?”

“Revolver, Dmitriy,” Foster corrected. “But, yeah. I’ll be like the guys I’ve read about, living out here in harmony with nature. Maybe find me a woman who thinks like I do, maybe build me a nice cabin in the mountains, like Jeremiah Johnson did—but no Crow Indians to worry me there,” he added with a chuckle.

“Foster?”

He turned. “Yeah?”

“Your pistol, may I hold it?” the Russian asked, praying for the correct response.

He got it. “Sure.” He drew it and passed it across, muzzle up for safety.

Popov felt the weight and the balance. “It is loaded?”

“Nothing much more useless than a handgun that ain’t loaded. Hell, you want to shoot it? Just cock the hammer back and let go, but you want to make sure your horse is reined in tight, okay? Jeremiah here’s used to the noise. That mare might not be.”

“I see.” Popov took the reins in his left hand to keep Buttermilk in check. Next he extended his right hand and cocked the hammer on the Colt, heard the distinctive triple click of this particular type of revolver, and took aim at a wooden surveyor’s stake and pulled the trigger. It broke cleanly at about five pounds.

Buttermilk jumped slightly with the noise, so close to her sensitive ears, but the horse didn’t react all that badly. And the bullet, Popov saw, grazed the two-inch stake, six meters or so away. So, he still knew how to shoot.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Hunnicutt asked. “If you ask me, the Single-Action Army’s got the best balance of any handgun ever made.”

“Yes,” Popov agreed, “it is very nice.” Then he turned. Foster

Hunnicutt was seated on his stallion, Jeremiah, not three meters away. That made it easy. The former KGB officer cocked the hammer again, turned and aimed right at the center of his chest, and pulled the trigger before the hunter could even be surprised by the action. His target's eyes widened, either from his unbelieving recognition of the impossible thing that was happening or from the impact of the heavy bullet, but what it was didn't matter. The bullet went straight through his heart. The body of the hunter stayed erect in the saddle for a few seconds, the eyes still wide with shock, then it fell lifelessly backward away from Popov and onto the grassland.

Dmitriy dismounted and took the three steps to the body to make sure that Hunnicutt was dead. Then he unsaddled Jeremiah, who took the death of his owner phlegmatically, and removed the bridle, too, surprised that the animal didn't bite him for what he'd just done, but a horse wasn't a dog. With that done, he smacked the stallion heavily on the rump, and it trotted off for fifty meters or so, then stopped and started grazing.

Popov remounted Buttermilk and clucked her to a northerly direction. He looked back, saw the lit windows of the Project building complex, and wondered if he or Hunnicutt would be missed. Probably not, he judged, as the interstate highway grew closer. There was supposed to be that little village to the west, but he decided that his best chance was the bus stop hut, or perhaps thumbing a ride on a car or truck. What he'd do after that, he wasn't sure, but he knew he had to get the hell away from this place, just as fast and as far as he could manage. Popov was not a man who believed in God. His education and his upbringing had not aimed him in that direction, and so for him "god" was only the first part of "goddamned." But he'd learned something important today. He might never know if there was a God, but there were surely devils—and he had worked for them, and the horror of that was like nothing he'd ever known as a young colonel of the KGB.

CHAPTER 36

FLIGHTS OF NECESSITY

The fear was as bad as the horror. Popov had never experienced a really frightening time as a field-intelligence officer. There had always been tension, especially at the beginning of his career, but he'd quickly grown confident in his fieldcraft, and the skills had become for him a kind of security blanket, whose warm folds had always made his soul comfortable. But not today.

Now he was in a foreign place. Not merely a foreign land, for he was a man of cities. In any such place he knew how to disappear in minutes, to vanish so completely that scarcely any police force in the world could find him. But this wasn't a city. He dismounted Buttermilk a hundred meters from the bus hut, and again he took the time to remove the saddle and bridle, because a saddled, riderless horse was sure to attract notice, but a horse merely walking about on its own probably would not, not here, where many people kept such animals for their pleasure. Then it was just a matter of easing his way through the barbed-wire fence and walking to the bus hut, which, he found, was empty. There was no schedule on the blank, white-painted walls. It was the simplest of structures, seemingly made of poured concrete, with a thick roof to stand up against the heavy winter snows, and perhaps survive the tornadoes that he'd heard about but never experienced. The bench was also made of concrete, and he sat on it briefly to work on making his shakes go away. He'd never felt like this in his life. The fear—if these people were willing to kill millions—billions—of people, surely they would not hesitate as long as a blink to end his solitary life. He had to get away.

Ten minutes after arriving at the hut, he checked his watch and wondered if there were any buses at this hour. If not, well, there were cars and trucks, and perhaps—

He walked to the shoulder and held up his hand. Cars were passing by at over a hundred thirty kilometers per hour, which left them little time to see him in the darkness, much less brake to stop. But after fifteen minutes, a cream-colored Ford pickup truck eased over to the side of the road.

"Where you headin', buddy?" the driver asked. He looked to be a

farmer, perhaps sixty years of age, his face and neck scored by lines from too many afternoon suns.

"The airport in the next town. Can you take me there?" Dmitriy said, getting in. The driver wasn't wearing a seat belt, which was probably against the law, but, then, so was cold-blooded murder, and for that reason alone he had to get the hell away from this place.

"Sure, I have to get off at that exit anyway. What's your name?"

"Joe—Joseph," Popov said.

"Well, I'm Pete. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Not originally. England, actually," Dmitriy went on, trying that accent on for size.

"Oh, yeah? What brings you here?"

"Business."

"What kind?" Pete asked.

"I am a consultant, kind of a go-between."

"So, how'd you get stuck out here, Joe?" the driver asked.

What was the matter with this man? Was he a police officer? He asked questions like someone from the Second Chief Directorate. "My, uh, friend, had a family emergency, and he had to drop me off there to wait for a bus."

"Oh." And that shut him up, Popov saw, blessing his most recent lie. *You see, I just shot and killed someone who wanted to kill you and everyone you know* . . . It was one of those times when the truth simply didn't work for him or for anyone else. His mind was going at a very rapid speed, faster by a considerable margin than this damned pickup truck, whose driver seemed unwilling to push the pedal much harder, every other vehicle on the road whizzing past. The farmer was an elderly man and evidently a patient one. Had Popov been driving, he'd soon establish how fast this damned truck could go. But for all that, it was only ten minutes to the green exit sign with the silhouette of an airplane tacked onto one side. He tried not to pound his fist on the armrest as the driver slowly took the exit, then a right turn to what looked like a small regional airport. In another minute, Pete took him to the US Air Express door.

"Thank you, sir," Popov said, as he left.

"Have a good trip, Joe," the driver said, with a friendly Kansas smile.

Popov walked rapidly into the diminutive terminal, and then to the desk, only twenty meters inside.

"I need to get to New York," Popov told the clerk. "First class, if possible."

"Well, we have a flight leaving in fifteen minutes for Kansas City, and from there you can connect to a US Airways flight to La Guardia, Mr.? . . . "

"Demetrius," Popov replied, remembering the name on his single remaining credit card. "Joseph Demetrius," he said, taking out his wallet and handing the card over. He had a passport in that name in a safe-deposit box in New York, and the credit card was good, with a high limit and nothing charged on it in the past three months. The desk clerk probably thought he was working quickly, but Popov also needed to visit a men's room and did his best not to show that urgent requirement. It was at that moment he realized he had a loaded revolver in the saddlebags he was carrying, and he had to get rid of *that* at once.

"Okay, Mr. Demetrius, here's your ticket for now, Gate 1, and here's the one for the Kansas City flight. It will be leaving from Gate A-34, and it's a first-class aisle seat, 2C. Any questions, sir?"

"No, no, thank you." Popov took the tickets and tucked them in his pocket. Then he looked for the entrance to the departure concourse, and headed that way, stopped by a waste bin and, after quickly looking around, very carefully took the monster handgun out of the bags, wiped it, and dumped it into the trash. He checked the terminal again. No, no one had noticed. He checked the saddlebags for anything else they might contain, but they were completely empty now. Satisfied, he headed through the security checkpoint, whose magnetometer blessedly didn't beep at his passage. Collecting the leather saddlebags off the conveyor system, he looked for and found a men's room, to which he headed directly, emerging in another minute feeling far better.

This regional airport, he saw, had but two gates, but it *did* have a bar, to which Popov went next. He had fifty dollars of cash in his wallet, and five of those paid for a double vodka, which he gulped down before taking the next hundred steps to the gate. Handing the ticket to the next clerk, he was directed out the door. The aircraft had propellers, and he hadn't traveled on one of those for years. But for this flight he would have settled for rubber bands, and Popov clambered aboard the Saab 340B short-haul airliner. Five minutes later, the propellers started turning, and Popov started to relax. Thirty-five minutes to Kansas City, a forty-five-minute layover, and then off to New York on a 737, in first class, where the alcohol was free. Best of all, he sat alone on the left side of the aircraft, with nobody to engage him in conversation. Popov needed to think, very carefully, and though quickly, not too quickly.

He closed his eyes as the aircraft started its takeoff roll, the noise of the engines blotting out all extraneous noise. *Okay,* he thought, *what have you learned, and what should you do with that knowledge?* Two simple questions, perhaps, but he had to organize the answer to the first before he knew how to answer the second. He almost started

praying to a God in whose existence he did not believe, but instead he stared out the window at the mainly dark ground while his mind churned away in a darkness of its own.

Clark awoke with a start. It was three in the morning at Hereford, and he'd had a dream whose substance retreated away from his consciousness like a cloud of smoke, shapeless and impossible to grab. He knew it had been an unpleasant dream, and he could only estimate the degree of unpleasantness by the fact that it had awakened him, a rare occurrence even when on a dangerous field assignment. He realized that his hands were shaking—and he didn't know why. He dismissed it, rolled back over, and closed his eyes for more sleep. He had a budgeting meeting today, the bane of his existence as commander of Rainbow group, playing goddamned accountant. Maybe that had been the substance of his dream, he thought with his head on the pillow. Trapped forever with accountants in discussions of where the money came from and how it would be spent . . .

The landing at Kansas City was a smooth one, and the Saab airliner pulled up to the terminal, where, presently, the propellers stopped. A ground-crewman came up and attached a rope to the propeller tip to keep it from turning while the passengers debarked. Popov checked his watch. They were a few minutes early as he walked out the door into the clean air, then into the terminal. There, three gates away from his flight at A-34—he checked to make sure it was the correct flight—he found a bar again. They even allowed smoking in here, which was unusual for an American airport, and he sniffed in the secondhand fumes, remembering the youth in which he'd smoked *Trud* cigarettes, and almost asked one of these Americans for a smoke. But he stopped short of it and merely drank his next double vodka in a corner booth, facing the wall, wanting no one to have a reason to remember him here. After thirty minutes, his flight was called. He left ten dollars on the table and walked off, carrying the empty saddlebags, then asked himself why he was bothering. But it would appear unusual for a person to board a flight carrying nothing, and so he retained them, and tucked them into the overhead bin. The best news of this flight was that 2-D was not occupied, and he took that, facing the window to make it harder for the stewardess to see his face. Then the Boeing 737 backed away from the gate and took off into the darkness. Popov declined the drink offered to him. He'd had enough for the moment, and though some alcohol helped him to organize his thoughts, too much of it muddled them. He had enough in his system to relax, and that was all he wanted.

What exactly had he learned this day? How did it fit in with all the

other things he'd learned at the building complex in western Kansas? The answer to the second question was easier than the first: whatever hard data he'd learned today contradicted *nothing* about the project's nature, location, or even its decor. It hadn't contradicted the magazines by his bedside, nor the videotapes next to the TV, nor the conversations he'd overheard in the corridors or in the building's cafeteria. Those maniacs were planning to end the world in the name of their pagan beliefs—but *how the hell* could he persuade anyone that this was so? And exactly what hard data did he have to give to someone else—and to *which* someone else? It had to be someone who would both believe him and be able to take action. But who? There was the additional problem that he'd murdered Foster Hunnicutt—he'd had no choice in the matter; he'd had to get away from the Project, and that had been his only chance to do so covertly. But now they could accuse him rightfully of murder, which meant that some police force might try to arrest him, and then how could he get the word out to stop those fucking druids from doing what they said they'd do? No policeman in the known world would believe his tale. It was far too grotesque to be absorbed by a normal mind—and surely those people in the Project had a cover story or legend which had been carefully constructed to shunt aside any sort of official inquiry. That was the most rudimentary security concern, and that Henriksen fellow would have worked on that himself.

Carol Brightling stood in her office. She'd just printed up a letter to the chief of staff saying that she'd be taking a leave of absence to work on a special scientific project. She'd discussed this matter with Arnie van Damm earlier in the day and gotten no serious objection to her departure. She would not be missed, his body language had told her quite clearly. *Well,* she thought with a cold look at the computer screen, *neither would he,* when it came to that.

Dr. Brightling tucked the letter in an envelope, sealed it, and left it on her assistant's desk for transfer into the White House proper the next day. She'd done her job for the Project and for the planet, and it was now time for her to leave. It had been so long, so very long, since she'd felt John's arms around her. The divorce had been well publicized. It had had to be. She would never have gotten the White House job if she'd been married to one of the country's richest men. And so, she'd forsworn him, and he'd publicly forsworn the movement, the beliefs they'd both held ten years before when they'd formulated the idea for the Project, but he'd never stopped believing, any more than she had. And so she'd gotten all the way inside the government, and gotten a security clearance that gave her access to literally everything, even operational intelligence, which she then

forwarded to John when he needed it. Most especially, she'd gotten access to biological-warfare information, so that they knew what USAMRIID and others had done to protect America, and so knew how to engineer Shiva in such a way as to defeat *any* proposed vaccine except those which Horizon Corporation had formulated.

But it had had its own price. John had been seen in public with all manner of young women, and had doubtless dallied with many of them, for he'd always been a passionate man. It was something they hadn't discussed before their public divorce, and for that reason it had come to her as an unpleasant surprise to see him at those occasional social functions they both had to attend, always with a pretty young thing on his arm—always a different one, since he'd never formed a real relationship with anyone but her. Carol Brightling told herself that this was good, since it meant that *she* was the only woman really a part of John's life, and thus those annoying young women were merely a way for him to dissipate his male hormones. . . . But it hadn't been easy to see, and harder still to think about, alone in her home, with only Jiggs for company, and often as not weeping in her loneliness.

But set against that small personal consideration was the Project. The White House job had merely fortified her beliefs. She'd seen it all here, Carol Brightling reminded herself, from the specifications for new nuclear weapons to bio-war reports. The Iranian attempt at a national plague, which had predated her government job, had both frightened and encouraged her. Frightened, because it had been a real threat to the country, and one that could have begun a massive effort to counter a future attack. Encouraged, because she'd learned in short order that a really effective defense was difficult at best, because vaccines had to be tailored for specific bugs. And, when one got down to it, the Iranian plague had merely heightened the public's appreciation of the threat, and *that* would make distribution of the "A" vaccine the easier to sell to the public . . . and to the government bureaucrats here and around the world who would leap at the offered cure. She would even return to her OEOB office at the proper time to urge approval for this essential public health measure, and on this issue she would be trusted.

Dr. Carol Brightling walked out of her office, turned left down the wide corridor, then left again and down the steps to her parked car. Twenty minutes later, she locked the car and walked up the steps of her apartment building, there to be greeted by the faithful Jiggs, who jumped into her arms and rubbed his furry head against her breast, as he always did. Her ten years of misery were over, and though the sacrifice had been hard to endure, the reward for it would be a planet turning back to green, and a Nature restored to Her deserved Glory.

It was somehow good to be back in New York. Though he didn't dare to return to his apartment, this was at least a city, and here he could disappear as easily as a rat in a junkyard. He told the taxi driver to take him to Essex House, an upscale hotel on Central Park South, and there he checked in under the name of Joseph Demetrius. Agreeably, there was a minibar in his room, and he mixed a drink with two miniatures of an American brand of vodka, whose inferior taste he was too anxious to be concerned about. Then, having come to his decision, he called the airline to confirm flight information, checked his watch, then called the front desk and instructed the clerk there to give him a wake-up call at the hellish hour of 3:30 A.M. The Russian collapsed into the bed without undressing. He'd have to do some quick shopping in the morning, and also visit his bank to pull his Demetrius passport out of the safe-deposit box. Then he'd get five hundred dollars out of an ATM cash machine, courtesy of his Demetrius Mas-terCard, and he'd be safe . . . well, if not truly safe, then safer than he was now, enough to be somewhat confident in himself and his future, such as it was, if the Project could be stopped. And if not, he told himself behind closed and somewhat drunken eyes, then at least he'd know what to avoid in order to keep himself alive. Probably.

Clark awoke at his accustomed hour. JC was sleeping better now, after two weeks of life, and this morning he'd at least synchronized himself with the master of the house, John found, as he emerged from his morning shave to hear his grandson's first wake-up chirps in the bedroom where he and Patsy were currently quartered. Sandy was awakened by the sounds, though she'd managed to ignore the alarm on John's side of the bed, her maternal or grand-maternal instincts obviously having their own selective power. Clark headed down to the kitchen to flip on the coffee machine, then opened the front door to collect his morning copies of the *Times,* the *Daily Telegraph,* and the *Manchester Guardian* for his morning news brief. One thing about Brit papers, he'd learned, the quality of the writing was better than in most American newspapers, and the articles were rather more concise.

The little guy was growing, John told himself when Patsy came into the kitchen with JC affixed to her left breast and Sandy in tow behind. But his daughter wasn't drinking coffee, evidently fearful that the caffeine might find its way into her breast milk. Instead she drank milk herself, while Sandy got breakfast going. John Conor Chavez was fully engaged with his breakfast, and in ten minutes, his grandfather was similarly engaged with his own, the radio now on a BBC channel to catch the morning news to supplement the print in front of him.

Both modalities confirmed that the world was essentially at peace. The lead story was the Olympic Games, which Ding had reported on every night for them—the morning for him, all those time zones away—the reports usually ending with the phone held to JC's little face so that his proud father might hear the mewings he occasionally made, though rarely on cue.

By 6:30, John was dressed and heading out the door, and this morning, unlike a few others, he drove to the athletic field for his morning exercises. The men of Team-1 were there, their numbers still short because of the losses at the hospital shoot-out, but proud and tough as ever. Sergeant First Class Fred Franklin led the team this morning, and Clark followed his instructions, not as ably as the younger men, but trying still to keep up, and so earn their respect if also a few disparaging looks at the old fart who thought he was something else. The also short-numbered Team-2 was at the other side of the field, led by Sergeant Major Eddie Price, John saw. Half an hour later, he showered again—doing so twice in ninety minutes almost every day had often struck him as strange, but the wake-up shower was so firm a part of his life that he couldn't dispense with it, and after working up a sweat with the troops, he always needed another. After that, dressed in his "boss's" suit, he entered the headquarters building, checked the fax machine first, as always, and found a message from FBI headquarters that told him that nothing new had developed on the Serov case. A second fax told him that a package would be couriered to him early that morning from Whitehall, without saying exactly what it was. Well, John thought, flipping on the office coffee-drip machine, he'd find out in due course.

Al Stanley came in just before eight, still showing the effects of his wounds, but bouncing back well for a man of his age. Bill Tawney was in just two minutes later, and the senior leadership of Rainbow was in place for another working day.

The phone woke him up with a jolt. Popov reached for it in the darkness, missed, then reached again. "Yes."

"It's three-thirty, Mr. Demetrius," the operator said.

"Yes, thank you," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied, switching on the light and swiveling to get his feet on the carpeted floor. The note next to his phone told him how to dial the number he wanted: nine . . . zero-one-one-four four...

Alice Foorgate came in a few minutes early. She put her purse in a desk drawer and sat down, and began reviewing her notes on the things that were supposed to happen today. Oh, she saw, a budget meeting. Mr. Clark would be in a foul mood until after lunch. Then

her phone rang.

"I need to speak to Mr. John Clark," the voice said.

"May I tell him who's calling?"

"No," the voice said. "You may not."

That made the secretary blink with puzzlement. She almost said that she could hardly forward a call under such circumstances, but didn't. It was too early in the morning for unpleasantness. She placed the incoming call on hold and punched another button.

"A call for you on line one, sir."

"Who is it?" Clark asked.

"He didn't say, sir."

"Okay," John grumbled. He switched buttons and said, "This is John Clark."

"Good morning, Mr. Clark," the anonymous voice said in greeting.

"Who is this?" John asked.

"We have a mutual acquaintance. His name is Sean Grady."

"Yes?" Clark's hand tightened on the instrument, and he punched the RECORD button for the attached taping system.

"You may know my name, therefore, as Iosef An-dreyevich Serov. We should meet, Mr. Clark."

"Yes," John replied evenly, "I'd like that. How do we do it?"

"Today, I think, in New York. Take the British Airways Concorde Flight 1 into JFK, and I will meet you at one in the afternoon at the entrance to the Central Park Zoo. The redbrick building that looks like a castle. I shall be there at eleven o'clock exactly. Any questions?"

"I suppose not. Okay, eleven A.M. in New York."

"Thank you. Good-bye." The line went dead, and Clark switched buttons again.

"Alice, could you have Bill and Alistair join me, please?"

They came in less than three minutes later. "Listen to this one, guys," John said, hitting the PLAY button on the tape machine.

"Bloody hell," Bill Tawney observed, a second before Al Stanley could do the same. "He wants to meet you? I wonder why."

"Only one way to find out. I have to catch the Con-corde for New York. Al, could you get Malloy awake so he can chopper me to Heathrow?"

"You're going?" Stanley asked. The answer was obvious.

"Why not? Hell"—John grinned—"it gets me out of the fucking budget meeting."

"Quite so. There could be dangers involved."

"I'll have the FBI send some people to look after me, and I'll have a friend with me," Clark pointed out, meaning his .45 Beretta. "We're dealing with a professional spook here. There's more danger to him than there is to me, unless he's got a very elaborate operation set up at

the other end, and we should be able to spot that. He wants to meet with me. He's a pro, and that means he wants to tell me something—or maybe ask me something, but I'd lean the other way, right?"

"I'd have to agree with that," Tawney said.

"Objections?" Clark asked his principal subordinates. There were none. They were just as curious as he was, though they'd want good security in New York for the meeting. But that would not be a problem.

Clark checked his watch. "It's short of four in the morning there—and he wants the meet to be today. Pretty fast for this sort of thing. Why the hurry? Any ideas?"

"He could want to tell you that he had no connection with the hospital incident. Aside from that? . . ." Tawney just shook his head.

"Timing's a problem. That's a ten-thirty flight, John," Stanley pointed out. "It's now three-thirty on your East Coast. No one important will be at work yet."

"We'll just have to wake them up." Clark looked at his phone and hit the speed-dial button for FBI headquarters.

"FBI," another anonymous voice said.

"I need to talk to Assistant Director Chuck Baker."

"I don't think Mr. Baker will be in now."

"I know. Call him at home. Tell him that John Clark is calling." He could almost hear the *oh, shit* at the other end of the call, but an order had been given by a voice that sounded serious, and it would have to be followed.

"Hello," another voice said somewhat groggily a minute later.

"Chuck, this is John Clark. Something's turned on the Serov case."

"What's that?" *And why the hell can't it wait four hours?* the voice didn't go on.

John explained. He could hear the man waking up at the other end.

"Okay," Baker said. "I'll have some guys from New York meet you at the terminal, John."

"Thanks, Chuck. Sorry to shake you loose at this hour."

"Yeah, John. Bye."

The rest was easy. Malloy came into his office after his own morning workout, and called to get his helicopter readied for a hop. It didn't take long. The only headache was having to filter through the in- and outbound airliner traffic, but the chopper landed at the general-aviation terminal, and an airport security car took John to the proper terminal, where Clark was able to walk into the Speedway Lounge twenty minutes before the flight to collect his ticket. This way, he also bypassed security, and was thus spared the embarrassment of having to explain that he carried a pistol, which in the United Kingdom was the equivalent of announcing that he had a case of

highly infectious leprosy. The service was British-lavish, and he had to decline the offer of champagne before boarding the aircraft. Then the flight was called, and Clark walked down the jet-way and into the world's fastest airliner for Flight 1 to New York's JFK International. The pilot gave the usual preflight brief, and a tractor pushed the oversized fighter aircraft away from its gate. In less than four hours, John thought, he'd be back in the States. Wasn't air travel wonderful? But better yet, he had in his lap the package that had just been couriered in. It was the personnel package for one Popov, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. It had been heavily edited, he was sure, but even so it made for interesting reading, as the Concorde leaped into the air and turned west for America. *Thank you, Sergey Nikolayevich,* John thought, flipping through the pages. It had to be the real KGB file, John saw. Some of the photocopied pages showed pinholes in the upper-left corners, which meant that they dated back to when KGB had used pins to keep pages together instead of staples, that having been copied from the British MI-6 back in the 1920s. It was a piece of trivia that only insiders really knew.

Clark was about halfway across the North Atlantic when Popov awoke on his own again at seven-fifteen. He ordered breakfast sent up and got himself clean in preparation for a busy day. By eight-fifteen, he was walking out the front door, and looked first of all for a men's store that was open for business. That proved to be frustrating, until finally he found one whose doors opened promptly at nine. Thirty minutes later, he had an expensive but somewhat ill-fitting gray suit, plus shirts and ties that he took back to his hotel room and into which he changed at once. Then it was time for him to walk to Central Park.

The building that guarded the Central Park Zoo was strange to behold. It was made of brick, and had battlements on the roof as though to defend the area against armed attack, but the same walls were dotted with windows, and the entire building sat in a depression rather than atop a hill, as a proper castle did. Well, American architects had their own ideas, Popov decided. He circulated about the area, looking for the FBI agents (or perhaps CIA field officers? he wondered) who were certain to be there to cover this meeting—and possibly to arrest him? Well, there was nothing to be done about that. He would now learn if this John Clark were truly an intelligence officer. That business had rules, and Clark should follow them as a matter of professional courtesy. The gamble was a huge one on his part, and Clark had to respect it for that very reason, but he couldn't be sure. Well, one couldn't be sure of much in this world.

Dr. Killgore came to the cafeteria at his accustomed hour, but

surprisingly didn't find his Russian friend, or Foster Hunnicutt, there. Well, maybe they'd both slept late. He lingered over breakfast twenty minutes more than usual before deciding, the hell with it, and drove to the horse barn. There he found another surprise. Both Buttermilk and Jeremiah were in the corral, neither of them saddled or bridled. There was no way for him to know that both horses had walked back to their home on their own last night. Curious, he walked both back to their stalls before saddling up his own usual mount. He waited outside in the corral for another fifteen minutes, wondering if his friends would show up, but they didn't, and he and Kirk Maclean rode off west for their morning tour of the countryside.

The covert side of the business could be fun, Sullivan thought. Here he was driving what appeared to be a Consolidated Edison van, and wearing the blue coveralls that announced the same employment. The clothing was baggy enough to allow him to carry a dozen weapons inside the ugly garment, but better yet it made him effectively invisible. There were enough of these uniforms on the streets of New York that no one ever noticed them. This discreet surveillance mission had been laid on in one big hurry, with no fewer than eight agents already at the rendezvous site, all carrying the passport photo of this Serov subject, for what good it was. They lacked height and weight estimates, and that meant they were looking for an OWG, an ordinary white guy, of which New York City had at least three million.

Inside the terminal, his partner, Frank Chatham, was waiting at the exit ramp off British Airways Flight 1, in a suit and tie. His coverall outfit was inside the Con Ed van that Sullivan had parked outside the terminal. They didn't even know who this Clark guy was whom they were meeting, just that Assistant Director Baker thought he was pretty fucking important.

The aircraft got in exactly on time. Clark, in seat 1-C, stood and was the first off the aircraft. The FBI escort at the jetway exit was easy to spot.

"Looking for me?"

"Your name, sir?"

"John Clark. Chuck Baker should have—"

"He did. Follow me, sir." Chatham led him out the fast way, bypassing immigration and customs, and it was just one more time that John's passport wouldn't be stamped to celebrate his entry into a sovereign country. The Con Ed van was easily spotted. Clark went for it without being told to and hopped in.

"Hi, I'm John Clark," he told the driver.

"Tom Sullivan. You've met Frank."

"Let's move, Mr. Sullivan," John told him.

"Yes, sir." The van took off at once. In the back, Chatham sat and struggled into his blue coveralls.

"Okay, sir, what exactly is happening here?"

"I'm meeting a guy."

"Serov?" Sullivan asked, as he negotiated his way onto the highway.

"Yeah, but his real name is Popov. Dmitriy Arkadeye-vich Popov. He used to be a colonel in the old KGB. I have his personnel package, read it coming across. He's a specialist in dealing with terrorists, probably has more connections than the phone company."

"This guy set up the operation that—"

"Yeah." John nodded in the front-right passenger seat. "The operation that went after my wife and my daughter. They were the primary targets."

"Shit!" Chatham observed, as he zipped his outfit up. They hadn't known *that*. "And you want to meet with this mutt?"

"Business is business, guys," John pointed out, wondering if he really believed that or not.

"So, who are you?"

"Agency, used to be, anyway."

"How do you know Mr. Baker?"

"I have a slightly different job now, and we have to interface with the Bureau. Mainly with Gus Werner, but lately I've been talking with Baker, too."

"You part of the team that took down the bad guys at the hospital over in England?"

"I'm the boss of it," Clark told them. "But don't go spreading that around, okay?"

"No problem," Sullivan replied.

"You're working the case on Mr. Serov?"

"That's one of them we've got on the desk, yes."

"What do you got on it?" John asked.

"Passport photo—I guess you have that."

"Better, I have his official KGB photo. Better than the passport one, it's like a mug shot full face and profile, but it's ten years old. What else you have?"

"Bank accounts, credit-card records, post-office box, but no address yet. We're still working on that."

"What's he wanted for?" John asked next.

"Conspiracy mainly," Sullivan answered. "Conspiracy to incite terrorism, conspiracy to traffic in illegal drugs. Those statutes are pretty broad, so that's what we use in cases where we don't have much of a clue as to what's really happening."

"Can you arrest him?"

"You bet. On sight," Chatham said in the back. "Do you want us to

do that?"

"I'm not sure." Clark settled into the uncomfortable seat, and watched the approach of the New York skyline, still wondering what the hell this was all about. He'd find out soon enough, John told himself, thinking that it couldn't be soon enough to meet the fucker who'd sent armed men out after his wife and daughter. He managed a scowl at the approaching city that the FBI agents didn't notice.

Popov thought that he had two FBI types spotted, not to mention a pair of uniformed police officers who might or might not be part of the surveillance that had to be assembling here. There was nothing for it, however. He had to meet with this Clark fellow, and that meant that the meet had to be in a public place, else he'd have to walk right into the lion's den, something he could not bring himself to do. Here he'd have some chance, just a matter, really, of walking south toward the subway station and racing down to catch a train. That would shake a lot of them off, and give him options. Dump his suit coat and change his appearance, put on the hat he had tucked into a pants pocket. He figured he had about an even chance of evading contact if he had to, and there was little danger that anyone would shoot him, not in the heart of America's largest city. But his best chance was to communicate with Clark. If he were the professional Popov believed him to be, then they could do business. They had to. There was no choice for either of them, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself.

The van crossed the East River and proceeded west through crowded streets. John checked his watch.

"No problem, sir. We'll be about ten minutes early," Sullivan told him.

"Good," John replied tensely. It was coming soon now, and he had to get his emotions totally under control. A passionate man, John Terence Clark had more than once let them loose on a job, but he couldn't allow this now. Whoever this Russian was, he had invited him to the meeting, and that meant something—what, he could not yet know, but it had to mean that *something* unusual was afoot. And so he had to set aside all thoughts of past dangers to his immediate family. He had to be stone cold at this meeting, and so, sitting there in the front seat of the Con Ed truck, Clark told himself to breathe deeply and relax, and slowly he managed to accomplish that. Then his curiosity took over. This Russian had to know that Clark knew what he'd done, and *still* he'd asked for this meeting, and insisted on having it done speedily. That had to mean something, John told himself, as they broke through traffic and turned left onto Fifth Avenue. He checked his watch again. They were fourteen minutes early. The van

eased over to the right and stopped. Clark stepped out and headed south on the crowded sidewalk, past people selling used books and other gimcracks from what appeared to be portable wooden closets. Behind him the FBI agents moved the van forward, stopped it close to the meet-building and got out, carrying papers and looking around rather too obviously like Con Ed employees, John thought. Then he turned right and walked down the stairs and looked up at the redbrick building that had been someone's idea of a castle a hundred years or so before. It didn't take long.

"Good morning, John Clark," a man's voice said behind him.

"Good morning, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich," John replied, without turning at first.

"Very good," the voice said approvingly. "I congratulate you on learning one of my names."

"We have good intelligence support," John went on, without turning.

"You had a pleasant flight?"

"A fast one. I've never done the Concorde before. It was not unpleasant. So, Dmitriy, what can I do for you?"

"I must first of all apologize to you for my contacts with Grady and his people."

"What about the other operations?" Clark asked as a dangle, something of a gamble, but he was in a gambling mood.

"Those did not concern you directly, and only one person was killed."

"But that one was a sick little girl," John observed too quickly.

"No, I had nothing to do with Worldpark. The bank in Bern, and the stock-trader outside Vienna, yes, those were my missions, but not the amusement park."

"So, you have implicated yourself in three terrorist operations. That is against the law, you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that," the Russian replied dryly.

"So, what can I do for you?" John asked again.

"It is more what I can do for you, Mr. Clark."

"And that is?" Still he didn't turn. But there had to be half a dozen FBI agents watching, maybe one with a shotgun microphone to record the exchange. In his haste to come over, Clark hadn't been able to get a proper recording system for his suit.

"Clark, I can give you the reason for the missions, and the name of the man who instigated it all—it is quite monstrous. I only discovered yesterday, not even twenty-four hours ago, what the purpose for all of this is."

"So, what is the objective?" John asked.

"To kill almost every human being on the planet," Popov replied.

That made Clark stop walking and turn to look at the man. The KGB file mug shot was pretty good, he saw. “Is this some sort of movie script?” he asked coldly.

“Clark, yesterday I was in Kansas. There I learned the plan for this ‘project.’ I shot and killed the person who told me so that I could escape. The man I killed was Foster Hunnicutt, a hunter-guide from Montana. I shot him in the chest with his own Colt forty-four pistol. From there I went to the nearest highway and managed to beg a ride to the nearest regional airport, from there to Kansas City, and from there to New York. I called you from my hotel room less than eight hours ago. Yes, Clark, I know you have the power to arrest me. You must have security watching us right now, presumably from your FBI,” he said as they walked into the area with the animal cages. “And so you need only wave your hand and I will be arrested, and I have just told you the name of the man I shot, and the location where it was done. Plus you have me for inciting terrorist incidents, and I presume for drug-trafficking as well. I know this, yet I have asked for this meeting. Do you suppose that I am joking with you, John Clark?”

“Perhaps not,” Rainbow Six answered, looking closely at the man.

“Very well, and in that case I propose that you have us taken to the local FBI office or some other secure place, so that I can give you the information you need under controlled circumstances. I require only your word that I will not be detained or arrested.”

“You would believe me if I were to say that?”

“Yes. You are CIA, and you know the rules of the game, do you not?”

Clark nodded. “Okay, you have my word—if you’re telling me the truth.”

“John Clark, I wish I were not,” Popov said. “Truly I wish I were not, *tovarich.”*

John looked hard into his eyes, and in them he saw fear . . . no, something deeper than fear. This guy had just called him *comrade.* That meant something, particularly under these circumstances.

“Come on,” John told him, turning around and heading for Fifth Avenue.

“That’s our subject, guys,” a female agent said over the radio circuit. “That is subject Serov all gift-wrapped like a toy from F.A.O. Schwarz. Wait. They’re turning around, heading east to Fifth.”

“No shit?” Frank Chatham asked. Then he saw them walking very quickly to where the van was parked.

“You got a safe house around here?” Clark asked.

“Well, yeah, we do, but—”

“Get us there, right now!” Clark ordered. “You can terminate your

cover operation at once, too. Get in, Dmitriy," he said, opening the sliding door.

The safe house was only ten blocks away. Sullivan parked the van, and all four men went inside.

CHAPTER 37

DYING FLAME

The safe house was a four-story brownstone that had been given to the federal government decades before by a grateful businessman whose kidnapped son had been recovered alive by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was used mainly for interviewing UN diplomats who worked in one way or another for the U.S. government, and had been one of the places used by Arkady Schevchenko, still the highest-ranking Soviet defector of all time. Outwardly unremarkable, inside it had an elaborate security system and three rooms outfitted with recording systems and two-way mirrors, plus the usual tables, and more comfortable chairs than normal. It was manned around the clock, usually by a rookie agent in the New York field division whose purpose was merely that of doorman.

Chatham took them to the top-floor interview room and sat Clark and Popov down in the windowless cubicle. The microphone was set up, and the reel-to-reel tape recorder set to turning. Behind one of the mirrors, a TV camera and attendant VCR was set up as well.

"Okay," Clark said, announcing the date, time, and place. "With me is Colonel Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov, retired, of the former Soviet KGB. The subject of this interview is international terrorist activity. My name is John Clark, and I am a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. Also here are—"

"Special Agent Tom Sullivan—"

"And—"

"Special Agent Frank Chatham—"

"Of the FBI's New York office. Dmitriy, would you please begin?" John said.

It was intimidating as hell for Popov to do this, and it showed in the first few minutes of his narrative. The two FBI agents showed total incredulity on their faces for the first half hour, until he got to the part about his morning rides in Kansas.

"Maclean? What was his first name?" Sullivan asked.

"Kirk, I think, perhaps Kurt, but I think it ended with a K," Popov replied. "Hunnicutt told me that he'd kidnapped people here in New York to be used as guinea pigs for this Shiva sickness."

"Fuck," Chatham breathed. "What does this guy look like?"

Popov told them in very accurate terms, down to hair length and eye color.

"Mr. Clark, we know this guy. We've interviewed him in the disappearance of a young woman, Mary Bannister. And another woman, Anne Pretloe, disappeared under very similar circumstances. Holy shit, you say they were murdered?"

"No, I said they were killed as test subjects for this Shiva disease that they plan to spread at Sydney."

"Horizon Corporation. That's where this Maclean guy works. He's out of town now, his coworkers told us."

"Yes, you will find him in Kansas," Popov told them, with a nod.

"You know how *big* Horizon Corporation is?" Sullivan asked.

"Big enough. Okay, Dmitriy," Clark said, turning back, "exactly how do you think they will spread this virus?"

"Foster told me it was part of the air-cooling system at the stadium. That is all I know."

John thought about the Olympics. They were running the marathon today, and that was the last event, to be followed by the closing ceremonies that evening. There wasn't time to think very much further than that. He turned, lifted the telephone, and dialed England. "Give me Stanley," he told Mrs. Foorgate.

"Alistair Stanley," the voice said next.

"Al, this is John. Get hold of Ding and have him call me here." John read the number off the phone. "Right now—immediately, Al. I mean right the hell now."

"Understood, John."

Clark waited four and a half minutes by his watch before the phone rang.

"You're lucky he got me, John. I was just getting dressed to leave and watch the mara—"

"Shut the hell up and listen to me, Domingo," Clark said harshly.

"Yeah, John, go ahead," Chavez answered, getting out a pad to take some notes. "Is this for real?" he asked after a few seconds.

"We believe it to be, Ding."

"It's like something from a bad movie." Was this something concocted by SPECTRE? Chavez wondered. What was the potential profit in it for anybody?

"Ding, the guy giving this to me is named Serov, Iosef Andreyevich. He's here with me now."

"Okay, I hear you, Mr. C. When is this operation supposed to take place?"

"Around the time of the closing ceremonies, supposedly. Is there

anything else today besides the marathon?"

"No, that's the last major event, and we ought not to be too busy 'til the race ends. We expect the stadium to start filling up around five this afternoon, and then they have the closing ceremonies, and everybody goes home." *Including me,* he didn't have to add.

"Well, that's their plan, Ding."

"And you want us to stop it."

"Correct. Get moving. Keep this number. I'll be here all day on the STU-4. From now on, all transmissions will be secure. Okay?"

"You got it. Let me get moving, John."

"Move," the voice told him. "Bye."

Chavez hung up, wondering how the hell he'd do this. First he had to assemble his team. They were all on the same floor, and he went into the corridor, knocked on each door, and told the NCOs to come to his suite.

"Okay, people, we got a job to handle today. Here's the deal," he began, then spun the tale for about five minutes.

"Christ," Tomlinson managed to say for all of them. The story was quite incredible, but they were accustomed to hearing and acting upon strange information.

"We have to find the control room for the fogging system. Once we do that, we'll put people in there. We'll rotate the duty. George and Homer, you start, then Mike and I will relieve you. Call it two-hour rotation inside and outside. Radios will be on at all times. Deadly force is authorized, people."

Noonan had heard the briefing, too. "Ding, this whole thing sounds kinda unlikely."

"I know, Tim, but we act on it anyway."

"You say so, man."

"Let's move, people," Ding told them, standing.

"This is the day, Carol," John Brightling told his ex-wife. "Less than ten hours from now, the Project starts."

She dropped Jiggs on the floor and came to embrace him. "Oh, John!"

"I know," he told her. "It's been a long time. Couldn't have done it without you."

Henriksen was there, too. "Okay, I talked with Wil Gearing twenty minutes ago. He'll be hooking up the Shiva dispenser right before they start the closing ceremonies. The weather is working for us, too. It's going to be another hot one in Sydney, temperature's supposed to hit ninety-seven degrees. So, people'll be camping out under the foggers."

"And breathing heavily," Dr. John Brightling confirmed. That was another of the body's methods for shedding excess heat.

Chavez was in the stadium now, already sweating from the building heat and wondering if any of the marathon runners would fall over dead from this day's race. So Global Security, with whose personnel he'd interfaced briefly, was part of the mission. He wondered if he could remember all the faces he'd seen in the two brief conferences he'd had, but for now he had to find Colonel Wilkerson. Five minutes later, in the security-reaction hut, he found the man.

"G'day, Major Chavez."

"Hey, Frank. I got a question for you."

"What's that, Ding?"

"The fogging system. Where's it come from?"

"The pumping room's by Section Five, just left of the ramp."

"How do I get in there?"

"You get a key to the door and the alarm code from me. Why, old boy?"

"Oh, well, I just want to see it."

"Is there a problem, Ding?" Wilkerson asked.

"Maybe. I got to thinking," Chavez went on, trying to formulate a persuasive lie for the moment. "What if somebody wanted to use it to dispense a chemical agent, like? And I thought I might—"

"Check it out? One of the Global people beat you to that one, lad. Colonel Gearing. He checked out the entire installation. Same concern as you, but a bit earlier."

"Well, can I do it, too?"

"Why?"

"Call it paranoia," Chavez replied.

"I suppose." Wilkerson rose from his chair and pulled the proper key off the wall. "The alarm code is one-one-three-three-six-six."

Eleven thirty-three sixty-six, Ding memorized.

"Good. Thanks, Colonel."

"My pleasure, Major," the SAS lieutenant colonel replied.

Chavez left the room, rejoined his people outside, and headed rapidly back to the stadium.

"Did you tell 'em about the problem?" Noonan asked.

Chavez shook his head. "I wasn't authorized to do that. John expects us to handle it."

"What if our friends are armed?"

"Well, Tim, we *are* authorized to use necessary force, aren't we?"

"Could be messy," the FBI agent warned, worried about local laws and jurisdictions.

"Yeah, I suppose so. We use our heads, okay? We know how to do that, too."

Kirk Maclean's job at the Project was to keep an eye on the environmental support systems, mainly the air-conditioning and the over-pressurization system, whose installation he didn't really understand. After all, everyone inside the buildings would have the "B" vaccine shot, and even if Shiva got in, there wasn't supposed to be any danger. But he supposed that John Brightling was merely being redundant in his protective-systems thinking, and that was okay with him. His daily work was easily dealt with—it mainly involved checking dials and recording systems, all of which were stuck in the very center of normal operating ranges—and then he felt like a ride. He walked into the transport office and took a set of keys for a Project Hummer, then headed out to the barn to get his horse. Another twenty minutes, and he'd saddled his quarter horse and headed north, cantering across the grassland, through the lanes in the wheat fields where the farm machines turned around, taking his time through one of the prairie-dog towns, and heading generally toward the interstate highway that formed the northern edge of the Project's real estate. About forty minutes into the ride, he saw something unusual.

Like every rural plot of land in the American West, this one had a resident buzzard population. Here, as in most such places, they were locally called turkey buzzards, regardless of the actual breed, large raptors that ate carrion and were distinctive for their size and their ugliness—black feathers and naked red-skinned heads that carried large powerful beaks designed for ripping flesh off the carcasses of dead animals. They were Nature's garbage collectors—or Nature's own morticians, as some put it—important parts of the ecosystem, though distasteful to some. He saw about six of them circling something in the tall grass to the northeast. Six was a lot—then he realized that there were more still, as he spotted the black angular shapes in the grass from two miles away. Something large had evidently died, and they had assembled to clean—eat—it up. They were careful, conservative birds. Their circling and examination was to ensure that whatever they saw and smelled wasn't still alive, and hence able to jump up and injure them when they came down to feed. Birds were the most delicate of creatures, made mostly for air, and needing to be in perfect condition to fly and survive.

What are they eating? Maclean wondered, heading his horse over that way at a walk, not wanting to spook the birds any more than necessary, and wondering if they were afraid of a horse and rider. Probably not, he thought, but he'd find out about this little bit of Nature's trivia.

Whatever it was, he thought five minutes later, the birds liked it. It was an ugly process, Maclean thought, but no more so than when he ate a burger, at least as far as the cow was concerned. It was Nature's

way. The buzzards ate the dead and processed the protein, then excreted it out, returning the nutrients back to the soil so that the chain of life could proceed again in its timeless cycle of life-death-life. Even from a hundred yards away, there were too many birds for him to determine what they were feasting on. Probably a deer or pronghorn antelope, he thought, from the number of birds and the way they bobbed their heads up and down, consuming the creature that Nature had reclaimed for Herself. What did pronghorns die of? Kirk wondered. Heart attacks? Strokes? Cancer? It might be interesting to find out in a few years, maybe have one of the Project physicians do a postmortem on one—if they got there ahead of the buzzards, which, he thought with a smile, ate up the evidence. But at fifty yards, he stopped his horse. Whatever they were eating seemed to be wearing a plaid shirt. With that he urged his horse closer, and at ten yards the buzzards took notice, first swiveling their odious red heads and cruel black eyes, then hopping away a few feet, then, finally, flapping back into the air.

"Oh, fuck," Maclean said quietly, when he got closer. The neck had been ripped away, leaving the spine partly exposed, and in some places the shirt had been shredded, too, by the powerful beaks. The face had also been destroyed, the eyes gone and most of the skin and flesh, but the hair was fairly intact, and—

"Jesus. . . Foster? What happened to you, man?" It required a few more feet of approach to see the small red circle in the center of the dark shirt. Maclean didn't dismount his horse. A man was dead, and, it appeared, had been shot dead. Kirk looked around and saw the hoofprints of one or two horses right here . . . probably two, he decided. Backing away, he decided to get back to the Project as quickly as his horse could manage. It took fifteen minutes, which left his quarter horse winded and the rider shaken. He jumped off, got into his Hummer and raced back to the Project and found John Killgore.

The room was grossly nondescript, Chavez saw. Just pipes, steel and plastic, and a pump, which was running, as the fogging-cooling system had started off from its timer a few minutes before, and Chavez's first thought was, *what if the bug's already in the system—I just walked through it, and what if I breathed the fucking thing in?*

But here he was, and if that were the case . . . but, no, John had told him that the poisoning was to start much later in the day, and that the Russian was supposed to know what was going on. You had to trust your intelligence sources. You just had to. The information they gave you was the currency of life and death in this business.

Noonan bent down to look at the chlorine canister that hung on the piping. "It looks like a factory product, Ding," the FBI agent said, for

what that was worth. “I can see how you switch them out. Flip off the motor here”—he pointed—“close this valve, twist this off with a wrench like the one on the wall there, swap on the new one, reopen the valve and hit the pump motor. Looks like a thirty-second job, maybe less. Boom-boom-boom, and you’re done.”

“And if it’s already been done?” Chavez asked.

“Then we’re fucked,” Noonan replied. “I hope your intel’s good on this, partner.”

The fog outside had the slight smell of chlorine, Chavez told himself hopefully, like American city water, and chlorine was used because it killed germs. It was the only element besides oxygen that supported combustion, wasn’t it? He’d read that somewhere, Domingo thought.

“What do you think, Tim?”

“I think the idea makes sense, but it’s one *hell* of a big operation for somebody to undertake, and it’s—Ding, who the hell would do something like this? And *why,* for Christ’s sake?”

“I guess we have to figure that one out. But for now, we watch this thing like it’s the most valuable gadget in the whole fucking world. Okay.” Ding turned to look at his men. “George and Homer, you guys stay here. If you gotta take a piss, do it on the floor.” There was a drainage pit there, they all saw. “Mike and I will handle things outside. Tim, you stay close, too. We got our radios, and that’s how we communicate. Two hours on, two hours off, but never more than fifty yards from this place. Questions?”

“Nope,” Sergeant Tomlinson said for the rest. “If somebody comes in and tries to fool with this? . . .”

“You stop him, any way you have to. And you call for help on your radios.”

“Roge-o, boss,” George said. Homer Johnston nodded agreement.

Chavez and the other two went back outside. The stadium had filled up, people wanting to see the start of the marathon . . . and then what? Ding wondered. Just sit here and wait for three hours? No, about two and a half. That was about the usual championship time, wasn’t it? Twenty-six miles. Forty-two kilometers or so. One hell of a long way for a man—or woman—to run, a daunting distance even for him, Chavez admitted to himself, a distance better suited to a helicopter lift or a ride in a truck. He, Pierce, and Noonan walked to one of the ramps and watched the TVs hanging there.

By this time the runners were assembling for the crowded start. The favorites were identified, some of them given up-close-and-personal TV biographies. The local Australian commentary discussed the betting on the event, who the favorites were, and what the odds were. Smart money seemed to be on a Kenyan, though there was an American who’d blown away the record for the Boston Marathon the

previous year by almost half a minute—evidently a large margin for such a race—and a thirty-year-old Dutchman who was the dark horse among the favorites. Thirty, and a competitor in an Olympic competition, Chavez thought. Good for him.

"Command to Tomlinson," Chavez said over his radio.

"I'm here, Command. Nothing much happening 'cept this damned pump noise. I'll call you if anything happens, over."

"Okay, Command out."

"So, what do we do now?" Mike Pierce asked.

"Wait. Stand around and wait."

"You say so, boss," Pierce responded. They all knew how to wait, though none of them especially liked it.

"Christ," Killgore observed. "You sure?"

"You want to drive out and see?" Maclean asked heatedly. Then he realized that they'd have to do that anyway, to collect the body for proper burial. Now Maclean understood Western funeral customs. It was bad enough to see vultures pick a deer's body apart. To see the same thing happening to a human being whom you knew was intolerable, love for Nature or not.

"You say he was shot?"

"Sure looked like it."

"Great." Killgore lifted his phone. "Bill, it's John Kill-gore. Meet me in the main lobby right away. We have a problem. Okay? Good." The physician replaced the phone and rose. "Come on," he said to Maclean.

Henriksen arrived in the lobby of the residential building two minutes after they did, and together they drove in a Hummer north to where the body was. Again the buzzards had to be chased off, and Henriksen, the former FBI agent, walked up to take a look. It was as distasteful as anything he'd seen in his law-enforcement career.

"He's been shot, all right," he said first of all. "Big bullet, right through the X-ring." The wound had been a surprise for Hunnicutt, he thought, though there wasn't enough of the man's face left to tell, really. There were ants on the body as well, he saw. Damn, Henriksen thought, he'd been depending on this guy to help with perimeter security once the Project went fully active. Somebody had murdered an important Project asset. But who?

"Who else hung out with Foster?" Bill asked.

"The Russian guy, Popov. We all rode together," Maclean answered.

"Hey," Killgore said. "Their horses were out this morning, Jeremiah and Buttermilk were both in the corral. Both unsaddled and—"

"Here's the saddle and bridle," Henriksen said, fifteen feet away. "Okay, somebody shot Hunnicutt and then stripped the tack gear off

his horse . . . okay, so nobody would see a riderless horse with a saddle on it. We have a murder here, people. Let's find Popov right now. I think I need to talk to him. Anybody see him lately?"

"He didn't show up for breakfast this morning like he usually does," Killgore revealed. "We've been eating together for a week or so, then taking a morning ride. He liked it."

"Yeah," Maclean confirmed. "We all did. You think he—"

"I don't think anything yet. Okay, let's get the body into the Hummer and head back. John, can you do a post on this?"

This seemed a cold appellation for a dead colleague, Killgore thought, but he nodded. "Yeah, doesn't look like it'll be too hard."

"Okay, you get the feet," Bill said next, bending down and trying to avoid touching the parts the buzzards had feasted on. Twenty minutes later, they were back in the Project. Henriksen went up to Popov's fourth-floor room and used his passkey to get in. Nothing, he saw. The bed hadn't been slept in. He had a suspect. Popov had killed Hunnicutt, probably. But why? And where the hell was that Russian bastard now?

It took half an hour to check around the Project complex. The Russian was nowhere to be found. That made sense, since his horse had been found loose that morning by Dr. Killgore. Okay, the former FBI agent thought. Popov had killed Hunnicutt and then skipped. But skipped where? He'd probably ridden to the interstate highway and thumbed a ride, or maybe walked to a bus stop or something. It was a mere twenty-five miles to the regional airport, and from there the bastard could be in Australia by now, Henriksen had to admit to himself. But why would he have done any of that?

"John?" he asked Killgore. "What did Popov know?" "What do you mean?"

"What did he know about the Project?"

"Not much. Brightling didn't really brief him in, did he?"

"No. Okay, what did Hunnicutt know?"

"Shit, Bill, Foster knew everything."

"Okay, then we think Popov and Hunnicutt went riding last night. Hunnicutt turns up dead, and Popov isn't anywhere to be found. So, could Hunnicutt have told Popov what the Project is doing?"

"I suppose, yes," Killgore confirmed with a nod.

"So, Popov finds out, gets Foster's revolver, shoots him, and bugs the hell out."

"Christ! You think he might—"

"Yes, he might. Shit, man, anybody *might."*

"But we'd got the 'B' vaccine in him. I gave him the shot myself!"

"Oh, well," Bill Henriksen observed. *Oh, shit,* his brain went on. *Wil Gearing's going to initiate Phase One* today*!* As if he could have

forgotten. He had to talk to Brightling right away.

Both Doctors Brightling were in the penthouse accommodations atop the residence building, overlooking the runway, which now had four Gulfstream V business jets on it. The news Henriksen delivered wasn't pleasing to either of them.

"How bad is this?" John asked.

"Potentially it's pretty bad," Bill had to admit.

"How close are we to—"

"Four hours or less," Henriksen replied.

"Does he know that?"

"It's possible, but we can't know for sure."

"Where would he have gone?" Carol Brightling asked.

"Shit, I don't know—CIA, FBI, maybe. Popov's a trained spook. In his position I'd go to the Russian embassy in D.C., and tell the *rezident*. He'll have credibility there, but the time zones and bureaucracy work for us. KGB can't do *anything* fast, Carol. They'll spend hours trying to swallow whatever he tells them."

"Okay. So, we proceed?" John Brightling asked.

A nod. "Yeah, I think so. I'll call Wil Gearing to give him a heads-up, maybe?"

"Can we trust *him?"* John inquired next.

"I think so, yes—I mean, hell, yes. He's been with us for years, guys. He's *part* of the Project. If we couldn't trust him, we'd all be fucking in jail now. He knows about the test protocols in Binghamton, and nobody interfered with that, did they?"

John Brightling leaned back in his chair. "You're saying we can relax?"

"Yeah," Henriksen decided. "Look, even if the whole thing comes apart, we're covered, aren't we? We turn out the 'B' vaccine instead of the 'A' one, and we're heroes for the whole world. Nobody can trace the missing people back to us unless someone cracks and talks, and there're ways to handle that. There's no physical evidence that we've done anything wrong—at least none that we can't destroy in a matter of minutes, right?"

That part had been carefully thought through. All of the Shiva virus containers were a two-minute walk from the incinerators both here and at Binghamton. The bodies of the test subjects were ashes. There *were* people with personal knowledge of what had happened, but for any of them to talk to the authorities meant implicating themselves in mass murder, and they'd all have attorneys present to shield them through the interrogation process. It would be a twitchy time for all involved, but nothing that they couldn't beat.

"Okay." John Brightling looked at his wife. They'd worked too hard and too long to turn back. They'd both endured separation from their

loves to serve their greater love for Nature, invested time and vast funds to do this. No, they couldn't turn back. And if this Russian talked—to whom, they couldn't speculate—even then, could those he talked to stop the Project in time? That was scarcely possible. Husband-physician-scientist traded a look with wife-scientist, and then both looked at their Director of Security.

"Tell Gearing to proceed, Bill."

"Okay, John." Henriksen stood and headed back to his office.

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"Yes, Bill," Colonel Gearing said.

"No big deal. Proceed as planned, and call me to confirm the package is delivered properly."

"Okay," Wil Gearing replied. "Anything else I have to do? I have plans of my own, you know."

"Like what?" Henriksen asked.

"I'm flying up north tomorrow, going to take a few days to dive the Great Barrier Reef."

"Oh, yeah? Well, don't let any sharks eat you."

"Right!" was the laughing reply, and the line cut off.

Okay, Bill Henriksen thought. *That's decided.* He could depend on Gearing. He knew that. He'd come to the Project after a life of poisoning things, and he, too, knew the rest of the Project's activities. If he'd ratted to anybody, they would not have gotten this far. But it'd have been so much better if that Russian cocksucker hadn't skipped. What could he do about that? Report Hunnicutt's murder to the local cops, and finger Popov/Serov as the likely killer? Was that worth doing? What were the possible complications? Well, Popov could spill what he knew—however much or little that might be—but then they could say that he was a former KGB spy who'd acted strangely, who'd done some consulting to Horizon Corporation—but, Jesus, started terrorist incidents in Europe? Be serious! This guy's a murderer with imagination, trying to fabricate a story to get himself off a cold-blooded killing right here in Middle America . . . Would that work? It might, Henriksen decided. It just might work, and take that bastard right the hell out of play. He could say anything he wanted, but what physical evidence did he have? Not a fucking thing.

Popov poured a drink from a bottle of Stolichnaya that the FBI had been kind enough to purchase from a corner liquor store. He had four previous drinks in his system. That helped to mellow his outlook

somewhat.

"So, John Clark. We wait."

"Yeah, we wait," Rainbow Six agreed.

"You have a question for me?"

"Why did you call me?"

"We've met before."

"Where?"

"In your building in Hereford. I was there with your plumber under one of my legends."

"I wondered how you knew me by sight," Clark admitted, sipping a beer. "Not many people from your side of the Curtain do."

"You do not wish to kill me now?"

"The thought's occurred to me," Clark replied, looking in Popov's eyes. "But I guess you have some scruples after all, and if you're lying to me, you'll soon wish you were dead."

"Your wife and daughter are well?"

"Yes, and so is my grandson."

"That is good," Popov announced. "That mission was a distasteful one. You have done distasteful missions in your career, John Clark?"

He nodded. "Yeah, a few."

"So, then, you understand?"

Not the way you mean, sport, Rainbow Six thought, before responding. "Yeah, I suppose I do, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich."

"How did you find my name? Who told you?"

The answer surprised him. "Sergey Nikolay'ch and I are old friends."

"Ah," Popov managed to observe, without fainting. His own agency had betrayed him? Was that possible? Then it was as if Clark had read his mind.

"Here," John said, handing over the sheaf of photocopies. "Your evaluations are pretty good."

"Not good enough," Popov replied, failing to recover from the shock of viewing items from a file that he had never seen before.

"Well, the world changed, didn't it?"

"Not as completely as I had hoped."

"I do have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"The money you gave to Grady, where is it?"

"In a safe place, John Clark. The terrorists I know have all become capitalists with regard to cash money, but thanks to your people, those I contacted have no further need of money, do they?" the Russian asked rhetorically.

"You greedy bastard," Clark observed, with half a smile.

The race started on time. The fans cheered the marathon runners as they took their first lap around the stadium, then disappeared out the tunnel onto the streets of Sydney, to return in two and a half hours or so. In the meantime, their progress would be followed on the Jumbotron for those who sat in the stadium seats, or on the numerous televisions that hung in the ramp and concourse areas. Trucks with remote TV transmitters rolled in front of the lead runners, and the Kenyan, Jomo Nyreiry, held the lead, closely followed by Edward Fulmer, the American, and Willem terHoost, the Dutchman, the leading trio not two steps apart, and a good ten meters ahead of the next group of runners as they passed the first milepost.

Like most people, Wil Gearing saw this on his hotel room TV as he packed. He'd be renting diving gear tomorrow, the former Army colonel told himself, and he'd treat himself to the best diving area in the world, in the knowledge that the oceanic pollution that was harming that most lovely of environments would soon be ending. He got all of his clothing organized in a pair of Tumi wheeled suitcases and set them by the door of the room. He'd be diving while all the ignorant plague victims flew off to their homes across the world, not knowing what they had and what they'd be spreading. He wondered how many would be lost to Phase One of the Project. Computer projections predicted anywhere from six to thirty million, but Gearing thought those numbers conservative. The higher the better, obviously, because the "A" vaccine had to be something that people all over the globe would cry out for, thus hastening their own deaths. The real cleverness of it was that if medical tests on the vaccine recipients showed Shiva antibodies, they'd be explained away by the vaccine —"A" was a live-virus vaccine, as everyone would know. Just a little more live than anyone would realize until it was a little too late.

It was ten hours later in New York, and there in the safe house Clark, Popov, Sullivan, and Chatham sat, watching network coverage of the Olympic games, like millions of other Americans. There was nothing else for them to do. It was boring for them all, as none were marathoners, and the steps of the leading runners were endlessly the same.

"The heat must be terrible to run in," Sullivan observed.

"It's not fun," Clark agreed.

"Ever run in a race like this?"

"No." John shook his head. "But I've had to run away from things in my time, mainly Vietnam. It was pretty hot there, too."

"You were there?" Popov asked.

"A year and a half's worth. Third SOG—Special Operations Group."

"Doing what?"

"Mainly looking and reporting. Some real operations, raids, assassinations, that sort of thing, taking out people we really didn't like." Thirty years ago, John thought. Thirty years. He'd given his youth to one conflict, and his manhood to another, and now, in his approaching golden years, what would he be doing? Was it really possible, what Popov had told him? It seemed so unreal, but the Ebola scare had been real as hell. He remembered flying all over the world about that one, and he remembered the news coverage that had shaken his country to its very foundations—and he remembered the terrible revenge that America had taken as a result. Most of all, he remembered lying with Ding Chavez on the flat roof of a Tehran dwelling and guiding two smart-bombs in to take the life of the man responsible for it all, in the first application of the president's new doctrine. But if this were real, if this "project" that Popov had told them about were what he said it was, then what would his country do? Was it a matter for law enforcement or something else? Would you put people like this on trial? If not, then—what? Laws hadn't been written for crimes of this magnitude, and the trial would be a horrid circus, spreading news that would shake the foundations of the entire world. That one corporation could have the power to do such a thing as this . . .

Clark had to admit to himself that his mind hadn't expanded enough to enclose the entire thought. He'd acted upon it, but not really accepted it. It was too big a concept for that.

"Dmitriy, why did you say they are doing this?"

"John Clark, they are druids, they are people who worship nature as though it were a god. They say that the animals belong in places, but people do not. They say they want to restore nature—and to do that they are willing to kill all of mankind. This is madness, I know, but it is what they told me. In my room in Kansas, they have videotapes and magazines that proclaim these beliefs. I never knew such people existed. They say that nature hates us, that the planet hates us for what we—all men—have done. But the planet has no mind, and nature has no voice with which to speak. Yet they believe that they do have these things. It's amazing," the Russian concluded. "It is as if I have found a new, mad religious movement whose god requires our deaths, human sacrifice, whatever you wish to call it." He waved his hands in frustration at his inability to understand it.

"Do we know what this guy Gearing looks like?" Noonan asked.

"No," Chavez said. "Nobody told me. I suppose Colonel Wilkerson knows, but I didn't want to ask him."

"Christ, Ding, is this whole thing *possible?"* the FBI agent asked next.

"I guess we'll know in a few hours, man. I know something like this

happened once before, and I know John and I helped take out the bastard who did it to us. On the technical side, I'd have to ask Patsy about it. I don't know biology. She does."

"Jesus," Noonan concluded, looking over at the entrance to the pump room. The three of them headed over to a concession area and got half-liter cups of Coca-Cola, then sat down to watch the blue-painted door. People walked past it, but nobody actually approached it.

"Tim?"

"Yeah, Ding?"

"Do you have arrest powers for this?"

The FBI agent nodded. "I think so, conspiracy to commit murder, the crime originated in America, and the subject is an American citizen, so, yes, that should hold up. I can take it a step further. If we kidnap his ass and bring him to America, the courts don't care how somebody got there. Once he's in front of a United States District Court judge, how he came to be there doesn't interest the court at all."

"How the hell do we get him out of the country?" Chavez wondered next. He activated his cell phone.

Clark picked up the STU-4's receiver. It took five seconds for Ding's encryption system to handshake with his. A computerized voice finally said *Line is secure,* followed by two beeps. "Yeah?"

"John, it's Ding. I got a question."

"Shoot."

"If we bag this Gearing guy, then what? How the hell do we get him back to America?"

"Good question. Let me work on that."

"Right." And the line went dead. The logical place to call was Langley, but, as it turned out, the DCI was not in his office. The call was routed to his home.

"John, what the hell is going on down there, anyway?" Ed Foley asked from his bed.

Clark told the DCI what he knew. That took about five minutes. "I have Ding staking out the only place this can be done, and—"

"Jesus Christ, John, is this for real?" Ed Foley asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"We'll know if this Gearing guy shows up with a package containing the bug, I suppose," Clark replied. "If he does, how do we get Ding, his people, and this Gearing guy back to the States?"

"Let me work on that. What's your number?" John gave it to him and Ed Foley wrote it down on a pad. "How long have you known about this?"

"Less than two hours. The Russian guy is right here with me. We're

in an FBI safe house in New York City."

"Is Carol Brightling implicated in this?"

"I'm not sure. Her ex-husband sure as hell is," Clark answered.

Foley closed his eyes and thought. "You know, she called me about you guys a while back, asked a couple of questions. She's the one who shook the new radios loose from E-Systems. She talked to me as though she was briefed in on Rainbow."

"She's not on my list, Ed," John pointed out. He'd personally approved all of the people cleared into the Rainbow compartment.

"Yeah, I'll look at that, too. Okay, let me check around and get back to you."

"Right." Clark replaced the receiver. "We have an FBI guy with the Sydney team," he told the others.

"Who?" Sullivan asked.

"Tim Noonan. Know him?"

"Used to be tech support with HRT?"

Clark nodded. "That's the guy."

"I've heard about him. Supposed to be pretty smart."

"He is. He saved our ass in Hereford, probably my wife and daughter, too."

"So, he can arrest this Gearing mutt, nice and legal."

"You know, I've never worried all that much about enforcing the law—mainly I enforce policy, but not law."

"I suppose things are a little different with the Agency, eh?" Sullivan asked, with a smile. The James Bond factor never really goes away, even with people who are supposed to know better.

"Yeah, some."

Gearing left his hotel, carrying a backpack like many of the other people on the street, and flagged a cab just outside. The marathon was about half an hour from its conclusion. He found himself looking around at the crowded sidewalks and all the people on them. The Australians seemed a friendly people, and what he'd seen of their country was pleasant enough. He wondered about the aborigines, and what might happen to them, and the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, and other such tribal groupings around the world, so removed from normal life that they wouldn't be exposed to Shiva in any way. If fate smiled upon them, well, he decided, that was okay with him. These kinds of people didn't harm Nature in any way, and they were insufficiently numerous to do harm even if they wanted to, which they didn't, worshipping the trees and the thunder as the Project members did. Were there enough of them to be a problem? Probably not. The Bushmen might spread out, but their folkways wouldn't allow them to change their tribal character very much, and though they'd increase

somewhat in number, they'd probably not even do much of that. The same with the "abos" of Australia. There hadn't been many of them before the Europeans had arrived, after all, and they'd had millennia to sweep over the continent. So the Project would spare many people, wouldn't it? It was vaguely comforting to the retired colonel that Shiva would kill only those whose lifestyles made them the enemies of Nature. That this criterion included everyone he could see out the cab windows troubled him little.

The taxi stopped at the regular drop-off point by the stadium. He paid his fare plus a generous tip, got out, walked toward the massive concrete bowl. At the entrance, he showed his security pass and was waved through. There came the expected creepy feeling. He'd be testing his "B" vaccine in a very immediate way, first admitting the Shiva virus into the fogging system, and then walking through it, breathing in the same nano-capsules as all the other hundred-thousand-plus tourists, and if the "B" shot didn't work, he'd be condemning himself to a gruesome death—but he'd been briefed in on that issue a long time ago.

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"That Dutchman looks pretty tough," Noonan said. Willem terHoost was currently in the lead, and had picked up the pace, heading for a record despite the weather conditions. The heat had taken its toll of many runners. A lot of them slowed their pace to get cold drinks, and some ran through pre-spotted water showers to cool off, though the TV commentators said that these had the effect of tightening up the leg muscles and were therefore not really a good thing for marathoners to do. But they took the relief anyway, most of them, or grabbed the offered ice-water drinks and poured them over their faces.

"Self-abuse," Chavez said, checking his watch and reaching for his radio microphone. "Command to Tomlinson."

"I'm here, boss," Chavez heard in his earpiece.

"Coming in to relieve you."

"Roger that, fine with us, boss," the sergeant replied from inside the locked room.

"Come on." Ding stood, waving for Pierce and Noo-nan to follow. It was just a hundred feet to the blue door. Ding twisted the knob and went inside.

Tomlinson and Johnston had hidden in the shadows in the corner opposite the door. They came out when they recognized their fellow

team members.

"Okay, stay close and stay alert," Chavez told the two sergeants.

"Roge-o," Homer Johnston said on his way out. He was thirsty and planned to get himself something to drink, and on the way out he placed his hands over his ears, popping them open to rid himself of the pump noise.

The sound was annoying, Chavez realized in the first few minutes. Not overly loud, but constant, a powerful deep whirring, like a well-insulated automobile engine. It hovered at the edge of your consciousness and didn't go away, and on further reflection made him think of a beehive. Maybe that was the annoying part of it.

"Why are we leaving the lights on?" Noonan asked.

"Good question." Chavez walked over and flipped the switch. The room went almost totally dark, with just a crack of light coming in from under the steel fire door. Chavez felt his way to the opposite wall, managed to get there without bumping his head, and leaned against the concrete wall, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Gearing was dressed in shorts and low-cut hiking boots, with short socks as well. It seemed the form of dress the locals had adopted for dealing with the heat, and it was comfortable enough, as was his backpack and floppy hat. The stadium concourses were crowded with fans coming in early for the closing ceremonies, and he saw that many of them were standing in the fog to relieve themselves from the oppressive heat of the day. The local weather forecasters had explained ad nauseam about how this version of the El Niño phenomenon had affected the global climate and inflicted unseasonably hot weather on their country, for which they all felt the need to apologize. He found it all rather amusing. Apologize for a natural phenomenon? How ridiculous. With that thought he headed to his objective. In doing so, he walked right past Homer Johnston, who was standing, sipping his Coke.

"Any other places the guy might use?" Chavez worried suddenly in the darkness.

"No," Noonan replied. "I checked the panel on the way in. The whole stadium fogging system comes from this one room. If it's going to happen, it will happen here."

"If it's gonna happen," Chavez said back, actually hoping that it would not. If that happened, they'd go back to Lieutenant Colonel Wilkerson and find out where this Gearing guy was staying, and then pay a call on him and have a friendly little chat.

Gearing spotted the blue door and looked around for security people. The Aussie SAS troops were easily spotted, once you knew how they dressed. But though he saw two Sydney policemen walking down the concourse, there were no army personnel. Gearing paused fifty feet or so from the door. The usual mission jitters, he told himself. He was about to do something from which there was no turning back. He asked himself for the thousandth time if he really wanted to do this. There were fellow human beings all around him, people seemingly just like himself with hopes and dreams and aspirations—but, no, those things they held in their minds weren't like the things he held in his own, were they? They didn't get it, didn't understand what was important and what was not. They didn't see Nature for what She was, and as a result they lived lives that were aimed only at hurting or even destroying Her, driving cars that injected hydrocarbons into the atmosphere, using chemicals that found their way into the water, pesticides that killed birds or kept them from reproducing, aiming spray cans at their hair whose propellants destroyed the ozone layer. They were *killing* Nature with nearly every act they took. They didn't care. They didn't even try to understand the consequences of what they were doing, and so, no, they didn't have a right to live. It was his job to protect Nature, to remove the blight upon the planet, to restore and save, and that was a job he must do. With that decided, Wil Gearing resumed his walk to the blue door, fished in his pocket for the key and inserted it into the knob.

"Command, this is Johnston, you got company coming in! White guy, khaki shorts, red polo shirt, and backpack," Homer announced loudly into everyone's ear. Beside him, Sergeant Tomlinson started walking in that direction, too.

"Heads up," Chavez said in the darkness. There were two shadows in the crack of light under the door, and then the sound of a key in the lock, and then there was another crack of light, a vertical one as the door opened, and a silhouette, a human shape—and just that fast, Chavez knew that it *was* all real after all. Would the lights reveal an inhuman monster, something from another planet, or . . .

. . . just a man, he saw, as the lights flipped on. About fifty, with closely cropped salt-and-pepper hair. A man who knew what he was about. He reached for the wrench hanging on the wall-mounted pegboard, then shrugged out of his backpack, and loosened the two straps that held the flap in place. It seemed to Chavez that he was watching a movie, something separated from reality, as the man flipped off the motor switch, ending the whirring. Then he closed the valve and lifted the wrench to—

"Hold it right there, pal," Chavez said, emerging from the shadows.

"Who are you?" the man asked in surprise. Then his face told the tale. He was doing something he shouldn't. He knew it, and suddenly someone else did, too.

"I could ask you the same thing, except I know who you are. Your name is Wil Gearing. What are you planning to do, Mr. Gearing?"

"I'm just here to swap out the chlorine canister on the fogging system," Gearing replied, shaken all the more that this Latino seemed to know his name. How had that happened ? Was he part of the Project—and if not, then what? It was as if someone had punched him in the stomach, and now his entire body cringed from the blow.

"Oh? Let's see about that, Mr. Gearing. Tim?" Chavez gestured for Noonan to get the backpack. Sergeant Pierce stayed back, his hand on his pistol and his eyes locked on their visitor.

"Sure looks like a normal one," Noonan said. If this was a counterfeit, it was a beaut. He was tempted to open the screw top, but he had good reason not to. Next to the pump motor, Chavez took the wrench and removed the existing canister.

"Looks about half full to me, pal. Not time to replace it yet, at least not with something called Shiva. Tim, let's be careful with that one."

"You bet." Noonan tucked it back into Gearing's pack and strapped the cover down. "We'll have this checked out. Mr. Gearing, you are under arrest," the FBI agent told him. "You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, we will provide you with one. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights, sir?"

Gearing was shaking now, and turned to look at the door, wondering if he could—

—he couldn't. Tomlinson and Johnston chose that moment to come in. "Got him?" Homer asked.

"Yep," Ding replied. He pulled his cell phone out and called America. Again the encryption systems went through the synchronization process.

"We got him," Chavez told Rainbow Six. "And we got the canister thing, whatever you call it. How the hell do we get everybody home?"

"There's an Air Force C-17 at Alice Springs, if you can get there. It'll wait for you."

"Okay, I'll see if we can fly there. Later, John." Chavez thumbed the END button and turned to his prisoner. "Okay, pal, you're coming with us. If you try anything stupid, Sergeant Pierce here will shoot you right in the head. Right, Mike?"

"Yes, sir, I sure as hell will," Pierce responded in a voice from the grave.

Noonan reopened the valve and turned the pump motor back on.

Then they went back out into the stadium concourse and walked to the cabstand. They ended up needing two taxis, both of which headed to the airport. There they had to wait an hour and a half for a 737 for the desert airport, a flight of nearly two hours.

Alice Springs is in the very center of the continental island called Australia, near the Macdonnell mountain range, and a strange place indeed to find the highest of high-tech equipment, but here were the huge antenna dishes that downloaded information from America's reconnaissance, electronic intelligence, and military communications satellites. The facility there is operated by the National Security Agency, NSA, whose main site is at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington.

The Qantas flight was largely empty, and on arrival, an airport van took them to the USAF terminal, which was surprisingly comfortable, though here the temperature was blisteringly hot, heading down from an afternoon temperature of 120.

"You're Chavez?" the sergeant in the Distinguished Visitors area asked.

"That's right. When's the plane leave?"

"They're waiting for you now, sir. Come this way." And with that they entered another van, which rolled them right to the front-left-side door, where a sergeant in a flight suit gestured them aboard.

"Where we going, Sarge?" Chavez asked on his way past.

"Hickam in Hawaii first, sir, then on to Travis in California."

"Fair enough. Tell the driver he can leave."

"Yes, sir." The crew chief laughed, as he closed the door and walked forward.

It was a mobile cavern, this monster transport aircraft, and there seemed to be no other passengers aboard. Gearing hadn't been handcuffed, somewhat to Ding's disappointment, and he behaved docilely, with Noonan at his side.

"So, you want to talk to us about it, Mr. Gearing?" the FBI agent asked.

"What's in it for me?"

He'd had to ask that question, Noonan supposed, but it was a sign of weakness, just what the FBI agent had hoped for. The question made the answer easy:

"Your life, if you're lucky."

CHAPTER 38

NATURE RESORT

It was just too much for Wil Gearing. Nobody had told him what to do in a case like this. It had never occurred to him that security would be broken on the Project. His life was forfeit now—how could that have happened? He could cooperate or not. The contents of the canister would be examined anyway, probably at USAMRIID at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and it would require only a few seconds for the medical experts there to see what he'd carried into the Olympic stadium, and there was no explaining that away, was there? His life, his plans for the future, had been taken away from him, and his only choice was to cooperate and hope for the best.

And so, as the C-17A Globemaster III transport climbed to its cruising altitude, he started talking. Noonan held a tape recorder in his hand, and hoped that the engine noise that permeated the cargo area wouldn't wash it all away. It turned out that the hardest part for him was to keep a straight face. He'd heard about extreme environmental groups, the people who thought killing baby seals in Canada was right up there with Treblinka and Auschwitz, and he knew that the Bureau had looked at some for offenses like releasing laboratory animals from medical institutions, or spiking trees with nails so that no lumber company would dare to run trees from those areas through their sawmills, but he'd never heard of those groups doing anything more offensive than that. This, however, was such a crime as to redefine "monstrous." And the religious fervor that went along with it was entirely alien to him, and therefore hard to credit. He wanted to believe that the contents of the chlorine canister really was just chlorine, but he knew that it was not. That and the backpack were now sealed in a mil-spec plastic container strapped down in a seat next to Sergeant Mike Pierce.

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"He hasn't called yet," John Brightling observed, checking his watch.

The closing ceremonies were under way. The head of the International Olympic Committee was about to give his speech, summoning the Youth of the World to the next set of games. Then the assembled orchestra would play, and the Olympic Flame would be extinguished . . . just as most of humanity would be extinguished. There was the same sort of sadness to it, but also the same inevitability. There would be no next Olympiad, and the Youth of the World would not be alive to hear the summons? . . .

"John, he's probably watching this the same as we are. Give him some time," Bill Henriksen advised.

"You say so." Brightling put his arm around his wife's shoulders and tried to relax. Even now, the people walking in the stadium were being sprinkled with the nano-capsules bearing Shiva. Bill was right. Nothing could have gone wrong. He could see it in his mind. The streets and highways empty, farms idle, airports shut down. The trees would thrive without lumberjacks to chop them down. The animals would nose about, wondering perhaps where all the noises and the two-legged creatures were. Rats and other carrion eaters would feast. Dogs and cats would return to their primal instincts and survive or not, as circumstances allowed. Herbivores and predators would be relieved of hunting pressure. Poison traps set out in the wild would continue to kill, but eventually these would run out of their poisons and stop killing game that farmers and others disliked. This year there would be no mass murder of baby harp seals for their lovely white coats. This year the world would be reborn … and even if that required an act of violence, it was worth the price for those who had the brains and aesthetic to appreciate it all. It was like a religion for Brightling and his people. Surely it had all the aspects of a religion. They worshiped the great collective life system called Nature. They were fighting for Her because they knew that She loved and nurtured them back. It was that simple. Nature was to them if not a person, then a huge enveloping idea that made and supported the things they loved. They were hardly the first people to dedicate their lives to an idea, were they?

"How long to Hickam?"

"Another ten hours, the crew chief told me," Pierce said, checking his watch. "This is like being back in the Eight-Deuce. All I need's my chute, Tim," he told Noonan.

"Huh?"

"Eighty-Second Airborne, Fort Bragg, my first outfit. All the way, baby," Pierce explained for the benefit of this FBI puke. He missed jumping, but that was something special-ops people didn't do. Going in by helicopter was better organized and definitely safer, but it didn't

have the *rush* you got from leaping out of a transport aircraft along with your squadmates. “What do you think of what this guy was trying to do?” Pierce asked, pointing at Gearing.

“Hard to believe it’s real.”

“Yeah, I know,” Pierce agreed. “I’d like to think nobody’s that crazy. It’s too big a thought for my brain, man.”

“Yeah,” Noonan replied. “Mine, too.” He felt the mini tape recorder in his shirt pocket and wondered about the information it contained. Had he taken the confession legally? He’d given the mutt his rights, and Gearing said that he understood them, but any halfway competent attorney would try hard to have it all tossed, claiming that since they were aboard a military aircraft surrounded by armed men, the circumstances had been coercive—and maybe the judge would agree. He might also agree that the arrest had been illegal. But, Noonan thought, all of that was less important than the result. If Gearing had spoken the truth, this arrest might have saved millions of lives.... He went forward to the aircraft’s radio compartment, got on the secure system, and called New York.

Clark was asleep when his phone rang. He grabbed the receiver and grunted, “Yeah?” only to find that the security system was still handshaking. Then it announced that the line was secure. “What is it, Ding?”

“It’s Tim Noonan, John. I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“What are you going to do when we get there? I have Gearing’s confession on tape, the whole thing, just like what you told Ding a few hours ago. Word for fucking word, John. What do we do now?”

“I don’t know yet. We probably have to talk to Director Murray, and also with Ed Foley at CIA. I’m not sure the law anticipates anything this big, and I’m not sure this is something we ever want to put in a public courtroom, y’know?”

“Well, yeah,” Noonan’s voice agreed from half a world away. “Okay, just so somebody’s thinking about it.”

“Okay, yeah, we’re thinking about it. Anything else?”

“I guess not.”

“Good. I’m going back to sleep.” And the line went dead, and Noonan walked back to the cargo compartment. Chavez and Tomlinson were keeping an eye on Gearing, while the rest of the people tried to get some sleep in the crummy USAF seats and thus pass the time on this most boring of flights. Except for the dreams, Noonan discovered in an hour. They weren’t boring at all.

“He still hasn’t called,” Brightling said, as the network coverage went through Olympic highlights.

"I know," Henriksen conceded. "Okay, let me make a call." He rose from his seat, pulled a card from his wallet, and dialed a number on the back of it to a cellular phone owned by a senior Global Security employee down in Sydney.

"Tony? This is Bill Henriksen. I need you to do something for me right now, okay? . . . Good. Find Wil Gearing and tell him to call me immediately. He has the number . . . Yes, that's the one. Right now, Tony . . . Yeah. Thanks." And Henriksen hung up. "That shouldn't take long. Not too many places he can be except maybe on the way to the airport for his flight up the coast. Relax, John," the security chief advised, still not feeling any chill on his skin. Gearing's cell phone could have a dead battery, he could be caught up in the crowds and unable to get a cab back to his hotel, maybe there weren't any cabs—any one of a number of innocent explanations.

Down in Sydney, Tony Johnson walked across the street to Wil Gearing's hotel. He knew the room already, since they'd met there, and took the elevator to the right room. Defeating the lock was child's play, just a matter of working a credit card into the doorjamb and flipping the angled latch, and then he was inside—

—and so were Gearing's bags, sitting there by the sliding mirror-doors of the closet, and there on the desk-table was the folder with his flight tickets to the Northeast Coast of Australia, plus a map and some brochures about the Great Barrier Reef. This was odd. Wil's flight—he checked the ticket folder—was due to go off in twenty minutes, and he ought to be all checked in and boarding the aircraft by now, but he hadn't left the hotel. This was very odd. *Where are you, Wil?* Johnson wondered. Then he remembered why he was here, and lifted the phone.

"Yeah, Tony. So, where's our boy?" Henriksen asked confidently. Then his face changed. "What do you mean? What else do you know? Okay, if you find out anything else, call me here. Bye." Henriksen set the phone down and turned to look at the other two. "Wil Gearing's disappeared. Not in his room, but his luggage and tickets are. Like he just fell off the planet."

"What's that mean?" Carol Brightling asked.

"I'm not sure. Hell, maybe he got hit by a car in the street—"

"—Or maybe Popov spilled his guts to the wrong people and they bagged him," John Brightling suggested nervously.

"Popov didn't even know his name—Hunnicutt couldn't have told him, he didn't know Gearing's name either." But then Henriksen thought, *Oh, shit. Foster* did *know how the Shiva was supposed to be delivered, didn't he? Oh, shit.*

"What's the matter, Bill?" John asked, seeing the man's face and knowing that something was wrong.

"John, we may have a problem," the former FBI agent announced.

"What problem?" Carol asked. Henriksen explained, and the mood in the room changed abruptly. "You mean, they might know? . . ."

Henriksen nodded. "That is possible, yes."

"My God," the Presidential Science Advisor exclaimed. "If they know that, then—then—then—"

"Yeah." Bill nodded. "Then we're fucked."

"What can we do about this?"

"For starters, we destroy all the evidence. All the Shiva, all the vaccines, all the records. It's all on computer, so we just erase it. There shouldn't be much in the way of a paper trail, because we told people not to print anything up, and to destroy any paper notes they might make. We can do that from here. I can access all the company computers from my office and kill off all the records—"

"They're encrypted, all of them," John Brightling pointed out.

"You want to bet against the code-breakers at Fort Meade? I don't," Henriksen told them. "No, those files all have to go, John. Look, you beat a criminal prosecution by denying evidence to the prosecutors. Without physical evidence, they can't hurt you."

"What about witnesses?"

"The most overrated thing in the world is an eyewitness. Any lawyer with half a brain can make fools out of them. No, when I was working cases for the Bureau, I wanted something I could hold in my hand, something you could pass over to the jury so they could see it and feel it. Eyewitness testimony is pretty useless in court, despite what you see on TV. Okay, I'm going to my office to get rid of the computer stuff." Henriksen left at once, leaving the two Brightlings behind him.

"My God, John," Carol said in quiet alarm, "what if people find out, nobody'll understand . . ."

"Understand that we were going to kill them and their families? No," her husband agreed dryly, "I don't think Joe Sixpack and Archie Bunker will understand that very well."

"So, what do we do?"

"We get the hell out of the country. We fly down to Brazil with everyone who knows what the Project is all about. We still have access to money—I have dozens of covert accounts we can access electronically—and they probably can't make a criminal case against us if Bill can trash all the computer files. Okay, they may have Wil Gearing under arrest, but he's just one voice, and I'm not sure they can come after us legally, in a foreign country, on the word of one person. There are only fifty or so people who really know what's

happening—all of it, I mean—and we have enough airplanes to get us all to Manaus."

In his office, Henriksen lit up his personal computer and pulled open an encrypted file. It had telephone numbers and access codes to every computer in Horizon Corporation, plus the names of the files relating to the Project. He accessed them via modem, looked for the files that had to go, and moved them with mouse-clicks into trash cans that shredded the files completely instead of merely removing their electronic address codes. He found that he was sweating as he did so, and it took him thirty-nine minutes, but after that time was concluded, he was certain that he'd completely destroyed them all. He checked his list and his memory for the file names and conducted another global search, but no, those files were completely gone now. Good.

Okay, he asked himself, what else might they have? They might have Gearing's Shiva-delivery canister. That would be hard to argue with, but what, really, did it mean? It would mean, if the right people looked at it, that Gearing had been carrying a potential bio-war weapon. Gearing could tell a U.S. attorney that it had come from Horizon Corporation, but no one working on that segment of the Project would ever admit to having done it, and so, *no,* there would be no corroborating evidence to back up the assertion.

Okay, there were by his count fifty-three Horizon and Global Security employees who knew the Project from beginning to end. Work on the "A" and "B" vaccines could be explained away as medical research. The Shiva virus and the vaccine supplies would be burned in a matter of hours, leaving no physical evidence at all.

This was enough—well, it was almost enough. They still had Gearing, and Gearing, if he talked—and he *would* talk, Henriksen was sure, because the Bureau had ways of choking information out of people—could make life very uncomfortable for Brightling and a lot of other people, including himself. They would probably avoid conviction, but the embarrassment of a trial—and the things that the revelations might generate, casual comments made by Project members to others, would be woven together . . . and there was Popov, who could link John Brightling and himself to terrorist acts. But they could finger Popov for murdering Foster Hunnicutt, and that would pollute whatever case he might try to make . . . the best thing would be to be beyond their reach when they tried to assemble a case. That meant Brazil, and Project Alternate in the jungles west of Manaus. They could head down there, sheltered by Brazil's wonderfully protective extradition laws, and study the rain forest . . . yes, that made sense. Okay, he thought, he had a list of the full-Project

members, those who knew everything, those who, if the FBI got them and interrogated them, could hang them all. He printed this list of the True Believers and tucked the pages in his shirt pocket. With the work done and the alternatives analyzed, Henriksen went back to Brightling's penthouse office.

"I've told the flight crews to get the birds warmed up," Brightling told him when he came in.

"Good." Henriksen nodded. "I think Brazil looks pretty good right now. If nothing else, we can get all of our critical personnel fully briefed on how to handle this, how to act if anyone asks them some questions. We can beat this one, John, but we have to be smart about it."

"What about the planet?" Carol Brightling asked sadly.

"Carol," Bill replied, "you take care of your own ass first. You can't save Nature from inside Marion Federal Penitentiary, but if we play it smart, we can deny evidence to anyone who investigates us, and without that we're safe, guys. Now"—he pulled the list from his pocket—"these are the only people we have to protect. There's fifty-three of them, and you have four Gulfstreams sitting out there. We can fly us all down to Project Alternate. Any disagreement on that?"

John Brightling shook his head. "No, I'm with you. Can this keep us in the clear legally?"

Henriksen nodded emphatically. "I think so. Popov will be a problem, but he's a murderer. I'm going to report the Hunnicutt killing to the local cops before we fly off. That will compromise his value as a witness—make it look like he's just telling a tale to save his own ass from the gallows, whatever they use to execute murderers here in Kansas. I'll have Maclean and Killgore tape statements we can hand over to the local police. It may not be enough to convict him, but it will make him pretty uncomfortable. That's how you do this, break up the other guy's chain of evidence and the credibility of his witnesses. In a year, maybe eighteen months, we have our lawyers sit down and chat with the local U.S. attorney, and then we come home. Until then we camp out in Brazil, and you can run the company from there via the Internet, can't you?"

"Well, it's not as good as what we planned, but . . ."

"Yes," Carol agreed. "But it beats the hell out of life in a federal prison."

"Get everything moving, Bill," John ordered.

"So, what do we do with this?" Clark asked, on waking up.

"Well," Tom Sullivan answered, "first we go to the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York office, and then we talk to a United States attorney about building a criminal case."

"I don't think so," Clark responded, rubbing his eyes and reaching for the coffee.

"We can't just put the arm on them and whack'em, you know. We're cops. We can't break the law," Chatham pointed out.

"This can never see the light of day in a court. Besides, who's to say that you'll win the case? How hard will this be to cover up?"

"I can't evaluate that. We have two missing girls they probably murdered—more, if our friend Popov is right—and that's a crime, both federal and state, and, Jesus, this other conspiracy . . . that's why we have laws, Mr. Clark."

"Maybe so, but how fast do you see yourself driving out to this place in Kansas, whose location we don't know yet, with warrants to arrest one of the richest men in America?"

"It will take a little time," Sullivan admitted.

"A couple of weeks at least, just to assemble the case information," Special Agent Chatham said. "We'll need to talk with experts, to have that chlorine jar examined by the right people—and all the while the subjects will be working to destroy every bit of physical evidence. It won't be easy, but that's what we do in the Bureau, y'know?"

"I suppose," Clark said dubiously. "But there won't be much element of surprise here. They probably know we have this Gearing guy. From that they know what he can tell us."

"True," Sullivan conceded.

"We might have to try something else."

"What might that be?"

"I'm not sure," Clark admitted.

The videotaping was done in the Project's media center, where they'd hoped to produce nature tapes for those who survived the plague. The end of the Project as an operational entity hit its members hard. Kirk Maclean was especially downcast, but he acted his role well in explaining the morning rides that he, Serov, Hunnicutt, and Killgore had enjoyed. Then Dr. John Killgore told of how he'd found the horses, and then came Maclean's explanation of how the body was found, and the autopsy Killgore had personally performed, which had found the .44 bullet that had ended Foster Hunnicutt's life. With that done, the men joined the others in the lobby of the residence building, and a minibus ferried them to the waiting aircraft.

It would be a 3,500-mile flight to Manaus, they were told on boarding, about eight hours, an easy hop for the Gulfstream V. The lead aircraft was nearly empty, just the doctors Brightling, Bill Henriksen, and Steve Berg, lead scientist for the Shiva part of the Project. The aircraft lifted off at nine in the morning local time. Next stop, the Amazon Valley of central Brazil.

It turned out that the FBI *did* know where the Kansas site was. A car and two agents from the local resident agency drove out in time to see the jets lift off, which they duly reported to their base station, and from there to Washington. Then they just parked at the side of the road, sipped at their drinks, ate their McDonald's burgers and watched nothing happening at all at the misplaced buildings in the middle of wheat country.

The C-17 switched crews at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, then refueled and lifted off for Travis in northern California. Chavez and his party never even departed the aircraft, but watched the new crew arrive with box lunches and drinks, and then settled in for the next six hours of air travel. Wilson Gearing was trying to explain himself now, talking about trees and birds and fish and stuff, Ding overheard. It was not an argument calculated to persuade the father of a newborn, and the husband of a physician, but the man rambled on. Noonan listened politely and recorded this conversation, too.

The flight south was quiet on all the aircraft. Those who hadn't heard about the developments in Sydney guessed that something was wrong, but they couldn't communicate with the lead aircraft without going through the flight crews, and they had not been briefed in on the Project's objectives—like so many of the employees of Horizon Corporation, they had simply been paid to do the jobs for which they were trained. They flew now on a southerly course to a destination just below the equator. It was a trip they'd made before, when Project Alternate had been built the previous year. It, too, had its own runway sufficient for the business jets, but only VFR daylight capable, since it lacked the navigation aids in Kansas. If anything went wrong, they would bingo to the Manaus city airport, ninety-eight miles to the east of their destination, which had full services, including repairs. Project Alternate had spare parts, and every aircraft had a trained mechanic aboard, but they preferred to leave major repairs to others. In an hour, they were "feet-wet" over the Gulf of Mexico, then turned east to fly through the international travel corridor over Cuba. The weather forecast was good all the way down to Venezuela, where they might have to dodge a few thunderheads, but nothing serious. The senior passengers in the lead aircraft figured that they were leaving the country about as fast as it could be done, disappearing off the face of the planet they'd hoped to save.

"What's that?" Sullivan asked. Then he turned. "Four jets just left the

Kansas location, and they headed off to the south."

"Is there any way to track them?"

Sullivan shrugged. "The Air Force maybe."

"How the hell do we do that?" Clark wondered aloud. Then he called Langley.

"I can try, John, but getting the Air Force hopping this quick won't be easy."

"Try, will you, Ed? Four Gulfstream-type business jets heading south from central Kansas, destination unknown."

"Okay, I'll call the NMCC."

That was not a difficult thing for the Director of Central Intelligence to do. The senior duty officer in the National Military Command Center was an Air Force two-star recently rotated into a desk job after commanding the remaining USAF fighter force in NATO.

"So, what are we supposed to do, sir?" the general asked.

"Four Gulfstream-type business jets took off from central Kansas about half an hour ago. We want them tracked."

"With what? All our air-defense fighters are on the Canadian border. Calling them down wouldn't work, they'd never catch up."

"How about an AWACS?" Foley asked.

"They belong to Air Combat Command at Langley—ours, not yours—and well, maybe one's up for counter-drug surveillance or maybe training. I can check."

"Do that," Ed Foley said. "I'll hold."

The two-star in blue went one better than that, calling the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Cheyenne Mountain, which had radar coverage over the entire country, and ordering them to identify the four Gs. That took less than a minute, and a computer command was sent to the Federal Aviation Administration to check the flight plans that had to be filed for international flights. NORAD also told the general that there were *two* E-3B AWACS aircraft aloft at the moment, one 300 miles south of New Orleans doing counter-drug operations, and the other just south of Eglin Air Force Base, conducting routine training with some fighters based there in an exercise against a Navy flight out of Pensacola Naval Air Station. With that information, he called Langley Air Force Base in the Virginia Tidewater, got Operations, and told them about the DCI's request.

"What's this for, sir?" the general asked Foley, once the phone lines were properly lashed up.

"I can't tell you that, but it's important as hell."

The general relayed that to Langley Operations, but did not relay the snarled response back to CIA. This one had to be kicked to the four-star who ran Air Combat Command, who, conveniently, was in

his office rather than the F-16 that came with the job. The four-star grunted approval, figuring CIA wouldn't ask without good reason.

"You can have it if you need it. How far will it be going?"

"I don't know. How far can one of those Gulfstream jets go?"

"Hell, sir, the new one, the G-V, can fly all the way to friggin' Japan. I may have to set up some tanker support."

"Okay, please do what you have to do. Who do I call to keep track of the shadowing operation?"

"NORAD." He gave the DCI the number to call.

"Okay, thank you, General. The Agency owes you one."

"I will remember that, Director Foley," the USAF major general promised.

"We're in luck," Clark heard. "The Air Force is chopping an AWACS to us. We can follow them all the way to where they're going," Ed Foley said, exaggerating somewhat, since he didn't understand the AWACS would have to refuel on the way.

The aircraft in question, a ten-year-old E-3B Sentry, got the word fifteen minutes later. The pilot relayed the information to the senior control officer aboard, a major, who in turn called NORAD for further information and got it ten minutes after the leading G departed U.S. airspace. The steer from Cheyenne Mountain made the tracking exercise about as difficult as the drive to the local 7-Eleven. A tanker would meet them over the Caribbean, after lifting off from Panama, and what had been an interesting air-defense exercise reverted to total boredom. The E-3B Sentry, based on the venerable Boeing 707-320B, flew at the identical speed as the business jets made in Savannah, and kept station from fifty miles behind. Only the aerial tanking would interfere with matters, and that not very much. The radar aircraft's call-sign was Eagle Two-Niner, and it had satellite radio capability to relay everything, including its radar picture, to NORAD in Colorado. Most of Eagle Two-Niner's crewmen rested in their comfortable seats, many of them dozing off while three controllers worked the four Gulfstreams they were supposed to track. It was soon evident that they were heading somewhere pretty straight, five minutes or about forty-one miles apart, attempting no deception at all, not even wavetop flying. But that, they knew, would only abuse the airframes and use up gas unnecessarily. It didn't matter to the surveillance aircraft, which could spot a trash bag floating in the water—something they regularly did in counter-drug operations, since that was one of the methods used by smugglers to transfer their cocaine—or even enforce the speed limit on interstate highways, since anything going faster than eighty miles per hour was automatically tracked by the radar-

computer system, until the operator told the computer to ignore it. But now all they had to look at were commercial airliners going and coming in routine daily traffic, plus the four Gulfstreams, who were traveling so normal, straight, and dumb that, as one controller observed, even a Marine could have taken them out without much in the way of guidance.

By this time, Clark was on a shuttle flight to Reagan National Airport across the river from Washington. It landed on time, and Clark was met by a CIA employee whose "company" car was parked outside for the twenty-minute ride to Langley and the seventh floor of the Old Headquarters Building. Dmitriy Popov had never expected to be inside this particular edifice, even wearing a VISITOR—ESCORT REQUIRED badge. John handled the introductions.

"Welcome," Foley said in his best Russian. "I imagine you've never been here before."

"As you have never been to Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square."

"Ah, but I have," Clark responded. "Right into Sergey Nikolay'ch's office, in fact."

"Amazing," Popov responded, sitting down as guided.

"Okay, Ed, where the hell are they now?"

"Over northern Venezuela, heading south, probably for central Brazil. The FAA tells us that they filed a flight plan—it's required by law—for Manaus. Rubber-tree country, I think. A couple of rivers come together there."

"They told me that there is a facility there, like the one in Kansas, but smaller," Popov informed his hosts.

"Task a satellite to it?" Clark asked the DCI.

"Once we know where it is, sure. The AWACS lost a little ground when it refueled, but it's only a hundred fifty miles back now, and that's not a problem. They say the four business jets are just flying normally, cruising right along."

"Once we know where they're going . . . then what?"

"Not sure," Foley admitted. "I haven't thought it through that far."

"There might not be a good criminal case on this one, Ed."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Clark confirmed with a nod. "If they're smart, and we have to assume they are, they can destroy all the physical evidence of the crime pretty easily. That leaves witnesses, but who, you suppose, is aboard those four Gs heading into Brazil?"

"All the people who know what's been happening. You'd want to keep that number low for security reasons, wouldn't you—so, you think they're going down there for choir practice?"

"What?" Popov asked.

"They need to find and learn a single story to tell the FBI when the interrogations begin," Foley explained. "So, they all need to learn the same hymn, and learn to sing it the same way every time."

"What would you do in their place, Ed?" Rainbow Six asked reasonably.

Foley nodded. "Yeah, that's about it. Okay, what should we do?"

Clark looked the DCI straight in the eye. "Pay them a little visit, maybe?"

"Who authorizes that?" the Director of Central Intelligence asked.

"I still draw my paychecks from this agency. I report to you, Ed, remember?"

"Christ, John."

"Do I have your permission to get my people together at a suitable staging point?"

"Where?"

"Fort Bragg, I suppose," Clark proposed. Foley had to yield to the logic of the moment.

"Permission granted." And with that Clark walked down the narrow office to a table with a secure phone to call Hereford.

• • •

Alistair Stanley had bounced back well from his wounds, enough so that he could just about manage a full day in his office without collapsing with exhaustion. Clark's trip to the States had left him in charge of a crippled Rainbow force, and he was facing problems now that Clark had not yet addressed, like replacements for the two dead troopers. Morale was brittle at the moment. There were still two missing people with whom the survivors had worked intimately, and that was never an easy thing for men to bear, though every morning they were out on the athletic field doing their daily routine, and every afternoon they fired their weapons to stay current and ready for a possible call-up. This was regarded as unlikely, but, then, none of the missions that Rainbow had carried out had been, in retrospect, very likely. His secure phone started chirping, and Stanley reached to answer it.

"Yes, this is Alistair Stanley."

"Hi, Al, this is John. I'm in Langley now."

"What the bloody hell's been happening, John? Chavez and his people have fallen off the earth, and—"

"Ding and his people are halfway between Hawaii and California now, Al. They arrested a major conspirator in Sydney."

"Very well, what the devil's been going on?"

"You sitting down, Al?"

"Yes, John, of course I am, and—"

"Listen up. I'll give you the short version," Clark commanded, and proceeded to do that for the next ten minutes.

"Bloody hell," Stanley said when his boss stopped talking. "You're sure of this?"

"Damned sure, Al. We are now tracking the conspirators in four aircraft. They seem to be heading for central Brazil. Okay, I need you to get all the people together and fly them to Fort Bragg—Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina—with all their gear. Everything, Al. We may be taking a trip down to the jungle to . . . to, uh, deal decisively with these people."

"Understood. I'll try to get things organized here. Maximum speed?"

"That is correct. Tell British Airways we need an airplane," Clark went on.

"Very well, John. Let me get moving here."

In Langley, Clark wondered what would happen next, but before he could decide that he needed to get all of his assets in place. Okay, Alistair would try to get British Airways to release a spare, reserve aircraft to his people for a direct flight to Pope, and from there—from there he'd have to think some more. And he'd have to get there, too, to Special Operations Command with Colonel Little Willie Byron.

"Target One is descending," a control officer reported over the aircraft's intercom. The senior controller looked up from the book he was reading, activated his scope, and confirmed the information. He was breaking international law at the moment. Eagle Two-Niner hadn't gotten permission to overfly Brazil, but the air-traffic-control radar systems down there read his transponder signal as a civilian air-cargo flight—the usual ruse—and nobody had challenged them yet. Confirming that information, he got on his satellite radio to report this information to NORAD and, though he didn't know it, on to CIA. Five minutes later, Target Two started doing the same. Also both aircraft were slowing, allowing Eagle Two-Niner to catch up somewhat. The senior controller told the flight crew to continue on this heading and speed, inquired about fuel state, and learned that they had another eight hours of flight time, more than enough to return to their home at Tinker Air Force Base outside Oklahoma City.

In England, the British Airways card was played, and the airline, after ten minutes of checking, assigned Rainbow a 737-700 airliner, which would await their pleasure at Luton, a small commercial airport north

of London. They'd have to go there by truck, and those were whistled up from the British army's transport company at Hereford.

• • •

It looked like a green sea, John Brightling thought, the top layer of the triple-canopy jungle. In the setting sun, he could see the silvery paths of rivers, but almost nothing of the ground itself. This was the richest ecosystem on the planet, and one that he'd never studied in detail—well, Brightling thought, now he'd be able to, for the next year or so. Project Alternate was a robust and comfortable facility with a maintenance staff of six people, its own power supply, satellite communications, and ample food. He wondered which of the people on the four aircraft might be good cooks. There would be a division of labor here, as at every other Project activity, with himself, of course, as the leader.

At Binghamton, New York, the maintenance staff was loading a bunch of biohazard-marked containers into the incinerator. It was sure a big furnace, one of the men thought—big enough to cremate a couple of bodies at the same time—and, judging by the thickness of the insulation, a damned hot one. He pulled down the three-inch-thick door, locked it in place, and punched the ignition button. He could hear the gas jetting it and lighting off from the sparkler-things inside, followed by the usual *voosh.* There was nothing unusual about this. Horizon Corporation was always disposing of biological material of one sort or another. Maybe it was live AIDS virus, he thought. The company did a lot of work in that area, he'd read. But for the moment he looked at the papers on his clipboard. Three sheets of paper from the special order that had been faxed in from Kansas, and every line was checked off. All the containers specified were now ashes. Hell, this incinerator even destroyed the metal lids. And up into the sky went the only physical evidence of the Project. The maintenance worker didn't know that. To him container G7-89-98-00A was just a plastic container. He didn't even know that there was a word such as Shiva. As required, he went to his desktop computer—everyone here had one—and typed in that he'd eliminated the items on the work order. This information went into Horizon Corporation's internal network, and, though he didn't know it, popped onto a screen in Kansas. There were special instructions with that, and the technician lifted his phone to relay the information to another worker, who relayed it in turn to the phone number identified on the electronically

posted notice.

"Okay, thank you," Bill Henriksen replied upon hearing the information. He replaced the cabin phone and made his way forward to the Brightlings.

"Okay, guys, that was Binghamton. All the Shiva stuff, all the vaccines, everything's been burned up. There is now no real physical evidence that the Project ever existed."

"We're supposed to be happy about that?" Carol demanded crossly, looking out her window at the approaching ground.

"No, but I hope you'll be happier than you'd be if you were facing an indictment for conspiracy to commit murder, Doctor."

"He's right, Carol," John said, sadness in his voice. So close. So damned close. Well, he consoled himself, he still had resources, and he still had a core of good people, and this setback didn't mean that he'd have to give up his ideals, did it? Not hardly, the chairman of Horizon told himself. Below, under the green sea into which they were descending, was a great diversity of life—he'd justified building Project Alternate to his board for that very reason, to find new chemical compounds in the trees and plants that grew only here—maybe a cure for cancer, who could say? He heard the flaps lower, and soon thereafter, the landing gear went down. Another three minutes, and they thumped down on the road-runway constructed along with the lab and residential buildings. The aircraft's thrust-reversers engaged, and it slowed to a gradual stop.

"Okay, Target One is down on the ground." The controller read off the exact position, then adjusted his screen's picture. There were buildings there, too? Well, okay, and he told the computer to calculate their exact position, which information was immediately relayed to Cheyenne Mountain.

"Thank you." Foley wrote the information down on a pad. "John, I have exact lat and longe for where they are. I'll task a satellite to get pictures for us. Should have that in, oh, two or three hours, depending on weather there."

"So fast?" Popov asked, looking out the seventh-floor windows at the VIP parking lot.

"It's just a computer command," Clark explained. "And the satellites are always up there." Actually, three hours struck him as a long time to wait. The birds must have been in the wrong places for convenience.

Rainbow lifted off the runway at Luton well after midnight, British time, looping around to the right over the automobile-assembly plant located just off the airport grounds and heading west for America. British Airways had assigned three flight attendants to the flight, and they kept the troopers fed and supplied with drink, which all the soldiers accepted before they settled down as best they could to sleep most of the way across. They had no idea why they were going to America. Stanley hadn't briefed them in on anything yet, though they wondered why they were packing *all* of their tactical gear.

Skies were blessedly clear over the jungles of central Brazil. The first KH-11D went over at nine-thirty in the night, local time. Its infrared cameras took a total of three hundred twenty frames, plus ninety-seven more in the visible spectrum. These images were immediately cross-loaded to a communications satellite, and from there beamed down to the antenna farm at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, near Washington. From there they went by landline to the National Reconnaissance Office building near Dulles Airport, and from there via another fiber-optic line to CIA headquarters.

"This looks pretty vanilla," the senior duty photoanalyst told them in Foley's office. "Buildings here, here, here, and this one here. Four airplanes on the ground, look like Gulfstream Vs—that one's got a longer wing. Private airfield, it's got lights but no ILS gear. I expect the fuel tanks are here. Power plant here. Probably a diesel generator system, by the look of this exhaust plume. This building looks residential from the window-light pattern. Somebody build a nature resort we're interested in?" the analyst asked.

"Something like that," Clark confirmed. "What else?"

"Nothing much for a ninety-mile radius. This here used to be a rubber-tree plantation, I'd say, but the buildings are not warmed up, and so I'd have to say it's inactive. Not much in the way of civilization. Fires down this way"—he pointed—"campfires, maybe from indigenous people, Indian tribes or such-like. That's one lonely place, sir. Must have been a real pain in the ass to build this place, isolated as it is."

"Okay, send us the Lacrosse images, too, and when we get good visual-light images, I want to see those, too," Foley said.

"We'll have a direct-overhead pass on another bird at about zero-seven-twenty Lima," he said, meaning local time. "Weather forecast looks okay. Ought to get good frames from that pass."

"How wide is this runway?" Clark asked.

"Oh, looks like seven thousand feet long by three hundred or so wide, standard width, and they've cut the trees down another hundred yards—meters, probably, on both sides. So, you could get a fair-sized

airplane in there if the concrete's thick enough. There's a dock here on the river, it's the Río Negro, actually, not the Amazon itself, but no boats. I guess that's left over from the construction process."

"I don't see any telephone or power lines," Clark said next, looking closely at the photo.

"No, sir, there ain't none. I guess they depend on satellite and radio comms from this antenna farm." He paused. "Anything else you need?"

"No, and thanks," Clark told the technician.

"Yes, sir, you bet." The analyst walked out to take the elevator for his basement office.

"Learn anything?" Foley asked. He himself knew nothing about running around in jungles, but he knew that Clark did.

"Well, we know where they are, and we know about how many of 'em there are."

"What are you planning, John?"

"I'm not sure yet, Ed" was the honest reply. Clark wasn't planning much, but he was starting to think.

The C-17 thumped down rather hard at Travis Air Force Base in California. Chavez and his companions were rather seriously disoriented by all the travel, but the walk outside the aircraft was, at least, in pleasantly cool air. Chavez pulled out his cell phone and speed-dialed Hereford, then learned that John was in Langley. He had to dredge that number up from his memory, but remembered it after twenty seconds or so, and dialed.

"Director's office."

"This is Domingo Chavez calling for John Clark."

"Hold, please," Foley's receptionist replied.

"Where are you now, Ding?" John asked, when he got on the line.

"Travis Air Force base, north of 'Frisco. Now where the hell are we supposed to go?"

"There should be an Air Force VC-20 waiting for you at the DV terminal."

"Okay, I'll get over that way. We don't have any of our gear with us, John. We left Australia in a hurry."

"I'll have somebody take care of that. You get the hell back to D.C., okay?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. C," Ding acknowledged.

"Your guest, what's his name—Gearing?"

"That's right. Noonan sat with him most of the way. He sang like a fuckin' canary, John. This thing they planned to do, I mean if it's real —*Jesuchristo, jefe."*

"I know, Ding. They've bugged out, by the way."

"Where to, do we know?"

"Brazil. We know exactly where they are. I have Al bringing the team across to Fort Bragg. You get to An-drews, and we'll get organized."

"Roge-o, John. Let me go find my airplane. Out." Chavez killed the phone and waved for a blue USAF van that took them to the Distinguished Visitors' lounge, where they found yet another flight crew waiting for them. Soon thereafter, they boarded the VC-20, the Air Force version of the Gulfstream business jet, and aboard they found out what time it was from the food that the sergeant served them. Breakfast. It had to be early morning, Chavez decided. Then he asked the sergeant for the correct time and reset his watch.

CHAPTER 39

HARMONY

It struck Noonan as terribly odd that he was traveling with a confessed attempted-mass-murderer in an aircraft without the man's being in handcuffs or a straitjacket or some sort of restraint. But, as a practical matter, what was he going to do, and where was he going to go? It might be possible to open the door and jump out, but Gearing didn't strike the FBI agent as a suicide risk, and Noonan was damned sure he wasn't going to hijack this aircraft to Cuba. And so Tim Noonan just kept an eye on the prisoner, while considering that he'd arrested the mutt on another continent, in a different time zone and hemisphere, and on the far side of the International Dateline. He'd been in on the Fuad Yunis takedown in the Eastern Mediterranean ten or eleven years before, but he figured this might be the FBI's all-time distance record for arresting a subject and bringing the mutt home. Close enough to twelve thousand miles. Damn. The price had been the air travel, which had his body thoroughly wrecked and crying out for exercise. He changed the time setting on his watch, then wondered if the day was the same—but, he decided, while you could ask the USAF sergeant flight attendant for the time, you'd look like a total fucking idiot to have to ask the date. Maybe he'd get it from a copy of *USA Today* back in the States, Noonan thought, pushing his seat back and locking his eyes on the back of Wil Gearing's head. Then he realized: He'd have to turn his prisoner in when they got to Washington, but to whom, and on what charge?

"Okay," Clark said. "They get into Andrews in two hours, and then we'll take a puddle-jumper to Pope and figure out what to do."

"You've got a plan already, John," Foley observed. He'd known Clark long enough to recognize that look in his eyes.

"Ed, is this my case to run or isn't it?" he asked the DCI.

"Within reason, John. Let's try not to start a nuclear war or anything, shall we?"

"Ed, can this ever come to trial? What if Brightling ordered the destruction of all the evidence? It's not hard to do, is it? Hell, what are we talking about? A few buckets of bio-gunk and some computer

records. There're commercial programs that destroy files thoroughly enough that you can't recover them ever, right?"

"True, but somebody might have printed stuff up, and a good search —"

"And then what do we have? A global panic when people realize what a bio-tech company can do if it wants. What good will that do?"

"Toss in a senior presidential advisor who violated security. Jesus, that would not be very helpful for Jack, would it?" Foley paused. "But we can't *murder* these people, John! They're U.S. citizens with *rights,* remember?"

"I know, Ed. But we can't let them go, and we probably can't prosecute them, can we? What's that leave?" Clark paused. "I'll try something creative."

"What?"

John Clark explained his idea. "If they fight back, well, then, it makes things easier for us, doesn't it?"

"Twenty men against maybe fifty?"

"My twenty—actually, more like fifteen—against those feather merchants? Give me a break, Ed. It may be the moral equivalent of murder, but *not* the legal equivalent."

Foley frowned mightily, worried about what would happen if this ever made the media, but there was no particular reason that it should. The special-operations community kept all manner of secrets, many of which would look bad in the public media. "John," he said finally.

"Yeah, Ed?"

"Make sure you don't get caught."

"Never happened yet, Ed," Rainbow Six reminded him.

"Approved," said the Director of Central Intelligence, wondering how the hell he'd ever explain this one to the president of the United States.

"Okay, can I use my old office?" Clark had some phone calls to make.

"Sure."

"Is that *all* you need?" General Sam Wilson asked.

"Yes, General, that should do it."

"Can I ask what it's for?"

"Something covert," he heard Clark reply.

"That's all you're willing to say?"

"Sorry, Sam. You can check this out with Ed Foley if you want."

"I guess I will," the general's voice rumbled.

"Fine with me, sir." Clark hoped the "sir" part would assuage his hurt feelings.

It didn't, but Wilson was a pro, and knew the rules. "Okay, let me make some phone calls."

The first of them went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, whose commanding officer, a colonel, made the expected objection, which was expectedly overridden. That colonel then lifted a phone of his own and ordered an MH-60K Night Hawk special-operations helicopter ferried to Pope Air Force Base, along with a maintenance crew for some TDY to a place he didn't know about. The next phone call went to an Air Force officer who took his notes and said, "Yes, sir," like the good airman he was. Getting the pieces in place was mainly an exercise in electronics, lifting encrypted phones and giving spooky orders to people who, fortunately, were accustomed to such things.

Chavez reflected that he'd come three quarters of the way around the world, most of it in the last twenty-two hours, and was landing at an airfield he'd used only once before. There was Air Force One, the VC-25A version of the 747 painted in a scheme known all over the world, and with him was someone who'd planned to kill all the people who'd known it. He'd learned years before not to reflect too much on the things that he did for his country and the $82,450 per year that he now earned as a mid-level CIA employee. He had a master's degree in international relations, which he jokingly defined as one country fucking another—but now, it wasn't a country, it was a *corporation*. Since when did *they* start to think they could play games at this level? he wondered. Maybe it was the New World Order that President Bush had once talked about. If that's what it was, it didn't make sense to the commander of Team-2. Governments were selected, by and large, by the citizens, and answered to them. Corporations answered—if they did so at all—to their shareholders. And that wasn't quite the same thing. Corporations were supposed to be overseen by the governments of the countries in which they were domiciled, but everything was changing now. It was private corporations that developed and defined the tools that people across the world were using. The changing technological world had given immense power to relatively small organizations, and now he was wondering if that was a good thing or not. Well, if people depended on governments for progress, then they'd still be riding horses and steamships around the world. But in this New World Order things had little in the way of controls at all, and that was something somebody should think about, Chavez decided, as the aircraft came to a halt on the Andrews ramp. Yet another anonymous blue USAF van appeared at the stairs even before they were fully deployed.

“Building up those frequent-flyer miles, Domingo?” John asked from the concrete.

“I suppose. Am I sprouting feathers yet?” Chavez asked tiredly.

“Only one more hop for now.”

“Where to?”

“Bragg.”

“Then let’s do it. I don’t want to get too used to standing still if it’s just temporary.” He needed a shave and a shower, but that, too, would have to wait until Fort Bragg. Soon they were in yet another Air Force short-haul aircraft, lifting off and heading southwest. This hop was blessedly short, and ended at Pope Air Force Base, which adjoins the home of the 82nd Airborne Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, also home of Delta Force and other special-operations units.

For the first time, someone had thought what to do with Wil Gearing, Noonan saw. Three military policemen carted him off to the base stockade. The rest of the people on the trip ended up in Bachelor Officers’ Quarters, more colloquially known as “the Q.”

Chavez wondered if the clothing he stripped off would ever be clean enough to wear again. But then he showered, and set on the sink in the bathroom was a razor that allowed him to scrape off a full day’s accumulation of black blur on his—he thought—manly face. He emerged to find clothing laid out.

“I had the base people run this over.”

“Thanks, John.” Chavez struggled into the white boxers and T-shirt, then selected the forest-pattern Battle Dress Uniform—BDU—items laid on the bed, complete to socks and boots.

“Long day?”

“Shit, John, it’s been a long *month* coming back from Australia.” He sat down on the bed, then on reflection lay down on the bedspread. “Now what?”

“Brazil.”

“How come?”

“That’s where they all went. We tracked them down, and I have overheads of the place where they’re camped out.”

“So, we’re going to see them?”

“Yes.”

“To do *what,* John?”

“To settle this thing out once and for all, Domingo.”

“Suits me, but is it legal?”

“When did you start worrying about that?”

“I’m a married man, John, and a father, remember? I have to be responsible now, man.”

“It’s legal enough, Ding,” his father-in-law told the younger man.

“Okay, you say so. What happens now?”

"You get a nap. The rest of the team arrives in about half an hour."

"The rest of what team?"

"Everybody who can move and shoot, son."

"Muy bien, jefe," Chavez said, closing his eyes.

The British Airways 737-700 was on the ground for as little time as possible, refueled from an Air Force fuel bowser and then lifted off for Dulles International Airport outside Washington, where its presence would not cause much in the way of comment. The Rainbow troopers were bused off to a secure location and allowed to continue their rest. That worried some of them slightly. Being allowed to rest implied that rest was something they'd need soon.

Clark and Alistair Stanley conferred in a room at Joint Special Operations Command Headquarters, a nondescript building facing a small parking lot.

"So, what gives here?" asked Colonel William Byron. Called "Little Willie" by his uniformed colleagues, Colonel Byron had the most unlikely sobriquet in the United States Army. Fully six-four and two hundred thirty pounds of lean, hard meat, Byron was the largest man in JSOC. The name dated back to West Point, where he'd grown six inches and thirty pounds over four years of exercise and wholesome food, and ended up a linebacker on the Army football team that had murdered Navy 35–10 in the autumn classic at Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium. His accent was still south Georgia despite his master's degree in management from Harvard Business School, which was becoming favored in the American military.

"We're taking a trip here," Clark told him, passing the overheads across the table. "We need a helo and not much else."

"Where the hell is this shithole?"

"Brazil, west of Manaus, on the Río Negro."

"Some facility," Byron observed, putting on the reading glasses that he hated. "Who built it, and who's there now?"

"The people who wanted to kill the whole fucking world," Clark responded, reaching for his cell phone when it started chirping. Again he had to wait for the encryption system to handshake with the other end. "This is Clark," he said finally.

"Ed Foley here, John. The sample was examined by the troops up at Fort Detrick."

"And?"

"And it's a version of the Ebola virus, they say, modified —'engineered' is the term they used, as a matter of fact—by the addition of what appears to be cancer genes. They say that makes the little bastard more robust. Moreover, the virus strands were encased in some sort of mini-capsules to help it survive in the open. In other

words, John, what your Russian friend told you—it looks like it's fully confirmed."

"What did you do with Dmitriy?" Rainbow Six asked.

"A safe house out in Winchester," the DCI replied. It was the usual place to quarter a foreign national the CIA wanted to protect. "Oh, the FBI tells me that the Kansas State Police are looking for him on a murder charge. Supposedly he killed one Foster Hunnicutt from the state of Montana, or so he has been accused."

"Why don't you have the Bureau tell Kansas that he didn't kill anybody. He was with me the whole time," Clark suggested. They had to take care of this man, didn't they? John had already made the conceptual leap of forgetting that Popov had instigated an attack on his wife and daughter. Business, in this case, was business, and it wasn't the first time a KGB enemy had turned into a valuable friend.

"Okay, yes, I can do that." It was a little white lie, Foley agreed, set against a big black truth. In his Lan-gley, Virginia, office, Foley wondered why his hands weren't shaking. These lunatics had not only *wanted* to kill the whole world, but they'd also had the *ability* to do so. This was a new development the CIA would have to study in detail, a whole new type of threat, and investigating it would be neither easy nor fun.

"Okay, thanks, Ed." Clark killed the phone and looked at the others in the room. "We just confirmed the contents of the chlorine canister. They created a modified form of Ebola for distribution."

"What?" Colonel Byron asked. Clark gave him a ten-minute explanation. "You're serious, eh?" he asked finally.

"As a heart attack," Clark replied. "They hired Dmitriy Popov to interface with terrorists to set up incidents throughout Europe. That was to increase the fear of terrorism, to get Global Security the consulting contract for the Australians, and—"

"Bill Henriksen?" Colonel Byron asked. "Hell, I *know* that guy!"

"Yeah? Well, his people were supposed to deliver the bug through the fogging-cooling system at the Olympic stadium in Sydney, Willie. Chavez was there in the control room when this Wil Gearing guy showed up with the container, and the contents were checked out by the USAMRIID guys at Fort Detrick. You know, the FBI could almost make a criminal case out of this. But not quite," Clark added.

"So, you're heading down there to . . ."

"To talk to them, Willie," Clark finished the statement for him. "They have the aircraft scrubbed yet?"

Byron checked his watch. "Ought to."

"Then it's time for us to get moving."

"Okay. I have BDUs for all your people, John. Sure you don't need a little help?"

"No, Willie. I appreciate the offer, but we want to keep this one tight, don't we?"

"I suppose, John." Byron stood. "Follow me, guys. Those folks you're going to see in Brazil?"

"Yeah?" Clark said.

"Give them a special hello for JSOC, will ya?"

"Yes, sir," John promised. "We'll do that."

The major aircraft sitting on the Pope Air Force Base ramp was an Air Force C-5B Galaxy transport, which the local ground crew had been working on for several hours. All official markings had been painted over, with HORIZON CORPORATION painted in the place of the USAF roundels. Even the tail number was gone. The clamshell cargo doors in the rear were being sealed now. Clark and Stanley got there first. The rest of the troops arrived by bus, carrying their personal gear, and they climbed into the passenger compartment aft of the wing box. From that point on, it was just a matter of having the flight crew—dressed in civilian clothing—climb up to the flight deck and commence start-up procedures as though they were a commercial flight. A KC-10 tanker would meet up with them south of Jamaica to top off their fuel tanks.

"Okay, so that's what seems to have happened," John Brightling told the people assembled in the auditorium. He saw disappointment on the faces of the other fifty-two people here, but some relief was evident as well. Well, even true believers had consciences, he imagined. Too bad.

"What do we do here, John?" Steve Berg asked. He'd been one of the senior scientists on the Project, developer of the "A" and "B" vaccines, who'd also helped to design Shiva. Berg was one of the best people Horizon Corporation had ever hired.

"We study the rain forest. We have destroyed everything of evidentiary value. The Shiva supply is gone. So are the vaccines. So are all the computer records of our laboratory notes, and so forth. The only records of the Project are what you people have in your heads. In other words, if anybody tries to make a criminal case against us, you just have to keep your mouths shut, and there will be no case. Bill?" John Brightling gestured to Henriksen, who walked to the podium.

"Okay, you know that I used to be in the FBI. I know how they make their criminal cases. Making one against us will not be easy under the best of circumstances. The FBI has to play by the rules, and they're strict rules. They *must* read you your rights, one of which is to have a lawyer present during questioning. All you have to say is, 'Yes, I want my lawyer here.' If you say *that,* then they can't even ask you

what the time is. Then you call us, and we get a lawyer to you, and the lawyer will tell you, right in front of the case agents, that you will not talk at all, and he'll tell the agents that you will not talk, and that if they try to make you talk then they've violated all sorts of statutes and Supreme Court decisions. That means that *they* can get into trouble, and anything you might say cannot be used anywhere. Those are your civil protections.

"Next," Bill Henriksen went on, "we will spend our time here looking at the rich ecosystem around us, and formulating a cover story. That will take us some time and—"

"Wait, if we can avoid answering their questions, then—"

"Why concoct a cover story? That's easy. Our lawyers will have to talk some with the United States attorneys. If we generate a plausible cover story, then we can make them go away. If the cops know they can't win, they won't fight. A good cover story will help with that. Okay, we can say that, yes, we were looking at the Ebola virus, because it's a nasty little fucker, and the world needs a cure. Then, maybe, some loony employee decided to kill the world—but *we* had nothing to do with that. Why are we here? We're here to do primary medical research into chemical compounds in the flora and fauna here in the tropical rain forest. That's legitimate, isn't it?" Heads nodded.

"Okay, we'll take our time to construct an ironclad cover story. Then we'll all memorize it. That way, when our lawyers let us talk to the FBI so that we can be cooperative, we give them only information which cannot hurt us, and will, in fact, help us evade the charges that they might hit us with. People, if we stand together and stick to our scripts, we can't lose. Please believe me on that. We *can't lose* if we use our heads. Okay?"

"And we can also work on Project 2," Brightling said, resuming the podium. "You are some of the smartest people in the world, and our commitment to our ultimate goal has *not* changed. We'll be here for a year or so. It's a chance for us to study nature, and learn things we need to learn. It will also be a year of working to find a new way to achieve that to which we have dedicated our lives," he went on, seeing nods. There were already alternate ideas he could investigate, probably. He was still the chairman of the world's foremost biotech company. He still had the best and brightest people in the world working for him. He and they still cared about saving the planet. They'd just have to find something else, and they had the resources and the time to do so.

"Okay," Brightling told them, with a beaming smile. "It's been a long day. Let's all bed down and get some rest. Tomorrow morning, I'm going out in the forest to see an ecosystem that we all want to learn about."

The applause moved him. Yes, all of these people cared as much as he did, shared his dedication—and, who knew, maybe there was a way for Project 2 to happen.

Bill Henriksen came up to John and Carol during the walk to their rooms. "There is one other potential problem."

"What's that?"

"What if they send a paramilitary team here?"

"You mean like the Army?" Carol Brightling asked.

"That's right."

"We fight them," John responded. "We have guns here, don't we?"

And that they did. The Project Alternate armory had no fewer than a hundred German-made G-3 military assault rifles, the real sort, able to go full-automatic, and quite a few of the people here knew how to shoot.

"Yes. Okay, the problem with this is, they can't really arrest us legally, but if they do manage to apprehend us and get us back to America, then the courts won't care that the arrests were illegal. That's a point of American law—once you're in front of the judge, that's all the judge cares about. So, if people show up, we just have to discourage them. I think—"

"I think our people won't need much in the way of encouragement to fight back after what those bastards did to the Project!"

"I agree, but we'll just have to see what happens. Damn, I wish we'd gotten some radar installed here."

"Huh?" John asked.

"They will come, if they come, by helicopter. Too far to walk through the jungle, and boats are too slow, and our people think in terms of helicopters. That's just how they do things."

"How do they even know where we are, Bill? Hell, we skipped the country pretty fast and—"

"And they can ask the flight crews where they delivered us. They had to file flight plans to Manaus, and that narrows it down some, doesn't it?"

"They won't talk. They're well paid," John objected. "How long before they can figure all that out?"

"Oh, a couple of days at worst. Two weeks at best. I think we ought to get our people trained in defense. We can start that tomorrow," Henriksen proposed.

"Do it," John Brightling agreed. "And let me call home and see if anybody's talked to our pilots."

The master suite had its own communications room. Project Alternate was state-of-the-art in many ways, from the medical labs to communications. In the latter case the antenna farm next to the power-generating facility had its own satellite-phone system that also

allowed e-mail and electronic access to Horizon Corp.'s massive internal computer network. Immediately upon arriving in his suite, Brightling flipped on the phone system and called Kansas. He left instructions for the flight crews, now most on the way back home, to inform Alternate if anyone tried to interrogate them regarding their most recent overseas trip. That done, there was little else left to do. Brightling showered and walked into the bedroom and found his wife there.

"It's so sad," Carol observed in the darkness.

"It's goddamned infuriating," John agreed. "We were so fucking close!"

"What went wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but I think our friend Popov found out what we were doing, then he killed the guy who told him about it and skipped. Somehow he told them enough to capture Wil Gearing down in Sydney. Damn, we were within *hours* of initiating Phase One!" he growled.

"Well, next time we'll be more careful," Carol soothed, reaching to stroke his arm. Failure or not, it was good to lie in bed with him again. "What about Wil?"

"He's going to have to take his chances. I'll get the best lawyers I can find for him," John promised. "And get him the word to keep his mouth shut."

Gearing had stopped talking. Somehow arriving back in America had awakened in him the idea of civil rights and criminal proceedings, and now he wasn't saying anything to anybody. He sat in his aft-facing seat in the C-5, looking backward at the circular seal that led into the immense void area there in the tail, while these soldiers mainly dozed. Two of them were wide awake, however, and looking right at him all the way while they chatted about something or other. They were loaded for bear, Gearing saw, lots of personal weapons evident here and others loaded into the cargo area below. Where were they going? Nobody had told him that.

Clark, Chavez, and Stanley were in the compartment aft of the flight deck on the massive air-lifter. The flight crew was regular Air Force—most such transports are actually flown by reservists, mainly airline pilots in civilian life—and they kept their distance. They'd been warned by their superiors, the warnings further reinforced by the alteration in the aircraft's exterior paint job. They were civilians now? They were dressed in civilian clothes so as to make the deception plausible to someone. But who would believe that a Lockheed Galaxy was civilian owned?

"It looks pretty straightforward," Chavez observed. It was

interesting to be an infantryman again, again a Ninja, Ding mused, again to own the night—except they were planning to go in the daylight. "Question is, will they resist?"

"If we're lucky," Clark responded.

"How many of them?"

"They went down in four Gulfstreams, figure a max of sixteen people each. That's sixty-four, Domingo."

"Weapons?"

"Would you live in the jungle without them?" Clark asked. The answer he anticipated was, not very likely.

"But are they trained?" Team-2's commander persisted.

"Most unlikely. These people will be scientist-types, but some will know the woods, maybe some are hunters. I suppose we'll see if Noonan's new toys work as well as he's been telling us."

"I expect so," Chavez agreed. The good news was that his people were highly trained and well equipped. Daylight or not, it would be a Ninja job. "I guess you're in overall command?"

"You bet your sweet ass, Domingo," Rainbow Six replied. They stopped talking as the aircraft jolted somewhat, as they flew into the wake-turbulence of the KC-10 for aerial refueling. Clark didn't want to watch the procedure. It had to be the most unnatural act in the world, two massive aircraft mating in midair.

Malloy was a few seats farther aft, looking at the satellite overheads as well, along with Lieutenant Harrison.

"Looks easy," the junior officer opined.

"Yeah, pure vanilla, unless they shoot at us. Then it gets a little exciting," he promised his copilot.

"We're going to be close to overloading the aircraft," Harrison warned.

"That's why it's got two engines, son," the Marine pointed out.

It was dark outside. The C-5's flight crew looked down at a surface with few lights after they'd topped off their tanks from the KC-10, but for them it was essentially an airliner flight. The autopilot knew where it was, and where it was going, with waypoints programmed in, and a thousand miles ahead the airport at Manaus, Brazil, knew they were coming, a special air-cargo flight from America which would need ramp space for a day or so, and refueling services—this information had already been faxed ahead.

It wasn't yet dawn when they spotted the runway lights. The pilot, a young major, squirmed erect in his front-left seat and slowed the aircraft, making an easy visual approach while the first-lieutenant copilot to his right watched the instruments and called off altitude and speed numbers. Presently, he rotated the nose up and allowed the C-5B to settle onto the runway, with only a minor jolt to tell those

aboard that the aircraft wasn't flying anymore. He had a diagram of the airport, and taxied off to the far corner of the ramp, then stopped the aircraft and told the loadmaster that it was his turn to go to work.

It took a few minutes to get things organized, but then the huge rear doors opened. Then the MH-60K Night Hawk was dragged out into the predawn darkness. Sergeant Nance supervised three other enlisted men from the 160th SOAR as they extended the rotor blades from their stowed position, and climbed atop the fuselage to make sure that they were safely locked in place for flight operations. The Night Hawk was fully fueled. Nance installed the M-60 machine gun in its place on the right side and told Colonel Malloy that the aircraft was ready. Malloy and Harrison preflighted the helicopter and decided that it was ready to go, then radioed this information to Clark.

The last people off the C-5B were the Rainbow troopers, now dressed in multicolor BDU fatigues, their faces painted in green and brown camouflage makeup. Gearing came down last of all, a bag over his head so that he couldn't see anything.

It turned out that they couldn't get everyone aboard. Vega and four others were left behind to watch the helicopter lift off just at first light. The blinking strobes climbed into the air and headed northwest, while the soldiers groused at having to stand in the warm, humid air close to the transport. About that time, an automobile arrived at the aircraft with some forms for the flight crew to fill out. To the surprise of everyone present, no special note was made of the aircraft type. The paint job announced that it was a large, privately owned transport, and the airport personnel accepted this, since all the paperwork seemed to be properly filled out, and therefore had to be true and correct.

It was so much like Vietnam, Clark thought, riding in a helicopter over solid treetops of green. But he was not in a Huey this time, and it was nearly thirty years since his first exposure to combat operations. He couldn't remember being very afraid—tense, yes, but not really afraid—and that struck him as remarkable, looking back now. He was holding one of the suppressed MP-10s, and now, riding in this chopper to battle, it was as though his youth had returned—until he turned to see the other troops aboard and remarked on how young they all looked, then reminded himself that they were, in the main, over thirty years of age, and that for them to look young meant that he had to be old. He put that unhappy thought aside and looked out the door past Sergeant Nance and his machine gun. The sky was lightening up now, too much light for them to use their night-vision goggles, but not enough to see very well. He wondered what the weather would be like here. They were right on the equator, and that was jungle down there,

and it would be hot and damp, and down there under the trees would be snakes, insects, and the other creatures for whom this most inhospitable of places was indeed home—and they were welcome to it, John told them without words, out the door of the Night Hawk.

"How we doing, Malloy?" John asked over the intercom.

"Should have it in sight any second—there, see the lights dead ahead!"

"Got it." Clark waved for the troops in the back to get ready. "Proceed as planned, Colonel Malloy."

"Roger that, Six." He held course and speed, on a heading of two-nine-six, seven hundred feet AGL—above ground level—and a speed of a hundred twenty knots. The lights in the distance seemed hugely out of place, but lights they were, just where the navigation system and the satellite photos said they would be. Soon the point source broke up into separate distinct sources.

"Okay, Gearing," Clark was saying in the back. "We're letting you go back to talk to your boss."

"Oh?" the prisoner asked through the black cloth bag over his head.

"Yes," John confirmed. "You're delivering a message. If he surrenders to us, nobody gets hurt. If he doesn't, things'll get nasty. His only option is unconditional surrender. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah." The head nodded inside the black bag.

The Night Hawk's nose came up just as it approached the west end of the runway that some construction crew had carved into the jungle. Malloy made a fast landing, without allowing his wheels to touch the ground—standard procedure, lest there be mines there. Gearing was pushed out the door, and immediately the helicopter lifted back off, reversing course to the runway's east end.

Gearing pulled the bag from his head and oriented himself, spotted the lights for Project Alternate, a facility he knew about but had never visited, and headed there without looking back.

At the east end, the Night Hawk again came in to hover a foot or so off the ground. The Rainbow troops leaped out, and the helicopter immediately climbed up for the return trip to Manaus, which would be made into the rising sun. Malloy and Harrison put on their sunglasses and held course, keeping a close watch on their fuel state. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment maintained its helos pretty well, the Marine thought, flexing his gloved hands on the controls. Just like the Air Force pukes in England.

Noonan was the first to get set up. All the troops ran immediately into the thick cover a scant hundred yards from the thick concrete pavement of the runway and headed west, wondering if Gearing had

noted their separate arrival here. It took fully half an hour for them to make their way over a distance that, had they run it, would have taken scarcely ten minutes. For all that, Clark thought it was good time—and now he remembered the creepy feeling that came from being in the jungle, where the very air seemed alive with things hoping to suck one's blood and give you whatever diseases would take your life as slowly and painfully as possible. How the hell had he endured the nineteen months he'd spent in Vietnam? Ten minutes here and he was ready to leave. Around him, massive hardwood trees reached two or three hundred feet to the sky to form the top canopy of this fetid place, with secondary trees reaching about a third that height, and yet another that stopped at fifty or so, with bushes and other plants at his feet. He could hear the sound of movement—whether his own people or animals he couldn't be sure, though he knew that this environment supported all manner of life, most of it unfriendly to humans. His people spread out to the north, most of them plucking branches to tuck under the elastic bands that ran around their Kevlar helmets, the better to break up the outline of their unnatural shapes and improve their concealment.

The front door of the building was unlocked, Gearing found, amazed that this should be so. He walked into what appeared to be a residential building, entered an elevator, punched the topmost button and arrived on the fourth floor. Once there, it was just a matter of opening one of the double doors on the corridor and flipping on a light in what had to be the master suite. The bedroom doors were open, and he walked that way.

John Brightling's eyes reported the sudden blaze of light from the sitting room. He opened them and saw—

"What the hell are you doing here, Wil?"

"They brought me down, John."

"*Who* brought you down?"

"The people who captured me in Sydney," Gearing explained.

"What?" It was a little much for so early in the morning. Brightling stood and put on the robe next to the bed.

"John, what is it?" Carol asked from her side of the bed.

"Nothing, honey, just relax." John went to the sitting room, pulling the doors closed as he did so.

"What the fuck is going on, Wil?"

"They're here, John."

"*Who*'s here?"

"The counterterror people, the ones who went to Australia, the ones who arrested me. They're *here,* John!" Gearing told him, looking around the room, thoroughly disoriented by all the traveling he'd

done and not sure of much of anything at the moment.

"Here? Where? In the building?"

"No." Gearing shook his head. "They dropped me off by helicopter. Their boss is a guy named Clark. He said to tell you that you have to surrender—unconditional surrender, John."

"Or else what?" Brightling demanded.

"Or else they're going to come in and get us!"

"Really?" This was no way to be awakened. Brightling had spent two hundred million dollars to build this place—labor costs were low in Brazil—and he considered Project Alternate a fortress, and more than that, a fortress that would have taken months to locate. Armed men—here, right now—demanding his surrender? What was this?

Okay, he thought. First he called Bill Henriksen's room and told him to come upstairs. Next he lit up his computer. There was no e-mail telling him that anyone had spoken with his flight crews. So, nobody had told anyone where they were. So, how the hell had anyone found out? And who the hell was here? And what the hell did they want? Sending someone he knew in to demand their surrender seemed like something from a movie.

"What is it, John?" Henriksen asked. Then he looked at the other man in the room: "Wil, how did you get here?"

Brightling held up his hand for silence, trying to think while Gearing and Henriksen exchanged information. He switched off the room lights, looked out the large windows for signs of activity, and saw nothing at all.

"How many?" Bill was asking.

"Ten or fifteen soldiers," Gearing replied. "Are you going to do what they—are you going to surrender to them?" the former colonel asked.

"Hell, no!" John Brightling snarled. "Bill, what they're doing, is it legal?"

"No, not really. I don't think it is, anyway."

"Okay, let's get our people up and armed."

"Right," the security chief said dubiously. He left the room for the main lobby, whose desk controlled the public-address system in the complex.

"Oh, baby, talk to me," Noonan said. The newest version of the DKL people-finding system was up and running now. He'd spotted two of the receiver units about three hundred yards apart. Each had a transmitter that reported to a receiving unit that was in turn wired to his laptop computer.

The DKL system tracked the electromagnetic field generated by the beating of the human heart. This was, it had been discovered, a unique signal. The initial items sold by the company had merely

indicated the direction of the signals they received, but the new ones had been improved with parabolic antennas to increase their effective range now to fifteen hundred meters, and, by triangulation, to give fairly exact positions—accurate to from two to four meters. Clark was looking down at the computer screen. It showed blips indicating people evenly spaced in their rooms in the headquarters/residential building.

"Boy, this would have been useful in Eye-Corps back when I was a kid," John breathed. Each of the Rainbow troopers had a GPS locator built into his personal radio transceiver, and these, also, reported to the computer, giving Noonan and Clark exact locations for their own people, and locations also on those in the building to their left.

"Yeah, that's why I got excited about this puppy," the FBI agent noted. "I can't tell you what floor they're on, but look, they've all started moving. I guess somebody woke them up."

"Command, this is Bear," Clark's radio crackled.

"Bear, Command. Where are you?"

"Five minutes out. Where do you want me to make my delivery?"

"Same place as before. Let's keep you out of the line of fire. Tell Vega and the rest that we are on the north side of the runway. My command post is a hundred meters north of the treeline. We'll talk them in from there."

"Roger that, Command. Bear out."

"This must be an elevator," Noonan said, pointing at the screen. Six blips converged on a single point, stayed together for half a minute or so, then diverged. A number of blips were gathering in one place, probably a lobby of some sort. Then they started moving north and converged again.

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"I like this one," Dave Dawson said, hefting his G3 rifle. The black German-made weapon had fine balance and excellent sights. He'd been the site-security chief in Kansas, another true believer who didn't relish the idea of flying back to America in federal custody and spending the rest of his life at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary—a part of Kansas for which he had little love. "What do we do now, Bill?"

"Okay, we split into pairs. Everybody gets one of these." Henriksen started passing over handheld radios. "Think. Don't shoot until we tell you to. Use your heads."

"Okay, Bill. I'll show these bastards what a hunter can do," Killgore observed, liking the feel of his rifle as well and pairing off with Kirk

Maclean.

"These, too." Henriksen opened another door, revealing camouflage jackets and pants for them to wear.

"What can we do to protect ourselves, Bill?" Steve Berg asked.

"We can kill the fuckers!" Killgore replied. "They're not cops, they're not here to arrest us, are they, Bill?"

"Well, no, and they haven't identified themselves, and so the law is —the law is unclear on this one, guys."

"And we're in a foreign country anyway. So those guys are probably breaking the fucking law to be here, and if people want to attack us with guns we can defend ourselves, right?" Ben Farmer asked.

"You know what you're doing?" Berg asked Farmer.

"Ex-Marine, baby. Light weapons, line-grunt, yeah, I know what's happening out there." Farmer looked confident, and was as angry as the rest of them at the upset of their plans.

"Okay, people, *I* am in command, okay?" Henriksen said to them. He had thirty armed men now. That would have to be enough. "We make them come to us. If you see somebody advancing toward you with a weapon, you take the bastard out. But be *patient!* Let them in close. Don't waste ammo. Let's see if we can discourage them. They can't stay here long without supplies, and they only have one helicopter to—"

"Look!" Maclean said. A mile and a half away, the black helo landed at the far end of the runway. Three or four people ran from it into the woods.

"Okay, be careful, people, and *think* before you act."

"Let's do it," Killgore said aggressively, waving to Maclean to follow him out the door.

"They're leaving the building," Noonan said. "Looks like thirty or so." He looked up to orient himself on the terrain. "They're heading into the woods—figuring to ambush us, maybe?"

"We'll see about that. Team-2, this is Command," Clark said into his tactical radio.

"-2 Lead here, Command," Chavez replied. "I can see people running out of the building. They appear to be armed with shoulder weapons."

"Roger that. Okay, Ding, we will proceed as briefed."

"Understood, Command. Let me get organized here." Team-2 was intact, except for the absence of Julio Vega, who'd just arrived on the second helicopter delivery. Chavez got onto his radio and paired his people off with their normal partners, extending his line northward into the forest, and keeping himself at the hinge point on the southern end of the line. The Team-1 people would be the operational reserve,

assigned directly to John Clark at the command post.

Noonan watched the Team-2 shooters move. Each friendly blip was identified by a letter so that he'd know them by name. "John," he asked, "when do we go weapons-free?"

"Patience, Tim," Six replied.

Noonan was kneeling on the damp ground, with his laptop computer sitting on a fallen tree. The battery was supposed to be good for five hours, and he had two spares in his pack.

Pierce and Loiselle took the lead, heading half a kilometer into the jungle. It wasn't a first for either of them. Mike Pierce had worked in Peru twice, and Loiselle had been to Africa three separate times. The familiarity with the environmental conditions was not the same thing as comfort. Both worried about snakes as much as the armed people heading their way, sure that this forest was replete with them, either poisonous or willing to eat them whole. The temperature was rising, and both soldiers were sweating under their camo makeup. After ten minutes, they found a nice spot, with a standing tree and a fallen one next to it, with a decent field of fire.

"They've got radios," Noonan reported. "Want me to take them away?" He had his jammer set up already.

Clark shook his head. "Not yet. Let's listen in to them for a while."

"Fair enough." The FBI agent flipped the radio scanner to the speaker setting.

"This is some place," one voice said. "Look at these trees, man."

"Yeah, big, ain't they?"

"What kind of trees?" a third asked.

"The kind somebody can hide behind and shoot your ass from!" a more serious voice pointed out. "Killgore and Maclean, keep moving north about half a mile, find a place, and sit still there!"

"Yeah, yeah, okay, Bill," the third voice agreed.

"Listen up everybody," "Bill's" voice told them. "Don't clutter up these radios, okay? Report in when I call you or when you see something important. Otherwise keep them clear!"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"You say so, Bill."

"Roger."

"I can't see shit," a fifth responded.

"Then find a place where you can!" another helpful voice suggested.

"They're in pairs, moving close together, most of'em," Noonan said, staring down at his screen. "This pair is heading right for Mike and Louis."

Clark looked down at the screen. "Pierce and Loiselle, this is

Command. You have two targets approaching you from the south, distance about two-fifty meters."

"Roger, Command. Pierce copies."

Sergeant Pierce settled into his spot, looking south, letting his eyes sweep back and forth through a ninety-degree arc. Six feet away, Loiselle did the same, starting to relax as far as the environment was concerned, and tensing with the approach of enemies.

Dr. John Killgore knew the woods and knew hunting. He moved slowly and carefully now, with every step looking down to assure quiet footing, then up and around to examine the landscape for a human shape. They'd be coming in to get us, he thought, and so he and Maclean would find good spots to shoot them from, just like hunting deer, picking a place in the shadows where you could belly up and wait for the game to come. Another couple of hundred yards, he thought, would be about right.

Three hundred meters away, Clark used the computer screen and the radios to get his people moving to good spots. This new capability was incredible. Like radar, he could spot people long before he or anyone else could see or hear them. This new electronic toy would be an astounding blessing to every soldier who ever made use of it . . .

"Here we go," Noonan said quietly, like a commentator at a golf tournament, tapping the screen.

"Pierce and Loiselle, this is Command, you have two approaching targets just east of south, approaching at about two hundred meters."

"Roger, Command. Can we engage?" Pierce asked. At his perch, Loiselle was looking at him instead of his direct front.

"Affirmative," Clark replied. Then: "Rainbow, this is Six. Weapons-free. I repeat, we are weapons-free at this time."

"Roger that, I copy weapons-free." Pierce acknowledged.

"Let's wait till we can get both of 'em, Louis," Pierce whispered.

"D'accord," Sergeant Loiselle agreed. Both men looked to their south, eyes sharp and ears listening for the first snapped twig.

This wasn't so bad, Killgore thought. He'd hunted in worse country, far noisier country. There were no pine needles here to make that annoying swishing sound that deer could hear from half a time zone away. Plenty of shadows, little in the way of direct sunlight. Except for the bugs, he might have even been comfortable here. But the bugs were murder. The next time he came out, he'd try to spray some

repellent, the physician thought, as he moved forward slowly. The branch of a bush was in his way. He used his left hand to move it, lest he make noise by walking through it.

There, Pierce saw. A bush branch had just moved, and there wasn't a breath of wind down there to make that happen.

"Louis," he whispered. When the Frenchman turned, Pierce held up one finger and pointed. Loiselle nodded and returned to looking forward.

"I have a visual target," Pierce reported over his radio. "One target, a hundred fifty meters to my south."

Maclean was less comfortable on his feet than he would have been on horseback. He did his best to mimic the way John Killgore was moving, however, though both keeping quiet and keeping up were proving to be incompatible. He tripped over an exposed root and fell, making noise, then swearing quietly before he stood.

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"Bonjour," Loiselle whispered to himself. It was as though the noise had switched on a light of sorts. In any case, Sergeant Loiselle now saw a man-shape moving in the shadows, about one hundred fifty meters away. "Mike?" he whispered, pointing to where his target was.

"Okay, Louis," Pierce responded. "Let them get closer, man."

"Yes."

Both men shouldered their MP-10s, though the range was a little too far as yet.

If there was anything larger than an insect moving, Killgore thought, he couldn't hear it. There were supposed to be jaguars in this jungle, leopard-size hunting cats whose pelts would make a nice throw rug, he thought, and the 7.62mm NATO round this rifle fired should be more than adequate for that purpose. Probably night hunters, though, and hard to stalk. But what about the capybaras, the largest rat in the world, supposed to be good to eat despite its biological family—they were supposed to feed during the day, weren't they? There was so much for his eyes to see here, so much visual clutter, and his eyes weren't used to it yet. Okay, he'd find a place to sit still, so that his eyes could learn a pattern of light and darkness and then note the change in it that denoted something that didn't belong. *There's a good spot,* he thought, a fallen tree and a standing one . . .

“Come on in, sweetheart,” Pierce whispered to himself. At one hundred yards, he thought, that would be close enough. He’d have to hold a little high, like for the target’s chin, and the natural drop of the bullet would place the rounds in the upper chest. A head shot would be nicer, but the distance was a little too far for that, and he wanted to be careful.

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Killgore whistled and waved to Maclean, pointing forward. Kirk nodded agreement. His initial enthusiasm for this job was fading rapidly. The jungle wasn’t quite what he expected, and being out here with people trying to attack him didn’t make the surroundings any more attractive. He found himself, strangely, thinking of that singles bar in New York, the darkened room and loud dance music, such a strange environment . . . and the women he’d found there. It was too bad, really, what had happened to them. They were—had been—people after all. But worst of all, their deaths had not had any meaning. At least, had the Project moved forward, their sacrifice would have counted for something, but now . . . but now it was just a failure, and here he was in the fucking jungle holding a loaded rifle, looking for people who wanted to do to him what he’d done....

“Louis, you got your target?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, let’s do it,” Pierce called in a raspy voice, and with that he tightened his grip on the MP-10, centered the target on the sights, and squeezed the trigger gently. The immediate result was the gentle *puff-puff-puff* sound of the three shots, the somewhat louder metallic sound of the cycling of the submachine gun’s action, and then the impact of all three rounds on the target. He saw the man’s mouth spring open, and then the figure fell. His ears reported similar sounds from his left. Pierce left his spot and ran forward, his weapon up, with Loiselle in close support.

Killgore’s mind didn’t have time to analyze what had happened to him, just the impacts to his chest, and now he was looking straight up into the treetops, where there were small cracks of blue and white from the distant sky. He tried to say something, but he wasn’t breathing very well at the moment, and when he turned his head a few inches, there was no one there to see. Where was Kirk? he wondered, but found himself unable to move his body to—he’d been

shot? The pain was real but strangely distant, and he lowered his head to see blood on his chest and—

—who was that in camouflage clothing, his face painted green and brown?

And who are you? Sergeant Pierce wondered. His three rounds had sprinkled across the chest, missing the heart but ripping into the upper lungs and major blood vessels. The eyes were still looking, focused on him.

"Wrong playground, partner," he said softly, and then life left the eyes, and he bent down to collect the man's rifle. It was a nice one, Pierce saw, slinging it across his back. Then he looked left to see Loiselle holding an identical rifle in one hand and waving his hand across his throat. His target was bloodily dead, too.

"Hey, you can even tell when they get killed," Noonan said. When the hearts stopped, so did the signals the DKL gadget tracked. Cool, Timothy thought.

"Pierce and Loiselle, this is command. We copy you took down two targets."

"That's affirmative," Pierce answered. "Anything else close to us?"

"Pierce," Noonan replied, "two more about two hundred meters south of your current position. This pair is still moving eastward slowly, they're heading toward McTyler and Patterson."

"Pierce, this is Command. Sit tight," Clark ordered.

"Roger, Command." Next Pierce picked up the radio his target had been carrying, leaving it on. With nothing else to do, he fished into the man's pants. So, he saw a minute later, he had just killed John Killgore, M.D., of Binghamton, New York. *Who were you?* he wanted to ask the body, but this Killgore fellow would answer no more questions, and who was to say that the answers would have made any sense?

"Okay, people, everybody check in," the citizens band walkie-talkie said over Noonan's scanner unit.

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Henriksen was just inside the treeline, hoping that his people had the brains to sit still once they found good spots. He worried about the incoming soldiers, if that's what they were. The Project people were a little too eager and a little too dumb. His radio crackled with voices acknowledging his order, except for two.

"Killgore and Maclean, report in." Nothing. "John, Kirk, where the hell are you?"

"That's the pair we took out," Pierce called into Command. "Want me to let him know?"

"Negative, Pierce, you know better than that!" Clark replied angrily.

"No sense of humor, our chief," Loiselle observed to his partner, with a Gallic shrug.

"Who's closest to them?" the voice on the radio asked next.

"Me and Dawson," another voice answered.

"Okay, Berg and Dawson, move north, take your time, and see what you can see, okay?"

"Okay, Bill," yet another voice said.

"More business coming our way, Louis," Pierce said.

"Oui," Loiselle agreed. He pointed. "That tree, Mike." It had to be three meters across at the base, Pierce saw. You could build a house from the lumber from just that one. A big house, too.

"Pierce and Loiselle, Command, two targets just started moving toward you, almost due south, they're close together."

Dave Dawson was a man trained in the United States Army fifteen years before, and he knew enough to be worried. He told Berg to stay close behind him, and the scientist did, as Dawson led the way.

• • •

"Command, Patterson, I have movement to my direct front, about two hundred meters out."

"That's about right," Noonan said. "They're heading straight for Mike and Louis."

"Patterson, Command, let 'em go."

"Roger," Hank Patterson acknowledged.

"This isn't very fair," Noonan observed, looking up from his tactical picture.

"Timothy, 'fair' means I bring all my people home alive. Fuck the others," Clark responded.

"You say so, boss," the FBI agent agreed. Together, he and Clark watched the blips move toward the ones labeled L and P. Five minutes after that, both of the unidentified blips dropped off the screen and did not return.

"That's two more kills for the our guys, John."

"Jesus, this thing's magic," Clark said after Pierce and Loiselle called in to confirm what the instrument had already told them.

"Chavez to Command."

"Okay, Ding, go," Clark responded.

"Can we use that instrument to move in on them?"

"I think so. Tim, can we steer our guys in behind them, like?"

"Sure. I can see where everybody is, just a question of keeping them well clear until we bend 'em around and bring them in close."

"Domingo, Noonan says he can do this, but it'll take time to do it right, and you guys'll have to use your heads."

"I'll do the best I can, *jefe,"* Chavez called back.

It was twenty minutes before Henriksen tried to raise Dawson and Berg, only to find that they were not answering. There was something bad happening out there, but he didn't have a clue. Dawson was a former soldier, and Killgore an experienced and skilled hunter—and yet they'd fallen off the earth without a trace? What was happening here? There were soldiers out there, yes, but *nobody* was that good. He had little choice but to leave his people out there.

Patterson moved first, along with Scotty McTyler, heading west-northwest for three hundred meters, then turning south, moving slowly and silently, blessing the surprisingly bare ground in the forest—the ground got little sunlight to allow grass to grow here. Steve Lincoln and George Tomlinson also moved as a team, steering around two bad-guy blips to their north, and maneuvering right behind them.

"We have our targets," McTyler reported in his Scottish burr. On Noonan's screen they appeared to be less than a hundred meters away, directly behind them.

"Take 'em down," Clark ordered.

Both men were facing east, away from the Rainbow troopers, one sheltering behind a tree and the other lying on the ground.

The standing one was Mark Waterhouse. Patterson took careful aim and loosed his three-round burst. The impacts pushed him against the tree, and he dropped his rifle, which clattered to the ground. That caused the lying one to turn, and grip his own rifle tighter when he was hit, and the reflexive action of his hand held the trigger down, resulting in ten rounds fired on full-automatic into the forest.

"Oh, shit," Patterson said over the radio. "That was mine. His rifle must've been set on rock-and-roll, Command."

"What was that, what was that—who fired?" Henriksen called over

the radio.

It only made things easier for Tomlinson and Lincoln. Both of their targets jumped up and looked to their left, bringing both into plain view. Both went down an instant later, and a few minutes after that the command voice on the enemy radio circuit called for another status check. It now came up eight names short.

By this time, Rainbow was more behind than in front of Henriksen's people, steered into place by Noonan's computer-tricorder rig.

"Can you get me on their radio?" Clark asked the FBI agent.

"Easy," Noonan replied, flipping a switch and plugging a microphone in. "Here."

"Hi, there," Clark said over the CB frequency. "That's eight of your people down."

"Who is this?"

"Is your name Henriksen?" John asked next.

"Who the hell is this?" the voice demanded.

"I'm the guy who's killing your people. We've taken eight of them down. Looks like you have twenty-two more out here. Want I should kill some more?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"The name's Clark, John Clark. Who are you?"

"William Henriksen!" the voice shouted back.

"Oh, okay, you're the former Bureau guy. I suppose you saw Wil Gearing this morning. Anyway." Clark paused. "I'm only going to say this once: Put your weapons down, walk into the open, and surrender, and we won't shoot any more of you. Otherwise, we'll take down every single one, Bill."

There was a long silence. Clark wondered what the voice on the other end would do, but after a minute he did what John expected.

"Listen up, everybody, listen up. Pull back to the building right now! Everybody move back right now!"

"Rainbow, this is Six, expect movement back to the building complex right now. Weapons are free," he added over the encrypted tactical radios.

The panic in Henriksen's radio call turned out to be contagious. Immediately they heard the thrashing sound of people running in the woods, through bushes, taking direct if not quiet paths back toward the open to which many ran without thinking.

That made an easy shot for Homer Johnston. One green-clad man broke from the trees and ran down the grassy part next to the runway. The weapon he carried made him an enemy, and Johnston dispatched a single round that went between his shoulder blades. The man took

one more stumbling step and went down. “Rifle Two-One, I got one north of the runway!” the sniper called in.

It was more direct for Chavez. Ding was sheltering behind a hardwood tree when he heard the noises coming his way from two people he’d been stalking alone. When he figured they were about fifty meters away, he stepped around the tree trunk, to see that they were heading the other way. Chavez sidestepped left and spotted one, and brought his MP-10 to his shoulder. The running man saw him and tried to bring up his rifle. He even managed to fire, but right into the ground, before taking a burst in the face and falling like a sack of beans. The man behind him skidded to a stop and looked at where Chavez was standing.

“Drop the fucking rifle!” Ding screamed at him, but the man either didn’t hear or didn’t listen. His rifle started coming up, too, but as with his companion, he never made it. “Chavez here, I just dropped two.” The excitement of the moment masked the shame of how easy it had been. This was pure murder.

It was like keeping score for Clark, like some sort of horrid gladiatorial game. The unknown blips on the screen of Noonan’s computer started disappearing as their hearts stopped and with them the electronic signals they generated. In another few minutes, he counted four of the thirty signals they’d originally tracked, and those were running back to the building.

“Christ, Bill, what happened out there?” Brightling demanded at the main entrance.

“They slaughtered us like fucking sheep, man. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“This is John Clark calling for William Henriksen,” the radio crackled.

“Yeah?”

“Okay, one last time, surrender right now, or else we come in after you.”

“Come and fucking get us!” Henriksen screamed in reply.

“Vega, start doing some windows,” Clark ordered in a calm voice.

“Roger that, Command,” Oso replied. He lifted the shoulder stock of his M-60 machine gun and started on the second floor. The weapon traced right to left, shattering glass as the line of tracers darted across the intervening distance into the building.

“Pierce and Loiselle, you and Connolly head northwest into the other buildings. Start taking stuff down.”

"Roger, Command," Pierce replied.

The survivors from the forest party were trying to shoot back, mainly at empty air, but making noise in the lobby of the headquarters building. Carol Brightling was screaming now. The glass from the upstairs windows cascaded like a waterfall in front of their faces.

"Make them stop!" Carol cried loudly.

"Give me the radio," Brightling said. Henriksen handed it to him.

"Cease firing. This is John Brightling, cease firing, everybody. That means you, too, Clark, okay?"

In a few seconds, it stopped, which proved harder for the Project people, since Rainbow had only one weapon firing, and Oso stopped immediately on being ordered to.

"Brightling, this is Clark, can you hear me?" the radio in John's hand crackled next.

"Yes, Clark, I hear you."

"Bring all of your people into the open right now and unarmed," the strange voice commanded. "And nobody will get shot. Bring all of your people out now, or we start playing really rough."

"Don't do it," Bill Henriksen urged, seeing the futility of resistance, but fearing surrender more and preferring to die with a weapon in his hands.

"So they can kill us all right here and right now?" Carol asked. "What choice do we have?"

"Not much of one," her husband observed. He walked to the reception desk and made a call over the building's intercom system, calling everyone to the lobby. Then he lifted the portable radio. "Okay, okay, we'll be coming out in a second. Give us a chance to get organized."

"Okay, we'll wait a little while," Clark responded.

"This is a mistake, John," Henriksen told his employer.

"This whole fucking thing's been a mistake, Bill," John observed, wondering where he'd gone wrong. As he watched, the black helicopter reappeared and landed about halfway down the runway, as close as the pilot was willing to come to hostile weapons.

Paddy Connolly was at the fuel dump. There was a huge above-ground fuel tank, labeled #2 Diesel, probably for the generator plant. There was nothing easier or more fun to blow up than a fuel tank, and with Pierce and Loiselle watching, the explosives expert set ten pounds of charges on the opposite side of the tank from the generator plant that it served. A good eighty thousand gallons, he thought, enough to keep those generators going for a very long time.

"Command, Connolly."

"Connolly, Command," Clark answered.
"I'm going to need more, everything I brought down," he reported.
"It's on the chopper, Paddy. Stand by."
"Roger."

John had advanced to the edge of the treeline, a scant three hundred yards from the building. Just beyond him, Vega was still on his heavy machine gun, and the rest of his troops were close by, except for Connolly and the two shooters with him. The elation was already gone. It had been a grim day. Success or not, there is little joy in the taking of life, and this day's work had been as close to pure murder as anything the men had ever experienced.

"Coming out," Chavez said, his binoculars to his eyes. He did a fast count. "I see twenty-six of 'em."

"About right," Clark said. "Gimme," he said next, taking the glasses from Domingo to see if he could recognize any faces. Surprisingly, the first face he could put a name on was the only woman he saw, Carol Brightling, presidential science advisor. The man next to her would be her former husband, John Brightling, Clark surmised. They walked out, away from the building onto the ramp that aircraft used to turn around on. "Keep coming straight out away from the building," he told them over the radio. And they did what he told them, John saw, somewhat to his surprise.

"Okay, Ding, take a team and check the building out. Move, boy, but be careful."

"You bet, Mr. C." Chavez waved for his people to follow him at a run for the building."

Using the binoculars again, Clark could see no one carrying weapons, and decided that it was safe for him to walk out with five Team-1 troops as an escort. The walk took five minutes or so, and then he saw John Brightling face-to-face.

"I guess this is your place, eh?"

"Until you destroyed it."

"The guys at Fort Detrick checked out the canister that Mr. Gearing there tried to use in Sydney, Dr. Brightling. If you're looking for sympathy from me, pal, you've called the wrong number."

"So, what are you going to do?" Just as he finished the question, the helicopter lifted off and headed for the power-plant building, delivering the rest of Connolly's explosives, Clark figured.

"I've thought about that."

"You killed our people!" Carol Brightling snarled, as though it meant something.

"The ones who were carrying weapons in a combat zone, yeah, and I imagine they would have shot at my people if they'd had a chance—

but we don't give freebies."

"Those were good people, people—"

"People who were willing to kill their fellow man—and for what?" John asked.

"To save the world!" Carol Brightling snapped back.

"You say so, ma'am, but you came up with a horrible way to do it, don't you think?" he asked politely. It didn't hurt to be polite, John thought. Maybe it would get them to talk, and maybe then he could figure them out.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I guess I'm not smart enough to get it, eh?"

"No," she said. "You're not."

"Okay, but let me get this right. You were willing to kill nearly every person on earth, to use germ warfare to do it, so that you could hug some trees?"

"So that we could save the world!" John Brightling repeated for them all.

"Okay." Clark shrugged. "I suppose Hitler thought killing all the Jews made sense. You people, sit down and keep still." He walked away and got onto his radio. There was no understanding them, was there?

Connolly was fast, but not a miracle worker. The generator room he left alone. As it turned out, the hardest thing to take care of was the freezer in the main building. For this he borrowed a Hummer—there were a bunch of them here—and used it to ferry two oil drums into the building. There being no time for niceties, Connolly simply drove the vehicle through the glass walls. Meanwhile, Malloy and his helicopter ferried half the team back to Manaus and refueled before returning. All in all, it took nearly three hours, during which time the prisoners said virtually nothing, didn't even ask for water, hot and uncomfortable as it was on the frying-pan surface of the runway. Clark didn't mind—it was all the better if he didn't have to acknowledge their humanity. Strangest of all to him, these were educated people, people whom he could easily have respected, except for that one little thing. Finally, Connolly came striding over to where he was standing, holding an electronic box in his hand. Clark nodded and cued his tactical radio.

"Bear, Command."

"Bear copies."

"Let's get wound up, Colonel."

"Roger that. Bear's on the way." In the distance, the Night Hawk's rotor started turning and Clark walked back to where the prisoners were sitting.

"We are not going to kill you, and we are not going to take you

back to America," he told them. The surprise in their faces was stunning.

"What, then?"

"You think we should all live in harmony with nature, right?"

"If you want the planet to survive, yes," John Brightling said. His wife's eyes were filled with hatred and defiance, but also curiosity now.

"Fine." Clark nodded. "Stand up and get undressed, all of you. Dump your clothes right here." He pointed at a corner joint in the runway.

"But—"

"Do it!" Clark shouted at them. "Or I will have you shot right here and right now."

And slowly they did. Some disrobed quickly, some slowly and uncomfortably, but one by one they piled their clothing up in the middle of the runway. Carol Brightling, oddly, wasn't the least bit modest about the moment.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Okay, here's the score. You want to live in harmony with nature, then go do it. If you can't hack it, the nearest city is Manaus, about ninety-eight miles that way—" He pointed, then turned. "Paddy, fire in the hole."

Without a word, Connolly started flipping switches on his box. The first thing to go was the fuel tank. The twin charges blew a pair of holes in the side of the tank. That ignited the diesel fuel, which blew out of the tank like the exhaust from a rocket, and propelled the tank straight into the power house, less than fifty meters away. There the tank stopped and ruptured, pouring burning #2 diesel fuel over the area.

They couldn't see the freezer area in the main building go, but here as well, the diesel fuel ignited, ripping out the wall of the freezer unit and then dropping part of the building on the burning wreckage. The other buildings went in turn, along with the satellite dishes. The headquarters-residence building went last, its poured concrete core resisting the damage done by the cratering charges, but after a few seconds of indecision, the core snapped at the ground-floor level and collapsed, bringing the rest of the building down with it. Over a period of less than a minute, everything useful to life here had been destroyed.

"You're sending us out into the jungle without even a knife?" Hendriksen demanded.

"Find some flint rocks and make one," Clark suggested, as the Night Hawk landed. "We humans learned how to do that about half a million years ago. You want to be in harmony with nature. Go

harmonize," he told them, as he turned to get aboard. Seconds later, he was strapped into the jump seat behind the pilots, and Colonel Malloy lifted off without circling.

You could always tell, Clark remembered from his time in 3rd SOG. There were those who got out of the Huey and ran into the bush, and there were those who lingered to watch the chopper leave. He'd always been one of the former, because he knew where the job was. Others only worried about getting back, and didn't want the chopper to leave them behind. Looking down one last time, he saw that all the eyes down there were following the Night Hawk as it headed east.

"Maybe a week, Mr. C?" Ding asked, reading his face. A graduate of the U.S. Army's Ranger School, he didn't think that *he* could survive very long in this place.

"If they're lucky," Rainbow Six replied.

EPILOGUE

NEWS

The *International Trib* landed on Chavez's desk after the usual morning exercise routine, and he leaned back comfortably to read it. Life had become boring at Hereford. They still trained and practiced all their skills, but they hadn't been called away from the base since returning from South America six months earlier.

Gold Mine in the Rockies, a front-page story started. A place in Montana, the article read, owned by a Russian national, had been found to contain a sizable gold deposit. The place had been bought as a ranch by Dmitriy A. Popov, a Russian entrepreneur, as an investment and vacation site and then he'd made the accidental discovery, the story read. Mining operations would begin in the coming months. Local environmentalists had objected and tried to block the development in court, but the federal district court judge had decided in summary judgment that laws from the 1800s governing mineral exploration and exploitation were the governing legal authority, and tossed the objections out of court.

"You see this?" Ding asked Clark.

"Greedy bastard," John replied, checking out the latest pictures of his grandson on Chavez's desk. "Yeah, I read it. He spent half a million to buy the place from the estate of Foster Hunnicutt. I guess the bastard told him more than just what Brightling was planning, eh?"

"I suppose." Chavez read on. In the business section he learned that Horizon Corporation stock was heading back up with the release of a new drug for heart disease, recovering from the loss in value that had resulted from the disappearance of its chairman, Dr. John Brightling, several months earlier, a mystery that remained to be solved, the business reporter added. The new drug, Kardiklear, had proven to reduce second heart attacks by fully 56 percent in FDA studies. Horizon was also working on human longevity and cancer medications, the article concluded.

"John, has anybody gone back to Brazil to—"

"Not that I know of. Satellite overheads show that nobody's cutting the grass next to their airport."

"So, you figure the jungle killed them?"

"Nature isn't real sentimental, Domingo. She doesn't distinguish between friends and enemies."

"I suppose not, Mr. C." Even terrorists could do that, Chavez thought, but not the jungle. So, who was the real enemy of mankind? Himself, mostly, Ding decided, setting the newspaper down and looking again at the photo of John Conor Chavez, who'd just learned to sit up and smile. His son would grow into the Brave New World, and his father would be one of those who tried to ensure that it would be a safe one—for him and all the other kids whose main tasks were learning to walk and talk.

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History admires the wise, but it elevates the brave.

—*EDMUND MORRIS*

PROLOGUE

The White Mercedes

Going to work was the same everywhere, and the changeover from Marxism-Leninism to Chaos-Capitalism hadn't changed matters much —well, maybe things were now a little worse. Moscow, a city of wide streets, was harder to drive in now that nearly anyone could have a car, and the center lane down the wide boulevards was no longer tended by militiamen for the Politburo and used by Central Committee men who considered it a personal right-of-way, like Czarist princes in their troika sleds. Now it was a left-turn lane for anyone with a Zil or other private car. In the case of Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko, the car was a white Mercedes 600, the big one with the S-class body and twelve cylinders of German power under the hood. There weren't many of them in Moscow, and truly his was an extravagance that ought to have embarrassed him . . . but didn't. Maybe there were no more *nomenklatura* in this city, but rank *did* have its privileges, and he was chairman of the SVR. His apartment was also large, on the top floor of a high-rise building on Kutusovskiy Prospekt, a structure relatively new and well-made, down to the German appliances which were a long-standing luxury accorded senior government officials.

He didn't drive himself. He had Anatoliy for that, a burly former Spetsnaz special-operations soldier who carried a pistol under his coat and who drove the car with ferocious aggression, while tending it with loving care. The windows were coated with dark plastic, which denied the casual onlooker the sight of the people inside, and the windows were thick, made of polycarbonate and specced to stop anything up to a 12.7-mm bullet, or so the company had told Golovko's purchasing agents sixteen months before. The armor made it nearly a ton heavier than was the norm for an S600 Benz, but the power and the ride didn't seem to suffer from that. It was the uneven streets that would ultimately destroy the car. Road-paving was a skill that his country had not yet mastered, Golovko thought as he turned the page in his morning paper. It was the American *International Herald Tribune,* always a good source of news since it was a joint venture of *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times,* which were together two of the most skilled intelligence services in the world, if a

little too arrogant to be the true professionals Sergey Nikolay'ch and his people were.

He'd joined the intelligence business when the agency had been known as the KGB, the Committee for State Security, still, he thought, the best such government department the world had ever known, even if it had ultimately failed. Golovko sighed. Had the USSR not fallen in the early 1990s, then his place as Chairman would have put him as a full voting member of the Politburo, a man of genuine power in one of the world's *two* superpowers, a man whose mere gaze could make strong men tremble . . . but . . . no, what was the use of that? he asked himself. It was all an illusion, an odd thing for a man of supposed regard for objective truth to value. That had always been the cruel dichotomy. KGB had always been on the lookout for hard facts, but then reported those facts to people besotted with a dream, who then bent the truth in the service of that dream. When the truth had finally broken through, the dream had suddenly evaporated like a cloud of steam in a high wind, and reality had poured in like the flood following the breakup of an icebound river in springtime. And then the Politburo, those brilliant men who'd wagered their lives on the dream, had found that their theories had been only the thinnest of reeds, and reality was the swinging scythe, and the eminence bearing *that* tool didn't deal in salvation.

But it was not so for Golovko. A dealer in facts, he'd been able to continue his profession, for his government still needed them. In fact, his authority was broader now than it would have been, because as a man who well knew the surrounding world and some of its more important personalities intimately, he was uniquely suited to advising his president, and so he had a voice in foreign policy, defense, and domestic matters. Of them, the third was the trickiest lately, which had rarely been the case before. It was now also the most dangerous. It was an odd thing. Previously, the mere spoken (more often, shouted) phrase "State Security!" would freeze Soviet citizens in their stride, for KGB had been the most feared organ of the previous government, with power such as Reinhart Heydrich's *Sicherheitsdienst* had only dreamed about, the power to arrest, imprison, interrogate, and to kill any citizen it wished, with no recourse at all. But that, too, was a thing of the past. Now KGB was split, and the domestic-security branch was a shadow of its former self, while the SVR—formerly the First Chief Directorate—still gathered information, but lacked the immediate strength that had come with being able to enforce the *will,* if not quite the *law,* of the communist government. But his current duties were still vast, Golovko told himself, folding the paper.

He was only a kilometer away from Dzerzhinskiy Square. That, too, was no longer the same. The statue of Iron Feliks was gone. It had

always been a chilling sight to those who'd known who the man was whose bronze image had stood alone in the square, but now it, too, was a distant memory. The building behind it was the same, however. Once the stately home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, it had later been known as the Lubyanka, a fearsome word even in the fearsome land ruled by Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin, with its basement full of cells and interrogation rooms. Most of those functions had been transferred over the years to Lefortovo Prison to the east, as the KGB bureaucracy had grown, as all such bureaucracies grow, filling the vast building like an expanding balloon, as it claimed every room and corner until secretaries and file clerks occupied the (remodeled) spaces where Kamenev and Ordzhonikidze had been tortured under the eyes of Yagoda and Beriya. Golovko supposed that there hadn't been too many ghosts.

Well, a new working day beckoned. A staff meeting at 8:45, then the normal routine of briefings and discussions, lunch at 12:15, and with luck he'd be back in the car and on his way back home soon after six, before he had to change for the reception at the French Embassy. He looked forward to the food and wine, if not the conversation.

Another car caught his eye. It was a twin to his own, another large Mercedes S-class, iceberg white just like his own, complete down to the American-made dark plastic on the windows. It was driving purposefully in the bright morning, as Anatoliy slowed and pulled behind a dump truck, one of the thousand such large ugly vehicles that covered the streets of Moscow like a dominant life-form, this one's load area cluttered with hand tools rather than filled with earth. There was yet another truck a hundred meters beyond, driving slowly as though its driver was unsure of his route. Golovko stretched in his seat, barely able to see around the truck in front of his Benz, wishing for the first cup of Sri Lankan tea at his desk, in the same room that Beriya had once . . .

. . . the distant dump truck. A man had been lying in the back. Now he rose, and he was holding . . .

"Anatoliy!" Golovko said sharply, but his driver couldn't see around the truck to his immediate front.

. . . it was an RPG, a slender pipe with a bulbous end. The sighting bar was up, and as the distant truck was now stopped, the man came up to one knee and turned, aiming his weapon at the other white Benz —

—the other driver saw it and tried to swerve, but found his way blocked by the morning traffic and—

—not much in the way of a visual signature, just a thin puff of smoke from the rear of the launcher-tube, but the bulbous part leapt off and streaked into the hood of the other white Mercedes, and there

it exploded.

It hit just short of the windshield. The explosion wasn't the fireball so beloved of Western movies, just a muted flash and gray smoke, but the sound roared across the square, and a wide, flat, jagged hole blew out of the trunk of the car, and that meant that anyone inside the vehicle would now be dead, Golovko knew without pausing to think on it. Then the gasoline ignited, and the car burned, along with a few square meters of asphalt. The Mercedes stopped almost at once, its left-side tires shredded and flattened by the explosion. The dump truck in front of Golovko's car panic-stopped, and Anatoliy swerved right, his eyes narrowed by the noise, but not yet—

"Govno!" Now Anatoliy saw what had happened and took action. He kept moving right, accelerating hard and swerving back and forth as his eyes picked holes in the traffic. The majority of the vehicles in sight had stopped, and Golovko's driver sought out the holes and darted through them, arriving at the vehicle entrance to Moscow Center in less than a minute. The armed guards there were already moving out into the square, along with the supplementary response force from its shack just inside and out of sight. The commander of the group, a senior lieutenant, saw Golovko's car and recognized it, waved him inside and motioned to two of his men to accompany it to the drop-off point. The arrival time was now the only normal aspect of the young day. Golovko stepped out, and two young soldiers formed up in physical contact with his heavy topcoat. Anatoliy stepped out, too, his pistol in his hand and his coat open, looking back through the gate with suddenly anxious eyes. His head turned quickly.

"Get him inside!" And with that order, the two privates strong-armed Golovko through the double bronze doors, where more security troops were arriving.

"This way, Comrade Chairman," a uniformed captain said, taking Sergey Nikolay'ch's arm and heading off to the executive elevator. A minute later, he stumbled into his office, his brain only now catching up with what it had seen just three minutes before. Of course, he walked to the window to look down.

Moscow police—called militiamen—were racing to the scene, three of them on foot. Then a police car appeared, cutting through the stopped traffic. Three motorists had left their vehicles and approached the burning car, perhaps hoping to render assistance. Brave of them, Golovko thought, but an entirely useless effort. He could see better now, even at a distance of three hundred meters. The top had bulged up. The windshield was gone, and he looked into a smoking hole, which had minutes before been a hugely expensive vehicle, and which had been destroyed by one of the cheapest weapons the Red Army had ever mass-produced. Whoever had been inside had been shredded

instantly by metal fragments traveling at nearly ten thousand meters per second. Had they even known what had happened? Probably not. Perhaps the driver had had time to look and wonder, but the owner of the car in the back had probably been reading his morning paper, before his life had ended without warning.

That was when Golovko's knees went weak. That could have been him . . . suddenly learning if there were an afterlife after all, one of the great mysteries of life, but not one which had occupied his thoughts very often . . .

But whoever had done the killing, who had been his target? As Chairman of the SVR, Golovko was not a man to believe in coincidences, and there were not all that many white Benz S600s in Moscow, were there?

"Comrade Chairman?" It was Anatoliy at the office door.

"Yes, Anatoliy Ivan'ch?"

"Are you well?"

"Better than he," Golovko replied, stepping away from the window. He needed to sit now. He tried to move to his swivel chair without staggering, for his legs were suddenly weak indeed. He sat and found the surface of his desk with both his hands, and looked down at the oaken surface with its piles of papers to be read—the routine sight of a day which was not now routine at all. He looked up.

Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin was not a man to show fear. He'd served in Spetsnaz through his captaincy, before being spotted by a KGB talent scout for a place in the 8th "Guards" Directorate, which he'd accepted just in time for KGB to be broken apart. But Anatoliy had been Golovko's driver and bodyguard for years now, part of his official family, like an elder son, and Shelepin was devoted to his boss. He was a tall, bright man of thirty-three years, with blond hair and blue eyes that were now far larger than usual, because though Anatoliy had trained for much of his life to deal with and in violence, this was the first time he'd actually been there to see it when it happened. Anatoliy had often wondered what it might be like to take a life, but never once in his career had he contemplated losing his own, certainly not to an ambush, and most certainly not to an ambush within shouting distance of his place of work. At his desk outside Golovko's office, he acted like a personal secretary more than anything else. Like all such men, he'd grown casual in the routine of protecting someone whom no one would dare attack, but now his comfortable world had been sundered as completely and surely as that of his boss.

Oddly, but predictably, it was Golovko's brain that made it back to reality first.

"Anatoliy?"

"Yes, Chairman?"

"We need to find out who died out there, and then find out if it was supposed to be us instead. Call militia headquarters, and see what they are doing."

"At once." The handsome young face disappeared from the doorway.

Golovko took a deep breath and rose, taking another look out the window as he did so. There was a fire engine there now, and firefighters were spraying the wrecked car to extinguish the lingering flames. An ambulance was standing by as well, but that was a waste of manpower and equipment, Sergey Nikolay'ch knew. The first order of business was to get the license-plate number from the car and identify its owner, and from that knowledge determine if the unfortunate had died in Golovko's place, or perhaps had possessed enemies of his own. Rage had not yet supplanted the shock of the event. Perhaps that would come later, Golovko thought, as he took a step toward his private washroom, for suddenly his bladder was weak. It seemed a horrid display of frailty, but Golovko had never known immediate fear in his life, and, like many, thought in terms of the movies. The actors there were bold and resolute, never mind that their words were scripted and their reactions rehearsed, and none of it was anything like what happened when explosives arrived in the air without warning.

Who wants me dead? he wondered, after flushing the toilet.

The American Embassy a few miles away had a flat roof on which stood all manner of radio antennas, most of them leading to radio receivers of varying levels of sophistication, which were in turn attached to tape recorders that turned slowly in order to more efficiently use their tapes. In the room with the recorders were a dozen people, both civilian and military, all Russian linguists who reported to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington. It was early in the day, and these people were generally at work before the Russian officials whose communications they worked to monitor. One of the many radios in the room was a scanning monitor of the sort once used by American citizens to listen in on police calls. The local cops used the same bands and the exact same type of radios that their American counterparts had used in the 1970s, and monitoring them was child's play—they were not encrypted yet. They listened in on them for the occasional traffic accident, perhaps involving a big shot, and mainly to keep a finger on the pulse of Moscow, whose crime situation was bad and getting worse. It was useful for embassy personnel to know what parts of town to avoid, and to be able to keep track of a crime to one of the

thousands of American citizens.

"Explosion?" an Army sergeant asked the radio. His head turned. "Lieutenant Wilson, police report an explosion right in front of Moscow Center."

"What kind?"

"Sounds like a car blew up. Fire department is on the scene now, ambulance . . ." He plugged in headphones to get a better cut on the voice traffic. "Okay, white Mercedes-Benz, tag number—" He pulled out a pad and wrote it down. "Three people dead, driver and two passengers and . . . oh, shit!"

"What is it, Reins?"

"Sergey Golovko . . ." Sergeant Reins's eyes were shut, and he had one hand pressing the headphones to his ears. "Doesn't he drive a white Benz?"

"Oh, shit!" Lieutenant Wilson observed for herself. Golovko was one of the people whom *her* people routinely tracked. "Is he one of the deaders?"

"Can't tell yet, ell-tee. New voice . . . the captain at the station, just said he's coming down. Looks like they're excited about this one, ma'am. Lotsa chatter coming up."

Lieutenant Susan Wilson rocked back and forth in her swivel chair. Make a call on this one or not? They couldn't shoot you for notifying your superiors of something, could they . . . ? "Where's the station chief?"

"On his way to the airport, ell-tee, he's flying off to St. Petersburg today, remember?"

"Okay." She turned back to her panel and lifted the secure phone, a STU-6 (for "secure telephone unit"), to Fort Meade. Her plastic encryption key was in its proper slot, and the phone was already linked and synchronized with another such phone at NSA headquarters. She punched the # key to get a response.

"Watch Room," a voice said half a world away.

"This is Station Moscow. We have an indication that Sergey Golovko may just have been assassinated."

"The SVR chairman?"

"Affirmative. A car similar to his has exploded in Dzerzhinskiy Square, and this is the time he usually goes to work."

"Confidence?" the disembodied male voice asked. It would be a middle-grade officer, probably military, holding down the eleven-to-seven watch. Probably Air Force. "Confidence" was one of their institutional buzzwords.

"We're taking this off police radios—the Moscow Militia, that is. We have lots of voice traffic, and it sounds excited, my operator tells me."

"Okay, can you upload it to us?"

"Affirmative," Lieutenant Wilson replied.

"Okay, let's do that. Thanks for the heads-up, we'll take it from here."

* * *

Okay, Station Moscow out," heard Major Bob Teeters. He was new in his job at NSA. Formerly a rated pilot who had twenty-one hundred hours in command of C-5s and C-17s, he'd injured his left elbow in a motorcycle accident eight months before, and the loss of mobility there had ended his flying career, much to his disgust. Now he was reborn as a spook, which was somewhat more interesting in an intellectual sense, but not exactly a happy exchange for an aviator. He waved to an enlisted man, a Navy petty officer first-class, to pick up on the active line from Moscow. This the sailor did, donning headphones and lighting up the word-processing program on his desktop computer. This sailor was a Russian linguist in addition to being a yeoman, and thus competent to drive the computer. He typed, translating as he listened in to the pirated Russian police radios, and his script came up on Major Teeters's computer screen.

I HAVE THE LICENSE NUMBER, CHECKING NOW, the first line read.

GOOD, QUICK AS YOU CAN.

WORKING ON IT, COMRADE. (TAPPING IN THE BACKGROUND, DO THE RUSSKIES HAVE COMPUTERS FOR THIS STUFF NOW?)

I HAVE IT, WHITE MERCEDES BENZ, REGISTERED TO G. F. AVSYENKO (NOT SURE OF SPELLING), 677 PROTOPOPOV PROSPEKT, FLAT 18A.

HIM? I KNOW THAT NAME!

Which was good for somebody, Major Teeters thought, but not all that great for Avsyenko. Okay, what next? The senior watch officer was another squid, Rear Admiral Tom Porter, probably drinking coffee in his office over in the main building and watching TV, maybe. Time to change that. He called the proper number.

"Admiral Porter."

"Sir, this is Major Teeters down in the watch center. We have some breaking news in Moscow."

"What's that, Major?" a tired voice asked.

"Station Moscow initially thought that somebody might have killed Chairman Golovko of the KG—the SVR, I mean."

"What was that, Major?" a somewhat more alert voice inquired.

"Turns out it probably wasn't him, sir. Somebody named Avsyenko —" Teeters spelled it out. "We're getting the intercepts off their police

radio bands. I haven't run the name yet."

"What else?"

"Sir, that's all I have right now."

By this time, a CIA field officer named Tom Barlow was in the loop at the embassy. The third-ranking spook in the current scheme of things, he didn't want to drive over to Dzerzhinskiy Square himself, but he did the next best thing. Barlow called the CNN office, the direct line to a friend.

"Mike Evans."

"Mike, this is Jimmy," Tom Barlow said, initiating a prearranged and much-used lie. "Dzerzhinskiy Square, the murder of somebody in a Mercedes. Sounds messy and kinda spectacular."

"Okay," the reporter said, making a brief note. "We're on it."

At his desk, Barlow checked his watch: 8:52 local time. Evans was a hustling reporter for a hustling news service. Barlow figured there'd be a mini-cam there in twenty minutes. The truck would have its own Ku-band uplink to a satellite, down from there to CNN headquarters in Atlanta, and the same signal would be pirated by the DoD downlink at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and spread around from there on government-owned satellites to interested parties. An attempt on the life of Chairman Golovko made it interesting as hell to a lot of people. Next he lit up his desktop Compaq computer and opened the file for Russian names that were known to CIA.

A duplicate of that file resided in any number of CIA computers at Langley, Virginia, and on one of those in the CIA Operations Room on the 7th floor of the Old Headquarters Building, a set of fingers typed A-V-S-Y-E-N-K-O . . . and came up with nothing other than:

ENTIRE FILE SEARCHED. THE SEARCH ITEM WAS NOT FOUND.

That evoked a grumble from the person on the computer. So, it wasn't spelled properly.

"Why does this name sound familiar?" he asked. "But the machine says no-hit."

"Let's see . . ." a co-worker said, leaning over and respelling the name. "Try this . . ." Again a no-hit. A third variation was tried.

"Bingo! Thanks, Beverly," the watch officer said. "Oh, yeah, we know who this guy is. Rasputin. Low-life bastard—sure as hell, look what happened when he went straight," the officer chuckled.

Rasputin?" Golovko asked. *"Nekulturniy* swine, eh?" He allowed himself a brief smile. "But who would wish *him* dead?" he asked his security chief, who, if anything, was taking the matter even more

seriously than the Chairman. His job had just become far more complicated. For starters, he had to tell Sergey Nikolay'ch that the white Mercedes was no longer his personal conveyance. Too ostentatious. His next task of the day was to ask the armed sentries who posted the corners of the building's roof why they hadn't spotted a man in the load area of a dump truck with an RPG—*within three hundred meters of the building they were supposed to guard!* And not so much as a warning over their portable radios until the Mercedes of Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko had been blown to bits. He'd sworn many oaths already on this day, and there would be more to come.

"How long has he been out of the service?" Golovko asked next.

"Since '93, Comrade Chairman," Major Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin said, having just asked the same question and received the answer seconds earlier.

The first big reduction-in-force, Golovko thought, but it would seem that the pimp had made the transition to private enterprise well. Well enough to own a Mercedes Benz S-600 . . . and well enough to be killed by enemies he'd made along the way . . . unless he'd unknowingly sacrificed his own life for that of another. That question still needed answering. The Chairman had recovered his self-control by this point, enough at any rate for his mind to begin functioning. Golovko was too bright a man to ask *Why would anyone wish to end my life?* He knew better than that. Men in positions like his made enemies, some of them deadly ones . . . but most of them were too smart to make such an attempt. Vendettas were dangerous things to begin at his level, and for that reason, they *never* happened. The business of international intelligence was remarkably sedate and civilized. People still died. Anyone caught spying for a foreign government against Mother Russia was in the deepest of trouble, new regime or not—state treason was still state treason—but those killings followed . . . what did the Americans call it? *Due process of law.* Yes, that was it. The Americans and their lawyers. If their lawyers approved of something, then it was civilized.

"Who else was in the car?" Golovko asked.

"His driver. We have the name, a former militiaman. And one of his women, it would seem, no name for her yet."

"What do we know of Gregoriy's routine? Why was he there this morning?"

"Not known at this time, Comrade," Major Shelepin replied. "The militia are working on it."

"Who is running the case?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Shablikov, Comrade Chairman."

"Yefim Konstantinovich—yes, I know him. Good man," Golovko allowed. "I suppose he'll need his time, eh?"

"It does require time," Shelepin agreed.

More than it took for Rasputin to meet his end, Golovko thought. Life was such a strange thing, so permanent when one had it, so fleeting when it was lost—and those who lost it could never tell you what it was like, could they? Not unless you believed in ghosts or God or an afterlife, things which had somehow been overlooked in Golovko's childhood. So, yet another great mystery, the spymaster told himself. It had come so close, for the first time in his life. It was disquieting, but on reflection, not so frightening as he would have imagined. The Chairman wondered if this was something he might call courage. He'd never thought of himself as a brave man, for the simple reason that he'd never faced immediate physical danger. It was not that he had avoided it, only that it had never come close until today, and after the outrage had passed, he found himself not so much bemused as curious. *Why* had this happened? *Who* had done it? Those were the questions he had to answer, lest it happen again. To be courageous once was enough, Golovko thought.

Dr. Benjamin Goodley arrived at Langley at 5:40, five minutes earlier than his customary time. His job largely denied him much of a social life, which hardly seemed fair to the National Intelligence Officer. Was he not of marriageable age, possessed of good looks, a man with good prospects both in the professional and business sense? Perhaps not the latter, Goodley thought, parking his car in a VIP slot by the cement canopy of the Old Headquarters Building. He drove a Ford Explorer because it was a nice car for driving in the snow, and there would be snow soon. At least winter was coming, and winter in the D.C. area was wholly unpredictable, especially now that some of the econuts were saying that global warming would cause an unusually *cold* winter this year. The logic of that escaped him. Maybe he'd have a chat with the President's Science Adviser to see if that made any sense talking with someone who could explain things. The new one was pretty good, and knew how to use single-syllable words.

Goodley made his way through the pass-gate and into the elevator. He walked into the Operations Room at 5:50 A.M.

"Hey, Ben," one said.

"Morning, Charlie. Anything interesting happening?"

"You're gonna love this one, Ben," Charlie Roberts promised. "A big day in Mother Russia."

"Oh?" Narrowed eyes. Goodley had his worries about Russia, and so did his boss. "What's that?"

"No big deal. Just somebody tried to whack Sergey Nikolay'ch."

His head snapped around like an owl's. "*What?*"

"You heard me, Ben, but they hit the wrong car with the RPG and

took out somebody else we know—well, used to know," Roberts corrected himself.

"Start from the beginning."

"Peggy, roll the videotape," Roberts commanded his watch officer with a theatrical wave of the arm.

"Whoa!" Goodley said after the first five seconds. "So, who was it really?"

"Would you believe Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko?"

"I don't know that name," Goodley admitted.

"Here." The watch officer handed over a manila folder. "What we had on the guy when he was KGB. A real sweetheart," she observed, in the woman's neutral voice of distaste.

"Rasputin?" Goodley said, scanning the first page. "Oh, okay, I have heard something about this one."

"So has the Boss, I bet."

"I'll know in two hours," Goodley imagined aloud. "What's Station Moscow saying?"

"The station chief is in St. Pete's for a trade conference, part of his cover duties. What we have is from his XO. The best bet to this point is that either Avseyenko made a big enemy in the Russian Mafia, or maybe Golovko was the real target, and they hit the wrong car. No telling which at this point." Followed by the usual NIO damned-if-I-know shrug.

"Who would want to take Golovko out?"

"Their Mafia? Somebody got himself an RPG, and they don't sell them in hardware stores, do they? So, that means somebody deeply into their criminal empire, probably, made the hit—but who was the real target? Avseyenko must have had some serious enemies along the way, but Golovko must have enemies or rivals, too." She shrugged again. "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"The Boss likes to have better information," Goodley warned.

"So do I, Ben," Peggy Hunter replied. "But that's all I got, and even the fuckin' Russians don't have better at this point."

"Any way we can look into their investigation?"

"The Legal Attaché, Mike Reilly, is supposed to be pretty tight with their cops. He got a bunch of them admitted to the FBI's National Academy post-grad cop courses down at Quantico."

"Maybe have the FBI tell him to nose around?"

Mrs. Hunter shrugged again. "Can't hurt. Worst thing anybody can say is no, and we're already there, right?"

Goodley nodded. "Okay, I'll recommend that." He got up. "Well," he observed on his way out the door, "the Boss won't bitch about how boring the world is today." He took the CNN tape with him and headed back to his SUV.

The sun was struggling to rise now. Traffic on the George Washington Parkway was picking up with eager-beaver types heading into their desks early, probably Pentagon people, most of them, Goodley thought, as he crossed over the Key Bridge, past Teddy Roosevelt Island. The Potomac was calm and flat, almost oily, like the pond behind a mill dam. The outside temperature, his dashboard said, was forty-four, and the forecast for the day was a high in the upper fifties, a few clouds, and calm winds. An altogether pleasant day for late fall, though he'd be stuck in his office for all of it, pleasant or not.

Things were starting early at The House, he saw on pulling in. The Blackhawk helicopter was just lifting off as he pulled into his reserved parking place, and the motorcade had already formed up at the West Entrance. It was enough to make him check his watch. No, he wasn't late. He hustled out of his car, bundling the papers and cassette into his arms as he hurried inside.

"Morning, Dr. Goodley," a uniformed guard said in greeting.

"Hi, Chuck." Regular or not, he had to pass through the metal detector. The papers and cassette were inspected by hand—as though he'd try to bring a gun in, Ben thought in passing irritation. Well, there had been a few scares, hadn't there? And these people were trained not to trust anybody.

Having passed the daily security test, he turned left, sprinted up the stairs, then left again to his office, where some helpful soul—he didn't know if it was one of the clerical staff or maybe one of the Service people—had his office coffee machine turning out some Gloria Jean's French Hazelnut. He poured himself a cup and sat down at his desk to organize his papers and his thoughts. He managed to down half of the cup before bundling it all up again for the ninety-foot walk. The Boss was already there.

"Morning, Ben."

"Good morning, Mr. President," replied the National Security Adviser.

"Okay, what's new in the world?" POTUS asked.

"It looks as though somebody might have tried to assassinate Sergey Golovko this morning."

"Oh?" President Ryan asked, looking up from his coffee. Goodley filled him in, then inserted the cassette in the Oval Office VCR and punched PLAY.

"Jeez," Ryan observed. What had been an expensive car was now fit only for the crushing machine. "Who'd they get instead?"

"One Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko, age fifty-two—"

"I know that name. Where from?"

"He's more widely known as Rasputin. He used to run the KGB Sparrow School."

Ryan's eyes went a little wider. "That cocksucker! Okay, what's the story on him?"

"He got RIF'd back in '93 or so, and evidently set himself up in the same business, and it would seem he's made some money at it, judging by his car, anyway. There was evidently a young woman in with him when he was killed, plus a driver. They were all killed."

Ryan nodded. The Sparrow School had been where for years the Soviets had trained attractive young women to be prostitutes in the service of their country both at home and abroad, because, since time immemorial, men with a certain weakness for women had often found their tongues loosened by the right sort of lubrication. Not a few secrets had been conveyed to the KGB by this method, and the women had also been useful in recruiting various foreign nationals for the KGB officers to exploit. So, on having his official office shut down, Rasputin—so called by the Soviets for his ability to get women to bend to his will—had simply plied his trade in the new free-enterprise environment.

"So, Avseyenko might have had 'business' enemies angry enough to take him out, and Golovko might not have been the target at all?"

"Correct, Mr. President. The possibility exists, but we don't have any supporting data one way or the other."

"How do we get it?"

"The Legal Attaché at the embassy is well connected with the Russian police," the National Security Adviser offered.

"Okay, call Dan Murray at FBI and have his man nose around," Ryan said. He'd already considered calling Golovko directly—they'd known each other for more than ten years, though one of their initial contacts had involved Golovko's pistol right in Jack's face on one of the runways of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport—and decided against it. He couldn't show that much immediate interest, though later, if they had a private moment together, he'd be able to ask a casual question about the incident. "Same for Ed and MP at CIA."

"Right." Goodley made a note.

"Next?"

Goodley turned the page. "Indonesia is doing some naval exercises that have the Aussies a little interested. . . ." Ben went on with the morning briefing for twenty more minutes, mainly covering political rather than military matters, because that's what national security had become in recent years. Even the international arms trade had diminished to the point that quite a few countries were treating their national military establishments as boutiques rather than serious instruments of statecraft.

"So, the world's in good shape today?" the President summarized.

"Except for the pothole in Moscow, it would seem so, sir."

The National Security Adviser departed, and Ryan looked at his schedule for the day. As usual, he had very little in the way of free time. About the only moments on his plan-of-the-day without someone in the office with him were those in which he'd have to read over briefing documents for the next meeting, many of which were planned literally weeks in advance. He took off his reading glasses—he hated them—and rubbed his eyes, already anticipating the morning headache that would come in about thirty minutes. A quick re-scan of the page showed no light moments today. No troop of Eagle Scouts from Wyoming, nor current World Series champs, nor Miss Plum Tomato from California's Imperial Valley to give him something to smile about. No. Today would be all work.

Shit, he thought.

The nature of the Presidency was a series of interlocking contradictions. The Most Powerful Man in the World was quite unable to use his power except under the most adverse circumstances, which he was supposed to avoid rather than to engage. In reality, the Presidency was about negotiations, more with the Congress than anyone else; it was a process for which Ryan had been unsuited until given a crash course by his chief of staff, Arnold van Damm. Fortunately, Arnie did a lot of the negotiations himself, then came into the Oval Office to tell the President what *his* (Ryan's) decision and/or position was on an issue, so that *he* (van Damm) could then do a press release or a statement in the Press Room. Ryan supposed that a lawyer treated his client that way much of the time, looking after his interests as best he could while *not* telling him what those interests were until they were already decided. The President, Arnie told everyone, had to be protected from direct negotiations with everyone—especially Congress. And, Jack reminded himself, he had a fairly tame Congress. What had it been like for presidents dealing with contentious ones?

And what the hell, he wondered, not for the first time, was he doing here?

The election process had been the purest form of hell—despite the fact that he'd had what Arnie invariably had called a cakewalk. Never less than five speeches per day, more often as many as nine, in as many different places before as many diverse groups—but always the same speech, delivered off file cards he kept in his pocket, changed only in minor local details by a frantic staff on the Presidential aircraft, trying to keep track of the flight plan. The amazing thing was that they'd never made a mistake that he'd caught. For variety, the President would alter the order of the cards. But the utility of that had faded in about three days.

Yes, if there were a hell in creation, a political campaign was its

most tangible form, listening to yourself saying the same things over and over until your brain started rebelling and you started *wanting* to make random, crazy changes, which might amuse yourself, but it would make you appear crazy to the audience, and you couldn't do that, because a presidential candidate was expected to be a perfect automaton rather than a fallible man.

There had been an upside to it. Ryan had bathed in a sea of love for the ten weeks of the endurance race. The deafening cheers of the crowds, whether in a parking lot outside a Xenia, Ohio, shopping mall, or in Madison Square Garden in New York City, or Honolulu, or Fargo, or Los Angeles—it had all been the same. Huge crowds of ordinary citizens who both denied and celebrated the fact that John Patrick Ryan was one of them . . . kind of, sort of, something like that—but something else, too. From his first formal speech in Indianapolis, soon after his traumatic accession to the Presidency, he'd realized just how strong a narcotic that sort of adulation was, and sure enough, his continued exposure to it had given him the same sort of rush that a controlled substance might. With it came a desire to be perfect for them, to deliver his lines properly, to seem sincere—as indeed he was, but it would have been far easier doing it once or twice instead of three hundred and eleven times, as the final count had been reckoned.

The news media in every place asked the same questions, written down or taped the same answers, and printed them as new news in every local paper. In every city and town, the editorials had praised Ryan, and worried loudly that this election wasn't really an election at all, except on the congressional level, and there Ryan had stirred the pot by giving his blessing to people of both major parties, the better to retain his independent status, and therefore to risk offending everyone.

The love hadn't quite been universal, of course. There were those who'd protested, who got their heads on the nightly commentary shows, citing his professional background, criticizing his drastic actions to stop the terrorist-caused Ebola plague that had threatened the nation so desperately in those dark days—"Yes, it worked in this particular case, *but . . . !*"—and especially to criticize his politics, which, Jack said in his speeches, weren't politics at all, but plain common sense.

During all of this, Arnie had been a godsend, preselecting a response to every single objection. Ryan was wealthy, some said. "My father was a police officer" had been the answer. "I've *earned* every penny I have—and besides [going on with an engaging smile], now my wife makes a lot more money than I do."

Ryan knew nothing about politics: "Politics is one of those fields in which everybody knows what it is, but nobody can make it work.

Well, maybe *I* don't know what it is, but I am *going* to make it work!"

Ryan had packed the Supreme Court: "I'm not a lawyer, either, sorry," he'd said to the annual meeting of the American Bar Association. "But I know the difference between right and wrong, and so do the justices."

Between the strategic advice of Arnie and the preplanned words of Callie Weston, he'd managed to parry every serious blow, and strike back with what was usually a soft and humorous reply of his own—leavened with strong words delivered with the fierce but quiet conviction of someone who had little left to prove. Mainly, with proper coaching and endless hours of preparation, he'd managed to present himself as Jack Ryan, regular guy.

Remarkably, his most politically astute move had been made entirely without outside expertise.

Morning, Jack," the Vice President said, opening the door unannounced.

"Hey, Robby." Ryan looked up from his desk with a smile. He still looked a little awkward in suits, Jack saw. Some people were born to wear uniforms, and Robert Jefferson Jackson was one of them, though the lapel of every suit jacket he owned sported a miniature of his Navy Wings of Gold.

"There's some trouble in Moscow," Ryan said, explaining on for a few seconds.

"That's a little worrisome," Robby observed.

"Get Ben to give you a complete brief-in on this. What's your day look like?" the President asked.

"Sierra-square, Delta-square." It was their personal code: SSDD—*same shit, different day*. "I have a meeting of the Space Council across the street in twenty minutes. Then tonight I have to fly down to Mississippi for a speech tomorrow morning at Ole Miss."

"You taking the wheel?" Ryan asked.

"Hey, Jack, the *one* good thing about this damned job is that I get to fly again." Jackson had insisted on getting rated on the VC-20B that he most often flew around the country on official trips under the code name "Air Force Two." It looked very good in the media, and it was also the best possible therapy for a fighter pilot who missed being in control of his aircraft, though it must have annoyed the Air Force flight crew. "But it's always to shit details you don't want," he added with a wink.

"It's the only way I could get you a pay raise, Robby. And nice quarters, too," he reminded his friend.

"You left out the flight pay," responded Vice Admiral R. J. Jackson, USN, retired. He paused at the door and turned. "What does that

attack say about the situation over there in Russia?"

Jack shrugged. "Nothing good. They just can't seem to get ahead of things, can they?"

"I guess," the Vice President agreed. "Problem is, how the hell do we help them?"

"I haven't figured that one out yet," Jack admitted. "And we have enough potential economic problems on our horizon, with Asia sliding down the tubes."

"That's something I have to learn, this economic shit," Robby admitted.

"Spend some time with George Winston," Ryan suggested. "It's not all that hard, but you have to learn a new language to speak. Basis points, derivatives, all that stuff. George knows it pretty good."

Jackson nodded. "Duly noted, sir."

" 'Sir'? Where the hell did that come from, Rob?"

"You still be the National Command Authority, oh great man," Robby told him with a grin and a lower-Mississippi accent. "I just be da XO, which means Ah gits all the shit details."

"So, think of this as PCO School, Rob, and thank God you have a chance to learn the easy way. It wasn't like that for me—"

"I remember, Jack. I was here as J-3, remember? And you did okay. Why do you think I allowed you to kill my career for me?"

"You mean it wasn't the nice house and the drivers?"

The Vice President shook his head. "And it wasn't to be a first-black, either. I couldn't say 'no' when my President asks, even if it's a turkey like you. Later, man."

"See ya at lunch, Robby," Jack said as the door closed.

"Mr. President, Director Foley on three," the speakerphone announced.

Jack lifted the secure phone and punched the proper button. "Morning, Ed."

"Hi, Jack, we have some more on Moscow."

"How'd we get it?" Ryan asked first, just to have a way of evaluating the information he was about to receive.

"Intercepts," the Director of Central Intelligence answered, meaning that the information would be fairly reliable. Communications intelligence was the most trusted of all, because people rarely lied to one another over the radio or telephone. "It seems this case has a very high priority over there, and the militiamen are talking very freely over their radios."

"Okay, what do you got?"

"Initial thinking over there is that Rasputin was the main target. He was pretty big, making a ton of money with his female . . . employees," Ed Foley said delicately, "and trying to branch out into

other areas. Maybe he got a little pushy with someone who didn't like being pushed."

You think so?" Mike Reilly asked.

"Mikhail Ivan'ch, I am not sure what I think. Like you, I am not trained to believe in coincidences," replied Lieutenant Oleg Provalov of the Moscow Militia. They were in a bar which catered to foreigners, which was obvious from the quality of the vodka being served.

Reilly wasn't exactly new to Moscow. He'd been there fourteen months, and before that had been the Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the New York office of the FBI—but not for Foreign Counter-Intelligence. Reilly was an OC—Organized Crime—expert who'd spent fifteen busy years attacking the Five Families of the New York Mafia, more often called LCN by the FBI, for La Cosa Nostra. The Russians knew this, and he'd established good relations with the local cops, especially since he'd arranged for some senior militia officers to fly to America to participate in the FBI's National Academy Program, essentially a Ph.D. course for senior cops, and a degree highly prized in American police departments.

"You ever have a killing like this in America?"

Reilly shook his head. "No, you can get regular guns pretty easy at home, but not anti-tank weapons. Besides, using them makes it an instant Federal case, and they've learned to keep away from us as much as they can. Oh, the wiseguys have used car bombs," he allowed, "but just to kill the people in the car. A hit like this is a little too spectacular for their tastes. So, what sort of guy was Avseyenko?"

A snort, and then Provalov almost spat the words out: "He was a pimp. He preyed on women, had them spread their legs, and then took their money. I will not mourn his passing, Mishka. Few will, but I suppose it leaves a vacuum that will be filled in the next few days."

"But you think he was the target, and not Sergey Golovko?"

"Golovko? To attack him would be madness. The chief of such an important state organ? I don't think any of our criminals have the balls for that."

Maybe, Reilly thought, *but you don't start off a major investigation by making assumptions of any kind, Oleg Gregoriyevich.* Unfortunately, he couldn't really say that. They were friends, but Provalov was thin-skinned, knowing that his police department did not measure up well against the American FBI. He'd learned that at Quantico. He was doing the usual right now, rattling bushes, having his investigators talk to Avseyenko's known associates to see if he'd spoken about enemies, disputes, or fights of one sort or another, checking with informants to see if anyone in the Moscow underworld had been talking about such things.

The Russians needed help on the forensic side, Reilly knew. At the moment they didn't even have the dump truck. Well, there were a few thousand of them, and that one might have been stolen without its owner/operator even knowing that it had been missing. Since the shot had been angled down, according to eyewitnesses, there would be little if any launch signature in the load area to help ID the truck, and they needed the right truck in order to recover hair and fibers. Of course, no one had gotten the tag number, nor had anyone been around with a camera during rush hour—well, so far. Sometimes a guy would show up a day or two later, and in major investigations you played for breaks—and usually the break was somebody who couldn't keep his mouth shut. Investigating people who knew how to stay silent was a tough way to earn a living. Fortunately, the criminal mind wasn't so circumspect—except for the smart ones, and Moscow, Reilly had learned, had more than a few of them.

There were two kinds of smart ones. The first was composed of KGB officers cut loose in the series of major reductions-in-force-known to Americans as RIFs—similar to what had happened in the American military. These potential criminals were frightening, people with real professional training and experience in black operations, who knew how to recruit and exploit others, and how to function invisibly—people, as Reilly thought of it, who'd played a winning game against the FBI despite the best efforts of the Bureau's Foreign Counter-Intelligence Division.

The other was a lingering echo of the defunct communist regime. They were called *tolkachi*—the word meant "pushers"—and under the previous economic system they'd been the grease that allowed things to move. They were facilitators whose relationships with everyone got things done, rather like guerrilla warriors who used unknown paths in the wilderness to move products from one place to another. With the fall of communism their skills had become genuinely lucrative because it was still the case that virtually no one understood capitalism, and the ability to get things done was more valuable than ever—and now it paid a *lot* better. Talent, as it always did, went where the money was, and in a country still learning what the rule of law meant, it was natural for men with this skill to break what laws there were, first in the service of whoever needed them, and then, almost instantly afterward, in the service of themselves. The former *tolkachi* were the most wealthy men in their country. With that wealth had come power. With power had come corruption, and with corruption had come crime, to the point that the FBI was nearly as active in Moscow as CIA had ever been. And with reason.

The union between the former KGB and the former *tolkachi* was creating the most powerful and sophisticated criminal empire in

human history.

And so, Reilly had to agree, this Rasputin—the name meant literally "the debauched one"—might well have been part of that empire, and his death might well have been something related to that. Or something else entirely. This would be a very interesting investigation.

"Well, Oleg Gregoriyevich, if you need any help, I will do my best to provide it for you," the FBI agent promised.

"Thank you, Mishka."

And they parted ways, each with his own separate thoughts.

CHAPTER 1

Echoes of the Boom

So, who were his enemies?" Lieutenant Colonel Shablikov asked.

"Gregoriy Filipovich had many. He was overly free with his words. He insulted too many people and—"

"What else?" Shablikov demanded. "He was not blown up in the middle of the street for abusing some criminal's feelings!"

"He was beginning to think about importing narcotics," the informant said next.

"Oh? Tell us more."

"Grisha had contacts with Colombians. He met them in Switzerland three months ago, and he was working to get them to ship him cocaine through the port of Odessa. I heard whispers that he was setting up a pipeline to transport the drugs from there to Moscow."

"And how was he going to pay them for it?" the militia colonel asked. Russian currency was, after all, essentially valueless.

"Hard currency. Grisha made a lot of that from Western clients, and certain of his Russian clients. He knew how to make such people happy, for a price."

Rasputin, the colonel thought. And surely he'd been the debauched one. Selling the bodies of Russian girls—and some boys, Shablikov knew—for enough hard currency to purchase a large German car (for cash; his people had checked on the transaction already) and then planning to import drugs. That had to be for cash "up front," too, as the Americans put it, which meant that he planned to sell the drugs for hard currency, too, since the Colombians probably had little interest in rubles. Avseyenko was no loss to his country. Whoever had killed him ought to get some reward . . . except someone new would certainly move into the vacuum and take control of the pimp's organization . . . and the new one might be smarter. That was the problem with criminals. There was a Darwinian process at work. The police caught some—even many—but they only caught the dumb ones, while the smart ones just kept getting smarter, and it seemed that the police were always trying to catch up, because those who broke the law always had the initiative.

"Ah, yes, and so, who else imports drugs?"

"I do not know who it is. There are rumors, of course, and I know some of the street vendors, but who actually organizes it, that I do not know."

"Find out," Shablikov ordered coldly. "It ought not to tax your abilities."

"I will do what I can," the informant promised.

"And you will do it quickly, Pavel Petrovich. You will also find out for me who takes over Rasputin's empire."

"Yes, Comrade Polkovnik Leytnant." The usual nod of submission.

There was power in being a senior policeman, Shablikov thought. Real human power, which you could impose on other men, and that made it pleasurable. In this case, he'd told a mid-level criminal what he had to do, and it would be done, lest his informant be arrested and find his source of income interrupted. The other side of the coin was protection of a sort. So long as this criminal didn't stray too far from what the senior cop found to be acceptable violations, he was safe from the law. It was the same over most of the world, Lieutenant Colonel Yefim Konstantinovich Shablikov of the Moscow Militia was sure. How else could the police collect the information they needed on people who did stray too far? No police agency in the world had the time to investigate everything, and thus using criminals against criminals was the easiest and least expensive method of intelligence-gathering.

The one thing to remember was that the informants *were* criminals, and hence unreliable in many things, too given to lying, exaggeration, to making up what they thought their master wanted to hear. And so Shablikov had to be careful believing anything this criminal said.

* * *

For his part, Pavel Petrovich Klusov had his own doubts, dealing as he did with this corrupted police colonel. Shablikov was not a former KGB officer, but rather a career policeman, and therefore not as smart as he believed himself to be, but more accustomed to bribes and informal arrangements with those he pursued. That was probably how he had achieved his fairly high rank. He knew how to get information by making deals with people like himself, Klusov thought. The informant wondered if the colonel had a hard-currency account somewhere. It would be interesting to find out where he lived, what sort of private car he or his wife drove. But he'd do what he was told, because his own "commercial" activities thrived under Shablikov's protection, and later that night he'd go out drinking with Irina Aganovna, maybe take her to bed later, and along the way find out

how deeply mourned Avseyenko was by his . . . former . . . employees.

"Yes, Comrade Polkovnik Leytnant," Klusov agreed. "It will be as you say. I will try to be back with you tomorrow."

"You will not try. You will do it, Pasha," Shablikov told him, like a schoolmaster demanding homework from an underachieving child.

It is already under way," Zhang told his Premier.

"I trust this one will go more smoothly than its two predecessors," the Premier replied dryly. The risks attached to this operation were incomparably greater. Both previous times, with Japan's attempt to drastically alter the Pacific Rim equation, and Iran's effort to create a new nation from the ashes of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic had not *done* anything, just . . . encouraged, behind the scenes. This venture, though, was different. Well, one could not really expect great things to happen on the cheap, could one?

"I—we have been unlucky."

"Perhaps so." A casual nod as he switched papers on his desk.

Zhang Han San's blood went a little cold at that. The Premier of the People's Republic was a man known for his detachment, but he'd always regarded his Minister Without Portfolio with a certain degree of warmth. Zhang was one of the few whose advice the Premier usually heeded. As indeed today the advice would be heeded, but without any feeling on the part of the senior official.

"We have exposed nothing and we have lost nothing," Zhang went on.

The head didn't come up. "Except that there is now an American ambassador in Taipei." And now there was talk of a mutual-defense treaty whose only purpose was to place the American navy between the two countries, regular port visits, perhaps even a permanent base (to be built entirely, most certainly, from Taiwanese money) whose only purpose, the Americans would innocently say, was merely to be a replacement for Subic Bay in the Philippines. The economy on Taiwan had exploded after the renewal of full U.S. diplomatic recognition, with an influx of massive new capital investments from all over the world. Much of that money would—and *should*—have come to the PRC, except for the change in America's outlook.

But the American President Ryan had taken his action entirely on his own, so the intelligence services claimed, contrary to political and diplomatic advice in Washington—though the American Secretary of State, that Adler man, had reportedly supported Ryan's foolish decision.

Zhang's blood temperature dropped another degree or so. Both of his plans had gone almost as he'd calculated they should, hadn't they? In neither case had his country risked anything of consequence—oh,

yes, they'd lost a few fighter aircraft the last time around, but those things and their pilots regularly crashed to no purpose anyway. Especially in the case of Taiwan, the People's Republic had acted responsibly, allowing Secretary Adler to shuttle directly back and forth between Beijing and its wayward province across the Formosa Strait, as though *giving* them legitimacy—something obviously *not* intended by the PRC, but rather as a convenience to aid the American in his peacemaking task, so as to appear more reasonable to the Americans . . . and so, why had Ryan done it? Had he guessed Zhang's play? That was possible, but it was more likely that there was a leak, an informer, a *spy* this close to the summit of political power in the People's Republic. The counterintelligence agencies were examining the possibility. There were few who knew what emerged from his mind and his office, and all of them would be questioned, while technical people checked his telephone lines and the very walls of his office. Had he, Zhang, been in error? Certainly not! Even if his Premier felt that way . . . Zhang next considered his standing with the Politburo. That could have been better. Too many of them regarded him as an adventurer with too great an access to the wrong ear. It was an easy thing to whisper, since they'd be delighted to reap the profits from his policy successes, and only slightly less delighted to pull away from him if things went awry. Well, such were the hazards of having reached the summit of policy-making in a country such as his.

"Even if we wished to crush Taiwan, unless we opted for nuclear weapons, it would require years and vast amounts of treasure to construct the means to make it possible, and then it would be a vast risk to little profit. Better that the People's Republic should grow so successful economically that they come begging to us to be let back into the family home. They are not powerful enemies, after all. They are scarcely even a nuisance on the world stage." But for some reason, they were a specific nuisance to his Premier, Zhang reminded himself, like some sort of personal allergy that marked and itched his sensitive skin.

"We have lost face, Zhang. That is enough for the moment."

"Face is not blood, Xu, nor is it treasure."

"They have ample treasure," the Premier pointed out, still not looking at his guest. And that was true. The small island of Taiwan was immensely rich from the industrious effort of its mainly ethnic-Chinese inhabitants, who traded nearly everything to nearly everywhere, and the restoration of American diplomatic recognition had increased both their commercial prosperity and their standing on the world stage. Try as he might, wish as he might, Zhang could not discount either of those things.

What had gone wrong? he asked himself again. Were not his plays

brilliantly subtle ones? Had his country ever overtly threatened Siberia? No. Did even the People's Liberation Army's leadership know what the plans were? Well, yes, he had to admit to himself, some did, but only the most trusted people in the operations directorate, and a handful of senior field commanders—the ones who would have to execute the plans if the time ever came. But such people knew how to keep secrets, and if they talked to anyone . . . but they wouldn't, because they knew what happened to people who spoke of things best left unspoken in a society such as theirs, and they knew that the very air had ears at their level of "trust." They hadn't even commented on the draft plans to anyone, just made the usual adjustments in the technical arrangements, as senior officers always tended to do. And so, perhaps some file clerks had the ability to examine the plans, but that was exceedingly unlikely as well. Security in the PLA was excellent. The soldiers, from private to the lower general ranks, had no more freedom than a machine bolted to the factory floor, and by the time they reached senior rank they'd mainly forgotten how to think independently, except perhaps in some technical matters, like which sort of bridge to build over a particular river. No, to Zhang they might as well have been machines, and were just as trustworthy.

Back to the original question: *Why* had that Ryan fellow reestablished relations with the "Republic of China"? Had he guessed anything about the Japan and Iran initiatives? The incident with the airliner had certainly looked like the accident it was supposed to simulate, and afterward the PRC had invited the American navy to come to the area and "keep the peace," as they liked to put it, as though peace were something you could place in a metal box and guard. In reality it was the other way 'round. War was the animal you kept in a cage, and then released when the time suited.

Had this President Ryan guessed the PRC's intentions to begin the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union, and then decided to punish the People's Republic with his recognition of the renegades on Taiwan? It was possible. There were those who found Ryan to be unusually perceptive for an American political figure . . . he was a former intelligence officer, after all, and had probably been a good one, Zhang reminded himself. It was always a serious mistake to underrate an adversary, as the Japanese and the Iranians had learned to their considerable sorrow. This Ryan fellow had responded skillfully to both of Zhang's plans, and yet he hadn't so much as whispered his displeasure to the PRC. There had been no American military exercises aimed even indirectly at the People's Republic, no "leaks" to the American media, and nothing that his country's own intelligence officers operating out of the embassy in Washington had discovered. And so, he was again back to the original question: Why had Ryan

taken that action? He just didn't know. Not knowing was a great annoyance to a man at his level of government. Soon his Premier might ask a question for which he needed to have the answer. But for now the leader of his government was flipping papers on his desk, ostensibly to tell him, Zhang, that he, the Premier, was displeased, but not at this moment doing anything about his emotions.

Ten meters away through a solid-core wood door, Lian Ming had her own emotions. The secretarial chair she sat in was an expensive one, purchased from Japan, the price of it equal to the wages of a skilled worker for, what? Four months? Five? Certainly more than the price of the new bicycle she could have used.

A university graduate in modern languages, she spoke English and French well enough to make herself understood in any city in the world, and as a result she found herself going over all manner of diplomatic and intelligence documents for her boss, whose language skills were considerably less than her own. The comfortable chair represented her boss's solicitude for the way in which she organized his work and his day. And a little more.

CHAPTER 2

The Dead Goddess

This was where it had all happened, Chester Nomuri told himself. The vast expanse of Tiananmen Square, the "Square of Heavenly Peace," with the massive walls to his right, was like . . . what? On reflection he realized that he had nothing with which to compare it. If there were another place in all the world like this place, he had neither visited nor even heard of it.

And yet the very paving stones seemed to drip with blood. It was almost as if he could smell it here, though that was more than ten years in the past, the massed students, not much younger than he had been at the time in California, rallying here to protest their government. They hadn't protested the form of their country's government so much as the corruption of those at its highest levels, and, predictably, such actions had been hugely offensive to the corrupted. Well, that's how it usually went. Only with discretion did one point out the nature of a powerful man to himself, Eastern or Western, but this was the most dangerous place of all, because of its long history of gross brutality. Here there was an *expectation* of it . . .

. . . but the first time it had been tried right here, the soldiers ordered to clear things up had balked. And *that* must have frightened the leadership in their plush and comfortable offices, because when the organs of the state refused to do the bidding of the state, *that* was when something called "Revolution" started (and in a place where there had already been a Revolution, enshrined on this very spot). And so, the initial troop formations had been pulled back and replaced with others, drawn from farther away, young soldiers (all soldiers were young, Nomuri reminded himself). They had not yet been contaminated by the words and thoughts of their contemporaries demonstrating in the Square, not yet sympathetic with them, not yet willing to ask themselves *why* the government which gave them their weapons and uniforms wished for them to hurt these people instead of listening to what they had to say . . . and so, they'd acted like the mindless automatons they'd been trained to be.

There, just a few yards away, were some soldiers of the People's Liberation Army on parade, wearing the strange wax-doll look they

tended to have, looking not quite human in their green wool uniforms, almost as though they used makeup, Chet thought, wanting to look more closely at their faces to see if maybe they really did. He turned away with a shake of his head. He hadn't flown JAL to China for that. Wangling this assignment for Nippon Electric Company had been difficult enough. It was a major drag working two jobs, as an upper-middle account executive for NEC *and* a field intelligence officer for CIA. To succeed in the second, he had also to succeed in the first, and to succeed in the first he had to simulate a true Japanese salaryman, one who subordinated everything short of his breathing to the good of the company. Well, at least he got to keep *both* of his salaries, and the Japanese one wasn't all that bad, was it? Not at the current exchange rate, anyway.

Nomuri supposed that this whole deal was a great sign of confidence in his abilities—he'd established a modestly productive network of agents in Japan who would now report to other CIA case officers—and also of desperation. The Agency had been singularly unsuccessful in getting a spy network operating over here in the PRC. Langley hadn't recruited many Chinese Americans into the fold . . . and one of those it had gotten was now in Federal prison after having developed a serious case of divided loyalties. It was a fact that certain federal agencies were allowed to be racist, and today Chinese ethnicity was strongly suspect at CIA headquarters. Well, there wasn't anything he could do about that—nor could he pretend to be Chinese himself, Nomuri knew. To some half-blind racist European types, everyone with crooked eyes looked the same, but here in Beijing, Nomuri, whose ancestry was a hundred percent Japanese (albeit entirely of the southern California variety), figured he stood out about as much as Michael Jordan would. It wasn't something to make an intelligence officer without diplomatic cover feel comfortable, especially since the Chinese Ministry of State Security was as active and well-supported as it was. MSS was every bit as powerful in this city as the Soviet KGB had ever been in Moscow, and was probably just as ruthless. China, Nomuri reminded himself, had been in the business of torturing criminals and other unloved ones for thousands of years . . . and *his* ethnicity would not be overly helpful. The Chinese did business with the Japanese because it was convenient—necessary was a more accurate term—but there was precisely zero love lost between the countries. Japan had killed far more Chinese in World War II than Hitler had killed Jews, a fact little appreciated anywhere in the world, except, of course, in China, and that set of facts only added to a racial/ethnic antipathy that went back at least as far as Kublai Khan.

He'd gotten too used to fitting in. Nomuri had joined CIA to serve

his country, and to have a little fun, he'd thought at the time. Then he'd learned what a deadly serious business field-intelligence was, followed by the challenge of slipping into places he wasn't supposed to be, of obtaining information he wasn't supposed to get, and then giving it to people who weren't supposed to know it. It wasn't just serving his country that kept Nomuri in the business. There was also the thrill, the *rush* of knowing what others didn't know, of beating people at their own game, on their own turf.

But in Japan he looked like everyone else. Not here in Beijing. He was also a few inches taller than the average Chinese—that came from his childhood diet and American furniture—and better dressed in Western-style clothes. The clothes he could fix. His face he could not. For starters, he'd have to change his haircut, Chet thought. At least that way he could disappear from behind, and perhaps shake an MSS tail that way. He had a car to drive around, paid for by NEC, but he'd get a bicycle, too, a Chinese make rather than an expensive European one. If asked about it, he'd say it was good exercise—and besides, wasn't it a perfectly fine socialist bicycle? But such questions would be asked, and notice of his presence would be taken, and in Japan, Nomuri realized, he'd gotten slack and comfortable running his agents. He'd known that he could disappear in a place as intimate as a steaming bathhouse, and there talk about women and sports and many other things, but rarely business. In Japan every business operation was secret at some level or other, and even with the intimate friends with whom he discussed their wives' shortcomings, a Japanese salaryman would not discuss goings-on in the office until after they were overt and public. And that was good for operational security, wasn't it?

Looking around like any other tourist, he wondered how he would handle such things here. But most of all he noticed that eyes lingered on him as he walked from one side of this immense square to the other. How had this place sounded when the tanks were here? He stood still for a moment, remembering . . . it was right *there*, wasn't it? . . . the guy with the briefcase and shopping bag who'd held up a company of tanks, just by standing there . . . because even the private in the driver's seat of a Type 80 PRC tank didn't have the stones to run over the guy, despite whatever his captain might have been screaming at him over the interphones from his place on top of the turret. Yeah, it was right about here that had happened. Later on, of course, in about a week, the guy with the briefcase had been arrested by MSS, so said CIA's sources, and he'd been taken away and interrogated to see what had persuaded him to take so public and so foolish a political stand against both the government and the armed forces of his country. That had probably lasted a while, the CIA officer thought,

standing here and looking around from the spot where one brave man had taken his stand . . . because the MSS interrogators just wouldn't have believed that it had been one man acting on his own . . . the concept of acting on one's own was not something encouraged in a communist regime, and was therefore entirely alien to those who enforced the will of the State on those who broke the State's rules. Whoever he'd been, the guy with the briefcase was dead now—the sources were pretty clear on that. An MSS official had commented on the matter with satisfaction later on, before someone whose ears were distantly connected to America. He'd taken the bullet in the back of the head, and his family—a wife and an infant son, the source believed—had been billed for the pistol round needed to execute the husband/ father/counterrevolutionary/enemy-of-the-state in question. Such was justice in the People's Republic of China.

And what was it they called foreigners here? Barbarians. *Yeah,* Nomuri thought, *sure*, *Wilbur*. The myth of central position was as alive here as it had been on the Ku-Damm of Adolf Hitler's Berlin. Racism was the same all over the world. Dumb. That was one lesson his country had taught the world, Chester Nomuri thought, though America still had to absorb the lesson herself.

She was a whore, and a very expensive one, Mike Reilly thought from his seat behind the glass. Her hair had been unnaturally blonded by some expensive shop in Moscow—she needed another treatment, since there was a hint of dark brown at the roots—but it went well with her cheekbones and eyes, which were not quite any shade of blue he'd ever seen in a woman's eyes. That was probably a hook for her repeat customers, the color, he thought, but not the expression. Her body could have been sculpted by Phidias of Athens to be a goddess fit for public worship, ample curves everywhere, the legs thinner than normal for Russian tastes, but ones that would have gotten along well at the corner of Hollywood and Vine, if that were still a nice neighborhood in which to be spotted . . .

. . . but the *expression* in her lovely eyes could have stopped the heart of a marathon runner. What was it about prostitution that did this to women? Reilly shook his head. He hadn't worked that particular class of crime very often—it was mainly a violation for local cops—and not enough, he supposed, to understand its practitioners. The look in her eyes was frightening. Only men were supposed to be predators, so he and most men thought. But this woman belied that belief to a fare-thee-well.

Her name was Tanya Bogdanova. She was, she said, twenty-three years of age. She had the face of an angel, and the body of a movie star. It was her heart and soul the FBI agent was unsure of. Maybe she

was just wired differently from normal people, as so many career criminals seemed to be. Maybe she'd been sexually abused in her youth. But even at twenty-three, her youth was a very distant thing, judging from the way her eyes looked at her interrogator. Reilly looked down at her dossier-folder from Militia headquarters. There was only one shot of her in it, a distant black-and-white of her with a john—well, probably an *ivan,* Reilly thought with a grunt—and in this photo her face was animated, youthful, and as alluring as the young Ingrid Bergman had been to Bogie in *Casablanca.* Tanya could act, Reilly thought. If this were the real Tanya in front of him, as it probably was, then the one in the photo was a construct, a role to be played, an illusion—a wonderful one, to be sure, but potentially a highly dangerous lie to anyone taken in by it. The girl on the other side of the one-way mirror could have dug a man's eyeballs out with her nail file, and then eaten them raw before going to her next appointment at the new Moscow Four Seasons Hotel and Convention Center.

"Who were his enemies, Tanya?" the militiaman asked in the interrogation room.

"Who were his friends?" she asked in bored reply. "He had none. Of enemies he had many." Her spoken language was literate and almost refined. Her English was supposed to be excellent as well. Well, she doubtless needed that for her customers . . . it was probably worth a few extra bucks, D-marks, pounds, or euros, a nice hard currency for whose printed notes she'd give a discount, doubtless smiling in a coquettish way when she told her john, jean, johannes, or ivan about it. Before or after? Reilly wondered. He'd never paid for it, though looking at Tanya, he understood why some men might . . .

"What's she charge?" he whispered to Provalov.

"More than I can afford," the detective lieutenant grunted. "Something like six hundred euros, perhaps more for an entire evening. She is medically clean, remarkably enough. A goodly collection of condoms in her purse, American, French, and Japanese brands."

"What's her background? Ballet, something like that?" the FBI agent asked, commenting implicitly on her grace.

Provalov grunted in amusement. "No, her tits are too big for that, and she's too tall. She weighs about, oh, fifty-five kilos or so, I would imagine. Too much for one of those little fairies in the Bolshoi to pick up and throw about. She could become a model for our growing fashion industry, but, no, on what you ask, her background is quite ordinary. Her father, deceased, was a factory worker, and her mother, also deceased, worked in a consumer-goods store. They both died of conditions consistent with alcohol abuse. Our Tanya drinks only in

moderation. State education, undistinguished grades in that. No siblings, our Tanya is quite alone in the world—and has been so for some time. She's been working for Rasputin for almost four years. I doubt the Sparrow School ever turned out so polished a whore as this one. Gregoriy Filipovich himself used her many times, whether for sex or just for his public escort, we're not sure, and she is a fine adornment, is she not? But whatever affection he may have had for her, as you see, was not reciprocated."

"Anyone close to her?"

Provalov shook his head. "None known to us, not even a woman friend of note."

The interview was pure vanilla, Reilly saw, like fishing for bass in a well-stocked lake, one of twenty-seven interrogations to this point concerning the death of G. F. Avseyenko—everyone seemed to forget the fact that there had been two additional human beings in the car, but they probably hadn't been the targets. It wasn't getting any easier. What they really needed was the truck, something with physical evidence. Like most FBI agents, Reilly believed in tangibles, something you could hold in your hand, then pass off to a judge or jury, and have them *know* it was both evidence of a crime and proof of who had done it. Eyewitnesses, on the other hand, were often liars; at best they were easy for defense lawyers to confuse, and therefore they were rarely trusted by cops or juries. The truck might have blast residue from the RPG launch, maybe fingerprints on the greasy wrapping paper the Russians used for their weapons, maybe anything—best of all would be a cigarette smoked by the driver or the shooter, since the FBI could DNA-match the residual saliva on that to anyone, which was one of the Bureau's best new tricks (six-hundred-million-to-one odds were hard for people to argue with, even highly paid defense attorneys). One of Reilly's pet projects was to bring over the DNA technology for the Russian police to use, but for that the Russians would have to front the cash for the lab gear, which would be a problem—the Russians didn't seem to have the cash for anything important. All they had now was the remainder of the RPG warhead—it was amazing how much of the things actually did survive launch and detonation—which had a serial number that was being run down, though it was doubtful that this bit of information would lead anywhere. But you ran them all down because you never knew what was valuable and what was not until you got to the finish line, which was usually in front of a judge's bench with twelve people in a box off to your right. Things were a little different here in Russia, procedurally speaking, but the one thing he was trying to get through to the Russian cops he counseled was that the aim of every investigation was a conviction. They were getting it, slowly for most, quickly for a few, and also getting the fact

that kicking a suspect's balls into his throat was not an effective interrogation technique. They had a constitution in Russia, but public respect for it still needed growing, and it would take time. The idea of the rule of law in this country was as foreign as a man from Mars.

The problem, Reilly thought, *was that neither he nor anyone else knew how much time there was for Russians to catch up with the rest of the world.* There was much here to admire, especially in the arts. Because of his diplomatic status, Reilly and his wife often got complimentary tickets to concerts (which he liked) and the ballet (which his wife loved), and that was still the class of the world . . . but the rest of the country had never kept up. Some at the embassy, some of the older CIA people who'd been here before the fall of the USSR, said that the improvements were incredible. But if that were true, Reilly told himself, then what had been here before must have been truly dreadful to behold, though the Bolshoi had probably still been the Bolshoi, even then.

"That is all?" Tanya Bogdanova asked in the interrogation room.

"Yes, thank you for coming in. We may call you again."

"Use this number," she said, handing over her business card. "It's for my cellular phone." That was one more Western convenience in Moscow for those with the hard currency, and Tanya obviously did.

The interrogator was a young militia sergeant. He stood politely and moved to get the door for her, showing Bogdanova the courtesy she'd come to expect from men. In the case of Westerners, it was for her physical attributes. In the case of her countrymen, it was her clothing that told them of her newfound worth. Reilly watched her eyes as she left the room. The expression was like that of a child who'd expected to be caught doing something naughty, but hadn't. *How stupid father was*, that sort of smile proclaimed. It seemed so misplaced on the angel-face, but there it was, on the other side of the mirror.

"Oleg?"

"Yes, Mishka?" Provalov turned.

"She's dirty, man. She's a player," Reilly said in English. Provalov knew the cop-Americanisms.

"I agree, Mishka, but I have nothing to hold her on, do I?"

"I suppose not. Might be interesting to keep an eye on her, though."

"If I could afford her, I would keep more than my eye on her, Mikhail Ivan'ch."

Reilly grunted amusement. "Yeah, I hear that."

"But she has a heart of ice."

"That's a fact," the FBI agent agreed. And the game in which she was a player was at best nasty, and at its worst, lethal.

* * *

So, what do we have?" Ed Foley asked, some hours later across the river from Washington.

"Gornischt so far," Mary Pat replied to her husband's question.

"Jack wants to be kept up to speed on this one."

"Well, tell the President that we're running as fast as we can, and all we have so far is from the Legal Attaché. He's in tight with the local cops, but they don't seem to know shit either. Maybe somebody tried to kill Sergey Nikolay'ch, but the Legat says he thinks Rasputin was the real target."

"I suppose he had his share of enemies," the Director of Central Intelligence conceded.

Thank you," the Vice President concluded to the packed house at the Ole Miss field house. The purpose of the speech was to announce that eight new destroyers would be built in the big Litton shipyard on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which meant jobs and money for the state, always items of concern for the governor, who was now standing and applauding as though the Ole Miss football team had just knocked off Texas at the Cotton Bowl. They took their sports seriously down here. And their politics, Robby reminded himself, stifling a curse for this tawdry profession that was so much like medieval bargaining in a village square, three good pigs for a cow or something, toss in a mug of bitter ale. Was *this* how one governed a country? He grinned as he shook his head. Well, there had been politics in the Navy, too, and he'd scaled those heights, but he'd done it by being one hell of a good naval officer and the best fucking fighter pilot ever to catapult off a flattop. On the last score, of course he knew that *every* fighter pilot sitting and waiting for the cat shot felt exactly the same way . . . it was just that he was totally correct in his self-assessment.

There were the usual hands to shake coming off the platform, guided by his Secret Service detail in their dark, forbidding shades, then down the steps and out the back door to his car, where another squad of armed men waited, their vigilant eyes looking ever outward, like the gunners on a B-17 over Schweinfurt must have done, the Vice President thought. One of them held open the car door, and Robby slid in.

"TOMCAT is rolling," the chief of the VP detail told his microphone as the car headed off.

Robby picked up his briefing folder as the car got onto the highway for the airport. "Anything important happening in D.C.?"

"Not that they've told me about," the Secret Service agent

answered.

Jackson nodded. These were good people looking after him. The detail chief, he figured, was a medium-to-senior captain, and the rest of his troops j.g.'s to lieutenant commanders, which was how Robby treated them. They were underlings, but good ones, well-trained pros who merited the smile and the nod when they did things right, which they nearly always did. They would have made good aviators, most of them—and the rest probably good Marines. The car finally pulled up to the VC-20B jet in an isolated corner of the general-aviation part of the airport, surrounded by yet more security troops. The driver stopped the car just twenty feet from the foot of the self-extending stairs.

"You going to drive us home, sir?" the detail chief asked, suspecting the answer.

"Bet your ass, Sam" was the smiling reply.

That didn't please the USAF captain detailed to be copilot on the aircraft, and it wasn't all that great for the lieutenant colonel supposed to be the pilot-in-command of the modified Gulfstream III. The Vice President liked to have the stick—in his case the yoke—in his hands at all times, while the colonel worked the radio and monitored the instruments. The aircraft spent most of its time on autopilot, of course, but Jackson, right seat or not, was determined to be the command pilot on the flight, and you couldn't very well say no to him. As a result, the captain would sit in the back and the colonel would be in the left seat, but jerking off. What the hell, the latter thought, the Vice President told good stories, and was a fairly competent stick for a Navy puke.

"Clear right," Jackson said, a few minutes later.

"Clear left," the pilot replied, confirming the fact from the plane-walker in front of the Gulfstream.

"Starting One," Jackson said next, followed thirty seconds later by "Starting Two."

The ribbon gauges came up nicely. "Looking good, sir," the USAF lieutenant colonel reported. The G had Rolls-Royce Spey engines, the same that had once been used on the U.K. versions of the F-4 Phantom fighter, but somewhat more reliable.

"Tower, this is Air Force Two, ready to taxi."

"Air Force Two, Tower, cleared to taxiway three."

"Roger, Tower AF-Two taxiing via three." Jackson slipped the brakes and let the aircraft move, its fighter engines barely above idle, but guzzling a huge quantity of fuel for all that. On a carrier, Jackson thought, you had plane handlers in yellow shirts to point you around. Here you had to go according to the map/diagram—clipped to the center of the yoke—to the proper place, all the while looking around

to make sure some idiot in a Cessna 172 didn't stray into your path like a stray car in the supermarket parking lot. Finally, they reached the end of the runway, and turned to face down it.

"Tower, this is Spade requesting permission to take off." It just sort of came out on its own.

A laughing reply: "This ain't the *Enterprise,* Air Force Two, and we don't have cat shots here, but you are cleared to depart, sir."

You could hear the grin in the reply: "Roger, Tower, AF-Two is rolling."

"Your call sign was really 'Spade'?" the assigned command pilot asked as the VC-20B started rolling.

"Got hung on by my first CO, back when I was a new nugget. And it kinda stuck." The Vice President shook his head. "Jesus, that seems like a long time ago."

"V-One, sir," the Air Force officer said next, followed by "V-R."

At velocity-rotation, Jackson eased back on the yoke, bringing the aircraft off the ground and into the air. The colonel retracted the landing gear on command, while Jackson flipped the wheel half an inch left and right, rocking the wings a little as he always did to make sure the aircraft was willing to do what he told it. It was, and inside of three minutes, the G was on autopilot, programmed to turn, climb, and level out at thirty-nine thousand feet.

"Boring, isn't it?"

"Just another word for safe, sir," the USAF officer replied.

Fucking trash-hauler, Jackson thought. No fighter pilot would say something like that out loud. Since when was flying supposed to be . . . well, Robby had to admit to himself, he always buckled his seat belt before starting his car, and never did anything reckless, even with a fighter plane. But it offended him that this aircraft, like almost all of the new ones, did so much of the work that he'd been trained to do himself. It would even land itself . . . well, the Navy had such systems aboard its carrier aircraft, but *no* proper naval aviator ever used it unless ordered to, something Robert Jefferson Jackson had always managed to avoid. This trip would go into his logbook as time in command, but it really wasn't. Instead it was a microchip in command, and his real function was to be there to take proper action in case something broke. But nothing ever did. Even the damned engines. Once turbojets had lasted a mere nine or ten hours before having to be replaced. Now there were Spey engines on the G fleet that had twelve *thousand* hours. There was one out there with over *thirty* thousand that Rolls-Royce wanted back, offering a free brand-new replacement because its engineers wanted to tear that one apart to learn what they'd done so right, but the owner, perversely and predictably, refused to part with it. The rest of the Gulfstream

airframe was about that reliable, and the electronics were utterly state-of-the-art, Jackson knew, looking down at the color display from the weather-radar. It was a clear and friendly black at the moment, showing what was probably smooth air all the way to Andrews. There was as yet no instrument that detected turbulence, but up here at flight level three-niner-zero, that was a pretty rare occurrence, and Jackson wasn't often susceptible to airsickness, and his hand was inches from the yoke in case something unexpected happened. Jackson occasionally hoped that something *would* happen, since it would allow him to show just how good an aviator he was . . . but it never did. Flying had become too routine since his childhood in the F-4N Phantom and his emerging manhood in the F-14A Tomcat. And maybe it was better that way. Yeah, he thought, sure.

"Mr. Vice President?" It was the voice of the USAF communications sergeant aboard the VC-20. Robby turned to see her with a sheaf of papers.

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"Flash traffic just came in on the printer." She extended her hand, and Robby took the paper.

"Colonel, your airplane for a while," the VP told the lieutenant colonel in the left seat.

"Pilot's airplane," the colonel agreed, while Robby started reading.

It was always the same, even though it was also always different. The cover sheet had the usual classification formatting. It had once impressed Jackson that the act of showing a sheet of paper to the wrong person could land him in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary—at the time, actually, the since-closed Portsmouth Naval Prison in New Hampshire—but now as a senior government official in Washington, D.C., he knew he could show damned near anything to a reporter from *The Washington Post* and not be touched for it. It wasn't so much that he was above the law as he was one of the people who decided what the law meant. What was so damned secret and sensitive in this case was that CIA didn't know shit about the possible attempt on the life of Russia's chief spymaster . . . which meant nobody else in Washington did, either. . . .

CHAPTER 3

The Problems with Riches

The issue was trade, not exactly the President's favorite, but then, at this level, every issue took on sufficient twists that even the ones you thought you knew about became strange at best, unknown and alien at worst.

"George?" Ryan said to his Secretary of the Treasury, George Winston.

"Mr. Pres—"

"Goddammit, George!" The President nearly spilled his coffee with the outburst.

"Okay." SecTreas nodded submission. "It's hard to make the adjustment . . . *Jack."* Ryan was getting tired of the Presidential trappings, and his rule was that here, in the Oval Office, his name was Jack, at least for his inner circle, of which Winston was one. After all, Ryan had joked a few times, after leaving this marble prison, he might be working *for* TRADER, as the Secret Service knew him, back in New York on The Street, instead of the other way 'round. After leaving the Presidency, something for which Jack prostrated himself before God every night—or so the stories went—he'd have to find gainful employment somewhere, and the trading business beckoned. Ryan had shown a rare gift for it, Winston reminded himself. His last such effort had been a California company called Silicon Alchemy, just one of many computer outfits, but the only one in which Ryan had taken an interest. So skillfully had he brought that firm to IPO that his own stock holdings in SALC—its symbol on the big board—were now valued at just over eighty million dollars, making Ryan by far the wealthiest American President in history. It was something his politically astute Chief of Staff, Arnold van Damm, did not advertise to the news media, who typically regarded every wealthy man as a robber baron, excepting, of course, the owners of the papers and TV stations themselves, who were, of course, the best of public-spirited citizens. None of this was widely known, even in the tight community of Wall Street big-hitters, which was remarkable enough. Should he ever return to The Street, Ryan's prestige would be sufficient to earn money while he slept in his bed at home. And that, Winston freely

admitted, was something well and truly earned, and be damned to whatever the media hounds thought of it.

"It's China?" Jack asked.

"That's right, Boss," Winston confirmed with a nod. "Boss" was a term Ryan could stomach, as it was also the in-house term the Secret Service—which was part of Winston's Department of the Treasury—used to identify the man they were sworn to protect. "They're having a little cash-shortfall problem, and they're looking to make it up with us."

"How little?" POTUS asked.

"It looks as though it will annualize out to, oh, seventy billion or so."

"That is, as we say, real money."

George Winston nodded. "Anything that starts with a 'B' is real enough, and this is a little better than six 'Bs' a month."

"Spending it for what?"

"Not entirely sure, but a lot of it has to be military-related. The French arms industries are tight with them now, since the Brits kiboshed the jet-engine deal from Rolls-Royce."

The President nodded, looking down at the briefing papers. "Yeah, Basil talked the PM out of it." That was Sir Basil Charleston, chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, sometimes called (erroneously) MI6. Basil was an old friend of Ryan's, going back to his CIA days. "It was a remarkably stand-up thing to do."

"Well, our friends in Paris don't seem to think the same way."

"They usually don't," Ryan agreed. The odd thing was the dichotomy inherent in dealing with the French. In some things, they weren't so much allies as blood brothers, but in others they were less than mere associates, and Ryan had trouble figuring out the logic by which the French changed their minds. Well, the President thought, that's what I have a State Department for. . . . "So, you think the PRC is building up its military again?"

"Big time, but not so much their navy, which makes our friends in Taiwan feel a little better."

That had been one of President Ryan's foreign-policy initiatives after concluding hostilities with the defunct United Islamic Republic, now restored to the separate nations of Iran and Iraq, which were at least at peace with each other. The real reasons for the recognition of Taiwan had never been made known to the public. It looked pretty clear to Ryan and his Secretary of State, Scott Adler, that the People's Republic of China had played a role in the Second Persian Gulf War, and probably in the preceding conflict with Japan, as well. Exactly why? Well, some in CIA thought that China lusted after the mineral riches in eastern Siberia—this was suggested by intercepts and other

access to the electronic mail of the Japanese industrialists who'd twisted their nation's path into a not-quite-open clash with America. They'd referred to Siberia as the "Northern Resource Area," harkening back to when an earlier generation of Japanese strategists had called South Asia the "Southern Resource Area." That had been part of another conflict, one known to history as the Second World War. In any case, the complicity of the PRC with America's enemies had merited a countermove, Ryan and Adler had agreed, and besides, the Republic of China on Taiwan *was* a democracy, with government officials elected by the people of that nation island—and *that* was something America was supposed to respect.

"You know, it would be better if they started working their navy and threatening Taiwan. We are in a better position to forestall that than—"

"You really think so?" SecTreas asked, cutting his President off.

"The Russians do," Jack confirmed.

"Then why are the Russians selling the Chinese so much hardware?" Winston demanded. "That doesn't make sense!"

"George, there is no rule demanding that the world has to make sense." That was one of Ryan's favorite aphorisms. "That's one of the things you learn in the intelligence business. In 1938, guess who was Germany's number one trading partner?"

SecTreas saw that sandbag coming before it struck. "France?"

"You got it." Ryan nodded. "Then, in '40 and '41, they did a lot of trade with the Russians. That didn't work out so well either, did it?"

"And everyone always told me that trade was a moderating influence," the Secretary observed.

"Maybe it is among people, but remember that governments don't have principles so much as interests—at least the primitive ones, the ones who haven't figured it all out yet . . ."

"Like the PRC?"

It was Ryan's turn to nod. "Yeah, George, like those little bastards in Beijing. They rule a nation of a billion people, but they do it as though they were the new coming of Caligula. Nobody ever told them that they have a positive duty to look after the interests of the people they rule—well, maybe that's not true," Ryan allowed, feeling a little generous. "They have this big, perfect theoretical model, promulgated by Karl Marx, refined by Lenin, then applied in their country by a pudgy sexual pervert named Mao."

"Oh? Pervert?"

"Yeah." Ryan looked up. "We had the data over at Langley. Mao liked virgins, the younger the better. Maybe he liked to see the fear in their cute little virginal eyes—that's what one of our pshrink consultants thought, kinda like rape, not so much sex as power. Well, I

guess it could have been worse—at least they were girls," Jack observed rather dryly, "and their culture is historically a little more liberal than ours on that sort of thing." A shake of the head. "You should see the briefs I get whenever a major foreign dignitary comes over, the stuff we know about their personal habits."

A chuckle: "Do I really want to know?"

A grimace: "Probably not. Sometimes I wish they didn't give me the stuff. You sit them down right here in the office, and they're charming and businesslike, and you can spend the whole fucking meeting looking for horns and hooves." That could be a distraction, of course, but it was more generally thought that as in playing poker for high stakes, the more you knew about the guy on the other side of the table, the better, even if it might make you want to throw up during the welcoming ceremony on the White House South Lawn. But that was the business of being President, Ryan reminded himself. *And people actually fought like tigers to get there.* And would again, when he left, POTUS reminded himself. *And so, Jack, is it your job to protect your country from the kind of rat who lusts to be where all the really good cheese is stored?* Ryan shook his head again. So many doubts. It wasn't so much that they never went away. They just kept getting bigger all the time. How strange that he understood and could recount every small step that had led him to this office, and yet he still asked himself several times every hour how the *hell* he'd come to be in this place . . . and how the hell he'd ever get out. Well, he had no excuses at all this time. He'd actually run for election to the Presidency. If you could call it that—Arnie van Damm didn't, as a matter of fact—which you could, since he'd fulfilled the constitutional requirements, a fact on which just about every legal scholar in the nation had agreed, and talked about on every major news network *ad nauseam. Well,* Jack reminded himself, *I wasn't watching much TV back then, was I?* But it all really came down to one thing: The people you dealt with as President were very often people whom you would never willingly invite into your home, and it had nothing to do with any lack of manners or personal charm, which, perversely, they usually displayed in abundance. One of the things Arnie had told Jack early on was that the main requirement to enter the political profession was nothing more nor less than the ability to be pleasant to people whom you despised, and then to do business with them as if they were bosom friends.

"So, what do we know about our heathen Chinese friends?" Winston asked. "The current ones, that is."

"Not much. We're working on that. The Agency has a long way to go, though we are started on the road. We still get intercepts. Their phone system is leaky, and they use their cell phones too much without encrypting them. Some of them are men of commendable

vigor, George, but nothing too terribly scandalous that we know about. Quite a few of them have secretaries who are very close to their bosses."

The Secretary of the Treasury managed a chuckle. "Well, a lot of that going around, and not just in Beijing."

"Even on Wall Street?" Jack inquired, with a theatrically raised eyebrow.

"I can't say for sure, sir, but I have heard the occasional rumor." Winston grinned at the diversion.

And even right here in this room, Ryan reminded himself. They'd changed the rug long since, of course, and all the furniture, except for the Presidential desk. One of the problems associated with holding this job was the baggage piled on your back by previous officeholders. They said the public had a short memory, but that wasn't true, was it? Not when you heard the whispers, followed by chuckles, and accompanied by knowing looks and the occasional gesture that made you feel dirty to be the subject of the chuckles. And all you could do about it was to live your life as best you could, but even then the best you could hope for was for people to think you were smart enough not to get caught, *because they* all *did it, right?* One of the problems with living in a free country was that anyone outside this palace/prison could think and say whatever he wished. And Ryan didn't even have the right that any other citizen might have to punch out whatever twit said something about his character that the twit was unwilling to back up. It hardly seemed fair, but as a practical matter, it would force Ryan to visit a lot of corner bars, and break a lot of knuckles, to little gain. And sending sworn cops or armed Marines out to handle matters wasn't exactly a proper use of Presidential power, was it?

Jack knew that he was far too thin-skinned to hold this job. Professional politicians typically had hides that made a rhinoceros's look like rose petals, because they expected to have things hurled at them, some true, some not. By cultivating that thick covering, they attenuated the pain somehow, until eventually people stopped hurling things at them, or such was the theory. Maybe it actually worked for some. Or maybe the bastards just didn't have consciences. You paid your money and you took your choice.

But Ryan did have a conscience. That was a choice he'd made long before. You still had to look in the mirror once a day, usually at shaving time, and there was no easy fix for not being able to like the face you saw there.

"Okay, back to the PRC's problems, George," the President commanded.

"They're going to juice up their trade—one way, that is. They're discouraging their own citizens from buying American, but all they

can sell, they sell. Including some of Mao's young virgins, probably."

"What do we have to prove that?"

"Jack, I pay close attention to results, and I have friends in various businesses who shake the bushes and talk to people over drinks. What they learn frequently gets back to me. You know, a lot of ethnic Chinese have some weird medical condition. You get one drink into them, it's like four or five for us—and the second drink is like chugging a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's, but some of the dummies try to keep up anyway, some hospitality thing, maybe. Anyway, when that happens, well, the talk becomes freer, y'know? It's been going on quite a while, but lately Mark Gant set up a little program. Senior executives who go to certain special places, well, I *do* own the Secret Service now, and the Secret Service *does* specialize in economic crimes, right? And a lot of my old friends know who I am and what I do now, and they cooperate pretty nice, and so I get a lot of good stuff to write up. It mainly goes to my senior people across the street."

"I'm impressed, George. You cross-deck it to CIA?"

"I suppose I could, but I was afraid they'd get all pissy over turf rights and stuff."

Ryan rolled his eyes at that bit of information. "Not Ed Foley. He's a real pro from way back, and the bureaucracy over at Langley hasn't captured him yet. Have him over to your office for lunch. He won't mind what you're doing. Same thing with Mary Pat. She runs the Directorate of Operations. MP's a real cowgirl, and she wants results, too."

"Duly noted. You know, Jack, it's amazing how much people talk, and the things they talk about under the proper circumstances."

"How'd you make all that money on The Street, George?" Ryan asked.

"Mainly by knowing a little more than the guy across the street," Winston replied.

"Works the same way for me here. Okay, if our little friends go forward with this, what should we do?"

"Jack—no, now it's *Mr. President*—we've been financing Chinese industrial expansion for quite a few years now. They sell things to us, we pay cash for them, and then they either keep the money for their own purposes on the international money markets, or they purchase things they want from other countries, often things they could as easily buy from us, but maybe half a percent more expensive from an American manufacturer. The reason it's called 'trade' is that you theoretically exchange something of yours for something of the other guy's—just like kids with baseball cards, okay?—but they're not playing the game that way. They're also dumping some products just to get dollars, selling items here for less than what they sell them to

their own citizens. Now, that is technically in violation of a couple federal statutes. Okay," Winston shrugged, "it's a statute we enforce somewhat selectively, but it *is* on the books, and it *is* the law. Toss in the Trade Reform Act that we passed a few years ago because of the games the Japs were playing—"

"I remember, George. It kinda started a little shooting war in which some people got killed," POTUS observed dryly. Worst of all, perhaps, it had begun the process that had ended up with Ryan in this very room.

SecTreas nodded. "True, but it's still the law, and it was not a bill of attainder meant only to apply to Japan. Jack, if we apply the same trade laws to China that the Chinese apply to us, well, it'll put a major crimp in their foreign-exchange accounts. Is that a bad thing? No, not with the trade imbalance we have with them now. You know, Jack, if they start building automobiles and play the same game they're playing on everything else, our trade deficit could get real ugly real fast, and frankly I'm tired of having us finance their economic development, which they then execute with heavy equipment bought in Japan and Europe. If they want trade with the United States of America, fine, but let it be *trade*. We can hold our own in any truly fair trade war with any country, because American workers can produce as well as anybody in the world and better than most. But if we let them cheat us, we're being cheated, Jack, and I don't like that here any more than I do around a card table. And here, buddy, the stakes are a hell of a lot higher."

"I hear you, George. But we don't want to put a gun to their head, do we? You don't do that to a nation-state, especially a *big* nation-state, unless you have a solid reason for doing so. Our economy is chugging along rather nicely now, isn't it? We can afford to be a little magnanimous."

"Maybe, Jack. What I was thinking was a little friendly encouragement on our part, not a pointed gun exactly. The gun is always there in the holster—the big gun is most-favored-nation status, and they know it, and we know they know it. TRA is something we can apply to any country, and I happen to think the idea behind the law is fundamentally sound. It's been fairly useful as a club to show to a lot of countries, but we've never tried it on the PRC. How come?"

POTUS shrugged, with no small degree of embarrassment. "Because I haven't had the chance to yet, and before me too many people in this town just wanted to kiss their collective ass."

"Leaves a bad taste in your mouth when you do that, Mr. President, doesn't it?"

"It can," Jack agreed. "Okay, you want to talk this over with Scott Adler. The ambassadors all work for him."

"Who do we have in Beijing?"

"Carl Hitch. Career FSO, late fifties, supposed to be very good, and this is his sunset assignment."

"Payoff for all those years of holding coats?"

Ryan nodded. "Something like that, I suppose. I'm not entirely sure. State wasn't my bureaucracy." CIA, he didn't add, was bad enough.

It was a much nicer office, Bart Mancuso thought. And the shoulderboards on his undress whites were a little heavier now, with the four stars instead of the two he'd worn as COMSUBPAC. But no more. His former boss, Admiral Dave Seaton, had fleeted up to Chief of Naval Operations, and then the President (or someone close to him) had decided that Mancuso was the guy to be the next Commander in Chief, Pacific. And so he now worked in the same office once occupied by Chester Nimitz, and other fine—and some brilliant—naval officers since. It was quite a stretch since Plebe Summer at Annapolis, lo those many years before, especially since he'd had only a single command at sea, USS *Dallas,* though that command tour had been a noteworthy one, complete with two missions he could *still* tell no one about. And having been shipmates once and briefly with the sitting President probably hadn't hurt his career very much.

The new job came with a plush official house, a sizable team of sailors and chiefs to look after him and his wife—the boys were all away at college now—the usual drivers, official cars, and, now, armed bodyguards, because, remarkably enough, there were people about who didn't much care for admirals. As a theater commander Mancuso now reported directly to the Secretary of Defense, Anthony Bretano, who in turn reported directly to President Ryan. In return, Mancuso got a lot of new perks. Now he had direct access to all manner of intelligence information, including the holy of holies, sources and methods—where the information came from, and how we'd gotten it out—because as America's principal executor for a quarter of the globe's surface, he had to know it all, so that he'd know what to advise the SecDef, who would, in turn, advise the President of CINCPAC's views, intentions, and desires.

The Pacific, Mancuso thought, having just completed his first morning intel brief, looked okay. It hadn't always been like that, of course, including recently, when he'd fought a fairly major connict —"war" was a word that had fallen very much out of favor in civilized discourse—with the Japanese, and that had included the loss of two of his nuclear submarines, killed with treachery and deceit, as Mancuso thought of it, though a more objective observer might have called the tactics employed by the enemy clever and effective.

Heretofore he'd been notified of the locations and activities of his

various submarines, but now he also got told about his carriers, tin cans, cruisers, and replenishment ships, plus Marines, and even Army and Air Force assets, which were technically his as a theater commander-in-chief. All that meant that the morning intel brief lasted into a third cup of coffee, by the end of which he looked longingly to the executive head, just a few feet away from his desk. Hell, his intelligence coordinator, called a J-2, was, in fact, an Army one-star doing his "joint" tour, and, in fairness, doing it pretty well. This brigadier, named Mike Lahr, had taught political science at West Point, in addition to other assignments. Having to consider political factors was a new development in Mancuso's career, but it came with the increased command territory. CINCPAC had done his "joint" tour along the way, of course, and was theoretically conversant with the abilities and orientation of his brother armed services, but whatever confidence he'd had along those lines diminished in the face of having the command responsibility to utilize such forces in a professional way. Well, he had subordinate commanders in those other services to advise him, but it was his job to know more than just how to ask questions, and for Mancuso that meant he'd have to go out and get his clothes dirty seeing the practical side, because that was where the kids assigned to his theater would shed blood if he didn't do his job right.

The team was a joint venture of the Atlantic Richfield Company, British Petroleum, and the largest Russian oil exploration company. The last of the three had the most experience but the least expertise, and the most primitive methods. This was not to say that the Russian prospectors were stupid. Far from it. Two of them were gifted geologists, with theoretical insights that impressed their American and British colleagues. Better still, they'd grasped the advantages of the newest exploration equipment about as quickly as the engineers who'd designed it.

It had been known for many years that this part of eastern Siberia was a geological twin to the North Slope region of Alaska and Northern Canada, which had turned into vast oil fields for their parent countries to exploit. The hard part had been getting the proper equipment there to see if the similarity was more than just cosmetic.

Getting the gear into the right places had been a minor nightmare. Brought by train into southeastern Siberia from the port of Vladivostok, the "thumper trucks"—they were far too heavy to airlift—had then spent a month going cross-country, north from Magdagachi, through Aim and Ust Maya, finally getting to work east of Kazachye.

But what they had found had staggered them. From Kazachye on the River Yana all the way to Kolymskaya on the Kolyma was an oil

field to rival the Persian Gulf. The thumper trucks and portable computer—carrying seismic-survey vehicles—had shown a progression of perfect underground dome formations in stunning abundance, some of them barely two thousand feet down, mere tens of vertical yards from the permafrost, and drilling through that would be about as hard as slicing a wedding cake with a cavalryman's saber. The scope of the field could not be ascertained without drilling test wells—over a hundred such wells, the chief American engineer thought, just from the sheer scope of the field—but no one had ever seen as promising or as vast a natural deposit of petroleum during his professional lifetime. The issues of exploitation would not be small ones, of course. Except for Antarctica itself, there was no place on the planet with a less attractive climate. Getting the production gear in here would take years of multistage investment, building airfields, probably building ports for the cargo ships that could alone deliver the heavy equipment—and then only in the brief summer months—needed to construct the pipeline which would be needed to get the oil out to market. Probably through Vladivostok, the Americans thought. The Russians could sell it from there, and supertankers, more precisely called VLCCs or ULCCs—for Very Large to Ultra-Large Crude Carriers—would move it out across the Pacific, maybe to Japan, maybe to America or elsewhere, wherever oil was needed, which was just about everywhere. From those users would come hard currency. It would take many more years until Russia could build the wherewithal needed for its own industries and consumers to use the oil, but, as such things happened, the cash generated from selling the Siberian crude could then be flipped and used to purchase oil from other sources, which would be much more easily transported to Russian ports and thence into existing Russian pipelines. The cash difference of selling and buying, as opposed to building a monstrous and monstrously expensive pipeline, was negligible in any case, and such decisions were usually made for political rather than economic reasons.

At precisely the same time, and only six hundred miles, or nine hundred sixty or so kilometers, away, another geology team was in the eastern extreme of the Sayan mountain range. Some of the semi-nomadic tribes in the area, who had made their living for centuries by herding reindeer, had brought into a government office some shiny yellow rocks. Few people in the world have been unaware of what such rocks mean, at least for the preceding thirty centuries, and a survey team had been dispatched from Moscow State University, still the nation's most prestigious school. They had been able to fly in, since their equipment was far lighter, and the last few hundred kilometers had been done on horseback, a wonderful anachronism for

the survey team of academics, who were far more used to riding Moscow's fine subway system.

The first thing they'd found was an eighty-ish man living alone with his herd and a rifle to fend off wolves. This citizen had lived alone since the death of his wife, twenty years before, quite forgotten by the changing governments of his country, known to exist only by a few shopkeepers in a dreary village thirty kilometers to the south, and his mental state reflected his long-term isolation. He managed to shoot three or four wolves every year, and he kept the pelts as any hunter/herdsman might, but with a difference. First he took the pelts and, weighting them down with stones, set them in the small river that ran near his hut.

In Western literature there is the well-known story of Jason and the Argonauts, and their heroic quest for the Golden Fleece. It was not known until recently that the legend of the artifact sought was quite real: The tribesmen of Asia Minor had set the skins of sheep in their streams to catch the gold dust being washed down from deposits higher up, changing the pale wool fibers into something almost magical in appearance.

It was no different here. The wolf pelts the geologists found hanging inside the old soldier's hut looked on first inspection to be sculptures by Renaissance masters, or even artisans of the Pharaohs of dynastic Egypt, they were so evenly coated, and then the explorers found that each pelt weighed a good sixty kilograms, and there were thirty-four of them! Sitting down with him over the necessary bottle of fine vodka, they learned that his name was Pavel Petrovich Gogol, that he'd fought against the Fascisti in the Great Patriotic War as a sniper, and, remarkably, was twice a Hero of the Soviet Union for his marksmanship, mainly in the battles around Kiev and Warsaw. A somewhat grateful nation had allowed him to return to his ancestral lands—he was, it turned out, descended from the entrepreneurial Russians who'd come to Siberia in the early nineteenth century—where he'd been forgotten by the bureaucrats who never really wondered much where the reindeer meat eaten by the locals came from, or who might be cashing his pension checks to buy ammunition for his old bolt-action rifle. Pavel Petrovich knew the value of the gold he found, but he'd never spent any of it, as he found his solitary life quite satisfactory. The gold deposit a few kilometers upstream from the place where the wolves went for their last swim—as Pavel Petrovich described it with a twinkle in the eye and a snort of vodka—turned out to be noteworthy, perhaps as much as the South African strike of the mid-nineteenth century, and *that* had turned into the richest gold mine in the history of the world. The local gold had not been discovered for several reasons, mainly relating to the dreadful

Siberian climate, which had, first, prevented a detailed exploratory survey, and, second, covered the local streams with ice so much of the time that the gold dust in the streambeds had never been noticed.

Both the oil and rock survey teams had traveled into the field with satellite phones, the more quickly to report what they found. This both teams did, coincidentally on the same day.

The Iridium satellite-communications system they used was a huge breakthrough in global communications. With an easily portable instrument, one could communicate with the low-altitude constellation of dedicated communications satellites which cross-linked their signals at the speed of light (which was *almost* instantaneous, but not quite) to conventional communications birds, and from there to the ground, which was where most people were most of the time.

The Iridium system was designed to speed communications worldwide. It was *not,* however, designed to be a secure system. There were ways to do that, but they all required the individual users to make their security arrangements. It was now theoretically possible to get commercially available 128-bit encryption systems, and these were extremely difficult to break even by the most sophisticated of nation-states and their black services . . . or so the salesmen said. But the remarkable thing was that few people bothered. Their laziness made life a lot easier for the National Security Agency, located between Baltimore and Washington at Fort Meade, Maryland. There, a computer system called ECHELON was programmed to listen in on every conversation that crossed the ether, and to lock in on certain codewords. Most of those words were nouns with national-security implications, but since the end of the Cold War, NSA and other agencies had paid more attention to economic matters, and so some of the new words were "oil," "deposit," "crude," "mine," "gold," and others, all in thirty-eight languages. When such a word crossed ECHELON'S electronic ear, the continuing conversation was recorded onto electronic media and transcribed and, where necessary, translated—all by computer. It was by no means a perfect system, and the nuances of language were still difficult for a computer program to unravel—not to mention the tendency of many people to mutter into the phone—but where a goof occurred, the original conversation would be reviewed by a linguist, of which the National Security Agency employed quite a few.

The parallel reports of the oil and gold strikes came in only five hours apart, and made their way swiftly up the chain of command, ending in a "flash" priority Special National Intelligence Estimate (called a SNIE, and pronounced "snee") destined for the President's desk right after his next breakfast, to be delivered by his National

Security Adviser, Dr. Benjamin Goodley. Before that, the data would be examined by a team from the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Science and Technology, with a big assist from experts on the payroll of the Petroleum Institute in Washington, some of whose members had long enjoyed a cordial relationship with various government agencies. The preliminary evaluation—carefully announced and presented as such, *preliminary,* lest someone be charged for being wrong if the estimate proved to be incorrect someday—used a few carefully chosen superlatives.

Damn," the President observed at 8:10 EST. "Okay, Ben, how big are they really?"

"You don't trust our technical weenies?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"Ben, as long as I worked on the other side of the river, I never once caught them wrong on something like this, but damned if I didn't catch them *under*estimating stuff." Ryan paused for a moment. "But, Jesus, if these are lowball numbers, the implications are pretty big."

"Mr. President"—Goodley was not part of Ryan's inner circie —"we're talking billions, exactly how many nobody knows, but call it two hundred billion dollars in hard currency earnings over the next five to seven years at minimum. That's money they can use."

"And at maximum?"

Goodley leaned back for a second and took a breath. "I had to check. A trillion is a *thousand* billion. On the sunny side of that number. This is pure speculation, but the guys at the Petroleum Institute that CIA uses, the guys across the river tell me, spent most of their time saying 'Holy shit!' "

"Good news for the Russians," Jack said, flipping through the printed SNIE.

"Indeed it is, sir."

"About time they got lucky," POTUS thought aloud. "Okay, get a copy of this to George Winston. We want his evaluation of what this will mean to our friends in Moscow."

"I was planning to call some people at Atlantic Richfield. They were in on the exploration. I imagine they'll share in the proceeds. Their president is a guy named Sam Sherman. Know him?"

Ryan shook his head. "I know the name, but we've never met. Think I ought to change that?"

"If you want hard information, it can't hurt."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, maybe I'll have Ellen track him down." Ellen Sumter, his personal secretary, was located fifteen feet away through the sculpted door to his right. "What else?"

"They're still beating bushes for the people who blew up the pimp

in Moscow. Nothing new to report on that, though."

"Would be nice to know what's going on in the world, wouldn't it?"

"Could be worse, sir," Goodley told his boss.

"Right." Ryan tossed the paper copy of the morning brief on his desk. "What else?"

Goodley shook his head. *"And that's the way it is* this morning, Mr. President." Goodley got a smile for that.

CHAPTER 4

Knob Rattling

It didn't matter what city or country you were in, Mike Reilly told himself. Police work was all the same. You talked to possible witnesses, you talked to the people involved, you talked to the victim.

But not the victim this time. Grisha Avseyenko would never speak again. The pathologist assigned to the case commented that he hadn't seen such a mess since his uniformed service in Afghanistan. But that was to be expected. The RPG was designed to punch holes in armored vehicles and concrete bunkers, which was a more difficult task than destroying a private-passenger automobile, even one so expensive as that stopped in Dzerzhinskiy Square. That meant that the body parts were very difficult to identify. It turned out that half the jaw had enough repaired teeth to say with great certainty that the decedent had indeed been Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko, and DNA samples would ultimately confirm this (the blood type also matched). There hadn't been enough of his body to identify—the face, for example, had been totally removed, and so had the left forearm, which had once borne a tattoo. The decedent's death had come instantaneously, the pathologist reported, after the processed remains had been packed into a plastic container, which in turn found its way into an oaken box for later cremation, probably—the Moscow Militia had to ascertain whether any family members existed, and what disposition for the body they might wish. Lieutenant Provalov assumed that cremation would be the disposal method of choice. It was, in its way, quick and clean, and it was easier and less expensive to find a resting place for a small box or urn than for a full-sized coffin with a cadaver in it.

Provalov took the pathology report back from his American colleague. He hadn't expected it to reveal anything of interest, but one of the things he'd learned from his association with the American FBI was that you checked everything thoroughly, since predicting how a criminal case would break was like trying to pick a ten-play football pool two weeks before the games were played. The human minds who committed crimes were simply too random in their operation for any sort of prediction.

And that had been the easy part. The pathology report on the driver

had essentially been useless. The only data in it of any use at all had been blood and tissue types (which could be checked with his military-service records, if they could be located), since the body had been so thoroughly shredded as to leave not a single identifying mark or characteristic, though, perversely, his identity papers had survived in his wallet, and so, they probably knew who he had been. The same was true of the woman in the car, whose purse had survived virtually intact on the seat to the right of her, along with her ID papers . . . which was a lot more than could be said for her face and upper torso. Reilly looked at the photos of the other victims—well, one presumed they matched up, he told himself. The driver was grossly ordinary, perhaps a little fitter than was the average here. The woman, yet another of the pimp's high-priced hookers with a photo in her police file, had been a dish, worthy of a Hollywood screen test, and certainly pretty enough for a *Playboy* centerfold. Well, no more.

"So, Mishka, have you handled enough of these crimes that it no longer touches you?" Provalov asked.

"Honest answer?" Reilly asked, then shook his head. "Not really. We don't handle that many homicides, except the ones that happen on Federal property—Indian reservations or military bases. I have handled some kidnappings, though, and those you never get used to." Especially, Reilly didn't add, since kidnapping for money was a dead crime in America. Now children were kidnapped for their sexual utility, and most often killed in five hours, often before the FBI could even respond to the initial request for assistance from the local police department. Of all the crimes which Mike Reilly had worked, those were by far the worst, the sort after which you retired to the local FBI bar—every field division had one—and had a few too many as you sat quietly with equally morose and quiet colleagues, with the occasional oaths that you were going to get this mutt no matter what it took. And, mostly, the mutts were apprehended, indicted, and then convicted, and the lucky ones went to death row. Those convicted in states without a death penalty went into the general prison population, where they discovered what armed robbers thought of the abusers of children. "But I see what you mean, Oleg Gregoriyevich. It's the one thing you have trouble explaining to an ordinary citizen." It was that the worst thing about a crime scene or autopsy photo was the *sadness* of it, how the victim was stripped not merely of life, but of all dignity. And these photos were particularly grisly. Whatever beauty this Maria Ivanovna Sablin had once had was only a memory now, and then mainly memories held by men who'd rented access to her body. *Who mourned for a dead whore?* Reilly asked himself. Not the johns, who'd move on to a new one with scarcely a thought. Probably not even her own colleagues in the trade of flesh and desire, and

whatever family she'd left behind would probably remember her not as the child who'd grown up to follow a bad path, but as a lovely person who'd defiled herself, pretending passion, but feeling no more than the trained physician who'd picked her organs apart on the dented steel table of the city morgue. Is that what prostitutes were, Reilly wondered, pathologists of sex? A victimless crime, some said. Reilly wished that such people could look at these photos and see just how "victimless" it was when women sold their bodies.

"Anything else, Oleg?" Reilly asked.

"We continue to interview people with knowledge of the deceased." Followed by a shrug.

He offended the wrong people," an informant said, with a shrug of his own that showed how absurdly obvious the answer to the preceding question was. How else could a person of Avseyenko's stature turn up dead in so spectacular a way?

"And what people are they?" the militiaman asked, not expecting a meaningful answer, but you asked the question anyway because you didn't know what the answer was until you did.

"His colleagues from State Security," the informant suggested.

"Oh?"

"Who else could have killed him in that way? One of his girls would have used a knife. A business rival from the street would have used a pistol or a larger knife, but an RPG . . . be serious, where does one get one of those?"

He wasn't the first to voice that thought, of course, though the local police did have to allow for the fact that all manner of weapons, heavy and light, had escaped one way or another from the coffers of what had once been called the Red Army into the active marketplace of criminal weapons.

"So, do you have any names for us?" the militia sergeant asked.

"Not a name, but I know the face. He's tall and powerfully built, like a soldier, reddish hair, fair skin, some freckles left over from his youth, green eyes." The informant paused. "His friends call him 'the boy,' because his appearance is so youthful. He was State Security once, but not a spy and not a catcher of spies. He was something else there, but I am not sure what."

The militia sergeant started taking more precise notes at this point, his pencil marks far more legible and much darker on the yellow page.

"And this man was displeased with Avseyenko?"

"So I have heard."

"And the reason for his displeasure?"

"That I do not know, but Gregoriy Filipovich had a way of offending men. He was very skilled at handling women, of course. For that he

had a true gift, but the gift did not translate into his dealings with men. Many thought him a *zhopnik,* but he was not one of those, of course. He had a different woman on his arm every night, and none of them were ugly, but for some reason he didn't get along well with men, even those from State Security, where, he said, he was once a great national asset."

"Is that a fact," the militia sergeant observed, bored again. If there was anything criminals liked to do, it was boast. He'd heard it all a thousand times or more.

"Oh, yes. Gregoriy Filipovich claims to have supplied mistresses for all manner of foreigners, including some of ministerial rank, and says that they continue to supply valuable information to Mother Russia. I believe it," the informer added, editorializing again. "For a week with one of those angels, I would speak much."

And who wouldn't? the militiaman wondered with a yawn. "So, *how* did Avseyenko offend such powerful men?" the cop asked again.

"I have told you I do not know. Talk to 'the boy,' perhaps he will know."

"It is said that Gregoriy was beginning to import drugs," the cop said next, casting his hook into a different hole, and wondering what fish might lurk in the still waters.

The informant nodded. "That is true. It was said. But I never saw any evidence of it."

"Who would have seen evidence of it?"

Another shrug. "This I do not know. One of his girls, perhaps. I never understood how he planned to distribute what he thought about importing. To use the girls was logical, of course, but dangerous for them—and for him, because his whores would not have been loyal to him in the face of a trip to the camps. So, then, what does that leave?" the informant asked rhetorically. "He would have to set up an entirely new organization, and there were also dangers in doing that, were there not? So, yes, I believe he was thinking about importing drugs for sale, and making vast sums of money from it, but Gregoriy was not a man who wished to go to a prison, and I think he was merely thinking about it, perhaps talking a little, but not much. I do not think he had made his final decision. I do not think he actually imported anything before he met his end."

"Rivals with the same ideas?" the cop asked next.

"There are people who can find cocaine and other drugs for you, as you well know."

The cop looked up. In fact, the militia sergeant *didn't* know that for certain. He'd heard rumbles and rumors, but not statements of fact from informants he trusted (insofar as any cop in any city truly trusted *any* informant). As with many things, there was a buzz on the streets

of Moscow, but like most Moscow cops he expected it to show up first in the Black Sea port of Odessa, a city whose criminal activity went back to the czars and which today, with the restoration of free trade with the rest of the world, tended to lead Russia in—well, led Russia *to* all forms of illicit activity. If there was an active drug trade in Moscow, it was so new and so small that he hadn't stumbled across it yet. He made a mental note to check with Odessa, to see what if anything was happening down there along those lines.

"And what people might they be?" the sergeant asked. If there was a growing distribution network in Moscow, he might as well learn about it.

Nomuri's job for Nippon Electric Company involved selling high-end desktop computers and peripherals. For him that meant the PRC government, whose senior bureaucrats had to have the newest and best of everything, from cars to mistresses, paid for in all cases by the government, which in turn took its money from the people, whom the bureaucrats represented and protected to the best of their abilities. As in many things, the PRC could have bought American brands, but in this case it chose to purchase the slightly less expensive (and less capable) computers from Japan, in the same way that it preferred to buy Airbus airlines from the European maker rather than Boeings from America—that had been a card played a few years before to teach the Americans a lesson. America had briefly resented it, then had quickly forgotten about it, in the way America seemed to handle all such slights, which was quite a contrast to the Chinese, who never forgot anything.

When President Ryan had announced the reestablishment of their official recognition of the Republic of China government on Taiwan, the repercussions had thundered through the corridors of power in Beijing like the main shocks of a major earthquake. Nomuri hadn't been here long enough yet to see the cold fury the move had generated, but the aftershocks were significant enough, and he'd heard echoes of it since his arrival in Beijing. The questions directed at himself were sometimes so direct and so demanding of an explanation that he'd momentarily wondered if his cover might have been blown, and his interlocutors had known that he was a CIA "illegal" field officer in the capital of the People's Republic of China, entirely without a diplomatic cover. But it hadn't been that. It was just a continuing echo of pure political rage. Paradoxically, the Chinese government was itself trying to shove that rage aside because they, too, had to do business with the United States of America, now their number one trading partner, and the source of vast amounts of surplus cash, which their government needed to do the things which Nomuri

was tasked to find out about. And so, here he was, in the outer office of one of the nation's senior officials.

"Good day," he said, with a bow and a smile to the secretary. She worked for a senior minister named Fang Gan, he knew, whose office was close by. She was surprisingly well dressed for a semi-ordinary worker, in a nation where fashion statements were limited to the color of the buttons one wore on the Mao jacket that was as much a part of the uniform of civilian government workers as was the gray-green wool of the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army.

"Good day," the young lady said in reply. "Are you Nomuri?"

"Yes, and you are . . . ?"

"Lian Ming," the secretary replied.

An interesting name, Chester thought. "Lian" in Mandarin meant "graceful willow." She was short, like most Chinese women, with a square-ish face and dark eyes. Her least attractive feature was her hair, short and cut in a manner that harkened back to the worst of the 1950s in America, and then only for children in Appalachian trailer parks. For all that, it was a classically Chinese face in its ethnicity, and one much favored in this tradition-bound nation. The look in her eyes, at least, suggested intelligence and education.

"You are here to discuss computers and printers," she said neutrally, having absorbed some of her boss's sense of importance and centrality of place in the universe.

"Yes, I am. I think you will find our new pin-matrix printer particularly appealing."

"And why is that?" Ming asked.

"Do you speak English?" Nomuri asked in that language.

"Certainly," Ming replied, in the same.

"Then it becomes simple to explain. If you transliterate Mandarin into English, the spelling, I mean, then the printer transposes into Mandarin ideographs automatically, like this," he explained, pulling a sheet of paper from his plastic folder and handing it to the secretary. "We are also working on a laser-printer system which will be even smoother in its appearance."

"Ah," the secretary observed. The quality of the characters was superb, easily the equal of the monstrous typewriting machine that secretaries had to use for official documents—or else have them hand-printed and then further processed on copying machines, mainly Canons, also of Japanese manufacture. The process was time-consuming, tedious, and much hated by the secretarial staff. "And what of inflection variations?"

Not a bad question, Nomuri noted. The Chinese language was highly dependent on inflection. The tone with which a word was delivered determined its actual meaning from as many as four distinct

options, and it was also a determining factor in which ideograph it designated in turn.

"Do the characters appear on the computer screen in that way as well?" the secretary asked.

"They can, with just a click of the mouse," Nomuri assured her. "There may be a 'software' problem, insofar as you have to think simultaneously in two languages," he warned her with a smile.

Ming laughed. "Oh, we always do that here."

Her teeth would have benefited from a good orthodontist, Nomuri thought, but there weren't many of them in Beijing, along with the other bourgeois medical specialties, like reconstructive surgery. For all that, he'd gotten her to laugh, and that was something.

"Would you like to see me demonstrate our new capabilities?" the CIA field officer asked.

"Sure, why not?" She appeared a little disappointed that he wasn't able to do so right here and now.

"Excellent, but I will need you to authorize my bringing the hardware into the building. Your security people, you see."

How did I forget that? he saw her ask herself, blinking rather hard in a mild self-rebuke. Better to set the hook all the way.

"Do you have the authority for that, or must you consult someone more senior?" The most vulnerable point in any communist bureaucrat was their sense of importance-of-place.

A knowing smile: "Oh, yes, I can authorize that on my own authority."

A smile of his own: "Excellent. I can be here with my equipment at, say, ten in the morning."

"Good, the main entrance. They will be awaiting you."

"Thank you, Comrade Ming," Nomuri said with his best officious (short) bow to the young secretary—and, probably, mistress to her minister, the field officer thought. This one had possibilities, but he'd have to be careful with her both for himself and for her, he thought to himself while waiting for the elevator. That's why Langley paid him so much, not counting the princely salary from Nippon Electric Company that was his to keep. He needed it to survive here. The price of living was bad enough for a Chinese. For a foreigner, it was worse, because for foreigners everything was—had to be—special. The apartments were special—and almost certainly bugged. The food he bought in a special shop was more expensive—and Nomuri didn't object to that, since it was also almost certainly healthier.

China was what Nomuri called a thirty-foot country. Everything looked okay, even impressive, until you got within thirty feet of it. Then you saw that the parts didn't fit terribly well. He'd found it could be especially troublesome getting into an elevator, of all things.

Dressed as he was in Western-made clothing (the Chinese thought of Japan as a Western country, which would have amused a lot of people, both in Japan and the West), he was immediately spotted as a *qwai*—a foreign devil—even before people saw his face. When that happened, the looks changed, sometimes to mere curiosity, sometimes to outright hostility, because the Chinese weren't like the Japanese; they weren't trained as thoroughly to conceal their feelings, or maybe they just didn't give a damn, the CIA officer thought behind his own blanked-out poker face. He'd learned the practice from his time in Tokyo, and learned it well, which explained both why he had a good job with NEC and why he'd never been burned in the field.

The elevator ran smoothly enough, but somehow it just didn't feel right. Maybe it was, again, because the pieces didn't quite seem to fit together. Nomuri hadn't had that feeling in Japan. For all their faults, the Japanese were competent engineers. The same was doubtless true of Taiwan, but Taiwan, like Japan, had a capitalist system which rewarded performance by giving it business and profits and comfortable salaries for the workers who turned out good work. The PRC was still learning how to do that. They exported a lot, but to this point the things exported were either fairly simple in design (like tennis shoes), or were manufactured mostly in strict accordance to standards established elsewhere and then slavishly copied here in China (like electronic gadgets). This was already changing, of course. The Chinese people were as clever as any, and even communism could keep them down only so long. Yet the industrialists who were beginning to innovate and offer the world genuinely new products were treated by their government masters as . . . well, as unusually productive peasants at best. That was not a happy thought for the useful men who occasionally wondered over drinks why it was that they, the ones who brought wealth into their nation, were treated as . . . unusually productive peasants, by the ones who deemed themselves the masters of their country and their culture. Nomuri walked outside, toward his parked automobile, wondering how long *that* could last.

This whole political and economic policy was schizophrenic, Nomuri knew. Sooner or later, the industrialists would rise up and demand that they be given a voice in the political operation of their country. Perhaps—doubtless—such whispers had happened already. If so, word had gotten back to the whisperers that the tallest tree *is* quickly cut for lumber, and the well with the sweetest water *is* first to be drunk dry, and he who shouts too loudly is first to be silenced. So, maybe the Chinese industrial leaders were just biding their time and looking around the rooms where they gathered, wondering which of their number would be the first to take the risk, and maybe he would be rewarded with fame and honor and later memories of heroism—or

maybe, more likely, his family would be billed for the 7.62x39 cartridge needed to send him into the next life, which Buddha had promised but which the government contemptuously denied.

So, they haven't made it public yet. That's a little odd," Ryan thought aloud.

"It is," Ben Goodley agreed with a nod.

"Any idea why they're sitting on the news?"

"No, sir . . . unless somebody is hoping to cash in on it somehow, but exactly how . . ." CARDSHARP shrugged.

"Buy stock in Atlantic Richfield? Some mine-machine builder—"

"Or just buy options in some land in eastern Siberia," George Winston suggested. "Not that such a thing is ever done by the honorable servants of the people." The President laughed hard enough that he had to set his coffee down.

"Certainly not in this administration," POTUS pointed out. One of the benefits the media had with Ryan's team was that so many of them were plutocrats of one magnitude or another, not "working" men. It was as if the media thought that money just appeared in the hands of some fortunate souls by way of miracle . . . or some unspoken and undiscovered criminal activity. But never by work. It was the oddest of political prejudices that wealth didn't come from work, but rather from something else, a something never really described, but always implied to be suspect.

"Yeah, Jack," Winston said, with a laugh of his own. "We've got enough that we can afford to be honest. Besides, who the hell needs an oil field or gold mine?"

"Further developments on the size of either?"

Goodley shook his head. "No, sir. The initial information is firming up nicely. Both discoveries are big. The oil especially, but the gold as well."

"The gold thing will distort the market somewhat," SecTreas opined. "Depending on how fast it comes on stream. It might also cause a shutdown of the mine we have operating in the Dakotas."

"Why?" Goodley asked.

"If the Russian strike is as good as the data suggests, they'll be producing gold for about twenty-five percent less than what it costs there, despite environmental conditions. The attendant reduction of the world price of gold will then make Dakota unprofitable to operate." Winston shrugged. "So, they'll mothball the site and sit until the price goes back up. Probably after the initial flurry of production, our Russian friends will scale things back so that they can cash in in a more, uh, orderly way. What'll happen is that the other producers, mainly South Africans, will meet with them and offer advice on how

to exploit that find more efficiently. Usually the new kids listen to advice from the old guys. The Russians have coordinated diamond production with the De Beers people for a long time, back to when the country was called the Soviet Union. Business is business, even for commies. So, you going to offer our help to our friends in Moscow?" TRADER asked SWORDSMAN.

Ryan shook his head. "I can't yet. I can't let them know that we know. Sergey Nikolay'ch would start wondering how, and he'd probably come up with SIGINT, and that's a method of gathering information that we try to keep covert." Probably a waste of time, Ryan knew, but the game had rules, and everyone played by those rules. Golovko could guess at signals intelligence, but he'd never quite know. I'll probably never stop being a spook, the President admitted to himself. Keeping and guarding secrets was one of the things that came so easily to him—a little too easily, Arnie van Damm often warned. A modern democratic government was supposed to be more open, like a torn curtain on the bedroom window that allowed people to look in whenever they wished. That was an idea Ryan had never grown to appreciate. He was the one who decided what people were allowed to know and when they'd know it. It was a point of view he followed even when he knew it to be wrong, for no other reason than it was how he'd learned government service at the knee of an admiral named James Greer. Old habits were hard to break.

"I'll call Sam Sherman at Atlantic Richfield," Winston suggested. "If he breaks it to me, then it's in the open, or at least open enough."

"Can we trust him?"

Winston nodded. "Sam plays by the rules. We can't ask him to screw over his own board, but he knows what flag to salute, Jack."

"Okay, George, a discreet inquiry."

"Yes, sir, Mr. President, sir."

"God damn it, George!"

"Jack, when the hell are you going to learn to relax in this fucking job?" SecTreas asked POTUS.

"The day I move out of this goddamned museum and become a free man again," Ryan replied with a submissive nod. Winston was right. He had to learn to stay on a more even keel in the office of President. In addition to not being helpful to himself, it wasn't especially helpful to the country for him to be jumpy with the folderol of office-holding. That also made it easy for people like the Secretary of the Treasury to twist his tail, and George Winston was one of the people who enjoyed doing that . . . maybe because it ultimately helped him relax, Ryan thought. Backwards English on the ball or something. "George, why do you think I *should* relax in this job?"

"Jack, because you're here to be effective, and being tight all the

time does not make you more effective. Kick back, guy, maybe even learn to like some aspect of it."

"Like what?"

"Hell." Winston shrugged, and then nodded to the secretaries' office. "Lots of cute young interns out there."

"There's been enough of that," Ryan said crossly. Then he did manage to relax and smile a little. "Besides, I'm married to a surgeon. Make that little mistake and I could wake up without something important."

"Yeah, I suppose it's bad for the country to have the President's dick cut off, eh? People might not respect us anymore." Winston stood. "Gotta go back across the street and look at some economic models."

"Economy looking good?" POTUS asked.

"No complaints from me or Mark Gant. Just so the Fed Chairman leaves the discount rate alone, but I expect he will. Inflation is pretty flat, and there's no upward pressure anywhere that I see happening."

"Ben?"

Goodley looked through his notes, as though he'd forgotten something. "Oh, yeah. Would you believe, the Vatican is appointing a Papal Nuncio to the PRC?"

"Oh? What's that mean, exactly?" Winston asked, stopping halfway to the door.

"The Nuncio is essentially an ambassador. People forget that the Vatican is a nation-state in its own right and has the usual trappings of statehood. That includes diplomatic representation. A nuncio is just that, an ambassador—and a spook," Ryan added.

"Really?" Winston asked.

"George, the Vatican has the world's oldest intelligence service. Goes back centuries. And, yeah, the Nuncio gathers information and forwards it to the home office, because people talk to him—who better to talk to than a priest, right? They're good enough at gathering information that we've made the occasional effort to crack their communications. Back in the thirties, a senior cryppie at the State Department resigned over it," Ryan informed his SecTreas, reverting back to history teacher.

"We still do that?" Winston directed this question at Goodley, the President's National Security Adviser. Goodley looked first to Ryan, and got a nod. "Yes, sir. Fort Meade still takes a look at their messages. Their ciphers are a little old-fashioned, and we can brute-force them."

"And ours?"

"The current standard is called TAPDANCE. It's totally random, and therefore it's theoretically unbreakable—un—less somebody screws up and reuses a segment of it, but with approximately six hundred forty-

seven million transpositions on every daily CD-ROM diskette, that's not very likely."

"What about the phone systems?"

"The STU?" Goodley asked, getting a nod. "That's computer-based, with a two-fifty-six-kay computer-generated encryption key. It *can* be broken, but you need a computer, the right algorithm, and a couple of weeks at least, and the shorter the message the harder it is to crack it, instead of the other way around. The guys at Fort Meade are playing with using quantum-physics equations to crack ciphers, and evidently they're having some success, but if you want an explanation, you're going to have to ask somebody else. I didn't even pretend to listen," Goodley admitted. "It's so far over my head I can't even see the bottom of it."

"Yeah, get your friend Gant involved," Ryan suggested. "He seems to know 'puters pretty well. As a matter of fact, you might want to get him briefed in on these developments in Russia. Maybe he can model the effects they'll have on the Russian economy."

"Only if everyone plays by the rules," Winston said in warning. "If they follow the corruption that's been gutting their economy the last few years, you just can't predict anything, Jack."

We cannot let it happen again, Comrade President," Sergey Nikolay'ch said over a half-empty glass of vodka. This was still the best in the world, if the only such Russian product of which he could make that boast. *That* thought generated an angry frown at what his nation had become.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, what do you propose?"

"Comrade President, these two discoveries are a gift from Heaven itself. If we utilize them properly, we can transform our country—or at least make a proper beginning at doing that. The earnings in hard currencies will be colossal, and we can use that money to rebuild so much of our infrastructure that we *can* transform our economy. *If,* that is"—he held up a cautionary finger—"if we don't allow a thieving few to take the money and bank it in Geneva or Liechtenstein. It does us no good there, Comrade President."

Golovko didn't add that a few people, a few well-placed individuals, would profit substantially from this. He didn't even add that he himself would be one of them, and so would his president. It was just too much to ask any man to walk away from such an opportunity. Integrity was a virtue best found among those able to afford it, and the press be damned, the career intelligence officer thought. What had they ever done for his country or any other? All they did was expose the honest work of some and the dishonest work of others, doing little actual work themselves—and besides, they were as easily bribed as

anyone else, weren't they?

"And so, who gets the concession to exploit these resources?" the Russian president asked.

"In the case of the oil, our own exploration company, plus the American company, Atlantic Richfield. They have the most experience in producing oil in those environmental conditions anyway, and our people have much to learn from them. I would propose a fee-for-service arrangement, a generous one, but *not* an ownership percentage in the oil field itself. The exploration contract was along those lines, generous in absolute terms, but no share at all in the fields discovered."

"And the gold strike?"

"Easier still. No foreigners were involved in that discovery at all. Comrade Gogol will have an interest in the discovery, of course, but he is an old man with no heirs, and, it would seem, a man of the simplest tastes. A properly heated hut and a new hunting rifle will probably make him very happy, from what these reports tell us."

"And the value of this venture?"

"Upwards of seventy billions. And all we need do is purchase some special equipment, the best of which comes from the American company Caterpillar."

"Is that necessary, Sergey?"

"Comrade President, the Americans are our friends, after a fashion, and it will not hurt us to remain on good terms with their President. And besides, their heavy equipment is the world's finest."

"Better than the Japanese?"

"For these purposes, yes, but slightly more expensive," Golovko answered, thinking that people really were all the same, and despite the education of his youth, in every man there seemed to be a capitalist, looking for ways to cut costs and increase his profits, often to the point of forgetting the larger issues. Well, that was why Golovko was here, wasn't it?

"And who will want the money?"

A rare chuckle in this office: "Comrade President, *everyone* wants to have money. In realistic terms, our military will be at the front of the line."

"Of course," the Russian president agreed, with a resigned sigh. "They usually are. Oh, any progress in the attack on your car?" he asked, looking up from his briefing papers.

Golovko shook his head. "No notable progress, no. The current thinking is that this Avseyenko fellow was the actual target, and the automobile was just a coincidence. The militia continues to investigate."

"Keep me posted, will you?"

“Of course, Comrade President.”

CHAPTER 5

Headlines

Sam Sherman was one of those whom age hadn't treated kindly, though he himself hadn't helped. An avid golfer, he moved from lie to lie via cart. He was much too overweight to walk more than a few hundred yards in a day. It was rather sad for one who'd been a first-string guard for the Princeton Tigers, once upon a time. Well, Winston thought, muscle just turned to blubber if you didn't use it properly. But the overweight body didn't detract from the sharpness of his brain. Sherman had graduated about fifth in a class not replete with dummies, double-majoring in geology and business. He'd followed up the first sheet of parchment with a Harvard MBA, and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, this one in geology as well, and so Samuel Price Sherman could not only talk rocks with the explorers but finance with his board members, and that was one of the reasons why Atlantic Richfield stock was as healthy as any oil issue in the known world. His face was lined by a lot of low sun and field grit, and his belly swollen by a lot of beers with the roughnecks out in many godforsaken places, plus hot dogs and other junk food preferred by the men who drifted into such employment. Winston was surprised that Sam didn't smoke, too. Then he spotted the box on the man's desk. Cigars. Probably good ones. Sherman could afford the best, but he still had the Ivy League manners not to light up in front of a guest who might be offended by the blue cloud they generated.

Atlantic Richfield's home office was elsewhere, but as with most major corporations, it didn't hurt to have a set of offices in Washington, the better to influence members of Congress with the occasional lavish party. Sherman's personal office was in a corner on the top floor, and plush enough, with a thick beige carpet. The desk was either mahogany or well-seasoned oak, polished like glass, and probably cost more than his secretary made in a year or two.

"So, how do you like working for the government, George?"

"It's really a fun change of pace. Now I can play with all the things I used to bitch about—so, I guess I've kinda given up my right to bitch."

"*That* is a major sacrifice, buddy," Sherman replied with a laugh. "It's kinda like going over to the enemy, isn't it?"

"Well, sometimes you gotta pay back, Sam, and making policy the right way can be diverting."

"Well, I have no complaints with what you guys are doing. The economy seems to like it. Anyway," Sherman sat up in his comfortable chair. It was time to change subjects. Sam's time was valuable, too, as he wanted his guest to appreciate. "You didn't come here for small talk. What can I do for you, Mr. Secretary?"

"Russia."

Sherman's eyes changed a little, as they might when the last card was laid in a high-stakes game of stud. "What about it?"

"You have a high-powered exploration team working with the Russians . . . they find anything nice?"

"George, that's sensitive stuff you're asking. If you were still running Columbus, this would constitute insider-trading information stuff. Hell, *I* can't buy any more of our stock now, based on this stuff."

"Does that mean you'd like to?" TRADER asked with a smile.

"Well, it'll be public soon enough anyway. Yeah, George. Looks like we've found the biggest goddamned oil field ever, bigger 'n the Persian Gulf, bigger 'n Mexico, damned sight bigger than Prudhoe Bay and Western Canada combined. I'm talking big, *billions and billions* of barrels of what looks like the very best light-sweet crude, just sitting there and waiting for us to pump it out of the tundra. It's a field we'll measure in years of production, not just barrels."

"Bigger than the P.G.?"

Sherman nodded. "By a factor of forty percent, and that's a very conservative number. The only beef is where it is. Getting that crude out is going to be a mother-humper—to get started, anyway. We're talking twenty billion dollars just for the pipeline. It'll make Alaska look like a kindergarten project, but it'll be worth it."

"And your end of it?" the Secretary of the Treasury asked.

That question generated a frown. "We're negotiating that now. The Russians seem to want to pay us a flat consulting fee, like a billion dollars a year—they're talking a lot less than that now, but you know how the hog-tradin' works at this stage, right? They say a couple of hundred million, but they mean a billion a year, for seven to ten years, I'd imagine. And that isn't bad for what we'd have to do for the money, but I want a minimum of five percent of the find, and that's not at all an unreasonable request on our part. They have some good people in the geology business, but nobody in the world can sniff out oil in ice like my people can, and they've got a lot to learn about how to exploit something like this. We've been there and done that in these environmental conditions. Ain't nobody knows this like we do, even the guys at BP, and they're pretty good—but we're the best in the world, George. That's the barrel we have them over. They can do it

without us, but with us helping, they'll make a ton more cash, and a hell of a lot faster, and they know that, and we know they know that. So, I got my lawyers talking to their lawyers—actually, they have diplomats doing the negotiating." Sherman managed a grin. "They're dumber than my lawyers."

Winston nodded. Texas turned out more good private-practice attorneys than most parts of America, and the excuse was that in Texas there were more men needin' killin' than horses needin' stealin'. And the oil business paid the best, and in Texas, like everyplace else, talent went where the money was.

"When will this go public?"

"The Russians are trying to keep a cork in it. One of the things we're getting from our lawyers is that they're worried about how to exploit this one—really who to keep out of it, you know, their Mafia and stuff. They do have some serious corruption problems over there, and I can sympathize—"

Winston knew he could ignore the next part. The oil industry did business all over the world. Dealing with corruption on the small scale (ten million dollars or less), or even the monstrous scale (ten *billion* dollars or more), was just part of the territory for such companies as Sam Sherman ran, and the United States government had never probed too deeply into that. Though there were federal statutes governing how American companies handled themselves abroad, many of those laws were selectively enforced, and this was merely one such example. Even in Washington, business was business.

"—and so they're trying to keep it quiet until they can make the proper arrangements," Sherman concluded.

"You hearing anything else?"

"What do you mean?" Sherman asked in reply.

"Any other geological windfalls," Winston clarified.

"No, I'm not that greedy in what I pray for. George, I haven't made it clear enough, just how huge this oil field is. It's—"

"Relax, Sam, I can add and subtract with the best of'em," SecTreas assured his host.

"Something I need to know about?" Sherman only saw hesitation. "Give and take, George. I played fair with you, remember?"

"Gold," Winston clarified.

"How much?"

"They're not sure. South Africa at least. Maybe more."

"Really? Well, that's not my area of expertise, but sounds like our Russian friends are having a good year for a change. Good for them," Sherman thought.

"You like them?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. They're a lot like Texans. They make

good friends and fearsome enemies. They know how to entertain, and Jesus, do they know how to drink. About time they got some good luck. Christ knows they've had a lot of the other kind. This is going to mean a lot for their economy, and damned near all of it's going to be good news, 'specially if they can handle the corruption stuff and keep the money inside their borders where it'll do them some good, instead of finding its way onto some Swiss bank's computer. That new Mafia they have over there is smart and tough . . . and a little scary. They just got somebody I knew over there."

"Really? Who was that, Sam?"

"We called him Grisha. He took care of some high rollers in Moscow. Knew how to do it right. He was a good name to know if you had some special requirements," Sherman allowed. Winston recorded the information in his mind for later investigation.

"Killed him?"

Sherman nodded. "Yup, blew him away with a bazooka right there on the street—it made CNN, remember?" The TV news network had covered it as a crime story with no further significance except for its dramatic brutality, a story gone and forgotten in a single day.

George Winston vaguely remembered it, and set it aside. "How often you go over there?"

"Not too often, twice this year. Usually hop my G-V over direct out of Reagan or Dallas/Fort Worth. Long flight, but it's a one-hop. No, I haven't seen the new oil field yet. Expect I'll have to in a few months, but I'll try for decent weather. Boy, you don't know what cold means 'til you go that far north in the winter. Thing is, it's dark then, so you're better off waiting 'til summer anyway. But at best you can leave the sticks at home. Ain't no golf a' tall in that part of the world, George."

"So take a rifle and bag yourself a bear, make a nice rug," Winston offered.

"Gave that up. Besides, I got three polar bears. That one is number eight in the Boone and Crockett all-time book," Sherman said, pointing to a photo on the far wall. Sure enough, it showed a hell of a big polar bear. "I've made two kids on that rug," the president of Atlantic Richfield observed, with a sly smile. The pelt in question lay before his bedroom fireplace in Aspen, Colorado, where his wife liked to ski in the winter.

"Why'd you give it up?"

"My kids think there aren't enough polar bears anymore. All that ecology shit they learn in school now."

"Yeah," SecTreas said sympathetically, "and they do make such great rugs."

"Right, well, *that* rug was threatening some of our workers up at

Prudhoe Bay back in . . . '75, as I recall, and I took him at sixty yards with my .338 Winchester. One shot," the Texan assured his guest. "I suppose nowadays you have to let the bear kill a human bein', and then all you're supposed to do is just cage him and transport him to another location so the bear doesn't get too traumatized, right?"

"Sam, I'm Secretary of the Treasury. I leave the birds and bees to EPA. I don't hug trees, not until they turn the wood chips into T-Bills, anyway."

A chuckle: "Sorry, George. I'm always hearing that stuff at home. Maybe it's Disney. All wild animals wear white gloves and talk to each other in good Midwestern Iowa English."

"Cheer up, Sam. At least they're laying off the supertankers out of Valdez now. How much of the eastern Alaska/Western Canada strike is yours?"

"Not quite half, but that'll keep my stockholders in milk and cookies for a long time."

"So, between that one and Siberia, how many options will they give you to exercise?" Sam Sherman got a nice salary, but at his level the way you earned your keep was measured in the number of options in the stock whose value your work had increased, invariably offered you by the board of directors, whose own holdings you inflated in value through your efforts.

A knowing smile, and a raised eyebrow: "A lot, George. Quite a lot."

Married life agrees with you, Andrea," President Ryan observed with a smile at his Principal Agent. She was dressing better, and there was a definite spring in her step now. He wasn't sure if her skin had a new glow, or maybe her makeup was just different. Jack had learned never to comment on a woman's makeup. He always got it wrong.

"You're not the only one to say that, sir."

"One hesitates to say such things to a grown adult female, especially if you're fashion-bereft, as I am," Jack said, his smile broadening somewhat. His wife, Cathy, still said she had to dress him because his taste was entirely, she said, in his mouth. "But the change is sufficiently marked that even a man such as myself can see it."

"Thank you, Mr. President. Pat is a very good man, even for a Bureau puke."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's up in Philadelphia right now. Director Murray sent him off on a bank robbery, two local cops got killed in that one."

"Caught that one on TV last week. Bad."

The Secret Service agent nodded. "The way the subjects killed the cops, both in the back of the head, that was pretty ruthless, but there's people out there like that. Anyway, Director Murray decided to handle

that one with a Roving Inspector out of Headquarters Division, and that usually means Pat gets to go do it."

"Tell him to be careful," Ryan said. Inspector Pat O'Day had saved his daughter's life less than a year before, and that act had earned him undying Presidential solicitude.

"Every day, sir," Special Agent Price-O'Day made clear.

"Okay, what's the schedule look like?" His "business" appointments were on his desk already. Andrea Price-O' Day filled him in every morning, after his national-security briefing from Ben Goodley.

"Nothing unusual until after lunch. National Chamber of Commerce delegation at one-thirty, and then at three the Detroit Red Wings, they won the Stanley Cup this year. Photo op, TV pukes and stuff, take about twenty minutes or so."

"I ought to let Ed Foley do that one. He's the hockey fanatic—"

"He's a Caps fan, sir, and the Red Wings swept the Caps four straight in the finals. Director Foley might take it personally," Price-O'Day observed with half a smile.

"True. Well, last year we got the jerseys and stuff for his son, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good game, hockey. Maybe I ought to catch a game or two. Trouble to arrange that?"

"No, sir. We have standing agreements with all the local sports facilities. Camden Yards even has that special box for us—they let us help design it, the protective stuff, that is."

Ryan grunted. "Yeah, I have to remember all the people who'd like to see me dead."

"My job to think about that, sir, not yours," Price-O'Day told him.

"Except when you won't let me go shopping or to a movie." Neither Ryan nor his family was entirely used to the restrictions imposed on the life of the President of the United States or his immediate family members. It was getting especially tough on Sally, who'd started dating (which was hard on her father), and dating was difficult with a lead car and a chase car (when the young gentleman drove himself) or an official car with a driver and a second armed agent up front (when he did not), and guns all over the place. It tended to restrain the young gentlemen in question—and Ryan hadn't told his daughter that this was just fine with him, lest she stop speaking to him for a week or so. Sally's Principal Agent, Wendy Merritt, had proven to be both a good Secret Service agent and a superb big sister of sorts. They spent at least two Saturdays per month shopping with a reduced detail—actually it wasn't reduced at all, but it appeared so to Sally Ryan when they went out to Tyson's Corner or the Annapolis Mall for the purpose of spending money, something for which all women seemed to have a

genetic predisposition. That these shopping expeditions had been planned days in advance, with every site scouted by the Secret Service, and a supplementary detail of young agents selected for their relative invisibility who showed up there an hour before SHADOW'S arrival, had never occurred to Sally Ryan. That was just as well, as the dating problems grated on her badly enough, along with being followed around St. Mary's School in Annapolis by the rifle squad, as she sometimes termed it. Little Jack, on the other hand, thought it was pretty neat, and had recently learned to shoot at the Secret Service Academy in Beltsville, Maryland, with his father's permission (and something he'd not allowed the press to learn, lest he get hammered on the front page of the *New York Times* for the social indiscretion of *encouraging* his own son to touch, much less actually to fire, something so inherently evil as a pistol!). Little Jack's Principal Agent was a kid named Mike Brennan, a South Boston Irishman, a third-generation Secret Service agent with fiery red hair and a ready laugh, who'd played baseball at Holy Cross and frequently played catch and pepper with the President's son on the South Lawn of the White House.

"Sir, we never don't let you do anything," Price said.

"No, you're pretty subtle about it," Ryan allowed. "You know that I'm too considerate of other people, and when you tell me about all the crap you people have to go through so that I can buy a burger at Wendy's, I usually back off . . . like a damned wimp." The President shook his head. Nothing frightened him more than the prospect that he'd somehow get used to all this panoply of "specialness," as he thought of it. As though he'd only recently discovered royal parentage, and was now to be treated like a king, hardly allowed to wipe his own ass after taking a dump. Doubtless some people who'd lived in this house *had* gotten used to it, but that was something John Patrick Ryan, Sr., wanted to avoid. He knew that *he* was *not* all that special, and not deserving of all this folderol . . . and besides, like every other man in the world, when he woke up in the morning the first thing he did was head to the bathroom. Chief Executive he might be, but he still had a working-class bladder. *And thank God for that*, the President of the United States reflected.

"Where's Robby today?"

"Sir, the Vice President is in California today, the Navy base at Long Beach, giving a speech at the shipyard."

Ryan grinned a little sideways. "I work him pretty hard, don't I?"

"That's the Vice President's job," Arnie van Damm said from the door. "And Robby's a big boy about it," added the President's Chief of Staff.

"Your vacation was good for you," Ryan observed. He had a very nice tan. "What did you do?"

"Mainly I laid on the beach and read all the books I haven't had time for. Thought I'd die of boredom," van Damm added.

"You actually thrive on this crap, don't you?" Jack asked, a little incredulous at the thought.

"It's what I do, Mr. President. Hey, Andrea," he added with a slight turn of the head.

"Good morning, Mr. van Damm." She turned to Jack. "That's all I have for you this morning. If you need me, I'll be in the usual place." Her office was in the Old Executive Office Building, just across the street, and upstairs from the new Secret Service command post, called JOC, for Joint Operations Center.

"Okay, Andrea, thanks." Ryan nodded, as she withdrew into the secretaries' room, from which she'd head down to the Secret Service Command Post. "Arnie, get some coffee?"

"Not a bad idea, boss." The Chief of Staff took his usual seat and poured a cup. The coffee in the White House was especially good, a rich blend, about half Colombian and half Jamaica Blue Mountain, the sort of thing that Ryan *could* get used to as President. There had to be *some* place he could buy this after escaping from his current job, he hoped.

"Okay, I've had my national security brief and my Secret Service brief. Now tell me about politics for the day."

"Hell, Jack, I've been trying to do that for over a year now, and you still aren't getting it very well."

Ryan allowed his eyes to flare at the simulated insult. "That's a cheap shot, Arnie. I've been studying this crap pretty hard, and even the damned newspapers say I'm doing fairly well."

"The Federal Reserve is doing a brilliant job of handling the economy, Mr. President, and that has damned little to do with you. But since you *are* the President, you get credit for all the good things that happen, and that's nice, but do remember, you will also get the blame for all the *bad* things that are going to happen—and some will, remember that—because you just happen to be here, and the citizens out there think you can make the rain fall on their flowers and the sun come out for their picnics just by wishing it so.

"You know, Jack," the Chief of Staff said after sipping his coffee. "We really haven't got past the idea of kings and queens. A lot of people really do think you have that sort of personal power—"

"But I don't, Arnie, how can that be?"

"It just is the truth, Jack. It doesn't have to make sense. It just is. Deal with it."

I do so love these lessons, Ryan thought to himself. "Okay, today is . . . ?"

"Social Security."

Ryan's eyes relaxed. "I've been reading up on that. The third rail of American political life. Touch it and die."

For the next half hour, they discussed what was wrong and why, and the irresponsibility of the Congress, until Jack sat back with a sigh.

"Why don't they learn, Arnie?"

"What do they need to learn?" Arnie asked, with the grin of a Washington insider, one of the anointed of God. "They've been *elected*. They must know it all already! How *else* do you think they got here?"

"Why the hell did I allow myself to stay in this damned place?" the President asked rhetorically.

"Because you had a conscience attack and decided to do the right thing for your country, you dumbass, that's why."

"Why is it you're the only person who can talk to me like that?"

"Besides the Vice President? Because I'm your teacher. Back to today's lesson. We *could* leave Social Security alone this year. It's in decent enough fiscal shape to last another seven to nine years without intervention, and that means you could leave it to your successor to handle—"

"That's not ethical, Arnie," Ryan snapped.

"True," the Chief of Staff agreed, "but it's good politics, and fairly Presidential. It's called letting sleeping dogs lie."

"You don't do that in the knowledge that as soon as it wakes up, it's going to rip the baby's throat out."

"Jack, you really ought to be a king. You'd be a good one," van Damm said, with what appeared to be genuine admiration.

"Nobody can handle that kind of power."

"I know: 'Power corrupts, and absolute power is actually pretty neat.' So said a staffer for one of your predecessors."

"And the bastard wasn't hanged for saying it?"

"We need to work on that sense of humor, Mr. President. That was meant as a joke."

"The scariest part of this job is that I do see the humor of it. Anyway, I told George Winston to start a quiet project to see what we can do with Social Security. Quiet project, I mean classified—black, this project doesn't exist."

"Jack, if you have one weakness as President, that's it. You're into this secrecy thing too much."

"But if you do something like this in the open, you get clobbered by ill-informed criticism before you manage to produce anything, and the press crawls up your ass demanding information you don't have yet, and so then they go make up stuff on their own, or they go to some yahoo who just makes up bullshit, and then *we* have to answer it."

"You are learning," Arnie judged. "That's exactly how it works in

this town."

"That does not constitute 'working' by any definition I know of."

"This is Washington, a government town. Nothing is really supposed to function efficiently here. It would scare the hell out of the average citizen if the government started to function properly."

"How about I just fucking resign?" Jack asked the ceiling. "If I can't get this damned mess to start working, then why the hell am I here?"

"You're here because some Japanese 747 pilot decided to crash the party at the House Chamber fifteen months ago."

"I suppose, Arnie, but I still feel like a damned fraud."

"Well, by my old standards, you are a fraud, Jack."

Ryan looked up. "Old standards?"

"Even when Bob Fowler took over the statehouse in Ohio, Jack, even he didn't try as hard as you to play a fair game, and Bob got captured by the system, too. You haven't yet, and that's what I like about you. More to the point, that's what Joe Citizen likes about you. They may not like your positions, but everybody knows you try damned hard, and they're sure you're not corrupt. And you're not. Now: Back to Social Security."

"I told George to get a small group together, swear them to secrecy, and make recommendations—more than one—and at least one of them has to be completely outside the box."

"Who's running this?"

"Mark Gant, George's technical guy."

The Chief of Staff thought that one over for a moment. "Just as well you keep it quiet. The Hill doesn't like him. Too much of a smart-ass."

"And they're not?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"You were naive with that, Jack. The people you tried to get elected, non-politicians, well, you semi-succeeded. A lot of them *were* regular people, but what you didn't allow for was the seductive nature of life in elected government service. The money isn't all that great, but the perks are, and a lot of people *like* being treated like a medieval prince. A lot of people *like* being able to enforce their will on the world. The people who used to be there, the ones that pilot fried in their seats, they started off as pretty good people, too, but the nature of the job is to seduce and capture. Actually, the mistake you made was to allow them to keep their staffs. Honestly, I think the problem down there is in the staffers, not the bosses. You have ten or more people around you all the time telling you how great you are, sooner or later you start believing that crap."

"Just so you don't do that to me."

"Not in this lifetime," Arnie assured him, as he stood to leave. "Make sure Secretary Winston keeps me in the loop on the Social Security project."

"No leaks," Ryan told his Chief of Staff forcefully.

"Me? Leak something? Me?" van Damm replied with open hands and an innocent face.

"Yeah, Arnie, you." As the door closed, the President wondered how fine a spook Arnie might have made. He lied with the plausibility one might associate with a trusted member of the clergy, and he could hold all manner of contradictory thoughts in his head at the same time, like the best of circus jugglers . . . and somehow they never quite crashed to earth. Ryan was the current president, but the one member of the administration who could not be replaced was the chief of staff he'd inherited from Bob Fowler, by way of Roger Durling . . .

And yet, Jack wondered, how much was he being manipulated by this staff employee? The truthful answer was that he couldn't tell, and that was somewhat troubling. He trusted Arnie, but he trusted Arnie because he had to trust him. Jack would not know what to do without him . . . but was that a good thing?

Probably not, Ryan admitted to himself, checking over his appointment list, but neither was being here in the Oval Office, and Arnie was at worst one more thing not to like about this job, and at best, he was a scrupulously honest, extremely hardworking, and utterly dedicated public servant . . .

. . . *just like everyone else in Washington, D.C.,* Ryan's cynicism added.

CHAPTER 6

Expansion

Moscow. is eight hours ahead of Washington, a source of annoyance to diplomats who are either a day behind the times or too far out of synch with their body clocks to conduct business properly. This was more a problem for the Russians, as by five or six in the evening, most of them had had a few stiff drinks, and given the relative speed of all diplomatic exchange, it was well into the falling night in Moscow before American diplomats emerged from their "working lunches" to issue a démarche or communiqué, or a simple letter of reply to whatever the Russians had issued the previous working day. In both capitals, of course, there was always a night crew to read and evaluate things on a more timely basis, but these were underlings, or at best people on their way up but not quite there yet, who always had to judge which possibility was worse: waking up a boss with something unworthy of the nighttime phone call, or delaying until the post-breakfast morning something that the minister or secretary ought to have been informed of *right now!* And more than one career had been made or broken on such seeming trivialities.

In this particular case, it would not be a diplomat's hide at risk. It was six-fifteen on the Russian spring evening, the sun high in the sky still, in anticipation of the "White Nights" for which the Russian summer is justly famous.

"Yes, Pasha?" Lieutenant Provalov said. He'd taken over Klusov from Shablikov. This case was too important to leave in anyone else's hands—and besides, he'd never really trusted Shablikov: There was something a little too corrupt about him.

Pavel Petrovich Klusov was not exactly an advertisement for the quality of life in the new Russia. Hardly one hundred sixty-five centimeters or so in height, but close to ninety kilos, he was a man the bulk of whose calories came in liquid form, who shaved poorly when he bothered at all, and whose association with soap was less intimate than it ought to have been. His teeth were crooked and yellow from the lack of brushing and a surfeit of smoking cheap, unfiltered domestic cigarettes. He was thirty-five or so, and had perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of making forty-five, Provalov estimated. It was not as

though he'd be much of a loss to society, of course. Klusov was a petty thief, lacking even the talent—or courage—to be a major violator of the law. But he knew those who were, and evidently scampered around them like a small dog, performing minor services, like fetching a bottle of vodka, the Militia lieutenant thought. But Klusov did have ears, which many people, especially criminals, had an odd inability to consider.

"Avseyenko was killed by two men from St. Petersburg. I do not know their names, but I think they were hired by Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov. The killers are former Spetsnaz soldiers with experience in Afghanistan, in their late thirties, I think. One is blond, the other red-haired. After killing Grisha, they flew back north before noon on an Aeroflot flight."

"That is good, Pasha. Have you seen their faces?"

A shake of the head: "No, Comrade Lieutenant. I learned this from . . . someone I know, in a drinking place." Klusov lit a new cigarette with the end of its predecessor.

"Did your acquaintance say why our friend Suvorov had Avseyenko killed?" *And who the hell is Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov?* the policeman wondered. He hadn't heard that name before, but didn't want Klusov to know that quite yet. Better to appear omniscient.

The informant shrugged. "Both were KGB, maybe there was bad blood between them."

"What exactly is Suvorov doing now?"

Another shrug: "I don't know. Nobody does. I am told he lives well, but the source of his income, no one knows."

"Cocaine?" the cop asked.

"It is possible, but I do not know." The one good thing about Klusov was that he didn't invent things. He told the (relatively) unvarnished truth . . . most of the time, the militia lieutenant told himself.

Provalov's mind was already spinning. Okay, a former KGB officer had hired two former Spetsnaz soldiers to eliminate another former KGB officer who'd specialized in running girls. Had this Suvorov chap approached Avseyenko for cooperation in a drug venture? Like most Moscow cops, he'd never grown to like the KGB. They'd been arrogant bullies most of the time, too besotted with their power to perform proper investigations, except against foreigners, for whom the niceties of civilized behavior were necessary, lest foreign nations treat Soviet citizens—worse, Soviet diplomats—the same way.

But so many KGB officers had been let go by their parent service, and few of them had drifted into menial labor. No, they had training in conspiracy, and many had done foreign travel, and there met all manner of people, most of whom, Provalov was sure, could be persuaded to undertake illegal operations for the right inducement,

which invariably meant money. For money, people would do anything, a fact known by every police officer in every country in the world.

Suvorov. Must track that name down, the militia lieutenant told himself as he took a casual sip of his vodka. *Examine his background, determine his expertise, and get a photo*. Suvorov, Klementi Ivanovich.

"Anything else?" the lieutenant asked.

Klusov shook his head. "That is all I have uncovered."

"Well, not too bad. Get back to work, and call me when you discover more."

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant." The informant stood up to leave. He left the bill with the cop, who'd pay it without much in the way of annoyance. Oleg Gregoriyevich Provalov had spent enough time in police work to understand that he might just have discovered something important. Of course, you couldn't tell at this stage, not until you ran it down, every single option and blind alley, which could take rather some time . . . but if it turned out to be something important, then it was worth it. And if not, it was just another blind alley, of which there were many in police work.

Provalov reflected on the fact that he hadn't asked his informant exactly who had given him this new flood of information. He hadn't forgotten, but perhaps had allowed himself to be a little gulled by the descriptions of the alleged former Spetsnaz soldiers who'd made the murder. He had their descriptions in his mind, and then removed his pad to write them down. Blond and red-haired, experience in Afghanistan, both living in St. Petersburg, flew back just before noon on the day Avseyenko was murdered. So, he would check for the flight number and run the names on the manifest through the new computers Aeroflot used to tie into the global ticketing system, then cross-check it against his own computer with its index of known and suspected criminals, and also with the army's records. If he got a hit, he'd have a man talk to the cabin crew of that Moscow—St. Petersburg flight to see if anyone remembered one or both of them. Then he'd have the St. Petersburg militia do a discreet check of these people, their addresses, criminal records if any, a normal and thorough background check, leading, possibly, to an interview. He might not conduct it himself, but he'd be there to observe, to get a feel for the suspects, because there was no substitute for that, for looking in their eyes, seeing how they talked, how they sat, if they fidgeted or not, if the eyes held those of the questioner, or traveled about the room. Did they smoke then, and if so, rapidly and nervously or slowly and contemptuously . . . or just curiously, as would be the case if they were innocent of this charge, if not, perhaps, of another.

The militia lieutenant paid the bar bill and headed outside.

"You need to pick a better place for your meets, Oleg," a familiar voice suggested from behind. Provalov turned to see the face.

"It is a big city, Mishka, with many drinking places, and most of them are poorly lit."

"And I found yours, Oleg Gregoriyevich," Reilly reminded him. "So, what have you learned?"

Provalov summarized what he'd found out this evening.

"Two shooters from Spetsnaz? I suppose that makes some sense. What would that cost?"

"It would not be inexpensive. As a guess . . . oh, five thousand euros or so," the lieutenant speculated as they walked up the street.

"And who would have that much money to throw around?"

"A Muscovite criminal . . . Mishka, as you well know, there are hundreds who could afford it, and Rasputin wasn't the most popular of men . . . and I have a new name, Suvorov, Klementi Ivan'ch."

"Who is he?"

"I do not know. It is a new name for me, but Klusov acted as though I ought to have known it well. Strange that I do not," Provalov thought aloud.

"It happens. I've had wise guys turn up from nowhere, too. So, check him out?"

"Yes, I will run the name. Evidently he, too, is former KGB."

"There are a lot of them around," Reilly agreed, steering his friend into a new hotel's bar.

"What will you do when CIA is broken up?" Provalov asked.

"Laugh," the FBI agent promised.

The city of St. Petersburg was known to some as the Venice of the North for the rivers and canals that cut through it, though the climate, especially in winter, could hardly have been more different. And it was in one of those rivers that the next clue appeared.

A citizen had spotted it on his way to work in the morning, and, seeing a militiaman at the next corner, he'd walked that way and pointed, and the policeman had walked back, and looked over the iron railing at the space designated by the passing citizen.

It wasn't much to see, but it only took a second for the cop to know what it was and what it would mean. Not garbage, not a dead animal, but the top of a human head, with blond or light brown hair. A suicide or a murder, something for the local cops to investigate. The militiaman walked to the nearest phone to make his call to headquarters, and in thirty minutes a car showed up, followed in short order by a black van. By this time, the militiaman on his beat had smoked two cigarettes in the crisp morning air, occasionally looking down into the water to make sure that the object was still there. The

arriving men were detectives from the city's homicide bureau. The van that had followed them had a pair of people called technicians, though they had really been trained in the city's public-works department, which meant water-and-sewer workers, though they were paid by the local militia. These two men took a look over the rail, which was enough to tell them that recovering the body would be physically difficult but routine. A ladder was set up, and the junior man, dressed in waterproof coveralls and heavy rubber gauntlets, climbed down and grabbed the submerged collar, while his partner observed and shot a few frames from his cheap camera and the three policemen on the scene observed and smoked from a few feet away. That's when the first surprise happened.

The routine was to put a flexible collar on the body under the arms, like that used by a rescue helicopter, so that the body could be winched up. But when he worked to get the collar under the body, one of the arms wouldn't move at all, and the worker struggled for several unpleasant minutes, working to get the stiff dead arm upward . . . and eventually found that it was handcuffed to another arm.

That revelation caused both detectives to toss their cigarettes into the water. It was probably not a suicide, since that form of death was generally not a team sport. The sewer rat—that was how they thought of their almost-police comrades—took another ten minutes before getting the hoist collar in place, then came up the ladder and started cranking the winch.

It was clear in a moment. Two men, not old ones, not badly dressed. They'd been dead for several days, judging by the distortion and disfigurement of their faces. The water had been cold, and that had slowed the growth and hunger of the bacteria that devoured most bodies, but water itself did things to bodies that were hard on the full stomach to gaze upon, and these two faces looked like . . . like Pokémon toys, one of the detectives thought, just like perverse and horrible Pokémon toys, like those that one of his kids lusted after. The two sewer rats loaded the bodies into body bags for transport to the morgue, where the examinations would take place. As yet, they knew nothing except that the bodies were indeed dead. There were no obviously missing body parts, and the general dishevelment of the bodies prevented their seeing anything like a bullet or knife wound. For the moment, they had what Americans would call two John Does, one with blond or light brown hair, the other with what appeared to be reddish hair. From appearances, they'd been in the water for three or four days. And they'd probably died together, handcuffed as they were, unless one had murdered the other and then jumped to his own death, in which case one or both might have been homosexual, the more cynical of the two detectives thought. The beat cop was told to

write up the proper reporting forms at his station, which, the militiaman thought, would be nice and warm. There was nothing like finding a corpse or two to make a cold day colder still.

The body-recovery team loaded the bags into their van for the drive to the morgue. The bags were not properly sealed because of the handcuffs, and they sat side by side on the floor of the van, perversely like the hands of lovers reaching out to each other in death . . . as they had in life? one of the detectives wondered aloud back in their car. His partner just growled at that one and continued his drive.

It was, agreeably, a slow day in the St. Petersburg morgue. The senior pathologist on duty, Dr. Aleksander Koniev, had been in his office reading a medical journal and well bored by the inactivity of the morning, when the call came in, a possible double homicide. Those were always interesting, and Koniev was a devotee of murder mysteries, most of them imported from Britain and America, which also made them a good way to polish up his language skills. He was waiting in the autopsy room when the bodies arrived, were transferred to gurneys at the loading ramp and rolled together into his room. It took a moment to see why the two gurneys were wheeled side by side.

"So," the pathologist asked with a sardonic grin, "were they killed by the militia?"

"Not officially," the senior detective replied, in the same emotional mode. He knew Koniev.

"Very well." The physician switched on the tape recorder. "We have two male cadavers, still fully dressed. It is apparent that both have been immersed in water—where were they recovered?" he asked, looking up at the cops. They answered. "Immersed in *fresh* water in the Neva. On initial visual inspection, I would estimate three to four days' immersion after death." His gloved hands felt around one head, and the other. "Ah," his voice said. "Both victims seem to have been shot. Both have what appear to be bullet holes in the center of the occipital region of both bodies. Initial impression is a small-caliber bullet hole in both victims. We'll check that later. Yevgeniy," he said, looking up again, this time at his own technician. "Remove the clothing and bag it for later inspection."

"Yes, Comrade Doctor." The technician put out his cigarette and came forward with cutting tools.

"Both shot?" the junior detective asked.

"In the same place in both heads," Koniev confirmed. "Oh, they were handcuffed after death, strangely enough. No immediately visible bruising on either wrist. Why do it afterwards?" the pathologist wondered.

"Keeps the bodies together," the senior detective thought aloud—*but why might that be important?* he wondered to himself. The killer or

killers had an overly developed sense of neatness? But he'd been investigating homicides long enough to know that you couldn't fully explain all the crimes you solved, much less the ones you'd newly encountered.

"Well, they were both fit," Koniev said next, as his technician got the last of their clothes off. "Hmm, what's that?" He walked over and saw a tattoo on the left biceps of the blond one, then turned to see —"They both have the same tattoo."

The senior detective came over to see, first thinking that maybe his partner had been right and there was a sexual element to this case, but—

"Spetsnaz, the red star and thunderbolt, these two were in Afghanistan. Anatoliy, while the doctor conducts his examination, let's go through their clothing."

This they did, and in half an hour determined that both had been well dressed in fairly expensive clothing, but in both cases entirely devoid of identification of any kind. That was hardly unusual in a situation like this, but cops, like everyone else, prefer the easy to the hard. No wallet, no identity papers, not a banknote, key chain, or tie tack. Well, they could trace them through the labels on the clothes, and nobody had cut their fingertips off, and so they could also use fingerprints to identify them. Whoever had done the double murder had been clever enough to deny the police some knowledge, but not clever enough to deny them everything.

What did that mean? the senior detective wondered. The best way to prevent a murder investigation was to make the bodies disappear. Without a body there was no proof of death, and therefore, no murder investigation, just a missing person who could have run off with another woman or man, or just decided to go someplace to start life anew. And disposing of a body was not all *that* difficult, if you thought about it a little. Fortunately, most killings were, if not exactly impulse crimes, then something close to it, and most killers were fools who would later seal their own fates by talking too much.

But not this time. Had this been a sexual killing, he probably would have heard about it by now. Such crimes were virtually advertised by their perpetrators in some perverse desire to assure their own arrest and conviction, because no one who committed that kind of crime seemed able to keep his mouth shut about anything.

No, this double killing had every hallmark of professionalism. Both bodies killed in the same way, and only *then* handcuffed together . . . probably for better and/or lengthier concealment. No sign of a struggle on either body, and both were manifestly fit, trained, dangerous men. They'd been taken unawares, and that usually meant someone they both knew and trusted. Why criminals trusted anyone in

their community was something neither detective quite understood. “Loyalty” was a word they could scarcely spell, much less a principle to which any of them adhered . . . and yet criminals gave strange lip-service to it.

As the detectives watched, the pathologist drew blood from both bodies for later toxicology tests. Perhaps both had been drugged as a precursor to the head shots, not likely, but possible, and something to be checked. Scrapings were taken from all twenty fingernails, and those, too, would probably be valueless. Finally, fingerprints were taken so that proper identification could be made. This would not be very fast. The central records bureau in Moscow was notoriously inefficient, and the detectives would beat their own local bushes in the hope of finding out who these two cadavers had once been.

“Yevgeniy, these are not men of whom I would have made enemies lightly.”

“I agree, Anatoliy,” the elder of the two said. “But someone either did not fear them at all . . . or feared them sufficiently to take very drastic action.” The truth of the matter was that both men were accustomed to solving easy murders where the killer confessed almost at once, or had committed his crime in front of numerous witnesses. This one would challenge their abilities, and they would report that to their lieutenant, in the hope of getting additional assets assigned to the case.

As they watched, photos were taken of the faces, but those faces were so distorted as to be virtually unrecognizable, and the photos would then be essentially useless for purposes of identification. But taking them prior to opening the skull was procedure, and Dr. Koniev did everything by the book. The detectives stepped outside to make a few phone calls and smoke in a place with a somewhat more palatable ambience. By the time they came back, both bullets were in plastic containers, and Koniev told them that the presumptive cause of both deaths was a single bullet in each brain, with powder tattooing evident on both scalps. They’d both been killed at short range, less than half a meter, the pathologist told them, with what appeared to be a standard, light 2.6-gram bullet fired from a 5.45-mm PSM police pistol. That might have generated a snort, since this was the standard-issue police side arm, but quite a few had found their way into the Russian underworld.

“The Americans call this a professional job,” Yevgeniy observed.

“Certainly it was accomplished with skill,” Anatoliy agreed. “And now, first . . .”

“First we find out who these unlucky bastards were. Then, who the hell were their enemies.”

The Chinese food in China wasn't nearly as good as that to be found in LA, Nomuri thought. Probably the ingredients, was his immediate analysis. If the People's Republic had a Food and Drug Administration, it had been left out of his premission briefing, and his first thought on entering this restaurant was that he didn't want to check the kitchen out. Like most Beijing restaurants, this one was a small mom-and-pop operation operating out of the first floor of what was in essence a private home, and serving twenty people out of a standard Chinese communist home kitchen, which must have involved considerable acrobatics. The table was circular, small, and eminently cheap, and the chair was uncomfortable, but for all that, the mere fact that such a place existed was testimony to fundamental changes in the political leadership of this country.

But the mission of the evening sat across from him. Lian Ming. She wore the standard off-blue boiler suit that was virtually the uniform of low- to mid-level bureaucrats in the various government ministries. Her hair was cut short, almost like a helmet. The fashion industry in this city must have been established by some racist son of a bitch who loathed the Chinese and tried his level best to make them as unattractive as he could. He'd yet to see a single local female citizen who dressed in a manner that anyone could call attractive—except, maybe, for some imports from Hong Kong. Uniformity was a problem with the Orient, the utter lack of variety, unless you counted the foreigners who were showing up in ever-increasing numbers, but they stuck out like roses in a junkyard, and that merely emphasized the plethora of junk. Back home, at USC, one could have—well, one could look at, the CIA officer corrected himself—any sort of female to be had on the planet. White, black, Jewish, gentile, yellow in various varieties, Latina, some real Africans, plenty of real Europeans—and there you had ample variety, too: the dark-haired, earthy Italians, the haughty French, the proper Brits, and the stiff Germans. Toss in some Canadians, and the Spanish (who went out of their way to be separated from the local Spanish speakers) and lots of ethnic Japanese (who were also separated from the local Japanese, though in this case at the will of the latter rather than the former), and you had a virtual deli of people. The only sameness there came from the Californian atmosphere, which commanded that every individual had to work hard to be presentable and attractive, for that was the One Great Commandment of life in California, home of Rollerblading and surfing, and the tight figures that went along with both pastimes.

Not here. Here everyone dressed the same, looked the same, talked the same, and largely acted the same way . . .

. . . except this one. There was something else to be had here, Nomuri thought, and that's why he'd asked her to dinner.

It was called seduction, which had been part of the spy's playbook since time immemorial, though it would be a first for Nomuri. He hadn't been quite celibate in Japan, where mores had changed in the past generation, allowing young men and young women to meet and . . . communicate on the most basic of levels—but there, in a savage, and for Chester Nomuri a rather cruel, irony, the more available Japanese girls had a yen for Americans. Some said it was because Americans had a reputation for being better equipped for lovemaking than the average Japanese male, a subject of much giggling for Japanese girls who have recently become sexually active. Part of it was also that American men were reputed to treat their women better than the Japanese variety, and since Japanese women were far more obsequious than their Western counterparts, it probably worked out as a good deal for both sides of the partnerships that developed. But Chet Nomuri was a spook covered as a Japanese salaryman, and had learned to fit in so well that the local women regarded him as just another Japanese male, and so his sex life had been hindered by his professional skills, which hardly seemed fair to the field officer, brought up, like so many American men, on the movies of 007 and his numerous conquests: Mr. Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang, as he was known in the West Indies. Well, Nomuri hadn't handled a pistol either, not since his time at The Farm—the CIA's training school off Interstate 64 near Yorktown, Virginia—and hadn't exactly broken any records there in the first place.

But this one had possibilities, the field officer thought, behind his normal, neutral expression, and there was nothing in the manual against getting laid on the job—what a crimp on Agency morale *that* would have been, he considered. Such stories of conquest were a frequent topic of conversation at the rare but real field-officer get-togethers that the Agency occasionally held, usually at The Farm, for the field spooks to compare notes on techniques—the after-hour beer sessions often drifted in this direction. For Chet Nomuri since getting to Beijing, his sex life had consisted of prowling Internet pornography sites. For one reason or another, the Asian culture made for an ample collection of such things, and while Nomuri wasn't exactly proud of this addiction, his sexual drive needed *some* outlet.

With a little work, Ming might have been pretty, Nomuri thought. First of all she needed long hair. Then, perhaps, better frames on her eyeglasses. Those she wore had all the attraction of recycled barbed wire. Then some makeup. Exactly what sort Nomuri wasn't sure—he was no expert on such things, but her skin had an ivory-like quality to it that a little chemical enhancement might turn into something attractive. But in this culture, except for people on the stage (whose makeup was about as subtle as a Las Vegas neon sign), makeup meant

washing your face in the morning, if that. It was her eyes, he decided. They were lively and . . . cute. There was life in them, or behind them, however that worked. She might even have had a decent figure, but it was hard to tell in that clothing.

"So, the new computer system works well?" he asked, after the lingering sip of green tea.

"It is magical," she replied, almost gushing. "The characters come out beautifully, and they print up perfectly on the laser printer, as though from a scribe."

"What does your minister think?"

"Oh, he is very pleased. I work faster now, and he is very pleased by that!" she assured him.

"Pleased enough to place an order?" Nomuri asked, reverting back to his salaryman cover.

"This I must ask the chief of administration, but I think you will be satisfied by the response."

That will make NEC happy, the CIA officer thought, again wondering briefly how much money he'd made for his cover firm. His boss in Tokyo would have gagged on his sake to know whom Nomuri really worked for, but the spook had won all of his promotions at NEC on merit, while moonlighting for his true country. It was a fortunate accident, Chet thought, that his real job and his cover one blended so seamlessly. That and the fact that he'd been raised in a very traditional home, speaking two native tongues . . . and more than that, the sense of *on*, the duty owed to his native land, far over and above that he pretended to owe to his parent culture. He'd probably gotten that from seeing his grandfather's framed plaque, the Combat Infantryman's Badge in the center on the blue velvet, surrounded by the ribbons and medallions that designated awards for bravery, the Bronze Star with combat "V," the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation, and the campaign ribbons won as a grunt with the 442nd Regimental Combat team in Italy and Southern France. Fucked over by America, his grandfather had earned his citizenship rights in the ultimate and best possible way before returning home to the landscaping business that had educated his sons and grandsons, and taught one of them the duty he owed his country. And besides, this could be fun.

It was now, Nomuri thought, looking deeply into Ming's dark eyes, wondering what the brain behind them was thinking. She had two cute dimples at the sides of her mouth, and, he thought, a very sweet smile on an otherwise unremarkable face.

"This is such a fascinating country," he said. "By the way, your English is very good." And good that it was. His Mandarin needed a lot of help, and one doesn't seduce women with sign language.

A pleased smile. “Thank you. I do study very hard.”

“What books do you read?” he asked with an engaging smile of his own.

“Romances, Danielle Steel, Judith Krantz. America offers women so many more opportunities than what we are used to here.”

“America is an interesting country, but chaotic,” Nomuri told her. “At least in this society one can know his place.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “There is security in that, but sometimes too much. Even a caged bird wishes to spread its wings.”

“I will tell you one thing I find bad here.”

“What is that?” Ming asked, not offended, which, Nomuri thought, was very good indeed. Maybe he’d get a Steele novel and read up on what she liked.

“You should dress differently. Your clothing is not flattering. Women should dress more attractively. In Japan there is much variety in clothing, and you can dress Eastern or Western as the spirit moves you.”

She giggled. “I would settle for the underthings. They must feel so nice on the skin. That is not a very socialist thought,” she told him, setting down her cup. The waiter came over, and with Nomuri’s assent she ordered mao-tai, a fiery local liqueur. The waiter returned rapidly with two small porcelain cups and a flask, from which he poured daintily. The CIA officer nearly gasped with his first sip, and it went down hot, but it certainly warmed the stomach. Ming’s skin, he saw, flushed from it, and there came the fleeting impression that a gate had just been opened and passed . . . and that it probably led in the right direction.

“Not everything can be socialist,” Nomuri judged, with another tiny sip. “This restaurant is a private concern, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. And the food is better than what I cook. That is a skill I do not have.”

“Truly? Then perhaps you will allow me to cook for you sometime,” Chet suggested.

“Oh?”

“Certainly.” He smiled. “I can cook American style, and I am able to shop at a closed store to get the correct ingredients.” Not that the ingredients would be worth a damn, shipped in as they were, but a damned sight better than the garbage you got here in the public markets, and a steak dinner was probably something she’d never had. Could he justify getting CIA to put a few Kobe beef steaks on his expense account? Nomuri wondered. Probably. The bean-counters at Langley didn’t bother the field spooks all that much.

“Really?”

“Of course. There are some advantages to being a foreign

barbarian," he told her with a sly smile. The giggling response was just right, he thought. Yeah. Nomuri took another careful sip of this rocket fuel. She'd just told him what she wanted to wear. Sensible, too, for this culture. However comfy it might be, it would also be quite discreet.

"So, what else can you tell me about yourself?" he asked next.

"There is little to tell. My job is beneath my education, but it carries prestige for . . . well, for political reasons. I am a highly educated secretary. My employer—well, technically I work for the state, as do most of us, but in fact I work for my minister as if he were in the capitalist sector and paid me from his own pocket." She shrugged. "I suppose it has always been so. I see and hear interesting things."

Don't want to ask about them now, Nomuri knew. Later, sure, but not now.

"It is the same with me, industrial secrets and such. Ahh," he snorted. "Better to leave such things at my official desk. No, Ming, tell me about you."

"Again, there is little to tell. I am twenty-four. I am educated. I suppose I am lucky to be alive. You know what happens to many girl babies here . . ."

Nomuri nodded. "I have heard the stories. They are distasteful," he agreed with her. It was more than that. It was not unknown for the father of a female toddler to drop her down a well in the hope that his wife would bear him a son on the next try. One-baby-per-family was almost a law in the PRC, and like most laws in a communist state, that one was ruthlessly enforced. An unauthorized baby was often allowed to come to term, but then as birth took place, when the baby "crowned," the top of the head appearing, the very moment of birth, the attending physician or nurse would take a syringe loaded with formaldehyde, and stab it into the soft spot at the crown of the almost-newborn's head, push the plunger, and extinguish its life at the moment of its beginning. It wasn't something the government of the PRC advertised as government policy, but government policy it was. Nomuri's one sister, Alice, was a physician, an obstetrician / gynecologist trained at UCLA, and he knew that his sister would take poison herself before performing such a barbarous act, or take a pistol to use on whoever demanded that she do it. Even so, some surplus girl babies somehow managed to be born, and these were often abandoned, and then given up for adoption, mainly to Westerners, because the Chinese themselves had no use for them at all. Had it been done to Jews, it would have been called genocide, but there were a lot of Chinese to go around. Carried to extremes, it could lead to racial extinction, but here it was just called population control. "In due course Chinese culture will again recognize the value of women,

Ming. That is certain."

"I suppose it is," she allowed. "How are women treated in Japan?"

Nomuri allowed himself a laugh. "The real question is how well they treat us, and how well they permit us to treat them!"

"Truly?"

"Oh, yes. My mother ruled the house until she died."

"Interesting. Are you religious?"

Why that question? Chet wondered.

"I have never decided between Shinto and Zen Buddhism," he replied, truthfully. He'd been baptized a Methodist, but fallen away from his church many years before. In Japan he'd examined the local religions just to understand them, the better to fit in, and though he'd learned much about both, neither had appealed to his American upbringing. "And you?"

"I once looked into Falun Gong, but not seriously. I had a friend who got very involved. He's in prison now."

"Ah, a pity." Nomuri nodded sympathetically, wondering how close the friend had been. Communism remained a jealous system of belief, intolerant of competition of any sort. Baptists were the new religious fad, springing up as if from the very ground itself, started off, he thought, from the Internet, a medium into which American Christians, especially Baptists and Mormons, had pumped a lot of resources of late. And so Jerry Falwell was getting some sort of religious/ideological foothold here? How remarkable—or not. The problem with Marxism-Leninism, and also with Mao it would seem, was that as fine as the theoretical model was, it lacked something the human soul craved. But the communist chieftains didn't and couldn't like that very much. The Falun Gong group hadn't even been a religion at all, not to Nomuri's way of thinking, but for some reason he didn't fully understand, it had frightened the powers that be in the PRC enough to crack down on it as if it had been a genuinely counterrevolutionary political movement. He heard that the convicted leaders of the group were doing seriously hard time in the local prisons. The thought of what constituted especially hard time in this country didn't bear much contemplation. Some of the world's most vicious tortures had been invented in this country, where the value of human life was a far less important thing than in the nation of his origin, Chet reminded himself. China was an ancient land with an ancient culture, but in many ways these people might as well have been Klingons as fellow human beings, so detached were their societal values from what Chester Nomuri had grown up with. "Well, I really don't have much in the way of religious convictions."

"Convictions?" Ming asked.

"Beliefs," the CIA officer corrected. "So, are there any men in your

life? A fiance, perhaps?"

She sighed. "No, not in some time."

"Indeed? I find that surprising," Nomuri observed with studied gallantry.

"I suppose we are different from Japan," Ming admitted, with just a hint of sadness in her voice.

Nomuri lifted the flask and poured some more mao-tai for both. "In that case," he said, with a smile and a raised eyebrow, "I offer you a friendly drink."

"Thank you, Nomuri-san."

"My pleasure, Comrade Ming." He wondered how long it would take. Perhaps not too long at all. Then the real work would begin.

CHAPTER 7

Developing Leads

It was the sort of coincidence for which police work is known worldwide. Provalov called militia headquarters, and since he was investigating a homicide, he got to speak with the St. Petersburg murder squad leader, a captain. When he said he was looking for some former Spetsnaz soldiers, the captain remembered his morning meeting in which two of his men had reported finding two bodies bearing possible Spetsnaz tattoos, and that was enough to make him forward the call.

"Really, the RPG event in Moscow?" Yevgeniy Petrovich Ustinov asked. "Who exactly was killed?"

"The main target appears to have been Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko. He was a pimp," Provalov told his colleague to the north. "Also his driver and one of his girls, but they appear to have been inconsequential." He didn't have to elaborate. You didn't use an anti-tank rocket to kill a chauffeur and a whore.

"And your sources tell you that two Spetsnaz veterans did the shooting?"

"Correct, and they flew back to St. Petersburg soon thereafter."

"I see. Well, we fished two such people from the River Neva yesterday, both in their late thirties or so, and both shot in the back of the head."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. We have fingerprints from both bodies. We're waiting for Central Army Records to match them up. But that will not be very fast."

"Let me see what I can do about that, Yevgeniy Petrovich. You see, also present at the murder was Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko, and we have concerns that he might have been the true target of the killing."

"That would be ambitious," Ustinov observed coolly. "Perhaps your friends at Dzerzhinskiy Square can get the records morons moving?"

"I will call them and see," Provalov promised.

"Good, anything else?"

"Another name, Suvorov, Klementi Ivan'ch, reportedly a former KGB officer, but that is all I have at the moment. Does the name mean

anything to you?" You could hear the man shaking his head over the phone, Provalov noted.

"*Nyet,* never heard that one," the senior detective replied as he wrote it down. "Connection?"

"My informant thinks he's the man who arranged the killing."

"I'll check our records here to see if we have anything on him. Another former 'Sword and Shield' man, eh? How many of those guardians of the state have gone bad?" the St. Petersburg cop asked rhetorically.

"Enough," his colleague in Moscow agreed, with an unseen grimace.

"This Avseyenko fellow, also KGB?"

"Yes, he reportedly ran the Sparrow School."

Ustinov chuckled at that one. "Oh, a state-trained pimp. Marvelous. Good girls?"

"Lovely," Provalov confirmed. "More than we can afford."

"A real man doesn't have to pay for it, Oleg Gregoriyevich," the St. Petersburg cop assured his Moscow colleague.

"That is true, my friend. At least not until long afterwards," Provalov added.

"That is the truth!" A laugh. "Let me know what you find out?"

"Yes, I will fax you my notes."

"Excellent. I will share my information with you as well," Ustinov promised. There is a bond among homicide investigators across the world. No country sanctions the private taking of human life. Nation-states reserve such power for themselves alone.

In his dreary Moscow office, Lieutenant Provalov made his notes for several minutes. It was too late to call the RVS about rattling the Central Army Records cage. First thing in the morning, he promised himself. Then it was time to leave. He picked his coat off the tree next to his desk and headed out to where his official car was parked. This he drove to a corner close to the American Embassy, and a place called Boris Godunov's, a friendly and warm bar. He'd only been there for five minutes when a familiar hand touched his shoulder.

"Hello, Mishka," Provalov said, without turning.

"You know, Oleg, it's good to see that Russian cops are like American cops."

"It is the same in New York?"

"You bet," Reilly confirmed. "After a long day of chasing bad guys, what's better than a few drinks with your pals?" The FBI agent waved to the bartender for his usual, a vodka and soda. "Besides, you get some real work done in a place like this. So, anything happening on the Pimp Case?"

"Yes, the two who did the killing may have shown up dead in St. Petersburg." Provalov tossed down the last of his straight vodka and

filled the American in on the details, concluding, “What do you make of that?”

“Either it’s revenge or insurance, pal. I’ve seen it happen at home.”

“Insurance?”

“Yeah, had it happen in New York. The Mafia took Joey Gallo out, did it in public, and they wanted it to be a signature event, so they got a black hood to do the hit—but then the poor bastard gets shot himself about fifteen feet away. Insurance, Oleg. That way the subject can’t tell anybody who asked him to take the job. The second shooter just walked away, never did get a line on him. Or it could have been a revenge hit: whoever paid them to do the job whacked them for hitting the wrong target. You pays your money and you takes your choice, pal.”

“How do you say, wheels within wheels?”

Reilly nodded. “That’s how we say it. Well, at least it gives you some more leads to run down. Maybe your two shooters talked to somebody. Hell, maybe they even kept a diary.” It was like tossing a rock into a pond, Reilly thought. The ripples just kept expanding in a case like this. Unlike a nice domestic murder, where a guy whacked his wife for fucking around, or serving dinner late, and then confessed while crying his eyes out at what he’d done. But by the same token, it was an awfully loud crime, and those, more often than not, were the ones you broke because people commented on the noise, and some of those people knew things that you could use. It was just a matter of getting people out on the street, rattling doorknobs and wearing out shoes, until you got what you needed. These Russian cops weren’t dumb. They lacked some of the training that Reilly took for granted, but for all that, they had the proper cop instincts, and the fact of the matter was that if you followed the proper procedures, you’d break your cases, because the other side wasn’t all that smart. The smart ones didn’t break the law in so egregious a way. No, the perfect crime was the one you never discovered, the murder victim you never found, the stolen funds missed by bad accounting procedures, the espionage never discovered. Once you knew a crime had been committed, you had a starting place, and it was like unraveling a sweater. There wasn’t all that much holding the wool together if you just kept picking at it.

“Tell me, Mishka, how worthy were your Mafia adversaries in New York?” Provalov asked after sipping his second drink.

Reilly did the same. “It’s not like the movies, Oleg. Except maybe *Goodfellas.* They’re cheap hoods. They’re not educated. Some of them are pretty damned dumb. Their cachet was that once upon a time they didn’t talk, *omertà* they used to call it, the Law of Silence. I mean, they’d take the fall and never cooperate. But that changed over time.

The people from the Old Country died out and the new generation was softer—and we got tougher. It's a lot easier to laugh your way through three years than it is to handle ten, and on top of that the organization broke down. They stopped taking care of the families while the dad was in the slammer, and that was real bad for morale. So, they started talking to us. And we got smarter, too, with electronic surveillance—now it's called 'special operations'; back then it was a 'black bag job'—and we weren't always very careful about getting a warrant. I mean, back in the '60s, a Mafia don couldn't take a leak without us knowing what color it was."

"And they never fought back?"

"You mean fuck with us? Mess with an FBI agent?" Reilly grinned at the very thought. "Oleg, *nobody ever* messes with the FBI. Back then, and still somewhat to this day, we are the Right Hand of God Himself, and if you mess with us, some really bad things are going to happen. The truth of the matter is that nothing like that has ever happened, but the bad guys worry that it might. The rules get bent some, but, no, we never really break them—at least not that I know about. But if you threaten a hood with serious consequences for stepping over the line, chances are he'll take you seriously."

"Not here. They do not respect us that much yet."

"Well, then you have to generate that respect, Oleg." And it really was about that simple in concept, though bringing it about, Reilly knew, would not be all that easy. Would it take having the local cops go off the reservation once in a while, to show the hoods the price of lèsemajesté? That was part of American history, Reilly thought. Town sheriffs like Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and Wild Bill Hickok, Lone Wolf Gonzales of the Texas Rangers, Bill Tilghman and Billy Threepersons of the U.S. Marshal Service, the cops of their time who didn't so much enforce the law as embody it in the way they walked down the street. There was no corresponding Russian lawman of legend. Maybe they needed one. It was part of the heritage of every American cop, and from watching movies and TV westerns, American citizens grew up with the expectation that breaking the law would bring such a man into your life, and not to your personal profit. The FBI had grown up in an era of increased crime during the Great Depression, and had exploited the existing Western tradition with modern technology and procedures to create its own institutional mystique. To do that had meant convicting a lot of criminals, and killing a few on the street as well. In America there was the expectation that cops were heroic figures who didn't merely enforce the law, but who protected the innocent as well. There was no such tradition here. Growing it would solve many of the problems in the former Soviet Union, where the lingering tradition was of oppression

rather than protection. No John Wayne, no Melvin Purvis in Russian movies, and this nation was the poorer for it. As much as Reilly liked working here, and as much as he'd come to like and respect his Russian counterparts, it was much like being dumped into a trash heap with instructions to make it as orderly as Bergdorf-Goodman's in New York. All the proper things were there, but organizing them made Hercules' task in the Augean stables seem trivial in comparison. Oleg had the right motivation, and the right set of skills, but it was some job he had ahead of him. Reilly didn't envy him the task, but he had to help as best he could.

"I do not envy you very much, Mishka, but your organization's status in your country is something I would like to have."

"It didn't just happen, Oleg. It's the product of many years and a lot of good men. Maybe I should show you a Clint Eastwood movie."

"Dirty Harry? I have seen it." *Entertaining,* the Russian thought, *but not overly realistic.*

"No, *Hang 'Em High,* about the Marshal Service, back in the Old West, when men were men and women were grateful. Actually it's not true in the usual sense. There wasn't much crime in the Old West."

That made the Russian look up from his drink in surprise. "Then why do all the movies say otherwise?"

"Oleg, movies have to be exciting, and there isn't much exciting about raising wheat or punching cattle. The American West was mainly settled by veterans of our Civil War. That was a hard and cruel conflict, but no man who'd survived the Battle of Shiloh was likely to be intimidated by some bozo on a horse, gun or not. A professor at Oklahoma State University did a book on this subject twenty or so years ago. He checked court records and such, and found out that except for saloon shootings—guns and whiskey make a crummy mix, right?—there wasn't a hell of a lot of crime in the West. The citizens could look after themselves, and the laws they had were pretty tough —not a hell of a lot of repeat offenders—but what it really came down to was that the citizens all had guns and all pretty much knew how to use them, and that is a big deterrent for the bad guys. A cop's less likely to shoot you than an aroused citizen, when you get down to it. He doesn't want to do all the paperwork if he can avoid it, right?" A sip and a chuckle from the American.

"In that we are the same, Mishka," Provalov agreed.

"And, by the way, all this quick-draw stuff in the movies. If it ever happened for real, I've never heard of such a case. No, that's all Hollywood bullshit. You can't draw and fire accurately that way. If you could, they would have trained us to do it that way at Quantico. But except for people who practice for special performances and tournaments and stuff, and that's always at the same angle and the

same distance, it just can't be done."

"You're sure of that?" Legends die hard, especially for an otherwise pretty smart cop who had, however, seen his share of Westerns.

"I was a Principal Instructor in my Field Division, and damned if *I* can do it."

"You are good shot, eh?"

Reilly nodded with uncharacteristic modesty on this particular issue. "Fair," he allowed. "Pretty fair." There were less than three hundred names on the FBI Academy's "Possible Board," identifying those who'd fired a perfect qualifying course on graduating. Mike Reilly was one of them. He'd also been assistant head of the SWAT team in his first field division in Kansas City before moving over to the chess players in the OC—Organized Crime—department. It made him feel a little naked to walk around without his trusty S&W 1076 automatic, but that was life in the FBI's diplomatic service, the agent told himself. What the hell, the vodka was good here, and he was developing a taste for it. For that his diplomatic license plates helped. The local cops were pretty serious about giving tickets out. It was a pity they still had so much to learn about major criminal investigations.

"So, our pimp friend was probably the primary target, Oleg?"

"Yes, I think that is likely, but not entirely certain yet." He shrugged. "But we'll keep the Golovko angle open. After all," Provalov added, after a long sip of his glass, "it will get us lots of powerful cooperation from other agencies."

Reilly had to laugh at that. "Oleg Gregoriyevich, you know how to handle the bureaucratic part of the job. I couldn't do that better myself!" Then he waved to the bartender. He'd spring for the next round.

The Internet had to be the best espionage invention ever made, Mary Patricia Foley thought. She also blessed the day that she'd personally recommended Chester Nomuri to the Directorate of Operations. That little Nisei had some beautiful moves for an officer still on the short side of thirty. He'd done superb work in Japan, and had volunteered in a heartbeat for Operation GENGHIS in Beijing. His cover job at Nippon Electric Company could hardly have been better suited to the mission requirements, and it seemed that he'd waltzed into his niche like Fred Astaire on a particularly good day. The easiest part of all, it seemed, was getting the data out.

Six years before, CIA had gone to Silicon Valley—undercover, of course—and commissioned a modern manufacturer to set up a brief production run of a very special modem. In fact, it seemed to many to be a sloppy one, since the linkup time it used was four or five seconds

longer than was the usual. What you couldn't tell was that the last four seconds weren't random electronic noise at all, but rather the mating of a special encryption system, which when caught on a phone tap sounded just like random noise anyway. So, all Chester had to do was set up his message for transmission and punch it through. To be on the safe side, the messages were super-encrypted with a 256-bit system specially made at the National Security Agency, and the double-encipherment was so complex that even NSA's own bank of supercomputers could only crack it with difficulty and after a lot of expensive time. After that, it was just a matter of setting up a www-dot-something domain through an easily available public vendor and a local ISP—Internet Service Provider—with which the world abounded. It could even be used on a direct call from one computer to another—in fact, that was the original application, and even if the opposition had a hardwire phone tap, it would take a mathematical genius *plus* the biggest and baddest supercomputer that Sun Microsystems made even to begin cracking into the message.

Lian Ming, Mary Pat read, secretary to . . . to him, eh? Not a bad potential source. The most charming part of all was that Nomuri included the sexual possibilities implicit in the recruitment. The kid was still something of an innocent; he'd probably blushed writing this, the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency thought to herself, but he'd included it because he was so damned honest in everything he did. It was time to get Nomuri a promotion and a raise. Mrs. Foley made the appropriate note on a Post-it for attachment to his file. James Bond-san, she thought with an internal chuckle. The easiest part was the reply: *Approved, proceed.* She didn't even have to add the "with caution" part. Nomuri knew how to handle himself in the field, which was not always the rule for young field officers. Then she picked up the phone and called her husband on the direct line.

"Yeah, honey?" the Director of Central Intelligence said.

"Busy?"

Ed Foley knew that wasn't a question his wife asked lightly. "Not too busy for you, baby. Come on down." And hung up.

The CIA Director's office is relatively long and narrow, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the woods and the special-visitors' parking lot. Beyond that are the trees overlooking the Potomac Valley and the George Washington Parkway, and little else. The idea of anyone having a direct line of sight into any part of this building, much less the Office of the Director, would have been the cause of serious heartburn for the security pukes. Ed looked up from his paperwork when his wife came in and took the leather chair across from his desk.

"Something good?"

"Even better than Eddie's marks at school," she replied with a soft, sexy smile she reserved for her husband alone. And that had to be pretty good. Edward Foley, Jr., was kicking ass up at Rensselaer Polytechnic in New York, and a starter on their hockey team, which damned near always kicked ass itself in the NCAA. Little Ed might earn a place on the Olympic team, though pro hockey was out. He'd make too much money as a computer engineer to waste his time in so pedestrian a pursuit. "I think we may have something here."

"Like what, honey?"

"Like the executive secretary to Fang Gan," she replied. "Nomuri's trying to recruit her, and he says the prospects are good."

"GENGHIS," Ed observed. They ought to have picked a different name, but unlike most CIA operations, the name for this one hadn't been generated by a computer in the basement. The fact of the matter was that this security measure hadn't been applied for the simple reason that nobody had ever expected anything to come of it. CIA had never gotten any kind of agent into the PRC government. At least not above the rank of captain in the People's Liberation Army. The problems were the usual ones. First, they had to recruit an ethnic Chinese, and CIA hadn't had much success at that; next, the officer in question had to have perfect language skills, and the ability to disappear into the culture. For a variety of reasons, none of that had ever happened. Then Mary Pat had suggested trying Nomuri. His corporation did a lot of business in China, after all, and the kid did have good instincts. And so, Ed Foley had signed off on it, not really expecting much to result. But again his wife's field instincts had proven superior to his. It was widely believed that Mary Pat Foley was the best field officer the Agency had had in twenty years, and it looked as if she was determined to prove that. "How exposed is Chet?"

His wife had to nod her concern at that one. "He's hanging out there, but he knows how to be careful, and his communications gear is the best we have. Unless they brute-force him, you know, just pick him up because they don't like his haircut, he ought to be pretty safe. Anyway—" She handed over the communication from Beijing.

The DCI read it three times before handing it back. "Well, if he wants to get laid—it's not good fieldcraft, honey. Not good to get that involved with your agent—"

"I *know* that, Ed, but you play the cards you're dealt, remember? And if we get her a computer like the one Chet's using, her security won't be all that bad either, will it?"

"Unless they have somebody pick it apart," Ed Foley thought aloud.

"Oh, Jesus, Ed, our best people would have a cast-iron motherfucker of a time figuring it all out. I ran that project myself, remember? It's

safe!"

"Easy, honey." The DCI held up his hand. When Mary used that sort of language, she was really into the matter at hand. "Yeah, I know, it's secure, but I'm the worrier and you're the cowgirl, remember?"

"Okay, honey-bunny." The usual sweet smile that went with seduction and getting her way.

"You've already told him to proceed?"

"He's my officer, Eddie."

A resigned nod. It wasn't fair that he had to work with his wife here. He rarely won any arguments at the office, either. "Okay, baby. It's your operation, run with it, but—"

"But what?"

"But we change GENGHIS to something else. If this one pans out, then we go to a monthly name cycle. This one has some serious implications, and we've got to go max-security on it."

She had to agree with that. As case officers, the two of them had run an agent known in CIA legend as CARDINAL, Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, who'd worked inside the Kremlin for more than thirty years, feeding gold-plated information on every aspect of the Soviet military, plus some hugely valuable political intelligence. For bureaucratic reasons lost in the mists of time, CARDINAL had not been handled as a regular agent-in-place, and that had saved him from Aldrich Ames and his treacherous betrayal of a dozen Soviet citizens who'd worked for America. For Ames it had worked out to roughly $100,000 per life given away. Both of the Foleys regretted the fact that Ames was allowed to live, but they weren't in the law-enforcement business.

"Okay, Eddie, monthly change-cycle. You're always so careful, honey. You call or me?"

"We'll wait until she gives us something useful before going to all the trouble, but let's change GENGHIS to something else. It's too obviously a reference to China."

"Okay." An impish smile. "How about SORGE for the moment?" she suggested. The name was that of Richard Sorge, one of the greatest spies who'd ever lived, a German national who'd worked for the Soviets, and just possibly the man who'd kept Hitler from winning his Eastern Front war with Stalin. The Soviet dictator, knowing this, hadn't lifted a hand to save him from execution. "Gratitude," Iosif Vissarionovich had once said, "is a disease of dogs."

The DCI nodded. His wife had a lively sense of humor, especially as applied to business matters. "When do you suppose we'll know if she'll play ball with us?"

"About as soon as Chet gets his rocks off, I suppose."

"Mary, did you ever . . . ?"

"In the field? Ed, that's a guy thing, not a girl thing," she told her husband with a sparkling grin as she lifted her papers and headed back out. "Except with you, honey-bunny."

The Alitalia DC-10 touched down about fifteen minutes early due to the favorable winds. Renato Cardinal DiMilo was pleased enough to think through an appropriate prayer of thanksgiving. A longtime member of the Vatican's diplomatic service, he was accustomed to long flights, but that wasn't quite the same as enjoying them. He wore his red—"cardinal"—and black suit that was actually more akin to an official uniform, and not a conspicuously comfortable one at that, despite the custom tailoring that came from one of Rome's better shops. One of the drawbacks to his clerical and diplomatic status was that he'd been unable to shed his suit coat for the flight, but he'd been able to kick off his shoes, only to find that his feet had swollen on the flight, and getting them back on was more difficult than usual. That evoked a sigh rather than a curse, as the plane taxied to the terminal. The senior flight attendant ushered him to the forward door and allowed him to leave the aircraft first. One advantage to his diplomatic status was that all he ever had to do was wave his diplomatic passport at the control officers, and in this case a senior PRC government official was there to greet him at the end of the jetway.

"Welcome to our country," the official said, extending his hand.

"It is my pleasure to be here," the cardinal replied, noting that this communist atheist didn't kiss his ring, as was the usual protocol. Well, Catholicism in particular and Christianity in general were not exactly welcome in the People's Republic of China, were they? But if the PRC expected to live in the civilized world, then they'd have to accept representation with the Holy See, and that was that. And besides, he'd go to work on these people, and, who knew, maybe he could convert one or two. Stranger things had happened, and the Roman Catholic Church had handled more formidable enemies than this one.

With a wave and a small escort group, the demi-minister conducted his distinguished visitor through the concourse toward the place where the official car and escort waited.

"How was your flight?" the underling asked.

"Lengthy but not unpleasant" was the expected reply. Diplomats had to act as though they loved flying, though even the flight crews found journeys of this length tiresome. It was his job to observe the new ambassador of the Vatican, to see how he acted, how he looked out the car's windows, even, which, in this case, was not unlike all the other first-time diplomats who came to Beijing. They looked out at the differences. The shapes of the buildings were new and different to

them, the color of the bricks, and how the brickwork looked close up and at a distance, the way in which things that were essentially the same became fascinating because of differences that were actually microscopic when viewed objectively.

It took a total of twenty-eight minutes to arrive at the residence/embassy. It was an old building, dating back to the turn of the previous century, and had been the largish home of an American Methodist missionary—evidently one who liked his American comforts, the official thought—and had passed through several incarnations, including, he'd learned the previous day, that of a bordello in the diplomatic quarter in the 1920s and '30s, because diplomats liked their comforts as well. Ethnic Chinese, he wondered, or Russian women who'd always claimed to be of the Czarist nobility, or so he'd heard. After all, Westerners enjoyed fucking noblewomen for some reason or other, as if their body parts were different somehow. He'd heard that one, too, at the office, from one of the archivists who kept track of such things at the Ministry. Chairman Mao's personal habits were not recorded, but his lifelong love for deflowering twelve-year-olds was well known in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Every national leader had something odd and distasteful about him, the young official knew. Great men had great aberrations.

The car pulled up to the old wooden frame house, where a uniformed policeman opened the door for the visiting Italian, and even saluted, earning himself a nod from the man wearing the ruby-red skullcap.

Waiting on the porch was yet another foreigner, Monsignor Franz Schepke, whose diplomatic status was that of DCM, or deputy chief of mission, which usually meant the person who was really in charge of things while the ambassador—mainly a man chosen for political reasons—reigned in the main office. They didn't know if that were the case here yet.

Schepke looked as German as his ancestry was, tall and spare with gray-blue eyes that revealed nothing at all, and a wonderful language gift that had mastered not only the complex Chinese language, but also the local dialect and accent as well. Over the phone this foreigner could pass for a party member, much to the surprise of local officials who were not in the least accustomed to foreigners who could even speak the language properly, much less master it.

The German national, the Chinese official saw, kissed his superior's ring. Then the Italian shook his hand and embraced the younger churchman. They probably knew each other. Cardinal DiMilo then led Schepke to the escort and introduced them-they'd met many times before, of course, and that made the senior churchman appear just a

little backward to the local official. In due course, the luggage was loaded into the residence/embassy building, and the Chinese official got back in the official car for the ride to the Foreign Ministry, where he'd make his contact report. The Papal Nuncio was past his prime, he'd write, a pleasant enough old chap, perhaps, but no great intellect. A fairly typical Western ambassador, in other words.

No sooner had they gotten inside than Schepke tapped his right ear and gestured around the building.

"Everywhere?" the cardinal asked.

"*Ja, doch,*" Monsignor Schepke replied in his native German, then shifted to Greek. Not modern, but Attic Greek, that spoken by Aristotle, similar to but different from the modern version of that language, a language perpetuated only by a handful of scholars at Oxford and a few more Western universities. "Welcome, Eminence."

"Even airplanes can take too long. Why can we not travel by ship? It would be a much gentler way to getting from point to point."

"The curse of progress," the German priest offered weakly. The Rome-Beijing flight was only forty minutes longer than the one between Rome and New York, after all, but Renato was a man from a different and more patient age.

"My escort. What can you tell me of him?"

"His name is Qian. He's forty, married, one son. He will be our point of contact with the Foreign Ministry. Bright, well educated, but a dedicated communist, son of another such man," Schepke said, speaking rapidly in the language learned long before in seminary. He and his boss knew that this exchange would probably be recorded, and would then drive linguists in the Foreign Ministry to madness. Well, it was not their fault that such people were illiterate, was it?

"And the building is fully wired, then?" DiMilo asked, heading over to a tray with a bottle of red wine on it.

"We must assume so," Schepke confirmed with a nod, while the cardinal poured a glass. "I could have the building swept, but finding reliable people here is not easy, and . . ." And those able to do a proper sweep would then use the opportunity to plant their own bugs for whatever country they worked for—America, Britain, France, Israel, all were interested in what the Vatican knew.

The Vatican, located in central Rome, is technically an independent country, hence Cardinal DiMilo's diplomatic status even in a country where religious convictions were frowned upon at best, and stamped into the earth at worst. Renato Cardinal DiMilo had been a priest for just over forty years, most of which time had been spent in the Vatican's foreign service. His language skills were not unknown within the confines of his own service, but rare even there, and damned rare in the outside world, where men and women took a great deal of time

to learn languages. But DiMilo picked them up easily—so much so that it surprised him that others were unable to do so as well. In addition to being a priest, in addition to being a diplomat, DiMilo was also an intelligence officer—all ambassadors are supposed to be, but he was much more so than most. One of his jobs was to keep the Vatican—therefore the Pope—informed of what was happening in the world, so that the Vatican—therefore the Pope—could take action, or at least use influence in the proper direction.

DiMilo knew the current Pope quite well. They'd been friends for years before his election to the chair of the Pontifex Maximus ("maximus" in this context meaning "chief," and "pontifex" meaning "bridge-builder," as a cleric was supposed to be the bridge between men and their God). DiMilo had served the Vatican in this capacity in seven countries. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, he'd specialized in Eastern European countries, where he'd learned to debate the merits of communism with its strongest adherents, mostly to their discomfort and his own amusement. Here would be different, the cardinal thought. It wasn't just the Marxist beliefs. This was a very different culture. Confucius had defined the place of a Chinese citizen two millennia before, and that place was different from what Western culture taught. There was a place for the teachings of Christ here, of course, as there was everywhere. But the local soil was not as fertile for Christianity as it was elsewhere. Local citizens who sought out Christian missionaries would do so out of curiosity, and once exposed to the gospel would find Christian beliefs more curious still, since they were so different from the nation's more ancient teachings. Even the more "normal" beliefs that were in keeping, more or less, with Chinese traditions, like the Eastern Spiritualist movement known as Falun Gong, had been ruthlessly, if not viciously, repressed. Cardinal DiMilo told himself that he'd come to one of the few remaining pagan nations, and one in which martyrdom was still a possibility for the lucky or luckless, depending on one's point of view. He sipped his wine, trying to decide what time his body thought it was, as opposed to what time it was by his watch. In either case, the wine tasted good, reminding him as it did of his home, a place which he'd never truly left, even in Moscow or Prague. Beijing, though—Beijing might be a challenge.

CHAPTER 8

Underlings and Underthings

It wasn't the first time he'd done this. It was exciting in its way, and arousing, and marginally dangerous because of the time and place. Mainly it was an exercise in effective memory and the discerning eye. The hardest part was converting the English units to metric. The perfect female form was supposed to be 36-24-36, not 91.44-60.96-91.44.

The last time he'd been in a place like this had been in the Beverly Center Mall in Los Angeles, buying for Maria Castillo, a voluptuous Latina who'd been delighted at his error, taking her waist for twenty-four rather than its true twenty-seven. You wanted to err on the low side in numbers, but probably the big side in letters. If you took a 36B chest to be a 34C, she wouldn't be mad, but if you took a twenty-four-inch waist for a twenty-eight-inch, she'd probably be pissed. Stress, Nomuri told himself with a shake of the head, came in many shapes and sizes. He wanted to get this right because he wanted Ming as a source, but he wanted her as a mistress, too, and that was one more reason not to make a mistake.

The color was the easy part. Red. Of course, red. This was still a country in which red was the "good" color, which was convenient because red had always been the lively choice in women's underthings, the color of adventure and giggles and . . . looseness. And looseness served both his biological and professional purposes. He had other things to figure out, too. Ming was not tall, scarcely five feet—151 centimeters or so, Nomuri thought, doing the conversion in his head. She was short but not really petite. There was no real obesity in China. People didn't overeat here, probably because of the lingering memory of times when food had not been in abundance and overeating was simply not possible. Ming would have been considered overweight in California, Chester thought, but that was just her body type. She was squat because she was short, and no amount of dieting or working out or makeup could change it. Her waist wouldn't be much less than twenty-seven inches. For her chest, 34B was about the best he could hope for . . . well, maybe 34C—no, he decided, B+ at most. So, a 34B bra, and medium shorts—panties—red silk, something

feminine . . . something on the wild, whorish side of feminine, something that she could look into the mirror alone with and giggle . . . and maybe sigh at how different she looked wearing such things, and maybe smile, that special inward smile women had for such moments. The moment when you knew you had them—and the rest was just dessert.

The best part of Victoria's Secret was the catalog, designed for men who really, and sensibly, wanted to buy the models themselves, despite the facial attitudes that sometimes made them look like lesbians on quaaludes—but with such bodies, a man couldn't have everything, could he? Fantasies, things of the mind. Nomuri wondered if the models really existed or were the products of computers. They could do anything with computers these days—make Rosie O'Donnell into Twiggy, or Cindy Crawford obsolete.

Back to work, he told himself. This might be a place for fantasies, but not that one, not yet. Okay, it had to be sexy. It had to be something that would both amuse and excite Ming, and himself, too: That was all part of it. Nomuri took the catalog off the pile because it was a lot easier for him to see what he wanted in a filled rather than an unfilled condition. He turned pages and stopped dead on page 26. There was a black girl modeling it, and whatever genetic stew she'd come from must have had some fine ingredients, as her face would have appealed to a member of Hitler's SS just as much as Idi Amin. It was that sort of face. Better yet, she wore something called a Racerback bra with matching string bikini panties, and the color was just perfect, a red-purple that the Romans had once called Tyrrian Scarlet, the color on the toga stripe of members of the senatorial order, reserved by price and custom to the richest of the Roman nobility, not quite red, not quite purple. The bra material was satin and Lycra, and it closed in front, the easier for a girl to put it on, and the more interesting for a guy to take it off, his mind thought, as he headed over to the proper rack of clothing. Thirty-four-B, he thought. If too small, it would be all the more flattering . . . small or medium on the string bikini? Shit, he decided, get one of each. Just to be sure, he also got a no-wire triangle-pattern bra and thong panties in an orange-red color that the Catholic Church would call a mortal sin just for looking at. On impulse he got several additional panties on the assumption that they soiled more quickly than bras did, something he wasn't sure of despite being a field intelligence officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. They didn't tell you about such things at The Farm. He'd have to do a memo on that. It might give MP a chuckle in her seventh-floor office at Langley.

One other thing, he thought. Perfume. Women liked perfume. You'd expect them to like it, especially here. The entire city of Beijing

smelled like a steel mill, lots of coal dust and other pollutants in the air—as Pittsburgh had probably been at the turn of the last century—and the sad truth was that the Chinese didn't bathe as diligently as Californians did, and nowhere nearly as regularly as the Japanese. So, something that smelled nice . . .

"Dream Angels," the brand was called. It came in a perfume spray, lotion, and other applications that he didn't understand, but he was sure Ming would, since she was a girl, and this was a quintessential girl thing. So, he bought some of that, too, using his NEC credit card to pay for it—his Japanese bosses would understand. There were skillfully arranged and choreographed sex tours that took Japanese salarymen to various places in Asia that catered to the sex trade. That was probably how AIDS had gotten to Japan, and why Nomuri used a condom for everything there except urinating. The total came to about 300 euros. The salesclerk wrapped everything and commented that the lady in his life was very lucky.

She will be, Nomuri promised himself. The underthings he'd just bought her, well, the fabrics felt as smooth as flexible glass, and the colors would arouse a blind man. The only question was how they would affect a dumpy Chinese female secretary to a government minister. It wasn't as though he was trying to seduce Suzie Wong. Lian Ming was pretty ordinary rather than ordinarily pretty, but you never knew. Amy Irvin, his first conquest at the ripe old age of seventeen years and three months, had been pretty enough to inspire him—which meant, for a boy of that age, she had the requisite body parts, no beard like a Civil War general, and had showered in the previous month. At least Ming wouldn't be like so many American women now who'd visited the plastic surgeon to have their tummies tucked, tits augmented to look like cereal bowls, and lips pumped full of chemicals until they looked like some strange kind of two-part fruit. What women did to attract men . . . and what men did in the hope of seducing them. What a potential energy source, Nomuri thought, as he turned the key in his company Nissan.

What is it today, Ben?" Ryan asked his National Security Adviser.

"CIA is trying to get a new operation under way in Beijing. For the moment it's called SORGE."

"As in Richard Sorge?"

"Correct."

"Somebody must be ambitious. Okay, tell me about it."

"There's an officer named Chester Nomuri, an illegal, he's in Beijing covered as a computer salesman for NEC. He's trying to make a move on a secretary, female, for a senior PRC minister, a guy named Fang Gan—"

“Who is?” Ryan asked over his coffee mug.

“Sort of a minister without portfolio, works with the Premier and the Foreign Minister.”

“Like that Zhang Han San guy?”

“Not as senior, but yes. Looks like a very high-level gofer type. Has contacts in their military and foreign ministries, good ideological credentials, sounding board for others in their Politburo. Anyway, Nomuri is trying to make a move on the girl.”

“Bond,” Ryan observed in a studiously neutral voice, “James Bond. I know Nomuri’s name. He did some good work for us in Japan when I had your job. This is for information only, not my approval?”

“Correct, Mr. President. Mrs. Foley is running this one, and wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“Okay, tell MP that I’m interested in whatever take comes out of this.” Ryan fought off the grimace that came from learning of another person’s private—well, if not private, then his sex—life.

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER 9

Initial Results

Chester Nomuri had learned many things in his life, from his parents and his teachers and his instructors at The Farm, but one lesson he'd yet to learn was the value of patience, at least as it applied to his personal life. That didn't keep him from being cautious, however. That was why he'd sent his plans to Langley. It was embarrassing to have to inform a woman of his proposed sex life—MP was a brilliant field spook, but she still took her leaks sitting down, Nomuri reminded himself—but he didn't want the Agency to think that he was an alley cat on the government payroll, because the truth was, he liked his job. The excitement was at least as addictive as the cocaine that some of his college chums had played with.

Maybe that's why Mrs. Foley liked him, Nomuri speculated. They were of a kind. Mary Pat, they said in the Directorate of Operations, was The Cowgirl. She'd swaggered through the streets of Moscow during the last days of the Cold War like Annie Fucking Oakley packing heat, and though she'd been burned by KGB's Second Chief Directorate, she hadn't given the fuckers anything, and whatever operation she'd run—this was still very, very secret—it must have been a son of a bitch, because she'd never gone back in the field but had scampered up the CIA career ladder like a hungry squirrel up an oak tree. The President thought she was smart, and if you wanted a friend in this business, the President of the United States was right up there, because he knew the spook business. Then came the stories about what President Ryan had once done. Bringing out the chairman of the fucking KGB? MP must have been part of that, the boys and girls of the DO all thought. All they knew even within the confines of CIA—except, of course, for those who needed to know (both of them, the saying went)—was what had been published in the press, and while the media generally knew jack shit about black operations, a CNN TV crew *had* put a camera in the face of a former KGB chairman now living in Winchester, Virginia. While he hadn't spilled many beans, the face of a man the Soviet government had declared dead in a plane crash was bean enough to make a very rich soup indeed. Nomuri figured he was working for a couple of real pros, and so he let

them know what he was up to, even if that meant causing a possible blush for Mary Patricia Foley, Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency.

He'd picked a Western-style restaurant. There were more than a few of them in Beijing now, catering both to the locals and to tourists who felt nostalgic for the taste of home (or who worried about their GI systems over here—not unreasonably, Nomuri thought). The quality wasn't anything close to a real American restaurant, but it was considerably more appealing than the deep-fried rat he suspected was on the menu of many Beijing eateries.

He'd arrived first, and was relaxing with a cheap American bourbon when Ming came through the door. Nomuri waved in what he hoped was not an overly boyish way. She saw him do so, and her resulting smile was just about right, he thought. Ming was glad to see him, and that was step one in the plan for the evening. She made her way to his corner table in the back. He stood, showing a degree of gentlemanliness unusual in China, where women were nowhere near as valued as they were back home. Nomuri wondered if that would change, if all the killing of female babies could suddenly make Ming a valuable commodity, despite her plainness. He still couldn't get over the casual killing of children; he kept it in the front of his mind, just to keep clear who the good guys were in the world, and who the bad guys were.

"It's so good to see you," he said with an engaging smile. "I was worried you might not meet me here."

"Oh, really? Why?"

"Well, your superior at work . . . I'm sure that he . . . well . . . needs you, I suppose is the polite way to put it," Nomuri said with a hesitant voice, delivering his rehearsed line pretty well, he thought. He had. The girl giggled a little.

"Comrade Fang is over sixty-five," she said. "He is a good man, a good superior, and a fine minister, but he works long hours, and he is no longer a young man."

Okay, so he fucks you, but not all that much, Nomuri interpreted that to mean. *And maybe you'd like a little more, from somebody closer to your age, eh?* Of course, if Fang was over sixty-five and still getting it on, then maybe he is worthy of some respect, Nomuri added to himself, then tossed the thought aside.

"Have you eaten here before?" The place was called Vincenzo's, and pretended to be Italian. In fact the owner/operator was a half-breed Italian-Chinese from Vancouver, whose spoken Italian would have gotten him hit by the Mafia had he tried it in Palermo, or even Mulberry Street in Manhattan, but here in Beijing it seemed genuinely ethnic enough.

"No," Ming replied, looking around at, to her, this most exotic of locations. Every table had an old wine bottle, its bottom wrapped in twine, and an old drippy red candle at the top. The tablecloth was checked white and red. Whoever had decorated this place had evidently seen too many old movies. That said, it didn't look anything like a local restaurant, even with the Chinese servers. Dark wood paneling, hooks near the door for hanging coats. It could have been in any East Coast city in America, where it would have been recognized as one of those old family Italian places, a mom-and-pop joint with good food and little flash. "What is Italian food like?"

"At its best, Italian cooking is among the very finest in the world," Nomuri answered. "You've never had Italian food? Never at all? Then may I select for you?"

Her response was girlish in its charm. Women were all the same. Treat them in the right way, and they turn into wax in your hand, to be kneaded and shaped to your will. Nomuri was starting to like this part of the job, and someday it might be useful in his *personal* personal life, too. He waved to the waiter, who came over with a subservient smile. Nomuri first of all ordered a genuine Italian white wine—strangely, the wine list here was actually first rate, and quite pricey to boot, of course—and, with a deep breath, fettuccine Alfredo, quintessential Italian heart-attack food. From looking at Ming, he figured that she'd not refuse rich food.

"So, the new computer and printer systems continue to work out?"

"Yes, and Minister Fang has praised me before the rest of the staff for choosing it. You have made me something of a hero, Comrade Nomuri."

"I am pleased to hear that," the CIA officer replied, wondering if being called "comrade" was a good thing for the current mission or a bad one. "We are bringing out a new portable computer now, one you could take home with you, but which has the same power as your office mainframe, with all the same features and software, of course, even a modem for accessing the Internet."

"Really? I get to do that so seldom. At work, you see, it is not encouraged for us to surf the 'Net, except when the Minister wants something specific."

"Is that so? What 'Net interests does Minister Fang have?"

"Mainly political commentary, and mainly in America and Europe. Every morning I print up various pieces from the newspapers, the *Times of London, New York Times, Washington Post*, and so on. The Minister especially likes to see what the Americans are thinking."

"Not very much," Nomuri observed, as the wine arrived.

"Excuse me?" Ming asked, getting him to turn back.

"Hmph, oh, the Americans, they don't think very much. The

shallowest people I have ever encountered. Loud, poorly educated, and their women . . .” Chet let his voice trail off.

“What of their women, Comrade Nomuri?” Ming asked, virtually on command.

“Ahh.” He took a sip of the wine and nodded for the waiter to serve it properly. It was a pretty good one from Tuscany. “Have you ever seen the American toy, the Barbie doll?”

“Yes, they are made here in China, aren’t they?”

“That is what every American woman wishes to be, hugely tall, with massive bosoms, a waist you can put your hands around. That is not a woman. It’s a toy, a mannequin for children to play with. And about as intelligent as your average American woman. Do you think they have language skills, as you do? Consider: We now converse in English, a language native to neither of us, but we converse well, do we not?”

“Yes,” Ming agreed.

“How many Americans speak Mandarin, do you suppose? Or Japanese? No, Americans have no education, no sophistication. They are a backward nation, and their women are very backward. They even go to surgeons to have their bosoms made bigger, like that stupid child’s doll. It’s comical to see them, especially to see them nude,” he concluded with a dangle.

“You have?” she asked, on cue.

“Have what—you mean seen American women nude?” He got a welcome nod for his question. This was going well. *Yes, Ming, I am a man of the world.* “Yes, I have. I lived there for some months, and it was interesting in a grotesque sort of way. Some of them can be very sweet, but not like a decent Asian woman with proper proportions, and womanly hair that doesn’t come from some cosmetics bottle. And manners. Americans lack the manners of an Asian.”

“But there are many of our people over there. Didn’t you . . . ?”

“Meet one? No, the round-eyes keep them for themselves. I suppose their men appreciate real women, even while their own women turn into something else.” He reached to pour some more wine into Ming’s glass. “But in fairness, there are some things Americans are good at.”

“Such as?” she asked. The wine was already loosening her tongue.

“I will show you later. Perhaps I owe you an apology, but I have taken the liberty of buying you some American things.”

“Really?” Excitement in her eyes. This was *really* going well, Nomuri told himself. He’d have to go easier on the wine. Well, half a bottle, two of these glasses, wouldn’t hurt him in any way. How did that song go . . . *It’s okay to do it on the first date* . . . Well, he didn’t have to worry about much in the way of religious convictions or inhibitions here, did he? That was one advantage to communism,

wasn't it?

The fettuccine arrived right on time, and surprisingly it was pretty good. He watched her eyes as she took her first forkful. (Vincenzo's used silverware instead of chopsticks, which was a better idea for fettuccine Alfredo anyway.) Her dark eyes were wide as the noodles entered her mouth.

"This is fine . . . lots of eggs have gone into it. I love eggs," she confided.

They're your arteries, honey, the case officer thought. He watched her inhale the first bit of the fettuccine. Nomuri reached across the table to top off her wineglass once more. She scarcely noticed, she attacked her pasta so furiously.

Halfway through the plate of pasta, she looked up. "I have never had so fine a dinner," Ming told him.

Nomuri responded with a warm grin. "I am so pleased that you are enjoying yourself." *Wait'll you see the drawers I just got you, honey.*

Attention to orders!"

Major General Marion Diggs wondered what his new command would bring him. The second star on his shoulder . . . well, he told himself that he could feel the additional weight, but the truth was that he couldn't, not really. His last five years in the uniform of his country had been interesting. The first commander of the reconstituted 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment—the Buffalo Soldiers—he'd made that ancient and honored regiment into the drill masters of the Israeli army, turning the Negev Desert into another National Training Center, and in two years he'd hammered every Israeli brigade commander into the ground, then built them up again, tripling their combat effectiveness by every quantifiable measure, so that now the Israeli troopers' swagger was actually justified by their skills. Then he'd gone off to the real NTC in the high California desert, where he'd done the same thing for his own United States Army. He'd been there when the Bio War had begun, with his own 11th ACR, the famous Blackhorse Cavalry, and a brigade of National Guardsmen, whose unexpected use of advanced battlefield-control equipment had surprised the hell out of the Blackhorse and their proud commander, Colonel Al Hamm. The whole bunch had deployed to Saudi, along with the 10th from Israel, and together they'd given a world-class bloody nose to the army of the short-lived United Islamic Republic. After acing his colonel-command, he'd really distinguished himself as a one-star, and that was the gateway to the second sparkling silver device on his shoulder, and also the gateway to his new command, known variously as "First Tanks," "Old Ironsides," or "America's Armored Division." It was the 1st Armored Division, based in Bad Kreuznach, Germany, one of the few

remaining heavy divisions under the American flag.

Once there had been a lot of them. Two full corps of them right here in Germany, 1st and 3rd Armored, 3rd and 8th Infantry, plus a pair of Armored Cavalry Regiments, 2nd and 11th, and the POMCUS sites—monster equipment warehouses—for stateside units like the 2nd Armored, and the 1st Infantry, the Big Red One out of Fort Riley, Kansas, which could redeploy to Europe just as fast as the airlines could deliver them, there to load up their equipment and move out. All that force—and it was a whole shitload of force, Diggs reflected—had been part of NATO's commitment to defend Western Europe from a country called the Soviet Union and its mirror-image Warsaw Pact, huge formations whose objective was the Bay of Biscay, or so the operations and intelligence officers in Mons, Belgium, had always thought. And quite a clash it would have been. Who would have won? Probably NATO, Diggs thought, depending on political interference, and command skills on both sides of the equation.

But, now, the Soviet Union was no more. And with it was also gone the need for the presence of V and VII Corps in Western Germany, and so, 1st Armored was about the only vestige left of what had once been a vast and powerful force. Even the cavalry regiments were gone, the 11th to be the OpFor—"opposing force," or Bad Guys—at the National Training Center and the 2nd "Dragoon" Regiment essentially disarmed at Fort Polk, Louisiana, trying to make up new doctrine for weaponless troopers. That left Old Ironsides, somewhat reduced in size from its halcyon days, but still a formidable force. Exactly whom Diggs might fight in the event hostilities sprang unexpectedly from the ground, he had no idea at the moment.

That, of course, was the job of his G-2 Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Richmond, and training for it was the problem assigned to his G-3 Operations Officer, Colonel Duke Masterman, whom Diggs had dragged kicking and screaming from the Pentagon. It was not exactly unknown in the United States Army for a senior officer to collect about him younger men whom he'd gotten to know on the way up. It was his job to look after their careers, and their jobs to take care of their mentor—called a "rabbi" in the NYPD or a "Sea Daddy" in the United States Navy—in a relationship that was more father/son than anything else. Neither Diggs nor Richmond nor Masterman expected much more than interesting professional time in the 1st Armored Division, and that was more than enough. They'd seen the elephant—a phrase that went back in the United States Army to the Civil War to denote active participation in combat operations—and killing people with modern weapons wasn't exactly a trip to Disney World. A quiet term of training and sand-table exercises would be plenty, they all thought. Besides, the beer was pretty good in

Germany.

"Well, Mary, it's all yours," outgoing Major General (promotable) Sam Goodnight said after his formal salute. "Mary" was a nickname for Diggs that went back to West Point, and he was long since past getting mad about it. But only officers senior to him could use that moniker, and there weren't all that many of them anymore, were there?

"Sam, looks like you have the kids trained up pretty well," Diggs told the man he'd just relieved.

"I'm especially pleased with my helicopter troops. After the hoo-rah with the Apaches down in Yugoslavia, we decided to get those people up to speed. It took three months, but they're ready to eat raw lion now—after they kill the fuckers with their pocketknives."

"Who's the boss rotor-head?"

"Colonel Dick Boyle. You'll meet him in a few minutes. He's been there and done that, and he knows how to run his command."

"Nice to know," Diggs allowed, as they boarded the World War II command car to troop the line, a goodbye ride for Sam Goodnight and welcome for Mary Diggs, whose service reputation was as one tough little black son of a bitch. His doctorate in management from the University of Minnesota didn't seem to count, except to promotion boards, and whatever private company might want to hire him after retirement, a possibility he had to consider from time to time now, though he figured two stars were only about half of what he had coming. Diggs had fought in two wars and comported himself well in both cases. There were many ways to make a career in the armed services, but none so effective as successful command on the field of battle, because when you got down to it, the Army was about killing people and breaking things as efficiently as possible. It wasn't fun, but it was occasionally necessary. You couldn't allow yourself to lose sight of that. You trained your soldiers so that if they woke up the next morning in a war, they'd know what to do and how to go about it, whether their officers were around to tell them or not.

"How about artillery?" Diggs asked, as they drove past the assembled self-propelled 155-mm howitzers.

"Not a problem there, Mary. In fact, no problems anywhere. Your brigade commanders all were there in 1991, mainly as company commanders or battalion S-3s. Your battalion commanders were almost all platoon leaders or company XOs. They're pretty well trained up. You'll see," Goodnight promised.

Diggs knew it would all be true. Sam Goodnight was a Major General (promotable), which meant he was going to get star number three as soon as the United States Senate got around to approving the next bill with all the flag officers on it, and that couldn't be rushed.

Even the President couldn't do that. Diggs had screened for his second star six months earlier, just before leaving Fort Irwin, to spend a few months parked in the Pentagon—an abbreviated "joint-ness" tour, as it was called—before moving back to Germany. The division was slated to run a major exercise against the Bundeswehr in three weeks. First AD vs. four German brigades, two tanks, two mechanized infantry, and that promised to be a major test of the division. Well, that was something for Colonel Masterman to worry about. It was his neck on the line. Duke had come to Germany a week early to meet with his also-outgoing predecessor as divisional operations officer and go over the exercise's rules and assumptions. The German commander in the exercise was Generalmajor Siegfried Model. Siggy, as he was known to his colleagues, was descended from a pretty good Wehrmacht commander from the old-old days, and it was also said of him that he regretted the fall of the USSR, because part of him wanted to take the Russian Army on and rape it. Well, such things had been said about a lot of German, and a few American senior officers as well, and in nearly every case it was just that—talk, because nobody who'd seen one battlefield ever yearned to see another.

Of course, Diggs thought, there weren't many Germans left who had ever seen a battlefield.

"They look good, Sam," Diggs said, as they passed the last static display.

"It's a hell of a tough job to leave, Marion. Damn." The man was starting to fight back tears, which was one way of telling who the really tough ones were in this line of work, Diggs knew. Walking away from the command of soldiers was like leaving your kid in the hospital, or maybe even harder. They'd all been Sam's kids, and now they would be his kids, Diggs thought. On first inspection, they looked healthy and smart enough.

Yeah, Arnie," President Ryan said. His voice betrayed his emotions more than a growl or a shout could have.

"Nobody ever said the job was fun, Jack. Hell, I don't know why you're complaining. You don't have to schmooze people to raise money for your reelection campaign, do you? You don't have to kiss ass. All you have to do is your work, and that saves you a good hour—maybe an hour and a half—per day to watch TV and play with your kids." If there was anything Arnie loved, Ryan thought, it was telling him (Ryan) how easy he had it in this fucking job.

"But I still spend half my day doing unproductive shit instead of doing what I'm paid to do."

"Only half, and still he complains," Arnie told the ceiling. "Jack, you'd better start liking this stuff, or it'll eat you up. This is the *fun*

part of being President. And, hell, man, you were a government employee for fifteen years before you came here. You should *love* being unproductive!"

Ryan nearly laughed, but managed to contain himself. If there was anything Arnie knew how to do, it was to soften his lessons with humor. That could be annoying as hell.

"Fine, but exactly what do I promise them?"

"You promise that you'll support this dam and bargecanal scheme."

"But it's probably a waste of money."

"No, it is *not* a waste of money. It provides employment in this two-state area, which is of interest to not one, not two, but *three* United States Senators, all of whom support you steadfastly on the Hill, and whom you, therefore, must support in turn. You reward them for helping you by helping them get reelected. And you help them get reelected by allowing them to generate about fifteen thousand construction jobs in the two states."

"And screw with a perfectly good river for"—Ryan checked the briefing folder on his desk—"three and a quarter *billion* dollars . . . Jesus H. Christ," he finished with a long breath.

"Since when have you been a tree-hugger? Cutthroat trout don't vote, Jack. And even if the barge traffic up the river doesn't develop, you'll still have one hell of a recreation area for people to water-ski and fish, toss in a few new motels, maybe a golf course or two, fast-food places . . ."

"I don't like saying things and doing things I don't believe in," the President tried next.

"For a politician, that is like color blindness or a broken leg: a serious handicap," van Damm noted. "That's part of the job, too. Nikita Khrushchev said it: 'Politicians are the same all over the world, we build bridges where there aren't any rivers.' "

"So wasting money is something we're *supposed* to do? Arnie, it isn't *our* money! It's the *people's* money. It belongs to them, and we don't have the right to piss it away!"

"Right? Who ever said this is about what's right?" Arnie asked patiently. "Those three senators who're"—he checked his watch—"on their way down here right now got you your defense appropriations bill a month ago, in case you didn't remember, and you may need their votes again. Now, that appropriations bill was important, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course it was," President Ryan responded with guarded eyes.

"And getting that bill through was the right thing for the country, wasn't it?" van Damm asked next.

A long sigh. He could see where this was going. "Yes, Arnie, it was."

"And so, doing this little thing *does* help you to do the right thing for the country, doesn't it?"

"I suppose." Ryan hated conceding such things, but arguing with Arnie was like arguing with a Jesuit. You were almost always outgunned.

"Jack, we live in an imperfect world. You can't expect to be doing the *right thing* all the time. The best you can expect to do is to make the right thing happen most of the time—actually, you will do well to have the right things outbalance the not-so-right things over the long term. Politics is the art of compromise, the art of getting the important things you want, while giving to others the less important things they want, and doing so in such a way that you're the one doing the giving, not them doing the taking—because that's what makes you the boss. You must understand that." Arnie paused and took a sip of coffee. "Jack, you try hard, and you're learning pretty well—for a fourth-grader in graduate school—but you have to learn this stuff to the point that you don't even think about it. It has to become as natural as zipping your pants after you take a piss. You still have no idea how well you're doing." *And maybe that's a good thing*, Arnie added to himself alone.

"Forty percent of the people don't think I'm doing a good job."

"Fifty-nine percent do, and some of those forty percent voted for you anyway!"

The election had been a remarkable session for write-in candidates, and Mickey Mouse had done especially well, Ryan reminded himself.

"What am I doing to offend those others?" Ryan demanded.

"Jack, if the Gallup Poll had been around in ancient Israel, Jesus would probably have gotten discouraged and gone back to carpentry."

Ryan punched a button on his desk phone. "Ellen, I need you."

"Yes, Mr. President," Mrs. Sumter replied to their not-so-secret code. Thirty seconds later, she appeared through the door with her hand at her side. Approaching the President's desk, she extended her hand with a cigarette in it. Jack took it and lit it with a butane lighter, removing a glass ashtray from a desk drawer.

"Thanks, Ellen."

"Surely." She withdrew. Every other day Ryan would slip her a dollar bill to pay off his cigarette debt. He was getting better at this, mooching usually no more than three smokes on a stressful day.

"Just don't let the media catch you doing that," Arnie advised.

"Yeah, I know. I can get it on with a secretary right here in the Oval Office, but if I get caught smoking, that's like goddamned child abuse." Ryan took a long hit on the Virginia Slim, also knowing what his wife would say if she caught him doing this. "If I were king, then I'd make the goddamned rules!"

"But you're not, and you don't," Arnie pointed out.

"My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the country—"

"No, your job is to preserve, protect, and defend the *Constitution*, which is a whole lot more complicated. Remember, to the average citizen 'preserve, protect, and defend' means that they get paid every week, and they feed their families, get a week at the beach every year, or maybe Disney World, and football every Sunday afternoon in the fall. Your job is to keep them content and secure, not just from foreign armies, but from the general vicissitudes of life. The good news is that if you do that, you can be in this job another seven-plus years and retire with their love."

"You left out the legacy part."

That made Arnie's eyes flare a bit. "Legacy? Any president who worries too much about that is offending God, and that's almost as dumb as offending the Supreme Court."

"Yeah, and when the Pennsylvania case gets there—"

Arnie held up his hands as though protecting against a punch. "Jack, I'll worry about that when the time comes. You didn't take my advice on the Supreme Court, and so far you've been lucky, but if—no, *when* that blows up in your face, it won't be pretty." Van Damm was already planning the defense strategy for that.

"Maybe, but I won't worry about it. Sometimes you just let the chips fall where they may."

"And sometimes you look out to make sure the goddamned tree doesn't land on you."

Jack's intercom buzzed just as he put out the cigarette. It was Mrs. Sumter's voice. "The senators just came through the West Entrance."

"I'm out of here," Arnie said. "Just remember, you will support the dam and canal on that damned river, and you value their support. They'll be there when you need them, Jack. Remember that. And you *do* need them. Remember that, too."

"Yes, Dad," Ryan said.

You walked here?" Nomuri asked, with some surprise.

"It is only two kilometers," Ming replied airily. Then she giggled. "It was good for my appetite."

Well, you went through that fettuccine like a shark through a surfer, Nomuri thought. *I suppose your appetite wasn't hurt very much*. But that was unfair. He'd thought this evening through very carefully, and if she'd fallen into his trap, it was his fault more than hers, wasn't it? And she did have a certain charm, he decided as she got into his company car. They'd already agreed that they'd come to his apartment so that he could give her the present he'd already advertised. Now Nomuri was getting a little excited. He'd planned this for more than a

week, and the thrill of the chase was the thrill of the chase, and that hadn't changed in tens of thousands of years of male humanity . . . and now he wondered what was going on in her head. She'd had two stiff glasses of wine with the meal—and she'd passed on dessert. She'd jumped right to her feet when he'd suggested going to his place. Either his trap had been superbly laid, or she was more than ready herself. . . . The drive was short, and it passed without words. He pulled into his numbered parking place, wondering if anyone would take note of the fact that he had company today. He had to assume that he was watched here. The Chinese Ministry of State Security probably had an interest in all foreigners who lived in Beijing, since all were potential spies. Strangely, his apartment was not in the same part of the building as the Americans and other Westerners. It wasn't overt segregation or categorization, but it had worked out that way, the Americans largely in one section, along with most of the Europeans . . . and the Taiwanese, too, Nomuri realized. And so, whatever surveillance existed was probably over on that end of the complex. A good thing now for Ming, and later, perhaps, a good thing for himself.

His place was a corner second-story walk-up in a Chinese interpretation of an American garden-apartment complex. The apartment was spacious enough, about a hundred square meters, and was probably not bugged. At least he'd found no microphones when he'd moved in and hung his pictures, and his sweep gear had discovered no anomalous signals—his phone had to be bugged, of course, but just because it was bugged didn't mean that there was somebody going over the tapes every day or even every week. MSS was just one more government agency, and in China they were probably little different from those in America, or France for that matter, lazy, underpaid people who worked as little as possible and served a bureaucracy that didn't encourage singular effort. They probably spent most of their time smoking the wretched local cigarettes and jerking off.

He had an American Yale lock on the door, with a pick-resistant tumbler and a sturdy locking mechanism. If asked about this, he'd explain that when living in California for NEC, he'd been burglarized—the Americans were such lawless and uncivilized people—and he didn't want that to happen again.

"So, this is the home of a capitalist," Ming observed, looking around. The walls were covered with prints, mainly movie posters.

"Yes, well, it's the home of a salaryman. I don't really know if I'm a capitalist or not, Comrade Ming," he added, with a smile and arched eyebrow. He pointed to his couch. "Please have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"Another glass of wine, perhaps?" she suggested, spotting and then

looking at the wrapped box on the chair opposite the couch.

Nomuri smiled. “That I can do.” He headed off into the kitchen, where he had a bottle of California Chardonnay chilling in the fridge. Popping the cork was easy enough, and he headed back to the living room with two glasses, one of which he handed to his guest. “Oh,” he said then. “Yes, this is for you, Ming.” With that he handed over the box, wrapped fairly neatly in red—of course—gift paper.

“May I open it now?”

“Certainly.” Nomuri smiled, in as gentlemanly a lustful way as he could manage. “Perhaps you would want to unwrap it, well . . .”

“Are you saying in your bedroom?”

“Excuse me. Just that you might wish some privacy when you open it. Please pardon me if I am too forward.”

The mirth in her eyes said it all. Ming took a deep sip of her white wine and walked off into that room and closed the door. Nomuri took a small sip of his own and sat down on the couch to await developments. If he’d chosen unwisely, she might throw the box at him and storm out . . . not much chance of that, he thought. More likely, even if she found him too forward, she’d keep the present and the box, finish her wine, make small talk, and then take her leave in thirty minutes or so, just to show good manners—effectively the same result without the overt insult—and Nomuri would have to search for another recruitment prospect. No, the best outcome would be . . .

. . . the door opened, and there she stood with a small, impish smile. The boiler suit was gone. Instead she wore the red-orange bra and panties set, the one with the front closure. She stood there holding her wineglass in salute, and it looked as if she’d taken another sip of her drink, maybe to work up her courage . . . or to loosen her inhibitions.

Nomuri found himself suddenly apprehensive. He took another drink himself before standing, and he walked slowly, and a little uneasily, to the bedroom doorway.

Her eyes, he saw, were a little uneasy themselves, a little frightened, and with luck maybe his were, too, because women everywhere liked their men to be just a little vulnerable. Maybe John Wayne hadn’t gotten all the action he wanted, Nomuri thought quickly. Then he smiled.

“I guessed right on the size.”

“Yes, and it feels wonderful, like a second skin, smooth and silky.” Every woman has it, Nomuri realized: the ability to smile and, regardless of the exterior, show the woman within, often a perfect woman, full of tenderness and desire, demureness and coquetry, and all you had to do . . .

. . . his hand came out and touched her face as gently as his slight shaking allowed. What the hell was this? he demanded of himself.

Shaking? James Bond's hands never shook. This was the time when he was supposed to scoop her up in his arms and stride in a masterful way off to the bed, there to possess her like Vince Lombardi taking over a football team, like George Patton leading an attack. But for all his triumphal anticipation of this moment, things were different from what he'd expected. Whoever or whatever Ming was, she was giving herself to him. There was no more in her than that—that was all she had. And she was giving it to him.

He bent his head down to kiss her, and there he caught the scent of the Dream Angel perfume, and somehow it suited the moment perfectly. Her arms came around him sooner than he'd expected. His hands replicated her gesture, and he found that her skin was smooth, like oiled silk, and his hands rubbed up and down of their own accord. He felt something strange on his chest and looked down to see her small hands undoing his buttons, and then her eyes looked into his, and her face was no longer plain. He unbuttoned his own cuffs, and she forced his shirt off, down his back, then lifted his T-shirt over his head—or tried to, for her arms were too short to make it quite all the way—and then he hugged her tighter, feeling the silklike artificial fibers of her new bra rub on his hairless chest. It was then that his hug became harder, more insistent, and his kiss harder on her mouth, and he took her face in his hands and looked hard into her dark, suddenly deep eyes, and what he saw was woman.

Her hands moved and unfastened his belt and slacks, which fell to his ankles. He nearly fell himself when he moved one leg, but Ming caught him and both laughed a little as he lifted his feet clear of his loafers and the slacks, and with that they both took a step toward the bed. Ming took another and turned, displaying herself for him. He'd underestimated the girl. Her waist was a full four inches slimmer than he'd thought—must be the damned boiler suit she wore to work, Nomuri thought at once—and her breasts filled the bra to perfection. Even the awful haircut seemed right just now, somehow fitting the amber skin and slanted eyes.

What came next was both easy and very, very hard. Nomuri reached out to her side, pulling her close, but not too close. Then he let his hand wander across her chest, for the first time feeling her breast through the gossamer fabric of the bra, at the same time watching her eyes closely for a reaction. There was little of that, though her eyes did seem to relax, perhaps even smile just a little at his touch, and then came the obligatory next step. With both hands, he unfastened the front closure of the bra. Instantly Ming's hands dropped to cover herself. *What did that mean?* the CIA officer wondered, but then her hands dropped and she pulled him to her, and their bodies met and his head came down to kiss her again, and his hands slid the bra

straps off her arms and onto the floor. There was little left to be done, and both, so it seemed, advanced with a combination of lust and fear. Her hands went down and loosened the elastic band of his briefs, with her eyes now locked on his, and this time she smiled, a for-real smile that made him blush, because he was as ready as he needed to be, and then her hands pushed down on the briefs, and all that left was his socks, and then it was his turn to kneel and pull down on the red silklike panties. She kicked them loose and each stood apart to inspect the other. Her breasts were about a large B, Nomuri thought, the nipples brown as potting soil. Her waist was not nearly model-thin, but a womanly contrast with both the hips and upper body. Nomuri took a step and then took her hand and walked her to the bed, laying her down with a gentle kiss, and for this moment he was not an intelligence officer for his country.

CHAPTER 10

Lessons of the Trade

The pathway started in Nomuri's apartment, and from there went to a Web site established in Beijing, notionally for Nippon Electric Company, but the site had been designed for NEC by an American citizen who worked for more than one boss, one of whom was a front operated by and for the Central Intelligence Agency. The precise address point for Nomuri's e-mail was then accessible to the CIA's Beijing station chief, who, as a matter of fact, didn't know anything about Nomuri. That was a security measure to which he would probably have objected, but which he would have understood as a characteristic of Mary Patricia Foley's way of running the Directorate of Operations—and besides which, Station Beijing hadn't exactly covered itself with glory in recruiting senior PRC officials to be American agents-in-place.

The message the station chief downloaded was just gibberish to him, scrambled letters that might as easily have been typed by a chimpanzee in return for a bunch of bananas at some research university, and he took no note of it, just super-encrypting on his own in-house system called TAPDANCE and cross-loading it to an official government communications network that went to a communications satellite, to be downloaded at Sunnyvale, California, then uploaded yet again, and downloaded at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. From there the message went by secure fiber-optic landline to CIA headquarters at Langley, and then first of all into Mercury, the Agency's communications center, where the Station Beijing super-encryption was stripped away, revealing the original gibberish, and then cross-loaded one last time to Mrs. Foley's personal computer terminal, which was the only one with the encryption system and daily key-selection algorithm for the counterpart system on Chet Nomuri's laptop, which was called INTERCRYPT. MP was doing other things at the time, and took twenty minutes to log into her own system and note the arrival of a SORGE message. That piqued her interest at once. She executed the command to decrypt the message, and got gibberish, then realized (not for the first time) that Nomuri was on the other side of the date line, and had

therefore used a different key sequence. *So, adjust the date for tomorrow* . . . and, yes! She printed a hard copy of the message for her husband, and then saved the message to her personal hard drive, automatically encrypting it along the way. From there, it was a short walk to Ed's office.

"Hey, baby," the DCI said, without looking up. Not too many people walked into his office without announcement. The news had to be good. MP had a beaming smile as she handed the paper over.

"Chet got laid last night!" the DDO told the DCI.

"Am I supposed to break out a cigar?" the Director of Central Intelligence asked. His eyes scanned the message.

"Well, it's a step forward."

"For him, maybe," Ed Foley responded with a twinkling eye. "I suppose you can get pretty horny on that sort of assignment, though I never had that problem myself." The Foleys had always worked the field as a married couple, and had gone through The Farm together. It had saved the senior Foley from all the complications that James Bond must have encountered.

"Eddie, you can be such a mudge!"

That made the DCI look up. "Such a what?"

"Curmudgeon!" she growled. "This could be a real breakthrough. This little chippy is personal secretary to Fang Gan. She knows all sorts of stuff we want to know."

"And Chet got to try her out last night. Honey, that's not the same thing as recruitment. We don't have an agent-in-place quite yet," he reminded his wife.

"I know, I know, but I have a feeling about this."

"Woman's intuition?" Ed asked, scanning the message again for any sordid details, but finding only cold facts, as though *The Wall Street Journal* had covered the seduction. Well, at least Nomuri had a little discretion. No rigid quivering rod plunging into her warm moist sheath—though Nomuri was twenty-nine, and at that age the rod tended to be pretty rigid. *Chet was from California, wasn't he?* the DCI wondered. So, probably not a virgin, maybe even a competent lover, though on the first time with anybody you mainly wanted to see if the pieces fit together properly—they always did, at least in Ed Foley's experience, but you still wanted to check and see. He remembered Robin Williams's takeoff on Adam and Eve, "Better stand back, honey. I don't know how big this thing gets!" The combination of careful conservatism and out-of-control wishful thinking common to the male of the species. "Okay, so, what are you going to reply? 'How many orgasms did the two of you have'?"

"God damn it, Ed!" The pin in the balloon worked, the DCI saw. He could almost see steam coming out of his wife's pretty ears. "You

know damned well what I'm going to suggest. Let the relationship blossom and ease her into talking about her job. It'll take a while, but if it works it'll be worth the wait."

And if it doesn't work, it's not a bad deal for Chester, Ed Foley thought. There weren't many professions in the world in which getting sex was part of the job that earned you promotions, were there?

"Mary?"

"Yes, Ed?"

"Does it strike you as a little odd that the kid's reporting his sex life to us? Does it make you blush a little?"

"It would if he were telling me face-to-face. The e-mail method is best for this, I think. Less human content."

"You're happy with the security of the information transfer?"

"Yeah, we've been through this. The message could just be sensitive business information, and the encryption system is very robust. The boys and girls at Fort Meade can break it, but it's brute force every time, and it takes up to a week, even after they make the right guesses on how the encryption system works. The PRC guys would have to go from scratch. The trapdoor in the ISP was very cleverly designed, and the way we tap into it should also be secure—and even then, just because an embassy phone taps into an ISP doesn't mean anything. We have a consular official downloading pornography from a local Web site through that ISP as another cover, in case anybody over there gets real clever." That had been carefully thought through. It would be something that one would wish to be covert, something the counterintelligence agency in Beijing would find both understandable and entertaining in its own right, if and when they cracked into it.

"Anything good?" Ed Foley asked, again, just to bedevil his wife.

"Not unless you're into child abuse. Some of the subjects for this site are too young to vote. If you downloaded it over here, the FBI might come knocking on your door."

"Capitalism really has broken out over there, eh?"

"Some of the senior Party officials seem to like this sort of thing. I guess when you're pushing eighty, you need something special to help jump-start the motor." Mary Pat had seen some of the photographs, and once had been plenty. She was a mother, and all of those photographic subjects had been infants once, strange though that might seem to a subscriber to that Web site. The abusers of girls must have thought that they all sprang into life with their legs spread and a welcoming look in their doll-child faces. Not quite, the DDO thought, but her job wasn't to be a clergyman. Sometimes you had to do business with such perverts, because they had information which her country needed. If you were lucky, and the information was really useful, then you often arranged for them to defect, to live in the

United States, where they could live and enjoy their perversions to some greater or lesser degree, after being briefed on the law, and the consequences of breaking it. Afterward there was always a bathroom and soap to wash your hands. It was a need of which she'd availed herself more than once. One of the problems with espionage was that you didn't always do business with the sort of people whom you'd willingly invite into your home. But it wasn't about Miss Manners. It was about getting information that your country needed to guard its strategic interests, and even to prevail in war, if it came to that. Lives were often at stake, either directly or indirectly. And so, you did business with anyone who had such information, even if he or she wasn't exactly a member of the clergy.

"Okay, babe. Keep me posted," Foley told his wife.

"Will do, honey-bunny." The DDO headed back to her own office. There she drew up her reply to Nomuri: MESSAGE RECEIVED. KEEP US POSTED ON YOUR PROGRESS. MP. ENDS.

The reply came as a relief to Nomuri when he woke and checked his e-mail. It was a disappointment that he didn't wake up with company, but to expect that would have been unrealistic. Ming would have been ill-advised to spend the night anywhere but in her own bed. Nomuri couldn't even drive her back. She'd just left, carrying her presents—well, wearing some of them—for the walk back to her own shared flat where, Nomuri fervently hoped, she wouldn't discuss her evening's adventures with her roommates. You never knew about women and how they talked. It wasn't all that dissimilar with some men, Nomuri remembered from college, where some of his chums had talked at length about their conquests, as though they'd slain a dragon with a Popsicle stick. Nomuri had never indulged in this aural spectator sport. Either he'd had a spy's mentality even then, or he'd been somehow imbued with the dictum that a gentleman didn't kiss and tell. But did women? That was a mystery to him, like why it was that women seemed to go to the bathroom in pairs—he'd occasionally joked that that was when they'd held their "union meetings." Anyway, women talked more than men did. He was sure of that. And while they kept many secrets from men, how many did they keep from other women? Jesus, all that had to happen was for her to tell a roomie that she'd had her brains fucked out by a Japanese salaryman, and if that roomie was an informant to the MSS, Ming would get a visit from a security officer, who at the very least would counsel her never to see Nomuri again. More likely, the counseling would involve a demand to send that degenerate American bourgeois trash (the Victoria's Secret underthings) back to him, plus a threat to lose her ministry job if she ever appeared on the same street with him again. And that also meant

that he'd be tailed and observed and investigated by the MSS, and that was something he had to take seriously. They didn't have to catch him committing espionage. This was a communist country, where due process of law was a bourgeois concept unworthy of serious consideration, and civil rights were limited to doing what one was told. As a foreigner doing business in the PRC, he might get some easiness of treatment, but not all that much.

So, he hadn't just gotten his rocks off, Nomuri told himself, past the delightful memories of a passionate evening. He'd crossed a wide red line in the street, and his safety depended entirely upon on how discreet Ming was. He hadn't—could not have—warned her to keep her mouth shut about their time together. Such things weren't said, because they added a level of gravity to what was supposed to have been a time of joy and friendship . . . or even something potentially bigger than friendship. Women thought in such terms, Chester reminded himself, and for that reason he might see a pointed nose and whiskers the next time he looked in the mirror, but this was *business*, not *personal*, he told himself as he shut down his computer.

Except for one small thing. He'd had sexual relations with an intelligent and not entirely unattractive young female human being, and the problem was that when you gave a little bit of your heart away, you never really got it back. And his heart, Nomuri belatedly realized, was distantly connected to his dick. He wasn't James Bond. He could not embrace a woman as a paid whore embraced a man. It just wasn't in him to be that sort of heartless swine. The good news was that for this reason he could stand to look in a mirror for the time being. The bad news was that this ability might be short-lived, if he treated Ming as a thing and not a person.

Nomuri needed advice on how to feel about this operation, and he didn't have a place to get it. It wasn't the sort of thing to e-mail to Mary Pat or to one of the pshrinks the Agency employed for counseling DO people who needed a little guidance with their work. This sort of thing had to be handled face-to-face with a real person, whose body language you could read and whose tone of voice would deliver its own content. No, e-mail wasn't the medium he needed right now. He needed to fly to Tokyo and meet a senior officer of the Directorate of Operations who could counsel him on how to handle things. But if the guy told him to cut himself off from intimate contact with Ming, then what would he do? Nomuri asked himself. It wasn't as though he had a girlfriend of any kind, and he had his needs for intimacy, too—and besides, if he cut her off, what effect would that have on his potential, prospective agent? You didn't check your humanity by the door when you joined up with the Agency, despite what all the books said and the public expectations were. All the

chuckles over beer during the nights after training sessions seemed a distant thing now, and all the expectations he and his colleagues had had back then. They'd been so far off the mark, in spite of what their training officers had told them. He'd been a child then, and to some extent even in Japan, but suddenly he was a man, alone in a country that was at best suspicious, and at worst hostile to him and his country. Well, it was in her hands now, and that was something he couldn't change.

Her co-workers noted a slight difference in their colleague. She smiled a little more, and in a somewhat different way. Something good must have happened to her, some of them thought, and for this they rejoiced, albeit in a reserved and private way. If Ming wished to share the experience with them, all well and good, and if not, that, too, was okay with them, because some things were private, even among a group of women who shared virtually everything, including stories of their minister and his fumbling, lengthy, and occasionally futile efforts at lovemaking. He was a wise man, and usually a gentle one, though as a boss he had his bad points. But Ming would notice none of those today. Her smile was sweeter than ever, and her eyes twinkled like little diamonds, the rest of the admin/secretarial staff all thought. They'd all seen it before, though not with Ming, whose love life had been an abbreviated one, and whom the minister liked a little too much, but whom he serviced imperfectly and too seldom. She sat at her computer to do her correspondence and translations of Western news articles that might be of interest to the Minister. Ming had the best English skills of anyone in this corner of the building, and the new computer system worked superbly. The next step, so the story went, was a computer into which you'd just speak, making the characters appear by voice command, sure to become the curse of every executive secretary in the world, because it would largely make them obsolete. Or maybe not. The boss couldn't fuck a computer, could he? Not that Minister Fang was all *that* intrusive in his demands. And the perks he delivered in return weren't bad at all.

Her first morning assignment took the customary ninety minutes, after which she printed up the resulting copy and stapled the pages together by article. This morning she'd translated pieces by the *Times of London*, and the *New York Times*, plus *The Washington Post*, so that her Minister would know what the barbarians around the world thought of the enlightened policy of the People's Republic.

In his private office, Minister Fang was going over other things. The MSS had a double report on the Russians: both oil and gold, the reports said. So, he thought, Zhang had been right all along, even

more right than he knew. Eastern Siberia was indeed a treasure-house, full of things everyone needed. Oil, because petroleum was the very blood of modern society, and gold, because in addition to its negotiable value as an old but still very real medium of exchange, it still had industrial and scientific uses as well. And each had a cache of its own. What a pity that such riches should fall to a people without the wit to make proper use of them. It was so strange, the Russians who had given the world the gift of Marxism but then failed to exploit it properly, and then abandoned it, only to fail also in their transition to a bourgeois capitalist society. Fang lit a cigarette, his fifth of the day (he was trying to cut back as his seventieth birthday approached), and set the MSS report down on his desk before leaning back in his chair to puff on his unfiltered smoke and consider the information this morning had brought. Siberia, as Zhang had been saying for some years now, had so much that the PRC needed, timber, minerals in abundance—even greater abundance, so these intelligence documents said—and *space*, which China needed above all things.

There were simply too many people in China, and that despite population-control measures that could only be called draconian both in their content, and in their ruthless application. Those measures were an affront to Chinese culture, which had always viewed children as a blessing, and now the social engineering was having an unexpected result. Allowed only one child per married couple, the people often chose to have boys instead of girls. It was not unknown for a peasant to take a female toddler of two years and drop her down a well—the merciful ones broke their necks first—to dispose of the embarrassing encumbrance. Fang understood the reasons for this. A girl child grew up to marry, to join her life to a man, while a boy child could always be depended upon to support and honor his parents, and provide security. But a girl child would merely spread her legs for some other couple's boy child, and where was the security for her parents in that?

It had been true in Fang's case. As he'd grown to a senior party official, he'd made sure that his own mother and father had found a comfortable place to live out their lives, for such were the duties of a child for those who had given him life. Along the way, he'd married, of course—his wife was long dead of cardiovascular disease—and he'd given some lip service to his wife's parents . . . but not as much as he'd done for his own. Even his wife had understood that, and used her shadow-influence as the wife of a party official to make her own special but lesser arrangements. Her brother had died young, at the hands of the American army in Korea, and was therefore just a memory without practical value.

But the problem for China that no one really talked about, even at

Politburo level, was that their population policy was affecting the demographics of their country. In elevating the value of boy children over girls, the PRC was causing an imbalance that was becoming statistically significant. In fifteen years or so, there would be a shortage of women—some said that this was a good thing, because they would achieve the overarching national objective of population stability faster but it also meant that for a generation, millions of Chinese men would have no women to marry and mate with. Would this turn into a flood of homosexuality? PRC policy still frowned upon that as a bourgeois degeneracy, though sodomy had been decriminalized in 1998. But if there were no women to be had, what was a man to do? And in addition to killing off surplus girl babies, those abandoned by their parents were often given away, to American and European couples unable to have children of their own. This happened by the hundreds of thousands, with the children disposed of as readily and casually as Americans sold puppies in shopping malls. Something in Fang's soul bridled at that, but his feelings were mere bourgeois sentimentality, weren't they? National policy dictated what must be, and policy was the means to achieving the necessary goal.

His was a life as comfortable as privilege could make it. In addition to a plush office as pleasant as any capitalist's, he had an official car and driver to take him to his residence, an ornate apartment with servants to look after his needs, the best food that his country could provide, good beverages, a television connected to a satellite service so that he could receive all manner of entertainment, even including Japanese pornographic channels, for his manly drives had not yet deserted him. (He didn't speak Japanese, but you didn't need to understand the dialogue in such movies, did you?)

Fang still worked long hours, rising at six-thirty, and was at his desk before eight every morning. His staff of secretaries and assistants took proper care of him, and some of the female ones were agreeably compliant, once, occasionally twice per week. Few men of his years had his vigor, Fang was sure, and unlike Chairman Mao, he didn't abuse children, which he'd known of at the time and found somewhat distasteful. But great men had their flaws, and you overlooked them because of the greatness that made them who they were. As for himself and people like him, they were entitled to the proper environments in which to rest, good nourishment to sustain their bodies through their long and grueling workdays, and the opportunities for relaxation and recreation that men of vigor and intelligence needed. It was *necessary* that they live better than most other citizens of their country, and it was also *earned*. Giving direction to the world's most populous country was no easy task. It demanded their every intellectual energy, and such energy needed to be

conserved and restored. Fang looked up as Ming entered with her folder of news articles.

"Good morning, Minister," she said with proper deference.

"Good morning, child." Fang nodded with affection. This one shared his bed fairly well, and for that reason merited more than a grunt. Well, he'd gotten her a very comfortable office chair, hadn't he? She withdrew, bowing proper respect for her father figure, as she always did. Fang noticed nothing particularly different about her demeanor, as he lifted the folder and took out the news articles, along with a pencil for making notations. He'd compare these with MSS estimates of the mood of other countries and their governments. It was Fang's way of letting the Ministry of State Security know that the Politburo members still had minds of their own with which to think. The MSS had signally failed to predict America's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, though in fairness, the American news media didn't seem to predict the actions of this President Ryan all that well, either. What an odd man he was, and certainly no friend of the People's Republic. A peasant, the MSS analysts called him, and in many ways that seemed both accurate and appropriate. He was strangely unsophisticated in his outlook, something the *New York Times* commented upon rather frequently. Why did they dislike him? Was he not capitalist enough, or was he too capitalist? Understanding the American news media was beyond Fang's powers of analysis, but he could at least digest the things they said, and that was something the intelligence "experts" at the MSS Institute for American Studies were not always able to do. With that thought, Fang lit another cigarette and settled back in his chair.

It was a miracle, Provalov thought. Central Army Records had gotten the files, fingerprints, and photographs of the two bodies recovered in St. Petersburg—but perversely sent the records to him rather than to Abramov and Ustinov, doubtless because he was the one who had invoked the name of Sergey Golovko. Dzerzhinskiy Square still inspired people to do their jobs in a timely fashion. The names and vital statistics would be faxed at once to St. Petersburg so that his northern colleagues might see what information could be developed. The names and photographs were only a start—documents nearly twenty years old showing youthful, emotionless faces. The service records were fairly impressive, though. Once upon a time, Pyotr Alekseyevich Amalrik and Pavel Borissovich Zimyanin had been considered superior soldiers, smart, fit . . . and highly reliable, politically speaking, which was why they'd gone to Spetsnaz school and sergeant school. Both had fought in Afghanistan, and done fairly well—they'd survived Afghanistan, which was not the usual thing for

Spetsnaz troops, who'd drawn all of the dirtiest duty in an especially dirty war. They'd not reenlisted, which was not unusual. Hardly anyone in the Soviet Army had ever reenlisted voluntarily. They'd returned to civilian life, both working in the same factory outside Leningrad, as it had been called then. But Amalrik and Zimyanin had both found ordinary civilian life boring, and both, he gathered, had drifted into something else. He'd have to let the investigators in St. Petersburg find out more. He pulled a routing slip from his drawer and rubber-banded it to the records package. It would be couriered to St. Petersburg, where Abramov and Ustinov would play with the contents.

A Mr. Sherman, Mr. Secretary," Winston's secretary told him over the intercom. "Line three."

"Hey, Sam," SecTreas said, as he picked up the phone. "What's new?"

"Our oil field up north," the president of Atlantic Richfield replied.

"Good news?"

"You might say that. Our field people say the find is about fifty percent bigger than our initial estimates."

"How solid is that information?"

"About as reliable as one of your T-bills, George. My head field guy is Ernie Beach. He's as good at finding oil as you used to be playing up on The Street." *Maybe even better* , Sam Sherman didn't add. Winston was known to have something of an ego on the subject of his own worth. The addendum got through anyway.

"So, summarize that for me," the Secretary of the Treasury commanded.

"So, when this field comes on line, the Russians will be in a position to purchase Saudi Arabia outright, plus Kuwait and maybe half of Iran. It makes east Texas look like a fart in a tornado. It's *huge*, George."

"Hard to get out?"

"It won't be easy, and it won't be inexpensive, but from an engineering point of view it's pretty straightforward. If you want to buy a hot stock, pick a Russian company that makes cold-weather gear. They're going to be real busy for the next ten years or so," Sherman advised.

"Okay, and what can you tell me of the implications for Russia in economic terms?"

"Hard to say. It will take eight to twelve years to bring this field fully on line, and the amount of crude this will dump on the market will distort market conditions quite a bit. We haven't modeled all that out—but it's going to be *huge*, like in the neighborhood of one

hundred billion dollars per year, current-year dollars, that is."

"For how long?" Winston could almost hear the shrug that followed.

"Twenty years, maybe more. Our friends in Moscow still want us to sit on this, but word's perking out in our company, like trying to hide a sunrise, y'know? I give it a month before it breaks out into the news media. Maybe a little longer' n that, but not much."

"What about the gold strike?"

"Hell, George, they're not telling *me* anything about that, but my guy in Moscow says the cat's gobbled down some kind of canary, or that's how it appears to him. That will probably depress the world price of gold about five, maybe ten percent, but our models say it'll rebound before Ivan starts selling the stuff he pulls out of the ground. Our Russian friends—well, their rich uncle just bit the big one and left them the whole estate, y'know?"

"And no adverse effects on us," Winston thought aloud.

"Hell, no. They'll have to buy all sorts of hardware from our people, and they'll need a lot of expertise that only we have, and after that's over, the world price of oil goes down, and that won't hurt us either. You know, George, I like the Russians. They've been unlucky sonsabitches for a long time, but maybe this'll change that for 'em."

"No objections here or next door, Sam," TRADER assured his friend. "Thanks for the information."

"Well, you guys still collect my taxes." *You bastards*, he didn't add, but Winston heard it anyway, including the chuckle. "See you around, George."

"Right, have a good one, Sam, and thanks." Winston killed one button on his phone, selected another line, and hit his number nine speed-dial line.

"Yeah?" a familiar voice responded. Only ten people had access to this number.

"Jack, it's George, just had a call from Sam Sherman, Atlantic Richfield."

"Russia?"

"Yeah. The field is fifty percent bigger than they initially thought. That makes it pretty damned big, biggest oil strike ever, as a matter of fact, bigger than the whole Persian Gulf combined. Getting the oil out will be a little expensive, but Sam says it's all cookbook stuff—hard, but they know how it's done, no new technology to invent, just a matter of spending the money—and not even all that much, 'cause labor is a lot cheaper there than it is here. The Russians are going to get rich."

"How rich?" the President asked.

"On the order of a hundred billion dollars per year once the field is fully on line, and that's good for twenty years, maybe more."

Jack had to whistle at that. “Two *trillion* dollars. That’s real money, George.”

“That’s what we call it on The Street, Mr. President,” Winston agreed. “Sure as hell, that’s real money.”

“And what effect will it have on the Russian economy?”

“It won’t hurt them very much,” SecTreas assured him. “It gets them a ton of hard currency. With that money they can buy the things they’d like to have, and buy the tools to build the things they can make on their own. This will reindustrialize their country, Jack, jump-start them into the new century, assuming they have the brains to make proper use of it and not let it all bug out to Switzerland and Liechtenstein.”

“How can we help them?” POTUS asked.

“Best answer to that, you and I and two or three others sit down with our Russian counterparts and ask them what they need. If we can get a few of our industrialists to build some plants over there, it won’t hurt, and it’ll damned sure look good on TV.”

“Noted, George. Get me a paper on that by the beginning of next week, and then we’ll see if we can figure out a way to let the Russians know what we know.”

It was the end of another overlong day for Sergey Golovko. Running the SVR was job enough for any man, but he also had to back up Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy, President of the Russian Republic. President Grushavoy had his own collection of ministers, some of them competent, the others selected for their political capital, or merely to deny them to the political opposition. They could still do damage on the inside of Grushavoy’s administration, but less than on the outside. On the inside they had to use small-caliber weapons, lest they be killed by their own shots.

The good news was that the Economics Minister, Vasily Konstantinovich Solomentsev, was intelligent and seemingly honest as well, as rare a combination in the Russian political spectrum as anywhere else in the known world. He had his ambitions—it was a rare minister who did not—but mainly, it seemed, he wanted his nation to prosper, and didn’t want to profit himself all that much. A little self-enrichment was all right with Golovko, just so that a man wasn’t a pig about it. The line, for Sergey Nikolay’ch, was about twenty million euros. More than that was hoggish, but less was understandable. After all, if a minister was successful at helping his country, he or she was entitled to get a proper reward for doing so. The ordinary working people out there wouldn’t mind, if the result was a better life for them, would they? Probably not, the spymaster thought. This wasn’t America, overrun with pointless and

counterproductive "ethics" laws. The American President, whom Golovko knew well, had an aphorism that the Russian admired: *If you have to write your ethics rules down, you've already lost*. No fool, that Ryan, once a deadly enemy, and now a good friend, or seemingly so. Golovko had cultivated that friendship by providing help to America in two serious international crises. He'd done it because it had, first of all, been in his nation's interest, and secondly, because Ryan was a man of honor, and unlikely to forget such favors. It had also amused Golovko, who'd spent most of his adulthood in an agency devoted to the destruction of the West.

But what about himself? Was someone intent on his own destruction? Had someone desired to end his life in a loud and spectacular manner on the paving stones of Dzerzhinskiy Square? The more his mind dwelt on that question, the more frightening it became. Few healthy men could contemplate the end of their lives with equanimity, and Golovko wasn't one of them. His hands never shook, but he didn't argue at all with Major Shelepin's increasingly invasive measures to keep him alive. The car changed every day in color, and sometimes in make, and the routes to his office shared only the starting place—the SVR building was sufficiently large that the daily journey to work had a total of five possible end points. The clever part, which Golovko admired, was that he himself occasionally rode in the front seat of the lead vehicle, while some functionary sat in the back seat of the putative guarded car. Anatoliy was no fool, and even showed the occasional spark of creativity.

But none of that now. Golovko shook his head and opened his last folder of the day, scanning first of all the executive summary—and his mind skidded to an almost instant halt, his hand reaching for a phone and dialing a number.

"This is Golovko," he told the male voice who answered. He didn't have to say anything else.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch," the minister's voice greeted him pleasantly five seconds later. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, Vasily Konstantinovich, you can confirm these numbers to me. Are they possible?"

"They are more than possible, Sergey. They are as real as the sunset," Solomentsev told the intelligence chief cum chief minister and advisor to President Grushavoy.

"Solkin syn," the intelligence chief muttered. *Son of a bitch!* "And this wealth has been there for how long?" he asked incredulously.

"The oil, perhaps five hundred thousand years; the gold, rather longer, Sergey."

"And we never knew," Golovko breathed.

"No one really looked, Comrade Minister. Actually, I find the gold

report the more interesting. I must see one of these gold-encrusted wolf pelts. Something for Prokofiev, eh? Peter and the *Golden* Wolf."

"An entertaining thought," Golovko said, dismissing it immediately. "What will it mean to our country?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I would have to be a fortune-teller to answer that substantively, but it could be the salvation of our country in the long term. Now we have something that all nations want—two somethings, as a matter of fact—and it belongs to us, and for it those foreigners will pay vast sums of money, and do so with a smile. Japan, for example. We will answer their energy needs for the next fifty years, and along the way we will save them vast sums in transportation costs—ship the oil a few hundred kilometers instead of ten *thousand.* And perhaps America, too, though they've made their own big strike on the Alaskan-Canadian border. The question becomes how we move the oil to market. We'll build a pipeline from the field to Vladivostok, of course, but maybe another one to St. Petersburg so that we can sell oil more easily to Europe as well. In fact, we can probably have the Europeans, especially the Germans, build the pipeline for us, just to get a discount on the oil. Serge, if we'd found this oil twenty years ago, we—"

"Perhaps." It wasn't hard to imagine what would come next: The Soviet Union would not have fallen but grown strong instead. Golovko had no such illusions. The Soviet government would have managed to fuck up these new treasures as it had fucked up everything else. The Soviet government had *owned* Siberia for seventy years but had never even gone looking for what might have been there. The country had lacked the proper experts to do the looking, but was too proud to let anyone else do it, lest they think less of the Motherland. If any one thing had killed the USSR, it wasn't communism, or even totalitarianism. It was that perverse *amour propre* that was the most dangerous and destructive aspect of the Russian character, created by a sense of inferiority that went back to the House of Romanov and beyond. The Soviet Union's death had been as self-inflicted as any suicide's, just slower and therefore far deadlier in coming. Golovko endured the next ninety seconds of historical speculation from a man who had little sense of history, then spoke: "All this is good, Vasily Konstantinovich, but what of the future? That is the time in which we will all live, after all."

"It will do us little harm. Sergey, this is the salvation of our country. It will take ten years to get the full benefit from the outfields, but then we shall have a steady and regular income for at least one whole generation, and perhaps more besides."

"What help will we need?"

"The Americans and the British have expertise which we need, from

their own exploitation of the Alaskan fields. They have knowledge. We shall learn it and make use of it. We are in negotiations now with Atlantic Richfield, the American oil company, for technical support. They are being greedy, but that's to be expected. They know that only they have what we need, and paying them for it is cheaper than having to replicate it ourselves. So, they will get most of what they now demand. Perhaps we will pay them in gold bricks," Solomentsev suggested lightly.

Golovko had to resist the temptation to inquire too deeply into the gold strike. The oil field was far more lucrative, but gold was prettier. He, too, wanted to see one of those pelts that this Gogol fellow had used to collect the dust. And this lonely forest-dweller would have to be properly taken care of—no major problem, as he lived alone and was childless. Whatever he got, the state would soon get back, old as he was. And there'd be a TV show, maybe even a feature film, about this hunter. He'd once hunted Germans, after all, and the Russians still made heroes of such men. That would make Pavel Petrovich Gogol happy enough, wouldn't it?

"What does Eduard Petrovich know?"

"I've been saving the information until I had a full and reliable reading on it. I have that now. I think he will be pleased at the next cabinet meeting, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

As well he should, Golovko thought. President Grushavoy had been as busy as a one-armed, one-legged paperhanger for three years. No, more like a stage magician or conjurer, forced to produce real things from nothing, and his success in keeping the nation moving often seemed nothing short of miraculous. Perhaps this was God's own way of rewarding the man for his efforts, though it would not be an entirely unmixed blessing. Every government agency would want its piece of the gold-and-oil pie, each with its needs, all of them presented by its own minister as vital to the security of the state, in white papers of brilliant logic and compelling reasoning. Who knew, maybe some of them would even be telling the truth, though truth was so often a rare commodity in the cabinet room. Each minister had an empire to build, and the better he built it, the closer he would come to the seat at the head of the table that was occupied, for now, by Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy. Golovko wondered if it had been this way under the czars. Probably, he decided at once. Human nature didn't change very much. The way people had acted in Babylon or Byzantium was probably little different from the way they'd act at the next cabinet meeting, three days hence. He wondered how President Grushavoy would handle the news.

"How much has leaked out?" the spymaster asked.

"There are doubtless some rumors," Minister Solomentsev

answered, “but the current estimates are less than twenty-four hours old, and it usually takes longer than that to leak. I will have these documents messengered to you—tomorrow morning?”

“That will be fine, Vasily. I’ll have some of my own analysts go over the data, so that I can present my own independent estimate of the situation.”

“I have no objection to that,” the economics minister responded, surprising Golovko more than a little. But then this wasn’t the USSR anymore. The current cabinet might be the modern counterpart to the old Politburo, but nobody there told lies . . . well, at least not big lies. And that was a measure of progress for his country, wasn’t it?

CHAPTER 11

Faith of the Fathers

His name was Yu Fa An, and he said he was a Christian. That was rare enough that Monsignor Schepke invited him in at once. What he saw was a Chinese national of fifty-plus years and stooped frame, with hair a curious mix of black and gray that one saw only rarely in this part of the world.

"Welcome to our embassy. I am Monsignor Schepke." He bowed quickly and then shook the man's hand.

"Thank you. I am the Reverend Yu Fa An," the man replied with the dignity of truth, one cleric to another.

"Indeed. Of what denomination?"

"I am a Baptist."

"Ordained? Is that possible?" Schepke motioned the visitor to follow him, and in a moment they stood before the Nuncio. "Eminence, this is the Reverend Yu Fa An—of Beijing?" Schepke asked belatedly.

"Yes, that is so. My congregation is mainly northwest of here."

"Welcome." Cardinal DiMilo rose from his chair for a warm handshake, and guided the man to the comfortable visitor's chair. Monsignor Schepke went to fetch tea. "It is a pleasure to meet a fellow Christian in this city."

"There are not enough of us, and that is a fact, Eminence," Yu confirmed.

Monsignor Schepke swiftly arrived with a tray of tea things, which he set on the low coffee table.

"Thank you, Franz."

"I thought that some local citizens should welcome you. I expect you've had the formal welcome from the Foreign Ministry, and that it was correct . . . and rather cold?" Yu asked.

The Cardinal smiled as he handed a cup to his guest. "It was correct, as you say, but it could have been warmer."

"You will find that the government here has ample manners and good attention to protocol, but little in the way of sincerity," Yu said, in English, with a very strange accent.

"You are originally from . . . ?"

"I was born in Taipei. As a youth, I traveled to America for my

education. I first attended the University of Oklahoma, but the call came, and I transferred to Oral Roberts University in the same state. There I got my first degree—in electrical engineering—and went on for my doctor of divinity and my ordination," he explained.

"Indeed, and how did you come to be in the People's Republic?"

"Back in the 1970s, the government of Chairman Mao was ever so pleased to have Taiwanese come here to live—rejecting capitalism and coming to Marxism, you see," he added with a twinkling eye. "It was hard on my parents, but they came to understand. I started my congregation soon after I arrived. That was troublesome for the Ministry of State Security, but I also worked as an engineer, and at the time the state needed that particular skill. It is remarkable what the State will accept if you have something it needs, and back then their need for people with my degree was quite desperate. But now I am a minister on a full-time basis." With the announcement of his triumph, Yu lifted his own teacup for a sip.

"So, what can you tell us about the local environment?" Renato asked.

"The government is truly communist. It trusts and tolerates no loyalty to anything except itself. Even the Falun Gong, which was not truly a religion—that is, not really a belief system as you or I would understand the term—has been brutally suppressed, and my own congregation has been persecuted. It is a rare Sunday on which more than a quarter of my congregation comes to attend services. I must spend much of my time traveling from home to home to bring the gospel to my flock."

"How do you support yourself?" the Cardinal asked.

Yu smiled serenely. "That is the least of my problems. American Baptists support me most generously. There is a group of churches in Mississippi that is particularly generous—many are black churches, as it turns out. I just received some letters from them yesterday. One of my classmates at Oral Roberts University has a large congregation near Jackson, Mississippi. His name is Gerry Patterson. We were good friends then, and he remains a friend in Christ. His congregation is large and prosperous, and he still looks after me." Yu almost added that he had far more money than he knew how to spend. In America, such prosperity would have translated into a Cadillac and a fine parsonage. In Beijing, it meant a nice bicycle and gifts to the needy of his flock.

"Where do you live, my friend?" the Cardinal asked.

The Reverend Yu fished in his pocket for a business card and handed it over. Like many such Chinese cards, it had a sketch-map on the back. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to join my wife and myself for dinner. Both of you, of course," he added.

"We should be delighted. Do you have children?"

"Two," Yu replied. "Both born in America, and so exempt from the bestial laws the communists have in place here."

"I know of these laws," DiMilo assured his visitor. "Before we can make them change, we need more Christians here. I pray on this subject daily."

"As do I, Eminence. As do I. I presume you know that your dwelling here is, well . . ."

Schepke tapped his ear and pointed his finger around the room. "Yes, we know."

"You have a driver assigned to you?"

"Yes, that was very kind of the ministry," Schepke noted. "He's a Catholic. Isn't that remarkable?"

"Is that a fact?" Yu asked rhetorically, while his head shook emphatically from side to side. "Well, I am sure he's loyal to his country as well."

"But of course," DiMilo observed. It wasn't much of a surprise. The Cardinal had been in the Vatican's diplomatic service a long time, and he'd seen most of the tricks at least once. Clever though the Chinese communists were, the Catholic Church had been around a lot longer, loath though the local government might be to admit that fact.

The chitchat went on for another thirty minutes before the Reverend Yu took his leave, with another warm handshake to send him on his way.

"So, Franz?" DiMilo asked outside, where a blowing breeze would impede any microphones installed outside the dwelling itself.

"First time I've seen the man. I've heard his name since I arrived here. The PRC government has indeed given him a bad time, and more than once, but he is a man of strong faith and no small courage. I hadn't known of his educational background. We could check on this."

"Not a bad idea," the Papal Nuncio said. It wasn't that he distrusted or disbelieved Yu, just that it was good to be sure of things. Even the name of a classmate, now an ordained minister, Gerry Patterson. Somewhere in Mississippi, USA. That would make it easy. The message to Rome went out an hour later, over the Internet, a method of communication that lent itself so readily to intelligence operations.

In this case, the time differences worked for them, as sometimes happened when the inquiries went west instead of east. In a few hours, the dispatch was received, decrypted, and forwarded to the proper desk. From there, a new dispatch, also encrypted, made its way to New York, where Timothy Cardinal McCarthy, Archbishop of New York and the chief of the Vatican's intelligence operations in the United States of America, received his copy immediately after

breakfast. From there, it was even easier. The FBI remained a bastion of Irish-Catholic America, though not so much as in the 1930s, with a few Italians and Poles tossed in. The world was an imperfect place, but when the Church needed information, and as long as the information was not compromising to American national security, it was gotten, usually very quickly.

In this case, particularly so. Oral Roberts University was a very conservative institution, and therefore ready to cooperate with the FBI's inquiries, official or not. A clerk there didn't even consult her supervisor, so innocuous was the phoned inquiry from Assistant Special Agent in Charge Jim Brennan of the FBI's Oklahoma City office. It was quickly established via computer records that one Yu Fa An had graduated the university, first with a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering, and then spent an additional three years in the university for his doctor of divinity, both degrees attained "with distinction," the clerk told Brennan, meaning nothing lower than a B+. The alumni office added that the Reverend Yu's current address was in Beijing, China, where he evidently preached the gospel courageously in the land of the pagans. Brennan thanked the clerk, made his notes, and replied to the e-mail inquiry from New York, then went off to his morning meeting with the SAC to review the Field Division's activities in enforcing federal law in the Sooner State.

It was a little different in Jackson, Mississippi. There it was the SAC —Special Agent in Charge—himself who made the call on Reverend Gerry Patterson's First Baptist Church, located in an upscale suburb of the Mississippi state capital. The church was three-quarters of the way into its second century, and among the most prosperous of such congregations in the region. The Reverend Patterson could scarcely have been more impressive, impeccably turned out in a white button-down shirt and a striped blue tie. His dark suit coat was hung in a corner in deference to the local temperature. He greeted the visiting FBI official with regal manners, conducted him to his plush office, and asked how he could be of service. On hearing the first question, he replied, "Yu! Yes, a fine man, and a good friend from school. We used to call him Skip—Fa sounded too much like something from *The Sound of Music,* you know? A good guy, and a *fine* minister of the gospel. He could give lessons in faith to Jerry Falwell. Correspond with him? You bet I do! We send him something like twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Want to see a picture? We have it in the church itself. We were both a lot younger then," Patterson added with a smile. "Skip's got real guts. It can't be much fun to be a Christian minister in China, you know? But he never complains. His letters are always upbeat. We could use a thousand more men like him in the clergy."

"So, you are that impressed with him?" SAC Mike Leary asked.

"He was a good kid in college, and he's a good man today, and a fine minister of the gospel who does his work in a very adverse environment. Skip is a hero to me, Mr. Leary." Which was very powerful testimony indeed from so important a member of the community. First Baptist Church hadn't had a mortgage in living memory, despite its impressive physical plant and amply cushioned pews.

The FBI agent stood. "That's about all I need. Thank you, sir."

"Can I ask why you came here to ask about my friend?"

Leary had expected that question, and so had preframed his answer. "Just a routine inquiry, sir. Your friend isn't in any trouble at all—at least not with the United States government."

"Good to know," the Reverend Patterson responded, with a smile and a handshake. "You know, we're not the only congregation that looks after Skip."

Leary turned. "Really?"

"Of course. You know Hosiah Jackson?"

"Reverend Jackson, the Vice President's dad? Never met him, but I know who he is."

Patterson nodded. "Yep. Hosiah's as good as they come." Neither man commented on how unusual it would have been a mere forty years earlier for a white minister to comment so favorably on a black one, but Mississippi had changed over time, in some ways even faster than the rest of America. "I was over at his place a few years ago and we got talking about things, and this subject came up. Hosiah's congregation sends Skip five or ten thousand dollars a year also, and he organized some of the other black congregations to help us look after Skip as well."

Mississippi whites and blacks looking after a Chinese preacher, Leary thought. *What was the world coming to?* He supposed that Christianity might really mean something after all, and headed back to his office in his official car, content at having done some actual investigative work for a change, if not exactly for the FBI.

Cardinal McCarthy learned from his secretary that his two requests for information had been answered before lunch, which was impressive even by the standards of the FBI-Catholic Church alliance. Soon after his midday meal, Cardinal McCarthy personally encrypted both of the replies and forwarded them back to Rome. He didn't know why the inquiry had come, but figured that he'd find out in due course if it were important, and if not, then not. It amused the churchman to be the Vatican's master spy in America.

It would have amused him less to know that the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, was interested in this sideshow

activity also, and that their monster Thinking Machines, Inc., supercomputer in the cavernous basement under the main building in the sprawling complex was on the case. This machine, whose manufacturer had gone bankrupt some years before, had been both the pride and joy and the greatest disappointment in the huge collection of computers at NSA, until quite recently, when one of the agency's mathematicians had finally figured out a way to make use of it. It was a massive parallel-processing machine and supposedly operated much as the human brain did, theoretically able to attack a problem from more than one side simultaneously, just as the human brain was thought to do. The problem was that no one actually knew how the human brain worked, and as a result drafting the software to make full use of the hugely powerful computer had been impossible for some years. This had relegated the impressive and expensive artifact to no more practical utility than an ordinary workstation. But then someone had recognized the fact that quantum mechanics had become useful in the cracking of foreign ciphers, wondered *why* this should be the case, and started looking at the problems from the programming unit. Seven months later, that intellectual sojourn had resulted in the first of three new operating systems for the Thinking Machines Super-Cruncher, and the rest was highly classified history. NSA was now able to crack any book or machine cipher in the world, and its analysts, newly rich with information, had pitched in to have a woodworker construct a sort of pagan altar to put before the Cruncher for the notional sacrifice of goats before their new god. (To suggest the sacrifice of virgins would have offended the womenfolk at the agency.) NSA had long been known for its eccentric institutional sense of humor. The only real fear was that the world would learn about the TAPDANCE system NSA had come up with, which was totally random, and therefore totally unbreakable, plus easy to manufacture—but it was also an administrative nightmare, and that would prevent most foreign governments from using it.

The Cardinal's Internet dispatches were copied, illegally but routinely, by NSA and fed into the Cruncher, which spat out the clear text, which found its way quickly to the desk of an NSA analyst, who, it had been carefully determined beforehand, wasn't Catholic.

That's interesting, the analyst thought. *Why is the Vatican interested in some Chink minister? And why the hell did they go to New York to find out about him? Oh, okay, educated over here, and friends in Mississippi . . . what the hell is this all about?* He was supposed to know about such things, but that was merely the theory under which he operated. He frequently didn't know beans about the information he looked at, but was honest enough to tell his superiors that. And so, his daily report was forwarded electronically to his supervisor, who looked it over,

coded it, and then forwarded it to CIA, where three more analysts looked it over, decided that they didn't know what to make of it either, and then filed it away, electronically. In this case, the data went onto VHS-sized tape cassettes, one of which went into storage container Doc, and the other into Grumpy—there are seven such storage units in the CIA computer room, each named after one of Disney's Seven Dwarfs—while the reference names went into the mainframe so that the computer would know where to look for the data for which the United States government as yet had no understanding. That situation was hardly unknown, of course, and for that reason CIA had every bit of information it generated in a computerized and thoroughly cross-referenced index, instantly accessible, depending on classification, to anyone in either the New or Old Headquarters Buildings located one ridgeline away from the Potomac River. Most of the data in the Seven Dwarfs just sat there, forevermore to be untouched, footnotes to footnotes, never to be of interest even to the driest of academics.

And so?" Zhang Han San asked.

"And so, our Russian neighbors have the luck of the devil," Fang Gan replied, handing the folder over to the senior Minister Without Portfolio. Zhang was seven years older than Fang, closer to his country's Premier. But not that much, and there was little competition between the two ministers. "What we could do with such blessings . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Indeed." That any country could have made constructive use of oil and gold was an obvious truth left unsaid. What mattered here and now was that China would not, and Russia would.

"I had planned for this, you know."

"Your plans were masterful, my friend," Fang said from his seat, reaching inside his jacket for a pack of cigarettes. He held it up to seek approval from his host, who'd quit the habit five years before. The response was a dismissive wave of the hand, and Fang tapped one out and lit it from a butane lighter. "But anyone can have bad luck."

"First the Japanese failed us, and then that religious fool in Tehran," Zhang groused. "Had either of our supposed allies performed as promised, the gold and the oil would now be ours . . ."

"Useful, certainly, for our own purposes, but I am somewhat doubtful on the subject of world acceptance of our notionally prosperous status," Fang said, with a lengthy puff.

The response was yet another wave of the hand. "You think the capitalists are governed by principle? They need oil and gold, and whoever can provide it cheaply gets to sell the most of it. Look whom they buy from, my old friend, anyone who happens to have it. With all

the oil in Mexico, the Americans can't even work up the courage to seize it. How cowardly of them! In our case, the Japanese, as we have learned to our sorrow, have no principles at all. If they could buy oil from the company which made the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they would. They call it realism," Zhang concluded scornfully. The real cite came from Vladimir Il'ych Ulyanov, Lenin himself, who'd predicted, not unreasonably, that capitalist nations would compete among themselves to sell the Soviet Union the rope with which the Russians would later hang them all. But Lenin had never planned for Marxism to fail, had he? Just as Mao hadn't planned for his perfect political/economic vision to fail in the People's Republic, as evidenced by such slogans as "The Great Leap Forward," which, among other things, had encouraged ordinary peasants to smelt iron in their backyards. That the resulting slag hadn't been useful even to make andirons with was a fact not widely advertised in the East or West.

"Alas, fortune did not smile upon us, and so, the oil and gold are not ours."

"For the moment," Zhang murmured.

"What was that?" Fang asked, not having quite caught the comment.

Zhang looked up, almost startled from his internal reverie. "Hmph? Oh, nothing, my friend." And with that the discussion turned to domestic matters. It lasted a total of seventy-five minutes before Fang went back to his office. There began another routine. "Ming," Fang called, gesturing on the way to his inner office.

The secretary stood and scampered after him, closing the door behind before finding her seat.

"New entry," Fang said tiredly, for it had been a lengthy day. "Regular afternoon meeting with Zhang Han San, and we discussed . . ." His voice went on, relating the substance and contents of the meeting. Ming duly took her notes for her minister's official diary. The Chinese were inveterate diarists, and besides that, members of the Politburo felt both an obligation (for scholarly history) and a personal need (for personal survival) to document their every conversation on matters political and concerning national policy, the better to document their views and careful judgment should one of their number make an error of judgment. That this meant his personal secretary, as, indeed, all of the Politburo members' personal secretaries, had access to the most sensitive secrets of the land was not a matter of importance, since these girls were mere robots, recording and transcription machines, little more than that—well, a little more, Fang and a few of his colleagues thought with the accompanying smile. You couldn't have a tape machine suck on your penis, could

you? And Ming was especially good at it. Fang was a communist, and had been for all of his adult life, but he was not a man entirely devoid of heart, and he had the affection for Ming that another man, or even himself, might have had for a favored daughter . . . except that you usually didn't fuck your own daughter. . . . His diary entry droned on for twenty minutes, his trained memory recounting every substantive part of his exchange with Zhang, who was doubtless doing the same with his own private secretary right at this moment—unless Zhang had succumbed to the Western practice of using a tape machine, which would not have surprised Fang. For all of Zhang's pretended contempt for Westerners, he emulated them in so many ways.

They'd also tracked down the name of Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov. He was yet another former KGB officer, part then of the Third Chief Directorate, which had been a hybrid department of the former spy agency, tasked to overseeing the former Soviet military, and also to overseeing certain special operations of the latter force, like the Spetsnaz, Oleg Provalov knew. He turned a few more pages in Suvorov's package, found a photograph and fingerprints, and also discovered that his first assignment had been in the First Chief Directorate, known as the Foreign Directorate because of its work in gathering intelligence from other nations. Why the change? he wondered. Usually in KGB, you stayed where you were initially put. But a senior officer in the Third had drafted him by name from the First . . . why? Suvorov, K. I., asked for by name by General Major Pavel Konstantinovich Kabinet. The name made Provalov pause. He'd heard it somewhere, but exactly where, he couldn't recall, an unusual state of affairs for a long-term investigator. Provalov made a note and set it aside.

So, they had a name and a photo for this Suvorov fellow. Had he known Amalrik and Zimyanin, the supposed—and deceased—killers of Avseyenko the pimp? It seemed possible. In the Third Directorate he would have had possible access to the Spetsnaz, but that could have been a mere coincidence. The KGB's Third Directorate had been mainly concerned with political control of the Soviet military, but that was no longer something the State needed, was it? The entire panoply of political officers, the *zampoliti* who had so long been the bane of the Soviet military, was now essentially gone.

Where are you now? Provalov asked the file folder. Unlike Central Army Records, KGB records were usually pretty good at showing where former intelligence officers lived, and what they were doing. It was a carryover from the previous regime that worked for the police agencies, but not in this case. *Where are you? What are you doing to support yourself? Are you a criminal? Are you a murderer?* Homicide

investigations by their nature created more questions than answers, and frequently ended with many such questions forever unanswered because you could never look inside the mind of a killer, and even if you could, what you might find there didn't have to make any sort of sense.

This murder case had begun as a complex one, and was only becoming more so. All he knew for certain was that Avseyenko was dead, along with his driver and a whore. And now, maybe, he knew even less. He'd assumed almost from the beginning that the pimp had been the real target, but if this Suvorov fellow had hired Amalrik and Zimyanin to do the killing, why would a former—he checked—lieutenant colonel in the Third Chief Directorate of the KGB go out of his way to kill a pimp? Was not Sergey Golovko an equally likely target for the killing, and would that not also explain the murder of the two supposed killers, for eliminating the wrong target? The detective lieutenant opened a desk drawer for a bottle of aspirin. It wasn't the first headache this case had developed, and it didn't seem likely that this would be the last. Whoever Suvorov was, if Golovko had been the target, he had not made the decision to kill the man himself. He'd been a contract killer, and therefore someone else had made the decision to do the killing.

But who?

And why?

Cui bonuo was the ancient question—old enough that the adage was in a dead language. *To whom the good?* Who profited from the deed?

He called Abramov and Ustinov. Maybe they could run Suvorov down, and then he'd fly north to interview the man. Provalov drafted the fax and fired it off to St. Petersburg, then left his desk for the drive home. He checked his watch. Only two hours late. Not bad for this case.

General Lieutenant Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko looked around his office. He'd had his three stars for a while, and sometimes he wondered if he'd get any further. He'd been a professional soldier for thirty-one years, and the job to which he'd always aspired was Commanding General of the Russian Army. Many good men, and some bad ones, had been there. Gregoriy Zhukov, for one, the man who'd saved his country from the Germans. There were many statues to Zhukov, whom Bondarenko had heard lecture when he was a wet-nosed cadet all those years before, seeing the blunt, bulldog face and ice-blue determined eyes of a killer, a true Russian hero whom politics could not demean, and whose name the Germans had come to fear.

That Bondarenko had come this far was no small surprise even to himself. He'd begun as a signals officer, seconded briefly to Spetsnaz

in Afghanistan, where he'd cheated death twice, both times taking command of a panic-worthy situation and surviving with no small distinction. He'd taken wounds, and killed with his own hands, something few colonels do, and few colonels relished, except at a good officers' club bar after a few stiff ones with their comrades.

Like many generals before him, Bondarenko was something of a "political" general. He'd hitched his career-star to the coattails of a quasi-minister, Sergey Golovko, but in truth he'd never have gone to general-lieutenant's stars without real merit, and courage on the battlefield went as far in the Russian army as it did in any other. Intelligence went further still, and above all came accomplishment. His job was what the Americans called J-3, Chief of Operations, which meant killing people in war and training them in peace. Bondarenko had traveled the globe, learning how other armies trained their men, sifted through the lessons, and applied them to his own soldiers. The only difference between a soldier and a civilian was training, after all, and Bondarenko wanted no less than to bring the Russian army to the same razor-sharp and granite-hard condition with which it had kicked in the gates of Berlin under Zhukov and Koniev. That goal was still off in the future, but the general told himself that he'd laid the proper foundation. In ten years, perhaps, his army would be at that goal, and he'd be around to see it, retired by then, of course, honorably so, with his decorations framed and hanging on the wall, and grandchildren to bounce on his knee . . . and occasionally coming in to consult, to look things over and offer his opinion, as retired general officers often did.

For the moment, he had no further work to do, but no particular desire to head home, where his wife was hosting the wives of other senior officers. Bondarenko had always found such affairs tedious. The military attaché in Washington had sent him a book, *Swift Sword*, by a Colonel Nicholas Eddington of the American Army National Guard. Eddington, yes, he was the colonel who'd been training with his brigade in the desert of California when the decision had come to deploy to the Persian Gulf, and his troops—civilians in uniform, really—had performed well: Better than well, the Russian general told himself. They'd exercised the Medusa Touch, destroying everything they'd touched, along with the regular American formations, the 10th and 11th cavalry regiments. Together that one division-sized collection of forces had smashed a full four corps of mechanized troops like so many sheep in the slaughter pen. Even Eddington's guardsmen had performed magnificently. Part of that, Gennady Iosifovich knew, was their motivation. The biological attack on their homeland had understandably enraged the soldiers, and such rage could make a poor soldier into an heroic one as easily as flipping a light switch. "Will to combat" was the technical term. In more

pedestrian language, it was the reason a man put his life at risk, and so it was a matter of no small importance to the senior officers whose job it was to lead those men into danger.

Paging through the book, he saw that this Eddington—also a professor of history, the flap said; wasn't that interesting? —paid no small attention to that factor. Well, maybe he was smart in addition to being lucky. He'd had the good fortune to command reserve soldiers with many years of service, and while they'd only had part-time practice for their training, they'd been in highly stable units, where every soldier knew every other, and that was a virtually unknown luxury for regular soldiers. And they'd also had the revolutionary new American IVIS gear, which let all the men and vehicles in the field know exactly what their commander knew, often in great detail . . . and in turn told their commander exactly what his men saw. Eddington said that had made his job a lot easier than any mechanized-force commander had ever had it.

The American officer also talked about knowing not only what his subordinate commanders were saying, but also the importance of knowing what they were *thinking,* the things they didn't have the time to say. The implicit emphasis was on the importance of continuity within the officer corps, and *that*, Bondarenko thought as he made a marginal note, was a most important lesson. He'd have to read this book in detail, and maybe have Washington purchase a hundred or so for his brother officers to read . . . even get reprint rights in Russia for it? It was something the Russians had done more than once.

CHAPTER 12

Conflicts of the Pocket

Okay, George, let's have it," Ryan said, sipping his coffee. The White House had many routines, and one that had evolved over the past year was that, after the daily intelligence briefing, the Secretary of the Treasury was Ryan's first appointment two or three days of the week. Winston most often walked across—actually under—15th Street via a tunnel between the White House and Treasury Building that dated back to the time of FDR. The other part of the routine was that the President's Navy messmen laid out coffee and croissants (with butter) in which both men indulged to the detriment of their cholesterol numbers.

"The PRC. The trade negotiations have hit the wall pretty hard. They just don't want to play ball."

"What are the issues?"

"Hell, Jack, what *aren't* the friggin' issues?" TRADER took a bite of croissant and grape jelly. "That new computer company their government started up is ripping off a proprietary hardware gadget that Dell has patented—that's the new doohickey that kicked their stock up twenty percent, y'know? They're just dropping the things into the boxes they make for their own market *and* the ones they just started selling in Europe. That's a goddamned violation of all sorts of trade *and* patent treaties, but when we point that out to them over the negotiating table, they just change the subject and ignore it. That could cost Dell something like four hundred million dollars, and that's real money for one company to lose, y'know? If I was their corporate counsel, I'd be flipping through the Yellow Pages for Assassins 'R Us. Okay, that's one. Next, they've told us that if we make too big a deal of these 'minor' disagreements, Boeing can forget the 777 order-twenty-eight aircraft they've optioned—in favor of Airbus."

Ryan nodded. "George, what's the trade balance with the PRC now?"

"Seventy-eight billion, and it's their way, not ours, as you know."

"Scott's running this over at Foggy Bottom?"

SecTreas nodded. "He's got a pretty fair team in place, but they need a little more in the way of executive direction."

"And what's this doing to us?"

"Well, it gets our consumers a lot of low-cost goods, about seventy percent of which is in low-tech stuff, lots of toys, stuffed animals, like that. But, Jack, thirty percent is upscale stuff. That amount's almost doubled in two and a half years. Pretty soon that's going to start costing us jobs, both in terms of production for domestic consumption and lost exports. They're selling a lot of laptops domestically—in their country, I mean—but they don't let us into the market, even though we've got 'em beat in terms of performance and price. We know for sure they're taking part of their trading surplus with us and using it to subsidize their computer industries. They want to build that up for strategic reasons, I suppose."

"Plus selling weapons to people we'd prefer not to have them," POTUS added. *Which they also do for strategic reasons.*

"Well, doesn't everybody need an AK-47 to take care of his gophers?" A shipment of fourteen hundred true—that is, fully automatic—assault rifles had been seized in the Port of Los Angeles two weeks before, but the PRC had denied responsibility, despite the fact that U.S. intelligence services had tracked the transaction order back to a particular Beijing telephone number. That was something Ryan knew, but it had not been allowed to leak, lest it expose methods of intelligence collection—in this case to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade. The new Beijing telephone system hadn't been built by an American firm, but much of the design work had been contracted to a company that had made a profitable arrangement with an agency of the United States government. It wasn't strictly legal, but different rules were attached to national security matters.

"They just don't play by the rules, do they?"

Winston grunted. "Not hardly."

"Suggestions?" President Ryan asked.

"Remind the little slant-eyed fucks that they need us a shitload more than we need them."

"You have to be careful talking like that to nation-states, especially ones with nuclear weapons," Ryan reminded his Treasury Secretary. "Plus the racial slur."

"Jack, either it's a level playing field or it isn't. Either you play fair or you don't. If they keep that much more of our money than we do of theirs, then it means they've got to start playing fair with us. Okay, I know"—he held his hands up defensively—"their noses are a little out of joint over Taiwan, but that was a good call, Jack. You did the right thing, punishing them. Those little fucks killed people, and they probably had complicity in our last adventure in the Persian Gulf—*and* the Ebola attack on us—and so they had it coming. But *nooooo*, we can't punish them for murder and complicity in an act of war on

the United States, can we? We have to be too big and strong to be so petty. Petty, my ass, Jack! Directly or indirectly, those little bastards helped that Daryaei guy kill seven thousand of our citizens, and establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan was the price they paid for it—and a damned small price that was, if you ask me. They ought to understand that. They've got to learn that the world has rules. So, what we have to do is show them that there's pain when you break the rules, and we have to make the pain stick. Until they understand that, there's just going to be more trouble. Sooner or later, they have to learn. I think it's been long enough to wait."

"Okay, but remember their point of view: Who are we to tell them the rules?"

"Horseshit, Jack!" Winston was one of the very few people who had the ability—if not exactly the right—to talk that way in the Oval Office. Part of it came from his own success, part of it from the fact that Ryan respected straight talk, even if the language was occasionally off-color. "Remember, they're the ones sticking it to us. We *are* playing fair. The world *does* have rules, and those rules are honored by the community of nations, and if Beijing wants to be part of that community, well, then they have to abide by the same rules that everyone else does. If you want to join the club, you have to pay the cost of admittance, *and* even then you still can't drive your golf cart on the greens. You can't have it both ways."

The problem, Ryan reflected, was that the people who ran entire nations—especially large, powerful, important nations—were not the sort to be told how or why to do anything at all. This was all the more true of despotic countries. In a liberal democracy the idea of the rule of law applied to just about everyone. Ryan was President, but he couldn't rob a bank just because he needed pocket change.

"George, okay. Sit down with Scott and work something out that I can agree to, and we'll have State explain the rules to our friends in Beijing." *And who knows, maybe it might even work this time*. Not that Ryan would bet money on it.

This would be the important evening, Nomuri thought. Yeah, sure, he'd banged Ming the night before, and she seemed to have liked it, but now that she'd had time to think it over, would her reaction be the same? Or would she reflect that he'd plied her with liquor and taken advantage of her? Nomuri had dated and bedded his share of women, but he didn't confuse amorous successes with any sort of understanding of the female psyche.

He sat at the bar of the medium-sized restaurant—different from the last one—smoking a cigarette, which was new for the CIA officer. He wasn't coughing, though his first two had made the room seem to spin

around some. Carbon monoxide poisoning, he thought. Smoking reduced the oxygen supply to your brain, and was bad for you in so many ways. But it also made waiting a lot easier. He'd bought a Bic lighter, blue, with a facsimile of the PRC flag on it, so that it appeared like their banner was waving in a clear sky. *Yeah*, he thought, *sure, and here I am wondering if my girl will show up, and she's already*—he checked his watch—*nine minutes late.* Nomuri waved to the bartender and ordered another Scotch. It was a Japanese brand, drinkable, not overly expensive, and when you got down to it, booze was booze, wasn't it?

Are you coming, Ming? the case officer's mind asked the air around him. Like most bars around the world, this one had a mirror behind the glasses and bottles, and the California native examined his face quizzically, pretending it was someone else's, wondering what someone else might see in it. Nervousness? Suspicion? Fear? Loneliness? Lust? There could be someone making that evaluation right now, some MSS counterintelligence officer doing his stakeout, careful not to look toward Nomuri too much of the time. Maybe using the mirror as an indirect surveillance tool. More likely sitting at an angle so that his posture naturally pointed his eyes to the American, whereas Nomuri would have to turn his head to see him, giving the surveillance agent a chance to avert his glance, probably toward his partner—you tended to do this with teams rather than an individual—whose head would be on the same line of sight, so that he could survey his target without seeming to do so directly. Every nation in the world had police or security forces trained in this, and the methods were the same everywhere because human nature was the same everywhere, whether your target was a drug dealer or a spook. That's just the way it was, Nomuri said to himself, checking his watch again. Eleven minutes late. *It's cool, buddy, women are* always *late. They do it because they can't tell time, or it takes them fucking forever to get dressed and do their makeup, or because they don't remember to wear a watch . . . or most likely of all, because it gives them an advantage.* Such behavior, perhaps, made women appear more valuable to men—after all, men waited for *them*, right? Not the other way around. It put a premium on their affection, which if *not* waited for, might *not* appear one day, and that gave men something to fear.

Chester Nomuri, behavioral anthropologist, he snorted to himself, looking back up in the mirror.

For Christ's sake, dude, maybe she's working late, or the traffic is heavy, or some friend at the office needed her to come over and help her move the goddamned furniture. Seventeen minutes. He fished out another Kool and lit it from his ChiComm lighter. *The East is Red,* he thought. And maybe this was the last country in the world that really was red . . .

wouldn't Mao be proud . . . ?

Where are you?

Well, whoever from the MSS might be watching, if he had any doubts about what Nomuri was doing, they'd damned sure know he was waiting for a woman, and if anything his stress would look like that of a guy bewitched by the woman in question. And spooks weren't supposed to be bewitched, were they?

What are you worrying about that for, asshole, just because you might not get laid tonight?

Twenty-three minutes late. He stubbed out one cigarette and lit another. If this was a mechanism women used to control men, then it was an effective one.

James Bond never had these problems, the intelligence officer thought. Mr. Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang was always master of his women—*and if anyone needed proof that Bond was a character of fiction, that was sure as hell it!*

As it turned out, Nomuri was so entranced with his thoughts that he didn't see Ming come in. He felt a gentle tap on his back, and turned rapidly to see—

—she wore the radiant smile, pleased with herself at having surprised him, the beaming dark eyes that crinkled at the corners with the pleasure of the moment.

"I am so sorry to be late," she said rapidly. "Fang needed me to transcribe some things, and he kept me in the office late."

"I must talk to this old man," Nomuri said archly, hauling himself erect on the bar stool.

"He is, as you say, an old man, and he does not listen very well. Perhaps age has impeded his hearing."

No, the old fucker probably doesn't want to listen, Nomuri didn't say. Fang was probably like bosses everywhere, well past the age when he looked for the ideas of others.

"So, what do you want for dinner?" Nomuri asked, and got the best possible answer.

"I'm not hungry." With sparkles in the dark eyes to affirm what she did want. Nomuri tossed off the last of his drink, stubbed out his cigarette, and walked out with her.

So?" Ryan asked.

"So, this is not good news," Arnie van Damm replied.

"I suppose that depends on your point of view. When will they hear arguments?"

"Less than two months, and that's a message, too, Jack. Those good 'strict-constructionist' justices you appointed are going to hear this case, and if I had to bet, I'd wager they're hot to overturn *Roe*."

Jack settled back in his chair and smiled up at his Chief of Staff. "Why is that bad, Arnie?"

"Jack, it's bad because a lot of the citizens out there like to have the option to choose between abortion or not. That's why. 'Pro choice' is what they call it, and so far it's the law."

"Maybe that'll change," the President said hopefully, looking back down at his schedule. The Secretary of the Interior was coming in to talk about the national parks.

"That is *not* something to look forward to, damn it! And it'll be blamed on you!"

"Okay, if and when that happens, I will point out that *I* am not a justice of the United States Supreme Court, and stay away from it entirely. If they decide the way I—and I guess you—think they will, abortion becomes a legislative matter, and the legislature of the 'several states,' as the Constitution terms them, will meet and decide for themselves if the voters want to be able to kill their unborn babies or not—but, Arnie, I've got four kids, remember. I was there to see them all born, and be damned if you are going to tell me that abortion is okay!" The fourth little Ryan, Kyle Daniel, had been born during Ryan's Presidency, and the cameras had been there to record his face coming out of the delivery room, allowing the entire nation—and the world, for that matter—to share the experience. It had bumped Ryan's approval rating a full fifteen points, pleasing Arnie very greatly at the time.

"God damn it, Jack, I never said that, did I?" van Damm demanded. "But you and I do objectionable things every so often, don't we? And we don't deny other people the right to do such things, too, do we? Smoke, for example?" he added, just to twist Ryan's tail a little.

"Arnie, you use words as cleverly as any man I know, and that was a good play. I'll give you that. But there's a qualitative difference between lighting up a goddamned cigarette and killing a living human being."

"True, if a fetus is a living human being, which is something for theologians, not politicians."

"Arnie, it's like this. The pro-abortion crowd says that whether or not a fetus is human is beside the point because it's inside a woman's body, and therefore her property to do with as she pleases. Fine. It was the law in the Roman Republic and Empire that a wife and children were property of the *paterfamilias,* the head of the family, and he could kill them anytime he pleased. You think we should go back to that?"

"Obviously not, since it empowers men and disempowers women, and we don't do things like that anymore."

"So, you've taken a moral issue and degraded it to what's good

politically and what's bad politically. Well, Arnie, I am not here to do that. Even the President is allowed to have some moral principles, or am I supposed to check my ideas of right and wrong outside the door when I show up for work in the morning?"

"But he's not allowed to impose it on others. Moral principles are things you keep on the inside, for yourself."

"What we call law is nothing more or less than the public's collective belief, their conviction of what right and wrong is. Whether it's about murder, kidnapping, or running a red light, society decides what the rules are. In a democratic republic, we do that through the legislature by electing people who share our views. That's how laws happen. We also set up a constitution, the supreme law of the land, which is very carefully considered because it decides what the other laws may and may not do, and therefore it protects us against our transitory passions. The job of the judiciary is to interpret the laws, or in this case the constitutional principles embodied in those laws, as they apply to reality. In *Roe versus Wade*, the Supreme Court went too far. It legislated; it changed the law in a way not anticipated by the drafters, and that was an error. All a reversal of *Roe* will do is return the abortion issue to the state legislatures, where it belongs."

"How long have you been thinking about that speech?" Arnie asked. Ryan's turn of phrase was too polished for extemporaneous speech.

"A little while," the President admitted.

"Well, when that decision comes through, be ready for a firestorm," his Chief of Staff warned. "I'm talking demonstrations, TV coverage, and enough newspaper editorials to paper the walls of the Pentagon, and your Secret Service people will worry about the additional danger to your life, and your wife's life, and your kids. If you think I'm kidding, ask them."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"There's no law, federal, state, or local, which compels the world to be logical, Jack. The people out there depend on you to keep the fucking weather pleasant, and they blame you when you don't. Deal with it." With that, an annoyed Chief of Staff headed out and west toward his corner office.

"Crap," Ryan breathed, as he flipped to the briefing papers for the Secretary of the Interior. Smokey Bear's owner. Also custodian of the national parks, which the President only got to see on the Discovery Channel, on such nights as he had free time to switch the TV on.

There wasn't much to be said for the clothing people wore in this place, Nomuri thought again, except for one thing. When you undid the buttons and found the Victoria's Secret stuff underneath, well, it was like having a movie switch from black-and-white to Technicolor.

This time Ming allowed him to do her buttons, then slide the jacket down her arms, and then get her trousers off. The panties looked particularly inviting, but then, so did her entire body. Nomuri scooped her up in his arms and kissed her passionately before dropping her on the bed. A minute later, he was beside her.

"So, why were you late?"

She made a face. "Every week Minister Fang meets with other ministers, and when he comes back, he has me transcribe the notes of the meetings so that he has a record of everything that was said."

"Oh, do you use my new computer for that?" The question concealed the quivering *Jesus!* he felt throughout his body on hearing Ming's words. This girl could be one hell of a source! Nomuri took a deep breath and resumed his poker face of polite disinterest.

"Of course."

"Excellent. It's equipped with a modem, yes?"

"Of course, I use it every day to retrieve Western news reports and such from their media Web sites."

"Ah, that is good." So, he'd taken care of business for the day, and with that job done, Nomuri leaned over for a kiss.

"Before I came into the restaurant, I put the lipstick on," Ming explained. "I don't wear it at work."

"So I see," the CIA officer replied, repeating the initial kiss, and extending it in time. Her arms found their way around his neck. The reason for her lateness had nothing to do with a lack of affection. That was obvious now, as his hands started to wander also. The front-closure on the bra was the smartest thing he'd done. Just a flick of thumb and forefinger and it sprang open, revealing both of her rather cute breasts, two more places for his hand to explore. The skin there was particularly silky . . . and, he decided a few seconds later, tasty as well.

This resulted in an agreeable moan and squirm of pleasure from his . . . what? Friend? Well, okay, but not enough. Agent? Not yet. Lover would do for the moment. They'd never talked at The Farm about this sort of thing, except the usual warnings not to get too close to your agent, lest you lose your objectivity. But if you didn't get a little bit close, you'd never recruit the agent, would you? Of course, Chester knew that he was far more than a *little bit* close at the moment.

Whatever her looks, she had delightful skin, and his fingertips examined it in great detail as his eyes smiled into hers, with the occasional kiss. And her body wasn't bad at all. A nice shape even when she stood. A little too much waist, maybe, but this wasn't Venice Beach, and the hourglass figure, however nice it might look in pictures, was just that, a picture look. Her waist was smaller than her hips, and that was enough for the moment. It wasn't as though she'd

be walking down the ramp at some New York fashion show, where the models looked like boys anyway. *So, Ming is not now and would never be a supermodel—deal with it, Chet,* the officer told himself. Then it was time to put all the CIA stuff aside. He was a man, dressed only in boxer shorts, next to a woman, dressed only in panties. Panties large enough maybe to make a handkerchief, though orange-red wouldn't be a good color for a man to pull from his back pocket, especially, he added to himself with a smile, in some artificial silk fabric.

"Why do you smile?" Ming asked.

"Because you are pretty," Nomuri replied. And so she was, now, with that particular smile on her face. No, she'd never be a model, but inside every woman was the look of beauty, if only they would let it out. And her skin was first-class, especially her lips, coated with after-work lipstick, smooth and greasy, yet making his lips linger even so. Soon their bodies touched almost all over, and a warm, comfortable feeling it was, so nicely she fit under one arm, while his left hand played and wandered. Ming's hair didn't tangle much. She could evidently brush it out very easily, it was so short. Her underarms, too, were hairy, like many Chinese women's, but that only gave Nomuri something else to play with, teasing and pulling a little. That evidently tickled her. Ming giggled playfully and hugged him tighter, then relaxed to allow his hand to wander more. As it passed her navel, she lay suddenly still, relaxing herself in some kind of invitation. Time for another kiss as his fingertips wandered farther, and there was humor in her eyes now. What game could this be . . . ?

As soon as his hands found her panties, her bottom lifted off the mattress. He sat up halfway and pulled them down, allowing her left foot to kick them into the air, where the red-orange pants flew like a mono-colored rainbow, and then—

"Ming!" he said in humorous accusation.

"I've heard that men like this," she said with a sparkle and a giggle.

"Well, it is different," Nomuri replied, as his hands traced over skin even smoother than the rest of her body. "Did you do this at work?"

A riotous laugh now: "No, fool! This morning at my apartment! In my own bathroom, with my own razor."

"Just wanted to make sure," the CIA officer assured her. *Damn, isn't this something!* Then her hand moved to do to him much the same as he was doing to her.

"You are different from Fang," her voice told him in a playful whisper.

"Oh? How so?"

"I think the worst thing a woman can say to a man is 'Are you in yet?' One of the other secretaries said that to Fang once. He beat her. She came into work the next day with black eyes—he made her come

in—and then the next night . . . well, he had me to bed," she admitted, not so much with shame as embarrassment. "To show what a man he still is. But I knew better than to say *that* to him. We all do, now."

"Will you say that to me?" Nomuri asked with a smile and another kiss.

"Oh, no! You are a sausage, not a string bean!" Ming told him enthusiastically.

It wasn't the most elegant compliment he'd ever had, but it sufficed for the moment, Nomuri thought.

"Do you think it's time for the sausage to find a home?"

"Oh, yes!"

As he rolled on top, Nomuri saw two things under him. One was a girl, a young woman with the usual female drives, which he was about to answer. The other was a potential agent, with access to political intelligence such as an experienced case officer only dreamed about. But Nomuri wasn't an experienced case officer. He was still a little wet behind the ears, and so he didn't know what was impossible. He'd have to worry about his potential agent, because if he ever recruited her successfully, her life would be in the gravest danger . . . he thought about what would happen, how her face would change as the bullet entered her brain . . . but, no, it was too ugly. With an effort, Nomuri forced the thought aside as he slipped into her. If he were to recruit her at all, he had to perform this function well. And if it made him happy, too, well, that was just a bonus.

I'll think about it," POTUS promised the Secretary of the Interior, walking him to the door that led to the corridor, to the left of the fireplace. *Sorry, buddy, but the money isn't there to do all that.* His SecInterior was by no means a bad man, but it seemed he'd been captured by his departmental bureaucracy, which was perhaps the worst danger of working in Washington. He sat back down to read the papers the Secretary had handed over. Of course he wouldn't have time to read it all over himself. On a good day, he'd be able to skim through the Executive Summary of the documents, while the rest went to a staffer who'd go through it all and draft a report to the President —in effect, *another* Executive Summary of sorts, and from that document, typed up by a White House staff member of maybe twenty-eight years, policy would actually be made.

And that was crazy! Ryan thought angrily. *He* was supposed to be the chief executive of the country. *He* was the only one who was supposed to make policy. But the President's time was valuable. So valuable, in fact, that others guarded it for him—and really those others guarded his time from himself, because ultimately it was they

who decided what Ryan saw and didn't see. Thus, while Ryan *was* the Chief Executive, and *did* alone make executive policy, he made that policy often based solely on the information presented to him by others. And sometimes it worried him that he was controlled by the information that made it to his desk, rather as the press decided what the public saw, and thus had a hand in deciding what the public thought about the various issues of the day.

So, Jack, have you been captured by your *bureaucracy, too?* It was hard to know, hard to tell, and hard to decide how to change the situation, if the situation existed in the first place.

Maybe that's why Arnie likes me to get out of this building to where the real people are, Jack realized.

The more difficult problem was that Ryan was a foreignpolicy and national-security expert. In those areas he felt the most competent. It was on domestic stuff that he felt disconnected and dumb. Part of that came from his personal wealth. He'd never worried about the cost of a loaf of bread or a quart of milk—all the more so in the White House, where you never saw milk in a quart container anyway, but only in a chilled glass on a silver tray, carried by a Navy steward's mate right to your hands while you sat in your easy chair. There were people out there who did worry about such things, or at least worried about the cost of putting little Jimmy through college, and Ryan, as President, had to concern himself with their worries. He had to try to keep the economy in balance so that they could earn their decent livings, could go to Disney World in the summer, and the football games in the fall, and splurge to make sure there were plenty of presents under the Christmas tree every year.

But *how* the hell was he supposed to do that? Ryan remembered a lament attributed to the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. On learning that he'd been declared a god, and that temples had been erected to him, and that people sacrificed to the statues of himself in those temples, Augustus angrily inquired: *When someone prays to me to cure his gout, what am I supposed to* do? The fundamental issue was how much government policy really had to do with reality. That was a question seldom posed in Washington even by conservatives who ideologically despised the government and everything it did in domestic terms, though they were often in favor of showing the flag and rattling the national saber overseas—exactly why they enjoyed this Ryan had never thought about. Perhaps just to be different from liberals who flinched from the exercise of force like a vampire from the cross, but who, like vampires, liked to extend government as far as they could get away with into the lives of everyone, and so suck their blood—in reality, use the instrument of taxation to take more and more to pay for the more and more they would have the government

do.

And yet the economy seemed to move on, regardless of what government did. People found their jobs, most of them in the private sector, providing goods and services for which people paid voluntarily with their after-tax money. And yet "public service" was a phrase used almost exclusively by and about political figures, almost always the elected sort. Didn't everyone out there serve the public in one way or another? Physicians, teachers, firefighters, pharmacists. Why did the media say it was just Ryan and Robby Jackson, and the 535 elected members of the Congress? He shook his head.

Damn. Okay, I know how I got here, but why the hell did I allow myself to run for election? Jack asked himself. It had made Arnie happy. It had even made the media happy—*perhaps because they loved him as a target?* the President asked himself—and Cathy had not been cross with him about it. But *why* the hell had he ever allowed himself to be stampeded into this? He fundamentally didn't know what he was supposed to do as President. He had no real agenda, and sort of bumped along from day to day. Making tactical decisions (for which he was singularly unqualified) instead of large strategic ones. There was nothing important he really wanted to change about his country. Oh, sure, there were a few problems to be fixed. Tax policy needed rewriting, and he was letting George Winston ramrod that. And Defense needed firming up, and he had Tony Bretano working on that. He had a Presidential Commission looking at health-care policy, which his wife, actually, was overseeing in a distant way, along with some of her Hopkins colleagues, and all of that was kept quiet. And there was that very black look at Social Security, being guided by Winston and Mark Gant.

The "third rail of American politics," he thought again. Step on it and die. But Social Security was something the American people really cared about, not for what it was, but for what they wrongly thought it to be—and, actually, they knew that their thoughts were wrong, judging by the polling data. As thoroughly mismanaged as any financial institution could possibly be, it was still part of a government promise made by the representatives *of* the people *to* the people. And somehow, despite all the cynicism out there—which was considerable—the average Joe Citizen really did trust his government to keep its word. The problem was that union chiefs and industrialists who'd dipped into pension funds and gone to federal prison for it had done nothing compared to what succeeding Congresses had done to Social Security—but the advantage of a crook in Congress was that he or she was not a crook, not legally. After all, Congress made the *law*. Congress made *government policy*, and those things couldn't be *wrong*, could they? Yet another proof that the drafters of the Constitution had

made one simple but far-reaching error. They'd assumed that the people selected by The People to manage the nation would be as honest and honorable as they'd been. One could almost hear the "Oops!" emanating from all those old graves. The people who'd drafted the Constitution had sat in a room dominated by George Washington himself, and whatever honor they'd lacked he'd probably provided from his own abundant supply, just by sitting there and looking at them. *The current Congress had no such mentor/living god to take George's place, and more was the pity,* Ryan thought. The mere fact that Social Security had shown a profit up through the 1960s had meant that—well, Congress couldn't let a *profit* happen, could it? *Profits* were what made rich people (who had to be bad people, because no one grew rich without having exploited someone or other, right?, which never stopped members of the Congress from going to those people for campaign contributions, of course) rich, and so profits had to be spent, and so Social Security taxes (properly called premiums, because Social Security was actually called OASDI, for Old Age, Survivors, and Disability *Insurance*) were transformed into general funds, to be spent along with everything else. One of Ryan's students from his days of teaching history at the Naval Academy had sent him a small plaque to keep on his White House desk. It read: *THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC WILL ENDURE UNTIL THE DAY CONGRESS DISCOVERS THAT IT CAN BRIBE THE PUBLIC WITH THE PUBLIC'S MONEY—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE.* Ryan paid heed to it. There were times when he wanted to grab Congress by its collective neck and throttle it, but there was no single such neck, and Arnie never tired of telling him how tame a Congress he had, the House of Representatives especially, which was the reverse of how things usually went.

The President grumbled and checked his daily schedule for his next appointment. As with everything else, the President of the United States lived a schedule determined by others, his appointments made weeks in advance, the daily briefing pages prepared the day before so that he'd know who the hell was coming in, and what the hell he, she, or they wanted to talk about, and also what his considered position (mainly drafted by others) was. The President's position was usually a friendly one so that the visitor(s) could leave the Oval Office feeling good about the experience, and the rules were that you couldn't change the agenda, lest the Chief Executive say, "What the hell are you asking me for now!" This would alarm both the guest and the Secret Service agents standing right behind them, hands close to their pistols—just standing there like robots, faces blank but scanning, ears taking everything in. After their shift ended, they probably headed off to whatever cop bar they frequented to chuckle over what the City Council President of Podunk had said in the Oval Office that day

—“Jesus, did you see the Boss’s eyes when that dumb bastard . . . ?”—be— cause they were bright, savvy people who in many ways understood his job better than he did, Ryan reflected. Well they should. They had the double advantage of having seen it all, and not being responsible for any of it. *Lucky bastards* , Jack thought, standing for his next appointment.

If cigarettes were good for anything, it was for this, Nomuri thought. His left arm was curled around Ming, his body snuggled up against hers, staring at the ceiling in the lovely, relaxed, deflationary moment, and puffing gently on his Kool as an accent to the moment, feeling Ming’s breathing, and feeling very much like a man. The sky outside the windows was dark. The sun had set.

Nomuri stood, stopping first in the bathroom and then heading to the kitchenette. He returned with two wineglasses. Ming sat up in bed and took a sip from hers. For his part, Nomuri couldn’t resist reaching over to touch her. Her skin was just so smooth and inviting.

“My brain is still not working,” she said, after her third sip.

“Darling, there are times when men and women don’t need their brains.”

“Well, your sausage doesn’t need one,” she responded, reaching down to fondle it.

“Gently, girl! He’s run a long hard race!” the CIA officer warned her with an inner smile.

“Oh, so he has.” Ming bent down to deliver a gentle kiss. “And he won the race.”

“No, but he did manage to catch up with you.” Nomuri lit another cigarette. Then he was surprised to see Ming reach into her purse and pull out one of her own. She lit it with grace and took a long puff, finally letting the smoke out her nose.

“Dragon girl!” Nomuri announced with a laugh. “Do flames come next? I didn’t know you smoked.”

“At the office, everyone does.”

“Even the minister?”

Another laugh: “*Especially* the minister.”

“Someone should tell him that smoking is dangerous to the health, and not good for the yang.”

“A smoked sausage is not a firm sausage,” Ming said, with a laugh. “Maybe that’s his problem, then.”

“You do not like your minister?”

“He is an old man with what he thinks is a young penis. He uses the office staff as his personal bordello. Well, it could be worse,” Ming admitted. “It’s been a long time since I was his favorite. Lately he’s fixed on Chai, and she is engaged, and Fang knows it. That is not a

civilized act on the part of a senior minister."

"The laws do not apply to him?"

She snorted with borderline disgust. "The laws apply to none of them. Nomuri-san, these are government *ministers*. They *are* the law in this country, and they care little for what others think of them or their habits—few enough find out in any case. They are corrupt on a scale that shames the emperors of old, and they say they are the guardians of the common people, the peasants and workers they claim to love as their own children. Well, I suppose sometimes I am one of those peasants, eh?"

"And I thought you liked your minister," Nomuri responded, goading her on. "So, what does he talk about?"

"What do you mean?"

"The late work that kept you away from here," he answered, waving at the bedclothes with a smile.

"Oh, talk between the ministers. He keeps an extensive personal political diary—in case the president might want to oust him, that is his defense, you see, something he could present to his peers. Fang doesn't want to lose his official residence and all the privileges that come along with it. So, he keeps records of all he does, and I am his secretary, and I transcribe all his notes. Sometimes it can take forever."

"On your computer, of course."

"Yes, the new one, in perfect Mandarin ideographs now that you've given us the new software."

"You keep it on your computer?"

"On the hard drive, yes. Oh, it's encrypted," she assured him. "We learned that from the Americans, when we broke into their weapons records. It's called a robust encryption system, whatever that means. I select the file I wish to open and type in the decryption key, and the file opens. Do you want to know what key I use?" She giggled. "YELLOW SUBMARINE. In English because of the keyboard—it was before your new software—and it's from a Beatles song I heard on the radio once. 'We all live in a yellow submarine,' something like that. I listened to the radio a lot back then, when I was first studying English. I spent half an hour looking up submarines in the dictionary and then the encyclopedia, trying to find out why a ship was painted yellow. Ahh!" Her hands flew up in the air.

The encryption key! Nomuri tried to hide his excitement. "Well, it must be a lot of folders. You've been his secretary for a lot of time," he said casually.

"Over four hundred documents. I keep them by number instead of making up new names for them. Today was number four hundred eighty-seven, as a matter of fact."

Holy shit, Nomuri thought, *four hundred eighty-seven computer documents of inside-the-Politburo conversations. This makes a gold mine look like a toxic waste dump.*

"What exactly do they talk about? I've never met a senior government functionary," Nomuri explained.

"Everything!" she answered, finishing her own cigarette. "Who's got ideas in the Politburo, who wants to be nice to America, who wants to hurt them—everything you can imagine. Defense policy. Economic policy. The big one lately is how to deal with Hong Kong. 'One Country, Two Systems' has developed problems with some industrialists around Beijing and Shanghai. They feel they are treated with less respect than they deserve—less than they get in Hong Kong, that is—and they are unhappy about it. Fang's one of the people trying to find a compromise to make them happy. He might. He's very clever at such things."

"It must be fascinating to see such information—to really know what's going on in your country!" Nomuri gushed. "In Japan, we never know what the *zaibatsu* and the MITI people are doing—ruining the economy, for the most part, the fools. But because nobody knows, no action is ever taken to fix things. Is it the same here?"

"Of course!" She lit another smoke, getting into the conversation, and hardly noticing that it wasn't about love anymore. "Once I studied my Marx and my Mao. Once I believed in it all. Once I even trusted the senior ministers to be men of honor and integrity, and totally believed the things they taught me in school. But then I saw how the army has its own industrial empire, and that empire keeps the generals rich and fat and happy. And I saw how the ministers use women, and how they furnish their apartments. They've become the new emperors. They have too much power. Perhaps a woman could use such power without being corrupted, but not a man."

Feminism's made it over here, too? Nomuri reflected. Maybe she was too young to remember Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who could have given corruption lessons to the court of Byzantium.

"Well, that is not a problem for people like us. And at least you get to see such things, and at least *you* get to know it. That makes you even more unique, Ming-chan," Nomuri suggested, tracing the palm of his hand over her left nipple. She shivered right on command.

"You think so?"

"Of course." A kiss this time, a nice lingering one, while his hand stroked her body. He was so close. She had told him of all the information she had—she'd even given him the fucking encryption key! So her 'puter was wired into the phone system—that meant he could call in to it, and with the right software he could go snooping around her hard drive, and with the encryption key he could lift

things right off, and cross-load them right to Mary Pat's desk. *Damn, first I get to fuck a Chinese citizen, and then I can fuck their whole country*. It didn't get much better than this, the field spook decided, with a smile at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 13

Penetration Agent

Well, he left the prurient parts out this time, Mary Pat saw when she lit up her computer in the morning. Operation SORGE was moving right along. Whoever this Ming girl was, she talked a little too much. Odd. Hadn't the MSS briefed all the executive secretaries about this sort of thing? Probably—it would have been a remarkable oversight if they hadn't—but it also seemed likely that of the well-known reasons for committing treason and espionage (known as MICE: Money, Ideology, Conscience, and Ego), this one was Ego. Young Miss Ming was being used sexually by her Minister Fang, and she didn't much like it, and that made perfect sense to Mary Patricia Foley. A woman only had so much to give, and to have it taken coercively by a man of power wasn't something calculated to make a woman happy—though ironically the powerful man in question probably thought he was honoring her with his biological attention. After all, was he not a great man, and was she not a peasant? The thought was good for a snort as she took a sip of morning seventh-floor coffee. It didn't matter what culture or race, men were all the same, weren't they? So many of them thought from the dick instead of the brain. Well, it was going to cost this one dearly, the Deputy Director (Operations) concluded.

Ryan saw and heard the PDB, the President's Daily Brief, every day. It covered intelligence information developed by CIA, was prepared late every night and printed early every morning, and there were less than a hundred copies, almost all of which were shredded and burned later in the day of delivery. A few copies, maybe three or four, were kept as archives, in case the electronic files somehow got corrupted, but even President Ryan didn't know where the secure-storage site was. He hoped it was carefully guarded, preferably by Marines.

The PDB didn't contain everything, of course. Some things were so secret that even the President couldn't be trusted. That was something Ryan accepted with remarkable equanimity. Sources' names had to remain secret, even from him, and methods were often so narrowly technical that he'd have trouble understanding the technology used anyway. But even some of the "take," the information obtained by the

CIA through nameless sources and overly intricate methods, was occasionally hidden from the Chief Executive, because some information *had* to come from a certain limited number of sources. The intelligence business was one in which the slightest mistake could end the life of a priceless asset, and while such things had happened, nobody had ever felt good about it—though to some politicians, it had been a matter of infuriating indifference. A good field spook viewed his agents as his own children, whose lives were to be protected against all hazards. Such a point of view was necessary. If you didn't care that much, then people died—and with their lost lives went lost information, which was the whole point of having a clandestine service in the first place.

"Okay, Ben," Ryan said, leaning back in his chair and flipping through the PDB pages. "What's interesting?"

"Mary Pat has something happening in China. Not sure what it is, though. She's keeping these cards pretty close. The rest of today's document you can get on CNN."

Which was, depressingly, not infrequently the case. On the other hand, the world was fairly sedate, and penetrating information wasn't all that necessary . . . or apparently so, Ryan corrected himself. You could never tell. He'd learned that one at Langley, too.

"Maybe I'll call her about it," POTUS said, flipping the page. "Whoa!"

"The Russian oil and gold?"

"Are these numbers for real?"

"It appears so. They track with what TRADER'S been feeding us from his sources, step for step."

"Ummhmm," Ryan breathed, looking over the resulting forecasts for the Russian economy. Then he frowned with some disappointment. "George's people did a better evaluation of results."

"Think so? CIA's economics troops have a pretty decent track record."

"George lives in that business. That's better than being an academic observer of events, Ben. Academia is fine, but the real world is the *real* world, remember."

Goodley nodded. "Duly noted, sir."

"Throughout the '80s, CIA overestimated the Soviet economy. Know why?"

"No, I don't. What went wrong?"

Jack smiled wryly. "It wasn't what was wrong. It was what was *right*. We had an agent back then who fed us the same information the Soviet Politburo got. It just never occurred to us that the system was lying to itself. The Politburo based its decisions on a chimera. Their numbers were almost never right because the underlings were

covering their own asses. Oops."

"Same thing in China, you suppose?" Goodley asked. "They're the last really Marxist country, after all."

"Good question. Call Langley and ask. You'll get an answer from the same sort of bureaucrat the Chinese have in Beijing, but to the best of my knowledge we don't have a penetration agent in Beijing who can give us the numbers we want." Ryan paused and looked at the fireplace opposite his desk. He'd have to have the Secret Service put a real fire in it someday . . . "No, I expect the Chinese have better numbers. They can afford to. Their economy is working, after a fashion. They probably deceive themselves in other ways. But they *do* deceive themselves. It's a universal human characteristic, and Marxism doesn't ameliorate it very much." Even in America, with its free press and other safeguards, reality often slapped political figures in the face hard enough to loosen some teeth. Everywhere, people had theoretical models based on ideology rather than facts, and those people usually found their way into academia or politics, because real-world professions punished that sort of dreamer more than politics ever did.

"Morning, Jack," a voice said from the corridor door.

"Hey, Robby." POTUS pointed to the coffee tray. Vice President Jackson got himself a cup, but passed on the croissants. His waistline looked a little tight. Well, Robby had never looked like a marathoner. So many fighter pilots tended to have thick waists. Maybe it was good for fighting g-forces, Jack speculated.

"Read the PDB this morning. Jack, this Russian oil and gold thing. Is it really that big?"

"George says it's even bigger. You ever sit down with him to learn economics?"

"End of the week, we're going to play a round at Burning Tree, and I'm reading Milton Friedman and two other books to bone up for it. You know, George comes across as pretty smart."

"Smart enough to make a ton of money on The Street—and I mean if you put his money in hundred-dollar bills and weigh them, it is a fucking ton of money."

"Must be nice," breathed a man who'd never made more than $130,000 in a year before taking on his current job.

"Has its moments, but the coffee here's still pretty good."

"It was better on *Big John*, once upon a time."

"Where?"

"*John F. Kennedy,* back when I was an O-3, and doing fun work, like driving Tomcats off the boat."

"Robby, hate to tell you, my friend, but you're not twenty-six anymore."

"Jack, you have such a way of brightening up my days for me. I've walked past death's door before, but it's safer and a hell of a lot more fun to do it with a fighter plane strapped to your back."

"What's your day look like?"

"Believe it or not, I have to drive down to the Hill and preside at the Senate for a few hours, just to show I know what the Constitution says I'm supposed to do. Then a dinner speech in Baltimore about who makes the best brassieres," he added with a smile.

"What?" Jack asked, looking up from the PDB. The thing about Robby's sense of humor was that you never really knew when he was kidding.

"National meeting of artificial fiber manufacturers. They also make bulletproof vests, but bras get most of their fibers, or so my research staff tells me. They're trying to make a few jokes for the speech."

"Work on your delivery," the President advised the Vice President.

"You thought I was funny enough way back when," Jackson reminded his old friend.

"Rob, I thought *I* was funny enough way back when, but Arnie tells me I'm not sensitive enough."

"I know, no Polish jokes. Some Polacks learned to turn on their TVs last year, and there's six or seven who know how to read. That doesn't count the Polish gal who doesn't use a vibrator because it chips her teeth."

"Jesus, Robby!" Ryan almost spilled his coffee laughing. "We're not even allowed to *think* things like that anymore."

"Jack, I'm not a politician. I'm a fighter jock. I got the flight suit, the hackwatch, and the dick to go along with the job title, y'dig?" the Vice President asked with a grin. "And I am allowed to tell a joke once in a while."

"Fine, just remember this isn't the ready room on the *Kennedy*. The media lacks the sense of humor enjoyed by naval aviators."

"Yeah, unless they catch us in something. Then it's funnier'n hell," the retired Vice Admiral observed.

"Rob, you're finally catching on. Glad to see it." Ryan's last sight of the departing subordinate was the back of a nicely tailored suit, accompanied by a muttered vulgarity.

So, Mishka, any thoughts?" Provalov asked.

Reilly took a sip of his vodka. It was awfully smooth here. "Oleg, you just have to shake the tree and see what falls out. It could be damned near anything, but 'don't know' means 'don't know.' And at the moment, we don't know." Another sip. "Does it strike you that two former Spetsnaz guys are a lot of firepower to go after a pimp?"

The Russian nodded. "Yes, of course, I've thought of that, but he

was a very prosperous pimp, wasn't he, Mishka? He had a great deal of money, and very many contacts inside the criminal establishment. He had power of his own. Perhaps he'd had people killed as well. We never had his name come up in a serious way in any murder investigations, but that doesn't mean that Avseyenko was not a dangerous man in his own right, and therefore worthy of such high-level attention."

"Any luck with this Suvorov guy?"

Provalov shook his head. "No. We have a KGB file for him and a photograph, but even if that is for the right person, we haven't found him yet."

"Well, Oleg Gregoriyevich, it looks as though you have a real head-scratcher on your hands." Reilly lifted his hand to order another round.

"You are supposed to be the expert on organized crime," the Russian lieutenant reminded his FBI guest.

"That's true, Oleg, but I ain't no gypsy fortune-teller, and I ain't the Oracle of Delphi either. You don't know who the real target was yet, and until you learn that, you don't know jack shit. Problem is, to find out who the target was, you have to find somebody who knows something about the crime. The two things are wrapped up together, bro. Get one, get both. Get neither, get nothing." The drinks arrived. Reilly paid and took another hit.

"My captain is not pleased."

The FBI agent nodded. "Yeah, bosses are like that in the Bureau, too, but he's supposed to know what the problems are, right? If he does, he knows he has to give you the time and the resources to play it out. How many men you have on it now?"

"Six here, and three more in St. Petersburg."

"May want to get some more, bro." In the FBI's New York OC office, a case like this could have as many as twenty agents working it, half of them on a full-time basis. But the Moscow Militia was stretched notoriously thin. For as much crime as there was now in Moscow, the local cops were still sucking hind tit when it came to government support. But it could have been worse. Unlike much of Russian society, the militiamen were getting paid.

You tire me out," Nomuri protested.

"There is always Minister Fang," Ming replied with a playful look.

"Ah!" was the enraged reply. "You compare me with an old man?"

"Well, both of you are men, but better a sausage than a string bean," she answered, grasping the former in her soft left hand.

"Patience, girl, allow me to recover from the first race." With that he lifted her body over his and let it down. *She must really like me,*

Nomuri reflected. *Three nights in a row. I suppose Fang isn't the man he thinks he is. Well, can't win 'em all, Charlie.* Plus the advantage of being forty years younger. There was probably something to that, the CIA officer admitted to himself.

"But you run so fast!" Ming protested, rubbing her body on his.

"There is something I want you to do."

A very playful smile. "What might that be?" she asked while her hand wandered a little.

"Not that!"

"Oh . . ." The disappointment in her voice was noteworthy.

"Something for work," Nomuri explained on. Just as well she couldn't feel the shaking inside his body, which, remarkably enough, didn't show.

"For work? I can't bring you into the office for this!" she said with a laugh, followed by a warm, affectionate kiss.

"Yes, something to upload onto your computer." Nomuri reached into the night-table drawer and pulled out a CD-ROM. "Here, you just load this into your machine, click INSTALL, and then dispose of it when you're done."

"And what will it do?" she asked.

"Do you care?"

"Well . . ." Hesitation. She didn't understand. "I must care."

"It will allow me to look at your computer from time to time."

"But why?"

"Because of Nippon Electric—we make your computer, don't you see?" He allowed his body to relax. "It is useful for my company to know how economic decisions are made in the People's Republic," Nomuri explained, with a wellrehearsed lie. "This will allow us to understand that process a little better, so that we can do business more effectively. And the better I do for them, the more they will pay me—and the more I can spend on my darling Ming."

"I see," she thought, wrongly.

He bent down to kiss a particularly nice spot. Her body shuddered in just the right way. Good, she wasn't resisting the idea, or at least wasn't letting it get in the way of this activity, which was good for Nomuri in more than one way. The intelligence officer wondered if someday his conscience would attack him for using this girl in such a way. But business, he told himself, was business.

"No one will know?"

"No, that is not possible."

"And it will not get me into trouble?"

With that question he rolled over, finding himself on top. He held her face in both hands. "Would I ever do something to get Ming-chan in trouble? Never!" he announced, with a deep and passionate kiss.

Afterward there was no talk about the CD-ROM, which she tucked into her purse before leaving. It was a nicelooking purse, a knockoff of something Italian that you could buy on the street here, rather like the genuine ones in New York that "fell off the back of the truck," as the euphemism went.

Every time they parted, it was a little hard. She didn't want to leave, and truly he didn't want her to depart, but it was necessary. For them to share an apartment would be commented upon. Even in her dreams, Ming couldn't think of that, actually sleeping at the apartment of a foreigner, because she *did* have a security clearance, and she *had* been given her security brief by a bored MSS officer, along with all the other senior secretaries, and she *hadn't* reported this contact to her superiors or the office security chief as she ought to have done—why? Partly because she'd forgotten the rules, because she'd never broken them or known someone who had done so, and partly because like many people she drew a line between her private life and her professional one. That the two were not allowed to be separate in her case was something that the MSS briefing had covered, but in so clumsy a way as to have been disregarded even upon its delivery. And so here she was, not even knowing where and what *here* was. With luck, she'd never have to find out, Nomuri thought, watching her turn the corner and disappear from view. Luck would help. What the MSS interrogators did to young women in the Beijing version of the Lubyanka didn't really bear much contemplation, certainly not when one had just made love to her twice in two hours.

"Good luck, honey," Nomuri whispered, as he closed the door and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

CHAPTER 14

(dot)com

It was a sleepless night for Nomuri. Would she do it? Would she do what she was told? Would she tell a security officer about it, and then about him? Might she be caught with the CD-ROM going into work and questioned about it? If so, a casual inspection would show it to be a music CD, Bill Conti's musical score for *Rocky*—a poorly marked knockoff of an American intellectual property that was quite common in the PRC. But a more careful examination would have revealed that the first—outermost—data line on the metallic surface told the computer CD-ROM reader to skip to a certain place where the content was not music, but binary code, and very efficient binary code at that.

The CD-ROM didn't contain a virus per se, because a virus circulates mainly across computer networks, entering a computer surreptitiously the way a disease organism enters a living host (hence the term virus). But this one came in the front door, and on being read by the CD-ROM reader, a single prompt came up on the screen, and Ming, after a quick look-around in her office, moved her mouse to put the pointer on the prompt, clicked the INSTALL command, and everything immediately disappeared. The program thus implanted searched her hard drive at nearly the speed of light, categorizing every file and setting up its own index, then compressing it into a small file that hid in plain sight, as it were, identified by any disk-sorting program with a wholly innocent name that referred to a function carried out by another program entirely. Thus only a very careful and directed search by a skilled computer operator could even detect that something was even there. Exactly what the program did could only be determined by a one-by-zero reading of the program itself, something difficult to accomplish at best. It would be like trying to find what was wrong with a single leaf on a single tree in a vast forest where all the trees and all the leaves looked pretty much alike, except that this one leaf was smaller and humbler than most. CIA and NSA could no longer attract the best programmers in America. There was just too much money in the consumer electronics industry for government to compete effectively in that marketplace. But you could still hire them, and the work that came out was just as good. And if you paid them

enough—strangely, you could pay lots more to a contractor than to an employee—they wouldn't talk to anyone about it. And besides, they never really knew what it was all about anyway, did they?

In this case, there was an additional level of complexity that went back over sixty years. When the Germans had overrun the Netherlands in 1940, they'd created a strange situation. In Holland the Germans had found both the most cooperative of their conquered nations and the most fiercely resistant. More Dutchmen per capita had joined the Germans than any other nationality—enough to form their own SS division, SS Nordland. At the same time, the Dutch resistance became the most effective in Europe, and one of their number was a brilliant mathematician/engineer working for the national telephone company. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the telephone had reached a developmental roadblock. When you lifted a phone, you were immediately connected with an operator to whom you gave the destination you were trying to call, and she then physically moved a plug into the proper hole. This system had been workable when only a few telephones were in use, but the appliance had rapidly proved too useful for limited applications. The solution to the problem, remarkably enough, had come from a mortician in the American South. Vexed by the fact that the local operator in his town referred the bereaved to a competing undertaker, he had invented the stepping switch, which enabled people to reach their own phone destinations merely by turning a rotary dial. That system served the world well, but also required the development of a whole body of new mathematical knowledge called "complexity theory," which was systematized by the American company AT&T in the 1930s.

Ten years later, merely by adding additional digits to be dialed, the Dutch engineer in the resistance had applied complexity theory to covert operations by creating theoretical pathways through the switching gear, thus enabling resistance fighters to call others without knowing whom they called, or even the actual telephone numbers they were calling.

This bit of electronic skullduggery had first been noticed by an officer for the British Special Operations Executive, the SOE, and, finding it very clever indeed, he'd discussed it over a beer with an American colleague in a London pub. The American OSS officer, like most of the men Wild Bill Donovan had chosen, was an attorney by profession, and in his case, a very thorough one, who wrote everything down and forwarded it up the line. The report on the Dutch engineer had made its way to the office of Colonel William Friedman, then America's foremost code-breaker. Though not himself a hardware expert, Friedman had known something useful when he saw it, and he knew there would be an after-the-war, during which his

agency—later reborn as the National Security Agency-would still be busy cracking other countries' codes and ciphers and producing codes and ciphers itself. The ability to develop covert communications links through a relatively simple mathematical trick had seemed a gift from God's own hand.

In the 1940s and '50s, NSA *had* been able to hire American's finest mathematicians, and one of the tasks assigned them had been to work with AT&T to create a universal telephone operating system that could be used covertly by American intelligence officers. Back then, AT&T was the only real rival NSA had had in the hiring of skilled mathematicians, and beyond that, AT&T had always been a prime contractor for just about every executive agency of the government. By 1955, it was done, and for a surprisingly modest fee AT&T provided the entire world with a model for telephone systems that most of the world adopted—the modest cost was explained by the desire of AT&T to make its systems compatible with every other country's to ease international communications. With the 1970s had come push-button phones, which directed calls electronically by frequency-controlled codes even easier for electronic systems to use, and infinitely easier to maintain than the former electro-mechanical stepping switches that had made the mortician hugely rich. They also proved even easier for AT&T to rig for NSA. The operating systems first given the world's telephone companies by AT&T's Parsippany, New Jersey, research laboratory had been upgraded yearly at least, giving further improvements to the efficiency of the world's phone systems—so much so that scarcely any telephone system in the world didn't use it. And tucked into that operating system were six lines of binary code whose operational concept traced back to the Nazi occupation of Holland.

Ming finished the installation and ejected the disk, discarding it into her waste can. The easy way to dispose of secret material was to have your adversary do it, through the front door, not the back one.

Nothing really happened for some hours, while Ming did her usual office tasks and Nomuri visited three commercial businesses to sell his high-powered desktop computers. All that changed at 7:45 P.M.

By this time, Ming was at her own home. Nomuri would get a night off; Ming had to do some things with her roommate to avoid too much suspicion—watching local television, chatting with her friend, and thinking about her lover, while the whole reason for the wispy smiles on her face played out entirely outside her consciousness. Strangely, it never occurred to her that her roomie had it all figured out in an instant, and was merely polite enough not to broach the subject.

Her NEC desktop computer had long since gone into auto-sleep mode, leaving the monitor screen dark and blank, and the indicator

light in the lower right position of the plastic frame amber instead of the green that went with real activity. The software she'd installed earlier in the day had been custom-designed for the NEC machines, which like all such machines had proprietary source-code unique to the brand. The source-code, however, was known to the National Security Agency.

Immediately upon installation, the Ghost program—as it had been christened at Fort Meade, Maryland—had buried itself in a special niche in the NEC's operating system, the newest version of Microsoft Windows. The niche had been created by a Microsoft employee whose favorite uncle had died over North Vietnam while flying an F-105 fighterbomber, and who did his patriotic work entirely without the knowledge of his parent company. It also dovetailed exactly with the NEC code, with the effect of making it virtually invisible even to a line-by-line inspection of all the code within the machine by an expert software engineer.

The Ghost had gone immediately to work, creating a directory that sorted the documents on Ming's computer first by date of creation/modification, and then by file type. Some files, like the operating system, it ignored. It similarly ignored the NEC-created transcription program that converted Roman characters, actually the English phonemes of the spoken Mandarin language, into the corresponding ideographs, but the Ghost did not ignore the graphic-text files that resulted from that program. Those it copied, along with telephone indexes and every other text file on the fivegigabyte hard drive. This entire procedure took the machine, guided by the Ghost, seventeen-point-one-four seconds, leaving a large file that sat by itself.

The machine did nothing for a second and a half, then new activity started. The NEC desktop machines had builtin high-speed modems. The Ghost activated these, but also turned off their internal mini-speakers so that no evidence of the transmission would be heard by anyone. (Leaving the speakers on was a primary security measure. The flashing lights that told of their activity were hidden because the modem was inside the box for this model.) The computer then dialed (this term had somehow survived the demise of rotary dials on telephones) a twelve-digit number rather than the usual seven used by the Beijing telephone system. The additional five digits sent the seeker-signal on a roundrobin adventure through the hardware of the central switching computer, and it came out in the place designated two weeks before by the engineers at Fort Meade, who, of course, never had an idea what this was all for, or where it would happen, or who might be involved. The number that rang—actually there wasn't a mechanical or electronic ringer of any sort—was the dedicated modem line that exited the wall by Chester Nomuri's desk and ended

in the back of his very high-end laptop—which was not an NEC, because here, as with most computer applications, the best was still American.

Nomuri was also watching TV at the moment, though in his case it was the CNN international news, so that he could know what was going on at home. After that he'd switch to a Japanese satellite channel, because it was part of his cover. A samurai show he liked was on tonight, in theme and simplicity rather like the Westerns that had polluted American TV in the 1950s. Though an educated man and a professional intelligence officer, Nomuri liked mindless entertainment as much as anyone else. The *beep* made him turn his head. Though his computer had software similar to that running in Ming's office, he'd allowed the aural prompt to tell him that something was coming in, and a three-key code lit up his screen to show exactly what it was and where it was coming from.

Yes! the CIA officer exulted, his right fist slamming into his open left hand hard enough to sting. Yes. He had his agent in fucking place, and here was the take from Operation SORGE. A bar at the top of the screen showed that the data was coming it at a rate of 57,000 bits per second. That was pretty fast. Now, just hope that the local commie phone system didn't develop a bad connection somewhere between Ming's office and the switching center, and from the switching center to his flat, Chester thought. Shouldn't be much of a problem. The outbound leg from Ming's office would be first-rate, tasked as it was to the service of the Party nobility. And from the switching center to his place would be okay, because he'd gotten numerous messages that way, most of them from NEC in Tokyo to congratulate him on exceeding his sales quota already.

Yeah, well, Chet, you are pretty good at making a sale, aren't you? he asked himself on the way to the kitchen. He figured he owed himself a drink for this bit of performance. On returning, he saw that the download wasn't finished yet.

Damn. How much shit is she sending me? Then he realized that the text files he was getting were actually graphics files, because Ming's computer didn't store ideographs as letters, but rather as the pictures that they actually were. That made the files memory-intensive. Exactly how memory-intensive they were, he saw forty minutes later when the download ended.

At the far end of the electronic chain, the Ghost program appeared to shut itself down, but in fact it slept rather as a dog did, one ear always cocked up, and always aware of the time of day. On finishing the transmission, the Ghost made a notation on its inside index of the files. It had sent everything up until this day. From now on, it would only send new ones—which would make for much shorter and faster

transmissions—but only in the evening, and only after ninety-five minutes of total inactivity on the computer, and only when it was outwardly in auto-sleep mode. Tradecraft and caution had been programmed in.

"Fuck," Nomuri breathed on seeing the size of the download. In pictures this could be the porno shots of damned near every hooker in Hong Kong. But his job was only half done. He lit up a program of his own and selected the "Preferences" folder that controlled it. Already checked was the box for autoencryption. Virtually everything on his computer was encrypted anyway, which was easily explainable as trade and business secrets—Japanese companies are renowned for the secrecy of their operations—but with some files more encrypted than others. The ones that arrived from the Ghost got the most robust scrambling, from a mathematically derived transcription system, fully 512 bits in the key, plus an additional random element which Nomuri could not duplicate. That was in addition to his numeric password, 51240, the street number of his first "score" in East LA. Then it was time to transmit his take.

This program was a close cousin to the Ghost he'd given Ming. But this one dialed the local Internet Service Provider, or ISP, and sent off a lengthy e-mail to a destination called patsbakery@brownienet.com. The "brownienet" was putatively a network established for bakeries and bakers, professional and amateur, who liked to swap recipes, often posting photos of their creations for people to download, which explained the occasional large file transferred. Photographs are notoriously rapacious in their demands for bytes and disk space.

In fact, Mary Patricia Foley had posted her own highly satisfactory recipe for French apple pie, along with a photo her elder son had taken with his Apple electronic camera. Doing so hadn't been so much a case of establishing a good cover as womanly pride in her own abilities as a cook, after spending an hour one night looking over the recipes others had put on this bulletin board. She'd tried one from a woman in Michigan a few weeks previously and found it okay, but not great. In coming weeks she wanted to try some of the bread recipes, which did look promising.

It was morning when Nomuri uploaded his e-mail to Pat's Bakery, an entirely real and legitimate business three blocks from the statehouse in Madison, Wisconsin, as a matter of fact, owned by a former CIA officer in the Science and Technology Directorate, now retired and a grandmother who was, however, too young for knitting. She'd created this Internet domain, paying the nominal fee and then forgetting about it, just as she'd forgotten nearly everything she'd ever done at Langley.

"You've got mail," the computer said when MP switched on her

Internet mail service, which used the new Pony Express e-mail program. She keyed the download command and saw the originator was cgoodjadecastle.com. The username was from *Gunsmoke*. Marshal Dillon's crippled sidekick had been named Chester Good.

DOWNLOADING, the prompt-box on the screen said. It also gave an estimate for how long the download would take. 47 MINUTES . . . !

"Son of a bitch," the DDO breathed, and lifted her phone. She pressed a button, waiting a second for the right voice to answer. "Ed, better come see this . . ."

"Okay, honey, give me a minute."

The Director of Central Intelligence came in, holding his morning mug of coffee, to see his wife of twenty-three years leaning back, away from her computer screen. Rarely in that time had Mary Pat ever backed away from anything. It just wasn't her nature.

"From our Japanese friend?" Ed asked his wife.

"So it would seem," MP replied.

"How much stuff is this?"

"Looks like a lot. I suppose Chester is pretty good in the sack."

"Who trained him?"

"Whoever it was, we need to get his ass down to The Farm and pass all that knowledge along. For that matter," she added, with a changed voice and an upward look to catch her husband's eye, "maybe you could audit the course, honey-bunny."

"Is that a complaint?"

"There's always room for improvement—and, okay, yes, I need to drop fifteen pounds, too," she added, to cut the DCI off before he could reply in kind. He hated when she did that. But not now. Now his hand touched her face quite tenderly, as the prompt screen said another thirty-four minutes to complete the download.

"Who's the guy at Fort Meade who put the Ghost programs together?"

"They contracted a game place—a guy at a game company, I guess," Mrs. Foley corrected herself. "They paid him four hundred fifty big ones for the job." Which was more than the Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director (Operations) made together, what with the federal pay caps, which didn't allow any federal employee to make more than a member of Congress—and they feared raising their own salaries, lest they offend the voters.

"Call me when you have it downloaded, baby."

"Who's the best guy we have for China?"

"Joshua Sears, Ph.D., from U-Cal Berkley, runs the China desk in the DI. But the guy at NSA is better for linguistic nuances, they say. His name's Victor Wang," the DCI said.

"Can we trust him?" MP asked. Distrust of ethnic Chinese in the

American national-security apparatus had reached a considerable level.

"Shit, I don't know. You know, we have to trust somebody, and Wang's been on the box twice a year for the last eight years. The ChiComms can't compromise every Chinese-American we have, you know. This Wang guy's third-generation American, was an officer in the Air Force—ELINT guy, evidently worked out of Wright-Patterson—and just made super-grade at NSA. Tom Porter says he's very good."

"Okay, well, let me see what all this is, then we'll have Sears check it out, and then, maybe, if we have to, we'll talk to this Wang guy. Remember, Eddie, at the end of this is an officer named Nomuri and a foreign national who has two eyes—"

Her husband cut her off with a wave. "And two ears. Yeah, baby, I know. We've been there. We've done that. And we both have the T-shirts to prove it." And he was about as likely to forget that as his wife was. Keeping your agents alive was as important to an intelligence agency as capital preservation was to an investor.

Mary Pat ignored her computer for twenty minutes, and instead went over routine message traffic hand-carried up from MERCURY down in the basement of the Old Headquarters Building. That was not especially easy, but necessary nonetheless, because CIA's Clandestine Service was running agents and operations all over the world—or trying to, Mary Pat corrected herself. It was her job to rebuild the Directorate of Operations, to restore the human-intelligence—HUMINT—capability largely destroyed in the late 1970s, and only slowly being rebuilt. That was no small task, even for an expert in the field. But Chester Nomuri was one of her pets. She'd spotted him at The Farm some years before and seen in him the talent, the gift, and the motivation. For him espionage was as much a vocation as the priesthood, something important to his country, and *fun,* as much fun as dropping a fifty-footer at Augusta was for Jack Nicklaus. Toss in his brains and street sense, and, Mary Pat had thought at the time, she had a winner there. Now Nomuri was evidently living up to her expectations. Big time. For the first time, CIA had an agent-in-place inside the ChiComm Politburo, and that was about as good as it got. Perhaps even the Russians didn't have one of those, though you could never be sure, and you could lose a lot of money betting against the Russian intelligence services.

"File's done," the computer's electronic voice finally said. That occasioned a turn in her swivel chair. The DDO first of all backed up her newly downloaded file to a second hard drive, and then to a "toaster" disk, so called because the disk went in and out of the drive box like a slice of bread. With that done, she typed in her decryption code, 51240. She had no idea why Nomuri had specified that number,

but knowing was not necessary, just so long as nobody else knew either. After typing in the five digits and hitting RETURN, the file icons changed. They were already aligned in list form, and MP selected the oldest. A page full of Chinese ideographs came up. With that bit of information, MP lifted her office phone and punched the button for her secretary. “Dr. Joshua Sears, DI, Chinese Section. Please ask him to come see me right away.”

That took six endless minutes. It took rather a lot to make Mary Patricia Kaminsky Foley shiver, but this was one such occasion. The image on her screen looked like something one might get from inking the feet of several drunken roosters, then making them loiter on a piece of white paper, but within the imagery were words and thoughts. Secret words and hidden thoughts. On her screen was the ability to read the minds of adversaries. It was the sort of thing that could win the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, but infinitely more important. It was the sort of thing that had won wars and altered history from the expected path determined by the most important of players, and in that was the value of espionage, the whole point of having an intelligence community, because the fates of nations really did ride on such things—

—and therefore, the fates of nations rode on Chet Nomuri’s schwantz and how well he used it, Mrs. Foley reflected. What a crazy fucking world it was. How the hell could an historian ever get that right? How did you communicate the importance of seducing some nameless secretary, an underling, a modern-day peasant who merely transcribed the thoughts of the important, but in being compromised made those thoughts available to others, and in doing so, altered the course of history as surely as turning the rudder changed the course of a mighty ship. For Mary Pat, Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency, it was a moment of fulfillment to place alongside the birth of her children. Her entire *raison d’être* lay in black-and-white ideographs on her computer monitor—and she couldn’t read the fucking things. She had the language skills to teach Russian literature at Moscow State University, but all she knew of Chinese was chop suey and moo goo gai pan.

“Mrs. Foley?” A head appeared at her door. “I’m Josh Sears.” He was fifty, tall, losing his hair, most of it gray. Brown eyes. He hit the cafeteria line downstairs a little too hard, the DDO thought.

“Please come in, Dr. Sears. I need you to translate some things for me.”

“Sure,” he replied, picking a seat and relaxing into it. He watched the DDO take some pages off her laser printer and hand them across.

“Okay, it says the date is last March twenty-first, and the place is Beijing—hmph, the Council of Ministers Building, eh? Minister Fang is

talking to Minister Zhang." Sears ran his eyes down the page. "Mrs. Foley, this is hot stuff. They're talking about the possibilities of Iran—no, the old UIR—taking over the entire Persian Gulf oil fields, and what effect it would have on China. Zhang appears to be optimistic, but guarded. Fang is skeptical . . . oh, this is an *aide-memoir,* isn't it? It's Fang's notes from a private conversation with Zhang."

"The names mean anything to you?"

"Both are Ministers Without Portfolio. They're both full Politburo members without direct ministerial duties. That means they're both trusted by the chairman, the PRC premier, Xu Kun Piao. They go back thirty years plus, well into the time of Mao and Chou. As you know, the Chinese are really into lengthy relationships. They develop—well, not friendships as we understand them, but associations. It's a comfort-level thing, really. Like at a card table. You know what the other guy's mannerisms and capabilities are, and that makes for a long, comfortable game. Maybe you won't win big, but you won't lose your shirt either."

"No, they don't gamble, do they?"

"This document demonstrates that. As we suspected, the PRC backed the Ayatollah Daryaei in his play, but they never allowed their support to be public. From skimming this, it appears that this Zhang guy is the one who ramrodded this—and the play the Japanese made. We've been trying to build a book on this Zhang guy—and Fang as well—without a whole lot of success. What do I need to know about this?" he asked, holding the page up.

"It's code word," MP replied. By federal statute, "top secret" was as high as it went, but in reality there were more secret things than that, called "special-access programs," which were designated by their controlling code words. "This one's called SORGE." She didn't have to say that he could not discuss this information with anyone, and that even dreaming in bed about it was forbidden. Nor did she have to say that in SORGE was Sears's path to a raise and much greater personal importance within the CIA's pantheon of bureaucrats.

"Okay." Sears nodded. "What can you tell me?"

"What we have here is a digest of conversations between Fang and Zhang, and probably other ministers as well. We've found a way to crash into their documents storage. We believe the documents are genuine," MP concluded. Sears would know that he was being misled on sources and methods, but that was to be expected. As a senior member of the DI—the Directorate of Intelligence—it was his job to evaluate information provided to him by various sources, in this case the DO. If he got bad information, his evaluation would be bad as well, but what Mrs. Foley had just told him was that he would not be held at fault for bad information. But he'd also question the

authenticity of the documents in an internal memo or two, just to cover his own ass, of course.

"Okay, ma'am. In that case, what we have here is pure nitroglycerine. We've suspected this, but here's confirmation. It means that President Ryan did the right thing when he granted diplomatic recognition to Taiwan. The PRC had it coming. They conspired to wage aggressive war, and since we got involved, you can say that they conspired against us. Twice, I bet. We'll see if another of these documents refers to the Japanese adventure. You'll recall that the Japanese industrialists implicated this Zhang guy by name. That's not a hundred percent, but if it's confirmed by this, then it's almost something you could take before a judge. Mrs. Foley, this is some source we have here."

"Evaluation?"

"It feels right," the analyst said, reading over the page again. "It sounds like conversation. I mean, it's unguarded, not official diplomatic-speak or even inside-minister-speak. So, it sounds like what it purports to be, the notes of a private, informal policy discussion between two senior colleagues."

"Any way to cross-check it?" MP asked next.

An immediate shake of the head. "No. We don't know much about either one of these guys. Zhang, well, we have the evaluation from Secretary Adler—you know, from the shuttle diplomacy after the Airbus shoot-down, which pretty well confirms what that Yamata guy told the Japanese police and our FBI guys about how the Chinese nudged them into the conflict with us, and what for. The PRC looks on eastern Siberia with covetous eyes," Sears reminded her, showing his knowledge of the PRC policies and objectives. "For Fang Gan, we have photos of him sipping mao-tai at receptions in his Mao jacket and smiling benignly, like they all do. We know he's tight with Xu, there are stories that he likes to play with the office help—but a lot of them do that—and that's about it."

It was good of Sears not to remind her that playing with the office help wasn't a character defect limited to China.

"So, what do we think about them?"

"Fang and Zhang? Well, both are Ministers Without Portfolio. So, they're utility infielders, maybe even assistant coaches. Premier Xu trusts their judgment. They get to sit in at the Politburo as full voting members. They get to hear everything and cast votes on everything. They influence policy not so much by making it as shaping it. Every minister knows them. These two know all the others. They've both been around a long time. Both are well into their sixties or seventies, but people over there don't mellow with age like they do in America. Both will be ideologically sound, meaning they're both probably solid

communists. That implies a certain ruthlessness, and you can add to that their age. At seventy-five, death starts being a very real thing. You don't know how much time you have left, and these guys don't believe in an afterlife. So, whatever goals they have, they have to address pretty quick at that age, don't they?"

"Marxism doesn't mix well with humanity, does it?"

Sears shook his head. "Not hardly, and toss in a culture that places a much lower value on human life than ours does."

"Okay. Good brief. Here," she said, handing over ten printed pages. "I want a written evaluation after lunch. Whatever you might be working on now, SORGE is more important."

That meant a "seventh-floor tasking" to Dr. Sears. He'd be working directly for the Directors. Well, he had a private office already, and a computer that wasn't hooked into any telephone lines, even a local area network, as many of the CIA's 'puters were. Sears tucked the papers into a coat pocket and departed, leaving Mary Pat to look out her floorto-ceiling windows and contemplate her next move. Really it was Ed's call, but things like this were decided collegially, especially when the DCI was your husband. This time she'd wander over to see him.

The DCI's office is long and relatively narrow, with the director's office near the door, well away from the sitting area. Mary Pat took the easy chair across from the desk.

"How good is it?" Ed asked, knowing the reason for her visit.

"Calling this SORGE was unusually prescient for us. It's at least that good."

Since Richard Sorge dispatches from Tokyo to Moscow might have saved the Soviet Union in 1941, that got Ed Foley's eyes to widen some. "Who looked at it?"

"Sears. He seems pretty smart, by the way. I've never really talked to him before."

"Harry likes him," Ed noted, referring to Harry Hall, the current Deputy Director (Intelligence), who was in Europe at the moment. "Okay, so he says it looks pretty good, eh?"

A serious nod. "Oh, yeah, Eddie."

"Take it to see Jack?" They could not *not* take this to the President, could they?

"Tomorrow, maybe?"

"Works for me." Just about any government employee can find space in his or her day for a drive to the White House. "Eddie, how far can this one spread?"

"Good question. Jack, of course. *Maybe* the Vice President. I like the guy," the DCI said, "but usually the veep doesn't get into stuff like this. SecState, SecDef, both are maybes. Ben Goodley, again a maybe.

Mary, you know the problem with this."

It was the oldest and most frequent problem with really valuable high-level intelligence information. If you spread it too far, you ran the risk of compromising the information—which also meant getting the source killed—and that killed the goose laying the golden eggs. On the other hand, if you didn't make *some* use of the information, then you might as well not have the eggs anyway. Drawing the line was the most delicate operation in the field of intelligence, and you never knew where the right place was to draw it. You also had to worry about methods of spreading it around. If you sent it encrypted from one place to another, what if the bad guys had cracked your encryption system? NSA swore that its systems, especially TAPDANCE, could not be broken, but the Germans had thought ENIGMA crackproof, too.

Almost as dangerous was giving the information, even by hand, to a senior government official. The bastards talked too much. They lived by talking. They lived by leaking. They lived by showing people how important they were, and importance in D.C. meant knowing what other people didn't know. Information was the coin of the realm in this part of America. The good news here was that President Ryan understood about that. He'd been CIA, as high as Deputy Director, and so he knew about the value of security. The same was probably true of Vice President Jackson, former naval aviator. He'd probably seen lives lost because of bad intelligence. Scott Adler was a diplomat, and he probably knew as well. Tony Bretano, the well-regarded SecDef, worked closely with CIA, as all Secretaries of Defense had to do, and he could probably be trusted as well. Ben Goodley was the President's National Security Advisor, and thus couldn't easily be excluded. So, what did that total up to? Two in Beijing. At Langley, the DCI, DDCI, DDI, and DDO, plus Sears from inside the DI. That made seven. Then the President, Vice President, SecState, SecDef, and Ben Goodley. That made twelve. And twelve was plenty for the moment, especially in a town where the saying went, *If two people know it, it's not a secret.* But the entire reason for having CIA was this sort of information.

"Pick a name for the source," Foley instructed his wife.

"SONGBIRD will do for now." It was a sentimental thing for MP, naming agents for birds. It dated back to CARDINAL.

"Fair enough. Let me see the translations you get, okay?"

"You bet, honey-bunny." Mary Pat leaned over her husband's desk to deliver a kiss, before heading back to her own office.

On arriving there, MP checked her computer for the SORGE file. She'd have to change that, MP realized. Even the name of this special-access compartment would be classified top secret or higher. Then she did a page count, making a note on a paper pad next to the screen.

ALL 1,349 PAGES OF RECIPES RECEIVED, she wrote as a reply to cgood@jadecastle.com. WILL LOOK THE RECIPES OVER. THANKS A BUNCH. MARY. She hit the RETURN key, and off the letter went, through the electronic maze called the Internet. *One thousand, three hundred and forty-nine pages*, the DDO thought. It would keep the analysts busy for quite a while. Inside the Old Headquarters Building, analysts would see bits and pieces of SORGE material, covered under other transitory code names randomly chosen by a computer in the basement, but only Sears would know the whole story—and, in fact, he didn't even know that, did he? What he knew might—probably would—be enough to get this Ming woman killed, once the MSS realized who'd had access to the information. They could do some things in Washington to protect her, but not much.

Nomuri rose early in his Beijing apartment, and the second thing he did was to log on to check his e-mail. There it was, number seven in the list, one from patsbakery@brownienet.com. He selected the decryption system and typed in the key . . . so, the pages had all been received. That was good. Nomuri dragged the message he'd dispatched to the "wipe-info" bin, where Norton Utilities not only deleted the file, but also five times electronically scrubbed the disk segments where they'd briefly resided, so that the files could never be recovered by any attempt, no matter how skilled. Next he eliminated the record of having sent any e-mail to brownienet. Now there was no record whatever of his having done anything, unless his telephone line was tapped, which he didn't really suspect. And even then the data was scrambled, fully encrypted, and thus not recoverable. No, the only dangers in the operation now attached to Ming. His part of it, being the spymaster, was protected by the method in which her desktop computer called him, and from now on those messages would be sent out to brownienet automatically, and erased the same way, in a matter of seconds. It would take a very clever counterintelligence operation to hurt Nomuri now.

CHAPTER 15

Exploitation

What's this mean, Ben?" Ryan asked, seeing a change in his morning schedule.

"Ed and Mary Pat want to talk something over with you. They didn't say what it was," Goodley replied. "The Vice President can be here, too, and me, but that's it, they requested."

"Some new kind of toilet paper in the Kremlin, I suppose," POTUS said. It was a long-standing CIA joke from Ryan's time in the Bad Old Days of the Cold War. He stirred his coffee and leaned back in his comfortable chair. "Okay, what else is happening in the world, Ben?"

So, this is mao-tai?" Cardinal DiMilo asked. He didn't add that he'd been given to understand that Baptists didn't drink alcoholic beverages. Odd, considering that Jesus' first public miracle had been to change water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. But Christianity had many faces. In any case, the mao-tai was vile, worse than the cheapest grappa. With advancing years, the Cardinal preferred gentler drinks. It was much easier on the stomach.

"I should not drink this," Yu admitted, "but it is part of my heritage."

"I know of no passage in Holy Scripture that prohibits this particular human weakness," the Catholic said. And besides, wine was part of the Catholic liturgy. He saw that his Chinese host barely sipped at his tiny cup. Probably better for his stomach, too, the Italian reasoned.

He'd have to get used to the food, too. A gourmet like many Italians, Renato Cardinal DiMilo found that the food in Beijing was not as good as he'd experienced in Rome's numerous Chinese restaurants. The problem, he thought, was the quality of the ingredients rather than the cook. In this case, the Reverand Yu's wife was away in Taiwan to see her sick mother, he'd said, apologizing on the Catholic's arrival. Monsignor Schepke had taken over the serving, rather like a young lieutenant-aide serving the needs of his general, Yu had thought, watching the drama play out with some amusement. The Catholics certainly had their bureaucratic ways. But this Renato fellow

was a decent sort, clearly an educated man, and a trained diplomat from whom Yu realized he might learn much.

"So, you cook for yourself. How did you learn?"

"Most Chinese men know how. We learn from our parents as children."

DiMilo smiled. "I, as well, but I have not cooked for myself in years. The older I get the less they allow me to do for myself, eh, Franz?"

"I have my duties also, Eminence," the German answered. He was drinking the mao-tai with a little more gusto. Must be nice to have a young stomach lining, both the older men thought.

"So, how do you find Beijing?" Yu asked.

"Truly fascinating. We Romans think that our city is ancient and redolent with history, but Chinese culture was old before the Romans set one stone upon another. And the art we saw yesterday . . ."

"The jade mountain," Schepke explained. "I spoke with the guide, but she didn't know about the artists involved, or the time required to carve it."

"The names of artisans and the time they needed—these were not matters of importance to the emperors of old. There was much beauty then, yes, but much cruelty as well."

"And today?" Renato asked.

"Today as well, as you know, Eminence," Yu confirmed with a long sigh. They spoke in English, and Yu's Oklahoma accent fascinated his visitors. "The government lacks the respect for human life, which you and I would prefer."

"Changing that will not be simple," Monsignor Schepke added. The problem wasn't limited to the communist PRC government. Cruelty had long been part of Chinese culture, to the point that someone had once said that China was too vast to be governed with kindness, an aphorism picked up with indecent haste by the left wings of the world, ignoring the explicit racism in such a statement. Perhaps the problem was that China had always been crowded, and in crowds came anger, and in anger came a callous disregard for others. Nor had religion helped. Confucius, the closest thing China had developed to a great religious leader, preached conformity as a person's best action. While the Judeo-Christian tradition talked of transcendent values of right and wrong, and the human rights that devolved from them, China saw authority as Society, not God. For that reason, Cardinal DiMilo thought, communism had taken root here. Both societal models were alike in their absence of an absolute rule of right and wrong. And that was dangerous. In relativism lay man's downfall, because, ultimately, if there were no absolute values, what difference was there between a man and a dog? And if there were no such difference, where was man's fundamental dignity? Even a thinking atheist could mark

religion's greatest gift to human society: human dignity, the value placed on a single human life, the simple idea that man was more than an animal. *That* was the foundation of all human progress, because without it, human life was doomed to Thomas Hobbes's model, "nasty, brutish, and short."

Christianity—and Judaism, and Islam, which were also religions of The Book—required merely that man believe in that which was self-evident: There *was* order in the universe, and that order came from a source, and that source was called God. Christianity didn't even require that a man believe in that idea—not anymore, anyway—just that he accept the sense of it, and the result of it, which was human dignity and human progress. Was that so hard?

It was for some. Marxism, in condemning religion as "the opiate of the people," merely prescribed another, less effective drug—"the radiant future," the Russians had called it, but it was a future they'd never been able to deliver. In China, the Marxists had shown the good sense to adopt some of the forms of capitalism to save their country's economy, but not to adopt the principle of human freedom that usually came along with it. That had worked to this point, DiMilo thought, only because Chinese culture had a preexisting model of conformity and acceptance of authority from above. But how long would that last? And how long could China prosper without some idea of the difference between what was *right* and what was *wrong?* Without that information, China and the Chinese were doomed to perdition. Someone had to bring the Good News of Jesus to the Chinese, because with that came not only eternal salvation, but temporal happiness as well. Such a fine bargain, and yet there were those too stupid and too blind to accept it. Mao had been one. He'd rejected all forms of religion, even Confucius and the Lord Buddha. But when he'd lain dying in his bed, what had Chairman Mao thought? To what Radiant Future had he looked forward then? What did a communist think on his deathbed? The answer to that question was something none of the three clergymen wanted to know, or to face.

"I was disappointed to see the small number of Catholics here—not counting foreigners and diplomats, of course. How bad is the persecution?"

Yu shrugged. "It depends on where you are, and the political climate, and the personality of the local party leadership. Sometimes they leave us alone—especially when foreigners are here, with their TV cameras. Sometimes they can become very strict, and sometimes they can harass us directly. I have been questioned many times, and been subjected to political counseling." He looked up and smiled. "It's like having a dog bark at you, Eminence. You need not answer back.

Of course, you will be spared any of that," the Baptist pointed out, noting DiMilo's diplomatic status, and his resulting personal inviolability.

The cardinal caught that reference, somewhat to his discomfort. He didn't see his life as any more valuable than anyone else's. Nor did he wish his faith to appear less sincere than this Chinese Protestant's, who'd been educated at some pretentious pseudo-university in the American prairie, whereas he had acquired his knowledge in some of the most ancient and honored institutions of higher learning on the planet, whose antecedents went back to the Roman empire, and beyond that, to the chambers of Aristotle himself. If there was one vanity Renato Cardinal DiMilo possessed, it was in his education. He'd been superbly educated, and he knew it. He could discuss Plato's *Republic* in Attic Greek, or the law cases of Marcus Tullius Cicero in Imperial Latin. He could debate a committed Marxist on the attributes of that political philosophy in the same language the German Marx himself had spoken—and win, because Marx had left a lot of unfilled holes in the walls of his political theories. He'd forgotten more about human nature than some psychologists knew. He was in the Vatican's diplomatic service because he could read minds—better than that, he could read the minds of politicians and diplomats highly skilled in concealing their thoughts. He could have been a gambler of talent and riches with these skills, but instead he applied them for the Greater Glory of God.

His only failing was that, like all men, he could not predict the future, and thus could not see the world war that this meeting would ultimately bring about.

"So, does the government harass you?" the Cardinal asked his host.

A shrug. "Occasionally. I propose to hold a prayer service in public to test their willingness to interfere with my human rights. There is some danger involved, of course."

It was a challenge skillfully delivered, and the elderly Catholic cleric rose to it: "Keep Franz and me informed, if you would."

SONGBIRD?" Ryan asked. "What can you tell me about him?"

"Do you really want to know, Jack?" Ed Foley asked, somewhat pointedly.

"You telling me I ought not to know?" Ryan responded. Then he realized that Robby Jackson and Ben Goodley were here as well, and he could know things that they could not. Even at this level, there were rules of classification. The President nodded. "Okay, we'll let that one go for now."

"The overall operation is called SORGE. That'll change periodically," Mary Pat told the assembled audience. Unusually, the

Secret Service had been hustled out of the Oval Office for this briefing—which told the USSS a lot more than CIA would have liked—and also a special jamming system had been switched on. It would interfere with any electronic device in the room. You could see that from the TV set to the left of the President's desk, tuned to CNN. The screen was now full of snow, but with the sound turned all the way down, there was no annoying noise to disturb the meeting. The possibility of a bug in this most secure of rooms was slight, but so great was the value of SORGE that this card was being played as well. The briefing folders had already been passed out. Robby looked up from his.

"Notes from the Chinese Politburo? Lordy," Vice President Jackson breathed. "Okay, no sources and methods. That's cool with me, guys. Now, how reliable is it?"

"For the moment, reliability is graded 'B+' " Mary Pat answered. "We expect to upgrade that later on. The problem is that we don't grade 'A' or higher without outside confirmation, and this stuff is so deep inside that we have no other asset to verify what we have here."

"Oops," Jackson observed. "So it could all be a false flag. Pretty one, I admit, but false even so."

"Perhaps, but unlikely. There's stuff here that is awfully sensitive to let out voluntarily, even for a major sting operation."

"So I see," Ryan partially agreed. "But I remember what Jim Greer used to say: Ain't nothing too crazy to be true. Our fundamental problem with these guys is that their culture is so different in so many ways that they might as well be Klingons."

"Well, they don't display much love for us in this," Ben Goodley observed, flipping halfway through the briefing folder. "Jesus, this is interesting material. We going to show it to Scott Adler?"

"That's our recommendation," the DCI agreed. "Adler is pretty good at figuring people out, and his take on some of this—especially page five—will be very interesting. Tony Bretano, too."

"Okay, that's EAGLE and THUNDER. Who else?" Ryan asked.

"That's all for now," Ed Foley said, with a nod from his wife. "Mr. Pres—"

Ryan's eyes flared a little. "My name is . . ."

The DCI held up his hand. "Okay. *Jack*, let's keep this one real close for a while. We'll figure a way to launder the information so that some others can know what we've learned. But *not* how. Not ever that. SONGBIRD'S too precious an asset to lose."

"This is potentially right up there with CARDINAL, isn't it?"

"Maybe even better, Jack," Mary Pat said. "This is like having a bug in the boardroom, and we've streamlined our methods on this one. We're being very, very careful with this source."

"Okay, what about analysts?" Ben Goodley asked. "Our best guy with the PRC is Professor Weaver up at Brown University. You know him, Ed."

Foley nodded. "Yeah, I know him, but let's hold off for a while. We have a pretty good guy in-house. Let me see what he can develop for us before we start farming things out. By the way, we're looking at something like a total of fifteen hundred printed pages from this source, plus daily information from now on."

Ryan looked up at that one. *Daily* information. How the hell had they arranged that? *Back to business*, he told himself. "Okay, for one thing, I want an evaluation of the Zhang Han San character," Ryan said. "I've seen this bastard's name before. He started two wars we got pulled into. What the hell is he all about?"

"We have a psychiatrist on staff to work on that," Mary Foley replied. *After,* she didn't say, *we scrub this information clean of source-related material.* "He does our profiling."

"Okay, yeah, I remember him." Ryan nodded agreement on this point. "Anything else?"

"Just the usual," Ed Foley said as he stood. "Don't leave these documents on your desk, okay?"

They all nodded agreement. They all had personal safes for that purpose, and every one was wired into the Secret Service command center, and was on round-the-clock TV surveillance. The White House was a good place to store documents, and besides, the secretaries were cleared higher than God. Mary Pat left the office with a special spring in her step. Ryan waved for his Vice President to stay as the rest walked toward the West Entrance.

"What do you think?" SWORDSMAN asked TOMCAT.

"This looks pretty damned hot, Jack. Jesus, boy, how the *hell* do they get stuff like this?"

"If they ever get around to telling me, I can't tell you, Rob, and I'm not sure I want to know. It isn't always pretty."

The retired fighter pilot agreed. "I believe it. Not quite the same as catapulting off the boat and shooting the bastard in the lips, is it?"

"But just as important."

"Hey, Jack, I know. Battle of Midway, like. Joe Rochefort and his band of merry men at FRUPAC back in '42 saved our country a lot of hassles with our little yellow friends in WestPac when they told Nimitz what was coming."

"Yeah, Robby, well, looks like we have more of the same sort of friends. If there's operational stuff in here, I want your opinion of it."

"I can do that already. Their army and what passes for a navy are talking in the open about how they take us on, how to counter carriers and stuff like that. It's mostly pipe dreams and self-delusion, but my

question is, why the hell are they putting this in the open? Maybe to impress the unwashed of the world—reporters and the other idiots who don't know shit about war at sea—and maybe to impress their own people with how smart and how tough they are. Maybe to put more heat on the ROC government on Taiwan, but if they want to invade, they have something to do first, like building a real navy with real amphibious capability. But that would take ten years, and we'd probably notice all the big gray canoes in the water. They've got some submarines, and the Russians, of all people, are selling them hardware —just forked over a Sovremenny-class DDG, complete with Sunburn missiles, supposedly. Exactly what they want to do with them, I have no idea. It's not the way I'd build up a navy, but they didn't ask me for advice. What freaks me is, the Russians sold them the hardware, and they're selling some other stuff, too. Crazy," the Vice President concluded.

"Tell me why," POTUS commanded.

"Because once upon a time a guy named Genghis Khan rode all the way to the Baltic Sea—like, all the way across Russia. The Russkies have a good sense of history, Jack. They ain't forgot that. If I'm a Russian, what enemies do I have to worry about? NATO? The Poles? Romania? I don't think so. But off to my southeast is a great big country with a shitload of people, a nice large collection of weapons, and a long history of killing Russians. But I was just an operations guy, and sometimes I get a little paranoid about what my counterparts in other countries might be thinking." Robby didn't have to add that the Russians had invented paranoia once upon a time.

This is *madness!"* Bondarenko swore. "There are many ways to prove Lenin was right, but *this* is not the one I would choose!" Vladimir Il'ych Ulyanov had once said that the time would come when the capitalist countries would bid among themselves to sell to the Soviet Union the rope with which the Soviet Union would later hang them. He hadn't anticipated the death of the country he'd founded, and certainly not that the next Russia might be the one doing what he had predicted.

Golovko could not disagree with his guest. He'd made a similar argument, though with fewer decibels, in the office of President Grushavoy. "Our country needs the hard currency, Gennady Iosifovich."

"Indeed. And perhaps someday we will also need the oil fields and the gold mines of Siberia. What will we do when the Chinks take those away from us?" Bondarenko demanded.

"The Foreign Ministry discounts that possibility," Sergey Nikolay'ch replied.

"Fine. Will those foreign-service pansies take up arms if they are proven wrong, or will they wring their hands and say it isn't their fault? I am spread too thin for this. I cannot stop a Chinese attack, and so now we sell them the T-99 tank design . . ."

"It will take them five years to bring about series production, and by that time we will have the T-10 in production at Chelyabinsk, will we not?"

That the People's Liberation Army had four thousand of the Russian-designed T-80/90 tanks was not discussed. That had happened years earlier. But the Chinese had not used the Russian-designed 115-mm gun, opting instead for the 105-mm rifled gun sold to them by Israel Defense Industries, known to America as the M-68. They came complete with three million rounds of ammunition made to American specifications, down to the depleted uranium projectiles, probably made with uranium depleted by the same reactors that made plutonium for their nuclear devices. What was it about politicians? Bondarenko wondered. You could talk and talk and talk to them, but they *never listened!* It had to be a *Russian* phenomenon, the general thought, rather than a political one. Stalin had executed the intelligence officer who'd predicted—correctly, as it turned out—the German attack of June 1941 on the Soviet Union. And *that* one had come within sight of Moscow. Executed him, why? Because his prediction was less pleasing than that of Levrenti Beriya, who'd had the good sense to say what Stalin had wanted to hear. And Beriya had survived being completely wrong. So much for the rewards of patriotism.

"If we have the money for it, and if Chelyabinsk hasn't been retooled to make fucking washing machines!" Russia had cannibalized its defense infrastructure even more quickly than America had. Now there was talk of converting the MiG airplane plants to automobile production. Would this never stop? Bondarenko thought. He had a potentially hostile nation next door, and he was years away from rebuilding the Russian Army into the shape he wished. But to do that meant asking President Grushavoy for something that he knew he couldn't have. To build a proper army, he had to pay the soldiers a living wage, enough to attract the patriotic and adventurous boys who wanted to wear their country's uniform for a few years, and most particularly those who found that they enjoyed uniformed life enough to make a career of it, to become sergeants, the middle-level professional soldiers without whom an army simply could not function, the sinews that held the muscles to the bone. To make that happen, a good platoon sergeant had to make almost as much money as a skilled factory worker, which was only fair, since the demands of such a man were on the same intellectual level. The rewards of a

uniformed career could not be duplicated in a television plant. The comradeship, and the sheer joy of soldiering, was something to which a special sort of man responded. The Americans had such men, as did the British and the Germans, but these priceless professionals had been denied the Russian Army since the time of Lenin, the first of many Soviet leaders who'd sacrificed military efficiency in favor of the political purity the Soviet Union had insisted upon. Or something like that, Bondarenko thought. It all seemed so distant now, even to one who'd grown up within the misbegotten system.

"General, please remember that I am your friend in the government," Golovko reminded him. Which was just as well. The Defense Minister was—well, he spoke the right words, but he wasn't really able to think the right thoughts. He could repeat what others told him, and that was about it. In that sense, he was the perfect politician.

"Thank you, Sergey Nikolay'ch." The general inclined his head with the proper respect. "Does that mean that I can count upon some of these riches that Fate has dropped into our lap?"

"At the proper time I will make the proper recommendation to the president."

By that time, I will be retired, writing my memoirs, or whatever the hell a Russian general is supposed to do, Bondarenko told himself. *But at least I can try to get the necessary programs drafted for my successors, and perhaps help choose the right man to follow me into the operations directorate.* He didn't expect to go any further than he already had. He was chief of operations (which included training) for his army, and that was as fine a goal as any man could ask for his career.

"Thank you, Comrade Minister. I know your job is also difficult. So, is there anything I need to know about the Chinese?"

Minister Golovko wished he could tell this general that SVR didn't have a decent pipeline into the PRC anymore. Their man, a second-deputy minister, long in the employ of the KGB, had retired on grounds of ill health.

But he could not make the admission that the last Russian source inside the Forbidden City was no longer operational, and with him had gone all the insights they needed to evaluate the PRC's long-term plans and intentions. Well, there was still the Russian ambassador in Beijing, and he was no one's fool, but a diplomat saw mainly what the host government wanted him to see. The same was true of the military, naval, and air attaches, trained intelligence officers all, but also limited to what the Chinese military wished them to see, and even that had to be reciprocated every step of the way in Moscow, as though in some elegant international waltz. No, there was no substitute for a trained intelligence officer running agents who looked

inside the other government, so that he, Golovko, could know exactly what was going on and report on it to his president. It wasn't often that Golovko had to report that he did not know enough, but it had happened in this case, and he would not confess his shortcomings to this soldier, senior one or not.

"No, Gennady Iosifovich, I have nothing to indicate that the Chinese seek to threaten us."

"Comrade Minister, the discoveries in Siberia are too vast for them not to consider the advantage to be had from seizing them. In their place, I would draw up the necessary plans. They import oil, and these new fields would obviate that necessity, and make them rich in the foreign exchange they seek. And the gold, Comrade, speaks for itself, does it not?"

"Perhaps." Golovko nodded. "But their economy seems healthy at the moment, and wars are not begun by those already rich."

"Hitler was prosperous enough in 1941. That did not prevent him from driving his army to within sight of this building," the chief of operations for the Russian army pointed out. "If your neighbor has an apple tree, sometimes you will pick an apple even if your belly is full. Just for the taste, perhaps," Bondarenko suggested.

Golovko couldn't deny the logic of that. "Gennady Iosifovich, we are of a kind. We both look out for dangers even when they are not obvious. You would have made a fine intelligence officer."

"Thank you, Comrade Minister." The three-star toasted his host with his almost empty vodka glass. "Before I leave my office, it is my hope to lay before my successor a plan, the accomplishment of which will make our country invulnerable to attack from any country. I know I will not be able myself to make that happen, but I will be grateful for the ability to set a firm plan in place, if our political leadership can see the merit of our ideas." And that was the real problem, wasn't it? The Russian army might be able to deal with external enemies. It was the internal ones which formed the really intractable problem. You usually knew where your enemy stood, because you faced them. Where your friends stood was more difficult, because they were usually behind you.

"I will make sure you present the case yourself to the cabinet. But"—Golovko held up his hand—"you must wait for the right moment."

"I understand, and let us hope the Chinese allow us the time for that moment." Golovko tossed off the last of his drink and rose. "Thanks for letting me come in to bare my heart to you, Comrade Chairman."

* * *

So, where is he?" Provalov demanded.

"I do not know," Abramov replied tiredly. "We've identified one person who claims to know him, but our informant has no idea where he lives."

"Very well. What *do* you know?" Moscow asked St. Petersburg.

"Our informant says that Suvorov is former KGB, RIF'd in 1996 or so, that he lives, probably, in St. Petersburg—but if that is true, he does so under an assumed name and false documents, or 'Suvorov' is itself a false name. I have a description. Male, fifty or so, average height and build. Thinning blond hair. Regular features. Blue eyes. Physically fit. Unmarried. Thought to frequent prostitutes. I have some people asking around those women for more information. Nothing yet," the St. Petersburg investigator replied.

This is amazing, Lieutenant Provalov thought. *All the resources we have, and we can't develop a single reliable piece of information.* Was he chasing ghosts? Well, he had five of those already. Avseyenko, Maria Ivanovna Sablin, a driver whose name he couldn't remember at the moment, and the two putative Spetsnaz killers, Pyotr Alekseyevich Amalrik and Pavel Borissovich Zimyanin. Three blown up spectacularly during a morning rush hour, and two murdered in St. Petersburg after having done the job—but killed for succeeding or failing?

"Well, let me know when you develop anything."

"I will do that, Oleg Gregoriyevich," Abramov promised.

The militia lieutenant hung up his phone and cleared his desk, putting all his "hot" files into the locked drawer, then he walked downstairs to his official car and drove to his favorite bar. Reilly was inside, and waved when he came through the door. Provalov hung up his coat on a hook and walked over to shake hands. He saw that a drink was waiting for him.

"You are a true comrade, Mishka," the Russian said to his American friend as he took his first slug.

"Hey, I know the problem, pal," the FBI agent said sympathetically.

"It is this way for you as well."

"Hell, when I was a brand-new brick agent, I started working the Gotti case. We busted our asses bagging that lowlife. Took three juries to put him in Marion. He's never coming back. Marion is a particularly nasty prison." Though "nasty" in American terms was different from the Russian. Russian prisons didn't really bear thinking about, though Reilly didn't worry much about that. People who broke the law in any society knew about the possible consequences going in, and what happened when they got caught was their problem, not his. "So, what's the story?"

"This Suvorov. We can't find him. Mishka, it is as if he doesn't

exist."

"Really?" It both was and was not a surprise to Reilly. The former, because Russia, like many European societies, kept track of people in ways that would have started a Second American Revolution. The cops here were supposed to know where everybody lived, a carryover from the Bad Old Days when KGB had kept a third of the population as informers on the other two-thirds. It was an uncommon situation for the local cops not to be able to find someone.

The situation was *not* surprising, however, because if this Suvorov mutt really was a former KGB officer, then he'd been expertly trained to disappear, and that sort of adversary didn't just die of the dumbs, like most American and Russian hoods did. Nor would he die from talking too much. Your average criminals acted—well, like criminals. They bragged too much, and to the wrong people, other criminals for the most part, who had the loyalty of rattlesnakes and would sell out a "friend" as readily as taking a piss. No, this Suvorov guy, if he was who and what the informants said he was, was a pro, and they made interesting game for interesting hunts, and usually long hunts at that. But you always got them in the end, because the cops never stopped looking, and sooner or later, he'd make a mistake, maybe not a big one, but big enough. He wouldn't be hanging with his former buds in KGB, people who would help keep him hidden, and would only talk among themselves and then not much. No, he was in a different milieu now, not a friendly one, not a safe one, and that was just too damned bad. Reilly had occasionally felt a certain sympathy for a criminal, but never for a killer. There were some lines you just couldn't cross.

"He has dived into a hole and then covered it up from inside," the Russian said, with some frustration.

"Okay, what do we know about him?"

Provalov related what he'd just learned. "They say they will be asking whores if they might know him."

"Good call." Reilly nodded. "I bet he likes the high-end ones. Like our Miss Tanya, maybe. You know, Oleg, maybe he knew Avseyenko. Maybe he knows some of his girls."

"That is possible. I can have my men check them out as well."

"Can't hurt," the FBI agent agreed, waving to the bartender for a couple of refills. "You know, buddy, you've got yourself a real investigation happening here. I kinda wish I was on your force to help out."

"You enjoy this?"

"Bet your ass, Oleg. The harder the case, the more thrilling the chase. And it feels real good at the end when you bag the bastards. When we convicted Gotti, damn if we didn't have one big party in

Manhattan. The Teflon Don," Reilly said, hoisting his glass, and telling the air, "Hope you like it in Marion, boy."

"This Gotti, he killed people, yes?" Provalov asked.

"Oh, yeah, some himself, and others he gave the orders. His number one boy, Salvatore Gravano—Sammy the Bull, they called him—turned government witness and helped make the case for us. So then we put Sammy in the witness-protection program, and the mutt starts dealing drugs again down in Arizona. So, Sammy's back inside. The dummy."

"They all are, as you say, criminals," Provalov pointed out.

"Yeah, Oleg, they are. They're too stupid to go straight. They think they can outsmart us. And y'know, for a while they do. But sooner or later . . ." Reilly took a sip and shook his head.

"Even this Suvorov, you think?"

Reilly smiled for his new friend. "Oleg, do you ever make a mistake?"

The Russian grunted. "At least once a day."

"So, why do you think they're any smarter than you are?" the FBI agent asked. "Everybody makes mistakes. I don't care if he's driving a garbage truck or President of the fucking United States. We all fuck up every so often. It's just part of being human. Thing is, if you recognize that fact, you can make it a lot further. Maybe this guy's been well trained, but we all have weaknesses, and we're not all smart enough to acknowledge them, and the smarter we are, the less likely we are to acknowledge them."

"You are a philosopher," Provalov said with a grin. He liked this American. They were of a kind, as though the gypsies had switched babies at birth or something.

"Maybe, but you know the difference between a wise man and a fool?"

"I am sure you will tell me." Provalov knew how to spot pontification half a block away, and the one approaching had flashing red lights on the roof.

"The difference between a wise man and a fool is the magnitude of his mistakes. You don't trust a fool with anything important." *The vodka was making him wax rhapsodic,* Reilly thought. "But a wise man you *do*, and so the fool doesn't have the chance to make a big screwup, while a wise man does. Oleg, a private can't lose a battle, but a general can. Generals are smart, right? You have to be real smart to be a doc, but docs kill people by accident all the time. It is the nature of man to make mistakes, and brains and training don't matter a rat-fuck. I make 'em. You make'em." Reilly hoisted his glass again. "And so does Comrade Suvorov." *It'll be his dick,* Reilly thought. *If he likes to play with hookers, it'll be his dick that does him in. Tough luck,*

bro. But he wouldn't be the first to follow his dick into trouble, Reilly knew. He probably wouldn't be the last, either.

So, did it all work?" Ming asked.

"Hmph?" Nomuri responded. This was strange. She was supposed to be in the afterglow period, his arm still around her, while they both smoked the usual after-sex cigarette.

"I did what you wished with my computer. Did it work?"

"I'm not sure," Nomuri tried as a reply. "I haven't checked."

"I do not believe that!" Ming responded, laughing. "I have thought about this. You have made me a spy!" she said, followed by a giggle.

"I did *what?*"

"You want me to make my computer accessible to you, so you can read all my notes, yes?"

"Do you care?" He'd asked her that once before, and gotten the right answer. Would it be true now? She'd sure as hell seen through his cover story. Well, that was no particular surprise, was it? If she weren't smart, she'd be useless as a penetration agent. But knowing what she was . . . how patriotic was she? Had he read her character right? He didn't let his body tense next to hers, remarkably enough. Nomuri congratulated himself for mastering another lesson in the duplicity business.

A moment's contemplation, then: "No."

Nomuri tried not to let his breath out in too obvious an expression of relief.

"Well, then you need not concern yourself. From now on, you will do nothing at all."

"Except this?" she asked with yet another giggle.

"As long as I continue to please you, I suppose!"

"Master Sausage!"

"Huh?"

"Your sausage pleases me greatly," Ming explained, resting her head on his chest.

And that, Chester Nomuri thought, was sufficient to the moment.

CHAPTER 16

The Smelting of Gold

Pavel Petrovich Gogol could believe his eyes, but only because he'd seen the whole Red Army armored corps on the move in the Western Ukraine and Poland, when he was a younger man. The tracked vehicles he saw now were even bigger and knocked down most of the trees, those that weren't blown down by engineers with explosives. The short season didn't allow the niceties of tree-felling and road-laying they used in the effete West. The survey team had found the source of the gold dust with surprising ease, and now a team of civil and military engineers was pushing a road to the site, slashing a path across the tundra and through the trees, dropping tons of gravel on the path which might someday be properly paved, though such roads were a problem in these weather conditions. Over the roads would come heavy mining equipment, and building materials for the workers who would soon make their homes in what had been "his" woods. They told him that the mine would be named in his honor. That hadn't been worth much more than a spit. And they'd taken most of his golden wolf pelts—after paying for them and probably paying most generously, he allowed. The one thing they'd given him that he liked was a new rifle, an Austrian Steyr with a Zeiss scope in the American .338 Winchester Magnum caliber, more than ample for local game. The rifle was brand-new—he'd fired only fifteen rounds through it to make sure it was properly sighted in. The blued steel was immaculate, and the walnut stock was positively sensuous in its honeyed purity. *How many Germans might he have killed with this!* Gogol thought. And how many wolves and bear might he take now.

They wanted him to leave his river and his woods. They promised him weeks on the beaches at Sochi, comfortable apartments anywhere in the country. Gogol snorted. Was he some city pansy? No, he was a *man* of the woods, a man of the mountains, a man feared by the wolves and the bear, and even the tigers to the south had probably heard of him. This land was *his* land. And truth be told, he knew no other way to live, and was too old to learn one in any case. What other men called comforts he would call annoyances, and when his time came to die, he would be content to die in the woods and let a

wolf or a bear pick over his corpse. It was only fair. He'd killed and skinned enough of them, after all, and good sport was good sport.

Well, the food they'd brought in—flown in, they'd told him—was pretty good, especially the beef, which was richer than his usual reindeer, and he had fresh tobacco for his pipe. The television reporters loved the pipe, and encouraged him to tell his story of life in the Siberian forests, and his best bear and wolf stories. But he'd never see the TV story they were doing on him; he was too far away from what they occasionally called "civilization" to have his own TV set. Still, he was careful to tell his stories carefully and clearly, so that the children and grandchildren he'd never had would see what a great man he'd been. Like all men, Gogol had a proper sense of self-worth, and he would have made a fine storyteller for any children's school, which hadn't occurred to any of the bureaucrats and functionaries who'd come to disturb his existence. Rather, they saw him as a TV personality, and an example of the rugged individualist whom the Russians had always worshipped on the one hand and brutally suppressed on the other.

But the real subject of the forty-minute story that was being put together by Russian national television wasn't really here. It was seventeen kilometers away, where a geologist tossed a gold nugget the size of his fist up and down like a baseball, though it weighed far more than the equivalent volume of iron. That was merely the biggest nugget they'd found. This deposit, the geology team explained to the cameras, was worthy of a tale from mythology, the garden, perhaps, of Midas himself. Exactly how rich it was they'd learn only from tunneling into the ground, but the chief of the geology team was willing to wager his professional reputation that it would beggar the South African mine, by far the richest found to date on the planet. Every day the tapes the cameras made were uploaded to the Russian communications satellite that spent most of its time hanging over the North Pole—much of the country is too far north to make proper use of the geosynchronous birds used by the rest of the world.

This was not a problem for the National Security Agency. NSA has stations worldwide, and the one located at Chicksands in England took the feed of the Russian satellite and instantly cross-loaded it to an American military-communications satellite, which dispatched the signal to Fort Meade, Maryland. Agreeably, the signal was not encrypted and so could be immediately forwarded to Russian linguists for translation, and then off it went to CIA and other national assets for evaluation. As it played out, the President of the United States would see the footage a week before the average Russian citizen.

"Damn, who is that guy, Jim Bridger?" Jack asked.

"His name is Pavel Petrovich Gogol. He's the guy credited with

discovering the gold deposit. See," Ben Goodley said. The camera took in the row of gilded wolf pelts.

"Damn, those could be hung in the Smithsonian . . . like something out of a George Lucas movie . . ." SWORDSMAN observed.

"Or you could buy one for your wife," Goodley suggested.

POTUS shook his head. "Nah . . . but . . . maybe if it was a gilded sable coat . . . you think the voters could handle it?"

"I think I defer on such questions to Mr. van Damm," the National Security Adviser said after a moment's consideration.

"Yeah, might be fun to see him have a cow right here in the Oval Office. This tape isn't classified, is it?"

"Yes, it is, but only 'confidential.' "

"Okay, I want to show this one to Cathy tonight." That level of classification wouldn't faze anybody, not even a major city newspaper.

"You want one with subtitles or a voice-over translation?"

"We both *hate* subtitles," Jack informed his aide, with a look.

"I'll have Langley get it done for you, then," Goodley promised.

"She'll flip out when she sees that pelt." With the money from his investment portfolio, Ryan had become a connoisseur of fine jewelry and furs. For the former, he had an arrangement with Blickman's, a very special firm in Rockefeller Center. Two weeks before the previous Christmas, one of their salespeople had come by train to Washington, accompanied by two armed guards, who hadn't been allowed into the White House proper—the outside guards had gone slightly nuts on learning that armed men were on campus, but Andrea Price-O'Day had smoothed that over—and shown the President about five million dollars' worth of estate jewelry, and some pieces newly made just across the street from their office, some of which Ryan had purchased. His reward had been to see Cathy's eyes pop nearly out of her head under the Christmas tree, and lament the fact that all she'd gotten him was a nice set of Taylor golf clubs. But that was fine with SWORDSMAN. To see his wife smile on Christmas morning was as fine a prize as he expected in life. Besides, it was proof that he had taste in jewelry, one of the better things for a man to have—at least in his woman's eyes. But damn, if he could have gotten her one of those wolf-fur coats . . . could he cut a deal with Sergey Golovko? Jack wondered briefly. But where the hell could you wear such a thing? He had to be practical.

"Would look nice in the closet," Goodley agreed, seeing the distant look in his boss's eyes.

Color would go so nice with her butter-blond hair. Ryan mused on for a few more seconds, then shook his head to dismiss the thought.

"What else today?"

"SORGE has developed new information. It's being couriered down

even as we speak."

"Important?"

"Mrs. Foley didn't say so, but you know how it works."

"Oh, yeah, even the minor stuff fits together into a real pretty picture when you need it." The major download still sat in his private safe. The sad truth was that while he did, technically, have the time to read it, that would have entailed taking time away from his family, and it would have had to have been *really* important for the President to do that.

So, what will the Americans do?" Fang asked Zhang.

"On the trade issue? They will, finally, bow to the inevitable, and grant us most-favored-nation status *and* remove their objection to our full entry into the World Trade Organization," the minister replied.

"None too soon," Fang Gan observed.

"That is true," Zhang Han San agreed. The financial conditions in the PRC had been well concealed to this point, which was one advantage of the communist form of government, both ministers would have agreed, if they had ever considered another form of government. The cold truth of the matter was that the PRC was nearly out of foreign exchange, having spent it mainly on armaments and armsrelated technology all over the world. Only incidental goods had come from America—mainly computer chips, which could be used in nearly any sort of mechanical contrivance. The overtly military material they'd purchased came most often from Western Europe, and sometimes from Israel. America sold what arms it released to this part of the world to the renegades on Taiwan, who paid cash, of course. That was like a mosquito bite to the mainland regime, not large, not life-threatening, but an annoyance that they continuously scratched at, in the process making it worse instead of better. There were over a billion—a *thousand* million—people in mainland China, and less than thirty million on the island across the strait. The misnamed Republic of China used its people well, producing more than a quarter of the goods and services the PRC turned out in a given year with forty times as many workers and peasants. However, while the mainland coveted the goods and services and the riches that resulted, they did not covet the political and economic system that made it possible. Their system was far superior, of course, because theirs was the better ideology. Mao himself had said so.

Neither of these two Politburo members, nor any of the others, reflected much on the objective realities at hand. They were as certain in their beliefs as any Western clergyman was in his. They even ignored the self-evident fact that what prosperity the People's Republic possessed came from capitalist enterprise allowed by

previous rulers, often over the screams and howls of other ministerial-rank politicians. The latter contented themselves by denying political influence to the people who were enriching their country, confident that this situation would go on forever, and that those businessmen and industrialists would be satisfied to make their money and live in relative luxury while they, the political theorists, continued to manage the nation's affairs. After all, the weapons and the soldiers belonged to *them*, didn't they? And power still grew out of the barrel of a gun.

"You are certain of this?" Fang Gan asked.

"Yes, Comrade, I am quite certain. We have been 'good' for the Yankees, haven't we? We have not rattled our saber at the Taiwanese bandits lately, have we?"

"What of American trade complaints?"

"Do they not understand business?" Zhang asked grandly. "We sell goods to them because of their quality and price. We shop the same way. Yes, I admit, their Boeing airplane company makes fine airplanes, but so does Airbus in Europe, and the Europeans have been more . . . accommodating to us politically. America rants on about opening our markets to their goods, and we do this—slowly, of course. We need to keep the surplus they so kindly give us, and spend it on items of importance to us. Next, we will expand our automobile production and enter their auto market, as the Japanese once did. In five years, Fang, we will be taking another ten billion dollars from America annually—and that, my friend, is a very conservative estimate."

"You think so?"

An emphatic nod. "Yes! We will not make the mistake the Japanese made early on, selling ugly little cars. We are already looking for American styling engineers who will help us design automobiles which are aesthetically pleasing to the white devils."

"If you say so."

"When we have the money we need to build up our military, we will be the world's leading power in every respect. Industrially, we will lead the world. Militarily, we are at the center of the world."

"I fear these plans are too ambitious," Fang said cautiously. "They will take more years than we have to implement in any case, *but* what legacy will we leave to our country if we point her on a erroneous path?"

"What error is this, Fang?" Zhang asked. "Do you doubt our ideas?"

Always that question, Fang thought with an inward sigh. "I remember when Deng said, 'It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice.' To which Mao responded with a livid snarl: 'What *emperor* said that?' "

"But it *does* matter, my old friend, and well you know it."

"That is true," Fang agreed with a submissive nod, not wanting a confrontation this late in the day, not when he had a headache. Age had made Zhang even more ideologically pure than he'd been in his youth, and it hadn't tempered his imperial ambition. Fang sighed once more. He was of a mind to set the issue aside. It wasn't worth the trouble. Though he'd mention it just once more, to cover his political backside.

"What if they don't?" Fang asked finally.

"What?"

"What if they don't go along? What if the Americans are troublesome on the trade issue?"

"They will not be," Zhang assured his old friend.

"But if they are, Comrade, what then will we do? What are our options?"

"Oh, I suppose we could punish with one hand and encourage with the other, cancel some purchases from America and then inquire about making some other ones. It's worked before many times," Zhang assured his guest. "This President Ryan is predictable. We need merely control the news. We will give him nothing to use against us."

Fang and Zhang continued their discussion into other issues, until the latter returned to his office, where, again, he dictated his notes of the discussion to Ming, who then typed them into her computer. The minister considered inviting her to his apartment, but decided against it. Though she'd become somewhat more attractive in the preceding weeks, catching his eye with her gentle smiles in the outer office, it had been a long day for him, and he was too tired for it, enjoyable though it often was with Ming. Minister Fang had no idea that his dictation would be in Washington, D.C., in less than three hours.

What do you think, George?"

"Jack," TRADER began, "what the hell is this, and how the hell did we get it?"

"George, this is an internal memorandum—well, of sorts—from the government of the People's Republic of China. How we got it, you do not, repeat, *not* need to know."

The document had been laundered—scrubbed—better than Mafia income. All the surnames had been changed, as had the syntax and adjectives, to disguise patterns of speech. It was thought—hoped would be a better term—that even those whose discourse was being reported would not have recognized their own words. But the content had been protected—even improved, in fact, since the nuances of Mandarin had been fully translated into American English idiom. That had been the hardest part. Languages do not really translate into one another easily or well. The denotations of words were one thing. The

connotations were another, and these never really paralleled from one tongue to another. The linguists employed by the intelligence services were among the best in the country, people who regularly read poetry, and sometimes published journal pieces, under their own names, so that they could communicate their expertise in—and indeed, love of—their chosen foreign language with others of a similar mind. *What resulted were pretty good translations*, Ryan thought, but he was always a little wary of them.

"These cocksuckers! They're talking about how they plan to fuck us over." For all his money, George Winston retained the patois of his working-class origins.

"George, it's business, not personal," the President tried as a tension-release gambit.

The Secretary of the Treasury looked up from the briefing document. "Jack, when I ran Columbus Group, I had to regard all of my investors as my family, okay? *Their* money had to be as important to me as *my* money. That was my professional obligation as an investment counselor."

Jack nodded. "Okay, George. That's why I asked you into the cabinet. You're honest."

"Okay, but now, I'm Sec-fucking-Treas, okay? *That* means that every citizen in our country is part of my family, and these Chink bastards are planning to fuck with my country—all those people out there"—Secretary Winston waved toward the thick windows of the Oval Office—"the ones who trust *us* to keep the economy leveled out. So, they want MFN, do they? They want into the WTO, do they? Well, *fuck* them!"

President Ryan allowed himself an early-morning laugh, wondering if the Secret Service detail had heard George's voice, and might now be looking through the spy holes in the door to see what the commotion was. "Coffee and croissants, George. The grape jelly is Smuckers, even."

TRADER stood and walked around the couch, tossing his head forcefully like a stallion circling a mare in heat. "Okay, Jack, I'll cool down, but you're used to this shit, and I'm not." He paused and sat back down. "Oh, okay, up on The Street we trade jokes and stories, and we even plot a little bit, but deliberately fucking people over—no! I've *never* done that! And you know what's worst?"

"What's that, George?"

"They're stupid, Jack. They think they can mess with the marketplace according to their little political theories, and it'll fall into line like a bunch of soldiers right out of boot camp. These little bastards couldn't run a Kmart and show a profit, but they let them dick around with a whole national economy—and then they want to

dick with ours, too."

"Got it all out of your system?"

"Think this is funny?" Winston asked crossly.

"George, I've never seen you get this worked up. I'm surprised by your passion."

"Who do you think I am, Jay Gould?"

"No," Ryan said judiciously. "I was thinking more of J. P. Morgan." The remark had the desired effect. SecTreas laughed.

"Okay, you got me there. Morgan was the first actual Chairman of the Fed, and he did it as a private citizen, and did it pretty well, but that's probably an institutional function,'cuz there ain't that many J. P. Morgans waiting around on deck. Okay, Mr. President, sir, I am calmed down. Yes, this is business, not personal. And our reply to this miserable *business* attitude will be *business*, too. The PRC will *not* get MFN. They will not get into the WTO—as a practical matter, they don't deserve it yet anyway, based on the size of their economy. And, I think we rattle the Trade Reform Act at them nice and hard. Oh, there's one other thing, and I'm surprised it's not in here," Winston said, pointing down at the briefing sheet.

"What's that?"

"We can get 'em by the short hairs pretty easy, I think. CIA doesn't agree, but Mark Gant thinks their foreign-exchange account's a little thin."

"Oh?" the President asked, stirring his coffee.

Winston nodded emphatically. "Mark's my tech-weenie, remember. He's very good at modeling stuff on the computers. I've set him up with his own little section to keep an eye on various things. Pulled the professor of economics out of Boston University to work there, Morton Silber, another good man with the microchips. Anyway, Mark's been looking at the PRC, and he thinks they're driving off the edge of the Grand Canyon because they've been pissing away their money, mainly on military hardware and heavy-manufacturing equipment, like to make tanks and things. It's a repeat of the old communist stuff, they have a fixation on heavy industry. They are really missing the boat on electronics. They have little companies manufacturing computer games and stuff, but they're not applying it at home, except for that new computer factory they set up that's ripping off Dell."

"So you think we ought to shove that up their ass at the trade negotiations?"

"I'm going to recommend it to Scott Adler at lunch this afternoon, as a matter of fact," SecTreas agreed. "They've been warned, but this time we're going to press it hard."

"Back to their foreign exchange account. How bad is it?"

"Mark thinks they're down to negative reserves."

"In the hole? For how much?" POTUS asked.

"He says at least fifteen billion, floated with paper out of German banks for the most part, but the Germans have kept it quiet—and we're not sure why. It could be a normal transaction, but either the Germans or the PRC wants to keep it under wraps."

"Wouldn't be the Germans, would it?" Ryan asked next.

"Probably not. It makes their banks look good. And, yeah, that leaves the Chinese covering it up."

"Any way to confirm that?"

"I have some friends in Germany. I can ask around, or have a friend do it for me. Better that way, I guess. Everybody knows I'm a government employee now, and that makes me sinister," Winston observed with a sly grin. "Anyway, I am having lunch with Scott today. What do I tell him about the trade negotiations?'

Ryan thought about that for several seconds. This was one of those moments—the frightening ones, as he thought of them—when his words would shape the policy of his own country, and, possibly, others as well. It was easy to be glib or flip, to say the first thing that popped into his mind, but, no, he couldn't do that. Moments like this were too important, too vast in their potential consequences, and he couldn't allow himself to make government policy on a whim, could he? He had to think the matter through, quickly perhaps, but through.

"We need China to know that we want the same access to their markets that we've given them to ours, and that we won't tolerate their stealing products from American companies without proper compensation. George, I want the playing field level and fair for everyone. If they don't want to play that way, we start hurting them."

"Fair enough, Mr. President. I will pass that message along to your Secretary of State. Want I should deliver this, too?" Winston asked, holding up his SORGE briefing sheet.

"No, Scott gets his own version of it. And, George, be very, very careful with that. If the information leaks, a human being will lose his life," SWORDSMAN told TRADER, deliberately disguising the source as a man, and therefore deliberately misleading his Secretary of the Treasury. But that, too, was business, and not personal.

"It goes into my confidential files." Which was a pretty secure place, they both knew. "Nice reading the other guy's mail, isn't it?"

"Just about the best intelligence there is," Ryan agreed.

"The guys at Fort Meade, eh? Tapping into somebody's cell phone via satellite?"

"Sources and methods—you really don't want to know that, George. There's always the chance that you'll spill it to the wrong person by mistake, and then you have some guy's life on your conscience. Something to be avoided, trust me."

“I hear you, Jack. Well, I have a day to start. Thanks for the coffee and the pastry, Boss.”

“Any time, George. Later.” Ryan turned to his appointment calendar as the Secretary walked out the corridor door, from which he’d go downstairs, cross outside because the West Wing wasn’t directly connected to the White House proper, dart back inside, and head off into the tunnel leading to Treasury.

Outside Ryan’s office, the Secret Service detail went over the appointment list also, but their copy also included the results of a National Crime Information Computer check, to make sure that no convicted murderer was being admitted into the Sanctum Sanctorum of the United States of America.

CHAPTER 17

The Coinage of Gold

Scott Adler was regarded as too young and inexperienced for the job, but that judgment came from would-be political appointees who'd schemed their way to near-the-top, whereas Adler had been a career foreign-service officer since his graduation from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy twenty-six years earlier. Those who'd seen him work regarded him as a very astute diplomatic technician. Those who played cards with him—Adler liked to play poker before a major meeting or negotiation—thought he was one very lucky son of a bitch.

His seventh-floor office at the State Department building was capacious and comfortable. Behind his desk was a credenza covered with the usual framed photographs of spouse, children, and parents. He didn't like wearing his suit jacket at his desk, as he found it too confining for comfort. In this he'd outraged some of the senior State Department bureaucrats, who thought this an entirely inappropriate informality. He did, of course, don the jacket for important meetings with foreign dignitaries, but he didn't think internal meetings were important enough to be uncomfortable for.

That suited George Winston, who tossed his coat over a chair when he came in. Like himself, Scott Adler was a working guy, and those were the people with whom Winston was most comfortable. He might be a career government puke, but the son of a bitch had a work ethic, which was more than he could say for too many of the people in his own department. He was doing his best to weed the drones out, but it was no easy task, and civil-service rules made firing unproductive people a non-trivial exercise.

"Have you read the Chinese stuff?" Adler asked, as soon as the lunch tray was on the table.

"Yeah, Scott. I mean, holy shit, fella," TRADER observed to EAGLE.

"Welcome to the club. The intelligence stuff we get can be very interesting." The State Department had its own spook service, called Intelligence and Research, or I&R, which, while it didn't exactly compete with CIA and the other services, occasionally turned up its own rough little diamonds from the thick diplomatic mud. "So, what

do you think of our little yellow brothers?"

Winston managed not to growl. "Buddy, I might not even eat their goddamned food anymore."

"They make our worst robber barons look like Mother Teresa. They're conscienceless motherfuckers, George, and that's a fact." Winston immediately started liking Adler more. A guy who talked like this had real possibilities. Now it was his turn to be coldly professional to counterpoint Adler's working-class patois.

"They're ideologically driven, then?"

"Totally—well, maybe with a little corruption thrown in, but remember, they figure that their political astuteness entitles them to live high on the hog, and so to them it's not corruption at all. They just collect tribute from the peasants, and 'peasant' is a word they still use over there."

"In other words, we're dealing with dukes and earls?"

The Secretary of State nodded. "Essentially, yes. They have an enormous sense of personal entitlement. They are not used to hearing the word 'no' in any form, and as a result they don't always know what to do when they do hear it from people like me. That's why they're often at a disadvantage in negotiations—at least, when we play hardball with them. We haven't done much of that, but last year, after the Airbus shoot-down I came on a little strong, and then we followed up with official diplomatic recognition of the ROC government on Taiwan. That really put the PRC noses seriously out of joint, even though the ROC government hasn't officially declared its independence."

"What?" Somehow SecTreas had missed that.

"Yeah, the people on Taiwan play a pretty steady and reasonable game. They've never really gone out of their way to offend the mainland. Even though they have embassies all over the world, they've never actually proclaimed the fact that they're an independent nation. That would flip the Beijing Chinese out. Maybe the guys in Taipei think it would be bad manners or something. At the same time, we have an understanding that Beijing knows about. If somebody messes with Taiwan, Seventh Fleet comes over to keep an eye on things, and we will not permit a direct military threat to the Republic of China government. The PRC doesn't have enough of a navy to worry our guys that much, and so all that flies back and forth, really, is words." Adler looked up from his sandwich. "Sticks and stones, y'know?"

"Well, I had breakfast with Jack this morning, and we talked about the trade talks."

"And Jack wants to play a little rougher?" SecState asked. It wasn't much of a surprise. Ryan had always preferred fair play, and that was

often a rare commodity in the intercourse among nation-states.

"You got it," Winston confirmed around a bite of his sandwich. One thing about working-class people like Adler, the SecTreas thought, they knew what a proper lunch was. He was so tired of fairyfied French food for lunch. Lunch was supposed to be a piece of meat with bread wrapped around it. French cuisine was just fine, but for dinner, not for lunch.

"How rough?"

"We get what we want. We need them to get accustomed to the idea that they need us a hell of a lot more than we need them."

"That's a tall order, George. If they don't want to listen?"

"Knock louder on the door, or on their heads. Scott, you read the same document this morning I did, right?"

"Yeah," SecState confirmed.

"The people they're cheating out of their jobs are American citizens."

"I know that. But what you have to remember is that we can't dictate to a sovereign country. The world doesn't work that way."

"Okay, fine, but we can tell them that they can't dictate trade practices to us, either."

"George, for a long time America has taken a very soft line on these issues."

"Maybe, but the Trade Reform Act is now law—"

"Yeah, I remember. I also remember how it got us into a shooting war," Adler reminded his guest.

"We won. I remember that, too. Maybe other people will as well. Scott, we're running a huge trade deficit with the Chinese. The President says that has to stop. I happen to agree. If we can buy from them, then they damned well have to buy from us, or we buy our chopsticks and teddy bears elsewhere."

"There are jobs involved," Adler warned. "They know how to play that card. They cancel contracts and stop buying our finished goods, and then some of our people lose their jobs, too."

"Or, if we succeed, then we sell more finished goods to them, and our factories have to hire people to make them. Play to win, Scott," Winston advised.

"I always do, but this isn't a baseball game with rules and fences. It's like racing a sailboat in the fog. You can't always see your adversary, and you can damned near never see the finish line."

"I can buy you some radar, then. How about I give you one of my people to help out?"

"Who?"

"Mark Gant. He's my computer whiz. He really knows the issues from a technical, monetary point of view."

Adler thought about that. State Department had always been weak in that area. Not too many business-savvy people ended up in the Foreign Service, and learning it from books wasn't the same as living it out in the real world, a fact that too many State Department "professionals" didn't always appreciate as fully as they should.

"Okay, send him over. Now, just how rough are we supposed to play this?"

"Well, I guess you'll need to talk that one over with Jack, but from what he told me this morning, we want the playing field leveled out."

An easy thing to say, Adler thought, but less easy to accomplish. He liked and admired President Ryan, but he wasn't blind to the fact that SWORDSMAN was not the most patient guy in the world, and in diplomacy, patience was everything—hell, patience was just about the only thing. "Okay," he said, after a moment's reflection. "I'll talk it over with him before I tell my people what to say. This could get nasty. The Chinese play rough."

"Life's a bitch, Scott," Winston advised.

SecState smiled. "Okay, duly noted. Let me see what Jack says. So, how's the market doing?"

"Still pretty healthy. Price/earnings ratios are still a little outrageous, but profits are generally up, inflation is under control, and the investment community is nice and comfy. The Fed Chairman is keeping a nice, even strain on monetary policy. We're going to get the changes we want in the tax code. So, things look pretty good. It's always easier to steer the ship in calm seas, y'know?"

Adler grimaced. "Yeah, I'll have to try that sometime." But he had marching orders to lay on a typhoon. This would get interesting.

So, how's readiness?" General Diggs asked his assembled officers.

"Could be better," the colonel commanding 1st Brigade admitted. "We've been short lately on funds for training. We have the hardware, and we have the soldiers, and we spend a lot of time in the simulators, but that's not the same as going out in the dirt with our tracks." There was general nodding on that point.

"It's a problem for me, sir," said Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti, who commanded 1st Squadron, 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Known within the Army as the Quarter Horse for the 1st/4th unit designator, it was the division reconnaissance screen, and its commander reported directly to the commanding general of First Tanks instead of through a brigade commander. "I can't get my people out, and it's hard to train for reconnaissance in the *kazerne*. The local farmers get kinda irate when we crunch through their fields, and so we have to pretend we can do recon from hard-surface roads. Well, sir, we can't, and that bothers me some."

There was no denying the fact that driving armored vehicles across a cornfield was tough on the corn, and while the U.S. Army trailed every tactical formation with a Hummer whose passengers came with a big checkbook to pay for the damage, the Germans were a tidy people, and Yankee dollars didn't always compensate for the suddenly untidy fields. It had been easier when the Red Army had been right on the other side of the fence, threatening death and destruction on West Germany, but Germany was now one sovereign country, and the Russians were now on the far side of Poland, and a lot less threatening than they'd once been. There were a few places where large formations could exercise, but those were as fully booked as the prettiest debutante's dance card at the cotillion, and so the Quarter Horse spent too much time in simulators, too.

"Okay," Diggs said. "The good news is that we're going to profit from the new federal budget. We have lots more funds to train with, and we can start using them in twelve days. Colonel Masterman, do you have some ways for us to spend it?"

"Well, General, I think I might come up with something. Can we pretend that it's nineteen-eighty-three again?" At the height of the Cold War, Seventh Army had trained to as fine an edge as any army in history, a fact ultimately demonstrated in Iraq rather than in Germany, but with spectacular effect. Nineteen eighty-three had been the year the increased funding had first taken real effect, a fact noted fully by the KGB and GRU intelligence officers, who'd thought until that time that the Red Army might have had a chance to defeat NATO. By 1984, even the most optimistic Russian officers fell off that bandwagon for all time. If they could reestablish that training regimen, the assembled officers all knew they'd have a bunch of happy soldiers, because, though training is hard work, it is what the troops had signed up for. A soldier in the field is most often a happy soldier.

"Colonel Masterman, the answer to your question is, Yes. Back to my original question. How's readiness?"

"We're at about eighty-five percent," 2nd Brigade estimated. "Probably ninety or so for the artillery—"

"Thank you, Colonel, and I agree," the colonel commanding divisional artillery interjected.

"But we all know how easy life is for the cannoncockers," 2nd Brigade added as a barb.

"Aviation?" Diggs asked next.

"Sir, my people are within three weeks of being at a hundred percent. Fortunately, we don't squash anybody's corn when we're up practicing. My only complaint is that it's too easy for my people to track tanks on the ground if they're road-bound, and a little more

realistic practice wouldn't hurt, but, sir, I'll put my aviators up against anyone in this man's army, especially my Apache drivers." The "snake" drivers enjoyed a diet of raw meat and human babies. The problems they'd had in Yugoslavia a few years earlier had alarmed a lot of people, and the aviation community had cleaned up its act with alacrity.

"Okay, so you're all in pretty good shape, but you won't mind sharpening the edge up a little, eh?" Diggs asked, and got the nods he expected. He'd read up on all his senior officers on the flight across the pond. There was little in the way of dead wood here. The Army had less trouble than the other services in holding on to good people. The airlines didn't try to hire tank commanders away from 1st Armored, though they were always trying to steal fighter and other pilots from the Air Force, and while police forces loved to hire experienced infantrymen, his division had only about fifteen hundred of them, which was the one structural weakness in an armored division: not enough people with rifles and bayonets. An American tank division was superbly organized to take ground—to immolate everyone who happened to be on real estate they wanted—but not so well equipped to hold the ground they overran. The United States Army had never been an army of conquest. Indeed, its ethos has always been liberation, and part and parcel of that was the expectation that the people who lived there would be of assistance, or at least show gratitude for their deliverance, rather than hostility. It was so much a part of the American military's history that its senior members rarely, if ever, thought about other possibilities. Vietnam was too far in the past now. Even Diggs had been too young for that conflict, and though he'd been told how lucky he was to have missed it, it was something he almost never thought about. Vietnam had not been his war, and he didn't really want to know about light infantry in the jungle. He was a cavalryman, and his idea of combat was tanks and Bradleys on open ground.

"Okay, gentlemen. I'll want to meet with all of you individually in the next few days. Then I need to come out and see your outfits. You will find that I'm a fairly easy guy to work for"—by which he meant that he wasn't a screamer, as some general officers were; he demanded excellence as much as anyone else, but he didn't think ripping a man's head off in public was a good way to achieve it—"and I know you're all pretty good. In six months or less, I want this division ready to deal with anything that might come down the road. I mean anything at all."

Who might that be, Colonel Masterman mused to himself, *the Germans?* It might be a little harder to motivate the troops, given the total absence of a credible threat, but the sheer joy of soldiering was

not all that much different from the kick associated with football. For the right guy, it was just plain fun to play in the mud with the big toys, and after a while, they started wondering what the real thing might be like. There was a leavening of troops in First Tanks from the 10th and 11th Cavalry Regiments who'd fought the previous year in Saudi Arabia, and like all soldiers, they told their stories. But few of the stories were unhappy ones. Mainly they expounded on how much like training it had been, and referred to their then-enemies as "poor, dumb raghead sunsabitches" who'd been, in the final analysis, unworthy of their steel. But that just made them swagger a little more. A winning war leaves only good memories for the most part, especially a short winning war. Drinks would be hoisted, and the names of the lost would be invoked with sadness and respect, but the overall experience had not been a bad one for the soldiers involved.

It wasn't so much that soldiers lusted for combat, just that they often felt like football players who practiced hard but never actually got to play for points. Intellectually, they knew that combat was the game of death, not football, but that was too theoretical for most of them. The tankers fired their practice rounds, and if the pop-up targets were steel, there was the satisfaction of seeing sparks from the impact, but it wasn't quite the same as seeing the turret pop off the target atop a column of flame and smoke . . . and knowing that the lives of three or four people had been extinguished like a birthday-cake candle in front of a five-year-old. The veterans of the Second Persian Gulf War did occasionally talk about what it was like to see the results of their handiwork, usually with a "Jesus, it was really something awful to see, bro," but that was as far as it went. For soldiers, killing wasn't really murder once you stepped back from it; they'd been the enemy, and both had played the game of death on the same playing field, and one side had won, and the other side had lost, and if you weren't willing to run that risk, well, don't put the uniform on, y'know? Or, "Train better, asshole, cuz we be serious out here." And that was the other reason soldiers liked to train. It wasn't just interesting and fairly enjoyable hard work. It was life insurance if the game ever started for real, and soldiers, like gamblers, like to hold good cards.

Diggs adjourned the meeting, waving for Colonel Masterman to stay behind.

"Well, Duke?"

"I've been nosing around. What I've seen is pretty good, sir. Giusti is especially good, and he's always bitching about training time. I like that."

"So do I," Diggs agreed at once. "What else?"

"Like the man said, artillery is in very good shape, and your maneuver brigades are doing okay, considering the lack of field time.

They might not like using the sims all that much, but they are making good use of them. They're about twenty percent off where we were in the Tenth Cav down in the Negev playing with the Israelis, and that isn't bad at all. Sir, you give me three or four months in the field, and they'll be ready to take on the world."

"Well, Duke, I'll write you the check next week. Got your plans ready?"

"Day after tomorrow. I'm taking some helicopter rides to scout out the ground we can use and what we can't. There's a German brigade says they're eager to play aggressor for us."

"They any good?"

"They claim to be. I guess we'll just have to see. I recommend we send Second Brigade out first. They're a little sharper than the other two. Colonel Lisle is our kind of colonel."

"His package looks pretty good. He'll get his star next go-round."

"About right," Masterman agreed. *And what about my star?* he couldn't ask. He figured himself a pretty good bet, but you never really knew. Oh, well, at least he was working for a fellow cavalryman.

"Okay, show me your plans for Second Brigade's next adventure in the farmland . . . tomorrow?"

"The broad strokes, yes, sir." Masterman bobbed his head and walked off toward his office.

How rough?" Cliff Rutledge asked.

"Well," Adler replied, "I just got off the phone with the President, and he says he wants what he wants and it's our job to get it for him."

"That's a mistake, Scott," the Assistant Secretary of State warned.

"Mistake or not, we work for the President."

"I suppose so, but Beijing's been pretty good about not tearing us a new asshole over Taiwan. This might not be the right time for us to press on them so hard."

"Even as we speak, American jobs are being lost because of their trade policy," Adler pointed out. "When does enough become too much?"

"I guess Ryan decides that, eh?"

"That's what the Constitution says."

"And you want me to meet with them, then?"

SecState nodded. "Correct. Four days from now. Put your position paper together and run it past me before we deliver it, but I want them to know we're not kidding. The trade deficit has to come down, and it has to come down soon. They can't make that much money off us and spend it somewhere else."

"But they can't buy military hardware from us," Rutledge observed.

"What do they need all that hardware for?" Scott Adler asked rhetorically. "What external enemies do they have?"

"They'll say that their national security is their affair."

"And we reply that our economic security is our affair, and they're not helping." That meant observing to the PRC that it looked as though they were preparing to fight a war—but against whom, and was that a good thing for the world? Rutledge would ask with studied sangfroid.

Rutledge stood. "Okay, I can present our case. I'm not fully comfortable with it, but, well, I suppose I don't have to be, do I?"

"Also correct." Adler didn't really like Rutledge all that much. His background and advancement had been more political than properly earned. He'd been very tight with former Vice President Kealty, for example, but after that incident had settled out, Cliff had dusted off his coattails with admirable speed. He would probably not get another promotion. He'd gone as far as one could go without really serious political ties—say a teaching position at the Kennedy School at Harvard, where one taught and became a talking head on the PBS evening news hour and waited to be noticed by the right political hopeful. But that was pure luck. Rutledge had come further than actual merit could justify, but with it came a comfortable salary and a lot of prestige on the Washington cocktail-party circuit, where he was on most of the A lists. And that meant that when he left government service, he'd increase his income by an order of magnitude or so with some consulting firm or other. Adler knew he could do the same, but probably wouldn't. He'd probably take over the Fletcher School at Tufts and try to pass along what he'd learned to a new generation of would-be diplomats. He was too young for real retirement, though there was little in the way of a government afterlife from being Secretary of State, and academia wouldn't be too bad. Besides, he'd get to do the odd consulting job, and do op-ed pieces for the newspapers, where he would assume the role of elder-statesman sage.

"Okay, let me get to work." Rutledge walked out and turned left to head to his seventh-floor office.

Well, this was a plum, the Assistant Secretary thought, even if it was the wrong plum. The Ryan guy was not what he thought a president should be. He thought international discourse was about pointing guns at people's heads and making demands, instead of reasoning with them. Rutledge's way took longer, but was a lot safer. You had to give something to get something. Well, sure, there wasn't much left to give the PRC, except maybe renouncing America's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. It wasn't hard to understand the reason they'd done it, but it had still been a mistake. It made the PRC unhappy, and you couldn't let some damned-fool "principle" get in the way of international

reality. Diplomacy, like politics—another area in which Ryan was sadly lacking—was a practical business. There were a *billion* people in the People's Republic, and you had to respect that. Sure, Taiwan had a democratically elected government and all that, but it was *still* a breakaway province of China, and that made it an internal matter. Their civil war was a fifty-plus-year affair, but Asia was a place where people took the long-term view.

Hmm, he thought, sitting down at his desk. *We want what we want, and we're going to get what we want* . . . Rutledge took out a legal pad and leaned back in his chair to make some notes. It might be the wrong policy. It might be dumb policy. It might be policy he disagreed with. But it *was* policy, and if he ever wanted to be kicked upstairs—ac—tually to a different office on the same floor—to Undersecretary of State, he had to present the policy as though it were his own personal passion. It was like being a lawyer, Rutledge thought. They had to argue dumb cases all the time, didn't they? That didn't make them mercenaries. It made them professionals, and he was a professional.

And besides, he'd never been caught. One thing about Ed Kealty, he'd never told anybody how Rutledge had tried to help him be President. Duplicitous he might have been toward the President, but he'd been loyal to his own people about it, as a politician was supposed to be. And that Ryan guy, smart as he might have been, he'd never caught on. *So there, Mr. President*, Rutledge thought. *You may be smart, you think, but you need me to formulate your policy for you.* Ha!

This is a pleasant change, Comrade Minister," Bondarenko observed on coming in. Golovko waved him to a chair, and poured him a small glass of vodka, the fuel of a Russian business meeting. The visiting general-lieutenant took the obligatory sip and expressed his thanks for the formal hospitality. He most often came here after normal working hours, but this time he'd been summoned officially, and right after lunch. It would have made him uneasy—once upon a time, such an invitation to KGB headquarters would involve a quick trip to the men's room—except for his cordial relationship with Russia's chief spy.

"Well, Gennady Iosifovich, I've talked you and your ideas over with President Grushavoy, and you've had three stars for a long time. It is time, the president and I agreed, for you to have another, and a new assignment."

"Indeed?" Bondarenko wasn't taken aback, but he became instantly wary. It wasn't always pleasant to have one's career in others' hands, even others one liked.

"Yes. As of Monday next, you will be General-Colonel Bondarenko, and soon after that you will travel to become commander-in-chief of

the Far East Military District."

That got his eyebrows jolting upward. This was the award of a dream he'd held in his own mind for some time. "Oh. May I ask, why there?"

"I happen to agree with your concerns regarding our yellow neighbors. I've seen some reports from the GRU about the Chinese army's continuing field exercises, and to be truthful, our intelligence information from Beijing is not all we would wish. Therefore, Eduard Petrovich and I feel that our eastern defenses might need some firming up. That becomes your job, Gennady. Do it well, and some additional good things might happen for you."

And that could only mean one thing, Bondarenko thought, behind an admirable poker face. Beyond the four stars of a general-colonel lay only the single large star of a marshal, and that was as high as any Russian soldier could go. After that, one could be commander-in-chief of the entire army, or defense minister, or one could retire to write memoirs.

"There are some people I'd like to take out to Chabarsovil with me, some colonels from my operations office," the general said contemplatively.

"That is your prerogative, of course. Tell me, what will you wish to do out there?"

"Do you really want to know?" the newly frocked fourstar asked.

Golovko smiled broadly at that. "I see. Gennady, you wish to remake the Russian army in your image?"

"Not my image, Comrade Minister. A winning image, such as we had in 1945. There are images one wishes to deface, and there are images one dares not touch. Which, do you think, ought we to have?"

"What will the costs be?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I am not an economist, nor am I an accountant, but I can tell you that the cost of doing this will be far less than the cost of not doing it." And now, Bondarenko thought, he'd get wider access to whatever intelligence his country possessed. It'd have been better if Russia had spent the same resources on what the Americans delicately called National Technical Means—strategic reconnaissance satellites—that the Soviet Union had once done. But he'd get such as there was, and maybe he could talk the air force into making a few special flights . . .

"I will tell that to President Grushavoy." Not that it would do all that much good. The cupboard was still bare of funding, though that could change in a few years.

"Will these new mineral discoveries in Siberia give us a little more money to spend?"

Golovko nodded. "Yes, but not for some years. Patience, Gennady."

The general took a final shot of the vodka. “I can be patient, but will the Chinese?”

Golovko had to grant his visitor’s concern. “Yes, they are exercising their military forces more than they used to.” What had once been a cause for concern had become, with its continuance, a matter of routine, and Golovko, like many, tended to lose such information in the seemingly random noise of daily life. “But there are no diplomatic reasons for concern. Relations between our countries are cordial.”

“Comrade Minister, I am not a diplomat, nor am I an intelligence officer, but I do study history. I recall that the Soviet Union’s relations with Hitler’s Germany were cordial right up until June 23, 1941. The leading German elements passed Soviet trains running westbound with oil and grain to the *fascisti.* I conclude from this that diplomatic discourse is not always an indicator of a nation’s intentions.”

“That is true, and that is why we have an intelligence service.”

“And then you will also recall that the People’s Republic has in the past looked with envy on the mineral riches of Siberia. That envy has probably grown with the discoveries we have made. We have not publicized them, but we may assume that the Chinese have intelligence sources right here in Moscow, yes?”

“It is a possibility not to be discounted,” Golovko admitted. He didn’t add that those sources would most probably be true-believing communists from Russia’s past, people who lamented the fall of their nation’s previous political system, and saw in China the means, perhaps, to restore Russia to the true faith of Marxism-Leninism, albeit with a little Mao tossed in. Both men had been Communist Party members in their day: Bondarenko because advancement in the Soviet Army had absolutely demanded it, and Golovko because he would never have been entrusted with a post in KGB without it. Both had mouthed the words, and kept their eyes mostly open during party meetings, in both cases while checking out the women in the meetings or just daydreaming about things of more immediate interest. But there were those who had listened and thought about it, who had actually believed all that political rubbish. Both Bondarenko and Golovko were pragmatists, interested mainly in a reality they could touch and feel rather than some model of words that might or might not come to pass someday. Fortunately for both, they’d found their way into professions more concerned with reality than theory, where their intellectual explorations were more easily tolerated, because men of vision were always needed, even in a nation where vision was supposed to be controlled. “But you will have ample assets to act upon your concerns.”

Not really, the general thought. He’d have—what? Six motor-rifle divisions, a tank division, and a divisional formation of artillery, all

regular-army formations at about seventy percent nominal strength and dubious training—that would be his first task, and not a minor one, to crack those uniformed boys into Red Army soldiers of the sort who had crushed the Germans at Kursk, and moved on to capture Berlin. *That would be a major feat to accomplish, but who was better suited to this task?* Bondarenko asked himself. There were some promising young generals he knew of, and maybe he'd steal one, but for his own age group Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko felt himself to be the best brain in his nation's armed forces. Well, then, he'd have an active command and a chance to prove it. The chance of failure was always there, but men such as he are the kind who see opportunities where others see dangers.

"I presume I will have a free hand?" he asked, after some final contemplation.

"Within reason." Golovko nodded. "We'd prefer that you did not start a war out there."

"I have no desire to drive to Beijing. I have never enjoyed their cooking," Bondarenko replied lightly. And Russians should be better soldiers. The fighting ability of the Russian male had never been an issue for doubt. He just needed good training, good equipment, and proper leadership. Bondarenko thought he could supply two of those needs, and that would have to do. Already, his mind was racing east, thinking about his headquarters, what sort of staff officer he would find, whom he'd have to replace, and where the replacements would come from. There'd be drones out there, careerist officers just serving their time and filling out their forms, as if that were what it meant to be a field-grade officer. Those men would see their careers aborted—well, he'd give everyone thirty days to straighten up, and if he knew himself, he'd inspire some to rediscover their vocations. His best hope was in the individual soldiers, the young boys wearing their country's uniform indifferently because no one had told them exactly what they were and how important that thing was. But he'd fix *that*. They were *soldiers*, those boys. Guardians of their country, and they deserved to be proud guardians. With proper training, in nine months they'd wear the uniforms better, stand straighter, and swagger a bit on leave, as soldiers were supposed to do. He'd show them how to do it, and he'd become their surrogate father, pushing and cajoling his new crop of sons toward manhood. It was as worthy a goal as any man could wish, and as Commander-in-Chief Far East, he just might set a standard for his country's armed forces to emulate.

"So, Gennady Iosifovich, what do I tell Eduard Petrovich?" Golovko asked, as he leaned across the desk to give his guest a little more of the fine Starka vodka.

Bondarenko lifted the glass to salute his host. "Comrade Minister,

you will please tell our president that he has a new CINC-Far East."

CHAPTER 18

Evolutions

The interesting part for Mancuso in his new job was that he now commanded aircraft, which he could fairly well understand, but also ground troops, which he hardly understood at all. This latter contingent included the 3rd Marine Division based on Okinawa, and the Army's 25th Light Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks on Oahu. Mancuso had never directly commanded more than one hundred fifty or so men, all of whom had been aboard his first and last real—as he thought of it—command, USS *Dallas*. That was a good number, large enough that it felt larger than even an extended family, and small enough that you knew every face and name. Pacific Command wasn't anything like that. The *square* of *Dallas'*s crew didn't begin to comprise the manpower which he could direct from his desk.

He'd been through the Capstone course. That was a program designed to introduce new flag officers to the other branches of the service. He'd walked in the woods with Army soldiers, crawled in the mud with Marines, even watched an aerial refueling from the jump seat of a C-5B transport (the most unnatural act he ever expected to see, two airplanes mating in midair at three hundred knots), and played with the Army's heavy troops at Fort Irwin, California, where he'd tried his hand at driving and shooting tanks and Bradleys. But seeing it all and playing with the kids, and getting mud on his clothing, wasn't really the same as knowing it. He had some very rough ideas of what it looked and sounded and smelled like. He'd seen the confident look on the faces of men who wore uniforms of different color, and told himself about a hundred times that they were, really, all the same. The sergeant commanding an Abrams tank was little different in spirit from a leading torpedoman on a fast-attack boat, just not recently showered, and a Green Beret was little different from a fighter pilot in his godlike self-confidence. But to command such people effectively, he ought to know more, CINCPAC told himself. He ought to have had more "joint" training. But then he told himself that he could take the best fighter jock in the Air Force or the Navy, and even then it would take months for them to understand what he'd done on *Dallas*. Hell, just getting them to understand the importance

of reactor safety would take a year—about what it had taken him to learn all those things once upon a time, and Mancuso wasn't a "nuc" by training. He'd always been a front-end guy. The services were all different in their *feel* for the mission, and that was because the missions were all as different in nature as a sheepdog was from a pit bull.

But he had to command them all, and do so effectively, lest he make a mistake that resulted in a telegram coming to Mrs. Smith's home to announce the untimely death of her son or husband because some senior officer had fucked up. Well, Admiral Bart Mancuso told himself, that was why he had such a wide collection of staff officers, including a surface guy to explain what that sort of target did (to Mancuso any sort of surface ship was a target), an Airedale to explain what naval aircraft did, a Marine and some soldiers to explain life in the mud, and some Air Force wing-wipers to tell him what their birds were capable of. All of them offered advice, which, as soon as he took it, became his idea alone, because he was in command, and command meant being responsible for everything that happened in or near the Pacific Ocean, including when some newly promoted E-4 petty officer commented lustily on the tits of another E-4 who happened to have them—a recent development in the Navy, and one which Mancuso would just as soon have put off for another decade. They were even letting women on submarines now, and the admiral didn't regret having missed that one little bit. What the hell would Mush Morton and his crop of WWII submarines have made of *that?*

He figured he knew how to set up a naval exercise, one of those grand training evolutions in which half of 7th Fleet would administratively attack and destroy the other half, followed by the simulated forced-entry landing of a Marine battalion. Navy fighters would tangle with Air Force ones, and after it was all over, computer records would show who'd won and who'd lost, and bets of various sorts would be paid off in various bars—and there'd be some hard feelings, because fitness reports (and with them, careers) could ride on outcomes of simulated engagements.

Of all his services, Mancuso figured his submarine force was in the best shape, which made sense, since his previous job had been COMSUBPAC, and he'd ruthlessly whipped his boats into shape. And, besides, the little shooting war they'd engaged in two years before had given everyone the proper sense of mission, to the point that the crews of the boomers who'd laid on a submarine ambush worthy of Charlie Lockwood's best day still swaggered around when on the beach. The boomers remained in service as auxiliary fast-attacks because Mancuso had made his case to the CNO, who was his friend, Dave Seaton, and Seaton had made his case to Congress to get some additional funding,

and Congress was nice and tame, what with two recent conflicts to show them that people in uniform did have more purposes than opening and closing doors for the people's elected representatives. Besides, the Ohio-class boats were just too expensive to throw away, and they were mainly off doing valuable oceanographic missions in the North Pacific, which appealed to the tree- (actually fish- and dolphin- in this case) huggers, who had far too much political power in the eyes of this white-suited warrior.

With every new day came his official morning briefing, usually run by Brigadier General Mike Lahr, his J-2 Intelligence Officer. This was particularly good news. On the morning of 7 December, 1941, the United States had learned the advantage of providing senior area commanders with the intelligence they might need, and so this CINCPAC, unlike Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, got to hear a lot.

"Morning, Mike," Mancuso said in greeting, while a chief steward's mate set up morning coffee.

"Good morning, sir," the one-star replied.

"What's new in the Pacific?"

"Well, top of the news this morning, the Russians have appointed a new guy to head their Far Eastern Military District. His name is Gennady Bondarenko. His last job was J-3 operations officer for the Russian army. His background's pretty interesting. He started off in signals, not a combat arm, but he distinguished himself in Afghanistan toward the end of that adventure on their part. He's got the Order of the Red Banner and he's a Hero of the Soviet Union—got both of those as a colonel. He moved rapidly up from there. Good political connections. He's worked closely with a guy named Golovko—he's a former KGB officer who's still in the spook business and is personally known to the President—ours, that is. Golovko is essentially the operational XO for the Russian President Grushavoy—like a chief minister or something. Grushavoy listens to him on a lot of issues, and he's a pipeline into the White House on matters 'of mutual interest.' "

"Great. So the Russians have Jack Ryan's ear via this guy. What sort of mensch is he?" CINCPAC asked.

"Very smart and very capable, our friends at Langley say. Anyway, back to Bondarenko. The book on the guy says he's also very smart and also very capable, a contender for further advancement. Brains and personal bravery can be career-enhancing in their military, just like ours."

"What sort of shape is his new command in?"

"Not very good at all, sir. We see eight division-sized formations, six motor-rifle divisions, one tank, and one artillery division. All appear to be under strength on our overheads, and they don't spend much time in the field. Bondarenko will change that, if he goes according to

the form card."

"Think so?"

"As their J-3, he agitated for higher training standards—and he's a bit of an intellectual. He published a lengthy essay last year on the Roman legions. It was called 'Soldiers of the Caesars.' It had that great quote from Josephus, 'Their drills are bloodless battles and their battles are bloody drills.' Anyway, it was a straight historical piece, sources like Josephus and Vegetius, but the implication was clear. He was crying out for better training in the Russian army, and also for career NCOs. He spent a lot of time with Vegetius's discussion of how you build centurions. The Soviet army didn't really have sergeants as we understand the term, and Bondarenko is one of the new crop of senior officers who's saying that the new *Russian* army should reintroduce that institution. Which makes good sense," Lahr thought.

"So, you think he's going to whip his people into shape. What about the Russian navy?"

"They don't belong to him. He's got Frontal Aviation tactical aircraft and ground troops, but that's all."

"Well, their navy's so far down the shitter they can't see where the paper roll is," Mancuso observed. "What else?"

"A bunch of political stuff you can read up on at your leisure. The Chinese are still active in the field. They're running a four-division exercise now south of the Amur River."

"That big?"

"Admiral, they've been on an increased training regimen for almost three years now. Nothing frantic or anything, but they've been spending money to get the PLA up to speed. This one's heavy with tanks and APCs. Lots of artillery live-fire exercises. That's a good training area for them, not much in the way of civilians, kinda like Nevada but not as flat. At first when they started this we kept a close eye on it, but it's fairly routine now."

"Oh, yeah? What do the Russians think about it?"

Lahr stretched in his chair. "Sir, that's probably why Bondarenko drew this assignment. This is backward from how the Russians trained to fight. The Chinese have them heavily outnumbered in theater, but nobody sees hostilities happening. The politics are pretty smooth at the moment."

"Uh-huh," CINCPAC grunted behind his desk. "And Taiwan?"

"Some increased training near the strait, but those are mainly infantry formations, and nothing even vaguely like amphibious exercises. We keep a close eye on that, with help from our ROC friends."

Mancuso nodded. He had a filing cabinet full of plans to send 7th Fleet west, and there was almost always one of his surface ships

making a "courtesy call" to that island. For his sailors, the Republic of China was one hell of a good liberty port, with lots of women whose services were subject to commercial negotiations. And having a gray U.S. Navy warship tied alongside pretty well put that city off-limits for a missile attack. Even scratching an American warship was classified delicately as a *casus belli*, a reason for war. And nobody thought the ChiComms were ready for that sort of thing yet. To keep things that way, Mancuso had his carriers doing constant workups, exercising their interceptor and strike-fighter forces in the manner of the 1980s. He always had at least one fast-attack or boomer slow-attack submarine in the Formosa Strait, too, something that was advertised only by casual references allowed to leak to the media from time to time. Only very rarely would a submarine make a local port call, however. They were more effective when not seen. But in another filing cabinet he had lots of periscope photos of Chinese warships, and some "hull shots," photos made from directly underneath, which was mainly good for testing the nerve of his submarine drivers.

He also occasionally had his people track ChiComm submarines, much as he'd done in *Dallas* against the former Soviet navy. But this was much easier. The Chinese nuclearpower plants were so noisy that fish avoided them to prevent damage to their ears, or so his sonarmen joked. As much as the PRC had rattled its saber at Taiwan, an actual attack, if opposed by his 7th Fleet, would rapidly turn into a bloody shambles, and he hoped Beijing knew that. If they didn't, finding out would be a messy and expensive exercise. But the ChiComms didn't have much in the way of amphibious capability yet, and showed no signs of building it.

"So, looks like a routine day in theater?" Mancuso asked, as the briefing wound down.

"Pretty much," General Lahr confirmed.

"What sort of assets do we have tasked to keep an eye on our Chinese friends?"

"Mainly overheads," the J-2 replied. "We've never had much in the way of human intelligence in the PRC—at least not that I ever heard about."

"Why is that?"

"Well, in simplest terms it would be kind of hard for you or me to disappear into their society, and most of our Asian citizens work for computer-software companies, last time I checked."

"Not many of them in the Navy. How about the Army?"

"Not many, sir. They're pretty underrepresented."

"I wonder why."

"Sir, I'm an intelligence officer, not a demographer," Lahr pointed out.

"I guess that job is hard enough, Mike. Okay, if anything interesting happens, let me know."

"You bet, sir." Lahr headed out the door, to be replaced by Mancuso's J-3 operations officer, who would tell him what all his theater assets were up to this fine day, plus which ships and airplanes were broken and needed fixing.

She hadn't gotten any less attractive, though getting her here had proven difficult. Tanya Bogdanova hadn't avoided anything, but she'd been unreachable for several days.

"You've been busy?" Provalov asked.

"*Da*, a special client," she said with a nod. "We spent time together in St. Petersburg. I didn't bring my beeper. He dislikes interruptions," she explained, without showing much in the way of remorse.

Provalov could have asked the cost of several days in this woman's company, and she would probably have told him, but he decided that he didn't need to know all that badly. She remained a vision, lacking only the white feathery wings to be an angel. Except for the eyes and the heart, of course. The former cold, and the latter nonexistent.

"I have a question," the police lieutenant told her.

"Yes?"

"A name. Do you know it? Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov."

Her eyes showed some amusement. "Oh, yes. I know him well." She didn't have to elaborate on what "well" meant.

"What can you tell me about him?"

"What do you wish to know?"

"His address, for starters."

"He lives outside Moscow."

"Under what name?"

"He does not know that I know, but I saw his papers once. Ivan Yurievich Koniev."

"How do you know this?" Provalov asked.

"He was asleep, of course, and I went through his clothes," she replied, as matter-of-factly as if she'd told the militia lieutenant where she shopped for bread.

So, he fucked you, and you, in turn, fucked him, Provalov didn't say. "Do you remember his address?"

She shook her head. "No, but it's one of the new communities off the outer ring road."

"When did you last see him?"

"It was a week before Gregoriy Filipovich died," she answered at once.

It was then that Provalov had a flash: "Tanya, the night before Gregoriy died, whom did you see?"

“He was a former soldier or something, let me think . . . Pyotr Alekseyevich . . . something . . .”

“Amalrik?” Provalov asked, almost coming off his seat.

“Yes, something like that. He had a tattoo on his arm, the Spetsnaz tattoo a lot of them got in Afghanistan. He thought very highly of himself, but he wasn’t a very good lover,” Tanya added dismissively.

And he never will be, Provalov could have said then, but didn’t. “Who set up that, ah, appointment?”

“Oh, that was Klementi Ivan’ch. He had an arrangement with Gregoriy. They knew each other, evidently for a long time. Gregoriy often made special appointments for Klementi’s friends.”

Suvorov had one or both of his killers fuck the whores belonging to the man they would kill the next day . . . ? Whoever Suvorov was, he had an active sense of humor . . . or the real target actually had been Sergey Nikolay’ch. Provalov had just turned up an important piece of information, but it didn’t seem to illuminate his criminal case at all. Another fact which only made his job harder, not easier. He was back to the same two possibilities: This Suvorov had contracted the two Spetsnaz soldiers to kill Rasputin, and then had them killed as “insurance” to avoid repercussions. Or he’d contracted them to eliminate Golovko, and then killed them for making a serious error. Which? He’d have to find this Suvorov to find out. But now he had a name and a probable location. And that was something he could work on.

CHAPTER 19

Manhunting

Things had quieted down at Rainbow headquarters in Hereford, England, to the point that both John Clark and Ding Chavez were starting to show the symptoms of restlessness. The training regimen was as demanding as ever, but nobody had ever drowned in sweat, and the targets, paper and electronic were—well, if not as *satisfying* as a real human miscreant wasn't the best way to put it, then maybe not as *exciting* was the right phrase. But the Rainbow team members didn't say that, even among themselves, for fear of appearing bloodthirsty and unprofessional. To them the studied mental posture was that it was all the same. Practice *was* bloodless battle, and battle *was* bloody drill. And certainly by taking their training so seriously, they were still holding a very fine edge. Fine enough to shave the fuzz off a baby's face.

The team had never gone public, at least not per se. But the word had leaked out somehow. Not in Washington, and not in London, but somewhere on the continent, the word had gotten out that NATO now had a very special and very capable counterterrorist team that had raped and pillaged its way through several high-profile missions, and only once taken any lumps, at the hands of Irish terrorists who had, however, paid a bitter price for their misjudgment. The European papers called them the "Men of Black" for their assault uniforms, and in their relative ignorance the European newsies had somehow made Rainbow even more fierce than reality justified. Enough so that the team had deployed to the Netherlands for a mission seven months before, a few weeks after the first news coverage had broken, and when the bad guys at the grammar school had found there were new folks in the neighborhood, they'd stumbled through a negotiating session with Dr. Paul Bellow and cut a deal before hostilities had to be initiated, which was pleasing for everyone. The idea of a shoot-out in a school full of kids hadn't even appealed to the Men of Black.

Over the last several months, some members had been hurt or rotated back to their parent services, and new members had replaced them. One of these was Ettore Falcone, a former member of the Carabinieri sent to Hereford as much for his own protection as to

assist the NATO team. Falcone had been walking the streets of Palermo in Sicily with his wife and infant son one pleasant spring evening when a shoot-out had erupted right before his eyes. Three criminals were hosing a pedestrian, his wife, and their police bodyguard with submachine guns, and in an instant Falcone had pulled out his Beretta and dropped all three with head shots from ten meters away. His action had been too late to save the victims, but not too late to incur the wrath of a *capo mafioso*, two of whose sons had been involved in the hit. Falcone had publicly spat upon the threat, but cooler heads had prevailed in Rome—the Italian government did not want a blood feud to erupt between the Mafia and its own federal police agency—and Falcone had been dispatched to Hereford to be the first Italian member of Rainbow. He had quickly proven himself to be the best pistol shot anyone had ever seen.

"Damn," John Clark breathed, after finishing his fifth string of ten shots. This guy had beaten him again! They called him Big Bird. Ettore —Hector—was about six-three and lean like a basketball player, the wrong size and shape for a counterterror trooper, but, Jesus, could this son of a bitch shoot!

"*Grazie*, General," the Italian said, collecting the fivepound note that had accompanied *this* blood feud.

And John couldn't even bitch that he'd done it for real, whereas Big Bird had only done it with paper. This spaghetti-eater had dropped three guys armed with SMGs, and done it with his wife and kid next to him. Not just a talented shooter, this guy had two big brass ones dangling between his legs. And his wife, Anna-Maria, was reputed to be a dazzling cook. In any case, Falcone had bested him by one point in a fifty-round shootoff. And John had practiced for a week before this grudge match.

"Ettore, where the hell did you learn to shoot?" RAINBOW Six demanded.

"At the police academy, General Clark. I never fired a gun before that, but I had a good instructor, and I learned well," the sergeant said, with a friendly smile. He wasn't the least bit arrogant about his talent, and somehow that just made it worse.

"Yeah, I suppose." Clark zippered his pistol into the carrying case and walked away from the firing line.

"You, too, sir?" Dave Woods, the rangemaster, said, as Clark made for the door.

"So I'm not the only one?" RAINBOW Six asked.

Woods looked up from his sandwich. "Bloody hell, that lad's got a fookin' letter of credit at the Green Dragon from besting me!" he announced. And Sergeant-Major Woods really *had* taught Wyatt Earp everything he knew. And at the SAS/Rainbow pub he'd probably

taught the new boy how to drink English bitter. Beating Falcone would not be easy. There just wasn't much room to take a guy who often as not shot a "possible," or perfect score.

"Well, Sergeant-Major, then I guess I'm in good company." Clark punched him on the shoulder as he headed out the door, shaking his head. Behind him, Falcone was firing another string. He evidently liked being Number One, and practiced hard to stay there. It had been a long time since anyone had bested him on a shooting range. John didn't like it, but fair was fair, and Falcone had won within the rules.

Was it just one more sign that he was slowing down? He wasn't running as fast as the younger troops at Rainbow, of course, and that bothered him, too. John Clark wasn't ready to be old yet. He wasn't ready to be a grandfather either, but he had little choice in that. His daughter and Ding had presented him with a grandson, and he couldn't exactly ask that they take him back. He was keeping his weight down, though that often required, as it had today, skipping lunch in favor of losing five paper-pounds at the pistol range.

"Well, how did it go, John?" Alistair Stanley asked, as Clark entered the office building.

"The kid's real good, Al," John replied, as he put his pistol in the desk drawer.

"Indeed. He won five pounds off me last week."

A grunt. "I guess that makes it unanimous." John settled in his swivel chair, like the "suit" he'd become. "Okay, anything come in while I was off losing money?"

"Just this from Moscow. Ought not to have come here anyway," Stanley told his boss, as he handed over the fax.

They want what?" Ed Foley asked in his seventh-floor office.

"They want us to help train some of their people," Mary Pat repeated for her husband. The original message had been crazy enough to require repetition.

"Jesus, girl, how ecumenical are we supposed to get?" the DCI demanded.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch thinks we owe him one. And you know . . ."

He had to nod at that. "Yeah, well, maybe we do, I guess. This has to go up the line, though."

"It ought to give Jack a chuckle," the Deputy Director (Operations) thought.

Shit," Ryan said in the Oval Office, when Ellen Sumter handed him the fax from Langley. Then he looked up. "Oh, excuse me, Ellen."

She smiled like a mother to a precocious son. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Got one I can . . . ?"

Mrs. Sumter had taken to wearing dresses with large slash pockets. From the left one, she fished out a flip-top box of Virginia Slims and offered it to her President, who took one out and lit it from the butane lighter also tucked in the box.

"Well, ain't this something?"

"You know this man, don't you?" Mrs. Sumter asked.

"Golovko? Yeah." Ryan smiled crookedly, again remembering the pistol in his face as the VC-137 thundered down the runway at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport all those years before. He could smile now. At the time, it hadn't seemed all that funny. "Oh, yeah, Sergey and I are old friends."

As a Presidential secretary, Ellen Sumter was cleared for just about everything, even the fact that President Ryan bummed the occasional smoke, but there were some things she didn't and would never know. She was smart enough to have curiosity, but also smart enough not to ask.

"If you say so, Mr. President."

"Thanks, Ellen." Ryan sat back down in his chair and took a long puff on the slender cigarette. Why was it that stress of any sort made him gravitate back to these damned things that made him cough? The good news was that they also made him dizzy. *So, that meant he wasn't a smoker, not really,* POTUS told himself. He read over the fax again. It had two pages. One was the original fax from Sergey Nikolay'ch to Langley—unsurprisingly, he had Mary Pat's direct fax line, and wanted to show off that fact—and the second was the recommendation from Edward Foley, his CIA director.

For all the official baggage, it was pretty simple stuff. Golovko didn't even have to explain *why* America had to accede to his request. The Foleys and Jack Ryan would know that KGB had assisted the CIA and the American government in two very sensitive and important missions, and the fact that both of them had also served Russian interests was beside the point. Thus Ryan had no alternative. He lifted the phone and punched a speed-dial button.

"Foley," the male voice at the other end said.

"Ryan," Jack said in turn. He then heard the guy at the other end sit up straighter in his chair. "Got the fax."

"And?" the DCI asked.

"And what the hell else can we do?"

"I agree." Foley could have said that he personally liked Sergey Golovko. Ryan did, too, as he knew. But this wasn't about like or don't-like. They were making government policy here, and that was bigger than personal factors. Russia had helped the United States of America, and now Russia was asking the United States of America for help in return. In the regular intercourse among nations, such

requests, if they had precedents, had to be granted. The principle was the same as lending your neighbor a rake after he had lent you a hose the previous day, just that at this level, people occasionally got killed from such favors. "You handle it or do I?"

"The request came to Langley. You do the reply. Find out what the parameters are. We don't want to compromise Rainbow, do we?"

"No, Jack, but there's not much chance of that. Europe's quieted down quite a bit. The Rainbow troopers are mainly exercising and punching holes in paper. That news story that ran—well, we might actually want to thank the putz who broke it." The DCI rarely said anything favorable about the press. And in this case some government puke had talked far too much about something he knew, but the net effect of the story had had the desired effect, even though the press account had been replete with errors, which was hardly surprising. But some of the errors had made Rainbow appear quite superhuman, which appealed to their egos and gave their potential enemies pause. And so, terrorism in Europe had slowed down to a crawl after its brief (and somewhat artificial, they knew now) rebirth. The Men of Black were just too scary to mess with. Muggers, after all, went after the little old ladies who'd just cashed their Social Security checks, not the armed cop on the corner. In this, criminals were just being rational. A little old lady can't resist a mugger very effectively, but a cop carries a gun.

"I expect our Russian friends will keep a lid on it."

"I think we can depend on that, Jack," Ed Foley agreed.

"Any reason not to do it?"

Ryan could hear the DCI shift in his seat. "I never have been keen on giving 'methods' away to anybody, but this isn't an intelligence operation per se, and most of it they could get from reading the right books. So, I guess we can allow it."

"Approved," the President said.

Ryan imagined he could see the nod at the other end. "Okay, the reply will go out today."

With a copy to Hereford, of course. It arrived on John's desk before closing time. He summoned Al Stanley and handed it to him.

"I suppose we're becoming famous, John."

"Makes you feel good, doesn't it?" Clark asked distastefully. Both were former clandestine operators, and if there had been a way to keep their own supervisors from knowing their names and activities, they would have found it long before.

"I presume you will go yourself. Whom will you take to Moscow with you?"

"Ding and Team-2. Ding and I have been there before. We've both

met Sergey Nikolay'ch. At least this way he doesn't see all that many new faces."

"Yes, and your Russian, as I recall, is first-rate."

"The language school at Monterey is pretty good," John said, with a nod.

"How long do you expect to be gone?"

Clark looked back down at the fax and thought it over for a few seconds. "Oh, not more than . . . three weeks," he said aloud. "Their Spetsnaz people aren't bad. We'll set up a training group for them, and after a while, we can probably invite them here, can't we?"

Stanley didn't have to point out that the SAS in particular, and the British Ministry of Defense in general, would have a conniption fit over that one, but in the end they'd have to go along with it. It was called diplomacy, and its principles set policy for most of the governments in the world, whether they liked it or not.

"I suppose we'll have to, John," Stanley said, already hearing the screams, shouts, and moans from the rest of the camp, and Whitehall.

Clark lifted his phone and hit the button for his secretary, Helen Montgomery. "Helen, could you please call Ding and ask him to come over? Thank you."

"His Russian is also good, as I recall."

"We had some good teachers. But his accent is a little southern."

"And yours?"

"Leningrad—well, St. Petersburg now, I guess. Al, do you believe all the changes?"

Stanley took a seat. "John, it is all rather mad, even today, and it's been well over ten years since they took down the red flag over the Spaskiy gate."

Clark nodded. "I remember when I saw it on TV, man. Flipped me out."

"Hey, John," a familiar voice called from the door. "Hi, Al."

"Come in and take a seat, my boy."

Chavez, simulated major in the SAS, hesitated at the "my boy" part. Whenever John talked that way, something unusual was about to happen. But it could have been worse. "Kid" was usually the precursor to danger, and now that he was a husband and a father, Domingo no longer went too far out of his way to look for trouble. He walked to Clark's desk and took the offered sheets of paper.

"Moscow?" he asked.

"Looks like our Commander-in-Chief has approved it."

"Super," Chavez observed. "Well, it's been a while since we met Mr. Golovko. I suppose the vodka's still good."

"It's one of the things they do well," John agreed.

"And they want us to teach them to do some other things?"

"Looks that way."

"Take the wives with us?"

"No." Clark shook his head. "This one's all business."

"When?"

"Have to work that out. Probably a week or so."

"Fair enough."

"How's the little guy?"

A grin. "Still crawling. Last night he started pulling himself up, standing, like. Imagine he'll start walking in a few days."

"Domingo, you spend the first year getting them to walk and talk. The next twenty years you spend getting them to sit down and shut up," Clark warned.

"Hey, Pop, the little guy sleeps all the way through the night, and he wakes up with a smile. Damned sight better than I can say for myself, y'know?" Which made sense. When Domingo woke up, all he had to look forward to was the usual exercises and a five-mile run, which was both strenuous and, after a while, boring.

Clark had to nod at that. It was one of the great mysteries of life, how infants always woke up in a good mood. He wondered where, in the course of years, one lost that.

"The whole team?" Chavez asked.

"Yeah, probably. Including BIG BIRD," RAINBOW Six added.

"Did he clean your clock today, too?" Ding asked.

"Next time I shoot against that son of a bitch, I want it right after the morning run, when he's a little shaky," Clark said crossly. He just didn't like to lose at much of anything, and certainly not something so much a part of his identity as shooting a handgun.

"Mr. C, Ettore just isn't human. With the MP, he's good, but not spectacular, but with that Beretta, he's like Tiger Woods with a pitching wedge. He just lays 'em dead."

"I didn't believe it until today. I think maybe I ought to have eaten lunch over at the Green Dragon."

"I hear you, John," Chavez agreed, deciding not to comment on his father-in-law's waist. "Hey, I'm pretty good with a pistol, too, remember. Ettore blew my ass away by three whole points."

"The bastard took me by one," John told his Team-2 commander. "First man-on-man match I've lost since Third SOG." And that was thirty years in the past, against his command-master-chief, for beers. He'd lost by two points, but beat the master-chief three straight after that, Clark remembered with pride.

Is that him?" Provalov asked.

"We don't have a photograph," his sergeant reminded him. "But he fits the general description." And he was walking to the right car.

Several cameras would be snapping now to provide the photos.

They were both in a van parked half a block from the apartment building they were surveilling. Both men were using binoculars, green, rubber-coated military-issue.

The guy looked about right. He'd come off the building's elevator, and had left the right floor. It had been established earlier in the evening that one Ivan Yurievich Koniev lived on the eighth floor of this upscale apartment building. There had not been time to question his neighbors, which had to be done carefully, in any case. There was more than the offchance that this Koniev/Suvorov's neighbors were, as he was reputed to be, former KGB, and thus asking them questions could mean alerting the subject of their investigation. This was not an ordinary subject, Provalov kept reminding himself.

The car the man got into was a rental. There was a private automobile registered to one Koniev, Ian Yurievich, at this address, a Mercedes C-class, and who was to say what other cars he might own under another identity? Provalov was sure he'd have more of those, and they'd all be very carefully crafted. The Koniev ID certainly was. KGB had trained its people thoroughly.

The sergeant in the driver's seat started up the van's motor and got on the radio. Two other police cars were in the immediate vicinity, both manned by pairs of experienced investigators.

"Our friend is moving. The blue rental car," Provalov said over the radio. Both of his cars radioed acknowledgments.

The rental car was a Fiat—a real one made in Turin rather than the Russian copy made at Togliattistad, one of the few special economic projects of the Soviet Union that had actually worked, after a fashion. Had it been selected for its agility, Provalov wondered, or just because it was a cheap car to rent? There was no knowing that right now. Koniev/Suvorov pulled out, and the first tail car formed up with him, half a block behind, while the second was half a block in front, because even a KGB-trained intelligence officer rarely looked for a tail *in front of* himself. A little more time and they might have placed a tracking device on the Fiat, but they hadn't had it, nor the darkness required. If he returned to his apartment, they'd do it late tonight, say about four in the morning. A radio beeper with a magnet to hold it onto the inside of the rear bumper; its antenna would hang down like a mouse's tail, virtually invisible. Some of the available technology Provalov was using had originally been used to track suspected foreign spies around Moscow, and that meant it was pretty good, at least by Russian standards.

Following the car was easier than he'd expected. Three trail cars helped. Spotting a single-car tail was not overly demanding. Two could also be identified, since the same two would switch off every

few minutes. But three shadow cars broke up the pattern nicely, and, KGB-trained or not, Koniev/Suvorov was not superhuman. His real defense lay in concealing his identity, and cracking that had been a combination of good investigation and luck—but cops knew about luck. KGB, on the other hand, didn't. In their mania for organization, their training program had left it out, perhaps because trusting to luck was a weakness that could lead to disaster in the field. That told Provalov that Koniev/Suvorov hadn't spent that much time in field operations. In the real world of working the street, you learned such things in a hurry.

The tailing was conducted at extreme range, over a block, and the city blocks were large ones here. The van had been specially equipped for it. The license-plate holders were triangular in cross-section, and at the flip of a switch one could switch from among three separate pairs of tags. The lights on the front of the vehicle were paired as well, and so one could change the light pattern, which was what a skilled adversary would look for at night. Switch them once or twice when out of sight of his rearview mirror, and he'd have to be a genius to catch on. The most difficult job went with the car doing the front-tail, since it was hard to read Koniev/Suvorov's mind, and when he made an unexpected turn, the lead car then had to scurry about under the guidance of the trailing shadow cars to regain its leading position. All of the militiamen on this detail, however, were experienced homicide investigators who'd learned how to track the most dangerous game on the planet: human beings who'd displayed the willingness to take another life. Even the stupid murderers could have animal cunning, and they learned a lot about police operations just from watching television. That made some of his investigations more difficult than they ought to have been, but in a case like this, the additional difficulty had served to train his men more thoroughly than any academy training would have done.

"Turning right," his driver said into his radio. "Van takes the lead." The leading trail car would proceed to the next right turn, make it, and then race to resume its leading position. The trailing car would drop behind the van, falling off the table for a few minutes before resuming its position. The trail car was a Fiat-clone from Togliattistad, by far the most common private-passenger auto in Russia, and therefore fairly anonymous, with its dirty off-white paint job.

"If that's his only attempt at throwing us off, he's very confident of himself."

"True," Provalov agreed. "Let's see what else he does."

The "what else" took place four minutes later. The Fiat took another right turn, this one not onto a cross-street, but into the underpass of another apartment building, one that straddled an entire block.

Fortunately, the lead trail car was already on the far side of the building, trying to catch up with the Fiat, and had the good fortune to see Koniev/Suvorov appear thirty meters in front.

"We have him," the radio crackled. "We'll back off somewhat."

"Go!" Provalov told his driver, who accelerated the van to the next corner. Along the way, he toggled the switch to flip the license plates and change the headlight pattern, converting the van into what at night would seem a new vehicle entirely.

"He is confident," Provalov observed five minutes later. The van was now in close-trail, with the lead trail car behind the van, and the other surveillance vehicle close behind that one. Wherever he was going, they were on him. He'd run his evasion maneuver, and a clever one it had been, but only one. Perhaps he thought that one such SDR —surveillance—detection run—was enough, that if he were being trailed it would only be a single vehicle, and so he'd run that underpass, eyes on the rearview mirror, and spotted nothing. Very good, the militia lieutenant thought. It was a pity he didn't have his American FBI friend along. The FBI could scarcely have done this better, even with its vast resources. It didn't hurt that his men knew the streets of Moscow and its suburbs as well as any taxi driver.

"He's getting dinner and a drink somewhere," Provalov's driver observed. "He'll pull over in the next kilometer."

"We shall see," the lieutenant said, thinking his driver right. This area had ten or eleven upscale eateries. Which would his quarry choose . . . ?

It turned out to be the Prince Michael of Kiev, a Ukrainian establishment specializing in chicken and fish, known also for its fine bar. Koniev/Suvorov pulled over and allowed the restaurant's valet to park his vehicle, then walked in.

"Who's the best dressed among us?" Provalov asked over the radio.

"You are, Comrade Lieutenant." His other two teams were attired as working-class people, and that wouldn't fly here. Half of the Prince Michael of Kiev's clientele were foreigners, and you had to dress well around such people—the restaurant saw to that. Provalov jumped out half a block away and walked briskly to the canopied entrance. The doorman admitted him after a look—in the new Russia, clothing made the man more than in most European nations. He could have flashed his police ID, but that might not be a good move. Koniev/Suvorov might well have some of the restaurant staff reporting to him. That was when he had a flash of imagination. Provalov immediately entered the men's lavatory and pulled out his cellular phone.

"Hello?" a familiar voice said on picking up the receiver.

"Mishka?"

"Oleg?" Reilly asked. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know a restaurant called the Prince Michael of Kiev?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"I need your help. How quickly can you get here?" Provalov asked, knowing that Reilly lived only two kilometers away.

"Ten or fifteen minutes."

"Quickly, then. I'll be at the bar. Dress presentably," the militiaman added.

"Right," Reilly agreed, wondering how he'd explain it to his wife, and wondering why he'd had his quiet evening in front of the TV interrupted.

Provalov headed back to the bar, ordered a pepper vodka, and lit a cigarette. His quarry was seven seats away, also having a solitary drink, perhaps waiting for his table to become available. The restaurant was full. A string quartet was playing some Rimsky-Korsakov on the far side of the dining room. The restaurant was far above anything Provalov could afford as a regular part of his life. So, Koniev/Suvorov was well set financially. That was no particular surprise. A lot of ex—KGB officers were doing very well indeed in the economic system of the new Russia. They had worldly ways and knowledge that few of their fellow citizens could match. In a society known for its burgeoning corruption, they had a corner on the market, and a network of fellow-travelers to call upon, with whom they could, for various considerations, share their gains, ill-gotten or not.

Provalov had finished his first drink, and had motioned to the bartender for another when Reilly appeared.

"Oleg Gregoriyevich," the American said in greeting. He was no fool, the Russian militia lieutenant realized. The American's Russian was manifestly American and overloud, a fine backward stealth for this environment. He was well dressed also, proclaiming his foreign origin to all who saw him.

"Mishka!" Provalov said in response, taking the American's hand warmly and waving to the bartender.

"Okay, who we looking for?" the FBI agent asked more quietly.

"The gray suit, seven seats to my left."

"Got him," Reilly said at once. "Who is he?"

"He is currently under the name Koniev, Ivan Yurievich. In fact we believe him to be Suvorov, Klementi Ivan'ch."

"Aha," Reilly observed. "What else can you tell me?"

"We trailed him here. He used a simple but effective evasion method, but we have three cars tracking him, and we picked him right back up."

"Good one, Oleg," the FBI agent said. Inadequately trained and poorly equipped or not, Provalov was a no-shit copper. In the Bureau, he'd be at least a supervisory special agent. Oleg had fine cop

instincts. Tracking a KGB type around Moscow was no trivial exercise, like following a paranoid button-man in Queens. Reilly sipped his pepper vodka and turned sideways in his seat. On the far side of the subject was a dark-haired beauty wearing a slinky black dress. She looked like another of those expensive hookers to Reilly, and her shingle was out. Her dark eyes were surveying the room as thoroughly as his. The difference was that Reilly was a guy, and looking at a pretty girl—or seeming to—was not the least bit unusual. In fact, his eyes were locked not on the woman, but the man. Fifty-ish, well turned out, nondescript in overall appearance, just as a spy was supposed to be, looked to be waiting for a table, nursing his drink and looking studiously in the bar's mirror, which was a fine way to see if he were being watched. The American and his Russian friend he dismissed, of course. What interest could an American businessman have in him, after all? And besides, the American was eyeing the whore to his left. For that reason, the subject's eyes did not linger on the men to his right, either directly or in the mirror. Oleg *was* smart, Reilly thought, using *him* as camouflage for his discreet surveillance.

"Anything else turn lately?" the FBI agent asked. Provalov filled in what he'd learned about the hooker and what had happened the night before the murders. "Damn, that is swashbuckling. But you still don't know who the target was, do you?"

"No," Provalov admitted, with a sip of his second drink. He'd have to go easy on the alcohol, he knew, lest he make a mistake. His quarry was too slick and dangerous to take any sort of risk at all. He could always bring the guy in for questioning, but he knew that would be a fruitless exercise. Criminals like this one had to be handled as gently as a cabinet minister. Provalov allowed his eyes to look into the mirror, where he got a good look at the profile of a probable multiple murderer. Why was it that there was no black halo around such people? Why did they look normal?

"Anything else we know about the mutt?"

The Russian had come to like that American term. He shook his head. "No, Mishka. We haven't checked with SVR yet."

"Worried that he might have a source inside the building?" the American asked. Oleg nodded.

"That is a consideration." And an obvious one. The fraternity of former KGB officers was probably a tight one. There might well be someone inside the old headquarters building, say someone in personnel records, who'd let people know if the police showed interest in any particular file.

"Damn," the American noted, thinking, *You son of a bitch, fucking the guy's hookers before you waste him*. There was a disagreeable coldness to it, like something from a Mafia movie. But in real life, La

Cosa Nostra members didn't have the stones for such a thing. Formidable as they might be, Mafia button-men didn't have the training of a professional intelligence officer, and were tabby cats next to panthers in this particular jungle. Further scrutiny of the subject. The girl beyond him was a distraction, but not that much.

"Oleg?"

"Yes, Mikhail?"

"He's looking at somebody over by the musicians. His eyes keep coming back to the same spot. He isn't scanning the room like he was at first." The subject did check out everyone who came into the restaurant, but his eyes kept coming back to one part of the mirror, and he'd probably determined that nobody in the place was a danger to him. Oops. Well, Reilly thought, even training has its limitations, and sooner or later your own expertise could work against you. You fell into patterns, and you made assumptions that could get you caught. In this case, Suvorov assumed that no American could be watching him. After all, he'd done nothing to any Americans in Moscow, and maybe not in his entire career, and he was on friendly, not foreign ground, and he'd dusted off his tail on the way over in the way he always did, looking for a single tail car. Well, the smart ones knew their limitations. How did it go? The difference between genius and stupidity was that genius knew that it had limits. This Suvorov guy thought himself a genius . . . but whom was he looking at? Reilly turned a little more on his bar stool and scanned that part of the room.

"What do you see, Mishka?"

"A lot of people, Oleg Gregoriyevich, mainly Russians, some foreigners, all well-dressed. Some Chinese, look like two diplomats dining with two Russians—they look like official types. Looks cordial enough," Reilly thought. He'd eaten here with his wife three or four times. The food was pretty good, especially the fish. And they had a good source of caviar at the Prince Michael of Kiev, which was one of the best things you could get over here. His wife loved it, and would have to learn that getting it at home would be a lot more expensive than it was here. . . . Reilly'd done discreet surveillance for so many years that he had trained himself to be invisible. He could fit in just about anyplace but Harlem, and the Bureau had black agents to handle that.

Sure as hell, that Suvorov guy was looking in the same place. Casually, perhaps, and using the bar's mirror to do it. He even sat so that his eyes naturally looked at the same place as he sat on his bar stool. But people like this subject didn't do anything by accident or coincidence. They were trained to think through everything, even taking a leak . . . it was remarkable, then, that he'd been turned so

stupidly. By a hooker who'd gone through his things while he was sleeping off an orgasm. Well, some men, no matter how smart, thought with their dicks. . . . Reilly turned again. . . . one of the Chinese men at the distant table excused himself and stood, heading for the men's room. Reilly thought to do the same at once, but . . . no. If it were prearranged, such a thing could spook it . . . *Patience, Mishka*, he told himself, turning back to look at the principal subject. Koniev/Suvorov set down his drink and stood.

"Oleg. I want you to point me toward the men's room," the FBI agent said. "In fifteen seconds."

Provalov counted out the time, then extended his arm toward the main entrance. Reilly patted him on the shoulder and headed that way.

The Prince Michael of Kiev restaurant was nice, but it didn't have a bathroom attendant, as many European places did, perhaps because Americans were uneasy with the custom, or maybe because the management thought it an unnecessary expense. Reilly entered and saw three urinals, two of them being used. He unzipped and urinated, then rezipped and turned to wash his hands, looking down as he did so . . . and just out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other two men share a sideways look. The Russian was taller. The men's room had the sort of pull-down roller towel that America had largely done away with. Reilly pulled it down and dried his hands, unable to wait too much longer. Heading toward the door, he reached in his pocket and pulled his car keys part of the way out. These he dropped just as he pulled the door open, with a muttered, "Damn," as he bent down to pick them up, shielded from their view by the steel divider. Reilly picked them off the tile floor and stood back up.

Then he saw it. It was well done. They could have been more patient, but they probably both discounted the importance of the American, and both were trained professionals. They scarcely touched each other, and what touching and bumping there was happened below the waist and out of sight to the casual observer. Reilly wasn't a casual observer, however, and even out of the corner of his eyes, it was obvious to the initiated. It was a classic brush-pass, so well done that even Reilly's experience couldn't determine who had passed what to whom. The FBI agent continued out, heading back to his seat at the bar, where he waved to the barkeep for the drink he figured he'd just earned.

"Yes?"

"You want to identify that Chinaman. He and our friend traded something in the shitter. Brush-pass, and nicely done," Reilly said, with a smile and a gesture at the brunette down the bar. Good enough, in fact, that had Reilly been forced to sit in a witness stand

and describe it to a jury, a week-old law-school graduate could make him admit that he hadn't actually seen anything at all. But that told him much. That degree of skill was either the result of a totally chance encounter between two entirely innocent people—the purest of coincidences—or it had been the effort of two trained intelligence officers applying their craft at a perfect place in a perfect way. Provalov was turned the right way to see the two individuals leave the men's room. They didn't even notice each other, or didn't appear to acknowledge the presence of the other any more than they would have greeted a stray dog—exactly as two unrelated people would act after a happenstance encounter with a total stranger in any men's room anywhere. But this time as Koniev/Suvorov resumed his seat at the bar, he tended to his drink and didn't have his eyes interrogate the mirror regularly. In fact, he turned and greeted the girl to his left, then waved for the bartender to get her another drink, which she accepted with a warm, commercial smile. Her face proclaimed the fact that she'd found her trick for the night. The girl could act, Reilly thought.

"Well, our friend's going to get laid tonight," he told his Russian colleague.

"She is pretty," Provalov agreed. "Twenty-three, you think?"

"Thereabouts, maybe a little younger. Nice hooters."

"Hooters?" the Russian asked.

"Tits, Oleg, tits," the FBI agent clarified. "That Chinaman's a spook. See any coverage on him around?"

"No one I know," the lieutenant replied. "Perhaps he is not known to be an intelligence officer."

"Yeah, sure, your counterintelligence people have all retired to Sochi, right? Hell, guy, they trail me every so often."

"That means I am one of your agents, then?" Provalov asked.

A chuckle. "Let me know if you want to defect, Oleg Gregoriyevich."

"The Chinese in the light blue suit?"

"That's the one. Short, about five-four, one fifty-five, pudgy, short hair, about forty-five or so."

Provalov translated that to about 163 centimeters and seventy kilos, and made a mental note as he turned to look at the face, about thirty meters away. He looked entirely ordinary, as most spies did. With that done, he headed back to the men's room to make a phone call to his agents outside.

And that pretty much ended the evening. Koniev/Suvorov left the restaurant about twenty minutes later with the girl on his arm, and drove straight back to his apartment. One of the men who'd stayed behind walked with the Chinese to his car, which had diplomatic

plates. Notes were written down, and the cops all headed home after an overtime day, wondering what they'd turned up and how important it might be.

CHAPTER 20

Diplomacy

Well?" Rutledge took his notes back from Secretary Adler.

"It looks okay, Cliff, assuming that you can deliver the message in an appropriate way," SecState told his subordinate.

"Process is something I understand." Then he paused. "The President wants this message delivered in unequivocal terms, correct?"

Secretary Adler nodded. "Yep."

"You know, Scott, I've never really landed on people this hard before."

"Ever want to?"

"The Israelis a few times. South Africa," he added thoughtfully.

"But never the Chinese or Japanese?"

"Scott, I've never been a trade guy before, remember?" But he was this time, because the mission to Beijing was supposed to be high-profile, requiring a higher-level diplomat instead of someone of mere ambassadorial rank. The Chinese knew this already. In their case negotiations would be handled publicly by their Foreign Minister, though they would actually be run by a lesser-ranked diplomat who was a foreign-trade specialist, and who had experienced a good run of luck dealing with America. Secretary Adler, with President Ryan's permission, was slowly leaking to the press that the times and the rules might have changed a little bit. He worried that Cliff Rutledge wasn't exactly the right guy to deliver the message, but Cliff was the on-deck batter.

"How are you working out with this Gant guy from Treasury?"

"If he were a diplomat, we'd be at war with the whole damned world, but I suppose he does know numbers and computers, probably," Rutledge allowed, not troubling to hide his distaste for the Chicago-born Jew with his nouveau-riche ways. That Rutledge had been of modest origins himself was long forgotten. A Harvard education and a diplomatic passport help one forget such distasteful things as having grown up in a row house, eating leftovers.

"Remember that Winston likes him, and Ryan likes Winston, okay?" Adler warned his subordinate gently. He decided not to concern

himself with Cliff's WASP-ish anti-Semitism. Life was too short for trivialities, and Rutledge knew that his career rested in Scott Adler's hands. He might make more money as a consultant after leaving the State Department, but being fired out of Foggy Bottom would not enhance his value on the free-agent market.

"Okay, Scott, and, yeah, I need backup on the monetary aspects of this trade stuff." The accompanying nod was almost respectful. Good. He did know how to grovel when required. Adler didn't even consider telling Rutledge about the intelligence source in his pocket, courtesy of POTUS. There was something about the career diplomat that failed to inspire trust in his superior.

"What about communications?"

"The Embassy in Beijing has TAPDANCE capability. Even the new phone kind, same as the airplane." But there were problems with it, recently fielded by Fort Meade. The instruments had trouble linking up with each other, and using a satellite lash-up didn't help at all. Like most diplomats, Rutledge rarely troubled himself with such trivialities. He often expected the intelligence to appear as if by magic, rarely wondering how it had been obtained, but *always* questioning the motives of the source, whoever that might be. All in all, Clifford Rutledge II was the perfect diplomat. He believed in little beyond his own career, some vague notions of international amity, and his personal ability to make it come about and to avoid war through the sheer force of his brilliance.

But on the plus side, Adler admitted to himself, Rutledge was a competent diplomatic technician who knew how the banter worked, and how to present a position in the gentlest possible but still firm terms. The State Department never had enough of those. As someone had once remarked of Theodore Roosevelt, "The nicest gentleman who ever slit a throat." But Cliff would never do that, even to advance his own career. He probably shaved with an electric razor, not for fear of cutting himself so much as fear of actually seeing blood.

"When's your plane leave?" EAGLE asked his subordinate.

Barry Wise was already packed. He was an expert at it, as well he might be, because he traveled about as much as an international airline pilot. At fifty-four, the black ex-Marine had worked for CNN since its beginnings more than twenty years before, and he'd seen it all. He'd covered the contras in Nicaragua, and the first bombing missions in Baghdad. He'd been there when mass graves were excavated in Yugoslavia, and done live commentary over Rwanda's roads of death, simultaneously wishing that he could and thanking God that he could not broadcast the ghastly smells that still haunted his dreams. A news professional, Wise regarded his mission in life to

be this: to transmit the truth from where it happened to where people were interested in it—and helping them to become interested if they were not. He didn't have much of a personal ideology, though he was a great believer in justice, and one of the ways to make justice happen was to give the correct information to the jury—in his case, the television-watching public. He and people like him had changed South Africa from a racist state into a functioning democracy, and he'd also played a role in destroying world communism. The truth, he figured, was about the most powerful weapon in the world, if you had a way of getting it to the average Joe. Unlike most members of his business, Wise respected Joe Citizen, at least the ones who were smart enough to watch him. They wanted the truth, and it was his job to deliver it to them to the best of his abilities, which he often doubted, as he constantly asked himself how well he was doing.

He kissed his wife on the way out the door, promising to bring back things for the kids, as he always did, and lugging his travel bag out to his one personal indulgence, a red Mercedes two-seater, which he then drove south to the D.C. Beltway and south again toward Andrews Air Force Base. He had to arrive early, because the Air Force had gotten overly security-conscious. Maybe it was from that dumbass movie that had had terrorists getting past all the armed guards—even though they were merely Air Force, not Marines, they did carry rifles, and they did at least *appear* to be competent—and aboard one of the 89th Military Airlift Wing's aircraft, which, Wise figured, was about as likely as having a pickpocket walk into the Oval Office and lift the President's wallet. But the military followed its own rules, senseless though they might be—that was something he remembered well from his time in the Corps. So, he'd drive down, pass through all the checkpoints, whose guards knew him better than they knew their own CO, and wait in the plush Distinguished Visitors' lounge at the end of Andrews' Runway Zero-One Left for the official party to arrive. Then they'd board the venerable VC-137 for the endless flight to Beijing. The seats were as comfortable as they could be on an airplane, and the service was as good as any airline's first class, but flights this long were never fun.

Never been there before," Mark Gant said, answering George Winston's question. "So—what's the score on this Rutledge guy?"

The SecTreas shrugged. "Career State Department puke, worked his way pretty far up the ladder. Used to have good political connections—he was tight with Ed Kealty once upon a time."

The former stock trader looked up. "Oh? Why hasn't Ryan fired his ass?"

"Jack doesn't play that sort of game," Winston replied, wondering if

in this case principle was getting in the way of common sense.

"George, he's still pretty naive, isn't he?"

"Maybe so, but he's a straight shooter, and I can live with that. He sure as hell backed us up on tax policy, and that's going to pass through Congress in another few weeks."

Gant wouldn't believe that until he saw it. "Assuming every lobbyist in town doesn't jump in front of the train."

That engendered an amused grunt. "So, the wheels get greased a little better. You know, wouldn't it be nice to close all those bastards down . . . ?"

George, Gant couldn't say in this office, *if you believe that, you've been hanging out with the President too long*. But idealism wasn't all that bad a thing, was it?

"I'll settle for squeezing those Chinese bastards on the trade balance. Ryan's going to back us up?"

"All the way, he says. And I believe him, Mark."

"I guess we'll see. I hope this Rutledge guy can read numbers."

"He went to Harvard," Secretary Winston observed.

"I know," Gant said back. He had his own academic prejudice, having graduated from the University of Chicago twenty years earlier. What the hell was Harvard except a name and an endowment?

Winston chuckled. "They're not all dumb."

"I suppose we'll see, boss. Anyway"—he lifted his suitcase up on its rollers; his computer bag went over his shoulder—"my car's waiting downstairs."

"Good trip, Mark."

Her name was Yang Lien-Hua. She was thirty-four, nine months pregnant, and very frightened. It was her second pregnancy. Her first had been a son whom they had named Ju-Long, a particularly auspicious given name, which translated roughly as Large Dragon. But the youngster had died at the age of four, bumped by a bicycle off the sidewalk into the path of a passenger bus. His death had devastated his parents, and even saddened the local Communist Party officials who'd officiated at the inquest, which had absolved the bus driver of guilt and never identified the careless bicyclist. The loss has been sufficiently hard on Mrs. Yang that she'd sought comfort in a way that this country's government did not especially approve.

That way was Christianity, the foreign religion despised in fact if not exactly in law. In another age she might have found solace in the teachings of Buddha or Confucius, but these, too, had been largely erased from the public consciousness by the Marxist government, which still regarded all religion as a public narcotic. A co-worker had quietly suggested that she meet a "friend" of hers, a man named Yu Fa

An. Mrs. Yang had sought him out, and so had begun her first adventure in treason.

Reverend Yu, she found, was a well-educated and -traveled man, which added to his stature in her eyes. He was also a fine listener, who attended to her every word, occasionally pouring her some sympathetic tea, and gently touching her hand when tears streamed down her face. Only when she had finished her tale of woe had he begun his own lessons.

Ju-Long, he told her, was with God, because God was especially solicitous to the needs of innocent children. While she could not see her son at this moment, her son could see her, looking down from Heaven, and while her sorrow was completely understandable, she should believe that the God of the Earth was a God of Mercy and Love who had sent his Only Begotten Son to earth to show mankind the right path, and to give His own life for the sins of humanity. He handed her a Bible printed in the *Gouyu,* the national language of the PRC (also called Mandarin), and helped her find appropriate passages.

It had not been easy for Mrs. Yang, but so deep was her grief that she kept returning for private counseling, finally bringing along her husband, Quon. Mr. Yang proved a harder sell on any religion. He'd served his time in the People's Liberation Army, where he'd been thoroughly indoctrinated in the politics of his nation, and done sufficiently well in his test answers to be sent off to sergeant school, for which political reliability was required. But Quon had been a good father to his little Large Dragon, and he, too, found the void in his belief system too large to bridge easily. This bridge the Reverend Yu provided, and soon both of the Yangs came to his discreet church services, and gradually they'd come to accept their loss with confidence in the continued life of Ju-Long, and the belief that they would someday see him again in the presence of an Almighty God, whose existence became increasingly real to both of them.

Until then, life had to go on. Both worked at their jobs, as factory workers in the same factory, with a working-class apartment in the Di'Anmen district of Beijing near Jingshan—Coal Hill—Park. They labored at their factory during the day, watched state-run television at night, and in due course, Lien-Hua became pregnant again.

And ran afoul of the government's population-control policy that was well to the left of draconian. It had long since been decreed that any married couple could have but one child. A second pregnancy required official government permission. Though this was not generally denied to those whose first child had died, pro forma permission had to be obtained, and in the case of politically unacceptable parents, this permission was generally withheld as a method of controlling the living population, as well. *That* meant that

an unauthorized pregnancy had to be terminated. Safely, and at state expense in a state hospital—but terminated.

Christianity translated exactly into political unreliability for the communist government, and unsurprisingly the Ministry of State Security had inserted intelligence officers into Reverend Yu's congregation. This individual—actually there were three, lest one be corrupted by religion and become unreliable himself—had entered the names of the Yangs on a master list of political unreliables. For that reason, when Mrs. Yang Lien-Hua had duly registered her pregnancy, an official letter had appeared in her box, instructing her to go to the Longfu Hospital located on Meishuguan Street for a therapeutic abortion.

This Lien-Hua was unwilling to do. Her given name translated as "Lotus Flower," but inside she was made of much sterner stuff. She wrote a week later to the appropriate government agency, telling them that her pregnancy had miscarried. Given the nature of bureaucracies, her lie was never checked out.

That lie had merely won Lotus Flower six months of ever-increasing stress. She never saw a physician, not even one of the "barefoot medics" that the PRC had invented a generation earlier, much to the admiration of political leftists all over the world. Lien-Hua was healthy and strong, and the human body had been designed by Nature to produce healthy offspring long before the advent of obstetricians. Her swelling belly she was able to hide, mostly, in her ill-fitting clothing. What she could not hide—at least from herself—was her inward fear. She carried a new baby in her belly. She wanted it. She wanted to have another chance at motherhood. She wanted to feel her child suckling at her breast. She wanted to love it and pamper it, watch it learn to crawl and stand and walk and talk, to see it grow beyond four years, enter school, learn and grow into a good adult of whom she could be proud.

The problem was politics. The state enforced its will with ruthlessness. She knew what could happen, the syringe filled with formaldehyde stabbed into the baby's head at the very moment of birth. In China, it was state policy. For the Yangs, it was premeditated, cold-blooded murder, and they were determined not to lose a second child, who, the Reverend Yu had told them, was a gift from God Himself.

And there was a way. If you delivered the baby at home without medical assistance, and if the baby took its first breath, then the state would not kill it. There were some things even the government of the People's Republic quailed at, and the killing of a living, breathing human infant was one of them. But until it took that breath, it was of no more consequence than a piece of meat in a market. There were

even rumors that the Chinese government was selling organs from the aborted newborns on the world's tissue market, to be used for medical purposes, and that was something the Yangs were able to believe.

So, their plan was for Lien-Hua to deliver the child at home, after which they would present their state with *a fait accompli*—and eventually have it baptized by Reverend Yu. To this end, Mrs. Yang had kept herself in good physical shape, walking two kilometers every day, eating sensibly, and generally doing all the things the government-published booklets told expectant mothers to do. And if anything went badly wrong, they'd go to Reverend Yu for counsel and advice. The plan enabled Lien-Hua to deal with the stress—in fact it was a heart-rending terror—of her unauthorized condition.

Well?" Ryan asked.

"Rutledge has all the right talents, and we've given him the instructions he needs. He ought to carry them out properly. Question is, will the Chinese play ball."

"If they don't, things become harder for them," the President said, if not coldly, then with some degree of determination. "If they think they can bully us, Scott, it's time they found out who the big kid in the playground is."

"They'll fight back. They've taken out options on fourteen Boeing 777s—just did that four days ago, remember? That's the first thing they'll chop if they don't like us. That's a lot of money and a lot of jobs for Boeing in Seattle," SecState warned.

"I never have been real big on blackmail, Scott. Besides, that's a classic case of penny-wise, pound-foolish. If we cave because of that, then we lose ten times the money and ten times the jobs elsewhere—okay, they won't be all in one place, and so the TV news guys won't be able to point their cameras, and so they won't do the real story, just the one that can fit on half-inch tape. But I'm not in here to keep the goddamned media happy. I'm here to serve the people to the best of my ability, Scott. And that's by-God going to happen," POTUS promised his guest.

"I don't doubt it, Jack," Adler responded. "Just remember that it won't play out quite the way you want it to."

"It never does, but if they play rough, it's going to cost them seventy billion dollars a year. We can afford to do without their products. Can they afford to do without our money?" Ryan asked.

Secretary Adler was not totally comfortable with the way the question was posed. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see."

CHAPTER 21

Simmering

So, what did you develop last night?" Reilly asked. He'd be late to his embassy office, but his gut told him that things were breaking loose in the RPG Case—that was how he thought of it—and Director Murray had a personal interest in the case, because the President did, and *that* made it more important than the routine bullshit on Reilly's desk.

"Our Chinese friend—the one in the men's room, that is—is the Third Secretary at their mission. Our friends across town at SVR have suspected that he is a member of their Ministry for State Security. He's not regarded as a particularly bright diplomat by the Foreign Ministry—ours, that is."

"That's how you cover a spook," Reilly agreed. "A dumb cookie-pusher. Okay, so he's a player."

"I agree, Mishka," Provalov said. "Now, it would be nice to know who passed what to whom."

"Oleg Gregoriyevich"—Reilly liked the semiformal Russian form of address—"if I'd been standing right there and staring, I might not have been able to tell." That was the problem dealing with real professionals. They were as good at that maneuver as a Vegas dealer was with a deck of Bicycles. You needed a good lens and a slow-motion camera to be sure, and that was a little bulky for work in the field. But they'd just proved, to their satisfaction at least, that both men were active in the spook business, and that was a break in the case any way you sliced it. "ID the girl?"

"Yelena Ivanova Dimitrova." Provalov handed the folder across. "Just a whore, but, of course, a very expensive one."

Reilly flipped it open and scanned the notes. Known prostitute specializing in foreigners. The photo of her was unusually flattering.

"You came in early this morning?" Reilly asked. He must have, to have all this work done already.

"Before six," Oleg confirmed. The case was becoming more exciting for him as well. "In any case, Klementi Ivan'ch kept her all night. She left his apartment and caught a taxi home at seven-forty this morning. She looked happy and satisfied, according to my people."

That was good for a chuckle. She didn't leave her trick until after Oleg hit the office? *That* must have affected his attitude somewhat, Reilly thought, with an inward grin. It sure as hell would have affected his. "Well, good for our subject. I expect he won't be getting too much of that in a few months," the FBI agent thought aloud, hoping it would make his Russian colleague a little happier about life.

"One can hope," Provalov agreed coldly. "I have four men watching his apartment. If he leaves and appears to be heading away for a while, I will try to get a team into his apartment to plant some electronic surveillance."

"They know how to be careful?" Reilly asked. If this Suvorov mutt was as trained as they thought, he'd leave telltales in his apartment that could make breaking in dicey.

"They are KGB-trained also. One of them helped catch a French intelligence officer back in the old times. Now, I have a question for you," the Russian cop said.

"Shoot."

"What do you know of a special counterterrorist group based in England?"

"The 'Men of Black,' you mean?"

Provalov nodded. "Yes. Do you know anything about them?"

Reilly knew he had to watch his words, even though he knew damned little. "Really, I don't know anything more than what I've seen in the papers. It's some sort of multinational NATO group, part military and part police, I think. They had a good run of luck last year. Why do you ask?"

"A request from on high, because I know you. I've been told that they are coming to Moscow to assist in training our people—Spetsnaz groups with similar tasks," Oleg explained.

"Really? Well, I've never been in the muscle end of the Bureau, just in a local SWAT team once. Gus Werner probably knows a lot about them. Gus runs the new Counter-Terrorism Division at Headquarters. Before that, Gus ran HRT and had a field command—a field division, that is, a big-city field office. I've met him once, just to say hello. Gus has a very good service rep."

"Rep?"

"Reputation, Oleg. He's well regarded by the field agents. But like I said, that's the muscle end of the Bureau. I've always been with the chess players."

"Investigations, you mean."

Reilly nodded. "That's right. It's what the FBI is supposed to be all about, but the outfit's mutated a bit over the years." The American paused. "So, you're covering this Suvorov/Koniev guy real tight?" Reilly asked, to recenter the discussion.

"My men have orders to be discreet, but yes, we will keep a close eye on him, as you say."

"You know, if he really is working with the Chinese spooks . . . do you think they might want to kill that Golovko guy?"

"I do not know, but we must regard that as a real possibility."

Reilly nodded, thinking this would make an interesting report to send to Washington, and maybe discuss with the CIA station chief as well.

I want the files for everyone who ever worked with him," Sergey Nikolay'ch ordered. "And I want *you* to get me his personal file."

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," Major Shelepin replied, with a bob of the head.

The morning briefing, delivered by a colonel of the militia, had pleased neither the SVR Chairman nor his principal bodyguard. In this case, for a change, the legendarily slow Russian bureaucracy had been circumvented, and the information fast-tracked to those interested in it. That included the man whose life might have been spared accidentally after all.

"And we will set up a special-action group to work with this Provalov child."

"Of course, Comrade Chairman."

It was strange, Sergey Nikolay'ch thought, how rapidly the world could change. He vividly remembered the morning of the murder—it was not the sort of thing a man could forget. But after the first few days of shock and attendant fear, he'd allowed himself to relax, to believe that this Avseyenko had been the real target of an underworld rub out—an archaic American term he liked—and that his own life had never been directly threatened. With the acceptance of that belief, the entire thing had become like driving past an ordinary traffic accident. Even if some unfortunate motorist had been killed there at the side of the road, you just dismissed it as an irrelevance, because that sort of thing couldn't happen to you in your own expensive official car, not with Anatoliy driving. But now he'd begun to wonder if perhaps his life had been *spared* by accident. Such things were not supposed to occur—there shouldn't have been any need for them.

Now he was more frightened than he'd been that bright Moscow morning, looking down from his window at the smoking wreck on the pavement. It meant that he might be in danger still, and he dreaded that prospect as much as the next man.

Worse still, his hunter might well be one of his own, a former KGB officer with connections to Spetsnaz, and if he were in contact with the Chinese . . .

. . . But why would the Chinese wish to end his life? For that matter,

why would the Chinese wish to perform any such crime in a foreign land? It was beyond imprudent.

None of this made any sense, but as a career intelligence officer, Golovko had long since shed the illusion that the world was supposed to make sense. What he did know was that he needed more information, and at least he was in a very good place to seek it out. If he wasn't as powerful as he might once have been, he was still powerful enough for his own purposes, Golovko told himself.

Probably.

He didn't try to come to the ministry very often. It was just a routine security measure, but a sensible one. Once you recruited an agent, you didn't want to hang out with him or her for fear of compromise. That was one of the things they taught you at The Farm. If you compromised one of your agents, you might have trouble sleeping at night, because CIA was usually active in countries where the Miranda warning was delivered by a gun or knife or fist, or something just as bad—as unpleasant as a police state could make it, and that, the instructors had told his class, could be pretty fuckin' unpleasant. Especially in a case like this, he was intimate with this agent, and breaking away from her could cause her to stop her cooperation, which, Langley had told him, was pretty damned good, and they wanted more of it. Erasing the program he'd had her input on her machine would be difficult for a CalTech-trained genius, but you could accomplish the same thing by clobbering the whole hard drive and reinstalling new files over the old ones, because the valuable little gopher file was hidden in the system software, and a write-over would destroy it as surely as the San Francisco Earthquake.

So, he didn't want to be here, exactly, but he was a businessman, in addition to being a spook, and the client had called him in. The girl two desks away from Ming had a computer problem, and he was the NEC rep for the ministry offices.

It turned out to be a minor problem—you just couldn't turn some women loose on computers. It was like loosing a four-year-old in a gun shop, he thought, but didn't dare say such things aloud in these liberated times, even here. Happily, Ming hadn't been in sight when he'd come in. He'd walked over to the desk with the problem and fixed it in about three minutes, explaining the error to the secretary in simple terms she was sure to understand, and which would now make her the office expert for an easily replicated problem. With a smile and a polite Japanese bow, he'd made his way to the door, when the door to the inner office opened, and Ming came out with her Minister Fang behind her, looking down at some papers.

"Oh, hello, Nomuri-san," Ming said in surprise, as Fang called the

name “Chai,” and waved to another of the girls to follow him in. If Fang saw Nomuri there, he didn’t acknowledge it, simply disappeared back into his private office.

“Hello, Comrade Ming,” the American said, speaking in English. “Your computer operates properly?” he asked formally.

“Yes, it does, thank you.”

“Good. Well, if you experience a problem, you have my card.”

“Oh, yes. You are well settled in to Beijing now?” she asked politely.

“Yes, thank you, I am.”

“You should try Chinese food instead of sticking to the food of your homeland, though, I admit, I have developed a taste lately for Japanese sausage,” she told him, and everyone else in the room, with a face that would have done Amarillo Slim proud.

For his part, Chester Nomuri felt his heart not so much skip a beat as stop entirely for about ten seconds, or so it seemed. “Ah, yes,” he had to say in reply, as soon as he got breath back in his lungs. “It can be very tasty.”

Ming just nodded and went to her desk and back to work. Nomuri nodded and bowed politely to the office and made his departure as well, then headed down the corridor immediately for a men’s room, the need to urinate urgent. Sweet Jesus. But that was one of the problems with agents. They sometimes got off on their work the way a drug addict got off on the immediate rush when the chemical hit his system, and they’d tickle the dragon with their new and playful enthusiasm just to experience a little more of the rush, forgetting that the dragon’s tail was a lot closer to its mouth than it appeared. It was foolish to enjoy danger. Zipping himself back up, he told himself that he hadn’t broken training, hadn’t stumbled on his reply to her playful observation. But he had to warn her about dancing in a minefield. You never really knew where to put your feet, and discovering the wrong places was usually painful.

That’s when he realized why it had happened, and the thought stopped him dead in his tracks. Ming loved him. She was playful because . . . well, why else would she have said that? As a game? Did she regard the whole thing as a game? No, she wasn’t the right personality type to be a hooker. The sex had been good, maybe too good—if such a thing were possible, Nomuri thought as he resumed walking toward the elevator. She’d surely be over tonight after saying that. He’d have to stop by the liquor store on the way home and get some more of that awful Japanese scotch for thirty bucks a liter. A working man couldn’t afford to get drunk here unless he drank the local stuff, and that was too vile to contemplate.

But Ming had just consecrated their relationship by risking her life in front of her minister and her co-workers, and that was far more

frightening to Nomuri than her illconsidered remark about his dick and her fondness for it. *Jesus*, he thought, *this is getting too serious*. But what could he do now? He'd seduced her and made a spy of her, and she'd fallen for him for no better reason, probably, than that he was younger than the old fucker she worked for, and was far nicer to her. Okay, so he was pretty good in the sack, and that was excellent for his male ego, and he was a stranger in a strange land and he had to get his rocks off, too, and doing it with her was probably safer to his cover than picking up some hooker in a bar—and he didn't even want to consider getting seriously involved with a real girl in his real life—

—but how was *this* so different from *that?* he asked himself. Aside from the fact that while she was loving him, her computer was sending her transcribed notes off into the etherworld . . . .

It was doing it again soon after the close of regular business hours, and the eleven-hour differential pretty much guaranteed that it arrived on the desks of American officials soon after their breakfasts. In the case of Mary Patricia Foley, mornings were far less hectic than they'd once been. Her youngest was not yet in college, but preferred to fix her own oatmeal from the Quaker envelopes, and now drove herself to school, which allowed her mother an extra twenty-five minutes or so of additional sleep every morning. Twenty years of being a field spook and mother should have been enough to drive her to distracted insanity, but it was, actually, a life she'd enjoyed, especially her years in Moscow, doing her business right there in the belly of the beast, and giving the bastard quite an ulcer at the time, she remembered with a smile.

Her husband could say much the same. The first husband-wife team to rise so high at Langley, they drove together to work every morning —in their own car rather than the "company" one to which they were entitled, but with lead and chase cars full of people with guns, because any terrorist with half a brain would regard them as targets more valuable than rubies. This way they could talk on the way in—and the car was swept for bugs on a weekly basis.

They took their usual reserved and oversized place in the basement of the Old Headquarters Building, then rode up in the executive elevator, which somehow was always waiting for them, to their seventh-floor offices.

Mrs. Foley's desk was always arrayed just so. The overnight crew had all her important papers arranged just so, also. But today, as she had for the last week, instead of looking over the striped-border folders full of TOP SECRET CODEWORDED material, she first of all flipped on her desktop computer and checked her special e-mail. This morning was no disappointment. She copied the file electronically to

her hard drive, printed up a hard copy, and when that was off her printer, deleted the e-mail from her system, effectively erasing it from electronic existence. Then she reread the paper copy and lifted the phone for her husband's office.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Some egg-drop soup," she told the Director of Central Intelligence. It was a Chinese dish he found especially vile, and she enjoyed teasing her husband.

"Okay, honey. Come on in." It had to be pretty good if she was trying to turn his stomach over this early in the friggin' morning, the DCI knew.

More SORGE?" the President asked, seventy-five minutes later.

"Yes, sir," Ben Goodley replied, handing the sheet over. It wasn't long, but it was interesting.

Ryan skimmed through it. "Analysis?"

"Mrs. Foley wants to go over it with you this afternoon. You have a slot at two-fifteen."

"Okay. Who else?"

"The Vice President, since he's around." Goodley knew that Ryan liked to have Robby Jackson in for strategically interesting material. "He's fairly free this afternoon as well."

"Good. Set it up," POTUS ordered.

Six blocks away, Dan Murray was just arriving at his capacious office (considerably larger than the President's, as a matter of fact) with his own security detail, because he, as the country's principal counterintelligence and counterterrorist officer, had all manner of information that others were interested in. This morning only brought in some more.

"Morning, Director," one of the staff said—she was a sworn agent carrying a side arm, not just a secretary.

"Hey, Toni," Murray responded. This agent had very nice wheels, but the FBI Director realized that he'd just proven to himself that his wife, Liz, was right: He was turning into a dirty old man.

The piles on the desk were arranged by the overnight staff, and there was a routine for this. The rightward-most pile was for intelligence-related material, the leftward-most for counterintelligence operations, and the big one in the middle was for ongoing criminal investigations requiring his personal attention or notification. That tradition went back to "Mr. Hoover," as he was remembered at the FBI, who seemingly went over every field case bigger than the theft of used cars off the government parking lot.

But Murray had long worked the "black" side of the Bureau, and

that meant he attacked the rightward pile first. There wasn't much there. The FBI was running some of its own pure intelligence operations at the moment, somewhat to the discomfort of CIA—but those two government agencies had never gotten along terribly well, even though Murray rather liked the Foleys. What the hell, he thought, a little competition was good for everybody, so long as CIA didn't mess with a criminal investigation, which would be a very different kettle of fish. The top report was from Mike Reilly in Moscow. . . .

"Damn . . ." Murray breathed. Then an inward smile. Murray had personally selected Reilly for the Moscow slot, over the objections of some of his senior people, who had all wanted Paul Landau out of the Intelligence Division. But no, Murray had decided, Moscow needed help with cop work, not spy-chasing, at which they had lots of good experience, and so he'd sent Mike, a second-generation agent who, like his father, Pat Reilly, had given the Mafia in New York City a serious case of indigestion. Landau was now in Berlin, playing with the German Bundeskriminalamt, the BKA, doing regular crime liaison stuff, and doing it pretty well. But Reilly was a potential star. His dad had retired an ASAC. Mike would do better than that.

And the way he'd bonded with this Russian detective, Provalov, wouldn't hurt his career one bit. So. They'd uncovered a link between a former KGB officer and the Chinese MSS, eh? And this was part of the investigation into the big ka-boom in Moscow . . . ? Jesus, could the Chinese have had a part in that? If so, what the hell did *that* mean? Now, *this* was something the Foleys had to see. To that end, Director Murray lifted his phone. Ten minutes later, the Moscow document slid into his secure fax machine to Langley—and just to make sure that CIA didn't take credit for an FBI job, a hard copy was hand-carried to the White House, where it was handed to Dr. Benjamin Goodley, who'd surely show it to the President before lunch.

It had gotten to the point that he recognized her knock at the door. Nomuri set his drink down and jumped to answer, pulling it open less than five seconds after the first sexy *tap tap*.

"Ming," Chet said.

"Nomuri-san," she greeted in turn.

He pulled her in the door, closed, and locked it. Then he lifted her off the floor with a passionate hug that was less than three percent feigned.

"So, you have a taste for Japanese sausage, eh?" he demanded, with a smile and a kiss.

"You didn't even smile when I said it. Wasn't it funny?" she asked, as he undid a few of her buttons.

"Ming—" Then he hesitated and tried something he'd learned earlier in the day. *"Bau-bei,"* he said instead. It translated to "beloved one."

Ming smiled at the words and made her own reply: *"Shing-gan,"* which literally meant "heart and liver," but in context meant "heart and soul."

"Beloved one," Nomuri said, after a kiss, "do you advertise our relationship at your office?"

"No, Minister Fang might not approve, but the other girls in the office probably would not object if they found out," she explained, with a coquettish smile. "But you never know."

"Then why risk exposing yourself by making such a joke, unless you wish *me* to betray you?"

"You have no sense of humor," Ming observed. But then she ran her hands under his shirt and up his chest. "But that is all right. You have the other things I need."

Afterward, it was time to do business.

"Bau-bei?"

"Yes?"

"Your computer still works properly?"

"Oh, yes," she assured him in a sleepy voice.

His left hand stroked her body gently. "Do any of the other girls in the office use their computers to surf the'Net?"

"Only Chai. Fang uses her as he uses me. In fact, he likes her better. He thinks she has a better mouth."

"Oh?" Nomuri asked, softening the question with a smile.

"I told you, Minister Fang is an old man. Sometimes he needs special encouragement, and Chai doesn't mind so much. Fang reminds her of her grandfather, she says," Ming told him.

Which was good in the American's mind for a *Yuck!* and little else. "So, all the girls in the office trade notes on your minister?"

Ming laughed. It was pretty funny. "Of course. We all do."

Damn, Nomuri thought. He'd always thought that women would be more . . . discreet, that it was just the men who bragged in the locker room over their sweat socks.

"The first time he did me," she went on, "I didn't know what to do, so I talked with Chai for advice. She's been there the longest, you see. She just said to enjoy it, and try to make him happy, and I might get a nice office chair out of it, like she did. Chai must be very good to him. She got a new bicycle last November. Me, well, I think he only likes me because I'm a little different to look at. Chai has bigger breasts than I do, and I think I'm prettier, but she has a sweet disposition, and she likes the old man. More than I do, anyway." She paused. "I don't want a new bicycle enough for that."

What does this mean?" Robby Jackson asked.

"Well, we're not sure," the DCI admitted. "This Fang guy had a long talk with our old friend Zhang Han San. They're talking about the meeting with our trade team that starts tomorrow. Hell"—Ed Foley looked at his watch—"call that fourteen hours from now. And it looks as though they want concessions from us instead of offering any to us. They're even angrier over our recognition of Taiwan than we'd anticipated."

"Tough shit," Ryan observed.

"Jack, I agree with your sentiment, but let's try not to be over-cavalier about their opinions, shall we?" Foley suggested.

"You're starting to sound like Scott," the President said.

"So? You want a yes-man handling Langley, you got the wrong guy," the DCI countered.

"Fair enough, Ed," Jack conceded. "Go on."

"Jack, we need to warn Rutledge that the PRC isn't going to like what he has to say. They may not be in a mood to make many trade concessions."

"Well, neither is the United States of America," Ryan told his Director of Central Intelligence. "And we come back to the fact that they need our money more than we need their trade goods."

"What's the chance that this is a setup, this information I mean?" Vice President Jackson asked.

"You mean that they're using this source as a conduit to get back-channel information to us?" Mary Patricia Foley asked. "I evaluate that chance as practically zero. As close to zero as something in the real world can be."

"MP, how can you be that confident?" President Ryan asked.

"Not here, Jack, but I *am* that confident," Mary Pat said, somewhat to the discomfort of her husband, Ryan saw. It was rare in the intelligence community for anyone to feel that confident about anything, but Ed had always been the careful one, and Mary Pat had always been the cowgirl. She was as loyal to her people as a mother was to her infant, and Ryan admired that, even though he also had to remind himself that it wasn't always realistic.

"Ed?" Ryan asked, just to see.

"I back Mary up on this one. This source appears to be gold-plated and copper-bottomed."

"So, this document represents the view of their government?" TOMCAT asked.

Foley surprised the Vice President by shaking his head. "No, it represents the view of this Zhang Han San guy. He's a powerful and influential minister, but he doesn't speak for their government per se.

Note that the text here doesn't say what their official position is. Zhang probably does represent a view, and a powerful view, inside their Politburo. There are also moderates whose position this document does not address."

"Okay, great," Robby said, shifting in his seat, "so why are you taking up our time with this stuff, then?"

"This Zhang guy is tight with their Defense Minister—in fact he has a major voice in their entire national-security establishment. If he's expanding his influence into trade policy, we have a problem, and our trade negotiations team needs to know that up front," the DCI informed them.

So?" Ming asked tiredly. She hated getting dressed and leaving, and it meant a night of not-enough sleep.

"So, you should get in early and upload this on Chai's computer. It's just a new system file, the new one, six-pointeight-point-one, like the one I uploaded on your computer." In fact, the newest real system file was 6.3.2, and so there was at least a year until a write-over would actually be necessary.

"Why do you have me do this?"

"Does it matter, *Bau-bei?*" he asked.

She actually hesitated, thinking it over a bit, and the second or so of uncertainty chilled the American spy. "No, I suppose not."

"I need to get you some new things," Nomuri whispered, taking her in his arms.

"Like what?" she asked. All his previous gifts had been noteworthy.

"It will be a surprise, and a good one," he promised.

Her dark eyes sparkled with anticipation. Nomuri helped her on with her dreadful jacket. Dressing her back up was not nearly as fun as undressing her, but that was to be expected. A moment later, he gave her the final goodbye kiss at the door, and watched her depart, then went back to his computer to tell patsbakery@brownienet.com that he'd arranged for a second recipe that he hoped she might find tasty.

CHAPTER 22

The Table and the Recipe

Minister, this is a pleasure," Cliff Rutledge said in his friendliest diplomatic voice, shaking hands. Rutledge was glad the PRC had adopted the Western custom—he'd never learned the exact protocol of bowing.

Carl Hitch, the U.S. Ambassador to the People's Republic, was there for the opening ceremony. He was a career foreign service officer who'd always preferred working abroad to working at Foggy Bottom. Running day-to-day diplomatic relations wasn't especially exciting, but in a place like this, it did require a steady hand. Hitch had that, and he was apparently well liked by the rest of the diplomatic community, which didn't hurt.

It was all new for Mark Gant, however. The room was impressive, like the boardroom of a major corporation—designed to keep the board members happy, like noblemen from medieval Italy. It had high ceilings and fabric-covered walls—Chinese silk, in this case, red, of course, so that the effect was rather like crawling inside the heart of a whale, complete with chandeliers, cut crystal, and polished brass. Everyone had a tiny glass of mao-tai, which really was like drinking flavored lighter fluid, as he'd been warned.

"It is your first time in Beijing?" some minor official asked him.

Gant turned to look down at the little guy. "Yes, it is."

"Too soon for first impressions, then?"

"Yes, but this room is quite stunning . . . but then silk is something with which your people have a long and fruitful history," he went on, wondering if he sounded diplomatic or merely awkward.

"This is so, yes," the official agreed with a toothy grin and a nod, neither of which told the visiting American much of anything, except that he didn't waste much money on toothbrushes.

"I have heard much of the imperial art collection."

"You will see it," the official promised. "It is part of the official program."

"Excellent. In addition to my duties, I would like to play tourist."

"I hope you will find us acceptable hosts," the little guy said. For his part, Gant was wondering if this smiling, bowing dwarf would hit his

knees and offer a blow job, but diplomacy was an entirely new area for him. These were not investment bankers, who were generally polite sharks, giving you good food and drink before sitting you down and trying to bite your dick off. But they never concealed the fact that they were sharks. These people—he just wasn't sure. This degree of politeness and solicitude was a new experience for Gant, but given his pre-mission brief, he wondered if the hospitality only presaged an unusually hostile meeting when they got to business. If the two things had to balance out, then the downside of this seesaw was going to be a son of a bitch, he was sure.

"So, you are not from the American State Department?" the Chinese man asked.

"No. I'm in the Department of the Treasury. I work directly for Secretary Winston."

"Ah, then you are from the trading business?"

So, the little bastard's been briefed . . . But that was to be expected. At this level of government you didn't freelance things. Everyone would be thoroughly briefed. Everyone would have read the book on the Americans. The State Department members of the American crew had done the same. Gant, however, had not, since he wasn't really a player per se, and had only been told what he needed to know. That gave him an advantage over the Chinese assigned to look after him. He was not State Department, hence should not have been regarded as important—but he was the personal representative of a very senior American official, known to be part of that man's inner circle, and that made him very important indeed. Perhaps he was even a principal adviser to the Rutledge man—and in a Chinese context, that might even mean that he, Gant, was the man actually running the negotiations rather than the titular chief diplomat, because the Chinese often ran things that way. It occurred to Gant that maybe he could fuck with their minds a little bit . . . but how to go about it?

"Oh, yes, I've been a capitalist all my life," Gant said, deciding to play it cool and just talk to the guy as though he were a human being and not a fucking communist diplomat. "So has Secretary Winston, and so has our President, you know."

"But he was mainly an intelligence officer, or so I have been told."

Time to stick the needle: "I suppose that's partly true, but his heart is in business, I think. After he leaves government service, he and George will probably go into business together and really take the world over." Which was almost true, Gant thought, remembering that the best lies usually were.

"And you have worked some years with Secretary Winston." A statement rather than a question, Gant noted. How to answer it? How much did they really know about him . . . or was he a man of mystery

to the ChiComms? If so, could he make that work for him . . . ?

A gentle, knowing smile. “Well, yeah, George and I made a little money together. When Jack brought him into the cabinet, George decided that he wanted me to come down with him and help make a little government policy. Especially tax policy. That’s been a real mess, and George turned me loose on it. And you know? We just might get all of that changed. It looks as though Congress is going to do what we told them to do, and that’s not bad, making those idiots do what we want them to do,” Gant observed, looking rather deliberately at the carved ivory fixture on the wooden display cabinet. Some craftsman with a sharp knife had spent a lot of time to get that thing just right . . . *So, Mr. Chinaman, do I look important now?* One thing about this guy. He would have been a pretty good poker player. His eyes told you nothing at all. Not a fucking thing. Gant looked down at the guy again. “Excuse me. I talk too much.”

The official smiled. “There is much of that at times like this. Why do you suppose everyone gets something to drink?” Amusement in his voice, letting Gant know, perhaps, who was really running this affair . . . ?

“I suppose,” Gant observed diffidently and wandered off with the junior—or was he?—official in tow.

For his part, Rutledge was trying to decide if the opposition knew what his instructions were. There had been a few leaked hints in the media, but Adler had arranged the leaks with skill, so that even a careful observer—and the PRC ambassador in Washington was one of those—might have trouble deciding who was leaking what, and to what purpose. The Ryan administration had utilized the press with a fair degree of skill, probably, Rutledge thought, because the cabinet officers mainly took their lead from Ryan’s chief of staff, Arnie van Damm, who was a very skillful political operator. The new cabinet didn’t have the usual collection of in-and-out political figures who needed to stroke the press to further their own agendas. Ryan had chiefly selected people with no real agenda at all, which was no small feat—especially since most of them seemed to be competent technicians who, like Ryan, only seemed to want to escape Washington with their virtue intact and return to their real lives as soon as they finished serving their country for a short period of time. The career diplomat had not thought it possible that his country’s government could be so transformed. He assigned credit for all this to that madman Japanese pilot who’d killed so much of official Washington in that one lunatic gesture.

It was then that Xu Kun Piao showed up, sweeping in to the greeting room with his official entourage. Xu was General Secretary of the Communist Party of the People’s Republic of China, and Chairman

of the Chinese Politburo, though referred to in the media as the country's "Premier," which was something of a misnomer, but one adopted even in the diplomatic community. He was a man of seventy-one years, one of the second generation of Chinese leaders. The Long March survivors had long since died out—there were some senior officials who claimed to have been there, but a check of the numbers showed that if they had, they'd been sucking their mothers' nipples at the time, and those men were not taken seriously. No, the current crop of Chinese political leaders were mainly the sons or nephews of the original set, raised in privilege and relative comfort, but always mindful of the fact that their place in life was a precarious one. On one side were the other political children who craved advancement beyond their parents' places, and to achieve that they'd been more Catholic than the local communist pope. They'd carried their *Little Red Books* high as adults during the Cultural Revolution, and before that they'd kept their mouths shut and ears open during the abortive and predatory "Hundred Flowers" campaign of the late '50s, which had trapped a lot of intellectuals who'd thought to keep hidden for the first decade of Maoist rule. They'd been enticed into the open by Mao's own solicitation for their ideas, which they'd foolishly given out, and in the process only extended their necks over the broad block for the axe that fell a few years later in the brutal, cannibalistic Cultural Revolution.

The current Politburo members had survived in two ways. First, they'd been secured by their fathers and the rank that attached to such lofty parentage. Second, they'd been carefully warned about what they could say and what they could not say, and so all along they'd observed cautiously, always saying out loud that Chairman Mao's ideas were those which China really needed, and that the others, while interesting, perhaps, in a narrow intellectual sense, were dangerous insofar as they distracted the workers and peasants from The True Way of Mao. And so when the axe had fallen, borne as it had been by the *Little Red Book*, they'd been among the first to carry and show that book to others, and so escaped the destruction for the most part—a few of their number had been sacrificed, of course, but none of the really smart ones who now shared the seats on the Politburo. It had been a brutal Darwinian process that they had all gotten through by being a little smarter than those around them, and now, at the peak of the power won for them by brains and caution, it was time for them to enjoy that which they'd earned.

The new crop of leaders accepted communism as truly as other men believed in God, because they'd learned nothing else, and had not exercised their intellectual agility to seek another faith, or even to seek solutions to the questions that Marxism could not answer. Theirs

was a faith of resignation rather than enthusiasm. Raised within a circumscribed intellectual box, they never ventured out of it, for they feared what they might find out there. In the past twenty years, they'd been forced to allow capitalism to blossom within the borders of their country, because that country needed money to grow into something more powerful than the failed experiment in the Democratic Republic of Korea. China had experienced its own killer famine around 1960, and slowly learned from it and the Chinese also used it as a launching point for the Cultural Revolution, thus gaining political capital from a self-imposed disaster.

They wanted their nation to be great. In fact, they already regarded it as such, but recognized the fact that other nations lacked this appreciation, and so they had to seek out the means to correct the misimpression foolishly held by the rest of the world. That had meant money, and money had meant industry, and industry required capitalists. It was something they had figured out before the foolish Soviets to their north and west. And so the Soviet Union had fallen, but the People's Republic of China remained.

Or so they all believed. They looked out, when they bothered themselves to do so, at a world that they pretended to understand and to which they felt superior for no better reason than their skin and their language—ideology came second in their self-reckoning; *amour propre* starts from within. They expected people to defer to them, and the previous years of interactive diplomacy with the surrounding world had not altered their outlook very much.

But in this, they suffered from their own illusions. Henry Kissinger had come to China in 1971 at the behest of President Richard Nixon not so much from his perceived need to establish normal relations with the world's most populous nation as to use the PRC as a stick with which to beat the Soviet Union into submission. In fact Nixon had begun a process so lengthy as to be considered beyond Western capabilities—it was more the sort of thing that Westerners thought the Chinese themselves capable of conceiving. With such ideas, people merely show ethnic prejudices of one sort or another. The typical chief of a totalitarian government is far too self-centered to think much beyond his own lifetime, and men all over the world live roughly the same number of years. For that simple reason, they all think in terms of programs that can be completed in their own living sight, and little beyond, because they were all men who'd torn down the statues of others, and such men had few illusions over the fate of their own monuments. It was only as they faced death that they considered what they had done, and Mao had conceded bleakly to Henry Kissinger that all he'd accomplished had been to change the lives of peasants within a few miles of Beijing.

But the men in this ceremonial room were not yet close enough to death to think in such terms. They were the magisters of their land. They made the rules that others followed. Their words were law. Their whims were granted with alacrity. People looked upon them as they once looked upon the emperors and princes of old. All a man could wish to have, they had. Most of all, they had the power. It was their wishes that ruled their vast and ancient land. Their communist ideology was merely the magic that defined the form their wishes took, the rules of the game they had all agreed to play all those years before. The power was the thing. They could grant life or take it with the stroke of a pen—or more realistically, a dictated word, taken down by a personal secretary, for transmission to the underling who squeezed the trigger.

Xu was a man of average everything—height, weight, eyes, and face . . . and intellect, some said. Rutledge had read all this in his briefing documents. The real power was elsewhere. Xu was a figurehead of sorts, chosen for his looks, partially; his ability to give a speech, certainly; and his ability to front the occasional idea of others on the Politburo, to simulate conviction. Like a Hollywood actor, he didn't so much have to be smart as to play smart.

"Comrade Premier," Rutledge said in greeting, holding out his hand, which the Chinese man took.

"Mr. Rutledge," Xu replied in passable English. There was an interpreter there, too, for the more complex thoughts. "Welcome to Beijing."

"It is my pleasure, and my honor, to visit your ancient country again," the American diplomat said, showing proper respect and subservience, the Chinese leader thought.

"It is always a pleasure to welcome a friend," Xu went on, as he'd been briefed to do. Rutledge had been to China before in his official capacity, but never before as a delegation leader. He was known to the Chinese Foreign Ministry as a diplomat who'd climbed his way up the ladder of his bureaucracy, much as they did in their own—a mere technician, but a high-ranking one. The Politburo chief raised his glass. "I drink to successful and cordial negotiations."

Rutledge smiled and hoisted his glass as well. "As do I, sir."

The cameras got it. The news media people were circulating around, too. The cameramen were doing mainly what they called "locator" shots, like any amateur would do with his less expensive mini-cam. They showed the room at an artificial distance, so that the viewers could see the colors, with a few close-ups of the furniture on which no one was supposed to sit, with somewhat closer shots of the major participants drinking their drinks and looking pleasant to one another —this was called "B-roll," intended to show viewers what it was like

to be at a large, formal, and not overly pleasant cocktail party. The real news coverage for the event would be by people like Barry Wise and the other talking heads, who would tell the viewer what the visuals could not.

Then the coverage would shift back to CNN's Washington studio, down the hill from Union Station, where other talking heads would discuss what had been leaked or not leaked to them, then discuss what they in their personal sagacious wisdom thought the proper course for the United States of America ought to be. President Ryan would see all this over breakfast, as he read the papers and the government-produced *Early Bird* clipping service. Over breakfast, Jack Ryan would make his own terse comments to be noted by his wife, who might discuss it over lunch with her colleagues at Johns Hopkins, who might discuss it with their spouses, from whom it would go no further. In this way, the President's thoughts often remained a mystery.

The party broke up at the predetermined hour, and the Americans headed back to the embassy in their official cars.

"So, what can you tell us off the record?" Barry asked Rutledge, in the sanctity of the stretch Lincoln's backseat.

"Not much, really," the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy replied. "We'll listen to what they have to say, and they'll listen to what we have to say, and it'll go from there."

"They want MFN. Will they get it?"

"That's not for me to decide, Barry, and you know that." Rutledge was too tired and jet-lagged for intelligent conversation at the moment. He didn't trust himself to speak under these circumstances, and figured Wise knew that. The reporter was leaning on him for just that reason.

"So, what are you going to talk about?"

"Obviously, we'd like the Chinese to open their markets more, and also to take a closer look at some issues we have, like patent and copyright violations that American business has complained about."

"The Dell Computer issue?"

Rutledge nodded. "Yes, that's one." Then he yawned. "Excuse me. The long flight . . . you know how it is."

"I was on the same airplane," Barry Wise pointed out.

"Well, maybe you're just better at this than I am," Rutledge offered. "Can we postpone this discussion a day or so?"

"If you say so," the CNN reporter agreed. He didn't much like this preppy asshole, but he was a source of information, and Wise was in the information business. The ride was a brief one in any case. The official delegation hopped out at the embassy, and the embassy cars took the newsies back to their hotels.

The embassy had sleeping accommodations for the entire official

party, mainly to ensure that anything they said wouldn't be recorded by the MSS bugs in every hotel room in the city. This was not to say that the accommodations were palatial, though Rutledge had a comfortable room. Here protocol failed Mark Gant, but he did have a comfortable single bed in his small private room and a shared bathroom with a shower. He opted instead for a hot bath and one of the sleeping pills the physician who accompanied the official party had issued him. It was supposed to give him a solid eight hours or so, which would just about synchronize him with local time by the morning. There would then be a big working breakfast, much like the astronauts got before a shuttle launch, and as much of an American tradition as the Stars and Stripes over Fort McHenry.

Nomuri caught the arrival of the trade delegation on Chinese TV, which he watched mainly to hone his language skills. These were improving, though the tonal nature of Mandarin drove him slightly nuts. He'd once thought Japanese was hard, but it was a walk in the park compared to Guoyu. He looked at the faces, wondering who they were. The Chinese narrator helped, stumbling badly over "Rutledge," however. Well, Americans murdered Chinese names, too, except for simple ones like Ming and Wang, and listening to an American businessman try to make himself understood to a local was enough to make Nomuri gag. The commentator went on to talk about the Chinese position on the trade talks, how America owed the PRC all manner of concessions—after all, was not China generous in allowing Americans to spend their worthless dollars for the valuable products of the People's Republic? In this, China sounded a lot like Japan had once done, but the new Japanese government had opened up their markets. While there was still a trade deficit in Japan's favor, fair competition on the playing field had muted American criticism, though Japanese cars were still less welcome in America than they had been. But that would pass, Nomuri was sure. If America had a weakness it was in forgiving and forgetting too rapidly. In this, he greatly admired the Jews. They still hadn't forgotten Germany and Hitler. As well they shouldn't, he thought. His last thought before retiring was to wonder how the new software was working on Chai's computer, and if Ming had actually installed it or not. Then he decided to check.

Rising from bed, he switched his laptop on and . . . yes! Chai's system lacked Ming's transcription software, but it was transmitting what it had. Okay, fine, they had linguists at Langley to fiddle with that. He didn't have the desire to do so, and just uploaded it and headed back to bed.

Damn!" Mary Pat observed. Nearly all of it was unreadable, but this was a second SORGE source. That was evident from the pathway it had taken through the 'Net. She wondered if Nomuri was showing off, or had somehow managed to get in the pants of a second high-ranking Chinese government secretary. It wouldn't exactly be a first for a field officer to have that active a sex life, but it wasn't all that common, either. She printed it up, saved it to disk, and called for a linguist to come up and translate. Then she downloaded SONGBIRD's current take. It was becoming as regular as *The Washington Post*, and a lot more interesting. She settled back in her chair and started reading the translation of Ming's latest notes from Minister Fang Gan. He'd be talking about the trade negotiations, she hoped, then to see that, sure enough, he was . . . This would be important, the DDO thought. She'd soon be surprised to find out how wrong that impression was.

CHAPTER 23

Down to Business

Bacon and eggs, toast and hash-brown potatoes, plus some Colombian-bean coffee. Gant was Jewish but not observant, and he loved his bacon. Everyone was up and looking pretty good, he thought. The governmentissued black capsule (they all called it that, evidently some sort of tradition that he didn't know about) had worked for all of them, and the cookie-pushers were all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Most of the talk, he noted, was about the NBA. The Lakers were looking tough again. Rutledge, Gant saw, was at the head of the table chatting amiably with Ambassador Hitch, who seemed a solid citizen. Then a more ruffled employee of the embassy came in with a manila folder whose borders were lined with striped red-and-white tape. This he handed to Ambassador Hitch, who opened it at once.

Gant realized at once that it was classified material. There wasn't much of that to be seen at Treasury, but there was some, and he'd been screened for a Top Secret/Special Access clearance as part of his employment on Secretary Winston's personal staff. So, there was intel coming in from Washington for the negotiations. Exactly what it was about, he couldn't see, and didn't know if he would see it. He wondered if he could flex his institutional muscles on this one, but Rutledge would be the one who decided if he got to see it or not, and he didn't want to give the State Department puke the excuse to show who was the he-bull in this herd. Patience was a virtue he'd long had, and this was just one more chance to exercise it. He returned to his breakfast, then decided to stand and get more off the buffet. Lunch in Beijing probably wouldn't be very appealing, even at their Foreign Ministry Building, where they would feel constrained to show off their most exotic national dishes, and Fried Panda Penis with candied bamboo roots wasn't exactly to his taste. At least the tea they served was acceptable, but even at its best, tea wasn't coffee.

"Mark?" Rutledge looked up from his seat and waved the Treasury guy over. Gant walked over with his refilled plate of eggs and bacon.

"Yeah, Cliff?"

Ambassador Hitch made room for Gant to sit down, and a steward

arrived with fresh silverware. The government could make one comfortable when it wanted. He asked the guy for more hash browns and toast. Fresh coffee arrived seemingly of its own volition.

"Mark, this just came in from Washington. This is codeword material—"

"Yeah, I know. I can't even see it now, and I am not allowed to have any memory of it. So, can I see it now?"

Rutledge nodded and slipped the papers across. "What do you make of these foreign-exchange figures?"

Gant took a bite of bacon and stopped chewing almost at once. "Damn, they're *that* low? What have they been pissing their money away on?"

"What does this mean?"

"Cliff, once upon a time, Dr. Samuel Johnson put it this way: 'Whatever you have, spend less.' Well, the Chinese didn't listen to that advice." Gant flipped the pages. "It doesn't say what they've been spending it on."

"Mainly military stuff, so I am told," Ambassador Hitch replied. "Or things that can be applied to military applications, especially electronics. Both finished goods and the machinery with which to make electronic stuff. I gather it's expensive to invest in such things."

"It can be," Gant agreed. He turned the pages back to start from the beginning. He saw it was transmitted with the TAPDANCE encryption system. That made it hot. TAPDANCE was only used for the most sensitive material because of some technical inconveniences in its use . . . so this was some really hot intelligence, TELESCOPE thought. Then he saw why. Somebody must have bugged the offices of some very senior Chinese officials to get *this* stuff . . . "Jesus."

"What does this mean, Mark?"

"It means they've been spending money faster than it's coming in, and investing it in noncommercial areas for the most part. Hell, it means they're acting like some of the idiots we have in our government. They think money is just something that appears when you snap your fingers, and then you can spend it as fast as you want and just snap your fingers to get some more . . . These people don't live in the real world, Cliff. They have no idea how and why the money appears." He paused. He'd gone too far. A Wall Street person would understand his language, but this Rutledge guy probably didn't. "Let me rephrase. They know that the money comes from their trade imbalance with the United States, and it appears that they believe the imbalance to be a natural phenomenon, something they can essentially dictate because of who they are. They think the rest of the world owes it to them. In other words, if they believe that, negotiating with them is going to be hard."

"Why?" Rutledge asked. Ambassador Hitch, he saw, was already nodding. He must have understood these Chinese barbarians better.

"People who think this way do not understand that negotiations mean give and take. Whoever's talking here thinks that he just gets whatever the hell he wants because everybody owes it to him. It's like what Hitler must have thought at Munich. I want, you give, and then I am happy. We're not going to cave for these bastards, are we?"

"Those are not my instructions," Rutledge replied.

"Well, guess what? Those are the instructions your Chinese counterpart has. Moreover, their economic position is evidently a lot more precarious than what we've been given to expect. Tell CIA they need better people in their financial-intelligence department," Gant observed. Then Hitch shifted his glance across the table to the guy who must have run the local CIA office.

"Do they appreciate how serious their position is?" Rutledge asked.

"Yes and no. Yes, they know they need the hard currency to do the business they want to do. No, they think they can continue this way indefinitely, that an imbalance is natural in their case because—because why? Because they think they're the fucking master race?" Gant asked.

Again it was Ambassador Hitch who nodded. "It's called the Middle Kingdom Complex. Yes, Mr. Gant, they really do think of themselves in those terms, and they expect people to come to them and give, not for themselves to go to other people as supplicants. Someday that will be their downfall. There's an institutional . . . maybe a racial arrogance here that's hard to describe and harder to quantify." Then Hitch looked over to Rutledge. "Cliff, you're going to have an interesting day."

Gant realized at once that this was not a blessing for the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy.

They should be eating breakfast right about now," Secretary Adler said over his Hennessey in the East Room.

The reception had gone well—actually Jack and Cathy Ryan found these things about as boring as reruns of *Gilligan's Island*, but they were as much a part of the Presidency as the State of the Union speech. At least the dinner had been good—one thing you could depend on at the White House was the quality of the food—but the people had been Washington people. Even that, Ryan did not appreciate, had been greatly improved from previous years. Once Congress had largely been populated with people whose life's ambition was "public service," a phrase whose noble intent had been usurped by those who viewed $130,000 per year as a princely salary (it was far less than a college dropout could earn doing software for a

computergame company, and a hell of a lot less than one could make working on Wall Street), and whose real ambition was to apply their will to the laws of their nation. Many of them now, mainly because of speeches the President had made all over the country, were people who actually had *served* the public by doing useful work until, fed up with the machinations of government, they had decided to take a few years off to repair the train wreck Washington had become, before escaping back to the real world of productive work. The First Lady had spent much of the evening talking with the junior senator from Indiana, who in real life was a pediatric surgeon of good reputation and whose current efforts were centered on straightening out government health-care programs before they killed too many of the citizens they supposedly wanted to assist. His greatest task was to persuade the media that a physician might know as much about making sick people well as Washington lobbyists did, something he'd been bending SURGEON'S ear about most of the night.

"That stuff we got from Mary Pat ought to help Rutledge."

"I'm glad that Gant guy is there to translate it for him. Cliff is going to have a lively day while we sleep off the food and the booze, Jack."

"Is he good enough for the job? I know he was tight with Ed Kealty. That does not speak well for the guy's character."

"Cliff's a fine technician," Adler said, after another sip of brandy. "And he has clear instructions to carry out, and some awfully good intelligence to help him along. This is like the stuff Jonathan Yardley gave our guys during the Washington Naval Treaty negotiations. We're not exactly reading their cards, but we are seeing how they think, and that's damned near as good. So, yes, I think he's good enough for this job, or I wouldn't have sent him out."

"How's the ambassador we have there?" POTUS asked.

"Carl Hitch? Super guy. Career pro, Jack, ready to retire soon, but he's like a good cabinetmaker. Maybe he can't design the house for you, but the kitchen will be just fine when he's done—and you know, I'll settle for that in a diplomat. Besides, designing the house is your job, Mr. President."

"Yeah," Ryan observed. He waved to an usher, who brought over some ice water. He'd pushed the booze enough for one night, and Cathy was starting to razz him about it again. *Damn, being married to a doctor,* Jack thought. "Yeah, Scott, but who the hell do I go to for advice when I don't know what the hell I'm doing?"

"Hell, I don't know," EAGLE replied. Maybe some humor, he thought: "Try doing a séance and call up Tom Jefferson and George Washington." He turned with a chuckle and finished his Hennessey. "Jack, just take it easy on yourself and do the fuckin' job. You're doing just fine. Trust me."

"I hate this job," SWORDSMAN observed with a friendly smile at his Secretary of State.

"I know. That's probably why you're doing it pretty well. God protect us all from somebody who *wants* to hold high public office. Hell, look at me. Think I ever wanted to be SecState? It was a lot more fun to eat lunch in the cafeteria with my pals and bitch about the dumb son of a bitch who was. But now—shit, they're down there saying that about *me!* It ain't fair, Jack. I'm a working guy."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, look at it this way: When you do your memoirs, you'll get a great advance from your publisher. *The Accidental President?*" Adler speculated for the title.

"Scott, you get funny when you're drunk. I'll settle for working on my golf game."

"Who spoke the magic word?" Vice President Jackson asked as he joined the conversation.

"This guy whips my ass so bad out there," Ryan complained to Secretary Adler, "that sometimes I wish I had a sword to fall on. What's your handicap now?"

"Not playing much, Jack, it's slipped to six, maybe seven."

"He's going to turn pro—Senior Tour," Jack advised.

"Anyway, Jack, this is my father. His plane was late and he missed the receiving line," Robby explained.

"Reverend Jackson, we finally meet." Jack took the hand of the elderly black minister. For the inauguration he'd been in the hospital with kidney stones, which probably had been even less fun than the inauguration.

"Robby's told me a lot of good things about you."

"Your son is a fighter pilot, sir, and they exaggerate a lot."

The minister had a good laugh at that. "Oh, that I know, Mr. President. That I know."

"How was the food?" Ryan asked. Hosiah Jackson was a man on the far side of seventy, short like his son, and rotund with increasing years, but he was a man possessed of the immense dignity that somehow attached to black men of the cloth.

"Much too rich for an old man, Mr. President, but I ate it anyway."

"Don't worry, Jack. Pap doesn't drink," TOMCAT advised. On the lapel of his tuxedo jacket was a miniature of his Navy Wings of Gold. Robby would never stop being a fighter pilot.

"And you shouldn't either, boy! That Navy taught you lots of bad habits, like braggin' on yourself too much."

Jack had to jump to his friend's defense. "Sir, a fighter pilot who doesn't brag isn't allowed to fly. And besides, Dizzy Dean said it best—if you can do it, it isn't bragging. Robby can do it . . . or so he

claims."

"They started talking over in Beijing yet?" Robby asked, checking his watch.

"Another half hour or so," Adler replied. "It's going to be interesting," he added, referring to the SORGE material.

"I believe it," Vice President Jackson agreed, catching the message. "You know, it's hard to love those people."

"Robby, you are not allowed to say such things," his father retorted. "I have a friend in Beijing."

"Oh?" His son didn't know about that. The answer came rather as a papal pronouncement.

"Yes, Reverend Yu Fa An, a fine Baptist preacher, educated at Oral Roberts University. My friend Gerry Patterson went to school with him."

"Tough place to be a priest—or minister, I guess," Ryan observed.

It was as though Jack had turned the key in the minister's dignity switch. "Mr. President, I envy him. To preach the Gospel of the Lord anywhere is a privilege, but to preach it in the land of the heathen is a rare blessing."

"Coffee?" a passing usher asked. Hosiah took a cup and added cream and sugar.

"This is fine," he observed at once.

"One of the fringe bennies here, Pap," Jackson told his dad with considerable affection. "This is even better than Navy coffee—well, we have navy stewards serving it. Jamaica Blue Mountain, costs like forty bucks a pound," he explained.

"Jesus, Robby, don't say that too loud. The media hasn't figured that one out yet!" POTUS warned. "Besides, I asked. We get it wholesale, thirty-two bucks a pound if you buy it by the barrel."

"Gee, that's a real bargoon," the VP agreed with a chuckle.

With the welcoming ceremony done, the plenary session began without much in the way of fanfare. Assistant Secretary Rutledge took his seat, greeted the Chinese diplomats across the table, and began. His statement started off with the usual pleasantries that were about as predictable as the lead credits for a feature film.

"The United States," he went on, getting to the meat of the issue, "has concerns about several disturbing aspects of our mutual trading relationship. The first is the seeming inability of the People's Republic to abide by previous agreements to recognize international treaties and conventions on trademarks, copyrights, and patents. All of these items have been discussed and negotiated at length in previous meetings like this one, and we had thought that the areas of disagreement were successfully resolved. Unfortunately, this seems

not to be the case." He went on to cite several specific items, which he described as being illustrative but in no way a comprehensive listing of his areas of "concern."

"Similarly," Rutledge continued, "commitments to open the Chinese market to American goods have not been honored. This has resulted in an imbalance in the mercantile exchange which ill serves our overall relationship. The current imbalance is approaching seventy *billion* U.S. dollars, and that is something the United States of America is not prepared to accept.

"To summarize, the People's Republic's commitment to honor international treaty obligations and private agreements with the United States has not been carried out. It is a fact of American law that our country has the right to adopt the trade practices of other nations in its own law. This is the well-known Trade Reform Act, enacted by the American government several years ago. It is my unpleasant obligation, therefore, to inform the government of the People's Republic that America will enforce this law with respect to trade with the People's Republic forthwith, unless these previously agreed-upon commitments are met immediately," Rutledge concluded. *Immediately* is a word not often used in international discourse. "That concludes my opening statement."

For his part, Mark Gant halfway wondered if the other side might leap across the polished oak table with swords and daggers at the end of Rutledge's opening speech. The gauntlet had been cast down in forceful terms not calculated to make the Chinese happy. But the diplomat handling the other side of the table—it was Foreign Minister Shen Tang—reacted no more than he might on getting the check in a restaurant and finding that he'd been overcharged about five bucks' worth. Not even a look up. Instead the Chinese minister continued to look down at his own notes, before finally lifting his eyes as he felt the end of Rutledge's opening imminent, with no more feeling or emotion than that of a man in an art gallery looking over some painting or other that his wife wanted him to purchase to cover a crack in the dining room wall.

"Secretary Rutledge, thank you for your statement," he began in his turn.

"The People's Republic first of all welcomes you to our country and wishes to state for the record its desire for a continued friendly relationship with America and the American people.

"We cannot, however, reconcile America's stated desire for friendly relations with her action to recognize the breakaway province on the island of Taiwan as the independent nation it is not. Such action was calculated to inflame our relationship—to fan the flames instead of helping to extinguish them. The people of our country will not accept

this unconscionable interference with Chinese internal affairs and—" The diplomat looked up in surprise to see Rutledge's hand raised in interruption. He was sufficiently shocked by this early breach of protocol that he actually stopped talking.

"Minister," Rutledge intoned, "the purpose of this meeting is to discuss trade. The issue of America's diplomatic recognition of the Republic of China is one best left to another venue. The American delegation has no desire to detour into that area today." Which was diplo-speak for "Take that issue and shove it."

"Mr. Rutledge, you cannot dictate to the People's Republic what our concerns and issues are," Minister Shen observed, in a voice as even as one discussing the price of lettuce in the street market. The rules of a meeting like this were simple: The first side to show anger lost.

"Do go on, then, if you must," Rutledge responded tiredly. *You're wasting my time, but I get paid whether I work or not,* his demeanor proclaimed.

Gant saw that the dynamic for the opening was that both countries had their agendas, and each was trying to ignore that of the other in order to take control of the session. This was so unlike a proper business meeting as to be unrecognizable as a form of verbal intercourse—and in terms of other intercourse, it was like two naked people in bed, purportedly for the purpose of sex, starting off their foreplay by fighting over the TV remote. Gant had seen all manner of negotiations before, or so he thought. This was something entirely new and, to him, utterly bizarre.

"The renegade bandits on Taiwan are part of China in their history and heritage, and the People's Republic cannot ignore this deliberate insult to our nationhood by the Ryan Regime."

"Minister Shen, the government of the United States of America has a long history of supporting democratically elected governments throughout the world. That has been part of our nation's ethos for over two hundred years. I would remind the People's Republic that the United States of America has the longest-lived government in the world. We have lived under our constitutional form of government for well over two hundred years. That is a small number in terms of Chinese history, but I would remind you further that when America elected her first President and first Congress, China was ruled by a hereditary monarch. The government of your country has changed many times since then, but the government of the United States of America has not. Thus it is well within our power both as an independent nation under recognized international law, and also as a *moral* right as a long-lived and therefore legitimate form of government, both to act as we choose and to foster governments like our own. The government of the Republic of China is democratically

elected, and therefore it commands the respect of similarly chosen governments of the people, like our own. In any case, Minister, the purpose of this meeting is to discuss trade. Shall we do that, or shall we fritter away our time discussing irrelevancies?"

"Nothing could be more relevant to this discussion than the fundamental lack of respect shown by your government—by the Ryan Regime, shall I say?—for the government of our country. The Taiwan issue is one of fundamental importance to . . ." He droned on for another four minutes.

"Minister Shen, the United States of America is not a 'regime' of any sort. It is an independent nation with a freely elected government chosen by its people. That experiment in government which we undertook when your country was ruled by the Manchu Dynasty is one which you might consider imitating at some future date, for the benefit of your own people. Now, shall we return to the issue at hand, or do you wish to continue wasting your own time and mine by discussing a topic for which I have neither instructions nor much in the way of interest?"

"We will not be brushed aside so cavalierly as that," Shen responded, earning Rutledge's brief and irrelevant respect for his unexpected command of the English language.

The American chief diplomat settled back in his chair and looked politely across the table while he thought over his wife's plans for redecorating the kitchen of their Georgetown town house. Was green and blue the right color scheme? He preferred earth tones, but he was far more likely to win this argument in Beijing than that one in Georgetown. A lifetime spent in diplomacy didn't enable him to win arguments with Mrs. Rutledge over items like decorating . . .

So it went for the first ninety minutes, when there came time for the first break. Tea and finger food was served and people wandered out the French doors—a strange place to find *those*, Gant thought—into the garden. It was Gant's first adventure in diplomacy, and he was about to learn how these things really worked. People paired off, American and Chinese. You could tell who was who from a distance. Every single one of the Chinese smoked, a vice shared by only two of the American delegation, both of whom looked grateful for the chance to enjoy their habit *indoors* in this country. They might be trade nazis, the Treasury Department official reflected, but they weren't health nazis.

"What do you think?" a voice asked. Gant turned to see the same little guy who'd bugged him at the reception. His name was Xue Ma, Gant remembered, all of five-footnothing, with poker-player's eyes and some acting ability. Smarter than he appeared to be, the American reminded himself. So, how was he supposed to handle this? When in

doubt, Gant decided, fall back on the truth.

"It's my first time observing diplomatic negotiations. It's intensely boring," Gant replied, sipping his (dreadful) coffee.

"Well, this is normal," Xue answered.

"Really? It's not that way in business. How do you get anything done?"

"Every endeavor has its process," the Chinese man told him.

"I suppose. Can you tell me something?" TELESCOPE asked.

"I can try."

"What's the big deal about Taiwan?"

"What was the big deal when your Civil War began?" Xue replied, with a clever question of his own.

"Well, okay, but after fifty years, why not call it even and start over?"

"We do not think in such short terms," Xue answered with a superior smile.

"Okay, but in America we call that living in the past." *Take* that, *you little Chink!*

"They are our countrymen," Xue persisted.

"But they have chosen not to be. If you want them back, then make it advantageous for them. You know, by achieving the same prosperity here that they've achieved there." *You backward commie.*

"If one of your children ran away from home, would you not work for his return?"

"Probably, but I would entice him, not threaten him, especially if I didn't have the ability to threaten him effectively." *And your military is for shit, too.* So the briefings had told them before flying over.

"But when others encourage our child to abscond and defy their father, are we not to object?"

"Look, pal," Gant responded, not quite showing the inward heat he felt—or so he thought. "If you want to do business, then do business. If you want to chat, we can chat. But my time is valuable, and so is the time of our country, and we can save the chat for another time." And then Gant realized that, no, he wasn't a diplomat, and this was not a game he could play and win. "As you see, I am not gifted at this sort of exchange. We have people who are, but I am not one of them. I am the kind of American who does real work and earns real money. If you enjoy this game, that's fine, but it's not my game. Patience is a good thing, I suppose, but not when it impedes the objective, and I think your minister is missing something."

"What is that, Mr. Gant?"

"It is we who will have what we wish to have out of these meetings," Gant told the little Chinese man, and realized instantly that he'd stuck his own foot into his mouth about to the knee. He finished

his coffee and excused himself, then headed unnecessarily for the bathroom, where he washed his hands before heading back outside. He found Rutledge standing alone, examining some spring flowers.

"Cliff, I think I fucked something up," Gant confessed quietly.

"What's that?" the Assistant Secretary asked, then listened to the confession. "Don't sweat it. You didn't tell them anything I haven't already told them. You just don't understand the language."

"But they'll think we're impatient, and that makes us vulnerable, doesn't it?"

"Not with me doing the talking inside," Rutledge answered, with a gentle smile. "Here I am Jimmy Connors at the U.S. Open, Mark. This is what I do."

"The other side thinks so, too."

"True, but we have the advantage. They need us more than we need them."

"I thought you didn't like taking this sort of line with people," Gant observed, puzzled by Rutledge's attitude.

"I don't have to like it. I just have to do it, and winning is always fun." He didn't add that he'd never met Minister Shen before, and therefore had no personal baggage to trip over, as often happened with diplomats who had been known to put personal friendship before the interest of their countries. They usually justified it by telling themselves that the bastard would owe them one next time, which would serve their country's interest. Diplomacy had always been a personal business, a fact often lost on observers, who thought of these verbose technicians as robots.

Gant found all of this puzzling, but he would play along with Rutledge because he had to, and because the guy at least acted as though he knew what the hell he was doing. Whether he did or not . . . Gant wondered how he'd be able to tell. Then it was time to go back indoors.

The ashtrays had been cleaned and the water bottles replenished by the domestic help, who were probably all politically reliable functionaries of one sort or another, or more likely professional intelligence officers, who were here because their government took no chances with anything, or at least tried not to. It was, in fact, a waste of trained personnel, but communists had never been overly concerned with utilizing manpower in an efficient way.

Minister Shen lit a smoke and motioned for Rutledge to lead off. For his part, the American remembered that Bismarck had counseled the use of a cigar in negotiations, because some found the thick tobacco smoke irritating and that gave the smoker the advantage.

"Minister, the trade policies of the People's Republic are set in place by a small number of people, and those policies are set in place for

political reasons. We in America understand that. What you fail to understand is that ours truly is a government of the people, and our people demand that we address the trade imbalance. The People's Republic's inability to open markets to American goods costs the jobs of American citizens. Now, in our country it is the business of the government to serve the people, not to rule them, and for that reason, we must address the trade imbalance in an effective way."

"I fully agree that it is the business of government to serve the interests of the people, and for that reason, we must consider also the agony that the Taiwan issue imposes on the citizens of my country. Those who should be our countrymen have been separated from us, and the United States has assisted in the estrangement of our kinsmen . . ." The remarkable thing, Rutledge thought, was that this droning old fart hadn't died from smoking those damned things. They looked and smelled like the Lucky Strikes his grandfather had died of, at age eighty. It had not been a death to please a physician, however. Grandpa Owens had been driving his great-grandson to South Station in Boston when, lighting one, he'd dropped it into his lap and, in retrieving it, strayed onto the wrong side of the road. Grandpa hadn't believed in seat belts, either . . . the bastard actually chainsmoked, lighting a new one with the butt of the previous one, like Bogie in a '30s movie. Well, maybe it was a way for the Chinese to pursue their population-control policy . . . but in rather an ugly way . . .

"Mr. Foreign Minister," Rutledge started off, when it was next his turn, "the government of the Republic of China is one elected in free and fair elections by the people who live in that country. In America's eyes, that makes the government of the Republic of China legitimate"—he didn't say that the government of the People's Republic was, therefore, illegitimate, but the thought hung in the room like a dark cloud—"and that makes the government in question worthy of international recognition, as you may have noticed has been the case in the last year.

"It is the policy of our government to recognize such governments. We will not change policies based upon firm principles to suit the wishes of other countries which do not share those principles. We can talk until you run out of cigarettes, but my government's position in this case is set in stone. So, you can recognize this fact and allow the meeting to move on to productive areas, or you can beat this dead horse until nothing is left of it. The choice is yours, of course, but is it not better to be productive than not?"

"America cannot dictate to the People's Republic that which concerns us. You claim to have your principles, and surely we have our own, and one of ours is the importance of our country's territorial integrity."

For Mark Gant, the hard part was keeping an impassive face. He had to pretend that this all made sense and was important, when he'd much prefer to set up his computer to review stock prices, or for that matter read a paperback book under the rim of the table. But he couldn't do that. He had to pretend that this was all interesting, which, if successfully done, could get him nominated for the next Academy Award ceremonies for Best Actor in a Supporting Role: "For keeping awake during the most boring contest since the Iowa grass-growing championships, the winner is . . ." He concentrated on not shifting in his seat, but that just made his ass tired, and these seats hadn't been designed to fit his ass. Maybe one of those skinny Chinese ones, but not that of a Chicago-raised professional who liked having a beer and a corned-beef sandwich for lunch at least once a week and didn't work out enough. His ass required a broader and softer seat for comfort, but he didn't have one. He tried to find something interesting. He decided that Foreign Minister Shen had terrible skin, as though his face had once been on fire and a friend had tried to extinguish the flames with an ice pick. Gant tried to conjure up the image of that supposed event without smiling. Then came the fact that Shen was smoking so much, lighting his smokes from cheap paper matches instead of a proper lighter. Perhaps he was one of those people who set things down and forgot where they were, which would also explain why he used cheap throwaway pens instead of something in keeping with his rank and status. So, this important son of a bitch had suffered from terminal acne as a kid and was a butterfingers. . . ? It was something worthy of an inward smile as the minister droned on in passable English. That engendered a new thought. He had access to an earphone for simultaneous translation . . . could he get one tuned to a local station? They had to have a radio station in Beijing that played music of some sort or other, didn't they?

When Rutledge's turn came, it was almost as bad. The stated American position was as repetitive as the Chinese one, perhaps more reasonable but no less boring. Gant imagined that lawyers talking over a divorce settlement probably went through bullshit like this. Like diplomats, they were paid by the hour and not by the product. Diplomats and lawyers. What a pair, Gant thought. He was unable even to look at his watch. The American delegation had to present a united front of solid stone, Gant thought, to show the Heathen Chinese that the Forces of Truth and Beauty were firm in their resolve. Or something like that. He wondered if it would feel different negotiating with the British, for example, everyone speaking much the same language, but those negotiations were probably handled with phone calls or e-mails rather than this formalistic crap. . . .

Lunch came at the expected hour, about ten minutes late because

the Shen guy ran over, which was hardly unexpected. The American team all headed to the men's room, where no talking was done for fear of bugs. Then they went back outside, and Gant went to Rutledge.

"This is how you earn your living?" the stock trader asked with no small degree of incredulity.

"I try to. These talks are going pretty well," the Assistant Secretary of State observed.

"What?" Gant inquired with total amazement.

"Yeah, well, their Foreign Minister is doing the negotiating, so we're playing with their varsity," Rutledge explained. "That means that we'll be able to reach a real agreement instead of a lot of back-and-forth between lower-level people and the Politburo—the additional layer of people can really mess things up. There'll be some of that, of course. Shen will have to talk over his positions with them every evening, maybe even right now—he's nowhere to be seen. I wonder who he reports to, exactly. We don't think he really has plenipotentiary powers, that the rest of the big boys second-guess him a lot. Like the Russians used to be. That's the problem with their system. Nobody really trusts anybody else."

"You serious?" TELESCOPE asked.

"Oh, yeah, it's how their system works."

"That's a clusterfuck," Gant observed.

"Why do you think the Soviet Union went belly-up?" Rutledge asked with amusement. "They never had their act together on any level because they fundamentally didn't know how properly to exercise the power they had. It was rather sad, really. But they're doing a lot better now."

"But how are the talks going, well?"

"If all they have to throw at us is Taiwan, their counterarguments on trade won't be all that impressive. Taiwan's a settled issue, and they know it. We may have a mutual-defense treaty with them in ten or eleven months, and they probably know that. They have good intelligence sources in Taipei."

"How do we know *that?*" Gant demanded.

"Because our friends in Taipei make sure they do. You want your adversaries to know a lot of things. It makes for better understandings, cuts down on mistakes and stuff." Rutledge paused. "I wonder what's for lunch . . .?"

Jesus, Gant thought. Then he thanked God that he was just here to offer economic backup for this diplomat. They were playing a game so different from anything he'd ever encountered before that he felt like a truck driver doing some day-trading on his laptop at a highway phone booth.

The newsies showed up for lunch so that they could get more B-roll tape of diplomats chatting amiably about such things as the weather and the food—the viewers would think they were handling matters of state, of course, when in fact at least half of the talks between diplomats at such affairs were limited to the problems of raising children or killing the crabgrass in your lawn. It was all, in fact, a kind of gamesmanship with few parallels in other forms of endeavor, Gant was only beginning to understand. He saw Barry Wise approach Rutledge without a microphone or camera in attendance.

"So, how's it going, Mr. Secretary?" the reporter asked.

"Pretty well. In fact, we had a fine opening session," Rutledge replied in Gant's earshot. It was a shame, TELESCOPE decided, that the people couldn't see what really happened. It would be the funniest thing this side of Chris Rock. It made *Laverne & Shirley* look like *King Lear* in its lunacy, and the world chess championship look like a heavyweight-championship fight in its torpor. But every field of human endeavor had its rules, and these were just different ones.

There's our friend," the cop observed, as the car pulled out. It was Suvorov/Koniev in his Mercedes C-class. The license tag number checked, as did the face in the binoculars.

Provalov had gotten the local varsity to handle this case, with even some help now from the Federal Security Service, formerly the Second Chief Directorate of the former KGB, the professional spy-chasers who'd made life in Moscow difficult for foreign intelligence operations. They remained superbly equipped, and though not so well funded as in the past, there was little to criticize in their training.

The problem, of course, was that they knew all that themselves, and took on a degree of institutional arrogance that had gotten the noses of his homicide investigators severely out of joint. Despite all that, they were useful allies. There were a total of seven vehicles to handle the surveillance. In America, the FBI would have arranged a helicopter as well, but Michael Reilly wasn't here to make that condescending observation, somewhat to Provalov's relief. The man had become a friend, and a gifted mentor in the business of investigation, but enough was sometimes enough. There were trucks containing TV cameras to tape the business of the morning, and every automobile had two people in it so that driving wouldn't interfere with watching. They followed Suvorov/Koniev into central Moscow.

Back at his apartment, another team had already defeated his lock and was inside his flat. What happened there was as graceful as any performance by the Bolshoi Ballet. Once inside, the investigative team stood still at first, scanning for telltales, left-behind items as innocuous

as a human hair stuck in place across a closet door to show if someone had opened it. Suvorov's KGB file was finally in Provalov's possession now, and he knew all the things the man had been trained in—it turned out that his training had been quite thorough, and Suvorov's grades had been, well, "C" class most of the time: not outstanding enough to earn him the chance to operate in the field as an "illegal" officer on the home ground of the "Main Enemy," meaning the United States, but good enough that he'd become a diplomatic-intelligence specialist, mainly going over information brought in by others, but spending some time in the field, trying to recruit and "run" agents. Along the way, he'd established contact with various foreign diplomats, including three from China—those three he'd used to gather low-level diplomatic information, mainly chitchat-level stuff, but it was all regarded as useful. Suvorov's last field assignment had been from 1989 to '91 in the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, where he'd again tried to gather diplomatic intelligence, and, they saw, with some success this time. The accomplishments had not been questioned at the time, Provalov saw, probably because he'd had some minor victories against the same country's diplomatic service while in Moscow. His file said that he could both speak and write Chinese, skills learned at the KGB Academy that had militated in favor of making him a China specialist.

One of the problems with intelligence operations was that what looked suspicious was often innocuous, and what looked innocuous could well be suspicious. An intelligence officer was *supposed* to establish contact with foreign nationals, often foreign intelligence officers, and then the foreign spy could execute a maneuver that the Americans called a "flip," turning an enemy into an asset. The KGB had done the same thing many times, and part of the price of doing such business was that it could happen to your own people, not so much while you were not looking as when you *were.* Nineteen eighty-nine to '91 had been the time of *glasnost*, the "openness" that had destroyed the Soviet Union as surely as smallpox had annihilated primitive tribesmen. *At that time, KGB was having problems of its own,* Provalov reminded himself, *and what if the Chinese had recruited Suvorov?* The Chinese economy had just been starting to grow back then, and so they'd had the money to toss around, not as much as the Americans always seemed to have, but enough to entice a Soviet civil servant looking at the prospect of losing his job soon.

But what had Suvorov been doing since then? He was now driving a Mercedes-Benz automobile, and those didn't appear in your mailbox. The truth was that they didn't know, and finding out would not be very easy. They knew that neither Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov nor Ivan Yurievich Koniev had paid his income taxes, but that merely put him

at the same level as most Russian citizens, who didn't want to be bothered with such irrelevancies. And, again, they hadn't wanted to question his neighbors. Those names were now being checked to see if any were former KGB, and perhaps, therefore, allies of their suspect. No, they didn't want to alert him in any way.

The apartment looked "clean" in the police sense. With that, they began looking around. The bed was mussed up. Suvorov/Koniev was a man and therefore not terribly neat. The contents of the apartment were, however, expensive, much of them of foreign manufacture. West German appliances, a common affectation of the Russian well-to-do. The searchers wore latex surgical gloves as they opened the refrigerator door (refrigerator-freezers are well-regarded hiding places) for a visual examination. Nothing obvious. Then dresser drawers. The problem was that their time was limited and any residence just had too many places to hide things, whether rolled up in a pair of socks or inside the toilet-paper tube. They didn't really expect to find much, but making the effort was *de rigueur*—it was too hard to explain to one's superiors why one didn't do it than it was to send the search team in to waste their expensively trained time. Elsewhere, people were tapping the apartment's phone. They'd thought about installing some pinhole-lens cameras. These were so easy to hide that only a paranoid genius was likely to find them, but putting them in took time—the hard part was running the wires to the central monitoring station—and time was an asset they didn't have. As it was, their leader had a cell phone in his shirt pocket, waiting for it to vibrate with the word that their quarry was driving back home, in which case they'd tidy up and leave in a hurry.

He was twelve kilometers away. Behind him, the trail cars were switching in and out of visual coverage as deftly as the Russian national football team advancing the soccer ball into tied-game opposition. Provalov was in the command vehicle, watching and listening as the KGB/FSS team leader used a radio and a map to guide his people in and out. The vehicles were all dirty, middle-aged, nondescript types that could be owned by the Moscow city government or gypsy-cab operators, expected to dart around, concealing themselves among the numerous twins they all had. In most cases, the second vehicle occupant was in the back seat, not the front, to simulate a taxi's passenger, and they even had cell phones to complete the disguise, which allowed them to communicate with their base station without looking suspicious. That, the FSS leader remarked to the cop, was one advantage of new technology.

Then came the call that the subject had pulled over, stopped, and parked his car. The two surveillance vehicles in visual contact

continued past, allowing new ones to close in and stop.

"He's getting out," a Federal Security Service major reported. "I'm getting out to follow on foot." The major was young for his rank, usually a sign of a precocious and promising young officer on the way up, and so it was in this case. He was also handsome with his twenty-eight years, and dressed in expensive clothing like one of the new crop of Moscovite business entrepreneurs. He was talking into his phone in a highly animated fashion, the very opposite of what someone conducting a surveillance would do. That enabled him to get within thirty meters of the subject, and to watch his every move with hawk's eyes. Those eyes were needed to catch the most elegant of maneuvers. Suvorov/Koniev sat on a bench, his right hand already in his overcoat pocket while his left fiddled with the morning paper he'd brought out from the car—and that is what tipped the FSS major that he was up to no good. A newspaper was the main disguise used by a spy, something to cover the actions of the working hand, just as a stage magician kept one hand ostentatiously busy while the other performed the actual illusion. And so it was here, so beautifully done that had he been an untrained man, he would never have caught it. The major took a seat on another bench and dialed up another false number on his cell phone and started talking to a fictitious business associate, then watched his surveillance subject stand and walk with studied casualness back to his parked Mercedes.

Major Yefremov called a real number when his subject was a hundred meters away. "This is Pavel Georgiyevich. I am staying here to see what he left behind," he told his base station. He crossed his legs and lit a cigarette, watching the figure get back into his car and drive off. When he was well out of sight, Yefremov walked over to the other bench and reached under. Oh, yes. A magnetic holder. Suvorov had been using this one for some time. He'd glued a metal plate to the bottom of the green-painted wood, and to this he could affix a magnetic holder . . . about a centimeter in thickness, his hand told him. Their subject was a "player" after all. He'd just executed a dead-drop.

On hearing it, Provalov experienced the thrill of seeing a crime committed before his very eyes. Now they had their man committing a crime against the state. Now he was theirs. Now they could arrest him at any time. But they wouldn't, of course. The operation's commander next to him ordered Yefremov to retrieve the container for examination. That would be done very speedily, because the container would have to be returned. They only had half of the spy team. The other half would come to pick it up.

It was the computer. It had to be. On turning it on, they found a

maze of folders, but one of them, they quickly saw, had encrypted contents. The encryption program was one they hadn't come across before. It was American, and its name was written down. They could do no more now. They lacked the proper disks to copy the covert file. That they could fix, and they could also copy the encryption program. Next, they'd have to plant a bugging device on the keyboard. In that way, they could use Sovorov's own password code to crack the encrypted file. With that decision made, the burglary team left the premises.

The next part was virtually preordained. They followed the Mercedes using the same multi-car drill, but the break came when a dump truck—still the dominant form of life on the Moscow streets—was closest. The subject parked the German sedan and jumped out, took just enough time to affix a strip of paper tape to a lamppost, and hopped back into his car. He didn't even bother to look around, as though he'd only done something routine.

But he hadn't. He'd just posted a flag, a notice to someone unknown that the dead-drop had something in it. That someone would walk or drive past and see the tape and know where to go. So, they had to examine the capsule quickly and replace it, lest they warn the enemy spy that their little operation had been compromised. No, you didn't do that until you had to, because things like this were like an unraveling sweater on a pretty woman. You didn't stop pulling the yarn until the tits were exposed, the FSS commander told Provalov.

CHAPTER 24

Infanticide

What's this?" the President asked at his morning intelligence briefing.

"A new SORGE source, this one's called WARBLER. I'm afraid it's not as good from an intelligence point of view, though it does tell us things about their ministers," Dr. Goodley added with some feigned delicacy.

Whoever WARBLER was, Ryan saw, she—it was definitely a she—kept a very intimate diary. She, too, worked with this Minister Fang Gan, and, it appeared, he was enamored of her, and she, if not exactly enamored of him, certainly kept records of his activities. All of them, Ryan saw. It was enough to make his eyes go a little wide this early in the morning.

"Tell Mary Pat that she can sell this stuff to *Hustler* if she wants, but I really don't need it at eight in the goddamned morning."

"She included it to give you a feel for the source," Ben explained. "The material isn't as narrowly political as we're getting from SONGBIRD, but MP thinks it tells us a lot about the guy's character, which is useful, and also there's some political content to go along with the information on Fang's sex life. It would appear he's a man of, uh . . . well, commendable vigor, I guess, though the girl in question would clearly prefer a younger lover. It appears that she had one, but this Fang guy scared him off."

"Possessive bastard," Ryan saw, skimming that section. "Well, I guess at that age you hold on to what you need. Does this tell us anything?"

"Sir, it tells us something about the kind of people who make decisions over there. Here we call them sexual predators."

"Of which we have a few in government service ourselves," Ryan observed. The papers had just broken a story on a member of the Senate.

"At least not in this office," Goodley told his President. He didn't add *anymore*.

"Well, this President is married to a surgeon. She knows how to use sharp instruments," Ryan said, with a wry grin. "So, the Taiwan stuff

yesterday was just a ploy because they haven't figured out how to address the trade issues yet?"

"So it would appear, and yes, that does seem a little odd. Also, MP thinks that they might have a low-level source in State. They know a little more than they could have gotten from the press, she thinks."

"Oh, great," Jack noted. "So what happened? The Japanese corporations sold their old sources to the Chinese?"

Goodley shrugged. "No telling at this time."

"Have Mary Pat call Dan Murray about this. Counterespionage is the FBI's department. Is this something we want to move on at once, or will this compromise SONGBIRD?"

"That's for somebody else to judge, sir," Goodley said, reminding the President that he was good, but not quite *that* good at this business.

"Yeah, somebody other than me, too. What else?"

"The Senate Select Intelligence Committee wants to look into the Russian situation."

"That's nice. What's the beef?"

"They seem to have their doubts about how trustworthy our friends in Moscow are. They're worried that they're going to use the oil and gold money to become the USSR again, and maybe threaten NATO."

"NATO's moved a few hundred miles east, last time I looked. The buffer zone will not hurt our interests."

"Except that we *are* obligated to defend Poland now," Goodley reminded his boss.

"I remember. So, tell the Senate to authorize funds to move a tank brigade east of Warsaw. We can take over one of the old Soviet laagers, can't we?"

"If the Poles want us to. They don't seem overly concerned, sir."

"Probably more worried by the Germans, right?"

"Correct, and there is a precedent for that concern."

"When will Europe get the word that peace has finally broken out for good and all?" Ryan asked the ceiling.

"There's a lot of history, some of it pretty recent, for them to remember, Mr. President. And much of it militates in the other direction."

"I've got a trip to Poland scheduled, don't I?"

"Yes, not too far off, and they're working out the itinerary right now."

"Okay, I'll tell the Polish president personally that he can depend on us to keep the Germans under control. If they step out of line—well, we'll take Chrysler back." Jack sipped his coffee and checked his watch. "Anything else?"

"That should do it for today."

The President looked up slyly. “Tell Mary Pat if she sends me more of this WARBLER stuff, I want the pictures to go with it.”

“Will do, sir.” Goodley had himself a good hoot at that.

Ryan picked up the briefing papers again and read through them more slowly this time, between sips of coffee and snorts, with a few grumbles thrown in. Life had been much easier when he was the guy who prepared these briefing papers than it was now that he was the guy who had to read them. Why was that? Shouldn’t it have been the other way around? Before, he’d been the one to find the answers and anticipate the questions, but now that other people had done all that stuff for him . . . it was harder. That didn’t make any sense at all, damn it. Maybe, he decided, it was because, after him, the information stopped. He had to make the decisions, and so whatever other decisions and analyses had been made at lower levels, the process came to one place and stopped cold. It was like driving a car: Someone else could tell him to turn right at the corner, but he was the guy at the wheel who had to execute the turn, and if somebody clobbered the car, he was the guy who’d get the blame. For a moment, Jack wondered if he was better suited to being a step or two down in the process, able to do the analysis work and make his recommendations with confidence . . . but always knowing that someone else would always get the credit for making the right move, or the blame for making the wrong one. In that insulation from consequence, there was safety and security. But that was cowardice talking, Ryan reminded himself. If there were anyone in Washington better suited for making decisions, he hadn’t met the guy yet, and if that was arrogance talking, then so be it.

But there ought to be someone better, Jack thought, as the clock wound to his first appointment of the day, and it wasn’t his fault that there wasn’t. He checked his appointment sheet. The whole day was political bullshit . . . except it wasn’t bullshit. Everything he did in this office affected the lives of American citizens in one way or another, and that made it important, to them and to him. But who had decided to make him the national *daddy?* What the hell made *him* so damned smart? The people behind his back, as he thought of it, outside the overly thick windows of the Oval Office, all expected him to know how to do the right thing, and over the dinner table or a low-stakes card game, they’d bitch and moan and complain about the decisions he’d made that they didn’t like, as though they knew better—which was easy to say out there. In here it was different. And so, Ryan had to apply himself to every little decision, even menus for school lunches—that one was a real son of a bitch. If you gave kids what they liked to eat, nutritionists would complain that they really ought to eat healthy twigs and berries, but for the most part, parents would probably opt

for burgers and fries, because that's what the kids *would* eat, and even healthy food, uneaten, did them little good. He'd talked that one over with Cathy once or twice, but he really didn't need to. She let their own kids eat pizza whenever they wished, claiming that pizza was high in protein, and that a kid's metabolism could eat almost anything without ill effect, but when cornered, she'd admit *that* put her at odds with some of her fellow professors at Johns Hopkins. And so what was Jack Ryan, President of the United States, Doctor of Philosophy in History, Bachelor of Arts in Economics, *and* a Certified Public Accountant (Ryan couldn't even remember why he had bothered taking that exam), supposed to think, when experts—including the one he was married to—disagreed? That was worth another snort, when his desk buzzer went off and Mrs. Sumter announced that his first appointment of the day was here. Already Jack was wishing for a bummed cigarette, but he couldn't do that until he had a break in his schedule, because only Mrs. Sumter and a few of his Secret Service detail were allowed to know that the President of the United States suffered, intermittently, from *that* vice.

Jesus, he thought, as he did so often when the workday began, *how did I ever get stuck in here?* Then he stood and faced the door, conjuring up his welcoming Presidential smile as he tried to remember who the hell was coming in first to discuss farm subsidies in South Dakota.

The flight, as usual, was out of Heathrow, this one in a Boeing 737, because it wasn't all that long a hop to Moscow. The Rainbow troopers filled the entire first-class section, which would please the cabin staff, though they didn't know it yet, because the passengers would be unusually polite and undemanding. Chavez sat with his father-inlaw, politely watching the safety-briefing video, though both knew that if the airplane hit the ground at four hundred knots, it really wouldn't help all that much to know where the nearest emergency exit was. But such things were rare enough to be ignored. Ding grabbed the magazine from the pocket in front and flipped through it in the hope of finding something interesting. He'd already bought all the useful items from the "flying mall" magazine, some to his wife's pitying amusement.

"So, the little guy's walking better?" Clark asked.

"You know, the enthusiasm he has for it is kinda funny, the big grin every time he makes it from the TV to the coffee table, like he's won the marathon, got a big gold medal, and a kiss from Miss America on his way to Disney World."

"The big things are made up of a lot of little things, Domingo," Clark observed, as the aircraft started its takeoff run. "And the horizon's a lot closer when you're that short."

"I suppose, Mr. C. Does seem kinda amusing, though . . . and kinda cute," he allowed.

"Not bad duty being the father of a little guy, is it?"

"I got no complaints," Chavez agreed, leaning his seat back now that the gear was up.

"How's Ettore working out?" Back to business, Clark decided. This grandpa stuff had its limitations.

"He's in better shape now. Needed about a month to get caught up. He took some razzing, but he handled it just fine. You know, he's smart. Good tactical instincts, considering he's a cop and not a soldier."

"Being a cop in Sicily isn't like walking a beat on Oxford Street in London, you know?"

"Yeah, guess so," Chavez agreed. "But on the simulator he hasn't made a single shoot/no-shoot mistake yet, and that's not bad. The only other guy who hasn't blown one is Eddie Price." The computerized training simulator back at Hereford was particularly ruthless in its presentation of possible tactical scenarios, to the point that in one a twelveyear-old picked up an AK-74 and hosed you if you didn't pay close enough attention. The other nasty one was the woman holding the baby who'd just happened to pick up a pistol from a dead terrorist and turn innocently to face the incoming Men of Black. Ding had taken her down once, to find a Cabbage Patch doll on his desk the next morning with a packet of McDonald's ketchup spread across the face. The RAINBOW troopers had a lively, if somewhat perverse, institutional sense of humor.

"So, what exactly are we supposed to be doing?"

"The old Eighth Chief Directorate of the KGB, their executive protective service," John explained. "They've got worries about domestic terrorists—from the Chechens, I guess, and other internal nationalities who want out of the country. They want us to help train up their boys to deal with them."

"How good are they?" Ding asked.

RAINBOW SIX shrugged. "Good question. The personnel are former KGB types, but with Spetsnaz training, so, probably career people as opposed to two-year in-and-outs in the Red Army. All probably titular commissioned officers, but with sergeants' duties. I expect they'll be smart, properly motivated, probably in decent physical shape, and they'll understand the mission. Will they be as good as they need to be? Probably not," John thought. "But in a few weeks we ought to be able to point them in the right direction."

"So mainly we're going to be training up their instructors?"

Clark nodded. "That's how I read it, yeah."

"Fair enough," Chavez agreed, as the lunch menu appeared. Why

was it, he wondered, that airline food never seemed to have what you wanted? This was dinner food, not lunch food. What the hell was wrong with a cheeseburger and fries? Oh, well, at least he could have a decent beer. The one thing he'd come to love about life in the UK was the beer. There wouldn't be anything like it in Russia, he was sure.

Sunrise in Beijing was as drab as the polluted air could make it, Mark Gant thought. For some reason he'd slipped out of synch with the local time, despite the black capsule and planned sleep. He'd found himself awake just at first light, which fought through air that was as bad as Los Angeles on its worst-ever day. Certainly there was no EPA in the PRC, and this place didn't even have much in the way of automobiles yet. If that ever happened, China might solve its local population problem with mass gassing. He hadn't been around enough to recognize this as a problem of Marxist nations—but there weren't many of them left to be examples, were there? Gant had never smoked—it was a vice largely removed from the stock-trading community, where the normal working stress was enough of a killer that they needed few others—and this degree of air pollution made his eyes water.

He had nothing to do and lots of time in which to do it—once awake he was never able to escape back into sleep—so he decided to flip on his reading light and go over some documents, most of which he'd been given without any particular expectation that he would read them. The purpose of diplomacy, Commander Spock had once said on *Star Trek,* was to *prolong* a crisis. Certainly the discourse meandered enough to make the Mississippi River look like a laser beam, but like the Father of Waters, it eventually had to get downstream, or downhill, or wherever the hell it was that rivers went. But this morning—what had awakened him? He looked out the window, seeing the orange-pink smudge beginning to form at the horizon, backlighting the buildings. Gant found them ugly, but he knew he just wasn't used to them. The tenements of Chicago weren't exactly the Taj Mahal, and the wood-frame house of his youth wasn't Buckingham Palace. Still, the sense of different-ness here was overpowering. Everywhere you looked, things seemed alien, and he wasn't cosmopolitan enough to overcome that feeling. It was like a background buzz in the Muzak, never quite there, but never gone away either. It was almost a sense of foreboding, but he shook it off. There was no reason to feel anything like that. He didn't know that he would be proven wrong very soon.

Barry Wise was already up in his hotel room, with breakfast coming

—the hotel was one of an American chain, and the breakfast menu approximately American as well. The local bacon would be different, but even Chinese chickens laid real eggs, he was sure. His previous day's experiment with waffles hadn't worked out very well, and Wise was a man who needed a proper breakfast to function throughout the day.

Unlike most American TV correspondent/reporters, Wise looked for his own stories. His producer was a partner, not a boss-handler. He credited that fact for his collection of Emmy awards, though his wife just grumbled about dusting the damned things behind the basement bar.

He needed a fresh new story for today. His American audience would be bored with another talking-head-plus-B-roll piece on the trade negotiations. He needed some local color, he thought, something to make the American people feel as one with the Chinese people. It wasn't easy, and there'd been enough stories on Chinese restaurants, which was the only Chinese thing with which most Americans were familiar. What, then? What did Americans have in common with the citizens of the People's Republic of China? *Not a hell of a lot,* Wise told himself, but there had to be *something* he could use. He stood when breakfast arrived, looking out the picture windows as the waiter wheeled the cart close to the bed. It turned out that they'd goofed on his order, ham instead of bacon, but the ham looked okay and he went with it, tipping the waiter and sitting back down.

Something, he thought, pouring his coffee, *but what?* He'd been through this process often enough. The writers of fiction often chided reporters for their own sort of "creativity," but the process was real. Finding stuff of interest was doubly hard for reporters, because, unlike novelists, they couldn't make things up. They had to use reality, and reality could be a son of a bitch, Barry Wise thought. He reached for his reading glasses in the drawer of the night table and was surprised to see . . .

Well, it wasn't all *that* surprising. It was a matter of routine in any American hotel, a Bible left there by the Gideon Society. It was only here, probably, because the hotel was American-owned and -operated, and they had a deal with the Gideon people . . . but what a strange place to find a Bible. The People's Republic wasn't exactly overrun with churches. Were there Christians here? Hmph. Why not find out? Maybe there was a story in that. . . . Better than nothing, anyway. With that semi-decided, he went back to breakfast. His crew would be waking up about now. He'd have his producer look around for a Christian minister, maybe even a Catholic priest. A rabbi was too much to hope for. That would mean the Israeli embassy, and that was cheating, wasn't it?

How was your day, Jack?" Cathy asked.

The night was an accident. They had nothing to do, no political dinner, no speech, no reception, no play or concert at the Kennedy Center, not even an intimate party of twenty or thirty on the bedroom level of the residence portion of the White House, which Jack hated and Cathy enjoyed, because they could invite people they actually knew and liked to those, or at least people whom they wanted to meet. Jack didn't mind the parties as such, but he felt that the bedroom level of The House (as the Secret Service called it, as opposed to the other *House,* sixteen blocks down the street) was the only private space he had left—even the place they owned at Peregrine Cliff on Chesapeake Bay had been redone by the Service. Now it had fireprotection sprinklers, about seventy phone lines, an alarm system like they used to protect nuclear-weapon storage sites, and a new building to house the protective detail who deployed there on the weekends when the Ryans decided to see if they still had a house to retreat to when this official museum got to be too much.

But tonight there was none of that. Tonight they were almost real people again. The difference was that if Jack wanted a beer or drink, he couldn't just walk to the kitchen and get it. That wasn't allowed. No, he had to order it through one of the White House ushers, who'd either take the elevator down to the basement-level kitchen, or to the upstairs bar. He could, of course, have insisted and walked off to make his own, but that would have meant insulting one of the ushers, and while these men, mainly black (some said they traced their lineage back to Andrew Jackson's personal slaves), didn't mind, it seemed unnecessarily insulting to them. Ryan had never been one to have others do his work, however. Oh, sure, it was nice to have his shoes shined every night by some guy who didn't have anything else to do, and who drew a comfortable government salary to do it, but it just seemed unmanly to be fussed over as if he were some sort of nobleman, when in fact his father had been a hardworking homicide detective on the Baltimore city police force, and he'd needed a government scholarship (courtesy of the United States Marine Corps) to get through Boston College without having his mom take a job. Was it his working-class roots and upbringing? Probably, Ryan thought. Those roots also explained what he was doing now, sitting in an easy chair with a drink in his hand, watching TV, as though he were a normal person for a change.

Cathy's life was actually the least changed in the family, except that every morning she flew to work on a Marine Corps VH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, to which the taxpayers and the media didn't object—not after SANDBOX, also known as Katie Ryan, had been attacked in her

daycare center by some terrorists. The kids were off watching televisions of their own, and Kyle Daniel, known to the Secret Service as SPRITE, was asleep in his crib. And so, *that* Dr. Ryan—code name SURGEON—was sitting in her own chair in front of the TV, going over her patient notes and checking a medical journal as part of her never-ending professional education.

"How are things at work, honey?" SWORDSMAN asked SURGEON.

"Pretty good, Jack. Bernie Katz has a new granddaughter. He's all bubbly about it."

"Which kid?"

"His son Mark—got married two years ago. We went, remember?"

"That's the lawyer?" Jack asked, remembering the ceremony, in the good old days, before he'd been cursed into the Presidency.

"Yeah, his other son, David, is the doctor—up at Yale, on the faculty, thoracic surgeon."

"Have I met that one?" Jack couldn't remember.

"No. He went to school out west, UCLA." She turned the page in the current *New England Journal of Medicine,* then decided to dog-ear it. It was an interesting piece on a new discovery in anesthesia, something worth remembering. She'd talk about it at lunch with one of the professors. It was her custom to lunch with her colleagues in different fields, to keep current on what was going on in medicine. The next big breakthrough, she thought, would be in neurology. One of her Hopkins colleagues had discovered a drug that seemed to make damaged nerve cells regrow. If it panned out, that was a Nobel Prize. It would be the ninth hanging on the trophy wall of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Her work with surgical lasers had won her a Lasker Public Service Award—the highest such award in American medicine—but it hadn't been fundamental enough for a trip to Stockholm. That was fine with her. Ophthalmology wasn't that sort of field, but fixing people's sight was pretty damned rewarding. Maybe the one good thing about Jack's elevation and her attendant status as First Lady was that she'd have a real shot at the Directorship of the Wilmer Institute if and when Bernie Katz ever decided to hang it up. She'd still be able to practice medicine—that was something she never wanted to give up—and also be able to oversee research in her field, decide who got the grants, where the really important exploratory work was, and that, she thought, was something she might be good at. So, maybe this President stuff wasn't a total loss.

Her only real beef was that people expected her to dress like a supermodel, and while she had always dressed well, being a clotheshorse had never appealed to her. It was enough, she figured, to wear nice formal gowns at all the damned formal affairs she had to attend (and not get charged for it, since the gowns were all donated

by the makers). As it was, *Women's Wear Daily* didn't like her normal choice of clothing, as though her white lab coat was a fashion statement—no, it was her uniform, like the Marines who stood at the doors to the White House, and one she wore with considerable pride. Not many women, or men, could claim to be at the very pinnacle of their profession. But she could. As it was, this had turned into a nice evening. She didn't even mind Jack's addiction to The History Channel, even when he grumbled at some minor mistake in one of their shows. Assuming, she chuckled to herself, that he was right, and the show was wrong. . . . Her wineglass was empty, and since she didn't have any procedures scheduled for the next day, she waved to the usher for a refill. Life could have been worse. Besides, they'd had their big scare with those damned terrorists, and with good luck and that wonderful FBI agent Andrea Price had married, they'd survived, and she didn't expect anything like that to happen again. Her own Secret Service detail was her defense against that. Her own Principal Agent, Roy Altman, inspired the same sort of confidence at his job that she did at hers, Cathy judged.

"Here you go, Dr. Ryan," the usher said, delivering the refilled glass.

"Thank you, George. How are the kids?"

"My oldest just got accepted to Notre Dame," he answered proudly.

"That's wonderful. What's she going to major in?"

"Premed."

Cathy looked up from her journal. "Great. If there's any way I can help her, you let me know, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am, I sure will." And the nice thing, George thought, was that she wasn't kidding. The Ryans were very popular with the staff, despite their awkwardness with all the fussing. There was one other family the Ryans looked after, the widow and kids of some Air Force sergeant whose connection with the Ryans nobody seemed to understand. And Cathy had personally taken care of two kids of staff members who'd had eye problems.

"What's tomorrow look like, Jack?"

"Speech to the VFW convention in Atlantic City. I chopper there and back after lunch. Not a bad speech Callie wrote for me."

"She's a little weird."

"She's different," the President agreed, "but she's good at what she does."

Thank God, Cathy didn't say aloud, *that* I *don't have to do much of that!* For her, a speech was telling a patient how she was going to fix his or her eyes.

There's a new Papal Nuncio in Beijing," the producer said.

"That's an ambassador, like, isn't it?"

The producer nodded. “Pretty much. Italian guy, Cardinal Renato DiMilo. Old guy, don’t know anything about him.”

“Well, maybe we can drive over and meet the guy,” Barry thought as he knotted his tie. “Got an address and phone number?”

“No, but our contact at the American Embassy can get’em quick enough.”

“Give the guy a call,” Wise ordered gently. He and the producer had been together for eleven years, and together they’d dodged bullets and won those Emmys, which wasn’t bad for a couple of ex—Marine sergeants.

“Right.”

Wise checked his watch. The timing worked just fine. He could get a report at his leisure, upload it on the satellite, and Atlanta could edit it and show it to people for breakfast in America. That would pretty much take care of his day in this heathen country. Damn, why couldn’t they do trade conferences in Italy? He remembered Italian food fondly from his time in the Mediterranean Fleet Marine Force. And the Italian women. They’d like the United States Marine uniform. Well, lots of women did.

One thing neither Cardinal DiMilo nor Monsignor Schepke had learned to like was Chinese breakfast food, which was totally alien from anything Europeans had ever served for the early-morning meal. And so Schepke fixed breakfast every morning before their Chinese staff came in—they’d do the dishes, which was enough for both churchmen. Both had already said their morning mass, which necessitated their rising before six every morning, rather like soldiers did, the elderly Italian had often remarked to himself.

The morning paper was the *International Herald Tribune,* which was too American-oriented, but the world was an imperfect place. At least the paper showed the football scores, and European football was a sport of interest to both of them, and one which Schepke could still go out and play when the opportunity arose. DiMilo, who’d been a pretty good midfielder in his day, had to content himself with watching and kibitzing now.

The CNN crew had their own van, an American make that had been shipped into the PRC ages ago. It had its own miniature satellite transceiver rig, a small technical miracle of sorts that enabled instant contact with any place in the world via orbiting communications satellites. It could do anything but operate when the vehicle was moving, and someone was working on that feature, which would be the next major breakthrough, because then the mobile crews could work with little threat of interference from the gomers in whatever

country they happened to be operating.

They also had a satellite-navigation system, which was a genuine miracle that allowed them to navigate anywhere, in any city for which they had a CD-ROM map. With it, they could find any address faster than a local taxi driver. And with a cell phone, they could get the address itself, in this case from the U.S. embassy, which had the street addresses for all foreign legations, of which the Papal Nuncio's house was just one more. The cell phone also allowed them to call ahead. The call was answered by a Chinese voice at first, then one that sounded German, of all things, but which said, sure, come on over.

Barry Wise was dressed in his usual coat and tie—his neatness was another leftover from the Marines—and he knocked on the door, finding the expected local—he was tempted to call them "natives," but that was too English, and distantly racist—at the door to conduct them in. The first Westerner they met was clearly not a Cardinal. Too young, too tall, and far too German.

"Hello, I am Monsignor Schepke," the man greeted him.

"Good day, I am Barry Wise of CNN."

"Yes," Schepke acknowledged with a smile. "I have seen you many times on the television. What brings you here?"

"We're here to cover the trade meeting between America and China, but we decided to look for other items of interest. We were surprised to see that the Vatican has a diplomatic mission here."

Schepke ushered Wise into his office and motioned him to a comfortable chair. "I've been here for several months, but the Cardinal just arrived recently."

"Can I meet him?"

"Certainly, but His Eminence is on the phone to Rome at the moment. Do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

"No problem," Wise assured him. He looked the monsignor over. He looked athletic, tall, and very German. Wise had visited that country many times, and always felt somewhat uneasy there, as if the racism that had occasioned the Holocaust was still there somewhere, hiding close by but out of sight. In other clothing, he would have taken Schepke for a soldier, even a Marine. He looked physically fit and very smart, clearly a keen observer.

"What order are you in, if I may ask?" Wise said.

"The Society of Jesus," Schepke replied.

A Jesuit, Wise thought at once. That explained it. "From Germany?"

"Correct, but I'm based in Rome now at Robert Bellarmine University, and I was asked to accompany His Eminence here because of my language skills." His English was about halfway between English and American, but not Canadian, grammatically perfect and remarkably precise in his pronunciations.

And because you're smart, Wise added to himself. He knew that the Vatican had a respected intelligence-gathering service, probably the oldest in the world. So, this Monsignor was a combination diplomat and spook, Wise decided.

"I won't ask how many languages you speak. I'm sure you have me beat," Wise observed. He'd never met or even heard of a dumb Jesuit.

Schepke offered a friendly smile. "It is my function." Then he looked at his desk phone. The light had gone out. Schepke excused himself and headed to the inner office, then returned. "His Eminence will see you now."

Wise rose and followed the German priest in. The man he saw was corpulent and clearly Italian, dressed not in priestly robes, but rather a coat and trousers, with a red shirt (or was it a vest?) underneath his Roman collar. The CNN correspondent didn't remember if the protocol was for him to kiss the man's ring, but hand-kissing wasn't his thing anyway, and so he just shook hands in the American custom.

"Welcome to our legation," Cardinal DiMilo said. "You are our first American reporter. Please—" The Cardinal gestured him to a chair.

"Thank you, Your Eminence." Wise did remember that part of the protocol.

"How may we serve you this day?"

"Well, we're in town to cover the trade talks—America and China—and we're just looking for a story about life in Beijing. We just learned last night that the Vatican has an embassy here, and we thought we might come over to talk to you, sir."

"Marvelous," DiMilo observed with a gracious priestly smile. "There are a few Christians in Beijing, though this is not exactly Rome."

Wise felt a lightbulb go off. "What about Chinese Christians?"

"We've only met a few. We're going over to see one this afternoon, as a matter of fact, a Baptist minister named Yu."

"Really?" That was a surprise. A *local* Baptist?

"Yes," Schepke confirmed. "Good chap, he was even educated in America, at Oral Roberts University."

"A Chinese citizen from Oral Roberts?" Wise asked somewhat incredulously, as the STORY! light flashed in his head.

"Yes, it is somewhat unusual, isn't it?" DiMilo observed.

It was unusual enough that a Baptist and a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church were on speaking terms, Wise thought, but to have it happen here seemed about as likely as a live dinosaur strolling up the Mall in Washington. Atlanta would sure as hell like this one.

"Could we go over with you?" the CNN correspondent asked.

The terror began soon after she arrived at her workplace. For all the waiting and all the anticipation, it still came as a surprise, and an

unwelcome one, the first twinge in her lower abdomen. The last time, now nearly six years before, it had presaged the birth of Ju-Long, and been a surprise as well, but that pregnancy had been authorized, and this one was not. She'd hoped that it would begin in the morning, but on a weekend, in their apartment, where she and Quon could handle things without external complications, but babies came at their own time in China, as they did elsewhere in the world, and this one would be no exception. The question was whether or not the State would allow it to take his first breath, and so the first muscle twinge, the first harbinger of the contractions of frank labor, brought with it the fear that murder would be committed, that her own body would be the scene of the crime, that she would be there to see it, to feel the baby stop moving, to feel death. The fear was the culmination of all the sleepless nights and the nightmares which had caused her to sweat in her bed for weeks. Her co-workers saw her face and wondered. A few of the women on the shop floor had guessed her secret, though they'd never discussed it with her. The miracle was that no one had informed on her, and that had been Lien-Hua's greatest fear of all—but that just wasn't the sort of thing one woman could do to another. Some of them, too, had given birth to daughters who had "accidentally" died a year or two later to satisfy their husbands' desire for a male heir. That was one more aspect of life in the People's Republic that was rarely the subject of conversation, even among women in private.

And so Yang Lien-Hua looked around the factory floor, feeling her muscles announce what was to come, and all she could hope was that it would stop, or delay itself. Another five hours, and she could pedal her bicycle home and deliver the baby there, and maybe that wasn't as good as on a weekend, but it was better than having an emergency here. "Lotus Flower" told herself that she had to be strong and resolute. She closed her eyes, and bit her lip, and tried to concentrate on her job, but the twinges soon grew into discomfort. Then would come mild pain, followed by the real contractions that would deny her the ability to stand, and then . . . what? It was her inability to see just a few hours beyond where she stood that contorted her face worse than pain ever could. She feared death, and while that fear is known to all humans, hers was for a life still part of herself, but not really her own. She feared seeing it die, feeling it die, feeling an unborn soul depart, and while it would surely go back to God, that was not God's intention. She needed her spiritual counselor now. She needed her husband, Quon. She needed Reverend Yu even more. But how would she make that happen?

The camera setup went quickly. Both of the churchmen watched with interest, since neither had seen this happen before. Ten minutes

later, both were disappointed with the questions. Both had seen Wise on television, and both had expected better of him. They didn't realize that the story he really wanted was a few miles and an hour or so away.

"Good," Wise said, when the vanilla questions were asked and answered. "Can we follow you over to your friend's place?"

"Certainly," His Eminence replied, standing. He excused himself, because even Cardinals have to visit the bathroom before motoring off —at least they did at DiMilo's age. But he reappeared and joined Franz for the walk to the car, which the Monsignor would drive, to the continuing disappointment of their own servant/driver who was, as they suspected, a stringer for the Ministry of State Security. The CNN van followed, twisting through the streets until they arrived at the modest house of the Reverend Yu Fa An. Parking was easy enough. The two Catholic churchmen walked to Yu's door, carrying a large package, Wise noted.

"Ah!" Yu observed with a surprised smile, on opening the door. "What brings you over?"

"My friend, we have a gift for you," His Eminence replied, holding up the package. It was clearly a large Bible, but no less pleasing for the obvious nature of the gift. Yu waved them in, then saw the Americans.

"They asked if they could join us," Monsignor Schepke explained.

"Certainly," Yu said at once, wondering if maybe Gerry Patterson might see the story, and even his distant friend Hosiah Jackson. But they didn't get the cameras set up before he unwrapped the package.

Yu did this at his desk, and on seeing it, he looked up in considerable surprise. He'd expected a Bible, but this one must have cost hundreds of American dollars . . . It was an edition of the King James version in beautifully literate Mandarin . . . and magnificently illustrated. Yu stood and walked around the desk to embrace his Italian colleague.

"May the Lord Jesus bless you for this, Renato," Yu said, with no small emotion.

"We both serve Him as best we can. I thought of it, and it seemed something you might wish to have," DiMilo replied, as he might to a good parish priest in Rome, for that was what Yu was, wasn't it? Close enough, certainly.

For his part, Barry Wise cursed that he hadn't quite gotten his camera running for that moment. "We don't often see Catholics and Baptists this friendly," the reporter observed.

Yu handled the answer, and this time the camera was rolling. "We are allowed to be friends. We work for the same boss, as you say in America." He took DiMilo's hand again and shook it warmly. He

rarely received so sincere a gift, and it was so strange to get it here in Beijing from what some of his American colleagues called papists, and an Italian one at that. Life really did have purpose after all. Reverend Yu had sufficient faith that he rarely doubted that, but to have it confirmed from time to time was a blessing.

The contractions came too fast, and too hard. Lien-Hua withstood it as long as she could, but after an hour, it felt as though someone had fired a rifle into her belly. Her knees buckled. She did her best to control it, to remain standing, but it was just too much. Her face turned pasty-white, and she collapsed to the cement floor. A co-worker was there at once. A mother herself, she knew what she beheld.

"It is your time?" she asked.

"Yes." Delivered with a gasp and a painful nod.

"Let me run and get Quon." And she was off at once. That bit of help was when things went bad for Lotus Flower.

Her supervisor noted one running employee, and then turned his head to see another prostrate one. He walked over, as one might to see what had happened after an automobile accident, more with curiosity than any particular desire to intervene. He'd rarely taken note of Yang Lien-Hua. She performed her function reliably, with little need for chiding or shouting, and was popular with her co-workers, and that was all he knew about her, really, and all that he figured he needed to know. There was no blood about. She hadn't fallen from some sort of accident or mechanical malfunction. How strange. He stood over her for a few seconds, seeing that she was in some discomfort and wondering what the problem was, but he wasn't a doctor or a medic, and didn't want to interfere. Oh, if she'd been bleeding he might have tried to slap a bandage over the wound or something, but this wasn't such a situation and so he just stood there, as he figured a manager should, showing that he was there, but not making things worse. There was a medical orderly in the first-aid room two hundred meters away. The other girl had probably run that way to fetch her, he thought.

Lien-Hua's face contorted after a few minutes' relative peace, as another contraction began. He saw her eyes screw closed and her face go pale, and her breathing change to a rapid pant. *Oh,* he realized, *that's it.* How odd. He was supposed to know about such things, so that he could schedule substitutions on the line. Then he realized something else. This was not an authorized pregnancy. Lien-Hua had broken the rules, and that wasn't supposed to happen, and it could reflect badly on his department, and on *him* as a supervisor . . . and he wanted to own an automobile someday.

"What is happening here?" he asked her.

But Yang Lien-Hua was in no shape to reply at the moment. The contractions were accelerating much faster than they'd done with Ju-Long. *Why couldn't this have waited until Saturday?* she demanded of Destiny. *Why does God wish my child to die aborning?* She did her best to pray through the pain, doing her utmost to concentrate, to entreat God for mercy and help in this time of pain and trial and terror, but all she saw around her was more cause for fear. There was no help in the face of her shop supervisor. Then she heard running feet again and looked to see Quon approaching, but before he got to her, the supervisor intercepted him.

"What goes on here?" the man demanded, with all the harshness of petty authority. "Your woman makes a baby here? An unauthorized baby?" the most minor of officials asked and accused in the same breath. *"Ju hai,"* he added: *Bitch!*

For his part, Quon wanted this baby as well. He hadn't told his wife of the fears that he'd shared with her, because he felt that it would have been unmanly, but that last statement from the shop supervisor was a little much for a man under two kinds of simultaneous stress. Recalling his army training, Quon struck out with his fist, following his hand with an imprecation of his own:

"*Pok gai,*" literally, fall down in the street, but in context, *Get the fuck out of my way!* The shop supervisor gashed his head when he went down, giving Quon the satisfaction of seeing an injury to avenge the insult to his wife. But he had other things to do.

With the words said, and the blow struck, he lifted Lien-Hua to her feet and supported her as best he could on the way to where their bicycles were parked. But, now what to do? Like his wife, Quon had wanted this all to happen at home, where at the worst she could call in sick. But he had no more power to stop this process than he did to stop the world from turning on its axis. He didn't even have time or energy to curse fate. He had to deal with reality as it came, one shaky second at a time, and help his beloved wife as best he could.

You were educated in America?" Wise asked, in front of the rolling camera.

"Yes," Yu replied over tea. "At Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma. My first degree was in electrical engineering, then my divinity degree and my ordination came later."

"I see you are married," the reporter observed, pointing to a picture on the wall.

"My wife is away in Taiwan, looking after her mother, who is sick at the moment," he explained.

"So, how did you two meet?" Wise asked, meaning Yu and the

Cardinal.

"That was Fa An's doing," the Cardinal explained. "It was he who came to us to extend a greeting to a newcomer in the same—same line of work, one could say." DiMilo was tempted to say that they enjoyed drinks together, but refrained for fear of demeaning the man before his fellow Baptists, some of whom objected to alcohol in any form. "As you might imagine, there are not so many Christians in this city, and what few there are need to stick together."

"Do you find it odd, a Catholic and a Baptist to be so friendly?"

"Not at all," Yu replied at once. "Why should it be odd? Are we not united by faith?" DiMilo nodded agreement at this perfect, if unanticipated, statement of belief.

"And what of your congregation?" Wise asked the Chinese minister next.

The bicycle lot outside was a confused mass of metal and rubber, for few of the Chinese workers owned automobiles, but as Quon helped Lien-Hua to the far corner, the two of them were spotted by someone who did have access to one. He was a factory security guard who drove about the perimeter of the plant very importantly in his three-wheel motorized cart, an accessory more important to his sense of status than his uniform and badge. Like Quon, a former sergeant in the People's Liberation Army, he'd never lost his feeling of personal authority, and this communicated itself in the way he spoke to people.

"Stop!" he called from the driver's seat in his cart. "What goes on here?"

Quon turned. Lien-Hua had just been hit with another contraction, with buckled knees and gasping breath, and he was almost dragging her to their bikes. Suddenly, he knew that this wasn't going to work. There was just no way that she could pedal her own bike. It was eleven blocks to their apartment. He could probably drag her up the three flights of steps, but how the hell was he going to get her to the front door?

"My wife is . . . she's hurt," Quon said, unwilling—afraid—to explain what the problem really was. He knew this guard—his name was Zhou Jingjin—and he seemed a decent enough chap. "I'm trying to get her home."

"Where do you live, Comrade?" Zhou asked.

"Great Long March Apartments, number seventy-four," Quon replied. "Can you help us?"

Zhou looked them over. The woman seemed to be in some distress. His was not a country which placed great value on personal initiative, but she was a comrade in difficulty, and there was supposed to be solidarity among the people, and their apartment was only ten or

eleven blocks, hardly fifteen minutes even in this slow and awkward cart. He made his decision, based on socialist worker solidarity.

"Load her on the back, Comrade."

"Thank you, Comrade." And Quon got his wife there, lifted her bottom up, and set her on the rusted steel deck behind the driver's compartment. With a wave, he signaled Zhou to head west. This contraction proved a difficult one. Lien-Hua gasped and then cried out, to the distress of her husband, and worse, the distress of the driver, who turned and saw what ought to have been a healthy woman grasping her abdomen in great pain. It was not a pretty thing to see by any stretch of the imagination, and Zhou, having taken one leap of initiative, decided that maybe he ought to take another. The path to Great Long March Apartments led down Meishuguan Street, past the Longfu Hospital, and like most Beijing teaching hospitals, this one had a proper emergency-receiving room. This woman was in distress, and she was a comrade, like himself a member of the working class, and she deserved his help. He looked back. Quon was doing his best to comfort his woman as a man should, far too busy to do much of anything as the security cart bumped along the uneven streets at twenty kilometers per hour.

Yes, Zhou decided, he had to do it. He turned the steering tiller gently, pulled up to the loading dock designed more for delivery trucks than ambulances, and stopped.

It took Quon a few seconds to realize that they'd stopped. He looked around, ready to help his wife off the cart, until he saw that they weren't at the apartment complex. Disoriented by the previous thirty minutes of unexpected emergency and chaos, he didn't understand, didn't grasp where they were, until he saw someone in a uniform emerge from the door. She wore a white bandanna-hat on her head—a nurse? Were they at the hospital? No, he couldn't allow that.

Yang Quon stood off the cart and turned to Zhou. He started to object that they'd come to the wrong place, that he didn't want to be here, but the hospital workers had an unaccustomed sense of industry at the moment—the emergency room was perversely idle at the moment—and a wheeled gurney emerged from the door with two men in attendance. Yang Quon tried to object, but he was merely pushed aside by the burly attendants as Lien-Hua was loaded on the gurney and wheeled inside before he could do much more than flap his mouth open and closed. He took a breath and rushed in, only to be intercepted by a pair of clerks asking for the information they needed to fill out their admitting forms, stopping him dead in his tracks as surely as a man with a loaded rifle, but far more ignominiously.

In the emergency room itself, a physician and a nurse watched as

the orderlies loaded Lien-Hua onto an examining table. It didn't take more than a few seconds for their trained eyes to make the first guess, which they shared with a look. Only a few seconds more and her work clothes had been removed, and the pregnant belly was as obvious as a sunrise. It was similarly obvious that Yang Lien-Hua was in frank labor, and that this was no emergency. She could be wheeled to the elevator and taken to the second floor, where there was a sizable obstetrics staff. The physician, a woman, beckoned to the orderlies and told them where to move the patient. Then she walked to the phone to call upstairs and tell them that a delivery was on the way up. With that "work" done, the doctor went back to the physicians' lounge for a smoke and a magazine.

Comrade Yang?" another clerk, a more senior one, said.

"Yes?" the worried husband replied, still stuck in the waiting room, held prisoner by clerks.

"Your wife is being taken upstairs to obstetrics. But," the clerk added, "there's one problem."

"What is that?" Quon asked, knowing the answer, but hoping for a miracle, and utterly trapped by the bureaucratic necessities of the moment.

"We have no record of your wife's pregnancy in our files. You are in our health district—we show you at Number Seventy-two Great Long March Flats. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's where we live," Quon sputtered out, trying to find a way out of this trap, but not seeing one anywhere.

"Ah." The clerk nodded. "I see. Thank you. I must now make a telephone call."

It was the way the last statement was delivered that frightened Quon: Ah, yes, I have to see that the trash is removed properly. Ah, yes, the glass is broken, and I'll try to find a repairman. Ah, yes, an unauthorized pregnancy, I'll call upstairs so that they'll know to kill the baby when it crowns.

Upstairs, Lien-Hua could see the difference in their eyes. When Ju-Long had been on his way, there'd been joy and anticipation in the eyes of the nurses who oversaw her labor. You could see their eyes crinkle with smiles at the corners of their masks . . . but not this time. Someone had come over to where she was in labor room #3 and said something to the nurse, and her head had turned rapidly to where Lien-Hua lay, and her eyes had turned from compassionate to . . . something else, and while Mrs. Yang didn't know what other thing it was, she knew the import. It might not be something the nurse particularly liked, but it was something she would assist in doing,

because she had to. China was a place where people did the things they had to do, whether they approved it or liked it or not. Lien-Hua felt the next contraction. The baby in her uterus was trying to be born, not knowing that it was racing to its own destruction at the hands of the State. But the hospital staffers knew. Before, with Ju-Long, they'd been close by, not quite hovering, but close enough to watch and see that things were going well. Not now. Now they withdrew, desiring not to hear the sounds of a mother struggling to bring forth death in a small package.

On the first floor, it was equally plain to Yang Quon. What came back to him now was his firstborn son, Ju-Long, the feel of his small body in his arms, the little noises he made, the first smile, sitting up, crawling, the first step in their small apartment, the first words he'd spoken . . . but their little Large Dragon was dead now, never to be seen again, crushed by the wheel of a passenger bus. An uncaring fate had ripped that child from his arms and cast him aside like a piece of blowing trash on the street—and now the State was going to slay his second child. And it would all happen upstairs, less than ten meters away, and he couldn't do a thing about it. . . . It was a feeling not unknown to citizens of the People's Republic, where rule from above was the rule, but opposed to it now was the most fundamental of human drives. The two forces battled within the mind of factory worker Yang Quon. His hands shook at his sides as his mind struggled with the dilemma. His eyes strained, staring at nothing closer than the room's wall, but straining even so . . . something, there had to be *something* . . .

There *was* a pay telephone, and he *did* have the proper coins, and he *did* remember the number, and so Yang Quon lifted the receiver and dialed the number, unable to find the ability within himself to change fate, but hoping to find that ability in another.

I'll get it," Reverend Yu said in English, rising and walking to where it was ringing.

"A remarkable guy, isn't he?" Wise asked the two Catholics.

"A fine man," Cardinal DiMilo agreed. "A good shepherd for his flock, and that is all a man can hope to be."

Monsignor's Schepke's head turned when he caught the tone of Yu's voice. Something was wrong here, and by the sound, something serious. When the minister returned to the sitting room, his face told the tale.

"What is amiss?" Schepke asked in his perfect Mandarin. Perhaps this was not something for the American reporters.

"One of my congregation," Yu replied, as he reached for his jacket.

“She is pregnant, in labor even now—but her pregnancy is unauthorized, and her husband fears the hospital will try to kill it. I must go to help.”

“Franz, *was gibt’s hier?*” DiMilo asked in German. The Jesuit then replied in Attic Greek to make damned sure the Americans wouldn’t get it.

“You’ve been told about this, Eminence,” Monsignor Schepke explained in the language of Aristotle. “The abortionists here commit what is virtually murder in any civilized country in the world, and the decision to do so, in this case, is purely political and ideological. Yu wishes to go and help the parents prevent this vile act.”

DiMilo needed less than a second. He stood, and turned his head. “Fa An?”

“Yes, Renato?”

“May we come with you and assist? Perhaps our diplomatic status will have practical value,” His Eminence said, in badly accented but comprehensible Mandarin.

It didn’t take long for Reverend Yu either: “Yes, a fine idea! Renato, I cannot allow this child to die!”

If the desire to procreate is the most fundamental known to mankind, then there are few more powerful calls to action for an adult than *child-in-danger*. For this, men race into burning buildings and jump into rivers. For this now, three clergymen would go to a community hospital to challenge the power of the world’s most populous nation.

“What’s happening?” Wise asked, surprised by the sudden shifts in language and the way the three churchmen had leapt to their feet.

“A pastoral emergency. A member of Yu’s congregation is in the hospital. She needs him, and we will go with our friend to assist in his pastoral duties,” DiMilo said. The cameras were still running, but this was the sort of thing that got edited out. *But what the hell,* Wise thought.

“Is it far? Can we help? Want us to run you over?”

Yu thought it over and quickly decided that he couldn’t make his bike go as fast as the American news van. “That is very kind. Yes.”

“Well, let’s go, then.” Wise stood and motioned to the door. His crew broke down their gear in a matter of seconds and beat them all out the door.

Longfu Hospital turned out to be less than two miles away, facing a north-south street. It was, Wise thought, a place designed by a blind architect, so lacking in aesthetic as to be a definite government-owned building even in this country. The communists had probably killed off anyone with a sense of style back in 1950 or so, and no one had attempted to take his place. Like most reporters, the CNN team came

in the front door in the manner of a police SWAT team. The cameraman's tool was up on his shoulder, with the soundman beside him, Barry Wise and the producer trailing while they looked for good establishing shots. To call the lobby dreary was generous. A Mississippi state prison had a better atmosphere than this, to which was added the disinfectant smell that makes dogs cringe in the vet's office and made kids hug your neck harder for fear of the coming needle.

For his part, Barry Wise was unnaturally alert. He called it his Marine training, though he'd never seen combat operations. But one January night in Baghdad, he'd started looking out the windows forty minutes before the first bombs had fallen from the Stealth fighters, and kept looking until what U.S. Air Force planners had called the AT&T Building took the first spectacular hit. He took the producer's arm and told him to keep his head up. The other ex-Marine nodded agreement. For him it was the suddenly grim looks on the faces of the three clergymen, who'd been so genial until the phone had rung. For that old Italian guy to look this way—it had to be something, they both were sure, and whatever it was, it wouldn't be pleasant, and that often made for a good news story, and they were only seconds from their satellite uplink. Like hunters hearing the first rustle of leaves in the forest, the four CNN men looked alertly for the game and the shot.

"Reverend Yu!" Yang Quon called, walking—almost running—to where they were.

"Eminence, this is my parishioner, Mr. Yang."

"Buon giorno," DiMilo said in polite greeting. He looked over to see the newsies taking their pictures and keeping out of the way, more politely than he'd expected them to do. While Yu spoke with Yang, he walked over to Barry Wise to explain the situation.

"You are right to observe that relations between the Catholics and the Baptists are not always as friendly as they ought to be, but on this issue we stand as one. Upstairs, the officials of this government wish to kill a human baby. Yu wants to save that child. Franz and I will try to help."

"This could get messy, sir," Wise warned. "The security personnel in this country can play rough. I've seen it before."

DiMilo was not an imposing man in physical terms. He was short and a good thirty pounds overweight, the American figured. His hair was thinning. His skin was sagging with age. He probably went out of breath going up two flights of stairs. But for all that, the Cardinal summoned what manhood he had and transformed himself before the American's eyes. The genial smile and gentle disposition evaporated like steam in cold air. Now he looked more like a general on a battlefield.

"The life of an innocent child is at risk, Signore Wise," was all DiMilo said, and it was all he had to say. The Cardinal walked back to his Chinese colleague.

"Get that?" Wise asked his cameraman, Pete Nichols.

"Fuckin' A, Barry!" the guy said behind his eyepiece.

Yang pointed. Yu headed that way. DiMilo and Schepke followed. At the reception desk, the head clerk lifted a phone and made a call. The CNN crew followed the others into the stairwell and headed up to the second floor.

If anything, the obstetrics and gynecology floor was even more drab than the first. They heard the shouts, cries, and moans of women in labor, because in China, the publichealth system did not waste drugs on women giving birth. Wise caught up to see that Yang guy, the father of the baby, standing still in the corridor, trying to identify the cries of his own wife from all the others. Evidently, he failed. Then he walked to the nurse's desk.

Wise didn't need to understand Chinese to get what the exchange was all about. Yang was supported by Reverend Yu and demanded to know where his wife was. The head nurse asked what the hell they were doing here, and told them all that they had to leave at once! Yang, his back straight with dignity and fear, refused and repeated his question. Again the head nurse told him to get lost. Then Yang seriously broke the rules by reaching across the high countertop and grabbing the nurse. You could see it in her eyes. It shocked her at a very fundamental level that anyone could defy her state-issued authority so blatantly. She tried to back away, but his grip was too strong, and for the first time she saw that his eyes were no longer a display of fear. Now they showed pure killing rage, because for Yang human instincts had cast aside all the societal conditioning he'd absorbed in his thirty-six years. His wife and child were in danger, and for them, right here and right now, he'd face a fire-breathing dragon barehanded and be damned to the consequences! The nurse took the easy way out and pointed to the left. Yang headed that way, Yu and the other two clergy with him, and the CNN crew trailing. The nurse felt her neck and coughed to get her breath back, still too surprised to be fearful, trying to understand how and why her orders had been disregarded.

Yang Lien-Hua was in Labor Room #3. The walls were of yellow glazed brick, the floor tile of some color that had been overcome by years of use, and was now a brown-gray.

For "Lotus Flower," it had been a nightmare without end. Alone, all alone in this institution of life and death, she'd felt the contractions strengthen and merge into one continuous strain of her abdominal

muscles, forcing her unborn child down the birth canal, toward a world that didn't want it. She'd seen that in the nurses' faces, the sorrow and resignation, what they must have seen and felt elsewhere in the hospital when death came to take a patient. They'd all learned to accept it as inevitable, and they tried to step away from it, because what had to be done was so contrary to all human instincts that the only way they could be there and see it happen was to—to be somewhere else. Even that didn't work, and though they scarcely admitted it even to one another, they'd go home from work and lie in their beds and weep bitterly at what they as women had to do to newborns. Some would cradle the dead children who never were, who never got to take that first life-affirming breath, trying to show womanly gentleness to someone who would never know about it, except perhaps the spirits of the murdered babies who might have lingered close by. Others went the other way, tossing them into bins like the trash the state said they were. But even they never joked about it—in fact, never talked about it, except perhaps to note it had been done, or, maybe, "There's a woman in Number Four who needs *the shot.*"

Lien-Hua felt the sensations, but worse, knew the thoughts, and her mind cried out to God for mercy. Was it so wrong to be a mother, even if she attended a Christian church? Was it so wrong to have a second child to replace the first that Fate had ripped from her arms? Why did the State deny to her the blessing of motherhood? Was there no way out? She hadn't killed the first child, as many Chinese families did. She hadn't murdered her little Large Dragon, with his sparkling black eyes and comical laugh and grasping little hands. Some other force had taken that away from her, and she *wanted,* she *needed* another. Just one other. She wasn't being greedy. She didn't want to raise two more children. Only one. Only one to suckle at her breasts and smile at her in the mornings. She *needed* that. She worked hard for the State, asked little in return, but she did ask for *this!* It was her *right* as a human being, wasn't it?

But now she knew only despair. She tried to reverse the contractions, to stop the delivery from happening, but she might as well have tried to stop the tide with a shovel. Her little one was coming out. She could feel it. She could see the knowledge of it in the face of the delivery nurse. She checked her watch and leaned out of the room, waving her arm just as Lien-Hua fought the urge to push and complete the process, and so offer up her child to Death. She fought, controlled her breathing, struggled with her muscles, panted instead of breathing deeply, fought and fought and fought, but it was all for nothing. She knew that now. Her husband was nowhere near to protect her. He'd been man enough to put her here, but not enough to

protect her and his own child from what was happening now. With despair came relaxation. It was time. She recognized the feeling from before. She could not fight anymore. It was time to surrender.

The doctor saw the nurse wave. This one was a man. It was easier on the men, and so they gave most of the "shots" in this hospital. He took the 50-cc syringe from stores and then went to the medication closet, unlocking it and withdrawing the big bottle of formaldehyde. He filled the syringe, not bothering to tap out the bubbles, because the purpose of this injection was to kill, and any special care was superfluous. He walked down the corridor toward Labor #3. He'd been on duty for nine hours that day. He'd performed a difficult and successful Caesarian section a few hours before, and now he'd end his working day with this. He didn't like it. He did it because it was his job, part of the State's policy. The foolish woman, having a baby without permission. It really was *her* fault, wasn't it? She knew what the rules were. Everyone did. It was impossible *not* to know. But she'd broken the rules. And she wouldn't be punished for it. Not really *her*. She wouldn't go to prison or lose her job or suffer a monetary fine. She'd just get to go home with her uterus the way it had been nine months before—empty. She'd be a little older, and a little wiser, and know that if this happened again, it was a lot better to have the abortion done in the second or third month, before you got too attached to the damned thing. Damned sure it was a lot more comfortable than going through a whole labor for nothing. That was sad, but there was much sadness in life, and for this part of it they'd all volunteered. The doctor had chosen to become a doctor, and the woman in #3 had chosen to become pregnant.

He came into #3, wearing his mask, because he didn't want to give the woman any infection. That was why he used a clean syringe, in case he should slip and stick her by mistake.

So.

He sat on the usual stool that obstetricians used both for delivering babies and for aborting the late-term ones. The procedure they used in America was a little more pleasant. Just poke into the baby's skull, suck the brains out, crush the skull and deliver the package with a lot less trouble than a full-term fetus, and a lot easier on the woman. He wondered what the story was on this one, but there was no sense in knowing, was there? No sense knowing that which you can't change.

So.

He looked. She was fully dilated and effaced, and, yes, there was the head. Hairy little thing. Better give her another minute or two, so that after he did his duty she could expel the fetus in one push and be done with it. Then she could go off and cry for a while and start getting over it. He was concentrating a little too much to note the commotion

in the corridor outside the labor room.

Yang pushed the door open himself. And there it all was, for all of them to see. Lien-Hua was on the delivery table. Quon had never seen one of them before, and the way it held a woman's legs up and apart, it looked for all the world like a device to make women easier to rape. His wife's head was back and down, not up and looking to see her child born, and then he saw why.

There was the . . . doctor, was he? And in his hand a large needle full of—

—they were in time! Yang Quon pushed the doctor aside, off his stool. He darted right to his wife's face.

"I am here! Reverend Yu came with me, Lien." It was like a light coming on in a darkened room.

"Quon!" Lien-Hua cried out, feeling her need to push, and finally wanting to.

But then things became more complicated still. The hospital had its own security personnel, but on being alerted by the clerk in the main lobby, one of them called for the police, who, unlike the hospital's own personnel, were armed. Two of them appeared in the corridor, surprised first of all to see foreigners with TV equipment right there in front of them. Ignoring them, they pushed into the delivery room to find a pregnant woman about to deliver, a doctor on the floor, and four men, two of *them* foreigners as well!

"What goes on here!" the senior one bellowed, since intimidation was a major tool for controlling people in the PRC.

"These people are interfering with my duties!" the doctor answered, with a shout of his own. If he didn't act fast, the damned baby would be born and breathe, and then he couldn't . . .

"What?" the cop demanded of him.

"This woman has an unauthorized pregnancy, and it is my duty to terminate the fetus now. These people are in my way. Please remove them from the room."

That was enough for the cops. They turned to the obviously unauthorized visitors. "You will leave now!" the senior one ordered, while the junior one kept his hand on his service pistol.

"No!" was the immediate reply, both from Yang Quon and Yu Fa An.

"The doctor has given his order, you must leave," the cop insisted. He was unaccustomed to having ordinary people resist his orders. "You will go now!"

The doctor figured this was the cue for him to complete his distasteful duty, so that he could go home for the day. He set the stool back up and slid it to where he needed to be.

“You will not do this!” This time it was Yu, speaking with all the moral authority his education and status could provide.

“Will you get him out of here?” the doctor growled at the cops, as he slid the stool back in place.

Quon was ill-positioned to do anything, standing as he was by his wife’s head. To his horror, he saw the doctor lift the syringe and adjust his glasses. Just then his wife, who might as well have been in another city for the past two minutes, took a deep breath and pushed.

“Ah,” the doctor said. The fetus was fully crowned now, and all he had to do was—

Reverend Yu had seen as much evil in his life as most clergymen, and they see as much as any seasoned police officer, but to see a human baby murdered before his eyes was just too much. He roughly shoved the junior of the two policemen aside and struck the doctor’s head from behind, flinging him to the right and jumping on top of him.

“Getting this?” Barry Wise asked in the corridor.

“Yep,” Nichols confirmed.

What offended the junior policeman was not the attack on the doctor, but rather the fact that this—this citizen had laid hands on a uniformed member of the Armed People’s Police. Outraged, he drew his pistol from its holster, and what had been a confused situation became a deadly one.

“No!” shouted Cardinal DiMilo, moving toward the young cop. He turned to see the source of the noise and saw an elderly *gwai*, or foreigner in very strange clothes, moving toward him with a hostile expression. The cop’s first response was a blow to the foreigner’s face, delivered with his empty left hand.

Renato Cardinal DiMilo hadn’t been physically struck since his childhood, and the affront to his personhood was all the more offensive for his religious and diplomatic status, and to be struck by this child! He turned back from the force of the blow and pushed the man aside, wanting to go to Yu’s aid, and to help him keep this murderous doctor away from the baby about to be born. The doctor was wavering on one foot, holding the syringe up in the air. This the Cardinal seized in his hand and hurled against the wall, where it didn’t break, because it was plastic, but the metal needle bent.

Had the police better understood what was happening, or had they merely been better trained, it would have stopped there. But they hadn’t, and it didn’t. Now the senior cop had his Type 77 pistol out. This he used to club the Italian on the back of the head, but his blow was poorly delivered, and all it managed to do was knock him off balance and split his skin.

Now it was Monsignor Schepke’s turn. His Cardinal, the man whom

it was his duty to serve and protect, had been attacked. He was a priest. He couldn't use deadly force. He couldn't attack. But he could defend. That he did, grasping the older officer's gun hand and twisting it up, in a safe direction, away from the others in the room. But there it went off, and though the bullet merely flattened out in the concrete ceiling, the noise inside the small room was deafening.

The younger policeman suddenly thought that his comrade was under attack. He wheeled and fired, but missed Schepke, and struck Cardinal DiMilo in the back. The .30 caliber bullet transited the body back to front, damaging the churchman's spleen. The pain surprised DiMilo, but his eyes were focused on the emerging baby.

The crash of the shot had startled Lien-Hua, and the push that followed was pure reflex. The baby emerged, and would have fallen headfirst to the hard floor but for the extended hands of Reverend Yu, who stopped the fall and probably saved the newborn's life. He was lying on his side, and then he saw that the second shot had gravely wounded his Catholic friend. Holding the baby, he struggled to his feet and looked vengefully at the youthful policeman.

"Huai dan!" he shouted: *Villain!* Oblivious of the infant in his arms, he lurched forward toward the confused and frightened policeman.

As automatically as a robot, the younger cop merely extended his arm and shot the Baptist preacher right in the forehead.

Yu twisted and fell, bumping into Cardinal DiMilo's supine form and landing on his back, so that his chest cushioned the newborn's fall.

"Put that away!" the older cop screamed at his young partner. But the damage had been done. The Chinese Reverend Yu was dead, the back of his head leaking brain matter and venting blood at an explosive rate onto the dirty tile floor.

The doctor was the first to take any intelligent action. The baby was out now, and he couldn't kill it. He took it from Yu's dead arms, and held it up by the feet, planning to smack it on the rump, but it cried out on its own. *So*, the doctor thought as automatically as the second policeman's shot, *this lunacy has one good result*. That he'd been willing to kill it sixty seconds before was another issue entirely. Then, it had been unauthorized tissue. Now, it was a breathing citizen of the People's Republic, and his duty as a physician was to protect it. The dichotomy did not trouble him because it never even occurred to him.

There followed a few seconds in which people tried to come to terms with what had happened. Monsignor Schepke saw that Yu was dead. He couldn't be alive with that head wound. His remaining duty was to his Cardinal.

"Eminence," he said, kneeling down to lift him off the bloody floor.

Renato Cardinal DiMilo thought it strange that there was so little pain, for he knew that his death was imminent. Inside, his spleen was

lacerated, and he was bleeding out internally at a lethal rate. He had not the time to reflect on his life or what lay in his immediate future, but despite that, his life of service and faith reasserted itself one more time.

"The child, Franz, the child?" he asked in a gasping voice.

"The baby lives," Monsignor Schepke told the dying man.

A gentle smile: "*Bene,*" Renato said, before closing his eyes for the last time.

The last shot taken by the CNN crew was of the baby lying on her mother's chest. They didn't know her name, and the woman's face was one of utter confusion, but then she felt her daughter, and the face was transformed as womanly instincts took over completely.

"We better get the fuck out of here, Barry," the cameraman advised, with a hiss.

"I think you're right, Pete." Wise stepped back and started to his left to get down the corridor to the stairs. He had a potential Emmy-class story in his hands now. He'd seen a human drama with few equals, and it had to go out, and it had to go out fast.

Inside the delivery room, the senior cop was shaking his head, his ears still ringing, trying to figure out what the hell had happened here, when he realized that the light level was lower—the TV camera was gone! He had to do something. Standing erect, he darted from the room and looked right, and saw the last American disappear into the stairwell. He left his junior in the delivery room and ran that way, turned into the fire stairs and ran downstairs as fast as gravity could propel him.

Wise led his people into the main lobby and right toward the main door, where their satellite van was. They'd almost made it, when a shout made them turn. It was the cop, the older one, about forty, they thought, and his pistol was out again, to the surprise and alarm of the civilians in the lobby.

"Keep going," Wise told his crew, and they pushed through the doors into the open air. The van was in view, with the mini-satellite dish lying flat on the roof, and that was the key to getting this story out.

"Stop!" the cop called. He knew some English, so it would seem.

"Okay, guys, let's play it real cool," Wise told the other three.

"Under control," Pete the cameraman advised. The camera was off his shoulder now, and his hands were out of casual view.

The cop bolstered his pistol and came close, with his right hand up and out flat. "Give me tape," he said. "Give me tape." His accent was crummy, but his English was understandable enough.

"That tape is my property!" Wise protested. "It belongs to me and my company."

The cop's English wasn't that good. He just repeated his demand: "Give me tape!"

"Okay, Barry," Pete said. "I got it."

The cameraman—his name was Peter Nichols—lifted the camera up and hit the EJECT button, punching the Betaformat tape out of the Sony camera. This he gave to the police officer with a downcast and angry expression. The cop took it with his own expression of satisfaction and turned on his heel to go back into the hospital.

There was no way he could have known that, like any news cameraman, Pete Nichols could deal seconds as skillfully as any Las Vegas poker dealer. He winked at Barry Wise, and the four headed off to the van.

"Send it up now?" the producer asked.

"Let's not be too obvious about it," Wise thought. "Let's move a few blocks."

This they did, heading west toward Tiananmen Square, where a news van doing a satellite transmission wasn't out of the ordinary. Wise was already on his satellite phone to Atlanta.

"This is Wise Mobile in Beijing with an upload," the correspondent said into the phone.

"Hey, Barry," a familiar voice said in reply. "This is Ben Golden. What you got for us?"

"It's hot," Wise told his controller half a world away. "A double murder and a childbirth. One guy who got whacked is a Catholic cardinal, the Vatican ambassador to Beijing. The other one's a Chinese Baptist minister. They were both shot on camera. You might want to call Legal about it."

"Fuck!" Atlanta observed.

"We're uploading the rough-cut now, just so you get it. I'll stand by to do the talking. But let's get the video uploaded first."

"Roger that. We're standing by on Channel Zero Six."

"Zero Six, Pete," Wise told his cameraman, who also ran the uplink.

Nichols was kneeling by the control panels. "Standing by . . . tape's in . . . setting up for Six . . . transmitting . . . now!" And with that, the Ku-band signal went racing upward through the atmosphere to the satellite hovering 22,800 miles directly over the Admiralty Islands in the Bismarck Sea.

CNN doesn't bother encrypting its video signals. To do so is technically inconvenient, and few people bother pirating signals they could just as easily get off their cable systems for free in a few minutes, or even get live just four seconds later.

But this one was coming in at an awkward hour, which was, however, good for CNN Atlanta, because some headquarters people

would want to go over it. A shooting death was not what the average American wanted with his Rice Krispies in the morning.

It was also downloaded by the American intelligence community, which holds CNN in very high regard, and doesn't distribute its news coverage very far in any case. But this one did go to the White House Office of Signals, a largely military operation located in the basement of the West Wing. There a watch officer had to decide how important it was. If it ranked as a CRITIC priority, the President had to know about it in fifteen minutes, which meant waking him up *right now,* which was not something to be done casually to the Commander-in-Chief. A mere FLASH could wait a little longer, like—the watch officer checked the wall clock—yeah, like until breakfast. So, instead, they called the President's National Security Adviser, Dr. Benjamin Goodley. They'd let him make the call. He was a carded National Intelligence Officer.

"Yeah?" Goodley snarled into the phone while he checked the clock radio next to his bed.

"Dr. Goodley, this is Signals. We just copied something off CNN from Beijing that the Boss is going to be interested in."

"What is it?" CARDSHARP asked. Then he heard the reply. "How certain are you of this?"

"The Italian guy looks like he might possibly have survived, from the video—I mean if there was a good surgeon close—but the Chinese minister had his brains blowed right out. No chance for him at all, sir."

"What was it all about?"

"We're not sure of that. NSA might have the phone conversation between this Wise guy and Atlanta, but we haven't seen anything about it yet."

"Okay, tell me what you got again," Goodley ordered, now that he was approximately awake.

"Sir, we have a visual of two guys getting shot and a baby being born in Beijing. The video comes from Barry Wise of CNN. The video shows three gunshots. One is upwards into the ceiling of what appears to be a hospital delivery room. The second shot catches a guy in the back. That guy is identified as the Papal Nuncio to Beijing. The third shot goes right into the head of a guy identified as a Baptist minister in Beijing. That one appears to be a Chinese national. In between, we have a baby being born. Now we—stand by a minute, Dr. Goodley, okay, I have FLASH traffic from Fort Meade. Okay, they got it, too, and they got a voice transmission via their ECHELON system, reading it now. Okay, the Catholic cardinal is dead, according to this, says Cardinal Renato DiMilo—can't check the spelling, maybe State Department for that—and the Chinese minister is a guy named Yu Fa

An, again no spelling check. They were there to, oh, okay, they were there to prevent a late-term abortion, and looks like they succeeded, but these two clergy got their asses killed doing it. Third one, a monsignor named Franz Schepke—that sounds pretty German to me—was there, too, and looks like he survived—oh, okay, he must be the tall one you see on the tape. You gotta see the tape. It's a hell of a confused mess, sir, and when this Yu guy gets it, well, it's like that video from Saigon during the Tet Offensive. You know, where the South Vietnamese police colonel shot the North Vietnamese spy in the side of the head with a Smith Chief's Special, you know, like a fountain of blood coming out the head. Ain't something to watch with your Egg McMuffin, y'know?" the watch officer observed. The reference came across clearly enough. The news media had celebrated the incident as an example of the South Vietnamese government's bloodthirstiness. They had never explained—probably never even knew—that the man shot had been an officer of the North Vietnamese army captured in a battle zone wearing civilian clothing, therefore, under the Geneva Protocols was a spy liable to summary execution, which was exactly what he'd received.

"Okay, what else?"

"Do we wake the Boss up for this? I mean, we got a diplomatic team over there, and this has some serious implications."

Goodley thought about that for a second or two. "No. I'll brief him in in a few hours."

"Sir, it's sure as hell going to be on CNN's seven o'clock morning report," the watch officer warned.

"Well, let me brief him when he has more than just pictures."

"Your call, Dr. Goodley."

"Thanks. Now, I think I'll try to get one more hour before I drive over to Langley." The phone went down before Goodley heard a reaction. His job carried a lot of prestige, but it denied him sleep and much of a social or sex life, and at moments like this he wondered what the hell was so goddamned prestigious about it.

CHAPTER 25

Fence Rending

The speed of modern communications makes for curious disconnects. In this case, the American government knew what had happened in Beijing long before the government of the People's Republic did. What appeared in the White House Office of Signals appeared also in the State Department's Operations Center, and there the senior officer present had decided, naturally enough, to get the information immediately to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. There Ambassador Carl Hitch took the call at his desk on the encrypted line. He forced the caller from Foggy Bottom to confirm the news twice before making his first reaction, a whistle. It wasn't often that an accredited ambassador of any sort got killed in a host country, much less *by* a host country. What the hell, he wondered, was Washington going to do about this?

"Damn," Hitch whispered. He hadn't even met Cardinal DiMilo yet. The official reception had been planned for two weeks from now in a future that would never come. What was *he* supposed to do? First, he figured, get off a message of condolence to the Vatican mission. (Foggy Bottom would so notify the Vatican through the Nuncio in Washington, probably. Maybe even Secretary Adler would drive over himself to offer official condolences. Hell, President Ryan was Catholic, and maybe *he* would go himself, Hitch speculated.) Okay, Hitch told himself, things to do here. He had his secretary call the Nuncio's residence, but all he got there was a Chinese national answering the phone, and that wasn't worth a damn. That would have to go on the back burner . . . what about the Italian Embassy? he thought next. The Nuncio was an Italian citizen, wasn't he? Probably. Okay. He checked his card file and dialed up the Italian ambassador's private line.

"Paulo? This is Carl Hitch. Thanks, and you? I have some bad news, I'm afraid . . . the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal DiMilo, he's been shot and killed in some Beijing hospital by a Chinese policeman . . . it's going to be on CNN soon, not sure how soon . . . we're pretty certain of it, I'm afraid . . . I'm not entirely sure, but what I've been told is that he was there trying to prevent the death of a child, or one of those late-term

abortions they do here . . . yeah . . . say, doesn't he come from a prominent family?" Then Hitch started taking notes. "Vincenzo, you said? I see . . . Minister of Justice two years ago? I tried to call over there, but all I got was some local answering the phone. German? Schepke?" More notes. "I see. Thank you, Paulo. Hey, if there's anything we can help you with over here . . . right. Okay. Bye." He hung up. "Damn. Now what?" he asked the desk. He could spread the bad news to the German Embassy, but, no, he'd let someone else do that. For now . . . he checked his watch. It was still short of sunrise in Washington, and the people there would wake up to find a firestorm. His job, he figured, was to verify what had happened so that he could make sure Washington had good information. But how the hell to do that? His best potential source of information was this Monsignor Schepke, but the only way to get him was to stake out the Vatican Embassy and wait for him to come home. Hmm, would the Chinese be holding him somewhere? No, probably not. Once their Foreign Ministry found out about this, they'd probably fall all over themselves trying to apologize. So, they'd put extra security on the Nuncio's place, and that would keep newsies away, but they're not going to mess with accredited diplomats, not after killing one. This was just so bizarre. Carl Hitch had been a foreign-service officer since his early twenties. He'd never come across anything like this before, at least not since Spike Dobbs had been held hostage in Afghanistan by guerrillas, and the Russians had screwed up the rescue mission and gotten him killed. Some said that had been deliberate, but even the Soviets weren't that dumb, Hitch thought. Similarly, this hadn't been a deliberate act either. The Chinese were communists, and communists didn't gamble that way. It just wasn't part of their nature or their training.

So, how had this happened? And what, exactly, *had* happened?

And when would he tell Cliff Rutledge about it? And what effect might this have on the trade talks? Carl Hitch figured he'd have a full evening.

The People's Republic will not be dictated to," Foreign Minister Shen Tang concluded.

"Minister," Rutledge replied, "it is not the intention of the United States to dictate to anyone. You make your national policy to suit your nation's needs. We understand and respect that. We require, however, that you understand and respect our right to make *our* national policy as well, to suit *our* country's needs. In this case, that means invoking the provisions of the Trade Reform Act."

That was a big, sharp sword to wave, and everyone in the room knew it, Mark Gant thought. The TRA enabled the Executive Branch to

replicate any nation's trade laws as applied to American goods, and mirror-image them against that nation's own goods. It was international proof of the adage that the shoe could sure pinch if it was on the other foot. In this case, everything China did to exclude American manufactured goods from the Chinese marketplace would simply be invoked in order to do the same to Chinese goods, and with a trade surplus of seventy billion dollars per year, that could well mean seventy billion dollars—all of it hard currency. The money to buy the things the PRC government wanted from America or elsewhere wouldn't be there anymore. Trade would become *trade,* one of mine for one of yours, which was the theory that somehow never became reality.

"If America embargoes Chinese trade, China can and will do the same to America," Shen shot back.

"Which serves neither your purposes nor our own," Rutledge responded. *And that dog ain't gonna hunt,* he didn't have to say. The Chinese knew that well enough without being told.

"And what of most-favored-nation status for our country? What of entry into the World Trade Organization?" the Chinese foreign minister demanded.

"Mr. Minister, America cannot look favorably upon either so long as your country expects open export markets while closing your import markets. Trade, sir, means *trade,* the even exchange of your goods for ours," Rutledge pointed out again—about the twelfth time since lunch, he reckoned. Maybe the guy would get it this time. But that was unfair. He already got it. He just wasn't acknowledging the fact. It was just domestic Chinese politics projected into the international arena.

"And again you dictate to the People's Republic!" Shen replied, with enough anger, real or feigned, to suggest that Rutledge had usurped his parking place.

"No, Minister, we do no such thing. It is you, sir, who tried to dictate to the United States of America. You say that we must accept your trade terms. In that, sir, you are mistaken. We see no more need to buy your goods than you do to buy ours." *Just that you need our hard cash a damned sight more than we need your chew toys for our fucking dogs!*

"We can buy our airliners from Airbus just as easily as from Boeing."

This really was getting tiresome. Rutledge wanted to respond: *But without our dollars, what will you pay for them with, Charlie?* But Airbus had excellent credit terms for its customers, one more way in which a European government-subsidized enterprise played "fair" in the marketplace with a private American corporation. So, instead he said:

"Yes, Mr. Minister, you can do that, and we can buy trade goods from Taiwan, or Korea, or Thailand, or Singapore, just as easily as we can buy them here." *And they'll fucking well buy their airplanes from Boeing!* "But that does not serve the needs of your people, or of ours," he concluded reasonably.

"We are a sovereign nation and a sovereign people," Shen retorted, continuing on as he had before, and Rutledge figured that the rhetoric was all about taking command of the verbiage. It was a strategy that had worked many times before, but Rutledge had instructions to disregard all the diplomatic theatrics, and the Chinese just hadn't caught on yet. Maybe in a few more days, he thought.

"As are we, Minister," Rutledge said, when Shen concluded. Then he ostentatiously checked his watch, and here Shen took the cue.

"I suggest we adjourn until tomorrow," the PRC foreign minister said.

"Good. I look forward to seeing you in the morning, Minister," Rutledge responded, rising and leaning across the table to shake hands. The rest of the party did the same, though Mark Gant didn't have a counterpart to be nice to at the moment. The American party shuffled out, downstairs toward their waiting cars.

"Well, that was lively," Gant observed, as soon as they were outside.

Rutledge actually had himself a nice grin. "Yeah, it was kind of diverting, wasn't it?" A pause. "I think they're exploring how far bluster can take them. Shen is actually rather a sedate kind of guy. He likes it nice and gentle most of the time."

"So, he has his instructions, too?" Gant wondered.

"Of course, but he reports to a committee, their Politburo, whereas we report to Scott Adler, and he reports to President Ryan. You know, I was a little mad about the instructions I had coming over here, but this is actually turning into fun. We don't get to snarl back at people very often. We're the U.S. of A., and we're supposed to be nice and calm and accommodating to everybody. That's what I'm used to doing. But this—this feels good." That didn't mean that he approved of President Ryan, of course, but switching over from canasta to poker made an interesting change. Scott Adler liked poker, didn't he? Maybe that explained why he got along so well with that yahoo in the White House.

It was a short drive back to the embassy. The Americans in the delegation rode mainly in silence, blessing the few minutes of quiet. The hours of precise diplomatic exchange had had to be attended to in the same way a lawyer read a contract, word by goddamned word, seeking meaning and nuance, like searching for a lost diamond in a cesspool. Now they sat back in their seats and closed their eyes or looked mutely at the passing drab scenery with no more than an

unstifled yawn, until they pulled through the embassy gate.

About the only thing to complain about was the fact that the limousines here, like those everywhere, were hard to get in and out of, unless you were six years old. But as soon as they alighted from their official transport, they could see that something was wrong. Ambassador Hitch was right there, and he hadn't bothered with that before. Ambassadors have high diplomatic rank and importance. They do not usually act as doormen for their own countrymen.

"What's the matter, Carl?" Rutledge asked.

"A major bump in the road," Hitch answered.

"Somebody die?" the Deputy Secretary of State asked lightly.

"Yeah," was the unexpected answer. Then the ambassador waved them inside. "Come on."

The senior delegation members followed Rutledge into the ambassador's conference room. Already there, they saw, were the DCM—the Deputy Chief of Mission, the ambassador's XO, who in many embassies was the real boss—and the rest of the senior staff, including the guy Gant had figured was the CIA station chief. *What the hell?* TELESCOPE thought. They all took their seats, and then Hitch broke the news.

"Oh, shit," Rutledge said for them all. "Why did this happen?"

"We're not sure. We have our press attaché trying to track this Wise guy down, but until we get more information, we really don't know the cause of the incident." Hitch shrugged.

"Does the PRC know?" Rutledge asked next.

"Probably they're just finding out," the putative CIA officer opined. "You have to assume the news took a while to percolate through their bureaucracy."

"How do we expect them to react?" one of Rutledge's underlings asked, sparing his boss the necessity of asking the obvious and fairly dumb question.

The answer was just as dumb: "Your guess is as good as mine," Hitch said.

"So, this could be a minor embarrassment or a major whoopsie," Rutledge observed. "Whoopsie" is a term of art in the United States Department of State, usually meaning a massive fuckup.

"I'd lean more toward the latter," Ambassador Hitch thought. He couldn't come up with a rational explanation for why this was so, but his instincts were flashing a lot of bright red lights, and Carl Hitch was a man who trusted his instincts.

"Any guidance from Washington?" Cliff asked.

"They haven't woken up yet, have they?" And as one, every member of the delegation checked his watch. The embassy people already had, of course. The sun had not yet risen on their national capital. What

decisions would be made would happen in the next four hours. Nobody here would be getting much sleep for a while, because once the decisions were made, then they'd have to decide how to implement them, how to present the position of their country to the People's Republic.

"Ideas?" Rutledge asked.

"The President won't like this very much," Gant observed, figuring he knew about as much as anyone else in the room. "His initial reaction will be one of disgust. Question is, will that spill over into what we're here for? I think it might, depending on how our Chinese friends react to the news."

"How will the Chinese react?" Rutledge asked Hitch.

"Not sure, Cliff, but I doubt we'll like it. They will regard the entire incident as an intrusion—an interference with their internal affairs—and their reaction will be somewhat crass, I think. Essentially they're going to say, 'Too damned bad.' If they do, there's going to be a visceral reaction in America and in Washington. They don't understand us as well as they'd like to think they do. They misread our public opinion at every turn, and they haven't shown me much sign of learning. I'm worried," Hitch concluded.

"Well, then it's our job to walk them through this. You know," Rutledge thought aloud, "this could work in favor of our overall mission here."

Hitch bristled at that. "Cliff, it would be a serious mistake to try to play this one that way. Better to let them think it through for themselves. The death of an ambassador is a big deal," the American ambassador told the people in the room, in case they didn't know. "All the more so if the guy was killed by an agent of their government. But, Cliff, if you try to shove this down their throats, they're going to choke, and I don't think we want that to happen either. I think our best play is to ask for a break of a day or two in the talks, to let them get their act together."

"That's a sign of weakness for our side, Carl," Rutledge replied, with a shake of the head. "I think you're wrong on that. I think we press forward and let them know that the civilized world has rules, and we expect them to abide by them."

What lunacy is this?" Fang Gan asked the ceiling.

"We're not sure," Zhang Han San replied. "Some troublesome churchman, it sounds like."

"And some foolish policeman with more gun than brains. He'll be punished, of course," Fang suggested.

"Punished? For what? For enforcing our population-control laws, for protecting a doctor against an attack by some *gwai?"* Zhang shook his

head. “Do we allow foreigners to spit upon our laws in this way? No, Fang, we do not. I will not see us lose face in such a way.”

“Zhang, what is the life of one insignificant police officer next to our country’s place in the world?” Fang demanded. “The man he killed was an *ambassador,* Zhang, a foreigner accredited to our country by another—”

“Country?” Zhang spat. “A *city,* my friend, no, not even that—a *district* in Rome, smaller than Qiong Dao!” He referred to Jade Island, home of one of the many temples built by the emperors, and not much larger than the building itself. Then he remembered a quote from Iosef Stalin. “How big an army does that Pope have, anyway? Ahh!” A dismissive wave of the hand.

“He *does* have a country, whose ambassador *we* accredited, in the hope of improving *our* position in the diplomatic world,” Fang reminded his friend. “His death is to be regretted, at the least. Perhaps he was merely one more troublesome foreign devil, Zhang, but for the purposes of diplomacy we must *appear* to regret his passing.” And if that meant executing some nameless policeman, they had plenty of policemen, Fang didn’t add.

“For what? For interfering with our laws? An *ambassador* may not do such a thing. *That* violates diplomatic protocol, does it not? Fang, you have become overly solicitous to the foreign devils,” Zhang concluded, using the term from history to identify the lesser people from those lesser lands.

“If we want their goods in trade, and we want them to pay for our goods so that we might have their hard currency, then we must treat them like guests in our home.”

“A guest in your home does not spit on the floor, Fang.”

“And if the Americans do not react kindly to this incident?”

“Then Shen will tell them to mind their own affairs,” Zhang replied, with the finality of one who had long since made up his mind.

“When does the Politburo meet?”

“To discuss this?” Zhang asked in surprise. “Why? The death of some foreign troublemaker and a Chinese . . . churchman? Fang, you are too cautious. I have already discussed the incident with Shen. There will be no full meeting of the Politburo for this trivial incident. We will meet the day after tomorrow, as usual.”

“As you say,” Fang responded, with a nod of submission. Zhang had him ranked on the Politburo. He had much influence with the foreign and defense ministries, and the ear of Xu Kun Piao. Fang had his own political capital—mainly for internal matters—but less such capital than Zhang, and so he had to spend it carefully, when it could profit himself. This was not such a case, he thought. With that, he went back to his office and called Ming to transcribe his notes. Then, later, he

thought, he'd have Chai come in. She was so useful in easing the tension of his day.

He felt better on waking this morning than was usually the case, probably because he'd gotten to sleep at a decent hour, Jack told himself, on the way to the bathroom for the usual morning routine. You never got a day off here, at least not in the sense that most people understood the term. You never really got to sleep late—8:25 was the current record dating all the way back to that terrible winter day when this had begun—and every day you had to have the same routine, including the dreaded national security briefing, which told you that some people really did believe that the world couldn't get on without you. The usual look in the mirror. He needed a haircut, Jack saw, but for that the barber came here, which wasn't a bad deal, really, except that you lost the fellowship of sitting in a male place and discussing male things. Being the most powerful man in the world insulated you from so many of the things that mattered. The food was good, and the booze was just fine, and if you didn't like the sheets they were changed at the speed of light, and people jumped to the sound of your voice. Henry VIII never had it so good . . . but Jack Ryan had never thought to become a crowned monarch. That whole idea of kingship had died across the world except in a few distant places, and Ryan didn't live in one of them. But the entire routine at the White House seemed designed to make him feel like a king, and that was disturbing on a level that was like grasping a cloud of cigarette smoke. It was there, but every time you tried to hold it, the damned stuff just vanished. The staff was just so eager to serve, grimly—but pleasantly—determined to make everything easy for them. The real worry was the effect this might have on his kids. If they started thinking they were princes and princesses, sooner or later their lives would go to hell in one big hurry. But that was his problem to worry about, Jack thought as he shaved. His and Cathy's. Nobody else could raise their kids for them. That was their job. Just that all of this White House *crap* got in the way practically all the time.

The worst part of all, however, was that he had to be dressed all the time. Except in bed or in the bathroom, the President had to be properly dressed—*or what would the staff think?* So, Ryan couldn't walk out into the corridor without pants and at least some kind of shirt. At home, a normal person would have padded around barefoot in his shorts, but while a truck driver might have that freedom in his own home, the President of the United States did not have that freedom in *his.*

Then he had to smile wryly at the mirror. He bitched to himself about the same things every morning, and if he *really* wanted to

change them, he could. But he was afraid to, afraid to take action that would cause people to lose their jobs. Aside from the fact that it would really look shitty in the papers—and practically everything he did made it into the news—it would feel bad to him, here, shaving every morning. And he didn't really need to walk out to the box and get the paper in the morning, did he?

And if you factored out the dress code, it wasn't all that bad. The breakfast buffet was actually quite nice, though it wasted at least five times the food it actually served. His cholesterol was still in the normal range, and so Ryan enjoyed eggs for his morning meal two or even three times a week, somewhat to his wife's distaste. The kids opted mainly for cereal or muffins. These were still warm from the downstairs kitchen and came in all sorts of healthy—and tasty—varieties.

The *Early Bird* was the clipping service the government provided for senior officials, but for breakfast SWORDSMAN preferred the real paper, complete with cartoons. Like many, Ryan lamented the retirement of Gary Larson and the attendant loss of the morning *Far Side,* but Jack understood the pressure of enforced daily output. There was also a sports page to be read, something the *Early Bird* left out completely. And there was CNN, which started in the White House breakfast room promptly at seven.

Ryan looked up when he heard the warning that kids should not see what they were about to show. His kids, like all other kids, stopped what they were doing to look.

"Eww, gross!" Sally Ryan observed, when some Chinese guy got shot in the head.

"Head wounds do that," her mother told her, wincing even so. Cathy did surgery, but not that sort. "Jack, what's this all about?"

"You know as much as I do, honey," the President told the First Lady.

Then the screen changed to some file tape showing a Catholic Cardinal. Then Jack caught "Papal Nuncio" off the audio, leaning to reach for the controller to turn the sound up.

"Chuck?" Ryan said, to the nearest Secret Service agent. "Get me Ben Goodley on the phone, if you could."

"Yes, Mr. President." It took about thirty seconds, then Ryan was handed the portable phone. "Ben, what the hell's this thing out of Beijing?"

In Jackson, Mississippi, Reverend Gerry Patterson was accustomed to rising early in preparation for his morning jog around the neighborhood, and he turned on the bedroom TV while his wife went to fix his hot chocolate (Patterson didn't approve of coffee any more

than he did of alcohol). His head turned at the words "Reverend Yu," then his skin went cold when he heard, "a Baptist minister here in Beijing . . ." He came back into the bedroom just in time to see a Chinese face go down, and shoot out blood as from a garden hose. The tape didn't allow him to recognize a face.

"My God . . . Skip . . . God, no . . ." the minister breathed, his morning suddenly and utterly disrupted. Ministers deal with death on a daily basis, burying parishioners, consoling the bereaved, entreating God to look after the needs of both. But it was no easier for Gerry Patterson than it would have been for anyone else this day, because there had been no warning, no "long illness" to prepare the mind for the possibility, not even the fact of age to reduce the surprise factor. Skip was—what? Fifty-five? No more than that. Still a young man, Patterson thought, young and vigorous to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to his flock. Dead? Killed, was it? Murdered? By whom? Murdered by that *communist* government? A Man of God, *murdered* by the godless heathen?

Oh, shit," the President said over his eggs. "What else do we know, Ben? Anything from SORGE?" Then Ryan looked around the room, realizing he'd spoken a word that was itself classified. The kids weren't looking his way, but Cathy was. "Okay, we'll talk about it when you get in." Jack hit the kill button on the phone and set it down.

"What's the story?"

"It's a real mess, babe," SWORDSMAN told SURGEON. He explained what he knew for a minute or so. "The ambassador hasn't gotten to us with anything CNN didn't just show."

"You mean with all the money we spend on CIA and stuff, CNN is the best source of information we have?" Cathy Ryan asked, somewhat incredulously.

"You got it, honey," her husband admitted.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense!"

Jack tried to explain: "CIA can't be everywhere, and it would look a little funny if all our field spooks carried video-cams everywhere they went, you know?"

Cathy made a face at being shut down so cavalierly. "But—"

"But it's not that easy, Cathy, and the news people are in the same business, gathering information, and occasionally they get there first."

"But you have other ways of finding things out, don't you?"

"Cathy, you don't need to know about things like that," POTUS told FLOTUS.

That was a phrase she'd heard before, but not one she'd ever learned to love. Cathy went back to her morning paper while her

husband graduated to the *Early Bird.* The Beijing story, Jack saw, had happened too late for the morning editions, one more thing to chuff up the TV newsies and annoy the print ones. Somehow the debate over the federal education budget didn't seem all that important this morning, but he'd learned to scan the editorials, because they tended to reflect the questions the reporters would ask at the press conferences, and that was one way for him to defend himself.

By 7:45, the kids were about ready for their drive to school, and Cathy was ready for her flight to Hopkins. Kyle Daniel went with her, with his own Secret Service detail, composed exclusively of women who would look after him at the Hopkins daycare center rather like a pack of shewolves. Katie would head back to her daycare center, the rebuilt Giant Steps north of Annapolis. There were fewer kids there now, but a larger protective detail. The big kids went to St. Mary's. On cue, the Marine VH-60 Blackhawk helicopter eased down on the South Lawn helipad. The day was about to start for real. The entire Ryan family took the elevator downstairs. First Mom and Dad walked the kids to the west entrance of the West Wing, where, after hugs and kisses, three of the kids got into their cars to drive off. Then Jack walked Cathy to the helicopter for the kiss goodbye, and the big Sikorsky lifted off under the control of Colonel Dan Malloy for the hop to Johns Hopkins. With that done, Ryan walked back to the West Wing, and inside to the Oval Office. Ben Goodley was waiting for him.

"How bad?" Jack asked his national security adviser.

"Bad," Goodley replied at once.

"What was it all about?"

"They were trying to stop an abortion. The Chinese do them late-term if the pregnancy is not government-approved. They wait until just before the baby pops out and zap it in the top of the head with a needle before it gets to take a breath. Evidently, the woman on the tape was having an unauthorized baby, and her minister—that's the Chinese guy who gets it in the head, a Baptist preacher educated, evidently, at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, would you believe? Anyway, he came to the hospital to help. The Papal Nuncio, Renato Cardinal DiMilo, evidently knew the Baptist preacher pretty well and came to offer assistance. It's hard to tell exactly what went wrong, but it blew up real bad, as the tape shows."

"Any statements?"

"The Vatican deplores the incident and has requested an explanation. But it gets worse. Cardinal DiMilo is from the DiMilo family. He has a brother, Vincenzo DiMilo, who's in the Italian parliament—he was a cabinet minister a while back—and so the Italian government has issued its own protest. Ditto the German government, because the Cardinal's aide is a German monsignor

named Schepke, who's a Jesuit, and he got a little roughed up, and the Germans aren't very happy either. This Monsignor Schepke was arrested briefly, but he was released after a few hours when the Chinese remembered he had diplomatic status. The thinking at State is that the PRC might PNG the guy, just to get him the hell out of the country and make the whole thing all go away."

"What time is it in Beijing?"

"Us minus eleven, so it's nine at night there," CARDSHARP answered.

"The trade delegation will need instructions of some sort about this. I need to talk to Scott Adler as soon as he gets in this morning."

"You need more than that, Jack." It was the voice of Arnold van Damm, at the door to the office.

"What else?"

"The Chinese Baptist who got killed, I just heard he has friends over here."

"Oral Roberts University," Ryan said. "Ben told me."

"The churchgoers are not going to like this one, Jack," Arnie warned.

"Hey, guy, *I* don't goddamn like it," the President pointed out. "Hell, *I* don't like abortion under the best of circumstances, remember?"

"I remember," van Damm said, recalling all the trouble Ryan had gotten into with his first Presidential statement on the issue.

"And this kind of abortion is especially barbaric, and so, two guys go to the fucking hospital and try to save the baby's life, and they get *killed* for it! Jesus," Ryan concluded, "and we have to do business with people like this."

Then another face showed up at the door. "You've heard, I suppose," Robby Jackson observed.

"Oh, yeah. Hell of a thing to see over breakfast."

"My pap knows the guy."

"What?" Ryan asked.

"Remember at the reception last week? He told you about it. Pap and Gerry Patterson both support his congregation out of Mississippi —some other congregations, too. It's a Baptist thing, Jack. Well-off churches look after ones that need help, and this Yu guy sure as hell needed help, looks like. I haven't talked to him yet, but Pap is going to raise pure fucking hell about this one, and you can bet on it," the Vice President informed his boss.

"Who's Patterson?" van Damm asked.

"White preacher, got a big air-conditioned church in the suburbs of Jackson. Pretty good guy, actually. He and Pap have known each other forever. Patterson went through school with this Yu guy, I

think."

"This is going to get ugly," the Chief of Staff observed.

"Arnie, baby, it's *already* ugly," Jackson pointed out. The CNN cameraman had been a little too good, or had just been standing in a good place, and had caught both shots in all their graphic majesty.

"What's your dad going to say?" Ryan asked.

TOMCAT made them wait for it. "He's going to call down the Wrath of Almighty God on those murdering cocksuckers. He's going to call Reverend Yu a martyr to the Christian faith, right up there with the Maccabees of the Old Testament, and those courageous bastards the Romans fed to the lions. Arnie, have you ever seen a Baptist preacher calling down the Vengeance of the Lord? It beats the hell out of the Super Bowl, boy," Robby promised. "Reverend Yu is standing upright and proud before the Lord Jesus right now, and the guys who killed him have their rooms reserved in the Everlasting Fires of Hell. Wait till you hear him go at it. It's impressive, guys. I've seen him do it. And Gerry Patterson won't be far behind."

"And the hell of it is, I can't disagree with any of it. Jesus," Ryan breathed. "Those two men died to save the life of a baby. If you gotta die, that's not a bad reason for it."

They both died like men, Mr. C," Chavez was saying in Moscow. "I wish I was there with a gun." It had hit Ding especially hard. Fatherhood had changed his perspective on a lot of things, and this was just one of them. The life of a child was sacrosanct, and a threat against a child was an invitation to immediate death in his ethical universe. And in the real universe, he was known to have a gun a lot of the time, and the training to use it efficiently.

"Different people have different ways of looking at things," Clark told his subordinate. But if he'd been there, he would have disarmed both of the Chinese cops. On the videotape, they hadn't looked all that formidable. And you didn't kill people to make a fashion statement. Domingo still had the Latin temperament, John reminded himself. And that wasn't so bad a thing, was it?

"What are you saying, John?" Ding asked in surprise.

"I'm saying two good men died yesterday, and I imagine God'll look after both of them."

"Ever been to China?"

He shook his head. "Taiwan once, for R and R, long time ago. That was okay, but aside from that, no closer than North Vietnam. I don't speak the language and I can't blend in." Both factors were distantly frightening to Clark. The ability to disappear into the surroundings was the *sine qua non* of being a field-intelligence officer.

They were in a hotel bar in Moscow after their first day of lecturing

their Russian students. The beer on tap was acceptable. Neither of them was in a mood for vodka. Life in Britain had spoiled them. This bar, which catered to Americans, had CNN on a large-screen TV next to the bar, and this was CNN's lead story around the globe. The American government, the report concluded, hadn't reacted to the incident yet.

"So, what's Jack going to do?" Chavez wondered.

"I don't know. We have that negotiations team in Beijing right now for trade talks," Clark reminded him.

"The diplomatic chatter might get a little sharp," Domingo thought.

Scott, we can't let this one slide," Jack said. A call from the White House had brought Adler's official car here instead of Foggy Bottom.

"It is not, strictly speaking, pertinent to trade talks," the Secretary of State pointed out.

"Maybe you want to do business with people like that," Vice President Jackson responded, "but the people outside the Beltway might not."

"We have to consider public opinion on this, Scott," Ryan said. "And, you know, we have to damn well consider *my* opinion. The murder of a diplomat is not something we can ignore. Italy is a NATO member. So is Germany. And we have diplomatic relations with the Vatican and about seventy million Catholics in the country, plus millions more Baptists."

"Okay, Jack," EAGLE said, with raised, defensive hands. "I am not defending them, okay? I'm talking about the foreign policy of the United States of America here, and we're not supposed to manage that on the basis of emotions. The people out there pay us to use our heads, not our dicks."

Ryan let out a long breath. "Okay, maybe I had that coming. Go on."

"We issue a statement deploring this sorry incident in strong language. We have Ambassador Hitch make a call on their foreign ministry and say the same thing, maybe even stronger, but in more informal language. We give them a chance to think this mess through before they become an international pariah, maybe discipline those trigger-happy cops—hell, maybe shoot them, given how the law works over there. We let common sense break out, okay?"

"And what do I say?"

Adler thought that one over for a few seconds. "Say whatever you want. We can always explain to them that we have a lot of churchgoers here and you have to assuage their sensibilities, that they have inflamed American public opinion, and in our country, public opinion counts for something. They know that on an intellectual level,

but deep down in the gut they don't get it. That's okay," SecState went on. "Just so they get it in the brain, because the brain talks to the gut occasionally. They have to understand that the world doesn't like this sort of thing."

"And if they don't?" the Vice President asked.

"Well, then we have a trade delegation to show them the consequences of uncivilized behavior." Adler looked around the room. "Are we okay on that?"

Ryan looked down at the coffee table. There were times when he wished he were a truck driver, able to scream out bloody murder when certain things happened, but that was just one more freedom the President of the United States didn't have. *Okay, Jack, you have to be sensible and rational about all this.* He looked up. "Yes, Scott, we're sort of okay on that."

"Anything from our, uh, new source on this issue?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, MP hasn't sent anything over yet."

"If she does . . ."

"You'll get a copy real fast," the President promised. "Get me some talking points. I'll have to make a statement—when, Arnie?"

"Eleven-ish ought to be okay," van Damm decided. "I'll talk to some media guys about this."

"Okay, if anybody has ideas later today, I want to hear them," Ryan said, standing, and adjourning the meeting.

CHAPTER 26

Glass Houses and Rocks

Fang Gan had worked late that day because of the incident that had Washington working early. As a result, Ming hadn't transcribed his discussion notes and her computer hadn't gotten them out on the 'Net as early as usual, but Mary Pat got her e-mail about 9:45. This she read over, copied to her husband, Ed, and then shot via secure fax line to the White House, where Ben Goodley walked it to the Oval Office. The cover letter didn't contain Mary Pat's initial comment on reading the transmission: "Oh, shit . . ."

"Those *cocksuckers!*" Ryan snarled, to the surprise of Andrea Price, who happened to be in the room just then.

"Anything I need to know about, sir?" she asked, his voice had been so furious.

"No, Andrea, just that thing on CNN this morning." Ryan paused, blushing that she'd heard his temper let go again—and in that way. "By the way, how's your husband doing?"

"Well, he bagged those three bank robbers up in Philadelphia, and they did it without firing a shot. I was a little worried about that."

Ryan allowed himself a smile. "That's one guy I wouldn't want to have a shoot-out with. Tell me, you saw CNN this morning, right?"

"Yes, sir, and we replayed it at the command post."

"Opinion?"

"If I'd've been there, my weapon would have come out. That was cold-blooded murder. Looks bad on TV when you do dumb stuff like that, sir."

"Sure as hell does," the President agreed. He nearly asked her opinion on what he ought to do about it. Ryan respected Mrs. O'Day's (she still went by Price on the job) judgment, but it wouldn't have been fair to ask her to delve into foreign affairs, and, besides, he already had his mind pretty well made up. But then he speed-dialed Adler's direct line on his phone.

"Yes, Jack?" Only one person had *that* direct line.

"What do you make of the SORGE stuff?"

"It's not surprising, unfortunately. You have to expect them to circle wagons."

"What do we do about it?" SWORDSMAN demanded.

"We say what we think, *but* we try not to make it worse than it already is," SecState replied, cautious as ever.

"Right," Ryan growled, even though it was exactly the good advice he'd expected from his SecState. Then he hung up. He reminded himself that Arnie had told him a long time ago that a president wasn't allowed to have a temper, but that was asking a hell of a lot, and at what point was he allowed to react the way a man needed to react? When was he supposed to stop acting like a goddamned robot?

"You want Callie to work up something for you in a hurry?" Arnie asked over the phone.

"No," Ryan replied, with a shake of the head. "I'll just wing it."

"That's a mistake," the Chief of Staff warned.

"Arnie, just let me be me once in a while, okay?"

"Okay, Jack," van Damm replied, and it was just as well the President didn't see his expression.

Don't make things worse than they already are, Ryan told himself at his desk. *Yeah, sure, like that's possible . . .*

Hi, Pap," Robby Jackson was saying in his office at the northwest corner of the West Wing.

"Robert, have you seen—"

"Yes, we've all seen it," the Vice President assured his father.

"And what are y'all going to do about it?"

"Pap, we haven't figured that out yet. Remember that we have to do business with these people. The jobs of a lot of Americans depend on trade with China and—"

"Robert"—the Reverend Hosiah Jackson used Robby's proper name mainly when he was feeling rather stern—"those people *murdered* a man of God—no, excuse me, they murdered *two* men of God, doing their duty, trying to save the life of an innocent child, and one does not do business with murderers."

"I know that, and I don't like it any more than you do, and, trust me, Jack Ryan doesn't like it any more than you do, either. But when we make foreign policy for our country, we have to think things through, because if we screw it up, people can lose their lives."

"Lives have already been lost, Robert," Reverend Jackson pointed out.

"I know that. Look, Pap, I know more about this than you do, okay? I mean, we have ways of finding out stuff that doesn't make it on CNN," the Vice President told his father, with the latest SORGE report right in his hand. Part of him wished that he could show it to his father, because his father was easily smart enough to grasp the importance of the secret things that he and Ryan knew. But there was

no way he could even approach discussing that sort of thing with anyone without a TS/SAR clearance, and that included his wife, just as it included Cathy Ryan. Hmm, Jackson thought—maybe that was something he should discuss with Jack. You had to be able to talk this stuff over with someone you trusted, just as a reality check on what was right and wrong. Their wives weren't security risks, were they?

"Like what?" his father asked, only halfway expecting an answer.

"Like I can't discuss some things with you, Pap, and you know that. I'm sorry. The rules apply to me just like they do to everybody else."

"So, what are we going to do about this?"

"We're going to let the Chinese know that we are pretty damned angry, and we expect them to clean their act up, and apologize, and —"

"Apologize!" Reverend Jackson shot back. "Robert, they *murdered* two people!"

"I know that, Pap, but we can't send the FBI over to arrest their government for this, can we? We're very powerful here, but we are not God, and as much as I'd like to hurl a thunderbolt at them, I can't."

"So, we're going to do *what?*"

"We haven't decided yet. I'll let you know when we figure it out," TOMCAT promised his father.

"Do that," Hosiah said, hanging up far more abruptly than usual.

"Christ, Pap," Robby breathed into the phone. Then he wondered how representative of the religious community his father was. The hardest thing to figure was public reaction. People reacted on a subintellectual level to what they saw on TV. If you showed some chief of state tossing a puppy dog out the window of his car, the ASPCA might demand a break in diplomatic relations, and enough people might agree to send a million telegrams or e-mails to the White House. Jackson remembered a case in California where the killing of a *dog* had caused more public outrage than the kidnap-murder of a little girl. But at least the bastard who'd killed the girl had been caught, tried, and sentenced to death, whereas the asshole who'd tossed the little dog into traffic had never been identified, despite the ton of reward money that had been raised. Well, it had all happened in the San Francisco area. Maybe that explained it. America wasn't supposed to make policy on the basis of emotion, but America was a democracy, and therefore her elected officials had to pay attention to what the *people* thought—and it wasn't easy, especially for rational folk, to predict the emotions of the public at large. Could the television image they'd just seen, theoretically upset international trade? Without a doubt, and *that* was a very big deal.

Jackson got up from his desk and walked to Arnie's office. "Got a

question," he said, going in.

"Shoot," the President's Chief of Staff replied.

"How's the public going to react to this mess in Beijing?"

"Not sure yet," van Damm answered.

"How do we find out?"

"Usually you just wait and see. I'm not into this focusgroup stuff. I prefer to gauge public opinion the regular way: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and the mail we get here. You're worried about this?"

"Yep." Robby nodded.

"Yeah, so am I. The Right-to-Lifers are going to be on this like a lion on a crippled gazelle, and so are the people who don't like the PRC. Lots of them in Congress. If the Chinese think they're going to get MFN this year, they're on drugs. It's a public relations nightmare for the PRC, but I don't think they're capable of understanding what they started. And I don't see them apologizing to anybody."

"Yeah, well, my father just tore me a new asshole over this one," Vice President Jackson said. "If the rest of the clergy picks this one up, there's going to be a firestorm. The Chinese have to apologize loud and fast if they want to cut their losses."

Van Damm nodded agreement. "Yeah, but they won't. They're too damned proud."

"Pride goeth before the fall," TOMCAT observed.

"Only *after* you feel the pain from the broken assbone, Admiral," van Damm corrected the Vice President.

Ryan entered the White House press room feeling tense. The usual cameras were there. CNN and Fox would probably be running this news conference live, and maybe C-SPAN as well. The other networks would just tape it, probably, for use in their news feeds to the local stations and their own flagship evening news shows. He came to the lectern and took a sip of water before staring into the faces of the assembled thirty or so reporters.

"Good morning," Jack began, grasping the lectern tightly, as he tended to do when angry. He didn't know that reporters knew about it, too, and could see it from where they sat.

"We all saw those horrible pictures on the television this morning, the deaths of Renato Cardinal DiMilo, the Papal Nuncio to the People's Republic of China, and the Reverend Yu Fa An, who, we believe, was a native of the Republic of China and educated at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma. First of all, the United States of America extends our condolences to the families of both men. Second, we call upon the government of the People's Republic to launch an immediate and full investigation of this horrible tragedy, to determine

who, if anyone, was at fault, and if someone was at fault, for such person or persons to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

"The death of a diplomat at the hands of an agent of a government is a gross violation of international treaty and convention. It is a quintessentially uncivilized act that must be set right as quickly and definitively as possible. Peaceful relations between nations cannot exist without diplomacy, and diplomacy cannot be carried out except through men and women whose personal safety is sacrosanct. That has been the case for literally thousands of years. Even in time of war, the lives of diplomats have always been protected by all sides for this very reason. We require that the government of the PRC explain this tragic event and take proper action to see to it that nothing of this sort will *ever* happen again. That concludes my statement. Questions?" Ryan looked up, trying not to brace too obviously for the storm that was about to break.

"Mr. President," the Associated Press said, "the two clergymen who died were there to prevent an abortion. Does that affect your reaction to this incident?"

Ryan allowed himself to show surprise at the stupid question: "My views on abortion are on the public record, but I think everyone, even the pro-choice community, would respond negatively to what happened here. The woman in question did *not* choose to have an abortion, but the Chinese government tried to impose its will on her by killing a full-term fetus about to be born. If anyone did that in the United States, that person would be guilty of a felony—probably more than one—yet that is government policy in the People's Republic. As you know, I personally object to abortion on moral grounds, but what we saw attempted on TV this morning is worse even than that. It's an act of incomprehensible barbarism. Those two courageous men tried to stop it, and they were killed for their efforts, but, thank God, the baby appears to have survived. Next question?" Ryan pointed next to a known troublemaker.

"Mr. President," the *Boston Globe* said, "the government's action grew out of the People's Republic's population-control policy. Is it our place to criticize a country's internal policy?"

Christ, Ryan thought, *another one?* "You know, once upon a time, a fellow named Hitler tried to manage the population of his country—in fact, of a lot of Europe—by killing the mentally infirm, the socially undesirable, and those whose religions he didn't like. Now, yes, Germany was a nation-state, and we even had diplomatic relations with Hitler until December 1941. But are you saying that America does not have the right to object to a policy we consider barbaric just because it is the official policy of a nation-state? Hermann Goring tried that defense at the Nürnberg Trials. Do you want the United

States of America to recognize it?" Jack demanded.

The reporter wasn't as used to answering questions as to asking them. Then she saw that the cameras were pointed her way, and she was having a bad-hair day. Her response, therefore, could have been a little better: "Mr. President, is it possible that your views of abortion have affected your reaction to this event?"

"No, ma'am. I've disapproved of murder even longer than I've objected to abortion," Ryan replied coldly.

"But you've just compared the People's Republic of China to Hitler's Germany," the *Globe* reporter pointed out. *You can't say* that *about* them!

"Both countries shared a view of population control that is antithetical to American traditions. Or do you approve of imposing late-term abortions on women who choose *not* to have one?"

"Sir, I'm not the President," the *Globe* replied, as she sat down, avoiding the question, but not the embarrassed blush.

"Mr. President," began the *San Francisco Examiner,* "whether we like it or not, China has decided for itself what sort of laws it wants to have, and the two men who died this morning were interfering with those laws, weren't they?"

"The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King interfered with the laws of Mississippi and Alabama back when I was in high school. Did the *Examiner* object to his actions then?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But we regard the personal human conscience as a sovereign force, don't we?" Jack shot back. "The principle goes back to St. Augustine, when he said that an unjust law is *no* law. Now, you guys in the media agree with that principle. Is it only when you happen to agree with the person operating on that principle? Isn't that intellectually dishonest? I do not personally approve of abortion. You all know that. I've taken a considerable amount of heat for that personal belief, some of which has been laid on me by you good people. Fine. The Constitution allows us all to feel the way we choose. But the Constitution does not allow me *not* to enforce the law against people who blow up abortion clinics. I can sympathize with their overall point of view, but I cannot agree or sympathize with the use of violence to pursue a political position. We call that terrorism, and it's against the law, and I have sworn an oath to enforce the law fully and fairly in all cases, regardless of how I may or may not feel on a particular issue.

"Therefore, if *you* do not apply it evenhandedly, ladies and gentlemen, it is not a principle at all, but ideology, and it is not very helpful to the way we govern our lives and our country.

"Now, on the broader question, you said that China has chosen its

laws. Has it? Has it really? The People's Republic is not, unfortunately, a democratic country. It is a place where the laws are imposed by an elite few. Two courageous men died yesterday objecting to those laws, and in the successful attempt to save the life of an unborn child. Throughout history, men have given up their lives for worse causes than that. Those men are heroes by any definition, but I do not think anyone in this room, or for that matter anyone in our country, believes that they deserved to die, heroically or not. The penalty for civil disobedience is not supposed to be death. Even in the darkest days of the 1960s, when black Americans were working to secure their civil rights, the police in the southern states did not commit wholesale murder. And those local cops and members of the Ku Klux Klan who *did* step over that line were arrested and convicted by the FBI and the Justice Department.

"In short, there are fundamental differences between the People's Republic of China and America, and of the two systems, I much prefer ours."

Ryan escaped the press room ten minutes later, to find Arnie standing at the top of the ramp.

"Very good, Jack."

"Oh?" The President had learned to fear that tone of voice.

"Yeah, you just compared the People's Republic of China to Nazi Germany and the Ku Klux Klan."

"Arnie, why is it that the media feel such great solicitude for communist countries?"

"They *don't,* and—"

"The *hell* they don't! I just compared the PRC to Nazi Germany and they damned near wet their pants. Well, guess what? Mao murdered more people than Hitler did. That's public knowledge—I remember when CIA released the study that documented it—but they ignore it. Is some Chinese citizen killed by Mao less dead than some poor Polish bastard killed by Hitler?"

"Jack, they have their sensibilities," van Damm told his President.

"Yeah? Well, just once in a while, I wish they'd display something I can recognize as a principle." With that, Ryan strode back to his office, practically trailing smoke from his ears.

"Temper, Jack, temper," Arnie said to no one in particular. The President still had to learn the first principle of political life, the ability to treat a son of a bitch like your best friend, because the needs of your nation depended on it. The world would be a better place if it were as simple as Ryan wished, the Chief of Staff thought. But it wasn't, and it showed no prospect of becoming so.

A few blocks away at Foggy Bottom, Scott Adler had finished

cringing and was making notes on how to mend the fences that his President had just kicked over. He'd have to sit down with Jack and go over a few things, like the principles he held so dear.

What did you think of that, Gerry?"

"Hosiah, I think we have a real President here. What does your son think of him?"

"Gerry, they've been friends for twenty years, back to when they both taught at the Naval Academy. I've met the man. He's a Catholic, but I think we can overlook that."

"We have to." Patterson almost laughed. "So was one of the guys who got shot yesterday, remember?"

"Italian, too, probably drank a lot of wine."

"Well, Skip was known to have the occasional drink," Patterson told his black colleague.

"I didn't know," Reverend Jackson replied, disturbed at the thought.

"Hosiah, it is an imperfect world we live in."

"Just so he wasn't a dancer." That was almost a joke, but not quite.

"Skip? No, I've never known him to dance," Reverend Patterson assured his friend. "By the way, I have an idea."

"What's that, Gerry?"

"How about this Sunday you preach at my church, and I preach at yours? I'm sure we're both going to speak on the life and martyrdom of a Chinese man."

"And what passage will you base your sermon on?" Hosiah asked, surprised and interested by the suggestion.

"Acts," Patterson replied at once.

Reverend Jackson considered that. It wasn't hard to guess the exact passage. Gerry was a fine biblical scholar. "I admire your choice, sir."

"Thank you, Pastor Jackson. What do you think of my other suggestion?"

Reverend Jackson hesitated only a few seconds. "Reverend Patterson, I would be honored to preach at your church, and I gladly extend to you the invitation to preach at my own."

Forty years earlier, when Gerry Patterson had been playing baseball in the church-sponsored Little League, Hosiah Jackson had been a young Baptist preacher, and the mere idea of preaching in Patterson's church could have incited a lynching. But, by the Good Lord, they *were* men of God, and they *were* mourning the death—the *martyrdom* —of another man of God of yet another color. Before God, all men were equal, and that was the whole point of the Faith they shared. Both men were thinking quickly of how they might have to alter their styles, because though both were Baptists, and though both preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Baptist congregations, their communities

were a little bit different and required slightly different approaches. But it was an accommodation both men could easily make.

"Thank you, Hosiah. You know, sometimes we have to acknowledge that our faith is bigger than we are."

For his part, Reverend Jackson was impressed. He never doubted the sincerity of his white colleague, and they'd chatted often on matters of religion and scripture. Hosiah would even admit, quietly, to himself, that Patterson was his superior as a scholar of the Holy Word, due to his somewhat lengthier formal education, but of the two, Hosiah Jackson was marginally the better speaker, and so their relative talents played well off each other.

"How about we get together for lunch to work out the details?" Jackson asked.

"Today? I'm free."

"Sure. Where?"

"The country club? You're not a golfer, are you?" Patterson asked hopefully. He felt like a round, and his afternoon was free today for a change.

"Never touched a golf club in my life, Gerry." Hosiah had a good laugh at that. "Robert is, learned at Annapolis and been playing ever since. Says he kicks the President's backside every time they go out." He'd never been to the Willow Glen Country Club either, and wondered if the club had any black members. Probably not. Mississippi hadn't changed quite *that* much yet, though Tiger Woods had played at a PGA tournament there, and so *that* color line had been breached, at least.

"Well, he'd probably whip me, too. Next time he comes down, maybe we can play a round." Patterson's membership at Willow Glen was complimentary, another advantage to being pastor of a well-to-do congregation.

And the truth of the matter was that, white or not, Gerry Patterson was not the least bit bigoted, Reverend Jackson knew. He preached the Gospel with a pure heart. Hosiah was old enough to remember when that had not been so, but that, too, had changed once and for all. Praise God.

For Admiral Mancuso, the issues were the same, and a little different. An early riser, he'd caught CNN the same as everyone else. So had Brigadier General Mike Lahr.

"Okay, Mike, what the hell is this all about?" CINCPAC asked when his J-2 arrived for his morning intel brief.

"Admiral, it looks like a monumental cluster-fuck. Those clergy stuck their noses in a tight crack and paid the price for it. More to the point, NCA is seriously pissed." NCA was the code-acronym for

National Command Authority, President Jack Ryan.

"What do I need to know about this?"

"Well, things are likely to heat up between America and China, for starters. The trade delegation we have in Beijing is probably going to catch some heat. If they catch too much, well . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Give me worst case," CINCPAC ordered.

"Worst case, the PRC gets its collective back up, and we recall the trade delegation *and* the ambassador, and things get real chilly for a while."

"Then what?"

"Then—that's more of a political question, but it wouldn't hurt for us to take it a little seriously, sir," Lahr told his boss, who took just about everything seriously.

Mancuso looked at his wall map of the Pacific. *Enterprise* was back at sea doing exercises between Marcus Island and the Marianas. *John Stennis* was alongside in Pearl Harbor. *Harry Truman* was en route to Pearl Harbor after taking the long way around Cape Horn—modern aircraft carriers are far too beamy for the Panama Canal. *Lincoln* was finishing up a bobtail refit in San Diego and about to go back to sea. *Kitty Hawk* and *Independence,* his two old, oil-fired carriers, were both in the Indian Ocean. At that, he was lucky. First and Seventh Fleets had six carriers fully operational for the first time in years. So, if he needed to project power, he had the assets to give people something to think about. He also had a lot of Air Force aircraft at his disposal. The 3rd Marine Division and the Army's 25th Light based right there in Hawaii wouldn't play in this picture. The Navy might bump heads with the ChiComms, and the Air Force, but he lacked the amphibious assets to invade China, and besides, he wasn't insane enough to think that was a rational course of action under any circumstances.

"What do we have in Taiwan right now?"

"*Mobile Bay, Milius, Chandler,* and *Fletcher* are showing the flag. Frigates *Curtis* and *Reid* are doing operations with the ROC navy. The submarines *La Jolla, Helena,* and *Tennessee* are trolling in the Formosa Strait or along the Chinese coast looking at their fleet units."

Mancuso nodded. He usually kept some high-end SAM ships close to Taiwan. *Milius* was a Burke-class destroyer, and *Mobile Bay* was a cruiser, both of them with the Aegis system aboard to make the ROC feel a little better about the putative missile threat to their island. Mancuso didn't think the Chinese were foolish enough to launch an attack against a city with some U.S. Navy ships tied alongside, and the Aegis ships had a fair chance of stopping anything that flew their way. But you never knew, and if this Beijing incident blew up any more . . . He lifted the phone for SURFPAC, the three-star who administratively

owned Pacific Fleet's surface ships.

"Yeah," answered Vice Admiral Ed Goldsmith.

"Ed, Bart. What material shape are those ships we have in Taipei harbor in?"

"You're calling about the thing on CNN, right?"

"Correct," CINCPAC confirmed.

"Pretty good. No material deficiencies I know about. They're doing the usual port-visit routine, letting people aboard and all. Crews are spending a lot of time on the beach."

Mancuso didn't have to ask what they were doing on the beach. He'd been a young sailor once, though never on Taiwan.

"Might not hurt for them to keep their ears perked up some."

"Noted," SURFPAC acknowledged. Mancuso didn't have to say more. The ships would now stand alternating Condition-Three on their combat systems. The SPY radars would be turned on aboard one of the Aegis ships at all times. One nice thing about Aegis ships was that they could go from half-asleep to fully operational in about sixty seconds; it was just a matter of turning some keys. They'd have to be a little careful. The SPY radar put out enough power to fry electronic components for miles around, but it was just a matter of how you steered the electronic beams, and that was computer-controlled. "Okay, sir, I'll get the word out right now."

"Thanks, Ed. I'll get you fully briefed in later today."

"Aye, aye," SURFPAC replied. He'd put a call to his squadron commanders immediately.

"What else?" Mancuso wondered.

"We haven't heard anything directly from Washington, Admiral," BG Lahr told his boss.

"Nice thing about being a CINC, Mike. You're allowed to think on your own a little."

What a fucking mess," General-Colonel Bondarenko observed to his drink. He wasn't talking about the news of the day, but about his command, even though the officers' club in Chabarsovil was comfortable. Russian general officers have always liked their comforts, and the building dated back to the czars. It had been built during the Russo-Japanese war at the beginning of the previous century and expanded several times. You could see the border between pre-revolution and post-revolution workmanship. Evidently, German POWs hadn't been trained this far east—they'd built most of the dachas for the party elite of the old days. But the vodka was fine, and the fellowship wasn't too bad, either.

"Things could be better, Comrade General," Bondarenko's operations officer agreed. "But there is much that can be done the

right way, and little bad to undo."

That was a gentle way of saying that the Far East Military District was less of a military command than it was a theoretical exercise. Of the five motor-rifle divisions nominally under his command, only one, the 265th, was at eighty-percent strength. The rest were at best regimentalsize formations, or mere cadres. He also had theoretical command of a tank division—about a regiment and a half—plus thirteen reserve divisions that existed not so much on paper as in some staff officer's dreams. The one thing he did have was huge equipment stores, but a lot of that equipment dated back to the 1960s, or even earlier. The best troops in his area of command responsibility were not actually his to command. These were the Border Guards, battalion-sized formations once part of the KGB, now a semi-independent armed service under the command of the Russian president.

There was also a defense line of sorts, which dated back to the 1930s and showed it. For this line, numerous tanks—some of them actually *German* in origin—were buried as bunkers. In fact, more than anything else the line was reminiscent of the French Maginot Line, also a thing of the 1930s. It had been built to protect the Soviet Union against an attack by the Japanese, and then upgraded halfheartedly over the years to protect against the People's Republic of China—a defense never forgotten, but never fully remembered either. Bondarenko had toured parts of it the previous day. As far back as the czars, the engineering officers of the Russian Army had never been fools. Some of the bunkers were sited with shrewd, even brilliant appreciation for the land, but the problem with bunkers was explained by a recent American aphorism: *If you can see it, you can hit it, and if you can hit it, you can kill it.* The line had been conceived and built when artillery fire had been a chancy thing, and an aircraft bomb was fortunate to hit the right county. Now you could use a fifteen-centimeter gun as accurately as a sniper rifle, and an aircraft could select which windowpane to put the bomb through on a specific building.

"Andrey Petrovich, I am pleased to hear your optimism. What is your first recommendation?"

"It will be simple to improve the camouflage on the border bunkers. That's been badly neglected over the years," Colonel Aliyev told his commander-in-chief. "That will reduce their vulnerability considerably."

"Allowing them to survive a serious attack for . . . sixty minutes, Andrushka?"

"Maybe even ninety, Comrade General. It's better than five minutes, is it not?" He paused for a sip of vodka. Both had been drinking for

half an hour. “For the 265th, we must begin a serious training program at once. Honestly, the division commander did not impress me greatly, but I suppose we must give him a chance.”

Bondarenko: “He’s been out here so long, maybe he likes the idea of Chinese food.”

“General, I was out here as a lieutenant,” Aliyev said. “I remember the political officers telling us that the Chinese had increased the length of the bayonets on their AK-47s to get through the extra fat layer we’d grown after discarding true Marxism-Leninism and eating too much.”

“Really?” Bondarenko asked.

“That is the truth, Gennady Iosifovich.”

“So, what do we know of the PLA?”

“There are a lot of them, and they’ve been training seriously for about four years now, much harder than we’ve been doing.”

“They can afford to,” Bondarenko observed sourly. The other thing he’d learned on arriving was how thin the cupboard was for funds and training equipment. But it wasn’t totally bleak. He had stores of consumable supplies that had been stocked and piled for three generations. There was a virtual mountain of shells for the 100-mm guns on his many—and long-since obsolete—T-54/55 tanks, for example, and a sea of diesel fuel hidden away in underground tanks too numerous to count. The one thing he had in the Far East Military District was infrastructure, built up by the Soviet Union over generations of institutional paranoia. But that wasn’t the same as an army to command.

“What about aviation?”

“Mainly grounded,” Aliyev answered glumly. “Parts problems. We used up so much in Chechnya that there isn’t enough to go around, and the Western District still has first call.”

“Oh? Our political leadership expects the Poles to invade us?”

“That’s the direction Germany is in,” the G-3 pointed out.

“I’ve been fighting that out with the High Command for three years,” Bondarenko growled, thinking of his time as chief of operations for the entire Russian army. “People would rather listen to themselves than to others with the voice of reason.” He looked up at Aliyev. “And if the Chinese come?”

The theater operations officer shrugged. “Then we have a problem.”

Bondarenko remembered the maps. It wasn’t all that far to the new gold strike . . . and the ever-industrious army engineers were building the damned roads to it . . .

“Tomorrow, Andrey Petrovich. Tomorrow we start drawing up a training regimen for the whole command,” CINC-FAR EAST told his own G-3.

CHAPTER 27

Transportation

Diggs didn't entirely like what he saw, but it wasn't all that unexpected. A battalion of Colonel Lisle's 2nd Brigade was out there, maneuvering through the exercise area—clumsily, Diggs thought. He had to amend his thoughts, of course. This wasn't the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, and Lisle's 2nd Brigade wasn't the 11th ACR, whose troopers were out there training practically every day, and as a result knew soldiering about as well as a surgeon knew cutting. No, 1st Armored Division had turned into a garrison force since the demise of the Soviet Union, and all that wasted time in what was left of Yugoslavia, trying to be "peacekeepers," hadn't sharpened their war-fighting skills. That was a term Diggs hated. Peacekeepers be damned, the general thought, they were supposed to be *soldiers,* not policemen in battle dress uniform. The opposing force here was a German brigade, and by the looks of it, a pretty good one, with their Leopard-II tanks. Well, the Germans had soldiering in their genetic code somewhere, but they weren't any better trained than Americans, and *training* was the difference between some ignorant damned civilian and a soldier. Training meant knowing where to look and what to do when you saw something there. Training meant knowing what the tank to your left was going to do without having to look. Training meant knowing how to fix your tank or Bradley when something broke. Training eventually meant pride, because with training came confidence, the sure knowledge that you were the baddest motherfucker in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and you didn't have to fear no evil at all.

Colonel Boyle was flying the UH-60A in which Diggs was riding. Diggs was in the jump seat immediately aft and between the pilots' seats. They were cruising about five hundred feet over the ground.

"Oops, that platoon down there just walked into something," Boyle reported, pointing. Sure enough the lead tank's blinking yellow light started flashing the *I'm dead* signal.

"Let's see how the platoon sergeant recovers," General Diggs said.

They watched, and sure enough, the sergeant pulled the remaining three tanks back while the crew bailed out of the platoon leader's

M1A2 main battle tank. As a practical matter, both it and its crew would probably have survived whatever administrative "hit" it had taken from the Germans. Nobody had yet come up with a weapon to punch reliably through the Chobham armor, but someone might someday, and so the tank crews were not encouraged to think themselves immortal and their tanks invulnerable.

"Okay, that sergeant knows his job," Diggs observed, as the helicopter moved to another venue. The general saw that Colonel Masterman was making notes aplenty on his pad. "What do you think, Duke?"

"I think they're at about seventy-five percent efficiency, sir," the G-3 operations officer replied. "Maybe a little better. We need to put everybody on the SIMNET, to shake 'em all up a little." That was one of the Army's better investments. SIMNET, the simulator network, comprised a warehouse full of M1 and Bradley simulators, linked by supercomputer and satellite with two additional such warehouses, so that highly complex and realistic battles could be fought out electronically. It had been hugely expensive, and while it could never fully simulate training in the field, it was nevertheless a training aid without parallel.

"General, all that time in Yugoslavia didn't help Lisle's boys," Boyle said from the chopper's right seat.

"I know that," Diggs agreed. "I'm not going to kill anybody's career just yet," he promised.

Boyle's head turned to grin. "Good, sir. I'll spread that word around."

"What do you think of the Germans?"

"I know their boss, General Major Siegfried Model. He's damned smart. Plays a hell of a game of cards. Be warned, General."

"Is that a fact?" Diggs had commanded the NTC until quite recently, and had occasionally tried his luck at Las Vegas, a mere two hours up I-15 from the post.

"Sir, I know what you're thinking. Think again," Boyle cautioned his boss.

"Your helicopters seem to be doing well."

"Yep, Yugoslavia was fairly decent training for us, and long as we have gas, I can train my people."

"What about live-fire?" the commanding general of First Tanks asked.

"We haven't done that in a while, sir, but again, the simulators are almost as good as the real thing," Boyle replied over the intercom. "But I think you'll want your track toads to get some in, General." And Boyle was right on that one. Nothing substituted for live-fire in an Abrams or a Bradley.

The stakeout on the park bench turned out to be lengthy and boring. First of all, of course, they'd pulled the container, opened it, and discovered that the contents were two sheets of paper, closely printed with Cyrillic characters, but encrypted. So the sheet had been photographed and sent off to the cryppies for decryption. This had not proven to be easy. In fact, it had thus far proven to be impossible, leading the officers from the Federal Security Service to conclude that the Chinese (if that was who it was) had adopted the old KGB practice of using one-time pads. These were unbreakable in theoretical terms because there was no pattern, formula, or algorithm to crack.

The rest of the time was just a matter of waiting to see who came to pick up the package.

It ended up taking days. The FSS put three cars on the case. Two of them were vans with long-lens cameras on the target. In the meanwhile, Suvorov/Koniev's apartment was as closely watched as the Moscow Stock Exchange ticker. The subject himself had a permanent shadow of up to ten trained officers, mainly KGB-trained spy-chasers instead of Provalov's homicide investigators, but with a leavening of the latter because it was technically still their case. It would remain a homicide case until some foreign national—they hoped—picked up the package under the bench.

Since it was a park bench, people sat on it regularly. Adults reading papers, children reading comic books, teenagers holding hands, people chatting amiably, even two elderly men who met every afternoon for a game of chess played on a small magnetic board. After every such visit, the stash was checked for movement or disturbance, always without result. By the fourth day, people speculated aloud that it was all some sort of trick. This was Suvorov/Koniev's way of seeing if he were being trailed or not. If so, he was a clever son of a bitch, the surveillance people all agreed. But they already knew that.

The break came in the late afternoon of day five, and it was the man they wanted it to be. His name was Kong Deshi, and he was a minor diplomat on the official list, age forty-six, a man of modest dimensions, and, the form card at the Foreign Ministry said, modest intellectual gifts—that was a polite way of saying he was considered a dunce. But as others had noted, that was the perfect cover for a spy, and one which wasted a lot of time for counterintelligence people, making them trail dumb diplomats all over the world who turned out to be nothing more than just that—dumb diplomats—of which the global supply was ample. The man was walking casually with another Chinese national, who was a businessman of some sort, or so they'd thought. Sitting, they'd continued to chat, gesturing around until the second man had turned to look at something Kong had pointed at.

Then Kong's right hand had slipped rapidly and almost invisibly under the bench and retrieved the stash, possibly replacing it with another before his hand went back in his lap. Five minutes later, after a smoke, they'd both walked off, back in the direction of the nearest Metro station.

"Patience," the head FSS officer had told his people over the radio circuit, and so they'd waited over an hour, until they were certain that there were no parked cars about keeping an eye on the dead-drop. Only then had an FSS man walked to the bench, sat down with his afternoon paper, and pulled the package. The way he flicked his cigarette away told the rest of the team that there had been a substitution.

In the laboratory, it was immediately discovered that the package had a key lock, and that got everyone's attention. The package was x-rayed immediately and found to contain a battery and some wires, plus a semi-opaque rectangle that collectively represented a pyrotechnic device. Whatever was inside the package was therefore valuable. A skilled locksmith took twenty minutes picking the lock, and then the holder was opened to reveal a few sheets of flash paper. These were removed and photographed, to show a solid collection of Cyrillic letters—and they were all random. It was a one-time-pad key sheet, the best thing they could have hoped to find. The sheets were refolded exactly as they had been replaced in the holder, and then the thin metal container—it looked like a cheap cigarette case—was returned to the bench.

"So?" Provalov asked the Federal Security Service officer on the case.

"So, the next time our subject sends a message, we'll be able to read it."

"And then we'll know," Provalov went on.

"Perhaps. We'll know something more than we know now. We'll have proof that this Suvorov fellow is a spy. That I can promise you," the counterintelligence officer pronounced.

Provalov had to admit to himself that they were no closer to solving his murder case than they'd been two weeks before, but at least things were moving, even if the path merely led them deeper into the fog.

So, Mike?" Dan Murray asked, eight time zones away.

"No nibbles yet, Director, but now it looks like we're chasing a spook. The subject's name is Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov, currently living as Ivan Yurievich Koniev." Reilly read off the address. "The trail leads to him, or at least it seems to, and we spotted him making probable contact with a Chinese diplomat."

"And what the hell does all this mean?" FBI Director Murray

wondered aloud into the secure phone.

"You got me there, Director, but it sure has turned into an interesting case."

"You must be pretty tight with this Provalov guy."

"He's a good cop, and yes, sir, we get along just fine."

That was more than Cliff Rutledge could say about his relationship with Shen Tang.

"Your news coverage of this incident was bad enough, but your President's remarks on our domestic policy is a violation of Chinese sovereignty!" the Chinese foreign minister said almost in a shout, for the seventh time since lunch.

"Minister," Cliff Rutledge replied. "None of this would have happened but for your policeman shooting an accredited diplomat, and that is not, strictly speaking, an entirely civilized act."

"Our internal affairs are our internal affairs," Shen retorted at once.

"That is so, Minister, but America has her own beliefs, and if you ask us to honor yours, then we may request that you show some respect for ours."

"We grow weary of America's interference with Chinese internal affairs. First you recognize our rebellious province on Taiwan. Then you encourage foreigners to interfere with our internal policies. Then you send a spy under the cover of religious beliefs to violate our laws with a diplomat from yet another country, then you photograph a Chinese policeman doing his duty, and then your President condemns us for *your* interference with our internal affairs. The People's Republic will not tolerate this uncivilized activity!"

And now you're going to demand most-favored-nation trade status, eh? Mark Gant thought in his chair. Damn, this *was* like a meeting with investment bankers—the pirate kind—on Wall Street.

"Minister, you call us uncivilized," Rutledge replied. "But there is no blood on our hands. Now, we are here, as I recall, to discuss trade issues. Can we return to that agenda?"

"Mr. Rutledge, America does not have the right to dictate to the People's Republic on one hand and to deny us our rights on the other," Shen retorted.

"Minister, America has made no such intrusion on China's internal affairs. If you kill a diplomat, you must expect a reaction. On the question of the Republic of China—"

"There is no Republic of China!" the PRC's Foreign Minister nearly screamed. "They are a renegade province, and *you* have violated our sovereignty by recognizing them!"

"Minister, the Republic of China is an independent nation with a freely elected government, and we are not the only country to

recognize this fact. It is the policy of the United States of America to encourage the self-determination of peoples. At such time as the people in the ROC elect to become part of the mainland, that is their choice. But since they have freely chosen to be what they are, America chooses to recognize them. As we expect others to recognize America as a legitimate government because it represents the will of her people, so it is incumbent upon America to recognize the will of other peoples." Rutledge sat back in his chair, evidently bored with the course the afternoon had taken. The morning he'd expected. The PRC had to blow off some steam, but one morning was enough for that. This was getting tiresome.

"And if another of our provinces rebels, will you recognize that?"

"Is the Minister telling me of further political unrest in the People's Republic?" Rutledge inquired at once, a little too fast and too glibly, he told himself a moment later. "In any case, I have no instructions for that eventuality." It was supposed to have been a (semi) humorous response to rather a dumb question, but Minister Shen evidently didn't have his sense of humor turned on today. His hand came up, finger extended, and now he shook it at Cliff Rutledge and the United States.

"You cheat us. You interfere with us. You insult us. You blame us for the inefficiency of your economy. You deny us fair access to your markets. And you sit there as though you are the seat of the world's virtue. We will have none of this!"

"Minister, we have opened our doors to trade with your country, and you have closed your door in our face. It is your door to open or close," he conceded, "but we have our doors to close as well if you so force us. We have no wish to do this. We wish for fair and free trade between the great Chinese people and the American people, but the impediments to that trade are not to be found in America."

"You insult us, and then you expect us to invite you into our home?"

"Minister, America insults no one. A tragedy happened in the People's Republic yesterday. It was probably something you would have preferred to avoid, but even so, it happened. The President of the United States has asked for you to investigate the incident. That is not an unreasonable request. What do you condemn us for? A journalist reported the facts. Does China deny the facts we saw on television? Do you claim that a private American company fabricated this event? I think not. Do you say that those two men are not dead? Regrettably, this is not the case. Do you say that your policeman was justified in killing an accredited diplomat and a clergyman holding a newborn child?" Rutledge asked in his most reasonable voice. "Minister, all you have said for the past three and a half hours is that America is wrong for objecting to what appears to be cold-blooded murder. And our

objection was merely a request for your government to investigate the incident. Minister, America has neither done nor said anything unreasonable, and we grow weary of the accusation. My delegation and I came here to discuss trade. We would like the People's Republic to open up its markets more so that trade can become *trade,* the free exchange of goods across international borders. You request a most-favored-nation trading relationship with the United States. That will not happen until such time as your markets are as open to America as America's are open to China, but it *can* happen at such time as you make the changes we require."

"The People's Republic is finished with acceding to America's insulting demands. We are finished with tolerating your insults to our sovereignty. We are finished with your interference in our internal affairs. It is time for America to consider our reasonable requests. China desires to have a fair trading relationship with the United States. We ask no more than what you give other nations: most favored nation."

"Minister, that will not happen until such time as you open your markets to our goods. Trade is not free if it is not fair. We object also to the PRC's violation of copyright and trademark treaties and agreements. We object to having industries fully owned by agencies of the government of the People's Republic to violate patent treaties, even to the point of manufacturing proprietary American products without permission or compensation and—"

"So now you call us thieves?" Shen demanded.

"Minister, I point out that such words have not escaped my lips. It is a fact, however, that we have examples of products made in China by factories owned by agencies of your government, which products appear to contain American inventions for which the inventors have not been compensated, and from whom permission to manufacture the copies has not been obtained. I can show you examples of those products if you wish." Shen's reaction was an angry wave of the hand, which Rutledge took to mean *No, thank you.* Or something like that.

"I have no interest in seeing physical evidence of American lies and distortions."

Gant just sat back in his chair while Rutledge made his injured reply, like a spectator at a prizefight, wondering if anyone would land the knockdown punch. Probably not, he thought. Neither had a glass chin, and both were too light on their feet. What resulted was a lot of flailing about, but no serious result. It was just a new kind of boring for him, exciting in its form, but dull in its result. He made some notes, but those were merely memory aids to help him remember how this had gone. It might make a fun chapter in his autobiography. What title, he wondered. *Trader and Diplomat,* maybe?

Forty-five minutes later, it broke up, with the usual handshakes, as cordial as the meeting had been contentious, which rather amazed Mark Gant.

"It's all business, not personal," Rutledge explained. "I'm surprised they're dwelling on this so much. It's not as though we've actually accused them of anything. Hell, even the President just asked for an investigation. Why are they so touchy?" he wondered aloud.

"Maybe they're worried they won't get what they want out of the talks," Gant speculated.

"But why are they *that* worried?" Rutledge asked.

"Maybe their foreign-exchange reserves are even lower than my computer model suggests." Gant shrugged.

"But even if they are, they're not exactly following a course that would ameliorate it." Rutledge slammed his hands together in frustration. "They're not behaving logically. Okay, sure, they're allowed to have a conniption fit over this shooting thing, and, yeah, maybe President Ryan pushed it a little too far saying some of the things he said—and Christ knows he's a real Neanderthal on the abortion issue. But all of that does not justify the time and the passion in their position."

"Fear?" Gant wondered.

"Fear of what?"

"If their cash reserves are that low, or maybe even lower, then they could be in a tight crack, Cliff. Tighter than we appreciate."

"Assume that they are, Mark. What makes it something to be fearful about?"

"A couple of things," Gant said, leaning forward in his limo seat. "It means they don't have the cash to buy things, or to meet the payments on the things they've already bought. It's an embarrassment, and like you said, these are proud people. I don't see them admitting they're wrong, or wanting to show weakness."

"That's a fact," Rutledge agreed.

"Pride can get people into a lot of trouble, Cliff," Gant thought aloud. He remembered a fund on Wall Street that had taken a hundred-million-dollar hit because its managing director wouldn't back off a position that he'd thought was correct a few days earlier, but then stayed with after it was manifestly clear that he was wrong. Why? Because he hadn't wanted to look like a pussy on The Street. And so instead of appearing to be a pussy, he'd proclaimed to the whole world that he was an ass. But how did one translate that into foreign affairs? A chief of state was smarter than that, wasn't he?

It's not going well, my friend," Zhang told Fang.

"That foolish policeman is to blame. Yes, the Americans were wrong

to react so strongly, but that would not have taken place at all if not for the overzealous police officer."

"President Ryan—why does he hate us so?"

"Zhang, twice you have plotted against the Russians, and twice you've played your intrigue against America. Is it not possible that the Americans know of this? Is it not possible that they guessed it was the case? Has it not occurred to you that this is why they recognized the Taiwan regime?"

Zhang Han San shook his head. "This is not possible. Nothing was ever written down." *And our security was perfect in both cases,* he didn't trouble himself to add.

"When things are said around people with ears, Zhang, they remember them. There are few secrets in the world. You can no more keep the affairs of state secret than you can conceal the sunrise," Fang went on, thinking that he'd make sure that this phrase went into the record of the talk that Ming would write up for him. "They spread too far. They reach too many people, and each of them has a mouth."

"Then what would you have us do?"

"The American has requested an investigation, so, we give him one. The facts we discover will be whatever facts we wish them to be. If a policeman must die, there are many others to take his place. Our trading relationship with America is more important than this trivial matter, Zhang."

"We cannot afford to abase ourselves before the barbarian."

"We cannot not afford *not* to in this case. We cannot allow false pride to put the country at risk." Fang sighed. His friend Zhang had always been a proud one. A man able to see far, certainly, but too aware of himself and the place he wanted. Yet the one he'd chosen was difficult. He'd never wanted the *first* place for himself, but instead to be the man who influenced the man at the top, to be like the court eunuchs who had directed the various emperors for over a thousand years. Fang almost smiled, thinking that no amount of power was worth becoming a eunuch, at the royal court or not, and that Zhang probably didn't wish to go that far, either. But to be the man of power behind the curtain was probably more difficult than to be the man in the first chair . . . and yet, Fang remembered, Zhang had been the prime mover behind Xu's selection to general secretary. Xu was an intellectual nonentity, a pleasant enough man with regal looks, able to speak in public well, but not himself a man of great ideas . . .

. . . and that explained things, didn't it? Zhang had helped make Xu the chief of the Politburo precisely *because* he was an empty vessel, and Zhang was the one to fill the void of ideas with his own thoughts. Of course. He ought to have seen it sooner. Elsewhere, it was believed that Xu had been chosen for his middle-of-the-road stance on

everything—a conciliator, a consensus-maker, they called him outside the PRC. In fact, he was a man of few convictions, able to adopt those of anyone else, if that someone—Zhang—looked about first and decided where the Politburo should go.

Xu was not a complete puppet, of course. That was the problem with people. However useful they might be on some issues, on others they held to the illusion that they thought for themselves, and the most foolish of them *did* have ideas, and those ideas were rarely logical and almost never helpful. Xu had embarrassed Zhang on more than one occasion, and since he was chairman of the Politburo, Xu *did* have real personal power, just not the wit to make proper use of it. But—what? Sixty percent of the time, maybe a little more?—he was merely Zhang's mouthpiece. And Zhang, for his part, was largely free to exert his own influence, and to make his own national policy. He did so mostly unseen and unknown outside the Politburo itself, and not entirely known inside, either, since so many of his meetings with Xu were private, and most of the time Zhang never spoke of them, even to Fang.

His old friend was a chameleon, Fang thought, hardly for the first time. But if he showed humility in not seeking prominence to match his influence, then he balanced that with the fault of pride, and, worse, he didn't seem to know what weakness he displayed. He thought either that it wasn't a fault at all, or that only he knew of it. All men had their weaknesses, and the greatest of these were invariably those unknown to their practitioners. Fang checked his watch and took his leave. With luck, he'd be home at a decent hour, after he transcribed his notes through Ming. What a novelty, getting home on time.

CHAPTER 28

Collision Courses

Those sonsabitches," Vice President Jackson observed with his coffee.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of statecraft, Robby," Ryan told his friend. It was 7:45 A.M. in the Oval Office. Cathy and the kids had gotten off early, and the day was starting fast. "We've had our suspicions, but here's the proof, if you want to call it that. The war with Japan and that little problem we had with Iran started in Beijing—well, not exactly, but this Zhang guy, acting for Xu, it would seem, aided and abetted both."

"Well, he may be a nasty son of a bitch, but I wouldn't give him points for brains," Robby said, after a moment's reflection. Then he thought some more. "But maybe that's not fair. From his point of view, the plans were pretty clever, using others to be his stalking horse. He risked nothing himself, then he figured to move in and profit on the risks of others. It certainly looked efficient, I suppose."

"Question is, what's his next move?"

"Between this and what Rutledge reports from Beijing, I'd say we have to take these people a little seriously," Robby reflected. Then his head perked up some more. "Jack, we have to get more people in on this."

"Mary Pat will flip out if we even suggest it," Ryan told him.

"Too damned bad. Jack, it's the old problem with intelligence information. If you spread it out too much, you risk compromising it, and then you lose it—*but* if you don't use it at all, you might as well not even have it. Where do you draw the line?" It was a rhetorical question. "If you err, you err on the side of safety—but the safety of the country, not the source."

"There's a real, live person on the other end of this sheet of paper, Rob," Jack pointed out.

"I'm sure there is. But there are two hundred fifty million people outside this room, Jack, and the oath we both swore was to them, not some Chinese puke in Beijing. What this tells us is that the guy making policy in China is willing to start wars, and twice now we've sent our people to fight wars he's had a part in starting. Jesus, man,

war is supposed to be a thing of the past, but this Zhang guy hasn't figured that one out yet. What's he doing that we don't know about?"

"That's what SORGE'S all about, Rob. The idea is that we find out beforehand and have a chance to forestall it."

Jackson nodded. "Maybe so, but once upon a time, there was a source called MAGIC that told us a lot about an enemy's intentions, but when that enemy launched the first attack, we were asleep—because MAGIC was so important we never told CINCPAC about it, and he ended up not preparing for Pearl Harbor. I know intel's important, but it has its operational limitations. All this really tells us is that we have a potential adversary with little in the way of inhibitions. We know his mind-set, but not his intentions or current operations. Moreover, SORGE'S giving us recollections of private conversations between one guy who makes policy and another guy who tries to influence policy. A lot of stuff is being left out. This looks like a cover-your-ass diary, doesn't it?"

Ryan told himself that this was a particularly smart critique. Like the people at Langley, he'd allowed himself to wax a little too euphoric about a source they'd never even approached before. SONGBIRD was good, but not without limitations. Big ones.

"Yeah, Rob, that's probably just what it is. This Fang guy probably keeps the diary just to have something to pull out of the drawer if one of his colleagues on the Chinese Politburo tries to butt-fuck him."

"So, it isn't Sir Thomas More whose words we're reading," TOMCAT observed.

"Not hardly," Ryan conceded. "But it's a good source. All the people who've looked at this for us say it feels very real."

"I'm not saying it isn't *true,* Jack, I'm saying it isn't *all,*" the Vice President persisted.

"Message received, Admiral." Ryan held up his hands in surrender. "What do you recommend?"

"SecDef for starters, and the Chiefs, and J-3 and J-5, and probably CINCPAC, your boy Bart Mancuso," Jackson added, with a hint of distaste.

"Why don't you like the guy?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"He's a bubblehead," the career fighter pilot answered. "Submariners don't get around all that much . . . but I grant you he's a pretty good operator." *The submarine operation he'd run on the Japs using old boomers had been pretty swift,* Jackson admitted to himself.

"Specific recommendations?"

"Rutledge tells us that the ChiComms are talking like they're real torqued over the Taiwan thing. What if they act on that? Like a missile strike into the island. Christ knows they have enough missiles to toss, and we have ships in harbor there all the time."

"You really think they'd be dumb enough to launch an attack on a city with one of our ships tied alongside?" Ryan asked. Nasty or not, this Zhang guy wasn't going to risk war with America quite that foolishly, was he?

"What if they don't know the ship's there? What if they get bad intel? Jack, the shooters don't always get good data from the guys in the back room. Trust me. Been there, done that, got the fucking scars, y'know?"

"The ships can take care of themselves, can't they?"

"Not if they don't have all their systems turned on, and can a Navy SAM stop a ballistic inbound?" Robby wondered aloud. "I don't know. How about we have Tony Bretano check it out for us?"

"Okay, give him a call." Ryan paused. "Robby, I have somebody coming in in a few minutes. We need to talk some more about this. With Adler and Bretano," the President added.

"Tony's very good on hardware and management stuff, but he needs a little educating on operations."

"So, educate him," Ryan told Jackson.

"Aye, aye, sir." The Vice President headed out the door.

They got the container back to its magnetic home less than two hours after removing it, thanking God—Russians were allowed to do that now—that the lock mechanism wasn't one of the new electronic ones. Those could be very difficult to break. But the problem with all such security measures was that they all too often ran the chance of going wrong and destroying that which they were supposed to protect, which only added complexity to a job with too much complexity already. The world of espionage was one in which everything that could go wrong invariably did, and so over the years, every way of simplifying operations had been adopted by all the players. The result was that since what worked for one man worked for all, when you saw someone following the same procedures as your own intelligence officers and agents, you knew you had a player in your sights.

And so the stakeout on the bench was renewed—of course it had never been withdrawn, in case Suvorov/ Koniev should appear unexpectedly while the transfer case was gone off to the lab—with an ever-changing set of cars and trucks, plus coverage in a building with a line-of-sight to the bench. The Chinese subject was being watched, but no one saw him set a telltale for the dead-drop. But that could be as simple as calling a number for Suvorov/Koniev's beeper . . . but probably no, since they'd assume that every phone line out of the Chinese embassy was bugged, and the number would be captured and perhaps traced to its owner. Spies had to be careful, because those who chased after them were both resourceful and unrelenting. That

fact made them the most conservative of people. But difficult to spot though they might be, once spotted they were usually doomed. And that, the FSS men all hoped, would be the case with Suvorov/Koniev.

In this case, it took until after nightfall. The subject left his apartment building and drove around for forty minutes, following a path identical to one driven two days before—probably checking to see if he had a shadow, and also to check for some telltale alert the FSS people hadn't spotted yet. But this time, instead of driving back to his flat, he came by the park, parked his car two blocks from the bench, and walked there by an indirect route, pausing on the way twice to light a cigarette, which gave him ample opportunity to turn and check his back. Everything was right out of the playbook. He saw nothing, though three men and a woman were following him on foot. The woman was pushing a baby carriage, which gave her the excuse to stop every so often to adjust the infant's blanket. The men just walked, not looking at the subject or, so it seemed, anything else.

"There!" one of the FSS people said. Suvorov/Koniev didn't sit on the bench this time. Instead he rested his left foot on it, tied his shoelace, and adjusted his pants cuff. The pickup of the holder was accomplished so skillfully that no one actually saw it, but it seemed rather a far-fetched coincidence that he would pick that particular spot to tie his shoes—and besides, one of the FSS men would soon be there to see if he'd replaced one holder with another. With that done, the subject walked back to his car, taking a different circuitous route and lighting two more American Marlboros on the way.

The amusing part, Lieutenant Provalov thought, was how obvious it was once you knew whom to look at. What had once been anonymous was now as plain as an advertising billboard.

"So, now what do we do?" the militia lieutenant asked his FSS counterpart.

"Not a thing," the FSS supervisor replied. "We wait until he places another message under the bench, and then we get it, decode it, and find out what exactly he's up to. Then we make a further decision."

"What about my murder case?" Provalov demanded.

"What about it? This is an espionage case now, Comrade Lieutenant, and that takes precedence."

Which was true, Oleg Gregoriyevich had to admit to himself. The murder of a pimp, a whore, and a driver was a small thing compared to state treason.

His naval career might never end, Admiral Joshua Painter, USN (Ret.), thought to himself. And that wasn't so bad a thing, was it? A farm boy from Vermont, he'd graduated the Naval Academy almost forty years earlier, made it through Pensacola, then gotten his life's

ambition, flying jets off aircraft carriers. He'd done it for the next twenty years, plus a stint as a test pilot, commanded a carrier air wing, then a carrier, then a group, and finally topped out as SACLANT/CINCLANT/CINCLANTFLT, three very weighty hats that he'd worn comfortably enough for just over three years before removing the uniform forever. Retirement had meant a civilian job paying about four times what the government had, mainly consulting with admirals he'd watched on the way up and telling them how he would have done it. In fact, it was something he would have done for free in any officers' club on any Navy base in America, maybe for the cost of dinner and a few beers and a chance to smell the salt air.

But now he was in the Pentagon, back on the government payroll, this time as a civilian supergrade and special assistant to the Secretary of Defense. Tony Bretano, Josh Painter thought, was smart enough, a downright brilliant engineer and manager of engineers. He was prone to look for mathematical solutions to problems rather than human ones, and he tended to drive people a little hard. All in all, Bretano might have made a decent naval officer, Painter thought, especially a nuc.

His Pentagon office was smaller than the one he'd occupied as OP-05—Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Air—ten years earlier, a job since de-established. He had his own secretary and a smart young commander to look after him. He was an entry-port to the SecDef's office for a lot of people, one of whom, oddly enough, was the Vice President.

"Hold for the Vice President," a White House operator told him on his private line.

"You bet," Painter replied.

"Josh, Robby."

"Good morning, sir," Painter replied. This annoyed Jackson, who'd served under Painter more than once, but Josh Painter wasn't a man able to call an elected official by his Christian name. "What can I do for you?"

"Got a question. The President and I were going over something this morning, and I didn't have the answer to his question. Can an Aegis intercept and kill a ballistic inbound?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so. We looked at that during the Gulf War and—oh, okay, yeah, I remember now. We decided they could probably stop one of those Scuds because of its relatively slow speed, but that's the top end of their ability. It's a software problem, software on the SAM itself." Which was the same story for the Patriot missiles as well, both men then remembered. "Why did that one come up?"

"The President's worried that if the Chinese toss one at Taiwan and

we have a ship alongside, well, he'd prefer that the ship could look after herself, y'know?"

"I can look into that," Painter promised. "Want me to bring it up with Tony today?"

"That's affirmative," TOMCAT confirmed.

"Roger that, sir. I'll get back to you later today."

"Thanks, Josh," Jackson replied, hanging up.

Painter checked his watch. It was about time for him to head in anyway. The walk took him out into the busy E-Ring corridor, then right again into the SecDef's office, past the security people and the various private secretaries and aides. He was right on time, and the door to the inner office was open.

"Morning, Josh," Bretano greeted.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary."

"Okay, what's new and interesting in the world today?"

"Well, sir, we have an inquiry from the White House that just came in."

"And what might that be?" THUNDER asked. Painter explained. "Good question. Why is the answer so hard to figure out?"

"It's something we've looked at on and off, but really Aegis was set up to deal with cruise-missile threats, and they top out at about Mach Three or so."

"But the Aegis radar is practically ideal for that sort of threat, isn't it?" The Secretary of Defense was fully briefed in on how the radar-computer system worked.

"It's a hell of a radar system, sir, yes," Painter agreed.

"And making it capable for this mission is just a question of software?"

"Essentially yes. Certainly it involves software in the missile's seekerhead, maybe also for the SPY and SPG radars as well. That's not exactly my field, sir."

"Software isn't all that difficult to write, and it isn't that expensive either. Hell, I had a world-class guy at TRW who's an expert on this stuff, used to work in SDIO downstairs. Alan Gregory, retired from the Army as a halfcolonel, Ph.D. from Stony Brook, I think. Why not have him come in to check it out?"

It amazed Painter that Bretano, who'd run one major corporation and had almost been headhunted away to head Lockheed-Martin before President Ryan had intercepted him, had so little appreciation for procedure.

"Mr. Secretary, to do that, we have to—"

"My ass," THUNDER interrupted. "I have discretionary authority over small amounts of money, don't I?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary," Painter confirmed.

"And I've sold all my stock in TRW, remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, I am not in violation of any of those fucking ethics laws, am I?"

"No, sir," Painter had to agree.

"Good, so call TRW in Sunnyvale, get Alan Gregory, I think he's a junior vice president now, and tell him we need him to fly here right away and look into this, to see how easy it would be to upgrade Aegis to providing a limited ballistic-missile-defense capability."

"Sir, it won't make some of the other contractors happy." *Including*, Painter did not add, *TRW*.

"I'm not here to make them happy, Admiral. Somebody told me I was here to defend the country efficiently."

"Yes, sir." It was hard not to like the guy, even if he did have the bureaucratic sensibilities of a pissed-off rhinoceros.

"So let's find out if Aegis has the technical capabilities to do this particular job."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"What time do I have to drive up to the Hill?" the SecDef asked next.

"About thirty minutes, sir."

Bretano grumbled. Half his working time seemed to be spent explaining things to Congress, talking to people who'd already made up their minds and who only asked questions to look good on C-SPAN. For Tony Bretano, an engineer's engineer, it seemed like a hellishly unproductive way to spend his time. But they called it public service, didn't they? In a slightly different context, it was called slavery, but Ryan was even more trapped than he was, leaving THUNDER with little room to complain. And besides, he'd volunteered, too.

They were eager enough, these Spetsnaz junior officers, and Clark remembered that what makes elite troops is often the simple act of telling them that they are elite—then waiting for them to live up to their own self-image. There was a little more to it, of course. The Spetsnaz were special in terms of their mission. Essentially they'd been copies of the British Special Air Service. As so often happened in military life, what one country invented, other countries tended to copy, and so the Soviet Army had selected troops for unusually good fitness tests and a high degree of political reliability—Clark never learned exactly how one tested for that characteristic—and then assigned them a different training regimen, turning them into commandos. The initial concept had failed for a reason predictable to anyone but the political leadership of the Soviet Union: The great majority of Soviet soldiers were drafted, served two years, then went back home. The average member of the British SAS wasn't even

considered for membership until he'd served four years and had corporal's stripes, for the simple reason that it takes more than two years to learn to be a competent soldier in ordinary duties, much less the sort that required thinking under fire—yet another problem for the Soviets, who didn't encourage independent thought for any of those in uniform, much less conscripted non-officers. To compensate for this, some clever weapons had been thought up. The spring-loaded knife was one with which Chavez had played earlier in the day. At the push of a button, it shot off the blade of a serious combat knife with a fair degree of accuracy over a range of five or six meters. But the Soviet engineer who'd come up with this idea must have been a movie watcher, because only in the movies do men fall silently and instantly dead from a knife in the chest. Most people find this experience painful, and most people respond to pain by making noise. As an instructor at The Farm, Clark had always warned, "Never cut a man's throat with a knife. They flop around and make noise when you do that."

By contrast, after all the thought and good engineering that had gone into the spring-knife, their pistol silencers were garbage, cans loaded with steel wool that selfdestructed after less than ten shots, when manufacturing a decent suppressor required only about fifteen minutes of work from a semi-skilled machinist. John sighed to himself. There was no understanding these people.

But the individual troopers were just fine. He'd watched them run with Ding's Team-2, and not one of the Russians fell out of the formation. Part of that had been pride, of course, but most of it had been ability. The shoot-house experience had been less impressive. They weren't as carefully trained as the boys from Hereford, and not nearly so well equipped. Their supposedly suppressed weapons were sufficiently noisy to make John and Ding both jump . . . but for all that, the eagerness of these kids was impressive. Every one of the Russians was a senior lieutenant in rank, and each was airborne-qualified. They all were pretty good with light weapons—and the Russian snipers *were* as good as Homer Johnston and Dieter Weber, much to the surprise of the latter. The Russian sniper rifles looked a little clunky, but they shot pretty well—at least out to eight hundred meters.

"Mr. C, they have a ways to go, but they got spirit. Two weeks, and they'll be right on line," Chavez pronounced, looking skeptically at the vodka. They were in a Russian officers' club, and there was plenty of the stuff about.

"Only two?" John asked.

"In two weeks, they'll have all their skills down pat, and they'll master the new weapons." RAINBOW was transferring five complete

team-sets of weapons to the Russian Spetsnaz team: MP-10 submachine guns, Beretta .45 pistols, and most important, the radio gear that allowed the team to communicate even when under fire. The Russians were keeping their own Dragunov long-rifles, which was partly pride, but the things could shoot, and that was sufficient to the mission. "The rest is just experience, John, and we can't really give 'em that. All we can really do is set up a good training system for 'em, and the rest they'll do for themselves."

"Well, nobody ever said Ivan couldn't fight." Clark downed a shot. The working day was over, and everybody else was doing it.

"Shame their country's in such a mess," Chavez observed.

"It's their mess to clean up, Domingo. They'll do it if we keep out of their way." *Probably,* John didn't add. The hard part for him was thinking of them as something other than the enemy. He'd been here in the Bad Old Days, operating briefly on several occasions in Moscow as an "illegal" field officer, which in retrospect seemed like parading around Fifth Avenue in New York stark naked holding up a sign saying he hated Jews, blacks, and NYPD cops. At the time, it had just seemed like part of the job, John remembered. But now he was older, a grandfather, and evidently a lot more chicken than he'd been back in the '70s and '80s. Jesus, the chances he'd taken back then! More recently, he'd been in KGB—to him it would *always* be KGB—headquarters at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square as a guest of the Chairman. Sure, Wilbur, and soon he'd hop in the alien spacecraft that landed every month in his backyard and accept their invitation for a luncheon flight to Mars. It felt about that crazy, John thought.

"Ivan Sergeyevich!" a voice called. It was Lieutenant General Yuriy Kirillin, the newly selected chief of Russian special forces—a man defining his own job as he went along, which was not the usual thing in this part of the world.

"Yuriy Andreyevich," Clark responded. He'd kept his given name and patronymic from his CIA cover as a convenience that, he was sure, the Russians knew all about anyway. So, no harm was done. He lifted a vodka bottle. It was apple vodka, flavored by some apple skins at the bottom of the bottle, and not bad to the taste. In any case, vodka was the fuel for any sort of business meeting in Russia, and since he was in Rome it was time to act Italian.

Kirillin gunned down his first shot as though he'd been waiting all week for it. He refilled and toasted John's companion: "Domingo Stepanovich," which was close enough. Chavez reciprocated the gesture. "Your men are excellent, comrades. We will learn much from them."

Comrades, John thought. *Son of a* bitch*!* "Your boys are eager, Yuriy, and hard workers."

"How long?" Kirillin asked. His eyes didn't show the vodka one little bit. *Perhaps they were immune,* Ding thought. He had to go easy on the stuff, lest John have to guide him home.

"Two weeks," Clark answered. "That's what Domingo tells me."

"That fast?" Kirillin asked, not displeased by the estimate.

"They're good troops, General," Ding said. "Their basic skills are there. They're in superb physical condition, and they're smart. All they need is familiarization with their new weapons, and some more directed training that we'll set up for them. And after that, they'll be training the rest of your forces, right?"

"Correct, Major. We will be establishing regional special-operations and counterterror forces throughout the country. The men you train this week will be training others in a few months. The problem with the Chechens came as a surprise to us, and we need to pay serious attention to terrorism as a security threat."

Clark didn't envy Kirillin the mission. Russia was a big country containing too many leftover nationalities from the Soviet Union—and for that matter from the time of the czars—many of whom had never particularly liked the idea of being part of Russia. America had had the problem once, but never to the extent that the Russians did, and here it wouldn't be getting better anytime soon. Economic prosperity was the only sure cure—prosperous people don't squabble; it's too rough on the china and the silverware—but prosperity was a way off in the future yet.

"Well, sir," Chavez went on, "in a year you'll have a serious and credible force, assuming you have the funding support you're going to need."

Kirillin grunted. "That is the question here, and probably in your country as well, yes?"

"Yeah." Clark had himself a laugh. "It helps if Congress loves you."

"You have many nationalities on your team," the Russian general observed.

"Yeah, well, we're mainly a NATO service, but we're used to working together. Our best shooter now is Italian."

"Really? I saw him, but—"

Chavez cut him off. "General, in a previous life, Ettore was James Butler Hickok. Excuse me, Wild Bill Hickok to you. That son of a bitch can sign his name with a handgun."

Clark refilled the vodka glasses. "Yuriy, he's won money off all of us at the pistol range. Even me."

"Is that a fact?" Kirillin mused, with the same look in his eyes that Clark had had a few weeks earlier. John punched him on the arm.

"I know what you're thinking. Bring money when you have your match with him, Comrade General," John advised. "You'll need it to

pay off his winnings."

"This I must see," the Russian announced.

"Hey, Eddie!" Chavez waved his number-two over.

"Yes, sir?"

"Tell the general here how good Ettore is with a pistol."

"That fucking Eyetalian!" Sergeant Major Price swore. "He's even taken twenty pounds off Dave Woods."

"Dave's the range-master at Hereford, and he's pretty good, too," Ding explained. "Ettore really ought to be in the Olympics or something—maybe Camp Perry, John?"

"I thought of that, maybe enter him in the President's Cup match next year . . ." Clark mused. Then he turned. "Go ahead, Yuriy. Take him on. Maybe you will succeed where all of us failed."

"All of you, eh?"

"Every bloody one of us," Eddie Price confirmed. "I wonder why the Italian government gave him to us. If the Mafia want to go after him, I wish the bastards luck."

"This I must see," Kirillin persisted, leading his visitors to wonder how smart he was.

"Then you will see it, *Tovarisch General,*" Clark promised.

Kirillin, who'd been on the Red Army pistol team as a lieutenant and a captain, couldn't conceive of being beaten in a pistol match. He figured these NATO people were just having fun with him, as he might do if the situation were reversed. He waved to the bartender and ordered pepper vodka for his own next round. But all that said, he liked these NATO visitors, and their reputation spoke forcefully for itself. This Chavez, a major—he was really CIA, Kirillin knew, and evidently a good spy at that, according to his briefing from the SVR—had the look of a good soldier, with confidence won in the field, the way a soldier ought to win his confidence. Clark was much the same—and also very capable, so the book on him read—with his own ample experience both as a soldier and a spy. And his spoken Russian was superb and very literate, his accent of St. Petersburg, where he probably could—and probably once or twice *had,* Kirillin reflected—pass for a native. It was so strange that such men as these had once been his sworn enemies. Had battle happened, it would have been bloody, and its outcome very sad. Kirillin had spent three years in Afghanistan, and had learned firsthand just how horrid a thing combat was. He'd heard the stories from his father, a much-decorated infantry general, but hearing them wasn't the same as seeing, and besides, you never told the really awful parts because you tended to edit them out of your memory. One did not discuss seeing a friend's face turn to liquid from a rifle bullet over a few drinks in a bar, because it was just not the sort of thing you could describe to one who didn't understand,

and you didn't need to describe it to one who did. You just lifted your glass to toast the memory of Grisha or Mirka, or one of the others, and in the community of arms, that was enough. Did these men do it? Probably. They'd lost men once, when Irish terrorists had attacked their own home station, to their ultimate cost, but not without inflicting their own harm on highly trained men.

And that was the essence of the profession of arms right there. You trained to skew the odds your way, but you could never quite turn them all the way in the direction you wished.

Yu Chun had experienced a thoroughly vile day. In the city of Taipei to look after her aged and seriously ill mother, she'd had a neighbor call urgently, telling her to switch on her TV, then seen her husband shot dead before her blinking eyes. And that had just been the first hammer blow of the day.

The next one involved getting to Beijing. The first two flights to Hong Kong were fully booked, and that cost her fourteen lonely and miserable hours sitting in the terminal as an anonymous face in a sea of such faces, alone with her horror and additional loneliness, until she finally boarded a flight to the PRC capital. That flight had been bumpy, and she had cowered in her last-row window seat, hoping that no one could see the anguish on her face, but hiding it as well as she might conceal an earthquake. In due course, that trial had ended, and she managed to leave the aircraft, and actually made it through immigration and customs fairly easily because she carried virtually nothing that could conceal contraband. Then it started all over again with the taxi to her home.

Her home was hidden behind a wall of policemen. She tried to pass through their line as one might wiggle through a market checkout, but the police had orders to admit no one into the house, and those orders did not include an exception for anyone who might actually live there. That took twenty minutes and three policemen of gradually increasing rank to determine. By this time, she'd been awake for twenty-six hours and traveling for twenty-two of them. Tears did not avail her in the situation, and she staggered her way to the nearby home of a member of her husband's congregation, Wen Zhong, a man who operated a small restaurant right in his home, a tall and rotund man, ordinarily jolly, liked by all who met him. Seeing Chun, he embraced her and took her into his home, at once giving her a room in which to sleep and a few drinks to help her relax. Yu Chin was asleep in minutes, and would remain that way for some hours, while Wen figured he had his own things to do. About the only thing Chun had managed to say before collapsing from exhaustion was that she wanted to bring Fa An's body home for proper burial. That Wen couldn't do all by

himself, but he called a number of his fellow parishioners to let them know that their pastor's widow was in town. He understood that the burial would be on the island of Taiwan, which was where Yu had been born, but his congregation could hardly bid their beloved spiritual leader farewell without a ceremony of its own, and so he called around to arrange a memorial service at their small place of worship. He had no way of knowing that one of the parishioners he called reported directly to the Ministry of State Security.

Barry Wise was feeling pretty good about himself. While he didn't make as much money as his colleagues at the other so-called "major" networks—CNN didn't have an entertainment division to dump money into news—he figured that he was every bit as well known as their (white) talking heads, and he stood out from them by being a serious newsie who went into the field, found his own stories, and wrote his own copy. Barry Wise did the news, and that was all. He had a pass to the White House press room, and was considered in just about every capital city in the world not only as a reporter with whom you didn't trifle, but also as an honest conveyor of information. He was by turns respected and hated, depending on the government and the culture. *This* government, he figured, had little reason to love him. To Barry Wise, they were fucking barbarians. The police here had delusions of godhood that evidently devolved from the big shots downtown who must have thought their dicks were pretty big because they could make so many people dance to their tune. To Wise, that was the sign of a little one, instead, but you didn't tell them that out loud, because, small or not, they had cops with guns, and the guns were certainly big enough.

But these people had huge weaknesses, Wise also knew. They saw the world in a distorted way, like people with astigmatism, and assumed that was its real shape. They were like scientists in a lab who couldn't see past their own theories and kept trying to twist the experimental data into the proper result—or ended up ignoring the data which their theory couldn't explain.

But that was going to change. Information was getting in. In allowing free-market commerce, the government of the PRC had also allowed the installation of a forest of telephone lines. Many of them were connected to fax machines, and even more were connected to computers, and so *lots* of information was circulating around the country now. Wise wondered if the government appreciated the implications of *that*. Probably not. Neither Marx nor Mao had really understood how powerful a thing information was, because it was the place where one found the Truth, once you rooted through it a little, and Truth wasn't Theory. Truth was the way things really *were*, and

that's what made it a son of a bitch. You could deny it, but only at your peril, because sooner or later the son of a bitch would bite you on the ass. Denying it just made the inevitable bite worse, because the longer you put it off, the wider its jaws got. The world had changed quite a bit since CNN had started up. As late as 1980, a country *could* deny anything, but CNN's signals, the voice *and* the pictures, came straight down from the satellite. You couldn't deny pictures worth a damn.

And that made Barry Wise the croupier in the casino of Information and Truth. He was an honest dealer—he had to be in order to survive in the casino, because the customers demanded it. In the free marketplace of ideas, Truth always won in the end, because it didn't need anything else to prop it up. Truth stood by itself, and sooner or later the wind would blow the props away from all the bullshit.

It was a noble enough profession, Wise thought. His mission in life was reporting history, and along the way, he got to make a little of it himself—or at least to help—and for that reason he was feared by those who thought that defining history was their exclusive domain. The thought often made him smile to himself. He'd helped a little the other day, Wise thought, with those two churchmen. He didn't know where it would lead. That was the work of others.

He still had more work of his own to do in China.

CHAPTER 29

Billy Budd

So, what else is going to go wrong over there?" Ryan asked.

"Things will quiet down if the other side has half a brain," Adler said hopefully.

"Do they?" Robby Jackson asked, just before Arnie van Damm could.

"Sir, that's not a question with an easy answer. Are they stupid? No, they are not. But do they see things in the same way that we do? No, they do not. That's the fundamental problem dealing with them—"

"Yeah, Klingons," Ryan observed tersely. "Aliens from outer space. Jesus, Scott, how do we predict what they're going to do?"

"We don't, really," SecState answered. "We have a bunch of good people, but the problem is in getting them all to agree on something when we need an important call. They *never* do," Adler concluded. He frowned before going on. "Look, these guys are kings from a different culture. It was already very different from ours long before Marxism arrived, and the thoughts of our old friend Karl only made things worse. They're kings because they have absolute power. There *are* some limitations on that power, but we don't fully understand what they are, and therefore it's hard for us to enforce or to exploit them. They are Klingons. So, what we need is a Mr. Spock. Got one handy, anyone?"

Around the coffee table, there were the usual halfhumorous snorts that accompany an observation that is neither especially funny nor readily escapable.

"Nothing new from SORGE today?" van Damm asked.

Ryan shook his head. "No, the source doesn't produce something every day."

"Pity," Adler said. "I've discussed the take from SORGE with some of my I and R people—always as my own theoretical musings . . ."

"And?" Jackson asked.

"And they think it's decent speculation, but not something to bet the ranch on."

There *was* amusement around the coffee table at that one.

"That's the problem with good intelligence information. It doesn't

agree with what your own people think—assuming they really think at all," the Vice President observed.

"Not fair, Robby," Ryan told his VP.

"I know, I know." Jackson held up surrendering hands. "I just can't forget the motto of the whole intelligence community: 'We bet *your* life.' It's lonely out there with a fighter plane strapped to your back, risking your life on the basis of a piece of paper with somebody's opinion typed on it, when you never know the guy it's from or the data it's based on." He paused to stir his coffee. "You know, out in the fleet we used to think—well, we used to *hope*—that decisions made in this room here were based on solid data. It's quite a disappointment to learn what things are really like."

"Robby, back when I was in high school, I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember wondering if the world was going to blow up. But I still had to translate half a page of Caesar's goddamned Gallic Wars, and I saw the President on TV, and I figured things were okay, because he was the President of the United Goddamned States, and he had to know what was really going on. So, I translated the battle with the Helvetii and slept that night. The President knows, because he's the President, right? Then I become President, and I don't know a damned thing more than I knew the month before, but everybody out there"—Ryan waved his arm at the window—"thinks I'm fucking omniscient. . . . *Ellen!*" he called loudly enough to get through the door.

The door opened seven seconds later. "Yes, Mr. President?"

"I think you know, Ellen," Jack told her.

"Yes, sir." She fished in her pocket and pulled out a fliptop box of Virginia Slims. Ryan took one out, along with the pink butane lighter stashed inside. He lit the smoke and took a long hit. "Thanks, Ellen."

Her smile was downright motherly. "Surely, Mr. President." And she headed back to the secretaries' room, closing the curved door behind her.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, Rob?" Ryan responded, turning.

"That's disgusting."

"Okay, I am not omniscient, and I'm not perfect," POTUS admitted crossly after the second puff. "Now, back to China."

"They can forget MFN," van Damm said. "Congress would impeach you if you asked for it, Jack. And you can figure that the Hill will offer Taiwan any weapons system they want to buy next go-round."

"I have no problems with that. And there's no way I was going to offer them MFN anyway, unless they decide to break down and start acting like civilized people."

"And that's the problem," Adler reminded them all. "They think

we're the uncivilized ones."

"I see trouble," Jackson said, before anyone else could. Ryan figured it was his background as a fighter pilot to be first in things. "They're just out of touch with the rest of the world. The only way to get them back in touch will involve some pain. Not to their people, especially, but sure as hell to the guys who make the decisions."

"And they're the ones who control the guns," van Damm noted.

"Roger that, Arnie," Jackson confirmed.

"So, how can we ease them the right way?" Ryan asked, to center the conversation once more.

"We stick to it. We tell them we want reciprocal trade access, or they will face reciprocal trade barriers. We tell them that this little flare-up with the Nuncio makes any concessions on our part impossible, and that's just how things are. If they want to trade with us, they have to back off," Adler spelled out. "They don't like being told such things, but it's the real world, and they have to acknowledge objective reality. They do understand that, for the most part," SecState concluded.

Ryan looked around the room and got nods. "Okay, make sure Rutledge understands what the message is," he told EAGLE.

"Yes, sir," SecState agreed, with a nod. People stood and started filing out. Vice President Jackson allowed himself to be the last in the line of departure.

"Hey, Rob," Ryan said to his old friend.

"Funny thing, watched some TV last night for a change, caught an old movie I hadn't seen since I was a kid."

"Which one?"

"*Billy Budd*, Melville's story about the poor dumb sailor who gets himself hanged. I'd forgot the name of Billy's ship."

"Yeah?" So had Ryan.

"It was *The Rights of Man*. Kind of a noble name for a ship. I imagine Melville made that up with malice aforethought, like writers do, but that's what we fight for, isn't it? Even the Royal Navy, they just didn't fight as well as we did back then. *The Rights of Man*," Jackson repeated. "It *is* a noble sentiment."

"How does it apply to the current problem, Rob?"

"Jack, the first rule of war is the mission: First, why the hell are you out there, and then what are you proposing to do about it. The Rights of Man makes a pretty good starting point, doesn't it? By the way, CNN's going to be at Pap's church tomorrow and at Gerry Patterson's. They're switching off, preaching in each other's pulpit for the memorial ceremonies, and CNN decided to cover it as a news event in and of itself. Good call, I think," Jackson editorialized. "Wasn't like that in Mississippi back when I was a boy."

"It's going to be like you said?"

"I'm only guessing," Robby admitted, "but I don't see either one of them playing it cool. It's too good an opportunity to teach a good lesson about how the Lord doesn't care a rat's ass what color we are, and how all men of faith should stand together. They'll both probably fold in the abortion thing—Pap ain't real keen on abortion rights, and neither's Patterson—but mainly it'll be about justice and equality and how two good men went to see God after doing the right thing."

"Your dad's pretty good with a sermon, eh?"

"If they gave out Pulitzers for preaching, he'd have a wall covered in the things, Jack, and Gerry Patterson ain't too bad for a white boy either."

Ah," Yefremov observed. He was in the building perch instead of one of the vehicles. It was more comfortable, and he was senior enough to deserve and appreciate the comforts. There was Suvorov/Koniev, sitting back on the bench, an afternoon newspaper in his hands. They didn't have to watch, but watch they did, just to be sure. Of course, there were thousands of park benches in Moscow, and the probability that their subject would sit in the same one this many times was genuinely astronomical. That's what they would argue to the judge when the time came for the trial . . . depending on what was in the subject's right hand. (His KGB file said that he was right-handed, and it seemed to be the case.) He was so skillful that you could hardly see what he did, but it was done, and it was seen. His right hand left the paper, reached inside his jacket, and pulled out something metallic. Then the hand paused briefly, and as he turned pages in the paper—the fluttering of the paper was a fine distraction to anyone who might be watching, since the human eye is always drawn to movement—the right hand slid down and affixed the metal transfer case to the magnetic holder, then returned for the paper, all in one smooth motion, done so quickly as to be invisible. Well, almost, Yefremov thought. He'd caught spies before—four of them, in fact, which explained his promotion to a supervisory position—and every one had a thrill attached to it, because he was chasing and catching the most elusive of game. And this one was Russian-trained, the most elusive of all. He'd never bagged one of them before, and there was the extra thrill of catching not just a spy but a traitor as well . . . and perhaps a traitor guilty of murder? he wondered. That was another first. Never in his experience had espionage involved the violation of that law. No, an intelligence operation was about the transfer of information, which was dangerous enough. The inclusion of murder was an additional hazard that was not calculated to please a trained spy. It made noise, as they said, and noise was something a spy

avoided as much as a cat burglar, and for much the same reason.

"Call Provalov," Yefremov told his subordinate. Two reasons for that. First, he rather owed it to the militia lieutenant, who'd presented him with both the case and the subject. Second, the civilian cop might know something useful to his part of this case. They continued to watch Suvorov/Koniev for another ten minutes. Finally, he stood and walked back to his car for the drive back to his apartment, during which he was duly followed by the ever-changing surveillance team. After the requisite fifteen minutes, one of Yefremov's people crossed the street and retrieved the case from the bench. It was the locked one again, which told them that the item inside was perhaps more important. You had to get past the anti-tamper device to keep the contents from being destroyed, but the FSS had people well skilled in that, and the key for this transfer case had already been struck. That was confirmed twenty minutes later, when the case was opened and the contents extracted, unfolded, photographed, refolded, reinserted, and, finally, relocked in the container, which was immediately driven back to the bench.

Back at FSS headquarters, the decryption team typed the message into a computer into which the one-time-pad had already been inputted. After that, it was a matter of mere seconds before the computer performed a function not unlike sliding a document over a printed template. The cleartext message was, agreeably, in Russian. The content of the message was something else.

"Yob tvoyu maht!" the technician breathed, in one of his language's more repulsive imprecations: *Fuck your mother*. Then he handed the page to one of the supervising inspectors, whose reaction was little different. Then he walked to the phone and dialed Yefremov's number.

"Pavel Georgeyevich, you need to see this."

Provalov was there when the chief of the decryption section walked in. The printout was in a manila folder, which the head cryppie handed over without a word.

"Well, Pasha?" the homicide investigator asked.

"Well, we have answered our first question."

The motorcar was even purchased at the same dealership in central Moscow, the sheet read. There is no fault to be found here. The men who performed the mission are both dead in St. P. Before I can make another attempt, I need an indication from you on the time line, and also on the payment to my contractors.

"Golovko was the target, then," Provalov observed. *And the head of our country's intelligence service owes his life to a pimp.*

"So it would appear," Yefremov agreed. "Note that he doesn't ask payment for himself. I would imagine he's somewhat embarrassed at

having missed his target on the first attempt."

"But he's working for the Chinese?"

"So that would appear as well," the FSS man observed, with an inward chill. *Why,* he asked himself, *would the Chinese wish to do such a thing? Isn't that nearly an act of war?* He sat back in his chair and lit up a smoke, looking into the eyes of his police colleague. Neither man knew what to say at the moment, and both kept silent. It would all soon be out of and far beyond their hands. With that decided, both men headed home for dinner.

The morning broke more brightly than usual in Beijing. Mrs. Yu had slept deeply and well, and though she awoke with a slight headache, she was grateful for Wen's insistence on a couple of drinks before retiring. Then she remembered why she was in Beijing, and any good feelings departed from her mind. Breakfast was mainly green tea and was spent looking down, remembering the sound of her husband's voice in the bleak acceptance of the fact that she'd never hear it again. He'd always been in a good mood over breakfast, never forgetting, as she had just done, to say grace over the morning meal and thank God for another day in which to serve Him. No more. *No more would he do that*, she reminded herself. But she had duties of her own to perform.

"What can we do, Zhong?" she asked, when her host appeared.

"I will go with you to the police post and we will ask for Fa An's body, and then I will help you fly our friend home, and we will have a memorial prayer service at the—"

"No, you can't, Zhong. There are police there to keep everyone out. They wouldn't even let me in, even though I had my papers in order."

"Then we will have it outside, and they will watch us pray for our friend," the restaurateur told his guest with gentle resolve.

Ten minutes later, she'd cleaned up and was ready to leave. The police station was only four blocks away, a simple building, ordinary in all respects except for the sign over the door.

"Yes?" the desk officer said when his peripheral vision noted the presence of people by his desk. He looked up from the paper forms that had occupied his attention for the past few minutes to see a woman and a man of about the same age.

"I am Yu Chun," Mrs. Yu answered, seeing some recognition in the desk officer's eyes result from her words.

"You are the wife of Yu Fa An?" he asked.

"That is correct."

"Your husband was an enemy of the people," the cop said next, sure of that but not sure of much else in this awkward case.

"I believe he was not, but all I ask is for his body, so that I might fly it home for burial with his family."

"I do not know where his body is," the cop said.

"But he was shot by a policeman," Wen put in, "and the disposal of his body is therefore a police matter. So, might you be so kind, comrade, as to call the proper number so that we can remove our friend's body?" His manners did not allow anger on the part of the desk officer.

But the desk cop really didn't know what number to call, and so he called someone inside the building, in the large administration division. He found this embarrassing to do with two citizens standing by his desk, but there was no avoiding that.

"Yes?" a voice answered on his third internal call.

"This is Sergeant Jiang at the desk in the public lobby. I have Yu Chun here, seeking the body of her husband, Yu Fa An. I need to tell her where to go."

The reply took a few seconds for the man on the other end of the phone, who had to remember. . . . "Ah, yes, tell her she can go to the Da Yunhe River. His body was cremated and the ashes dumped in the water last evening."

And, enemy of the people or not, it would not be a pleasant thing to tell his widow, who'd probably had feelings for him. Sergeant Jiang set the phone down and decided to give her the news.

"The body of Yu Fa An was cremated and the ashes scattered in the river, comrade."

"That is cruel!" Wen said at once. Chun was too stunned to say anything at the moment.

"I cannot help you more than that," Jiang told his visitors and looked back down at his paperwork to dismiss them.

"Where is my husband?" Yu Chun managed to blurt, after thirty seconds or so of silence.

"Your husband's body was cremated and the ashes scattered," Jiang said, without looking up, because he really didn't wish to see her eyes under these circumstances. "I cannot help you further. You may leave now."

"I want my husband back!" she insisted.

"Your husband is dead and his body has been cremated. Be gone now!" Sergeant Jiang insisted in return, wishing she'd just go away and allow him to get back to his paperwork.

"I want my husband," she said louder now, causing a few eyes to turn her way in the lobby.

"He is gone, Chun," Wen Zhong told her, taking her arm and steering her to the door. "Come, we will pray for him outside."

"But why did they—I mean, why is he—and why did they—" It had just been too much for one twenty-four-hour period. Despite the night's sleep, Yu Chun was still too disoriented. Her husband of over

twenty years had vanished, and now she could not even see the urn containing his ashes? It was a lot to absorb for a woman who'd never so much as bumped into a policeman on the street, who'd never done a single thing to offend the state—except, perhaps, to marry a Christian—but what did *that* hurt, anyway? Had either of them, had any of their congregation ever plotted treason against the state? No. Had any of them so much as violated the criminal or civil law? No. And so why had this misfortune fallen upon her? She felt as though she'd been struck by an invisible truck while crossing the street, then had it decided that her injuries were all her fault. Behind one invisible truck was just another, and all the more merciless at that.

There was nothing left for her to do, no recourse, legal or otherwise. They couldn't even go into her home, whose living room had so often served as their church, there to pray for Yu's soul and entreat God for mercy and help. Instead they'd pray . . . where? she wondered. One thing at a time. She and Wen walked outside, escaping the eyes of the lobby, which had zoomed in on them with almost physical impact. The eyes and the weight they'd carried were soon left behind, but the sun outside was just one more thing that intruded on what ought to have been, and what needed to be, a day of peace and lonely prayer to a God whose mercy was not very evident at the moment. Instead, the brightness of the sun defeated her eyelids, bringing unwanted brilliance into the darkness that might have simulated, if not exactly granted, peace. She had a flight booked back to Hong Kong, and from there back to Taipei, where she could at least weep in the presence of her mother, who was awaiting her death as well, for the woman was over ninety and frail.

For Barry Wise, the day had long since begun. His colleagues in Atlanta had praised him to the heavens in an e-mail about his earlier story. Maybe another Emmy, they said. Wise liked getting the awards, but they weren't the reason for his work. It was just what he did. He wouldn't even say he enjoyed it, because the news he reported was rarely pretty or pleasant. It was just his job, the work he'd chosen to do. If there was an aspect of it that he actually liked, it was the newness of it. Just as people awoke wondering what they'd see on CNN every day, from baseball scores to executions, so he awoke every day wondering what he'd report. He often had some idea of where the story would be and roughly what it would contain, but you were never really sure, and in the newness was the adventure of his job. He'd learned to trust his instincts, though he never really understood where they came from or how they seemed to know what they did, and today his instincts reminded him that one of the people he'd seen shot the other day had said he was married, and that his wife was on

Taiwan. Maybe she'd be back now? It was worth trying out. He'd tried to get Atlanta to check with the Vatican, but that story would be handled by the Rome bureau. The aircraft containing Cardinal DiMilo's body was on its way back to Italy, where somebody would be making a big deal about it for CNN to cover live and on tape to show to the entire world ten times at least.

The hotel room had a coffeemaker, and he brewed his own from beans stolen from the CNN Beijing bureau office. Sipping coffee, for him as for so many others, helped him think.

Okay, he thought, the Italian guy, the Cardinal, his body was gone, boxed and shipped out on an Alitalia 747, probably somewhere over Afghanistan right now. But what about the Chinese guy, the Baptist minister who took the round in the head? He had to have left a body behind, too, and he had a congregation and—he said he was married, didn't he? Okay, if so, he had a wife somewhere, and she'd want the body back to bury. So, at the least he could try to interview her . . . it would be a good follow-up, and would allow Atlanta to play the tape of the killings again. He was sure the Beijing government had written him onto their official shitlist, but fuck 'em, Wise thought with a sip of the Starbucks, it was hardly a disgrace to be there, was it? These people were racist as hell. Even folks on the street cringed to see him pass, with his dark skin. Even Birmingham under Bull Connor hadn't treated black Americans like aliens from another goddamned planet. Here, everyone looked the same, dressed the same, talked the same. Hell, they *needed* some black people just to liven up the mix some. Toss in a few blond Swedes and maybe a few Italians to set up a decent restaurant. . . .

But it wasn't his job to civilize the world, just to tell people what was going on in it. The trade talks were not where it was happening, not today, Wise thought. Today he and his satellite truck would head back to the home of Reverend Yu Fa An. Wise was playing a hunch. No more than that. But they'd rarely failed him before.

Ryan was enjoying another night off. The following night would be different. He had to give another goddamned speech on foreign policy. Why he couldn't simply announce policy in the press room and be done with it, nobody had yet told him—and he hadn't asked, for fear of looking the fool (again) before Arnie. This was just how it was done. The speech and the subject had nothing to do with the identity of the group he was addressing. Surely there had to be an easier way to tell the world what he thought. This way, too, Cathy had to come with him, and she hated these things even more than he did, because it took her away from her patient notes, which she guarded about as forcefully as a lion over the wildebeests he'd just killed for lunch.

Cathy often complained that this First Lady stuff was hurting her performance as a surgeon. Jack didn't believe that. It was more likely that like most women, Cathy needed something to bitch about, and this subject was worthier than her more pedestrian complaints, like being unable to cook dinner once in a while, which she missed a lot more than the women's lib people would have cared to learn. Cathy had spent over twenty years learning to be a gourmet cook, and when time allowed (rarely) she'd sneak down to the capacious White House kitchen to trade ideas and recipes with the head chef. For the moment, however, she was curled up in a comfortable chair making notes on her patient files and sipping at her wineglass, while Jack watched TV, for a change *not* under the eyes of the Secret Service detail and the domestic staff.

But the President wasn't really watching TV. His eyes were pointed in that direction, but his mind was looking at something else. It was a look his wife had learned to understand in the past year, almost like open-eyed sleep while his brain churned over a problem. In fact, it was something she did herself often enough, thinking about the best way to treat a patient's problem while eating lunch at the Hopkins doctors' cafeteria, her brain creating a picture as though in a Disney cartoon, simulating the problem and then trying out theoretical fixes. It didn't happen all that much anymore. The laser applications she'd helped to develop were approaching the point that an auto mechanic could perform them—which was not something she or her colleagues advertised, of course. There had to be a mystique with medicine, or else you lost your power to tell your patients what to do in a way that ensured that they might actually do it.

For some reason, that didn't translate to the Presidency, Cathy thought. With Congress, well, most of the time they went along with him—as well they ought, since Jack's requests were usually as reasonable as they could be—but not always, and often for the dumbest reasons. "It may be good for the country, but it's not so good for my district, and . . ." And they all forgot the fact that when they had arrived in Washington, they'd sworn an oath to the country, not to their stupid little districts. When she'd said that to Arnie, he'd had a good laugh and lectured her on how the real world worked—*as though a* physician *didn't know that!* she fumed. And so Jack had to balance what was real with what wasn't but ought to be—as opposed to what wasn't and never would be. Like foreign affairs. It made a lot more sense for a married man to have an affair with some floozy than it did to try to reason with some foreign countries. At least you could tell the floozy that it was all over after three or four times, but these damned foreign chiefs of state would stay around forever with their stupidity.

That was one nice thing about medicine, Professor Ryan thought. Doctors all over the world treated patients pretty much the same way because the human body was the same everywhere, and a treatment regimen that worked at Johns Hopkins in east Baltimore worked just as well in Berlin or Moscow or Tokyo, even if the people looked and talked different—and if that was true, why couldn't people all over the world think the same way? Their damned brains were the same, weren't they? Now it was her turn to grumble, as her husband did often enough.

"Jack?" she said, as she put her notebook down.

"Yeah, Cathy?"

"What are you thinking about now?"

Mainly how I wish Ellen Sumter was here with a cigarette, he couldn't say. If Cathy knew he was sneaking smokes in the Oval Office, she didn't let on, which was probably the case, since she didn't go around looking for things to fight over, and he never ever smoked in front of her or the kids anymore. Cathy allowed him to indulge his weaknesses, as long as he did so in the utmost moderation. But her question was about the cause for his yearning for some nicotine.

"China, babe. They really stepped on the old crank with the golf shoes this time, but they don't seem to know how bad it looked."

"Killing those two people—how could it *not* look bad?" SURGEON asked.

"Not everybody values human life in the same way that we do, Cath."

"The Chinese doctors I've met are—well, they're doctors, and we talk to each other like doctors."

"I suppose." Ryan saw a commercial start on the TV show he was pretending to watch, and stood to walk off to the upstairs kitchen for another whiskey. "Refill, babe?"

"Yes, thank you." With her Christmas-tree smile.

Jack lifted his wife's wineglass. So, she had no procedures scheduled for the next day. She'd come to love the Chateau Ste. Michelle Chardonnay they'd first sampled at Camp David. For him tonight, it was Wild Turkey bourbon over ice. He loved the pungent smell of the corn and rye grains, and tonight he'd dismissed the upstairs staff and could enjoy the relative luxury of fixing his own—he could even have made a peanut butter sandwich, had he been of such a mind. He walked the drinks back, touching his wife's neck on the way, and getting the cute little shiver she always made when he did so.

"So, what's going to happen in China?"

"We'll find out the same way as everybody else, watching CNN. They're a lot faster than our intelligence people on some things. And

our spooks can't predict the future any better than the traders on Wall Street." *You'd be able to identify such a man at Merrill Lynch easily if he existed*, Jack didn't bother saying aloud. *He'd be the guy with all the millionaires lined up outside his office.*

"So, what do you think?"

"I'm worried, Cath," Ryan admitted, sitting back down.

"About what?"

"About what we'll have to do if they screw things up again. But we can't warn them. That only makes it certain that bad things are going to happen, because then they'll do something really dumb just to show us how powerful they are. That's how nation-states are. You can't talk to them like real people. The people who make the decisions over there think with their . . ."

". . . dicks?" Cathy offered with a half giggle.

"Yep," Jack confirmed with a nod. "A lot of them follow their dicks everywhere they go, too. We know about some foreign leaders who have habits that would get them tossed out of any decent whorehouse in the world. They just love to show everybody how tough and manly they are, and to do that, they act like animals in a goddamned barnyard."

"Secretaries?"

"A lot of that." Ryan nodded. "Hell, Chairman Mao liked doing twelve-year-old virgins, like changing shirts. I guess old as he was, it was the best he could do—"

"No Viagra back then, Jack," Cathy pointed out.

"Well, you suppose that drug will help civilize the world?" he asked, turning to grin at his physician wife. It didn't seem a likely prospect.

"Well, maybe it'll protect a lot of twelve-year-olds."

Jack checked his watch. Another half hour and he'd be turning in. Until then, maybe he could actually watch the TV for a little while.

Rutledge was just waking up. Under his door was an envelope, which he picked up and opened, to find an official communique from Foggy Bottom, his instructions for the day, which weren't terribly different from those of the previous day. Nothing in the way of concessions to offer, which were the grease of dealing with the PRC. You had to give them something if you wanted to get anything, and the Chinese never seemed to realize that such a procedure could and occasionally *should* work the other way as well. Rutledge headed to his private bathroom and wondered if it had been like this chatting with German diplomats in May 1939. Could anyone have prevented *that* war from breaking out? he wondered. Probably not, in retrospect. Some chiefs of state were just too damned stupid to grasp what their

diplomats told them, or maybe the idea of war just appealed to one sort of mind. Well, even diplomacy had its limitations, didn't it?

Breakfast was served half an hour later, by which time Rutledge was showered and shaved pink. His staff were all there in the dining room, looking over the papers for the most part, learning what was going on back home. They already knew, or thought they knew, what was going to happen here. A whole lot of nothing. Rutledge agreed with that assessment. He was wrong, too.

CHAPTER 30

And the Rights of Men

Got the address?" Wise asked his driver. He was also the team's cameraman, and drew the driving duty because of his steady hands and genius for anticipating traffic clogs.

"Got it, Barry," the man assured him. Better yet, it had been inputted into the satellite-navigation system, and the computer would tell them how to get there. *Hertz was going to conquer the world someday,* Wise reflected with a chuckle. Just so they didn't bring back the O.J. commercials.

"Going to rain, looks like," Barry Wise thought aloud.

"Could be," his producer agreed.

"What do you suppose happened to the gal who had the baby?" the cameraman asked from the driver's seat.

"Probably home with her kid now. I bet they don't keep mothers in the hospital very long here," Wise speculated. "Trouble is, we don't know her address. No way to do a follow-up on her and the kid." And that was too bad, Wise could have added. They had the surname, Yang, on their original tape, but the given names of the husband and wife were both garbled.

"Yeah, I bet there's a lot of Yangs in the phone book here."

"Probably," Wise agreed. He didn't even know if there was such a thing as a Beijing phone book—or if the Yang family had a phone—and none of his crew could read the ideographic characters that constituted the Chinese written language. All of those factors combined to make a stone wall.

"Two blocks," the cameraman reported from the front seat. "Just have to turn left . . . here . . ."

The first thing they saw was a crowd of khaki uniforms, the local police, standing there like soldiers on guard duty, which was essentially what they were, of course. They parked the van and hopped out, and were immediately scrutinized as though they were alighting from an alien spacecraft. Pete Nichols had his camera out and up on his shoulder, and that didn't make the local cops any happier, because they'd all been briefed on this CNN crew at the Longfu hospital and what they'd done to damage the People's

Republic. So the looks they gave the TV crew were poisonous—Wise and his crew could not have asked for anything better for their purposes.

Wise just walked up to the cop with the most rank-stuff on his uniform.

"Good day," Barry said pleasantly.

The sergeant in command of the group just nodded. His face was entirely neutral, as though he were playing cards for modest stakes.

"Could you help us?" Wise asked.

"Help you do what?" the cop asked in his broken English, suddenly angry at himself for admitting he could speak the language. Better if he'd played dumb, he realized a few seconds too late.

"We are looking for Mrs. Yu, the wife of the Reverend Yu, who used to live here."

"No here," the police sergeant replied with a wave of the hands. "No here."

"Then we will wait," Wise told him.

Minister," Cliff Rutledge said in greeting.

Shen was late, which was a surprise to the American delegation. It could have meant that he was delivering a message to his guests, telling them that they were not terribly important in the great scheme of things; or he might have been delayed by new instructions from the Politburo; or maybe his car hadn't wanted to start this morning. Personally, Rutledge leaned toward option number two. The Politburo would want to have input into these talks. Shen Tang had probably been a moderating influence, explaining to his colleagues that the American position, however unjust, would be difficult to shake in this series of talks, and so the smart long-term move would be to accommodate the American position for now, and make up for the losses in the next go-around the following year—the American sense of fair play, he would have told them, had cost them more negotiations than any other single factor in history, after all.

That's what Rutledge would have done in his place, and he knew Shen was no fool. In fact, he was a competent diplomatic technician, and pretty good at reading the situation quickly. He had to know—no, Rutledge corrected himself, he *should know* or *ought to know*—that the American position was being driven by public opinion at home, and that that public opinion was against the interests of the PRC, because the PRC had fucked up in public. So, if he'd been able to sell his position to the rest of the Politburo, he'd start off with a small concession, one which would show the course the day would take, allowing Rutledge to beat him back a few steps by the close of the afternoon session. Rutledge hoped for that, because it would get him

what his country wanted with little further fuss, and would, by the way, make him look pretty good at Foggy Bottom. So he took a final sip of the welcoming tea and settled back in his chair, motioning for Shen to begin the morning's talks.

"We find it difficult to understand America's position in this and other matters—"

Uh-oh . . .

"America has chosen to affront our sovereignty in many ways. First, the Taiwan issue . . ."

Rutledge listened to the earphone which gave him the simultaneous translation. So, Shen hadn't been able to persuade the Politburo to take a reasonable tack. That meant another unproductive day at these talks, and maybe—possible but not likely as yet—failed talks entirely. If America was unable to get concessions from China, and was therefore forced to impose sanctions, it would be ruinous to both sides, and not calculated to make the world a safer or better place. The tirade lasted twenty-seven minutes by his watch.

"Minister," Rutledge began when it was his turn, "I find it difficult as well to understand your intransigence—" He went on along his own well-grooved path, varying only slightly when he said, "We put you *on notice* that unless the PRC allows its markets to be opened to American trade goods, the government of the United States will enact the provisions of the Trade Reform Act—"

Rutledge saw Shen's face coloring up some. Why? He had to know the rules of the new game. Rutledge had said this half a hundred times in the previous few days. Okay, fine, he'd never said "put on notice," which was diplo-speak for *no shit, Charlie, we're not fuckin' kidding anymore,* but the import of his earlier statements had been straightforward enough, and Shen was no fool . . . was he? Or had Cliff Rutledge misread this whole session?

Hello," a female voice said.

Wise's head turned sharply. "Hi. Have we met?"

"You met my husband briefly. I am Yu Chun," the woman said, as Barry Wise came to his feet. Her English was pretty good, probably from watching a lot of TV, which was teaching English (the American version, anyway) to the entire world.

"Oh." Wise blinked a few times. "Mrs. Yu, please accept our condolences for the loss of your husband. He was a very courageous man."

Her head nodded at the good wishes, but they made her choke up a little, remembering what sort of man Fa An had been. "Thank you," she managed to say, struggling not to show the emotions that welled up within her, held back, however, as though by a sturdy dam.

"Is there going to be a memorial service for your husband? If so, ma'am, we would ask your permission to make a record of it." Wise had never grown to like the oh-yourloved-one-is-dead, what's-it-feel-like? school of journalism. He'd seen far more death as a reporter than as a Marine, and it was all the same all over the world. The guy on the pale horse came to visit, always taking away something precious to somebody, most of the time more than one somebody, and the vacuum of feelings it left behind could only be filled by tears, and that language was universal. The good news was that people all over the world understood. The bad news was that getting it out did further harm to the living victims, and Wise had trouble stomaching his occasional obligation to do that, however relevant it was to the all-important story.

"I do not know. We used to worship there in our house, but the police will not let me inside," she told him.

"Can I help?" Wise offered, truly meaning it. "Sometimes the police will listen to people like us." He gestured to them, all of twenty meters away. Quietly, to Pete Nichols: "Saddle up."

How it looked to the cops was hard for the Americans to imagine, but the widow Yu walked toward them with this American black man in attendance and the white one with the camera close behind.

She started talking to the senior cop, with Wise's microphone between the two of them, speaking calmly and politely, asking permission to enter her home.

The police sergeant shook his head in the universal *No, you cannot* gesture that needed no translation.

"Wait a minute. Mrs. Yu, could you please translate for me?" She nodded. "Sergeant, you know who I am and you know what I do, correct?" This generated a curt and none too friendly nod. "What is the reason for not allowing this lady to enter her own home?"

" 'I have my orders,' " Chun translated the reply.

"I see," Wise responded. "Do you know that this will look bad for your country? People around the world will see this and feel it is improper." Yu Chun duly translated this for the sergeant.

" 'I have my orders,' " he said again, through her, and it was plain that further discussion with a statue would have been equally productive.

"Perhaps if you called your superior," Wise suggested, and to his surprise the Chinese cop leaped on it, lifting his portable radio and calling his station.

" 'My lieutenant come,' " Yu Chun translated. The sergeant was clearly relieved, now able to dump the situation on someone else, who answered directly to the captain at the station.

"Good, let's go back to the truck and wait for him," Wise suggested.

Once there, Mrs. Yu lit up an unfiltered Chinese cigarette and tried to retain her composure. Nichols let the camera down, and everyone relaxed for a few minutes.

"How long were you married, ma'am?" Wise asked, with the camera shut off.

"Twenty-four years," she answered.

"Children?"

"One son. He is away at school in America, University of Oklahoma. He study engineering," Chun told the American crew.

"Pete," Wise said quietly, "get the dish up and operating."

"Right." The cameraman ducked his head to go inside the van. There he switched on the uplink systems. Atop the van, the mini-dish turned fifty degrees in the horizontal and sixty degrees in the vertical, and saw the communications satellite they usually used in Beijing. When he had the signal on his indicator, he selected Channel Six again and used it to inform Atlanta that he was initiating a live feed from Beijing. With that, a home-office producer started monitoring the feed, and saw nothing. He might have succumbed to immediate boredom, but he knew Barry Wise was usually good for something, and didn't go live unless there was a good reason for it. So, he leaned back in his comfortable swivel chair and sipped at his coffee, then notified the duty director in Master Control that there was a live signal inbound from Beijing, type and scope of story unknown. But the director, too, knew that Wise and his crew had sent in a possible Emmy-class story just two days earlier, and to the best of anyone's knowledge, none of the majors was doing anything at all in Beijing at the moment—CNN tracked the communications-satellite traffic as assiduously as the National Security Agency, to see what the competition was doing.

More people started showing up at the Wen house/church. Some were startled to see the CNN truck, but when they saw Yu Chun there, they relaxed somewhat, trusting her to know what was happening. Showing up in ones and twos for the most part, there were soon thirty or so people, most of them holding what had to be Bibles, Wise thought, getting Nichols up and operating again, but this time with a live signal going up and down to Atlanta.

"This is Barry Wise in Beijing. We are outside the home of the Reverend Yu Fa An, the Baptist minister who died just two days ago along with Renato Cardinal DiMilo, the Papal Nuncio, or Vatican Ambassador to the People's Republic. With me now is his widow, Yu Chun. She and the reverend were married for twenty-four years, and they have a son now studying at the University of Oklahoma at Norman. As you can imagine, this is not a pleasant time for Mrs. Yu, but it is all the more unpleasant since the local police will not allow her to enter her own home. The house also served as the church for

their small congregation, and as you can see, the congregation has come together to pray for their departed spiritual leader, the Reverend Yu Fa An.

"But it does not appear that the local government is going to allow them to do so in their accustomed place of worship. I've spoken personally with the senior police official here. He has orders, he says, not to admit anyone into the house, not even Mrs. Yu, and it appears that he intends to follow those orders." Wise walked to where the widow was.

"Mrs. Yu, will you be taking your husband's body back to Taiwan for burial?" It wasn't often that Wise allowed his face to show emotion, but the answer to this question grabbed him in a tender place.

"There will be no body. My husband—they take his body and burn it, and scatter the ashes in river," Chun told the reporter, and saying it cracked both her composure and her voice.

"What?" Wise blurted. He hadn't expected that any more than she had, and it showed on his face. "They cremated his body without your permission?"

"Yes," Chun gasped.

"And they're not even giving you the ashes to take home with you?"

"No, they scatter ashes in river, they tell me."

"Well" was all Wise could manage. He wanted to say something stronger, but as a reporter he was supposed to maintain some degree of objectivity, and so he couldn't say what he might have preferred to say. *Those barbarian cocksuckers.* Even the differences in culture didn't explain this one away.

It was then that the police lieutenant arrived on his bicycle. He walked at once to the sergeant, spoke to him briefly, then walked to where Yu Chun was.

"What is this?" he asked in Mandarin. He recoiled when the TV camera and microphone entered the conversation. *What is THIS?* his face demanded of the Americans.

"I wish to enter my house, but he won't let me," Yu Chun answered, pointing at the sergeant. "Why can't I go in my house?"

"Excuse me," Wise put in. "I am Barry Wise. I work for CNN. Do you speak English, sir?" he asked the cop.

"Yes, I do."

"And you are?"

"I am Lieutenant Rong."

He could hardly have picked a better name for the moment , Wise thought, not knowing that the literal meaning of this particular surname actually was *weapon*.

"Lieutenant Rong, I am Barry Wise of CNN. Do you know the reason

for your orders?"

"This house is a place of political activity which is ordered closed by the city government."

"Political activity? But it's a private residence—a house, is it not?"

"It is a place of political activity," Rong persisted. "Unauthorized political activity," he added.

"I see. Thank you, Lieutenant." Wise backed off and started talking directly to the camera while Mrs. Yu went to her fellow church members. The camera traced her to one particular member, a heavyset person whose face proclaimed resolve of some sort. This one turned to the other parishioners and said something loud. Immediately, they all opened their Bibles. The overweight one flipped his open as well and started reading a passage. He did so loudly, and the other members of the congregation looked intently into their testaments, allowing the first man to take the lead.

Wise counted thirty-four people, about evenly divided between men and women. All had their heads down into their own Bibles, or those next to them. That's when he turned to see Lieutenant Rong's face. It twisted into a sort of curiosity at first, then came comprehension and outrage. Clearly, the "political" activity for which the home had been declared off-limits was religious worship, and that the local government called it "political" activity was a further affront to Barry Wise's sense of right and wrong. He reflected briefly that the news media had largely forgotten what communism really had been, but now it lay right here in front of him. The face of oppression had never been a pretty one. It would soon get uglier.

Wen Zhong, the restaurateur, was leading the ad-hoc service, going through the Bible but doing so in Mandarin, a language which the CNN crew barely comprehended. The thirty or so others flipped the pages in their Bibles when he did, following his scriptural readings very carefully, in the way of Baptist, and Wise started wondering if this corpulent chap might be taking over the congregation right before his eyes. If so, the guy seemed sincere enough, and that above all was the quality a clergyman needed. Yu Chun headed over to him, and he reached out to put his arm around her shoulder in a gesture that didn't seem Chinese at all. That was when she lost it and started weeping, which hardly seemed shameful. Here was a woman married over twenty years who'd lost her husband in a particularly cruel way, then doubly insulted by a government which had gone so far as to destroy his body, thus denying her even the chance to look upon her beloved's face one last time, or the chance to have a small plot of ground to visit.

These people are *barbarians*, Wise thought, knowing he couldn't say such a thing in front of the camera, and angry for that reason, but his

profession had rules and he didn't break them. But he did have a camera, and the camera showed things that mere words could not convey.

Unknown to the news crew, Atlanta had put their feed on live, with voice-over commentary from CNN headquarters because they hadn't managed to get Barry Wise's attention on the side-band audio circuit. The signal went up to the satellite, then down to Atlanta, and back up to a total of four orbiting birds, then it came down all over the world, and one of the places it came to was Beijing.

The members of the Chinese Politburo all had televisions in their offices, and all of them had access to the American CNN, which was for them a prime source of political intelligence. It came down also to the various hotels in the city, crowded as they were with businessmen and other visitors, and even some Chinese citizens had access to it, especially businesspeople who conducted their affairs both within and without the People's Republic and needed to know what was happening in the outside world.

In his office, Fang Gan looked up from his desk to the TV that was always kept on while he was there. He lifted the controller to get the sound, and heard English, with some Chinese language in the background that he could not quite understand. His English wasn't very good, and he called Ming into his office to translate.

"Minister, this is coverage of something right here in Beijing," she told him first of all.

"I can see that, girl!" he snapped back at her. "What is being said?"

"Ah, yes. It is associates of the man Yu who was shot by the police two days ago . . . also his widow . . . this is evidently a funeral ceremony of some sort—oh, they say that Yu's body was cremated and scattered, and so his widow has nothing to bury, and that explains her added grief, they say."

"What lunatic did that?" Fang wondered aloud. He was not by nature a very compassionate man, but a wise man did not go out of his way to be cruel, either. "Go on, girl!"

"They are reading from the Christian Bible, I can't make out the words, the English speaker is blanking them out . . . the narrator is mainly repeating himself, saying . . . ah, yes, saying they are trying to establish contact with their reporter Wise here in Beijing but they are having technical difficulties . . . just repeating what he has already said, a memorial ceremony for the man Yu, friends . . . no, members of his worship group, and that is all, really. They are now repeating what happened before at the Longfu hospital, commenting also on the Italian churchman whose body will soon arrive back in Italy."

Fang grumbled and lifted his phone, calling for the Interior

Minister.

"Turn on your TV!" he told his Politburo colleague at once. "You need to get control of this situation, but do so intelligently! This could be ruinous for us, the worst since those foolish students at Tiananmen Square."

Ming saw her boss grimace before setting the phone down and mutter, "*Fool!*" after he did so, then shake his head with a mixture of anger and sorrow.

"That will be all, Ming," he told her, after another minute.

His secretary went back to her desk and computer, wondering what was happening with the aftermath of the man Yu's death. Certainly it had seemed sad at the time, a singularly pointless pair of deaths which had upset and offended her minister for their stupidity. He'd even advocated punishing the trigger-happy policemen, but that suggestion had come to nothing, for fear of losing face for their country. With that thought, she shrugged and went back to her daily work.

The word from the Interior Minister went out fast, but Barry Wise couldn't see that. It took another minute for him to hear the voices from Atlanta on his IFB earphone. Immediately thereafter, he went live on audio and started again to do his own on-the-scene commentary for a global audience. He kept turning his head while Pete Nichols centered the video on this rump religious meeting in a narrow, dirty street. Wise saw the police lieutenant talk into his portable radio—it looked like a Motorola, just like American cops used. He talked, listened, talked again, then got something confirmed. With that, he holstered the radio and came walking directly to the CNN reporter. There was determination on his face, a look Wise didn't welcome, all the more so that on the way over, this Lieutenant Rong spoke discreetly with his men, who turned in the same direction, staying still but with a similar look of determination on their faces as they flexed their muscles in preparation for something.

"You must turn camera off," Rong told Wise.

"Excuse me?"

"Camera, turn off," the police lieutenant repeated.

"Why?" Wise asked, his mind going immediately into race mode.

"Orders," Rong explained tersely.

"What orders?"

"Orders from police headquarter," Rong said further.

"Oh, okay," Wise replied. Then he held out his hand.

"Turn off camera now!" Lieutenant Rong insisted, wondering what the extended hand was all about.

"Where is the order?"

"What?"

"I cannot turn my camera off without a written order. It is a rule for my company. Do you have a written order?"

"No," Rong said, suddenly nonplussed.

"And the order must be signed by a captain. A major would be better, but it must be a captain at least to sign the order," Wise went on. "It is a rule of my company."

"Ah," Rong managed to say next. It was as if he'd walked headfirst into an invisible wall. He shook his head, as though to shake off the force of a physical impact, and walked five meters away, pulling out his radio again to report to someone elsewhere. The exchange took about a minute, then Rong came back. "Order come soon," the lieutenant informed the American.

"Thank you," Wise responded, with a polite smile and half bow. Lieutenant Rong went off again, looking somewhat confused until he grouped his men together. He had instructions to carry out now, and they were instructions he and they understood, which was usually a good feeling for citizens of the PRC, especially those in uniform.

"Trouble, Barry," Nichols said, turning the camera toward the cops. He'd caught the discussion of the written order, and managed to keep his face straight only by biting his tongue hard. Barry had a way of confounding people. He'd even done it to presidents more than once.

"I see it. Keep rolling," Wise replied off-mike. Then to Atlanta: "Something's going to happen here, and I don't like the looks of it. The police appear to have gotten an order from someone. As you just heard, they asked us to turn our camera off and we managed to refuse the request until we get a written order from a superior police official, in keeping with CNN policy," Wise went on, knowing that someone in Beijing was watching this. The thing about communists, he knew, was that they were maniacally organized, and found a request in writing to be completely reasonable, however crazy it might appear to an outsider. The only question now, he knew, was whether they'd follow their verbal radioed order before the draft for the CNN crew came. Which priority came first . . .?

The immediate priority, of course, was maintaining order in their own city. The cops took out their batons and started heading toward the Baptists.

"Where do I stand, Barry?" Pete Nichols asked.

"Not too close. Make sure you can sweep the whole playing field," Wise ordered.

"Gotcha," the cameraman responded.

They tracked Lieutenant Rong right up to Wen Zhong, where a verbal order was given, and just as quickly rejected. The order was given again. The shotgun mike on the camera just barely caught the reply for the third iteration:

"*Diao ren, chou ni ma di be!*" the overweight Chinese shouted into the face of the police official. Whatever the imprecation meant, it made a few eyes go wide among the worshippers. It also earned Wen a smashed cheekbone from Rong's personal baton. He fell to his knees, blood already streaming from the ripped skin, but then Wen struggled back to his feet, turned his back on the cop, and turned to yet another page in his Bible. Nichols changed position so that he could zoom in on the testament, and the blood dripping onto the pages.

Having the man turn his back to him only enraged Lieutenant Rong more. His next swing came down on the back of Wen's head. That one buckled his knees, but amazingly failed to drop him. This time, Rong grabbed his shoulder with his left hand and spun him about, and the third blow from the baton rammed directly into the man's solar plexus. That sort of blow will fell a professional boxer, and it did so to this restaurateur. A blink later, he was on his knees, one hand holding his Bible, the other grasping at his upper abdomen.

By this time, the other cops were moving in on the remainder of the crowd, swinging their own nightsticks at people who cringed but didn't run. Yu Chun was the first of them. Not a tall woman even by Chinese standards, she took the full force of a blow squarely in the face, which broke her nose and shot blood out as though from a garden sprinkler.

It didn't take long. There were thirty-four parishioners and twelve cops, and the Christians didn't resist effectively, not so much because of their religious beliefs as because of their societal conditioning not to resist the forces of order in their culture. And so, uniformly they stood, and uniformly they took the blows with no more defense than a cringe, and uniformly they collapsed to the street with bleeding faces. The policemen withdrew almost immediately, as though to display their work to the CNN camera, which duly took the shots and transmitted them around the world in a matter of seconds.

"You getting this?" Wise asked Atlanta.

"Blood and all, Barry," the director replied, from his swivel chair at CNN headquarters. "Tell Nichols I owe him a beer."

"Roger that."

"It seems that the local police had orders to break up this religious meeting, which they regard as something of a political nature, and politically threatening to their government. As you can see, none of these people are armed, and none resisted the attack by the police in any way. Now—" He paused on seeing another bicycle speed its way up the street to where they were. A uniformed cop jumped off and handed something to Lieutenant Rong. This the lieutenant carried to Barry Wise.

"Here order. Turn camera off!" he demanded.

“Please, allow me to look at the order,” Wise replied, so angry at what he’d just seen that he was willing to risk a cracked head of his own, just so Pete got it up to the satellite. He scanned the page and handed it back. “I cannot read this. Please excuse me,” he went on, deliberately baiting the man and wondering exactly where the limits were, “but I cannot read your language.”

It looked as though Rong’s eyes would pop out of his head. “It say here, turn camera off!”

“But I can’t read it, and neither can my company,” Wise responded, keeping his voice entirely reasonable.

Rong saw the camera and microphone were both pointed his way, and now he realized that he was being had, and had badly. But he also knew he had to play the game. “It say here, must turn camera off now.” Rong’s fingers traced the page from one symbol to another.

“Okay, I guess you’re telling me the truth.” Wise stood erect and turned to face the camera. “Well, as you have just seen, we’ve been ordered by the local police to cease transmission from this place. To summarize, the widow of the Reverend Yu Fa An and members of his congregation came here today to pray for their departed pastor. It turns out that Reverend Yu’s body was cremated and his ashes scattered. His widow, Yu Chun, was denied access to her home by the police because of alleged improper ‘political’ activity, by which I guess they mean religious worship, and as you just saw, the local police attacked and clubbed members of the congregation. And now we’re being chased away, too. Atlanta, this is Barry Wise, reporting live from Beijing.” Five seconds later, Nichols dropped the camera off his shoulder and turned to stow it in the truck. Wise looked back down at the police lieutenant and smiled politely, thinking, *You can shove this up your skinny little ass, Gomer!* But he’d done his job, getting the story out. The rest was in the hands of the world.

CHAPTER 31

The Protection of Rights

CNN transmits its news coverage twenty-four hours a day to satellite dishes all over the world, and so the report from the streets of Beijing was noted not only by the American intelligence services, but by accountants, housewives, and insomniacs. Of the last group, a goodly number had access to personal computers, and being insomniacs, many of them also knew the e-mail address for the White House. E-mail had almost overnight replaced telegrams as the method of choice for telling the U.S. government what you thought, and was a medium which they appeared to heed, or at least to read, count, and catalog. The latter was done in a basement office in the Old Executive Office Building, the OEOB, the Victorian monstrosity immediately to the west of The House. The people who ran this particular office reported directly to Arnold van Damm, and it was actually rather a thorough and well-organized measure of American public opinion, since they also had electronic access to every polling organization in the country—and, indeed, the entire world. It saved money for the White House not to conduct its own polling, which was useful, since this White House didn't really have a political office per se, somewhat to the despair of the Chief of Staff. Nevertheless, he ran that part of White House operations himself, and largely uncompensated. Arnie didn't mind. For him, politics was as natural as breathing, and he'd decided to serve this President faithfully long before, especially since serving him so often meant protecting him from himself and his frequently stunning political ineptitude.

The data which started arriving just after midnight, however, didn't require a political genius to understand it. Quite a few of the e-mails had actual names attached—not mere electronic "handles"—and a lot of them were **DEMANDING!!!** action. Arnie would remark later in the day that he hadn't known that so many Baptists were computer-literate, something he reproached himself for even thinking.

In the same building, the White House Office of Signals duly made a high-quality tape of the report and had it walked to the Oval Office. Elsewhere in the world, the CNN report from Beijing arrived at breakfast time, causing more than a few people to set their coffee (or

tea) cups down immediately before a groan of anger. *That* occasioned brief dispatches from American embassies around the world, informing the Department of State that various foreign governments had reacted adversely to the story on CNN, and that various PRC embassies had found demonstrators outside their gates, some of them quite vociferous. This information rapidly found its way to the Diplomatic Protection Service, the State Department agency tasked with the job of securing foreign diplomats and their embassies. Calls went out from there to the D.C. police to increase the uniformed presence near the PRC's various missions to America, and to arrange a rapid backup should any similar problems develop right here in Washington.

By the time Ben Goodley awoke and drove over to Langley for his morning briefing, the American intelligence community had pretty well diagnosed the problem. As Ryan had so colorfully said it himself, the PRC had stepped very hard on the old crank with the golf shoes, and even they would soon feel the pain. This would prove to be a gross understatement.

The good news for Goodley, if you could call it that, was that Ryan invariably had his breakfast-room TV tuned to CNN, and was fully aware of the new crisis before putting on his starched white button-down shirt and striped tie. Even kissing his wife and kids on their way out of The House that morning couldn't do much to assuage his anger at the incomprehensible stupidity of those people on the other side of the world.

"God damn it, Ben!" POTUS snarled when Goodley came into the Oval Office.

"Hey, Boss, *I* didn't do it!" the National Security Adviser protested, surprised at the President's vehemence.

"What do we know?"

"Essentially, you've seen it all. The widow of the poor bastard who got his brains blown out the other day came to Beijing hoping to bring his body back to Taiwan for burial. She found out that the body had been cremated, and the ashes disposed of. The local cops would not let her back into her house, and when some members of the parish came by to hold a prayer service, the local cops decided to break it up." He didn't have to say that the attack on the widow had been caught with particular excellence by the CNN cameraman, to the point that Cathy Ryan had commented upstairs that the woman definitely had a broken nose, and possibly worse, and would probably need a good maxillary surgeon to put her face back together. Then she'd asked her husband why the cops would hate anyone so much.

"She believes in God, I suppose," Ryan had replied in the breakfast

room.

"Jack, this is like something out of Nazi Germany, something from that History Channel stuff you like to watch." And doctor or not, she'd cringed at the tape of the attacks on Chinese citizens armed only with Bibles.

"I've seen it, too," van Damm said, arriving in the Oval Office. "And we're getting a flood of responses from the public."

"Fuckin' barbarians," Ryan swore, as Robby Jackson came in to complete the morning's intelligence-briefing audience.

"You can hang a big roger on that one, Jack. Damn, I know Pap's going to see this, too, and today's the day for him to do the memorial service at Gerry Patterson's church. It's going to be epic, Jack. Epic," the Vice President promised.

"And CNN's going to be there?"

"Bet your bippy, My Lord President," Robby confirmed.

Ryan turned to his Chief of Staff. "Okay, Arnie, I'm listening."

"No, *I'm* the one listening, Jack," van Damm replied. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I have to talk to the public about this. Press conference, maybe. As far as action goes, I'll start by saying that we have a huge violation of human rights, all the more so that they had the fucking arrogance to do it in front of world opinion. I'll say that America has trouble doing business with people who act in this way, that commercial ties do not justify or cancel out gross violations of the principles on which our country is founded, that we have to reconsider all of our relations with the PRC."

"Not bad," the Chief of Staff observed, with a teacher's smile to a bright pupil. "Check with Scott for other options and ideas."

"Yeah." Jack nodded. "Okay, broader question, how will the country react to this?"

"The initial response will be outrage," Arnie replied. "It looks bad on TV, and that's how most people will respond, from the gut. If the Chinese have the good sense to make some kind of amends, then it'll settle down. If not"—Arnie frowned importantly—"I have a bad feeling. The church groups are going to raise hell. They've offended the Italian and German governments—so our NATO allies are also pissed off at this—and smashing that poor woman's face isn't going to win them any friends in the women's rights movement. This whole business is a colossal loser for them, but I'm not sure they understand the implications of their actions."

"Then they're going to learn, the easy way or the hard way," Goodley suggested to the group.

Dr. Alan Gregory always seemed to stay at the same Marriott

overlooking the Potomac, under the air approach to Reagan National Airport. He'd again taken the red-eye in from Los Angeles, a flight which hadn't exactly improved with practice over the years. Arriving, he took a cab to the hotel for a shower and a change of clothes, which would enable him to feel and look vaguely human for his 10:15 with the SecDef. For this at least, he would not need a taxi. Dr. Bretano was sending a car for him. The car duly arrived with an Army staff sergeant driving, and Gregory hopped in the back, to find a newspaper. It took only ten minutes to pull up to the River Entrance, where an Army major waited to escort him through the metal detector and onto the E-ring.

"You know the Secretary?" the officer asked on the way in.

"Oh, yeah, from a short distance, anyway."

He had to wait half a minute in an anteroom, but only half a minute.

"Al, grab a seat. Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you, Dr. Bretano."

"Tony," the SecDef corrected. He wasn't a formal man most of the time, and he knew the sort of work Gregory was capable of. A Navy steward got coffee for both men, along with croissants and jam, then withdrew. "How was the flight?"

"The red-eye never changes, sir—Tony. If you get off alive, they haven't done it right."

"Yeah, well, one nice thing about this job, I have a G waiting for me all the time. I don't have to walk or drive very much, and you saw the security detail outside."

"The guys with the knuckles dragging on the floor?" Gregory asked.

"Be nice. One of them went to Princeton before he became a SEAL."

That must be the one who reads the comic books to the others, Al didn't observe out loud. "So, Tony, what did you want me here for?"

"You used to work downstairs in SDIO, as I recall."

"Seven years down there, working in the dark with the rest of the mushrooms, and it never really worked out. I was in the free-electron-laser project. It went pretty well, except the damned lasers never scaled up the way we expected, even after we stole what the Russians were doing. They had the best laser guy in the world, by the way. Poor bastard got killed in a rock-climbing accident back in 1990, or that's what we heard in SDIO. He was bashing his head against the same wall our guys were. The 'wiggle chamber,' we called it, where you lase the hot gasses to extract the energy for your beam. We could never get a stable magnetic containment. They tried everything. I helped for nineteen months. There were some really smart guys working that problem, but we all struck out. I think the guys at Princeton will solve the fusion-containment problem before this one.

We looked at that, too, but the problems were too different to copy the theoretical solutions. We ended up giving them a lot of our ideas, and they've been putting it to good use. Anyway, the Army made me a lieutenant colonel, and three weeks later, they offered me an early out because they didn't have any more use for me, and so I took the job at TRW that Dr. Flynn offered, and I've been working for you ever since." And so Gregory was getting eighty percent of his twenty-year Army pension, plus half a million a year from TRW as a section leader, with stock options, and one hell of a retirement package.

"Well, Gerry Flynn sings your praises about once a week."

"He's a good man to work for," Gregory replied, with a smile and a nod.

"He says you can do software better than anyone in Sunnyvale."

"For some things. I didn't do the code for 'Doom,' unfortunately, but I'm still your man for adaptive optics."

"How about SAMs?"

Gregory nodded. "I did some of that when I was new in the Army. Then later they had me in to play with Patriot Block-4, you know, intercepting Scuds. I helped out on the warhead software." It had been three days too late to be used in the Persian Gulf War, he didn't add, but his software was now standard on all Patriot missiles in the field.

"Excellent. I want you to look over something for me. It'll be a direct contract for the Office of the Secretary of Defense—me—and Gerry Flynn won't gripe about it."

"What's that, Tony?"

"Find out if the Navy's Aegis system can intercept a ballistic inbound."

"It can. It'll stop a Scud, but that's only Mach three or so. You mean a *real* ballistic inbound?"

The SecDef nodded. "Yeah, an ICBM."

"There's been talk about that for years . . ." Gregory sipped his coffee. "The radar system is up to it. May be a slight software issue there, but it would not be a hard one, because you'll be getting raid-warning from other assets, and the SPY radar can see a good five hundred miles, and you can do all sorts of things with it electronically, like blast out seven million watts of RF down half a degree of bearing. That'll fry electronic components out to, oh, seven or eight thousand meters. You'll end up having two-headed kids, and have to buy a new watch.

"Okay," he went on, a slightly spacey look in his eyes. "The way Aegis works, the big SPY radar gives you a rough location for your target-interception, so you can loft your SAMs into a box. That's why Aegis missiles get such great range. They go out on autopilot and only do actual maneuvering for the last few seconds. For that, you have the

SPG radars on the ships, and the seeker-head on the missile tracks in on the reflected RF energy off the target. It's a killer system against airplanes, because you don't know you're being illuminated until the last couple of seconds, and it's hard to eyeball the missile and evade in so short a time.

"Okay, but for an ICBM, the terminal velocity is way the hell up there, like twenty-five thousand feet per second, like Mach eleven. That means your targeting window is very small . . . in all dimensions, but especially depth. Also you're talking a fairly hard, robust target. The RV off an ICBM is fairly sturdy, not tissue paper like the boosters are. I'll have to see if the warhead off a SAM will really hurt one of those." The eyes cleared and he looked directly into Bretano's eyes. "Okay, when do I start?"

"Commander Matthews," THUNDER said into his intercom phone. "Dr. Gregory is ready to talk to the Aegis people. Keep me posted, Al" was Bretano's final order.

"You bet."

The Reverend Doctor Hosiah Jackson donned his best robe of black silk, a gift handmade by the ladies of his congregation, the three stripes on the upper arms designating his academic rank. He was in Gerry Patterson's study, and a nice one it was. Outside the white wooden door was his congregation, all of them well-dressed and fairly prosperous white folks, some of whom would be slightly uncomfortable with having a black minister talk to them—Jesus was white, after all (or Jewish, which was almost the same thing). This was a little different, though, because this day they were remembering the life of someone only Gerry Patterson had ever met, a Chinese Baptist named Yu Fa An, whom their minister had called Skip, and whose congregation they had supported and supported generously for years. And so to commemorate the life of a yellow minister, they would sit through the sermon of a black one while their own pastor preached the gospel in a black church. *It was a fine gesture on Gerry's part*, Hosiah Jackson thought, hoping it wouldn't get him into any trouble with this congregation. *There'd be a few out there, their bigoted thoughts invisible behind their self-righteous faces*, *but*, the Reverend Jackson admitted to himself, *they'd be tortured souls because of it*. Those times had passed. He remembered them better than white Mississippians did because he'd been the one walking in the streets—he'd been arrested seven times during his work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—and getting his parishioners registered to vote. That had been the real problem with the rednecks. Riding in a municipal bus was no big deal, but voting meant power, real civic power, the ability to elect the people who made the laws

which would be enforced on black and white citizens alike, and the rednecks hadn't liked that at all. But times had changed, and now they accepted the inevitable—*after* it had come to pass—and they'd learned to deal with it, and they'd also learned to vote Republican instead of Democrat, and the amusing part of *that* to Hosiah Jackson was that his own son Robert was more conservative than these well-dressed rednecks were, and *he'd* gone pretty far for the son of a colored preacherman in central Mississippi. But it was time. Patterson, like Jackson, had a large mirror on the back of the door so that he could check his appearance on the way out. Yes, he was ready. He looked solemn and authoritative, as the Voice of God was supposed to look.

The congregation was already singing. They had a fine organ here, a real hundred-horsepower one, not the electronic kind he had at his church, but the singing . . . they couldn't help it. They sang white, and there was no getting around it. The singing had all the proper devotion, but not the exuberant passion that he was accustomed to . . . but he'd love to have that organ, Hosiah decided. The pulpit was finely appointed, with a bottle of ice water, and a microphone provided by the CNN crew, who were discreetly in both back corners of the church and not making any trouble, *which was unusual for news crews*, Reverend Jackson thought. His last thought before beginning was that the only other black man to stand in this pulpit before this moment was the man who'd painted the woodwork.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I am Hosiah Jackson. You all probably know where my church is. I am here today at the invitation of my good friend and colleague, your pastor, Gerry Patterson.

"Gerry has the advantage over me today, because, unlike me, and I gather unlike any person in the church, he actually knew the man whom we are here to remember.

"To me, Yu Fa An was just a pen pal. Some years ago, Gerry and I had occasion to talk about the ministry. We met in the chapel at the local hospital. It'd been a bad day for both of us. We'd both lost good people that day, at about the same time, and to the same disease, cancer, and both of us needed to sit in the hospital chapel. I guess we both needed to ask God the same question. It's the question all of us have asked—why is there such cruelty in the world, why does a loving and merciful God permit it?

"Well, the answer to that question is found in Scripture, and in many places. Jesus Himself lamented the loss of innocent life, and one of his miracles was the raising of Lazarus from the dead, both to show that He was indeed the Son of God, and also to show His humanity, to show how much He cared about the loss of a good man.

"But Lazarus, like our two parishioners that day in the hospital, had died from disease, and when God made the world, He made it in such

a way that there were, and there still are, things that need fixing. The Lord God told us to take dominion over the world, and part of that was God's desire for us to cure disease, to fix *all* the broken parts and so to bring perfection to the world, even as, by following God's Holy Word, we can bring perfection to ourselves.

"Gerry and I had a good talk that day, and that was the beginning of our friendship, as all ministers of the Gospel ought to be friends, because we preach the same Gospel from the same God.

"The next week we were talking again, and Gerry told me about his friend Skip. A man from the other side of the world, a man from a place where the religious traditions do not know Jesus. Well, Skip learned about all that at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, the same as many others, and he learned it so well that he thought long and hard and decided to join the ministry and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ . . ."

Skip's skin was a different color than mine," Gerry Patterson was saying in another pulpit less than two miles away. "But in God's eyes, we are all the same, because the Lord Jesus looks through our skin into our hearts and our souls, and He always knows what's in there."

"That's right," a man's voice agreed in the congregation.

"And so, Skip became a minister of the Gospel. Instead of returning to his native land, where freedom of religion is something their government protects, Skip decided to keep flying west, into communist China. Why there?" Patterson asked. "Why there indeed! The other China does not have freedom of religion. The other China refuses to admit that there is such a thing as God. The other China is like the Philistines of the Old Testament, the people who persecuted the Jews of Moses and Joshua, the enemies of God Himself. Why did Skip do this? Because he knew that no other place needed to hear the Word of God more than those people, and that Jesus wants us to preach to the heathen, to bring His Holy Word to those whose souls cry out for it, and this he did. No United States Marine storming the shores of Iwo Jima showed more courage than Skip did, carrying his Bible into Red China and starting to preach the Gospel in a land where religion is a crime."

And we must not forget that there was another man there, a Catholic cardinal, an old unmarried man from a rich and important family who long ago decided on his own to join the clergy of his church," Jackson reminded those before him. "His name was Renato, a name as foreign to us as Fa An, but despite that, he was a man of God who also took the Word of Jesus to the land of the heathen.

"When the government of that country found out about Reverend

Yu, they took Skip's job away. They hoped to *starve* him out, but the people who made that decision didn't know Skip. They didn't know Jesus, and they didn't know about the faithful, did they?"

"Hell, no!" replied a white male voice from the pews, and that's when Hosiah knew he had them.

"No, sir! That's when your Pastor Gerry found out and that's when you good people started sending help to Skip Yu, to support the man his godless government was trying to destroy, because they didn't know that people of faith share a *commitment* to justice!"

Patterson's arm shot out. "And Jesus pointed and said, see that woman there, she gives from her *need*, not from her riches. It takes more for a poor man or a poor woman to give than it does for a rich man to do it. *That* was when you good people began helping my congregation to support my friend Skip. And Jesus also said that which you do for the least of My brethren you do also unto Me. And so your church and my church helped this man, this lonely minister of the Gospel in the land of the pagans, those people who *deny* the Name and Word of God, those people who worship the corpse of a monster named Mao, who put his embalmed body on display as though it were the body of a saint! He was no saint. He was no man of God. He was hardly a man at all. He was a mass murderer worse than anything our country has ever seen. He was like the Hitler that our fathers fought to destroy sixty years ago. But to the people who run that country, that killer, that murderer, that destroyer of life and freedom is the new god. That 'god' is *false*," Patterson told them, with passion entering his voice. "That 'god' is the voice of Satan. That 'god' is the mouthpiece for the fires of Hell. That 'god' was the incarnation of evil—and that 'god' is dead, and now he's a stuffed animal, like the dead bird you might see over the bar in a saloon, or the deer head a lot of you have in your den—and they still worship him. They *still* honor his word, and they *still* revere his beliefs—the beliefs that *killed* millions of people just because their false god didn't like them." Patterson stood erect and brushed his hair back.

"There are those who say that what evil we see in the world is just the absence of good. But we know better than that. There is a devil in creation, and that devil has agents among us, and some of those agents run countries! Some of those agents start wars. Some of those agents take innocent people from their homes and put them in camps and murder them there like cattle in a slaughterhouse. Those are the agents of Satan! Those are the devotees of the Prince of Darkness. They are those among us who take the lives of the innocent, even the lives of innocent little babies . . ."

And so, those three men of God went to the hospital. One of them, our friend Skip, went to assist his parishioner in her time of need. The other two, the Catholics, went because they, too, were men of God, and they, too, stood for the same things that we do, *because the Word of Jesus is THE SAME FOR ALL OF US*!" Hosiah Jackson's voice boomed out.

"Yes, sir," the same white voice agreed, and there were nods in the congregation.

"And so those three men of God went to the hospital to save the life of a little baby, a little baby that the government of that heathen land wanted to kill—and why? They wanted to kill it because its mother and father believe in God—and, oh, no, they couldn't allow people like *that* to bring a child into the world! Oh, no, they couldn't allow people of faith to bring a child into their country, because that was like inviting in a spy. That was a *danger* to their godless government. And why is it a danger?

"It's a *danger* because they *know* that they are godless pagans! It's a *danger* because they *know* that God's Holy Word is the most powerful force in the world! And their only response to that kind of danger is to kill, to take the life that God Himself gives to each of us, because in denying God, they can also deny life, and you know, those pagans, those unbelievers, those killers *love* to have that kind of power. They *love* pretending that *they* are gods. They love their power, and they love using it in the service of Satan! They know they are destined to spend eternity in Hell, and they want to share their Hell with us here on earth, and they want to deny to us the only thing that can liberate us from the destiny they have chosen for themselves. *That* is why they condemned that innocent little baby to death.

"And when those three men went to the hospital to preserve the life of that innocent baby, they stood in God's own place. They took God's place, but they did so in humility and in the strength of their faith. They stood in *God's* place to fulfill *God's* will, not to get power for themselves, not to be false heroes. They went there to serve, not to rule. To serve, as the Lord Jesus Himself served. As his apostles served. They went there to protect an innocent life. They went there to do the Lord God's work!"

You people probably don't know this, but when I was first ordained I spent three years in the United States Navy, and I served as a chaplain to the Marines. I was assigned to the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. When I was there, I got to know people we call heroes, and for sure a lot of Marines fall into that category. I was there to minister to the dead and dying after a terrible helicopter crash, and it was one of the great honors of my life to be

there and to comfort dying young Marines—be—cause I *knew* they were going to see God. I remember one, a sergeant, the man had just gotten married a month before, and he died while he was saying a prayer to God for his wife. He was a veteran of Vietnam, that sergeant, and he had lots of decorations. He was what we call a tough guy," Patterson told the black congregation, "but the toughest thing about that Marine was that when he knew he was going to die, he prayed not for himself, but for his young wife, that God would comfort her. That Marine died as a Christian man, and he went from this world to stand proud before his God as a man who did his duty in every way he could.

"Well, so did Skip, and so did Renato. They sacrificed their lives to save a baby. God sent them. God gave those men their orders. And they heard the orders, and they followed them without flinching, without hesitating, without thinking except to be sure that they were doing the right thing.

"And today, eight thousand miles from here there is a new life, a new little baby, probably asleep now. That baby will never know all the hubbub that came just before she was born, but with parents like that, that baby will know the Word of God. And all that happened because three brave men of God went to that hospital, and two of them died there to do the Lord's Work.

"Skip was a Baptist. Renato was a Catholic.

"Skip was yellow. I'm white. You people are black.

"But Jesus doesn't care about any of that. We have all heard His words. We have all accepted Him as our Savior. So did Skip. So did Renato. Those two brave men sacrificed their lives for The Right. The Catholic's last words—he asked if the baby was okay, and the other Catholic, the German priest, said 'yes,' and Renato said, '*Bene*.' That's Italian. It means, 'That's good, that's all right.' He died knowing that he did the right thing, And that's not a bad thing, is it?"

"That's right!" three voices called out.

There is so much to learn from their example," Hosiah Jackson told his borrowed congregation.

"We must learn, first of all, that God's Word is the same for all of us. I'm a black man. You folks are white. Skip was Chinese. In that we are all different, but in God's Holy Word we are all the same. Of all the things we have to learn, of all the things we have to keep in our hearts every day we live, that is the most important. Jesus is Savior to us all, if only we accept Him, if only we take Him into our hearts, if only we listen when He talks to us. That is the first lesson we need to learn from the death of those two brave men.

"The next lesson we need to learn is that Satan is still alive out

there, and while we must listen to the words of God, there are those out there who prefer to listen to the words of Lucifer. We need to recognize those people for what they are.

"Forty years ago, we had some of those people among us. I remember it, and probably you do, too. We got over all that. The reason we got over it is that we have all heard the Word of God. We've all remembered that our God is a God of Mercy. Our God is a God of Justice. If we remember that, we remember a lot more besides. God does not measure us by what we are against. Jesus looks into our hearts and measures us by what we are *for*.

"But we cannot be *for* justice except by being against *in*justice. We must remember Skip and Renato. We must remember Mr. and Mrs. Yang, and all like them, those people in China who've been denied the chance to hear the Word of God. The sons of Lucifer are *afraid* of God's Holy Word. The sons of Lucifer are *afraid* of us. The sons of Satan are *afraid* of God's Will, because in God's Love and in the Way of the Lord lies their destruction. They may hate God. They may hate God's word—but they *fear*, they *FEAR* the consequences of their own actions. They *fear* the damnation that awaits them. They may *deny* God, but they know the *righteousness* of God, and they know that every human soul cries out for knowledge of our Lord.

"*That's* why they feared Reverend Yu Fa An. That's why they feared Cardinal DiMilo, and that's why they fear us. Me and you good people. Those sons of Satan are *afraid* of us because they know that their words and their false beliefs can no more stand up to the Word of God than a house trailer can stand before a springtime tornado! And they know that all men are born with some knowledge of God's Holy Word. That's why they fear us.

"Good!" Reverend Hosiah Jackson exclaimed. "Then let's give them another reason to fear us! Let God's faithful show them the power and the conviction of our faith!"

But we can be sure that God was there with Skip, and with Cardinal DiMilo. God directed their brave hands, and through them God saved that innocent little child," Patterson told his black congregation. "And God welcomed to his bosom the two men He sent there to do His work, and today our friend Skip and Cardinal DiMilo stand proudly before the Lord God, those good and faithful servants of His Holy Word.

"My friends, they did their job. They did the Lord's work that day. They saved the life of an innocent child. They showed the whole world what the power of faith can be.

"But what of our job?" Patterson asked.

It is *not* the job of the faithful to encourage Satan," Hosiah Jackson told the people before him. He'd captured their attention as surely as Lord Olivier on his best day—and why not? These were not the words of Shakespeare. These were the words of one of God's ministers. "When Jesus looks into our hearts, will He see people who support the sons of Lucifer? Will Jesus see people who give their money to support the godless killers of the innocent? Will Jesus see people who give their money to the new *Hitler*?"

"No!" A female voice shouted in reply. "*No!*"

"What is it that we, we the people of God, the people of faith—what is it that we stand for? When the sons of Lucifer kill the faithful, where do *you* stand? Will you stand for justice? Will you stand for your faith? Will you stand with the holy martyrs? Will you stand with Jesus?" Jackson demanded of his borrowed white congregation.

And as one voice, they answered him: *"Yes!"*

Jesus H. Christ," Ryan said. He'd walked over to the Vice President's office to catch the TV coverage.

"Told you my Pap was good at this stuff. Hell, I grew up with it over the dinner table, and he still gets inside my head," said Robby Jackson, wondering if he'd allow himself a drink tonight. "Patterson is probably doing okay, too. Pap says he's an okay guy, but my Pap is the champ."

"Did he ever think of becoming a Jesuit?" Jack asked with a grin.

"Pap's a preacherman, but he ain't quite a saint. The celibacy would be kinda hard on him," Robby answered.

Then the scene changed to Leonardo di Vinci International Airport outside Rome, where the Alitalia 747 had just landed and was now pulling up to the jetway. Below it was a truck, and next to the truck some cars belonging to the Vatican. It had already been announced that Renato Cardinal DiMilo would be getting his own full state funeral at St. Peter's Basilica, and CNN would be there to cover all of it, joined by SkyNews, Fox, and all the major networks. They'd been late getting onto the story at the beginning, but that only made this part of the coverage more full.

Back in Mississippi, Hosiah Jackson walked slowly down from the pulpit as the last hymn ended. He walked with grace and dignity to the front door, so as to greet all of the congregation members on the way out.

That took much longer than he'd expected. It seemed that every single one of them wanted to take his hand and thank him for coming —the degree of hospitality was well in excess of his most optimistic expectations. And there was no doubting their sincerity. Some insisted

on talking for a few moments, until the press of the departing crowd forced them down the steps and onto the parking lot. Hosiah counted six invitations to dinner, and ten inquiries about his church, and if it needed any special work. Finally, there was just one man left, pushing seventy, with scraggly gray hair and a hooked nose that had seen its share of whiskey bottles. He looked like a man who'd topped out as assistant foreman at the sawmill.

"Hello," Jackson said agreeably.

"Pastor," the man replied, uneasily, as though wanting to say more.

It was a look Hosiah had seen often enough. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Pastor . . . years ago . . ." And his voice choked up again. "Pastor," he began again. "Pastor, I sinned."

"My friend, we all sin. God knows that. That's why he sent His Son to be with us and conquer our sins." The minister grabbed the man's shoulder to steady him.

"I was in the Klan, Pastor, I did . . . sinful things . . . I . . . hurt nigras just cuz I hated them, and I—"

"What's your name?" Hosiah asked gently.

"Charlie Picket," the man replied. And then Hosiah knew. He had a good memory for names. Charles Worthington Picket had been the Grand Kleegle of the local Klavern. He'd never been convicted of a major crime, but his name was one that came up much of the time.

"Mr. Picket, those things all happened many years ago," he reminded the man.

"I ain't never—I mean, I ain't never *killed* nobody. Honest, Pastor, I ain't never done that," Picket insisted, with real desperation in his voice. "But I know'd thems that did, and I never told the cops. I never told them not to do it . . . sweet Jesus, I don't know what I was back then, Pastor. I was . . . it was . . ."

"Mr. Picket, are you sorry for your sins?"

"Oh, yes, oh Jesus, yes, Pastor. I've prayed for forgiveness, but—"

"There is no 'but,' Mr. Picket. God has forgiven you your sins," Jackson told him in his gentlest voice.

"Are you sure?"

A smile and a nod. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Pastor, you need help at your church, roofing and stuff, you call me, y'hear? That's the house of God, too. Maybe I didn't always know it, but by damn I know it now, sir."

He'd probably never called a black man "sir" in his life, unless there'd been a gun to his head. So, the minister thought, at least one person had listened to his sermon, and learned something from it. And that wasn't bad for a man in his line of work.

"Pastor, I gots to apologize for all the evil words and thoughts I had. Ain't never done that, but I gots to do it now." He seized Hosiah's

hand. “Pastor, I am sorry, sorry as a man can be for all the things I done back then, and I beg your forgiveness.”

“And the Lord Jesus said, ‘Go forth and sin no more.’ Mr. Picket, that’s all of scripture in one sentence. God came to forgive our sins. God has already forgiven you.”

Finally, their eyes met. “Thank you, Pastor. And God bless you, sir.”

“And may the Lord bless you, too.” Hosiah Jackson watched the man walk off to his pickup truck, wondering if a soul had just been saved. If so, Skip would be pleased with the black friend he’d never met.

CHAPTER 32

Coalition Collision

It was a long drive from the airport to the Vatican, every yard of it covered by cameras in the high-speed motorcade, until finally the vehicles entered the Piazza San Pietro, St. Peter's Square. There, waiting, was a squad of Swiss Guards wearing the purple-and-gold uniforms designed by Michelangelo. Some of the Guards pulled the casket containing a Prince of the Church, martyred far away, and carried it through the towering bronze doors into the cavernous interior of the church, where the next day a Requiem Mass would be celebrated by the Pope himself.

But it wasn't about religion now, except to the public. For the President of the United States, it was about matters of state. It turned out that Tom Jefferson had been right after all. The power of government devolved directly from the people, and Ryan had to act now, in a way that the people would approve, because when you got down to it, the nation wasn't his. It was theirs.

And one thing made it worse. SORGE had coughed up another report that morning, and it was late coming in only because Mary Patricia Foley wanted to be doubly sure that the translation was right.

Also in the Oval Office were Ben Goodley, Arnie van Damm, and the Vice President. "Well?" Ryan asked them.

"Cocksuckers," Robby said, first of all. "If they really think this way, we shouldn't sell them shit in a paper bag. Even at Top Gun after a long night of boilermakers, even Navy fighter pilots don't talk like this."

"It is callous," Ben Goodley agreed.

"They don't issue consciences to the political leaders, I guess," van Damm said, making it unanimous.

"How would your father react to information like this, Robby?" Ryan asked.

"His immediate response will be the same as mine: Nuke the bastards. Then he'll remember what happens in a real war and settle down some. Jack, we have to punish them."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, but if we shut down trade to the PRC, the first people hurt are the poor schlubs in the factories, aren't they?"

"Sure, Jack, but who's holding them hostage, the good guys or the bad guys? Somebody can *always* say that, and if fear of hurting them prevents you from taking any action, then you're only making sure that things *never* get better for them. So, you can't allow yourself to be limited that way," TOMCAT concluded, "or *you* become the hostage."

Then the phone rang. Ryan got it, grumbling at the interruption.

"Secretary Adler for you, Mr. President. He says it's important."

Jack leaned across his desk and punched the blinking button. "Yeah, Scott."

"I got the download. It's not unexpected, and people talk differently inside the office than outside, remember."

"That's great to hear, Scott, and if they talk about taking a few thousand Jews on a train excursion to Auschwitz, is that supposed to be funny, too?"

"Jack, I'm the Jew here, remember?"

Ryan let out a long breath and pushed another button. "Okay, Scott, you're on speaker now. Talk," POTUS ordered.

"This is just the way the bastards talk. Yes, they're arrogant, but we already knew that. Jack, if other countries knew how *we* talk inside the White House, we'd have a lot fewer allies and a lot more wars. Sometimes intelligence can be too good."

Adler really was a good SecState, Ryan thought. His job was to look for simple and safe ways out of problems, and he worked damned hard at it.

"Okay, suggestions?"

"I have Carl Hitch lay a note on them. We demand a statement of apology for this fuckup."

"And if they tell us to shove it?"

"Then we pull Rutledge and Hitch back for 'consultations,' and let them simmer for a while."

"The note, Scott?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Write it on asbestos paper and sign it in blood," Jack told him coldly.

"Yes, sir," SecState acknowledged, and the line went dead.

It was a lot later in the day in Moscow when Pavel Yefremov and Oleg Provalov came into Sergey Golovko's office.

"I'm sorry I couldn't have you in sooner," the SVR chairman told his guests. "We've been busy with problems—the Chinese and that shooting in Beijing." He'd been looking into it just like every other person in the world.

"Then you have another problem with them, Comrade Chairman."

"Oh?"

Yefremov handed over the decrypt. Golovko took it, thanking the man with his accustomed good manners, then settled back in his chair and started reading. In less than five seconds, his eyes widened.

"This is not possible," his voice whispered.

"Perhaps so, but it is difficult to explain otherwise."

"*I* was the target?"

"So it would appear," Provalov answered.

"But *why?*"

"That we do not know," Yefremov said, "and probably nobody in the city of Moscow knows. If the order was given through a Chinese intelligence officer, the order originated in Beijing, and the man who forwarded it probably doesn't know the reasoning behind it. Moreover, the operation is set up to be somewhat deniable, since we cannot even prove that this man is an intelligence officer, and not an assistant or what the Americans call a 'stringer.' In fact, their man was identified for us by an American," the FSS officer concluded.

Golovko's eyes came up. "How the hell did *that* happen?"

Provalov explained. "A Chinese intelligence officer in Moscow is unlikely to be concerned by the presence of an American national, whereas any Russian citizen is a potential counterintelligence officer. Mishka was there and offered to help, and I permitted it. Which leads me to a question."

"What do you tell this American?" Golovko asked for him.

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes, Comrade Chairman. He knows a good deal about the murder investigation because I confided in him and he offered some helpful suggestions. He is a gifted police investigator. And he is no fool. When he asks how this case is going, what can I say?"

Golovko's initial response was as predictable as it was automatic: *Say nothing*. But he restrained himself. If Provalov said nothing, then the American would have to be a fool not to see the lie, and, as he said, the American was no fool. On the other hand, did it serve Golovko's—or Russia's—purposes for America to know that his life was in danger? That question was deep and confusing. While he pondered it, he'd have his bodyguard come in. He beeped his secretary.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," Major Shelepin said, coming in the door.

"Something new for you to worry about, Anatoliy Ivan'ch," Golovko told him. It was more than that. The first sentence turned Shelepin pale.

It started in America with the unions. These affiliations of working people, which had lost power in the preceding decades, were in their way the most conservative organizations in America, for the simple

reason that their loss of power had made them mindful of the importance of what power they retained. To hold on to that, they resisted any change that threatened the smallest entitlement of their humblest member.

China had long been a *bête noir* for the labor movement, for the simple reason that Chinese workers made less in a day than American union automobile workers made during their morning coffee break. That tilted the playing field in favor of the Asians, and *that* was something the AFL/CIO was not prepared to approve.

So much the better that the government that ruled those underpaid workers disregarded human rights. That just made them easier to oppose.

American labor unions are nothing if not organized, and so every single member of Congress started getting telephone calls. Most of them were taken by staffers, but those from senior union officials in a member's state or district usually made it all the way through, regardless of which side the individual member stood on. Attention was called to the barbaric action of that godless state which also, by the way, shit on its workers *and* took American jobs through its unfair labor practices. The size of the trade surplus came up in every single telephone call, which would have made the members of Congress think that it was a carefully orchestrated phone campaign (which it was) had they compared notes on the telephone calls with one another (which they didn't).

Later in the day, demonstrations were held, and though they were about as spontaneous as those held in the People's Republic of China, they were covered by the local and/or national media, because it was a place to send cameras, and the newsies belonged to a union, too.

Behind the telephone calls and in front of the TV coverage of the demonstrations came the letters and e-mails, all of which were counted and cataloged by the members' staffers.

Some of them called the White House to let the President know what was happening on the Hill. Those calls *all* went to the office of Arnold van Damm, whose own staff kept a careful count of the calls, their position, and their degree of passion, which was running pretty high.

On top of that came the notices from the religious communities, virtually all of which China had managed to offend at once.

The one unexpected but shrewd development of the day didn't involve a call or letter to anyone in the government. Chinese manufacturers located on the island of Taiwan all had lobbying and public-relations agencies in America. One of these came up with an idea that caught on as rapidly as the powder inside a rifle cartridge. By midday, three separate printers were turning out peel-off stickers

with the flag of the Republic of China and the caption "We're the good guys." By the following morning, clerks at retail outlets all over America were affixing them to items of Taiwanese manufacture. The news media found out about it even before the process had begun, and thus aided the Republic of China industrialists by letting the public know of their "them not us" campaign even before it had properly begun.

The result was that the American public was reacquainted with the fact that there were indeed *two* countries called China, and that only one of them killed people of the clergy and then beat up on those who tried to say a few prayers on a public street. The other one even played Little League baseball.

It wasn't often that union leaders and the clergy both cried out so vociferously, and together they were being heard. Polling organizations scrambled to catch up, and were soon framing their questions in such a way that the answers were defined even before they were given.

The draft note arrived in the Beijing embassy early in the morning. When decrypted by an NS employee, it was shown to the embassy's senior watch officer, who managed not to throw up and decided to awaken Ambassador Hitch at once. Half an hour later, Hitch was in the office, sleepy and crabby at being awakened two hours before his accustomed time. The content of the note wasn't contrived to brighten his day. He was soon on the phone to Foggy Bottom.

"Yes, that's what we want you to say," Scott Adler told him on the secure phone.

"They're not going to like it."

"That doesn't surprise me, Carl."

"Okay, just so you know," Hitch told the SecState.

"Carl, we do think about these things, but the President is seriously pissed about—"

"Scott, I live here, y'know? I *know* what happened."

"What are they going to do?" EAGLE asked.

"Before or after they take my head off?" Hitch asked in return. "They'll tell me where to stick this note—a little more formally, of course."

"Well, make it clear to them that the American people demand some sort of amends. And that killing diplomats cannot be done with impunity."

"Okay, Scott. I know how to handle it. I'll get back to you later."

"I'll be awake," Adler promised, thinking of the long day in the office he was stuck with.

"See ya." Hitch broke the connection.

CHAPTER 33

Square One

You may not talk to us this way," Shen Tang observed.

"Minister, my country has principles which we do not violate. Some of those are respect for human rights, the right of free assembly, the right to worship God as one wishes, the right to speak freely. The government of the People's Republic has seen fit to violate those principles, hence America's response. Every other great power in the world recognizes those rights. China must as well."

"Must? You tell us what we *must* do?"

"Minister, if China wishes to be a member of the community of nations, then, yes."

"America will *not* dictate to us. You are not the rulers of the world!"

"We do not claim to be. But we can choose those nations with whom we have normal relations, and we would prefer them to recognize human rights as do all other civilized nations."

"Now you say we are uncivilized?" Shen demanded.

"I did not say that, Minister," Hitch responded, wishing he'd not let his tongue slip.

"America does not have the right to impose its wishes on us or any other nation. You come here and dictate trade terms to us, and now also you demand that we conduct our internal affairs so as to suit you. Enough! We will not kowtow to you. We are not your servants. I reject this note." Shen even tossed it back in Hitch's direction to give further emphasis to his words.

"That is your reply, then?" Hitch asked.

"That is the reply of the People's Republic of China," Shen answered imperiously.

"Very well, Minister. Thank you for the audience." Hitch bowed politely and withdrew. Remarkable, he thought, that normal—if not exactly friendly—relations could come unglued this fast. Only six weeks before, Shen had been over to the embassy for a cordial working dinner, and they'd toasted each other's country in the friendliest manner possible. But Kissinger had said it: Countries do not have friends; they have interests. And the PRC had just shit on some of America's most closely felt principles. And that was that. He walked

back out to his car for the drive to the embassy.

Cliff Rutledge was waiting there. Hitch waved him into his private office.

"Well?"

"Well, he told me to shove it up my ass—in diplo-speak," Hitch told his visitor. "You might have a lively session this morning."

Rutledge had seen the note already, of course. "I'm surprised Scott let it go out that way."

"I gather things at home have gotten a little firm. We've seen CNN and all, but maybe it's even worse than it appears."

"Look, I don't condone anything the Chinese did, but all this over a couple of shot clergymen . . ."

"One was a diplomat, Cliff," Hitch reminded him. "If you got your ass shot off, you'd want them to take it seriously in Washington, wouldn't you?"

The reprimand made Rutledge's eyes flare a little. "It's President Ryan who's driving this. He just doesn't understand how diplomacy works."

"Maybe, maybe not, but he is the President, and it's our job to represent him, remember?"

"Hard to forget it," Rutledge groused. He'd never be Undersecretary of State while that yahoo sat in the White House, and Undersecretary was the job he'd had his eye on for the last fifteen years. But neither would he get the job if he allowed his private feelings, however justified, to cloud his professional judgment. "We're going to be called home or sent home," he estimated.

"Probably," Hitch agreed. "Be nice to catch some baseball. How do the Sox look this season?"

"Forget it. A rebuilding year. Once again."

"Sorry about that." Hitch shook his head and checked his desk for new dispatches, but there were none. Now he had to let Washington know what the Chinese Foreign Minister had said. Scott Adler was probably sitting in his seventhfloor office waiting for the secure direct line to ring.

"Good luck, Cliff."

"Thanks a bunch," Rutledge said on his way out the door.

Hitch wondered if he should call home and tell his wife to start packing for home, but no, not yet. First he had to call Foggy Bottom.

So, what's going to happen?" Ryan asked Adler from his bed. He'd left orders to be called as soon as they got word. Now, listening to Adler's reply, he was surprised. He'd thought the wording of the note rather wimpy, but evidently diplomatic exchange had even stricter rules than he'd appreciated. "Okay, now what, Scott?"

"Well, we'll wait and see what happens with the trade delegation, but even money we call them and Carl Hitch home for consultations."

"Don't the Chinese realize they could take a trade hit from all this?"

"They don't expect that to happen. Maybe if it does, it'll make them think over the error of their ways."

"I wouldn't bet much on that card, Scott."

"Sooner or later, common sense has to break out. A hit in the wallet usually gets a guy's attention," SecState said.

"I'll believe that when I see it," POTUS replied. "'Night, Scott."

"'Night, Jack."

"So what did they say?" Cathy Ryan asked.

"They told us to stick it up our ass."

"Really?"

"Really," Jack replied, flipping the light off.

The Chinese thought they were invincible. It must be nice to believe that. Nice, but dangerous.

The 265th Motor Rifle Division was composed of three regiments of conscripts—Russians who hadn't chosen to avoid military service, which made them patriotic, or stupid, or apathetic, or sufficiently bored with life that the prospect of two years in uniform, poorly fed and largely unpaid, didn't seem that much of a sacrifice. Each regiment was composed of about fifteen hundred soldiers, about five hundred fewer than full authorized strength. The good news was that each regiment had an organic tank battalion, and that all of the mechanized equipment was, if not new, then at least recently manufactured, and reasonably well maintained. The division lacked its organic tank regiment, however, the fist which gave a motor-rifle division its offensive capabilities. Also missing was the divisional antitank battalion, with its Rapier antitank cannons. These were anachronistic weapons which Bondarenko nonetheless liked because he'd played with them as an officer cadet nearly forty years before. The new model of the BMP infantry carrier had been modified to carry the AT-6 antitank missle, the one NATO called "Spiral," actually a Russian version of the NATO Milan, courtesy of some nameless KGB spy of the 1980s. The Russian troops called it the Hammer for its ease of use, despite a relatively small warhead. Every BMP had ten of these, which more than made up for the missing battalion of towed guns.

What worried Bondarenko and Aliyev most was the lack of artillery. Historically the best trained and best drilled part of the Russian army, the artillery was only half present in the Far East's maneuver forces, battalions taking the place of regiments. The rationale for this was the fixed defense line on the Chinese border, which had a goodly supply

of fixed and fortified artillery positions, albeit of obsolete designs, though with trained crews and massive stocks of shells to pour into predetermined positions.

The general scowled in the confines of his staff car. It was what he got for being smart and energetic. A properly prepared and trained military district didn't *need* a man like him, did it? No, his talents were needed by a shithole like this one. Just once, he thought, might a good officer get a reward for good performance instead of another "challenge," as they called it? He grunted. Not in this lifetime. The dunces and dolts drew the comfortable districts with no threats and lots of equipment to deal with them.

His worst worry was the air situation. Of all the Russian military arms, the air forces had suffered the most from the fall of the Soviet Union. Once Far East had had its own fleets of tactical fighters, poised to deal with a threat from American aircraft based in Japan or on aircraft carriers of their Pacific Fleet, that *plus* what was needed to face off the Chinese. No more. Now he had perhaps fifty usable aircraft in theater, and the pilots for those got perhaps seventy flight hours per year, barely enough to make sure they could take off and land safely. Fifty modern fighter-class aircraft, mainly for air-to-air combat, not air-to-ground. There were several hundred more, rotting at their bases, mainly in hardened shelters to keep them dry, their tires dry-rotted and internal seals cracked from lack of use because of the spare-parts shortage that grounded nearly the entire Russian air force.

"You know, Andrey, I can remember when the world shook with fear of our country's army. Now, they shake with laughter, those who bother to take note of us." Bondarenko took a sip of vodka from a flask. It had been a long time since he'd drunk alcohol on duty, but it was cold—the heater in the car was broken—and he needed the solace.

"Gennady Iosifovich, it is not as bad as it appears—"

"I agree! It is worse!" CINC-FAR EAST growled. "If the Chinks come north, I shall learn to eat with chopsticks. I've always wondered how they do that," he added with a wry smile. Bondarenko was always one to see the humor in a situation.

"But to others we appear strong. We have thousands of tanks, Comrade General."

Which was true. They'd spent the morning inspecting monstrous sheds containing of all things T-34/85 tanks manufactured at Chelyabinsk in 1946. Some had virgin guns, never fired. The Germans had shaken in their jackboots to see these tanks storm over the horizon, but that's what they were, World War II tanks, over nine hundred of them, three complete division sets. And there were even

troops to maintain them! The engines still turned over, serviced as they were by the *grand*children of the men who'd used them in combat operations against the *fascisti.* And in the same sheds were shells, some made as recently as 1986, for the 85-mm guns. The world was mad, and surely the Soviet Union had been mad, first to store such antiques, then to spend money and effort maintaining them. And even now, more than ten years after the demise of that nation-state, the sheer force of bureaucratic inertia *still* sent conscripts into the sheds to maintain the antique collection. For what purpose? No one knew. It would take an archivist to find the documents, and while that might be of interest to some historian of a humorous bent, Bondarenko had better things to do.

"Andrey, I appreciate your willingness to see the lighter side of every situation, but we do face a practical reality here."

"Comrade General, it will take months to get permission to terminate this operation."

"That is probably true, Andruska, but I remember a story about Napoleon. He wished to plant trees by the side of the French roads to shade his marching troops. A staff officer said, but, Marshal, it will take twenty years for the trees to grow enough to accomplish that. And Napoleon said, yes, indeed, so we must start at once! And so, Colonel, we will start with that at once."

"As you say, Comrade General." Colonel Aliyev knew that it was a worthwhile idea. He only wondered if he would have enough time to pursue all of the ideas that needed accomplishing. Besides, the troops at the tank sheds seemed happy enough. Some even took the tanks out into the open to play with them, drive them about the nearby test range, even shoot the guns occasionally. One young sergeant had commented to him that it was good to use them, because it made the war movies he'd seen as a child seem even more real. Now *that*, Colonel Aliyev thought, was something to hear from a soldier. It made the movies better. Damn.

Who does that slant-eyed motherfucker think he is?" Gant demanded out in the garden.

"Mark, we laid a rather firm note on them this morning, and they're just reacting to it."

"Cliff, explain to me why it's okay for other people to talk like that to us, but it's not okay for us to talk that way to them, will you?"

"It's called diplomacy," Rutledge explained.

"It's called horseshit, Cliff," Gant hissed back. "Where I come from, if somebody disses you like that, you punch him right in the face."

"But we don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we're above it, Mark," Rutledge tried to explain. "It's the little dogs that yap at you. The big powerful dogs don't bother. They know they can rip your head off. And we know we can handle these people if we have to."

"Somebody needs to tell *them* that, Cliffy," Gant observed. "Because I don't think they got the word yet. They're talking like they own the world, and they think they can play tough-guy with us, Cliff, and until they find out they can't, we're going to have a lot more of their shit to deal with."

"Mark, this is how it's done, that's all. It's just how the game is played at this level."

"Oh, yeah?" Gant countered. "Cliff, it's not a game to them. I see that, but you don't. After this break, we're going back in there, and they're going to threaten us. What do we do then?"

"We brush it off. How can they threaten us?"

"The Boeing order."

"Well, Boeing will have to sell its airplanes to somebody else this year," Rutledge said.

"Really? What about the interests of all those workers we're supposed to represent?"

"Mark, at this level, we deal with the big picture, not the little one, okay?" Rutledge was actually getting angry with this stock trader.

"Cliffy, the big picture is made up of a lot of little ones. You ought to go back in there and ask if they like selling things to us. Because if they do, then they have to play ball. Because they need us a fucking lot more than we need them."

"You don't talk that way to a great power."

"Are we a great power?"

"The biggest," Rutledge confirmed.

"Then how come they talk that way to us?"

"Mark, this is my job. You're here to advise me, but this is your first time to this sort of ball game, okay? I know how to play the game. It's my job."

"Fine." Gant let out a long breath. "But when we play by the rules and they don't, the game gets a little tedious." Gant wandered off on his own for a moment. The garden was pretty enough. He hadn't done this sort of thing enough to know that there was usually a garden of some sort for diplomats to wander in after two or three hours of talking at each other in a conference room, but he had learned that the garden was where a lot of the real work got done.

"Mr. Gant?" He turned to see Xue Ma, the diplomat/spook he'd chatted with before.

"Mr. Xue," TELESCOPE said in his own greeting.

"What do you think of the progress of the talks?" the Chinese

diplomat asked.

Mark was still trying to understand this guy's use of language. "If this is progress, I'd hate to see what you call an adverse development."

Xue smiled. "A lively exchange is often more interesting than a dull one."

"Really? I'm surprised by all this. I always thought that diplomatic exchange was more polite."

"You think this impolite?"

Gant again wondered if he was being baited or not, but decided *the hell with it*. He didn't really need his government job anyway, did he? And taking it had involved a considerable personal sacrifice, hadn't it? Like a few million bucks. Didn't that entitle him to say what the hell he thought?

"Xue, you accuse us of threatening your national identity because we object to the murders your government—or its agents, I suppose—committed in front of cameras. Americans don't like it when people commit murder."

"Those people were breaking our laws," Xue reminded him.

"Maybe so," Gant conceded. "But in America when people break the law, we arrest them and give them a trial in front of a judge and jury, with a defense lawyer to make sure the trial is fair, and we damned sure don't shoot people in the head when they're holding a goddamned newborn infant!"

"That was unfortunate," Xue almost admitted, "but as I said, those men *were* breaking the law."

"And so your cops did the judge/jury/executioner number on them. Xue, to Americans that was the act of a barbarian."

The "B" word finally got through. "America cannot talk to China in that way, Mr. Gant."

"Look, Mr. Xue, it's your country, and you can run your country as you wish. We're not going to declare war on you for what you do inside your own borders. But there's no law that says we have to do business with you either, and so we *can* stop buying your goods—and I have news for you: The American people *will* stop buying your stuff if you continue to do stuff like that."

"Your people? Or your government?" Xue asked, with a knowing smile.

"Are you really *that* stupid, Mr. Xue?" Gant fired back.

"What do you mean?" The last insult had actually cracked through the shell, Gant saw.

"I mean America is a democracy. Americans make a lot of decisions entirely on their own, and one of them is what they spend their money on, and the average American will not buy something from a fucking barbarian." Gant paused. "Look, I'm a Jew, okay? Sixty-some

years ago, America fucked up. We saw what Hitler and the Nazis were doing in Germany, and we didn't act in time to stop it. We really blew the call and a lot of people got killed unnecessarily, and we've been seeing things on TV about that since I was in short pants, and it ain't *never* going to happen again on our watch, and when people like you do stuff like what we just saw, it just sets off the Holocaust light in American heads. Do you get it now?"

"You cannot talk to us in that way."

Again with the broken record! The doors were opening. It was time to head back inside for the next round of confrontational diplo-speak.

"And if you persist in attacking our national sovereignty, we will buy elsewhere," Xue told him with some satisfaction.

"Fine, and we can do the same. And you need our cash a lot more than we need your trade goods, Mr. Xue." He must have finally understood, Gant thought. His face actually showed some emotion now. So did his words:

"We will never kowtow to American attacks on our country."

"We're not attacking your country, Xue."

"But you threaten our economy," Xue said, as they got to the door.

"We threaten nothing. I am telling you that my fellow citizens will not buy goods from a country that commits barbarities. That is not a threat. It is a statement of fact." Which was an even greater insult, Gant did not fully appreciate.

"If America punishes us, we will punish America."

Enough was goddamned enough. Gant pulled the door open halfway and stopped to face the diplomat/spook:

"Xue, your dicks aren't big enough to get in a pissing contest with us." And with that, he walked on inside. A half hour later, he was on his way out again. The words had been sharp and heated, and neither side had seen any purpose in continuing that day—though Gant strongly suspected that once Washington heard about that morning's exchanges, there wouldn't *be* any other day.

In two days, he'd be totally jet-lagged but back at his office on 15th Street. He was surprised that he was looking forward to *that.*

Anything from WestPac?" Mancuso asked.

"They just put three submarines to sea, a Song and two of the Kilos the Russians sold them," BG Lahr answered. "We're keeping an eye on them. *La Jolla* and *Helena* are close by. *Tennessee* is heading back to Pearl as of midday." The former boomer had been on patrol for fifty days, and that was about enough. "Our surface assets are all back to sea. Nobody's scheduled to get back into Taipei for twelve days."

"So, the Taipei hookers get two weeks off?" CINCPAC asked with a chuckle.

"And the bartenders. If your sailors are like my soldiers, they may need the relaxation," the J-2 replied, with a smile of his own.

"Oh, to be young and single again," Bart observed. "Anything else out there?"

"Routine training on their side, some combined air and ground stuff, but that's up north by the Russian border."

"How good do they look?"

Lahr shrugged. "Good enough to give the Russians something to think about, sir. On the whole, the PLA is trained up as good as I've ever known them to be, but they've been working hard for the past three or four years."

"How many of them?" Bart asked, looking at his wall map, which was a lot more useful for a sailor than a soldier. China was just a beige shape on the left border.

"Depends on where. Like, if they go north into Russia, it'd be like cockroaches in some ghetto apartment in New York. You'd need a lot o' Raid to deal with it."

"And you said the Russians are thin in their East?"

Lahr nodded. "Yep. Admiral, if I was that Bondarenko guy, I'd sweat it some. I mean, it's all theoretical as a threat and all, but as theoretical threats go, that's one that might keep me awake at night."

"And what about reports of gold and oil in eastern Siberia?"

Lahr nodded. "Makes the threat less theoretical. China's a net importer of oil, and they're going to need a lot more to expand their economy the way they plan to—and on the gold side, hell, everybody's wanted that for the last three thousand years. It's negotiable and fungible."

"Fungible?" That was a new word for Mancuso.

"Your wedding band might have been part of Pharaoh Ramses II's double-crown once," Lahr explained. "Or Caligula's necklace, or Napoleon's royal scepter. You take it, hammer it, and it's just raw material again, and it's *valuable* raw material. If the Russian strike's as big as our intel says, it'll be sold all over the world. Everybody'll use it for all sorts of purposes, from jewelry to electronics."

"How big's the strike supposed to be?"

Lahr shrugged. "Enough to buy you a new Pacific Fleet, and then some."

Mancuso whistled. That was real money.

It was late in Washington, and Adler was up late, again, working in his office. SecState was usually a busy post, and lately it had been busier than usual, and Scott Adler was getting accustomed to fourteen-hour days. He was reading over post reports at the moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop in Beijing. On his desk was a STU-6 secure

telephone. The "secure telephone unit" was a sophisticated encryption device grafted onto an AT&T-made digital telephone. This one worked on a satellite-communications channel, and though its signal therefore sprinkled down all over the world from its Defense Department communications satellite, all the casual listener would get was raspy static, like the sound of water running out of a bathroom faucet. It had a randomized 512-bit scrambling system that the best computers at Fort Meade could break about a third of the time after several days of directed effort. And that was about as secure as things got. They were trying to make the TAPDANCE encryption system link into the STU units to generate a totally random and hence unbreakable signal, but that was proving difficult, for technical reasons that nobody had explained to the Secretary of State, and that was just as well. He was a diplomat, not a mathematician. Finally, the STU rang in its odd trilling warble. It took eleven seconds for the two STU units on opposite sides of the world to synchronize.

"Adler."

"Rutledge here, Scott," the voice said on the other side of the world. "It didn't go well," he informed SecState at once. "And they're canceling the 777 order with Boeing, as we thought they would."

Adler frowned powerfully into the phone. "Super. No concessions at all on the shootings?"

"Zip."

"Anything to be optimistic about?"

"Nothing, Scott, not a damned thing. They're stonewalling like we're the Mongols and they're the Chin Dynasty."

Somebody needs to remind them that the Great Wall ultimately turned out to be a waste of bricks, EAGLE didn't bother saying aloud. "Okay, I need to discuss this with the President, but you're probably going to be flying home soon. Maybe Carl Hitch, too."

"I'll tell him. Any chance that we can make some concession, just to get things going?"

"Cliff, the likelihood that Congress will roll over on the trade issue is right up there with Tufts making the Final Four. Maybe less." Tufts University *did* have a basketball team, after all. "There's nothing we can give them that they would accept. If there's going to be a break, they're the ones who'll have to bend this time. Any chance of that?"

"Zero" was the reply from Beijing.

"Well, then, they'll just have to learn the hard way." The good news, Adler thought, was that the hard lessons were the ones that really did teach you something. Maybe even the Chinese.

***W**hat* did that capitalist *diao ren* say?" Zhang asked. Shen told him what Xue had relayed, word-for-word. "And what does he represent?"

"He is personal assistant to the American Treasury Minister. Therefore we think he has the ear of both his minister and the American president," Shen explained. "He has not taken an active part in the talks, but after every session he speaks privately with Vice Minister Rutledge. Exactly what their relationship is, we do not know for certain, and clearly he is not an experienced diplomat. He talks like an arrogant capitalist, to insult us in so crude a way, but I fear he represents the American position more forthrightly than Rutledge does. I think he gives Rutledge the policy he must follow. Rutledge is an experienced diplomat, and the positions he takes are not his own, obviously. He wants to give us some concessions. I am sure of that, but Washington is dictating his words, and this Gant fellow is probably the conduit to Washington."

"Then you were right to adjourn the talks. We will give them a chance to reconsider their position. If they think they can dictate to us, then they are mistaken. You canceled the airplane order?"

"Of course, as we agreed last week."

"Then *that* will give them something to think about," Zhang observed smugly.

"If they do not walk out of the talks."

"They wouldn't dare." *Walk away from the Middle Kingdom? Absurd.*

"There is one other thing that Gant man said. He said, not in so many words, that we need them—their money, that is—more than they need us. And he is not entirely wrong in that, is he?"

"We do not need their dollars more than we need our sovereignty. Do they really think they can dictate our domestic laws to us?"

"Yes, Zhang, they do. They apply an astounding degree of importance to this incident."

"Those two policemen ought to be shot for what they did, but we cannot allow the Americans to dictate that sort of thing to us." The embarrassment of the incident was one thing—and embarrassing the state was often a capital offense in the People's Republic—but China had to make such a decision on its own, not at the order of an outsider.

"They call it barbaric," Shen added.

"*Barbaric?* They say *that* to *us?*"

"You know that Americans have tender sensibilities. We often forget that. And their religious leaders have some influence in their country. Our ambassador in Washington has cabled some warnings to us about this. It would be better if we had some time to let things settle down, and truly it would be better to punish those two policemen just to assuage American sensibilities, but I agree we cannot allow them to dictate domestic policy to us."

"And this Gant man says his *ji* is bigger than ours, does he?"

"So Xue tells me. Our file on him says that he's a stock trader, that he's worked closely with Minister Winston for many years. He's a Jew, like lots of them are—"

"Their Foreign Minister is also a Jew, isn't he?"

"Minister Adler? Yes, he is," Shen confirmed after a moment's thought.

"So, this Gant really does tell us their position, then?"

"Probably," Foreign Minister Shen said.

Zhang leaned forward in his chair. "Then you will make them clear on ours. The next time you see this Gant, tell him *chou ni ma de bi*." Which was rather a strong imprecation, best said to someone in China if you had a gun already in your hand.

"I understand," Shen replied, knowing that he'd never say anything like that except to a particularly humble underling in his own office.

Zhang left. He had to talk this one over with his friend Fang Gan.

CHAPTER 34

Hits

Over the last week Ryan had come to expect bad news upon waking up, and as a result so had his family. He knew that he was taking it too seriously when his children started asking him about it over breakfast.

"What's happening with China, Dad?" Sally asked, giving Ryan one more thing to lament. Sally didn't say "daddy" anymore, and that was a title far more precious to Jack than "Mr. President." You expected it from your sons, but not from your daughter. He'd discussed it with Cathy, but she'd told him that he just had to roll with the punch.

"We don't know, Sally."

"But you're supposed to know everything!" And besides, her friends asked her about it at school.

"Sally, the President doesn't know everything. At least I don't," he explained, looking up from the morning *Early Bird*. "And if you never noticed, the TVs in my office are tuned to CNN and the other news networks because they frequently tell me more than CIA does."

"Really?" Sally observed. She watched too many movies. In Hollywood, CIA was a dangerous, lawbreaking, antidemocratic, fascist, and thoroughly evil government agency that nonetheless knew everything about everybody, and had really killed President Kennedy for its own purposes, whatever they were (Hollywood never quite got around to that). But it didn't matter, because whoever the star was always managed to thwart the nasty old CIA before the credits, or the last commercial, depending on the format.

"Really, honey. CIA has some good people in it, but basically it's just one more government agency."

"What about the FBI and Secret Service?" she asked.

"They're cops. Cops are different. My dad was a cop, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," and then she went back to the "Style" section of *The Washington Post*, which had both the comics and the stories that interested her, mainly ones having to do with the sort of music that her father put quotation marks around.

Then there was a discreet knock at the door, and Andrea came in. At this time of day, she also acted as his private secretary, in this case

delivering a dispatch from the State Department. Ryan took it, looked at it, and managed not to pound on the table, because his children were present.

"Thanks, Andrea," he told her.

"Yes, Mr. President." And Special Agent Price-O'Day went back out to the corridor.

Jack saw his wife looking at him. The kids couldn't read all his facial expressions, but his wife could. To Cathy, Ryan couldn't lie worth a damn, which was also why she didn't worry about his fidelity. Jack had the dissimulation ability of a two-year-old, despite all the help and training he got from Arnie. Jack caught the look and nodded. Yeah, it was China again. Ten minutes later, breakfast was fully consumed and the TV was turned off, and the Ryan family headed downstairs to work, to school, or to the day-care center at Johns Hopkins, depending on age, with the requisite contingent of Secret Service bodyguards. Jack kissed them all in their turn, except for little Jack—SHORTSTOP to the Secret Service—because John Patrick Ryan, Jr., didn't go in for that sissy stuff. *There was something to be said for having daughters,* Ryan thought, as he headed for the Oval Office. Ben Goodley was there, waiting with the President's Daily Brief.

"You have the one from SecState?" CARDSHARP asked.

"Yeah, Andrea delivered it." Ryan fell into his swivel chair and lifted the phone, punching the proper speed-dial button.

"Good morning, Jack," SecState said in greeting, despite a short night's sleep gotten on the convertible sofa in his own office. Fortunately, his private bathroom also had a shower.

"Approved. Bring them all back," SWORDSMAN told EAGLE.

"Who handles the announcement?" Secretary Adler asked.

"You do it. We'll try to low-key it," the President said, with forlorn hope in his voice.

"Right," Adler thought. "Anything else?"

"That's it for now."

"Okay, see ya, Scott." Ryan replaced the phone. "What about China?" he asked Goodley. "Are they doing anything unusual?"

"No. Their military is active, but it's routine training activity only. Their most active sectors are up in their northeast and opposite Taiwan. Lesser activity in their southwest, north of India."

"With all the good luck the Russians are having with oil and gold, are the Chinese looking north with envy?"

"It's not bad speculation, but we have no positive indications of that from any of our sources." Everybody envied rich neighbors, after all. That's what had encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait, despite having lots of oil under his own sand.

"Any of our sources" includes SORGE, the President reminded

himself. He pondered that for a second. “Tell Ed I want a SNIE on Russia and China.”

“Quick?” Goodley asked. A Special National Intelligence Estimate could take months to prepare.

“Three or four weeks. And I want to be able to hang my hat on it.”

“I’ll tell the DCI,” Goodley promised.

“Anything else?” Ryan asked.

“That’s it for now, sir.”

Jack nodded and checked his calendar. He had a fairly routine day, but the next one would largely be spent on Air Force One flying hither and yon across America, and he was overnighting in—he flipped the page on the printout—Seattle, before flying home to Washington and another full day. It was just as easy for him to use the VC-25A as a red-eye . . . oh, yeah, he had a breakfast speech in Seattle to the local Jaycees. He’d be talking about school reform. That generated a grunt. There just weren’t enough nuns to go around. The School Sisters of Notre Dame had taught him at St. Matthew’s Elementary School in northeast Baltimore back forty-plus years earlier—and taught him well, because the penalty for not learning or for misbehaving did not bear contemplation for a seven-year-old. But the truth of the matter was that he’d been a good, and fairly obedient—*dull*, Jack admitted to himself with a wry smile—child who’d gotten good marks because he’d had a good mom and a good dad, which was a lot more than too many contemporary American kids could say—*and how the hell was he supposed to fix* that? Jack asked himself. How could he bring back the ethos of his parents’ generation, the importance of religion, and a world in which engaged people went to the altar as virgins? Now they were talking about telling kids that homosexual and lesbian sex was okay. *What would Sister Frances Mary have said about* that? Jack wondered. A pity she wasn’t around to crack some senators and representatives over the knuckles with her ruler. It had worked on him and his classmates at St. Matthew’s . . .

The desk speaker buzzed. “Senator Smithers just arrived at the West Entrance.” Ryan stood and went to his right, the door that came in from the secretaries’ anteroom. For some reason, people preferred that one to the door off the corridor opposite the Roosevelt Room. Maybe it was more businesslike. But mainly they liked to see the President standing when the door opened, his hand extended and a smile on his face, as though he really was glad to see them. Sure, Wilbur.

Mary Smithers from Iowa, matronly, three kids and seven grandkids, he thought, *more talk about the Farm Bill*. What the hell was he supposed to know about farms? the President wondered. On those rare occasions that he purchased food, he did it at the supermarket—because that’s where it all came from, wasn’t it? One of the things on

the briefing pages for his political appearances was always the local price for bread and milk in case some local reporter tested him. And chocolate milk came from brown cows.

Accordingly, Ambassador Hitch and Assistant Secretary Rutledge, will be flying back to Washington for consultations," the spokesman told the audience.

"Does this signal a break in relations with China?" a reporter asked at once.

"Not at all. 'Consultations' means just that. We will discuss the recent developments with our representatives so that our relations with China can more speedily be brought back to what they ought to be," the spokesman replied smoothly.

The assembled reporters didn't know what to make of that and so three more questions of virtually identical content were immediately asked, and answers of virtually identical content repeated for them.

"He's good," Ryan said, watching the TV, which was pirating the CNN (and other) coverage off the satellites. It wasn't going out live, oddly enough, despite the importance of the news being generated.

"Not good enough," Arnie van Damm observed. "You're going to get hit with this, too."

"I figured. When?"

"The next time they catch you in front of a camera, Jack."

And he had as much chance of ducking a camera as the leadoff hitter at opening day at Yankee Stadium, the President knew. Cameras at the White House were as numerous as shotguns during duck season, and there was no bag limit here.

Christ, Oleg!" It took a lot to make Reilly gasp, but this one crossed the threshold. "Are you serious?"

"So it would appear, Mishka," Provalov answered.

"And why are you telling me?" the American asked. Information like this was a state secret equivalent to the inner thoughts of President Grushavoy.

"There is no hiding it from you. I assume you tell everything we do together to Washington, and it was you who identified the Chinese diplomat, for which I and my country are in your debt."

The amusing part of that was that Reilly had darted off to track Suvorov/Koniev without a thought, just as a cop thing, to help out a brother cop. Only afterward—about a nanosecond afterward, of course—had he thought of the political implications. And he'd thought this far ahead, but only as speculation, not quite believing that it could possibly have gone this far forward.

"Well, yes, I have to keep the Bureau informed of my operations

here," the legal attaché admitted, not that it was an earthshaking revelation.

"I know that, Mishka."

"The Chinese wanted to kill Golovko," Reilly whispered into his vodka. "*Fuck*."

"My word exactly," Provalov told his American friend. "The question is—"

"Two questions, Oleg. First, why? Second, now what?"

"Third, who is Suvorov, and what is he up to?"

Which was obvious, Reilly thought. Was Suvorov merely a paid agent of a foreign country? Or was he part of the KGB wing of the Russian Mafia being paid by the Chinese to do something—but what, and to what purpose?

"You know, I've been hunting OC guys for a long time, but it never got anywhere near this big. This is right up there with all those bullshit stories about who 'really' killed Kennedy."

Provalov's eyes looked up. "You're not saying . . ."

"No, Oleg. The Mafia isn't that crazy. You don't go around looking to make enemies that big. You can't predict the consequences, and it isn't good for business. The Mafia is a business, Oleg. They try to make money for themselves. Even their political protection is aimed only at that, and that has limits, and they know what the limits are."

"So, if Suvorov is Mafia, then he is only trying to make money?"

"Here it's a little different," Reilly said slowly, trying to help his brain keep up with his mouth. "Here your OC guys think more politically than they do in New York." And the reason for that was that the KGB types had all grown up in an intensely political environment. Here politics really was power in a more direct sense than it had ever been in America, where politics and commerce had always been somewhat separate, the former protecting the latter (for a fee) but also controlled by it. Here it had always been, and still remained, the other way around. Business needed to rule politics because business was the source of prosperity, from which the citizens of a country derived their comforts. Russia had never prospered, because the cart kept trying to pull the horse. The recipient of the wealth had always tried to generate that wealth—and political figures are always pretty hopeless in that department. They are only good at squandering it. Politicians live by their political theories. Businessmen use reality and have to perform in a world defined by reality, not theory. That was why even in America they understood one another poorly, and never really trusted one another.

"What makes Golovko a target? What's the profit in killing him?" Reilly asked aloud.

"He is the chief adviser to President Grushavoy. He's never wanted

to be an elected official, and therefore cannot be a minister per se, but he has the president's ear because he is both intelligent and honest—and he's a patriot in the true sense."

Despite his background, Reilly didn't add. Golovko was KGB, formerly a deadly enemy to the West, and an enemy to President Ryan, but somewhere along the line they'd met each other and they'd come to respect each other—even *like* each other, so the stories in Washington went. Reilly finished off his second vodka and waved for another. He was turning into a Russian, the FBI agent thought. It was getting to the point that he couldn't hold an intelligent conversation without a drink or two.

"So, get him and thereby hurt your president, and thereby hurt your entire country. Still, it's one hell of a dangerous play, Oleg Gregoriyevich."

"A *very* dangerous play, Mishka," Provalov agreed. "Who would do such a thing?"

Reilly let out a long and speculative breath. "One very ambitious motherfucker." He had to get back to the embassy and light up his STU-6 in one big fucking hurry. He'd tell Director Murray, and Murray would tell President Ryan in half a New York minute. Then what? It was way the hell over his head, Mike Reilly thought.

"Okay, you're covering this Suvorov guy."

"We and the Federal Security Service now," Provalov confirmed.

"They good?"

"Very," the militia lieutenant admitted. "Suvorov can't fart without us knowing what he had to eat."

"And you have his communications penetrated."

Oleg nodded. "The written kind. He has a cell phone—maybe more than one, and covering them can be troublesome."

"Especially if he has an encryption system on it. There's stuff commercially available now that our people have a problem with."

"Oh?" Provalov's head came around. He was surprised for two reasons: first, that there was a reliable encryption system available for cell phones, and second, that the Americans had trouble cracking it.

Reilly nodded. "Fortunately, the bad guys haven't found out yet." Contrary to popular belief, the Mafia wasn't all that adept at using technology. Microwaving their food was about as far as they went. One Mafia don had thought his cell phone secure because of its frequency-hopping abilities, and then had entirely canceled that supposed advantage out by standing still while using it! The dunce-don had never figured that out, even after the intercept had been played aloud in Federal District Court.

"We haven't noticed any of that yet."

"Keep it that way," Reilly advised. "Anyway, you have a national-

security investigation."

"It's still murder and conspiracy to commit murder," Provalov said, meaning it was still his case.

"Anything I can do?"

"Think it over. You have good instincts for Mafia cases, and that is probably what it is."

Reilly tossed off his last drink. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, right here?"

Oleg nodded. "That is good."

The FBI agent walked back outside and got into his car. Ten minutes later, he was at his desk. He took the plastic key from his desk drawer and inserted it into the STU, then dialed Washington.

All manner of people with STU phones had access to Murray's private secure number, and so when the large system behind his desk started chirping, he just picked it up and listened to the hiss of static for thirty seconds until the robotic voice announced, "Line is secure."

"Murray," he said.

"Reilly in Moscow," the other voice said.

The FBI Director checked his desk clock. It was pretty damned late there. "What's happening, Mike?" he asked, then got the word in three fast-spoken minutes.

Yeah, Ellen?" Ryan said when the buzzer went off.

"The AG and the FBI Director want to come over, on something important, they said. You have an opening in forty minutes."

"Fair enough." Ryan didn't wonder what it was about. He'd find out quickly enough. When he realized what he'd just thought, he cursed the Presidency once more. He was becoming jaded. In *this* job?

What the hell?" Ed Foley observed.

"Seems to be solid information, too," Murray told the DCI.

"What else do you know?"

"The fax just came in, only two pages, and nothing much more than what I just told you, but I'll send it over to you. I've told Reilly to offer total cooperation. Anything to offer from your side?" Dan asked.

"Nothing comes to mind. This is all news to us, Dan. My congrats to your man Reilly for turning it." Foley was an information whore, after all. He'd take from anybody.

"Good kid. His father was a good agent, too." Murray knew better than to be smug about it, and Foley didn't deserve the abuse. Things like this were not, actually, within CIA's purview, and not likely to be tumbled to by one of their operations.

For his part, Foley wondered if he'd have to tell Murray about SORGE. If this was for real, it had to be known at the very highest levels of the Chinese government. It wasn't a freelance operation by their Moscow station. People got shot for fucking around at this level, and such an operation would not even occur to communist bureaucrats, who were not the most inventive people in the world.

"Anyway, I'm taking Pat Martin over with me. He knows espionage operations from the defensive side, and I figure I'll need the backup."

"Okay, thanks. Let me go over the fax and I'll be back to you later today."

He could hear the nod at the other end. "Right, Ed. See ya."

His secretary came in thirty seconds later with a fax in a folder. Ed Foley checked the cover sheet and called his wife in from her office.

CHAPTER 35

Breaking News

Shit," Ryan observed quietly when Murray handed him the fax from Moscow. "Shit!" he added on further reflection. "Is this for real?"

"We think so, Jack," the FBI Director confirmed. He and Ryan went back more than ten years, and so he was able to use the first name. He filled in a few facts. "Our boy Reilly, he's an OC expert, that's why we sent him over there, but he has FCI experience, too, also in the New York office. He's good, Jack," Murray assured his President. "He's going places. He's established a very good working relationship with the local cops—helped them out on some investigations, held their hands, like we do with local cops over here, y'know?"

"And?"

"And this looks gold-plated, Jack. Somebody tried to put a hit on Sergey Nikolay'ch, and it looks as though it was an agency of the Chinese government."

"Jesus. Rogue operation?"

"If so, we'll find out when some Chinese minister dies of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage—induced by a bullet in the back of the head," Murray told the President.

"Has Ed Foley seen this yet?"

"I called it in, and sent the fax over. So, yeah, he's seen it."

"Pat?" Ryan turned to the Attorney General, the smartest lawyer Ryan had yet met, and that included all of his Supreme Court appointees.

"Mr. President, this is a stunning revelation, again, if we assume it's true, and not some sort of false-flag provocation, or a play by the Russians to make something happen—problem is, I can't see the rationale for such a thing. We appear to be faced with something that's too crazy to be true, and too crazy to be false as well. I've worked foreign counterintelligence operations for a long time. I've never seen nothing like this before. We've always had an understanding with the Russians that they wouldn't hit anybody in Washington, and we wouldn't hit anybody in Moscow, and to the best of my knowledge that agreement was never violated by either side. But this thing here. If it's real, it's tantamount to an act of war. That

doesn't seem like a very prudent thing for the Chinese to do either, does it?"

POTUS looked up from the fax. "It says here that your guy Reilly turned the connection with the Chinese . . . ?"

"Keep reading," Murray told him. "He was there during a surveillance and just kinda volunteered his services, and—bingo."

"But can the Chinese really be this crazy . . ." Ryan's voice trailed off. "This isn't the Russians messing with our heads?" he asked.

"What would be the rationale behind that?" Martin asked. "If there is one, I don't see it."

"Guys, nobody is *this* crazy!" POTUS nearly exploded. It was penetrating all the way into his mind now. The world wasn't rational yet.

"Again, sir, that's something you're better equipped to evaluate than we are," Martin observed. It had the effect of calming Jack down a few notches.

"All the time I spent at Langley, I saw a lot of strange material, but this one really takes the prize."

"What do we know about the Chinese?" Murray asked, expecting to hear a reply along the lines of *jack shit*, because the Bureau had not experienced conspicuous success in its efforts to penetrate Chinese intelligence operations in America, and figured that the Agency had the same problem and for much the same reason—Americans of Chinese ethnicity weren't thick in government service. But instead he saw that President Ryan instantly adopted a guarded look and said nothing. Murray had interviewed thousands of people during his career and along the way had picked up the ability to read minds a little bit. He read Ryan's right then and wondered about what he saw there.

"Not enough, Dan. Not enough," Ryan replied tardily. His mind was still churning over this report. Pat Martin had put it right. It was too crazy to be true, and too crazy to be false. He needed the Foleys to go over this for him, and it was probably time to get Professor Weaver down from Brown University, assuming Ed and Mary Pat wouldn't throw a complete hissy-fit over letting him into both SORGE and this FBI bombshell. SWORDSMAN wasn't sure of much right now, but he was sure that he needed to figure this stuff out, and do it damned fast. American relations with China had just gone down the shitter, and now he had information to suggest they were making a direct attack on the Russian government. Ryan looked up at his guests. "Thanks for this, guys. If you have anything else to tell me, let me know quick as you can. I have to ponder this one."

"Yeah, I believe it, Jack. I've told Reilly to offer all the assistance he can and report back. They know he's doing that, of course. So, your

pal Golovko wants you to know this one. How you handle that one's up to you, I suppose."

"Yeah, I get all the simple calls." Jack managed a smile. The worst part was the inability to talk things over with people in a timely way. Things like this weren't for the telephone. You wanted to see a guy's face and body language when you picked his brain—her brain, in MP's case—on a topic like this one. He hoped George Weaver was as smart as everyone said. Right now he needed a witch.

The new security pass was entirely different from his old SDI one, and he was heading for a different Pentagon office. This was the Navy section of the Pentagon. You could tell by all the blue suits and serious looks. Each of the uniformed services had a different corporate mentality. In the U.S. Army, everyone was from Georgia. In the Air Force, they were all from southern California. In the Navy, they all seemed to be swamp Yankees, and so it was here in the Aegis Program Office.

Gregory had spent most of the morning with a couple of serious commander-rank officers who seemed smart enough, though both were praying aloud to get the hell back on a ship and out to sea, just as Army officers always wanted to get back out in the field where there was mud to put on your boots and you had to dig a hole to piss in—but that's where the soldiers were, and any officer worth his salt wanted to be where the soldiers were. For sailors, Gregory imagined, it was saltwater and fish, and probably better food than the MREs inflicted on the guys in BDUs.

But from his conversations with the squids, he'd learned much of what he'd already known. The Aegis radar/missile system had been developed to deal with the Russian airplane and cruise-missile threat to the Navy's aircraft carriers. It entailed a superb phased-array radar called the SPY and a fair-to-middlin' surface-to-air missile originally called the Standard Missile, because, Gregory imagined, it was the only one the Navy had. The Standard had evolved from the SM-1 to the SM-2, actually called the SM-2-MR because it was a "medium-range" missile instead of an ER, or extended-range, one, which had a booster stage to kick it out of the ships' launch cells a little faster and farther. There were about two hundred of the ER versions sitting in various storage sheds for the Atlantic and Pacific fleets, because full production had never been approved—because, somebody thought, the SM-2-ER might violate the 1972 AntiBallistic Missile Treaty, which had, however, been signed with a country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which country, of course, no longer existed. But after the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, the Navy had looked at using the Standard Missile and Aegis system that shot it off against theater-

missile threats like the Iraqi Scud. During that war, Aegis ships had actually been deployed into Saudi and other Gulf ports to protect them against the ballistic inbounds, but no missiles had actually been aimed that way, and so the system had never been combat-tested. Instead, Aegis ships periodically sailed out to Kwajalein Atoll, where their theater-missile capabilities were tested against ballistic target drones, and where, most of the time, they worked. But that wasn't quite the same, Gregory saw. An ICBM reentry vehicle had a maximum speed of about seventeen thousand miles per hour, or twenty-five thousand feet per second, which was almost ten times the speed of a rifle bullet.

The problem here was, oddly enough, one of both hardware and software. The SM-2-ER-Block-IV missile had indeed been designed with a ballistic target in mind, to the point that its terminal guidance system was infrared. You could, theoretically, stealth an RV against radar, but anything plunging through the atmosphere at Mach 15-plus would heat up to the temperature of molten steel. He'd seen Minuteman warheads coming into Kwajalein from California's Vandenberg Air Force Base; they came in like man-made meteors, visible even in daylight, screaming in at an angle of thirty degrees or so, slowing down, but not visibly so, as they encountered thicker air. The trick was hitting them, or rather, hitting them hard enough to destroy them. In this, the new ones were actually easier to kill than the old ones. The original RVs had been metallic, some actually made of beryllium copper, which had been fairly sturdy. The new ones were lighter—therefore able to carry a heavier and more powerful nuclear warhead—and made from material like the tiles on the space shuttle. This was little different in feel from Styrofoam and not much stronger, since it was designed only to insulate against heat, and then only for a brief span of seconds. The space shuttles had suffered damage when their 747 ferry had flown through rainstorms, and some in the ICBM business referred to large raindrops as "hydro meteors" for the damage they could do to a descending RV. On rare occasions when an RV had come down through a thunderstorm, relatively small hailstones had damaged them to the point that the nuclear warhead might not have functioned properly.

Such a target was almost as easy a kill as an aircraft—shooting airplanes down is easy if you hit them, not unlike dropping a pigeon with a shotgun. The trick remained hitting the damned things.

Even if you got close with your interceptor, close won you no cigars. The warhead on a SAM is little different from a shotgun shell. The explosive charge destroys the metal case, converting it into jagged fragments with an initial velocity of about five thousand feet per second. These are ordinarily quite sufficient to rip into the aluminum

skin that constitutes the lift and control surfaces of the strength-members of an airplane's internal framing, turning an aircraft into a ballistic object with no more ability to fly than a bird stripped of its wings.

But hitting one necessitates exploding the warhead far enough from the target that the cone formed of the flying fragments intersects the space occupied by the target. For an aircraft, this is not difficult, but for a missile warhead traveling *faster* than the explosive-produced fragments, it is—which explained the controversy over the Patriot missiles and the Scuds in 1991.

The gadget telling the SAM warhead where and when to explode is generically called the "fuse." For most modern missiles, the fusing system is a small, low-powered laser, which "nutates," or turns in a circle to project its beam in a cone forward of its flight path, until the beam hits and reflects off the target. The reflected beam is received by a receptor in the laser assembly, and *that* generates the signal telling the warhead to explode. But quick as it is, it takes a finite amount of time, and the inbound RV is coming in very fast. So fast, in fact, that if the laser beam lacks the power for more than, say, a hundred meters of range, there isn't enough time for the beam to reflect off the RV in time to tell the warhead to explode soon enough to form the cone of destruction to engulf the RV target. Even if the RV is immediately next to the SAM warhead when the warhead explodes, the RV is going faster than the fragments, which cannot hurt it because they can't catch up.

And there's the problem, Gregory saw. The laser chip in the Standard Missile's nose wasn't very powerful, and the nutation speed was relatively slow, and that combination could allow the RV to slip right past the SAM, maybe as much as half the time, even if the SAM came within three meters of the target, and that was no good at all. They might actually have been better off with the old VT proximity fuse of World War II, which had used a non-directional RF emitter, instead of the new high-tech gallium-arsenide laser chip. But there was room for him to play. The nutation of the laser beam was controlled by computer software, as was the fusing signal. That was something he could fiddle with. To that end, he had to talk to the guys who made it, "it" being the current limited-production test missile, the SM-2-ER-Block-IV, and they were the Standard Missile Company, a joint venture of Raytheon and Hughes, right up the street in McLean, Virginia. To accomplish that, he'd have Tony Bretano call ahead. Why not let them know that their visitor was anointed by God, after all?

My God, Jack," Mary Pat said. The sun was under the yardarm. Cathy was on her way home from Hopkins, and Jack was in his

private study off the Oval Office, sipping a glass of whiskey and ice with the DCI and his wife, the DDO. “When I saw this, I had to go off to the bathroom.”

“I hear you, MP.” Jack handed her a glass of sherry—Mary Pat’s favorite relaxing drink. Ed Foley picked a Samuel Adams beer in keeping with his working-class origins. “Ed?”

“Jack, this is totally fucking crazy,” the Director of Central Intelligence blurted. “Fucking” was not a word you usually used around the President, even this one. “I mean, sure, it’s from a good source and all that, but, Jesus, you just don’t *do* shit like this.”

“Pat Martin was in here, right?” the Deputy Director (Operations) asked. She got a nod. “Well, then he told you this is damned near an act of war.”

“Damned near,” Ryan agreed, with a small sip of his Irish whiskey. Then he pulled out his last cigarette of the day, stolen from Mrs. Sumter, and lit it. “But it’s a hard one to deny, and we have to fit this into government policy somehow or other.”

“We have to get George down,” Ed Foley said first of all.

“And show him SORGE, too?” Ryan asked. Mary Pat winced immediately. “I know we have to guard that one closely, MP, but, damn it, if we can’t use it to figure out these people, we’re no better off than we were before we had the source.”

She let out a long breath and nodded, knowing that Ryan was right, but not liking it very much. “And our internal pshrink,” she said. “We need a doc to check this out. It’s crazy enough that we probably need a medical opinion.”

“Next, what do we say to Sergey?” Jack asked. “He knows we know.”

“Well, start off with ‘keep your head down,’ I suppose,” Ed Foley announced. “Uh, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“You give this to your people yet, the Secret Service, I mean?”

“No . . . oh, yeah.”

“If you’re willing to commit one act of war, why not another?” the DCI asked rhetorically. “And they don’t have much reason to like you at the moment.”

“But why Golovko?” MP asked the air. “He’s no enemy of China. He’s a pro, a king-spook. He doesn’t *have* a political agenda that I know about. Sergey’s an *honest* man.” She took another sip of sherry.

“True, no political ambitions that I know of. But he is Grushavoy’s tightest adviser on a lot of issues—foreign policy, domestic stuff, defense. Grushavoy likes him because he’s smart and honest—”

“Yeah, that’s rare enough in this town, too,” Jack acknowledged. That wasn’t fair. He’d chosen his inner circle well, and almost

exclusively of people with no political ambition, which made them an endangered species in the environs of Washington. The same was true of Golovko, a man who preferred to serve rather than to rule, in which he was rather like the American President. “Back to the issue at hand. Are the Chinese making some sort of play, and if so, what?”

“Nothing that I see, Jack,” Foley replied, speaking for his agency in what was now an official capacity. “But remember that even with SORGE, we don’t see that much of their inner thinking. They’re so different from us that reading their minds is a son of a bitch, and they’ve just taken one in the teeth, though I don’t think they really know that yet.”

“They’re going to find out in less than a week.”

“Oh? How’s that?” the DCI asked.

“George Winston tells me a bunch of their commercial contracts are coming up due in less than ten days. We’ll see then what effect this has on their commercial accounts—and so will they.”

The day started earlier than usual in Beijing. Fang Gan stepped out of his official car and hurried up the steps into the building, past the uniformed guard who always held the door open for him, and this time did not get a thank-you nod from the exalted servant of the people. Fang walked to his elevator, into it, then stepped off after arriving at his floor. His office door was only a few more steps. Fang was a healthy and vigorous man for his age. His personal staff leaped to their feet as he walked in—an hour early, they all realized.

“Ming!” he called on the way to his inner office.

“Yes, Comrade Minister,” she said, on going through the still-open door.

“What items have you pulled off the foreign media?”

“One moment.” She disappeared and then reappeared with a sheaf of papers in her hand. “*London Times, London Daily Telegraph*, *Observer, New York Times*, *Washington Post, Miami Herald, Boston Globe*. The Western American papers are not yet available.” She hadn’t included Italian or other European papers because she couldn’t speak or read those languages well enough, and for some reason Fang only seemed interested in the opinions of English-speaking foreign devils. She handed over the translations. Again, he didn’t thank her even peremptorily, which was unusual for him. Her minister was exercised about something.

“What time is it in Washington?” Fang asked next.

“Twenty-one hours, Comrade Minister,” she answered.

“So, they are watching television and preparing for bed?”

“Yes, Comrade Minister.”

“But their newspaper articles and editorials are already prepared.”

"That is the schedule they work, Minister. Most of their stories are done by the end of a normal working day. At the latest, news stories—aside from the truly unusual or unexpected ones—are completely done before the reporters go home for their dinner."

Fang looked up at that analysis. Ming was a clever girl, giving him information on something he'd never really thought about. With that realization, he nodded for her to go back to her desk.

For their part, the American trade delegation was just boarding their plane. They were seen off by a minor consular official who spoke plastic words from plastic lips, received by the Americans through plastic ears. Then they boarded their USAF aircraft, which started up at once and began rolling toward the runway.

"So, how do we evaluate this adventure, Cliff?" Mark Gant asked.

"Can you spell 'disaster'?" Rutledge asked in return.

"That bad?"

The Assistant Secretary of State for Policy nodded soberly. Well, it wasn't his fault, was it? That stupid Italian clergyman gets in the way of a bullet, and then the widow of that other minister-person had to pray for him in public, *knowing* that the local government would object. And, of course, CNN had to be there for both events to stir the pot at home . . . How was a diplomat supposed to make peace happen if people kept making things worse instead of better?

"That bad, Mark. China may never get a decent trade agreement if this crap keeps going on."

"All they have to do is change their own policies a little," Gant offered.

"You sound like the President."

"Cliffy, if you want to join a club, you have to abide by the club rules. Is that so hard to understand?"

"You don't treat great nations like the dentist nobody likes who wants to join the country club."

"Why is the principle different?"

"Do you really think the United States can govern its foreign policy by *principle?*" Rutledge asked in exasperation. So much so, in fact, that he'd let his mind slip a gear.

"The President does, Cliff, and so does your Secretary of State," Gant pointed out.

"Well, if we want a trade agreement with China, we have to consider their point of view."

"You know, Cliff, if you'd been in the State Department back in 1938, maybe Hitler could have killed all the Jews without all that much of a fuss," Gant observed lightly.

It had the desired effect. Rutledge turned and started to object:

"Wait a minute—"

"It was just his internal policy, Cliff, wasn't it? So what, they go to a different church—gas 'em. Who cares?"

"Now look, Mark—"

"You look, Cliff. A country has to stand for certain things, because if you don't, who the fuck are you, okay? We're in the club—hell, we pretty much run the club. Why, Cliff? Because people know what we stand for. We're not perfect. You know it. I know it. They all know it. But they also know what we will and won't do, and so, we can be trusted by our friends, and by our enemies, too, and so the world makes a little sense, at least in our parts of it. And *that* is why we're respected, Cliff."

"And all the weapons don't matter, and all the commercial power we have, what about them?" the diplomat demanded.

"How do you think we got them, Cliffy?" Gant demanded, using the diminutive of Rutledge's name again, just to bait him. "We are what we are because people from all over the world came to America to work and live out their dreams. They worked hard. My grandfather came over from Russia because he didn't like getting fucked over by the czar, and he worked, and he got his kids educated, and they got *their* kids educated, and so now I'm pretty damned rich, but I haven't forgotten what Grandpa told me when I was little either. He told me this was the best place the world ever saw to be a Jew. Why, Cliff? Because the dead white European men who broke us away from England and wrote the Constitution had some good ideas and they lived up to them, for the most part. That's who we are, Cliff. And that means we have to *be* what we are, and *that* means we have to stand for certain things, and the world has to see us do it."

"But we have so many flaws ourselves," Rutledge protested.

"Of course we do! Cliff, we don't have to be perfect to be the best around, and we never stop trying to be better. My dad, when he was in college, he marched in Mississippi, and got his ass kicked a couple of times, but you know, it all worked out, and so now we have a black guy in the Vice Presidency. From what I hear, maybe he's good enough to take one more step up someday. Jesus, Cliff, how can you represent America to other nations if you don't get it?"

Diplomacy is business, Rutledge wanted to reply. *And I know how to do the business.* But why bother trying to explain things to this Chicago Jew? So, he rocked his seat back and tried to look dozy. Gant took the cue and stood for a seventy-foot walk. The Air Force sergeants who pretended to be stewardesses aboard served breakfast, and the coffee was pretty decent. He found himself in the rear of the aircraft looking at all the reporters, and that felt a little bit like enemy territory, but not, on reflection, as much as it did sitting next to that diplo-jerk.

The morning sun that lit up Beijing had done the same to Siberia even earlier in the day.

"I see our engineers are as good as ever," Bondarenko observed. As he watched, earthmoving machines were carving a path over a hundred meters wide through the primeval forests of pine and spruce. This road would serve both the gold strike and the oil fields. And this wasn't the only one. Two additional routes were being worked by a total of twelve crews. Over a third of the Russian Army's available engineers were on these projects, and that was a lot of troops, along with more than half of the heavy equipment in the olive-green paint the Russian army had used for seventy years.

"This is a 'Hero Project,' " Colonel Aliyev said. And he was right. The "Hero Project" idea had been created by the Soviet Union to indicate something of such great national importance that it would draw the youth of the nation in patriotic zeal—and besides, it was a good way to meet girls and see a little more of the world. This one was moving even faster than that, because Moscow had assigned the military to it, and the military was no longer worrying itself about an invasion from (or into) NATO. For all its faults, the Russian army still had access to a lot of human and material resources. Plus. there was real money in this project. Wages were very high for the civilians. Moscow wanted both of these resource areas brought on line—and quickly. And so the goldfield workers had been helicoptered in with light equipment, with which they'd built a larger landing area, which allowed still heavier equipment to be air-dropped, and with that a small, rough airstrip had been built. That had allowed Russian air force cargo aircraft to lift in truly heavy equipment, which was now roughing in a proper airlanding strip for when the crew extending the railroad got close enough to deliver the cement and rebar to create a real commercial-quality airport. Buildings were going up. Some of the first things that had been sent in were the components of a sawmill, and one thing you didn't have to import into this region was wood. Large swaths were being cleared, and the trees cut down to clear them were almost instantly transformed into lumber for building. First, the sawmill workers set up their own rough cabins. Now, administrative buildings were going up, and in four months, they expected to have dormitories for over a thousand of the miners who were already lining up for the highly paid job of digging this gold out of the ground. The Russian government had decided that the workers here would have the option of being paid in gold coin at world-price, and that was something few Russian citizens wanted to walk away from. And so expert miners were filling out their application forms in anticipation of the flights into the new strike. Bondarenko wished them luck. There

were enough mosquitoes there to carry off a small child and suck him dry of blood like minivampires. Even for gold coin, it was not a place he'd want to work.

The oil field was ultimately more important to his country, the general knew. Already, ships were fighting their way through the late-spring ice, shepherded by navy icebreakers like the *Yamal* and *Rossiya,* to deliver the drilling equipment needed to commence proper exploration for later production. But Bondarenko had been well briefed on this subject. This oil field was no pipe dream. It was the economic salvation of his country, a way to inject *huge* quantities of hard currency into Russia, money to buy the things it needed to smash its way into the twenty-first century, money to pay the workers who'd striven so hard and so long for the prosperity they and their country deserved.

And it was Bondarenko's job to guard it. Meanwhile, army engineers were furiously at work building harbor facilities so that the cargo ships would be able to land what cargo they had. The use of amphibious-warfare ships, so that the Russian navy could land the cargo on the beaches as though it were battle gear, had been examined but discarded. In many cases, the cargo to be landed was larger than the main battle tanks of the Russian army, a fact which had both surprised and impressed the commanding general of the Far East Military District.

One consequence of all this was that most of Bondarenko's engineers had been stripped away for one project or another, leaving him with a few battalions organically attached to his fighting formations. And he had uses of his own for those engineers, the general grumbled. There were several places on the Chinese border where a couple of regiments could put together some very useful obstacles against invading mechanized forces. But they'd be visible, and too obviously intended to be used against Chinese forces, Moscow had told him, not caring, evidently, that the only way they could be used against the People's Liberation Army was if that army decided to come north and *liberate* Russia!

What was it about politicians? Bondarenko thought. Even the ones in America were the same, so he'd been told by American officers he'd met. Politicians didn't really care much about what something did, but they cared a great deal about what it *appeared* to do. *In that sense, all politicians of whatever political tilt all over the world were communists,* Bondarenko thought with an amused grunt, *more interested in show than reality*.

"When will they be finished?" the general-colonel asked.

"They've made amazing progress," Colonel Aliyev replied. "The routes will be fully roughed in—oh, another month or six weeks,

depending on weather. The finishing work will take much longer."

"You know what worries me?"

"What is that, Comrade General?" the operations officer asked.

"We've built an invasion route. For the first time, the Chinese could jump across the border and make good time to the north Siberian coast." Before, the natural obstacles—mainly the wooded nature of the terrain—would have made that task difficult to the point of impossibility. But now there was a way to get there, and a reason to go there as well. Siberia now truly *was* something it had often been thought to be, a treasure house of cosmic proportions. *Treasure house*, Bondarenko thought. *And I am the keeper of the keys*. He walked back to his helicopter to complete his tour of the route being carved out by army engineers.

CHAPTER 36

SORGE Reports

President Ryan awoke just before six in the morning. The Secret Service preferred that he keep the shades closed, thus blocking the windows, but Ryan had never wanted to sleep in a coffin, even a large one, and so when he awoke momentarily at such times as 3:53 he preferred to see some sort of light outside the window, even if only the taillights of a patrolling police car or a lonely taxicab. Over the years, he'd become accustomed to waking early. That surprised him. As a boy, he'd always preferred to sleep late, especially on weekends. But Cathy had been the other way, like most doctors, and especially most surgeons: early to rise, and get to the hospital, so that when you worked on a patient you had all day to see how he or she tolerated the procedure.

So, maybe he'd picked it up from her, and in some sort of perverse one-upmanship he'd come to open his eyes even earlier. Or maybe it was a more recently acquired habit in this damned place, Jack thought, as he slid off the bed and padded off to the bathroom as another damned day started, this one like so many others, too damned early. What the hell was the matter? the President wondered. Why was it that he didn't need sleep as much anymore? Hell, sleep was one of the very few pure pleasures given to man on earth, and all he wanted was just a little more of it . . .

But he couldn't have it. It was just short of six in the morning, Jack told himself as he looked out the window. Milkmen were up, as were paperboys. Mailmen were in their sorting rooms, and in other places people who had worked through the night were ending their working days. That included a lot of people right here in the White House: protective troops in the Secret Service, domestic staff, some people Ryan knew by sight but not by name, which fact shamed him somewhat. They were *his* people, after all, and he was supposed to know about them, know their names well enough to speak them when he saw the owners thereof—but there were just too many of them for him to know. Then there were the uniformed people in the White House Military Office—called *Wham-o* by insiders—who supplemented the Office of Signals. There was, in fact, a small army of

men and women who existed only to serve John Patrick Ryan—and through him the country as a whole, or that was the theory. What the hell, he thought, looking out the window. It was light enough to see. The streetlights were clicking off as their photoelectric sensors told them the sun was coming up. Jack pulled on his old Naval Academy robe, stepped into his slippers—he'd only gotten them recently; at home he just walked around barefoot, but a President couldn't do that in front of the troops, could he?—and moved quietly into the corridor.

There must have been some sort of bug or motion sensor close to the bedroom door, Jack thought. He never managed to surprise anyone when he came out into the upstairs corridor unexpectedly. The heads always seemed to be looking in his direction and there was the instant morning race to see who could greet him first.

The first this time was one of the senior Secret Service troops, head of the night crew. Andrea Price-O'Day was still at her home in Maryland, probably dressed and ready to head out the door—what shitty hours these people worked on his behalf, Jack reminded himself—for the hourlong drive into D.C. And with luck she'd make it home—when? Tonight? That depended on his schedule for today, and he couldn't remember offhand what he had happening.

"Coffee, Boss?" one of the younger agents asked.

"Sounds like a winner, Charlie." Ryan followed him, yawning. He ended up in the Secret Service guard post for this floor, a walk-in closet, really, with a TV and a coffeepot—probably stocked by the kitchen staff—and some munchies to help the people get through the night.

"When did you come on duty?" POTUS asked.

"Eleven, sir," Charlie Malone answered.

"Boring duty?"

"Could be worse. At least I'm not working the badcheck detail in Omaha anymore."

"Oh, yeah," agreed Joe Hilton, another one of the young agents on the deathwatch.

"I bet you played ball," Jack observed.

Hilton nodded. "Outside linebacker, sir. Florida State University. Not big enough for the pros, though."

Only about two-twenty, and it's all lean meat, Jack thought. Young Special Agent Hilton looked like a fundamental force of nature.

"Better off playing baseball. You make a good living, work fifteen years, maybe more, and you're healthy at the end of it."

"Well, maybe I'll train my boy to be an outfielder," Hilton said.

"How old?" Ryan asked, vaguely remembering that Hilton was a recent father. His wife was a lawyer at the Justice Department, wasn't she?

"Three months. Sleeping through the night now, Mr. President. Good of you to ask."

I wish they'd just call me Jack. I'm not God, *am I?* But that was about as likely as his calling his commanding general Bobby-Ray back when he'd been Second Lieutenant John P. Ryan, USMC.

"Anything interesting happen during the night?"

"Sir, CNN covered the departure of our diplomats from Beijing, but that just showed the airplane taking off."

"I think they just send the cameras down halfway hoping the airplane'll blow up so that they'll have tape of it—you know, like when the chopper comes to lift me out of here." Ryan sipped his coffee. These junior Secret Service agents were probably a little uneasy to have "The Boss," as he was known within the Service, talking with them as if he and they were normal people. If so, Jack thought, tough shit. He wasn't going to turn into Louis XIV just to make *them* happy. Besides, he wasn't as good-looking as Leonardo DiCaprio, at least according to Sally, who thought that young actor was the cat's ass.

Just then, a messenger arrived with the day's copies of the morning's *Early Bird.* Jack took one along with the coffee and headed back to read it over. A few editorials bemoaning the recall of the trade delegation—maybe it was the lingering liberalism in the media, the reason they were not, never had been, and probably never would be entirely comfortable with the amateur statesman in the White House. Privately, Ryan knew, they called him other things, some rather less polite, but the average Joe out there, Arnie van Damm told Jack once a week or so, still liked him a lot. Ryan's approval rating was still very high, and the reason for it, it seemed, was that Jack was perceived as a regular guy who'd gotten lucky—if they called *this* luck, POTUS thought with a stifled grunt.

He returned to reading the news articles, wandering back to the breakfast room, as he did so, where, he saw, people were hustling to get things set up—notified, doubtless, by the Secret Service that SWORDSMAN was up and needed to be fed. Yet more of the *His Majesty Effect*, Ryan groused. But he was hungry, and food was food, and so he wandered in, picked what he wanted off the buffet, and flipped the TV on to see what was happening in the world as he attacked his eggs Benedict. He'd have to devour them quickly, before Cathy appeared to yell at him about the cholesterol intake. All around him, to a radius of thirty miles or so, the government was coming to consciousness, or what passed for it, dressing, getting in their cars, and heading in, just as he was, but not as comfortably.

"Morning, Dad," Sally said, coming in next and walking to the TV, which she switched to MTV without asking. It was a long way since

that bright afternoon in London when he'd been shot, Jack thought. He'd been "daddy" then.

In Beijing the computer on Ming's desk had been in autosleep mode for just the right number of minutes. The hard drive started turning again, and the machine began its daily routine. Without lighting up the monitor, it examined the internal file of recent entries, compressed them, and then activated the internal modem to shoot them out over the 'Net. The entire process took about seventeen seconds, and then the computer went back to sleep. The data proceeded along the telephone lines in the city of Beijing until it found its destination server, which was, actually, in Wisconsin. There it waited for the signal that would call it up, after which it would be dumped out of the server's memory, and soon thereafter written over, eliminating any trace that it had ever existed.

In any case, as Washington woke up, Beijing was heading for sleep, with Moscow a few hours behind. The earth continued its turning, oblivious of what transpired in the endless cycle of night and day.

Well?" General Diggs looked at his subordinate.

"Well, sir," Colonel Giusti said, "I think the cavalry squadron is in pretty good shape." Like Diggs, Angelo Giusti was a career cavalryman. His job as commander of 1st Armored's cavalry squadron (actually a battalion, but the cav had its own way of speaking) was to move out ahead of the division proper, locating the enemy and scouting out the land, being the eyes of Old Ironsides, but with enough combat power of its own to look after itself. A combat veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Giusti had smelled the smoke and seen the elephant. He knew what his job was, and he figured he had his troopers trained up about as well as circumstances in Germany allowed. He actually preferred the free-form play allowed by simulators to the crowded training fields of the Combat Maneuver Training Center, which was barely seventy-five square kilometers. It wasn't the same as being out there in your vehicles, but neither was it restricted by time and distance, and on the global SimNet system you could play against a complete enemy battalion, even a brigade if you wanted your people to get some sweat in their play. Except for the bumpy-float sensation of driving your Abrams around (some tankers got motion sickness from that), it conveyed the complexity better than any place except the NTC at Fort Irwin in the California desert, or the comparable facility the Army had established for the Israelis in the Negev.

Diggs couldn't quite read the younger officer's mind, but he'd just watched the Quarter Horse move around with no lack of skill. They'd

played against some Germans, and the Germans, as always, were pretty good at the war business—but not, today, as good as First Tanks' cavalry troopers, who'd first outmaneuvered their European hosts, and then (to the surprise and distaste of the German brigadier who'd supervised the exercise) set an ambush that had cost them half a battalion of their Leos, as the Americans called the Leopard-II main battle tanks. Diggs would be having dinner with the brigadier later today. Even the Germans didn't know night-fighting as well as the Americans did—which was odd, since their equipment was roughly comparable, and their soldiers pretty well trained . . . but the German army was still largely a conscript army, most of whose soldiers didn't have the time-in-service the Americans enjoyed.

In the wider exercise—the cavalry part had just been the "real" segment of a wider command post exercise, or CPX—Colonel Don Lisle's 2nd Brigade was handling the fuller, if theoretical, German attack quite capably. On the whole, the Bundeswehr was not having a good day. Well, it no longer had the mission of protecting its country against a Soviet invasion, and with that had gone the rather furious support of the citizenry that the West German army had enjoyed for so many years. Now the Bundeswehr was an anachronism with little obvious purpose, and the occupier of a lot of valuable real estate for which Germans could think up some practical uses. And so the former West German army had been downsized and mainly trained to do peacekeeping duty, which, when you got down to it, was heavily armed police work. The New World Order was a peaceful one, at least so far as Europeans were concerned. The Americans had engaged in combat operations to the rather distant interest of the Germans, who, while they'd always had a healthy interest in war-fighting, were now happy enough that their interest in it was entirely theoretical, rather like a particularly intricate Hollywood production. It also forced them to respect America a little more than they would have preferred. But some things couldn't be helped.

"Well, Angelo, I think your troopers have earned themselves a beer or two at the local Gasthauses. That envelopment you accomplished at zero-two-twenty was particularly adroit."

Giusti grinned and nodded his appreciation. "Thank you, General. I'll pass that one along to my S-3. He's the one who thought it up."

"Later, Angelo."

"Roger that one, sir." Lieutenant Colonel Giusti saluted his divisional commander on his way.

"Well, Duke?"

Colonel Masterman pulled a cigar out of his BDU jacket and lit it up. One nice thing about Germany was that you could always get good Cuban ones here. "I've known Angelo since Fort Knox. He knows his

stuff, and he had his officers particularly well trained. Even had his own book on tactics and battle-drill printed up."

"Oh?" Diggs turned. "Is it any good?"

"Not bad at all," the G-3 replied. "I'm not sure that I agree with it all, but it doesn't hurt to have everyone singing out of the same hymnal. His officers all think pretty much the same way. So, Angelo's a good football coach. Sure enough he kicked the Krauts' asses last night." Masterman closed his eyes and rubbed his face. "These night exercises take it out of you."

"How's Lisle doing?"

"Sir, last time I looked, he had the Germans well contained. Our friends didn't seem to know what he had around them. They were putzing around trying to gather information—short version, Giusti won the reconnaissance battle, and that decided things—again."

"Again," Diggs agreed. If there was any lesson out of the National Training Center, it was that one. Reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance. Find the enemy. Don't let the enemy find you. If you pulled that off, it was pretty hard to lose. If you didn't, it was very hard to win.

"How's some sleep grab you, Duke?"

"It's good to have a CG who looks after his troopers, *mon Général.*" Masterman was sufficiently tired that he didn't even want a beer first.

And so with that decided, they headed for Diggs's command UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter for the hop back to the divisional kazerne. Diggs particularly liked the four-point safety belt. It made it a lot easier to sleep sitting up.

***O**ne of the things I have to do today*, Ryan told himself, *is figure out what to do about the Chinese attempt on Sergey.* He checked his daily briefing sheet. Robby was out west again. That was too bad. Robby was both a good sounding board and a source of good ideas. So, he'd talk it over with Scott Adler, if he and Scott both had holes in their day, and the Foleys. *Who else?* Jack wondered. Damn, whom else could he trust with this? If this one leaked to the press, there'd be hell to pay. Okay, Adler had to be there. He'd actually met that Zhang guy, and if some Chinese minister-type had owned a piece of this, then he'd be the one, wouldn't he?

Probably. Not *certainly*, however. Ryan had been in the spook business too long to make that mistake. When you made *certainty* assumptions about things you weren't really sure about, you frequently walked right into a stone wall headfirst, and that could hurt. Ryan punched a button on his desk. "Ellen?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Later today, I need Scott Adler and the Foleys in here. It'll take

about an hour. Find me a hole in the schedule, will you?"

"About two-thirty, but it means putting off the Secretary of Transportation's meeting about the air-traffic-control proposals."

"Make it so, Ellen. This one's important," he told her.

"Yes, Mr. President."

It was by no means perfect. Ryan preferred to work on things as they popped into his mind, but as President you quickly learned that you served the schedule, not the other way around. Jack grimaced. So much for the illusion of power.

Mary Pat Foley strolled into her office, as she did nearly every morning, and as always turned on her computer—if there was one thing she'd learned from SORGE, it was to turn the damned thing all the way off when she wasn't using it. There was a further switch on her phone line that manually blocked it, much as if she'd pulled the plug out of the wall. She flipped that, too. It was an old story for an employee of an intelligence service. Sure, she was paranoid, but was she paranoid *enough?*

Sure enough, there was another e-mail from cgood@jadecastle.com. Chet Nomuri was still at work, and this download took a mere twenty-three seconds. With the download complete, she made sure she'd backed it up, then clobbered it out of her in-box so that no copies remained even in the ether world. Next, she printed it all up and called down for Joshua Sears to do the translations and some seat-of-the-pants analysis. SORGE had become routine in handling if not in importance, and by a quarter to nine she had the translation in hand.

"Oh, Lord. Jack's just going to love this one," the DDO observed at her desk. Then she walked the document to Ed's larger office facing the woods. That's when she found out about the afternoon trip to the White House.

Mary Abbot was the official White House makeup artist. It was her job to make the President look good on TV, which meant making him look like a cheap whore in person, but that couldn't be helped. Ryan had learned not to fidget too much, which made her job easier, but she knew he was fighting the urge, which both amused and concerned her.

"How's your son doing at school?" Ryan asked.

"Just fine, thank you, and there's a nice girl he's interested in."

Ryan didn't comment on that. He knew that there had to be some boy or boys at St. Mary's who found his Sally highly interesting (she was pretty, even to disinterested eyes), but he didn't want to think about that. It did make him grateful for the Secret Service, however. Whenever Sally went on a date, there would be at least a chase car

full of armed agents close by, and *that* would take the starch out of most teenaged boys. So, the USSS did have its uses, eh? *Girl children*, Jack thought, *were God's punishment on you for being a man*. His eyes were scanning his briefing sheets for the mini—press conference. The likely questions and the better sorts of answers to give to them. It seemed very dishonest to do it this way, but some foreign heads of government had the question prescreened so that the answers could be properly canned. Not a bad idea in the abstract, Jack thought, but the American media would spring for that about as quickly as a coyote would chase after a whale.

"There," Mrs. Abbot said, as she finished touching up his hair. Ryan stood, looked in the mirror, and grimaced as usual.

"Thank you, Mary," he managed to say.

"You're welcome, Mr. President."

And Ryan walked out, crossing the hall from the Roosevelt Room to the Oval Office, where the TV equipment was set up. The reporters stood when he entered, as the kids at St. Matthew's had stood when the priest came into class. But in third grade, the kids asked easier questions. Jack sat down in a rocking swivel chair. Kennedy had done something similar to that, and Arnie thought it a good idea for Jack as well. The gentle rocking that a man did unconsciously in the chair gave him a homey look, the spin experts all thought—Jack didn't know that, and knowing it would have caused him to toss the chair out the window, but Arnie did and he'd eased the President into it merely by saying it looked good, and getting Cathy Ryan to agree. In any case, SWORDSMAN sat down, and relaxed in the comfortable chair, which was the other reason Arnie had foisted it on him, and the real reason why Ryan had agreed. It was comfortable.

"We ready?" Jack asked. When the President asked that, it usually meant *Let's get this fucking show on the road!* But Ryan thought it was just a question.

Krystin Matthews was there to represent NBC. There were also reporters from ABC and Fox, plus a print reporter from the *Chicago Tribune.* Ryan had come to prefer these more intimate press conferences, and the media went along with it because the reporters were assigned by lot, which made it fair, and everyone had access to the questions and answers. The other good thing from Ryan's perspective was that a reporter was less likely to be confrontational in the Oval Office than in the raucous locker-room atmosphere of the pressroom, where the reporters tended to bunch together in a mob and adopt a mob mentality.

"Mr. President," Krystin Matthews began. "You've recalled both the trade delegation and our ambassador from Beijing. Why was that necessary?"

Ryan rocked a little in the chair. “Krystin, we all saw the events in Beijing that so grabbed the conscience of the world, the murder of the cardinal and the minister, followed by the roughing-up—to use a charitable term for it—of the minister’s widow and some members of the congregation.”

He went on to repeat the points he’d made in his previous press conference, making particular note of the Chinese government’s indifference to what had happened.

“One can only conclude that the Chinese government doesn’t care. Well, we care. The American people care. And this administration cares. You cannot take the life of a human being as casually as though you are swatting an insect. The response we received was unsatisfactory, and so, I recalled our ambassador for consultations.”

“But the trade negotiations, Mr. President,” the *Chicago Tribune* broke in.

“It is difficult for a country like the United States of America to do business with a nation which does not recognize human rights. You’ve seen for yourself what our citizens think of all this. I believe you will find that they find those murders as repellent as I do, and, I would imagine, as you do yourself.”

“And so you will not recommend to Congress that we normalize trading relations with China?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, I will not so recommend, and even if I did, Congress would rightly reject such a recommendation.”

“At what time might you change your position on this issue?”

“At such time as China enters the world of civilized nations and recognizes the rights of its common people, as all other great nations do.”

“So you are saying that China today is not a civilized country?”

Ryan felt as though he’d been slapped across the face with a cold, wet fish, but he smiled and went on. “Killing diplomats is not a civilized act, is it?”

“What will the Chinese think of that?” Fox asked.

“I cannot read their minds. I do call upon them to make amends, or at least to consider the feelings and beliefs of the rest of the world, and then to reconsider their unfortunate action in that light.”

“And what about the trade issues?” This one came from ABC.

“If China wants normalized trade relations with the United States, then China will have to open its markets to us. As you know, we have a law on the books here called the Trade Reform Act. That law allows us to mirror-image other countries’ trade laws and practices, so that whatever tactics are used against us, we can then use those very same tactics with respect to trade with them. Tomorrow, I will direct the Department of State and the Department of Commerce to set up a

working group to implement TRA with respect to the People's Republic," President Ryan announced, making the story for the day, and a bombshell it was.

Christ, Jack," the Secretary of the Treasury said in his office across the street. He was getting a live feed from the Oval Office. He lifted his desk phone and punched a button. "I want a read of the PRC's current cash accounts, global," he told one of his subordinates from New York. Then his phone rang.

"Secretary of State on Three," his secretary told him over the intercom. SecTreas grunted and picked up the phone.

"Yeah, I saw it too, Scott."

So, Yuriy Andreyevich, how did it go?" Clark asked. It had taken over a week to set up, and mainly because General Kirillin had spent a few hours on the pistol range working on his technique. Now he'd just stormed into the officers' club bar looking as though he'd taken one in the guts.

"Is he a Mafia assassin?"

Chavez had himself a good laugh at that. "General, he came to us because the Italian police wanted to get him away from the Mafia. He got in the way of a mob assassination, and the local chieftain made noises about going after him and his family. What did he get you for?"

"Fifty euros," Kirillin nearly spat.

"You were confident going in, eh?" Clark asked. "Been there, done that."

"Got the fuckin' T-shirt," Ding finished the statement with a laugh. And fifty euros was a dent even in the salary of a Russian three-star.

"Three points, in a five-hundred-point match. I scored four ninety-three!"

"Ettore only got four ninety-six?" Clark asked. "Jesus, the boy's slowing down." He slid a glass in front of the Russian general officer.

"He's drinking more over here," Chavez observed.

"That must be it." Clark nodded. The Russian general officer was not, however, the least bit amused.

"Falcone is not human," Kirillin said, gunning down his first shot of vodka.

"He could scare Wild Bill Hickok, and that's a fact. And you know the worst part about it?"

"What is that, Ivan Sergeyevich?"

"He's so goddamned humble about it, like it's fucking normal to shoot like that. Jesus, Sam Snead was never that good with a five-iron."

"General," Domingo said after his second vodka of the evening. The

problem with being in Russia was that you tended to pick up the local customs, and one of those was drinking. “Every man on my team is an expert shot, and by expert, I mean close to being on his country’s Olympic team, okay? Big Bird’s got us all beat, and none of us are used to losing any more’n you are. But I’ll tell you, I’m goddamned glad he’s on my team.” Just then, Falcone walked through the door. “Hey, Ettore, come on over!”

He hadn’t gotten any shorter. Ettore towered over the diminutive Chavez, and still looked like a figure from an El Greco painting. “General,” he said in greeting to Kirillin. “You shoot extremely well.”

“Not so good as you, Falcone,” the Russian responded.

The Italian cop shrugged. “I had a lucky day.”

“Sure, guy,” Clark reacted, as he handed Falcone a shot glass.

“I’ve come to like this vodka,” Falcone said on gunning it down. “But it affects my aim somewhat.”

“Yeah, Ettore.” Chavez chuckled. “The general told us you blew four points in the match.”

“You mean you have done better than this?” Kirillin demanded.

“He has,” Clark answered. “I watched him shoot a possible three weeks ago. That was five hundred points, too.”

“That was a good day,” Falcone agreed. “I had a good night’s sleep beforehand and no hangover at all.”

Clark had himself a good chuckle and turned to look around the room. Just then, another uniform entered the room and looked around. He spotted General Kirillin and walked over.

“Damn, who’s this recruiting poster?” Ding wondered aloud as he approached.

“Tovarisch General,” the man said by way of greeting.

“Anatoliy Ivan’ch,” Kirillin responded. “How are things at the Center?”

Then the guy turned. “You are John Clark?”

“That’s me,” the American confirmed. “Who are you?”

“This is Major Anatoliy Shelepin,” General Kirillin answered. “He’s chief of personal security for Sergey Golovko.”

“We know your boss.” Ding held out his hand. “Howdy. I’m Domingo Chavez.”

Handshakes were exchanged all around.

“Could we speak in a quieter place?” Shelepin asked. The four men took over a corner booth in the club. Falcone remained at the bar.

“Sergey Nikolay’ch sent you over?” the Russian general asked.

“You haven’t heard,” Major Shelepin answered. It was the way he said it that got everyone’s attention. He spoke in Russian, which Clark and Chavez understood well enough. “I want my people to train with you.”

"Haven't heard what?" Kirillin asked.

"We found out who tried to kill the Chairman," Shelepin announced.

"Oh, he was the target? I thought they were after the pimp," Kirillin objected.

"You guys want to tell us what you're talking about?" Clark asked.

"A few weeks ago, there was an assassination attempt in Dzerzhinskiy Square," Shelepin responded, explaining what they'd thought at the time. "But now it appears they hit the wrong target."

"Somebody tried to waste Golovko?" Domingo asked. "Damn."

"Who was it?"

"The man who arranged it was a former KGB officer named Suvorov—so we believe, that is. He used two ex—Spetsnaz soldiers. They have both been murdered, probably to conceal their involvement, or at least to prevent them from discussing it with anyone." Shelepin didn't add anything else. "In any case, we have heard good things about your Rainbow troops, and we want you to help train my protective detail."

"It's okay with me, so long as it's okay with Washington." Clark stared hard into the bodyguard's eyes. He looked damned serious, but not very happy with the world at the moment.

"We will make the formal request tomorrow."

"They are excellent, these Rainbow people," Kirillin assured him. "We're getting along well with them. Anatoliy used to work for me, back when I was a colonel." The tone of voice told what he thought of the younger man.

There was more to this, Clark thought. A senior Russian official didn't just ask a former CIA officer for help with something related to his personal safety out of the clear blue. He caught Ding's eye and saw the same thought. Suddenly both were back in the spook business.

"Okay," John said. "I'll call home tonight if you want." He'd do that from the American Embassy, probably on the STU-6 in the station chief's office.

CHAPTER 37

Fallout

The VC-137 landed without fanfare at Andrews Air Force Base. The base lacked a proper terminal and the attendant jetways, and so the passengers debarked on stairs grafted onto a flatbed truck. Cars waited at the bottom to take them into Washington. Mark Gant was met by two Secret Service agents who drove him at once to the Treasury Department building across the street from the White House. He'd barely gotten used to being on the ground when he found himself in the Secretary's office.

"How'd it go?" George Winston asked.

"Interesting, to say the least," Gant said, his mind trying to get used to the fact that his body didn't have a clue where it was at the moment. "I thought I'd be going home to sleep it off."

"Ryan's invoking the Trade Recovery Act against the Chinese."

"Oh? Well, that's not all that much of a surprise, is it?"

"Look at this," SecTreas commanded, handing over a recently produced printout. "This" was a report on the current cash holdings of the People's Republic of China.

"How solid is this information?" TELESCOPE asked TRADER.

The report was an intelligence estimate in all but name. Employees within the Treasury Department routinely kept track of international monetary transactions as a means of determining the day-to-day strength of the dollar and other internationally traded currencies. That included the Chinese yuan, which had been having a slightly bad time of late.

"They're this thin?" Gant asked. "I thought they were running short of cash, but I didn't know it was quite this bad . . ."

"It surprised me, too," SecTreas admitted. "It appears that they've been purchasing a lot of things on the international market lately, especially jet engines from France, and because they're late paying for the last round, the French company has decided to take a harder line —they're the only game in town. We won't let GE or Pratt and Whitney bid on the order, and the Brits have similarly forbidden Rolls-Royce. That makes the French the sole source, which isn't so bad for the French, is it? They've jacked up the price about fifteen percent,

and they're asking for cash up front."

"The yuan's going to take a hit," Gant predicted. "They've been trying to cover this up, eh?"

"Yeah, and fairly successfully."

"That's why they were hitting us so hard on the trade deal. They saw this one coming, and they wanted a favorable announcement to bail them out. But they sure didn't play it very smart. Damn, you have this sort of a problem, you learn to crawl a little."

"I thought so, too. Why, do you think?"

"They're proud, George. Very, very proud. Like a rich family that's lost its money but not its social position, and tries to make up for the one with the other. But it doesn't work. Sooner or later, people find out that you're not paying your bills, and then the whole world comes crashing in on you. You can put it off for a while, which makes sense if you have something coming in, but if the ship don't dock, you sink." Gant flipped some pages, thinking: The other problem is that countries are run by politicians, people with no real understanding of money, who figure they can always maneuver their way out of whatever comes up. They're so used to having their own way that they never really think they can't have it that way all the time. One of the things Gant had learned working in D.C. was that politics was just as much about illusion as the motion-picture business was, which perhaps explained the affinity the two communities had for each other. But even in Hollywood you had to pay the bills, and you had to show a profit. Politicians always had the option of using T-bills to finance their accounts, and they also printed the money. Nobody expected the government to show a profit, and the board of directors was the voters, the people whom politicians conned as a way of life. It was all crazy, but that was the political game.

That's probably what the PRC leaders were thinking, Gant surmised. But sooner or later, reality raised its ugly head, and when it did all the time spent trying to avoid it was what really bit you on the ass. That was when the whole world said *gotcha.* And then you were well and truly got. In this case, the *gotcha* could be the collapse of the Chinese economy, and it would happen virtually overnight.

"George, I think State and CIA need to see this, and the President, too."

Lord." The President was sitting in the Oval Office, smoking one of Ellen Sumter's Virginia Slims and watching TV. This time it was C-SPAN. Members of the United States House of Representatives were speaking in the well about China. The content of the speeches was not complimentary, and the tone was decidedly inflammatory. All were speaking in favor of a resolution to condemn the People's Republic of

China. C-SPAN2 was covering much the same verbiage in the Senate. Though the language was a touch milder, the import of the words was not. Labor unions were united with churches, liberals with conservatives, even free-traders with protectionists.

More to the point, CNN and the other networks showed demonstrations in the streets, and it appeared that Taiwan's "We're the Good Guys" campaign had taken hold. Somebody (nobody was sure who yet) had even printed up stickers of the Red Chinese flag with the caption "We Kill Babies and Ministers." They were being attached to products imported from China, and the protesters were also busy identifying the American firms that did a lot of business on the Chinese mainland, with the aim of boycotting them.

Ryan's head turned. "Talk to me, Arnie."

"This looks serious, Jack," van Damm said.

"Gee, Arnie, I can see that. How serious?"

"Enough that I'd sell stock in those companies. They're going to take a hit. And this movement may have legs . . ."

"What?"

"I mean it might not go away real soon. Next you're going to see posters with stills from the TV coverage of those two clerics being murdered. That's an image that doesn't go away. If there's any product the Chinese sell here that we can get elsewhere, then a lot of Americans will start buying it elsewhere."

The picture on CNN changed to live coverage of a demonstration outside the PRC Embassy in Washington. The signs said things like MURDERERS, KILLERS, and BARBARIANS!

"I wonder if Taiwan is helping to organize this . . ."

"Probably not—at least not yet," van Damm thought. "If I were they, I wouldn't exactly mind, but I wouldn't need to play with this. They'll probably increase their efforts to distinguish themselves from the mainland—and that amounts to the same thing. Look for the networks to do stories about the Republic of China, and how upset *they* are with all this crap in Beijing, how they don't want to be tarred with the same brush and all that," the Chief of Staff said. "You know, 'Yes, we are Chinese, but *we* believe in human rights and freedom of religion.' That sort of thing. It's the smart move. They have some good PR advisers here in D.C. Hell, I probably know some of them, and if I were on the payroll, that's what I would advise."

That's when the phone rang. It was Ryan's private line, the one that usually bypassed the secretaries. Jack lifted it. "Yeah?"

"Jack, it's George across the street. Got a minute? I want to show you something, buddy."

"Sure. Come on over." Jack hung up and turned to Arnie. "SecTreas," he explained. "Says it's important." The President paused.

"Arnie?"

"Yeah?"

"How much maneuvering room do I have with this?"

"The Chinese?" Arnie asked, getting a nod. "Not a hell of a lot, Jack. Sometimes the people themselves decide what our policy is. And the people will be making policy now by voting with their pocketbooks. Next we'll see some companies announce that they're suspending their commercial contracts with the PRC. The Chinese already fucked Boeing over, and in the full light of day, which wasn't real smart. Now the people out there will want to fuck them back. You know, there are times when the average Joe Citizen stands up on his hind feet and gives the world the finger. When that happens, it's your job mainly to follow them, not to lead them," the Chief of Staff concluded. His Secret Service code name was CARPENTER, and he'd just constructed a box for his President to stay inside.

Jack nodded and stubbed out the smoke. He might be the Most Powerful Man in the World, but his power came from the people, and as it was theirs to give, it was also sometimes theirs to exercise.

Few people could simply open the door to the Oval Office and walk in, but George Winston was one of them, mainly because the Secret Service belonged to him. Mark Gant was with him, looking as though he'd just run a marathon chased by a dozen armed and angry Marines in jeeps.

"Hey, Jack."

"George. Mark, you look like hell," Ryan said. "Oh, you just flew in, didn't you?"

"Is this Washington or Shanghai?" Gant offered, as rather a wan joke.

"We took the tunnel. Jesus, have you seen the demonstrators outside? I think they want you to nuke Beijing," SecTreas observed. The President just pointed at his bank of television sets by way of an answer.

"Hell, why are they demonstrating here? I'm on *their* side—at least I think I am. Anyway, what brings you over?"

"Check this out." Winston nodded to Gant.

"Mr. President, these are the PRC's current currency accounts. We keep tabs on currency trading worldwide to make sure we know where the dollar is—which means we pretty much know where all the hard currency is in the world."

"Okay." Ryan knew about that—sort of. He didn't worry much about it, since the dollar was in pretty good shape, and the nonsqueaky wheel didn't need any grease. "So?"

"So, the PRC's liquidity situation is in the shitter," Gant reported. "Maybe that's why they were so pushy in the trade talks. If so, they

picked the wrong way to approach us. They demanded instead of asked."

Ryan looked down the columns of numbers. "Damn, where have they been dumping all their money?"

"Buying military hardware. France and Russia, mostly, but a lot went to Israel, too." It was not widely known that the PRC had spent a considerable sum of money in Israel, mainly paid to IDI—Israel Defense Industries—to buy American-designed hardware manufactured under license in Israel. It was stuff the Chinese could not purchase directly from America, including guns for their tanks and air-to-air missiles for their fighter aircraft. America had winked at the transactions for years. In conducting this business, Israel had turned its back on Taiwan, despite the fact that both countries had produced their nuclear weapons as a joint venture, back when they'd stuck together—along with South Africa—as international pariahs with no other friends in that particular area. In polite company, it was called *realpolitik*. In other areas of human activity, it was called *fuck your buddy*.

"And?" Ryan asked.

"And they've spent their entire trade surplus this way," Gant reported. "All of it, mainly on short-term purchase items, but some long-term as well, and for the long-term stuff they had to pay cash up front because of the nature of the transactions. The producers need the cash to run the production, and they don't want to get stuck holding the bag. Not too many people need five thousand tank guns," Gant explained. "The market is kinda exclusive."

"So?"

"So, China is essentially out of cash. And they have real short-term cash needs. Like oil," TELESCOPE went on. "China's a net importer of oil. Production in their domestic fields falls well short, even though their needs are not really that great. Not too many Chinese citizens own cars. They have enough cash for three months' worth of oil, and then they come up short. The international oil market demands prompt payment. They can skate for a month, maybe six weeks, but after that, the tankers will turn around in midocean and go somewhere else—they can do that, you know—and then the PRC runs out. It'll be like running into a wall, sir. *Smack*. No more oil, and then their country starts coming to a stop, including their military, which is their largest oil consumer. They've been running unusually high for some years because of increased activity in their maneuvers and training and stuff. They probably have strategic reserves, but we don't know exactly how much. And that can run out, too. We've been expecting them to make a move on the Spratly Islands. There's oil there, and they've been making noises about it off and on for about

ten years, but the Philippines and other countries in the area have made claims, too, and they probably expect us to side with the Philippines for historical reasons. Not to mention, Seventh Fleet is still the biggest kid on the block in that part of the world."

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. "If it came to a showdown, the Philippines appear to have the best claim on the islands, and we would back them up. We've shed blood together in the past, and that counts. Go on."

"So, John Chinaman is short of oil, and he may not have the cash to pay for it, especially if our trade with them goes down the toilet. They need our dollars. The yuan isn't very strong anyway. International trading is also done in dollars, and as I just told you, sir, they've spent most of them."

"What are you telling me?"

"Sir, the PRC is just about bankrupt. In a month or so, they're going to find that out, and it's going to be a bit of a shock for them."

"When did *we* find this out?"

"That's my doing, Jack," the Secretary of the Treasury said. "I called up these documents earlier today, and then I had Mark go over them. He's our best man for economic modeling, even whacked out with jet lag."

"So, we can squeeze them on this?"

"That's one option."

"What if these demonstrations take hold?"

Gant and Winston shrugged simultaneously. "That's where psychology enters into the equation," said Winston. "We can predict it to some extent on Wall Street—that's how I made most of my money—but psychoanalyzing a country is beyond my ken. That's your job, pal. I just run your accounting office across the street."

"I need more than that, George."

Another shrug. "If the average citizen boycotts Chinese goods, and/or if American companies who do business over there start trimming their sails—"

"That's damned likely," Gant interjected. "This has got to have a lot of CEOs shitting their pants."

"Well, if that happens, the Chinese get one in the guts, and it's going to hurt, big time," TRADER concluded.

And how will they react to that? Ryan wondered. He punched his phone button. "Ellen, I need one." His secretary appeared in a flash and handed him a cigarette. Ryan lit it and thanked her with a smile and a nod.

"Have you talked this one over with State yet?"

A shake of the head. "No, wanted to show it to you first."

"Hmm. Mark, what did you make of the negotiations?"

"They're the most arrogant sons of bitches I've ever seen. I mean,

I've met all sorts of big shots in my time, movers and shakers, but even the worst of them know when they need my money to do business, and when they know that, their manners get better. When you shoot a gun, you try to make sure you don't have it aimed at your own dick."

That made Ryan laugh, while Arnie cringed. You weren't supposed to talk that way to the President of the United States, but some of these people knew that you could talk that way to John Patrick Ryan, the man.

"By the way, along those lines, I liked what you told that Chinese diplomat."

"What's that, sir?"

"Their dicks aren't big enough to get in a pissing contest with us. Nice turn of phrase, if not exactly diplomatic."

"How did you know that?" Gant asked, the surprise showing on his face. "I never repeated that to anybody, not even to that jerk Rutledge."

"Oh, we have ways," Jack answered, suddenly realizing that he'd revealed something from a compartment named SORGE. *Oops.*

"Sounds like something you say at the New York Athletic Club," SecTreas observed. "But only if you're four feet or so away from the guy."

"But it appears it's true. At least in monetary terms. So, we have a gun we can point at their heads?"

"Yes, sir, we sure do," Gant answered. "It might take them a month to figure it out, but they won't be able to run away from it for very long."

"Okay, make sure State and the Agency find this out. And, oh, tell CIA that they're supposed to get this stuff to me first. Intelligence estimates are their job."

"They have an economics unit, but they're not all that good," Gant told the others. "No surprise. The smart people in this area work The Street, or maybe academia. You can make more money at Harvard Business School than you can in government service."

"And talent goes where the money is," Jack agreed. Junior partners at medium-sized law firms made more than the President, which sometimes explained the sort of people who ended up here. Public service was supposed to be a sacrifice. It was for him—Ryan had proven his ability to make money in the trading business, but for him service to his country had been learned from his father, and at Quantico, long before he'd been seduced into the Central Intelligence Agency and then later tricked into the Oval Office. And once here, you couldn't run away from it. At least, not and keep your manhood. That was always the trap. Robert Edward Lee had called duty the most

sublime of words. And he would have known, Ryan thought. Lee had felt himself trapped into fighting for what was at best a soiled cause because of his perceived duty to his place of birth, and therefore many would curse his name for all eternity, despite his qualities as a man and a soldier. *So, Jack*, he asked himself, *in* your *case, where do talent and duty and right and wrong and all that other stuff lie? What the hell are you supposed to do now?* He was supposed to know. All those people outside the White House's campuslike grounds expected him to know all the time where the right thing was, right for the country, right for the world, right for every working man, woman, and innocent little kid playing T-ball. *Yeah*, the President thought, *sure. You're anointed by the wisdom fairy when you walk in here every day, or kissed on the ear by the muse, or maybe Washington and Lincoln whisper to you in your dreams at night*. He sometimes had trouble picking his tie in the morning, especially if Cathy wasn't around to be his fashion adviser. But he was supposed to know what to do with taxes, defense, and Social Security—why? Because it was his job to know. Because he happened to live in government housing at One Thousand Six Hundred Pennsylvania Avenue and had the Secret goddamned Service protect him everywhere he went. At the Basic School at Quantico, the officers instructing newly commissioned Marine second lieutenants had told them about the loneliness of command. The difference between that and what he had here was like the difference between a fucking firecracker and a nuclear weapon. This kind of situation had started wars in the past. That wouldn't happen now, of course, but it had once. It was a sobering thought. Ryan took a last puff on his fifth smoke of the day and killed it in the brown glass ashtray he kept hidden in a desk drawer.

"Thanks for bringing me this. Talk it over with State and CIA," he told them again. "I want a SNIE on this, and I want it soon."

"Right," George Winston said, standing for the underground walk back to his building across the street.

"Mr. Gant," Jack added. "Get some sleep. You look like hell."

"I'm allowed to sleep in this job?" TELESCOPE asked.

"Sure you are, just like I am," POTUS told him with a lopsided smile. When they left, he looked at Arnie: "Talk to me."

"Speak to Adler, and have him talk to Hitch and Rutledge, which you ought to do, too," Arnie advised.

Ryan nodded. "Okay, tell Scott what I need, and that I need it fast."

Good news," Professor North told her, as she came back into the room.

Andrea Price-O'Day was in Baltimore, at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, seeing Dr. Madge North, Professor of Obstetrics and

Gynecology.

"Really?"

"Really," Dr. North assured her with a smile. "You're pregnant."

Before anything else could happen, Inspector Patrick O'Day leapt to his feet and lifted his wife in his arms for a powerful kiss and a rib-cracking hug.

"Oh," Andrea said almost to herself. "I thought I was too old."

"The record is well into the fifties, and you're well short of that," Dr. North said, smiling. It was the first time in her professional career that she'd given this news to *two* people carrying guns.

"Any problems?" Pat asked.

"Well, Andrea, you are prime-ep. You're over forty and this is your first pregnancy, isn't it?"

"Yes." She knew what was coming, but she didn't invite it by speaking the word.

"That means that there is an increased likelihood of Down's syndrome. We can establish that with an amniocentesis. I'd recommend we do that soon."

"How soon?"

"I can do it today if you wish."

"And if the test is . . . ?"

"Positive? Well, then you two have to decide if you want to bring a Down's child into the world. Some people do, but others don't. It's your decision to make, not mine," Madge North told them. She'd done abortions in her career, but like most obstetricians, she much preferred to deliver babies.

"Down's—how and . . . I mean . . ." Andrea said, squeezing her husband's hand.

"Look, the odds are very much in your favor, like a hundred to one or so, and those are betting odds. Before you worry about it, the smart thing is to find out if there's anything to worry about at all, okay?"

"Right now?" Pat asked for his wife.

Dr. North stood. "Yes, I have the time right now."

"Why don't you take a little walk, Pat?" Special Agent Price-O'Day suggested to her husband. She managed to keep her dignity intact, which didn't surprise her husband.

"Okay, honey." A kiss, and he watched her leave. It was not a good moment for the career FBI agent. His wife was pregnant, but now he had to wonder if the pregnancy was a good one or not. If not—then what? He was an Irish Catholic, and his church forbade abortion as murder, and murders were things he'd investigated—and even witnessed once. Ten minutes later, he'd killed the two terrorists responsible for it. That day still came back to him in perverse dreams, despite the heroism he'd displayed and the kudos he'd received for all

of it.

But now, he was afraid. Andrea had been a fine stepmother for his little Megan, and both he and she wanted nothing in all the world more than this news—if it was, really, good news. It would probably take an hour, and he knew he couldn't spend it sitting down in a doctor's outer office full of pregnant women reading old copies of *People* and *US Weekly*. But where to go? Whom to see?

Okay. He stood and walked out, and decided to head over to the Maumenee Building. It ought not be too hard to find. And it wasn't.

Roy Altman was the telltale. The big former paratrooper who headed the SURGEON detail didn't stand in one place like a potted plant, but rather circulated around, not unlike a lion in a medium-sized cage, always checking, looking with highly trained and experienced eyes for something that wasn't quite right. He spotted O'Day in the elevator lobby and waved.

"Hey, Pat! What's happening?" All the rivalry between the FBI and the USSS stopped well short of this point. O'Day had saved the life of SANDBOx and avenged the deaths of three of Altman's fellow agents, including Roy's old friend, Don Russell, who'd died like a man, gun in hand and three dead assassins in front of him. O'Day had finished Don's work.

"My wife's over being checked out," the FBI inspector answered.

"Nothing serious?" Altman asked.

"Routine," Pat responded, and Altman caught the scent of a lie, but not an important one.

"Is she around? While I'm here, I thought I'd stop over and say hi."

"In her office." Altman waved. "Straight down, second on the right."

"Thanks."

"Bureau guy coming back to see SURGEON," he said into his lapel mike.

"Roger," another agent responded.

O'Day found the office door and knocked.

"Come in," the female voice inside said. Then she looked up. "Oh, Pat, how are you?"

"No complaints, just happened to be in the neighborhood, and—"

"Did Andrea see Madge?" Cathy Ryan asked. FLOTUS had helped make the appointment, of course.

"Yeah, and the little box doodad has a plus sign in it," Pat reported.

"Great!" Then Professor Ryan paused. "Oh, you're worried about something." In addition to being an eye doctor, she knew trouble when she saw it.

"Dr. North is doing an amniocentesis. Any idea how long it takes?"

"When did it start?"

"Right about now, I think."

Cathy knew the problem. “Give it an hour. Madge is very good, and very careful in her procedures. They tap into the uterus and withdraw some of the amniotic fluid. That will give them some of the tissue from the embryo, and then they examine the chromosomes. She’ll have the lab people standing by. Madge is senior staff, and when she talks, people listen.”

“She seems pretty competent.”

“She’s a wonderful doc. She’s *my* OB. You’re worried about Down’s, right?”

A nod. “Yep.”

“Nothing you can do but wait.”

“Dr. Ryan, I’m—”

“My name’s Cathy, Pat. We’re friends, remember?” There was nothing like saving the life of a woman’s child to get on her permanent good side.

“Okay, Cathy. Yeah, I’m scared. It’s not—I mean, Andrea’s a cop, too, but—”

“But being good with a gun or just being tough doesn’t help much right now, does it?”

“Not worth a damn,” Inspector O’Day confirmed quietly. He was about as used to being frightened as he was of flying the Space Shuttle, but potential danger to his wife and/or kid—*kids* now, maybe—the kind of danger in which he was utterly helpless—well, that was one of the buttons a capricious Fate could push while she laughed.

“The odds are way in your favor,” Cathy told him.

“Yeah, Dr. North said so . . . but . . .”

“Yeah. And Andrea’s younger than I am.”

O’Day looked down at the floor, feeling like a total fucking wimp. More than once in his life, he’d faced down armed men—criminals with violent pasts—and intimidated them into surrender. Once in his life he’d had to use his Smith & Wesson 1076 automatic in anger, and both times he’d double-tapped the heads of the terrorists, sending them off to Allah—so they’d probably believed—to answer for the murder of the innocent woman. It hadn’t been easy, exactly, but neither had it been all that hard. The endless hours of practice had made it nearly as routine as the working of his service automatic. But this wasn’t danger to himself. He could deal with that. The worst danger, he was just learning, was to those you loved.

“Pat, it’s okay to be scared. John Wayne was just an actor, remember?”

But that was it. The code of manhood to which most Americans subscribed was that of the Duke, and that code did not allow fear. In truth it was about as realistic as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, but foolish or not, there it was.

"I'm not used to it."

Cathy Ryan understood. Most doctors did. When she'd been a straight ophthalmic surgeon, before specializing in lasers, she'd seen the patients and the patients' families, the former in pain, but trying to be brave, the latter just scared. You tried to repair the problems of one and assuage the fears of the other. Neither task was easy. The one was just skill and professionalism; the other involved showing them that, although this was a horrid emergency which they'd never experienced before, for Cathy Ryan, M.D., FACS, it was just another day at the office. She was the Pro from Dover. She could handle it. SURGEON was blessed with the demeanor that inspired confidence in all she met.

But even that didn't apply here. Though Madge North was a gifted physician, she was testing for a predetermined condition. Maybe someday it could be fixed—genetic therapy offered that hope, ten years or so down the line—but not today. Madge could merely determine what already was. Madge had great hands, and a good eye, but the rest of it was in God's hands, and God had already decided one way or the other. It was just a matter of finding out what His decision had been.

"This is when a smoke comes in handy," the inspector observed, with a grimacing smirk.

"You smoke?"

He shook his head. "Gave it up a long time ago."

"You should tell Jack."

The FBI agent looked up. "I didn't know he smokes."

"He bums them off his secretary every so often, the wimp," Cathy told the FBI agent, with almost a laugh. "I'm not supposed to know."

"That's very tolerant for a doc."

"His life's hard enough, and it's only a couple a day, and he doesn't do it around the kids, or Andrea'd have to shoot me for ripping his face off."

"You know," O'Day said, looking down again and speaking from the cowboy boots he liked to wear under his blue FBI suit, "if it comes back that it's a Down's kid, what the hell do we do then?"

"That's not an easy choice."

"Hell, under the law I don't get a choice. I don't even have a say in it, do I?"

"No, you don't." Cathy didn't venture that this was an inequity. The law was firm on the point. The woman—in this case, the wife—alone could choose to continue the pregnancy or terminate it. Cathy knew her husband's views on abortion. Her own views were not quite identical, but she did regard that choice as distasteful. "Pat, why are you borrowing trouble?"

"It's not under my control."

Like most men, Cathy saw, Pat O'Day was a control freak. She could understand that, because so was she. It came from using instruments to change the world to suit her wishes. But this was an extreme case. This tough guy was deeply frightened. He really ought not to be, but it was a question of the unknown for him. She knew the odds, and they were actually pretty good, but he was not a doctor, and all men, even the tough ones, she saw, feared the unknown. Well, it wasn't the first time she'd baby-sat an adult who needed his hand held—and this one had saved Katie's life.

"Want to walk over to the day-care center?"

"Sure." O'Day stood.

It wasn't much of a walk, and her intention was to remind O'Day what this was all about—getting a new life into the world.

"SURGEON'S on the way to the playpen," Roy Altman told his detail. Kyle Daniel Ryan—SPRITE—Was sitting up now, and playing very simply with very rudimentary toys under the watchful eyes of the lionesses, as Altman thought of them, four young female Secret Service agents who fawned over SPRITE like big sisters. But these sisters all carried guns, and they all remembered what had nearly happened to SANDBOX. A nuclear-weapons-storage site was hardly as well-guarded as this particular day-care center.

Outside the playroom was Trenton "Chip" Kelley, the only male agent on the detail, a former Marine captain who would have frightened the average NFL lineman with a mere look.

"Hey, Chip."

"Hi, Roy. What's happening?"

"Just strolling over to see the little guy."

"Who's the muscle?" Kelley saw that O'Day was carrying heat, but decided he looked like a cop. But his left thumb was still on the button of his "crash alarm," and his right hand was within a third of a second of his service automatic.

"Bureau. He's cool," Altman assured his subordinate.

" 'Kay." Kelley opened the door.

"Who'd he play for?" O'Day asked Altman, once inside.

"The Bears drafted him, but he scared Ditka too much." Altman laughed. "Ex-Marine."

"I believe it." Then O'Day walked up behind Dr. Ryan. She'd already scooped Kyle up, and his arms were around her neck. The little boy was babbling, still months away from talking, but he knew how to smile when he saw his mommy.

"Want to hold him?" Cathy asked.

O'Day cradled the infant somewhat like a football. The youngest Ryan examined his face dubiously, especially the Zapata mustache,

but Mommy's face was also in sight, and so he didn't scream.

"Hey, buddy," O'Day said gently. Some things came autornatically. When holding a baby, you don't stand still. You move a little bit, rhythmically, which the little ones seemed to like.

"It'll ruin Andrea's career," Cathy said.

"Make for a lot better hours for her, and be nice to see her every night, but, yeah, Cathy, be kinda hard for her to run alongside the car with her belly sticking out two feet." The image was good enough for a laugh. "I suppose they'll put her on restricted duty."

"Maybe. Makes for a great disguise, though, doesn't it?" O'Day nodded. This wasn't so bad, holding a kid. He remembered the old Irish adage: *True strength lies in gentleness*. But what the hell, taking care of kids was also a man's duty. There was a lot more to being a man than just having a dick.

Cathy saw the display and had to smile. Pat O'Day had saved Katie's life, and done it like something out of a John Woo movie, except that Pat was a real tough guy, not the movie kind. His scenes weren't scripted; he'd had to do it for real, making it up as he'd gone along. He was a lot like her husband, a servant of the law, a man who'd sworn an oath to Do the Right Thing every time, and like her husband, clearly a man who took his oaths seriously. One of those oaths concerned Pat's relationship with Andrea, and they all came down to the same thing: preserve, protect, defend. And now, this tiger with a tie was holding a baby and smiling and swaying back and forth, because that's what you did with a baby in your arms.

"How's your daughter?" Cathy asked.

"She and your Katie are good friends. And she's got a thing going with one of the boys at Giant Steps."

"Oh?"

"Jason Hunt. I think it's serious. He gave Megan one of his Hot Wheels cars." O'Day laughed. That's when his cell phone went off. "Right side coat pocket," he told the First Lady.

Cathy fished in his pocket and pulled it out. She flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Who's this?" a familiar voice asked.

"Andrea? It's Cathy. Pat's right here." Cathy took Kyle and handed off the phone, watching the FBI agent's face.

"Yeah, honey?" Pat said. Then he listened, and his eyes closed for two or three seconds, and that told the tale. His tense face relaxed. A long breath came out slowly, and the shoulders no longer looked like a man anticipating a heavy blow. "Yeah, baby, I came over to see Dr. Ryan, and we're in the nursery. Oh, okay." Pat looked over and handed over the phone. Cathy cradled it between her shoulder and ear.

"So, what did Madge say?" Cathy asked, already knowing most of it.

"Normal—and it's going to be a boy."

"So, Madge was right, the odds were in your favor." And they still were. Andrea was very fit. She wouldn't have any problems, Cathy was sure.

"Seven months from next Tuesday," Andrea said, her voice already bubbling.

"Well, listen to what Madge says. I do," Cathy assured her. She knew all the stuff Dr. North believed in. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Do your exercises. Take the classes on prepared delivery along with your husband. Come see me in five weeks for your next checkup. Read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Cathy handed the phone back. Inspector O'Day had taken a few steps and turned away. When he turned back to take the phone, his eyes were unusually moist.

"Yeah, honey, okay. I'll be right over." He killed the phone and dumped it back in his pocket.

"Feel better?" she asked with a smile. One of the lionesses came over to take Kyle back. The little guy loved them all, and smiled up at her.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry to bother you. I feel like a wuss."

"Oh, bullcrap." Rather a strong imprecation for Mrs. Dr. Ryan. "Like I said, life isn't a movie, and this isn't the Alamo. I know you're a tough guy, Pat, and so does Jack. What about you, Roy?"

"Pat can work with me any day. Congratulations, buddy," Altman added, turning back from the lead.

"Thanks, pal," O'Day told his colleague.

"Can I tell Jack, or does Andrea want to?" SURGEON asked.

"I guess you'll have to ask her about that one, ma'am."

Pat O'Day was transformed, enough spring in his step now to make him collide with the ceiling. He was surprised to see that Cathy was heading off to the OB-GYN building, but five minutes later it was obvious why. This was to be girl-girl bonding time. Even before he could embrace his wife, Cathy was there.

"Wonderful news, I'm so happy for you!"

"Yeah, well, I suppose the Bureau is good for something after all," Andrea joked.

Then the bear with the Zapata mustache lifted her off the floor with a hug and a kiss. "This calls for a small celebration," the inspector observed.

"Join us for dinner tonight at The House?" SURGEON asked.

"We can't," Andrea replied.

"Says who?" Cathy demanded. And Andrea had to bow to the situation.

"Well, maybe, if the President says it's okay."

"*I* say it's okay, girl, and there are times when Jack doesn't count," Dr. Ryan told them.

"Well, yes, then, I guess."

"Seven-thirty," SURGEON told them. "Dress is casual." It was a shame they were no longer regular people. This would have been a good chance for Jack to do steaks on the grill, something he remained very good at, and she hadn't made her spinach salad in months. Damn the Presidency anyway! "And, Andrea, you *are* allowed two drinks tonight to celebrate. After that, one or two a week."

Mrs. O'Day nodded. "Dr. North told me."

"Madge is a real stickler on the alcohol issue." Cathy wasn't sure about the data on that, but then, she wasn't an OB-GYN, and she'd followed Dr. North's rules with Kyle and Katie. You just didn't fool around when you were pregnant. Life was too precious to risk.

CHAPTER 38

Developments

It's all handled electronically. Once a country's treasury was in its collection of gold bricks, which were kept in a secure, well-guarded place, or else traveled in a crate with the chief of state wherever he went. In the nineteenth century, paper currency had gained wide acceptance. At first, it had to be redeemable for gold or silver—something whose weight told you its worth—but gradually this, too, was discarded, because precious metals were just too damned heavy to lug around. But soon enough even paper currency became too bulky to drag about, as well. For ordinary citizens, the next step was plastic cards with magnetic strips on the back, which moved your *theoretical* currency from your account to someone else's when you made a purchase. For major corporations and nations, it meant something even more theoretical. It became an electronic expression. A nation determined the value of its currency by estimating what quantity of goods and services its citizens generated with their daily toil, and that became the volume of its monetary wealth, which was generally agreed upon by the other nations and citizens of the world. Thus it could be traded across national boundaries by fiber-optic or copper cables, or even by satellite transmissions, and so billions of dollars, pounds, yen, or the new euros moved from place to place via simple keystrokes. It was a lot easier and faster than shipping gold bricks, but, for all the convenience, the system that determined a person's or a nation's wealth was no less rigid, and at certain central banks of the world, a country's net collection of those monetary units was calculated down to a fraction of a percentage point. There was some leeway built into the system, to account for trades in process and so forth, but that leeway was also closely calculated electronically. What resulted was no different in its effect from the numbering of the bricks of King Croesus of Lydia. In fact, if anything, the new system that depended on the movement of electrons or photons from one computer to another was even more exact, and even less forgiving. Once upon a time, one could paint lead bricks yellow and so fool a casual inspector, but lying to a computerized accounting system required a lot more than that.

In China, the lying was handled by the Ministry of Finance, a bastard orphan child in a Marxist country peopled by bureaucrats who struggled on a daily basis to do all manner of impossible things. The first and easiest impossibility—because it had to be done—was for its senior members to cast aside everything they'd learned in their universities and Communist Party meetings. To operate in the world financial system, they had to understand and play by—and within—the world monetary rules, instead of the Holy Writ of Karl Marx.

The Ministry of Finance, therefore, was placed in the unenviable position of having to explain to the communist clergy that their god was a false one, that their perfect theoretical model just didn't play in the real world, and that therefore they had to bend to a reality which they had rejected. The bureaucrats in the ministry were for the most part observers, rather like children playing a computer game that they didn't believe in but enjoyed anyway. Some of the bureaucrats were actually quite clever, and played the game well, sometimes even making a profit on their trades and transactions. Those who did so won promotions and status within the ministry. Some even drove their own automobiles to work and were befriended by the new class of local industrialists who had shed their ideological straitjackets and operated as capitalists within a communist society. That brought wealth into their nation, and earned the tepid gratitude, if not the respect, of their political masters, rather as a good sheepdog might. This crop of industrialists worked closely with the Ministry of Finance, and along the way influenced the bureaucracy that managed the income that they brought into their country.

One result of all this activity was that the Ministry of Finance was surely and not so slowly drifting away from the True Faith of Marxism into the shadowy in-between world of socialist capitalism—a world with no real name or identity. In fact, every Minister of Finance had drifted away from Marxism to some greater or lesser extent, whatever his previous religious fervor, because one by one they had all seen that their country needed to play on this particular international playground, and to do that, had to play by the rules, and, oh, by the way, this game was bringing prosperity to the People's Republic in a way that fifty years of Marx and Mao had singularly failed to do.

As a direct result of this inexorable process, the Minister of Finance was a candidate, not a full member of the Politburo. He had a voice at the table, but not a vote, and his words were judged by those who had never really troubled themselves to understand his words or the world in which he operated.

This minister was surnamed Qian, which, appropriately, meant coins or money, and he'd been in the job for six years. His background was in engineering. He'd built railroads in the northeastern part of his

country for twenty years, and done so well enough to merit a change in posting. He'd actually handled his ministerial job quite well, the international community judged, but Qian Kun was often the one who had to explain to the Politburo that the Politburo couldn't do everything it wanted to do, which meant he was often about as welcome in the room as a plague rat. This would be one more such day, he feared, sitting in the back of his ministerial car on the way to the morning meeting.

Eleven hours away, on Park Avenue in New York, another meeting was under way. Butterfly was the name of a burgeoning chain of clothing stores which marketed to prosperous American women. It had combined new micro-fiber textiles with a brilliant young designer from Florence, Italy, into fully a six percent share of its market, and in America that was big money indeed.

Except for one thing. Its textiles were all made in the People's Republic, at a factory just outside the great port city of Shanghai, and then cut and sewn into clothing at yet another plant in the nearby city of Yancheng.

The chairman of Butterfly was just thirty-two, and after ten years of hustling, he figured he was about to cash in on a dream he'd had from all the way back in Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. He'd spent nearly every day since graduating Pratt Institute conceiving and building up his business, and now it was *his* time. It was time to buy that G so that he could fly off to Paris on a whim, get that house in the hills of Tuscany, and another in Aspen, and really live in the manner he'd earned.

Except for that one little thing. His flagship store at Park and 50th today had experienced something as unthinkable as the arrival of men from Mars. People had demonstrated there. People wearing Versace clothing had shown up with cardboard placards stapled to wooden sticks proclaiming their opposition to trade with BARBARIANS! and condemning Butterfly for doing business with such a country. Someone had even shown up with an image of the Chinese flag with a swastika on it, and if there was *anything* you didn't want associated with your business in New York, it was Hitler's odious logo.

"We've got to move fast on this," the corporate counsel said. He was Jewish and smart, and had steered Butterfly through more than one minefield to bring it to the brink of ultimate success. "This could kill us."

He wasn't kidding, and the rest of the board knew it. Exactly four customers had gone past the protesters into the store today, and one of them had been returning something which, she said, she no longer wanted in her closet.

"What's our exposure?" the founder and CEO asked.

"In real terms?" the head of accounting asked. "Oh, potentially four hundred." By which he meant four hundred *million* dollars. "It could wipe us out in, oh, twelve weeks."

Wipe us out was not what the CEO wanted to hear. To bring a line of clothing this far was about as easy as swimming the Atlantic Ocean during the annual shark convention. This was his moment, but he found himself standing in yet another minefield, one for which he'd had no warning at all.

"Okay," he responded as coolly as the acid in his stomach allowed. "What can we do about it?"

"We can walk on our contracts," the attorney advised.

"Is that legal?"

"Legal enough." By which he meant that the downside exposure of shorting the Chinese manufacturers was less onerous than having a shop full of products that no person would buy.

"Alternatives?"

"The Thais," Production said. "There's a place outside Bangkok that would love to take up the slack. They called us today, in fact."

"Cost?"

"Less than four percent difference. Three-point-six-three, to be exact, and they will be off schedule by, oh, maybe four weeks max. We have enough stock to keep the stores open through that, no problem," Production told the rest of the board with confidence.

"How much of that stock is Chinese in origin?"

"A lot comes from Taiwan, remember? We can have our people start putting the Good Guys stickers on them . . . and we can fudge that some, too." Not all that many consumers knew the difference between one Chinese place name and another. A flag was much easier to differentiate.

"Also," Marketing put in, "we can start an ad campaign tomorrow. 'Butterfly doesn't do business with dragons.' " He held up an illustration that showed the corporate logo escaping a dragon's fiery breath. That it looked terminally tacky didn't matter for the moment. They had to take action, and they had to do it fast.

"Oh, got a call an hour ago from Frank Meng at Meng, Harrington, and Cicero," Production announced. "He says he can get some ROC textile houses on the team in a matter of days, and he says they have the flexibility to retool in less than a month—and if we green-light it, the ROC ambassador will officially put us on their good-guy list. In return, we just have to guarantee five years' worth of business, with the usual escape clauses."

"I like it," Legal said. The ROC ambassador would play fair, and so would his country. They knew when they had the tiger by the balls.

"We have a motion on the table," the chairman and CEO announced. "All in favor?"

With this vote, Butterfly was the first major American company to walk out on its contracts with the People's Republic. Like the first goose to leave Northern Canada in the fall, it announced that a new and chilly season was coming. The only potential problem was legal action from the PRC businesses, but a federal judge would probably understand that a signed contract wasn't quite the same thing as a suicide note, and perhaps even regard the overarching political question sufficient to make the contract itself void. After all, counsel would argue in chambers—and in front of a New York jury if necessary—when you find out you're doing business with Adolf Hitler, you *have* to take a step back. Opposing counsel would argue back, but he'd know his position was a losing one, and he'd tell his clients so before going in.

"I'll tell our bankers tomorrow. They're not scheduled to cut the money loose for another thirty-six hours." This meant that one hundred forty million dollars would not be transferred to a Beijing account as scheduled. And now the CEO could contemplate going ahead with his order for the G. The corporate logo of a monarch butterfly leaving its cocoon, he thought, would look just great on the rudder.

We don't know for sure yet," Qian told his colleagues, but I am seriously concerned."

"What's the particular problem today?" Xu Kun Piao asked.

"We have a number of commercial and other contracts coming due in the next three weeks. Ordinarily I would expect them to proceed normally, but our representatives in America have called to warn my office that there might be a problem."

"Who are these representatives?" Shen Tang asked.

"Mainly lawyers whom we employ to manage our business dealings for us. Almost all are American citizens. They are not fools, and their advice is something a wise man attends carefully," Qian said soberly.

"Lawyers are the curse of America," Zhang Han San observed. "And all civilized nations." *At least here we decide the law,* he didn't have to explain.

"Perhaps so, Zhang, but if you do business with America you need such people, and they are very useful in explaining conditions there. Shooting the messenger may get you more pleasant news, but it won't necessarily be accurate."

Fang nodded and smiled at that. He liked Qian. The man spoke the truth more faithfully than those who were supposed to listen for it. But Fang kept his peace on this. He, too, was concerned with the

political developments caused by those two overzealous policemen, but it was too late to discipline them now. Even if Xu suggested it, Zhang and the others would talk him out of it.

Secretary Winston was at home watching a movie on his DVD player. It was easier than going to the movies, and he could do it without four Secret Service agents in attendance. His wife was knitting a ski sweater—she did her important Christmas presents herself, and it was something she could do while watching TV or talking, and it brought the same sort of relaxation to her that sailing his big offshore yacht did for her husband.

Winston had a multiline phone in the family room—and every other room in his Chevy Chase house—and the private line had a different ring so that he knew which one he had to answer himself.

"Yeah?"

"George, it's Mark."

"Working late?"

"No, I'm home. Just got a call from New York. It may have just started."

"What's that?" TRADER asked TELESCOPE.

"Butterfly—the ladies' clothing firm?"

"Oh, yeah, I know the name," Winston assured his aide. Well he might: His wife and daughter loved the place.

"They're going to bail on their contracts with their PRC suppliers."

"How big?"

"About a hundred forty."

Winston whistled. "That much?"

"That big," Gant assured him. "And they're a trendsetter. When this breaks tomorrow, it's going to make a lot of people think. Oh, one other thing."

"Yeah?"

"The PRC just terminated its options with Caterpillar—equipment to finish up the Three Gorges project. That's about three-ten million, switching over to Kawa in Japan. That's going to be in the *Journal* tomorrow morning."

"That's real smart!" Winston grumbled.

"Trying to show us who's holding the whip, George."

"Well, I hope they like how it feels going up their ass," SecTreas observed, causing his wife to look over at him.

"Okay, when's the Butterfly story break?"

"It's too late for the *Journal* tomorrow, but it'll be on CNN-FN and CNBC for damned sure."

"And what if other fashion houses do the same?"

"Over a billion, right away, and you know what they say, George, a

billion here, a billion there, pretty soon you're talking real money." It had been one of Everett McKinley Dirksen's better Washington observations.

"How much before their currency account goes in the tank?"

"Twenty, and it starts hurting. Forty, and they're in the shitter. Sixty, and they're fuckin' broke. Never seen a whole country sleeping over a steam vent, y'now? George, they also import food, wheat mainly, from Canada and Australia. That could *really* hurt."

"Noted. Tomorrow."

"Right." The phone clicked off.

Winston picked up the controller to un-pause the DVD player, then had another thought. He picked up the mini—tape machine he used for notes and said, "Find out how much of the PRC military purchases have been executed financially—especially Israel." He clicked the STOP button, set it down, and picked the DVD controller back up to continue his movie, but soon found he couldn't concentrate on it very well. Something big was happening, and experienced as he was in the world of commerce, and now in the business of international transactions, he realized that he didn't have a handle on it. That didn't happen to George Winston very often, and it was enough to keep him from laughing at *Men in Black*.

Her minister didn't look very happy, Ming saw. The look on his face made her think that he might have lost a family member to cancer. She found out more when he called her in to dictate his notes. It took fully ninety minutes this time, and then two entire hours for her to transcribe them into her computer. She hadn't exactly forgotten what her computer probably did with them every night, but she hadn't thought about it in weeks. She wished she had the ability to discuss the notes' content with Minister Fang. Over the years of working for him, she'd acquired rather a sophisticated appreciation for the politics of her country, to the point that she could anticipate not only the thoughts of her master, but also those of some of his colleagues. She was in effect, if not in fact, a confidant of her minister, and while she could not counsel him on his job, if he'd had the wit to appreciate the effect of her education and her time inside his head, he might have used her far more efficiently than as a mere secretary. But she was a woman in a land ruled by men, and therefore voiceless. Orwell had been right. She'd read *Animal Farm* some years ago. Everyone *was* equal, but some *were* more equal than others. If Fang were smart, he'd use her more intelligently, but he wasn't, and he didn't. She'd talk to Nomuri-san about that tonight.

For his part, Chester was just finalizing an order for one thousand

six hundred sixty-one high-end NEC desktops at the China Precision Machine Import and Export Corporation, which, among other things, made guided missiles for the People's Liberation Army. That would make Nippon Electric Company pretty happy. The sad part was that he couldn't rig these machines to talk as glibly as the two in the Council of Ministers, but that would have been too dangerous, if a good daydream over a beer and a smoke. Chester Nomuri, cyber-spy. Then his beeper started vibrating. He reached down and gave it a look. The number was 745-4426. Applied to the keys on a phone, and selecting the right letters, that translated in personal code to *shin gan,* "heart and soul," Ming's private endearment for her lover and an indication that she wanted to come over to his place tonight. That suited Nomuri just fine. So, he'd turned into James Bond after all. Good enough for a private smile, as he walked out to his car. He flipped open his shoephone, dialed up his e-mail access, and sent his own message over the 'Net, 226-234: *bao bei,* "beloved one." She liked to hear him say that, and he didn't mind saying it. So, something other than TV for tonight. Good. He hoped he had enough of the Japanese scotch for the *après*-sex.

You knew you had a bad job when you welcomed a trip to the dentist. Jack had been going to the same one for nineteen years, but this time it involved a helicopter flight to a Maryland State Police barracks with its own helipad, followed by five minutes in a car to the dentist's office. He was thinking about China, but his principal bodyguard mistook his expression.

"Relax, boss," Andrea told the President. "If he makes you scream, I'll cap him."

"You shouldn't be up so early," Ryan responded crossly.

"Dr. North said I could work my regular routine until further notice, and I just started the vitamins she likes."

"Well, Pat looks rather pleased with himself." It had been a pleasant evening at the White House. It was always good to entertain guests who had no political agenda.

"What is it about you guys? You strut like roosters, but *we* have to do all the work!"

"Andrea, I would *gladly* switch jobs with you!" Ryan joked. He'd had this discussion with Cathy often enough, claiming that having a baby couldn't be all that hard—men had to do almost all of the tough work in life. But he couldn't joke with someone else's wife that way.

Nomuri heard his computer beep in the distance, meaning it had received and was now automatically encrypting and retransmitting the data e-mailed from Ming's desktop. It made an entertaining

interruption to his current activity. It had been five days since their last tryst, and that was a long enough wait for him . . . and evidently for her as well, judging by the passion in her kisses. In due course, it was over, and they both rolled over for a smoke.

"How is the office?" Nomuri asked, with the answer to his question now residing in a server in Wisconsin.

"The Politburo is debating great finance. Qian, the minister in charge of our money, is trying to persuade the Politburo to change its ways, but they're not listening as Minister Fang thinks they ought."

"Oh?"

"He's rather angry with his old comrades for their lack of flexibility." Then Ming giggled. "Chai said the minister was very flexible with her two nights ago."

"Not a nice thing to say about a man, Ming," Nomuri chided.

"I would never say it about you and your jade sausage, *shin gan,*" she said, turning for a kiss.

"Do they argue often there? In the Politburo, I mean?"

"There are frequent disagreements, but this is the first time in months that the matter has not been resolved to Fang's satisfaction. They are usually collegial, but this is a disagreement over ideology. Those can be violent—at least in intellectual terms." Obviously, the Politburo members were too old to do much more than smack an enemy over the head with their canes.

"And this one?"

"Minister Qian says the country may soon be out of money. The other ministers say that is nonsense. Qian says we must accommodate the Western countries. Zhang and the others like him say we cannot show weakness after all they—especially the Americans—have done to us lately."

"Don't they see that killing that Italian priest was a bad thing?"

"They see it as an unfortunate accident, and besides, he was breaking our laws."

Jesus, Nomuri thought, *they really do think they're godkings, don't they? "Bao bei,* that is a mistake on their part."

"You think so?"

"I have been to America, remember? I lived there for a time. Americans are very solicitous to their clergy, and they place a high value on religion. Spitting on it angers them greatly."

"You think Qian is right, then?" she asked. "You think America will deny us money for this foolish action?"

"I think it is possible, yes. Very possible, Ming."

"Minister Fang thinks we should take a more moderate course, to accommodate the Americans somewhat, but he did not say so at the meeting."

"Oh? Why?"

"He does not wish to depart too greatly from the path of the other ministers. You say that in Japan people fear not being elected. Here, well, the Politburo elects its own, and it can expel those who no longer fit in. Fang does not wish to lose his own status, obviously, and to make sure that doesn't happen, he takes a cautious line."

"This is hard for me to understand, Ming. How do they select their members? How do the 'princes' choose the new 'prince'?"

"Oh, there are party members who have distinguished themselves ideologically, or sometimes from work in the field. Minister Qian, for example, used to be chief of railroad construction, and was promoted for that reason, but mainly they are picked for political reasons."

"And Fang?"

"My minister is an old comrade. His father was one of Mao's faithful lieutenants, and Fang has always been politically reliable, but in recent years he has taken note of the new industries and seen how well they function, and he admires some of the people who operate them. He even has some into his office from time to time for tea and talk."

So, the old pervert is a progressive *here?* Nomuri wondered. Well, the bar for that was pretty low in China. You didn't have to jump real high, but that put him in advance of the ones who dug a trench under it, didn't it?

"Ah, so the people have no voice at all, do they?"

Ming laughed at that. "Only at party meetings, and there you guard your voice."

"Are you a member?"

"Oh, yes. I go to meetings once a month. I sit in the back. I nod when others nod, and applaud when they applaud, and I pretend to listen. Others probably listen better. It is not a small thing to be a party member, but my membership is because of my job at the ministry. I am here because they needed my language and computer skills—and besides, the ministers like to have young women under them," she added.

"You're never on top of him, eh?"

"He prefers the ordinary position, but it is hard on his arms." Ming giggled.

Ryan was glad to see that he was brushing enough. The dentist told him to floss, as he always did, and Ryan nodded, as he always did, and he'd never bought floss in his life and wasn't going to start now. But at least he'd undergone nothing more invasive than a couple of X rays, for which, of course, he'd gotten the lead apron. On the whole, it had been ninety minutes torn off the front of his day. Back in the Oval

Office, he had the latest SORGE, which was good enough for a whispered "damn." He lifted the phone for Mary Pat at Langley.

"They're dense," Ryan observed.

"Well, they sure as hell don't know high finance. Even I know better than this."

"TRADER has to see this. Put him on the SORGE list," POTUS ordered.

"With your day-to-day approval only," the DDO hedged. "Maybe he has a need-to-know on economics, but nothing else, okay?"

"Okay, for now," Jack agreed. But George was coming along nicely on strategic matters, and might turn into a good policy adviser. He understood high-stress psychology better than most, and that was the name of the game. Jack broke the connection and had Ellen Sumter call the SecTreas over from across the street.

So, what else do they worry about?" Chester asked."They're concerned that some of the workers and peasants are not as happy as they should be. You know about the riots they had in the coal region."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the miners rioted last year. The PLA went in to settle things down. Several hundred people were shot, and three thousand arrested." She shrugged while putting her bra back on. "There is unrest, but that is nothing especially new. The army keeps control of things in the outlying regions. That's why they spend so much money, to keep the army reliable. The generals run the PLA's economic empire—all the factories and things—and they're good at keeping a lid on things. The ordinary soldiers are just workers and peasants, but the officers are all party members, and they are reliable, or so the Politburo thinks. It's probably true," Ming concluded. She hadn't seen her minister worry all that much about it. Power in the People's Republic decidedly grew from the barrel of a gun, and the Politburo owned all the guns. That made things simple, didn't it?

For his part, Nomuri had just learned things he'd never thought about before. He might want to make his own report on this stuff. Ming probably knew a lot of things that didn't go out as SONGBIRD material, and he'd be remiss not to send that to Langley, too.

It's like a five-year-old in a gun store," Secretary Winston observe. "These people have no business making economic decisions for a city government, much less a major country. I mean, hell, as stupid as the Japanese were a few years ago, at least they know to listen to the coaches."

"And?"

"And when they run into the brick wall, their eyes'll still be closed.

That can smart some, Jack. They're going to get bit on the ass, and they don't see it coming." Winston could mix metaphors with the best of 'em, Ryan saw.

"When?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Depends on how many companies do what Butterfly did. We'll know more in a few days. The fashion business will be the lead indicator, of all things."

"Really?"

"Surprised me, too, but this is the time for them to commit to the next season, and there's a *ton* of money in that business going on over there, man. Toss in all the toys for next Christmas. There's seventeen billion—plus just in that, Mark Gant tells me."

"Damn."

"Yeah, I didn't know Santa's reindeer had slanted eyes either, Jack. At least not to that extent."

"What about Taiwan?" Ryan wondered.

"You're not kidding. They're jumping into the growing gap with both feet. Figure they pick up a quarter, maybe a third, of what the PRC is going to lose. Singapore's going to be next. And the Thais. This little bump in the road will go a long way to restore the damage done to their economy a few years back. In fact, the PRC's troubles might rebuild the whole South Asian economy. It could be a swing of fifty billion dollars out of China, and it has to go somewhere. We're starting to take bids, Jack. It won't be a bad deal for our consumers, and I'll bet those countries learn from Beijing's example, and kick their doors open a notch or so. So, our workers will profit from it, too—somewhat, anyway."

"Downside?"

"Boeing's squealing some. They wanted that triple-seven order, but you wait an' see. Somebody's going to take up that slack, too. One other thing."

"Yeah?" Ryan asked.

"It's not just American companies bailing out on them. Two big Italian places, and Siemens in Germany, they've announced termination of some business with their Chinese partners," TRADER said.

"Will it turn into a general movement . . . ?"

"Too soon to say, but if I were these guys"—Winston shook the fax from CIA—"I'd be thinking about fence-mending real soon."

"They won't do it, George."

"Then they're going to learn a nasty lesson."

CHAPTER 39

The Other Question

No action with our friend?" Reilly asked.

"Well, he continues his sexual adventures," Provalov answered.

"Talk to any of the girls yet?"

"Earlier today, two of them. He pays them well, in euros or d-marks, and doesn't request any, uh, 'exotic' services from them."

"Nice to know he's normal in his tastes," the FBI agent observed, with a grunt.

"We have numerous photos of him now. We've put an electronic tracker on his cars, and we've also planted a bug on his computer keyboard. That'll allow us to determine his encryption password, next time he makes use of it."

"But he hasn't done anything incriminating yet," Reilly said. He didn't even make it a question.

"Not under our observation," Oleg confirmed.

"Damn, so, he was really trying to whack Sergey Golovko. Hard to believe, man."

"That is so, but we cannot deny it. And on Chinese orders."

"That's like an act of war, buddy. It's a big fucking deal." Reilly took a sip of his vodka.

"So it is, Mishka. Rather more complex than any case I've handled this year." It was, Provalov thought, an artful understatement. He'd gladly go back to a normal homicide, a husband killing his wife for fucking a neighbor, or the other way around. Such things, nasty as they were, were far less nasty than this one was.

"How's he pick the girls up, Oleg?" Reilly asked.

"He doesn't call for them on the phone. He seems to go to a good restaurant with a good bar and wait until a likely prospect appears at his elbow."

"Hmm, plant a girl on him?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean get yourself a pretty girl who does this sort of thing for a living, brief her on what she ought to say, and set her in front of him like a nice fly on your fishhook. If he picks her up, maybe she can get him to talk."

"Have you ever done such a thing?"

"We got a wiseguy that way in Jersey City three years ago. Liked to brag in front of women how tough he was, and the guys he whacked, that sort of thing. He's in Rahway State Prison now on a murder rap. Oleg, a lot more people have talked their way into prison than you'll ever catch on your own. Trust me. That's how it is for us, even."

"I wonder if the Sparrow School has any graduates working . . . ?" Provalov mused.

It wasn't fair to do it at night, but nobody had ever said war was marked by fairness in its execution. Colonel Boyle was in his command post monitoring the operation of 1st Armored's Aviation Brigade. It was mainly his Apaches, though some Kiowa Warriors were up, too, as scouts for the heavy shooters. The target was a German heavy battalion, simulating a night's laagering after a day on the offense. In fact, they were pretending to be Russians—it was a NATO scenario that went back thirty years to the introduction of the first Huey Cobras, back in the 1970s, when the value of a helicopter gunship had first been noticed in Vietnam. And a revelation it had been. Armed for the first time in 1972 with TOW missiles, they'd proven to the tanks of the North Vietnamese just how fearsome a foe a missile-armed chopper could be, and that had been before night-vision systems had come fully on line. Now the Apache turned combat operations into sport shooting, and the Germans were still trying to figure a counter for it. Even their own night-vision gear didn't compensate for the huge advantage held by the airborne hunters. One idea that had almost worked was to lay a thermal-insulating blanket over the tanks so as to deny the helicopters the heat signature by which they hunted their motionless prey, but the problem there was the tank's main gun tube, which had proved impractical to conceal, and the blankets had never really worked properly, any more than a twin-bed coverlet could be stretched over a king-size bed. And so, now, the Apaches' laser-illumination systems were "painting" the Leos for enough seconds to guarantee hits from the Hellfire missiles, and while the German tanks tried to shoot back, they couldn't seem to make it work. And now the yellow "I'm dead" lights were blinking, and yet another tank battalion had fallen victim to yet another administrative attack.

"They should have tried putting SAM teams outside their perimeter," Colonel Boyle observed, watching the computer screen. Instead, the German colonel had tried IR lures, which the Apache gunners had learned to distinguish from the real thing. Under the rules of the scenario, proper tank decoys had not been allowed. They were a little harder to discriminate—the American-made ones almost

exactly replicated the visual signature of an M1 tank, and had an internal heat source for fooling infrared gear at night—*and* fired off a Hoffman pyrotechnic charge to simulate a return shot when they took a hit. But they were made so well for their mission that they could not be mistaken for anything other than what they were, either a real M1 main battle tank, and hence friendly, or a decoy, and thus not really useful in a training exercise, all in all a case of battlefield technology being too good for a training exercise.

"Pegasus Lead to Archangel, over," the digital radio called. With the new radios, it was no longer a static-marred crackle.

"Archangel to Pegasus," Colonel Boyle answered.

"Sir, we are Winchester and just about out of targets. No friendly casualties. Pegasus is RTB, over."

"Roger, Pegasus. Looks good from here. Out."

And with that, the Apache battalion of attack choppers and their Kiowa bird-dogs turned back for their airfield for the mission debrief and post-game beers.

Boyle looked over at General Diggs. "Sir, I don't know how to do it much better than that."

"Our hosts are going to be pissed."

"The Bundeswehr isn't what it used to be. Their political leadership thinks peace has broken out all the way, and their troopers know it. They could have put some of their own choppers up to run interference, but my boys are pretty good at air-to-air—we train for it, and my pilots really like the idea of making ace on their own—but their chopper drivers aren't getting all the gas they need for operational training. Their best chopper drivers are down in the Balkans doing traffic observation."

Diggs nodded thoughtfully. The problems of the Bundeswehr were not, strictly speaking, his problems. "Colonel, that was well done. Please convey my pleasure to your people. What's next for you?"

"General, we have a maintenance stand-down tomorrow, and two days later we're going to run a major search-and-rescue exercise with my Blackhawks. You're welcome to come over and watch."

"I just might, Colonel Boyle. You done good. Be seeing you."

"Yes, sir." The colonel saluted, and General Diggs walked out to his HMMWV, with Colonel Masterman in attendance.

"Well, Duke?"

"Like I told you, sir, Boyle's been feeding his boys and girls a steady diet of nails and human babies."

"Well, his next fitness report's going to get him a star, I think."

"His Apache commander's not bad either."

"That's a fact," the divisional G-3 agreed. "Pegasus" was his call sign, and he'd kicked some serious ass this night.

"What's next?"

"Sir, in three days we have a big SimNet exercise against the Big Red One at Fort Riley. Our boys are pretty hot for it."

"Divisional readiness?" Diggs asked.

"We're pushing ninety-five percent, General. Not much slack left to take up. I mean, sir, to go any farther, we gotta take the troops out to Fort Irwin or maybe the Negev Training Area. Are we as good as the Tenth Cav or the Eleventh? No, we don't get to play in the field as much as they do." And, he didn't have to add, no division in any army in the world got the money to train that hard. "But given the limitations we have to live with, there's not a whole lot more we can do. I figure we play hard on SimNet to keep the kids interested, but we're just about as far as we can go, sir."

"I think you're right, Duke. You know, sometimes I kinda wish the Cold War could come back—for training purposes, anyway. The Germans won't let us play the way we used to back then, and that's what we need to take the next step."

"Unless somebody springs for the tickets to fly a brigade out to California." Masterman nodded.

"That ain't gonna happen, Duke," Diggs told his operations officer. And more was the pity. First Tanks' troops were almost ready to give the Blackhorse a run for their money. Close enough, Diggs thought, that he'd pay to watch. "How's a beer grab you, Colonel?"

"If the General is buying, I will gladly assist him in spending his money," Duke Masterman said graciously, as their sergeant driver pulled up to the *kazerne's* O-Club.

Good morning, Comrade General," Gogol said, pulling himself to attention.

Bondarenko had felt guilt at coming to see this old soldier so early in the morning, but he'd heard the day before that the ancient warrior was not one to waste daylight. And so he wasn't, the general saw.

"You kill wolves," Gennady Iosifovich observed, seeing the gleaming pelts hanging on the wall of this rough cabin.

"And bear, but when you gild the pelts, they grow too heavy," the old man agreed, fetching tea for his guests.

"These are amazing," Colonel Aliyev said, touching one of the remaining wolf pelts. Most had been carried off.

"It's an amusement for an old hunter," Gogol said, lighting a cigarette.

General Bondarenko looked at his rifles, the new Austrian-made one, and the old Russian M1891 Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle.

"How many with this one?" Bondarenko asked.

"Wolves, bears?"

"Germans," the general clarified, with coldness in his voice.

"I stopped counting at thirty, Comrade General. That was before Kiev. There were many more after that. I see we share a decoration," Gogol observed, pointing to his visitor's gold star, for Hero of the Soviet Union, which he'd won in Afghanistan. Gogol had two, one from Ukraine and the other in Germany.

"You have the look of a soldier, Pavel Petrovich, and a good one." Bondarenko sipped his tea, served properly, a clear glass in a metal—was it silver?—holder.

"I served in my time. First at Stalingrad, then on the long walk to Berlin."

I bet you did walk all the way, too, the general thought. He'd met his share of Great Patriotic War veterans, now mostly dead. This wizened old bastard had stared death in the face and spat at it, trained to do so, probably, by his life in these woods. He'd grown up with bears and wolves as enemies—as nasty as the German fascists had been, at least they didn't eat you—and so had been accustomed to wagering his life on his eye and his nerve. There was no real substitute for that, the kind of training you couldn't institute for an army. A gifted few learned how the hard way, and of those the lucky ones survived the war. Pavel Petrovich hadn't had an easy time. Soldiers might admire their own snipers, might value them for their skills, but you could never say "comrade" to a man who hunted men as though they were animals—because on the other side of the line might be another such man who wanted to hunt *you.* Of all the enemies, that was the one you loathed and feared the most, because it became personal to see another man through a telescopic sight, to see his face, and take his life as a deliberate act against *one* man, even gazing at his face when the bullet struck. Gogol had been one of those, Gennady thought, a hunter of individual men. And he'd probably never lost a minute's sleep over it. Some men were just born to it, and Pavel Petrovich Gogol was one of them. With a few hundred thousand such men, a general could conquer the entire world, but they were too rare for that. . .

. . . and maybe that was a good thing, Bondarenko mused.

"Might you come to my headquarters some night? I would like to feed you dinner and listen to your stories."

"How far is it?"

"I will send you my personal helicopter, Sergeant Gogol."

"And I will bring you a gilded wolf," the hunter promised his guest.

"We will find an honored place for it at my headquarters," Bondarenko promised in turn. "Thank you for your tea. I must depart and see to my command, but I *will* have you to headquarters for dinner, Sergeant Gogol." Handshakes were exchanged, and the general

took his leave.

"I would not want him on the other side of a battlefield," Colonel Aliyev observed, as they got into their helicopter.

"Do we have a sniper school in the command?"

"Yes, General, but it's mainly inactive."

Gennady turned. "Start it up again, Andrushka! We'll get Gogol to come and teach the children how it's done. He's a priceless asset. Men like that are the soul of a fighting army. It's our job to command our soldiers, to tell them where to go and what to do, but those are the men who do the fighting and the killing, and it's *our* job to make sure they're properly trained and supplied. And when they're too old, we use them to teach the new boys, to give them heroes they can touch and talk to. How the *hell* did we ever forget that, Andrey?" The general shook his head as the helicopter lifted off.

Gregory was back in his hotel room, with three hundred pages of technical information to digest as he sipped his Diet Coke and finished off his french fries. Something was wrong with the whole equation, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The Navy had tested its Standard-2-ER missile against all manner of threats, mainly on computer, but also against live targets at Kwajalein Atoll. It had done pretty well, but there'd never been a full-up live test against a for-real ICBM reentry vehicle. There weren't enough of them to go around. Mainly they used old Minuteman-II ICBMs, long since retired from service and fired out of test silos at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, but those were mostly gone. Russia and America had retired all of their ballistic weapons, chiefly as a reaction to the nuclear terrorist explosion at Denver and the even more horrific aftermath that had barely been averted. The negotiations to draw the numbers down to zero—the last ones had been eliminated in public just before the Japanese had launched their sneak attack on the Pacific Fleet—had gone so rapidly that a lot of the minor ancillary points had scarcely been considered, and only later had it been decided to take the "spare" launchers whose disposition had somehow been overlooked and retain them for ABM testing (every month a Russian officer checked the American ones at Vandenberg, and an American officer counted the Russian ones outside Plesetsk). The ABM tests were also monitored, but that entire area of effort was now largely theoretical. Both America and Russia retained a goodly number of nuclear warheads, and these could easily be affixed to cruise missiles, which, again, both sides had in relative abundance and no country could stop. It might take five hours instead of thirty-four minutes, but the targets would be just as dead.

Anti-missile work had been relegated to theater missiles, such as the

ubiquitous Scuds, which the Russians doubtless regretted ever having built, much less sold to jerkwater countries that couldn't even field a single decent mechanized division, but who loved to parade those upgraded V-2-class ballistic stovepipes because they looked impressive as hell to the people on the sidewalks. But the new upgrades on Patriot and its Russian counterpart SAM largely negated that threat, and the Navy's Aegis system had been tested against them, with pretty good success. Like Patriot, though, Standard was really a point-defense weapon with damned little cross-range ability to cover an area instead of maybe twenty square miles of important sea-estate.

All in all, it was a pity that they'd never solved the power-throughput problem with his free-electron lasers. *Those* could have defended whole coastlines, if only . . . and if only his aunt had balls, Gregory thought, she'd be his uncle. There was talk of building a chemical laser aboard a converted 747 that could sure as hell clobber a ballistic launch during boost phase, but to do *that,* the 747 had to be fairly close to the launch point, and so *that* was just one more version of theater defense, and of little strategic use.

The Aegis system had real possibilities. The SPY radar system was first-rate, and though the computer that managed the information was the flower of 1975 technology—a current Apple Macintosh had it beat by a good three orders of magnitude in all categories of performance—intercepting a ballistic warhead wasn't a question of computing speed so much as kinetic energy—getting the kill vehicle to the right place at the right time. Even that wasn't so great a feat of engineering. The real work had been done as far back as 1959, with the Nike Zeus, which had turned into Spartan and shown great promise before being shitcanned by the 1972 treaty with the Soviet Union, which was, belatedly, just as dead as the Safeguard system, which had been aborted at half-built. Well, the fact of the matter was that MIRV technology had negated that entire defense concept. No, you had to kill the ICBM in boost phase to kill all the MIRVs at once, and do it over the enemy's territory so that if he had a primitive arming system he'd only fry his own turf. The method for doing that was the Brilliant Pebbles system developed at Lawrence-Livermore National Laboratory, and though it had never been given a full-up test, the technology was actually pretty straightforward. Being hit by a matchstick traveling at fifteen thousand miles per hour would ruin your entire day. But that would never happen. The drive to fund and deploy such a system had died with all the ballistic launchers. In a way, it was a pity, Gregory thought. Such a system would have been a really cool engineering accomplishment—but it had little practical application today. The PRC retained its land-based ballistic launchers, but there were only ten or so of them, and that was a long way from

the fifteen hundred the Soviets had once pointed at America. The Chinese had a missile submarine, too, but Gregory figured that CINCPAC could make that go away if he had to. Even if it was just tied alongside the pier, one two-thousand-pound smart bomb could take it out of play, and the Navy had a lot of those.

So, he thought, *figure the PRC gets really pissed at Taiwan, and figure the Navy has an Aegis cruiser tied alongside so that its sailors can get drunk and laid in the city, and those folks in Beijing pick that moment to push the button on one of their ICBMs, how can the Navy keep its cruiser from turning into slag, and oh, by the way, keep the city of Taipei alive . . . ?*

The SM-2-ER had almost enough of the right ingredients to handle such a threat. If the missile was targeted on where the cruiser was, cross-range was not an issue. You just had to put the interceptor on the same line of bearing, because in essence the inbound rack wasn't moving at all, and you just had to put the SAM in the same place—Spot X—that the RV was going to be, at Time Y. The Aegis computer could figure where and when that was, and you weren't really hitting a bullet with a bullet. The RV would be about a meter across, and the kill-zone of the SAM's warhead would be about, what? Three meters across? Five? Maybe even eight or ten?

Call it eight, Al Gregory thought. Was the SM-2 *that* accurate? In absolute terms, probably yes. It had ample-sized control surfaces, and getting into the line of a jet aircraft—what the SM-2 had been designed to kill—had to take into account the maneuverability of the aircraft (pilots would do their damnedest to avoid the things), and so the eight-meter globe of destruction could probably be made to intercept the inbound RV in terms of pure geometry.

The issue was speed. Gregory popped open another Diet Coke from the room's minibar and sat back on the bed to consider how troublesome that issue was. The inbound RV, at a hundred thousand feet, would be traveling at about sixteen thousand miles per hour, 23,466 feet per second, eight times the speed of a rifle bullet, 7,150 meters per second. That was pretty damned fast. It was about the same speed as a high-explosive detonation. You could have the RV sitting next to a ton of TNT at the moment the explosive went off, and the explosion couldn't catch up with the RV. *That was FAST.*

So, the SAM's warhead has to go off well before it gets to where the RV is. Figuring out how much was a simple mathematical exercise. That meant that the proximity fuse on the SM-2 was the important variable in the equation, Gregory decided. He didn't know that he was wrong on this, didn't see what he was missing, and went on with his calculations. The software fix for the proximity laser fusing system looked less difficult than he'd imagined. Well, wasn't that good news?

It was another early day for Minister Fang Gan. He'd gotten a phone call at his home the previous night, and decided he had to arrive early for the appointment made then. This was a surprise for his staff, who were just setting up for the day when he breezed in, not looking as cross as he felt for the disturbance of his adamantine routine. It wasn't their fault, after all, and they had the good sense not to trouble him, and thus generate artificial wrath.

Ming was just printing up her downloads from the Web. She had pieces that she thought would be of interest, especially one from *The Wall Street Journal,* and another from *Financial Times.* Both commented on what she thought might be the reason for the minister's early arrival. His 9:20 appointment was with Ren He-Ping, an industrialist friendly with her boss. Ren arrived early. The slender, elderly man looked unhappy—no, she thought, worried—about something. She lifted her phone to get permission, then stood and walked him into the inner office, racing back outside to fetch morning tea, which she hadn't had a chance to serve her boss yet.

Ming was back inside in less than five minutes, with the fine porcelain cups on a decorated serving tray. She presented the morning drinks to both men with an elegance that earned her a thank-you from her boss, and then she took her leave. Ren, she saw, wasn't any happier to be in with her minister.

"What is the problem, Ren?"

"In two weeks, I will have a thousand workers with nothing to do, Fang."

"Oh? What is the reason for that, my friend?"

"I do much business with an American business. It is called Butterfly. They sell clothing to wealthy American women. My factory outside Shanghai makes the cloth, and my tailoring plant at Yancheng turns the fabric into clothing, which we ship to America and Europe. We've been doing business with Butterfly for three years now, very satisfactorily for all concerned."

"Yes? So, what, then, is the difficulty?"

"Fang, Butterfly just canceled an order worth one hundred forty million American dollars. They did it without any warning. Only last week they told us how happy they were with our products. We've invested a fortune into quality control to make sure they would stay with us—but they've left us like a dog in the street."

"Why did this happen, Ren?" Minister Fang asked, fearing he knew the answer.

"Our representative in New York tells us that it's because of the deaths of the two clergymen. He tells us that Butterfly had no choice, that Americans demonstrated outside his establishment in New York

and prevented people from going inside to buy his wares. He says that Butterfly cannot do business with me for fear of having their own business collapse."

"Do you not have a contract with them? Are they not obligated to honor it?"

Ren nodded. "Technically, yes, but business is a practical thing, Minister. If they cannot sell our goods, then they will not buy them from us. They cannot get the financing to do so from their bankers—bankers loan money in the expectation that it will be paid back, yes? There is an escape clause in the contract. We could dispute it in court, but it would take years, and we would probably not succeed, and it would also offend others in the industry, and thus prevent us from ever doing business in New York again. So, in practical terms there is no remedy."

"Is this a temporary thing? Surely this difficulty will pass, will it not?"

"Fang, we also do business in Italy, with the House of d'Alberto, a major trendsetter in European fashion. They also canceled their relationship with us. It seems that the Italian man our police killed comes from a powerful and influential family. Our representative in Italy says that no Chinese firm will be able to do business there for some time. In other words, Minister, that 'unfortunate incident' with the churchmen is going to have grave consequences."

"But these people have to purchase their cloth somewhere," Fang objected.

"Indeed they do. And they will do so in Thailand, Singapore and Taiwan."

"Is that possible?"

Ren nodded quickly and sadly. "It is very possible. Sources have told me that they are busily contacting our former business partners to 'take up the slack,' as they put it. You see, the Taiwan government has launched an aggressive campaign to distinguish themselves from us, and it would appear that their campaign is, for the moment, highly successful."

"Well, Ren, surely you can find other customers for your goods," Fang suggested with confidence.

But the industrialist shook his head. He hadn't touched his tea and his eyes looked like wounds in a stone head. "Minister, America is the world's largest such market, and it appears it will soon be closed to us. After that is Italy, and that door, also, has been slammed shut. Paris, London, even the avant-garde marketers in Denmark and Vienna will not even return our phone calls. I've had my representatives contact all potential markets, and they all say the same thing: No one wants to do business with China. Only America could save us, but America will

not."

"What will this cost you?"

"As I told you, one hundred forty million dollars just from the Butterfly account alone, and another similar amount from our other American and European businesses."

Fang didn't have to think long to calculate the take the PRC's government got from that.

"Your colleagues?"

"I have spoken with several. The news is the same. The timing could hardly be worse. *All* of our contracts are coming due at the same time. We are talking *billions* of dollars, Minister. *Billions,"* he repeated.

Fang lit a cigarette. "I see," he said. "What would it take to fix this?"

"Something to make America happy, not just the government, but the citizens, too."

"Is that truly important?" Fang asked, somewhat tiredly. He'd heard this rubbish so many times from so many voices.

"Fang, in America people can buy their clothing from any number of stores and manufacturers, any number of marketers. The people choose which succeeds and which fails. Women's clothing in particular is an industry as volatile as vapor. It does not take much to make such a company fail. As a result, those companies will not assume additional and unnecessary risks. To do business with the People's Republic, now, today, is something they see as an unnecessary risk."

Fang took a drag and thought about that. It was, actually, something he'd always known, intellectually, but never quite appreciated. America *was* a different place, and it *did* have different rules. And since China wanted American money, China had to abide by those rules. That wasn't politics. That was practicality.

"So, you want me to do what?"

"Please, tell your fellow ministers that this could mean financial ruin for us. Certainly for my industry, and we are a valuable asset for our country. We bring wealth into China. If you want that wealth to spend on other things, then you must pay attention to what we need in order to get you that wealth." What Ren could not say was that he and his fellow industrialists were the ones who made the Politburo's economic (and therefore, also political) agenda possible, and that therefore the Politburo needed to listen to them once in a while. But Fang knew what the Politburo would say in reply. A horse may pull the cart, but you do not ask the horse where it wishes to go.

Such was political reality in the People's Republic of China. Fang knew that Ren had been around the world, that he had a sizable personal fortune which the PRC had graciously allowed him to

accumulate, and that, probably more important, he had the intelligence and personal industry to thrive anywhere he chose to live. Fang knew also that Ren could fly to Taiwan and get financing to build a factory there, where he could employ others who looked and spoke Chinese, and he'd make money there *and* get some political influence in the bargain. Most of all, he knew that Ren knew this. Would he act upon it? Probably not. He was Chinese, a citizen of the mainland. This was *his* land, and he had no desire to leave it, else he would not be here now, pleading his case to the one minister—well, probably Qian Kun would listen also—whose ear might be receptive to his words. Ren was a patriot, but not a communist. What an odd duality that was . . .

Fang stood. This meeting had gone far enough. "I will do this, my friend," he told his visitor. "And I will let you know what develops."

"Thank you, Comrade Minister." Ren bowed and took his leave, not looking better, but pleased that someone had actually listened to him. Listening was not what one expected of Politburo members.

Fang sat back down and lit another cigarette, then reached for his tea. He thought for a minute or so. "Ming!" he called loudly. It took seven seconds by his watch.

"Yes, Minister?"

"What news articles do you have for me?" he asked. His secretary disappeared for another few seconds, then reappeared, holding a few pages.

"Here, Minister, just printed up. This one may be of particular interest."

"This one" was a cover story from *The Wall Street Journal.* "Major Shift in China Business?" it proclaimed. The question mark was entirely rhetorical, he saw in the first paragraph. Ren was right. He had to discuss this with the rest of the Politburo.

The second major item in Bondarenko's morning was observing tank gunnery. His men had the newest variant of the T-80UM main battle tank. It wasn't quite the newest T-99 that was just coming into production. This UM *did,* however, have a decent fire-control system, which was novel enough. The target range was about as simple as one could ask, large white cardboard panels with black tank silhouettes painted on them, and they were set at fixed, known ranges. Many of his gunners had never fired a live round since leaving gunnery school —such was the current level of training in the Russian Army, the general fumed.

Then he fumed some more. He watched one particular tank, firing at a target an even thousand meters away. It should have been mere spitting distance, but as he watched, first one, then two more, of the

tracer rounds missed, all falling short, until the fourth shot hit high on the painted turret shape. With that feat accomplished, the tank shifted aim to a second target at twelve hundred meters and missed that one twice, before achieving a pinwheel in the geometric center of the target.

"Nothing wrong with that," Aliyev said next to him.

"Except that the tank and the crew were all dead ninety seconds ago!" Bondarenko observed, followed by a particularly vile oath. "Ever see what happens when a tank blows up? Nothing left of the crew but sausage! Expensive sausage."

"It's their first time in a live-fire exercise," Aliyev said, hoping to calm his boss down. "We have limited practice ammunition, and it's not as accurate as warshots."

"How many live rounds do we have?"

Aliyev smiled. "Millions." They had, in fact, warehouses full of the things, fabricated back in the 1970s.

"Then issue them," the general ordered.

"Moscow won't like it," the colonel warned. Warshots were, of course, far more expensive.

"I am not here to *please* them, Andrey Petrovich. I am here to *defend* them." And someday he'd meet the fool who'd decided to replace the tank's loader crewman with a machine. It was slower than a soldier, and removed a crewman who could assist in repairing damage. Didn't engineers ever consider that tanks were actually supposed to go into *battle?* No, this tank had been designed by a committee, as all Soviet weapons had been, which explained, perhaps, why so many of them didn't work—or, just as badly, didn't protect their users. Like putting the gas tank inside the *doors* of the BTR armored personnel carrier. Who ever thought that a crewman might want to bail out of a damaged vehicle and perhaps even survive to fight afoot? The tank's vulnerability had been the very first thing the Afghans had learned about Soviet mobile equipment . . . and how many Russian boys had burned to death because of it? *Well,* Bondarenko thought, *I have a new country now, and Russia does have talented engineers, and in a few years perhaps we can start building weapons worthy of the soldiers who carry them.*

"Andrey, is there anything in our command which does work?"

"That's why we're training, Comrade General." Bondarenko's service reputation was of an upbeat officer who looked for solutions rather than problems. His operations officer supposed that Gennady Iosifovich was overwhelmed by the scope of the difficulties, not yet telling himself that however huge a problem was, it had to be composed of numerous small ones which *could* be addressed one at a time. Gunnery, for example. Today, it was execrable. But in a week it

would be much better, especially if they gave the troops real rounds instead of the practice ones. Real “bullets,” as soldiers invariably called them, made you feel like a man instead of a schoolboy with his workbook. There was much to be said for that, and like many of the things his new boss was doing, it made good sense. In two weeks, they’d be watching more tank gunnery, and seeing more hits than misses.

CHAPTER 40

Fashion Statements

So, George?" Ryan asked.

"So, it's started. Turns out there are a ton of similar contracts coming due for the next season or something, plus Christmas toy contracts," SecTreas told his President. "And it's not just us. Italy, France, England, *everybody's* bugging out on them. The Chinese have made huge inroads into that industry, and they pissed off a lot of people in the process. Well, the chicken hasn't so much come home to roost as it's flown the coop, and that leaves our friends in Beijing holding the bag. It's a big bag, Jack. We're talking billions here."

"How badly will that hurt them?" SecState asked.

"Scott, I grant you it seems a little odd that the fate of a nation could ride on Victoria's Secret brassieres, but money is money. They need it, and all of a sudden there's a big hole in their current account. How big? Billions. It's going to make a hell of a bellyache for them."

"Any actual harm?" Ryan asked.

"Not my department, Jack," Winston answered. "That's Scott."

"Okay." Ryan turned his head to look at his other cabinet member.

"Before I can answer that, I need to know what net effect this will have on the Chinese economy."

Winston shrugged. "Theoretically, they could ride this out with minimal difficulties, but that depends on how they make up the shortfall. Their national industrial base is an incredibly muddled hodgepodge of private- and state-owned industries. The private ones are the efficient ones, of course, and the worst of the state-owned industries belong to their army. I've seen analyses of PLA operations that look like something out of *MAD* magazine, just impossible to credit on first reading. Soldiers don't generally know much about making things—they're better at breaking them—and tossing Marxism into the mix doesn't exactly help the situation. So, those 'enterprises' piss away vast quantities of cash. If they shut those down, or just cut them back, they could kiss this little shortfall off and move on—but they won't."

"That's right," Adler agreed. "The Chinese People's Liberation Army has a lot of political clout over there. The party controls it, but the tail

wags the dog to a considerable extent. There's quite a bit of political and economic unrest over there. They need the army to keep things under control, and the PLA takes a big cut off the top of the national treasure because of that."

"The Soviets weren't like that," POTUS objected.

"Different country, different culture. Keep that in mind."

"Klingons," Ryan muttered, with a nod. "Okay, go on."

Winston took the lead. "We can't predict the impact this will have on their society without knowing how they're going to react to the cash shortfall."

"If they squeal when it starts to hurt, what do we do?" Ryan asked next.

"They're going to have to make nice, like reinstating the Boeing and Caterpillar orders, and doing it publicly."

"They won't—they can't," Adler objected. "Too much loss of face. Asian mind-set. That won't happen. They might offer us concessions, but they'll have to be hidden ones."

"Which is not politically acceptable to us. If I try to take *that* to Congress, first they'll laugh at me, then they'll crucify me." Ryan took a sip of his drink.

"And they won't understand why you can't tell Congress what to do. They think you're a strong leader, and therefore you're supposed to make decisions on your own," EAGLE informed his President.

"Don't they know *anything* about how our government works?" POTUS asked.

"Jack, I'm sure they have all sorts of experts who know more about the constitutional process than I do, but the Politburo members are not required to listen to them. They come from a very different political environment, and that's the one they understand. For us 'the people' means popular opinion, polls, and ultimately elections. For them, it means the peasants and workers who are supposed to do what they're told."

"We do business with these people?" Winston asked the ceiling.

"It's called realpolitik, George," Ryan explained.

"But we can't pretend they don't exist. There's over a billion of them, and, oh, by the way, they also have nuclear weapons, on ballistic launchers, even." Which added a decidedly unpleasant element to the overall equation.

"Twelve of them, according to CIA, and we can turn their country into a parking lot if we have to, just it'll take twenty-four hours instead of forty minutes," Ryan told his guests, managing not to get a chill when he said it. The possibility was too remote to make him nervous. "And they know that, and who wants to be the king of a parking lot? They *are* that rational, Scott, aren't they?"

"I think so. They rattle their saber at Taiwan, but not even much of that lately, not when we have Seventh Fleet there all the time." Which, however, burned up a lot of fuel oil for the Navy.

"Anyway, this cash problem won't actually cripple their economy?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so, unless they're pretty damned dumb."

"Scott, are they dumb?" Ryan asked State Department.

"Not that dumb—at least I don't think so," State told the President.

"Good, then I can go upstairs and have another drink." Ryan rose, and his guests did the same.

This is lunacy!" Qian Kun growled at Fang half a world away, discussing what turned out to be the same set of issues.

"I will not disagree with you, Qian, but we must make our case to the rest of our colleagues."

"Fang, this could mean ruin for us. With what shall we buy wheat and oil?"

"What are our reserves?"

The Finance Minister had to sit back and think about that one. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the numbers on which he got briefed the first Monday of every month. The eyes opened. "The harvest from last year was better than average. We have food for about a year—assuming an average harvest this year, or even a slightly short one. The immediate problem is oil. We've been using a lot of that lately, with the PLA's constant exercises up north and on the coast. In oil, we have perhaps four months in reserve, and the money to purchase another two months. After that, we will have to cut back our uses. Now, we are self-sufficient in coal, and so we'll have all the electricity we need. The lights will burn. The trains will run, but the PLA will be crippled." *Not that this is an entirely bad thing*, he didn't add. Both men acknowledged the value of the People's Liberation Army, but today it was really more of a domestic security service, like a large and well-armed police force, than a real guarantor of their national security, which had, really, no external threats to deal with.

"The army won't like that," Fang warned.

"I am not overly concerned with their likes and dislikes, Fang," the Finance Minister countered. "We have a country to bring out of the nineteenth century. We have industries to grow, and people to feed and employ. The ideology of our youth has not been as successful in bringing this about as we were educated to expect."

"Do you say that . . . ?"

Qian shifted in his chair. "Remember what Deng said? It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice. And Mao

exiled him soon thereafter, and so today we have two hundred million more mouths to feed, but the only additional funds with which we do it came to us from the black cat, not the white one. We live in a practical world, Fang. I, too, have my copy of *The Little Red Book,* but I've never tried to eat it."

This former railroad engineer had been captured by his bureaucracy and his job, just like the last one had been—he'd died at the relatively young age of seventy-eight, before he could be expelled from his Politburo chair. Qian, a youthful sixty-six, would have to learn to watch his words, and his thoughts, more carefully. He was about to say so when Qian started speaking again.

"Fang, people like you and me, we must be able to speak freely to one another. We are not college students full of revolutionary zeal. We are men of years and knowledge, and we *must* have the ability to discuss issues frankly. We waste too much time in our meetings kneeling before Mao's cadaver. The man is *dead,* Fang. Yes, he was a great man, yes, he was a great leader for our people, but *no,* he *wasn't* the Lord Buddha, or Jesus, or whatever. He was only a man, and he had ideas, and most of them were right, but some of them were wrong, some of them don't work. The Great Leap Forward accomplished nothing, and the Cultural Revolution, in addition to killing off undesirable intellectuals and troublemakers, also starved millions of our people to death, and that is not desirable, is it?"

"That is true, my young friend, but it is important how you present your ideas," Fang warned his junior, non-voting member of the Politburo. *Present them stupidly, and you'll find yourself counting rice bags on a collective farm.* He was a little old to go barefoot into the paddies, even as punishment for ideological apostasy.

"Will you support me?" Qian asked.

"I will try," was the halfhearted answer. He had to plead Ren He-Ping's case as well this day, and it wouldn't be easy.

They'd counted on the funds transfer at Qian's ministry. They had contracts to pay for. The tanker had long since been scheduled, because they were booked well in advance, and this carrier was just now coming alongside the loading pier off the coast of Iran. She'd load four hundred and fifty-six thousand tons of crude oil over a period of less than a day, then steam back out of the Persian Gulf, turn southeast for the passage around India, then transit the crowded Malacca Strait past Singapore and north to the huge and newly built oil terminal at Shanghai, where she'd spend thirty or forty hours offloading the cargo, then retrace her journey back to the Gulf for yet another load in an endless procession.

Except that the procession wasn't quite endless. It would end when

the money stopped, because the sailors had to be paid, the debt on the tanker serviced, and most of all, the oil had to be bought. And it wasn't just one tanker. There were quite a few of them on the China run. A satellite focused on just that one segment of the world's oil trade would have seen them from a distance, looking like cars on a highway going to and from the same two points continuously. And like cars, they didn't have to go merely between those two places. There were other ports at which to load oil, and others at which to offload it, and to the crews of the tankers, the places of origin and destination didn't really matter very much, because almost all of their time was spent at sea, and the sea was always the same. Nor did it matter to the owners of the tankers, or the agents who did the chartering. What mattered was that they got paid for their time.

For this charter, the money had been wire-transferred from one account to another, and so the crew stood at their posts watching the loading process—monitoring it mainly by watching various dials and gauges; you couldn't see the oil going through the pipes, after all. Various crew members were on the beach to see to the victualing of their ship, and to visit the chandlers to get books and magazines to read, videocassette movies, and drink to go with the food, plus whatever consumable supplies had been used up on the inbound trip. A few crewmen looked for women whose charms might be rented, but that was an iffy business in Iran. None of them knew or thought very much about who paid for their services. Their job was to operate the ship safely and efficiently. The ship's officers mainly had their wives along, for whom the voyages were extended, if rather boring, pleasure cruises: Every modern tanker had a swimming pool and a deck for tanning, plus satellite TV for news and entertainment. And none of them particularly cared where the ship went, because for the women shopping was shopping, and any new port had its special charms.

This particular tanker, the *World Progress,* was chartered out of London, and had five more Shanghai runs scheduled until the charter ran out. The charter was paid, however, on a per-voyage basis, and the funds for this trip had been wired only seven days before. That was hardly a matter of concern for the owners or the ship's agent. After all, they were dealing with a nation-state, whose credit tended to be good. In due course, the loading was completed. A computerized system told the ship's first officer that the ship's trim was correct, and he so notified the master, who then told the chief engineer to wind up the ship's gas-turbine engines. This engine type made things easy, and in less than five minutes, the ship's power plant was fully ready for sea. Twenty minutes after that, powerful harbor tugs eased the ship away from the loading dock. This evolution is the most demanding for a tanker's crew, because only in confined waters is the risk of collision

and serious damage quite so real. But within two hours, the tanker was under way under her own power, heading for the narrows at Bandar Abbas, and then the open sea.

Yes, Qian," Premier Xu said tiredly. "Proceed."

"Comrades, at our last meeting I warned you of a potential problem of no small proportions. That problem is with us now, and it is growing larger."

"Are we running out of money, Qian?" Zhang Han San asked, with a barely concealed smirk. The answer amused him even more.

"Yes, Zhang, we are."

"How can a nation run out of money?" the senior Politburo member demanded.

"The same way a factory worker can, by spending more than he has. Another way is to offend his boss and lose his job. We have done both," Qian replied evenly.

"What 'boss' do we have?" Zhang inquired, with a disarming and eerie gentleness.

"Comrades, that is what we call trade. We sell our goods to others in return for money, and we use that money to purchase goods from those others. Since we are not peasants from ancient times bartering a pig for a sheep, we must use money, which is the means of international exchange. Our trade with America has generated an annual surplus on the order of seventy billion American dollars."

"Generous of the foreign devils," Premier Xu observed to Zhang *sotto voce*.

"Which we have almost entirely spent for various items, largely for our colleagues in the People's Liberation Army of late. Most of these are long-term purchase items for which advance payment was necessary, as is normal in the international arms business. To this, we must add oil and wheat. There are other things which are important to our economy, but we will concentrate on these for the moment." Qian looked around the table for approval. He got it, though Marshal Luo Cong, Defense Minister, and commander-in-chief of the People's Liberation Army—*and* lord of the PLA's sizable industrial empire—was now looking on with a gimlet eye. The expenditures of his personal empire had been singled out, and that was not calculated to please him.

"Comrades," Qian continued, "we now face the loss of much, perhaps most, of that trade surplus with America, and other foreign countries as well. You see these?" He held up a fistful of telexes and e-mail printouts. "These are cancellations of commercial business orders and funds transfers. Let me clarify. *These* are *billions* of lost dollars, money which in some cases we have already spent—but money we

will never have because we have angered those with whom we do business."

"Do you tell me that they have such power over us? Rubbish!" another member observed.

"Comrade, they have the power to buy our trade goods for cash, or *not* buy them for cash. If they choose *not* to buy them, we do *not* get the money we need to spend for Marshal Luo's expensive toys." He used that word deliberately. It was time to explain the facts of life to these people, and a slap across the face was sure to get their attention. "Now, let us consider wheat. We use wheat to make bread and noodles. If you have no wheat, you have no noodles.

"Our country does not grow enough wheat to feed our people. We know this. We have too many mouths to feed. In a few months, the great producing countries, America, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and so forth, they will all have wheat to sell—but with what shall we buy it? Marshal Luo, your army needs oil to refine into diesel fuel and jet fuel, does it not? We need the same things for our diesel trains, and our airlines. But we cannot produce all the oil we need for our domestic needs, and so we must buy it from the Persian Gulf and elsewhere—again, with what shall we buy it?"

"So, sell our trade goods to someone else?" a member asked, *with rather surprising innocence,* Qian thought.

"Who else might there be, comrade? There is only one America. We have also offended all of Europe. Whom does that leave? Australia? They are allied to Europe and America. Japan? They also sell to America, and *they* will move to replace our lost markets, not to buy from us. South America, perhaps? Those are all Christian countries, and we just killed a senior Christian churchman, didn't we? Moreover, in *their* ethical world, he died heroically. We have not just killed. We have created a holy martyr to their faith!

"Comrades, we have deliberately structured our industry base to sell to the American market. To sell elsewhere, we would first have to determine what they need that we can make, and then enter the market. You don't just show up with a boatload of products and exchange it for cash on the dock! It takes time and patience to become a force in such a market. Comrades, we have cast away the work of *decades.* The money we are losing will not come back for years, and until then, we must learn to live our national life differently."

"What are you saying?" Zhang shot back.

"I am saying that the People's Republic faces economic ruin because two of our policemen killed those two meddling churchmen."

"*That is not possible!*"

"It is not possible, Zhang? If you offend the man who gives you money, then he will give you no more. Can you understand that?

We've gone far out of our way to offend America, and then we offended all of Europe as well. We have made ourselves outcasts—they call us barbarians because of that unhappy incident at the hospital. I do not defend them, but I must tell you what *they* say and think. And as long as they say those things and think those things, it is we who will pay for the error."

"I refuse to believe this!" Zhang insisted.

"That is fine. You may come to my ministry and add up the numbers yourself." Qian was feeling full of himself, Fang saw. Finally, he had them listening to him. Finally, he had them thinking about his thoughts and his expertise. "Do you think I make this story up to tell in some country inn over rice wine?"

Then it was Premier Xu leaning forward and thinking aloud. "You have our attention, Qian. What can we do to avert this difficulty?"

Having delivered his primary message quickly and efficiently, Qian Kun didn't know what to say now. There *wasn't* a way to avert it that these men would accept. But having given them a brief taste of the harsh truth, now he had to give them some more:

"We need to change the perception of American minds. We need to show them that we are not what they consider barbarians. We have to transform our image in their eyes. For starters, we must make amends for the deaths of those two priests."

"Abase ourselves before the foreign devils? *Never!"* Zhang snarled.

"Comrade Zhang," Fang said, coming carefully to Qian's defense. "Yes, we are the Middle Kingdom, and no, we are not the barbarians. They are. But sometimes one must do business with barbarians, and that might mean understanding their point of view, and adapting to it somewhat."

"Humble ourselves before *them?"*

"Yes, Zhang. We need what they have, and to get it, we must be acceptable to them."

"And when they next demand that we make political changes, then what?" This was the premier, Xu, getting somewhat agitated, which was unusual for him.

"We face such decisions when and if they come," Qian answered, pleasing Fang, who didn't want to risk saying *that* himself.

"We cannot risk that," the Interior Minister, Tong Jie, responded, speaking for the first time. The police of the nation belonged to him, and he was responsible for civil order in the country—only if he failed would he call upon Marshal Luo, which would cause him both loss of face and loss of power at this table. In a real sense, the deaths of the two men had been laid at his place, for he had generated the formal orders on the suppression of religious activity in the PRC, increasing the harshness of law enforcement in order to increase the relative

influence of his own ministry. “If the foreigners insist upon internal political changes, it could bring us all down.”

And that was the core issue, Fang saw at once. The People’s Republic rested absolutely upon the power of the party and its leaders, these men before him in this room. Like noblemen of old, each was attended by a trusted servant, sitting in the chairs against the wall, around the table, waiting for the order to fetch tea or water. Each had his rationale for power, whether it was Defense, or Interior, or Heavy Industry, or in his particular case, friendship and general experience. Each had labored long and hard to reach this point, and none of them relished the thought of losing what he had, any more than a provincial governor under the Ching Dynasty would have willingly reverted to being a mere mandarin, because that meant at least ignominy, and just as likely, death. These men knew that if a foreign country demanded and got internal political concessions, then their grip on power would loosen, and that was the one thing they dared not risk. They ruled the workers and peasants, and because of that, they also feared them. The noblemen of old could fall back upon the teachings of Confucius, or Buddha; on a spiritual foundation for their temporal power. But Marx and Mao had swept all that away, leaving only force as their defense. And if to maintain their country’s prosperity they had to diminish that force, what would then happen? They didn’t know, and these men feared the unknown as a child feared the evil monsters under his bed at night, but with far more reason. It had happened, right here in Beijing, not all that many years before. Not one of these men had forgotten it. To the public, they’d always shown steadfast determination. But each of them, alone in his bathroom before the mirror, or lying in bed at night before sleep came, had shown fear. Because though they basked in the devotion of the peasants and workers, somehow each of them knew that the peasants and workers might fear them, but also hated them. Hated them for their arrogance, their corruption, for their privilege, their better food, their luxurious housing, their personal servants. Their servants, they all knew, loathed them as well, behind smiles and bows of obeisance, which could just as easily conceal a dagger, because that’s how the peasants and workers had felt about the nobles of a hundred years before. The revolutionaries had made use of that hatred against the class enemies of that age, and new ones, they all knew, could make use of the same silent rage against themselves. And so they would cling to power with the same desperation as the nobles of old, except they would show even more ruthlessness, because unlike the nobles of old, they had no place to run to. Their ideology had trapped them in their golden cages more surely than any religion could.

Fang had never before considered all of these thoughts *in toto.* Like

the others, he'd worried a lot when the college students had demonstrated, building up their "goddess of liberty" out of plaster or papier-mâché—Fang didn't remember, though he did remember his sigh of relief when the PLA had destroyed it. It came as a surprise to him, the realization of how snared he was here in this place. The power he and his colleagues exercised was like something shown before a mirror that could be turned on them all instantly under the proper circumstances. They had immense power over every citizen in their country, but that power was all an illusion—

—and, no, they couldn't allow another country to dictate political practices to them, because their lives all depended on that illusion. It was like smoke on a calm day, seemingly a pillar to hold up the heavens, but the slightest wind could blow it all away, and then the heavens would fall. On them all.

But Fang also saw that there was no way out. If they didn't change to make America happy, then their country would run out of wheat and oil, and probably other things as well, and they would risk massive social change in a groundswell from below. But if to prevent that, they allowed some internal changes, they would just be inviting the same thing on themselves.

Which would kill them the more surely?

Did it matter? Fang asked himself. Either way, they'd be just as dead. He wondered idly how it would come, the fists of a mob, or bullets before a wall, or a rope. No, it would be bullets. That was how his country executed people. Probably preferable to the beheading sword of old. What if the swordsman missed his aim, after all? It must have been a horrid mess. He only had to look around the table to see that everyone here had similar thoughts, at least those with *enough* wit. All men feared the unknown, but now they had to choose which unknown to fear, and the choice was yet another thing to dread.

"So, Qian, you say we risk running out of things because we can no longer get the money we need to purchase them?" Premier Xu asked.

"That is correct," the Finance Minister confirmed.

"In what other ways could we get money and oil?" Xu asked next.

"That is not within my purview, Chairman," Qian answered.

"Oil is its own currency," Zhang said. "And there is ample oil to our north. There is also gold, and many other things we need. Timber in vast quantities. And that which we need most of all—space, living space for our people."

Marshal Luo nodded. "We have discussed this before."

"What do you mean?" Fang asked.

"The Northern Resource Area, our Japanese friends once called it," Zhang reminded them all.

"*That* adventure ended in disaster," Fang observed at once. "We

were fortunate not to have been damaged by it."

"But we were not damaged at all," Zhang replied lightly. "We were not even implicated. We can be sure of that, can we not, Luo?"

"This is so. The Russians have never strengthened their southern defenses. They even ignore our exercises that have raised our forces to a high state of readiness."

"Can we be sure of that?"

"Oh, yes," the Defense Minister told them all. "Tan?" he asked.

Tan Deshi was the chief of the Ministry of State Security, in charge of the PRC's foreign and domestic intelligence services. One of the younger men here at seventy, he was probably the healthiest of them all, a nonsmoker and a very light imbiber of alcohol. "When we first began our increased exercises, they watched with concern, but after the first two years, they lost interest. We have over a million of our citizens living in eastern Siberia—it's illegal, but the Russians do not make much issue of it. A goodly number of them report to me. We have good intelligence of the Russian defenses."

"And what is their state of readiness?" Tong Jie asked.

"Generally, quite poor. They have one full-strength division, one at two-thirds, and the rest are hardly better than cadre-strength. Their new Far East commander, a General-Colonel Bondarenko, despairs of making things better, our sources tell us."

"Wait," Fang objected. "Are we discussing the possibility of war with Russia here?"

"Yes," Zhang Han San replied. "We have done this before."

"That is true, but on the first such occasion, we would have had Japan as an ally, and America neutralized. On the second, we assumed that Russia would have been broken up beforehand along religious lines. Who are our allies in this case? How has Russia been crippled?"

"We've been a little unlucky," Tan answered. "The chief minister—well, the chief adviser to their President Grushavoy is still alive."

"What do you mean?" Fang asked.

"I mean that our attempt to kill him misfired." Tan explained on for two minutes. The reaction around the table was one of mild shock.

"Tan had my approval," Xu told them calmly.

Fang looked over at Zhang Han San. That's where the idea must have originated. His old friend might have hated capitalists, but that didn't stop him from acting like the worst pirate when it suited his goals. And he had Xu's ear, and Tan as his strong right arm. Fang thought he knew all of these men, but now he saw that his assumption had been in error. In each was something hidden, and sinister. They were far more ruthless than he, Fang saw.

"That is an act of war," Fang objected.

"Our operational security was excellent. Our Russian agent, one

Klementi Suvorov, is a former KGB officer we recruited ages ago when he was stationed here in Beijing. He's performed various functions for us for a long time and he has superb contacts within both their intelligence and military communities—that is, those segments of it that are now in the new Russian underworld. In fact he's a common criminal—a lot of the old KGB people have turned into that—but it works for us. He likes money, and for enough of it, he will do anything. Unfortunately in this case, a pure happenstance prevented the elimination of this Golovko person," Tan concluded.

"And now?" Fang asked. Then he cautioned himself. He was asking too many questions, taking too much of a personal position here. Even in this room, even with these old comrades, it didn't pay to stand out too far.

"And now, that is for the Politburo to decide," Tan replied blandly. It had to be affected, but was well acted in any case.

Fang nodded and leaned back, keeping his peace for the moment.

"Luo?" Xu asked. "Is this feasible?"

The Marshal had to guard his words as well, not to appear too confident. You could get in trouble around this table by promising more than you could deliver, though Luo was in the unique position—somewhat shared by Interior Minister Tong—of having guns behind him and his position.

"Comrades, we have long examined the strategic issue here. When Russia was the Soviet Union, this operation was not possible. Their military was much larger and better supported, and they had numerous intercontinental and theater ballistic missiles tipped with thermonuclear warheads. Now they have none, thanks to their bilateral agreement with America. Today, the Russian military is a shadow of what it was only ten or twelve years ago. Fully half of their draftees do not even report when called for service—if that happened here, we all know what would happen to the miscreants, do we not? They squandered much of their remaining combat power with their Chechen religious minority—and so, you might say that Russia is *already* splitting up along religious lines. In practical terms, the task is straightforward, if not entirely easy. The real difficulty facing us is distance and space, not actual military opposition. It's many kilometers from our border to their new oil field on the Arctic Ocean—much fewer to the new goldfield. The best news of all is that the Russian army is itself building the roads we need to make the approach. It reduces our problems by two thirds right there. Their air force is a joke. We should be able to cope with it—they sell us their best aircraft, after all, and deny them to their own flyers. To make our task easier, we would do well to disrupt their command and control, their political stability and so forth. Tan, can you accomplish that?"

"That depends on what, exactly, is the task," Tan Deshi replied.

"To eliminate Grushavoy, perhaps," Zhang speculated. "He is the only person of strength in Russia at the moment. Remove him, and their country would collapse politically."

"Comrades," Fang had to say, taking the risk, "what we discuss here is bold and daring, but also fraught with danger. What if we fail?"

"Then, my friend, we are no worse off than we appear to be already," Zhang replied. "But if we succeed, as appears likely, we achieve the position for which we have striven since our youth. The People's Republic will become the foremost power in all the world." *As is our right,* he didn't have to add. "Chairman Mao never considered failing to destroy Chiang, did he?"

There was no arguing with that, and Fang didn't attempt it. The switchover from fear to adventurousness had been as abrupt as it was now becoming contagious. Where was the caution these men exercised so often? They were men on a floundering ship, and they saw a means of saving themselves, and having accepted the former proposition, they were catapulted into the latter. All he could do was lean back and watch the talk evolve, waiting—hoping—that reason would break out and prevail.

But from whom would it come?

CHAPTER 41

Plots of State

Yes, Minister?" Ming said, looking up from her almost-completed notes.

"You are careful with these notes, aren't you?"

"Certainly, Comrade Minister," she replied at once. "I never even print these documents up, as you well know. Is there a concern?"

Fang shrugged. The stresses of today's meeting were gradually bleeding off. He was a practical man of the world, and he was an elderly man. If there was a way to deal with the current problem, he would find it. If there wasn't, then he would endure. He always had. He was not the one taking the lead here, and his notes would show that he was one of the few cautious skeptics at the meeting. One of the others, of course, was Qian Kun, who'd walked out of the room shaking his head and muttering to his senior aide. Fang then wondered if Qian was keeping notes. It would have been a good move. If things went badly, those could be his only defense. At this level of risk, the hazard wasn't relegation to a menial job, but rather having one's ashes scattered in the river.

"Ming?"

"Yes, Minister?"

"What did you think of the students in the square all those years ago?"

"I was only in school then myself, Minister, as you know."

"Yes, but what did you think?"

"I thought they were reckless. The tallest tree is always the first to be cut down." It was an ancient Chinese adage, and therefore a safe thing to say. Theirs was a culture that discouraged taking such action —but perversely, their culture also lionized those who'd had the courage to do so. As with every human tribe, the criterion was simple. If you succeeded, then you were a hero, to be remembered and admired. If you failed, nobody would remember you anyway, except, perhaps, as a negative example. And so safety lay always in the middle course, and in safety was life.

The students had been too young to know all that. Too young to accept the idea of death. The bravest soldiers were always the young

ones, those spirits of great passions and beliefs, those who had not lived long enough to reflect on what shape the world took when it turned against you, those too foolish to know fear. For children, the unknown was something you spent almost all your time exploring and finding out. Somewhere along the line, you discovered that you'd learned all that was safe to learn, and that's where most men stopped, except for the very few upon whom progress depended, the brave ones and the bold ones who walked with open eyes into the unknown, and humanity remembered those few who came back alive . . .

. . . and soon enough forgot those who did not.

But it was the substance of history to remember those who did, and the substance of Fang's society to remind them of those who didn't. Such a strange dichotomy. What *societies,* he wondered, *encourage people to seek out the unknown? How did they do? Did they thrive, or did they blunder about in the darkness and lose their substance in aimless, undirected wanderings?* In China, everyone followed the words and thoughts of Marx, as modified by Mao, because he had boldly walked into the darkness and returned with revolution, and changed the path of his nation. But there things had stopped, because no one was willing to proceed beyond the regions Mao had explored and illuminated—and proclaimed to be all that China and the world in general needed to know about. *Mao was like some sort of religious prophet, wasn't he?* Fang reflected.

. . . Hadn't China just killed a couple of those?

"Thank you, Ming," he told her, waiting there for his next order. He didn't see her close the door as she went to her desk to transcribe the notes of this Politburo meeting.

Dear God," Dr. Sears whispered at his desk. As usual, the SORGE document had been printed up on the DDO's laser jet and handed over to him, and he'd walked back to his office to do the translation. Sometimes the documents were short enough to translate standing in front of her desk, but this one was pretty long. It was, in fact, going to take eight line-and-a-half-spaced pages off *his* laser printer. He took his time on this because of its content. He rechecked his translation. Suddenly he had doubts about his understanding of the Chinese language. He couldn't afford to mistranslate or misrepresent this sort of thing. It was just too hot. All in all, he took two and a half hours, more than double what Mrs. Foley probably expected, before he walked back.

"What took so long?" MP asked when he returned.

"Mrs. Foley, this is hot."

"How hot?"

"Magma," Sears said, as he handed the folder across.

"Oh?" She took the pages and leaned back in her comfortable chair to read it over. SORGE, source SONGBIRD. Her eyes cataloged the heading, yesterday's meeting of the Chinese Politburo. Then Sears saw it. Saw her eyes narrow as her hand reached for a butterscotch. Then her eyes shifted to him. "You weren't kidding. Evaluation?"

"Ma'am, I can't evaluate the accuracy of the source, but if this is for real, well, then we're looking in on a process I've never seen before outside history books, and hearing words that nobody has ever heard in this building—not that I've ever heard about, anyway. I mean, every minister in their government is quoted there, and most of them are saying the same thing—"

"And it's not something we want them to say," Mary Patricia Foley concluded his statement. "Assuming this is all accurately reported, does it feel real?"

Sears nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It sounds to me like real conversation by real people, and the content tracks with the personalities as I know them. Could it be fabricated? Yes, it could. If so, the source has been compromised in some way or other. However, I don't see that this could be faked without their wanting to produce a specific effect, and that would be an effect which would not be overly attractive to them."

"Any recommendations?"

"It might be a good idea to get George Weaver down from Providence," Sears replied. "He's good at reading their minds. He's met a lot of them face-to-face, and he'll be a good backup for my evaluation."

"Which is?" Mary Pat asked, not turning to the last page, where it would be printed up.

"They're considering war."

The Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency stood and walked out her door, with Dr. Joshua Sears right behind her. She took the short walk to her husband's office and went through the door without even looking at Ed's private secretary.

Ed Foley was having a meeting with the Deputy Director (Science and Technology) and two of his senior people when MP walked in. He looked up in surprise, then saw the blue folder in her hand. "Yeah, honey?"

"Excuse me, but this can't wait even one minute." Her tone of voice told as much as her words did.

"Frank, can we get together after lunch?"

"Sure, Ed." DDS&T gathered his documents and his people and headed out.

When they were gone and the door closed, the DCI asked, "SORGE?"

Mary Pat just nodded and handed the folder across, taking a seat on

the couch. Sears remained standing. It was only then that he realized his hands were a little moist. That hadn't happened to him before. Sears, as head of the DI's Office of China Assessments, worked mainly on political evaluations: who was who in the PRC's political hierarchy, what economic policies were being pursued—the Society Page for the People's Republic, as he and his people thought of it, and joked about it over lunch in the cafeteria. He'd never seen anything like this, nothing hotter than handling internal dissent, and while their methods for handling such things tended to be a little on the rough side, as he often put it—mainly it meant summary execution, which was more than a *little* on the rough side for those affected—the distances involved helped him to take a more detached perspective. But not on this.

"Is this for real?" the DC asked.

"Dr. Sears thinks so. He also thinks we need to get Weaver down from Brown University."

Ed Foley looked over at Sears. "Call him. Right now."

"Yes, sir." Sears left the room to make the call.

"Jack has to see this. What's he doing now?"

"He's leaving for Warsaw in eight hours, remember? The NATO meeting, the photo opportunity at Auschwitz, stopping off at London on the way home for dinner at Buckingham Palace. Shopping on Bond Street," Ed added. There were already a dozen Secret Service people in London working with the Metropolitan Police and MI-5, properly known as the Security Service. Twenty more were in Warsaw, where security concerns were not all that much of an issue. The Poles were very happy with America right now, and the leftover police agencies from the communist era still kept files on everyone who might be a problem. Each would have a personal baby-sitter for the entire time Ryan was in the country. The NATO meeting was supposed to be almost entirely ceremonial, a basic feel-good exercise to make a lot of European politicians look pretty for their polyglot constituents.

"Jesus, they're talking about making a move on Grushavoy!" Ed Foley gasped, getting to page three. "Are they totally off their fuckin' rockers?"

"Looks like they found themselves in a corner unexpectedly," his wife observed. "We may have overestimated their political stability."

Foley nodded and looked up at his wife. "Right now?"

"Right now," she agreed.

Her husband lifted his phone and punched speed-dial #1.

"Yeah, Ed, what is it?" Jack Ryan asked.

"Mary and I are coming over."

"When?"

"Now."

"That important?" the President asked.

"This is CRITIC stuff, Jack. You'll want Scott, Ben, and Arnie there, too. Maybe George Winston. The foundation of the issue is his area of expertise."

"China?"

"yet."

"Okay, come on over." Ryan switched phones. "Ellen, I need SecState, SecTreas, Ben, and Arnie in my office, thirty minutes from right now."

"Yes, Mr. President," his secretary acknowledged. This sounded hot, but Robby Jackson was on his way out of town again, to give a speech in Seattle, at the Boeing plant of all places, where the workers and the management wanted to know about the 777 order to China. Robby didn't have much to say on that point, and so he'd talk about the importance of human rights and America's core beliefs and principles, and all that wave-the-flag stuff. The Boeing people would be polite about it, and it was hard to be impolite to a black man, especially one with Navy Wings of Gold on his lapel, and learning to handle this political bullshit was Robby's main task. Besides, it took pressure off Ryan, and that was Jackson's primary mission in life, and oddly enough, one which he accepted with relative equanimity. So, his VC-20B would be over Ohio right about now, Jack thought. Maybe Indiana. Just then Andrea came in.

"Company coming?" Special Agent Price-O'Day asked. She looked a little pale, Jack thought.

"The usual suspects. You feeling okay?" the President asked.

"Stomach is a little upset. Too much coffee with breakfast."

Morning sickness? Ryan wondered. If so, too bad. Andrea tried so hard to be one of the boys. Admitting this female failing would scar her soul as though from a flamethrower. He couldn't say anything about it. Maybe Cathy could. It was a girl thing.

"Well, the DCI's coming over with something he says is important. Maybe they've changed the toilet paper in the Kremlin, as we used to say at Langley back when I worked there."

"Yes, sir." She smiled. Like most Secret Service agents, she'd seen the people and the secrets come and go, and if there were important things for her to know, she'd find out in due course.

General-Lieutenant Kirillin liked to drink as much as most Russians, and that was quite a lot by American standards. The difference between Russians and Brits, Chavez had learned, was that the Brits drank just as much, but they did it with beer, while the Russians made do with vodka. Ding was neither a Mormon nor a Baptist, but he was over his capacity here. After two nights of keeping up with the local

Joneses, he'd nearly died on the morning run with his team, and only avoided falling out for fear of losing face before the Russian Spetsnaz people they were teaching to come up to Rainbow standards. Somehow he'd managed not to puke, though he had allowed Eddie Price to take charge of the first two classes that day while he'd wandered off to drink a gallon of water to chase down three aspirins. Tonight, he'd decided, he'd cut off the vodkas at two . . . maybe three.

"How are our men doing?" the general asked.

"Just fine, sir," Chavez answered. "They like their new weapons, and they're picking up on the doctrine. They're smart. They know how to think before they act."

"Does this surprise you?"

"Yes, General, it does. It was the same for me once, back when I was a squad sergeant in the Ninjas. Young soldiers tend to think with their dicks rather than their brains. I learned better, but I had to learn it the hard way in the field. It's sometimes a lot easier to get yourself into trouble than it is to think yourself out of it. Your Spetsnaz boys started off that way, but if you show them the right way, they listen pretty good. Today's exercise, for example. We set it up with a trap, but your captain stopped short on the way in and thought it through before he committed, and he passed the test. He's a good team leader, by the way. I'd say bump him to major." Chavez hoped he hadn't just put the curse of hell on the kid, realizing that praise from a CIA officer wasn't calculated to be career-enhancing for a Russian officer.

"He's my nephew. His father married my sister. He's an academician, a professor at Moscow State University."

"His English is superb. I'd take him for a native of Chicago." And so Captain Leskov had probably been talent-scouted by KGB or its successor agency. Language skills of that magnitude didn't just happen.

"He was a parachutist before they sent him to Spetsnaz," Kirillin went on, "a good light-infantryman."

"That's what Ding was, once upon a time," Clark told the Russian.

"Seventh Light Infantry. They de-established the division after I left. Seems like a long time now."

"How did you go from the American army into CIA?"

"His fault," Chavez answered. "John spotted me and foolishly thought I had potential."

"We had to clean him up and send him to school, but he's worked out pretty well—even married my daughter."

"He's still getting used to having a Latino in the family, but I made him a grandfather. Our wives are back in Wales."

"So, how did you emerge from CIA into Rainbow?"

"My fault, again," Clark admitted. "I did a memo, and it perked to

the top, and the President liked it, and he knows me, and so when they set the outfit up, they put me in charge of it. I wanted Domingo here to be part of it, too. He's got young legs, and he shoots okay."

"Your operations in Europe were impressive, especially at the park in Spain."

"Not our favorite. We lost a kid there."

"Yeah," Ding confirmed with a tiny sip of his drink. "I was fifty yards away when that bastard killed Anna. Homer got him later on. Nice shot it was."

"I saw him shoot two days ago. He's superb."

"Homer's pretty good. Went home last fall on vacation and got himself a Dall sheep at eight hundred-plus yards up in Idaho. Hell of a trophy. He made it into the Boone and Crockett book in the top ten."

"He should go to Siberia and hunt tiger. I could arrange that," Kirillin offered.

"Don't say that too loud." Chavez chuckled. "Homer will take you up on it."

"He should meet Pavel Petrovich Gogol," Kirillin went on.

"Where'd I hear that name?" Clark wondered at once.

"The gold mine," Chavez handled the answer.

"He was a sniper in the Great Patriotic War. He has two gold stars for killing Germans, and he's killed hundreds of wolves. There aren't many like him left."

"Sniper on a battlefield. The hunting must get real excitring."

"Oh, it is, Domingo. It is. We had a guy in Third SOG who was good at it, but he damned near got his ass killed half a dozen times. You know—" John Clark had a satellite beeper, and it started vibrating in his belt. He picked it up and checked the number. "Excuse me," he said and looked for a good place. The Moscow officers' club had a courtyard, and he headed for it.

What does this mean?" Arnie van Damm asked. The executive meeting had started with copies of the latest SORGE/SONGBIRD being passed out. Arnie was the fastest reader of the group, but not the best strategic observer.

"It doesn't mean anything good, pal," Ryan observed, turning to the third page.

"Ed," Winston asked, looking up from page two. "What can you tell me about the source? This looks like the insider-trading document from hell."

"A member of the Chinese Politburo keeps notes on his conversations with the other ministers. We have access to those notes, never mind how."

"So, this document and the source are both genuine?"

"We think so, yes."

"How reliable?" TRADER persisted.

The DCI decided to take a long step out on a thin limb. "About as reliable as one of your T-bills."

"Okay, Ed, you say so." And Winston's head went back down. In ten seconds, he muttered, "Shit . . ."

"Oh, yeah, George," POTUS agreed. " 'Shit' about covers it."

"Concur, Jack," SecState agreed.

Of those present, only Ben Goodley managed to get all the way through it without a comment. For his part, Goodley, for all the status and importance that came from his job as the President's National Security Adviser, felt particularly junior and weak at the moment. Mainly he knew that he was far the President's inferior in knowledge of national-security affairs, that he was in his post mainly as a high-level secretary. He was a carded National Intelligence Officer, one of whom, by law and custom, accompanied the President everywhere he went. His job was to convey information to the President. Former occupants of his corner office in the West Wing of the White House had often told their presidents what to think and what to do. But he was just an information-conveyor, and at the moment, he felt weak even in that diminished capacity.

Finally, Jack Ryan looked up with blank eyes and a vacant face. "Okay. Ed, Mary Pat, what do we have here?"

"It looks as if Secretary Winston's predictions on the financial consequences of the Beijing Incident might be coming true."

"They're talking about precipitous consequences," Scott Adler observed coolly. "Where's Tony?"

"Secretary Bretano's down at Fort Hood, Texas, looking at the heavy troopers at Third Corps. He gets back late tonight. If we yank him back in a hurry, people will notice," van Damm told the rest.

"Ed, will you object if we get this to him, secure?"

"No"

"Okay." Ryan nodded and reached across his desk for his phone. "Send Andrea in, please." That took less than five seconds.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Could you walk this over to Signals, and have them TAPDANCE it to THUNDER?" He handed her the document. "Then please bring it back here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Andrea," Ryan told the disappearing form. Then he took a drink of water and turned to his guests. "Okay, it looks pretty serious. How serious is it?"

"We're bringing Professor Weaver down from Brown to evaluate it for us. He's about the best guy in the country for reading their minds."

"Why the hell doesn't he work for me?" Jack asked.

"He likes it at Brown. He comes from Rhode Island. We've offered him a job across the river half a dozen times that I know of," DCI Foley told Ryan, "but he always says the same thing."

"Same at State, Jack. I've known George for fifteen years or more. He doesn't want to work for the government."

"Your kind of man, Jack," Arnie added for a little levity.

"Besides, he can make more money as a contractor, can't he? Ed, when he comes down, make sure he comes in to see me."

"When? You're flying out in a few hours," Ed pointed out.

"Shit." Ryan remembered it now. Callie Weston was just finishing up the last of his official speeches in her office across the street. She was even coming across on Air Force One with the official party. Why was it that you couldn't deal with things one at a time? Because at this level, they just didn't arrive that way.

"All right," Jack said next. "We need to evaluate how serious this is, and then figure a way to forestall it. That means—what?"

"One of several things. We can approach them quietly," SecState Adler said. "You know, tell them that this has gone too far, and we want to work with them on the sly to ameliorate the situation."

"Except Ambassador Hitch is over here now, consulting, remember? Where's he doing it today, Congressional or Burning Tree?" POTUS asked. Hitch enjoyed golf, a hobby he could hardly pursue in Beijing. Ryan could sympathize. He was lucky to get in one round a week, and what swing he'd once had was gone with the wind.

"The DCM in Beijing is too junior for something like this. No matter what we said through him, they wouldn't take it seriously enough."

"And what, exactly, could we give them?" Winston asked. "There's nothing big enough to make them happy that we could keep quiet. They'd have to give us something so that we could justify giving them anything, and from what I see here, they don't want to give us anything but a bellyache. We're limited in our action by what the country will tolerate."

"You think they'd tolerate a shooting war?" Adler snapped.

"Be cool, Scott. There are practical considerations. Anything juicy enough to make these Chinese bastards happy has to be approved by Congress, right? To get such a concession through Congress would mean giving them the justification for it." Winston waved the secret document in his hand. "But we can't do that because Ed here would have a fit, and even if we did, somebody on the Hill would leak it to the papers in a New York minute, and half of them would call it danegeld, and say fuck the Chinks, millions for defense but not one penny for tribute. Am I right?"

"Yes," Arnie answered. "The other half would call it responsible

statesmanship, but the average Joe out there wouldn't much like it. The average citizen would expect you to call Premier Xu on the phone and say, 'Better not do this, buddy,' and expect it to stick."

"Which would, by the way, kill SONGBIRD," Mary Pat added as a warning, lest they take that option seriously. "That would end a human life, and deny us further information that we need to have. And from my reading of this report, Xu would deny everything and just keep going forward. They really think they're in a corner, but they can't see a way to smart themselves out of it."

"The danger is . . . ?" TRADER asked.

"Internal political collapse," Ryan explained. "They're afraid that if anything upsets the political or economic conditions inside the country, the whole house of cards comes tumbling down. With serious consequences for the current royal family of the PRC."

"Called the chop." Ben Goodley had to say something, and that was an easy one. "Actually a rifle bullet today." It didn't help him feel much better. He was out of his depth and he knew it.

That's when the President's STU rang. It was SecDef Tony Bretano, THUNDER. "Yeah," Ryan said. "Putting you on speaker, Tony. Scott, George, Arnie, Ed, Mary Pat, and Ben are here, and we just read what you got."

"I presume this is real?"

"Real as hell," Ed Foley told the newest member of the SORGE/SONGBIRD chorus.

"This is worrisome."

"On that we are agreed, Tony. Where are you now?"

"Standing on top of a Bradley in the parking lot. Never seen so many tanks and guns in my life. Feels like real power here."

"Yeah, well, what you just read shows you the limits of our power."

"So I gather. If you want to know what I think we should do about it—well, make it clear to them somehow that this would be a really bad play for them."

"How do we do that, Tony?" Adler asked.

"Some animals—the puffer fish, for example. When threatened, it swallows a gallon of water and expands its size—makes it look too big to eat."

Ryan was surprised to hear that. He'd no idea that Bretano knew anything about animals. He was a physics and science guy. Well, maybe he watched the Discovery Channel like everyone else.

"Scare them, you mean?"

"Impress them, better way of putting it."

"Jack, we're going to Warsaw—we can let Grushavoy know about this . . . how about we invite him into NATO? The Poles are there already. It would commit all of Europe to come to Russia's defense in

the event of an invasion. I mean, that's what alliances and mutual-defense treaties are all about. 'You're not just messing with me, Charlie. You're messing with all my friends, too: It's worked for a long time."

Ryan considered that one, and looked around the room. "Thoughts?"

"It's something," Winston thought.

"But what about the other NATO countries? Will they buy into this? The whole purpose of NATO," Goodley reminded them, "was to protect them from the Russians."

"The Soviets," Adler corrected. "Not the same thing anymore, remember?"

"The same people, the same language, sir," Goodley persisted. He felt pretty secure on this one. "What you propose is an elegant possible solution to the present problem, but to make it happen we'd have to share SORGE with other countries, wouldn't we?" The suggestion made the Foleys both wince. There were few things on the planet as talkative as a chief of government.

"What the hell, we've been watching their military with overheads for a long time. We can say that we're catching stuff there that makes us nervous. Good enough for the unwashed," the DCI offered.

"Next, how do we persuade the Russians?" Jack wondered aloud. "This could be seen in Moscow as a huge loss of face."

"We have to explain the problem to them. The danger is to their country, after all," Adler pronounced.

"But they're not unwashed. They'll want to know chapter and verse, and it is *their* national security we're talking about here," Goodley added.

"You know who's in Moscow now?" Foley asked POTUS.

"John?"

"RAINBOW SIX. John and Ding both know Golovko, and he's Grushavoy's number one boy. It's a nice, convenient back channel. Note that this also confirms that the Moscow rocket was aimed at him. Might not make Sergey Nikolay'ch feel better, but he'd rather know than guess."

"Why can't those stupid fucking people just say they're sorry they shot those two people?" Ryan wondered crossly.

"Why do you think pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins?" the DCI asked in reply.

Clark's portable phone was a satellite type with a built-in encryption system, really just a quarter-inch-thick plastic pad that actually made the phone easier to cradle against his shoulder. Like most such phones, it took time to synchronize with its companion on

the other end, the task made harder by the delay inherent in the use of satellites.

"Line is secure," the synthetic female voice said finally.

"Who's this?"

"Ed Foley, John. How's Moscow?"

"Pleasant. What gives, Ed?" John asked. The DCI didn't call from D.C. on a secure line to exchange pleasantries.

"Get over to the embassy. We have a message we want you to deliver."

"What sort?"

"Get to the embassy. It'll be waiting. Okay?"

"Roger. Out." John killed the phone and walked back inside.

"Anything important?" Chavez asked.

"We have to go to the embassy to see somebody," Clark replied, simulating anger at the interruption of his quiet time of the day.

"See you tomorrow then, Ivan and Domingo," Kirillin saluted them with his glass.

"What gives?" Chavez asked from thirty feet away.

"Not sure, but it was Ed Foley who paged me."

"Something important?"

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"Who drives?"

"Me." John knew Moscow fairly well, having learned it first on missions in the 1970s that he was just as happy to forget about, when his daughters had been the age of his new grandson.

The drive took twenty minutes, and the hard part turned out to be persuading the Marine guard that they really were entitled to come inside after normal business hours. To this end, the man waiting for them, Tom Barlow, proved useful. The Marines knew him, and he knew them, and that made everything okay, sort of.

"What's the big deal?" Jack asked, when they got to Barlow's office.

"This." He handed the fax across, a copy to each. "Might want to take a seat, guys."

"Madre de Dios," Chavez gasped thirty seconds later.

"Roger that, Domingo," his boss agreed. They were reading a hastily laundered copy of the latest SORGE dispatch.

"We got us a source in Beijing, 'mano."

"Hang a big roger on that one, Domingo. And we're supposed to share the take with Sergey Nikolay'ch. Somebody back home is feeling real ecumenical."

"Fuck!" Chavez observed. Then he read on a little. "Oh, yeah, I see. This does make some sense."

"Barlow, we have a phone number for our friend?"

"Right here." The CIA officer handed over a Post-it note and pointed

to a phone. “He’ll be out at his dacha, out in the Lenin Hills. They haven’t changed the name yet. Since he found out he was the target, he’s gotten a little more security-conscious.”

“Yeah, we’ve met his baby-sitter, Shelepin,” Chavez told Barlow. “Looks pretty serious.”

“He’d better be. If I read this right, he might be called up to bat again, or maybe Grushavoy’s detail.”

“Is this for real?” Chavez had to wonder. “I mean, this is *casus belli* stuff.”

“Well, Ding, you keep saying that international relations is two countries fucking each other.” Then he dialed the phone. “Tovarisch Golovko,” he told the voice that answered it, adding in Russian, “It’s Klerk, Ivan Sergeyevich. That’ll get his attention,” John told the other two.

“Greetings, Vanya,” a familiar voice said in English. “I will not ask how you got this number. What can I do for you?”

“Sergey, we need to see you at once on an important matter.”

“What sort of matter?”

“I am the mailman, Sergey. I have a message to deliver to you. It is worthy of your attention. Can Domingo and I see you this evening?”

“Do you know how to get here?”

Clark figured he’d find his way out to the woods. “Just tell the people at the gate to expect two capitalist friends of Russia. Say about an hour from now?”

“I will be waiting.”

“Thank you, Sergey.” Clark replaced the phone. “Where’s the piss-parlor, Barlow?”

“Down the hall on the right.”

The senior field intelligence officer folded the fax and tucked it into his coat pocket. Before having a talk about something like this, he needed a bathroom.

CHAPTER 42

Birch Trees

They drove into the sunset, west from the Russian capital. Traffic had picked up in Moscow since his last real adventure here, and you could use the center lane in the wide avenues. Ding handled navigation with a map, and soon they were beyond the ring roads around the Russian capital and entering the hills that surrounded the city. They passed a memorial which neither had ever seen before, three huge—

"What the hell is that?" Ding asked.

"This is as close as the Germans got in 1941," John explained. "This is where they stopped 'em."

"What do you call those things?" "Those things" were immense steel I-beams, three of them welded at ninety-degree angles to look like enormous jacks.

"Hedgehogs, but in the SEALs we called 'em horned scullies. Hard to drive a tank over one," Clark told his younger partner.

"They take their history serious here, don't they?"

"You would, too, if you stopped somebody who wanted to erase your country right off the map, sonny. The Germans were pretty serious back then, too. It was a very nasty war, that one."

"Guess so. Take the next right, Mr. C."

Ten minutes later, they were in a forest of birch trees, as much a part of the Russian soul as vodka and borscht. Soon thereafter they came to a guard shack. The uniformed guard held an AK-47 and looked surprisingly grim. *Probably briefed on the threat to Golovko and others*, John imagined. But he'd also been briefed on who was authorized to pass, and they only had to show their passports to get cleared, the guard also giving them directions about which country lane to take.

"The houses don't look too bad," Chavez observed.

"Built by German POWs," John told him. "Ivan doesn't exactly like the Germans very much, but he does respect their workmanship. These were built for the Politburo members, mainly after the war, probably. There's our place."

It was a wood-frame house, painted brown and looking like a cross

between a German country house and something from an Indiana farm, Clark thought. There were guards here, too, armed and walking around. *They'd been called from the first shack*, John figured. One of them waved. The other two stood back, ready to cover the first one if something untoward happened.

"You are Klerk, Ivan Sergeyevich?"

"Da," John answered. "This is Chavez, Domingo Stepanovich."

"Pass, you are expected," the guard told them.

It was a pleasant evening. The sun was down now, and the stars were making their appearance in the sky. There was also a gentle westerly breeze, but Clark thought he could hear the ghosts of war here. Hans von Kluge's panzer grenadiers, men wearing the *feldgrau* of the Wehrmacht. World War II on this front had been a strange conflict, like modern TV wrestling. No choice between good and bad, but only between bad and worse, and on that score it had been six-five and pick 'em. But their host probably wouldn't see history that way, and Clark had no intention of bringing up the subject.

Golovko was there, standing on the sheltered porch by the furniture, dressed casually. Decent shirt, but no tie. He wasn't a tall man, about halfway between Chavez and himself in height, but the eyes always showed intelligence, and now they also showed interest. He was curious about the purpose of this meeting, as well he might be.

"Ivan Sergeyevich," Golovko said in greeting. Handshakes were exchanged, and the guests conducted inside. Mrs. Golovko, a physician, was nowhere in evidence. Golovko first of all served vodka, and directed them to seats.

"You said you had a message for me." The language for this meeting was to be English, John saw.

"Here it is." Clark handed the pages across.

"Spasiba." Sergey Nikolay'ch sat back in his chair and started to read.

He would have been a fine poker player, John thought. His face changed not at all through the first two pages. Then he looked up.

"Who decided that I needed to see this?" he asked.

"The President," Clark answered.

"Your Ryan is a good comrade, Vanya, and an honorable man." Golovko paused. "I see you have improved your human-intelligence capabilities at Langley."

"That's probably a good supposition, but I know nothing of the source here, Chairman Golovko," Clark answered.

"This is, as you say, hot."

"It is all of that," John agreed, watching him turn another page.

"Son of a bitch!" Golovko observed, finally showing some emotion.

"Yeah, that's about what I said," Chavez entered the conversation.

"They are well-informed. This does not surprise me. I am sure they have ample espionage assets in Russia," Golovko observed, with anger creeping into his voice. "But this is—this is naked aggression they discuss."

Clark nodded. "Yep, that's what it appears to be."

"This is genuine information?" Golovko asked.

"I'm just the mailman, Chairman," Clark replied. "I vouch for nothing here."

"Ryan is too good a comrade to play agent provocateur. This is madness." And Golovko was telling his guests that he had no good intelligence assets in the Chinese Politburo, which actually surprised John. It wasn't often that CIA caught the Russians short at anything. Golovko looked up. "We once had a source for such information, but no longer."

"I've never worked in that part of the world, Chairman, except long ago when I was in the Navy." And the Chinese part of that, he didn't explain, was mainly getting drunk and laid in Taipei.

"I've traveled to Beijing several times in a diplomatic capacity, not recently. I cannot say that I've ever really understood those people." Golovko finished reading the document and set it down. "I can keep this?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied.

"Why does Ryan give us this?"

"I'm just the delivery boy, Sergey Nikolay'ch, but I should think the motive is in the message. America does not wish to see Russia hurt."

"Decent of you. What concessions will you require?"

"None that I am aware of."

"You know," Chavez observed, "sometimes you just want to be a good neighbor."

"At this level of statecraft?" Golovko asked skeptically.

"Why not? It does not serve American interests to see Russia crippled and robbed. How big are these mineral finds, anyway?" John asked.

"Immense," Golovko replied. "I'm not surprised you've learned of them. Our efforts at secrecy were not serious. The oil field is one to rival the Saudi reserves, and the gold mine is very rich indeed. Potentially, these finds could save our economy, could make us a truly wealthy nation and a fit partner for America".

"Then you know why Jack sent this over. It's a better world for both of us if Russia prospers."

"Truly?" Golovko was a bright man, but he'd grown up in a world in which both America and Russia had often wished each other dead. Such thoughts died hard, even in so agile a mind as his.

"Truly," John confirmed. "Russia is a great nation, and you are

great people. You *are* fit partners for us." He didn't add that, this way, America wouldn't have to worry about bailing them out. Now they'd have the wherewithal to see to their own enrichment, and America needed only offer expertise and advice about how to enter the capitalist world with both feet, and open eyes.

"This from the man who helped arrange the defection of the KGB chairman?" Golovko asked.

"Sergey, as we say at home, that was business, not personal. I don't have a hard-on for Russians, and you wouldn't kill an American just for entertainment purposes, would you?"

Indignation: "Of course not. That would be *nekulturniy."*

"It is the same with us, Chairman."

"Hey, man," Chavez added. "From when I was a teenager, I was trained to kill your people, back when I was an Eleven-Bravo carrying a rifle, but, guess what, we're not enemies anymore, are we? And if we're not enemies, then we can be friends. You helped us out with Japan and Iran, didn't you?"

"Yes, but we saw that we were the ultimate target of both conflicts, and it was in our national interest."

"And perhaps the Chinese have us as *their* ultimate target. Then this is in our interest. They probably don't like us any more than they like you."

Golovko nodded. "Yes, one thing I do know about them is their sense of racial superiority."

"Dangerous way for people to think, man. Racism means your enemies are just insects to be swatted," Chavez concluded, impressing Clark with the mixture of East LA accent and master's-degree analysis of the situation at hand. "Even Karl Marx didn't say that he was better than anybody else 'cuz of his skin color, did he?"

"But Mao did," Golovko added.

"Doesn't surprise me," Ding went on. "I read his *Little Red Book* in graduate school. He didn't want to be just a political leader. Hell, he wanted to be God. Let his ego get in the way of his brain—not an uncommon affliction for people who take countries over, is it?"

"Lenin was not such a man, but Stalin was," Golovko observed. "So, then Ivan Emmetovich is a friend of Russia. What shall I do with this?"

"That's up to you, pal," Clark told him.

"I must speak to my president. Yours comes to Poland tomorrow, doesn't he?"

"I think so."

"I must make some phone calls. Thank you for coming, my friends. Perhaps another time I will be able to entertain you properly."

"Fair enough." Clark stood and tossed off the end of his drink. More

handshakes, and they left the way they'd come.

"Christ, John, what happens now?" Ding asked, as they drove back out.

"I suppose everybody tries to beat some sense into the Chinese."

"Will it work?"

A shrug and arched eyebrows: "News at eleven, Domingo."

Packing for a trip isn't easy, even with a staff to do it all for you. This was particularly true for SURGEON, who was not only concerned about what she wore in public while abroad, but was also the Supreme Authority on her husband's clothes, a status which her husband tolerated rather than entirely approved. Jack Ryan was still in the Oval Office trying to do business that couldn't wait—actually it mostly could, but there were fictions in government that had to be honored—and also waiting for the phone to ring.

"Arnie?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Tell the Air Force to have another G go over to Warsaw in case Scott has to fly to Moscow on the sly."

"Not a bad idea. They'll probably park it at some air force base or something." Van Damm went off to make the phone call.

"Anything else, Ellen?" Ryan asked his secretary.

"Need one?"

"Yeah, before Cathy and I wing off into the sunset." Actually, they were heading east, but Mrs. Sumter understood. She handed Ryan his last cigarette of the day.

"Damn," Ryan breathed with his first puff. He'd be getting a call from Moscow sure as hell—wouldn't he? That depended on how quickly they digested the information, or maybe Sergey would wait for the morning to show it to President Grushavoy. Would he? In Washington, something that hot would be graded CRITIC and shoved under the President's nose inside twenty minutes, but different countries had different rules, and he didn't know what the Russians did. For damned sure he'd be hearing from one of them before he stepped off the plane at Warsaw. But for now . . . He stubbed the smoke out, reached inside his desk for the breath spray, and zapped his mouth with the acidic stuff before leaving the office and heading outside—the West Wing and the White House proper are not connected by an indoor corridor, due to some architectural oversight. In any case, inside six minutes he was on the residential level, watching the ushers organize his bags. Cathy was there, trying to supervise, under the eyes of the Secret Service as well, who acted as though they worried about having a bomb slipped in. But paranoia was their job. Ryan walked over to his wife. "You need to talk to

Andrea."

"What for?"

"Stomach trouble, she says."

"Uh-oh." Cathy had suffered from queasiness with Sally, but that was ages ago, and it hadn't been severe. "Not really much you can do about it, you know."

"So much for medical progress," Jack commented. "She probably could use some girl-girl support anyway."

Cathy smiled. "Oh, sure, womanly solidarity. So, you're going to bond with Pat?"

Jack grinned back at her. "Yeah, maybe he'll teach me to shoot a pistol better."

"Super," SURGEON observed dryly.

"Which dress for the big dinner?" POTUS asked FLOTUS.

"The light-blue one."

"Slinky," Jack said, touching her arm.

The kids showed up then, shepherded up to the bedroom level by their various detail leaders, except for Kyle, who was carried by one of his lionesses. Leaving the kids was never particularly easy, though all concerned were somewhat accustomed to it. The usual kisses and hugs took place, and then Jack took his wife's hand and led her to the elevator.

It let them off at the ground level, with a straight walk out to the helicopter pad. The VH-3 was there, with Colonel Malloy at the controls. The Marines saluted, as they always did. The President and First Lady climbed inside and buckled into the comfortable seats, under the watchful eyes of a Marine sergeant, who then went forward to report to the pilot in the right-front seat.

Cathy enjoyed helicopter flight more than her husband did, since she flew in one twice a day. Jack was no longer afraid of it, but he did prefer driving a car, which he hadn't been allowed to do in months. The Sikorsky lifted up gently, pivoted in the air, and headed off to Andrews. The flight took about ten minutes. The helicopter alighted close to the VC-25A, the Air Force's version of the Boeing 747; it was just a few seconds to the stairs, with the usual TV cameras to mark the event.

"Turn and wave, honey," Jack told Cathy at the top of the steps. "We might make the evening news."

"Again?" Cathy grumped. Then she waved and smiled, not at people, but at cameras. With this task completed, they went inside the aircraft and forward to the presidential compartment. There they buckled in, and were observed to do so by an Air Force NCO, who then told the pilot it was okay to spool up the engines and taxi to the end of Runway Zero-one-right. Everything after that was ordinary,

including the speech from the pilot, followed by the usual, stately takeoff roll of the big Boeing, and the climb out to thirty-eight thousand feet. Aft, Ryan was sure, everyone was comfortable, because the worst seat on this aircraft was as good as the best first-class seat on any airline in the world. On the whole this seemed a serious waste of the taxpayers' money, but to the best of his knowledge no taxpayer had ever complained very loudly.

The expected happened off the coast of Maine.

"Mr. President?" a female voice asked.

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"Call for you, sir, on the STU. Where do you want to take it?"

Ryan stood. "Topside."

The sergeant nodded and waved. "This way, sir."

"Who is it?"

"The DCI."

Ryan figured that made sense. "Let's get Secretary Adler in on this, too."

"Yes, sir," she said as he started up the spiral stairs.

Upstairs, Ryan settled into a working-type seat vacated for him by an Air Force NCO who handed him the proper phone. "Ed?"

"Yeah, Jack. Sergey called."

"Saying what?"

"He thinks it's a good idea you coming to Poland. He requests a high-level meeting, on the sly if possible."

Adler took the chair next to Ryan and caught the comment.

"Scott, feel like a hop to Moscow?"

"Can we do it quietly?" SecState asked.

"Probably."

"Then, yes. Ed, did you field the NATO suggestion?"

"Not my turf to try that, Scott," the Director of Central Intelligence replied.

"Fair enough. Think they'll spring for it?"

"Three-to-one, yes."

"I'll agree with that," Ryan concurred. "Golovko will like it, too."

"Yeah, he will, once he gets over the shock," Adler observed, with irony in his voice.

"Okay, Ed, tell Sergey that we are amenable to a covert meeting. SecState flying into Moscow for consultations. Let us know what develops."

"Will do."

"Okay, out." Ryan set the handset down and turned to Adler. "Well?"

"Well, if they spring for it, China will have something to think about." This statement was delivered with a dollop of hope.

The problem, Ryan thought once again as he stood, *is that Klingons don't think quite the same way we do.*

The bugs had them all smirking. Suvorov/Koniev had picked up another expensive hooker that night, and her acting abilities had played out in the proper noises at the proper moments. *Or maybe he was really that good in bed*, Provalov wondered aloud, to the general skepticism of the others in the surveillance van. *No*, the others thought, *this girl was too much of a professional to allow herself to get into it that much*. They all thought that was rather sad, lovely as she was to look at. But they knew something their subject didn't know. This girl had been a "dangle," prebriefed to meet Suvorov/Koniev.

Finally the noise subsided, and they heard the distinctive *snap* of an American Zippo lighter, and the usual post-sex silence of a sated man and a (simulatedly) satisfied woman.

"So, what sort of work do you do, Vanya?" the female voice asked, showing the expected professional interest of an expensive hooker in a wealthy man she might wish to entertain again.

"Business" was the answer.

"What sort?" Again, just the right amount of interest. The good news, Provalov thought, was that she didn't need coaching. The Sparrow School must have been fairly easy to operate, he realized. Women did this sort of thing from instinct.

"I take care of special needs for special people," the enemy spy answered. His revelation was followed by a feminine laugh.

"I do that, too, Vanya."

"There are foreigners who need special services which I was trained to handle under the old regime."

"You were KGB? Really?" Excitement in her voice. This girl was good.

"Yes, one of many. Nothing special about it."

"To you, perhaps, but not to me. Was there really a school for women like me? Did KGB train women to . . . to take care of the needs of men?"

A man's laugh this time: "Oh, yes, my dear. There was such a school. You would have done well there."

Now the laugh was coquettish. "As well as I do now?"

"No, not at what you charge."

"But am I worth it?" she asked.

"Easily" was the satisfied answer.

"Would you like to see me again, Vanya?" Real hope, or beautifully simulated hope, in the question.

"Da, I would like that very much, Maria."

"So, you take care of people with special needs. What needs are

those?" She could get away with this because men so enjoyed to be found fascinating by beautiful women. It was part of their act of worship at this particular altar, and men *always* went for it.

"Not unlike what I was trained to do, Maria, but the details need not concern you."

Disappointment: "Men always say that," she grumped. "Why do the most interesting men have to be so mysterious?"

"In that is our fascination, woman," he explained. "Would you prefer that I drove a truck?"

"Truck drivers don't have your. . . your manly abilities," she replied, as if she'd learned the difference.

"A man could get hard just listening to this bitch," one of the FSS officers observed.

"That's the idea," Provalov agreed. "Why do you think she can charge so much?"

"A real man need not pay for it."

"Was I that good?" Suvorov/Koniev asked in their headphones.

"Any better and I would have to pay you, Vanya," she replied, with joy in her voice. Probably a kiss went along with the proclamation.

"No more questions, Maria. Let it lie for now," Oleg Gregoriyevich urged to the air. She must have heard him.

"You know how to make a man feel like a man," the spy/assassin told her. "Where did you learn this skill?"

"It just comes naturally to a woman," she cooed.

"To some women, perhaps." Then the talking stopped, and in ten minutes, the snoring began.

"Well, that's more interesting than our normal cases," the FSS officer told the others.

"You have people checking out the bench?"

"Hourly." There was no telling how many people delivered messages to the dead-drop, and they probably weren't all Chinese nationals. No, there'd be a rat-line in this chain, probably not a long one, but enough to offer some insulation to Suvorov's handler. That would be good fieldcraft, and they had to expect it. So, the bench and its dead-drop would be checked out regularly, and in *that* surveillance van would be a key custom-made to fit the lock on the drop-box, and a photocopier to make a duplicate of the message inside. The FSS had also stepped up surveillance of the Chinese Embassy. Nearly every employee who came outside had a shadow now. To do this properly meant curtailing other counterespionage operations in Moscow, but this case had assumed priority over everything else. It would soon become even more important, but they didn't know that yet.

How many engineers do we have available?" Bondarenko asked

Aliyev in the east Siberian dawn.

"Two regiments not involved with the road-building," the operations officer answered.

"Good. Get them all down here immediately to work on the camouflage on these bunkers, and to set up false ones on the other side of these hills. Immediately, Andrey."

"Yes, General, I'll get them right on it."

"I love the dawn, the most peaceful time of day."

"Except when the other fellow uses it for his attack." Dawn was the universal time for a major offensive, so that one had all the light of the day to pursue it.

"If they come, it will be right up this valley."

"Yes, it will."

"They will shoot up the first line of defenses—what they think they are, that is," Bondarenko predicted, pointing. The first line was composed of seemingly real bunkers, made of rebarred concrete, but the gun tubes sticking out of them were fake. Whatever engineer had laid out these fortifications had been born with an eye for terrain worthy of Alexander of Macedon. They *appeared* to be beautifully sited, but a little too much so. Their positioning was a little too predictable, and they were visible, if barely so, to the other side, and something *barely* visible would be the first target hit. There were even pyrotechnic charges in the false bunkers, so that after a few direct hits they'd explode, and really make the enemy feel fine for having hit them. Whoever had come up with *that* idea had been a genius of a military engineer.

But the real defenses on the front of the hills were tiny observation posts whose buried phone lines led back to the real bunkers, and beyond them to artillery positions ten or more kilometers back. Some of these were old, also pre-sited, but the rockets they launched were just as deadly today as they'd been in the 1940s, design progeny of the Katushka artillery rockets the Germans had learned to hate. Then came the direct-fire weapons. The first rank of these were the turrets of old German tanks. The sights and the ammunition still worked, and the crewmen knew how to use them, and they had escape tunnels leading to vehicles that would probably allow them to survive a determined attack. The engineers who had laid this line out were probably all dead now, and General Bondarenko hoped they'd been buried honorably, as soldiers deserved. This line wouldn't stop a determined attack—no fixed line of defenses could accomplish that—but it would be enough to make an enemy wish he'd gone somewhere else.

But the camouflage needed work, and that work would be done at night. A high-flying aircraft tracing over the border with a side-

looking camera could see far into his country and take thousands of useful, pretty pictures, and the Chinese probably had a goodly collection of such pictures, plus whatever they could get from their own satellites, or from the commercial birds that anyone could employ now for money—

"Andrey, tell intelligence to see if we can determine if the Chinese have accessed commercial photo satellites."

"Why bother? Don't they have their own—"

"We don't know how good their reconsats are, but we do know that the new French ones are as good as anything the Americans had up until 1975 or so, and that's good enough for most purposes."

"Yes, General." Aliyev paused. "You think something is going to happen here?"

Bondarenko paused, frowning as he stared south over the river. He could see into China from this hilltop. The ground looked no different, but for political reasons it was alien land, and though the inhabitants of that land were no different ethnically from the people native to *his* land, the political differences were enough to make the sight of them a thing of concern, even fear, for him. He shook his head.

"Andrey Petrovich, you've heard the same intelligence briefings I've heard. What concerns me is that their army has been far more active than ours. They have the ability to attack us, and we do not have the ability to defeat them. We have less than three full-strength divisions, and the level of their training is inadequate. We have much to do before I will begin to feel comfortable. Firming up this line is the easiest thing to do, and the easiest part of firming it up is hiding the bunkers. Next, we'll start rotating the soldiers back to the training range and have them work on their gunnery. That will be easy for them to do, but it hasn't been done in ten months! So much to do, Andrushka, so much to do."

"That is so, Comrade General, but we've made a good beginning."

Bondarenko waved his hand and growled, "Ahh, a good beginning will be a year from now. We've taken the first morning piss in what will be a long day, Colonel. Now, let's fly east and see the next sector."

General Peng Xi-Wang, commander of the Red Banner 34th Shock Army, only sixteen kilometers away, looked through powerful spotting glasses at the Russian frontier. Thirty-fourth Shock was a Type A Group Army, and comprised about eighty thousand men. He had an armored division, two mechanized ones, a motorized infantry division, and other attachments, such as an independent artillery brigade under his direct command. Fifty years of age, and a party member since his twenties, Peng was a long-term professional soldier who'd enjoyed the

last ten years of his life. Since commanding his tank regiment as a senior colonel, he'd been able to train his troops incessantly on what had become his home country.

The Shenyang Military District comprised the northeasternmost part of the People's Republic. It was composed of hilly, wooded land, and had warm summers and bitter winters. There was a touch of early ice on the Amur River below Peng now, but from a military point of view, the trees were the real obstacle. Tanks could knock individual trees down, but not every ten meters. No, you had to drive between and around them, and while there was room for that, it was hard on the drivers, and it ate up fuel almost as efficiently as tipping the fuel drum over on its side and just pouring it out. There were some roads and railroad rights-of-way, and if he ever went north, he'd be using them, though that made for good ambush opportunities, if the Russians had a good collection of antitank weapons. But the Russian doctrine, going back half a century, was that the best antitank weapon was a better tank. In their war with the fascists, the Soviet army had enjoyed possession of a superb tank in the T-34. They'd built a lot of the Rapier antitank guns, and duly copied NATO guided antitank weapons, but you dealt with those by blanketing an area with artillery fire, and Peng had lots of guns and mountains of shells to deal with the unprotected infantrymen who had to steer the missiles into their targets. He wished he had the Russian-designed Arena anti-missile system, which had been designed to protect their tanks from the swarm of NATO's deadly insects, but he didn't, and he heard it didn't work all that well anyway.

The spotting glasses were Chinese copies of a German Zeiss model adopted for use by the Soviet Army of old. They zoomed from twenty- to fifty-power, allowing him an intimate view of the other side of the river. Peng came up here once a month or so, which allowed him to inspect his own border troops, who stood what was really a defensive watch, and a light one at that. He had little concern about a Russian attack into his country. The People's Liberation Army taught the same doctrine as every army back to the Assyrians of old: The best defense is a good offense. If a war began here, better to begin it yourself. And so Peng had cabinets full of plans to attack into Siberia, prepared by his operations and intelligence people, because that was what operations people did.

"Their defenses look ill-maintained," Peng observed.

"That is so, Comrade," the colonel commanding the border-defense regiment agreed. "We see little regular activity there."

"They are too busy selling their weapons to civilians for vodka," the army political officer observed. "Their morale is poor, and they do not train anything like we do."

"They have a new theater commander," the army's intelligence chief countered. "A General-Colonel Bondarenko. He is well regarded in Moscow as an intellect and as a courageous battlefield commander from Afghanistan."

"That means he survived contact once," Political observed. "Probably with a Kabul whore."

"It is dangerous to underestimate an adversary," Intelligence warned.

"And foolish to overestimate one."

Peng just looked through the glasses. He'd heard his intelligence and political officer spar before. Intelligence tended to be an old woman, but many intelligence officers were like that, and Political, like so many of his colleagues, was sufficiently aggressive to make Genghis Khan seem womanly. As in the theater, officers played the roles assigned to them. His role, of course, was to be the wise and confident commander of one of his country's premier striking arms, and Peng played that role well enough that he was in the running for promotion to General First Class, and if he played his cards very carefully, in another eight years or so, maybe Marshal. With that rank came real political power and personal riches beyond counting, with whole factories working for his own enrichment. Some of those factories were managed by mere colonels, people with the best of political credentials who knew how to kowtow to their seniors, but Peng had never gone that route. He enjoyed soldiering far more than he enjoyed pushing paper and screaming at worker-peasants. As a new second lieutenant, he'd fought the Russians, not very far from this very spot. It had been a mixed experience. His regiment had enjoyed initial success, then had been hammered by a storm of artillery. That had been back when the Red Army, the real Soviet Army of old, had fielded whole artillery *divisions* whose concentrated fire could shake the very earth and sky, and that border clash had incurred the wrath of the nation the Russians had once been. But no longer. Intelligence told him that the Russian troops on the far side of this cold river were not even a proper shadow of what had once been there. Four divisions, perhaps, and not all of them at full strength. So, however clever this Bondarenko fellow was, if a clash came, he'd have his hands very full indeed.

But that was a political question, wasn't it? Of course. All the really important things were.

"How are the bridging engineers?" Peng asked, surveying the watery obstacle below.

"Their last exercise went very well, Comrade General," Operations replied. Like every other army in the world, the PLA had copied the Russian "ribbon" bridge, designed by Soviet engineers in the 1960s to

force crossings of all the streams of Western Germany in a NATO/Warsaw Pact war so long expected, but never realized. Except in fiction, mainly Western fiction that had had the NATO side win in every case. Of course. Would capitalists spend money on books that ended their culture? Peng chuckled to himself. Such people enjoyed their illusions . . .

. . . almost as much as his own country's Politburo members. That's the way it was all over the world, Peng figured. The rulers of every land held images in their heads, and tried to make the world conform to them. Some succeeded, and those were the ones who wrote the history books.

"So, what do we expect here?"

"From the Russians?" Intelligence asked. "Nothing that I have heard about. Their army is training a little more, but nothing to be concerned about. If they wanted to come south across that river, I hope they can swim in the cold."

"The Russians like their comforts too much for that. They've grown soft with their new political regime," Political proclaimed.

"And if we are ordered north?" Peng asked.

"If we give them one hard kick, the whole rotten mess will fall down," Political answered. He didn't know that he was exactly quoting another enemy of the Russians.

CHAPTER 43

Decisions

The colonel flying Air Force One executed an even better landing than usual. Jack and Cathy Ryan were already awake and showered to alertness, helped by a light breakfast heavy on fine coffee. The President looked out the window to his left and saw troops formed up in precise lines, as the aircraft taxied to its assigned place.

"Welcome to Poland, babe. What do you have planned?"

"I'm going to spend a few hours at their big teaching hospital. Their chief eye-cutter wants me to look at his operation." It was always the same for FLOTUS, and she didn't mind. It came from being an academic physician, treating patients, but also teaching young docs, and observing how her counterparts around the world did their version of her job. Every so often, you saw something new that was worth learning from, or even copying, because smart people happened everywhere, not just at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. It was the one part of the First Lady folderol that she actually enjoyed, because she could learn from it, instead of just being a somewhat flat-chested Barbie doll for the world to gawk at. To this end she was dressed in a beige business suit, whose jacket she would soon exchange for a doc's proper white lab coat, which was always her favorite item of apparel. Jack was wearing one of his dark-blue white-pinstriped President-of-the-United- States suits, with a maroon striped tie because Cathy liked the color combination, and she really did decide what Jack wore, except for the shirt. SWORDSMAN wore only white cotton shirts with button-down collars, and despite Cathy's lobbying for something different, on that issue he stood firm. This had caused Cathy to observe more than once that he'd wear the damned things with his tuxedos if convention didn't demand otherwise.

The aircraft came to a halt, and the stagecraft began. The Air Force sergeant—this one always a man—opened the door on the left side of the aircraft to see that the truck-mounted stairs were already in place. Two more non-coms scurried down so that they could salute Ryan when he walked down. Andrea Price-O'Day was talking over her digital radio circuit to the chief of the Secret Service advance team to make sure it was safe for the President to appear in the open. She'd

already heard that the Poles had been as cooperative as any American police force, and had enough security deployed here to defend against an attack by space aliens or Hitler's Wehrmacht. She nodded to the President and Mrs. Ryan.

"Showtime, babe," Jack told Cathy, with a dry smile.

"Knock 'em dead, Movie Star," she said in reply. It was one of their inside jokes.

John Patrick Ryan, President of the United States of America, stood in the door to look out over Poland, or at least as much of it as he could see from this vantage. The first cheers erupted then, for although he'd never even been close to Poland before, he was a popular figure here, for what reason Jack Ryan had no idea. He walked down, carefully, telling himself not to trip and spill down the steps. It looked bad to do so, as one of his antecedents had learned the hard way. At the bottom, the two USAF sergeants snapped off their salutes, which Ryan unconsciously returned, and then he was saluted again by a Polish officer. They did it differently, Jack saw, with ring and little finger tucked in, like American Cub Scouts. Jack nodded and smiled to this officer, then followed him to the receiving line. There was the U.S. ambassador to introduce him to the Polish president. Together they walked down a red carpet to a small lectern, where the Polish president welcomed Ryan, and Ryan made remarks to demonstrate his joy at visiting this ancient and important new American ally. Ryan had a discordant memory of the "Polack" jokes so popular when he'd been in high school, but managed not to relate any to the assembled throng. This was followed by a review past the honor guard of soldiers, about three companies of infantrymen, all spiffed up for this moment; Jack walked past them, looking in each face for a split second and figuring they just wanted to go back to barracks to change into their more comfortable fatigues, where they'd say that this Ryan guy looked okay for a damned American chief of state, and wasn't it good that this pain-in-the-ass duty was over. Then Jack and Cathy (carrying flowers given to her by two cute Polish kids, a boy and a girl, age six or so, because that was the best age to greet an important foreign woman) got into the official car, an American limo from the U.S. Embassy, for the drive into town. Once there, Jack looked over to the ambassador.

"What about Moscow?"

Ambassadors had once been Very Important People, which explained why each still had to be approved by vote of the United States Senate. When the Constitution had been drafted, world travel had been done by sailing ship, and an ambassador in a foreign land was the United States of America, and had to be able to speak for his country entirely without guidance from Washington. Modern

communications had transformed ambassadors into glorified mailmen, but they still, occasionally, had to handle important matters with discretion, and this was such a case.

"They want the Secretary to come over as soon as possible. The backup aircraft is at a fighter base about fifteen miles from here. We can get Scott there within the hour," Stanislas Lewendowski reported.

"Thanks, Stan. Make it happen."

"Yes, Mr. President," the ambassador, a native of Chicago, agreed with a curt nod.

"Anything we need to know?"

"Aside from that, sir, no, everything's pretty much under control."

"I hate it when they say that," Cathy observed quietly. "That's when I look up for the falling sandbag."

"Not here, ma'am," Lewendowski promised. "Here things *are* under control."

That's nice to hear, President Ryan thought, *but what about the rest of the fucking world?*

Eduard Petrovich, this is not a happy development," Golovko told his president.

"I can see that," Grushavoy agreed tersely. "Why did we have to learn this from the Americans?"

"We had a very good source in Beijing, but he retired not long ago. He's sixty-nine years old and in ill health, and it was time to leave his post in their Party Secretariat. Sadly, we had no replacement for him," Golovko admitted. "The American source appears to be a man of similar placement. We are fortunate to have this information, regardless of its source."

"Better to have it than not to have it," Eduard Petrovich admitted. "So, now what?"

"Secretary of State Adler will be joining us in about three hours, at the Americans' request. He wishes to consult with us directly on a 'matter of mutual interest.' That means the Americans are as concerned with this development as we are."

"What will they say?"

"They will doubtless offer us assistance of some sort. Exactly what kind, I cannot say."

"Is there anything I don't already know about Adler and Ryan?"

"I don't think so. Scott Adler is a career diplomat, well regarded everywhere as an experienced and expert diplomatic technician. He and Ryan are friends, dating back to when Ivan Emmetovich was Deputy Director of CIA. They get along well and do not have any known disagreements in terms of policy. Ryan I have known for over ten years. He is bright, decisive, and a man of unusually fine personal

honor. A man of his word. He was the enemy of the Soviet Union, and a skilled enemy, but since our change of systems he has been a friend. He evidently wishes us to succeed and prosper economically, though his efforts to assist us have been somewhat disjointed and confused. As you know, we have assisted the Americans in two black operations, one against China and one against Iran. This is important, because Ryan will see that he owes us a debt. He is, as I said, an honorable man, and he will wish to repay that debt, as long as it does not conflict with his own security interests."

"Will an attack on China be seen that way?" President Grushavoy asked.

Golovko nodded decisively. "Yes, I believe so. We know that Ryan has said privately that he both likes and admires Russian culture, and that he would prefer that America and Russia should become strategic partners. So, I think Secretary Adler will offer us substantive assistance against China."

"What form will it take?"

"Eduard Petrovich, I am an intelligence officer, not a gypsy fortune-teller . . ." Golovko paused. "We will know more soon, but if you wish me to make a guess . . ."

"Do so," the Russian president commanded. The SVR Chairman took a deep breath and made his prediction:

"He will offer us a seat on the North Atlantic Council." That startled Grushavoy:

"Join NATO?" he asked, with an open mouth.

"It would be the most elegant solution to the problem. It allies us with the rest of Europe, and would face China with a panoply of enemies if they attack us."

"And if they make this offer to us . . .?"

"You should accept it at once, Comrade President," the chief of the RSV replied. "We would be fools not to."

"What will they demand in return?"

"Whatever it is, it will be far less costly than a war against China."

Grushavoy nodded thoughtfully. "I will consider this. Is it really possible that America can recognize Russia as an ally?"

"Ryan will have thought this idea through. It conforms to his strategic outlook, and, as I said, I believe he honestly admires and respects Russia."

"After all his time in CIA?"

"Of course. That is why he does. He knows us. He ought to respect us."

Grushavoy thought about that one. Like Golovko, he was a Russian patriot who loved the very smell of Russian soil, the birch forests, the vodka and the borscht, the music and literature of his land. But he

was not blind to the errors and ill fortune his country had endured over the centuries. Like Golovko, Grushavoy had come to manhood in a nation called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and had been educated to be a believer in Marxism-Leninism, but he'd gradually come to see that, although the path to political power had required worshiping at that godless altar, the god there had been a false one. Like many, he'd seen that the previous system simply didn't work. But unlike all but a small and courageous few, he'd spoken out about the system's shortcomings. A lawyer, even under the Soviet system when law had been subordinated to political whim, he'd crusaded for a rational system of laws which would allow people to predict the reaction of the state to their actions with something akin to confidence. He'd been there when the old system had fallen, and had embraced the new system as a teenager embraced his first love. Now he was struggling to bring order—lawful order, which was harder still—to a nation which had known only dictatorial rule for centuries. If he succeeded, he knew he'd be remembered as one of the giants of human political history. If he failed, he'd just be remembered as one more starry-eyed visionary unable to turn his dream into reality. The latter, he thought in quiet moments, was the more likely outcome.

But despite that concern, he was playing to win. Now he had the gold and oil discoveries in Siberia, which had appeared as if gifts from the merciful God his education had taught him to deny. Russian history predicted—nay, demanded—that such gifts be taken from his country, for such had always been their hateful ill luck. Did God hate Russia? Anyone familiar with the past in his ancient country would think so. But today hope appeared as a golden dream, and Grushavoy was determined not to let this dream evaporate as all the others had. The land of Tolstoy and Rimsky-Korsakov had given much to the world, and now it deserved something back. Perhaps this Ryan fellow would indeed be a friend of his country and his people. His country needed friends. His country had the resources to exist alone, but to make use of those resources, he needed assistance, enough to allow Russia to enter the world as a complete and self-sufficient nation, ready to be a friend to all, ready to give and to take in honor and amity. The wherewithal was within his reach, if not quite within his hand. To take it would make him an Immortal, would make Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy the man who raised up his entire country. To do that he'd need help, however, and while that abraded his sense of *amour propre,* his patriotism, his duty to his country required that he set self aside.

"We shall see, Sergey Nikolay'ch. We shall see."

The time is ripe," Zhang Han San told his colleagues in the room of

polished oak. "The men and weapons are in place. The prize lies right before our eyes. That prize offers us economic salvation, economic security such as we have dreamed of for decades, the ability," he went on, "to make China the world's preeminent power. That is a legacy to leave our people such as no leader has ever granted his descendants. We need only take it. It lies almost in our hands, like a peach upon a tree."

"It is feasible?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked cautiously.

"Marshal?" Zhang handed the inquiry off to the Defense Minister.

Luo Cong leaned forward. He and Zhang had spent much of the previous evening together with maps, diagrams, and intelligence estimates. "From a military point of view, yes, it is possible. We have four Type A Group armies in the Shenyang Military District, fully trained and poised to strike north. Behind them are six Type B Group armies with sufficient infantry to support our mechanized forces, and four more Type C Group armies to garrison the land we take. From a strictly military point of view, the only issues are moving our forces into place and then supplying them. That is mainly a question of railroads, which will move supplies and men. Minister Qian?" Luo asked. He and Zhang had considered this bit of stage-managing carefully, hoping to co-opt a likely opponent of their proposed national policy early on.

The Finance Minister was startled by the question, but pride in his former job and his innate honesty compelled him to respond truthfully: "There is sufficient rolling stock for your purposes, Marshal Luo," he replied tersely. "The concern will be repairing damage done by enemy air strikes on our rights-of-way and bridges. That is something the Railroad Ministry has examined for decades, but there is no precise answer to it, because we cannot predict the degree of damage the Russians might inflict."

"I am not overly worried about that, Qian," Marshal Luo responded. "The Russian air force is in miserable shape due to all their activity against their Muslim minorities. They used up a goodly fraction of their best weapons and spare parts. We estimate that our air-defense groups should preserve our transportation assets with acceptable losses. Will we be able to send railroad-construction personnel into Siberia to extend our railheads?"

Again Qian felt himself trapped. "The Russians have surveyed and graded multiple rights-of-way over the years in their hopes for extending the Trans-Siberian Railroad and settling people into the region. Those efforts date back to Stalin. Can we lay track rapidly? Yes. Rapidly enough for your purposes? Probably not, Comrade Marshal," Qian replied studiously. If he didn't answer honestly, his seat at this table would evaporate, and he knew it.

"I am not sanguine on this prospect, comrades," Shen Tang spoke for the Foreign Ministry.

"Why is that, Shen?" Zhang asked.

"What will other nations do?" he asked rhetorically. "We do not know, but I would not be optimistic, especially with the Americans. They become increasingly friendly with the Russians. President Ryan is well known to be friendly with Golovko, chief advisor to President Grushavoy."

"A pity that Golovko still lives, but we were unlucky," Tan Deshi had to concede.

"Depending on luck is dangerous at this level," Fang Gan told his colleagues. "Fate is no man's friend."

"Perhaps the next time," Tan responded.

"Next time," Zhang thought aloud, "better to eliminate Grushavoy and so throw their country into total chaos. A country without a president is like a snake without a head. It may thrash about, but it harms no one."

"Even a severed head can bite," Fang observed. "And who is to say that Fate will smile upon this enterprise?"

"A man can wait for Fate to decide for him, or he can seize the foul woman by the throat and take her by force—as we have all done in our time," Zhang added with a cruel smile.

Much more easily done with a docile secretary than with Destiny herself, Zhang, Fang didn't say aloud. He could go only so far in this forum, and he knew it. "Comrades, I counsel caution. The dogs of war have sharp teeth, but any dog may turn and bite his master. We have all seen *that* happen, have we not? Some things, once begun, are less easily halted. War is such a thing, and it is not to be undertaken so lightly."

"What would you have us do, Fang?" Zhang asked. "Should we wait until we run out of oil and wheat? Should we wait until we need troops to quell discord among our own people? Should we wait for Fate to decide for us, or should we choose our own destiny?"

The only reply to that came from Chinese culture itself, the ancient beliefs that came to all of the Politburo members almost as genetic knowledge, unaffected by political conditioning: "Comrades, Destiny awaits us all. It chooses us, not we it. What you propose here, my old friend, could merely accelerate what comes for us in any case, and who among us can say if it will please or displease us?" Minister Fang shook his head. "Perhaps what you propose is necessary, even beneficial," he allowed, "but only after the alternatives have been examined fully and discarded."

"If we are to decide," Luo told them, "then we must decide soon. We have good campaigning weather before us. That season will only

last so long. If we strike soon—in the next two weeks—we can seize our objectives, and then time works *for* us. Then winter will set in and make offensive campaigning virtually impossible against a determined defense. Then we can depend upon Shen's ministry to safeguard and consolidate what we have seized, perhaps to share our winnings with the Russians . . . for a time," he added cynically. China would never share such a windfall, they all knew. It was merely a ploy fit to fool children and mushy-headed diplomats, which the world had in abundance, they all knew.

Through all this, Premier Xu had sat quietly, observing how the sentiments went, before making his decision and calling for a vote whose outcome would, of course, be predetermined. There was one more thing that needed asking. Not surprisingly, the question came from Tan Deshi, chief of the Ministry of State Security:

"Luo, my friend, how soon would the decision have to be made to ensure success? How easily could the decision be called back if circumstances warrant?"

"Ideally, the 'go' decision would be made today, so that we can start moving our forces to their preset jumping-off places. To stop them—well, of course, you can stop the offensive up to the very moment the artillery is to open fire. It is much harder to advance than it is to stay in place. Any man can stand still, no matter where he is." The preplanned answer to the preplanned question was as clever as it was misleading. Sure, you could always stop an army poised to jump off, about as easily as you could stop a Yangtze River flood.

"I see," Tan said. "In that case, I propose that we vote on *conditional* approval of a 'go' order, subject to change at any time by majority vote of the Politburo."

Now it was Xu's turn to take charge of the meeting: "Comrades, thank you all for your views on the issue before us. Now we must decide what is best for our country and our people. We shall vote on Tan's proposal, a conditional authorization for an attack to seize and exploit the oil and goldfields in Siberia."

As Fang had feared, the vote was already decided, and in the interests of solidarity, he voted with the rest. Only Qian Kun wavered, but like all the others, he sided with the majority, because it was dangerous to stand alone in any group in the People's Republic, most of all this one. And besides, Qian was only a candidate member, and didn't have a vote at this most democratic of tables.

The vote turned out to be unanimous.

Long Chun, it would be called: Operation SPRING DRAGON.

Scott Adler knew Moscow as well as many Russian citizens did, he'd been here so many times, including one tour in the American Embassy

as a wet-behind-the-ears new foreign-service officer, all those years before, during the Carter Administration. The Air Force flight crew delivered him on time, and they were accustomed to taking people on covert missions to odd places. This mission was less unusual than most. His aircraft rolled to a stop at the Russian fighter base, and the official car rolled up even before the mechanical steps unfolded. Adler hustled out, unaccompanied even by an aide. A Russian official shook hands with him and got him into the car for the drive into Moscow. Adler was at ease. He knew that he was offering Russia a gift fit for the world's largest Christmas tree, and he didn't think they were stupid enough to reject it. No, the Russians were among the world's most skillful diplomats and geopolitical thinkers, a trait that went back sixty years or more. It had struck him as sad, back in 1978, that their adroit people had been chained to a doomed political system—even back then, Adler had seen the demise of the Soviet Union coming. Jimmy Carter's "human rights" proclamation had been that president's best and least appreciated foreign-policy play, for it had injected the virus of rot into their political empire, begun the process of eating away their power in Eastern Europe, and also of letting their own people start to ask questions. It was a pot that Ronald Reagan had sweetened—upping the ante with his defense buildup that had stretched the Soviet economy to the breaking point and beyond, allowing George Bush to be there when they'd tossed in their cards and cast off from the political system that stretched back to Vladimir ll'ych Ulyanov, Lenin himself, the founding father, even the god of Marxism-Leninism. It was usually sad when a god died . . .

. . . but not in this case, Adler thought as the buildings flashed by.

Then he realized that there was one more large but false god out there, Mao Zedong, awaiting final interment in history's rubbish heap. When would that come? Did this mission have a role to play in that funeral? Nixon's opening to China had played a role in the destruction of the Soviet Union, which historians still had not fully grasped. Would its final echo be found in the fall of the People's Republic itself? That remained to be seen.

The car pulled into the Kremlin through the Spaskiy Gate, then proceeded to the old Council of Ministers Building. There Adler alighted and hurried inside, into an elevator to a third-floor meeting room.

"Mr. Secretary." The greeting came from Golovko. Adler should have found him an *eminence gris*, he thought. But Sergey Nikolay'ch was actually a man of genuine intellect and the openness that resulted directly from it. He was not even a pragmatist, but a man who sought what was best for his country, and would search for it everywhere his mind could see. *A seeker of truth*, SecState thought. That sort of man

he and America could live with.

"Chairman. Thank you for receiving us so quickly."

"Please come with me, Mr. Adler." Golovko led him through a set of high double doors into what almost appeared to be a throne room. EAGLE couldn't remember if this building went back to the czars. President Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy was waiting for him, already standing politely, looking serious but friendly.

"Mr. Adler," the Russian president said, with a smile and an extended hand.

"Mr. President, a pleasure to be back in Moscow."

"Please." Grushavoy led him to a comfortable set of chairs with a low table. Tea things were already out, and Golovko handled the serving like a trusted earl seeing to the needs of his king and guest.

"Thank you. I've always loved the way you serve your tea in Russia." Adler stirred his and took a sip.

"So, what do you have to say to us?" Grushavoy asked in passable English.

"We have shown you what has become for us a cause for great concern."

"The Chinese," the Russian president observed. Everyone knew all of this, but the beginning of the conversation would follow the conventions of high-level talk, like lawyers discussing a major case in chambers.

"Yes, the Chinese. They seem to be contemplating a threat to the peace of the world. America has no wish to see that peace threatened. We've all worked very hard—your country and mine—to put an end to conflict. We note with gratitude Russia's assistance in our most recent conflicts. Just as we were allies sixty years ago, so Russia has acted again lately. America is a country that remembers her friends."

Golovko let out a breath slowly. Yes, his prediction was about to come true. Ivan Emmetovich was a man of honor, and a friend of his country. What came back to him was the time he'd held a pistol to Ryan's head, the time Ryan had engineered the defection of KGB chairman Gerasimov all those years before. Sergey Nikolay'ch had been enraged back then, as furious as he had ever been in a long and stressful professional life, but he'd held back from firing the pistol because it would have been a foolish act to shoot a man with diplomatic status. Now he blessed his moderation, for now Ivan Emmetovich Ryan offered to Russia what he had always craved from America: predictability. Ryan's honor, his sense of fair play, the personal honesty that was the most crippling aspect of his newly acquired political persona, all combined to make him a person upon whom Russia could depend. And at this moment, Golovko could do that which he'd spent his life trying to do: He could see the future that

lay only a few short minutes away.

"This Chinese threat, it is real, you think?" Grushavoy asked.

"We fear it is," the American Secretary of State answered. "We hope to forestall it."

"But how will we accomplish that? China knows of our military weakness. We have de-emphasized our defense capabilities of late, trying to shift the funds into areas of greater value to our economy. Now it seems we might pay a bitter price for that," the Russian president worried aloud.

"Mr. President, we hope to help Russia in that respect."

"How?"

"Mr. President, even as we speak, President Ryan is also speaking with the NATO chiefs of state and government. He is proposing to them that we invite Russia to sign the North Atlantic Treaty. That will ally the Russian Federation with all of Europe. It ought to make China take a step back to consider the wisdom of a conflict with your country."

"Ahh," Grushavoy breathed. "So, America offers Russia a full alliance of state?"

Adler nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. As we were allies against Hitler, so today we can again be allies against all potential enemies."

"There are many complications in this, talks between your military and ours, for example—even talks with the NATO command in Belgium. It could take months to coordinate our country with NATO."

"Those are technical matters to be handled by diplomatic and military technicians. At this level, however, we offer the Russian Federation our friendship in peace and in war. We place the word and the honor of our countries at your disposal."

"What of the European Union, their Common Market of economic alliances?"

"That, sir, is something left to the EEC, but America will encourage our European friends to welcome you completely into the European community, and offer all influence we can muster to that end."

"What do you ask in return?" Grushavoy asked. Golovko hadn't offered that prediction. This could be the answer to many Russian prayers, though his mind made the leap to see that Russian oil would be a major boon to Europe, and hence a matter of mutual, not unilateral, profit.

"We ask for nothing special in return. It is in the American interest to help make a stable and peaceful world. We welcome Russia into that world. Friendship between your people and ours is desirable to everyone, is it not?"

"And in our friendship is profit also for America," Golovko pointed out.

Adler sat back and smiled agreement. “Of course. Russia will sell things to America, and America will sell things to Russia. We will become neighbors in the global village, friendly neighbors. We will compete economically, giving and taking from each other, as we do with many other countries.”

“The offer you make is this simple?” Grushavoy asked.

“Should it be more complicated?” the SecState asked. “I am a diplomat, not a lawyer. I prefer simple things to complex ones.”

Grushavoy considered all this for half a minute or so. Usually, diplomatic negotiations lasted weeks or months to do even the simplest of things, but Adler was right: Simple was better than complex, and the fundamental issue here was simple, though the downstream consequences might be breathtaking. America offered salvation to Russia, not just a military alliance, but the opening of all doors to economic development. America and Europe would partner with the Russian Federation, creating what could become both an open and integrated community to span the northern hemisphere. It stood to make Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy the Russian who brought his country a full century into the present/future of the world, and for all the statues of Lenin and Stalin that had been toppled, well, maybe some of his own likeness would be erected. It was a thought to appeal to a Russian politician. And after a few minutes, he extended his hand across the low table of tea things.

“The Russian Federation gladly accepts the offer of the United States of America. Together we once defeated the greatest threat to human culture. Perhaps we can do so again—better yet, together we may forestall it.”

“In that case, sir, I will report your agreement to my President.”

Adler checked his watch. It had taken twenty minutes. Damn, you could make history in a hurry when you had your act together, couldn’t you? He stood. “I must be off then to make my report.”

“Please convey my respects to President Ryan. We will do our best to be worthy allies to your country.”

“He and I have no doubts of that, Mr. President.” Adler shook hands with Golovko and walked to the door. Three minutes after that, he was back in his car and heading back to the airport. Once there, the aircraft had barely begun to taxi when he got on the secure satellite phone.

Mr. President?” Andrea said, coming up to Ryan just as the plenary session of the NATO chiefs was about to begin. She handed over the secure portable phone. “It’s Secretary Adler.”

Ryan took the phone at once. “Scott? Jack here. What gives?”

“It’s a done deal, Jack.”

"Okay, now I have to sell it to these guys. Good job, Scott. Hurry back."

"We're rolling now, sir." The line went dead. Ryan tossed the phone to Special Agent Price-O'Day.

"Good news?" she asked.

"Yep." Ryan nodded and walked into the conference room.

"Mr. President." Sir Basil Charleston came up to him. The chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, he'd known Ryan longer than anyone else in the room had. One odd result of Ryan's path to the Presidency was that the people who knew him best were all spooks, mainly NATO ones, and these found themselves advising their chiefs of government on how to deal with America. Sir Basil had served no less than five Prime Ministers of Her Majesty's Government, but now he was in rather a higher position than before.

"Bas, how are you?"

"Doing quite well, thank you. May I ask a question?"

"Sure." *But I don't have to answer it,* Jack's smile added in reply.

"Adler is in Moscow now. Can we know why?"

"How will your PM react to inviting Russia into NATO?"

That made Basil blink, Ryan saw. It wasn't often that you could catch this guy unawares. Instantly, his mind went into overdrive to analyze the new situation. "China?" he asked after about six seconds.

Jack nodded. "Yeah. We may have some problems there."

"Not going north, are they?"

"They're thinking about it," Ryan replied.

"How good is your information on that question?"

"You know about the Russian gold strike, right?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. President. Ivan's been bloody lucky on both scores."

"Our intel strike in Beijing is even better."

"Indeed?" Charleston observed, letting Jack know that the SIS had also been pretty much shut out there.

"Indeed, Bas. It's class-A information, and it has us worried. We're hoping that pulling Russia into NATO can scare them off. Grushavoy just agreed on it. How do you suppose the rest of these folks will react to it?"

"They'll react cautiously, but favorably, after they've had a chance to consider it."

"Will Britain back us on this play?" Ryan asked.

"I must speak with the PM. I'll let you know." With that, Sir Basil walked over to where the British Prime Minister was chatting with the German Foreign Minister. Charleston dragged him off and spoke quietly into his ear. Instantly, the Prime Minister's eyes, flaring a little wide, shot over to Ryan. The British PM was somewhat trapped, somewhat unpleasantly because of the surprise factor, but the

substance of the trap was that Britain and America *always* supported each other. The "special relationship" was as alive and well today as it had been under the governments of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. It was one of the few constants in the diplomatic world for both countries, and it belied Kissinger's dictum that great nations didn't have friendships, but rather interests. Perhaps it was the exception proving the rule, but if so, exception it was. Both Britain and America would hurl themselves in front of a train for the other. The fact that in England, President Ryan was Sir John Ryan, KCVO, made the alliance even more firm. In acknowledgment of that, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom walked over to the American chief of state.

"Jack, will you let us in on this development?"

"Insofar as I can. I may give Basil a little more on the side, but, yeah, Tony, this is for real, and we're damned worried about it."

"The gold and the oil?" the PM asked.

"They seem to think they're in an economic box. They're just about out of hard currency, and they're hurting for oil and wheat."

"You can't make an arrangement for that?"

"After what they did? Congress would hang me from the nearest lamppost."

"Quite," the Brit had to agree. BBC had run its own news miniseries on human rights in the PRC, and the Chinese hadn't come off very well. Indeed, despising China was the new European sport, which hadn't helped their foreign-currency holdings at all. As China had trapped themselves, so the Western nations had been perversely co-opted into building the wall. The citizens of these democracies wouldn't stand for economic or trade concessions any more than the Chinese Politburo could see its way to making the political sort. "Rather like Greek tragedy, isn't it, Jack?"

"Yeah, Tony, and our tragic flaw is adherence to human rights. Hell of a situation, isn't it?"

"And you're hoping that bringing Russia into NATO will give them pause?"

"If there's a better card to play, I haven't seen it in my deck, man."

"How set are they on the path?"

"Unknown. Our intelligence on this is very good, but we have to be careful making use of it. It could get people killed, and deny us the information we need."

"Like our chap Penkovskiy in the 1960s." One thing about Sir Basil, he knew how to educate his bosses on how the business of intelligence worked.

Ryan nodded, then proceeded with a little of his own disinformation. It was business, and Basil would understand: "Exactly.

I can't have that man's life on my conscience, Tony, and so I have to treat this information very carefully."

"Quite so, Jack. I understand fully."

"Will you support us on this?"

The PM nodded at once. "Yes, old boy, we must, mustn't we?"

"Thanks, pal." Ryan patted him on the shoulder.

CHAPTER 44

The Shape of a New World Order

It took all day, lengthening what was supposed to have been a pro forma meeting of the NATO chiefs into a minor marathon. It took all of Scott Adler's powers of persuasion to smooth things over with the various foreign ministers, but with the assistance of Britain, whose diplomacy had always been of the Rolls-Royce class, after four hours there was a head-nod-and-handshake agreement, and the diplomatic technicians were sent off to prepare the documents. All this was accomplished behind closed doors, with no opportunity for a press leak, and so when the various government leaders made it outside, the media learned of it like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. What they did not learn was the real reason for the action. They were told it had to do with the new economic promise in the Russian Federation, which seemed reasonable enough, and when you came down to it, was the root cause in any case.

In fact most of the NATO partners didn't know the whole story, either. The new American intelligence was directly shared only with Britain, though France and Germany were given some indications of America's cause for concern. For the rest, the simple logic of the situation was enough to offer appeal. It would look good in the press, and for most politicians all over the world, that was sufficient to make them doff their clothes and run about a public square naked. Secretary Adler cautioned his President about the dangers of drawing sovereign nations into treaty obligations without telling them all the reasons behind them, but even he agreed that there was little other choice in the matter. Besides, there *was* a built-in escape clause that the media wouldn't see at first, and hopefully, neither would the Chinese.

The media got the story out in time for the evening news broadcasts in America and the late-night ones in Europe, and the TV cameras showed the arrival of the various VIPs at the official dinner in Warsaw.

"I owe you one, Tony," Ryan told the British Prime Minister with a salute of his wineglass. The white wine was French, from the Loire Valley, and excellent. The hard liquor of the night had been an equally fine Polish vodka.

"Well, one can hope that it gives our Chinese friends pause. When will Grushavoy arrive?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, followed by more drinking. Vodka again, I suppose." The documents were being printed up at this very moment, and then would be bound in fine leather, as such important documents invariably were, after which they'd be tucked away in various dusty basement archives, rarely to be seen by the eyes of men again.

"Basil tells me that your intelligence information is unusually good, and rather frightening," the PM observed, with a sip of his own.

"It is all of that, my friend. You know, we're supposed to think that this war business is a thing of the past."

"So they thought a hundred years ago, Jack. It didn't quite work out that way, did it?"

"True, but that was then, and this is now. And the world really has changed in the past hundred years."

"I hope that is a matter of some comfort to Franz Ferdinand, and the ten million or so chaps who died as an indirect result of his demise, not to mention Act Two of the Great European Civil War," the Prime Minister observed.

"Yeah, day after tomorrow, I'm going down to Auschwitz. That ought to be fun." Ryan didn't really want to go, but he figured it was something of an obligation under the circumstances, and besides, Arnie thought it would look good on TV, which was why he did a lot of the things he did.

"Do watch out for the ghosts, old boy. I should think there are a number of them there."

"I'll let you know," Ryan promised. Would it be like Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*? he wondered. The ghost of horrors past, accompanied by the ghost of horrors present, and finally the ghost of horrors yet to be? But he was in the business of preventing such things. That's what the people of his country paid him for. Maybe $250,000 a year wasn't much for a guy who'd twice made a good living in the trading business, but it was a damned sight more than most of the taxpayers made, and they gave it to him in return for his work. That made the obligation as sacred as a vow sworn to God's own face. Auschwitz had happened because other men hadn't recognized their obligation to the people whom *they* had been supposed to serve. Or something like that. Ryan had never quite made the leap of imagination necessary to understand the thought processes of dictators. Maybe Caligula had really figured that the lives of the Roman people were his possessions to use and discard like peanut shells. Maybe Hitler had thought that the German people existed only to serve his ambition to enter the history books—and if so, sure enough it had happened, just not quite

the way he'd hoped it would. Jack Ryan knew objectively that he'd be in various history books, but he tried to avoid thinking about what future generations would make of him. Just surviving in his job from day to day was difficult enough. The problem with history was that you couldn't transport yourself into the future so that you could look back with detachment and see what the hell you were supposed to do. No, making history was a damned sight harder than studying it, and so he'd decided to avoid thinking about it altogether. He wouldn't be around to know what the future thought anyway, so there was no sense in worrying about it, was there? He had his own conscience to keep him awake at night, and that was hard enough.

Looking around the room, he could see the chiefs of government of more than fifteen countries, from little Iceland to the Netherlands to Turkey. He was President of the United States of America, by far the largest and most powerful country of the NATO alliance—until tomorrow, anyway, he corrected himself—and he wanted to take them all aside and ask each one how the hell he (they were all men at the moment) reconciled his self and his duties. How did you do the job honorably? How did you look after the needs of every citizen? Ryan knew that he couldn't reasonably expect to be universally loved. Arnie had told him that—that he only needed to be liked, not loved, by half-plus-one of the voters in America—but there had to be more to the job than that, didn't there? He knew all of his fellow chief executives by name and sight, and he'd been briefed in on each man's character. That one there, he had a mistress only nineteen years old. That one drank like a fish. That one had a little confusion about his sexual preference. And that one was a crook who'd enriched himself hugely on the government payroll. But they were all allies of his country, and therefore they were officially his friends. And so Jack had to ignore what he knew of them and treat them like what they appeared to be rather than what they really were, and the really funny part of that was that they felt themselves to be his superiors because they were better politicians than he was. And the funniest part of all was that they were right. They *were* better politicians than he was, Ryan thought, sipping his wine. The British Prime Minister walked off to see his Norwegian counterpart, as Cathy Ryan rejoined her husband.

"Well, honey, how did it go?"

"The usual. Politics. Don't any of these women have a real job?" she asked the air.

"Some do," Jack remembered from his briefings. "Some even have kids."

"Mainly grandkids. I'm not old enough for that yet, thank God."

"Sorry, babe. But there are advantages to being young and beautiful," POTUS told FLOTUS.

"And you're the best-looking guy here," Cathy replied with a smile.

"But I'm too tired. Long day at the bargaining table."

"Why are you bringing Russia into NATO?"

"To stop a war with China," Jack replied honestly. It was time she knew. The answer to her question got her attention.

"What?"

"I'll fill you in later, babe, but that's the short version."

"A war?"

"Yeah. It's a long story, and we hope that what we agreed to do today will prevent it."

"You say so," Cathy Ryan observed dubiously.

"Meet anybody you like?"

"The French President is very charming."

"Oh, yeah? He was a son of a bitch in the negotiating session today. Maybe he's just trying to get in your knickers," Jack told his wife. He'd been briefed in on the French President, and he was reputed to be a man of "commendable vigor," as the State Department report delicately put it. Well, the French had a reputation as great lovers, didn't they?

"I'm spoke for, Sir John," she reminded him.

"And so am I, my lady." He could have Roy Altman shoot the Frenchman for making a move on his wife, Ryan thought with amusement, but that would cause a diplomatic incident, and Scott Adler always got upset about those. . . . Jack checked his watch. It was about time to call this one a day. Soon some diplomat would make a discreet announcement that would end the evening. Jack hadn't danced with his wife. The sad truth was that Jack couldn't dance a lick, which was a source of minor contention with his wife, and a shortcoming he planned to correct someday . . . maybe.

The party broke up on time. The embassy had comfortable quarters, and Ryan found his way to the king-sized bed brought in for his and Cathy's use.

Bondarenko's official residence at Chabarsovil was a very comfortable one, befitting a four-star resident and his family. But his wife didn't like it. Eastern Siberia lacked the social life of Moscow, and besides, one of their daughters was nine months pregnant, and his wife was in St. Petersburg to be there when the baby arrived. The front of the house overlooked a large parade ground. The back, where his bedroom was, looked into the pine forests that made up most of this province. He had a large personal staff to look after his needs. That included a particularly skilled cook, and communications people. It was one of the latter who knocked on his bedroom door at three in the local morning.

"Yes, what is it?"

"An urgent communication for you, Comrade General," the voice answered.

"Very well, wait a minute." Gennady Iosifovich rose and donned a cloth robe, punching on a light as he went to open the door. He grumbled as any man would at the loss of sleep, but generals had to expect this sort of thing. He opened the door without a snarl at the NCO who handed over the telex.

"Urgent, from Moscow," the sergeant emphasized.

"Da, spasiba," the general replied, taking it and walking back toward his bed. He sat in the comfortable chair that he usually dumped his tunic on and picked up the reading glasses that he didn't actually need, but which made reading easier in the semidarkness. It was something urgent—well, urgent enough to wake him up in the middle of the fucking—

"My God," CINC-FAR EAST breathed to himself, halfway down the cover sheet. Then he flipped it over to read the substance of the report.

In America it would be called a Special National Intelligence Estimate. Bondarenko had seen them before, even helped draft some, but never one like this.

It is believed that there is an imminent danger of war between Russia and the People's Republic of China. The Chinese objective in offensive operations will be to seize the newly discovered gold and oil deposits in eastern Siberia by rapid mechanized assault north from their border west of Khabarovsk. The leading elements will include the 34th Shock Army, a Type A Group Army . . .

This intelligence estimate is based upon national intelligence assets with access to the political leaders of the PRC, and the quality of the intelligence is graded "1A," the report went on, meaning that the SVR regarded it as Holy Writ. Bondarenko hadn't seen that happen very much.

Far East Command is directed to make all preparations to meet and repel such an attack . . .

"With what?" the general asked the papers in his hand. "With what, comrades?" With that he lifted the bedside phone. "I want my staff together in forty minutes," he told the sergeant who answered. He would not take the theatrical step of calling a full alert just yet. That would follow his staff meeting. Already his mind was examining the problem. It would continue to do so as he urinated, then shaved, his mind running in small circles, a fact which he recognized but couldn't change, and the fact that he couldn't change it didn't slow the process one small bit. The problem he faced as he scraped the whiskers from his face was not an easy one, perhaps an impossible one, but his four-star rank made it *his* problem, and he didn't want to be remembered

by future Russian military students as the general who'd not been up to the task of defending his country against a foreign invasion. He was here, Bondarenko told himself, because he was the best operational thinker his country had. He'd faced battle before, and comported himself well enough not only to live but to wear his nation's highest decorations for bravery. He'd studied military history his whole life. He'd even spent time with the Americans at their battle laboratory in California, something he lusted to copy and re-create in Russia as the best possible way to prepare soldiers for battle, but which his country couldn't begin to afford for years. He had the knowledge. He had the nerve. What he lacked were the assets. But history was not made by soldiers who had what they needed, but by those who did not. When the soldiers had enough, the political leaders went into the books. Gennady Iosifovich was a soldier, and a *Russian* soldier. His country was *always* taken by surprise, because for whatever reason her political leaders didn't ever see war coming, and because of that soldiers had to pay the price. A distant voice told him that at least he wouldn't be shot for failure. Stalin was long dead, and with him the ethos of punishing those whom he had failed to warn or prepare. But Bondarenko didn't listen to that voice. Failure was too bitter an alternative for him to consider while he lived.

The Special National Intelligence Estimate made its way to American forces in Europe and the Pacific even more quickly than to Chabarsovil. For Admiral Bartolomeo Vito Mancuso, it came before a scheduled dinner with the governor of Hawaii. His Public Affairs Officer had to knock that one back a few hours while CINCPAC called his staff together.

"Talk to me, Mike," Mancuso commanded his J-2, BG Michael Lahr.

"Well, it hasn't come totally out of left field, sir," the theater intelligence coordinator replied. "I don't know anything about the source of the intelligence, but it looks like high-level human intelligence, probably with a political point of origin. CIA says it's highly reliable, and Director Foley is pretty good. So, we have to take this one very seriously." Lahr paused for a sip of water.

"Okay, what we know is that the PRC is looking with envious eyes at the Russian mineral discoveries in the central and northern parts of eastern Siberia. That plays into the economic problems they got faced with after the killings in Beijing caused the break in trade talks, and it also appears that their other trading partners are backing away from them as well. So, the Chinese now find themselves in a really tight economic corner, and that's been a *casus belli* as far back as we have written history."

"What can we do to scare them off?" asked the general commanding

Pacific Fleet Marine Force.

"What we're doing tomorrow is to make the Russian federation part of NATO. Russian President Grushavoy will be flying to Warsaw in a few hours to sign the North Atlantic Treaty. *That* makes Russia an ally of the United States of America, and of *all* the NATO members. So, the thinking is that if China moves, they're not just taking on Russia, but all the rest of the North Atlantic Council as well, and *that* ought to give them pause."

"And if it doesn't?" Mancuso asked. As a theater commander-in-chief, he was paid to consider diplomatic failure rather than success.

"Then, sir, if the Chinese strike north, we have a shooting war on the Asian mainland between the People's Republic of China and an American ally. That means we're going to war."

"Do we have any guidance from Washington along those lines?" CINCPAC asked.

Lahr shook his head. "Not yet, Admiral. It's developing a little fast for that, and Secretary Bretano is looking to us for ideas."

Mancuso nodded. "Okay. What can we do? What kind of shape are we in?"

The four-star commanding Seventh Fleet leaned forward: "I'm in pretty decent shape. My carriers are all available or nearly so, but my aviators could use some more training time. Surface assets—well, Ed?"

Vice Admiral Goldsmith looked over to his boss. "We're good, Bart."

COMSUBPAC nodded. "It'll take a little time to surge more of my boats west, but they're trained up, and we can give their navy a major bellyache if we have to."

Then eyes turned to the Marine. "I hope you're not going to tell me to invade the Chinese mainland with one division," he observed. Besides, all of Pacific Fleet didn't have enough amphibious-warfare ships to land more than a brigade landing force, and they knew that. Good as the Marines were, they couldn't take on the entire People's Liberation Army.

"What sort of shape are the Russians in?" Seventh Fleet asked General Lahr.

"Not good, sir. Their new Commander Far East is well regarded, but he's hurting for assets. The PLA has him outnumbered a good eight to one, probably more. So, the Russians don't have much in the way of deep-strike capabilities, and just defending themselves against air attack is going to be a stretch."

"That's a fact," agreed the general commanding the Air Force assets in the Pacific Theater. "Ivan's pissed away a lot of his available assets dealing with the Chechens. Most of their aircraft are grounded with maintenance problems. That means his drivers aren't getting the stick time they need to be proficient airmen. The Chinese, on the other

hand, have been training pretty well for several years. I'd say their air force component is in pretty good shape."

"What can we move west with?"

"A lot," the USAF four-star answered. "But will it be enough? Depends on a lot of variables. It'll be nice to have your carriers around to back us up." Which was unusually gracious of the United States Air Force.

"Okay," Mancuso said next. "I want to see some options. Mike, let's firm up our intelligence estimates on what the Chinese are capable of, first of all, and second, what they're thinking."

"The Agency is altering the tasking of its satellites. We ought to be getting a lot of overheads soon, plus our friends on Taiwan—they keep a pretty good eye on things for us."

"Are they in on this SNIE?" Seventh Fleet asked.

Lahr shook his head. "No, not yet. This stuff is being held pretty close."

"Might want to tell Washington that they have a better feel for Beijing's internal politics than we do," the senior Marine observed. "They ought to. They speak the same language. Same thought processes and stuff. Taiwan ought to be a prime asset to us."

"Maybe, maybe not," Lahr countered. "If a shooting war starts, they won't jump in for the fun of it. Sure, they're our friends, but they don't really have a dog in this fight yet, and the smart play for them is to play it cautious. They'll go to a high alert status, but they will not commence offensive operations on their own hook."

"Will we really back the Russians if it comes to that? More to the point, will the Chinese regard that as a credible option on our part?" COMAIRPAC asked. He administratively "owned" the carriers and naval air wings. Getting them trained was his job.

"Reading their minds is CIA's job, not ours," Lahr answered. "As far as I know, DIA has no high-quality sources in Beijing, except what we get from intercepts out of Fort Meade. If you're asking me for a personal opinion, well, we have to remember that their political assessments are made by Maoist politicians who tend to see things their own way rather than with what we would term an objective outlook. Short version, I don't know, and I don't know anyone who does, but the asset that got us this information tells us that they're serious about this possible move. Serious enough to bring Russia into NATO. You could call that rather a desperate move toward deterring the PRC, Admiral."

"So, we regard war as a highly possible eventuality?" Mancuso summarized.

"Yes, sir," Lahr agreed.

"Okay, gentlemen. Then we treat it that way. I want plans and

options for giving our Chinese brethren a bellyache. Rough outlines after lunch tomorrow, and firm options in forty-eight hours. Questions?" There were none. "Okay, let's get to work on this."

Al Gregory was working late. A computer-software expert, he was accustomed to working odd hours, and this was no exception. At the moment he was aboard USS *Gettysburg,* an Aegis-class cruiser. The ship was not in the water, but rather in dry dock, sitting on a collection of wooden blocks while undergoing propeller replacement. *Gettysburg* had tangled with a buoy that had parted its mooring chain and drifted into the fairway, rather to the detriment of the cruiser's port crew. The yard was taking its time to do the replacement because the ship's engines were about due for programmed maintenance anyway. This was good for the crew. Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, part of the Norfolk Naval Base complex, wasn't exactly a garden spot, but it was where most of the crew's families lived, and that made it attractive enough.

Gregory was in the ship's CIC, or Combat Information Center, the compartment from which the captain "fought" the ship. All the weapons systems were controlled from this large space. The SPY radar display was found on three side-by-side displays about the size of a good big-screen TV. The problem was the computers that drove the systems.

"You know," Gregory observed to the senior chief who maintained the systems, "an old iMac has a ton more power than this."

"Doc, this system is the flower of 1975 technology," the senior chief protested. "And it ain't all that hard to track a missile, is it?"

"Besides, Dr. Gregory," another chief put it, "that radar of mine is still the best fucking system ever put to sea."

"That's a fact," Gregory had to agree. The solid-state components could combine to blast six *megawatts* of RF power down a one-degree line of bearing, enough to make a helicopter pilot, for example, produce what cruel physicians called FLKs: funny-looking kids. And more than enough to track a ballistic reentry vehicle at a thousand miles or more. The limitation there also was computer software, which was the new gold standard in just about every weapons system in the world.

"So, when you want to track an RV, what do you do?"

"We call it 'inserting the chip,' " the senior chief answered.

"What? It's hardware?" Al asked. He had trouble believing that. This wasn't a computer that you slid a board into.

"No, sir, it's software. We upload a different control program."

"Why do you need a second program for that? Can't your regular one track airplanes and missiles?" the TRW vice president demanded.

"Sir, I just maintain and operate the bitch. I don't design the things. RCA and IBM do that."

"Shit," Gregory observed.

"You could talk to Lieutenant Olson," the other chief thought aloud. "He's a Dartmouth boy. Pretty smart for a j.g."

"Yeah," the first chief agreed. "He writes software as sort of a hobby."

"Dennis the Menace. Weps and the XO get annoyed with him sometimes."

"Why?" Gregory asked.

"Because he talks like you, sir," Senior Chief Leek answered. "But he ain't in your pay grade."

"He's a good kid, though," Senior Chief Matson observed. "Takes good care of his troops, and he knows his stuff, doesn't he, Tim?"

"Yeah, George, good kid, going places if he stays in."

"He won't. Computer companies are already trying to recruit him. Shit, Compaq offered him three hundred big ones last week."

"That's a living wage," Chief Leek commented. "What did Dennis say?"

"He said no. I told him to hold out for half a mil." Matson laughed as he reached for some coffee.

"What d'ya think, Dr. Gregory? The kid worth that kinda money in the 'puter business?"

"If he can do really good code, maybe," Al replied, making a mental note to check out this Lieutenant Olson himself. TRW always had room for talent. Dartmouth was known for its computer science department. Add field experience to that, and you had a real candidate for the ongoing SAM project. "Okay, if you insert the chip, what happens?"

"Then you change the range of the radar. You know how it works, the RF energy goes out forever on its own, but we only accept signals that bounce back within a specific time gate. This"—Senior Chief Leek held up a floppy disk with a hand-printed label on it—"changes the gate. It extends the effective rage of the SPY out to, oh, two thousand kilometers. Damned sight farther than the missiles'll go. I was on *Port Royal* out at Kwajalein five years ago doing a theater-missile test, and we were tracking the inbound from the time it popped over the horizon all the way in."

"You hit it?" Gregory asked with immediate interest.

Leek shook his head. "Guidance-fin failure on the bird, it was an early Block-IV. We got within fifty meters, but that was a cunt hair outside the warhead's kill perimeter, and they only allowed us one shot, for some reason or other nobody ever told me about. *Shiloh* got a kill the next year. Splattered it with a skin-skin kill. The video of that

one is a son of a bitch," the senior chief assured his guest.

Gregory believed it. When an object going one way at fourteen thousand miles per hour got hit by something going the other way at two thousand miles per hour, the result could be quite impressive. "First-round hit?" he asked.

"You bet. The sucker was coming straight at us, and this baby doesn't miss much."

"We always clean up with Vandal tests off Wallops Island," Chief Matson confirmed.

"What are those exactly?"

"Old Talos SAMs," Matson explained. "Big stovepipes, ramjet engines, they can come in on a ballistic track at about twenty-two hundred miles per hour. Pretty hot on the deck, too. That's what we worry about. The Russians came out with a sea-skimmer we call Sunburn—"

"Aegis-killer, some folks call it," Chief Leek added. "Low and fast."

"But we ain't missed one yet," Matson announced. "The Aegis system's pretty good. So, Dr. Gregory, what exactly are you checking out?"

"I want to see if your system can be used to stop a ballistic inbound."

"How fast?" Matson asked.

"A for-real ICBM. When you detect it on radar, it'll be doing about seventeen thousand miles per hour, call it seventy-six hundred meters per second."

"That's real fast," Leek observed. "Seven, eight times the speed of a rifle bullet."

"Faster'n a theater ballistic weapon like a Scud. Not sure we can do it," Matson worried.

"This radar system'll track it just fine. It's very similar to the Cobra Dane system in the Aleutians. Question is, can your SAMs react fast enough to get a hit?"

"How hard's the target?" Matson asked.

"Softer than an aircraft. The RV's designed to withstand heat, not an impact. Like the space shuttle. When you fly it through a rainstorm, it plays hell with the tiles."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yep." Gregory nodded. "Like foam coffee cups."

"Okay, so then the problem's getting the SM2 close enough to have the warhead pop off when the target's in the fragmentation cone."

"Correct." They might be enlisted men, Gregory thought, but that didn't make them dumb.

"Software fix in the seeker head, right?"

"Also correct. I've rewritten the code. Pretty easy job, really. I

reprogrammed the way the laser mutates. Ought to work okay if the infrared homing system works as advertised. At least it did in the computer simulations up in Washington."

"It worked just fine on *Shiloh*, Doc. We got the videotape aboard somewhere," Leek assured him. "Wanna see it?"

"You bet," Dr. Gregory said with enthusiasm.

"Okay." Senior Chief Leek checked his watch. "I'm free now. Let me head aft for a smoke, and then we'll *roll the videotape*," he said, sounding like Warner Wolf on WCBS New York.

"You can't smoke in here?"

Leek grunted annoyance. "It's the New Navy, Doc. The cap'n's a health Nazi. You gotta go aft to light up. Not even in chief's quarters," Leek groused.

"I quit," Matson said. "Not a pussy like Tim here."

"My ass," Leek responded. "There's a few real men left aboard."

"How come you sit sideways here?" Gregory asked, rising to his feet to follow them aft. "The important displays go to the right side of the ship instead of fore and aft. How come?"

" 'Cuz it helps you puke if you're in a seaway." Matson laughed. "Whoever designed these ships didn't like sailors much, but at least the air-conditioning works." It rarely got above sixty degrees in the CIC, causing most of the men who worked there to wear sweaters. Aegis cruisers were decidedly not known for their comforts.

This is serious?" Colonel Aliyev asked. It was a stupid question, and he knew it. But it just had to come out anyway, and his commander knew that.

"We have orders to treat it that way, Colonel," Bondarenko replied crossly. "What do we have to stop them?"

"The 265th Motor-Rifle Division is at roughly fifty percent combat efficiency," the theater operations officer replied. "Beyond that, two tank regiments at forty percent or so. Our reserve formations are mostly theoretical," Aliyev concluded. "Our air assets—one regiment of fighter-interceptors ready for operations, another three who don't have even half their aircraft fit to fly."

Bondarenko nodded at the news. It was better than it had been upon his arrival in theater, and he'd done well to bring things that far, but that wouldn't impress the Chinese very much.

"Opposition?" he asked next. Far East's intelligence officer was another colonel, Vladimir Konstantinovich Tolkunov.

"Our Chinese neighbors are in good military shape, Comrade General. The nearest enemy formation is Thirty-fourth Shock Army, a Type A Group Army commanded by General Peng Xi-Wang," he began, showing off what he knew. "That one formation has triple or

more our mechanized assets, and is well trained. Chinese aircraft—well, their tactical aircraft number over two thousand, and we must assume they will commit everything to this operation. Comrades, we do not have anything like the assets we need to stop them."

"So, we will use space to our advantage," the general proposed. "Of that we have much. We will fight a holding action and await reinforcements from the west. I'll be talking with Stavka later today. Let's draw up what we'll need to stop these barbarians."

"All down one line of railroad," Aliyev observed. "And our fucking engineers have been busily clearing a route for the Chinks to take to the oil fields. General, first of all, we need to get our engineers working on minefields. We have millions of mines, and the route the Chinese will take is easily predicted."

The overall problem was that the Chinese had strategic, if not tactical, surprise. The former was a political exercise, and like Hitler in 1941, the Chinese had pulled it off. At least Bondarenko would have tactical warning, which was more than Stalin had allowed his Red Army. He also expected to have freedom of maneuver, because also unlike Stalin, his President Grushavoy would be thinking with his brain instead of his balls. With freedom of maneuver Bondarenko would have the room to play a mobile war with his enemy, denying the Chinese a chance at decisive engagement, allowing hard contact only when it served his advantage. Then he'd be able to wait for reinforcements to give him a chance to fight a set-piece battle on his own terms, at a place and time of his choosing.

"How good are the Chinese, really, Pavel?"

"The People's Liberation Army has not engaged in large-scale combat operations for over fifty years, since the Korean War with the Americans, unless you cite the border clashes we had with them in the late '60s and early '70s. In that case, the Red Army dealt with them well, but to do that we had massive firepower, and the Chinese were only fighting for limited objectives. They are trained largely on our old model. Their soldiers will not have the ability to think for themselves. Their discipline is worse than draconian. The smallest infraction can result in summary execution, and that makes for obedience. At the operational level, their general officers are well-trained in theoretical terms. Qualitatively, their weapons are roughly the equal of ours. With their greater funding, their training levels mean that their soldiers are intimately familiar with their weapons and rudimentary tactics," Zhdanov told the assembled staff. "But they are probably not our equal in operational-maneuver thinking. Unfortunately, they do have numbers going for them, and quantity has a quality all its own, as the NATO armies used to say of us. What they will want to do, and what I fear they will, is try to roll over us quickly

—just crush us and move on to their political and economic objectives as quickly as possible."

Bondarenko nodded as he sipped his tea. This was mad, and the maddest part of all was that he was playing the role of a NATO commander from 1975—maybe a German one, which was truly insane—faced with adverse numbers, but blessed, as the Germans had not been, with space to play with, and Russians had always used space to their advantage. He leaned forward:

"Very well. Comrades, we will *deny* them the opportunity for decisive engagement. If they cross the border, we will fight a maneuver war. We will sting and move. We will hurt them and withdraw before they can counterattack. We will give them land, but we will *not* give them blood. The life of every single one of our soldiers is precious to us. The Chinese have a long way to go to their objectives. We will let them go a lot of that way, and we will bide our time and husband our men and equipment. We will make them pay for what they take, but we will not—we must not—give them the chance to catch our forces in decisive battle. Are we understood on that?" he asked his staff. "When in doubt, we will run away and deny the enemy what he wants. When we have what we need to strike back, we will make him wish he never heard of Russia, but until then, let him chase his butterflies."

"What of the border guards?" Aliyev asked.

"They will hurt the Chinese, and then they will pull out. Comrades, I cannot emphasize this enough: the life of every single private soldier is important to us. Our men will fight harder if they know we care about them, and more than that, they *deserve* our care and solicitude. If we ask them to risk their lives for their country, their country *must* be loyal to them in return. If we achieve that, they will fight like tigers. The Russian soldier knows how to fight. We must all be worthy of him. You are all skilled professionals. This will be the most important test of our lives. We must all be equal to our task. Our nation depends on us. Andrey Petrovich, draw up some plans for me. We are authorized to call up reserves. Let us start doing that. We have hectares of equipment for them to use. Unlock the gates and let them start drawing gear, and God permit the officers assigned to those cadres are worthy of their men. Dismissed." Bondarenko stood and walked out, hoping his declamation had been enough for the task.

But wars were not won by speeches.

CHAPTER 45

Ghosts of Horrors Past

President Grushavoy arrived in Warsaw with the usual pomp and circumstance. A good actor, Ryan saw, watching the arrival on TV. You never would have guessed from his face that his country was looking at a major war. Grushavoy passed the same receiving line, doubtless composed of the same troops Ryan had eyeballed on his arrival, made a brief but flowery arrival speech citing the long and friendly history shared by Poland and Russia (conveniently leaving out the equally long and less-than-friendly parts), then got into a car for the city, accompanied, Ryan was glad to see, by Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko.

In the President's hand was a fax from Washington outlining what the Chinese had in the way of war assets to turn loose on their northern neighbors, along with an estimate from the Defense Intelligence Agency on what they called the "correlation of forces," which, Jack remembered, was a term of art used by the Soviet army of old. Its estimate of the situation was not especially favorable. Almost as bad, America didn't have much with which to help the Russians. The world's foremost navy was of little direct use in a land war. The United States Army had a division and a half of heavy troops in Europe, but that was thousands of miles from the expected scene of action. The Air Force had all the mobility it needed to project force anywhere on the globe, and that could give anyone a serious headache, but airplanes could not by themselves defeat an army. No, this would be largely a Russian show, and the Russian army, the fax said, was in terrible shape. The DIA had some good things to say about the senior Russian commander in theater, but a smart guy with a .22 against a dumb one with a machine gun was still at a disadvantage. So, he hoped the Chinese would be taken aback by this day's news, but CIA and State's estimate of that possibility was decidedly iffy.

"Scott?" Ryan asked his Secretary of State.

"Jack, I can't say. This ought to discourage them, but we can't be sure how tight a corner they think they are in. If they think they're trapped, they might still lash out."

"God damn it, Scott, is this the way nations do business?" Jack demanded. "Misperceptions? Fears? Outright stupidity?"

Adler shrugged. "It's a mistake to think a chief of government is any smarter than the rest of us, Jack. People make decisions the same way, regardless of how big and smart they are. It comes down to how they perceive the question, and how best they can serve their own needs, preserve their own personal well-being. Remember that we're not dealing with clergymen here. They don't have much in the way of consciences. Our notion of right and wrong doesn't play in that sort of mind. They translate what's good for their country into what's good for themselves, just like a king in the twelfth century, but in this case there isn't any bishop around to remind them that there may be a God looking down at them with a notebook." They'd gone out of their way, Adler didn't have to say, to eliminate a cardinal-archbishop just to get themselves into this mess.

"Sociopaths?" the President asked.

Secretary Adler shrugged. "I'm not a physician, just a diplomat. When you negotiate with people like this, you dangle what's good for their country—them—in front of their eyes and hope they reach for it. You play the game without entirely understanding them. These people do things neither one of us would ever do. And they run a major country, complete with nuclear weapons."

"Great," Ryan breathed. He stood and got his coat. "Well, let's go watch our new ally sign up, shall we?"

Ten minutes later, they were in the reception room of the Lazienski Palace. There was the usual off-camera time for the various chiefs of government to socialize over Perrier-and-a-twist before some nameless protocol official opened the double doors to the table, chairs, documents, and TV cameras.

The speech from President Grushavoy was predictable in every detail. The NATO alliance had been established to protect Western Europe against what his country had once been, and his former country had established its own mirror-image alliance called the Warsaw Pact right here in this very city. But the world had turned, and now Russia was pleased to join the rest of Europe in an alliance of friends whose only wish was peace and prosperity for all. Grushavoy was pleased indeed to be the first Russian in a very long time to be a real part of the European community, and promised to be a worthy friend and partner of his newly close neighbors. (The military ramifications of the North Atlantic Treaty were not mentioned at all.) And everyone present applauded. And Grushavoy pulled out an ancient fountain pen borrowed from the collection at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg to sign in the name of his country, and so bring membership in NATO up by one. And everyone applauded again as

the various chiefs of state and government walked over to shake their new ally's hand. And the shape of the world changed yet again.

"Ivan Emmetovich," Golovko said, as he approached the American President.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch," Ryan said in quiet reply.

"What will Beijing think of this?" the chief of the Russian intelligence service asked.

"With luck, we'll know in twenty-four hours," Ryan answered, knowing that this ceremony had gone out on CNN's live global feed, and positive that it was being watched in China.

"I expect the language will be profane."

"They've said nasty things about me lately," Jack assured him.

"That you should have carnal relations with your mother, no doubt."

"Actually, that I should have oral sex with her," the President confirmed distastefully. "I suppose everybody says things like that in private."

"In person, it can get a man shot."

Ryan grunted grim semi-amusement. "Bet your ass, Sergey."

"Will this work?" Golovko asked.

"I was going to ask you that. You're closer to them than we are."

"I do not know," the Russian said, with a tiny sip of his vodka glass. "And if it does not . . ."

"In that case, you have some new allies."

"And what of the precise wording of Articles Five and Six of the treaty?"

"Sergey, you may tell your president that the United States will regard an attack on any part of the territory of the Russian Federation as operative under the North Atlantic Treaty. On that, Sergey Nikolay'ch, you have the word and the commitment of the United States of America," SWORDSMAN told his Russian acquaintance.

"Jack, if I may address you in this way, I have told my president more than once that you are a man of honor, and a man of your word." The relief on his face was obvious.

"Sergey, from you those words are flattering. It's simple, really. It's your land, and a nation like ours cannot just stand by and watch a robbery of this scale taking place. It corrupts the foundations of international peace. It's our job to remake the world into a peaceful place. There's been enough war."

"I fear there will be another," Golovko said, with characteristic honesty.

"Then together your country and mine will make it the very last."

"Plato said, 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.' "

"So, are we to be bound by the words of a Greek who lived twenty-

five centuries ago? I prefer the words of a Jew who lived five centuries later. It's time, Sergey. It's fucking time," Ryan said forcefully.

"I hope you are right. You Americans, always so madly optimistic . . ."

"There's a reason for that."

"Oh? What would that be?" the Russian asked.

Jack fixed his eyes on his Russian colleague. "In my country, all things *are* possible. They will be in your country, too, if you just allow it. Embrace democracy, Sergey. Embrace freedom. Americans are not genetically different from the rest of the world. We're mongrels. We have the blood of every country on earth in our veins. The only thing different between us and the rest of the world is our Constitution. Just a set of rules. That's all, Sergey, but it has served us well. You've been studying us for how long?"

"Since I joined the KGB? Over thirty-five years."

"And what have you learned of America and how it works?" Ryan asked.

"Obviously not enough," Golovko answered honestly. "The spirit of your country has always puzzled me."

"Because it's too simple. You were looking for complexity. We allow people to pursue their dreams, and when the dreams succeed, we reward them. Others see that happen and chase after their own dreams."

"But the class issues?"

"What class issues? Sergey, not everybody goes to Harvard. I didn't, remember? My father was a cop. I was the first guy in my family to finish college. Look how I turned out. Sergey, we do not have class distinctions in America. You can be what you choose to be, if you are willing to work at it. You can succeed or you can fail. Luck helps," Ryan admitted, "but it comes down to work."

"All Americans have stars in their eyes," the Chairman of the SVR observed tersely.

"The better to see the heavens," Ryan responded.

"Perhaps. Just so they don't come crashing down on us."

So, what does this mean for us?" Xu Kun Piao asked, in an entirely neutral voice.

Zhang Han San and his premier had been watching the CNN feed in the latter's private office, complete with simultaneous translation through headphones now discarded. The senior Minister Without Portfolio made a dismissive wave of the hand.

"I've read the North Atlantic Treaty," he said. "It does not apply to us at all. Articles Five and Six limit its military application to events in

Europe and North America only—all right, it includes Turkey, and, as originally written, Algeria, which was part of France in 1949. For incidents at sea, it applies only to the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and then only north of the Tropic of Cancer. Otherwise, the NATO countries would have been compelled to join in the Korean War and Vietnam on the American side. Those things did not happen because the treaty did not apply outside its defined area. Nor does it apply to us. Treaty documents have discrete language and discrete application," he reminded his party chief. "They are not open-ended."

"I am concerned even so," Xu responded.

"Hostilities are not activities to be undertaken lightly," Zhang admitted. "But the real danger to us is economic collapse and the resulting social chaos. *That,* comrade, could bring down our entire social order, and *that* is something we cannot risk. But, when we succeed in seizing the oil and gold, we need not worry about such things. With our own abundant oil supply, we will not face an energy crisis, and with gold we can buy anything we require from the rest of the world. My friend, you must understand the West. They worship money, and they base their economies on oil. With those two things they must do business with us. Why did America intervene in the Kuwait affair? Oil. Why did Britain, France, and all the other nations join in? Oil. He who has oil is their friend. We shall have oil. It is that simple," Zhang concluded.

"You are very confident."

The minister nodded. "Yes, Xu, I am, because I have studied the West for many years. The way they think is actually very predictable. The purpose of this treaty might be to frighten us, I suppose, but it is at most a paper tiger. Even if they wished to provide military assistance to Russia, they do not have the ability to do so. And I do not believe that they have that wish. They cannot know our plans, because if they did, they would have pressed their advantage over us in terms of currency reserves at the trade talks, but they did not, did they?" Zhang asked.

"Is there no way they could know?"

"It is most unlikely. Comrade Tan has no hint of foreign espionage in our country at anything approaching a high level, and his sources in Washington and elsewhere have not caught a sniff of such information being available to them."

"Then why did they just broaden NATO?" Xu demanded.

"Is it not obvious? Russia is becoming rich with oil and gold, and the capitalist states wish to partake in the Russians' good fortune. That is what they said in the press, isn't it? It is fully in keeping with the capitalist ethos: mutual greed. Who can say, perhaps in five years they

will invite us into NATO for the same reason," Zhang observed with an ironic leer.

"You are confident that our plans have not been compromised?"

"As we come to a higher alert level and begin moving troops, we may expect some reaction from the Russians. But the rest of them? Bah! Tan and Marshal Luo are confident as well."

"Very well," Xu said, not entirely persuaded, but agreeing even so.

It was morning in Washington. Vice President Jackson was de facto boss of the crisis-management team, a place assured by his previous job, Director of Operations—J-3—for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. One nice thing about the White House was the good security, made better still by bringing people in via helicopter and car, and by the fact that the Joint Chiefs could teleconference in from their meeting room —"the Tank"—over a secure fiber-optic link.

"Well?" Jackson asked, looking at the large television on the wall of the Situation Room.

"Mancuso has his people at work in Hawaii. The Navy can give the Chinese a bad time, and the Air Force can move a lot of assets to Russia if need be," said Army General Mickey Moore, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "It's the land side of the equation that has me worried. We could theoretically move one heavy division—First Armored—from Germany east, along with some attachments, and maybe NATO will join in with some additional stuff, but the Russian army is in miserable shape at the moment, especially in the Far East, and there's also the additional problem that China has twelve CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles. We figure eight or more of them are aimed at us."

"Tell me more," TOMCAT ordered.

"They're Titan-II clones. Hell," Moore went on, "I just found out the background earlier today. They were designed by a CalTech-educated Air Force colonel of Chinese ethnicity who defected over there in the 1950s. Some bonehead trumped up some security charges against him —turned out they were all bullshit, would you believe—and he bugged out with a few suitcases' worth of technical information right out of JPL, where he was working at the time. So, the ChiComms built what were virtually copies of the old Martin-Marietta missile, and, like I said, we figure eight of them are aimed back at us."

"Warheads?"

"Five-megaton is our best guess. City-busters. The birds are bitches to maintain, just like ours were. We figure they're kept defueled most of the time, and they probably need two to four hours to bring them up to launch readiness. That's the good news. The bad news is that they upgraded the protection on the silos over the last decade,

probably as a result of what we did in the Iraq bombing campaign and also the B-2 strikes into Japan on their SS-19 clones. The current estimate is that the covers are fifteen feet of rebarred concrete plus three feet of armor-class steel. We don't have a conventional bomb that'll penetrate that."

"Why not?" Jackson demanded in considerable surprise.

"Because the GBU-29 we cobbled together to take out that deep bunker in Baghdad was designed to hang on the F-111. It's the wrong dimensions for the B-2's bomb bay, and the 111s are all at the boneyard in Arizona. So, we have the bombs, okay, but nothing to deliver them with. Best option to take those silos out would be air-launched cruise missiles with W-80 warheads, assuming the President will authorize a nuclear strike on them."

"What warning will we have that the Chinese have prepared the missiles for launch?"

"Not much," Moore admitted. "The new silo configuration pretty well prevents that. The silo covers are massive beasts. We figure they plan to blow them off with explosives, like we used to do."

"Do we have nuke-tipped cruise missiles?"

"No, the President has to authorize that. The birds and the warheads are co-located at Whiteman Air Force Base along with the B-2s. It would take a day or so to mate them up. I'd recommend that the President authorize that if this Chinese situation goes any further," Moore concluded.

And the best way to deliver nuclear-tipped cruise missiles—off Navy submarines or carrier-based strike aircraft—was impossible because the Navy had been completely stripped of its nuclear weapons inventory, and fixing that would not be especially easy, Jackson knew. The fallout of the nuclear explosion in Denver, which had brought the world to the brink of a full-scale nuclear exchange, had caused Russia and America to take a deep breath and then to eliminate all of their ballistic launchers. Both sides still had nuclear weapons, of course. For America they were mostly B-61 and -83 gravity bombs and W-80 thermonuclear warheads that could be affixed to cruise missiles. Both systems could be delivered with a high degree of confidence and accuracy, and stealth. The B-2A bomber was invisible to radar (and hard enough to spot visually unless you were right next to it) and the cruise missiles smoked in so low that they merged not merely with ground clutter but with highway traffic as well. But they lacked the speed of ballistic weapons. That was the trouble with the fearsome weapons, but that was also their advantage. Twenty-five minutes from turning the "enable-launch" key to impact—even less for the sea-launched sort, which usually flew shorter distances. But those were all gone, except for the ones kept for ABM tests, and those had been

modified to make them difficult to fit with warheads.

"Well, we just try to keep this one conventional. How many nuclear weapons could we deliver if we had to?"

"First strike, with the B-2s?" Moore asked. "Oh, eighty or so. If you figure two per target, enough to turn every major city in the PRC into a parking lot. It would kill upwards of a hundred million people," the Chairman added. He didn't have to say that he had no particular desire to do that. Even the most bloodthirsty soldiers were repelled by the idea of killing civilians in such numbers, and those who made four-star rank got there by being thoughtful, not psychotic.

"Well, if we let them know that, they ought to think hard about pissing us off that big," Jackson decided.

"They ought to be *that* rational, I suppose," Mickey Moore agreed. "Who wants to be the ruler of a parking lot?" But the problem with that, he didn't add, was that people who started wars of aggression were never completely rational.

How do we go about calling up reserves?" Bondarenko asked.

Theoretically, almost every Russian male citizen was liable to such a call-up, because most of them had served in their country's military at one time or another. It was a tradition that dated back to the czars, when the Russian army had been likened to a steamroller because of its enormous mass.

The practical problem today, however, was that the state didn't know where they all lived. The state required that the veterans of uniformed service tell the army when they moved from one residence to another, but the men in question, since until recently they'd needed the state's permission to move anywhere, assumed that the state knew where they were and rarely bothered, and the country's vast and cumbersome bureaucracy was too elephantine to follow up on such things. As a result, neither Russia, nor the Soviet Union before it, had done much to test its ability to call up trained soldiers who'd left their uniforms behind. There were whole reserve divisions that had the most modern of equipment, but it had never been moved after being rolled into their warehouses, and was attended only by cadres of active-duty mechanics who actually spent the time to maintain it, turning over the engines in accordance with written schedules which they followed as mindlessly as the orders that had been drafted and printed. And so, the general commanding the Far East Military Theater had access to thousands of tanks and guns for which he had no soldiers, along with mountains of shells and virtual lakes of diesel fuel.

The word "camouflage," meaning a trick to be played or a ruse, is French in origin. It really ought to be Russian, however, because

Russians were the world's experts at this military art. The storage sites for the real tanks that formed the backbone of Bondarenko's theoretical army were so skillfully hidden that only his own staff knew where they were. A good fraction of the sites had even evaded American spy satellites that had searched for years for the locations. Even the roads leading to the storage sites were painted with deceptive colors, or planted with false conifer trees. This was all one more lesson of World War II, when the Soviet Army had totally befuddled the Germans so often that one wondered why the Wehrmacht even bothered employing intelligence officers, they had been snookered so frequently.

"We're getting orders out now," Colonel Aliyev replied. "With luck, half of them ought to find people who've worn the uniform. We could do better if we made a public announcement."

"No," Bondarenko replied. "We can't let them know we're getting ready. What about the officer corps?"

"For the reserve formations? Well, we have an ample supply of lieutenants and captains, just no privates or NCOs for them to command. I suppose if we need to we can field a complete regiment or so of junior officers driving tanks," Aliyev observed dryly.

"Well, such a regiment ought to be fairly proficient," the general observed with what passed for light humor. "How fast to make the call-up happen?"

"The letters are already addressed and stamped. They should all be delivered in three days."

"Mail them at once. See to it yourself, Andrey," Bondarenko ordered.

"By your command, Comrade General." Then he paused. "What do you make of this NATO business?"

"If it brings us help, then I am for it. I'd love to have American aircraft at my command. I remember what they did to Iraq. There are a lot of bridges I'd like to see dropped into the rivers they span."

"And their land forces?"

"Do not underestimate them. I've seen how they train, and I've driven some of their equipment. It's excellent, and their men know how to make use of it. One company of American tanks, competently led and supported, can hold off a whole regiment. Remember what they did to the army of the United Islamic Republic. Two active-duty regiments and a brigade of territorials crushed two heavy corps as if it were a sand-table exercise. That's why I want to upgrade our training. Our men are as good as theirs, Andrey Petrovich, but their training is the best I have ever seen. Couple that to their equipment, and there you have their advantage."

"And their commanders?"

"Good, but no better than ours. Shit, they copy our doctrine time and again. I've challenged them on this face-to-face, and they freely admit that they admire our operational thinking. But they make better use of our doctrine than we do—because they train their men better."

"And they train better because they have more money to spend."

"There you have it. They don't have tank commanders painting rocks around the motor pool, as we do," Bondarenko noted sourly. He'd just begun to change that, but just-begun was a long way from mission-accomplished. "Get the call-up letters out, and remember, we must keep this quiet. Go. I have to talk to Moscow."

"Yes, Comrade General." The G-3 made his departure.

Well, ain't that something?" Major General Diggs commented after watching the TV show.

"Makes you wonder what NATO is for," Colonel Masterman agreed.

"Duke, I grew up expecting to see T-72 tanks rolling through the Fulda Gap like cockroaches on a Bronx apartment floor. Hell, now they're our friends?" He had to shake his head in disbelief. "I've met a few of their senior people, like that Bondarenko guy running the Far East Theater. He's pretty smart, serious professional. Visited me at Fort Irwin. Caught on real fast, really hit it off with Al Hamm and the Blackhorse. Our kind of soldier."

"Well, sir, I guess he really is now, eh?"

That's when the phone rang. Diggs lifted it. "General Diggs. Okay, put him through. . . . Morning, sir. . . . Just fine, thanks, and—yes? What's that? . . . This is serious, I presume. . . . Yes, sir. Yes, sir, we're ready as hell. Very well, sir. Bye." He set the phone back down. "Duke, good thing you're sitting down."

"What gives?"

"That was SACEUR. We got alert orders to be ready to entrain and move east."

"East where?" the divisional operations officer asked, surprised. An unscheduled exercise in Eastern Germany, maybe?

"Maybe as far as Russia, the eastern part. Siberia, maybe," Diggs added in a voice that didn't entirely believe what it said.

"What the hell?"

"NCA is concerned about a possible dust-up between the Russians and the Chinese. If it happens, we may have to go east to support Ivan."

"What the hell?" Masterman observed yet again.

"He's sending his J-2 down to brief us in on what he's got from Washington. Ought to be here in half an hour."

"Who else? Is this a NATO tasking?"

"He didn't say. Guess we'll have to wait and see. For the moment

just you and the staff, the ADC, and the brigade sixes are in on the brief."

"Yes, sir," Masterman said, there being little else he could say.

The Air Force sends a number of aircraft when the President travels. Among these were C-5B Galaxies. Known to the Navy as "the aluminum cloud" for its huge bulk, the transport is capable of carrying whole tanks in its cavernous interior. In this case, however, they carried VC-60 helicopters, larger than a tank in dimensions, but far lighter in weight.

The VH-60 is a version of the Sikorsky Blackhawk troop-carrier, somewhat cleaned up and appointed for VIP passengers. The pilot was Colonel Dan Malloy, a Marine with over five thousand hours of stick time in rotary-ring aircraft, whose radio call-sign was "Bear." Cathy Ryan knew him well. He usually flew her to Johns Hopkins in the morning in a twin to this aircraft. There was a co-pilot, a lieutenant who looked impossibly young to be a professional aviator, and a crew chief, a Marine staff sergeant E-6 who saw to it that everyone was properly strapped in, something that Cathy did better than Jack, who was not used to the different restraints in this aircraft.

Aside from that the Blackhawk flew superbly, not at all like the earthquake-while-sitting-on-a-chandelier sensation usually associated with such contrivances. The flight took almost an hour, with the President listening in on the headset/ear protectors. Overhead, all aerial traffic was closed down, even commercial flights in and out of every commercial airport to which they came close. The Polish government was concerned with his safety.

"There it is," Malloy said over the intercom. "Eleven o'clock."

The aircraft banked left to give everyone a good look out the polycarbonate windows. Ryan felt a sudden sense of enforced sobriety come over him. There was a rudimentary railroad station building with two tracks, and another spur that ran off through the arch in yet another building. There were a few other structures, but mainly just concrete pads to show where there had been a large number of others, and Ryan's mind could see them from the black-and-white movies shot from aircraft, probably Russian ones, in World War II. They'd been oddly warehouse-like buildings, he remembered. But the wares stored in them had been human beings, though the people who'd built this place hadn't seen it that way; they had regarded them as vermin, insects or rats, something to be eliminated as efficiently and coldly as possible.

That's when the chill hit. It was not a warm morning, the temperature in the upper fifties or so, Jack thought, but his skin felt colder than that number indicated. The chopper landed softly, and the

sergeant got the door open and the President stepped out onto the landing pad that had recently been laid for just this purpose. An official of the Polish government came up and shook his hand, introducing himself, but Ryan missed it all, suddenly a tourist in Hell itself, or so it felt. The official who would be serving as guide led them to a car for the short drive closer to the facility. Jack slid in beside his wife.

"Jack . . ." she whispered.

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "Yeah, babe, I know." And he spoke not another word, not even hearing the well-prepared commentary the Pole was giving him.

"Arbeit Macht Frei" the wrought-iron arch read. *Work makes free* was the literal meaning, perhaps the most callously cynical motto ever crafted by the twisted minds of men calling themselves civilized. Finally, the car stopped, and they got out into the air again, and again the guide led them from place to place, telling them things they didn't hear but rather felt, because the very air seemed heavy with evil. The grass was wonderfully green, almost like a golf course from the spring rain . . . from the nutrients in the soil? Jack wondered. Lots of those. More than two million people had met death in this place. Two million. Maybe three. After a while, counting lost its meaning, and it became just a number, a figure on a ledger, written in by some accountant or other who'd long since stopped considering what the digits represented.

He could see it in his mind, the human shapes, the bodies, the heads, but thankfully not the faces of the dead. He presently found himself walking along what the German guards had called *Himmel Straβe,* the Road to Heaven. But why had they called it that? Was it pure cynicism, or did they really believe there was a God looking down on what they did, and if so, what had they thought He thought of this place and their activity? What kind of men could they have been? Women and children had been slaughtered immediately upon arrival here because they had little value as workers in the industrial facilities that I. G. Farben had built, so as to take the last measure of utility from the people sent here to die—to make a little profit from their last months. Not just Jews, of course; the Polish aristocracy and the Polish priesthood had been killed here. Gypsies. Homosexuals. Jehovah's Witnesses. Others deemed undesirable by Hitler's government. Just insects to be eliminated with Zyklon-B gas, a derivative of pesticide research by the German chemical industries.

Ryan had not expected this to be a pleasant side trip. What he'd anticipated was an educational experience, like visiting the battlefield at Antietam, for example.

But this hadn't been a battlefield, and it didn't feel at all like one.

What must it have been like for the men who'd liberated this place in 1945? Jack wondered. Even hardened soldiers, men who'd faced death every day for years, must have been taken aback by what they'd found here. For all its horrors, the battlefield remained a place of honor, where men tested men in the most fundamental way—it was cruel and final, of course, but there was the purity of fighting men contesting with other fighting men, using weapons, but—but that was rubbish, Jack thought. There was little nobility to be found in war . . . and far less in this place. On a battlefield, for whatever purpose and with whatever means, men fought against *men*, not women and kids. There was some honor to be had in the former, but not . . . this. This was crime on a vast scale, and as evil as war was, at the human level it stopped short of what men called crime, the deliberate infliction of harm upon the innocent. How could men do such a thing? Germany was today, as it had been then, a Christian country, the same nation that had brought forth Martin Luther, Beethoven, and Thomas Mann. Did it all come down to their leader? Adolf Hitler, a nebbish of a man, born to a middle-grade civil servant, a failure at everything he'd tried . . . except demagoguery. He'd been a fucking genius at that . . .

. . . But why had Hitler hated anyone so much as to harness the industrial might of his nation not for conquest, which was bad enough, but for the base purpose of cold-blooded extermination? That, Jack knew, was one of history's most troublesome mysteries. Some said Hitler had hated the Jews because he'd seen one on the streets of Vienna and simply disliked him. Another expert in the field, a Jew himself, had posed the proposition that a Jewish prostitute had given the failed Austrian painter gonorrhea, but there was no documentary evidence upon which to base that. Yet another school of thought was more cynical still, saying that Hitler hadn't really cared about the Jews one way or another, but needed an enemy for people to hate so that he could become leader of Germany, and had merely seized upon the Jews as a target of opportunity, just something against which to mobilize his nation. Ryan found this alternative unlikely, but the most offensive of all. For whatever reason, he'd taken the power his country had given him and turned it to this purpose. In doing so, Hitler had cursed his name for all time to come, but that was no consolation to the people whose remains fertilized the grass. Ryan's wife's boss at Johns Hopkins was a Jewish doc named Bernie Katz, a friend of many years. How many such men had died here? How many potential Jonas Salks? Maybe an Einstein or two? Or poets, or actors, or just ordinary workers who would have raised ordinary kids . . .

. . . and when Jack had sworn the oath of office mandated by the United States Constitution, he'd really sworn to protect such people as those, and maybe such people as these, too. As a man, as an American,

and as President of the United States, did he not have a duty to prevent such things from ever happening again? He actually believed that the use of armed force could only be justified to protect American lives and vital American security interests. But was that all America was? What about the principles upon which his nation was founded? Did America only apply them to specific, limited places and goals? What about the rest of the world? Were these not the graves of real people?

John Patrick Ryan stood and looked around, his face as empty right now as his soul, trying to understand what had taken place here, and what he could—what he *had to* learn from this. He had immense power at his fingertips every day he lived in the White House. How to use it? How to apply it? What to fight against? More important, what to fight *for?*

"Jack," Cathy said quietly, touching his hand.

"Yeah, I've seen enough, too. Let's get the hell away from this place." He turned to the Polish guide and thanked him for words he'd scarcely heard and started walking back to where the car was. Once more they passed under the wrought-iron arch of a lie, doing what two or three million people had never done.

If there were such a thing as ghosts, they'd spoken to him without words, but done it in one voice: *Never again*. And silently, Ryan agreed. Not while he lived. Not while America lived.

CHAPTER 46

Journey Home

They waited for SORGE, and rarely had anyone waited more expectantly even for the arrival of a firstborn child. There was a little drama to it, too, because SORGE didn't deliver every day, and they could not always see a pattern when it appeared and when it didn't. Ed and Mary Pat Foley both awoke early that morning, and lay in bed for over an hour with nothing to do, then finally arose to drink their breakfast coffee and read the papers in the kitchen of their middle-class home in suburban Virginia. The kids went off to school, and then the parents finished dressing and walked out to their "company" car, complete with driver and escort vehicle. The odd part was that their car was guarded but their house was not, and so a terrorist only had to be smart enough to attack the house, which was not all that hard. The *Early Bird* was waiting for them in the car, but it had little attraction for either of them this morning. The comic strips in the *Post* had been more interesting, especially "Non Sequitur," their favorite morning chuckle, and the sports pages.

"What do you think?" Mary Pat asked Ed. That managed to surprise him, since his wife didn't often ask his opinion of a field-operations question.

He shrugged as they passed a Dunkin' Donuts box. "Coin toss, Mary."

"I suppose. I sure hope it comes up heads this time."

"Jack's going to ask us in . . . an hour and a half, I suppose."

"Something like that," the DDO agreed in a breathy voice.

"The NATO thing ought to work, ought to make them think things over," the DCI thought aloud.

"Don't bet the ranch on it, honey bunny," Mary Pat warned.

"I know." Pause. "When does Jack get on the airplane to come home?"

She checked her watch. "About two hours."

"We should know by then."

"Yeah," she agreed.

Ten minutes later, informed of the shape of the world en route by National Public Radio's *Morning Edition,* they arrived at Langley, again

parking in the underground garage, and again taking the elevator up to the seventh floor, where, again, they split up, going to their separate offices. In this, Ed surprised his wife. She'd expected him to hover over her shoulder as she flipped on her office computer, looking for another brownie recipe, as she called it. This happened at seven-fifty-four.

"You've got mail," the electronic voice announced as she accessed her special Internet account. Her hand wasn't quite shaking when she moved the mouse to click on the proper icon, but nearly so. The letter came up, went through the descrambling process, and came up as clear-text she couldn't read. As always, MP saved the document to her hard drive, confirmed that it was saved, then printed up a hard copy, and finally deleted the letter from her electronic in-box, completely erasing it off the Internet. Then she lifted her phone.

"Please have Dr. Sears come up right away," she told her secretary.

Joshua Sears had also come in early this morning, and was sitting at his desk reading the *New York Times* financial page when the call came. He was in the elevator in under a minute, and then in the office of the Deputy Director (Operations).

"Here," Mary Pat said, handing over the six pages of ideographs. "Take a seat."

Sears sat in a comfortable chair and started his translation. He could see that the DDO was a little exercised about this, and his initial diagnosis came as he turned to page two.

"This isn't good news," he said, without looking up. "Looks like Zhang is guiding Premier Xu in the direction he wants. Fang is uneasy about it, but he's going along, too. Marshal Luo is fully on the team. I guess that's to be expected. Luo's always been a hardball guy," Sears commented. "Talk here's about operational security, concern that we might know what they're up to—but they think they're secure," Sears assured the DDO.

As many times as she'd heard that sort of thing, it never failed to give her a severe case of the chills, hearing the enemy (to Mary Pat nearly everyone was an enemy) discuss the very possibility that she'd devoted her entire professional life to realizing. And almost always you heard their voices saying that, no, there wasn't anyone like her out there hearing them. She'd never really left her post in Moscow, when she'd been control officer for Agent CARDINAL. He'd been old enough to have been her grandfather, but she'd thought of him as her own newborn, as she gave him taskings, and collected his take, forwarding it back to Langley, always worried for his safety. She was out of that game now, but it came down to the same thing. Somewhere out there was a foreign national sending America information of vital interest. She knew the person's name, but not her

face, not her motivation, just that she liked to share her bed with one of her officers, and she kept the official diary for this Minister Fang, and her computer sent it out on the Web, on a path that ended at her seventh-floor desk.

"Summary?" she asked Dr. Sears.

"They're still on the warpath," the analyst replied. "Maybe they'll turn off it at some later date, but there is no such indication here."

"If we warn them off . . . ?"

Sears shrugged. "No telling. Their real concern is internal political dissension and possible collapse. This economic crisis has them worried about political ruin for them all, and that's all they're worried about."

"Wars are begun by frightened men," the DDO observed.

"That's what history tells us," Sears agreed. "And it's happening again, right before our eyes."

"Shit," Mrs. Foley observed. "Okay, print it up and get it back to me, fast as you can."

"Yes, ma'am. Half hour. You want me to show this to George Weaver, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded. The academic had been going over the SORGE data for several days, taking his time to formulate his part of the SNIE slowly and carefully, which was the way he worked. "You mind working with him?"

"Not really. He knows their heads pretty well, maybe a little better than I do—he has a master's in psychology from Yale. Just he's a little slow formulating his conclusions."

"Tell him I want something I can use by the end of the day."

"Will do," Sears promised, rising for the door. Mary Pat followed him out, but took a different turn.

"Yeah?" Ed Foley said, when she came into his office.

"You'll have the write-up in half an hour or so. Short version: They are not impressed by the NATO play."

"Oh, shit," the DCI observed at once.

"Yeah," his wife agreed. "Better find out how quick we can get the information to Jack."

"Okay." The DCI lifted his secure phone and punched the speed-dial button for the White House.

There was one last semi-official meeting at the American Embassy before departure, and again it was Golovko speaking for his President, who was away schmoozing with the British Prime Minister.

"What did you make of Auschwitz?" the Russian asked.

"It ain't Disney World," Jack replied, taking a sip of coffee. "Have you been there?"

"My uncle Sasha was part of the force that liberated the camp," Sergey replied. "He was a tank commander—a colonel—in the Great Motherland War."

"Did you talk to him about it?"

"When I was a boy. Sasha—my mother's brother, he was—was a true soldier, a hard man with hard rules for life, and a committed communist. That must have shaken him, though," Golovko went on. "He didn't really talk about what effect it had on him. Just that it was ugly, and proof to him of the correctness of his cause. He said he had an especially good war after that—he got to kill more Germans."

"And what about the things—"

"Stalin did? We never spoke of that in my family. My father was NKVD, as you know. He thought that whatever the state did was correct. Not unlike what the *fascisti* thought at Auschwitz, I admit, but he would not have seen it that way. Those were different times, Ivan Emmetovich. Harder times. Your father served in the war as well, as I recall."

"Paratrooper, One-Oh-First. He never talked much about it, just the funny things that happened. He said the night drop into Normandy was pretty scary, but that's all—he never said what it was like running around in the dark with people shooting at him."

"It cannot be very enjoyable, to be a soldier in combat."

"I don't suppose it is. Sending people out to do it isn't fun, either. God damn it, Sergey! I'm supposed to protect people, not risk their lives."

"So, you are not like Hitler. And not like Stalin," the Russian added graciously. "And neither is Eduard Petrovich. It is a gentler world we live in, gentler than that of our fathers and our uncles. But not gentle enough yet. When will you know how our Chinese friends reacted to yesterday's events?"

"Soon, I hope, but we're not exactly sure. You know how that works."

"*Da.*" You depended on the reports of your agents, but you were never sure when they would come in, and in the expectation came frustration. Sometimes you wanted to wring their necks, but that was both foolish and morally wrong, as they both knew.

"Any public reaction?" Ryan asked. The Russians would have seen it sooner than his own people.

"A nonreaction, Mr. President. No public comment at all. Not unexpected, but somewhat disappointing."

"If they move, can you stop them?"

"President Grushavoy has asked that very question of Stavka, his military chiefs, but they have not yet answered substantively. We are concerned with operational security. We do not wish the PRC to know

that we know anything."

"That can work against you," Ryan warned.

"I said that very thing this morning, but soldiers have their own ways, don't they? We are calling up some reserves, and warning orders have gone out to some mechanized troops. The cupboard, however, as you Americans say, is somewhat bare at the moment."

"What have you done about the people who tried to kill you?" Ryan asked, changing the subject.

"The main one is under constant observation at the moment. If he tries something else, we will then speak to him," Golovko promised. "The connection, again, is Chinese, as you know."

"I've heard."

"Your FBI agent in Moscow, that Reilly fellow, is very talented. We could have used him in Second Directorate."

"Yeah, Dan Murray thinks a lot of him."

"If this Chinese matter goes further, we need to set up a liaison group between your military and ours."

"Work through SACEUR," Ryan told him. He'd already thought that one through. "He has instructions to cooperate with your people."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I will pass that along. So, your family, it is well?" You couldn't have this sort of meeting without irrelevant pleasantries.

"My oldest, Sally, is dating. That's hard on Daddy," Ryan admitted.

"Yes." Golovko allowed himself a smile. "You live in fear that she will come upon such a boy as you were, yes?"

"Well, the Secret Service helps keep the little bastards under control."

"There is much to be said for men with guns, yes," the Russian agreed with some amusement, to lighten the moment.

"Yeah, but I think daughters are God's punishment on us for being men." That observation earned Ryan a laugh.

"Just so, Ivan Emmetovich, just so." And Sergey paused again. Back to business: "It is a hard time for both of us, is it not?"

"Yeah, it is that."

"Perhaps the Chinese will see us standing together and reconsider their greed. Together our fathers' generation killed Hitler, after all. Who can stand against the two of us?"

"Sergey, wars are not rational acts. They are not begun by rational men. They're begun by people who don't care a ratfuck about the people they rule, who're willing to get their fellow men killed for their own narrow purposes. This morning I saw such a place. It was Satan's amusement park, I suppose, but not a place for a man like me. I came away angry. I wouldn't mind having a chance to see Hitler, long as I have a gun in my hand when I do." It was a foolish thing to say, but

Golovko understood.

"With luck, together we will prevent this Chinese adventure."

"And if not?"

"Then together we will defeat them, my friend. And perhaps that will be the last war of all."

"I wouldn't bet on it," the President replied. "I've had that thought before myself, but I suppose it's a worthy goal."

"When you find out what the Chinese say . . . ?"

"We'll get the word to you."

Golovko rose. "Thank you. I will convey that to my President."

Ryan walked the Russian to the door, then headed off to the ambassador's office.

"This just came in." Ambassador Lewendowski handed over the fax. "Is this as bad as it looks?" The fax was headed EYES-ONLY PRESIDENT, but it had come into *his* embassy.

Ryan took the pages and started reading. "Probably. If the Russians need help via NATO, will the Poles throw in?"

"I don't know. I can ask."

The President shook his head. "Too soon for that."

"Did we bring the Russians into NATO with the knowledge of this?" The question showed concern that stopped short of outrage at the violation of diplomatic etiquette.

Ryan looked up. "What do you think?" He paused. "I need your secure phone."

Forty minutes later, Jack and Cathy Ryan walked up the steps into their airplane for the ride home. SURGEON was not surprised to see her husband disappear into the aircraft's upper communications level, along with the Secretary of State. She suspected that her husband might have stolen a smoke or two up there, but she was asleep by the time he came back down.

For his part, Ryan wished he had, but couldn't find a smoker up there. The two who indulged had left their smokes in their luggage to avoid the temptation to violate USAF regulations. The President had a single drink and got into his seat, rocking it back for a nap, during which he found himself dreaming of Auschwitz, mixing it up with scenes remembered from *Schindler's List.* He awoke over Iceland, sweating, to see his wife's angelic sleeping face, and to remind himself that, bad as the world was, it wasn't quite that bad anymore. And his job was to keep it that way.

Okay, is there any way to make them back off?" Robby Jackson asked the people assembled in the White House Situation Room.

Professor Weaver struck him as just one more academic, long of wind and short of conclusion. Jackson listened anyway. This guy knew

more about the way the Chinese thought. He must. His explanation was about as incomprehensible as the thought processes he was attempting to make clear.

"Professor," Jackson said finally, "that's all well and good, but what the hell does something that happened nine centuries ago tell us about today? These are Maoists, not royalists."

"Ideology is usually just an excuse for behavior, Mr. Vice President, not a reason for it. Their motivations are the same today as they would have been under the Chin Dynasty, and they fear exactly the same thing: the revolt of the peasantry if the economy goes completely bad," Weaver explained to this pilot, a technician, he thought, and decidedly not an intellectual. At least the President had some credentials as a historian, though they weren't impressive to the tenured Ivy League department chairman.

"Back to the real question here: What can we do to make them back off, short of war?"

"Telling them that we know of their plans might give them pause, but they will make their decision on the overall correlation of forces, which they evidently believe to be fully in their favor, judging from what I've been reading from this SORGE fellow."

"So, they won't back off?" the VP asked.

"I cannot guarantee that," Weaver answered.

"And blowing our source gets somebody killed," Mary Pat Foley reminded the assembly.

"Which is just one life against many," Weaver pointed out.

Remarkably, the DDO didn't leap across the table to rip his academic face off. She respected Weaver as an area specialist/consultant. But fundamentally he was one more ivory-tower theoretician who didn't consider the human lives that rode on decisions like that one. Real people had their lives end, and that was a big deal to those real people, even if it wasn't to this professor in his comfortable office in Providence, Rhode Island.

"It also cancels out a vital source of information in the event that they go forward anyway—which could adversely affect our ability to deal with the real-world military threat, by the way."

"There is that, I suppose," Weaver conceded diffidently.

"Can the Russians stop them?" Jackson asked. General Moore took the question.

"It's six-five and pick 'em," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs answered. "The Chinese have a lot of combat power to unleash. The Russians have a lot of room to absorb it, but not the combat power to repel it per se. If I had to bet, I'd put my money on the PRC—unless we come in. Our air-power could alter the equation somewhat, and if NATO comes in with ground forces, the odds change. It depends on

what reinforcements we and the Russians can get into the theater."

"Logistics?"

"A real problem," Mickey Moore conceded. "It all comes down one railway line. It's double-tracked and electrified, but that's the only good news about it."

"Does anybody know how to run an operation like that down a railroad? Hell, we haven't done it since the Civil War," Jackson thought aloud.

"Just have to wait and see, sir, if it comes to that. The Russians have doubtless thought it over many times. We'll depend on them for that."

"Great," the Vice President muttered. A lifelong USN sailor, he didn't like depending on anything except people who spoke American and wore Navy Blue.

"If the variables were fully in our favor, the Chinese wouldn't be thinking about this operation as seriously as they evidently are." Which was about as obvious as the value of a double play with the bases loaded and one out in the bottom of the ninth.

"The problem," George Winston told them, "is that the prize is just too damned inviting. It's like the bank doors have been left open over a three-day weekend, and the local cops are on strike."

"Jack keeps saying that a war of aggression is just an armed robbery writ large," Jackson told them.

"That's not far off," SecTreas agreed. Professor Weaver thought the comparison overly simplistic, but what else could you expect of people like these?

"We can warn them off when we start seeing preparations on our overheads," Ed Foley proposed. "Mickey, when will we start seeing that?"

"Conceivably, two days. Figure a week for them to get ramped up. Their forces are pretty well in theater already, and it's just a matter of getting them postured—putting them all near their jump-off points. Then doing the final approach march will happen, oh, thirty-six hours before they start pulling the strings on their field guns."

"And Ivan can't stop them?"

"At the border? Not a chance," the general answered, with an emphatic shake of the head. "They'll have to play for time, trading land for time. The Chinese have a hell of a long trip to get the oil. That's their weakness, a huge flank to protect and a god-awful vulnerable logistics train. I'd look out for an airborne assault on either the gold or the oil fields. They don't have much in the way of airborne troops or airlift capacity, but you have to figure they'll try it anyway. They're both soft targets."

"What can we send in?"

"First thing, a lot of air assets, fighters, fighter-bombers, and every

aerial tanker we can scrape up. We may not be able to establish air superiority, but we can quickly deny it to them, make it a fifty-fifty proposition almost at once, and then start rolling their air force back. Again it's a question of numbers, Robby, and a question of how well their flyers are trained. Probably better than the Russians, just because they have more hours on the stick, but technically the Russians actually have generally better aircraft, and probably better doctrine—except they haven't had the chance to practice it."

Robby Jackson wanted to grumble that the situation had too many unknowns, but if there hadn't been, as Mickey Moore had just told him, the Chinese wouldn't be leaning on their northern border. Muggers went after little old ladies with their Social Security money, not cops who had just cashed their paychecks on the way home from work. There was much to be said for carrying a gun on the street, and as irrational as street crime or war-starting might be, those who did it were *somewhat* reflective in their choices.

Scott Adler hadn't slept at all on the flight, as he'd played over and over in his mind the question of how to stop a war from starting. That was the primary mission of a diplomat, wasn't it? Mainly he considered his shortcomings. As the prime foreign-affairs officer of his country, he was supposed to know—he was *paid* to know—what to say to people to deflect them from irrational actions. At base that could mean telling them, *Do this and the full power and fury of America will descend on you and ruin your whole day.* Better to cajole them into being reasonable, because in reasonableness was their best salvation as a nation in the global village. But the truth was that the Chinese thought in ways that he could not replicate within his own mind, and so he wasn't sure what to say to make them see the light. The worst part of all was that he'd met this Zhang guy in addition to Foreign Minister Shen, and all he knew for sure was that they did not look upon reality as he did. They saw blue where he saw green, and he couldn't understand their strange version of green well enough to explain it into blue. A small voice chided him for possible racism, but this situation was too far gone for political correctness. He had a war to stop, and he didn't know how. He ended up staring at the bulkhead in front of his comfortable glove-leather seat and wishing it was a movie screen. He felt like seeing a movie now, something to get his mind off the hamster wheel that just kept turning and turning. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see his President, who motioned him to the circular staircase to the upper level. Again they chased two Air Force communicators off their seats.

"Thinking over the newest SORGE?"

"Yep." EAGLE nodded.

"Any ideas?"

The head moved in a different plane now. "No. Sorry, Jack, but it just isn't there. Maybe you need a new SecState."

Ryan grunted. "No, just different enemies. The only thing I see is to tell them we know what they're up to, and that they'd better stop."

"And when they tell us to shove it up our collective ass, then what?"

"You know what we need right now?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Oh, yeah, a couple hundred Minuteman or Trident missiles would work just fine to show them the light. Unfortunately . . ."

"Unfortunately, we did away with them to make the world a safer place. Oops," Ryan concluded.

"Well, we have the bombs and the aircraft to deliver them, and—"

"No!" Ryan hissed. "No, God damn it, I will not initiate a nuclear war in order to stop a conventional one. How many people do you want me to kill?"

"Easy, Jack. It's my job to present options, remember? Not to advocate them—not that one anyway." He paused. "What did you think of Auschwitz?"

"It's the stuff of nightmares—wait a minute, your parents, right?"

"My father—Belzec in his case, and he lucked out and survived."

"Does he talk about it?"

"Never. Not a single word, even to his rabbi. Maybe a pshrink. He went to one for a few years, but I never knew what for."

"I can't let anything like that happen again. To stop that—yeah, to stop that," Ryan speculated aloud, "yeah, I might drop a B-83."

"You know the lingo?"

"A little. I got briefed in a long time ago, the names for the hardware stuck in my mind. Funny thing, I've never had nightmares about *that.* Well, I've never read into the SIOP—Single Integrated Operation Plan, the cookbook for ending the world. I think I'd eat a gun before I did that."

"A whole lot of presidents had to think those things over," Adler pointed out.

"Before my time, Scott, and they never expected them to happen anyway. They all figured they'd smart their way through it. 'Til Bob Fowler came along and damned near stumbled into calling in the codes. That was some wild Sunday night," Ryan said, remembering.

"Yeah, I know the story. You kept your head screwed on straight. Not many others did."

"Yeah. And look where it got me," POTUS observed with a grim chuckle. He looked out a window. They were over land now, probably Labrador, lots of green and lakes, and few straight lines to show the hand of man on the land. "What do we do, Scott?"

"We try to warn them off. They'll do things we can see with

satellites, and then we can call them on it. Our last play will be to tell them that Russia is an American ally now, and messing with Ivan means messing with Uncle Sam. If that doesn't stop them, nothing else will."

"Offer some danegeld to buy them off?" the President wondered.

"A waste of time. I don't think it would work, but I'd be for-damned sure they'd see it as a sign of weakness and be encouraged by it. No, they respect strength, and we have to show them that. Then they'll react one way or another."

"They're going to go," Jack thought.

"Coin toss. Hope it comes up tails, buddy."

"Yeah." Ryan checked his watch. "Early morning in Beijing."

"They'll be waking up and heading in for work," Adler agreed. "What exactly can you tell me about this SORGE source?"

"Mary Pat hasn't told me much, probably best that way. One of the things I learned at Langley. You can know too much sometimes. Better not to know their faces, and especially their names."

"In case something bad happens?"

"When it does, it's pretty bad. Don't want to think what these people would do. Their version of the Miranda warning is, 'You can scream all you want. We don't mind.' "

"Funny," SecState thought.

"Actually it's not all that effective as an interrogation technique. They end up telling you exactly what you want to hear, and you end up dictating it to them instead of getting what they really know."

"What about the appeals process?" Scott asked, with a yawn. Finally, belatedly, he was getting sleepy.

"In China? That's when the shooter asks if you prefer the left ear or the right ear." Ryan stopped himself. Why was he making bad jokes on *this* subject?

The busy place in the Washington, D.C., area was the National Reconnaissance Office. A joint venture of CIA and the Pentagon, NRO ran the reconsats, the big camera birds circling the earth at low-medium altitude, looking down with their hugely expensive cameras that rivaled the precision and expense of the Hubble space telescope. There were three photo-birds up, circling the earth every two hours or so, and passing over the same spot twice a day each. There was also a radar-reconnaissance satellite that had much poorer resolution than the Lockheed- and TRWMADE KH-11s, but which could see through clouds. This was important at the moment, because a cold front was tracing across the Chinese-Siberian border, and the clouds at its forward edge blanked out all visual light, much to the frustration of the NRO technicians and scientists whose multibillion-dollar satellites

were useful only for weather forecasting at the moment. Cloudy with scattered showers, and chilly, temperature in the middle forties, dropping to just below freezing at night.

The intelligence analysts, therefore, closely examined the "take" from the Lacrosse radar-intelligence bird because that was the only game in town at the moment.

"The clouds go all the way down to six thousand feet or so. Even a Blackbird wouldn't be much use at the moment," one of the photo-interpreters observed. "Okay, what do we have here . . . ? Looks like a higher level of railroad activity, looks like flatcars mostly. Something on them, but too much clutter to pick out the shapes."

"What do they move on flatcars?" a naval officer asked.

"Tracked vehicles," an Army major answered, "and heavy guns."

"Can we confirm that supposition from this data?" the Navy guy asked.

"No," the civilian answered. "But . . . there, that's the yard. We see six long trains sitting still in the yard. Okay, where's the . . ." He accessed his desktop computer and called up some visual imagery. "Here we go. See these ramps? They're designed to offload rolling equipment from the trains." He turned back to the Lacrosse "take." "Yeah, these here look like tank shapes coming off the ramps, and forming up right here in the assembly areas, and that's the shape of an armored regiment. That's three hundred twenty-two main battle tanks, and about a buck and a quarter of APCs, and so . . . yeah, I'd estimate that this is a full armored division detraining. Here's the truck park . . . and this grouping here, I'm not sure. Looks bulky . . . square or rectangular shapes. Hmm," the analyst concluded. He turned back to his own desktop and queried some file images. "You know what this looks like?"

"You going to tell us?"

"Looks like a five-ton truck with a section of ribbon bridge on it. The Chinese copied the Russian bridge design—hell, everybody did. It's a beautiful little design Ivan cobbled together. Anyway, on radar, it looks like this and"—he turned back to the recent satellite take —"that's pretty much what these look like, isn't it? I'll call that eighty percent likelihood. So, this group here I'll call two engineer regiments accompanying this tank division."

"Is that a lot of engineers to back up a single division?" the naval officer asked.

"Sure as hell," the Army major confirmed.

"I'd say so," the photo-interpreter agreed. "The normal TO and E is one battalion per division. So, this is a corps or army vanguard forming up, and I'd have to say they plan to cross some rivers, guys."

"Go on," the senior civilian told him.

"They're postured to head north."

"Okay," the Army officer said. "Have you ever seen this before?"

"Two years ago, they were running an exercise, but that was one engineer regiment, not two, and they left this yard and headed southeast. That one was a pretty big deal. We got a lot of visual overheads. They were simulating an invasion or at least a major assault. That one used a full Group A army, with an armored division and two mechanized divisions as the assault force, and the other mech division simulating a dispersed defense force. The attacking team won that one."

"How different from the way the Russians are deployed on their border?" This was the Navy intelligence officer.

"Thicker—I mean, for the exercise the Chinese defenders were thicker on the ground than the Russians are today."

"And the attacking force won?"

"Correct."

"How realistic was the exercise?" the major asked.

"It wasn't Fort Irwin, but it was as honest as they can run one, and probably accurate. The attackers had the usual advantages in numbers and initiative. They punched through and started maneuvering in the defender's trains area, had themselves a good old time."

The naval officer looked at his colleague in green. "Just what they'd be thinking if they wanted to head north."

"Concur."

"Better call this one in, Norm."

"Yep." And both uniformed officers headed to the phones.

"When's the weather clear?" the lingering civilian asked the tech.

"Call it thirty-six hours. It'll start to clear tomorrow night, and we have the taskings already programmed in." He didn't have to say that the nighttime capabilities on the KH-11 satellites weren't all that different from in the daylight—you just didn't get much in the way of color.

CHAPTER 47

Outlooks and All-Nighters

Westbound jet lag, or travel-shock, as President Ryan preferred to call it, is always easier than eastbound's, and he'd gotten sleep on the airplane. Jack and Cathy walked off Air Force One and to the waiting helicopter, which got them to the landing pad on the South Lawn in the usual ten minutes. This time FLOTUS walked directly into the White House while POTUS walked left toward the West Wing, but to the Situation Room rather than the Oval Office. Vice President Jackson was waiting for him there, along with the usual suspects.

"Hey, Robby."

"How was the flight, Jack?"

"Long." Ryan stretched to get his muscles back under control. "Okay, what's happening?"

"Ain't good, buddy. We have Chinese mechanized troops heading for the Russian border. Here's what we got in from NRO." Jackson personally spread out the printouts from the photo-intelligence troops. "We got mechanized forces here, here, and here, and these are engineers with bridging equipment."

"How long before they're ready?" Ryan asked.

"Potentially as little as three days," Mickey Moore answered. "More likely five to seven."

"What are we doing?"

"We have a lot of warning orders out, but nobody's moving yet."

"Do they know we're onto this?" the President asked next.

"Probably not, but they must know we're keeping an eye on things, and they must know our reconnaissance capabilities. It's been in the open media for twenty-some years," Moore answered.

"Nothing from them to us over diplomatic channels?"

"Bupkis," Ed Foley said.

"Don't tell me they don't care. They have to care."

"Maybe they care, Jack," the DCI responded. "But they're not losing as much sleep over it as they are over internal political problems."

"Anything new from SORGE?"

Foley shook his head. "Not since this morning."

"Okay, who's our senior diplomat in Beijing?"

"The DCM at the embassy, but he's actually fairly junior, new in the post," the DCI said.

"Okay, well, the note we're going to send won't be," Ryan said. "What time is it over there?"

"Eight-twelve in the morning," Jackson said, pointing to a wall clock set on Chinese time.

"So, SORGE didn't report anything from their working day yesterday?"

"No. That happens two or three days per week. It's not unusual," Mary Pat pointed out. "Sometimes that means the next one will be extra meaty."

Everyone looked up when Secretary Adler came in; he had driven instead of helicoptered in from Andrews. He quickly came up to speed.

"That bad?"

"They look serious, man," Jackson told SecState.

"Sounds like we have to send them that note."

"They're too far gone down this road to stop," another person said. "It's not likely that any note will work."

"Who are you?" Ryan asked.

"George Weaver, sir, from Brown. I consult to the Agency on China."

"Oh, okay. I've read some of your work. Pretty good stuff, Dr. Weaver. So, you say they won't turn back. Tell us why," the President commanded.

"It's not because they fear revelation of what they're up to. Their people don't know, and won't find out until Beijing tells them. The problem, as you know, is that they fear a potential economic collapse. If their economy goes south, sir, then you get a revolt of the masses, and that's the one thing they really fear. They don't see a way to avoid that other than getting rich, and the way for them to get rich is to seize the newly discovered Russian assets."

"Kuwait writ large?" Ryan asked.

"Larger and more complex, but, yes, Mr. President, the situation is fundamentally similar. They regard oil both as a commodity and as an entry card into international legitimacy. They figure that if they have it, the rest of the world will have to do business with them. The gold angle is even more obvious. It's the quintessential trading commodity. If you have it, you can sell it for anything you care to purchase. With those assets and the cash they can buy with them, they figure to bootstrap their national economy to the next level, and they just assume that the rest of the world will play along with them because they're going to be rich, and capitalists are only interested in money."

"They're really that cynical, that shallow?" Adler asked, somewhat

shocked at the thought, even after all he'd already been through.

"Their reading of history justifies that outlook, Mr. Secretary. Their analysis of our past actions, and those of the rest of the world, lead them to this conclusion. I grant you that they fail to appreciate what we call our reasons for the actions we took, but in strictly and narrowly factual terms, that's how the world looks to them."

"Only if they're idiots," Ryan observed tiredly. "We're dealing with idiots."

"Mr. President, you're dealing with highly sophisticated political animals. Their outlook on the world is different from ours, and, true, they do not understand us very well, but that does not make them fools," Weaver told the assembly.

Fine, Ryan thought for what seemed the hundredth time, *but then they're Klingons.* There was no sense saying that to Weaver. He'd simply launch into a long-winded rebuttal that wouldn't take the discussion anywhere. And Weaver would be right. Fools or geniuses, you only had to understand *what* they were doing, not *why.* The *what* might not make sense, but if you knew it, you also knew what had to be stopped.

"Well, let's see if they understand this," Ryan said. "Scott, tell the PRC that if they attack into Russia, America will come to Russia's aid, as required by the North Atlantic Treaty, and—"

"The NATO Treaty doesn't actually say that," Adler warned.

"I say it does, Scott, and more to the point, I told the Russians it does. If the Chinese realize we're not kidding, will it make a difference?"

"That opens up a huge can of worms, Jack," Adler warned. "We have thousands of Americans in China, thousands. Businessmen, tourists, a lot of people."

"Dr. Weaver, how will the Chinese treat foreign nationals in time of war?"

"I would not want to be there to find out. The Chinese can be fine hosts, but in time of war, if, for example, they think you're a spy or something, it could get very difficult. The way they treat their own citizens—well, we've seen that on TV, haven't we?"

"Scott, we also tell them that we hold their government leaders *personally* responsible for the safety and well-being of American citizens in their country. I mean that, Scott. If I have to, I'll sign the orders to track them down and bury their asses. Remind them of Tehran and our old friend Daryaei. That Zhang guy met him once, according to the former Indian Prime Minister, and I had him taken all the way out," Ryan announced coldly. "Zhang would do well to consider that."

"They will not respond well to such threats," Weaver warned. "It's

just as easy to say we have a lot of their citizens here, and—"

"We can't do that, and they know it," Ryan shot back.

"Mr. President, I just told you, our concept of laws is alien to them. That sort of threat is one they *will* understand, and they will take it seriously. The question then is how valuable they regard the lives of their own citizens."

"And that is?"

"Less than we do," Weaver answered.

Ryan considered that. "Scott, make sure they know what the Ryan Doctrine means," he ordered. "If necessary, I *will* put a smart bomb through their bedroom windows, even if it takes us ten years to find them."

"The DCM will make that clear. We can also alert our citizens to get the next bird out."

"Yeah, I'd want to get the hell out of Dodge City," Robby Jackson observed. "And you can get that warning out over CNN."

"Depending on how they respond to our note. It's eight-thirty in the morning over there. Scott, that note has to be in their hands before lunch."

SecState nodded. "Right."

"General Moore, we have warning orders cut to the forces we can deploy?"

"Yes, sir. We can have Air Force units in Siberia in less than twenty-four hours. Twelve hours after that, they'll be ready to launch missions."

"What about bases, Mickey?" Jackson asked.

"Tons of 'em, from when they worried about splashing B-52s. Their northern coast is lousy with airstrips. We have our Air Attaché in Moscow sitting down with their people right now," General Moore said. The colonel in question was pulling a serious all-nighter. "The Russians, he says, are being very cooperative."

"How secure will the bases be?" the Vice President asked next.

"Their main protection will be distance. The Chinese will have to reach the best part of a thousand miles to hit them. We've tagged ten E-3B AWACS out of Tinker Air Force Base to go over and establish continuous radar coverage, plus a lot of fighters to do BARCAP. Once that's done, we'll think about what missions we'll want to fly. Mainly defensive at first, until we get firmly established."

Moore didn't have to explain to Jackson that there was more to moving an Air Force than just the aircraft. With each fighter squadron went mechanics, ordnancemen, and even air-traffic controllers. A fighter plane might have only one pilot, but it needed an additional twenty or more personnel to make it a functioning weapon. For more complex aircraft, the numbers just went higher.

"What about CINCPAC?" Jackson asked.

"We can give their navy a serious headache. Mancuso's moving his submarines and other ships."

"These images aren't all that great," Ryan observed, looking down at the radar overheads.

"We'll have visuals late tomorrow," Ed Foley told him.

"Okay, when we do, we'll have to show them to NATO, see what they'll do to help us out."

"First Armored has orders to stand by to entrain. The German railroads are in better shape today than they were in 1990 for DESERT SHIELD," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs informed them. "We can change trains just east of Berlin. The Russian railroads have a different gauge. It's wider. That actually helps us, wider cars for our tracks to ride on. We figure we can move First Armored to the far side of the Urals in about seven days."

"Who else?" Ryan asked.

"Not sure," Moore answered.

"The Brits'll go with us. Them we can depend on," Adler told them all. "And Grushavoy was talking to their Prime Minister. We need to talk to Downing Street to see what developed from that."

"Okay, Scott, please look into that. But first let's get that note drafted for Beijing."

"Right," SecState agreed, and headed for the door.

"Jesus, I hope we can get them to see sense," Ryan said to the maps and imagery before his eyes.

"Me, too, Jack," the Vice President agreed. "But don't bet the farm on it."

What Adler had said to him on the flight from Warsaw came back to him. If only America still had ballistic missiles, deterrence would have been far easier. But Ryan had played a role in eliminating the damned things, and it seemed a very strange thing for him to regret now.

The note was generated and sent to the embassy in Beijing in less than two hours. The Deputy Chief of Mission, or DCM, in the embassy was a career foreign-service officer named William Kilmer. The formal note arrived as e-mail, and he had a secretary print it up in proper form and on expensive paper, which was folded into an envelope of creamy texture for hand delivery. He called the Chinese Foreign Ministry, requesting an urgent meeting with Foreign Minister Shen Tang. This was granted with surprising alacrity, and Kilmer walked to his own automobile, a Lincoln Town Car, and drove himself to the Ministry.

Kilmer was in his middle thirties, a graduate of the College of William and Mary in Virginia and Georgetown University in

Washington. A man on his way up, his current position was rather ahead of his years, and the only reason he'd gotten it was that Ambassador Carl Hitch had been expected to be a particularly good mentor for bringing him along from AAA ball into the bigs. This mission, delivering *this* note, made him think about just how junior he was. But he couldn't very well run from the job, and career-wise he was taking a big step. Assuming he didn't get shot. Unlikely, but . . .

The walk to Shen's office was a lonely one. The corridor seemed to stretch into infinity as he stepped down it in his best suit and shiny black shoes. The building and its appointments were supposed to be imposing, to show representatives of foreign countries just how impressive the People's Republic of China was. Every country did it this way, some better than others. In this case the architect had earned his money, Kilmer thought. Finally—but sooner than he'd expected when he'd begun—he found the door and turned right to enter the secretaries' anteroom. Shen's male executive assistant led the American into a more comfortable waiting room and fetched water for him. Kilmer waited for the expected five minutes, because you didn't just barge in to see a senior government minister of a major power, but then the high doors—they were always double doors at this level of diplomacy—opened and he was beckoned in.

Shen was wearing a Mao jacket today instead of the usual Western-style business suit, a dark blue in color. He approached his guest and extended his hand.

"Mr. Kilmer, a pleasure to see you again."

"Thank you for allowing this impromptu audience, Minister."

"Please have a seat." Shen waved to some chairs surrounding the usual low table. When both of them were seated, Shen asked, "What can I do for you this day?"

"Minister, I have a note from my government to place into your hand." With that, Kilmer pulled the envelope from his coat pocket and handed it across.

The envelope was not sealed. Shen withdrew the two-page diplomatic message and leaned back to read it. His face didn't alter a dot before he looked up.

"This is a most unusual communication, Mr. Kilmer."

"Minister, my government is seriously concerned with recent deployments of your military."

"The last note delivered from your embassy was an insulting interference with our internal affairs. Now you threaten us with war?"

"Sir, America makes no threats. We remind you that since the Russian Federation is now a signatory of the North Atlantic Treaty, any hostilities directed at Russia will compel America to honor her treaty commitments."

"And you threaten the senior members of our government if something untoward should happen to Americans in our country? What do you take us for, Mr. Kilmer?" Shen asked in an even, unexcited voice.

"Minister, we merely point out that, as America extends to all of our visitors the protection of our laws, we hope that the People's Republic will do the same."

"Why should we treat American citizens any differently from the way we treat our own?"

"Minister, we merely request your assurance that this will be the case."

"Why should it not be the case? Do you accuse us of plotting a war of aggression against our neighbor?"

"We take note of recent military actions by the People's Republic and request clarification."

"I see." Shen folded the papers back up and set them on the table. "When do you request a reply?"

"As soon as you find it convenient to do so, Minister," Kilmer answered.

"Very well. I will discuss this matter with my colleagues on the Politburo and reply to you as quickly as we can."

"I will convey that good news to Washington, Minister. I will not take more time from your day, sir. Thank you very much indeed for your time." Kilmer stood and shook hands one more time. Kilmer walked through the anteroom without a glance left or right, turned left in the corridor, and headed toward the elevators. The corridor seemed just as long for this little walk, he thought, and the clicking of his heels on the tile floor seemed unusually loud. Kilmer had been an FSO long enough to know that Shen should have reacted more irately to the note. Instead he had received it like an invitation to an informal dinner at the embassy. That meant something, but Kilmer wasn't sure what. Once in his car, he started composing his dispatch to Foggy Bottom, then quickly realized that this was something he'd better report by voice first over the STU.

How good is he, Carl?" Adler asked the ambassador. "He's an okay kid, Scott. Photographic memory, talent I wish I had. Maybe he was promoted a little fast, but he's got the brains he needs, just a little short on field experience. I figure in another three years or so, he'll be ready to run his own embassy and start his way up the ladder."

In a place like Lesotho, SecState thought, which was a place to make "backwater" seem a compliment. Well, you had to start somewhere. "How will Shen react?"

"Depends. If they're just maneuvering troops on routine training,

they might be a little angry. If it's for real and we've caught them with their hands in the cookie jar, they'll act hurt and surprised." Hitch paused for a yawn. "Excuse me. The real question is whether it'll make them think things over."

"Will it? You know most of 'em."

"I don't know," Hitch admitted uncomfortably. "Scott, I've been there a while, sure, but I can't say that I fully understand them. They make decisions on political considerations that Americans have a hard time comprehending."

"The President calls them Klingons," Adler told the ambassador.

Hitch smiled. "I wouldn't go that far, but there is logic in the observation." Then Adler's intercom buzzed.

"Call from William Kilmer in Beijing on the STU, Mr. Secretary," the secretary's voice said.

"This is Scott Adler," SecState said when he lifted the phone. "Ambassador Hitch is here with me. You're on speaker."

"Sir, I made the delivery. Minister Shen hardly blinked. He said he'd get back to us soon, but not exactly when, after he talked it over with his Politburo colleagues. Aside from that, not much of a reaction at all. I can fax you the transcript in about half an hour. The meeting didn't last ten minutes."

Adler looked over at Hitch, who shook his head and didn't look happy at the news.

"Bill, how was his body language?" Hitch asked.

"Like he was on Prozac, Carl. No physical reaction at all."

"Shen tends to be a little hyperactive," Hitch explained. "Sometimes he has trouble sitting still. Conclusions, Bill?"

"I'm worried," Kilmer replied at once. "I think we have a problem here."

"Thank you, Mr. Kilmer. Send the fax quick as you can." Adler punched the phone button and looked at his guest. "Oh, shit."

"Yeah. How soon will we know how they're going to react to this?"

"Tomorrow morning, I hope, we—"

"We have a source inside their government?" Hitch asked. The blank look he got in reply was answer enough.

Thanks, Scott," Ryan said, hanging up the phone. He was back in the Oval Office now, sitting in his personally-fitted swivel chair, which was about as comfortable as any artifact could make him. It didn't help much at the moment, but he supposed it was one less thing to worry about.

"So?"

"So, we wait to see if SORGE tells us anything."

"SORGE?" Professor Weaver asked.

"Dr. Weaver, we have a sensitive source of information that sometimes gives us information on what their Politburo is thinking," Ed Foley told the academic. "And that information does not leave this room."

"Understood." Academic or not, Weaver played by the rules. "That's the name for the special stuff you've been showing me?"

"Correct."

"It's a hell of a source, whoever it is. It reads like a tape of their meetings, captures their personalities, especially Zhang. He's the real bad actor here. He's got Premier Xu pretty well wrapped around his little finger."

"Adler's met him, during the shuttle talks after the Airbus shoot-down at Taipei," Ryan said.

"And?" Weaver asked. He knew the name and the words, but not the man.

"And he's powerful and not a terribly nice chap," the President answered. "He had a role in our conflict with Japan, and also the fracas with the UIR last year."

"Machiavelli?"

"That's pretty close, more a theoretician than a lead actor, the man-behind-the-throne sort of guy. Not an ideologue per se, but a guy who likes to play in the real world—patriot, Ed?" Ryan asked the DCI.

"We've had our pshrink profile him." Foley shrugged. "Part sociopath, part political operator. A guy who enjoys the exercise of power. No known personal weaknesses. Sexually active, but a lot of their Politburo members are. Maybe it's a cultural thing, eh, Weaver?"

"Mao was like that, as we all know. The emperors used to have rather large stables of concubines."

"That's what people did before TV, I suppose," Arnie van Damm observed.

"Actually that's not far from the truth," Weaver agreed. "The carryover to today is cultural, and it's a fundamental form of personal power that some people like to exercise. Women's lib hasn't made it into the PRC yet."

"I must be too Catholic," the President thought aloud. "The idea of Mao popping little girls makes my skin crawl."

"They didn't mind, Mr. President," Weaver told him. "Some would bring their little sisters over after they got in bed with the Great Leader. It's a different culture, and it has different rules from ours."

"Yeah, just a little different," observed the father of two daughters, one just starting to date. What would the fathers of those barely nubile little girls have thought? Honored to have their daughters deflowered by the great Mao Zedong? Ryan had a minor chill from the thought, and dismissed it. "Do they care about human life at all? What

about their soldiers?"

"Mr. President, the Judeo-Christian Bible wasn't drafted in China, and efforts by missionaries to get Christianity going over there were not terribly successful—and when Mao came along, he suppressed it fairly effectively, as we saw again recently. Their view of man's place in nature is different from ours, and, no, they do not value a single human life as we do. We're talking here about communists who view everything through a political lens, and that is over and above a culture in which a human life had little import. So, you could say it's a very infelicitous confluence of belief systems from our point of view."

Infelicitous, Ryan thought, *there's a delicate turn of phrase. We're talking about a government that killed off twenty million-plus of its own people along the way, just in a few months, in pursuit of political perfection.* "Dr. Weaver, best guess: What's their Politburo going to say?"

"They will continue on the path they're on," Weaver answered quickly. He was surprised at the reaction.

"God damn it, doesn't anybody think common sense is going to break out?" Ryan snarled. He looked around the room, to see people suddenly looking down at the royal-blue rug.

"Mr. President, they fear war less than they fear the alternatives to war," Weaver answered, rather courageously, Arnie van Damm thought. "To repeat, if they don't enrich their country in oil and gold, they fear an economic collapse that will destroy their entire political order, and that, to them, is more frightening than the prospect of losing a hundred thousand soldiers in a war of conquest."

"And I can stop it only by dropping a nuclear bomb on their capital—which will, by the way, kill a couple of million ordinary people. God damn it!" Ryan swore again.

"More like five million, maybe as many as ten," General Moore pointed out, earning him a withering look from his Commander in Chief. "Yes, sir, that would work, but I agree the price of doing it's a little high."

"Robby?" Jack turned to his Vice President in hope of hearing something encouraging.

"What do you want me to say, Jack? We can hope they realize that this is going to cost them more than they expect, but it would appear the odds are against it."

"One other thing we need to do is prepare the people for this," Arnie said. "Tomorrow we should alert the press, and then you'll have to go on TV and tell everybody what's happening and why."

"You know, I really don't like this job very much—excuse me. That's rather a puerile thing to say, isn't it?" SWORDSMAN apologized.

"Ain't supposed to be fun, Jack," van Damm observed. "You've played the game okay to this point, but you can't always control the other people at the card table."

The President's phone rang. Jack answered it. "Yes? Okay." He looked up. "Ed, it's for you."

Foley stood and walked to take the phone. "Foley . . . Okay, good, thanks." He replaced the phone. "Weather's clearing over Northeast China. We'll have some visual imagery in half an hour."

"Mickey, how fast can we get aerial recon assets in place?" Jackson asked.

"We have to fly them in. We have things we can stage out of California, but it's a lot more efficient to fly them over in a C-17 and lift them off from a Siberian airfield. We can do that in, oh . . . thirty-six hours from your order."

"The order is given," Ryan said. "What sort of aircraft are they?"

"They're UAVs, sir. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, used to call them drones. They're stealthy and they stay up a long time. We can download real-time video from them. They're fabulous for battlefield reconnaissance, the best new toys the Air Force has fielded, so far as the Army is concerned. I can get them going right now."

"Do it," Ryan told him.

"Assuming we have a place to land them. But we could stage them out of Elmendorf in Alaska if we have to." Moore lifted the phone and made his call to the National Military Command Center, the NMCC, in the Pentagon.

For General Peng, things were getting busy. The operation order was topped with the ideographs Long Chun, SPRING DRAGON. The "dragon" part sounded auspicious, since for thousands of years the dragon had been the symbol of imperial rule and also good fortune. There was still plenty of daylight. That suited Peng, and he hoped it would suit his soldiers. Daylight made for good hunting, and made it harder for large bodies of men to hide or move unseen, and that suited his mission.

He was not without misgivings. He was a general officer with orders to fight a war, and nothing makes such a man reflective like instructions to perform the things he'd claimed the ability to do. He would have preferred more artillery and air support, but he had a good deal of the former, and probably enough of the latter. At the moment, he was going over intelligence estimates and maps. He'd studied the Russian defenses on the far side of the border for years, to the point of occasionally putting reconnaissance specialists across the river to scout out the bunkers that had faced south for fifty years. The Russians were good military engineers, and those fixed defenses would

take some dealing with.

But his attack plan was a simple one. Behind a massive artillery barrage, he'd put infantry across the Amur River in assault boats to deal with the Russian bunkers, simultaneously bringing up engineers to span the river with ribbon bridges in order to rush his mechanized forces across, up the hills on the far side, then farther north. He had helicopters, though not enough of the attack kind to suit his needs. He'd complained about this, but so had every other senior officer in the People's Liberation Army. The only thing about the Russian Army that worried him were their Mi-24 attack helicopters. They were clumsy machines but dangerous in their capabilities, if wisely used.

His best intelligence came from reams of Humint from Chinese citizens living illegally but comfortably in Russia—shopkeepers and workers, a fair number of whom were officers or stringers for the Ministry for State Security. He would have preferred more photographs, but his country had only a single orbiting reconnaissance satellite, and the truth was that the imagery purchased from the French SPOT commercial satellite company was better, at one-meter resolution, than his own country could manage. It was also easier to acquire over the Internet, and for that his intelligence coordinator had a blank check. They showed the nearest Russian mechanized formation over a hundred kilometers away. That confirmed the human intelligence that had said only things within artillery range were garrison units assigned to the border defenses. It was interesting that the Russian high command had not surged forces forward, but they didn't have many to surge, and defending a border, with its numerous crenellations and meanders, used up manpower as a sponge used up water—and they didn't have that many troops to squander. He also possessed information that this General-Colonel Bondarenko was training his troops harder than his predecessor had, but that was not much cause for concern. The Chinese had been training hard for years, and Ivan would take time to catch up.

No, his only concern was distance. His army and its neighbors had a long way to go. Keeping them supplied would be a problem, because as Napoleon said that an army marched on its stomach, so tanks and tracked vehicles floated on a sea of diesel oil. His intelligence sources gave locations for large Russian stocks, but he couldn't count on seizing them intact, desirable though that might be, and even though he had plans for helicopter assaults on every one he had charted.

Peng put out his sixtieth cigarette of the day and looked up at his operations officer. "Yes?"

"The final order has arrived. Jump off at 0330 in three days."

"Will you have everything in place by then?" Peng asked.

"Yes, Comrade General, with twenty-four hours to spare."

"Good. Let's make sure that all our men are well fed. It may be a long time between meals for the next few weeks."

"That order has already been given, Comrade General," the colonel told him.

"And total radio silence."

"Of course, Comrade General."

Not a whisper," the sergeant said. "Not even carrier waves."

The RC-135 Rivet Joint aircraft was the first USAF bird to deploy, flying out of Anderson Air Force base on the island of Guam. It had refueled over the Sea of Okhotsk and entered Russian airspace over the port city of Ayan, and now, two hours later, was just east of Skovorodino on the Russian side of the border. The Rivet Joint was an extensively modified windowless version of the old Boeing 707, crammed with radio-receiving equipment and crewed with experienced ferret personnel, one of only two USAF crews who spoke passable Chinese.

"Sergeant, what's it mean when you have a lot of soldiers in the field and no radios?" the colonel in command of the mission asked. It was a rhetorical question, of course.

"Same thing it means when your two-year-old isn't making any noise, sir. He's crayoning the wall, or doing something else to get his bottom smacked." The sergeant leaned back in the pilot-type seat, looking at the numerous visual scans tuned to known PLA frequencies. The screen was blank except for mild static. Maybe there'd been some chatter as the PLA had moved units into place, but now there was nothing but some commercial FM traffic, mainly music that was as alien to the American flight crew as Grand Ol' Opry would have been in Beijing. Two crewmen listening to the civilian stations noted that the lyrics of the Chinese love ballads were as mindless as those of their Nashville counterparts, though the stations were leaning more heavily to patriotic songs at the moment.

The same was noted at Fort Meade, Maryland. The National Security Agency had a lot of ferret satellites up and circling the globe, including two monster Rhyolite-types in geosynchronous orbit over the equator, and all were tuned to Chinese military and government channels. The FM-radio chatter associated with military formations had trended down to zero in the last twelve hours, and to the uniformed and civilian analysts alike that meant just one thing: A quiet army is an army planning to do something.

The people at the National Reconnaissance Office had the main

tasking in finishing up a Special National Intelligence Estimate, because people tended to believe photographs more than mere words. The imagery had been computer-matched with the radar-imaging satellites' "take," but surprisingly to no one, the assembly areas were mostly empty now. The tanks and other tracked vehicles had lingered only long enough to get reorganized after the train trip, and had moved out north, judging by the ruts they'd left in the mainly dirt roads of the region. They'd taken the time to spread their camouflage nets over the redeployed tanks, but that, too, had been a pro forma waste of time, because they could as little hide the track marks of hundreds of such vehicles as they could hide a mountain range. And scarcely any such effort had been taken with the hundreds of supply trucks, which, they saw, were still moving in tight little convoys, at about thirty kilometers per hour, heading for assembly areas just a few klicks south of where the shooters were. The imagery was printed up on six of the big laser printers custom-made for the NRO, and driven to the White House, where people were mainly sitting around in the Oval Office pulling a Presidential all-nighter, which was rather more special than those done by the deliveryman, an Army sergeant E-5 in this case. The civilian analyst who'd come with him stayed inside while the NCO walked back out to the government Ford sedan, having left behind a Newport hundred-millimeter cigarette for the President.

"Jack, you're bad," Jackson observed. "Bumming a smoke off that innocent young boy."

"Stick it, Robby," POTUS replied with a grin. The smoke made him cough, but it helped him stay awake as much as the premium coffee did. "You handle the stress your way, I'll handle it my way. Okay, what do we have here?" the President asked the senior analyst.

"Sir, this is as many armored vehicles in one area as I have ever seen in China, plus all their equipment. They're going north, and soon, in less than three days, I'd say."

"What about air?" Jackson asked.

"Right here, sir." The analyst's finger traced over one of the photos. "Dedicated fighter base at Jinxi is a good example. Here's a squadron of Russian-made Su-27s, plus a whole regiment of J-7s. The Sukhoi's a pretty good fighter plane, similar in mission and capabilities to an early F-15. The -7's a day-fighter knockoff of the old MiG-21, modified for ground attack as well as mixing up in the furball. You can count sixty-eight aircraft. Probably at least four were in the air when the satellite went overhead. Note the fueling trucks right on the ramp, and this aircraft has ground crew tinkering with it. We estimate that this base was stood-down for five days—"

"—getting everything ready?" Jackson asked. That's how people did

it.

"Yes, sir. You will also note missile noses peeking out under the wings of all these aircraft. They appear to be loaded for combat."

"White ones on the rails," Robby observed. "They're planning to go do some work."

"Unless our note gets them to calm down," Ryan said, with a minor degree of hope in his voice. A very minor note, the others in the room thought. The President got one last puff off the purloined Newport and stubbed it out. "Might it help for me to make a direct personal call to Premier Xu?"

"Honest answer?" It was Professor Weaver, rather the worse for wear at four in the Washington morning.

"The other sort isn't much use to me at the moment," Ryan replied, not quite testily.

"It will look good in the papers and maybe the history books, but it is unlikely to affect their decision-making process."

"It's worth a try," Ed Foley said in disagreement. "What do we have to lose?"

"Wait until eight, Jack," van Damm thought. "We don't want him to think we've been up all night. It'll inflate his sense of self-worth."

Ryan turned to look at the windows on his south wall. The drapes hadn't been closed, and anyone passing by could have noted that the lights had been on all night. But, strangely, he didn't know if the Secret Service ever turned them off at night.

"When do we start moving forces?" Jack asked next.

"The Air Attaché will call from Moscow when his talks have been concluded. Ought to be any time."

The President grunted. "Longer night than ours."

"He's younger than we are," Mickey Moore observed. "Just a colonel."

"If this goes, what are our plans like?" van Damm asked.

"Hyperwar," Moore answered. "The world doesn't know the new weapons we've been developing. It'll make DESERT STORM look like slow motion."

CHAPTER 48

Opening Guns

While others were pulling all-nighters, Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko was forgetting what sleep was supposed to have been. His teleprinter was running hot with dispatches from Moscow, reading that occupied his time, and not always to his profit. Russia had still not learned to leave people alone when they were doing their jobs, and as a result, his senior communications officer cringed when he came in with new "FLASH" traffic.

"Look," the general said to his intelligence officer. "What I need is information on what equipment they have, where they are, and how they are postured to move north on us. Their politics and objectives are not as important to me as where they are right now!"

"I expect to have hard information from Moscow momentarily. It will be American satellite coverage, and—"

"God damn it! I remember when we had our own fucking satellites. What about aerial reconnaissance?"

"The proper aircraft are on their way to us now. We'll have them flying by tomorrow noon, but do we dare send them over Chinese territory?" Colonel Tolkunov asked.

"Do we dare not to?" CINC-FAR EAST demanded in reply.

"General," the G-2 said, "the concern is that we would be giving the Chinese a political excuse for the attack."

"Who said that?"

"Stavka."

Bondarenko's head dropped over the map table. He took a breath and closed his eyes for three blissful seconds, but all that achieved was to make him wish for an hour—no, just thirty minutes of sleep. That's all, he thought, just thirty minutes.

"A political excuse," the general observed. "You know, Vladimir Konstantinovich, once upon a time, the Germans were sending high-flying reconnaissance aircraft deep into Western Russia, scouting us out prior to their invasion. There was a special squadron of fighters able to reach their altitude, and their regimental commander asked for permission to intercept them. He was relieved of his command on the spot. I suppose he was lucky that he wasn't shot. He ended up a major

ace and a Hero of the Soviet Union before some German fighter got him. You see, Stalin was afraid of provoking Hitler, too!"

"Comrade Colonel?" Heads turned. It was a young sergeant with an armful of large-format photographs.

"Here, quickly!"

The sergeant laid them on the table, obscuring the topographical maps that had occupied the previous four hours. The quality wasn't good. The imagery had been transmitted over a fax machine instead of a proper photographic printer, but it was good enough for their purposes. There were even inserts, small white boxes with legends typed in, in English, to tell the ignorant what was in the pretty little pictures. The intelligence officer was the first to make sense of it all.

"Here they come," the colonel breathed. He checked the coordinates and the time indicated in the lower-right corner of the top photo. "That's a complete tank division, and it's right"—he turned back to the printed map—"right here, just as we expected. Their marshaling point is Harbin. Well, it had to be. All their rail lines converge there. Their first objective will be Belogorsk."

"And right up the valley from there," Bondarenko agreed. "Through this pass, then northwest." One didn't need to be a Nobel laureate to predict a line of advance. The terrain was the prime objective condition to which all ambitions and plans had to bend. Bondarenko could read the mind of the enemy commander well enough, because any trained soldier would see the contour lines on the map and analyze them the same way. Flat was better than sloped. Clear was better than wooded. Dry was better than wet. There was a lot of sloped terrain on the border, but it smoothed out, and there were too many valleys inviting speedy advance. With enough troops, he could have made every one of those valleys a deathtrap, but if he'd had enough troops, the Chinese wouldn't be lined up on his border. They'd be sitting in their own prepared defenses, fearing him. But that was not the shape of the current world for Commander-in-Chief Far East.

The 265th Motor Rifle was a hundred kilometers back from the border. The troops were undergoing frantic gunnery training now, because that would generate the most rapid return for investment. The battalion and regimental officers were in their command posts running map-table exercises, because Bondarenko needed them thinking, not shooting. He had sergeants for that. The good news for Bondarenko was that his soldiers enjoyed shooting live rounds, and their skill levels were improving rapidly. The bad news was that for every trained tank crew he had, the Chinese had over twenty.

"What an ambush we could lay, if we only had the men," Tolkunov breathed.

"When I was in America, watching them train, I heard a good if-

only joke. If only your aunt had balls, then she'd be your uncle, Vladimir Konstantinovich."

"Quite so, Comrade General." They both turned back to the maps and the photos.

So, they know what we're doing," Qian Kun observed. "This is not a good development."

"You can know what a robber will do, but if he has a pistol and you don't, what difference does it make?" Zhang Han San asked in return. "Comrade Marshal?"

"One cannot hide so large a movement of troops," Marshal Luo said blandly. "Tactical surprise is always hard to achieve. But we do have strategic surprise."

"That is true," Tan Deshi told the Politburo. "The Russians have alerted some of their divisions for movement, but they are all in the west, and days away, and all will approach down this rail line, and our air force can close it, can't you, Luo?"

"Easily," the Defense Minister agreed.

"And what of the Americans?" Fang Gan asked. "In that note we just got, they have told us that they regard the Russians as allies. How many times have people underestimated the Americans, Zhang? Including yourself," he added.

"There are objective conditions which apply even to the Americans, for all their magic," Luo assured the assembly.

"And in three years we will be selling them oil and gold," Zhang assured them all in turn. "The Americans have no political memory. They always adapt to the changing shape of the world. In 1949, they drafted the NATO Treaty, which included their bitter enemies in Germany. Look at what they did with Japan, after dropping atomic bombs on them. The only thing we should consider: though few Americans will be deployed, and they will have to take their chances along with everyone else, perhaps we should avoid inflicting too many casualties. We would also do well to treat prisoners and captured civilians gently—the world does have sensibilities we must regard somewhat, I suppose."

"Comrades," Fang said, summoning up his courage for one last display of his inner feelings. "We still have the chance to stop this from happening, as Marshal Luo told us some days ago. We are not fully committed until shots are fired. Until then, we can say we were running a defense exercise, and the world will go along with that explanation, for the reasons my friend Zhang has just told us. But once hostilities are begun, the tiger is out of the cage. Men defend what is theirs with tenacity. You will recall that Hitler underestimated the Russians, to his ultimate sorrow. Iran underestimated the Americans

just last year, causing disaster for them and the death of their leader. Are we *sure* that we can prevail in this adventure?" he asked. "Sure? We gamble with the life of our country here. We ought not to forget that."

"Fang, my old comrade, you are wise and thoughtful as ever," Zhang responded graciously. "And I know you speak on behalf of our nation and our people, but as we must not underestimate our enemies, so we ought not to underestimate ourselves. We fought the Americans once before, and we gave them the worst military defeat in their history, did we not?"

"Yes, we did surprise them, but in the end we lost a *million* men, including Mao's own son. And why? Because we *over* estimated our own abilities."

"Not this time, Fang," Luo assured them all. "Not this time. We will do to the Russians the same thing we did to the Americans at the Yalu River. We will strike with power and surprise. Where they are weak, we will rush through. Where they are strong, we will encircle and surround. In 1950, we were a peasant army with only light weapons. Today," Luo went on, "we are a fully modern army. We can do things today such as even the Americas could not dream of back then. We *will* prevail," the Defense Minister concluded with firm conviction.

"Comrades, do we wish to stop now?" Zhang asked, to focus the debate. "Do we wish to doom our country's economic and political future? For that is the issue at hand. If we stand still, we risk national death. Who among us wishes to stand still then?"

Predictably no one, not even Qian, moved to pick up that gauntlet. The vote was entirely pro forma, and unanimous. As always, the Politburo achieved collegiality for its own sake. The ministers returned to their various offices. Zhang buttonholed Tan Deshi for several minutes before heading back to his. An hour after that, he dropped in on his friend, Fang Gan.

"You are not cross with me?" Fang asked.

"The voice of caution is something that does not offend me, my old friend," Zhang said, graciously taking his seat opposite the other's desk. He could afford to be gracious. He had won.

"I am afraid of this move, Zhang. We *did* underestimate the Americans in 1950, and it cost us many men."

"We have the men to spare," the senior Minister Without Portfolio pointed out. "And it will make Luo feel valuable."

"As if he needs that." Fang gestured his displeasure with that strutting martinet.

"Even a dog has his uses," his visitor pointed out.

"Zhang, what if the Russians are more formidable than you think?"

"I've taken care of that. We will create instability in their country in

two days, the very day our attack begins."

"How?"

"You'll recall we had that failed attempt against Grushavoy's senior advisor, that Golovko fellow."

"Yes, and I counseled against that, too," Fang reminded his visitor.

"And there, perhaps, you were right," Zhang acknowledged, to smooth his host's feathers. "But Tan has developed the capability, and what better way to destabilize Russia than to eliminate their president? This we can do, and Tan has his orders."

"You assassinate a government chief in a foreign land?" Fang asked, surprised at this level of boldness. "What if you fail?"

"We commit an act of war against Russia anyway. What have we to lose by this? Nothing—but there is much to gain."

"But the political implications . . ." Fang breathed.

"What of them?"

"What if they turn the tables on us?"

"You mean attempt to attack Xu personally?" The look on his face provided the real answer to the question: *China would be better off without the nonentity.* But even Zhang would not say that aloud, even in the privacy of this room. "Tan assures me that our physical security is perfect. Perfect, Fang. There are no foreign intelligence operations of consequence in our country."

"I suppose every nation says such a thing—right before the roof caves in on them. We've done well with our spying in America, for example, and for that our good Comrade Tan is to be congratulated, but arrogance falls before the blow, and such blows are never anticipated. We would do well to remember that."

Zhang dismissed the thought: "One cannot fear everything."

"That is true, but to fear nothing is also imprudent." Fang paused to mend fences. "Zhang, you must think me an old woman."

That made the other minister smile. "Old woman? No, Fang, you are a comrade of many years' standing, and one of our most thoughtful thinkers. Why, do you suppose, I brought you onto the Politburo?"

To get my votes, of course, Fang didn't answer. He had the utmost respect for his senior colleague, but he wasn't blind to his faults. "For that I am grateful."

"For that the *people* ought to be grateful, you are so solicitous to their needs."

"Well, one must remember the peasants and workers out there. We serve them, after all." The ideological cant was just perfect for the moment. "This is not an easy job we share."

"You need to relax a little. Get that girl Ming out there, take her to your bed. You've done it before." It was a weakness both men shared. The tension of the moment abated, as Zhang wished it to.

"Chai sucks better," Fang replied, with a sly look.

"Then take her to your flat. Buy her some silk drawers. Get her drunk. They all like that."

"Not a bad idea," Fang agreed. "It certainly helps me sleep."

"Then do it by all means! We'll need our sleep. The next few weeks will be strenuous for us—but more so for our enemies."

"One thing, Zhang. As you said, we must treat the captives well. One thing the Americans do not forgive rapidly is cruelty to the helpless, as we have seen here in Beijing."

"Now, *they* are old women. They do not understand the proper use of strength."

"Perhaps so, but if we wish to do business with them, as you say, why offend them unnecessarily?"

Zhang sighed and conceded the point, because he knew it to be the smart play. "Very well. I will tell Luo." He checked his watch. "I must be off. I've having dinner with Xu tonight."

"Give him my best wishes."

"Of course." Zhang rose, bowed to his friend, and took his leave. Fang took a minute or so before rising and walking to the door. "Ming," he called, on opening it. "Come here." He lingered at the door as the secretary came in, allowing his eyes to linger on Chai. Their eyes met and she winked, adding a tiny feminine smile. Yes, he needed his sleep tonight, and she would help.

"The Politburo meeting ran late this day," Fang said, settling into his chair and doing his dictation. It took twenty-five minutes, and he dismissed Ming to do her daily transcription. Then he had Chai come in, gave her an order, and dismissed her. In another hour, the working day ended. Fang walked down to his official car, with Chai in trail. Together they rode to his comfortable apartment, and there they got down to business.

Ming met her lover at a new restaurant called the Jade Horse, where the food was better than average.

"You look troubled," Nomuri observed.

"Busy time at the office," she explained. "There is big trouble to come."

"Oh? What sort of trouble?"

"I cannot say," she demurred. "It will probably not affect your company."

And Nomuri saw that he'd taken his agent to the next—actually the last—step. She no longer thought about the software on her office computer. He never brought the subject up. Better that it should happen below the visible horizon. Better that she should forget what she was doing. Your conscience doesn't worry about things you've

forgotten. After dinner, they walked back to Nomuri's place, and the CIA officer tried his best to relax her. He was only partially successful, but she was properly appreciative and left him at quarter to eleven. Nomuri had himself a nightcap, a double, and checked to make sure his computer had relayed her almost-daily report. Next week he hoped to have software he could cross-load to hers over the 'Net, so that she'd be transmitting the reports directly out to the recipe network. If Bad Things were happening in Beijing, NEC might call him back to Japan, and he didn't want SONGBIRD'S reports to stop going to Langley.

As it happened, this one was already there, and it had generated all manner of excitement.

It was enough to make Ed Foley wish he'd lent a STU to Sergey Golovko, but America didn't give away its communications secrets that readily, and so the report had been redrafted and sent by secure fax to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, then hand-carried to SVR headquarters by a consular officer not associated with the CIA. Of course, now they'd assume that he was a spook, which would cause the Russians to shadow him everywhere he went, and use up trained personnel of the FSS. Business was still business, even in this New World Order.

Golovko, predictably, bounced hard off his high office ceiling.

John Clark got the news over his secure satellite phone.

"What the hell?" RAINBOW Six asked, sitting still in his personal car not far from Red Square.

"You heard me," Ed Foley explained.

"Okay, now what?"

"You're tight with their special-operations people, right?"

"Somewhat," Clark allowed. "We're training them."

"Well, they might come to you for advice of some sort. You have to know what's happening."

"Can I tell Ding?"

"Yes," the DCI agreed.

"Good. You know, this proves the Chavez Premise."

"What's that?" Foley asked.

"He likes to say that international relations is largely composed of one nation fucking another."

It was enough to make Foley laugh, five thousand miles and eight time zones away. "Well, our Chinese friends are sure playing rough."

"How good is the information?"

"It's Holy Writ, John. Take it to the bank," Ed assured his distant field officer.

We have some *source in Beijing,* Clark didn't observe aloud. "Okay, Ed. If they come to me, I'll let you know. We cooperate, I presume."

"Fully," the DCI assured him. "We're allies now. Didn't you see CNN?"

"I thought it was the Sci-Fi Channel."

"You ain't the only one. Have a good one, John."

"You, too, Ed. Bye." Clark thumbed the END button and went on just to himself: "Holy jumpin' Jesus." Then he restarted the car and headed off to his rendezvous with Domingo Chavez.

Ding was at the bar that RAINBOW had adopted during its stay in the Moscow area. The boys congregated in a large corner booth, where they complained about the local beer, but appreciated the clear alcohol preferred by the natives.

"Hey, Mr. C," Chavez said in greeting.

"Just got a call from Ed on my portable."

"And?"

"And John Chinaman is planning to start a little war with our hosts, and that's the good news," Clark added.

"What the fuck is the bad news?" Chavez asked, with no small incredulity in his voice.

"Their Ministry of State Security just put a contract out on Eduard Petrovich," John went on.

"Are they fuckin' crazy?" the other CIA officer asked the booth.

"Well, starting a war in Siberia isn't exactly a rational act. Ed let us in because he thinks the locals might want our help soon. Supposedly they know the local contact for the ChiComms. You have to figure a hot takedown's going to evolve from this, and we've been training their troopies. I figure we might be invited in to watch, but they probably won't want us to assist."

"Agreed."

That's when General Kirillin came in, with a sergeant at his side. The sergeant stood by the door with his overcoat unbuttoned and his right hand close to the opening. The senior officer spotted Clark and came directly over.

"I don't have your cell-phone number."

"What do you want us for today, General?" Clark asked.

"I need for you to come with me. We have to see Chairman Golovko."

"Do you mind if Domingo comes along?"

"That is fine," Kirillin replied.

"I've talked to Washington recently. How much do you know?" Clark asked his Russian friend.

"Much, but not all. That's why we need to see Golovko." Kirillin waved them to the door, where his sergeant was doing his best

Doberman imitation.

"Something happening?" Eddie Price asked. No one was guarding his expression, and Price knew how to read faces.

"Tell you when we get back," Chavez told him. The staff car waiting outside had a chase car with four men in it, and the sergeant/bodyguard accompanying the general was one of the few enlisted men who'd been let into the cross-training that RAINBOW had been running. The Russians, they knew, were coming along very well. It didn't hurt to draw people hand-selected from an already elite unit.

The cars moved through Moscow traffic with less than the usual regard for traffic and safety laws, then pulled into the main gate at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. The elevator was held for them, and they made the top floor in a hurry.

"Thank you for coming so quickly. I assume you've spoken with Langley," Golovko observed.

Clark held up his cell phone.

"The encryption unit is so small?"

"Progress, Chairman," Clark observed. "I'm told this intelligence information is to be taken seriously."

"Foleyeva has a fine source in Beijing. I've seen some of the 'take' from him. It would appear, first, that a deliberate attempt was made on my life, and now another is planned for President Grushavoy. I've already notified him. His security people are fully alerted. The Chinese lead agent in Moscow has been identified and is under surveillance. When he receives his instructions, we will arrest him. But we do not know who his contacts are. We assume they are former Spetsnaz people loyal to him, criminals, of course, doing special work for the underworld we've grown up here."

That made sense, John thought. "Some people will do anything for money, Sergey Nikolay'ch. How can we help you?"

"Foley has instructed you to assist? Good of him. Given the nature of how the intelligence came to us, an American observer seems appropriate. For the takedown, we will use police, with cover from General Kirillin's people. As RAINBOW commander, this will be your task."

Clark nodded. It wasn't all that demanding. "Fair enough."

"We'll keep you safe," the general assured him.

"And you expect the Chinese to launch a war on Russia?"

"Within the week," Golovko nodded.

"The oil and the gold?" Chavez asked.

"So it would seem."

"Well, that's life in the big city," Ding observed.

"We will make them regret this barbaric act," Kirillin told everyone present.

"That remains to be seen," Golovko cautioned. He knew what Bondarenko was saying to Stavka.

"And with you guys in NATO, we're coming to help out?" Clark asked.

"Your President Ryan is a true comrade," the Russian agreed.

"That means RAINBOW, too, then," John thought aloud. "We're all NATO troopers."

"Ain't never fought in a real war before," Chavez thought aloud. But now he was a simulated major, and he might just get drafted into this one. His life insurance, he remembered, was fully paid up.

"It's not exactly fun, Domingo," Clark assured him. *And I'm getting a little old for this shit.*

The Chinese Embassy was under continuous and expert surveillance by a large team of officers from the Russian Federal Security Service. Almost all of them were formerly of the KGB's Second Chief Directorate. Reconstituted under a new agency's aegis, they performed the same function as the FBI's Intelligence Division, and they gave away little to their American counterparts. No fewer than twenty of them were assigned to this task. They comprised all physical types, male and female, prosperous-and impoverished-looking, middle-aged and old—but no really young ones, because this case was too important for inexperienced officers. The vehicles assigned to the task included everything from dump trucks to motorbikes, and every mobile group had at least one radio, of types so advanced that the Russian Army didn't have them yet.

Kong Deshi emerged from the PRC embassy at seven-forty. He walked to the nearest Metro station and took the escalator down. This was entirely routine. At the same time, another minor consular officer left and headed in a different direction, but the FSS officers didn't know to watch him. He walked three blocks to the second lamppost on a busy street and, passing it, he pulled a strip of white paper tape from his coat pocket and stuck it vertically on the metal post. Then he walked on to a restaurant and had dinner alone, having fulfilled a mission whose purpose he didn't know. He was the flagman for the MSS in the embassy, but was not a trained intelligence officer.

Third Secretary Kong rode the train for the proper number of stops and got off, with four FSS officers in trail, another one waiting in the station, and two more at the top of the long escalator to the surface. Along the way, he purchased a newspaper from one of the kiosks on the street. Twice he stopped, once to light a cigarette and the other time to look around as if lost and trying to get his bearings. Both efforts, of course, were to spot a tail, but the FSS people were too numerous, some too near, and the close ones studiously, but not too

studiously, looking elsewhere. The truth of the matter, as known to the FBI and the British Security Service as well, is that once a contact is identified, he is as naked and helpless as a newborn in the jungle, as long as those shadowing him are not total fools. These KGB-trained professionals were anything but fools. The only thing they didn't know was the identity of the flagman, but that, as usual, was something you might never get. The problem there was that you never knew how quickly to get the dead-drop that was about to be made.

The other problem for the control agent, Kong Deshi, was that once the location of the dead-drop was identified, it was as easily watched as the single cloud in an otherwise clear sky. The size of the surveillance troop was just to make sure there wasn't another drop. And there wasn't. Kong sat down on the expected bench. Here he violated fieldcraft by acting as though he could read a newspaper in the diminishing light, but as there was a streetlamp close by, it wouldn't tip off the casual onlooker.

"There," one of the FSS men observed. Kong's right hand made the emplacement. Three minutes later, he folded his paper and strolled off, in the same direction he'd been heading. The FSS detail let him go a long way before they moved in.

Again it was done from a van, and again the locksmith was inside and waiting with the custom-made key. Also in the van was a high-end American laptop computer with the onetime cipher pad preprogrammed in, an exact copy of Suvorov/Koniev's desktop machine in his upscale flat on the ring road. And so, the senior FSS officer on the case thought, their quarry was like a tiger prowling through the jungle with ten unknown rifles aimed at it, powerful, and dangerous, perhaps, but utterly doomed.

The transfer case was delivered. The locksmith popped it open. The contents were unfolded and photocopied, then replaced, and the case was resealed and returned to its spot on the metal plate under the bench. Already a typist was keying in the random letters of the message, and inside of four minutes, the clear-text came up.

"Yob tvoyu mat!" the senior officer observed. "They want him to kill President Grushavoy!"

"What is that?" a junior officer asked. The case-leader just handed over the laptop computer and let him read the screen.

"This is an act of war," the major breathed. The colonel nodded.

"It is that, Gregoriy." And the van pulled away. He had to report this, and do it immediately.

Lieutenant Provalov was home when the call came. He grumbled the usual amount as he re-dressed and headed to FSS headquarters. He hadn't grown to love the Federal Security Service, but he had come to

respect it. With such resources, he thought, he could end crime in Moscow entirely, but they didn't share resources, and they retained the above-the-law arrogance their antecedent agency had once displayed. Perhaps it was necessary. The things they investigated were no less serious than murder, except in scale. Traitors killed not individuals, but entire regions. Treason was a crime that had been taken seriously in his country for centuries, and one that his nation's long-standing institutional paranoia had always feared as much as it had hated.

They were burning more than the usual amount of midnight oil here, Provalov saw. Yefremov was standing in his office, reading a piece of paper with the sort of blank look on his face that frequently denoted something monstrous.

"Good evening, Pavel Georgiyevich."

"Lieutenant Provalov. Here." Yefremov handed over the paper. "Our subject grows ambitious. Or at least his controllers do."

The militia lieutenant took the page and read it quickly, then returned to the top to give it a slower redigestion.

"When did this happen?"

"Less than an hour ago. What observations do you make?"

"We should arrest him at once!" the cop said predictably.

"I thought you'd say that. But instead we will wait and see whom he contacts. Then we will snatch him up. But first, I want to see the people he notifies."

"What if he does it from a cell phone or a pay phone?"

"Then we will have the telephone company identify them for us. But I want to see if he has a contact within an important government office. Suvorov had many colleagues where he was in KGB. I want to know which of them have turned mercenary, so that we can root all of them out. The attack on Sergey Nikolay'ch displayed a frightening capability. I want to put an end to it, to scoop that all up, and send them all to a labor camp of strict regime." The Russian penal system had three levels of camps. Those of "mild" regime were unpleasant. The "medium" ones were places to avoid. But those of "strict" regime were hell on earth. They were particularly useful for getting the recalcitrant to speak of things they preferred to keep quiet about in ordinary circumstances. Yefremov had the ability to control which scale of punishment a man earned. Suvorov already merited death, in Russia, usually delivered by a bullet . . . but there were worse things than death.

"The president's security detail has been warned?"

The FSS officer nodded. "Yes, though that was a tender one. How can we be sure that one of them is not compromised? That nearly happened to the American President last year, you may have heard,

and it is a possibility we have to consider. They are all being watched. But Suvorov had few contacts with the Eighth Directorate when he was KGB, and none of the people he knew ever switched over to there."

"You are sure of that?"

"We finished the cross-check three days ago. We've been busy checking records. We even have a list of people Suvorov might call. Sixteen of them, in fact. All of their phones have been tapped, and all are being watched." But even the FSS didn't have the manpower to put full surveillance details on those potential suspects. This had become the biggest case in the history of the FSS, and few of the KGB's investigations had used up this much manpower, even back to Oleg Penkovskiy.

"What about the names Amalrik and Zimyanin?"

"Zimyanin came up in our check, but not the other. Suvorov didn't know him, but Zimyanin did—they were comrades in Afghanistan—and presumably recruited the other himself. Of the sixteen others, seven are prime suspects, all Spetsnaz, three officers and four non-coms, all of them people who've put their talent and training on the open market. Two are in St. Petersburg, and might have been implicated in the elimination of Amalrik and Zimyanin. It would appear that their comradeship was lacking," Yefremov observed dryly. "So, Provalov, do you have anything to add?"

"No, it would seem that you have covered all likely investigative avenues."

"Thank you. Since it remains a murder case, you will accompany us when we make the arrest."

"The American who assisted us . . . ?"

"He may come along," Yefremov said generously. "We'll show him how we do things here in Russia."

Reilly was back in the U.S. Embassy on the STU, talking to Washington.

"Holy shit," the agent observed.

"That about covers it," Director Murray agreed. "How good's their presidential-protective detail?"

"Pretty good. As good as the Secret Service? I don't know what their investigative support is like, but on the physical side, I'd have to say they're okay."

"Well, they've certainly been warned by now. Whatever they have is going to be perked up a notch or two. When will they do the takedown on this Suvorov guy?"

"Smart move is to sit on it until he makes a move. Figure the Chinese will get the word to him soon—like now, I suppose—and then

he'll make some phone calls. That's when I'd put the arm on him, and not before."

"Agreed," Murray observed. "We want to be kept informed on all this. So, stroke your cop friend, will ya?"

"Yes, sir." Reilly paused. "This war scare is for real?"

"It looks that way," Murray confirmed. "We're ramping up to help them out, but I'm not sure how it's going to play out. The President's hoping that the NATO gig will scare them off, but we're not sure of that either. The Agency's running in circles trying to figure the PRC out. Aside from that, I don't know much."

That surprised Reilly. He'd thought Murray was tight with the President, but supposed now that this information was too compartmentalized.

I'll take that," Colonel Aliyev said to the communications officer.

"It's for the immediate attention of—"

"He needs sleep. To get to him, you must go through me," the operations officer announced, reading through the dispatches. "This one can wait . . . this one I can take care of. Anything else?"

"This one's from the President!"

"President Grushavoy needs a lucid general more than he needs an answer to this, Pasha." Aliyev could use some sleep, too, but there was a sofa in the room, and its cushions were calling out to him.

"What's Tolkunov doing?"

"Updating his estimate."

"Is it getting better in any way?" Comms asked.

"What do you think?" Ops replied.

"Shit."

"That's about right, comrade. Know where we can purchase chopsticks for us to eat with?"

"Not while I have my service pistol," the colonel replied. At nearly two meters in height, he was much too tall to be a tanker or an infantryman. "Make sure he sees these when he wakes. I'll fix it with Stavka."

"Good. I'm going to get a few hours, but wake me, not him," Aliyev told his brother officer.

"*Da*."

They were small men in the main. They started arriving at Never, a small railroad town just east of Skovorodino, on day coaches tacked onto the regular rail service on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Getting off, they found officers in uniform directing them to buses. These headed down a road paralleling the railroad right-of-way southeast toward a tunnel drilled ages before in the hills over the diminutive

Urkan River. Beside the tunnel was an opening which appeared to the casual viewer to be a siding for service equipment for the railroad. And so it was, but this service tunnel went far into the hillside, and branching off it were many more, all constructed in the 1930s by political prisoners, part of Iosef Stalin's gulag labor empire. In these man-made caverns were three hundred T-55 tanks, built in the mid-1960s and never used, but rather stored here to defend against an invasion from China, along with a further two hundred BTR-60 wheeled infantry carriers, plus all the other rolling stock for a Soviet-pattern tank division. The post was garrisoned by a force of four hundred conscripts who, like generations before them, served their time servicing the tanks and carriers, mainly moving from one to another, turning over the diesel engines and cleaning the metal surfaces, which was necessary because of water seepage through the stone roof. The "Never Depot," it was called on classified maps, one of several such places close to the main rail line that went from Moscow to Vladivostok. Cunningly hidden, partially in plain sight, it was one of the aces that General-Colonel Bondarenko had hidden up his sleeve.

As were the men. They were mostly in their thirties, confused, and more than a little angry at having been called away from their homes. However, like good Russians, or indeed good citizens in any land, they got their notices, figured that their country had a need, and it was their country, and so about three-fourths of them went as summoned. Some saw familiar faces from their time in the conscript army of the Soviet Union—these men were mainly from that time—and greeted old friends, or ignored those less happily remembered. Each was given a preprinted card telling him where to go, and so the tank crews and infantry squads formed up, the latter finding their uniforms and light weapons, plus ammunition, waiting in the assigned motor-carrier. The tank crewmen were all small men, about 167 centimeters in height—about five feet six inches to an American—because the interiors of the old Russian tanks did not permit tall men to fit inside.

The tankers returning to the steeds of their youth knew the good and bad points of the T-55s. The engines were made of roughly machined parts and would grind off a full kilogram of metal shavings into the oil sumps during the first few hours of running, but, they all figured, that would have been taken care of by the routine turning-over of the engines in the depot. The tanks were, in fact, in surprisingly good shape, better than the ones they'd used on active duty. This seemed both strange and unsurprising to the returning soldiers, because the Red Army had made little logical sense when they'd been in it, but that, for a Soviet citizen of the 1970s and '80s, was not unexpected either. Most remembered their service with some fondness, and for the usual reasons, the chance to travel and see new,

different things, and the comradeship of men their own age—a time of life in which young men seek out the new and the exciting. The poor food, miserable pay, and strenuous duty were largely forgotten, though exposure to the rolling equipment brought back some of it with the instant memory that accompanied smells and feels from the past. The tanks all had full internal fuel tanks, plus the oil drums affixed to the rear that had made all of the men cringe when thinking about a battlefield—one live round could turn every tank into a pillar of fire, and so that was the fuel you burned off first, just so you could pull the handle to dump the damned things off when the first bullet flew.

Most agreeably of all, those who pressed the start buttons felt and heard the familiar rumble after only a few seconds of cranking. The benign environment of this cavern had been kind to these old, but essentially unused, tanks. They might have been brand new, fresh from the assembly lines of the massive factory at Nizhnyi Tagil, for decades the armory of the Red Army. The one thing that had changed, they all saw, was that the red star was gone from the glacis plate, replaced with an all-too-visible representation of their new white-blue-red flag, which, they all thought, was far too good an aiming point. Finally they were all called away from their vehicles by the young reserve officers, who, they saw, looked a little worried. Then the speeches began, and the reservists found out why.

Damn, isn't she a lovely one," the FSS officer said, getting into the car. They'd followed their subject to yet another expensive restaurant, where he'd dined alone, then walked into the bar, and within five minutes fixed upon a woman who'd also arrived alone, pretty in her black, red-striped dress that looked to have been copied from some Italian designer. Suvorov/Koniev was driving back toward his flat with a total of six cars in trail, three of them with light-change switches on their dashboards to alter their visual appearance at night. The cop riding in the number-two car thought that was an especially clever feature.

He was taking his time, not racing his car to show his courage, but instead dazzling the girl with his man-of-the-world demeanor, the investigators thought. The car slowed as it passed one corner, a street with old iron lampposts, then changed direction, if not abruptly, then unexpectedly.

"Shit, he's going to the park," the senior FSS guy said, picking up his radio microphone to say this over the air. "He must have spotted a flag somewhere."

And so he did, but first he dropped off what appeared to be a very disappointed woman, holding some cash in her hand to ease the pain.

One of the FSS cars paused to pick her up for questioning, while the others continued their distant pursuit, and five minutes later, it happened. Suvorov/ Koniev parked his car on one side of the park and walked across the darkened grass to the other, looking about as he did so, not noticing the fact that five cars were circling.

"That's it. He picked it up." He'd done it skillfully, but that didn't matter if you knew what to look for. Then he walked back to his car. Two of the cars headed directly over to his flat, and the three in trail just kept going when he pulled in.

He said he felt suddenly ill. I gave him my card," she told the interrogators. "He gave me fifty euros for my trouble." Which was fair payment, she thought, for wasting half an hour of her valuable time.

"Anything else? Did he look ill?"

"He said that the food suddenly disagreed with him. I wondered if he'd gotten cold feet as some men do, but not this one. He is a man of some sophistication. You can always tell."

"Very well. Thank you, Yelena. If he calls you, please let us know."

"Certainly." It had been a totally painless interview, which came as rather a surprise for her, and for that reason she'd cooperated fully, wondering what the hell she'd stumbled into. A criminal of some sort? Drug trafficker, perhaps? If he called her, she'd call these people and to hell with him. Life for a woman of her trade was difficult enough.

He's on the computer," an electronics specialist said at FSS headquarters. He read the keystrokes off the keyboard bug they'd planted, and they not only showed up on his screen, but also ran live on a duplicate of the subject desktop system. "There, there's the clear-text. He's got the message."

There was a minute or so of thoughtful pause, and then he began typing again. He logged onto his e-mail service and started typing up messages. They all said some variant of "contact me as soon as you can," and that told them what he was up to. A total of four letters had gone out, though one suggested forwarding to one or more others. Then he logged off and shut his computer down.

"Now, let's see if we can identify his correspondents, shall we?" the senior investigator told his staff. That took all of twenty minutes. What had been routine drudgery was now as exciting as watching the World Cup football final.

* * *

The Myasishchev M-5 reconnaissance aircraft lifted off from Taza just before dawn. An odd-looking design with its twin booms, it was a forty-years-too-late Russian version of the venerable Lockheed U-2, able to cruise at seventy thousand feet at a sedate five hundred or so knots and take photographs in large numbers with high resolution. The pilot was an experienced Russian air force major with orders not to stray within ten kilometers of the Chinese border. This was to avoid provoking his country's potential enemies, and that order was not as easy to execute as it had been to write down in Moscow, because the borders between countries are rarely straight lines. So, the major programmed his autopilot carefully and sat back to monitor his instruments while the camera systems did all the real work. The main instrument he monitored was his threat-receiver, essentially a radio scanner programmed to note the energy of radar transmitters. There were many such transmitters on the border, most of the low- to mid-frequency search types, but then a new one came up. This was on the X-band, and it came from the south, and that meant that a Chinese surface-to-air missile battery was illuminating him with a tracking-and-targeting radar. *That* got his attention, because although seventy thousand was higher than any commercial aircraft could fly, and higher than many fighters could reach, it was well within the flight envelope of a SAM, as an American named Francis Gary Powers had once discovered over Central Russia. A fighter could outmaneuver most SAMs, but the M-5 was not a fighter and had trouble outmaneuvering clouds on a windless day. And so he kept his eye on the threat-receiver's dials while his ears registered the shrill *beep-beep* of the aural alert. The visual display showed that the pulse-repetition rate was in the tracking rather than the lock-up mode. So, a missile was probably not in the air, and the sky was clear enough that he'd probably see the smoke trail that such missiles always left, and today —no, no smoke coming up from the ground. For defensive systems, he had only a primitive chaff dispenser and prayer. Not even a white-noise jammer, the major groused. But there was no sense in worrying. He *was* ten kilometers inside his own country's airspace, and whatever SAM systems the Chinese possessed were probably well inside their own borders. It would be a stretch for them to reach him, and he could always turn north and run while punching loose a few kilos of shredded aluminum foil to give the inbound missile something else to chase. As it played out, the mission involved four complete sweeps of the border region, and that required ninety otherwise boring minutes before he reprogrammed the M-5 back to the old fighter base outside Taza.

The ground crew supporting the mission had also been deployed from the Moscow area. As soon as the M-5 rolled to a stop, the film

cassettes were unloaded and driven to the portable film lab for development, then forwarded, still wet, to the interpreters. They saw few tanks, but lots of tracks in the ground, and that was all they needed to see.

CHAPTER 49

Disarming

I know, Oleg. I understand that we developed the intelligence in Washington and forwarded it to your people immediately," Reilly said to his friend.

"You must be proud of that," Provalov observed.

"Wasn't the Bureau that did it," Reilly responded. The Russians would be touchy about having Americans provide them with such sensitive information. Maybe Americans would have reacted the same way. "Anyway, what are you going to do about it?"

"We're trying to locate his electronic correspondents. We have their addresses, and they are all on Russian-owned ISPs. FSS probably has them all identified by now."

"Arrest them when?"

"When they meet Suvorov. We have enough to make the arrests now."

Reilly wasn't sure about that. The people Suvorov wanted to meet could always say that they came to see him by invitation without having a clue as to the purpose of the meeting, and a day-old member of the bar could easily enough sell the "reasonable doubt" associated with that to a jury. Better to wait until they all did something incriminating, and then squeeze one of them real hard to turn state's evidence on the rest. But the rules and the juries were different here.

Anatoliy, what are you thinking about?" Golovko asked. "Comrade Chairman, I am thinking that Moscow has suddenly become dangerous," Major Shelepin replied. "The idea of former Spetsnaz men conspiring to commit treason on this scale sickens me. Not just the threat, but also the infamy of it. These men were my comrades in the army, trained as I was to be guardians of the State." The handsome young officer shook his head.

"Well, when this place was the KGB, it happened to us more than once. It is unpleasant, yes, but it is reality. People are corruptible. It is human nature," Golovko said soothingly. *Besides, the threat isn't against me now,* he didn't add. An unworthy thought, perhaps, but that also was human nature. "What is President Grushavoy's detail doing now?"

"Sweating, I should imagine. Who can say that this is the only threat? What if this Kong bastard has more than one such agent in Moscow? We should pick him up, too."

"So we shall, when the time comes. He's been observed to do only one dead-drop over the past week, and we control that one—yes, yes, I know," Sergey added, when he saw the beginnings of Anatoliy's objections. "He isn't the only MSS operative in Moscow, but he's probably the only one on this case. Security considerations are universal. They must worry that one of their officers might be in *our* employ, after all. There are many wheels in such an operation, and they don't all turn in the same direction, my young friend. You know what I miss?"

"I should imagine it is having the second chief directorate under the same roof. That way the operation would be run cooperatively."

Golovko smiled. "Correct, Anatoliy Ivan'ch. For now, we can only do our job and wait for others to do theirs. And, yes, waiting is never an entertaining way to spend one's time." With that observation, both men resumed staring at the desk phones, waiting for them to ring.

The only reason that surveillance hadn't been tightened any more was that there wasn't enough room for the additional personnel, and Suvorov might take note of the thirty people who followed him everywhere. That day he awoke at his normal hour, washed up, had coffee and kasha for breakfast, left the apartment building at 9:15, and drove his car into the city, with a good deal of elusive company. He parked his car two blocks from Gor'iy Park and walked the rest of the way there.

So did four others, also under surveillance. They met at a magazine kiosk at precisely 9:45 and walked together toward a coffee shop that was disagreeably crowded, too much so for any of the watchers to get close enough to listen in, though the faces were observed. Suvorov/Koniev did most of the talking, and the other four listened intently, and nods started.

Yefremov of the Federal Security Service kept his distance. He was senior enough that he could no longer guarantee that his face was unknown, and had to trust the more junior men to get in close, their earpieces removed and radio transmitters turned off, wishing they could read lips like the people in spy movies.

For Pavel Georgiyevich Yefremov, the question was, what to do now? Arrest them all and risk blowing the case—or merely continue to shadow, and risk having them go forward . . . and perhaps accomplish the mission?

The question would be answered by one of the four contacts. He was the oldest of them, about forty, a Spetsnaz veteran of Afghanistan

with the Order of the Red Banner to his name. His name was Igor Maximov. He held up his hand, rubbing forefinger and thumb, and, getting the answer to his question, he shook his head and politely took his leave. His departure was a cordial one, and his personal two-man shadow team followed him to the nearest Metro station while the others continued talking.

On learning this, Yefremov ordered him picked up. That was done when he got off the Metro train five kilometers away at the station near his flat, where he lived with his wife and son. The man did not resist and was unarmed. Docile as a lamb, he accompanied the two FSS officers to their headquarters.

"Your name is Maximov, Igor Il'ych," Yefremov told him. "You met with your friend Suvorov, Klementi Ivan'ch, to discuss participation in a crime. We want to hear your version of what was discussed."

"Comrade Yefremov, I met some old friends for coffee this morning and then I left. Nothing in particular was discussed. I do not know what you are talking about."

"Yes, of course," the FSS man replied. "Tell me, do you know two former Spetsnaz men like yourself, Amalrik and Zimyanin?"

"I've heard the names, but I don't know the faces."

"Here are the faces." Yefremov handed over the photos from the Leningrad Militia. "They are not pleasant to look upon."

Maximov didn't blanch, but he didn't look at the photos with affection either. "What happened to them?"

"They did a job for your comrade, Suvorov, but he was evidently displeased with how they went about it, and so, they went swimming in the River Neva. Maximov, we know that you were Spetsnaz. We know that you earn your living today doing illegal things, but that is not a matter of concern to us at the moment. We want to know exactly what was said at the coffee shop. You will tell us this, the easy way or the hard way. The choice is yours." When he wanted to, Yefremov could come on very hard to his official guests. In this case, it wasn't difficult. Maximov was not a stranger to violence, at least on the giving side. The receiving side was something he had no wish to learn about.

"What do you offer me?"

"I offer you your freedom in return for your cooperation. You left the meeting before any conclusions were reached. That is why you are here. So, do you wish to speak now, or shall we wait a few hours for you to change your mind?"

Maximov was not a coward—Spetsnaz didn't have many of those, in Yefremov's experience—but he was a realist, and realism told him that he had nothing to gain by noncooperation.

"He asked me and the others to participate in a murder. I presume it

will be a difficult operation, otherwise why would he need so many men? He offers for this twenty thousand euros each. I decided that my time is more valuable than that."

"Do you know the name of the target?"

Maximov shook his head. "No. He did not say. I did not ask."

"That is good. You see, the target is President Grushavoy." That got a reaction, as Maximov's eyes flared.

"That is state treason," the former Spetsnaz sergeant breathed, hoping to convey the idea that he'd never do such a thing. He learned fast.

"Yes. Tell me, is twenty thousand euros a good price for a murder?"

"I would not know. If you want me to tell you that I have killed for money, no, Comrade Yefremov, I will not say that."

But you have, and you'd probably participate in this one if the price went high enough. In Russia, E20,000 was a considerable sum. But Yefremov had much bigger fish to fry. "The others at the meeting, what do you know of them?"

"All are Spetsnaz veterans. Ilya Suslov and I served together east of Qandahar. He's a sniper, a very good one. The others, I know them casually, but I never served with them."

Sniper. Well, those were useful, and President Grushavoy appeared in public a lot. He was scheduled to have an outdoor rally the very next day, in fact. It was time to wrap this up.

"So, Suvorov spoke of a murder for hire?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good. We will take your statement. You were wise to cooperate, Igor Il'ych." Yefremov had a junior officer lead him away. Then he lifted his phone. "Arrest them all," he told the field commander.

"The meeting broke up. We have all of them under surveillance. Suvorov is en route back to his flat with one of the three."

"Well, assemble the team and arrest them both."

Feeling better?" Colonel Aliyev asked.

"What time is it?"

"Fifteen-forty, Comrade General," Colonel Aliyev replied. "You slept for thirteen hours. Here are some dispatches from Moscow."

"You let me sleep that long?" the general demanded, instantly angry.

"The war has not begun. Our preparations, such as they are, are progressing, and there seemed no sense in waking you. Oh, we have our first set of reconnaissance photos. Not much better than the American ones we had faxed to us. Intelligence has firmed up its estimate. It's not getting any better. We have support now from an American ELINT aircraft, but they tell us that the Chinese aren't using

their radios, which is not a surprise."

"God damn it, Andrey!" the general responded, rubbing his unshaven face with both hands.

"So, court-martial me after you've had your coffee. I got some sleep, too. You have a staff. I have a staff, and I decided to let them do their jobs while we slept," the operations officer said defiantly.

"What of the Never Depot?"

"We have a total of one hundred eighty tanks operating with full crews. Shorter on the infantry component and artillery, but the reservists seem to be functioning with some degree of enthusiasm, and the 265th Motor Rifle is starting to act like a real division for the first time." Aliyev walked over a mug of coffee with milk and sugar, the way Bondarenko preferred it. "Drink, Gennady Iosifovich." Then he pointed to a table piled with buttered bread and bacon.

"If we live, I will see you promoted, Colonel."

"I've always wanted to be a general officer. But I want to see my children enter university, too. So, let's try to stay alive."

"What of the border troops?"

"I have transport assigned to each post—where possible, two sets of transport. I've sent some of the reservists in BTRs to make sure they have a little protection against the artillery fire when they pull out. We have a lot of guns in the photos from the M-5, Comrade General. And fucking mountains of shells. But the border troops have ample protection, and the orders have gone out so that they will not need permission to leave their posts when the situation becomes untenable—at the company-officer level, that is," Aliyev added. Commissioned officers were less likely to bug out than enlisted men.

"No word on when?"

The G-3 shook his head. "Nothing helpful from Intelligence. The Chinese are still moving trucks and such around, from what we can tell. I'd say another day, maybe as many as three."

So?" Ryan asked.

"So, the overheads show they're still moving the chess pieces on the board," Foley answered. "But most of them are in place."

"What about Moscow?"

"They're going to arrest their suspects soon. Probably going to pick up the control officer in Moscow, too. They'll sweat him some, but he does have diplomatic immunity, and you can't squeeze him much." Ed Foley remembered when KGB had arrested his wife in Moscow. It hadn't been pleasant for her—and less so for him—but they hadn't roughed her up, either. Messing with people who traveled on diplomatic passports didn't happen often, despite what they'd seen on TV a few weeks before. And the Chinese probably regretted that one a

lot, pronouncements on the SORGE feeds to the contrary notwithstanding.

"Nothing from inside to encourage us?"

"Nope." The DCI shook his head.

"We ought to start moving the Air Force," Vice President Jackson urged.

"But then it could be seen as a provocation," Secretary Adler pointed out. "We can't give them any excuse."

"We can move First Armored into Russia, say it's a joint training exercise with our new NATO allies," TOMCAT said. "That could buy us a few days."

Ryan weighed that and looked over at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "Well, General?"

"It can't hurt all that much. They're already working with Deutsche Rail to get the move organized."

"Then do it," the President ordered.

"Yes, sir." General Moore moved to make the call.

Ryan checked his watch. "I have a reporter to talk to."

"Have fun," Robby told his friend.

Zhigansk, on the west side of the Lena River, had once been a major regional air-defense center for the old Soviet PVO Strany, the Russian air-defense command. It had a larger-than-average airfield with barracks and hangars, and had been largely abandoned by the new Russian military, with just a caretaker staff to maintain the facility in case it might be needed someday. This turned out to be a piece of lucky foresight, because the United States Air Force started moving in that day, mainly transport aircraft from the central part of America that had staged through Alaska and flown over the North Pole to get there. The first of thirty C-5 Galaxy transports landed at ten in the morning local time, taxiing to the capacious but vacant ramps to off-load their cargo under the direction of ground crewmen who'd ridden in the large passenger area aft of the wing box in the huge transports. The first things wheeled off were the Dark Star UAVs. They looked like loaves of French bread copulating atop slender wings, and were long-endurance, stealthy reconnaissance drones that took six hours to assemble for flight. The crews got immediately to work, using mobile equipment shipped on the same aircraft.

Fighter and attack aircraft came into Suntar, far closer to the Chinese border, with tankers and other support aircraft—including the American E-3 Sentry AWACS birds—just west of there at Mirnyy. At these two air bases, the arriving Americans found their Russian counterparts, and immediately the various staffs started working together. American tankers could not refuel Russian aircraft, but to

everyone's relief the nozzles for ground fueling were identical, and so the American aircraft could make use of the take fuel from the Russian JP storage tanks, which, they found, were huge, and mainly underground to be protected against nuclear airbursts. The most important element of cooperation was the assignment of Russian controllers to the American AWACS, so that Russian fighters could be controlled from the American radar aircraft. Almost at once, some E-3s lifted off to test this capability, using arriving American fighters as practice targets for controlled intercepts. They found immediately that the Russian fighter pilots reacted well to the directions, to the pleased surprise of the American controllers.

They also found almost immediately that the American attack aircraft couldn't use Russian bombs and other ordnance. Even if the shackle points had been the same (they weren't), the Russian bombs had different aerodynamics from their American counterparts, and so the computer software on the American aircraft could not hit targets with them—it would have been like trying to jam the wrong cartridge into a rifle: even if you could fire the round, the sights would send it to the wrong point of impact. So, the Americans would have to fly in the bombs to be dropped, and shipping bombs by air was about as efficient as flying in gravel to build roads. Bombs came to fighter bases by ship, train, truck, and forklift, not by air. For this reason, the B-1s and other heavy-strike aircraft were sent to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, where there were some bomb stores to be used, even though they were a long way from the supposed targets.

The air forces of the two sides established an immediate and friendly rapport, and in hours—as soon as the American pilots had gotten a little mandated crew rest—they were planning and flying missions together with relative ease.

The QUARTER HORSE went first. Under the watchful eyes of Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti, the M1A2 main battle tanks and M3 Bradley cavalry scout vehicles rolled onto the flatcars of Deutsche Rail, accompanied by the fuel and other support trucks. Troops went into coaches at the head end of the train "consists" and were soon heading east to Berlin, where they'd change over to the Russian-gauge cars for the further trip east. Oddly, there were no TV cameramen around at the moment, Giusti saw. That couldn't last, but it was one less distraction for the unit that was the eyes of First Tanks. The division's helicopter brigade was sitting at its own base, awaiting the availability of Air Force transports to ferry them east. Some genius had decided against having the aircraft fly themselves, which, Giusti thought, they were perfectly able to do, but General Diggs had told him not to worry about it. Giusti would worry about it, but not out

loud. He settled into a comfortable seat in the lead passenger coach, along with his staff, and went over maps just printed up by the division's cartography unit, part of the intelligence shop. The maps showed the terrain they might be fighting for. Mostly they predicted where the Chinese would be going, and that wasn't overly demanding.

So, what are we going to do?" Bob Holtzman asked.

"We're beginning to deploy forces to support our allies," Ryan answered. "We hope that the PRC will see this and reconsider the activities that now appear to be under way."

"Have we been in contact with Beijing?"

"Yes." Ryan nodded soberly. "The DCM of our embassy in Beijing, William Kilmer, delivered a note from us to the Chinese government, and we are now awaiting a formal reply."

"Are you telling us that you think there will be a shooting war between Russia and China?"

"Bob, our government is working very hard to forestall that possibility, and we call on the Chinese government to think very hard about its position and its actions. War is no longer a policy option in this world. I suppose it once was, but no longer. War only brings death and ruin to people. The world has turned a corner on this thing. The lives of people—including the lives of soldiers—are too precious to be thrown away. Bob, the reason we have governments is to serve the needs and the interests of *people*, not the ambitions of rulers. I hope the leadership of the PRC will see that." Ryan paused. "A couple of days ago, I was at Auschwitz. Bob, that was the sort of experience to get you thinking. You could *feel* the horror there. You could hear the screams, smell the death smell, you could *see* the lines of people being led off under guns to where they were murdered. Bob, all of a sudden it wasn't just black-and-white TV anymore.

"It came to me then that there is no excuse at all for the government of a country, any country, to engage in killing for profit. Ordinary criminals rob liquor stores to get money. Countries rob countries to get oil or gold or territory. Hitler invaded Poland for *Lebensraum,* for room for Germany to expand—but, damn it, there were already people living there, and what he tried to do was to steal. That's all. Not statecraft, not vision. Hitler was a *thief* before he was a murderer. Well, the United States of America will not stand by and watch that happen again." Ryan paused and took a sip of water.

"One of the things you learn in life is that there's only one thing really worth having, and that's love. Well, by the same token there's only one thing worth fighting for, and that is justice. Bob, that's what America fights for, and if China launches a war of aggression—a war of robbery—America will stand by her ally and stop it from

happening."

"Many say that your policy toward China has helped to bring this situation about, that your diplomatic recognition of Taiwan—" Ryan cut him off angrily.

"Bob, I will not have any of that! The Republic of China's government is a freely elected one. America *supports* democratic governments. Why? Because we stand *for* freedom and self-determination. Neither I nor America had anything to do with the cold-blooded murders we saw on TV, the death of the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal DiMilo, and the killing of the Chinese minister Yu Fa An. We had nothing to do with that. The revulsion of the entire civilized world came about because of the PRC's actions. Even then, China could have straightened it out by investigating and punishing the killers, but they chose not to, and the world reacted—to what they did all by themselves."

"But what is this all about? Why are they massing troops on the Russian border?"

"It appears that they want what the Russians have, the new oil and gold discoveries. Just as Iraq once invaded Kuwait. It was for oil, for money, really. It was an armed robbery, just like a street thug does, mugging an old lady for her Social Security check, but somehow, for some reason, we sanctify it when it happens at the nation-state level. Well, no more, Bob. The world will no longer tolerate such things. And America will not stand by and watch this happen to our ally. Cicero once said that Rome grew great not through conquest, but rather through defending her allies. A nation acquires respect from acting *for* things, not *against* things. You measure people not by what they are against, but by what they are *for.* America stands *for* democracy, *for* the self-determination of people. We stand *for* freedom. We stand *for* justice. We've told the People's Republic of China that if they launch a war of aggression, then America will stand with Russia and against the aggressor. We believe in a peaceful world order in which nations compete on the economic battlefield, not with tanks and guns. There's been enough killing. It's time for that to stop, and America will be there to make it stop."

"The world's policeman?" Holtzman asked. Immediately, the President shook his head.

"Not that, but we will defend our allies, and the Russian Federation is an ally. We stood with the Russian people to stop Hitler. We stand with them again," Ryan said.

"And again we send our young people off to war?"

"There need be no war, Bob. There is no war today. Neither America nor Russia will start one. That question is in the hands of others. It isn't hard, it isn't demanding, for a nation-state to stand its

military down. It's a rare professional soldier who relishes conflict. Certainly no one who's seen a battlefield will voluntarily rush to see another. But I'll tell you this: If the PRC launches a war of aggression, and if because of them American lives are placed at risk, then those who make the decision to set loose those dogs are putting their own lives at risk."

"The Ryan Doctrine?" Holtzman asked.

"Call it anything you want. If it's acceptable to kill some infantry private for doing what his government tells him, then it's also acceptable to kill the people who tell the government what to do, the ones who send that poor, dumb private out in harm's way."

Oh, shit, Arnie van Damm thought, hovering in the doorway of the Oval Office. *Jack, did you have to say* that?

"Thank you for your time, Mr. President," Holtzman said. "When will you address the nation?"

"Tomorrow. God willing, it'll be to say that the PRC has backed off. I'll be calling Premier Xu soon to make a personal appeal to him."

"Good luck."

We are ready," Marshal Luo told the others. "The operation commences early tomorrow morning."

"What have the Americans done?"

"They've sent some aircraft forward, but aircraft do not concern me," the Defense Minister replied. "They can sting, as a mosquito does, but they cannot do real harm to a man. We will make twenty kilometers the first day, and then fifty per day thereafter—maybe more, depending on how the Russians fight. The Russian Air Force is not even a paper tiger. We can destroy it, or at least push it back out of our way. The Russians are starting to move mechanized troops east on their railroad, but we will pound on their marshaling facility at Chita with our air assets. We can dam them up and stop them to protect our left flank until we move troops in to wall that off completely."

"You are confident, Marshal?" Zhang asked—rhetorically, of course.

"We'll have their new gold mine in eight days, and then it's ten more to the oil," the marshal predicted, as though describing how long it would take to build a house.

"Then you are ready?"

"Fully," Luo insisted.

"Expect a call from President Ryan later today," Foreign Minister Shen warned the premier.

"What will he say?" Xu asked.

"He will give you a personal plea to stop the war from beginning."

"If he does, what ought I to say?"

"Have your secretary say you are out meeting the people," Zhang advised. "Don't talk to the fool."

Minister Shen wasn't fully behind his country's policy, but nodded anyway. It seemed the best way to avoid a personal confrontation, which Xu would not handle well. His ministry was still trying to get a feel for how to handle the American President. He was so unlike other governmental chiefs that they still had difficulty understanding how to speak with him.

"What of our answer to their note?" Fang asked.

"We have not given them a formal answer," Shen told him.

"It concerns me that they should not be able to call us liars," Fang said. "That would be unfortunate, I think."

"You worry too much, Fang," Zhang commented, with a cruel smile.

"No, in that he is correct," Shen said, rising to his colleague's defense. "Nations must be able to trust the words of one another, else no intercourse at all is possible. Comrades, we must remember that there will be an 'after the war,' in which we must be able to reestablish normal relations with the nations of the world. If they regard us as outlaw, that will be difficult."

"That makes sense," Xu observed, speaking his own opinion for once. "No, I will not accept the call from Washington, and no, Fang, I will not allow America to call us liars."

"One other development," Luo said. "The Russians have begun high-altitude reconnaissance flights on their side of the border. I propose to shoot down the next one and say that their aircraft intruded on our airspace. Along with other plans, we will use that as a provocation on their part."

"Excellent," Zhang observed.

So?" John asked.

"So, he is in this building," General Kirillin clarified. "The takedown team is ready to go up and make the arrest. Care to observe?"

"Sure," Clark agreed with a nod. He and Chavez were both dressed in their RAINBOW ninja suits, black everything, plus body armor, which struck them both as theatrical, but the Russians were being overly solicitous to their hosts, and that included official concern for their safety. "How is it set up?"

"We have four men in the apartment next door. We anticipate no difficulties," Kirillin sold his guests. "So, if you will follow me."

"Waste of time, John," Chavez observed in Spanish.

"Yeah, but they want to do a show-and-tell." The two of them followed Kirillin and a junior officer to the elevator, which whisked them up to the proper floor. A quick, furtive look showed that the corridor was clear, and they moved like cats to the occupied

apartment.

"We are ready, Comrade General," the senior Spetsnaz officer, a major, told his commander. "Our friend is sitting in his kitchen discussing matters with his guest. They're looking at how to kill President Grushavoy tomorrow on his way to parliament. Sniper rifle," he concluded, "from eight hundred meters."

"You guys make good ones here," Clark observed. Eight hundred was close enough for a good rifleman, especially on a slow-moving target like a walking man.

"Proceed, Major," Kirillin ordered.

With that, the four-man team walked back out into the corridor. They were dressed in their own RAINBOW suits, black Nomex, and carrying the equipment Clark and his people had brought over, German MP-10 submachine guns, and .45 Beretta sidearms, plus the portable radios from E-Systems. Clark and Chavez were wearing identical gear, but not carrying weapons. Probably the real reason Kirillin had brought them over, John thought, was to show them how much his people had learned, and that was fair enough. The Russian troopers looked ready. Alert and pumped up, but not nervous, just the right amount of tenseness.

The officer in command moved down the corridor to the door. His explosives man ran a thin line of det-cord explosive along the door's edges and stepped aside, looking at his team leader for the word.

"Shoot," the major told him—

—and before Clark's brain could register the singleword command, the corridor was sundered with the crash of the explosion that sent the solid-core door into the apartment at about three hundred feet per second. Then the Russian major and a lieutenant tossed in flash-bangs sure to disorient anyone who might have been there with a gun of his own. It was hard enough for Clark and Chavez, and they'd known what was coming and had their hands over their ears. The Russians darted into the apartment in pairs, just as they'd been trained to do, and there was no other sound, except for a scream down the hall from a resident who hadn't been warned about the day's activities. That left John Clark and Domingo Chavez just standing there, until an arm appeared and waved them inside.

The inside was a predictable mess. The entry door was now fit only for kindling and toothpicks, and the pictures that decorated the wall did so without any glass in the frames. The blue sofa had a ruinous scorch mark on the right side, and the carpet was cratered by the other flashbang.

Suvorov and Suslov had been sitting in the kitchen, always the heart of any Russian home. That had placed them far enough away from the explosion to be unhurt, though both looked stunned by the

experience, and well they might be. There were no weapons in evidence, which was surprising to the Russians but not to Clark, and the two supposed miscreants were now facedown on the tile floor, their hands manacled behind them and guns not far behind their heads.

"Greetings, Klementi Ivan'ch," General Kirillin said. "We need to talk."

The older of the two men on the floor didn't react much. First, he was not really able to, and second, he knew that talking would not improve his situation. Of all the spectators, Clark felt the most sympathy for him. To run a covert operation was tense enough. To have one blown—it had never happened to John, but he'd thought about the possibility often enough—was not a reality that one wished to contemplate. Especially in this place, though since it was no longer the Soviet Union, Suvorov could take comfort in the fact that things might have been a little worse. But not that much worse, John was sure. It was time for him to say something.

"Well executed, Major. A little heavy on the explosives, but we all do that. I say that to my own people almost every time."

"Thank you, General Clark." The senior officer of the strike team beamed, but not too much, trying to look cool for his subordinates. They'd just done their first real-life mission, and pleased as they all were, the attitude they had to adopt was *of course we did it right*. It was a matter of professional pride.

"So, Yuriy Andreyevich, what will happen with them now?" John asked in his best Leningrad Russian.

"They will be interrogated for murder and conspiracy to commit murder, plus state treason. We picked up Kong half an hour ago, and he's talking," Kirillin added, lying. Suvorov might not believe it, but the statement would get his mind wandering in an uncomfortable direction. "Take them out!" the general ordered. No sooner had that happened than an FSS officer came in to light up the desktop computer to begin a detailed check of its contents. The protection program Suvorov had installed was bypassed because they knew the key to it, from the keyboard bug they'd installed earlier. Computers, they all agreed, must have been designed with espionage in mind—but they worked both ways.

"Who are you?" a stranger in civilian clothes asked.

"John Clark" was the surprising answer in Russian. "And you?"

"Provalov. I am a lieutenant-investigator with the militia."

"Oh, the RPG case?"

"Correct."

"I guess that's your man."

"Yes, a murderer."

“Worse than that,” Chavez said, joining the conversation.

“There is nothing worse than murder,” Provalov responded, always the cop.

Chavez was more practical in his outlook. “Maybe, depends on if you need an accountant to keep track of all the bodies.”

“So, Clark, what do you think of the operation?” Kirillin asked, hungry for the American’s approval.

“It was perfect. It was a simple operation, but flawlessly done. They’re good kids, Yuriy. They learn fast and they work hard. They’re ready to be trainers for your special-operations people.”

“Yeah, I’d take any of them out on a job,” Ding agreed. Kirillin beamed at the news, unsurprising as it was.

CHAPTER 50

Thunder and Lightning

They got him," Murray told Ryan. "Our friend Clark was there to watch. Damned ecumenical of the Russkies."

"Just want to be an ally back to us, I suppose, and RAINBOW is a NATO asset. You suppose he'll sing?"

"Like a canary, probably," the FBI Director predicted. "The Miranda Rule never made it to Russia, Jack, and their interrogation techniques are a little more—uh, enthusiastic than ours are. Anyway, it's something to put on TV, something to get their public seriously riled up. So, boss, this war going to stop or go?"

"We're trying to stop it, Dan, but—"

"Yeah, I understand," Murray said. "Sometimes big shots act just like street hoods. Just with bigger guns."

This bunch has H-bombs, Jack didn't say. It wasn't something you wanted to talk about right after breakfast. Murray hung up and Ryan checked his watch. It was time. He punched the intercom button on his phone.

"Ellen, could you come in, please?"

It took the usual five seconds. "Yes, Mr. President."

"I need one, and it's time to call Beijing."

"Yes, sir." She handed Ryan a Virginia Slim and went back to the anteroom.

Ryan saw one of the phone lights go on and waited, lighting his smoke. He had his speech to Premier Xu pretty well canned, knowing that the Chinese leader would have a good interpreter nearby. He also knew that Xu would still be in the office. He'd been working pretty late over the past few days—it wasn't hard to figure out why. Starting a potential world war had to be a time-consuming business. So, it would be less than thirty seconds to make the guy's phone ring, then Ellen Sumter would talk to the operator on the far end—the Chinese had full-time switchboard operators rather than secretary-receptionists as in the White House—and the call would be put through. So, figure another thirty seconds, and then Jack would get to make his case to Xu: *Let's reconsider this one, buddy, or something bad will happen. Bad for our country. Bad for yours. Probably worse for yours.* Mickey Moore had

promised something called Hyperwar, and that would be seriously bad news for someone unprepared for it. The phone light stayed on, but Ellen wasn't beeping him to get on the line . . . why? Xu was still in his office. The embassy in Beijing was supposed to be keeping an eye on the guy. Ryan didn't know how, but he was pretty sure they knew their job. It might have been as easy as having an embassy employee —probably an Agency guy—stand on the street with a cell phone and watch a litup office window, then report to the embassy, which would have an open line to Foggy Bottom, which had many open lines to the White House. But then the light on the phone blinked out, and the intercom started:

"Mr. President, they say he's out of the office," Mrs. Sumter said.

"Oh?" Ryan took a long puff. "Tell State to confirm his location."

"Yes, Mr. President." Then forty seconds of silence. "Mr. President, the embassy says he's in his office, as far as they can tell."

"And his people said . . . ?"

"They said he's out, sir."

"When will he be back?"

"I asked. They said they didn't know."

"Shit," Ryan breathed. "Please get me Secretary Adler."

"Yeah, Jack," SecState said a few seconds later.

"He's dodging my call, Scott."

"Xu?"

"Yeah."

"Not surprising. They—the Chinese Politburo—don't trust him to talk on his own without a script."

Like Arnie and me, Ryan thought with a mixture of anger and humor. "Okay, what's it mean, Scott?"

"Nothing good, Jack," Adler replied. "Nothing good."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Diplomatically, there's not much we can do. We've sent them a stiff note, and they haven't answered. Your position vis-à-vis them and the Russian situation is as clear as we can make it. They know what we're thinking. If they don't want to talk to us, it means they don't care anymore."

"Shit."

"That's right," the Secretary of State agreed.

"You're telling me we can't stop it?"

"Correct." Adler's tone was matter-of-fact.

"Okay, what else?"

"We tell our civilians to get the hell out of China. We're set up to do that here."

"Okay, do it," Ryan ordered, with a sudden flip of his stomach.

"Right."

"I'll get back to you." Ryan switched lines and punched the button for the Secretary of Defense.

"Yeah," Tony Bretano answered.

"It looks like it's going to happen," Ryan told him.

"Okay, I'll alert all the CINCs."

In a matter of minutes, FLASH traffic was dispatched to each of the commanders-in-chief of independent commands. There were many of them, but at the moment the most important was CINCPAC, Admiral Bart Mancuso in Pearl Harbor. It was just after three in the morning when the STU next to his bed started chirping.

"This is Admiral Mancuso," he said, more than half asleep.

"Sir, this is the watch officer. We have a war warning from Washington. China. 'Expect the commencement of hostilities between the PRC and the Russian Federation to commence within the next twenty-four hours. You are directed to take all measures consistent with the safety of your command.' Signed Bretano, SecDef, sir," the lieutenant commander told him.

Mancuso already had both feet on the floor of the bedroom. "Okay, get my staff together. I'll be in the office in ten minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The chief petty officer assigned to drive him was already outside the front door, and Mancuso noted the presence of four armed Marines in plain sight. The senior of them saluted while the others studiously looked outward at a threat that probably wasn't there . . . but might be. Minutes later, he walked into his hilltop headquarters overlooking the naval base. Brigadier General Lahr was there, waiting for him.

"How'd you get in so fast?" CINCPAC asked him.

"Just happened to be in the neighborhood, Admiral," the J-2 told him. He followed Mancuso into the inner office.

"What's happening?"

"The President tried to phone Premier Xu, but he didn't take the call. Not a good sign from our Chinese brethren," the theater intelligence officer observed.

"Okay, what's John Chinaman doing?" Mancuso asked, as a steward's mate brought in coffee.

"Not much in our area of direct interest, but he's got a hell of a lot of combat power deployed in the Shenyang Military District, most of it right up on the Amur River." Lahr set up a map stand and started moving his hand on the acetate overlay, which had a lot of red markings on it. For the first time in his memory, Mancuso saw Russian units drawn in blue, which was the "friendly" color. It was too surprising to comment on.

"What are we doing?"

"We're moving a lot of air assets into Siberia. The shooters are here

at Suntar. Reconnaissance assets back here at Zhigansk. The Dark Stars ought to be up and flying soon. It'll be the first time we've deployed 'em in a real shooting war, and the Air Force has high hopes for them. We have some satellite overheads that show where the Chinese are. They've camouflaged their heavy gear, but the Lacrosse imagery sees right through the nets."

"And?"

"And it's over half a million men, five Group-A mechanized armies. That's one armored division, two mechanized infantry, and one motorized infantry each, plus attachments that belong directly to the army commander. The forces deployed are heavy in tanks and APCs, fair in artillery, but light in helicopters. The air assets belong to somebody else. Their command structure for coordinating air and ground isn't as streamlined as it ought to be, and their air forces aren't very good by our standards, but their numbers are better than the Russians'. Manpower-wise, the Chinese have a huge advantage on the ground. The Russians have space to play with, but if it comes down to a slugging match, bet your money on the People's Liberation Army."

"And at sea?"

"Their navy doesn't have much out of port at the moment, but overheads show they're lighting up their boilers alongside. I would expect them to surge some ships out. Expect them to stay close in, defensive posture, deployment just to keep their coast clear."

Mancuso didn't have to ask what he had out. Seventh Fleet was pretty much out to sea after the warnings from previous weeks. His carriers were heading west. He had a total of six submarines camped out on the Chinese coast, and his surface forces were spun up. If the People's Liberation Army Navy wanted to play, they'd regret it.

"Orders?"

"Self-defense only at this point," Lahr said.

"Okay, we'll close to within two hundred fifty miles of their coast minimum for surface ships. Keep the carriers an additional hundred back for now. The submarines can close in and shadow any PLAN forces at will, but no shooting unless attacked, and I don't want anyone counter-detected. The Chinese have that one reconsat up. I don't want it to see anything painted gray." Dodging a single reconnaissance satellite wasn't all that difficult, since it was entirely predictable in course and speed. You could even keep out of the way of two. When the number got to three, things became difficult.

In the Navy, the day never starts because the day never ends, but that wasn't true for a ship sitting in wooden blocks. Then things changed, if not to an eight-hour day, then at least to a semi-civilian job where most of the crew lived at home and drove in every morning

(for the most part) to do their jobs. That was principally preventive maintenance, which is one of the U.S. Navy's religions. It was the same for Al Gregory; in his case, he drove his rented car in from the Norfolk motel and blew a kiss at the rent-a-cop at the guard shack, who waved everyone in. Once there had been armed Marines at the gates, but they'd gone away when the Navy had been stripped of its tactical nuclear weapons. There were still some nukes at the Yorktown ordnance station, because the Trident warheads hadn't yet all been disassembled out at Pantex in Texas, and some still occupied their mainly empty bunkers up on the York River, awaiting shipment west for final disposal. But not at Norfolk, and the ships that had guards mainly depended on sailors carrying Beretta M9 pistols which they might, or might not, know how to use properly. That was the case on USS *Gettysburg*, whose sailors recognized Gregory by sight and waved him aboard with a smile and a greeting.

"Hey, Doc," Senior Chief Leek said, when the civilian came into CIC. He pointed to the coffee urn. The Navy's real fuel was coffee, not distillate fuel, at least as far as the chiefs were concerned.

"So, anything good happening?"

"Well, they're going to put a new wheel on today."

"Wheel?"

"Propeller," Leek explained. "Controllable pitch, reversible screw, made of high-grade manganese-bronze. They're made up in Philadelphia, I think. It's interesting to watch how they do it, long as they don't drop the son of a bitch."

"What about your toy shop?"

"Fully functional, Doc. The last replacement board went in twenty minutes ago, didn't it, Mr. Olson?" The senior chief addressed his assistant CIC officer, who came wandering out of the darkness and into view. "Mr. Olson, this here's Dr. Gregory from TRW."

"Hello," the young officer said, stretching his hand out. Gregory took it.

"Dartmouth, right?"

"Yep, physics and mathematics. You?"

"West Point and Stony Brook, math," Gregory said.

"Hudson High?" Chief Leek asked. "You never told me that."

"Hell, I even did Ranger School between second- and first-class years," he told the surprised sailors. People looked at him and often thought "pussy." He enjoyed surprising them. "Jump School, too. Did nineteen jumps, back when I was young and foolish."

"Then you went into SDI, I gather," Olson observed, getting himself some CIC coffee. The black-gang coffee, from the ship's engineers, was traditionally the best on any ship, but this wasn't bad.

"Yeah, spent a lot of years in that, but it all kinda fizzled out, and

TRW hired me away before I made bird. When you were at Dartmouth, Bob Jastrow ran the department?"

"Yeah, he was involved in SDI, too, wasn't he?"

Gregory nodded. "Yeah, Bob's pretty smart." In his lexicon, *pretty smart* meant doing the calculus in your head.

"What do you do at TRW?"

"I'm heading up the SAM project at the moment, from my SDI work, but they lend me out a lot to other stuff. I mainly do software and the theoretical engineering."

"And you're playing with our SM-2s now?"

"Yeah, I've got a software fix for one of the problems. Works on the 'uter, anyway, and the next job's reprogramming the seeker heads on the Block IVs."

"How you going to do that?"

"Come on over and I'll show you," Gregory said. He and Olson wandered to a desk, with the chief in tow. "The trick is fixing the way the laser nutates. Here's how the software works . . ." This started an hour's worth of discussion, and Senior Chief Leek got to watch a professional software geek explaining his craft to a gifted amateur. Next they'd have to sell all this to the Combat Systems Officer —"Weps"—before they could run the first computer simulations, but it looked to Leek as though Olson was pretty well sold already. Then they'd have to get the ship back in the water to see if all this bullshit actually worked.

T*he sleep had worked,* Bondarenko told himself. Thirteen hours, and he hadn't even awakened to relieve his bladder—so, he must have really needed it. Then and there he decided that Colonel Aliyev would screen successfully for general's stars.

He walked into his evening staff meeting feeling pretty good, until he saw the looks on their faces.

"Well?" he asked, taking his seat.

"Nothing new to report," Colonel Tolkunov reported for the intelligence staff. "Our aerial photos show little, but we know they're there, and they're still not using their radios at all. Presumably they have a lot of phone lines laid. There are scattered reports of people with binoculars on the southern hilltops. That's all. But they're ready, and it could start at any time—oh, yes, just got this from Moscow," the G-2 said. "The Federal Security Service arrested one K. I. Suvorov on suspicion of conspiring to assassinate President Grushavoy."

"What?" Aliyev asked.

"Just a one-line dispatch with no elaboration. It could mean many things, none of them good," the intelligence officer told them. "But nothing definite either."

"An attempt to unsettle our political leadership? That's an act of war," Bondarenko said. He decided he had to call Sergey Golovko himself about that one!

"Operations?" he asked next.

"The 265th Motor Rifle is standing-to. Our air-defense radars are all up and operating. We have interceptor aircraft flying combat air patrol within twenty kilometers of the border. The border defenses are on full alert, and the reserve formation—"

"Have a name for it yet?" the commanding general asked.

"BOYAR," Colonel Aliyev answered. "We have three companies of motorized infantry deployed to evacuate the border troops if necessary, the rest are out of their depot and working up north of Never. They've done gunnery all day."

"And?"

"And for reservists they did acceptably," Aliyev answered. Bondarenko didn't ask what that meant, partly because he was afraid to.

"Anything else we can do? I want ideas, comrades," General Bondarenko said. But all he saw were headshakes. "Very well. I'm going to get some dinner. If anything happens, I want to know about it. Anything at all, comrades." This generated nods, and he walked back to his quarters. There he got on the phone.

"Greetings, General," Golovko said. It was still afternoon in Moscow. "How are things at your end?"

"Tense, Comrade Chairman. What can you tell me of this attempt on the president?"

"We arrested a chap named Suvorov earlier today. We're interrogating him and one other right now. We believe that he was an agent of the Chinese Ministry of State Security, and we believe also that he was conspiring to kill Eduard Petrovich."

"So, in addition to preparing an invasion, they also wish to cripple our political leadership?"

"So it would seem," Golovko agreed gravely.

"Why weren't we given fuller information?" Far East demanded.

"You weren't?" The chairman sounded surprised.

"No!" Bondarenko nearly shouted.

"That was an error. I am sorry, Gennady Iosifovich. Now, you tell me: Are you ready?"

"All of our forces are at maximum alert, but the correlation of forces is adverse in the extreme."

"Can you stop them?"

"If you give me more forces, probably yes. If you do not, probably no. What help can I expect?"

"We have three motor-rifle divisions on trains at this moment

crossing the Urals. We have additional air power heading to you, and the Americans are beginning to arrive. What is your plan?"

"I will not try to stop them at the border. That would merely cost me all of my troops to little gain. I will let the Chinese in and let them march north. I will harass them as much as possible, and then when they are well within our borders, I will kill the body of the snake and watch the head die. *If,* that is, you give me the support I need."

"We are working on it. The Americans are being very helpful. One of their tank divisions is now approaching Poland on trains. We'll send them right through to where you are."

"What units?"

"Their First Tank division, commanded by a Negro chap named Diggs."

"Marion Diggs? I know him."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he commanded their National Training Center and also commanded the force they deployed to the Saudi kingdom last year. He's excellent. When will he arrive?"

"Five days, I should imagine. You'll have three Russian divisions well before then. Will that be enough, Gennady?"

"I do not know," Bondarenko replied. "We have not yet taken the measure of the Chinese. Their air power worries me most of all. If they attack our railhead at Chita, deploying our reinforcements could be very difficult." Bondarenko paused. "We are well set up to move forces laterally, west to east, but to stop them we need to move them northeast from their drop-off points. It will be largely a race to see who can go north faster. The Chinese will also be using infantry to wall off the western flank of their advance. I've been training my men hard. They're getting better, but I need more time and more men. Is there any way to slow them down politically?"

"All political approaches have been ignored. They pretend nothing untoward is happening. The Americans have approached them as well, in hope of discouraging them, but to no avail."

"So, it comes to a test of arms?"

"Probably," Golovko agreed. "You're our best man, Gennady Iosifovich. We believe in you, and you will have all the support we can muster."

"Very well," the general replied, wondering if it would be enough. "I will let you know of any developments here."

General Bondarenko knew that a proper general—the sort they had in movies, that is—would now eat the combat rations his men were having, but no, he'd eat the best food available because he needed his strength, and false modesty would not impress his men at all. He did refrain from alcohol, which was probably more than his sergeants and

privates were doing. The Russian soldier loves his vodka, and the reservists had probably all brought their own bottles to ease the chill of the nights—such would be the spoken excuse. He could have issued an order forbidding it, but there was little sense in drafting an order that his men would ignore. It only undermined discipline, and discipline was something he needed. That would have to come from within his men. The great unknown, as Bondarenko thought of it. When Hitler had struck Russia in 1941—well, it was part of Russian mythology, how the ordinary men of the land had risen up with ferocious determination. From the first day of the war, the courage of the Russian soldier had given the Germans pause. Their battlefield skills might have been lacking, but never their courage. For Bondarenko, both were needed; a skillful man need not be all that brave, because skill would defeat what bravery would only defy. Training. It was always training. He yearned to train the Russian soldier as the Americans trained their men. Above all, to train them to think—to encourage them to think. A thinking *German* soldier had nearly destroyed the Soviet Union—how close it had been was something the movies never admitted, and it was hard enough to learn about it at the General Staff academies, but three times it had been devilishly close, and for some reason the gods of war had sided with Mother Russia on all three occasions.

What would those gods do now? That was the question. Would his men be up to the task? Would *he* be up to the task? It was his name that would be remembered, for good or ill, not those of the private soldiers carrying the AK-47 rifles and driving the tanks and infantry carriers. Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko, general-colonel of the Russian Army, commander-in-chief Far East, hero or fool? Which would it be? Would future military students study his actions and cluck their tongues at his stupidity or shake their heads in admiration of his brilliant maneuvers?

It would have been better to be a colonel again, close to the men of his regiment, even carrying a rifle of his own as he'd done at Dushanbe all those years before, to take a personal part in the battle, and take direct fire at enemies he could see with his own eyes. That was what came back to him now, the battle against the Afghans, defending that missited apartment block in the snow and the darkness. He'd earned his medals that day, but medals were always things of the past. People respected him for them, even his fellow soldiers, the pretty ribbons and metal stars and medallions that hung from them, but what did they mean, really? Would he find the courage he needed to be a commander? He was sure here and now that that sort of courage was harder to find than the sort that came from mere survival instinct, the kind that was generated in the face of armed men who

wished to steal your life away.

It was so easy to look into the indeterminate future with confidence, to know what had to be done, to suggest and insist in a peaceful conference room. But today he was in his quarters, in command of a largely paper army that happened to be facing a real army composed of men and steel, and if he failed to deal with it, his name would be cursed for all time. Historians would examine his character and his record and say, well, yes, he was a brave colonel, and even an adequate theoretician, but when it came to a real fight, he was unequal to the task. And if he failed, men would die, and the nation he'd sworn to defend thirty years before would suffer, if not by his hand, then by his responsibility.

And so General Bondarenko looked at his plate of food and didn't eat, just pushed the food about with his fork, and wished for the tumbler of vodka that his character denied him.

General Peng Xi-Wang was finishing up what he expected to be his last proper meal for some weeks. He'd miss the long-grain rice that was not part of combat rations—he didn't know why that was so: The general who ran the industrial empire that prepared rations for the frontline soldiers had never explained it to him, though Peng was sure that he never ate those horrid packaged foods himself. He had a staff to taste-test, after all. Peng lit an after-dinner smoke and enjoyed a small sip of rice wine. It would be the last of those for a while, too. His last pre-combat meal completed, Peng rose and donned his tunic. The gilt shoulderboards showed his rank as three stars and a wreath.

Outside his command trailer, his subordinates waited. When he came out, they snapped to attention and saluted as one man, and Peng saluted back. Foremost was Colonel Wa Cheng-Gong, his operations officer. Wa was aptly named. Cheng-Gong, his given name, meant "success."

"So, Wa, are we ready?"

"Entirely ready, Comrade General."

"Then let us go and see." Peng led them off to his personal Type 90 command-post vehicle. Cramped inside, even for people of small size, it was further crowded by banks of FM radios, which fed the ten-meter-tall radio masts at the vehicle's four corners. There was scarcely room for the folding map table, but his battle staff of six could work in there, even when on the move. The driver and gunner were both junior officers, not enlisted men.

The turbocharged diesel caught at once, and the vehicle lurched toward the front. Inside, the map table was already down, and the operations officer showed their position and their course to men who already knew it. The large roof hatch was opened to vent the smoke.

Every man aboard was smoking a cigarette now.

Hear that?" Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov had his head outside the top hatch of the tank turret that composed the business end of his bunker. It was the turret of an old—ancient—JS-3 tank. Once the most fearsome part of the world's heaviest main-battle tank, this turret had never gone anywhere except to turn around, its already thick armor upgraded by an additional twenty centimeters of applique steel. As part of a bunker, it was only marginally slower than the original tank, which had been underpowered at best, but the monster 122-mm gun still worked, and worked even better here, because underneath it was not the cramped confines of a tank hull, but rather a spacious concrete structure which gave the crewmen room to move and turn around. That arrangement cut the reloading speed of the gun by more than half, and didn't hurt accuracy either, because this turret had better optics. Lieutenant Komanov was, notionally, a tanker, and his platoon here was twelve tanks instead of the normal three, because these didn't move. Ordinarily, it was not demanding duty, commanding twelve six-man crews, who didn't go anywhere except to the privy, and they even got to practice their gunnery at a duplicate of this emplacement at a range located twenty kilometers away. They'd been doing that lately, in fact, at the orders of their new commanding general, and neither Komanov nor his men minded, because for every soldier in the world, shooting is fun, and the bigger the gun, the greater the enjoyment. Their 122-mms had a relatively slow muzzle velocity, but the shell was large enough to compensate for it. Lately, they'd gotten to shoot at worn-out old T-55s and blown the turret off each one with a single hit, though getting the single hit had taken the crews, on the average, 2.7 shots fired.

They were on alert now, a fact which their eager young lieutenant was taking seriously. He'd even had his men out running every morning for the last two weeks, not the most pleasant of activities for soldiers detailed to sit inside concrete emplacements for their two years of conscripted service. It wasn't easy to keep their edge. One naturally felt secure in underground concrete structures capped with thick steel and surrounded with bushes which made their bunker invisible from fifty meters away. Theirs was the rearmost of the platoons, sitting on the south slope of Hill 432—its summit was 432 meters high—facing the north side of the first rank of hills over the Amur Valley. Those hills were a lot shorter than the one they were on, and also had bunkers on them, but those bunkers were fakes—not that you could tell without going inside, because they'd also been made of old tank turrets—in their case from truly ancient KV-2s that had fought the Germans before rusting in retirement—set in concrete

boxes. The additional height of their hill meant that they could see into China, whose territory started less than four kilometers away. And that was close enough to hear things on a calm night.

Especially if the thing they heard was a few hundred diesel engines starting up at once.

"Engines," agreed Komanov's sergeant. "A fucking lot of them."

The lieutenant hopped down from his perch inside the turret and walked the three steps to the phone switchboard. He lifted the receiver and punched the button to the regimental command post, ten kilometers north.

"This is Post Five Six Alfa. We can hear engines to our south. It sounds like tank engines, a lot of them."

"Can you see anything?" the regimental commander asked.

"No, Comrade Colonel. But the sound is unmistakable."

"Very well. Keep me informed."

"Yes, comrade. Out." Komanov set the phone back in its place. His most-forward bunker was Post Five Nine, on the south slope of the first rank of hills. He punched that button.

"This is Lieutenant Komanov. Can you see or hear anything?"

"We see nothing," the corporal there answered. "But we hear tank engines."

"You see nothing?"

"Nothing, Comrade Lieutenant," Corporal Vladimirov responded positively.

"Are you ready?"

"We are fully ready," Vladimirov assured him. "We are watching the south."

"Keep me informed," Komanov ordered, unnecessarily. His men were alert and standing-to. He looked around. He had a total of two hundred rounds for his main gun, all in racks within easy reach of the turret. His loader and gunner were at their posts, the former scanning the terrain with optical sights better than his own officer's binoculars. His reserve crewmen were just sitting in their chairs, waiting for someone to die. The door to the escape tunnel was open. A hundred meters through that was a BTR-60 eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier ready to get them the hell away, though his men didn't expect to make use of it. Their post was impregnable, wasn't it? They had the best part of a meter of steel on the gun turret, and three meters of reinforced concrete, with a meter of dirt atop it—and besides, they were hidden in a bush. You couldn't hit what you couldn't see, could you? And the Chinks had slitty little eyes and couldn't see very well, could they? Like all the men in this crew, Komanov was a European Russian, though there were Asians under his command. This part of his country was a mishmash of nationalities and languages, though all

had learned Russian, if not at home, then in school.

"Movement," the gunner said. "Movement on Rice Ridge." That was what they called the first ridge line in Chinese territory. "Infantrymen."

"You're sure they're soldiers?" Komanov asked.

"I suppose they might be shepherds, but I don't see any sheep, Comrade Lieutenant." The gunner had a wry sense of humor.

"Move," the lieutenant told the crewman who'd taken his place in the command hatch. He reclaimed the tank commander's seat. "Get me the headset," he ordered next. Now he'd be connected to the phone system with a simple push-button microphone. With that, he could talk to his other eleven crews or to regiment. But Komanov didn't don the earphones just yet. He wanted his ears clear. The night was still, the winds calm, just a few gentle breezes. They were a good distance from any real settlement, and so there were no sounds of traffic to interfere. Then he leveled his binoculars on the far ridge. Yes, there was the ghostly suggestion of movement there, almost like seeing someone's hair blowing in the wind. But it wasn't hair. It could only be people. And as his gunner had observed, they would not be shepherds.

For ten years, the officers in the border bunkers had cried out for low-light goggles like those issued to the Spetsnaz and other elite formations, but, no, they were too expensive for low-priority posts, and so such things were only seen here when some special inspection force came through, just long enough for the regular troops to drool over them. No, they were supposed to let their eyes adapt to the darkness . . . *as though they think we're cats,* Komanov thought. But all the interior battle lights in the bunkers were red, and that helped. He'd forbidden the use of white lights inside the post for the past week.

Brothers of this tank turret had first been produced in late 1944—the JS-3 had stayed in production for many *years*, *as though no one had summoned the courage to stop producing something with the name Iosif Stalin on it,* he thought. Some of them had rolled into Germany, invulnerable to anything the Fritzes had deployed. And the same tanks had given serious headaches to the Israelis, with their American- and English-built tanks, as well.

"This is Post Fifty. We have a lot of movement, looks like infantry, on the north slope of Rice Ridge. Estimate regimental strength," his earphones crackled.

"How many high-explosive shells do we have?" Komanov asked.

"Thirty-five," the loader answered.

And that was a goodly amount. And there were fifteen heavy guns within range of Rice Ridge, all of them old ML-20 152-mm howitzers,

all sitting on concrete pads next to massive ammo bunkers. Komanov checked his watch. Almost three-thirty. Ninety minutes to first light. The sky was cloudless. He could look up and see stars such as they didn't have in Moscow, with all its atmospheric pollution. No, the Siberian sky was clear and clean, and above his head was an ocean of light made brighter still by a full moon still high in the western sky. He focused his eyes through his binoculars again. Yes, there was movement on Rice Ridge.

So?" Peng asked.

"At your command," Wa replied.

Peng and his staff were forward of their guns, the better to see the effect of their fire.

But seventy thousand feet over General Peng's head was Marilyn Monroe. Each of the Dark Star drones had a name attached to it, and given the official name of the platform, the crews had chosen the names of movie stars, all of them, of course, of the female persuasion. This one even had a copy of the movie star's *Playboy* centerfold from 1953 skillfully painted on the nose, but the eyes looking down from the stealthy UAV were electronic and multispectrum rather than china blue. Inside the fiberglass nosecone, a directional antenna cross-linked the "take" to a satellite, which then distributed it to many places. The nearest was Zhigansk. The farthest was Fort Belvoir, Virginia, within spitting distance of Washington, D.C., and that one sent its feed via fiberoptic cable to any number of classified locations. Unlike most spy systems, this one showed realtime movie-type imagery.

"Looks like they're getting ready, sir," an Army staff sergeant observed to his immediate boss, a captain. And sure enough, you could see soldiers ramming shells into the breeches of their field pieces, followed by the smaller cloth bags that contained the propellant. Then the breeches were slammed shut, and the guns elevated. The 30-30-class blank cartridges were inserted into the firing ports of the breechblocks, and the guns were fully ready. The last step was called "pulling the string," and was fairly accurate. You just jerked the lanyard rope to fire the blank cartridge and that ignited the powder bags, and then the shell went north at high speed.

"How many guns total, Sergeant?" the captain asked.

"A whole goddamned pisspot full, sir."

"I can see that. What about a number?" the officer asked.

"North of six hundred, and that's just in this here sector, Cap'n. Plus four hundred mobile rocket launchers."

"We spotted air assets yet?"

"No, sir. The Chinese aren't nighttime flyers yet, least not for

bombing."

Eagle Seven to Zebra, over," the AWACS senior controller radioed back to Zhigansk.

"Zebra to Seven, reading you five-by-five," the major running the ground base replied.

"We got bogies, call it thirty-two coming north out of Siping, estimate they're Sierra-Uniform Two-Sevens."

"Makes sense," the major on the ground told his wing commander. "Siping's their 667th Regiment. That's their best in terms of aircraft, and stick-time. That's their varsity, Colonel."

"Who do we have to meet them?"

"Our Russian friends out of Nelkan. Nearest American birds are well north and—"

"—and we haven't got orders to engage anybody yet," the colonel agreed. "Okay, let's get the Russians alerted."

"Eagle Seven to Black Falcon Ten, we have Chinese fighters three hundred kilometers bearing one-nine-six your position, angels thirty, speed five hundred knots. They're still over Chinese territory, but not for much longer."

"Understood," the Russian captain responded. "Give me a vector."

"Recommend intercept vector two-zero-zero," the American controller said. His spoken Russian was pretty good. "Maintain current speed and altitude."

"Roger."

On the E-3B's radar displays, the Russian Su-27s turned to head for the Chinese Su-27s. The Russians would have radar contact in about nine minutes.

Sir, this don't look real nice," another major in Zhigansk said to his general.

"Then it's time to get a warning out," the USAF two-star agreed. He lifted a phone that went to the Russian regional command post. There hadn't as yet been time to get a proper downlink to them.

General, a call from the American technical mission at Zhigansk," Tolkunov said.

"This is General Bondarenko."

"Hello, this is Major General Gus Wallace. I just set up the reconnaissance shop here. We just put up a stealthy recon-drone over the Russian Chinese border at . . ." He read off the coordinates. "We show people getting ready to fire some artillery at you, General."

"How much?" Bondarenko asked.

"Most I've ever seen, upwards of a thousand guns total. I hope your people are hunkered down, buddy. The whole damned world's about to land on 'em."

"What can you do to help us?" Bondarenko asked.

"My orders are not to take action until they start shooting," the American replied. "When that happens, I can start putting fighters up, but not much in the way of bombs. We hardly have any to drop," Wallace reported. "I have an AWACS up now, supporting your fighters in the Chulman area, but that's all for now. We have a C-130 ferrying you a downlink tomorrow so that we can get you some intelligence directly. Anyway, be warned, General, it looks here as though the Chinese are going to launch their attack momentarily."

"Thank you, General Wallace." Bondarenko hung up and looked at his staff. "He says it's going to start at any moment."

And so it did. Lieutenant Komanov saw it first. The line of hills his men called Rice Ridge was suddenly backlit by yellow flame that could only be the muzzle flashes of numerous field guns. Then came the upward-flying meteor shapes of artillery rockets.

"Here it comes," he told his men. Unsurprisingly, he kept his head up so that he could see. His head, he reasoned, was a small target. Before the shells landed, he felt the impact of their firing; the rumble came through the ground like a distant earthquake, causing his loader to mutter, "Oh, shit," probably the universal observation of men in their situation.

"Get me regiment," Komanov ordered.

"Yes, Lieutenant," the voice answered.

"We are under attack, Comrade Colonel, massive artillery fire to the south. Guns and rockets are coming our—"

Then the first impacts came, mainly near the river, well to his south. The exploding shells were not bright, but like little sparks of light that fountained dirt upward, followed by the noise. That *did* sound like an earthquake. Komanov had heard artillery fire before, and seen what the shells do at the far end, but this was as different from that as an exploding oil tank was from a cigarette lighter.

"Comrade Colonel, our country is at war," Post Five Six Alfa reported to command. "I can't see enemy troop movement yet, but they're coming."

"Do you have any targets?" regiment asked.

"No, none at this time." He looked down into the bunker. His various positions could just give a direction to a target, and when another confirmed it and called in its own vector, they'd have a pre-plotted artillery target for the batteries in the rear—

—but those were being hit already. The Chinese rockets were

targeted well behind him, and that's what their targets had to be. He turned his head to see the flashes and hear the booms from ten kilometers back. A moment later, there was a fountaining explosion skyward. One of the first flight of Chinese rockets had gotten lucky and hit one of the artillery positions in the rear. *Bad news for that gun crew*, Komanov thought. The first casualties in this war. There would be many more . . . perhaps including himself. Surprisingly, that thought was a distant one. Someone was attacking *his* country. It wasn't a supposition or a possibility anymore. He could see it, and feel it. This was *his* country they were attacking. He'd grown up in this land. His parents lived here. His grandfather had fought the Germans here. His grandfather's two brothers had, too, and both had died for their country, one west of Kiev and the other at Stalingrad. And now these Chink bastards were attacking his country, too? More than that, they were attacking *him*, Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov. These *foreigners* were trying to kill him, his men, *and* trying to steal part of his country.

Well, fuck that! he thought.

"Load HE!" he told his loader.

"Loaded!" the private announced. They all heard the breech clang shut.

"No target, Comrade Lieutenant," the gunner observed.

"There will be, soon enough."

"Post Five Nine, this is Five Six Alfa. What can you see?"

"We just spotted a boat, a rubber boat, coming out of the trees on the south bank . . . more, more, more, many of them, maybe a hundred, maybe more."

"Regiment, this is Fifty-six Alfa, fire mission!" Komanov called over the phone.

The gunners ten kilometers back were at their guns, despite the falling Chinese shells and rockets that had already claimed three of the fifteen gun crews. The fire mission was called in, and the preset concentration dialed in from range books so old they might as well have been engraved in marble. In each case, the high-explosive projectile was rammed into the breech, followed by the propellant charge, and the gun cranked up and trained to the proper elevation and azimuth, and the lanyards pulled, and the first Russian counterstrokes in the war just begun were fired.

Unknown to them, fifteen kilometers away a fire-finder radar was trained on their positions. The millimeter-wave radar tracked the shells in flight and a computer plotted their launch points. The Chinese knew that the Russians had guns covering the border, and knew roughly where they would be—the performance of the guns told

that tale—but not exactly where, because of the skillful Russian efforts at camouflage. In this case, those efforts didn't matter too greatly. The calculated position of six Russian howitzers was instantly radioed to rocket launchers that were dedicated counter-battery weapons. One Type-83 launcher was detailed to each target, and each of them held four monster 273-mm rockets, each with a payload of 150 kilograms of submunitions, in this case eighty hand grenade—sized bomblets. The first rocket launched three minutes after the first Russian counter-fire salvo, and required less than two minutes of flight time from its firing point ten kilometers inside Chinese territory. Of the first six fired, five destroyed their targets, and then others, and the Russian gunfire died in less than five minutes.

Why did it stop?" Komanov asked. He'd seen a few rounds hit among the Chinese infantry just getting out of their boats on the Russian side of the river. But the shriek of shells overhead passing south had just stopped after a few minutes. "Regiment, this is Five Six Alfa, why has our fire stopped?"

"Our guns were taking counter-battery fire from the Chinese. They're trying to get set back up now," was the encouraging reply. "What is your situation?"

"Position Five-Zero has taken a little fire, but not much. Mainly they're hitting the reverse slope of the southern ridge." That was where the fake bunkers were, and the concrete lures were fulfilling their passive mission. This line of defenses had been set up contrary to published Russian doctrine, because whoever had set them up had known that all manner of people can read books. Komanov's own position covered a small saddle-pass through two hills, fit for advancing tanks. If the Chinese came north in force, if this was not just some sort of probe aimed at expanding their borders—they'd done that back in the late 1960s—this was a prime invasion route. The maps and the terrain decided that.

"That is good, Lieutenant. Now listen: Do not expose your positions unnecessarily. Let them in close before you open up. Very close." That, Komanov knew, meant a hundred meters or so. He had two heavy machine guns for that eventuality. But he wanted to kill tanks. That was what his main gun had been designed to do.

"Can we expect more artillery support?" he asked his commander.

"I'll let you know. Keep giving us target information."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

For the fighter planes, the war began when the first PLAAF crossed over the Amur. There were four Russian fighter-interceptors up, and these, just like the invaders, were Sukhoi-27. Those on both sides had

been made in the same factories, but the Chinese pilots had triple the recent flight time of the defending Russians, who were outnumbered eight to one.

Countering that, however was the fact that the Russian aircraft had support from the USAF E-3B Sentry AWACS aircraft, which was guiding them to the intercept. Both sets of fighters were flying with their target-acquisition radars in standby mode. The Chinese didn't know what was out there. The Russians did. That was a difference.

"Black Falcon Ten, this is Eagle Seven. Recommend you come right to new course two-seven-zero. I'm going to try an' bring you up on the Chinese from their seven o'clock." It would also keep them out of Chinese radar coverage.

"Understood, Eagle. Coming right to two-seven-zero." The Russian flight leader spread his formation out and settled down as much as he could, with his eyes tending to look off to his left.

"Okay, Black Falcon Ten, that's good. Your targets are now at your nine o'lock, distance thirty kilometers. Come left now to one-eight-zero."

"Coming left," the Russian major acknowledged. "We will try to start the attack Fox-Two," he advised. He knew American terminology. That meant launching infrared seekers, which did not require the use of radar, and so did not warn anyone that he was in harm's way. The Marquis of Queensberry had never been a fighter pilot.

"Roger that, Falcon. This boy's smart," the controller commented to his supervisor.

"That's how you stay alive in this business," the lieutenant colonel told the young lieutenant at the Nintendo screen.

"Okay, Falcon Ten, recommend you come left again. Targets are now fifteen kilometers . . . make that seventeen kilometers to your north. You should have tone shortly."

"*Da.* I have tone," the Russian pilot reported, when he heard the warble in his headset. "Flight, prepare to fire . . . Fox-Two!" Three of the four aircraft loosed a single missile each. The fourth pilot was having trouble with his IR scanner. In all cases, the blazing rocket motors wrecked their night vision, but none of the pilots looked away, as they'd been trained to do, and instead watched their missiles streak after fellow airmen who did not yet know they were under attack. It took twenty seconds, and as it turned out, two missiles were targeted on the same Chinese aircraft. That one took two hits and exploded. The second died from its single impact, and then things really got confusing. The Chinese fighters scattered on command from their commander, doing so in a preplanned and well-rehearsed maneuver, first into two groups, then into four, each of which had a piece of sky

to defend. Everyone's radar came on, and in another twenty seconds, a total of forty missiles were flying, and with this began a deadly game of chicken. The radarhoming missiles needed a radar signal to guide them, and that meant that the firing fighter could not switch off or turn away, only hope that his bird would kill its target and switch off his radar before his missile got close.

"Damn," the lieutenant observed, in his comfortable controller's seat in the E-3B. Two more Chinese fighters blinked into larger bogies on his screen and then started to fade, then another, but there were just too many of the Chinese air-to-air missiles, and not all of the Chinese illumination radars went down. One Russian fighter took three impacts and disintegrated. Another one limped away with severe damage, and as quickly as it had begun, this air encounter ended. Statistically, it was a Russian win, four kills for one loss, but the Chinese would claim more.

"Any chutes?" the senior controller asked over the intercom. The E-3 radar could track those, too.

"Three, maybe four ejected. Not sure who, though, not till we play the tape back. Damn, that was a quick one."

The Russians didn't have enough planes up to do a proper battle. Maybe next time, the colonel thought. The full capabilities of a fighter/AWACS team had never been properly demonstrated in combat, but this war held the promise to change that, and when it happened, some eyes would be opened.

CHAPTER 51

Falling Back

Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov learned something he'd never suspected. The worst part of battle—at least to a man in a fixed emplacement—was knowing that the enemy was out there, but being unable to shoot at him. The reverse slopes of the ridge to his immediate south had to be swarming with Chinese infantry, and his supporting artillery had been taken out in the first minutes of the battle. Whoever had set up the artillery positions had made the mistake of assuming that the guns were too far back and too shielded by terrain for the enemy to strike at them. Fire-finder radar/computer systems had changed that, and the absence of overhead cover had doomed the guncrews to rapid death, unless some of them had found shelter in the concrete-lined trenches built into their positions. He had a powerful gun at his fingertips, but it was one that could not reach over the hills to his south because of its flat trajectory. As envisioned, this defense line would have included leg infantry who'd depend on and also support the bunker strongpoints—and be armed with mortars which could reach over the close-in hills and punish those who were there but unseen behind the terrain feature. Komanov could only engage those he could see, and they—

"There, Comrade Lieutenant," the gunner said. "A little right of twelve o'lock, some infantry just crested the ridge. Range one thousand five hundred meters."

"I see them." There was just a hint of light on the eastern horizon now. Soon there would be enough light to see by. That would make shooting easier, but for both sides. In an hour, his bunker would be targeted, and they'd get to see just how thick their armor protection really was.

"Five Six Alfa, this is Five Zero. We have infantry eleven hundred meters to our south. Company strength and moving north toward us."

"Very well. Do not engage until they are within two hundred meters." Komanov automatically doubled the shooting range at which he'd been trained to open fire. What the hell, he thought, his crews would do that in their own minds anyway. A man thinks differently when real bullets are flying.

As if to emphasize that, shells started landing on the crest immediately behind his position, close enough to make him duck down.

"So they see us?" his loader asked.

"No, they're just barraging the next set of hills to support their infantrymen."

"Look, look there, they're on top of false bunker One Six," the gunner said. Komanov shifted his glasses—

Yes, they were there, examining the old KV-2 gun turret with its vertical sides and old 155-mm gun. As he watched, a soldier hung a satchel charge on the side and backed away. Then the charge went off, destroying something that had never worked anyway. *That would make some Chinese lieutenant feel good,* Komanov thought. Well, Five Six Alfa would change his outlook somewhat, in another twenty or thirty minutes.

The bad part was that now he had perfect targets for his supporting artillery, and those old six-inch guns would have cut through them like a harvester's scythe. Except the Chinese were *still* hitting those positions, even though the Russian fire had stopped. He called Regiment again to relay his information.

"Lieutenant," his colonel answered, "the supporting battery has been badly hit. You are on your own. Keep me posted."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. Out." He looked down at his crew. "Don't expect supporting fire." The weapons of World War III had just destroyed those of World War I.

"Shit," the loader observed.

"We'll be in the war soon, men. Be at ease. The enemy is now loser . . ."

"Five hundred meters," the gunner agreed.

* * *

Well?" General Peng asked at his post atop Rice Ridge. "We've found some bunkers, but they are all unoccupied," Colonel Wa reported. "So far, the only fire we've taken has been indirect artillery, and we've counterbatteried that to death. The attack is going completely to plan, Comrade General." They could see the truth of that. The bridging engineers were rolling up to the south bank of the Amur now, with folded sections of ribbon bridge atop their trucks. Over a hundred Type 90 main-battle tanks were close to the river, their turrets searching vainly for targets so that they could support the attacking infantry, but there was nothing for them to shoot at, and so the tankers, like the generals, had nothing to do but watch the

engineers at work. The first bridge section went into the water, flipping open to form the first eight meters of highway across the river. Peng checked his watch. Yes, things were going about five minutes ahead of schedule, and that was good.

Post Five Zero opened up first with its 12.7-mm machine gun. The sound of it rattled across the hillside. Five Zero was thirty-five hundred meters to his east, commanded by a bright young sergeant named Ivanov. *He opened up too early*, Komanov thought, reaching for targets a good four hundred meters away, but there was nothing to complain about, and the heavy machine gun could easily reach that far . . . yes, he could see bodies crumpling from the heavy slugs—

—then a crashing *BOOM* as the main gun let loose a single round, and it reached into the saddle they defended, exploding there amidst a squad or so.

"Comrade Lieutenant, can we?" his gunner asked.

"No, not yet. Patience, Sergeant," Komanov replied, watching to the east to see how the Chinese reacted to the fire. Yes, their tactics were predictable, but sound. The lieutenant commanding them first got his men down. Then they set up a base of fire to engage the Russian position, and then they started maneuvering left and right. Aha, a section was setting up something . . . something on a tripod. An anti-tank recoilless rifle, probably. He could have turned his gun to take it out, but Komanov didn't want to give away his position yet.

"Five Zero, this is Five Six Alfa, there's a Chinese recoilless setting up at your two o'lock, range eight hundred," he warned.

"Yes, I see it!" the sergeant replied. And he had the good sense to engage it with his machine gun. In two seconds, the green tracers reached out and ripped through the gun section once, twice, three times, just to be sure. Through his binoculars, he could see some twitching, but that was all.

"Well done, Sergeant Ivanov! Look out, they're moving to your left under terrain cover."

But there wasn't much of that around here. Every bunker's field of fire had been bulldozed, leveling out almost all of the dead ground within eight hundred meters of every position.

"We shall see about that, Comrade Lieutenant." And the machine gun spoke again. Return fire was coming in now. Komanov could see tracers bouncing off the turret's thick armor into the sky.

"Regiment, Five Six Alfa here. Post Five Zero is under deliberate attack now from infantry, and—"

Then more artillery shells started landing, called in directly on Five Zero. He hoped Ivanov was now under his hatch. The turret had a coaxial machine gun, an old but powerful PK with the long 7.62-mm

cartridge. Komanov let his gunner survey the threat to his bunker while he watched how the Chinese attacked Sergeant Ivanov's. Their infantry moved with some skill, using what ground they had, keeping fire on the exposed gun turret—enough artillery fell close enough to strip away the bushes that had hidden it at first. Even if your bullets bounced off, they were still a distraction to those inside. It was the big shells that concerned the lieutenant. A direct hit might penetrate the thinner top armor, mightn't it? An hour before, he would have said no, but he could see now what the shells did to the ground, and his confidence had eroded quickly.

"Comrade Lieutenant," his gunner said. "The people headed for us are turning away to attack Ivanov. Look."

Komanov turned around to see. He didn't need his binoculars. The sky was improving the light he had, and now he could see more than shadows. They were man shapes, and they were carrying weapons. One section was rushing to his left, three of them carrying something heavy. On reaching a shallow intermediate ridgeline, they stopped and started putting something together, some sort of tube . . .

. . . it was an HJ-8 anti-tank missile, his mind told him, fishing up the information from his months of intelligence briefings. They were about a thousand meters to his left front, within range of Ivanov . . .

. . . and within range of his big DshKM machine gun. Komanov stood on his firing stand and yanked back hard on the charging handle, leveling the gun and sighting carefully. His big tank gun could do this, but so could he . . .

So, you want to kill Sergeant Ivanov? his mind asked. Then he thumbed the trigger lever, and the big gun shook in his hands. His first burst was about thirty meters short, but his second was right on, and three men fell. He kept firing to make sure he'd destroyed their rocket launcher. He realized a moment later that the brilliant green tracers had just announced his location for all to see—tracers work in both directions. That became clear in two minutes, when the first artillery shells began landing around Position Five Six Alfa. He only needed one close explosion to drop down and slam his hatch. The hatch was the weakest part of his position's protection, with only a fifth of the protective thickness of the rest—else he'd be unable to open it, of course—and if a shell hit *that,* he and his crew would all be dead. The enemy knew their location now, and there was no sense in hiding.

"Sergeant," he told his gunner. "Fire at will."

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant!" And with that, the sergeant loosed his first high-explosive round at a machine-gun crew eight hundred meters away. The shell hit the gun itself and vaporized the infantrymen operating it. "There's three good Chinks!" he exulted.

“Load me another!” The turret started turning, and the gunner started hunting.

* * *

Getting some resistance now,” Wa told Peng. “There are Russian positions on the southern slope of the second ridge. We’re hitting them now with artillery.”

“Losses?”

“Light,” the operations officer reported, listening in on the tactical radio.

“Good,” said General Peng. His attention was almost entirely on the river. The first bridge was about a third complete now.

Those bridging engineers are pretty good,” General Wallace thought, watching the “ake” from Marilyn Monroe.

“Yes, sir, but it might as well be a peacetime exercise. They’re not taking any fire,” the junior officer observed, watching another section being tied off. “And it’s a very efficient bridge design.”

“Russian?”

The major nodded. “Yes, sir. We copied it, too.”

“How long?”

“The rate they’re going? About an hour, maybe an hour ten.”

“Back to the gunfight,” Wallace ordered.

“Sergeant, let’s go back to the ridge,” the officer told the NCO who was piloting the UAC. Thirty seconds later, the screen showed what looked like a tank sunk in the mud surrounded by a bunch of infantrymen.

“Jesus, that looks like real fun,” Wallace thought. A fighter pilot by profession, the idea of fighting in the dirt appealed to him about as much as anal sex.

“They’re not going to last much longer,” the major said. “Look here. The gomers are behind some of the bunkers now.”

“And look at all that artillery.”

A total of a hundred heavy field guns were now pounding Komanov’s immobile platoon. That amounted to a full battery fixed on each of them, and heavy as his buried concrete box was, it was shaking now, and the air inside filled with cement dust, as Komanov and his crew struggled to keep up with all the targets.

“This is getting exciting, Comrade Lieutenant,” the gunner observed, as he loosed his fifteenth main-gun shot.

Komanov was in his commander's cupola, looking around and seeing, rather to his surprise, that his bunker and all the others under his command could not deal with the attackers. It was a case of intellectual knowledge finally catching up with what his brain had long proclaimed as evident common sense. He actually was *not* invincible here. Despite his big tank gun and his two heavy machine guns, he could not deal with all these *insects* buzzing about him. It was like swatting flies with an icepick. He reckoned that he and his crew had personally killed or wounded a hundred or so attackers—but no tanks. Where were the tanks he yearned to kill? He could do that job well. But to deal with infantry, he needed supporting artillery fire, plus foot soldiers of his own. Without them, he was like a big rock on the seacoast, indestructible, but the waves could just wash around him. And they were doing that now, and then Komanov remembered that all the rocks by the sea *were* worn down by the waves, and eventually toppled by them. His war had lasted three hours, not even that much, and he was fully surrounded, and if he wanted to survive, it would soon be time to leave.

The thought enraged him. Desert his post? *Run away?* But then he remembered that he had orders allowing him to do so, if and when his post became untenable. He'd received the orders with a confident chuckle. Run away from an impregnable mini-fortress? What nonsense. But now he was alone. Each of his posts was alone. And—

—the turret rang like an off-tone bell with a direct impact of a heavy shell, and then—

—"*Shit!*" the gunner screamed. "Shit! My gun's damaged!"

Komanov looked out of one of his vision slits, and yes, he could see it. The gun tube was scorched and . . . and actually bent. Was that possible? A gun barrel was the sturdiest structure men could make—but it was slightly bent. And so it was no longer a gun barrel at all, but just an unwieldy steel club. It had fired thirty-four rounds, but it would fire no more. With that gone, he'd never kill a Chinese tank. Komanov took a deep breath to collect himself and his thoughts. Yes, it was time.

"Prepare the post for destruction!" he ordered.

"Now?" the gunner asked incredulously.

"Now!" the lieutenant ordered. "Set it up!"

There was a drill for this, and they'd practiced it. The loader took a demolition charge and set it among the racked shells. The electrical cable was in a spool, which he played out. The gunner ignored this, cranking the turret right to fire his coaxial machine gun at some approaching soldiers, then turning rapidly the other way to strike at those who'd used his reaction to the others' movement for cover to move themselves. Komanov stepped down from the cupola seat and

looked around. There was his bed, and the table at which they'd all eaten their food, and the toilet room and the shower. This bunker had become home, a place of both comfort and work, but now they had to surrender it to the Chinese. It was almost inconceivable, but it could not be denied. In the movies, they'd fight to the death here, but fighting to the death was a lot more comfortable for actors who could start a new film the next week.

"Come on, Sergeant," he ordered his gunner, who took one last long burst before stepping down and heading toward the escape tunnel.

Komanov counted off the men as they went, then headed out. He realized he hadn't phoned his intentions back to Regiment, and he hesitated, but, no, there wasn't time for that now. He'd radio his action from the moving BTR.

The tunnel was low enough that they had to run bent over, but it was also lit, and there was the outer door. When the reserve gunner opened it, they were greeted by the much louder sound of falling shells.

"You fucking took long enough," a thirtyish sergeant snarled at them. "Come on!" he urged, waving them to his BTR-60.

"Wait." Komanov took the twist-detonator and attached the wire ends to the terminals. He sheltered behind the concrete abutment that contained the steel door and twisted the handle once.

The demolition charge was ten kilograms of TNT. It and the stored shells created an explosion that roared out of the escape tunnel with a sound like the end of the world, and on the far side of the hill the heavy turret of the never-finished JS-3 tank rocketed skyward, to the amazed pleasure of the Chinese infantrymen. And with that, Komanov's job was done. He turned and followed his men to board the eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier. It was ensconced on a concrete pad under a grass-covered concrete roof that had prevented anyone from seeing it, and now it raced down the hill to the north and safety.

Bugging out," the sergeant told the major, tapping the TV screen taking the feed from Marilyn Monroe. "This bunch just blew up their gun turret. That's the third one to call it a day."

"Surprised they lasted this long," General Wallace said. Sitting still in a combat zone was an idea entirely foreign to him. He'd never done fighting while moving slower than four hundred knots, and he considered that speed to be practically standing still.

"I bet the Russians will be disappointed," the major said.

"When do we get the downlink to Chabarsovil?"

"Before lunch, sir. We're sending a team down to show them how to use it."

The BTR was in many ways the world's ultimate SUV, with eight driving wheels, the lead four of which turned with the steering wheel. The reservist behind that wheel was a truck driver in civilian life, and knew how to drive only with his right foot pressed to the floor, Komanov decided. He and his men bounced inside like dice in a cup, saved from head injury only by their steel helmets. But they didn't complain. Looking out of the rifle-firing ports, they could see the impact of Chinese artillery, and the quicker they got away from that, the better they'd all feel.

"How was it for you?" the lieutenant asked the sergeant commanding the vehicle.

"Mainly we were praying for you to be a coward. What with all those shells falling around us. Thank God for whoever built that garage we were hidden in. At least one shell fell directly on it. I nearly shit myself," the reservist reported with refreshing candor. They were communicating in face-to-face shouts.

"How long to regimental headquarters?"

"About ten minutes. How many did you get?"

"Maybe two hundred," Komanov thought, rather generously. "Never saw a tank."

"They're probably building their ribbon bridges right now. It takes a while. I saw a lot of that when I was in Eighth Guards Army in Germany. Practically all we practiced was crossing rivers. How good are they?"

"They're not cowards. They advance under fire even when you kill some of them. What happened to our artillery?"

"Wiped out, artillery rockets, came down like a blanket of hail, Comrade Lieutenant, *crump,"* he replied with a twohanded gesture.

"Where is our support?"

"Who the fuck do you think we are?" the sergeant asked in reply. They were all surprised when the BRT skidded to an unwarned stop. "What's happening?" he shouted at the driver.

"Look!" the man said in reply, pointing.

Then the rear hatches jerked open and ten men scrambled in, making the interior of the BTR as tight as a can of fish.

"Comrade Lieutenant!" It was Ivanov from Five Zero.

"What happened?"

"We took a shell on the hatch," he replied, and the bandages on his face told the truth of the tale. He was in some pain, but happy to be moving again. "Our BTR took a direct hit on the nose, killed the driver and wrecked it."

"I've never seen shelling like this, not even in exercises in Germany and the Ukraine," the BTR sergeant said. "Like the war movies, but

different when you're really in it."

"Da," Komanov agreed. It was no fun at all, even in his bunker, but especially out here. The sergeant lit up a cigarette, a Japanese one, and held on to the overhead grip to keep from rattling around too much. Fortunately, the driver knew the way, and the Chinese artillery abated, evidently firing at random target sets beyond visual range of their spotters.

It's started, Jack," Secretary of Defense Bretano said. "I want to release our people to start shooting."

"Who, exactly?"

"Air Force, fighter planes we have in theater, to start. We have AWACS up and working with the Russians already. There's been one air battle, a little one, already. And we're getting feed from reconnaissance assets. I can cross-link them to you if you want."

"Okay, do that," Ryan told the phone. "And on the other issue, okay, turn 'm loose," Jack said. He looked over at Robby.

"Jack, it's what we pay 'm for, and believe me, they don't mind. Fighter pilots live for this sort of thing—until they see what happens, though they mainly never do. They just see the broke airplane, not the poor shot-up bleeding bastard inside, trying to eject while he's still conscious," Vice President Jackson explained. "Later on, a pilot may think about that a little. I did. But not everyone. Mainly you get to paint a kill on the side of your aircraft, and we all want to do that."

Okay, people, we are now in this fight," Colonel Bronco Winters told his assembled pilots. He'd gotten four kills over Saudi the previous year, downing those poor dumb ragheaded gomers who flew for the country that had brought biological warfare to his own nation. One more, and he'd be a no-shit fighter ace, something he dreamed about all the way back to his doolie year at Colorado Springs. He'd been flying the F-15 Eagle fighter for his entire career, though he hoped to upgrade to the new F-22A Raptor in two or three more years. He had 4,231 hours in the Eagle, knew all its tricks, and couldn't imagine a better aircraft to go up in. So, now he'd kill Chinese. He didn't understand the politics of the moment, and didn't especially care. He was on a Russian air base, something he'd never expected to see except through a gunsight, but that was okay, too. He thought for a moment that he rather liked Chinese food, especially the things they did to vegetables in a wok, but those were American Chinese, not the commie kind, and that, he figured, was that. He'd been in Russia for just over a day, long enough to turn down about twenty offers to snort down some vodka. Their fighter pilots seemed smart enough, maybe a little too eager for their own good, but friendly and respectful when

they saw the four kills painted on the side panel of his F-15-Charlie, the lead fighter of the 390th Fighter Squadron. He hopped off the Russian jeep—they called it something else that he hadn't caught—at the foot of his fighter. His chief mechanic was there.

"Got her all ready for me, Chief?" Winters asked, as he took the first step on the ladder.

"You bet," replied Chief Master Sergeant Neil Nolan. "Everything is toplined. She's as ready as I can make her. Go kill us some, Bronco." It was a squadron rule that when a pilot had his hands on his aircraft, he went only by his call-sign.

"I'll bring you the scalps, Nolan." Colonel Winters continued his climb up the ladder, patting the decorated panel as he went. Chief Master Sergeant Nolan scurried up to help him strap in, then dropped off, detached the ladder, and got clear.

Winters began his start-up procedures, first of all entering his ground coordinates, something they still did on the Eagle despite the new GPS locator systems, because the F-15C had inertial navigation in case it broke (it never did, but procedure was procedure). The instruments came on-line, telling Winters that his Eagle's conformal fuel tanks were topped off, and he had a full load of four AIM-120 AM-RAAM radar-guided missiles, plus four more of the brandnew AIM-9X Sidewinders, the super-snake version of a missile whose design went back to before his mom and dad had married in a church up on Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

"Tower, this is Bronco with three, ready to taxi, over."

"Tower, Bronco, you are cleared to taxi. Wind is threezero-five at ten. Good luck, Colonel."

"Thank you, Tower. Boars, this is lead, let's get goin'." With that, he tripped his brakes and the fighter started moving, driven by its powerful Pratt & Whitney engines. A bunch of Russians, mainly groundcrewmen, but judging by the outfits, some drivers as well, were out on the ramp watching him and his flight. *Okay,* he thought, *we'll show 'em how we do things downtown.* The four taxied in pairs to the end of the runway and then roared down the concrete slabs, and pulled back into the air, wingman tucked in tight. Seconds later, the other two pulled up and they turned south, already talking to the nearest AWACS, Eagle Two.

"Eagle Two, this is Boar Leader in the air with four."

"Boar Leader, this is Eagle Two. We have you. Come south, vector one-seven-zero, climb and maintain flight level three-three. Looks like there's going to be some work for ya today, over."

"Suits me. Out." Colonel Winters—he'd just been deepdip selected for his bird as a full bull colonel—wiggled a little in his seat to get things just right, and finished his climb to 33,000 feet. His radar

system was off, and he wouldn't speak unnecessarily because someone out there might be listening, and why spoil the surprise? In a few minutes, he'd be entering the coverage of Chinese border radar stations. Somebody would have to do something about that. Later today, he hoped, the Little Weasel F-16s would go and see about those. But his job was Chinese fighter aircraft, and any bombers that might offer themselves. His orders were to remain over Russian airspace for the entire mission, and so if Joe Chink didn't want to come out and play, it would be a dull day. But Joe had Su-27s, and he thought those were pretty good. And Joe Chink Fighter Pilot probably thought he was pretty good, too.

So, they'd just have to see.

Otherwise, it was a good day for flying, two-tenths clouds and nice clean country air to fly in. His falcon's eyes could see well over a hundred miles from up here, and he had Eagle Two to tell him where the gomers were. Behind him, a second and third flight of four Eagles were each taking off. The Wild Boars would be fully represented today.

The train ride was fairly jerky. Lieutenant Colonel Giusti squirmed in his upright coach seat, trying to get a little bit comfortable, but the Russian-made coach in which he and his staff were riding hadn't been designed with creature comforts in mind, and there was no sense grumbling about it. It was dark outside, the early morning that children sensibly take to be nighttime, and there wasn't much in the way of lights out there. They were in Eastern Poland now, farm country, probably, as Poland was evolving into the Iowa of Europe, lots of pig farms to make the ham for which this part of the world was famous. Vodka, too, probably, and Colonel Giusti wouldn't have minded a snort of that at the moment. He stood and walked down the aisle of the car. Nearly everyone aboard was asleep or trying to be. Two sensible NCOs were stretched out on the floor instead of curled up on the seats. The dirty floor wouldn't do their uniforms much good, but they were heading to combat operations, where neatness didn't really count all that much. Personal weapons were invariably stowed in the overhead racks, in the open for easy access, because they were all soldiers, and they didn't feel very comfortable without a usable weapon close by. He continued aft. The next coach had more troopers from Headquarters Company. His squadron sergeant major was in the back of that one, reading a paperback.

"Hey, Colonel," the sergeant major said in greeting. "Long ride, ain't it?"

"At least three more days to go, maybe four."

"Super," the senior non-com observed. "This is worse'n flying."

"Yeah, well, at least we got our tracks with us."

"Yes, sir."

"How's the food situation?"

"Well, sir, we all got our MREs, and I got me a big box of Snickers bars stashed. Any word what's happening in the world?"

"Just that it's started in Siberia. The Chinese are across the border and Ivan's trying to stop 'em. No details. We ought to get an update when we go through Moscow, after lunchtime, I expect."

"Fair nuff."

"How are the troopers taking things?"

"No problems, bored with the train ride, want to get back in their tracks, the usual."

"How's their attitude?"

"They're ready, Colonel," the sergeant-major assured him.

"Good." With that, Giusti turned and headed back to his seat, hoping he'd get a few hours anyway, and there wasn't much of Poland to see anyway. The annoying part was being so cut off. He had satellite radios in his vehicles, somewhere on the flatcars aft of this coach, but he couldn't get to them, and without them he didn't know what was happening up forward. A war was on. He knew that. But it wasn't the same as knowing the details, knowing where the train would stop, where and when he'd get to offload his equipment, get the Quarter Horse organized, and get back on the road, where they belonged.

The train part was working well. The Russian train service seemingly had a million flatcars designed expressly to transport tracked vehicles, undoubtedly intended to take their battle tanks west, into Germany for a war against NATO. Little had the builders ever suspected that the cars would be used to bring American tanks east to help defend Russia against an invader. Well, nobody could predict the future more than a few weeks. At the moment, he would have settled for five days or so.

The rest of First Armored was stretched back hundreds of miles on the east-west rail line. Colonel Don Lisle's Second Brigade was just finishing up boarding in Berlin, and would be tail-end Charlie for the division. They'd cross Poland in daylight, for what that was worth.

The Quarter Horse was in the lead, where it belonged. Wherever the drop-off point was, they'd set up perimeter security, and then lead the march farther east, in a maneuver called Advance to Contact, which was where the "fun" started. And he needed to be well-rested for that, Colonel Giusti reminded himself. So he settled back in his seat and closed his eyes, surrendering his body to the jerks and sways of the train car.

Dawn patrol was what fighter pilots all thought about. The title for the duty went back to a 1930s Errol Flynn movie, and the term had probably originated with a real mission name, meaning to be the first up on a new day, to see the sun rise, and to seek out the enemy right after breakfast.

Bronco Winters didn't look much like Errol Flynn, but that was okay. You couldn't tell a warrior by the look of his face, though you could by the look *on* his face. He was a fighter pilot. As a youngster in New York, he'd ride the subway to La Guardia Airport, just to stand at the fence and watch the airplanes take off and land, knowing even then that he wanted to fly. He'd also known that fighters would be more fun than airliners, and known finally that to fly fighters he had to enter a service academy, and to do that he'd have to study. And so he'd worked hard all through school, especially in math and science, because airplanes were mechanical things, and that meant that science determined how they worked. So, he was something of a math whiz—that had been his college major at Colorado Springs—but his interest in it had ended the day he'd walked into Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi, because once he got his hands on the controls of an aircraft, the "study" part of his mission was accomplished, and the "learning" part really began. He'd been the number one student in his class at Columbus, quickly and easily mastering the Cessna Tweety Bird trainer, and then moving on to fighters, and since he'd been number one in his class, he'd gotten his choice—and that choice, of course, had been the F-15 Eagle fighter, the strong and handsome grandson of the F-4 Phantom. An easy plane to fly, it was a harder one to fight, since the controls for the combat systems are located on the stick and the throttles, all in buttons of different shapes so that you could manage all the systems by feel, and keep your eyes up and out of the aircraft instead of having to look down at instruments. It was something like playing two pianos at the same time, and it had taken Winters a disappointing six months to master. But now those controls came as naturally as twirling the wax into his Bismarck mustache, his one non-standard affectation, which he'd modeled on Robin Olds, a legend in the American fighter community, an instinctive pilot and a thinking—and therefore a very dangerous—tactician. An ace in World War II, an ace in Korea, and also an ace over North Vietnam, Olds was one of the best who'd ever strapped a fighter plane to his back, and one whose mustache had made Otto von Bismarck himself look like a pussy.

Colonel Winters wasn't thinking about that now. The thoughts were there even so, as much a part of his character as his situational awareness, the part of his brain that kept constant track of the three-dimensional reality around him at all times. Flying came as naturally

to him as it did to the gyrfalcon mascot at the Air Force Academy. And so did hunting, and now he was hunting. His aircraft had instrumentation that downloaded the take from the AWACS aircraft a hundred fifty miles to his rear, and he divided his eye time equally between the sky around him and the display three feet from his 20-10 brown eyes . . .

. . . there . . . two hundred miles, bearing one-seven-two, four bandits heading north. Then four more, and another flight of four. Joe Chink was coming up to play, and the pigs were hungry.

"Boar Lead, this is Eagle Two." They were using encrypted burst-transmission radios that were very difficult to detect, and impossible to listen in on.

"Boar Lead." But he kept his transmission short anyway. Why spoil the surprise?

"Boar Lead, we have sixteen bandits, one-seven-zero your position at angels thirty, coming due north at five hundred knots."

"Got' em."

"They're still south of the border, but not for long," the young controller on the E-3B advised. "Boar, you are weapons-free at this time."

"Copy weapons-free," Colonel Winters acknowledged, and his left hand flipped a button to activate his systems. A quick look down to his weapons-status display showed that everything was ready to fire. He didn't have his tracking/targeting radar on, though it was in standby mode. The F-15 had essentially been designed as an appendage to the monstrous radar in its nose—a design consideration that had defined the size of the fighter from the first sketch on paper—but over the years the pilots had gradually stopped using it, because it could warn an enemy with the right sort of threat receiver, telling him that there was an Eagle in the neighborhood with open eyes and sharp claws. Instead he could now cross-load the radar information from the AWACS, whose radar signals were unwelcome, but nothing an enemy could do anything about, and not directly threatening. The Chinese would be directed and controlled by ground radar, and the Boars were just at the fuzzy edge of that, maybe spotted, maybe not. Somewhere to his rear, a Rivet Joint EC-135 was monitoring both the radar and the radios used by the Chinese ground controllers, and would cross-load any warnings to the AWACS. But so far none of that. So, Joe Chink was coming north.

"Eagle, Boar, say bandit type, over."

"Boar, we're not sure, but probably Sierra-Uniform Two-Sevens by point of origin and flight profile, over."

"Roger." Okay, good, Winters thought. They thought the Su-27 was a pretty hot aircraft, and for a Russian-designed bird it was

respectable. They put their best drivers into the Flanker, and they'd be the proud ones, the ones who thought they were as good as he was. *Okay, Joe, let's see how good you are.* "Boar, Lead, come left to one-three-five."

"Two." "Three." "Four," the flight acknowledged, and they all banked to the left. Winters took a look around to make sure he wasn't leaving any contrails to give away his position. Then he checked his threat receiver. It was getting some chirps from Chinese search radar, but still below the theoretical detection threshold. That would change in twenty miles or so. But then they'd just be unknowns on the Chinese screens, and fuzzy ones at that. Maybe the ground controllers would radio a warning, but maybe they'd just peer at their screens and try to decide if they were real contacts or not. The robin's-egg blue of the Eagles wasn't all that easy to spot visually, especially when you had the sun behind you, which was the oldest trick in the fighter-pilot bible, and one for which there was still no solution . . .

The Chinese passed to his right, thirty miles away, heading north and looking for Russian fighters to engage, because the Chinese would want to control the sky over the battlefield they'd just opened up. That meant that they'd be turning on their own search radars, and when that happened, they'd spend most of their time looking down at the scope instead of out at the sky, and that was dangerous. When he was south of them, Winters brought his flight right, west, and down to twenty thousand feet, well below Joe Chink's cruising altitude, because fighter pilots might look back and up, but rarely back and down, because they'd been taught that height, like speed, was life. And so it was . . . most of the time. In another three minutes, they were due south of the enemy, and Winters increased power to maximum dry thrust so as to catch up. His flight of four split on command into two pairs. He went left, and then his eyes spotted them, dark flecks on the brightening blue sky. They were painted the same light gray the Russians liked—and that would be a real problem if Russian Flankers entered the area, because you didn't often get close enough to see if the wings had red stars or white-blue-red flags painted on them.

The audio tone came next. His Sidewinders could see the heat bloom from the Lyul'a turbofan engines, and that meant he was just about close enough. His wingman, a clever young lieutenant, was now about five hundred yards to his right, doing his job, which was covering his leader. *Okay,* Bronco Winters thought. He had a good hundred knots of overtake speed now.

"Boar, Eagle, be advised these guys are heading directly for us at the moment."

"Not for long, Eagle," Colonel Winters responded. They weren't

flecks anymore. Now they were twin-rudder fighter aircraft. Cruising north, tucked in nice and pretty. His left forefinger selected Sidewinder to start, and the tone in his earphones was nice and loud. He'd start with two shots, one at the left-most Flanker, and the other at the right-most . . . right about . . .

"Fox-Two, Fox-Two with two birds away," Bronco reported. The smoke trails diverged, just as he wanted them to, streaking in on their targets. His gunsight camera was operating, and the picture was being recorded on videotape, just as it had been over Saudi the previous year. He needed one kill to make ace—

—he got the first six seconds later, and the next half a second after that. Both Flankers tumbled right. The one on the left nearly collided with his wingman, but missed, and tumbled violently as pieces started coming off the airframe. The other one was rolling and then exploded into a nice white puffball. The first pilot ejected cleanly, but the second didn't.

Tough luck, Joe, Winters thought. The remaining two Chinese fighters hesitated, but both then split and started maneuvering in diverging directions. Winters switched on his radar and followed the one to the left. He had radar lock and it was well within the launch parameters for his AM-RAAM. His right forefinger squeezed the pickle switch.

"Fox-One, Fox-One, Slammer on guy to the west." He watched the Slammer, as it was called, race in. Technically a fire-and-forget weapon like the Sidewinder, it accelerated almost instantly to mach-two-plus and rapidly ate up the three miles between them. It only took about ten seconds to close and explode a mere few feet over the fuselage of its target, and that Flanker disintegrated with no chute coming away from it.

Okay, three. This morning was really shaping up, but now the situation went back to World War I. He had to search for targets visually, and searching for jet fighters in a clear sky wasn't . . .

. . . there . . .

"You with me, Skippy?" he called on the radio.

"Got you covered, Bronco," his wingman replied. "Bandit at your one o'lock, going left to right."

"On him," Winters replied, putting his nose on the distant spot in the sky. His radar spotted it, locked onto it, and the IFF transponder didn't say friendly. He triggered off his second Slammer: "Fox-One on the south guy! Eagle, Boar Lead, how we doing?"

"We show five kills to this point. Bandits are heading east and diving. Razorback is coming in from your west with four, angels three-five at six hundred, now at your ten o'lock. Check your IFF, Boar Lead." The controller was being careful, but that was okay.

"Boar, Lead, check IFF now!"

"Two." "Three." "Four," they all chimed in. Before the last of them confirmed his IFF transponder was in the transmit setting, his second Slammer found its target, running his morning's score to four. *Well, damn,* Winters thought, *this morning is really shaping up nice.*

"Bronco, Skippy is on one!" his wingman reported, and Winters took position behind, low, and left of his wingman. "Skippy" was First Lieutenant Mario Acosta, a red-haired infant from Wichita who was coming along nicely for a child with only two hundred hours in type. "Fox-Two with one," Skippy called. His target had turned south, and was heading almost straight into the streaking missile. Winters saw the Sidewinder go right into his right-side intake, and the resulting explosion was pretty impressive.

"Eagle, Boar Lead, give me a vector, over."

"Boar Lead, come right at zero-nine-zero. I have a bandit at ten miles and low, angels ten, heading south at sixhundred-plus."

Winters executed the turn and checked his radar display. "Got him!" And this one also was well within the Slammer envelope. "Fox-One with Slammer." His fifth missile of the day leaped off the rail and rocketed east, angling down, and again Winters kept his nose on the target, ensuring that he'd get it on tape . . . yes! "That's a splash. Bronco has a splash, I think that's five."

"Confirm five kills to Bronco," Eagle Two confirmed. "Nice going, buddy."

"What else is around?"

"Boar Lead, the bandits are running south on burner, just went through Mach One. We show a total of nine kills plus one damage, with six bandits running back to the barn, over."

"Roger, copy that, Eagle. Anything else happening at the moment?"

"Ah, that's a negative, Boar Lead."

"Where's the closest tanker?"

"You can tank from Oliver-Six, vector zero-zero-five, distance two hundred, over."

"Roger that. Flight, this is Bronco. Let's assemble and head off to tank. Form up on me."

"Two." "Three." "Four."

"How we doing?"

"Skippy has one," his wingman reported.

"Ducky has two," the second element leader chimed in.

"Ghost Man has two and a scratch."

It didn't add up, Winters thought. Hell, maybe the AWACS guys got confused. That's why they had videotape. All in all, not a bad morning. Best of all, they'd put a real dent in the ChiComm Flanker inventory, and probably punched a pinhole in the confidence of their

Su-27 drivers. Shaking up a fighter jock's confidence was almost as good as a kill, especially if they'd bagged the squadron commander. It would make the survivors mad, but it would make them question themselves, their doctrine, and their aircraft. And that was good.

So?"

"The border defenses did about as well as one could reasonably expect," Colonel Aliyev replied. "The good news is that most of our men escaped with their lives. Total dead is under twenty, with fifteen wounded."

"What do they have across the river now?"

"Best guess, elements of three mechanized divisions. The Americans say that they now have six bridges completed and operating. So, we can expect that number to increase rapidly. Chinese reconnaissance elements are pushing forward. We've ambushed some of them, but no prisoners yet. Their direction of advance is exactly what we anticipated, as is their speed of advance to this point."

"Is there any good news?" Bondarenko asked.

"Yes, General. Our air force and our American friends have given their air force a very bloody nose. We've killed over thirty of their aircraft with only four losses to this point, and two of the pilots have been rescued. We've captured six Chinese pilots. They're being taken west for interrogation. It's unlikely that they'll give us any really useful information, though I am sure the air force will want to grill them for technical things. Their plans and objectives are entirely straightforward, and they are probably right on, or even slightly in advance of their plans."

None of this was a surprise to General Bondarenko, but it was unpleasant even so. His intelligence staff was doing a fine job of telling him what they knew and what they expected, but it was like getting a weather report in winter: Yes, it was cold, and yes, it was snowing, and no, the cold and the snow will probably not stop, and isn't it a shame you don't have a warm coat to wear? He had nearly perfect information, but no ability to do anything to change the news. It was all very good that his airmen were killing Chinese airmen, but it was the Chinese tanks and infantry carriers that he had to stop.

"When will we be able to bring air power to bear on their spearheads?"

"We will start air-to-ground operations this afternoon with Su-31 ground-attack aircraft," Aliyev replied. "But . . ."

"But what?" Bondarenko demanded.

"But isn't it better to let them come in with minimal interference for a few days?" It was a courageous thing for his operations officer to say. It was also the right thing, Gennady Iosifovich realized on

reflection. If his only strategic option was to lay a deep trap, then why waste what assets he had before the trap was fully set? This was not the Western Front in June of 1941, and he didn't have Stalin sitting in Moscow with a figurative pistol to his head.

No, in Moscow now, the government would be raising all manner of political hell, probably calling for an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, but that was just advertising. It was his job to defeat these yellow barbarians, and doing that was a matter of using what power he had in the most efficient manner possible, and that meant drawing them out. It meant making their commander as confident as a schoolyard bully looking down at a child five years his junior. It meant giving them what the Japanese had once called the Victory Disease. Make them feel invincible, and *then* leap at them like a tiger dropping from a tree.

"Andrey, only a few aircraft, and tell them not to risk themselves by pressing their attacks too hard. We can hurt their air force, but their ground forces—we let them keep their advantage for a while. Let them get fat on this fine table set before them for a while."

"I agree, Comrade General. It's a hard pill to swallow, but in the end, harder for them to eat—assuming our political leadership allows us to do the right thing."

"Yes, that is the real issue at hand, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 52

Deep Battle

General Peng crossed over into Russia in his command vehicle, well behind the first regiment of heavy tanks. He thought of using a helicopter, but his operations staff warned him that the air battle was not going as well as the featherheads in the PLAAF had told him to expect. He felt uneasy, crossing the river in an armored vehicle on a floating bridge—like a brick tied to a balloon—but he did so, listening as his operations officer briefed him on the progress to this point.

"The Americans have surged a number of fighter aircraft forward, and along with them their E-3 airborne radar fighter-control aircraft. These are formidable, and difficult to counter, though our air force colleagues say that they have tactics to deal with them. I will believe that when I see it," Colonel Wa observed. "But that is the only bad news so far. We are several hours ahead of schedule. Russian resistance is lighter than I expected. The prisoners we've taken are very disheartened at their lack of support."

"Is that a fact?" Peng asked, as they left the ribbon bridge and thumped down on Russian soil.

"Yes, we have ten men captured from their defensive positions—we'll see them in a few minutes. They had escape tunnels and personnel carriers set to evacuate the men. They didn't expect to hold for long," Colonel Wa went on. "They *planned* to run away, rather than defend to the last as we expected. I think they lack the heart for combat, Comrade General."

That information got Peng's attention. It was important to know the fighting spirit of one's enemy: "Did any of them stand and fight to the end?"

"Only one of their bunker positions. It cost us thirty men, but we took them out. Perhaps their escape vehicle was destroyed and they had no choice," the colonel speculated.

"I want to see one of these positions at once," Peng ordered.

"Of course, Comrade General." Wa ducked inside and shouted an order to the track driver. The Type 90 armored personnel carrier lurched to the right, surprising the MP who was trying to do traffic control, but he didn't object. The four tall radio whips told him what

sort of track this was. The command carrier moved off the beaten track directly toward an intact Russian bunker.

General Peng got out, ducking his head as he did so, and walked toward the mainly intact old gun turret. The “inverted frying pan” shape told him that this was off an old Stalin-3 tank—a very formidable vehicle, once upon a time, but now an obvious relic. A team of intelligence specialists was there. They snapped to attention when they saw the general approach.

“What did we kill it with?” Peng asked.

“We didn’t, Comrade General. They abandoned it after firing fifteen cannon shots and about three hundred machine gun rounds. They didn’t even destroy it before we captured it,” the intelligence captain reported, waving the general down the tank hatch. “It’s safe. We checked for booby traps.”

Peng climbed down. He saw what appeared to be a comfortable small barracks, shell storage for their big tank gun, ample rounds for their two machine guns. There were empty rounds for both types of guns on the floor, along with wrappers for field rations. It appeared to be a comfortable position, with bunks, shower, toilet, and plenty of food storage. Something worth fighting for, the general thought. “How did they leave?” Peng asked.

“This way,” the young captain said, leading him north into the tunnel. “You see, the Russians planned for everything.” The tunnel led under the crest of the hill to a covered parking pad for—probably for a BTR, it looked like, confirmed by the wheel tracks on the ground immediately off the concrete pad.

“How long did they hold?”

“We took the place just less than three hours after our initial bombardment. So, we had infantry surrounding the main gun emplacement, and soon thereafter, they ran away,” the captain told his army commander.

“I see. Good work by our assault infantry.” Then Peng saw that Colonel Wa had brought his command track over the hill to the end of the escape tunnel, allowing him to hop right aboard.

“Now what?” Wa asked.

“I want to see what we did to their artillery support positions.”

Wa nodded and relayed the orders to the track commander. That took fifteen minutes of bouncing and jostling. The fifteen heavy guns were still there, though the two Peng passed had been knocked over and destroyed by counter-battery fire. The position they visited was mainly intact, though a number of rockets had fallen close aboard, near enough that three bodies were still lying there untended next to their guns, the bodies surrounded by sticky pools of mainly dried blood. More men had survived, probably. Close to each gun was a

two-meter-deep narrow trench lined with concrete that the bombardment hadn't done more than chip. Close by also was a large ammo-storage bunker with rails on which to move the shells and propellant charges to the guns. The door was open.

"How many rounds did they get off?" he asked.

"No more than ten," another intelligence officer, this one a major, replied. "Our counter-battery fire was superb here. The Russian battery was fifteen guns, total. One of them got off twenty shots, but that was all. We had them out of action in less than ten minutes. The artillery-tracker radars worked brilliantly, Comrade General."

Peng nodded agreement. "So it would appear. This emplacement would have been fine twenty or thirty years ago—good protection for the gunners and a fine supply of shells, but they did not anticipate an enemy with the ability to pinpoint their guns so rapidly. If it stands still, Wa, you can kill it." Peng looked around. "Still, the engineers who sited this position and the other one, they were good. It's just that this sort of thing is out of date. What were our total casualties?"

"Killed, three hundred fifty, thereabouts. Wounded, six hundred twenty," operations replied. "It was not exactly cheap, but less than we expected. If the Russians had stood and fought, it could have been far worse."

"Why did they run so soon?" Peng asked. "Do we know?"

"We found a written order in one of the bunkers, authorizing them to leave when they thought things were untenable. That surprised me," Colonel Wa observed. "Historically, the Russians fight very hard on the defense, as the Germans found. But that was under Stalin. The Russians had discipline then. And courage. Not today, it would seem."

"Their evacuation was conducted with some skill," Peng thought out loud. "We ought to have taken more prisoners."

"They ran too fast, Comrade General," operations explained.

"He who fights and runs away," General Peng quoted, "lives to fight another day. Bear that in mind, Colonel."

"Yes, Comrade General, but he who runs away is not an immediate threat."

"Let's go," the general said, heading off to his command track. He wanted to see the front, such as it was.

So?" Bondarenko asked the lieutenant. The youngster had been through a bad day, and being required to stand and make a report to his theater commander made it no better. "Stand easy, boy. You're alive. It could have been worse."

"General, we could have held if we'd been given a little support," Komanov said, allowing his frustration to appear.

"There was none to give you. Go on." The general pointed at the

map on the wall.

"They crossed here, and came through this saddle, and over this ridge to attack us. Leg infantry, no vehicles that we ever saw. They had man-portable anti-tank weapons, nothing special or unexpected, but they had massive artillery support. There must have been an entire battery concentrated just on my one position. Heavy guns, fifteen-centimeter or more. And artillery rockets that wiped out our artillery support almost immediately."

"That's the one surprise they threw at us," Aliyev confirmed. "They must have a lot more of those fire-finder systems than we expected, and they're using their Type 83 rockets as dedicated counter-battery weapons, like the Americans did in Saudi. It's an effective tactic. We'll have to go after their counter-battery systems first of all, or use self-propelled guns to fire and move after only two or three shots. There's no way to spoof them that I know of, and jamming radars of that type is extremely difficult."

"So, we have to work on a way to kill them early on," Bondarenko said. "We have electronic-intelligence units. Let them seek out those Chink radars and eliminate them with rockets of our own." He turned. "Go, on. Lieutenant. Tell me about the Chinese infantry."

"They are not cowards, Comrade General. They take fire and act properly under it. They are well-drilled. My position and the one next to us took down at least two hundred, and they kept coming. Their battle drill is quite good, like a soccer team. If you do *this*, they do *that*, almost instantly. For certain, they call in artillery fire with great skill."

"They had the batteries already lined up, Lieutenant, lined up and waiting," Aliyev told the junior officer. "It helps if you are following a prepared script. Anything else?"

"We never saw a tank. They had us taken out before they finished their bridges. Their infantry looked well-prepared, well-trained, even eager to move forward. I did not see evidence of flexible thinking, but I did not see much of anything, and as you say, their part of the operation was preplanned, and thoroughly rehearsed."

"Typically, the Chinese tell their men a good deal about their planned operations beforehand. They don't believe in secrecy the way we do," Aliyev said. "Perhaps it makes for comradely solidarity on the battlefield."

"But things are going their way, Andrey. The measure of an army is how it reacts when things go badly. We haven't seen that yet, however." *And would they ever?* Bondarenko wondered. He shook his head. He had to banish that sort of thinking from his mind. If he had no confidence, how could his men have it? "What about your men, Valeriy Mikhailovich? How did they fight?"

"We *fought*, Comrade General," Komanov assured the senior officer. "We killed two hundred, and we would have killed many more with a little artillery support."

"Will your men fight some more?" Aliyev asked.

"Fuck, yes!" Komanov snarled back. "Those little bastards are invading *our* country. Give us the right weapons, and we'll fucking kill them all!"

"Did you graduate tank school?"

Komanov bobbed his head like a cadet. "Yes, Comrade General, eighth in my class."

"Give him a company with BOYAR," the general told his ops officer. "They're short of officers."

Major General Marion Diggs was in the third train out of Berlin; it wasn't his choosing, just the way things worked out. He was thirty minutes behind Angelo Giusti's cavalry squadron. The Russians were running their trains as closely together as safety allowed, and probably even shading that somewhat. What *was* working was that the Russian national train system was fully electrified, which meant that the engines accelerated well out of stations and out of the slow orders caused by track problems, which were numerous.

Diggs had grown up in Chicago. His father had been a Pullman porter with the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, working the Super Chief between Chicago and Los Angeles until the passenger service had died in the early 1970s; then, remarkably enough, he'd changed unions to become an engineer. Marion remembered riding with him as a boy, and loving the feel of such a massive piece of equipment under his hands—and so, when he'd gone to West Point, he'd decided to be a tanker, and better yet, a cavalryman. Now he owned a lot of heavy equipment.

It was his first time in Russia, a place he certainly hadn't expected to see when he'd been in the first half of his uniformed career, when the Russians he'd worried about seeing had been mainly from First Guards Tank and Third Shock armies, those massive formations that had once sat in East Germany, always poised to take a nice little drive to Paris, or so NATO had feared.

But no more, now that Russia was part of NATO, an idea that was like something from a bad science-fiction movie. There was no denying it, however. Looking out the windows of the train car, he could see the onion-topped spires of Russian Orthodox churches, ones that Stalin had evidently failed to tear down. The railyards were pretty familiar. Never the most artistic examples of architecture or city planning, they looked the same as the dreary yards leading into Chicago or any other American city. No, only the train yards that you

built under your Christmas tree every year were pretty. But they didn't have any Christmas trees in evidence here. The train rolled to a stop, probably waiting for a signal to proceed—

—but no, this looked to be some sort of military terminal. Russian tanks were in evidence off to the right, and a lot of sloped concrete ramps—the Russians had probably built this place to ship their own tracked vehicles west, he judged.

"General?" a voice called.

"Yo!"

"Somebody here to see you, sir," the same voice announced.

Diggs stood and walked back to the sound. It was one of his junior staff officers, a new one fresh from Leavenworth, and behind him was a Russian general officer.

"You are Diggs?" the Russian asked in fair English.

"That's right."

"Come with me please." The Russian walked out onto the platform. The air was fresh, but they were under low, gray clouds this morning.

"You going to tell me how things are going out east?" Diggs asked.

"We wish to fly you and some of your staff to Chabarsovil so that you can see for yourself."

That made good sense, Diggs thought. "How many?"

"Six, plus you."

"Okay." The general nodded and reached for the captain who'd summoned him from his seat. "I want Colonels Masterman, Douglas, Welch, Turner, Major Hurst, and Lieutenant Colonel Garvey."

"Yes, sir." The boy disappeared.

"How soon?"

"The transport is waiting for you now."

One of theirs, Diggs thought. He'd never flown on a Russian aircraft before. How safe would it be? How safe would it be to fly into a war zone? Well, the Army didn't pay him to stay in safe places.

"Who are you?"

"Nosenko, Valentin Nosenko, general major, Stavka."

"How bad is it?"

"It is not good, General Diggs. Our main problem will be getting reinforcements to the theater of action. But they have rivers to cross. The difficulties, as you Americans say, should even out."

Diggs's main worry was supply. His tanks and Bradleys all had basic ammo loads already aboard, and two and a half additional such loads for each vehicle were on supply trucks sitting on other trains like this one. After that, things got a little worrisome, especially for artillery. But the biggest worry of all was diesel fuel. He had enough to move his division maybe three or four hundred miles. That was a good long way in a straight line, but wars never allowed troops to travel in

straight lines. That translated to maybe two hundred miles of actual travel at best, and that was not an impressive number at all. Then there was the question of jet fuel for his organic aircraft. So, his head logistician, Colonel Ted Douglas, was the first guy he needed, after Masterman, his operations brain. The officers started showing up.

"What gives, sir?" Masterman asked.

"We're flying east to see what's going on."

"Okay, let me make sure we have some communications gear."Masterman disappeared again. He left the train car, along with two enlisted men humping satellite radio equipment.

"Good call, Duke," LTC Garvey observed. He was communications and electronic intelligence for First Tanks.

"Gentlemen, this is General Nosenko from Stavka. He's taking us east, I gather?"

"Correct, I am an intelligence officer for Stavka. This way, please." He led them off, to where four cars were waiting. The drive to a military airport took twenty minutes.

"How are your people taking this?" Diggs asked.

"The civilians, you mean? Too soon to tell. Much disbelief, but some anger. Anger is good," Nosenko said. "Anger gives courage and determination."

If the Russians were talking about anger and determination, the situation must be pretty bad, Diggs thought, looking out at the streets of the Moscow suburbs.

"What are you moving east ahead of us?"

"So far, four motor-rifle divisions," Nosenko answered. "Those are our best-prepared formations. We are assembling other forces."

"I've been out of touch. What else is NATO sending? Anything?" Diggs asked next.

"A British brigade is forming up now, the men based at Hohne. We hope to have them on the way here in two days."

"No way we'd go into action without at least the Brits to back us up," Diggs said. "Good, they're equipped about the same way we are." And better yet, they trained according to the same doctrine. *Hohne*, he thought, their 22nd Brigade from Haig Barracks, Brigadier Sam Turner. Drank whiskey like it was Perrier, but a good thinker and a superior tactician. And his brigade was all trained up from some fun and games down at Grafenwöhr. "What about Germans?"

"That's a political question," Nosenko admitted.

"Tell your politicians that Hitler's dead, Valentin. The Germans are pretty good to have on your side. Trust me, buddy. We play with them all the time. They're down a little from ten years ago, but the German soldier ain't no dummy, and neither are his officers. Their reconnaissance units are particularly good."

"Yes, but that is a political question," Nosenko repeated. And that, Diggs knew, was that, at least for now.

The aircraft waiting was an Il-86, known to NATO as the Camber, manifestly the Russian copy of Lockheed's C-141 Starlifter. This one had Aeroflot commercial markings, but retained the gun position in the tail that the Russians liked to keep on all their tactical aircraft. Diggs didn't object to it at the moment. They'd scarcely had the chance to sit down and strap in when the aircraft started rolling.

"In a hurry, Valentin?"

"Why wait, General Diggs? There's a war on," he reminded his guest.

"Okay, what do we know?"

Nosenko opened the map case he'd been carrying and laid out a large sheet on the floor as the aircraft lifted off. It was of the Chinese-Russian border on the Amur River, with markings already penciled on. The American officers all leaned over to look.

"They came in here, and drove across the river . . ."

How fast are they moving?" Bondarenko asked.

"I have a reconnaissance company ahead of them. They report in every fifteen minutes," Colonel Tolkunov replied. "They are moving in a deliberate manner. Their reconnaissance screen is composed of WZ-501 tracked APCs, heavy on radios, light on weapons. They are on the whole not very enterprising, however. As I said, deliberate. They move by leapfrogging half a kilometer at a bound, depending on terrain. We're monitoring their radios. They're not encrypted, though their spoken language is deceptive in terminology. We're working on that."

"Speed of advance?"

"Five kilometers in an hour is the fastest we've seen, usually slower than that. Their main body is still getting organized, and they haven't set up a logistics train yet. I'd expect them to attempt no more than thirty kilometers in a day on flat open ground, based on what I've seen so far."

"Interesting." Bondarenko looked back at his maps. They'd start going north-northwest because that's what the terrain compelled them to do. At this speed, they'd be at the gold strike in six or seven days.

Theoretically, he could move 265th Motor Rifle to a blocking position . . . here . . . in two days and make a stand, but by then they'd have at least three, maybe eight, mechanized divisions to attack his one full-strength unit, and he couldn't gamble on that so soon. The good news was that the Chinese were bypassing his command post—*contemptuously?* he wondered, *or just because there was nothing there to threaten them, and so nothing to squander force on?* No, they'd run as

fast and hard as they could, bringing up foot infantry to wall off their line of advance. That was classic tactics, and the reason was because it worked. Everyone did it that way, from Hannibal to Hitler.

So, their lead elements moved deliberately, and they were still forming up their army over the Amur bridgehead.

"What units have we identified?"

"The lead enemy formation is their 34th Red Banner Shock Army, Commanded by Peng Xi-Wang. He is politically reliable and well-regarded in Beijing, an experienced soldier. Expect him to be the operational army group commander. The 34th Army is mainly across the river now. Three more Group A mechanized armies are lined up to cross as well, the 31st, 29th, and 43rd. That's a total of sixteen mechanized divisions, plus a lot of other attachments. We think the 65th Group B Army will be next across. Four infantry divisions plus a tank brigade. Their job will be to hold the western flank, I would imagine." That made sense. There was no Russian force east of the breakthrough worthy of the name. A classic operation would also wheel east to Vladivostok on the Pacific Coast, but that would only distract forces from the main objective. So, the turn east would wait for at least a week, probably two or three, with just light screening forces heading that way for the moment.

"What about our civilians?" Bondarenko asked.

"They're leaving the towns in the Chinese path as best they can, mainly cars and buses. We have MP units trying to keep them organized. So far nothing has happened to interfere with the evacuation," Tolkunov said. "See, from this it looks as if they're actually bypassing Belogorsk, just passing east of it with their reconnaissance elements."

"That's the smart move, isn't it?" Bondarenko observed. "Their real objective is far to the north. Why slow down for anything? They don't want land. They don't want people. They want oil and gold. Capturing civilians will not make those objectives any easier to accomplish. If I were this Peng fellow, I would be worried about the extent of my drive north. Even unopposed, the natural obstacles are formidable, and defending his line of advance will be a beast of a problem." Gennady paused. Why have any sympathy for this barbarian? His mission was to kill him and all his men, after all. But how? If even marching that far north was a problem—and it was—then how much harder would it be to strike through the same terrain with less-prepared troops? The tactical problems on both sides were the kind men in his profession did not welcome.

"General Bondarenko?" a foreign voice asked.

"Yes?" He turned to see a man dressed in an American flight suit.

"Sir, my name is Major Dan Tucker. I just flew in with a downlink

for our Dark Star UAVs. Where do you want us to set up, sir?"

"Colonel Tolkunov? Major, this is my chief of intelligence."

The American saluted sloppily, as air force people tended to do. "Howdy, Colonel."

"How long to set up?"

The American was pleased that this Tolkunov's English was better than his own Russian. "Less than an hour, sir."

"This way." The G-2 led him outside. "How good are your cameras?"

"Colonel, when a guy's out taking a piss, you can see how big his dick is."

Tolkunov figured that was typical American braggadocio, but it set him wondering.

Captain Feodor Il'ych Aleksandrov commanded the 265th Motor Rifle's divisional reconnaissance element—the division was supposed to have a full battalion for this task, but he was all they had—and for that task he had eight of the new BRM reconnaissance tracks. These were evolutionary developments of the standard BMP infantry combat vehicle, upgraded with better automotive gear—more reliable engine and transmission systems—plus the best radios his country made. He reported directly to his divisional commander, and also, it seemed, to the theater intelligence coordinator, some colonel named Tolkunov. That chap, he'd discovered, was very concerned with his personal safety, always urging him to stay close—but not too close—not to be spotted, and to avoid combat of any type. His job, Tolkunov had told him at least once every two hours for the last day and a half, was to stay alive and to keep his eye on the advancing Chinese. He wasn't supposed to so much as injure one little hair on their cute little Chink heads, just stay close enough that if they mumbled in their sleep, to copy down the names of the girlfriends they fucked in their dreams.

Aleksandrov was a young captain, only twenty-eight, and rakishly handsome, an athlete who ran for personal pleasure—and running, he told his men, was the best form of exercise for a soldier, especially a reconnaissance specialist. He had a driver, gunner, and radio operator for each of his tracks, plus three infantrymen whom he'd personally trained to be invisible.

The drill was for them to spend about half their time out of their vehicles, usually a good kilometer or so ahead of their Chinese counterparts, either behind trees or on their bellies, reporting back with monosyllabic comments on their portable radios, which were of Japanese manufacture. The men moved light, carrying only their rifles and two spare magazines, because they weren't supposed to be seen or heard, and the truth was that Aleksandrov would have preferred to

send them out unarmed, lest they be tempted to shoot someone out of patriotic anger. However, no soldier would ever stand for being sent out on a battlefield weaponless, and so he'd had to settle for ordering them out with bolts closed on empty chambers. The captain was usually out with his men, their BRM carriers hidden three hundred or so meters away in the trees.

In the past twenty-four hours, they'd become intimately familiar with their Chinese opponents. These were also trained and dedicated reconnaissance specialists, and they were pretty good at their jobs, or certainly appeared to be. They were also moving in tracked vehicles, and also spent a lot of their time on foot, ahead of their tracks, hiding behind trees and peering to the north, looking for Russian forces. The Russians had even started giving them names.

"It's the gardener," Sergeant Buikov said. That one liked touching trees and bushes, as though studying them for a college paper or something. The gardener was short and skinny, and looked like a twelve-year-old to the Russians. He seemed competent enough, carrying his rifle slung on his back, and using his binoculars often. He was a Chinese lieutenant, judging by his shoulderboards, probably commander of this platoon. He ordered his people around a lot, but didn't mind taking the lead. So, he was probably conscientious. *He is, therefore, the one we should kill first*, Aleksandrov thought. Their BRM reconnaissance track had a fine 30-mm cannon that could reach out and turn the gardener into fertilizer from a thousand meters or so, but Captain Aleksandrov had forbidden it, worse luck, Buikov thought. He was from this area, a woodsman of sorts who'd hunted in the forests many times with his father, a lumberjack. "We really ought to kill him."

"Boris Yevgeniyevich, do you wish to alert the enemy to our presence?" Aleksandrov asked his sergeant.

"I suppose not, my captain, but the hunting season is—"

"—closed, Sergeant. The season is closed, and no, he is not a wolf that you can shoot for your own pleasure, and— down," Aleksandrov ordered. The gardener was looking their way with his field glasses. Their faces were painted, and they had branches tucked into their field clothing to break up their outlines, but he was taking no chances. "They'll be moving soon. Back to the track."

The hardest part of their drill was to avoid leaving tracks for the Chinese to spot. Aleksandrov had "discussed" this with his drivers, threatening to shoot anyone who left a trail. (He knew he couldn't do that, of course, but his men weren't quite sure.) Their vehicles even had upgraded mufflers to reduce their sound signature. Every so often, the men who designed and built Russian military equipment got things right, and this was such a case. Besides, they didn't crank their

engines until they saw the Chinese doing the same. Aleksandrov looked up. Okay, the gardener was waving to those behind him, the wave that meant to bring their vehicles up. They were doing another leapfrog jump, with one section standing fast and providing overwatch cover for the next move, should something happen. He had no intention of making anything happen, but of course they couldn't know that. Aleksandrov was surprised that they were maintaining their careful drill into the second day. They weren't getting sloppy yet. He'd expected that, but it seemed that the Chinese were better drilled even than his expectations, and were assiduously following their written doctrine. Well, so was he.

"Move now, Captain?" Buikov asked.

"No, let's sit still and watch. They ought to stop at that little ridge with the logging road. I want to see how predictable they are, Boris Yevgeniyevich." But he did trigger his portable radio. "Stand by, they're jumping again."

The other radio just clicked on and off, creating a whisper of static, rather than a spoken reply. Good, his men were adhering to their radio discipline. The second echelon of Chinese tracks moved forward carefully, at about tenkilometer speed, following this opening in the forest. Interesting, he thought, that they weren't venturing too far into the adjoining woods. No more than two or three hundred meters. Then he cringed. A helicopter chattered overhead. It was a Gazelle, a Chinese copy of the French military helicopter. But his track was back in the woods, and every time it stopped, the men ran outside to stretch the camo-net around it. His men, also, were well-drilled. And *that*, he told his men, was why they didn't dare leave a visible trail if they wanted to live. It wasn't much of a helicopter, but it did carry rockets—and their BRM was an armored personnel carrier, but it wasn't *that* armored.

"What's he doing?" Buikov asked.

"If he's looking, he's not being very careful about it."

The Chinese were driving up a pathway built ages ago for an unbuilt spur off the Trans-Siberian Railroad. It was wide, in some places five hundred meters, and fairly wellgraded. Someone in years past had thought about building this spur to exploit the unsurveyed riches of Siberia—enough to cut down a lot of trees, and they'd barely grown back in the harsh winters. Just saplings in this pathway now, easily ground into splinters by tracked vehicles. Farther north, the work was being continued by army engineers, making a path to the new gold find, and beyond that to the oil discoveries on the Arctic Coast. When they got that far, the Chinese would find a good road, ready-made for a mechanized force to exploit. But it was a narrow one, and the Chinese would have to learn about flank security if they

kept this path up.

Aleksandrov remembered a Roman adventure into Germany, a soldier named Quintilius Varus, commanding three legions, who'd ignored his flanks, and lost his army in the process to a German named Armenius. Might the Chinese make a similar mistake? No, everyone knew of the Teutonenberg Forest disaster. It was a textbook lesson in every military academy in the known world. Quintilius Varus had been a political commander, given that command because he'd been beloved of his emperor, Caesar Augustus, obviously not because of his operational skill. It was a lesson probably better remembered by soldiers than by politicians. And the Chinese army was commanded by soldiers, wasn't it?

"That's the fox," Buikov said. This was the other officer in the Chinese unit, probably the subordinate of the gardener. Similar in size, but he had less interest in plants than he had in darting about. As they watched, he disappeared into the tree line to the east, and if he went by the form card, he'd be invisible for five to eight minutes.

"I could use a smoke," Sergeant Buikov observed.

"That will have to wait, Sergeant."

"Yes, Comrade Captain. May I have a sip of water, then?" he asked petulantly. It wasn't water he wanted, of course.

"Yes, I'd like a shot of vodka, too, but I neglected to bring any with me, as, I am sure, you did as well."

"Regrettably, yes, Comrade Captain. A good slug of vodka helps keep the chill away in these damp woods."

"And it also dulls the senses, and we need our senses, Boris Yevgeniyevich, unless you enjoy eating rice. Assuming the Chinks take prisoners, which I rather doubt. They do not like us, Sergeant, and they are not a civilized people. Remember that."

So, they don't go to the ballet. Neither do I, Sergeant Buikov didn't say aloud. His captain was a Muscovite, and spoke often of cultural matters. But like his captain, Buikov had no love for the Chinese, and even less now that he was looking at Chinese soldiers on the soil of his country. He only regretted not killing some, but killing was not his job. His job was watching them piss on his country, which somehow only made him angrier.

"Captain, will we ever get to shoot them?" the sergeant asked.

"In due course, yes, it will be our job to eliminate their reconnaissance elements, and yes, Boris, I look forward to that as well." *And, yes, I could use a smoke as well. And I'd love a glass of vodka right now.* But he'd settle for some black bread and butter, which he did have in his track, three hundred meters to the north.

Six and a half minutes this time. The fox had at least looked into the woods to the east, probably listened for the sound of diesel engines,

but heard nothing but the chirping of birds. Still, this Chink lieutenant was the more conscientious of the two, in Buikov's opinion. *They should kill him first, when the time came*, the sergeant thought. Aleksandrov tapped the sergeant on the shoulder. "Our turn to leapfrog, Boris Yevgeniyevich."

"By your command, Comrade Captain." And both men moved out, crouching for the first hundred meters, and taking care not to make too much noise, until they heard the Chinese tracks start their engines. In five more minutes, they were back in their BRM and heading north, slowly picking their way through the trees, Aleksandrov buttered some bread and ate it, sipping water as he did so. When they'd traveled a thousand meters, their vehicle stopped, and the captain got on his big radio.

Who is Ingrid?" Tolkunov asked. "Ingrid Bergman," Major Tucker replied. "Actress, good-lookin' babe in her day. All the Dark Stars are named for movie stars, Colonel. The troops did it." There was a plastic strip on the monitor top to show which Dark Star was up and transmitting. Marilyn Monroe was back at Zhigansk for service, and Grace Kelly was the next one up, scheduled to go in fifteen hours. "Anyway"—he flipped a switch and then played a little with his mouse control—"there's the Chinese lead elements."

"Son of a bitch," Tolkunov said, demonstrating his knowledge of American slang.

Tucker grinned. "Pretty good, ain't it? Once I sent one over a nudist colony in California—that's like a private park where people walk around naked all the time. You can tell the difference between the flat-chested ones and the ones with nice tits. Tell the natural blondes from the peroxide ones, too. Anyway, you use this mouse to control the camera—well, somebody else is doing it now up at Zhigansk. Anything in particular that you're interested in?"

"The bridges on the Amur," Tolkunov said at once. Tucker picked up a radio microphone.

"This is Major Tucker. We have a tasking request. Slew Camera Three onto the big crossing point."

"Roger," the speaker next to the monitor said.

The picture changed immediately, seeming to race across the screen like a ribbon from ten o'clock down to four o'clock. Then it stabilized. The field of view must have been four kilometers across. It showed a total of what appeared to be eight bridges, each of them approached by what looked like a parade of insects.

"Give me control of Camera Three," Tucker said next.

"You got it, sir," the speaker acknowledged.

"Okay." Tucker played with the mouse more than the keyboard, and

the picture zoomed in—"isolated"—on the third bridge from the west. There were three tanks on it at once, moving at about ten kilometers per hour south to north. The display showed a compass rose in case you got disoriented, and it was even in color. Tolkunov asked why.

"No more expensive than black-and-white cameras, and we put it on the system because it sometimes shows you things you don't get from gray. First time for overheads, even the satellites don't do color yet," Tucker explained. Then he frowned. "The angle's wrong, can't get the divisional markings on the tanks without moving the platform. Wait." He picked up the microphone again. "Sergeant, who's crossing the bridges now?"

"Appears to be their Three-Oh-Second armored division, sir, part of the Twenty-Ninth Group-A Army. The Thirty-Fourth Army is fully across now. We estimate one full regiment of the Three-Oh-Second is across and moving north at this time," the intel weenie reported, as though relating the baseball scores from yesterday.

"Thanks, Sarge."

"Roger that, Maj."

"And they can't see this drone?" Tolkunov asked.

"Well, on radar it's pretty stealthy, and there's another little trick we have on it. Goes back to World War II, called Project Yehudi back then, you put lights on the thing."

"What?" Tolkunov asked.

"Yeah, you spot airplanes because they're darker'n the sky, but if you put lightbulbs on 'em, they turn invisible. So, there are lights on the airframe, and a photo sensor dials the brightness automatically. They're damned near impossible to spot—they cruise at sixty thousand feet, way the hell above contrail level, and they got no infrared signature at all, hardly—even if you know where to look, and they tell me you can't hardly *make* an air-to-air missile lock onto one. Pretty cool toy, eh?"

"How long have you had this?"

"I've been working on it, oh, about four years now."

"I've heard of Dark Star, but this capability is amazing."

Tucker nodded. "Yeah, it's pretty slick. Nice to know what the other guy's doing. First time we deployed it was over Yugoslavia, and once we learned how to use it, and how to coordinate it with the shooters, well, we learned to make their lives pretty miserable. Tough shit, Joe."

"Joe?"

"Joe Chink." Tucker pointed at the screen. "That's what we mainly call him." The friendly nickname for Koreans had once been Luke the Gook. "Now, Ingrid doesn't have it yet, but Grace Kelly does, a laser designator, so you can use these things to clobber targets. The fighter

just lofts the bomb in from, oh, maybe twenty miles away, and we guide it into the target. I've only done that at Red Flag, and we can't do it from here with this terminal, but they can up at Zhigansk."

"Guide bombs from six hundred kilometers away?"

"Yeah. Hell, you can do it from Washington if you want. It all goes over the satellite, y'now?"

"*Yob tvoyu maht!*"

"Soon we're going to make the fighter jocks obsolete, Colonel. Another year or so and we'll be doing terminal guidance on missiles launched from a coupla hundred miles away. Won't need fighter pilots then. Guess I'll have to buy me a scarf. So, Colonel, what else do you want to see?"

The Il-86 landed at a rustic fighter base with only a few helicopters on it, Colonel Mitch Turner noted. As divisional intelligence officer, he was taking in a lot of what he saw in Russia, and what he saw wasn't all that encouraging. Like General Diggs, he'd entered the Army when the USSR had been the main enemy and principal worry for the United States Army, and now he was wondering how many of the intelligence estimates he'd help draft as a young spook officer had been pure fantasy. Either that or the mighty had fallen farther and faster than any nation in history. The Russian army wasn't even a shadow of what the Red Army had been. The "Rompin', Stompin'Russian Red Ass" so feared by NATO was as dead as the stegosaurus toys his son liked to play with, and right now that was not such a good thing. The Russian Federation looked like a rich family of old with no sons to defend it, and the girl kids were getting raped. Not a good thing. The Russians, like America, still had nuclear weapons—bombs, deliverable by bombers and tactical fighters. However, the Chinese had missiles to deliver theirs, and they were targeted at cities, and the Big Question was whether the Russians had the stones to trade a few cities and, say, forty million people for a gold mine and some oil fields. Probably not, Turner figured. Not something a smart man would do. Similarly, they could not afford a war of attrition against a country with nine times as many people *and* a healthier economy, even over this ground. No, if they were to defeat the Chinese, it had to be with maneuver and agility, but their military was in the shitter, and neither trained nor equipped to play maneuver warfare.

This, Turner thought on reflection, *was going to be an interesting war*. It was not the sort he wanted to fight. Better to clobber a dumb little enemy than mix it up with a smart powerful one. It might not be glorious, but it was a hell of a lot safer.

"Mitch," General Diggs said, as they stood to walk off the airplane. "Thoughts?"

“Well, sir, we might have picked a better place to fly to. Way things look, this is going to be a little exciting.”

“Go on,” the general ordered.

“The other side has better cards. More troops, bettertrained troops, more equipment. Their task, crossing a lot of nasty country, is not enviable, but neither is the Russian task, defending against it. To win they have to play maneuver warfare. But I don’t see that they have the horsepower to pull it off.”

“Their boss out here, Bondarenko. He’s pretty good.”

“So was Erwin Rommel, sir, but Montgomery whupped his ass.”

There were staff cars lined up to drive them into the Russian command post. The weather was clearer here, and they were close enough to the Chinese that a clear sky wasn’t something to enjoy anymore.

CHAPTER 53

Deep Concerns

So, what's happening there?" Ryan asked. "The Chinese are seventy miles inside Russia. They have a total of eight divisions over the river, and they're pushing north," General Moore replied, moving a pencil across the map spread on the conference table. "They blew through the Russian border defenses pretty fast—it was essentially the Maginot Line from 1940. I wouldn't have expected it to hold very long, but our overheads showed them punching through fairly professionally with their leading infantry formations, supported by a lot of artillery. Now they have their tanks across—about eight hundred to this point, with another thousand or so to go."

Ryan whistled. "That many?"

"When you invade a major country, sir, you don't do it on the cheap. The only good news at this point is that we've really given their air force a bloody nose."

"AWACS and -15s?" Jackson asked.

"Right." The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs nodded. "One of our kids made ace in a single engagement. A Colonel Winters."

"Bronco Winters," Jackson said. "I've heard the name. Fighter jock. Okay, what else?"

"Our biggest problem on the air side is going to be getting bombs to our airmen. Flying bombs in is not real efficient. I mean, you can use up a whole C-5 just to deliver half the bombs for one squadron of F-15Es, and we've got a lot of other things for the C-5s to do. We're thinking about sending the bombs into Russia by train to Chita, say, and then flying them up to Suntar from there, but the Russian railroad is moving just tanks and vehicles for now, and that isn't going to change soon. We're trying to fight a war at the end of one railroad line. Sure, it's double-tracked, but it's still just one damned line. Our logistical people are already taking a lot of Maalox over this one."

"Russian airlift capacity?" Ryan asked.

"FedEx has more," General Moore replied. "In fact, FedEx has a lot more. We're going to ask you to authorize call-up of the civilian reserve air fleet, Mr. President."

"Approved," Ryan said at once.

"And a few other little things," Moore said. He closed his eyes. It was pushing midnight, and nobody had gotten much sleep lately. "VMH-1 is standing-to. We're in a shooting war with a country that has nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers. So, we have to think about the possibility—re—mote maybe, but still a possibility—that they could launch at us. So, VMH-1 and the Air Force's First Heli at Andrews are standing-to. We can get a chopper here to lift you and your family out in seven minutes. That concerns you, Mrs. O'ay," Moore said to Andrea.

The President's Principal Agent nodded. "We're dialed in. It's all in The Book," she said. That nobody had opened that particular book since 1962 was beside the point. It was written down. Mrs. Price-O'Day looked a little peaked.

"You okay?" Ryan asked.

"Stomach," she explained.

"Try some ginger?" Jack went on.

"Nothing much works for this, Dr. North tells me. Please excuse me, Mr. President." She was embarrassed that he'd noticed her discomfort. She always wanted to be one of the boys. But the boys didn't get pregnant, did they?

"Why don't you drive home?"

"Sir, I—"

"Go," Ryan said. "That's an order. You're a woman, and you're pregnant. You can't be a cop all the time, okay? Get some relief here and go. Right now."

Special Agent Price-O'Day hesitated, but she did have an order, so she walked out the door. Another agent came in immediately.

"Machismo from a woman. What's the goddamned world coming to?" Ryan asked the assembly.

"You're not real liberated, Jack," Jackson observed with a grin.

"It's called objective circumstances, I think. She's still a girl, even if she does carry a pistol. Cathy says she's doing fine. This nausea stuff doesn't last forever. Probably feels like it to her, though. Okay, General, what else?"

"Kneecap and Air Force One are on hot-pad alert 'round the clock. So, if we get a launch warning, in seven minutes or less, you and the Vice President are on choppers, five more minutes to Andrews, and three more after that you're doing the takeoff roll. The drill is, your family goes to Air Force One and you go to Kneecap," he concluded. Kneecap was actually the National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP), but the official acronym was too hard to pronounce. Like the VC-25A that served as Air Force One, Kneecap was a converted 747 that was really just a wrapper for a bunch of radios flying in very close formation.

"Gee, that's nice to know. What about my family?" PO-TUS asked.

"In these circumstances, we keep a chopper close to where your wife and kids are at all times, and then they'll fly in whatever direction seems the safest at the moment. If that's not Andrews, then they'll get picked up later by a fixed-wing aircraft and taken to whatever place seems best. It's all theoretical," Moore explained, "but something you might as well know about."

"Can the Russians stop the Chinese?" Ryan asked, turning his attention back to the map.

"Sir, that remains to be seen. They do have the nuclear option, but it's not a card I would expect them to play. The Chinese *do* have twelve CSS-4 ICBMs. It's essentially a duplicate of our old Titan-II liquid fuels, with a warhead estimated to be between three and five megatons."

"City-buster?" Ryan asked.

"Correct. No counterforce capability, and there's nothing we have left to use against it in that role anyway. The CEP on the warhead is estimated to be plus or minus a thousand meters or so. So, it'd do a city pretty well, but that's about all."

"Any idea where they're targeted?" Jackson asked. Moore nodded at once.

"Yes. The missile is pretty primitive, and the silos are oriented on their targets because the missile doesn't have much in the way of cross-range maneuverability. Two are targeted on Washington. Others on LA, San Francisco, and Chicago. Plus Moscow, Kiev, St. Petersburg. They're all leftovers from the Bad Old Days, and they haven't been modified in any way."

"Any way to take them out?" Jackson asked.

"I suppose we could stage a mission with fighter or bomber aircraft and go after the silos with PGMs," Moore allowed. "But we'd have to fly the bombs to Suntar first, and even then it'll be rather a lengthy mission for the F-117s."

"What about B-2s out of Guam?" Jackson asked.

"I'm not sure they can carry the right weapons. I'll have to check that."

"Jack, this is something we need to think about, okay?"

"I hear you, Robby. General, have somebody look into this, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Gennady Iosifovich!" General Diggs called on entering the map room.

"Marion Ivanovich!" The Russian came over to take his hand, followed by a hug. He even kissed his guest, in the Russian fashion, and Diggs flinched from this, in the American fashion. "In!"

And Diggs waited for ten seconds: “Out!” Both men shared the laugh of an insider’s joke.

“The turtle bordello is still there?”

“It was the last time I looked, Gennady.” Then Diggs had to explain to the others. “Out at Fort Irwin—we collected all the desert tortoises and put them in a safe place so the tanks wouldn’t squish ’em and piss off the tree-huggers. I suppose they’re still in there making little turtles, but the damned things screw so slow they must fall asleep doing it.”

“I have told that story many times, Marion.” Then the Russian turned serious. “I am glad to see you. I will be more glad to see your division.”

“How bad is it?”

“It is not good. Come.” They walked over to the big wall map. “These are their positions as of thirty minutes ago.”

“How are you keeping track of them?”

“We now have your Dark Star invisible drones, and I have a smart young captain on the ground watching them as well.”

“That far . . .” Diggs said. Colonel Masterman was right beside him now. “Duke?” Then he looked at his Russian host. “This is Colonel Masterman, my G-3. His last job was as a squadron commander in the Tenth Cav.”

“Buffalo Soldier, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” Masterman confirmed with a nod, but his eyes didn’t leave the map. “Ambitious bastards, aren’t they?”

“Their first objective will be here,” Colonel Aliyev said, using a pointer. “This is the Gogol Gold Strike.”

“Well, hell, if you’re gonna steal something, might as well be a gold mine, right?” Duke asked rhetorically. “What do you have to stop them with?”

“Two-Six-Five Motor Rifle is here.” Aliyev pointed.

“Full strength?”

“Not quite, but we’ve been training them up. We have four more motor-rifle divisions en route. The first arrives at Chita tomorrow noon.” Aliyev’s voice was a little too optimistic for the situation. He didn’t want to show weakness to Americans.

“That’s still a long way to move,” Masterman observed. He looked over at his boss.

“What are you planning, Gennady?”

“I want to take the four Russian divisions north to link up with the 265th, and stop them about here. Then, perhaps, we will use your forces to cross east through here and cut them off.”

Now it wasn’t the Chinese who were being ambitious, both Diggs and Masterman thought. Moving First Infantry Division (Mechanized) from

Fort Riley, Kansas, to Fort Carson, Colorado, would have been about the same distance, but it would have been on flat ground and against no opposition. Here that task would involve a lot of hills and serious resistance. *Those factors did make a difference*, the American officers thought.

"No serious contact yet?"

Bondarenko shook his head. "No, I'm keeping my mechanized forces well away from them. The Chinese are advancing against no opposition."

"You want 'em to fall asleep, get sloppy?" Masterman asked.

"*Da*, better that they should get overconfident."

The American colonel nodded. That made good sense, and as always, war was as much a psychological game as a physical one. "If we jump off the trains at Chita, it's still a long-approach march to where you want us, General."

"What about fuel?" Colonel Douglas asked.

"That is the one thing we have plenty of," answered Colonel Aliyev. "The blue spots on the map, fuel storage—it is the same as your Number Two Diesel."

"How much?" Douglas asked.

"At each fuel depot, one billion two hundred fifty million liters."

"Shit!" Douglas observed. "*That* much?"

Aliyev explained, "The fuel depots were established to support a large mobile force in a border conflict. They were built in the time of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev. Huge concrete-and-steel storage tanks, all underground, well hidden."

"They must be," Mitch Turner observed. "I've never been briefed on them."

"So, we evaded even your satellite photos, yes?" That pleased the Russian. "Each depot is manned by a force of twenty engineers, with ample electric pumps."

"I like the locations," Masterman said. "What's this unit here?"

"That is BOYAR, a reserve mechanized force. The men have just been called up. Their weapons are from a hidden equipment-storage bunker. It's a short division, old equipment—T-55s and such—but serviceable. We're keeping that force hidden," Aliyev said.

The American G-3 arched his eyebrows. Maybe they were outmanned, but they weren't dumb. That BOYAR force was in a particularly interesting place . . . if Ivan could make proper use of it. Their overall operational concept looked good—theoretically. A lot of soldiers could come up with good ideas. The problem was executing them. Did the Russians have the ability to do that? Russia's military theorists were as good as any the world had ever seen—good enough that the United States Army regularly stole their ideas. The problem

was that the U.S. Army could apply those theories to a real battlefield, and the Russians could not.

"How are your people handling this?" Masterman asked.

"Our soldiers, you mean?" Aliyev asked. "The Russian soldier knows how to fight," he assured his American counterpart.

"Hey, Colonel, I am not questioning their guts," Duke assured his host. "How's their spirit, for one thing?"

Bondarenko handled that one: "Yesterday I had to face one of my young officers, Komanov, from the border defenses. He was furious that we were unable to give him the support he needed to defeat the Chinese. And I was ashamed," the general admitted to his guests. "My men have the spirit. Their training is lacking—I just got here a few months ago, and my changes have barely begun to take effect. But, you will see, the Russian soldier has *always* risen to the occasion, and he will today—if we here are worthy of him."

Masterman didn't share a look with his boss. Diggs had spoken well of this Russian general, and Diggs was both a good operational soldier and a good judge of men. But the Russian had just admitted that his men weren't trained up as well as they ought to be. The good news was that on the battlefield, men learned the soldier's trade rapidly. The bad news was that the battlefield was the most brutal Darwinian environment on the face of the planet. Some men would learn, but others would die in the process, and the Russians didn't have all that many they could afford to lose. This wasn't 1941, and they weren't fighting with half their population base this time around.

"You're going to want us to move out fast when the trains drop us off at Chita?" Tony Welch asked. He was the divisional chief of staff.

"Yes," Aliyev confirmed.

"Okay, well, then I need to get down there and look over the facilities. What about fuel for our choppers?"

"Our air force bases have fuel storage similar to the diesel depots," Aliyev told him. "Your word is infrastructure, yes? That is the one thing we have much of. When will they arrive?"

"The Air Force is still working that out. They're going to fly our aviation brigade in. Apaches first. Dick Boyle's chomping at the bit."

"We will be very pleased to see your attack helicopters. We have all too few of our own, and our air force is also slow delivering them."

"Duke," Diggs said, "get on the horn to the Air Force. We need some choppers right the hell now, just so we can get around and see what we need to see."

"Roger," Masterman replied.

"Let me get a satellite radio set up," Lieutenant Colonel Garvey said, heading for the door.

Ingrid Bergman was heading south now. General Wallace wanted a better idea for the Chinese logistical tail, and now he was getting it. The People's Republic of China was in many ways like America had been at the turn of the previous century. Things moved mainly by rail. There were no major highways as Americans understood them, but a lot of railroads. Those were efficient for moving large quantities of anything over medium-to-long distances, but they were also inflexible, and hard to repair—especially the bridges—and most of all the tunnels, and so that was what he and his targeting people were looking at. The problem was that they had few bombs to drop. None of his attack assets—mainly F-15E Strike Eagles at the moment—had flown over with bombs on their wings, and he had barely enough air-to-mud munitions for an eight-ship strike mission. It was like going to a dance and finding no girls there. The music was fine, and so was the fruit punch, but there really wasn't anything to do. Perversely, his -15E crews didn't mind. They got to play fighter plane, and all such people prefer shooting other airplanes down to dropping bombs on mud soldiers. It just came with the territory. The one thing he had going now was that his scarf-and-goggles troops were playing hell with the PRC air force, with over seventy confirmed kills already for not a single air-to-air loss. The advantage of having E-3B AWACS aircraft was so decisive that the enemy might as well have been flying World War I Fokkers, and the Russians were learning rapidly how to make use of E-3B support. Their fighters were good aerodynamic platforms, just lacking in legs. The Russians had never built a fighter with fuel capacity for more than about one hour's flight time. Nor had they ever learned how to do midair refueling, as the Americans had. And so the Russian MiG and Sukhoi fighters could go up, take their instructions from the AWACS, and participate in one engagement, but then they had to return to base for gas. Half of the kills his Eagle drivers had collected so far were of Chinese fighters that had broken off their fights to RTB for gas as well. It wasn't fair, but Wallace, like all Air Force fighter types, could hardly have cared less about being fair in combat.

But Wallace was fighting a defensive war to this point. He was successfully defending Russian airspace. He was not taking out Chinese targets, not even attacking the Chinese troops on the ground in Siberia. So, though his fighters were having a fine, successful war, they just weren't accomplishing anything important. To that end, he lifted his satellite link to America.

"We ain't got no bombs, General," he told Mickey Moore.

"Well, your fellow Air Scouts are maxed out on taskings, and Mary Diggs is screaming to get some trash haulers to get him his chopper brigade moved to where he needs it."

"Sir, this is real simple. If you want us to kill some Chinese targets, we have to have bombs. I hope I'm not going too fast for you," Wallace added.

"Go easy, Gus," Moore warned.

"Well, sir, maybe it just looks a little different in Washington, but where I'm sitting right now, I have missions, but not the tools to carry those missions out. So, you D.C. people can either send me the tools or rescind the missions. Your call, sir."

"We're working on it," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs assured him.

Do I have any orders?" Mancuso asked the Secretary of Defense.

"Not at this time," Bretano told CINCPAC.

"Sir, may I ask why? The TV says we're in a shooting war with China. Am I supposed to play or not?"

"We are considering the political ramifications," THUNDER explained.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"You heard me."

"Mr. Secretary, all I know about politics is voting every couple of years, but I have a lot of gray ships under my command, and they're technically known as *war*ships, and my country is at war." The frustration in Mancuso's voice was plain.

"Admiral, when the President decides what to do, you will find out. Until then, ready your command for action. It's going to happen. I'm just not sure when."

"Aye, aye, sir." Mancuso hung up and looked at his subordinates. "Political ramifications," he said. "I didn't think Ryan was like that."

"Sir," Mike Lahr soothed. "Forget 'political' and think 'psychological,' okay? Maybe Secretary Bretano just used the wrong word. Maybe the idea is to hit them when it'll do the most good—because we're messing with their heads, sir, remember?"

"You think so?"

"Remember who the Vice President is? He's one of us, Admiral. And President Ryan isn't a pussy, is he?"

"Well . . . no, not that I recall," CINCPAC said, remembering the first time he'd met the guy, and the shoot-out he'd had aboard *Red October*. No, Jack Ryan wasn't a pussy. "So, what do you suppose he's thinking?"

"The Chinese have a land war going on—air and land, anyway. Nothing's happening at sea. They may not expect anything to happen at sea. But they are surging some ships out, just to establish a defense line for the mainland. If we get orders to hit those ships, the purpose will be to make a psychological impact. So, let's plan along those

lines, shall we? Meanwhile, we keep getting more assets in place:"

"Right." Mancuso nodded and turned to face the wall. Pacific Fleet was nearly all west of the dateline now, and the Chinese had probably no clue where his ships were, but he knew about them. USS *Tucson* was camped out on *406*, the single PRC ballistic-missile submarine. It was known to the west as a "Xia" class SSBN, and his intelligence people disagreed on the sub's actual name, but "406" was the number painted on its sail, and that was how he thought of it. None of that mattered to Mancuso. The first shoot order he planned to issue would go to *Tucson*—to put that missilearmed sub at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. He remembered that the PRC had nuclear-tipped missiles, and those in his area of responsibility would disappear as soon as he had authorization to deal with them. USS *Tucson* was armed with Mark 48 ADCAP fish, and they'd do the job on *that* target, assuming that he was right and President Ryan wasn't a pussy after all.

And so, Marshal Luo?" Zhang Han San asked.

"Things go well," he replied at once. "We crossed the Amur River with trivial losses, captured the Russian positions in a few hours, and are now driving north."

"Enemy opposition?"

"Light. Very light, in fact. We're starting to wonder if the Russians have any forces deployed in sector at all. Our intelligence suggests the presence of two mechanized divisions, but if they're there, they haven't advanced to establish contact with us. Our forces are racing forward, making better than thirty kilometers per day. I expect to see the gold mine in seven days."

"Is anything going badly?" Qian asked.

"Only in the air. The Americans have deployed fighters to Siberia, and as we all know, the Americans are very clever with their machines, especially the ones that fly. They have inflicted some losses on our fighter aircraft," the Defense Minister admitted.

"How large are the losses?"

"Total, over one hundred. We've gotten twenty-five or so of theirs in return, but the Americans are masters of aerial combat. Fortunately, their aircraft can do little to hinder the advance of our tanks, and, as you have doubtless noted, they have not attacked into our territory at all."

"Why is that, Marshal?" Fang asked.

"We are not certain," Luo answered, turning to the MSS chief. "Tan?"

"Our sources are not certain, either. The most likely explanation is that the Americans have made a political decision not to attack us

directly, but merely to defend their Russian 'ally' in a pro forma way. I suppose there is also the consideration that they do not wish to take losses from our air defenses, but the main reason for their restraint is undoubtedly political."

Heads nodded around the table. It was indeed the most likely explanation for the American lack of action, and all of these men understood political considerations.

"Does this mean that they are measuring their action against us in such a way as to cause us minimal injury?" Tong Jie asked. It was so much the better for him, of course, since the Interior Ministry would have to deal with the internal dislocations that systematic attacks might cause.

"Remember what I said before," Zhang pointed out. "They *will* do business with us once we've secured our new territory. So, they already anticipate this. It seems plain that they will support their Russian friends, but only so much. What else are the Americans but mercenaries? This President Ryan, what was he?"

"He was a CIA spy, and by all accounts an effective one," Tan Deshi reminded them.

"No," Zhang disagreed. "He was a trader in stocks before he joined CIA, and then he was a stock trader again after he left—and whom does he bring into his cabinet? Winston, another hugely rich capitalist, a trader in stocks and securities, a typical American rich man. I tell you, money is the key to understanding these people. They do business. They have no political ideology, except to fatten their purses. To do that, you try not to make blood enemies, and now, here, with us, they do not try to anger us too greatly. I tell you, I understand these people."

"Perhaps," Qian said. "But what if there are objective circumstances which prevent more aggressive action?"

"Then why is their navy not taking action? Their navy is most formidable, but it does nothing, correct, Luo?"

"Not to this point, but we are wary of them," the marshal warned. He was a soldier, not a sailor, even though the PLAN did come under his command. "We have patrol aircraft looking for them, but so far we have not spotted anything. We know they are not in harbor, but that is all."

"They do nothing with their navy. They do nothing with their land forces. They sting us slightly with their air forces, but what is that? The buzzing of insects." Zhang dismissed the issue.

"How many have underestimated America, and this Ryan fellow, and done so to their misfortune?" Qian demanded. "Comrades, I tell you, this is a dangerous situation we are in. Perhaps we can succeed, all well and good if that comes to pass, but overconfidence can be any

man's undoing."

"And overestimating one's enemy ensures that you will never do anything," Zhang Han San countered. "Did we get to where we are, did our country get to where we are, by timidity? The Long March was not made by cowards." He looked around the table, and no one summoned the character to argue with him.

"So, things go well in Russia?" Xu asked the Defense Minister.

"Better than the plan," Luo assured them all.

"Then we proceed," the Premier decided for them all, once others had made the real decisions. The meeting soon adjourned, and the ministers went their separate ways.

"Fang?"

The junior Minister-Without-Portfolio turned to see Qian Kun coming after him in the corridor. "Yes, my friend?"

"The reason the Americans have not taken firmer action is that they act at the end of a single railroad to move them and their supplies. This takes time. They have not dropped bombs on us, probably, because they don't have any. And where does Zhang get this rubbish about American ideology?"

"He is wise in the ways of international affairs," Fang replied.

"Is he? Is he really? Is he not the one who tricked the Japanese into commencing a war with America? And why—so that we and they could seize Siberia. And then did he not quietly support Iran and their attempt to seize the Saudi kingdom? And why? So that we could then use the Muslims as a hammer to beat Russia into submission—so that we could seize Siberia. Fang, all he thinks about is Siberia. He wishes to see it under our flag before he dies. Perhaps he wishes to have his ashes buried in a golden urn, like the emperors," Qian hissed. "He's an adventurer, and those men come to bad ends."

"Except those who succeed," Fang suggested.

"How many of them succeed, and how many die before a stone wall?" Qian shot back. "I say the Americans will strike us, and strike us hard once their forces are assembled. Zhang follows his own political vision, not facts, not reality. He may lead our country to its doom."

"Are the Americans so formidable as that?"

"If they are not, Fang, why does Tan spend so much of his time trying to steal their inventions? Don't you remember what America did to Japan and Iran? They are like the wizards of legend. Luo tells us that they've savaged our air force. How often has he told us how formidable our fighters are? All the money we spent on those wonderful aircraft, and the Americans slaughter them like hogs fattened for market! Luo claims we've gotten twenty-five of theirs. He *claims* only twenty-five. More likely we've gotten one or two! Against

over a hundred losses, but Zhang tells us the Americans don't want to challenge us. Oh, really? What held them back from smashing Japan's military, and then annihilating Iran's?" Qian paused for breath. "I fear this, Fang. I fear what Zhang and Luo have gotten us into."

"Even if you are right, what can we do to stop it?" the minister asked.

"Nothing," Qian admitted. "But *someone* must speak the truth. *Someone* must warn of the danger that lies before us, if we are to have a country left at the end of this misbegotten adventurism."

"Perhaps so. Qian, you are as ever a voice of reason and prudence. We will speak more," Fang promised, wondering how much of the man's words was alarmism, and how much was good sense. He'd been a brilliant administrator of the state railroads, and therefore was a man with a firm grasp on reality.

Fang had known Zhang for most of his adult life. He was a highly skilled player on the political stage, and a brilliantly gifted manipulator of people. But Qian was asking if those talents translated into a correct perception of reality, and did he *really* understand America and Americans—and most of all, this Ryan fellow? Or was he just forcing oddly shaped pegs into the slots he'd engraved in his own mind? Fang admitted that he didn't know, and more to the point, didn't know the answers to the implicit questions. He did not know himself whether Zhang was right or not. And he really should. But who might? Tan of the Ministry of State Security? Shen of the Foreign Ministry? Who else? Certainly not Premier Xu. All he did was to confirm the consensus achieved by others, or to repeat the words spoken into his ear by Zhang.

Fang walked to his office thinking about all these things, trying to organize his thoughts. Fortunately, he had a system for achieving that.

It started in Memphis, the headquarters of Federal Express. Faxes and telexes arrived simultaneously, telling the company that its wide-body cargo jets were being taken into federal service under the terms of a Phase I call-up of the Civilian Reserve Air Fleet. That meant that all freight-capable aircraft that the federal government had helped to finance (that was nearly all of them, because no commercial bank could compete with Washington when it came to financing things) were now being taken, along with their crews, under the control of the Air Mobility Command. The notice wasn't welcome, but neither was it much of a surprise. Ten minutes later came follow-up messages telling the aircraft where to go, and soon thereafter they started rolling. The flight crews, the majority of them militarytrained, wondered where their ultimate destinations were, sure that they'd be surprising ones. The pilots would not be disappointed in this.

FedEx would have to make do with its older narrowbody aircraft, like the venerable Boeing 727s with which the company had gotten started two decades earlier. That, the dispatchers knew, would be a stretch, but they had assistance agreements with the airlines, which they would now activate in order to try to keep up with the continuing shipment of legal documents and live lobsters all over America.

"Just how inefficient is it?" Ryan asked.

"Well, we can deliver one day's worth of bombs in three days' worth of flying—maybe two if we stretch things a little, but that's as good as it's going to get," Moore told him. "Bombs are heavy things, and getting them around uses up a lot of jet fuel. General Wallace has a nice list of targets to service, but to do that he needs bombs."

"Where are the bombs going to come from?"

"Andersen Air Force Base on Guam has a nice pile," Moore said. "Ditto Elmendorf in Alaska, and Mountain Home in Idaho. Various other places. It's not so much a question of time and distance as of weight. Hell, the Russian base he's using at Suntar is plenty big for his purposes. We just have to get the bombs to him, and I've just shunted a lot of Air Force lifters to Germany to start loading First Armored's aviation assets to where Diggs is. That's going to take four days of nonstop flying."

"What about crew rest?" Jackson asked.

"What?" Ryan looked up.

"It's a Navy thing, Jack. The Air Force has union rules on how much they can fly. Never had those rules out on the boats," Robby explained. "The C-5 has a bunk area for people to sleep. I was just being facetious." He didn't apologize. It was late—actually "early" was the correct adjective—and nobody in the White House was getting much sleep.

For his part, Ryan wanted a cigarette to help him deal with the stress, but Ellen Sumter was home and in bed, and no one on night duty in the White House smoked, to the best of his knowledge. But that was the wimp part of his character speaking, and he knew it. The President rubbed his face with his hands and looked over at the clock. He had to get some sleep.

"It's late, honey-bunny," Mary Pat said to her husband.

"I never would have guessed. Is that why my eyes keep wanting to close?"

There was, really, no reason for them to be here. CIA had little in the way of assets in the PRC. SORGE was the only one of value. The rest of the intelligence community, DIA and NSA, each of them larger

than the Central Intelligence Agency in terms of manpower, didn't have any directly valuable human sources either, though NSA was doing its utmost to tap in on Chinese communications. They were even listening in on cell phones through their constellation of geosynchronous ferret satellites, downloading all of the "take" through the Echelon system and then forwarding the "hits" to human linguists for full translation and evaluation. They were getting some material, but not all that much. SORGE was the gemstone of the collection, and both Edward and Mary Patricia Foley were really staying up late to await the newest installment in Minister Fang's personal diary. The Chinese Politburo was meeting every day, and Fang was a dedicated diarist, not to mention a man who enjoyed the physical attractions of his female staff. They were even reading significance into the less regular writings of WARBLER, who mainly committed to her computer his sexual skills, occasionally enough to make Mary Pat blush. Being an intelligence officer was often little different from being a paid voyeur, and the staff psychiatrist translated all of the prurient stuff into what was probably a very accurate personality profile, but to them it just meant that Fang was a dirty old man who happened to exercise a lot of political power.

"It's going to be another three hours at best," the DCI said.

"Yeah," his wife agreed.

"Tell you what . . ." Ed Foley rose off the couch, tossed away the cushions, and reached in to pull out the foldaway bed. It was marginally big enough for two.

"When the staff sees this, they'll wonder if we got laid tonight."

"Baby, I have a headache," the DCI reported.

CHAPTER 54

Probes and Pushes

Much of life in the military is mere adherence to Parkinson's Law, the supposition that work invariably expands to fill the time allocated for it. In this case, Colonel Dick Boyle arrived on the very first C-5B Galaxy, which, immediately upon rolling to a stop, lifted its nose "visor" door to disgorge the first of three UH-60A Blackhawk helicopters, whose crewmen just as immediately rolled it to a vacant piece of ramp to unfold the rotor blades, assure they were locked in place, and ready the aircraft for flight after the usual safety checks. By that time, the C-5B had refueled and rolled off into the sky to make room for the next Galaxy, this one delivering AH-64 Apache attack helicopters—in this case complete with weapons and other accoutrements for flying real missions against a real armed enemy.

Colonel Boyle busied himself with watching everything, even though he knew that his troops were doing their jobs as well as they could be done, and would do those jobs whether he watched and fussed over them or not. Perversely, what Boyle wanted to do was to fly to where Diggs and his staff were located, but he resisted the temptation because he felt he should be supervising people whom he'd trained to do their jobs entirely without supervision. That lasted three hours until he finally saw the logic of the situation and decided to be a commander rather than a shop supervisor, and lifted off for Chabarsovil. The flying was easy enough, and he preferred the medium-low clouds, because there had to be fighters about, and not all of them would be friendly. The GPS navigation system guided him to the right location, and the right location, it turned out, was a concrete helipad with soldiers standing around it. They were wearing the "wrong" uniform, a state of mind that Boyle knew he'd have to work on. One of them escorted Boyle into a building that looked like the Russian idea of a headquarters, and sure enough, it was.

"Dick, come on over," General Diggs called. The helicopter commander saluted as he approached.

"Welcome to Siberia, Dick," Marion Diggs said in greeting.

"Thank you, sir. What's the situation?"

"Interesting," the general replied. "This is General Bondarenko. He's

the theater commander." Boyle saluted again. "Gennady, this is Colonel Boyle, who commands my aviation brigade. He's pretty good."

"What's the air situation, sir?" Boyle asked Diggs.

"The Air Force is doing a good job on their fighters so far."

"What about Chinese helicopters?"

"They do not have many," another Russian officer said. "I am Colonel Aliyev, Andrey Petrovich, theater operations. The Chinese do not have many helicopters. We've only seen a few, mainly scouts."

"No troop carriers? No staff transport?"

"No," Aliyev answered. "Their senior officers prefer to move around in tracked vehicles. They are not married to helicopters as you Americans are."

"What do you want me to do, sir?" Boyle asked Diggs.

"Take Tony Turner to Chita. That's the railhead we're going to be using. We need to get set up there."

"Drive the tracks in from there, eh?" Boyle looked at the map.

"That's the plan. There are closer points, but Chita has the best facilities to off-load our vehicles, so our friends tell us."

"What about gas?"

"The place you landed is supposed to have sizable underground fuel tanks."

"More than you will need," Aliyev confirmed. Boyle thought that was quite a promise.

"And ordnance?" Boyle asked. "We've got maybe two days' worth on the C-5s so far. Six complete loads for my Apaches, figuring three missions per day."

"Which version of the Apache?" Aliyev asked.

"Delta, Colonel. We've got the Longbow radar."

"Everything works?" the Russian asked.

"Colonel, not much sense bringing them if they don't," Boyle replied, with a raised eyebrow. "What about secure quarters for my people?"

"At the base where you landed, there will be secure sleeping quarters for your aviators—bombproof shelters. Your maintenance people will be housed in barracks."

Boyle nodded. It was the same everywhere. The weenies who built things acted as if pilots were more valuable than the people who maintained the aircraft. And so they were, until the aircraft needed repairs, at which point the pilot was as useful as a cavalryman without a horse.

"Okay, General. I'll take Tony to this Chita place and then I'm going back to see to my people's needs. I could sure use one of Chuck Garvey's radios."

"He's outside. Grab one on your way."

"Okay, sir. Tony, let's get moving," he said to the chief of staff.

"Sir, as soon as we get some infantry in, I want to put security on those fueling points," Masterman said. "Those places need projecting."

"I can give you what you need," Aliyev offered.

"Fine by me," Masterman responded. "How many of those secure radios did Garvey bring?"

"Eight, I think. Two are gone already," General Diggs warned. "Well, there'll be more on the train. Go tell Boyle to send two choppers here for our needs."

"Right." Masterman ran for the door.

The ministers all had offices and, as in every other such office in the world, the cleanup crews came in, in this case about ten every night. They picked up all sorts of trash, from candy wrappers to empty cigarette packs to papers, and the latter went into special burn-bags. The janitorial staff was not particularly smart, but they had had to pass background checks and go through security briefings that were heavy on intimidation. They were not allowed to discuss their jobs with anyone, not even a spouse, and not ever to reveal what they saw in the wastebaskets. In fact, they never thought much about it—they were less interested in the thoughts or ideas of the Politburo members than they were in the weather forecasts. They'd rarely even seen the ministers whose offices they cleaned, and none of the crew had ever so much as spoken a single word to any of them; they just tried to be invisible on those rare occasions when they saw one of the godlike men who ruled their nation. Maybe a submissive bow, which was not even acknowledged by so much as a look, because they were mere furniture, menials who did peasants' work because, as peasants, that was all they were suited for. The peasants knew what computers were, but such machines were not for the use of such men as they were, and the janitorial staff knew it.

And so when one of the computers made a noise while a cleaner was in the office, he took no note of it. Well, it seemed odd that it should whir when the screen was dark, but why it did what it did was a mystery to him, and he'd never even been so bold as to touch the thing. He didn't even dust the keyboard as he cleaned the desktop—no, he always avoided the keys.

And so, he heard the whir begin, continue for a few seconds, then stop, and he paid no mind to it.

Mary Pat Foley opened her eyes when the sun started casting shadows on her husband's office wall, and rubbed her eyes reluctantly. She checked her watch. Seventwenty. She was usually up long before this—but she usually didn't go to bed after four in the

morning. Three hours of sleep would probably have to do. She stood and headed into Ed's private washroom. It had a shower, like hers. She'd make use of her own shortly, and for the moment settled for some water splashed on her face and a reluctant look in the mirror that resulted in a grimace at what the look revealed.

The Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency shook her head, and then her entire body to get the blood moving, and then put her blouse on. Finally, she shook her husband's shoulder.

"Out of the hutch, honey-bunny, before the foxes get you."

"We still at war?" the DCI asked from behind closed eyes.

"Probably. I haven't checked yet." She paused for a stretch and slipped her feet into her shoes. "I'm going to check my e-mail."

"Okay, I'll call downstairs for breakfast," Ed told her.

"Oatmeal. No eggs. Your cholesterol is too high," Mary Pat observed.

"Yeah, baby," he grumbled in submissive reply.

"That's a good honey-bunny." She kissed him and headed out.

Ed Foley made his bathroom call, then sat at his desk and lifted the phone to call the executive cooking staff. "Coffee. Toast. Three-egg omelet, ham, and hash browns." Cholesterol or not, he had to get his body working.

You've got mail," the mechanical voice said. "Great." The DDO breathed. She downloaded it, going through the usual procedures to save and print, but rather more slowly this morning because she was groggy and therefore mistake-prone. That sort of thing made her slow down and be extra careful, something she'd learned to do as the mother of a newborn. And so in four minutes instead of the usual two, she had a printed hard copy of the latest SORGE feed from Agent SONGBIRD. Six pages of relatively small ideographs. Then she lifted the phone and punched the speed-dial button for Dr. Sears.

"Yes?"

"This is Mrs. Foley. We got one."

"On the way, Director." She had some coffee before he arrived, and the taste, if not the effect of the caffeine, helped her face the day.

"In early?" she asked.

"Actually I slept in last night. We need to improve the selection on the cable TV," he told her, hoping to lighten the day a little. One look at her eyes told him how likely that was.

"Here." She handed the sheets across. "Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you." His eyes didn't leave the page as his hand reached out for the cup. "This is good stuff today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it's Fang's account of a Politburo discussion of how the war's

going . . . they're trying to analyze our actons . . . yeah, that's about what I'd expect . . ."

"Talk to me, Dr. Sears," Mary Pat ordered.

"You're going to want to get George Weaver in on this, too, but what he's going to say is that they're projecting their own political outlook onto us generally, and onto President Ryan in particular . . . yeah, they're saying that we are not hitting them hard for political reasons, that they think we don't want to piss them off too much . . ." Sears took a long sip of coffee. "This is really good stuff. It tells us what their political leadership is thinking, and what they're thinking isn't very accurate." Sears looked up. "They misunderstand us worse than we misunderstand them, Director, even at this level. They see President Ryan's motivation as a strictly political calculation. Zhang says that he's laying back so that we can do business with them, after they consolidate their control over the Russian oil and goldfields."

"What about their advance?"

"They say—that is, Marshal Luo says—that things are going according to plan, that they're surprised at the lack of Russian opposition, and also surprised that we haven't struck any targets within their borders."

"That's because we don't have any bombs over there yet. Just found that out myself. We're having to fly the bombs in so that we can drop them."

"Really? Well, they don't know that yet. They think it's deliberate inaction on our part."

"Okay, get me a translation. When will Weaver get in?"

"Usually about eight-thirty."

"Go over this with him as soon as he arrives."

"You bet." Sears took his leave.

Bedding down for the night?" Aleksandrov asked.

"So it would seem, Comrade Captain," Buikov answered. He had his binoculars on the Chinese. The two command-reconnaissance vehicles were together, which only seemed to happen when they secured for the night. It struck both men as odd that they confined their activities to daylight, but that wasn't a bad thing for the Russian watchers, and even soldiers needed their sleep. More than most, in fact, both of the Russians would have said. The stress and strain of keeping track of the enemies of their country—and doing so *within* their own borders—were telling on both of them.

The Chinese drill was thorough, but predictable. The two command tracks were together. The others were spread out, mainly in front of them, but one three hundred meters behind to secure their rear. The crews of each track stayed together as a unit. Each broke out a small

petrol stove for cooking their rice—*probably rice*, the Russians all thought. And they settled down to get four or five hours of sleep before waking, cooking breakfast, and moving out before dawn. Had they not been enemies, their adherence to so demanding a drill might have excited admiration. Instead, Buikov found himself wondering if he could get two or three of their BRMs to race up on the invaders and immolate them with the 30-mm rapid-fire cannons on their tracked carriers. But Aleksandrov would never allow it. You could always depend on officers to deny the sergeants what they wanted to do.

The captain and his sergeant walked back north to their track, leaving three other scouts to keep watch on their "guests," as Aleksandrov had taken to calling them.

"So, Sergeant, how are you feeling?" the officer asked in a quiet voice.

"Some sleep will be good." Buikov looked back. There was now a ridgeline in addition to the trees between him and the Chinks. He lit a cigarette and let out a long, relaxed breath. "This is harder duty than I expected it to be."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain. I always thought we could kill our enemies. Baby-sitting them is very stressful."

"That is so, Boris Yevgeniyevich, but remember that if we do our job properly, then Division will be able to kill more than just one or two. We are their eyes, not their teeth."

"As you say, Comrade Captain, but it is like making a movie of the wolf instead of shooting him."

"The people who make good wildlife movies win awards, Sergeant."

The odd thing about the captain, Buikov thought, *was that he was always trying to reason with you.* It was actually rather endearing, as if he was trying to be a teacher rather than an officer.

"What's for dinner?"

"Beef and black bread, Comrade Captain. Even some butter. But no vodka," the sergeant added sourly.

"When this is over, I will allow you to get good and drunk, Boris Yevgeniyevich," Aleksandrov promised.

"If we live that long, I will toast your health." The track was where they'd left it, and the crew had spread out the camouflage netting. *One thing about this officer*, Buikov thought, *he got the men to do their duty without much in the way of complaint. The same sort of good comradely solidarity my grandfather spoke about, as he told his endless tales of killing Germans on the way to Vienna, just like in all the movies*, the sergeant thought.

The black bread was canned, but tasty, and the beef, cooked on their own small petrol heater, wasn't so bad as to choke a dog. About

the time they finished, Sergeant Grechko appeared. He was the commander of the unit's #3 BRM, and he was carrying . . .

"Is that what I think it is?" Buikov asked. "Yuriy Andreyevich, you are a comrade!"

It was a half-liter bottle of vodka, the cheapest "ВОΔКА" brand, with a foil top that tore off and couldn't be resealed.

"Whose idea is this?" the captain demanded.

"Comrade Captain, it is a cold night, and we are Russian soldiers, and we need something to help us relax," Grechko said. "It's the only bottle in the company, and one slug each will not harm us, I think," the sergeant added reasonably.

"Oh, all right." Aleksandrov extended his metal cup, and received perhaps sixty grams. He waited for the rest of his crew to get theirs, and saw that the bottle was empty. They all drank together, and sure enough, it tasted just fine to be Russian soldiers out in the woods, doing their duty for their Motherland.

"We'll have to refuel tomorrow," Grechko said.

"There will be a fuel truck waiting for us, forty kilometers north at the burned-down sawmill. We'll go up there one at a time, and hope our Chinese guests do not get overly ambitious in their advance."

That must be your Captain Aleksandrov," Major Tucker said. "Fourteen hundred meters from the nearest Chinese. That's pretty close," the American observed.

"He's a good boy," Aliyev said, "Just reported in. The Chinese follow their drill with remarkable exactitude. And the main body?"

"Twenty-five miles back—forty kilometers or so. They're laagering in for the night, too, but they're actually building campfires, like they want us to know where they are." Tucker worked the mouse to show the encampments. The display was green-on-green now. The Chinese armored vehicles showed as bright spots, especially from the engines, which glowed from residual heat.

"This is amazing," Aliyev said in frank admiration.

"We decided back around the end of the 1970s that we could play at night when everybody else can't. It took a while to develop the technology, but it by-God works, Colonel. All we need now is some Smart Pigs."

"What?"

"You'll see, Colonel. You'll see," Tucker promised. Best of all, this "take" came from Grace Kelly, and she *did* have a laser designator plugged in to the fuselage, tooling along now at 62,000 feet and looking down with her thermal-imaging cameras. Under Tucker's guidance, the UAV kept heading south, to continue the catalog of the Chinese units advancing into Siberia. There were sixteen ribbon

bridges on the Amur River now, and a few north of there, but the really vulnerable points were around Harbin, well to the south, inside Chinese territory. Lots of railroad bridges between there and Bei'an, the terminus of the railroad lifeline to the People's Liberation Army. Grace Kelly saw a lot of trains, mainly diesel engines, but even some old coalburning steam engines that had come out of storage in order to keep the weapons and supplies coming north. Most interesting of all was the recently built traffic circle, where tank cars were unloading something, probably diesel fuel, into what appeared to be a pipeline that PLAA engineers were working very hard to extend north. That was something they'd copied from America. The U.S. and British armies had done the same thing from Normandy east to the front in late 1944, and *that*, Tucker knew, was a target worthy of note. Diesel fuel wasn't just the food of a field army. It was the very air it breathed.

There were huge numbers of idle men about. Laborers, probably, there to repair damaged tracking, and the major bridging points had SAM and FLAK batteries in close attendance. So, Joe Chink knew that the bridges were important, and he was doing his best to guard them.

For what good that would do, Tucker thought. He got on the satellite radio to talk things over with the crew up at Zhigansk, where General Wallace's target book was being put together. The crunchies on the ground were evidently worried about taking on the advancing People's Liberation Army, but to Major Tucker, it all looked like a collection of targets. For point targets, he wanted J-DAMs, and for area targets, some smart pigs, the J-SOWs, and then Joe Chink was going to take one on the chin, and probably, like all field armies, this one had a glass jaw. If you could just hit it hard enough.

The Russians on the ground had no idea what FedEx was, and were more than a little surprised that any private, nongovernment corporation could actually own something as monstrous as a Boeing 747F freighter aircraft.

For their part, the flight crews, mainly trained by the Navy or Air Force, had never expected to see Siberia except maybe through the windows of a B-52H strategic bomber. The runways were unusually bumpy, worse than most American airports, but there was an army of people on the ground, and when the swinging door on the nose came up, the ground crews waved the forklifts in to start collecting the palletized cargo. The flight crews didn't leave the aircraft. Fueling trucks came up and connected the four-inch hoses to the proper nozzle points and started refilling the capacious tanks so that the aircraft could leave as soon as possible, to clear the ramp space. Every 747F had a bunking area for the spare pilots who'd come along for the ride.

They didn't even get a drink, those who'd sleep for the return flight, and they had to eat the boxed lunches they'd been issued at Elmendorf on the outbound flight. In all, it took fifty-seven minutes to unload the hundred tons of bombs, which was scarcely enough for ten of the F-15Es parked at the far end of the ramp, but that was where the forklifts headed.

Is that a fact?" Ryan observed.

"Yes, Mr. President," Dr. Weaver replied. "For all their sophistication, these people can be very insular in their thinking, and as a practical matter, we are all guilty of projecting our own ways of thinking onto other people."

"But I have people like you to advise me. Who advises them?" Jack asked.

"They have some good ones. Problem is, their Politburo doesn't always listen."

"Yeah, well, I've seen that problem here, too. Is this good news or bad news, people?"

"Potentially it could be both, but let's remember that we understand them now a lot better than they understand us," Ed Foley told those present. "That gives us a major advantage, if we play our cards intelligently."

Ryan leaned back and rubbed his eyes. Robby Jackson wasn't in much better shape, though he'd slept about four hours in the Lincoln Bedroom (unlike President Lincoln— it was called that simply because a picture of the sixteenth President hung on the wall). The good Jamaican coffee helped everyone at least simulate consciousness.

"I'm surprised that their Defense Minister is so narrow," Robby thought aloud, his eyes tracing over the SORGE dispatch. "You pay the senior operators to be big-picture thinkers. When operations go as well as the one they're running, you get suspicious. I did, anyway."

"Okay, Robby, you used to be God of Operations across the river. What do you recommend?" Jack asked.

"The idea in a major operation is always to play with the other guy's head. To lead him down the path you want him to go, or to get inside his decision cycle, just prevent him from analyzing the data and making a decision. I think we can do that here."

"How?" Arnie van Damm asked.

"The common factor of every successful military plan in history is this: You show the guy what he expects and hopes to see, and then when he thinks he's got the world by the ass, you cut his legs off in one swipe." Robby leaned back, holding court for once. "The smart move is to let them keep going for a few more days, make it just seem easier and easier for them while we build up our capabilities, and then

when we hit them, we land on them like the San Francisco earthquake —no warning at all, just the end of the fuckin' world hits 'em. Mickey, what's their most vulnerable point?"

General Moore had that answer: "It's always logistics. They're burning maybe nine hundred tons of diesel fuel a day to keep those tanks and tracks moving north. They have a full five thousand engineers working like beavers running a pipeline to keep up with their lead elements. We cut that, and they can make up some of the shortfall with fuel trucks, but not all of it—"

"And we use the Smart Pig to take care of those," Vice President Jackson finished.

"That's one way to handle it," General Moore agreed.

"Smart Pig?" Ryan asked.

Robby explained, concluding: "We've been developing this and a few other tricks for the last eight years. I spent a month out at China Lake a few years ago with the prototype. It works, if we have enough of them."

"Gus Wallace has that at the top of his Christmas list."

"The other trick is the political side," Jackson concluded.

"Funny, I have an idea for that. How is the PRC presenting this war to its people?"

It was Professor Weaver's turn: "They're saying that the Russians provoked a border incident—same thing Hitler did with Poland in 1939. The Big Lie technique. They've used it before. Every dictatorship has. It works if you control what your people see."

"What's the best weapon for fighting a lie?" Ryan asked.

"The truth, of course," Arnie van Damm answered for the rest. "But they control their news distribution. How do we get the truth to their population?"

"Ed, how is the SORGE data coming out?"

"Over the 'Net, Jack. So?"

"How many Chinese citizens own computers?"

"Millions of them—the number's really jumped in the past couple of years. That's why they're ripping that patent off Dell Computer that we made a stink about in the trade talks and—oh, yeah . . ." Foley looked up with a smile. "I like it."

"That could be dangerous," Weaver warned.

"Dr. Weaver, there's no safe way to fight a war," Ryan said in reply. "This isn't a negotiation between friends. General Moore?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get the orders out."

"Yes, sir."

"The only question is, will it work?"

"Jack," Robby Jackson said, "it's like with baseball. You play the

games to find out who the best is."

The first reinforcing division to arrive at Chita was the 201st. The trains pulled into the built-for-the-purpose offloading sidings. The flatcars had been designed (and built in large numbers) to transport tracked military vehicles. To that end, flip-down bridging ramps were located at each end of every single car, and when those were tossed down in place, the tanks could drive straight off to the concrete ramps to where every train had backed up. It was a little demanding—the width of the cars was at best marginal for the tank tracks—but the drivers of each vehicle kept their path straight, breathing a small sigh of relief when they got to the concrete. Once on the ground, military police troops, acting as traffic cops, directed the armored vehicles to assembly areas. The 201st Motor Rifle Division's commander and his staff were there already, of course, and the regimental officers got their marching orders, telling them what roads to take northeast to join Bondarenko's Fifth Army, and by joining it, to make it a real field army rather than a theoretical expression on paper.

The 201st, like the follow-on divisions, the 80th, 34th, and 94th, were equipped with the newest Russian hardware, and were at their full TO&E. Their immediate mission was to race north and east to get in front of the advancing Chinese. It would be quite a race. There weren't many roads in this part of Russia, and what roads there were here were unpaved gravel, which suited the tracked vehicles. The problem would be diesel fuel, because there were few gas stations for the trucks which ran the roads in peacetime pursuits, and so the 201st had requisitioned every tanker truck its officers could locate, and even that might not be enough, the logisticians all worried, not that they had much choice in the matter. If they could get their tanks there, then they'd fight them as pillboxes if it came to that.

About the only thing they had going for them was the network of telephone lines, which enabled them to communicate without using radios. The entire area was under the strictest possible orders for radio silence, to deny all conceivable knowledge to the enemy; and the air forces in the area, American and Russian, were tasked to eliminate all tactical reconnaissance aircraft that Chinese would be sending about. So far, they'd been successful. A total of seventeen J-6 and -7 aircraft, thought to be the reconnaissance variants of their classes, had been "splashed" short of Chita.

The Chinese problem with reconnaissance was confirmed in Paris, of all places. SPOT, the French corporation which operated commercial photosatellites, had received numerous requests for photos of Siberia, and while many of them came from seemingly

legitimate western businesses, mainly news agencies, all had been summarily denied. Though not as good as American reconnaissance satellites, the SPOT birds were good enough to identify all the trains assembled at Chita.

And since the People's Republic of China still had a functioning embassy in Moscow, the other concern was that their Ministry of State Security had Russian nationals acting as paid spies, feeding data to Russia's new enemy. Those individuals about whom the Russian Federal Security Service had suspicions were picked up and questioned, and those in custody were interrogated vigorously.

This number included Klementi Ivanovich Suvorov.

"You were in the service of an enemy country," Pavel Yefremov observed. "You killed for a foreign power, and you conspired to kill our country's president. We know all this. We've had you under surveillance for some time now. We have this." He held up a photocopy of the onetime pad recovered from the dead-drop on the park bench. "You may talk now, or you may be shot. It is your life at risk, not mine."

In the movies, this was the part where the suspect was supposed to say defiantly, "You're going to kill me anyway," except that Suvorov had no more wish to die than anyone else. He loved life as much as any man, and he'd never expected to be caught any more than the most foolish of street criminals did. If anything, he'd expected arrest even less than one of those criminals, because he knew how intelligent and clever he was, though this feeling had understandably deflated over the last few days.

The outlook of Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov was rather bleak at the moment. He *was* KGB-trained, and he knew what to expect—a bullet in the head—unless he could give his interrogators something sufficiently valuable for them to spare his life, and at the moment even life in a labor camp of strict regime was preferable to the alternative.

"Have you truly arrested Kong?"

"We told you that before, but, no, we have not. Why tip them off that we've penetrated their operation?" Yefremov said honestly.

"Then you can use me against them."

"How might we do that?" the FSS officer asked.

"I can tell them that the operation they propose is going forward, but that the situation in Siberia wrecked my chance to execute it in a timely fashion."

"And if Kong cannot leave their embassy—we have it guarded and isolated now, of course—how would you get that information to him?"

"By electronic mail. Yes, you can monitor their landlines, but to

monitor their cellular phones is more difficult. There's a backup method for me to communicate with him electronically."

"And the fact that you haven't made use of it so far will not alert them?"

"The explanation is simple. My Spetsnaz contact was frightened off by the outbreak of hostilities, and so was I."

"But we've already checked your electronic accounts."

"Do you think they are all written down?" He tapped the side of his head. "Do you think I am totally foolish?"

"Go on, make your proposal."

"I will propose that I can go forward with the mission. I require them to authorize it by a signal—the way they set the shades in their windows, for example."

"And for this?"

"And for this I will not be executed," the traitor suggested.

"I see," Yefremov said quietly. He would have been perfectly content to shoot the traitor right here and now, but it might be politically useful to go forward with his proposal. He'd kick that one upstairs.

The bad part about watching them was that you had to anticipate everything they did, and that meant that they got to have more sleep, about an hour's worth, Aleksandrov figured, and no more than that only because they were predictable. He'd had his morning tea. Sergeant Buikov had enjoyed two morning cigarettes with his, and now they lay prone on wet dew-dampened ground, with their binoculars to their eyes. The Chinese had also had soldiers out of their tracks all night, set about a hundred meters away from them, so it seemed. *They weren't very adventurous,* the captain thought. He would have spread his sentries much farther out, at least half a kilometer, in pairs with radios to go with their weapons. For that matter, he would have set up a mortar in the event that they spotted something dangerous. But the fox and the gardener seemed to be both conservative and confident, which was an odd combination of characteristics.

But their morning drill was precise. The petrol heaters came out for tea—*probably tea,* they all figured—and whatever it was that they had for breakfast. Then the camouflage nets came down. The outlying sentries came in and reported in person to their officers, and everyone mounted up. The first hop on their tracks was a short one, not even half a kilometer, and again the foot-scouts dismounted and moved forward, then quickly reported back for the second, much longer morning frog leap forward.

"Let's move, Sergeant," Aleksandrov ordered, and together they ran

to their BRM for their first trek into the woods for their own third installment of frog leap backwards.

There they go again," Major Tucker said, after getting three whole hours of sleep on a thin mattress four feet from the Dark Star terminal. It was Ingrid Bergman up again, positioned so that she could see both the reconnaissance element and main body of the Chinese army. "You know, they really stick to the book, don't they?"

"So it would seem," Colonel Tolkunov agreed.

"So, going by that, tonight they'll go to about here." Tucker made a green mark on the acetate-covered map. "That puts them at the gold mine day after tomorrow. Where do you plan to make your stand?" the major asked.

"That depends on how quickly the Two Zero One can get forward."

"Gas?" Tucker asked.

"Diesel fuel, but, yes, that is the main problem with moving so large a force."

"Yeah, with us it's bombs."

"When will you begin to attack Chinese targets?" Tolkunov asked.

"Not my department, Colonel, but when it happens, you'll see it here, live and in color."

Ryan had gotten two hours of nap in the afternoon, while Arnie van Damm covered his appointments (the Chief of Staff needed his sleep, too, but like most people in the White House, he put the President's needs before his own), and now he was watching TV, the feed from Ingrid Bergman.

"This is amazing," he observed. "You could almost get on the phone and tell a guy where to go with his tank."

"We try to avoid that, sir," Mickey Moore said at once. In Vietnam it had been called the "squad leader in the sky" when battalion commanders had directed sergeants on their patrols, not always to the enlisted men's benefit. The miracle of modern communications could also be a curse, with the expected effect that the people in harm's way would ignore their radios or just turn the damned things off until they had something to say themselves.

Ryan nodded. He'd been a second lieutenant of Marines once, and though it hadn't been for long, he remembered it as demanding work for a kid just out of college.

"Do the Chinese know we're doing this?"

"Not as far as we can tell. If they did, they'd sure as hell try to take the Dark Star down, and we'd notice if they tried. That's not easy, though. They're damned near invisible on radar, and tough to spot visually, so the Air Force tells me."

"Not too many fighters can reach sixty thousand feet, much less cruise up there," Robby agreed. "It's a stretch even for a Tomcat." His eyes, too, were locked on the screen. No officer in the history of military operations had ever had a capability akin to this, not even two percent of it, Jackson was sure. Most of war-fighting involved finding the enemy so that you knew where to kill him. These new things made it like watching a Hollywood movie—and if the Chinese knew they were there, they'd freak. Considerable efforts had been designed into Dark Star to prevent that from happening. Their transmitters were directional, and locked onto satellites, instead of radiating outward in the manner of a normal radio. So, they might as well have been black holes up there, orbiting twelve miles over the battlefield.

"What's the important thing here?" Jack asked General Moore.

"Logistics, sir, always logistics. Told you this morning, sir, they're burning up a lot of diesel fuel, and replenishing that is a mother of a task. The Russians have the same problem. They're trying to race a fresh division north of the Chinese spearhead, to made a stand around Aldan, close to where the gold strike is. It's only even money they can make it, even over roads and without opposition. They have to move a lot of fuel, too, and the other problem for them is that it'll wear out the tracks on their vehicles. They don't have lowboy trailers like ours, and so their tanks have to do it all on their own. Tanks are a lot more delicate to operate than they look. Figure they'll lose a quarter to a third of their strength just from the approach march."

"Can they fight?" Jackson asked.

"They're using the T-80U. It would have given the M60A3 a good fight, but no, not as good as our first-flight M1, much less the M1A2, but against the Chinese M-90, call it an even match, qualitatively. It's just that the Chinese have a lot more of them. It comes down to training. The Russian divisions that they're sending into the fight are their best-trained and -equipped. Question is, are they good enough? We'll just have to see."

"And our guys?"

"They start arriving at Chita tomorrow morning. The Russians want them to assemble and move east-southeast. The operational concept is for them to stop the Chinese cold, and then we chop them off from their supplies right near the Amur River. It makes sense theoretically," Mickey Moore said neutrally, "and the Russians say they have all the fuel we'll need in underground bunkers that have been there for damned near fifty years. We'll see."

CHAPTER 55

Looks and Hurts

General Peng was all the way forward now, with the leading elements of his lead armored division, the 302nd. Things were going well for him—sufficiently well, in fact, that he was becoming nervous about it. *No opposition at all?* he asked himself. Not so much as a single rifle round, much less a barrage of artillery. Were the Russians totally asleep, totally devoid of troops in this sector? They had a full army group command section at Chabarsovil, commanded by that Bondarenko fellow, who was reported to be a competent, even a courageous, officer. But where the hell were his troops? Intelligence said that a complete Russian motor-rifle division was here, the 265th, and a Russian motor-rifle division was a superbly designed mechanized formation, with enough tanks to punch a hole in most things, and manned with enough infantry to hold any position for a long time. Theoretically. But where the hell was it? And where were the reinforcements the Russians had to be sending? Peng had asked for information, and the air force had supposedly sent photo-reconnaissance aircraft to look for his enemies, but with no result. He had expected to be mainly on his own for this campaign, but not *entirely* on his own. Fifty kilometers in advance of the 302nd Armored was a reconnaissance screen that had reported nothing but some tracks in the ground that might or might not have been fresh. The few helicopter flights that had gone out had reported nothing. They should have spotted *something*, but no, only some civilians, who for the most part got the hell out of the way and stayed there.

Meanwhile, his troops had crewed up this ancient railroad right-of-way, but it wasn't much worse than traveling along a wide gravel road. His only potential operational concern was fuel, but two hundred 10,000-liter fuel trucks were delivering an adequate amount from the pipeline the engineers were extending at a rate of forty kilometers per day from the end of the railhead on the far bank of the Amur. In fact, that was the most impressive feat of the war so far. Well behind him, engineer regiments were laying the pipe, then covering it under a meter of earth for proper concealment. The only things they couldn't conceal were the pumping stations, but they had

the spare parts to build plenty more should they be destroyed.

No, Peng's only real concern was the location of the Russian Army. The dilemma was that either his intelligence was faulty, and there *were* no Russian formations in his area of interest, or it was accurate and the Russians were just running away and denying him the chance to engage and destroy them. But since when did Russians *not* fight for their land? Chinese soldiers surely would. And it just didn't fit with Bondarenko's reputation. None of this situation made sense. Peng sighed. *But battlefields were often that way*, he told himself. For the moment, he was on—actually slightly ahead of—schedule, and his first strategic objective, the gold mine, was three days away from his leading reconnaissance element. He'd never seen a gold mine before.

I'll be damned!" Pavel Petrovich said. "This is *my* land. No Chink's going to chase me off of it!"

"They are only three or four days away, Pasha."

"So? I have lived here for over fifty years. I'm not going to leave now." The old man was well to the left of defiant. The chief of the mining company had come personally to drive him out, and expected him to come willingly. But he'd misread the old man's character.

"Pasha, we can't leave you here in their way. This is their objective, the thing they invaded us to steal—"

"Then I shall *fight* for it!" he retorted. "I killed Germans, I've killed bears, I've killed wolves. Now, I will kill Chinese. I'm an old man, not an old *woman*, comrade!"

"Will you fight against enemy soldiers?"

"And why not?" Gogol asked. "This is *my* land. I know all its places. I know where to hide, and I know how to shoot. I've killed soldiers before." He pointed to his wall. The old service rifle was there, and the mining chief could easily see the notches he'd cut on the stock with a knife, one for every German. "I can hunt wolves and bear. I can hunt men, too."

"You're too old to be a soldier. That's a young man's job."

"I need not be an athlete to squeeze a trigger, comrade, and I know these woods." To emphasize his words, Gogol stood and took down his old sniper rifle from the Great Patriotic War, leaving the new Austrian rifle. The meaning was clear. He'd fought with this arm before, and he was quite willing to do so again. Hanging on his wall still were a number of the gilded wolf skins, most of which had single holes in the head. He touched one, then looked back at his visitors. "I am a Russian. I will fight for my land."

The mining chief figured he'd buck this information up to the military. Maybe they could take him out. For himself, he had no particular desire to entertain the Chinese army, and so he took his

leave. Behind him, Pavel Petrovich Gogol opened a bottle of vodka and enjoyed a snort. Then he cleaned his rifle and thought of old times.

T*he train terminal was well-designed for their purposes*, Colonel Welch thought. Russian engineers might have designed things clunky, but they'd also designed them to work, and the layout here was a lot more efficient than it looked on first inspection. The trains reversed direction on what American railroaders called a wye—Europeans called it a turning triangle—which allowed trains to back up to any one of ten off-loading ramps, and the Russians were doing it with skill and aplomb. The big VL80T electric locomotive eased backwards, with the conductors on the last car holding the air-release valve to activate the brakes when they reached the ramp. When the trains stopped, the soldiers jumped from their passenger coaches and ran back to their individual vehicles to start them up and drive them off. It didn't take longer than thirty minutes to empty a train. That impressed Colonel Welch, who'd used the Auto Train to take his family to Disney World, and the off-loading procedure in Sanford, Florida, usually took an hour and a half or so. Then there was no further waiting. The big VL (Vladimir Lenin) engines immediately moved out for the return trip west to load up another ten thousand tons of train cars and cargo. It certainly appeared as though the Russians could make things happen when they had to.

"Colonel?" Welch turned to see a Russian major, who saluted crisply.

"Yes?"

"The first train with your personnel is due in four hours twenty minutes. We'll take them to the southern assembly area. There is fuel there if they need it, and then we have guides to direct them east."

"Very good."

"Until then, if you wish to eat, there is a canteen inside the station building."

"Thank you. We're okay at the moment." Welch walked over to where his satellite radio was set up, to get that information to General Diggs.

Colonel Bronco Winters now had seven red stars painted on the side panel of his F-15C, plus four of the nowdefunct UIR flags. He could have painted on some marijuana or coca leaves as well, but that part of his life was long past, and those kills had been blacker than his uncle Ernie, who still lived in Harlem. So, he was a double-ace, and the Air Force hadn't had many of those on active duty in a very long time. He took his flight to what they had taken to calling Bear Station,

on the western edge of the Chinese advance.

It was an Eagle station. There were now over a hundred F-16 fighters in Siberia, but they were mainly air-to-mud rather than air-to-air, and so the fighting part of the fighter mission was his department, while the -16 jocks grumbled about being second-class citizens. Which they were, as far as Colonel Winters thought. Damned little single-engine pukes.

Except for the F-16CGs. They were useful because they were dedicated to taking out enemy radars and SAM sites. The Siberian Air Force (so they now deemed themselves) hadn't done *any* air-to-mud yet. They had orders not to, which offended the guys whose idea of fun was killing crunchies on the ground instead of more manly pursuits. They didn't have enough bombs for a proper bombing campaign yet, and so they were coming up just to ride guard on the E-3Bs in case Joe Chink decided to go after them—it was a hard mission, but marginally doable, and Bronco was surprised that they hadn't made the attempt yet. It was a sure way to lose a lot of fighter planes, but they'd lost a bunch anyway, and why not lose them to a purpose . . .?

"Boar Lead, this is Eagle Two, over."

"Boar Leader."

"We show something happening, numerous bandits onefour-five your position, angels three-three, range two hundred fifty miles, coming north at six hundred knots—make that count thirty-plus bandits, looks like they're coming right for us, Boar Lead," the controller on the AWACS reported.

"Roger, copy that. Boar, Lead," he told his flight of four. "Let's get our ears perked up."

"Two." "Three." "Four," the rest of his flight chimed in.

"Boar Leader, this is Eagle Two. The bandits just went supersonic, and they are heading right for us. Looks like they're not kidding. Vector right to course one-three-five and prepare to engage."

"Roger, Eagle. Boar Lead, come right to one-three-five."

"Two." "Three." "Four."

Winters checked his fuel first of all. He had plenty. Then he looked at his radar display for the picture transmitted from the AWACS, and sure enough, there was a passel of bandits inbound, like a complete ChiComm regiment of fighters. The bastards had read his mind.

"Damn, Bronco, this looks like a knife fight coming."

"Be cool, Ducky, we got better knives."

"You say so, Bronco," the other element leader answered.

"Let's loosen it up, people," Colonel Winters ordered. The flight of four F-15Cs separated into two pairs, and the pairs slipped apart as well so that each could cover the other, but a single missile could not

engage both.

The display between his legs showed that the Chinese fighters were just over a hundred miles off now, and the velocity vectors indicated speeds of over eight hundred knots. Then the picture dirtied up some.

"Boar Lead, looks like they just dropped off tanks."

"Roger that." So, they'd burned off fuel to get altitude, and now they were committed to the battle with full internal fuel. That would give them better legs than usual, and they had closed to less than two hundred miles between them and the E-3B Sentry they clearly wanted to kill. There were thirty people on that converted 707, and Winters knew a lot of them. They'd worked together for years, mainly in exercises, and each controller on the Sentry had a specialty. Some were good at getting you to a tanker. Some were good at sending you out to hunt. Some were best at defending themselves against enemies. This third group would now take over. The Sentry crewmen would think this wasn't cricket, that it wasn't exactly fair to chase deliberately after a converted obsolete airliner . . . just because it acted as bird-dog for those who were killing off their fighter-pilot comrades. *Well, that's life*, Winters thought. But he wasn't going to give any of these bandits a free shot at another USAF aircraft.

Eighty miles now. "Skippy, follow me up," the colonel ordered.

"Roger, Lead." The two clawed up to forty thousand feet, so that the cold ground behind the targets would give a better contrast for their infrared seekers. He checked the radar display again. There had to be a good thirty of them, and that was a lot. If the Chinese were smart, they'd have two teams, one to engage and distract the American fighters, and the other to blow through after their primary target. He'd try to concentrate on the latter, but if the former group's pilots were competent, that might not be easy.

The warbling tone started in his headphones. The range was now sixty miles. *Why not now?* he asked himself. They were beyond visual range, but not beyond range of his AM-RAAM missiles. Time to shoot 'em in the lips.

"Going Slammer," he called on the radio.

"Roger, Slammer," Skippy replied from half a mile to his right.

"Fox-One!" Winters called, as the first one leapt off the rails. The first Slammer angled left, seeking its designated target, one of the enemy's leading fighters. The closure speed between missile and target would be well over two thousand miles per hour. His eyes dropped to the radar display. His first missile appeared to hit—yes, the target blip expanded and started dropping. Number Eight. Time for another: "Fox-One!"

"Fox-One," his wingman called. Seconds later: "Kill!" Lieutenant Acosta called.

Winters's second missile somehow missed, but there wasn't time for wondering why. He had six more AMRAAMs, and he pickled four of them off in the next minute. By that time, he could see the inbound fighters. They were Shenyang J-8IIs, and they had radars and missiles, too. Winters flipped on his jammer pod, wondering if it would work or not, and wondering if their infrared missiles had all-aspect targeting like his Sidewinders. He'd probably find out soon, but first he fired off two 'winders. "Breaking right, Skippy."

"I'm with you, Bronco," Acosta replied.

Damn, Winters thought, *there are still at least twenty of the fuckers*. He headed down, speeding up as he went and calling for a vector.

"Boar Lead, Eagle, there's twenty-three of them left and they're still coming. Dividing into two elements. You have bandits at your seven o'clock and closing."

Winters reversed his turn and racked his head against the g-forces to spot it. Yeah, a J-8 all right, the Chinese two-engine remake of the MiG-21, trying to get position to launch on him—no, two of the bastards. He reefed the turn in tight, pulling seven gees, and after ten endless seconds, getting his nose on the targets. His left hand selected Sidewinder and he triggered two off.

The bandits saw the smoke trails of the missiles and broke apart, in opposite directions. One would escape, but both the heat-seekers locked on the guy to the right, and both erased his aircraft from the sky. But where had the other one gone? Winters' eyes swept a sky that was both crowded and empty at the same time. His threat receiver made its unwelcome screeching sound, and now he'd find out if the jammer pod worked or not. Somebody was trying to lock him up with a radar-guided missile. His eyes swept around looking for who that might be, but he couldn't see anyone—

—Smoke trail! A missile, heading in his general direction, but then it veered and exploded with its target—friend or foe, Winters couldn't tell.

"Boar Flight, Lead, check in!" he ordered.

"Two." "Three." A pause before: "Four!"

"Skippy, where are you?"

"Low and right, one mile, Leader. Heads up, there's a bandit at your three and closing."

"Oh, yeah?" Winters yanked his fighter to the right and was rewarded with an immediate warbling tone—but was it friend or foe? His wingman said the latter, but he couldn't tell, until—

Whoever it was, it had launched at him, and so he triggered a Sidewinder in reply, then dove hard for the deck while punching off flares and chaff to distract it. It worked. The missile, a radar seeker, exploded harmlessly half a mile behind him, but his Sidewinder didn't

miss. He'd just gotten another kill, but he didn't know how many today, and there wasn't time to think things over.

"Skippy, form up on me, we're going north."

"Roger, Bronco."

Winters had his radar on, and he saw at least eight enemy blips to the north. He went to afterburner to chase, checking his fuel state. Still okay. The Eagle accelerated rapidly, but just to be safe, he popped off a string of chaff and flares in case some unknown Chinese was shooting at him. The threat receiver was screeching continuously now, though not in the distinctive chirping tone that suggested lock-up. He checked his weapons board. Three AIM-9X Sidewinders left. Where the hell had this day gone to?

"Ducky is hit, Ducky is hit!" a voice called. "Aw, shit!"

"Ghost Man here, got the fucker for you, Ducky. Come right, let me give you a damage check."

"One engine gone, other one's running hot," the second element leader reported, in a voice more angry than afraid. He didn't have time for fear yet. Another thirty seconds or so and that would start to take hold, Winters was sure.

"Ducky, you're trailing vapor of some sort, recommend you find a place to set it down."

"Eagle Two, Bronco, what's happening?"

"Bronco, we have six still inbound, putting Rodeo on it now. You have a bandit at your one o'clock at twenty miles, angels three-one, speed seven-five-zero."

"Roger that, Eagle. I'm on him." Winters came a little right and got another acquisition tone. "Fox-Two!" he called. The smoke trail ran straight for several miles, then corkscrewed to the left as it approached the little dot of gray-blue and . . . yes!

"Rodeo Lead," a new voice called. "Fox-One, Fox-One with two!"

"Conan, Fox-One!"

Now things were really getting nervous. Winters knew that he might be in the line of fire for those Slammers. He looked down to see that the light on his IFF was a friendly, constant green. The Identification Friend or Foe was supposed to tell American radars and missiles that he was on their side, but Winters didn't entirely trust computer chips with his life, and so he squinted his eyes to look for smoke trails that weren't going sideways. His radar could see the AWACS now, and it was moving west, taking the first part of evasive action, but its radar was still transmitting, even with Chinese fighters within . . . twenty miles? Shit! But then two more blips disappeared, and the remaining ones all had friendly IFF markers.

Winters checked his weapons display. No missiles left. How had all that happened? He was the United States Air Force champ for

situational awareness, but he'd just lost track of a combat action. He couldn't remember firing all his missiles.

"Eagle Two, this is Boar Lead. I'm Winchester. Do you need any help?" "Winchester" meant out of weapons. That wasn't entirely true. He still had a full magazine of 20-mm cannon shells, but suddenly all the gees and all the excitement were pulling on him. His arms felt leaden as he eased his Eagle back to level flight.

"Boar Lead, Eagle. Looks like we're okay now, but that was kinda exciting, fella."

"Roger that, Eagle. Same here. Anything left?"

"Negative, Boar. Rodeo Lead got the last two. I think we owe that major a couple of beers."

"I'll hold you to that, Eagle," Rodeo Lead observed.

"Ducky, where are you?" Winters called next.

"Kinda busy, Bronco," a strained voice replied. "I got a hole in my arm, too."

"Bronco, Ghost Man. Ducky's got some holes in the airframe. I'm going to shepherd him back to Suntar. Thirty minutes, about."

"Skippy, where you be?"

"Right behind you, Leader. I think I got four, maybe five, in that furball."

"Any weapons left?"

"Slammer and 'winder, one each. I'll look after you, Colonel," Lieutenant Acosta promised. "How'd you make out?"

"Two, maybe more, not sure," the squadron commander answered. The final tally would come from the AWACS, plus a check of his own videotape. Mainly he wanted to get out of the aircraft and take a good stretch, and he now had time to worry about Major Don Boyd—Ducky—and his aircraft.

So, we want to mess with their heads, Mickey?" Admiral Dave Seaton asked.

"That's the idea," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs told the chief of naval operations.

"Makes sense. Where are their heads at?"

"According to what CIA says, they think we're limiting the scope of operations for political reasons—to protect their sensibilities, like."

"No foolin'?" Seaton asked with no small degree of incredulity.

Moore nodded. "Yep."

"Well, then it's like a guy holding aces and eights, isn't it?" the CNO thought aloud, referring to the last poker hand held by James Butler—"Wild Bill"—Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota. "We just pick the mission that's sure to flip them out."

"What are you thinking?" Moore asked.

"We can slam their navy pretty hard. Bart Mancuso's a pretty good operator. What are they most afraid of . . . ?" Seaton leaned back in his swivel chair. "First thing Bart wants to do is take out their missile submarine. It's at sea now with *Tucson* in trail, about twenty thousand yards back."

"That far?"

"It's plenty close enough. It's got an SSN in close proximity to protect it. So, *Tucson* takes 'em both out—zap." Moore didn't get the terminology, but Seaton was referring to the Chinese ships as "it," meaning an enemy, a target worthy only of destruction. "Beijing might not know it's happened right away, unless they've got an 'I'm Dead' buoy on the sail. Their surface navy's a lot easier. That'll be mainly aircraft targets, some missiles to keep the surface community happy."

"Submarine-launched missiles?"

"Mickey, you don't sink ships by making holes that let air in. You sink ships by making holes that let water in," Seaton explained. "Okay, if this is supposed to be for psychological effect, we hit everything simultaneously. That'll mean staging a lot of assets, and it runs the risk of being overly complicated, having the other guy catch a sniff of what's happening before we do anything. It's a risk. Do we really want to run it?"

"Ryan's thinking 'big picture.' Robby's helping him."

"Robby's a fighter pilot," Seaton agreed. "He likes to think in terms of movie stuff. Hell, Tom Cruise is taller than he is," Seaton joked.

"Good operational thinker. He was a pretty good J-3," Moore reminded the senior sailor.

"Yeah, I know, it's just that he likes to make dramatic plays. Okay, we can do it, only it complicates things." Seaton looked out the window for a second. "You know what might really flip them out?"

"What's that?" Moore asked. Seaton told him. "But it's not possible for us to do, is it?"

"Maybe not, but we're not dealing with professional military people, are we? They're politicians, Mickey. They're used to dealing with images instead of reality. So, we give them an image."

"Do you have the pieces in place to do that?"

"Let me find out."

"This is crazy, Dave."

"And deploying First Armored to Russia isn't?" the CNO demanded.

Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti was now certain that he'd be fully content never to ride on another train as long as he lived. He didn't know that all of the Russian State Railroad's sleeper cars were being used to transport Russian army forces—they'd never sent any of the

cars as far west as Berlin, not to slight the Americans, but because it had simply never occurred to anyone to do so. He took note of the fact that the train veered off to the north, off the main track, thumping over various switches and interlockings as it did so, and then the train came to a halt and started going backwards slowly. They seemed to be in the yard alone. They'd passed numerous westbound trains in the past two hours, all with engines dragging empty flatcars, and the conductor who appeared and disappeared regularly had told them that this was the approximate arrival time scheduled, but he hadn't really believed it, on the premise that a railroad with such uncomfortable seats probably didn't adhere to decent schedules either. But here they were, and the off-loading ramps were obvious for what they were.

"People, I think we're here," the commander of the Quarter Horse told his staff.

"Praise Jesus," one of them observed. A few seconds later, the train jolted to a stop, and they were able to walk out onto the concrete platform, which, they saw, stretched a good thousand meters to the east. Inside of five minutes, the soldiers of Headquarters Troop were out and walking to their vehicles, stretching and grousing along the way.

"Hey, Angie," called a familiar voice.

Giusti looked to see Colonel Welch and walked up to him with a salute.

"What's happening?" Giusti asked.

"It's a mess out east of here, but there is good news."

"What might that be?"

"There's plenty of fuel stashed for us. I've been flying security detachments out, and Ivan says he's got fuel depots that're the size of fuckin' supertankers. So, we're not going to run out of gas."

"That's good to know. What about my choppers?" Welch just pointed. There was an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior sitting not three hundred yards away. "Thank God for that. What's the bad news?"

"The PLA has four complete Group-A armies in Siberia and heading north. There hasn't been any heavy contact yet because Ivan's refusing combat at the moment, until they can get something big enough to meet them with. They have one motor-rifle division in theater and four more heading up there. The last of 'em just cleared this railyard an hour and a half ago."

"That's, what? Sixteen heavy divisions in the invasion force?"

Welch nodded. "Thereabouts."

"What's my mission?"

"Assemble your squadron and head southeast. The idea is First Armored will cut off the bottom of the break-in and interrupt their supply line. Russian blocking force will then try to stop them about

two hundred miles northeast of here."

"Can they do it?" Four Russian divisions against sixteen Chinese didn't seem especially favorable odds.

"Not sure," Welch admitted. "Your job is to get out and establish lead security for the division. Advance to and secure the first big fuel depot. We'll play it from there."

"Support?"

"At the moment, the Air Force is mainly doing fighter work. No deep strikes yet because they don't have enough bombs to sustain any kind of campaign."

"What about resupply?"

"We have two basic loads for all the tracks. That'll have to do for a while. At least we have four units of fire for the artillery." That meant four days' worth of shells—based on what the Army computed that a day of combat required. The supply weenies who did those calculations weren't stingy on shells to shoot at the other guy. And in the entire Persian Gulf war, not a single tank had completely shot out its first basic load of shells, they both knew. But that was a different war. No two were ever the same, and they only got worse.

Giusti turned when he heard the first engine start up. It was an M3A2 Bradley Scout track, and the sergeant in the commander's hatch looked happy to be moving. A Russian officer took over as traffic cop, waving the Brad forward, then right toward the assembly area. The next train backed up to the next ramp over. That would be "A" or Avenger Troop, with the first of Quarter Horse's really heavy equipment, nine of the M1A2 main battle tanks.

"How long before everything's here?" Giusti asked.

"Ninety minutes, they told me," Welch answered.

"We'll see."

What's this?" a captain asked the screen in front of him. The E-3B Sentry designated Eagle Two was back on the ground at Zhigansk. Its crew was more than a little shaken. Being approached by real fighters with real blood in their eyes was qualitatively different from exercises and postmission analysis back stateside. The tapes of the engagement had been handed off to the wing intelligence staff, who viewed the battle with some detachment, but they could see that the PLAAF had thrown a full regiment of first-line fighters at the AWACS, and more than that, done it on a one-way mission. They'd come in on burner, and that would have denied them a trip back to their base. So, they'd been willing to trade over thirty fighters for a single E-3B. But there was more to the mission than that, the captain saw.

"Look here," he told his colonel. "Three, no, four reconnaissance birds went northwest." He ran the tape forward and backward. "We

didn't touch any of them. Hell, they didn't even see them."

"Well, I'm not going to fault the Sentry crew for that, Captain."

"Not saying that, sir. But John Chinaman just got some pictures of Chita, and also of these Russian units moving north. The cat's out of the bag, Colonel."

"We've got to start thinking about some counter-air missions on these airfields."

"We have bombs to do it?"

"Not sure, but I'm taking this to General Wallace. What's the score on the air fight?"

"Colonel Winters got four for sure and two probables. Damn, that guy's really cleaning up. But it was the -16 guys saved the AWACS. These two J-8s got pretty damned close before Rodeo splashed them."

"We'll put some more coverage on the E-3s from now on," the colonel observed.

"Not a bad idea, sir."

* * *

Yes?" General Peng said, when his intelligence officer came up to him.

"Aerial reconnaissance reports large mechanized formations one hundred fifty kilometers west of us, moving north and northeast."

"Strength?" the general asked.

"Not sure. Analysis of the photos is not complete, but certainly regimental strength, maybe more."

"Where, exactly?"

"Here, Comrade General." The intelligence officer unfolded a map and pointed. "They were spotted here, here, and from here to here. The pilot said large numbers of tanks and tracked vehicles."

"Did they shoot at him?"

"No, he said there was no fire at all."

"So, they are rushing to where they are going . . . racing to get to our flank, or to get ahead of us . . . ?" Peng considered this, looking down at the map. "Yes, that's what I would expect. Any reports from our front?"

"Comrade General, our reconnaissance screen reports that they have seen the tracks of vehicles, but no visual sightings of the enemy at all. They have taken no fire, and seen nothing but civilians."

Quickly," Aleksandrov urged.

How the driver and his assistant had gotten the ZIL-157 to this

place was a mystery whose solution didn't interest the captain. That it had gotten here was enough. His lead BRM at that moment had been Sergeant Grechko's, and he'd filled up his tanks, and then radioed to the rest of the company, which for the first time broke visual contact with the advancing Chinese and raced north to top off as well. It was dangerous and against doctrine to leave the Chinese unseen, but Aleksandrov couldn't guarantee that they'd all have a chance to refuel otherwise. Then Sergeant Buikov had a question.

"When do *they* refuel, Comrade Captain? We haven't seen them do it, have we?"

That made his captain stop and think. "Why, no, we haven't. Their tanks must be as empty as ours."

"They had extra fuel drums the first day, remember? They dropped them off sometime yesterday."

"Yes, so maybe they have one more day of fuel, maybe only half a day, but then someone must refill them—but who will that be, and how . . . ?" the officer wondered. He turned to look. The fuel came out of the portable pump at about forty liters or ten gallons per minute. Grechko had taken his BRM south to reestablish contact with the Chinese. They were still sitting still, between frog-leap bounds, probably half an hour away if they stuck with their drill, from which they hadn't once deviated. And people had once said that the Red Army was inflexible . . .

"There, that's it," Aleksandrov's driver said. He handed the hose back and capped the tank.

"You," the captain told the driver of the fuel truck. "Go east."

"To where?" the man asked. "There's nothing there."

That stopped his thinking for a few seconds. There had been a sawmill here once, and you could see the wide swaths of saplings left over from when whoever had worked here had cut trees for lumber. It was the closest thing to open ground they'd seen in over a day.

"I came from the west. I can get back there now, with the truck lighter, and it's only six kilometers to the old logging road."

"Very well, but do it quickly, Corporal. If they see you, they'll blast you."

"Farewell then, Comrade Captain." The corporal got back into the truck, started up, and turned to the north to loop around.

"I hope someone gives him a drink tonight. He's earned it," Buikov said. There was much more to any army than the shooters.

"Grechko, where are you?" Aleksandrov called over his radio.

"Four kilometers south of you. They're still dismounted, Captain. Their officer seems to be talking on the radio."

"Very well. You know what to do when they remount." The captain set the radio microphone down and leaned against his track. This

business was getting very old. Buikov lit a smoke and stretched.

"Why can't we just kill a *few* of them, Comrade Captain? Would it not be worth it to get *some* sleep?"

"How many times must I tell you what our fucking mission is, Sergeant!" Aleksandrov nearly screamed at his sergeant.

"Yes, Captain," Buikov responded meekly.

CHAPTER 56

March to Danger

Lieutenant Colonel Giusti started off in his personal HMMWV, the new incarnation of the venerable jeep. *Using a Bradley would have been more comfortable, even more sensible, but overly dramatic,* he thought, *and there wouldn't be any contact anytime soon*. Besides, the right front seat in this vehicle was better for his back after the endless train ride. In any case, he was following a Russian UAZ-469, which looked like a Russian interpretation of an American SUV, and whose driver knew the way. The Kiowa Warrior helicopter he'd seen at the railyard was up and flying, scouting ahead and reporting back that there was nothing there but mostly empty road, except for some civilian traffic being kept out of the way by Russian MPs. Right behind Giusti's command vehicle was a Bradley flying the red-and-white guidon of the First of the Fourth Cavalry. The regiment had, for American arms, a long and distinguished history—its combat action had begun on July 30, 1857, against the Cheyenne Indians at Solomon River—and this campaign would add yet another battle streamer to the regimental standard . . . and Giusti hoped he'd live long enough to attach it himself. The land here reminded him of Montana, rolling foothills with pine trees in abundance. The views were decently long, just what a mechanized trooper liked, because it meant you could engage an enemy at long range. American soldiers especially preferred that, because they had weapons that could reach farther than those of most other armies.

"DARKHORSE SIX to SABRE SIX, over," the radio crackled.

"SABRE SIX," LTC Giusti responded.

"SABRE, I'm now at checkpoint Denver. The way continues to be clear. Negative traffic, negative enemy indications, over. Proceeding east to checkpoint Wichita."

"Roger that, thank you, out." Giusti checked the map to be sure he knew exactly where the chopper was.

So, twenty miles ahead there was still nothing to be concerned about, at least according to the captain flying his lead helicopter. *Where would it start?* Giusti wondered. On the whole, he would have preferred to stand still and sit in on the divisional commander's

conference, just to find out what the hell was happening, but as cavalry-screen commander, it was his job to go out forward and find the enemy, then report back to IRON Six, the divisional commander. He really didn't have much of a mission yet, aside from driving up to the Russian fuel depot, refueling his vehicles there, and setting up security, then pulling out and continuing his advance as the leading elements of the First Armored's heavy forces got there. It was his job, in short, to be the ham in the sandwich, as one of his troop commanders liked to joke. But this ham could bite back. Under his command were three troops of armored cavalry, each with nine M1A2 Abrams main-battle tanks and thirteen M3A2 Bradley cavalry scout vehicles, plus a FISTV track for forward observers to call in artillery support—somewhere behind him, the First Armored's artillery would be off-loading soon from its train, he hoped. His most valuable assets were D and E troops, each with eight OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters, able both to scout ahead and to shoot with Hellfire and Stinger missiles. In short, his squadron could look after itself, within reasonable limits.

As they got closer, his troopers would become more cautious and circumspect, because good as they were, they were neither invincible nor immortal. America had fought against China only once, in Korea nearly sixty years earlier, and the experience had been satisfactory to neither side. For America, the initial Chinese attack had been unexpected and massive, forcing an ignominious retreat from the Yalu River. But for China, once America had gotten its act together, the experience had cost a million lives, because firepower was always the answer to raw numbers, and America's lasting lesson from its own Civil War was that it was better to expend *things* than to expend *people*. The American way of war was not shared by everyone, and in truth it was tailored to American material prosperity as much as to American reverence for human life, but it was the American way, and that was the way its warriors were schooled.

I think it's about time to roll them back a little," General Wallace observed over the satellite link to Washington.

"What do you propose?" Mickey Moore asked.

"For starters, I want to send my F-16CGs after their radar sites. I'm tired of having them use radar to direct their fighters against my aircraft. Next, I want to start going after their logistical choke points. In twelve hours, the way things are going, I'll have enough ordnance to start doing some offensive warfare here. And it's about time for us to start, General," Wallace said.

"Gus, I have to clear that with the President," the Chairman told the Air Force commander in Siberia.

"Okay, fine, but tell him we damned near lost an AWACS yesterday —with a crew of thirty or so—and I'm not in a mood to write that many letters. We've been lucky so far, and an AWACS is a hard kill. Hell, it cost them a full regiment of fighters to fail in that mission. But enough's enough. I want to go after their radar sites, and I want to do some offensive counter-air."

"Gus, the thinking here is that we want to commence offensive operations in a systematic way for maximum psychological effect. That means more than just knocking some antennas down."

"General, I don't know what it looks like over there, but right here it's getting a little exciting. Their army is advancing rapidly. Pretty soon our Russian friends are going to have to make their stand. It'll be a whole lot easier if the enemy is short on gas and bullets."

"We know that. We're trying to figure a way to shake up their political leadership."

"It isn't politicians coming north trying to kill us, General. It's soldiers and airmen. We have to start crippling them before they ruin our whole damned day."

"I understand that, Gus. I will present your position to the President," the Chairman promised.

"Do that, will ya?" Wallace killed the transmission, wondering what the hell the lotus-eaters in Washington were thinking about, assuming they were thinking at all. He had a plan, and he thought it was a pretty good systematic one. His Dark Star drones had given him all the tactical intelligence he needed. He knew what targets to hit, and he had enough ordnance to do the hitting, or at least to start doing it.

If they let me, Wallace thought.

Well, it wasn't a complete waste," Marshal Luo said. "We got some pictures of what the Russians are doing."

"And what's that?" Zhang asked.

"They're moving one or two—probably two—divisions northeast from their rail assembly point at Chita. We have good aerial pictures of them."

"And still nothing in front of our forces?"

Luo shook his head. "Our reconnaissance people haven't seen anything more than tracks in the ground. I have to assume there are Russians in those woods somewhere, doing reconnaissance of their own, but if so, they're light forces who're working very hard to keep out of the way. We know they've called up some reserves, but they haven't shown up either. Maybe their reservists didn't report. Morale in Russia is supposed to be very low, Tan tells us, and that's all we've really seen. The men we captured are very disheartened because of their lack of support, and they didn't fight all that well. Except for the

American airplanes, this war is going extremely well."

"And they haven't attacked our territory yet?" Zhang wanted to be clear on that.

Another shake of the head. "No, and I can't claim that they're afraid to do it. Their fighter aircraft are excellent, but to the best of our knowledge they haven't even attempted a photo-reconnaissance mission. Maybe they just depend on satellites now. Certainly those are supposed to be excellent sources of information for them."

"And the gold mine?"

"We'll be there in thirty-six hours. And at that point we can make use of the roads their own engineers have been building to exploit the mineral finds. From the gold mine to the oil fields—five to seven days, depending on how well we can run supplies up."

"This is amazing, Luo," Zhang observed. "Better than my fondest hopes."

"I almost wish the Russians would stand and fight somewhere, so that we could have a battle and be done with it. As it is, my forces are stringing out somewhat, but only because the lead elements are racing forward so well. I've thought about slowing them down to maintain unit integrity, but—"

"But speed works for us, doesn't it?" Zhang observed.

"Yes, it would seem to," the Defense Minister agreed. "But one prefers to keep units tightly grouped in case there is some contact. However, if the enemy is running, one doesn't want to give him pause to regroup. So, I'm giving General Peng and his divisions free rein."

"What forces are you facing?"

"We're not sure. Perhaps a regiment or so could be ahead of us, but we see no evidence of it, and two more regiments are trying to race ahead of us, or attack our flank, but we have flank security out to the west, and they've seen nothing."

Bondarenko hoped that someday he'd meet the team that had developed this American Dark Star drone. Never in history had a commander possessed such knowledge as this, and without it he would have been forced to commit his slender forces to battle just to ascertain what stood against him. Not now. He probably had a better feel for the location of the advancing Chinese than their own commander did.

Better yet, the leading regiment of the 201st Motor Rifle Division was only a few kilometers away, and the leading formation was the division's steel fist, its independent tank regiment of ninety-five T-80U main-battle tanks.

The 265th was ready for the reinforcement, and its commander, Yuriy Sinyavskiy, proclaimed that he was tired of running away. A

career professional soldier and mechanized infantryman, Sinyavskiy was a profane, cigarchomping man of forty-six years, now leaning over a map table in Bondarenko's headquarters.

"This, this is my ground, Gennady Iosifovich," he said, stabbing at the point with his finger. It was just five kilometers north of the Gogol Gold Field, a line of ridges twenty kilometers across, facing open ground the Chinese would have to cross. "And put the Two-Oh-First's tanks just here on my right. When we stop their advance guard, they can blow in from the west and roll them up."

"Reconnaissance shows their leading division is strung out somewhat," Bondarenko told him.

It was a mistake made by every army in the world. The sharpest teeth of any field force are its artillery, but even self-propelled artillery, mounted on tracks for cross-country mobility, can't seem to keep up with the mechanized forces it is supposed to support. It was a lesson that had even surprised the Americans in the Persian Gulf, when they'd found their artillery could keep up with the leading tank echelons only with strenuous effort, and across flat ground. The People's Liberation Army had tracked artillery, but a lot of it was still the towed variety, and was being pulled behind trucks that could not travel cross-country as well as the tracked kind.

General Diggs observed the discussion, which his rudimentary Russian could not quite keep up with, and Sinyavskiy spoke no English, which really slowed things down.

"You still have a lot of combat power to stop, Yuriy Andreyevich," Diggs pointed out, waiting for the translation to get across.

"If we cannot stop them completely, at least we can give them a bloody nose" was the belated reply.

"Stay mobile," Diggs advised. "If I were this General Peng, I'd maneuver east—the ground is better suited for it—and try to wrap you up from your left."

"We will see how maneuver-minded they are," Bondarenko said for his subordinate. "So far all they have done is drive straight forward, and I think they are becoming complacent. See how they are stretched out, Marion. Their units are too far separated to provide mutual support. They are in a pursuit phase of warfare, and that makes them disorganized, *and* they have little air support to warn them of what lies ahead. I think Yuriy is right: This is a good place for a stand."

"I agree it's good ground, Gennady, just don't marry the place, okay?" Diggs warned.

Bondarenko translated that for his subordinate, who answered back in machine-gun Russian around his cigar.

"Yuriy says it is a place for a fucking, not a wedding. When will you join your command, Marion?"

"My chopper's on the way in now, buddy. My cavalry screen is at the first fuel depot, with First Brigade right behind. We should be in contact in a day and a half or so."

They'd already discussed Diggs's plan of attack. First Armored would assemble northwest of Belogorsk, fueling at the last big Russian depot, then leap out in the darkness for the Chinese bridgehead. Intelligence said that the PLA's 65th Type-B Group Army was there now, digging in to protect the left shoulder of their break-in. Not a mechanized force, it was still a lot for a single division to chew on. If the Chinese plan of attack had a weakness, it was that they'd bet all their mechanized forces on the drive forward. The forces left behind to secure the breakthrough were at best motorized—carried by wheeled vehicles instead of tracked ones—and at worst leg infantry, who had to walk where they went. That made them slow and vulnerable to men who sat down behind steel as they went to battle in their tracked vehicles.

But there were a hell of a lot of them, Diggs reminded himself.

Before he could leave, General Sinyavskiy reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a flask. "A drink for luck," he said in his only words of broken English.

"Hell, why not?" Diggs tossed it off. It was good stuff, actually. "When this is all over, we will drink again," he promised.

"*Da*," the general replied. "Good luck, Diggs."

"Marion," Bondarenko said. "Be careful, comrade."

"You, too, Gennady. You got enough medals, buddy. No sense getting your ass shot off trying to win another."

"Generals are supposed to die in bed," Bondarenko agreed on the way to the door.

Diggs trotted out to the UH-60. Colonel Boyle was flying this one. Diggs donned the crash helmet, wishing they'd come up with another name for the damned thing, and settled in the jump seat behind the pilots.

"How we doing, sir?" Boyle asked, letting the lieutenant take the chopper back off.

"Well, we have a plan, Dick. Question is, will it work?"

"Do I get let in on it?"

"Your Apaches are going to be busy."

"There's a surprise," Boyle observed.

"How are your people?"

"Ready" was the one-word reply. "What are we calling this?"

"CHOPSTICKS." Diggs then heard a laugh over the intercom wire.

"I love it."

Okay, Mickey," Robby Jackson said. "I understand Gus's position.

But we have a big picture here to think about."

They were in the Situation Room looking at the Chairman on TV from the Pentagon room known as The Tank. It was hard to hear what he was muttering that way, but the way he looked down was a sufficient indication of his feelings about Robby's remark.

"General," Ryan said, "the idea here is to rattle the cage of their political leadership. Best way to do that is to go after them in more places than one, overload 'em."

"Sir, I agree with that idea, but General Wallace has his point, too. Taking down their radar fence will degrade their ability to use their fighters against us, and they still have a formidable fighter force, even though we've handled them pretty rough so far."

"Mickey, if you handle a girl this way down in Mississippi, it's called rape," the Vice President observed. "Their fighter pilots look at their aircraft now and they see caskets, for Christ's sake. Their confidence has got to be gone, and that's all a fighter jock has to hold on to. Trust me on this one, will ya?"

"But Gus—"

"But Gus is too worried about his force. Okay, fine, let him send some Charlie-Golfs against their picket fence, but mainly we want those birds armed with Smart Pigs to go after their ground forces. The fighter force can look after itself."

For the first time, General Mickey Moore regretted Ryan's choice of Vice President. Robby was thinking like a politician rather than an operational commander—and that came as something of a surprise. He was seemingly less worried about the safety of his forces than of . . .

. . . *than of what the overall objective was*, Moore corrected himself. And *that* was not a completely bad way to think, was it? Jackson had been a pretty good J-3 not so long before, hadn't he?

American commanders no longer thought of their men as expendable assets. That was not a bad thing at all, but sometimes you had to put forces in harm's way, and when you did that, some of them did not come home. And that was what they were paid for, whether you liked it or not. Robby Jackson had been a Navy fighter pilot, and he hadn't forgotten the warrior ethos, despite his new job and pay grade.

"Sir," Moore said, "what orders do I give General Wallace?"

Cecil B. goddamned DeMille," Mancuso observed crossly.

"Ever wanted to part the Red Sea?" General Lahr asked.

"I ain't God, Mike," CINCPAC said next.

"Well, it *is* elegant, and we *do* have most of the pieces in place," his J-2 pointed out.

"This is a political operation. What the hell are we, a goddamned focus group?"

"Sir, you going to continue to rant, or are we going to get to work on this?"

Mancuso wished for a *lupara* to blast a hole in the wall, or Mike Lahr's chest, but he *was* a uniformed officer, and he *did* now have orders from his Commander-in-Chief.

"All right. I just don't like to have other people design my operations."

"And you know the guy."

"Mike, once upon a time, back when I had three stripes and driving a submarine was all I had to worry about, Ryan and I helped steal a whole Russian submarine, yeah—and if you repeat that to anyone, I'll have one of my Marines shoot your ass. Sink some of their ships, yeah, splash a few of their airplanes, sure, but 'trailing our coat' in sight of land? Jesus."

"It'll shake them up some."

"If they don't sink some of my ships in the attempt."

Hey, Tony," the voice on the phone said. It took Bretano a second to recognize it.

"Where are you now, Al?" the Secretary of Defense asked.

"Norfolk. Didn't you know? I'm on USS *Gettysburg* upgrading their SAMs. It was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose it was," Tony Bretano agreed, thinking back.

"You must have seen this Chinese thing coming a long way off, man."

"As a matter of fact, we—" The SecDef paused for a second. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if the ChiComms loft an ICBM at us, this Aegis system does give us something to fall back on, if the computer simulations are right. They ought to be. I wrote most of the software," Gregory went on.

Secretary Bretano didn't want to admit that he hadn't really thought about that eventuality. Thinking things through was one of the things he was paid for, after all. "How ready are you?"

"The electronics stuff is okay, but we don't have any SAMs aboard. They're stashed at some depot or something, up on the York River, I think they said. When they load them aboard, I can upgrade the software on the seeker heads. The only missiles aboard, the ones I've been playing with, they're blue ones, exercise missiles, not shooters, I just found out. You know, the Navy's a little weird. The ship's in a floating dry dock. They're going to lower us back in the water in a few hours. He couldn't see his former boss's face at the moment. If he

could, he would have recognized the *oh, shit* expression on his Italian face.

"So, you're confident in your systems?"

"A full-up test would be nice, but if we can loft three or four SAMs at the inbound, yeah, I think it oughta work."

"Okay, thanks, Al."

"So, how's this war going? All I see on TV is how the Air Force is kicking some ass."

"They are, the TV's got that right, but the rest—can't talk about it over the phone. Al, let me get back to you, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

In his office, Bretano switched buttons. "Ask Admiral Seaton to come in to see me." That didn't take very long.

"You rang, Mr. Secretary," the CNO said when he came in.

"Admiral, there's a former employee of mine from TRW in Norfolk right now. I set him up to look at upgrading the Aegis missile system to engage ballistic targets."

"I heard a little about that. How's his project going?" Dave Seaton asked.

"He says he's ready for a full-up test. But, Admiral, what if the Chinese launch one of their CSS-4s at us?"

"It wouldn't be good," Seaton replied.

"Then how about we take our Aegis ships and put them close to the likely targets?"

"Well, sir, the system's not certified for ballistic targets yet, and we haven't really run a test, and—"

"Is it better than nothing?" the SecDef asked, cutting him off.

"A little, I suppose."

"Then let's make that happen, and make it happen right now."

Seaton straightened up. "Aye aye, sir."

"*Gettysburg* first. Have her load up what missiles she needs, and bring her right here," Bretano ordered.

"I'll call SACLANT right now."

It was the strangest damned thing, Gregory thought. This ship—not an especially big ship, smaller than the one he and Candi had taken a cruise on the previous winter, but still an oceangoing *ship*—was in an elevator. That's what a floating dry dock was. They were flooding it now, to make it go down, back into the water to see if the new propeller worked. Sailors who worked on the dry dock were watching from their perches on—whatever the hell you called the walls of the damned thing.

"Weird, ain't it, sir?"

Gregory smelled the smoke. It had to be Senior Chief Leek. He

turned. It was.

"Never seen this sort of thing before."

"Nobody does real often, 'cept'n those guys over there who operate this thing. Did you take the chance to walk under the ship?"

"Walk *under* ten thousand tons of metal?" Gregory responded. "I don't think so."

"You was a soldier, wasn't you?"

"Told you, didn't I? West Point, jump school, ranger school, back when I was young and foolish."

"Well, Doc, it's no big deal. Kinda interesting to see how she's put together, 'specially the sonar dome up forward. If I wasn't a radar guy, I probably woulda been a sonar guy,'cept there's nothing for them to do anymore."

Gregory looked down. Water was creeping across the gray metal floor—*deck?* he wondered—of the dry dock.

"Attention on deck!" a voice called. Sailors turned and saluted, including Chief Leek.

It was Captain Bob Blandy, *Gettysburg*'s CO. Gregory had met him only once, and then just to say hello.

"Dr. Gregory."

"Captain." They shook hands.

"How's your project been going?"

"Well, the simulations look good. I'd like to try it against a live target."

"You got sent to us by the SecDef?"

"Not exactly, but he called me in from California to look at the technical aspects of the problem. I worked for him when he was head of TRW."

"You're an SDI guy, right?"

"That and SAMs, yes, sir. Other things. I'm one of the world's experts on adaptive optics, from my SDI days."

"What's that?" Captain Blandy asked.

"The rubber mirror, we called it. You use computercontrolled actuators to warp the mirror to compensate for atmospheric distortions. The idea was to use that to focus the energy beam from a free-electron laser. But it didn't work out. The rubber mirror worked just fine, but for some reason we never figured out, the damned lasers didn't scale up the way we hoped they would. Didn't come up to the power requirements to smoke a missile body." Gregory looked down in the dry dock again. It certainly took its time, but they probably didn't want to drop anything this valuable. "I wasn't directly involved in that, but I kibitzed some. It turned out to be a monster of a technical problem. We just kept bashing our heads against the wall until we got tired of the squishy sound."

"I know mechanical engineering, some electrical, but not the high-energy stuff. So, what do you think of our Aegis system?"

"I love the radar. Just like the Cobra Dane the Air Force has up at Shemya in the Aleutians. A little more advanced, even. You could probably bounce a signal off the moon if you wanted to."

"That's a little out of our range gate," Blandy observed. "Chief Leek here been taking good care of you?"

"When he leaves the Navy, we might have a place for him at TRW. We're part of the ongoing SAM project."

"And Lieutenant Olson, too?" the skipper asked.

"He's a very bright young officer, Captain. I can think of a lot of companies who might want him." If Gregory had a fault, it was being too truthful.

"I ought to say something to discourage you from that, but—"

"Cap'n!" A sailor came up. "Flash-traffic from SACLANT, sir." He handed over a clipboard. Captain Blandy signed the acknowledgment sheet and took the message. His eyes focused very closely.

"Do you know if the SecDef knows what you're up to?"

"Yes, Captain, he does. I just spoke to Tony a few minutes ago."

"What the hell did you tell him?"

Gregory shrugged. "Not much, just that the project was coming along nicely."

"Uh-huh. Chief Leek, how's your hardware?"

"Everything's a hundred percent on line, Cap'n. We got a job, sir?" the senior chief asked.

"Looks like it. Dr. Gregory, if you will excuse me, I have to see my officers. Chief, we're going to be getting under way soon. If any of your troops are on the beach, call 'em back. Spread the word."

"Aye aye, sir." He saluted as Captain Blandy hustled back forward. "What's that all about?"

"Beats me, Chief." "What do I do? Getting under way?" Gregory asked.

"Got your toothbrush? If not, you can buy one in the ship's store. Excuse me, Doc, I have to do a quick muster." Leek tossed his cigarette over the side and went the same way that the captain had.

And there was precisely nothing for Gregory to do. There was no way for him to leave the ship, except to jump down into the flooding floating dry dock, and that didn't look like a viable option. So, he headed back into the superstructure and found the ship's store open. There he bought a toothbrush.

Bondarenko spent the next three hours with Major General Sinyavskiy, going over approach routes and fire plans.

"They have fire-finder radar, Yuriy, and their counter-battery

rockets have a long reach."

"Can we expect any help from the Americans?"

"I'm working on that. We have superb reconnaissance information from their movie-star drones."

"I need the location of their artillery. If we can take that away from them, it makes my job much easier."

"Tolkunov!" the theater commander yelled. It was loud enough that his intelligence coordinator came running.

"Yes, Comrade General!"

"Vladimir Konstantinovich, we'll be making our stand here," Bondarenko said, pointing to a red line on the map. "I want minute-to-minute information of the approaching Chinese formations—especially their artillery."

"I can do that. Give me ten minutes." And the G-2 disappeared back out to where the Dark Star terminal was. Then his boss thought about it.

"Come on, Yuriy, you have to see this."

"General," Major Tucker said by way of greeting. Then he saw a second one. "General," he said again.

"This is General Sinyavskiy. He commands Two-Six-Five. Would you please show him the advancing Chinese?" It wasn't a question or a request, just phrased politely because Tucker was a foreigner.

"Okay, it's right here, sir, we've got it all on videotape. Their leading reconnaissance elements are . . . here, and their leading main-force units are right here."

"Fuck," Sinyavskiy observed in Russian. "Is this magic?"

"No, this is—" Bondarenko switched languages. "Which unit is this, Major?"

"Grace Kelly again, sir. *To Catch a Thief* with Cary Grant, Hitchcock movie that one was. The sun'll be down in another hour or so and we'll be getting it all on the thermal-imaging systems. Anyway, here's their leading battalion, all look like their Type-90 tanks. They're keeping good formation discipline, and they just refueled about an hour ago, so, figure they're good for another two hundred or so kilometers before they stop again."

"Their artillery?"

"Lagging behind, sir, except for this tracked unit here." Tucker played with the mouse some and brought up another picture.

"Gennady Iosifovich, how can we fail with such information?" the division commander asked.

"Yuriy, remember when we thought about attacking the Americans?"

"Madness. The Chinks can't see this drone?" Sinyavskiy asked, somewhat incredulously.

"It's stealthy, as they call it, invisible on radar."

"Nichevo."

"Sir, I have a direct line to our headquarters at Zhigansk. If you guys are going to make a stand, what do you want from us?' Tucker asked. "I can forward your request to General Wallace."

"I have thirty Su-25 attack bombers and also fifty Su-24 fighter bombers standing by, plus two hundred Mi-24 helicopters." Getting the last in theater had been agonizingly slow, but finally they were here, and they were the Ace of Diamonds Bondarenko had facedown on the card table. He hadn't let so much as one approach the area of operations yet, but they were two hundred kilometers away, fueled and armed, their flight crews flying to practice their airmanship and shooting live weapons as rehearsal—for some, the first live weapons they'd ever shot.

"That's going to be a surprise for good old Joe," Tucker observed with a whistle. "Where'd you hide them, sir? Hell, General, *I* didn't know they were around."

"There are a few secure places. We want to give our guests a proper greeting when the time is right," Gennady Iosifovich told the young American officer.

"So, what do you want us to do, sir?"

"Take down their logistics. Show me this Smart Pig you've been talking to Colonel Tolkunov about."

"That we can probably do, sir," Tucker said. "Let me get on the phone to General Wallace."

So, they're turning me loose?" Wallace asked.

"As soon as contact is imminent between Russian and Chinese ground forces." Mickey Moore then gave him his targets. "It's most of the things you wanted to hit, Gus."

"I suppose," the Air Force commander allowed, somewhat grudgingly. "And if the Russians ask for help?"

"Give it to them, within reason."

"Right."

LTC Giusti, SABRE SIX, got off the helicopter at the Number Two fueling point and walked toward General Diggs.

"They weren't kidding," Colonel Masterman was saying. "This *is* a fuckin' lake." One and a quarter *billion* liters translated to more than three hundred million gallons, or nearly a million tons of fuel, about the carrying capacity of four supertankers, all of Number Two Diesel, or close enough that the fuel injectors on his tanks and Bradleys wouldn't notice the difference. The manager of the site, a civilian, had said that the fuel had been there for nearly forty years, since

Khrushchev had had a falling-out with Chairman Mao, and the possibility of war with the *other* communist country had turned from an impossibility into a perceived likelihood. Either it was remarkable prescience or paranoid wish fulfillment, but in either case it worked to the benefit of First Armored Division.

The off-loading facilities could have been better, but the Soviets evidently hadn't had much experience with building gas stations. It was more efficient to pump the fuel into the division's fuel bowsers, which then motored off to fill the tanks and tracks four or six at a time.

"Okay, Mitch, what do we have on the enemy?" General Diggs asked his intelligence officer.

"Sir, we've got a Dark Star tasked directly to us now, and she'll be up for another nine hours. We're up against a leginfantry division. They're forty kilometers that way, mainly sitting along this line of hills. There's a regiment of ChiComm tanks supporting them."

"Artillery?"

"Some light and medium, all of it towed, setting up now, with fire-finder radars we need to worry about," Colonel Turner warned. "I've asked General Wallace to task some F-16s with HARMs to us. They can tune the seekers on those to the millimeter-band the fire-finders use."

"Make that happen," Diggs ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Duke, how long to contact?" the general asked his operations officer.

"If we move on schedule, we'll be in their neighborhood about zero-two-hundred."

"Okay, let's get the brigade commanders briefed in. We party just after midnight," Diggs told his staff, not even regretting his choice of words. He was a soldier about to go into combat, and with that came a different and not entirely pleasant way of thinking.

CHAPTER 57

Hyperwar

I had been rather a tedious couple of days for USS *Tucson*. She'd been camped out on *406* for sixteen days, and was holding station seventeen thousand yards—eight and a half nautical miles—astern of the Chinese boomer, with a nuclear-powered fast-attack camped out just to the south of it at the moment. The SSN, at least, supposedly had a name, *Hai Long*, the intelligence weenies said it was. But to *Tucson*'s sonarman, *406* was Sierra-Eleven, and *Hai Long* was Sierra-Twelve, and so they were known to the fire-control tracking party.

Tracking both targets was not demanding. Though both had nuclear power plants, the reactor systems were noisy, especially the feed pumps that ran cooling water through the nuclear pile. That, plus the sixty-hertz generators, made for two pairs of bright lines on the waterfall sonar display, and tracking both was about as difficult as watching two blind men in an empty shopping mall parking lot at high noon on a cloudless day. But it was more interesting than tracking whales in the North Pacific, which some of PACFLT's boats had been tasked to do of late, to keep the tree-huggers happy.

Things had gotten a little more interesting lately. *Tucson* ran to periscope/antenna depth twice a day, and the crew had learned, much to everyone's surprise, that Chinese and American armed forces were trading shots in Siberia, and *that* meant, the crew figured, that *406* might have to be made to disappear, and *that* was a mission, and while it might not exactly be fun, it was what they were paid to do, which made it a worthwhile activity.

406 had submarine-launched ballistic missiles aboard, twelve Ju Lang-1 CSS-N-3s, each with a single megatonrange warhead. The name meant "Great Wave," so the intelligence book said. It also said they had a range of less than three thousand kilometers, which was less than half the range needed to strike California, though it could hit Guam, which was American territory. That didn't really matter. What did matter was that *406* and *Hai Long* were ships of war belonging to a nation with which the United States was now trading shots.

The VLF radio fed off an antenna trailed off the after corner of *Tucson*'s sail, and it received transmissions from a monstrous, mainly

underground transmitter located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The tree-huggers complained that the energy emanating from this radio confused migrating geese in the fall, but no hunters had yet complained about smaller bags of waterfowl, and so the radio remained in service. Built to send messages to American missile submarines, it still transmitted to the fast-attacks that remained in active service. When a transmission was received, a bell went off in the submarine's communications room, located aft of the attack center, on the starboard side.

The bell *ding*ed. The sailor on watch called his officer, a lieutenant, j.g., who in turn called the captain, who took the submarine back up to antenna depth. Once there, he elevated the communications laser to track in on the Navy's own communications satellite, known as SSIX, the Submarine Satellite Information Exchange, telling it that he was ready for a transmission. The reply action message came over a directional S-band radio for the higher bandwidth. The signal was cross-loaded into the submarine's crypto machines, decoded, and printed up.

TO: USS TUCSON (SSN-770)
FROM: CINCPAC

1. UPON RECEIVING "XQT SPEC OP" SIGNAL FROM VLS YOU WILL ENGAGE AND DESTROY PRC SSBN AND ANY PRC SHIPS IN CONTACT.
2. REPORT RESULTS OF ATTACK VIA SSIX.
3. SUBSEQUENT TO THIS OPERATION, CONDUCT UNRESTRICTED OPERATIONS AGAINST PRC NAVAL UNITS.
4. YOU WILL NOT RPT NOT ENGAGE COMMERCIAL TRAFFIC OF ANY KIND. CINCPAC SENDS

END MESSAGE

"Well, it's about goddamned time," the CO observed to his executive officer.

"Doesn't say when to expect it," the XO observed.

"Call it two hours," the captain said. "Let's close to ten thousand yards. Get the troops perked up. Spin up the weapons."

"Aye."

"Anything else close?"

"There's a Chinese frigate off to the north, about thirty miles."

"Okay, after we do the subs, we'll Harpoon that one, then we'll close to finish it off, if necessary."

"Right." The XO went forward to the attack center. He checked his watch. It was dark topside. It didn't really matter to anyone aboard the submarine, but darkness made everybody feel a little more secure for some reason or other, even the XO.

It was tenser now. Giusti's reconnaissance troopers were now within twenty miles of the expected Chinese positions. That put them inside artillery range, and that made the job serious.

The mission was to advance to contact, and to find a hole in the Chinese positions for the division to exploit. The secondary objective was to shoot through the gap and break into the Chinese logistical area, just over the river from where they'd made their breakthrough. There they would rape and pillage, as LTC Giusti thought of it, probably turning north to roll up the Chinese rear with one or two brigades, and probably leaving the third to remain in place astride the Chinese line of communications as a blocking force.

His troopers had all put on their "makeup," as some called it, their camouflage paint, darkening the natural light spots of the face and lightening the dark ones. It had the overall effect of making them look like green and black space aliens. The advance would be mounted, for the most part, with the cavalry scouts mostly staying in their Bradleys and depending on the thermal-imaging viewers used by the driver and gunner to spot enemies. They'd be jumping out occasionally, though, and so everyone checked his PVS-11 personal night-vision system. Every trooper had three sets of fresh AA batteries that were as important as the magazines for their M16A2 rifles. Most of the men gobbled down an MRE ration and chased it with water, and often some aspirin or Tylenol to ward off minor aches and pains that might come from bumps or sprains. They all traded looks and jokes to lighten the stress of the night, plus the usual brave words meant as much for themselves as for others. Sergeants and junior officers reminded the men of their training, and told them to be confident in their abilities.

Then, on radioed command, the Bradleys started off, leading the heavier main-battle tanks off to the enemy, moving initially at about ten miles per hour.

The squadron's helicopters were up, all sixteen of them, moving very cautiously because armor on a helicopter is about as valuable as a sheet of newspaper, and because someone on the ground only needed a thermal-imaging viewer to see them, and a heat-seeking missile would snuff them out of the sky. The enemy had light flak, too, and that was just as deadly.

The OH-58D Kiowa Warriors had good night-vision systems, and in training the flight crews had learned to be confident of them, but people didn't often die in training. Knowing that there were people out there with live weapons and the orders to make use of them made everyone discount some of the lessons they'd learned. Getting shot down in one of those exercises meant being told over the radio to

land, and maybe getting a tongue-lashing from the company commander for screwing up, which usually ended with a reminder that in real combat operations, he'd be dead, his wife a widow, and his children orphans. But they weren't, really, and so those words were never taken as seriously as they were now. Now it could be real, and all of the flight crews had wives or sweethearts, and most of them had children as well.

And so they moved forward, using their own night-vision equipment to sweep the ground ahead, their hands a little more tingly than usual on the controls.

Division Headquarters had its own Dark Star terminal set up, with an Air Force captain running it. Diggs didn't much like being so far in the rear with his men going out in harm's way, but command wasn't the same thing as leadership. He'd been told that years before at Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff School, and he'd experienced it in Saudi Arabia only the previous year, but even so, he felt the need to be out forward, close to his men, so that he could share the danger with them. But the best way for him to mitigate the danger to them was to stay back here and establish effective control over operations, along with Colonel Masterman.

"Cookstoves?" Masterman asked.

"Yep," the USAF captain—his name was Frank Williams—agreed. "And these bright ones are campfires. Cool night. Ground temperature's about forty-three degrees, air temperature is forty-one. Good contrast for the thermal viewing systems. They seem to use the kind of stoves we had in the Boy Scouts. Damn, there's a bunch of'em. Like hundreds."

"Got a hole in their lines?"

"Looks thin right here, 'tween these two hills. They have a company on this hilltop, and another company here—I bet they're in different battalions," Williams said. "Always seems to work that way. The gap between them looks like a little more 'n a kilometer, but there's a little stream at the bottom."

"Bradleys don't mind getting a little wet," Diggs told the junior officer. "Duke?"

"Best bet for a blow-through I've seen so far. Aim Angelo for it?"

Diggs thought about that. It meant committing his cavalry screen, and that also meant committing at least one of his brigades, but such decisions were what generals were for. "What else is around?"

"I'd say their regimental headquarters is right about here, judging by the tents and trucks. You're going to want to hit it with artillery, I expect."

"Right about the time QUARTER HORSE gets there. No sense

alerting them too soon," Masterman suggested. General Diggs thought it over one more time and made his first important decision of the night:

"Agreed. Duke, tell Giusti to head for that gap."

"Yes, sir." Colonel Masterman moved off toward the radios. They were doing this on the fly, which wasn't exactly the way they preferred, but that was often the world of realtime combat operations.

"Roger," Diggs called.

Colonel Roger Ardan was his divisional artillery commander—GUNFIGHTER SIX on the divisional radio net—a tall thin man, rather like a not-tall-enough basketball player.

"Yes, sir."

"Here's your first fire mission. We're going to shoot Angelo Giusti through this gap. Company of infantry here and here, and what appears to be a regimental command post here."

"Enemy artillery?"

"Some one-twenty-twos here, and what looks like twooh-threes, eight inch, right here."

"No rocket-launchers?"

"None I've seen yet. That's a little odd, but they're not around that I can see," Captain Williams told the gunner.

"What about radars?" Colonel Ardan asked.

"Maybe one here, but hard to tell. It's under some camo nets." Williams selected the image with his mouse and expanded it.

"We'll take that one on general principles. Put a pin in it," Ardan said.

"Yes, sir. Print up a target list?"

"You bet, son."

"Here you go," Williams said. A command generated two sheets of paper out of the adjacent printer, with latitude-longitude positions down to the second of angle. The captain handed it across.

"How the hell did we ever survive without GPS and overheads?" Ardan wondered aloud. "Okay, General, this we can do. When?"

"Call it thirty minutes."

"We'll be ready," GUNFIGHTER promised. "I'll TOT the regimental command post."

"Sounds good to me," Diggs observed.

First Armored had a beefed-up artillery brigade. The second and the third battalions of the First Field Artillery Regiment had the new Paladin self-propelled 155-mm howitzer, and the 2nd Battalion, 6th Field Artillery, had self-propelled eight-inch, plus the division's Multiple Launch Rocket System tracks, which ordinarily were under the direct order of the divisional commander, as his personal shotgun.

These units were six miles behind the leading cavalry troops, and on order left the roads they were on and pulled off to firing positions north and south of the gravel track. Each of them had a Global Positioning Satellite, or GPS, receiver, and these told them where they were located down to an accuracy of less than three meters. A transmission over the Joint Tactical Information Distribution System, or J-TIDS, told them the locations of their targets, and onboard computers computed azimuth and range to them. Then they learned the shell selection, either "common" high-explosive or VT (for variable-time). These were loaded and the guns trained onto the distant targets, and the gunners just waited for the word to pull the strings. Their readiness was radioed back to the divisional HQ.

All set, sir," Colonel Ardan reported.

"Okay, we'll wait to see how Angelo's doing."

"Your screen is right here," Captain Williams told the senior officers. For him it was like being in a skybox at a football game, except that one team didn't know he was there, and didn't know the other team was on the field as well. "They're within three klicks of the enemy's first line of outposts."

"Duke, tell Angelo. Get it out on the IVIS."

"Done," Masterman replied. The only thing they couldn't do was cross-deck the "take" from the Dark Star drone.

SABRE SIX was now in his Bradley instead of the safer Abrams main-battle tank. He could see better out of this one, Giusti judged.

"IVIS is up," the track commander called. Colonel Giusti ducked down and twisted around the gun-turret structure to see where the sergeant was sitting. Whoever had designed the Bradley hadn't considered that a senior officer might use it—and his squadron didn't have one of the new "God" tracks yet, with the IVIS display in the back.

"First enemy post is right over there, sir, at eleven o'clock, behind this little rise," the sergeant said, tapping the screen.

"Well, let's go say hi."

"Roger that, Colonel. Kick it, Charlie," he told the driver. For the rest of the crew: "Perk it up, people. Heads up. We're in Indian Country."

How are things up north?" Diggs asked Captain Williams.

"Let's see." The captain deselected Marilyn Monroe and switched over to the "take" from Grace Kelly. "Here we go, the leading Chinese elements are within fifteen klicks of the Russians. Looks like they're

settled in for the night, though. Looks like we'll be in contact first."

"Oh, well." Diggs shrugged. "Back to Miss Monroe."

"Yes, sir." More computer maneuvers. "Here we are. Here's your leading cavalry element, two klicks from John Chinaman's first hole in the ground."

Diggs had grown up watching boxing on TV. His father had been a real fan of Muhammad Ali, but even when Ali had lost to Leon Spinks, he'd known the other guy was in the ring with him. Not now. The camera zoomed in to isolate the hole. There were two men there. One was hunched down smoking a cigarette, and that must have ruined the night vision of one of them, maybe both, which explained why they hadn't seen anything yet, though they ought to have heard something . . . the Brad wasn't all that quiet . . .

"There, he just woke up a little," Williams said. On the TV screen, the head turned abruptly. Then the other head came up, and the bright point of the cigarette went flying off to their right front. Giusti's track was coming in from their left, and now both heads were oriented in that general direction.

"How close can you get?" Diggs asked.

"Let's see . . ." In five seconds, the two nameless Chinese infantrymen in their hand-dug foxhole took up half the screen. Then Williams did a split screen, like the picture-in-picture feature of some television sets. The big part showed the two doomed soldiers, and the little one was locked on the leading Bradley Scout, whose gun turret was now turning a little to the left . . . about eleven hundred meters now . . .

They had a field phone in the hole, Diggs could see now, sitting on the dirt between the two grunts. Their hole was the first in the enemy combat outpost line, and their job would have been to report back when something evil this way came. They heard something, but they weren't sure what it was, were probably waiting until they saw it. *The PLA didn't have night-vision goggles, at least not at this level*, Diggs thought. That was important information. "Okay, back it off."

"Right, sir." Williams dumped the close-up of the two grunts, returning to the picture that showed both them and the approaching Brad. Diggs was sure that Giusti's gunner could see them now. It was just a question of when he chose to take the first shot, and that was a call for the guy in the field to make, wasn't it?

"There!" The muzzle of the 25-mm chain gun flashed three times, causing the TV screen to flare, and there was a line of the tracers, streaking to the hole—

—and the two grunts were dead, killed by three rounds of high-explosive incendiary-tracer ammunition. Diggs turned.

"GUNFIGHTER, commence firing!"

“Fire!” Colonel Ardan said into his microphone. Moments later, the ground shook under their feet, and a few seconds after that came the distant sound of thunder, and more than ninety shells started arcing into the air.

Colonel Ardan had ordered a TOT, or time-on-target barrage, on the regimental command post behind the small pass that the Quarter Horse was driving for. An American invention from World War II, TOT was designed so that every round fired from the various guns targeted on the single spot on the map would arrive at the same instant, and so deny the people there the chance to dive for cover at the first warning. In the old days, that had meant laboriously computing the flight time of every single shell, but computers did that now in less time than it took to frame the thought. This particular mission had fallen to 2nd/6th and its eightinchers, universally regarded as the most accurate heavy guns in the United States Army. Two of the shells were common impact-fused high-explosive, and the other ten were VT. That stood for “variable time,” but really meant that in the nose of each shell was a tiny radar transponder set to explode the shell when it was about fifty feet off the ground. In this way, the fragments lancing away from the exploding shell were not wasted into the ground, but instead made an inverted cone of death about two hundred feet across at its base. The common shells would have the effect of making craters, immolating those who might be in individual shelter holes.

Captain Williams switched Marilyn’s focus to the enemy command post. From a high perspective the thermal cameras even caught the bright dots of the shells racing through the night. Then the camera zoomed back in on the target. By Diggs’s estimation, all of the shells landed in less than two seconds The effects were horrific. The six tents there evaporated, and the glowing green stick figures of human beings fell flat and stopped moving. Some pieces separated from one another, an effect Diggs had never seen.

“Whoa!” Williams observed. “Stir-fry.”

What was it about the Air Force? General Diggs wondered. *Or maybe it was just the kid’s youth.*

On the screen, some people were still moving, having miraculously survived the first barrage, but instead of moving around (or of running away, because artillery barrages didn’t arrive in groups of only one) they remained at their posts, some looking to the needs of the wounded. It was courageous, but it doomed most of them to death. The only one or two people in the regimental command post who were going to live were the ones who’d pick winning lottery tickets later in life. If there were going to be as many as two, that is. The second barrage landed twenty-eight seconds after the first, and then a

third thirty-one seconds after that, according to the time display in the upper-right corner of the screen.

"Lord have mercy," Colonel Ardan observed in a whisper. He'd never in his career seen the effect of fire in this way. It had always been a distant, detached thing to the cannon-cocker, but now he saw what his guns actually did.

"Target, cease fire," Diggs said, using tanker-talk for *It's dead, you killed it, find another one.* A year before in the sands of Saudi Arabia, he'd watched combat on a computer screen and felt the coldness of war, but this was infinitely worse. This was like watching a Hollywood special-effects movie, but it wasn't computer-generated animation. He'd just watched the command section of an infantry regiment, perhaps forty people, erased from the face of the earth in less than ninety seconds, and they had, after all, been human beings, something this young Air Force captain didn't seem to grasp. To him it was doubtless some sort of Nintendo game. Diggs decided that it was probably better to think of it that way.

The two infantry companies on the hilltops north and south of the little pass were clobbered by a full battery each. The next question was what that would generate. With the regimental CP down, things might get a little confusing for the divisional commander. Somebody would hear the noise, and if someone from regiment had been on the phone, the disconnect first of all would make people think, *huh*, because that was the normal human reaction, even for soldiers in a combat zone; bad phone connections were probably the rule rather than the exception, and they'd probably use phones rather than radios because they were more secure and more reliable—except when shellfire killed the phone and/or cut the lines. So, the enemy division commander was probably just waking up with a tug on his shoulder, then he'd be a little confused by what he was told.

"Captain, do we know where the enemy's divisional CP is yet?"

"Probably right here, sir. Not completely sure, but there's a bunch of trucks."

"Show me on a map."

"Here, sir." The computer screen again. Diggs had a sudden thought: This young Air Force officer might eat his meals off it. More to the point, the CP was just in range of his MLRS batteries. And it had a lot of radio masts. Yeah, that was where the ChiComm general was.

"GUNFIGHTER, I want this hit right now."

"Yes, sir." And the command went out over JTIDS to the 2nd/6th Field Artillery. The MLRS tracks were already set up awaiting orders, and the target assigned was well within the slewing angle for their launchers. The range, forty-three kilometers, was just within their capability. Here also the work was done by computer. The crewmen

trained the weapons on the correct azimuth, locked their suspension systems to stabilize the vehicles, and closed the shutters on their windows to protect against blast and the ingress of the rocket exhaust smoke, which was lethal when breathed. Then it was just a matter of pushing the red firing button, which happened on command of the battery commander, and all nine vehicles unleashed their twelve rockets each, about a second apart, every one of which contained 644 grenadesized submunitions, all targeted on an area the size of three football fields.

The effect of this, Diggs saw three minutes after giving the order, was nearly seventy *thousand* individual explosions in the target area, and as bad as it had been for the regimental CP, that had been trick or treat compared to this. Whatever division he'd been facing was now as thoroughly decapitated as though by Robespierre himself.

After the initial fire, Lieutenant Colonel Giusti found that he had no targets. He sent one troop through the gap while holding the north side of it himself, taking no fire at all. The falling 155s on the hills to his front and rear explained much of that, for surely it was a storm of steel and explosives. Someone somewhere fired off a parachute flare, but nothing developed from it. Twenty minutes after the initial barrage, the leading elements of First Brigade came into view. He waited until they were within a hundred meters before pulling off to the east to rejoin his squadron in the shallow valley. He was now technically inside enemy lines, but as with the first good hit in a football game, the initial tension was now gone, and there was a job to be done.

Dick Boyle, like most aviators, was qualified in more than one sort of aircraft, and he could have chosen to fly-lead the mission in an Apache, which was one of the really enjoyable experiences for a rotary-wing pilot, but instead he remained in his UH-60 Blackhawk, the better to observe the action. His target was the independent tank brigade which was the organizational fist of the 65th Type B Group Army, and to service that target he had twenty-eight of his forty-two AH-64D Apache attack helicopters, supported by twelve Kiowa Warriors and one other Blackhawk.

The Chinese tank force was twenty miles northwest of their initial crossing point, agreeably sitting in open ground in circular formation so as to have guns pointing in all directions, none of which were a matter of concern to Dick Boyle and his men. It had probably made sense to laager them that way forty years ago, but not today, not in the night with Apaches nearby. With his OH-58Ds playing the scout role, the attack formation swept in from the north, down the valley.

Whatever colonel was in command of this force had selected a place from which he could move to support any of the divisions in the 65th Army, but that merely concentrated his vehicles in a single spot, about five hundred meters across. Boyle's only worry was SAMs and maybe flak, but he had Dark Star photos to tell him where that all was, and he had a team of four Apaches delegated to handle the threat first of all.

It was in the form of two missile batteries. One was composed of four DK-9 launchers very similar to the American Chaparral, with four Sidewinder-class heat-seekers mounted on a tracked chassis. Their range would be about seven miles, just a touch longer than the effective range of his Hellfire missiles. The other was their HQ-61A, which Boyle thought of as the Chinese version of the Russian SA-6. There were fewer of these, but they had ten miles of range and supposedly a very capable radar system, and also had a hard floor of about a hundred meters, below which they couldn't track a target, which was a good thing to know, if true. His tactic would be to detect them and take them out as quickly as possible, depending on his EH-60 electronic-intelligence helicopter to sniff them out. The code for one of these was HOLIDAY. The heat-seekers were called DUCKS.

The Chinese soldiers on the ground would also have simple man-portable heat-seekers that were about as capable as the old American Redeye missile, but his Apaches had suppressed exhausts that were expected to defeat the heat-seekers—and those who had voiced the expectations weren't flying tonight. They never did.

There were more air missions tonight, and not all of them were over Russian territory. Twenty F-117A Stealth fighters had deployed to Zhigansk, and they'd mainly sat on the ground since their first arrival, waiting for bombs to be flown over, along with the guidance package attachments that changed them from simple ballistic weapons to smart bombs that went deliberately for a special piece of real estate. The special weapons for the Black Jets were the GBU-27 laser-guided hard-target penetrators. These were designed not merely to hit objects and explode, but to lance inside them before detonating, and they had special targets. There were twenty-two such targets tonight, all located in or near the cities of Harbin and Bei'an, and every one was a railroad bridge abutment.

The People's Republic depended more on its rail transportation than most countries, because it lacked the number of motor vehicles to necessitate the construction of highways, and also because the inherent efficiency of railroads appealed to the economic model in the heads of its political leaders. They did not ignore the fact that such a dependence on a single transportation modality could make them

vulnerable to attack, and so at every potential chokepoint, like river crossings, they'd used the ample labor force of their country to build multiple bridges, all of heavily-built rebarred concrete abutments. *Surely*, they'd thought, *six separate crossing points at a single river couldn't* all *be damaged beyond timely repair.*

The Black Jets refueled from the usual KC-135 tanker aircraft and continued south, unseen by the radar fence erected by the PRC government along its northeastern border, and kept going. The heavily automated aircraft continued to their destinations on autopilot. They even made their bombing runs on autopilot, because it was too much to expect a pilot, however skilled, both to fly the aircraft and guide the infrared laser whose invisible grounded dot the bomb's seeker-head sought out. The attacks were made almost simultaneously, just a minute apart from east to west at the six parallel bridges over the Songhua Jiang River at Harbin. Each bridge had major pier abutments on the north and south bank. Both were attacked in each case. The bomb drops were easier than contractor tests, given the clear air and the total lack of defensive interference. In every case, the first set of six bombs fell true, striking the targets at Mach-1 speed and penetrating in for a distance of twenty-five to thirty feet before exploding. The weapons each had 535 pounds of Tritonal explosive. Not a particularly large quantity, in tight confinement it nevertheless generated hellish power, rupturing the hundreds of tons of concrete around it like so much porcelain, albeit without the noise one would expect from such an event.

Not content with this destruction, the second team of F-117s struck at the northern abutments, and smashed them as well. The only lives directly lost were those of the engineer and fireman of a northbound diesel locomotive pulling a trainload of ammunition for the army group across the Amur River, who were unable to stop their train before running over the edge.

The same performance was repeated in Bei'an, where five more bridges were dropped into the Wuyur He River, and in this dual stroke, which had lasted a mere twenty-one minutes, the supply line to the Chinese invasion force was sundered for all time to come. The eight aircraft left over—they'd been a reserve force in case some of the bombs should fail to destroy their targets—headed for the loop siding near the Amur used by tank cars. This was, oddly enough, not nearly as badly hit as the bridges, since the deep-penetrating bombs went too far into the ground to create much of surface craters, though some train cars were upset, and one of them caught fire. All in all, it had been a routine mission for the F-117s. Attempts to engage them with the SAM batteries in the two cities failed because the aircraft never appeared on the search-radar screens, and a missile launch was not

even attempted.

The bell went off again, and the ELF message printed up as EQT SPEC OP, or "execute special operation" in proper English. *Tucson* was now nine thousand yards behind Sierra-Eleven, and fifteen from Sierra-Twelve.

"We're going to do one fish each. Firing order Two, One. Do we have a solution light?" the captain asked.

"Valid solutions for both fish," the weapons officer replied.

"Ready Tube Two."

"Tube Two is ready in all respects, tube flooded, outer door is open, sir."

"Very well. Match generated bearings and . . . shoot!"

The handle was turned on the proper console. "Tube Two fired electrically, sir." *Tucson* shuddered through her length with the sudden explosion of compressed air that ejected the weapon into the seawater.

"Unit is running hot, straight, and normal, sir," Sonar reported.

"Very well, ready Tube One," the captain said next.

"Tube One is ready in all respects, tube is flooded, outer door is open," Weps announced again.

"Very well. Match generated bearings and shoot!" This command came as something of an exclamation. The captain figured he owed it to the crew, which was at battle stations, of course.

"Tube One fired electrically, sir," the petty officer announced after turning the handle again, with exactly the same physical effect on the ship.

"Unit Two running hot, straight, and normal, sir," Sonar said again. And with that, the captain took the five steps to the Sonar Room.

"Here we go, Cap'n," the leading sonarman said, pointing to the glass screen with a yellow grease pencil.

The nine thousand yards' distance to *406* translated to four and a half nautical miles. The target was traveling at a depth of less than a hundred feet, maybe transmitting to its base on the radio or something, and steaming along at a bare five knots, judging by the blade count. That worked out to a running time of just under five minutes for the first target, and then another hundred sixty seconds or so to the second one. The second shot would probably get a little more complicated than the first. Even if they failed to hear the Mark 48 ADCAP torpedo coming, a deaf man could not miss the sound of 800 pounds of Torpex going off underwater three miles away, and he'd try to maneuver, or do something more than break out the worry beads and say a few Hail Maos, or whatever prayer these people said. The captain leaned back into the attack center.

"Reload ADCAP into Tube Two, and a Harpoon into Tube One."

"Aye, Cap'n," the Weapons Officer acknowledged.

"Where's that frigate?" he asked the lead sonarman.

"Here, sir, Luda-class, an old clunker, steam-powered, bearing two-one-six, tooling along at about fourteen knots, by blade count."

"Time on Unit Two," the skipper called.

"Minute twenty seconds to impact, sir." The captain looked at the display. If Sierra-Eleven had sonarmen on duty, they weren't paying much attention to the world around them. That would change shortly.

"Okay, go active in thirty seconds."

"Aye, aye."

On the sonar display, the torpedo was dead on the tone line from *406*. It seemed a shame to kill a submarine when you didn't even know its name . . .

"Going active on Unit Two," Weps called.

"There it is, sir," the sonarman said, pointing to a different part of the screen. The ultrasonic sonar lit up a new line, and fifteen seconds later—

—"Sierra-Eleven just kicked the gas, sir, look here, cavitation and blade count is going up, starting a turn to starboard . . . ain't gonna matter, sir," the sonarman knew from the display. You couldn't outmaneuver a -48.

"What about—Twelve?"

"He's heard it, too, Cap'n. Increasing speed and—" The sonarman flipped his headphones off. "Yeow! That hurt." He shook his head hard. "Unit impact on Sierra-Eleven, sir."

The captain picked up a spare set of headphones and plugged them in. The sea was still rumbling. The target's engine sounds had stopped almost at once—the visual display confirmed that, though the sixty-hertz line showed her generators were still—no, they stopped, too. He heard and saw the sound of blowing air. Whoever he was, he was trying to blow ballast and head for the roof, but without engine power . . . no, not much of a chance of that, was there? Then he shifted his eyes to the visual track of Sierra-Twelve. The fast-attack had been a little more awake, and was turning radically to port, and really kicking on the power. His plant noise was way up, as was his blade count . . . and he was blowing ballast tanks, too . . . why?

"Time on Unit One?" the captain called.

"Thirty seconds for original plot, probably a little longer now."

Not much longer, the skipper thought. The ADCAP was motoring along on the sunny side of sixty knots this close to the surface . . . Weps went active on it, and the fish was immediately in acquisition. A well-trained crew would have fired off a torpedo of their own, just to scare their attacker off, and maybe escape if the first fish missed—not

much of a play, but it cost you nothing to do it, and maybe got you the satisfaction of having company arrive in hell right after you knocked on the door . . . but they didn't even get a decoy off. They must have all been asleep . . . certainly not very awake . . . not very alert . . . didn't they know there was a war going on . . . ? Twenty-five seconds later, they found out the hard way, when another splotch appeared on the sonar display.

Well, he thought, *two for two. That was pretty easy*. He stepped back into the attack center and lifted a microphone. "Now hear this. This is the captain speaking. We just launched two fish on a pair of ChiComm submarines. We won't be seeing either one of them anymore. Well done to everybody. That is all." Then he looked over at his communications officer: "Prepare a dispatch to CINCLANT. 'Four Zero Six destroyed at . . . Twenty-Two-Fifty-Six Zulu along with escorting SSN. Now engaging Frigate.' Send that off when we get to antenna depth."

"Yes, sir."

"Tracking party, we have a frigate bearing two-one-six. Let's get a track on him so we can Harpoon his ass."

"Aye, sir," said the lieutenant manning the tracking plot.

It was approaching six in the evening in Washington, where everybody who was somebody was watching TV, but not the commercial kind. The Dark Star feeds were going up on encrypted satellite links, and being distributed around Washington over dedicated military fiber-optic lines. One of those, of course, led to the White House Situation Room.

"Holy God," Ryan said. "It's like some kind of fucking video game. How long have we had this capability?"

"It's pretty new, Jack, and yeah," the Vice President agreed, "it is kind of obscene—but, well, it's just what the operators see. I mean, the times I splashed airplanes, I got to see it, just I was in a G-suit with a Tomcat strapped to my back. Somehow this feels dirtier, man. Like watching a guy and a gal go at it, and not in training films—"

"What?"

"That's what you call porno flicks on the boats, Jack, 'training films.' But this is like peeking in a window on a guy's wedding night, and he doesn't know about it . . . feels kinda dirty."

"The people will like it," Arnie van Damm predicted. "The average guy out there, especially kids, to them it'll be like a movie."

"Maybe so, Arnie, but it's a snuff film. Real lives being snuffed out, and in large numbers. That division CP Diggs got with his MLRS rockets—I mean, Jesus Christ. It was like an act of an angry pagan god, like the meteor that got the dinosaurs, like a murderer wasting a

kid in a schoolyard," Robby said, searching for just how dirty it felt to him. But it was business, not personal, for what little consolation that might be to the families of the departed.

Getting some radio traffic," Tolkunov told General Bondarenko. The intelligence officer had half a dozen electronic-intelligence groups out, listening in on the frequencies used by the PLA. They usually spoke in coded phrases which were difficult to figure out, especially since the words changed on a day-to-day basis, along with identifying names for the units and personalities involved.

But the security measures tended to fall by the wayside when an emergency happened, and senior officers wanted hard information in a hurry. In this case, Bondarenko had watched the take from Grace Kelly and felt little pity for the victims, wishing only that he'd been the one inflicting the casualties, because it was *his* country the Chinks had invaded.

"The American artillery doctrine is impressive, isn't it?" Colonel Tolkunov observed.

"They've always had good artillery. But so do we, as this Peng fellow will discover in a few hours," CINC-FAR EAST replied. "What do you think he'll do?"

"It depends on what he finds out," the G-2 replied. "The information that gets to him will probably be fairly confusing, and it will concern him, but less than his own mission."

And that made sense, Gennady Iosifovich had to agree. Generals tended to think in terms of the missions assigned to them, leaving the missions of others to those others, trusting them to do the jobs assigned to *them*. It was the only way an army could function, really. Otherwise you'd be so worried about what was happening around you that you'd never get your own work done, and the entire thing would quickly grind to a halt. It was called tunnel vision when it didn't work, and good teamwork when it did.

"What about the American deep strikes?"

"Those Stealth aircraft are amazing. The Chinese rail system is completely disrupted. Our guests will soon be running short of fuel."

"Pity," Bondarenko observed. The Americans were efficient warriors, and their doctrine of deep-strike, which the Russian military had scarcely considered, could be damned effective if you brought it off, and if your enemy couldn't adapt to it. Whether the Chinese could adapt was something they'd have to see about. "But they still have sixteen mechanized divisions for us to deal with."

"That is so, Comrade General," Tolkunov agreed.

FALCON THREE to FALCON LEADER, I see me a SAM track. It's a

Holiday," the pilot reported. "Hilltop two miles west of the CLOVERLEAF—wait, there's a Duck there, too."

"Anything else?" FALCON LEAD asked. This captain commanded the Apaches tasked to SAM suppression.

"Some light flak, mainly two-five mike-mike set up around the SAMs. Request permission to fire, over."

"Stand by," FALCON LEAD replied. "EAGLE LEAD, this is FALCON LEAD, over."

"EAGLE LEAD copies, FALCON," Boyle replied from his Blackhawk.

"We have SAM tracks in view. Permission to engage, over."

Boyle thought fast. His Apaches now had the tank laager in sight and surrounded on three sides. Okay, Falcon was approaching the hill overlooking the laager, code-named CLOVERLEAF. Well, it was about time.

"Permission granted. Engage the SAMs. Out."

"Roger, engaging. FALCON THREE, this is LEAD. Take'em out."

"Take your shot, Billy," the pilot told his gunner.

"Hellfire, now!" The gunner in the front seat triggered off his first missile. The seven-inch-wide missile leaped off its launch-rail with a flare of yellow light, and immediately tracked on the laser dot. Through his thermal viewer, he saw a dismounted crewman looking that way, and he immediately pointed toward the helicopter. He was yelling to get someone's attention, and the race was between the inbound missile and human reaction time. The missile had to win. He got the attention of someone, maybe his sergeant or lieutenant, who then looked in the direction he was pointing. You could tell by the way he cocked his head that he didn't see anything at first, while the first one was jerking his arm like a fishing pole, and the second one saw it, but by that time there was nothing for him to do but throw himself to the ground, and even that was a waste of energy. The Hellfire hit the base of the launcher assembly and exploded, killing everything within a ten-meter circle.

"Tough luck, Joe." Then the gunner switched over to the other one, the Holiday launcher. This crew had been alerted by the sound, and he could see them scurrying to light up their weapon. They'd just about gotten to their places when the Duck launcher blew up.

Next came the flak. There were six gun mounts, equally divided between 25- and 35-mm twin gun sets, and those could be nasty. The Apache closed in. The gunner selected his own 20-mm cannon and walked it across every site. The impacts looked like flashbulbs, and the guns were knocked over, some with exploding ammo boxes.

"EAGLE LEAD, FALCON THREE, this hilltop is cleaned off. We're circling to make sure. No coverage over the CLOVERLEAF now. It's wide open."

"Roger that." And Boyle ordered his Apaches in.

It was about as fair as putting a professional boxer into the ring against a six-year-old. The Apaches circled the laagered tanks just like Indians in the movies around a circled wagon train, except in this one, the settlers couldn't fire back. The Chinese tank crewmen were mainly sleeping outside, next to their mounts. Some crews were in their vehicles, standing guard after a fashion, and some dismounted crewmen were walking around on guard, holding Type 68 rifles. They'd been alerted somewhat by the explosions on the hilltop overlooking the laager. Some of the junior officers were shouting to get their men up and into their tanks, not knowing the threat, but thinking naturally enough that the safe place to be was behind armor, from which place they could shoot back to defend themselves. They could scarcely have been more wrong.

The Apaches danced around the laager, sideslipping as the gunners triggered off their missiles. Three of the PLA tanks used their thermal viewers and actually saw helicopters and shot at them, but the range of the tank guns was only half that of the Hellfires, and all of the rounds fell well short, as did the six handheld HN-5 SAMs that were fired into the night. The Hellfires, however, did not, and in every case —only two of them missed—the huge warheads had the same effect on the steel tanks that a cherry bomb might have on a plastic model. Turrets flew into the air atop pillars of flame, then crashed back down, usually upside-down on the vehicles to which they'd been attached. There'd been eighty-six tanks here, and that amounted to three missiles per helicopter, with a few lucky gunners getting a fourth shot. All in all, the destruction of this brigade took less than three minutes, leaving the colonel who'd been in command to stand at his command post with openmouthed horror at the loss of the three hundred soldiers he'd been training for over a year for this very moment. He even survived a strafing of his command section by a departing Apache, seeing the helicopter streak overhead so quickly that he didn't even have time to draw his service pistol.

"EAGLE LEAD, FALCON LEAD. The CLOVERLEAF is toast, and we are RTB, over."

Boyle could do little more than shake his head. "Roger, FALCON. Well done, Captain."

"Roger, thank you, sir. Out." The Apaches formed up and headed northwest to their base to refuel and rearm for the next mission. Below, he could see the First Brigade, blown through the gap in Chinese lines, heading southeast into the Chinese logistics area.

Task Force 77 had been holding station east of the Formosa Strait until receiving orders to race west. The various Air Bosses had word

that one of their submarines had eliminated a Chinese boomer and fast-attack submarine, which was fine with them, and probably just peachy for the task force commander. Now it was their job to go after the People's Liberation Army Navy, which, they all agreed, was a hell of a name for a maritime armed force. The first aircraft to go off, behind the F-14Ds flying barrier combat air patrol, or BARCAP, for the Task Force, were the E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft, the Navy's two-engine propdriven mini-AWACS. These were tasked to finding targets for the shooters, mainly F/A-18 Hornets.

This was to be a complex operation. The Task Force had three SSNs assigned to "sanitize" the area of ChiComm submarines. The Task Force commander seemed especially concerned with the possibility of a Chinese diesel-powered SSK punching a hole in one of his ships, but that was not an immediate concern for the airmen, unless they could find one tied alongside the pier.

The only real problem was target identification. There was ample commercial shipping in the area, and they had orders to leave that entirely alone, even ships flying the PRC flag. Anything with a SAM radar would be engaged beyond visual range. Otherwise, a pilot had to have eyeballs on the target before loosing a weapon. Of weapons they had plenty, and ships were fragile targets as far as missiles and thousand-pound bombs were concerned. The overall target was the PLAN South Sea Fleet, based at Guangszhou (better known to Westerners as Canton). The naval base there was well-sited for attack, though it was defended by surface-to-air missile batteries and some flak.

The F-14s on the lead were guided to aerial targets by the Hawkeyes. Again since there was commercial air traffic in the sky, the fighter pilots had to close to visual range for a positive ID of their targets. This could be dangerous, but there was no avoiding it.

What the Navy pilots didn't know was that the Chinese knew the electronic signature of the APD-138 radar on the E-2Cs, and therefore they also knew that something was coming. Fully a hundred Chinese fighters scrambled into the air and set up their own combat air patrol over their East Coast. The Hawkeyes spotted that and radioed a warning to the advancing fighters, setting the stage for a massive air engagement in the predawn darkness.

There was no elegant way to go about it. Two squadrons of Tomcats, twenty-four in all, led the strike force. Each carried four AIM-54C Phoenix missiles, plus four AIM-9X Sidewinders, The Phoenixes were old—nearly fifteen years old for some of them, and in some cases the solid-fuel motor bodies were developing cracks that would soon become apparent. They had a theoretical range of over a hundred miles, however, and that made them useful things to hang on

one's airframe.

The Hawkeye crews had orders to make careful determination of what was a duck and what was a goose, but it was agreed quickly that two or more aircraft flying in close formation were not Airbuses full of civilian passengers, and the Tomcats were authorized to shoot a full hundred miles off the Chinese mainland. The first salvo was composed of forty-eight. Of these, six self-destructed within five hundred yards of their launching aircraft, to the displeased surprise of the pilots involved. The remaining forty-two streaked upward in a ballistic path to a height of over a hundred thousand feet before tipping over at Mach-5 speed and switching on their millimeter-band Doppler homing radars. By the end of their flight, their motors were burned out, and they did not leave the smoke trail that pilots look for. Thus, though the Chinese pilots knew that they'd been illuminated, they couldn't see the danger coming, and therefore could not see anything to evade. The forty-two Phoenixes started going off in their formations, and the only survivors were those who broke into radical turns when they saw the first warheads go off. All in all, the forty-eight launches resulted in thirty-two kills. The surviving Chinese pilots were shaken but also enraged. As one man, they turned east and lit up their search radars, looking for targets for their own air-to-air missiles. These they found, but beyond range of their weapons. The senior officer surviving the initial attack ordered them to go to afterburner and streak east, and at a range of sixty miles, they fired off their PL-10 radar-guided air-to-air missiles. These were a copy of the Italian Aspide, in turn a copy of the old American AIM-7E Sparrow. To track a target, they required that the launching aircraft keep itself and its radar pointed at the target. In this case, the Americans were heading in as well, with their own radars emitting, and what happened was a great game of chicken, with the fighter pilots on either side unwilling to turn and run—and besides, they all figured that to do so merely guaranteed one's death. And so the race was between airplanes and missiles, but the PL-10 had a speed of Mach 4 against the Phoenix's Mach 5.

Back on the Hawkeyes, the crewmen kept track of the engagement. Both the aircraft and the streaking missiles were visible on the scopes, and there was a collective holding of breath for this one.

The Phoenixes hit first, killing thirty-one more PLAAF fighters, and also turning off their radars rather abruptly. That made some of their missiles "go dumb," but not all, and the six Chinese fighters that survived the second Phoenix barrage found themselves illuminating targets for a total of thirty-nine PL-10s, which angled for only four Tomcats.

The American pilots affected by this saw them coming, and the feeling wasn't particularly pleasant. Each went to afterburner and

dove for the deck, loosing every bit of chaff and flares he had in his protection pods, plus turning the jamming pods up to max power. One got clean away. Another lost most of them in the chaff, where the Chinese missiles exploded like fireworks in his wake, but one of the F-14s had nineteen missiles chasing him alone, and there was no avoiding them all. The third missile got close enough to trigger its warhead, and then nine more, and the Tomcat was reduced to chaff itself, along with its two-man crew. That left one Navy fighter whose radar-intercept officer ejected safely, though the pilot did not.

The remaining Tomcats continued to bore in. They were out of Phoenix missiles now, and closed to continue the engagement with Sidewinders. Losing comrades did nothing more than anger them for the moment, and this time it was the Chinese who turned back and headed for their coast, chased by a cloud of heat-seeking missiles.

This bar fight had the effect of clearing the way for the strike force. The PLAN base had twelve piers with ships alongside, and the United States Navy went after its Chinese counterpart—as usually happened, on the principle that in war people invariably kill those most like themselves before going after the different ones.

The first to draw the wrath of the Hornets were the submarines. They were mainly old Romeo-class diesel boats, long past whatever prime they'd once had. They were mainly rafted in pairs, and the Hornet drivers struck at them with Skippers and SLAMs. The former was a thousand-pound bomb with a rudimentary guidance package attached, plus a rocket motor taken off obsolete missiles, and they proved adequate to the task. The pilots tried to guide them between the rafted submarines, so as to kill two with a single weapon, and that worked in three out of five attempts. SLAM was a land-attack version of the Harpoon anti-ship missile, and these were directed at the port and maintenance facilities without which a naval base is just a cluttered beach. The damage done looked impressive on the videotapes. Other aircraft tasked to a mission called IRON HAND sought out Chinese missile and flak batteries, and engaged those at safe distance with HARM anti-radiation missiles which sought out and destroyed acquisition and illumination radars with high reliability.

All in all, the first U.S. Navy attack on the mainland of East Asia since Vietnam went off well, eliminating twelve PRC warships and laying waste to one of its principal naval bases.

Other bases were attacked with Tomahawk cruise missiles launched mainly from surface ships. Every PLAN base over a swath of five hundred miles of coast took one form of fire or another, and the ship count was jacked up to sixteen, all in a period of a little over an hour. The American tactical aircraft returned to their carriers, having spilled the blood of their enemies, though also having lost some of their own.

CHAPTER 58

Political Fallout

It was a difficult night for Marshal Luo Cong, the Defense Minister for the People's Republic of China. He'd gone to bed about eleven the previous night, concerned with the ongoing operations of his military forces, but pleased that they seemed to be going well. And then, just after he'd closed his eyes, the phone rang.

His official car came at once to convey him to his office, but he didn't enter it. Instead he went to the Defense Ministry's communications center, where he found a number of senior- and mid-level officers going over fragmentary information and trying to make sense of it. Minister Luo's presence didn't help them, but just added stress to the existing chaos.

Nothing seemed clear, except that they could identify holes in their information. The 65th Army had seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. Its commanding general had been visiting one of his divisions, along with his staff, and hadn't been heard from since 0200 or so. Nor had the division's commanding general. In fact, nothing at all was known about what was happening up there. To fix that, Marshal Luo ordered a helicopter to fly up from the depot at Sunwu. Then came reports from Harbin and Bei'an of air raids that had damaged the railroads. A colonel of engineers was dispatched to look into that.

But just when he thought he'd gotten a handle on the difficulties in Siberia, then came reports of an air attack on the fleet base at Guangszhou, and then the lesser naval bases at Haikuo, Shantou, and Xiachuandao. In each case, the headquarters facilities seemed hard-hit, since there was no response from the local commanders. Most disturbing of all was the report of huge losses to the fighter regiments in the area—reports of American naval aircraft making the attacks. Then finally, worst of all, a pair of automatic signals, the distress buoys from his country's only nuclear-powered missile submarine and the hunter submarine detailed to protect her, the *Hai Long*, were both radiating their automated messages. It struck the marshal as unlikely to the point of impossibility that so many things could have happened at once. And yet there was more. Border radar emplacements were off the air and could not be raised on radio or telephone. Then came

another phone call from Siberia. One of the divisions on the left shoulder of the breakthrough—the one the commanding general of 65th Type B Group Army had been visiting a few hours before—reported . . . that is, a junior communications officer said, a subunit of the division reported, that unknown armored forces had lanced through its western defenses, going east, and . . . disappeared?

"How the hell does an enemy attack successfully *and disappear*?" the marshal had demanded, in a voice to make the young captain wilt. "Who reported this?"

"He identified himself as a major in the Third Battalion, 745th Guards Infantry Regiment, Comrade Marshal," was the trembling reply. "The radio connection was scratchy, or so it was reported to us."

"And who made the report?"

"A Colonel Zhao, senior communications officer in the intelligence staff of 71st Type C Group Army north of Bei'an. They are detailed to border security in the breakthrough sector," the captain explained.

"I know that!" Luo bellowed, taking out his rage on the nearest target of opportunity.

"Comrade Marshal," said a new voice. It was Major General Wei Dao-Ming, one of Luo's senior aides, just called in from his home after one more of a long string of long days, and showing the strain, but trying to smooth the troubled waters even so. "You should let me and my staff assemble this information in such a way that we can present it to you in an orderly manner."

"Yes, Wei, I suppose so." Luo knew that this was good advice, and Wei was a career intelligence officer, accustomed to organizing information for his superiors. "Quick as you can."

"Of course, Comrade Minister," Wei said, to remind Luo that he was a political figure now rather than the military officer he'd grown up as.

Luo went to the VIP sitting room, where green tea was waiting. He reached into the pocket of his uniform tunic and pulled out some cigarettes, strong unfiltered ones to help him wake up. They made him cough, but that was all right. By the third cup of tea, Wei returned with a pad of paper scribbled with notes.

"So, what is happening?"

"The picture is confused, but I will tell you what I know, and what I think," Wei began.

"We know that General Qi of Sixty-fifth Army is missing, along with his staff. They were visiting 191st Infantry Division, just north and west of our initial breakthrough. The 191st is completely off the air as well. So is the 615th Independent Tank Brigade, part of Sixty-fifth Army. Confused reports talk of an air attack on the tank brigade, but

nothing precise is known. The 735th Guards Infantry Regiment of the 191st division is also off the air, cause unknown. You ordered a helicopter out of Sunwu to take a look and report back. The helicopter will get off at dawn. Well and good.

"Next, there are additional reports from that sector, none of which make sense or help form any picture of what is happening. So, I have ordered the intelligence staff of the Seventy-first Army to send a reconnaissance team across the river and ascertain what's happening there and report back. That will take about three hours.

"The good news is that General Peng Xi-Wang remains in command of 34th Shock Army, and will be at the gold mine before midday. Our armored spearhead is deep within enemy territory. I expect the men are waking up right now and will be moving within the hour to continue their attack.

"Now, this news from the navy people is confusing, but it's not really a matter of consequence. I've directed the commander of South Sea Fleet to take personal charge of the situation and report back. So say about three hours for that.

"So, Comrade Minister, we will have decent information shortly, and then we can start addressing the situation. Until then, General Peng will soon resume his offensive, and by evening, our country will be much richer," Wei concluded. He knew how to keep his minister happy. His reward for this was a grunt and a nod. "Now," General Wei went on, "why don't you get a few hours of sleep while we maintain the watch?"

"Good idea, Wei." Luo took two steps to the couch and lay down across it. Wei opened the door, turned off the lights, then he closed the door behind himself. The communications center was only a few more steps.

"Now," he said, stealing a smoke from a major, "what the hell is happening out there?"

"If you want an opinion," a colonel of intelligence said, "I think the Americans just flexed their muscles, and the Russians will do so in a few hours."

"What? Why do you say that? And why the Russians?"

"Where has their air force been? Where have their attack helicopters been? We don't know, do we? Why don't we know? Because the Americans have swatted our airplanes out of the sky like flies, that's why."

"We've deluded ourselves that the Russians don't want to fight, haven't we? A man named Hitler once thought the same thing. He died a few years later, the history books say. We similarly deluded ourselves into thinking the Americans would not strike us hard for political reasons. Wei, some of our political leaders have been off

chasing the dragon!" The aphorism referred to opium-smoking, a popular if illegal pastime in the southern part of China a few centuries before. "There were no political considerations. They were merely building up their forces, which takes time. And the Russians didn't fight us because they wanted us to get to the end of the logistical string, and then the fucking Americans cut that string off at Harbin and Bei'an! General Peng's tanks are nearly *three* hundred kilometers inside Russia now, with only *two* hundred kilometers of fuel in their tanks, and there'll be no more fuel coming up to them. We've taken over two *thousand* tanks and turned their crews into badly trained light infantry! That is what's happening, Comrade Wei," the colonel concluded.

"You can say that sort of thing to me, Colonel. Say it before Minister Luo, and your wife will pay the state for the bullet day after tomorrow," Wei warned.

"Well, I know it," Colonel Geng He-ping replied. "What will happen to you later today, Comrade General Wei, when you organize the information and find out that I am correct?"

"The remainder of today will have to take care of itself" was the fatalistic reply. "One thing at a time, Geng." Then he assembled a team of officers and gave them each a task to perform, found himself a chair to sit in, and wondered if Geng might have a good feel for the situation—

"Colonel Geng?"

"Yes, Comrade General?"

"What do you know of the Americans?"

"I was in our embassy in Washington until eighteen months ago. While there, I studied their military quite closely."

"And—are they capable of what you just said?"

"Comrade General, for the answer to that question, I suggest you consult the Iranians and the Iraqis. I'm wondering what they might try next, but thinking exactly like an American is a skill I have never mastered."

They're moving," Major Tucker reported with a stretch and a yawn. "Their reconnaissance element just started rolling. Your people have pulled way back. How come?"

"I ordered them to collect Comrade Gogol before the Chinese kill him," Colonel Tolkunov told the American. "You look tired."

"Hell, what's thirty-six hours in the same chair?" *A helluva sore back, that's what it is*, Tucker didn't say. Despite the hours, he was having the time of his life. For an Air Force officer who'd flunked out of pilot training, making him forever an "unrated weenie" in Air Force parlance, a fourth-class citizen in the Air Force pecking order—below

even helicopter pilots—he was earning his keep more and better than he'd ever done. He'd probably been more valuable to his side in this war than even that Colonel Winters, with all his air-to-air snuffs. But if anyone ever said such a thing to him, he'd have to *aw-shucks* it and look humbly down at his shoes. *Humble, my ass,* Tucker thought. He was proving the value of a new and untested asset, and doing so like the Red Baron in his red Fokker Trimotor. The Air Force was not a service whose members cultivated humility, but his lack of pilot's wings had compelled him to do just that for all ten of his years of uniformed service. The next generation of UAVs would have weapons attached, and maybe even be able to go air-to-air, and then, maybe, he'd show those strutting fighter jock-itches who had the real balls in this man's Air Force. Until then, he'd just have to be content gathering information that helped the Russians kill Joe Chink and all his brothers, and if this was Nintendo War, then little Danny Tucker was the by-God cock of the by-God walk in *this* virtual world.

"You have been most valuable to us, Major Tucker."

"Thank you, sir. Glad to help," Tucker replied with his best little-boy smile. *Maybe I'll grow me a good mustache*. He set the thought aside with a smile, and sipped some instant coffee from an MRE pack—the extra caffeine was about the only thing keeping him up at the moment. But the computer was doing most of the work, and it showed the Chinese reconnaissance tracks moving north.

Son of a bitch," Captain Aleksandrov breathed. He'd heard about Gogol's wolf pelts on state radio, but he hadn't seen the TV coverage, and the sight took his breath away. Touching one, he halfway expected it to be cold and stiff like wire, but, no, it was like the perfect hair of a perfect blonde . . .

"And who might you be?" The old man was holding a rifle and had a decidedly gimlet eye.

"I am Captain Fedor Il'ych Aleksandrov, and I imagine you are Pavel Petrovich Gogol."

A nod and a smile. "You like my furs, Comrade Captain?"

"They are unlike anything I have ever seen. We have to take these with us."

"Take? Take where? I'm not going anywhere," Pasha said.

"Comrade Gogol, I have my orders—to get you away from here. Those orders come from Headquarters Far East Command, and those orders will be obeyed, Pavel Petrovich."

"No Chink is going to chase me off my land!" his old voice thundered.

"No, Comrade Gogol, but soldiers of the Russian Army will not leave you here to die. So, that is the rifle you killed Germans with?"

"Yes, many, many Germans," Gogol confirmed.

"Then come with us, and maybe you can kill some yellow invaders."

"Who exactly are you?"

"Reconnaissance company commander, Two-Six-Five Motor Rifle Division. We've been playing hide-and-seek with the Chinks for four long days, and now we're ready to do some real fighting. Join us, Pavel Petrovich. You can probably teach us a few things we need to know." The young handsome captain spoke in his most reasonable and respectful tones, for this old warrior truly deserved it. The tone turned the trick.

"You promise me I will get to take one shot?"

"My word as a Russian officer, comrade," Aleksandrov pledged, with a bob of his head.

"Then I come." Gogol was already dressed for it—the heat in his cabin was turned off. He shouldered his old rifle and an ammunition pack containing forty rounds—he'd never gone into the field with more than that—and walked to the door. "Help me with my wolves, boy, will you?"

"Gladly, Grandfather." Then Aleksandrov found out how heavy they were. But he and Buikov managed to toss them inside their BRM, and the driver headed off.

"Where are they?"

"About ten kilometers back. We've been in visual contact with them for days, but they've pulled us back. Away from them."

"Why?"

"To save you, you old fool," Buikov observed with a laugh. "And to save these pelts. These are too good to drape over the body of some Chinese strumpet!"

"I think, Pasha—I am not sure," the captain said, "but I think it's time for our Chinese guests to get a proper Russian welcome."

"Captain, look!" the driver called.

Aleksandrov lifted his head out the big top hatch and looked forward. A senior officer was waving to him to come forward more quickly. Three minutes later, they halted alongside him.

"You are Aleksandrov?"

"Yes, Comrade General!" the young man confirmed to the senior officer.

"I am General Sinyavskiy. You've done well, boy. Come out here and talk to me," he ordered in a gruff voice that was not, however, unkind.

Aleksandrov had only once seen his senior commander, and then only at a distance. He was not a large man, but you didn't want him as a physical enemy in a small room. He was chewing on a cigar that had gone out seemingly hours before, and his blue eyes blazed.

"Who is this?" Sinyavskiy demanded. Then his face changed. "Are you the famous Pasha?" he asked more respectfully.

"Senior Sergeant Gogol of the Iron and Steel Division," the old man said with great dignity, and a salute which Sinyavskiy returned crisply.

"I understand you killed some Germans in your day. How many, Sergeant?"

"Count for yourself, Comrade General," Gogol said, handing his rifle over.

"Damn," the general observed, looking at the notches, like those on the pistol of some American cowboy. "I believe you really did it. But combat is a young man's game, Pavel Petrovich. Let me get you to a place of safety."

Gogol shook his head. "This captain promised me one shot, or I would not have left my home."

"Is that a fact?" The commanding general of 265th Motor Rifle looked around. "Captain Aleksandrov, very well, we'll give our old comrade his one shot." He pointed to a place on the map before him. "This should be a good spot for you. And when you can, get him the hell away from there," Sinyavskiy told the young man. "Head back this way to our lines. They'll be expecting you. Boy, you've done a fine job shadowing them all the way up. Your reward will be to see how we greet the bastards."

"Behind the reconnaissance element is a large force."

"I know. I've been watching them on TV for a day and a half, but our American friends have cut off their supplies. And we will stop them, and we will stop them right here."

Aleksandrov checked the map reference. It looked like a good spot with a good field of fire, and best of all, an excellent route to run away on. "How long?" he asked.

"Two hours, I should think. Their main body is catching up with the screen. Your first job is to make their screen vehicles disappear."

"Yes, Comrade General, that we can do for you!" the captain responded with enthusiasm.

Sunrise found Marion Diggs in a strangely bizarre environment. Physically, the surroundings reminded him of Fort Carson, Colorado, with its rolling hills and patchy pine woods, but it was unlike America in its lack of paved roads or civilization, and that explained why the Chinese had invaded here. With little civilian population out here, there was no infrastructure or population base to provide for the area's defense, and that had made things a lot easier for John Chinaman. Diggs didn't mind it, either. It was like his experience in the Persian Gulf—no noncombatants to get in the way—and that was

good.

But there were a lot of Chinese to get in the way. Mike Francisco's First Brigade had debauched into the main logistics area for the Chinese advance. The ground was carpeted with trucks and soldiers, but while most of them were armed, few were organized into cohesive tactical units, and that made all the difference. Colonel Miguel Francisco's brigade of four battalions had been organized for combat with the infantry and tank battalions integrated into unified battalion task groups of mixed tanks and Bradleys, and these were sweeping across the ground like a harvesting machine in Kansas in August. If it was painted green, it was shot.

The monstrous Abrams main-battle tanks moved over the rolling ground like creatures from Jurassic Park—alien, evil, and unstoppable, their gun turrets traversing left and right—but without firing their main guns. The real work was being done by the tank commanders and their M2 .50 machine guns, which could turn any truck into an immobile collection of steel and canvas. Just a short burst into the engine made sure that the pistons would never move again, and the cargo in the back would remain where it was, for inspection by intelligence officers, or destruction by explosives-carrying engineer troops who came behind the tanks in their HMMWVs. Some resistance was offered by the Chinese soldiers, but only by the dumb ones, and never for long. Even those with man-portable anti-tank weapons rarely got close enough to use them, and those few who popped up from Wolfholes only scratched the paint on the tanks, and usually paid for their foolishness with their lives. At one point, a battalion of infantry did launch a deliberate attack, supported by mortars that forced the tank and Bradley crews to button up and reply with organized fire. Five minutes of 155-mm fire and a remorseless advance by the Bradleys, spitting fire from their chain guns and through the firing ports for the mounted infantry inside, made them look like fire-breathing dragons, and these dragons were not a sign of good luck for the Chinese soldiers. That battalion evaporated in twenty minutes, along with its dedicated but doomed commander.

Intact enemy armored vehicles were rarely seen by the advancing First Brigade. Where it went, Apache attack helicopters had gone before, looking for targets for their Hellfire missiles, and killing them before the ground troops could get close. All in all, it was a perfect military operation, totally unfair in the balance of forces. It wasn't the least bit sporting, but a battlefield is not an Olympic stadium, and there were no uniformed officials to guard the supposed rules of fair play.

The only exciting thing was the appearance of a Chinese army

helicopter, and two Apaches blazed after it and destroyed it with air-to-air missiles, dropping it in the Amur River close to the floating bridges, which were now empty of traffic but not yet destroyed.

What have you learned, Wei?" Marshal Luo asked, when he emerged from the conference room he'd used for his nap.

"The picture is still unclear in some respects, Comrade Minister," the general answered.

"Then tell me what is clear," Luo ordered.

"Very well. At sea, we have lost a number of ships. This evidently includes our ballistic missile submarine and its escorting hunter submarine, cause unknown, but their emergency beacons deployed and transmitted their programmed messages starting at about zero-two-hundred hours. Also lost are seven surface warships of various types from our South Sea Fleet. Also, seven fleet bases were attacked by American aircraft, believed to be naval carrier aircraft, along with a number of surface-to-air missile and radar sites on the southeastern coast. We've succeeded in shooting down a number of American aircraft, but in a large fighter battle, we took serious losses to our fighter regiments in that region."

"Is the American navy attacking us?" Luo asked.

"It appears that they are, yes," General Wei answered, choosing his words with care. "We estimate four of their aircraft carriers, judging by the number of aircraft involved. As I said, reports are that we handled them roughly, but our losses were severe as well."

"What are their intentions?" the minister asked.

"Unclear. They've done serious damage to a number of bases, and I doubt we have a single surface ship surviving at sea. Our navy personnel have not had a good day," Wei concluded. "But that is not really a matter of importance."

"The attack on the missile submarine is," Luo replied. "That is an attack on a strategic asset. That is something we must consider." He paused. "Go on, what else?"

"General Qi of Sixty-fifth Army is missing and presumed dead, along with all of his senior staff. We've made repeated attempts to raise him by radio, with no result. The 191st Infantry Division was attacked last night by heavy forces of unknown identity. They sustained heavy losses due to artillery and aircraft, but two of their regiments report that they are holding their positions. The 735th Guards Infantry Regiment evidently took the brunt of the attack, and reports from there are fragmentary.

"The most serious news is from Harbin and Bei'an. Enemy aircraft attacked all of the railroad bridges in both cities, and all of them took damage. Rail traffic north has been interrupted. We're trying now to

determine how quickly it might be reestablished."

"Is there any good news?" Marshal Luo asked.

"Yes, Comrade Minister. General Peng and his forces are getting ready now to resume their attack. We expect to have the Russian goldfield in our control by midday," Wei answered, inwardly glad that he didn't have to say what had happened to the logistical train behind Peng and his 34th Shock Army. Too much bad news could get the messenger killed, and *he* was the messenger.

"I want to talk to Peng. Get him on the phone," Luo ordered.

"Telephone lines have been interrupted briefly, but we do have radio contact with him," Wei told his superior.

"Then get me Peng on the radio," Luo repeated his order.

What is it, Wa?" Peng asked. Couldn't he even take a piss without interruption?

"Radio, it's the Defense Minister," his operations officer told him.

"Wonderful," the general groused, heading back to his command track as he buttoned his fly. He ducked to get inside and lifted the microphone. "This is General Peng."

"This is Marshal Luo. What is your situation?" the voice asked through the static.

"Comrade Marshal, we will be setting off in ten minutes. We have still not made contact with the enemy, and our reconnaissance has seen no sizable enemy formations in our area. Have you developed any intelligence we can use?"

"Be advised we have aerial photography of Russian mechanized units to your west, probably division strength. I would advise you to keep your mechanized forces together, and guard your left flank."

"Yes, Comrade Marshal, I am doing that," Peng assured him. The real reason he stopped every day was to allow his divisions to close up, keeping his fist tight. Better yet, 29th Type A Group Army was right behind his if he needed support. "I recommend that 43rd Army be tasked to flank guard."

"I will give the order," Luo promised. "How far will you go today?"

"Comrade Marshal, I will send a truckload of gold back to you this very evening. Question: What is this I've heard about damage to our line of supply?"

"There was an attack last night on some railroad bridges in Harbin and Bei'an, but nothing we can't fix."

"Very well. Comrade Marshal, I must see to my dispositions."

"Carry on, then. Out."

Peng set the microphone back in its holder. "Nothing he can't fix, he says."

"You know what those bridges are like. You'd need a nuclear

weapon to hurt them," Colonel Wa Cheng-Gong observed confidently.

"Yes, I would agree with that." Peng stood, buttoned his tunic, and reached for a mug of morning tea. "Tell the advance guard to prepare to move out. I'm going up front this morning, Wa. I want to see this gold mine for myself."

"How far up front?" the operations officer asked.

"With the lead elements. A good officer leads from the front, and I want to see how our people move. Our reconnaissance screen hasn't detected anything, has it?"

"Well, no, Comrade General, but—"

"But what?" Peng demanded.

"But a prudent commander leaves leading to lieutenants and captains," Wa pointed out.

"Wa, sometimes you talk like an old woman," Peng chided.

There," Yefremov said. "They took the bait."

It was just after midnight in Moscow, and the embassy of the People's Republic of China had most of its lights off, but not all; more to the point, three windows had their lights on, and their shades fully open, and they were all in a row. It was just as perfect as what the Americans called a "sting" operation. He'd stood over Suvorov's shoulder as he'd typed the message: *I have the pieces in place now. I have the pieces in place now. If you wish for me to carry out the operation, leave three windows in a row with the lights on and the windows fully open.* Yefremov had even had a television camera record the event, down to the point where the traitor Suvarov had tapped the ENTER key to send the letter to his Chink controller. And he'd gotten a TV news crew to record the event as well, because the Russian people seemed to trust the semi-independent media more than their government now, for some reason or other. Good, now they had proof positive that the Chinese government was conspiring to kill President Grushavoy. That would play well in the international press. And it wasn't an accident. The windows all belonged to the Chief of Mission in the PRC embassy, and he was, right now, asleep in his bed. They'd made sure of that by calling him on the phone ten minutes earlier.

"So, what do we do now?"

"We tell the President, and then, I expect, we tell the TV newspeople. And we probably spare Suvarov's life. I hope he likes it in the labor camp."

"What about the killings?"

Yefremov shrugged. "He only killed a pimp and a whore. No great loss, is it?"

Senior Lieutenant Komanov had not exactly enjoyed his last four

days, but at least they'd been spent profitably, training his men to shoot. The reservists, now known as BOYAR FORCE, had spent them doing gunnery, and they'd fired four basic loads of shells over that time, more than any of them had ever shot on active duty, but the Never Depot had been well stocked with shells. Officers assigned to the formation by Far East Command told them that the Americans had moved by to their south the previous day, and that their mission was to slide north of them, and do it today. Only thirty kilometers stood between them and the Chinese, and he and his men were ready to pay them a visit. The throaty rumble of his own diesel engine was answered by the thunder of two hundred others, and BOYAR started moving northeast through the hills.

Peng and his command section raced forward, calling ahead on their radios to clear the way, and the military-police troops doing traffic control waved them through. Soon they reached the command section of the 302nd Armored, his leading "fist" formation, commanded by Major General Ge Li, a squat officer whose incipient corpulence made him look rather like one of his tanks.

"Are you ready, Ge?" Peng asked. The man was wellnamed for his task. "Ge" had the primary meaning of "spear."

"We are ready," the tanker replied. "My leading regiments are turning over and straining at the leash."

"Well, shall we observe from the front together?"

"Yes!" Ge jumped aboard his own command tank—he preferred this to a personnel carrier, despite the poorer radios, and led the way forward. Peng immediately established a direct radio connection with his subordinate.

"How far to the front?"

"Three kilometers. The reconnaissance people are moving now, and they are another two kilometers ahead."

"Lead on, Ge," Peng urged. "I want to see that gold mine."

***I**t was a good spot*, Aleksandrov thought, *unless the enemy got his artillery set up sooner than expected*, and he hadn't seen or heard Chinese artillery yet. He was on the fairly steep reverse side of an open slope that faced south, rather like a lengthy ramp, perhaps three kilometers in length, not unlike a practice shooting range at a regimental base. The sun was starting to crest the eastern horizon, and they could see now, which always made soldiers happy. Pasha had stolen a spare coat and laid his rifle across it, standing in the open top hatch of the BRM, looking through the telescopic sight of his rifle.

"So, what was it like to be a sniper against the Germans?" Aleksandrov asked once he'd settled himself in.

"It was good hunting. I tried to stick to killing officers. You have more effect on them that way," Gogol explained. "A German private—well, he was just a man—an enemy, of course, but he probably had no more wish to be on a battlefield than I did. But an officer, those were the ones who directed the killing of my comrades, and when you got one of them, you confused the enemy."

"How many?"

"Lieutenants, eighteen. Captains, twelve. Only three majors, but nine colonels. I decapitated nine Fritz regiments. Then, of course, sergeants and machine-gun crews, but I don't remember them as well as the colonels. I can still see every one of those, my boy," Gogol said, tapping the side of his head.

"Did they ever try to shoot at you?"

"Mainly with artillery," Pasha answered. "A sniper affects the morale of a unit. Men do not like being hunted like game. But the Germans didn't use snipers as skillfully as we did, and so they answered me with field guns. That," he admitted, "could be frightening, but it really told me how much the Fritzes feared me," Pavel Petrovich concluded with a cruel smile.

"There!" Buikov pointed. Just off the trees to the left.

"Ahh," Gogol said, looking through his gunsight. "Ahh, yes."

Aleksandrov laid his binoculars on the fleeting shape. It was the vertical steel side on a Chinese infantry carrier, one of those he'd been watching for some days now. He lifted his radio. "This is GREEN WOLF ONE. Enemy in sight, map reference two-eight-five, nine-zero-six. One infantry track coming north. Will advise."

"Understood, GREEN WOLF," the radio crackled back.

"Now, we must just be patient," Fedor Il'ych said. He stretched, touching the camouflage net that he'd ordered set up the moment they'd arrived in this place. To anyone more than three hundred meters away, he and his men were just part of the hill crest. Next to him, Sergeant Buikov lit a cigarette, blowing out the smoke.

"That is bad for us," Gogol advised. "It alerts the game."

"They have little noses," Buikov replied.

"Yes, and the wind is in our favor," the old hunter conceded.

Lordy, Lordy," Major Tucker observed. "They've bunched up some."

It was Grace Kelly again, looking down on the battlefield-to-be like Pallas Athena looking down on the plains of Troy. And about as pitilessly. The ground had opened up a little, and the corridor they moved across was a good three kilometers wide, enough for a battalion of tanks to travel line-abreast, a regiment in columns of battalions, three lines of thirty-five tanks each with tracked infantry carriers interspersed with them. Colonels Aliyev and Tolkunov stood

behind him, speaking in Russian over their individual telephones to the 265th Motor Rifle's command post. In the night, the entire 201st had finally arrived, plus leading elements of the 80th and 44th. There were now nearly three divisions to meet the advancing Chinese, and included in that were three full divisional artillery sets, plus, Tucker saw for the first time, a shitload of attack helicopters sitting on the ground thirty kilometers back from the point of expected contact. Joe Chink was driving into a motherfucker of an ambush. Then a shadow crossed under Grace Kelly, out of focus, but something moving fast.

It was two squadrons of F-16C fighter-bombers, and they were armed with Smart Pigs.

That was the nickname for J-SOW, the Joint Stand-Off Weapon. The night before, other F-16s, the CG version, the new and somewhat downsized version of the F-4G Wild Weasel, had gone into China and struck at the line of border radar transmitters, hitting them with HARM antiradar missiles and knocking most of them off the air. That denied the Chinese foreknowledge of the inbound strike. They had been guided by two E-3B Sentry aircraft, and protected by three squadrons of F-15C Eagle air-superiority fighters in the event some Chinese fighters appeared again to die, but there had been little such fighter activity in the past thirty-six hours. The Chinese fighter regiments had paid a bloody price for their pride, and were staying close to home in what appeared to be a defense mode—on the principle that if you weren't attacking, then you were defending. In fact they were doing little but flying standing patrols over their own bases—that's how thoroughly they had been whipped by American and Russian fighters—and that left the air in American and Russian control, which was going to be bad news for the People's Liberation Army.

The F-16s were at thirty thousand feet, holding to the east. They were several minutes early for the mission, and circled while awaiting word to attack. Some concertmaster was stage-managing this, they all thought. They hoped he didn't break his little baton-stick-thing.

Getting closer," Pasha observed with studied nonchalance.

"Range?" Aleksandrov asked the men down below in the track.

"Twenty-one hundred meters, within range," Buikov reported from inside the gun turret. "The fox and the gardener approach, Comrade Captain."

"Leave them be for the moment, Boris Yevgeniyevich."

"As you say, Comrade Captain." Buikov was comfortable with the no-shoot rule, for once.

How much farther to the reconnaissance screen?" Peng asked.

"Two more kilometers," Ge replied over the radio. "But that might not be a good idea."

"Ge, have you turned into an old woman?" Peng asked lightly.

"Comrade, it is the job of lieutenants to find the enemy, not the job of senior generals," the division commander replied in a reasonable voice.

"Is there any reason to believe the enemy is nearby?"

"We are in Russia, Peng. They're here somewhere."

"He is correct, Comrade General," Colonel Wa Cheng-gong pointed out to his commander.

"Rubbish. Go forward. Tell the reconnaissance element to stop and await us," Peng ordered. "A good commander leads from the front!" he announced over the radio.

"Oh, shit," Ge observed in his tank. "Peng wants to show off his *ji-ji*. Move out," he ordered his driver, a captain (his entire crew was made of officers). "Let's lead the emperor to the recon screen."

The brand-new T-98 tank surged forward, throwing up two rooster tails of dirt as it accelerated. General Ge was in the commander's hatch, with a major acting as gunner, a duty he practiced diligently because it was his job to keep his general alive in the event of contact with the enemy. For the moment, it meant going ahead of the senior general with blood in his eye.

Why did they stop?" Buikov asked. The PLA tracks had suddenly halted nine hundred meters off, all five of them, and now the crews dismounted, manifestly to take a stretch, and five of them lit up smokes.

"They must be waiting for something," the captain thought aloud. Then he got on the radio. "GREEN WOLF here, the enemy has halted about a kilometer south of us. They're just sitting still."

"Have they seen you?"

"No, they've dismounted to take a piss, looks like, just standing there. We have them in range, but I don't want to shoot until they're closer," Aleksandrov reported.

"Very well, take your time. There's no hurry here. They're walking into the parlor very nicely."

"Understood. Out." He set the mike down. "Is it time for morning break?"

"They haven't been doing that the last four days, Comrade Captain," Buikov reminded his boss.

"They appear relaxed enough."

"I could kill any of them now," Gogol said, "but they're all privates,

except for that one . . .”

“That’s the fox. He’s a lieutenant, likes to run around a lot. The other officer’s the gardener. He likes playing with plants,” Buikov told the old man.

“Killing a lieutenant’s not much better than killing a corporal,” Gogol observed. “There’s too many of them.”

“What’s this?” Buikov said from his gunner’s seat. “Tank, enemy tank coming around the left edge, range five thousand.”

“I see it!” Aleksandrov reported. “. . . Just one? Only one tank—oh, all right, there’s a carrier with it—”

“It’s a command track, look at all those antennas!” Buikov called.

The gunner’s sight was more powerful than Aleksandrov’s binoculars. The captain couldn’t confirm that for another minute or so. “Oh, yes, that’s a command track, all right. I wonder who’s in it. . .”

There they are,“ the driver called back. ”The reconnaissance section, two kilometers ahead, Comrade General.”

“Excellent,” Peng observed. Standing up to look out of the top of his command track with his binoculars, good Japanese ones from Nikon. There was Ge in his command tank, thirty meters off to the right, protecting him as though he were a good dog outside the palace of some ancient nobleman. Peng couldn’t see anything to be concerned about. It was a clear day, with some puffy white clouds at three thousand meters or so. If there were American fighters up there, he wasn’t going to worry about them. Besides, they’d done no ground-attacking that he’d heard about, except to hit those bridges back at Harbin, and one might as well attack a mountain as those things, Peng was sure. He had to hold on to the sill of the hatch lest the pitching of the vehicle smash him against it—*it was a track specially modified for senior officers, but no one had thought to make it safer to stand in*, he thought sourly. He wasn’t some peasant-private who could smash his head with no consequence . . . Well, in any case, it was a good day to be a soldier, in the field leading his men. A fair day, and no enemy in sight.

“Pull up alongside the reconnaissance track,” he ordered his driver.

Who the hell is this?” Captain Aleksandrov wondered aloud. ”Four big antennas, at least a division commander,” Buikov thought aloud. “My thirty will settle his hash.”

“No, no, let’s let Pasha have him if he gets out.”

Gogol had anticipated that. He was resting his arms on the steel top of the BRM, tucking the rifle in tight to his shoulder. The only thing in his way was the loose weave of the camouflage netting, and that

wasn't an obstacle to worry about, the old marksman was sure.

"Stopping to see the fox?" Buikov said next.

"Looks that way," the captain agreed.

Comrade General!" the young lieutenant called in surprise.

"Where's the enemy, Boy?" Peng asked loudly in return.

"General, we haven't seen much this morning. Some tracks in the ground, but not even any of that for the past two hours."

"Nothing at all?"

"Not a thing," the lieutenant replied.

"Well, I thought there'd be something around." Peng put his foot in the leather stirrup and climbed to the top of his command vehicle.

It's a general, has to be, look at that clean uniform!" Buikov told the others as he slewed his turret around to center his sight on the man eight hundred meters away. It was the same in any army. Generals never got dirty.

"Pasha," Aleksandrov asked, "ever kill an enemy general before?"

"No," Gogol admitted, drawing the rifle in very tight and allowing for the range. . . .

Better to go to that ridgeline, but our orders were to stop at once," the lieutenant told the general.

"That's right," Peng agreed. He took out his Nikon binoculars and trained them on the ridge, perhaps eight hundred meters off. Nothing to see except for that one bush . . .

Then there was a flash—

"Yes!" Gogol said the moment the trigger broke. Two seconds, about, for the bullet to—

They'd never hear the report of the shot over the sound of their diesel engines, but Colonel Wa heard the strange, wet thud, and his head turned to see General Peng's face twist into surprise rather than pain, and Peng grunted from the sharp blow to the center of his chest, and then his hands started coming down, pulled by the additional weight of the binoculars—and then his body started down, falling off the top of the command track through the hatch into the radiofilled interior.

That got him," Gogol said positively. "He's dead." He almost added that it might be fun to skin him and lay his hide in the river for a final swim and a gold coating, but, no, you only did that to wolves, not people—not even Chinese.

"Buikov, take those tracks!"

"Gladly, Comrade Captain," and the sergeant squeezed the trigger, and the big machine gun spoke.

They hadn't seen or heard the shot that had killed Peng, but there was no mistaking the machine cannon that fired now. Two of the reconnaissance tracks exploded at once, but then everything started moving, and fire was returned.

"Major!" General Ge called.

"Loading HEAT!" The gunner punched the right button, but the autoloader, never as fast as a person, took its time to ram the projective and then the propellant case into the breech.

Back us up!" Aleksandrov ordered loudly. The diesel engine was already running, and the BRM's transmission set in reverse. The corporal in the driver's seat floored the pedal and the carrier jerked backward. The suddenness of it nearly lost Gogol over the side, but Aleksandrov grabbed his arm and dragged him down inside, tearing his skin in the process. "Go north!" the captain ordered next.

"I got three of the bastards!" Buikov said. Then the sky was rent by a crash overhead. Something had gone by too fast to see, but not too fast to hear.

"That tank gunner knows his business," Aleksandrov observed. "Corporal, get us out of here!"

"Working on it, Comrade Captain."

"GREEN WOLF to command!" the captain said next into the radio.

"Yes, GREEN WOLF, report."

"We just killed three enemy tracks, and I think we got a senior officer. Pasha, Sergeant Gogol, that is, killed a Chinese general officer, or so it appeared."

"He was a general, all right," Buikov agreed. "The shoulder boards were pure gold, and that was a command track with four big radio antennas."

"Understood. What are you doing now, GREEN WOLF?"

"We're getting the fuck away. I think we'll be seeing more Chinks soon."

"Agreed, GREEN WOLF. Proceed to divisional CP. Out."

"Yuriy Andreyevich, you will have heavy contact in a few minutes. What is your plan?"

"I want to volley-fire my tanks before firing my artillery. Why spoil the surprise, Gennady?" Sinyavskiy asked cruelly. "We are ready for them here."

"Understood. Good luck, Yuriy."

"And what of the other missions?"

"BOYAR is moving now, and the Americans are about to deploy their magical pigs. If you can handle the leading Chinese elements, those behind ought to be roughly handled."

"You can rape their daughters for all I care, Gennady."

"That is *nekulturniy,* Yuriy. Perhaps their wives," he suggested, adding, "We are watching you on the television now."

"Then I will smile for the cameras," Sinyavskiy promised.

The orbiting F-16 fighters were under the tactical command of Major General Gus Wallace, but he, at the moment, was under the command—or at least operating under the direction—of a Russian, General-Colonel Gennady Bondarenko, who was in turn guided by the action of this skinny young Major Tucker and Grace Kelly, a soulless drone hovering over the battlefield.

"There they go, General," Tucker said, as the leading Chinese echelons resumed their drive north.

"I think it is time, then." He looked to Colonel Aliyev, who nodded agreement.

Bondarenko lifted the satellite phone. "General Wallace?"

"I'm here."

"Please release your aircraft."

"Roger that. Out." And Wallace shifted phone receivers. "EAGLE ONE, this is ROUGHRIDER. Execute, execute, execute. Acknowledge."

"Roger that, sir, copy your order to execute. Executing now. Out." And the colonel on the lead AWACS shifted to a different frequency: "CADILLAC LEAD, this is EAGLE ONE. Execute your attack. Over."

"Roger that," the colonel heard. "Going down now. Out."

The F-16s had been circling above the isolated clouds.

Their threat receivers chirped a little bit, reporting the emissions of SAM radars somewhere down there, but the types indicated couldn't reach this high, and their jammer pods were all on anyway. On command, the sleek fighters changed course for the battlefield far below and to their west. Their GPS locators told them exactly where they were, and they also knew where their targets were, and the mission became a strictly technical exercise.

Under the wings of each aircraft were the Smart Pigs, four to the fighter, and with forty-eight fighters, that came to 192 J-SOWs. Each of these was a canister thirteen feet long and not quite two feet wide, filled with BLU-108 submunitions, twenty per container. The fighter pilots punched the release triggers, dropped their bombs, and then angled for home, letting the robots do the rest of the work. The Dark Star tapes would later tell them how they'd done.

The Smart Pigs separated from the fighters, extended their own

little wings to guide themselves the rest of the way to the target area. They knew this information, having been programmed by the fighters and were now able to follow guidance from their own GPS receivers. This they did, acting in accordance with their own onboard minicomputers, until each reached a spot five thousand feet over their designated segment of the battlefield. They didn't know that this was directly over the real estate occupied by the Chinese 29th Type A Group Army and its three heavy divisions, which included nearly seven hundred main-battle tanks, three hundred armored personnel carriers, and a hundred mobile guns. That made a total of roughly a thousand targets for the nearly four thousand descending submunitions. But the falling bomblets were guided, too, and each had a seeker looking for heat of the sort radiated by an operating tank, personnel carrier, self-propelled gun, or truck. There were a lot of them to look for.

No one saw them coming. They were small, no larger, really, than a common crow, and falling rapidly; they were also painted white, which helped them blend in to the morning sky. Each had a rudimentary steering mechanism, and at an altitude of two thousand feet they started looking for and homing in on targets. Their downward speed was such that a minor deflection of their control vanes was sufficient to get them close, and close meant straight down.

They exploded in bunches, almost in the same instant. Each contained a pound and a half of high-explosive, the heat from which melted the metal casing, which then turned into a projectile—the process was called "self-forging"—which blazed downward at a speed of ten thousand feet per second. The armor on the top of a tank is always the thinnest, and five times the thickness would have made no difference. Of the 921 tanks on the field, 762 took hits, and the least of these destroyed the vehicles' diesel engine. Those less fortunate took hits through the turret, which killed the crews at once and/or ignited the ammunition storage, converting each armored vehicle into a small manfabricated volcano. Just that quickly, three mechanized divisions were changed into one badly shaken and disorganized brigade. The infantry carriers fared no better, and it was worse for the trucks, most of them carrying ammunition or other flammable supplies.

All in all, it took less than ninety seconds to turn 29th Type A Group Army into a thinly spread junkyard and funeral pyre.

Holy God," Ryan said. "Is this for real?"

"Seeing is believing. Jack, when they came to me with the idea for J-SOW, I thought it had to be something from a science-fiction book. Then they demo'd the submunitions out at China Lake, and I thought,

Jesus, we don't need the Army or the Marines anymore. Just send over some F-18s and then a brigade of trucks full of body bags and some ministers to pray over them. Eh, Mickey?"

"It's some capability," General Moore agreed. He shook his head. "Damn, just like the tests."

"Okay, what's happening next?"

Next" was just off the coast near Guangszhou. Two Aegis cruisers, *Mobile Bay* and *Princeton*, plus the destroyers *Fletcher, Fife*, and *John Young*, steamed in line-ahead formation out of the morning fog and turned broadside to the shore. There was actually a decent beach at this spot. There was nothing much behind it, just a coastal-defense missile battery that the fighter-bombers had immolated a few hours before. To finish that job, the ships trained their guns to port and let loose a barrage of five-inch shells. The crack and thunder of the gunfire could be heard on shore, as was the shriek of the shells passing overhead, and the explosions of the detonations. That included one missile that the bombs of the previous night had missed, plus the crew getting it ready for launch. People living nearby saw the gray silhouettes against the morning sky, and many of them got on the telephone to report what they saw, but being civilians, they reported the wrong thing, of course.

It was just after nine in the morning in Beijing when the Politburo began its emergency session. Some of those present had enjoyed a restful night's sleep, and then been disturbed by the news that came over the phone at breakfast. Those better informed had hardly slept at all past three in the morning and, though more awake than their colleagues, were not in a happier mood.

"Well, Luo, what is happening?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked.

"Our enemies counterattacked last night. This sort of thing we must expect, of course," he admitted in as low-key a voice as circumstances permitted.

"How serious were these counterattacks?" Tong asked.

"The most serious involved some damage to railroad bridges in Harbin and Bei'an, but repairs are under way."

"I hope so. The repair effort will require some months," Qian Kun interjected.

"Who said that!" Luo demanded harshly.

"Marshal, I supervised the construction of two of those bridges. This morning I called the division superintendent for our state railroad in Harbin. All six of them have been destroyed—the piers on both sides of the river are totally wrecked; it will take over a month just to clear the debris. I admit this surprised me. Those bridges were very sturdily

built, but the division superintendent tells me they are quite beyond repair."

"And who is this defeatist?" Luo demanded.

"He is a loyal party member of long standing and a very competent engineer whom you will *not* threaten in my presence!" Qian shot back. "There is room in this building for many things, but there is *not* room here for a *lie!*"

"Come now, Qian," Zhang Han Sen soothed. "We need not have that sort of language here. Now, Luo, how bad is it really?"

"I have army engineers heading there now to make a full assessment of the damage and to commence repairs. I am confident that we can restore service shortly. We have skilled bridging engineers, you know."

"Luo," Qian said, "your magic army bridges can support a tank or a truck, yes, but not a locomotive that weighs two hundred tons pulling a train weighing four thousand. Now, what else has gone wrong with your Siberian adventure?"

"It is foolish to think that the other side will simply lie down and die. Of course they fight back. But we have superior forces in theater, and we will smash them. We will have that new gold mine in our pocket before this meeting is over," the Defense Minister promised. But the pledge seemed hollow to some of those around the table.

"What else?" Qian persisted.

"The American naval air forces attacked last night and succeeded in sinking some of our South Sea Fleet units."

"Which units?"

"Well, we have no word from our missile submarine, and—"

"They sank our only missile submarine?" Premier Xu asked. "How is this possible? Was it sitting in harbor?"

"No," Luo admitted. "It was at sea, in company with another nuclear submarine, and that one is also possibly lost."

"Marvelous!" Tong Jie observed. "Now the Americans strike at our strategic assets! That's half our nuclear deterrent gone, and that was the *safe* half of it. What goes on, Luo? What is happening now?"

At his seat, Fang Gan took note of the fact that Zhang was strangely subdued. Ordinarily he would have leaped to Luo's defense, but except for the one conciliatory comment, he was leaving the Defense Minister to flap in the wind. What might that mean?

"What do we tell the people?" Fang asked, trying to center the meeting on something important.

"The people will believe what they are told," Luo said.

And everyone nodded nervous agreement on that one. They *did* control the media. The American CNN news service had been turned off all over the People's Republic, along with all Western news

services, even in Hong Kong, which usually enjoyed much looser reins than the rest of the country. But the thing no one addressed, but everyone knew to worry about, was that every soldier had a mother and a father who'd notice when the mail home stopped coming. Even in a nation as tightly controlled as the PRC, you couldn't stop the Truth from getting out—or rumors, which, though false, could be even worse than an adverse Truth. People *would* believe things other than those they were told to believe, if those other things made more sense than the Official Truth proclaimed by their government in Beijing.

Truth was something so often feared in this room, Fang realized, and for the first time in his life he wondered why that had to be. If the Truth was something to fear, might that mean they were doing something wrong in here? But, no, that couldn't be true, could it? Didn't they have a perfect political model for reality? Wasn't that Mao's bequest to their country?

But if that were true, why did they fear having the people find out what was really happening?

Could it be that they, the Politburo members, could handle the Truth and the peasantry could not?

But then, if they feared having the peasantry get hold of the Truth, didn't that have to mean that the Truth was harmful to the people sitting in this room? And if the Truth was a danger to the peasants and workers, then didn't *they* have to be wrong?

Fang suddenly realized how dangerous was the thought that had just entered his mind.

"Luo, what does it mean to us strategically," the Interior Minister asked, "if the Americans remove half of our strategic weapons? Was that done deliberately? If so, for what cause?"

"Tong, you do not sink a ship by accident, and so, yes, the attack on our missile submarine must have been a deliberate act," Luo answered.

"So, the Americans deliberately removed from the table one of our only methods for attacking them directly? Why? Was that not a political act, not just a military one?"

The Defense Minister nodded. "Yes, you could see it that way."

"Can we expect the Americans to strike at us directly? To this date they have struck some bridges, but what about our government and vital industries? Might they strike directly at *us*?" Tong went on.

"That would be unwise. We have missiles targeted at their principal cities. They know this. Since they disarmed themselves of nuclear missiles some years ago—well, they still have nuclear bombs that can be delivered by bombers and tactical aircraft, of course, but not the ability to strike at us in the way that we could strike at them—and the Russians, of course."

"How sure are we that they are disarmed?" Tong persisted.

"If they have ballistic arms, they've concealed it from everyone," Tan Deshi told them all. Then he shook his head decisively. "No, they have no more."

"And that gives us an advantage, doesn't it?" Zhong asked, with a ghoulish smile.

USS *Gettysburg* was alongside the floating pier in the York River. Once the warheads for Trident missiles had been stored here, and there must still have been some awaiting dismantlement, because there were Marines to be seen, and only Marines were entrusted to guard the Navy's nuclear weapons. But none of those were on the pier. No, the trucks that rolled out from the weapons depot were carrying long, square cross-sectioned boxes that contained SM-2 ER Block-IVD surface-to-air missiles. When the trucks got to the cruiser, a traveling crane lifted them up to the foredeck of the ship, where, with the assistance of some strongbacked sailors, the boxes were rapidly lowered into the vertical launch cells of the forward missile launcher. It took about four minutes per box, Gregory saw, with the captain pacing his wheelhouse all the while. Gregory knew why. He had an order to take his cruiser right to Washington, D.C., and the order had the word "expedite" on it. Evidently, "expedite" was a word with special meaning for the United States Navy, like having your wife call for you from the baby's room at two in the morning. The tenth box was duly lowered, and the crane swung clear of the ship.

"Mr. Richardson," Captain Blandy said to the Officer of the Deck.

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered.

"Let's get under way."

Gregory walked out on the bridge wing to watch. The Special Sea Detail cast off the six-inch hawsers, and scarcely had they fallen clear of the cleats on the main deck when the cruiser's auxiliary power unit started pushing the ten thousand tons of gray steel away from the floating pier. And the ship was for sure in a hurry. She was not fifteen feet away when the main engines started turning, and less than a minute after that, Gregory heard the *WHOOSH* of the four jet-turbines taking a big gulp of air, and he could *feel* the ship accelerate for the Chesapeake Bay, almost like being on a city transit bus.

"Dr. Gregory?" Captain Blandy had stuck his head out the pilothouse door.

"Yeah, Captain?"

"You want to get below and do your software magic on our birds?"

"You bet." He knew the way, and in three minutes was at the computer terminal which handled that task.

"Hey, Doc," Senior Chief Leek said, sitting down next to him. "All

ready? I'm supposed to help."

"Okay, you can watch, I suppose." The only problem was that it was a clunky system, about as user-friendly as a chain saw, but as Leek had told him a week before, this was the flower of 1975 technology, back when an Apple-II with 64K of RAM was the cat's own ass. Now he had more computing power in his wristwatch. Each missile had to be upgraded separately, and each was a seven-step process.

"Hey, wait a minute," Gregory objected. The screen wasn't right.

"Doc, we loaded six Block-IVD. The other two are stock SM-2 ER Block IIIC radar-homers. What can I tell you, Cap'n Blandy's conservative."

"So I only do the upgrade on holes one through six?"

"No, do 'em all. It'll just ignore the changes you made to the infrared homing code. The chips on the birds can handle the extra code, no sweat, right, Mr. Olson?"

"Correct, Senior Chief," Lieutenant Olson confirmed. "The missiles are current technology even if the computer system isn't. It probably costs more to make missile seekerheads with current technology that can talk to this old kludge than it would to buy a new Gateway to upgrade the whole system, not to mention having a more reliable system overall, but you'll have to talk to NAVSEA about that."

"Who?" Gregory asked.

"Naval Sea Systems Command. They're the technical geniuses who won't put stabilizers on these cruisers. They think it's good for us to puke in a seaway."

"Feathermerchants," Leek explained. "Navy's full of'em—on land, anyway." The ship heeled strongly to starboard.

"Cap'n's in a hurry, ain't he?" Gregory observed. *Gettysburg* was making a full-speed right-angle turn to port.

"Well, SACLANT said it's the SecDef's idea. I guess that makes it important," Mr. Olson told their guest.

I think this is imprudent," Fang told them all.

"Why is that?" Luo asked.

"Is fueling the missiles necessary? Is there not a danger of provocation?"

"I suppose this is a technical matter," Qian said. "As I recall, once you fuel them, you cannot keep them fueled for more than—what? Twelve hours?"

The technocrat caught the Defense Minister off guard with that question. He didn't know the answer. "I will have to consult with Second Artillery for that," he admitted.

"So, then, you will not prepare them for launch until we have a chance to consider the matter?" Qian asked.

"Why—of course not," Luo promised.

"And so the real problem is, how do we tell the people what has transpired in Siberia?"

"The people will believe what we tell them to believe!" Luo said yet again.

"Comrades," Qian said, struggling to keep his voice reasonable, "we cannot conceal the rising of the sun. Neither can we conceal the loss of our rail-transport system. Nor can we conceal the large-scale loss of life. Every soldier has parents, and when enough of them realize their son is lost, they will speak of it, and the word will get out. We must face facts here. It is better, I think, to tell the people that there is a major battle going on, and there has been loss of life. To proclaim that we are winning when we may not be is dangerous for all of us."

"You say the people will rise up?" Tong Jie asked.

"No, but I say there could be dissatisfaction and unrest, and it is in our collective interest to avoid that, is it not?" Qian asked the assembly.

"How will adverse information get out?" Luo asked.

"It frequently does," Qian told them. "We can prepare for it, and mitigate the effect of adverse information, or we can try to withstand it. The former offers mild embarrassment to us. The latter, if it fails, could be more serious."

"The TV will show what we wish them to show, and the people will see nothing else. Besides, General Peng and his army group are advancing even as we speak."

What do they call it?"

"This one's Grace Kelly. The other two are Marilyn Monroe and—can't remember," General Moore said. "Anyway, they named 'em for movie stars."

"And how do they transmit?"

"The Dark Star uploads directly to a communications satellite, encrypted, of course, and we distribute it out of Fort Belvoir."

"So, we can send it out any way we want?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, Ed, the Chinese are telling their people what?"

"They started off by saying the Russians committed a border intrusion and they counterattacked. They're also saying that they're kicking Ivan's ass."

"Well, that's not true, and it'll be especially untrue when they reach the Russian stop-line. That Bondarenko guy's really played his cards beautifully. They're pretty strung out. We've chopped their supply line for fair, and they're heading into a real motherfucker of an ambush," the DCI told them. "How about it, General?"

"The Chinese just don't know what's ahead of them. You know, out at the NTC we keep teaching people that he who wins the reconnaissance battle wins the war. The Russians know what's happening. The Chinese do not. My God, this Dark Star has really exceeded our expectations."

"It's some shiny new toy, Mickey," Jackson agreed. "Like going to a Vegas casino when you're able to read the cards halfway through the deck. You just can't hardly lose this way."

The President leaned forward. "You know, one of the reasons we took it on the chin with Vietnam is how the people got to see the war every night on Huntley-Brinkley. How will it affect the Chinese if their people see the war the same way, but *live* this time?"

"The battle that's coming? It'll shake them up a lot," Ed Foley thought. "But how do we—oh, oh, yeah . . . Holy shit, Jack, are you serious?"

"Can we do it?" Ryan asked.

"Technically? It's child's play. My only beef is that it really lets people know one of our capabilities. This is sensitive stuff, I mean, right up there with the performance of our reconnaissance satellites. It's not the sort of thing you just let out."

"Why not? Hell, couldn't some university duplicate the optics?" the President asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess. The imagery systems are good, but they're not all that new a development, except some of the thermal systems, but even so—"

"Ed, let's say we can shock them into stopping the war. How many lives would it save?"

"Quite a few," the DCI admitted. "Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands."

"Including some of our people?"

"Yes, Jack, including some of ours."

"And from a technical point of view, it's really child's play?"

"Yes, it's not technically demanding at all."

"Then turn the children loose, Ed. Right now," Ryan ordered.

"Yes, Mr. President."

CHAPTER 59

Loss of Control

With the death of General Peng, command of 34th Shock Army devolved to Major General Ge Li, CG also of 302nd Armored. His first task was to get himself clear, and this he did, ordering his tank off the long gun-range slope while one of the surviving reconnaissance tracks recovered Peng's body. All of those tracked vehicles also pulled back, as Ge figured his first task was to determine what had happened, rather than to avenge the death of his army commander. It took him twenty minutes to motor back to his own command section, where he had a command track identical to the one Peng had driven about in. He needed the radios, since he knew the field phones were down, for whatever reason he didn't know.

"I need to talk to Marshal Luo," he said over the command frequency, which was relayed back to Beijing via several repeater stations. It took another ten minutes because the Defense Minister, he was told, was in a Politburo meeting. Finally, the familiar voice came over the radio.

"This is Marshal Luo."

"This is Major General Ge Li, commanding Three-Oh-Second Armored. General Peng Xi-Wang is dead," he announced.

"What happened?"

"He went forward to join the reconnaissance section to see the front, and he was killed by a sniper bullet. The recon section ran into a small ambush, looked like a single Russian personnel carrier. I drove it off with my own tank," Ge went on. It was fairly true, and it seemed like the sort of thing he was supposed to say.

"I see. What is the overall situation?" the Defense Minister asked.

"Thirty-fourth Shock Army is advancing—well, it was. I paused the advance to reorganize the command group. I request instructions, Comrade Minister."

"You will advance and capture the Russian gold mine, secure it, and then continue north for the oil field."

"Very well, Comrade Minister, but I must advise you that Twenty-ninth Army, right behind us, sustained a serious attack an hour ago, and was reportedly badly hit."

"How badly?"

"I do not know. Reports are sketchy, but it doesn't sound good."

"What sort of attack was it?"

"An air attack, origin unknown. As I said, reports are very sketchy at this time. Twenty-ninth seems very disorganized at the moment," Ge reported.

"Very well. You will continue the attack. Forty-third Army is behind Twenty-ninth and will support you. Watch your left flank—"

"I know of the reports of Russian units to my west," Ge said. "I will orient a mechanized division to deal with that, but . . ."

"But what?" Luo asked.

"But, Comrade Marshal, we have no reconnaissance information on what lies before us. I need such information in order to advance safely."

"You will find your safety in advancing rapidly into enemy territory and destroying whatever formations you find," Luo told him forcefully. "Continue your advance!"

"By your command, Comrade Minister." There wasn't much else he could say to that.

"Report back to me as necessary."

"I will do that," Ge promised.

"Very well. Out." Static replaced the voice.

"You heard him," Ge said to Colonel Wa Cheng-gong, whom he'd just inherited as army operations officer. "Now what, Colonel?"

"We continue the advance, Comrade General."

Ge nodded to the logic of the situation. "Give the order."

It took hold four minutes later, when the radio commands filtered down to battalion level and the units started moving.

They didn't need reconnaissance information now, Colonel Wa reasoned. They knew that there had to be some light Russian units just beyond the ridgeline where Peng had met his foolish death. *Didn't I warn him?* Wa raged to himself. *Didn't Ge warn him?* For a general to die in battle was not unexpected. But to die from a single bullet fired by some lone rifleman was worse than foolish. Thirty years of training and experience wasted, lost to a single rifleman!

There they go again," Major Tucker said, seeing the plume of diesel exhaust followed by the lurching of numerous armored vehicles. "About six kilometers from your first line of tanks."

"A pity we can't get one of these terminals to Sinyavskiy," Bondarenko said.

"Not that many of them, sir," Tucker told him. "Sun Microsystems is still building them for us."

That was General Ge Li," Luo told the Politburo. "We've had some bad luck. General Peng is dead, killed by a sniper bullet, I just learned."

"How did that happen?" Premier Xu asked.

"Peng had gone forward, as a good general should, and there was a lucky Russian out there with a rifle," the Defense Minister explained. Then one of his aides appeared and walked to the marshal's seat, handing him a slip of paper. He scanned it. "This is confirmed?"

"Yes, Comrade Marshal. I requested and got confirmation myself. The ships are in sight of land even now."

"What ships? What land?" Xu asked. It was unusual for him to take an active part in these meetings. Usually he let the others talk, listened passively, and then announced the consensus conclusions reached by the others.

"Comrade," Luo answered. "It seems some American warships are bombarding our coast near Guangszhou."

"Bombarding?" Xu asked. "You mean with guns?"

"That's what the report says, yes."

"Why would they do that?" the Premier asked, somewhat nonplussed by this bit of information.

"To destroy shore emplacements, and—"

"Isn't that what one does prior to invading, a preparation to putting troops on the beach?" Foreign Minister Shen asked.

"Well, yes, it could be that, I suppose," Luo replied, "but—"

"Invasion?" Xu asked. "A direct attack on our own soil?"

"Such a thing is most unlikely," Luo told them. "They lack the ability to put troops ashore in sufficiently large numbers. America simply doesn't have the troops to do such a—"

"What if they get assistance from Taiwan? How many troops do the bandits have?" Tong Jie asked.

"Well, they have some land forces," Luo allowed. "But we have ample ability to—"

"You told us a week ago that we had all the forces required to defeat the Russians, even if they got some aid from America," Qian observed, becoming agitated. "What fiction do you have for us now, Luo?"

"*Fiction!*" the marshal's voice boomed. "I tell you the facts, but now you accuse me of that?"

"What have you *not* told us, Luo?" Qian asked harshly. "We are not peasants here to be told what to believe."

"The Russians are making a stand. They have fought back. I told you that, and I told you this sort of thing is to be expected—and it is. We fight a war with the Russians. It's not a burglary in an unoccupied house. This is an armed contest between two major powers—and we

will win because we have more and better troops. They do not fight well. We swept aside their border defenses, and we've pursued their army north, and they didn't have the manhood to stand and fight for their own land! We will *smash* them. Yes, they will fight back. We must expect that, but it won't matter. We will *smash* them, I tell you!" he insisted.

"Is there any information which you have not told us to this point?" Interior Minister Tong asked, in a voice more reasonable than the question itself.

"I have appointed Major General Ge to assume command of the Thirty-fourth Shock Army. He reported to me that Twenty-ninth Army sustained a serious air attack earlier today. The effects of this attack are not clear, probably they managed to damage communications—and an *air* attack cannot seriously hurt a large mechanized *land* force. The tools of war do not permit such a thing."

"Now what?" Premier Xu asked.

"I propose that we adjourn the meeting and allow Minister Luo to return to his task of managing our armed forces," Zhang Han Sen proposed. "And that we reconvene, say, at sixteen hours."

There were nods around the table. Everyone wanted the time to consider the things that they'd heard this morning—and perhaps to give the Defense Minister the chance to make good his words. Xu did a head count and stood.

"Very well. We adjourn until this afternoon." The meeting broke up in an unusually subdued manner, without the usual pairing off and pleasantries between old comrades. Outside the conference room, Qian buttonholed Fang again.

"Something is going badly wrong. I can feel it."

"How sure are you of that?"

"Fang, I don't know what the Americans have done to my railroad bridges, but I assure you that to destroy them as I was informed earlier this morning is no small thing. Moreover, the destruction inflicted was deliberately systematic. The Americans—it must have been the Americans—deliberately crippled our ability to supply our field armies. You only do such a thing in preparation to smashing them. And now the commanding general of our advancing armies is suddenly killed—stray bullet, my ass! That *tset ha tset ha* Luo leads us to disaster, Fang."

"We'll know more this afternoon," Fang suggested, leaving his colleague and going to his office. Arriving there, he dictated another segment for his daily journal. For the first time, he wondered if it might turn out to be his testament.

* * *

For her part, Ming was disturbed by her minister's demeanor. An elderly man, he'd always nonetheless been a calm and optimistic one for the most part. His mannerisms were those of a grandfatherly gentleman even when taking her or one of the other office girls to his bed. It was an endearing quality, one of the reasons the office staff didn't resist his advances more vigorously—and besides, he *did* take care of those who took care of *his* needs. This time she took her dictation quietly, while he leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed, and his voice a monotone. It took half an hour, and she went out to her desk to do the transcription. It was time for the midday meal by the time she was done, and she went out to lunch with her co-worker, Chai.

"What is the matter with him?" she asked Ming.

"The meeting this morning did not go well. Fang is concerned with the war."

"But isn't it going well? Isn't that what they say on TV?"

"It seems there have been some setbacks. This morning they argued about how serious they were. Qian was especially exercised about it, because the American attacked our rail bridges in Harbin and Bei'an."

"Ah." Chai shoveled some rice into her mouth with her chopsticks. "How is Fang taking it?"

"He seems very tense. Perhaps he will need some comfort this evening."

"Oh? Well, I can take care of him. I need a new office chair anyway," she added with a giggle.

Lunch dragged on longer than usual. Clearly their minister didn't need any of them for the moment, and Ming took the time to walk about on the street to gauge the mood of the people there. The feeling was strangely neutral. She was out just long enough to trigger her computer's downtime activation, and though the screen was blank, in the auto-sleep mode, the hard drive started turning, and silently activated the onboard modem.

Mary Pat Foley was in her office, though it was past midnight, and she was logging onto her mail account every fifteen minutes, hoping for something new from SORGE.

"You've got mail!" the mechanical voice told her.

"Yes!" she said back to it, downloading the document at once. Then she lifted the phone. "Get Sears up here."

With that done, Mrs. Foley looked at the time entry on the e-mail. It had gone out in the early afternoon in Beijing . . . what might that

mean? she wondered, afraid that any irregularity could spell the death of SONGBIRD, and the loss of the SORGE documents.

"Working late?" Sears asked on entering.

"Who isn't?" MP responded. She held out the latest printout. "Read."

"Politburo meeting, in the morning for a change," Sears said, scanning the first page. "Looks a little raucous. This Qian guy is raising a little hell—oh, okay, he chatted with Fang after it and expressed serious concerns . . . agreed to meet later in the day and—oh, shit!"

"What's that?"

"They discussed increasing the readiness of their ICBM force . . . let's see . . . nothing firm was decided for technical reasons, they weren't sure how long they could keep the missiles fueled, but they were shook by our takeout of their missile submarine . . ."

"Write that up. I'm going to hang a CRITIC on it," the DDO announced.

CRITIC—shorthand for "critical"—is the highest priority in the United States government for message traffic. A CRITICFLAGGED document must be in the President's hands no less than fifteen minutes after being generated. That meant that Joshua Sears had to get it drafted just as quickly as he could type in his keyboard, and that made for errors in translation.

Ryan had been asleep for maybe forty minutes when the phone next to his bed went off.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. President," some faceless voice announced in the White House Office of Signals, "we have CRITIC traffic for you."

"All right. Bring it up." Jack swung his body across the bed and planted his feet on the rug. As a normal human being living in his home, he wasn't a bathrobe person. Ordinarily he'd just pad around his house barefoot in his underwear, but that wasn't allowed anymore, and he always kept a long blue robe handy now. It was a gift from long ago, when he'd taught history at the Naval Academy—a gift from the students there—and bore on the sleeves the one wide and four narrow stripes of a Fleet Admiral. So dressed, and wearing leather slippers that also came with the new job, he walked out into the upstairs corridor. The Secret Service night team was already up and moving. Joe Hilton came to him first.

"We heard, sir. It's on the way up now."

Ryan, who'd been existing on less than five hours of sleep per night for the past week, had an urgent need to lash out and rip the face off someone—anyone—but, of course, he couldn't do that to men who

were just doing their job, with miserable hours of their own.

Special Agent Charlie Malone was at the elevator. He took the folder from the messenger and trotted over to Ryan.

"Hmm." Ryan rubbed his hand over his face as he flipped the folder open. The first three lines jumped into his consciousness. "Oh, shit."

"Anything wrong?" Hilton asked.

"Phone," Ryan said.

"This way, sir." Hilton led him to the Secret Service upstairs cubbyhole office.

Ryan lifted the phone and said, "Mary Pat at Langley." It didn't take long. "MP, Jack here. What gives?"

"It's just what you see. They're talking about fueling their intercontinental missiles. At least two of them are aimed at Washington."

"Great. Now what?"

"I just tasked a KH-11 to give their launch sites a close look. There's two of them, Jack. The one we need to look at is Xuanhua. That's at about forty degrees, thirty-eight minutes north, one hundred fifteen degrees, six minutes east. Twelve silos with CCC-4 missiles inside. This is one of the newer ones, and it replaced older sites that stored the missiles in caves or tunnels. Straight, vertical, in-the-ground silos. The entire missile field is about six miles by six miles. The silos are well separated so that a single nuclear impact can't take out any two missiles," MP explained, manifestly looking at overheads of the place as she spoke.

"How serious is this?"

A new voice came on the line. "Jack, it's Ed. We have to take this one seriously. The naval bombardment on their coast might have set them off. The damned fools think we might be attempting a no-shit invasion."

"What? What with?" the President demanded.

"They can be very insular thinkers, Jack, and they're not always logical by our rules," Ed Foley told him.

"Great. Okay. You two come on down here. Bring your best China guy with you."

"On the way," the DCI replied.

Ryan hung up and looked at Joe Hilton. "Wake everybody up. The Chinese may be going squirrelly on us."

The drive up the Potomac River hadn't been easy. Captain Blandy hadn't wanted to wait for a river pilot to help guide him up the river —naval officers tend to be overly proud when it comes to navigating their ships—and that had made it quite tense for the bridge watch. Rarely was the channel more than a few hundred yards wide, and

cruisers are deepwater ships, not riverboats. Once they came within a few yards of a mudbank, but the navigator got them clear of it with a timely rudder order. The ship's radar was up and running—people were actually afraid to turn off the billboard system because it, like most mechanical contrivances, preferred operation to idleness, and switching it off might have broken something. As it was, the RF energy radiating from the four huge billboard transmitters on *Gettysburg*'s superstructure had played hell with numerous television sets on the way northwest, but that couldn't be helped, and probably nobody noticed the cruiser in the river anyway, not at this time of night. Finally, *Gettysburg* glided to a halt within sight of the Woodrow Wilson bridge, and had to wait for traffic to be halted on the D.C. Beltway. This resulted in the usual road rage, but at this time of night there weren't that many people to be outraged, though one or two did honk their horns when the ship passed through the open drawbridge span. Perhaps they were New Yorkers, Captain Blandy thought. From there it was another turn to starboard into the Anacostia River, through another drawbridge, this one named for John Philip Sousa—accompanied by more surprised looks from the few drivers out—and then a gentle docking alongside the pier that was also home to USS *Barry,* a retired destroyer relegated to museum status.

The line handlers on the pier, Captain Blandy saw, were mainly civilians. Wasn't that a hell of a thing?

The "evolution"—that, Gregory had learned, was what the Navy called parking a boat—had been interesting but unremarkable to observe, though the skipper looked quite relieved to have it all behind him.

"Finished with engines," the CO told the engine room, and let out a long breath, shared, Gregory could see, by the entire bridge crew.

"Captain?" the retired Army officer asked.

"Yes?"

"What is this all about, exactly?"

"Well, isn't it kinda obvious?" Blandy responded. "We have a shooting war with the Chinese. They have ICBMs, and I suppose the SecDef wants to be able to shoot them down if they loft one at Washington. SACLANT is also sending an Aegis to New York, and I'd bet Pacific Fleet has some looking out for Los Angeles and San Francisco. Probably Seattle, too. There's a lot of ships there anyway, and a good weapons locker. Do you have spare copies of your software?"

"Sure."

"Well, we'll have a phone line from the dock in a few minutes. We'll see if there's a way for you to upload it to other interested parties."

"Oh," Dr. Gregory observed quietly. He really should have thought

that one all the way through.

This is RED WOLF FOUR. I have visual contact with the Chinese advance guard," the regimental commander called on the radio. "About ten kilometers south of us."

"Very well," Sinyavskiy replied. Just where Bondarenko and his American helpers said they were. Good. There were two other general officers in his command post, the CGs of 201st and 80th Motor Rifle divisions, and the commander of the 34th was supposed to be on his way as well, though 94th had turned and reoriented itself to attack east from a point about thirty kilometers to the south.

Sinyavskiy took the old, sodden cigar from his mouth and tossed it out into the grass, pulling another from his tunic pocket and lighting it. It was a Cuban cigar, and superb in its mildness. His artillery commander was on the other side of the map table—just a couple of planks on sawhorses, which was perfect for the moment. Close by were holes dug should the Chinese send some artillery fire their way, and most important of all, the wires which led to his communications station, set a full kilometer to the west—that was the first thing the Chinese would try to shoot at, because they'd expect him to be there. In fact the only humans present were four officers and seven sergeants, in armored personnel carriers dug into the ground for safety. It was their job to repair anything the Chinese might manage to break.

"So, Comrades, they come right into our parlor, eh?" he said for those around him. Sinyavskiy had been a soldier for twenty-six years. Oddly, he was not the son of a soldier. His father was an instructor in geology at Moscow State University, but ever since the first war movie he'd seen, this was the profession he'd craved to join. He'd done all the work, attended all the schools, studied history with the manic attention common in the Russian army, and the Red Army before it. This would be his Battle of the Kursk Bulge, remembering the battle where Vatutin and Rokossovskiy had smashed Hitler's last attempt to retake the offensive in Russia—where his mother country had begun the long march that had ended at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. There, too, the Red Army had been the recipient of brilliant intelligence information, letting them know the time, place, and character of the German attack, and so allowing them to prepare so well that even the best of the German field commanders, Erich von Manstein, could do no more than break his teeth on the Russian steel.

And so it will be here, Sinyavskiy promised himself. The only unsatisfactory part was that he was stuck here in this camouflaged tent instead of in the line with his men, but, no, he wasn't a captain anymore, and his place was here, to fight the battle on a goddamned

printed map.

"RED WOLF, you will commence firing when the advance guard gets to within eight hundred meters."

"Eight hundred meters, Comrade General," the commander of his tank regiment acknowledged. "I can see them quite clearly now."

"What exactly can you see?"

"It appears to be a battalion-strength formation, principally Type 90 tanks, some Type 98s but not too many of those, spread out as though they went to sub-unit commanders. Numerous tracked personnel carriers. I do not see any artillery-spotting vehicles, however. What do we know of their artillery?"

"It's rolling, not set up for firing. We're watching them," Sinyavskiy assured him.

"Excellent. They are now two kilometers off by my range finder."

"Stand by."

"I will do that, Command."

"I hate waiting," Sinyavskiy commented to the officers around him. They all nodded, having the same prejudice. He hadn't seen Afghanistan in his younger years, having served mainly in 1st and 2nd Guards Tank armies in Germany back then, preparing to fight against NATO, an event which blessedly had never taken place. This was his very first experience with real combat, and it hadn't really started yet, and he was ready for it to start.

* * *

Okay, if they light those missiles up, what can we do about it?" Ryan asked.

"If they launch 'em, there's not a goddamned thing but run for cover," Secretary Bretano said.

"That's good for us. We'll all get away. What about the people who live in Washington, New York, and all the other supposed targets?" POTUS asked.

"I've ordered some Aegis cruisers to the likely targets that are near the water," THUNDER went on. "I had one of my people from TRW look at the possibility of upgrading the missile systems to see if they might do an intercept. He's done the theoretical work, and he says it looks good on the simulators, but that's a ways from a practical test, of course. It's better than nothing, though."

"Okay, where are the ships?"

"There's one here now," Bretano answered.

"Oh? When did that happen?" Robby Jackson asked.

"Less than an hour ago. *Gettysburg.* There's another one going to

New York—and San Francisco and Los Angeles. Also Seattle, though that's not really a target as far as we know. The software upgrade is going out to them to get their missiles reprogrammed."

"Okay, that's something. What about taking those missiles out, before they can launch?" Ryan asked next.

"The Chinese silos have recently been upgraded in protection, steel armor on the concrete covers—shaped like a Chinese coolie hat, it will probably deflect most bombs, but not the deep penetrators, the GBU-27s we used on the railroad bridges—"

"If they have any left over there. Better ask Gus Wallace," the Vice President warned.

"What do you mean?" Bretano asked.

"I mean we never made all that many of them, and the Air Force must have dropped about forty last night."

"I'll check that," SecDef promised.

"What if he doesn't?" Jack asked.

"Then either we get some more in one big hurry, or we think up something else," TOMCAT replied.

"Like what, Robby?"

"Hell, send in a special-operations team and blow them the fuck up," the former fighter pilot suggested.

"I wouldn't much want to try that myself," Mickey Moore observed.

"Beats the hell out of a five-megaton bomb going off on Capitol Hill, Mickey," Jackson shot back. "Look, the preferred thing to do is find out if Gus Wallace has the right bombs. It's a long stretch for the Black Jets, but you can tank them going and coming—and put fighters up to protect the tankers. It's complicated, but we practice that sort of thing. If he doesn't have the goddamned bombs, we fly them to him, assuming there are any. You know, weapons storage isn't a cornucopia, guys. There's a finite, discrete number for every item in the inventory."

"General Moore," Ryan said, "call General Wallace and find out, right now, if you would."

"Yes, sir." Moore stood and left the Situation Room.

"Look," Ed Foley said, pointing to the TV. "It's started."

The wood line erupted in a sheet of flame two kilometers across. The sight caused the eyes of the Chinese tankers to flare, but most of the front rank of tank crews didn't have time for much more than that. Of the thirty tanks in that line, only three escaped immediate destruction. It was little better for the personnel carriers interspersed with them.

"You may commence firing, Colonel," Sinyavskiy told his artillery commander.

The command was relayed at once, and the ground shook beneath their feet.

It was spectacular to see on the computer terminal. The Chinese had walked straight into the ambush, and the effect of the Russian opening volley was ghastly to behold.

Major Tucker took in a deep breath as he saw several hundred men lose their lives.

"Back to their artillery," Bondarenko ordered.

"Yes, sir." Tucker complied at once, altering the focus of the high-altitude camera and finding the Chinese artillery. It was mainly of the towed sort, being pulled behind trucks and tractors. They were a little slow getting the word. The first Russian shells were falling around them before any effort was made to stop the trucks and lift the limbers off the towing hooks, and for all that the Chinese gunners worked rapidly.

But theirs was a race against Death, and Death had a head start. Tucker watched one gun crew struggle to manhandle their 122-mm gun into a firing position. The gunners were loading the weapon when three shells landed close enough to upset the weapon and kill more than half their number. Zooming in the camera, he could see one private writhing on the ground, and there was no one close by to offer him assistance.

"It is a miserable business, isn't it?" Bondarenko observed quietly.

"Yeah," Tucker agreed. When a tank blew up it was easy to tell yourself that a tank was just a *thing*. Even though you knew that three or four human beings were inside, you couldn't see them. As a fighter pilot never killed a fellow pilot, but only shot down his aircraft, so Tucker adhered to the Air Force ethos that death was something that happened to objects rather than people. Well, that poor bastard with blood on his shirt wasn't a *thing*, was he? He backed off the camera, taking a wider field that permitted godlike distancing from the up-close-and-personal aspects of the observation.

"Better that they should have remained in their own country, Major," the Russian explained to him.

Jesus, what a mess," Ryan said. He'd seen death up-close-and-personal himself in his time, having shot people who had at the time been quite willing to shoot him, but that didn't make this imagery any the more palatable. Not by a long fucking shot. The President turned.

"Is this going out, Ed?" he asked the DCI.

"Ought to be," Foley replied.

And it was, on a URL—"Uniform Resource Locator" in'Netspeak—called http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberiabattle/realtime.ram. It didn't even have to be advertised. Some 'Net crawlers stumbled onto it in the first five minutes, and the "hits" from people looking at the "streaming video" site climbed up from 0 to 10 in a matter of three minutes. Then some of them must have ducked into chat rooms to spread the word. The monitoring program for the URL at CIA headquarters also kept track of the locations of the people logging into it. The first Asian country, not unexpectedly, was Japan, and the fascination of the people there in military operations guaranteed a rising number of hits. The video also included audio, the real-time comments of Air Force personnel giving some perverse color-commentary back to their comrades in uniform. It was sufficiently colorful that Ryan commented on it.

"It's not meant for anyone much over the age of thirty to hear," General Moore said, coming back into the room.

"What's the story on the bombs?" Jackson asked at once.

"He's only got two of them," Moore replied. "The nearest others are at the factory, Lockheed-Martin, Sunnyvale. They're just doing a production run right now."

"Uh-oh," Robby observed. "Back to Plan B."

"It might have to be a special operation, then, unless, Mr. President, that is, you are willing to authorize a strike with cruise missiles."

"What kind of cruise missiles?" Ryan asked, knowing the answer even so.

"Well, we have twenty-eight of them on Guam with W-80 warheads. They're little ones, only about three hundred pounds. It has two settings, one-fifty or one-seventy kilotons."

"Thermonuclear weapons, you mean?"

General Moore let out a breath before replying. "Yes, Mr. President."

"That's the only option we have for taking those missiles out?" He didn't have to say that he would not voluntarily launch a nuclear strike.

"We could go in with conventional smart bombs—GBU-10s and -15s. Gus has enough of those, but not deep penetrators, and the protection on the silos would have a fair chance at deflecting the weapon away from the target. Now, that might not matter. The CSS-4 missiles are delicate bastards, and the impact even of a miss could scramble their guidance systems . . . but we couldn't be sure."

"I'd prefer that those things not fly."

"Jack, nobody wants them to fly," the Vice President said. "Mickey, put together a plan. We need *something* to take them out, and we need it in one big fuckin' hurry."

"I'll call SOCOM about it, but, hell, they're down in Tampa."

"Do the Russians have special-operations people?" Ryan asked.

"Sure, it's called Spetsnaz."

"And some of these missiles are targeted on Russia?"

"It certainly appears so, yes, sir," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs confirmed.

"Then they owe us one, and they damned well owe it to themselves," Jack said, reaching for a phone. "I need to talk to Sergey Golovko in Moscow," he told the operator.

The American President," his secretary said.

"Ivan Emmetovich!" Golovko said in hearty greeting. "The reports from Siberia are good."

"I know, Sergey, I'm watching it live now myself. Want to do it yourself?"

"It is possible?"

"You have a computer with a modem?"

"One cannot exist without the damned things," the Russian replied.

Ryan read off the URL identifier. "Just log onto that. We're putting the feed from our Dark Star drones onto the Internet."

"Why is that, Jack?" Golovko asked at once.

"Because as of two minutes ago, one thousand six hundred and fifty Chinese citizens are watching it, and the number is going up fast."

"A political operation against them, yes? You wish to destabilize their government?"

"Well, it won't hurt our purposes if their citizens find out what's happening, will it?"

"The virtues of a free press. I must study this. Very clever, Ivan Emmetovich."

"That's not why I called."

"Why is that, *Tovarisch Prezidyent*?" the SVR chairman asked, with sudden concern at the change in his tone. Ryan was not one to conceal his feelings well.

"Sergey, we have a very adverse indication from their Politburo. I'm faxing it to you now," he heard. "I'll stay on the line while you read it."

Golovko wasn't surprised to see the pages arrive on his personal fax machine. He had Ryan's personal numbers, and the Americans had his. It was just one way for an intelligence service to demonstrate its prowess in a harmless way. The first sheets to come across were the English translation of the Chinese ideographs that came through immediately thereafter.

Sergey, I sent you our original feed in case your linguists or

psychologists are better than ours," the President said, with an apologetic glance at Dr. Sears. The CIA analyst waved it off. "They have twelve CSS-4 missiles, half aimed at you, half at us. I think we need to do something about those things. They may not be entirely rational, the way things are going now."

"And your shore bombardment might have pushed them to the edge, Mr. President," the Russian said over the speakerphone. "I agree, this is a matter of some concern. Why don't you bomb the things with your brilliant bombs from your magical invisible bombers."

"Because we're out of bombs, Sergey. They ran out of the sort they need."

"*Nichevo*" was the reaction.

"You should see it from my side. My people are thinking about a commando-type operation."

"I see. Let me consult with some of my people. Give me twenty minutes, Mr. President."

"Okay, you know where to reach me." Ryan punched the kill button on the phone and looked sourly at the tray of coffee things. "One more cup of this shit and I'm going to turn into an urn myself."

The only reason he was alive now, he was sure, was that he'd withdrawn to the command section for 34th Army. His tank division was being roughly handled. One of his battalions had been immolated in the first minute of the battle. Another was now trying to maneuver east, trying to draw the Russians out into a running battle for which his men were trained. The division's artillery had been halved at best by Russian massed fire, and 34th Army's advance was now a thing of the past. His current task was to try and use his two mechanized divisions to establish a base of fire from which he could try to wrest back control of the battle. But every time he tried to move a unit, something happened to it, as though the Russians were reading his mind.

"Wa, pull what's left of Three-Oh-Second back to the ten o'clock start-line, and do it now!" he ordered.

"But Marshal Luo won't—"

"And if he wishes to relieve me, he can, but he isn't here *now,* is he?" Ge snarled back. "Give the order!"

"Yes, Comrade General."

With this toy in our hands, the Germans would not have made it as far as Minsk," Bondarenko said.

"Yeah, it helps to know what the other guy's doing, doesn't it?"

"It's like being a god on Mount Olympus. Who thought this thing

up?"

"Oh, a couple of people at Northrop started the idea, with an airplane called Tacit Rainbow, looked like a cross between a snow shovel and a French baguette, but it was manned, and the endurance wasn't so good."

"Whoever it is, I would like to buy him a bottle of good vodka," the Russian general said. "This is saving the lives of my soldiers."

And beating the living shit out of the Chinese, Tucker didn't add. But combat was that sort of game, wasn't it?

"Do you have any other aircraft up?"

"Yes, sir. Grace Kelly's back up to cover First Armored."

"Show me."

Tucker used his mouse to shrink one video window and then opened another. General Diggs had a second terminal up and running, and Tucker just stole its take. There were what looked like two brigades operating, moving north at a measured pace and wrecking every Chinese truck and track they could find. The battlefield, if you could call it that, was a mass of smoke columns from shot-up trucks, reminding Tucker of the vandalized Kuwaiti oil fields of 1991. He zoomed in to see that most of the work was being done by the Bradleys. What targets there were simply were not worthy of a main-gun round from the tanks. The Abrams just rode herd on the lighter infantry carriers, doing protective overwatch as they ground mercilessly forward. The major slaved one camera to his terminal and went scouting around for more action . . .

"Who's this?" Tucker asked.

"That must be BOYAR," Bondarenko said.

It was what looked like twenty-five T-55 tanks advancing on line, and these tanks were using their main guns . . . against trucks and some infantry carriers . . .

Load HEAT," Lieutenant Komanov ordered. "Target track, one o'clock! Range two thousand."

"I have him," the gunner said a second later.

"Fire!"

"Firing," the gunner said, squeezing the trigger. The old tank rocked backwards from the shot. Gunner and commander watched the tracer arcing out . . .

"Over, damn it, too high. Load another HEAT."

The loader slammed another round into the breech in a second: "Loaded!"

"I'll get the bastard this time," the gunner promised, adjusting his sights down a hair. The poor bastard out there didn't even know he'd been shot at the first time . . .

"Fire!"

"Firing . . . "

Yet another recoil, and . . .

"Hit! Good shooting Vanya!"

Three Company was doing well. The time spent in gunnery practice was paying off handsomely, Komanov thought. This was much better than sitting in a damned bunker and waiting for them to come to you . . .

What is that?" Marshal Luo asked.

"Comrade Marshal, come here and see," the young lieutenant colonel urged.

"What is this?" the Defense Minister asked with a trailing-off voice . . . "*Cao ni ma*," he breathed. Then he thundered: "*What the hell is this?*"

"Comrade Marshal, this is a web site, from the Internet. It purports to be a live television program from the battlefield in Siberia." The young field-grade officer was almost breathless. "It shows the Russians fighting Thirty-fourth Shock Army . . ."

"And?"

"And they're slaughtering our men, according to this," the lieutenant colonel went on.

"Wait a minute—what—how is this possible?" Luo demanded.

"Comrade, this heading here says *darkstar*. 'Dark Star' is the name of an American unmanned aerial vehicle, a reconnaissance drone, reported to be a stealth aircraft used to collect tactical intelligence. Thus, it appears that they are using this to feed information, and putting the information on the Internet as a propaganda tool." He had to say it that way, and it was, in fact, the way he thought about it.

"Tell me more."

The officer was an intelligence specialist. "This explains the success they've had against us, Comrade Marshal. They can see everything we do, almost before we do it. It's as though they listen to our command circuit, or even listen into our staff and planning meetings. There is no defense against this," the staff officer concluded.

"You young defeatist!" the marshal raged.

"Perhaps there is a way to overcome this advantage, but I do not know what it is. Systems like this can see in the dark as well as they can in the sunlight. Do you understand, Comrade Marshal? With this tool they can see everything we do, see it long before we approach their formations. It eliminates any possibility of surprise . . . see here," he said, pointing at the screen. "One of Thirty-fourth Army's mechanized divisions is maneuvering east. They are here"—he pointed to a printer map on the table—"and the enemy is here. If our troops

get to this point unseen, then perhaps they can hit the Russians on their left flank, but it will take two hours to get there. For the Russians to get one of their units to a blocking position will take but one hour. That is the advantage," he concluded.

"The Americans do that to us?"

"Clearly, the feed on the Internet is from America, from their CIA."

"This is how the Russians have countered us, then?"

"Clearly. They've outguessed us at every turn today. This must be how they do it."

"Why do the Americans put this information out where everyone can see it?" Luo wondered. The obvious answer didn't occur to him. Information given out to the public had to be carefully measured and flavored for the peasants and workers to draw the proper conclusions from it.

"Comrade, it will be difficult to say on state television that things are going well when this is available to anyone with a computer."

"Ahh." Less a sound of satisfaction than one of sudden dread. "Anyone can see this?"

"Anyone with a computer and a telephone line." The young lieutenant colonel looked up, only to see Luo's receding form.

"I'm surprised he didn't shoot me," the officer observed.

"He still might," a full colonel told him. "But I think you frightened him." He looked at the wall clock. It was sixteen hours, four in the afternoon.

"Well, it is a concern."

"You young fool. Don't you see? Now he can't even conceal the truth from the Politburo."

Hello, Yuri," Clark said. It was different to be in Moscow in time of war. The mood of the people on the street was unlike anything he'd ever seen. They were concerned and serious—you didn't go to Russia to see the smiling people any more than you went to England for the coffee—but there was something else, too. Indignation. Anger . . . determination? Television coverage of the war was not as strident and defiant as he'd expected. The new Russian news media were trying to be even-handed and professional. There was commentary to the effect that the army's inability to stop the Chinese cold spoke ill of their country's national cohesion. Others lamented the demise of the Soviet Union, whom China would not have dared to threaten, much less attack. More asked what the hell was the use of being in NATO if none of the other countries came to the aid of their supposed new ally.

"We told the television people that if they told anyone of the American division now in Siberia, we'd shoot them, and of course they believed us," Lieutenant General Kirillin said with a smile. That was

something new for Clark and Chavez to see. He hadn't smiled much in the past week.

"Things looking up?" Chavez inquired.

"Bondarenko has stopped them at the gold mine. They will not even see that, if my information is correct. But there is something else," he added seriously.

"What's that, Yuriy?" Clark asked.

"We are concerned that they might launch their nuclear weapons."

"Oh, shit," Ding observed. "How serious is that?"

"It comes from your President. Golovko is speaking with President Grushavoy right now."

"And? How do they plan to go about it? Smart bombs?" John asked.

"No, Washington has asked us to go in with a special-operations team," Kirillin said.

"What the hell?" John gasped. He pulled his satellite phone out of his pocket and looked for the door. "Excuse me, General. E.T. phone home."

You want to say that again, Ed?" Foley heard. "You heard me. They've run out of the bombs they need. Evidently, it's a pain in the ass to fly bombs to where the bombers are."

"Fuck!" the CIA officer observed, out in the parking lot of this Russian army officers' club. The encryption on his phone didn't affect the emotion in his voice. "Don't tell me, since RAINBOW is a NATO asset, and Russia's part of NATO now, and since you're going to be asking the fucking Russians to front this operation, in the interest of North Atlantic solidarity, we're going to get to go and play, too, right?"

"Unless you choose not to, John. I know you can't go yourself. Combat's a kid's game, but you have some good kids working for you."

"Ed, you expect me to send my people in on something like that and I stay home and fucking knit socks?" Clark demanded heatedly.

"That's your call to make. You're the RAINBOW commander."

"How is this supposed to work? You expect us to jump in?"

"Helicopters—"

"Russian helicopters. No thanks, buddy, I—"

"Our choppers, John. First Armored Division had enough and they're the right kind . . ."

They want me to do *what*?" Dick Boyle asked.

"You heard me."

"What about fuel?"

"Your fueling point's right about here," Colonel Masterman said,

holding the just-downloaded satellite photo. “Hilltop west of a place called Chicheng. Nobody lives there, and the numbers work out.”

“Yeah, except out flight path takes us within ten miles of this fighter base.”

“Eight F-117s are going to hit it while you’re on the way in. Ought to close down their runways for a good three days, they figure.”

“Dick,” Diggs said, “I don’t know what the problem is exactly, but Washington is really worried that Joe is going to launch his ICBMs at us at home, and Gus Wallace doesn’t have the right bombs to take them out reliably. That means a special-ops force, down and dirty. It’s a strategic mission, Dick. Can you do it?”

Colonel Boyle looked at the map, measuring distance in his mind . . . “Yeah, we’ll have to mount the outrigger wings on the Blackhawks and load up to the max on gas, but, yeah, we got the range to get there. Have to refuel on the way back, though.”

“Okay, can you use your other birds to ferry the fuel out?”

Boyle nodded. “Barely.”

“If necessary, the Russians can land a Spetsnaz force anywhere through here with additional fuel, so they tell me. This part of China is essentially unoccupied, according to the maps.”

“What about opposition on the ground?”

“There is a security force in the area. We figure maybe a hundred people on duty, total, say a squad at each silo. Can you get some Apaches out there to run interference?”

“Yeah, they can get that far, if they travel light.” *Just cannon rounds and 2.75-inch rockets*, he thought.

“Then get me your mission requirements,” General Diggs said. It wasn’t quite an order. If he said it was impossible, then Diggs couldn’t make him do it. But Boyle couldn’t let his people go out and do something like this without being there to command them.

The MI-24s finished things off. The Russian doctrine for their attack helicopters wasn’t too different from how they used their tanks. Indeed, the MI-24—called the Hind by NATO, but strangely unnamed by the Russians themselves—was referred to as a flying tank. Using AT-6 Spiral missiles, they finished off a Chinese tank battalion in twenty minutes of jump and shoot, sustaining only two losses in the process. The sun was setting now, and what had been Thirty-fourth Shock Army was wreckage. What few vehicles had survived the day were pulling back, usually with wounded men clinging to their decks.

In his command post, General Sinyavskiy was all smiles. Vodka was snorted by all. His 265th Motor Rifle Division had halted and thrown back a force more than double its size, suffering fewer than three hundred dead in the process. The TV news crews were finally allowed

out to where the soldiers were, and he delivered the briefing, paying frequent compliments to his theater commander, Gennady Iosefovich Bondarenko, for his cool head and faith in his subordinates. “He never lost his nerve,” Sinyavskiy said soberly. “And he allowed us to keep ours for when the time came. He is a Hero of Russia,” the division commander concluded. “And so are many of my men!”

Thank you for that, Yuriy Andreyevich, and, yes, for that you will get your next star,“ the theater commander told the television screen. Then he turned to his staff. “Andrey Petrovich, what do we do tomorrow?”

“I think we will let Two-Six-Five start moving south. We will be the hammer, and Diggs will be the anvil. They still have a Type-A Group army largely intact to the south, the Forty-third. We will smash it starting day after tomorrow, but first we will maneuver it into a place of our choosing.”

Bondarenko nodded. “Show me a plan, but first, I am going to sleep for a few hours.”

“Yes, Comrade General.”

CHAPTER 60

Skyrockets in Flight

It was the same Spetsnaz people they'd trained for the past month or so. Nearly everyone on the transport aircraft was a commissioned officer, doing sergeants' work, which had its good points and its bad ones. The really good thing was that they all spoke passable English. Of the RAINBOW troopers, only Ding Chavez and John Clark spoke conversational Russian.

The maps and photos came from SRV and CIA, the latter transmitted to the American Embassy in Moscow and messengered to the military airfield out of which they'd flown. They were in an Aeroflot airliner, fairly full with over a hundred passengers, all of them soldiers.

"I propose that we divide by nationalities," Kirillin said. "Vanya, you and your RAINBOW men take this one here. My men and I will divide the rest among us, using our existing squad structures."

"Looks okay, Yuriy. One target's pretty much as good as another. When will we be going in?"

"Just before dawn. Your helicopters must have good range to take us all the way down, then back with only one refueling."

"Well, that'll be the safe part of the mission."

"Except this fighter base at Anshan," Kirillin said. "We pass within twenty kilometers of it."

"Air Force is going to hit that, they tell me, Stealth fighters with smart bombs, they're gonna post-hole the runways before we drive past."

"Ah, that is a fine idea," Kirillin said.

"Kinda like that myself," Chavez said. "Well, Mr. C, looks like I get to be a soldier again. It's been a while."

"What fun," Clark observed. Oh, yeah, sitting in the back of a helicopter, going deep into Indian Country, where there were sure to be people with guns. Well, could be worse. Going in at dawn, at least the gomers on duty would be partly asleep, unless their boss was a real prick. *How tough was discipline in the People's Liberation Army?* John wondered. Probably pretty tough. Communist governments didn't encourage back talk.

"How, exactly, are we supposed to disable the missiles?" Ding asked.

"They're fueled by a ten-centimeter pipe—two of them, actually—from underground fueling tanks adjacent to the launch silo. First, we destroy the pipes," Kirillin said. "Then we look for some way to access the missile silo itself. A simple hand grenade will suffice. These are delicate objects. They will not sustain much damage," the general said confidently.

"What if the warhead goes off?" Ding asked.

Kirillin actually laughed at that. "They will not, Domingo Stepanovich. These items are very secure in their arming procedures, for all the obvious reasons. And the sites themselves will not be designed to protect against a direct assault. They are designed to protect against nuclear blast, not a squad of engineer-soldiers. You can be sure of that."

Hope you're right on that one, fella, Chavez didn't say aloud.

"You seem knowledgeable on this subject, Yuriy."

"Vanya, this mission is one Spetsnaz has practiced more than once. We Russians have thought from time to time about taking these missiles—how you say? Take them out of play, yes?"

"Not a bad idea at all, Yuriy. Not my kind of weapons," Clark said. He really did prefer to do his killing close enough to see the bastard's face. Old habits died hard, and a telescopic sight was just as good as a knife in that respect. Much better. A rifle bullet didn't make people flop around and make noise the way a knife across the throat did. But death was supposed to be administered one at a time, not whole cities at once. It just wasn't tidy or selective enough.

Chavez looked at his Team-2 troopers. They didn't look overtly tense, but good soldiers did their best to hide such feelings. Of their number, only Ettore Falcone wasn't a career soldier, but instead a cop from the Italian Carabinieri, which was about halfway between military and police. Chavez went over to see him.

"How you doing, BIG BiRD?" Ding asked.

"It is tense, this mission, no?" Falcone replied.

"It might be. You never really know until you get there."

The Italian shrugged. "As with raids on mafiosi, sometimes you kick the door and there is nothing but men drinking wine and playing cards. Sometimes they have *machinapistoli,* but you must kick the door to find out."

"You do a lot of those?"

"Eight," Falcone replied. "I am usually the first one through the door because I am usually the best shot. But we have good men on the team there, and we have good men on the team here. It should go well, Domingo. I am tense, yes, but I will be all right. You will see,"

BIG BiRD ended. Chavez clapped him on the shoulder and went off to see Sergeant-Major Price.

"Hey, Eddie."

"Do we have a better idea for the mission yet?"

"Getting there. Looks like mainly a job for Paddy, blowing things up."

"Connolly's the best explosives man I've ever seen," Price observed. "But don't tell him that. His head's swollen enough already."

"What about Falcone?"

"Ettore?" Price shook his head. "I will be very surprised if he puts a foot wrong. He's a very good man, Ding, bloody machine—a robot with a pistol. That sort of confidence rarely goes bad. Things are too automatic for him."

"Okay, well, we've picked our target. It the north- and east-most silo. Looks like it's on fairly flat ground, two four-inch pipes running to it. Paddy'll blow those, and then try to find a way to pop the cover off the silo or otherwise find an access door—there's one on the overhead. Then get inside, toss a grenade to break the missile, and we get the hell out of Dodge City."

"Usual division of the squad?" Price asked. It had to be, but there was no harm in making sure.

Chavez nodded. "You take Paddy, Louis, Hank, and Dieter, and your team handles the actual destruction of the missile. I take the rest to do security and overwatch." Price nodded as Paddy Connolly came over.

"Are we getting chemical gear?"

"What?" Chavez asked.

"Ding, if we're going to be playing with bloody liquidfueled missiles, we need chemical-warfare gear. The fuels for these things—you don't want to breathe the vapor, trust me. Red-fuming nitric acid, nitrogen tetroxide, hydrazine, that sort of thing. Those are bloody corrosive chemicals they use to power rockets, not like a pint of bitter at the Green Dragon, I promise you. And if the missiles are fueled and we blow them, well, you don't want to be close, and you *definitely* don't want to be downwind. The gas cloud will be bloody lethal, like what you chaps use in America to execute murderers, but rather less pleasant."

"I'll talk to John about that." Chavez made his way back forward.

Oh, shit," Ed Foley observed when he took the call. "Okay, John, I'll get hold of the Army on that one. How long 'til you're there?"

"Hour and a half to the airfield."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Ed, never been better."

Foley was struck by the tone. Clark had been CIA's official iceman

for close to twenty years. He'd gone out on all manner of field operations without so much as a blink. But being over fifty—had it changed him, or did he just have a better appreciation of his own mortality now? The DCI figured that sort of thing came to everybody. "Okay, I'll get back to you." He switched phones. "I need General Moore."

"Yes, Director?" the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said in greeting. "What can I do for you?"

"Our special-operations people say they need chemical-warfare gear for their mission and—"

"Way ahead of you, Ed. SOCOM told us the same thing. First Armored's got the right stuff, and it'll be waiting for them at the field."

"Thanks, Mickey."

"How secure are those silos?"

"The fueling pipes are right in the open. Blowing them up ought not to be a problem. Also, every silo has a metal access door for the maintenance people, and again, getting into it ought not to be a problem. My only concern is the site security force; there may be as much as a whole infantry battalion spread out down there. We're waiting for a KH-11 to overfly the site now for a final check."

"Well, Diggs is sending Apaches down to escort the raiding force. That'll be an equalizer," Moore promised. "What about the command bunker?"

"It's centrally located, looks pretty secure, entirely underground, but we have a rough idea of the configuration from penetrating radar." Foley referred to the KH-14 Lacrosse satellite. NASA had once published radar photos that had shown underground tributaries of the Nile that emptied into the Mediterranean Sea at Alexandria. But the capability hadn't been developed for hydrologists. It had also spotted Soviet missile silos that the Russians had thought to be well camouflaged, and other sensitive facilities, and America had wanted to let the Russians know that the locations were not the least bit secret. "Mickey, how do you feel about the mission?"

"I wish we had enough bombs to do it," General Moore replied honestly.

"Yeah," the DCI agreed.

The Politburo meeting had gone past midnight.

"So, Marshal Luo," Qian said, "things went badly yesterday. How badly? We need the truth here," he concluded roughly. If nothing else, Qian Kun had made his name in the past few days, as the only Politburo member with the courage to take on the ruling clique, expressing openly the misgivings that they'd all felt. Depending on

who won, it could mean his downfall, either all the way to death or simply to mere obscurity, but it seemed he didn't care. That made him unusual among the men in the room, Fang Gan thought, and it made him a man to be respected.

"There was a major battle yesterday between 34th Shock Army and the Russians. It appears to have been a draw, and we are now maneuvering to press our advantage," the Defense Minister told them. They were all suffering from fatigue in the room, and again the Finance Minister was the only one to rise to his words.

"In other words, a battle was fought, and we lost it," Qian shot back.

"I didn't say that!" Luo responded angrily.

"But it is the truth, is it not?" Qian pressed the point.

"I told you the truth, Qian!" was the thundering reply.

"Comrade Marshal," the Finance Minister said in a reasonable tone, "you must forgive me for my skepticism. You see, much of what you've said in this room has turned out to be less than completely accurate. Now, I do not blame you for this. Perhaps you have been misinformed by some of your subordinates. All of us are vulnerable to that, are we not? But now is the time for a careful examination of objective realities. I am developing the impression that objective reality may be adverse to the economic and political objectives on whose pursuit this body has sent our country and its people. Therefore, we must now know what the facts are, and what also are the dangers facing us. So, Comrade Marshal, now, what is the military situation in Siberia?"

"It has changed somewhat," Luo admitted. "Not entirely to our benefit, but the situation is by no means lost." He'd chosen his words a little too carefully.

By no means lost, everyone around the table knew, was a delicate way of saying that a disaster had taken place. As in any society, if you knew the aphorisms, you could break the code. Success here was always proclaimed in the most positive terms. Setbacks were brushed aside without admission as something less than a stunning success. Failure was something to be blamed on individuals who'd failed in their duty—often to their great misfortune. But a real policy disaster was invariably explained as a situation that could yet be restored.

"Comrades, we still have our strengths," Zhang told them all. "Of all the great powers of the world, only we have intercontinental missiles, and no one will dare strike us hard while we do."

"Comrade, two days ago the Americans totally destroyed bridges so stout that one would have thought that only an angry deity could so much as scratch them. How secure can those missiles be, when we face a foe with invisible aircraft and magical weapons?" Qian asked. "I

think we may be approaching the time when Shen might wish to approach America and Russia to propose an end to hostilities," he concluded.

"You mean surrender?" Zhang asked angrily. *"Never!"*

It had already started, though the Politburo members didn't know it yet. All over China, but especially in Beijing, people owning computers had logged onto the Internet. This was especially true of young people, and university students most of all.

The CIA feed, http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberiabattle/realtime.ram, had attracted a global audience, catching even the international news organizations by surprise. CNN, Fox, and Europe's SkyNews had immediately pirated it, and then called in their expert commentators to explain things to their viewers in the first continuous news coverage of an event since February of 1991. CIA had taken to pirating CNN in turn, and now available on the CIA website were live interviews from Chinese prisoners. They spoke freely, they were so shocked at their fates—stunned at how near they'd come to death, and so buoyantly elated at their equally amazing survival when so many of their colleagues had been less fortunate. That made for great verbosity, and it was also something that couldn't be faked. Any Chinese citizen could have spotted false propaganda, but equally, any could discern this sort of truth from what he saw and heard.

The strange part was that Luo hadn't commented on the Internet phenomenon, thinking it irrelevant to the political facts of life in the PRC, but in that decision he'd made the greatest political misapprehension of his life.

They met in college dorm rooms first of all, amid clouds of cigarette smoke, chattering animatedly among themselves as students do, and like students everywhere they combined idealism with passion. That passion soon turned to resolve. By midnight, they were meeting in larger groups. Some leaders emerged, and, being leaders, they felt the need to take their associates somewhere. When the crowds mingled outside, the individual leaders of smaller groups met and started talking, and super-leaders emerged, rather like an instant military or political hierarchy, absorbing other groups into their own, until there were six principal leaders of a group of about fifteen hundred students. The larger group developed and then fed upon its own energy. Students everywhere are well supplied with piss and vinegar, and these Chinese students were no different. Some of the boys were there hoping to score with girls—another universal motivation for students—but the unifying factor here was rage at what had happened to their soldiers and their country, and even more rage at the lies that had gone out over State TV, lies so clearly and utterly refuted by the

reality they saw over the Internet, a source they'd learned to trust.

There was only one place for them to go, Tiananmen Square, the "Square of Heavenly Peace," the psychological center of their country, and they were drawn there like iron filings to a magnet. The time of day worked for them. The police in Beijing, like police everywhere, worked twenty-four-hour days divided into three unequal shifts, and the shift most lightly manned was that from 2300 to 0700. Most people were asleep then, and as a direct result there was little crime to suppress, and so this shift was the smallest in terms of manning, and also composed of those officers loved the least by their commanders, because no man in his right mind prefers the vampire life of wakefulness in darkness to that in the light of day. And so the few police on duty were those who had failed to distinguish themselves in their professional skills, or were disliked by their captains, and returned the compliment by not taking their duties with sufficient gravity.

The appearance of the first students in the square was barely noted by the two policemen there. Their main duties involved directing traffic and/or telling (frequently inebriated) foreign tourists how to stumble back to their hotels, and the only danger they faced was usually that of being blinded by the flashes of foreign cameras held by oafishly pleasant but drunken gwai.

This new situation took them totally by surprise, and their first reaction was to do nothing but watch. The presence of so many young people in the square was unusual, but they weren't *doing* anything overtly unlawful at the moment, and so the police just looked on in a state of bemusement. They didn't even report what was going on because the watch captain was an ass who wouldn't have known what to do about it anyway.

What if they strike at our nuclear arms?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked.

"They already have," Zhang reminded them. "They sank our missile submarine, you will recall. If they also strike at our land-based missiles, then it would mean they plan to attack us as a nation, not just our armed forces, for then they would have nothing to hold them back. It would be a grave and deliberate provocation, is that not so, Shen?"

The Foreign Minister nodded. "It would be an unfriendly act."

"How do we defend against it?" Tan Deshi asked.

"The missile field is located far from the borders. Each is in a heavily constructed concrete silo," Defense Minister Luo explained. "Moreover, we have recently fortified them further with steel armor to deflect bombs that might fall on them. The best way to add to their

defense would be to deploy surface-to-air missiles."

"And if the Americans use their stealthy bombers, then what?" Tan asked.

"The defense against that is passive, the steel hats we put on the silos. We have troops there—security personnel of Second Artillery Command—but they are there only for site security against intruders on the ground. If such an attack should be made, we should launch them. The principle is to use them or lose them. An attack against our strategic weapons would have to be a precursor to an attack against our nationhood. That is our one trump card," Luo explained. "The one thing that even the Americans truly fear."

"Well, it should be," Zhang Han Sen agreed. "That is how we tell the Americans where they must stop and what they must do. In fact, it might now be a good time to tell the Americans that we have those missiles, and the willingness to use them if they press us too hard."

"Threaten the Americans with nuclear arms?" Fang asked. "Is that wise? They know of our weapons, surely. An overt threat against a powerful nation is most unwise."

"They must know that there are lines they may not cross," Zhang insisted. "They can hurt us, yes, but we can hurt them, and this is one weapon against which they have no defense, and their sentimentality for their people works for us, not them. It is time for America to regard us as an equal, not a minor country whose power they can blithely ignore."

"I repeat, Comrade," Fang said, "that would be a most unwise act. When someone points a gun at your head, you do not try to frighten him."

"Fang, you have been my friend for many years, but in this you are wrong. It is *we* who hold that pistol now. The Americans only respect strength controlled by resolve. This will make them think. Luo, are the missiles ready for launch?"

The Defense Minister shook his head. "No, yesterday we did not agree to ready them. To do so takes about two hours—to load them with fuel. After that, they can be kept in a ready condition for about forty-eight hours. Then you defuel them, service them—it takes about four hours to do that—and you can refuel them again. We could easily maintain half of them in a ready-launch condition indefinitely."

"Comrades, I think it is in our interest to ready the missiles for flight."

"No!" Fang countered. "That will be seen by the Americans as a dangerous provocation, and provoking them this way is madness!"

"And we should have Shen remind the Americans that we have such weapons, and they do not," Zhang went on.

"That invites an attack on us!" Fang nearly shouted. "They do not

have rockets, yes, but they have other ways of attacking us, and if we do that now, when a war is already under way, we guarantee a response."

"I think not, Fang," Zhang replied. "They will not gamble millions of their citizens against all of ours. They have not the strength for such gambling."

"Gambling, you say. Do we gamble with the life of our country? Zhang, you are mad. This is lunacy," Fang insisted.

"I do not have a vote at this table," Qian observed. "But I have been a Party member all of my adult life, and I have served the People's Republic well, I think. It is our job here to build a country, not destroy it. What have we done here? We've turned China into a thief, a highway robber—and a *failed* highway robber at that! Luo has said it. We have lost our play for riches, and now we must adjust to that. We can recover from the damage we have done to our country and its people. That recovery will require humility on our part, not blustering defiance. To threaten the Americans now is an act of weakness, not strength. It's the act of an impotent man trying to show off his *gau.* It will be seen by them as a foolish and reckless act."

"If we are to survive as a nation—if we are to survive as the rulers of a powerful China," Zhang countered, "we must let the Americans know that they cannot push us further. Comrades, make no mistake. Our lives lie on this table." And that focused the discussion. "I do not suggest that we launch a nuclear strike on America. I propose that we demonstrate to America our resolve, and if they press us too far, then we will punish them—and the Russians. Comrades, I propose that we fuel up our missiles, to place them in a ready posture, and then have Shen tell the Americans that there are limits beyond which we cannot be pushed without the gravest possible consequences."

"No!" Fang retorted. "That is tantamount to the threat of nuclear war. *We must not do such a thing!*"

"If we do not, then we are all doomed," said Tan Deshi of the Ministry of State Security. "I am sorry, Fang, but Zhang is correct here. Those are the only weapons with which we can hold the Americans back. They will be tempted to strike at them—and if they do . . ."

"If they do, then we must use them, because if they take those weapons away from us, then they can strike us at will, and destroy all we have built in sixty years," Zhang concluded. "I call a vote."

Suddenly and irrationally, Fang thought, the meeting had struck out on a path with no logic or direction, leading to disaster. But he was the only one who saw this, as for the first time in his life he took a stand against the others. The meeting finally broke up. The Politburo members drove directly home. None of them passed through

Tiananmen Square on the way, and all of them fell rapidly asleep.

There were twenty-five UH-60A Blackhawks and fifteen Apaches on the ramp. Every one had stubby wings affixed to the fuselage. Those on the Blackhawks were occupied with fuel tanks. The Apaches had both fuel and rockets. The flight crews were grouped together, looking at maps.

Clark took the lead. He was dressed in his black Ninja gear, and a soldier directed him and Kirillin—he was in the snowflake camouflage used by Russian airborne troops—to Colonel Boyle.

"Howdy, Dick Boyle."

"I'm John Clark, and this is Lieutenant General Yuriy Kirillin. I'm RAINBOW," John explained. "He's Spetsnaz."

Boyle saluted. "Well, I'm your driver, gentlemen. The objective is seven hundred sixteen miles away. We can just about make it with the fuel we're carrying, but we're going to have to tank up on the way back. We're doing that right here"—he pointed to a spot on the navigation chart—"hilltop west of this little town named Chicheng. We got lucky. Two C-130s are going to do bladder drops for us. There will be a fighter escort for top cover, F-15s, plus some F-16s to go after any radars along the way, and when we get to about here, eight F-117s are going to trash this fighter base at Anshan. That should take care of any Chinese fighter interference. Now, this missile base has an associated security force, supposed to be battalion strength, in barracks located here"—this time it was a satellite photo—"and five of my Apaches are going to take that place down with rockets. The others will be flying direct support. The only other question is, how close do you want us to put you on these missile silos?"

"Land right on top of the bastards," Clark told him, looking over at Kirillin.

"I agree, the closer the better."

Boyle nodded. "Fair enough. The helicopters all have numbers on them indicating the silo they're flying for. I'm flying lead, and I'm going right to this one here."

"That means I go with you," Clark told him.

"How many?"

"Ten plus me."

"Okay, your chem gear's in the aircraft. Suit up, and we go. Latrine's that way," Boyle pointed. It would be better for every man to take a piss before the flight began. "Fifteen minutes."

Clark went that way, and so did Kirillin. Both old soldiers knew what they needed to do in most respects, and this one was as vital as loading a weapon.

"Have you been to China before, John?"

"Nope. Taiwan once, long ago, to get screwed, blued, and tattooed."

"No chance for that on this trip. We are both too old for this, you know."

"I know," Clark said, zipping himself up. "But you're not going to sit back here, are you?"

"A leader must be with his men, Ivan Timofeyevich."

"That is true, Yuriy. Good luck."

"They will not launch a nuclear attack on my country, or on yours," Kirillin promised. "Not while I live."

"You know, Yuriy, you might have been a good guy to have in 3rd SOG."

"And what is that, John?"

"When we get back and have a few drinks, I will tell you."

The troops suited up outside their designated helicopters. The U.S. Army chemical gear was bulky, but not grossly so. Like many American-issue items, it was an evolutionary development of a British idea, with charcoal inside the lining to absorb and neutralize toxic gas, and a hood that—

"We can't use our radios with this," Mike Pierce noted. "Screws up the antenna."

"Try this," Homer Johnston suggested, disconnecting the antenna and tucking it into the helmet cover.

"Good one, Homer," Eddie Price said, watching what he did and trying it himself. The American-pattern Kevlar helmet fit nicely into the hoods, which they left off in any case as too uncomfortable until they really needed it. That done, they loaded into their helicopters, and the flight crews spooled up the General Electric turboshaft engines. The Blackhawks lifted off. The special-operations troops were set in what were—for military aircraft—comfortable seats, held in place with four-point safety belts. Clark took the jump seat, aft and between the two pilots, and tied into the intercom.

"Who, exactly, are you?" Boyle asked.

"Well, I have to kill you after I tell you, but I'm CIA. Before that, Navy."

"SEAL?" Boyle asked.

"Budweiser badge and all. Couple years ago we set up this group, called RAINBOW, special operations, counterterror, that sort of thing."

"The amusement park job?"

"That's us."

"You had a -60 supporting you for that. Who's the driver?"

"Dan Malloy. Goes by 'BEAR' when he's driving. Know him?"

"Marine, right?"

"Yet." Clark nodded.

"Never met him, heard about him a little. I think he's in D.C. now."

"Yeah, when he left us he took over VMH-1."

"Flies the President?"

"Correct."

"Bummer," Boyle observed.

"How long you been doing this?"

"Flying choppers? Oh, eighteen years. Four thousand hours. I was born in the Huey, and grew up into these. Qualified in the Apache, too."

"What do you think of the mission?" John asked.

"Long" was the reply, and Clark hoped that was the only cause for concern. A sore ass you could recover from quickly enough.

I wish there was another way to do this one, Robby," Ryan said over lunch. It seemed utterly horrid to be sitting here in the White House Mess, eating a cheeseburger with his best friend, while others—including two people he knew well—Jack had learned, were heading into harm's way. It was enough to kill his appetite as dead as the low-cholesterol beef in the bun. He set it down and sipped at his Coke.

"Well, there is—if you want to wait the two days it's going to take Lockheed-Martin to assemble the bombs, then a day to fly them to Siberia, and another twelve hours to fly the mission. Maybe longer. The Black Jet only flies at night, remember?" the Vice President pointed out.

"You're handling it better than I am."

"Jack, I don't like it any more than you do, okay? But after twenty years of flying off carriers, you learn to handle the stress of having friends in tight corners. If you don't, might as well turn in your wings. Eat, man, you need your strength. How's Andrea doing?"

That generated an ironic smile. "Puked her guts out this morning. Had her use my own crapper. It's killing her, she was embarrassed as a guy caught naked in Times Square."

"Well, she's in a man's job, and she doesn't want to be seen as a wimp," Robby explained. "Hard to be one of the boys when you don't have a dick, but she tries real hard. I'll give her that."

"Cathy says it passes, but it isn't passing fast enough for her." He looked over to see Andrea standing in the doorway, always the watchful protector of her President.

"She's a good troop," Jackson agreed.

"How's your dad doing?"

"Not too bad. Some TV ministry agency wants him and Gerry Patterson to do some more salt-and-pepper shows on Sunday mornings. He's thinking about it. The money could dress up the church some."

"They were impressive together."

"Yeah, Gerry didn't do bad for a white boy—and he's actually a pretty good guy, Pap says. I'm not sure of this TV-ministry stuff, though. Too easy to go Hollywood and start playing to the audience instead of being a shepherd to your flock."

"Your father's a pretty impressive gent, Robby."

Jackson looked up. "I'm glad you think so. He raised us pretty good, and it was pretty tough on him after Mom died. But he can be a real sundowner. Gets all pissy when he sees me drink a beer. But, what the hell, it's his job to yell at people, I suppose."

"Tell him that Jesus played bartender once. It was his first public miracle."

"I've pointed that out, and then he says, if Jesus wants to do it, that's okay for Jesus, boy, but *you* ain't Jesus." The Vice President had a good chuckle. "Eat, Jack."

"Yes, Mom."

This food isn't half bad," Al Gregory said, two miles away in the wardroom of USS *Gettysburg*.

"Well, no women and no booze on a ship of war," Captain Blandy pointed out. "Not this one yet, anyway. You have to have some diversion. So, how are the missiles?"

"The software is fully loaded, and I e-mailed the upgrade like you said. So all the other Aegis ships ought to have it."

"Just heard this morning that the Aegis office in the Pentagon is having a bit of a conniption fit over this. They didn't approve the software."

"Tell 'em to take it up with Tony Bretano," Gregory suggested.

"Explain to me again, what exactly did you upgrade?"

"The seeker software on the missile warhead. I cut down the lines of code so it can recycle more quickly. And I reprogrammed the nutation rate on the laser on the fusing system so that I can handle a higher rate of closure. It should obviate the problem the Patriots had with the Scuds back in'91—I helped with that software fix, too, back then, but this one's about half an order of magnitude faster."

"Without a hardware fix?" the skipper asked.

"It *would* be better to increase the range of the laser, yes, but you can get away without it—at least it worked okay on the computer simulations."

"Hope to hell we don't need to prove it."

"Oh, yeah, Captain. A nuke headed for a city is a bad thing."

"Amen."

There were five thousand of them now, with more coming, summoned by the cell phones that they all seemed to have. Some even

had portable computers tied into cellular phones so that they could tap into the Internet site out here in the open. It was a clear night, with no rain to wreck a computer. The leaders of the crowd—they now thought of it as a demonstration—huddled around them to see more, and then relayed it to their friends. The first big student uprising in Tiananmen Square had been fueled by faxes. This one had taken a leap forward in technology. Mainly they milled around, talking excitedly with one another, and summoning more help. The first such demonstration had failed, but they'd all been toddlers then and their memory of it was sketchy at best. They were all old and educated enough to know what needed changing, but not yet old and experienced enough to know that change in their society was impossible. And they didn't know what a dangerous combination that could be.

The ground below was dark and unlit. Even their night-vision goggles didn't help much, showing only rough terrain features, mainly the tops of hills and ridges. There were few lights below. There were some houses and other buildings, but at this time of night few people were awake, and all of the lights were turned off.

The only moving light sources they could see were the rotor tips of the helicopters, heated by air friction to the point that they would be painful to touch, and hot enough to glow in the infrared spectrum that the night goggles could detect. Mainly the troops were lulled into stuporous lassitude by the unchanging vibration of the aircraft, and the semi-dreaming state that came with it helped to pass the time.

That was not true of Clark, who sat in the jump seat, looking down at the satellite photos of the missile base at Xuanhua, studying by the illumination of the IR light on his goggles, looking for information he might have missed on first and twenty-first inspection. He was confident in his men. Chavez had turned into a fine tactical leader, and the troops, experienced sergeants all, would do what they were told to the extent of their considerable abilities.

The Russians in the other helicopters would do okay, too, he thought. Younger—by eight years on average—than the RAINBOW troopers, they were all commissioned officers, mainly lieutenants and captains with a leavening of a few majors, and all were university graduates, well educated, and that was almost as good as five years in uniform. Better yet, they were well motivated young professional soldiers, smart enough to think on their feet, and proficient in their weapons.

The mission should work, John thought. He leaned to check the clock on the helicopter's instrument panel. Forty minutes and they'd find out. Turning around, he noticed the eastern sky was lightening,

according to his goggles. They'd hit the missile field just before dawn.

It was a stupidly easy mission for the Black Jets. Arriving overhead singly, about thirty seconds apart, each opened its bomb bay doors and dropped two weapons, ten seconds apart. Each pilot, his plane controlled by its automatic cruising system, put his laser dot on a preplanned section of the runway. The bombs were the earliest Paveway-II guidance packages bolted to Mark-84 2,000-pound bombs with cheap—$7.95 each, in fact—M905 fuses set to go off a hundredth of a second after impact, so as to make a hole in the concrete about twenty feet across by nine feet deep. And this all sixteen of them did, to the shocked surprise of the sleepy tower crew, and with enough noise to wake up every person within a five-mile radius—and just that fast, Anshan fighter base was closed, and would remain so for at least a week. The eight F-117s turned singly and made their way back to their base at Zhigansk. Flying the Black Jet wasn't supposed to be any more exciting than driving a 737 for Southwest Airlines, and for the most part it wasn't.

Why the hell didn't they send one of those Dark Stars down to cover the mission?" Jack asked.

"I suppose it never occurred to anybody," Jackson said. They were back in the situation room.

"What about satellite overheads?"

"Not this time," Ed Foley advised. "Next pass over is in about four hours. Clark has a satellite phone. He'll clue us in."

"Great." Ryan leaned back in a chair that suddenly wasn't terribly comfortable.

Objective in sight," Boyle said over the intercom. Then the radio. "BANDIT SIX to chicks, objective in sight. Check in, over."

"Two." "Three." "Four." "Five." "Six." "Seven." "Eight." "Nine." "Ten."

"COCHISE, check in."

"This is COCHISE LEADER with five, we have the objective."

"Crook with five, objective in sight," the second attack-helicopter team reported.

"Okay, move in as briefed. Execute, execute, execute!"

Clark was perked up now, as were the troops in the back. Sleep was shaken off, and adrenaline flooded into their bloodstreams. He saw them shake their heads and flex their jaws. Weapons were tucked in tight, and every man moved his left hand to the twist-dial release fitting on the belt buckle.

COCHISE flight went in first, heading for the barracks of the security battalion tasked to guard the missile base. The building could have been transported bodily from any WWII American army base—a two-story wood-frame construction, with a pitched roof, and painted white. There was a guard shack outside, also painted white, and it glowed in the thermal sights of the Apache gunners. They could even see the two soldiers there, doubtless approaching the end of their duty tour, standing slackly, their weapons slung over their shoulders, because *nobody* ever came out here, rarely enough during the day, and never in living memory at night—unless you counted the battalion commander coming back drunk from a command-staff meeting.

Their heads twisted slightly when they thought they heard something strange, but the four-bladed rotor on the Apache was also designed for sound suppression, and so they were still looking when they saw the first nash—

—the weapons selected were the 2.75-inch-diameter free-flight rockets, carried in pods on the Apaches' stub wings. Three of the section of five handled the initial firing run, with two in reserve should the unexpected develop. They burned in low, so as to conceal their silhouettes in the hills behind them, and opened up at two hundred meters. The first salvo of four blew up the guard shack and its two sleepy guards. The noise would have been enough to awaken those in the barracks building, but the second salvo of rockets, this time fifteen of them, got there before anyone inside could do more than blink his eyes open. Both floors of the two-story structure were hit, and most of those inside died without waking, caught in the middle of dreams. The Apaches hesitated then, still having weapons to fire. There was a subsidiary guard post on the other side of the building; COCHISE LEAD looped around the barracks and spotted it. The two soldiers there had their rifles up and fired blindly into the air, but his gunner selected his 20-mm cannon and swept them aside as though with a broom. Then the Apache pivoted in the air and he salvoed his remaining rockets into the barracks, and it was immediately apparent that if anyone was alive in there, it was by the grace of God Himself, and whoever it was would not be a danger to the mission.

"COCHISE Four and Five, Lead. Go back up Crook, we don't need you here."

"Roger, Lead," they both replied. The two attack helicopters moved off, leaving the first three to look for and erase any signs of life.

Crook flight, also of five Apaches, smoked in just ahead of the Blackhawks. It turned out that each silo had a small guard post, each for two men, and those were disposed of in a matter of seconds with

cannon fire. Then the Apaches climbed to higher altitude and circled slowly, each over a pair of missile silos, looking for anything moving, but seeing nothing.

BANDIT SIX, Colonel Dick Boyle, flared his Blackhawk three feet over Silo #1, as it was marked on his satellite photo.

"Go!" the co-pilot shouted over the intercom. The RAINBOW troopers jumped down just to the east of the actual hole itself; the "Chinese hat" steel structure, which looked like an inverted blunt ice-cream cone, prohibited dropping right down on the door itself.

The base command post was the best-protected structure on the entire post. It was buried ten meters underground, and the ten meters was solid reinforced concrete, so as to survive a nuclear bomb's exploding within a hundred meters, or so the design supposedly promised. Inside was a staff of ten, commanded by Major General Xun Qing-Nian. He'd been a Second Artillery (the Chinese name for their strategic missile troops) officer since graduating from university with an engineering degree. Only three hours before, he'd supervised the fueling of all twelve of his CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles, which had never happened before in his memory. No explanation had come with that order, though it didn't take a rocket scientist—which he was, by profession—to connect it with the war under way against Russia.

Like all members of the People's Liberation Army, he was a highly disciplined man, and always mindful of the fact that he had his country's most valuable military assets under his personal control. The alarm had been raised by one of the silo-guard posts, and his staff switched on the television cameras used for site inspection and surveillance. They were old cameras, and needed lights, which were switched on as well.

What the fuck!" Chavez shouted. "Turn the lights off!" he ordered over his radio.

It wasn't demanding. The light standards weren't very tall, nor were they very far away. Chavez hosed one with his MP-10, and the lights went out, thank you. No other lasted for more than five seconds at any of the silos.

We are under attack," General Xun said in a quiet and disbelieving voice. "We are under attack," he repeated. But he had a drill for this. "Alert the guard force," he told one NCO. "Get me Beijing," he ordered another.

At Silo #1, Paddy Connolly ran to the pipes that led to the top of the concrete box that marked the top of the silo. To each he stuck a block of Composition B, his explosive of choice. Into each block he inserted a blasting cap. Two men, Eddie Price and Hank Patterson, knelt close by with their weapons ready for a response force that was nowhere to be seen.

"Fire in the hole!" Patterson shouted, running back to the other two. There he skidded down to the ground, sheltered behind the concrete, and twisted the handle on his detonator. The two pipes were blown apart a millisecond later.

"Masks!" he told everyone on the radio . . . but there was no vapor coming off the fueling pipes. That was good news, wasn't it?

"Come on!" Eddie Price yelled at him. The three men, guarded now by two others, looked for the metal door into the maintenance entrance for the silo.

"Ed, we're on the ground, we're on the ground," Clark was saying into his satellite phone, fifty yards away. "The barracks are gone, and there's no opposition on the ground here. Doing our blasting now. Back to you soon. Out."

Well, shit," Ed Foley said in his office, but the line was now dead.

What?" It was an hour later in Beijing, and the sun was up. Marshal Luo, having just woken up after not enough sleep following the worst day he'd known since the Cultural Revolution, had a telephone thrust into his hands. "What is this?" he demanded of the phone.

"This is Major General Xun Qing-Nian at Xuanhua missile base. We are under attack here. There is a force of men on the ground over our heads trying to destroy our missiles. I require instructions!"

"Fight them off!" was the first idea Luo had.

"The defense battalion is dead, they do not respond. Comrade Minister, what do I do?"

"Are your missiles fueled and ready for launch?"

"Yes!"

Luo looked around his bedroom, but there was no one to advise him. His country's most priceless assets were now about to be ripped from his control. His command wasn't automatic. He actually thought first, but in the end, it wouldn't matter how considered his decision was.

"Launch your missiles," he told the distant general officer.

"Repeat your command," Luo heard.

"Launch your missiles!" his voice boomed. "*Launch your missiles NOW!*"

"By your command," the voice replied.

Fuck," Sergeant Connolly said. "This is some bloody door!" The first explosive block had done nothing more than scorch the paint. This time he attached a hollow-charge to the upper and lower hinges and backed off again. "This one will do it," he promised as he trailed the wires back.

The crash that followed gave proof to his words. When next they looked in, the door was gone. It had been hurled inward, must have flown into the silo like a bat out of—

—"Bloody hell!" Connolly turned. "Run! *RUN!"*

Price and Patterson needed no encouragement. They ran for their lives. Connolly caught them reaching for his protective hood as he did so, not stopping until he was over a hundred yards away.

"The bloody missile's fueled. The door ruptured the upper tank. It's going to blow!"

"Shit! Team, this is Price, the missiles are fueled, I repeat the missiles are fueled. Get the fucking hell away from the silo!"

The proof of that came from Silo #8, off to Price's south. The concrete structure that sat atop it surged into the air, and under it was a volcanic blast of fire and smoke. Silo #1, theirs, did the same, a gout of flame going sideways out of the open service door.

The infrared signature was impossible to miss. Over the equator, a DSP satellite focused in on the thermal bloom and cross-loaded the signal to Sunnyvale, California. From there it went to NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, dug into the sub-basement level of Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado.

"Launch! Possible launch at Xuanhua!"

"What's that?" asked CINC-NORAD.

"We got a bloom, a huge—*two* huge ones at Xuanhua," the female captain announced. "Fuck, there's another one."

"Okay, Captain, settle down," the four-star told her. "There's a special op taking that base down right now. Settle down, girl."

In the control bunker, men were turning keys. The general in command had never really expected to do this. Sure, it was a possibility, the thing he'd trained his entire career for, but, no, not this. No. Not a chance.

But someone was trying to destroy his command—and he did have his orders, and like the automaton he'd been trained to be, he gave the orders and turned his command key.

The Spetsnaz people were doing well. Four silos were now disabled. One of the Russian teams managed to crack the maintenance door on their first try. This team, General Kirillin's own, sent its technical genius inside, and he found the missile's guidance module and blew it apart with gunfire. It would take a week at least to fix this missile, and just to make sure *that* didn't happen, he affixed an explosive charge to the stainless steel body and set the timer for fifteen minutes. "Done!" he called.

"Out!" Kirillin ordered. The lieutenant general, now feeling like a new cadet in parachute school, gathered his team and ran to the pickup point. As guilty as any man would be of mission focus, he looked around, surprised by the fire and flame to his north—

—but more surprised to see three silo covers moving. The nearest was only three hundred meters away, and there he saw one of his Spetsnaz troopers walk right to the suddenly open silo and toss something in—then he ran like a rabbit—

—because three seconds later, the hand grenade he'd tossed in exploded, and took the entire missile up with it. The Spetsnaz soldier disappeared in the fireball he'd caused, and would not be seen again—

—but then something worse happened. From exhaust vents set left and right of Silos #5 and #7 came two vertical fountains of solid white-yellow flame, and less than two seconds later appeared the blunt, black shape of a missile's nosecone.

Fuck," breathed the Apache pilot coded CROOK Two. He was circling a kilometer away, and without any conscious thought at all, lowered his nose, twisted throttle, and pulled collective to jerk his attack helicopter at the rising missile.

"Got it," the gunner called. He selected his 20-mm cannon and held down the trigger. The tracers blazed out like laser beams. The first set missed, but the gunner adjusted his lead and walked them into the missile's upper half—

—the resulting explosion threw CROOK Two out of control, rolling it over on its back. The pilot threw his cyclic to the left, continuing the roll before he stopped it, barely, a quarter of the way through the second one, and then he saw the fireball rising, and the burning missile fuel falling back to the ground, atop Silo #9, and on all the men there who'd disabled that bird.

The last missile cleared its silo before the soldiers there could do much about it. Two tried to shoot at it with their personal weapons, but the flaming exhaust incinerated them in less time than it takes to pull a trigger. Another Apache swept in, having seen what CROOK Two had accomplished, but its rounds fell short, so rapidly the CSS-4

climbed into the air.

Oh, fuck," Clark heard in his radio earpiece. It was Ding's voice. "Oh, fuck."

John got back on his satellite phone.

"Yeah, how's it going?" Ed Foley asked.

"One got off, one got away, man."

"What?"

"You heard me. We killed all but one, but that one got off . . . going north, but leaning east some. Sorry, Ed. We tried."

It took Foley a few seconds to gather his thoughts and reply. "Thanks, John. I guess I have some things to do here."

* * *

There's another one," the captain said.

CINC-NORAD was trying to play this one as cool as he could. Yes, there was a spec-op laid on to take this Chinese missile farm down, and so he expected to see some hot flashes on the screen, and okay, all of them so far had been on the ground.

"That should be all of them," the general announced.

"Sir, this one's moving. This one's a launch."

"Are you sure?"

"Look, sir, the bloom is moving off the site," she said urgently. "Valid launch, valid launch—valid threat!" she concluded. "Oh, my God . . ."

"Oh, shit," CINC-NORAD said. He took one breath and lifted the Gold Phone. No, first he'd call the NMCC.

The senior watch officer in the National Military Command Center was a Marine one-star named Sullivan. The NORAD phone didn't ring very often.

"NMCC, Brigadier General Sullivan speaking."

"This is CINC-NORAD. We have a valid launch, valid threat from Xuanhua missile base in China. I say again, we have a valid launch, valid threat from China. It's angling east, coming to North America."

"Fuck," the Marine observed.

"Tell me about it."

The procedures were all written down. His first call went to the White House military office.

Ryan was sitting down to dinner with the family. An unusual night, he had nothing scheduled, no speeches to give, and that was good,

because reporters always showed up and asked questions, and lately—

"Say that again?" Andrea Price-O'Day said into her sleeve microphone. "What?"

Then another Secret Service agent bashed into the room. *"Marching Order!"* he proclaimed. It was a code phrase often practiced but never spoken in reality.

"What?" Jack said, half a second before his wife could make the same sound.

"Mr. President, we have to get you and your family out of here," Andrea said. "The Marines have the helicopters on the way."

"What's happening?"

"Sir, NORAD reports an inbound ballistic threat."

"What? China?"

"That's all I know. Let's go, right now," Andrea said forcefully.

"Jack," Cathy said in alarm.

"Okay, Andrea." The President turned. "Time to go, honey. Right now."

"But—what's happening?"

He got her to her feet first, and walked to the door. The corridor was full of agents. Trenton Kelly was holding Kyle Daniel—the lionesses were nowhere in sight—and the principal agents for all the other kids were there. In a moment, they saw that there was not enough room in the elevator. The Ryan family rode. The agents mainly ran down the wide, white marble steps to the ground level.

"Wait!" another agent called, holding his left hand up. His pistol was in his right hand, and none of them had seen *that* very often. They halted as commanded—even the President doesn't often argue with a person holding a gun.

Ryan was thinking as fast as he knew how: "Andrea, where do I go?"

"You go to KNEECAP. Vice President Jackson will join you there. The family goes to Air Force One."

At Andrews Air Force base, just outside Washington, the pilots of First Heli, the USAF 1st Helicopter Squadron, were sprinting to their Bell Hueys. Each had an assignment, and each knew where his Principal was, because the security detail of each was reporting in constantly. Their job was to collect the cabinet members and spirit them away from Washington to preselected places of supposed safety. Their choppers were off the ground in less than three minutes, scattering off to different preselected pickup points.

* * *

Jack, what is this?" It took a lot to make his wife afraid, but this one had done it.

"Honey, we have a report that a ballistic missile is flying toward America, and the safest place for us to be is in the air. So, they're getting you and the kids to Air Force One. Robby and I will be on KNEECAP. Okay?"

"Okay? Okay? What is this?"

"It's bad, but that's all I know."

On the Aleutian island of Shemya, the huge Cobra Dane radar scanned the sky to the north and west. It frequently detected satellites, which mainly fly lower than ICBM warheads, but the computer that analyzed the tracks of everything that came into the system's view categorized this contact as exactly what it was, too high to be a low-orbit satellite, and too slow to be a launch vehicle.

"What's the track?" a major asked a sergeant.

"Computer says East Coast of the United States. In a few minutes we'll know more . . . for now, somewhere between Buffalo and Atlanta." That information was relayed automatically to NORAD and the Pentagon.

The entire structure of the United States military went into hyperdrive, one segment at a time, as the information reached it. That included USS *Gettysburg,* alongside the pier in the Washington Navy Yard.

Captain Blandy was in his in-port cabin when the growler phone went off. "Captain speaking . . . go to general quarters, Mr. Gibson," he ordered, far more calmly than he felt.

Throughout the ship, the electronic gonging started, followed by a human voice: "General Quarters—General Quarters—all hands man your battle stations."

Gregory was in CIC, running another simulation. "What's that mean?"

Senior Chief Leek shook his head. "Sir, that means something ain't no simulation no more." *Battle stations alongside the fucking pier?* "Okay, people, let's start lighting it all up!" he ordered his sailors.

The regular presidential helicopter muttered down on the South Lawn, and the Secret Service agent at the door turned and yelled: *"COME ON!"*

Cathy turned. "Jack, you coming with us?"

"No, Cath, I have to go to KNEECAP. Now, get along. I'll see you later tonight, okay?" He gave her a kiss, and all the kids got a hug,

except for Kyle, whom the President took from Kelley's arms for a quick hold before giving him back. "Take care of him," he told the agent.

"Yes, sir. Good luck." Ryan watched his family run up the steps into the chopper, and the Sikorsky lurched off before they could have had a chance to sit and strap down.

Then another Marine helicopter appeared, this one with Colonel Dan Malloy at the controls. This one was a VH-60, whose doors slid open. Ryan walked quickly to it, with Andrea Price-O'Day at his side. They sat and strapped down before it lumbered back into the air.

"What about everybody else?" Ryan asked.

"There's a shelter under the East Wing for some . . ." she said. Then her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

"Oh, shit, what about everybody else?" Ryan demanded.

"Sir, I have to look after *you.*"

"But—what—"

Then Special Agent Price-O'Day started retching. Ryan saw and pulled out a barf bag, one with a very nice Presidential logo printed on it, and handed it to her. They were over the Mall now, just passing the George Washington Monument. Off to the right was southwest Washington, filled with the working- and middle-class homes of regular people who drove cabs or cleaned up offices, tens of thousands of them . . . there were people visible in the Mall, on the grass, just enjoying a walk in the falling darkness, just being people . . .

And you just left behind a hundred or so. Maybe twenty will fit in the shelter under the East Wing . . . what about the rest, the ones who make your bed and fold your socks and shine your shoes and serve dinner and pick up after the kids—what about them, *Jack?* a small voice asked. *Who flies* them *off to safety?*

He turned his head to see the Washington Monument, and beyond that the reflecting pool and the Lincoln Memorial. He was in the same line as those men, in the city named for one, and saved in time of war by another . . . and he was running away from danger . . . the Capitol Building, home of the Congress. The light was on atop the dome. Congress was in session, doing the country's work, or trying to, as they did . . . but he was running away . . . eastern Washington, mainly black, working-class people who did the menial jobs for the most part, and had hopes to send their kids to college so that they could make out a little better than their parents had . . . eating their dinner, watching TV, maybe going out to a movie tonight or just sitting on their porches and shooting the bull with their neighbors—

—Ryan's head turned again, and he saw the two gray shapes at the Navy Yard, one familiar, one not, because Tony Bretano had—

Ryan flipped the belt buckle in his lap and lurched forward,

knocking into the Marine sergeant in the jump seat. Colonel Malloy was in the right-front seat, doing his job, flying the chopper. Ryan grabbed his left shoulder. The head came around.

"Yes, sir, what is it?"

"See that cruiser down there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Land on it."

"Sir, I—"

"Land on it, that's an order!" Ryan shouted at him.

"Aye aye," Malloy said like a good Marine.

The Blackhawk turned, arcing down the Anacostia River, and flaring as Malloy judged the wind. The Marine hesitated, looking back one more time. Ryan insistently jerked his hand at the ship.

The Blackhawk approached cautiously.

"What are you doing?" Andrea demanded.

"I'm getting off here. You're going to KNEECAP."

"NO!" she shouted back. "I stay with you!"

"Not this time. Have your baby. If this doesn't work out, I hope the kid turns out like you and Pat." Ryan moved to open the door. The Marine sergeant got there first. Andrea moved to follow.

"Keep her aboard, Marine!" Ryan told the crew chief. "She goes with you!"

"NO!" Price-O'Day screamed.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant acknowledged, wrapping his arms around her.

President Ryan jumped to the nonskid decking of the cruiser's landing area and ducked as the chopper pulled back into the sky. Andrea's face was the last thing he saw. The rotor wash nearly knocked him down, but going to one knee prevented that. Then he stood up and looked around.

"What the hell is—Jesus, sir!" the young petty officer blurted, recognizing him.

"Where's the captain?"

"Captain's in CIC, sir."

"Show me!"

The petty officer led him into a door, then a passageway that led forward. A few twists and turns later, he was in a darkened room that seemed to be set sideways in the body of the ship. It was cool in here. Ryan just walked in, figuring he was President of the United States, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, and the ship belonged to him anyway. It took a stretch to make his limbs feel as though they were a real part of his body, and then he looked around, trying to orient himself. First he turned to the sailor who'd brought him here.

"Thanks, son. You can go back to your place now."

"Aye, sir." He turned away as though from a dream/nightmare and resumed his duties as a sailor.

Okay, Jack thought, now what? He could see the big radar displays set fore and aft, and the people sitting sideways to look at it. He headed that way, bumping into a cheap aluminum chair on the way, and looked down to see what looked like a Navy chief petty officer in a khaki shirt whose pocket—well, damn—Ryan exercised his command prerogative and reached down to steal the sailor's cigarette pack. He lifted one out, and lit it with a butane lighter. Then he walked to look at the radar display.

"Jesus, sir," the chief said belatedly.

"Not quite. Thanks for the smoke." Two more steps and he was behind a guy with silver eagles on his collar. That would be the captain of USS *Gettysburg*. Ryan took a long and comforting drag on the smoke.

"God damn it! There's no smoking in my CIC!" the captain snarled.

"Good evening, Captain," Ryan replied. "I think at this moment we have a ballistic warhead inbound on Washington, presumably with a thermonuclear device inside. Can we set aside your concerns about secondhand smoke for a moment?"

Captain Blandy turned around and looked up. His mouth opened as wide as a U.S. Navy ashtray. "How—who—what?"

"Captain, let's ride this one out together, shall we?"

"Captain Blandy, sir," the man said, snapping to his feet.

"Jack Ryan, Captain." Ryan shook his hand and bade him sit back down. "What's happening now?"

"Sir, the NMCC tells us that there's a ballistic inbound for the East Coast. I've got the ship at battle stations. Radar's up. Chip inserted?" he asked.

"The chip is in, sir," Senior Chief Leek confirmed.

"Chip?"

"Just our term for it. It's really a software thing," Blandy explained.

Cathy and the kids were pulled up the steps and hustled into the forward cabin. The colonel at the controls was in an understandable hurry. With Three and Four already turning, he started engines One and Two, and the VC-25 started rolling the instant the truck with the steps pulled away, making one right-angle turn, and then lumbering down Runway One-Nine Right into the southerly wind. Immediately below him, Secret Service and Air Force personnel got the First Family strapped in, and for the first time in fifteen minutes, the Secret Service people allowed themselves to breathe normally. Not thirty seconds later, Vice President Jackson's helicopter landed next to the E-4B National Emergency Airborne Command Post, whose pilot was as

anxious to get off the ground as the driver of the VC-25. That was accomplished in less than ninety seconds. Jackson had never strapped in, and stood to look around. "Where's Jack?" the Vice President asked. Then he saw Andrea, who looked as though she just miscarried her pregnancy.

"He stayed, sir. He had the pilot drop him on the cruiser in the Navy Yard."

"He did *what?"*

"You heard me, sir."

"Get him on the radio—*right now!"* Jackson ordered.

Ryan was actually feeling somewhat relaxed. No more rushing about, here he was, surrounded by people calmly and quietly going about their jobs—outwardly so, anyway. The captain looked a little tense, but captains were supposed to, Ryan figured, being responsible in this case for a billion dollars' worth of warship and computers.

"Okay, how are we doing?"

"Sir, the inbound, if it's aimed at us, is not on the scope yet."

"Can you shoot it down?"

"That's the idea, Mr. President," Blandy replied. "Is Dr. Gregory around?"

"Here, Captain," a voice answered. A shape came closer. "Jesus!"

"That's not my name—I know you!" Ryan said in considerable surprise "Major—Major . . ."

"Gregory, sir. I ended up a half a colonel before I pulled the plug. SDIO. Secretary Bretano had me look into upgrading the missiles for the Aegis system," the physicist explained. "I guess we're going to see if it works or not."

"What do you think?" Ryan asked.

"It worked fine on the simulations" was the best answer available.

"Radar contact. We got us a bogie," a petty officer said. "Bearing three-four-niner, range nine hundred miles, speed—that's the one, sir. Speed is one thousand four hundred knots—I mean fourteen *thousand* knots, sir." *Damn,* he didn't have to add.

"Four and a half minutes out," Gregory said.

"Do the math in your head?" Ryan asked.

"Sir, I've been in the business since I got out of West Point."

Ryan finished his cigarette and looked around for—

"Here, sir." It was the friendly chief with an ashtray that had magically appeared in CIC. "Want another one?"

"Why not?" the President reasoned. He took a second one, and the senior chief lit it up for him. "Thanks."

"Gee, Captain Blandy, maybe you're declaring a blanket amnesty?"

"If he isn't, I am," Ryan said.

"Smoking lamp is lit, people," Senior Chief Leek announced, an odd satisfaction in his voice.

The captain looked around in annoyance, but dismissed it.

"Four minutes, it might not matter a whole lot," Ryan observed as coolly as the cigarette allowed. Health hazard or not, they had their uses.

"Captain, I have a radio call for the President, sir."

"Where do I take it?" Jack asked.

"Right here, sir," yet another chief said, lifting a phone-type receiver and pushing a button.

"Ryan."

"Jack, it's Robby."

"My family get off okay?"

"Yeah, Jack, they're fine. Hey, what the hell are you doing down there?"

"Riding it out. Robby, I can't run away, pal. I just can't."

"Jack if this thing goes off—"

"Then you get promoted," Ryan cut him off.

"You know what I'll have to do?" the Vice President demanded.

"Yeah, Robby, you'll have to play catch-up. God help you if you do." *But it won't be my problem,* Ryan thought. There was some consolation in that. Killing some guy with a gun was one thing. Killing a million with a nuke . . . no, he just couldn't do that without eating a gun afterward. *You're just too Catholic, Jack, my boy.*

"Jesus, Jack," his old friend said over the digital, encrypted radio link. Clearly thinking about what horrors he'd have to commit, son of a preacher-man or not . . .

"Robby, you're the best friend any man could hope to have. If this doesn't work out, look after Cathy and the kids for me, will ya?"

"You know it."

"We'll know in about three minutes, Rob. Get back to me then, okay?"

"Roger," the former Tomcat driver replied. "Out."

"Dr. Gregory, what can you tell me?"

"Sir, the inbound is probably their equivalent of one of our old W-51s. Five megatons, thereabouts. It'll do Washington, and everything within ten miles—hell, it'll break windows in Baltimore."

"What about us, here?"

"No chance. Figure it'll be targeted inside a triangle defined by the White House, the Capitol Building, and the Pentagon. The ship's keel might survive, only because it's under water. No people. Oh, maybe some really lucky folks in the D.C. subway. That's pretty far underground. But the fires will suck all the air out of the tunnels, probably." He shrugged. "This sort of thing's never happened before.

You can't say for sure until it does."

"What chances that it'll be a dud?"

"The Pakistanis have had some failed detonations. We had fizzles once, mainly from helium contamination in the secondary. That's why the terrorist bomb at Denver fizzled—"

"I remember."

"Okay," Gregory said. "It's over Buffalo now. Now it's reentering the atmosphere. That'll slow it down a little."

"Sir, the track is definitely on us, the NMCC says," a voice said.

"Agreed," Captain Blandy said.

"Is there a civilian alert?" Ryan asked.

"It's on the radio, sir," a sailor said. "It's on CNN, too."

"People will be panicking out there," Ryan murmured, taking another drag.

Probably not. Most people don't really know what the sirens mean, and the rest won't believe the radio, Gregory thought. "Captain, we're getting close." The track crossed over the Pennsylvania/New York border—

"System up?" Blandy asked.

"We are fully on line, sir," the Weapons Officer answered. "We are ready to fire from the forward magazine. Firing order is selected, all Block IVs."

"Very well." The captain leaned forward and turned his key in the lock. "System is fully enabled. Special-Auto." He turned. "Sir, that means the computer will handle it from here."

"Target range is now three hundred miles," a kid's voice announced.

They're so cool about this, Ryan thought. *Maybe they just don't believe it's real . . . hell, it's hard enough for me . . .* He took another drag on the cigarette, watching the blip come down, following its computer-produced velocity vector right for Washington, D.C.

"Any time now," the Weapons Officer said.

He wasn't far off. *Gettysburg* shuddered with the launch of the first missile.

"One away!" a sailor said off to the right. "One is away clean."

"Okay."

The SM2-ER missile had two stages. The short booster kicked the assembly out of its silo-type hole in the forward magazine, trailing an opaque column of gray smoke.

"The idea is to intercept at a range of two hundred miles," Gregory explained. "The interceptor and the inbound will rendezvous at the same spot, and—zap!"

"Mainly farmland there, place you go to shoot pheasants," Ryan said, remembering hunting trips there in his youth.

"Hey, I got a visual on the fucker," another voice called. There was a TV camera with a ten-power lens slaved into the fire-control radar,

and it showed the inbound warhead, just a featureless white blob now, like a meteor, Ryan thought.

"Intercept in four—three—two—one—"

The missile came close, but exploded behind the target.

"Firing Two!" *Gettysburg* shook again.

"Two away clean!" the same voice as before announced.

It was over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, now, its speed "down" to thirteen thousand miles per hour . . .

Then a third missile launched, followed a second later by a fourth. In the "Special-Auto" setting, the computer was expending missiles until it saw a dead target. That was just fine with everyone aboard.

"Only two Block IVs left," Weps said.

"They're cheap," Captain Blandy observed. "Come on, baby!"

Number Two also exploded behind the target, the TV picture showed.

"Three—two—one—now!"

So did Number Three.

"Oh, shit, oh, my God!" Gregory exclaimed. That caused heads to snap around.

"What?" Blandy demanded.

The IR seekers, they're going for the centroid of the infrared source, and that's *behind* the inbound."

"What?" Ryan asked, his stomach in an instant knot.

"The brightest part of the target is *behind* the target. The missiles are going for *that!* Oh, fuck!" Dr. Gregory explained.

"Five away . . . Six away . . . both got off clean," the voice to the right announced again.

The inbound was over Frederick, Maryland, now, doing twelve thousand knots . . .

"That's it, we're out of Block IVs."

"Light up the Block IIIs," Blandy ordered at once.

The next two interceptors did the same as the first two, coming within mere feet of the target, but exploding just behind it, and the inbound was traveling faster than the burn rate of explosive in the Standard-2-ER missile warheads. The lethal fragments couldn't catch up—

"Firing Seven! Clean." *Gettysburg* shook yet again.

"That one's a radar homer," Blandy said, clenching his fist before his chest.

Five and Six performed exactly as the four preceding them, missing by mere yards, but a miss in this case was as good as a mile.

Another shudder.

"Eight! Clean!"

"We have to get it before it gets to five or six thousand feet. That's

optimal burst height," Gregory said.

"At that range, I can engage it with my five-inch forward," Blandy said, some fear in his voice now.

For his part, Ryan wondered why he wasn't shaking. Death had reached its cold hand out for him more than once . . . the Mall in London . . . his own home . . . *Red October* . . . some nameless hill in Colombia. Someday it would touch him. Was this the day? He took a last drag on the smoke and stabbed it out in the aluminum ashtray.

"Okay, here comes seven—five—four—three—two—one—now!"

"Miss! *Fuck!"*

"Nine away—Ten away, both clean! We're out of missiles," the distant chief called out. "This is it, guys."

The inbound crossed over the D.C. Beltway, Interstate Highway 695, now at an altitude of less than twenty thousand feet, streaking across the night sky like a meteor, and so some people thought it was, pointing and calling out to those nearby. If they continued to look at it until detonation, their eyes would explode, and they would then die blind . . .

"Eight missed! Missed by a cunt hair!" a voice announced angrily. Clear on the TV, the puff of the explosion appeared mere inches from the target.

"Two more to go," the Weapons Officer told them.

Aloft, the forward port-side SPG-62 radar was pouring out X-band radiation at the target. The rising SM-2 missile, its rocket motor still burning, homed in on the reflected signal, focusing, closing, seeing the source of the reflected energy that drew it as a moth to a flame, a kamikaze robot the size of a small car, going at nearly two thousand miles per hour, seeking an object going six times faster . . . two miles . . . one mile . . . a thousand yards . . . five hundred, one hun—

—On the TV screen the RV meteor changed to a shower of sparks and fire—*"Yeah!"* twenty voices called as one.

The TV camera followed the descending sparks. The adjacent radar display showed them falling within the city of Washington.

"You're going to want to get people to collect those fragments. Some of them are going to be plutonium. Not real healthy to handle," Gregory said, leaning against a stanchion. "Looked like a skin-skin kill. Oh, God, how did I fuck up my programming like that?" he wondered aloud.

"I wouldn't sweat it too bad, Dr. Gregory," Senior Chief Leek observed. "Your code also helped the last one home in more efficient-like. I think I might want to buy you a beer, fella."

CHAPTER 61

Revolution

As usual, the news didn't get back quickly to the place where it had actually started. Having given the launch order, Defense Minister Luo had little clue what to do next. Clearly, he couldn't go back to sleep. America might well answer his action with a nuclear strike of its own, and therefore his first rational thought was that it might be a good idea for him to get the hell out of Beijing. He rose, made normal use of his bathroom, and splashed water on his face, but then again his mind hit a brick wall. What to do? The one name he knew to call was Zhang Han Sen. Once connected, he spoke very quickly indeed.

"You did—*what* happened, Luo?" the senior Minister Without Portfolio asked with genuine alarm.

"Someone—Russians or Americans, I'm not sure which—struck at our missile base at Xuanhua, attempting to destroy our nuclear deterrent. I ordered the base commander to fire them off, of course," Luo told his associate minister, in a voice that was both defiant and defensive. "We agreed on this in our last meeting, did we not?"

"Luo, yes, we discussed the possibility. But *you fired them without consulting with us?"* Zhang demanded. Such decisions were always collegial, never unilateral.

"What choice did I have, Zhang?" Marshal Luo asked in reply. "Had I hesitated a moment, there would have been none left to fire."

"I see," the voice on the phone said. "What is happening now?"

"The missiles are flying. The first should hit their first targets, Moscow and Leningrad, in about ten minutes. I had no choice, Zhang. I could not allow them to disarm us completely."

Zhang could have sworn and screamed at the man, but there was no point in that. What had happened had happened, and there was no sense expending intellectual or emotional energy on something he could not alter. "Very well. We need to meet. I will assemble the Politburo. Come to the Council of Ministers Building at once. Will the Americans or Russians retaliate?"

"They cannot strike back in kind. They have no nuclear missiles. An attack by bombers would take some hours," Luo advised, trying to make it sound like good news.

At his end of the connection, Zhang felt a chill in his stomach that rivaled liquid helium. As with many things in life, this one—contemplated theoretically in a comfortable conference room—was something very different now that it had turned into a most uncomfortable reality. And yet—was it? It was a thing too difficult to believe. It was too unreal. There were no outward signs—you'd at least expect thunder and lightning outside the windows to accompany news like this, even a major earthquake, but it was merely early morning, not yet seven o'clock. Could this be real?

Zhang padded across his bedroom, switched on his television, and turned it to CNN—it had been turned off for most of the country, but not *here,* of course. His English skills were insufficient to translate the rapid-fire words coming over the screen now. They were showing Washington, D.C., with a camera evidently atop the CNN building there—wherever that was, he had not the faintest idea. It was a black American speaking. The camera showed him standing atop a building, microphone in hand like black plastic ice cream, speaking very, very rapidly—so much so that Zhang was catching only one word in three, and looking off to the camera's left with wide, frightened eyes.

So, he knows what is coming there, doesn't he? Zhang thought, then wondered if he would see the destruction of the American capital via American news television. That, he thought, would have *some* entertainment value.

"Look!" the reporter said, and the camera twisted to see a smoke trail race across the sky—

—*What the hell is that?* Zhang wondered. Then there was another . . . and more besides . . . and the reporter was showing real fear now . . .

. . . it was good for his heart to see such feelings on the face of an American, especially a black American *reporter.* Another one of those *monkeys* had caused his country such great harm, after all . . .

So, now he'd get to see one incinerated . . . or maybe not. The camera and the transmitter would go, too, wouldn't they? So, just a flash of light, maybe, and a blank screen that would be replaced by CNN headquarters in Atlanta . . .

. . . more smoke trails. Ah, yes, they were surface-to-air missiles . . . could such things intercept a nuclear missile? Probably not, Zhang judged. He checked his watch. The sweep hand seemed determined to let the snail win this race, it jumped so slowly from one second to the next, and Zhang felt himself watching the display on the TV screen with anticipation he knew to be perverse. But America had been his country's principal enemy for so many years, had thwarted two of his best and most skillfully laid plans—and now he'd see its destruction by means of one of its very own agencies, this cursed medium of

television news, and though Tan Deshi claimed that it was not an organ of the American government, surely that could not be the case. The Ryan regime in Washington must have a very cordial relationship with those minstrels, they followed the party line of the Western governments so fawningly . . .

. . . two more smoke trails. . . the camera followed them and . . . what was that? Like a meteor, or the landing light of a commercial aircraft, a bright light, seemingly still in the sky—no, it was moving, unless that was the fear of the cameraman showing—oh, yes, that was it, because the smoke trails seemed to seek it out . . . but not quite closely enough, it would seem . . . *and so, farewell, Washington,* Zhang Han Sen thought. Perhaps there'd be adverse consequences for the People's Republic, but he'd have the satisfaction of seeing the death of —

—what was that? Like a bursting firework in the sky, a shower of sparks, mainly heading down . . . what did *that* mean . . . ?

It was clear sixty seconds later. Washington had not been blotted from the map. *Such a pity*, Zhang thought . . . *especially since there would be consequences* . . . With that, he washed and dressed and left for the Council of Ministers Building.

Dear God," Ryan breathed. The initial emotions of denial and elation were passing now. The feelings were not unlike those following an auto accident. First was disbelief, then remedial action that was more automatic than considered, then when the danger was past came the whiplash after-fear, when the psyche started to examine what had passed, and what had almost been, and fear after survival, fear after the danger was past, brought on the real shakes. Ryan remembered that Winston Churchill had remarked that there was nothing more elating than rifle fire that had missed—"to be shot at without result" was the exact quote the President remembered. If so, Winston Spencer Churchill must have had ice water in his cardiovascular system, or he enjoyed braggadocio more than this American President did.

"Well, I hope that was the only one," Captain Blandy observed.

"Better be, Cap'n. We be out of missiles," Chief Leek said, lighting up another smoke in accordance with the Presidential amnesty.

"Captain," Jack said when he was able to, "every man on this ship gets promoted one step by Presidential Order, and USS *Gettysburg* gets a Presidential Unit Citation. That's just for starters, of course. Where's a radio? I need to talk to KNEECAP."

"Here, sir." A sailor handed him a phone receiver. "The line's open, sir."

"Robby?"

"Jack?"

"You're still Vice President," SWORDSMAN told TOMCAT.

"For now, I suppose. Christ, Jack, what the hell were you trying to do?"

"I'm not sure. It seemed like the right idea at the time." Jack was seated now, both holding the phone in his hand and cradling it between cheek and shoulder, lest he drop it on the deck. "Is there anything else coming in?"

"NORAD says the sky is clear—only one bird got off. Targeted on us. Shit, the Russians still have dedicated ABM batteries all around Moscow. *They* probably could have handled it better than us." Jackson paused. "We're calling in the Nuclear Emergency Search Team from Rocky Mountain Arsenal to look for hot spots. DOD has people coordinating with the D.C. police . . . Jesus, Jack, that was just a little intense, y'know?"

"Yeah, it was that way here, too. Now what?" the President asked.

"You mean with China? Part of me says, load up the B-2 bombers on Guam with the B-61 gravity bombs and send them to Beijing, but I suppose that's a little bit of an overreaction."

"I think some kind of public statement—not sure what kind yet. What are you gonna be doing?"

"I asked. The drill is for us to stay up for four hours before we come back to Andrews. Same for Cathy and the kids. You might want to call them, too."

"Roger. Okay, Robby, sit tight. See you in a few hours. I think I'm going to have a stiff one or two."

"I hear that, buddy."

"Okay, POTUS out." Ryan handed the phone back. "Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Your entire ship's crew is invited to the White House, right now, for some drinks on the house. I think we all need it."

"Sir, I will not disagree with that."

"And those who stay aboard, if they feel the need to bend an elbow, as Commander in Chief, I waive Navy Regulations on that subject for twenty-four hours."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Chief?" Jack said next.

"Here, sir." He handed his pack and lighter over. "I got more in my locker, sir."

Just then two men in civilian clothes entered CIC. It was Hilton and Malone from the night crew.

"How'd you guys get here so fast?" Ryan asked.

"Andrea called us, sir—did what we think happened just happen?"

"Yep, and your President needs a bottle and a soft chair,

gentlemen."

"We have a car on the pier, sir. You want to come with us?"

"Okay—Captain, you get buses or something, and come to the White House right away. If it means locking the ship up and leaving her without anyone aboard, that's just fine with me. Call the Marine Barracks at Eighth and I for security if you need to."

"Aye, aye, Mr. President. We'll be along shortly."

I might be drunk before you get there, the President thought.

The car Hilton and Malone had brought down was one of the black armored Chevy Suburbans that followed the President everywhere he went. This one just drove back to the White House. The streets were suddenly filled with people simply standing and looking up—it struck Ryan as odd. The thing was no longer in the sky, and whatever pieces were on the ground were too dangerous to touch. In any case, the drive back to the White House was uneventful, and Ryan ended up in the Situation Room, strangely alone. The uniformed people from the White House Military Office—called Wham-O by the staff, which seemed particularly inappropriate at the moment—were all in a state somewhere between bemused and stunned. And the immediate consequence of the great effort to whisk senior government officials out of town—the scheme was officially called the Continuation of Government—had had the reverse effect. The government was at the moment still fragmented in twenty or so helicopters and one E-4B, and quite unable to coordinate itself. Ryan figured that the emergency was better designed to withstand a nuclear attack than to avoid one, and that, at the moment, seemed very strange.

Indeed, the big question for the moment was *What the hell do we do now?* And Ryan didn't have much of a clue. But then a phone rang to help him.

"This is President Ryan."

"Sir, this is General Dan Liggett at Strike Command in Omaha. Mr. President, I gather we just dodged a major bullet."

"Yeah, I think you can say that, General."

"Sir, do you have any orders for us?"

"Like what?"

"Well, sir, one option would be retaliation, and—"

"Oh, you mean because they blew a chance to nuke us, we should take the opportunity to nuke them for real?"

"Sir, it's my job to present options, not to advocate any," Liggett told his Commander-in-Chief.

"General, do you know where I was during the attack?"

"Yes, sir. Gutsy call, Mr. President."

"Well, I am now trying to deal with my own restored life, and I don't have a clue what I ought to do about the big picture, whatever

the hell that is. In another two hours or so, maybe we can think of something, but at the moment I have no idea at all. And you know, I'm not sure I want to have any such idea. So, for the moment, General, we do nothing at all. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Nothing at all happens with Strike Command."

"I'll get back to you."

"Jack?" a familiar voice called from the door.

"Arnie, I hate drinking alone—except when there's nobody else around. How about you and me drain a bottle of something? Tell the usher to bring down a bottle of Midleton, and, you know, have him bring a glass for himself."

"Is it true you rode it out on the ship down at the Navy Yard?"

"Yep." Ryan bobbed his head.

"Why?"

"I couldn't run away, Arnie. I couldn't run off to safety and leave a couple of million people to fry. Call it brave. Call it stupid. I just couldn't bug out that way."

Van Damm leaned into the corridor and made the drink order to someone Jack couldn't see, and then he came back in. "I was just starting dinner at my place in Georgetown when CNN ran the flash. Figured I might as well come here—didn't really believe it like I should have, I suppose."

"It was somewhat difficult to swallow. I suppose I ought to ask myself if it was our fault, sending the special-operations people in. Why is it that people second-guess everything we do here?"

"Jack, the world is full of people who can only feel big by making other people look small, and the bigger the target, the better they feel about it. And reporters love to get their opinions, because it makes a good story to say you're wrong about anything. The media prefers a good story to a good truth most of the time. It's just the nature of the business they're in."

"That's not fair, you know," Ryan observed, when the head usher arrived with a silver tray, a bottle of Irish whiskey, and some glasses with ice already in them. "Charlie, you pour yourself one, too," the President told him.

"Mr. President, I'm not supposed—"

"Today the rules changed, Mr. Pemberton. If you get too swacked to drive home, I'll have the Secret Service take you. Have I ever told you what a good guy you are, Charlie? My kids just plain love you."

Charles Pemberton, son and grandson of ushers at the White House, poured three drinks, just a light one for himself, and handed the glasses over with the grace of a neurosurgeon.

"Sit down and relax, Charlie. I have a question for you."

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Where did you ride it out? Where did you stay when that H-bomb was coming down on Washington?"

"I didn't go to the shelter in the East Wing, figured that was best for the womenfolk. I—well, sir, I took the elevator up to the roof and figured I'd just watch."

"Arnie, there sits a brave man," Jack said, saluting with his glass.

"Where were you, Mr. President?" Pemberton asked, breaking the etiquette rules because of pure curiosity.

"I was on the ship that shot the damned thing down, watching our boys do their job. That reminds me, this Gregory guy, the scientist that Tony Bretano got involved. We look after him, Arnie. He's one of the people who saved the day."

"Duly noted, Mr. President." Van Damm took a big pull on his glass. "What else?"

"I don't *have* a what-else right now," SWORDSMAN admitted.

Neither did anyone in Beijing, where it was now eight in the morning, and the ministers were filing into their conference room like sleepwalkers, and the question on everyone's lips was "What happened?"

Premier Xu called the meeting to order and ordered the Defense Minister to make his report, which he did in the monotone voice of a phone recording.

"You ordered the launch?" Foreign Minister Shen asked, aghast.

"What else was I to do? General Xun told me his base was under attack. They were trying to take our assets away—we spoke of this possibility, did we not?"

"We spoke of it, yes," Qian agreed. "But to do such a thing without our approval? That was a political action without reflection, Luo. What new dangers have you brought on us?"

"And what resulted from it?" Fang asked next.

"Evidently, the warhead either malfunctioned or was somehow intercepted and destroyed by the Americans. The only missile that launched successfully was targeted on Washington. The city was not, I regret to say, destroyed."

"You regret to say—you regret to say?" Fang's voice spoke more loudly than anyone at the table could ever remember. "You fool! If you had succeeded, *we would be facing national death now!* You *regret?"*

At about that time in Washington, a mid-level CIA bureaucrat had an idea. They were feeding live and taped coverage from the Siberian battlefield over the Internet, because independent news coverage wasn't getting into the People's Republic. "Why not," he asked his supervisor, "send them CNN as well?" That decision was made

instantaneously, though it was possibly illegal, maybe a violation of copyright laws. But on this occasion, common sense took precedence over bureaucratic caution. CNN, they decided quickly, could bill them later.

And so, an hour and twenty minutes after the event, http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberiabattle/realtime.ram began to cover the coverage of the near-destruction of Washington, D.C. The news that a nuclear war had been begun but aborted stunned the students in Tiananmen Square. The collective realization that they themselves might be the targets of a retaliatory strike did not put fear so much as rage into their young hearts. There were about ten thousand of them now, many with their portable laptop computers, and many of those hooked into cell phones for Internet access. From overhead you could tell their positions just by the tiny knots of pressed-together bodies. Then the leaders of the demonstration got together and started talking fast among themselves. They knew they had to do something, they just didn't know exactly what. For all they knew, they might well all be facing death.

The ardor was increased by the commentators CNN had hurriedly rushed into their studios in Atlanta and New York, many of whom opined that the only likely action for America was to reply in kind to the Chinese attack, and when the reporter acting as moderator asked what "in kind" meant, the reply was predictable.

For the students, the question now was not so much life and death as saving their nation—the thirteen hundred *million* citizens whose lives had been made forfeit by the madmen of the Politburo. The Council of Ministers Building was not all that far away, and the crowd started heading that way.

By this time, there was a police presence in the Square of Heavenly Peace. The morning watch replaced the night team and saw the mass of young people—to their considerable surprise, since this had not been a part of their morning briefing. The men going off duty explained that nothing had happened at all that was contrary to the law, and for all they knew, it was a spontaneous demonstration of solidarity and support for the brave PLA soldiers in Siberia. So, there were few of them about, and fewer still of the People's Armed Police. It would probably not have mattered in any case. The body of students coalesced, and marched with remarkable discipline to the seat of their country's government. When they got close, there were armed men there. These police officers were not prepared to see so many people coming toward them. The senior of their number, a captain, walked out alone and demanded to know who was in charge of this group, only to be brushed aside by a twenty-two-year-old engineering student.

Again, it was a case of a police officer totally unaccustomed to having his words disregarded, and totally nonplussed when it took place. Suddenly, he was looking at the back of a young man who was supposed to have stopped dead in his tracks when he was challenged. The security policeman had actually expected the students to stop as a body at his command, for such was the power of law in the People's Republic, but strong as the force of law was, it was also brittle, and when broken, there was nothing behind it. There were also only forty armed men in the building, and all of them were on the first floor in the rear, kept out of the way because the ministers wanted the armed peasants out of sight, except in ones and twos. The four officers on duty at the main entrance were just swept aside as the crowd thundered in through the double doors. All drew their pistols, but only one fired, wounding three students before being knocked down and kicked into senselessness. The other three just ran to the main post to find the reserve force. By the time they got there, the students were running up the wide, ceremonial stairs to the second floor.

The meeting room was well soundproofed, a security measure to prevent eavesdropping. But soundproofing worked in both directions, and so the men sitting around the table did not hear anything until the corridor was filled with students only fifty meters away, and even then the ministers just turned about in nothing more than annoyance —

—the armed guard force deployed in two groups, one running to the front of the building on the first floor, the other coming up the back on the second, led by a major who thought to evacuate the ministers. The entire thing had developed much too quickly, with virtually no warning, because the city police had dropped the ball rather badly, and there was no time to call in armed reinforcements. As it played out, the first-floor team ran into a wall of students, and while the captain in command had twenty men armed with automatic rifles, he hesitated to order opening fire because there were more students in view than he had cartridges in his rifles, and in hesitating, he lost the initiative. A number of students approached the armed men, their hands raised, and began to engage them in reasonable tones that belied the wild-eyed throng behind them.

It was different on the second floor. The major there didn't hesitate at all. He had his men level their rifles and fire one volley high, just to scare them off. But these students didn't scare. Many of them crashed through doors off the main corridor, and one of these was the room in which the Politburo was sitting.

The sudden entrance of fifteen young people got every minister's attention.

"What is this!" Zhang Han Sen thundered. "Who are you?"

"And who are *you?*" the engineering student sneered back. "Are you the maniac who started a nuclear war?"

"There is no such war—who told you such nonsense?" Marshal Luo demanded. His uniform told them who he was.

"And you are the one who sent our soldiers to their death in Russia!"

"What is this?" the Minister Without Portfolio asked.

"I think these are the people, Zhang," Qian Kun observed. *"Our* people, Comrade," he added coldly.

Into the vacuum of power and direction, more of the students forced their way into the room, and now the guard force couldn't risk shooting—too many of their country's leadership was right there, right in the field of fire.

"Grab them, grab them! They will not shoot these men!" one student shouted. Pairs and trios of students raced around the table, each to a separate seat.

"Tell me, boy," Fang said gently to the one closest to him, "how did you learn all this?"

"Over our computers, of course," the youngster replied, a little impolitely, but not grossly so.

"Well, one finds truth where one can," the grandfatherly minister observed.

"So, Grandfather, is it true?"

"Yes, I regret to say it is," Fang told him, not quite knowing what he was agreeing to.

Just then, the troops appeared, their officer in the lead with a pistol in his hand, forging their way into the conference room, wide-eyed at what they saw. The students were not armed, but to start a gunfight in this room would kill the very people he was trying to safeguard, and now it was his turn to hesitate.

"Now, everyone be at ease," Fang said, pushing his seat gently back from the table. "You, Comrade Major, do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Minister—but—"

"Good, Comrade Major. First, you will have your men stand down. We need no killing here. There has been enough of that."

The officer looked around the room. No one else seemed to be speaking just yet, and into that vacuum had come words which, if not exactly what he wanted to hear, at least had some weight in them. He turned and without words—waving his hands—had his men relax a little.

"Very good. Now, comrades," Fang said, turning back to his colleagues. "I propose that some changes are needed here. First of all, we need Foreign Minister Shen to contact America and tell them that a horrible accident has occurred, and that we rejoice that no lives

were lost as a result, and that those responsible for that mistake will be handled by us. To that end, I demand the immediate arrest of Premier Xu, Defense Minister Luo, and Minister Zhang. It is they who caused us to embark on the foolish adventure in Russia that threatens to bring ruin to us all. You three have endangered our country, and for this crime against the people, you must pay.

"Comrades, what is your vote?" Fang demanded.

There were no dissents; even Tan and Interior Minister Tong nodded their assent.

"Next, Shen, you will immediately propose an end to hostilities with Russia and America, telling them also that those responsible for this ruinous adventure will be punished. Are we agreed on that, Comrades?"

They were.

"For myself, I think we ought all to give thanks to Heaven that we may be able to put an end to this madness. Let us make this happen quickly. For now, I will meet with these young people to see what other things are of interest to them. You, Comrade Major, will conduct the three prisoners to a place of confinement. Qian, will you remain with me and speak to the students as well?"

"Yes, Fang," the Finance Minister said. "I will be pleased to."

"So, young man," Fang said to the one who'd seemed to act like a leader. "What is it you wish to discuss?"

The Blackhawks were long on their return flight. The refueling went off without a hitch, but it was soon apparent that almost thirty men, all Russians, had been lost in the attack on Xuanhua. It wasn't the first time Clark had seen good men lost, and as before, the determining factor was nothing more than luck, but that was a lousy explanation to have to give to a new widow. The other thing eating at him was the missile that had gotten away. He'd seen it lean to the east. It hadn't gone to Moscow, and that was all he knew right now. The flight back was bleakly silent the whole way, and he couldn't fix it by calling in on his satellite phone because he'd taken a fall at some point and broken the antenna off the top of the damned thing. He'd failed. That was all he knew, and the consequences of this kind of failure surpassed his imagination. The only good news he could come up with was that no one in his family lived close to any likely target, but lots of other people did. Finally the chopper touched down, and the doors were opened for the troopers to get out. Clark saw General Diggs there and went over to him.

"How bad?"

"The Navy shot it down over Washington."

"What?"

"General Moore told me. Some cruiser—*Gettysburg,* I think he said—shot the bastard down right over the middle of D.C. We got lucky, Mr. Clark."

John's legs almost buckled at that news. For the past five hours, he'd been imagining a mushroom cloud with his name on it over some American city, but God, luck, or the Great Pumpkin had intervened, and he'd settle for that.

"What gives, Mr. C?" Chavez asked, with considerable worry in his voice. Diggs gave him the word, too.

"The Navy? The fuckin' Navy? Well, I'll be damned. They are good for something, eh?"

Jack Ryan was about half in the bag by this time, and if the media found out about it, the hell with them. The cabinet was back in town, but he'd put off the meeting until the following morning. It would take time to consider what had to be done. The most obvious response, the one talking heads were proclaiming on the various TV stations, was one he could not even contemplate, much less order. They'd have to find something better than wholesale slaughter. He wouldn't order that, though some special operation to take out the Chinese Politburo certainly appealed to his current state of mind. A lot of blood had been spilled, and there would be some more, too. To think it had all begun with an Italian cardinal and a Baptist preacher, killed by some trigger-happy cop. Did the world really turn on so perverse an axis as that?

That, Ryan thought, *calls for another drink.*

But some good had to come from this. You had to learn lessons from this sort of thing. But what was there to learn? It was too confusing for the American President. Things had happened too fast. He'd gone to the brink of something so deep and so dreadful that the vast maw of it still filled his eyes, and it was just too much for one man to handle. He'd bounced back from facing imminent death himself, but not the deaths of millions, not as directly as this. The truth of the matter was that his mind was blanked out by it all, unable to analyze, unable to correlate the information in a way that would help him take a step forward, and all he really wanted and needed to do was to embrace his family, to be certain that the world still had the shape he wanted it to have.

People somehow expected him to be a superman, to be some godlike being who handled things that others could not handle—*well, yeah*, Jack admitted to himself. Maybe he had shown courage by remaining in Washington, but after courage came deflation, and he needed something outside himself to restore his manhood. The well he'd tapped wasn't bottomless at all, and this time the bucket was

clunking down on rocks . . .

The phone rang. Arnie got it. "Jack? It's Scott Adler."

Ryan reached for it. "Yeah, Scott, what is it?"

"Just got a call from Bill Kilmer, the DCM in Beijing. Seems that Foreign Minister Shen was just over to the embassy. They have apologized for launching the missile. They say it was a horrible accident and they're glad the thing didn't go off—"

"That's fucking nice of them," Ryan observed.

"Well, whoever gave the order to launch is under arrest. They request our assistance in bringing an end to hostilities. Shen said they'd take any reasonable action to bring that about. He said they're willing to declare a unilateral ceasefire and withdraw all their forces back to their own borders, and to consider reparations to Russia. They're surrendering, Jack."

"Really? Why?"

"There appears to have been some sort of riot in Beijing. Reports are very sketchy, but it seems that their government has fallen. Minister Fang Gan seems to be the interim leader. That's all I know, Jack, but it looks like a decent beginning. With your permission, and with the concurrence of the Russians, I think we ought to agree to this."

"Approved," the President said, without much in the way of consideration. Hell, he told himself, you *don't have to dwell too much on* ending *a war do you*? "Now what?"

"Well, I want to talk to the Russians to make sure they'll go along. I think they will. Then we can negotiate the details. As a practical matter, we hold all the cards, Jack. The other side is folding."

"Just like that? We end it all just like that?" Ryan asked.

"It doesn't have to be Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, Jack. It just has to work."

"Will it work?"

"Yes, Jack, it ought to."

"Okay, get hold of the Russians," Ryan said, setting his glass down.

Maybe this was the end of the last war, Jack thought. If so, no, it didn't have to be pretty.

It was a good dawn for General Bondarenko, and was about to get better. Colonel Tolkunov came running into his command center holding a sheet of paper.

"We just copied this off the Chinese radio, military and civilian. They are ordering their forces to cease fire in place and to prepare to withdraw from our territory."

"Oh? What makes them think we will let them go?" the Russian commander asked.

"It's a beginning, Comrade General. If this is accompanied by a

diplomatic approach to Moscow, then the war will soon be over. You have won," the colonel added.

"Have I?" Gennady losifovich asked. He stretched. It felt good this morning, looking at his maps, seeing the deployments, and knowing that he held the upper hand. If this was the end of the war, and he was the winner, then that was sufficient to the moment, wasn't it? "Very well. Confirm this with Moscow."

It wasn't that easy, of course. Units in contact continued to trade shots for some hours, until the orders reached them, but then the firing died down, and the invading troops withdrew away from their enemies, and the Russians, with orders of their own, didn't follow. By sunset, the shooting and the killing had stopped, pending final disposition. Church bells rang all over Russia.

Golovko took note of the bells and the people in the streets, swigging their vodka and celebrating their country's victory. Russia felt like a great power again, and that was good for the morale of the people. Better yet, in another few years they'd start reaping the harvest of their resources—and before that would come bridge loans of enormous size . . . and maybe, just maybe, Russia would turn the corner, finally, and begin a new century well, after wasting most of the previous one.

It was nightfall before the word got out from Beijing to the rest of China. The end of the war so recently started came as a shock to those who'd never really understood the reasons or the facts in the first place. Then came word that the government had changed, and that was also a puzzling development for which explanations would have to wait. The interim Premier was Fang Gan, a name known from pictures rather than words or deeds, but he looked old and wise, and China was a country of great momentum rather than great thoughts, and though the course of the country would change, it would change slowly so far as its people were concerned. People shrugged, and discussed the puzzling new developments in quiet and measured words.

For one particular person in Beijing, the changes meant that her job would change somewhat in importance if not in actual duties. Ming went out to dinner—the restaurants hadn't closed—with her foreign lover, gushing over drinks and noodles with the extraordinary events of the day, then walked off to his apartment for a dessert of Japanese sausage.

RED RABBIT

TOM CLANCY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS ◆ NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To Danny O and the men of Engine 52 and Ladder 52

Heroes are often the most ordinary of men.
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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The most momentous thing in human life is the art of winning the soul to good or to evil.

PYTHAGORAS

Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man.

CONFUCIUS

PROLOGUE

THE BACK GARDEN

THE SCARY PART, Jack decided, was going to be driving. He'd already bought a Jaguar—pronounced *jag-you-ah* over here, he'd have to remember—but both times he'd walked to it at the dealership, he'd gone to the left-front door instead of the right. The dealer hadn't laughed at him, but Ryan was sure he'd wanted to. At least he hadn't climbed into the passenger seat by mistake and really made an ass of himself. He'd have to remember all that: The "right" side of the road was the *left.* A right turn crossed oncoming traffic, not a left turn. The left lane was the slow lane on the interstates—*motorways,* he corrected himself. The plugs in the wall were all cockeyed. The house didn't have central heating, despite the princely price he'd paid for it. There was no air-conditioning, though that probably wasn't necessary here. It wasn't the hottest of climates: The locals started dropping dead in the street when the mercury topped 75. Jack wondered what the D.C. climate would do to them. Evidently, the "mad dogs and Englishmen" ditty was a thing of the past.

But it could have been worse. He did have a pass to shop for food at the Army–Air Force Exchange Service—otherwise known as the PX at nearby Greenham Commons Air Base—so at least they'd have proper hot dogs, and brands that resembled the ones he bought at the Giant at home in Maryland.

So many other discordant notes. British television was different, of course, not that he really expected much chance to vegetate in front of the phosphor screen anymore, but little Sally needed her ration of cartoons. Besides, even when you were reading something important, the background chatter of some mindless show was comforting in its own way. The TV news wasn't too bad, though, and the newspapers were particularly good—better than those he normally read at home, on the whole, but he'd miss the morning *Far Side.* Maybe the *International Tribune* had it, Ryan hoped. He could buy it at the train station kiosk. He had to keep track of baseball anyway.

The movers—*re*movers, he reminded himself—were beavering away under Cathy's direction. It wasn't a bad house, though smaller than their place at Peregrine Cliff, now rented to a Marine colonel teaching

the earnest young boys and girls at the Naval Academy. The master bedroom overlooked what seemed to be about a quarter-acre of garden. The realtor had been particularly enthused about that. And the previous owners had spent a lot of time there: It was wall-to-wall roses, mainly red and white, to honor the houses of Lancaster and York, it would seem. There were pink ones in between to show that they'd joined together to form the Tudors, though that house had died out with Elizabeth I—and ultimately made way for the new set of Royals, whom Ryan had ample reason to like.

And the weather wasn't bad at all. They'd been in country three days and it hadn't rained at all. The sun rose very early and set late, and in the winter, he'd heard, it never came up and immediately went back down again. Some of the new friends he'd made at the State Department had told him that the long nights could be hard on the little kids. At four years and six months, Sally still qualified for that. Five-month-old Jack probably didn't notice such things, and fortunately, he slept just fine—he was doing so right now, in fact, in the custody of his nanny, Margaret van der Beek, a young redhead and daughter of a Methodist minister in South Africa. She'd come highly recommended . . . and then had been cleared by a background check performed by the Metropolitan Police. Cathy was a little concerned about the whole idea of a nanny. The idea of somebody else raising her infant grated on her like fingernails on a chalkboard, but it was an honored local custom, and it had worked out pretty well for one Winston Spencer Churchill. Miss Margaret had been vetted through Sir Basil's agency—her own agency, in fact, was officially sanctioned by Her Majesty's government. Which meant precisely nothing, Jack reminded himself. He'd been thoroughly briefed in the weeks before coming over. The "opposition"—a British term also used at Langley—had penetrated the British intelligence community more than once. CIA believed they hadn't done so at Langley yet, but Jack had to wonder about that. KGB was pretty damned good, and people were greedy all over the world. The Russians didn't pay very well, but some people sold their souls and their freedom for peanuts. They also didn't carry a flashing sign on their clothing that said I AM A TRAITOR.

Of all his briefings, the security ones had been the most tiresome. Jack's dad had been the cop in the family, and Ryan himself had never quite mastered that mode of thinking. It was one thing to look for hard data amid the cascade of crap that worked its way up the intelligence system, quite another to look with suspicion at everyone in the office and yet expect to work cordially with them. He wondered if any of the others regarded him that way . . . *probably not,* he decided. He'd paid his dues the hard way, after all, and had the pale scars on his shoulder to prove it, not to mention the nightmares of

that night on Chesapeake Bay, the dreams in which his weapon never fired despite his efforts, Cathy's frantic cries of terror and alarm ringing in his ears. He'd won that battle, hadn't he? Why did the dreams think otherwise? Something to talk to a pshrink about, perhaps, but as the old wives' tale went, you had to be crazy to go to a pshrink. . . .

Sally was running about in circles, looking at her new bedroom, admiring the new bed being assembled by the removers. Jack kept out of the way. Cathy had told him he was unfitted even to supervise this sort of thing, despite his tool kit, without which no American male feels very manly, which had been among the first things unpacked. The removers had their own tools, of course—and they, too, had been vetted by SIS, lest some KGB-controlled agent plant a bug in the house. It just wouldn't do, old boy.

"Where's the tourist?" an American voice asked. Ryan went to the foyer to see who it—

"Dan! How the hell are you?"

"It was a boring day at the office, so Liz and I came out to see how things are going for you." And sure enough, just behind the Legal Attaché was his beauty-queen wife, the long-suffering St. Liz of the FBI Wives. Mrs. Murray went over to Cathy for a sisterly hug and kiss, then the two of them went immediately off to the garden. Cathy loved the roses, of course, which was fine with Jack. His dad had carried all the gardening genes in the Ryan family, and passed on none to his son. Murray gazed at his friend. "You look like hell."

"Long flight, boring book," Jack explained.

"Didn't you sleep on the way across?" Murray asked in surprise.

"On an airplane?" Ryan responded.

"It bothers you that much?"

"Dan, on a ship, you can see what's holding you up. Not in an airplane."

That gave Murray a chuckle. "Better get used to it, bud. You're gonna be building up a lot of frequent-flyer miles hopping back and forth to Dulles."

"I suppose." Strangely, Jack hadn't really considered that when he'd accepted the posting. *Dumb,* he'd realized too late. He'd be going back and forth to Langley at least once a month—not the greatest thing for a reluctant flyer.

"The moving going okay? You can trust this bunch, you know. Bas has used them for twenty-plus years, my friends at the Yard like them, too. Half of these guys are ex-cops." And cops, he didn't have to say, were more reliable than spooks.

"No bugs in the bathroom? Great," Ryan observed. During his very short experience of it so far, Ryan had learned that life in the

intelligence service was a little different from teaching history at the Naval Academy. There probably *were* bugs—but wired to Basil's office . . .

"I know. Me, too. Good news, though: You'll be seeing a lot of me—if you don't mind."

Ryan nodded tiredly, trying to manage a grin. "Well, at least I'll have somebody to have a beer with."

"That's the national sport. More business gets done in pubs than at the office. Their version of the country club."

"The beer's not too bad."

"Better than the piss we have at home. I'm fully converted on that score."

"They told me at Langley that you do a lot of intel work for Emil Jacobs."

"Some." Murray nodded. "Fact of the matter is, we're better at it than a lot of you Agency types. The Operations people haven't recovered from seventy-seven yet, and I'm not sure that'll happen for a while."

Ryan had to agree. "Admiral Greer thinks so, too. Bob Ritter is pretty smart—maybe a little too smart, if you know what I mean—but he doesn't have enough friends in Congress to get his empire expanded the way that he wants."

Greer was the CIA's chief analyst, Ritter the Ops director. The two were often at odds.

"They don't trust Ritter like they do the DDI. Carryover from the Church Committee mess ten years ago. You know, the Senate never seems to remember who ran those operations. They canonize the boss and crucify the troops who tried to follow his orders—though badly. Damn, was that a—" Murray searched for the word. "The Germans call it a *schweinerei.* No translation, exactly, but, you know, it just sounds like what it is."

Jack grunted with amusement. "Yeah, better than fuckup."

The CIA's effort to assassinate Fidel Castro, which had been run out of the office of the Attorney General during the time of Camelot, had been right out of Woody Woodpecker, with a sprinkling of the Three Stooges: politicians trying to imitate James Bond, a character made up by a *failed* Brit spook. The movies just weren't the real world, as Ryan had learned the hard way, first in London, and then in his own living room.

"So, Dan, how good are they really?"

"The Brits?" Murray led Ryan out onto the front lawn. The removers *were* vetted by SIS—but Murray was FBI. "Basil is world-class. That's why he's lasted so long. He was a brilliant field spook, and he was the first guy to get a bad vibe about Philby—and remember, Basil was just

a rookie then. He's good at administration, one of the most agile thinkers I've ever come across. The local politicians on both sides of the aisle like him and trust him. That isn't easy. Kinda like Hoover was for us once, but without the cult-of-personality thing. I like him. Good dude to work with. And Bas likes you a lot, Jack."

"Why?" Ryan asked. "I haven't done much of anything."

"Bas has an eye for talent. He thinks you have the right stuff. He flat loved that thing you dreamed up last year to catch security leaks—the Canary Trap—and rescuing their next king didn't exactly hurt, y'know? You're going to be a popular boy down at Century House. If you live up to your billing, you might just have a future in the spook business."

"Great." Ryan still wasn't entirely sure that was what he wanted to do, though. "Dan, I'm a stockbroker who turned into a history teacher, remember?"

"Jack, that's behind you now. Look forward, will ya? You were pretty good picking stocks at Merrill Lynch, right?"

"I made a few bucks," Ryan admitted. Actually, it was a lot of bucks, and his portfolio was still growing. People were getting fat on The Street back home.

"So, apply your brains to something really important," Dan suggested. "I hate to tell you, Jack, but there aren't that many smart people in the intelligence community. I know. I work there. A lot of drones, a lot of moderately smart people, but damned few stars, pal. You have the stuff to be a star. Jim Greer thinks so. So does Basil. You think outside the box. I do, too. That's why I'm not chasing bank robbers in Riverside, Philadelphia, anymore. But I never made any million bucks playing the market."

"Getting lucky doesn't make you a great guy, Dan. Hell, Cathy's dad, Joe, has made a lot more 'n I ever will, and he's an opinionated, overbearing son of a bitch."

"Well, you made his daughter the wife of an honorary knight, didn't you?"

Jack smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, I suppose I did."

"That'll open a lot of doors over here, Jack. The Brits do like their titles." He paused. "Now—how about I drag you guys out for a pint? There's a nice pub up the hill, The Gypsy Moth. This moving stuff'll drive you crazy. It's almost as bad as building a house."

HIS OFFICE WAS in the first basement level of The Centre, a security measure that had never been explained to him, but it turned out there was an exact counterpart room in the headquarters of the Main Enemy. There, it was called MERCURY, messenger of the gods—very apt, if his nation acknowledged the concept of a god. The messages

passed through the code and cipher clerks, came to his desk, and he examined them for content and code words, before routing them to the proper offices and officers for action; then, when the messages came back down, he routed things the other way. The traffic broke into a regular routine; mornings were usually inbound traffic and afternoons usually outbound. The tedious part was the encrypting, of course, since so many of the people out in the field used one-time pads unique to themselves—the single copies of those pads were located in the set of rooms to his right. The clerks in there transmitted and kept secrets ranging from the sex lives of Italian parliamentarians to the precise targeting hierarchy of American nuclear-strike plans.

Strangely, none of them talked about what they did or what they encrypted, inbound or outbound. The clerks were pretty mindless. Perhaps they were recruited with those psychological factors in mind—it would not have surprised him. This was an agency designed by geniuses for operation by robots. If someone could actually build such robots, he was sure they'd have them here, because you could trust machines not to diverge too greatly from their intended path.

Machines couldn't think, however, and for his own job, thinking and remembering were useful things, if the agency was to function—and function it must. It was the shield and the sword of a state which needed both. And he was the postmaster of sorts; he had to remember what went where. He didn't know everything that went on here, but he knew a lot more than most people in this building: operation names and locations, and, often enough, operational missions and taskings. He generally did not know the proper names and faces of field officers, but he knew their targets, knew the code names of their recruited agents, and, for the most part, knew what those agents were providing.

He'd been here, in this department, for nine and a half years. He'd

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started in 1973, just after graduating from Moscow State University with a degree in mathematics, and his highly disciplined mind had gotten him spotted early on by a KGB talent scout. He played a particularly fine game of chess, and that, he supposed, was where his trained memory came from, all that study of the games of the old grandmasters, so that in a given situation he'd know the next move. He'd actually thought of making chess his career, but though he'd studied hard, it wasn't quite hard enough, it seemed. Boris Spassky, just a young player himself then, had annihilated him six games to none, with two desperate draws, and so ended his hopes of fame and

fortune . . . and travel. He sighed at his desk. Travel. He'd studied his geography books, too, and in closing his eyes could see the images—mainly black-and-white: Venice's Grand Canal, London's Regent Street, Rio de Janeiro's magnificent Copacabana beach, the face of Mt. Everest, which Hillary had climbed when he himself had just been learning to walk . . . all those places he would never get to see. Not him. Not a person with his access and his security clearances. No, KGB was very careful with such people. It trusted no one, a lesson that had been learned the hard way. What was it about his country that so many tried to escape from it? And yet so many millions had died fighting for the *rodina*. . . . He'd been spared military service because of his mathematics and his chess potential, and then, he supposed, because of his recruitment to #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. Along with it came a nice flat, fully seventy-five square meters, in a recently finished building. Military rank, too—he'd become a senior captain within weeks of his majority, which, on the whole, wasn't too bad. Even better, he'd just started getting paid now in certificate rubles, and so was able to shop in the "closed" stores for Western consumer goods—and, best of all, with shorter lines. His wife appreciated that. He'd soon be in the entry level of the *nomenklatura*, like a minor czarist prince, looking up the ladder and wondering how far he might climb. But unlike the czars, he was here not by blood but by merit—a fact that appealed to his manhood, Captain Zaitzev thought.

Yes, he'd earned his way here, and that was important. That's why he was trusted with secrets, this one for example: an agent code-named CASSIUS, an American living in Washington; it seemed he had access to valuable political intelligence that was treasured by people on the fifth floor, and which was often seconded to experts in the U.S.—Canada Institute, which studied the tea leaves in America. Canada wasn't very important to the KGB, except for its participation in the American airdefense systems, and because some of its senior politicians didn't like their powerful southern neighbor, or so the *rezident* in Ottawa regularly told his superiors upstairs. Zaitzev wondered about that. The Poles might not love their eastern neighbor either, but the Poles mostly did what they were told—the Warsaw *rezident* had reported with unconcealed pleasure in his dispatch the previous month—as that union hothead had found out to his discomfort. "Counterrevolutionary scum" had been the term used by Colonel Igor Alekseyevich Tomachevskiy. The Colonel was thought to be a rising star, due for a posting to the West. That's where the really good ones went.

TWO AND A half miles across town, Ed Foley was first in the door,

with his wife, Mary Patricia, just behind him, leading Eddie by the hand. Eddie's young blue eyes were wide with a child's curiosity, but even now the four-and-a-half-year-old was learning that Moscow wasn't Disney World. The culture shock was about to fall like Thor's own hammer, but it would expand his horizons a bit, his parents thought. As it would theirs.

"Uh-huh," Ed Foley said on his first look. An embassy consular officer had lived here before, and he'd at least made an effort to clean the place up, no doubt helped by a Russian domestic—the Soviet government provided them, and diligent they were . . . for both their bosses. Ed and Mary Pat had been thoroughly briefed for weeks—nay, months—before taking the long Pan Am flight out of JFK for Moscow.

"So, this is home, eh?" Ed observed in a studiously neutral voice.

"Welcome to Moscow," Mike Barnes told the newbies. He was another consular officer, a career FSO on the way up, and had this week's duty as the embassy greeter. "The last occupant was Charlie Wooster. Good guy, back at Foggy Bottom now, catching the summer heat."

"How are the summers here?" Mary Pat asked.

"Kinda like Minneapolis," Barnes answered. "Not real hot, and the humidity's not too bad, and the winters are actually not as severe—I grew up in Minneapolis," he explained. "Of course, the German army might not agree, or Napoleon, but, well, nobody ever said Moscow was supposed to be like Paris, right?"

"Yeah, they told me about the nightlife," Ed chuckled. It was all right with him. They didn't need a stealthy Station Chief in Paris, and this was the biggest, ripest plum assignment he'd never expected to get. Bulgaria, maybe, but not the very belly of the beast. Bob Ritter must have been really impressed by his time in Tehran. Thank God Mary Pat had delivered Eddie when she had. They'd missed the takeover in Iran by, what, three weeks? It had been a troublesome pregnancy, and Mary Pat's doc had insisted on their coming back to New York for the delivery. Kids were a gift from God, all right.... Besides, that had made Eddie a New Yorker, too, and Ed had damned well wanted his son to be a Yankees and Rangers fan from birth. The best news of this assignment, aside from the professional stuff, was that he'd see the best ice hockey in the world right here in Moscow. Screw the ballet and the symphony. These fuckers knew how to skate. Pity the Russkies didn't understand baseball. Probably too sophisticated for the muzhiks. All those pitches to choose from . . .

"It's not real big," Mary Pat observed, looking at one cracked window. They were on the sixth floor. At least the traffic noise wouldn't be too bad. The foreigners' compound—ghetto—was walled and guarded. This was for their protection, the Russians insisted, but

street crime against foreigners wasn't a problem in Moscow. The average Russian citizen was forbidden by law to have foreign currency in his possession, and there was no convenient way to spend it in any case. So there was little profit in mugging an American or Frenchman on the streets, and there was no mistaking them—their clothing marked them about as clearly as peacocks among crows.

"Hello!" It was an English accent. The florid face appeared a moment later. "We're your neighbors. Nigel and Penny Haydock," the face's owner said. He was about forty-five, tall and skinny, with prematurely gray and thinning hair. His wife, younger and prettier than he probably deserved, appeared an instant later with a tray of sandwiches and some welcoming white wine.

"You must be Eddie," the flaxen-haired Mrs. Haydock observed. That's when Ed Foley noticed the maternity dress. She was about six months gone, by the look of her. So the briefings had been right in every detail. Foley trusted CIA, but he'd learned the hard way to verify everything, from the names of people living on the same floor to whether the toilet flushed reliably. *Especially in Moscow,* he thought, heading for the bathroom. Nigel followed.

"The plumbing works reliably here, but it is noisy. No one complains," Haydock explained.

Ed Foley flipped the handle and, sure enough, it was noisy.

"Fixed that myself. Bit of a handyman, you see," he said. Then, more quietly, "Be careful where you speak in this place, Ed. Bloody bugs everywhere. Especially the bedrooms. The bloody Russians like to count our orgasms, so it seems. Penny and I try not to disappoint." A sly grin. Well, to some cities you brought your own nightlife.

"Two years here?" The toilet seemed to run forever. Foley was tempted to lift the tank cover to see if Haydock had replaced the plumbing hardware inside with something special. He decided he didn't have to look to check that.

"Twenty-nine months. Seven to go. It's a lively place to work. I'm sure they told you, everywhere you go, you'll have a 'friend' handy. Don't underestimate them, either. The Second Directorate chaps are thoroughly trained. . . ." The toilet ran its course, and Haydock changed his voice. "The shower—the hot water is pretty reliable, but the spray pipe, it rattles, just like the one in our flat. . . ." He turned the faucet to demonstrate. Sure enough, it rattled. *Had someone worked on the wall to loosen it?* Ed wondered. Probably. Probably this very handyman with him.

"Perfect."

"Yes, you will get a lot of work done in here. Shower with a friend and save water—isn't that what they say in California?"

Foley managed his first laugh in Moscow. "Yeah, that's what they

say, all right." He gave his visitor a look. He was surprised that Haydock had introduced himself so early, but maybe it was just reverse-English tradecraft to be so obvious. The business of espionage had all manner of rules, and the Russians were rule-followers. So, Bob Ritter had told him, toss away *part* of the rulebook. Stick to your cover and be a dumbass unpredictable American every chance you get. He'd also told the Foleys that Nigel Haydock was one guy they could trust. He was the son of another intelligence officer—a man betrayed by Kim Philby himself, one of the poor bastards who'd parachuted into Albania into the waiting arms of the KGB reception committee. Nigel had been five years old then, just old enough always to remember what it was like to lose your father to the enemy. Nigel's motivation was probably as good as Mary Pat's, and that was pretty damned good. Better even than his own, Ed Foley might admit after a few drinks. Mary Pat hated the bastards as the Lord God Himself hated sin. Haydock wasn't the Station Chief here, but he was the head birddog for the SIS's operation in Moscow, and that made him pretty good. The CIA's Director, Judge Moore, trusted the Brits: after Philby, he'd seen them go through SIS with a flamethrower hotter than even James Jesus Angleton's fly rod and cauterize every possible leak. In turn, Foley trusted Judge Moore, and so did the President. That was the craziest part of the intelligence business: You couldn't trust *anybody*—but you had to trust *somebody*.

Well, Foley thought, checking the hot water with his hand, *nobody ever said the business made much sense.* Like classical metaphysics. It just was.

"When's the furniture get here?"

"The container ought to be on a truck in Leningrad right now. Will they tamper with it?"

Haydock shrugged. "Check everything," he warned, then softened. "You can never know how thorough they are, Edward. The KGB is a great bloody bureaucracy—you don't know the meaning of the word until you see it in operation here. For example, the bugs in your flat—how many of them actually work? They're not British Telecom, nor are they AT&T. It's the curse of this country, really, and it works for us, but that, too, is unreliable. When you're followed, you can't know if it's an experienced expert or some bloody nimrod who can't find his way to the loo. They look alike and dress alike. Just like our people, when you get down to it, but their bureaucracy is so large that there's a greater likelihood it will protect the incompetent—or maybe not. God knows, at Century House we have our share of drones."

Foley nodded. "At Langley, we call it the Intelligence Directorate."

"Quite. We call ours the Palace of Westminster," Haydock observed, with his own favorite prejudice. "I think we've tested the plumbing

enough."

Foley turned off the faucet and the two men returned to the living room, where Penny and Mary Pat were getting acquainted.

"Well, we have enough hot water anyway, honey."

"Glad to hear it," Mary Pat responded. She turned back to her guest. "Where do you shop around here?"

Penny Haydock smiled: "I can take you there. For special items, we can order from an agency in Helsinki, excellent quality: English, French, German—even American, for things like juices and preserved foods. The perishables are Finnish in origin, and they're generally very good, especially the lamb. Don't they have the finest lamb, Nigel?"

"Indeed it is—as good as New Zealand," her husband agreed.

"The steaks leave something to be desired," Mike Barnes told them, "but every week we get steaks flown in from Omaha. Tons of them—we distribute them to all our friends."

"That is the truth," Nigel confirmed. "Your corn-fed beef is superb. I'm afraid we're all quite addicted to it."

"Thank God for the U.S. Air Force," Barnes went on. "They fly the beef into all their NATO bases, and we're on the distribution list. They come in frozen, not quite as good as fresh at Delmonico's, but close enough to remind you of home. I hope you guys brought a grill. We tend to take them up on the roof to cook out. We import charcoal, too. Ivan just doesn't seem to understand about that." The apartment had no balcony, perhaps to protect them from the diesel smell that pervaded the city.

"What about going to work?" Foley asked.

"Better to take the metro. It really is great," Barnes told him.

"Leaving me with the car?" Mary Pat asked, with a hopeful smile. This was going exactly to plan. That was expected, but anything that went well in this business came as something of a surprise, like the right presents under the Christmas tree. You always hoped Santa got the letter, but you could never be sure.

"You might as well learn how to drive in this city," Barnes said. "At least you have a nice car." The previous resident in this apartment had left behind a white Mercedes 280 for them, which was indeed a nice car. Actually, a little too nice at only four years old. Not that there were all that many cars in Moscow, and the license plates surely marked it as belonging to an American diplomat, and thus easy to spot by any traffic cop, and by the KGB vehicle that would follow it most places it went. Again, it was reverse-English. Mary Pat would have to learn to drive like an Indianapolis resident on her first trip to New York. "The streets are nice and wide," Barnes told her, "and the gas station is only three blocks that way." He pointed. "It's a huge one. The Russians like to build them that way."

"Great," she observed for Barnes's benefit, already dropping into her cover as a pretty, ditsy blonde. Around the world, the pretty ones were supposed to be the dumb ones, and blondes most of all. It was a hell of a lot easier to play dumb than to be smart, after all, Hollywood actors notwithstanding.

"What about servicing the car?" Ed asked.

"It's a Mercedes. They don't break much," Barnes assured them. "The German embassy has a guy who can fix anything that goes bad. We're cordial with our NATO allies. You guys soccer fans?"

"Girls' game," Ed Foley responded immediately.

"That's rather coarse of you," Nigel Haydock observed.

"Give me American football any time," Foley countered.

"Bloody foolish, uncivilized game, full of violence and committee meetings," the Brit sniffed.

Foley grinned. "Let's eat."

They sat down. The interim furniture was adequate, something like you'd find in a no-tell motel in Alabama. You could sleep on the bed, and the bug spray had probably done for all the crawly things. Probably.

The sandwiches were okay. Mary Pat went to get glasses and turned on the taps—

"Recommend against that one, Mrs. Foley," Nigel warned. "Some people come down with stomach complaints from the tap water. . . ."

"Oh?" She paused. "And my name's Mary Pat, Nigel."

Now they were properly introduced. "Yes, Mary Pat. We prefer bottled water for drinking. The tap water is good enough for bathing, and you can boil it in a pinch for coffee and tea."

"It's even worse in Leningrad," Nigel warned. "The natives are more or less immunized, they tell me, but we foreigners can get some serious GI problems there."

"What about schools?" Mary Pat had been worried about that.

"The American-British school looks after the children well," Penny Haydock promised. "I work there myself part-time. And the academic program there is top-drawer."

"Eddie's starting to read already, isn't he, honey?" the proud father announced.

"Just *Peter Rabbit* and that sort of thing, but not bad for four," an equally pleased mother confirmed for the rest. For his part, Eddie had found the sandwich plate and was gnawing through something. It wasn't his treasured bologna, but a hungry kid is not always discriminating. There were also four large jars of Skippy's Super Chunk peanut butter packed away in a safe place. His parents figured they could get grape jelly anywhere, but probably not Skippy. The local bread, everyone said, was decent, if not exactly the Wonder

Bread that American children had been raised on. And Mary Pat had a bread-maker in their cargo container, now on a truck or train between Moscow and Leningrad. A good cook, she was a positive artist at baking bread, and expected that to be her entrée into the embassy social set.

NOT ALL THAT far away from where they sat, a letter changed hands. The deliverer was from Warsaw, and had been dispatched by his government—actually, by an agency of his government to an agency of the recipient government. The messenger was not all that pleased by his mission. He was a communist—he had to be in order to be entrusted with such a task—but he was nonetheless a Pole, as was the subject of the message and the mission. And that was the rub.

The message was in fact a photocopy of the original, which had arrived by hand to an office—an important one—in Warsaw only three days before.

The messenger, a full colonel in his country's intelligence service, was personally known to the recipient, by sight if not especially by affection. The Russians used their western neighbors for many tasks. The Poles had a real talent for intelligence operations, for the same reason the Israelis did: They were surrounded by enemies. To their west was Germany, and to their east was the Soviet Union. The unhappy circumstances involved in both had resulted in Poland's putting many of its best and brightest into the intelligence business.

The recipient knew all that. In fact, he already knew word for word the content of the message. He'd learned it the previous day. He was not surprised at the delay, though. The Polish government had taken that day to consider the contents and its import before forwarding it, and the recipient took no umbrage. Every government in the world took at least one day to go over such things. It was just the nature of men in positions of authority to diddle and waver, even though they had to know that delay was a waste of time and air. Even Marxism-Leninism couldn't alter human nature. Sad, but true. The New Soviet Man, like the New Polish Man, was, in the end, still a man.

The ballet being played out now was as stylized as any performed by the Kirov troupe in Leningrad. The recipient even imagined he could hear the music playing. He actually preferred Western jazz to classical, but in any case the music at the ballet was just the garnish, the system that told the dancers when to leap together like pretty, trained dogs. The ballerinas were far too slender for Russian tastes, of course, but real women were far too heavy for those little fairies they called men to toss about.

Why was his mind wandering? He resumed his seat, falling back

slowly into his leather chair as he unfolded the letter. It was written in Polish, and he didn't speak or read Polish, but affixed to it was a translation in literate Russian. Of course, he'd have his own translators go over it, plus two or three psychiatrists to consider the mental state of the drafter and to compose their own multipage analysis, which he'd have to read, time waster though that would be. Then he'd have to report on it, to provide his political superiors—no, his political *peers*—with all of these additional insights so that they could waste *their* time going over the message and its import before considering what to do about it.

The Chairman wondered if this Polish colonel realized how easy his own political bosses had had it. In the end, all they'd had to do was forward it to their own political masters for action, bucking the decision up the tree of responsibility as government functionaries all do, regardless of place or philosophy. Vassals were vassals the world over.

The Chairman looked up at him. "Comrade Colonel, thank you for bringing this to my attention. Please extend my greetings and my respects to your commander. Dismissed."

The Pole snapped to attention, saluted in the curious Polish way, did his best parade-ground about face, then headed off to the door.

Yuriy Andropov watched the door close before turning his attention back to the message and its appended translation.

"So, Karol, you threaten us, eh?" He clucked his tongue and shook his head before going on as quietly as before. "You are brave, but your judgment needs adjustment, my cleric comrade."

He looked up again, pondering. The office had the usual artwork covering the walls, and for the same reason as in any other office—to avoid blankness. Two were oil paintings by Renaissance masters, borrowed from the collection of some long-dead czar or nobleman. A third portrait, rather a good one, actually, was of Lenin, the pale complexion and domed forehead known to millions all around the world. A nicely framed color photograph of Leonid Brezhnev, the current General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, hung near it. The photo was a lie, a picture of a young and vigorous man, not the senile old goat who now sat at the head of the Politburo table. Well, all men grew old, but in most places, such men left their jobs for honorable retirement. But not in his country, Andropov realized . . . and looked down at the letter. And not this man, either. This job, too, was for life.

But he is threatening to change that part of the equation, the Chairman of the Committee for State Security thought. And in that was the danger.

Danger?

The consequences were unknown, and that was danger enough. His Politburo colleagues would see it the same way, old, cautious, and frightened men that they were.

And so he had not merely to report the danger. He must also present a means of dealing with it effectively.

The portraits that ought to have been on his wall right now were of two men who were semiforgotten. One would have been Iron Feliks—Dzerzhinskiy himself, the founder of the Cheka, the antecedent of the KGB.

The other ought to have been Josef Vissarionovich Stalin. The leader had once posed a question that was relevant to the very situation that faced Andropov now. Then, it had been 1944. Now—now maybe it was even more relevant.

Well, that remained to be seen. And he'd be the man to make that determination, Andropov told himself. All men could be made to disappear. The thought should have surprised him when it leapt into his head, but it didn't. This building, built eighty years earlier to be the palatial home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, had seen a lot of that, and its inhabitants had issued orders to cause many, many more deaths. They used to have executions in the basement. That had ended only a few years before, as KGB expanded to include all the space in even this massive structure—and another on the inner ring road around the city—but the cleanup crew occasionally whispered about the ghosts to be seen on quiet nights, sometimes startling the old washerwomen with their buckets and brushes and witch-like hair. The government of this country didn't believe in such things as spirits and ghosts any more than it believed in a man's immortal soul, but doing away with the superstitions of the simple peasants was a more difficult task than getting the intelligentsia to buy into the voluminous writings of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Karl Marx, or Friedrich Engels, not to mention the turgid prose attributed to Stalin (but actually done by a committee formed of frightened men, and all the worse because of it), which was, blessedly, no longer much in demand except to the most masochistic of scholars.

No, Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself, *getting people to believe in Marxism wasn't all that hard.* First, they hammered it into their heads in grammar schools, and the Young Pioneers, and high schools, and the Komsomolets, the Young Communist League, and then the really smart ones became full Party members, keeping their Party cards "next to their hearts," in the cigarette pockets of their shirts.

But by then, they knew better. The politically aware members professed their belief at Party meetings because they had to do that to get ahead. In the same way, the smart courtiers in pharaonic Egypt kneeled and shielded their eyes from the bright-light-emanating face,

lest they be blinded—they held up their hands because, in Pharaoh, in the person of their Living God, was personal power and prosperity, and so they knelt their obeisance and denied their senses and their sensibility and got ahead. So it was here. Five thousand years, was it? He could check a history book. The Soviet Union turned out some of the world's foremost medieval historians, and doubtless some competent antiquarians as well, because that was one area of scholarship where politics didn't matter much. The facts of ancient Egypt were too distant from contemporary reality to matter to the philosophical speculation of Marx or the endless ramblings of Lenin. And so some fine scholars went into that field. More went into the pure sciences, because pure science was pure science and a hydrogen atom had no politics.

But agriculture did. Manufacturing did. And so the best and brightest stayed away from those areas, opting instead for political studies. Because there success was to be found. You didn't have to believe it any more than you believed that Ramses II was the living son of the sun god, or whatever the hell god he was supposed to have issued from. Instead, Yuriy Vladimirovich figured, the courtiers saw that Ramses had numerous wives and even more numerous progeny, and that, on the whole, wasn't a bad life for a man to have. The classical equivalent of a dacha in the Lenin Hills and summers on the beach at Sochi. So, did the world ever really change?

Probably not, the Chairman of the Committee for State Security decided. And his job was largely to protect against change.

And this letter threatened change, didn't it? It was a threat, and he might have to do something about the threat. That meant doing something about the man behind it.

It had happened before. It could happen again, he decided.

Andropov would not live long enough to learn that in considering this action, he would set in motion the demise of his own country.

CHAPTER 1

RUMBLINGS AND DREAMS

"**W**HEN DO YOU START, JACK?" Cathy asked in the quiet of their bed.

And her husband was glad it was their bed. Comfortable as the New York hotel had been, it is never the same, and besides, he'd had quite enough of his father-in-law, with his Park Avenue duplex and immense sense of self-importance. Okay, Joe Muller had a good ninety million in the bank and his diversified portfolio, and it was growing nicely with the new presidency, but enough was enough.

"Day after tomorrow," her husband answered. "I suppose I might go in after lunch, just to look around."

"You ought to be asleep by now," she said.

There were drawbacks to marrying a physician, Jack occasionally told himself. You couldn't hide much from them. A gentle, loving touch could convey your body temperature, heart rate, and Christ knew what else, and docs hid their feelings about what they found with the skill of a professional poker player. Well, some of the time.

"Yeah, long day." It was short of five in the evening in New York, but his "day" had lasted longer than the normal twenty-four. He really had to learn to sleep on airplanes. It wasn't as though his seat had been uncomfortable. He'd upgraded the government-issue tickets to first class on his own American Express card, and soon the frequent-flyer miles would build up so much that such upgrades would be automatic. *Yeah, great,* Jack thought. They'd know him by sight at Heathrow and Dulles. Well, at least he had his new black diplomatic passport and didn't have to be troubled with inspections and such. Ryan was technically assigned to the U.S. Embassy at London's Grosvenor Square, just across the street from the building that had housed Eisenhower's WW2 office, and with that assignment came the diplomatic status that made him a super-person, untrammeled by such inconveniences as civil law. He could smuggle a couple pounds of heroin into England, and no one could so much as touch his bags without permission—which he could summarily withhold, claiming diplomatic privilege and urgent business. It was an open secret that diplomats didn't trouble themselves with customs duties for such

things as perfumes for their wives (or significant others) and/or booze for themselves, but to Ryan's Catholic measure of personal conduct, these were venial sins, not mortal.

The usual muddle of thoughts in a fatigued brain, he recognized. Cathy would never allow herself to operate in this mental state. Sure, as an intern they'd kept her on duty for endless hours—the idea being to get her accustomed to making good decisions under miserable circumstances—but part of her husband wondered how many patients were sacrificed on the altar of medical boot camp. If trial lawyers ever managed to figure out how to make money off of that . . .

Cathy—Dr. Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, her white lab coat and plastic name tag announced—had struggled through that phase of her training, and more than once her husband had worried about her drive home in her little Porsche sports car, after thirty-six straight hours on duty in obstetrics, or pediatrics, or general surgery, fields she wasn't interested in herself, but about which she had to know a little in order to be a proper Johns Hopkins doc. Well, she'd known enough to patch up his shoulder that afternoon in front of Buckingham Palace. He hadn't bled to death in front of his wife and daughter, which would have been pretty ignominious for everyone involved, especially the Brits. *Would my knighthood have been awarded posthumously?* Jack wondered with a stifled chuckle. Then, finally, his eyes closed for the first time in thirty-nine hours.

"I HOPE HE likes it over there," Judge Moore said, at his end-of-the-day senior staff get-together.

"Arthur, our cousins know their hospitality," James Greer pointed out. "Basil ought to be a good teacher."

Ritter didn't say anything. This Ryan amateur had gotten himself a lot of—way the hell too much—publicity for any employee of the CIA, even more so since he was a DI guy. As far as Ritter was concerned, the Directorate of Intelligence was the tail wagging the Operations Directorate dog. Sure, Jim Greer was a fine spook and a good man to work with, but he wasn't a *field* spook, and—Congress to the contrary—that's what the Agency needed. At least Arthur Moore understood that. But on The Hill, if you said "field intelligence officer" to the representatives who controlled appropriations, they recoiled like Dracula from a golden crucifix and collectively went *ewwwwww*. Then it was time to speak.

"What do you suppose they'll let him in on?" the DDO wondered aloud.

"Basil will regard him as my personal representative," Judge Moore said, after a moment's consideration. "So, everything they share with us, they will share with him."

"They're going to co-opt him, Arthur," Ritter warned. "He's into things they don't know about. They will try to squeeze things out of Ryan. He doesn't know how to defend against that."

"Bob, I briefed him on that myself," Greer announced. The DDO knew that already, of course, but Ritter had a real talent for acting grumpy when he didn't get his way. Greer wondered what it had been like to be Bob's mother. "Don't underestimate this kid, Bob. He's smart. I'll wager you a steak dinner that he gets more things out of the Brits than they get out of him."

"Sucker bet," the Deputy Director (Operations) snorted.

"At Snyder's," the Deputy Director (Intelligence) goaded further. It was the favorite steak house for both executives, located just across the Key Bridge in Georgetown.

Judge Arthur Moore, the Director of Central Intelligence, or DCI, watched the exchange with amusement. Greer knew how to twist Ritter's tail, and somehow Bob never quite figured out how to defend against it. Maybe it was Greer's down-east accent. Texans like Bob Ritter (and Arthur Moore himself) deemed themselves superior to anyone who talked through his nose, certainly over a deck of playing cards or around a bottle of bourbon whiskey. The Judge figured he was above such things, though they were fun to watch.

"Okay, dinner at Snyder's." Ritter extended his hand. And it was time for the DCI to resume control of the meeting.

"Now that we've settled that one, gentlemen, the President wants me to tell him what's going to happen in Poland."

Ritter didn't leap at that. He had a good Station Chief in Warsaw, but the guy only had three proper field officers in his department, and one of them was a rookie. They did, however, have one very good source agent-in-place inside the Warsaw government's political hierarchy, and several good ones in their military.

"Arthur, *they* don't know. They're dancing around this Solidarity thing on a day-to-day basis," the DDO told the others. "And the music keeps changing on them."

"It's going to come down to what Moscow tells them to do, Arthur," Greer agreed. "And Moscow doesn't know either."

Moore took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. They don't know what to do when someone openly defies them. Joe Stalin would have shot everyone in sight, but the current bunch doesn't have the gumption to do that, thank the Good Lord for that."

"Collegial rule brings out the coward in everyone, and Brezhnev just doesn't have the ability to lead. From what I hear, they have to walk

him to the men's room." It was a slight exaggeration, but it appealed to Ritter that Soviet leadership was softening.

"What's CARDINAL telling us?" Moore referred to the Agency's premiere agent-in-place in the Kremlin, the personal assistant to Defense Minister Dmitriy Fedorovich Ustinov. His name was Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, but to all but a bare handful of active CIA personnel, he was simply CARDINAL.

"He says that Ustinov despairs of anything useful coming out of the Politburo until they do have a leader who can actually lead. Leonid is slowing down. Everybody knows it, even the man on the street. You can't camouflage a TV picture, can you?"

"How long do you suppose he has left?"

A collection of shrugs, then Greer took the question: "The doctors I've talked to say he could drop over tomorrow, or he could dote along for another couple of years. They say they see mild Alzheimer's, but only mild. His general condition is progressive cardiovascular myopathy, they think, probably exacerbated by incipient alcoholism."

"They *all* have that problem," Ritter observed. "CARDINAL confirms the heart problem, by the way, along with the vodka."

"And the liver is important, and his is probably suboptimum," Greer went on, with a gross understatement. Then Moore finished the thought.

"But you can't tell a Russian to stop drinking any more than you can tell a grizzly bear not to shit in the woods. You know, if anything ever brings these guys down, it will be their inability to handle the orderly transition of power."

"Well, gee, Your Honor." Bob Ritter looked up with a wicked grin. "I guess they just don't have enough lawyers. Maybe we could ship them a hundred thousand of ours."

"They're not that stupid. Better we shoot a few Poseidon missiles at them. Less net damage to their society," the DDI said.

"Why do people disparage my honorable profession?" Moore asked the ceiling. "If anybody saves their system, it will have to be a lawyer, gentlemen."

"You think so, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"You can't have a rational society without the rule of law, and you can't have the rule of law without lawyers to administer it." Moore was the former Chief Judge of the Texas State Court of Appeals. "They don't have those rules yet, not when the Politburo can reach out and execute anyone they don't like without a semblance of an appeals process. It must be like living in hell. You can't depend on anything. It's like Rome under Caligula—if he got a notion, that notion had the force of law. Hell, though, even Rome had *some* laws the emperors had to abide by. Not our Russian friends." The others couldn't really

appreciate how horrid a concept that was to their Director. He'd once been the finest trial lawyer in a state noted for the quality of its legal community, and then a learned judge on a bench replete with thoughtful, fair men. Most Americans were as accustomed to the rule of law as to the ninety feet between bases on a baseball diamond. For Ritter and Greer, it was more important that, before his legal career, Arthur Moore had been a superior field spook. "So, what the hell do I tell the President?"

"The truth, Arthur," Greer suggested. "We don't know because *they* don't know."

That was the only truthful and rational thing he could say, of course, but: "Damn it, Jim, they *pay* us to know!"

"It comes down to how threatened the Russians feel. Poland is just a cat's paw for them, a vassal state that jumps when they say 'jump,' " Greer said. "The Russians can control what their own people see on TV and in *Pravda*—"

"But they can't control the rumors that come across the border," said Ritter. "And the stories their soldiers tell when they come home from service there—*and* in Germany, *and* in Czechoslovakia, *and* in Hungary, and what they hear on Voice of America and Radio Free Europe." CIA controlled the first of those outlets directly, and, while the other was theoretically almost independent, that was a fiction nobody believed. Ritter himself had a great deal of input on both propaganda arms of the American government. The Russians understood and respected good agitprop.

"How squeezed do you suppose they feel?" Moore wondered aloud.

"Just two or three years ago, they thought they were on the crest of the wave," Greer announced. "Our economy was in the toilet with inflation and we had gas lines, the Iran mess. They'd just got Nicaragua to drop into their lap. Our national morale was bad, and . . ."

"Well, that's changing, thank God," Moore went on for him. "Full reversal?" he asked. It was too much to hope for, but at heart Arthur Moore was an optimist—otherwise, how could he be DCI?

"We're heading that way, Arthur," Ritter said. "They're slow to catch on. They are not the most agile of thinkers. That's their greatest weakness. The top dogs are wedded to their ideology to the point that they can't see around it. You know, we can hurt these bastards—hurt 'em bad—if we can analyze their weaknesses thoroughly and come up with a way to exploit them."

"You really think so, Bob?" the DDI asked.

"I don't think it—I damned well know it!" the DDO shot back. "They are *vulnerable,* and best of all, they don't yet know that they are vulnerable. It's time to do something. We've got a President now

who'll back our play if we can come up with something good enough for him to invest his political capital. Congress is so afraid of him, they won't stand in the way."

"Robert," the DCI said, "it sounds to me like you've got something rattling up your sleeve."

Ritter thought for a few seconds before going on. "Yes, Arthur, I do. I've been thinking about this since they brought me in from the field eleven years ago. I haven't written a single word of it down." He didn't have to explain why. Congress could subpoena any piece of paper in the building—well, almost any piece—but not something carried only in a man's mind. But perhaps this was the time to set it down. "What is the Soviets' fondest wish?"

"To bring us down," Moore answered. That didn't exactly require a Nobel-class intellect.

"Okay, what is our fondest wish?"

Greer took that one. "We aren't allowed to think in those terms. We want to find a modus vivendi with them." That was what *The New York Times* said, anyway, and wasn't that the voice of the nation? "Okay, Bob. Spit it out."

"How do we attack them?" Ritter asked. "And by that I mean nail the bastards right where they live, hurt them—"

"Bring them down?" Moore asked.

"Why the hell not?" Ritter demanded.

"Is it possible?" the DCI asked, interested that Ritter was thinking along such lines.

"Well, Arthur, if they can aim that big a gun at us, why can't we do it to them?" Ritter had the bit in his teeth now. "They send money into political groups in our country to try and make it hard on our political process. They have antinuclear demonstrations all across Europe, calling to eliminate our Theater Nuclear Weapons while they rebuild theirs. We can't even leak what we know about that to the media—"

"And if we did, the media wouldn't print it," Moore observed. After all, the media didn't like nuclear weapons either, though it was willing to tolerate Soviet weapons because they, for one reason or another, were not destabilizing. What Ritter really wanted to do, he feared, was to see if the Soviets had influence on the American mass media. But even if it did, such an investigation would bear only poisoned fruit. The media held on to their vision of its integrity and balance as a miser held his hoard. But they knew without having the evidence that KGB *did* have some power over the American media, because it was so easy to establish and exercise. Flatter them, let them in on supposed secrets, and then become a trusted source. But did the Soviets know how dangerous a game that could be? The American

news media did have a few core beliefs, and tampering with them was like tinkering with a live bomb. One wrong move could be expensive. No one in this Seventh-Floor office was under much illusion about the genius of the Russian intelligence service. It had skilled people, certainly, and trained them thoroughly and well, but KGB also had its weaknesses. Like the society it served, KGB applied a political template to reality, and largely ignored the information that didn't match up with the holes. And so, after months, even years, of painstaking planning and preparation, they often had operations go bad because one of their officers had decided that life in the land of the enemy wasn't quite so bad as it was portrayed. The cure for a lie was always the truth. It just had a way of smacking you in the face, and the smarter you were, the worse it hurt.

"That's not important," Ritter said, surprising both his colleagues.

"Okay, keep going," Moore ordered.

"What we need to do is examine their vulnerabilities and attack them—with the objective of destabilizing their entire country."

"That's a very tall order, Robert," Moore observed.

"You take an ambition pill, Bob?" Greer asked, intrigued even so. "Our political masters will blanch at that large an objective."

"Oh, I know." Ritter held up his hands. "Oh, no, we mustn't hurt them. They might nuke us. Come on, they're a hell of a lot less likely to lash out than we are. People, they are *afraid* of us, a lot more than we are of them. They are afraid of *Poland,* for Christ's sake. Why? Because there's a disease in Poland that their own people might catch. It's called rising expectations. And rising expectations are the one thing they can't satisfy. Their economy is as stagnant as stump water. If we give them a little push . . ."

" 'All we have to do is kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will collapse,' " Moore quoted. "That's been said before, but Adolf had himself a nasty little surprise when the snow started falling."

"He was an idiot who didn't read his Machiavelli," Ritter retorted. "First, you conquer 'em, then you murder 'em. Why give them warning?"

"Whereas our current adversaries could have taught old Niccolò a lesson or two," Greer agreed. "Okay, Bob, exactly what do you propose?"

"A systematic examination of Soviet weaknesses with an eye to exploitation. In simplest terms, we investigate the possible shape of a plan to cause great discomfort to our enemy."

"Hell, we ought to be doing that all the time anyway," Moore said, agreeing at once with the concept. "James?"

"I have no problem with it. I can get a team together in my shop to

toss some ideas together."

"Not the usual suspects," the DDO urged. "We'll never get anything useful from the regular crew. It's time to think way the hell outside the usual box."

Greer thought about that for a moment, then nodded agreement. "Okay, I'll do the picking. Special project. Pick a name for it?"

"How about INFECTION?" Ritter asked.

"And if it turns into an operation, call it PLAGUE?" the DDI asked with a laugh.

Moore shared in the chuckle. "No, I've got it. MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH. Something from Poe sounds about right to me."

"This is really about having the DO take over the DI, isn't it?" Greer thought aloud.

It wasn't a serious undertaking yet, just an interesting academic exercise, the same way a corporate trader might look into the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of a company he might want to take over . . . and then, if the circumstances justified, break it up for parts. No, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was the center of their professional world, the Bobby Lee to their Army of the Potomac, the New York Yankees to their Boston Red Sox. Defeating them, however attractive a dream it might be, was little more than that, a dream.

Even so, Judge Arthur Moore approved of that sort of thinking. If man's reach didn't exceed his grasp, then what the hell was heaven for?

APPROACHING TWENTY-THREE hours in Moscow, Andropov was enjoying a cigarette—an American Marlboro, in fact—and sipping at his vodka, the premium Starka brand, which was brown like American bourbon. On the record player was another American product, an LP of Louis Armstrong on the trumpet, blowing some superb New Orleans jazz. Like many Russians, the Chairman of the KGB regarded blacks as little more than monkey cannibals, but the ones in America had invented their own fine art form. He knew that he ought to have been a devotee of Borodin or one of the other classical Russian composers, but there was just something about the vitality of American jazz that rang some sort of bell in his mind.

But the music was merely an aid for thinking. Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov had heavy brows over his brown eyes and a lantern jaw suggestive of another ethnic origin, but his mind was entirely Russian, which meant part Byzantine, part Tartar, part Mongol, and all focused on achieving his own goals. Of these he had many, but above all: He wanted to be the leader of his country. Someone had to save it, and he

knew exactly how much it needed saving. One of the advantages of being Chairman of the Committee for State Security was that few things were secret from him, and this in a society that was replete with lies, where lies were indeed the highest of art forms. This was especially true of the Soviet economy. The command-driven structure of that flaccid colossus meant that every factory—and every factory manager—had a production goal that both it and he had to meet. The goals might or might not be realistic. That didn't matter. What did matter was that their enforcement was draconian. Not as draconian as they'd once been, of course. In the 1930s and '40s, failure to meet the goal set forth in The Plan could mean death right here in this very building, because those who failed to meet The Plan were "wreckers," saboteurs, enemies of the state, *traitors* in a nation where state treason was a crime worse than any other, and so demanded a penalty worse than any other, usually a .44-caliber bullet from one of the old Smith & Wesson revolvers the czars had purchased from America.

As a result, factory managers had learned that if they couldn't meet The Plan's expectations in fact, they'd do so on paper, thus prolonging both their lives and the perks of their office. The facts of their failure were usually lost in the elephantine bureaucracy that had been inherited from the czars and then nurtured to further growth under Marxism-Leninism. His own agency had a lot of that same tendency, Andropov knew. He could say something, even thunder out the words, but that didn't mean that any real result had to happen. Sometimes it did—indeed, fairly often of late, because Yuriy Vladimirovich kept his own personal notes and would follow up a week or so later. And, gradually, his agency was learning to change.

But there was no changing the fact that obfuscation was the foil of even his brand of ruthlessness. Even Stalin reborn could not change that—and *nobody* wanted Stalin reborn. Institutional obfuscation had reached all the way to the summit of the Party hierarchy. The Politburo was no more decisive than the management staff of State Farm "Sunrise." No one had learned efficiency, he'd observed on his climb to the top of the heap, and as a result a great deal happened with a wink and a nod, with an understanding that it really wasn't all that important.

And because so little progress actually happened, it devolved on him and KGB to make right all the things that went wrong. If the organs of the State could not come up with what the State needed, then KGB had to go steal it from those who did have it. Andropov's spy agency, and its sister service, the military's GRU, stole all manner of weapons designs from the West. *They were so efficient,* he thought with a grunt, *that Soviet pilots occasionally died from the same design defects that had killed American pilots years before.*

And that was the rub. However efficient KGB was, its most stirring successes merely guaranteed that his country's military was five years behind the West *at best.* And the one thing he and his field officers couldn't steal from the West was the quality control in their industries that made advanced weapons possible. *How many times,* he wondered, *had his people secured designs from America and elsewhere only to learn that his country simply could not replicate them?*

And that was what he had to fix. The mythical tasks of Hercules seemed trivial in comparison, Andropov told himself, stubbing out his cigarette. Transform his nation? In Red Square, they kept the mummy of Lenin as some sort of Communistic god, the relic of the man who had transformed Russia from a backward monarchic state into . . . a backward socialist state. The Moscow government expressed contempt for any countries that tried to combine socialism with capitalism—except for one little thing: KGB tried to steal from them, too. The West rarely shed blood and treasure to find out about Soviet weapons—except to find out what was wrong with them. The Western intelligence services did their best to frighten their parent governments, proclaiming every new Soviet weapon to be Satan's own tool of destruction, but then they later found out that the Soviet tiger wore lead boots, and couldn't catch the deer, however frightening the tiger's teeth might appear. Whatever original ideas Russian scientists did come up with—and there were many of them—were duly stolen and converted by the West into instruments that actually worked.

The design bureaus made their promises to the military and to the Politburo. They told them how their new systems would improve, with just a little more funding . . . *Hah!* And all the time, this new American president was doing what his predecessors hadn't: He was feeding *his* tiger. The American industrial monster was eating raw red meat, and actually manufacturing in numbers the weapons they'd developed over the preceding decade. His field officers and their agents reported that morale in the American military was rising for the first time in a generation. Their Army in particular was training on increased tempos, and their new weapons . . .

. . . Not that the Politburo believed him when he told them. Its members were too insular, they were unexposed to the real world beyond the Soviet frontiers. They assumed that all the world was more or less like it was here, in accord with the political theories of Lenin—written sixty years ago! As if the world hadn't changed at all since then! Yuriy Vladimirovich raged silently. He expended enormous funds to find out what was happening in the world, had the data run through exquisitely trained and qualified experts, presented superbly organized reports to the old men who sat around that oaken table—and *still* they didn't listen!

And then there was the current problem.

This is how it will start, Andropov told himself, with another long sip of his Starka. It takes only one person, if it's the right person. Being the right person meant that people listened, paid attention to his words and deeds. And some people just got that sort of attention.

And those were the ones you had to be afraid of . . .

Karol, Karol, why must you make such trouble?

And trouble it would be if he took the action he threatened. The letter he'd sent to Warsaw hadn't been just for those lackeys in Warsaw—he had to have known where it would end up. He was no fool. In fact, he was as shrewd as any political figure Yuriy had ever known. You couldn't be a Catholic clergyman in a communist country and rise to the very pinnacle of the world's largest church, to be *their* General Secretary, even, without knowing how to operate the levers of power. But his post went back nearly two thousand years, if you happened to believe all that nonsense—well, maybe so. The age of the Roman church was an objective fact, wasn't it? Historical facts were historical facts, but that didn't make the belief structure underneath it any more valid than Marx said it was—or *wasn't,* to be more precise. Yuriy Vladimirovich had never considered belief in God to make any more sense than belief in Marx and Engels. But he knew that everyone had to believe in something, not because it was true, but because it in itself was a source of power. Lesser people, the ones who needed to be told what to do, had to believe in something larger than themselves. Primitives living in the remaining jungles of the world still heard in the thunder, not just the clash of hot air and cold, but the voice of some living thing. Why? Because they knew they were weaklings in a strong world, and they thought they could influence whatever deity controlled them with slaughtered pigs or even slaughtered children, and those who controlled that *influence* then acquired the power to shape their society. Power was its own currency. Some Great Men used it to gain comfort, or women—one of his own predecessors here at KGB had used it to get women, actually young girls, but Yuriy Vladimirovich did not share that particular vice. No, power was enough in and of itself. A man could bask in it as a cat warmed itself by a fire, with the simple enjoyment that came from having it close by, knowing that he enjoyed the ability to rule others, to bring death or comfort to those who served him, who pleased him with their obeisance and their fawning acknowledgment that he was greater than they.

There was more to it, of course. You had to *do* something with that power. You had to leave footprints in the sands of time. Good or bad, it didn't matter, just so they were large enough to command notice. In his case, a whole country needed his direction because, of all the men

on the Politburo, only he could see what needed to be done. Only he could chart the course his nation needed to follow. And if he did it right, then he would be remembered. He knew that someday his life would end. In Andropov's case, it was a liver ailment. He ought not to drink his vodka, but with power also came the absolute right to choose his own path. No other man could tell him what to do. His latent intelligence knew that this was not always the wise thing to do, but Great Men did not listen to lesser men, and he considered himself the foremost of the former. Was not his force of will strong enough to define the world in which he lived? Of course it was, and so he had the occasional drink or two, or sometimes three, in the evening. Even more at official dinners. His country had long since passed beyond the point of rule by a single man—that had ended thirty years before with the passing of "Koba," Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, who'd ruled with a ruthlessness to make Ivan the Terrible quake in his boots. No, that sort of power was too dangerous to ruler and ruled. Stalin had made as many errors as good judgments, and as useful as the latter had been, the former had very nearly doomed the Soviet Union to perpetual backwardness—and, in fact, by creating the world's most formidable bureaucracy, he'd largely foresworn progress for his nation.

But one man, the right man, could lead and direct his political associates on the Politburo in the correct direction, and then by helping to select the new members, could accomplish the needed goals by influence rather than by terror. Just maybe, then, he could get his country moving again, keeping the single control that all nations needed, but adding the flexibility that they needed just as much for new things to happen—to achieve the True Communism—to see the Radiant Future that the writings of Lenin proclaimed awaited the Faithful.

Andropov did not quite see the contradiction in his own mind. Like so many Great Men, he was blind to those things that conflicted with his own capacious ego.

And, in any case, it all came back to Karol and the danger he posed.

He made a mental note for the morning staff meeting. He had to see what the possibilities were. The Politburo would wonder aloud how to deal with the problem announced by the Warsaw Letter, and eyes would turn to his chair, and he'd need something to say. The trick would be in finding something that would not frighten his colleagues out of their conservative wits. They were so fearful, these supposedly powerful men.

He read so many reports from his field officers, the talented spies of the First Chief Directorate, always probing into the thoughts of their counterparts. It was so strange, how much fear there was in the world, and the most fearful of all were so often those who held the power in

their hands.

No, Andropov drained his glass and decided against another nightcap. The reason for their fear was that they worried they did not have the power. They were not strong. They were henpecked by their wives, just like factory workers and peasant farmers. They dreaded losing what they so greedily held, and so they used their power in ignoble enterprises directed at crushing those who would seize what they held. Even Stalin, that mightiest of despots, had used his power mainly to eliminate those who might sit in his elevated chair. And so the great Koba had spent his energy not looking forward, not looking outward, but looking down. He was like a woman in her kitchen who feared mice under her skirt, instead of a man with the power and the will to slay an onrushing tiger.

But could he do otherwise? Yes! Yes, he could look forward and see the future and chart a path to it. Yes, he could communicate his vision to the lesser men who sat around the table in the Kremlin, and lead them with the force of his will. Yes, he could find and refocus the vision of Lenin and all the thinkers of the governing philosophy of his country. Yes, he could alter the course of his nation and be forever remembered as a Great Man. . . .

But first, here and now, he'd need to deal with Karol and his annoying threat to the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 2

VISIONS AND HORIZONS

CATHY ALMOST PANICKED at the thought of driving him to the train station. Seeing him walk to the left side of the car, she'd assumed, as any American would, that he'd be driving, and so she was visibly surprised when he tossed her the keys.

The pedals, she discovered, were the same as in an American car, because people all around the world were right-footed, even if those in England drove left-handed. The gear shift was in the center console, and so she had to use her left hand to shift. Backing out of the brick driveway was not terribly different from normal. Both instantly wondered if it was as hard for Brits to transform their driving to the right—in more ways than one—side of the road when they came to America, or hopped the ferry to France. Jack decided he'd ask somebody over a beer someday.

"Just remember, left is right, and right is left, and you drive on the wrong side of the road."

"Okay," she replied with annoyance. She knew she'd have to learn, and the rational part of her brain knew that this was as good a time as ever, even though *now* had a nasty way of appearing out of the ground like a guerrilla out of a spider hole. The way out of the mini-development took them past a one-story building that looked like it housed a doctor's office, past the park with the swing set that had sold Jack on this particular house. Sally liked swings, and she'd surely meet and make new friends here. And Little Jack would get some sun there, too. In the summer, anyway.

"Turn left, babe. It's a right turn here when you go left, you don't cross traffic."

"I know," Dr. Caroline Ryan said, wondering why Jack hadn't called for a cab. She still had a ton of work to do with the house, and didn't need a driving lesson. Well, at least it seemed to be a nimble car, she found, giving it a kick that was answered by rapid acceleration. Not her old Porsche, though.

"Bottom of the hill, turn right."

"Uh-huh." Good, this would be simple. She'd have to find her way home, and she hated asking for directions. It came from being a

surgeon, as in command of her world as a fighter pilot in his cockpit.... And, being a surgeon, she wasn't allowed to panic, was she?

"Right here," Jack told her. "Remember oncoming traffic." There was none at the moment, but that would change, probably as soon as he got out of the car. He didn't envy her attempt to learn local navigation solo, but the surest way to learn to swim was to jump in—assuming you didn't drown. But the Brits were hospitable people, and if necessary some kind local driver would probably lead her all the way home.

The train station was about as impressive as a Bronx elevated platform, a smallish stone building with stairs and/or escalators that led down to the tracks. Ryan bought his ticket with cash, but noted a sign that offered books of commuter tickets for daily use. He picked up a copy of *The Daily Telegraph.* That would mark him to the locals as a conservative sort of person. Those of a more liberal bent chose *The Guardian.* He decided to pass on the tabloids that had naked women on the inside. Hell of a thing to see right after breakfast.

He had to wait about ten minutes for the train, which arrived with little noise, being a cross between an American electric intercity train and a subway. His ticket was first class, which placed him in a small compartment. The windows went up and down if you pulled on a leather strap, and the compartment door hinged outward to let him exit directly instead of walking down the corridor. With that set of discoveries made, Ryan sat down and scanned the paper's front page. As in America, local politics covered about half of the sheet, and Ryan looked at two of the articles, figuring he might as well learn the local customs and beefs. The schedule said about forty minutes to Victoria Station. Not too bad, and much better than driving it, Dan Murray had told him. In addition, parking a car in London was even worse than it was in New York, wrong side of the street and all.

The ride on the train was agreeably smooth. The trains were evidently a government-run monopoly, and somebody spent money on the roadbeds. A conductor took his ticket with a smile—doubtless marking Jack as a Yank instantly—and moved on, leaving Ryan to his paper. The passing scenery soon overtook his interest. The countryside was green and lush. The Brits did love their lawns. The row houses here were smaller than those in his childhood neighborhood in Baltimore, with what looked like slate roofs, and Jesus, the streets were narrow here. You'd really have to pay attention while driving, lest you end up in someone's living room. That probably wouldn't sit well, even to Englishmen accustomed to dealing with the shortcomings of visiting Yanks.

It was a clear day, some white fluffy clouds aloft, and the sky a delightful blue. He'd never experienced rain over here. Yet they had to

have it. Every third man on the street carried a furled umbrella. And a lot of them wore hats. Ryan hadn't done that since his time in the Marine Corps. England was just different enough from America to be dangerous, he decided. There were a lot of similarities, but the differences rose up and bit you on the ass when you least expected them. He'd have to be very careful with Sally crossing the street. At four and a half, she was just imprinted enough to look the wrong way at the wrong time. He'd seen his little girl in the hospital once, and that was, by God, enough for a lifetime.

He was rumbling through a city now, a thick one. The right-of-way was elevated. He looked around for recognizable landmarks. Was that St. Paul's Cathedral off to the right? If so, he'd be at Victoria soon. He folded his paper. Then the train slowed, and—yeah. Victoria Station. He opened the compartment door like a native and stepped out on the platform. The station was a series of steel arches with embedded glass panes, long since blackened by the stack gasses of steam trains long departed.... But nobody had ever cleaned the glass. Or was it just air pollution that did it? There was no telling. Jack followed the rest of the people to the brick wall that seemed to mark the station's waiting/arrival area. Sure enough, there were the usual collection of magazine stands and small stores. He could see the way out and found himself in the open air, fumbling in his pocket for his Chichester map of London. Westminster Bridge Road. It was too far to walk, so he hailed a cab.

From the cab, Ryan looked around, his head swiveling, just like the tourist he wasn't quite anymore. And there it was.

Century House, so named because it was 100 Westminster Bridge Road, was what Jack took to be a typical interwar structure of fair height and a stone façade that was . . . peeling off? The edifice was covered with an orange plastic netting that was manifestly intended to keep the façade from falling onto pedestrians. Oops. Maybe somebody was ripping through the building, looking for Russian bugs? Nobody had warned him about that at Langley. Just up the road was Westminster Bridge, and across that were the Houses of Parliament. Well, it was in a nice neighborhood, anyway. Jack trotted up the stone steps to the double door and made his way inside for all of ten feet, where he found an entry-control desk manned by someone in a sort of cop uniform.

"Can I help you, sir?" the guard asked. The Brits always said such things as though they really wanted to help you. Jack wondered if there might be a pistol just out of view. If not there, then not too far away. There had to be security here.

"Hi, I'm Jack Ryan. I'm starting work here."

Instant smile and recognition: "Ah, Sir John. Welcome to Century

House. Please let me call upstairs." Which he did. "Someone's on his way down, sir. Please have a seat."

Jack barely had a chance to feel the seat when someone familiar came through the revolving door.

"Jack!" he called out.

"Sir Basil." Ryan rose to take his extended hand.

"Didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I'm letting Cathy get everything unpacked. She doesn't trust me to do it anyway."

"Yes, we men do have our limitations, don't we?" Sir Basil Charleston was pushing fifty, tall and imperially thin, as the poet had once called it, with brown hair not yet going gray. His eyes were hazel and bright-looking, and he wore a suit that wasn't cheap, gray wool with a broad white pinstripe, looking to all the world like a very prosperous London merchant banker. In fact, his family had been in that line of work, but he'd found it confining, and opted instead to use his Cambridge education in the service of his country, first as a field intelligence officer, and later as an administrator. Jack knew that James Greer liked and respected him, as did Judge Moore. He'd met Charleston himself a year earlier, soon after being shot, then he'd learned that Sir Basil admired his invention of the Canary Trap, which had been his path to high-level notice at Langley. Basil had evidently used it to plug a few annoying leaks. "Come along, Jack. We need to get you properly outfitted." He didn't mean Jack's suit, which was Savile Row and as expensive as his own. No, this meant a trip to personnel.

The presence of C, as the job title went, made it painless. They already had a set of Ryan's fingerprints from Langley, and it was mainly a matter of getting his picture taken and inserted in his pass-card, which would allow him through all the electronic gates, just like the ones at the CIA. They checked it through a dummy gate and saw that it worked. Then it was up in the executive elevator to Sir Basil's capacious corner office.

It was better than the long, narrow room that Judge Moore made do with. A decent view of the river and the Palace of Westminster. The DG waved Jack into a leather chair.

"So, any first impressions?" Charleston asked.

"Pretty painless so far. Cathy hasn't been to the hospital yet, but Bernie—her boss at Hopkins—says that the boss-doc there is a good guy."

"Yes, Hammersmith has a good reputation, and Dr. Byrd is regarded as the best eye surgeon in Britain. Never met him, but I'm told he's a fine chap. Fisherman, loves to take salmon out of the rivers in Scotland, married, three sons, eldest is a *lef*tenant in the Coldstream

Guards."

"You had him checked out?" Jack asked incredulously.

"One cannot be too careful, Jack. Some of your distant cousins across the Irish Sea are not overly fond of you, you know."

"Is that a problem?"

Charleston shook his head. "Most unlikely. When you helped to bring down the ULA, you probably saved a few lives in the PIRA. That's still sorting itself out, but that is mainly a job for the Security Service. We don't really have much business with them—at least nothing that will concern you directly." Which led to Jack's next question.

"Yes, Sir Basil—what exactly is my job to be here?"

"Didn't James tell you?" Charleston asked.

"Not exactly. He likes his surprises, I've learned."

"Well, the Joint Working Group mainly focuses on our Soviet friends. We have some good sources. So do your chaps. The idea is to share information in order to improve our overall picture."

"Information. Not sources," Ryan observed.

Charleston smiled understandingly. "One must protect those, as you know."

Jack did know about that. In fact, he was allowed to know damned little about CIA's sources. Those were the most closely guarded secrets in the Agency, and doubtless here as well. Sources were real people, and a slip of the tongue would get them killed. Intelligence services valued sources more for their information than for their lives—the intelligence business was a business, after all—but sooner or later you started worrying about them and their families and their personal characteristics. *Mainly booze,* Ryan thought. Especially for the Russians. The ordinary Soviet citizen drank enough to qualify him as an alcoholic in America.

"No problem there, sir. I do not know the name or identity of one CIA source over there. Not one," Ryan emphasized. It wasn't quite true. He hadn't been told, but you could guess a lot from the character of the information transmitted and the way he/she quoted people—they were usually "he," but Ryan wondered about a few of the sources. It was an intriguing game that all analysts played, invariably in the confines of their own minds, though Ryan had speculated a few times with his personal boss, Admiral Jim Greer. Usually, the DDO had warned him not to speculate too loudly, but the way he'd blinked twice had told Ryan more than he'd wanted to convey. Well, they'd hired him for his analytical ability, Ryan knew. They didn't really want him to turn it off. When the information transmitted got a little kinky, it told you that something had happened to the source, like being caught, or going nuts. "The admiral is interested in one thing,

though. . . .”

“What’s that?” the DG asked.

“Poland. It looks to us as though it’s coming a little unglued, and we’re wondering how far, how fast, and what it’ll do—the effects, I mean.”

“So are we, Jack.” A thoughtful nod. People—especially reporters in their Fleet Street pubs—were speculating a lot about that. And reporters also had good sources, in some areas as good as his own. “What does James think?”

“It reminds both of us of something that happened in the 1930s.” Ryan leaned back in the chair and relaxed. “The United Auto Workers. When they organized Ford, there was trouble. Big time. Ford even hired thugs to work the union organizers over. I remember seeing photos of—who was it?” Jack paused for a moment’s thought. “Walter Reuther? Something like that. It was in *Life* magazine back then. The thugs were talking to him and a few of his guys—the first few pictures show them smiling at each other like men do right before the gloves come off—and then a brawl started. You have to wonder about Ford’s management—letting something like that happen in front of reporters is bad enough, but reporters with *cameras?* Damn, that’s big-league dumb.”

“The Court of Public Opinion. Yes,” Charleston agreed. “It is quite real, and modern technology has made it even more so, and, yes, that is troubling to our friends across the wire. You know, this CNN news network that just started up on your side of the ocean. It just might change the world. Information has its own way of circulating. Rumors are bad enough. You cannot stop them, and they have a way of acquiring a life of their own—”

“But a picture really is worth a thousand words, isn’t it?”

“I wonder who first said that. Whoever he was, he was no one’s fool. It’s even more true for a moving picture.”

“I presume we’re using that . . .”

“Your chaps are reticent about doing so. I am less so. It’s easy enough to have an embassy functionary have a pint with some reporter and maybe drop the odd hint in the course of a conversation. One thing about reporters, they are not ungracious if you give them the odd decent story.”

“At Langley, they hate the press, Sir Basil. And I do mean *hate.*”

“Rather backward of them. But, then, we can exercise more control over the press here than you can in America, I suppose. Still and all, it’s not that hard to outsmart them, is it?”

“I’ve never tried. Admiral Greer says that talking to a reporter is like dancing with a rottweiler. You can’t be sure if he’s going to lick your face or rip your throat out.”

"They're not bad dogs at all, you know. You just need to train them properly."

Brits and their dogs, Ryan reflected. *They like their pets more than their kids.* He didn't care for big dogs all that much. A Labrador like Ernie was different. Labs had a soft mouth. Sally really missed him.

"So, what's your take on Poland, Jack?"

"I think the pot's going to simmer until the lid slides off, and then when it boils over, there's going to be a hell of a mess. The Poles haven't really bought into communism all that well. Their army has *chaplains,* for Christ's sake. A lot of their farmers operate on a free-agent basis, selling hams and stuff. The most popular TV show over there is *Kojak,* they even show it on Sunday morning to draw people away from going to church. That shows two things. The people there like American culture, and the government is still afraid of the Catholic Church. The Polish government is unstable, and they know they're unstable. Allowing a little wiggle room is probably smart, at least in the short term, but the fundamental problem is that they operate a fundamentally unjust regime. Unjust countries are not stable, sir. However strong they appear, they're rotten underneath."

Charleston nodded thoughtfully. "I briefed the PM just three days ago out at Chequers, and told her much the same thing." The Director General paused for a moment, then decided. He lifted a file folder from the pile on his desk and handed it across.

The cover read MOST SECRET. *So*, Jack thought, *now it starts.* He wondered if Basil had learned to swim by falling into the Thames, and thought everyone should learn the same way.

Flipping the cover open, he saw that this information came from a source called WREN. He was clearly Polish, and by the look of the report, well placed, and what he said—

"Damn," Ryan observed. "This is reliable?"

"Very much so. It's a five-five, Jack." By that he meant that the source was rated 5 on a scale of 5 for reliability, and the importance of the information reported was graded the same way. "You're Catholic, I think." He knew, of course. It was just the English way of talking.

"Jesuits at high school, Boston College, and Georgetown, plus the nuns at Saint Matthew's. I'd better be."

"What do you think of your new Pope?"

"First non-Italian in four centuries, maybe more: That's saying something right there. When I heard the new one was Polish, I expected it to be Cardinal Wiszynski from Warsaw—guy's got the brains of a genius and the cunning of a fox. This guy, I didn't know beans about, but from what I've read since, he's a very solid citizen. Good parish priest, good administrator, politically very astute . . ."

Ryan paused. He was discussing the head of his church as though he were a political candidate, and he was damned sure there was more substance to him than that. This had to be a man of deep faith, with the sort of core convictions that an earthquake couldn't budge or crack. He'd been chosen by other such men to be the leader and spokesman for the world's largest church, which, by the way, also happened to be Ryan's church. He'd be a man who didn't fear much of anything, a man for whom a bullet was his get-out-of-jail-free card, a key to God's own presence. And he'd be a man who felt God's presence in everything he did. He was not someone you could scare, not someone you could turn away from what he deemed the right thing.

"If he wrote this letter, Sir Basil, it's not a bluff. When was it delivered?"

"Less than four days ago. Our chap broke a rule getting it to us so quickly, but its importance is patently clear, is it not?"

Welcome to London, Jack, Ryan thought. He'd just fallen into the soup. A big pot, like they used to boil missionaries in the cartoons.

"Okay, it's been forwarded to Moscow, right?"

"So our chap tells us. So, Sir John, what will Ivan have to say about this?" And with that question, Sir Basil Charleston lit the fire under Jack's personal cauldron.

"That's a multifaceted question," Ryan said, dodging as artfully as the situation allowed.

It wasn't very far: "He will say something," Charleston observed, leveling his hazel eyes at Ryan.

"Okay, they won't like it. They will see it as a threat. The questions are how seriously they will take it and how much credence they will attach to it. Stalin might have laughed it off . . . or maybe not. Stalin defined paranoia, didn't he?" Ryan paused and looked out the windows. Was that a rain cloud blowing in? "No, Stalin would have acted somehow."

"Think so?" Charleston was evaluating him, Jack knew. This was like the orals for his doctorate at Georgetown. Father Tim Riley's rapier wit and needlepoint questions. Sir Basil was more civilized than the acerbic priest, but this exam was not going to be an easy one.

"Leon Trotsky was no threat to him. That assassination came from a combination of paranoia and pure meanness. It was a personal thing. Stalin made enemies, and he never forgot them. But the current Soviet leadership doesn't have the guts to do the stuff he did."

Charleston pointed out the plate glass window toward Westminster Bridge. "My lad, the Russians had the intestinal fortitude to kill a man right on that bridge, less than five years ago—"

"And got blamed for it," Ryan reminded his host. It had been a

combination of good luck and a very smart British doctor, and it hadn't been worth a damn in saving the poor bastard's life. They had identified the cause of death, though, and it hadn't resulted from a street hood.

"Think they lost any sleep over that incident? I do not," C assured him.

"Looks bad. They don't do much of this anymore, not that I've heard about."

"Only at home, I grant you that. But Poland is 'home' for them, well within their sphere of influence."

"But the Pope lives in Rome, and that *isn't.* It comes down to how scared they are, sir. Father Tim Riley at Georgetown, back when I got my doctorate, he said never to forget that wars are begun by frightened men. They fear war, but more than that, they fear what will happen if they don't start one—or take equivalent action, I suppose. So, the real questions are, as I said, how seriously they will take the threat and how serious it will appear to them. On the former, yes, I don't think this is a bluff. The Pope's character, background, and personal courage—those are not things to be doubted. So the threat is a real one. The larger question is how to evaluate the magnitude of the threat to them. . . ."

"Go on," the Director General ordered gently.

"If they're smart enough to recognize it—yes, sir, in their position, I'd be concerned about it . . . maybe even a little frightened. As much as the Soviets think they're a superpower—America's equal and all that—deep down they know that their state is not really legitimate. Kissinger gave a lecture to us at Georgetown. . . ." Jack leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment to recapture the performance. "It was something he said near the end, talking about the character of the Russian leaders. Brezhnev was showing him around some official building or other in the Kremlin, where Nixon was going to come for his last summit meeting. He was lifting cloth covers off the statuary, showing how they'd taken the time to clean everything up in preparation for the visit. Why do that, I wondered at the time. I mean, sure, they have maids and maintenance people. Why make a point of showing it to Henry? It has to be a sense of inferiority, fundamental insecurity. We keep hearing that they're ten feet tall, but I don't think so, and the more I learn about them, the less formidable I think they are. The Admiral and I have argued this one back and forth for the last couple of months. They have a large military. Their intelligence services are first-rate. They are *big.* Big ugly bear, like Muhammad Ali used to say, but you know, Ali beat the bear twice, didn't he?

"That's a roundabout way of saying that, yes, sir, I think this letter will scare them. Question is, scare them enough to do something?"

Ryan shook his head. “Possibly yes, but we have insufficient data at this time. If they decide to push that particular button, will we know beforehand?”

Charleston had been waiting for Ryan to turn the tables on him. “One can hope so, but it’s impossible to be sure.”

“In the year I’ve been at Langley, the impression I get is that our knowledge of the target is deep but narrow in some areas, shallow and broad in others. I’ve yet to meet somebody who feels comfortable analyzing them—well, that’s not exactly true. Some are comfortable, but their analyses are often—to me at least—unreliable. Like the stuff we get on their economy—”

“James lets you into that?” Basil was surprised.

“The Admiral sent me all around the barn the first couple of months. My first degree was economics from Boston College. I passed my CPA exam before I went away with the Marine Corps—certified public accountant. You call it something different over here. Then, after I left the Corps, I did okay in the stock-and-bond business before I finished up my doctorate and went into teaching.”

“Exactly how much did you make on Wall Street?”

“While I was at Merrill Lynch? Oh, between six and seven million. A lot of that was the Chicago and North Western Railroad. My uncle Mario—my mom’s brother—told me that the employees were going to buy out the stock and try to get the railroad profitable again. I took a look at it and liked what I saw. It paid off a net of twenty-three to one on my investment. I ought to have dropped more into it, but they taught me to be conservative at Merrill Lynch. Never worked in New York, by the way. I was in the Baltimore office. Anyway, the money’s still in stocks, and the market looks pretty healthy at the moment. I still dabble in it. You never know when you’re going to stumble across a winner, and it’s still an interesting hobby.”

“Indeed. If you see anything promising, do let me know.”

“No fees—but no guarantees, either,” Ryan joked.

“I’m not accustomed to those, Jack, not in this bloody business. I’m going to assign you to our Russian working group with Simon Harding. Oxford graduate, doctorate in Russian literature. You’ll see just about everything he sees—everything but source information—” Ryan stopped him with two raised hands.

“Sir Basil, I do not want to know that stuff. I don’t need it, and knowing it would keep me awake at night. Just so I see the raw. I prefer to do my own analysis. This Harding guy is smart?” Ryan asked with deliberate artlessness.

“Very much so. You’ve probably seen his product before. He did the personal evaluation on Yuriy Andropov we turned out two years ago.”

“I did read that. Yeah, that was good work. I figured he was a

pshrink."

"He's read psychology, but not quite enough for a degree. Simon's a clever lad. Wife is an artist, painter, lovely lady."

"Right now?"

"Why not? I must get back to my work. Come, I'll walk you down."

It wasn't far. Ryan immediately learned that he'd be sharing an office right here on the top floor. This came as a surprise. Getting to the Seventh Floor at Langley took years, and often meant climbing over bloody bodies. Somebody, Jack speculated, must have thought he was smart.

Simon Harding's office was not overly impressive. The two windows overlooked the upriver side of the building, mainly two- and three-story brick structures of indeterminate occupancy. Harding himself was crowding forty, pale and fair-haired with china-blue eyes. He wore an unbuttoned vest—waistcoat locally—and a drab tie. His desk was covered with folders trimmed in striped tape, the universal coding for secret material.

"You must be Sir John," Harding said, setting down his briar pipe.

"The name's Jack," Ryan corrected him. "I'm really not allowed to pretend I'm a knight. Besides, I don't own a horse or a steel shirt." Jack shook hands with his workmate. Harding had small, bony hands, but those blue eyes looked smart.

"Take good care of him, Simon." Sir Basil immediately took his leave.

There was already a swivel chair in place at a suspiciously clean desk. Jack tried it out. The room was going to be a little crowded, but not too badly so. His desk phone had a scrambler under it for making secure calls, Ryan wondered if it worked as well as the STU he'd had at Langley. GCHQ out at Cheltenham worked closely with NSA, and maybe it was the same innards with a different plastic case. He'd have to keep reminding himself that he was in a foreign country. That ought not to be too hard, Ryan hoped. People did talk funny here: gr*ah*ss, r*ah*sberry and c*ah*stle, for example, though the effect of American movies and global television was perverting the English language to the American version slowly but surely.

"Did Bas talk to you about the Pope?" Simon asked.

"Yeah. That letter could be a bombshell. He's wondering how Ivan's going to react to it."

"We all are, Jack. You have any ideas?"

"I just told your boss, if Stalin was sitting there, he might want to shorten the Pope's life, but that would be a hell of a big gamble."

"The problem, I think, is that although they are rather collegial in their decision-making, Andropov is in the ascendancy, and he might be less reticent than the rest of them."

Jack settled back in to his chair. “You know, my wife’s friends at Hopkins flew over there a couple of years ago. Mikhail Suslov had diabetic retinopathy of the eyes—he was also a high myope, very nearsighted—and they went over to fix it, and to teach some Russian docs how to do the procedure. Cathy was just a resident then. But Bernie Katz was on the fly team. He’s the director at Wilmer. Super eye surgeon, hell of a good guy. The Agency interviewed him and the others after they came back. Ever see that document?”

There was interest in his eyes now: “No. Is it any good?”

“One of the things I’ve learned being married to a doc is that I listen to what she says about people. I’d damned sure listen to Bernie. It’s worth reading. There’s a universal tendency for people to talk straight to surgeons and, like I said, docs are good for seeing things that most of us miss. They said Suslov was smart, courteous, businesslike, but underneath he was the sort of guy you wouldn’t trust with a gun in his hand—or more likely a knife. He really didn’t like the fact that he needed Americans to save his sight for him. It didn’t tickle his fancy that no Russians were able to do what he needed done. On the other hand, they said that the hospitality was Olympic-class once they did the job. So they’re not complete barbarians, which Bernie halfway expected—he’s Jewish, family from Poland, back when it belonged to the czar, I think. Want me to have the Agency send that one over?”

Harding waved a match over his pipe. “Yes, I would like to see that. The Russians—they’re a rum lot, you know. In some ways, wonderfully cultured. Russia is the last place in the world where a man can make a decent living as a poet. They revere their poets, and I rather admire that about them, but at the same time . . . you know, Stalin himself was reticent about going after artists—the writing sort, that is. I remember one chap who lived years longer than one would have expected.... Even so, he eventually died in the Gulag. So, their civilization has its limits.”

“You speak the language? I never learned it.”

The Brit analyst nodded. “It can be a wonderful language for literature, rather like Attic Greek. It lends itself to poetry, but it masks a capacity for barbarism that makes the blood run cold. They are a fairly predictable people in many ways, especially their political decisions, within limits. Their unpredictability lies in playing off their inherent conservatism against their dogmatic political outlook. Our friend Suslov is seriously ill, heart problems—from the diabetes, I suppose—but the chap behind him is Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov, equal parts Russian and Marxist, with the morals of Lavrenti Beria. He bloody hates the West. I expect he counseled Suslov—they are old, old friends—to accept blindness rather than submit to American physicians. And if this Katz chap is Jewish, you said? That

would not have helped, either. Not an attractive chap at all. When Suslov departs—a few months, we think—he'll be the new ideologue on the Politburo. He will back Yuriy Vladimirovich on anything he wishes to do, even if it means a physical attack on His Holiness."

"You really think it could go that far?" Jack asked.

"Could it? Possibly, yes."

"Okay, has this letter been sent to Langley?"

Harding nodded. "Your local Station Chief came over to collect it today. I would expect your chaps have their own sources, but there's no sense taking chances."

"Agreed. You know, if Ivan does anything that extreme, there's going to be hell to pay."

"Perhaps so, but they do not see things in the same way we do, Jack."

"I know. Hard to make the full leap of imagination, however."

"It does take time," Simon agreed.

"Does reading their poetry help?" Ryan wondered. He'd only seen a little of it, and only in translation, which was not how one read poetry.

Harding shook his head. "Not really. That's how some of them protest. The protests have to be sufficiently roundabout that the more obtuse of their readers can just enjoy the lyrical tribute to a particular girl's figure without noticing the cry for freedom of expression. There must be a whole section of KGB that analyzes the poems for the hidden political content, to which no one pays particular attention until the Politburo members notice that the sexual content is a little too explicit. They are a bunch of prudes, you know. . . . How very odd of them to have that sort of morality and no other."

"Well, one can hardly knock them for disapproving *Debbie Does Dallas,*" Ryan suggested.

Harding nearly choked on his pipe smoke. "Quite so. Not exactly *King Lear,* is it? They did produce Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Pasternak."

Jack hadn't read any of them, but this didn't seem the time to admit to it.

"HE SAID *WHAT*?" Alexandrov asked.

The outrage was predictable, but remarkably muted, Andropov thought. Perhaps he only raised his voice for a fuller audience, or more likely his subordinates over at the Party Secretariat building.

"Here is the letter, and the translation," the KGB Chairman said, handing over the documents.

The chief-ideologue-in-waiting took the message forms and read them over slowly. He didn't want his rage to miss a single nuance.

Andropov waited, lighting a Marlboro as he did so. His guest didn't touch the vodka that he'd poured, the Chairman noted.

"This holy man grows ambitious," he said finally, setting the papers down on the coffee table.

"I would agree with that," Yuriy observed.

Amazement in his voice: "Does he feel invulnerable? Does he not know that there are consequences for such threats?"

"My experts feel that his words are genuine, and, no, they believe he does not fear the possible consequences."

"If martyrdom is what he wishes, perhaps we should accommodate him. . . ." The way his voice trailed off caused a chill even in Andropov's cold blood. It was time for a warning. The problem with ideologues was that their theories did not always take reality into proper account, a fact to which they were mostly blind.

"Mikhail Yevgeniyevich, such actions are not to be undertaken lightly. There could be political consequences."

"No, not great ones, Yuriy. Not great ones," Alexandrov repeated himself. "But, yes, I agree, what we do in reply must be considered fully before we take the necessary action."

"What does Comrade Suslov think? Have you consulted him?"

"Misha is very ill," Alexandrov replied, without any great show of regret. That surprised Andropov. His guest owed much to his ailing senior, but these ideologues lived in their own little circumscribed world. "I fear his life is coming to its end."

That part was not a surprise. You only had to look at him at the Politburo meetings. Suslov had the desperate look you saw on the face of a man who knew that his time was running out. He wanted to make the world right before he departed from it, but he also knew that such an act was beyond his capacity, a fact that had come to him as an unwelcome surprise. Did he finally grasp the reality that Marxism-Leninism was a false path? Andropov had come to that conclusion about five years before. But that wasn't the sort of thing one talked about in the Kremlin, was it? And not with Alexandrov, either.

"He has been a good comrade these many years. If what you say is true, he will be sorely missed," the KGB Chairman noted soberly, genuflecting to the altar of Marxist theory and its dying priest.

"That is so," Alexandrov agreed, playing his role as his host did—as all Politburo members did, because it was expected . . . because it was necessary. Not because it was true, or even approximately so.

Like his guest, Yuriy Vladimirovich believed not because he believed, but because what he *purported* to believe was the source of the real thing: power. What, the Chairman wondered, would this man say next? Andropov needed him, and Alexandrov needed *him* as well, perhaps even more. Mikhail Yevgeniyevich did not have the personal

power needed to become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He was respected for his theoretical knowledge, his devotion to the state religion that Marxism-Leninism had become, but no one who sat around the table thought him a proper candidate for leadership. But his support would be vital to whoever did have that ambition. As in medieval times, when the eldest son became the lord of the manor, and the second son became the bishop of the attendant diocese, so Alexandrov, like Suslov in his time, had to provide the spiritual—was that the proper word?—justification for his ascension to power. The system of checks and balances remained, just more perversely than before.

"You will, of course, take his place when the time comes," Andropov offered as the promise of an alliance.

Alexandrov demurred, of course . . . or pretended to: "There are many good men in the Party Secretariat."

The Chairman of the Committee for State Security waved his hand dismissively. "You are the most senior and the most trusted."

Which Alexandrov well knew. "You are kind to say so, Yuriy. So, what will we do about this foolish Pole?"

And that, so baldly stated, would be the cost of the alliance. To get Alexandrov's support for the General Secretaryship, Andropov would have to make the ideologue's blanket a little thicker by . . . well, by doing something he was already thinking about anyway. That was painless, wasn't it?

The KGB Chairman adopted a clinical, businesslike tone of voice: "Misha, to undertake an operation of this sort is not a trivial or a simple exercise. It must be planned very carefully, prepared with the greatest caution and thoroughness, and then the Politburo must approve it with open eyes."

"You must have something in mind. . . ."

"I have many things in mind, *but* a daydream is not a plan. To move forward requires some in-depth thinking and planning merely to see if such a thing is possible. One cautious step at a time," Andropov warned. "Even then, there are no guarantees or promises to be made. This is not something for a movie production. The real world, Misha, is complex." It was as close as he could come to telling Alexandrov not to stray too far from his sandbox of theories and toys and into the real world of blood and consequences.

"Well, you are a good Party man. You know what the stakes in this game are." With those words, Alexandrov told his host what was expected by the Secretariat. For Mikhail Yevgeniyevich, the Party and its beliefs were the State—and the KGB was the Sword and Shield of the Party.

Oddly, Andropov realized, this Polish Pope surely felt the same

about his beliefs and his view of the world. But those beliefs weren't, strictly speaking, an ideology, were they? *Well, for these purposes, they might as well be,* Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself.

"My people will look at this carefully. We cannot do the impossible, Misha, but—"

"But what is impossible for this agency of the Soviet state?" A rhetorical question with a bloody answer. And a dangerous one, more dangerous than this academician realized.

How alike they were, the KGB Chairman realized. This one, comfortably sipping his brown Starka, believed absolutely in an ideology that could not be proven. And he desired the death of a man who also believed things that could not be proved. What a curious state of affairs. A battle of ideas, both sets of which feared the other. Feared? What did Karol fear? Not death, certainly. His letter to Warsaw proclaimed that without words. Indeed, he cried aloud for death. He *sought* martyrship. *Why would a man seek that?* the Chairman wondered briefly. To use his life or death as a weapon against his enemy. Surely he regarded both Russia and communism as enemies, one for nationalistic reasons, the other for reasons of his religious conviction.... But did he *fear* that enemy?

No, probably not, Yuriy Vladimirovich admitted to himself. That made his task harder. His was an agency that needed fear to get its way. Fear was its source of power, and a man lacking fear was a man he could not manipulate. . . .

But those whom he could not manipulate could always be killed. Who, after all, remembered much about Leon Trotsky?

"Few things are truly impossible. Merely difficult," the Chairman belatedly agreed.

"So, you will look into the possibilities?"

He nodded cautiously. "Yes, starting in the morning." And so the processes began.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLORATIONS

"**W**ELL, JACK'S GOT HIS DESK in London," Greer told his colleagues on the Seventh Floor.

"Glad to hear it," Bob Ritter observed. "Think he knows what to do with it?"

"Bob, what is it with you and Ryan?" the DDI asked.

"Your fair-haired boy is moving up the ladder too fast. He's going to fall off someday and it's going to be a mess."

"You want me to turn him into just one more ordinary desk-weenie?" James Greer had often enough fended off Ritter's beefs about the size and consequent power of the Intelligence Directorate. "You have some burgeoning stars in your shop, too. This kid's got possibilities, and I'm going to let him run until he hits the wall."

"Yeah, I can hear the *splat* now," the DDO grumbled. "Okay, which one of the crown jewels does he want to hand over to our British cousins?"

"Nothing much. The appraisal of Mikhail Suslov that the doctors up at Johns Hopkins did when they flew over to fix his eyes."

"They don't have that already?" Judge Moore asked. It wasn't as though it were a super-sensitive document.

"I guess they never asked. Hell, Suslov won't be around much longer anyway, from what we've been seeing."

The CIA had many ways to determine the health of senior Soviet officials. The most commonly used was photographs or, better yet, motionpicture coverage of the people in question. The Agency employed physicians—most often full professors at major medical schools—to look at the photos and diagnose their ills without getting within four thousand miles of them. It wasn't good medicine, but it was better than nothing. Also, the American Ambassador, every time he went into the Kremlin, came back to the embassy and dictated his impressions of everything he saw, however small and insignificant it might seem. Often enough, people had lobbied for putting a physician in the post of ambassador, but it had never happened. More often, direct DO operations had been aimed at collecting urine samples of important foreign statesmen, since urine was a good diagnostic source

of information. It made for some unusual plumbing arrangements at Blair House, across the street from the White House, where foreign dignitaries were often quartered, plus the odd attempt to break into doctors' offices all over the world. And gossip, there was always gossip, especially over there. All of this came from the fact that a man's health played a role in his thinking and decision-making. All three men in this office had joked about hiring a gypsy or two and observed, rightly, that it would have produced results no less accurate than they got from wellpaid professional intelligence officers. At Fort Meade, Maryland, was yet another operation, code-named STARGATE, where the Agency employed people who were well to the left of gypsies; it had been started mainly because the Soviets also employed such people.

"How sick is he?" Moore asked.

"From what I saw three days ago, he won't make Christmas. Acute coronary insufficiency, they say. We have a shot of him popping what looks like a nitroglycerine pill, not a good sign for Red Mike," James Greer concluded with Suslov's in-house nickname.

"And Alexandrov replaces him? Some bargain," Ritter observed tersely. "I think the gypsies switched them at birth—another True Believer in the Great God Marx."

"We can't all be Baptists, Robert," Arthur Moore pointed out.

"This came in two hours ago on the secure fax from London," Greer said, passing the sheets around. He'd saved the best for last. "Might be important," the DDI added.

Bob Ritter was a multilingual speed-reader: "Jesus!"

Judge Moore took his time. *As a judge should,* he thought. About twenty seconds later than the DDO: "My goodness." A pause. "Nothing about this from our sources?"

Ritter shifted in his chair. "Takes time, Arthur, and the Foleys are still settling in."

"I presume we'll hear about this from CARDINAL." They didn't often invoke *that* agent's code name. In the pantheon of CIA crown jewels, he was the Cullinan Diamond.

"We should, if Ustinov talks about it, as I expect he will. If they do something about it—"

"Will they, gentlemen?" the DCI asked.

"They'll sure as hell think about it," Ritter opined at once.

"It's a big step to take," Greer thought more soberly. "You suppose His Holiness is courting it? Not too many men walk up to the tiger, open the cage door, and then make faces at him."

"I'll have to show this to the President tomorrow." Moore paused for a moment's thought. His weekly meeting at the White House was set for 10:00 the following morning. "The Papal Nuncio is out of town,

isn't he?" It turned out that the others didn't know. He'd have to have that one checked out.

"What would you say to him, anyway?" This was Ritter. "You have to figure that the other guys in Rome tried to talk him out of this."

"James?"

"Kinda takes us back to Nero, doesn't it? It's almost as though he's threatening the Russians with his own death.... Damn, do people really think that way?"

"Forty years ago, you put your life on the line, James." Greer had served his time on fleet boats in the Second World War, and often wore a miniature of his gold dolphins on the lapel of his suit coat.

"Arthur, I took my chances, along with everybody else on the boat. I did *not* tell Tojo where I was in a personal letter."

"The man has some serious *cojones,* guys," Ritter breathed. "We have seen this sort of thing before. Dr. King never took a step back in his life, did he?"

"And I suppose the KKK was as dangerous to him as the KGB is to the Pope," Moore completed the thought. "Men of the cloth have a different way of looking at the world. It's called 'virtue,' I think." He sat forward. "Okay, when the President asks me about this—and for damned sure he will—what the hell do I tell him?"

"Our Russian friends might just decide that His Holiness has lived long enough," Ritter answered.

"That's a hell of a big and dangerous step to take," Greer objected. "Not the sort of thing a committee does."

"This committee might," the DDO told the DDI.

"There would be hell to pay, Bob. They know that. These men are chess players, not gamblers."

"This letter backs them into a corner." Ritter turned. "Judge, I think the Pope's life might be in danger."

"It's much too early to say that," Greer objected.

"Not when you remember who's running KGB. Andropov is a Party man. What loyalty he has is to that institution, damned sure not to anything we would recognize as a principle. If this frightens, or merely worries them, they will think about it. The Pope has hurled down his gauntlet at their feet, gentlemen," the Deputy Director (Operations) told the others. "They just might pick it up."

"Has any Pope ever done this?" Moore asked.

"Resign his post? Not that I can remember," Greer admitted. "I don't even know if there's a mechanism for this. I grant you it's one hell of a gesture. We have to assume he means it. I don't see this as a bluff."

"No," Judge Moore agreed. "It can't be that."

"He's loyal to his people. He has to be. He was a parish priest once upon a time. He's christened babies, officiated at weddings. He *knows*

these people. Not as an amorphous mass—he's been there to baptize and bury them. They are *his* people. He probably thinks of all Poland as his own parish. Will he be loyal to them, even at the peril of his life? How can he not be?" Ritter leaned forward. "It's not just a question of personal courage. If he doesn't do it, the Catholic Church loses face. No, guys, he's serious as hell, and he isn't bluffing. Question is, what the hell can we do about it?"

"Warn the Russians off?" Moore wondered aloud.

"No chance," Ritter shot back. "You know better than that, Arthur. If they set up an operation, it'll have more cutouts than anything the Mafia's ever done. How good do you suppose security is around him?"

"Not a clue," the DCI admitted. "I know the Swiss Guards exist, with their pretty uniforms and pikes.... Didn't they fight once?"

"I think so," Greer observed. "Somebody tried to kill him, and they fought a rear-guard action while he skipped town. Most of them got killed, I think."

"Now they mostly pose for pictures and tell people where the bathroom is, probably," Ritter thought out loud. "But there has to be something to what they do. The Pope is too prominent a figure not to attract the odd nutcase. The Vatican is technically a sovereign state. It has to have some of the mechanisms of a country. I suppose we could warn them—"

"Only when we have something to warn them about. Which we don't have, do we?" Greer pointed out. "He knew when he sent this off that he'd be rattling a few cages. What protection he does have must be alerted already."

"This will get the President's attention, too. He's going to want to know more, and he's going to want options. Jesus, people, ever since he made that Evil Empire speech, there's been trouble across the river. If they really do something, even if we can't pin it on them, he's going to erupt like Mount Saint Helens. There's damned near a hundred million Catholics right here in America, and a lot of them voted for him."

For his part, James Greer wondered how far out of control this might spin. "Gentlemen, all we have to this point is a fax of a photocopy of a letter delivered to the government in Warsaw. We do not know for certain that it's gone to Moscow yet. We have no sign of any reaction to this from Moscow. Now, we can't tell the Russians we know about it. So we can't warn them off. We can't tip our hand in any way. We can't tell the Pope that we're concerned, for the same reason. If Ivan's going to react, hopefully one of Bob's people will get us the word, and the Vatican has its own intelligence service, and we know that's pretty good. So, for the moment, all we have is an interesting bit of information that is probably true, but even that is

not yet confirmed."

"So, for the moment, you think we just sit on this and think it through?" Moore asked.

"There's nothing else we can do, Arthur. Ivan won't act very fast. He never does—not on something with this degree of political import. Bob?"

"Yeah, you're probably right," the DDI agreed. "Still, the President needs to hear about it."

"It's a little thin for that," Greer cautioned. "But, yes, I suppose so." Mainly he knew that *not* telling the President, and then having something dire happen, would cause all of them to seek new employment. "If it goes further in Moscow, we ought to hear about it before anything drastic happens."

"Fine, I can tell him that," Judge Moore agreed. *Mr. President, we're taking a very close look at this.* That sort of thing usually worked. Moore rang his secretary and asked for some coffee to be sent in. Tomorrow at ten, they'd brief the President in the Oval Office, and then after lunch would be his weekly sit-down with the chiefs of the other services, DIA and NSA, to see what interesting things they had happening. The order should have been reversed, but that's just how things were usually scheduled.

HIS FIRST DAY at work had lingered quite a bit longer than expected before he'd been able to leave. Ed Foley was impressed by the Moscow Metro. The decorator must have been the same madman who'd designed Moscow State University's wedding-cake stonework—evidently beloved of Joe Stalin, whose personal aesthetic had run the gamut from Y to Z. It was strangely reminiscent of the czarist palaces, as interpreted by a terminal alcoholic. That said, the metro was superbly engineered, if somewhat clunky. More to the point, the crush of people was very agreeable to the spook. Making a brush-pass or other sort of pickup from an agent would not be overly trying, so long as he kept to his training, and that was something Edward Francis Foley was good at. Mary Pat would love it here, he was sure now. The milieu for her would be like Disney World was for Eddie. The crush of people, all speaking Russian. His Russian was pretty good. Hers was literary, having learned it at her grandfather's knee, though she'd have to de-tune it, lest she be made out as someone whose language skills were a little too good to be merely those of the wife of a minor embassy official.

The subway worked well for him. With one station only a couple of blocks from the embassy, and the other practically at their apartment house's doorstep, even the most paranoid Directorate Two shadow

would not find his use of it terribly suspicious, despite the well-known American love for cars. He didn't look around any more than a tourist would, and thought that maybe he'd made one tail. There'd probably be more than that for the moment. He was a new embassy employee, and the Russians would want to see if he wiggled like a CIA spook. He decided to act like an innocent American abroad, which might or might not be the same thing to them. It depended on how experienced his current shadow was, and there was no telling that. For certain, he'd have a tail for a couple weeks. That was an expected annoyance. So would Mary Pat. So, probably, would Eddie. The Soviets were a paranoid bunch, but then, he could hardly complain about that, could he? Not hardly. It was his job to crack into the deepest secrets of their country. He was the new Chief of Station, but he was supposed to be a stealthy one. This was one of Bob Ritter's new and more creative ideas. Typically, the identity of the boss spook in an embassy wasn't expected to be a secret. Sooner or later, everyone got burned one way or another, either ID'd by a false-flag operation or through an operational error, and that was like losing one's virginity. Once gone, it never came back. But the Agency only rarely used a husband-wife team in the field, and he'd spent years building his cover. A graduate of New York's Fordham University, Ed Foley had been recruited fairly young, vetted by an FBI background check, and then gone to work for *The New York Times* as a reporter on a general beat. He'd turned in a few interesting stories, but not too many, and had eventually been told that, while the *Times* wasn't going to fire him, it might be better for him to seek employment with a smaller newspaper where he might blossom better on his own. He'd taken the hint and gotten a job with the State Department as a Press Attaché, a job that paid a decent bureaucratic wage, though without a supergrade's destiny. His official job at the embassy would be to schmooze the elite foreign corespondents of the great American papers and TV networks, granting them access to the ambassador and other embassy officials, and then keeping out of the way while they filed their important stories.

His most important job was to appear competent, but little more. Already the local *Times* correspondent was telling his colleagues that Foley hadn't had the right stuff to make it big as a journalist at America's Foremost Newspaper, and since he wasn't old enough to teach yet—the other resting place for incompetent reporters—he was doing the next worst thing, being a government puke. It was his job to foster that arrogance, knowing that the KGB would have its people ping on the American press corps for their evaluation of the embassy personnel. The best cover of all for a spook was to be regarded as dull and dim, because the dull and the dim weren't smart enough to be

spies. For that, he thanked Ian Fleming and the movies he'd inspired. James Bond was a clever boy. Not Ed Foley. No, Ed Foley was a functionary. The crazy part was that the Soviets, whose entire country was governed by dull functionaries, more often than not fell for this story just as readily as if they were someone fresh off the pig farm in Iowa.

There is nothing predictable about the espionage business . . . except here, the Station Chief told himself. The one thing you could depend on with the Russians was predictability. Everything was written down in some huge book, and everybody here played the game by the book.

Foley got aboard the subway car, looking around at his fellow passengers, seeing how they looked at him. His clothing marked him as a foreigner as clearly as a glowing halo marked a saint in a Renaissance painting.

"Who are you?" a neutral voice asked, rather to Foley's surprise.

"Excuse me?" Foley replied in badly accented Russian.

"Ah, you are American."

"*Da,* that is so. I work at American embassy. My first day. I am new in Moscow." Shadow or not, he knew that the only sensible thing was to play this straight.

"How do you like it here?" the inquisitor asked. He looked like a bureaucrat, maybe a KGB counterespionage spook or a stringer. Or maybe just some officer-sitter for some government-run business who suffered from curiosity. There were some of those. Would an ordinary citizen approach him? Probably not, Foley judged. The atmosphere tended to limit curiosity to the space between a person's ears . . . except that Russians were curious as hell about Americans of every stripe. Told to disdain or even to hate Americans, the Russians frequently regarded them as Eve had regarded the apple.

"The metro is very impressive," Foley answered, looking around as artlessly as he could.

"Where in America do you come from?" was the next question.

"New York City."

"You play ice hockey in America?"

"Oh, yes! I've been a fan of the New York Rangers since I was a child. I want to see the hockey here." Which was entirely truthful. The Russian skate-and-pass game was the closest thing to Mozart in the world of sports. "The embassy has good tickets, they told me today. Central Army," he added.

"Bah!" the Muscovite snorted. "I am Wings fan."

The guy might just be genuine, Foley thought with surprise. The Russians were as picky about their hockey clubs as American baseball fans were with their home teams. But the Second Chief Directorate probably had hockey fans working there, too. "Too careful" was a

concept he did not admit to, especially here.

"Central Army is the champion team, isn't it?"

"Too prissy. Look what happened to them in America."

"In America we play a more physical—is that the right word?—game. To you they must seem like hooligans, yes?" Foley had taken the train to Philadelphia to see that game. The Flyers—more widely known as the Broad Street Bullies—had beaten the snot out of the somewhat arrogant Russian visitors, rather to his amusement. The Philadelphia team had even wheeled out its secret weapon, the aging Kate Smith, singing "God Bless America," which for that team was like breakfasting on nails and human infants. Damn, what a game that one had been!

"They play roughly, yes, but they are not fairies. Central Army thinks they are the Bolshoi, the way they skate and pass. It's good to see them humbled sometimes."

"Well, I remember the '80 Olympics, but honestly that was a miracle for us to defeat your fine team."

"Miracle! *Bah!* Our coach was asleep. Our heroes were asleep. Your children played a spirited game, and they won honestly. The coach needed to be shot." Yeah, this guy talked like a fan.

"Well, I want my son to learn hockey over here."

"How old is he?" Genuine interest in the man's eyes.

"Four and a half," Foley answered.

"A good age to learn to skate. There are many opportunities for children to skate in Moscow, aren't there, Vanya?" he observed to the man next to him, who'd watched the exchange with a mixture of curiosity and unease.

"Make sure he gets good skates," the other man said. "Bad ones can injure the ankles." A typical Russian response. In this often harsh country, solicitude for children was endearingly genuine. The Russian bear had a soft heart for kids, but one of icy granite for adults.

"Thank you. I will be sure to do that."

"You live in the foreigners' compound?"

"Correct," Foley confirmed.

"Next stop is yours."

"Oh, *spasiba,* and good day to you." He made his way to the door, turning to nod a friendly good-bye to his newfound Russian friends. *KGB?* he wondered. Perhaps, but not certainly. He'd determine that by whether or not he saw them on the train a month or so from now.

What Ed Foley didn't know was that the entire exchange had been observed by a man a mere two meters away, holding a copy of today's *Sovietskiy Sport.* His name was Oleg Zaitzev, and Oleg Ivanovich *was* KGB.

The Station Chief left the subway car and followed the crush to the

escalator. At one time, it would have led him to a full-standing portrait of Stalin, but that was gone now, and not replaced. The outside air was acquiring the early autumn chill, just enough to feel good after the stuffiness of the metro. Around him, ten or more men lit up their foul-smelling cigarettes and walked their separate ways. It was only half a block to the walled compound of apartment blocks, with its guard shack and the uniformed attendant, who looked Foley over and decided he was an American by the quality of his overcoat, without acknowledging his passage by even a nod, and certainly not a smile. The Russians didn't smile much. It was something that struck all American visitors to the country; the outwardly dour nature of the Russian people seemed almost inexplicable to foreigners.

TWO STOPS FARTHER DOWN, Oleg Zaitzev wondered if he should write up a contact report. KGB officers were encouraged to do so, partly as a sign of loyalty, partly to show their eternal vigilance against citizens of the Main Enemy, as America was known within his professional community. It was mostly to show their institutional paranoia, a characteristic openly fostered by KGB. But by profession Zaitzev was a paper-pusher and he didn't feel the need to generate more meaningless paper. It would just be looked at, read in a cursory way at most, and tossed into some file box by some other bureaucrat from his upstairs office, never to be read again. His time was too precious for that sort of nonsense. Besides, he hadn't even talked to the foreigner, had he? He left the train at the proper stop, rode up the moving stairs into the crisp evening air, lighting his Trud cigarette as he got outside. It was a vile thing. He had access to the "closed" stores and could have bought French, British, or even American smokes, but they were too costly, and his funds were not as unlimited as his choices. So, he smoked the well-known "Labor" brand, like untold millions of his countrymen. The quality of his clothing was a tiny bit better than that worn by most of his comrades, but not overly so. Not so much that he stood out from the others. It was two blocks to his apartment building. His flat was #3 on the first—the Americans would have called it the second—floor instead of higher up, and that was fine with him, because it meant that he didn't risk a heart attack if the elevator didn't work, which happened about once a month. Today it worked. The elderly woman who occupied the janitor/superintendent's flat on the ground floor had her door closed today, instead of open to denote some mechanical problem she'd have to warn him about. So nothing in the building was broken today. Not quite cause for celebration, just one of the small things in life for which to be grateful to God or whoever determined the vagaries of

fate. The cigarette died as he walked through the main door. Zaitzev flicked the butt into the ashtray and walked to the elevator, which, remarkably, was waiting for him with the door open.

"Good evening, Comrade Zaitzev," the operator said in greeting.

"Good evening, Comrade Glenko." The man was a disabled veteran of the Great Patriotic War, with the medals to prove it. Artilleryman, so he said. Probably the building informer, the man who reported unusual occurrences to some other KGB stringer, in return for which he got a niggardly stipend to supplement whatever pension the Red Army paid him. That was the extent of their exchange. Glenko turned the handle and brought the elevator car smoothly to his floor and opened the door. From there, it was a mere five meters to his home.

Opening his apartment door, he was greeted by the smell of boiling cabbage—so cabbage soup for dinner. Not unusual. It was a staple of the Russian diet, along with rich black bread.

"Papa!" Oleg Ivanovich bent down to scoop up his little Svetlana. She was the light of Zaitzev's life, with her cherubic face and welcoming smile.

"How is my little *zaichik* today?" He scooped her up in his arms and accepted her darling little kiss.

Svetlana attended a day-care center crowded with other children her age—not quite a preschool, not quite a nursery. Her clothing comprised about the only colorful things to be had in his country, in this case a green pullover shirt and gray pants over little red leather shoes. If his access to the "closed" shops had one advantage, it was in what he could get his little girl. The Soviet Union didn't even have cloth diapers for its infants—mothers usually made them out of old bedsheets—much less the disposable kind favored in the West. As a result, there was a premium on getting the little ones toilet-trained, which little Svetlana had managed some time ago, much to her mother's relief. Oleg followed the smell of cabbage to his wife in the kitchen.

"Hello, darling," Irina Bogdanova said from the stove. Cabbage, potatoes, and what he hoped was some ham cooking. Tea and bread. No vodka yet. The Zaitzevs drank, but not to excess. They usually waited until Svetlana went down to bed. Irina worked as an accountant at the GUM department store. The possessor of a degree from Moscow State University, she was liberated in the Western sense, but not emancipated. Hanging by the kitchen table was the string bag she carried in her purse everywhere she went, eyes always on the lookout for something she might buy to eat or brighten their drab flat. It meant standing in line, which was the task of women in the Soviet Union, along with cooking dinner for her man, regardless of his professional status in life or hers. She knew that he worked for State

Security, but did not know his job there, just that it paid a fairly comfortable salary, and came with a uniform that he rarely wore, and a rank soon to take a jump upward. So, whatever he did, he did it well enough, she judged, and that was sufficient. The daughter of an infantryman in the great Patriotic War, she'd gone to state schools and gotten above-average marks, but never quite achieved what she'd wished. She'd shown some talent at the piano, but not enough to go onward to a state conservatory. She'd also tried her hand at writing, but there, too, she'd fallen short of the necessary talent to get published. Not an unattractive woman, she was thin by Russian standards. Her mouse-brown hair fell to her shoulders and was usually well brushed-out. She read a good deal, whichever books she could get that were worth her time, and enjoyed listening to classical music. She and her husband occasionally attended concerts at the Tchaikovsky. Oleg preferred the ballet, and so they went there as well, helped, Irina assumed, by his job at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. He was not yet so senior as to allow them to hobnob with senior State Security officials at comradely parties. Perhaps when he got his colonelcy, she hoped. For the moment they lived the middle-class life of state-employed bureaucrats, scratching by on their combined salaries. The good news was that they had occasional access to the "closed" KGB stores where at least they could buy nice things for her and Svetlana. And, who knew, maybe they could afford to have another child in due course. They were both young enough, and a little boy would brighten their home.

"Anything interesting today?" she asked. It was almost their daily joke.

"There is never anything interesting at the office," he joked in reply. No, just the usual messages to and from field officers, which he forwarded to the appropriate pigeonholes for in-house couriers to hand-carry upstairs to the offices of the control officers who really ran things at KGB. A very senior colonel had come down to see the operation the previous week, which he'd done without a smile, a friendly word, or a question for twenty minutes, before disappearing off to the elevator banks. Oleg knew the man's seniority only from the identity of his escort: the colonel who ran his own operation. Whatever words had been exchanged had been too distant for him to overhear—people tended to talk in whispers, if at all, in his department—and he was trained not to show much interest.

But training could only go so far. Captain Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev was too bright to turn his mind all the way off. Indeed, his job required something approaching judgment for its proper execution, but that was something to be exercised as gingerly as a mouse's stroll through a roomful of cats. He always went to his immediate superior

and always started off with the most humble of questions before getting approval. In fact, his judgmental questions were always approved. Oleg was gifted in that, and he was beginning to get recognized as such. His majority wasn't all that far off. More money, more access to the closed stores, and, gradually, more independence—no, that wasn't quite right. A little less circumscription on what he would be able to do. Someday he might even ask if a message going out made good sense. *Do we* really *want to do* this, *comrade?* he'd wanted to ask every so often. Operational decisions were not his to make, of course, but he could—or would be able to in the future—question the wording of a directive in the most oblique terms. Every so often he'd see something going out to Officer 457 in Rome, for example, and wonder if his country really wanted to risk the consequences of having the mission order go bad. And sometimes they did go bad. Just two months before, he'd seen a dispatch from Bonn warning that something had gone wrong with the West German counterintelligence service, and the field officer had urgently requested instructions—and the instructions had been to continue his mission without questioning the intelligence of his superiors. And *that* field officer had disappeared right off the network. *Arrested and shot?* Oleg wondered. He knew some of the field officers' names, virtually all of the operations' names, and a lot of the operational targets and objectives. Most of all, he knew the code names of hundreds of foreign nationals who were agents of the KGB. At its best, it could be like reading a spy novel. Some of the field officers had a literary streak. Their dispatches were not the terse communiqués of military officers. No, they liked to communicate the state of mind of their agents, the *feel* of the information and the mission assigned. They could be like travelogue writers describing things for a paying audience. Zaitzev wasn't really supposed to digest such information, but he was a man with a mind, and besides, there were telltale codes built into every dispatch. The third word misspelled, for example, could be a warning that the officer had been compromised. Every officer had a different such key system, and Zaitzev had a list of them all. Only twice had he caught such irregularities, and on one of those occasions his supervisors had told him to ignore it as a clerical error—a fact that still astounded him. But the mistake had never been repeated, and so, maybe it really had just been an enciphering error by the officer in question. After all, his superior had told him, men trained at The Centre didn't often get caught in the field. They were the best in the world, and the Western enemies were not *that* clever, were they? Then Captain Zaitzev had nodded submission to the moment, written down his warning notation, and made sure it was in the permanent files, covering his ass like any good bureaucrat.

What if his immediate superior were under the control of some Western spy agency, he'd wondered at the time and later on, usually after a few drinks in front of his TV set. Such a compromise would be perfection itself. Nowhere in KGB was there a single written list of their officers and agents. No, "compartmentalization" was a concept invented here back in the 1920s, or perhaps earlier still. Even Chairman Andropov was not allowed to have such a thing within his reach, lest *he* defect to the West and take it with him. KGB trusted no one, least of all its own Chairman. And so, oddly, only people in his own department had access to such broad information, but they were not operations personnel. They were just communicators.

But wasn't the one person KGB *always* tried to compromise the cipher clerk in a foreign embassy? Because he or she was the one functionary, the one not bright enough to be entrusted with anything of importance—wasn't *she* the one person who *was* so entrusted? It was so often a woman, after all, and KGB officers were trained to seduce them. He'd seen dispatches along those lines, some of them describing the seduction in graphic detail, perhaps to impress the men upstairs with their manly prowess and the extent of their devotion to the State. Being paid to fuck women didn't strike Zaitzev as conspicuously heroic, but then, perhaps the women were surpassingly ugly, and performing a man's duty under such circumstances might have been difficult.

What it came down to, Oleg Ivanovich reflected, was that functionaries were so often entrusted with cosmic secrets, and he was one of them, and wasn't that amusing? More amusing than his cabbage soup, certainly, nutritious though it might be. So even the Soviet state trusted some people, despite the fact that "trust" was a concept as divorced from its way of collective thinking as a man is from Mars. And he was such a man. Well, one result of that irony was the cute green shirt his little daughter wore. He set a few books on the kitchen chair and hoisted Svetlana there so that she could eat her dinner. Svetlana's hands were a little small for the zinc-aluminum tableware, but at least it wasn't too heavy for her to use. He still had to butter her bread for her. It was good to be able to afford real butter.

"I saw something nice at the special store on the way home," Irina observed as women do over dinner, to catch their husbands in a good mood. The cabbage was especially good today, and the ham was Polish. So she'd shopped today at the "closed" store, all right. She'd gotten into the habit only nine months before, and now she wondered aloud how she'd ever lived without it.

"What's that?" Oleg asked, sipping his Georgian tea.

"Brassieres, Swedish ones."

Oleg smiled. Those of Soviet manufacture always seemed to be

designed for peasant girls who suckled calves instead of children—far too big for a woman of his wife's more human proportions. "How much?" he asked without looking up.

"Only seventeen rubles each."

Seventeen certificate *rubles,* he didn't correct her. A certificate ruble had actual value. You could, theoretically, even exchange it for a foreign "hard" currency, as opposed to the valueless paper that they used to pay the average factory worker, whose value was entirely theoretical . . . like everything else in his country, when you got down to it.

"What color?"

"White." Perhaps the special store had black or red ones, but it was a rare Soviet woman who would wear such things. People were very conservative in their habits here.

With dinner finished, Oleg left the kitchen to his wife and took his little girl into the living room and the TV set. The TV news announced that the harvest was under way, as it was every year, with the heroic laborers on the collective farms bringing in the first crop of summer wheat in the northern areas, where they had to grow and harvest it quickly. A fine crop, the TV said. *Good,* Oleg thought, *no bread shortages this winter . . . probably.* You could never really be sure about what was said on the TV. Next, some complaining coverage of the American nuclear weapons being deployed in the NATO countries, despite the reasonable Soviet requests that the West forgo such unnecessary, destabilizing, and provocative actions. Zaitzev knew that the Soviet SS-20s were going into place elsewhere, and they, of course, were in no way destabilizing. The big show on TV tonight was *We Serve the Soviet Union,* about military operations, fine young Soviet men serving their country. Today would be rare coverage of men doing their "international duty" in Afghanistan. The Soviet media didn't often cover that, and Oleg was curious as to what they'd show. There were occasional discussions over lunch at work about the war in Afghanistan. He tended to listen rather than talk, because he'd been excused from military service, something he didn't regret one little bit. He'd heard too many stories about the casual brutality in the infantry units, and besides, the uniforms were not attractive to wear. His rarely worn KGB uniform was bad enough. Still, pictures told stories that mere words did not, and he had the keen eye for detail that his job required.

"YOU KNOW, every year they harvest wheat in Kansas, and it never makes the *NBC Nightly News,"* Ed Foley said to his wife.

"I suppose feeding themselves is a major accomplishment," Mary

Pat observed. “How’s the office?”

“Small.” Then he waved his hands in such a way as to say that nothing interesting had happened.

Soon she’d have to drive their car around to check for alert signals. They were working Agent CARDINAL here in Moscow, and he was their most important assignment. The colonel knew that he’d have new handlers here. Setting that arrangement up would be touchy, but Mary Pat was accustomed to handling the touchy ones.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTIONS

IT WAS FIVE IN THE EVENING in London, and noon in Langley, when Ryan lit up his secure phone to call home. He'd have to get used to the time zones. Like a lot of people, he found that his creative times of day tended to divide themselves into two parts. Mornings were best for digesting information, but later afternoons were better for contemplation. Admiral Greer tended to be the same way, and so Jack would find himself disconnected from his boss's work routine, which wasn't good. He also had to get used to the mechanics of handling documents. He'd been in government service long enough to know that it would never be as easy as he expected, nor as simple as it ought to be.

"Greer," a voice said, after the secure link was established.

"Ryan here, sir."

"How's England, Jack?"

"Haven't seen it rain yet. Cathy starts her new job tomorrow morning."

"How's Basil?"

"I can't complain about the hospitality, sir."

"Where are you now?"

"Century House. They gave me an office on the top floor with a guy in their Russian section."

"I bet you want an STU for your home."

"Good call, sir." The old bastard was pretty good at reading minds.

"What else?"

"Nothing comes immediately to mind, Admiral."

"Anything interesting yet?"

"Just settling in, sir. Their Russian section looks smart. The guy I'm working with, Simon Harding, reads the tea leaves pretty well," Ryan said, glad that Simon was off at the moment. Of course, maybe the phone was bugged . . . nah . . . not for a Knight Commander of the Victorian Order . . . or would they?

"Kids okay?"

"Yes, sir. Sally's trying to figure out the local TV."

"Kids adapt pretty well."

Better than adults do. "I'll let you know, Admiral."

"The Hopkins document ought to be on your desk tomorrow."

"Thanks. I think they'll like it. Bernie said some interesting things. This other thing with the Pope . . ."

"What are our cousins saying?"

"They're concerned. So am I. I think His Holiness has rattled their cage pretty hard, and I think Ivan's going to notice."

"What's Basil saying?"

"Not much. I do not know what assets they have on site. I imagine they're waiting to see what they can find out." Jack paused. "Anything from our end?"

"Not yet" was the terse reply. It was a step up from *nothing I can talk to you about. Does Admiral Greer really trust me now?* Jack wondered. Sure, Greer liked him, but did he really trust him to be a good analyst? Perhaps this London sojourn was, if not boot camp, then maybe a second trip through the Basic School. That was where the Marine Corps made sure that young men with lieutenant's bars really had the right stuff to lead Marines in the field. It was reputed to be the hardest school in the Corps. It hadn't been especially easy for Ryan, but he had graduated at the top of his class. Maybe he'd just been lucky . . . ? He hadn't served long enough to find out, courtesy of a broken CH-46 over the island of Crete, an event that still visited him in the occasional nightmare. Fortunately, his gunnery sergeant and a navy corpsman had stabilized him, but Jack still got a chill even thinking about helicopters. "Tell me what you think, Jack."

"If my job were to keep the Pope alive, I'd be a little nervous. The Russians can play rough when they want to. What I cannot evaluate is how the Politburo might react—I mean, how much starch they might have in their backbone. When I talked to Basil, I said it comes down to how scared they are by his threat, if you call it a threat."

"What would you call it, Jack?" the DDI asked from 3,400 miles away.

"Yes, sir, you have me there. I suppose it is a threat of sorts to their way of thinking."

"Of sorts? How does it look to them?" Jim Greer would have been one tough son of a bitch teaching graduate-level history or political science. Right up there with Father Tim at Georgetown.

"Noted, Admiral. It's a threat. And they will see it as such. I am not sure, however, how serious a threat they will take it to be. It's not as though they believe in God. To them, 'God' is politics, and politics is just a process, not a belief system as we understand the term."

"Jack, you need to learn to see reality through the eyes of your adversary. Your analytical ability is first-rate, but you have to work on perception. This isn't stocks and bonds, where you dealt with hard

numbers, not perceptions of numbers. They say El Greco had a stigmatism in his eyes that gave everything a visual slant. They see reality through a different lens, too. If you can replicate that, you'll be one of the best around, but you have to make that leap of imagination. Harding's pretty good at that. Learn from him to see the inside of their heads."

"You know Simon?" Jack asked.

"I've been reading his analyses for years."

None of this is an accident, Jack, he told himself, with more surprise than there ought to have been. His second important lesson of the day. "Understood, sir."

"Don't sound too surprised, my boy."

"Aye-aye, sir," Ryan responded like a Marine shavetail. *I won't make that mistake again, Admiral.* And in that moment, John Patrick Ryan became a real intelligence analyst.

"I'll have the embassy deliver the STU to you. You know about keeping it secure," the DDI added as a cautionary note.

"Yes, sir. I can do that."

"Good. Lunchtime here."

"Yes, sir. Talk to you tomorrow." Ryan replaced the receiver in the cradle and then extracted the plastic key from the slot in the phone set. That went into his pocket. He checked his watch. Time to close up shop. He'd already cleared his desk of classified folders. A woman came around about 4:30 with a shopping cart to take them back to central-records storage. Right on cue, Simon came back in.

"What time's your train?"

"Six-ten."

"Time for a beer, Jack. Interested?"

"Works for me, Simon." He rose and followed his roommate out the door.

It was only a four-minute walk to the Fox and Cock, a very traditional pub a block from Century House. A little too traditional: It looked like a relic from Shakespeare's time, with massive wooden timbers and plaster walls. It had to be for architectural effect; no real building could have survived that long, could it? Inside was a cloud of tobacco smoke and a lot of people wearing jackets and ties. Clearly an upscale pub, a lot of the patrons were probably from Century House. Harding confirmed it.

"It's our watering hole. The publican used to be one of us, probably makes more here than he ever did at the shop." Without being bidden, Harding ordered two pints of Tetley's bitter, which arrived quickly. Then he ushered Jack to a corner booth.

"So, Sir John, how do you like it here?"

"No complaints so far." He took a sip. "Admiral Greer thinks you're

pretty smart."

"And Basil thinks he's rather bright as well. Good chap to work for?" Harding asked.

"Yeah, big-time. He listens and helps you think. Doesn't stomp on you when you goof. He'd rather teach than embarrass you—that's my experience, anyway. Some of the more senior analysts have had him tear a stripe off their ass. I guess I'm not senior enough for that yet." Ryan paused. "You supposed to be my training officer over here, Simon?"

The directness of the question surprised his host. "I wouldn't say that exactly. I'm a Soviet specialist. You're more a generalist, I take it?"

"Try 'apprentice,' " Ryan suggested.

"Very well. What do you want to know?"

"How to think like a Russian."

Harding laughed into his beer. "That's something we all learn every day. The key is to remember that to them everything is politics, and politics, remember, is all about nebulous ideas, aesthetics. Especially in Russia, Jack. They can't deliver real products like automobiles and television sets, so they have to concentrate on everything fitting into their political theory, the sayings of Marx and Lenin. And, of course, Lenin and Marx knew sod-all about doing real things in the real world. It's like a religion gone mad, but instead of thunderbolts or biblical plagues, they kill their apostates with firing squads. In their world outlook, everything that goes wrong is the result of political apostasy. Their political theory ignores human nature, and since their political theory is Holy Writ, and therefore is never wrong, it must be human nature that's wrong. It's not logically consistent, you see. Ever study metaphysics?"

"Boston College, second year. The Jesuits make you spend a semester on it," Ryan confirmed, taking a long sip. "Whether you want to or not."

"Well, communism is metaphysics applied ruthlessly to the real world, and when things don't fit, it's the fault of the square sods who don't fit into their round bloody holes. That can be rather hard on the poor sods, you see. And so, Joe Stalin murdered roughly twenty million of them, partly because of political theory, partly because of his own mental illness and bloody-mindedness. That insane bugger defined paranoia. One pays a price for being ruled by a madman with a twisted book of rules, you see."

"But how faithful is the current political leadership to Marxist theory?" A thoughtful nod. "That's the question, Jack. The answer is, we don't bloody know. They all claim to be true believers, but are they?" Harding paused for a contemplative sip of his own. "Only when

it suits them, I think. But that depends on who one is talking about. Suslov, for example, believes totally—but the rest of them? To some greater or lesser extent, they do and they don't. I suppose you can characterize them as people who used to go to church every Sunday, then fell away from the habit. Part of them still believes, but some greater or lesser part does not. What they *do* believe in is the fact that the state religion is the source of their power and status. And so, for all the common folk out there, they must *appear* to believe, because believing is the only thing that gives them that power and status."

"Intellectual inertia?" Ryan wondered aloud.

"Exactly, Jack. Newton's first law of motion."

Part of Ryan wanted to object to the discourse. The world had to make more sense than that. But did it? What rule said that it had to? he asked himself. And who enforced such rules? And was it expressed that simply? What Harding had just explained in less than two hundred words purported to justify hundreds of billions of dollars in expenditures, strategic weapons of incomprehensible power, and millions of people whose uniforms denoted enmity that demanded aggression and death in time of war or near-war.

But the world was about ideas, good and bad, and the conflict between this one and Ryan's own defined the reality in which Ryan worked, defined the belief system of the people who'd tried to kill him and his family. And that was as real as it had to be, wasn't it? No, there was no rule that compelled the world to make sense. People decided on their own what made sense and what did not. So, was everything about the world a matter of perception? Was it all a thing of the mind? What was reality?

But *that* was the question behind all of metaphysics. When Ryan had studied it at Boston College, it had been so purely theoretical that it seemed to have no attachment at all to reality. It had been a lot for Ryan to absorb at age nineteen, and, he realized, just as much to absorb at age thirty-two. But here the marks were often recorded in human blood, not on a report card.

"Christ, Simon. You know, it would be a lot easier if they did believe in God."

"Then, Jack, it would be just another religious war, and those are bloody affairs, too, you may recall. Think of it as the crusades, one version of God against another. Those wars were quite nasty enough. The true believers in Moscow think that they are riding the wave of history, that they are bringing perfection to the human condition. It must drive them mad when they see that their country can scarcely feed itself, and so they try to ignore it—but it is difficult to ignore an empty belly, isn't it? So they blame it all on us and on 'wreckers'—traitors and saboteurs—in their own country. Those are the people

they imprison or kill." Harding shrugged. "Personally, I regard them as infidels, believers in a false god. It's just easier that way. I've studied their political theology, but that has limited value because, as I said, so many of them do not really believe in the substance of their system. Sometimes they think like tribal Russians, whose outlook on the world has always been skewed by our standards. Russian history is such a muddle that studying it has its own limits in terms of Western logic. They're xenophobes of a very high order, always have been—but for fairly reasonable historical causes. They've always had threats from both east and west. The Mongols, for example, have been as far west as the Baltic, and the Germans and French have hammered on the gates of Moscow. As we say, they're a rum lot. One thing I do know is that no sane man wants them as masters. A pity, really. They have so many marvelous poets and composers."

"Flowers in a junkyard," Ryan suggested.

"Exactly, Jack. Very good." Harding fished for his pipe and lit it with a kitchen match. "So, how do you like the beer?"

"Excellent, much better than at home."

"I don't know how you Americans can stomach it. But your beef is better than ours."

"Corn-fed. Turns out better meat than grass does," Ryan sighed. "I'm still getting used to life over here. Every time I start feeling comfortable, something hits me like a snake in high grass."

"Well, you've had less than a week to get used to us."

"My kids will be talking funny."

"Civilized, Jack, civilized," Harding observed with a good laugh. "You Yanks do ravage our language, you know."

"Yeah, right." Pretty soon he'd refer to baseball as "rounders," which was a girls' game over here. They didn't know dick about a good fastball.

FOR HIS PART, Ed Foley found himself suddenly outraged by the bugs that he knew had to be in his apartment. Every time he made love to his wife, some KGB desk weenie was listening in. Probably a nice perverse diversion for their counterespionage spooks, but it was, by God, the Foleys' love life, and was nothing sacred? He and Mary Pat had been briefed in on what to expect, and his wife had actually joked about it, on the flight over—you couldn't bug airplanes. She'd called it a way of showing those barbarians how real people lived, and he'd laughed, but here and now it wasn't so goddamned funny. It was like being an animal in the goddamned zoo, with people watching and laughing and pointing. Would KGB keep a log of how often he and his wife got it on? *They might,* he thought, looking for marital difficulties

as a pretext for recruiting him or Mary Pat. Everyone did it. So, they'd have to make love regularly just to discourage that possibility, though playing a reverse false-flag did have interesting theoretical possibilities of its own.... No, the Station Chief decided, it'd be an unnecessary complication for their stay in Moscow, and being Chief of Station was already complex enough.

Only the ambassador, the defense attaché, and his own officers were allowed to know who he was. Ron Fielding was the overt COS, and his job was to wiggle like a good worm on the hook. When parking his car, he'd occasionally leave his sun visor down or rotated ninety degrees; sometimes he'd wear a flower in his buttonhole and take it out halfway down a block as though signalling someone or, best of all, he'd bump into people, simulating a brush-pass. That sort of thing could make the Second Chief Directorate counterspooks go nuts—race after innocent Muscovites, perhaps snatch a few up for interrogations, or put a squad of officers on the poor random bastard to watch everything he did. If nothing else, it forced KGB to waste assets on fool's errands, chasing after phantom geese. Best of all, it persuaded them that Fielding was a clumsy Station Chief. It always made the other side feel good, and *that* was always a smart move for CIA. The game he played made other power moves look like a game of Chutes and Ladders.

But the fact that there were probably bugs in his bedroom pissed him off. And he couldn't do the usual things to contravene them, like playing the radio and talking under it. No, he couldn't act like a trained spook. He had to be dumb, and playing dumb required brains and discipline and the utmost thoroughness. Not a single mistake was allowed. That one mistake could get people killed, and Ed Foley had a conscience. It was a dangerous thing for a field spook to have, but it was impossible not to have. You had to care about your agents, those foreign nationals who worked for you and fed you information. All—well, nearly all—had problems. The big one here was alcoholism. He expected every agent he ran into to be a boozer. Some were quite mad. Most were people who wanted to get even—with their bosses, with the system, with the country, with communism, with their spouses, with the whole perverse world. Some, a very few, might be genuinely attractive people. But Foley would not pick them. They would pick him. And he'd have to play the cards he was dealt. The rules of this game were hard and damned harsh. His life was safe. Oh, sure, he might get a little roughed up—or Mary Pat—but they both had diplomatic passports, and to seriously mess with him meant that somewhere in America some Soviet diplomat of fairly high rank might get a rough time at the hands of some street thugs—who might or might not be trained law-enforcement personnel. Diplomats didn't like

such things, and so it was avoided; in fact, the Russians played by the rules more faithfully than the Americans did. So he and his wife were safe, but their agents, if and when blown, would get less mercy than a mouse would get from a particularly sadistic cat. There was still torture here, still interrogations that lasted into long hours. Due process of law was whatever the government at the time felt like it was. And the appeals process was limited to whether or not the shooter's pistol was loaded. So he had to treat his agents, whether drunks, whores, or felons, like his own children, changing their diapers, getting them a bedtime glass of water, and wiping their noses.

All in all, Ed Foley thought, it was one hell of a game. And it kept him awake at night. Could the Russians tell that? Were there cameras in the walls? Wouldn't *that* be perverse? But American technology wasn't that advanced, so he was damned sure the Russians' wasn't. Probably. Foley reminded himself that there were smart people here, and a lot of them worked for KGB.

What amazed him was that his wife slept the sleep of the just, lying there next to him. She really was a better field spook than he was. She took to it like a seal to ocean water, chasing after her fish. But what about the sharks? He supposed it was normal for a man to worry about his wife, however capable she might be as a spook. That was just how men were programmed, as she was programmed to be a mother. Mary Pat looked like an angel to him in the dim light, the cute little sleep-smile she had, and the way her baby-fine blond hair always got messed up the instant she lay down on the pillow. To the Russians, she was a potential spy, but to Edward Foley she was his beloved wife, workmate, and mother of his child. It was so strange that people could be so many different things, depending on who looked at them, and yet all were true. With that philosophical thought —Christ, he *did* need sleep!—Ed Foley closed his eyes.

"SO, WHAT DID HE SAY?" Bob Ritter asked.

"He's not terribly pleased," Judge Moore replied, to nobody's surprise. "But he understands that there's not a hell of a lot we can do about it. He'll probably make a speech next week about the nobility of the workingman, especially the unionized sort."

"Good," Ritter grunted. "Let him tell the air-traffic controllers." The DDO was the master of the cheap shot, though he had the good sense not to say such things in the wrong company.

"Where's the speech?" the DDI asked.

"Chicago, next week. There's a large ethnic Polish population there," Moore explained. "He'll talk about the shipyard workers, of course, and point out that he once headed his own union. I haven't

seen the speech yet, but I expect it will be mainly vanilla, with a few chocolate chips tossed in."

"And the papers will say that he's courting the blue-collar vote," Jim Greer observed. Sophisticated as they purported to be, the newspapers didn't catch on to much until you presented it to them with french fries and ketchup. They were masters of political discourse, but they didn't know shit about how the real game was played until they were briefed-in, preferably with single-syllable words. "Will our Russian friends notice?"

"Perhaps. They have good people reading the tea leaves at the U.S.—Canada Institute. Maybe someone will drop a word en passant in a casual conversation over at Foggy Bottom that we look upon the Polish situation with some small degree of concern, since we have so many American citizens of Polish ancestry. Can't take it much further than that at the moment," Moore explained.

"So, we're concerned about Poland, but not the Pope right now," Ritter clarified the situation.

"We don't know about that yet, do we?" the DCI asked rhetorically.

"Won't they wonder why the Pope didn't let us in on his threat . . . ?"

"Probably not. The wording of the letter suggests a private communication."

"Not so private that Warsaw didn't forward it to Moscow," Ritter objected.

"As my wife likes to say, that's different," Moore pointed out.

"You know, Arthur, sometimes this wheels-inside-of-other-wheels stuff gives me a headache," Greer observed.

"The game has rules, James."

"So does boxing, but those are a lot more straightforward."

" 'Protect yourself at all times,' " Ritter pointed out. "That's Rule Number One here, too. Well, we don't have any specific warnings yet, do we?" Heads shook wordlessly. No, they didn't. "What else did he say, Arthur?"

"He wants us to find out if there's any danger to His Holiness. If anything happens to him, our President is going to be seriously pissed."

"Along with a billion or so Catholics," Greer agreed.

"You suppose the Russians might contract the Northern Irish Protestants to do the hit?" Ritter asked, with a nasty smile. "They don't like him either, remember. Something for Basil to look into."

"Robert, that's a little too far off the wall, I think," Greer analyzed. "They hate communism almost as much as Catholicism, anyway."

"Andropov doesn't think that far outside the box," Moore decided. "Nobody over there does. If he decides to take the Pope out, he'll use

his own assets and try to be clever about it. That's how we'll know if, God forbid, it goes that far. And if it looks as if he's leaning that way, we'll have to dissuade him from that notion."

"It won't get that far. The Politburo is too circumspect," said the DDI.

"And it's too unsubtle for them. It's not the sort of thing a chess player does, and chess is still their national game."

"Tell that to Leon Trotsky," Ritter said sharply.

"That was personal. Stalin wanted to eat his liver with onions and gravy," Greer replied. "That was pure personal hatred, and it achieved nothing on the political level."

"Not the way Uncle Joe looked at it. He was genuinely afraid of Trotsky—"

"No, he wasn't. Okay, you can say he was a paranoid bastard, but even he knew the difference between paranoia and genuine fear." Greer knew that statement was a mistake the moment the words escaped his lips. He covered his tracks: "And even if he was afraid of the old goat, the current crop isn't like that. They lack Stalin's paranoia but, more to the point, they lack his decisiveness."

"Jim, you're wrong. The Warsaw Letter is a potentially dangerous threat to their political stability, and they *will* take that seriously."

"Robert, I didn't know you were that religious," Moore joked.

"I'm not, and neither are they, but they will be worried about this. I think they will be worried a lot. Enough to take direct action? That I'm not sure of, but they will damned well think about it."

"That remains to be seen," Moore countered.

"Arthur, that is my assessment," the DDO shot back, and with the A-word, it became serious, at least within the cloisters of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"What changed your mind so quickly, Bob?" the Judge asked.

"The more I think about it, from their point of view, the more serious it starts to look."

"You planning anything?"

That made Ritter a little uneasy. "It's a little early to hit the Foleys with a major tasking, but I am going to send them a heads-up, at least to get them thinking about it."

This was an operational question, on which the others typically deferred to Bob Ritter and his field-spook instincts. Taking information from an agent was often simpler and more routine than getting instructions *to* an agent. Since it was assumed that every employee of the Moscow embassy was followed on a regular or irregular basis, it was dangerous to make them do something that looked spookish. This was especially true for the Foleys—they were so new that they would be tightly covered. Ritter didn't want them

blown, for the usual reasons and for one other: His selection of this husband/wife team had been a daring play, and if it didn't work, it would come back at him. A high-stakes poker player, Ritter didn't like losing his chips any more than the next man. He had very high hopes for the Foleys. He didn't want their potential blown two weeks into their assignment in Moscow.

The other two didn't comment, which allowed Ritter to proceed, running his shop as he saw fit.

"You know," Moore observed, with a lean-back into his chair, "here we are, the best and brightest, the best-informed members of this presidential administration, and we don't know beans about a subject that may turn out to be of great importance."

"True, Arthur," Greer agreed. "But we don't know with considerable authority. That's more than anybody else can say, isn't it?"

"Just what I needed to hear, James." It meant that those outside this building were free to pontificate, but that these three men were not. No, they had to be cautious in everything they said, because people tended to view their opinions as facts—which, you learned up here on the Seventh Floor, they most certainly were not. If they were that good, they'd be doing something more profitable with their lives, like picking stocks.

RYAN SETTLED BACK into his easy chair with a copy of the *Financial Times.* Most people preferred to read it in the morning, but not Jack. Mornings were for general news, to prepare him for the workday at Century House—back home, he'd listened to news radio during the hour-or-so drive, since the intelligence business so often tracked the news. Here and now, he could relax with the financial stuff. This British paper wasn't quite the same as *The Wall Street Journal,* but the different twist it put on things was interesting—it gave him a new slant on abstract problems, to which he could then apply his American-trained expertise. Besides, it helped to keep current. There were bound to be financial opportunities out here, waiting for people to harvest them. Finding a few would make this whole European adventure worth the time. He still regarded his CIA sojourn as a side trip in life, whose ultimate destination was too far off in the haze. He'd play his cards one at a time.

"Dad called today," Cathy said, perusing her medical journal. This was *The New England Journal of Medicine,* one of the six she subscribed to.

"What did Joe want?"

"Just asked how we were doing, how the kids are, that sort of thing," Cathy responded.

Didn't waste any words about me, did he? Ryan didn't bother asking. Joe Muller, senior VP of Merrill Lynch, didn't approve of the way his son-in-law had left the trading business, after having had the bad grace to run off with his own daughter, first to teach, and then to play fox-and-hounds with spies and other government employees. Joe didn't much care for the government and its minions—he deemed them unproductive takers of what he and others made. Jack was sympathetic, but someone had to deal with the tigers of the world, and one of those somebodies was John Patrick Ryan. Ryan liked money as much as the next guy, but to him it was a tool, not an end in itself. It was like a good car—it could take you to nice places but, once there, you didn't sleep in the car. Joe didn't see things that way and didn't even try to understand those who thought otherwise. On the other hand, he did love his daughter, and he had never hassled her about becoming a surgeon. Perhaps he figured taking care of sick people was okay for girls, but making money was man's work.

"That's nice, honey," Ryan said from behind the *FT*. The Japanese economy was starting to look shaky to Ryan, though not to the paper's editorial board. Well, they'd been wrong before.

IT WAS A sleepless night in Moscow. Yuriy Andropov had smoked more than his usual complement of Marlboros, but had held himself to only one vodka after he'd gotten home from a diplomatic reception for the ambassador from Spain—a total waste of his time. Spain had joined NATO, and its counterintelligence service was depressingly effective at identifying his attempts to get a penetration agent into their government. He'd probably be better advised to try the king's court. Courtiers were notoriously talkative, after all, and the elected government would probably keep the newly restored monarch informed, for no other reason than their desire to suck up to him. So he had drunk the wine, nibbled on the finger food, and chattered on with the usual small talk. *Yes, it has been a fine summer, hasn't it?* Sometimes he wondered if his elevation to the Politburo was worth the demands on his time. He hardly ever had time to read anymore—just his work and his diplomatic/political duties, which were endless. Now he knew what it must be like to be a woman, Andropov thought. No wonder they all nagged and groused so much at their men.

But the thought that never left his mind was the Warsaw Letter. *If the government of Warsaw persists in its unreasonable repression of the people, I will be compelled to resign the papacy and return to be with my people in their time of trouble.* That bastard! Threatening the peace of the world. Had the Americans put him up to it? None of his field officers had turned up anything like that, but one could never be sure.

The American President was clearly no friend to his country, he was always looking for ways to sting Moscow—the nerve of that intellectual nonentity, saying that the Soviet Union was the center of evil in the world! That fucking *actor* saying such things! Even the howls of protest from the American news media and academia hadn't lessened the sting. Europeans had picked up on it—worst of all, the *Eastern* European intelligentsia had seized on it, which had caused all manner of problems for his subordinate counterintelligence throughout the Warsaw Pact. As if they weren't busy enough already, Yuriy Vladimirovich grumbled, as he pulled another cigarette out of the red-and-white box and lit it with a match. He didn't even listen to the music that was playing, as his brain turned the information over and over in his head.

Warsaw *had to* clamp down on those counterrevolutionary troublemakers in Danzig—strangely, Andropov always thought of that port city by the old German name—lest its government come completely unglued. Moscow had told them to sort things out in the most direct terms, and the Poles knew how to follow orders. The presence of Soviet Army tanks on their soil would help them understand what was necessary and what was not. If this Polish "Solidarity" rubbish went much further, the infection would begin to spread—west to Germany, south to Czechoslovakia . . . and east to the Soviet Union? They couldn't allow that.

On the other hand, if the Polish government could suppress it, then things would quiet down again. *Until the next time?* Andropov wondered.

Had his outlook been just a little broader, he might have grasped the fundamental problem. As a Politburo member, he was insulated from the more unpleasant aspects of life in his country. He lacked for nothing. Good food was no farther away than his telephone. His lavish apartment was well furnished, outfitted with German appliances. The furniture was comfortable. The elevator in his building was *never* out of service. He had a driver to take him to and from the office. He had a protective detail to make sure that he was never troubled by street hooligans. He was as protected as Nikolay II had been and, like all men, he assumed that his living conditions were normal, even though intellectually he knew that they were anything but. The people outside his windows had food to eat, TV and films to watch, sports teams to cheer for, and the chance to own an automobile, didn't they? In return for giving them all those things, he enjoyed a somewhat better lifestyle. That was entirely reasonable, wasn't it? Didn't he work harder than they all did? What the hell *else* did those people want?

And now this Polish priest was trying to upset the entire thing.

And he just might do it, too, Andropov thought. Stalin had once

famously asked how many divisions the Pope had at his command, but even he must have known that not all the power in the world grew out of the barrel of a gun.

If Karol *did* resign the papacy, then what? He'd try to come back to Poland. Might the Poles keep him out—revoke his citizenship, for example? No, somehow he'd manage to get back into Poland. Andropov and the Poles had their agents inside the church, of course, but such things only went so far. To what extent did the church have his agencies infiltrated? There was no telling. So no, any attempt to keep him out of Poland was probably doomed to failure, and, once attempted, if the Pope did get into Poland, *that* would be an epic disaster.

They could try diplomatic contacts. The right Foreign Ministry official could fly to Rome and meet clandestinely with Karol and try to dissuade him from following through on his threat. But what cards would he be able to play? An overt threat on his life . . . that would not work. That sort of challenge would be an invitation to martyrdom and sainthood, which likely would only encourage him to make the trip. For a believer, it would be an invitation to Heaven, one sent by the devil himself, and he'd pick up that gauntlet with alacrity. No, you could not threaten such a man with death. Even threatening his people with harsher measures would only encourage him further—he'd want to come home to protect them all the sooner, so as to appear more heroic to the world.

The sophistication of the threat he had sent to Warsaw was something that only appreciated with contemplation, Andropov admitted to himself. But there was one certain answer to it: Karol would have to find out for himself if there really was a god.

Is there a god? Andropov wondered. A question for the ages, answered by many people in many ways until Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin had settled the matter—at least so far as the Soviet Union was concerned. *No*, Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself, it was too late for him to reconsider his own answer to that question. *No, there is no God.* Life was here and now, and when it ended, it ended, and so what you did was the best you could, living your life as fully as possible, taking the fruit you could reach and building a ladder to seize those you could not.

But Karol was trying to change that equation. He was trying to shake the ladder—or perhaps the tree? That question was a little too deep.

Andropov turned in his chair and poured some vodka out of the decanter, then took a contemplative sip. Karol was trying to enforce his false beliefs on his own, trying to shake the very foundations of the Soviet Union and its far-flung alliances, trying to tell people that there

was something better to believe in. In that, he was trying to upset the work of generations, and he and his country could not permit it. But he could not forestall Karol's effort. He could not persuade him to turn away. No, Karol would have to be stopped in a manner that would forestall him fully and finally.

It would not be easy, and it would not be entirely safe. But doing nothing was even less safe, for him, for his colleagues, and for his country.

And so, Karol had to die. First, Andropov would have to come up with a plan. Then he'd have to take it to the Politburo. Before he proposed action, he'd have to have the action fully plotted out, with a guarantee of success. Well, that was what he had KGB for, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 5

GETTING CLOSE

AN EARLY RISER, Yuriy Vladimirovich was showered, shaved, dressed, and eating his breakfast before seven in the morning. For him it was bacon, three scrambled eggs, and thickly cut Russian bread with Danish butter. The coffee was German in origin, just like the kitchen appliances his apartment boasted. He had the morning *Pravda,* plus selected cuttings from Western newspapers, translated by KGB linguists, and some briefing material prepared in the early hours of the morning at The Centre and hand-delivered to his flat every morning at six. There was nothing really important today, he saw, lighting his third cigarette and drinking his second cup of coffee. All routine. The American President hadn't rattled his sabre the night before, which was an agreeable surprise. Perhaps he'd dozed off in front of the TV, as Brezhnev often did.

How much longer would Leonid continue to head the Politburo? Andropov wondered. Clearly the man would not retire. If he did, his children would suffer, and they enjoyed being the royal family of the Soviet Union too much to let their father do that. Corruption was never a pretty thing. Andropov did not suffer from it himself—indeed, that was one of his core beliefs. That was why the current situation was so frustrating. He would—he *had to*—save his country from the chaos into which it was falling. *If I live long enough, and Brezhnev dies soon enough, that is.* Leonid Ilyich was clearly in failing health. He'd managed to stop smoking—at the age of seventy-six, which, Yuriy Vladimirovich admitted to himself, was fairly impressive—but the man was in his dotage. His mind wandered. He had trouble remembering things. He occasionally dozed off at important meetings, to the dismay of his associates. But his grasp of power was a deathgrip. He'd engineered the downfall of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev through a masterful series of political maneuvers, and *nobody* in Moscow forgot that tidbit of political history—a trick like that was unlikely to work on someone who'd engineered it himself. No one had even suggested to Leonid that he might wish to slow down—if not actually step slightly aside, then at least let others undertake some of his more administrative duties and allow him to concentrate

his abilities on the really major questions. The American President was not all that much younger than Brezhnev, but he had lived a healthier life, or perhaps came from hardier peasant stock.

In his reflective moments, it struck Andropov as strange that he objected to this sort of corruption. He saw it precisely as such, but only rarely asked himself *why* he saw it so. In those moments, he actually did fall back on his Marxist beliefs, the very ones he'd discarded years ago, because even he had to fall back on some sort of ethos, and that was all he had. Stranger still, it was an area in which Marx and Christianity actually overlapped in their beliefs. Must have been an accident. After all, Karl Marx had been a Jew, not a Christian, and whatever religion he rejected or embraced ought to have been his own, not one foreign to him and his heritage. The KGB Chairman dismissed the entire line of thought with an annoyed shake of the head. He had enough on his professional plate, even as he finished what lay before him. There was a discreet knock on the door.

"Come," Andropov called, knowing who it was by the sound.

"Your car is ready, Comrade Chairman," the head of the security detail announced.

"Thank you, Vladimir Stepanovich." He rose from the table, lifted his suit jacket, and shrugged into it for the trip to work.

This was a routine fourteen-minute drive through central Moscow. His ZIL automobile was entirely handmade, actually similar in appearance to the American Checker taxicab. It ran straight down the center of the expansive avenues, in a broad lane kept clear by officers of the Moscow Militia exclusively for senior political officials. They stood out there all day in the heat of summer and the punishing cold of winter, one cop every three blocks or so, making sure no one obstructed the way for longer than it took to make a crossing turn. It made the drive to work as convenient as taking a helicopter, and far easier on the nerves.

Moscow Centre, as KGB was known throughout the world of intelligence, was located in the former home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, and a mighty company it must have been to build such an edifice. Andropov's car pulled through the gate into the inner courtyard, right up to the bronze doors, where his car door was yanked open, and he alit to the official salutes from uniformed Eighth Directorate men. Inside, he walked to the elevator, which was held for him, of course, and then rode to the top floor. His detail examined his face to ascertain his mood—as such men did all over the world—and, as usual, saw nothing: He guarded his feelings as closely as a professional cardplayer. On the top floor was a walk of perhaps fifteen meters to his secretary's door. That was because Andropov's office had no door of its own. Instead, there was a clothes dresser in the

anteroom, and the entrance to his office lay within that. This chicanery dated back to Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's own chief of clandestine services, who'd had a large and hardly unreasonable fear of assassination and had come up with this security measure, lest a commando team reach all the way into NKVD headquarters. Andropov found it theatrical, but it was something of a KGB tradition and, in its way, roundly entertaining for visitors—it had been around too long to be a secret from anyone able to get this far, in any case.

His schedule gave him fifteen free minutes at the beginning of the day to review the papers on his desk before the daily briefings began, followed by meetings that were scheduled days or even weeks in advance. Today it was almost all internal-security matters, though someone from the Party Secretariat was scheduled before lunch to discuss strictly political business. *Oh, yes, that thing in Kiev*, he remembered. Soon after becoming KGB Chairman, he'd found that Party affairs paled in importance next to the agreeably broad canvas he had here at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. The charter of KGB, insofar as it had such a limitation, was to be the "Sword and Shield" of the Party. Hence its primary mission, theoretically, was to keep an eye on Soviet citizens who might not be as enthusiastic as they ought toward their own country's government. Those Helsinki Watch people were becoming a major annoyance. The USSR had made an agreement in the Finnish capital seven years before, regarding the monitoring of human rights, and they evidently took it seriously. Worse, they had attracted the on-and-off attention of the Western news media. Reporters could be a huge nuisance, and you couldn't rough them up the way you used to—not all of them, anyway. The capitalist world treated them like demigods, and expected everyone else to do the same, when everyone knew they were all spies of some kind. It was amusing to see how the American government overtly forbade its intelligence services from adopting journalistic covers. Every other spy service in the world did it. As if the Americans would follow their own lily-white laws, which had been passed only to make other countries feel good about having *The New York Times* snooping around their countries. It wasn't even worth a dismissive snort. Preposterous. *All* foreign visitors in the Soviet Union were spies. Everyone knew it, and that was why his Second Chief Directorate, whose job was counterespionage, was so large a part of the KGB.

Well, the problem that had cost him an hour of sleep the night before wasn't all that different, was it? Not when you got down to it. Yuriy Vladimirovich punched a button on his intercom.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," his secretary—a man, of course—answered immediately.

"Send Aleksey Nikolay'ch in to see me."

"At once, comrade." It took four minutes by Andropov's desk clock.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman." Aleksey Nikolayevich Rozhdestvenskiy was a senior colonel in the First Chief—"Foreign"—Directorate, a very experienced field officer who'd served extensively in Western Europe, though never in the Western Hemisphere. A gifted field officer and runner-of-agents, he'd been bumped up to The Centre for his streetsmart expertise and to act more or less as an in-house expert for Andropov to consult when he needed information on field operations. Not tall, not especially handsome, he was the sort of man who could turn invisible on any city street in the world, which partly explained his success in the field.

"Aleksey, I have a theoretical problem. You've worked in Italy, as I recall."

"For three years in Station Rome, Comrade Chairman, yes, under Colonel Goderenko. He's still there, as *rezident*."

"A good man?" Andropov asked.

He gave an emphatic nod of the head. "A fine senior officer, yes, Comrade Chairman. He runs a good station. I learned much from him."

"How well does he know the Vatican?"

That made Rozhdestvenskiy blink. "There is not much to be learned there. We do have some contacts, yes, but it has never been a matter of great emphasis. The Catholic Church is a difficult target to infiltrate, for the obvious reasons."

"What about through the Orthodox Church?" Andropov asked.

"There are some contacts there, yes, and we have had some feedback, but rarely anything of value. More along the line of gossip and, even then, nothing we cannot get through other channels."

"How good is security around the Pope?"

"Physical security?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked, wondering where this was going.

"Precisely," the Chairman confirmed.

Rozhdestvenskiy felt his blood temperature drop a few degrees. "Comrade Chairman, the Pope does have some protection about him, mainly of the passive sort. His bodyguards are Swiss, in plainclothes—that comic-opera group that parades around in striped jumpsuits is mostly for show. They occasionally have to grab a believer overcome by his proximity to the head priest, that sort of thing. I am not even sure if they carry weapons, though I must assume that they do."

"Very well. I want to know how difficult it might be to get physically close to the Pope. Do you have any ideas?"

Ah, Rozhdestvenskiy thought. "Personal knowledge? No, comrade. I visited Vatican City several times when I was in Rome. The art collection there, as you may imagine, is impressive, and my wife is

interested in such things. I took her there perhaps half a dozen times. The area crawls with priests and nuns. I confess I never looked about for security provisions, but nothing was readily apparent, aside from what you'd expect—measures against thefts and vandalism, that sort of thing. There are the usual museum guards, whose main function seems to be to tell people where the lavatories are.

"The Pope lives in the Papal Apartments, which adjoin the church of St. Peter's. I have never been there. It is not the sort of place in which I had any professional interest. I know our ambassador is there occasionally for diplomatic functions, but I was not invited—my posting was that of Assistant Commercial Attaché, you see, Comrade Chairman, and I was too junior," Rozhdestvenskiy went on. "You say you wish to know about getting close to the Pope. I presume by that you mean . . . ?"

"Five meters, closer if possible, but certainly five meters."

Pistol range, Rozhdestvenskiy grasped at once. "I don't know enough myself. That would be a job for Colonel Goderenko and his people. The Pope gives audiences for the faithful. How you get into those, I do not know. He also appears in public for various purposes. I do not know how such things are scheduled."

"Let's find out," Andropov suggested lightly. "Report directly to me. Do not discuss this with anyone else."

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," the colonel said, coming to attention with the receipt of the order. "The priority?"

"Immediate," Andropov replied, in the most casual of voices.

"I shall see to it myself, Comrade Chairman," Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy promised. His face revealed nothing of his feelings. Indeed, he had few of those. KGB officers were not trained to have much in the way of scruples, at least outside politics, in which they were supposed to have a great deal of faith. Orders from above carried the force of Divine Will. Aleksey Nikolay'ch's only concerns at the moment were centered on the potential political fallout to be had from dropping this particular nuclear device. Rome was more than a thousand kilometers from Moscow, but that would probably not be far enough. However, political questions were not his to ask, and he scrubbed the matter from his mind—for the moment, anyway. While he did so, the intercom box on the Chairman's desk buzzed. Andropov flipped the top-right switch.

"Yes?"

"Your first appointment is here, Comrade Chairman." His secretary announced.

"How long will this take, Aleksey, do you suppose?"

"Several days, probably. You want an immediate assessment, I assume, followed by what sort of specific data?"

"Correct. For the moment, just a general assessment," Yuriy Vladimirovich said. "We're not planning any sort of operation just yet."

"By your order, Comrade Chairman. I'll go down to the communications center directly."

"Excellent. Thank you, Aleksey."

"I serve the Soviet Union" was the automatic reply. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy came to attention again, then left-faced for the door. He had to duck his head going out into the secretary's room, as most men did, and from there he turned right and out into the corridor.

So, how does *one get close to the Pope, this Polish priest?* Rozhdestvenskiy wondered. It was, at least, an interesting theoretical question. KGB abounded with theoreticians and academics who examined everything, from how to assassinate chiefs of foreign governments—useful in the event that a major war was about to be undertaken—to the best way to steal and interpret medical records from hospitals. The broad scope of KGB field operations knew few limitations.

One could not have guessed much from the colonel's face as he walked to the elevator bank. He pushed the button and waited for forty seconds until the doors opened.

"Basement," he told the operator. The elevators all had operators. Elevators were too good a potential dead-drop location to leave unattended. Even then, the operators were trained to look for brush-passes. Nobody was trusted in this building. There were too many secrets to be had. If there were one single place in the Soviet Union in which an enemy would want to place a penetration agent, this building was it, and so everyone looked at everyone else in some sort of black game, always watching, measuring every conversation for an inner meaning. Men made friends here as they did in every walk of life. They chatted about their wives and children, about sports and weather, about whether to buy a car or not, about getting a dacha in the country for the lucky ones with seniority. But rarely did men chat about work, except with their immediate workmates, and then only in conference rooms where such things were supposed to be discussed. It never occurred to Rozhdestvenskiy that these institutional restrictions reduced productivity and might actually hinder the efficiency of his agency. That circumscription was just part of the institutional religion of the Committee for State Security.

He had to pass a security checkpoint to enter the communications room. The watch NCO checked his photo pass and waved him through without much in the way of acknowledgment.

Rozhdestvenskiy had been here before, of course, often enough that he was known by face and name to the senior operators, and he knew

them. The desks were arranged with a lot of space between them, and the background noise of the teleprinters prevented ordinary conversation from being overheard at a distance of more than three or four meters, even by the most sensitive ears. This, and nearly everything else about the arrangement of the room, had evolved over the years until the security provisions were as close to perfect as anyone could imagine, though that didn't keep the efficiency experts on the third floor from wandering about with their scowls, always looking for something wrong. He walked to the desk of the senior communications watch officer.

"Oleg Ivanovich," he said in greeting.

Zaitzev looked up to see his fifth visitor of the young day, the fifth visitor and the fifth *interruption.* It was often a curse being the senior watch officer here, especially on the morning shift. The overnight watch was boring, but at least you could work in a straight line.

"Yes, Colonel, what can I do for you this morning?" he asked pleasantly, junior officer to senior.

"A special message to Station Rome, personal to the *rezident*. I think a one-time pad for this one. I'd prefer that you handle it yourself." *Instead of having a cipher clerk do the encryption,* he didn't say. This was somewhat unusual, and it pricked Zaitzev's interest. He would have to see it anyway. Eliminating the cipher clerk just halved the number of people that would see this particular message.

"Very well." Captain Zaitzev took up a pad and pencil. "Go on."

"Most Secret. IMMEDIATE AND URGENT. FROM MOSCOW CENTRE, OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN. TO COLONEL RUSLAN BORISSOVICH GODERENKO, *REZIDENT,* ROME. MESSAGE FOLLOWS: ASCERTAIN AND REPORT MEANS OF GETTING PHYSICALLY CLOSE TO THE POPE. ENDS."

"That's all?" Zaitzev asked, surprised. "And if he asks what that means? It's not very clear in its intent."

"Ruslan Borissovich will understand what it means," Rozhdestvenskiy assured him. He knew that Zaitzev wasn't asking anything he shouldn't. One-time cipher pads were a nuisance to use, and so messages sent that way were supposed to be explicit in all details, lest the back-and-forth clarification messages compromise the communications links. As it was, this message would be telexed, and so was certain to be intercepted, and equally certain to be recognized by its formatting as a one-time-pad encipherment, hence a message of some importance. American and British codebreakers would probably attack it, and everyone was wary of them and their clever tricks. The West's damned intelligence agencies worked so closely together.

"If you say so, Comrade Colonel. I'll send it out within the hour." Zaitzev checked the wall clock to make sure he could do that. "It

should be on his desk when he gets into his office."

It will take twenty minutes for Ruslan to decrypt it, Rozhdestvenskiy estimated. *Then will he query us about it, as Zaitzev suggests? Probably. Goderenko is a careful, thorough man—and politically astute. Even with Andropov's name at the top, Ruslan Borissovich will be curious enough to ask for a clarification.*

"If there is a reply, call me as soon as you have the clear text."

"You are the point of contact for this line?" Zaitzev asked, just to make sure he routed things correctly. After all, the message header, as this colonel had dictated it to him, said "Office of the Chairman."

"That is correct, Captain."

Zaitzev nodded, then handed the message blank to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy for his signature/confirmation. Everything in KGB had to have a paper trail. Zaitzev looked down at the checklist. Message, originator, recipient, encryption method, point of contact . . . yes, he had everything, and all spaces were properly signed. He looked up. "Colonel, it will go out shortly. I will call you to confirm transmission time." He would also send a paper record upstairs for the permanent operations files. He made a final written notation and handed off the carbon copy.

"Here's the dispatch number. It will also be the operation-reference number until such time as you change it."

"Thank you, Captain." The colonel took his leave.

Oleg Ivanovich looked again at the wall clock. Rome was three hours behind Moscow time. Ten or fifteen minutes for the *rezident* to clear-text the message—the field people were so clumsy at such things, he knew—and then to think about it, and then . . . ? Zaitzev made a small wager with himself. The Rome *rezident* would send back a request for clarification. Sure as hell. The captain had been sending out messages and getting them back from this man for some years. Goderenko was a careful man who liked things clear. So he'd leave the Rome pad in his desk drawer in readiness for the return message. He counted: 209 characters, including blank spaces and punctuation. A pity they couldn't do this on one of those new American computers they were playing with upstairs. But there was no sense wishing for the moon. Zaitzev pulled out the cipher-pad book from his desk drawer and unnecessarily wrote down its number before walking to the west side of the capacious room. He knew nearly all of them by number, a product of his chess background, Zaitzev imagined.

"Pad one-one-five-eight-nine-zero," he told the clerk behind the metal screen, handing off the paper slip. The clerk, a man of fifty-seven long years, most of them here, walked a few meters to fetch the proper cipher book. It was a loose-leaf binder, about ten centimeters across by twentyfive high, filled with punched paper pages, probably

five hundred or more. The current page was marked with a plastic tag.

The pages looked like those in a telephone book, until you looked closely and saw that the letters didn't form names in any known language, except by random accident. There were on average two or three such occurrences per page. Outside Moscow, on the Outer Ring Road, was the headquarters of Zaitzev's own directorate, the Eighth, the part of KGB tasked with making and breaking codes and ciphers. On the roof of the building was a highly sensitive antenna which led to a teletype machine. The receiver that lay between the antenna and the teletype listened in on random atmospheric noise, and the teletype interpreted these "signals" as dot-dash letters, which the adjacent teletype machine duly printed up. In fact, several such machines were cross-connected in such a way that the randomness of the atmospheric noise was re-randomized into totally unpredictable gibberish. From that gibberish were made the one-time pads, which were supposed to be totally random transpositions that no mathematical formula could predict or, therefore, decrypt. The one-time-pad cipher was universally regarded as the most secure of encryption systems. That was important, since the Americans were the world leaders at cracking ciphers. Their "Venona" project had even compromised Soviet ciphers of the late 1940s and '50s, much to the discomfort of Zaitzev's parent agency. The most secure one-time pads were also the most cumbersome and inconvenient, even for experienced hands like Captain Zaitzev. But that couldn't be helped. And Andropov himself wanted to know how to get physically close to the Pope.

That's when it hit Zaitzev: *Physically close to the Pope.* But why would anyone want that? Surely Yuriy Vladimirovich didn't want anyone to hear his confession.

What was he being asked to transmit?

The Rome *rezident,* Goderenko, was a highly experienced field officer whose *rezidentura* operated many Italian and other nationals as agents for the KGB. He forwarded all manner of information, some overtly important, some merely amusing, though potentially useful in compromising otherwise important people with embarrassing foibles. Was it that only the important had such weaknesses, or did their positions merely allow them to entertain themselves in manners which all men dreamt about but few could indulge in? Whatever the answer, Rome would have to be a good city for it. *City of the Caesars,* Zaitzev thought, *it ought to be.* He thought of the travel and history books he'd read on the city and the era—classical history in the Soviet Union had some political commentary, but not all that much. The political spin applied to every single aspect of life was the most tiring intellectual feature of life in his country, often enough to drive a man to drink—which, in the USSR, wasn't all that distant a drive, of course. Time to

go back to work. He took a cipher wheel from his top drawer. It was like a phone dial—you set the letter to be transposed at the top of one dial, then rotated the other to the letter indicated on the page of the transposition pad. In this case, he was working from the beginning of the twelfth line of page 284. That reference would be included in the first line of the transmission so that the recipient would know how to get clear text from the transmitted gibberish.

It was laborious despite the use of the cipher wheel. He had to set the clear-text letter he'd written in the message form, then dial to the transposition letter on the printed page of the cipher-pad book, and write down each individual result. Each operation required him to set his pencil down, dial, pick up the pencil again, recheck his results—twice in his case—and begin again. (The cipher clerks, who did nothing else, worked two-handed, a skill Zaitzev had not acquired.) It was beyond tedious, hardly the sort of work designed for someone educated in mathematics. Like checking spelling tests in a primary school, Zaitzev grumbled to himself. It took more than six minutes to get it right. It would have taken less time had he been allowed to have a helper in the process, but that would have violated the rules, and here the rules were adamantine.

Then, with the task done, he had to repeat everything to make sure he hadn't transmitted any garbles, because garbles screwed everything up on both ends of the system, and this way, if they happened, he could blame them on the teletype operators—which everyone did anyway. Another four and a half minutes confirmed that he hadn't made any errors. Good.

Zaitzev rose and walked to the other side of the room, through the door into the transmission room. The noise there was enough to drive a man mad. The teletypes were of an old design—actually, one had been stolen from Germany in the 1930s—and sounded like machine guns, though without the banging noise of exploding cartridges. In front of each machine was a uniformed typist—they were all men, each sitting erect like a statue, his hands seemingly affixed to the keyboard in front of him. They all had ear protection, lest the noise in the room land them in a psychiatric hospital. Zaitzev walked his message form to the room supervisor, who took the sheet without a word—he wore ear-protectors, too—and walked it to the leftmost typist in the back row. There, the supervisor clipped it to a vertical board over the keyboard. At the top of the form was the identifier for the destination. The typist dialed the proper number, then waited for the warbling sound of the teleprinter at the other end—it had been designed to get past the ear plugs, and it also lit up a yellow light on the teletype machine. He then typed in the gibberish.

How they did that without going mad, Zaitzev did not understand.

The human mind craved patterns and good sense, but typing TKALNNETPTN required robotic attention to detail and a total denial of humanity. Some said that the typists were all expert pianists, but that couldn't be true, Zaitzev was sure. Even the most discordant piano piece had *some* unifying harmony to it. But not a one-time-pad cipher.

The typist looked up after just a few seconds: "Transmission complete, comrade." Zaitzev nodded and walked back to the supervisor's desk.

"If anything comes in with this operation-reference number, bring it to me immediately."

"Yes, Comrade Captain," the supervisor acknowledged, making a notation on his set of "hot" numbers.

With that done, Zaitzev headed back for his desk, where the work pile was already quite high enough, and only marginally less mind-numbing than that of the robots in the next room. Perhaps that was why something started whispering at the back of his head: *physically close to the Pope . . . why?*

THE ALARM WENT OFF at a quarter of six. That was an uncivilized hour. At home, Ryan told himself, it was quarter of *one,* but that thought did not bear reflection. He flipped the covers clear off the bed and rose, staggering to the bathroom. There was still a lot to get used to here. The toilets flushed pretty much the same, but the sink . . . *Why the hell*, Ryan wondered, *did you need two spouts to put water in the sink, one for hot and one for cold?* At home you just held your hand under the damned spout, but here the water had to mix up in the sink first, and that slowed you down. The first morning look in the mirror was difficult. *Do I really look like that?* he always wondered on the way back into the bedroom to pat his wife on the rump.

"It's time, honey."

An oddly feminine grumble. "Yeah. I know."

"Want me to get Little Jack?"

"Let him sleep," Cathy advised. The little guy hadn't felt like sleeping the previous evening. So now, of course, he wouldn't feel like waking up.

" 'Kay." Jack headed to the kitchen. The coffee machine only needed its button punched, and Ryan was able to handle that task. Just before flying over, he'd seen a new American company IPO. It sold premium coffee, and since Jack had always been something of a coffee snob, he'd invested $100,000 and gotten himself some of their product—as fine a country as England might be, it was not a place you visited for the coffee. At least he could get Maxwell House from the

Air Force, and perhaps he'd get this new Starbucks outfit to ship him some of their brew. One more mental note to make. Next he wondered what Cathy might make for breakfast. Surgeon or not, she regarded the kitchen as her domain. Her husband was allowed to make sandwiches and fix drinks, but that was about it. That suited Jack, for whom a stove was terra incognita. The stove here was gas, like his mom had used, but with a different trademark. He stumbled to the front door, hoping to find a newspaper.

It was there. Ryan had signed up for the *Times,* to go with the *International Herald Tribune* he picked up at the train station in London. Finally, he switched on the TV. Remarkably, there was a start-up version of cable TV in this subdivision, and, mirabile dictu, it had the new American CNN news service—just in time for baseball scores. So England was civilized after all. The Orioles had knocked off Cleveland the previous night, 5–4, in eleven innings. The ballplayers were doubtless in bed right now, sleeping off the postgame beers they'd quaffed at their hotel bar. What a pleasant thought that was. They had a good eight hours of sack time ahead of them. At the turn of the hour, the CNN night crew in Atlanta summarized the previous day's events. Nothing overly remarkable. The economy was still a little fluky. The Dow Jones had snapped back nicely, but the unemployment rate always lagged behind, and so did working-class voters. Well, that was democracy for you. Ryan had to remind himself that his view of the economy was probably different from that of the guys who made the steel and assembled the Chevys. His dad had been a union member, albeit a police lieutenant and part of management rather than labor, and his dad had voted Democrat most of the time. Ryan hadn't registered in either party, opting instead to be an independent. It limited the junk mail you got, and who cared about primaries, anyway?

"Morning, Jack," Cathy said, entering the kitchen in her pink housecoat. It was shabby, which was surprising, since his wife was always a fastidious dresser. He hadn't asked, but supposed it had sentimental significance.

"Hey, babe." Jack rose to give his wife the first kiss of the day, accompanied by a rather limp hug. "Paper?"

"No. I'll save it for the train." She pulled open the refrigerator door and pulled some things out. Jack didn't look.

"Having coffee this morning?"

"Sure. I don't have any procedures scheduled." If she had a surgery scheduled, Cathy kept off the coffee, lest the caffeine give her hands a minor tremor. You couldn't have that when you were screwing an eyeball back together. No, today was get-acquainted day with Professor Byrd. Bernie Katz knew him and called him a friend, which

boded well, and besides, Cathy was about as good as eye surgeons got, and there was no reason for her to be the least bit concerned about a new hospital and a new boss. Still, such concerns were human, though Cathy was too macho to let it show. "How does bacon and eggs grab you?" she asked.

"I'm allowed to have some cholesterol?" her husband asked in surprise.

"Once a week," Mrs. Dr. Ryan replied, imperiously. Tomorrow she'd serve him oatmeal.

"Sounds good to me, babe," Ryan said, with some pleasure.

"I know you'll get something bad for you at the office anyway."

"Moi?"

"Yeah, croissant and butter, probably. They're made entirely out of butter anyway, you know."

"Bread without butter is like a shower without soap."

"Tell me that when you get your first heart attack."

"My last physical, my cholesterol was . . . what?"

"One fifty-two," Cathy answered, with an annoyed yawn.

"And that's pretty good?" her husband persisted.

"It's acceptable," she admitted. But hers had been one forty-six.

"Thank you, honey," Ryan acknowledged, turning to the op-ed page of the *Times.* The letters to the editor here were a positive hoot, and the quality of the writing throughout the papers was superior to anything he found in the American print media. Well, they had invented the language over here, Ryan figured, and fair was fair. The turn of phrase here was often as elegant as poetry, and occasionally too subtle for his American eye to appreciate. He'd pick it up, he figured.

The familiar sound and pleasant smell of frying bacon soon permeated the room. The coffee—tempered with milk instead of cream—was agreeable, and the news wasn't of the sort to ruin breakfast. Except for the ungodly time, things were not all that bad, and besides, the worst part of waking up was already behind him.

"Cathy?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Have I told you yet that I love you?"

She ostentatiously checked her watch. "You're a little late, but I'll write that off to the early hour."

"What's your day look like, honey?"

"Oh, meet the people, look around at how things are laid out. Meet my nurses especially. I hope I get good ones."

"Is that important?"

"Nothing screws surgery up worse than a clumsy scrub nurse. But the people at Hammersmith are supposed to be pretty good, and

Bernie says that Professor Byrd is about the best guy they have over here. He teaches at Hammersmith and Moorefields. He and Bernie go back about twenty years. He's been to Hopkins a lot, but somehow I've never bumped into him. Over easy?" she asked.

"Please."

Then came the sound of cracking eggs. Like Jack, Cathy believed in a proper cast-iron skillet. Harder to clean, perhaps, but the eggs tasted a lot better that way. Finally came the sound of the toaster lever being depressed.

The sports page—it was called "sport" (singular) over here—told Jack everything he'd ever need to know about soccer, which wasn't much.

"How'd the Yankees do last night?" Cathy asked.

"Who cares?" her husband countered. He'd grown up with Brooks Robinson and Milt Pappas and the Orioles. His wife was a Yankees fan. It was hard on the marriage. Sure, Mickey Mantle had been a good ballplayer—probably loved his mother, too—but he'd played in pinstripes. And that was that. Ryan rose and fixed the coffee for his wife, handing it to her with a kiss.

"Thanks, honey." Cathy handed Jack his breakfast.

The eggs looked a little different, as though the chickens had eaten orange corn to make the yellows come out so bright. But they tasted just fine. Five satisfying minutes after that, Ryan headed for the shower to make room for his wife.

Ten minutes later, he was picking out a shirt—white cotton, buttondown—striped tie, and his Marine Corps tie pin. At 6:40, there was a knock at the door.

"Good morning." It was Margaret van der Beek, the nanny/governess. She lived just a mile away and drove herself. Recommended from an agency vetted by the SIS, she was a South Africa native, the daughter of a minister, thin, pretty, and seemingly very nice. She carried a huge purse. Her hair was napalm-red, which hinted at Irish ancestry, but it was apparently strictly South African–Dutch. Her accent was different from those of most locals, but nonetheless pleasant to Jack's ear.

"Good morning, Miss Margaret." Ryan waved her into the house. "The kids are still asleep, but I expect them up at any moment."

"Little Jack sleeps well for five months."

"Maybe it's the jet lag," Ryan thought out loud, though Cathy had said that infants didn't suffer from it. Jack had trouble swallowing that. In any case, the little bastard—Cathy snarled at Jack whenever he said that—hadn't gone to sleep until half past ten the previous night. That was harder on Cathy than on Jack. He could sleep through the noise. She couldn't.

"Almost time, honey," Jack called.

"I know, Jack," came the retort. The she appeared, carrying their son, with Sally following in her yellow bunny-rabbit sleeper.

"Hey, little girl." Ryan went over to lift his daughter for a hug and kiss.

Sally smiled back and rewarded her daddy with a ferocious hug. How children could wake up in such a good humor was a perverse mystery to him. Maybe it was some important bonding instinct, to make sure their parents looked after them, like when they smiled at mommy and daddy practically from their first moment. Clever little critters, babies.

"Jack, put a bottle on," Cathy said, heading with the little guy to the changing table.

"Roger that, doc," the intelligence analyst responded dutifully, doubling back into the kitchen for a bottle of the junk he'd mixed up the previous night—that *was* man's work, Cathy had made clear to him during Sally's infancy. Like moving furniture and taking out the garbage, the household tasks for which men were genetically prepared.

It was like cleaning a rifle to a soldier: unscrew the top, reverse the nipple, place bottle in pot with four to five inches of water, turn on stove, and wait a few minutes.

That would be Miss Margaret's task, however. Jack saw the taxi outside the window, just pulling onto the parking pad.

"Car's here, babe."

"Okay," was the resigned response. Cathy didn't like leaving her kids for work. Well, probably no mother did. Jack watched her head into the halfbath to wash her hands, then emerge to put on the suit coat that went with her gray outfit—even gray cloth-covered flat shoes. She wanted to make a good first impression. A kiss for Sally, and one for the little guy, and she headed for the door, which Jack held open for her.

The taxi was an ordinary Land Rover saloon car—only London required the classic English taxi for public livery, though some of the older ones found their way into the hinterland. Ryan had arranged the morning pickup the previous day. The driver was one Edward Beaverton, and he seemed awfully chipper for a man who had to work before 7:00 A.M.

"Howdy," Jack said. "Ed, this is my wife. She's the good-looking Dr. Ryan."

"Good morning, mum," the driver said. "You're a surgeon, I understand."

"That's right, ophthalmic—"

Her husband cut her off: "She cuts up eyeballs and sews them back

together. You should watch, Eddie, it's fascinating to see how she does it."

The driver shuddered. "Thank you, sir, but, no, thank you."

"Jack just says that to make people throw up," Cathy told the driver. "Besides, he's too much of a wuss to come watch any real surgery."

"And properly so, mum. Much better to cause surgery than to attend it."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a former Marine?"

"That's right. And you?"

"I was in the Parachute Regiment. That's what they taught us: Better to inflict harm on the other bloke than to suffer it yourself."

"Most Marines would agree with that one, pal," Ryan agreed with a chuckle.

"That's not what they taught us at Hopkins," Cathy sniffed.

IT WAS AN hour later in Rome. Colonel Goderenko, titularly the Second Secretary at the Soviet Embassy, had about two hours per day of diplomatic duties, but most of his time was taken up by his job as *rezident,* or Chief of Station for the KGB. It was a busy posting. Rome was a major information nexus for NATO, a city in which one could obtain all manner of political and military intelligence, and that was his main professional concern. He and his six full- and part-time officers ran a total of twenty-three agents—Italian (and one German) nationals who fed information to the Soviet Union for political or pecuniary reasons. It would have been better for him if their motivation was mainly ideological, but that was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The *rezidentura* in Bonn had a better atmosphere in which to work. Germans were Germans, and many of them could be persuaded that helping out their co-linguists in the DDR was preferable to working with the Americans, British, and French who called themselves allies of the Fatherland. For Goderenko and his fellow Russians, Germans would never be allies, whatever politics they might claim to have, though the fig leaf of Marxism-Leninism could sometimes be a useful disguise.

In Italy, things were different. The lingering memory of Benito Mussolini was pretty well faded now, and the local true-believer communists were more interested in wine and pasta than revolutionary Marxism, except for the bandits of the Red Brigade—and they were dangerous hooligans rather than politically reliable operatives. Vicious dilettantes more than anything else, though not without their uses. He occasionally saw to their trips to Russia, where

they studied political theory and, more to the point, learned proper fieldcraft skills that at least had some tactical use.

On his desk was a pile of overnight dispatches, topmost of which was a message flimsy from Moscow Centre. The header told him it was important, and the cipher book: 115890. This was in his office safe, in the credenza behind his desk. He had to turn in his swivel chair and halfkneel to dial in the combination to open the door, after first deactivating the electronic alarm that was wired to the dial. That took a few seconds. Atop the book was his cipher wheel. Goderenko cordially hated using one-time pads, but they were as much a part of his life as using the toilet. Distasteful, but necessary. Decryption of the dispatch took him ten minutes. Only when it was done did he grasp the actual message. *From the Chairman himself?* he thought. As with any mid-level government official across the world, it was like being called to the principal's office.

The Pope? Why the hell does Yuriy Vladimirovich care a rat's ass about getting close to the Pope? Then he thought for a second. *Oh, of course. It's not about the head of the Catholic Church. It's about Poland. You can take the Polack out of Poland, but you can't take Poland out of the Polack. It's political.* That made it important.

But it did not please Goderenko.

"ASCERTAIN AND REPORT MEANS OF GETTING PHYSICALLY CLOSE TO THE POPE," he read again. In the professional language of the KGB, that could only mean one thing.

Kill the Pope? Goderenko thought. That would be a political disaster. As Catholic as Italy was, the Italians were not a conspicuously religious people. *La dolce vita*, the sweet life—that was the religion of this country. The Italians were the most profoundly disorganized people in the world. How they had ever been allies to the Hitlerites boggled the imagination. For the Germans, everything was supposed to be *in Ordnung*, properly arranged, clean and ready for use at all times. About the only things the Italians kept in proper order were their kitchens and perhaps their wine cellars. Aside from that, everything was so casual here. To a Russian, coming to Rome was a culture shock, akin to being bayoneted in the chest. The Italians had no sense of discipline. You only had to observe their traffic to see that, and driving in it was what flying a fighter plane must be like.

But the Italians were all born with a sense of style and propriety. There were some things one could not do here. Italians had a collective sense of beauty that was difficult for any man to fault, and to violate that code could have the most serious of consequences. For one thing, it could compromise his intelligence sources. Mercenaries or not . . . Even mercenaries would not work against their very religion, would they? Every man had some scruples, even—no, he

corrected himself, *especially*—here. So the political consequences of something like this potential mission could adversely affect the productivity of his *rezidentura* and would seriously impact recruitment.

So, what in hell do I do now? he asked himself. A senior colonel in the KGB's First Chief Directorate and a highly successful *rezident,* he had a certain degree of flexibility in his actions. He was also a member of a huge bureaucracy, and the easiest thing for him to do was what all bureaucrats did. He would delay, obfuscate, and obstruct.

There was some degree of skill required for this, but Ruslan Borissovich Goderenko knew all he needed to know about that.

CHAPTER 6

BUT NOT TOO CLOSE

NEW THINGS ARE ALWAYS INTERESTING, and that was true for surgeons, too. While Ryan read his paper, Cathy looked out the train window. It was another bright day, with a sky as blue as his wife's pretty eyes. For his part, Jack had the route pretty well memorized, and boredom invariably made him sleepy. He slumped in the corner of the seat and found his eyelids getting heavy.

"Jack, are you going to sleep? What if you miss the stop?"

"It's a terminal," her husband explained. "The train doesn't just stop there; it *ends* there. Besides, never stand up when you can sit down, and never sit down when you can lie down."

"Who ever told you that?"

"My gunny," Jack said, from behind closed eyes.

"Who?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Phillip Tate, United States Marine Corps. He ran my platoon for me until I got killed in that chopper crash—ran it after I left, too, I suppose." Ryan still sent him Christmas cards. Had Tate screwed up, that "killed" might not have been the limp joke he pretended it was. Tate and a Navy Hospital Corpsman Second Class named Michael Burns had stabilized Ryan's back, at the very least preventing a permanent crippling injury. Burns got a Christmas card, too.

About ten minutes to Victoria, Ryan rubbed his eyes and sat up straight.

"Welcome back," Cathy observed dryly.

"You'll be doing it by the middle of next week."

She snorted. "For an ex-Marine, you sure are lazy."

"Honey, if there's nothing to do, you might as well use the time productively."

"I do." She held up her copy of *The Lancet.*

"What have you been reading up on?"

"You wouldn't understand," she replied. It was true. Ryan's knowledge of biology was limited to the frog he'd disassembled in high school. Cathy had done that, too, but she'd probably put it together again and watched it hop back to its lily pad. She could also

deal cards like a Vegas cardsharp, a talent that flat amazed her husband every time she demonstrated it. But she wasn't worth a damn with a pistol. Most physicians probably weren't, and here guns were regarded as unclean objects, even by the cops, some of whom were allowed to carry them. Funny country.

"How do I get to the hospital?" Cathy asked, as the train slowed for its last stop.

"Take a cab the first time. You can take the tube, too," Jack suggested. "It's a new city. Takes time to learn your way around."

"How's the neighborhood?" she asked. It came from growing up in New York and working in Baltimore's inner city, where you did well to keep your eyes open.

"Damned sight better than the one around Hopkins. You won't be seeing too much gunshot trauma in the ER. And the people are as nice as they can be. When they figure out that you're an American, they practically give you the joint."

"Well, they were nice to us in the grocery store yesterday," Cathy allowed. "But, you know, they don't have grape juice here."

"My God, no civilization at all!" Jack exclaimed. "So get Sally some of the local bitter."

"You moron!" she laughed. "Sally likes her grape juice, remember, and Hi-C cherry. All they have here is black-currant juice. I was afraid to buy it."

"Yeah, and she's going to learn to spell funny, too." Jack didn't worry about his little Sally. Kids were the most adaptable of creatures. Maybe she'd even learn the rules for cricket. If so, she could explain the incomprehensible game to her daddy.

"My God, *everybody* smokes here," Cathy observed as they pulled into Victoria Station.

"Honey, think of it as a future income source for all the docs."

"It's an awful and a *dumb* way to die."

"Yes, dear." Whenever Jack smoked a cigarette, there was hell to pay in the Ryan house. One more cost of being married to a doc. She was right, of course, and Jack knew it, but everyone was entitled to at least one vice. Except Cathy. If she had one, she concealed it with great skill. The train slowed to a halt, allowing them to stand and open the compartment door.

They stepped out into the arriving rush of office workers. *Just like Grand Central Terminal in New York*, Jack thought, *but not quite as crowded.* London had a lot of stations, laid out like the legs of an octopus. The platform was agreeably wide, and the rush of people politer than New York would ever be. Rush hour was rush hour everywhere, but the English city had a patina of gentility that was hard not to like. Even Cathy would soon be admiring it. Ryan led his

wife to the outside, where a rank of cabs waited. He walked her to the first one in line.

"Hammersmith Hospital," he told the driver. Then he kissed his wife good-bye.

"See you tonight, Jack." She always had a smile for him.

"Have a good one, babe." And Ryan made his way to the other side of the building. Part of him hated the fact that Cathy had to work. His mom never had. His father, like all men of his generation, had figured that it was the man's job to put food on the table. Emmet Ryan had liked the fact that his son had married a physician, but his chauvinistic attitude about a woman's place had somehow or other carried over to his son despite the fact that Cathy made a lot more than Jack did, probably because ophthalmologists were more valuable to society than intelligence analysts. Or the marketplace thought so, anyway. Well, she couldn't do what he did, and he couldn't do what she did, and that was that.

At Century House, the uniformed security guard recognized him with a wave and a smile.

"Good morning, Sir John."

"Hey, Bert." Ryan slid his card into the slot. The light blinked green, and Jack transited the security gate. From there, it was just a few steps to the elevator.

Simon Harding was just arriving, too. The usual greeting: "Morning, Jack."

"Hey," Jack grunted in reply on the way to his desk. There was a manila envelope waiting for him. The cover tag said it had been messengered over from the U.S. Embassy in Grosvenor Square. He ripped the top open to see that it was the report from Hopkins on Mikhail Suslov. Jack flipped through the pages and saw something he'd forgotten. Bernie Katz, ever the thorough doc, had evaluated Suslov's diabetes as dangerously advanced, and predicted that his longevity was going to be limited.

"Here, Simon. Says here the head commie's sicker than he looks."

"Pity," Harding observed, taking it as he fumbled with his pipe. "He's not a very nice chap, you know."

"So I've heard."

Next in Ryan's pile were the morning briefing papers. They were labeled SECRET, which meant that the contents might not be in the newspapers for a day or two. It was interesting even so, because this document occasionally gave sources, and that sometimes told you if the information was good or not. Remarkably, not all the data received by the intelligence services was very reliable. A lot of it could be classified as gossip, because even important people inside the world's government loops indulged in it. They were jealous and

backbiting sons-of-bitches, like anyone else. Especially in Washington. Perhaps even more so in Moscow? He asked Harding.

"Oh, yes, very much so. Their society depends so much on status, and the backstabbing can be—well, Jack, you could say that it's their national sport. I mean, we have it here as well, of course, but over there it can be remarkably vicious. Rather like it must have been in a medieval court, I imagine—people jockeying for position every bloody day. The infighting inside their major bureaucracies must be horrific."

"And how does that affect this sort of information?"

"I often think I should have read psychology at Oxford. We have a number of psychiatrists on staff here—as I'm sure you do at Langley."

"Oh, yeah. I know a few of the pshrinks. Mainly in my directorate, but some in S and T, too. We're not as good at that as we ought to be."

"How so, Jack?"

Ryan stretched in his chair. "A couple of months ago, I was talking to one of Cathy's pals at Hopkins, his name's Solomon, neuropsychiatrist. You'd have to understand Sol. He's real smart—department chairman and all that. He doesn't believe much in putting his patients on the couch and talking to them. He thinks most mental illness comes from chemical imbalances in the brain. They nearly chopped him out of the profession for that but, twenty years later, they all realized that he was right. Anyway, Sol told me that most politicians are like movie stars. They surround themselves with sycophants and yes-men and people to whisper nice shit into their ears—and a lot of them start believing it, because they *want* to believe it. It's all a great big game to them, but a game where everything is process and damned little of it is product. They're not like real people. They don't do any real work, but they appear to. There's a line in *Advise and Consent:* Washington is a town where you deal with people not as they are, but as they are reputed to be. If that's true in Washington, then how much more must it be in Moscow? There, *everything* is politics. It's all symbols, right? So the infighting and backstabbing must really be wild there. I figure that has to affect us in two ways. First, it means that a lot of the data we get is skewed, because the sources of the data either don't know reality even when it jumps up and bites them on the ass, or they twist the data for their own ends as they process it and pass it on—whether consciously or unconsciously. Second, it means that even the people on the other side who need the data don't know good from bad, so even if we can figure it out, we can't predict what it means because they can't decide for themselves what the hell to do with it—*even if* they know what the hell it is in the first place. We here have to analyze faulty information that will probably be incorrectly implemented by the people to whom it's supposed to go. So, how the hell do we predict what they will do

when they themselves don't know the right thing to do?"

That was worth a grin around the pipe stem. "Very good, Jack. You're starting to catch on. Very little they do makes any bloody sense, objectively speaking. However, it isn't all that hard to predict their behavior. You decide for yourself what the intelligent action is, and then reverse it. Works every time," Harding laughed.

"But the other thing Sol said that worries me is that people like that who have power in their hands can be dangerous sons-of-bitches. They don't know when to stop, and they don't know how to use their power intelligently. I guess that's how Afghanistan got started."

"Correct." Simon nodded seriously. "They are captured by their own ideological illusions, and they can't see their way clear of it. And the real problem is, they *do* control a bloody great lot of power."

"I'm missing something in the equation," Ryan said.

"We all are, Jack. That's part of the job."

It was time to change subjects: "Anything new on the Pope?"

"Nothing yet today. If Basil has anything, I ought to hear about it before lunch. Worried about that?"

Jack nodded soberly. "Yeah. The problem is, if we do see a real threat, what the hell can we do about it? It's not like we can put a company of Marines around him, is it? Exposed as he is—I mean, he's in public so much that you can't protect him."

"And people like him don't shrink from danger, do they?"

"I remember when Martin Luther King got whacked. Hell, he knew—he *must* have known—there were guns out there with his name on them. But he never backed away. It just wasn't part of his ethos to run and hide. Won't be any different in Rome, buddy, and every other place he goes."

"Moving targets are supposed to be harder to hit," Simon observed halfheartedly.

"Not when you know where he's moving to a month or two in advance. If KGB decides to put a hit on the guy, damn, I don't see much we can do about it."

"Except perhaps to warn him."

"Great. So he can laugh about it. He probably would, you know. He's been through Nazis and communists for the past forty years. What the hell is left to scare the guy with?" Ryan paused. "If they decide to do it, who pushes the button?"

"I should think it would have to be voted on by the Politburo itself in plenary session. The political implications are too severe for any one member, however senior, to try something like this on his own authority, and remember how collegial they are—no one moves anywhere by himself, even Andropov, who's the most independent-minded of the lot."

"Okay, that's—what? Fifteen guys have to vote up or down on it. Fifteen mouths, plus staffs and family members to talk to about it. How good are our sources? Will we hear about it?"

"Sensitive question, Jack. I cannot answer that one, I'm afraid."

"Can't-can't or can't-I'm-not-allowed-to?" Jack asked more pointedly.

"Jack, yes, we have sources of which I am aware, but which I cannot discuss with you." Harding actually seemed embarrassed to say it.

"Hey, I understand, Simon." Jack had some of those himself. For instance, he couldn't even speak the words TALENT KEYHOLE here, for which he was cleared, but which was NOFORN, no talking about this one to a foreigner—even though Simon and certainly Sir Basil knew quite a bit about it. It was so perverse, because it mainly denied information to people who might have made good use of it. If Wall Street acted this way, all of America would be under the poverty line, Jack groused. Either people were trustworthy or they were not. But the game had its rules, and Ryan played by those rules. That was the cost of admittance into this particular club.

"This is bloody good stuff," Harding said, flipping to page three of Bernie Katz's debriefing.

"Bernie's smart," Ryan confirmed. "That's why Cathy likes working for him."

"But he's an eye doctor, not a psychiatrist, correct?"

"Simon, at that level of medicine, everybody is a little bit of everything. I asked Cathy: The diabetic retinopathy Suslov had is indicative of a major health problem. The diabetes messes up the little blood vessels in the back of the eye, and you can see it when you do an examination. Bernie and his team fixed it partway—you can't fix it all the way—and gave him back about, oh, seventy-five to eighty percent of his sight, good enough to drive a car in daylight, anyway, but the underlying health problem is a mother. It isn't just the small blood vessels in the eye, right? He's got that problem all over his body. Figure Red Mike will croak from kidney failure or heart disease in the next two years at the outside."

"Our chaps think he's got five years or so," Harding offered.

"Well, I'm not a doc. You can have some people talk to Bernie about it if you want, but everything is right there. Cathy says you can tell a lot about diabetes from looking at the eyeball."

"Does Suslov know that?"

Ryan shrugged. "That is a good question, Simon. Docs don't always tell their patients, probably less so over there. Figure Suslov's being treated by a politically reliable doctor of professorial rank. Here, that would mean a top-drawer guy who really knows his stuff. Over there .

. . ?”

Harding nodded. “Correct. He may know his Lenin more than his Pasteur. Did you ever hear about Sergey Korolev, their chief rocket designer? That was a particularly ugly incident. The poor bugger was essentially murdered on the table because two senior surgeons didn’t like each other, and one wouldn’t bail the other out when the boat began to leak badly. It was probably good for the West, but he was a fine engineer, and he was killed by medical incompetence.”

“Anybody pay up for that one?” Ryan asked.

“Oh, no. They were both too politically important, lots of patrons in high places. They’re safe, until they kill one of their friends, and that won’t happen. I’m sure they both have competent young people under them to cover their backsides.”

“You know what they need in Russia? Lawyers. I don’t like ambulancechasers, but I guess they do keep people on their toes.”

“In any case, no, Suslov probably does not know the gravity of his condition. At least that’s what our medical consultants think. He still drinks his vodka according to HUMINT reports, and that is definitely contraindicated.” Harding grimaced. “And his replacement will be Alexandrov, every bit as unpleasant a chap as his mentor. I’ll have to see about updating his dossier.” He made a note.

As for Ryan, he turned back to his morning briefing pages before starting on his official project. Greer wanted Ryan to work on a study of management practices in the Soviet armament industry, to see how —and if—that segment of the Soviet economy worked. Ryan and Harding would be cooperating on the study, which would use both British and American data. It was something that suited Ryan’s academic background. It might even get him noticed high up.

THE RETURN MESSAGE came in at 11:32 hours. *Fast work in Rome*, Zaitzev thought, as he began the decryption. He’d call Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy as soon as he got through it, but it was going to take a while. The captain checked the wall clock. It would delay his lunch, too, but the priority condemned him to some stomach growls. About the only good news was that Colonel Goderenko had started his encipherment sequence at the top of page 285.

MOST SECRET
IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
FROM: REZIDENT ROME
TO: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
REFERENCE: YOUR OP DISPATCH 15-8-82-666
GETTING CLOSE TO THE PRIEST IS NOT DIFFICULT
WITHOUT FIXED TIME CONSTRAINTS. GUIDANCE WILL BE

NEEDED FOR A FULL EVALUATION OF YOUR REQUEST. PRIEST ENGAGES IN PREDICTABLE
PUBLIC AUDIENCES AND APPEARANCES WHICH ARE KNOWN WELL IN ADVANCE. TO MAKE USE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY WILL NOT RPT NOT BE EASY DUE TO LARGE CROWDS ATTENDING FUNCTIONS.
SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR HIM DIFFICULT TO ASSESS WITHOUT FURTHER GUIDANCE. RECOMMEND AGAINST PHYSICAL ACTION TO BE TAKEN AGAINST PRIEST DUE TO EXPECTED ADVERSE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES. DIFFICULT TO HIDE ORIGIN OF AN OPERATION AGAINST PRIEST. ENDS.

Well, Zaitzev thought, *the* rezident *didn't like this idea very much.* Would Yuriy Vladimirovich listen to this bit of advice from the field? That, Zaitzev knew, was far above his pay grade. He lifted his phone and dialed.

"Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," the brusque voice answered.

"Captain Zaitzev in Communications Central. I have a reply to your six-six-six, Comrade Colonel."

"On my way," Rozhdestvenskiy responded.

The colonel was as good as his word, passing through the control point three minutes later. By that time, Zaitzev had returned the cipher book to central storage and slipped the message form, plus the translation, into a brown envelope, which he handed to the colonel.

Has anyone seen this?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked.

"Certainly not, comrade," Zaitzev replied.

"Very well." Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy walked away without another word. For his part, Zaitzev left his work desk and headed off to the cafeteria for lunch. The food was the best reason to work at The Centre.

What he could not leave behind as he stopped at the lavatory to wash his hands was the message sequence. Yuriy Andropov wanted to kill the Pope, and the *rezident* in Rome didn't like the idea. Zaitzev wasn't supposed to have any opinions. He was just part of the communications system. It rarely occurred to the hierarchy of the Committee for State Security that its people actually had minds . . .

. . . and even consciences . . .

Zaitzev took his place in line and got the metal tray and utensils. He decided on the beef stew and four thick slices of bread, with a large glass of tea. The cashier charged him fifty-five kopecks. His usual luncheon mates had already been and gone, so he ended up picking an end seat at a table filled with people he didn't know. They were talking about football, and he didn't join in, alone with his thoughts. The stew was quite good, as was the bread, fresh from the ovens. About the only thing they didn't have here was proper silverware, as

they did in the private dining rooms on the upper floors. Instead they used the same feather-light zinc-aluminum as all the other Soviet citizens. It worked well enough, but because it was so light, it felt awkward in his hands.

So, he thought, *I was right. The Chairman is thinking about murdering the Pope.* Zaitzev was not a religious man. He had not been to a church in his entire life—except those large buildings converted to museums since the Revolution. All he knew about religion was the propaganda dispensed as a matter of course in Soviet public education. And yet some of the children he'd known in school had talked about believing in God, and he hadn't reported them, because informing just wasn't his way. The Great Questions of Life were things he didn't much think about. For the most part, life in the Soviet Union was limited to yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The economic facts of life really didn't allow a person to make long-term plans. There were no country houses to buy, no luxury cars to desire, no elaborate vacations to save for. In committing what it called socialism on the people, the government of his country allowed—forced—everyone to aspire to much the same things, regardless of individual tastes, which meant getting on an endless list and being notified when one's name came up—and being unknowingly bumped by those with greater Party seniority—or not, because some people had access to better places. His life, like everyone else's, was like that of a steer on a feed lot. He was cared for moderately well and fed the same bland food at the same time on endlessly identical days. There was a grayness, an overarching boredom, to every aspect of life—alleviated in his case only by the content of the messages which he processed and forwarded. He wasn't supposed to think about the messages, much less remember them, but without anybody to talk to, all he could do was dwell on them in the privacy of his own mind. Today his mind had just one occupant, and it would not silence itself. It raced around like a hamster in an exercise wheel, going round and round but always returning to the same place.

Andropov wants to kill the Pope.

He'd processed assassination messages before. Not many. KGB was gradually drifting away from it. Too many things went wrong. Despite the professional skill and cleverness of the field officers, policemen in other countries were endlessly clever and had the mindless patience of a spider in its web, and until KGB could just wish a person dead and have it come to pass, there would be witnesses and evidence, because a cloak of invisibility was something found only in tales for children.

More often he processed messages about defectors or suspected would-be defectors—or, just as deadly, suspicion of officers and agents who'd "doubled," gone over to serve the enemy. He'd even seen such

evidence passed along in message form, calling an officer home for "consultations" from which they'd rarely returned back to their *rezidenturas*. Exactly what happened to them—that was just the subject of gossip, all of it unpleasant. One officer who'd gone bad, the story went, had been loaded alive into a crematorium, the way the German SS was supposed to have done. He'd heard there was a film of it, and he'd talked to people who knew people who knew people who'd seen it. But he had never actually seen it himself, nor met anyone who had. Some things, Oleg Ivanovich thought, were too beyond the pale even for the KGB. No, most of the stories talked of firing squads—which often fucked up, so the stories went—or a single pistol round in the head, as Lavrenti Beriya had done himself. Those stories, *everyone* believed. He'd seen photos of Beria, and they seemed to drip with blood. And Iron Feliks would doubtless have done it between bites of his sandwich. He was the kind of man to give ruthlessness an evil name.

But it was generally felt, if not widely spoken, that KGB was becoming more *kulturniy* in its dealings with the world. More cultured. More civilized. Kinder and gentler. Traitors, of course, were executed, but only after a trial in which they were at least given a pro forma chance to explain their actions and, if they were innocent, to prove it. It almost never happened, but only because the State only prosecuted the truly guilty. The investigators in the Second Chief Directorate were among the most feared and skilled people in the entire country. It was said they were never wrong and never fooled, like some kind of gods.

Except that the State said that there were no gods.

Men, then—and women. Everyone knew about the Sparrow School, about which the men often spoke with twisty grins and winking eyes. *Ah, to be an instructor or, better still, a quality-assurance officer there!* they dreamed. And to be paid for it. As his Irina often noted, all men were pigs. *But*, Zaitzev mused, *it could be fun to be a pig.*

Kill the Pope—why? He was no threat to this country. Stalin himself had once joked, *How many divisions does the Pope have?* So why kill the man? Even the *rezident* warned against it. Goderenko feared the political repercussions. Stalin had ordered Trotsky killed, and had dispatched a KGB officer to do it, *knowing* that he'd suffer long-term imprisonment for the task. But he'd done it, faithful to the Will of the Party, in a professional gesture that they talked about in the academy training classes—along with the more casual advice that *we really don't do that sort of thing anymore.* It was not, the instructors didn't add, *kulturniy*. And so, yes, KGB was drifting away from that sort of behavior.

Until now. Until today. And even our senior *rezident* is advising

against it. Why? Because he doesn't want himself and his agency—and his country! —to be so *nekulturniy*?

Or because to do so would be worse than foolish? It would be *wrong* . . . ? "Wrong" was a concept foreign to citizens in the Soviet Union. At least, what people perceived as things that were morally wrong. Morality in his country had been replaced by what was politically correct or incorrect. Whatever served the interests of his country's political system was worthy of praise. That which did not was worthy of . . . death?

And who decided such things?

Men did.

Men did because there was no morality, as the world understood the term. There was no God to pronounce what was good and what was evil.

And yet . . .

And yet, in the heart of every man was an inborn knowledge of right and wrong. To kill another man was wrong. To take a man's life you had to have a just cause. But it was also men who decided what constituted such cause. The right men in the right place with the right authority had the ability and the right to kill because—why?

Because Marx and Lenin said so.

That was what the government of his country had long since decided.

Zaitzev buttered his last piece of bread and dipped it in the remaining gravy in his bowl before eating it. He knew he was thinking overly deep, even dangerous, thoughts. His parent society did not encourage or even permit independent thinking. You were not supposed to question the Party and its wisdom. Certainly not here. In the KGB cafeteria, you *never, ever, not even once* heard someone wonder aloud if the Party and the Motherland it served and protected were even capable of doing an incorrect act. Oh, maybe once in a while, people speculated on tactics, but even then the talk was within limits that were taller and stronger than the Kremlin's own brick walls.

His country's morality, he mused, had been predetermined by a German Jew living in London, and the son of a czarist bureaucrat who simply hadn't liked the czar much and whose overly adventurous brother had been executed for taking direct action. That man had found shelter in that most capitalistic of nations, Switzerland, then had been dispatched back to Mother Russia by the Germans in the hope that he could upset the czar's government, allowing Germany then to defeat the other Western nations on the Western Front of the First World War. All in all, it didn't sound like something ordained by any deity for some great plan for human advancement, did it?

Everything Lenin had used as a model for changing his country—and through it, the entire world—had come from a book written by Karl Marx, more writings by Friedrich Engels, and his own vision for becoming the chief of a new kind of country.

The only thing that distinguished Marxism-Leninism from a religion was the lack of a godhead. Both systems claimed absolute authority over the affairs of men, and both claimed to be right a priori. Except that his country's system chose to assert that authority by exercising the power of life and death.

His country said it worked for justice, for the good of the workers and peasants all around the world. But other men, higher up in the hierarchy, decided who the workers and peasant were, and they themselves lived in ornate dachas and multiroom flats, and had automobiles and drivers . . . and privileges.

What privileges they had! Zaitzev had also dispatched messages about pantyhose and perfumes that the men in this building wanted for their women. These items were often delivered in the diplomatic bag from embassies in the West, things his own country could not produce, but which the *nomenklatura* craved, along with their West German refrigerators and stoves. When he saw the big shots racing down the center of Moscow's streets in their chauffeured Zils, then Zaitzev understood how Lenin had felt about the czars. The czar had claimed divine right as his personal deed to power. The Party chieftains claimed their positions by the will of the people.

Except that the People had never given anything to them by public acclamation. The Western democracies had elections—*Pravda* spat upon them every few years—but they *were* real elections. England was now run by a nasty-looking woman, and America by an aged and buffoonish actor, but both had been chosen by the people of their countries, and the previous rulers had been removed by popular choice. Neither leader was wellloved in the Soviet Union, and he'd seen many official messages sent out to ascertain their mental state and deeply held political beliefs; the concern in those messages had been manifest, and Zaitzev himself had his worries, but as distasteful and unstable as these leaders might be, their people had chosen them. The Soviet people had decidedly not selected the current crop of princes on the Politburo.

And now the new communist princes were thinking about murdering a Polish priest in Rome. But how did *he* threaten the *Rodina*? This Pope fellow had no military formations at his command. A political threat, then? But how? The Vatican was supposed to have diplomatic identity, but nationhood without military power was—what? If there was no God, then whatever power the Pope exercised had to be an illusion, of no more substance than a puff of cigarette

smoke. Zaitzev's country had the greatest army on earth, a fact proclaimed regularly by *We Serve the Soviet Union*, the TV show that everybody watched.

So, why do they want to kill a man who poses no threat? Would he part the oceans with a wave of his staff or bring down plagues on the land? Of course not.

And to kill a harmless man is a crime, Zaitzev told himself, exercising his mind for the first time in his tenure at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square, silently asserting his free will. He'd asked a question and come up with an answer.

It would have been helpful if he'd had someone to talk to about that, but of course that was out of the question. That left Zaitzev without a safety valve—a way to process his feelings and bring them to some kind of resolution. The laws and customs of his nation forced him to recycle his thoughts over and over, and ultimately that led in only one direction. That it was a direction of which the State would not approve was, in the end, a product of the State's own making.

On finishing his lunch, he sipped his tea and lit a cigarette, but that contemplative act didn't help the state of his mind. The hamster was still running in its wheel. No one in the huge dining room noticed. To those who saw Zaitzev, he was just one more man enjoying his after-meal smoke in solitude. Like all Soviet citizens, Zaitzev knew how to hide his feelings, and so his face gave nothing away. He just looked at the wall clock so that he wouldn't be late going back to work for his afternoon watch, just one more bureaucrat in a large building full of them.

UPSTAIRS, it was a little different. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy hadn't wanted to interrupt the Chairman's lunch, and so he'd sat in his own office waiting for the hands on the clock to move, munching on his own sandwich but ignoring the cup of soup that had come with it. Like his Chairman, he smoked American Marlboro cigarettes, which were milder and better made than their Soviet counterparts. It was an affectation he'd picked up in the field, but as a high-ranking First Chief Directorate officer, he could shop at the special store in Moscow Centre. They were expensive, even for one paid in "certificate" rubles, but he only drank cheap vodka, so it evened out. He wondered how Yuriy Vladimirovich would react to Goderenko's message. Ruslan Borissovich was a very capable *rezident*, careful and conservative, and a man senior enough to be allowed to talk back, as it were. His job, after all, was to feed good information to Moscow Centre, and if he thought something might compromise that mission, it was his duty to warn them about it—and besides, the original dispatch had not

carried an obligatory directive in it, just an instruction to ascertain a situation. So, no, Ruslan Borissovich would probably not get into any trouble from his reply. But Andropov might bark and, if he did, then he, Colonel A. N. Rozhdestvenskiy, would bear the noise, which was never fun. His place here was enviable in one way and frightening in another. He had the ear of the Chairman, but being that close meant that he had to be close to the teeth, too. In the history of KGB, it was not unknown for some people to suffer for the actions of others. But it was unlikely in this case. Though an undeniably tough man, Andropov was also a reasonably fair one. Even so, it didn't pay to be too close to a rumbling volcano. His desk phone rang. It was the Chairman's private secretary.

"The Chairman will see you now, Comrade Colonel."

"Spasiba." He rose and walked down the corridor.

"We have a reply from Colonel Goderenko," Rozhdestvenskiy reported, handing it over.

For his part, Andropov was not surprised, and to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy's invisible relief, he did not lose his temper.

"I expected this. Our people have lost their sense of daring, haven't they, Aleksey Nikolay'ch?"

"Comrade Chairman, the *rezident* gives you his professional assessment of the problem," the field officer answered.

"Go on," Andropov commanded.

"Comrade Chairman," Rozhdestvenskiy replied, choosing his words with the greatest care, "you cannot undertake an operation like the one you are evidently considering without political risks. This priest has a good deal of influence, however illusory that influence may be. Ruslan Borissovich is concerned that an attack on him might affect his ability to gather information, and that, comrade, is his primary task."

"The assessment of political risk is my job, not his."

"That is true, Comrade Chairman, but it is his territory, and it is his job to tell you what he thinks you need to know. The loss of some of his agents' services could be costly to us both in direct and indirect terms."

"How costly?"

"That is impossible to predict. The Rome *rezidentura* has a number of highly productive agents for NATO military and political intelligence information. Can we live without it? Yes, I suppose we could, but better that we should live with it. The human factors involved make prediction difficult. Running agents is an art and not a science, you see."

"So you have told me before, Aleksey." Andropov rubbed his eyes tiredly. His skin was a little sallow today, Rozhdestvenskiy noted. Was his liver problem kicking up again?

"Our agents are all people, and individual people have their individual peculiarities. There is no avoiding it," Rozhdestvenskiy explained for perhaps the hundredth time. It could have been worse; Andropov actually listened some of the time. His predecessors had not all been so enlightened. Perhaps it came from Yuriy Vladimirovich's intelligence.

"That's what I like about signals intelligence," the Chairman of KGB groused. That was what everyone in the business said, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy noted. The problem was in getting signals intelligence. The West was better at it than his country, despite their infiltration of the West's signals agencies. The American NSA and British GCHQ, in particular, worked constantly to defeat Soviet communications security and occasionally, they worried, succeeded at it. Which was why KGB depended so absolutely on one-time pads. They couldn't trust anything else.

"HOW GOOD IS THIS?" Ryan asked Harding.

"We think it's the genuine article, Jack. Part of it comes from open sources, but most comes from documents prepared for their Council of Ministers. At that level, they don't lie to themselves much."

"Why not?" Jack asked pointedly. "Everyone else there does."

"But here you're dealing with something concrete, products that have to be delivered to their army. If they do not appear, it will be noted, and inquiries will be made. In any case," Harding went on, qualifying himself carefully, "the most important material here has to do with policy questions, and for that you gain nothing by lying."

"I suppose. I raised a little hell at Langley last month when I ripped through an economics assessment that was going on to the President's office. I said it couldn't possibly be true, and the guy who drew it up said it was just what the Politburo saw at their meetings—"

"And you said what, Jack?" Harding interrupted.

"Simon, I said, whether the big shots saw it or not, it simply could not be true. That report was total bullshit—which makes me wonder how the hell their Politburo makes policy when the data they base it on is about as truthful as Alice-in-goddamned-Wonderland. You know, when I was in the Marine Corps, we worried that Ivan Ivanovich the Russian Soldier might be ten feet tall. He isn't. There may be a lot of them, but they're actually smaller than our people because they don't eat as well as children, and their weapons suck. The AK-47's a nice rifle, but I'll take the M-16 over it any time, and a rifle is a damned sight simpler than a portable radio. So I finally get into CIA and find out the tactical radios their army uses are for shit, and so it turns out I was right about that back when I was a shavetail butter-bar in the

Green Machine. Bottom line, Simon, they lie to the Politburo on what are supposed to be economic realities, and if they lie to those folks, they'll lie about anything."

"So, what happened to the report to your President?"

"They sent it to him, but with five pages of mine appended to the back. I hope he got that far. They say he reads a lot. Anyway, what I'm saying is that they base their policy on lies, and maybe we can make better policy by appreciating reality a little bit better. I think their economy's in the shitter, Simon. It can't be performing as well as their data says it is. If it were, we'd be seeing the positive results in the products they make, but we don't, do we?"

"Why be afraid of a country that can't feed itself?"

"Yep." Ryan nodded.

"In the Second World War—"

"In 1941, Russia got invaded by a country that they never liked much, but Hitler was too damned stupid to make their antipathy for their own government work for him, so he implemented racist policies that were *calculated* to drive the Russian people back into the arms of Joe Stalin. So that's a false comparison, Simon. The Soviet Union is fundamentally unstable. Why? Because it's an unjust society, and there ain't no such thing as a *stable* unjust society. Their economy . . ." He paused. "You know, there ought to be a way to make that work for us . . ."

"And do what?"

"Shake their foundations some. Maybe a mild earthquake," Ryan suggested.

"And bring them crashing down?" Harding asked. His eyebrows went up. "They do have a lot of nuclear weapons, you might want to remember."

"Okay, fine, we try to arrange a soft landing."

"Bloody decent of you, Jack."

CHAPTER 7

SIMMERING

ED FOLEY'S JOB as Press Attaché was not overly demanding in terms of the time required to stroke the local American correspondents and occasionally others. "Others" included reporters purportedly from *Pravda* and other Russian publications. Foley assumed that all of them were KGB officers or stringers—there was no difference between the two since KGB routinely used journalistic covers for its field officers. As a result, most Soviet reporters in America as often as not had an FBI agent or two in close attendance, at least when the FBI had agents to spare for the task, which wasn't all that often. Reporters and field intelligence officers had virtually identical functions.

He'd just been pinged hard by a *Pravda* guy named Pavel Kuritsyn, who was either a professional spook or sure as hell had read a lot of spy novels. Since it was easier to act dumb than smart, he'd fumbled through his Russian, smiling with apparent pride at how well he'd mastered the complex language. For his part, Kuritsyn had advised the American to watch Russian TV, the quicker to master the mother tongue. Foley had then drafted a contact report for the CIA files, noting that this Pavel Yevgeniyevich Kuritsyn smelled like a Second Chief Directorate boy who was checking *him* out, and opining that he thought he'd passed the test. You couldn't be sure, of course. For all he knew, the Russians did employ people who read minds. Foley knew that they'd experimented in almost everything, even something called remote viewing, which to his professional mind was a step down from gypsy fortune-tellers—but which had gotten the Agency to start a program of its own, much to Foley's disgust. For Ed Foley, if you couldn't hold it, then it wasn't real. But there was no telling what those pantywaists in the Directorate of Intelligence would try, just to bypass what the DO people—the *real* spooks in CIA—had to do every goddamned day.

It was enough that Ivan had eyes, and Christ knew how many ears, in the embassy, though the building was regularly swept by electronics experts. (Once they'd even succeeded in planting a bug in the ambassador's own office.) Just across the street was a former church that was used by KGB. In the U.S. Embassy, it was known as

Our Lady of the Microchips, because the structure was full of microwave transmitters aimed at the embassy, their function being to interfere with all the listening devices that Station Moscow used to tap in to Soviet phone and radio systems. The amount of radiation that came in flirted with dangerous-to-your-health levels, and as a result the embassy was protected with metal sheeting in the drywall, which reflected a lot of it right back at the people across the street. The game had rules, and the Russians pretty much played within them, but the rules often didn't make a hell of a lot of sense. There had been quiet protests to the local natives about the microwaves, but these were invariably met with shrugs of "Who, us?" And that was as far as it usually went. The embassy doc said he wasn't worried—but *his* office was in the basement, shielded from the radiation by stone and dirt. Some people said you could cook a hot dog by putting it on the east-facing windowsills.

Two people who did know about Ed Foley were the ambassador and the Defense Attaché. The former was Ernest Fuller. Fuller looked like an illustration from a book about patricians: tall, slim, with a regal mane of white hair. In fact, he'd grown up on an Iowa hog farm, gotten a scholarship to Northwestern University, and then a law degree, which had taken him to corporate boardrooms, where he finally ended up as CEO of a major auto company. Along the way, he'd served three years in the U.S. Navy in World War II on the light cruiser USS *Boise* during the Guadalcanal campaign. He was regarded as a serious player and a gifted amateur by the embassy's FSOs.

The Defense Attaché was Brigadier General George Dalton. By profession an artilleryman, he got along well with his Russian counterparts. Dalton was a bear of a man with curly black hair, who'd played linebacker for West Point twenty-odd years before.

Foley had an appointment with both of them—ostensibly, to talk over relations with the American news correspondents. Even his internal embassy business needed a cover in this station.

"How's your son adjusting?" Fuller asked.

"He misses his cartoons. Before we came over, I bought one of those new tape machines—you know, the Betamax thing—and some tapes, but those only last so long, and they cost an arm and a leg."

"There's a local version of Roadrunner-Coyote," General Dalton told him. "It's called *Wait a Moment,* something like that. It's not as good as Warner Brothers, but better than that damned exercise show in the morning. The gal on that could whip a command sergeant-major."

"I noticed that yesterday morning. Is she part of their Olympic weightlifting squad?" Foley joked. "Anyway . . ."

"First impressions—any surprises?" Fuller asked.

Foley shook his head. "About what I was briefed to expect. Looks

like everywhere I go, I have company. How long you suppose that will last?"

"Maybe a week or so. Take a walk around—better yet, watch Ron Fielding when he takes a walk. He does his job pretty well."

"Anything major under way?" Ambassador Fuller asked.

"No, sir. Just routine operations at the moment. But the Russians have something very large happening at home."

"What's that?" Fuller asked.

"They call it Operation RYAN. Their acronym for Surprise Nuclear Attack on the Motherland. They're worried that the President might want to nuke them, and they have officers running around back home trying to get a feel for his mental state."

"You're serious?" Fuller asked.

"As a heart attack. I guess they took the campaign rhetoric a little too seriously."

"I have had a few odd questions from their foreign ministry," the Ambassador said. "But I just wrote it off to small talk."

"Sir, we're investing a lot of money in the military, and that makes them nervous."

"Whereas, when they buy ten thousand new tanks, it's normal?" General Dalton observed.

"Exactly," Foley agreed. "A gun in my hand is a defensive weapon, but a gun in your hand is an offensive weapon. It's a matter of outlook, I suppose."

"Have you seen this?" Fuller asked, handing across a fax from Foggy Bottom.

Foley scanned it. "Uh-oh."

"I told Washington it would worry the Soviets a good deal. What do you think?"

"I concur, sir. In several ways. Most important will be the potential unrest in Poland, which could spread throughout their empire. That's the one area in which they think long-term. Political stability is their sine qua non. What are they saying in Washington?"

"The Agency just showed it to the President, and he handed it off to the Secretary of State, and he faxed it to me for comment. Can you rattle any bushes, see if they're talking about it in the Politburo?"

Foley thought for a moment and nodded. "I can try." It made him slightly uncomfortable, but that was his job, wasn't it? It meant getting a message to one or more of his agents, but that was what they were for. The troubling part was that it meant exposing his wife. Mary Pat would not object—hell, she *loved* the spy game in the field—but it always bothered her husband to expose her to danger. He supposed it was chauvinism. "What's the priority on this?"

"Washington is very interested," Fuller said. That made it

important, but not quite an emergency tasking.

"Okay, I'll get on it, sir."

"I don't know what assets you're running here in Moscow—and I don't want to know. It's dangerous to them?"

"They shoot traitors over here, sir."

"This is rougher than the car business, Foley. I do understand that."

"Hell, it wasn't this rough in the Central Highlands," General Dalton noted. "Ivan plays pretty mean. You know, I've been asked about the President, too, usually over drinks by senior officers. They're really that worried about him, eh?"

"It sure looks that way," Foley confirmed.

"Good. Never hurts to rattle the other guy's confidence a little, keep him looking over his shoulder some."

"Just so it doesn't go too far," Ambassador Fuller suggested. He was relatively new to diplomacy, but he had respect for the process. "Okay, anything that I need to know about?"

"Not from my end," the COS replied. "Still getting used to things. Had a Russian reporter in today, maybe a KGB counterspook checking me out, guy named Kuritsyn."

"I think he's a player," General Dalton said at once.

"I caught a whiff of that. I expect he'll check me out through the *Times* correspondent."

"You know him?"

"Anthony Prince." Foley nodded. "And that pretty much sums him up. Groton and Yale. I bumped into him a few times in New York when I was at the paper. He's very smart, but not quite as smart as he thinks he is."

"How's your Russian?"

"I can pass for a native—but my wife can pass for a poet. She's really good at it. Oh, one other thing. I have a neighbor in the compound, Haydock, husband Nigel, wife Penelope. I presume they're players, too."

"Big-time," General Dalton confirmed. "They're solid."

Foley thought so, but it never hurt to be sure. He stood. "Okay, let me get some work done."

"Welcome aboard, Ed," the Ambassador said. "Duty here isn't too bad once you get used to it. We get all the theater and ballet tickets we want through their foreign ministry."

"I prefer ice hockey."

"That's easy, too," General Dalton responded.

"Good seats?" the spook asked.

"First row."

Foley smiled. "Dynamite."

FOR HER PART, Mary Pat was out on the street with her son. Eddie was too big for a stroller, which was too bad. You could do a lot of interesting things with a stroller, and she figured the Russians would be hesitant to mess with an infant and a diaper bag—especially when they both came with a diplomatic passport. She was just taking a walk at the moment, getting used to the environment, the sights and smells. This was the belly of the beast, and here she was, like a virus—a deadly one, she hoped. She'd been born Mary Kaminsky, the granddaughter of an equerry to the House of Romanov. Grandfather Vanya had been a central figure of her youth. From him she'd learned Russian as a toddler, and not the base Russian of today, but the elegant, literary Russian of a bygone time. She could read the poetry of Pushkin and weep, and in this she was more Russian than American, for the Russians had venerated their poets for centuries, while in America they were mainly relegated to writing pop songs. There was much to admire and much to love about this country.

But not its government. She'd been twelve, looking forward to her teens with enthusiasm, when Grandfather Vanya had told her the story of Aleksey, the crown prince of Russia—a good child, so her grandfather said, but an unlucky one, stricken with hemophilia and for that reason a fragile child. Colonel Vanya Borissovich Kaminsky, a minor nobleman in the Imperial Horse Guards, had taught the boy to ride a horse, because that was one physical skill a prince needed in that age. He'd had to be ever so careful—Aleksey often went about in the arms of a sailor in the Imperial navy, lest he trip and fall and bleed—but he'd accomplished the task, to the gratitude of Nikolay II and Czarina Alexandra, and along the way the two had become as close as, if not father and son, then uncle and nephew. Grandfather Vanya had gone to the front and fought against the Germans, but early in the war had been captured at the Battle of Tannenberg. It had been in a German prisoner-of-war camp that he'd learned of the revolution. He'd managed to come back to Mother Russia, and fought with the White Guards in the doomed counterrevolutionary effort—then learned that the czar and his entire family had been murdered by the usurpers at Ekaterinberg. He'd known then that the war was lost, and he'd managed to escape and make his way to America, where he'd begun a new life, but one in perpetual mourning for the dead.

Mary Pat remembered the tears in his eyes when he told the tale, and the tears had communicated to her his visceral hatred for the Bolsheviks. It had muted somewhat. She wasn't a fanatic, but when she saw a Russian in a uniform, or in a speeding ZIL, headed for a

Party meeting, she saw the face of the enemy, an enemy that needed defeating. That communism was her country's adversary was merely sauce for the goose. If she could find a button that would bring down this odious political system, she'd push it without a blink of hesitation.

And so the appointment to Moscow had been the best of all dream assignments. Just as Vanya Borissovich Kaminsky had told her his ancient and sad story, so he had given her a mission for her life, and a passion for its achievement. Her choice to join CIA had been as natural as brushing out her honey-blond hair.

And now, walking about, for the first time in her life she really understood her grandfather's passionate love for things past. Everything was different from what she knew in America, from the pitch of the building roofs to the color of the asphalt in the streets to the blank expressions on the faces of the people. They looked at her as they passed, for in her American clothes she stood out like a peacock among crows. Some even managed a smile for little Eddie, because dour as the Russians were, they were unfailingly kind to children. For the fun of it, she asked for directions from a militiaman, as the local police were called, and he was polite to her, helping with her poor pronunciation of his language and giving directions. So that was one good thing. She had a tail, she noted, a KGB officer, about thirty-five, following behind by about fifty yards, doing his best to remain invisible. His mistake was in looking away when she turned. That's probably how he had been trained, so that his face would not become too familiar to his surveillance target.

The streets and sidewalks were wide here, but not overly crowded with people. Most Russians were at work, and there was no population of free women here, out shopping or heading to social affairs or golf outings—maybe the wives of the really important party members, that was all. Kind of like the idle rich at home, Mary Pat reflected, if there were still such people. Her mom had always worked, at least in her memory—still did, in fact. But here working women used shovels while the men drove dump trucks. They were always fixing potholes in the streets, but never quite fixing them well enough. *Just like in Washington and New York,* she thought.

There were street vendors here, though, selling ice cream, and she bought one for little Eddie, whose eyes were taking it all in. It troubled her conscience to inflict this place and this mission on her son, but he was only four and it would be a good learning experience for him. At least he'd grow up bilingual. He'd also learn to appreciate his country more than most American kids, and that, she thought, was a good thing. So, she had a tail. How good was he? Perhaps it was time to find out. She reached into her purse and surreptitiously removed a length of paper tape. It was red in color, a bright red.

Turning a corner, she stuck it to a lamppost in a gesture so casual as to be invisible and kept going. Then, fifty yards down the new block, she turned to look back as though lost . . . and she saw him walk right past that lamppost. So he hadn't seen her leave the flag signal. Had he seen her, he would at least have looked . . . and he was the only one following her; her route had been so randomly chosen that there wouldn't be anyone else assigned to her, unless there was a really major surveillance effort applied to her, and that didn't seem likely. She'd never been blown on any of her field assignments. She remembered every single moment of her training at The Farm in Tidewater, Virginia. She'd been at the top of her class, and she knew she was good—and better still, she knew that you were never so good that you could forget to be careful. But as long as you were careful, you could ride any horse. Grandfather Vanya had taught her to ride, too.

She and little Eddie would have many adventures in this city, Mary Pat thought. She'd let it wait until the KGB got tired of hanging a shadow on her, and then she could really cut loose. She wondered whom she might recruit to work for CIA, in addition to running the established agents-in-place. Yeah, she was in the belly of the beast, all right, and her job was to give the son of a bitch a bleeding ulcer.

"VERY WELL, Aleksey Nikolay'ch, you know the man," Andropov said. "What do I tell him now?"

It was a sign of the Chairman's intelligence that he didn't lash out with a scorching reply, to put the Rome *rezident* back in his place. Only a fool stomped on his senior subordinates.

"He asks for guidance—the scope of the operation and so forth. We should give it to him. This brings into question exactly what you are contemplating, Comrade Chairman. Have you thought it through to that point?"

"Very well, Colonel, what do *you* think we should do?"

"Comrade Chairman, there is an expression the Americans use which I have learned to respect: That is above my pay grade."

"Are you telling me that you do not play Chairman yourself—in your own mind?" Yuriy Vladimirovich asked, rather pointedly.

"Honestly, no, I limit my thinking to that which I understand—operational questions. I am not competent to trespass into high political confines, comrade."

A clever answer, if not a truthful one, Andropov noted. But Rozhdestvenskiy would be unable to discuss whatever high-level

thoughts he might have, because no one else at KGB was cleared to discuss such things. Now, he *might* be interviewed by some very senior member of the Party's Central Committee, on orders from the Politburo, but such an order would almost have to come from Brezhnev himself. And that, Yuriy Vladimirovich thought, was not likely at this time. So, yes, the colonel would think about it in the privacy of his own mind, as all subordinates did, but as a professional KGB officer, rather than a Party flack, he would leave such thoughts right there.

"Very well, we will dispense with the political considerations entirely. Consider this a theoretical question: How would one kill this priest?"

Rozhdestvenskiy looked uneasy.

"Sit," the Chairman told his subordinate. "You have planned complex operations before. Take your time to walk through this one."

Rozhdestvenskiy took his seat before speaking. "First of all, I would ask for assistance from someone better-versed in such things. We have several such officers here in The Centre. But . . . since you ask me to think about it in theoretical terms . . ." The colonel's voice trailed off and his eyes went up and to the left. When he started speaking again, his words came slowly.

"First of all, we would use Goderenko's station only for information —reconnaissance of the target, that sort of thing. We would not want to use Station Rome's people in any active way.... In fact, I would advise against using Soviet personnel at all for the active parts of the operation."

"Why?" Andropov asked.

"The Italian police are professionally trained, and for an investigation of this magnitude, they would throw people into it, assign their very best men. At any event like this, there will be witnesses. Everyone on earth has two eyes and a memory. Some have intelligence. That sort of thing cannot be predicted. While on the one hand, this militates in favor of, let us say, a sniper and a long-range shot, such a methodology would point to a state-level operation. Such a sniper would have to be well-trained and properly equipped. That would mean a soldier. A soldier means an army. An army means a nation-state—and which nation-state would wish to kill the Pope?" Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy asked. "A truly black operation cannot be traced back to its point of origin."

Andropov lit a cigarette and nodded. He'd chosen well. This colonel was no man's fool. "Go on."

"Ideally, the shooter would have no ties whatsoever to the Soviet Union. We must be sure of that because we cannot ignore the possibility that he will be arrested. If he is arrested, he will be

questioned. Most men talk under questioning, either for psychological or physical reasons." Rozhdestvenskiy reached into his pocket and pulled out his own cigarette. "I remember reading about a Mafia killing in America. . . ." Again, the voice tailed off and his eyes fixed on the far wall while examining something in the past.

"Yes?" the Chairman prompted.

"A killing in New York City. One of their senior people was at odds with his peers, and they decided to not merely kill him, but to do so with some degree of ignominy. They had him killed by a black man. To the Mafia, that is particularly disgraceful," Rozhdestvenskiy explained. "In any case, the shooter was immediately thereafter killed by another man, presumably a Mafia assassin who then made a successful escape—no doubt he had assistance, which proves that it was a carefully planned exercise. The crime was never solved. It was a perfect technical exercise. The target was killed and so was the assassin. The true killers—those who had planned the exercise—accomplished their mission, and gained prestige within their organization, but were never punished for it."

"Criminal thugs," Andropov snorted.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman, but a properly carried-out mission is worthy of study, even so. It does not completely apply to our task at hand, because it was *supposed* to look like a well-executed Mafia murder. But the shooter got close to his target because he was manifestly *not* a member of a Mafia gang and could not later implicate or identify those who paid him to commit the act. That is precisely what we would wish to achieve. Of course, we cannot copy this operation in full—for example, killing off our shooter would point directly to us. This cannot be like the elimination of Leon Trotsky. In that case, the origin of the operation was not really concealed. As with the Mafia killing I just cited, it was supposed to be something of a public announcement." That a Soviet state action was a direct parallel to this New York City gangster rubout did not need much elaboration in Rozhdestvenskiy's eyes. But in his operational brain, the Trotsky killing and the Mafia assassination were an interesting confluence of tactics and objectives.

"Comrade, I need some time to consider this fully."

"I'll give you two hours," Chairman Andropov responded generously.

Rozhdestvenskiy stood, came to attention, and walked out through the clothes dresser into the secretary's room.

Rozhdestvenskiy's own office was small, of course, but it was private and on the same floor as the Chairman's. A window overlooked Dzerzhinskiy Square, with all its traffic and the statue of Iron Feliks. His swivel chair was comfortable, and his desk had three

telephones because the Soviet Union had somehow failed to master multiline phones. He had a typewriter of his own, which he rarely used, preferring to have a secretary come in from the executive pool. There was talk that Yuriy Vladimirovich used one of them for something other than taking dictation, but Rozhdestvenskiy did not believe it. The Chairman was too much of an aesthete for that. Corruption just wasn't his way, which appealed to him. It was hard to feel loyal to a man such as Brezhnev. Rozhdestvenskiy took the Sword and Shield motto of his agency seriously. It was his job to protect his country and its people, and they needed protecting—sometimes from the members of their own Politburo.

But why did they need protection from this priest? he asked himself.

He shook his head and applied his mind to the exercise. He tended to think with his eyes open, examining his thoughts like a film on an invisible screen.

The first consideration was the nature of the target. The Pope seemed to be a tall man in the pictures, and he usually dressed in white. One could scarcely ask for a finer shooting target than that. He rode about in an open vehicle, which made him an even better target, because it drove about slowly, so that the faithful could see him well.

But who would be the shooter? Not a KGB officer. Not even a Soviet citizen. A Russian exile, perhaps. KGB had them throughout the West, many of them sleeper agents, living their lives and awaiting their activation calls.... But the problem was, so many of them went native and ignored their activation notices, or called the counterintelligence service in their country of residence. Rozhdestvenskiy didn't like that sort of long-term assignment. It was too easy for an officer to forget who he was and become what his cover said he was supposed to be.

No, the shooter had to be an outsider, not a Russian national, not a non-Russian former Soviet citizen, not even a foreigner trained by KGB. Best of all would be a renegade priest or nun, but people like that didn't just fall into your lap, except in Western spy fiction and TV shows. The real world of intelligence operations was rarely that convenient.

So, what sort of shooter did he need? A non-Christian? A Jew? A Muslim? An atheist would be too easy to associate with the Soviet Union, so no, not one of those. To get a Jew to do it—that would be rich! One of the Chosen People. Best of all, an Israeli. Israel had its fair share of religious fanatics. It *was* possible . . . but unlikely. KGB had assets in Israel—many of the Soviet citizens who emigrated there were KGB sleepers—but Israeli counterintelligence was notoriously efficient. The possibility of such an operation being blown was too high, and this was one operation that could not be blown. So that left Jews out.

Maybe a madman from Northern Ireland. Certainly the Protestants there loathed the Catholic Church, and one of their chieftains—Rozhdestvenskiy couldn't remember his name, but he looked like an advertisement for a brewery—had said he wished the Pope dead. The man was even supposed to be a minister himself. But, sadly, such people hated the Soviet Union even more, because their IRA adversaries claimed to be Marxists—something Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy had trouble accepting. If they were truly Marxists, he could have used Party discipline to get one of them to undertake the operation . . . but no. What little he knew of Irish terrorists told him that getting one to put Party discipline above his ethnic beliefs was far too much to ask. Attractive as it might be in a theoretical sense, it would be too hard to arrange.

That left Muslims. A lot of them were fanatics, with as little to do with the core beliefs of their religion as the Pope did with Karl Marx. Islam was just too big, and it suffered from the diseases of bigness. But if he wanted a Muslim, where to get him? KGB did have operations in many countries, with Islamic populations, as did other Marxist nations. *Hmm,* he thought, *that's a good idea.* Most of the Soviet Union's allies had intelligence services, and most of them were under KGB's thumb.

The best of them was the DDR's Stasi, superbly operated by its director, Markus Wolf. But there were few Muslims there. The Poles were good, as well, but there was no way he would use them for this operation. The Catholics had it penetrated—and that meant the West had it penetrated as well, if only at second hand. Hungary—no, again the country was too Catholic, and the only Muslims there were foreigners in ideological training camps for terrorist groups, and those he probably ought not to use. The same was true of the Czechs. Romania was not regarded as a true Soviet ally. Its ruler, though a stern communist, played too much like the gypsy gangsters native to his country. That left . . . Bulgaria. Of course. Neighbor to Turkey, and Turkey was a Muslim country, but one with a secularized culture and a lot of good gangster material. And the Bulgars had a lot of cross-border contacts, often covered as smuggling activity, which they used to get NATO intelligence, just as Goderenko did in Rome.

So, they would use the *rezident* in Sofia to get the Bulgars to do their dirty work. They had a debt of long standing to KGB, after all. Moscow Centre had enabled them to dispose of their wayward national on Westminster Bridge in a very clever operation that been partially blown only by the worst case of bad luck.

But there was a lesson in that, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy reminded himself. Just as with that Mafia killing, the operation could not be so clever as to point directly to KGB. No, this one had to look gangsterish

in its execution. Even then, there were dangers. Western governments would have their suspicions—but with no direct or even indirect connection to Dzerzhinskiy Square, they would not be able to talk about it in public....

Would that be good enough? he asked himself.

The Italians, the Americans, and the British would all wonder. They would whisper, and perhaps those whispers would find their way into the public press. Did that matter?

It depended on how important this operation was to Andropov and the Politburo, didn't it? There would be risks, but in the great political reckoning, you weighed the risks against the importance of the mission.

So Station Rome would be the reconnaissance element. Station Sofia would contract the Bulgarians to hire the shooter—it would probably have to be done with a pistol. Getting close enough to use a knife was too difficult a task to plan for seriously, and rifles were too hard to conceal, though a sub-machine gun was always the weapon of choice for something like this. And the shooter would not even be a citizen of a socialist country. No, they'd get one from a NATO country. There was some degree of complexity here. But not all that much.

Rozhdestvenskiy lit up another cigarette and mentally walked back and forth through his reasoning, looking for errors, looking for weaknesses. There were some. There were always some. The real problem would be in finding a good Turk to do the shooting. For that they had to depend on the Bulgars. Just how good were their clandestine services? Rozhdestvenskiy had never worked directly with them, and knew them only by reputation. That reputation was not entirely good. They reflected their government, which was cruder and more thuggish than Moscow, not very *kulturniy,* but he supposed that was partly Russian chauvinism on the KGB's part. Bulgaria was Moscow's little brother, politically and culturally, and big brother–little brother thinking was inescapable. They just had to be good enough to have decent contacts in Turkey, and that meant just one good intelligence officer, preferably one trained in Moscow. There would be a lot of those, and KGB's own academy would have the necessary records. The Sofia *rezident* might even know him personally.

This theoretical exercise was shaping up, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy thought to himself, with some degree of pride. So he still knew how to set up a good field operation, despite having become a headquarters drone. He smiled as he stubbed out his smoke. Then he lifted his white phone and dialed 111 for the Chairman's office.

CHAPTER 8

THE DISH

THANK YOU, ALEKSEY NIKOLAY'CH. That is a most interesting concept. So, how do we move forward, then?"

"Comrade Chairman, we have Rome keep us updated on the Pope's schedule—as far in advance as possible. We do not let them know of the existence of any operation. They are merely a source of information. When the time comes, we might wish for one of their officers to be in the area merely to observe, but it is better for all concerned that Goderenko knows as little as possible."

"You do not trust him?"

"No, Comrade Chairman. Excuse me; I did not mean to give that impression. But the less he knows, the less he might ask questions or inadvertently ask things of his personnel that might tip matters off, even innocently. We choose our Chiefs of Station for their intelligence, for their ability to see things where others do not. Should he sense that something is happening, his professional expertise might compel him at least to keep watch—and that might impede the operation."

"Freethinkers," Andropov snorted.

"Can it be any other way?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked reasonably. "There is always that price when you hire men of intelligence."

Andropov nodded. He was not so much a fool as to ignore the lesson.

"Good work, Colonel. What else?"

"Timing is crucial, Comrade Chairman."

"How long to set something like this up?" Andropov asked.

"Certainly a month, likely more. Unless you have people already in place, these things always take longer than you hope or expect," Rozhdestvenskiy explained.

"I shall need that much time to get approval for this. But we will go forward with operational planning, so that when approval comes, we can execute as rapidly as possible."

Execute, Rozhdestvenskiy thought, *was the right choice of words,* but even he found it cold. And he had said *when* approval comes, not *if,* the colonel noted. Well, Yuriy Vladimirovich was supposed to be the most powerful man on the Politburo now, and that suited Aleksey

Nikolay'ch. What was good for his agency was also good for him, especially in his new job. There might be general's stars at the end of this professional rainbow, and that possibility suited him as well.

"How would you proceed?" the Chairman asked.

"I should cable Rome to assuage Goderenko's fears and tell him that his tasking for the moment is to ascertain the Pope's schedule for traveling, appearances, and so forth. Next, I will cable Ilya Bubovoy. He's our *rezident* in Sofia. Have you met him, Comrade Chairman?"

Andropov searched his memory. "Yes, at a reception. He's overweight, isn't he?"

Rozhdestvenskiy smiled. "Yes, Ilya Fedorovich has always fought that, but he's a good officer. He's been there for four years, and he enjoys good relations with the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost."*

"Grown a mustache, has he?" Andropov asked, with a rare hint of humor. Russians often chided their neighbors for facial hair, which seemed to be a national characteristic of Bulgarians.

"That I do not know," the colonel admitted. He was not yet so obsequious as to promise to find out.

"What will your cable to Sofia say?"

"That we have an operational requirement for—"

The Chairman cut him off: "Not in a cable. Fly him here. I want security very tight on this, and flying him back and forth from Sofia will raise few eyebrows."

"By your order. Immediately?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked.

"Da. Yes, at once."

The colonel came to his feet. "Right away, Comrade Chairman. I will go to communications directly."

Chairman Andropov watched him leave. One nice thing about KGB, Yuriy Vladimirovich thought, when you gave orders here, things actually happened. Unlike the Party Secretariat.

COLONEL ROZHDESTVENSKIY took the elevator back down to the basement and headed for communications. Captain Zaitzev was back at his desk, doing his paperwork as usual—that's all he had, really—and the colonel went right up to him.

"I have two more dispatches for you."

"Very well, Comrade Colonel." Oleg Ivan'ch held out his hand.

"I have to write them out," Rozhdestvenskiy clarified.

"You can use that desk right there, comrade." The communicator pointed. "Same security as before?"

"Yes, one-time pad for both. One more for Rome, and the other for Station Sofia. Immediate priority," he added.

"That is fine." Zaitzev handed him the message form blanks and

turned back to his work, hoping the dispatches wouldn't be too lengthy. They had to be pretty important for the colonel to come down here even before they were drafted. Andropov must have a real bug up his rectum. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was the Chairman's personal gofer. It had to be kind of demeaning for someone with the skills to be a *rezident* somewhere interesting. Travel, after all, was the one real perk KGB offered its employees.

Not that Zaitzev got to travel. Oleg Ivanovich knew too much to be allowed in a Western country. After all, he might not come back—KGB always worried about that. And for the first time, he wondered why. That was the kind of day it had been. Why did KGB worry so much about possible defections? He'd seen dispatches openly discussing the troublesome possibility, and he'd seen officers who had been brought home to "talk" about it here in The Centre and often never returned to the field. He'd always known about it, but he'd never actually thought about it for as much as thirty seconds.

They left because—because they thought their state was wrong? Could they actually think it was so bad they would do something so drastic as *betray* their Motherland? That, Zaitzev belatedly realized, was a very big thought.

And yet, what was KGB but an agency that lived on betrayal? How many hundreds—thousands—of dispatches had he read about just that? Those were Westerners—Americans, Britons, Germans, Frenchmen—all used by KGB to find out things that his country wanted to know—and they were all traitors to their mother countries, weren't they? They did it mainly for money. He'd seen a lot of those messages, too, discussions between The Centre and the *rezidenturas* discussing the amounts of payment. He knew that The Centre was always niggardly with the money it paid out, which was to be expected. The agents wanted American dollars, British pounds sterling, Swiss francs. And cash, real paper money—they always wanted to be paid in cash. Never rubles or even certificate rubles. It was the only money they trusted, clearly enough. They betrayed their country for money, but only for *their* own money. Some of them even demanded millions of dollars, not that they ever got it. The most he'd ever seen authorized was £50,000, paid out for information about British and American naval ciphers. *What would the Western powers* not *pay for the communications information in* his *mind?* Zaitzev thought idly. It was a question with no answer. He did not really have the ability to frame the question properly, much less consider the answer seriously.

"Here you go," Rozhdestvenskiy said, handing over the message blanks. "Send them out at once."

"As soon as I get them enciphered," the communicator promised.

"And the same security as before," the colonel added.

"Certainly. Same identifier tag on both?" Oleg Ivanovich asked.

"Correct, all with this number," he replied, tapping the 666 in the upperright corner.

"By your order, Comrade Colonel. I'll see to it right now."

"And call me when they go out."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. I have your office number," Zaitzev assured him.

There was more to it than the mere words, Oleg knew. The tone of his voice had told him much. This *was* going out under the direct order of the Chairman, and all this attention made it a matter of the highest priority, not just something of routine interest to an important man. This wasn't about ordering pantyhose for some bigwig's teenage daughter.

He walked to the cipher-book storage room to get two books, the ones for Rome and Sofia, and then he pulled out his cipher wheel and laboriously encrypted both messages. All in all, it took forty minutes. The message to Colonel Bubovoy in Sofia was a simple one: Fly to Moscow immediately for consultations. Zaitzev wondered if that would make the *rezident*'s knees wobble a little. Colonel Bubovoy could not know what the numerical identifier meant, of course. He'd find out soon enough.

The rest of Zaitzev's day went routinely. He managed to lock up his confidential papers and walk out before six in the evening.

LUNCH AT CENTURY HOUSE was good, but British-eccentric. Ryan had learned to enjoy the British Ploughman's Lunch, mainly because the bread was so uniformly excellent over here.

"So, your wife's a surgeon?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, eye cutter. She's actually starting to use lasers for some things now. She's hoping to be a pioneer in that stuff."

"Lasers? What for?" Harding asked.

"Some of it's like welding. They use a laser to cauterize a leaky blood vessel, for instance—they did it with Suslov. Blood leaked inside the eye, so they drilled into the eyeball and drained out all the fluid—aqueous humor, I think they call it—and then used lasers to weld shut the leaky vessels. Sounds pretty yucky, doesn't it?"

Harding shuddered at the thought. "I suppose it's better than being blind."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Like when Sally was in shock-trauma. The idea of somebody carving up my little girl didn't exactly thrill me." Ryan remembered how fucking awful that had been, in fact. Sally still had the scars on her chest and abdomen from it, though

they were fading.

"What about you, Jack? You've been under the knife before," Simon observed.

"I was asleep, and they didn't make videos of the operations—but you know, Cathy would probably be interested in seeing all three of them."

"Three?"

"Yeah, two when I was in the Marines. They stabilized me on the ship, then flew me to Bethesda for the rest of it—I was asleep practically the whole time, thank God, but the neurosurgeons there weren't quite good enough, and that left me with a bad back. Then, when Cathy and I were dating—no, we were engaged then—my back blew up again over dinner in Little Italy, and she took me into Hopkins and had Sam Rosen take a look at me. Sam fixed it all up. Good guy, and a hell of a doc. You know, sometimes it's nice to be married to a doctor. She knows some of the best people in the world." Ryan took a big bite of turkey and baguette. It was better than the burgers in the CIA cafeteria. "Anyway, that's the short version of a three-year adventure that started with a broke helicopter on Crete. It ended up with me being married, so I guess it all worked out okay."

Harding filled his pipe out of a leather pouch and lit it. "So, how's your report coming on Soviet management and practices?"

Jack set his beer down. "It's amazing how screwed up they are, especially when you compare their internal documents with the hard data we learn when our guys get hands-on with their gear. What they call quality control, we call a dog's breakfast. At Langley, I saw some stuff on their fighter planes that the Air Force got, mainly through the Israelis. The goddamned parts don't fit together! They can't even cut aluminum sheets into regular shapes. I mean, a high-school kid in shop class would have to do better or flunk out of school. We know they have competent engineers, especially the guys who work in theoretical stuff, but their manufacturing practices are so primitive that you'd expect better from third-graders."

"Not in all areas, Jack," Harding cautioned.

"And not all the Pacific Ocean's blue, Simon. There are islands and volcanoes, sure. I know that. But the rule is the ocean is blue, and the rule in the Soviet Union is shitty work. The problem is that their economic system doesn't reward people for doing good work. There's a saying in economics: 'Bad money drives out good.' That means poor performance will take over if good performance isn't recognized. Well, over there, mainly it isn't, and for their economy it's like cancer. What happens in one place gradually carries over to the whole system."

"There are some things at which they are very good indeed," Harding persisted.

"Simon, the Bolshoi Ballet isn't going to attack into West Germany. Neither is their Olympic team," Jack retorted. "Their military may be competently led at the higher levels, but their equipment is crummy, and the middle-level management is practically nonexistent. Without my gunnery sergeant and my squad leaders, I could not have used my platoon of Marines efficiently, but the Red Army doesn't have sergeants as we understand them. They have competent officers—and, again, some of their theoretical people are world-class—and their soldiers are probably patriotic Russians and all that, but without proper training at the tactical level, they're like a beautiful car with flat tires. The engine might turn over and the paint job might shine, but the car isn't going anywhere."

Harding took a few contemplative puffs. "Then what are we worried about?"

Jack shrugged. "There's a hell of a lot of them, and quantity does have a quality all its own. If we go forward with our defense buildup, however, we can stop anything they try. A Russian tank regiment is just a collection of targets if we have the right equipment and our guys are properly trained and led. Anyway, that's what my report is probably going to say."

"It's a little early for a conclusion," Simon told his new American friend. Ryan hadn't yet learned how a bureaucracy was supposed to work.

"Simon, I used to make my money in trading. You succeed in that business by seeing things a little faster than the next guy, and that means you don't wait until you have every last little crumb of information. I can see where this information is pointing me. It's bad over there, and it's getting worse. Their military is a distillation of what is good and bad in their society. Look at how badly they're doing in Afghanistan. I haven't seen your data, but I've seen what they have at Langley, and it isn't pretty. Their military is performing very poorly in that rockpile."

"I think they will ultimately succeed."

"It's possible," Jack conceded, "but it'll be an ugly win. We did a lot better in Vietnam." He paused. "You guys have ugly memories of Afghanistan, don't you?"

"My great-uncle was there in 1919. He said it was worse than the Battle of the Somme. Kipling did a poem that ends with an instruction to a soldier to blow his brains out rather than be captured there. I'm afraid some Russians have learned that lesson, to their sorrow."

"Yeah, the Afghans are courageous, but not overly civilized," Jack agreed. "But I think they're going to win. There's talk at home about giving them the Stinger SAM. That would neutralize the helicopters the Russians are using, and without those, Ivan's got a problem."

"Is the Stinger that good?"

"Never used it myself, but I've heard some nice things about it."

"And the Russian SAM-seven?"

"They kind of invented the idea of a man-portable SAM, didn't they? But we got a bunch through the Israelis in seventy-three, and our guys weren't all that impressed. Again, Ivan had a great idea, then couldn't execute it properly. That's their curse, Simon."

"Then explain KGB to me," Harding challenged.

"Same as the Bolshoi Ballet and their ice hockey teams. They load a lot of talent and money into that agency, and they get a fair return for it—but they have a lot of spooks skip over the wall, too, don't they?"

"True," Simon had to concede.

"And why, Simon?" Jack asked. "Because they fill their heads with how corrupt and messed up we are, and then when their people get here and look around, it isn't all that bad, is it? Hell, we have safe houses all over America with KGB guys in them, watching TV. Not many of them decide to go home, either. I've never met a defector, but I've read a lot of transcripts, and they all say pretty much the same thing. Our system is better than theirs, and they're smart enough to tell the difference."

"We have some living here as well," Harding admitted. He didn't want to admit that the Russians also had a few Brits—nowhere near as many, just enough to be a considerable embarrassment to Century House. "You're a hard man to debate, Jack."

"I just speak the truth, buddy. That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

"That's the theory," Harding had to admit. This Ryan fellow would never be a bureaucrat, the Brit decided, and wondered if that was a good thing or bad. The Americans took a different slant on things, and the contrast to his own organization's take was entertaining, at least. Ryan had a lot to learn . . . but he also had a few things to teach, Harding realized. "How's your book coming along?"

Ryan's face changed. "Haven't gotten much work done lately. I do have my computer set up. Hard to concentrate on that after a full day here—but if I don't make the time, the thing will never get done. At heart, I'm lazy," Ryan admitted.

"Then how did you become rich?" Harding demanded. He got a grin.

"I'm also greedy. Gertrude Stein said it, pal: 'I've been rich and I've been poor. It's better to be rich.' Truer words have never been spoken."

"I must discover that for myself someday," the British civil servant observed.

Oops, Ryan thought. *Well, it wasn't his fault, was it?* Simon was smart enough to make money in the real world, but he didn't seem to think

in those terms. It made good sense to have a smart guy here in the analyst pool at Century House, even though that meant sacrificing his own wellbeing for his country. But that was not a bad thing, and Ryan reflected that he was doing it, too. His advantage was that he'd made his money up front and could afford to kiss this job off and go back to teaching whenever the urge struck him. It was a sort of independence that most government employees would never know. . . . *And their work probably suffered because of it,* Jack thought.

ZAITZEV MADE HIS WAY out past the various security checkpoints. Some people were frisked at random by the guards to make sure that they weren't taking anything out with them, but the checks—he'd suffered through his share of them—were too cursory to be effective, he thought. Just enough to be a nuisance, and not regular enough to be a real threat—perhaps once in thirty days—and, if you got frisked one day, you knew you were safe for at least the next five or so, because the guards knew all the faces of the people they checked out, and even here there was human contact and friendly relationships among the employees, especially at the working level—a kind of blue-collar solidarity that was in some ways surprising. As it happened, Zaitzev was allowed to pass without inspection and made his way into the capacious square, then walked to the metro station.

He didn't usually dress in the paramilitary uniform—most KGB employees did not choose to do so, as though their employment might make them seem tainted to their fellow citizens. Neither did he hide it. If anyone asked, he gave an honest answer, and the questioning usually stopped there, because everyone knew that you didn't ask questions about what went on at the Committee for State Security. There were occasional movies and TV shows about KGB, and some of them were even fairly honest, though they gave little away concerning methods and sources beyond what some fiction writer might imagine, which wasn't always all that accurate. There was a small office at The Centre that consulted on such things, usually taking things out and—rarely—putting accurate things in, because it was in his agency's interest to be fearful and forbidding to Soviet citizens and foreigners alike. *How many ordinary citizens supplement their incomes by being informers?* Zaitzev wondered. He almost never saw any dispatches about that—that sort of thing rarely went overseas.

The things that did go out of the country were troubling enough. Colonel Bubovoy would probably be in Moscow the next day. There was regular air service between Sofia and Moscow through Aeroflot. Colonel Goderenko in Rome had been told to sit down and shut up, and to forward to The Centre the Pope's appearance schedule for the

indefinite future. Andropov hadn't lost interest in that bit of information.

And now the Bulgarians would be involved. Zaitzev worried about that, but he didn't need to wonder all that much. He'd seen those dispatches before. The Bulgarian State Security Service was the loyal vassal of KGB. The communicator knew that. He'd seen enough messages go to Sofia, sometimes through Bubovoy, sometimes directly, and sometimes for the purpose of ending someone's life. KGB didn't do much of that anymore, but *Dirzhavna Sugurnost* did, on occasion. Zaitzev imagined that they had a small subunit of the DS officers who were trained and skilled and *practiced* at that particular skill. And the message header had the 666 suffix, so this dispatch concerned the same thing that Rome had been initially queried on. So this was going forward.

His agency—his country—wanted to kill that Polish priest, and that, Zaitzev thought, was probably a bad thing.

He took the escalator down to the subterranean station amid the usual afterwork crowd. Usually, the crowd of people was comforting. It meant that Zaitzev was in his element, surrounded by his countrymen, people just like himself, serving one another and the State. But was that true? *What would these people think of Andropov's mission?* It was hard to gauge. The subway ride was usually quiet. Some people might talk to friends, but group discussions were rare, except perhaps for some unusual sporting event, a bad referee's call at a soccer match, or a particularly spectacular play on the hockey rink. Other than that, people were usually alone with their thoughts.

The train stopped, and Zaitzev shuffled aboard. As usual, there were no seats available. He grasped the overhead handrail and kept thinking. *Are the others on the train thinking as well? If so, about what? Jobs? Children? Wives? Lovers? Food?* You couldn't tell. Even Zaitzev couldn't tell, and he'd seen these people—these *same* people—on the metro for years. He knew only a few names, mainly given names overheard in conversations. No, he knew them only by their favorite sports teams....

It struck him suddenly and hard how alone he was in his society. *How many real friends do I have?* Zaitzev asked himself. The answer was shockingly few. Oh, sure, there were people at work he chatted with. He knew the most intimate details about their wives and children—but friends in whom he could confide, with whom he could talk over some troubling development, to whom he could go for guidance in a troubling situation . . . No, he didn't have any of those. That made him unusual in Moscow. Russians often made deep and close friendships, and consecrated them often enough with the deepest and sometimes the darkest of secrets, as though daring one of their

intimates to be a KGB informer, as though courting a trip to the Gulag. But his job denied him that. He'd never dare to discuss the things he did at work, not even to his coworkers.

No, whatever problems he had with this 666 series of messages were ones he had to work out for himself. Even his Irina couldn't know. She might talk with her friends at GUM, and that would surely be death for him. Zaitzev let out a breath and looked around....

There he was again, that American embassy official, reading *Sovietskiy Sport* and minding his own business. He was wearing a raincoat—rain had been forecast, but had not materialized—but not a hat. The coat was open, not buttoned or belted. He was less than two meters away....

On an impulse, Zaitzev shifted his position from one side of the car to the other, switching hands on the overhead rail as though to stretch a stiff muscle. That move put him next to the American. And, on further impulse, Zaitzev slid his hand into the raincoat pocket. There was nothing in there, no keys or pocket change, just empty cloth. But he had established that he could reach into this American's pocket and remove his hand without notice. He backed away, sweeping his eyes around the subway car to see if anyone had noticed or had even been looking his way. But . . . no, almost certainly not. His maneuver had gone undetected, even by the American.

FOLEY DIDN'T EVEN let his eyes move as he read to the bottom of the hockey article. Had he been in New York or any other Western city, he would have thought that someone had just attempted to pick his pocket. Strangely, he didn't expect that here. Soviet citizens were not allowed to have Western currency, and so there was nothing but trouble to be gained in robbing an American on the street, much less picking his pocket. And KGB, which was probably still shadowing him, was most unlikely to do anything like that. If they wanted to lift his wallet, they'd use a two-man team, as professional American pickpockets did, one to delay and distract, and the other to make the lift. You could get almost anyone that way, unless the target was alerted, and staying alert for so long was a lot to ask, even of an expert professional spook. So you employed passive defenses, like wrapping a rubber band or two around the wallet—simple, but very effective, and one of the things they taught you at The Farm, the sort of basic tradecraft that didn't announce *"spy!"* to everyone. The NYPD advised people to do the same thing on the streets of Manhattan, and he was *supposed* to look like an American. Since he had a diplomatic passport and "legal" cover, theoretically, his person was inviolable. Not necessarily from a street thug, of course, and both the KGB and

the FBI were not above having a highly trained street thug rough someone up, albeit within carefully thought-through parameters, lest things get out of control. The entire state of affairs made the Imperial Court of Byzantium look simple by comparison, but Ed Foley didn't make the rules.

Those rules now did not allow him to check his pocket or make the least sign that he knew that someone's hand had been in there. Maybe someone had dropped him a note—a notice of desire to defect, even. But why him? His cover was supposed to be as solid as a T-bill, unless someone in the embassy had made a very shrewd guess and then ratted him out.... But no, even then, KGB wouldn't tip their hand this quickly. They'd watch him for a few weeks at least, just to see what else he might lead them to. KGB played the game too skillfully for that sort of play, so, no, there wasn't much chance that whoever had searched his pocket was a Second Chief Directorate guy. And probably not a pickpocket, either. *Then what?* Foley wondered. He'd have to be patient to find out, but Foley knew a lot about patience. He kept on reading his newspaper. If it were someone who wanted to do a little business, why scare him off? At the very least, he'd let him feel clever. It was always useful to help other people feel smart. That way, they could continue their mistakes.

Three more stops before he got off the subway. Foley had known up front that it would be a lot more productive to ride it than to drive the car. That Mercedes was just too standout-ish for this place. It would make Mary Pat stand out, too, but to her way of thinking, that worked for her rather than against. His wife had brilliant field instincts, better than his, but she often scared him in her daring. It wasn't so much that Mary Pat was a risk-taker. Every member of the DO took risks. It was her relish for doing so that occasionally worried him. For him, playing with the Russians was part of the job. It was business, as Don Vito Corleone would have put it, not personal. But for Mary Patricia, it was as personal as hell, because of her grandfather.

She'd lusted to be part of CIA before they'd met in the Student Union at Fordham, and then again at the CIA recruiter's desk, and they'd hit it off soon after that. She'd already had her Russian-language skills. She could pass for a native. She could alter her accent for any region of the country. She could feign being an instructor in poetry at Moscow State University, and she was pretty, and pretty women had an advantage over everyone else. It was the oldest of prejudices, that the attractive among us had to be good people, that the bad people had to be ugly because they did ugly things. Men were especially deferential to pretty women, other women were less so, because they envied their looks, but even they were nice by instinct. So Mary Pat could skate on a lot of things, because she was just that

pretty American girl, that ditsy blonde, because blondes were universally thought to be dumb, even here in Russia, where they were not all that uncommon. The ones here were probably natural blondes, too, because the local cosmetics industry was about as advanced as it must have been in twelfth-century Hungary, and there wasn't much Clairol Blond #100G in the local drugstores. No, the Soviet Union paid scant attention to the needs of its womenfolk, which led his mind to another question—why had the Russians stopped at only one revolution? In America there would have been hell to pay for the lack of choices in clothes and cosmetics the women had here....

The train stopped at his station. Foley made his way to the door and walked to the escalator. Halfway up, his curiosity got the better of him. He rubbed his nose as though with a case of the sniffles, and fished in his pocket for a handkerchief. He rubbed his nose with it and then shoved it in his coat pocket, which, he discovered, was empty. So what had that been all about? There was no telling. Just one more random event in a life filled with them?

But Edward Foley hadn't been trained to think in terms of random events. He'd continue this regular schedule, and be sure to catch this same subway train every day for a week or so, just to see if there might be a repeat.

ALBERT BYRD SEEMED a competent eye cutter. He was shorter and older than Jack. He had a beard, black and showing hints of gray—like a lot of beards in England, she'd noted. And tattoos. More than she'd ever encountered before. Professor Byrd was a skilled clinician, good with his patients, and a very adept surgeon, liked and trusted by his nursing team—always the sign of a good doc, Cathy knew. He seemed to be a good teacher, but Cathy already knew most of what he had to teach, and knew more about lasers than he did. The argon laser here was new, but not as new as the one at Hopkins, and it would be two weeks before they even had a xenon-arc laser, for which she was Wilmer Eye Institute's best jockey at Hopkins.

The bad news was in the physical facilities. Health care in Britain was effectively a government monopoly. Everything was free—and, like everywhere in the world, you got what you paid for. The waiting rooms were far shabbier than Cathy was used to, and she remarked on it.

"I know," Professor Byrd said tiredly. "It's not a priority."

"The third case I saw this morning, Mrs. Dover, she'd been on the waiting list for eleven months—for a cataract evaluation that took me twenty minutes. My God, Albert, at home her family physician just calls my secretary and I see her in three or four days. I work hard at

Hopkins, but not that hard."

"What would you charge?"

"For that? Oh . . . two hundred dollars. Since I'm an assistant professor at Wilmer, I come a little higher than a new resident." But, she didn't add, she was a damned sight smarter than the average resident, more experienced, and a faster worker. "Mrs. Dover is going to need surgery to correct it," she added. "Want me to do it?"

"Complicated?" Byrd asked.

She shook her head. "Routine procedure. About ninety minutes' work because of her age, but it doesn't look as though there should be any complications."

"Well, Mrs. Dover will go on the list."

"How long?"

"It's not an emergency procedure . . . nine to ten months," Byrd figured.

"You're kidding," Cathy objected. "That long?"

"That's about normal."

"But that's nine or ten months during which she can't see well enough to drive a car!"

"She won't ever see a bill," Byrd pointed out.

"Fine. She can't read the newspapers for the best part of a year. Albert, that's awful!"

"It's our national health-care system," Byrd explained.

"I see," Cathy said. But she didn't really. The surgeons here were proficient enough, but they did only a bit more than half the procedures she and her colleagues did at Hopkins—and she'd never felt overworked in the Maumenee Building. Sure, you worked hard. But people needed you, and her job was to restore and improve the sight of people who required expert medical care—and to Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, that was a religious calling. It wasn't that the local docs were lazy, it was just that the system allowed—nay, encouraged—them to take a very laissez-faire attitude toward their work. She'd arrived in a very new medical world, and it wasn't all that brave.

Neither had she seen a CAT scanner. They'd essentially been invented in Britain by EMI, but some bean counter in the British government—the Home Office, they'd told her—had decided that the country only needed a few of them, and so most hospitals lost the lottery. The CAT scan had just come into being a few years before she'd entered the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, but in the ensuing decade they'd become as much a part of medicine as the stethoscope. Practically every hospital in America had one. They cost a million dollars apiece, but the patient paid for the use of the things, and they paid themselves off quickly enough. She only rarely needed one—to examine tumors around the eye, for example—but when you

did, you damned well needed it right now!

And at Johns Hopkins, the floors were mopped every day.

But the people had the same needs, and she was a doc, and that, Cathy decided, was that. One of her medical school colleagues had gone to Pakistan and come back with the kind of experience in eye pathologies that you couldn't get in a lifetime in American hospitals. Of course, he'd also come back with amoebic dysentery, which was guaranteed to lessen anyone's enthusiasm for foreign travel. At least that wouldn't happen here, she told herself. Unless she caught it in a doctor's waiting room.

CHAPTER 9

SPIRITS

THUS FAR, Ryan had not managed to catch the same train home as his wife, always managing to get home later than she did. By the time he got home, he'd be able to think about doing some work on his Halsey book. It was about 70 percent done, with all the serious research behind him. He just had to finish the writing. What people never seemed to understand was that this was the hard part; researching was just locating and recording facts. Making the facts seem to come together in a coherent story was the difficult part, because human lives were never coherent, especially a hard-drinking warrior like William Frederick Halsey, Jr. Writing a biography was more than anything else an exercise in amateur psychiatry. You seized incidents that happened in his life at randomly selected ages and education levels, but you could never know the little key memories that formed a life—the third-grade schoolyard fight, or the admonishment from his maiden aunt Helen that resonated in his mind for his entire life, because men rarely revealed such things to others. Ryan had such memories, and some of them appeared and disappeared in his consciousness at seemingly random intervals, when the message from Sister Frances Mary in Second Grade at St. Matthew's School leaped into his memory as though he were seven years old again. A skilled biographer seemed to have the ability to simulate such things, but it sometimes came down to making things up, to applying your own personal experiences to the life of another person and that was . . . fiction, and history wasn't supposed to be fiction. Neither was an article in a newspaper, but Ryan knew from his own experience that much purported "news" was made up from whole cloth. But nobody ever said that writing a biography was easy. His first book, *Doomed Eagles,* had been in retrospect a much easier project. Bill Halsey, Fleet Admiral, USN, had fascinated him since reading the man's own autobiography as a boy. He'd commanded naval forces in battle, and while that had seemed exciting to a boy of ten years, it was positively frightening to a man of thirty-two, because now he understood the things that Halsey didn't discuss in full—the unknowns, having to trust intelligence information without really

knowing where it came from, how it was gathered, how it was analyzed and processed, how it was transmitted to him, and whether or not the enemy was listening in. Ryan was now in that loop, and having to wager his life on the work that he did himself was frightening as hell—rather more so, actually, to be wagering the lives of others whom he might or, more likely, might not know.

There was a joke he remembered from his time in the Marine Corps, Ryan thought, as the green English countryside slid past his window: The motto of the intelligence services was "We bet *your* life." That was now his business. He had to wager the lives of others. Theoretically, he might even come up with an intelligence estimate that risked the fate of his country. You had to be so damned sure of yourself and your data....

But you couldn't always be sure, could you? He'd scoffed at many official CIA estimates to which he'd been exposed back at Langley, but it was a damned sight easier to spit on the work of others than it was to produce something better yourself. His Halsey book, tentatively titled *Fighting Sailor,* would upset a few conventional-wisdom apple carts, and deliberately so. Ryan thought that the conventional thinking in some areas was not merely incorrect, but stuff that could not possibly be true. Halsey had acted rightly in some cases where the all-seeing eye of hindsight had castigated him for being wrong. And that was unfair. Halsey could only be judged responsible for the information that was available to him. To say otherwise was like castigating doctors for not being able to cure cancer. They were smart people doing their best, but there were some things they didn't know yet—they were working like hell to find them out, but the process of discovery took time then, and it was still taking time now, Ryan thought. Was it ever. And Bill Halsey could only know what he was given, or what a reasonably intelligent man might deduce from that information, given a lifetime of experience and what he knew of the psychology of his enemy. And even then the enemy did not willingly cooperate in his own destruction, did he?

That's my job, all right, Ryan thought behind blank eyes. It was a quest for Truth, but it was more than that. He had to replicate for his own masters the thinking processes of others, to explain them to his own superiors, so that they, Ryan's bosses, could better understand their adversaries. He was playing pshrink without a diploma. In a way, that was amusing. It was less so when you considered the magnitude of the task and the potential consequences of failure. It came down to two words: *dead people.* In the Basic School at Quantico Marine Base, they'd hammered the same lesson home often enough. Screw up leading your platoon, and some of your Marines don't go home to their mothers and wives, and that would be a heavy burden

to carry on your conscience for the rest of your life. The profession of arms attached a large price tag to mistakes. Ryan hadn't served long enough to learn that lesson for himself, but it had frightened him on quiet nights, feeling the roll of the ship on her way across the Atlantic. He'd talked it over with Gunny Tate, but the sergeant—then an "elderly" man of thirty-four—had just told him to remember his training, trust his instincts, and to think before acting if he had the time, and then warned that you didn't always have the luxury of time. And he'd told his young boss not to worry, because he seemed pretty smart for a second lieutenant. Ryan would never forget that. The respect of a Marine gunnery sergeant didn't come cheaply.

So he had the brains to make good intelligence estimates and the guts to put his name behind them, but he had to be damned sure they were good stuff before he put them out. Because he *was* betting the lives of other people, wasn't he?

The train slowed to a stop. He walked up the steps, and there were a few cabs topside. Jack imagined they had the train schedule memorized.

"Good evening, Sir John." Jack saw it was Ed Beaverton, his morning pickup.

"Hi, Ed. You know," Ryan said, getting into the front seat for a change. Better legroom. "My name is actually Jack."

"I can't call you that," Beaverton objected. "You're a knight."

"Only honorary, not a real one. I do not own a sword—well, only my Marine Corps one, and that's back home in the States."

"And you were a lieutenant, and I was only a corporal."

"And you jumped out of airplanes. Damned if I ever did anything that stupid, Eddie."

"Only twenty-eight times. Never broke anything," the taxi driver reported, turning up the hill.

"Not even an ankle?"

"Just a sprain or two. The boots help with that, you see," the cabbie explained.

"I haven't learned to like flying yet—damned sure I'll never jump out of an airplane." No, Jack was sure, he never would have opted for Force Recon. Those Marines just weren't wired right. He'd learned the hard way that flying over the beach in helicopters was scary enough. He still had dreams about it—the sudden sensation of falling, and seeing the ground rush up—but he always woke up just before impact, usually lurching up to a sitting position in the bed and then looking around the darkened bedroom to make sure he wasn't in that damned CH-46 with a bad aft rotor, falling to the rocks on Crete. It was a miracle that he and a lot of his Marines hadn't been killed. But his had been the only major injury. The rest of his platoon had gotten away

with nothing worse than sprains.

Why the hell are you thinking about that? he demanded of himself. It was more than eight years in his past.

They were pulling up in front of the house in Grizedale Close. “Here we are, sir.”

Ryan handed him his fare, plus a friendly tip. “The name’s Jack, Eddie.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Roger that.” Ryan walked off, knowing he’d never win that battle. The front door was unlocked in anticipation of his arrival. His tie went first, as he headed to the kitchen.

“Daddy!” Sally fairly screamed, as she ran to his arms. Jack scooped her up and gave and got a hug. “How’s my big girl?”

“Fine.”

Cathy was at the stove, fixing dinner. He set Sally down and headed to his wife for a kiss. “How is it,” her husband asked, “that you’re always home first? At home you’re usually later.”

“Unions,” she replied. “Everybody clocks out on time here, and ‘on time’ is usually pretty early—not like Hopkins.” Where, she didn’t add, just about everyone on the professional staff worked late.

“Must be nice to work bankers’ hours.”

“Even dad doesn’t leave his office this early, but everybody over here does. And lunch means a full hour—half the time away from the hospital. Well,” she allowed, “the food’s a little better that way.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Spaghetti.” And Jack saw that the pot was full of her special meat sauce. He turned to see a baguette of French bread on the counter.

“Where’s the little guy?”

“Living room.”

“Okay.” Ryan headed that way. Little Jack was in his crib. He’d just mastered sitting up—it was a little early for that, but that was fine with his dad. Around him was a collection of toys, all of which found their way into his mouth. He looked up to see his father and managed a toothless smile. Of course, that merited a pickup, which Jack accomplished. His diaper felt dry and fresh. Doubtless, Miss Margaret had changed him before scooting off—as always, before Jack made it home from the shop. She was working out fairly well. Sally liked her, and that was the important part. He set his son back down, and the little guy resumed playing with a plastic rattle and watching the TV—especially the commercials. Jack went off to the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes, then back to the kitchen. Then the doorbell chimed, much to everyone’s surprise. Jack went to answer it.

“Dr. Ryan?” the voice asked in American English. It was a guy of Ryan’s height and general looks, dressed in a jacket and tie, holding a

large box.

"That's right."

"I got your STU for you, sir. I work comms at the embassy," the guy explained. "Mr. Murray said I should bring this right over."

The box was a cardboard cube about two and a half feet on a side, and blank, with no printing on it. Ryan let the man into the house and led him directly to his den. It took about three minutes to extract the oversized phone from the box. It went next to Jack's Apple IIe computer.

"You're NSA?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, sir. Civilian. Used to be in the Army Security Agency, E-5. Got out and got a pay increase as a civilian. Been over here two years. Anyway, here's your encryption key." He handed over the plastic device. "You know how these things work, right?"

"Oh yeah." Ryan nodded. "Got one on my desk downtown."

"So you know the rules about this. If anything breaks, you call me"—he handed over his card—"and nobody but me or one of my people is allowed to look at the inside. If that happens, the system self-destructs, of course. Won't start a fire or anything, but it does stink some, 'cause of the plastic. Anyway, that's it." He broke down the box.

"You want a Coke or anything?"

"No, thanks. Gotta get home." And with that, the communications expert walked back out the door to his car.

"What was that, Jack?" Cathy asked from the kitchen.

"My secure phone," Jack explained, returning to his wife's side.

"What's that for?"

"So I can call home and talk to my boss."

"Can't you do that from the office?"

"There's the time difference and, well, there are some things I can't talk about there."

"Secret-agent stuff," she snorted.

"That's right." Just like the pistol he had in his closet. Cathy accepted the presence of his Remington shotgun with some equanimity—he used it for hunting, and she was prepared to tolerate that, since you could cook and eat the birds, and the shotgun was unloaded. But she was less comfortable with a pistol. And so, like civilized married people, they didn't talk about it, so long as it was well out of Sally's reach, and Sally knew that her father's closet was off-limits. Ryan had gotten fond of his Browning Hi-Power 9mm automatic, which *was* loaded with fourteen Federal hollow-point cartridges and two spare magazines, plus tritium match sights and custom-made grips. If he ever needed a pistol again, this would be the one. He'd have to find a place to practice shooting, Ryan reminded

himself. Maybe the nearby Royal Navy base had a range. Sir Basil could probably make a phone call and straighten it out. As an honorary knight, he didn't own a sword, but a pistol was the modern equivalent, and it could be a useful tool on occasion.

So could a corkscrew. "Chianti?" Ryan asked.

Cathy turned. "Okay, I don't have anything scheduled for tomorrow."

"Cath, I've never understood what a glass or two of wine tonight would have to do with surgery tomorrow—it's ten or twelve hours away."

"Jack, you don't mix alcohol with surgery," she explained patiently.

"Okay? You don't drink and drive. You don't drink and cut, either. Not ever. Not once."

"Yes, doctor. So tomorrow you just set glasses prescriptions for people?"

"Uh-huh, simple day. How about you?"

"Nothing important. Same crap, different day."

"I don't know how you stand it."

"Well, it's interesting, secret crap, and you have to be a spook to understand it."

"Right." She poured the spaghetti sauce into a bowl. "Here."

"I haven't got the wine open yet."

"So work faster."

"Yes, Professor the Lady Ryan," Jack responded, taking the bowl of sauce and setting it on the table. Then he pulled the cork out of the Chianti.

Sally was too big a girl for a high chair but still small enough for a booster seat, which she carried to the chair herself. Since the dinner was "pisgetty," her father tucked the cloth napkin into her collar. The sauce would probably get to her pants anyway, but it would teach his little girl about napkins, and that, Cathy thought, was important. Then Ryan poured the wine. Sally didn't ask for any. Her father had indulged her once (over his wife's objections), and that had ended that. Sally got some Coca-Cola.

SVETLANA WAS ASLEEP, finally. She liked to stay up as long as she could, every night the same, or so it seemed, until she finally put her head down. She slept with a smile, her father saw, like a little angel, the sort that decorated Italian cathedrals in the travel books he used to read. The TV was on. Some World War II movie, it sounded like. They were all the same. The Germans attacked cruelly—well,

occasionally there was a German character with something akin to humanity, usually a German communist, it would be revealed along the way, torn by conflicting loyalties to his class (working class, of course) and his country—and the Soviets resisted bravely, losing a lot of defiant men at first until turning the tide, usually outside Moscow in December 1941, at Stalingrad in January 1943, or the Kursk Bulge in the summer of 1943. There was always a heroic political officer, a courageous private soldier, a wise old sergeant, and a bright young junior officer. Toss in a grizzled general who wept quietly and alone for his men, then had to set his feelings aside and get the job done. There were about five different formulas, all of them variations of the same theme, and the only real difference was whether Stalin was seen as a wise, godlike ruler or simply wasn't mentioned at all. *That* depended on when the film had been shot. Stalin had fallen out of fashion in the Soviet film industry about 1956, soon after Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev had made his famous but then-secret speech revealing what a monster Stalin had been—something Soviet citizens still had trouble with, especially the cabdrivers, or so it seemed. Truth in his country was a rare commodity, and almost always one hard to swallow.

But Zaitzev wasn't watching the movie now. Oleg Ivanovich sipped at his vodka, eyes focused on the TV screen, without seeing it. It had just struck him how huge a step he'd taken that afternoon on the metro. At the time, it had almost been a lark, like a child playing a prank, reaching into that American's pocket like a sneak-thief, just to see if he could do it. No one had noticed. He'd been clever and careful about it, and even the American hadn't noticed, or else he would have reacted.

So he'd just proven that he had the ability to . . . *what?* To *do* what? Oleg Ivan'ch asked himself with surprising intensity.

What the hell had he done on the metro coach? What had he been thinking about? Actually, he hadn't really thought about it at all. It had just been some sort of foolish impulse . . . hadn't it?

He shook his head and took another sip of his drink. He was a man of intelligence. He had a university degree. He was an excellent chess player. He had a job that required the highest security clearance, that paid well, and that had just put him at the bottom entry level of the *nomenklatura.* He was a person of importance—not much, but some. The KGB trusted him with knowledge about many things. The KGB had confidence in him . . . but . . .

But what? he asked himself. What came after the "but" part? His mind was wandering in directions he didn't understand and could barely see....

The priest. It came down to that, didn't it? Or did it? What was he

thinking? Zaitzev asked himself. He didn't really know if he was thinking anything at all. It was as though his hand had developed a mind of its own, taking action without the brain's or the mind's permission, leading off in a direction that he didn't understand.

Yes, it had to be that damned priest. Was he bewitched? Was some outside force taking control of his body?

No! That is not possible! Zaitzev told himself. That was something from ancient tales, the sort of thing old women discussed—prattled about—over a boiling pot.

But why, then, did I put my hand in the American's pocket? his mind demanded of itself, but there was no immediate answer.

Do you want to be a part of murder? some small voice asked. *Are you willing to facilitate the murder of an innocent man?*

Was he innocent? Zaitzev asked himself, taking another swallow. Not a single dispatch crossing his desk suggested otherwise. In fact, he could hardly remember any mention of this Father Karol in any KGB messages during the past couple years. Yes, they'd taken note of his trip back to Poland soon after being elected Pope, but what man didn't go home after his promotion to see his friends and seek their approval of his new place in the world?

The Party was made up of men, too. And men made mistakes. He saw them every day, even from the skilled, highly trained officers of KGB, who were punished, or chided, or just remarked upon by their superiors in The Centre. Leonid Ilyich made mistakes. People chuckled about them over lunch often enough—or talked more quietly about the things his greedy children did, especially his daughter. Hers was a petty corruption, and while people talked about it, they usually spoke quietly. But he was thinking about a much larger and more dangerous kind of corruption.

Where did the legitimacy of the State come from? In the abstract, it came from the people, but the people had no say in things. The Party did, but only a small minority of the people were in the Party, and of those only a much smaller minority achieved anything resembling power. And so the legitimacy of his State resided atop what was by any logical measure . . . a fiction . . .

And that was a very big thought. Other countries were ruled by dictators, often fascists on the political Right. Fewer countries were ruled by people on the political Left. Hitler represented the most powerful and dangerous of the former, but he'd been overthrown by the Soviet Union and Stalin on one side, and by the Western states on the other. The two most unlikely of allies had combined to destroy the German threat. And who were they? They claimed to be democracies, and while that claim was consistently denigrated by his own country, the elections held in those countries were real—they had to be, since

his country and his agency, the KGB, spent time and money trying to influence them—and so *there,* the Will of the People had some reality to it, or else why would KGB try to affect it? Exactly how much, Zaitzev didn't know. There was no telling from the information available in his own country, and he didn't bother listening to the Voice of America and other obvious propaganda arms of the Western nations.

So, it wasn't the people who wanted to kill the priest. It was Andropov, certainly, and the Politburo, possibly, who wished to do it. Even his workmates at The Centre had no particular bone to pick with Father Karol. There was no talk of his enmity to the Soviet Union. The State TV and radio had not called out for class hatred against him, as they did for other foreign enemies. There had been no pejorative articles about him in *Pravda* that he'd seen of late. Just some rumbles about the labor problems in Poland, and those were not overly loud, more the sort of thing a neighbor might say about a misbehaving child next door.

But that's what it had to be all about. Karol was Polish, and a source of pride for the people there, and Poland was politically troubled because of labor disputes. Karol wanted to use his political or spiritual power to protect his people. That was understandable, wasn't it?

But was killing him understandable?

Who would stand up and say, "No, you cannot kill this man because you dislike his politics"? The Politburo? No, they'd go along with Andropov. He was the heir apparent. When Leonid Ilyich died, he'd be the one to take his chair at the head of the table. Another Party man. Well, what else could he be? The Party was the Soul of the People, so the saying went. That was about the only mention of "soul" the Party permitted.

Did some part of a man live on after death? That was what the soul was supposed to be, but here the Party was the soul, and the Party was a thing of men, and little more. And corrupt men at that.

And they wanted to kill a priest.

He'd seen the dispatches. In a very small way, he, Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev, was helping. And that was eating at something inside him. A conscience? Was he supposed to have one of those? But a conscience was something that measured one set of facts or ideas against another and was either content or not. If not, if it found some action at fault, then the conscience started complaining. It whispered. It forced him to look and keep looking until the issue was resolved, until the wrong action was stopped, or reversed, or atoned for—

But how did you stop the Party or the KGB from doing something?

To do that, Zaitzev knew, you had, at the very least, to demonstrate that the proposed action was contrary to political theory or would

have adverse political consequences, because politics was the measure of right and wrong. But wasn't politics too fleeting for that? Didn't "right" and "wrong" have to depend on something more solid than mere politics? Wasn't there some higher value system? Politics was just *tactics,* after all, wasn't it? And while tactics were important, strategy was more so, because strategy was the measure of what you used tactics for, and strategy in this case was supposed to be what was right—transcendentally right. Not just right at the moment, but right for all times—something historians could examine in a hundred or a thousand years and pronounce as correct action.

Did the Party think in such terms? How exactly did the Communist Party of the Soviet Union make its decisions? What was good for the people? But who measured that? Individuals did, Brezhnev, Andropov, Suslov, the rest of the full voting members of the Politburo, advised by the nonvoting candidate members, further advised by the Council of Ministers and the members of the Central Committee of the Party, all the senior members of the *nomenklatura*—the ones to whom the *rezident* in Paris shipped perfume and pantyhose in the diplomatic bag. Zaitzev had seen enough of those dispatches. And he'd heard the stories. Those were the ones who lavished presents and status upon their children, the ones who raced down the center lane of the broad Moscow boulevards, the corrupt Marxist princes who ruled his country with hands of iron.

Did those princes think in terms of what was good for the *narod*—the masses, as they were called—the numberless workers and peasants whom they ruled, for whose good they supposedly looked after?

But probably the minor princes under Nikolay Romanov had thought and spoken the same way. And Lenin had ordered them all shot as enemies of the people. As modern movies spoke of the Great Patriotic War, so earlier movies had portrayed them for less sophisticated audiences as evil buffoons, hardly serious enemies, easily hated and easily killed, caricatures of real people who were all so different from those men who'd replaced them, of course....

As the princes of old had driven their troika-harnessed sleds over the very bodies of the peasants on their way to the royal court, so today the officers of the Moscow militia kept the center lane open for the new *nomenklatura* members who didn't have time for traffic delays.

Nothing had really changed....

Except that the czars of old had at least paid lip service to a higher authority. They'd financed St. Basil's Cathedral here in Moscow, and other noblemen had financed countless other churches in lesser cities, because even the Romanovs had acknowledged a power higher than theirs. But the Party acknowledged no higher order.

And so it could kill without regret, because killing was often a political necessity, a *tactical* advantage to be undertaken when and where convenient.

Was that all this was? Zaitzev asked himself. *Were they killing the Pope just because it was more convenient?*

Oleg Ivan'ch poured himself another portion of vodka from the nearby bottle and took another swallow.

There were many inconveniences in his life. It was too long a walk from his desk to the water cooler. There were people at work whom he didn't like—Stefan Yevgeniyevich Ivanov, for example, a more senior major in communications. How he'd managed to get promoted four years ago was a mystery to everyone in the section. He was disregarded by the more senior people as a drone who was unable to do any useful work. Zaitzev supposed every business had one such person, an embarrassment to the office, but not easily removed because . . . because he was just there and that was all there was to it. Were Ivanov out of the way, Oleg could be promoted—if not in rank, then in status to chief of the section. Every single breath Ivanov took was an inconvenience to Oleg Ivan'ch, but that didn't give him the right to kill the more senior communicator, did it?

No, he'd be arrested and prosecuted, and perhaps even executed for murder. Because it was forbidden by law. Because it was *wrong.* The law, the Party, and his own conscience told him that.

But Andropov wanted to kill Father Karol, and his conscience didn't say nay. Would some other conscience do so? Another swallow of vodka. Another snort. A *conscience,* on the *Politburo?*

Even in the KGB, there were no ruminations. No debates. No open discussion. Just action messages and notices of completion or failure. Evaluations of foreigners, of course, discussions of the thinking of foreigners, real agents, or mere agents of influence—called "useful fools" in the KGB lexicon. Never had a field officer written back about an order and said, "No, comrade, we ought not to do that because it would be morally wrong." Goderenko in Rome had come closest, posing the observation that killing Karol might have adverse consequences on operations. Did that mean that Ruslan Borissovich had a troubled conscience as well? No. Goderenko had three sons—one in the Soviet navy; another, he'd heard, at the KGB's own academy out on the Ring Road; and the third in Moscow State University. If Ruslan Borissovich had any difficulties with the KGB, any action could mean, if not death, then at least serious embarrassment for his children, and few men took action like that.

So, was his the only conscience in KGB? Zaitzev took a swallow to ponder that one. Probably not. There were thousands of men in The Centre, and thousands more elsewhere, and just the laws of statistics

made it likely that there were plenty of “good” men (however one defined that), but how did one identify them? It was certain death—or lengthy imprisonment—to try to go looking for them. That was the baseline problem he had. There was no one in whom he could confide his doubts. No one with whom he could discuss his worries—not a doctor, not a priest . . . not even his wife, Irina . . .

No, he had only his vodka bottle, and though it helped him think, after a fashion, it wasn’t much of a companion. Russian men were not averse to shedding tears, but they wouldn’t have helped either. Irina might ask a question, and he wouldn’t be able to answer to anyone’s satisfaction. All he had was sleep. It would not help, he was sure, and in this he was right.

Another hour and two more slugs of the vodka at least drugged him into sleepiness. His wife was dozing in front of the TV—the Red Amy had won the Battle of Kursk, again, and the movie ended at the beginning of a long march that would lead to the Reichstag in Berlin, full of hope and enthusiasm for the bloody task. Zaitzev chuckled to himself. It was more than he had at the moment. He carried his empty glass to the kitchen, then roused his wife for the trip to the bedroom. He hoped that sleep would come quickly. The quarter-liter of alcohol in his belly should help. And so it did.

“YOU KNOW, ARTHUR, there are a lot of things we don’t know about him,” Jim Greer said.

“Andropov, you mean?”

“We don’t even know if the bastard’s married,” the DDI continued.

“Well, Robert, that’s your department,” the DCI observed, with a look at Bob Ritter.

“We think he is, but he’s never brought his wife, if any, to an official function. That’s usually how we find out,” the DDO had to admit. “They often hide their families, like Mafia dons. They’re so anal about hiding everything over there. And, yeah, we’re not all that good about digging the information up, because it’s not operationally important.”

“How he treats his wife and kids, if any,” Greer pointed out, “can be useful in profiling the guy.”

“So you want me to task CARDINAL on something like that? He could do it, I’m sure, but why waste his time that way?”

“Is it a waste? If he’s a wife-beater, it tells us something. If he’s a doting father, it tells us something else,” the DDI persisted.

“He’s a thug. You can look at his photo and see that. Look how his staff acts around him. They’re stiff, like you’d have expected from Hitler’s staff,” Ritter responded. A few months before, a gaggle of

American state governors had flown to Moscow for some sub-rosa diplomacy. The governor of Maryland, a liberal Democrat, had reported back that when Andropov had entered the reception room, he'd spotted him at once as a thug, then learned that it was Yuriy Vladimirovich, Chairman of the Committee for State Security. The Marylander had possessed a good eye for reading people, and that evaluation had gone into the Andropov file at Langley.

"Well, he wouldn't have been much of a judge," Arthur Moore observed. He'd read the file, too. "At least not at the appeals level. Too interested in hanging the poor son of a bitch just to see if the rope breaks or not." Not that Texas hadn't had a few judges like that, once upon a time, but it was much more civilized now. There were fewer horses that needed stealing than men who needed killing, after all. "Okay, Robert, what can we do to flesh him out a little? Looks like he's going to be their next General Secretary, after all. Strikes me as a good idea."

"I can rattle some cages. Why not ask Sir Basil what he can do? They're better at the social stuff than we are, and it takes the heat off our people."

"I like Bas, but I don't like having him hold that many markers for us," Judge Moore answered.

"Well, James, your protégé is over there. Have him ask the question. You get him an STU at home yet?"

"Ought to have gotten there today, yes."

"So call your lad and have him ask, nice and casual-like."

Greer's eyes went to the Judge. "Arthur?"

"Approved. Lowercase this, though. Tell Ryan that it's for his personal interest, not ours."

The Admiral checked his watch. "Okay, I can do that before I head home."

"Now, Bob, any progress on MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH?" the DCI asked with amusement, just to close down the afternoon meeting. It was a fun idea, but not a very serious one.

"Arthur, let's not discount it too much, shall we? They *are* vulnerable to the right sort of bullet, once we load it in the gun."

"Don't talk that way in front of Congress. They might foul their panties," Greer warned, with a laugh. "We're supposed to enjoy peaceful coexistence with them."

"That didn't work very well with Hitler. Stalin and Chamberlain both tried to make nice with the son of a bitch. Where did it get them? They are our enemies, gentlemen, and the sad truth is that we can't have a real peace with them, like it or not. Their ideas and ours are too out of sync for that." He held up his hands. "Yeah, I know, we're not supposed to think that way, but thank God the President does, and

we still work for him."

They didn't have to comment on that. All three had voted for the current President, despite the institutional joke that the two things one never found at Langley were communists and . . . Republicans. No, the new President had a little iron in his spine and a fox's instinct for opportunity. It especially appealed to Ritter, who was the cowboy of the three, if also the most abrasive.

"Okay. I have some budget work to do for that hearing with the Senate day after tomorrow," Moore announced, breaking up the meeting.

RYAN WAS AT his computer, thinking over the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when the phone rang. It was the first time for it, with its oddly trilling ringer. He reached in his pocket for the plastic key, slid it into the appropriate slot, then lifted the receiver.

"STAND BY," a mechanical voice said, "SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE; STAND BY, SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE; STAND BY, SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE—LINE IS SECURE," it said at last.

"Hello," Ryan said, wondering who had an STU and would call him this late. It turned out to be the obvious answer.

"Hi, Jack," a familiar voice greeted him. One nice thing about the STU: The digital technology made voices as clear as if the speaker were sitting in the room.

Ryan checked the desk clock. "Kinda late there, sir."

"Not as late as in Jolly Old England. How's the family?"

"Mainly asleep at the moment. Cathy is probably reading a medical journal," which was what she did instead of watching TV, anyway. "What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"I have a little job for you."

"Okay," Ryan responded.

"Ask around—casual-like—about Yuriy Andropov. There are a few things about him we don't know. Maybe Basil has the information we want."

"What exactly, sir?" Jack asked.

"Is he married, and does he have any kids?"

"We don't know if he's married?" Ryan realized that he hadn't seen that information in the dossier, but he'd assumed it was elsewhere, and had taken no particular note of it.

"That's right. The Judge wants to see if Basil might know."

"Okay, I can ask Simon. How important is this?"

"Like I said, casual-like, like it's your own interest. Then call me back from there, your home, I mean."

"Will do, sir. We know his age, birthday, education, and stuff, but

not if he's married or has any kids, eh?"

"That's how it works sometimes."

"Yes, sir." And that got Jack thinking. They knew everything about Brezhnev but his dick size. They *did* know his daughter's dress size—12—which someone had thought important enough to get from the Belgian milliner who'd sold the silken wedding dress to her doting father, through the ambassador. But they didn't know if the likely next General Secretary of the Soviet Union was married. *Christ, the guy was pushing sixty, and they didn't know? What the hell?* "Okay, I can ask. That ought not to be too hard."

"Otherwise, how's London?"

"I like it here, and so does Cathy, but she's a little dubious about their state medical-care system."

"Socialized medicine? I don't blame her. I still get everything done at Bethesda, but it helps a little that I have 'admiral' in front of my name. It's not quite as fast for a retired chief bosun's mate."

"I bet." In Ryan's case, it helped a whole lot that his wife was on the faculty at Johns Hopkins. He didn't talk to anyone in a lab coat without "professor" on his nametag, and he'd learned that in the field of medicine, the really smart ones were the teachers, unlike the rest of society.

THE DREAMS CAME after midnight, though he had no way of knowing that. It was a clear Moscow summer day, and a man in white was walking across the Red Square. St. Basil's Cathedral was behind him, and he was walking against the traffic past Lenin's mausoleum. Some children were with him, and he was talking to them in a kindly way, as a favored uncle might . . . or perhaps a parish priest. Then Oleg knew that's what he was, a parish priest. But why in white? With gold brocade, even. The children, four or five each of boys and girls, were holding his hands and looking up at him with innocent smiles. Then Oleg turned his head. Up at the top of the tomb, where they stood for the May Day parades, were the Politburo members: Brezhnev, Suslov, Ustinov, and Andropov. Andropov was holding a rifle and pointing at the little procession. There were other people around—faceless people walking aimlessly, going about their business. Then Oleg was standing with Andropov, listening to his words. He was arguing for the right to shoot the man. *Be careful of the children, Yuriy Vladimirovich,* Suslov warned. *Yes, be careful,* Brezhnev agreed. Ustinov reached over to adjust the sights on the rifle. They all ignored Zaitzev, who moved among them, trying to get their attention.

But why? Zaitzev asked. *Why are you doing this?*

Who is this? Brezhnev asked Andropov.

Never mind him, Suslov snarled. *Just shoot the bastard!*

Very well, Andropov said. He took his aim carefully, and Zaitzev was unable to intervene, despite being right there. Then the Chairman squeezed the trigger.

Zaitzev was back on the street now. The first bullet struck a child, a boy on the priest's right, who fell without a sound.

Not him*, you idiot—the priest!* Mikhail Suslov screamed like a rabid dog.

Andropov shot again, this time hitting a little blonde girl standing at the priest's left. Her head exploded in red. Zaitzev bent down to help her, but she said it was all right, and so he left her and returned to the priest.

Look out, why don't you?

Look out for what, my young comrade? The priest asked pleasantly, then he turned. *Come, children, we're off to see God.*

Andropov fired again. This time the bullet struck the priest square in the chest. There was a splash of blood, about the size and color of a rose. The priest grimaced, but kept going, with the smiling children in tow.

Another shot, another rose on the chest, to the left of the first. But still he kept going, walking slowly.

Are you hurt? Zaitzev asked.

It is nothing, the priest replied. *But why didn't you stop him?*

But I tried! Zaitzev insisted.

The priest stopped walking, turning to look him square in the face. *Did you?*

That's when the third bullet struck him right in the heart.

Did you? the priest asked again. Now the children were looking at him and not the priest.

Zaitzev found himself sitting up in the bed. It was just before four in the morning, the clock said. He was sweating profusely. There was only one thing to do. He rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom. There he urinated, then had himself a glass of water, and padded off to the kitchen. Sitting down by the sink, he lit a cigarette. Before he went back to sleep, he wanted to be fully awake. He didn't want to walk back into *that* dream.

Out the window, Moscow was quiet, the streets completely empty—not even a drunk staggering home. A good thing, too. No apartment house elevators would be working at this hour. There was not a car in view, which was a little odd, but not so much as in a Western city.

The cigarette achieved its goal. He was now awake enough to go back to sleep afresh. But even now he knew that the vision wouldn't leave him. Most dreams faded away, just like cigarette smoke, but this one would not. Zaitzev was sure of that.

CHAPTER 10

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

HE HAD A LOT of thinking to do. It was as if the decision had made itself, as if some alien force had overtaken his mind and, through it, his body, and he had been transformed into a mere spectator. Like most Russians, he didn't shower, but washed his face and shaved with a blade razor, nicking himself three times in the process. Toilet paper took care of that—the symptoms, anyway, if not the cause. The images from the dream still paraded before his eyes like that war film on television. They continued to do so during breakfast, causing a distant look in his eyes that his wife noticed but decided not to comment on. Soon enough it was time to go to work. He went along the way like an automaton, taking the right path to the metro station by rote memory, his brain both quiescent and furiously active, as though he'd suddenly split into two separate but distantly connected people, moving along parallel paths to a destination he couldn't see and didn't understand. He was being carried there, though, like a chip of wood down mountain rapids, the rock walls passing so rapidly by his left and right that he couldn't even see them. It came almost as a surprise when he found himself aboard the metro carriage, traveling down the darkened tunnels dug by political prisoners of Stalin's under the direction of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, surrounded by the quiet, almost faceless bodies of other Soviet citizens also making their way to workplaces for which they had little love and little sense of duty. But they went to them because it was how they earned the money with which they bought food for their families, minuscule cogs in the gigantic machine that was the Soviet state, which they all purported to serve and which purported to serve them and their families....

But it was all a lie, wasn't it? Zaitzev asked himself. Was it? How did the murder of a priest serve the Soviet State? How did it serve all these people? How did it serve him and his wife and his little daughter? By feeding them? By giving him the ability to shop in the "closed" shops and buy things that the other workers could not even think about getting for themselves?

But he *was* better off than nearly everyone else on the subway car,

Oleg Ivan'ch reminded himself. Ought he not be grateful for that? Didn't he eat better food, drink better coffee, watch a better TV set, sleep on better sheets? Didn't he have all the creature comforts that these people would like to have? *Why am I suddenly so badly troubled?* the communicator asked himself. The answer was so obvious that it took nearly a minute for him to grasp the answer. It was because his position, the one that gave him the comforts he enjoyed, also gave him knowledge, and in this case, for the first time in his life, knowledge was a curse. He knew the thoughts of the men who determined the course his country was taking, and in that knowledge he saw that the course was a false one . . . an evil one, and inside his mind was an agency that looked at the knowledge and judged it wrong. And in that judgment came the need to do something to change it. He could not object and expect to keep what passed for freedom in his country. There was no agency open to him through which he could make his judgment known to others, though others might well concur with his judgment, might ask the men who governed their country for a redress of their grievances. No, there was no way for him to act within such a system as it existed. To do that, you had to be so very senior that before you voiced doubts you had to think carefully, lest you lose your privilege, and so whatever consciences you had were tempered by the cowardice that came with having so much to lose. He'd never heard of any senior political figure in his country standing up that way, standing on a matter of principle and telling his peers that they were doing something wrong. No, the system precluded that by the sort of people it selected. Corrupted men only selected other corrupted men to be their peers, lest they have to question the things that gave them their own vast privileges. Just as the princes under the czars rarely if ever considered the effect their rule had on the serfs, so the new princes of Marxism never questioned the system that gave them their place in the world. Why? Because the world hadn't changed its shape—just its color, from czarist white to socialist red—and in keeping the shape, it kept its method of working, and in a red world, a little extra spilled blood was difficult to notice.

The metro carriage stopped at his station, and Zaitzev made his way to the sliding metal door, to the platform, left to the escalator, up to the street on a fine, clear, late-summer day, again part of a crowd, but one that dispersed as it moved. A medium-sized contingent walked at a steady pace toward the stone edifice of The Centre, through the bronze doors, and past the first security checkpoint. Zaitzev showed his pass to the uniformed guard, who checked the picture against his face and jerked his head to the right, signaling that it was all right for him to enter the vast office building. Showing the same lack of emotion as he would any other day, Zaitzev took the stone steps down

to the basement level through another checkpoint and finally into the open-bay work area of the signals center.

The night crew was just finishing up. At Zaitzev's desk was the man who worked the midnight-to-eight shift, Nikolay Konstantinovich Dobrik, a newly promoted major like himself.

"Good morning, Oleg," Dobrik said in comradely greeting, accompanied by a stretch in his swivel chair.

"And to you, Kolya. How was the night watch?"

"A lot of traffic last night from Washington. That madman of a president was at it again. Did you know that we are 'the focus of evil in the modern world'?"

"He said that?" Zaitzev asked incredulously.

Dobrik nodded. "He did. The Washington *rezidentura* sent us the text of his speech—it was red meat for his party faithful, but it was incendiary even so. I expect the ambassador will get instructions from the foreign ministry about it, and the Politburo will probably have something to say. But at least it gave me a lively watch to read it all!"

"They didn't put it on the pad, did they?" A complete transmission on a one-time cipher pad would have been a nightmare job for the clerks.

"No, it was a machine job, thank God," Dobrik replied. His choice of words wasn't entirely ironic. That euphemism was a common one, even at The Centre. "Our officers are trying to make sense of his words even now. The political department will be going over it for hours—days, more likely, complete with the psychiatrists, I wager."

Zaitzev managed a chuckle. The back-and-forth between the head doctors and the field officers would undoubtedly be entertaining to read—and, like good clerks, they tended to read all of the entertaining dispatches.

"You have to wonder how such men get to rule major countries," Dobrik observed, standing up and lighting a cigarette.

"I think they call it the democratic process," Zaitzev responded.

"Well, in that case, thanks be for the Collective Will of the People as expressed through the beloved Party." Dobrik was a good Party member, despite the planned irony of his remark, as was everyone in this room, of course.

"Indeed, Kolya. In any case"—Zaitzev looked over at the wall clock. He was six minutes early—"I relieve you, Comrade Major."

"And I thank you, Comrade Major." Dobrik headed off to the exit.

Zaitzev took the seat, still warm from Dobrik's backside, and signed in on the time sheet, noting the time. Next he dumped the contents of the desk ashtray into the trash bucket—Dobrik never seemed to do that—and started a new day at the office. Relieving his colleague had been a rote process, if a pleasant one. He hardly knew Dobrik, except

for these moments at the start of his day. Why anyone would volunteer for continuous night duty mystified him. At least Dobrik always left a clean desk behind, not one piled up with unfinished work, which gave Zaitzev a few minutes to get caught up and mentally organized for the day.

In this case, however, those few minutes merely brought back the images that, it seemed, were not about to go away. And so Oleg Ivanovich lit up his first work cigarette of the day and shuffled the papers on the metal desk while his mind was elsewhere, doing things that he himself didn't want to know about just yet. It was ten minutes after the hour when a cipher clerk came to him with a folder.

"From Station Washington, Comrade Major," the clerk announced.

"Thank you, comrade," Zaitzev acknowledged.

Taking the manila folder, he opened it and started leafing through the dispatches.

Ah, he thought, *this CASSIUS fellow has reported in* . . . yes, more political intelligence. He didn't know the name or face that went along with CASSIUS, but he had to be an aide to a senior parliamentarian, possibly even a senator. He delivered high-quality political intelligence that hinted at access to hard intelligence information. So a servant to a very senior American politician worked for the Soviet Union, too. He wasn't paid, which made him an ideologically motivated agent, the very best sort.

He read through the dispatch and then searched his memory for the right recipient upstairs . . . Colonel Anatoliy Gregorovich Fokin, in the political department, whose address was Washington Desk, Line PR, First Department, First Chief Directorate, up on the fourth floor.

OUTSIDE OF TOWN, Colonel Ilya Fedorovich Bubovoy walked off his morning flight from Sofia. To catch it, he'd had to arise at three in the morning, an embassy car taking him to the airport for the flight to Moscow. The summons had come from Aleksey Rozhdestvenskiy, whom he'd known for some years and who had shown him the courtesy to call the day before and assure him that nothing untoward was meant by this summons to The Centre. Bubovoy had a clear conscience, but it was nice to know, even so. You never could be sure with KGB. Like children called to the principal's office, officers were often known to have a few uppergastric butterflies on the way into headquarters. In any case, his tie was properly knotted, and his good shoes shined properly. He did not wear his uniform, as his identity as the Sofia *rezident* was technically secret.

A uniformed sergeant of the Red Army met him at the gate and led him out to a car—in fact, the sergeant was KGB, but that wasn't for

public knowledge: Who knew if CIA or other Western services had eyes at the airport? Bubovoy picked up a copy of *Sovietskiy Sport* at a kiosk on the walk out to the car. It would be thirty-five minutes in. Sofia's soccer team had just beaten Moscow Dynamo, 3–2, a few days before. The colonel wondered if the local sportswriters would be calling for the heads of the Moscow team, couched in appropriate Marxist rhetoric, of course. Good socialists always won, but the sportswriters tended to get confused when one socialist team lost to another.

FOLEY WAS ON the metro as well, running a little late this morning. A power failure had reset his alarm clock without formal notice, so he'd been awakened by sunlight through the windows instead of the usual metallic buzz. As always, he tried not to look around too much, but he couldn't help checking for the owner of the hand that had searched his pocket. But none of the faces looked back at him. He'd try again that afternoon, on the train that left the station at 17:41, just in case. In case of what? Foley didn't know, but that was one of the exciting things about his chosen line of work. If it had been just happenstance, all well and good, but for the next few days he'd be on the same train, in the same coach, standing in much the same place. If he had a shadow, the man wouldn't remark on it. The Russians actually found it comforting to trail someone who followed a routine —the randomness of Americans could drive them to distraction. So, he'd be a "good" American, and show them what they want, and they wouldn't find it strange. The Moscow Chief of Station shook his head in amazement.

Reaching his stop, he took the escalator up to the street level, and from there it was a short walk to the embassy, just across the street from Our Lady of the Microchips, and the world's largest microwave oven. Foley always liked to see the flag on the pole, and the Marines inside, more proof that he was in the right place. They always looked good, in their khaki shirts over dress-blue uniform trousers, holstered pistols, and white caps.

His office was as shabby as usual—it was part of his cover to be a little on the untidy side.

But his cover did not include the communications department. It couldn't. Heading embassy comms was Mike Russell, formerly a lieutenant colonel in the Army Security Agency—ASA was the Army's own communications-security arm—and now a civilian with the National Security Agency, which officially did the same for the entire government. Moscow was a hardship tour for Russell. Black and divorced-single, he didn't get much female action here, since the

Russians were notoriously dubious of people with dark skin. The knock on the door was distinctive.

"Come on in, Mike," Foley said.

"Morning, Ed." Russell was under six feet, and he needed to watch his eating by the look of his waist. But he was a good guy with codes and comms, and that was sufficient for the moment. "Quiet night for you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, just this." He fished an envelope out of his coat pocket and handed it over. "Nothing important, looks like." He had also decrypted the dispatch. Even the ambassador wasn't cleared as high as the head of communications. Foley was suddenly glad for Russian racism. It made Mike that much less likely to get turned. *That* was a scary thought. Of all the people in the embassy, Mike Russell was the one guy who could rat everyone out, which was why intelligence services always tried to corrupt cipher clerks, the underpaid and spat-upon people who had enormous information power in any embassy.

Foley took the envelope and opened it. The dispatch inside was lower than routine, proof positive that CIA was just one more government bureaucracy, however important its work might be. He snorted and entered the paper into his shredder, where rotating steel wheels reduced it to fragments about two centimeters square.

"Must be nice to get your day's work done in ten seconds," Russell observed, with a laugh.

"Wasn't like that in Vietnam, I bet."

"Not hardly. I remember once one of my troops DF'd a VC transmitter at MAC-V headquarters, and that was one busy night."

"Get him?"

"Oh yeah," Russell replied with a nod. "The locals were seriously pissed about that little dink. He came to a bad end, they told me." Russell had been a first lieutenant then. A Detroit native, his father had built B-24 bombers during World War II, and had never stopped telling his son how much more satisfying that had been than making Fords. Russell detested everything about this country (they didn't even appreciate good soul music!), but the extra pay that came with duty here—Moscow was officially a hardship posting—would buy him a nice place on the Upper Peninsula someday, where he'd be able to hunt birds and deer to his heart's content. "Anything to go out, Ed?"

"Nope, not today—not yet, anyway."

"Roger that. Have a good one." And Russell disappeared out the door.

It wasn't like the spy novels—the job of a CIA officer was composed of a good deal more boredom than excitement. At least two-thirds of Foley's time as a field officer was taken up with writing reports that

somebody at Langley might or might not read, and/or waiting for meets that might or might not come off. He had case officers to do most of the street work, because his identity was too sensitive to risk exposure—something about which he had to lecture his wife on occasion. Mary Pat just liked the action a little too much. It was somewhat worrying, though neither of them faced much real physical danger. They both had diplomatic immunity, and the Russians were assiduous about respecting that, for the most part. Even if things should get a little rough, it would never be really rough. Or so he told himself.

"GOOD MORNING, Colonel Bubovoy," Andropov said pleasantly, without rising.

"Good day to you, Comrade Chairman," the Sofia *rezident* replied, swallowing his relief that Rozhdestvenskiy hadn't lied to him. You could never be too careful, after all, or too paranoid.

"How go things in Sofia?" Andropov waved him to the leather seat opposite the big oak desk.

"Well, Comrade Chairman, our fraternal socialist colleagues remain cooperative, especially with Turkish matters."

"Good. We have a proposed mission to undertake and I require your opinion of its feasibility." The voice stayed entirely pleasant.

"And what might that be?" Bubovoy asked.

Andropov outlined the plans, watching his visitor's face closely for his reaction. There was none. The colonel was too experienced for that, and besides, he knew the look he was getting.

"How soon?" he asked.

"How quickly could you set things up?"

"I will need to get cooperation from our Bulgarian friends. I know who to go to—Colonel Boris Strokov, a very skillful player in the DS. He runs their operations in Turkey—smuggling and such—which gives him entrée into Turkish gangster organizations. The contacts are very useful, especially when a killing is necessary."

"Go on," the Chairman urged quietly.

"Comrade Chairman, such an operation will not be simple. Without a means of getting a gunman into the private residence of the target, it will mean making the attempt at a public appearance, at which there will necessarily be many people. We can tell our gunman that we have the means of getting him away, but that will be a lie, of course. From a tactical point of view, it would be better to have a second man present, to kill him immediately after he takes his shot—with a suppressed weapon. For the second killer, escape is far easier, since the attention of the crowd will be on the first gunman. It also

alleviates the possible problem of our gunman talking to the police. The Italian police do not have a good public reputation, but this is not, strictly speaking, true. As our *rezident* in Rome can tell you, their investigative arms are quite well organized and highly professional. Thus, it is in our interest to have our gunman eliminated at once."

"But won't that suggest the involvement of an intelligence service?" Andropov asked. "Is it too elegant?"

Bubovoy leaned back and spoke judiciously. This was what Andropov wanted to hear, and he was ready to deliver it. "Comrade Chairman, one must weigh one hazard against another. The greatest danger is if our assassin talked about how he came to be in Rome. A dead man tells no tales, as they say. And a silenced voice cannot give out information. The other side can speculate, but it is merely speculation. For our part, we can easily release information through the press sources we control about Muslim animosity toward the head of the Roman church. The Western news services will pick it up and, with proper guidance, we can help shape the public understanding of what has taken place. The United States and Canada Institute has some excellent academicians for this purpose, as you know. We can use them to formulate the black propaganda, and then use people from the First Chief Directorate to propagate it. This proposed operation is not without risk, of course, but, though complex, it is not all that difficult from a conceptual point of view. The real problems will be in its execution and in operational security. That's why it's critical to eliminate the assassin immediately. The most important thing is the denial of information to the other side. Let them speculate all they wish, but without hard information, they will *know* nothing. This operation will be very closely held, I presume."

"Less than five people at present. How many more?" Andropov asked, impressed at Bubovoy's expertise and sangfroid.

"At least three Bulgarians. Then they will select the Turk—it must be a Turk, you see."

"Why?" Though Andropov figured he knew the answer.

"Turkey is a Muslim country, and there is a long-standing antipathy between the Christian churches and Islam. This way, the operation will generate additional discord between the two religious groups—consider that a bonus," the Sofia *rezident* suggested.

"And how will you select the assassin?"

"I will leave that to Colonel Strokov—his ancestry is Russian, by the way. His family settled in Sofia at the turn of the century, but he thinks like one of us. He is *nashi,*" Bubovoy assured his boss, "a graduate of our own academy, and an experienced field operator."

"How long to set this up?"

"That depends more on Moscow than Sofia. Strokov will need

approval from his own command, but that is a political question, not an operational one. After he gets his orders . . . two weeks, perhaps as many as four."

"And the chances of success?" the Chairman asked.

"Medium to high, I should think. The DS field officer will drive the killer to the proper place, and then kill him a moment after the mission is accomplished, before making his escape. That is more dangerous than it sounds. The assassin will probably have a pistol, and it will not be a suppressed weapon. So the crowd will be drawn to the sound. Most people will draw back, but some will leap forward into danger, hoping to detain the gunman. If he falls from a silent bullet in the back, they will still rush in, while our man, like others in the crowd, draws back. Like waves on the beach," Bubovoy explained. He could see it all happening in his mind. "Shooting a pistol is not as easy as the cinema would have us believe, though. Remember, on a battlefield, for every man killed, two or three are wounded and survive. Our gunman will get no closer than four or five meters. That's close enough for an expert, but our man will not be an expert. And then there's the complicating factor of medical care. Unless you're shot through the heart or brain, skilled surgeons can often reach into the grave and pull a wounded man back out. So, realistically, it is a fifty-percent operation. The consequences of failure, therefore, must be taken into account. That is a political question, Comrade Chairman," Bubovoy concluded, meaning that it wasn't his ass on the line, exactly. At the same time, he knew that mission success meant general's stars, which, for the colonel, was an acceptable gamble with a huge upside and little in the way of a downside. It appealed to his careerism as well as his patriotism.

"Very well. What needs to be done?"

"First of all, the DS operates under political guidance. The section that Colonel Strokov commands operates with few written records, but it is directly controlled by the Bulgarian Politburo. So we would have to get political authorization, which necessarily means approval from our own political leadership. The Bulgarians will not authorize their cooperation without an official request from our government. After that, it's actually a straightforward operation."

"I see." Andropov went silent for half a minute or so. There was a Politburo meeting the day after tomorrow. *Was it too soon to float this mission?* he wondered. How difficult might it be to make his case? He'd have to show them the Warsaw Letter, and they would not be the least bit pleased by it. He'd have to present it in such a way as to make the urgency of the matter plain and . . . frightening to them.

Would they be frightened? Well, he could help them along that path, couldn't he? Andropov pondered the question for a few more

seconds and came to a favorable conclusion.

"Anything else, Colonel?"

"It hardly needs saying that operational security must be airtight. The Vatican has its own highly effective intelligence service. It would be a mistake to underestimate their capabilities," Bubovoy warned. "Therefore, our Politburo and the Bulgarians must know that this matter cannot be discussed outside of their own number. And for our side, that means no one, even in the Central Committee or the Party Secretariat. The smallest leak would be ruinous to the mission. But, at the same time," he went on, "we have much working for us. The Pope necessarily cannot isolate himself, nor can he be protected as we or any other nation-state would do with such a threat to its chief of state. In an operational sense, he is, actually, rather a 'soft' target—*if,* that is, we can find an assassin willing to risk his life to get sufficiently close to take his shot."

"So, if I can get authorization from the Politburo, and then we make the request for assistance from our Bulgarian brothers, and then you can get this Colonel Strokov moving, how long before it actually happens?"

"A month, I should think, perhaps two months, but not more than that. We would need some support from Station Rome, for issues of timing and such, but that's all. Our own hands would be entirely clean —especially if Strokov assists in eliminating the assassin immediately upon completion of his mission."

"You'd want this Strokov fellow to act personally?"

"Da." Bubovoy nodded. "Boris Andreyevich is not averse to getting his hands wet. He's done this sort of thing before."

"Very well." Andropov looked down at his desk. "There will be no written records of this operation. Once I have proper authorization, you will receive notice to proceed from my office, but only by operational code, and that is 15-8-82-666. Any complex information will be relayed by messenger or by face-to-face contact only. Is that clear?"

"It is clear, Comrade Chairman. Nothing gets written down except the operation number. I expect I will be flying a good deal between Sofia and Moscow, but that is not a problem."

"The Bulgarians are trustworthy?" Andropov asked, suddenly worried.

"Yes, they are, Comrade Chairman. We have a long-standing operational relationship with them, and they are expert at this sort of thing—more than we are, in fact. They have had more practice. When someone must die, it's often the Bulgars who take care of matters for us."

"Yes, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy has told me that. I just have no

direct knowledge of it."

"You could, of course, meet with Colonel Strokov any time you wish," Bubovoy suggested.

Andropov shook his head. "Better that I should not, I think."

"As you wish, Comrade Chairman." *That figures,* Bubovoy thought. Andropov was a party man, not used to getting his hands dirty. Politicians were all the same—bloodthirsty, but personally tidy, depending on others to carry out their nasty wishes. Well, that was his job, the colonel decided, and since politicians controlled the good things in his society, he needed to please them to get the honey from the hive. And he had as big a sweet tooth as anyone else in the Soviet Union. At the end of this mission might be general's stars, a nice flat in Moscow—even a modest dacha in the Lenin Hills. He'd be glad to return to Moscow, and so would his wife. If the price of it was the death of some foreigner who was a political inconvenience to his country, well, that was just too bad. He should have been more careful about who he was offending.

"Thank you for coming and for giving me your expertise, Comrade Colonel. You will be hearing from me."

Bubovoy stood. "I serve the Soviet Union," he said, and made his way through the hidden door.

Rozhdestvenskiy was in the secretaries' room, waiting for him.

"How did it go, Ilya?"

"I am not sure I am allowed to say" was the guarded reply.

"If this is about Operation -666, then you are allowed, Ilya Fedorovich," Rozhdestvenskiy assured him, leading him out the door into the corridor.

"Then the meeting went well, Aleksey Nikolay'ch. More than that, I can only say with the Chairman's approval." This might be a security test, after all, however much a friend Rozhdestvenskiy might be.

"I told him you could be relied upon, Ilya. This could be good for both of us."

"We serve, Aleksey, just like everybody else in this building."

"Let me get you to your car. You can make the noon flight easily." A few minutes later, he was back in Andropov's office.

"Well?" the Chairman asked.

"He says the meeting went well, but he will not say another word without your permission. Ilya Fedorovich is a serious professional, Comrade Chairman. Am I to be your contact for the mission?"

"Yes, you are, Aleksey," Andropov confirmed. "I will send a signal to that effect." Andropov didn't feel the need to run the operation himself. His was a big-picture mind, not an operational one. "What do you know of this Colonel Boris Strokov?"

"Bulgarian? The name is familiar. He's a senior intelligence officer

who has in the past specialized in assassination operations. He has ample experience—and obviously Ilya knows him well."

"How does one specialize in assassinations?" the Chairman asked. It was an aspect of the KGB he hadn't been briefed in on.

"His real work is something else, obviously, but the DS has a small group of officers with experience in this sort of thing. He is the most experienced. His operational record is flawless. If memory serves, he's personally eliminated seven or eight people whose deaths were necessary—mostly Bulgarians, I think. Probably a Turk or two as well, but no Westerners that I know of."

"Is it difficult to do?" Yuriy Vladimirovich asked.

"I have no such experience myself," Rozhdestvenskiy admitted. He didn't add that he didn't especially want any. "Those who do say that their concern is not so much in accomplishing the mission as in completing it—that is, avoiding police investigation afterwards. Modern police agencies are fairly effective at investigating murders, you see. In this case, you can expect a most vigorous investigation."

"Bubovoy wants this Strokov fellow to go on the mission and then eliminate the assassin immediately afterward."

Rozhdestvenskiy nodded thoughtfully. "That makes good sense. We have discussed that option ourselves, as I recall."

"Yes." Andropov closed his eyes for a moment. Again, the image paraded itself before his mind. Certainly it would solve a lot of political problems. "Yes, my next job will be to get the Politburo's approval for the mission."

"Quickly, Comrade Chairman?" Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I think."

DOWN IN COMMUNICATIONS, Zaitzev had allowed his daily routine to absorb his consciousness. It suddenly struck him how mindless his job was. They wanted this job to be done by machines, and he'd become that machine. He had it all committed to memory, which operational designator went to which case officer upstairs and what the operations were all about. So much information slid into his mind along the way that it rather amazed him. It had happened so gradually that he'd never really noticed. He noticed now.

But it was 15-8-82-666 that kept swimming around his mind....

"Zaitzev?" a voice asked. The communicator turned to see Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel?"

"A dispatch for *rezident* Sofia." He handed across the message form, properly made out.

"On the machine or the pad, comrade?"

The colonel paused for a moment, weighing the two options. He came down on the side of consistency: "The pad, I think."

"As you wish, Comrade Colonel. I will have it out in a few minutes."

"Good. It will be waiting for Bubovoy when he gets back to his desk." He made the comment without thinking about it. People all over the world talk too much, and no amount of training can entirely stop them from doing so.

So, the Sofia rezident *was just here?* Zaitzev didn't have to ask. "Yes, Comrade Colonel. Shall I call you to confirm the dispatch?"

"Yes, thank you, Comrade Major."

"I serve the Soviet Union," Zaitzev assured him.

Rozhdestvenskiy made his way back upstairs, while Zaitzev went through the normal, mind-numbing routine of encryption.

MOST SECRET
IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
FOR ALL FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS YOUR OPERATIONAL CONTACT
WILL BE COLONEL ROZHDESTVENSKIY. BY ORDER OF THE CHAIRMAN.

It was just a housekeeping message, but coded "Immediate and Urgent." That meant it was important to Chairman Andropov, and the reference made it an operation, not just a query to some *rezident.*

They really want to do it, Zaitzev realized.

What the hell could he do about it? No one in this room—no one in the entire building—could forestall this operation. But outside the building . . . ?

Zaitzev lit a cigarette. He'd be taking the metro home as usual. Would that American be there as well?

He was contemplating treason, he thought chillingly. The crime had a fearsome sound to it, with an even more fearsome reality. But the other side of that coin was to sit here and read over the dispatches while an innocent man was killed . . . and, no, he could not do that.

Zaitzev took a message blank off a centimeter-thick pad of them on his desk. He set the single sheet of paper on the desk surface and wrote in English, using a #1 soft pencil: IF YOU FIND THIS INTERESTING, WEAR A GREEN TIE TOMORROW. That was as far as his courage stretched this afternoon. He folded the form and tucked it inside his cigarette pack, careful to do everything with normal

motions, because anything the least bit unusual in this room was noticed. Next, he scribbled something on another blank form, then crumpled and tossed it into the waste can, and went back to his usual work. For the next three hours, Oleg Ivan'ch would rethink his action every time he reached in his pocket for a smoke. Every time, he'd consider taking out the folded sheet of paper and ripping it to small bits before relegating it to the waste can and then the burn bag. But every time, he'd leave it there, telling himself that he'd done nothing yet. Above all, he tried to set his mind free, to do his regular work and deliberately put himself on auto-pilot, trying to let the day go by. Finally, he told himself that his fate was in hands other than his own. If he got home without anything unusual happening, he'd take the folded form out of his cigarette pack and burn it in his kitchen, and that would be the end of it. About four in the afternoon, Zaitzev looked up at the water-stained ceiling of Communications and whispered something akin to a prayer.

Finally, the workday ended. He took the usual route at the usual pace to the usual metro stop, down the escalator, onto the platform. The metro schedule was as predictable as the coming and going of the tides, and he boarded the carriage along with a hundred others.

Then his heart almost stopped cold in his chest: There was the American, standing in exactly the same place, reading a newspaper in his right hand, with his left holding on to the overhead rail, his raincoat unbuttoned and loose around his slender frame. The open pocket beckoned to him as the Sirens had to Odysseus. Zaitzev made his way to the center of the railcar, shuffling between other riders. His right hand fished in his shirt pocket for the cigarette pack. He deftly removed the message blank from the pack and palmed it, shuffling about the car as it slowed for a station, making room for another passenger. It worked perfectly. He jostled into the American and made the transfer, then drew back.

Zaitzev took a deep breath. The deed was done. What happened now was indeed in other hands.

Was the man really an American—or some false-flag from the Second Chief Directorate?

Had the "American" seen his face?

Did that matter? Weren't his fingerprints on the message form? Zaitzev didn't have a clue. He'd been careful when tearing off the form—and, if questioned, he could always say that the pad just lay on his desk, and anyone could have taken a form—even asked him for it! It might be enough even to foil a KGB investigation if he stuck to his story. Soon enough, he was off the subway car and walking into the open air. He hoped nobody saw his hands shake as he lit up a smoke.

FOLEY'S HIGHLY TRAINED senses had failed him. With his coat loose about him, he hadn't noticed any touch, except for the usual bumps associated with the subway, whether in Moscow or New York. But as he made his way off the train, he stuck his left hand into the left-side pocket, and there was something there, and he knew that it wasn't something he'd placed there himself. A quizzical look crossed his face, which his training quickly erased. He succumbed to the temptation to look around for a tail, but instantly realized that, given his regular schedule, there'd be a fresh face here on the surface to track him, or most likely a series of cameras atop the surrounding buildings. Movie film was as cheap here as everywhere else in the world. And so he walked home, just as on any other day, nodded at the guard at the gate, and then made his way into the elevator, then through the door.

"I'm home, honey," Ed Foley announced, taking out the paper only after the door was closed. He was reasonably certain that there were no cameras in the apartment—even American technology wasn't that far along yet, and he'd seen enough of Moscow to be unimpressed with their technical capabilities. His fingers unfolded the paper, and then he stopped cold in his tracks.

"What's for dinner?" he called out.

"Come and see, Ed." Mary Pat's voice came from the kitchen. Hamburgers were sizzling on the stove. Mashed potatoes and gravy, plus baked beans, your basic American working-class dinner. But the bread was Russian, and that wasn't bad. Little Eddie was in front of the TV, watching a *Transformers* tape, which would keep him occupied for the next twenty minutes.

"Anything interesting happen today?" Mary Pat asked from the stove. She turned for her kiss, and her husband replied with their personal code phrase for the unusual.

"Not a thing, baby." That piqued her interest enough that when he held up the sheet of paper, she took it, and her eyes went wide.

It wasn't so much the handwritten message as the printed header: STATE SECURITY OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION.

Damn. His wife's lips mouthed the word.

The Moscow COS nodded thoughtfully.

"Can you watch the burgers, honey? I have to get something."

Ed took the spatula and flipped one over. His wife was back quickly, holding a kelly green tie.

CHAPTER 11

HAND JIVE

OF COURSE, there was little to be done at the moment. Dinner was served and eaten, and Eddie went back to his VCR and cartoon tapes. Four-year-olds were easy to please, even in Moscow. His parents got down to business. Years ago, they'd seen *The Miracle Worker* on TV, in which Annie Sullivan (Anne Bancroft) taught Helen Keller (Patty Duke) the use of the manual alphabet, and they'd decided it was a useful skill to learn as a means of communicating not quickly but quietly and with their own shorthand.

W[ell], what do [yo]u think? Ed asked Mary.

This could b[e] pretty h[ot], his wife replied.

Y [ep].

Ed, this guy works in MERCURY, th[eir] version anyway! Wow!

More likely he just has access to their mess [age] forms, the Chief of Station cautioned slowly. *But I'll wear the green tie and take the same subway train for the next w[eek] or so.*

FAB, his wife agreed, which was shorthand for Fuckin' A, Bubba!

Hope it isn't a trap or a false-flag, Ed observed.

Part of the terr[itory], h[oney], MP responded. The thought of being burned didn't frighten her, though she didn't want to suffer the embarrassment. She looked for opportunities more than her husband did—he worried more. But, strangely, not this time. If the Russians had "made" him as the Chief of Station or even just as a field spook—*not likely,* Ed thought—they'd be total idiots to burn him like this, not this fast and not this amateurishly. Unless they were trying to make some sort of political point, and he couldn't see the logic of that—and the KBG was as coldly logical as Mr. Spock ever was on planet Vulcan. Even the FBI wouldn't play this loose a game. So this opportunity had to be real, unless KGB was shaking down every embassy employee it could, just to see what might fall off the tree. Possible, but damned unlikely, and therefore worth the gamble, Foley judged. He'd wear the green tie and see what happened, and be damned careful to check all the faces on the subway car.

Tell L[angley]? Mary asked next.

He just shook his head. *2 early 4 that.*

She nodded agreement. Next, Mary Pat mimed riding a horse. That meant that there was a chase and they were really in the game, finally. It was as though she were afraid that her skills were going stale. *Damned little chance of that,* her husband thought. He was willing to bet that his wife had gone all the way through parochial school without a single rap on the knuckles, because the sisters had never once caught her misbehaving....

And, for that matter, Ed reflected, neither had he.

W[ell], tomor[row] will be inter[esting], he told her, getting a sexy nod as a reply.

The hard part for the rest of the evening was not dwelling on the opportunity. Even with their training, their thoughts kept coming back to the idea of working an agent in the Russian MERCURY. It was a conceptual homer in the bottom of the ninth in the seventh game of the World Series—Reggie Jackson Foley as Mister October.

Damn.

"SO, SIMON, what do we really know about the guy?"

"Not all that much on the personal level," Harding admitted. "He's a Party man first, last, and always. His horizons have been broadened, I suppose, from his chairmanship of KGB. There's talk that he prefers Western liquor to his own vodka, and stories that he enjoys American jazz, but those could be stories floated in-house by The Centre to help him appear amenable to the West—not bloody likely, in my humble opinion. The man is a thug. His Party record is not one of gentleness. One doesn't advance in that organization except by toughness—and remarkably often the highflyers are men who have crushed their own mentors along the way. It's a Darwinian organization gone mad, Jack. The fittest survive, but they prove themselves to be the fittest by smashing those who are a threat to them, or merely smashing people to prove their own ruthlessness in the arena they've chosen."

"How smart is he?" Ryan asked next.

Another draw on the briar pipe. "He's no fool. Highly developed sense of human nature, probably a good—even a brilliant—amateur psychologist."

"You haven't compared him to someone from Tolstoy or Chekhov," Jack noted. Simon was a lit major, after all.

Harding dismissed the thought. "Too easy to do so. No, people like him most often do not appear in literature, because novelists lack the requisite imagination. There was no warning of a Hitler in German literature, Jack. Stalin evidently thought himself another Ivan the Terrible, and Sergei Eisenstein played along with his epic movie about the chap, but that sort of thing is only for those without the

imagination to see people as they are instead of being like someone else they understand. No, Stalin was a complex and fundamentally incomprehensible monster, unless you have psychiatric credentials. I do not," Harding reminded him. "One need not understand them fully to predict their actions, because such people are rational within their own context. One need only understand that, or so I have always believed."

"Sometimes I think I ought to get Cathy involved in this work."

"Because she's a physician?" Harding asked.

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, she's pretty good reading people. That's why we had the docs report in on Mikhail Suslov. None of them were pshrinks," Jack reminded his workmate.

"So, no, we know remarkably little on Andropov's personal life," Harding admitted. "No one's ever been tasked to delve too deeply into it. If he gets elevated to the General-Secretaryship, I imagine his wife will become a semipublic figure. In any case, there's no reason to think him a homosexual or anything like that. They are quite intolerant of that aberration over there, you know. Some colleague would have used it against him along the way and wrecked his career for fair. No, the closet they live in within the Soviet Union is a very deep one. Better to be celibate," the analyst concluded.

Okay, Ryan thought, *I'll call the Admiral tonight and tell him that the Brits don't know, either.* It was strangely disappointing, but somehow predictable. For all that the intelligence services knew, the frequency of holes in their knowledge was often surprising to the outsiders, but not so to those on the inside. Ryan was still new enough at the game to be surprised and disappointed. A married man would be used to compromise, to letting his wife have her way on all manner of things, because every married man is pussy-whipped to one extent or another —unless he is a total thug, and few people fit into that category. Fewer still could rise up any hierarchy that way, because in any organization you had to go along in order to get along. That was human nature, and even the Communist Party of the Soviet Union couldn't repeal that, for all their talk about the New Soviet Man that they kept trying to build over there. *Yeah,* Ryan thought, *sure.*

"Well," Harding said, checking his watch, "I think we've served Her Majesty enough for one day."

"Agreed." Ryan stood up and collected his jacket off the clothes tree. Take the tube this time to Victoria Station, and catch the Lionel home. The routine was getting to him. It would have been better to get a place in town and cut down the commute, but that way Sally wouldn't have much in the way of green grass to play on, and Cathy had been adamant about that. Renewed proof that he was indeed pussy-whipped, Jack thought on the way to the elevator. Well, it could

have been worse. He did have a good wife to do the whipping, after all.

COLONEL BUBOVOY came back to the embassy on his way home from the airport. A short dispatch was waiting, which he quickly decrypted: He'd be working through Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy. No particular surprise there. Aleksey Nikolay'ch was Andropov's lapdog. And that was probably a good job, the *rezident* thought. You just had to keep the boss happy, and Yuriy Vladimirovich was probably not the demanding bastard that Beria had been. Party people might be overly precise in their demands, but anyone who'd worked in the Party Secretariat doubtless knew how to work with people. The age of Stalin had indeed passed.

So, it looked as though he had an assassination to arrange, Bubovoy thought. He wondered how Boris Strokov would react to it. Strokov was a professional, with little in the way of excess emotion, and less in the way of a professional conscience. To him, work was work. But the magnitude of this was higher than anything he would have encountered working for the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost.* Would that frighten him or excite him? It would be interesting to see. There was a coldness to his Bulgarian colleague that both alarmed and impressed the KGB officer. His particular skills could be useful things to have in one's pocket. And if the Politburo needed this annoying Pole killed, then he would just have to die. Too bad, but if what he believed was true, then they were just sending him off to heaven as a holy martyr, weren't they? Surely that was the secret ambition of every priest.

Bubovoy's only concern was the political repercussions. Those would be epic, and so it was good that he was just a cutout in the operation. If it went bad, well, it wouldn't be his fault. That Strokov was the best man for the job, based on his curriculum vitae, was something no man could deny, something a board of inquiry, if any, could confirm. He'd warned the Chairman that a shot, however closely taken, would not necessarily be fatal. He'd have to put that in a memo to make sure the thin paper trail on operation 15-8-82-666 would have his formal evaluation in it. He'd draft it himself and send it by diplomatic bag to The Centre—and keep his own copy in his office safe, just to make sure his own backside was properly covered.

But for now he would have to wait for the authorization to come from the Politburo. Would those old women elect to go forward with this? That was the question, and one on which he would not make a wager. Brezhnev was in his dotage. Would that make him bloodthirsty or cautious? It was too hard a question for the colonel to puzzle out. They were saying that Yuriy Vladimirovich was the heir apparent. If

so, here was his chance to win his spurs.

"SO, MIKHAIL YEVGENIYEVICH, will you support me tomorrow?" Andropov asked over drinks in his flat.

Alexandrov swirled the expensive brown vodka in his glass. "Suslov will not attend tomorrow. They say his kidneys have failed, and he has no more than two weeks," the ideologue-in-waiting said, briefly dodging the issue. "Will you support me for his chair?"

"Need you ask, Misha?" the Chairman of the Committee for State Security responded. "Of course I will support you."

"Very well. So, what are the chances for success in this operation you propose?"

"About fifty-fifty, my people tell me. We will use a Bulgarian officer to set it up, but for security reasons the assassin will have to be a Turk. . . ."

"A black-ass Muslim?" Alexandrov asked sharply.

"Misha, whoever it is will almost certainly be apprehended—dead, according to our plan. It is impossible to expect a clean getaway in such a mission. Thus, we cannot use one of our own. The nature of the mission places constraints upon us. Ideally, we would use a trained sniper—from Spetsnaz, for example—from three hundred meters, but that would mark the assassination as a killing done by a nation-state. No, this must appear to be the act of a single madman, as the Americans have them. You know, even with all the evidence the Americans had, some fools over there still blamed Kennedy on us or Castro. No, the evidence we leave must be a clear sign that we were *not* involved. That limits our operational methods. I think this is the best plan we can come up with."

"How closely have you studied it?" Alexandrov asked, taking a swallow.

"It has been closely held. Operations like this must be. Security must be airtight, Mikhail Yevgeniyevich."

The Party man conceded the point: "I suppose that is so, Yuriy—but the risk of failure . . ."

"Misha, in every aspect of life, there is risk. The important thing is that the operation not be tied to us. That we can assure with certainty. If nothing else, a serious wound will at least lessen Karol's ardor for making trouble for us, will it not?"

"It should—"

"And half a chance of failure means half a chance of total success," Andropov reminded his guest.

"Then I will support you. Leonid Ilyich will go along as well. That will carry the day. How long after that to get things moving?"

"A month or so, perhaps six weeks."

"That quickly?" Party matters rarely sped along that well.

"What is the point of taking such, such—'executive action,' isn't that what the Americans call it?—if it is to take so long? If it is to be done, better that it should be done quickly, so as to forestall further political intrigue by this man."

"Who will replace him?"

"Some Italian, I suppose. His selection was a major aberration. Perhaps his death will encourage the Romans to go back to their old habits," Andropov suggested. It generated a laugh from his guest.

"Yes, they are so predictable, these religious fanatics."

"So tomorrow I will float the mission, and you will support me?" Andropov wanted that one very clear.

"Yes, Yuriy Vladimirovich. You will have my support. And you will support me for Suslov's full voting seat at the table."

"Tomorrow, comrade," Andropov promised.

CHAPTER 12

HANDOFF

THIS TIME, the alarm clock worked, and woke them both. Ed Foley rose and headed for the bathroom, quickly made way for his wife, then headed to Eddie's room to shake him loose while Mary Pat started breakfast. Their son immediately switched on the TV and got the morning exercise show that every city in the world seemed to have, starring, as everywhere in the world, a woman of impressive physique—she looked capable of waltzing through the Army's Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Because he had seen the Lynda Carter series at home on cable, Eddie called her Worker-*Womannnnnn!* Mary Pat was of the opinion that the Russian's blond hair came out of a bottle, while Ed thought it hurt just to watch the things she did. With no decent paper or sports page to read, however, he had little choice in the matter, and semi-vegetated in front of the TV while his son giggled through the end of the wake-up-and-sweat program. It was done live, the Chief of Station saw. So, whoever this broad was, she had to wake up at four in the morning, and so this was probably her morning workout as well. Well, then, at least it was honest. Her husband must have been a Red Army paratrooper, and she could probably beat the shit out of him, Ed Foley thought, waiting for the morning news.

That started at 6:30. The trick was to watch it and then try to figure out what was really happening in the world—*just like at home,* the CIA officer thought, with an early-morning grumble. Well, he'd have the *Early Bird* at the embassy for that, sent by secure fax from Washington for the senior embassy staffers. For an American citizen, living in Moscow was like being on a desert island. At least they had a satellite dish at the embassy so they could download CNN and other programming. It made them feel like real people—almost.

Breakfast was breakfast. Little Eddie liked Frosted Flakes—the milk was from Finland, because his mother didn't trust the local grocery store, and the foreigners-only store was convenient to the compound. Ed and Mary Pat didn't talk much over breakfast, in deference to the bugs that littered their walls. They never talked at home about important matters, except via hand code—and *never* in front of their

son, because little kids were incapable of keeping secrets of any kind. In any case, their KGB surveillance people were probably bored with the Foleys by now, which they'd both worked hard at, inserting just enough randomness in their behavior to make them look like Americans. But a considered amount. Not too much. They'd planned it out carefully and thoroughly at Langley, with the help of a tame KGB Second Chief Directorate defector.

Mary Pat had her husband's clothes all laid out on the bed, including the green tie to go with his brown suit. Like the President, Ed looked good in brown, his wife thought. Ed would wear a raincoat again, and he would keep it unbuttoned and loose around his body should another message be passed, and his senses would be thoroughly sandpapered all day.

"What are your plans for the day?" he asked Mary Pat in the living room.

"The usual. I might get together with Penny after lunch."

"Oh? Well, say hello for me. Maybe we can get together for dinner later this week."

"Good idea," his wife said. "Maybe they can explain rugby to me."

"It's like football, honey, just the rules are a little goofy," the Station Chief explained. "Well, off to keep the reporters happy."

"Right!" Mary Pat laughed, working her eyes at the walls. "That guy from the *Boston Globe* is such an ass."

Outside, the morning was pleasant enough—just a hint of cool air to suggest the approach of autumn. Foley walked off toward the station, waving at the gate guard. The guy on morning duty actually smiled once in a while. He'd clearly been around foreigners too much, or had been trained to do so by KGB. His uniform was that of the Moscow Militia—the city police—but Foley thought he looked a little too intelligent for that. Muscovites thought of their police as a rather low form of life, and such an agency would not attract the brightest of people.

The couple blocks to the metro station passed quickly. Crossing the streets was reasonably safe here—far more so than in New York—because private cars were pretty rare. And it was a good thing. Russian drivers made the Italians look prudent and orderly. The guys driving the ubiquitous dump trucks must all have been former tank crewmen, judging by their road manners. He picked up his copy of *Pravda* at the kiosk and took the escalator down to the platform. A man of the strictest habits, he arrived at the station at exactly the same time every morning, then checked the clock hanging from the ceiling to make sure. The subway trains ran on an inhumanly precise schedule, and he walked aboard at exactly 7:43 A.M. He hadn't looked over his shoulder. It was too far into his residency in Moscow to

rubberneck like a new tourist, and that, he figured, would make his KGB shadow think that his American subject was about as interesting as the kasha that Russians liked for breakfast along with the dreadful local coffee. Quality control was something the Soviets reserved for their nuclear weapons and space program, though Foley had doubts about those, based on what he'd seen in this city, where only the metro seemed to work properly. Such a strange combination of casual-klutz and Germanlike precision they were. You could tell how well things worked over here by what they were used for, and intelligence operations had the highest priority of all, lest the Soviets' enemies find out not what they had, but what they didn't have. Foley had agent CARDINAL to tell him and America what the Soviet Union had in the military realm. Generally, it was good stuff to learn, but that was mainly because the more you learned, the less you had to worry. No, it was political intelligence that counted most here because, as backward as they were, they were still big enough to cause trouble if you couldn't counter them early on. Langley was very worried about the Pope at the moment. He'd evidently done something that might be embarrassing to the Russians. And Ivan didn't like being embarrassed in the political field any more than American politicians—just that Ivan didn't go running off to *The Washington Post* to get even. Ritter and Moore were very concerned about what Ivan might do—and even more worried about what Yuriy Andropov might do. Ed Foley didn't have a feel for that particular Russian. Like most in CIA, he knew the guy only by his face, name, and his evident liver problems—that information had leaked out through a means the Station Chief didn't know. Maybe the Brits . . . *if you could trust the Brits,* Ed cautioned himself. He had to trust them, but something kept making the hackles on his neck get nervous about them. Well, they probably had doubts about CIA. Such a crazy game this was. He scanned the front page. Nothing surprising, though the piece on the Warsaw Pact was a little interesting. They still worried about NATO. Maybe they really did worry about having the German army come east again. They were certainly paranoid enough.... Paranoia had probably been invented in Russia. *Maybe Freud discovered it on a trip here,* he mused, lifting his eyes for a pair tracking him . . . no, none, he decided. Was it possible that the KGB *wasn't* tracking him? Well, possible, yes, but likely, no. If they had a guy—more likely a team—shadowing him, the coverage would be expert—but why put expert—but why put expert coverage on the Press Attaché? Foley sighed to himself. Was he too much of a worrier, or not paranoid enough? And how did you tell the difference? Or might he have exposed himself to a false-flag operation by wearing a green tie? *How the hell do you tell?*

If he *was* burned, then so was his wife, and that would put the

brakes on two very promising CIA careers. He and Mary Pat were Bob Ritter's fair-haired pair, the varsity, the young all-pro team at Langley, and it was a reputation that had to be both protected carefully and also built upon. The President of the United States himself would read their "take" and maybe make decisions based on the information they brought in. Important decisions that could affect the policy of their country. The responsibility was not something to dwell on. It could drive you nuts, make you too cautious—so cautious that you never accomplished anything. No, the biggest problem in the intelligence business was in drawing the line between circumspection and effectiveness. If you leaned too far the one way, you never got anything useful done. If you went too far the other way, then you got yourself burned, and your agents, and over here that meant virtual certain death for people for whose lives *you* were responsible. It was a dilemma fit to drive a man to drink.

The metro stopped at his station and he went out the door, then up the escalator. He was pretty sure that nobody had fished in his pocket. On the street level, he checked. Nothing. So whomever it was, either he only rode the afternoon train or the Chief of Station had been "made" by the opposition. It would give him something to worry about all day.

"THIS ONE'S FOR YOU," Dobrik said, handing it over. "From Sofia."

"Oh?" Zaitzev responded.

"It's in the book, your-eyes-only, Oleg Ivan'ch," the night-duty officer said. "At least it's short."

"Ah," Zaitzev said, taking the message and seeing the header: 15-8-82-666. So they figured that with a number instead of a name, the header didn't need to be encrypted. He didn't react or say anything further. It just wasn't done. Surely, Kolya wondered about it—it was the office sport in Communications, wondering about the things one couldn't read. This message had come in just forty minutes after his departure. "Well, something to start my watch with. Anything else, Nikolay Konstantinovich?"

"No, aside from that, you have a clean desk." Dobrik was an efficient worker, whatever faults he might have had. "And now I am properly relieved of duty. At home I have a fresh bottle of vodka."

"You should eat first, Kolya," Zaitzev warned.

"That's what my mother says, Oleg. Perhaps I'll have a sandwich with my breakfast," he joked.

"Sleep well, Comrade Major, I relieve you," Zaitzev said, as he took his seat. Ten minutes later, he had the brief dispatch decrypted. The Sofia *rezident* acknowledged that Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was his

point of contact for Operation 15-8-82-666. So that *t* was properly crossed. And 15-8-82-666 was a full-fledged operation now. He tucked the decrypted message into a manila envelope, sealed it, and then dripped hot wax on the seal.

They're really going to do it, Oleg Ivanovich told himself with a frown. *What do I do now?*

Work his usual day, and then look for a green tie on the metro home. And pray he saw it? Or pray he didn't?

Zaitzev shook the thought off and called for a messenger to handdeliver the dispatch to the top floor. A moment later, a basketful of dispatches landed on his desk for processing.

"OUCH," Ed Foley said aloud at his desk. The message—a lengthy one—came from Ritter and Moore, speaking for the President. He'd have to rattle some serious bushes for this.

Station Moscow didn't have a written list of agents, even by code names, and even in Foley's office safe, which in addition to a combination had a two-phase alarm built in, a keypad on the outside, and one on the inside with a different code, which Foley had set himself. The embassy's Marines had orders to respond to either alarm with drawn weapons, since the contents of this safe were about the most sensitive documents in the whole building.

But Foley had the names of every Russian citizen who worked for the Agency hard cut into his eyelids, along with their specialty areas. Twelve such agents were currently operating. They'd just lost one the week before he'd arrived in Moscow—burned. No one knew how, though Foley was concerned that the Russians might have a mole in Langley itself. It was heresy to think it, but as CIA tried to do it to KGB, so KGB tried to do it to CIA, and there was no referee on the playing field to let the players know what the score was. The lost agent, whose code name had been SOUSA, was a lieutenant colonel in the GRU and had helped identify some major leaks in the German defense ministry and other NATO sources, through which KGB had gotten political-military intelligence of a high order. But that guy was dead—still breathing, perhaps, but dead even so. Foley hoped they wouldn't load the guy alive into a furnace, as had been done with another GRU source back in the 1950s. Rather a cruel method of execution, even for the Russians under Khrushchev, and something that had kept his case officer awake for a very long time, the COS was sure.

So they'd have to get two, maybe three, of their agents working on this one. They had a good guy in KGB and another in the Party Central Committee. Maybe one of them might have heard about a possible

operation against the Pope.

Damn, Foley thought, *are they* that *crazy?* It required a considerable stretch of his imagination. An Irishman by ancestry, and Roman Catholic by education and religious affiliation, Ed Foley had to make a mental effort to set aside his personal thoughts. Such a plot was beyond the pale, perhaps, but he was dealing with people who didn't recognize the concept of limits, certainly not from any outside agency. For them, God was politics, and a threat to their political world was like Lucifer himself challenging the order of heaven. Except that the simile only went so far. This was more like Michael the Archangel challenging the order of Hell. Mary Pat called it the belly of the beast, and this one was one nasty fuckin' beast.

"DADDY!" SALLY EXCLAIMED, waking up with her usual smile. He guided her to the bathroom and then downstairs, where her oatmeal was waiting. Sally still wore her bunny-rabbit sleepers, with feet and a long zipper. This one was yellow. And it was the largest size, and her feet were stretching it. She'd have to change to some other sleepwear soon, but that was Cathy's department.

The routine was set. Cathy fed Little Jack and, halfway through, her husband set down his paper and headed upstairs to shave. By the time he was dressed, she was finished with her duty, and went off to get cleaned up and dressed while Jack burped the little guy and got him into his socks to keep his feet warm, and also to give him something to pull off so that he could see if the feet tasted the same as they had the previous day, which was a newly acquired skill.

Soon the doorbell rang, and it was Margaret van der Beek, soon followed by Ed Beaverton, which allowed the parents to escape off to work. At Victoria Station, Cathy kissed her husband good-bye and headed for the tube station for the ride to Moorefields, while Jack took a different train to Century House, and the day was about to start for real.

"Good morning, Sir John."

"Hey, Bert." Ryan paused. Bert Canderton had "army" written all over him, and it was time to ask. "What regiment were you?"

"I was Regimental Sergeant Major of the Royal Green Jackets, sir."

"Infantry?"

"Correct, sir."

"I thought you guys wore red coats," Ryan observed.

"Well, that's your fault—you Yanks, that is. In your revolutionary war, my regiment took so many casualties from your riflemen that the colonel of the regiment decided a green tunic might be safer. It's been that way ever since."

"How did you end up here?"

"I'm waiting for an opening at the Tower to be a Yeoman Warder, sir. Should have a new red coat in a month or so, they tell me."

Canderton's rent-a-cop blouse had some service ribbons on it, probably not for brushing and flossing his teeth, and a regimental sergeant major in the British army was *somebody*, like a master gunnery sergeant in the Marine Corps.

"I've been there, been to the club they have," said Ryan. "Good bunch of troops."

"Indeed. I have a friend there, Mick Truelove. He was in the Queen's Regiment."

"Well, sar-major, keep the bad guys out," Ryan said, as he worked his card into the electronic slot that controlled the entry gate.

"I will do that, sir," Canderton promised.

Harding was at his desk when Ryan came in. Jack hung his jacket on the tree.

"Come in early, Simon?"

"Your Judge Moore sent a fax to Bas last night—just after midnight, as a matter of fact. Here." He handed it across.

Ryan scanned it. "The Pope, eh?"

"Your President is interested, and so is the PM, as it happens," Harding said, relighting his pipe. "Basil called us in early to go over what data we have."

"Okay, what *do* we have?"

"Not much," Harding admitted. "I can't talk to you about our sources—"

"Simon, I'm not dumb. You have somebody in close, either a confidante of a Politburo member or someone in the Party Secretariat. He's not telling you anything?" Ryan had seen some very interesting "take" in here, and it had to have come from somebody inside the big red tent.

"I can't confirm your suspicion," Harding cautioned, "but no, none of our sources have given us anything, not even that the Warsaw Letter has arrived in Moscow, though we know it must have."

"So, we don't know jackshit?"

Simon nodded soberly. "Correct."

"Amazing how often that happens."

"It's just a part of the job, Jack."

"And the PM has her panties in a wad?"

Harding hadn't heard that Americanism before, and it caused him to blink twice. "So it would seem."

"So, what are we supposed to tell her? She damned sure doesn't want to hear that we don't know."

"No, our political leaders do not like to hear that sort of thing."

Neither do ours, Ryan admitted to himself. "So, how good is Basil at a song-and-dance number?"

"Quite good, actually. In this case, he can say that your chaps do not have very much, either."

"Ask other NATO services?"

Harding shook his head. "No. It might leak out to the opposition—first, that we're interested, and second, that we don't know enough."

"How good are our friends?"

"Depends. The French SDECE occasionally turns good information, but they do not like to share. Neither do our Israeli friends. The Germans are thoroughly compromised. That Markus Wolf chap in East Germany is a bloody genius at this business—perhaps the best in the world, and under Soviet control. The Italians have some talented people, but they, too, have problems with penetration. You know, the best service on the continent might well be the Vatican itself. But if Ivan is doing anything at the moment, he's covering it nicely. Ivan is quite good at that, you know."

"So I've heard," Ryan agreed. "When does Basil have to go to Downing Street?"

"After lunch—three this afternoon, I understand."

"And what will we be able to give him?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid—worse, Basil might want me with him."

Ryan grunted. "That ought to be fun. Met her before?"

"No, but the PM has seen my analyses. Bas says she wants to meet me." He shuddered. "It'd be much better if I had something substantive to tell her."

"Well, let's see if we can come up with a threat analysis, okay?" Jack sat down. "What exactly *do* we know?"

Harding handed a sheaf of documents across. Ryan leaned back in his chair to pick through them.

"You got the Warsaw Letter from a Polish source, right?"

Harding hesitated, but it was clear he had to answer this one: "That is correct."

"So nothing from Moscow itself?" Jack asked.

He shook his head. "No. We know the letter was forwarded to Moscow, but that's all."

"We're really in the dark, then. You might want to have a beer before you go across the river."

Harding looked up from his notes. "Why, thank you, Jack. I really needed to hear that bit of encouragement."

They were silent for a moment.

"I work better on a computer," Ryan said. "How hard is it to get one in here?"

"Not easy. They have to be tempest-checked to make sure someone

outside the building cannot read the keystrokes electronically. You can call administration about it."

But not today, Ryan didn't say aloud. He'd learned that the bureaucracy at Century House was at least as bad as the one at Langley, and after a few years of working in the private sector, it could drive him to distraction. *Okay,* he'd try to come up with some ideas to save Simon from getting a new asshole installed in his guts. The Prime Minister was a lady, but in terms of demands, Father Tim at Georgetown had nothing on her.

OLEG IVAN'CH got back from lunch at the KGB cafeteria and faced facts. Very soon, he would have to decide what to say to his American, and how to say it.

If he was a regular embassy employee, he would have passed the first note along to the CIA chief in the embassy—there had to be one, he knew, an American *rezident* whose job it was to spy on the Soviet Union, just as Russians spied on everyone in the world. The big question was whether they were spying on *him.* Could he have been "doubled" by the Second Chief Directorate, whose reputation would frighten the devil in hell himself? Or could this ostensible American have been a Russian bearing a "false-flag"?

So, first of all, Oleg had to make damned sure he was dealing with the real thing. How to do that . . . ?

Then it came to him. *Yes,* he thought. That was something KGB could never bring off. That would ensure that he was dealing with someone able to do what he needed done. No one could fake that. In celebration, Zaitzev lit up another cigarette and went back into the morning dispatches from the Washington *rezidentura.*

IT WAS HARD to like Tony Prince. The *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow was well-regarded by the Russians, and, as far as Ed Foley was concerned, that spoke to a weakness in his character.

"So, how do you like the new job, Ed?" Prince asked.

"Still settling in. Dealing with the Russian press is kind of interesting. They're predictable, but unpredictably so."

"How can people be unpredictably predictable?" the *Times* correspondent inquired, with a crooked smile.

"Well, Tony, you know what they're going to say, just not how they're going to ask it." *And half of them are spooks or at least stringers,*

anyway, in case you haven't noticed.

Prince affected a laugh. He felt himself to be the intellectual superior. Foley had failed as a general-beat reporter in New York, whereas Prince had parlayed his political savvy to one of the top jobs in American journalism. He had some good contacts in the Soviet government, and he cultivated them assiduously, frequently sympathizing with them over the boorish, *nekulturniy* behavior of the current regime in Washington, which he occasionally tried to explain to his Russian friends, often pointing out that *he* hadn't voted for this damned actor, and neither had anyone in his New York office.

"Have you met the new guy, Alexandrov, yet?"

"No, but one of my contacts knows him, says he's a reasonable sort, talks like he's in favor of peaceful coexistence. More liberal than Suslov. I hear *he's* pretty sick."

"I've heard that, too, but I'm not sure what's wrong with him."

"He's diabetic, didn't you hear? That's why the Baltimore docs came over to work on his eyes. Diabetic retinopathy," Prince explained, speaking the word slowly so that Foley could comprehend it.

"I'll have to ask the embassy doc what that means," Foley observed, making an obvious note on his pad. "So, this Alexandrov guy is more liberal, you think?" "Liberal" was a word that meant "good guy" to Prince.

"Well, I haven't met him myself, but that's what my sources think. They also think that when Suslov departs from this life, Mikhail Yevgeniyevich will take his place."

"Really? I'll have to drop that on the ambassador."

"And the Station Chief?"

"You know who that is? I don't," Foley said.

An eye roll. "Ron Fielding. Hell, *everybody* knows that."

"No, he isn't," Ed protested as sharply as his acting talent allowed. "He's the senior consular officer, not a spook."

Prince smiled, thinking, *You never could figure things out, could you?* His Russian contacts had fingered Fielding to him, and he knew they wouldn't lie to him. "Well, that's just a guess, of course," the reporter went on.

And if you thought it was me, you'd blurt it right out, wouldn't you? Foley thought right back at him. *You officious ass.* "Well, I'm cleared for some things, as you know, but not that one."

"I know who does know," Prince offered.

"Yeah, but I'm not going to ask the Ambassador, Tony. He'd rip my face off."

"He's just a political appointment, Ed—nothing special. This ought to be a posting for somebody who knows diplomacy, but the President didn't ask me for advice."

Thank God, the Station Chief commented inwardly.

"Fielding sees him a lot, doesn't he?" Prince went on.

"A consular officer works directly with the Ambassador, Tony. You know that."

"Yeah. Convenient, isn't it? How much do you see him?"

"The boss, you mean? Once a day, usually," Foley answered.

"And Fielding?"

"More. Maybe two or three times."

"There you have it," Prince concluded grandly. "You can always tell."

"You read too many James Bond books," Foley said dismissively. "Or maybe Matt Helm."

"Get real, Ed," Prince bristled with elegant gentleness.

"If Fielding is the head spook, who are his underlings? Damned if I know."

"Well, those are always pretty covert," Prince admitted. "No, on that I don't have a clue."

"Pity. That's one of the games you play in the embassy—who are the spooks."

"Well, I can't help you."

"It's not something I need to know anyway, I guess," Foley admitted.

You never were curious enough to be a good reporter, Prince thought, with a casual, pleasant smile. "So, does this keep you busy?"

"It's not a ball-breaker. Anyway, can we make a deal?"

"Sure," Prince replied. "What is it?"

"If you hear anything interesting, let us know here?"

"You can read about it in the *Times,* usually on the front page above the fold," he added, to make sure Foley knew how important he was, along with his penetrating analysis.

"Well, some things, you know, the Ambassador likes to get a heads-up. He told me to ask, off-the-record-like."

"That's an ethical issue, Ed."

"If I tell Ernie that, he won't be real happy."

"Well, you work for him. I don't."

"You are an American citizen, right?"

"Don't wave the flag at me, okay?" Prince responded wearily. "Okay, if I find out they're about to launch nuclear weapons, I'll let you know. But it looks to me like we're more likely to do something that stupid than they are."

"Tony, give me a break."

"This 'focus of evil in the world' crap wasn't exactly Abe Lincoln talking, was it?"

"You saying the President was wrong?" the Chief of Station asked,

wondering just how far his opinion of this ass might sink.

"I know about the Gulag, okay? But that's a thing of the past. The Russians have mellowed since Stalin died, but the new administration hasn't figured that one out yet, have they?"

"Look, Tony, I'm just a worker bee here. The Ambassador asked me to forward a simple request. I take it your response is 'no'?"

"You take it correctly."

"Well, don't expect any Christmas cards from Ernie Fuller."

"Ed, my duty is to *The New York Times* and my readers, period."

"Okay, fine. I had to ask," Foley said defensively. He hadn't expected anything better from the guy, but he'd suggested this to Ambassador Fuller himself to feel Prince out, and the Ambassador had approved it.

"I understand." Prince checked his watch. "Hey, I have a meeting scheduled at the CPSU Central Committee building."

"Anything I ought to know about?"

"Like I said, you can read it in the *Times.* They fax you the *Early Bird* out of Washington, don't they?"

"Yeah, it eventually trickles down here."

"Then, day after tomorrow, you can read it," Prince advised, standing to take his leave. "Tell Ernie."

"I'll do that," Foley said, extending his hand. Then he decided he'd walk Prince to the elevator. On the way back, he'd hit the men's room to wash his hands. His next stop after that was the Ambassador's office.

"Hi, Ed. Meet with that Prince guy?"

Foley nodded his head. "Just cut him loose."

"Did he nibble at your hook?"

"Nope. Just spat it right back at me."

Fuller smiled crookedly. "What did I tell you? There used to be some patriotic reporters back when I was your age, but they've mostly grown out of it over the last few years."

"I'm not surprised. When Tony was a new kid in New York, he never liked the cops very much, but he was good at getting them to talk to him. Persuasive bastard, when he wants to be."

"Did he work on you?"

"No, sir. I'm not important enough for that."

"What did you think of the Washington request about the Pope?" Fuller asked, changing the subject.

"I'm going to have some people look into it, but—"

"I know, Ed. I don't *want* to know exactly what you're doing about it. If you find anything, will you be able to tell me about it?"

"Depends, sir," Foley answered, meaning *probably not.*

Fuller accepted that. "Okay. Anything else shaking?"

"Prince is on to something, ought to be in the papers day after tomorrow. He's on his way to the Central Committee, or so he told me. He confirmed that Alexandrov will replace Mikhail Suslov when Red Mike checks out. If they're telling him, it must be official. I think we can believe that one. Tony has good contacts with their political types, and it tracks with what our other friends tell us about Suslov."

"I've never met the guy. What gives with him?"

"He's one of the last true believers. Alexandrov is another one. He thinks Marx is the One True God, and Lenin is his prophet, and their political and economic system really does work."

"Really? Some people never learn."

"Yep. You can take that to the bank, sir. There are a few left, but Leonid Ilyich isn't one of them, and neither is his heir apparent, Yuriy Vladimirovich. But Alexandrov is Andropov's ally. There's a Politburo meeting later today."

"When will we know what they discussed?"

"Couple of days, probably." *But exactly how we find out, you do not need to know, sir,* Foley didn't add.

He didn't have to. Ernie Fuller knew the rules of the game. The U.S. Ambassador to every country was thoroughly briefed on the embassy he was taking over. To get into Moscow involved voluntary brainwashing at Foggy Bottom and Langley. In reality, the American ambassador to Moscow was his country's chief intelligence officer in the Soviet Union, and Uncle Ernie was a pretty good one, Foley thought.

"Okay, keep me posted if you can."

"Will do, sir," the Chief of Station promised.

CHAPTER 13

COLLEGIALITY

ANDROPOV ARRIVED IN THE KREMLIN at 12:45 for the 1:00 P.M. meeting. His driver pulled the handmade ZIL through the Spasskiy Gate's towering brick structure, past the security checkpoints, past the saluting soldiers of the ceremonial Tamanskiy Guards Division stationed outside Moscow and used mainly for parades and pretty-soldier duties. The soldier saluted smartly, but the gesture went unnoticed by the people inside the car. From there it was a hundred fifty meters to the destination, where another soldier wrenched open the door. Andropov noted this salute and nodded absently to let the senior sergeant know that he was seen, then made his way inside the yellow-cream-colored building. Instead of taking the stone steps, Andropov turned right to go to the elevator for the ride to the second floor, followed by his aide, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, for whom this was the most interesting and about to be the most intimidating part of his official duties since joining KGB.

There was yet more security on the upper floors: uniformed Red Army officers with holstered side arms, in case of trouble. But there would be no trouble in his ascension to the General Secretaryship, Andropov thought. This would be no palace coup. He'd be elected by his political peers in the usual way that the Soviet Union handled the transition of power—awkwardly and badly, but predictably. The one with the most political capital would chair this counsel of peers, because they would trust him not to rule by force of will, but by collegial consensus. None of them wanted another Stalin, or even another Khrushchev, who might lead them on adventures. These men did not enjoy adventures. They'd all learned from history that gambling carried with it the possibility of losing, and none of them had come this far to risk losing anything at all. They were the chieftains in a nation of chess players, for whom victory was something determined by skillful maneuvers taken patiently and progressively over a period of hours, whose conclusion would seem as foreordained as the setting of the sun.

That was one of the problems today, Andropov thought, taking his seat next to Defense Minister Ustinov. Both sat near the head of the

table, in the seats reserved for members of the Defense Counsel or *Soviet Orborony,* the five most senior officials in the entire Soviet government, including the Secretary for Ideology—Suslov. Ustinov looked up from his briefing papers.

"Yuriy," the minister said in greeting.

"Good day, Dmitriy." Andropov had already reached his accommodation with the Marshal of the Soviet Union. He'd never obstructed his requests for funding for the bloated and misdirected Soviet military, which was blundering around Afghanistan like a beached whale. It would probably win in the end, everyone thought. After all, the Red Army had never failed . . . unless you remembered Lenin's first assault into Poland in 1919, which had ended in an ignominious rout. No, they preferred to remember defeating Hitler after the Germans had come to within sight of the Kremlin itself, stopping only when attacked by Russia's historically most reliable ally, General Winter. Andropov was not a devotee of the Soviet military, but it remained the security blanket for the rest of the Politburo, because the army made sure the country did what they told it to do. That was not because of love, but because the Red Army had guns in large numbers. So did the KGB, and the Ministry of the Interior, in order to act as a check on the Red Army—no sense giving them ideas. Just to make sure, KGB also had the Third Chief Directorate, whose job it was to keep an eye on every single rifle company in the Red Army. In other countries, it was called checks and balances. Here it was a balance of terror.

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev came in last of all, walking like the aged peasant he was, his skin dropping on his once manly face. He was approaching eighty years, a number he might meet but would not surpass, by the look of him. That was both good news and bad. There was no telling what thoughts wiggled their way around the inside of his doting brain. He'd been a man of great personal power once—Andropov could remember it plainly enough. He'd been a vigorous man who'd enjoyed walking in the forests to kill elk or even bear—the mighty hunter of wild animals. But not now. He hadn't shot anything in years—except, perhaps, people, at second or third hand. But that didn't make Leonid Ilyich mellow with age. Far from it. The brown eyes were still sly, still looking for treachery, and sometimes finding it where there was none. Under Stalin, that was frequently a death sentence. But not now. Now you'd just be broken, stripped of power, and relegated to a provincial post where you'd die of boredom.

"Good afternoon, comrades," the General Secretary said, as pleasantly as his grumbly voice allowed.

At least there was no obvious bootlicking anymore, every communist courtier jousting with each other to curry favor with the

Marxist emperor. You could waste half the meeting with that twaddle, and Andropov had important things to discuss.

Leonid Ilyich had been prebriefed, and after sipping his post-lunch tea, the General Secretary turned his face to the KGB Chairman. "Yuriy Vladimirovich, you have something to discuss with us?"

"Thank you, Comrade General Secretary. Comrades," he began, "something has come up which commands our attention." He waved to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, who quickly circulated around the table, handing out copies of the Warsaw Letter.

"What you see is a letter dispatched to Warsaw last week by the Pope of Rome." Each man had a photocopy of the original—some of them spoke Polish—plus an exact translation into literary Russian, complete with footnotes. "I feel that this is a potential political threat to us."

"I have already seen this letter," Alexandrov said from his distant "candidate" seat. In deference to the seniority of the terminally ill Mikhail Suslov, the latter's seat at Brezhnev's left hand (and next to Andropov) was empty, though his place at the table had the same collection of papers as everyone else's—maybe Suslov had read them on his deathbed, and he'd lash out one last time from his waiting niche in the Kremlin wall.

"This is outrageous," Marshal Ustinov said immediately. He was also well into his seventies. "Who does this priest think he is!"

"Well, he is Polish," Andropov reminded his colleagues, "and he feels he has a certain duty to provide his former countrymen with political protection."

"Protection from what?" the Minister of the Interior demanded. "The threat to Poland comes from their own counterrevolutionaries."

"And their own government lacks the balls to deal with them. I told you last year we needed to move in on them," the First Secretary of the Moscow Party reminded the rest.

"And if they resist our move?" the Agricultural Minister inquired from his seat at the far end of the table.

"You may be certain of that," the Foreign Minister thought out loud. "At least politically, they will resist."

"Dmitriy Fedorovich?" Alexandrov directed his question at Marshal Ustinov, who sat there in his military uniform, complete with a square foot of ribbons, and two Hero of the Soviet Union gold stars. He'd won them both for political courage, not on the battlefield, but he was one of the smartest people in the room, having earned his spurs as People's Commissar of Armaments in the Great Motherland War, and for helping shepherd the USSR into the Space Age. His opinion was predictable, but respected for its sagacity.

"The question, comrades, is whether the Poles would resist with

armed force. That would not be militarily threatening, but it would be a major political embarrassment, both here and abroad. That is, they could not stop the Red Army on the battlefield, but should they make the attempt, the political repercussions would be serious. That is why I supported our move last year to bring political pressure on Warsaw—which was successfully accomplished, you will recall." At the age of seventy-four, Dmitriy Fedorovich had learned caution, at least on the level of international politics. The unspoken concern was the effect such resistance would have on the United States of America, which liked to stick its nose where it didn't belong.

"Well, this might well incite additional political unrest in Poland, or so my analysts tell me," Andropov told his colleagues, and the room got a little chilly.

"How serious is this, Yuriy Vladimirovich? How serious might it become?" It was Brezhnev speaking for the first time from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Poland continues to be unstable, due to counterrevolutionary elements within their society. Their labor sector, in particular, is restless. We have our sources within this 'Solidarity' cabal, and they tell us that the pot continues to boil. The problem with the Pope is that if he does what he threatens and comes to Poland, the Polish people will have a rallying point, and if a sufficient number of them become involved, the country might well try to change its form of government," the Chairman of the KGB said delicately.

"That is not acceptable," Leonid Ilyich observed in a quiet voice. At this table, a loud voice was just a man venting his stress. A quiet one was far more dangerous. "If Poland falls, then Germany falls . . ." and then the entire Warsaw Pact, which would leave the Soviet Union without its buffer zone to the West. NATO was strong, and would become more so, as the new American defense buildup began to take effect. They'd already been briefed on that troublesome subject. Already, the first new tanks were being given to line units, preparatory to shipping them to West Germany. And so were the new airplanes. Most frightening of all was the vastly increased training regimen for the American soldiers. It was as though they were actually preparing for a strike east.

The fall of Poland and Germany would mean that a trip to Soviet territory would be shortened by more than a thousand kilometers, and there was not a man at this table who did not remember the last time the Germans had entered the Soviet Union. Despite all the protestations that NATO was a defensive alliance whose entire purpose was to keep the Red Army from driving down the Champs Élysées, to Moscow NATO and all the other American alliances looked like an enormous noose designed to fit around their collective necks.

They'd all considered that before at great length. And they really didn't need political instability to add to their problems. Communists—though not quite so fervent as Suslov and his ideological heir, Alexandrov—feared above all the possible turning away of their people from the True Faith, which was the source of their own very comfortable personal power. They'd all come to power at second hand to a popular peasant revolt which had overthrown the Romanov dynasty—or so they all told themselves, despite what history really said—and they had no illusions about what a revolt would do to them. Brezhnev shifted in his chair. "So, this Polish priest is a threat."

"Yes, comrades, he is," Andropov said. "His letter is a genuine and sincere thrust at the political stability of Poland, and thus of the entire Warsaw Pact. The Catholic Church remains politically powerful throughout Europe, including our fraternal socialist allies. If he were to resign the papacy and travel back to his homeland, that in itself would be a huge political statement.

"Josef Vissarionovich Stalin once asked how many army divisions the Pope had. The answer is none, of course, but we cannot disregard his power. I suppose we could try diplomatic contacts to dissuade him from this course . . ."

"A complete waste of time," the Foreign Minister observed at once. "We have had occasional diplomatic contacts in the Vatican itself, and they listen to us politely, and they speak reasonably, and then they take whatever action they want to take. No, we cannot influence him, even with direct threats to the church. They merely see threats as challenges."

And that put the matter squarely in the middle of the table. Andropov was grateful to the Foreign Minister, who was also in his camp for the issue of succession. He wondered idly if Brezhnev knew or cared about what would happen after he died—well, he'd care about his children's fate and protection, but that was easily handled. Sinecure Party posts could be found for all of them, and there would be no future marriages to require the china and tableware from the Hermitage.

"Yuriy Vladimirovich, what can KGB do about this threat?" Brezhnev inquired next. *He is so easy to manage,* Andropov reflected briefly and gratefully.

"It may be possible to eliminate the threat by eliminating the man who makes it," the Chairman replied, with an even, unemotional voice.

"To kill him?" Ustinov asked.

"Yes, Dmitriy."

"What are the dangers of that?" the Foreign Minister asked at once. Diplomats always worried about such things.

"We cannot entirely eliminate them, but we can control them. My people have come up with an operational concept, which would involve shooting the Pope at one of his public appearances. I have brought my aide, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, to brief us in on it. With your permission, comrades?" He received a collection of nods. Then he turned his head: "Aleksey Nikolay'ch?"

"Comrades." The colonel rose and walked to the lectern, trying to keep his shaking knees under control. "The operation has no name, and will have none for security reasons. The Pope appears in public every Wednesday afternoon. He generally parades around Saint Peter's Square in a motor vehicle, which offers him no protection against attack and comes within three or four meters of the assembled multitude." Rozhdestvenskiy had chosen his words carefully. Every man at the table knew biblical matters and terminology. You could not grow up, even here, without acquiring knowledge of Christianity —even if it was just enough to despise everything about it.

"The question then is how to get a man with a pistol to the front rank of spectators, so that he can take his shot at sufficiently close range to make a successful shot likely."

"Not 'certain'?" the Minister of the Interior asked harshly.

Rozhdestvenskiy did his best not to wilt. "Comrade Minister, we rarely deal in absolute certainties. Even a skilled pistol shot cannot guarantee a perfect shot against a moving target, and the tactical realities here will not allow a carefully aimed round. The assassin will have to bring his weapon up rapidly from a place of concealment, and fire. He will be able to get off two, possibly three, shots before the crowd collapses on him. At that point, a second officer will then kill the assassin from behind with a silenced pistol—and then make his own escape. This will leave no one behind to speak to the Italian police. For this, we will use our Bulgarian socialist allies to select the assassin, to get him to the scene, and then to eliminate him."

"How will our Bulgarian friend get away under these circumstances?" Brezhnev asked. His personal knowledge of firearms allowed him to skip over technical issues, Andropov saw.

"It is likely that the crowd will concentrate on the assassin, and will not take note of the intelligence officer's follow-up shot. It will be virtually silent and there will be a great deal of crowd noise. He will then simply back away and make his escape," Rozhdestvenskiy explained. "The officer we want on this is well experienced in operations of this kind."

"Does he have a name?" Alexandrov asked.

"Yes, comrade, and I can give it to you if you wish, but for security reasons . . ."

"Correct, Colonel," Ustinov put in. "We do not really need to know

his name, do we, comrades?" Heads shook around the table. For these men, secrecy came as naturally as urination.

"Not a rifleman?" Interior asked.

"That would risk exposure. The buildings around the square are patrolled by the Vatican's own security force, Swiss mercenaries, and —"

"How good are these Swiss militiamen?" another voice asked.

"How good do they need to be to see a man with a rifle and to raise an alarm?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked, reasonably. "Comrades, when you plan an operation like this one, you try to keep the variables under strict control. Complexity is a dangerous enemy in any such undertaking. As planned, all we need to do is to insert two men into a crowd of thousands and get them close. Then it's just a matter of taking the shot. A pistol is easily concealed in loose clothing. The people there are not screened or searched in any way. No, comrades, this plan is the best we can establish—unless you would have us dispatch a platoon of Spetsnaz soldiers into the Vatican Apartments. That would obviously work, but the origin of such an operation would be impossible to conceal. This mission, if it comes off, depends only on two people, only one of whom will survive, and who will almost certainly escape cleanly."

"How reliable are the participants?" the Chairman of the Party Control Commission asked.

"The Bulgarian officer has personally killed eight men, and he has good contacts within the Turkish criminal community, from which he will select our assassin."

"A Turk?" the Party man asked.

"Yes, a Muslim," Andropov confirmed. "If the operation can be blamed on a Turkish follower of Mohammed, so much the better for us. Correct?"

"It would not hurt our purposes," the Foreign Minister confirmed. "In fact, it might well have the effect of making Islam look more barbaric to the West. That would cause America to increase its support for Israel, and that would annoy the Muslim countries from whom they buy their oil. There is an elegance to it all, which appeals to me, Yuriy."

"So, the complexity of the operation is entirely limited to its consequences," Marshal Ustinov observed, "and not to the undertaking itself."

"Correct, Dmitriy," Andropov confirmed.

"What are the chances that this operation might be linked to us?" asked the Ukrainian Party Secretary.

"If all we leave behind is a dead Turk, connections will be very difficult to establish," the KGB Chairman replied. "This operation has

no name. The number of people involved is less than twenty, and most of them are in this room, right here. There will be no written records. Comrades, the security of this operation will be absolute. I must insist that none of you speak about this to anyone. Not your wives, not your private secretaries, not your political advisers. In that way, we can ensure against leaks. We must remember that the Western intelligence services are always trying to discover our secrets. In this case, that cannot be allowed to happen."

"You should have limited this discussion to the Defense Counsel," Brezhnev thought aloud.

"Leonid Ilyich, I thought of that," Andropov responded. "But the political implications of this matter command attention by the entire Politburo."

"Yes, I can see that," the General Secretary agreed with a nod. What he did not see was that Andropov had carefully followed this course so as not to be seen as an adventurer by the men who would someday soon elect him to his own head chair. "Very well, Yuriy. I cannot object to that," Brezhnev said thoughtfully.

"It's still a dangerous thing to contemplate," said the Secretary of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. "I must say that I am not entirely comfortable with this plan."

"Gregoriy Vasil'yevich," the Ukrainian Party boss responded, "about Poland—if their government falls, there will be consequences for me that I do not find attractive. Nor should you," he warned. "If this Pole returns home, the results could be ruinous to all of us."

"I understand that, but murder of a chief of state is nothing to be undertaken lightly. I think we ought to warn him first. There are ways to get his attention."

The Minister for Foreign Affairs shook his head. "I've already said it—a waste of time. Men like this do not understand what death is. We could threaten his church members in the Warsaw Pact, but that would probably only have the opposite effect of what we desire. It would give us the worst of all worlds, the consequences of attacking the Roman Church without the option of eliminating this troublesome churchman. No." He shook his head. "If it is to be done, then it must be done properly, decisively, and speedily. Yuriy Vladimirovich, how long to accomplish this mission?"

"Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy?" the KGB Chairman asked.

All heads turned to the colonel, and he did his best to keep his voice level. This was very deep water for a mere colonel. The entire operation now rested on his shoulders, a possibility he had somehow never fully considered. But if he was to get his general's stars, he had to take this responsibility, didn't he?

"Comrade Minister, I would estimate four to six weeks, if you

authorize the operation today, and so notify the Bulgarian Politburo. We will be using one of their assets, for which their permission is necessary."

"Andrey Andreyevich?" Brezhnev asked. "How cooperative will they be in Sofia?"

The Foreign Minister took a moment. "That depends on what we ask them and how we ask it. If they know the purpose of the operation, they might dally somewhat."

"Can we ask their cooperation without telling them what it is for?" Ustinov asked.

"Yes, I think so. We can just offer them a hundred new tanks or some fighter aircraft, as a gesture of socialist solidarity," the Minister for Foreign Affairs suggested.

"Be generous," Brezhnev agreed. "I'm sure they have a request floating in the Defense Ministry, yes, Dmitriy?"

"Always!" Marshal Ustinov confirmed. "It's all they ever ask for, more tanks and more MiGs!"

"Then load the tanks on a train and send them to Sofia. Comrades, we have a vote to take," the General Secretary told the Politburo. The eleven voting members felt a little bit railroaded. The seven "candidate," or nonvoting, members just watched and nodded.

As usual, the vote was unanimous. No one voted no, despite the fact that some of them had doubts concealed in their silence. In this room, one did not want to stray too far from the *kollectiv* spirit. Power here was as circumscribed as everywhere else in the world, a fact upon which they rarely reflected and on which they *never* acted.

"Very well." Brezhnev turned his head to Andropov. "KGB is authorized to undertake this operation, and may God have mercy on his Polish soul," he added, in a bit of peasant levity. "So, what is next?"

"Comrade, if I may . . ." Andropov said, getting a nod. "Our brother and friend Mikhail Andreyevich Suslov will soon depart this life, after long and devoted service to the Party we all hold dear. His chair is already empty due to his illness, and needs filling. I propose Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov as the next Central Committee Secretary for Ideology, with full voting membership in the Politburo."

Alexandrov even managed to blush. He held up his hands and spoke with the utmost sincerity. "Comrades, my—our—friend is still alive. I cannot take his place while he still lives."

"It is good of you to put it that way, Misha," the General Secretary observed, using the affectionate abbreviation for his Christian name. "But Mikhail Andreyevich is gravely ill and has not long to live. I suggest that we table Yuriy's motion for the moment. Such an appointment must, of course, be ratified by the Central Committee as

a whole." But that was less than a formality, as everyone here knew. Brezhnev had just given his blessing to Alexandrov's promotion, and that was all he needed.

"Thank you, Comrade General Secretary." And now Alexandrov could look at the empty chair at Brezhnev's left hand and know that in a few weeks it would soon be his officially. He'd weep like all the others when Suslov died, and the tears would be just as cold. And Mikhail Andreyevich would even understand. His biggest problem now was facing death, the greatest of life's mysteries, and wondering what lay on the other side of it. It was something everyone at the table would have to face, but for all of them it was sufficiently distant to be dismissed . . . for the moment. That, Yuriy Andropov thought, was one difference between them and the Pope, who was soon to die at their hands.

The meeting broke up just after four in the afternoon. The men took their leave, as always, with friendly words and shaken hands, before they went their separate ways. Andropov, with Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy in tow, headed out toward the end. Soon he would be the last to leave, as was the prerogative of the General Secretary.

"Comrade Chairman, a moment, if you would allow it," Rozhdestvenskiy said, heading for the men's room. He emerged a minute and a half later with an easier stride.

"You did well, Aleksey," Andropov told him, as they resumed their way out—the Chairman took the steps down instead of the elevator. "So, what did you make of it?"

"Comrade Brezhnev is frailer than I expected."

"Yes, he is. It didn't help him very much to stop smoking," Andropov reached into his coat pocket for his Marlboros—at the Politburo meetings, people now avoided smoking, out of deference to Leonid Ilyich, and the KGB Chairman needed a cigarette right now. "What else?"

"It was remarkably collegial. I expected more disagreement, more arguing, I suppose." Discussions between spooks at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square were far more lively, especially when discussing operations.

"They are all cautious players, Aleksey. Those with so much power at their fingertips always are—and they should be. But they often do not take action because they fear doing anything new and different." Andropov knew that his country needed new and different things, and wondered how difficult it would be for him to bring them about.

"But, Comrade Chairman, our operation—"

"That's different, Colonel. When they feel threatened, then they can take action. They fear the Pope. And they are probably right to. Don't you think?"

"Comrade Chairman, I am a colonel only. I serve. I do not rule."

"Keep it that way, Aleksey. It's safer." Andropov entered the car and sat down, and immediately became lost in his thoughts.

AN HOUR LATER, Zaitzev was finishing up his day and awaiting his relief. Then Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy appeared at his side without warning.

"Captain, I need you to send this out to Sofia immediately." He paused. "Does anyone else see these messages?"

"No, Comrade Colonel. The message designator labels it as something to come to me only. That is in the order book."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." He handed over the blank.

"By your order, Comrade Colonel." Zaitzev watched him head off. He barely had time to get this done before taking his leave.

MOST SECRET
IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
OPERATION APPROVED. NEXT STEP INTERMEDIATE APPROVAL
BULGARIAN POLITBURO. EXPECT FULL APPROVAL TEN DAYS OR LESS. CONTINUE PLANNING FOR OPERATION.

Zaitzev saw it telexed off, then handed the copy to a messenger to be hand-delivered to the top floor. Then he took his leave, walking a little more swiftly than usual. Out on the street, he fished out his cigarette pack to get himself another Trud before going down the escalator to the metro platform. There, he checked the ceiling clock. He'd actually walked too quickly, he saw, and so let the train go without him, fumbling with his cigarette pack as an excuse if anyone was watching him—but then again, if anyone were watching him now, he was already a dead man. The thought made his hands shake, but it was too late for that. The next train came out of the tunnel exactly on time, and he boarded the proper carriage, shuffling in with fifteen or so other workers....

And there he was. Reading a newspaper, wearing an unbuttoned raincoat, his right hand on the chrome overhead bar.

Zaitzev wandered that way. In his right hand was the second note that he'd just fished out of his cigarette pack. Yes, he saw belatedly, the man was wearing a bright green tie, held in place by a gold-colored tie bar. A brown suit, a clean white shirt that looked expensive, and his face was occupied with the paper. The man did not look around. Zaitzev slid closer.

ONE OF THE things Ed Foley had studied at The Farm was how to perfect his peripheral vision. With training and practice, your eyes could actually see a wider field than the unschooled realized. At CIA camp, he'd learned by walking down the street and reading house numbers without turning his head. Best of all, it was like riding a bicycle. Once learned, it was always there if you just concentrated when you needed to. And so he noticed that someone was moving slowly toward him—white male, about five-nine, medium build, brown eyes and hair, drab clothes, needed a haircut. He didn't see the face clearly enough to remember it or to pick it out of a lineup. A Slavic face, that was all. Expressionless, and the eyes were definitely in his direction. Foley didn't allow his breathing to change, though his heart might have increased its frequency by a few extra beats.

Come on, Ivan. I'm wearing the fucking tie, just like you said. He'd gotten on at the right stop. KGB headquarters was just a block from the escalator. So, yeah, this guy was probably a spook. And not a false-flag. If this was some Second Chief Directorate guy, they would have staged it differently. This was too obvious, too amateurish, not the way KGB would do things. They would have done it at a different subway stop.

This guy's fuckin' real, Foley told himself. He forced himself to be patient, which wasn't easy, even for this experienced field officer, but he took an imperceptible deep breath and waited, telling the nerve endings in his skin to report the least shift in the weight of his topcoat on his shoulders....

ZAITZEV LOOKED AROUND the car as casually as he could. There were no eyes on him, none even looking in this general direction. So his right hand slid into the open pocket, quickly but not too quickly. Then he withdrew.

BINGO, FOLEY THOUGHT, as his heart skipped two or three beats. *Okay, Ivan, what's the message this time?*

Again, he had to be patient. No sense getting this guy killed. If he was really a guy from the Russian MERCURY, then there was no telling how important this might be. Like the first nibble on a deep-sea fishing boat. Was this a marlin, a shark, or a lost boot? If a nice blue

marlin, how big? But he couldn't even pull back on the fishing rod to set the hook yet. No, that would come later, if it came at all. The recruitment phase of field operations—taking some innocent Soviet citizen and making him an agent, an information-procuring asset of the CIA, a *spy*—that was harder than going to a CYO dance and getting laid. The real trick was not getting the girl pregnant—or the agent killed. No, the way the game was played, you had the first fast dance, then the first slow dance, then the first kiss, then the first grope, and then, if you got lucky, unbuttoning the blouse . . . and then...

The reverie stopped when the train did. Foley removed his hand from the overhead rail and looked around....

And there he was, actually looking at him, and the face went into the mental photo album.

Bad tradecraft, buddy. That can get your ass killed. Never look right at your case officer in a public place, Foley thought, his eyes passing right over him, no expression at all on his own face as he walked past the guy, deliberately taking the long way to the door.

ZAITZEV WAS IMPRESSED by the American. He'd actually looked at his new Russian contact, but his eyes had revealed nothing, had not even looked at him directly, but past him to the end of the carriage. And, just that quickly, the American had walked away. *Be what I hope you are*, Oleg Ivan'ch's mind thought, just as loudly as it could.

FIFTY METERS UP on the open street, Foley refused even to let his hand go into the coat. He was certain that a hand had been there. He'd felt it, all right. And Ivan Whoever hadn't done it looking for change.

Foley walked past the gate guard, into the building, and went up in the elevator. His key went into the lock, and the door opened. Only when it was closed behind him did he reach into the pocket.

Mary Pat was there, watching his face, and she saw the unguarded flash of recognition and discovery.

Ed took the note out. It was the same blank message form and, as before, it had writing on it. Foley read it once, then again, and a third time before handing it over to his wife.

Mary Pat's eyes flared, too.

It was a fish, Foley thought. *Maybe a big one.* And he was asking for something substantive. Whoever he was, he wasn't stupid. It would not be easy to arrange what he wanted, but he'd be able to pull it off.

It just meant making the gunnery sergeant angry, and more important, visibly angry, because the embassy was always under surveillance. Something like this could not appear routine, or deliberate, but it didn't have to be an Oscar-class bit of acting either. He was sure the Marines could bring it off. Then he felt Mary Pat's hand in his.

"Hey, honey," he said, for the microphones.

"Hi, Ed." Her hand entered his.

This guy's re[al], her hand said. He answered with a nod.

Tomor[row] mor[ning], she asked, and got another nod.

"Honey, I have to run back to the embassy. I left something in my desk, damn it." Her answer was a thumbs-up.

"Well, don't take too long. I have dinner on. Got a nice roast from the Finnish store. Baked potatoes and frozen corn on the cob."

"Sounds good," he agreed. "Half an hour, max."

"Well, don't be late."

"Where are the car keys?"

"In the kitchen." And they both walked that way.

"Do I have to leave without a kiss?" he asked in his best pussy-whipped voice.

"I guess not" was the playful reply.

"Anything interesting at work today?"

"Just that Price guy from the *Times."*

"He's a jerk."

"Tell me about it. Later, honey." Foley headed for the door, still wearing his topcoat.

He waved to the gate guard on the way back out, a frustrated grimace on his face for theatrical effect. The guards would probably write down his passage—maybe even call it in somewhere—and, with luck, his drive to the embassy would be matched against the tapes from the apartment, and the Second Chief Directorate pukes would tick off whatever box they had on their surveillance forms and decide that Ed Foley had fucked up and indeed left something at the office. He'd have to remember to drive back with a manila envelope on the front seat of the Mercedes. Spooks earned their living most of all by remembering everything and forgetting nothing.

The drive to the embassy was faster than taking the metro at this time of day, but that was factored in to everything else his working routine encompassed. In just a few minutes, he pulled into the embassy gate, past the Marine sentry, and took a visitor's slot before running in, past some more Marines, and up to his office. There he lifted the phone and made a call, while he took a manila envelope and slid a copy of the *International Herald Tribune* into it.

"Yeah, Ed?" The voice belonged to Dominic Corso, one of Foley's field officers. Actually older than his boss, Corso was covered as a

Commercial Attaché. He'd worked Moscow for three years and was well regarded by his Station Chief. Another New Yorker, he was a native of the Borough of Richmond—Staten Island—the son of an NYPD detective. He looked like what he was, a New York guinea, but he was a quite a bit smarter than ethnic bigots would like to have admitted. Corso had the fey brown eyes of an old red fox, but he kept his intelligence under wraps.

"Need you to do something."

"What's that?"

Foley told him.

"You're serious?" It wasn't exactly a normal request.

"Yep."

"Okay, I'll tell the gunny. He's going to ask why." Gunnery Sergeant Tom Drake, the NCO-in-Charge of the Marine detail at the embassy, knew whom Corso worked for.

"Tell him it's a joke, but it's an important one."

"Right." Corso nodded. "Anything I need to know?"

"Not right now."

Corso blinked. *Okay, this was sensitive if the COS wasn't sharing information, but that wasn't so unusual, was it?* Corso reflected. In CIA, you often didn't know what your own team was doing. He didn't know Foley all that well, but he knew enough to respect him.

"Okay, I'll go see him now."

"Thanks, Dom."

"How's the boy like Moscow?" the field officer asked his boss on the way out the door.

"He's adjusting. Be better when he can skate some. He really likes hockey."

"Well, he's in the right town for that."

"Ain't that the truth." Foley gathered his papers and stood. "Let's get this one done, Dom."

"Right now, Ed. See you tomorrow."

CHAPTER 14

DANGER SIGNAL

IF THERE IS ANYTHING CONSTANT in the business of espionage, it is a persistent lack of sleep for the players. That comes from stress, and stress is always the handmaiden of spooks. When sleep was slow in coming for Ed and Mary Pat Foley, they could at least talk with their hands in bed.

He's re[al as] h[ell], b[aby], Foley told his wife under the covers.

Y[ep], she agreed. *Have w[e] ev[er] had a g[uy] fr[om] that far in[side]?* she wondered.

N[o] way José, he replied.

Lan[gley] will flip.

B[ig]-time, her husband agreed. Bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, full count, and the pitcher had hung a curveball right over Main Street, and he was about to stroke it over the scoreboard. *Assuming we don't fuck it all up,* Foley warned himself.

Want me to get inv[olved]? she wondered next.

Need to wait n s[ee].

A sigh told him, *Yeah, I know.* Even for them, patience came hard. Foley could see that curveball, hanging right over the middle of the plate, just about belt-high, and the Louisville Slugger was tight in his hands: his eyes were locked on the ball so tight that he could see the stitches turning as it approached—and this one was going out of the park, going downfuckin'-town. He'd show Reggie Jackson who was the hitter on this playground . . .

If he didn't fuck it up, he thought again. But Ed Foley had done this kind of operation in Tehran, had developed an agent in the revolutionary community, and had been the only field officer in the station to get a feel for how bad it was for the Shah, and that series of reports had lit up his star at Langley and made him one of Bob Ritter's varsity.

And he was going to take this one deep, too.

At Langley, MERCURY was the one place that everyone was afraid of—*everybody* knew that an employee there under foreign control could damned near bring the whole building down. That was why they all went "on the box" twice a year, polygraphed by the best

examiners FBI had—they didn't even trust CIA's own polygraph experts for that tasking. A bad field officer or a bad senior analyst could burn agents and missions, and that was bad for everyone involved—but a leaker in MERCURY would be like turning a female KGB officer loose on Fifth Avenue with an American Express Gold Card. She'd be able to get anything her heart desired. Hell, the KGB might even pay a million bucks for such a source. It would bust the Russian exchequer, but they would cash in one of Nikolay II's Fabergé eggs, and be glad for it. Everyone knew there had to be a KGB counterpart office to MERCURY, but nobody in any intelligence service had ever bagged a Russian national from there.

Foley found himself wondering what it was like, how the room looked. At Langley it was immense, the size of a parking garage, with no internal walls or dividers, so that everyone could see everyone else. There were seven drum-shaped cassette storage structures, named for Disney's Seven Dwarfs; they even had TV cameras on the inside, should some lunatic try to get in there, though he'd almost certainly be killed by such an adventure, since the motorized retrievers turned powerfully and without warning. Besides, only the big mainframe computers—including the fastest and most powerful one, made by Cray Research—knew which cassette had which data and lay in which storage slot. The security there was unreal, multilayered, and checked on a daily—maybe an hourly—basis. The people who worked there were occasionally and randomly followed home from work, probably by the FBI, which was pretty good at such stuff, for a bunch of gumshoed cops. It must have been oppressive for the people who worked there, but if anyone had ever complained about it, those reports hadn't come to Ed Foley. Marines had to run their three miles per day and undergo formal inspections, and CIA employees had to put up with the overpowering institutional paranoia, and that was just how things were. The polygraph was a particular pain in the ass, and the Agency even had psychiatrists who trained people in how to defeat them. He'd undergone such training, and so had his wife—and still CIA put them on the box at least once a year, whether to test their loyalty or to see if they still remembered their training, who could tell?

But did KGB do that as well? They'd be crazy not to, but he wasn't sure if they had polygraph technology, and so . . . maybe, maybe not. There was so much about KGB that he and CIA didn't know. Langley made a lot of SWAGs—stupid wild-ass guesses—mainly from people who said, "Well, we do it this way, and therefore they must, too," which was total horseshit. No two people, and damned-sure no two countries, had ever done anything exactly the same way, and that was why Ed Foley deemed himself one of the best in this crazy business.

He knew better. He never stopped looking. He never did anything the same way twice, except as a ruse, to give a false impression to someone else—especially Russians, who probably (almost certainly, he figured) suffered from the same bureaucratic disease that circumscribed minds at CIA.

Wh[at] if this g[uy] wants a tick[et] out? Mary Pat asked.

First class on Pan Am, her husband answered, as fast as his fingers could move, *and he gets to screw the stew.*

U R bad, Mary Patricia responded, with the gagging sound of a suppressed laugh. But she knew he was right. If this guy wanted to play spy, it might be smarter just to yank his ass out of the USSR and fly him to Washington, and toss in a lifetime pass to Disney World for after the debrief. A Russian would go into sensory overload in the Magic Kingdom, not to mention the newly opened Epcot Center. Coming out of Space Mountain, Ed had joked that CIA ought to rent the whole place for one day and take the Soviet Politburo around, let them ride every ride and gobble down the burgers and swill the Cokes, and then, on the way out, tell them, "This is what Americans do for fun. Unfortunately, we can't show you the things we do when we're serious." And if that didn't scare the piss out of them, nothing would. But it would scare the piss out of them, both Foleys were sure. They—even the important ones with access to everything KGB got out of the Main Enemy—even they were the most insular and provincial of people. For the most part, they really did believe the propaganda because they had nothing to measure it against, because they were as much victims of their system as the poor dumb muzhiks— peasants—driving the dump trucks.

But the Foleys didn't live in a fantasy world.

So, w[e] d[o] what he says, then what? she asked next.

One step at a time, he replied, and she nodded in the darkness. Like having a baby, this couldn't be rushed unless you wanted a funny-looking kid. It told Mary Pat that her husband wasn't a total curmudgeon, though, and that elicited a kiss in the darkness.

ZAITZEV WASN'T COMMUNICATING with his wife. For him, right now, even a half liter of vodka couldn't help him sleep. He'd made his request. Only tomorrow would he know for sure if he was dealing with someone able to help him. What he'd asked wasn't entirely reasonable, but he didn't have the time or the security to be reasonable. He was secure in the knowledge that even KGB couldn't fake what he'd specified. Oh, sure, maybe they could get the Poles or the Romanians or some other socialist country to do it, but not the Americans. Even KGB had its limits.

So, again, he got to wait, but sleep didn't come. Tomorrow he would not be a very happy comrade. He could feel the hangover coming already, like an earthquake trapped and contained inside his skull....

"HOW'D IT GO, SIMON?" Ryan asked.

"It could have been worse. The PM didn't rip my head off. I told her that we only have what we have, and Basil backed me up. She wants more. She said that in my presence."

"No surprise. Ever hear of a president who wanted less information, buddy?"

"Not recently," Harding admitted. Ryan saw the stress bleeding off his workmate. Damned sure he'd have a beer at the pub before heading home. The Brit analyst loaded his pipe and lit it, taking a long pull.

"If it makes you feel any better, Langley doesn't have any more than you guys do."

"I know. She asked, and that's what Basil said. Evidently, he talked to your Judge Moore before driving over."

"So we're all ignorant together."

"Bloody comforting," Simon Harding snorted.

It was far past going-home time. Ryan had waited to see what Simon would say about the meeting at 10 Downing Street, because Ryan was also here to gather intelligence on the Brits. They would understand, because that was the game they all played. He checked his watch.

"Well, I've got to boogie on home. See you tomorrow."

"Sleep well," Harding said, as Ryan headed out the door. Jack was reasonably sure that Simon would not. He knew what Harding made, as a mid-level civil servant, and it wasn't quite enough for this stressful a day. *But,* he told himself out on the street, *that's Life in the Big City.*

"WHAT DID YOU tell your people, Bob?" Judge Moore asked.

"Just what you told me, Arthur. The President wants to know. No feedback yet. Tell the Boss he's going to have to be patient."

"I said that. He was not overly pleased," the DCI responded.

"Well, Judge, I can't stop the rain from falling. We don't have power over a lot of things, and time is one of them. He's a big boy; he can understand that, can't he?"

"Yes, Robert, but he likes to get what he needs. He's worried about

His Holiness, now that the Pope has kicked over the anthill—"

"Well, we think he has. The Russians might be smart enough to work through diplomatic channels and tell him to cool down and let things work out, and—"

"Bob, that wouldn't work," Admiral Greer put in. "He's not the sort of guy you can warn off with lawyer talk, is he?"

"No," Ritter admitted. This Pope was not a man to compromise on issues of great importance. He'd seen himself through all manner of unpleasantness, from Hitler's Nazis to Stalin's NKVD, and he'd kept his church together by circling the wagons, like settlers against Indian attacks in those old Western movies. He hadn't managed to keep his church alive in Poland by giving in on important issues, had he? And, by holding his ground, he'd maintained enough moral and political strength to threaten the other of the world's superpowers. No, this guy wasn't going to fold under pressure.

Most men feared death and ruin. This one didn't. The Russians would never understand why, but they would understand the respect it earned him. It was becoming clear to Bob Ritter and the other senior intelligence officers in this room that the one single response that would make sense to the Politburo was an attack on the Pope. And the Politburo had met today, though what they had discussed and concluded were frustratingly unknown.

"Bob, do we have any assets who can find out what they talked about in the Kremlin today?"

"We have a few, and they will be alerted in the next two days—or, if they come up with something important, they can decide to get the information on their own hook. If they become aware of something this hot, you'd expect them to figure it out on their own and get a packet of information out to their handlers," Ritter told the DCI. "Hey, Arthur, I don't like waiting and not knowing any more than you do, but we have to let this thing take its course. You know the dangers of a balls-to-the-wall alert to our agents as well as I do."

And all three of them did. That sort of thing had gotten Oleg Penkovskiy killed. The information he'd gotten out had probably averted a nuclear war—and had assisted in the recruitment of CIA's longest-lived agent-in-place, CARDINAL—but that hadn't done Penkovskiy much good. On his discovery, no less a figure than Khrushchev himself had demanded his blood—and gotten it.

"Yeah," Greer agreed, "and this isn't all *that* important in the great scheme of things, is it?"

"No," Judge Moore had to admit, though he didn't especially look forward to explaining that one to the President. But the new Boss did understand things once you made them clear. The really scary part was what the President might do if the Pope were to die unexpectedly.

The Boss, too, was a man of principle, but also a man of emotions. It would be as enraging as waving the Soviet flag in front of a fighting bull. You couldn't let emotion get in the way of statecraft—it only called out more emotion, frequently the mourning of the newly dead. And the miracle of modern technology only served to make the number of such people all the larger. The DCI reproached himself for that thought. The new President was a thoughtful man. His emotions were the servant of his intellect, and his intellect was far larger than it was generally believed, especially by the media, who only saw the smile and the theatrical personality. But the media, like a lot of politicians, was a lot more comfortable dealing with appearances than reality. It was a lot less intellectually demanding, after all. Judge Moore looked at his principal subordinates. "Okay, but let's remember that it can be lonely facing him in the Oval Office when you don't have what he wants."

"I'm sure it is, Arthur," Ritter sympathized.

HE **COULD** STILL TURN BACK, Zaitzev told himself, as sleep still had not come. Next to him, Irina was breathing placidly in sleep. The sleep of the just, it was called. Not the sleeplessness of the traitor.

All he had to do was stop. That was all. He'd taken two small steps, but no more. The American might know his face, but that was easily fixed—take a different metro, walk onto a different carriage. He'd never see him again; their contact would be as broken as a water glass dropped to the floor, and his life would return to normal, and his conscience . . .

. . . would never trouble him again? He snorted. It was his conscience that had gotten him into this mess. No, that wasn't going to go away.

But the other side of that coin was perpetual worry and sleeplessness, and fear. He hadn't really tasted the fear yet. That would come, he was sure. Treason had only one punishment. Death for the traitor, followed by ruin for his survivors. They'd be sent off to Siberia—to count trees, as the euphemism went. It was the Soviet hell, a place of eternal damnation, from which death was the only escape.

In fact, it was exactly what his conscience would do to him if he didn't follow through on his action, Zaitzev realized, finally losing his battle and sliding off into sleep.

A SECOND LATER, so it seemed to him, the alarm clock went off. At least, he hadn't been tormented with dreams. That was the only good

news this morning. His head pounded, threatening to push his eyeballs out of their sockets. He staggered into the bathroom, where he splashed water onto his face and took three aspirin, which, he forlornly hoped, might ease his hangover in a few hours.

He couldn't face sausages for breakfast, since his stomach was also irritated, and so he settled for cereal and milk with some buttered bread on the side. He thought about coffee, but decided a glass of milk would be easier on his stomach.

"You drank too much last night," Irina told him.

"Yes, darling, I know that now," he managed to say, not unpleasantly. His condition wasn't her fault, and she was a good wife to him, and a good mother for Svetlana, his little *zaichik*. He knew that he'd survive this day. He just wouldn't like it much. Worst of all, he had to get going early, and this he did, shaving very badly along the way, but becoming presentable with a clean shirt and tie. He tucked four more aspirin into his coat pocket before walking out the door, and, to get his blood moving, he took the stairs down instead of the elevator. There was a mild chill in the morning air, which helped somewhat on the way to the metro. He bought a copy of *Izvestia* and smoked a Trud, and that helped move him along, too.

If anyone recognized him—well, few would. He was not in the usual carriage, and he was not on the usual train. He was usually fifteen minutes later. He was just one more anonymous face on a subway train filled with anonymous people.

And so no one would note that he was getting off at the wrong station.

The American Embassy was just a couple of blocks away, and he headed that way, checking his watch.

He knew the proper timing because he'd been here once before, as a cadet in the KGB Academy, brought here early one morning in a bus along with forty-five other members of his class. They'd even worn their official uniforms for the trip, probably to remind them of their professional identity. Even then, it had seemed a foolish waste of time, but the academy commandant back then had been a hard-liner, and now the trip served a purpose that would have outraged the man. Zaitzev lit another cigarette as the building came into view.

He checked his watch. At precisely 0730 hours every day, they raised their flag. The academy commandant, ten years before, had pointed and said, "See there, comrades, that is the enemy! That is where he lives in our fine city of Moscow. In that building live spies which those of you who enter the Second Chief Directorate will endeavor to identify and expel from our fair land. There live and work the ones who spy on our country and our people. *That* is their flag. Remember it always." And then, exactly on time, the flag had been

hoisted to the top of a white pole with a bronze eagle at the top, hauled up by members of the United States Marine Corps in their pretty uniforms. Zaitzev had checked his watch in the metro station. It should be right about . . . now.

A BUGLE **BLEW** a tune that he didn't know. He could just make out the white caps of the Marines, barely visible above the stone parapet of the building's flat roof. He was on the other side of the street, just by the old church, which KGB had crammed full of electronic devices.

There, he thought, staring, along with a handful of other passersby on the cracked cement sidewalk.

Yes, he saw. The top part of the flag as it appeared was red and white horizontal stripes, not the blue canton with its fifty white stars. The flag was being hoisted upside down! It was unmistakably wrong. And it went all the way to the top of the pole that way.

So, they did as I asked. Quickly, Zaitzev walked to the end of the block and turned right, then right again, and back to the metro station he'd just left, and, with the payment of a large five-kopeck copper coin, he boarded another subway car for the trip to Dzerzhinskiy Square.

Just that quickly, his hangover went away, as though by magic. He scarcely even noticed until he took the escalator up to the street level.

The Americans want to help me, the communications officer told himself. *They will* help *me. Perhaps I can save the life of that Polish priest after all.* There was a spring in his step as he entered The Centre.

"SIR, what the fuck was that all about?" Gunnery Sergeant Drake asked Dominic Corso. They'd just fixed the flag back properly atop its pole.

"Gunny, I can't say," was the best Corso could do, though his eyes said a little more.

"Aye aye, sir. How do I log it?"

"You don't log it, Gunny. Somebody made a dumb mistake, and you fixed it."

"You say so, Mr. Corso." The gunnery sergeant would have to explain it to his Marines, but he'd explain it in much the same way in which it had just been explained to him, though, in his case, rather more profanely. If anyone in the Marine Embassy Regiment asked him, he'd just say he'd gotten orders from somebody in the embassy, and Colonel d'Amici would just have to deal with it. What the hell, he could hand the colonel off to Corso. They were both wops, maybe

they'd understand each other, the sergeant from Helena, Montana, hoped. If not, then Colonel d'Amici would tear him and his Marines each a new and bloody asshole.

ZAITZEV TOOK HIS seat after relieving Major Dobrik. The morning traffic was a little lighter than usual, and he began his normal morning routine. Forty minutes later, that changed again.

"Comrade Major," a newly familiar voice said. Zaitzev turned to see Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel. You have something for me?"

"This." Rozhdestvenskiy handed over the message blank. "Please send it out immediately, on the pad."

"By your command. Information copy to you?"

"Correct." Rozhdestvenskiy nodded.

"I presume it's permissible to use an internal messenger to get that to your hand?"

"Yes, it is."

"Very well. I'll have it out in a few minutes."

"Good." Rozhdestvenskiy took his leave.

Zaitzev looked at the dispatch. It was agreeably short. Encryption and transmission took only fifteen minutes.

> MOST SECRET
> IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
> FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
> TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
> REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
> OPERATIONAL APPROVAL EXPECTED TODAY, VIA CHANNELS DISCUSSED IN OUR MEETING. REPORT WHEN PROPER CONTACTS ESTABLISHED.

And that meant that operation -666 was going forward. The day before, that notice had chilled Zaitzev, but not today. Today he knew he'd be doing something to prevent it. If anything bad happened now, it would be the fault of the Americans. That made a considerable difference. Now he just had to figure how to establish some sort of regular contact with them....

UPSTAIRS, Andropov had the Foreign Minister in his office.

"So, Andrey, how do we go about this?"

"Ordinarily our Ambassador would meet with their First Secretary, but, in the interests of security, we might want to try another method of approach."

"How much executive authority does their First Secretary have?" the Chairman asked.

"About as much as Koba did thirty years ago. Bulgaria is run in a very tight way. Their Politburo members represent various constituencies, but only their Party First Secretary really has decision-making power."

"Ah." That was good news to Yuriy Vladimirovich. He lifted his desk phone. "Send in Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," he told his secretary.

The colonel appeared through the dresser door in two minutes. "Yes, Comrade Chairman."

"Andrey, this is Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, my executive assistant. Colonel, does our Sofia *rezident* talk directly to the Bulgarian head of government?"

"Rarely, comrade, but he has done so occasionally in the past." Rozhdestvenskiy was surprised that the Chairman didn't know that, but he was still learning how field operations worked. At least he had the good sense to ask questions, and he was not embarrassed to do so.

"Very well. For security reasons, we would prefer that the entire Bulgarian Politburo not know the scope of this operation -666. So, do you think we could have Colonel Bubovoy brief in their party chief and get approval by a more direct route?"

"To that end, a signed letter from Comrade Brezhnev would probably be necessary," Rozhdestvenskiy answered.

"Yes, that would be the best way to do it," the Foreign Minister agreed at once. "A good thought, colonel," he added approvingly.

"Very well. We'll get that today. Leonid Ilyich will be in his office, Andrey?"

"Yes, Yuriy. I will call ahead and tell him what is needed. I can have it drafted in my office if you wish, or would you prefer it to be done here?"

"With your permission, Andrey," Andropov said graciously, "better that we should do it. And we'll have it couriered to Sofia for delivery tomorrow or the day after."

"Better to give our Bulgarian comrade a few days, Yuriy. They are our allies, but they remain a sovereign country, after all."

"Quite so, Andrey." Every country in the world had a bureaucracy, whose entire purpose was to delay important things from happening.

"And we don't want the world to know that our *rezident* is making a highly important call on the man," the Foreign Minister added, teaching the KGB Chairman a little lesson in operational security, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy noted.

"How long after that, Aleksey Nikolay'ch?" Andropov asked his aide.

"Several weeks, at least." He saw annoyance in his boss's eyes and

decided to explain. “Comrade Chairman, selecting the right assassin will not be a matter of lifting a phone and dialing a number. Strokov will necessarily be careful in making his selection. People are not as predictable as machines, after all, and this is the most important—and most sensitive—aspect of the operation.”

“Yes, I suppose that is so, Aleksey. Very well. Notify Bubovoy that a hand-delivered message is on the way.”

“Now, Comrade Chairman, or after we have it signed and ready for dispatch?” Rozhdestvenskiy asked the question like a skilled bureaucrat, letting his boss know the best way without saying it out loud.

This colonel would go far, the Foreign Minister thought, taking note of his name for the first time.

“A good point, Colonel. Very well, I will let you know when the letter is ready to go.”

“By your command, Comrade Chairman. Do you need me further?”

“No, that is all for now,” Andropov answered, sending him on his way.

“Yuriy Vladimirovich, you have a good aide.”

“Yes, there is so much for me still to learn here,” Andropov admitted. “And he educates me every day.”

“You are fortunate in having so many expert people.”

“That is the truth, Andrey Andreyevich. That is the truth.”

DOWN THE HALL in his office, Rozhdestvenskiy drew up the brief dispatch for Bubovoy. This was moving fast, he thought, but not fast enough for the Chairman of the KGB. He really wanted that priest dead. The Politburo certainly seemed fearful of political earthquakes, but Rozhdestvenskiy himself was doubtful of that. The Pope, after all, was just one person, but the colonel had tailored his advice to what his boss wanted to hear, like a good functionary, while also letting the Chairman know the things he needed to know. His job actually carried great power with it. Rozhdestvenskiy knew that he could break the careers of officers whom he did not like and influence operations to a significant degree. If CIA ever tried to recruit him, he could be an agent of great value. But Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was a patriot, and besides, the Americans probably had no idea who he was and what he did. The CIA was more feared than it deserved to be. The Americans didn’t really have a feel for espionage. The English did, but KGB and its antecedents had enjoyed some success at infiltrating it in the past. Less so today, unfortunately. The young Cambridge communists of the 1930s were all old now, either in British prisons or drawing their government pensions in peace, or living out their years in Moscow,

like Kim Philby, considered a drunk even by Muscovites. He probably drank because he missed his country—missed the place in which he'd grown up, the food and drink and football games, the newspapers with which he'd always philosophically disagree, but he'd miss them even so. *What a terrible thing it must be to be a defector,* Rozhdestvenskiy thought.

WHAT WILL I DO? Zaitzev asked himself. *What will I ask for?*

Money? CIA probably paid its spies very well—more money than he would ever be able to spend. Luxuries beyond his imagination. A videotape machine! They were just becoming available in Russia, mainly made in Hungary, patterned after Western machines. The bigger problem was in getting tapes—pornographic ones were particularly in demand. Some of his KGB coworkers spoke of such things. Zaitzev had never seen one himself, but he was curious, as any man might be. The Soviet Union was run by such conservative men. Maybe the Politburo members were just too old to enjoy sex, and so saw no need for younger citizens to indulge.

He shook his head. Enough! He had to decide what to tell the American in the metro. That was a task that he chewed on with his lunch in the KGB cafeteria.

CHAPTER 15

MEETING PLACE

MARY PAT WAS EXPECTED to come into the embassy sometimes, to see her husband about family matters or to purchase special food items from the commissary. To do this, she always dressed up—better than she did for the Moscow streets—with her hair well-brushed and held in place by a youthful headband, and her makeup done, so that when she drove into the compound parking lot she would look like a typical airheaded American blonde. She smiled to herself. She liked being a natural blonde, and anything that made her appear dumb worked for her cover.

So she breezed in the front door, waving airily at the ever-polite Marines, and into the elevator. She found her husband alone in his office.

"Hey, baby." Ed rose to kiss her, then drew back to take in the whole picture. "Looking good."

"Well, it's an effective disguise." It had worked fine in Iran, too, especially when she'd been pregnant. That country didn't treat women especially well, but it did extend them an odd deference, especially when pregnant, she'd found, right before she'd skipped the country for good. It was one station she didn't particularly miss.

"Yeah, babe. Just gotta get you a surfboard and a nice beach, maybe the Banzai Pipeline."

"Oh, Ed, that's just so *tubular*. And Banzai Beach is in Hawaii, dummy." A quick gear change. "The flag go up wrong?"

"Yep. The TV cameras didn't show anyone on the street paying particular attention to it. But you could see it from a block away, and the security cameras don't look that far out. We'll see if our friend drops a message in my pocket on the ride home tonight."

"What did the Marines say?" she asked.

"They asked why, but Dom didn't tell them anything. Hell, he doesn't know either, does he?"

"He's a good spook, Dominic is," Mary Pat judged.

"Ritter likes him. Oh," Foley remembered. He fished a message out of his drawer and handed it across.

"Shit," his wife breathed, scanning it quickly. "The *Pope*? Those

motherfuckers want to kill the Pope?" Mary Pat didn't always talk like a California blonde.

"Well, there's no information to suggest that directly, but, if they want to, we're supposed to find out."

"Sounds like a job for WOODCUTTER," who was their man in the Party Secretariat.

"Or maybe CARDINAL?" Ed wondered.

"We haven't flagged him yet," MP pointed out, but it would soon be time to check in with him. They checked his apartment every night for the light-and-blinds combination in his living room. His apartment was agreeably close to their own, and the ratline was well established, beginning with a piece of paper tape on a lamppost. Setting that flag signal was MP's job. She'd already walked Little Eddie by it half a dozen times. "Is this a job for him?" she asked.

"The President wants to know," her husband pointed out.

"Yeah." But CARDINAL was their most important agent-in-place, and not one to be alerted unless it was really critical. CARDINAL would also know to get something like this out on his own if he became aware of it. "I'd hold off on that unless Ritter says different."

"Agreed," Ed Foley conceded. If Mary Pat advised caution, then caution was justified. After all, she was the one who enjoyed taking risks and betting her skill against the house odds. But that didn't mean that his wife was a reckless player, either. "I'll sit on that one for a while."

"Be nice to see what your new contact will do next."

"Bet your cute little tushy, babe. Want to meet the Ambassador?"

"I suppose it's time," she agreed.

"SO, RECOVER FROM yesterday?" Ryan asked Harding. It was the first time he'd beaten his workmate into the office.

"Yes, I suppose I have."

"If it makes you feel any better, I haven't met the President yet, myself. And I'm not exactly looking forward to the experience. Like Mark Twain said about the guy who got himself tarred and feathered, if it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon have missed it."

Harding managed a brief laugh. "Precisely, Jack. One does go a little weak in the knees."

"Is she as tough as they say?"

"I'm not sure I'd want to play rugger against her. She's also very, very bright. Doesn't miss a thing, and asks bloody good questions."

"Well, answering them is what they pay us for, Simon," Ryan pointed out. There was no sense being afraid of people who were only

doing their job as well, and who needed good information to do it properly.

"And her, too, Jack. She has to do questions in Parliament."

"On this sort of thing?" Jack asked, surprised.

"No, not this. It's occasionally discussed with the opposition, but under strict rules."

"You worry about leaks?" Jack asked, wondering. In America, there were select committees whose members were thoroughly briefed on what they could say and what they could not. The Agency did worry about leaks—they were politicians, after all—but he'd never heard of a serious one off The Hill. Those more often came from inside the Agency, and mainly from the Seventh Floor . . . or from the White House's West Wing. That didn't mean that CIA was comfortable with leaks of any kind, but at least these were more often than not sanctioned, and often they were disinformation with a political purpose behind them. It was probably the same here, especially since the local news media operated under controls that would have given *The New York Times* a serious conniption fit.

"One always wonders about them, Jack. So, anything new come in last night?"

"Nothing new on the Pope," Ryan reported. "Our sources, such as they are, have run into a brick wall. Will you be turning your field spooks loose?"

"Yes, the PM made it clear to Basil that she wants more information. If something happens to His Holiness, well—"

"—she blows a head gasket, right?"

"You Americans do have a way with words, Jack. And your President?"

"He'll be seriously pissed, and by that I do not mean hitting the booze. His dad was Catholic, and his mom raised him a Protestant, but he wouldn't be real happy if the Pope so much as catches a late-summer cold."

"You know, even if we turn some information, it is not at all certain that we'll be able to do a thing with it."

"I kinda figured that, but at least we can say something to his protective detail. We can do that much, and maybe he can change his schedule—no, he won't. He'd rather take the bullet like a man. But maybe we can interfere somehow with what the Bad Guys are planning. You just can't know until you have a few facts to rub together. But that's not really our job, is it?"

Harding shook his head, as he stirred his morning tea. "No, the field officers feed it to us, and we try to determine what it means."

"Frustrating?" Ryan wondered. Harding had been at the job much longer than he had.

"Frequently. I know the field officers sweat blood doing their jobs—and it can be physically dangerous to the ones who do not have a 'legal' cover—but we users of information can't always see it from their perspective. As a result, they do not appreciate us as much as we appreciate them. I've met with a few of them over the years, and they are good chaps, but it's a clash of cultures, Jack."

The field guys are probably pretty good at analysis themselves, when you get down to it, Ryan thought. *I wonder how often the analyst community really appreciates that?* It was something for Ryan to slip into his mental do-not-forget file. The Agency was supposed to be one big happy team, after all. Of course it wasn't, even at the Seventh Floor level.

"Anyway, we had this come in from East Germany." Jack handed the folder across. "Some rumbles in their political hierarchy last week."

"Those bloody Prussians," Harding breathed, as he took it and flipped to the first page.

"Cheer up. The Russians don't much like them either."

"I don't blame them a bit."

ZAITZEV WAS DOING some hard thinking at his desk, as his brain worked on autopilot. He'd have to meet with his new American friend. There was danger involved, unless he could find a nice, anonymous place. The good news was that Moscow abounded with such places. The bad news was that the Second Chief Directorate of the KGB probably knew all of them. But if it was crowded enough, that didn't matter.

What would he say?

What would he ask for?

What would he offer them?

Those were all good questions, weren't they? The dangers would only increase. The best possible outcome would be for him to leave the Soviet Union permanently, with his wife and daughter.

Yes, that was what he'd ask for, and if the Americans said no, he'd just melt back into his accustomed reality, knowing that he'd tried. He had things they would want, and he'd make it clear to them that the price of that information was his escape.

Life in the West, he thought. All the decadent things the State preached to everyone who could read a newspaper or watch TV, all the awful things they talked about. The way America treated its minorities. They even showed pictures on TV of the slum areas—but they also showed automobiles. If America oppressed its blacks, why, then, did it allow them to purchase so many automobiles? Why did it

permit them to riot in the streets? Had that sort of thing happened in the USSR, the government would have called in armed troops. So no, the state propaganda could not be entirely true, could it? And, besides, wasn't he white? What did he care about some discontented blacks who could buy any car they wished? Like most Russians, he'd only seen black people on TV—his first reaction was to wonder if there really were such a thing as a chocolate man, but, yes, there were. KGB ran operations in Africa. But then he asked himself: Could he remember a KGB operation in America using a black agent? Not very many, perhaps one or two, and those had both been sergeants in the American army. If blacks were oppressed, how then did they get to become sergeants? In the Red Army, only the politically reliable were admitted to Sergeant School. So, one more lie uncovered—and that one only because he worked for KGB. What other lies was he being told? Why not leave? Why not ask the Americans for a ticket out?

But will they grant it? Zaitzev wondered.

Surely they would. He could tell them about all manner of KGB operations in the West. He had the names of officers and the code names of agents—traitors to the Western governments, people whom they would definitely wish to eliminate.

Was that being an accessory to murder? he asked himself.

No, it was not. Those persons were *traitors*, after all. And a traitor was a traitor....

And what does that make you, Oleg Ivanovich? The little voice in his mind asked, just to torment him.

But he was strong enough now to shake it off with a simple movement of his head left and right. Traitor? No, he was *preventing* a murder, and that was an honorable thing. And he was an honorable man.

But he still had to figure a way to do it. He had to meet with an American spy and say what he wanted.

Where and how?

It would have to be a crowded place, where people could bump into each other so naturally that even a counterspy from the Second Chief Directorate would not be able to see what was happening or hear what was being said.

And suddenly he realized: His own wife worked in such a place.

So he'd write it down on another blank message form and transfer it on the metro as he'd already done twice. Then he'd see if the Americans really wanted to play his game. He was in the Chairman's seat now, wasn't he? He had something they wanted, and he controlled how they could get it, and he would make the rules in this game, and they would have to play by those rules. It was just that simple, wasn't it?

Yes, he told himself.

Wasn't this rich? He'd be doing something the KGB had always wanted to do, dictate terms to the American CIA.

Chairman for a day, the communicator told himself. The words had a delicious taste to them.

IN LONDON, Cathy watched as two local ophthalmic surgeons worked on one Ronald Smithson, a bricklayer with a tumor behind his right eye. The X-rays showed a mass about half the size of a golf ball, which had been so worrisome that Mr. Smithson had only waited five weeks for the procedure to be done. That was maybe thirty-three days longer than it would have been at Hopkins, but considerably faster than was usual over here.

The two Moorefields surgeons were Clive Hood and Geoffrey Phillips, both experienced senior residents. It was a fairly routine procedure. After exposing the tumor, a sliver was removed for freezing and dispatch to Pathology—they had a good histopathologist on duty and he would decide if the growth was benign or malignant. Cathy hoped for the former, as the malignant variety of this tumor could be troublesome for its victims. But the odds were heavily on the patient's side, she thought. On visual examination it didn't look terribly aggressive, and her eye was right about 85 percent of the time. It was bad science to tell herself that, and she knew it. It was almost superstition, but surgeons, like baseball players, knew about superstition. That was why they put their socks on the same way every morning—pantyhose, in her case—because they just fell into a pattern of living, and surgeons were creatures of habit, and they tended to translate those dumb personal habits into the outcome of their procedures. So, with the frozen section off to Pathology, it was just a matter of excising the pinkish-gray encapsulated mass....

"What time is it, Geoffrey?" Dr. Hood asked.

"Quarter to one, Clive," Dr. Phillips reported, checking the wall clock.

"How about we break for lunch, then?"

"Fine with me. I could use something to eat. We'll need to call in another anesthesiologist to keep Mr. Smithson unconscious," their gas-passer observed.

"Well, call and get one, Owen, would you?" Hood suggested.

"Righto," Dr. Ellis agreed. He left his chair at the patient's head and walked to the wall phone. He was back in seconds. "Two minutes."

"Excellent. Where to, Geoffrey?" Hood asked.

"The Frog and Toad? They serve a fine bacon, lettuce, and tomato with chips."

"Splendid," Hood said.

Cathy Ryan, standing behind Dr. Phillips, kept her mouth shut behind the surgical mask, but her china-blue eyes had gone wide. *They were leaving a patient unconscious on the table while they went to lunch?* Who were these guys, witch doctors?

The backup anesthesiologist came in just then, all gowned up and ready to take over. "Anything I need to know, Owen?" he asked Ellis.

"Entirely routine," the primary gas-passer replied. He pointed to the various instruments measuring the patient's vital signs, and they were all in the dead center of normal values, Cathy saw. But even so . . .

Hood led them out to the dressing room, where the four medics shucked their greens and grabbed their coats, then left for the corridor and the steps down to street level. Cathy followed, not knowing what else to do.

"So, Caroline, how do you like London?" Hood asked pleasantly.

"We like it a lot," she answered, still somewhat shell-shocked.

"And your children?"

"Well, we have a very nice nanny, a young lady from South Africa."

"One of our more civilized local customs," Phillips observed approvingly.

The pub was scarcely a block away, west on City Road. A table was quickly found. Hood immediately fished out a cigarette and lit it. He noticed Cathy's disapproving look.

"Yes, Mrs. Ryan, I know it's not healthy and bad form for a physician, but we are all entitled to one human weakness, aren't we?"

"You're seeking approval from the wrong person," she responded.

"Ah, well, I'll blow the smoke away from you, then." Hood had himself a chuckle as the waiter came over. "What sort of beer do you have here?" he asked him.

It was good that he smoked, Cathy told herself. She had trouble handling more than one major shock at a time, but at least that one gave her fair warning. Hood and Phillips both decided on John Courage. Ellis preferred Tetley's. Cathy opted for a Coca-Cola. The docs mainly talked shop, as physicians often do.

For her part, Caroline Ryan sat back in her wooden chair, observing three physicians enjoying beer, and, in one case, a smoke, while their blissfully unconscious patient was on nitrous oxide in Operating Room #3.

"So, how do we do things here? Differently from Johns Hopkins?" Hood asked, as he stubbed out his cigarette.

Cathy nearly gagged, but decided not to make any of the comments running around her brain. "Well, surgery is surgery. I'm surprised that you don't have very many CAT scans. Same for MRI and PET scanners. How can you do without them? I mean, at home, for Mr. Smithson, I

wouldn't even think of going in without a good set of shots of the tumor."

"She's right, you know," Hood thought, after a moment's reflection. "Our bricklayer chum could have waited several months more if we'd had a better idea of the extent of the growth."

"You wait that long for a hemangioma?" Cathy blurted out. "At home, we take them out immediately." She didn't have to add that these things *hurt* to have inside your skull. It caused a frontal protrusion of the eyeball itself, sometimes with blurring of vision—which was why Mr. Smithson had gone to this local doctor to begin with. He'd also reported god-awful headaches that must have driven him mad until they'd given him a codeinebased analgesic.

"Well, here things operate a little differently."

Uh-huh. That must be a good way to practice medicine, by the hour instead of by the patient. Lunch arrived. The sandwich was okay—better than the hospital food she was accustomed to—but she still couldn't get over these guys drinking *beer!* The local beer was about double the potency of American stuff, and they were drinking a full pint of it—*sixteen ounces! What the* hell *was this?*

"Ketchup for your chips, Cathy?" Ellis slid the bottle over. "Or should I say Lady Caroline? I hear that His Highness is your son's godfather?"

"Well, sort of. He agreed to it—Jack asked him on the spur of the moment in the hospital at the Naval Academy. The real godparents are Robby and Sissy Jackson. Robby's a Navy fighter pilot. Sissy plays concert piano."

"Was that the black chap in the papers?"

"That's right. Jack met him when they were both teachers at the Naval Academy, and they're very close friends."

"Quite so. So the news reports were correct? I mean—"

"I try not to think about it. The only good thing that happened that night was that Little Jack arrived."

"I quite understand that, Cathy," Ellis responded around his sandwich. "If the news accounts were accurate, it must have been a horrid evening."

"It wasn't fun." She managed a smile. "The labor and delivery was the good part."

The three Brits had a good laugh at that remark. All had kids, and all had been there for the deliveries, which were no more fun for British women than for American women. Half an hour later, they headed back to Moorefields. Hood smoked another cigarette along the way, though he had the good manners do stay downwind of his American colleague. Ten more minutes, and they were back in the OR. The pinch-hitting gas-passer reported that nothing untoward had

taken place, and surgery resumed.

"Want me to assist now?" Cathy asked hopefully.

"No, thank you, Cathy," Hood replied. "I have it," he added, bending over his patient, who, being soundly asleep, wouldn't smell the beer on his breath.

Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, thought to congratulate herself for not screaming her head off, but mostly she leaned in as closely as she could to make sure these two Englishmen didn't screw up and remove the patient's ear by mistake. *Maybe the alcohol would help steady their hands,* she told herself. But she had to concentrate to keep her own hands from trembling.

THE CROWN AND CUSHION was a delightful, if typical, London pub. The sandwich was just fine, and Ryan enjoyed a pint of John Smith Ale while talking shop with Simon. He thought vaguely about serving beer at the CIA cafeteria, but that would never fly. Someone in Congress would find out and raise hell in front of the C-Span cameras, while enjoying a glass of Chardonnay with his lunch in the Capitol Building, of course, or something a little stronger in his office. The culture was just different here, and *vive la difference,* he thought, walking across Westminster Bridge Road toward Big Ben—the bell, not the bell *tower*, which was, in fact, St. Mary's Bell Tower, tourist errors to the contrary. The Parliamentarians there had three or four pubs right there in the building, Ryan was sure. And they probably didn't get any drunker than their American colleagues.

"You know, Simon, I think everyone's worried about this."

"It's a pity he had to send that letter to Warsaw, isn't it?"

"Could you expect him not to?" Ryan countered. "They are his people. It is his homeland, after all, isn't it? It's his parish the Russians are trying to stomp on."

"That is the problem," Harding agreed. "But the Russians will not change. Impasse."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah. What's the chance that the Russians will back off?"

"Absent a solid reason to, not a very great chance. Will your President try to warn them off?"

"Even if he could, he wouldn't. Not on something like this, buddy."

"So we have two sides. One is driven by what it deems to be the proper moral course of action—and the other by political necessity, by fear of not acting. As I said, Jack, it's a bloody impasse."

"Father Tim at Georgetown liked to say that wars are begun by

frightened men. They're afraid of the consequences of war, but they are more afraid of not fighting. Hell of a way to run a world," Ryan thought out loud, opening the door for his friend.

"August 1914 as the model, I expect."

"Right, but at least those guys all believed in God. The second go-round was a little different in that respect. The players in that one—the Bad Guys, anyway—didn't live under that particular constraint. Neither do the guys in Moscow. You know, there have to be some limits on our actions, or we can turn into monsters."

"Tell that to the Politburo, Jack," Harding suggested lightly.

"Yeah, Simon, sure." Ryan headed off to the men's room to dump some of his liquid lunch.

THE EVENING DIDN'T come quickly enough for either of the players. Ed Foley wondered what was coming next. There was no guarantee that this guy would follow up on what he'd started. He could always get cold feet—actually, it'd be rather a sensible thing for him to do. Treason was dangerous outside the U.S. Embassy. He was still wearing a green tie—the other one; he had only two—for luck, because he'd gotten to the point where luck counted. Whoever the guy was, just so he didn't get cold feet.

Come on, Ivan, keep coming and we'll give you the joint, Foley thought, trying to reach out with his mind. *Lifetime ticket to Disney World, all the football games you can handle. Oleg Penkovskiy wanted to meet Kennedy and, yeah, we can probably swing that with the new President. Hell, we'll even throw in a movie in the White House theater.*

AND ACROSS TOWN, Mary Pat was thinking exactly the same thing. If this went one more step, she'd play a part in the opening drama. If this guy worked in the Russian MERCURY, and if he wanted a ticket out of Mother Russia, then she and Ed would have to figure a way to make that happen. There *were* ways, and they'd been used before, but they weren't what you'd call "routine." Soviet border security wasn't exactly perfect, but it was pretty tight—tight enough to make you sweat playing with it, and though she had the sort of demeanor that often worked well while playing serious games, it didn't make you feel comfortable. And so she started kicking some ideas around, just in her head, as she worked around the apartment and little Eddie took his afternoon nap, and the hours crept by, one lengthy second at a time.

ED FOLEY HADN'T sent any messages off to Langley yet. It wasn't time. He had nothing substantive to report, and there was no sense getting Bob Ritter all excited over something that hadn't developed yet. It happened often enough: People made approaches to CIA and then felt a chill inside their shoes and backed away. You couldn't chase after them. More often than not, you didn't even know who they were and, if you did, and if they decided not to play, the sensible thing for the other guy was to report you to KGB. That fingered you as a spook—rendering your value to your country as approximately zero—and covered his ass nicely as a loyal and vigilant Soviet citizen, doing his duty to the Motherland.

People didn't realize that CIA almost never recruited its agents. No, those people came to you—sometimes cleverly, sometimes not. That left you open to be fooled by a false-flag operation. The American FBI was particularly good at that sort of play, and KGB's Second Chief Directorate was known to use the gambit, too, just to identify spooks on the embassy staff, which was always something worth doing. If you knew who they were, you could follow them and watch them service their dead-drops, and then camp out on the drop site to see who else stopped off there. Then you had your traitor, who could lead you to other traitors, and with luck you could roll up a whole spy ring, which earned you a gold star—well, a nice red star—in your copybook. Counterespionage officers could make their whole careers on one such case, both in Russia and in America, and so they worked pretty hard at it. The Second Directorate people were numerous—supposedly, half of KGB's personnel were in there—and they were smart, professional spooks with all sorts of resources, and the patience of a vulture circling over the Arizona desert, sniffing the air for the smell of a dead jackrabbit, then homing in to feast on the carcass.

But KGB was more dangerous than a vulture. A vulture didn't actively hunt. Ed Foley could never be sure if he had a shadow as he traveled around Moscow. Oh, sure, he might spot one, but that could just be a deliberate effort to put a clumsy—or an exceedingly clever—officer on his tail to see if he'd try to shake him. All intelligence officers were trained in surveillance and countersurveillance, and the techniques were both universally valid and universally recognized, and so Foley *never* used them. Not ever. Not even once. It was too dangerous to be clever in this game, because you could never be clever enough. There were other countermoves to use when necessary, like the preplanned brush-pass known to every spook in the world, but very difficult to spot even so, because of its very simplicity. No, when

that failed, it was usually because your agent got rattled. It was a lot harder to be an agent than a field officer. Foley had diplomatic cover. The Russians could have movie film of him buggering Andropov's pet goat and not be able to do a thing about it. He was technically a diplomat, and protected by the Vienna Convention, which made his person inviolable—even in time of war, though things got a little dicier then. But that, Foley judged, was not a problem. He'd be fried like everyone else in Moscow then, and so would not be lonely in whatever afterlife spies inhabited.

He wrenched his mind away from the irrelevancies, entertaining though they might be. It came down to one thing: Would his friend Ivan take the next step, or would he just fade back into the woodwork, taking satisfaction that he'd managed to make the U.S. Embassy dance to his tune one cool Moscow morning? To find that out, you had to turn over the cards. Would it be blackjack, or just a pair of fours?

That's why you got into this business, Ed, Foley reminded himself—the thrill of the chase. It sure as hell was a thrill, even if the game disappeared into the mists of the forest. It was more fun skinning the bear than smelling it.

Why was this guy doing what he was doing? Money? Ideology? Conscience? Ego? Those were the classic reasons, as summarized by the acronym MICE. Some spies just wanted the mayonnaise jar full of onehundred-dollar bills. Some came to believe in the politics of the foreign countries they served with the religious fervor of the newly converted. Some were troubled because their Motherland was doing something they couldn't abide. Some just knew they were better men than their bosses, and this was a way to get even with the sons-of-bitches.

Historically, ideological spies were the most productive. Men would put their lives on the betting line for their beliefs—which was why religious wars were so bloody. Foley preferred the monetarily motivated. They were always rational, and they'd take chances, because the bigger the risk, the greater their reward. Ego-driven agents were touchy and troublesome. Revenge was never a pretty motive for doing anything, and those people were usually unstable. Conscience was almost as good as ideology. At least they were driven by a principle of sorts. The truth of the matter was that CIA paid its agents well, just out of the spirit of fair play if nothing else, and besides, it didn't hurt to have that word out on the street. Knowing that you'd be properly compensated made for one hell of a tiebreaker for those who had trouble making up their minds. Whatever your baseline motivation, being paid was always attractive. The ideological needed to eat, too. So did the conscience-driven. And the ego types saw that living well was indeed a pretty good form of revenge.

Which one are you, Ivan? Foley wondered. *What is driving you to betray your country?* The Russians were a ferociously patriotic people. When Stephen Decatur said, "Our country, right or wrong," he could well have been speaking as a Russian citizen. But the country was so badly run—tragically so. Russia had to be the world's unluckiest nation—first too large to be governed efficiently; then taken over by the hopelessly inept Romanovs; and then, when even they couldn't hold back the vitality of their nation, dropped screaming into the bloody maw of the First World War, suffering such huge casualties that Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—Lenin—had been able to take over and set in place a political regime calculated to do destruction to itself; then handing the wounded country over to the most vicious psychopath since Caligula, in the person of Josef Stalin. The accumulation of that sort of abuse was beginning to shake the faith of the people here....

Your mind sure is wandering, Foley, the Chief of Station told himself. Another half hour. He'd leave the embassy on time and catch the metro, with his topcoat open and loose around him, and just wait and see. He headed off to the men's room. Occasionally, his bladder got as excited as his intellect.

ACROSS TOWN, Zaitzev took his time. He'd be able to write on only one message blank—throwing one away in plain view was too dangerous, the burn bag could not be trusted, and he could hardly light one up in his ashtray—and so he mentally composed his message, then rethought the words, then rethought them again, and again, and again.

The process took him more than an hour in full, and then he was able to write it up surreptitiously, fold it, and tuck it into his cigarette pack.

LITTLE EDDIE SLID his favorite *Transformers* tape into the VCR. Mary Pat watched idly, behind her son's rapt attention on the living room floor. Then it hit her.

That's what I am, she realized. *I transform myself from ditsy blonde housewife to CIA spy. And I do it seamlessly.* The thought appealed to her. She was giving the Soviet Bear a peptic ulcer, hopefully a bleeding one that wouldn't be fixed by drinking milk and taking Rolaids. *In another forty minutes, Ed will find out if his new friend really wants to play and, if he wants to play, I'll have to work the agent. I'll hold his hand and lead him along and take his information and send it off to*

Langley.

What will he give us? she wondered. *Something nice and juicy? Does he work in their communications center, or does he just have access to a blank message pad? Probably a lot of those in The Centre . . . well, maybe, depending on their security procedures.* Those would be pretty stringent. Only a very few people would be trusted with KGB signals....

And that was the worm dangling on the hook, she knew, watching a Kenworth diesel tractor turn into a two-legged robot. This Christmas, they'd have to start buying those toys. She wondered if Little Eddie would need help transforming them.

THE TIME CAME. Ed would leave the embassy door exactly on time, which would be a comfort to his shadow, if any. If there was, he'd notice a green tie again, and think that the earlier one was not all that unusual—not unusual enough to be any sort of signal for an agent he might be working. *Even the KGB couldn't think every embassy employee was a spook,* Foley told himself. Despite the paranoia that was pandemic in the Soviet Union, even they knew the rules of the game, and his friend from the *The New York Times* had probably told his own contacts that Foley was a dumb son of a bitch who hadn't even made it as a police reporter in the Big Apple, where the busy police made that field about as difficult as watching TV on a weekend. The best possible cover for a spook was to be too dumb, and what better person to set it up for him than that arrogant ass, Anthony—*never* just plain Tony—Prince.

Out on the street, the air was cool with approaching autumn. Ed wondered if the Russian winter was all it was cracked up to be. If so, you could always dress for cold weather. It was heat that Foley detested, though he remembered playing stickball out on the streets, and the sprinklers on the tops of some of the fire hydrants. The innocence of youth was far behind him. A damned far way behind, the chief of station reflected, checking his watch as he entered the metro station. As before, the efficiency of the metro worked for him, and he entered the usual subway car.

THERE, ZAITZEV THOUGHT, maneuvering that way. His American friend was doing everything exactly as before, reading his paper, his right hand on the grab rail, his raincoat hanging loose around him . . . and in a minute or two, he was standing next to him.

FOLEY'S PERIPHERAL VISION was still working, The shape was there, dressed exactly as before. *Okay, Ivan, make your transfer. . . . Be careful, boy, be very careful,* his mind said, knowing that this sort of thing was going to be too dangerous to sustain. No, they'd have to set up a dead-drop somewhere convenient. But first they'd have to do a meet, and he'd let Mary Pat handle that one for him, probably. She just had a better disguise....

ZAITZEV WAITED UNTIL the train slowed. Bodies shifted as it did so, and he reached quickly in and out of the offered pocket. Then he turned away, slowly, not so far as to be obvious, just a natural motion easily explained by the movement of the metro car.

YES! WELL DONE, IVAN. Every fiber of his being wanted to turn and eyeball the guy, but the rules didn't allow that. If there was a shadow in the car, those people noticed that sort of thing, and it wasn't Ed Foley's job to be noticed. So he waited patiently for his subway stop, and this time he turned right, away from Ivan, and made his way off the car, onto the platform, and up to the cool air on the street.

He didn't reach into his pocket. Instead, he walked all the way home, as normal as a sunset on a clear day, into the elevator, not reaching in even then, because there could well be a video camera in the ceiling.

Not until he got into his flat did Foley pull out the message blank. This time it was anything but blank, covered with black ink letters—as before, written in English. Whoever Ivan was, Foley reflected, he was educated, and that was very good news, wasn't it?

"Hi, Ed." A kiss for the microphones. "Anything interesting happen at work?"

"The usual crap. What's for dinner?"

"Fish," she answered, looking at the paper in her husband's hand and giving an immediate thumbs-up.

Bingo! They both thought. They had an agent. A no-shit spy in KGB. Working for *them.*

CHAPTER 16

A FUR HAT FOR THE WINTER

THEY DID WHAT?" Jack asked.

"They broke for lunch in the middle of surgery and went to a pub and had a beer each!" Cathy replied, repeating herself.

"Well, so did I."

"You weren't doing *surgery!*"

"What would happen if you did that at home?"

"Oh, nothing much," Cathy said. "You'd probably lose your license to practice medicine—after Bernie amputated your fucking hands with a chain saw!"

That got Jack's attention. Cathy didn't talk like that.

"No shit?"

"I had a bacon, lettuce, and tom-AH-to sandwich with chips—that's french fries for us dumb colonials. *I* had a Coke, by the way."

"Glad to hear it, doctor." Ryan walked over to give his wife a kiss. She appeared to need it.

"I've never seen anything like it," she went on. "Oh, maybe out in Bumfuck, Montana, they do stuff like that, but not in a real hospital."

"Cathy, settle down. You're talking like a stevedore."

"Or maybe a foulmouthed ex-Marine." She finally managed a smile. "Jack, I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. Those two eye cutters are technically senior to me, but if they *ever* tried that sort of shit at home, they'd be finished. They wouldn't even let them work on dogs."

"Is the patient okay?"

"Oh, yeah. The frozen section came back cold as ice—totally benign, not malignant—and we took out the growth and closed him back up. He'll be just fine—four or five days for recovery. No impairment to his sight, no more headaches, but those two bozos operated on him with booze in their systems!"

"No harm, no foul, babe," he suggested, lamely.

"Jack, it isn't supposed to be that way."

"So report them to your friend Byrd."

"I ought to. I really ought to."

"And what would happen?"

That lit her up again: “I don’t know!”

“It’s a big deal to take the bread off somebody’s table, and you’d be branded as a troublemaker,” Jack warned.

“Jack, at Hopkins, I’d’ve called them on it right then and there, and there would have been hell to pay, but over here—over here I’m just a guest.”

“And the customs are different.”

“Not *that* different. Jack, it’s grossly unprofessional. It’s potentially harmful to the patient, and that’s a line you *never* cross. At Hopkins, if you have a patient in recovery, or you have surgery the next day, you don’t even have a glass of wine with dinner, okay? That’s because the good of the patient comes before everything else. Okay, sure, if you’re driving home from a party and you see a hurt person on the side of the road, and you’re the only one around, you do what you can, and get him to a doc who’s got it all together, and you probably tell that doc that you had a couple before you saw the emergency. I mean, sure, during internship, they work you through impossible hours so you can train yourself to make good decisions when you’re not fully functional, but there’s *always* somebody to back you up if you’re not capable, and you’re supposed to be able to tell when you’re in over your head. Okay? I had that happen to me once on pediatric rotation, and it scared the hell out of me when that little kid stopped breathing, but I had a good nurse backing me up and we got the senior resident down in one big fucking hurry, and we got him going again with no permanent damage, thank God. But, Jack, you don’t go creating a suboptimal situation. You don’t go looking for them. You deal with them when they happen, but you don’t voluntarily jump into the soup, okay?”

“Okay, Cath, so, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t *know.* At home, I’d go right to Bernie, but I’m not at home. . . .”

“And you want my advice?”

Her blue eyes fixed on her husband’s. “Well, yes. What do you think?”

What he thought didn’t really matter, Jack knew. It was just a question of guiding her to her own decision. “If you do nothing, how will you feel next week?”

“Terrible. Jack, I saw something that—”

“Cathy.” He hugged her. “You don’t need me. Go ahead and do what you think is right. Otherwise, well, it’ll just eat you up. You’re never sorry for doing the right thing, no matter what the adverse consequences are. Right is right, my lady.”

“They said *that,* too. I’m not comfortable with—”

“Yeah, babe. Every so often at work, they call me Sir John. You roll

with the punch. It's not like it's an insult."

"Over here, they call a surgeon Mr. Jones or Mrs. Jones, not *Doctor* Jones. What the hell is that all about?"

"Local custom. It goes back to the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century. A ship's doctor was usually a youngish lieutenant, and aboard ship that rank is called mister rather than *lef*tenant. Somehow or other it carried over to civilian life, too."

"How do you know that?" Cathy demanded.

"Cathy you are a doctor of medicine. I am a doctor of history, remember? I know a lot of things, like putting a Band-Aid on a cut, after that painful Merthiolate crap. But that's as far as my knowledge of medicine goes—well, they taught us a little at the Basic School, but I don't expect to patch up a bullet wound any time soon. I'll leave that to you. Do you know how?"

"I patched you up last winter," she reminded him.

"Did I ever thank you for that?" he asked. Then he kissed her. "Thanks, babe."

"I have to talk to Professor Byrd about it."

"Honey, when in doubt, do what you think is right. That's why we have a conscience, to remind us what the right thing is."

"They won't like me for it."

"So? Cathy, *you* have to like you. Nobody else. Well, me, of course," Jack added.

"Do you?"

A very supportive smile: "Lady Ryan, I worship your dirty drawers."

And finally she relaxed. "Why, thank you, Sir John."

"Let me go upstairs and change." He stopped in the doorway. "Should I wear my formal sword for dinner?"

"No, just the regular one." And now she could smile, too. "So, what's happening in your office?"

"A lot of learning the things we don't know."

"You mean finding out new stuff?"

"No, I mean realizing all the stuff we don't know that we should know. It never stops."

"Don't feel bad. Same in my business."

And Jack realized that the similarity between both businesses was that if you screwed up, people might die. And that was no fun at all.

He reappeared in the kitchen. By now Cathy was feeding Little Jack. Sally was watching TV, that great child pacifier, this time some local show instead of a Roadrunner-Coyote tape. Dinner was cooking. Why an assistant professor of ophthalmology insisted on cooking dinner herself like a truck driver's wife baffled her husband, but he didn't object—she was good at it. Had they had cooking lessons at Bennington? He picked a kitchen chair and poured himself a glass of

white wine.

"I hope this is okay with the professor."

"Not doing surgery tomorrow, right?"

"Nothing scheduled, Lady Ryan."

"Then it's okay." The little guy went to her shoulder for a burp, which he delivered with great gusto.

"Damn, Junior. Your father is impressed."

"Yeah." She took the edge of the cloth diaper on her shoulder to wipe his mouth. "Okay, how about a little more?"

John Patrick Ryan, Jr. did not object to the offer.

"What things don't you know? Still worried about that guy's wife?" Cathy asked, cooled down somewhat.

"No news on that front," Jack admitted. "We're worried what they might do on something."

"Can't say what it is?" she asked.

"Can't say what it is," he confirmed. "The Russians, as my buddy Simon says, are a rum bunch."

"So are the Brits," Cathy observed.

"Dear God, I married Carrie Nation." Jack took a sip. It was Pinot Grigio, a particularly good Italian white that the local liquor stores carried.

"Only when I cut somebody open with a knife." She liked saying it that way, because it always gave her husband chills.

He held up his glass. "Want one?"

"When I'm finished, maybe." She paused. "Nothing you can talk about?"

"Sorry, babe. It's the rules."

"And you never break them?"

"Bad habit to get into. Better not to start."

"What about when some Russian decides to work for us?"

"That's different. Then he's working for the forces of Truth and Beauty in the world. We," Ryan emphasized, "are the Good Guys."

"What do they think?"

"They think they are. But so did a guy named Adolf," he reminded her. "And he wouldn't have liked Bernie very much."

"But he's long dead."

"Not everybody like him is, babe. Trust me on that one."

"You're worried about something, Jack. I can see it. Can't say, eh?"

"Yes. And no, I can't."

"Okay." She nodded. Intelligence information didn't interest her beyond her abstract desire to learn what was going on in the world. But as a physician there were many things she really wanted to know —like the cure for cancer—but didn't, and, reluctantly, she'd come to accept that. But medicine didn't allow much in the way of secrets.

When you found something that helped patients, you published your discovery in your favorite medical journal so the whole world could know about it right away. Damned sure CIA didn't do that very often, and part of that offended her. Another tack, then. "Okay, when you do find out something important, what happens then?"

"We kick it upstairs. Here, it goes right to Sir Basil, and I call it in to Admiral Greer. Usually a phone call over the secure phone."

"Like the one upstairs?"

"Yep. Then we send it over by secure fax or, if it's really hot, it goes by diplomatic courier out of the embassy, when we don't want to trust the encryption systems."

"How often does that happen?"

"Not since I've been here, but I don't make those decisions. What the hell, the diplomatic bag goes over in eight or nine hours. Damned sight faster than it used to happen."

"I thought that phone thingee upstairs was unbreakable?"

"Well, some things you do are nearly perfect, too, but you still take extra care with them, right? Same with us."

"What would that be for? Theoretically speaking, that is." She smiled at her cleverness.

"Babe, you know how to phrase a question. Let's say we got something, oh, on their nuclear arsenal, something from an agent way the hell inside, and it's really good stuff, but losing it might ID the agent for the opposition. That is what you send via the bag. The name of the game is protecting the source."

"Because if they ID the guy—"

"He's dead, maybe in a very unpleasant way. There's a story that once they loaded a guy into a crematorium alive and then turned on the gas—and they made a film of it, *pour encourager les autres,* as Voltaire put it."

"Nobody does that anymore!" Cathy objected immediately.

"There's a guy at Langley who claims to have seen the film. The poor bastard's name was Popov, a GRU officer who worked for us. His bosses were very displeased with him."

"You're serious?" Cathy persisted.

"As a heart attack. Supposedly, they used to show the film to people in the GRU Academy as a warning about not crossing the line—it strikes me as bad psychology but, like I said, I've met a guy who says he saw the film. Anyway, that's one of the reasons we try to protect our sources."

"That's a little hard to believe."

"Oh, really? You mean, like a surgeon breaking for lunch and having a beer?"

"Well . . . yes."

"It's an imperfect world we live in, babe." He'd let things go. She'd have all weekend to think things over, and he'd get some work done on his Halsey book.

BACK IN MOSCOW, fingers were flying. *How u gonna tell Lan*[*gley*], she asked.

N[ot] sure, he replied.

Cour[ier], she suggested. *This could be re[ally] hot.*

Ed nodded agreement. *Rit [ter] will be exci[ted]*.

D[amn] st[raight], she agreed. *Want m[e] 2 han[dle] the me[et]?* she asked.

Y [our] Ru[ssian] is pre[etty] g[ood], he agreed.

This time she nodded. She spoke an elegant literary Russian reserved to the well-educated over here, Ed knew. The average Soviet couldn't believe that a foreigner spoke his language that well. When walking the street or conversing with a shop clerk, she never let that skill slip, instead stumbling over complex phrases. To do otherwise would have been noticed at once, and so avoiding it was an important part of her cover, even more than her blond hair and American mannerisms. It would finger her immediately to their new agent.

When? she asked next.

Iv[an] sez tom[orrow]. Up 4 it? he responded.

She patted his hip and gave a cute, playful smile, which translated to *bet your ass.*

Foley loved his wife as fully as a man could, and part of that was his respect for her love of the game they both played. Paramount Central Casting could not have given him a better wife. They'd be making love tonight. The rule in boxing might be no sex before a fight, but for Mary Pat the rule was the reverse, and if the microphones in the walls noticed, well, *fuck 'em,* the Chief of Station Moscow thought, with a sly smile of his own.

"WHEN DO YOU leave, Bob?" Greer asked the DDO.

"Sunday. ANA to Tokyo, and from there on to Seoul."

"Better you than me. I hate those long flights," the DDI observed.

"Well, you try to sleep about half the way," and Ritter was good at that. He had a conference scheduled with the KCIA, to go over things on both North Korea and the Chinese, both of which he was worried about—as were the Koreans. "Nothing much happening in my shop at the moment, anyway."

"Smart of you to skip town while we have the President chewing my

backside about the Pope," Judge Moore thought aloud.

"Well, I'm sorry about that, Arthur," Ritter retorted, with an ironic smile. "Mike Bostock will be handling things in my absence." Both senior executives knew and liked Bostock, a career field spook and an expert on the Soviets and the Central Europeans. He was a little too much of a cowboy to be trusted on The Hill, though, which everyone thought was a pity. Cowboys had their uses—like Mary Pat Foley, for example.

"Still nothing out of the Politburo meeting?"

"Not yet, Arthur. Maybe they just talked about routine stuff. You know, they don't always sit there and plan the next nuclear war."

"No." Greer chuckled. "They think we're always doing that. Jesus, they're a paranoid bunch."

"Remember what Henry said: 'Even paranoids have enemies.' And that *is* our job," Ritter reminded them.

"Still ruminating over your MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH plan, Robert?"

"Nothing specific yet. The in-house people I've talked to about it—damn it, Arthur, you tell our people to think outside of the box, and what do they do? They build a better box!"

"We don't have many entrepreneur types here, remember. Government agency. Pay caps. Tends to militate against creative thinking. That's what we're for," Judge Moore pointed out. "How do we change that?"

"We have a few people from the real world. Hell, I've got one on my team—he doesn't know how to think *inside* the box."

"Ryan?" Ritter asked.

"That's one of them," Jim Greer confirmed with a nod.

"He's not one of us," the DDO observed at once.

"Bob, you can't have it both ways," the DDI shot back. "Either you want a guy who thinks like one of our bureaucrats, or a guy who thinks creatively. Ryan knows the rules, he's an ex-Marine who even knows how to think on his feet, and pretty soon he's going to be a star analyst." Greer paused. "He's about the best young officer I've seen in a few years, and what your beef with him is, Robert, I do not understand."

"Basil likes him," Moore added to the conversation, "and Basil's a hard man to fool."

"Next time I see Jack, I'd like to let him know about RED DEATH."

"Really?" Moore asked. "It's way over his pay grade."

"Arthur, he knows economics better than anyone I have in the DI. I didn't put him in my economics section only because he's too smart to be limited that way. Bob, if you want to wreck the Soviet Union—without a war—the only way to do it is to cripple their economy.

Ryan made himself a pile of money because he knows all that stuff. I'm telling you, he knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff. Maybe he can figure a way to burn down a wheat field. Anyway, what does it hurt? Your project is entirely theoretical, isn't it?"

"Well?" the DCI turned to Ritter. Greer was right, after all.

"Oh, what the hell, okay," the DDO conceded the point. "Just so he doesn't talk about this to *The Washington Post.* We don't need that idea out in the open. Congress and the press would have a meltdown."

"Jack, talk to the press?" Greer asked. "Not likely. He doesn't curry favor with people, including us. He's one guy I think we can trust. The whole Russian KGB doesn't have enough hard currency to buy him off. That's more than I can say for myself," he joked.

"I'll remember you said that, James," Ritter promised, with a thin smile of his own. Such jokes were usually limited to the Seventh Floor at Langley.

A DEPARTMENT STORE was a department store anywhere in the world, and GUM was supposedly Moscow's counterpart to Macy's in New York. *Theoretically,* Ed Foley thought, walking in the main entrance. Just like the Soviet Union was theoretically a voluntary union of republics, and Russia theoretically had a constitution that existed over and above the will of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And there was theoretically an Easter Bunny, too, he thought, looking around.

They took the escalator to the second floor—the escalator was of the old sort, with thick wooden runners instead of the metal type which had long since taken over in the West. The fur department was over on the right, toward the back, and, on initial visual inspection, the selection there wasn't all that shabby.

Best of all, so was Ivan, wearing the same clothes that he'd worn on the metro. *Maybe his best suit?* Foley wondered. If so, he'd better get his ass to a Western country as soon as possible.

Other than the at-best-mediocre quality of the goods here, a department store was a department store, though here the departments were semi-independent shops. But their Ivan was smart. He'd suggested a meet in a part of the place where there would certainly be high-quality goods. For millennia, Russia had been a place of cold winters, a place where even the elephants had needed fur coats, and since 25 percent of the human blood supply goes to the brain, men needed hats. The decent fur hats were called *shapkas,* roughly tubular fur head coverings that had little in the way of precise shape, but did serve to keep the brain from freezing. The really good ones were made out of muskrat—mink and sable went only to the

most expensive specialty stores, and those were mainly limited to well-to-do women, the wives and/or mistresses of Party bosses. But the noble muskrat, a swamp creature that smelled—well, the smell was taken out of the skin somehow, lest the wearer of the hat be mistaken for a tidal wetland garbage dump—had very fine fur or hair or whatever it was, and was a good insulator. So, fine, a rat with a high R rating. But that wasn't the important part, was it?

Ed and Mary Pat could also communicate with their eyes, though the bandwidth was pretty narrow. The time of day helped. The winter hats had just been stocked in the store, and the fall weather didn't have people racing to buy new ones yet. There was just one guy in a brown jacket, and Mary Pat moved in that direction, after shooing her husband away, as though to buy him something as a semi-surprise.

The man was shopping, just as she was, and he was in the hat department. *He's not a dummy, whoever he is,* she thought.

"Excuse me," she said in Russian.

"Yes?" His head turned. Mary Pat checked him out; he was in his early thirties, but looked older than that, as life in Russia tended to age people more rapidly, even more rapidly than New York City. Brown hair, brown eyes—rather smart-looking in the eyes. That was good.

"I am shopping for a winter hat for my husband, as you suggested," she added in her very best Russian, "on the metro."

He didn't expect it to be a girl, Mrs. Foley saw at once. He blinked hard and looked at her, trying to square the perfect Russian with the fact that she had to be an American.

"On the metro?"

"That's right. My husband thought it better that I should meet you, rather than he. So . . ." She lifted a hat and riffled the fur, then turned to her new friend, as though asking his opinion. "So, what do you wish of us?"

"What do you mean?" he blurted back at her.

"You have approached an American and requested a meeting. Do you want to assist me in buying a hat for my husband?" she asked very quietly indeed.

"You are CIA?" he asked, his thought now back under semicontrol.

"My husband and I work for the American government, yes. And you work for KGB."

"Yes," he replied, "in communications, Central Communications."

"Indeed?" She turned back to the gable and lifted another *shapka. Holy shit,* she thought, but was he telling the truth, or did he just want a cheap ticket to New York?

"Really? How can I be sure of that?"

"I say it is so," he replied, surprised and slightly outraged that his

honesty should come into question. Did this woman think he was risking his life as a lark? "Why do you talk to me?"

"The message blanks you passed on the metro did get my attention," she said, holding up a dark brown hat and frowning, as though it were too dark.

"Madam, I work in the Eighth Chief Directorate."

"Which department?"

"Simple communications processing. I am not part of the signals intelligence service. I am a communications officer. I transmit outgoing signals to the various *rezidenturas,* and when signals come to my desk from out in the field, I forward them to the proper recipients. As a result, I see many operational signals. Is that sufficient to your purpose?" He was at least playing the game properly, gesturing to the *shapka* and shaking his head, then pointing to another, its fur dyed a lighter brown, almost a blond color.

"I suppose it might be. What do you ask of us?"

"I have information of great importance—very great importance. In return for that information, I require passage to the West for myself, my wife, and my daughter."

"How old is your daughter?"

"Three years and seven months. Can you deliver what I require?"

That question shot a full pint of adrenaline into her bloodstream. She'd have to make this decision almost instantly, and with that decision she was committing the whole power of CIA onto a single case. Getting three people out of the Soviet Union was not going to be a picnic.

But this guy works in MERCURY, Mary Pat realized. He'd know things a hundred well-placed agents couldn't get to. Ivan here was custodian of the Russian Crown Jewels, more valuable even than Brezhnev's balls, and so—

"Yes, we can get you and your family out. How soon?"

"The information I have is very time-sensitive. As soon as you can arrange. I will not reveal my information until I am in the West, but I assure you the information is a matter of great importance—it is enough to force me into this action," he added as an additional dangle.

Don't overplay your hand, Ivan, she thought. An ego-driven agent would tell them he had the launch codes for the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces, when he just had his mother's recipe for borscht, and getting the bastard out would be a waste of resources that had to be used with the greatest care. But, against that possibility, Mary Pat had her eyes. She looked into this man's soul, and saw that whatever he was, "liar" probably wasn't among them.

"Yes, we can do this very quickly if necessary. We need to discuss

place and methods. We cannot talk any longer here. I suggest a meeting place to discuss details."

"That is simple," Zaitzev replied, setting the place for the following morning.

You're in a hurry. "What name do I call you?" she finally asked.

"Oleg Ivan'ch," he answered automatically, then realized he'd spoken the truth, in a situation where dissimulation might have served him better.

"That is good. My name is Maria," she replied. "So, which *shapka* would you recommend?"

"For your husband? This one, certainly," Zaitzev said, handing over the dirty-blond one.

"Then I shall buy it. Thank you, comrade." She fussed over the hat briefly, then walked off, checking the price tag, 180 rubles, more than a month's pay for a Moscow worker. To effect the purchase, she handed the *shapka* over to one clerk, then walked to a cash register, where she paid her cash—the Soviets hadn't discovered credit cards yet—and got a receipt in return, which she handed to the first clerk, who gave her the hat back.

So, it was true—the Russians really were more inefficient than the American government. Amazing that it was possible, but seeing was believing, she told herself, clutching the brown-paper bag and finding her husband, whom she quickly walked outside.

"So, what did you buy me?"

"Something you'll like," she promised, holding up the bag, but her sparkling blue eyes said it all. Then she checked her watch. It was just 3:00 A.M. in Washington and, if they phoned this one in, it was too early. This wasn't something for the night crew, even the trusted people in MERCURY. She'd just learned that one the hard way. No, this one would get written up, encrypted, and put in the diplomatic bag. Then it was just a matter of getting approval from Langley.

THEIR CAR HAD just been swept by an embassy mechanic the previous day—everybody in the embassy did it routinely, so this didn't finger them as spooks, and the telltales on door and hood hadn't been disturbed the previous night. The Mercedes 280 also had a fairly sophisticated alarm. So Ed Foley just turned up the sound on the radio–tape player. In the slot was a Bee Gees tape sure to offend anyone listening to a bug, and easily loud enough to overpower it. In her passenger seat, Mary Pat danced to the music, like a good California girl.

"Our friend needs a ride," she said, just loudly enough to be heard by her husband. "Him, wife, and daughter, age three and a half."

"When?" Ed wanted to know.

"Soon."

"How?"

"Up to us."

"He's serious?" Ed asked his wife, meaning, *Worth our time?*

"Think so."

You couldn't be sure, but MP had a good eye for reading people, and he was willing to wager on those cards. He nodded. "Okay."

"Any company?" she asked next.

Foley's eyes were about equally divided between the street and the mirrors. If they were being followed, it was by the Invisible Man. "Nope."

"Good." She turned the sound down some. "You know, I like it, too, Ed, but easy on the ears."

"Fine, honey. I have to go back to the office this afternoon."

"What for?" she asked in the semiangry voice every husband in the world knows.

"Well, I have some paperwork from yesterday—"

"And you want to check the baseball scores," she huffed. "Ed, why can't we get satellite TV in our apartment block?"

"They're working on getting it for us, but the Russians are making a little trouble. They're afraid it might be a spy tool," he added in a disgusted voice.

"Yeah," she observed. "Sure. Give me a break." Just in case KGB had a very clever black-bag guy who prowled the parking lot at night. Maybe the FBI could pull that one off but, though they had to guard against the possibility, she doubted that the Russians had anybody that clever. Their radios were just too bulky. Even so, yes. They were paranoid, but were they paranoid *enough?*

CATHY TOOK SALLY and Little Jack outside. There was a park just a block and a half away, off Fristow Way, where there were a few swings that Sally liked and grass for the little guy to pull at and try to eat. He'd just figured out how to use his hands, badly and awkwardly, but whatever found its way into his little fist immediately thereafter found its way to his mouth, a fact known by every parent in the world. Still and all, it was a chance to get the kids some sun—the winter nights would be long and dark here—and it got the house quiet for Jack to get some work done on his Halsey book.

He'd already taken out one of Cathy's medical textbooks, *Principles of Internal Medicine,* to read up on shingles, the skin disease that had tormented the American admiral at a very inconvenient time. Just from reading the subchapter on the ailment—related to chicken pox, it

turned out—it must have been like medieval torture to the then elderly naval aviator. Even more so that his beloved carrier battle group, *Enterprise* and *Yorktown,* would have to sail into a major engagement without him. But he'd taken it like a man—the only way William Frederick Halsey, Jr., had ever taken anything—and recommended his friend Raymond Spruance to take his place. The two men could scarcely have been more different. Halsey the profane, hard-drinking, chain-smoking former football player. Spruance, the nonsmoking, teetotaling intellectual reputed never to have raised his voice in anger. But they'd become the closest of friends, and would later in the war switch off command of the Pacific Fleet, renaming it from Third Fleet to Fifth Fleet and back again when command was exchanged. *That,* Ryan thought, *was the most obvious clue that Halsey had been the intellectual, too, and not the blustering hell-for-leather aggressor that the contemporary newspapers had proclaimed him to be.* Spruance the intellectual would not have befriended a knuckle-dragger. But their staffs had snarled at each other like tomcats fighting over a tabby in heat, probably the military equivalent of "my daddy can whip your daddy," engaged in by children up to the age of seven or so—and no more intellectually respectable.

He had Halsey's own words on the illness, though what he'd really said must have been muted by his editor and cowriter, since Bill Halsey really had spoken like a Chief Bosun's Mate with a few drinks under his belt—probably one of the reasons reporters had liked him so much. He'd made such good copy.

His notes and some source documents were piled next to his Apple IIe computer. Jack used WordStar as his word-processing program. It was fairly complicated, but a damned sight better than using a typewriter. He wondered which publisher would be right for the book. The Naval Institute Press was after him again, but he found himself wondering whether to switch over to a big-league publisher. But he had to finish the damned book first, didn't he? And so, back into Halsey's complex brain.

But he was hesitating today. That was unusual. His typing—three fingers and a thumb (two thumbs on a good day)—was the same, but his brain wasn't concentrating properly, as though it wanted to look at something else. This was an occasional curse of his CIA analysis work. Some problems just wouldn't go away, forcing his mind to go over the same material time and again until he stumbled upon the answer to a question that often enough made little sense in and of itself. The same thing had occasionally happened during his time at Merrill Lynch, when he'd investigated stock issues, looking for hidden worth or danger in the operations and finances of some publicly traded company. That had occasionally put him at odds with the big boys up

in the New York office, but Ryan had never been one to do something just because a superior told him to. Even in the Marine Corps, an officer, however junior, was expected to think, and a stockbroker with clients was entrusted by them to safeguard their money as though it were his own. Mostly, he'd succeeded. After putting his own funds into Chicago and North Western Railroad, he'd been hammered by his supervisors, but he'd stood his ground, and those clients who'd listened to him had cashed in rather nicely—which had earned him a crowd of new clients. So Ryan had learned to listen to his instincts, to scratch the itches he couldn't quite see and could barely feel. This was one of those, and "this" was the Pope. The information he had did not form a complete picture, but he was used to that. In the stock-trading business, he'd learned how and when to bet his money on incomplete pictures, and nine times out of ten he'd been right.

He had nothing to bet on this one but his itch, however. Something was happening. He just didn't know what. All he'd seen was a copy of a warning letter sent to Warsaw, and certainly forwarded to Moscow, where a bunch of old men would look upon it as a threat.

That wasn't much to go on, was it? Ryan asked himself. He found himself wishing for a cigarette. Such things helped his thinking process sometimes, but there'd be hell to pay if Cathy smelled smoke in their house. But chewing gum, even bubble gum, just didn't cut it at times like this.

He needed Jim Greer. The Admiral often treated him like a surrogate son—his own son had been killed as a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam, Ryan had learned along the way—giving him the occasional chance to talk through a problem. But he wasn't that close to Sir Basil Charleston, and Simon was too near to him in age, if not quite in experience. And this was not a problem to be kicked around alone. He wished he could discuss it with his wife—doctors, he knew, were pretty smart—but that wasn't allowed, and, anyway, Cathy didn't really know the situation well enough to understand the threats. No, she'd grown up in a more privileged environment, daughter of a millionaire stock-and-bonds trader, living in a large Park Avenue apartment, all the best schools, her own new car for her sixteenth birthday, and all the hazards of life held off well beyond arm's length. Not Jack. His dad had been a cop, mostly a homicide investigator, and, while his father hadn't brought work home, Jack had asked enough questions to understand that the real world could be a place of unpredictable danger and that some people just didn't think like real people. They were called Bad Guys—and they could be pretty goddamned bad. He'd never lived without a conscience. Whether he'd picked that up in distant childhood or Catholic schools, or it had been part of his genetic makeup, Jack didn't know. He did know that

breaking the rules was rarely a good thing, but he also knew that the rules were a product of reason, and reason was paramount, and so the rules *could* be broken if you had a good—a very goddamned good—reason for doing so. That was called judgment, and the Marines, oddly enough, had nurtured that particular flower. You made an estimate of the situation and thought through the options, and then you acted. Sometimes you had to do it in a very big hurry—and that was why officers were paid more than sergeants, though you were always well advised to listen to your gunny if you had the time.

But Ryan had none of those things now, and that was the bad news. There was no immediately identifiable threat in view, and that was the good news. But now he was in an environment in which the threats were not always readily visible, and it was his job to find them out by piecing the available information together. But there wasn't much of that now either. Just a possibility, which he had to apply to the minds of people he didn't know and would never meet, except as paper documents written up by other people he didn't know. It was like being the navigator on a ship in Christopher Columbus's little fleet, thinking land might be out there, but not knowing where or when he might come upon it—and hoping to God it wouldn't be at night, in a storm, and that the land would not appear as a barrier reef to rip the bottom of his ship out. His own life was not in danger, but, as he'd been compelled by professional obligation to treat the money of his clients as his own, so he had to regard the life of a man in potential danger as having the importance of the life of his own child.

And that was where the itch came from. He could call Admiral Greer, Ryan thought, but it wasn't even seven in the morning in Washington yet, and he'd be doing his boss no favor by waking him up to the trilling sound of his home STU. Especially as he had nothing to tell, just a few things to ask. So he leaned back in his chair and stared at the green screen of his Apple monitor, looking for something that just wasn't there.

CHAPTER 17

FLASH TRAFFIC

ED FOLEY WROTE IN HIS OFFICE:

PRIORITY: FLASH
TO: DDO/CIA
CC: DCI, DDI
FROM: COS MOSCOW
SUBJECT: RABBIT
TEXT FOLLOWS:
WE HAVE A RABBIT, A HIGHLY PLACED WALK-IN, CLAIMS TO BE COMMO OFFICER IN KGB CENTRE, WITH INFORMATION OF INTEREST TO USG. ESTIMATION: HE IS TRUTHFUL. 5/5.
URGENTLY REQUEST AUTHORIZATION FOR IMMEDIATE EXFILTRATION FROM REDLAND. PACKAGE INCLUDES RABBIT WIFE AND DAUGHTER (3).
5/5 PRIORITY REQUESTED.
ENDS

There, Foley thought, *that's concise enough.* The shorter the better with messages like this one—it provided less opportunity for the opposition to work on the text and crack the cipher, in the event they got their hands on it.

But the only hands that would touch this one were CIA. He was betting a lot on this op-dispatch. 5/5 meant that the estimated importance of the information available, as well as its presumed accuracy and the priority for his proposed action, was class-5, the highest. He gave an identical evaluation for the accuracy of the subject. Four aces—not the sort of dispatch you sent out every day. It was the classification he'd give to a message from Oleg Penkovskiy, or from Agent CARDINAL himself, and that was about as hot a potato as they came. He thought for a moment, wondering if he was guessing correctly, but, over his career, Ed Foley had learned to go with his instincts. He'd also measured his own thoughts against those of his wife, and her instincts were just as finely tuned. Their Rabbit—the CIA term of art for a person wanting a fast ticket out of whatever bad place he found himself in—claimed a lot, but he gave every sign of

being what he claimed: the possessor of some very hot information. That made him a conscience defector, and thus pretty reliable. If he were a plant, a false-flag, he would have asked for money, because that's how KGB thought defectors thought—and CIA had never done anything to disabuse them of that notion.

So, it just *felt* right, though "feels right" isn't something you send by Diplomatic Courier to the Seventh Floor. They'd have to play along with this. They had to trust him. He was Chief of Station in Moscow, the CIA's top field posting, and with that came a truckload of credibility. They'd have to weigh it against whatever misgivings they were feeling. If a summit meeting were scheduled, then that might queer the deal, but the President had no such plans, nor did SecState. So there was nothing in the way of Langley approving some form of action—if they thought he was right....

Foley didn't even know why he was questioning himself. He was The Man in Moscow, and that, by God, was that. He lifted the phone and punched three buttons.

"Russell," a voice said.

"Mike, this is Ed. I need you here."

"Right."

It took a minute and a half. The door opened.

"Yeah, Ed?"

"Something for the bag."

Russell checked his watch. "Not much margin, guy."

"It's short. I'll have to come down with you on this one."

"Well, let's get it on, then, bro." Russell walked out the door, with Foley in pursuit. Fortunately, the corridor was empty, and his office was not far.

Russell sat down in his swivel chair and lit up his cipher machine. Foley handed the sheet over. Russell clipped it to a fixture right over the keyboard. "Short enough," he said approvingly, and started typing. He was nearly as skillful as the Ambassador's own secretary, and he finished the job in a minute, including some padding—sixteen surnames taken at random from the Prague telephone book. When the new page came out of the machine, Foley took it, folded it, tucked it in a manila envelope, and sealed it. Wax was dripped over the closure, and Foley handed the envelope back to Russell.

"Back in five, Ed," the communications officer said on his way out the door. He took the elevator down to the first floor. The diplomatic courier was there. His name was Tommy Cox, a former Army warrant officer/helicopter pilot who'd been shot down four times in the Central Highlands as part of the First Cavalry Division, and a man who had only the most negative feelings for his country's adversaries. The Diplomatic Bag was a canvas carry-on–type bag that would be

handcuffed to his wrist during transit. He was already booked on a Pan Am 747 direct flight to New York's Kennedy International, a flight of eleven hours, during which he would neither drink nor sleep, though he did have three paperback mysteries to read along the way. He'd be leaving the embassy in an official car in ten minutes, and his diplomatic credentials meant he wouldn't be troubled with security or immigration procedures. The Russians were actually fairly cordial about that, though they probably drooled over the chance of seeing what was inside the canvas bag. For sure, it wasn't Russian perfume or pantyhose for a friend in New York or Washington.

"Good flight, Tommy."

Cox nodded. "Roger that, Mike."

Russell headed back to Foley's office topside. "Okay, it's in the bag. Flight leaves in an hour and ten minutes, man."

"Good."

"Is a Rabbit what I think it is?"

"Can't say, Mike," Foley pointed out.

"Yeah, I know, Ed. Excuse my question." Russell wasn't one to break the rules, though he had as much curiosity as the next man. And he knew what a Rabbit was, of course. He'd spent his entire life inside the black world in one capacity or another, and the jargon wasn't all that hard to pick up. But the black world had walls, and that was that.

Foley took his copy of the message, tucked it in his office safe, and set both the combination and the alarm. Then he headed down to the embassy cafeteria, where a TV was tuned in to ESPN. There he learned that his Yankees had lost another one—three straight, and in a pennant race! *Is there no fairness in the world?* he grumbled.

MARY PAT WAS doing housework, which was boring, but a good opportunity for her to put her brain in neutral while her imagination ran wild. Okay, she'd be meeting Oleg Ivanovich again. It would be up to her to figure a way to get the "package"—yet another CIA term of art, meaning the material or person(s) to be taken out of the country—to a safe place. There were many ways to do such a thing. They were all dangerous, but she and Ed and other CIA field spooks were trained to do dangerous things. Moscow was a city of millions, and in such an environment three people on the move were just part of the background noise, like one single leaf falling in an autumn forest, one more buffalo in the herd in Yellowstone National Park, one more car on the L.A. Freeway during rush hour. That wasn't hard, was it?

Well, actually, it was. In the Soviet Union, every aspect of personal life was subject to control. As applied to America, sure, the package was just one more car on the L.A. Freeway, but going to Las Vegas

meant crossing a state line, and you had to have a reason for that. Nothing was easy here in the sense that everything was easy in America.

And there was something else....

It would be better, Mary Pat thought, *that the Russians didn't know he was gone.* After all, it was not a murder if there wasn't a corpse to let everyone know that somebody had died. And it wasn't a defection unless they knew that one of their citizens had turned up somewhere else—where he wasn't supposed to be. *So, how much the better... was it possible . . . ?* she wondered.

Wouldn't that *be a kick in the ass? But how to make it happen?* It was something to speculate on while she vacuumed the living room rug. And, oh, by the way, vacuuming would invalidate whatever bugs the Russians had implanted in the walls.... And so she stopped at once. Why waste that chance? She and Ed could communicate with their hands, but the bandwidth was like maple syrup in January.

She wondered if Ed would go for this. *He might,* she thought. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd think up. Ed, for all his skills, wasn't a cowboy. Though he had his talents, and good ones they were, he was more a bomber pilot than a fighter pilot. But Mary Pat thought like Chuck Yeager in the X-1, like Pete Conrad in the lunar module. She was just better at thinking long-ball.

The idea also had strategic implications. If they could get their Rabbit out unknown to the opposition, then they could make indefinite use of whatever he knew, and that possibility, if you could figure out how to make it happen, was very enticing indeed. It wouldn't be easy, and it might be a needless complication—and if so, it could be discarded—but it was worth thinking about, if she could get Ed's brain into it. She'd need his planning talents and his reality-checking ability, but the basic idea set her head abuzz. It would come down to available assets.... And that would be the hard part. But "hard" didn't mean "impossible." And, for Mary Pat, "impossible" didn't mean "impossible" either, did it? she asked herself.

Hell, no.

THE PAN AM FLIGHT rolled off on time, lurching across the lumpy taxiways of Sheremetyevo Airport, which was famous in the world of aviation for its roller-coaster paving. But the runways were adequate, and the big JT-9D Pratt and Whitney turbofan engines pushed the airframe to rotation speed, and the aircraft took flight. Tommy Cox, in seat 3-A, noted with a smile the usual reaction when an American airliner departed Moscow: The passengers all cheered and/or applauded. There was no rule, and the flight crew didn't encourage it.

It just happened all on its own—that's how impressed Americans were with Soviet hospitality. It appealed to Cox, who had no love for the people who'd supplied the machine guns that had splashed his Huey four times and, by the way, earned him a total of three Purple Heart medals, a miniature ribbon of which decorated the lapels of all his suitcoats, along with the two repeat stars. He looked out the window, watching the ground fall away to his left and, when he heard the welcome *ding,* fished out a Winston to light with his Zippo. It was a pity he couldn't drink or sleep on these flights, but the movie was one he hadn't seen, remarkably enough. In this job you learned to appreciate the small things. Twelve hours to New York, but a direct flight was better than having to stop over in Frankfurt or Heathrow. Such places were just an opportunity for him to drag this fucking canvas bag around, sometimes without benefit of a cart or trolley. Well, he had a full pack of smokes, and the dinner menu didn't look too bad. And the government actually paid him to sit down for twelve hours, baby-sitting a piece of cheap luggage. It was better than flying his Huey around the Central Highlands. Cox was long past wondering what important information he transported in his bag. And if other people were that interested, that was their problem.

RYAN HAD GOTTEN a hot three pages done—not a very productive day, and he couldn't claim that the artistry of his prose demanded a slow writing pace. His language was literate—he'd learned his grammar from priests and nuns for the most part, and his word mechanics were serviceable—but not particularly elegant. In his first book, *Doomed Eagles,* every bit of artistic language he'd attempted to put into his manuscript had been edited out, to his quiet and submissive fury. And so the few critics who had read and commented on his historical epic had faintly praised the quality of his analysis, but then tersely noted that it might be a good textbook for academic students of history, but not something on which a casual reader might wish to waste his money. And so the book had netted 7,865 copies sold—not much to show for two and a half years' work, but that, Jack reminded himself, was just his first outing, and maybe a new publisher would get him an editor who was more an ally than an enemy. He could hope, after all.

But the damned thing would not get done until he did it, and three pages wasn't much to show for a full day in his den. He was time-sharing his brain with another problem, and that wasn't a useful productivity tool.

"How did it go?" Cathy asked, suddenly appearing at his shoulder.

"Not too bad," he lied.

"Where are you up to?"

"May. Halsey is fighting off his skin disease."

"Dermatitis? That can be nasty, even today," Cathy noted. "It can drive the poor patients crazy."

"Since when are you a dermatologist?"

"M.D., Jack, remember? I may not know it all, but I know most of it."

"All that, and humble, too." He made a face.

"Well, when you get a cold, don't I take good care of you?"

"I suppose." She did, actually. "How are the kids?"

"Fine. Sally had a good time on the swings, and she made a new friend, Geoffrey Froggatt. His father's a solicitor."

"Great. Isn't there anything but lawyers around here?"

"Well, there's a doctor and a spook," Cathy pointed out. "Trouble is, I can't tell people what you do, can I?"

"So what *do* you tell them?" Jack asked.

"That you work for the embassy." Close enough.

"Another desk-sitting bureaucrat," he grumped.

"Well, you want to go back to Merrill Lynch?"

"Ugh. Not in this lifetime."

"Some people like making tons of money," she pointed out.

"Only as a hobby, babe." Were he to go back to trading, his father-in-law would gloat for a year. No, not in this lifetime. He'd served his time in hell, like a good Marine. "I have more important things to do."

"Like what?"

"I can't tell you," he countered.

"I know that," his wife responded, with a playful smile. "Well, at least it isn't insider trading."

Actually, it was, Ryan couldn't say—the nastiest sort. Thousands of people working every day to find out things they weren't supposed to know, and then taking action they weren't supposed to take.

But both sides played that game—played it diligently—because it wasn't about money. It was about life and death, and those games were as nasty as they got. But Cathy didn't lose any sleep over the cancer tissue she consigned to the hospital incinerator and probably those cancer cells wanted to live, too, but that was just too damned bad, wasn't it?

COLONEL BUBOVOY HAD the dispatch on his desk and read it. His hands didn't shake, but he lit a cigarette to help his contemplation. So, the Politburo was willing to go forward with this. Leonid Ilyich himself had signed the letter to the Bulgarian Party chairman. He'd have the ambassador call Monday morning to set up the meeting,

which ought not to take too long. The Bulgarians were lapdogs of the Soviet Union, but occasionally useful lapdogs. The Soviets had assisted in the murder of Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge in London—KGB had supplied the weapon, if you could call it that, an umbrella to deliver the poison-filled metal miniball to transfer the ricin, and so silence the annoying defector who'd talked too much on BBC World Service. That had been a while, and such debts had no expiration date, did they? Not at this level of statecraft. So Moscow was calling in the debt. Besides that, there was the agreement from 1964, when it had been agreed that DS would handle KGB's wet work in the West. And Leonid Ilyich was promising to transfer a full battalion's worth of the new version of the T-72 main-battle tank, which was always the sort of thing to make a communist chief of state feel better about his political security. And it was cheaper than the MiG-29s the Bulgarians were asking for. As though a Bulgarian pilot could handle such an aircraft—the Russian joke was that they had to tuck their mustaches into the flight helmet before closing the visor, Bubovoy reminded himself. Mustaches or not, the Bulgarians were regarded as the children of Russia—an attitude that went back to the czars. And, for the most part, they were obedient children, though like them they had little appreciation of right and wrong, so long as they weren't caught. So he'd show proper respect for this chief of state and be received cordially as the messenger of a greater power, and the Chairman would hem and haw a little bit and then agree. It would be as stylized as a performance of ballet dancer Aleksander Gudonov, and just as predicable in its conclusion.

And then he'd meet with Boris Strokov and get an idea how quickly the operation might proceed. Boris Andreyevich would find the prospect exciting. This would be the biggest mission of his life, like playing in the Olympics, not so much daunting as exhilarating, and there was a sure promotion to be had for its successful completion—perhaps a new car for Strokov and/or a nice dacha outside Sofia. Or even both. *And for myself?* the KGB officer wondered. *A promotion, certainly.* General's stars and a return to Moscow, a plush office at The Centre, a nice flat on Kutusovskiy Prospekt. Going back to Moscow appealed to the *rezident,* who'd spent a lot of years outside the borders of the *Rodina. Enough,* he thought. *More than enough.*

"WHERE'S THE COURIER?" Mary Pat asked, vacuuming the living room rug.

"Over Norway by now," her husband thought out loud.

"I have an idea," she said.

"Oh?" Ed asked with no small degree of trepidation.

"What if we can get the Rabbit out and they don't know?"

"How the hell do we do that?" her husband asked, in surprise. What was she thinking about now? "Getting him and his family out in the first place won't exactly be easy."

She told him the idea she'd evolved in her tricky little head, and an original one it was.

Trust you to come up with something like that, he thought, with a neutral expression. But then he started thinking about it. "Complicated," the Chief of Station observed tersely.

"But doable," she countered.

"Honey, that's a big thought." But he was thinking about it, Mary Pat saw in his eyes.

"Yeah, but if we can pull it off, what a coup," she said, getting under the sofa. Eddie slid himself closer to the TV so that he could hear what the Transformer robots were saying. A good sign. If Eddie couldn't hear, then neither would the KGB microphones.

"It's worth thinking about," Ed conceded. "But doing it—damn."

"Well, they pay us to be creative, don't they?"

"No way in hell we could pull that one off here"—not without involving a whole lot of assets, some of whom might not be entirely reliable, which was, of course, their greatest fear, and one they couldn't easily defend against. That was one of the problems in the spook business. If the counterspies in KGB ID'd one of their assets, they were very often clever about how they handled it. They could, for example, have a little chat with the guy and tell him to keep operating, and then, maybe, he'd live to the end of the year. Their agents were trained to give a danger-wave-off signal, but who was to say that the agent would do it? It demanded a lot from the supposed dedication of their assets, more than some—most—of them would probably give.

"So, there are other places they can go. Eastern Europe, for example. Get them out that way," she suggested.

"I suppose it's possible," he conceded again. "But the mission here *is* to get them out, not score style points from the East German judge."

"I know, but think about it. If we can get him away from Moscow, that gives us a lot more flexibility in our options, doesn't it?"

"Yes, honey. It also means communications problems." And that meant the risk of screwing everything up. The KISS principle—"keep it simple, stupid"—was as much a part of the CIA ethos as the trench coat and fedora hat that people used in bad movies. Too many cooks fucked up the soup.

Yet what she'd suggested had real merit. Getting the Rabbit out in a way that made the Soviets think him dead would mean that they'd take no precautions. It would be like sending Captain Kirk into KGB

headquarters by transporter—and invisible—and extracting him without anyone knowing he'd been there, along with tons of hot information. It would be as close to the perfect play as anything that had ever happened. *Hell,* Ed thought, *as perfect a play as* never *happened in the real world.* He reflected for a moment that he was blessed to have a wife as creative in her work as she was in bed.

And that was pretty damned good.

Mary Pat saw her husband's face, and she knew how to read his mind. He was a cautious player, but she'd pushed a very sensitive button, and he was smart enough to see the merit in it. Her idea was a complication . . . but maybe not that great of one. Getting the package out of Moscow would be no day at the beach under the best of circumstances. The hard part would be in crossing the Finnish border—it was always Finland, and everyone knew it. There were ways to do it, and it mostly involved trick cars with hidden passenger accommodations. The Russians had trouble countering that tactic, because if the driver of the car had diplomatic credentials, then international convention limited their search options. Any diplomat who wanted to make fast money could make a small pile by smuggling drugs—and some did, she was sure, and few of them ever got caught. With a get-out-of-jail-free card, you could accomplish a lot. But even that was not an entirely free pass. If the Soviets knew this guy was missing, then rules might get broken because the data inside his head was so valuable. The other side of the diplomatic-rules violation was that it would result only in a protest, muddled up by the public disclosure that an accredited foreign diplomat was spying—and if some of their diplomats got roughed up in the process, well, the Soviets had been known to sacrifice large numbers of military forces for a political end and just think of it as a price of doing business. For the information the Rabbit had, they'd gladly shed blood—including some of their own. Mary Pat wondered how well this guy understood the danger he was in, and how formidable the forces were arrayed against him. What it came down to was whether or not the Sovs knew something was afoot. If not, their routine surveillance procedures, no matter how thorough, were predictable. If alerted, however, they could put the entire city of Moscow under lockdown.

But everything they did in the CIA's Clandestine Service was done carefully, and there were backup procedures for when things went wrong, as well as other measures, some desperate, that had proven to be effective when you put them in play. You just tried to avoid doing that.

"Finishing up," she warned her husband.

"Okay, Mary Pat, you have me thinking." And with that his formidable mind started sifting through ideas. *Sometimes he needs a*

little push, Mary Pat thought, but once you had him going in the right direction, he was like George Patton with the bit in his teeth. She wondered how much sleeping Ed would be doing tonight. Well, she'd be able to tell, wouldn't she?

"BASIL LIKES YOU," Murray said. The womenfolk were in the kitchen. Jack and Dan were out in the garden, pretending to inspect the roses.

"Really?"

"Yeah, a lot."

"Damned if I know why," Ryan said. "I haven't turned much work out yet."

"Your roomie reports to him about you every day. Simon Harding is a corner, in case nobody told you. That's why he went with Bas to Number Ten."

"Dan, I thought you were Bureau, not Agency," Jack noted, wondering just how far the Legal Attaché spread himself.

"Well, the guys down the hall are pals, and I interface with the local spooks some." *The guys down the hall* was Dan's way of saying CIA people. Yet again Jack wondered just which branch of the government Murray actually belonged to. But everything about him said "cop" to one who knew what to look for. Was this some elaborate kind of disguise, too? No, not possible. Dan had been the personal troubleshooter for Emil Jacobs, the quiet, competent FBI Director, and that was far too elaborate for a government cover. Besides, Murray didn't run agents in London, did he?

Did he? Nothing was ever what it seemed to be. Ryan hated that aspect of his CIA job, but he had to admit that it kept his mind fully awake. Even drinking a beer in his backyard.

"Well, nice to hear, I suppose."

"Basil's hard to impress, my boy. But he and Judge Moore like each other. Jim Greer, too. Basil just plain loves his analytical ability."

"He's pretty smart," Ryan agreed. "I've learned a lot from him."

"He's making you one of his stars."

"Really?" It didn't always seem that way to Ryan.

"Haven't you noticed how quick he's moving you up? Like you were a professor from Harvard or something, fella."

"Boston College and Georgetown, remember?"

"Yeah, well, us Jesuit products run the world—we're just humble about it. They don't teach 'humble' at Harvard."

For sure they don't encourage their graduates to do anything as plebeian as police work, Ryan thought. He remembered the Harvard kids in Boston, many of whom thought they owned the world—because daddy had bought it for them. Ryan preferred to make the purchase

himself, doubtless because of his working-class background. But Cathy wasn't like those upper-class snots, and she *had* been born with a golden spoon in her mouth. Of course, nobody was ever disgraced to point to his son or daughter the doctor, and certainly not to a graduate of Johns Hopkins. *Maybe Joe Muller wasn't so bad a guy after all,* Ryan thought briefly. He'd helped raise a pretty good daughter. Too bad he was an overbearing asshole to his son-in-law.

"So, you like it at Century House?"

"Better than Langley. Too much like a monastery out there. At least in London you live in a city. You can step out for a beer or do some shopping over lunch."

"Shame the building's coming apart. It's the same trouble they've had in some other buildings in London—the mortar or grout, whatever you call it, it's defective. So the façade's peeling off. Embarrassing, but the contractor's gotta be long dead. Can't take a corpse to court."

"You never have?" Jack asked, lightheartedly.

Murray shook his head. "No, I've never popped a cap on anyone. Came close once, but stopped short. Good thing, too. Turned out the mutt wasn't armed. Would have been embarrassing to explain that to the judge," he added, sipping his beer.

"So, how are the local cops doing?" It was Murray's job to interface with them after all.

"They're pretty good, really. Well organized, good investigators for the major stuff. Not much street crime for them to worry about."

"Not like New York or D.C."

"Not hardly. So, anything interesting shaking at Century House?" he asked.

"Not really. Mainly, I've been looking over old stuff, back-checking old analysis against newly developed data. Nothing worth writing home about—but I have to do that anyway. The Admiral is keeping me on a long leash, but it's still a leash."

"What do you think of our cousins?"

"Basil is pretty smart," Ryan observed. "But he's careful about what he shows me. That's fair, I suppose. He knows that I'm reporting back to Langley, and I really don't need to know much about sources.... But I can make some guesses. 'Six' has gotta have some good people in Moscow." Ryan paused. "Damned if I'd ever play that game. Our prisons are pretty nasty. I don't even want to think about what the Russian ones are like."

"You wouldn't live long enough to find out, Jack. They're not the most forgiving people in the world, especially on espionage. You're a lot safer whacking a cop right in front of the precinct station than playing spy."

"And with us?"

"It's amazing—how patriotic convicts are, that is. Spies do very hard time in the Federal prisons. Them and child molesters. They get a lot of attention from Bubba and his armed-robber friends—you know, honest crooks."

"Yeah, my dad talked about that once in a while, how there's a hierarchy in prison, and you don't want to be on the bottom.

"Better to be a pitcher than a catcher." Murray laughed.

It was time for a real question: "So, Dan, just how tight are you with the spook shops?"

Murray surveyed the horizon. "Oh, we get along pretty nicely" was all he was willing to say.

"You know, Dan," Jack observed, "if there's anything I've learned to worry about over here, it's understatement."

Murray liked that one. "Well, then you're living in the wrong place, son. They all talk like that over here."

"Yeah, especially in the spook shops."

"Well, if we talked like everybody else, then the mystique would be gone, and people would understand how screwed up everything really is." Murray had a sip and grinned broadly. "We couldn't maintain the confidence of the people that way. I bet it's the same with doctors and stockbrokers," the FBI rep suggested.

"Every business has its own insiders language." The supposed reason was that it offered more speedy and efficient communications to those inside the fold—but the truth of the matter, of course, was that it denied knowledge and/or access to outsiders. But that was really okay if you were one of the people on the inside.

THE BAD NEWS happened in Budapest, and it resulted from pure bad luck. The agent wasn't even all that important. He provided information on the Hungarian Air Force, but that was an organization that no one took very seriously at best, along with the rest of the Hungarian military, which had rarely distinguished itself on the field of battle. Marxism-Leninism had never really taken firm root here anyway, but the state did have a hardworking, if not especially competent, intelligence/counterintelligence service, and not all of them were stupid. Some of them were even KGBTRAINED, and if there was anything the Soviets knew, it was intelligence and counterintelligence. This officer, Andreas Morrisay, was just sitting, drinking his morning coffee in a shop on Andrassy Utca, when he saw someone make a mistake. He would not have caught it had he not been bored with his newspaper, but there it was. A Hungarian national—you could tell from his clothing—dropped something. It was

about the size of a tin of pipe tobacco. He quickly bent down to pick it up, and then, remarkably enough, he stuck it to the underside of his table. And, Andreas saw, it didn't fall off. It must have some sort of adhesive on the side. And that sort of thing was not only unusual, but also one of the things he'd been shown in a training film at the KGB Academy outside Moscow. It was a very simple and obsolete form of dead-drop, something used by enemy spies to transfer information. It was, Andreas thought, like walking unexpectedly into the cinema and watching a spy film and knowing what was happening just on pure instinct. His immediate reaction was to walk off to the men's room, where there was a pay phone. There he dialed his office and spoke for less than thirty seconds. Next he made use of the men's room, because this might take a while, and he was suddenly excited. No harm was done. The head office of his agency was only a half-dozen blocks away, and two of his coworkers came in, took their seats, and ordered their coffee, talking with apparent animation about something or other. Andreas was relatively new in his job—just two years—and he'd yet to catch anyone doing anything. But this was his day, the officer knew. He was looking at a spy. A Hungarian national who was working for some foreign power, and even if he were giving information to the Soviet KGB, he was committing a crime for which he could be arrested—though in that case, it would be cleared up quickly by the KGB liaison officer. After another ten minutes, the Hungarian rose and walked out, with one of the two other officers in trail.

What followed was, well, nothing, for more than an hour. Andreas ordered some strudel—every bit as tasty here as it was in Vienna, three hundred kilometers away, and this despite the Marxist government in the country, because the Hungarians loved their food, and Hungary was a productive agricultural country, despite the command economy imposed on the farmers to the east. Andreas lit up a string of cigarettes, read his newspaper, and just waited for something to happen.

Presently, it did. A man dressed a little too well to be a Hungarian citizen took his seat at the table next to his, lit a cigarette of his own, and read *his* newspaper.

Here it worked for Andreas that he was badly nearsighted. His glasses were so thick that it took a few seconds for anyone to see where his eyes were pointed, and he remembered his training enough not to allow his eyes to linger on any one spot more than a few brief seconds. Mainly he appeared to be reading his paper, like half a dozen others in this elegant little shop, which had somehow survived the Second World War. He watched the American—Andreas had it fixed in his mind that this one had to be an American—sip his own coffee

and read his own paper, until he set his coffee cup down in the saucer, then reached into his hip pocket for a handkerchief, which he used to wipe his nose, and then replaced in the pocket....

But first he retrieved the tobacco tin from under the table. It was a move so skillfully done that only a trained counterintelligence officer could have spotted it, but, Andreas told himself, that was exactly what he was. And it was his pride that generated his first and most costly mistake of the day.

The American finished his coffee and took his leave, with Andreas in close pursuit. The foreigner walked toward the underground station a block away and nearly made it. But not quite. He turned in surprise when he felt a hand on his upper arm.

"Could I see the tobacco tin that you took from the table?" Andreas said, politely, because this foreigner was probably, technically speaking, a diplomat.

"Excuse me?" the foreigner said, and his accent made him either British or American.

"The one in your pants pocket," Andreas clarified.

"I do not know what you are talking about, and I have business to do." The man started to walk away.

He didn't get far. Andreas pulled out his pistol. It was a Czech Agrozet Model 50 and it effectively ended the conversation. But not quite.

"What is this? Who are you?"

"Papers." Andreas held out his hand, keeping his pistol in close. "We already have your contact. You are," he added, "under arrest."

In the movies, the American would have drawn his own side arm and tried to make his escape down the twenty-eight steps into the ancient metro. But the American's fear was that this guy had seen too many movies himself, and it might make him nervous enough to pull the trigger on his Czech piece-of-shit handgun. So he reached into his coat pocket, very slowly and deliberately, lest he scare the idiot, and withdrew his passport. It was a black one, the sort issued to diplomats, and instantly recognizable to lucky asses like this stupid, fucking Hunky. The American's name was James Szell, and he was by ancestry Hungarian, one of the many minorities welcomed to the America of the previous century.

"I am an American diplomat, properly accredited to your government. You will take me to my embassy immediately." Inwardly, Szell was seething. His face didn't show it, of course, but his five years in the field had just come to a screeching halt. All this over a rookie second-rate agent furnishing second-rate information about a third-rate communist air force. *Goddamn it!*

"First you will come with me," Andreas told him. He motioned with

his pistol. “This way.”

THE PAN AM 747 LANDED at Kennedy half an hour early due to favorable winds. Cox put his books back in his carry-on and stood, managing to be the first passenger off, with a little help from the stewardess. From there, it was a quick walk through customs—his canvas bag told everyone who and what he was—and from there to the next shuttle to Washington National. A total of ninety minutes later, he was in the back of a cab to the State Department at Foggy Bottom. Inside that capacious building, he opened the Diplomatic Bag and parceled out the various contents. The envelope from Foley was handed to a courier, who drove up the George Washington Parkway to Langley, where things also move fairly fast.

The message was hand-carried to MERCURY, the CIA’s message center, and, once decrypted and printed up, hand-delivered to the Seventh Floor. The original was put in the burn bag, and no hard copies were kept, though an electronic one was transferred to a VHS cassette, which ended up in a slot in Sneezy.

Mike Bostock was in his office, and when he saw the envelope from Moscow, he decided that everything else could wait. It surely could, he saw at once, but when he checked his watch he knew that Bob Ritter was over eastern Ohio and heading west on an All Nippon Airlines 747. So he called Judge Moore at home, and requested that he come in to the office. Grumbling, the DCI agreed to do so, at once, also telling Bostock to call Jim Greer as well. Both lived agreeably close to CIA headquarters, and they came out of the executive elevator just eight minutes apart.

“What is it, Mike?” Moore asked on his arrival.

“From Foley. Looks like he has something interesting.” Cowboy or not, Bostock was one to understate things.

“Damn,” the DCI breathed. “And Bob’s already gone?”

“Yes, sir, just an hour ago.”

“What is it, Arthur?” Admiral Greer asked, wearing a cheap golf shirt.

“We got us a Rabbit.” Moore handed the message over.

Greer took his time going over it. “This could be very interesting,” he thought, after a moment’s reflection.

“Yes, it could.” Moore turned to the deputy of the Operations Directorate. “Mike, talk to me.”

“Foley thinks it’s hot. Ed’s as good a field officer as anybody we have, and so’s his wife. He wants to exfiltrate this guy and his family soonest. We pretty much have to go with his instincts on this one, Judge.”

"Problems?"

"The question is: How do we accomplish the mission? Ordinarily, we leave that to the people in the field, unless they try to pull something crazy, but Ed and Mary are too smart for that." Bostock took a breath and looked out the floor-length windows to the Potomac Valley, out beyond the VIP parking lot. "Judge, Ed seems to think this guy has some very hot information. We can't question him on that. The obvious supposition is that the Rabbit's pretty far inside, and he wants to get the hell out of Dodge City. Adding the wife and daughter to the package is a serious complication. Again, we pretty much have to go with the instincts of our field personnel. It would be nice if we could run the guy as an agent, have him deliver information on a continuing basis, but for some reason either that isn't feasible, or Ed thinks he has what we need and want already."

"Why couldn't he tell us more?" Greer observed, still holding the dispatch.

"Well, it's possible that he was time-limited on getting this to the bagman, or he didn't trust the courier system with stuff that could ID the guy to the opposition. Whatever this guy has, Ed didn't want to trust normal communications channels, and that, gentlemen, is a message in and of itself."

"So, you say approve the request?" Moore asked.

"Not a hell of a lot else we can do," Bostock pointed out rather obviously.

"Okay—approved," the DCI said officially. "Get it off to him, right now."

"Yes, sir." And Bostock left the room.

Greer had himself a chuckle. "Bob's going to be pissed."

"What can be so important that Foley would want to short-circuit procedures this abruptly?" Moore wondered aloud.

"We're just going to have to wait to find out."

"I suppose, but you know, patience has never been my long suit."

"Well, think of this as a chance to acquire a virtue, Arthur."

"Great." Moore stood. He could go home now and grumble all day, like a kid on Christmas Eve, wondering what was going to be under the tree—if Christmas was really going to happen this year.

CHAPTER 18

CLASSICAL MUSIC

THE BOUNCE-BACK SIGNAL arrived after midnight in Moscow, where it was printed up and walked to Mike Russell's desk by the night communications officer and promptly forgotten. Due to the eight-hour time difference from Washington, this was often the busiest time for inbound signals, and that one was just another piece of paper with gibberish on it, one which he was not allowed to decrypt.

AS MARY PAT had expected, Ed hadn't gotten any sleep to speak of, but had done his best not to roll around too much, lest he disturb his wife. Doubts were also part of the espionage game. Was Oleg Ivan'ch a false-flag, some random attempt from the KGB on which he'd bitten down a little too fast and a little too hard? Had the Soviets just gone fishing at random and landed a big blue marlin on the first try? Did KGB play such games? Not according to his lengthy mission briefing at Langley. They'd played similar games in the past, but those had been targeted deliberately toward people whom they knew to be players, from whom they could get a line on other agents just by following them around to check out drop sites....

But you didn't play it this way. You didn't ask for a ticket out on the first go-round unless you really wanted something specific, like the neutralization of a particular target—and that couldn't be it. He and Mary Pat hadn't *done* much of anything yet. Hell, only a handful of people at the embassy knew who and what he was. He hadn't recruited new agents yet, nor worked any existing ones. That wasn't, strictly speaking, his job. The Chief of Station wasn't supposed to work the field. He was supposed to direct and supervise those who did, like Dom Corso and Mary Pat and the rest of his small but expert crew.

And if Ivan knew who he was, why tip its hand so quickly—it would only tell CIA more than it knew now, or could easily learn. You didn't play the spy game that way.

Okay, what if the Rabbit was a throwaway, whose job it was to ID Foley and then give over useless or false information—what if the

whole job had as its objective nothing more than to ID the COS Moscow? But they couldn't have targeted him without knowing who he was, could they? Even KGB didn't have the assets to shotgun such a mission and ping on every embassy staffer—it was way too clumsy and was certain to alert embassy personnel to something very strange under way.

No, KGB was too professional for that.

So they couldn't target him without knowing, and if they knew, they'd want to hide that information, lest they alert CIA to a source or method that they'd be far better advised to conceal.

So Oleg Ivanovich couldn't be a false-flag, and that was that.

So, he *had to be* the real thing. Didn't he?

For all his intelligence and experience, Foley could not come up with a construct that made the Rabbit anything but the genuine item. The problem was that it made little sense.

But what in espionage ever made sense?

What *did* make sense was the necessity of getting this guy out. They had a Rabbit, and the Rabbit needed to run away from the Bear.

"YOU CAN'T SAY what's bothering you?" Cathy asked.

"Nope."

"But it's important?"

"Yep." He nodded. "Yeah, it sure is, but the problem is that we don't know how serious."

"Something for me to worry about?"

"Well, no. It's not World War Three or anything like that. But I really can't talk about it."

"Why?"

"You know why—it's classified. You don't tell me about your patients, do you? That's because you have rules of ethics, and I have rules of classification." Smart as Cathy was, she still hadn't fully grasped that one yet.

"Isn't there any way I can help?"

"Cathy, if you were cleared for this, maybe you could offer insights. But maybe not. You're not a pshrink, and that's the medical field that applies to this—how people respond to threats, what their motivations are, how they perceive reality, and how those perceptions determine their actions. I've been trying to get inside the heads of people I haven't met to figure out what they're going to do about something. I've been studying how they think for quite a while, even before I joined the Agency, but you know—"

"Yeah, it's hard to look inside somebody's brain. And you know what?"

"What's that?"

"It's harder with the sane ones than the crazy ones. People can think rationally and still do crazy things."

"Because of their perceptions?"

She nodded. "Partially that, but partially because they've chosen to believe totally false things—for entirely rational reasons, but the things they believe in are still false."

This struck Ryan as worth pursuing. "Okay. Tell me about . . . Josef Stalin, for instance. He killed a lot of people. Why?"

"Part of it was rational, and part of it was wild paranoia. When he saw a threat, he dealt with it decisively. But he tended to see threats that weren't there or weren't serious enough to merit deadly force. Stalin lived on the borderline between madness and normality, and he crossed back and forth like a guy on a bridge who couldn't make up his mind about where he lived. In international affairs, he was supposed to be just as rational as everybody else, but he had a ruthless streak and nobody ever said 'no' to him. One of the docs at Hopkins wrote a book on the guy. I read it when I was in med school."

"What did it say?"

Mrs. Dr. Ryan shrugged. "It wasn't all that satisfactory. The current thinking is that it's chemical imbalances in the brain that cause mental illness, not whether your dad slapped you around too much or you saw your mom in bed with a goat. But we can't test Stalin's blood chemistry now, can we?"

"Not hardly. I think they finally burned him up and put him in—where? I don't remember," Jack admitted. It wasn't the Kremlin wall, was it? Or maybe they just buried the pine box instead of burning it all up. It wasn't worth finding out, was it?

"It's funny. A lot of historical figures did the stuff they did because they were mentally unstable. Today, we could fix them with lithium or other stuff we've learned about—mainly in the last thirty years or so—but back then, all they had was alcohol and iodine. Or maybe an exorcism," she added, wondering if those were real.

"And Rasputin had a bad chemical imbalance, too?" Jack wondered aloud.

"Maybe. I don't know much about that, except he was supposed to be a crazy kinda priest, wasn't he?"

"Not a priest, some kinda mystic civilian. I suppose today he'd be a TV evangelist, right? Whatever he was, he brought down the House of Romanov—but they were pretty useless anyway."

"And then Stalin took over?"

"Lenin first, then Stalin. Vladimir Ilyich checked out from strokes."

"Hypertensive, maybe, or just cholesterol buildup and he clotted in the brain and that did him. And Stalin was worse, right?"

"Lenin was no day at the beach, but Stalin was pretty amazing—Tamerlane come back to the twentieth century, or maybe one of the Caesars. When the Romans reconquered a rebellious city, they killed everything there was, right down to the dogs."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but the Brits always spared the dogs. Too sentimental about them," Jack added.

"Sally misses Ernie," Cathy reminded him in female fashion—almost, but not totally irrelevant to the conversation. Ernie was their dog back home.

"So do I, but he's going to have a lot of fun this fall—duck season soon. He'll get to retrieve all the dead birds out of the water."

Cathy shivered. She'd never hunted anything more alive than the hamburger at the local supermarket—but she carved up human beings with knives. *Like* that *makes any sense,* Ryan thought with a wry smile. But the world had no rule that required logic on its surface—not the last time he'd checked.

"Don't worry, babe. Ernie will like it. Trust me."

"Yeah, sure."

"He loves to go swimming," Jack pointed out, extending the needle. "So, what interesting eyeball problems at the hospital next week?"

"Just routine stuff—checking eyes and prescribing glasses all week."

"No fun stuff, like cutting some poor bastard's left eye in half and then sewing it back together?"

"That's not a procedure," she pointed out.

"Babe, I could never cut into a person's eyeball with a knife without tossing my cookies—or maybe fainting." The very thought of it made him shiver.

"Wimp" was all she had to say about that admission. She didn't understand that this was a skill not covered in the Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico, Virginia.

MARY PAT COULD feel that her husband was still awake, but it wasn't a time to talk, even with their personal hand-jive technique. Instead she was thinking about operations—how to get the package out. Moscow would be too hard. Other parts of the Soviet Union were no easier, because Moscow Station didn't have all that many assets it could use elsewhere in this vast country—intelligence operations tended to be centered in national capitals because that was where you could place "diplomats" who were truly wolves in sheep's clothing. The obvious counter for that was to use your government capital just for strictly government-related administrative services, distanced from military and other sensitive affairs, but nobody would do that, for the

simple reason that government big shots wanted all their functionaries within arm's length so that *they*—the big shots—could enjoy their exercise of power. And that was what they all lived for, whether it was in Moscow, Hitler's Berlin, or Washington, D.C.

So, if not out of Moscow, then where? There were only so many places the Rabbit was free to go. Nowhere west of the wire, as she thought of the Iron Curtain that had fallen across Europe in 1945. And there were few places where a man like him could plausibly want to go that were convenient to CIA. The beaches at Sochi, perhaps. Theoretically, the Navy could get a submarine there and make the snatch, but you couldn't just whistle up a submarine, and the Navy would have a cow over that, just for having it asked of them.

That left the fraternal socialist states of Eastern Europe, which were about as exciting as tourist spots as central Mississippi in the summer: a good place to go if you got off on cotton plantations and blazing heat, but otherwise why bother? Poland was out. Warsaw had been rebuilt after the Wehrmacht's harsh version of urban renewal, but Poland right now was a very tight place due to its internal political troubles, and the easiest exit point, Gdansk, was now as tightly guarded as the Russian-Polish border. It hadn't helped that the Brits had arranged for the purloining of a new Russian T-72 main battle tank there. Mary Pat hoped the stolen tank was useful to somebody, but some idiot in London had bragged about it to the newspapers and the story had broken, ending Gdansk's utility as a port of exit for the next few years. The DDR, perhaps? But few Russians cared a rat's ass about Germany, and there was little there for them to want to see. Czechoslovakia? An interesting city supposedly, landmarked with imperial architecture, and a good cultural life. Their symphonies and ballet were almost on a class with the Russians' own, and the art galleries were supposedly excellent. But the Czech-Austrian border was also very tightly guarded.

That left . . . Hungary.

Hungary, she thought. Budapest was also an old imperial city, once ruled sternly by the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty, conquered by the Russians in 1945 after a nasty, prolonged battle with the German SS, probably rebuilt to whatever former glory it had enjoyed a hundred years before. It was not enthusiastically communist, as they'd demonstrated in 1956, before being harshly put down by the Russians, at Khrushchev's personal orders, and then under Andropov's stewardship as USSR Ambasssador reestablished as a happy socialist brotherhood, though one more loosely governed after the brief and bloody rebellion. The head rebels had all been hanged, shot, or otherwise disposed of. Forgiveness had never been a Marxist-Leninist virtue.

But a lot of Russians took the train to Budapest. It was the neighbor of Yugoslavia, the communist San Francisco, a place where Russians could not go without permission, but Hungary traded freely with Yugoslavia, and so Soviet citizens could purchase VCRs, Reebok running shoes, and Fogal pantyhose there. Typically, Russians went there with one suitcase full and two or three empty, and a shopping list for all their friends.

Soviets could travel there with reasonable freedom, because they had Comecon rubles, which all socialist countries were required to honor by the socialist Big Brother in Moscow. Budapest was, in fact, the boutique of the Eastern Bloc. You could even get X-rated tapes for the tape machines that were manufactured there—rip-offs of Japanese designs, reverse-engineered and made in their own fraternal socialist factories. The tapes were smuggled in from Yugoslavia and copied—everywhere, everything from *The Sound of Music* to *Debbie Does Dallas.* Budapest had decent art galleries and historical sites, good orchestras, and the food was supposed to be pretty good. An entirely plausible place for the Rabbit to go, with every ostensible intention of going back to his beloved *Rodina.*

That's the beginning of a plan, Mary Pat thought. That was also enough lost sleep for one night.

"SO, WHAT HAPPENED?" the Ambassador asked.

"An AVH spook was having coffee one table away from where my agent made a drop," Szell explained in the Ambassador's private office. It was located on the top floor, in the corner—in fact, in the quarters once occupied by Jozsef Cardinal Mindszenty during his lengthy residency at the U.S. Embassy. A beloved figure both in the eyes of the American staffers and the Hungarian people, he'd been imprisoned by the Nazis, released by the arriving Red Army, and promptly returned to prison for not being enthusiastic enough over the advent of the New Faith of Russia, though, technically, he'd been imprisoned on the far-fetched charges of being a raging royalist who wished to return the House of Hapsburg to imperial rule. The local communists hadn't been overly strong on creative writing. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, the Hapsburgs had been about as popular in Budapest as a bargeload of plague rats.

"Why were you doing it, Jim?" Ambassador Peter "Spike" Ericsson asked. He'd have to reply to the venomous, but entirely predictable, communiqué that had arrived with the Station Chief, which was now sitting in the center of his desk.

"Bob Taylor's wife—she's pregnant, remember?—had some plumbing problems, and they flew 'em both off to Second Army

General Hospital up at Kaiserslauten to get checked out."

Ericsson grunted. "Yeah, I forgot."

"Anyway, the short version is, I blew it," Szell had to admit. It just wasn't his way to cover things up. It would cause a major hiccup in his CIA career, but that couldn't be helped. Damned sure it was a lot rougher right now for that poor clumsy bastard who'd screwed up the transfer. The Hungarian State Security Authority—*Allavedelmi Hatosag,* or AVH—officers who'd interrogated him evidently hadn't had a good gloat in some time, and had made a point of telling him how easily he'd been bagged. *Fucking amateurs,* Szell raged. But the end of the game was that he was now PNG'd, declared *persona non grata* by the Hungarian government, and requested to leave the country in forty-eight hours—preferably, with his tail tucked firmly between his legs.

"Sorry to lose you, Bob, but there's nothing much I can do."

"And I'm pretty useless to the team now anyway. I know." Szell let out a long and frustrated breath. He'd been here long enough to set up a pretty good little spy shop, providing fairly good political and military information—none of it overly important, because Hungary was not an overly important country, but you just never knew when something of interest would happen, even in Lesotho—which might well be his next posting, Szell reflected. He'd have to buy some sunblock and a nice bush jacket.... At least he'd get to catch the World Series back at home.

But for now, Station Budapest was out of business. *Not that Langley would really miss it,* Szell consoled himself.

The signal about this would go to Foggy Bottom via embassy telex—encrypted, of course. Ambassador Ericsson drafted his reply to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, rejecting out of hand the absurd allegation that James Szell, Second Secretary to the Embassy of the United States of America, had done anything inconsistent with his diplomatic status, and lodging an official protest in the name of the U.S. Department of State. Perhaps in the next week, Washington would send some Hungarian diplomat back—whether he was a sheep or a goat would be decided in Washington. Ericsson thought it would be a sheep. Why let on that the FBI had ID'd a goat, after all? Better to let the goat continue to munch away in whatever garden it had invaded—under close observation. And so the game went on. The Ambassador thought it a stupid game, but every member of his staff played it with greater or lesser enthusiasm.

THE MESSAGE ABOUT SZELL, it turned out, was sufficiently under the radar so that when it was forwarded to CIA headquarters, it was tucked into routine traffic as not worthy of interfering with the DCI's

weekend—Judge Moore got a morning brief every single day anyway, of course, and this item would wait until 8:00 A.M. Sunday, the watch officers collectively decided, because judges liked an orderly life. And Budapest wasn't all that important in the Great Scheme of Things, was it?

SUNDAY MORNING IN Moscow was much the same as Sunday morning everywhere else, albeit with fewer people getting dressed up for church. That was true for Ed and Mary Pat, also. A Catholic priest celebrated mass at the U.S. Embassy on Sunday mornings, but most of the time they didn't make it—though they were both Catholic enough to feel guilt for their slothful transgressions. They both told themselves that their guilt was mitigated by the fact that they were both doing God's own work right in the center of the land of the heathen. So the plan for today was to take Eddie for a walk in the park, where he might meet some kids to play with. At least, that was Eddie's mission brief. Ed rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom first, followed by his wife and then by little Eddie. No morning paper, and the Sunday TV programming was every bit as bad as it was the rest of the week. So they actually had to talk over breakfast, something many Americans find hard to do. Their son was still young and impressionable enough to find Moscow interesting, though nearly all of his friends were Americans or Brits: inmates, like his entire family, in the compound /ghetto, guarded by MGB or KGB—opinions were divided on that question, but everyone knew it made little real difference.

The meeting was set for 11:00. Oleg Ivan'ch would be easy to spot—as would she, Mary Pat knew. Like a peacock among crows, her husband liked to say (even though the peacock was actually a male bird). She decided to play it down today. No makeup, just casually brushed-out hair, jeans, and a pullover shirt. She couldn't change her figure very much—the local aesthetic preferred women of her height to be about ten kilograms heavier. Diet, she supposed. Or maybe when you had food available in what was largely a hungry country, you ate it. Maybe the fat layer you acquired made the winters more comfortable? Whatever, the level of fashion for the average Russian female was like something from a Dead End Kids movie. You could tell the wives of important people easily, because their clothes looked almost middle-class, as opposed to the more normal Appalachia class of dress. But that was grossly unfair to the people of Appalachia, Mary Pat decided.

"You coming, Ed?" she asked after breakfast.

"No, honey. I'll clean up the kitchen and get into this new book I

got last week."

"The truck driver did it," she offered. "I've read that guy before."

"Thanks a bunch," her husband grumbled.

And with that, she checked her watch and headed out. The park was just three of the long blocks to the east. She waved to the gate guard—definitely KGB, she thought—and headed to the left, holding little Eddie's hand. The traffic on the street was minimal by American standards, and it was definitely getting cooler out. She was glad she'd dressed her son in a long-sleeve shirt. A turn to look down at him revealed no obvious tail. There could, of course, be binoculars in the apartments across the street, but somehow she thought not. She'd pretty well established herself as a dumb American blonde, and just about everyone bought it. Even Ed's press contacts thought her dumber than him—and they thought him to be an ass—which could not have suited her any better. Those chattering blackbirds repeated everything she and Ed said to one another, until the word was as uniformly spread as the icing on one of her cakes. It all got back to KGB as quickly as any rumor could go—damned near the speed of light in that community, because reporters did intellectual incest as a way of life—and the Russians listened to them and put everything in their voluminous dossiers until it became something that "everybody knows." A good field officer always used others to build his or her cover. Such a cover was random-sounding—just as real life always was—and that made it plausible, even to a professional spook.

The park was about as bleak as everything else in Moscow. A few trees, some badly trodden grass. Almost as though KGB had had all the parks trimmed to make them bad contact points. That it would also limit places for young Muscovites to rendezvous and trade some kisses probably would not have troubled the consciences at The Centre, which were probably about the Pontius Pilate level on a reflective day.

And there was the Rabbit, a hundred meters or so away, nicely located, near some play items that would appeal to a three-year-old—or a four-year-old. Walking closer, she saw again that Russians doted on their little ones, and, in this case, maybe a little more—the Rabbit was KGB, and so he had access to better consumer goods than the average Russian, which, like a good parent in any land, he lavished on his little girl. That was a good sign for his character, Mary Pat decided. Maybe she could even like this guy, an unexpected gift for a field officer. So many agents were screwed up as badly as a South Bronx street mugger. He didn't observe her approach any more than to turn and scan the area in boredom, as men walking their children did. The two Americans headed the right way in what would surely appear to be a random act.

"Eddie, there's a little girl you can say hello to. Try out your Russian on her," his mommy suggested.

"Okay!" and he raced off in the manner of toddlers. Little Eddie ran right up to her and said "Hello."

"Hello."

"My name is Eddie."

"My name is Svetlana Olegovna. Where do you live?"

"That way." Eddie pointed back to the foreigners' ghetto.

"That is your son?" the Rabbit asked.

"Yes, Eddie Junior. Edward Edwardovich to you."

"So," Oleg Ivan'ch said next, without amusement, "is he also CIA?"

"Not exactly." Almost theatrically, she extended her hand to him. She had to protect him, just in case cameras were about. "I am Mary Patricia Foley."

"I see. Does your husband like his *shapka*?"

"Actually, he does. You have good taste in furs."

"Many Russians do." Then he switched gears. It was time to go back to business. "Have you decided that you can help me or not?"

"Yes, Oleg Ivan'ch, we can. Your daughter is darling. Her name is Svetlana?"

The communications officer nodded. "Yes, that is my little *zaichik*."

The irony of that was positively eerie. Their Rabbit called his little girl his bunny. It generated a brilliant smile. "So, Oleg, how do we get you to America?"

"You ask me this?" he asked with no small degree of incredulity.

"Well, we need some information. Your hobbies and interests, for example, and your wife's."

"I play chess. More than anything else, I read books on old chess matches. My wife is more classically educated than I. She loves music—classical music, not the trash you make in America."

"Any particular composer?"

He shook his head. "Any of the classical composers, Bach, Mozart, Brahms—I do not know all of the names. It is Irina's passion. She studied piano as a child, but wasn't quite good enough to get official state training. That is her greatest regret, and we do not have a piano for her to practice on," he added, knowing that he had to give her this kind of information to assist in her efforts to save him and his family. "What else do you require?"

"Do any of you have any health problems—medications, for example?" They were speaking in Russian again, and Oleg noted her elegant language skills.

"No, we are all quite healthy. My Svetlana has been through all the usual childhood diseases, but without complications of any sort."

"Good." *That simplifies a lot of things,* Mary Pat thought. "She's a

lovely little girl. You must be very proud of her."

"But will she like life in the West?" he worried aloud.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, no child has ever had reason to dislike life in America."

"And how does your little Edward like things in the Soviet Union?"

"He misses his friends, of course, but right before we came over, we took him to Disney World. He still talks a lot about that."

Then came a surprise: "Disney World? What is that?"

"It is a large commercial business made for the pleasure of children—and for adults who remember their childhood. It's in Florida," she added.

"I've never heard of it."

"You will find it remarkable and most enjoyable. More so for your daughter." She paused. "What does your wife think of your plans?"

"Irina knows nothing of this," Zaitzev said, surprising the hell out of his American interlocutor.

"What did you say?" *Are you out of your fucking mind?* MP wondered at once.

"Irina is a good wife to me. She will do what I tell her to do." Russian male chauvinism was of the aggressive variety.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, that is most dangerous for you. You must know that."

"The danger to me is being caught by KGB. If that happens, I am a dead man, and so is someone else," he added, thinking a further dangle was in his interest.

"Why are you leaving? What convinced you that it is necessary?" she had to ask.

"KGB is planning to kill a man who does not deserve to die."

"Who?" And she had to ask that one, too.

"That I will tell you when I am in the West."

"That is a fair response," she had to say in reply. *Playing a little cagey, aren't we?*

"One other thing," he added.

"Yes?"

"Be very careful what items you transmit to your headquarters. There is reason to believe your communications are compromised. You should use one-time pads, as we do at The Centre. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"All communications about you were first encrypted and then dispatched by Diplomatic Bag to Washington." When she said that, the relief on his face was real, much as he tried to hide it. And the Rabbit had just told her something of very great importance. "Are we penetrated?"

"That, also, is something I will discuss only in the West."

Oh, shit, Mary Pat thought. *They have a mole somewhere, and he might*

be in the White House Rose Garden for all we know. Oh, shit . . .

"Very well, we will take the utmost security with your case," she promised. But that meant that there'd be a two-day minimum turnaround time for important signals. It was back to World War One procedures with this guy. Ritter would just love that. "Can you tell me what methods might be safe?"

"The British changed their cipher machines about four months ago. We have as yet had no success in cracking them. That I know. Exactly which of your signals are compromised, I do not know, but I do know that some are fully penetrated. Please keep this in mind."

"That I will do, Oleg Ivan'ch." This guy had information that CIA needed—big-time. Cracked communications were the most dangerous things that could happen to any covert agency. Wars had been won and lost over such things as that. The Russians lacked American computer technology, but they did have some of the world's finest mathematicians, and the brain between a person's ears was the most dangerous instrument of all, and a damned site more competent that the ones that sat on a desk or a floor. Did Mike Russell have any of the old one-time pads at the embassy? CIA had used them once upon a time, but their cumbersome nature had caused them to be discarded. NSA told everybody who'd listen that on his best day, Seymour Cray couldn't brute-force their ciphers, even with his brand-new CRAY-2 supercomputer on amphetamines. If they were wrong, it could hurt America in ways too vast to comprehend. But there were many cipher systems, and those who cracked one could not necessarily crack another. Or so everybody said . . . but communications security was not her area of expertise. Even she had to trust someone and something once in a while. But this was like being shot in the back by the starting gun in a hundred-meter race and having to run for the tape anyway. Damn.

"It is an inconvenience, but we will do what is necessary to protect you. You want to be taken out soon."

"This week would be very helpful—not so much for my needs as for the needs of a man whose life is in danger."

"I see," she said, not quite seeing. This guy might be laying a line on her, but if so, he was doing it like a real pro, and she wasn't getting that signal from this guy. No, he didn't read like an experienced field spook. He was a player, but not her kind of player.

"Very well. When you get to work tomorrow, make a contact report," she told him.

That one surprised him: "Are you serious?"

"Of course. Tell your supervisor that you met an American, the wife of a minor embassy official. Describe me and my son—"

"And tell them you are a pretty but shallow American female who

has a handsome and polite little boy," he surmised. "And your Russian needs a little work, shall we say?"

"You learn quickly, Oleg Ivan'ch. I bet you play a good game of chess."

"Not good enough. I will never be a Grand Master."

"We all have our limitations, but in America you will find them far more distant than they are in the Soviet Union."

"By the end of the week?"

"When my husband wears his bright red tie, you set the time and place for a meeting. Possibly by tomorrow afternoon you will get your signal, and we will make the arrangements."

"Good day to you, then. Where did you learn your Russian?"

"My grandfather was equerry to Aleksey Nikolayevich Romanov," she explained. "In my childhood, he told me many stories about the young man and his untimely death."

"So, your hatred for the Soviet Union runs deep, eh?"

"Only for your government, Oleg. Not for the people of this country. I would see you free."

"Someday, perhaps, but not soon."

"History, Oleg Ivan'ch, is made not of a few big things but of many small things." That was one of her core beliefs. Again, for the cameras that might be there or not, she shook his hand and called her son. They walked around the park for another hour before heading back home for lunch.

But for lunch instead they all drove to the embassy, talking on the way about nothing more sensitive than the admirably clear weather. Once there, they all had hot dogs in the embassy canteen, and then Eddie went to the day-care room. Ed and Mary Pat went to his office.

"He said what?" the Chief of Station snapped.

"He said his wife—named Irina, by the way—doesn't know his plans," Mary Pat repeated.

"Son of a *bitch!*" her husband observed at once.

"Well, it does simplify some of our exposure. At least she can't let anything slip." His wife was always the optimist, Ed saw.

"Yeah, baby, until we try to make the exfiltration, and she decides not to go anywhere."

"He says she'll do what he says. You know, the men here like to rule the roost."

"That wouldn't work with you," the Chief of Station pointed out. For several reasons, not the least of which was that her balls were every bit as big as his.

"I'm not Russian, Eddie."

"Okay, what else did he say?"

"He doesn't trust our comms. He thinks some of our systems are

compromised."

"Jesus!" He paused. "Any other good news?"

"The reason he's skipping town is that KGB wants to kill somebody who, he says, doesn't deserve to be killed."

"Did he say who?"

"Not until he breathes free air. But there is good news. His wife is a classical music buff. We need to find a good conductor in Hungary."

"Hungary?"

"I was thinking last night. Best place to get him out from. That's Jimmy Szell's station, isn't it?"

"Yeah." They both knew Szell from time at The Farm, CIA's training installation in Tidewater, Virginia, off Interstate 64, a few miles from Colonial Williamsburg. "I always thought he deserved something bigger." Ed took a second to think. "So, out of Hungary via Yugoslavia, you're thinking?"

"I always knew you were smart."

"Okay . . ." His eyes fixed on a blank part of the wall while his brain went to work. "Okay, we can make that work."

"Your flag signal's a red tie on the metro. Then he slips you the meeting arrangement, we do that, and the Rabbit skips out of town, along with Mrs. Rabbit and the Bunny—oh, you'll love this, he already calls his daughter *zaichik."*

"Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail?" Ed exercised his sense of humor.

"I like that. Call it Operation BEATRIX," she suggested. Both of them had read Mrs. Potter's *Peter Rabbit* as kids. Who hadn't?

"The problem's going to be getting Langley's approval. If we can't use normal comm channels, coordinating everything is going to be a major pain in the ass."

"They never told us at The Farm that this job was easy. So remember what John Clark told us. Be flexible."

"Yeah, like linguine." He let out a long breath. "With the communications limitations, it essentially means we plan it and run it out of this office, with no help from the Home Office."

"Ed, that's the way it's supposed to be anyway. All Langley does is tell us we can't do what we want to do"—which was, after all, the function of every home office in every business in the world.

"Whose comms can we trust?"

"The Rabbit says the Brits just set up a new system they can't crack—yet, anyway. Do we have any one-time pads left here?"

The COS shook his head. "Not that I know of." Foley lifted his phone and punched the right numbers. "Mike? You're in today? Want to come over here? Thanks."

Russell arrived in a couple minutes. "Hey, Ed—hello, Mary. What are you doing in the shop today?"

"Got a question."

"Okay."

"Got any one-timers left?"

"Why do you ask?"

"We just like the extra security," she replied. The studiedly casual reply didn't work.

"You telling me my systems aren't secure?" Russell asked in well-hidden alarm.

"There is reason to believe some of our encryption systems are not fully secure, Mike," Ed told the embassy Communications Officer.

"Shit," he breathed, then turned with some embarrassment. "Oh, sorry, Mary."

She smiled. "It's okay, Mike. I don't know what the word means, but I've heard it spoken before." The joke didn't quite get to Russell. The previous revelation was too earthshaking for him to see much humor at the moment.

"What can you tell me about that?"

"Not a thing, Mike," the Station Chief said.

"But you think it's solid?"

"Regrettably, yes."

"Okay, back in my safe I do have a few old pads, eight or nine years old. I never got rid of them—you just never know, y'know?"

"Michael, you're a good man." Ed nodded his approval.

"They're good for maybe ten dispatches of about a hundred words each—assuming they still have matching pads at Fort Meade, but the guys I report to don't throw much away. They will have to dig them out of some file drawer, though."

"How hard to use them?"

"I hate the goddamned things. You know why. Damn it, guys, the new STRIPE cipher is just a year old. The new Brit system is an adaptation of it. I know the team in Z-Division who developed it. I'm talking 128-bit keying, plus a daily key that's unique to the individual machines. No way in hell you can crack that."

"Unless they have an agent-in-place at Fort Meade, Mike," Ed pointed out.

"Then let me get my hands on him, and I'll skin the motherfucker alive with my Buck hunting knife." The very thought had jacked up his blood pressure enough that he didn't apologize to the lady present for his vulgarity. This black man had killed and skinned his share of white-tailed deer, but he still had a hankering to convert a bear into a rug, and a big ol' Russian brown bear would suit him just fine. "Okay, I can't tell The Fort about this?"

"Not with STRIPE you can't," Foley answered.

"Well, when you hear a big, angry shout from the West, you'll know

what it is."

"Better you don't discuss this with anybody right now, Mike," Mary Pat thought out loud. "They'll find out soon enough through other channels."

That told Russell that the Rabbit signal he'd dispatched the other day was about somebody they wanted to get out in a hurry, and now he figured he knew why. Their Rabbit was a communications specialist, and damned sure when you got one of those, you got him the hell on the first train out of Dodge. *Soon enough* meant right the hell now, or as close to it as you could arrange.

"Okay, get me your signal. I'll encrypt it on my STRIPE machine and then one-time-pad it. If they're reading my signals"—he managed not to shudder—"will that tell them anything?"

"You tell me," Ed Foley replied.

Russell thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, it shouldn't. Even when you can crack the other guy's systems, you never get more than a third of the traffic. The systems are too complex for that—unless the other guy's agent-in-place is reading the cleartext on the far end. Ain't no defense against that, least not from my point of view."

And that was the *other* very scary thought. It was, after all, the same game they played and the same objective they were constantly trying to achieve. Get a guy all the way inside who could get the all-the-way-inside information back out. Like their agent CARDINAL, a word they *never* spoke aloud. But that was the game they'd chosen and, while they knew the other side was pretty good, they figured that they were better. And that was the name of that tune.

"Okay, Mike. Our friend believes in one-time pads. I guess everybody does."

"Ivan sure as hell does, but it must drive their troops crazy, having to go through every signal one letter at a time."

"Ever work the penetration side?" Ed Foley asked him.

Russell shook his head at once. "Not smart enough. Good thing, too. A lot of those guys end up in rubber rooms cutting out paper dolls with blunted scissors. Hey, I know a lot of the guys in Z-Division. The boss guy there just turned down the chair in math at Cal Tech. He's pretty smart," Russell estimated. "Damned sight smarter than I'll ever be. Ed Popadopolous's—his name is Greek—father used to run a restaurant up in Boston. Ask me if I want his job."

"No, eh?"

"Not even if they threw in Pat Cleveland as a fringe benefit." And that was one fine-looking lady, Ed Foley knew. Mike Russell really did need a woman in his life....

"Okay, I'll get you a dispatch in about an hour. Okay?"

"Cool." Russell headed out.

"Well, I think we rattled his cage pretty hard," MP thought aloud.

"Admiral Bennett at Fort Meade ain't going to be real happy either. I got a signal to draft."

"Okay, I'll see how Eddie's doing with his crayons." And Mary Patricia Kaminsky Foley took her leave as well.

JUDGE ARTHUR MOORE'S morning briefing normally happened at 7:30 in the morning, except on Sunday, when he slept late, and so it took place at 9:00. His wife even recognized the knock of the National Intelligence Officer who delivered the daily intelligence news, always in the private study of his Great Falls house, which was swept weekly by the Agency's best debugging expert.

The world had been relatively quiet the previous day—even communists liked to relax on weekends, he'd learned on taking the job.

"Anything else, Tommy?" the Judge asked.

"Some bad news from Budapest," the NIO answered. "Our Station Chief, James Szell, got burned by the opposition making a pickup. Details unknown, but he got himself PNG'd by the Hungarian government. His principal deputy, Robert Taylor, is out of the country on personal business. So Station Budapest is out of business for the moment."

"How bad is that?" Not too bad, the DCI thought.

"Not a major tragedy. Nothing much seems to happen in Hungary. Their military is pretty much a minor player in the Warsaw Pact, and their foreign policy, aside from the things they do in their immediate neighborhood, is just a mirror image of Moscow's. The station's been passing us a fair amount of military information, but the Pentagon doesn't worry too much about it. Their army doesn't train enough to be a threat to much of anybody, and the Soviets regard them as unreliable," the NIO concluded.

"Is Szell somebody to screw up?" Moore asked. He vaguely remembered meeting the guy at an Agency get-together.

"Actually, Jimmy is well regarded. As I said, sir, we don't have any details yet. He'll probably be home by the end of the week."

"Okay. That does it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nothing new on the Pope?"

"Not a word, sir, but it'll take time for our people to shake all their trees."

"That's what Ritter says."

IT TOOK FOLEY almost an hour to write up his dispatch. It had to be short but comprehensive, and that taxed his writing ability. Then he walked it down to Mike Russell's office. He sat there and watched a grumbling chief communications officer one-time-pad the words one goddamned letter at a time, pad it with more Czech surnames, then super-encrypt on his STRIPE encryption machine. With that done, it went on the secure fax machine, which, of course, encrypted the text one more time, but in a graphics fashion rather than an alphanumeric one. The fax encryption was relatively simple, but since the opposition —which was assumed to monitor the embassy's satellite transmitter— could not tell if the signal was graphics or text, that was just one more hoop for their decryption people to jump through. The signal went up to a geosynchronous satellite and back down to different downlinks, one at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, another at Sunnyvale, California, and, of course, one at Fort Meade, Maryland, to which the other stations sent their "take" via secure fiber-optic landlines.

The communications people at Fort Meade were all uniformed noncomms, and when one of them, an Air Force E-5, ran it through his decoding machine, he was surprised to see the notation that said the super-encryption was on a one-time pad, NHG-1329.

"Where the hell is that?" he asked his watch supervisor, a Navy senior chief.

"Damn," the chief commented. "I haven't seen one of those in a long time." He had to open a three-ring binder and root through it until he found the storage site inside the big communications vault at the far corner of the room. That was guarded by an armed Marine staff sergeant whose sense of humor, like that of all the Marines who worked here, had been surgically removed at Bethesda Naval Medical Center prior to his assignment to Fort Meade.

"Hey, Sarge, gotta go inside for something," he told the jarhead.

"You gotta see the Major first," the sergeant informed him. And so the senior chief walked to the desk of the USAF major who was sitting at his desk, reading the morning paper.

"Morning, Major. I need to get something out of the vault."

"What's that, Chief?"

"A one-time pad, NHG-1329."

"We still have any of them?" the major asked in some surprise.

"Well, sir, if not, you can use this to start a fire on your grill with." He handed the dispatch over.

The Air Force officer inspected it. "Tell me about it. Okay." He scribbled an authorization on a pad in the corner of his desk. "Give this to the Marine."

"Aye aye, sir." The senior chief walked back to the vault, leaving the Air Force puke to wonder why the squids always talked so funny.

"Here you go, Sam," the chief said, handing over the form.

The Marine unlocked the swinging door, and the senior chief headed inside. The box the pad was in wasn't locked, presumably because anyone who could get past the seven layers of security required to get to this point was probably as trustworthy as the President's wife.

The one-time pad was a small-ring binder. The Navy chief signed for it on the way out, then went back to his desk. The Air Force sergeant joined him, and together they went through the cumbersome procedure of decrypting the dispatch.

"Damn," the young NCO observed about two-thirds of the way through. "Do we tell anybody about that?"

"That's above our pay grade, sonny. I expect the DCI will let the right people know. And forget you ever heard that," he added. But neither really would, and both knew it. With all the wickets they had to pass through to be here, the idea that their signal systems were not secure was rather like hearing that their mother was turning tricks on Sixteenth Street in D.C.

"Yeah, Chief, sure," the young wing-wiper replied. "How do we deliver this one?"

"I think a courier, sonny. You want to whistle one up?"

"Aye aye, sir." The USAF sergeant took his leave with a smile.

The courier was an Army staff sergeant, driving a tan Army Plymouth Reliant, who took the sealed envelope, tucked it into the attaché case on his front seat, and drove down the Baltimore-Washington Parkway to the D.C. Beltway, and west on that to the George Washington Parkway, the first right off of which was CIA. At that point, the dispatch—whatever the hell it was, he didn't know—ceased being his responsibility.

The address on the envelope sent it to the Seventh Floor. Like many government agencies, CIA never really slept. On the top floor was Tom Ridley, a carded National Intelligence Officer, and the very one who handled Judge Moore's weekend briefings. It took him about three seconds to see that this one had to go to the judge right now. He lifted his STU secure phone and hit speed-dial button 1.

"This is Arthur Moore," a voice said presently.

"Judge, Tom Ridley here. Something just came in." "Something" means it was really something.

"Now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you come out here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jim Greer, too?"

"Yes, sir, and probably Mr. Bostock also."

That made it interesting. "Okay, call them and then come on out." Ridley could almost hear the *God damn it, don't I* ever *get a day off!* at the other end before the line went dead. It took another few minutes to call the two other senior Agency officials, and then Ridley went down to his car for the drive out, pausing only to make three Xerox copies.

IT WAS LUNCHTIME in Great Falls. Mrs. Moore, ever the perfect hostess, had lunch meats and soft drinks set out for her unexpected guests before retiring to her sitting room upstairs.

"What is it, Tommy?" Moore asked. He liked the newly appointed NIO. A graduate of Marquette University, he was a Russian expert and had been one of Greer's star analysts before fleeting up to his present post. Soon he'd be one of the guys who always accompanied the President on Air Force One.

"This came in late this morning via Fort Meade," Ridley said, handing out the copies.

Mike Bostock was the fastest reader of the group: "Oh, Lord."

"This will make Chip Bennett happy," James Greer predicted.

"Yeah, like a trip to the dentist," Moore observed last of all. "Okay, people, what does this tell us?"

Bostock took it first. "It means we want this Rabbit in our hutch in one big hurry, gentlemen."

"Through Budapest?" Moore asked, remembering his morning brief.

"Uh-oh," Bostock observed.

"Okay." Moore leaned forward. "Let's get our thinking organized. First, how important is this information?"

James Greer took it. "He says KGB's going to kill somebody who doesn't deserve it. That kinda suggests the Pope, doesn't it?"

"More importantly, he says our communications systems might be compromised," Bostock pointed out. "That's the hottest thing I see in this signal, James."

"Okay, in either case, we want this guy on our side of the wire, correct?"

"Judge, you can bet your bench on that," the Deputy DDO shot back. "As quickly as we can make it happen."

"Can we use our own assets to accomplish it?" Moore asked next.

"It won't be easy. Budapest has been burned down."

"Does that change the importance of getting his cute little cottontail out of Redland?" the DCI asked.

"Nope." Bostock shook his head.

"Okay, if we can't do it ourselves, do we call in a marker?"

"The Brits, you mean?" Greer asked.

"We've used them before. We have good relations with them, and Basil does like to generate debts with us," Moore reminded them. "Mike, can you live with that?" he asked Bostock.

A decisive nod. "Yes, sir. But it might be nice to have one of our people around to keep an eye on things. Basil can't object to that."

"Okay, we need to decide which of our assets we can send. Next," Moore went on, "how fast?"

"How does tonight grab you, Arthur?" Greer observed to general amusement. "The way I read this, Foley's willing to run the operation out of his own office, and he's pretty hot to trot, too. Foley's a good boy. I think we let him run with it. Budapest is probably a good exit point for our Rabbit."

"Concur," Mike Bostock agreed. "It's a place a KGB officer can get to, like on vacation, and just disappear."

"They'll know he's gone pretty fast," Moore thought out loud.

"They knew when Arkady Shevchenko skipped, too. So what? He still gave us good information, didn't he?" Bostock pointed out. He'd helped oversee that operation, which had really been ramrodded by the FBI in New York City.

"Okay. What do we send back to Foley?" Moore asked.

"One word: 'Approved.' " Bostock *always* backed his field officers.

Moore looked around the room. "Objections? Anybody?" Heads just shook.

"Okay, Tommy. Back to Langley. Send that to Foley."

"Yes, sir." The NIO stood and walked out. One nice thing about Judge Moore. When you needed a decision, you might not like what you got, but you always got it.

CHAPTER 19

CLEAR SIGNAL

THE TIME DIFFERENCE was the biggest handicap in working his station, Foley knew. If he waited around the embassy for a reply, he might have to wait for hours, and there was no percentage in that. So, right after the signal went out, he'd collected his family and gone home, with Eddie conspicuously eating another hot dog on the way out to the car, and a facsimile copy of the New York *Daily News* in his hand. It was the best sports page of the New York papers, he'd long thought, if a little lurid in its headlines. Mike Lupica knew his baseball better than the rest of the wannabe ballplayers, and Ed Foley had always respected his analysis. He might have made a good spook if he'd chosen a useful line of work. So now he could see why the Yankees had fallen on their asses this season. It looked as though the goddamned Orioles were going to take the pennant, and that, to his New York sensibilities, was a crime worse than how the Rangers looked this year.

"So, Eddie, you looking forward to skating?" he asked his son, belted in the back seat.

"Yeah!" the little guy answered at once. Eddie Junior was his son, all right, and maybe here he'd really learn how to play ice hockey the right way. Waiting in his father's closet was the best pair of junior hockey skates that money could buy, and another pair for when his feet got bigger. Mary Pat had already checked out the local junior leagues, and those, her husband thought, were about the best this side of Canada, and maybe better.

On the whole, it was a shame he couldn't have an STU in his house, but the Rabbit had told him that they might not be entirely secure, and besides, it would have told the Russians that he wasn't just the embassy officer who baby-sat the local reporters.

Weekends were the dullest time for the Foley family. Neither minded the time with the little guy, of course, but they could have done that at their now-rented Virginia home. They were in Moscow for their work, which was a passion for both of them, and something their son, they hoped, would understand someday. So for now his father read some books with him. The little guy was picking up on the

alphabet, and seemed to read words, though as calligraphic symbols rather than letter constructs. It was enough for his father to be pleased about, though Mary Pat had a few minor doubts. After thirty minutes of that, Little Eddie talked his dad through a half hour of *Transformers* tapes, to the great satisfaction of the former and the bemusement of the latter.

The Station Chief's mind, of course, was on the Rabbit, and now it returned to his wife's suggestion of getting the package out without KGB's knowing they were gone. It was during the *Transformers* tape that it came back to him. You couldn't have a murder without a body, but with a body you damned sure had a murder. But what if the body wasn't the right one?

The essence of magic, he'd once heard Doug Henning say, was controlling the perception of the audience. If you could determine what they saw, then you could also dictate what they thought they saw, and from that precisely what they would remember seeing, and what they would then tell others. The key to *that* was in giving them something that they expected to see, even if it was unbelievable. People—even intelligent people—believed all manner of impossible things. It was sure as hell true in Moscow, where the rulers of this vast and powerful country believed in a political philosophy as out of tune with contemporary reality as the Divine Right of Kings. More to the point, they knew it was a false philosophy, and yet they commanded themselves to believe it as though it were Holy Scripture written in gold ink by God's own hand. So these people *could* be fooled. They worked pretty hard to fool themselves, after all.

Okay, how to fool them? Foley asked himself. Give the other guy something he expected to see, and he'd see it, whether it was really there or not. They wanted the Sovs to believe that the Rabbit and his family had . . . not skipped town, but had . . . died?

Dead people, so Captain Kidd had supposedly said, tell no tales. And neither did the *wrong* dead people.

The Brits did this once in World War II, didn't they? Foley wondered. Yes, he'd read the book in high school, and even then, at Fordham Prep, the operational concept had impressed him. Operation MINCEMEAT, it had been called. That concept had been very elegant indeed, as it had involved making the opposition feel smart, and people everywhere loved to feel smart....

Especially the dumb ones, Foley reminded himself. And the German intelligence services in World War II hadn't been worth the powder to blow them to hell. They were so inept that the Germans would have been better advised to do without them entirely—Hitler's astrologer would have been just as good, and probably a lot cheaper in the long run.

But the Russians, on the other hand, were pretty damned smart—smart enough that you wanted to be very careful playing head games with them, but not so smart that if they found something they expected to find, they would toss it in the trash can and go looking for what they *didn't* expect. No, that was just human nature, and even the New Soviet Man they kept trying to build was subject to human nature, much as the Soviet government tried to breed it out of him.

So, how would we go about that? he wondered quietly, as on the television a diesel truck-tractor changed into a two-legged robot, the better to fight off the forces of evil—whoever they were....

Oh. Yeah. It was pretty obvious, wasn't it? You just had to give them what they needed to see to prove that the Rabbit and his little hutchmates were dead, to give them what dead people always left behind. *That* would be a major complication, but not so vast of one as to be impossible to arrange. But they'd need assistance. That thought did not make Ed Foley feel secure. In his line of work, you trusted yourself more than you trusted anyone or anything else—and after that, maybe, others of your own organization, but as few of them as possible. After *that,* when it became necessary to trust people in some other organization, you really gritted your teeth. Okay, sure, on his premission brief at Langley, he'd been told that Nigel Haydock could be relied upon as a very tame—and very able—Brit, and a pretty good field spook working for a closely allied service, and, okay, sure, he liked the look of the guy, and, okay, sure, they'd hit it off fairly well. But, God damn it, he wasn't Agency. But Ritter had told him that, in a pinch, Haydock could be relied upon for a helping hand, and the Rabbit himself had told him that Brit comms hadn't been cracked yet, and he had to trust the Rabbit to be an honest player. Foley's life wasn't riding on that, but damned sure his career was.

Okay, but what—no, *how*—to work this one. Nigel was the Commercial Attaché at the Brit Embassy, right across the river from the Kremlin itself, a station that went back to the czars, and one that had supposedly pissed Stalin off royally, to see the Union Jack every morning from his office window. And the Brits had helped recruit, and had later run GRU Colonel Oleg Penkovskiy, the agent who'd prevented World War III and, along the way, recruited CARDINAL, the brightest jewel in CIA's crown. So if he had to trust anyone, it would have to be Nigel. Necessity was the mother of many things, and if the Rabbit came to grief, well, they'd know that SIS was penetrated. Again. He realized he'd have to apologize to Nigel just for thinking this way, but this was business, not personal.

Paranoia, Eddie, the COS told himself. *You can't suspect everybody.*

The hell I can't!

But, probably, he knew, Nigel Haydock thought the same thing

about him. That was just how the game was played.

And if they got the Rabbit out, it was proof positive that Haydock was straight. No way in hell that Ivan would let this bunny skip town alive. He just knew too much.

Did Zaitzev have any idea at all of the danger he was walking into? He *trusted* CIA to get him and his family out of Dodge City alive....

But with all the information to which he had access, wasn't he making an informed judgment?

Jesus, there were enough interlocking wheels in this to make a bicycle factory, weren't there?

The tape ended, and Master Truck Robot—or whatever the hell his name was—transformed himself back into a truck and motored off to the sound of "Transformers, more than meets the eye . . ." It was sufficient to the moment that Eddie liked it. So, he'd arranged some quality time with his son and some good think time for himself—not a bad Sunday evening on the whole.

"SO, WHAT'S THE PLAN, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"Good question, James," the DCI answered. They were watching TV in his den, the Orioles and the White Sox playing in Baltimore. Mike Flanagan was pitching, and looked to be on his way to another Cy Young Award, and the rookie shortstop the Orioles had just brought up was playing particularly well, and looked to have a big-league future. Both men were drinking beer and eating pretzels, as though they were real people enjoying a Sunday afternoon of America's pastime. That was partly true.

"Basil will help. We can trust him," Admiral Greer opined.

"Agreed. Whatever problems he had are a thing of the past, and he'll compartmentalize it as tight as the Queen's jewel box. But we'll want one of our people involved at his end."

"Who, do you suppose?"

"Not the COS London. Everybody knows who he is, even the cabdrivers." There was no disputing that. The London Station Chief had been in the spook business for a very long time, and was more an administrator now than an active field officer. The same could be said of most of his people, for whom London was a sinecure job, and mainly a sunset posting for people looking forward to retirement. They were good men all, of course, just ready to hang up the spikes. "Whoever it is, he'll have to go to Budapest, and he'll have to be invisible."

"So, somebody they don't know."

"Yep." Moore nodded as he took a bite of his sandwich and reached for some chips. "He won't have to do very much, just let the Brits

know he's there. Keep 'em honest, like."

"Basil's going to want to interview this guy."

"No avoiding that," Moore agreed. "And he's entitled to dip his beak, too." That was a line he had picked up as a judge on a rare organized-crime appeals case. He and his fellow jurists in Austin, Texas, had laughed about it for weeks, after rejecting the appeal, 5–0.

"We'll want one of our people in for that, too."

"Bet your bippy, James," Moore agreed again.

"And better that our guy is based over there. Timing might get a little tough."

"You bet."

"How about Ryan?" Greer asked. "He's way the hell under the radar. Nobody knows who he is—he's one of mine, right? He doesn't even look like a field officer."

"His face has been in the papers," Moore objected.

"You think KGB reads the society page? At most they might have noticed him as a rich wannabe writer, and if he has a file, it's in some subbasement at The Centre. That ought not to be a problem."

"You think so?" Moore wondered. For sure, this would give Bob Ritter a bellyache. But that wasn't entirely a bad thing. Bob had visions of taking over all CIA operations, and, good man that he was, he would never be DCI, for any number of reasons, not the least of which was that Congress didn't much like spooks with Napoleonic complexes. "Is he up to it?"

"The boy's an ex-Marine and he knows how to think on his feet, remember?"

"He *has* paid his dues, James. He doesn't take a leak sitting down," the DCI conceded.

"And all he has to do is keep an eye on our friends, not play spook on enemy soil."

"Bob will have a conniption fit."

"It won't hurt our purposes to keep Bob in his place, Arthur." *Especially,* he didn't add, *if this works out.* And work out it should. Once out of Moscow, it ought to be a fairly routine operation. Tense, of course, but routine.

"What if he screws things up?"

"Arthur, Jimmy Szell dropped the ball in Budapest, and he's an experienced field officer. I know, probably not even his fault, probably just bad luck, but it proves the point. A lot of this racket is just luck. The Brits will be doing all the real work, and I'm sure Basil will pick a good team."

Moore weighed the thought quietly. Ryan was very new at CIA, but he was a rising star. What helped was his adventure, not yet a year old, where twice he'd faced loaded guns and gotten it done anyway.

One nice thing about the Marine Corps, they didn't turn out many pussies. Ryan *could* think and act on his feet, and that was a nice thing to have in your pocket. Better yet, the Brits liked him. He'd seen the comments from Sir Basil Charleston on Ryan's tenure at Century House—he was taking quite a liking to the young American analyst. So this was a chance to bring a new talent along, and though he wasn't a graduate of The Farm, that didn't mean he was a babe in the woods. Ryan had been through the woods, and he'd killed himself a couple of wolves along the way, hadn't he?

"James, it's a little outside the box, but I won't say no for that reason. Okay, cut him loose. I hope your boy doesn't wet his pants."

"What did Foley call this operation?"

"BEATRIX, he said. You know, like *Peter Rabbit."*

"Foley, that boy is going places, Arthur, and his wife, Mary Patricia, she is a real piece of work."

"There we surely agree, James. She'd make a great rodeo rider, and he'd be a pretty good town marshal west of the Pecos," the DCI said. He liked to see some of the young talent the Agency was producing. Where they all came from—well, they came from a lot of different places, but they all seemed to have the same fire in the belly that he'd had thirty years before, working with Hans Tofte. They weren't terribly different from the Texas Rangers he'd learned to admire as a little boy—the smart, tough people who did what had to be done.

"How do we get the word to Basil?"

"I called Chip Bennett last night, told him to have his people gin up some one-timers. Ought to be at Langley this evening. We'll fly them to London on the 747 tonight, and shoot some on from there to Moscow. So we'll be able to communicate securely, if not conveniently."

THAT, IN FACT, was just about done. A computer system used for taking down the dot-dash signals of International Morse Code was connected to a highly sensitive radio tuned to a frequency used by no human agency, transforming the garbage noise into Roman letters. One of the technicians at Fort Meade remarked along the way that the intergalactic noise they were copying down was the residual static produced by the Big Bang, for which Penzias and Miller had collected a Nobel Prize a few years before, and that was as random as things got —unless you could decode it to learn what God thought, which was beyond the skills even of NSA's Z-division. A dot-matrix printer put the letters to carbon-paper sets—three copies of each, the original to

the originators, and a copy each for CIA and NSA. They all contained enough letters to transcribe the first third of the Bible, and each page and each line were alphanumerically identified to make decryption possible. Three people separated the pages, made sure that the sets were properly arranged, and then slipped them into ring binders for some semblance of ease of use. Then two were handed off to an Air Force NCO, who drove the CIA copies off to Langley. The lead technician wondered what was so goddamned important to require such massive one-time pads, which NSA had long before gotten past with its institutional worship of electronic technology, but his was not —ever—to reason why, was it? Not at Fort Meade, Maryland, it wasn't.

RYAN WAS WATCHING TV, trying to get used to the British sitcoms. He'd grown to like British humor—they'd invented Benny Hill, after all. That guy had to be mentally disabled to do some of the things he did—but the regular series TV took a little getting used to. The signals were just different, and though he spoke English as well as any American, the nuances here—exaggerated, of course, on TV—had a subtle dimension that occasionally slipped by him. But not his wife, Jack observed. His wife was laughing hard enough to gag, and at things he barely comprehended. Then came the trilling note of his STU in his upstairs den. He trotted upstairs to get it. It wouldn't be a wrong number. Whoever had set his number up—British Telecom, a semiprivate corporation that did exactly what the government told it to do—would have chosen a number so far off the numerical trail that only an infant could dial his secure phone by mistake.

"Ryan," he said, after his phone mated up with the one at the other end.

"Jack, Greer here. How's Sunday evening in Jolly Old England?"

"It rained today. I didn't get to cut the grass," Ryan reported. He didn't mind much. He *hated* cutting grass, having learned as a child that however much you sliced it down, the goddamned stuff just grew back in a few days to look scraggly again.

"Well, here the Orioles are leading the White Sox five-two after six innings. I think your team looks good for the pennant."

"Who in the National League?"

"If I had to bet, I'd say the Phillies all the way, my boy."

"I got a buck says you're wrong, sir. My O's look good from here." *Which isn't* there, *damn it.* Since losing the Colts, he'd transferred his loyalty to baseball. The game was more interesting, tactically speaking, though lacking the manly combat of NFL football. "So, what's happening in Washington on a Sunday afternoon, sir?"

"Just wanted to give you a heads-up. There's a signal on its way to London that's going to involve you. New tasking. It'll take maybe three or four days."

"Okay." It perked his interest, but he'd have to see what it was before he got overly excited about it. Probably some new analysis that they wanted him for. Those were usually economics, because the Admiral liked his way of working through the numbers games. "Important?"

"Well, we're interested in what you can do with it" was all the DDI wanted to say.

This guy must teach foxes how to outsmart dogs and horses. Good thing he wasn't a Brit. The local aristocracy would shoot him for ruining their steeplechases, Ryan told himself. "Okay, sir, I'll be looking for it. I don't suppose you can give me a play-by-play?" he asked with a little hope in his voice.

"That new shortstop—Ripken, is it?—just doubled down the left-field line, drove in run number six, one out, bottom of the seventh."

"Thank you for that, sir. It beats *Fawlty Towers*."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's what they call a comedy over here, Admiral. It's funny if you can understand it."

"Brief me in next time I come over," the DDI suggested.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Family okay?"

"We're all just fine, sir, thank you for asking."

"Okay. Have a good one. See ya."

"What was that?" Cathy asked in the living room.

"The boss. He's sending me something to work on."

"What exactly?" She never stopped trying.

"He didn't say, just a heads-up that I have something new to play with."

"And he didn't tell you what it was?"

"The Admiral likes his surprises."

"Hmph" was her response.

THE COURIER SETTLED into his first-class seat. The package in his carry-on bag was tucked under the seat in front, and he had a collection of magazines to read. Since he was covert, not an official diplomatic courier, he could pretend to be a real person, a disguise that he'd shed at Heathrow's Terminal Four immigration desk, there to catch an embassy car for the ride into Grosvenor Square. Mainly he looked forward to a nice pub and some Brit beer before he flew back home in a day and a half. It was a waste of talent and training for the

newly hatched field officer, but everyone had to pay his dues, and this, for a guy fresh out of The Farm, was just that. He consoled himself with the thought that whatever it was, it had to be a little bit important. Sure, Wilbur. If it were all that important, he'd be on the Concorde.

ED FOLEY WAS sleeping the sleep of the just. The next day, he'd find an excuse to head over to the British Embassy and have a sit-down with Nigel and plan the operation. If that went well, he'd wear his reddest tie and take the message from Oleg Ivan'ch, set up the next face-to-face and go forward with the operation. *Who is it*, he wondered, *who the KGB is trying to kill? The Pope?* Bob Ritter had his knickers in a twist over that. *Or somebody else?* The KGB had a very direct way of dealing with people it didn't like. CIA did not. They hadn't actually killed anyone since the fifties, when President Eisenhower had used CIA—actually quite skillfully—as an alternative to employing uniformed troops in an overt fashion. But that skill hadn't been conveyed to the Kennedy Administration, which had screwed up nearly everything it touched. Too many James Bond books, probably. Everything in fiction was simpler than the real world, even fiction written by a former field spook. In the real world, zipping your zipper could be hard.

But he was planning a fairly complex operation and telling himself that it wasn't all *that* complex. Was he making a mistake? Foley's mind wandered while the rest of his consciousness slept. Even asleep, he kept going over and over things. In his dreams, he saw rabbits running around a green field while foxes and bears watched. The predators didn't move on them, perhaps because they were too fast and/or too close to their rabbit holes for them to waste a chase. But what happened when the rabbits got too far away from their holes? Then the foxes could catch them, and the bears could move in to swallow them whole.... And his job was to protect the little bunnies, wasn't it?

Even so, in his dream the foxes and bears just watched while he, the eagle, circled high and looked down. He, the eagle, had sworn off rabbits, though a fox might be a nice morsel to rip apart, if his talons got it properly, just behind the head to snap the neck, and leave him for the bear to eat, because bears didn't really care whom they ate. No, Mr. Bear didn't care one little bit. He was just a big old bear, and his belly was always empty. He'd even eat an eagle if he got the chance, but the eagle was too swift and too smart, wasn't he? Only so long as he kept his eyes open, the noble eagle told himself; he had great abilities and fine sight, but even he had to be careful. And so the eagle soared aloft, riding the thermals and watching. He couldn't enter

the fray, exactly. At most, he could swoop down and warn the cute little bunnies that there was danger about, but the bunnies were proverbially dumb bunnies, munching their grass and not looking around as much as they ought to. That was his job, the noble eagle told himself, to use his superb eyesight to make sure he knew everything he needed to know. The bunny's job was to run when he needed to run, and with help from the eagle, to run to a different field, one without foxes and bears around it, so that he could be free to raise more cute little bunnies and live happily ever after, like Beatrix Potter's little Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail.

Foley rolled over, and the dream ended, the eagle watching for danger, and the rabbits eating their grass, and the foxes and bears a good way off, just watching but not moving, because they didn't know which bunny would stray too far from its safe little hole.

THE ALARM CLOCK'S deliberately annoying buzz caused Foley's eyes to snap open, and he rolled over to switch it off. Then he jerked himself out of bed and into the bathroom. He suddenly missed his house in Virginia. It had more than one bathroom—two and a half, in fact, which allowed some degree of flexibility should an emergency occur. Little Eddie got up when summoned, then almost immediately sat on the floor in front of the TV set and called out "Worker-womannnn!" when the exercise show came on. That generated a smile from his mom and dad. Even the KGB guys on the other end of the bug wires probably had a little chuckle at that.

"Anything important planned for the office today?" Mary Pat asked in the kitchen.

"Well, ought to be the usual weekend traffic from Washington. I have to run over to the Brit Embassy before lunch."

"Oh? What for?" his wife asked.

"I want to stop over and see Nigel Haydock about a couple of things," he told her, as she set the bacon frying. Mary Pat always did bacon and eggs on the day of important spook work. He wondered if their KGB listeners would ever tumble to that. Probably not. Nobody was that thorough, and American eating habits probably interested them only insofar as foreigners usually ate better than Russians.

"Well, say hello for me."

"Right." He yawned and took a sip of coffee.

"We need to have them over—maybe next weekend?"

"Works for me. Roast beef and the usual?"

"Yeah, I'll try to get some frozen corn on the cob." Russians grew corn you could buy in the open farmers' markets, and it was okay, but it wasn't the Silver Queen that they'd come to love in Virginia. So they

usually settled for the frozen corn the Air Force flew in from Rhein-Main, along with the Chicago Red hot dogs that they served in the embassy canteen and all the other tastes of home that became so important on a posting like this one. *It was probably just as true in Paris,* Ed thought. Breakfast went quickly, and half an hour later, he was almost dressed.

"Which tie today, honey?"

"Well, in Russia, you should wear red once in a while," she said, handing the tie over with a wink, along with the lucky silver tie bar.

"Um-hmm," he agreed, looking in the mirror to snug it into his collar. "Well, here is Edward Foley, Senior, foreign-service officer."

"Works for me, honey." She kissed him, a little loudly.

"Bye, Daddy," Junior said as his father headed for the door. A high five instead of a kiss. He'd gotten a little too old for the sissy stuff.

The rest of the trip was stultifyingly routine. Walk to the metro. Buy his paper at the kiosk and catch the exact same train for the same five-kopeck fare, because if he caught the same one going home, so as to be marked by KGB as a creature of strict routine, then he had to mirror-image morning and afternoon habits. At the embassy, he entered his office and waited for Mike Russell to bring in the morning message traffic. More than usual, he saw at once, flipping through the messages and checking the headers.

"Anything about what we talked about?" the communications officer asked, lingering for a moment.

"Doesn't look like it," Foley replied. "Got you a little torqued?"

"Ed, getting secure stuff in and out is my only job, y'know?"

"Look at it from my side, Mike. If they tumble to me, I'm as useless as tits on a boarhog. Not to mention the guys who get killed because of it."

"Yeah, I hear you." Russell paused. "I just can't believe they can crack my systems, Ed. Like you said, you'd be losing people left and right."

"I want to agree with you, but we can't be too careful, can we?"

"Roger that, man. I catch anybody dicking around in my shop, they won't live long enough to talk to the FBI," he promised darkly.

"Don't get too carried away."

"Ed, when I was in Vietnam, nonsecure signals got soldiers killed. That's as important as things get, y'know?"

"If I hear anything, I'll make sure you know about it, Mike."

"Okay." Russell headed out, not quite trailing smoke out of his ears.

Foley organized his message traffic—it was addressed to the Chief of Station, of course, not to anyone's name—and started reading through it. There was still concern about KGB and the Pope, but, aside from the Rabbit, he had nothing new to report, and it was only hope

that told him the Flopsy had anything to report on that subject. A lot of interest in last week's Politburo meeting, but for that he'd have to wait for his sources to report in. Questions about Leonid Brezhnev's health, but while they knew the names of his physicians—a whole team of them—none of them talked to CIA directly. You could see the picture on TV and know that Leonid Ilyich wasn't going to be running the marathon in the next Olympics. But people like that could linger for years, good news and bad news. Brezhnev wasn't going to be doing anything new and different, but, as he became increasingly irrational, there was no telling what dumbass things he might try—damned sure he wasn't going to be pulling out of Afghanistan. He didn't care a rap about the lives of young Russian soldiers, not when he heard Death's footsteps approaching his own door. The succession was of interest to CIA, but it was fairly settled that Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov would be the next guy at the seat at the head of the table, absent a sudden death or a major foot put wrong in a political sense. Andropov was too canny a political operator for that, however. No, he was the current czarevich, and that was that. Hopefully, he wouldn't be too vigorous—and he wouldn't if the stories about his liver disease were true. Every time Foley saw him on Russian TV, he looked for the yellow tinge on his skin that announced that particular ailment—but makeup could hide that, if they used makeup on their political chieftains.... *Hmm, how to check that?* he wondered. Something to send back to the Science and Technology Directorate at Langley, maybe.

ZAITZEV TOOK HIS SEAT, after relieving Kolya Dobrik, and looked over his message traffic. He decided to memorize as much as possible, and so he took a little longer than usual forwarding the messages to their end-recipients. There was one from Agent CASSIUS again, routed for politicalintelligence people upstairs, and also at the U.S.–Canada Institute, where the academicians read the tea leaves for The Centre as a backup. There was one from NEPTUNE, requesting money for the agent who was giving KGB such good communications intelligence. NEPTUNE suggested the sea, didn't it? Zaitzev searched his memory for previous signals from that source. Wasn't it mainly about the American navy? And *he* was the reason he worried about American signals security. Surely KGB was paying him a *huge* amount of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars in American cash, something KGB had a problem getting ahold of—it was far easier for the Soviet Union to pay in diamonds, since it could mine for diamonds in eastern Siberia. They'd paid some Americans in diamonds, but they'd been caught by the vigilant American FBI, and KGB had never tried to negotiate their release . . . so much for loyalty. The Americans tried to

do that, he knew, but most of the time the people they tried to get out had already been executed—a thought that stopped his thoughts cold in their tracks.

But there was no turning back now, and CIA was competent enough that KGB feared it, and didn't *that* mean that he was in good hands?

Then he remembered one other thing he had to do today. In his drawer was a pad of contact reports. Mary had suggested he report their meeting, and so he did. He described her as pretty, in her late twenties or early thirties, mother of a fairly nice little son, and none too bright—*very American in mannerisms,* he wrote—with modest language skills, good vocabulary but poor syntax and pronunciation, which made her Russian understandable but stilted. He didn't make an evaluation of her likelihood to be an intelligence officer, which, he figured, was the smart thing to do. After fifteen minutes of writing, he walked it over to the department security officer.

"This was a waste of time," he said, handing it to the man, a captain passed over for promotion twice.

The security officer scanned it. "Where did you meet her?"

"It's right there." He pointed to the contact form. "I took my *zaichik* for a walk in the park, and she showed up with her little boy. His name is Eddie, actual name is evidently Edward Edwardovich—Edward Junior, as the Americans say it—age four, I think she said, a nice little boy. We talked a few minutes about not very much, and the two of them walked away."

"Your impression of her?"

"If she is a spy, then I am confident of the victory of socialism," Zaitzev replied. "She is rather pretty, but far too skinny, and not overly bright. What I suppose is a typical American housewife."

"Anything else?"

"It's all there, Comrade Captain. It took longer to write that up than it did to speak with her."

"Your vigilance is noted, Comrade Major."

"I serve the Soviet Union." And Zaitzev headed back to his desk. *It was a good idea on her part*, he thought, *to cross this* t *so assiduously.* There might have been a shadow on her, after all, and if not, then there would be a new entry in her KGB file, reported by a KGB officer, certifying that she was no threat to world socialism.

Back at his desk, he returned to making extra-careful mental notes of his daily work. The more he gave CIA, the better he'd be paid. Maybe he would take his daughter to that Disney Planet amusement park, and maybe his little *zaichik* would enjoy herself there. His signals included other countries, too, and he memorized those as well. One code-named MINISTER in England was interesting. He was probably in their Foreign Ministry, and provided excellent political/

diplomatic intelligence that they loved upstairs.

FOLEY TOOK AN embassy car for the drive to the British Embassy. They were cordial enough once he showed his ID, and Nigel came down to meet him in the grand foyer, which was indeed quite grand.

"Hello, Ed!" He gave a hearty handshake and a smile. "Come this way." They went up the marble stairs and then right to his office. Haydock closed the door and pointed him to a leather chair.

"What can I do for you?"

"We got a Rabbit," Foley said, skipping the preliminaries.

And that said it all. Haydock knew that Foley was a spook—a "cousin" in the British terminology.

"Why are you telling me?"

"We're going to need your help getting him out. We want to do that through Budapest, and our station there just got burned down. How's your shop there?"

"The chief is Andy Hudson. Former officer in the Parachute Regiment, able chap. But do back up, Edward. What can you tell me, and why is this so important?"

"He's a walk-in, I guess you'd say. He seems to be a communications guy. He feels real as hell, Nigel. I've requested permission to bust him right out, and Langley has green-lighted it. Pair of fives, man," he added.

"So, high priority and high reliability on this chappie?"

Foley bobbed his head. "Yep. Want the good news?"

"If there is any."

"He says our comms may be compromised, but your new system hasn't been cracked yet."

"Good to hear. So, that means I can communicate freely, but you cannot?"

Another nod. "I learned this morning that a communications aid is on its way to me—perhaps they ginned up a couple of pads for me to use. I'll find out later today, maybe."

Haydock leaned back in his chair and lit up a smoke, a low-tar Silk Cut. He'd switched to them to make his wife happy.

"You have a plan?" the Brit spook asked.

"I figure he takes the train to Budapest. For the rest of it, well . . ." Foley outlined the idea he and Mary Pat had figured out.

"That *is* creative, Edward." Haydock thought. "When did you read up on MINCEMEAT? It's part of the syllabus at our academy, you know."

"Back when I was a kid. I always thought it was pretty clever."

"In the abstract, not a bad idea—but, you know, the pieces you

need are not something you pick up at the ironmongers."

"I kinda figured that, Nigel. So, if we want to make the play, better that we get moving on it right quick."

"Agreed." Haydock paused. "Basil will want to know a few things. What else can I tell him?"

"He ought to get a hand-carried letter from Judge Moore this morning. All I can really say is, this guy looks pretty real."

"You said he's a communications officer—in The Centre, is it?"

"Yep."

"That could be very valuable indeed," Haydock agreed. "Especially if he's a mail clerk." He pronounced it *clark*. The invocation of the name of Foley's training officer almost caused him to smile . . . but not quite.

It was a slower nod this time, with Foley's eyes locked in on his host. "That's what we're thinking, guy."

It finally got home. "Bloody hell," Haydock breathed. "That would be valuable. And he's just a walk-in?"

"Correct. A little more complicated than that, but that's what it comes down to, bud."

"Not a trap, not a false-flag?"

"I've thought about that, of course, but it just doesn't make sense, does it?" Foley asked. The Brit knew he was Agency, but didn't know he was Station Chief. "If they've ID'd me, why tip their hand this early?"

"True," Nigel had to agree. "That would be clumsy. So, Budapest, is it? Easier than out of Moscow—at least there's that."

"There's bad news, too. His wife isn't in on the plan." Foley had to tell him that.

"You must be joking, Edward."

"Wish I was, man. But that's how it's going down."

"Ah. Well, what's life without a few complications? Any preferences how to get your Rabbit out?" He asked, not quite letting Foley know what he was thinking.

"That's for your guy Hudson in Budapest, I suppose. It's not my turf, not my place to tell him how to run his operation."

Haydock just nodded. It was one of those things that went without saying but had to be said anyway. "When?" he asked.

"Soon, as soon as possible. Langley's almost as hot for this as I am." And, he didn't add, it was sure as hell a way for him to make an early mark as Chief of Station Moscow.

"Rome, you're thinking? Sir Basil has been rattling my windows about that."

"Your Prime Minister interested?"

"About as much as your President, I should imagine. That play

might well muddy the waters rather thoroughly."

"Big-time," Foley agreed. "Anyway, I wanted to give you a heads-up. Sir Basil will probably have a signal for you later today."

"Understood, Edward. When that arrives, I'll be able to begin taking action." He checked his watch—too soon to offer his guest a beer in the embassy pub. Pity.

"When you get authorization, give me a call. Okay?"

"Certainly. We shall get things sorted out for you, Ed. Andy Hudson's a good officer, and he runs a tight operation in Budapest."

"Great." Foley stood.

"How about a dinner soon?" Haydock asked.

"I guess we'd better do it soon. Penny looks about due. When will you be flying her home?"

"A couple of weeks. The little bugger is rolling about and kicking all the time now."

"Always a good sign, man."

"And we have a good physician right here in the embassy, should he be a little early." Just that the embassy doc didn't really want to deliver a baby. They never did.

"Well, if it's a boy, Eddie will lend you his *Transformers* tapes," Ed promised.

"*Transformers*? What's that?"

"If it's a boy, you'll find out," Foley assured him.

CHAPTER 20

STAGING

THE JUNIOR FIELD OFFICER arrived in London's Heathrow Terminal Four just before seven in the morning. He breezed through immigration and customs and headed out, where he saw his driver holding the usual sign card, this one in a false name, of course, since CIA spooks only used their real names when they had to. The driver's name was Leonard Watts. Watts drove an embassy Jaguar, and, since he had a diplomatic passport and tags on the car, he wasn't all that concerned with speed limits.

"How was the flight?"

"Fine. Slept most of the way."

"Well, welcome to the world of field operations," Watts told him. "The more sleep you get, the better."

"I suppose." It was his first overseas assignment, and not a very demanding one. "Here's the package." And his cover wasn't enhanced by the fact that he was traveling with only the courier package and a small bag that had spent the trip in the overhead bin, with a clean shirt, clean underwear, and shaving kit.

"Name's Len, by the way."

"Okay, I'm Pete Gatewood."

"First time in London?"

"Yeah," Gatewood answered, trying to get used to sitting in the left front seat without a steering wheel to protect him, and being driven by a NASCAR reject. "How long to get to the embassy?"

"Half hour." Watts concentrated on his driving. "What are you carrying?"

"Something for the COS, is all I know."

"Well, it isn't routine. They woke me up for it," Watts groused.

"Where have you worked?" Gatewood asked, hoping to get this maniac to slow down some.

"Oh, around. Bonn, Berlin, Prague. Getting ready to retire, back to Indiana. We got a football team to watch now."

"Yeah, and all the corn, too," Gatewood observed. He'd never been to Indiana, and had no particular wish to tour the farming state, which did, he reminded himself, turn out some fairly good basketball

players.

Soon enough, or nearly so, they were passing a large green park on the left, and a few blocks after that, the green rectangle of Grosvenor Square. Watts stopped the car to let Gatewood out. He dodged around the "flower pots" designed to keep car bombers from getting too close to the concrete that surrounded the surpassingly ugly building, and walked it. The Marines inside checked his ID and made a call. Presently, a middle-aged woman came into the entrance foyer and led him to an elevator that took him to the third floor, just next door to the technical group that worked closely with the British GCHQ at Cheltenham. Gatewood walked into the proper corner office and saw a middle-aged man sitting at an oaken desk.

"You're Gatewood?"

"Yes, sir. You're . . .?"

"I'm Randy Silvestri. You have a package for me," the COS London announced.

"Yes, sir." Gatewood opened the zipper on his bag and pulled out the large manila envelope. He handed it over.

"Interested in what's in it?" Silvestri asked, eyeing the youngster.

"If it concerns me, I expect you'll tell me, sir."

The Station Chief nodded his approval. "Very good. Annie will take you downstairs for breakfast if you want, or you can catch a cab for your hotel. Got some Brit money?"

"A hundred pounds, sir, in tens and twenties."

"Okay, that'll handle your needs. Thanks, Gatewood."

"Yes, sir." And Gatewood left the office.

Silvestri ripped open the package after determining that the closure hadn't been disturbed beforehand. The flat ring binder had what looked like forty or fifty printed sheets of paper—all space-and-a-half random letters. So, a one-time-cipher pad—for Station Moscow, the cover note said. He'd have that couriered to Moscow on the noon British Airways flight. And two letters, one for Sir Basil, with hand delivery indicated. He'd have a car drive him to Century House after calling ahead. The other one was for that Ryan kid that Jim Greer liked so much, also for hand delivery via Basil's office. He wondered what was up. It had to be nontrivial for this sort of handling. He picked up his phone and hit speed-dial #5.

"This is Basil Charleston."

"Basil, it's Randy. Something just came in for you. Can I bring it over?"

A sound of shuffling papers. Basil would know this was important. "Say, ten o'clock, Randy?"

"Right. See you then." Silvestri sipped his coffee and estimated the time required. He could sit here for about an hour before heading

over. Next he punched his intercom button.

"Yes, sir?"

"Annie, I have a package to be couriered to Moscow. We got a bagman on deck?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, could you take this down to him?"

"Yes, sir." CIA secretaries are not paid to be verbose.

"Good. Thanks." Silvestri hung up.

JACK AND CATHY were on the train, passing through Elephant and Castle—and he'd still not learned how the damned place had gotten *that* name, Jack reminded himself. The weather looked threatening. *England wasn't broad enough for a storm system to linger*, Ryan thought. Maybe there was just a series of rain clouds coming across the Atlantic? In any case, between yesterday and today, his personal record of fair weather over here seemed to be ending. Too bad.

"Just glasses this week, babe?" he asked his wife, her head buried as usual in a medical journal.

"All week," she confirmed. Then she looked up. "It's not as exciting as surgery, but it's still important, you know."

"Cath, if you do it, it must be important."

"And you can't say what you'll be doing?"

"Not until I get to my desk." And probably not then, either. Whatever it was, it had doubtless been transmitted via secure printer or fax line overnight . . . unless it was something really important, and had been sent via courier. The time difference actually made that fairly convenient. The early 747 from Dulles usually got in between six and seven in the morning, and then it was forty minutes more to his desk. The government could work more efficiently than Federal Express when it wanted to. Another fifteen minutes of his *Daily Telegraph* and her *NEJM* and they parted company at Victoria. Cathy perversely took the tube. Ryan opted for a cab. It hustled past the Palace of Westminster, then hopped across the Thames. Ryan paid the four pounds fifty and added a healthy tip. Ten seconds later, he was inside.

"Good morning, Sir John," Bert Canderton called in greeting.

"Howdy, Sar-Major," Ryan said in reply, sliding his pass through the gate, then to the elevator and up to his floor.

Simon was already in his seat, going over message traffic. His eyes came up when Jack entered. "Morning, Jack."

"Hey, Simon. How was the weekend?"

"Didn't get any gardening done. Bloody rain."

"Anything interesting this morning?" He poured himself a cup of

coffee. Simon's English Breakfast Tea wasn't bad for tea, but tea just didn't make it for Jack, at least not in the morning. They didn't have bear claws here, either, and Jack had neglected to get his croissant on the way in.

"Not yet, but something's coming in from America."

"What is it?"

"Basil didn't say, but when something comes in by hand on a Monday morning, it's usually interesting. Must be Soviet-related. He's told me to stand by for it."

"Well, might as well start the week with something interesting." Ryan sipped his coffee. It wasn't quite up to what Cathy made, but better than tea. "When's it coming in?"

"About ten. Your Station Chief, Silvestri, is driving it over."

Ryan had only met him once. He'd seemed competent enough, but you expected that of a COS, even one in a sunset posting.

"Nothing new from Moscow?"

"Just some new rumors about Brezhnev's health. It seems that stopping smoking did him precious little good," Harding said, lighting his pipe. "Nasty old bugger," the Brit analyst added.

"What about this stuff from Afghanistan?"

"Ivan's getting cleverer. Those Mi-24 helicopters seem to be rather effective. Bad news for the Afghans."

"How do you think that's going to play out?"

Harding shrugged. "It's a question of how many casualties Ivan is willing to take. They have the firepower they need to win, and so it's a matter of political will. Unfortunately for the Mujahideen, the leadership in Moscow doesn't trouble itself very much with casualties."

"Unless something changes the equation," Ryan thought out loud.

"Like what?"

"Like an effective surface-to-air missile to neutralize their helos. We have the Stinger. Never used it myself, but the write-up's pretty good."

"But can a mob of illiterate savages use a missile properly?" Harding asked dubiously. "A modern rifle, certainly. A machine gun, sure. But a missile?"

"The idea is to make a new weapon soldier-proof, Simon. You know, simple enough that you don't have to think while you're dodging bullets. There's not much time to think then, and you make the steps as short as you can. Like I said, I've never used that one, but I've played with anti-tank weapons, and they're pretty simple."

"Well, your government will have to decide to give them the SAMs, and they haven't yet. Hard for me to get overly excited about it. Yes, they are killing Russians, and I reckon that's good, but they are bloody savages."

And they killed a lot of Brits once, Ryan reminded himself, *and Brit memories are as long as anyone else's.* There was also the issue of having Stingers fall into Russian hands, which would not make the United States Air Force terribly happy. But that was well above his pay grade. There were some rumbles in Congress about it, though.

Jack settled into his seat, sipped his coffee, and read his message traffic. After that he'd get back to his real job of analyzing the Soviet economy. That would be like drafting a road map of a plateful of spaghetti.

SILVESTRI'S JOB in London was not a secret. He'd been in the spook business too long, and while he hadn't been burned per se, the East Bloc had pretty much guessed which government agency he worked for by the end of his stay in Warsaw, where he'd run a very tight shop and winkled out a lot of good political intelligence. This was to be his final tour of duty—the same was true of most of his officers—and since he was respected by various allied services, he'd drawn the London posting, where his main job was interfacing with the British Secret Intelligence Service. So he had an embassy Daimler drive him over across the river.

He didn't even need a pass to get through security. Sir Basil himself was waiting for him at the entrance, where hands were cordially shaken before the trip upstairs.

"What's the news, Randy?"

"Well, I have a package for you, and one for that Ryan guy," Silvestri announced.

"Indeed. Should I call him in?"

The London COS had read the cover sheet and knew what was in the packages. "Sure, Bas, no problem. Harding, too, if you want."

Charleston lifted his phone and made the summons. The two analysts arrived in less than two minutes. They had all met at least once. Ryan, in fact, was the least familiar with the other American. Sir Basil pointed them to seats. He'd already ripped his envelope open. Silvestri handed Ryan his own message.

For his part, Jack was already thinking *oh, shit.* Something unusual was in the offing, and he'd learned not to trust new and different things at CIA.

"This *is* interesting," Charleston observed.

"Do I open this now?" Ryan asked. Silvestri nodded, so he took out his Swiss Army Knife and sliced through the heavy manila paper. His message was only three pages, personally signed by Admiral Greer.

A Rabbit, he saw. He knew the terminology. Somebody wanted a ticket out of . . . Moscow . . . and CIA was providing it, with the help

of SIS because Station Budapest was currently out of business....

"Tell Arthur that we will be pleased to assist, Randy. We will, I assume, get a chance to speak with him before you fly him off to London?"

"It's only fair, Bas," Silvestri confirmed. "How hard to pull this one off, you suppose?"

"Out of Budapest?" Charleston thought for a moment. "Not all that difficult, I should think. The Hungarians have a rather nasty secret-police organization, but the country as a whole is not devoutly Marxist—oh, this Rabbit says that KGB may have compromised your communications. *That* is what Langley is excited about."

"Damned straight, Basil. If that's a hole, we have to plug it up fast."

"This guy's in their MERCURY? Jesus Christ," Ryan breathed.

"You got that one right, sonny," Silvestri agreed.

"But what the hell am I going into the field for?" Jack demanded next. "I'm not a field officer."

"We need one of ours to keep an eye on things."

"I quite understand, Randy," Charleston observed, his head still down in his briefing papers. "And you want someone whom the opposition doesn't know?"

"So it seems."

"But why me?" Ryan persisted.

"Jack," Sir Basil soothed, "your only job will be to watch what happens. It's just pro forma."

"But what about my cover?"

"We'll give you a new diplomatic passport," C answered. "You will be quite safe. The Vienna Convention, you know."

"But . . . but . . . it'll be fake."

"They won't know that, dear boy."

"What about my *akzint*?" It was painfully obvious that his accent was an American's, not a Brit's.

"In Hungary?" Silvestri asked with a smile.

"Jack, with their bloody language, I seriously doubt they will notice the difference, and in any case, with your new documents, your person is quite inviolable."

"Relax, kid. It's better than your little girl's teddy bear. Trust me on that one, okay?" Silvestri assured him.

"And you'll have a security officer with you at all times," Charleston added.

Ryan had to sit back and take a breath. He couldn't allow himself to appear to be a wuss, not in front of these guys and not before Admiral Greer. "Okay, excuse me. It's just that I've never been in the field before. It's all kinda new to me." He hoped that was adequate backpedaling. "What exactly will I be doing, and how do I go about

it?"

"We'll fly you into Budapest out of Heathrow. Our chaps will pick you up at the airport and take you to the embassy. You will sit it out there—a couple of days, I expect—and then watch how Andy gets your Rabbit out of Redland. Randy, how long would you expect?"

"To get this moving? End of the week, maybe a day or two longer," Silvestri thought. "The Rabbit will fly or take the train to Budapest, and your man will figure how to get him the hell out of Dodge City."

"Two or three days for that," Sir Basil estimated. "Mustn't be too quick."

"Okay, that keeps me away from home for four days. What's my cover story?"

"For your wife?" Charleston asked. "Tell her that you have to go to—oh, to Bonn, shall we say, on NATO business. Be vague on the time factor," he advised. He was inwardly amused to have to explain this to the Innocent American Abroad.

"Okay," Ryan conceded the point. *Not like I have a hell of a lot of choice in the matter, is there?*

UPON GETTING BACK to the embassy, Foley walked to Mike Barnes's office. Barnes was the Cultural Attaché, the official expert on artsy-fartsy stuff. That was a major assignment in Moscow. The USSR had a fairly rich cultural life. The fact that the best part of it dated back to the czars didn't seem to matter to the current regime, probably, Foley thought, because all Great Russians wanted to appear *kulturniy,* and superior to Westerners, especially Americans, whose "culture" was far newer and far crasser than the country of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Barnes was a graduate of the Juilliard School and Cornell, and especially appreciated Russian music.

"Hey, Mike," Foley said in greeting.

"How's keeping the newsies happy?" Barnes asked.

"The usual. Hey, got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Mary Pat and I are thinking about traveling some, maybe to Eastern Europe. Prague and like that. Any good music to be heard that way?"

"The Prague symphony hasn't opened up yet. But Jozsef Rozsa is in Berlin right now, and then he's going to Budapest."

"Who's he? I don't know the name," Foley said, as his heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

"Hungarian native, cousin of Miklos Rozsa, Hollywood composer—*Ben Hur,* and like that. Musical family, I guess. He's supposed to be excellent. The Hungarian State Railroad has four orchestras, believe it

or not, and Jozsef is going to conduct number one. You can go there by train or fly, depends on how much time you have."

"Interesting," Foley thought aloud. *Fascinating,* he thought inside.

"You know, the Moscow State Orchestra opens up beginning of next month. They have a new conductor, guy named Anatoliy Sheymov. Haven't heard him yet, but he's supposed to be pretty good. I can get you tickets easy. Ivan likes to show off to us foreigners, and they really are world-class."

"Thanks, Mike, I'll think about it. Later, man." Foley took his leave.

And he smiled all the way back to his office.

"BLOODY HELL," Sir Basil observed, reading over the newest cable from Moscow. "What bloody genius came up with this idea?" he asked the air. Oh, he saw. The American officer, Edward Foley. *How the hell will he make* this *come about?* the Director General wondered.

He'd been about to leave for lunch at Westminster Palace across the river, and he couldn't break that one off. Well, it would be something to ruminate over with his roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

"LUCKY ME," Ryan observed, back in his office.

"Jack, it will be less dangerous than crossing the street"—which could be a lively exercise in London.

"I can take care of myself, Simon," Ryan reminded his workmate. "But if I screw up, somebody else takes the fall."

"You'll not be responsible for any of that. You'll just be there to observe. I don't know Andy Hudson myself, but he has an excellent professional reputation."

"Great," Ryan commented. "Lunchtime, Simon, and I feel like a beer."

"Duke of Clarence all right?"

"Isn't that the guy who drowned in a barrel of malmsey wine?"

"Worse ways to go, Sir John," Harding observed.

"What is malmsey anyway?"

"Strong and sweet, rather like a Madeira. It now comes from those islands, in fact."

One more piece of trivia learned, Ryan thought, going to get his coat.

IN MOSCOW, Zaitzev checked his personnel file. He'd accrued twelve days of vacation time. He and his family hadn't gotten a time slot at

Sochi the previous summer—the KGB quota had been filled in July and August—and so they had gone without. It was easier to schedule a vacation with a preschool child, as in any other country—you got to run away from town whenever you wished. Svetlana was in state-provided day care, but missing a few days of blocks and crayons was a lot easier to arrange than a week or two of state primary school, which was frowned upon.

UPSTAIRS, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was going over the latest message from Colonel Bubovoy in Sofia, just brought in by courier. So the Bulgarian premier had agreed to Moscow's request with a decent lack of annoying questions. The Bulgars knew their place. The chief of state of a supposedly sovereign nation knew how to take his orders from a fieldgrade officer of Russia's Committee for State Security. *Which was just as it should be,* the colonel thought. And now Colonel Strokov of the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost* would be out picking his shooter, undoubtedly a Turk, and Operation -666 could go forward. He would report this to Chairman Andropov later in the day.

"THREE *HUMAN* BODIES?" Alan Kingshot asked in considerable surprise. He was Sir Basil's most senior field officer, a very experienced operator who'd worked the streets of every major European city, first as a "legal" officer and later as a headquarters troubleshooter, in his thirty-seven years of service to Queen and Country. "Some sort of switch, is it?"

"Yes. The chap who suggested it is a fan of MINCEMEAT, I imagine," Basil responded.

Operation MINCEMEAT was a World War II legend. It had been designed to give Germany the impression that the next major Allied operation would not be the planned Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, and so it had been decided to suggest to German intelligence that Corsica was the intended invasion target. To do this, the Germans were given the body of a dead alcoholic who'd been transformed after a death of dissipation into a major of the Royal Marines, putatively a planning officer for the fictitious operation to seize Corsica. The body had been dropped in the water off the Spanish coast by the submarine HMS *Seraph*, from which it had washed to shore, been duly picked up, delivered to the local police, autopsied, and the document case handcuffed to the cadaver's wrist handed over to the local *Abwehr* officer. He'd fired the papers off to Berlin, where they'd had the intended effect, moving several German divisions to an island with no

more military significance than the fact that it was Napoleon's birthplace. The story was called *The Man Who Never Was,* the subject of a book and a movie, and further proof of the wretched performance of German intelligence, which couldn't tell the difference between the body of a dead drunk and that of a professional soldier.

"What else do we know? I mean," Kingshot pointed out, "what age and gender, sir?"

"Yes, and hair color and so forth. The manner of death will also be important. We do not know those things yet. So the initial question is a broad one: Is it possible to do this?"

"In the abstract, yes, but before we can go forward with it, I shall need a lot of specifics. As I said, height, weight, hair and eye color, gender to be sure. With that, we can go forward."

"Well, Alan, get thinking about it. Get me a specific list of what you need by tomorrow noon."

"What city will this be in?"

"Budapest probably."

"Well, that's something," the field spook thought aloud.

"Damned grisly business," Sir Basil muttered after his man left.

ANDY HUDSON WAS sitting in his office, relaxing after his Ploughman's Lunch in the embassy's pub, along with a pint of John Courage beer. Not a tall man, he had eighty-two parachute jumps under his belt, and had the bad knees to prove it. He'd been invalided out of active service eight years before, but because he liked a little excitement in his life, he'd opted to join the Secret Intelligence Service, and worked his way rapidly up the ladder mainly on the strength of his superior language skills. Here in Budapest, he needed those. The Hungarian language is known as Indo-Altaic to philologists. Its nearest European neighbor is Finnish and, after that, Mongolian. It has no relationship at all with any European language, except for some Christian names, which were conveyed when the Magyar people succumbed to Christianity, after killing off enough missionaries to become bored with doing so. Along the way, they'd also lost whatever warrior ethos they'd once had. The Hungarians were about the most unwarlike people on the continent.

But they were pretty good at intrigue, and, like any society, they had a criminal element—but theirs had mainly gone into the Communist Party and power apparat. The Secret Police here, the *Allavedelmi Hatosag,* could be as nasty as the Cheka had been under Iron Feliks himself. But nasty wasn't quite the same as efficient. It was as though they tried to make up for their inbred inefficiency by viciousness against those whom they blundered into catching. And

their police were notoriously stupid—there was a Hungarian aphorism, "As stupid as six pairs of policeman's boots," which Hudson had largely found to be true. They weren't the Metropolitan Police, but Budapest wasn't London, either.

In fact, he found life pleasant here. Budapest was a surprisingly pretty city, very French in its architecture, and surprisingly casual for a communist capital. The food was remarkably good, even in the government-run worker canteens that dotted every street corner, where the fare was not elegant but tasty. Public transportation was adequate to his purposes, which were mainly political intelligence. He had a source—called PARADE—inside the Foreign Ministry who fed him very useful information about the Warsaw Pact and East Bloc politics in general, in return for cash, and not very much cash at that, so low were his expectations.

Like the rest of Central Europe, Budapest was an hour ahead of London. The embassy messenger knocked on Hudson's door, then reached in to toss an envelope onto his desk. Hudson set down his small cigar and lifted it. From London, he saw. Sir Basil himself . . .

Bloody hell, Hudson thought. His life was about to get a little bit more interesting.

"More details to follow," it ended. About right. You never knew it all until you had to do it. Sir Basil wasn't a bad chap to work for but, like most spymasters, he greatly enjoyed being clever, which was something never fully appreciated out in the field, where the worker bees had wasps to worry about. Hudson had a staff of three, including himself. Budapest wasn't a major station, and for him it was a way station until something more important opened up. As it was, he was young to be a Station Chief. Basil was giving him the chance to stretch his legs. That suited Hudson. Most Station Chiefs sat in their offices like spiders in their web, which looked dramatic but could actually be quite boring, since it involved writing endless reports. He ran field tasks himself. That ran the risk of his being burned, as Jim Szell had been—bloody awful luck, nothing more than that, Hudson had learned from a source named BOOT, who was right inside the AVH. But in the danger came the charm of the job. It was less dangerous than jumping out the back of a Lockheed Hercules with sixty pounds of weapons and rations strapped to your back. Also less dangerous than patrolling Belfast with Provos about. But it was the skills learned in the city streets of Ulster that gave him his street smarts as a spook. As with everything else in life, you took the bitter with the sweet. But better, he told himself, to take his bitter by the pint.

He had a rabbit coming out. That ought not to be difficult, though this rabbit had to be an important one, so much so that CIA was asking for assistance from "Six," and that didn't happen every day.

Only when the bloody Yanks buggered things up, which was, Hudson thought, not too infrequent.

There was nothing for him to do as yet. He could not know what needed to be done until he had a lot more specifics, but in the abstract he knew how to get people out of Hungary. It wasn't all that hard. The Hungarians were insufficiently wedded to Marxism to be that serious an adversary. So, he sent off a "message received" dispatch to Century House and awaited further developments.

THE BRITISH AIRWAYS noon flight to Moscow was a Boeing 737 twinengine jet. The flight took about four hours, depending on winds, which were fairly calm today. On arriving at Sheremetyevo Airport, the Diplomatic Courier walked out the forward door and breezed through immigration control on the strength of his canvas bag and diplomatic passport, then walked to the waiting embassy car for the drive into town. The courier had been there and done that many times, enough so that his driver and the embassy guards knew him by sight, and he knew his own way around the embassy. With his delivery made, he headed down to the canteen for a hot dog and a beer, and settled into his newest paperback book. It occurred to him that he needed to exercise some, since his job was entirely occupied with sitting down, in cars and mainly in airplanes. It couldn't be healthy, he thought.

MIKE RUSSELL LOOKED over the monstrous one-time pad he'd been sent, hoping that he wouldn't have to use it all in one day. The sheer drudgery of transposing random letters was enough to drive a man mad, and there had to be an easier way. That was what his KH-7 encrypting machines were for, but Foley had suggested to him that the -7 was not fully secure, which thought outraged the professional in him. The KH-7 was the most sophisticated encryption machine ever made, easy to use, and utterly impossible—so he thought—to crack. He knew the design team of mathematicians who'd figured out the algorithms. The algebraic formulas used in the -7 were sufficiently over his head that he had to strain to see the bottom. . . . But what one mathematician could make, another, in theory, could break, and the Russians had good ones. And from that fact came the nightmare: The communications that it was his job to protect were being read by the enemy.

And that just wouldn't do.

So, he had to use this pad for super-critical communications, inconvenient or not. It wasn't as though he had much of a social life in Moscow. Ordinary Russian citizens viewed his dark skin as an indication of some relationship with some tree-climbing African monkey, which was so offensive to Russell that he never talked about it to anyone, just let it generate rage in his heart, the sort of deep-soul anger that he'd felt for the Ku Klux Klan before the FBI had put those ignorant crackers out of business. Maybe they still hated him, but a steer could lust after a lot of things without being able to fuck them, and so it was with those bigoted idiots who'd forgotten that Ulysses Simpson Grant had defeated Bobby Lee, after all. They could hate all they wanted, but the prospect of Leavenworth Federal Pen kept them in their dark little holes. *The Russians are just as bad*, Russell thought, *racist cocksuckers.* But he had his books and his tape player for cool jazz, and the extra pay that came with this hardship post. And for now he'd show Ivan a signal he couldn't crack, and Foley would get his Rabbit out. He lifted his phone and dialed the proper numbers.

"Foley."

"Russell. Want to come down to my office for a minute?"

"On the way," the Station Chief replied. Four minutes. "What is it, Mike?" he asked, coming through the door.

Russell held up the ring binder. "Only three copies of this. Us, Langley, and Fort Meade. You want secure, my man, you got secure. Just try to keep the messages short, okay? This shit can really jack up my blood pressure."

"Okay, Mike. Shame there isn't a better way of doing that."

"Maybe someday. Ought to be a way to do it with a computer—you know, put the pad on a floppy disk. Maybe I'll write to Fort Meade about it," Russell thought. "This stuff can make you cross-eyed."

Better you than me, Foley couldn't say. "Okay, I'll have something for you later today."

"Right." Russell nodded. He didn't have to add that it would also be enciphered on his KH-7 and *then* super-encrypted with the pad. He hoped that Ivan would intercept the signal and give his cryptanalysts the document to work on. Thinking about those bastards going nuts over one of his signals was one of the things he liked to smile about. Fine, give their world-class math aces this stuff to fool with.

But there was no telling. If KGB had managed, for example, to plant a bug in the building, it would be powered not by an internal battery, but rather by microwave emanations from Our Lady of the Microchips across the street. He had two permanent staff people who roamed the embassy, searching for unexplained RF signals. Every so often, they found one and dug the bug out, but the last of those had been twenty

months before. Now they said that the embassy was fully swept and fully clean. But nobody believed that. Ivan was just too clever. Russell wondered how Foley kept his identity a secret, but that was not his problem. Keeping the comms secure was hard enough.

BACK IN HIS OFFICE, Foley drafted his next signal to Langley, trying to keep it as short as possible to make it easy for Russell. It would surely open some eyes on the Seventh Floor. He hoped that the Brits hadn't gotten word on the idea to Washington yet. That would be seen as a major impropriety, and senior officials everywhere got their noses out of joint on trivial crap like that. But with some things you just didn't have time to run it through channels, and as a senior Station Chief, it was expected that he would show some initiative once in a while.

And along with initiative, maybe a little panache.

Foley checked his watch. He was wearing his reddest tie, and he was an hour and a half from taking the metro home, and the Rabbit needed to see him and the flag signal. A little voice was telling Foley to get BEATRIX moving as fast as practicable. Whether it was danger to the Rabbit or something else, he couldn't tell, but Foley was one to trust his instincts.

CHAPTER 21

VACATION

IT WASN'T EASY, really, to make sure one took the right subway train. Both the Rabbit and Foley were using the inhuman efficiency of what had to be the only aspect of Soviet life that actually functioned properly, and the remarkable thing was that the trains ran on a schedule that was as regular and predictable as the setting of the sun, just far more frequent. Foley got his dispatch into Mike Russell's hands, then put his raincoat on and walked out the embassy front door at exactly the right moment, walked at exactly the usual pace, and got to the subway platform at exactly the right time, then turned to verify it with the clock that hung on the ceiling of the station. Yeah, he'd done it again. The train pulled in, just as the previous train pulled out, and Foley walked aboard the usual car, turning to see . . . yes, the Rabbit was there. Foley unfolded his paper. His unbuttoned raincoat hung loosely on his shoulders.

Zaitzev was actually surprised to see the red tie, but he could hardly complain. As usual, he inched his way in the proper direction.

It was almost routine now, the COS thought. He felt the hand surreptitiously enter his pocket and withdraw. Then his acute senses felt the man take a step away. Hopefully, there would be little more of this. It was safe for Foley, but decidedly unsafe for the Rabbit, however skillful he might have become at this exercise. The presence of others on this subway car—some faces he recognized from repetition—could well represent people of the Second Chief Directorate. There could be intermittent surveillance on him, using a bunch of different officers. That would be a sensible tactic for the opposition to use, on and off, to diminish the chance that he'd spot them.

In due course, as before, the train arrived at the appointed stop, and Foley walked off. In a few more weeks, he'd have to put the lining in his coat, and maybe even wear the *shapka* Mary Pat had bought him. He had to start thinking about what would happen *after* they got the Rabbit out. If BEATRIX worked all the way, he'd have to maintain his cover activities for a time—or maybe switch to driving to the embassy, a change in routine that the Russians would not note as

unusual. He was an American, after all, and Americans were famous for driving everywhere. The metro was getting tedious. Too crowded, often with people who didn't know what a shower was for. The things he did for his country, Foley thought. No, he corrected himself, the things he did *against* his country's enemies. That was what made it worthwhile. *Giving the big ol' Bear a bellyache—maybe even stomach cancer,* he mused, walking to his apartment.

"YES, ALAN?" Charleston asked, looking up from his desk.

"This is a major operation, I take it?" Kingshot asked.

"Major in its objective, yes," the Director General confirmed. "As routine as possible in its operation. We only have three people in Budapest, and it would not be overly brilliant to fly in a goon squad."

"Anyone else going?"

"Jack Ryan, the American," Sir Basil said.

"He's no field officer," Kingshot objected immediately.

"It's fundamentally an American operation, Alan. They reasonably requested that one of their people go along to observe. In return, we'll have a day or two to debrief their Rabbit at a safe house of our choosing. He will doubtless have a good deal of useful information, and we'll get the first chance to speak with him."

"Well, I hope this Ryan fellow doesn't queer the pitch for us."

"Alan, he's shown himself to be fairly levelheaded in time of trouble, hasn't he?" Sir Basil asked, reasonable as ever.

"Must be his Marine training," Kingshot observed with dark generosity.

"And he's very clever, Alan. He's been giving us excellent work on his analysis project."

"If you say so, sir. To get the three bodies, I need to get some help from Special Branch, and then spend time on my knees hoping for something dreadful to happen."

"What are you thinking?"

Kingshot explained his nascent operational concept. It was really the only way to make something like this happen. And, as Sir Basil had observed earlier in the day, it was as grisly as an autopsy.

"How likely is such a thing to happen?" Basil asked.

"I need to talk with the police to answer that one."

"Who's your contact there?"

"Chief Superintendent Patrick Nolan. You've met him."

Charleston closed his eyes for a moment. "The huge chap, arrests rugby forwards for light exercise?"

"That's Nolan. They call him 'Tiny' on the force. I think he eats barbells with his porridge. Am I free to discuss this Operation

BEATRIX with him?"

"Just in terms of our needs, Alan."

"Very good, sir," Kingshot agreed, and left the room.

"YOU WANT *WHAT?*" Nolan asked over a pint in a pub a block from New Scotland Yard, just after four in the afternoon.

"You heard me, Tiny," Kingshot said. He lit a cigarette to fit in with the rest of the bar's patrons.

"Well, I must say I've heard a lot of strange things in my time with the Yard, but never that." Nolan was a good six-four and two hundred thirty pounds, very little of it fat. He spent at least an hour, three times a week, in the Yard's exercise room. He rarely carried a handgun on duty. He'd never needed one to help a felon see the futility of resistance. "Can you say what this is for?" he asked.

"Sorry, not allowed to. All I can say is that's it's a matter of some importance."

A long pull on his beer. "Well, you know that we do not keep such things in cold storage, even in the Black Museum."

"I was thinking a traffic smash. They happen all the time, don't they?"

"Yes, they do, Alan, but not to a family of three."

"Well, how often *do* such things happen?" Kingshot asked.

"Perhaps twenty such incidents in an average year, and their occurrence is wholly irregular. You cannot depend on it in any given week."

"Well, we'll just have to hope for good luck, and if it doesn't happen, then it simply does not happen." That would be an inconvenience. Perhaps it would be better to enlist the help of the Americans. They killed at least fifty thousand people per year on their highways. He'd suggest that to Sir Basil in the morning, Kingshot decided.

"Good luck? Not sure I'd call it that, Alan," Nolan pointed out.

"You know what I mean, Tiny. All I can say is that it's bloody important."

"And if it happens out on the M4, then what?"

"We collect the bodies—"

"And the survivors of the deceased?" Nolan asked.

"We substitute weighted bags for the bodies. The condition of the corpses will preclude an open-casket ceremony, won't it?"

"Yes, there is that. Then what?"

"We'll have our people deal with the bodies. You really do not need to know the details." The SIS had a close and cordial relationship with the Metropolitan Police, but it went only so far.

Nolan finished his pint. “Yes, I’ll leave the nightmares to you, Alan.” He managed not to shiver. “I should start keeping my eyes open at once, is it?”

“Immediately.”

“And we should consider taking the leavings from more than one such incident?”

“Obviously.” Kingshot nodded. “Another round?”

“Good idea, Alan,” Nolan agreed. And his host waved to the barman. “You know, someday I’d love to know what you are using me for.”

“Someday after we’re both retired, Patrick. You’ll be pleased to know what you are helping with. That I can promise you, old man.”

“If you say so, Alan.” Nolan conceded the point. For now.

“WHAT THE HELL?” Judge Moore observed, reading the latest dispatch from Moscow. He handed the fresh copy over to Greer, who scanned it and passed it along to Mike Bostock.

“Mike, your boy Foley has a lively imagination,” the Admiral commented.

“This sounds more like Mary Pat. She’s the cowboy—well, cow*girl*, I suppose you’d say. It *is* original, guys.”

“Original isn’t the word,” the DCI said, rolling his eyes somewhat. “Okay, Mike, is it doable?”

“Theoretically, yes—and I like the operational concept. To get a defector and keep Ivan ignorant of the fact. That’s style, gentlemen,” Bostock said admiringly. “The ugly part is that you need three bodies, one of them a child.”

The three intelligence executives managed not to shudder at the thought. It was easiest, oddly, for Judge Moore, who’d managed to get his hands wet thirty years earlier. But that had been in time of war, when the rules were a lot looser. But not loose enough for him to keep from having regrets. That was what had gotten him back into the law. He couldn’t take back the things he’d done wrong, but he could make sure they wouldn’t happen again. *Or something like that,* he told himself now. *Something like that.*

“Why a car crash?” Moore asked. “Why not a house fire? Doesn’t that suit the tactical purposes better?”

“Good point,” Bostock agreed at once. “Less physical trauma to have to explain away.”

“I’ll shoot that off to Basil.” Even the most brilliant of people, Moore realized, could be limited in their thinking. Well, that was why he kept telling people to think outside the box. And every so often, someone managed to do that. Just not often enough.

"You know," Mike Bostock said, after a little thinking. "This will be something if we can pull it off."

" 'If' can be a very large word, Mike," Greer cautioned.

"Well, maybe this time the glass is half full," the Deputy DDO suggested. "Fine. The main mission is getting this guy out, but the goose can use a little sauce once in a while."

"Hmph," Greer observed dubiously.

"Well, I'll call Emil over at the Bureau and see what he has to say about this," Moore said. "More his turf than ours."

"And if some lawyer gets hold of it, then what, Arthur?"

"James, there are ways of dealing with lawyers."

A pistol is often useful, Greer didn't say. He nodded concurrence. One bridge to cross at a time was always a good rule, especially in this crazy business.

"HOW DID THINGS go today, honey?" Mary Pat asked.

"Oh, the usual" was the reply for the microphones in the ceiling. More significant was the double thumbs-up, followed by the pass of the note from his coat pocket. They had a meeting place and a time. MP would handle that. She read the note and nodded. She and Eddie would take another walk to meet little Svetlana, the *zaichik*. Then it was just a matter of getting the Rabbit out of town, and since he was KGB, it ought not to be overly hard. That was one advantage of having him work at The Centre. They were taking out a minor nobleman, after all, not just another *muzhik* from the widget factory.

Dinner, he saw, was steak, the usual celebratory meal. MP was as psyched about this as he was—probably more so. With just a little luck, this Operation BEATRIX would make their reputation, and a good field rep was something they both wanted.

RYAN TOOK THE usual train back to Chatham. He'd missed his wife again, but she'd had a routine day, so she'd probably left early, like all the government-employed docs with whom she worked. He wondered if this bad habit would carry over when they went home to Peregrine Cliff. Probably not. Bernie Katz liked to have his desk clean, and waiting lists at zero, and the local work habits were driving his wife to drink. The good news was that, with no surgery scheduled this week, they'd be able to have wine that evening with dinner.

He wondered how long he'd be away from home. It wasn't something he was used to. One advantage of being an analyst was that he did all of his work at the office, then drove home. He'd rarely slept

away from his wife in all the time they'd been married, a rule almost sacred in their marriage. He liked it when he woke up at three in the morning and could roll over and kiss her in mid-dream, then see her smile in her sleep. His marriage to Cathy was the anchor to his life, the very center of his universe. But now duty would take him away from her for several days—not something he looked forward to. Nor did he look forward to flying on another goddamned airplane into a communist country with false identity papers and overseeing a black operation there—he didn't know shit about them, just what he'd picked up talking to the occasional field spook at Langley . . . and from his own experiences here in London, and at home over the Chesapeake, when Sean Miller and his terrorists had come to his house with guns blazing. It was something he tried very hard to forget. It might have been different had he stayed in the Marine Corps, but there he would have been surrounded by fellow warriors. He'd have been able to bathe in their respect, to remember his feat of arms with pride at having done the right thing at the right time, to recount his deeds to the interested, to pass along the tactical lessons learned the hard way on the field of demibattle over beers at the O-club, even to smile about something that one didn't ordinarily smile about. But he'd left the Marine Corps with a bad back, and had had to endure his combat as a very frightened civilian. Courage, though, he'd once been told, was being the only one who knew how terrified you were. And, yeah, he supposed, he'd shown that quality when it had counted. And his job in Hungary would be only to watch, and then, the important part, to sit in while Sir Basil's boys interviewed the Rabbit at some safe house in London, or wherever, before the Air Force, probably, flew them to Washington in their own special-mission KC-135 out of RAF Bentwaters, with nice food and plenty of liquor to ease the flight fright.

He walked off the train and up the steps, and caught a cab for Grizedale Close, where he found that Cathy had sent Miss Margaret away and was busy in the kitchen, assisted, he saw, by Sally.

"Hey, babe." Kiss. He lifted Sally for the usual hug. Little girls give the best hugs.

"So, what was the important message about?" Cathy asked.

"No big deal. Kinda disappointing, actually."

Cathy turned to look her husband in the eye. Jack couldn't lie worth a damn. It was one of the things she liked about him, actually. "Uh-huh."

"Honest, babe," Ryan said, knowing the look, and then deepening the hole in which he was standing. "I didn't get shot at or anything."

"Okay," she acknowledged, meaning, *We'll talk about it later.*

Blew it again, Jack, Ryan told himself. "How's the glasses business?"

"Saw six people, had time for eight or nine, but that's all I had on my list."

"Have you told Bernie about working conditions here?"

"Called him today, right after I got home. He had himself a good laugh and told me to enjoy the vacation."

"What about the guys who had a brewski during a procedure?"

Cathy turned. "He said, and I quote, 'Jack's in the CIA, isn't he? Have him shoot the bastards.' End of quote." She turned back to her cooking.

"You need to tell him that we don't do that sort of thing." Jack managed a smile. This, at least, wasn't a lie, and he hoped she could tell.

"I know. You'd never be able to carry it on your conscience."

"Too Catholic," he confirmed.

"Well, at least I know you'll never fool around on me."

"May God strike me dead with cancer if I ever do." It was the one imprecation about cancer that she almost approved of.

"You'll never have reason to, Jack." And that was true enough. She didn't like guns and she didn't like bloodshed, but she did love him. And that was sufficient to the moment.

Dinner turned out okay, followed by the usual evening activities, until it was time for their four-year-old to put on her yellow sleeper and climb into her big-girl bed.

With Sally in bed and Little Jack dozing as well, there was time for the usual mindless TV watching. Or so Jack hoped, until . . .

"Okay, Jack, what's the bad news?"

"Nothing much," he answered. The worst possible answer. Cathy was just too good at reading his mind.

"What's that mean?"

"I have to go on a little trip—to Bonn," Jack remembered the advice from Sir Basil. "It's a NATO thing I got stuck with."

"Doing what?"

"I can't say, babe."

"How long?"

"Three or four days, probably. They think I am uniquely suited to this for some damned reason or other."

"Uh-huh." Ryan's semi-truthfulness was just oblique enough to foil her mind reading for once.

"You're not going to be carrying a gun or anything?"

"Honey, I am an analyst, not a field officer, remember? That sort of thing is not my job. For that matter, I don't think field spooks carry guns very much anyway. Too hard to explain away if somebody notices."

"But—"

"James Bond is in the movies, babe, not real life."

Ryan returned his attention to the TV. ITV was doing a repeat of *Danger—UXB,* and again Jack found himself wondering if Brian would survive his job of defusing unexploded bombs and then marry Suzy when he returned to civilian life. EOD, now *there* was a miserable job, but, if you made a mistake, at least it wouldn't hurt for very long.

"HEARD ANYTHING FROM BOB?" Greer asked just before six in the evening.

Judge Moore stood up from his expensive swivel chair and stretched. Too much time sitting down, and not enough moving around. Back in Texas, he had a small ranch—called that because he owned three quarter horses; you couldn't be a prominent citizen in Texas unless you owned a horse or two—and three or four times a week, he'd saddle Aztec up and ride around for an hour or so, mainly to get his head clear, to allow himself to think outside his office. That was how he tended to get his best thinking done. Maybe, Moore thought, that's why he felt so goddamned unproductive here. An office just wasn't a very good place for thinking, but every executive in the world pretended it was. Christ knew why. That's what he needed at Langley—his own stable. There was plenty of room on the Langley campus—a good five times what he had in Texas. But if he ever did that, the stories would spread around the world: The American DCI liked to ride horses with his black Stetson hat—that went along with the horse—and probably a Colt .45 on his hip—that was optional—and *that* just wouldn't look good to the TV crews that would sooner or later appear at the perimeter fence with their minicams. And so, for reasons of personal vanity, he had to deny himself the chance to do some good creative thinking. It was totally asinine, the former judge told himself, to allow such considerations to affect the way he did his work. Over in England, Basil could chase foxes on the back of a nice hunter-thoroughbred, and would anyone over there care? Hell, no. He'd be admired for it, or at worst thought a tiny bit eccentric, in a country where eccentricity was an admirable quality. But in the Land of the Free, men were enslaved by customs imposed on them by news reporters and elected officials who screwed their secretaries. Well, there was no rule that the world had to make sense, was there?

"Nothing important. Just a cable that said his meetings with our Korean friends were going well," Moore reported.

"You know, those people scare me a little," Greer observed. He didn't have to explain why. The KCIA occasionally had its field personnel deal a little too directly with employees of the other Korean government. The rules were a little different over there. The ongoing

state of war between North and South was still a very real thing and, in time of war, some people lost their lives. CIA hadn't done such things in almost thirty years. Asian people hadn't adopted Western ideas of the value of human life. Maybe because their countries were just too crowded. Maybe because they have different religious beliefs. Maybe a lot of things, but for whatever reason they were just a little different in the operational parameters they felt free to work within—or without.

"They're our best eye on North Korea and China, James," Moore reminded him. "And they are very faithful allies."

"I know, Arthur." It was nice to hear things about the People's Republic of China once in a while. Penetrating *that* country was one of CIA's most frustrating tasks. "I just wish they weren't so cavalier about murder."

"They operate within fairly strict rules, and both sides seem to play by them."

And on both sides, killings had to be authorized at a very high level. Not that this would matter all that much to the corpse in question. "Wet" operations interfered with the main mission, which was gathering information. That was something people occasionally forgot, but something that CIA and KGB mainly understood, which was why both agencies had gotten away from it.

But when the information retrieved frightened or otherwise upset the politicians who oversaw the intelligence services, then the spook shops were ordered to do things that they usually preferred to avoid—and so, then, they took their action through surrogates and/or mercenaries, mainly....

"Arthur, if KGB wants to hurt the Pope, how do you suppose they'd go about it?"

"Not one of their own," Moore thought. "Too dangerous. It would be a political catastrophe, like a tornado going right through the Kremlin. It would sure as hell kibosh Yuriy Vladimirovich's political career and, you know, I don't see him taking that much risk for any cause. Power is just too important to him."

The DDI nodded. "Agreed. I think he's going to resign his chairmanship soon. Has to. They wouldn't even let him jump from KGB boss to the General Secretaryship. That's a little too sinister even for them. They still remember Beria—the ones who sit around that table do, anyway."

"That's a good point, James," Moore said, turning back from the window. "I wonder how much longer Leonid Illyich has." Ascertaining Brezhnev's health was a constant CIA interest—hell, it was a matter of interest to everyone in Washington.

"Andropov is our best indicator on that. We're pretty sure he's

Brezhnev's replacement. When it looks like Leonid Illyich is heading for the last roundup, then Yuriy Vladimirovich changes jobs."

"Good point, James. I'll float that to State and the White House."

Admiral Greer nodded. "It's what they pay us for. Back to the Pope," he suggested.

"The President is still asking questions," Moore confirmed.

"If they do anything, it won't be a Russian. Too many political pitfalls, Arthur."

"Again, I agree. But what the hell does that leave us?"

"They use the Bulgarians for wet work," Greer pointed out.

"So, look for a Bulgarian shooter?"

"How many Bulgars make pilgrimages to Rome, you suppose?"

"We can't tell the Italians to look into that, can we? It would leak sure as hell, and we can't have that. It would look pretty stupid in the press. It's just something we can't do, James."

Greer let out a long breath. "Yeah, I know, not without something firm."

"Firmer than what we have now—and that's air, James, just plain damned air." *It would be nice,* Judge Moore thought, *if CIA were as powerful as the movies and the critics think we are. Not all the time. Just once in a while.* But they weren't, and that was a fact.

THE NEXT DAY started in Moscow before it started anywhere else. Zaitzev awoke at the ringing of his windup alarm clock, grumbled and cursed like every workingman in the world, then stumbled off to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, he was drinking his morning tea and eating his black bread and butter.

Less than a mile away, the Foley family was doing much the same thing. Ed decided on an English muffin and grape jelly with his coffee for a change, joined by Little Eddie, who took a break from Worker Woman and his *Transformers* tapes. He was looking forward to the preschool that had been set up for Western children right there in the ghetto, where he showed great promise with crayons and the newly arrived Hot Wheels tricycles, plus being champion at the Sit 'n Spin.

He told himself that he could relax today. The meeting would be in the evening, and MP would handle that. In another week or so . . . maybe . . . BEATRIX would be all over, and he could relax again, letting his field officers do the running around this damned ugly city. Sure enough, the goddamned Baltimore Orioles were in the playoffs, and looking to go head to head with the Philadelphia Phillies, relegating his Bronx Bombers to the Hot Stove League yet again. What was with the new ownership, anyway? How could rich people be so stupid?

He'd have to keep to his metro routine. If KGB had him shadowed, it would be unusual—or would it?—for them to mark the specific train he was getting on. There was a question for him. If they did a one-two tail, the number two guy would stay on the platform and, after the train left, write down the time off the clock in the station—that was the only one that made sense, since it was the one that governed the trains themselves. KGB was thorough and professional, but would they be *that* good? That sort of precision was positively Germanic, but if the bastards could make the trains run that precisely, then probably KGB could take note of it, and the precise timing was what had enabled *him* to contact the Rabbit.

God damn this life, anyway! Foley raged briefly. But he'd known that before he'd accepted the posting to Moscow, and it was *exciting* here, wasn't it? *Yeah, like Louis XVI was probably excited on the cart ride to the guillotine,* Ed Sr. thought.

Someday he'd lecture on this down at The Farm. He hoped they'd appreciate just how hard it had been to write the lesson plan for his Operation BEATRIX lecture. Well, they might be a little impressed.

Forty minutes later, he purchased his copy of *Izvestia* and rode down the interminable escalator to the platform, as usual not noting the sideways looks of Russians looking at a real, live American as though he were a creature in the zoo. It would never have happened to a Russian in New York, where every ethnic group could be found, especially behind the wheel of a yellow cab.

THE MORNING ROUTINE was set in concrete by now. Miss Margaret was hovering over the kids, and Eddie Beaverton was outside the door. The kids were duly hugged and kissed, and the parents headed off to work. If there was anything Ryan hated, it was this routine. If only he'd been able to persuade Cathy to buy a flat in London, then every work day would have been a good two hours shorter—but, no, Cathy wanted green stuff around for the kids to play on. And soon they wouldn't see the sun until they got to work, and soon thereafter, hardly even then.

Ten minutes later, they were in their first-class compartment rolling northwest for London, Cathy in her medical journal and Jack in his *Daily Telegraph.* There was an article about Poland, and this reporter was unusually well-informed, Ryan saw at once. The articles in Britain tended to be a lot less long-winded than in *The Washington Post*, and for once Jack found himself regretting that. This guy had been well-briefed and/or he was pretty good at analysis. The Polish government was really caught between a rock and a hard place, and was getting squeezed, and there was talk, he saw, that the Pope was making some

rumbles about the welfare of his homeland and his people, and *that,* the reporter noted, could upset a lot of apple carts.

Ain't that the truth, Jack thought. The really bad news was that it was in the open now. Who'd leaked it? He knew the reporter's name. He was a specialist in foreign affairs, mainly European. So, who'd leaked this? Somebody in the Foreign Office? Those people were, on the whole, pretty smart, but, like their American counterparts at Foggy Bottom, they occasionally spoke without thinking, and over here that could happen over a friendly pint in one of the thousands of comfortable pubs, maybe in a quiet corner booth, with a government employee paying off a marker or just wanting to show the media how smart he was. Would a head roll over this one? he wondered. Something to talk about with Simon.

Unless Simon had been the leaker. He was senior enough and well liked by his boss. Maybe Basil had authorized the leak? Or maybe they both knew a guy in Whitehall and had authorized him to have a friendly pint with a guy from Fleet Street.

Or maybe the reporter was smart enough to put two and two together all by himself. Not all the smart guys worked at Century House. Damned sure not all the smart ones in America worked at Langley. Generally speaking, talent went to where the money was, because smart people wanted large houses and nice vacations just like everyone else did. Those who went into government service knew that they could live comfortably, but not lavishly—but the best of them also knew that they had a mission to fulfill in life, and that was why you found very good people wearing uniforms or carrying guns and badges. In his own case, Ryan had done well in the trading business, but he finally found it unsatisfying. And so not all talented people sought after money. Some found themselves on some sort of quest.

Is that what you're doing, Jack? he asked himself, as the train pulled into Victoria Station.

"What deep thoughts this morning?" his wife asked.

"Huh?" Jack responded.

"I know the look, honey," she pointed out. "You're chewing over something important."

"Cathy, are you an eye cutter or a pshrink?"

"With you, I'm a pshrink," she replied, with a playful smile.

Jack stood and opened the compartment door. "Okay, my lady. You have eyeballs to regulate, and I have secrets to figure out." He waved his wife out the door. "What new things did you learn from *The Asshole and Armpit Monthly Gazette* on the way in?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Probably," Jack conceded, heading off to the cabstand. They took a robin's-egg-blue one instead of the usual black.

"Hammersmith Hospital," Ryan told the driver, "and then One Hundred Westminster Bridge Road."

"MI-Six, is it, sir?"

"Excuse me?" Ryan replied innocently.

"Universal Export, sir, where James Bond used to work." He chuckled and pulled off.

Well, Ryan reflected, the CIA exit off the George Washington Parkway wasn't marked NATIONAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION anymore. Cathy thought it was pretty funny. There was no keeping secrets from London cabdrivers. Cathy hopped out in the large underpass at Hammersmith, and the driver U-turned and went the last few blocks to Century House. Ryan went through the door, past Sergeant Major Canderton, and up to his office.

Coming in the door, he dropped the *Telegraph* on Simon's desk before doffing his raincoat.

"I saw it, Jack," Harding said at once.

"Who's talking?"

"Not sure. Foreign Office, probably. They've been briefed in on this. Or perhaps someone from the PM's office. Sir Basil is not pleased," Harding assured him.

"Nobody called the paper?"

"No. We didn't know about this until it was published this morning."

"I thought the local papers had a more cordial relationship with the government over here."

"Generally, they do, which leads me to believe it was the PM's office that did the leak." Harding's face was innocent enough, but Jack found himself trying to read it. That was something his wife was far better at. He had the feeling that Harding was not being entirely truthful, but he had no real reason to complain about that, did he?

"Anything new from the overnights?"

Harding shook his head. "Nothing of great interest. Nothing on this BEATRIX operation, either. Tell your wife about your impending trip?"

"Yeah, and I didn't tell you that she's pretty good at reading my mind."

"Most wives can, Jack." Harding had a good laugh at that.

ZAITZEV HAD THE same desk and the same pile of message traffic, always different in exact details, but always the same really: reports from field officers transmitting data from foreign nationals on all manner of subjects. He had hundreds of operation names memorized, and untold thousands of details resident between his ears, including

the actual names of some of the agents and the code names of many, many others.

As on the previous workdays, he took his time, reading over all the morning traffic before sending it upstairs, trusting his trained memory to record and file away all of the important details.

Some, of course, contained information that was hidden in multiple ways. There was probably a penetration agent within CIA, for example, but his code name—TRUMPET—was all Zaitzev knew. Even the data he transmitted were concealed by the use of layered super-encryption, including a one-time pad. But the data went to a colonel on the sixth floor who specialized in CIA investigations and worked closely with the Second Chief Directorate—so, by implication, TRUMPET was giving KGB something in which the Second Directorate was interested, and *that* meant agents operating *for* CIA right here in Moscow. Which was enough to give him chills, but the Americans he'd talked to—he'd warned them about communications security, and that would flag any dispatch about him to a very limited number of people. And he knew that TRUMPET was being paid huge amounts of money, and so, probably he was not a senior CIA official, who, Zaitzev judged, were probably very well paid. An ideological agent would have given him cause to worry, but there were none of them in America whom he knew about—and he would know, wouldn't he?

In a week, perhaps less, the communicator told himself, he'd be in the West and safe. He hoped his wife would not go totally amok when he told her his plans, but probably she would not. She had no immediate family. Her mother had died the previous year, to Irina's great sorrow, and she had neither brothers nor sisters to hold her back, and she was not happy working at GUM because of all the petty corruption there. And he would promise to get her the piano she longed to have, but which even his KGB post couldn't get for her, so meager was the supply.

So he shuffled his papers, perhaps more slowly than usual, but not greatly so, he thought. There were few really hard workers, even in KGB. The cynical adage in the Soviet Union was "As long as they pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work," and the principle applied here as well. If you exceeded your quota, they'd just increase it the following year without any improvement in your working conditions—and so, few worked hard enough to be noticed as Heroes of Socialist Labor.

Just after 11:00, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy appeared in the comms room. Zaitzev caught his eye and waved him over.

"Yes, Comrade Major?" the colonel asked.

"Comrade Colonel," he said quietly, "there have been no recent communications about six-six-six. Is there anything I need to know?"

The question took Rozhdestvenskiy aback. “Why do you ask?”

“Comrade Colonel,” Zaitzev went on humbly, “it was my understanding that this operation is important and that I am the only communicator cleared for it. Have I acted improperly in any way?”

“Ah.” Rozhdestvenskiy relaxed. “No, Comrade Colonel, we have no complaints with your activities. The operation no longer requires communications of this type.”

“I see. Thank you, Comrade Colonel.”

“You look tired, Major Zaitzev. Is anything the matter?”

“No, comrade. I suppose I could use a vacation. I didn’t get to go anywhere during the summer. A week or two off duty would be a blessing, before the winter hits.”

“Very well. If you have any difficulties, let me know, and I’ll try to smooth things out for you.”

Zaitzev managed a grateful smile. “Why, thank you, Comrade Colonel.”

“You do good work down here, Zaitzev. We’re all entitled to some time off, even State Security people.”

“Thank you again, Comrade Colonel. I serve the Soviet Union.”

Rozhdestvenskiy nodded and took his leave. As he walked out the door, Zaitzev took a long breath and went back to work memorizing dispatches . . . but not for the Soviet Union. *So,* he thought, *-666 was being handled by courier now.* He’d learn no more about it, but he’d just learned that it was going forward on a high-priority basis. They were really going to do it. He wondered if the Americans would get him out quickly enough to forestall it. The information was in his hands, but the ability to do anything about it was not. It was like being Cassandra of old, daughter of King Priam of Troy, knowing what was going to happen, but unable to get anyone to do anything about it. Cassandra had angered the gods somehow or other and received that curse as a result, but what had *he* done to deserve it? Zaitzev wondered, suddenly angry at CIA’s inefficiency. But he couldn’t just board a Pan American flight out of Sheremetyevo International Airport, could he?

CHAPTER 22

PROCUREMENTS AND ARRANGEMENTS

THE SECOND FACE-TO-FACE meeting was back at GUM department store, where a certain Little Bunny needed some fall/winter clothing, which her father wanted to get her—which was something of a surprise for Irina Bogdanova, but a pleasant one. Mary Pat, the supreme expert on shopping in the Foley family, wandered about looking at the various items on sale, surprised to see that they weren't all Soviet schlock. Some were even attractive . . . though not quite attractive enough to buy. She dawdled again in the fur department—the furs here might have sold fairly well in New York, though they were not quite on a par with Fendi. There weren't enough Italian designers in Russia. But the quality of the furs—that is, the animal skins themselves—wasn't too shabby. The Soviets just didn't know how to sew them together properly. *That was too bad, really,* she thought. The saddest thing about the Soviet Union was how the government of that gray country prevented its citizens from actually accomplishing much. There was so little originality here. The best things to buy were all old, prerevolutionary art works, usually small ones, almost always religious pieces, sold at impromptu flea markets to raise needed money for some family or other. She'd already purchased several pieces, trying not to feel like a thief in doing so. To assuage her conscience, she never haggled, almost always paying the price asked instead of trying to chisel it down by a few percent. That would have been like armed robbery, she thought, and her ultimate mission in Moscow—this was a core belief for her—was to help these people, though in a way they could hardly have understood or approved. But, for the most part, Muscovites liked her American smile and friendliness. And certainly they liked the blue-stripe certificate rubles she paid with, cash money that would give them access to luxury items or, almost as good, cash that they could exchange at a rate of three or four to one.

She wandered about for half an hour, then saw her target in the children's clothing area. She maneuvered that way, taking time to lift and examine various items before coming up behind him.

"Good evening, Oleg Ivan'ch," she said quietly, handling a parka

meant for a girl of three or four.

"Mary, is it?"

"That is correct. Tell me, do you have any vacation days available to you?"

"Yes, I do. Two weeks of it, in fact."

"And you told me that your wife likes classical music?"

"That is also correct."

"There is a fine conductor. His name is Jozsef Rozsa. He will start performing in the main concert hall in Budapest on Sunday evening. The best hotel for you to check in to is the Astoria. It is a short distance from the train station, and is popular with Soviet guests. Tell all your friends what you are doing. Arrange to buy them things in Budapest. Do everything that a Soviet citizen does. We will handle the rest," she assured him.

"All of us," Zaitzev reminded her. "All of us come out?"

"Of course, Oleg. Your little *zaichik* will see many wonders in America, and the winters are not so fierce as they are here," MP added.

"We Russians enjoy our winters," he pointed out, with a little amour propre.

"In that case, you will be able to live in an area as cold as Moscow. And if you desire warm weather in February, you can drive or fly to Florida and relax on a sunny beach."

"You are tourist agent, Mary?" the Rabbit asked.

"For you, Oleg, I am just that. Are you comfortable passing information to my husband on the metro?"

"Yes."

You shouldn't be, Mary Pat thought. "What is your best necktie?"

"A blue one with red stripes."

"Very well, wear that one two days before you take the train to Budapest. Bump into him and apologize, and we will know. Two days before you leave Moscow, wear your blue-striped tie and bump into him on the metro," she repeated. You had to be careful doing this. People could make the goddamnedest mistakes in the simplest of matters, even when—no, *especially* when—their lives were on the line. That was why she was making it as easy as possible. Only one thing to remember. Only one thing to do.

"*Da,* I can do that easily."

Optimistic bastard, aren't you? "Excellent. Please be very careful, Oleg Ivan'ch." And with that, she went on her way. But then she stopped five or six meters away and turned. In her purse was a Minox camera. She shot five frames, and then walked away.

“WELL, DIDN’T YOU see anything worth getting?” her husband asked, out in their used Mercedes 280.

“No, nothing really worthwhile. Maybe we should try a trip up to Helsinki to get some winter stuff,” she suggested. “You know, take the train, like. Ought to be fun to do it that way. Eddie should like it.”

The Station Chief’s eyebrow went up. *Probably better to take the train,* he thought. *Doesn’t look rushed or forced. Carry lots of suitcases, half of them empty to bring back all the shit you’ll buy there with your Comecon rubles,* Ed Foley thought. *Except you don’t come back . . . and if Langley and London get their shit together, maybe we can make it a real home-run ball. . . .*

“Home, honey?” Foley asked. Wouldn’t it be a hoot if KGB *didn’t* have their home and car bugged, and they were doing all this secret-agent crap for no reason at all? he thought idly. Well, at worst, it was good practice, wasn’t it?

“Yeah, we’ve done enough for one day.”

“BLOODY HELL,” Basil Charleston breathed. He lifted his phone and punched three buttons.

“Yes, sir?” Kingshot asked, coming into the room.

“This.” C handed the dispatch across.

“Shit,” Kingshot breathed.

Sir Basil managed a smile. “It’s always the obvious, simple things, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Even so, does make one feel rather thick,” he admitted. “A house fire. Works better than what we originally thought.”

“Well, something to remember. How many house fires do we have in London, Alan?”

“Sir Basil, I have not a clue,” the most senior field spook in the SIS admitted. “But find out I shall.”

“Get this to your friend Nolan as well.”

“Tomorrow morning, sir,” Kingshot promised. “At least it improves our chances. Are CIA working on this as well?”

“Yes.”

AS WAS THE FBI. Director Emil Jacobs had heard his share of oddball requests from the folks on “the other side of the river,” as CIA was sometimes called in official Washington. But this was positively gruesome. He lifted his phone and punched his direct line to the DCI.

"There's a good reason for this, I presume, Arthur?" he asked without preamble.

"Not over the phone, Emil, but yes."

"Three Caucasians, one male in his early thirties, one female same age, and a little girl age three or four," Jacobs said, reading it off the hand-delivered note from Langley. "My field agents will think the Director's slipped a major gear, Arthur. We'd probably be better off asking local police forces for assistance—"

"But—"

"Yes, I know, it would leak too quickly. Okay, I can send a message to all my SACs and have them check their morning papers, but it won't be easy to keep something like this from leaking out."

"Emil, I understand that. We're trying to get help from the Brits on this as well. Not the sort of thing you can just whistle up, I know. All I can say is that it's very important, Emil."

"You due on The Hill anytime soon?"

"House Intelligence Committee tomorrow at ten. Budget stuff," Moore explained. Congress was always going after that information, and Moore always had to defend his agency from people on The Hill, who would just as soon cut CIA off at the ankles—so that they could complain about "intelligence failures" later on, of course.

"Okay, can you stop off here on the way? I gotta hear this cock-and-bull story," Jacobs announced.

"Eight-forty or so?"

"Works for me, Arthur."

"See you then," Moore promised.

Director Jacobs replaced his phone, wondering what could be so goddamned important as to request the Federal Bureau of Investigation to play grave robber.

ON THE METRO HOME, after buying his little *zaichik* a white parka with red and green flowers on it, Zaitzev thought over his strategy. When would he tell Irina about their impromptu vacation? If he sprang it on her as a surprise, there would be one sort of problem—Irina would worry about her accounting job at GUM, but the office was, by her account, so loosely run that they'd hardly notice a missing body. But if he did give her too much warning, there would be another problem—she'd try to micromanage everything, like every wife in the known world, since, in her mind, he was unfitted to figure out anything. That was rather amusing, Oleg Ivan'ch thought, given the current circumstances.

So, then, no, he would not tell her ahead of time, but instead spring this trip on her as a surprise, and use this Hungarian conductor as the

excuse. Then the big surprise would come in Budapest. He wondered how she'd react to that piece of news. Perhaps not well, but she was a Russian wife, trained and educated to accept the orders of her man, which, all Russian men thought, was as it should be.

Svetlana loved riding the metro. That was the thing with little children, Oleg had learned. To them everything was an adventure to take in with their wide children's eyes, even something as routine as riding the underground train. She didn't walk or run. She pranced, like a puppy—or like a bunny, her father thought, smiling down at her. Would his little *zaichik* find better adventures in the West?

Probably so . . . if I get her there alive, Zaitzev reminded himself. There was danger involved, but somehow his fear was not for himself, but for his daughter. How odd that was. Or was it? He didn't know anymore. He knew that he had a mission of sorts, and that was all that he actually saw before him. The rest of it was just a collection of intermediate steps, but at the end of the steps was a bright, shining light, and that was all he could really see. It was very strange how the light had grown brighter and brighter since his first doubts about Operation -666 until now, when it occupied all his mental eyes could see. Like a moth drawn to a light, he kept circling in closer and closer, and all he could really hope was that the light was not a flame that would kill him.

"Here, Papa!" Svetlana said, recognizing their stop, taking his hand, and dragging him forward to the sliding doors. A minute later, she jumped on the moving steps of the escalator, excited by that ride as well. His child was like an American adult—or how Russians supposed them to be, always seeing opportunities and possibilities and the fun to be had, instead of the dangers and threats that careful, sober Soviet citizens saw everywhere. But if Americans were so foolish, why were Soviets always trying—and failing—to catch up with them? Was America really right where the USSR was so often wrong? It was a deeper question that he'd scarcely considered. All he knew of America was the obvious propaganda he saw every night on television or read about in the official State newspapers. He knew that had to be wrong, but his knowledge was unbalanced, since he did not really know true information. And so his leap to the West was fundamentally a leap of faith. If his country was so wrong, then the alternative superpower had to be right. It was a big, long, and dangerous leap, he thought, walking down the sidewalk and holding his little girl's hand. He told himself that he ought to be more fearful.

But it was too late to be frightened, and turning back would have been as harmful to him as going forward. Above everything else, it was a question of who would destroy him—his country or himself—if he failed to carry out his mission. And on the other side, would

America reward him for trying to do what he deemed the right thing? It seemed that he was like Lenin and the other revolutionary heroes: He saw something that was objectively wrong, and he was going to try to prevent it. Why? Because he had to. He had to trust that his country's enemies would see right and wrong as he did. Would they? While the American President had denounced his nation as the focus of all the evil in the world, his country said much the same thing of America. Who was right? Who was wrong? But it was *his* country and *his* employer that was conspiring to murder an innocent man, and that was as far as he could see into the right/wrong question.

As Oleg and Svetlana turned left to go into their apartment building, he recognized one final time that his course was set. He could not change it, but could only toss the dice and wait to see how they came up.

And where would his daughter grow up? That also rested on the flying dice.

IT HAPPENED FIRST in York, the largest city in northern England. Firesafety engineers tell everyone who will listen that the least important thing about fires is what causes them to start, because they always start for the same reasons. In this case, it was the one that firefighters most hate to discover. Owen Williams, after a friendly night at his favorite pub, The Brown Lion, managed to down six pints of dark beer, which, added to a lengthy and tiring day working his job as a carpenter, had made him rather sleepy by the time he got to his third-floor flat, but that didn't stop him from switching on the TV in his bedroom and lighting a final cigarette of the day. His head propped up on a plumped pillow, he took a few puffs before fading out from the alcohol and the day's hard work. When that happened, his hand relaxed, and the cigarette fell onto the bedclothes. There it smoldered for about ten minutes before the white cotton sheets started to burn. Since Williams was unmarried—his wife had divorced him a year before—there was no one nearby to take note of the acrid, evil smell, and gradually the smoke wafted up to the ceiling as the low-level fire progressively consumed the bedclothes and then the mattress.

People rarely die from fire, and neither did Owen Williams. Instead, he started breathing in the smoke. Smoke—engineers often use the term "fire gas"—mainly consists of hot air, carbon monoxide, and soot particles, which are unburned material from the fire's fuel. Of these, the carbon monoxide is often the deadliest component, since it forms a bond with the red blood cells. This bond is actually stronger than the bond that hemoglobin forms with the free oxygen that the blood

conveys to the various parts of the human body. The overall effect on the human consciousness is rather like that of alcohol—euphoria, like being pleasantly drunk, followed by unconsciousness and, if it goes too far, as in this case, death from oxygen starvation of the brain. And so, with a fire all around him, Owen Williams never woke, only fell deeper and deeper into a sleep that took him peacefully into eternity at the age of thirty-two years.

It wasn't until three hours later that a shift worker who lived on the same floor came home from work and noticed a smell in the third-floor corridor that lit up his internal alarm lights. He pounded on the door, and, getting no response, ran to his own flat and dialed 999.

There was a firehouse only six blocks away, and there, as with any other such house in the world, the firefighters rolled out of their military-style single beds, pulled on their boots and their turn-out coats, slid down the brass rail to the apparatus floor, punched the button to lift the automatic doors, and raced out on the street in their Dennis pumper, followed by a ladder truck. The drivers both knew the streets as well as any taxi driver and arrived at the apartment building less than ten minutes after their bells had chimed them awake. The pumper crew halted their vehicle, and two men dragged the draft hoses to the corner fire hydrant, charging the line in a skillful and well-practiced drill. The ladder men, whose primary job was search and rescue, raced inside to find that the concerned citizen who'd called in the alarm had already pounded on every door on the third floor and gotten his neighbors awake and out of their apartments. He pointed the lead fireman to the correct door, and that burly individual knocked it down with two powerful swings of his axe. He was greeted by a dense cloud of black smoke, the smell of which got past his air mask and immediately announced "mattress" to his experienced mind. This was followed by a quick prayer that they'd gotten here in time, and then instant dread that they had not. Everything, including the time of day, was against them in the dark, early morning. He ran into the back bedroom, smashed out the windows with his steel axe to vent the smoke outside, and then turned to see what he'd seen thirty or more times before—a human form, nearly hidden by the smoke and not moving. By then, two more of his colleagues were in the room. They dragged Owen Williams out into the corridor.

"Oh, shit!" one of them observed. The senior paramedic on the crew put an oxygen mask on the colorless face and started hitting the button to force pure oxygen into the lungs, and a second man began pounding on the victim's chest to get his heart restarted while, behind them, the enginemen snaked a two-and-a-half-inch hose into the flat and started spraying water.

All in all, it was a textbook exercise. The fire was snuffed out in less

than three minutes. Soon thereafter, the smoke had largely cleared, and the firemen took off their protective air masks. But, out in the corridor, Owen Williams showed not a flicker of life. The rule was that nobody was dead until a physician said so, and so they carried the body like a large and heavy limp rag to the white ambulance sitting on the street. The paramedic crew had their own battle drill, and they followed it to the letter, first putting the body on their gurney, then checking his eyes, then his airway—it was clear—and using their ventilator to get more oxygen into him, plus more CPR to get the heart moving. The peripheral burns would have to wait. The first thing to be done was to get the heart beating and lungs breathing, as the driver pulled out onto the darkened streets for Queen Victoria Hospital, just more than a mile away.

But by the time they got there, the paramedics in the back knew that it was just a waste of their highly valuable time. The casualty-receiving area was ready for them. The driver reversed direction and backed in, the rear doors were wrenched open, and the gurney was wheeled out, with a young doctor observing but not touching anything yet.

"Smoke inhalation," the fireman-paramedic said, on coming in the swinging doors. "Severe carbon monoxide intoxication." The extensive but mainly superficial burns could wait for the moment.

"How long?" the ER doc asked at once.

"Don't know. It does not look good, doctor. CO poisoning, eyes fixed and dilated, fingernails red, no response to CPR or oxygen as yet," the paramedic reported.

The medics all tried. You don't just kiss off the life of a man in his early thirties, but an hour later it was clear that Owen Williams would not open his blue eyes ever again, and, on the doctor's command, lifesaving efforts were stopped and a time of death announced, to be typed in on the death certificate. The police were there, also, of course. They mostly chatted with the firemen until the cause of death was established. The blood chemistry was taken—they'd drawn blood immediately to check blood gasses—and after fifteen minutes, the lab reported that the level of carbon monoxide was 39 percent, deep into the lethal range. He'd been dead before the firemen had rolled off their cots. And that was that.

It was the police rather than the firemen who took it from there. A man had died, and it had to be reported up the chain of command.

That chain ended in London in the steel-and-glass building that was New Scotland Yard, with its revolving triangular sign that made tourists think that the name of the London police force was, in fact, Scotland Yard, when actually that had been a street name years before for the old headquarters building. There, a Post-it note on a teletype

machine announced that Chief Superintendent Nolan of Special Branch wanted to be informed at once of any death by fire or accident, and the teletype operator lifted a phone and called the appropriate number.

That number was to the Special Branch watch officer, who asked a few questions, then called York for further information. Then it was his job to awaken "Tiny" Nolan just after four in the morning.

"Very well," the Chief Superintendent said, after collecting himself. "Tell them to do nothing whatsoever with the body—nothing at all. Make sure they understand, nothing at all."

"Very well, sir," the sergeant in the office confirmed. "I will relay that." And seven miles away, Patrick Nolan went back to sleep, or at least tried to, while his mind wondered again what the hell SIS wanted a roasted human body for. It had to be something interesting, just that it was also quite disgusting to contemplate—enough that it denied him sleep for twenty minutes or so, before he faded back out.

THE MESSAGES WERE flying back and forth across the Atlantic and Eastern Europe all that night, and all of them were processed by the signals specialists in the various embassies, the underpaid and overworked clerical people who, virtually alone, were needed to transmit all of the most sensitive information from originators to end-users, and so, virtually alone, were the people who knew it all but did nothing with it. They were also the ones whom enemies tried so hard to corrupt, and who were, as a result, the most carefully watched of all staffers, whether at headquarters or in the various embassies, though for all the concern, there was usually no compensating solicitude for their comfort. But it was through these so often unappreciated but vital people that the dispatches found their way to the proper desks.

One recipient was Nigel Haydock, and it was to him that the most important of the morning's messages went, because only he, at this moment, knew the scope of BEATRIX, there in his office, where he was covered as Commercial Attaché to Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy, on the eastern bank of the Moscow River.

Haydock usually took his breakfast at the embassy, since with his wife so gravidly pregnant, he felt it improper for him to have her fix the morning meal for him—and besides, she was sleeping a lot, in preparation for not sleeping at all when the little bugger arrived, Nigel thought. So there he was at his desk, drinking his morning tea and eating a buttered muffin when he got to the dispatch from London.

"Bloody hell," he breathed, then paused to think. It was brilliant, this American play on MINCEMEAT—nasty and grisly, but brilliant.

And it appeared that Sir Basil was going forward with it. That tricky old bugger. It was the sort of thing Bas would like. The current C was a devotee of the old school, one who liked the feel of devious operations. *His over-cleverness might be the downfall of him someday, but,* Haydock thought, *one has to admire his panache.* So get the Rabbit to Budapest and arrange his escape from there....

ANDY HUDSON PREFERRED coffee in the morning, accompanied by eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, and toast. "Bloody brilliant," he said aloud. The audacity of this operation appealed to his adventurous nature. So they'd have to get three individuals—an adult male, an adult female, and a little girl—all out of Hungary covertly. Not overly difficult, but he'd have to check his rat line, because this was one operation he didn't want to bollix up, especially if he had thoughts of promotion in the future. The Secret Intelligence Service was singular among British government bureaucracies insofar as, while it rewarded success fairly well, it was singularly unforgiving of failure—there was no union at Century House to protect the worker bees. But he'd known that going in, and they couldn't take his pension away in any case—once he had the seniority to qualify for one, Hudson cautioned himself. But while this operation wasn't quite the World Cup, it would be rather like scoring the winning goal for Arsenal against Manchester United at Wembly Stadium.

So his first task of the day was to see after his cross-border connections. *Those were reliable,* he thought. He'd spent a good deal of time setting them up, and he'd checked them out before. But he'd check them out again, starting today. He'd also check in with his AVH contact . . . or would he? Hudson wondered. What would that get him? It could allow him to find out if the Hungarian secret police force was on a state of alert or looking for something, but if that were true, the Rabbit would not be leaving Moscow. His information had to be highly important for an operation of this complexity to be run by CIA through SIS, and KGB was too careful and conservative an agency to take any sort of chances with information of that importance. The other side was never predictable in the intelligence business. There were just too many people with slightly different ideas for everyone to operate in lockstep. So, no, AVH wouldn't know very much, if anything at all. KGB trusted no one at all, absent direct oversight, preferably with guns.

So the only smart thing for him to do would be to look in on his escape procedures, and even to do that circumspectly, and otherwise wait for this Ryan chap to arrive from London to look over his shoulder.... *Ryan,* he thought, *CIA.* The same one who—no chance of

that. Just a coincidence. Had to be. That Ryan was a bootneck—an *American* bootneck. *Just too much of a coincidence,* the COS Budapest decided.

RYAN HAD REMEMBERED his croissants, and this time he'd taken them with him in the cab from Victoria to Century House, along with the coffee. He arrived to see Simon's coat on the tree, but no Simon. *Probably off with Sir Basil,* he decided, and sat down at his desk, looking at the pile of overnights to go through. The croissants—he'd pigged out and bought three of them, plus butter and grape-jelly packets—were sufficiently flaky that he risked ending up wearing them instead of eating them, and this morning's coffee wasn't half bad. He made a mental note to write to Starbucks and suggest that they open some outlets in London. The Brits needed good coffee to get them off their damned tea, and this new Seattle company might just pull it off, assuming they could train people to brew it up right. He looked up when the door opened.

"Morning, Jack."

"Hey, Simon. How's Sir Basil this morning?"

"He's feeling very clever indeed with this Operation BEATRIX. It's under way, in a manner of speaking."

"Can you fill me in on what's happening?"

Simon Harding thought for a moment, then explained briefly.

"Is somebody out of his fucking mind?" Ryan demanded at the conclusion of the minibrief.

"Jack, yes, it is creative," Harding agreed. "But there should be little in the way of operational difficulties."

"Unless I barf," Jack responded darkly.

"So take a plastic bag," Harding suggested. "Take one from the airplane with you."

"Funny, Simon." Ryan paused. "What is this, some sort of initiation ceremony for me?"

"No, we don't do that sort of thing. The operational concept comes from your people, and the request for cooperation comes from Judge Moore himself."

"Fuck!" Jack observed. "And they dump me in the shitter, eh?"

"Jack, the objective here is not merely to get the Rabbit out, but to do so in such a way as to make Ivan believe he's dead, not defected, along with his wife and daughter."

Actually, the part that bothered Ryan was the corpses. What could be more distasteful than that? *And he doesn't even know the nasty part yet,* Simon Harding thought, glad that he'd edited that part out.

ZAITZEV WALKED INTO the administrative office on The Centre's second floor. He showed his ID to the girl and waited a few minutes before going into the supervisor's office.

"Yes?" the bureaucrat said, only half looking up.

"I wish to take my vacation days. I want to take my wife to Budapest. There's a conductor there she wants to hear—and I wish to travel there by train instead of by air."

"When?"

"In the next few days. As soon as possible, in fact."

"I see." The KGB's travel office did many things, most of them totally mundane. The travel agent—what else could Zaitzev call him?—still didn't look up. "I must check the availability of space on the train."

"I want to travel International Class, compartments, beds for three—I have a child, you see."

"That may not be easy," the bureaucrat noted.

"Comrade, if there are any difficulties, please contact Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," he said mildly.

That name caused him to look up, Zaitzev saw. The only question was whether or not he'd make the call. The average desk-sitter did not go out of his way to become known to a senior official, and, like most people in The Centre, he had a healthy fear of those on the top floor. On the one hand, he might want to see if someone were taking the colonel's name in vain. On the other hand, calling his attention to that senior officer as an officious little worm in Administration would do him little good. He looked at Zaitzev, wondering if he had authorization to invoke Rozhdestvenskiy's name and authority.

"I will see what I can do, Comrade Captain," he promised.

"When can I call you?"

"Later today."

"Thank you, comrade." Zaitzev walked out and down the corridor to the elevators. So that was done, thanks to his temporary patron on the top floor. To make sure everything was all right, he had his blue striped tie folded and in his coat pocket. Back at his desk, he went back to memorizing the content of his routine message traffic. A pity, he thought, that he could not copy out of the one-time-pad books, but that was not practical, and memorizing them was a sheer impossibility even for his trained memory.

UNDERWAY WAS THE single word on the message from Langley,

Foley saw. So they were going forward. That was good. Headquarters was hot to trot on BEATRIX, and that was probably because the Rabbit had warned them about general communications security, the one thing sure to cause a general panic on the Seventh Floor at headquarters. But could it possibly be true? No. Mike Russell didn't think so, and, as he'd already observed, were it true, some of his agents would have been swept up like confetti after a parade, and that hadn't happened . . . unless KGB was really being clever and had doubled his agents, operating them under Soviet control, and he'd be able to determine that, wouldn't he? *Well, probably,* Foley judged. Certainly they could not all be double agents. Some things were just impossible to hide, unless KGB's Second Chief Directorate had the cleverest operation in the history of espionage, and while that was theoretically possible, it was the tallest of tall orders, and something that they'd probably avoid since the quality of some information going out would have to be good—too good to let go voluntarily....

But he couldn't entirely discount that possibility. For sure, NSA would be taking steps right now to examine their KH-7 and other cipher machines, but Fort Meade had a very active Red Team whose only job was to crack their own systems, and while Russian mathematicians were pretty smart—always had been—they weren't aliens from another planet . . . unless they had an agent of their own deep inside Fort Meade, and that was a worry that everyone had. How much would KGB pay for that sort of information? Millions, perhaps. They didn't have all *that* much cash to pay their people and, in addition to being niggardly, KGB was singularly disloyal to its people, regarding them all as expendable assets. Oh, sure, they got Kim Philby out and safely ensconced in Moscow. The Western spy agencies knew where he lived and had even photographed the turncoat bastard. They even knew how much he drank—a lot, even by Russian standards. But when the Russians lost an agent to arrest, did they ever try to bargain for him, do a trade? No, not since CIA had bargained for Francis Gary Powers, the unlucky U-2 pilot whom they'd shot down in 1961 and then traded for Rudolf Abel, but Abel had been one of their own officers, a colonel and a pretty good one, operating in New York. That *had to be* a deterrent to any American national in the spook business who had illusions of getting rich off Mother Russia's bank account. And traitors did hard time in the federal prison system, which had to be one hell of a deterrent.

But traitors were real, however misguided they were. At least the age of the ideological spy was largely ended. Those had been the most productive and the most dedicated, back when people really had believed that communism was the leading wave of human evolution, but even Russians no longer believed in Marxism-Leninism, except for

Suslov—who was just about dead—and his successor-to-be, Alexandrov. So, no, KGB agents in the West were almost entirely mercenary bastards. Not the freedom fighters Ed Foley ran on the streets of Moscow, the COS told himself. That was an illusion all CIA officers held dearly, even his wife.

And the Rabbit? He was mad about something. A murder, he said, a proposed killing. Something that offended the sense of an honorable and decent man. So, yes, the Rabbit was honorable in his motivations, and therefore worthy of CIA's attention and solicitude.

Jesus, Ed Foley thought, *the illusions you have to have to carry on this stupid fucking business.* You had to be psychiatrist, loving mother, stern father, close friend, and father confessor to the idealistic, confused, angry, or just plain greedy individuals who chose to betray their country. Some of them drank too much; some of them were so enraged that they endangered themselves by taking grotesque risks. Some were just plain mad, demented, clinically disturbed. Some became sexual deviants—hell, some started off that way and just got worse. But Ed Foley had to be their social worker, which was such an odd job description for someone who thought of himself as a warrior against the Big Ugly Bear. *Well,* he told himself, *one thing at a time.* He'd knowingly chosen a profession with barely adequate pay, virtually no credit ever to be awarded, and no recognition for the dangers, physical and psychological, that attended it, serving his country in a way that would never be appreciated by the millions of citizens he helped to protect, despised by the news media—whom he in turn despised—and never being able to defend himself with the truth of what he did. What a hell of a life.

But it did have its satisfactions, like getting the Rabbit the hell out of Dodge City.

If BEATRIX worked.

Foley told himself that now, once more, he knew what it was like to pitch in the World Series.

ISTVAN KOVACS LIVED a few blocks from the Hungarian parliamentary palace, an ornate building reminiscent of the Palace of Westminster, on the third floor of a turn-of-the-century tenement, whose four toilets were on the first floor of a singularly dreary courtyard. Hudson took the local metro over to the government palace and walked the rest of the way, making sure that he didn't have a tail. He'd called ahead—remarkably, the city's phone lines were secure, uncontrolled mainly because of the inefficiency of the local phone systems.

Kovacs was so typically Hungarian as to deserve a photo in the

nonexistent tourist brochures: five-eight, swarthy, a mainly circular face with brown eyes and black hair. But he dressed rather better than the average citizen because of his profession. Kovacs was a smuggler. It was almost an honored livelihood in this country, since he traded across the border to a putatively Marxist country to the south, Yugoslavia, whose borders were open enough that a clever man could purchase Western goods there and sell them in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe. The border controls on Yugoslavia were fairly loose, especially for those who had an understanding with the border guards. Kovacs was one such person.

"Hello, Istvan," Andy Hudson said, with a smile. "Istvan" was the local version of Steven, and "Kovacs" the local version of Smith, for its ubiquity.

"Andy, good day to you," Kovacs replied in greeting. He opened a bottle of Tokaji, the local tawny wine made of grapes with the noble rot, which afflicted them every few years. Hudson had come to enjoy it as the local variant of sherry, with a different taste but an identical purpose.

"Thank you, Istvan." Hudson took a sip. This was good stuff, with six baskets of nobly rotten grapes on the label, indicating the very best. "So, how is business?"

"Excellent. Our VCRs are popular with the Yugoslavs, and the tapes they sell me are popular with everyone. Oh, to have such a prick as those actors do!" He laughed.

"The women aren't bad, either," Hudson noted. He'd seen his share of such tapes.

"How can a *kurva* be so beautiful?"

"The Americans pay their whores more than we do in Europe, I suppose. But, Istvan, they have no heart, those women." Hudson had never paid for it in his life—at least not up front.

"It's not their hearts that I want." Kovacs had himself another hearty laugh. He'd been hitting the Tokaji already this day, so he wasn't making a run tonight. Well, nobody worked all the time.

"I may have a task for you."

"Bringing what in?"

"Nothing. Bringing something out," Hudson clarified.

"That is simple. What trouble the *határ rség* give us is when we come in, and then not much." He held up his right hand, rubbing thumb and forefinger together in the universal gesture for what the border guards wanted—money or something negotiable.

"Well, this package might be bulky," Hudson warned.

"How bulky? A tank you want to take out?" The Hungarian army had just taken delivery of new Russian T-72s, and that had made the TV, in an attempt to buck up the fighting spirit of the troops. *A waste*

of time, Hudson thought. “That might be hard, but it can be done, for a price.” But the Poles had already given one of those to SIS, a fact not widely known.

“No, Istvan, smaller than that. About my size, but three packages.”

“Three people?” Kovacs asked, getting a dull stare in return. He got the message. “Bah, a simple task—*baszd meg*!” he concluded: Fuck it.

“I thought I could count on you, Istvan,” Hudson said with a smile. “How much?”

“For three people into Yugoslavia . . .” Kovacs pondered that for a moment. “Oh. Five thousand d-mark.”

“Ez kurva drága!” Hudson objected, or ostensibly so. It was cheap at the price, hardly a thousand quid. “Very well, you thief! I’ll pay it because you are my friend—but just this one time.” He finished his drink. “You know, I could just fly the packages out,” Hudson suggested.

“But the airport is the one place where the *határ rség* are alert,” Kovacs pointed out. “The poor bastards are always in the light, with their senior officers about. No chance for them to be open to . . . negotiations.”

“I suppose that is so,” Hudson agreed. “Very well. I will call you to keep track of your schedule.”

“That is fine. You know where to find me.”

Hudson stood. “Thanks for the drink, my friend.”

“It lubricates the business,” Kovacs said, as he opened the door for his guest. Five thousand West German marks would cover a lot of obligations and buy him a lot of goods to resell in Budapest for a handsome profit.

CHAPTER 23

ALL ABOARD

ZAITZEV CALLED THE TRAVEL OFFICE at 1530. He hoped that this didn't show an unusual eagerness, but everyone was interested in their vacation arrangements, he figured.

"Comrade Major, you are on the train day after tomorrow. It leaves Kiev Station at thirteen hours thirty and arrives in Budapest two days later at fourteen hours exactly. You and your family are booked into Carriage nineoh-six in compartments A and B. You are also booked into Budapest's Hotel Astoria, Room three-oh-seven, for eleven days. The hotel is directly across the street from the Soviet Culture and Friendship House, which is, of course, a KGB operation with a liaison office, should you need any local assistance."

"Excellent. Thank you very much for your help." Zaitzev thought for a moment. "Is there anything I might purchase for you in Budapest?"

"Why, thank you, comrade." His voice just lit up. "Yes, perhaps some pantyhose for my wife," the functionary said in a furtive voice.

"What size?"

"My wife is a real Russian," he replied, meaning decidedly not anorexic.

"Very good. I will find something—or my wife will assist me."

"Excellent. Have a grand trip."

"Yes, I shall," Zaitzev promised him. With that settled, Oleg Ivan'ch left his desk and went to his watch supervisor to announce his plans for the coming two weeks.

"Isn't there some upstairs project that only you are cleared for?" the lieutenant colonel asked.

"Yes, but I asked Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, and he said not to be concerned about it. Feel free to call him to confirm that, comrade," Zaitzev told him.

And he did, in Zaitzev's presence. The brief call ended with a "thank you, comrade," and then he looked up at his subordinate. "Very well, Oleg Ivan'ch, you are relieved of your duties beginning this evening. Say, while you are in Budapest . . ."

"Certainly, Andrey Vasili'yevich. You may pay me for them when I get back." Andrey was a decent boss, who never screamed, and helped

his people when asked. A pity he worked for an agency that murdered innocent people.

And then it was just a matter of cleaning up his desk, which wasn't difficult. KGB regulations dictated that every desk be set up exactly the same way, so that a worker could switch desks without confusion, and Zaitzev's desk was arranged exactly according to office specifications. With his pencils properly sharpened and lined up, his message log up to the moment, and all his books properly in place, he dumped his trash and walked to the men's room. There he selected a stall, removed his brown tie, and replaced it with his striped one. He checked his watch. He was actually a little early. So Zaitzev took his time on the way out, smoked two cigarettes instead of one, and took a moment to enjoy the clear afternoon, stopping off to get a paper along the way, and, to pamper himself, six packs of Krasnopresnensky, the premium cigarette smoked by Leonid Brezhnev himself, for two rubles forty. Something nice to smoke on the train. Might as well spend his rubles now, he decided. They'd be valueless where he was going. Then he walked down to the metro station and checked the clock. The train, of course, came right on time.

FOLEY WAS IN the same place, doing the same thing in exactly the same way, his mind racing as the train slowed to a stop at *this* station. He felt the tiny vibration from the boarding passengers and the grunts of people bumping into one another. He straightened up to turn the page. Then the train lurched off. The engineers—or motormen, whatever the hell you called them—were always a little heavy on the throttle. A moment later, there was a presence to his left. Foley didn't see it, but he could feel it. Two minutes later, the subway train slowed for another station. It lurched to a stop, and someone bumped into him. Foley turned slightly to see who it was.

"Excuse me, comrade," the Rabbit said. He was wearing a blue tie with red stripes.

"No problem," Foley responded dismissively, as his heart leapt inside his chest.

Okay, two days from now, Kiev Station. The train to Budapest. The Rabbit moved a step or two away, and that was that. The signal had been passed.

Skyrockets in flight. Foley folded his paper, and made his way to the sliding doors. The usual walk to his apartment. Mary Pat was fixing dinner.

"Like my tie? You didn't tell me this morning."

MP's eyes lit up. *Day after tomorrow,* she realized. They'd have to get the word out, but that was just a procedural thing. She hoped Langley

was ready. BEATRIX was going a little fast, but why dawdle?

"So, what's for dinner?"

"Well, I wanted to get a steak, but I'm afraid you'll have to settle for fried chicken today."

"That's okay, honey. Steak for day after tomorrow, maybe?" she asked.

"Sounds good to me. Honey, where's Eddie?"

"Watching *Transformers,* of course." She pointed to the living room.

"That's my boy," Ed observed, with a smile. "He knows the important stuff." Foley kissed his wife tenderly.

"Later, tiger," Mary Pat breathed back. But a successful operation merited a discreet celebration. Not that this one was successful yet, but it was certainly headed that way, and it was their first in Moscow. "Got the pictures?" she whispered.

He pulled them out of his jacket pocket. They were not exactly magazine-cover quality, but they did give good representations of the Rabbit and his little bunny. They didn't know what Mrs. Rabbit looked like, but this would have to do. They'd get the shots to Nigel and Penny. One of them would cover the train station to make sure the Rabbit family got going on time.

"Ed, there's a problem with the shower," Mary Pat said. "The spray thingee isn't right."

"I'll see if Nigel has the right tools." Foley walked out the door and down the hall. In a few minutes, they were back, Nigel carrying his toolbox.

"Hello, Mary." Nigel waved on his way to the bathroom. Once there, he made a fuss about opening his toolbox, then turning on the water, and now any bug the KGB might have here was jammed.

"Okay, Ed, what is it?"

Ed handed over the photos. "The Rabbit and the Bunny. We have nothing on Mrs. Rabbit yet. They'll all be taking the one P.M. train to Budapest, day after tomorrow."

"Kiev Station," Haydock said, with a nod. "You'll want me to get a picture of Mrs. Rabbit."

"Correct."

"Very well. I can do that." The wheels started turning at once. As Commercial Attaché, he could come up with a cock-and-bull story to cover it, Haydock reasoned. He'd get a tame reporter to accompany him and make it look like a news story—something about tourism, perhaps. Paul Matthews of the *Times* would play along. Easily done. He'd have Matthews bring a photographer and take professional photos of the whole Rabbit family for London and Langley to use. And Ivan shouldn't suspect a thing. However important the Rabbit's information might be, the Rabbit himself was just a cipher, one of

many thousands of KGB employees not important enough to be taken any note of. So tomorrow morning Haydock would call the Soviet state railroad and say that the Soviets' sister service in Britain—which was also state-owned—was interested in how the Russians ran theirs, and so . . . yes, that would work. There was nothing the Soviets liked better than others wanting to learn from their glorious system. Good for their egos. Nigel reached over to turn off the water.

"There, I think that has it fixed, Edward."

"Thanks, pal. Any good places in Moscow to buy tools?"

"I don't know, Ed. I've had these since I was a lad. Belonged to my father, you see."

Then Foley remembered what had happened to Nigel's father. Yeah, he wanted BEATRIX to succeed. He wanted to take every opportunity to shove a big one up the Bear's hairy ass. "How's Penny?"

"The baby hasn't dropped yet. So at least another week, probably more. Strictly speaking, she isn't due for another three weeks, but—"

"But the docs *never* get that one right, buddy. Never," Foley told his friend. "Best advice, stay close. When you planning to fly home?"

"Ten days should be about right, the embassy physician tells us. It's only a two-hour flight, after all."

"Your doc is an optimist, pal. These things never go according to plan. I don't suppose you want a little Englishman to be born in Moscow, eh?"

"No, Edward, we don't."

"Well, keep Penny off the trampoline," Foley suggested with a wink.

"Yes, I will do that, Ed." American humor could be rather crass, he thought.

This could be interesting, Foley thought, walking his friend to the door. He'd always thought Brit children were born at the age of five and sent immediately off to boarding school. Did they raise them the same way Americans did? He'd have to see.

THE BODY OF Owen Williams was never collected—it turned out he had no immediate family, and his ex-wife had no interest in him at all, especially dead. The local police, on receipt of a telex from Chief Superintendent Patrick Nolan of London's Metropolitan Police, transferred the body to an aluminum casket, which was loaded in a police van and driven south toward London. But not quite. The van stopped at a preselected location, and the aluminum box was transferred to another, unmarked, van for the drive into the city. It ended up in a mortuary in the Swiss Cottage district of north London.

The body was not in very good shape, and, since it had not yet seen a mortician, it had also not been treated in any way. The unburned

underside was a blue-crimson shade of postmortem lividity. Once the heart stops, the blood is pulled by gravity to the lower regions of the body—in this case, the back—where, lacking oxygen, it tends to turn the caucasian body a pale bluish color, leaving the upper side with a disagreeable ivory pallor. The mortician here was a civilian who occasionally contracted specialty work to the Secret Intelligence Service. Along with a forensic pathologist, he examined the body for anything unusual. The worst thing was the smell of roasted human meat, but their noses were covered with surgical masks to attenuate the odor.

"Tattoo, underside of the forearm, partially but not entirely burned off," the mortician reported.

"Very well." The pathologist lit the flame of a propane blowtorch and applied it to the arm, burning all evidence of the tattoo off the body. "Anything else, William?" he asked a couple minutes later.

"Nothing I can see. The upper body is well charred. Hair is mainly gone"—the smell of burned human hair is particularly vile—"and one ear nearly burned off. I presume this chap was dead before he burned."

"Ought to have been," the pathologist said. "The blood gasses had the CO well spiked into lethal range. I doubt this poor bugger felt a thing." Then he burned off the fingerprints, lingering to sear both hands with the torch so that it would not appear to have been a deliberate mutilation of the body.

"There," the pathologist said finally. "If there's a way to identify this body, I do not know what it is."

"Freeze it now?" the undertaker asked.

"No, I don't think so. If we chill it down to, oh, two or three degrees Celsius, no noticeable decomposition ought to take place."

"Dry ice, then."

"Yes. The metal casket is well insulated and it seals hermetically. Dry ice doesn't melt, you know. It goes directly from a solid to a gas. Now we need to get it dressed." The doctor had brought the underclothing with him. None of it was British in origin, and all of it was badly damaged by fire. All in all, it was a distasteful job, but one that pathologists and morticians get used to very early in their professions. It was just a different way of thinking for a different kind of job. But this was unusually gruesome, even for these two. Both would have an extra drink before turning in that night. When they finished, the aluminum box was reloaded on the van and driven to Century House. There would be a note on Sir Basil's desk in the morning to let him know that Rabbit A was ready for his last flight.

LATER THAT NIGHT and three thousand miles away, in Boston, Massachusetts, there was a gas explosion on the second floor of a two-story frame dwelling overlooking the harbor. Three people were there when it happened. The two adults were not married, but both were drunk, and the woman's four-year-old daughter—not related to the male resident—was already in bed. The fire spread quickly, too quickly for the two adults to respond to it through their intoxication. The three deaths didn't take long, all of them from smoke inhalation rather than incineration. The Boston Fire Department responded within ten minutes, and their search-and-rescue ladder men battled their way through the flames under cover of two hose streams, found the bodies, and dragged them out, but they knew that they'd been too late again. The captain of the responding company could tell almost instantly what had gone wrong. There had been a gas leak in the kitchen from the old stove that the landlord hadn't wanted to replace, and so three people had died of his parsimony. (He'd gladly collect the insurance check, of course, and say how sorry he was about the tragic incident.) This was not the first such case. It wouldn't be the last, either, and so he and his men would have some nightmares about the three bodies, especially the little girl's. But that just went with the job.

The story was early enough to make the eleven o'clock news on the rule that "If it bleeds, it leads." The Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Boston field division was up and watching, actually waiting for coverage of the baseball playoffs—he'd been at an official dinner and missed the live broadcast on NBC—and saw the story and instantly remembered the lunatic telex he'd gotten earlier in the day. That caused a curse to be muttered and a phone to be lifted.

"FBI," said the young agent guarding the phones when he picked up.

"Get Johnny up," the SAC ordered. "A family got burned up in a fire on Hester Street. He'll know what to do. Have him call me at home if he has to."

"Yes, sir." And that was that, except for Assistant Special Agent in Charge John Tyler, who'd been reading a book in his bed—a native of South Carolina, he preferred college football to professional baseball—when the phone rang. He managed to grumble on the way to the bathroom, then collected his side arm and car keys for the ride south. He'd seen the telex from Washington, too, and wondered what sort of drugs Emil Jacobs was taking, but his was not to reason why.

NOT TOO LONG after that, but five time zones to the east, Jack Ryan rolled out of bed, got his paper, and switched on the TV. CNN also carried the fire story from Boston—it was a slow news night at home

—and he breathed a quiet prayer for the victims of the fire, followed by speculation about the gas pipe connection in his own stove. His house, though, was a lot newer than the standing lumberyard that defined a house in south Boston. When they went, they went big, and they went fast. Too fast for those people to get out, evidently. He remembered his father often saying how much he respected firemen, people who ran *into* burning buildings instead of away from them. The worst part of the job had to be what they found unmoving on the inside. He shook his head as he opened his morning paper and reached for his coffee, while his physician wife saw the tail end of the fire story and thought her own thoughts. She remembered treating burn victims in her third year of medical school and the horrid screams that went with debriding burned tissue off the underlying wounds, and there wasn't a damned thing you could do about it. But those people in Boston were dead now, and that was that. She didn't like it, but she'd seen a lot of death, because sometimes the Bad Guy won, and that was just how things worked. It was not a pleasant thought for a parent, especially since the little girl in Boston had been Sally's age and now would never get older. She sighed. At least she'd be doing some surgery that morning, something that really made a difference with somebody's health.

SIR BASIL CHARLESTON lived in an expensive townhouse in London's posh Belgravia district south of Knightsbridge. A widower whose grown children had long since moved away, he was accustomed to living alone, though he had a discreet security detail in attendance at all times. He also had a maid service which came in three times a week to straighten up, though he didn't bother with a cook, preferring to dine out or even fix small meals for himself. He had, of course, the usual accoutrements of a king spook: three different sorts of secure phones, a secure telex, and a new secure fax machine. There was no live-in secretary, but when the office was busy and he wasn't there, a courier service kept him apprised of the printed material circulating in Century House. Indeed, since he had to assume that the "opposition" kept an eye on his home, he deemed it smarter to remain at home in time of crisis, the better to project the image of calmness. It really didn't matter. He was firmly tied to the SIS by an electronic umbilical cord.

And so it was this morning. Someone at Century House had decided to let him know that SIS had an adult male body to use in Operation BEATRIX: just the sort of thing he needed with breakfast, Basil noted,

with a twisted expression. They needed three, though, one of them a female child, which was *really* not something to contemplate with his morning tea and Scottish oatmeal.

However, it was hard not to get excited about this BEATRIX operation. If their Rabbit was speaking the truth—not all of them did—this chap would have all manner of useful information in his head. The most useful of all, of course, would be if he could identify Soviet agents within Her Majesty's government. That was properly the job of the Security Service—erroneously called MI-5—but the two agencies cooperated closely, more closely than CIA and FBI did in America, or so it appeared to Charleston. Sir Basil and his people had long suspected a high-level leak somewhere in the Foreign Office, but they'd been unable to close in on him or her. So, if they got their Rabbit out—it wasn't done until it was done, he reminded himself—that was certainly one question his people would be asking in the safe house they used outside of Taunton in the rolling hills of Somerset.

"NOT GOING TO work today?" Irina asked her husband. He ought to have left for the office by now, surely.

"No, and I have a surprise for you," Oleg announced.

"What is that?"

"We're going to Budapest tomorrow."

That snapped her head around. "What?"

"I decided to take my vacation days, and there's a new conductor in Budapest now, Jozsef Rozsa. I knew you liked classical music, and I decided to take you and *zaichik* there, dear."

"Oh," was all she had to say. "But what about my job at GUM?"

"Can't you get free of that?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," Irina admitted. "But why Budapest?"

"Well, the music, and we can buy some things there. I have a list of items to get for people at The Centre," he told her.

"Ah, yes . . . we can get some nice things for Svetlana," she thought out loud on reflection. Working at GUM, she knew what was available in Hungary that she'd never get in Moscow, even in the "closed" stores. "Who is this Rozsa, anyway?"

"He's a young Hungarian conductor touring Eastern Europe. He has a fine reputation, darling. The program is supposed to be Brahms and Bach, I think—one of the Hungarian state orchestras and," he added, "a lot of good shopping." There wasn't a woman in all the world who wouldn't respond favorably to that opportunity, Oleg judged. He waited patiently for the next objection:

"I don't have anything to wear."

"My dear, that is why we're going to Budapest. You will be able to

buy anything you need there."

"Well . . ."

"And remember to pack everything you need in one bag. We'll take empty bags for all the things we're buying for ourselves and our friends."

"But—"

"Irina, think of Budapest as one big consumer-goods store. Hungarian VCRs, Western jeans and pantyhose, real perfume. You will be the envy of your office at GUM," he promised her.

"Well . . ."

"I thought so. My darling, we are going on vacation!" he told her, a little manly force in his voice.

"If you say so," she responded, with the hint of an avaricious smile. "I will call in to the office later and let them know. I suppose they won't miss me too badly."

"The only people they miss in Moscow are the Politburo members, and they only miss them for the day and a half it takes to replace them," he announced.

And so that was settled. They were taking the train to Hungary. Irina started thinking about what to pack. Oleg would leave that to her. *Inside a week or ten days, we will all have much better clothes,* the KGB communications officer told himself. And maybe in a month or two, they would go to that Disney Planet place in the American province of Florida....

He wondered if CIA knew how much trust he was putting in them, and he prayed—an unusual activity for a KGB officer—that they would perform as well as he hoped.

"GOOD MORNING, JACK."

"Hey, Simon. What's new in the world?" Jack set his coffee down before taking his coat off.

"Suslov died last night," Harding announced. "It will be in their afternoon papers."

"What a pity. Another bat found his way back into hell, eh?" *At least he died with good eyesight, thanks to Bernie Katz and the guys from Johns Hopkins,* Ryan thought. "Complications of diabetes?"

Harding shrugged. "Plus being old, I should imagine. Heart attack, our sources tell us. Amazing that the nasty old bugger actually had a heart. In any case, his replacement will be Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov."

"And he's not exactly a day at the beach. When will they plant Suslov?"

"He's a senior Politburo member. I would expect a full state funeral,

marching band, the lot, then cremation and a slot in the Kremlin wall."

"You know, I've always wondered, what does a real communist think about when he knows he's dying? You suppose they wonder if it was all a great big fucking mistake?"

"I have no idea. But Suslov was evidently a true believer. He probably thought of all the good he'd done in his life, leading humanity to the 'Radiant Future' they like to talk about."

Nobody's that dumb, Ryan wanted to retort, but Simon was probably right. Nothing lingered longer in a man's mind than a bad idea, and certainly Red Mike had held his bad ideas close to whatever heart had finally cashed in. But a communist's best-case scenario for after death corresponded with Ryan's worst, and if the communist was wrong, then, quite literally, there was hell to pay. *Tough luck, Mishka, hope you took some sunblock with you.*

"Okay, what's up for today?"

"The PM wants to know if this will have any effect on Politburo policy."

"Tell her no, it won't. In political terms, Alexandrov might as well be Suslov's twin brother. He thinks Marx is God, and Lenin is his prophet, and Stalin was mostly right, just a little too *nekulturniy* in his application of political theory. The rest of the Politburo doesn't really believe that stuff anymore, but they have to pretend that they do. So call Alexandrov the new conductor of the ideological symphony orchestra. They don't much like the music anymore, but they dance to it anyway, 'cause it's the only dance they know. I don't think he will affect their policy decisions a dot. I bet they listen when he talks, but they let it go in one ear and out the other; they pretend to respect him, but they really don't."

"It's a little more complex than that, but you've caught the essentials," Harding agreed. "The thing is, I have to find a way to produce ten doublespaced pages that say it."

"Yeah, in bureaucratese." Ryan had never quite mastered that language, which was one of the reasons Admiral Greer liked him so much.

"We have our procedures, Jack, and the PM—indeed, all of the Prime Ministers—like to have it in words they understand."

"The Iron Lady understands the same language as a stevedore, I bet."

"Only when she speaks those words, Sir John, not when others try to speak them to her."

"I suppose. Okay," Ryan had to concede the point. "What documents do we need?"

"We have an extensive dossier file on Alexandrov. I've already

called down for it."

So this day would be occupied with creative writing, Ryan decided. It would have been more interesting to look into their economy, but instead he'd have to help do a prospective, analytical obituary for a man whom nobody had liked, and who'd probably died intestate anyway.

THE PREPARATION WAS even easier than he'd hoped. Haydock had expected the Russians to be pleased, and, sure enough, one call to his contact in the Ministry of Transportation had done the trick. At ten the next morning, he, Paul Matthews, and a *Times* photographer would be at the Kiev station to do a story about Soviet state rail and how it compared to British Rail, which needed some help, most Englishmen thought, especially in upper management.

Matthews probably suspected that Haydock was a "six" person, but had never let on, since the spook had been so helpful feeding stories to him. It was the usual way of creating a friendly journalist—even taught at the SIS Academy—but it was officially denied to the American CIA. *The United States Congress passes the most remarkable and absurd laws to hamstring its intelligence services,* the Brit thought, though he was sure the official rules were broken on a daily basis by the people in the field. He'd violated a few of the much looser rules of his own mother service. And had never been caught, of course. Just as he had never been caught working agents on the streets of Moscow....

"HI, TONY." Ed Foley extended a friendly hand to the Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times.* He wondered if Prince knew how much Ed despised him. But it probably went both ways. "What's happening today?"

"Looking for a statement by the Ambassador on the death of Mikhail Suslov."

Foley laughed. "How about he's glad the nasty old cocksucker is dead?"

"Can I quote you on that?" Prince held up his scribble pad.

Time to back up. "Not exactly. I have no instructions in that matter, Tony, and the boss is tied up on other things at the moment. No time loose to see you until later afternoon, I'm afraid."

"Well, I need *something,* Ed."

" 'Mikhail Suslov was an important member of the Politburo, and an important ideological force in this country, and we regret his untimely passing.' That good enough?"

"Your first quote was better and a lot more truthful," the *Times* correspondent observed.

"You ever meet him?"

Prince nodded. "Couple of times, before and after the Hopkins docs worked on his eyes—"

"Is that for real? I mean, I heard a few stories about it, but nothing substantive." Foley acted the words out.

Prince nodded again. "It was true enough. Glasses like Coke-bottle bottoms. Courtly gent, I thought. Well-mannered and all that, but there was a little 'tough guy' underneath. I guess he was the high priest of communism, like."

"Oh, took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, did he?"

"You know, there was something of the aesthete about him, like he really was a priest of a sort," Prince said, after a moment's reflection.

"Think so?"

"Yeah, something otherworldly about the guy, like he could see things the rest of us couldn't, like a priest or something. He sure enough believed in communism. Didn't apologize for it, either."

"Stalinist?" Foley asked.

"No, but thirty years ago he would have been. I can see him signing the order to kill somebody. Wouldn't lose any sleep over it—not our Mishka."

"Who's going to replace him?"

"Not sure," Prince admitted. "My contacts say they don't know."

"I thought he was tight with another Mike, that Alexandrov guy," Foley offered, wondering if Prince's contacts were as good as he thought they were. Fucking with Western reporters was a game for the Soviet leadership. It was different in Washington, where a reporter had power to use over politicians. That didn't apply here. The Politburo members didn't fear reporters at all—much the reverse, actually.

Prince's contacts weren't all that great: "Maybe, but I'm not sure. What's the talk here?"

"Haven't been to the lunch room yet, Tony. Haven't heard the gossip yet," Foley parried. *You don't* really *expect a tip from me, do you?*

"Well, we'll know by tomorrow or day after."

But it would look good for you if you were the first reporter to make the prediction, and you want me to help you, right? Not is this lifetime, Foley thought, but then he had to reconsider. Prince would not be a particularly valuable friend, but perhaps a usable one, and it never made sense to make enemies for the fun of it. On the other hand, to be too helpful to the guy might suggest either that Foley was a spook or knew who the spooks were, and Tony Prince was one of those guys

who liked to talk and tell people how smart he is.... *No, it's better for Prince to think I'm dumb, because he'll tell everyone he knows how smart* he *is and how dumb* I *am.*

The best cover of them all, he'd learned at The Farm, was to be thought a dullard, and while it was a little hurtful to his ego to play that game, it was helpful to the mission, and Ed Foley was a mission-oriented guy. So . . . *fuck Prince and what he thinks.* I'm *the guy in this city who makes a difference.*

"Tell you what, I'll ask around—see what people think."

"Fair enough." *Not that I expected anything useful from you,* Prince thought a little too loudly.

He was less skillful than he thought at concealing his feelings. He would never be a good poker player, the Chief of Station thought, seeing him out the door. He checked his watch. Lunchtime.

LIKE MOST EUROPEAN stations, Kiev's was a pale yellow—just like a lot of old royal palaces, in fact, as if in the early nineteenth century there had been a continent-wide surplus of mustard, and some king or other had liked the color, and so everyone had painted his palace that way. *It never happened in Britain, thank God,* Haydock thought. The ceiling was glass set in iron frames to let the light in but, as in London, the glass was rarely, if ever, cleaned, and was instead coated with soot from long-gone steam engines and their coal-fired boiler fires.

But Russians were still Russians. They came to the platform carrying their cheap suitcases, and they were almost never alone, mostly in family groups, even if only one of them was leaving, so that proper goodbyes could be experienced, with passionate kisses, male-to-female, and male-to-male, which always struck the Englishman as peculiar. But it was a local custom, and all local customs were peculiar to visitors. The train to Kiev, Belgrade, and Budapest was scheduled to leave at 1:00 P.M. on the dot, and the Russian railroads, like the Moscow Metro, kept to a fairly precise schedule.

Just a few feet away, Paul Matthews was conversing with a representative of the Soviet state railway, talking about the motive power—it was all electric, since Comrade Lenin had decided to bring electricity and eliminate lice all across the USSR. The former, strangely, had proved easier than the latter.

The big VL80T locomotive, two hundred tons of steel, sat at the head of the train on Track Three, with three-day coaches, a dining car, and six international class sleepers, plus three mail cars just behind the engine. On the platform were the various conductors and stewards, looking rather surly, as Russians in service-related jobs

tended to do.

Haydock was looking around, the photos of the Rabbit and the Bunny seared into his memory. The station clock said it was 12:15, and that tallied with his wristwatch. Would the Rabbit show? Haydock usually preferred to be early for a flight or a train, perhaps from a fear of being late left over from his childhood. Whatever the reason, he'd have been here by now for a one o'clock train. But not everyone thought that way, Nigel reminded himself—his wife, for example. He was slightly afraid that she'd deliver the baby in their car on the way to the hospital. It would make a hell of a mess, the spook was sure, while Paul Matthews asked his questions, and the photographer shot his Kodak film. Finally . . .

Yes, that was the Rabbit, along with Mrs. Rabbit and the little Bunny. Nigel tapped the shoulder of the photographer.

"This family approaching now. Lovely little girl," he observed, for anyone close enough to listen. The photographer fired off ten frames at once, then switched to another Nikon and fired off ten more. *Excellent,* Haydock thought. He'd have them printed up before the embassy closed down for the night, get several printed off to—no, he'd personally hand them to Ed Foley, and make sure the others went by Queen's Messenger—the Brits' rather more dignified term for a diplomatic courier—so they'd be sure to be in Sir Basil's hands before he turned in. He wondered how they would arrange for hiding the fact of the Rabbit's defection—it certainly meant getting cadavers. Distasteful, but possible. He was glad he didn't have to figure out all the details.

As it turned out, the Rabbit family walked within ten feet of him and his reporter friend. No words were exchanged, though the little girl, like little girls everywhere, turned to look at him as she passed. He gave her a wink and got a little smile in return. And then they passed by, walked up to the attendant, and showed their paper ticket forms.

Matthews kept on asking his questions and got very polite answers from the smiling Russian trainman.

At 12:59:30, the conductor—or at least so Haydock assumed, from the shabby uniform—walked up and down the side of the train and made sure all the doors but one were secure. He blew a whistle and waved a paddlelike wand to let the engineer know it was time to move off, and at 1:00 on the dot, the horn sounded, and the train started inching away from the platform, gaining speed slowly as it headed west into the capacious railyard, heading for Kiev, Belgrade, and Budapest.

CHAPTER 24

ROLLING HILLS

IT WAS AN ADVENTURE for Svetlana most of all, but actually for all of them, since none of the Zaitzev family had ever taken an intercity train. The railyards on the way out were like any railyards: miles of parallel and converging and diverging track packed with box- and flatcars carrying who-knew-what to who-knew-where. The roughness of the tracks only seemed to increase the apparent speed. Oleg and Irina both lit cigarettes and looked with casual interest out the large but grubby windows. The seats were not unreasonable, and Oleg could see how the beds folded down from the overhead.

They had two compartments, in fact, with a connecting door. The paneling was wood—birch, by the look of it—and each compartment, remarkably, had its own lavatory, and so *zaichik* would have her very own, for the first time in her life, a fact she had yet to appreciate.

Five minutes after leaving the station, the conductor came by for their tickets, which Zaitzev handed over.

"You are State Security?" the conductor asked politely. *So the KGB travel office called ahead for me,* Zaitzev thought. *Good of them.* That desk-sitter probably really wanted the pantyhose for his wife.

"I am not permitted to discuss that, comrade," Oleg Ivan'ch answered, with a hard look, making sure that the trainman appreciated his importance. That was one way to ensure proper service. A KGB officer wasn't quite as good as a Politburo member, but it beat the hell out of being a mere factory manager. It wasn't so much that people dreaded KGB, but that they just didn't want to go out of their way to come to the agency's adverse notice.

"Yes, of course, comrade. If you need anything, please call for me. Supper is at eighteen hours, and the dining car is the next one forward." He pointed the way.

"How is the food?" Irina decided to ask. Surely, being the wife of a KGB officer had its advantages....

"It is not bad, comrade," the conductor answered politely. "I eat there myself," he added, which said something, Oleg and Irina both thought.

"Thank you, comrade."

"Enjoy your trip with us," he said, and he took his leave.

Oleg and Irina both took out books. Svetlana pressed her nose to the window to watch the world passing by, and so the trip began, with only one of them knowing the final destination. Western Russia is mostly a region of rolling plains and distant horizons, not unlike Kansas or eastern Colorado. It was boring to everyone but their *zaichik,* for whom everything was new and exciting, especially the cattle that were mainly munching on grass. *Cows,* she thought, *are pretty cool.*

BACK IN MOSCOW, Nigel Haydock thanked the bureaucrat from the Transport Ministry for his splendid help, along with Paul Matthews, and then they made their way off to the British Embassy. The embassy had a photo lab, and the photographer went that way, while Matthews followed Nigel to his office.

"So, Paul, is there a useful story in that?"

"I suppose there might be. Is it important that there should be?"

"Well, it's valuable to me that the Sovs should think I can bring attention to the glory of their country," Haydock explained with a chuckle.

You are a -6 chap, aren't you? Matthews thought without voicing his suspicion. "I suppose I can generate something. God knows British Rail needs a boost. Maybe this will encourage the exchequer to send some more money their way."

"Not a bad idea at all," Nigel agreed. It was clear that his guest had his suspicions but had the good grace to keep them quiet, perhaps until a later day, when Nigel was back at a desk in Century House, and they were at a Fleet Street pub.

"You want to see our photos?"

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all. We throw most of them away, as you know."

"Excellent," Haydock announced. Then he reached into the credenza behind his desk. "Drink, Paul?"

"Thank you, Nigel. Yes, a sherry would be nice."

Two sherries later, the photographer came in with a folder full of prints. Haydock took it and leafed through them. "You do excellent work. You know, when I use my Nikon, I never quite get the light right. . . ." he said. There, a nice family shot of the Rabbit—and, most important, Mrs. Rabbit. There were three, each one better than the last. He slid them into his drawer and handed the folder back. Matthews took his cue.

"Well, must get back to my office and write this story up. Thanks for the lead, Nigel."

"My pleasure, Paul. See your own way out?"

"Not a problem, old man." And Matthews and his photographer disappeared into the corridor. Haydock returned his attention to the photos. Mrs. Rabbit was typically Russian, with her round, Slavic face—she could have had a million identical sisters throughout the Soviet Union. She needed to lose a few pounds and get a makeover in the West . . . *if they make it that far,* he cautioned himself. Height, about five feet four or so; weight, about a hundred forty pounds, not at all unpleasant. The child, he saw, was darling with her lively blue eyes and happy expression—too young to learn to hide her feelings behind a blank mask, as nearly all the adults here did. No, children were the same everywhere in their innocence and insatiable curiosity. But, most important, they now had high-quality photos of the Rabbit family.

The courier was on the top floor, near the office of the Ambassador, Sir John Kenny. Haydock passed him a manila envelope sealed by metal clasp, glue, and wax over the flap. The address on the front designated the Foreign Office box that went straight to Century House across the Thames from Whitehall. The courier's bag was an expensive leather attaché case with the coat of arms of the Royal House of Windsor embossed on both sides. There was also a pair of handcuffs for him to secure it to his wrist, despite the stern rules of the Vienna Convention. The Queen's Messenger had a car waiting to take him to Sheremetyevo International Airport for the British Airways 737 afternoon return flight to Heathrow. The photos would be in Sir Basil's hand before he went home for the evening, and surely some Century House experts would be staying late that night to go over them. That would be the last official check to see if the Rabbit was genuine. His face would be compared with those of known KGB field and security officers—and if there was a hit, then Ed and Mary Foley were in for a bad time. But Haydock didn't expect that to happen. He agreed with his CIA counterparts. This one looked and felt real. But then, so did good Directorate Two people, didn't they? His last stop was at Communications to get a quick message off to SIS Headquarters that an important message was en route via courier on Operation BEATRIX. That would perk up everyone's eyeballs, and an SIS man would be waiting at the mailroom in Whitehall for this particular envelope. *As laggardly as a government bureaucracy could be,* Haydock thought, *when you had something important to do, it usually got done quickly, at least in the SIS.*

THE FLIGHT TOOK two hours and twenty minutes—a little late due to adverse winds—before arriving at Heathrow's Terminal Three. There, a Foreign Office representative whisked the courier off to downtown

London in a black Jaguar saloon car, and the Queen's Messenger made his delivery and went off to his own office. Before he even got there, an SIS officer had taken the package and hustled down to Westminster Bridge and across the Thames.

"You have it?" Sir Basil asked.

"Here, sir." The messenger passed over the envelope. Charleston checked the closures and, satisfied that it had not been tampered with, slit it open with his paper knife. Then, for the first time, he saw what the Rabbit looked like. Three minutes later, Alan Kingshot walked in. C handed over the color prints.

Kingshot took the top photo and gave it a long look. "So, this is our Rabbit, is it?"

"Correct, Alan," Sir Basil confirmed.

"He looks ordinary enough. His wife, as well. The little girl is rather cute," the senior field spook thought out loud. "On the way to Budapest now, are they?"

"Left Kiev Station five and a half hours ago."

"Fast work from Nigel." Kingshot gave the faces a closer look, wondering what information lay in the brain behind the man's face, and whether or not they'd get to use it. "So, BEATRIX goes forward. Do we have the bodies?"

"The male from York is close enough. We'll need to burn his face off, I'm afraid," C observed distastefully.

"No surprise there, sir," Kingshot agreed. "What about the other two?"

"Two candidates from America. Mother and daughter killed in a house fire in Boston, I believe. The FBI is working on that as we speak. We need to get this photo to them at once to make sure the bodies match up properly."

"I'll take care of that now if you wish, sir."

"Yes, Alan, please do that."

The machine downstairs was a color-photo transmitter like the one used by newspapers—relatively new and, its operator told Kingshot, very easy to use. He gave the photo only a cursory look. Transmission to an identical machine made by Xerox and located at Langley took less than two minutes. Kingshot took the photo back and returned to C's office.

"Done, sir." Sir Basil waved him to a seat.

Charleston checked his watch, giving it five minutes because CIA headquarters was a large building, and the communications people were in the basement. Then he called Judge Arthur Moore on the secure, dedicated line.

"Afternoon, Basil," Moore's voice said over the digitized circuit.

"Hello, Arthur. You have the photo?"

"Just got here. Looks like a nice little family," the DCI observed. "This is from the train station?"

"Yes, Arthur, they are en route as we speak. They will arrive in Budapest in about twenty—no, nineteen hours."

"Okay. Ready at your end, Basil?"

"We soon will be. There is the matter of those unfortunate people from Boston, however. We have the male body. It appears on first inspection that it will serve our needs quite well."

"Okay, I'll have the FBI expedite things here," Moore replied. He'd have to get this photo to the Hoover Building ASAP. *Might as well share this grisly business with Emil,* he thought.

"Very good, Arthur. I shall keep you posted."

"Great, Bas. See you."

"Excellent." Charleston hung up his phone, then looked over at Kingshot. "Have our people prepare the body for transport to Budapest."

"Timing, sir?"

"Three days should be about right," Sir Basil thought out loud.

"Right." Kingshot left the room.

C thought for a moment and decided it was time to warn the American. He punched another button on his phone. This took only a minute and a half.

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, entering his office.

"Your trip to Budapest, three days from today—perhaps four, but more likely three."

"Where do I leave from?"

"There's a morning British Airways flight from Heathrow. You can leave from here, or just take a taxi from Victoria Station. You'll be accompanied on the flight by one of our people, and met in Budapest by Andy Hudson, he's our Chief of Station there. Good man. Runs a good little station."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, not knowing what the hell else to say in preparation for his first field mission as a spook. Then it was time for a question. "What, exactly, is going to happen, sir?"

"I'm not sure yet, but Andy has good connections with local smugglers. I would expect him to arrange a crossing into Yugoslavia, and then home from there by commercial aircraft."

Great. More fucking airplanes, Ryan thought. *Couldn't we take the train?* But ex-Marines weren't supposed to show fear. "Okay, I guess that works."

"You may speak with our Rabbit—discreetly," Charleston warned. "And then you'll be allowed to sit in on our initial debriefing out in Somerset. Finally, I rather expect you'll be one of the chaps to escort him back to the States, probably on U.S. Air Force transport out of

RAF Bentwaters."

Better and better, Jack thought. His hatred for flying was something he'd have to get over, and intellectually he knew that sooner or later he'd do it. It was just that he hadn't quite gotten over it *yet.* Well, at least he wouldn't be flying anywhere in a CH-46 with a fluky transmission. He drew the line there.

"My total time away from home?" *And sleeping apart from my wife,* Ryan thought.

"Four days, perhaps as many as seven. It depends on how things work out in Budapest," C replied. "That is difficult to predict."

NONE OF THEM had ever eaten at sixty miles per hour. The adventure for their little girl just got better and better. Dinner was adequate. The beef was about average for the Soviet Union, and so they could not be disappointed by it, along with potatoes and greens, and, of course, a carafe of vodka, one of the better brands, to erase the pain of travel. They were heading into the setting sun, now in country used exclusively for farming. Irina leaned across the table to cut the *zaichik*'s meat for her, watching their little angel eat her dinner, like the big girl she proclaimed herself to be, along with a glass of cold milk.

"So, looking forward to the trip now, my dear?" Oleg asked his wife.

"Yes, especially the shopping." Of course.

Part of Oleg Ivan'ch was calm—in fact, the calmest he'd been in weeks. It was really happening. His treason—part of his consciousness thought of it that way—was under way. How many of his countrymen, he wondered—indeed, how many of his coworkers at The Centre—would take the chance if they had the courage to do so? You couldn't know. He lived in a country and worked at an office where everyone concealed their inner thoughts. And at KGB, even the Russian custom of sanctifying especially close friendships by speaking things that could put you in prison, trusting that a true friend would never denounce you—no, a KGB officer didn't do such things. KGB was founded on the dichotomous balance of loyalty and betrayal. Loyalty to the state and its principles, and betrayal of any who violated them. But since he didn't believe in those principles anymore, he had turned to treason to save his soul.

And now the treason was under way. If the Second Chief Directorate knew of his plans, they would have been mad to allow him on this train. He could leave it at any intermediate stop—or just jump off the train when it slowed, approaching some preplanned point—and escape to Western hands, which could be waiting anywhere for him.

No, he was safe, at least as long as he was on this train. And so he could be calm for now, and he'd let the days come as they would and see what happened. He kept telling himself that he was doing the right thing, and from that knowledge came his feeling, however illusory, of personal safety. If there were a God, surely He would protect a man on the run from evil.

DINNER IN THE Ryan house was spaghetti again. Cathy had a particularly good recipe for sauce—from her mom, who didn't have a single drop of Italian blood in her veins—and her husband loved it, especially with good Italian bread, which Cathy had found at a local bakery in downtown Chatham. No surgery tomorrow, so they had wine with dinner. Time to tell her.

"Honey, I have to travel in a few days."

"The NATO thing?"

"'Fraid so, babe. Looks like three or four days—maybe a little more."

"What's it about, can you say?"

"Nope, not allowed."

"Spook business?"

"Yep." He was allowed to say that.

"What's a spook?" Sally asked.

"It's what daddy does," Cathy said, without thinking.

"Spook, like in the *Wizzerdaboz*?" Sally went on.

"What?" her father asked.

"The Cowardly Lion says he believes in spooks, remember?" Sally pointed out.

"Oh, you mean the *Wizard of Oz.*" It was her favorite movie so far this year.

"That's what I *said,* Daddy." How could her daddy be so stupid?

"Well, no, Daddy isn't one of those," Jack told his daughter.

"Then why did Mommy say so?" Sally persisted. *She has the makings of a good FBI agent,* Jack thought at that moment.

It was Cathy's turn. "Sally, Mommy was just making a joke."

"Oh." Sally went back to work on her *pisghetti.* Jack gave his wife a look. They couldn't talk about his work in front of his daughter—not ever. Kids never kept secrets for more than five minutes, did they? So, he'd learned, never say anything in front of a kid that you didn't want on the first page of *The Washington Post.* Everyone on Grizedale Close thought that John Patrick Ryan worked at the U.S. Embassy and was lucky enough to be married to a surgeon. They didn't need to know that he was an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. Too much curiosity. Too many jokes.

"Three or four days?" Cathy asked.

"That's what they tell me. Maybe a little longer, but not too much, I think."

"Important?" Sally had gotten her inquisitive nature from her mother, Jack figured . . . and maybe a little bit from himself.

"Important enough that they're throwing my ass on an airplane, yeah." That actually worked. Cathy knew of her husband's hatred for air travel.

"Well, you have your Valium prescription. Want a beta-blocker, too?"

"No thanks, babe, not this time."

"You know, if you got airsick, it would be easier to understand." And easier to treat, she didn't have to add.

"Babe, you were there when my back went out, remember? I have some bad memories from flying. Maybe when we go home, we can take the boat," he added, with some hope in his voice. But, no, it wouldn't work out that way. It never did in the real world.

"Flying is fun," Sally protested. She definitely got that from her mother.

TRAVEL IS INEVITABLY TIRING, and so the Zaitzev family was agreeably surprised to see their beds turned out when they got back to their compartments. Irina got her daughter changed into her little yellow nightgown with flowers on what would have been the bodice. She gave her parents the usual good-night kiss and climbed onto her bed all by herself—she insisted on doing that—and slid under the covers. Instead of sleeping, she propped her head on the pillow and looked out the window at the darkened countryside passing by. Just a few lights from buildings on the collective farms but, for all that, fascinating to the little girl.

Her mother and father left the connecting door partly open, lest she have a nightmare or other sudden need to get a reassuring hug. Before going to bed, Svetlana had looked under the bed to see if there might be a hiding place for a big black bear, and she was satisfied that no such hiding place existed. Oleg and Irina opened books and gradually nodded off to the rocking of the train.

"BEATRIX IS RUNNING," Moore told Admiral Greer. "The Rabbit and his family are on the train, probably crossing into the Ukraine right

about now."

"I hate waiting like this," the DDI observed. It was easier for him to admit it. He'd never gone into the field on an intelligence mission. No, his job had always been at a desk, looking over important information. It was times like this that reminded him of the simple pleasures of standing watch on a ship of war—mainly submarines, in his case—where you could look at wind and wave, feel the breeze on your face and, merely by speaking a few words, change the course and speed of your ship instead of waiting to see what the ocean and distant enemy might do to you. You had the illusion there of being master of your fate.

"Patience is the hardest of the virtues to acquire, James, and the higher you get, the more you need the bastard. For me, this is like sitting on the bench, waiting for the lawyers to get to the damned point. It can take forever, especially when you know what the fools are going to say," Moore admitted. He'd also been there and done that, out in the field. But so much of that job was composed of waiting, too. No man controlled his fate, a knowledge that came late in life. You just tried to muddle along from one point to another, making as few mistakes as possible.

"Tell the President about this one yet?"

Moore shook his head. "No sense getting him overly excited. If he thinks this guy has information that he doesn't have—hell, why disappoint him? We do enough of that here, don't we?"

"Arthur, we never have enough information, and the more we get, the more we appreciate what we need and don't have."

"James, my boy, neither one of us is educated to be a philosopher."

"Comes with the gray hair, Arthur." Then Mike Bostock walked in.

"Couple more days and BEATRIX goes into the history books," he announced with a smile.

"Mike, where the hell did you learn to believe in Santa Claus?" the DCI asked.

"Judge, it's like this: We got us a defector who's defecting right now. We have a good team to get him out of Redland. You trust your troops to do the job you send them out to do."

"But they're not all our troops," Greer pointed out.

"Basil runs a good shop, Admiral. You know that."

"True," Greer admitted.

"So, you just wait to see what's under the Christmas tree, Mike?" Moore asked.

"I sent Santa my letter, and Santa always delivers. Everybody knows that." He was beaming at the possibilities. "What are we going to do with him when he arrives?"

"The farmhouse out at Winchester, I imagine," Moore thought out

loud. “Give him a nice place to depressurize—let him travel around some on day trips.”

“What stipend?” Greer inquired.

“Depends,” Moore said. He was the one who controlled that out of the Agency’s black budget. “If it’s good information . . . oh, as much as a million, I imagine. And a nice place to work after we tickle all of it out of him.”

“Where, I wonder?” Bostock put in.

“Oh, we let him decide that.”

It was both a simple and a complex process. The arriving Rabbit family would have to learn English. New identities. They’d need new names, for starters, probably make them Norwegian immigrants to explain away the accents. CIA had the power to admit a total of one hundred new citizens every year through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (and they’d never used them all up). The Rabbits would need a set of Social Security numbers, driver’s licenses—probably driving lessons beforehand, maybe for both, certainly for the wife—from the Commonwealth of Virginia. (The Agency had a cordial relationship with the state government. Richmond never asked too many questions.)

Then came the psychological help for people who’d walked away from everything they’d ever known and had to find their footing in a new and grossly different country. The Agency had a Columbia University professor of psychology on retainer to handle that. Then they’d get some older defectors to hand-walk them through the transition. None of this was ever easy on the new immigrants. For Russians, America was like a toy store for a child who’d never known such a thing as a toy store existed—it was overwhelming in every respect, with virtually no common points of comparison, almost like a different planet. They had to make it as comfortable for the defectors as possible. First, for the information, and second, to make sure they didn’t want to go back—it would be almost certain death, at least for the husband, but it had happened before, so strong was the call of home for every man.

“If he likes a cold climate, send him to Minneapolis–Saint Paul,” Greer suggested. “But, gentlemen, we are getting a little bit ahead of ourselves.”

“James, you are always the voice of sober counsel,” the DCI observed with a smile.

“Somebody has to be. The eggs haven’t hatched yet, people. *Then* we count the chicks.”

And what if he doesn’t know squat? Moore thought. *What if he’s just a guy who wants a ticket out?*

God damn this business! the DCI completed the thought.

"Well, Basil will keep us posted, and we have your boy Ryan looking out for our interests."

"That's great news, Judge. Basil must be laughing into his beer about that."

"He's a good boy, Mike. Don't underestimate him. Those who did are in Maryland State Penitentiary now, waiting for the appeals process to play out," Greer said, in defense of his protégé.

"Well, yeah, he was a Marine once," Bostock conceded. "What do I tell Bob when he calls in?"

"Nothing," the DCI said at once. "Until we find out from the Rabbit what part of our comms are compromised, we are careful what goes out on a wire. Clear?"

Bostock nodded his head like a first-grader. "Yes, sir."

"I've had S and T go over our phone lines. They say they're clean. Chip Bennett is still raising hell and running in circles at Fort Meade." Moore didn't have to say that this alleged claim from the Rabbit was the scariest revelation to Washington since Pearl Harbor. But maybe they'd be able to turn it around on Ivan. Hope sprang eternal at Langley, just like everywhere else. It was unlikely that the Russians knew anything his Directorate of Science and Technology didn't, but you had to pay to see the cards.

RYAN WAS QUIETLY packing his things. Cathy was better at it, but he didn't know what he'd need. How did one pack for being secret-agent man? Business suit. His old Marine utilities? (He still had them, butter bar on the collar and all.) Nice leather shoes? Sneaks? That, he thought, sounded appropriate. He ended up deciding on a middle-of-the-road suit and two pairs of walking shoes, one semiformal, one informal. And it all had to fit in one bag—for that, an L.L. Bean canvas two-suiter that was easy to carry and fairly anonymous. He left his passport in the desk drawer. Sir Basil would be giving him a nice new British one, another diplomatic or fuckyou passport. Probably a new name to go with it. *Damn,* Jack thought, *a new name to remember and respond to.* He was used to having only one.

One nice thing about Merrill Lynch: You always knew who the hell you were. *Sure,* Jack's mind went on, *let the whole damned world know you were a flunky of Joe Muller. Not in this lifetime.* Any opinionated asshole could make money, and his father-in-law was one of them.

"Finished?" Cathy asked from behind him.

"Just about, babe," Jack answered.

"It's not dangerous, what you're doing, is it?"

"I don't expect it to be, babe." But Jack couldn't lie, and his uncertainty conveyed just enough.

"Where are you going?"

"I told you, remember, Germany." *Uh-oh. She caught me again.*

"Some NATO thing?"

"That's what they tell me."

"What do you do in London, Jack? Century House, that's intelligence stuff, and—"

"Cathy, I've told you before. I'm an analyst. I go over information from various sources, and I try to figure out what it means, and I write reports for people to read. You know, it's not all that different from what I did at Merrill Lynch. My job is to look at information and figure out what it really means. They think I'm good at it."

"But nothing with guns?" Half a question and half an observation. Jack supposed it was from her work in the Emergency Room at Hopkins. As a group, doctors didn't much care for firearms, except the ones who liked hunting birds in the fall. She didn't like the Remington shotgun in his closet, unloaded, and she liked the Browning Hi-Power hidden on the shelf in his closet, loaded, even less.

"Honey, no, no guns, not at all. I'm not that kind of spook."

"Okay," she semi-conceded. She didn't believe him completely, but she knew he couldn't say what he was doing any more than she could discuss her patients with him. In that understanding came her frustration. "Just so you're not away too long."

"Babe, you know I hate being away from you. I can't even sleep worth a damn unless you're next to me."

"So take me with you?"

"So you can go shopping in Germany? For what? Dirndls for Sally?"

"Well, she likes the Heidi movies." It was a weak offering.

"Nice try, babe. Wish you could, but you can't."

"Oh, damn," Lady Ryan observed.

"We live in an imperfect world, babe."

She especially hated *that* aphorism of his, and her reply was an ungrammatical grunt. But, really, there was no reply she could make.

Minutes later, in bed, Jack wondered what the hell he would be doing. Reason told him that it would be routine in every respect, except for the location. But except for one little thing, Abe Lincoln had enjoyed that play at Ford's Theater. He'd be on foreign soil—no, *hostile* foreign soil. He was already living in a foreign place, and, friendly as the Brits were, only home was home. But the Brits liked him. The Hungarians wouldn't. They might not take a shot at him, but neither would they give him the key to the city. And what if they found out he was traveling on a false passport? What did the Vienna Convention say about *that*? But he couldn't wimp out on this one, could he? He *was* an ex-Marine. He was *supposed* to be fearless. Yeah, sure. About the only good thing that had happened at his house a few

months back was that he'd made a head call before the bad guys had crashed the party, and so hadn't been *able* to wet his pants with a gun to his head. He'd gotten it done, but he damned sure didn't feel heroic. He'd managed to survive, managed to kill that one guy with the Uzi, but the only thing he felt good about was *not* killing that bastard Sean Miller. No, he'd let the State of Maryland handle that one, by the numbers, unless the Supreme Court stepped in again, and that didn't strike him as very likely in this particular case, with a bunch of Secret Service agents dead. The courts didn't ignore dead cops very often.

But what would happen in Hungary? He'd just be a watcher, the semiofficial CIA officer overseeing the evacuation of some fool Russian who wanted to move out of his place in Moscow. *Damn, why the hell does this sort of thing always seem to happen to me?* Jack wondered. It was like hitting the devil's lottery, and his number kept coming up. Would that ever stop? He was paid to look into the future and make his predictions, but inside he knew that he couldn't do it worth a damn. He needed other people to tell him what *was* happening, so that then he could compare it with things that everyone knew *had* happened, and then combine the two into a wild-ass guess on what somebody *might* do. And, sure, he'd done okay at that in the trading business, but nobody ever got killed over a few shares of common stock. And now, maybe, *his* cute little ass would be on the line. Great. Just fucking great. He stared at the ceiling. Why were they always white? Wouldn't black be a better color for sleeping? You could always see white ceilings, even in a darkened room. Was there a reason for that?

Was there a reason why he couldn't sleep? Why was he asking damnedfool questions with no answers? However this played out, he'd almost certainly be okay. Basil wouldn't let anything happen to him. It would look very bad to Langley, and the Brits couldn't afford that—too embarrassing. Judge Moore wouldn't forget, and it would become part of CIA's institutional memory, and that would be bad for the next ten years or more. So, no, SIS wouldn't let anything bad happen to him.

On the other hand, they wouldn't be the only players on the field and, as in baseball, the problem was that both teams played to win, and you needed the right timing to send that 95-mph fastball out to the cheap seats.

But you can't wimp out, Jack, he told himself. Others, whose opinions he valued, would be ashamed of him—worse, he'd be ashamed of himself. So, like it or not, he had to suit up and go out on the field and hope he didn't drop the damned ball.

Or just go back to Merrill Lynch, but, no, he'd rather face bayonets

than do that. *I really would,* Ryan realized, in considerable surprise. Did that make him brave, or just hardheaded? *There's a question,* he thought. And the only answer had to come from someone else, someone who would only see one side of the equation. You could only see the physical part, never the thought that went into it. And that wasn't enough to judge from, much as newsmen and historians tried to shape reality in that way, as though they really understood such things at a distance of miles or years. Yeah, sure.

In any case, his bags were packed, and with luck the worst part of this trip would be the airplane ride. Much as he hated it, it was fairly predictable . . . unless a wing fell off.

"WHAT THE *FUCK* is this all about?" John Tyler asked nobody in particular. The telex in his hand only gave orders, not the reasons behind them.

The bodies had been transported to the city coroner, with a request for no action to be taken with them. Tyler thought for a moment and then called the Assistant U.S. Attorney he usually worked with.

"You want *what*?" Peter Mayfair asked in some incredulity. He'd graduated third in his Harvard Law School class three years before and was racing up the career ladder at the U.S. Attorney's office. People called him Max.

"You heard me."

"What is this all about?"

"I don't know. I just know it comes straight from Emil's office. It sounds like stuff from the other side of the river, but the telex doesn't say beans. How do we do it?"

"Where are the bodies?"

"Coroner's office, I guess. There's a note on them—mother and daughter—that says don't post them. So I suppose they're in the freezer."

"And you want them raw, like?"

"Frozen, I suppose, but yeah, raw." *What a hell of a way to put it,* the Assistant Special Agent in Charge thought.

"Any families involved?"

"The police haven't located any yet that I know of."

"Okay, we hope it stays that way. If there's no family to say no, we declare them indigent and get the coroner to release them to federal custody, you know, like a dead drunk on the street. They just put them in a cheap box and bury them in Potter's Field. Where you going to take them?"

"Max, I don't know. Guess I send a reply telex to Emil and he'll tell me."

“Fast?” Mayfair asked, wondering what priority went on this.

“Last week, Max.”

“Okay, if you want, I’ll drive down to the coroner’s right now.”

“Meet you there, Max. Thanks.”

“You owe me a beer and dinner at Legal Seafood,” the U.S. Attorney told him.

“Done.” He’d have to deliver on this one.

CHAPTER 25

EXCHANGING THE BOGIES

THE BODIES WERE LOADED in cheap aluminum boxes, the sort used for transporting bodies by air, and then loaded on a van used by the FBI and driven to Logan International Airport. Special Agent Tyler called Washington to ask what came next, and fortunately his car radio was encrypted.

FBI Director Emil Jacobs, it turned out, hadn't thought things all the way through quite yet either, and he had to call Judge Moore at CIA, where more rapid dancing was done, until it was decided to load them on the British Airways 747 scheduled to leave Boston for London Heathrow, so that Basil's people could collect them. This was done with alacrity because BA cooperated readily with American police agencies, and Flight 214 rolled away from the gate on time at 8:10 and soon thereafter climbed to altitude for the three-thousand-mile hop to Heathrow's Terminal Four.

IT WAS APPROACHING five in the morning when Zaitzev awoke in his upper bunk, not sure why he had done so. He rolled a little to look out the window when it hit him: The train was stopped at a station. He didn't know which one—he didn't have the schedule memorized—and he felt a sudden chill. What if some Second Chief Directorate men had just boarded? In the daylight, he might have shaken it off, but KGB had the reputation of arresting people in the middle of the night, when they'd be less likely to resist effectively, and suddenly the fear came back. Then he heard feet walking down the corridor . . . but they passed him by, and moments later the train started moving again, pulling away from the wooden station building, and presently the view outside was just darkness again. *Why did this frighten me?* Zaitzev asked himself. Why now? Wasn't he safe now? *Or almost so,* he corrected himself. The answer was, no, not until his feet stood on foreign soil. He had to remind himself of that fact, until he stood on foreign, nonsocialist soil. And he wasn't there yet. With that reminder refixed in his mind, he rolled back and tried to get back to sleep. The

motion of the train eventually overcame his anxiety, and he returned to dreams that were not the least bit reassuring.

THE BRITISH AIRWAYS 747 also flew through darkness, its passengers mainly asleep while the flight crew monitored its numerous instruments and sipped their coffee, taking time to enjoy the night stars, and watched the horizon for the first hint of dawn. That usually came over the west coast of Ireland.

RYAN AWOKE EARLIER than usual. He slipped out of bed without disturbing his wife, dressed casually, and went outside. The milkman was driving into the cul-de-sac at the end of Grizedale Close. He stopped his truck and got out with the half-gallon of whole milk his kids drank like a Pratt & Whitney engine guzzled jet fuel, and a loaf of bread. He was halfway to the house before he noticed his customer.

"Anything amiss, sir?" the milkman asked, thinking perhaps a child was ill, the usual reason for the parents of young children to be up and about at this time of day.

"No, just woke up a little early," Ryan replied with a yawn.

"Anything special you might need?"

"Just a cigarette," Ryan replied, without thinking. Under Cathy's iron rule, he hadn't had one since arriving in England.

"Well, here, sir." The man extended a pack with one shaken loose.

It surprised the hell out of Ryan. "Thanks, buddy." But he took it anyway, along with the light from a butane lighter. He coughed with the first drag, but got over it pretty fast. It was a remarkably friendly feeling in the still, predawn air, and the wonderful thing about bad habits was how quickly one picked them back up. It was a strong cigarette, like the Marlboros he'd smoked in his senior year of high school, part of the ascension to manhood back in the late 1960s. *The milkman ought to quit,* Jack thought, *but he probably wasn't married to a Hopkins surgeon.*

He didn't often get to talk to his customers, either. "You like living here, sir?"

"Yes, I do. The people here are very friendly."

"We try to be, sir. Have a good day, then."

"Thanks, buddy. You, too," Ryan said, as the man walked back to his truck. Milkmen had mostly gone extinct in America, victims of supermarkets and 7-Eleven stores. *A pity,* Jack thought. He remembered Peter Wheat bread and honey-dipped donuts when he'd been a little kid. Somehow it had all gone away without his noticing it

around the seventh grade or so. But the smoke and the quiet air wasn't at all a bad way to wake up. There was no sound at all. Even the birds were still asleep. He looked up to see the lights of aircraft high in the sky. People traveling to Europe, probably Scandinavia, by the apparent courses they were flying—out of Heathrow, probably. *What poor bastard has to get up this early to make a meeting?* he wondered. Well . . . he finished the cigarette and flicked it out on the lawn, wondering if Cathy might spot it. Well, he could always blame it on somebody else. A pity the paperboy hadn't come yet. So Jack went inside and turned on the kitchen TV to get CNN. He caught the sports. The Orioles had won again and would be going to the World Series against the Phillies. That was good news, or nearly so. Had he been home, he would have gotten tickets to catch a game or two at Memorial Stadium and seen the rest on TV. Not this year. His cable system didn't have a single channel to catch baseball games, though the Brits were starting to watch NFL football. They didn't really get it, but for some reason they enjoyed watching it. *Better than their regular TV*, Ryan thought with a snort. Cathy liked their comedy, but for some reason it just didn't click with him. But their news programming was pretty good. It was just taste, he assumed. *Non est disputandum*, as the Romans had said. Then he saw dawn coming, the first hint of light on the eastern horizon. It'd be more than an hour before morning actually began, but coming it was, and even the desire for more sleep would not hold it back.

Jack decided to get the coffee going—just a matter of flipping the switch on the drip machine he'd gotten Cathy for her birthday. Then he heard the *flop* of the paper on the front step, and he went to get it.

"Up early?" Cathy said, when he got back.

"Yeah. Didn't see any sense in rolling back over." Jack kissed his wife. She got a funny look on her face after the kiss but shook it off. Her tobacco-sniffing nose had delivered a faint message, but her intellect had erroneously dismissed it as too unlikely.

"Got the coffee going?"

"Flipped the button," Jack confirmed. "I'll let you do the rest."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"I get a choice?" Ryan asked, somewhat incredulously. She was on another health kick of late. No donuts.

"GOOD MORNING, *ZAICHIK*!" Oleg said to his daughter.

"Papa!" She reached both her arms out with that smile kids have when they awaken. It was something they lost long before adulthood, and something universally astonishing to parents while it lasted. Oleg lifted her from the bed and gave her a hug. Her little bare feet went

down on the carpeted floor, and then she took two steps to her private toilet. Irina came in to lay her clothes out, and both withdrew to the adult side of the accommodations. Within ten minutes, they were on their way to the dining car. Oleg looked over his shoulder to see the attendant hustling forward to make up their compartments first. Yes, there were advantages to being KGB, even if it was just for another day.

Somewhere during the night, the train had stopped at a state farm and taken on fresh milk, which Svetlana loved for her morning meal. The adults in the party had mediocre (at best) coffee and buttered bread. (The kitchen was out of eggs.) At least the bread and butter were fresh and tasty. There was a stack of newspapers at the back end of the car. Oleg picked up a *Pravda* and sat down to read it—the usual lies. One other thing about being KGB was that you knew better than to believe what was in the papers. Izvestia *at least had stories about real people, some of which were even true,* he thought. But a Soviet train would, of course, carry only the most politically correct newspapers, and "Truth" was it, Zaitzev snorted.

RYAN MAINTAINED TWO complete sets of shaving and grooming things for the occasional exigencies of travel. His Bean bag was hanging by its large brass hook in his closet, ready for whenever Sir Basil dispatched him to Budapest. He looked at it while knotting his tie, wondering when he'd be going. Then Cathy reentered the bedroom and got herself dressed. Her white lab coat doubtless hung on a hook on her office door—both of them, probably, Hammersmith and Moorefields, with the appropriate name tags.

"Cath?"

"Yeah?"

"Your office coat—did you keep your Hopkins name tag, or did you get new ones?" He'd never bothered to ask.

"Local ones. Too hard to explain it to every new patient who might notice." But some asked about her accent anyway, or would ask why the name tag proclaimed her to be Lady Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS. The "Lady" part appealed to her woman's vanity. Jack watched her brush her hair out, something that always gave him pleasure. She would have been an absolute knockout with somewhat longer hair, but she never let it grow, saying that the surgical caps ruined whatever set she might have gotten. That would change the next time they got invited to a formal dinner. They were due for one. The Queen liked both of them, and so did the Prince of Wales, and they were on the local version of the A-list. You had to accept such invitations, though Cathy had an excuse if she was doing surgery the next day.

Spooks, on the other hand, were expected to be delighted at the honor, even if it meant three short hours of sleep before the next day at work.

"What's on the agenda for today?"

"Giving a lecture on the xenon-arc laser. They're going to be buying one soon, and I'm the only person in London who knows how to use it right."

"My wife, the laser jockey."

"Well, at least I can talk about what I do," she responded, "secret-agent man."

"Yes, dear," Ryan sighed. *Maybe I should pack my Browning today just to piss her off*. But if anyone on the train noticed, he'd at best be regarded as unclean, and at worst would be asked by a police constable what he was doing with such a thing on his person. And even his diplomatic status would not entirely protect him from the resulting hassle.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Jack and Cathy were in their compartment, heading northwest to London, she again reading her medical journals, and he going through the *Telegraph*. John Keegan had a column on the inside and he was a historian for whom Ryan had considerable respect as an analyst of complex information. Why Basil hadn't recruited him for Century House was a mystery to Jack. Maybe Keegan was just doing too well as an historian, able to spread his ideas to the masses—well, at least the smart civilians out there. That made sense. Nobody ever got rich as a British civil servant, and the anonymity—well, it was nice once in a while to get a pat on the head for doing something especially well. Bureaucrats were denied that all over the world.

ABOUT THE TIME their express train passed by the Elephant and Castle station, Flight 214 rolled to an early stop at Heathrow's Terminal Four. It didn't come to a jetway. Instead it came to a halt where the shuttle buses waited to take people to Immigration and Customs. No sooner had the wheels been chocked than the cargo hatch came open. The last two items loaded at Logan had been the two coffins, and they became the first items of baggage to be manhandled off. The tags on one corner of each told the handlers where to send them, and two anonymous men from Century House were there to watch the process anyway. Placed on a four-wheel cart —called a trolley in England—they were pulled off to an area for

parked cars and small trucks, where the boxes were quickly loaded on a small four-wheeled truck with no marking on its sides at all. The two men from SIS hopped aboard and drove off, easterly for London, entirely without a clue what this job was all about. It was often that way.

The truck arrived at 100 Westminster Bridge Road forty minutes later. There the boxes were removed and placed on another trolley for a ride to the freight elevator and a trip down to the second-level basement.

Two more men were waiting there. The boxes were duly opened, and both men thanked fate that there was a goodly supply of dry ice inside and the bodies were not yet venting the particularly foul smell of dead and mortifying human tissue. Wearing rubber gloves, they lifted the bodies—neither was especially heavy—and transferred them to stainless-steel tables. Neither body was clothed and, in the case of the little girl, their job was particularly sad.

It would get more so. Comparing the bodies with the *Times*-generated photograph, it was determined, unsurprisingly, that the child's face didn't match the picture. The same was true of the grown woman, though her body mass and configuration were about right. Her face was virtually untouched by the fire, the toxic gasses of which had ended her life. And so both of them would have to be grossly disfigured to be usable for Operation BEATRIX. This was done with propane blowtorches. First, the senior of the two turned on the powerful exhaust fan in the ceiling. Both then donned fire-protective coveralls and lit their torches. These were heartlessly applied to both faces. Hair color was wrong in both cases, and so that was burned off first of all. Then the torches were applied at close range to both faces. It went quickly, but not quickly enough for the two SIS employees. The one doing the little girl breathed a series of prayers for her child's soul, knowing that she was wherever innocent children went. That which remained was just cold meat, of no value to its previous owner, but of some value to the United Kingdom—and doubtless the United States of America as well, else they would not be doing such ghoulish work as this. It was when the little girl's left eye exploded from internal pressure that her tormentor had to turn away and vomit. But it had to be done. Her eyes were the wrong color.

Hands and feet had to be well-charred, and both bodies were examined for tattoos, scars, or other distinguishing characteristics, but none were found, not even an appendectomy scar.

All in all, it took ninety minutes before they were satisfied with their work. Then the bodies had to be dressed. Clothing of Soviet origin was maneuvered onto the bodies, and then *that* had to be burned so that the fibers would be enmeshed with the surface burns.

With all this grisly work done, the bodies were reloaded into their transport boxes, and more dry ice was added to keep them cool enough to retard decay. The boxes were set near a third identical such box in the corner of the room. By then it was lunchtime, but neither of them cared much for food at the moment. A few shots of whiskey were more what they needed, and there were plenty of pubs within walking distance.

"JACK?" Sir Basil stuck his head through the door to find Ryan going over his documents, like a good analyst.

"Yes, sir," Ryan responded, looking up.

"Are you packed?"

"My stuff is at home, but yes, sir."

"Good. You're on the BA flight from Heathrow Terminal Three at eight this evening. We'll have a car to run you home to pick up your things—say, about three-thirty?"

"I haven't gotten my passport and visa yet," Ryan told C.

"You'll have it after lunch. Your overt cover is as an auditor from the Foreign Office. As I recall, you had an accountant's charter once upon a time. Perhaps you can look over the books while you're there." This was funny, Charleston thought.

Ryan tried to return the favor. "Probably more interesting than the local stock market. Anyone going with me?"

"No, but you'll be met at the airport by Andy Hudson. He's our Station Chief in Budapest. Good man," Sir Basil promised. "Stop in to see me before you head off."

"Will do, sir." And Basil's head vanished back into the corridor.

"Simon, how about a pint and a sandwich?" Ryan said to his workmate.

"Fine idea." Harding stood and got his coat. They walked off to the Duke of Clarence.

LUNCH ON THE TRAIN was pleasant: borscht, noodles, black bread, and a proper dessert—strawberries from some farm or other. The only problem was that Svetlana didn't care for borscht, which was odd for a Russian native, even a child. She picked at the sour cream topping, then later attacked the noodles with gusto and positively devoured the late-season strawberries. They'd just climbed through the low Transylvanian mountains on the Bulgarian border. The train would pass through Sofia, then turn northwest for Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and finally Hungary.

The Zaitzevs lingered over lunch, Svetlana peering out the windows as the train approached Sofia.

Oleg Ivanovich did the same, puffing on his cigarette. Passing through Sofia, he found himself wondering which building housed the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. Was Colonel Bubovoy there, working on his plot, probably with that Colonel Strokov? How far along might they be? Was the Pope's life in immediate danger? How would he feel if the Polish priest was murdered before he could get his warning out? Could he or should he have moved faster? *These damned questions*, and no one in whom he could confide them! *You are doing your best, Oleg Ivan'ch*, he told himself, *and no man can do more than that!*

The Sofia station looked like a cathedral, an impressive stone building with an almost religious purpose. Somehow he wasn't worried now about a KGB arrest team boarding the train. His only thoughts were to press on, get to Budapest, and see what the CIA did there . . . and hope they were competent. KGB could do a job like this with consummate professionalism, almost like stage magicians. Was CIA also that good? On Russian TV, they were frequently portrayed as evil but bumbling adversaries—but that wasn't what they said at The Centre. No, at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square, they were thought to be evil spirits, always on the prowl, clever as the devil himself, the most deadly of enemies. So, which was true? Certainly he'd find out quickly enough—one way or another. Zaitzev stubbed out his cigarette and led his family back to their compartments.

"LOOKING FORWARD TO the mission, Jack?" Harding asked.

"Yeah, like the dentist. And don't tell me how easy it'll be. You've never gone out in the field either."

"Your own people suggested this, you know."

"So, when I get home—if I get home—I'll slug Admiral Greer," Ryan responded, half—but only half—joking. "I'm not trained for this, Simon, remember?"

"How many people are trained to deal with a direct physical attack? You've done that," Simon reminded him.

"Okay, I was a marine lieutenant once, for—what was it?—eleven months or so, before the helicopter crunched on Crete and I got my back broke. Shit, I don't even like roller-coasters. My mom and dad loved the goddamned things; they were always taking me up in them at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park when I was a little kid. Expected me to like the damned things, too. Dad," Ryan explained, "was a paratrooper in the One hundred first Airborne, back forty years ago. Falling out of the sky didn't worry him too much." That was followed by a snort. One nice thing about the Marine Corps, they didn't make

you jump out of an airplane. *Well, damn,* Jack thought suddenly. Was he more worried about this than the airline flight? That caused a downward look and an ironic chuckle. “Do your field officers carry weapons?”

That generated a laugh. “Only in the movies, Jack. They’re bloody heavy to lug about, and they can be difficult to explain. There are no double-o people in SIS—at least not to my knowledge. The French occasionally kill people, and they are actually rather good at it. So are the Israelis, but people do make mistakes, even trained professionals, and that sort of thing can be difficult to explain to the press.”

“You can’t invoke a D-notice?”

“Theoretically, yes, but they can be difficult to enforce. Fleet Street has its own rules, you see.”

“So does *The Washington Post*, as Nixon found out. So I ought not to kill anyone.”

“I would try to avoid it,” Simon agreed, munching on his turkey sandwich.

BELGRADE—BEOGRAD TO its natives—also had a fine station. In the previous century, evidently, architects had worked hard to outdo each other, like the pious ones who’d built cathedrals in the Middle Ages. The train was several hours late, he saw with surprise. He couldn’t see why. The train hadn’t stopped for any length of time anywhere. Perhaps it wasn’t traveling as fast as it was supposed to. Leaving Belgrade, it snaked up some modest hills, and none too quickly at that. He imagined this country would be pretty in winter. Wasn’t there an upcoming Olympiad hereabouts? The winter probably came here about the same time it did in Moscow. It was a little late this year, but that usually meant it would be unusually harsh when it arrived. He wondered what winter would be like in America....

“READY, JACK?” Charleston asked in his office.

“I suppose.” Jack looked at his new passport. Since it was a diplomatic one, it was a little more ornate than the usual, and bound in red leather, with the Royal Coat of Arms on the front cover. He paged through it to see the stamps of all the places he had *not* visited. Thailand, the People’s Republic of China. *Damn*, Jack thought, *I really do get around*. “Why this visa?” he asked. The U.K. didn’t require them for anybody.

“Hungary controls movement in and out rather sternly. They require an entry and exit visa. You’ll not be needing the latter, I

expect," C observed. "Hudson will probably be taking you out in a southerly direction. He has good relations with the local smugglers."

"Walking over any mountains?" Ryan asked.

Basil shook his head. "No, we don't often do that. Car or truck, I should think. Ought not to be any problem at all, my boy." He looked up. "It really is quite routine, Jack."

"You say so, sir." *It damned sure isn't for me.*

Charleston stood. "Good luck, Jack. See you back in a few days."

Ryan took his hand. "Roger that, Sir Basil." Semper fi, *pal*.

There was a car waiting on the street. Jack hopped in the left-front seat, and the driver headed east. The ride took about fifty minutes with the light afternoon traffic, almost as fast as the train would have been.

On getting to Chatham, Ryan found his daughter napping, Little Jack playing with his feet—fascinating things they were—in the playpen, and Miss Margaret sitting with a magazine in the living room.

"Dr. Ryan, I didn't expect—"

"That's okay, I have to take a business trip." He walked to the wall phone in the kitchen and tried calling Cathy, only to learn that she was giving her damned lecture on her laser toy. *It was the one she used for welding blood vessels back shut,* he thought. Something like that. Frowning, he went upstairs for his bag. He'd try to call her from the airport. But, just in case, he scribbled a note.

OFF TO BONN. TRIED TO CALL. WILL TRY AGAIN. LOVE, JACK.

This one found its way to the refrigerator door. Ryan bent down to give Sally a kiss and then reached down to lift his son for a hug, a sloppy one, as it turned out. The little guy dribbled the way a car engine dripped oil. That necessitated a paper towel on the way out.

"Have a good trip, Dr. Ryan," the nanny called.

"Thanks, Margaret. See ya." As soon as the car pulled off, she called Century House to let people know Sir John was on the way to Heathrow. Then she went back to her magazine, this month's *Tattler*.

THE TRAIN CAME to an unexpected halt in a yard right at the Hungarian frontier, near the town of Zombor. Zaitzev hadn't known about this, and the surprise was soon compounded. There were cranes on their side of the train, and no sooner had the train stopped than a crowd of coveralled workmen appeared.

The Hungarian State Railway operated on standard gauge, the tracks 1,435 milimeters—4 feet, 8½ inches—apart, which was the world's standard, and which incongruously dated back to the two-horse chariots used by the Romans. But the Russian train gauge was

five feet, or 1,524 millimeters—for some reason no one remembered. The solution to that here was to lift the train bodies off the Russian tracks—the wheel sets—and lower them onto a different set. That took about an hour, but it was efficiently done, for all that. It utterly fascinated Svetlana, and it even impressed her father that the task was performed so routinely. An hour and twenty minutes later, they were moving almost due north on narrower tracks behind a new electric locomotive, crossing the rich agricultural soil of Hungary. Almost at once, Svetlana chirped at the sight of men in local dress riding horses, which struck both parents and child as quite exotic.

THE AIRCRAFT WAS a fairly new Boeing 737 and, for this trip, Ryan decided to take a friend. He bought a pack of cigarettes at the airport and lit one up at once on the concourse.

The good news was that he'd been given a first-class window seat, 1-A. The scenery up in the sky was the only good part of flying, with the additional bonus that nobody could see the fear in your face, except maybe the stewardess, because like doctors they could probably also smell fear. But up front the booze was free, and so Ryan tried to order whiskey, only to find that the selection was Scotch (which he didn't like), vodka (which he didn't like), or gin (which he could not stand in his presence). It was the wrong airline for Jack Daniel's, but the wine list was okay, and, climbing to cruise altitude, the no-smoking light *ding*ed off, and Ryan lit up another smoke. Not as good as a nice bourbon, but better than nothing at all. At least it enabled him to lean back and pretend to relax behind closed eyes, occasionally looking out to see if the stuff under the aircraft was green or blue. The flight was agreeably smooth, with only a few bumps to make him grab for the armrests, and three glasses of a decent French white helped smooth his anxiety out. About halfway there, over Belgium, he got back to thinking. How many people hated flying? Maybe a third, maybe half? How many of them detested it as much as he did? Half of those? So, probably, he wasn't alone. Fearful people tried to hide it, and a look around showed faces much the same as his probably was. So at least he probably wasn't the only wimp on the airplane. And the wine was nice and fruity. And if the ULA hadn't been able to punch his ticket with Uzis right in his home on the Chesapeake Bay, then random chance was probably on his side as well. So he might as well relax and enjoy the ride—he was stuck here one way or another, after all, and the Boeing cruised along at 500 knots or so.

There were a few bumps in the descent, but for Ryan this was the one part of the flight during which he felt safe—when the aircraft was

returning to earth. Intellectually, he knew that this was actually the most dangerous part, but somehow his gut didn't see it that way. He heard the whine of various servos, and then the whooshing sound that announced the open landing-gear doors, and then felt safe enough to see the ground rushing toward him. The landing was bumpy, but Jack welcomed it. He was back on the ground, where you could stand up and ambulate all by yourself at a reasonably safe speed. Good.

THEY WERE IN another train yard, packed with boxcars and cattle cars, and their train car jostled back and forth through switches and turns. Once more, *zaichik* had her nose against the glass, and finally they passed under a glass roof and the train jerked to a stop in Eastern Station. Semiuniformed and rather scruffy-looking porters drew up by the baggage car. *Zaichik* practically leaped off the car to look around, almost outracing her mother, who fumbled after her with their carry-on bags. Oleg walked to the baggage car and oversaw the transfer of his bags to the two-wheel hand truck. They walked away from the train, through the old and rather seedy ticket room, and from there outside to the cabstand. There were a lot of cabs, all of them Russian-made Ladas—the Soviet version of an old Fiat—and all the same color, which might have been beige under the dirt. Zaitzev tipped the porter one Comecon ruble and supervised the loading of their bags into the car. The trunk of the diminutive taxicab was far too small. Three bags went to the front seat, and Svetlana would have to sit in her mother's lap for the ride to the hotel. The cab pulled away, made a swift and legally dubious U-turn, and then raced at breakneck speed down what appeared to be a major shopping street.

The Astoria Hotel was only four minutes from the station. It seemed to be an impressive structure, looking almost like a grand hotel of another age. The lobby was modest in size, though not in appointments, and much carved oak was in evidence. The desk clerk expected them, and greeted them with a smile. Soon after giving Zaitzev the room key, he pointed across the street to the Soviet-Hungarian Culture and Friendship Center, which was so obviously a KGB operation that it might as well have had a statue of Iron Feliks in front. The bellman led them to the tiny elevator and then to the third floor, turning right for Room 307, a corner room that would be their home for the next ten days, or so everyone but Oleg thought. He also got a ruble for his trouble and withdrew, leaving the family in a room little larger than the combined space of their train accommodations, and with only a single bathroom, albeit one with a bath/shower, which all three of them needed. Oleg let his wife and daughter go first.

As shabby as the room was by Western standards, however, by Soviet ones it was almost palatial. There was a chair by the window, and Zaitzev sat down and surveyed the streets for a CIA officer. That, he knew, was a fool's errand, but he could hardly resist the temptation.

THE MEN HE was looking for were not Americans at all, but rather Tom Trent and Chris Morton, both of whom worked for Andy Hudson. Both had dark hair and hadn't washed that day so that they could appear to be working-class Hungarians. Trent had staked out the train station and spotted them coming in, while Morton had camped out in the hotel. With good photographic prints provided by the *Times* photographer in Moscow, identifying the Zaitzev family had been simplicity itself. As a final check, Morton, who spoke flawless Russian, walked to the reception desk and verified his "old friend's" room number at the desk, in return for a twentyflorint banknote and a wink. Then he wandered down to the bar, while surveying the hotel's ground floor for future reference. So far, they decided on the subway ride back to the embassy, things were going remarkably well. The train had arrived late, but their information on the hotel had been bang-on for once.

ANDY HUDSON WAS a man of average height and appearance, except his sandy hair marked him as a foreigner in a land where everyone looked pretty much alike. *Certainly at the airport they all did,* Ryan thought.

"Can we talk?" Ryan asked on the way away from the airport.

"Yes, the car is clean." Like all such vehicles, it was regularly swept and parked in a secure location.

"How sure are you of that?"

"The opposition doesn't break the rules of diplomatic conduct. Strange, but true. And besides, the car has a very sophisticated alarm. Not sure I could fiddle it myself, as a matter of fact. In any case, welcome to Budapest, Sir John." He pronounced the city's name as *Byudapesht*, as opposed to the way Ryan thought it was spoken.

"So, you know who I am?"

"Yes, I was home in London last March. I was in town when you performed your heroics—bloody fool, you ought to have gotten yourself killed, except for the stupid bloody Irish."

"I've said that to myself many times, Mr. Hud—"

"Andy," Hudson suggested at once.

"Fine. My name is Jack."

"Good flight?"

"Any flight you walk off of is a good one, Andy. So, tell me about the mission and how you're going to go about it."

"Entirely routine. We observe the Rabbit and his family—we'll keep them under intermittent surveillance—and when the time is right, we'll whisk them out of the city and into Yugoslavia."

"How?"

"Car or truck, haven't decided yet," Hudson answered. "Hungary is the only possible problem. The Yugoslavs care sod-all about people crossing their border—they have a million citizens working overseas in various capacities. And our relations with the border guards is very cordial indeed," Andy assured him.

"Payoffs?"

Hudson nodded as he took a turn around a modest-sized park. "It's a good way for them to outfit their families with fashionable items. I know people who smuggle hard drugs in—I make no use of them, of course. Drugs are one thing the locals at least pretend to care about, but some border guards are more open to negotiation than others—hell, they probably all are, or damned nearly all. It's remarkable what you can get for some hard currency or a pair of Reebok running shoes. The black market here is a lively one, and since it often brings hard currency into the country, the political leadership will look the other way so long as it doesn't get too out of hand, you see."

"Then how did the CIA station get clobbered?"

"Bad bloody luck." Hudson went on to explain for a minute or two. "Like being run over by a lorry on an empty road."

"Damn, does that sort of thing really happen?"

"Not often, rather like winning a state lottery."

"You gotta play to win," Ryan murmured. It was the motto for the Maryland State Lottery, which was just one more form of tax for those dumb enough to partake, just one that was a little more cynical than the other kinds.

"Yes, that's right. It's a chance we all take."

"And how does that apply to getting the Rabbit and his family out?"

"One in ten thousand."

To Ryan, those sounded like betting odds, but there was one other hang-up to worry about. "Have they told you his wife and kid don't know how extended his vacation is?"

That made Hudson's head turn. "You're bloody joking."

"Nope. That's what he told our people in Moscow. Complication?"

His hands flexed on the wheel. "Only if she's noisy. I suppose we

can handle that if we must." But it was plain on his face that it was something to worry about.

"European women, they tell me, are less assertive than American ones."

"They are, as a matter of fact," Hudson agreed. "Particularly true of the Russians, I believe. Well, we shall see."

One last turn onto Harm Utca, and they were at the British Embassy. Hudson parked the car and got out.

"That building there is the *Budapesti Rendõrfõkápitanság,* the police headquarters. Good to be in a secure location—they are little threat to us. The local police are not very highly regarded. The local language is bloody impossible. Indo-Altaic, philologists call it. Origin is somewhere in Mongolia, if you can believe it. Unrelated to any language you've ever heard about. Not too many people here speak English, but some German, because Austria is the next country over. Not to worry, you'll have one of us with you at all times. I'll take you on a walkabout tomorrow morning. Don't know about you, but traveling always tires me out."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed at once. "I call it travel shock."

"So, we'll get you settled in your quarters upstairs. The embassy canteen is quite adequate, and your quarters will be comfortable if not elaborate. Let me get your bag."

You couldn't knock the hospitality, Jack thought ten minutes later. A bed, private bath, a TV, and a VCR with a dozen or so tapes. He decided on *The Cruel Sea* with Jack Hawkins, and he made it to the end before fading off to sleep.

CHAPTER 26

TOURISTS

ALL OF THEM WOKE UP about the same time. Little *zaichik* was first, quickly followed by her mother and finally her father. The Hotel Astoria even had room service, an unheard-of luxury for Soviet citizens. Their room had a telephone, and Irina, after taking down the orders, called it in to the right extension, then was told that their food would arrive in about thirty minutes.

"I could fix it faster," Irina observed, with a hint of sourness. But even she had to admit that not having to fix it wasn't a bad deal for her at all. And so they all took turns in the bathroom in anticipation of their morning meal.

RYAN GOT HIMSELF showered and found his way to the embassy canteen about a quarter to eight. Evidently, the Brits liked their luxuries as much as American foreign service officers. He got himself a pile of scrambled eggs and bacon—Ryan loved English bacon, though their most popular sausages seemed to him to use sawdust as a filler—and four slices of white toast, figuring that he'd need a big breakfast to make it through this day. The coffee wasn't all that bad. On asking, he found out that it was Austrian in origin, which explained the quality.

"The Ambassador insisted on that," Hudson said, sitting down across the table from his American guest. "Dickie loves his coffee."

"Who?" Jack asked.

"Richard Dover. He's the Ambassador—back in London at the moment, just left day before yesterday. Too bad. He'd enjoy meeting you. Good boss, he is. So, sleep well?"

"No complaints. What the hell, only one hour's worth of time difference. Is there a way for me to call London? I didn't get a chance to talk to my wife before I left yesterday. Don't want her to worry," Jack explained.

"Not a problem, Sir John," Hudson told him. "You can do that from my office."

"She thinks I'm in Bonn on NATO business."

"Really?"

"Cathy knows I'm Agency, but she doesn't know much about what I do—and besides, *I* don't know what the hell I'm doing here anyway. Analyst," Ryan explained, "not an operations guy."

"So the signal about you said. Bollocks," the field officer observed tersely. "Think of this as a new experience for your collection."

"Thanks a bunch, Andy." Ryan looked up with a very crooked smile. "I got plenty already, pal."

"Well, then, the next time you do a memo, you'll have a better appreciation for how things are at the sharp end."

"Fine with me, just so I don't get blunted by a brick wall."

"It's my job to prevent that."

Ryan took a long sip of the coffee. It wasn't up to Cathy's but, for industrial coffee, not too shabby. "What's the plan for today?"

"Finish breakfast, and I'm your tour guide. We'll get you a feel for the land and start thinking about how we complete Operation BEATRIX."

THE ZAITZEV FAMILY was agreeably surprised by the quality of the food. Oleg had heard good things about Hungarian cuisine, but the proof of the pudding is always in the eating, and the surprise was a pleasant one. Eager to see the new city, they finished, got dressed, and asked for directions. Since Irina was the one most interested in the local opportunities, she asked for the best shopping street. This, the desk clerk said, was Váci Utca, to which they could take the local metro, which, he told them, was the oldest in Europe. And so they walked to Andrassy Utca and walked down the steps. The Budapest Metro, they saw, was really an ordinary streetcar tram, just underground. Even the tram car was of wooden construction, with the same overhead catenary you usually found over the street. But it was underground, if barely so, and it moved efficiently enough. Barely ten minutes after boarding, they were at Vorosmarty Tér, or Red Marty Square, a short walk from Váci Street. They didn't notice the man who accompanied them at a discreet distance—Tom Trent—who was quite amazed to see them walking directly toward the British Embassy on Harm Utca.

RYAN WENT BACK to his room to get his raincoat—Hudson had advised a topcoat for the morning's jaunt—and then hustled down to the foyer, then outside onto the street. The weather was broken

clouds, which suggested rain later in the day. Hudson nodded at the security officer at the door and led Ryan out, rather to his surprise when he got there. Hudson's first look was to the left at police headquarters, but there was Tom Trent, not seventy-five yards away....

Following the Rabbit family?

"Uh, Jack?"

"Yeah, Andy?"

"That's our bloody Rabbit, Mrs. Rabbit, and the little Bunny."

Ryan turned to look, and was startled to see the three people from the photos walking right toward him. "What the hell . . . ?"

"Must be going shopping on the next block. It's a tourist area—shops and everything. Bloody strange coincidence," Hudson observed, wondering what the hell this might mean.

"Follow them?" Jack asked.

"Why not?" Hudson asked rhetorically. He lit a smoke of his own—he liked small cigars—and waited for his companion to ignite a cigarette as the Rabbits passed. They waited for Trent to pass by before heading that way as well.

"Does this mean anything?" Ryan asked.

"I do not know," Hudson answered. But while he wasn't visibly uneasy, the tone of his voice carried a message of its own. They followed anyway.

Things were clear almost immediately. Within minutes, it was apparent that the Rabbits were shopping, with Mrs. Rabbit taking the lead, as all mama rabbits usually do.

Váci Street was seemingly an old one, though the buildings must have been restored after World War II, Ryan thought. This city had been fought for, and viciously so, in early 1945. Ryan looked in the shop windows and saw the usual variety of goods, though of poorer quality, and lesser quantities than one saw in America or London. Certainly they were impressive to the Rabbit family, whose matriarch gestured with enthusiasm at every window she passed.

"Woman thinks she's on Bond Street," Hudson observed.

"Not quite." Jack chuckled back. He'd already dropped a fair bit of his personal exchequer there. Bond Street was perhaps the finest shopping street in all the world, if you could afford to walk the sidewalk there. But what was Moscow like, and how did this shopping area look to a Russian?

All women, it seemed to Jack, were alike in one respect. They liked window shopping, until the strain of not buying things drove them over the edge. In Mrs. Rabbit's case, it lasted about 0.4 blocks before she walked into a clothing store, dragging little Bunny with her, while Mr. Rabbit went in last, with visible reluctance.

"This is going to be a while," Ryan predicted. "Been there, done

that, got the T-shirt."

"What's that, Jack?"

"You married, Andy?"

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"Two boys."

"You're lucky. Girls require more expensive upkeep, buddy." They walked forward to eyeball the store in question. Women's and girls' stuff. *Yeah,* Jack thought, *they'll be a while.*

"Well, good, we know what they look like. Time for us to be off, Sir John." Hudson waved up and down Váci Utca as though describing it to a new visitor to Budapest, and then led his guest back to the embassy, his eyes sweeping like radar antennae. He kept gesturing out of sync with his words. "So, we know what they look like. I don't see any obvious coverage. That is good. If this were one of your sting operations, they would not have let the bait come so near to us like this—at least, I would not do it that way, and KGB is fairly predictable."

"Think so?"

"Oh, yes. Ivan is very good, but predictable, rather like they play football, or chess, I suppose: a very straightforward game with excellent execution, but little in the way of originality or flair. Their activities are always circumscribed. It's their culture. They do not encourage people to stand out from the crowd, do they?"

"True, but their leaders often have."

"That one died thirty years ago, Jack, and they do not want another one."

"Concur." No sense arguing the point. The Soviet system did not encourage individualism of any sort. "Now where?"

"The concert hall, the hotel, points of interest. We've had enough surprises for one morning, I think."

LITTLE BOYS GENERALLY detest shopping, but that is not ordinarily true of little girls. It was certainly not true of *zaichik*, who had never seen such a variety of brightly colored clothing, even in the special shops to which her parents had recently achieved access. With her mother selecting and watching, Svetlana tried on a total of six coats, ranging from forest green to an incandescent red with a black velvet collar, and while she tried two after that one, the red one was the one they purchased, and which *zaichik* insisted on wearing right away. The next stop was for Oleg Ivan'ch, who bought three videocassette recorders, all unlicensed Hungarian copies of Sony Betamax machines from Japan. This shop, he learned, would deliver them to his hotel

room—visiting Westerners shopped there—and this purchase took care of half of his office shopping list. He decided to toss in some tapes also, the sort that he didn't want his daughter to see, but which would have gone over well with his friends at The Centre. And so, Zaitzev parted with nearly two thousand Comecon rubles, for which he would have little use in the West anyway.

The shopping expedition continued nearly to lunch, by which time they were carrying more goods than it was comfortable to lug about, and so they walked back to the ancient metro and headed back to their hotel to dump them off before doing something for their daughter.

HEROES SQUARE WAS a place built by the Hapsburgs to honor their royal (but not entirely willing) possession of Hungary at the end of the previous century, with statues of previous Hungarian kings, back to St. Stephen—"Istvan" in the Magyar language—whose crown Jimmy Carter had returned to the country just a few years before, the one with the bent cross on the top.

"That happened, so they say," Hudson explained, "when Stephen slammed his crown atop the other one. Returning it was probably a clever move on Carter's part. It's a symbol of their nationhood, you see. The communist regime could not very well reject it, and in accepting it, they had to acknowledge that the history of the country long predates Marxism-Leninism. I am not really a fan of Mr. Carter, but that was, I think, a subtle move on his part. The Hungarians mainly detest communism, Jack. The nation is fairly religious."

"There *are* a lot of churches," Ryan observed. He'd counted six or seven on the way to this park.

"That's the other thing that gives them a sense of political identity. The government doesn't like it, but it's too big and too dangerous a thing to destroy, and so there's rather an uneasy peace between the two."

"If I had to bet, I'd put my money down on the church."

Hudson turned. "As would I, Sir John."

Ryan looked around. "Hell of a big square." It looked like more than a square mile of pavement.

"That goes back to 1956," Hudson explained. "The Sovs wanted this to be large enough to bring in troop carriers. You can land an AN-ten Cub right here, which makes it quicker to bring in airborne troops if the locals ever revolt again. You could bring, oh, say ten or twelve Cubs, a hundred and fifty soldiers each, and they would defend the center of the city against the counterrevolutionaries and wait for the tanks coming in from the east. It's not a brilliant plan, but that is how

they think."

"But what if you park two city buses here and shoot the tires out?"

"I didn't say it was perfect, Jack," Hudson replied. "Even better, a few land mines. Might as well kill a few of the bastards and start a nice little fire. No way a pilot would be able to see them on his approach. And transport pilots are the blindest and dumbest lot going."

And Ivan figures he'd insert his troops before things really got out of hand. Yeah, it made sense, Ryan thought.

"You know who the Soviet ambassador was in 'fifty-six?"

"No—wait a minute, I do . . . wasn't it Andropov?"

Hudson nodded. "Yuriy Vladimirovich himself. It explains why he is so beloved of the locals. A bloody great lot of people lost their lives in that adventure."

Ryan remembered being in grammar school then—too young to appreciate the complications: It was the fall of a presidential election year, and at the same time Britain and France had decided to invade Egypt to protect their rights with the Suez Canal. Eisenhower had been hamstrung by two simultaneous crises, and had perforce been unable to do much of anything. But America had gotten a good bunch of immigrants out of it. Not a total loss.

"And the local Secret Police?"

"Just down Andrassy Utca from here, Number sixty. It's an ordinarylooking building that positively drips with blood. Not as bad now as it used to be. The original lot there were devotees of Iron Feliks, more ruthless than Hitler's Gestapo. But after the failed rebellion, they moderated somewhat and changed their name from *Allamvedelmi Osztaly* to *Allavedelmi Hivatal.* State Security *Bureau* instead of State Security *Section.* The former boss was replaced, and they got gentler. Formerly, they had a deserved reputation for torture. Supposedly, that is a thing of the past. The reputation alone is enough to make a suspect crumble. Good thing to have a diplomatic passport," Andy concluded.

"How good are they?" Jack asked next.

"Oafish. Perhaps they recruited competent people once, but that is well in the past. Probably a lingering effect of how evil they were in the forties and fifties. Good people don't want to work there and there's no real benefit from doing so, of the kind that KGB can offer its recruits. In fact, this country has some superb universities. They turn out remarkably good engineers and people in the sciences. And the Semmelweis medical school is first-rate."

"Hell, half the guys in the Manhattan Project were Hungarians, weren't they?"

Hudson nodded. "Indeed they were, and many of them Hungarian

Jews. Not too many of those left, though in the big war the Hungarians saved about half of theirs. The Chief of State, Admiral Horthy, was probably killed over that—he died under what are euphemistically called 'mysterious circumstances.' Hard to say what sort of chap he actually was, but there is a school of thought that says he was a rabid anti-Communist, but decidedly not a pro-Nazi. Perhaps just a man who picked a bad place and time to be born. We may never know for sure." Hudson enjoyed being a tour guide for a change. Not a bad change of pace from being a king—well, maybe prince—spook.

But it was time to get back to business. "Okay, how are we going to do this?" Jack asked. He was looking around for a tail, but if there was one about, it was invisible to him, unless there was a team of the ubiquitous—dirty—Lada automobiles following them about. He'd have to trust Hudson to scan for that possibility.

"Back to the car. We'll go see the hotel." It was just a few minutes of driving time down Andrassy Utca, a route of remarkably French-style architecture. Ryan had never been to Paris, but, closing his eyes, he thought he might well have been.

"There, that's it," Hudson said, pulling over. One nice thing about communist countries: It wasn't hard to find a parking space.

"Nobody watching us?" Ryan wondered, trying not to look too obvious in his turning around.

"If so, he's being very clever about it. Now, right there across the street is the local KGB station. The Soviet Cultural and Friendship House, sadly lacking in culture or friendship, but we reckon thirty or forty KGB types there—none interested in us," Hudson added. "The average Hungarian would probably rather catch gonorrhea than go inside. Hard to tell you how detested the Soviets are in this country. The locals will take their money and perhaps even shake hands after the money is exchanged, but not much more than that. They remember 1956 here, Jack."

The hotel struck Ryan as something from what H. L. Mencken had called the gilded age—champagne ambition on a beer budget.

"I've stayed in better," Jack observed. It wasn't the Plaza in New York or London's Savoy.

"Our Russian friends probably have not."

Damn. If we get them to America, they're going to be in hog heaven, Jack thought at once.

"Let's go inside. There's a rather nice bar," Hudson told him.

And so there was, off to the right and down some steps, almost like a New York City disco bar, though not quite as noisy. The band wasn't there yet, just some records playing, and not too loudly. The music, Jack noted, was American. How odd. Hudson ordered a couple glasses of Tokaji.

Ryan sipped his. It wasn't bad.

"It's bottled in California, too, I think. Your chaps call it Tokay, the national drink of Hungary. It's an acquired taste, but better than grappa."

Ryan chuckled. "I know. That's Italian for 'lighter fluid.' My uncle Mario used to love it. *De gustibus*, as they say." He looked around. There was nobody within twenty feet. "Can we talk?"

"Better just to look about. I'll come here tonight. This bar closes after midnight, and I need to see what the staff is like. Our Rabbit is in Room 307. Third floor, corner. Easy access via the fire stairs. Three entrances, front and either side. If, as I expect, there's only a single clerk at the desk, it's just a matter of distracting him to get our packages up and the Rabbit family out."

"Packages up?"

Hudson turned. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Bloody hell, Hudson thought, *they* never *get the necessary information out to everyone who needs it. Never changes*.

"We'll talk about it later," he told Ryan.

Uh-oh, Ryan thought at once. Something was up that he wouldn't like. Sure as hell. Maybe he should have brought his Browning with him. *Oh, shit*. He finished his drink and went looking for the men's room. The symbology helped. The room had not been recently scrubbed, and it was a good thing he didn't need to sit down. He emerged to find Andy waiting for him, and followed him back outside. Soon they were back in his car.

"Okay, can we discuss that little problem now?" Jack asked.

"Later," Hudson told him. It just made Ryan worry a little more.

THE PACKAGES WERE just arriving at the airport—three rather large boxes with diplomatic stickers on them—and an official from the embassy was at the ramp to make sure they weren't tampered with. Someone had made sure to put them in identifying boxes from an electronics company—the German company Siemens, in this case—thus making it seem that they were coding machines or something else bulky and sensitive. They were duly loaded in the embassy's own light truck and driven downtown with nothing more than curiosity in their wake. The presence of an embassy officer had prevented their being x-rayed, and that was important. That might have damaged the microchips inside, of course, the customs people at the airport thought, and so made up their official report to the *Belügyminisztérium*. Soon it would be reported to everyone interested, including the KGB, that the U.K. Budapest Embassy had taken on some new encryption

gear. The information would be duly filed and forgotten.

"ENJOY YOUR TOUR?" Hudson asked, back in his office.

"Beats doing a real audit. Okay, Andy," Ryan shot back. "You want to walk me through this?"

"The idea comes from your people. We're to get the Rabbit family out in such a way that KGB think them dead, and hence not defectors who will cooperate with the West. To that end, we have three bodies to put into the hotel room after we get Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail out."

"Okay, that's right," Ryan said. "Simon told me about it. Then what?"

"Then we torch the room. The three bodies are victims of domestic fires. They ought to have arrived today."

All Ryan could still feel was a visceral disgust. His face showed it.

"This is not always a tidy business, Sir John," the SIS COS informed his guest.

"Christ, Andy! Where are the bodies from?"

"Does that matter to anyone?"

A long breath. "No, I suppose not." Ryan shook his head. "Then what?"

"We drive them south. We'll meet with an agent of mine, Istvan Kovacs, a professional smuggler who is being well paid to get us over the border into Yugoslavia. From there into Dalmatia. Quite a few of my countrymen like to get some sun there. We put the Rabbit family aboard a commercial airliner to take them—and you—back to England, and the operation is concluded to everyone's satisfaction."

"Okay." *What else can I say?* Jack thought. "When?"

"Two or three days, I think."

"Are you going to be packing?" he wondered next.

"A pistol, you mean?"

"Not a slingshot," Ryan clarified.

Hudson just shook his head. "Not really very useful things, guns. If we run into trouble, there will be trained soldiers with automatic rifles, and a pistol is useless to anyone, except to cause the opposition to fire at us with rather a higher probability of hitting us. No, should that happen, you're better off talking your way out of it, using the diplomatic papers. We already have British passports for the Rabbits." He lifted a large envelope from his desk drawer. "Mr. Rabbit reportedly speaks good English. That should suffice."

"It's all thought through, eh?" Ryan wasn't sure if it seemed that way to him or not.

"It's what they pay me for, Sir John."

And I don't have standing to criticize, Ryan realized. "Okay, you're the pro here. I'm just a fucking tourist."

"Tom Trent reported in." There was a message on Hudson's desk. "He did not see any coverage on the Rabbit family. So the operation looks entirely unremarkable to this point. I would say things are going very well indeed." *Except for the frozen burned bodies in the embassy basement,* he didn't add. "Seeing them this morning helped. They look entirely ordinary, and that helps. At least we're not trying to smuggle Grace Kelly out of the country. People like that get noticed, but women like Mrs. Rabbit do not."

"Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail . . ." Ryan whispered.

"Just a matter of moving them to a different hutch."

"You say so, man," Ryan responded dubiously. This guy just lived a different sort of life from his own. Cathy cut up people's eyeballs for a living, and that would have made Jack faint dead away like a broad confronting a rattlesnake in the bathtub. Just a different way of earning a living. It sure as hell wasn't his.

TOMTRENT WATCHED them take the long walk from the hotel to the local zoo, which was always a good place for children. The male lion and tiger were both quite magnificent, and the elephant house—built in a drunken Arabian pastel style—housed several adequate pachyderms. With an ice cream cone bought for the little girl, the tourist part of the day came to its end. The Rabbit family walked back to the hotel, with the father carrying the sleeping child for the last half kilometer or so. This was the hardest part for Trent, for whom staying invisible on a square mile of cobblestone landing field taxed even his professional skills, but the Rabbit family was not all that attentive, and on getting back to the Astoria, he ducked into a men's room to switch his reversible coat to change at least his outward colors. Half an hour later, the Zaitzevs walked out again, but turned immediately to enter the people's restaurant just next door. The food there was wholesome if not especially exciting and, more to the point, quite inexpensive. As he watched, they piled their plates high with the local cuisine and sat down to devour it. They all saved room for apple strudel, which in Budapest was just as fine as a man could eat in Vienna, but for about a tenth of the price. Another forty minutes, and they looked thoroughly tired and well stuffed, not even taking a postprandial walk around the block to settle their stomachs before riding the elevator back to the third floor and, presumably, their night's sleep. Trent took half an hour to make sure, then caught a cab for Red Marty Park. He'd had a long day and now needed to write up his report for Hudson.

THE COS AND RYAN were drinking beer in the canteen when he arrived back at the embassy. Introductions were made, and another pint of beer secured for Trent.

"Well, what do you think, Tom?"

"It certainly appears that they are just what we've been told to expect. The little girl—the father calls her *zaichik;* means 'bunny,' doesn't it?—seems a very sweet child. Other than that, an ordinary family doing ordinary things. He purchased three TV tape machines over on Váci Street. The store delivered them to the hotel. Then they went on a bimble."

"A what?"

"A walkabout, just wandering around as tourists do," Trent explained. "To the zoo. The little girl was properly impressed by the animals, but most of all by a new red coat with a black collar they bought this morning. All in all, they seem rather a pleasant little family," the spook concluded.

"Nothing out of the ordinary?" Hudson asked.

"Not a thing, Andy, and if there is any coverage on them, I failed to see it. The only surprise of the day was in the morning when they walked right past the embassy here on the way to shopping. *That* was rather a tender moment, but it seems to have been entirely coincidental. Váci Utca is the best shopping area for Easterners and Westerners. I expect the desk clerk told them to take the underground here."

"Pure vanilla, eh?" Jack asked, finishing his beer.

"So it would appear," Trent replied.

"Okay, when do we make our move?" the American asked next.

"Well, that Rozsa chap opens his concert series tomorrow night. Day after, then? We give Mrs. Rabbit a chance to hear her music. Can we get tickets for ourselves?" Hudson asked.

"Done," Trent answered. "Box six, right side of the theater, fine view of the entire building. Helps to be a diplomat, doesn't it?"

"The program is . . . ?"

"J. S. Bach, the first three Brandenberg concerti, then some other opuses of his."

"Ought to be pleasant enough," Ryan observed.

"The local orchestras are actually quite good, Sir John."

"Andy, enough of that knighthood shit, okay? My name is Jack. John Patrick, to be precise, but I've gone by 'Jack' since I was three years old."

"It is an honor, you know."

"Fine, and I thanked Her Majesty for it, but we don't do that sort of

thing where I live, okay?"

"Well, wearing a sword can be inconvenient when you try to sit down," Trent sympathized.

"And caring for the horse can be such a bother." Hudson had himself a good laugh. "Not to mention the expense of jousting."

"Okay, maybe I had that coming," Ryan admitted. "I just want to get the Rabbit the hell out of Dodge."

"Which we shall do, Jack," Hudson assured him. "And you will be there to see it."

"EVERYBODY'S IN BUDAPEST," Bostock reported. "The Rabbit and his family are staying in a no-tell motel called the Astoria."

"Isn't there a part of New York by that name?" the DCI asked.

"Queens," Greer confirmed. "What about the hotel?"

"Evidently, it suits our purposes," the Deputy DDO informed them. "Basil says the operation is nominal to this point. No surveillance on our subjects has been spotted. Everything looks entirely routine. I guess our cousins have a competent Station Chief in Budapest. The three bodies arrived there today. Just a matter of crossing the t's and dotting the i's."

"Confidence level?" the DDI asked.

"Oh, say, seventy-five percent, Admiral," Bostock estimated. "Maybe better."

"What about Ryan?" Greer asked next.

"No beefs from London on how he's doing. I guess your boy is handling himself."

"He's a good kid. He ought to."

"I wonder how unhappy he is," Judge Moore wondered.

The other two each had a smile and a head shake at that. Bostock spoke first. Like all DO people, he had his doubts about members of the far more numerous DI.

"Probably not as comfortable as he is at his desk with his comfy swivel chair."

"He'll do fine, gentlemen," Greer assured them, hoping he was right.

"I wonder what this fellow has for us . . . ?" Moore breathed.

"We'll know in a week," Bostock assured them. He was always the optimist. And three out of four constituted betting odds, so long as your own ass wasn't on the line.

Judge Moore looked at his desk clock and added six hours. People would be asleep in Budapest now, and almost there in London. He remembered his own adventures in the field, mostly composed of waiting for people to show up for meets or filling out contact reports for the at-home bureaucrats who still ran things at CIA. You just

couldn't get free of the fact that the Agency was a government operation, subject to all of the same restrictions and inefficiencies that attended that sad reality. But this time, for this BEATRIX operation, they *were* making things happen speedily for once . . . only because this Rabbit person said that government communications were compromised. *Not* because he'd said he had information about an innocent life that might be lost. The government had its priorities, and they did not always correspond to the needs of a rational world. He was Director of Central Intelligence, supposedly—and by federal law—in command of the entire intelligence-gathering and -analysis operations of the government of the United States of America. But getting this bureaucracy to operate efficiently was the functional equivalent of beaching a whale and commanding it to fly. You could scream all you wanted, but you couldn't fight gravity. Government was a thing made by men, and so it ought to be possible for men to change it, but in practice that just didn't happen. So, three chances out of four, they'd get their Russian out and get to debrief him in a comfortable safe house in the Virginia hills, pick his brain clean, and maybe they'd find out some important and useful things, but the game wouldn't change and neither, probably, would CIA.

"Anything we need to say to Basil?"

"Nothing comes to mind, sir," Bostock answered. "We just sit as still as we can and wait for his people to carry out the mission."

"Right," Judge Moore conceded.

DESPITE THE THREE PINTS of dark British beer, Ryan did not sleep well. He couldn't think of anything that he might be missing. Hudson and his crew seemed competent enough, and the Rabbit family had looked ordinary enough on the street the previous morning. There were three people, one of whom really wanted out of the USSR, which struck Ryan as something entirely reasonable . . . though the Russians were some of the most rabidly patriotic people in all the world. But every rule had exceptions, and evidently this man had a conscience and felt the need to stop . . . something. Whatever it was, Jack didn't know, and he knew better than to guess. Speculation wasn't analysis, and good analysis was what they paid him his meager salary for.

It would be interesting to find out. Ryan had never spoken directly with a defector. He'd read over their stuff, and had sent written questions to some of them to get answers to specific inquiries, but he'd never actually looked one in the eye and watched his face when he answered. As in playing cards, it was the only way to read the other guy. He didn't have the ability at it that his wife had—there was something to be said for medical training—but neither was he a three-

year-old who'd believe anything. No, he wanted to see this guy, talk to him, and pick his brain apart, just to evaluate the reliability of what he said. The Rabbit could be a plant, after all. KGB had done that in the past, Ryan had heard. There'd been one defector who'd come out after the assassination of John Kennedy who'd proclaimed to the very heavens that KGB had taken no part in that act. It was, in fact, sufficient to make the Agency wonder if maybe KGB had done precisely that. KGB could be tricky, but like all clever, tricky people, they inevitably overplayed their hand sooner or later—and the later they did it, the worse they overplayed it. They understood the West and how its people really thought things through. No, Ivan wasn't ten feet tall, and neither was he a genius at everything, despite what the frightmongers in Washington—and even some at Langley—thought.

Everyone had the capacity for making mistakes. He'd learned that from his father, who'd made a living catching murderers, some of whom thought themselves very clever indeed. No, the only difference between a wise man and a fool was in the magnitude of his mistakes. To err was human, and the smarter and more powerful you were, the greater the scope of your screwup. Like LBJ and Vietnam, the war Jack had barely avoided due to his age—a colossal screwup foisted on the American people by the most adroit political tactician of his age, a man who'd thought his political abilities would translate to international power politics, only to learn that an Asian communist didn't think the same way that a senator from Texas did. All men had their limitations. It was just that some were more dangerous than others. And while genius knew it had limits, idiocy was always unbounded.

He lay in his bed, smoking a cigarette and looking at the ceiling, wondering what would come tomorrow. Another manifestation of Sean Miller and his terrorists?

Hopefully not, Jack thought, still wondering why Hudson wouldn't have a gun close by for the coming adventures. Had to be some European thing, he decided. Americans on hostile soil liked to have at least one friend around.

CHAPTER 27

RABBIT RUN

O*NE MORE DAY in a strange city,* Zaitzev thought, as the sun began to rise in the east, two hours earlier than in Moscow. At home he'd still be sleeping, Oleg Ivan'ch told himself. In due course, he hoped, he'd be waking up somewhere else, in an altogether different time zone yet again. But for now he just lay still, savoring the moment. There was virtually no sound outside, perhaps a few delivery trucks on the streets. The sun was not quite yet above the horizon. It was dark, but no longer night; brightening up, but not yet morning; the middle part of the early day. It could be a pleasant moment. It was a time children could like, a magical time when the world belonged only to those few who were awake, and all others were still unseen in their beds, and the kids could walk around like little kings, until their mothers caught them and dragged them back into their beds.

But Zaitzev just lay there, hearing the slow breathing of his wife and daughter, while he was now fully awake, free to think entirely alone.

When would they contact him? What would they say? Would they change their minds? Would they betray his trust?

Why was he so goddamned uneasy about everything? Wasn't it time to trust the CIA just a little bit? Wasn't he going to be a huge asset to them? Would he not be valuable to them? Even KGB, as stingy as a child with the best toys, gave comfort and prestige to its defectors. All the alcohol Kim Philby could drink. All the *zhopniki* Burgess could ass-fuck, or so the stories went. In both cases, the stories went, the appetites were fairy large. But such stories always grew with the telling, and they depended at least partly on the Soviet antipathy for homosexuals.

He wasn't one of those. He was a man of principle, wasn't he? Zaitzev asked himself. Of course he was. For principle he was taking his own life in his hands and juggling it. Like knives in the circus. And like that juggler, only he would be hurt by a misjudgment. Oleg lit his first smoke of the day, trying to think things through for the hundredth time, looking for another viable course of action.

He *could* just go to the concerts, continue his shopping, take the

train back to Kiev Station, and be a hero to his workmates for getting them their tape machines and pornographic movies, and the pantyhose for their wives, and probably a few things for himself. And KGB would never be the wiser.

But then the Polish priest will die, at Soviet hands . . . hands you have the power to forestall, and then *what sort of man will you see in the mirror, Oleg Ivan'ch?*

It always came back to the same thing, didn't it?

But there was little point in going back to sleep, so he smoked his cigarette and lay there, watching the sky brighten outside his hotel window.

CATHY RYAN DIDN'T really wake up until her hand found empty bed where it ought to have found her husband. That automatically, somehow, caused her to come fully awake in an instant and just as quickly to remember that he was out of town and out of the country—theirs *and* this one—and that as a result she was alone, effectively a single mother, which was not something she'd bargained for when she'd married John Patrick Ryan, Sr. She wasn't the only woman in the world whose husband traveled on business—her father did it often enough, and she'd grown up with that. But this was the first time for Jack, and she didn't like it at all.

It wasn't that she was unable to cope. She had to cope on a daily basis with worse tribulations than this one. Nor was she concerned that Jack might be getting a little on the side while he was away. She'd often enough wondered that about her father on his trips—her parents' marriage had occasionally been a rocky one—and didn't know what her mother (now deceased) had wondered about. But with Jack, no, that ought not to be a problem. But she loved him, and she knew that he loved her, and people in love were supposed to be together. Had they met while he was still an officer in the Marine Corps, it would have been a problem with which she would have had to deal—and worse, she might someday have had to deal with a husband who'd gone in harm's way, and that, she was sure, was the purest form of hell to live with. But no, she'd not met him until after all that. Her own father had taken her to dinner, bringing Jack along as an afterthought, a bright young broker with keen instincts, ready to move from the Baltimore office up to New York, only to be surprised—pleasantly at first—by the interest they'd instantly found in each other, and then had come the revelation that Jack wanted to take his money and go back to teaching history, of all things. It was something she had to deal with more than Jack, who barely tolerated Joseph Muller, Senior Vice President of Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner and

Smith, plus whatever acquisitions they'd made in the past five years. Joe was still "Daddy" to her and "him" (which translated to "that pain in the ass") to Jack.

What the hell is he working on? she wondered. *Bonn? Germany? NATO stuff?* The goddamned intelligence business, looking at secret stuff and making equally secret observations on it that went to other people who might or might not read it and think about it. She, at least, was in an honest line of work, making sick people well, or at least helping them to see better. But not Jack.

It wasn't that he did useless things. He'd explained it to her earlier in the year. There were bad people out there, and somebody had to fight against them. Fortunately, he didn't do that with a loaded gun—Cathy hated guns, even the ones that had prevented her kidnapping and murder at their home in Maryland on the night that had ended blessedly with Little Jack's birth. She'd treated her share of gunshot wounds in the emergency room during her internship, enough to see the harm they inflicted, though not the harm they might have prevented in other places. Her world was somewhat circumscribed in that respect, a fact she appreciated, which was why she *allowed* Jack to keep a few of the damned things close by, where the kids could not reach them, even standing on a chair. He'd once tried to teach her how to use them, but she'd refused even to touch the things. Part of her thought that she was overreacting, but she was a woman, and that was that.... And Jack didn't seem to mind that very much.

But why isn't he here? Cathy asked herself in the darkness. What could be so damned important as to take her husband away from his wife and children?

He couldn't tell her. And *that* really made her angry. But there was no fighting it, and it wasn't as if she were dealing with a terminal cancer patient. And it wasn't as if he were boffing some German chippie on the side. But . . . damn. She just wanted her husband back.

EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AWAY, Ryan was already awake, out of the shower, shaved, brushed, and ready to face the day. Something about travel made it easy for him to wake up in the morning. But now he had nothing to do until the embassy canteen opened. He looked at the phone by his bed and thought about calling home, but he didn't know how to dial out on this phone system, and he probably needed Hudson's permission—and assistance—to accomplish the mission. Damn. He'd awakened at three in the morning, thinking to roll over and give Cathy a kiss on the cheek—it was something Jack liked to do, even though she never had any memory of it. The good news was that she always kissed back. She really did love him. Otherwise, the

return kiss would not have come. People can't dissimulate while asleep. It was an important fact in Ryan's personal universe.

There was no use turning on the bedside radio. Hungarian—actually Magyar—was a language probably found on the planet Mars. For damned sure, it didn't belong on Planet Earth. He'd not heard one, not even one, word that he recognized from English, German, or Latin, the three languages he'd studied at one time or another in his life. The locals also spoke as quickly as a machine gun, adding to the difficulty on his part. Had Hudson dropped him off anywhere in this city, he would have been unable to find his way back to the British Embassy, and *that* was a feeling of vulnerability he hadn't had since he was four years old. He might as well have been on an alien planet, and having a diplomatic passport wouldn't help, since he was accredited *by* the wrong country *to* this alien world. Somehow he'd not fully considered that on the way in. Like most Americans, he figured that with a passport and an American Express card he could safely travel the entire world in his shorts, but that world was only the capitalist world, where somebody would speak enough English to point him to a building with the American flag on the roof and U.S. Marines in the lobby. Not in this alien city. He didn't know enough to find the men's room—well, he'd found one in a bar the previous day, Ryan admitted to himself. The feeling of helplessness was hovering at the border of his consciousness like the proverbial monster under the bed, but he was a grown-up American male citizen, over thirty, formerly a commissioned officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. It wasn't the way he usually felt about things. And so he watched the numbers change on his digital clock radio, bringing him closer to his personal date with destiny, whatever the hell that was going to be, one red-lit number at a time.

ANDY HUDSON WAS already up and about. Istvan Kovacs was preparing for one of his normal smuggling runs, this time bringing Reebok running shoes into Budapest from Yugoslavia. His hard cash was in a steel box under his bed, and he was drinking his morning coffee and listening to music on the radio when a knock on the door made him look up. He walked to answer it in his underwear.

"Andy!" he said in surprise.

"Did I wake you, Istvan?"

Kovacs waved him inside. "No, I've been up for half an hour. What brings you here?"

"We need to move our package tonight," Hudson replied.

"When, exactly?"

"Oh, about two in the morning."

Hudson reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of banknotes. "Here is half of the agreed sum." There was no point in paying this Hungarian what they were really worth. It would alter the whole equation.

"Excellent. Can I get you some coffee, Andy?"

"Yes, thank you."

Kovacs waved him to the kitchen table and poured a cup. "How do you want to go about it?"

"I will drive our package to near the border, and you will take them across. I presume you know the border guards at the crossing point."

"Yes, it will be Captain Budai Laszlo. I've done business with him for years. And Sergeant Kerekes Mihály, good lad, wants to go to university and be an engineer. They do twelve-hour shifts at the crossing point, midnight to noon. They will already be bored, Andy, and open to negotiation." He held up his hand and rubbed a thumb over his forefinger.

"What is the usual rate?"

"For four people?"

"Do they need to know our package is people?" Hudson asked in return.

Kovacs shrugged. "No, I suppose not. Then some pairs of shoes. The Reeboks are very popular, you know, and some Western movie tapes. They already have all the tape-player machines they need," Kovacs explained.

"Be generous," Hudson suggested, "but not too generous." *Mustn't make them suspicious*, he didn't have to add. "If they are married, perhaps something for their wives and children. . . ."

"I know Budai's family well, Andy. That will not be a problem." Budai had a young daughter, and giving something for little Zsóka would cause no problems for the smuggler.

Hudson made a calculation for distance. Two and a half hours to the Yugoslav border should be about right at that time of night. They'd be using a small truck for the first part of the journey. Istvan would handle the rest in his larger truck. And if anything went wrong, Istvan would expect to be shot by the British Secret Service officer. That was one benefit of the world-famous James Bond movies. But, more to the point, five thousand d-mark went a very long way in Hungary.

"I will be driving to what destination?"

"I will tell you tonight," Hudson answered.

"Very well. I shall meet you at Csurgo at two tomorrow morning without fail."

"That is very good, Istvan." Hudson finished his coffee and stood. "It is good to have such a reliable friend."

"You pay me well," Kovacs observed, defining their relationship.

Hudson was tempted to say how much he trusted his agent, but that wasn't strictly true. Like most field spooks, he didn't trust anybody—not until after the job was completed. Might Istvan be in the pay of the AVH? Probably not. No way they could afford five thousand West German marks on anything approaching a regular basis, and Kovacs liked the good life too much. If the communist government of this country ever fell, he'd be among the first to become a millionaire, with a nice house in the hills of Pest on the other side of the Danube, overlooking Buda.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Hudson found Ryan at the front of the line in the embassy canteen.

"Like your eggs, I see," the COS observed.

"Local, or do you truck it in from Austria?"

"The eggs are local. The farm products here are actually quite good. But we like our English bacon."

"Developed a taste for it myself," Jack reported. "What's happening?" he asked. Andy's eyes had a certain excitement in them.

"It's tonight. First we go to the concert hall, and then we make our pickup."

"Giving him a heads-up?"

Hudson shook his head. "No. He might act differently. I prefer to avoid that complication."

"What if he's not ready? What if he has second thoughts?" Jack worried.

"In that case, it's a blown mission. And we disappear into the mists of Budapest, and come tomorrow morning many faces will be red in London, Washington, and Moscow."

"You're pretty cool about this, buddy."

"In this job, you take things as they come. Getting excited about them doesn't help at all." He managed a smile. "So long as I take the Queen's shilling and eat the Queen's biscuit, I shall do the Queen's work."

"Semper fi, man," Jack observed. He added cream to his coffee and took a sip. Not great, but good enough for the moment.

SO WAS THE food in the state-run cafeteria next door to the Hotel Astoria. Svetlana had chosen and positively inhaled a cherry Danish pastry, along with a glass of whole milk.

"The concert is tonight," Oleg told his wife. "Excited?"

"You know how long it has been since I've been to a proper concert?" she retorted. "Oleg, I shall never forget this kindness on your part." She was surprised by the look on his face, but made no comment on it.

"Well, my dear, today we have more shopping to do. Ladies' things. You will have to handle that for me."

"Anything for myself?"

"To that end, we have eight hundred and fifty Comecon rubles, just for you to spend," Oleg Ivan'ch told her, with a beaming smile, wondering if anything she bought would be in use by the end of the week.

"YOUR HUSBAND STILL off on business?" Beaverton asked.

"Unfortunately," Cathy confirmed.

Too bad, the former Para didn't say. He'd become a good student of human behavior over the years, and her unhappiness with the current situation was plain. Well, Sir John was doubtless off doing something interesting. He'd taken the time to do a little research on the Ryans. She, the papers said, was a surgeon, just as she'd told him weeks before. Her husband, on the other hand, despite his claim to be a junior official at the American Embassy, was probably CIA. It had been hinted at by the London papers back when he'd had that run-in with the ULS terrorists, but that supposition had *never* been repeated. Probably because someone had asked Fleet Street—politely—not to say such a thing ever again. That told Eddie Beaverton everything he needed to know. The papers had also said he was, if not rich, certainly comfortably set, and that was confirmed by the expensive Jaguar in their driveway. So, Sir John was away on secret business of some sort or other. There was no sense in wondering what, the cabdriver thought, pulling up to the miniature Chatham train station. "Have a good day, mum," he told her when she got out.

"Thanks, Eddie." The usual tip. It was good to have such a generous steady customer.

For Cathy it was the usual train ride into London, with the company of a medical journal, but without the comfort of having her husband close by, reading his *Daily Telegraph* or dozing. It was funny how you could miss even a sleeping man next to you.

"THAT'S THE CONCERT HALL."

Like Ryan's old Volkswagen Rabbit, the Budapest Concert Hall was well made in every detail, but little, hardly filling the city block it sat

upon, its architecture hinting at the Imperial style found in better and larger form in Vienna, two hundred miles away. Andy and Ryan went inside to collect the tickets arranged by the embassy through the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. The foyer was disappointingly small. Hudson asked for permission to see where the box was, and, by virtue of his diplomatic status, an usher took them upstairs and down the side corridor to the box.

Inside, it struck Ryan as similar to a Broadway theater—the Majestic, for example—not large, but elegant, with its red-velvet seating and gilt plaster, a place for the king to come when he deigned to visit the subject city far from his imperial palace up the river in Vienna. A place for the local big shots to greet their king and pretend they were in the big leagues, when they and their sovereign knew differently. But for all that, it was an earnest effort, and a good orchestra would cover for the shortcomings. The acoustics were probably excellent, and that was what really mattered. Ryan had never been to Carnegie Hall in New York, but this would be the local equivalent, just smaller and humbler—though grudgingly so.

Ryan looked around. The box was admirably suited for that. You could scan just about every seat in the theater.

"Our friends' seats—where are they?" he asked quietly.

"Not sure. Tom will follow them in and see where they sit before he joins us."

"Then what?" Jack asked next.

But Hudson cut him off with a single word: "Later."

BACK AT THE EMBASSY, Tom Trent had his own work to do. First of all, he got two gallons of pure grain alcohol, 190 proof, or 95 percent pure. It was technically drinkable, but only for one who wanted a very fast and deep drunk. He sampled it, just a taste to make sure it was what the label said. This was not a time to take chances. One millimetric taste was enough for that. This was as pure as alcohol ever got, with no discernible smell, and only enough taste to let you know that it wasn't distilled water. Trent had heard that some people used this stuff to spike the punch at weddings and other formal functions to . . . liven things up a bit. Surely this would accomplish that task to a fare-thee-well.

The next part was rather more distasteful. It was time to inspect the boxes. The embassy basement was now off-limits to everyone. Trent cut loose the sealing tape and lifted off the cardboard to reveal . . .

The bodies were in translucent plastic bags, the sort with handles,

used by morticians to transport bodies. The bags even came in more than one size, he saw, probably to accommodate the bodies of children and adults of various dimensions. The first body he uncovered was that of a little girl. Blessedly, the plastic obscured the face, or what had once been a face. All he could really see was a blackened smudge, and for the moment, that was good. He didn't need to open the bag, and that, too, was good.

The next boxes were heavier but somehow easier. At least these bodies were adults. He manhandled them onto the concrete floor of the cellar and left them there, then moved the dry ice to the opposite corner, where the frozen CO_2 would evaporate on its own without causing harm or distraction to anyone. The bodies would have about fourteen hours to thaw out, and that, he hoped, would be enough. Trent left the basement, being careful to lock the door.

Then he went to the embassy's security office. The British legation had its own security detail of three men, all of them former enlisted servicemen. He'd need two of them tonight. Both were former sergeants in the British army, Rodney Truelove and Bob Small, and both were physically fit.

"Lads, I need your help tonight with something."

"What's that, Tom?" Truelove asked.

"We'll just need to move some objects, and do it rather covertly," Trent semi-explained. He didn't bother telling them it would be something of great importance. These were men for whom everything was treated as a matter of some importance.

"Sneak in and sneak out?" Small asked.

"Correct," Trent confirmed to the former color sergeant in the Royal Engineers. Small was from the Royal Regiment of Wales, the men of Harlech.

"What time?" Truelove inquired next.

"We'll leave here about oh-two-hundred. Ought not to take more than an hour overall."

"Dress?" This was Bob Small.

And that was a good question. To wear coats and ties didn't feel right, but to wear coveralls would be something a casual observer might notice. They'd have to dress in such a way as to be invisible.

"Casual," Trent decided. "Jackets but no coats. Like a local. Shirts and pants, that should be sufficient. Gloves, too." *Yeah, they'll surely want to wear gloves,* the spook thought.

"No problem with us," Truelove concluded. As soldiers, they were accustomed to doing things that made no sense and taking life as it came. Trent hoped they'd feel that way the following morning.

FOGAL PANTYHOSE WERE French in origin. The packaging proclaimed that. Irina nearly fainted, holding the package in her hand. The contents were real but seemed not to be, so sheer as to be a manufactured shadow and no more substantial than that. She'd heard about these things, but she'd never held them in her hand, much less worn any. And to think that any woman in the West could own as many as she needed. The wives of Oleg's Russian colleagues would swoon wearing them, and how envious her own friends at GUM would be! And how careful they'd be putting them on, afraid to create a run, careful not to blunder into things with their legs, like children who bruised every single day. These hose were far too precious to endanger. She had to get the right size for the women on Oleg's list . . . plus six pairs for herself.

But what size? To buy any article of clothing that was too large was a deadly insult to a woman in any culture, even Russia, where women tended more to the Rubenesque than to a starving waif in the Third World . . . or Hollywood. The sizes shown on the packages were A, B, C, and D. This was an additional complication, since in Cyrillic, "B" corresponded to the Roman "V" and "C" to "S," but she took a deep breath and bought a total of twenty pairs of size C, including the six for herself. They were hideously expensive, but the Comecon rubles in her purse were not all hers, and so with another deep breath she paid cash for the collection, to the smile of the female salesclerk, who could guess what was going on. Walking out of the store with such luxuries made her feel like a czarist princess, a good sensation for any female in the world. She now had 489 rubles left to spend on herself, and that almost produced a panic. So many nice things. So little money. So little closet space at home.

Shoes? A new coat? A new handbag?

She left out jewelry, since that was Oleg's job, but, like most men, he didn't know a thing about what women wore.

What about foundation garments? Irina wondered next. A Chantarelle brassiere? Did she dare purchase something that elegant? That was at least a hundred rubles, even at this favorable exchange rate.... And it would be something only she knew she had on. Such a brassiere would feel like . . . hands. Like the hands of your lover. Yes, she had to get one of those.

And cosmetics. She had to get cosmetics. It was the one thing Russian women always paid attention to. She was in the right city for that. Hungarian women cared about skin care as well. She'd go to a good store and ask, comrade to comrade. Hungarian women—their faces proclaimed to the world that they cared about their skin. In this the Hungarians were most *kulturniy*.

It took another two hours of utter bliss, so pleasant that she didn't

even notice her husband and daughter waiting about. She was living every Soviet woman's dream, spending money in—well, if not the West, then the next best thing. And it was wonderful. She'd wear the Chantarelle to the concert tonight, listen to Bach, and pretend she was in another time and another place, where everyone was *kulturniy* and it was a good thing to be a woman. It was a pity that no such place existed in the Soviet Union.

OUTSIDE THE SUCCESSION of women's stores, Oleg just stood around and smoked his cigarettes like any other man in the world, intensely bored by the details of women's shopping. How they could enjoy the process of picking and comparing, picking and comparing, never making a decision, just sucking in the ambience of being surrounded by things they couldn't wear and didn't really like? They always took the dress and held it up to their necks and looked in a mirror and decided *nyet*, not this one. On and on and on, past the sunset and into the night, as though their very souls depended on it. Oleg had learned patience with his current life-threatening adventure, but one thing he'd never learned, and never expected to learn, was how to watch a woman shop . . . without wishing to throttle her. Just standing there like a fucking beast of burden, holding the things she'd finally decided to purchase—then waiting while she decided to change her mind or not. Well, it couldn't last forever. They did have tickets to the concert that night. They had to go back to the hotel, try to get a sitter for *zaichik*, get dressed, and go to the concert hall. Even Irina would appreciate that.

Probably, Oleg Ivan'ch thought bleakly. As though he didn't have enough to worry about. But his little girl wasn't concerned about a thing, Oleg saw. She ate her ice cream and looked around at this different place with its different sights. There was much to be said for a child's innocence. A pity one lost it—and why, then, did children try so hard to grow up and leave their innocence behind? Didn't they know how wonderful the world was for them alone? Didn't they know that, with understanding, the wonders of the world only became burdens? And pain.

And doubts, Zaitzev thought. *So many doubts.*

But no, *zaichik* didn't know that, and by the time she found out, it would be too late.

Finally, Irina walked outside, with a beaming smile such as she'd not had since delivering their daughter. Then she really surprised him—she came up to him for a hug and a kiss.

"Oh, Oleg, you are so good to me!" And another passionate kiss of a woman sated by shopping. Even better than one sated by sex, her husband suddenly thought.

"Back to the hotel, my dear. We must dress for the concert."

The easy part was the ride on the metro, then into the Astoria and up to Room 307. Once there, they decided more or less by default to take Svetlana with them. Getting a sitter would have been an inconvenience—Oleg had thought about a female KGB officer from the Culture and Friendship House across the street, but neither he nor his wife felt comfortable with such arrangements, and so *zaichik* would have to behave herself during the concert. His tickets were in the room, Orchestra Row 6, seats A, B, and C, which put him right on the aisle, where he preferred to be. Svetlana would wear her new clothes this evening, which, he hoped, would make her happy. It usually did, and these were the best clothes she'd ever had.

The bathroom was crowded in their room. Irina worked hard and long to get her face right. It was easier for her husband, and easier still for their daughter, for whom a wet washcloth across her grimacing face was enough. Then they all got dressed in their best clothing. Oleg buckled his little girl's shiny black shoes over the white tights to which she'd taken an immediate love. Then she put on the red coat with the black collar, and the little Bunny was all ready for the adventures of the evening. They took the elevator down to the lobby and caught a cab outside.

FOR TRENT IT was a little awkward. Staking out the lobby ought to have been difficult, but the hotel staff seemed not to notice him, and so when the package left, it was a simple matter of walking out to his car and following their cab to the concert hall, just a mile down the street. Once there, he found a parking place close by and walked quickly to the entrance. Drinks were being served there, and the Zaitzevs availed themselves of what looked like Tokaji before heading in. Their little girl was as radiant as ever. *Lovely child,* Trent thought. He hoped she'd like life in the West. He watched them head into the theater to their seats, and then he turned to go up the stairs to his box.

RYAN AND HUDSON were already there, sitting on the old chairs with their velvet cushions.

"Andy, Jack," Trent said in greeting. "Sixth row, left side of center, just on the aisle."

Then the houselights started flickering. The curtain drew back, the

meandering tones of musicians tuning their various instruments trailed off, and the conductor, Jozsef Rozsa, appeared from stage right. The initial applause was little more than polite. It was his first concert in the series, and he was new to this audience. That struck Ryan as odd—he was a Hungarian, a graduate of their own Franz Liszt Academy. Why wasn't their greeting more enthusiastic? He was a tall and thin guy with black hair and the face of an aesthete. He bowed politely to the audience and turned back to the orchestra. His little baton stick—whatever it was called, Ryan didn't know—was there on the little stand, and when he lifted it, the room went dead still, and then his right arm shot out to the string section of the Hungarian State Railroad Orchestra #1.

Ryan was not the student of music that his wife was, but Bach was Bach, and the concerto built in majesty almost from the first instant. Music, like poetry or painting, Jack told himself, was a means of communication, but he'd never quite figured out what composers were trying to say. It was easier with a John Williams movie score, where the music so perfectly accompanied the action, but Bach hadn't known about moving pictures, and so he must have been "talking about" things that his original audiences would have recognized. But Ryan wasn't one of those, and so he just had to appreciate the wonderful harmonies. It struck him that the piano wasn't right, and only when he looked did he see that it wasn't a piano at all, but rather an ancient harpsichord, played, it seemed, by an equally ancient virtuoso with flowing white hair and the elegant hands of . . . a surgeon, Jack thought. Jack did know piano music. Their friend Sissy Jackson, a solo player with the Washington Symphony, said Cathy was too mechanical in her playing, but Ryan only noted that she never missed a key—you could always tell—and to him that was sufficient. *This guy,* he thought, watching his hands and catching the notes through the wonderful cacophony, *didn't miss a single note,* and every one, it seemed, was precisely as loud or soft as the concert required, and so precisely timed as to define perfection. The rest of the orchestra seemed about as well practiced as the Marine Corps Silent Drill Team, everything as precise as a series of laser beams.

The one thing Ryan couldn't tell was what the conductor was doing. Wasn't the concerto written down? Wasn't conducting just a matter of making sure—beforehand—that everybody knew his part and did it on time? He'd have to ask Cathy about it, and she'd roll her eyes and remark that he really was a Philistine. But Sissy Jackson said that Cathy was a mechanic on the keyboard, lacking in soul. So there, Lady Caroline!

The string section was also superb, and Ryan wondered how the hell you ran a bow along a string and made the exact noise you wanted to.

Probably because they do it for a living, he told himself, and he sat back to enjoy the music. It was only then that he watched Andy Hudson, whose eyes were on the package. He took the moment to look that way as well.

The little girl was squirming, doing her best to be good, and maybe taking note of the music, but it couldn't be as good as a tape of *The Wizard of Oz*, and that couldn't be helped. Still and all, she was behaving well, the little Bunny sitting between Ma and Pa Rabbit.

Mama Rabbit was watching the concert with rapt attention. Papa Rabbit was being politely attentive. Maybe they should call ahead to London and get Irina a Walkman, Jack thought, along with some Christopher Hogwood tapes.... Cathy seemed to like him a lot, along with Nevile Marriner.

In any case, after about twenty minutes, they finished the Menuetto, the orchestra went quiet, and when Conductor Rozsa turned to face the audience . . .

The concert hall went berserk with cheering and shouts of *"Bravo!"* Jack didn't know what he'd done differently, but evidently the Hungarians did. Rozsa bowed deeply to the audience and waited for the noise to subside before turning back and commanding quiet again as he raised his little white stick to start Brandenberg #2.

This one started with a brass and strings, and Ryan found himself entranced by the individual musicians more than whatever the conductor had done with them. *How long do you have to study to get that good?* he wondered. Cathy played two or three times a week at home in Maryland—their Chatham house wasn't big enough for a proper grand piano, rather to her disappointment. He'd offered to get an upright, but she'd declined, saying that it just wasn't the same. Sissy Jackson said that she played three hours or more every single day. But Sissy did it for a living, while Cathy had another and somewhat more immediate passion in her professional life.

The second Brandenberg concerto was shorter than the first, ending in about twelve minutes, and the third followed at once. Bach must have loved the violins more than any other instrument, and the local string section was pretty good. In any other setting Jack might have given himself over to the moment and just drunk in the music, but he did have something more important planned for this evening. Every few seconds, his eyes drifted left to see the Rabbit family....

BRANDENBERG # 3 ENDED roughly an hour after #1 had begun. The houselights came on, and it was time for the intermission. Ryan watched Papa Rabbit and Mrs. Rabbit leave their seats. The reason was plain. The Bunny needed a trip to the little girls' room, and

probably Papa would avail himself of the local plumbing as well. Hudson saw that and leapt to his feet, back out of the box, into the private corridor, closely followed by Tom Trent, and down the steps to the lobby and into the men's room, while Ryan stayed in the box and tried to relax. The mission was now fully under way.

NOT FIFTY YARDS AWAY, Oleg Ivan'ch was standing in the line to use the men's room. Hudson managed to get right behind him. The lobby was filled with the usual buzz of small talk. Some people went to the portable bar for more drinks. Others were puffing on cigarettes, while twenty men or so were waiting to relieve their bladders. The line moved fairly rapidly—men are more efficient at this than women are—and soon they were in the tiled room.

The urinals were as elegant as everything else, seemingly carved from Carerra marble for this noble purpose. Hudson stood like everyone else, hoping that his clothing did not mark him as a foreigner. Just inside the wood-and-glass door, he took a breath and, leaning forward, called on his Russian.

"Good evening, Oleg Ivanovich," Hudson said quietly. "Do not turn around."

"Who are you?" Zaitzev whispered back.

"I am your travel agent. I understand you wish to take a little trip."

"Where might that be?"

"Oh, in a westerly direction. You are concerned for the safety of someone, are you not?"

"You are CIA?" Zaitzev could not utter the acronym in anything but a hiss.

"I am in an unusual line of work," Hudson confirmed. No sense confusing the chap at the moment.

"So, what will you do with me?"

"This night you will sleep in another country, my friend," Hudson told him, adding, "along with your wife and your lovely little daughter." Hudson watched his shoulders slump—with relief or fear, the British spook wondered. Probably both.

Zaitzev cleared his throat before whispering again. "What must I do?"

"First, you must tell me that you wish to go forward with your plan."

Only the briefest hesitation before: "*Da*. We will proceed."

"In that case, just do your business in here—" they were approaching the head of the line "—and then enjoy the rest of the concert, and return to your hotel. We shall speak again there at one-thirty or so. Can you do that?"

Just a curt nod and a gasping single syllable: "*Da.*" Oleg Ivan'ch really needed to use the urinal now.

"Be at ease, my friend. All is planned. All will go well," Hudson said to him. The man would need assurance and confidence now. This had to be the most frightening moment of his life.

There was no further reply. Zaitzev took the next three steps to the marble urinal, unzipped, and relieved himself in more than one way. He turned to leave without seeing Hudson's face.

But Trent saw his, as he stood there and sipped a glass of white wine. If he'd made any signal to a fellow KGB spook in the room, the British officer hadn't seen it. No rubbing the nose or adjusting his tie, no physical sign at all. He just walked back through the swinging door and back to his seat. BEATRIX was looking better and better.

THE AUDIENCE WAS back in its seats. Ryan was doing his best to look like just one more classical music fan. Then Hudson and Trent reentered the box.

"Well?" Ryan rasped.

"Bloody good music, isn't it?" Hudson replied casually. "This Rozsa chap is first-rate. Amazing that a communist country can turn out anything better than a reprise of the *Internationale.* Oh, after it's over," Hudson added, "how about a drink with some new friends?"

Jack let out a very long breath. "Yeah, Andy, I'd like that." *Son of a bitch*, Ryan thought. *It's really going to happen*. He had lots of doubts, but they'd just subsided half a step or so. It wasn't really very much, but it was a damned sight better than it could have been.

THE SECOND HALF of the concert started with more Bach, the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Instead of strings, this one was a celebration of brass, and the lead cornet here might have taught Louis Armstrong himself something about the higher notes. This was as much Bach as Ryan had ever heard at one time, and that old German composer had really had his shit wired, the former Marine thought, for the first time relaxing enough to enjoy it somewhat. Hungary was a country that respected its music, or so it seemed. If there was anything wrong with this orchestra, he didn't notice it, and the conductor looked as though he were in bed with the love of his life, so transfixed he was by the joy of the moment. Jack wondered idly if Hungarian women were any good at that. There was an earthy look to them, but not much smiling.... Maybe that was the communist government. Russians were not known for smiling, either.

"SO, ANY NEWS?" Judge Moore asked.

Mike Bostock handed over the brief dispatch from London. "Basil says his COS Budapest is going to make his move tonight. Oh, you'll love this part. The Rabbit is staying in a hotel right across the street from the KGB *rezidentura*."

Moore's eyes flared a bit. "You have to be kidding."

"Judge, do you think I'd say that for the fun of it?"

"When does Ritter get back?"

"Later today, flying back on Pan Am. From what he sent to us from Seoul, everything went pretty well with the KCIA meetings."

"He'll have a heart attack when he finds out about BEATRIX," the DCI predicted.

"It *will* get his eyes opened," the Deputy DDO agreed.

"Especially when he finds out that this Ryan boy is in on it?"

"On that, sir, you can bet the ranch, the cattle, and the big house."

Judge Moore had himself a good chuckle at that one. "Well, I guess the Agency is bigger than any one individual, right?"

"So they tell me, sir."

"When will we know?"

"I expect Basil will let us know when the plane takes off from Yugoslavia. It's going to be a long day for our new friends, though."

THE NEXT SELECTION was Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze." Ryan recognized it as the tune played in a Navy recruiting commercial. It was a gentle piece, very different from that which had preceded it. He wasn't sure if this evening's performance was a showcase for Johann Sebastian or for the conductor. In either case, it was pleasant enough, and the audience was wildly appreciative, noisier than for the concert selection. One more piece. Ryan had a program, but hadn't bothered looking at it, since it was printed in Magyar, and he couldn't read Martian any better than he could decipher the spoken form.

The last selection was Pachelbel's Canon, a justly famous piece, one that had always struck Ryan like a movie of a pretty girl saying her prayers back in the seventeenth century, trying to concentrate on her devotions instead of thinking about the handsome boy down the lane from her farmhouse—and not quite succeeding.

WITH THE END, Jozsef Rozsa turned to the audience, which leapt again to its feet and howled its approval for endless minutes. Yeah, Jack thought, the local boy had gone away, but he'd come home to make good, and the home boys from the old days were glad to have him back. The conductor hardly smiled, as though exhausted from running the marathon. And he was sweating, Jack saw. Was conducting that hard? If you were that far into it, maybe it was. He and his Brit companions were standing and applauding as much as everyone else—no sense standing out—before, finally, the noise stopped. Rozsa waved to the orchestra, which caused the cheering to continue, and then to the concertmaster of the orchestra, the first fiddle. It seemed gracious of Rozsa, but probably the thing you had to do if you wanted the musicians to put out their best for you. And then, at long last, it was time for the crowd to break up.

"Enjoy the music, Sir John?" Hudson asked with a sly grin.

"It beats what they play on the radio at home," Ryan observed. "Now what?"

"Now we get a nice drink in a quiet place." Hudson nodded to Trent, who made his own way off, and took Ryan in tow.

The air was cool outside. Ryan immediately lit a cigarette, along with every other man in view and most of the women. Hungarians didn't plan to live all that long, or so it seemed. He felt as tied to Hudson as a child to his mother, but that wouldn't last too much longer. The street had mostly apartment-type buildings. In a Western city, it would have been condos, but those probably didn't exist here. Hudson waved for Ryan to follow and they walked two blocks to a bar, ending up following about thirty people leaving the concert. Andy got a corner booth from which he could scan the room, and a waiter came with a couple glasses of wine.

"SO, WE GO?" Jack asked.

Hudson nodded. "We go. I told him we'd be to the hotel about one-thirty."

"And then?"

"And then we drive to the Yugoslav border."

Ryan didn't ask further. He didn't have to.

"The security to the south is trivial. Different the other way," Andy explained. "Near the Austrian border, it's fairly serious, but Yugoslavia, remember, is a sister communist state—that's the local fiction in any case. I'm no longer sure what Yugoslavia is, politically speaking. The border guards on the Hungarian side do well for themselves—many friendly arrangements with the smugglers. That is a growth industry, but the smart ones don't grow too much. Do that

and the Belügyminisztérium, their Interior Ministry, might take notice. Better to avoid that," Hudson reminded him.

"But if this is the back door into the Warsaw Pact—hell, KGB's gotta know, right?"

Hudson completed the question. "So, why don't they shut things down? I suppose they could, but the local economy would suffer, and the Sovs get a lot of the things they like here, too. Trent tells me that our friend has made some major purchases here. Tape machines and pantyhose—bloody pantyhose, their women kill for the things. Probably most are overtly intended for friends and colleagues back in Moscow. So, if KGB intervened, or forced the AVH to do so, then they would lose a source of things they themselves want. So a little corruption doesn't do any major damage, and it supplies the greed of the other side. Never forget that they have their weaknesses, too. Probably more than we do, in fact, much as people argue to the contrary. They want the things we have. Official channels can't work very well, but the unofficial ones do. There's a saying in Hungarian that I like: *A nagy kapu mellett, mindig van egy kis kapu*. Next to the big gate, there is always a little door. That little door is what makes things work over here."

"And I'm going through it."

"Correct." Andy finished his wine and decided against another. He had a ways to drive tonight, in the dark, over inferior roads. Instead, he lit one of his cigars.

Ryan lit a smoke of his own. "I've never done this before, Andy."
"Frightened?"

"Yeah," Jack admitted freely. "Yeah, I am."

"First time is never easy. I've never had people with machine guns come into my home."

"I don't recommend it as after-dinner entertainment," Jack replied, with a twisted smile. "But we managed to luck our way out of it."

"I don't really believe in luck—well, sometimes, perhaps. Luck does not go about in search of a fool, Sir John."

"Maybe so. Kinda hard to notice from the inside." Ryan thought back, again, to that dreadful night. The feel of the Uzi in his hands. Having to get that one shot right. No second chance in that ballgame. And he'd dropped to one knee, taken aim, and gotten it right. He'd never learned the name of the guy in the boat he'd stitched up. *Strange,* he reflected. *If you kill a man right by your home, you should at least know his name.*

But, yeah, if he could do that, he could damned well do this. He checked his watch. It would be a while still, and he wasn't driving tonight, and another glass of wine seemed a good idea. But he'd stop it there.

BACK AT THE ASTORIA, the Zaitzevs got their little Bunny to bed, and Oleg ordered some vodka to be brought up. It was the generic Russian vodka brand that the working class drank, a half-liter bottle with a foil closure at the top that essentially forced you to drink it all in one sitting. Not an altogether bad idea for this night. The bottle arrived in five minutes, and by then *zaichik* was asleep. He sat on the bed. His wife sat in the one upholstered chair. They drank from tumblers out of the bathroom.

Oleg Ivan'ch had one task yet to perform. His wife didn't know his plan. He didn't know how she'd react to it. He knew she was unhappy. He knew that this trip was the high point of their marriage. He knew she hated her job at GUM, that she wanted to enjoy the finer things in life. But would she willingly leave her motherland behind?

On the plus side of the ledger, Russian women did not enjoy much in the way of freedom, within their marriages or without. They usually did what their husbands told them to do—the husband might pay for it later, but only later. And she loved him and trusted him, and he'd shown her the best of good times in the past few days, and so, yes, she'd go along.

But he'd wait before telling her. Why spoil things by taking a risk right now? Right across the street was the KGB's Budapest *rezidentura*. And if they got word of what he had planned, then he was surely a dead man.

BACK AT THE British Embassy, sergeants Bob Small and Rod Truelove lifted the plastic bags and carried them to the embassy's nondescript truck—the license tags had already been switched. Both tried to ignore the contents, then went back to get the alcohol containers, plus a candle and a cardboard milk carton. Then they were ready. Neither had so much as a glass of beer that night, though both wished otherwise. They drove off just after midnight, planning to take their time to scout the objective before committing to a course of action. The hard part would be getting the right parking place, but, with more than hour to pick it, they were confident that one would appear in due course.

THE BAR WAS emptying out, and Hudson didn't wish to be the last one in there. The bar bill was fifty forints, which he paid, not leaving

a tip, because it wasn't the local custom, and it wouldn't do to be remembered. He motioned to Ryan and headed out but, on second thought, made his way to the loo. The thought struck Ryan as very practical, too.

Outside, Ryan asked what came next.

"We take a stroll up the street, Sir John," Hudson answered, using the knightly title as an unfair barb. "Thirty-minute stroll to the hotel, I think, will be about right." The exercise would also give them a chance to make sure they weren't being followed. If the opposition were onto their operation, they'd be unable to resist the temptation to shadow the two intelligence officers, and, on mainly empty city streets, it wouldn't be too difficult to "make" them along the way . . . unless the opposition consisted of KGB. They were cleverer than the locals by a sizable margin.

ZAITZEV AND HIS WIFE had the comfortable glow of three very stiff drinks each. Oddly, his wife showed little sign of approaching sleep, however. Too excited by the night's fine entertainment, Oleg thought. Maybe it was for the better. Just that one more worry to go—except for how the CIA planned to get them out of Hungary. What would it be? A helicopter near the border, flying them under Hungarian radar coverage? That was what he would have chosen. Would CIA be able to hop them from inside Hungary to Austria? Just how clever were they? Would they let him know? Might it be something really clever and daring? And frightening? he wondered.

Would it succeed? If not . . . well, the consequences of failure did not bear much contemplation.

But neither would they go entirely away. Not for the first time, Oleg considered that his own death might result from this adventure, and prolonged misery for his wife and child. The Soviets would not kill them, but it would mark them forever as pariahs, doomed to a life of misery. And so they were hostages to *his* conscience as well. How many Soviets had stopped short of defection just on that basis? Treason, he reminded himself, was the blackest of crimes, and the penalties for it were equally forbidding.

Zaitzev poured out the remainder of the vodka and gunned it down, waiting the last half hour before the CIA arrived to save his life . . .

Or whatever they planned to do with him and his family. He kept checking his watch while his wife finally dozed off and back, smiling and humming the Bach concert with a head that lolled back and forth. At least he'd given her as fine a night as he'd ever managed to do....

THERE WAS A parking place just by the hotel's side door. Small drove up to it and backed in neatly. Parallel parking is an art form in England that he still remembered how to perform. Then they sat, Small with a cigarette and Truelove with his favorite briar pipe, looking out at empty streets, just a few pedestrians in the distance, with Small keeping an eye on the rearview mirror for activity at the KGB residency. There were some lights on up on the second floor, but nothing moving that he could see. Probably some KGB chap had just forgotten to flip the switch on the way out.

THERE IT WAS, Ryan saw, just three blocks, on the right-hand side of the street.

Showtime.

The remaining walk passed seemingly in an instant. Tom Trent, he saw, was by the corner of the building. People were coming out of the building, probably from the basement bar Hudson had shown him, about right for closing time, just in twos and threes, nobody leaving alone. *Must be a saloon for the local singles crowd,* Jack thought, *setting up one-night stands for the terminally lonely*. So, they had them in communist countries too, eh?

As they approached, Hudson flicked a finger across his nose. That was the sign for Trent to go inside and distract the desk clerk. How he did that, Ryan would never know, but minutes later when they walked in the door, the lobby was totally empty.

"Come on." Hudson hurried over to the stairs, which wrapped around the elevator shaft. Getting to the third floor took less than a minute. And there was Room 307. Hudson turned the knob. The Rabbit had not locked it. Hudson opened it slowly.

Zaitzev saw the door open. Irina was mostly asleep now. He looked at her to be sure, then stood.

"Hello," Hudson said in quiet greeting. He extended his hand.

"Hello," Zaitzev said, in English. "You are travel agent?"

"Yes, we both are. This is Mr. Ryan."

"Ryan?" Zaitzev asked. "There is KGB operation by that name."

"Really?" Jack asked, surprised. He hadn't heard about that one yet.

"We can discuss that later, Comrade Zaitzev. We must leave now."

"Da." He turned to shake his wife awake. She started violently when she saw the two unexpected men in her room.

"Irina Bogdanova," Oleg said with a touch of sternness in his voice.

"We are taking an unexpected trip. We are leaving right now. Get Svetlana ready."

Her eyes came fully open in surprise. "Oleg, what is this? What are we doing?"

"We are leaving right now for a new destination. You must get moving now."

Ryan didn't understand the words, but the content was pretty clear. Then the woman surprised him by coming to her feet and moving like an automaton. The daughter was on a small children's bed. Mother Rabbit lifted the sleeping child to semi-wakefulness and got her clothes organized.

"What are we doing exactly?" the Rabbit asked.

"We are taking you to England—tonight," Hudson emphasized.

"Not America?"

"England first," Ryan told him. "Then I will take you to America."

"Ah." He was in a very tense state, Ryan saw, but that was to be expected. This guy had laid his life on the craps table, and the dice were still in the air. It was Ryan's job to make sure they didn't come up snake eyes. "What do I bring?"

"Nothing," Hudson said. "Not a bloody thing. Leave all your papers here. We have new ones for you." He held up three passports with a lot of faked stamps on the inside pages. "For now I will hold these for you."

"You are CIA?"

"No, I am British. Ryan here is CIA."

"But—why?"

"It's a long story, Mr. Zaitzev," Ryan said. "But right now we must leave."

The little girl was dressed now, but still sleepy, as Sally had been on that horrible night at Peregrine Cliff, Jack saw.

Hudson looked around, suddenly delighted to see the empty vodka bottle on the night table. Bloody good luck that was. Mother Rabbit was still confused, by the combination of three or four drinks and the postmidnight earthquake that had exploded around her. It had taken less than five minutes and everyone looked ready to leave. Then she saw her pantyhose bag, and moved toward it.

"Nyet," Hudson said in Russian. "Leave them. There are many of those where we are taking you."

"But—but—but . . ."

"Do what he says, Irina!" Oleg snarled, his equilibrium upset by the drink and the tension of the moment.

"Everyone ready?" Hudson asked. Next, Irina scooped her daughter up, her face a mass of utter confusion, and they all went to the door. Hudson looked out into the corridor, then waved for the others to

follow. Ryan took the rear, closing the door, after making sure it was unlocked.

The lobby was still vacant. They didn't know what Tom Trent had done, but whatever it was, it had worked. Hudson led the others out the side door and onto the street. There was the embassy car Trent had brought over, and Hudson had the spare set of keys. On the way, he waved at the truck for Small and Truelove. The car was a Jaguar, painted a dark blue, with left-hand drive. Ryan loaded them into the backseat, closed the door, and hopped in the front. The big V-8 started instantly—the Jag was lovingly maintained for purposes like this one—and Hudson started driving.

THEIR TAILLIGHTS WERE still visible as Small and Truelove stepped out of their truck, hustling to the back. Each took one of the adult bags and headed in the side door. The lobby was still empty, and they raced up the stairs, each with a heavy and limp burden. The upstairs corridor was also empty. The two retired soldiers moved as stealthily as possible into the room. There they unzipped the bags, and with gloved hands removed the bodies. That was a hard moment on each of them. Professional soldiers that they were, both with combat experience, the immediate sight of a burned human body was hard to take without a deep breath and an inner command to take charge of their feelings. They laid the man's and the woman's bodies from different countries and continents side by side on the double bed. Then they left the room to return to the truck, taking the empty body bags with them. Small got the smallest of the bags out of the truck, while Truelove got the rest of the necessary gear, and back in they went.

Small's job proved the hardest; removing the little girl's body from the plastic bag was something he'd work hard to erase from his memory. She went on the cot, as he thought of it, in her nearly incinerated nightgown. He might have patted her little head had her hair not been entirely burned off with a blowtorch, and all he could do was whisper a prayer for her innocent little soul before his stomach nearly lost control, and to prevent that he turned abruptly away.

THE FORMER ROYAL Engineer was already into his own task. He made sure they'd left nothing. The last of the plastic bags was folded and tucked into his belt. They both still had their work gloves, and so there was nothing they'd brought to be left in the room. He took his time looking around, and then waved Small out into the corridor.

Then he tore the top off the milk carton—it had been washed clean and dried beforehand. He lit the candle with his butane lighter and dripped a dollop of hot wax into the bottom of the carton, to make sure it would have a good place to stand. Then he blew out the candle and made sure it was secure in its place.

THEN CAME THE dangerous part. Truelove opened the top of the alcohol container, first pouring nearly a quart into the carton, to within just less than an inch of the top of the candle. Next he poured the alcohol on the adult bed, and more onto the child's cot. The remainder went on the floor, much of it around the milk carton. Finished, he tossed the empty alcohol container to Bob Small.

Okay, Truelove thought, fully a gallon of pure grain alcohol soaked into the bedclothes and another on the cheap rug on the floor. A demolitions expert—in fact, he had many fields of technical expertise, like most military engineers—he knew to be careful for the next part. Bending down, he flicked his lighter again and lit the candle wick with the same care a heart surgeon might have exercised in a valve replacement. He didn't waste a second leaving the room, except to make sure the door was properly locked and the do-not-disturb card hung on the knob.

"TIME TO LEAVE, Robert," Rodney said to his colleague, and in thirty seconds they were out the side door and off to the street.

"How long on the candle?" Small asked by the truck.

"Thirty minutes at most," the Royal Engineer sergeant answered.

"That poor little girl—you suppose?" he almost asked.

"People die in house fires every day, mate. They didn't do it special for this lot."

Small nodded to himself. "I reckon."

Just then Tom Trent appeared in the lobby. They'd never found the camera he lost in an upstairs room, but he tipped the desk clerk for his effort. It turned out that he was the only employee on duty until five in the morning.

Or so the chap thinks, Trent told himself, getting into the truck.

"Back to the embassy, lads," the spook told the security men. "There's a good bottle of single-malt Scotch whiskey waiting for us all."

"Good. I could use a dram," Small observed, thinking of the little girl. "Or two."

"Can you say what this adventure is all about?"

“Not tonight. Perhaps later,” Trent replied.

CHAPTER 28

BRITISH MIDLANDS

THE CANDLE BURNED NORMALLY, not knowing the part it was playing in the night's adventures, consuming wick and wax at a slow pace, gradually burning down to the still surface of the alcohol—soon to play the part of an accelerant in an arson fire. All in all, it took thirty-four minutes before the surface of the flammable fluid ignited. What started then is called a class-B fire by professionals—a flammable-liquid event. The alcohol burned with an enthusiasm hardly less than that of gasoline—this was why the Germans had used alcohol rather than kerosene in their V-2 missile—and rapidly consumed the cardboard of the milk carton, releasing the burning quart of alcohol onto the floor. That ignited the soaked surface of the hotel room's rug. The blue wave of the fire-front raced across the room's floor in a matter of seconds, like a living thing, a blue line followed by an incandescent white mass as the fire reached up to consume the available oxygen in the high-ceilinged room. Another moment and both beds ignited as well, enveloping the bodies in them with flames and searing heat.

The Hotel Astoria was an old one, lacking both smoke detectors and automatic sprinklers to warn of danger or extinguish the blaze before it got too dangerous. Instead the flames climbed almost immediately to the water-stained white ceiling, burning off paint and charring the underlying plaster, plus attacking the cheap hotel furniture. The inside of the room turned into a crematorium for three human beings already dead, eating their bodies like the carnivorous animal the ancient Egyptians thought a fire to be. The worst of the damage took just five minutes, but while the fire died down somewhat after its first glut of consumption, it didn't die just yet.

The desk clerk in the lobby had a more complex job than one might have expected. At two-thirty every morning, he placed a please-wait-backin-a few-minutes sign on the desk, and took the elevator to the top floor to walk the corridors. He found the usual—nothing at all in this floor, and all the others, until getting to number three.

Coming down the steps, he noticed an unusual smell. That perked his senses, but not all that much until his feet touched the floor. Then

he turned left and saw a wisp of smoke coming out from under the door to 307. He took the three steps to the door, and touched the knob, finding it hot, but not painfully so. That was when he made his mistake.

Taking the passkey from his pocket, he unlocked the door, and without feeling the wooden portion to see if that was hot, he pushed the door open.

The fire had largely died down, starved of oxygen, but the room remained hot, the hotel walls insulating the incipient blaze as efficiently as a barbecue pit. Opening the door admitted a large volume of fresh air and oxygen to the room, and barely had he had the chance to see the horror within when a phenomenon called flashover happened.

It was the next thing to an explosion. The room reignited in a blast of flame and a further intake of air, sufficiently strong that it nearly pulled the clerk off his feet and into the room even as an outward blast of flame pushed him the other way—and saved his life. Slapping his hands to his flash-burned face, he fell to his knees and struggled to the manual-pull alarm on the wall next to the elevator—without pulling 307's door back shut. That sounded alarm bells throughout the hotel and also reported to the nearest firehouse, three kilometers away. Screaming with pain, he walked, or fell, down the stairs to the lobby, where he first threw a glass of water on his burned face, then called the emergency number next to the phone to report the fire to the city fire department. By this time people were coming down the stairs. For them, getting past the third floor had been harrowing, and the clerk, burned as he was, got an extinguisher to spray on them, but he was unable to climb back to use the fire hose in its little cabinet on the involved floor. It would not have mattered anyway.

The first fire truck arrived less than five minutes after the pull alarm had sounded. Hardly needing to be told—the fire was visible from outside, since the room's windows had shattered from the heat of the renewed blaze—they forced their way past the escaping hotel guests. Within a minute after arriving, the first seventy-millimeter hose was spraying water into the room. It took less than five minutes to knock the fire down, and through the smoke and horrid smell, the firemen forced their way inside to find what they feared—a family of three, dead in their beds.

The fire lieutenant in command of the first responders cradled the dead child in his arms and ran down and out onto the street, but he could see it was a waste. The child had roasted like a piece of meat in an oven. Hosing her body down only exposed the ghastly effect a fire has on a human body, and there was nothing for him to do but say a prayer for her. The lieutenant was the brother of a priest and a devout

Catholic in this Marxist country, and he prayed to his God for mercy for the little girl's soul, not knowing that the very same thing had happened over four thousand miles away and ten days earlier.

THE RABBITS WERE out of the city in a matter of minutes. Hudson drove carefully, within the posted speed limits, lest there be a cop around, though there was virtually no traffic in evidence, merely the occasional truck, commercial ones with canvas sides, carrying who knew what to who knew where. Ryan was in the right-front seat, half turned to look in the back. Irina Zaitzev was a mask of tipsy confusion, not comprehending enough to be frightened. The child was asleep, as children invariably were at this time of night. The father was trying to be stoic, but the edge of fear was visible on his face, even in the darkness. Ryan tried to put himself in his place, but found it impossible to do so. To betray one's country was too great a leap of imagination for him. He knew there were those who stabbed America in the back, mainly for money, but he didn't pretend to understand their motivation. Sure, back in the '30s and '40s there had been those for whom communism looked like the leading wave of human history, but those thoughts were all as dead as V. I. Lenin was today. Communism was a dying idea, except in the minds of those who needed it to be the source of their personal power.... And perhaps some still believed in it because they'd never been exposed to anything else, or because the idea had been too firmly planted in their distant youth, as a minister or priest believed in God. But the words of Lenin's *Collected Works* were not Holy Writ to Ryan and never would be. As a new college graduate, he'd sworn his oath to the Constitution of the United States and promised to "bear true faith and allegiance to the same" as a second lieutenant of the United States Marine Corps, and that was that.

"How long, Andy?"

"A little over an hour to Csurgo. Traffic ought not to be a problem," Hudson answered.

And it wasn't. In minutes, they were outside the boundaries of Hungary's capital, and then the lights of houses and businesses just stopped as though someone had flipped the master switch for electricity to the region. The road was two-lane blacktop, and none too wide at that. Telephone poles, no guardrails. *And this is a major commercial highway?* Ryan wondered. They might as well have been driving across central Nevada. Perhaps one or two lights every kilometer, farmhouses where people liked to have one on to help find their way to the bathroom. Even the road signs looked decrepit and not very helpful—not the mint-green highway signs of home or the

friendly blue ones of England. It didn't help that the words on them were in Martian. Otherwise they were the European sort, showing the speed limit in black numbers on a white disc within a red circle.

Hudson was a competent driver, puffing away on his cigars and driving as though he were on his way to Covent Garden in London. Ryan thanked God that he'd made a trip to the head before walking to the hotel—otherwise he might lose control of his bladder. Well, probably his face didn't show how nervous he was, Jack hoped. He kept telling himself that his own life wasn't on the line, but those of the people in the back were, and they were now his responsibility, and something in him, probably something learned from his policeman father, made that a matter of supreme importance.

"What is your full name?" Oleg asked him, breaking the silence unexpectedly.

"Ryan, Jack Ryan."

"What sort of name is Ryan?" the Rabbit pressed on.

"My ancestry is Irish. John corresponds to Ivan, I think, but people call me Jack, like Vanya, maybe."

"And you are in CIA?"

"Yes, I am."

"What is your job in CIA?"

"I am an analyst. Mostly I sit at a desk and write reports."

"I also sit at desk in Centre."

"You are a communications officer?"

A nod. "*Da*, that is my job in Centre." Then Zaitzev remembered that his important information was not for the back of a car, and he shut back up.

Ryan saw that. He had things to say, but not here, and that was fair enough for the moment.

The trip went smoothly. Four cigars for Hudson, and six cigarettes for Ryan, until they approached the town of Csurgo.

Ryan had expected something more than this. Csurgo was barely a wide place in the road, with not even a gas station in evidence, and surely not an all-night 7-Eleven. Hudson turned off the main road onto a dirt track, and three minutes later there was the shape of a commercial truck. It was a big Volvo, he saw in a moment, with a black canvas cover on the back and two men standing next to it, both smoking. Hudson pulled around it, finding concealment behind some nondescript sort of shed a few yards from it, and stopped the Jaguar. He hopped out, and motioned to the rest to do the same.

Ryan followed the Brit spook to the two men. Hudson walked right up to the older of the two and shook his hand.

"Hello, Istvan. Good of you to wait for us."

"Hello, Andy. It is a dull night. Who are your friends?"

"This is Mr. Ryan. These are the Somerset family. We're going across the border," Hudson explained.

"Okay," Kovacs agreed. "This is Jani. He's my driver for tonight. Andy, you can ride in front with us. The rest will be in the back. Come," he said, leading the way.

The truck's tailgate had ladder steps built in. Ryan climbed up first, and bent down to lift the little girl—Svetlana, he remembered, was her name—and watched her mother and father climb up. In the cargo area, he saw, were some large cardboard boxes, perhaps containers for the tape machine Hungarians made. Kovacs climbed up also.

"You all speak English?" he asked, and got nods. "It is a short way to the border, just five kilometer. You will hide in boxes here. Please make no noise. Is important. You understand? Make no noise." He got more nods, noting that the man—definitely not an Englishman, he could see—translated to his wife. The man took the child, Kovacs saw also. With his cargo hidden away, he closed the tailgate and walked forward.

"Five thousand d-mark for this, eh?" Istvan asked.

"That is correct," Hudson agreed.

"I should ask more, but I am not a greedy man."

"You are a trusted comrade, my friend," Hudson assured him, briefly wishing that he had a pistol in his belt.

The Volvo's big diesel lit up with a rumbling roar and the truck jerked off, back to the main road, with Jani at the large, almost flat steering wheel.

It didn't take long.

And that was a good thing for Ryan, crouching in the cardboard box in the back. He could only guess how the Russians felt, like unborn babies in a horrible womb, one with loaded guns outside it.

Ryan was afraid even to smoke a final cigarette, fearing someone might smell the smoke over the pungent diesel exhaust, which was altogether unlikely.

"So, Istvan," Hudson asked in the cab, "what is the routine?"

"Watch. We usually travel at night. Is more—dramatic, you say? I know the Határ-rség here many years now. Captain Budai Laszlo is good man to do business with. He has wife and little daughter, always want present for daughter Zsóka. I have," Kovacs promised, holding up a paper bag.

The border post was sufficiently well lighted that they could see it three kilometers off, and blessedly there was little traffic this time of night. Jani drove up normally, slowing and stopping there when the private of the border guards, the *Határ-rség,* waved for them to halt.

"Is Captain Budai here?" Kovacs asked at once. "I have something for him." The private headed into the guardhouse and returned

instantly with a more senior man.

"Laszlo! How are you this cold night?" Kovacs called in Magyar, then jumped down from the cab with the paper shopping bag.

"Istvan, what can I say, it is dull night," the youngish captain replied.

"And your little Zsóka, she is well?"

"Her birthday is next week. She will be five."

"Excellent!" the smuggler observed. He handed over the bag. "Give her these."

"These" were a pair of candy-apple-red Reebok sneakers with Velcro closures.

"Lovely," Captain Budai observed, with genuine pleasure. He took them out to look at them in the light. Any female child in the world loved the things, and Laszlo was as happy as his daughter would be in four days. "You are a good friend, Istvan. So, what do you transport tonight?"

"Nothing of value. I'm making a pickup this morning in Beograd, though. Anything you need?"

"My wife would love some tapes for the Walkman you got her last month." The amazing thing about Budai was that he was not an overly greedy man. That was one of the reasons Kovacs liked to travel across the border on his watch.

"What groups?"

"The Bee Gees, I think she called them. For me, some show tunes, if you don't mind."

"Anything in particular? The music from American movies, like *Star Wars,* perhaps."

"I have that one, but not the new one, the *Empire Attacks Back,* perhaps?"

"Done." They shook hands. "How about some Western coffee?"

"What kind?"

"Austrian or American, maybe? There's a place in Beograd that has American Folgers coffee. It is very tasty," Kovacs assured him.

"I have never tried that."

"I'll get you some and you can try it—no charge."

"You are a good man," Budai observed. "Have a good night. Pass," he concluded, waving to his corporal.

And it was just that easy. Kovacs walked back around and climbed into his truck. He wouldn't have to part with the present he had for Sergeant Kerekes Mikaly, and that was good, too.

Hudson was surprised. "No paper check?"

"Laszlo just runs the name through the teletype to Budapest. Some people there are also on my payroll. They are more greedy than he is, but is not major expense. Jani, go," he said to the driver, who started

up and pulled across the line painted on the pavement. And just that easily, the truck left the Warsaw Pact.

In the back, Ryan had rarely felt so good to feel a vehicle start to move. It stopped again in a minute, but this was a different border.

And going into Yugoslavia, Jani handled it, just trading a few words with the guard, not even killing the engine, before being waved forward and into the semi-communist country. He drove three kilometers before being told to pull off onto a side road. There, after a few bumps, the Volvo stopped. Yugoslavian border security, Hudson saw, was sod-all.

Ryan was already out of his cardboard box and standing at the back when the canvas cover was flipped aside.

"We're here, Jack," Hudson said.

"Where is that exactly?"

"Yugoslavia, my lad. The nearest town is Légrád, and here we part company."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I'm turning you over to Vic Lucas. He's my counterpart in Belgrade. Vic?" Hudson beckoned.

The man who came into view might have been Hudson's twin, except for the hair, which was black. He was also two or three inches taller, Jack decided on second inspection. He went forward to get the Rabbits out of the boxes. That happened in a hurry, and Ryan helped them down, handing the little girl—remarkably, still asleep—to her mother, who looked more confused than ever.

Hudson walked them to a car, a station wagon—"estate wagon" to the Brits—which would at least have ample room for everyone.

"Sir John—Jack, that is—well done, and thanks for all your help."

"I didn't do shit, Andy, but you handled this pretty damned well," Ryan said, taking his hand. "Come see me in London for a pint sometime."

"That I shall do," Hudson promised.

The estate wagon was a British Ford. Ryan helped the Rabbits into their seats and then took the right-front again.

"Mr. Lucas, where do we go now?"

"To the airport. Our flight is waiting," the Belgrade COS replied.

"Oh? Special flight?"

"No, the commercial aircraft is experiencing 'technical difficulties' at the moment. I rather expect they will be cleared up about the time we get aboard."

"Good to know," Ryan observed. Better this than a real broken airplane, then he realized that one more harrowing adventure lay ahead. His hatred of flying was suddenly back, now that they were in semi-free country.

"Right, let's be off," Lucas said, starting his engine and pulling off. Whatever sort of spook Vic Lucas was, he must have thought himself Stirling Moss's smarter brother. The car rocketed down the road into the Yugoslavian darkness.

"So, how has your night been, Jack?"

"Eventful," Ryan answered, making sure his seat belt was properly fastened.

The countryside here was better lit and the road better engineered and maintained, or so it seemed, flashing by at what felt like seventy-five miles per hour, rather fast for a strange road in the dark. Robby Jackson drove like this, but Robby was a fighter pilot, and therefore invincible while at the controls of any transportation platform. This Vic Lucas must have felt the same way, calmly looking forward and turning the wheel in short, sharp increments. In the back, Oleg was still tense, and Irina still trying to come to terms with some new and incomprehensible reality, while their little daughter continued to sleep like a diminutive angel. Ryan was chain-smoking. It seemed to help somewhat, though if Cathy smelled it on his breath there would be hell to pay. Well, she'd just have to understand, Jack thought, watching telephone poles flash by the car like fence pickets. He was doing Uncle Sam's business.

Then Ryan saw a police car sitting by the side of the road, its officers sipping coffee or sleeping through their watch.

"Not to worry," Lucas said. "Diplomatic tags. I am the senior political counselor at Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy. And you good people are my guests."

"You say so, man. How much longer?"

"Half an hour, roughly. Traffic's been very kind to us so far. Not much truck traffic. This road can be crowded, even late at night with cross-border trade. That Kovacs chap's been working with us for years. I could make quite a good living in partnership with him. He often brings those Hungarian tape machines this way. They're decent machines, and they're giving the bloody things away, what with the labor costs in Hungary. Surprising they don't try to sell them in the West, though I expect they'd have to pay the Japanese for the patent infringements. Not too scrupulous about such things on the other side of the line, you see." Lucas took another high-speed turn.

"Jesus, guy, how fast do you go in daylight?"

"Not much faster than this. Good night vision, you see, but the suspension on this car slows me down. American design, you see. Too soft for proper handling."

"So buy a Corvette. Friend of mine has one."

"Lovely things, but made out of plastic." Lucas shook his head and reached for a cigar. Probably a Cuban one, Ryan was sure. They loved

the things in England.

Half an hour later, Lucas congratulated himself. “There it is. Just on time.”

Airports are airports all over the world. The same architect probably designed them all, Ryan thought. The only differences were the signs for the rest rooms. In England they called them toilets, which had always struck him as a little crude in an otherwise gentle country. Then he got a surprise. Instead of driving to the terminal, Lucas took the path through the open gate right onto the flight line.

“I have an arrangement with the airport manager,” he explained. “He likes single malts.” Still and all, Lucas stayed on the yellow-lined car path, right to a lonely aircraft jetway with an airliner parked next to it. “Here we are,” the Brit spook announced.

They all stepped out of the car, this time with Mrs. Rabbit holding the Bunny. Lucas led them up the exterior stairs into the jetway’s control booth, and from there right into the aircraft’s open door.

The captain, hatless but wearing four stripes on his shoulders, was standing right there. “You’re Mr. Lucas?”

“That is correct, Captain Rogers. And here are your extra passengers.” He pointed to Ryan and the Rabbit family.

“Excellent.” Captain Rogers turned to his lead stew. “We can board the aircraft now.”

The second-ranking flight attendant took them to the four front-row first-class seats, where Ryan was singularly surprised to be happy belting himself in to 1-B, the aisle seat just behind the front bulkhead. He watched thirty or so working-class passengers come aboard after sunning themselves on the Dalmatian Coast—a favorite for Brits of late—none of them looking very happy for the three-hour delay on what was already supposed to be the day’s last flight to Manchester. Things happened quickly after that. He heard both engines start up, and then the BAC-111—the British counterpart to the Douglas DC-9—backed away from the jetway and taxied out on the ramp.

“What now?” Oleg asked, in what was almost a normal voice.

“We fly to England,” Ryan replied. “Two hours or so, I guess, and we’ll be there.”

“So easy?”

“You think this was easy?” Ryan asked, with no small amount of incredulity in his voice. Then the intercom turned on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Rogers speaking. I am glad to say that we finally got the electronic problem repaired. Thank you ever so much for your patience, and after we lift off, the drinks will be free to all passengers.” That evoked a cheer from the back of the aircraft. “For the moment, please pay attention to the flight attendants for your safety message.”

Put your seat belts on, dummies, and they work like this, *for those of you stupid enough not to notice that you have the fucking things in your personal automobiles, too*. And then in three more minutes the British Midlands airliner clawed its way into the sky.

As promised, before they'd gotten to ten thousand feet, the no-smoking light *ding*ed off and the drink cart arrived. The Russian asked for vodka and got three miniatures of Finlandia. Ryan got himself a glass of wine and the promise of more. He wouldn't sleep on this flight, but he wouldn't worry as much as usual, either. He was leaving the communist world behind at five hundred miles per hour, and that was probably the best way to do it.

Oleg Ivan'ch, he saw, drank vodka as though it were water after a hot day of cutting the grass. His wife, over in 1-C, was doing the same. Ryan felt positively virtuous sipping gently at his French wine.

"SIGNAL IN FROM BASIL," Bostock reported over the phone. "The Rabbit is in the air. ETA Manchester in ninety minutes."

"Great," Judge Moore breathed, relieved as always when a black operation worked out as planned. Better still, they'd run it without Bob Ritter, who, though a good man, was not entirely indispensable.

"Three more days and we can debrief him," Bostock said next. "The nice house out by Winchester?"

"Yeah, we'll see if he likes horse country." The house even had a Steinway piano for Mrs. Rabbit to play and lots of green for the kid to run around on.

ALAN KINGSHOT WAS just pulling into the parking area at the Manchester airport, along with two subordinates. There would be a large back Daimler automobile to take the arriving defectors out to Somerset in the morning. He hoped they didn't mind driving. It would be nearly a two-hour drive. For the moment, they'd be quartering at a nice country house just a few minutes from the airport. They'd probably done quite enough traveling for the moment, with still more to come before the end of the week. But then he started thinking about it. Might that be too hard on them? The question gave him something to ponder at one of the airport's bars.

RYAN WAS PRETTY well potted. Maybe alcohol interacted with anxiety, he thought, taking a moment to go to the forward rest room

on the airliner, and feeling better when he got back and was strapped in. He almost never took his seat belt off. The food served was just sandwiches—English ones, with their unnatural affection for a weed called watercress. What he really wanted now was a good corned beef, but the Brits didn't even know what corned beef was, thinking it the canned junk that looked like dog food to most Americans. In fact, the Brits probably fed better stuff to their dogs, as enthralled as they were with their pets. The lights passing underneath the airliner proved that they were overflying Western Europe. The Eastern part was never well lit, as he'd learned coming south from Budapest.

BUT ZAITZEV wasn't sure. What if this was a very elaborate ruse to get him to spill the beans? What if the Second Chief Directorate had staged a huge *maskirovka* village for his brief benefit?

"Ryan?"

Jack turned. "Yes?"

"What will I see in England when we get there?"

"I don't know what the plan is after we get to Manchester," Ryan reported.

"You are CIA?" the Rabbit asked again.

"Yes." Jack nodded.

"How can I be sure of this?"

"Well . . ." Ryan fished out his wallet. "Here are my driver's license, credit cards, some cash. My passport is fake, of course. I'm an American, but they fixed me up with a British one. Oh," Ryan realized, "you're worried that this is all faked?"

"How can I be sure?"

"My friend, in less than an hour, you will be certain it is not. Here —" He opened his wallet again. "This is my wife, my daughter, and our new son. My address at home—in America, that is—is here on my driver's license, 5000 Peregrine Cliff Road, Anne Arundel County, Maryland. That is right on the Chesapeake Bay. It takes me about an hour to drive from there to CIA Headquarters at Langley. My wife is an eye surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. It is world-famous. You must have heard of it."

Zaitzev just shook his head.

"Well, a couple years ago, three docs from Hopkins fixed the eyes of Mikhail Suslov. I understand he just died. His replacement, we think, will be Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov. We know a little about him, but not enough. In fact, we don't know enough about Yuriy Vladimirovich."

"What do you not know?"

"Is he married? We've never seen a picture of his wife, if any."

"Yes, everyone knows this. His wife is Tatiana, elegant woman, my wife says she has noble features. But no children for them," Oleg concluded.

Well, there's factoid #1 from the Rabbit, Ryan thought.

"How is it possible that you do not know this?" Zaitzev demanded.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, there are many things we do not know about the Soviet Union," Jack admitted. "Some are important, and some are not."

"Is this true?"

"Yes, it is."

Something rattled loose in Zaitzev's head. "You say your name Ryan?" "That's right."

"Your father policeman?"

"How did you know that?" Ryan asked in some surprise.

"We have small dossier on you. Washington *rezidentura* do it. Your family attacked by hooligans, yes?"

"Correct." *KGB is interested in me, eh?* Jack thought. "Terrorists, they tried to kill me and my family. My son was born that night."

"And you join CIA after that?"

"Again, yes—officially, anyway. I've done work for the Agency for several years." Then curiosity took full hold. "What does my dossier say about me?"

"It say you are rich fool. You were officer in naval infantry, and your wife is rich and you marry her for that reason. To get more money for self."

So, even the KGB is a prisoner of its own political prejudices, Jack thought. *Interesting.*

"I am not poor," Jack told the Rabbit. "But I married my wife for love, not money. Only a fool does that."

"How many capitalists are fools?"

Ryan had himself a good laugh. "A lot more than you might think. You do not need to be very smart in America to become rich." New York and Washington in particular were full of rich idiots, but Ryan thought the Rabbit needed a little while before he learned that lesson. "Who did the dossier on me?"

"Reporter in Washington *rezidentura* of *Izvestia* is junior KGB officer. He do it last summer."

"And how did you come to know about it?"

"His dispatch come to my desk, and I forward to America–Canada Institute—is KGB office. You know that, yes?"

"Yes," Jack confirmed. "That is one we do know." That was when his ears popped. The airliner was descending. Ryan gunned down the last of his third white wine and told himself it would all be over in a few minutes. One thing he'd learned from Operation BEATRIX: This

field work wasn't for him.

The no-smoking sign *ding*ed back on. Ryan brought his chair to its full upright position, and then the lights of Manchester appeared through the windows, the car headlights and the airport fence, and in a few more seconds . . . *thump,* the wheels touched down in Merry Old England. It might not be the same as America, but for the moment it would do.

Oleg, he saw, had his face against the window, checking out the tail colors of the aircraft. There were too many for this to be a Soviet Air Force base and a huge *maskirovka*. He visibly started to relax.

"We welcome you to Manchester," the pilot said over the intercom. "The time is three-forty, and the temperature outside is fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit. We appreciate your patience earlier today, and we hope to see you again soon in British Midlands Airways."

Yeah, Jack thought. *In your dreams, skipper.*

Ryan sat and waited as the aircraft taxied to the international-arrivals area. A truck-borne stairway came to the front door, which the lead stew duly opened. Ryan and the Rabbit family were first off and down the steps, where they were guided to some cars instead of the waiting transfer bus.

Alan Kingshot was there to take his hand. "How was it, Jack?"

"Just like a trip to Disney World," Ryan answered, without a trace of audible irony in his voice.

"Right. Let's get you all loaded and off to a comfortable place."

"Works for me, pal. What is it, quarter of three?" Ryan hadn't changed his watch back yet. Britain was an hour behind the rest of Europe.

"That's right," the field spook confirmed.

"Damn," Jack reacted. Too damned late to call home and tell Cathy he was back. But, then, he wasn't really back. Now he had to play CIA representative for the first interview of the Red Rabbit. Probably Sir Basil had him doing this because he was too junior to be very effective. Well, maybe he'd show his British host just how dumb he was, Ryan growled to himself. But first it was time for sleep. Stress, he'd learned, was about as tiring as jogging—just harder on the heart.

BACK IN BUDAPEST, the three bodies were at the city morgue, an institution as depressing behind the Iron Curtain as in front of it. When Zaitzev's identity as a Russian citizen had been confirmed, a call had been made to the Soviet Embassy, where it was speedily established that the man in question was a KGB officer. *That* generated interest in the *rezidentura,* just across the street from the hotel where he'd ostensibly died, and more telephone calls were made.

Before five in the morning, Professor Zoltán Bíró was awakened in his bed by the AVH. Bíró was professor of pathology at the Ignaz Semmelweis Medical College. Named for one of the fathers of the germ theory that had transformed the science of medicine in the nineteenth century, it remained a good one, even attracting students from West Germany, none of whom would attend the postmortem examinations ordered by the country's Belügyminisztérium, which would also be attended by the physician-in-residence at the Soviet Embassy.

The first done would be the adult male. Technicians took blood samples from all three bodies for analysis in the adjacent laboratory.

"This is the body of a male Caucasian, approximately thirty-five years of age, length approximately one hundred seventy-five centimeters, weight approximately seventy-six kilograms. Color of hair cannot be determined due to extensive charring from a domestic fire. Initial impression is death by fire—more probably from carbon monoxide intoxication, as the body shows no evidence of death throes." Then the dissection began with the classical Y incision to open the body cavity for viewing of the internal organs.

He was examining the heart—unremarkable—when the lab reports came in.

"Professor Bíró, carbon monoxide in all three blood samples are well into lethal range," the voice on the speaker said, giving the exact numbers.

Bíró looked over at his Russian colleague. "Anything else you need? I can do a full postmortem on all three victims here, but the cause of death is determined. This man was not shot. We will do fuller blood-chemistry checks, of course, but it's unlikely that they were poisoned, and there is clearly no bullet wound or other penetrating trauma in this man. They were all killed by fire. I will send you the full laboratory report this afternoon." Bíró let out a long breath. *"A kurva életbe!"* he concluded with a popular Magyar epithet.

"Such a pretty little girl," the Russian internist observed. Zaitzev's wallet had somehow survived the fire, along with its family photos. The picture of Svetlana had been particularly engaging.

"Death is never sentimental, my friend," Bíró told him. As a pathologist, he knew that fact all too well.

"Very well. Thank you, Comrade Professor." And the Russian took his leave, already thinking through his official report to Moscow.

CHAPTER 29

REVELATION

THE SAFE HOUSE WAS palatial, the country home of somebody with both money and taste, built in the previous century by the look of it, with stucco and the sort of heavy oaken timbers used to build ships like HMS *Victory* once upon a time. But landlocked, it was about as far from blue water as one could get on this island kingdom.

Evidently, Alan Kingshot knew it well enough, since he drove them there and then got them settled inside. The two-person staff that ran the place looked like cops to Ryan, probably married and retired from the Police Force of the Metropolis, as the London Constabulary was officially known. They kindly escorted their new guests to a rather nice suite of rooms. Irina Zaitzev's eyes were agog at the accommodations, which were impressive even by Ryan's standards. All Oleg Ivanovich did was set his shaving kit in the bathroom, strip off his clothes, and collapse onto the bed, where alcohol-aided sleep proved to be less than five minutes away.

WORD GOT TO Judge Moore just before midnight that the package was safely ensconced in a very secure location, and with that information he also went to bed. All that remained was to tell the Air Force to get a KC-135 or a similar aircraft ready to fly the package home, and that would take a mere telephone call to an officer in the Pentagon. He wondered what the Rabbit would say, but he could wait for that. Patience, once the dangerous stuff was behind, was not all that difficult for the Director of Central Intelligence. It was like Christmas Eve, and while he wasn't exactly sure what would be under the tree, he could be confident that it wouldn't be anything bad.

FOR SIR BASIL Charleston at his Belgravia house, the news came before breakfast, when a messenger from Century House arrived with the word. *An altogether pleasant way to start a working day,* he thought, certainly better than some others he'd had. He left home for the office

just before seven A.M., ready for his morning brief to outline the success of Operation BEATRIX.

RYAN WAS AWAKENED by traffic noise. Whoever had built this magnificent country home hadn't anticipated the construction of a motorway just three hundred yards away, but somehow Ryan had avoided a hangover from all the drinks on the flight in, and the lingering excitement of the moment had gotten him fully awake after a mere six and a half hours of slumber. He washed up and made his way to the pleasant not-so-little breakfast room. Alan Kingshot was there, working on his morning tea.

"Probably coffee for you, eh?"

"If you have any."

"Only instant," Kingshot warned.

Jack stifled his disappointment. "Better than no coffee at all."

"Eggs Benedict?" the retired woman cop asked.

"Ma'am, for that I will forgive the absence of Starbucks," Jack replied, with a smile. Then he saw the morning papers, and he thought that reality and normality had finally returned to his life. Well, almost.

"Mr. and Mrs. Thompson run this house for us," Kingshot explained. "Nick was a homicide detective with the Yard, and Emma was in administration."

"That's what my dad used to do," Ryan observed. "How did you guys get working for SIS?"

"Nick worked on the Markov case," Mrs. Thompson answered.

"And did a damned good job of it, too," Kingshot told Ryan. "He would have been a fine field officer for us."

" 'Bond, James Bond'?" Nick Thompson said, walking into the kitchen. "I think not. Our guests are moving about. It sounds as though the little girl got them up."

"Yeah," Jack observed. "Kids will do that. So, we do the debrief here or somewhere else?"

"We were planning to do it in Somerset, but I decided last night not to drive them around too much. Why stress them out?" Kingshot asked rhetorically. "We just took title to this house last year, and it's as comfortable a place as any. The one in Somerset—near Taunton—is a touch more isolated, but these people ought not to bolt, you think?"

"If he goes home, he's one dead Rabbit," Ryan thought out loud. "He has to know that. On the plane, he was worried that we were KGB and this was all an elaborate *maskirovka* setup, I think. His wife did a lot of shopping in Budapest. Maybe we have somebody take her shopping around here?" the American wondered. "Then we can talk to

him in comfort. His English seems okay. Do we have anybody here with good Russian?"

"My job," Kingshot told Ryan.

"First thing we want to know, why the hell did he decide to skip town?"

"Obviously, but then, what's all this lot about compromised communications?"

"Yeah." Ryan took a deep breath. "I imagine people are jumping out windows about that one."

"Too bloody right," Kingshot confirmed.

"So, Al, you've worked Moscow?"

The Brit nodded. "Twice. Good sport it was, but rather tense the whole time I was there."

"Where else?"

"Warsaw and Bucharest. I speak all the languages. Tell me, how was Andy Hudson?"

"He's a star, Al. Very smooth and confident all the way—knows his turf, good contacts. He took pretty good care of me."

"Here's your coffee, Sir John," Mrs. Thompson said, bringing his cup of Taster's Choice. The Brits were good people, and their food, Ryan thought, was wrongly maligned, but they didn't know beans about coffee, and that was that. But it was still better than tea.

The Eggs Benedict arrived shortly thereafter, and at that dish, Mrs. Thompson could have given lessons. Ryan opened his paper—it was the *Times*—and relaxed to get reacquainted with the world. He'd call Cathy in about an hour when he was at work. With luck, he might even see her in a couple days. In a perfect world, he'd have a copy of an American paper, or maybe the *International Tribune*, but the world was not yet perfect. There was no sense asking how the World Series was going. It was going to start tomorrow, wasn't it? How good were the Phillies this year? Well, as usual, you played the games to find out.

"So, how was the trip, Jack?" Kingshot asked.

"Alan, those field officers earn every nickel they make. How you deal with the constant tension, I do not understand."

"Like everything else, Jack, you get used to it. Your wife is a surgeon. The idea of cutting people open with a knife is not at all appealing to me."

Jack barked a short laugh. "Yeah, me too, pal. And she does eyeballs. Nothing important, right?"

Kingshot shuddered visibly at the thought, and Ryan reminded himself that working in Moscow, running agents—and probably arranging rescue missions like they'd done for the Rabbit—could not have been much more fun than a heart transplant.

"Ah, Mr. Somerset," Ryan heard Mrs. Thompson say. "Good

morning, and welcome."

"*Spasiba*," Oleg Ivan'ch replied in a sleepy voice. Kids could get you up at the goddamnedest hours, with their smiling faces and lovely dispositions. "That is my new name?"

"We'll figure something more permanent later," Ryan told him. "Again, welcome."

"This is England?" the Rabbit asked.

"We're eight miles from Manchester," the British intelligence officer replied. "Good morning. In case you don't remember, my name is Alan Kingshot. This is Mrs. Emma Thompson, and Nick will be back in a few minutes." Handshakes were exchanged.

"My wife be here soon. She see to *zaichik*," he explained.

"How are you feeling, Vanya?" Kingshot asked.

"Much travel, much fear, but I am safe now, yes?"

"Yes, you are entirely safe," Kingshot assured him.

"And what would you like for breakfast?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

"Try this," Jack suggested, pointing at his plate. "It's great."

"Yes, I will—what is called?"

"Eggs Benedict," Jack told him. "Mrs. Thompson, this hollandaise sauce is just perfect. My wife needs your recipe, if I may impose." And maybe Cathy could teach her about proper coffee. *That would be an equitable trade,* Ryan thought.

"Why, certainly, Sir John," she replied with a beaming smile. No woman in all the world objects to praise for her cooking.

"For me also, then," Zaitzev decided.

"Tea or coffee?" she asked her guest.

"You have English Breakfast tea?" the Rabbit asked.

"Of course," she answered.

"Please for me, then."

"Certainly." And she disappeared back into the kitchen.

It was still a lot for Zaitzev to take. Here he was, in the breakfast room of a manor house fit for a member of the old nobility, surrounded by a green lawn such as one might see at Augusta National, with monstrous oak trees planted two hundred years before, a carriage house, and stables in the distance. It was something he might have imagined as worthy of Peter the Great, the things of books and museums, and he was in it as an honored guest?

"Nice house, isn't it?" Ryan asked, finishing off the Eggs Benny.

"Is amazing," Zaitzev responded, wide eyes sweeping around.

"Belonged to a ducal family, bought by a textiles manufacturer a hundred years ago, but his business fell on hard times, and the government bought it last year. We use it for conferences and as a safe house. The heating system is a little primitive," Kingshot reported. "But that is not a problem at the moment. We've had a very pleasant

summer, and the fall looks promising as well."

"At home, there'd be a golf course around this place," Jack said, looking out the windows. "A big one."

"Yes," Alan agreed. "It would be splendid for that."

"When I go America?" the Rabbit asked.

"Oh, three or four days," Kingshot answered. "We would like to talk with you a little, if you don't mind."

"When do we start?"

"After breakfast. Take your time, Mr. Zaitzev. You are no longer in the Soviet Union. We shall not pressure you at all," Alan promised.

My ass, Ryan thought. *Buddy, they're going to suck your brain out of your head and strain it for your thoughts one molecule at a time*. But the Rabbit had just gotten a free ride out of Mother Russia, with the prospect of a comfortable life for him and his family in the West, and everything in life had its price.

He loved his tea. Then the rest of the family came out and, over the next twenty minutes, Mrs. Thompson nearly ran out of Hollandaise sauce, while the arriving Russians ensured steady employment for the local egg farmers.

Irina left the breakfast room to tour the house and was greatly excited to see a concert grand Bösendorfer piano, turning like a kid at Christmas to ask if she might tickle the keys. She was years out of practice, but the look on her face was like a return of childhood as she struggled through "On the Bridge at Avignon," which had been her favorite exercise tune many years before—and which she still remembered.

"A friend of mine plays professionally," Jack said, with a smile. It was hard not to appreciate her joy of the moment.

"Who? Where?" Oleg asked.

"Sissy—actually, Cecilia Jackson. Her husband and I are friends. He's a fighter pilot for the U.S. Navy. She is number-two piano soloist at the Washington Symphony. My wife plays, too, but Sissy is really good."

"You are good to us," Oleg Ivan'ch said.

"We try to take decent care of our guests," Kingshot told him. "Shall we talk in the library?" He pointed the way.

The chairs were comfortable. The library was another stellar example of nineteenth-century woodwork, with thousands of books and three rolling ladders—it isn't a proper English library without a ladder. The chairs were plush. Mrs. Thompson brought in a tray of ice water and glasses, and business began.

"So, Mr. Zaitzev, can you begin to tell us about yourself?" Kingshot asked. He was rewarded by name, ancestry, place of birth, and education.

"No military service?" Ryan asked.

Zaitzev shook his head. "No, KGB spot me and they protect me from army time."

"And that was in university?" Kingshot asked for clarity. A total of three tape recorders were turning.

"Yes, that is correct. My first year they speak to me for first time."

"And when did you join KGB?"

"Immediately I leave Moscow State University. They take me into communications department."

"And how long there?"

"Since, well, for nine and half years in total, set aside my time in academy and other training."

"And where do you work now?" Kingshot led him on.

"I work in Central Communications in basement of Moscow Centre."

"And what exactly did you do there?" Alan finally asked.

"During my watch, all dispatches come in from field to my desk. My job is to maintain security, to be sure proper procedures followed, and then I forward to action officers upstairs. Or to United States–Canada Institute sometimes," Oleg said, gesturing to Ryan.

Jack did his best not to let his mouth fall open. This guy really *was* an escapee from the Soviet counterpart to CIA's MERCURY. This guy saw it all. Everything, or damned near. He'd just helped a gold mine escape from behind the wire. *Son of a bitch!*

Kingshot did a somewhat better job of concealing his feelings, but he let his eyes slip over to Ryan's, and that expression said it all.

Bloody hell.

"So, do you know the names of your field officers and their agents?" Kingshot asked.

"KGB officer names—I know many names. Agents, the names I know very few, but I know code names. In Britain, our best agent is code-named MINISTER. He give us high-value diplomatic and political intelligence for many years—twenty years, I think, perhaps more."

"You said KGB has compromised our communications," Ryan observed.

"Yes, somewhat. That is agent NEPTUNE. How much he give, I am not sure, but I know KGB read much of American naval communications."

"What about other communications?" Jack asked immediately.

"Naval communications, that I am sure. Others, I am not sure, but you use same cipher machines for all, yes?"

"Actually not," Alan told him. "So, you say British communications are secure?"

"If broken, I do not know it," Zaitzev replied. "Most American diplomatic and intelligence information we get come from Agent

CASSIUS. He is aide to senior politician in Washington. He give us good information on what CIA do and what CIA learn from us."

"But you said he's not part of CIA?" Ryan asked.

"No, I think he is politician aide, helper, member of staff—like that," Zaitzev said rather positively.

"Good." Ryan lit up a smoke and offered one to Zaitzev, who took it at once.

"I run out of my *Krasnopresnenskiye,*" he explained.

"I should give you all of mine. My wife wants me to quit. She's a doctor," Jack explained.

"Bah," the Rabbit responded.

"So, why did you decide to leave?" Kingshot asked, taking a sip of tea. The reply nearly made him drop the cup.

"KGB want to kill Pope."

"You're serious?" It was the more experienced man who asked that question, not Ryan.

"Serious? I risk my life, my wife life, my daughter life. *Da,* I am serious," Oleg Ivanovich assured his interlocutors with an edge on his voice.

"Fuck," Ryan breathed. "Oleg, we need to know about this."

"It start in August. Fifteen August it start," Zaitzev told them, spinning out his tale without interruption for five or six minutes.

"No name for the operation?" Jack asked when he stopped.

"No name, just dispatch number fifteen-eight-eighty-two-six-six-six. That is date of first message from Andropov to *rezidentura* Rome, and number of message, yes? Yuriy Vladimirovich ask how get close to Pope. Rome say bad idea. Then Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy—he is main assistant to chairman, yes?—he send signal to *rezidentura* Sofia. Operation go from Sofia. So, operation -six-six-six probably run for KGB by *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. I think officer name is Strokov, Boris Andreyevich."

Kingshot had a thought and rose, leaving the room. He came back with Nick Thompson, a former detective superintendent of the Metropolitan Police.

"Nick, does the name Boris Andreyevich Strokov mean anything to you?" The former cop blinked hard. "Indeed it does, Alan. He's the chappie we think killed Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge. We had him under surveillance, but he flew out of the country before we had enough cause to pick him up for questioning."

"Wasn't he under diplomatic cover?" Ryan asked, and was surprised by Thompson's answer.

"Actually not. He came in undocumented and left the same way. I saw him myself at Heathrow. But we didn't put the pieces together quickly enough. Dreadful case it was. The poison they gave Markov

was horrific stuff."

"You eyeballed this Strokov guy?"

Thompson nodded. "Oh, yes. He might have noticed me. I wasn't being all that careful under the circumstances. He's the one who killed Markov. I'd stake my life on it."

"How can you be sure?"

"I chased murderers for near on twenty years, Sir John. You get to know them in all that time. And that's what he was, a murderer," Thompson said with total confidence. Ryan could remember his father being like this, even on frustrating cases when he knew what he needed but couldn't quite prove it to a jury.

"The Bulgarians have a sort of contract with the Soviets," Kingshot explained. "Back in 1964 or so, they agreed to handle all the 'necessary' eliminations for the KGB. In return, they get various perks, mostly political. Strokov, yes, I've heard that name before. Did you get a photo of the chap, Nick?"

"Fifty or more, Alan," Thompson assured him. "I'll never forget that face. He has the eyes of a corpse—no life in them at all, like a doll's eyes."

"How good is he?" Ryan asked.

"As an assassin? Quite good, Sir John. Very good indeed. His elimination of Markov on the bridge was expertly done—it was the third attempt. The first two would-be assassins bungled the job, and they called Strokov in to get it right. And that he did. Had things gone just a little differently, we would not have realized it was a murder at all."

"We think he's worked elsewhere in the West," Kingshot said. "But very little good information. Just gossip really. Jack, this is a dangerous development. I need to get this information to Basil soonest." And with that, Alan left the room to get to a secure phone. Ryan turned back to Zaitzev.

"And that's why you decided to leave?"

"KGB want kill innocent man, Ryan. I see plot grow. Andropov himself say do this. I handle the messages. How can man stop KGB?" he asked. "I cannot stop KGB, but I will not help KGB kill priest—he is innocent man, yes?"

Ryan's eyes looked down at the floor. "Yes, Oleg Ivan'ch, he is." *Dear God in heaven*. He checked his watch. He had to get this information out PDQ, but nobody was awake at Langley yet.

"BLOODY HELL," Sir Basil Charleston said into his secure phone. "Is this reliable information, Alan?"

"Yes, sir, I believe it to be entirely truthful. Our Rabbit seems a

decent chap, and a rather clever one. He seems to be motivated exclusively by his conscience." Next, Kingshot told him about the first revelation of the morning, MINISTER.

"We need to get 'five' looking into that." The British Security Service—once known as MI-5—was the counterespionage arm of their government. They'd need a little more specific information to run that putative traitor down, but they already had a starting point. Twenty years, was it? What a productive traitor that fellow had to be, Sir Basil thought. Time for him to see Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. Charleston had spent years cleaning up his own shop, once a playground for the KGB. But no more, and never bloody again, the Knight Commander of the Bath swore to himself.

WHOM DO I TELL? Ryan wondered. Basil would doubtless call Langley—Jack would make sure of that, but Sir Basil was a supremely reliable guy. Next came a more difficult question: *What the hell can I/we do about this?*

Ryan lit another smoke to consider that one. It was more police work than intelligence work....

And the central issue would be classification.

Yeah, that's going to be the problem. If we tell anybody, the word will get out somehow, and then somebody will know we have the Rabbit—and guess what, Jack? The Rabbit is now more important to the CIA than the life of the Pope.

Oh, shit, Ryan thought. It was like a trick of jujitsu, like a sudden reversal of polarity on the dial of a compass. North was now south. Inside was now outside. And the needs of American intelligence might now supersede the life of the Bishop of Rome. His face must have betrayed what he was thinking.

"What is amiss, Ryan?" the Rabbit asked. It seemed to Jack a strange word for him to know.

"The information you just gave us. We've been worrying about the safety of the Pope for a couple of months, but we had no specific information to make us believe his life was actually at risk. Now you have given that information to us, and someone must decide what to do with it. Do you know anything at all about the operation?"

"No, almost nothing. In Sofia the action officer is the *rezident*, Colonel Bubovoy, Ilya Fedorovich. Senior colonel, he is—Ambassador, can I say? To Bulgarian DS. This Colonel Strokov, this name I know from old cases. He is officer assassin for DS. He do other things, too, yes, but when man need bullet, Strokov deliver bullet, yes?"

This struck Ryan as something from a bad movie, except that in the movies the big, bad CIA was the one with a special assassination

department, like a cupboard with vampire bats inside. When the director needed somebody killed, he'd open the door, and one of the bats flew out and made its kill, then flew back docilely to the cupboard and hung upside down until the next man needed killing. Sure, Wilbur. Hollywood had everything figured out, except that government bureaucracies all ran on paper—nothing happened without a written order of some sort, because only a piece of white paper with black ink on it would cover somebody's ass when things went bad—and if somebody really needed killing, someone inside the system had to sign the order, and who would sign *that* kind of order? That sort of thing became a *permanent* record of something bad, and so the signature blank would be bucked all the way to the Oval Office, and once there it just wasn't the sort of paper that would find its way into the Presidential Library that memorialized the person known inside the security community as National Command Authority. And nobody in between would sign the order, because government employees never stuck their necks out—that wasn't the way they were trained.

Except me, Ryan thought. But he wouldn't kill someone in cold blood. He hadn't even killed Sean Miller in very hot blood, and while that was a strange thing to be proud of, it beat the hell out of the alternative.

But Jack wasn't afraid of sticking it out. The loss of his government paycheck would be a net profit for John Patrick Ryan. He could go back to teaching, perhaps at a nice private university that paid halfway decently, and he'd be able to dabble with the stock market on the side, something with which his current job interfered rather badly....

What the hell am I going to do? The worst part of all was that Ryan considered himself to be a Catholic. Maybe he didn't make it to mass every week. Maybe they'd never name a church after him, but, God damn it, the Pope was someone he was compelled by his lengthy education—Catholic schools all the way, including almost twelve years of Jesuits—to respect. And added to that was something equally important—the education he'd received at the gentle hands of the United States Marine Corps at Quantico's Basic School. They'd taught him that when you saw something that needed doing, you damned well did it, and you hoped that your senior officers would bless it afterward, because decisive action had saved the day more than once in the history of the Corps. "It's a lot easier to get forgiveness than permission" was what the major who'd taught that particular class had said, then added with a smile, "But don't you people ever quote me on that." You just had to apply judgment to your action, and such judgment came with experience—but experience often came from bad

decisions.

You're over thirty now, Jack, and you've had experience that you never wanted to get, but be damned if you haven't learned a hell of a lot from it. He would have been at least a captain by now, Jack thought. Maybe even a junior major, like Billy Tucker, who'd taught that class. Just then, Kingshot walked back into the room.

"Al, we have a problem," Ryan told him.

"I know, Jack. I just told Sir Basil. He's thinking about it."

"You're a field spook. What do you think?"

"Jack, this is well over my level of expertise and command."

"You turn your brain off, Al?" Ryan asked sharply.

"Jack, we cannot compromise our source, can we?" Kingshot shot back. "That is the paramount consideration here and now."

"Al, we know that somebody is going to try to whack the head of my church. We know his name, and Nick has a photo album on the fucker, remember?" Ryan took a deep breath before going on. "I am not going to sit here and do nothing about it," Ryan concluded, entirely forgetting the presence of the Rabbit for the moment.

"You do nothing? I risk my life for this and you do nothing?" Zaitzev demanded, catching on to the rapid-fire English exchanged in front of him. His face showed both outrage and puzzlement.

Al Kingshot handled the answer. "That is not for us to say. We cannot compromise our source—you, Oleg. We must protect you as well."

"Fuck!" Ryan stood and walked out of the room. But what the hell could he actually do? Jack asked himself. Then he went looking for the secure phone and dialed a number from memory.

"Murray," a voice said after the STUs married up.

"Dan, it's Jack."

"Where you been? I called two nights ago and Cathy said you were in Germany on NATO business. I wanted to—" Ryan just cut him off.

"Stick it, Dan. I was somewhere else doing something else. Listen up. I need some information and I need it in a hurry," Jack announced, lapsing briefly back into the voice of an officer of Marines.

"Shoot," Murray replied.

"I need to know the Pope's schedule for the next week or so." It was Friday. Ryan hoped the Bishop of Rome didn't have anything hopping for the weekend.

"What?" The FBI official's voice communicated predictable puzzlement.

"You heard me."

"What the hell for?"

"Can't tell you—oh, shit," Ryan swore, and then went on. "Dan, we have reason to believe there's a contract out on the Pope."

"Who?" Murray asked.

"It ain't the Knights of Columbus," was all Ryan felt comfortable saying.

"Shit, Jack. Are you serious?"

"What the hell do you think?" Ryan demanded.

"Okay, okay. Let me make some phone calls. What exactly am I free to say?"

That question stopped Ryan cold in his tracks. *Think, boy, think*. "Okay, you're a private citizen and a friend of yours is going to Rome and he wants to eyeball His Holiness. You want to know what's the best way to accomplish that mission. Fair enough?"

"What's Langley say about this?"

"Dan, frankly, I don't care a rat's ass right now, okay? Please, get me that information. I'll call back in an hour. Okay?"

"Roger that, Jack. One hour." Murray hung up. Ryan knew he could trust Murray. He was himself a Jesuit product, like so many FBI agents, in his case a Boston College alum, just like Ryan, and so whatever additional loyalties he had would work in Ryan's favor. Breathing a little easier, Ryan returned to the ducal library.

"Whom did you call, Jack?" Kingshot asked.

"Dan Murray at the embassy, the FBI rep. You ought to know him."

"The Legal Attaché—yes, I do. Okay, what did you ask?"

"The Pope's schedule for the coming week."

"But we don't know anything yet," Kingshot objected.

"Does that make you feel any better, Al?" Jack inquired delicately.

"You did not compro—"

"Compromise our source? You think I'm that stupid?"

The Brit spook nodded to the logic of the moment. "Very well. No harm done, I expect."

The next hour of the first interview returned to routine things. Zaitzev fleshed out for the Brits what he knew about MINISTER. It was sufficiently juicy to give them a good start on IDing the guy. It was immediately clear that Kingshot wanted his hide on the barn door. There was no telling how much good information KGB was getting from him—it was definitely a him, Zaitzev made clear, and "him" was probably a senior civil servant in Whitehall, and soon his residence would be provided by Her Majesty's Government for the indefinite future—"at the Queen's pleasure" was the official phrase. But Jack had more pressing concerns. At 2:20 in the afternoon, he went back to the STU in the next room.

"Dan, it's Jack."

The Legal Attaché spoke without preamble. "He has a busy week ahead, the embassy in Rome tells me, but the Pope is always in the open on Wednesday afternoons. He parades around in his white jeep

in St. Peter's Square, right in front of the cathedral, for the people to see him and take his blessing. It's an open car, and, if you want to pop a cap, that sounds to me like a good time to try—unless they have a shooter infiltrated all the way inside. Maybe a cleaning man, plumber, electrician, hard to say, but you have to assume that the inside staff is pretty loyal, and that people keep an eye on them."

Sure, Jack thought, *but those are the guys best suited to do something like this. Only the people you trust can really duck you. Damn.* The best people to look into this were with the Secret Service, but he didn't know anybody in there, and even if he did, getting them into the Vatican bureaucracy—the world's oldest—would require divine intervention.

"Thanks, pal. I owe you one."

"*Semper fi,* bud. Will you be able to tell me more? This sounds like a major case you're working on."

"Probably not, but it's not for me to say, Dan. Gotta run. Later, man." Ryan hung up and reentered the library.

The sun was over the yardarm, and a wine bottle had just appeared, a French white from the Loire Valley, probably a nice old one. There was dust on the bottle. It had been there for a while, and the cellar downstairs would not be stocked with Thunderbird and Wild Irish Rose.

"Zaitzev here has all manner of good information on this MINISTER chap." *Just a matter of dredging it up,* Kingshot didn't add. But tomorrow they'd have skilled psychologists sitting in, using their pshrink skills to massage his memories—maybe even hypnosis. Ryan didn't know if that actually worked or not; though some police forces believed in the technique, a lot of defense lawyers foamed at the mouth over it, and Jack didn't know who was right on that issue. On the whole, it was a shame that the Rabbit wasn't able to come out with photos taken of KGB files, but it would have been asking a lot to request that the guy place his neck not so much on the block as inside the guillotine head-holder and shout for the operator to come over. And so far, Zaitzev had impressed Ryan with his memory.

Might he be a plant, a false defector sent West to give the Agency and others false information? It was possible, but the proof of that pudding would lie in the quality of the agents he identified to the Western counterintelligence services. If MINISTER was really giving out good information, the quality of it would tell the Security Service if he were that valuable an agent. The Russians were never the least bit loyal to their agents—they'd *never*, not once, tried to bargain for an American or British traitor rotting away in prison, as America had often done, sometimes successfully. No, the Russians considered them expendable assets, and such assets were . . . expended, with little more

than a covert decoration that would never be worn by its "honored" recipient. It struck Ryan as very strange. The KGB was the most professional of services in so many ways—didn't they know that showing loyalty to an agent would help make other agents willing to take greater chances? Perhaps it was a case of national philosophy overruling common sense. A lot of that went on in the USSR.

By 4:00 local time, Jack could be sure that somebody would be at work at Langley. He asked one more question of the Rabbit.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, do you know if KGB can crack our secure phone systems?"

"I think not. I am not sure, but I know that we have an agent in Washington—code name CRICKET—whom we have asked to get information on your STU telephones for us. As yet he has not been able to provide what our communications people wish. We are afraid that you can read our telephone traffic, however, and so we mainly avoid using telephones for important traffic."

"Thanks." And Ryan went back to the STU in the next room. The next number was another he had memorized.

"This is James Greer."

"Admiral, this is Jack."

"I am told the Rabbit is in his new hutch," the DDI said by way of a greeting.

"That is correct, sir, and the good news is that he believes our comms are secure, including this one. The earlier fears appear to have been exaggerated or misinterpreted."

"Is there bad news?" the DDI asked warily.

"Yes, sir. Yuriy Andropov wants to kill the Pope."

"How reliable is that assertion?" James Greer asked at once.

"Sir, that's the reason he skipped. I'll have chapter and verse to you in a day or two at most, but it's official, there is a no-shit KGB operation to assassinate the Bishop of Rome.We even have the operation designator. You will want to let the Judge in on that, and probably NCA will want to know as well."

"I see," Vice Admiral Greer said from thirty-four hundred miles away. "That's going to be a problem."

"Damned straight it is." Ryan took a breath. "What can we do about it?"

"That's the problem, my boy," the DDI said next. "First, can we do anything about it? Second, do we want to do anything about it?"

"Admiral, why would we *not* want to do something about it?" Ryan asked, trying to keep his voice short of insubordinate. He respected Greer as a boss and as a man.

"Back up, son. Think it all the way through. First, our mission in life is to protect the United States of America, and no one else—well,

allies, too, of course," Greer added for the tape recorders that had to be on this line. "But our primary duty is to our flag, not to any religious figure. We *will* try to help him if we can, but if we cannot, then we cannot."

"Very well," Ryan responded through gritted teeth. *What about right and wrong?* He wanted to ask, but that would have to wait a few moments.

"We do not ordinarily give away classified information, and you can imagine how tightly held this defection is going to be," Greer went on.

"Yes, sir." But at least it wasn't going to be NOFORN—not for distribution to foreigners. The Brits were foreigners, and they already knew all about BEATRIX and the Rabbit, but the Brits weren't big on sharing, except, sometimes, with America, and usually with a big quid pro quo tacked onto it. It was just how things worked. Similarly, Ryan wasn't allowed to discuss a single thing about some operations he was cleared into. TALENT KEYHOLE was the code name: the reconnaissance satellites, though CIA and the Pentagon had fallen all over themselves giving the raw data to the British during the Falklands War, plus every intercept the National Security Agency had from South America. Blood was still thicker than water. "Admiral, how will it look in the papers if it becomes known that the Central Intelligence Agency had data on the threat to the Pope and we just sat on our hands?"

"Is that a—"

"Threat? No, sir, not from me. I play by the rules, sir, and you know it. But somebody there will leak the information just because he's pissed about it, and you know that, and when that happens, there'll be hell to pay."

"Point taken," Greer agreed. "Are you proposing anything?"

"That's above my pay grade, sir, but we have to think hard about possible action of some sort."

"What else are we getting from our new friend?"

"We have the code names of three major leaks. One is MINISTER, sounds like a political and foreign policy leak in Whitehall. Two for our side of the ocean: NEPTUNE sounds naval, and that's the source of our communications insecurity. Somebody in Redland is reading the Navy's mail, sir. And there's one in D.C. called CASSIUS. Sounds like a leaker on The Hill, top-drawer political intelligence, plus stuff about our operations."

"Our—you mean CIA?" the DDI asked, with sudden concern in his voice. No matter how old a player you were, no matter how much experience you had, the idea that your parent agency might be compromised scared the living hell out of you.

"Correct," Ryan answered. He didn't need to press that button very

hard. Nobody at Langley was entirely comfortable with all the information that went to the "select" intelligence committees in the House and Senate. Politicians talked for a living, after all. Hell, there were few things harder than making a political figure keep his mouth shut. "Sir, this guy is a fantastically valuable source. We'll get him cut loose from over here in three days or so. I think the debriefing process will take months. I've met his wife and daughter. They seem nice enough—the little girl is Sally's age. I think this guy's the real deal, sir, and there's gold in them thar hills."

"How comfortable is he?"

"Well, they're all probably in sensory overload at the moment. I'd think hard about getting a pshrink assigned to them to help with the transition. Maybe more than one. We want to keep him settled down—we want him confident in his new life. That might not be easy, but it'll damned sure pay off for us."

"We have a couple of guys for that. They know how to talk them through the transition part. Is the Rabbit a flight risk?"

"Sir, I see nothing to suggest that, but we have to remember that he's made one hell of a broad jump, and the stuff he landed in isn't exactly what he's used to."

"Noted. Good call, Jack. What else?"

"That's all for the moment. We've only been talking to the guy about five and a half hours, just preliminary stuff so far, but the waters look pretty deep."

"Okay. Arthur is on the phone with Basil right now. I'm going to head over that way and give him your read. Oh, Bob Ritter just got back from Korea—jet-lagged all to hell and gone. We're going to tell him about your adventure in the field. If he tries to bite your head off, it's our fault, mine and the Judge's."

Ryan took a long look down at the carpet. He didn't quite understand why Ritter disliked him, but they didn't swap Christmas cards, and that was a fact. "Gee, thanks, sir."

"Don't sweat it. From what I understand, it sounds like you acquitted yourself pretty well."

"Thanks, Admiral. I didn't trip over my own feet. That's all I'm going to claim, if that's okay with you."

"Fair enough, my boy. Get your write-up completed and fax it to me PDQ."

IN MOSCOW, the secure fax went into the office of Mike Russell. Oddly, it was a graphic, the first-edition cover of *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. The address on the cover sheet told him who was supposed to get it. And on the page was a handwritten message:

“Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail have moved to a new hutch.”

So, Russell thought, *they did have a Rabbit case, and it had been successfully run.* Nothing he could claim to know for certain, but he knew the language spoken in the community. He walked down to Ed Foley’s office and knocked on the door.

“Come,” Foley’s voice called.

“This just came in from Washington, Ed.” Russell handed the fax across.

“Well, that’s good news,” the COS observed. He folded the signal into his jacket pocket for Mary Pat. “There’s an additional message in this fax, Mike,” Foley said.

“What’s that?”

“Our comms are secure, pal. Otherwise it would not have come in this way.”

“Well, thank the Good Lord for that,” Russell said.

CHAPTER 30

FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATER

"**R**YAN? HE DID WHAT ?" Bob Ritter growled.

"Bob, you want to settle down? It's nothing to get your tits in a flutter about," James Greer said, half soothingly and half an indirect challenge in the CIA's in-house power playground. Judge Moore looked on in amusement. "Jack went into the field to observe an operation for which we had no available field officer. He didn't step on his crank with the golf shoes, and the defector is in a safe house in the English Midlands right now, and from what I hear, he's singing like a canary."

"Well, what's he telling us?"

"For starters," Judge Moore answered, "it seems that our friend Andropov wants to assassinate the Pope."

Ritter's head snapped around. "How solid is that?"

"It's what made the Rabbit decide to take a walk," the DCI said. "He's a conscience defector, and that set him off."

"Okay, good. What does he know?" the DDO asked.

"Bob, it seems that this defector—his name is Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev, by the way—was a senior watch officer in The Centre's communications, their version of our MERCURY."

"Shit," Ritter observed an instant later. "This is for real?"

"You know, sometimes a guy puts a quarter in the slot and pulls the handle and he really does get the jackpot," Moore told his subordinate.

"Well, damn."

"I didn't think you'd object. And the good part," the DCI went on, "is that Ivan doesn't know he's gone."

"How the hell did we do that?"

"It was Ed and Mary Pat who twigged to that possibility." Then Judge Moore explained how it had been carried out. "They both deserve a nice pat on the head, Bob."

"And all while I was out of town," Ritter breathed. "Well, I'll be damned."

"Yes, there's a bunch of attaboy letters to be drawn up," Greer said next. "Including one for Jack."

"I suppose," the DDO conceded. He went quiet for a moment, thinking over the possibilities of Operation BEATRIX. "Anything good so far?"

"Aside from the plot against the Pope? Two code names of penetration agents they have working: NEPTUNE—he sounds like somebody working in the Navy—and CASSIUS. He's probably on The Hill. More to come, I expect."

"I talked to Ryan a few minutes ago. He's pretty excited about this guy, says his knowledge is encyclopedic, says there's gold in these hills, to quote the boy."

"Ryan does know a thing or two about gold," Moore thought out loud.

"Fine, we'll make him our portfolio manager, but he isn't a field officer," Ritter groused.

"Bob, he succeeded. We don't punish people for that, do we?" the DCI asked. This had gone far enough. It was time for Moore to act like the appeals-court judge he had been until a couple years before: the Voice of God.

"Fine, Arthur. You want me to sign the letter of commendation?" Ritter saw the freight train coming, and there was no sense in standing in its way. What the hell, it would just go into the files anyway. CIA commendations almost never saw the light of day. The Agency even classified the names of field officers who'd died heroically thirty years before. It was like a back door into heaven, CIA style.

"Okay, gentlemen, now that we've settled the administrative issues, what about the plot to kill the Pope?" Greer asked, trying to bring order back to the meeting of supposed sober senior executives.

"How solid is the information?" Ritter wanted to know.

"I talked to Basil a few minutes ago. He thinks we need to take it seriously, but I think we need to talk to this Rabbit ourselves to quantify the danger to our Polish friend."

"Tell the President?"

Moore shook his head. "He's tied up all day today with legislative business, and he's flying out to California late this afternoon. Sunday and Monday, he'll be giving speeches in Oregon and Colorado. I'll see him Tuesday afternoon, about four." Moore could have asked for an urgent meeting—he could break into the President's schedule on really vital matters—but until they had the chance to speak face-to-face with the Rabbit, that was out of the question. The President might even want to speak to the guy himself. He was like that.

"What kind of shape is Station Rome in?" Greer asked Ritter.

"The Chief of Station is Rick Nolfi. Good guy, but he retires in three months. Rome's his sunset post. He asked for it. His wife, Anne, likes Italy. Six officers there, mainly working on NATO stuff—two pretty

experienced, four rookies," Ritter reported. "But before we get them alerted we need to think this threat through, and a little Presidential guidance won't hurt. The problem is, how the hell do we tell people about this in such a way as not to compromise the source? Guys," Ritter pointed out, "if we went to all the trouble of concealing the defection, it doesn't make much sense to broadcast the information we get from him out to the four winds, y'know?"

"That is the problem," Moore was forced to agree.

"The Pope doubtless has a protective detail," Ritter went on. "But they can't have the same latitude that the Secret Service does, can they? And we don't know how secure they are."

"IT'S THE OLD STORY," Ryan was saying at the same time in Manchester. "If we use the information too freely, we compromise the source and lose all of its utility. But if we don't use it for fear of compromising it, then we might as well not have the fucking source to begin with." Jack finished off his wine and poured another glass. "There's a book on this, you know."

"What's that?"

"*Double-Edged Secrets*. A guy named Jasper Holmes wrote it. He was a U.S. Navy crippie in World War Two, worked signals intelligence in FRUPAC with Joe Rochefort and his bunch. It's a pretty good book on how the intelligence business works down where the rubber meets the road."

Kingshot made a mental note to look that book up. Zaitzev was out on the lawn—a very plush one—with his wife and daughter at the moment. Mrs. Thompson wanted to take them all shopping. They had to have their private time—their bedroom suite was thoroughly bugged, of course, complete to a white-noise filter in the bathroom—and keeping the wife and kid happy was crucial to the entire operation.

"Well, Jack, whatever the opposition has planned, it will take time for them to set it up. The bureaucracies over there are even more moribund than ours, you know."

"KGB, too, Al?" Ryan wondered. "I think that's the one part of their system that actually works, and Yuriy Andropov isn't known for his patience, is he? Hell, he was their ambassador in Budapest in 1956, remember? The Russians worked pretty decisively back then, didn't they?"

"That was a serious political threat to their entire system," Kingshot pointed out.

"And the Pope isn't?" Ryan fired back.

"You have me there," the field spook admitted.

"Wednesday. That's what Dan told me. He's all the way in the open every Wednesday. Okay, the Pope can appear at that porch he uses to give blessings and stuff, and a halfway good man with a rifle can pop him doing that, but a man with a rifle is too visible to even a casual observer, and a rifle says 'military' to people, and 'military' says 'government' to everybody. But those probably aren't scheduled very far in advance—at least they're irregular, but every damned Wednesday afternoon he hops in his jeep and parades around the Piazza San Pietro right in the middle of the assembled multitude, Al, and that's pistol range." Ryan sat back in his chair and took another sip of the French white.

"I am not sure I'd want to fire a pistol at that close a range."

"Al, once upon a time they got a guy to do Leon Trotsky with an ice axe—engagement range maybe two feet," Ryan reminded him. "Sure, different situation now, but since when have the Russians been reticent about risking their troops—and this will be that Bulgarian bastard, remember? *Your* guy called him an expert killer. It's amazing what a real expert can do. I saw a gunnery sergeant at Quantico—that guy could write his name with a forty-five at fifty feet. I watched him do it once." Ryan had never really mastered the big Colt automatic, but that gunny sure as hell had.

"You're probably being overly concerned."

"Maybe," Jack admitted. "But I'd feel a hell of a lot better if His Holiness wore a Kevlar jacket under his vestments." He wouldn't, of course. People like that didn't scare the way civilians did. It wasn't the sense of invincibility that some professional soldiers had. It was just that to them death wasn't something to be afraid of. Any really observant Catholic was supposed to feel that way, but Jack wasn't one of those. Not quite.

"As a practical matter, what can one do? Look for one face in a crowd, and who's to say it's the right face?" Kingshot asked. "Who's to say Strokov hasn't hired someone else to do the actual shooting? I can see myself shooting someone, but not in a crowd."

"So, you use a suppressed weapon, a big can-type silencer. Cut down the noise, and you remove a lot of the danger of being identified. All the eyes are going to be on the target, remember, not looking sideways into the crowd."

"True," Al conceded.

"You know, it's too damned easy to find reasons to do nothing. Didn't Dr. Johnson say that doing nothing is in every man's power?" Ryan asked forlornly. "That's what we're doing, Al, finding reasons not to do anything. Can we let the guy die? Can we just sit here and

drink our wine and *let* the Russians kill the man?"

"No, Jack, but we cannot go off like a loose hand grenade, either. Field operations have to be planned. You need professionals to think things through in a professional way. There are many things professionals can do, but first they have orders to do them."

But that was being decided elsewhere.

"PRIME MINISTER, we have reason to believe that the KGB has an operation underway to assassinate the Pope of Rome," C reported. He'd come over on short notice, interrupting her afternoon political business.

"Really?" she asked Sir Basil in dry reply. She was used to hearing the strangest of things from her Intelligence Chief, and had cultivated the habit of not responding too violently to them. "What is the source for that information?"

"I told you several days ago about Operation BEATRIX. Well, we and the Americans have got him out successfully. We even managed to do it in such a way that the Sovs think him dead. The defector is in a safe house outside Manchester right now," C told his chief of government.

"Have we told the Americans?"

Basil nodded. "Yes, Prime Minister. He's their fox, after all. We'll let him fly to America next week, but I discussed the case briefly earlier today with Judge Arthur Moore, their Director of Central Intelligence. I expect he'll brief the President in early next week."

"What action do you suppose they will take?" she asked next.

"Difficult to say, ma'am. It's a rather dicey proposition, actually. The defector—his name is Oleg—is a most important asset, and we must work very hard to protect his identity, and also knowledge of the fact that he is now on our side of the Curtain. Exactly how we might warn the Vatican of the potential danger is a complex issue, to say the least."

"This is a real operation the Soviets have under way?" the PM asked again. It was rather a lot to swallow, even for them, who she believed capable of almost anything.

"It appears so, yes," Sir Basil confirmed. "But we do not know the priority, and, of course, we know nothing of the schedule."

"I see." The Prime Minister fell quiet for a moment. "Our relations with the Vatican are cordial but not especially close." That fact went all the way back to Henry VIII, though the Roman Catholic Church had gradually come to letting bygones be bygones over the intervening centuries.

"Regrettably, that is so," C agreed.

"I see," she said again, and thought some more before speaking again. When she leaned forward, she spoke with dignity and force. "Sir Basil, it is not the policy of Her Majesty's Government to stand idly by while a friendly Chief of State is murdered by our adversaries. You are directed to look into any possible action that might forestall this eventuality."

Some people shot from the hip, Sir Basil thought. Others shot from the heart. For all her outward toughness, the United Kingdom's Chief of Government was one of the latter.

"Yes, Prime Minister." The problem was that she didn't say how the hell he was supposed to do this. Well, he'd coordinate with Arthur at Langley. But for right now he had a mission that would be difficult at best. What exactly was he supposed to do, deploy a squadron of the Special Air Service to St. Peter's Square?

But you didn't say no to this Prime Minister, at least not in a 10 Downing Street conference room.

"Anything else this defector has told us?"

"Yes, ma'am. He has identified by code name a Soviet penetration agent, probably in Whitehall. The code name is MINISTER. When we get more information about the man in question, we'll have the Security Service root about after him."

"What does he give them?"

"Political and diplomatic intelligence, ma'am. Oleg tells us that it is high-level material, but he has not as yet given us information that would directly identify him."

"Interesting." It was not a new story. This one could be one of the Cambridge group that had been so valuable to the USSR back in the war years and then all the way into the 1960s, or perhaps a person recruited by them. Charleston had been instrumental in purging them out of SIS, but Whitehall wasn't quite his patch. "Do keep me posted on that." A casual order from her had the force of a granite slab hand-delivered from Mt. Sinai.

"Of course, Prime Minister."

"Would it be helpful if I spoke to the American President on this matter with the Pope?"

"Better to let CIA brief him first, I think. It wouldn't do to short-circuit their system. This defector was, after all, mainly an American operation, and it's Arthur's place to speak to him first."

"Yes, I suppose so. But when I do talk to him, I want him to know that we are taking it with the utmost seriousness, and that we expect him to take some substantive action."

"Prime Minister, I should think he will not take it lying down, as it were."

"I agree. He's such a good chap." The full story on America's covert

support for the Falkland Islands War would not see the light of day for many years. America had to keep her fences with South America well mended, after all. But neither was the PM one to forget such assistance, covert or not.

"This BEATRIX operation, it was well executed?" she asked C.

"Flawlessly, ma'am," Charleston assured her. "Our people did everything exactly by the book."

"I trust you will look after those who carried it out."

"Most certainly, ma'am," C assured her.

"Good. Thank you for coming over, Sir Basil."

"A pleasure as always, Prime Minister." Charleston stood, thinking that that Ryan fellow would have called her his sort of broad. As, indeed, she was. But all the way back to Century House, he worried about the operation he now had to get under way. What, exactly, would he be doing about it? Figuring such things out, of course, was why he was so lavishly paid.

"HI, HONEY," Ryan said.

"Where are you?" Cathy asked at once.

"I can't say exactly, but I'm back in England. The thing I had to do on the continent—well, it developed into something I have to look after here."

"Can you come home and see us?"

" 'Fraid not." One major problem was that, although his Chatham home was actually within driving distance, he wasn't confident enough yet to drive that far without crunching himself on a side road. "Everybody okay?"

"We're fine, except that you aren't here," Cathy responded, with an edge of anger/disappointment in her voice. One thing she was sure of: Wherever Jack had been, it sure as hell hadn't been Germany. But she couldn't say that over the phone. She understood the intelligence business that much.

"I'm sorry, babe. I can tell you that what I'm doing is pretty important, but that's all."

"I'm sure," she conceded. And she understood that Jack wanted to be home with his family. He wasn't one to skip town for the fun of it.

"How's work?"

"I did glasses all day. Got some surgery tomorrow morning, though. Wait a minute, here's Sally."

"Hi, Daddy," a new and small voice said.

"Hi, Sally. How are you?"

"Fine." What kids *always* said.

"What did you do today?"

"Miss Margaret and I colored."

"Anything good?"

"Yeah, cows and horses!" she reported with considerable enthusiasm. Sally especially liked pelicans and cows.

"Well, I need to talk to Mommy."

"Okay." And Sally would think of this as a deep and weighty conversation, as she went back to the *Wizzerdaboz* tape in the living room.

"And how's the little guy?" Jack asked his wife.

"Chewing on his hands, mostly. He's in the playpen right now, watching the TV."

"He's easier than Sally was at that age," Jack observed with a smile.

"He's not colicky, thank God," Mrs. Dr. Ryan agreed.

"I miss you," Jack said, rather forlornly. It was true. He *did* miss her.

"I miss you, too."

"Gotta get back to work," he said next.

"When will you be home?"

"Couple of days, I think."

"Okay." She had to surrender to that unhappy fact. "Call me."

"Will do, babe."

"Bye."

"See you soon. Love ya."

"I love you, too."

"Bye."

"Bye, Jack."

Ryan put the phone back in the cradle and told himself that he wasn't designed for this kind of life. Like his father before him, he wanted to sleep in the same bed as his wife—had his father ever slept away from home? Jack wondered. He couldn't remember such a night. But Jack had chosen a line of work in which that was not always possible. It was supposed to have been. He was an analyst who worked at a desk and slept at home, but somehow it wasn't working out that way, God damn it.

Dinner was beef Wellington with Yorkshire pudding. Mrs. Thompson could have been head chef at a good restaurant. Jack didn't know where the beef came from, but it seemed more succulent than the usual grassfed British sort. Either she got the meat in a special place—they still had specialty butcher shops over here—or she really knew how to tenderize it, and the Yorkshire pudding was positively ethereal. Toss in the French wine, and this dinner was just plain brilliant—an adjective popular in the U.K.

The Russians attacked the food rather as Georgiy Zhukov had attacked Berlin, with considerable gusto.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, I have to tell you," Ryan admitted in a fit of honesty, "the food in America is not always of this quality." He'd timed this for Mrs. Thompson's appearance at the dining-room door. Jack turned to her. "Ma'am, if you ever need a recommendation as a chef, you just call me, okay?"

Emma had a very friendly smile. "Thank you, Sir John."

"Seriously, ma'am, this is wonderful."

"You're very kind."

Jack wondered if she'd like his steaks on the grill and Cathy's spinach salad. The key was getting good corn-gorged Iowa beef, which wasn't easy here, though he could try the Air Force commissary at Greenham Commons....

It took nearly an hour to finish dinner, and the after-dinner drinks were excellent. They even served Starka vodka, in a gesture of additional hospitality to their Russian guests. Oleg, Jack saw, really gunned it down.

"Even the Politburo does not eat so well," the Rabbit observed, as dinner broke up.

"Well, we raise good beef in Scotland. This was Aberdeen Angus," Nick Thompson advised, as he collected the plates.

"Fed on corn?" Ryan asked. They didn't have that much corn over here, did they?

"I do not know. The Japanese feed beer to their Kobe beef," the former cop observed. "Perhaps they do that up in Scotland."

"That would explain the quality," Jack replied with a chuckle. "Oleg Ivan'ch, you must learn about British beer. It's the best in the world."

"Not American?" the Russian asked.

Ryan shook his head. "Nope. That's one of the things they do better than us."

"Truly?"

"Truly," Kingshot confirmed. "But the Irish are quite good as well. I do love my Guinness, though it's better in Dublin than in London."

"Why waste the good stuff on you guys?" Jack asked.

"Once a bloody Irishman, always a bloody Irishman," Kingshot observed.

"So, Oleg," Ryan asked, lighting up an after-dinner smoke, "is there anything different we ought to be doing—to make you comfortable, I mean?"

"I have no complaints, but I expect CIA will not give me so fine a house as this one."

"Oleg, I am a millionaire and don't live in a house this nice," Ryan confirmed with a laugh. "But your home in America will be more comfortable than your apartment in Moscow."

"Will I get car?"

"Sure."

"Wait how long?" Zaitzev asked.

"Wait for what? To buy a car?"

Zaitzev nodded.

"Oleg, you can pick from any of hundreds of car dealerships, pick the car you like, pay for it, and drive it home—we usually let our wives pick the color," Jack added.

The Rabbit was incredulous. "So easy?"

"Yep. I used to drive a Volkswagen Rabbit, but I kinda like the Jaguar now. I might get one when I get home. Nice engine. Cathy likes it, but she might go back to a Porsche. She's been driving them since she was a teenager. Of course, it's not real practical with two kids," Ryan added hopefully. He didn't like the German two-seater that much. Mercedes seemed to him a much safer design.

"And buy house, also easy?"

"Depends. If you buy a new house, yes, it's pretty easy. To buy a house that somebody already owns, first you have to meet the owner and make an offer, but the Agency will probably help you with that."

"Where will we live?"

"Anywhere you want." *After we pick your brain clean,* Ryan didn't add. "There's a saying in America: 'It's a free country.' It's also a big country. You can find a place you like and move there. A lot of defectors live in the Washington area. I don't know why. I don't much like it. The summers can be miserable."

"Beastly hot," Kingshot agreed. "And the humidity is awful."

"You think it's bad there, try Florida," Jack suggested. "But a lot of people love it down there."

"And travel from one part to another, no papers?" Zaitzev asked.

For a KGB puke, this guy doesn't know shit, Jack thought. "No papers," Ryan assured him. "We'll get you an American Express card to make that easy." Then he had to explain credit cards to the Rabbit. It took ten minutes, it was so alien a concept to a Soviet citizen. By the end, Zaitzev's head was visibly swimming.

"You do have to pay the bill at the end of the month," Kingshot warned him. "Some people forget that, and they can get into serious financial trouble as a result."

C WAS IN HIS Belgravia townhouse, sipping some Louis XIII brandy and chatting with a friend. Sir George Hendley was a colleague of thirty years' standing. By profession a solicitor, he'd worked closely with the British government for most of his life, often consulting

quietly with the Security Service and the Foreign Office. He had a "Most Secret" clearance, plus one into compartmented information. He'd been a confidant of several prime ministers over the years, and was considered as reliable as the Queen herself. He thought it just came along with the Winchester school tie.

"The Pope, eh?"

"Yes, George," Charleston confirmed. "The PM wants us to look into protecting the man. Trouble is, I haven't a clue at the moment. We can't contact the Vatican directly about it."

"Quite so, Basil. One can trust their loyalty, but not their politics. Tell me, how good do you suppose their own intelligence service is?"

"I'd have to say it's top-drawer in many areas. What better confidant than a priest, after all, and what better way to transfer information than inside the confessional? Plus all the other techniques that one can use. Their political intelligence is probably as good as ours—perhaps even better. I would imagine they know everything that happens in Poland, for example. And Eastern Europe probably has few secrets from them as well. One cannot underestimate their ability to call on a man's highest loyalty, after all. We've kept an ear on their communications for decades."

"Is that so?" Hendley asked.

"Oh, yes. During World War Two, they were very valuable to us. There was a German cardinal in the Vatican back then, chap named Mansdorf—odd, isn't it? Sounds like a Jewish name. First name Dieter, archbishop of Mannheim, then promoted to the Vatican diplomatic service. Traveled a lot. Kept us posted on the inner secrets of the Nazi Party from 1938 through to the end of the war. He didn't much care for Hitler, you see."

"And their communications?"

"Mansdorf actually gave us his own cipher book to copy. They changed it after the war, of course, and so we got little more in the way of their private mail later on, but they never changed their cipher system, and the chaps at GCHQ have occasional success listening in. Good man, Dieter Cardinal Mansdorf. Never got recognized for his service, of course. Died in 'fifty-nine, I think."

"So how do we know that the Romans don't know about this operation already?" Not a bad question, Charleston thought, but he'd long since considered that one.

"It is being held very closely, our defector tells us. Hand-delivered messages, not going out on their machine ciphers, that sort of thing. And a bare handful of people involved. The one important name we do know is a Bulgarian field officer, Boris Strokov, colonel in the DS. We suspect he's the chap who killed Georgiy Markov just up the road from my office." Which Charleston considered an act of lèse-majesté,

perhaps even executed as a direct challenge to the Secret Intelligence Service. CIA and KGB had an informal covenant: Neither service ever killed in the other's capital. SIS had no such agreement with anyone, a fact that might have cost Georgiy Markov his life.

"So, you think he might be the prospective assassin?"

C waved his hands. "It's all we have, George."

"Not much," Hendley observed.

"Too thin for comfort, but it's better than nothing. We have numerous photos of this Strokov fellow. The Yard was close to arresting him when he flew out of Heathrow—for Paris, actually, and from there on to Sofia."

"Perhaps he was in a hurry to leave?" Hendley suggested.

"He's a professional, George. How many chances do such people take? In retrospect, it's rather amazing that the Yard got a line on him at all."

"So, you think he might be in Italy." A statement, not a question.

"It's a possibility, but whom can we tell?" C asked. "The Italians have criminal jurisdiction to a point. The Lateran Treaty gives them discretionary jurisdiction, subject to a Vatican veto," Charleston explained. He'd had to look into the legalities of the situation. "The Vatican has its own security service—the Swiss Guards, you know—but however good the men are, it's necessarily a thin reed, what with the restrictions imposed on them from above. And the Italian authorities cannot flood the area with their own security forces, for obvious reasons."

"So, the PM has saddled you with an impossible task."

"Yes, again, George," Sir Basil had to agree.

"So, what can you do?"

"All I can really come up with is to put some officers in the crowd and look for this Strokov fellow."

"And if they see him?"

"Ask him politely to depart the area?" Basil wondered aloud. "It would work, probably. He is a professional, and being spotted—I suppose we'd ostentatiously take photographs of him—would give him serious pause, perhaps enough to abandon the mission."

"Thin." Hendley thought of that idea.

"Yes, it is," C had to agree. But it would at least give him something to tell the Prime Minister.

"Whom to send?"

"We have a good Station Chief in Rome, Tom Sharp. He has four officers in his shop, plus we could send a few more from Century House, I suppose."

"Sounds reasonable, Basil. Why did you call me over?"

"I was hoping you'd have an idea that's eluded me, George." A final

sip from the snifter. As much as he felt like some more brandy for the night, he demurred.

"One can only do what one can," Hendley sympathized.

"He's too good a man to be cut down this way—at the hands of the bloody Russians. And for what? For standing up for his own people. That sort of loyalty is supposed to be rewarded, not murdered in public."

"And the PM feels the same way."

"She is comfortable taking a stand." For which the PM was famous throughout the world.

"The Americans?" Hendley asked.

Charleston shrugged. "They haven't had a chance to speak to the defector yet. They trust us, George, but not that much."

"Well, do what you can. This KGB operation probably will not happen in the immediate future, anyway. How efficient are the Soviets, anyway?"

"We shall see" was all C had to say.

IT WAS QUIETER HERE than in his own house, despite the nearby presence of the motorway, Ryan thought, rolling out of bed at 6:50. The sink continued the eccentric British way of having two faucets, one hot and one cold, making sure that your left hand boiled while the right one froze when you washed your hands. As usual, it felt good to shave and brush and otherwise get yourself ready for the day, even if you had to start it with Taster's Choice.

Kingshot was already in the kitchen when Jack got there. Funny how people slept late on Sunday but frequently not on Saturday.

"Message from London," Al said by way of greeting.

"What's that?"

"A question. How would you feel about a flight to Rome this afternoon?"

"What's up?"

"Sir Basil is sending some people to the Vatican to suss things out. He wants to know if you want to go. It's a CIA op, after all."

"Tell him yes," Jack said without a moment's thought. "When?" Then he realized he was being impetuous again. Damn.

"Noon flight out of Heathrow. You ought to have time to go home and change clothes."

"Car?"

"Nick will drive you over," Kingshot told him.

"What are you going to tell Oleg?"

"The truth. It ought to make him feel more important," Al thought aloud. It was always a good thing for defectors.

RYAN AND THOMPSON left within the hour, with Jack's bags in the "boot."

"This Zaitzev chap," Nick said out on the motorway. "He seems rather an important defector."

"Bet your ass, Nick. He's got all kinds of hot information between his ears. We're going to treat him like a hod full of gold bricks."

"Good of CIA to let us talk to him."

"It'd be kinda churlish not to. You guys got him out for us, and covering the defection up was pretty slick." Jack couldn't say too much more. As trusted as Nick Thompson was, Jack couldn't know how much clearance he had.

The good news was that Thompson knew what not to ask. "So, your father was a police officer?"

"Detective, yeah. Mainly homicide. Did that more than twenty years. He topped out at lieutenant. Said captains never got to do anything more than administrative stuff, and dad wasn't into that. He liked busting bad guys and sending them to the joint."

"The what?"

"Prison. The Maryland State Prison is one evil-looking structure in Baltimore, by Jones Falls. Kinda like a medieval fortress, but more forbidding. The inmates call it Frankenstein's Castle."

"Fine with me, Sir John. I've never had much sympathy for murderers."

"Dad didn't talk about them much. Didn't bring his work home. Mom didn't like hearing about it. Except once, a father killed his son over a crab cake. That's like a little hamburger made out of crab meat," Jack explained. "Dad said it seemed like a shitty thing to get killed over. The father—the killer—copped right out, all broken up about it. But it didn't do his son much good."

"Amazing how many murderers react that way. They gather up the rage to take a life, then afterwards they are consumed by remorse."

"Too soon old, too late smart," Jack quoted from the Old West.

"Indeed. The whole business can be so bloody sad."

"What about this Strokov guy?"

"Different color of horse, entirely," Thompson replied. "You don't see many of those. For them it's part of the job, ending a life. No motive in the usual sense, and they leave little behind in the way of physical evidence. They can be very difficult to find, but mainly we do find them. We have time on our side, and sooner or later someone talks and it gets to our ear. Most criminals talk their own way into

prison," Nick explained. "But people like this Strokov fellow, they do not talk—except when he gets home and writes up his official report. But we never see those. Getting a line on him was plain luck. Mr. Markov remembered being poked by the umbrella, remembered the color suit the man was wearing. One of our constables saw him wearing the same suit and thought there was something odd about him—you know, instead of flying right home, he waited to make sure Markov died. They'd bungled two previous attempts, you see, and so they called him in because of his expertise. Good professional, Strokov. He wanted to be completely sure, and he waited to read the death notice in the newspapers. In that time, we talked to the staff at his hotel and started assembling information. The Security Service got involved, and they were helpful in some ways but not in others—and the government got involved. The government was worried about creating an international incident, and so they held us up—cost us two days, I reckon. On the first of those two days, Strokov took a taxi to Heathrow and flew off to Paris. I was on the surveillance team. Stood within fifteen feet of him. We had two detectives with cameras, shot a lot of pictures. The last was of Strokov walking down the jetway to the Boeing. Next day, the government gave us permission to detain him for questioning."

"Day late and a dollar short, eh?"

Thompson nodded. "Quite. I would have liked to put him in the dock at the Old Bailey, but that fish got away. The French shadowed him at De Gaulle International, but he never left the international terminal, never talked with anyone. The bugger showed no remorse at all. I suppose for him it was like chopping firewood," the former detective said.

"Yeah. In the movies you make your hit and have a martini, shaken not stirred. But it's different when you kill a good guy."

"All Markov ever did was broadcast over BBC World Service," Nick said, gripping the wheel a little tightly. "I imagine the people in Sofia were somewhat put out with what he said."

"The people on the other side of the Curtain aren't real big on Freedom of Speech," Ryan reminded him.

"Bloody barbarians. And now this chap is planning to kill the Pope? I am not a Catholic, but he is a man of God, and he seems rather a good chap. You know, the most vicious criminal hesitates before trifling with a man of the clergy."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't do to piss God off. But they don't believe in God, Nick."

"Fortunate for them that I am not God."

"Yeah, it would be nice to have the power to right all the wrongs in the world. The problem is, that's what Markov's bosses think they're

doing."

"That is why we have laws, Jack—yes, I know, they make up their own."

"That's the problem," Jack agreed as they came into Chatham.

"This is a pleasant area," Thompson said, turning up the hill on City Way.

"Not a bad neighborhood. Cathy likes it. I would have preferred closer to London, but, well, she got her way."

"Women usually do." Thompson chuckled, turning right onto Fristow Way and then left on Grizedale Close. And there was the house. Ryan got out and retrieved his bags.

"Daddy!" Sally screamed when he walked in the door. Ryan dropped his bags and scooped her up. Little girls, he'd long since learned, gave the best hugs, though their kisses tended to be a little sloppy.

"How's my little Sally?"

"Fine." It was oddly like a cat, coming out of her mouth.

"Oh, hello, Dr. Ryan," Miss Margaret said in greeting. "I didn't expect you."

"Just making a low pass. Have to change cleans for dirties and head back out."

"You going away *again*?" Sally asked with crushing disappointment in her voice.

"Sorry, Sally. Daddy has business."

Sally wriggled out of his arms. "Phooey." And she went back to the TV, putting her father firmly in his place.

Jack took the cue to go upstairs. Three—no, four—clean shirts, five sets of underwear, four new ties, and . . . yes, some casual wear, too. Two new jackets, two pairs of slacks. His Marine tie bar. That about did it. He left the pile of dirties on the bed and, with his bags packed, headed back down. Oops. He set his bags down and went back upstairs for his passport. No sense using the fake Brit one anymore.

"Bye, Sally."

"Bye, Daddy." But then she thought again and jumped to her feet to give him another hug. She wouldn't grow up to break hearts, but to rip them out and cook them over charcoal. But that was a long way off, and for now her father had the chance to enjoy her. Little Jack was asleep on his back in the playpen, and his father decided not to disturb him.

"See ya, buddy," Ryan said as he turned to the door.

"Where are you going?" Miss Margaret asked.

"Out of the country. Business," Jack explained. "I'll call Cathy from the airport."

"Good trip, Dr. Ryan."

"Thanks, Margaret." And back out the door.

"How are we on time?" Ryan asked, back in the car.

"No problem," Thompson thought out loud. If they were late, this airliner, too, would have a minor mechanical problem.

"Good." Jack adjusted his seat to lean back and get a few winks.

He awoke just outside Heathrow Terminal Three. Thompson drove up to where a man in civilian clothes was standing. He looked like some sort of government worker.

He was. As soon as Ryan alighted from the car, the man came over with a ticket envelope.

"Sir, your flight leaves in forty minutes, Gate Twelve," the man reported. "You'll be met in Rome by Tom Sharp."

"What's he look like?" Jack asked.

"He will know you, sir."

"Fair enough." Ryan took the tickets and headed to the back of the car for his bags.

"I'll take care of that for you, sir."

This sort of traveling had its possibilities, Jack thought. He waved at Thompson and headed into the terminal, looking for Gate Twelve. That proved easy enough. Ryan took a seat close by the gate and checked his ticket—1-A again, a first-class ticket. The SIS must have had a comfortable understanding with British Airways. Now all he had to do was survive the flight.

He boarded twenty minutes later, sitting down, strapping in, and turning his watch forward one hour. He endured the usual rigmarole of useless safety briefing and instructions on how to buckle his seat belt, which, in Jack's case, was already clicked and snugged in.

The flight took two hours, depositing Jack at Leonardo da Vinci Airport at 3:09 local time. Jack walked off the aircraft and looked for the Blue Channel to get his diplomatic passport stamped after a wait of about five seconds—one other diplomat had been ahead of him, and the bonehead had forgotten which pocket his passport was in.

With that done, he retrieved his bags off the carousel and headed out. A man with a gray and brown beard seemed to be eyeballing him.

"You're Jack Ryan?"

"You must be Tom Sharp."

"Correct. Let me help you with your bags." Why people did this, Ryan didn't know, though on reflection, he'd done it himself often enough, and the Brits were the world champions at good manners.

"And you are?" Ryan asked.

"Station Chief Rome," Sharp replied. "C called to say you were coming in, Sir John, and that I ought to meet you personally."

"Good of Basil," Jack thought out loud.

Sharp's car was, in this case, a Bentley sedan, bronze in color, with

left-hand driver's seat in deference to the fact that they were in a barbarian country.

"Nice wheels, fella."

"My cover is Deputy Chief of Mission," Sharp explained. "I could have had a Ferrari, but it seemed a little too ostentatious. I do little actual field work, you see, just administrative things. I actually *am* the DCM of the embassy. Too much diplomatic work—that can drive one mad."

"How's Italy?"

"Lovely place, lovely people. Not terribly well organized. They say we Brits muddle through things, but we're bloody Prussians compared to this lot."

"Their cops?"

"Quite good, actually. Several different police forces. Best of the lot are the Carabinieri, paramilitary police of the central government. Some of them are excellent. Down in Sicily they're trying to get a handle on the Mafia—pig of a job that is, but, you know, eventually I think they will succeed. "

"You briefed in on why they sent me down?"

"Some people think Yuriy Vladimirovich wants to kill the Pope? That's what my telex said."

"Yeah. We just got a defector out who says so, and we think he's giving us the real shit."

"Any details?"

" 'Fraid not. I think they sent me down here to work with you until somebody figures out the right thing to do. Looks to me like an attempt might be made Wednesday."

"The weekly appearance in the square?"

Jack nodded. "Yep." They were on the highway from the airport to Rome. The country looked odd to Ryan, but it took a minute to figure out why. Then he got it. The pitch of the roofs was different—shallower than what he was used to. They probably didn't get much snow here in winter. Otherwise the houses looked rather like sugar cubes, painted white to reject the heat of the Italian sun. Well, every country had its unique architecture.

"Wednesday, eh?"

"Yeah. We're also looking for a guy named Boris Strokov, colonel in the Bulgarian DS. Sounds like a professional killer."

Sharp concentrated on the road. "I've heard the name. Wasn't he a suspect in the Georgiy Markov killing?"

"That's the guy. They ought to be sending some photos of him."

"Courier on your flight," Sharp reported. "Taking a different way into the city."

"Any ideas on what the hell to do?"

"We'll get you settled at the embassy—my house, actually, two blocks away. It's rather nice. Then we'll drive down to Saint Peter's and look around, get a feel for things. I've been there to see the artwork and such—the Vatican art collection is on a par with the Queen's—but I've never worked there per se. Ever been to Rome?"

"Never."

"Very well, let's take a drive-about first instead, give you a quick feel for the place."

Rome seemed a remarkably disorganized place—but so did a street map of London, whose city fathers had evidently not been married to the city mothers. And Rome was older by a thousand years or so, built when the fastest thing going was a horse, and they were slower in real life than in a John Ford Western. Not many straight lines for the roads, and a meandering river in the middle. Everything looked old to Ryan—no, not old but *old,* as though dinosaurs had once walked the streets. That was a little hard to reconcile with the automobile traffic, of course.

"That's the Flavian Amphitheater. It was called the Coliseum because the Emperor Nero had built a large statue of himself right there"—Sharp pointed—"and the people took to calling the stadium by that name, rather to the annoyance of the Flavian family, which built the place out of proceeds from the Jewish rebellion that Josephus wrote about."

Jack had seen it on TV and in the movies, but that wasn't quite the same as driving past it. Men had built that with nothing more than sweat power and hemp ropes. Its shape was strangely reminiscent of Yankee Stadium in New York. But Babe Ruth had never spilled a guy's guts out in the Bronx. A lot of that had happened here. It was time for Ryan to make an admission.

"You know, if they ever invent a time machine, I think I might like to come back and see what it was like. Makes me a barbarian, doesn't it?"

"Just their version of rugby," Sharp said. "And the football here can be pretty tough."

"Soccer is a girl's game," Jack snorted.

"You *are* a barbarian, Sir John. Soccer," he explained in his best accent, "is a gentleman's game played by thugs, while rugby is a thug's game played by gentlemen."

"I'll take your word for it. I just want to see the *International Tribune*. My baseball team's in the World Series, and I don't even know how it's going."

"Baseball? Oh, you mean rounders. Yes, that is a girl's game," Sharp announced.

"I've had this talk before. You Brits just don't understand."

"As you do not understand proper football, Sir John. In Italy it's even more a national passion than at home. They tend to play a fiery game, rather different from the Germans, for example, who play like great bloody machines."

It was like listening to the distinction between a curveball and a slider or a screwball and a forkball. Ryan wasn't all that good a baseball fan to be able to grasp all the distinctions; it depended on the TV announcer, who probably just made it up anyway. But he knew that there wasn't a player in baseball who could smack a good curveball on the outside corner.

Saint Peter's Basilica was five minutes after that.

"Damn!" Jack breathed.

"Big, isn't it?"

It wasn't big; it was *vast*.

Sharp went to the left side of the cathedral, ending up in what looked like an area of shops—jewelry, it seemed—where he parked.

"Let's take a look, shall we?"

Ryan took the chance to leave the car and stretch his legs, and he had to remind himself that he was not here to admire the architecture of Bramante and Michelangelo. He was here to scout the terrain for a mission, as he had been taught to plan for at Quantico. It wasn't really all that hard if you spoke the language.

From above, it must have looked like an old-fashioned basketball key. The circular part of the piazza looked to be a good two hundred yards in diameter, then narrowed down to perhaps a third of that as you got away from the monstrous bronze doors to the church itself.

"When he sees the crowd, he boards his car—rather like a cross between a jeep and a golf trolley—just there, and he follows a cleared path in the crowd along this way," Sharp explained, "around there, and back. Takes about, oh, twenty minutes or so, depending on whether he stops the car for—what you Americans call pressing the flesh. I suppose I shouldn't compare him to a politician. He seems a very decent chap, a genuinely good man. Not all the popes have been so, but this one is. And he's no coward. He's had to live through the Nazis and the communists, and that never turned him a single degree from his path."

"Yeah, he must like riding the point of the lance," Ryan murmured in reply. There was just one thing occupying his mind now. "Where's the sun going to be?"

"Just at our backs."

"So, if there's a bad guy, he'll stand just about here, sun behind him, not in his eyes. People looking that way from the other side have the sun in *their* eyes. Maybe it's not all that much, but when your ass is on the line, you play every card in your hand. Ever been in uniform,

Tom?"

"Coldstream Guards, *lef* tenant through a captaincy. Saw some action in Aden, but mainly served in the BOAR. I agree with your estimate of the situation," Sharp said, turning to do his own evaluation. "And professionals are somewhat predictable, since they all study out of the same syllabus. But what about a rifle?"

"How many men you have to use for this?"

"Four, besides myself. C might send more down from London, but not all that many."

"Put one up there?" Ryan gestured to the colonnade. Seventy feet high? Eighty? About the same height as the perch Lee Harvey Oswald had used to do Jack Kennedy . . . *with an Italian rifle,* Jack reminded himself. That was good for a brief chill.

"I can probably get a man up there disguised as a photographer." And long camera lenses made for good telescopes.

"How about radios?"

"Say, six civilian-band walkie-talkies. If we don't have them at the embassy, I can have them flown in from London."

"Better to have military ones, small enough to conceal—we had one in the Corps that had an earpiece like from a transistor radio. Also better if it's encrypted, but that might be hard." *And such systems,* Ryan didn't add, *are not entirely reliable.*

"Yes, we can do that. You have a good eye, Sir John."

"I wasn't a Marine for long, but the way they teach lessons in the Basic School, it's kinda hard to forget them. This is one hell of a big place to cover with six men, fella."

"And not something SIS trains us to do," Sharp added.

"Hey, the U.S. Secret Service would cover this place with over a hundred trained agents—shit, maybe more—plus try to get intel on every hotel, motel, and flophouse in the area." Jack let out a breath. "Mr. Sharp, this is not possible. How thick are the crowds?"

"It varies. In the summer tourist season, there are enough people here to fill Wembley Stadium. This coming week? Certainly thousands," he estimated. "How many is hard to reckon."

This mission is a real shitburger, Ryan told himself.

"Any way to hit the hotels, try to get a line on this Strokov guy?"

"More hotels in Rome than in London. It's a lot to cover with four field officers. We can't get any help from the local police, can we?"

"What guidance on that from Basil?" Ryan inquired, already guessing the answer.

"Everything is on close hold. No, we cannot let anyone know what we're doing."

He couldn't even call for help from CIA's local station, Jack realized. Bob Ritter would never sanction it. *Shitburger* was optimistic.

CHAPTER 31

BRIDGE BUILDER

SHARP'S OFFICIAL RESIDENCE was as impressive in its way as the safe house outside Manchester. There was no guessing what—whom—it had been built for, and Ryan was tired of asking anyway. He had a bedroom and a private bathroom, and that was enough. The ceilings were high in every room, presumably defense against the hot summers Rome was known for. It had been about 80 during the afternoon drive, warm, but not too bad for someone from the Baltimore-Washington area, though to an Englishman it must have seemed like the very boiler room of hell. *Whoever had written about mad dogs and Englishmen must have lived in another age,* Jack thought. In London, people started dropping dead in the street when it got to 75. As it was, he thought he had three days to worry, and one in which to execute whatever plan he and Sharp managed to come up with—in the hope that nothing at all would happen, and that CIA would come up with a way to warn His Holiness's security troops that they needed to firm up their means of seeing to his physical safety. Christ, the guy even wore white, the better to make a perfect sight picture for whatever gun the bad guy might use—like a great big paper target blank for the bad guy to put his rounds into. George Armstrong Custer hadn't walked into a worse tactical environment, but at least he'd done it with open eyes, albeit clouded by lethal pride and faith in his own luck. The Pope didn't live under that illusion. No, he believed that God would come and collect him whenever it suited His purpose, and that was *that*. Ryan's personal beliefs were not all that different from the Polish priest's, but he figured that God had given him brains and free will for a reason—did that make Jack an instrument of God's will? It was too deep a question for the moment, and besides, Ryan wasn't a priest to dope that one out. Maybe it was a lack of faith. Maybe he believed in the real world too much. His wife's job was to fix health problems, and were those problems visited upon people by God Himself? Some thought so. Or were those problems things God merely allowed to happen so that people like Cathy could fix them, and thus do His work? Ryan tended to this view, and the Church must have agreed, since it had built so many hospitals across the world.

But for damned sure, the Lord God didn't approve of murder, and it was now Jack's mission to stop one from happening, if that was possible. Certainly he wasn't one to stand by and ignore it. A priest would have to limit himself to persuasion or, at most, passive interference. Ryan knew that if he saw a criminal drawing a bead on the Pope—or, for that matter, anyone else—and he had a gun in his hand, he wouldn't hesitate more than a split second to interrupt the act with a pistol bullet of his own. Maybe that was just how he was made up, maybe it was the things he'd learned from his dad, maybe it was his training in the Green Machine, but for whatever reason, the use of physical force would not make him faint away—at least not until after he'd done the act. There were a few people in hell to prove that fact. And so Jack started the mental preparation for what he'd have to do, maybe, if the Bad Guys were in town and he saw them. Then it hit him that he wouldn't even have to answer for it—not with diplomatic status. The State Department had the right to withdraw his protection under the Vienna Convention, but, no, not in a case like this they wouldn't. So whatever he did could be a freebie, and that wasn't so bad a deal, was it?

The Sharps took him out for dinner—just a neighborhood place, but the food was brilliant, renewed proof that the best Italian restaurants are often the little mom-and-pop places. Evidently, the Sharps ate there often, the staff was so friendly to them.

"Tom, what the hell are we going to do?" Jack asked openly, figuring that Annie had to know what he did for a living.

"Churchill called it KBO—keep buggering on." He shrugged. "We do the best we can, Jack."

"I suppose I'd feel a hell of a lot better with a platoon of Marines to back my play."

"As would I, my boy, but one does the best one can with what one has."

"Tommy," Mrs. Sharp said. "What exactly are you two talking about?"

"Can't say, my dear."

"But you are CIA," she said next, looking at Jack.

"Yes, ma'am," Ryan confirmed. "Before that, I taught history at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and before that I traded stocks, and before that I was a Marine."

"Sir John, you're the one who—"

"And I'll never live it down, either." Why the hell, Jack wondered, hadn't he just kept his wife and daughter behind that tree on the Mall in London and let Sean Miller do his thing? Cathy would have gotten some pictures and that would have helped with the police, after all. No good—or dumb—deed ever went unpunished, he supposed. "And

you can stop the Sir John stuff. I do not own a horse or a steel shirt." And his only sword was the Mameluke that the Marine Corps gave to its officers upon graduation at Quantico.

"Jack, a knight is ceremonially one who will take up arms in protection of the sovereign. You've done that twice, if memory serves. You are, therefore, entitled to the honorific," Sharp pointed out.

"You guys never forget, do you?"

"Not something like that, Sir John. Courage under fire is one of the things worth remembering."

"Especially in nightmares, but in those the gun never works, and, yeah, sometimes I have them," Jack admitted, for the first time in his life. "What are we doing tomorrow, Tom?"

"I have embassy work in the morning. Why don't you scout the area some more, and I can join you for lunch."

"Fair enough. Meet where?"

"Just inside the Basilica, to the right, is Michelangelo's *Pietá.* Just there at one fifteen exactly."

"Fair enough," Jack agreed.

"SO, WHERE IS RYAN?" the Rabbit asked.

"Rome," Alan Kingshot answered. "He's looking into what you told us." All of this day had been occupied with uncovering what he knew of KGB operations in the UK. It turned out to be quite a lot, enough that the three-man Security Service team had positively drooled as they took their notes. Ryan had been wrong, Kingshot thought over dinner. This fellow wasn't a gold mine. No, he was Kimberly, and the diamonds just spilled out from his mouth. Zaitzev was relaxing a little more, enjoying his status. *As well he might,* Alan thought. Like the man who'd invented the computer chip, this Rabbit was set for life, all the carrots he could eat, and men with guns would protect his hole in the ground against all bears.

The Bunny, as he thought of her, had discovered Western cartoons today. She especially liked "Roadrunner," immediately noting the similarity to the Russian "Hey, Wait a Minute," and laughing through every one of them.

Irina, on the other hand, was rediscovering her love for the piano, playing the big Bösendorfer in the home's music room, making mistakes but learning from them, and starting to recover her former skills, to the admiring looks of Mrs. Thompson, who'd never learned to play herself, but who'd found reams of sheet music in the house for Mrs. Zaitzev to try her hand at.

This family, Kingshot thought, *will do well in the West.* The child was a child. The father had tons of good information. The mother would

breathe free and play her music to her heart's content. They would wear their newfound freedom like a loose and comfortable garment. They were, to use the Russian word, *kulturniy,* or cultured people, fit representatives of the rich culture which had long predated communism. Good to know that not all defectors were alcoholic ruffians.

"LIKE A CANARY on amphetamines, Basil says," Moore told his senior people in the den of his home. "He says this guy will give us more information than we can easily use."

"Oh, yeah? Try us," Ritter thought out loud.

"Indeed, Bob. When do we get him over here?" Admiral Greer asked.

"Basil asked for two more days to get him over. Say, Thursday afternoon. I'm having the Air Force send a VC-137 over. Might as well do it first class," the Judge observed generously. It wasn't *his* money, after all. "Basil's alerted his people in Rome, by the way, just in case KGB is running fast on their operation to whack the Pope."

"They're not that efficient," Ritter said with some confidence.

"I'd be careful about that, Bob," the DDI thought out loud. "Yuriy Vladimirovich isn't noted for his patience." Greer was not the first man to make that observation.

"I know, but their system grinds slower than ours."

"What about the Bulgarians?" Moore asked. "They think the shooter is a guy named Strokov, Boris Strokov. He's probably the guy who killed Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge. Experienced assassin, Basil thinks."

"It figures they'd use the Bulgars," Ritter observed. "They're the Eastern Bloc's Murder Incorporated, but they're still communists, and they're chess players, not high-noon types. But we still haven't figured out how to warn the Vatican. Can we talk to the Nuncio about this?"

They'd all had a little time to think through that question, and now it was time to face it again. The Papal Nuncio was the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, Giovanni Cardinal Sabatino. Sabatino was a longtime member of the Pope's own diplomatic service and was well regarded by the State Department's career foreign-service officers, both for his sagacity and his discretion.

"Can we do it in such a way as not to compromise the source?" Greer wondered.

"We can say some Bulgarian talked too much—"

"Pick that fictional source carefully, Judge," Ritter warned.

“Remember, the DS has that special subunit. It reports directly to their Politburo, and they don’t write much down, according to what sources we have over there. Kinda like the commie version of Albert Anastasia. This Strokov guy is one of them, or so we have heard.”

“We could say their party chairman talked to a mistress. He has a few,” Greer suggested. The Director of Intelligence had all manner of information on the intimate habits of world leaders, and the Bulgarian party boss was a man of the people in the most immediate of senses. Of course, if this ever leaked, life might get difficult for the women in question, but adultery had its price, and the Bulgarian chairman was such a copious drinker that he might not remember to whom he’d (never) said what would be attributed to him. That might serve to salve their consciences a little.

“Sounds plausible,” Ritter opined.

“When could we see the Nuncio?” Moore asked.

“Middle of the week, maybe?” Ritter suggested again. They all had a full week before them. The Judge would be on The Hill doing budget business until Wednesday morning.

“Where?” They couldn’t bring him here, after all. The churchman wouldn’t come. Too much potential unpleasantness if anyone noticed. And Judge Moore couldn’t go to the Nuncio. His face, also, was too well known by the Washington establishment.

“Foggy Bottom,” Greer thought out loud. Moore went to see the Secretary of State often enough, and the Nuncio wasn’t exactly a stranger there.

“That’ll work,” the DCI decided. “Let’s get it set up.” Moore stretched. He hated having to do work on a Sunday. Even a judge of the appeals court got weekends off.

“There’s still the issue of what they can actually do with the information,” Ritter warned them. “What is Basil doing?”

“He’s got his Rome Station rooting around, only five of them, but he’s going to send some more troops from London tomorrow just in case they try to make their hit on Wednesday—that’s when His Holiness appears in public. I gather he has a pretty busy work schedule, too.”

“Shame he can’t call off the ride around the plaza, but I guess he wouldn’t listen if anybody asked.”

“Not hardly,” Moore agreed. He didn’t bring up the word from Sir Basil that Ryan had been dispatched to Rome. Ritter would just throw another conniption fit, and Moore wasn’t up to that on a Sunday.

RYAN AROSE EARLY, as usual, had his breakfast, and caught a taxi to St. Peter’s. It was good to walk around the square—which was almost

entirely round, of course—just to stretch his legs. It seemed odd that here, inside the capital of the Italian Republic, was a titularly sovereign state whose official language was Latin. He wondered if the Caesars would have liked that or not, the last home of their language also being the home of the agency that had brought down their world-spanning empire, but he couldn't go to the Forum to ask whatever ghosts lived there.

The church commanded his attention. There were no words for something that large. The funds to build it had necessitated the indulgence selling that had sparked Martin Luther to post his protest on the cathedral door and so start the Reformation, something the nuns at St. Matthew's had not approved of, but for which the Jesuits of his later life had taken rather a broader view. The Society of Jesus also owed its existence to the Reformation—they'd been founded to fight against it.

That didn't much matter at the moment. The basilica beggared description, and it seemed a fit headquarters for the Roman Catholic Church. He walked in and saw that, if anything, the interior seemed even more vast than the outside. You could play a football game in there. A good hundred yards away was the main altar, reserved for use by the Pope himself, under which was the crypt where former popes were buried, including, tradition had it, Simon Peter himself. "Thou art Peter," Jesus was quoted in the Gospel, "and upon this rock I shall build my church." Well, with the help of some architects and what must have been an army of workers, they'd certainly built a church here. Jack felt drawn into it as though it were God's own personal house. The cathedral in Baltimore would scarcely have been an alcove here. Looking around, he saw the tourists, also staring at the ceiling with open mouths. *How had they built this place without structural steel?* Jack wondered. It was all stone resting on stone. *Those old guys really knew their stuff*, Ryan reflected. The sons of those engineers now worked for Boeing or NASA. He spent a total of twenty minutes walking around, then reminded himself that he wasn't, after all, a tourist.

This had once been the site of the original Roman Circus Maximus. The big racetrack for chariots, like those in the movie *Ben-Hur*, had then been torn down and a church built here, the original St. Peter's, but over time that church had deteriorated, and so a century-plus-long project to build this one had been undertaken and was finished in the sixteenth century, Ryan remembered. He went back outside to survey the area once again. Much as he looked for alternatives, it seemed that his first impression had been the correct one. The Pope got in his car *there*, drove around *that way*, and the place of greatest vulnerability was . . . *right about there.* The problem was that *there* was a

semicircular space perhaps two hundred yards long.

Okay, he thought, *time to do some analysis.* The shooter would be a pro. A pro would have two considerations: one, getting a good shot off; and two, getting the hell out of here alive.

So Ryan turned to see potential exit routes. To the left, closest to the façade of the church, people would really pile up there in their desire to get the first look at the Pope as he came out. Farther down, the open vehicle path widened somewhat, increasing the range of the shot —something to be avoided. But the shooter still needed to get his ass out of Dodge City, and the best way to do that was toward the side street where Sharp had parked the day before. You could stash a car there, probably, and if you made it that far, you'd go pedal-to-the-metal and race the hell off to wherever you had a backup car parked —a backup, because the cops would sure as hell be looking for the first one, and Rome had a goodly supply of police officers who'd run through fire to catch whoever had popped a cap on the Pope.

Back to the shooting place. He wouldn't want to be in the thickest part of the crowd, so he wouldn't want to be too close to the church. But he'd want to boogie out through *that* arch. Maybe sixty or seventy yards. Ten seconds, maybe? With a clear path, yeah, about that. Double it, just to be sure. He'd probably yell something like *"There he goes!"* as a distraction. It might make him easier to identify later, but Colonel Strokov will be figuring to sleep Wednesday night in Sofia. *Check flight times*, Jack told himself. *If he takes the shot and gets away, he won't be swimming home, will he? No, he'll opt for the fastest way out —unless he has a really deep hidey-hole here in Rome*.

That was a possibility. The problem was that he was dealing with an experienced field spook, and he could have a lot of things planned. But this was reality, not a movie, and professionals kept things simple, because even the simplest things could go to shit in the real world.

He'll have at least one backup plan. Maybe more, but sure as hell he'll have one.

Dress up like a priest, maybe? There were a lot of them in evidence. Nuns, too—more than Ryan had ever seen. *How tall is Strokov?* Anything over five-eight and he'd be too tall for a nun. But if he dressed as a priest, you could hide a fucking RPG in a cassock. That was a pleasant thought. But how fast could one run in a cassock? That was a possible downside.

You have to assume a pistol, probably a suppressed pistol. A rifle—no, its dangers lay in its virtues. It was so long that the guy standing next to him could bat the barrel off target, and he'd never get a good round off. An AK-47, maybe, able to go rock-and-roll? But, no, it was only in the movies that people fired machine guns from the hip. Ryan had tried it with his M-16 at Quantico. It felt real John Wayne, but you

just couldn't hit shit that way. The sights, the gunnery sergeants had all told his class at the Basic School, are there for a reason. Like Wyatt Earp shooting on TV—draw and fire from the hip. It just didn't work unless your other hand was on the fucker's shoulder. The sights are there for a reason, to tell you where the weapon is pointed, because the bullet you're shooting is about a third of an inch in diameter, and you are, in fact, shooting *at* a target just that small, and a hiccup could jerk you off target, and under stress your aim just gets worse . . . unless you're used to the idea of killing people. Like Boris Strokov, colonel of the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. What if he was one of those who just didn't rattle, like Audie Murphy of the Third Infantry Division in WWII? But how many people like that were around? Murphy had been one in eight million American soldiers, and nobody had seen that deadly quality in him before it just popped out on the battlefield, probably surprising even him. Murphy himself probably never appreciated how different he was from everybody else.

Strokov is a pro, Jack reminded himself. *And so he'll act like a pro. He'll plan every detail, especially the getaway*.

"You must be Ryan," a British voice said quietly. Jack turned to see a pale man with red hair.

"Who are you?"

"Mick King," the man replied. "Sir Basil sent the four of us down. Sussing the area out?"

"How obvious am I?" Ryan worried suddenly.

"You could well be an architecture student." King blew it off. "What do you think?"

"I think the shooter would stand right about here, and try to boogie on out that way," Jack said, pointing. King looked around before speaking.

"It's a dicey proposition, however one plans it, with all the people sure to be here, but, yes, that does look the most promising option," the spook agreed.

"If I were planning to do it myself, I'd want to use a rifle from up there. We'll need to have somebody topside to handle that possibility."

"Agreed. I'll have John Sparrow go up there. The chap with short hair over there. He brought a ton of cameras with him."

"One more man to camp out in the street that way. Our bird will probably have a car to skip town with, and that's where I'd park it."

"A little too convenient, don't you think?"

"Hey, I'm an ex-Marine, not a chess master," Ryan replied. But it was good to have somebody second-guessing him. There were a lot of tactical possibilities here, and everybody read a map a little differently, and Bulgarians might well study out of a different playbook altogether.

"It's a pig of a mission they've given us. Best hope is that this Strokov fellow doesn't show up. Oh, here he is," King said, handing Ryan an envelope.

It was full of eight-by-ten prints, actually of pretty good quality.

"Nick Thompson told me he has lifeless eyes," Ryan said, looking at one of them.

"Does seem rather a cold chap, doesn't he?"

"When we come here Wednesday, we going to be carrying?"

"I certainly shall be," King said positively. "Nine-millimeter Browning. There ought to be a few more at the embassy. I know you can shoot accurately under pressure, Sir John," he added, with casual respect.

"It doesn't mean I like to, pal." And the best engagement range for any pistol was contact range, holding the gun right against the other bastard. Kinda hard to miss that way. It would even cut the noise down, too. Plus, it was a hell of a good way to tell someone not to do anything untoward.

For the next two hours, the five men walked the piazza, but they kept coming back to the same place.

"We can't cover it all, not without a hundred men," Mick King finally said. "And if you can't be strong everywhere, you might as well pick one place and be strong there."

Jack nodded, remembering how Napoleon had ordered his generals to come up with a plan for protecting France from invasion, and when a senior officer had spread his troops evenly along the borders, he'd heartlessly inquired if the guy was trying to protect against smuggling. So, yeah, if you couldn't be strong *everywhere*, then you planned to be strong *somewhere*, and prayed that you'd picked the right spot. The key, as always, was to put yourself into the other guy's head, just as they'd taught him to do as an intelligence analyst. Think the way your adversary thinks, and stop him that way. It sounded so good and so easy theoretically. It was rather different in the field, however.

They caught Tom Sharp walking into the basilica, and together they went off to a restaurant for lunch and a talk.

"Sir John is right," King said. "The best spot is over on the left side. We have photos of the bugger. We put you, John"—he said to Sparrow—"atop the colonnade with your cameras. Your job will be to sweep the crowd and try to spot the bastard, and radio your information to us."

Sparrow nodded, but his face showed what he thought of the job as the beers arrived.

"Mick, you had it right from the beginning," Sparrow said. "It's a pig of a job. We ought to have the whole bloody SAS regiment here, and even *that* would not be enough." The 22nd Special Air Service

Regiment was actually just a company or two in size, brilliant troopers that they were.

"Ours is not to reason why, lad," Sharp told them all. "So good to know that Basil knows his Tennyson." The resulting snorts around the lunch table told the tale.

"What about radios?" Jack asked.

"On the way by courier," Sharp answered. "Small ones, they'll fit in a pocket, and they have ear pieces, but not small microphones, unfortunately."

"Shit," Ryan observed. The Secret Service would have exactly what they needed for this mission, but you couldn't just call them up and have them delivered. "What about the Queen's protective detail? Who does that?"

"The Metropolitan Police, I believe. Why—"

"Lapel mikes," Ryan answered. "It's what the Secret Service uses at home."

"I can ask," Sharp responded. "Good idea, Jack. They might well have what we need."

"They ought to cooperate with us," Mick King thought aloud.

"I'll see to it this afternoon," Sharp promised.

Yeah, Ryan thought, *we'll be the best-equipped guys ever to blow a mission*.

"They call this beer?" Sparrow asked after his first sip.

"Better than American canned piss," another of the new arrivals thought aloud.

Jack didn't rise to the bait. Besides, you went to Italy for the wine, not the beer.

"What do we know about Strokov?" Ryan asked.

"They faxed me the police file on him," Sharp reported. "Read it this morning. He's five-eleven, about fifteen stone. Evidently, he likes to eat too much. So, not an athlete—certainly not a sprinter. Brown hair, fairly thick. Good language skills. Speaks accented English, but reportedly speaks French and Italian like a native. Thought to be an expert with small arms. He's been in the business twenty years—age forty-three or so. Selected for the special DS assassination unit about fifteen years ago, with eight kills attributed to him, possibly more—we don't have good information on that."

"Delightful chap, sounds like," Sparrow thought aloud. He reached for one of the photos. "Ought not to be difficult to spot. Better to get some of these prints reduced to pocket size, so that we can all carry them with us."

"Done," Sharp promised. The embassy had its own little photo lab, mainly for his use.

Ryan looked around the table. At least it was good to be surrounded

by professionals. Given the chance to perform, they probably wouldn't blow it—like a good bunch of Marines. It was not all that much, but it was something.

"What about side arms?" Ryan asked next.

"All the nine-millimeter Brownings we need," Tom Sharp assured him.

Ryan wanted to ask if they had hollow-point ammunition, but they probably just had military-issue hardball. That Geneva Convention bullshit. The nine-millimeter Parabellum cartridge was thought by Europeans to be powerful, but it was hardly a BB compared to the .45 Colt with which he'd been trained. So, then, why did he own a Browning Hi-Power? Jack asked himself. But the one he had at home was loaded with Federal 147-grain hollow-points, regarded by the American FBI as the only useful bullet to shoot out of the thing, good both for penetration and for expanding to the diameter of a dime inside the target's body, to make him bleed out in a hurry.

"He'd better be bloody close," Mick King announced. "I haven't fired one of the things in years." Which reminded Jack that England did not have the gun culture America has, even in their security services. James Bond was someone from the movies, Ryan had to remember. Ryan himself was probably the best pistol shot in the room, and he was a long way from being an expert. The pistols Sharp would hand out would be military-issue, the ones with invisible sights and crummy grips. The one Ryan owned had Pachmayr grips that fit his hand so nicely that it might have been a custom-made glove. Damn, nothing about this job was going to be easy.

"Okay. John, you'll be atop the colonnade. Find out how you get there, and arrange to get up there Wednesday morning early."

"Right." He had press credentials to make that easy. "I'll recheck the timing for everything as well."

"Good," Sharp replied. "We'll spend the afternoon going over the ground more. Look for things we may have overlooked. I'm thinking we put one man over on the side street to try and spot our friend Strokov coming in. If we spot him, we shadow him all the way in."

"Not stop him out there?" Ryan asked.

"Better to get him in closer," Sharp thought out loud. "More of us, less chance for him to bolt. If we're onto him, Jack, he won't be doing anything untoward, will he? We'll see to that."

"Will he be that predictable?" Jack worried.

"He's doubtless been here already. Indeed, we could just spot him today or tomorrow, couldn't we?"

"I wouldn't bet the ranch on it," Jack shot back.

"We play the card we are dealt, Sir John," King said. "And hope for luck."

There was no arguing with that, Ryan realized.

"If I were planning this operation, I'd be trying very hard to keep it simple. The most important preparation he'll be making is up here." Sharp tapped the side of his head. "He, too, will be somewhat tense, no matter how experienced he is in this business. Yes, he's a clever bugger, but he is not bloody Superman. The key to his success is surprise. Well, he doesn't really have that, does he? And blown surprise is the worst nightmare of a field officer. Lose that and everything comes apart like a wrecked watch. Remember, if he sees one thing that he doesn't like, he will probably just walk away and plan to come back again. There is no clock on this mission from his point of view."

"Think so?" Ryan wasn't the least bit sure of that.

"Yes, I do. If there were, from an operational standpoint, they would well have executed the mission already, and the Pope would already be chatting directly with God. According to what I've heard from London, this mission has been in planning for more than six weeks. So, clearly he's taking his time. I'll be very surprised if it happens day after tomorrow, but we must act as though it will."

"I wish I had your confidence, man."

"Sir John, field officers think and act like field officers, whatever their nationality," Sharp said with confidence. "Our mission is a difficult one, yes, but we speak his language, as it were. If this were a balls-out mission, it would have been done already. Agreed, gentlemen?" he asked, and got nods from around the table, except from the American.

"What if we're missing something?" Ryan wondered.

"That is a possibility," Sharp admitted, "but it's a possibility we have to both live with and discount. We have only the information we have, and we must design our plan around that."

"Not much choice for us, is it, Sir John?" Sparrow asked. "We have only what we have."

"True," Ryan admitted, rather miserably. There had come the sudden thought that other things might be happening as well. What if there were a diversion? What if somebody tossed firecrackers—to draw eyes toward the noise and away from the real action? *That*, he suddenly thought, was a real possibility.

Damn.

"WHAT'S THIS ABOUT RYAN?" Ritter asked, storming into Judge Moore's office.

"Basil thought that since BEATRIX was a CIA operation from the getgo, why not send one of our officers down there to take a look at

things? I don't see that it can hurt anything," Moore told his DDO.

"Who the hell does Ryan think he's working for?"

"Bob, why don't you just settle down? What the hell can he do to hurt things?"

"Damn it, Arthur—"

"Settle down, Robert," Moore shot back in the voice of a judge used to having his own way on everything from the weather on down.

"Arthur," Ritter said, calming down a whisker, "it's not a place for him."

"I see no reason to object, Bob. None of us think anything's going to happen anyway, do we?"

"Well . . . no, I suppose not," the DDO admitted.

"So he's just broadening his horizons, and from what he learns, he'll be a better analyst, won't he?"

"Maybe so, but I don't like having some desk-sitter playing field spook. He isn't trained for this."

"Bob, he used to be a Marine," Moore reminded him. And the U.S. Marine Corps had its own cachet, independent of the CIA. "He's not going to wet his pants on us, is he?"

"I suppose not."

"And all he's going to do is look around at nothing happening, and the exposure to some field officers will not do his education any harm, will it?"

"They're Brits, not our guys," Ritter objected weakly.

"The same guys who brought the Rabbit out for us."

"Okay, Arthur, I'll give you this one."

"Bob, you throw a hell of a conniption fit, but why not use them for something important?"

"Yes, Judge, but the DO is my shop to run. You want me to get Rick Nolfi into this?"

"You think it's necessary?"

Ritter shook his head. "No, I expect not."

"Then we let the Brits run this mini-op and keep it cool here at Langley until we can interview the Rabbit and quantify the threat to the Pope, all right?"

"Yes, Arthur." And the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency headed back to his office.

DINNER WENT WELL. The Brits made good company, especially when the talk turned to non-mission-related things. All were married. Three had kids, with one expecting his first shortly.

"You have two, as I recall?" Mick King asked Jack.

"Yeah, and number two arrived on a busy night."

"Too bloody right!" Ray Stones, one of the new arrivals, agreed with a laugh. "How did the missus take it?"

"Not too bad after Little Jack arrived, but the rest of the evening was subpar."

"I believe it," King observed.

"So, who told us that the Bulgarians want to kill the Pope?" Sparrow asked.

"It's KGB that wants his ass," Jack replied. "We just got a defector out. He's in a safe house, and he's singing like the girl in *Aida*. This is the most important thing so far."

"Reliable information?" King inquired.

"We think it's gold-plated and copper-bottomed, yeah. Sir Basil has bought into it. That's why he flew you guys down," Jack let them know, in case they hadn't already figured that one out. "I've met the Rabbit myself, and I think he's the real deal."

"CIA operation?" This was Sharp.

Jack nodded. "Correct. We had an operational problem, and you guys were kind enough to help us out. I'm not cleared to say much more, sorry."

They all understood. They didn't want their asses exposed by loose talk about a black operation.

"This must go to Andropov himself—the Pope's giving them trouble in Poland, is it?"

"It would seem so. Maybe he has command of more divisions than they appreciate."

"Even so, this seems a little extreme—how will the world see the assassination of His Holiness?" King wondered aloud.

"Evidently, they fear that less than a total political collapse in Poland, Mick," Stones thought out loud. "And they're afraid that he might be able to bring that about. The sword and the spirit, as Napoleon said, Mick. The spirit always wins in the end."

"Yes, I reckon so, and here we are at the epicenter of the world of the spirit."

"My first time here," Stones said. "It *is* bloody impressive. I must bring the family down here sometime."

"They do know their food and wine," Sparrow observed, going through his veal. "What about the local police?"

"Rather good, actually," Sharp told him. "Pity we can't enlist their assistance. They know the territory—it is their patch, after all."

But these guys are the pros from Dover, Ryan thought, with some degree of hope. Just that there weren't enough of them. "Tom, you talk to London about the radios?"

"Ah, yes, Jack. They're sending us ten. Earpieces and lapel microphones to speak into. Sideband, rather like what the army use. I

don't know if they're encrypted, but fairly secure in any case, and we'll use proper radio discipline. So at least we'll be able to communicate clearly. We'll practice with them tomorrow afternoon."

"And Wednesday?"

"We'll arrive about nine in the morning, pick our individual surveillance areas, and mill about while the crowd arrives."

"This isn't what they trained me for in the Corps," Ryan thought aloud.

"Sir John," Mick King responded, "this isn't what they trained any of us for. Yes, we are all experienced intelligence officers, but this really is a job for someone in the protective services, like the police constables who guard Her Majesty and the PM or your Secret Service chaps. Hell of a way to earn a living, this is."

"Yes, Mick, I expect we'll all appreciate them a little more after this lot," Ray Stones observed, to general agreement around the table.

"John." Ryan turned to Sparrow. "You've got the most important job, spotting this motherfucker for the rest of us."

"Lovely," Sparrow replied. "All I have to do is examine five-thousandplus faces for the one that might or might not be there. Lovely," the spook repeated.

"What will you be using?"

"I have three Nikon cameras and a good assortment of lenses. I think tomorrow I might buy some seven-by-fifty binoculars also. I just hope I can find a good perch to scan from. The height of the parapet worries me. There's a dead space extending out from the base of the columns about thirty yards or so that I can't see at all. That limits what I can do, lads."

"Not much choice," Jack thought out loud. "You can't see shit from ground level."

"That is the problem we have," Sparrow agreed. "Our best choice would be two men, one—actually, more than one—on each side with good spotting glasses. But we lack the manpower, and we'd have to get permission from the Pope's own security people, which is, I gather, quite out of the question."

"Getting them involved would be useful, but—"

"But we can't let the whole world know about the Rabbit. Yeah, I know. The Pope's life is secondary to that consideration. Isn't that just great?" Ryan growled.

"What is the security of your country worth, Sir John, and ours also?" King asked rhetorically.

"More than his life," Ryan answered. "Yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Has any Pope ever been murdered?" Sharp asked. Nobody knew the answer.

"Somebody tried once. The Swiss Guards fought a stonewall action to protect his retreat. Most of them went down hard, but the Pope escaped alive," Ryan said, remembering something from a comic book he'd read at St. Matthew's in the—what was it? Fourth grade or so?

"I wonder how good they are, those Swiss chaps?" Stones asked.

"They're pretty enough in the striped uniforms. Probably well motivated. Question of training, really," Sharp observed. "That's the difference between a civilian and a soldier—training. The chaps in plainclothes are probably well briefed, but if they carry pistols, are they allowed to use them? They work for a church, after all. Probably not trained to shoot people outright."

"You had that guy jump out from a crowd and fire off a starter pistol at the Queen—on the way to Parliament, wasn't it?" Ryan remembered. "There was a cavalry officer on a horse right there. I was surprised he didn't cut the asshole in half with his sabre—that would have been my instinct—but he didn't."

"Parade sword, just for ceremonial occasions. You probably couldn't cut cold butter with it," Sparrow said. "Nearly trampled the bastard with his horse, though."

"The Secret Service would have dropped him on the spot. Sure, the gun was loaded with blanks," Ryan said, "but it damned sure looked and sounded like the real thing. Her Majesty kept her head screwed on pretty tight. I would have shit myself."

"I'm sure Her Majesty availed herself of the proper facilities at Westminster Palace. She has her own loo there, you know," King told the American.

"In the event, he was some disturbed fellow, doubtless cutting out paper dolls in a mental hospital now," Sharp said, but, like every other British subject, his heart had stopped cold watching the incident on TV, and he, too, had been surprised that the lunatic had survived the event. Had one of the Yeomen of the Tower been there with his ceremonial fighting spear—called a partisan—he surely would have been pinned to the pavement like a butterfly in a collection box. Perhaps God did look after fools, drunks, and little children after all. "So, if Strokov does show up, and does take his shot, you suppose the local Italians will do for him?"

"One can hope," King said.

Wouldn't that be just great? Jack thought. The professionals can't protect the Pope, but local waiters and clothing salesmen beat the fucker to death. That'll look great on *NBC Nightly News*.

BACK IN MANCHESTER, the Rabbit and his family finished yet another superb dinner from Mrs. Thompson.

"What does an ordinary English worker eat?" Zaitzev asked.

"Not quite this well," Kingshot admitted. He sure as hell didn't. "But we try to take decent care of our guests, Oleg."

"Have I told you enough about MINISTER?" he asked next. "Is all I know." The Security Service had picked his brain pretty thoroughly on the subject that afternoon, going over every single fact at least five times.

"You've been most helpful, Oleg Ivan'ch. Thank you." In fact, he'd given the Security Service quite a lot. Most often, the way you caught such penetration agents was by identifying the information he'd transferred. Only a limited number of people would have access to all of it, and the "Five" people would observe all of them until one did something difficult to explain. Then they would see who arrived at the dead-drop site to retrieve the package, and from that they'd get the bonus of identifying his KGB control officer, and get two breaks for the price of one—or perhaps even more, because the case officer would be working more than one agent, and the discoveries could branch out like the limbs of a tree. Then you tried to arrest a peripheral agent before going after the main target, because then the KGB could not know how their main penetration agent had been exposed, and *that* would protect the primary source, Oleg Zaitzev, from discovery. The counterintelligence business was as baroque as medieval-court intrigue and was both loved and hated by the players for its intricacy, but that just made the apprehension of a real Bad Guy that much more rewarding.

"And what of the Pope?"

"As I said the other day, we have a team in Rome right now to look into the matter," Kingshot answered. "Not much we can say—in fact, not much we can really do, but we are taking action based on your information, Oleg."

"That is good," the defector thought out loud, hoping it hadn't all been for nothing. He'd not really looked forward to exposing Soviet agents throughout the West. He'd do that, to safeguard his own position in his new home, of course, and for the money he'd get for turning traitor to his Motherland, but his highest concern was in saving that one life.

TUESDAY MORNING,Ryan slept later than usual, arising just after eight, figuring he'd need to bankroll his rest for the following day. He'd sure as hell need it then.

Sharp and the rest of the team were already up.

"Anything new?" Jack asked, coming into the dining room.

"We have the radios," Sharp reported. There was, indeed, one at

every place at the table. “They’re excellent—the very same sort your Secret Service use—same manufacturer, Motorola. Brand new, and they are encrypted. Lapel microphones and earpieces.”

Ryan looked at his. The earpiece was clear plastic, curled up like a phone cord, and nearly invisible. That was good news. “Batteries?”

“Brand new, and two sets of replacements for each. Good to know that Her Majesty is well looked after.”

“Okay, so nobody can listen in, and we can swap information,” Ryan said. It was one more piece of good news set against a big black pile of the bad sort. “What’s the plan for the day?”

“Back to the piazza, do some more looking, and hope we see our friend Strokov.”

“And if we do?” Ryan asked.

“We follow him back to his accommodations and try to see if there’s a way to speak with the chap this evening.”

“If we get that far, just talk to him?”

“What do you suppose, Sir John?” Sharp replied with a cold look.

You really willing to go that far, Mr. Sharp? Jack didn’t ask. Well, the bastard was a multiple murderer, and as civilized as the Brits were, under all the good manners and world-class hospitality, they knew how to do business, and while Jack wasn’t entirely sure that he’d be able to go all the way, these guys probably didn’t have his inhibitions. Ryan figured he could live with that, as long as he wasn’t the trigger man himself. Besides, they’d probably give him a chance to change countries first. Better a talking defector than a silent corpse.

“Would that give anything away?”

Sharp shook his head. “No. He’s the chappie who killed Georgiy Markov, remember? We can always say it is a case of visiting Her Majesty’s justice on someone who needed to learn about it.”

“We don’t approve of murder at home, Jack,” John Sparrow advised. “It would indeed be a pleasure to have him answer for that.”

“Okay.” Ryan could live with that, too. He was certain his dad would approve.

Oh, yeah.

THE REST OF the day, they all played tourist and tested their radios. It turned out that the radios worked both inside and outside the basilica, and, better yet, inside to outside the immense stone structure. Each man would use his own name as an identifier. It made more sense than setting up numbers or code names that they’d all have to remember—one more confusing factor that they wouldn’t need if the shit hit the fan. All the while, they looked around for the face of Boris Strokov, hoping for a miracle, and reminding themselves that miracles

did occasionally happen. People really did hit the lottery—they had one in Italy, too—and the football pools every week, and so it *was* possible, just damned unlikely, and this day, it did not happen.

Nor did they find a better or more likely place from which to take a shot at a man in a slow-moving vehicle. It seemed to them all that Ryan's first impression of the tactical realities of the place was correct. That felt good to Jack until he realized that if he'd blown it, then it was his fault, not theirs.

"You know," Ryan said to Mick King—Sharp was back doing Deputy-Chief-of-Mission business for the British ambassador—"more than half the crowd is going to be in the middle there."

"Works for us, Jack. Only a fool would take the shot from in there, unless he plans to have Scotty beam him up to the starship *Enterprise*. No escape possible from that place."

"True," Jack agreed. "What about inside somewhere, get the Pope on the way to the car?"

"Possible," Mick agreed. "But that would mean that somehow Strokov or someone under his control is already inside the Papal administration—household, whatever one calls it—and is thus free to make his killing whenever he wishes. Somehow I think that infiltrating that organization would be difficult. It would mean maintaining a difficult psychological disguise for an extended period of time. No." He shook his head. "I would discount that possibility."

"Hope you're right, man."

"So do I, Jack."

They all left at about four, each catching a separate cab to within a few blocks of the Brit Embassy and walking the rest of the way.

Dinner was quiet that night. Each of them had his own worries, and everyone hoped that whatever the hell Colonel Strokov of the DS had in mind, it wasn't for this week, and that they could all fly back to London the following evening none the worse off for the experience. One thing Ryan had learned: Experienced field spooks that they were, they were no more comfortable with this mission than he was. It was good not to be alone in his anxiety. Or was that just schadenfreude? What the hell, was this how it felt the night before D-Day? No, there was no German Army waiting for them. Their job was to prevent a possible murder, and the danger was not even to themselves. It was to someone else who either didn't know or didn't care about the danger to himself, and so they had assumed responsibility for his life. Mick King had gotten it right from his first impression the day before. It was a pig of a mission.

"MORE STUFF FROM the Rabbit," Moore reported at the usual

evening get-together.

"What's that?"

"Basil says there's a deep-penetration agent in their Foreign Office, and the Rabbit gave them enough information to narrow him down to four potential individuals. 'Five' is already looking at them. And he gave them some more on this CASSIUS guy over here. He's been working for them just over ten years. Definitely a senior aide to a senator on the Intelligence Committee—sounds like a political adviser. So it's probably somebody who's been briefed in and has a clearance. That cuts it down to eighteen people for the Bureau to check out."

"What's he giving them, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"Sounds like whatever we tell The Hill about KGB operations gets back to Dzerzhinskiy Square in less than a week."

"I want that son of a bitch," Ritter announced. "If that's true, then we've lost agents because of him." And Bob Ritter, whatever his faults, looked after his agents like a mama grizzly bear with her cubs.

"Well, he's been doing this long enough that he's probably pretty comfortable in his fieldcraft."

"He told us about a Navy guy—NEPTUNE, wasn't it?" Greer remembered.

"Nothing new there, but we'll be sure to ask him about it. That could be anybody. How careful is the Navy with their crypto gear?"

Greer shrugged. "Every single ship has communications people, petty officers, and a commissioned communications officer. They're supposed to destroy the setting sheets and circuit boards on a daily basis, and toss them over the side—and not just one. Two people have to see it, supposedly. And they're all cleared—"

"But only people with clearances can fuck us in the ass," Ritter reminded them.

"Only the people you trust with your money can steal from you," Judge Moore observed. He'd seen enough criminal cases along that score. "That's the problem. Imagine how Ivan's going to feel if he finds out about the Rabbit."

"That," Ritter said, "is different."

"Very good, Bob," the DCI reacted with a laugh. "My wife says that to me all the time. It must be the war cry of women all over the world —*that's different*. The other side thinks they're the forces of Truth and Beauty, too, remember."

"Yeah, Judge, but we're going to whip 'em."

It was good to see such confidence, especially in a guy like Bob Ritter, Moore thought.

"Still thinking about THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH, Robert?"

"Putting some ideas together. Give me a few weeks."

"Fair enough."

IT WAS JUST one in the morning in Washington when Ryan awoke on Italian time. The shower helped get him alert, and the shave got his face smooth. By seven-thirty, he was heading down for breakfast. Mrs. Sharp fixed coffee in the Italian style, which surprisingly tasted as though someone had emptied an ashtray into the pot. Jack wrote that off to differing national tastes. The eggs and (English) bacon were just fine, as was the buttered toast. Someone had decided that men going into action needed full bellies. A pity the Brits didn't know about hash brown potatoes, the most filling of unhealthy breakfast foods.

"All ready?" Sharp asked, coming in.

"I guess we all have to be. What about the rest of the crew?"

"We rendezvous at the front of the basilica in thirty-five minutes." And it was only a five-minute drive from there. "Here's a friend for you to take along." He handed over a pistol.

Jack took it and slid the slide back. It was, fortunately, empty.

"You may need this, too." Sharp handed over two loaded magazines. Sure enough, they were hardball—full-metal-jacketed—cartridges, which would go right through the target, making only a nine-millimeter hole in and out. But Europeans thought you could drop an elephant with them. *Yeah, sure,* Jack thought, wishing for a .45 Colt M1911A1, which was much better suited for putting a man on the ground and leaving him there until the ambulance crew arrived. But he'd never mastered the big Colt, though he had, barely, qualified with it. It was with a rifle that Ryan could really shoot, but nearly anyone could shoot a rifle. Sharp didn't provide a holster. The Browning Hi-Power would have to go in his belt, and he'd have to keep his jacket buttoned to conceal it. The bad thing about carrying a pistol was that they were heavy damned things to port around with you, and without a proper holster he'd have to keep adjusting it in his belt to make sure it didn't fall out or slide down his pants. That just wouldn't do. It would also make sitting down a pain in the gut, but there wouldn't be much of that today. The spare magazine went into his coat pocket. He pulled the slide back, locked it in place, and slid the loaded one into the butt, then dropped the locking lever to release the slide. The weapon was now loaded and "in battery," meaning ready to fire. On reflection, Ryan carefully dropped the hammer. A safety might have sufficed, but Ryan had been trained not to trust safeties. To fire the weapon, he'd have to remember to cock the hammer, something he'd fortunately forgotten to do with Sean Miller. But this time, if the worst happened, he would not.

"Time to boogie?" Jack asked Sharp.

"Does that mean go?" the Chief of Station Rome asked. "I meant to

ask the other time you said that."

"Yeah, like, boogie on down the road. It's an Americanism. 'Boogie' used to be a kind of dance, I think."

"And your radio." Sharp pointed. "It clips on the belt over your wallet pocket. On/off switch"—he demonstrated—"earpiece fastens to your collar, and the microphone onto your collar. Clever bit of kit, this."

"Okay." Ryan got everything arranged properly, but left the radio off. The spare batteries went into his left-side coat pocket. He didn't expect to need them, but safe was always better than sorry. He reached behind to find the on/off switch and flipped it off and on. "What's the range on the radios?"

"Three miles—five kilometers—the manual says. More than we need. Ready?"

"Yeah." Jack stood, set his pistol snugly on the left side of his belt, and followed Sharp out to the car.

Traffic was agreeably light this morning. Italian drivers were not, from what he'd seen so far, the raving maniacs he'd heard them to be. But the people out now would be people heading soberly to work, whether it was selling real estate or working in a warehouse. One of the difficult things for a tourist to remember was that a city was just another city, not a theme park set in place for his personal amusement.

And damned sure this morning Rome wasn't here for anything approaching that, was it? Jack asked himself coldly.

Sharp parked his official Bentley about where they expected Strokov to park. There were other cars there, people who worked in the handful of shops, or perhaps early shoppers hoping to get their buying done before Wednesday's regularly scheduled chaos.

In any case, this most expensive of British motorcars had diplomatic tags, and nobody would fool with it. Getting out, he followed Sharp into the piazza and reached back with his right hand to flip his radio on without exposing his pistol.

"Okay," he said into his lapel. "Ryan is here. Who else is on the net?"

"Sparrow in place on the colonnade," a voice answered immediately.

"King, in place."

"Ray Stones, in place."

"Parker, in place," Phil Parker, the last of the arrivals from London, reported from his spot on the side street.

"Tom Sharp here with Ryan. We'll do a radio check every fifteen minutes. Report immediately if you see the least thing of interest. Out." He turned to Ryan. "So, that's done."

"Yeah." He checked his watch. They had hours to go before the Pope appeared. What would he be doing now? He was supposed to be a very early riser. Doubtless the first important thing he did every day was to say Mass, like every Catholic priest in the world, and it was probably the most important part of his morning routine, something to remind himself exactly what he was—a priest sworn to God's service—a reality he'd known and probably celebrated within his own mind through Nazi and communist oppression for forty-odd years, serving his flock. But now his flock, his parish, straddled the entire world, as did his responsibility to them, didn't it?

Jack reminded himself of his time in the Marine Corps. Crossing the Atlantic on his helicopter-landing ship—unknowingly on his way to a life-threatening helicopter crash—on Sunday they'd held church services, and at that moment the church pennant had been run up to the truck. It flew *over* the national ensign. It was the U.S. Navy's way of acknowledging that there was *one* higher loyalty than the one a man had for his country. That loyalty was to God Himself—the one power higher than that of the United States of America, and his country acknowledged that. Jack could feel it, here and now, carrying a gun. He could feel that fact like a physical weight on his shoulders. There were people who wanted the Pope—the Vicar of Christ on earth—dead. And that, suddenly, was massively offensive to him. The worst street criminal gave a priest, minister, or rabbi a free pass, because there might really be a god up there, and it wouldn't do to harm His personal representative among the people. How much more would God be annoyed by the murder of His #1 Representative on Planet Earth. The Pope was a man who'd probably never hurt a single human being in his life. The Catholic Church was not a perfect institution—nothing with mere people in it was or ever could be. But it was founded on faith in Almighty God, and its policies rarely, if ever, strayed from love and charity.

But those doctrines were seen as a threat by the Soviet Union. What better proof of who the Bad Guys were in the world? Ryan had sworn as a Marine to fight his country's enemies. But here and now he swore to himself to fight against God's own enemies. The KGB recognized no power higher than the Party it served. And, in proclaiming that, they defined themselves as the enemy of all mankind—for wasn't mankind made in God's own image? Not Lenin's. Not Stalin's. God's.

Well, he had a pistol designed by John Moses Browning, an American, perhaps a Mormon—Browning had come from Utah, but Jack didn't know what faith he'd adhered to—to help him see about that.

Time passed slowly for Ryan. Constant reference to his watch didn't help. People were arriving steadily. Not in large numbers, but rather

like a baseball crowd, arriving single, or in pairs, or in small family groups. Lots of children, infants carried by their mothers, some escorted by nuns—school trips, almost certainly—to see the Pontifex Maximus. That term, too, came from the Romans, who with remarkable clarity likened a priest to a *pontifex*—bridge builder—between men and what was greater than men.

Vicar of Christ on earth was what kept repeating in Jack's mind. This Strokov bastard—hell, he would have killed Jesus Himself. A new Pontius Pilate—if not an oppressor himself, then certainly the representative of the oppressors, here to spit in God's face. It wasn't that he could harm God, of course. Nobody was that big, but in attacking one of God's institutions and God's personal representative—well, that was plenty bad enough. God was supposed to punish such people in His own good time . . . and maybe the Lord chose His instruments to handle that for Him . . . maybe even ex-Marines from the United States of America . . .

Noon. It would be a warm day. What had it been like to live here in Roman times without air-conditioning? Well, they hadn't known the difference, and the body adapted itself to the environment—something in the medulla, Cathy had told him once. It would have been more comfortable to take his jacket off, but not with a pistol stuck in his belt.... There were street vendors about, selling cold drinks and ice cream. *Like money changers in the Temple?* Jack wondered. *Probably not.* The priests in evidence didn't chase them away. *Hmm, a good way for the bad guy to get close with his weapon?* he suddenly wondered. But they were a good way off, and it was too late to worry about that, and none of them matched the photos he had. Jack had a small print of Strokov's face in his left hand, and looked down at it every minute or so. The bastard might be wearing a disguise, of course. He'd be stupid not to, and Strokov probably wasn't stupid. Not in his business. Disguises didn't cover everything. Hair length and color, sure. But not height. It took major surgery to do that. You could make a guy look heavier, but not lighter. Facial hair? *Okay, look for a guy with a beard or mustache* . Ryan turned and scanned the area. Nope. Nothing obvious, anyway.

Half an hour to go. The crowd was buzzing now, people speaking a dozen or more languages. He could see tourists and the faithful from many lands. Blond heads from Scandinavia, African blacks, Asians. Some obvious Americans . . . but no obvious Bulgarians. What did Bulgarians look like? This new problem was that the Catholic Church was supposed to be universal, and that meant people of every physical description. Lots of possible disguises.

"Sparrow, Ryan. See anything likely?" Jack asked his lapel.

"Negative," the voice in his ear answered. "I'm scanning the crowd

around you. Nothing to report."

"Roger," Jack acknowledged.

"If he's here, he's bloody invisible," Sharp said, standing next to Ryan. They were eight or ten yards from the interlocking steel barriers brought in for the Pope's weekly appearance. They looked heavy. *Two men to put them on the truck, or four?* Jack wondered. He discovered that the mind liked to wander at times like this, and he had to guard against that. *Keep scanning the crowd,* he told himself.

There's too many goddamned faces! the self responded angrily. *And as soon as the fucker gets into place, he'll be looking away*.

"Tom, how about we edge forward and sweep along the railing?"

"Good idea," Sharp agreed at once.

The crowd was difficult, but not impossible, to slip through. Ryan checked his watch. Fifteen minutes. People were now edging against the barriers, wanting to get close. There was a belief from medieval times that the mere touch of a king could cure the ill or bring good fortune, and evidently that belief lingered—and how much more true if the man in question was the Pontifex Maximus? Some of the people here would be cancer victims, entreating God for a miracle. Maybe some miracles actually happened. Docs called that spontaneous remission and wrote it off to biological processes they didn't yet understand. But maybe they really were miracles—to the recipients they certainly were exactly that. It was just one more thing Ryan didn't understand.

People were leaning forward more, heads were turning to the face of the church.

"Sharp/Ryan, Sparrow. Possible target, twenty feet to your left, standing three ranks back of the barrier. Blue coat," Jack's earpiece crackled. He headed that way without waiting for Sharp. It was hard pressing through the crowd, but it wasn't a New York subway crush. Nobody turned to curse at him. Ryan looked forward....

Yes . . . right there. He turned to look at Sharp and tapped his nose twice.

"Ryan is on the target," he said into his lapel. "Steer me in, John."

"Forward ten feet, Jack, immediately left of the Italian-looking woman in the brown dress. Our friend has light brown hair. He is looking to his left."

Bingo, Jack thought in silent celebration. It took two more minutes and he was standing right behind the cocksucker. *Hello, Colonel Strokov*.

Hidden in the thickness of the crowd, Jack unbuttoned his jacket.

The man was farther back than he would have done it, Jack thought. His field of fire was limited by the bodies around him, but the woman directly in front of him was short enough that he could

easily draw and fire right over her, and his field of view was fairly unrestricted.

Okay, Boris Andreyevich, if you want to play, this game's going to surprise you some. If the Army or the Navy ever look on heaven's scenes/ They will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines, motherfucker.

Tom Sharp took the chance to slide through the crowd in front of Strokov, brushing past as he went. On the other side, he turned in Ryan's direction and reached up with his fist into the sky. Strokov was armed.

The noise of the crowd rose in frequency, and the languages all melded into one murmuring hiss of noise that suddenly went dead still. A bronze door had opened out of Ryan's view.

Sharp was four feet away, just one person, an adolescent boy, between him and Strokov . . . easy for him to dart right and get his hands on the man.

Then a cavalcade of screams erupted. Ryan inched back and pulled out his pistol, thumbing the hammer back, putting his pistol fully in battery. His eyes were locked on Strokov.

"King, the Pope is coming out now! Vehicle is in view."

But Ryan couldn't answer. Neither could he see the Popemobile.

"Sparrow, I see him. Ryan/Sharp, he will enter your field of view in a few seconds."

Unable to say a word, unable to see His Holiness approach, Jack's eyes were locked on his target's shoulders. You can't move your arm without having them move, too, and when he did that . . .

Shooting a man in the back is murder, Jack. . . .

In his peripheral vision, Ryan saw the front-left corner of the white jeep/golf cart slowly moving left to right. The man in front of him was looking in that general direction . . . but not quite . . . why?

But then his right shoulder moved ever so slightly.... At the bottom of Ryan's field of view, his right elbow came into view, meaning that his forearm was now parallel to the ground.

And then his right foot moved back, ever so slightly. The man was getting ready to—

Ryan pressed the muzzle of his pistol against the base of his spine. He could feel the vertebrae of his backbone on the muzzle of his Browning. Jack saw his head rock back, just a few millimeters. Ryan leaned forward and rasped a whisper into his ear.

"If that gun in your hand goes off, you'll be pissing into a diaper the rest of your life. Now, real slow, with your fingertips, hand it back to me, or I will shoot you where you stand."

Mission accomplished, Ryan's brain announced. *This fucker isn't going to kill anybody. Go ahead, resist if you want. Nobody's that fast*. His

finger was so tight on the trigger that if Strokov turned suddenly, the pistol would go off on its own accord, and sever his spine for all time to come.

The man hesitated, and surely his mind was running at the speed of light through various options. There were drills for what to do when someone had a gun in one's back, and he'd even practiced them in his intelligence academy, but here, now, twenty years later, with a real pistol against his spine, those lessons with play guns seemed a very distant thing, and could he bat the gun away so fast to keep it from destroying a kidney? Probably not. And so, his right hand came back just as he'd just been told....

Ryan jumped at the sound of one-two-three pistol shots, not fifteen feet away. It was the sort of moment in which the world stops its turning, hearts and lungs stop functioning, and every mind has an instant of total clarity. Jack's eyes were drawn to the sound. There was the Holy Father, and on his snow-white cassock was a spot of red, the size of a half-dollar, in the chest, and on his handsome face was the shock of something too fast for him yet to feel the pain, but his body was already collapsing, slumping and turning to the left, folding into itself as he started to go down.

It required all of Ryan's discipline not to squeeze the trigger. His left hand snatched the pistol out of his subject's hand.

"Stand still, you motherfucker. Don't take a step, don't turn, don't do anything. Tom!" he called loudly.

"Sparrow, they have him, they have the gunman. The gunman is down on the pavement, must be ten people on him. The Pope took two, possibly three, hits."

The reaction of the crowd was almost binary in character. Those closest to the shooter jumped on him like cats on a single unlucky mouse, and whoever the shooter was, he was invisible under a mound of tourists, perhaps ten feet from where Ryan, Sharp, and Strokov stood. The people immediately around Ryan were drawing away—rather slowly, actually....

"Jack, let's get our friend away from here, shall we?" And the three men moved into the escape arch, as Ryan had come to think of it.

"Sharp to all. We have Strokov with us. Leave the area separately and rendezvous at the embassy."

A minute later, they were in Sharp's official Bentley. Ryan got in back with the Bulgarian.

Strokov was clearly feeling better about things now. "What is this? I am member of Bulgarian embassy and—"

"We'll remember you said that, old man. For now, you are a guest of Her Britannic Majesty's government. Now, be a good chap and sit still, or my friend will kill you."

"Interesting tool of diplomacy, this." Ryan lifted the gun he'd taken from Strokov—East Bloc issue, with a large and awkward can-type silencer screwed on the business end. Sure as hell he'd been planning to shoot somebody.

But whom? Suddenly, Ryan wasn't sure.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Jack?"

"Something was more wrong than we thought."

"I think you're right," Sharp agreed. "But we have someone to clear that up for us."

The drive back to the embassy illustrated what had been to Ryan a hidden talent. The Bentley had an immensely powerful engine, and Sharp knew how to use it, exploding away from the Vatican like a drag-racing top fuel eliminator. The car screeched to a halt in the small parking lot next to the embassy, and the three of them went in through a side door, and from there to the basement. With Ryan covering, Sharp handcuffed the Bulgarian and sat him in a wooden chair.

"Colonel Strokov, you must answer for Georgiy Markov," Sharp told him. "We've been after you for some years now."

Strokov's eyes went as wide as doorknobs. As fast as the Bentley had gone, Tom Sharp's mind had been driving faster still.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we have these photos of you leaving Heathrow Airport after killing our good friend on Westminster Bridge. The Yard was onto you, old boy, but you left minutes before they got permission to arrest you. That's your bad luck. So, now, it was our job to arrest you. You will find us rather less civilized than the Yard, Colonel. You murdered a man on British soil. Her Majesty the Queen does not approve of that sort of thing, Colonel."

"But—"

"Why are we bothering to talk with this bastard, Tom?" Ryan asked, catching on. "We have our orders, don't we?"

"Patience, Jack, patience. He's not going anywhere at the moment, is he?"

"I want to have a phone to call my embassy," Strokov said—rather weakly, Ryan thought.

"Next he'll want a lawyer," Sharp observed humorously. "Well, in London you could have a solicitor to assist you, but we are not *in* London, are we, old boy?"

"And we are not Scotland Yard," Jack added, taking his lead from Sharp. "I should have just done him at the church, Tom."

Sharp shook his head. "Too noisy. Better we just let him . . . disappear, Jack. I'm sure Georgiy would understand."

It was clear from Strokov's face that he was not accustomed to having men discuss his own fate in the way that he had so often determined for himself the fates of others. It was easier to be brave, he was finding, when he was the fellow holding the gun.

"Well, I wasn't going to kill him, Tom, just sever his spine below the waist. You know, put him in a wheelchair the rest of his life, make him as incontinent as a baby. How loyal you suppose his government will be to him?"

Sharp nearly gagged on the thought. "Loyal, the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*? Please, Jack. Be serious. They'd just put him in a hospital, probably a mental hospital, and they'll wipe his ass once or twice a day if he's lucky."

That one went through the hoop, Ryan saw. None of the East Bloc services were big on loyalty-down, even to those who'd shown a lot of loyalty-up. And Strokov knew it. No, once you screwed the pooch, you were in very deep shit, and your friends evaporated like the morning mist—and somehow Strokov didn't strike Ryan as one who had all that many friends anyway. Even in his own service he'd be like an attack dog—valuable, perhaps, but not loved or trusted around the kids.

"In any case, while Boris and I discuss the future, you have a flight to catch," Sharp told him. It was just as well. Ryan was running out of impromptu lines. "Give my regards to Sir Basil, will you?"

"You bet, Tommy." Ryan left the room and took a deep breath. Mick King and the rest were waiting out there for him. Someone at Sharp's official residence had packed his bags, and there was an embassy minibus waiting to take them all to the airport. There, a British Airways Boeing 737 was waiting, and they caught it just in time, all with first-class tickets. Ryan was next to King for the flight.

"What the hell," Jack asked, "are we going to do with him?"

"Strokov? Good question," Mick replied. "Are you sure you want to know the answer?"

CHAPTER 32

MASQUED BALL

ON THE TWO-HOUR FLIGHT back to Heathrow, Ryan availed himself of three miniatures of single-malt scotch, mainly because it was the only hard stuff they had. Somehow, his fear of flying receded into the background—it helped that the flight was so smooth that the aircraft might as well have been sitting still on the ground, but Ryan also had a head full of other thoughts.

"What went wrong, Mick?" Ryan asked over the Alps.

"What went wrong was that our friend Strokov wasn't planning to do the assassination himself. He got someone else to do the actual shooting."

"Then why was he carrying a pistol with a silencer on the front end?"

"You want a guess? I'd wager he was hoping to kill the assassin himself and then blend into the crowd and make his escape. You can't read everyone's mind, Jack," King added.

"So, we failed," Ryan concluded.

"Perhaps. It depends on where the bullets went. John said there was one hit in the body, one perhaps in the hand or arm, and one other that might have gone wild, or at worst was a peripheral strike. So, whether the man survives or not is up to whatever surgeon is working on him now." King shrugged. "Out of our hands, my friend."

"Fuck," Ryan breathed quietly.

"Did you do your best, Sir John?"

That snapped his head around. "Yes—I mean, of course. We all did."

"And that is all a man can do, isn't it? Jack, I've been in the field for, what? Twelve years. Sometimes things go according to plan. Sometimes they do not. Given the information we had and the manpower we were able to deploy, I don't see how we could have done any better. You're an analyst, aren't you?"

"Correct."

"Well, for a desk boffin, you acquitted yourself well, and now you know a good deal more about field operations. There are no guarantees in this line of work." King took another swallow of his drink. "I can't say that I like it, either. I lost an agent in Moscow two

years ago. He was a young captain in the Soviet army. Seemed a decent sort. Wife and a young son. They shot him, of course. Lord only knows what happened to his family. Maybe she's in a labor camp, or maybe in some godforsaken town in Siberia, for all I know. You never find that out, you know. Nameless, faceless victims, but victims still."

"THE PRESIDENT IS PISSED," Moore told his senior executives, his right ear still burning from a conversation ten minutes before.

"That bad?" Greer asked.

"That bad," the DCI confirmed. "He wants to know who did it and why, and he'd prefer to know before lunch."

"That's not possible," Ritter said.

"There's the phone, Bob. You call him and tell him that," the Judge suggested. None of them had ever seen the President angry. It was, for the most part, something people tried to avoid.

"So, Jack was right?" Greer offered.

"He might have made a good guess. But he didn't stop it from happening, either," Ritter observed.

"Well, it gives you something to say, Arthur," Greer said, with a little hope in his voice.

"Maybe so. I wonder how good Italian doctors are."

"What do we know?" Greer asked. "Anything?"

"One serious bullet wound in the chest. The President ought to be able to identify with that," Moore thought out loud. "Two other hits, but not serious ones."

"So, call Charlie Weathers up at Harvard and ask him what the likely prognosis is." This was from Ritter.

"The President's already talked to the meatball surgeons at Walter Reed. They're hopeful but noncommittal."

"I'm sure they all say, 'If I was on it, it'd be okay.' " Greer had experience with military doctors. Fighter pilots were shrinking violets next to battlefield surgeons.

"I'm going to call Basil and have the Rabbit flown here as soon as the Air Force can get a plane ready. If Ryan's available—they ought to be flying him back from Rome right now, if I know Basil—I want him on the aircraft, too."

"Why?" Ritter asked.

"So he can brief us—maybe the President, too—on his threat analysis prior to the event."

"Christ, Arthur." Greer nearly exploded. "They told us about the threat four, five days ago."

"But we wanted to interview the guy ourselves," Moore acknowledged. "I know, James, I know."

RYAN FOLLOWED MICK KING off the airliner. At the bottom of the steps was somebody who had to be from Century House. Ryan saw that the man was staring right at him.

"Dr. Ryan, could you come with me, please? We'll have a man get your bags," the fellow promised.

"Where now?"

"We have a helicopter to take you to RAF Mildenhall, and—"

"My ass. I don't do helicopters since one nearly killed me. How far is it?"

"An hour and a half's drive."

"Good. Get a car," Jack ordered. Then he turned. "Thanks for the try, guys." Sparrow, King, and the rest shook his hand. They had indeed all tried, even though no one would ever know about their effort. Then Jack wondered what Tom Sharp would be doing with Strokov, and decided that Mick King was right. He really didn't want to know.

RAF MILDENHALL is just north of Cambridge, the home of one of the world's great universities, and Ryan's driver was in another Jaguar, and didn't much care about whatever speed limits there were on British roads. When they pulled past the RAF Ground Defense Regiment's security troops, the car didn't go to the aircraft waiting there on the ramp, but rather to a low building that looked like—and was—a VIP terminal. There, a man handed Ryan a telex that took about twenty seconds to read and resulted in a muttered "Great." Then Jack found a phone and called home.

"Jack?" his wife said when she recognized his voice. "Where the hell are you?" She must have been exercised. Cathy Ryan didn't ordinarily talk like that.

"I'm at RAF Mildenhall. I have to fly back to Washington."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you this, honey: How good are Italian doctors?"

"You mean—the Pope?"

"Yep." She couldn't see his tired but curt nod.

"Every country has good surgeons—Jack, what's going on? Were you there?"

"Cath, I was about forty feet away, but I can't tell you any more than that, and you can't repeat it to anybody, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, with wonder and frustration in her voice. "When will you be home?"

"Probably in a couple of days. I have to talk to some people at headquarters, and they'll probably send me right back. Sorry, babe. Business. So, how good are the docs in Italy?"

"I'd feel better if Jack Cammer was working on him, but they have to have some good ones. Every big city does. The University of Padua is about the oldest medical school in the world. Their ophthalmologists are about as good as we are at Hopkins. For general surgery, they must have some good people, but the guy I know best for this is Jack." John Michael Cammer was Chairman of Hopkins' Department of Surgery, holder of the prestigious Halstead Chair, and one hell of a good man with a knife. Cathy knew him well. Jack had met him once or twice at fund-raisers and been impressed by his demeanor, but wasn't a physician and couldn't evaluate the man's professional abilities. "It's fairly straightforward to treat a gunshot wound, mostly. Unless the liver or spleen is hit. The real problem is bleeding. Jack, it's like when Sally got hurt in the car with me. If you get him there fast, and if the surgeon knows his stuff, you have a good chance of surviving—unless the spleen's ruptured or the liver is badly lacerated. I saw the TV coverage. His heart wasn't hit—wrong angle. I'd say better than even money he'll recover. He's not a young man, and that won't help, but a really good surgical team can do miracles if they get to him fast enough." She didn't talk about the nasty variables of trauma surgery. Bullets could ricochet off ribs and go in the most unpredictable directions. They could fragment and do damage in widely separated places. Fundamentally, you couldn't diagnose, much less treat, a bullet wound from five seconds of TV tape. So the odds on the Pope's survival were better than even money, but a lot of 5–1 horses had beaten the chalk horse and won the Kentucky Derby.

"Thanks, babe. I'll probably be able to tell you more when I get home. Hug the kids for me, okay?"

"You sound tired," she said.

"I *am* tired, babe. It's been a busy couple of days." And it wasn't going to get any quieter. "Bye for now."

"I love you, Jack," she reminded him.

"I love you, too, babe. Thanks for saying that."

Ryan waited more than an hour for the Zaitzev family. So the offer of a helicopter would have just enabled him to wait here longer—fairly typical of the U.S. military. Ryan sat on a comfortable couch and drifted off to sleep for perhaps half an hour.

The Rabbits arrived by car. A USAF sergeant shook Jack awake and pointed him to the waiting KC-135. It was essentially a windowless Boeing 707, also equipped to refuel other aircraft. The lack of windows didn't help his attitude very much, but orders were orders, and he climbed up the steps and found a plush leather seat just

forward of the wing box. The aircraft had hardly lifted off the ground when Oleg fell into the seat beside his own.

"What happened?" Zaitzev demanded.

"We caught Strokov. I got him myself, and he had a gun in his hand," Ryan reported. "But there was another shooter."

"Strokov? You arrested him?"

"Not exactly an arrest, but he decided to come with me to the British Embassy. SIS has him now."

"I hope they kill the *zvoloch,*" Zaitzev snarled.

Ryan didn't reply, wondering if that might actually happen. Did the Brits play that rough? He had committed rather a nasty murder on their soil—hell, within sight of Century House.

"The Pope, will he live?" the Rabbit asked. Ryan was surprised to see his degree of interest. Maybe the guy was a real conscience defector after all.

"I don't know, Oleg. I called my wife—she's a surgeon. She says that it's better than a fifty-fifty chance that he will survive."

"That is something," Zaitzev thought out loud.

"WELL?" Andropov asked.

Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy stood a little more erect. "Comrade Chairman, we know little at this point. Strokov's man took the shot, as you know, and he hit his target in a deadly area. Strokov was unable to eliminate him as planned, for reasons unknown. Our Rome *rezidentura* is working carefully to discover what happened. Colonel Goderenko is taking personal charge. We will know more when Colonel Strokov flies back to Sofia. He is scheduled to be on the regular flight at nineteen hours. So, to this point it appears we have had a partial success."

"There is no such thing as a partial success, Colonel!" Andropov pointed out heatedly.

"Comrade Chairman, I told you weeks ago that this was a possibility. You will recall that. And even if this priest survives, he will not be going back to Poland anytime soon, will he?"

"I suppose not," Yuriy Vladimirovich grumbled.

"And that was the real mission, wasn't it?"

"Da," the Chairman admitted.

"No signals as yet?"

"No, Comrade Chairman. We've had to break in a new watch officer in Communications, and—"

"What is that?"

"Major Zaitzev, Oleg Ivanovich, he and his family died in a hotel fire in Budapest. He had been our communicator for mission six-six-

six."

"Why was I not informed of this?"

"Comrade Chairman," Rozhdestvenskiy soothed, "it was fully investigated. The bodies have been returned to Moscow and were duly buried. They all died of smoke inhalation. The autopsy procedures were viewed in person by a Soviet physician."

"You are sure of this, Colonel?"

"I can get the official report to you if you wish," Rozhdestvenskiy said with confidence. "I have read it myself."

Andropov shook it off. "Very well. Keep me informed on whatever comes in. And I want to be notified at once of the condition of this troublesome Pole."

"By your order, Comrade Chairman." Rozhdestvenskiy made his way out while the Chairman went back to other business. Brezhnev's health had taken a definite downturn. Very soon Andropov would have to step away from KGB in order to protect his ascension to the head seat at the table, and that was the main item on his plate at the moment. And, besides, Rozhdestvenskiy was right. This Polish priest would not be a problem for months, even if he survived, and that was sufficient to the moment.

"WELL, ARTHUR?" Ritter asked.

"He's calmed down a little bit. I told him about Operation BEATRIX. I told him that we and the Brits had people right there. He wants to meet the Rabbit we just got out, personally. So, he's still pretty pissed, but at least it's not at us," Moore reported on his arrival back from the White House.

"The Brits have this Strokov guy in custody," Greer let the DCI know. Word had just come in from London. "Would you believe Ryan's the guy who put the bag on him? The Brits have him now at their Rome embassy. Basil's trying to decide what to do with him. Best bet, Strokov ran the operation and enlisted this Turkish thug to do the shooting. The Brits say they caught him with a silenced pistol in his hand. The thinking is that his job was to take the shooter out, like that Mafia hit in New York a while back, to put big-league deniability on the assassination attempt."

"Your boy captured him?" the DCI asked in some surprise.

"He was there with a team of experienced British field spooks, and maybe his Marine training helped," Ritter allowed. "So, James, your fair-haired boy gets another attaboy."

Don't bite your tongue off when you sign the Letter of Commendation, Robert, Greer managed not to say. "Where are they all now?"

"Halfway home, probably. The Air Force is flying them over," Ritter

told them. “ETA at Andrews is about eleven-forty, they told me.”

THERE *WERE* WINDOWS in the front office, Ryan found out, and the flight crew was friendly enough. He was even able to talk a little about baseball. The Orioles had just one more game to win to finish the Phillies off, he was pleased and surprised to learn. The flight crew didn’t even hint at asking why they were driving him back to America. They’d done it too many times and, besides, they never got good answers anyway. Aft, the Rabbit Family was sound asleep, a feat Ryan had not yet managed to accomplish.

“How long?” he asked the pilot.

“Well, that’s Labrador there.” He pointed. “Call it three hours more, and we’ll be feet-dry almost all the way. Why don’t you get some sleep, sir?”

“I don’t sleep in the air,” Jack admitted.

“Don’t feel too bad, sir. Neither do we,” the copilot told him. And that was good news, on reflection, Jack thought.

SIR BASIL CHARLESTON was having his own meeting with his Chief of Government at the moment. Neither in America nor in the U.K. did reporters write stories about when and why the chiefs of the various intelligence services met with their political masters.

“So, tell me about this Strokov fellow,” she ordered.

“Not a very pleasant chap,” C replied. “We reckon he was there to kill the actual shooter. He had a suppressed weapon to eliminate the noise. So, it would appear that the idea was to kill His Holiness and leave a dead assassin behind. Dead men still tell no tales, you see, Prime Minister. But perhaps this one will, after all. The Italian police must be chatting with him right now, I would imagine. He is a Turkish national, and I’ll wager he had a criminal record, and/or experience in smuggling things into Bulgaria.”

“So, it was the Russians who were behind this?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. That seems virtually certain. Tom Sharp is talking to Strokov in Rome. We’ll see how loyal he is to his masters.”

“What will we do with him?” the PM asked. The answer was in the form of another question that she would have to answer. She did.

IT DID NOT occur to Strokov that when Sharp invoked the names of Aleksey Nikolay’ch Rozhdestvenskiy and Ilya Fedorovich Bubovoy, his own fate was sealed. He was merely dumbfounded that the British Secret Intelligence Service had the KGB so thoroughly penetrated.

Sharp saw no reason to disabuse him of that notion. Shocked beyond his capacity to react intelligently, Strokov forgot all of his training and started singing. His duet with Sharp lasted two and a half hours, all of it on tape.

RYAN WAS MORE on autopilot than the Boeing was before it touched down at Runway Zero-One Right at Andrews Air Force Base. He'd been on the go for what? Twenty-two hours? Something like that. Something more easily done as a Marine second lieutenant (age twenty-two) than as a married father of two (age *thirty*-two) who'd had a fairly stressful day. He was also feeling his liquor somewhat.

There were two cars waiting at the bottom of the steps—Andrews had yet to install a jetway. He and Zaitzev took the first. Mrs. Rabbit and the Bunny took the second. Two minutes after that, they were on Suitland Parkway, heading into D.C. Ryan drew the task of explaining what they were passing along the way. Unlike his arrival in England, Zaitzev was not under the impression that this might be a *maskirovka.* And the detour past the Capitol Building ended whatever lingering suspicions he might have had. George Lucas on his best day could not have faked this scenery. The cars crossed the Potomac and went north of the George Washington Parkway, finally taking the marked exit to Langley.

"So, this is the home of the Main Enemy," the Rabbit said.

"I just think of it as the place I used to work."

"Used to?"

"Didn't you know? I'm stationed back in England now," Jack told him.

The whole debriefing team was under the canopy by the main entrance. Ryan knew only one of them, Mark Radner, a Russian scholar from Dartmouth who got called down for some special work—one of the people who liked working for CIA, but not full-time. Ryan was now able to understand that. When the car stopped, he got out first and went to James Greer.

"You've had a busy couple of days, my boy."

"Tell me about it, Admiral."

"How was it in Rome?"

"First, tell me about the Pope," Jack shot back.

"He came through surgery okay. He's critical, but we asked Charlie Weathers up at Harvard about that, and he said not to worry. People that age who come through surgery are always classified as being in critical condition—probably just a way to drive the bill up. Unless something unusual crops up, he'll probably be fine. Charlie says they grow good cutters in Rome. His Holiness ought to be home in three to

four weeks, Charlie says. They won't rush it with a guy his age."

"Thank God. Sir, when I had that Strokov bastard I thought we'd done it, y'know? Then when I heard the shots—Jesus, what a moment that was, Admiral."

Greer nodded. "I can imagine. But the good guys won this one. Oh, your Orioles took the series from Philly. Game just ended twenty minutes ago. That new shortstop you have, Ripken, looks to me like he's going places."

"Ryan." Judge Moore came over next. "Well done, son." Another handshake.

"Thank you, Director."

"Nice going, Ryan," Ritter said next. "Sure you wouldn't like to try our training course at the Farm?" The handshake was surprisingly cordial. Ritter must have had a drink or two in the office, Jack surmised.

"Sir, right now, I'd be just as happy to go back to teaching history."

"It's more fun to make it, boy. Remember that."

The party moved inside, past the memorial on the right-side wall to the dead officers, many of whose names were still secret, then left to the executive elevator. The Rabbit family went its own way. There were hotellike accommodations for VIP visitors and back-from-overseas field officers on the sixth floor, and evidently the CIA was bedding them down there. Jack followed the senior executives to the Judge's office.

"How good is our new Rabbit?" Moore asked.

"Well, sure as hell he gave us good information on the Pope, Judge," Ryan answered in considerable surprise. "And the Brits sound pretty happy with what he's told them about that Agent MINISTER. I'm kinda curious who this CASSIUS guy is."

"And NEPTUNE," Greer added. The Navy needed secure communications to survive in the modern world, and James Greer still had blue suits in his closet.

"Any other thoughts?" This was Moore again.

"Has anyone thought about how desperate the Russians are? I mean, sure, the Pope was—I guess he still is—a political threat of some sort to them, but, damn it, this was not a rational operation, was it?" Jack asked. "Looks to me as though they're a lot more desperate than we usually think. We ought to be able to exploit that." The mixture of alcohol and fatigue made it easier than usual for Ryan to speak his mind, and he'd been chewing on this idea for about twelve hours.

"How?" Ritter asked, reminding himself that Ryan was something of a whiz at economics.

"I'll tell you one thing for sure: The Catholic Church is not going to be very happy. Lots of Catholics in Eastern Europe, guys. That is a

capability we need to think about using. If we approach the Church intelligently, they might just cooperate with us. The Church is big on forgiveness, sure, but you're supposed to go to confession first."

Moore raised an eyebrow.

"The other thing is, I've been studying their economy. It's very shaky, a lot more than our people think it is, Admiral," Jack said, turning to his immediate boss.

"What do you mean?"

"Sir, the stuff our guys are looking at, it's the official economics reports that come into Moscow, right?"

"We work pretty hard to get it, too," Moore confirmed.

"Director, why do we think it's true?" Ryan asked. "Just because the Politburo gets it? We know they lie to us, and they lie to their own people. What if they lie to themselves? If I were an examiner for the SEC, I think I could put a whole lot of guys in Allenwood Federal Prison. What they say they have doesn't jibe with what we can identify them as actually having. Their economy is teetering, and if that goes bad, even a little bit, the whole shebang comes down."

"How could we exploit that?" Ritter asked. His own blue-team analysis had said something very similar four days earlier, but even Judge Moore didn't know that.

"Where do they get their hard currency—I mean, what do they get it from?"

"Oil." Greer answered the question. The Russians exported as much oil as the Saudis.

"And who controls the world price of oil?"

"OPEC?"

"And who," Ryan went on, "controls OPEC?"

"The Saudis."

"Aren't they our friends?" Jack concluded. "Look at the USSR as a takeover target, like we did at Merrill Lynch. The assets are worth a lot more than the parent corporation, because it's so badly run. This isn't hard stuff to figure out." *Even by a guy exhausted by a long day, five thousand miles of air travel, and a little too much booze,* he didn't add. There were a lot of smart people at CIA, but they thought too much like government workers, and not enough like Americans. "Don't we have *anybody* who thinks outside the box?"

"Bob?" Moore asked.

Ritter was warming to the young analyst by the minute. "Ryan, you ever read Edgar Allan Poe?"

"In high school," Ryan replied in some small confusion.

"How about a story called 'The Masque of the Red Death'?"

"Something about a plague coming in to ruin the party, wasn't it?"

"Get some rest. Before you fly back to London tomorrow, you're

going to get briefed in on something."

"Sleep sounds like a plan, gentlemen. Where do I crash for the night?" he asked, letting them know, if they hadn't already guessed, that he was ready to collapse.

"We have a place for you at the Marriott up the road. You're all checked in. There's a car waiting at the entrance for you. Go on, now," Moore told him.

"Maybe he's not so dumb after all," Ritter speculated.

"Robert, it's nice to see that you're strong enough to change," Greer smilingly observed as he reached for Moore's own office bottle of expensive bourbon whiskey. It was time to celebrate.

THE FOLLOWING DAY in *Il Tempo*, a morning newspaper in Rome, was a story about a man found dead in a car of an apparent heart attack. It would be a little time before the body was identified and it was finally determined that he was a Bulgarian tourist who'd evidently come to the end of his life quite unexpectedly. How clear his conscience had been was not apparent from physical examination.

THE TEETH OF THE TIGER

TOM CLANCY

BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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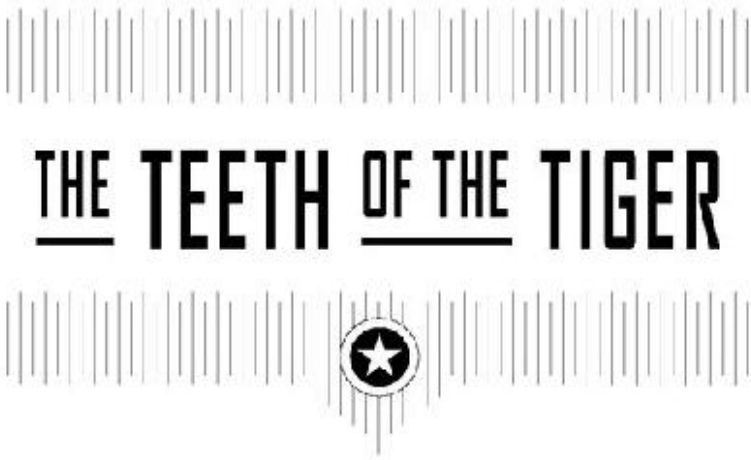

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Version_7

To Chris and Charlie.
Welcome aboard

. . . and, of course, Lady Alex, whose light burns
as brightly as ever

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

—GEORGE ORWELL

“This is a war of the unknown warriors; but let all strive without failing in faith or in duty . . .”

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

Whether the State can loose and bind
In Heaven as well as on Earth:
If it be wiser to kill mankind
Before or after the birth—
These are matters of high concern
Where State-kept schoolmen are;
But Holy State (we have lived to learn)
Endeth in Holy War.

Whether The People be led by The Lord,
Or lured by the loudest throat:
If it be quicker to die by the sword
Or cheaper to die by vote—
These are things we have dealt with once,
(And they will not rise from their grave)
For Holy People, however it runs,
Endeth in wholly Slave.

Whatsoever for any cause,
Seeketh to take or give
Power above or beyond the Laws,
Suffer it not to live!
Holy State or Holy King—
Or Holy People's Will—
Have no truck with the senseless thing.
Order the guns and kill!
Saying—after—me:—

Once there was The People—Terror gave it birth;
Once there was The People and it made a Hell of Earth
Earth arose and crushed it. Listen, O ye slain!
Once there was The People—it shall never be again!

—RUDYARD KIPLING, "Macdonough's Song"

PROLOGUE

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

DAVID GREENGOLD had been born in that most American of communities, Brooklyn, but at his Bar Mitzvah, something important had changed in his life. After proclaiming "Today I am a man," he'd gone to the celebration party and met some family members who'd flown in from Israel. His uncle Moses was a very prosperous dealer in diamonds there. David's own father had seven retail jewelry stores, the flagship of which was on Fortieth Street in Manhattan.

While his father and his uncle talked business over California wine, David had ended up with his first cousin, Daniel. His elder by ten years, Daniel had just begun work for the Mossad, Israel's main foreign-intelligence agency, and, a quintessential newbie, he had regaled his cousin with stories. Daniel's obligatory military service had been with the Israeli paratroopers, and he'd made eleven jumps, and had seen some action in the 1967 Six Day War. For him, it had been a happy war, with no serious casualties in his company, and just enough kills to make it seem to have been a sporting adventure—a hunting trip against game that was dangerous, but not overly so, with a conclusion that had fitted very well indeed with his prewar outlook and expectations.

The stories had provided a vivid contrast to the gloomy TV coverage of Vietnam that led off every evening news broadcast then, and with the enthusiasm of his newly reaffirmed religious identity, David had decided on the spot to emigrate to his Jewish homeland as soon as he graduated from high school. His father, who'd served in the U.S. Second Armored Division in the Second World War, and on the whole found the adventure less than pleasing, had been even less happy by the possibility of his son's going to an Asian jungle to fight a war for which neither he nor any of his acquaintances had much enthusiasm—and so, when graduation came, young David flew El Al to Israel and really never looked back. He brushed up on his Hebrew, served his uniformed time, and then, like his cousin, he was recruited by the Mossad.

In this line of work, he'd done well—so well that today he was the Station Chief in Rome, an assignment of no small importance. His

cousin Daniel, meanwhile, had left and gone back to the family business, which paid far better than a civil servant's wage. Running the Mossad Station in Rome kept him busy. He had three full-time intelligence officers under his command, and they took in a goodly quantity of information. Some of this information came from an agent they called Hassan. He was Palestinian by ancestry, and had good connections in the PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the things he learned there he shared with his enemies, for money—enough money, in fact, enough to finance a comfortable flat a kilometer from the Italian parliament building. David was making a pickup today.

The location was one he'd used before, the men's room of the Ristorante Giovanni near the foot of the Spanish Steps. First taking the time to enjoy a lunch of Veal Francese—it was superb here—he finished his white wine and then rose to collect his package. The dead drop was on the underside of the leftmost urinal, a theatrical choice but it had the advantage of never being inspected or cleaned. A steel plate had been glued there, and even had it been noticed, it would have looked innocent enough, since the plate bore the embossed name of the manufacturer, and a number that meant nothing at all. Approaching it, he decided to take advantage of the opportunity by doing what men usually do with a urinal, and, while engaged, he heard the door creak open. Whoever it was took no interest in him, however, but, just to make sure, he dropped his cigarette pack, and as he bent down to retrieve it with his right hand, his left snatched the magnetic package off its hiding place. It was good fieldcraft, just like a professional magician's, attracting attention with the one hand and getting the work done with the other.

Except in this case it didn't work. Scarcely had he made the pickup when someone bumped into him from behind.

"Excuse me, old man—*signore,* that is," the voice corrected itself in what sounded like Oxford English. Just the sort of thing to make a civilized man feel at ease with a situation.

Greengold didn't even respond, just turned to his right to wash his hands and take his leave. He made it to the sink, and turned on the water, when he looked in the mirror.

Most of the time, the brain works faster than the hands. This time he saw the blue eyes of the man who had bumped into him. They were ordinary enough, but their expression was not. By the time his mind had commanded his body to react, the man's left hand had reached forward to grab his forehead, and something cold and sharp bit into the back of his neck, just below the skull. His head was pulled sharply backward, easing the passage of the knife into his spinal cord, severing it completely.

Death did not come instantly. His body collapsed when all of the electrochemical commands to his muscles ceased. Along with that went all feeling. Some distant fiery sensations at his neck were all that remained, and the shock of the moment didn't allow them to grow into serious pain. He tried to breathe, but couldn't comprehend that he would never do that again. The man turned him around like a department store mannequin and carried him to the toilet stall. All he could do now was look and think. He saw the face, but it meant nothing to him. The face looked back, regarding him as a thing, an object, without even the dignity of hatred. Helplessly, David scanned with his eyes as he was set down on the toilet. The man appeared to reach into his coat to steal his wallet. Was that what this was, just a robbery? A robbery of a senior Mossad officer? Not possible. Then the man grabbed David by the hair to lift up his drooping head.

"Salaam aleikum," his killer said: Peace be unto you. So, this was an Arab? He didn't look the least bit Arabic. The puzzlement must have been evident on his face.

"Did you really trust Hassan, Jew?" the man asked. But he displayed no satisfaction in his voice. The emotionless delivery proclaimed contempt. In his last moments of life, before his brain died from lack of oxygen, David Greengold realized that he'd fallen for the oldest of espionage traps, the False Flag. Hassan had given him information so as to be able to identify him, to draw him out. Such a stupid way to die. There was time left for only one more thought:

Adonai echad.

The killer made sure his hands were clean, and checked his clothing. But knife thrusts like this one didn't cause much in the way of bleeding. He pocketed the wallet, and the dead-drop package, and after adjusting his clothing made his way out. He stopped at his table to leave twenty-three Euros for his own meal, including only a few cents for the tip. But he would not be coming back soon. Finished with Giovanni's, he walked across the square. He'd noticed a Brioni's on his way in, and he felt the need for a new suit.

* * *

HEADQUARTERS, United States Marine Corps, is not located in the Pentagon. The largest office building in the world has room for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but somehow or other the Marines got left out, and have to satisfy themselves with their own building complex called the Navy Annex, a quarter of a mile away on Lee Highway in Arlington, Virginia. It isn't that much of a sacrifice. The Marines have always been something of a stepchild of the American military,

technically a subordinate part of the Navy, where their original utility was to be the Navy's private army, thus precluding the need to embark soldiers on warships, since the Army and the Navy were never supposed to be friendly.

Over time, the Marine Corps became a rationale unto itself, for more than a century the only American land fighting force that foreigners ever saw. Absolved of the need to worry about heavy logistics, or even medical personnel—they had the squids to handle that for them—every Marine was a rifleman, and a forbidding, sobering sight to anyone who did not have a warm spot in his heart for the United States of America. For this reason, the Marines are respected, but not always beloved, among their colleagues in America's service. Too much show, too much swagger, and too highly developed a sense of public relations for the more staid services.

The Marine Corps acts like its own little army, of course—it even has its own air force, small, but possessed of sharp fangs—and that now included a chief of intelligence, though some uniformed personnel regarded that as a contradiction in terms. The Marine intelligence headquarters was a new establishment, part of the Green Machine's effort to catch up with the rest of the services. Called the M-2—"2" being the numerical identifier of someone in the information business—the chief's name was Major General Terry Broughton, a short, compact professional infantryman who'd been stuck with this job in order to bring a little reality to the spook trade: The Corps had decided to remember that at the end of the paper trail was a man with a rifle who needed good information in order to stay alive. It was just one more secret of the Corps that the native intelligence of its personnel was second to none—even to the computer wizards of the Air Force whose attitude was that anyone able to fly an airplane just *had to be* smarter than anybody else. Eleven months from now, Broughton was in line to take command of the Second Marine Division, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This welcome news had just arrived a week before, and he was still in the best of good moods from it.

That was good news for Captain Brian Caruso as well, for whom an audience with a general officer was, if not exactly frightening, certainly reason for a little circumspection. He was wearing his Class-A olive-colored uniform, complete to the Sam Browne belt, and all the ribbons to which he was entitled, which wasn't all that many, though some of them were kind of pretty, as well as his gold parachute-jumper's wings, and a collection of marksmanship awards large enough to impress even a lifelong rifleman like General Broughton.

The M-2 rated a lieutenant-colonel office boy, plus a black female gunnery sergeant as a personal secretary. It all struck the young

captain as odd, but nobody had ever accused the Corps of logic, Caruso reminded himself. As they liked to say: two hundred thirty years of tradition untrammeled by progress.

"The General will see you now, Captain," she said, looking up from the phone on her desk.

"Thank you, Gunny," Caruso said, coming to his feet and heading for the door, which the sergeant held open for him.

Broughton was exactly what Caruso had expected. A whisker under six feet, he had the sort of chest that might turn away a high-speed bullet. His hair was a tiny bit more than stubble. As with most Marines, a bad hair day was what happened when it got to half an inch, and required a trip to the barber. The general looked up from his paperwork and looked his visitor up and down with cold hazel eyes.

Caruso did not salute. Like naval officers, Marines do not salute unless under arms or "covered" with a uniform cap. The visual inspection lasted about three seconds, which only felt like a week or so.

"Good morning, sir."

"Have a seat, Captain." The general pointed to a leathercovered chair.

Caruso did sit down, but remained at the position of attention, bent legs and all.

"Know why you're here?" Broughton asked.

"No, sir, they didn't tell me that."

"How do you like Force Recon?"

"I like it just fine, sir," Caruso replied. "I think I have the best NCOs in the whole Corps, and the work keeps me interested."

"You did a nice job in Afghanistan, says here." Broughton held up a folder with red-and-white-striped tape on the edges. That denoted top-secret material. But special-operations work often fell into that category, and, sure as hell, Caruso's Afghanistan job had not been something for the *NBC Nightly News.*

"It was fairly exciting, sir."

"Good work, says here, getting all your men out alive."

"General, that's mostly because of that SEAL corpsman with us. Corporal Ward got shot up pretty bad, but Petty Officer Randall saved his life, and that's for sure. I put him in for a decoration. Hope he gets it."

"He will," Broughton assured him. "And so will you."

"Sir, I just did my job," Caruso protested. "My men did all—"

"And that's the sign of a good young officer," the M-2 cut him off. "I read your account of the action, and I read Gunny Sullivan's, too. He says you did just fine for a young officer in his first combat action." Gunnery Sergeant Joe Sullivan had smelled the smoke before, in

Lebanon and Kuwait, and a few other places that had never made the TV news. “Sullivan worked for me once,” Broughton informed his guest. “He’s due for promotion.”

Caruso bobbed his head. “Yes, sir. He’s sure enough ready for a step up in the world.”

“I’ve seen your fit-rep on him.” The M-2 tapped another folder, this one not with TS formatting. “Your treatment of your men is generous in its praise, Captain. Why?”

That made Caruso blink. “Sir, they did very well. I could not have expected more under any circumstances. I’ll take that bunch of Marines up against anybody in the world. Even the new kids can all make sergeant someday, and two of them have ‘gunny’ written all over them. They work hard, and they’re smart enough that they start doing the right thing before I have to tell them. At least one of them is officer material. Sir, those are my people, and I am damned lucky to have them.”

“And you trained them up pretty well,” Broughton added.

“That’s my job, sir.”

“Not anymore, Captain.”

“Excuse me, sir? I have another fourteen months with the battalion, and my next job hasn’t been determined yet.” Though he’d happily stay in Second Force Recon forever. Caruso figured he’d screen for major soon, and maybe jump to battalion S-3, operations officer for the division’s reconnaissance battalion.

“That Agency guy who went into the mountains with you, how was he to work with?”

“James Hardesty, says he used to be in the Army Special Forces. Age forty or so, but he’s pretty fit for an older guy, speaks two of the local languages. Doesn’t wet his pants when bad things happen. He—well, he backed me up pretty well.”

The TS folder went up again in the M-2’s hands. “He says here you saved his bacon in that ambush.”

“Sir, nobody looks smart getting into an ambush in the first place. Mr. Hardesty was reconnoitering forward with Corporal Ward while I was getting the satellite radio set up. The bad guys were in a pretty clever little spot, but they tipped their hand. They opened up too soon on Mr. Hardesty, missed him with their first burst, and we maneuvered uphill around them. They didn’t have good enough security out. Gunny Sullivan took his squad right, and when he got in position, I took my bunch up the middle. It took a total of ten to fifteen minutes, and then Gunny Sullivan got our target, took him right in the head from ten meters. We wanted to take him alive, but that wasn’t possible the way things played out.” Caruso shrugged. Superiors could generate officers, but not the exigencies of the

moment, and the man had had no intention of spending time in American captivity, and it was hard to put the bag on someone like that. The final score had been one badly shot-up Marine, and sixteen dead Arabs, plus two live captives for the Intel pukes to chat with. It had ended up being more productive than anyone had expected. The Afghans were brave enough, but they weren't madmen—or, more precisely, they chose martyrdom only on their own terms.

"Lessons learned?" Broughton asked.

"There is no such thing as too much training, sir, or being in too good a shape. The real thing is a lot messier than exercises. Like I said, the Afghans are brave enough, but they are not trained. And you can never know which ones are going to slug it out, and which ones are going to cave. They taught us at Quantico that you have to trust your instincts, but they don't issue instincts to you, and you can't always be sure if you're listening to the right voice or not." Caruso shrugged, but he just went ahead and spoke his mind. "I guess it worked out okay for me and my Marines, but I can't really say I know why."

"Don't think too much, Captain. When the shit hits the fan, you don't have time to think it all the way through. You think beforehand. It's in how you train your people, and assign responsibilities to them. You prepare your mind for action, but you never think you know what form the action is going to take. In any case, you did everything pretty well. You impressed this Hardesty guy—and he *is* a fairly serious customer. That's how this happened," Broughton concluded.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The Agency wants to talk to you," the M-2 announced. "They're doing a talent hunt, and your name came up."

"To do what, sir?"

"Didn't tell me that. They're looking for people who can work in the field. I don't think it's espionage. Probably the paramilitary side of the house. I'd guess that's the new counterterror shop. I can't say I'm pleased to lose a promising young Marine. However, I have no say in the matter. You are free to decline the offer, but you do have to go up and talk to them beforehand."

"I see." He didn't, really.

"Maybe somebody reminded them of another ex-Marine who worked out fairly well up there . . ." Broughton half observed.

"Uncle Jack, you mean? Jesus—excuse me, sir, but I've been dodging that ever since I showed up at the Basic School. I'm just one more Marine O-3, sir. I'm not asking for anything else."

"Good," was all Broughton felt like saying. He saw before him a very promising young officer who'd read the *Marine Corps Officer's Guide* front to back, and hadn't forgotten any of the important parts. If anything he was a touch too earnest, but he'd been the same way once

himself. “Well, you’re due up there in two hours. Some guy named Pete Alexander, another ex–Special Forces guy. Helped run the Afghanistan operation for the Agency back in the 1980s. Not a bad guy, so I’ve heard, but he doesn’t want to grow his own talent. Watch your wallet, Captain,” he said in dismissal.

“Yes, sir,” Caruso promised. He came to his feet, into the position of attention.

The M-2 graced his guest with a smile. “Semper Fi, son.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Caruso made his way out of the office, nodded to the gunny, never said a word to the half-colonel, who hadn’t bothered looking up, and headed downstairs, wondering what the hell he was getting into.

HUNDREDS OF miles away, another man named Caruso was thinking the same thing. The FBI had made its reputation as one of America’s premier law-enforcement agencies by investigating interstate kidnappings, beginning soon after passage of the Lindbergh Law in the 1930s. Its success in closing such cases had largely put an end to kidnapping-for-money—at least for smart criminals. The Bureau closed *every single one* of those cases, and professional criminals had finally caught on that this form of crime was a sucker’s game. And so it had remained for years, until kidnappers with objectives other than money had decided to delve into it.

And those people were much harder to catch.

Penelope Davidson had vanished on her way to kindergarten that very morning. Her parents had called the local police within an hour after her disappearance, and soon thereafter the local sheriff’s office had called the FBI. Procedure allowed the FBI to get involved as soon as it was possible for the victim to have been taken across a state line. Georgetown, Alabama, was just half an hour from the Mississippi state line, and so the Birmingham office of the FBI had immediately jumped on the case like a cat on a mouse. In FBI nomenclature, a kidnapping case is called a “7,” and nearly every agent in the office got into his car and headed southwest for the small farming-market town. In the mind of each agent, however, was the dread of a fool’s errand. There was a clock on kidnapping cases. Most victims were thought to be sexually exploited and killed within four or six hours. Only a miracle could get the child back alive that quickly, and miracles didn’t happen often.

But most of them were men with wives and children themselves, and so they worked as though there were a chance. The office ASAC—Assistant Special Agent in Charge—was the first to talk to the local sheriff, whose name was Paul Turner. The Bureau regarded him as an amateur in the business of investigations, out of his depth, and Turner

thought so as well. The thought of a raped and murdered little girl in his jurisdiction turned his stomach, and he welcomed federal assistance. Photos were passed out to every man with a badge and a gun. Maps were consulted. The local cops and FBI Special Agents headed to the area between the Davidson house and the public school to which she'd walked five blocks every morning for two months. Everyone who lived on that pathway was interviewed. Back in Birmingham, computer checks were made of possible sex offenders living within a hundred-mile radius, and agents and Alabama state troopers were sent to interview them, too. Every house was searched, usually with permission of the owner, but often enough without, because the local judges took a stern view of kidnapping.

For Special Agent Dominic Caruso, it wasn't his first major case, but it was his first "7," and while he was unmarried and childless, the thought of a missing child caused his blood first to chill, and then to boil. Her "official" kindergarten photo showed blue eyes and blond hair turning brown, and a cute little smile. This "7" wasn't about money. The family was working class and ordinary. The father was a lineman for the local electric co-op, the mother worked part-time as a nurse's aide in the county hospital. Both were churchgoing Methodists, and neither, on first inspection, seemed a likely suspect for child abuse, though that would be looked into, too. A senior agent from the Birmingham Field Office was skilled in profiling, and his initial read was frightening: This unknown subject could be a serial kidnapper and killer, someone who found children sexually attractive, and who knew that the safest way to commit this crime was to kill the victim afterward.

He was out there somewhere, Caruso knew. Dominic Caruso was a young agent, hardly a year out of Quantico, but already in his second field assignment—unmarried FBI agents had no more choice in picking their assignments than a sparrow in a hurricane. His initial assignment had been in Newark, New Jersey, all of seven months, but Alabama was more to his taste. The weather was often miserable, but it wasn't a beehive like that dirty city. His assignment now was to patrol the area west of Georgetown, to scan and wait for some hard bit of information. He wasn't experienced enough to be an effective interviewer. The skill took years to develop, though Caruso thought he was pretty smart, and his college degree was in psychology.

Look for a car with a little girl in it, he told himself, *one* not *in a car seat?* he wondered. It might give her a better way to look out of the car, and maybe wave for help . . . So, no, the subject would probably have her tied up, cuffed, or wrapped with duct tape, and probably gagged. *Some little girl, helpless and terrified.* The thought made his hands tighten on the wheel. The radio crackled.

"Birmingham Base to all '7' units. We have a report that the '7' suspect might be driving a white utility van, probably a Ford, white in color, a little dirty. Alabama tags. If you see a vehicle matching that description, call it in, and we'll get the local PD to check it out."

Which meant, don't flash your gum-ball light and pull him over yourself unless you have to, Caruso thought. It was time to do some thinking.

If I were one of those creatures, where would I be... ? Caruso slowed down. He thought . . . a place with decent road access. Not a main road per se . . . a decent secondary road, with a turnoff to something more private. Easy in, easy out. A place where the neighbors couldn't see or hear what he's up to . . .

He picked up his microphone.

"Caruso to Birmingham Base."

"Yeah, Dominic," responded the agent on the radio desk. The FBI radios were encrypted, and couldn't be listened into by anyone without a good descrambler.

"The white van. How solid is that?"

"An elderly woman says that when she was out getting her paper, she saw a little girl, right description, talking to some guy next to a white van. The possible subject is male Caucasian, undetermined age, no other description. Ain't much, Dom, but it's all we got," Special Agent Sandy Ellis reported.

"How many child abusers in the area?" Caruso asked next.

"A total of nineteen on the computer. We got people talking to all of them. Nothing developed yet. All we got, man."

"Roger, Sandy. Out."

More driving, more scanning. He wondered if this was anything like his brother Brian had experienced in Afghanistan: alone, hunting the enemy . . . He started looking for dirt paths off the road, maybe for one with recent tire tracks.

He looked down at the wallet-sized photo again. A sweet-faced little girl, just learning the ABC's. A child for whom the world has always been a safe place, ruled by Mommy and Daddy, who went to Sunday school and made caterpillars out of egg cartons and pipe cleaners, and learned to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know / 'Cause the Bible tells me so . . ." His head swiveled left and right. There, about a hundred yards away, a dirt road leading into the woods. As he slowed, he saw that the path took a gentle S-curve, but the trees were thin, and he could see . . .

. . . cheap frame house . . . and next to it . . . the corner of a van . . . ? But this one was more beige than white . . .

Well, the little old lady who'd seen the little girl and the truck . . . how far away had it been . . . sunlight or shadows . . . ? So many

things, so many inconstants, so many variables. As good as the FBI Academy was, it couldn't prepare you for everything—hell, not even close to everything. That's what they told you, too—told you that you had to trust your instinct and experience . . .

But Caruso had hardly a year's experience.

Still...

He stopped the car.

"Caruso to Birmingham Base."

"Yeah, Dominic," Sandy Ellis responded.

Caruso radioed in his location. "I'm going 10-7 to walk in and take a look."

"Roger that, Dom. Do you request backup?"

"Negative, Sandy. It's probably nothing, just going to knock on the door and talk to the occupant."

"Okay, I'll stand by."

Caruso didn't have a portable radio—that was for local cops, not the Bureau—and so was now out of touch, except for his cell phone. His personal side arm was a Smith & Wesson 1076, snug in its holster on his right hip. He stepped out of the car, and closed the door without latching it, to avoid making noise. People always turned to see what made the noise of a slammed car door.

He was wearing a darker than olive green suit, a fortunate circumstance, Caruso thought, heading right. First he'd look at the van. He walked normally, but his eyes were locked on the windows of the shabby house, halfway hoping to see a face, but, on reflection, glad that none appeared.

The Ford van was about six years old, he judged. Minor dings and dents on the bodywork. The driver had backed it in. That put the sliding door close to the house, the sort of thing a carpenter or plumber might do. Or a man moving a small, resisting body. He kept his right hand free, and his coat unbuttoned. Quick-draw was something every cop in the world practiced, often in front of a mirror, though only a fool fired as part of the motion, because you just couldn't hit anything that way.

Caruso took his time. The window was down on the driver-side door. The interior was almost entirely empty, bare, unpainted metal floor, the spare tire and jack . . . and a large roll of duct tape . . .

There was a lot of that stuff around. The free end of the roll was turned down, as though to make sure he'd be able to pull some off the roll without having to pick at it with his fingernails. A lot of people did that, too. There was, finally, a throw rug, tucked—no, *taped,* he saw, to the floor, just behind the right-side passenger seat . . . and was that some tape dangling from the metal seat framing? What might that mean?

Why there? Caruso wondered, but suddenly the skin on his forearms started tingling. It was a first for that sensation. He'd never made an arrest himself, had not yet been involved in a major felony case, at least not to any sort of conclusion. He'd worked fugitives in Newark, briefly, and made a total of three collars, always with another, more experienced agent to take the lead. He was more experienced now, a tiny bit seasoned . . . But not all that much, he reminded himself.

Caruso's head turned to the house. His mind was moving quickly now. What did he really have? Not much. He'd looked into an ordinary light truck with no direct evidence at all in it, just an empty truck with a roll of duct tape and a small rug on the steel floor.

Even so . . .

The young agent took the cell phone out of his pocket and speed-dialed the office.

"FBI. Can I help you?" a female voice asked.

"Caruso for Ellis." That moved things quickly.

"What you got, Dom?"

"White Ford Econoline van, Alabama tag Echo Romeo Six Five Zero One, parked at my location. Sandy—"

"Yeah, Dominic?"

"I'm going to knock on this guy's door."

"You want backup?"

Caruso took a second to think. "Affirmative—roger that."

"There's a county mountie about ten minutes away. Stand by," Ellis advised.

"Roger, standing by."

But a little girl's life was on the line . . .

He headed toward the house, careful to keep out of the sight lines from the nearest windows. That's when time stopped.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the scream. It was an awful, shrill sound, like someone looking at Death himself. His brain processed the information, and he suddenly found that his automatic pistol was in his hands, just in front of his sternum, pointed up into the sky, but in his hands even so. It had been a woman's scream, he realized, and something just went *click* inside his head.

As quickly as he could move without making much noise, he was on the porch, under the uneven, cheaply made roof. The front door was mostly wire screening to keep the bugs out. It needed painting, but so did the whole house. Probably a rental, and a cheap one at that. Looking through the screen he could see what seemed to be a corridor, leading left to the kitchen and right to a bathroom. He could see into it. A white porcelain toilet and a sink were all that was visible from this perspective.

He wondered if he had probable cause to enter the house, and

instantly decided that he had enough. He pulled the door open and slipped in as stealthily as he could manage. A cheap and dirty rug leading down the corridor. He headed that way, gun up, senses sandpapered to ultimate alertness. As he moved, the angles of vision changed. The kitchen became invisible, but he could see into the bathroom better . . .

Penny Davidson was in the bathtub, naked, china blue eyes wide open, and her throat cut from ear to ear, with a whole body's supply of blood covering her flat chest and the sides of the tub. So violently had her neck been slashed that it lay open like a second mouth.

Strangely, Caruso didn't react physically. His eyes recorded the snapshot image, but for the moment all he thought about was that the man who'd done it was alive, and just a few feet away.

He realized that the noise he heard came from the left and ahead. The living room. A television. The subject would be in there. Might there be a second one? He didn't have time for that, nor did he particularly care at the moment.

Slowly, carefully, his heart going like a trip-hammer, he edged forward and peeked around the corner. There he was, late thirties, white male, hair thinning, watching the TV with rapt attention—it was a horror movie, the scream must have come from that—and sipping Miller Lite beer from an aluminum can. His face was content and in no way aroused. He'd probably been through that, Dominic thought. And right in front of him—Jesus—was a butcher knife, a bloody one, on the coffee table. There was blood on his T-shirt, as if sprayed. From a little girl's throat.

"The trouble with these mutts is that they never resist," an instructor had told his class at the FBI Academy. "Oh, yeah, they're John Wayne with an attitude when they have little kids in their hands, but they don't resist armed cops—ever. And, you know, that's a damned shame," the instructor had concluded.

You are not going in to jail today. The thought entered Caruso's mind seemingly of its own accord. His right thumb pulled back the spurless hammer until it clicked in place, putting his side arm fully in battery. His hands, he noted briefly, felt like ice.

Just at the corner, where you turned left to enter the room, was a battered old end table. Octagonal in shape, atop it was a transparent blue glass vase, a cheap one, maybe from the local Kmart, probably intended for flowers, but none were there today. Slowly, carefully, Caruso cocked his leg, then kicked the table over. The glass vase shattered loudly on the wooden floor.

The subject started violently, and turned to see an unexpected visitor in his house. His defensive response was instinctive rather than reasoned—he grabbed for the butcher knife on the coffee table.

Caruso didn't even have time to smile, though he knew the subject had made the final mistake of his life. It's regarded as holy gospel in American police agencies that a man with a knife in his hand less than twenty-one feet away is an immediate and lethal threat. He even started to rise to his feet.

But he never made it.

Caruso's finger depressed the trigger of his Smith, sending the first round straight through the subject's heart. Two more followed in less than a second. His white T-shirt blossomed in red. He looked down at his chest, then up at Caruso, total surprise on his face, and then he sat back down, without speaking a word or crying out in pain.

Caruso's next action was to reverse direction and check out the house's only bedroom. Empty. So was the kitchen, the rear door still locked from the inside. There came a moment's relief. Nobody else in the house. He took another look at the kidnapper. The eyes were still open. But Dominic had shot true. First he disarmed and handcuffed the dead body, because that was how he'd been trained. A check of the carotid pulse came next, but it was wasted energy. The guy saw nothing except the front door of hell. Caruso pulled his cell phone out and speed-dialed the office again.

"Dom?" Ellis asked when he got the phone.

"Yeah, Sandy, it's me. I just took him down."

"What? What do you mean?" Sandy Ellis asked urgently.

"The little girl, she's here, dead, throat cut. I came in, and the guy came up at me with a knife. Took him down, man. He's dead, too, dead as fuckin' hell."

"Jesus, Dominic! The county sheriff is just a couple of minutes out. Stand by."

"Roger, standing by, Sandy."

Not another minute passed before he heard the sound of a siren. Caruso went out on the porch. He decocked and holstered his automatic; then he took his FBI credentials out of his coat pocket, and held them up in his left hand as the sheriff approached, his service revolver out.

"It's under control," Caruso announced in as calm a voice as he could muster. He was pumped up now. He waved Sheriff Turner into the house, but stayed outside by himself while the local cop went inside. A minute or two later, the cop came back out, his own Smith & Wesson holstered.

Turner was the Hollywood image of a southern sheriff, tall, heavyset, with beefy arms, and a gun belt that dug deeply into his waistline. Except he was black. Wrong movie.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Want to give me a minute?" Caruso took a deep breath and

thought for a moment how to tell the story. Turner's understanding of it was important, because homicide was a local crime, and he had jurisdiction over it.

"Yeah." Turner reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of Kools. He offered one to Caruso, who shook his head.

The young agent sat down on the unpainted wooden deck and tried to put it all together in his head. What, exactly, had happened? What, exactly, had he just done? And how, exactly, was he supposed to explain it? The whispering part of his mind told him that he felt no regret at all. At least not for the subject. For Penelope Davidson—too damned late. An hour sooner? Maybe even a half hour? That little girl would not be going home tonight, would never more be tucked into bed by her mother, or hug her father. And so Special Agent Dominic Caruso felt no remorse at all. Just regret for being too slow.

"Can you talk?" Sheriff Turner asked.

"I was looking for a place like this one, and when I drove past, I saw the van parked . . ." Caruso began. Presently, he stood and led the sheriff into the house to relate the other details.

"Anyway, I tripped over the table. He saw me, and went for his knife, turned toward me—and so, I drew my pistol and shot the bastard. Three rounds, I think."

"Uh-huh." Turner went over to the body. The subject hadn't bled much. All three rounds had gone straight through the heart, ending its ability to pump almost instantly.

Paul Turner wasn't anywhere nearly as dumb as he looked to a government-trained agent. He looked at the body, and turned to look back at the doorway from which Caruso had taken his shots. His eyes measured distance and angle.

"So," the sheriff said, "you tripped on that end table. The suspect sees you, grabs his knife, and you, being in fear of your life, take out your service pistol and take three quick shots, right?"

"That's how it went down, yeah."

"Uh-huh," observed a man who got himself a deer almost every hunting season.

Sheriff Turner reached into his right-side pants pocket and pulled out his key chain. It was a gift from his father, a Pullman porter on the old Illinois Central. It was an old-fashioned one, with a 1948 silver dollar soldered onto it, the old kind, about an inch and a half across. He held it over the kidnapper's chest, and the diameter of the old coin completely covered all three of the entrance wounds. His eyes took a very skeptical look, but then they drifted over toward the bathroom, and his eyes softened before he spoke his verdict on the incident.

"Then that's how we'll write it up. Nice shootin', boy."

FULLY A dozen police and FBI vehicles appeared within as many minutes. Soon thereafter came the lab truck from the Alabama Department of Public Safety to perform the crime-scene investigative work. A forensic photographer shot twenty-three rolls of 400-speed color film. The knife was taken from the subject's hand and bagged for fingerprints and blood-type matching with the victim—it was all less than a formality, but criminal procedure was especially strict in a murder case. Finally, the body of the little girl was bagged and removed. Her parents would have to identify her, but blessedly her face was reasonably intact.

One of the last to arrive was Ben Harding, the Special Agent in Charge of the Birmingham Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. An agent-involved shooting meant a formal report from his desk to that of Director Dan Murray, a distant friend. First, Harding came to make sure that Caruso was in decent physical and psychological shape. Then he went to pay respects to Paul Turner, and get his opinion of the shooting. Caruso watched from a distance, and saw Turner gesture through the incident, accompanied by nods from Harding. It was good that Sheriff Turner was giving his official stamp of approval. A captain of state troopers listened in as well, and he nodded, too.

The truth of the matter was that Dominic Caruso didn't really give a damn. He knew he'd done the right thing, just an hour later than it ought to have been. Finally, Harding came over to his young agent.

"How you feeling, Dominic?"

"Slow," Caruso said. "Too damned slow—yeah, I know, unreasonable to expect otherwise."

Harding grabbed his shoulder and shook it. "You could not have done much better, kid." He paused. "How'd the shooting go down?"

Caruso repeated his story. It had almost acquired the firmness of truth in his mind now. He could probably have spoken the exact truth and not been hammered for it, Dom knew, but why take the chance? It was, officially, a clean shoot, and that was enough, so far as his Bureau file was concerned.

Harding listened, and nodded thoughtfully. There'd be paperwork to complete and FedEx up the line to D.C. But it would not look bad in the newspapers for an FBI agent to have shot and killed a kidnapper the very day of the crime. They'd probably find evidence that this was not the only such crime this mutt had committed. The house had yet to be thoroughly searched. They'd already found a digital camera in the house, and it would surprise no one to see that the mutt had a record of previous crimes on his Dell personal computer. If so, Caruso had closed more than one case. If so, Caruso would get a big gold star in his Bureau copybook.

Just how big, neither Harding nor Caruso could yet know. The talent hunt was about to find Dominic Caruso, too.

And one other.

CHAPTER 1

THE CAMPUS

THE TOWN of West Odenton, Maryland, isn't much of a town at all, just a post office for people who live in the general area, a few gas stations and a 7-Eleven, plus the usual fast-food places for people who need a fat-filled breakfast on the drive from Columbia, Maryland, to their jobs in Washington, D.C. And half a mile from the modest post office building was a mid-rise office building of government-undistinguished architecture. It was nine stories high, and on the capacious front lawn a low decorative monolith made of gray brick with silvery lettering said HENDLEY ASSOCIATES, without explaining what, exactly, Hendley Associates was. There were few hints. The roof of the building was flat, tar-and-gravel over reinforced concrete, with a small penthouse to house the elevator machinery and another rectangular structure that gave no clue about its identity. In fact, it was made of fiberglass, white in color, and radio-transparent. The building itself was unusual only in one thing: Except for a few old tobacco barns that barely exceeded twenty-five feet in height, it was the only building higher than two stories that sat on a direct line of sight from the National Security Agency located at Fort Meade, Maryland, and the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley, Virginia. Some other entrepreneurs had wished to build on that sight line, but zoning approval had never been granted, for many reasons, all of them false.

Behind the building was a small antenna farm not unlike that found next to a local television station—a half-dozen six-meter parabolic dishes sat inside a twelve-foot-high, razor-wire-crowned Cyclone fence enclosure and pointed at various commercial communications satellites. The entire complex, which wasn't terribly complex at all, comprised fifteen and a third acres in Maryland's Howard County, and was referred to as "The Campus" by the people who worked there. Nearby was the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, a government-consulting establishment of long standing and well-established sensitivity of function.

To the public, Hendley Associates was a trader in stocks, bonds, and international currencies, though, oddly, it did little in the way of

public business. It was not known to have any clients, and while it was whispered to be quietly active in local charities (the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine was rumored to be the main recipient of Hendley's corporate largesse), nothing had ever leaked to the local media. In fact, it had no public-relations department at all. Neither was it rumored to be doing anything untoward, though its chief executive officer was known to have had a somewhat troubled past, as a result of which he was shy of publicity, which, on a few rare occasions, he'd dodged quite adroitly and amiably, until, finally, the local media had stopped asking. Hendley's employees were scattered about locally, mostly in Columbia, lived upper-middle-class lifestyles, and were generally as remarkable as Beaver's father, Ward Cleaver.

Gerald Paul Hendley, Jr., had had a stellar career in the commodities business, during which he'd amassed a sizable personal fortune and then turned to elected public service in his late thirties, soon becoming a United States senator from South Carolina. Very quickly, he'd acquired a reputation as a legislative maverick who eschewed special interests and their campaign money offers, and followed a rather ferociously independent political track, leaning toward liberal on civil-rights issues, but decidedly conservative on defense and foreign relations. He'd never shied away from speaking his mind, which had made him good and entertaining copy for the press, and eventually there were whispered-about presidential aspirations.

Toward the end of his second six-year term, however, he'd suffered a great personal tragedy. He'd lost his wife and three children in an accident on Interstate 185 just outside of Columbia, South Carolina, their station wagon crushed beneath the wheels of a Kenworth tractor-trailer. It had been a predictably crushing blow, and soon thereafter, at the very beginning of the campaign for his third term, more misfortune had struck him. It became known through a column in the *New York Times* that his personal investment portfolio—he'd always kept it private, saying that since he took no money for his campaigning, he had no need to disclose his net worth except in the most general of terms—showed evidence of insider trading. This suspicion was confirmed with deeper delving by the newspapers and TV, and despite Hendley's protest that the Securities and Exchange Commission had never actually published guidelines about what the law meant, it appeared to some that he'd used his inside knowledge on future government expenditures to benefit a real-estate investment enterprise which would profit him and his co-investors over fifty million dollars. Worse still, when challenged on the question in a public debate by the Republican candidate—a self-described "Mr. Clean"—he'd responded with two mistakes. First, he'd lost his temper

in front of rolling cameras. Second, he'd told the people of South Carolina that if they doubted his honesty, then they could vote for the fool with whom he shared the stage. For a man who'd never put a political foot wrong in his life, that surprise alone had cost him five percent of the state's voters. The remainder of his lackluster campaign had only slid downhill, and despite the lingering sympathy vote from those who remembered the annihilation of his family, his seat had ended up an upset-loss for the Democrats, which had further been exacerbated by a venomous concession statement. Then he'd left public life for good, not even returning to his antebellum plantation northwest of Charleston but rather moving to Maryland and leaving his life entirely behind. One further flamethrower statement at the entire congressional process had burned whatever bridges might have remained open to him.

His current home was a farm dating back to the eighteenth century, where he raised Appaloosa horses—riding and mediocre golf were his only remaining hobbies—and lived the quiet life of a gentleman farmer. He also worked at The Campus seven or eight hours per day, commuting back and forth in a chauffeured stretch Cadillac.

Fifty-two now, tall, slender and silver-haired, he was well known without being known at all, perhaps the one lingering aspect of his political past.

"YOU DID well in the mountains," Jim Hardesty said, waving the young Marine to a chair.

"Thank you, sir. You did okay, too, sir."

"Captain, anytime you walk back through your front door after it's all over, you've done well. I learned that from my training officer. About sixteen years ago," he added.

Captain Caruso did the mental arithmetic and decided that Hardesty was a little older than he looked. Captain in the U.S. Army Special Forces, then CIA, plus sixteen years made him closer to fifty than forty. He must have worked very hard indeed to keep in shape.

"So," the officer asked, "what can I do for you?"

"What did Terry tell you?" the spook asked.

"He told me I'd be talking with somebody named Pete Alexander."

"Pete got called out of town suddenly," Hardesty explained.

The officer accepted the explanation at face value. "Okay, anyway, the general said you Agency guys are on some kind of talent hunt, but you're not willing to grow your own," Caruso answered honestly.

"Terry is a good man, and a damned fine Marine, but he can be a little parochial."

"Maybe so, Mr. Hardesty, but he's going to be my boss soon, when he takes over Second Marine Division, and I'm trying to stay on his

good side. And you still haven't told me why I'm here."

"Like the Corps?" the spook asked. The young Marine nodded.

"Yes, sir. The pay ain't all that much, but it's all I need, and the people I work with are the best."

"Well, the ones we went up the mountain with are pretty good. How long did you have them?"

"Total? About fourteen months, sir."

"You trained them pretty well."

"It's what they pay me for, sir, and I had good material to start with."

"You also handled that little combat action well," Hardesty observed, taking note of the distant replies he was getting.

Captain Caruso was not quite modest enough to regard it as a "little" combat action. The bullets flying around had been real enough, which made the action big enough. But his training, he'd found, had worked just about as well as his officers had told him it would in all the classes and field exercises. It had been an important and rather gratifying discovery. The Marine Corps actually did make sense. Damn.

"Yes, sir," was all he said in reply, however, adding, "And thank you for your help, sir."

"I'm a little old for that sort of thing, but it's nice to see that I still know how." And it had been quite enough, Hardesty didn't add. Combat was still a kid's game, and he was no longer a kid. "Any thoughts about it, Captain?" he asked next.

"Not really, sir. I did my after-action report."

Hardesty had read it. "Nightmares, anything like that?"

The question surprised Caruso. Nightmares? Why would he have those? "No, sir," he responded with visible puzzlement.

"Any qualms of conscience?" Hardesty went on.

"Sir, those people were making war on my country. We made war back. You ought not to play the game if you can't handle the action. If they had wives and kids, I'm sorry about that, but when you screw with people, you need to understand that they're going to come see you about it."

"It's a tough world?"

"Sir, you'd better not kick a tiger in the ass unless you have a plan for dealing with his teeth."

No nightmares and no regrets, Hardesty thought. That was the way things were supposed to be, but the kinder, gentler United States of America didn't always turn out its people that way. Caruso was a warrior. Hardesty rocked back in his seat and gave his guest a careful look before speaking.

"Cap'n, the reason you're here . . . you've seen it in the papers, all

the problems we've had dealing with this new spate of international terrorism. There have been a lot of turf wars between the Agency and the Bureau. At the operational level, there's usually no problem, and there isn't all that much trouble at the command level—the FBI director, Murray, is solid troop, and when he worked Legal Attaché in London he got along well with our people."

"But it's the mid level staff pukes, right?" Caruso asked. He'd seen it in the Corps, too. Staff officers who spent a lot of their time snarling at other staff officers, saying that their daddy could beat up the other staff's daddy. The phenomenon probably dated back to the Romans or the Greeks. It had been stupid and counterproductive back then, too.

"Bingo," Hardesty confirmed. "And you know, God Himself might be able to fix it, but even He would have to have a really good day to bring it off. The bureaucracies are too entrenched. It's not so bad in the military. People there shuffle in and out of jobs, and they have this idea of 'mission,' and everybody generally works to accomplish it, especially if it helps them all hustle up the ladder individually. Generally speaking, the farther you are from the sharp end, the more likely you are to immerse yourself in the minutiae. So, we're looking for people who know about the sharp end."

"And the mission is—what?"

"To identify, locate, and deal with terrorist threats," the spook answered.

"'Deal with'?" Caruso asked.

"Neutralize—shit, okay, when necessary and convenient, kill the son of a bitches. Gather information on the nature and severity of the threat, and take whatever action is necessary, depending on the specific threat. The job is fundamentally intelligence-gathering. The Agency has too many restrictions on how it does business. This special sub-group doesn't."

"Really?" *That* was a considerable surprise.

Hardesty nodded soberly. "Really. You won't be working for CIA. You may use Agency assets as resources, but that's as far as it goes."

"So, who am I working for?"

"We have a little way to go before we can discuss that." Hardesty lifted what had to be the Marine's personnel folder. "You score in the top three percent among the Marine officers in terms of intelligence. Four-point-oh in nearly everything. Your language skills are particularly impressive."

"My dad is an American citizen—native-born, I mean—but his dad came off the boat from Italy, ran—still runs—a restaurant in Seattle. So, Pop actually grew up speaking mostly Italian, and a lot of that came down on me and my brother, too. Took Spanish in high school and college. I can't pass for a native, but I understand it pretty well."

"Engineering major?"

"That's from my dad, too. It's in there. He works for Boeing—aerodynamicist, mainly designs wings and control surfaces. You know about my mom—it's all in there. She's mainly a mom, does things with the local Catholic schools, too, now that Dominic and I are grown."

"And he's FBI?"

Brian nodded. "That's right, got his law degree and signed up to be a G-man."

"Just made the papers," Hardesty said, handing over a faxed page from the Birmingham papers. Brian scanned it.

"Way to go, Dom," Captain Caruso breathed when he got to the fourth paragraph, which further pleased his host.

IT WAS scarcely a two-hour flight from Birmingham to Reagan National in Washington. Dominic Caruso walked to the Metro station and hopped a subway train for the Hoover Building at Tenth and Pennsylvania. His badge absolved him of the need to pass through the metal detector. FBI agents were supposed to carry heat, and his automatic had earned a notch in the grip—not literally, of course, but FBI agents occasionally joked about it.

The office of Assistant Director Augustus Ernst Werner was on the top floor, overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue. The secretary waved him right in.

Caruso had never met Gus Werner. He was a tall, slender, and very experienced street agent, an ex-Marine, and positively monkish in appearance and demeanor. He'd headed the FBI Hostage Rescue Team and two field divisions, and been at the point of retirement before being talked into his new job by his close friend, Director Daniel E. Murray. The Counter-Terrorism Division was a stepchild of the much larger Criminal and Foreign Counter Intelligence divisions, but it was gaining in importance on a daily basis.

"Grab yourself a seat," Werner said, pointing, as he finished up a call. That just took another minute. Then Gus replaced the phone and hit the DO NOT DISTURB button.

"Ben Harding faxed this up to me," Werner said, holding the shooting report from the previous day. "How did it go?"

"It's all in there, sir." He'd spent three hours picking his own brain and putting it all down on paper in precise FBI bureaucratese. Strange that an act requiring less than sixty seconds to perform should require so much time to explain.

"And what did you leave out, Dominic?" The question was accompanied by the most penetrating look the young agent had ever encountered.

"Nothing, sir," Caruso replied.

"Dominic, we have some very good pistol shots in the Bureau. I'm one of them," Gus Werner told his guest. "Three shots, all in the heart from a range of fifteen feet, is pretty good range shooting. For somebody who just tripped over an end table, it's downright miraculous. Ben Harding didn't find it remarkable, but Director Murray and I do—Dan's a pretty good marksman, too. He read this fax last night and asked me to render an opinion. Dan's never whacked a subject before. I have, three times, twice with HRT—those were cooperative ventures, as it were—and once in Des Moines, Iowa. That one was a kidnapping, too. I'd seen what he'd done to two of his victims—little boys—and, you know, I really didn't want some psychiatrist telling the jury that he was the victim of an adverse childhood, and that it really wasn't his fault, and all that bullshit that you hear in a nice clean court of law, where the only thing the jury sees are the pictures, and maybe not even them if the defense counsel can persuade the judge that they're overly inflammatory. So, you know what happened? I got to be the law. Not to enforce the law, or write the law, or explain the law. That one day, twenty-two years ago, I got to *be* the law. God's Own Avenging Sword. And you know, it felt good."

"How did you know . . . ?"

"How did I know for sure that he was our boy? He kept souvenirs. Heads. There were eight of them there in his house trailer. So, no, there wasn't any doubt at all in my mind. There was a knife nearby, and I told him to pick it up, and he did, and I put four rounds in his chest from a range of ten feet, and I've never had a moment's regret." Werner paused. "Not many people know that story. Not even my wife. So, don't tell me you tripped over a table, drew your Smith, and printed three rounds inside the subject's ventricle standing on one foot, okay?"

"Yes, sir." Caruso responded ambiguously. "Mr. Werner—"

"Name's Gus," the Assistant Director corrected.

"Sir," Caruso persisted. Senior people who used first names tended to make him nervous. "Sir, were I to say something like that, I'd be confessing to the next thing to murder, in an official government document. He *did* pick up that knife, he *was* getting up to face me, he *was* just ten or twelve feet away, and at Quantico they taught us to regard that as an immediate and lethal threat. So, yes, I took the shot, and it was righteous, in accordance with FBI policy on the use of lethal force."

Werner nodded. "You have your law degree, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm admitted to the bar in Virginia and D.C. both. I haven't taken the Alabama bar exam yet."

"Well, stop being a lawyer for a minute," Werner advised. "This was a righteous shooting. I still have the revolver I whacked that bastard with. Smith Model 66 four-inch. I even wear it to work sometimes. Dominic, you got to do what every agent would like to do just once in his career. You got to deliver justice all by yourself. Don't feel bad about it."

"I don't, sir," Caruso assured him. "That little girl, Penelope—I couldn't save her, but at least that bastard won't ever do it again." He looked Werner right in the eye. "You know what it feels like."

"Yeah." He looked closely at Caruso. "And you're sure you have no regrets?"

"I caught an hour's nap on the flight up, sir." He delivered the statement without a visible smile.

But it generated one on Werner's face. He nodded. "Well, you'll be getting an official attaboy from the office of the Director. No OPR."

OPR was the FBI's own "Internal Affairs" office, and while respected by rank-and-file FBI agents, was not beloved of them. There was a saying, "If he tortures small animals and wets his bed, he's either a serial killer or he works for the Office of Professional Responsibility."

Werner lifted Caruso's folder. "Says here you're pretty smart... good language skills, too . . . Interested in coming to Washington? I'm looking for people who know how to think on their feet, to work in my shop."

Another move, was what Special Agent Dominic Caruso heard.

GERRY HENDLEY was not an overly formal man. He wore a jacket and tie to work, but the jacket ended up on a clothes tree in his office within fifteen seconds of arrival. He had a fine executive secretary—like himself, a native of South Carolina—named Helen Connolly, and after running through his day's schedule with her, he picked up his *Wall Street Journal* and checked the front page. He'd already devoured the day's *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to get his political fix for the day, grumbling as always how they never quite got it right. The digital clock on his desk told him that he had twenty minutes before his first meeting, and he lit up his computer to get the morning's *Early Bird* as well, the clipping service that went to senior government officials. This he scanned to see if he'd missed anything in his morning read of the big-time papers. Not much, except for an interesting piece in the *Virginia Pilot* about the annual Fletcher Conference, a circle-think held by the Navy and Marine Corps every year at the Norfolk Navy Base. They talked about terrorism, and fairly intelligently, Hendley thought. People in uniform often did. As opposed to elected officials.

We kill off the Soviet Union, Hendley thought, *and we expected*

everything in the world to settle down. But what we didn't *see coming was all these lunatics with leftover AK-47s and education in kitchen chemistry, or simply a willingness to trade their own lives for those of their perceived enemies.*

And the other thing they hadn't done was prepare the intelligence community to deal with it. Even a president experienced in the black world and the best DCI in American history hadn't managed to get all that much done. They'd added a lot more people—an extra five hundred personnel in an agency of twenty thousand didn't sound like a lot, but it had doubled the operations directorate. That had given the CIA a force only half as horribly inadequate as it had been before, but that wasn't the same as adequate. And in return for it, the Congress had further tightened oversight and restrictions, thus further crippling the new people hired to flesh out the governmental skeleton crew. They never learned. He himself had talked at infinite length to his colleagues in the World's Most Exclusive Men's Club, but while some listened, others did not, and almost all of the remainder vacillated. They paid too much attention to the editorial pages, often of newspapers not even native to their home states, because *that,* they foolishly figured, was what the American People thought. Maybe it was this simple: Any newly elected official was seduced into the game the same way Cleopatra had snookered Gaius Julius Caesar. It was the staffs, he knew, the "professional" political helpers who "guided" their employers into the right way to be reelected, which had become the Holy Grail of public service. America did not have a hereditary ruling class, but it did have plenty of people happy to lead their employers onto the righteous path of government divinity.

And working inside the system just didn't work.

So, to accomplish anything, you just had to be outside the system.

Way the hell outside the system.

And if anybody noticed, well, he was already disgraced anyway, wasn't he?

He spent his first hour discussing financial matters with some of his staff, because that was how Hendley Associates made its money. As a commodities trader, and as a currency arbitrageur, he'd been ahead of the curve almost from the beginning, sensing the momentary valuation differences—he always called them "Deltas"—which were generated by psychological factors, by perceptions that might or might not turn out to be real.

He did all his business anonymously through foreign banks, all of which liked having large cash accounts, and none of which were overly fastidious about where the money came from, so long as it was not overtly dirty, which his certainly was not. It was just another way of keeping outside the system.

Not that every one of his dealings was strictly legal. Having Fort Meade's intercepts on his side made the game a lot easier. In fact, it was illegal as hell, and not the least bit ethical. But in truth Hendley Associates did little in the way of damage on the world stage. It could have been otherwise, but Hendley Associates operated on the principle that pigs got fed and hogs got slaughtered, and so they ate only a little out of the international trough. And, besides, there was no real governing authority for crimes of this type and this magnitude. And tucked away in a safe within the company vault was an official Charter signed by the former President of the United States.

Tom Davis came in. The titulary head of bond trading, Davis's background was similar in some ways to Hendley's, and he spent his days glued to his computer. He didn't worry about security. In this building all of the walls had metal sheathing to contain electronic emanations, and all of the computers were tempest-protected.

"What's new?" asked Hendley.

"Well," Davis answered, "we have a couple of potential new recruits."

"Who might they be?"

Davis slid the files across Hendley's desk. The CEO took them and opened both.

"Brothers?"

"Twins. Fraternals. Their mom must have punched out two eggs instead of one that month. Both of them impressed the right people. Brains, mental agility, fitness, and between them a good mix of talents, plus language skills. Spanish, especially."

"This one speaks Pashtu?" Hendley looked up in surprise.

"Just enough to find the bathroom. He was in country eight weeks or so, took the time to learn the local patois. Acquitted himself pretty well, the report says."

"Think they're our kind of people?" Hendley asked. Such people did not walk in the front door, which was why Hendley had a small number of very discreet recruiters sprinkled throughout the government.

"We need to check them out a little more," Davis conceded, "but they do have the talents we like. On the surface, both appear to be reliable, stable, and smart enough to understand why we're here. So, yeah, I think they're worth a serious look."

"What's next for them?"

"Dominic is going to transfer to Washington. Gus Werner wants him to join the counterterror office. He'll probably be a desk man to start with. He's a little young for HRT, and he hasn't proven his analytical abilities yet. I think Werner wants to see how smart he is first. Brian will fly to Camp Lejeune, back to working with his company. I'm

surprised the Corps hasn't seconded him to intelligence. He's an obvious candidate, but they do like their shooters, and he did pretty well over in camel-land. He'll be fast-tracked to major's rank, if my sources are correct. So, first, I think I'll fly down and have lunch with him, feel him out some, then come back to D.C. And do the same with Dominic. Werner was impressed with him."

"And Gus is a good judge of men," the former senator noted.

"That he is, Gerry," Davis agreed. "So—anything new shaking?"

"Fort Meade is buried under a mountain, as usual." The NSA's biggest problem was that they intercepted so much raw material it would take an army to sort through it all. Computer programs helped by homing in on key words and such, but nearly all of it was innocent chatter. Programmers were always trying to improve the catcher program, but it had proven to be virtually impossible to give a computer human instincts, though they were still trying. Unfortunately, the really talented programmers worked for game companies. That was where the money was, and talent usually followed the money path. Hendley couldn't complain about that. After all, he'd spent his twenties and half of his thirties doing the same. So, he often went looking for rich and very successful programmers for whom the money chase had become not so much boring as redundant. It was usually a waste of time. Nerds were often greedy bastards. Just like lawyers, but not quite as cynical. "I've seen half a dozen interesting intercepts today, though . . ."

"Such as?" Davis asked. The company's chief recruiter, he was also a skilled analyst.

"This." Hendley handed the folder across. Davis opened it and scanned down the page.

"Hmm," was all he said.

"Could be scary, if it turns into anything," Hendley thought aloud.

"True. But we need more." That was not earthshaking. They *always* needed more.

"Who do we have down there right now?" He ought to have known, but Hendley suffered from the usual bureaucratic disease: He had trouble keeping all the information current in his head.

"Right now? Ed Castilanno is in Bogotá, looking into the Cartel, but he's in deep cover. Real deep," Davis reminded his boss.

"You know, Tom, this intelligence business sometimes sucks the big one."

"Cheer up, Gerry. The pay's a hell of a lot better—at least for us underlings," he added with a tiny grin. His bronze skin contrasted starkly with the ivory teeth.

"Yeah, must be terrible to be a peasant."

"At least da massa let me get educated, learn my letters and such.

Could have been worse, don' have to chop cotton no more, Mas Gerry." Hendley rolled his eyes. Davis had, in fact, gotten his degree from Dartmouth, where he took a lot less grief for his dark skin than for his home state. His father grew corn in Nebraska, and voted Republican.

"What's one of those harvesters cost now?" the boss asked.

"You kidding? Far side of two hundred thousand. Dad got a new one last year and he's *still* bitching about it.'Course, this one'll last until his grandchildren die rich. Cuts through an acre of corn like a battalion of Rangers going through some bad guys." Davis had made a good career in CIA as a field spook, becoming a specialist in tracking money across international borders. At Hendley Associates he'd discovered that his talents were also quite useful in a business sense, but, of course, he'd never lost his nose for the real action. "You know, this FBI guy, Dominic, he did some interesting work in financial crimes in his first field assignment in Newark. One of his cases is developing into a major investigation into an international banking house. He knows how to sniff things out pretty well for a rookie."

"All that, and he can kill people on his own hook," Hendley agreed.

"That's why I like his looks, Gerry. He can make decisions in the saddle, like a guy ten years older."

"Brother act. Interesting," Hendley observed, eyes on the folders again.

"Maybe breeding tells. Grandfather was a homicide cop, after all."

"And before that in the 101st Airborne. I see your point, Tom. Okay. Sound them both out soon. We're going to be busy soon."

"Think so?"

"It's not getting any better out there." Hendley waved at the window.

THEY WERE at a sidewalk café in Vienna. The nights were turning less cold, and the patrons of the establishment were enduring the chill to enjoy a meal on the wide sidewalk.

"So, what is your interest with us?" Pablo asked.

"There is a confluence of interests between us," Mohammed answered, then clarified: "We share enemies."

He gazed off. The women passing by were dressed in the formal, almost severe local fashion, and the traffic noise, especially the electric trams, made it impossible for anyone to listen in on their conversation. To the casual, or even the professional, observer, these were simply two men from other countries—and there were a lot of them in this imperial city—talking business in a quiet and amiable fashion. They were speaking in English, which was also not unusual.

"Yes, that is the truth," Pablo had to agree. "The enemies part, that

is. What of the interests?"

"You have assets for which we have use. We have assets for which you have use," the Muslim explained patiently.

"I see." Pablo added cream to his coffee and stirred. To his surprise, the coffee here was as good as in his own country.

He'd be slow to reach an agreement, Mohammed expected. His guest was not as senior as he would have preferred. But the enemy they shared had enjoyed greater success against Pablo's organization than his own. It continued to surprise him. They had ample reason to employ effective security measures, but as with all monetarily motivated people they lacked the purity of purpose that his own colleagues exercised. And from that fact came their higher vulnerability. But Mohammed was not so foolish as to assume that made them his inferiors. Killing one Israeli spy didn't make him Superman, after all. Clearly they had ample expertise. It just had limits. As his own people had limits. As everyone but Allah Himself had limits. In that knowledge came more realistic expectations, and gentler disappointments when things went badly. One could not allow emotions to get in the way of "business," as his guest would have misidentified his Holy Cause. But he was dealing with an unbeliever, and allowances had to be made.

"What can you offer us?" Pablo asked, displaying his greed, much as Mohammed had expected.

"You need to establish a reliable network in Europe, correct?"

"Yes, we do." They'd had a little trouble of late. European police agencies were not as restrained as the American sort.

"We have such a network." And since Muslims were not thought to be active in the drug trade—drug dealers often lost their heads in Saudi Arabia, for example—so much the better.

"In return for what?"

"You have a highly successful network in America, and you have reason to dislike America, do you not?"

"That is so," Pablo agreed. Colombia was starting to make progress with the Cartel's uneasy ideological allies in the mountains of Pablo's home country. Sooner or later, the FARC would cave in to the pressure and then, doubtless, turn on their "friends"—really "associates" was a loose enough word—as their price of admission to the democratic process. At that time, the security of the Cartel might be seriously threatened. Political instability was their best friend in South America, but that might not last forever. The same was true of his host, Pablo considered, and that *did* make them allies of convenience. "Precisely what services would you require of us?"

Mohammed told him. He didn't add that no money would be exchanged for the Cartel's service. The first shipment that

Mohammed's people shepherded into—Greece? Yes, that would probably be the easiest—would be sufficient to seal the venture, wouldn't it?

"That is all?"

"My friend, more than anything else we trade in ideas, not physical objects. The few material items we need are quite compact, and can be obtained locally if necessary. And I have no doubt that you can help with travel documents."

Pablo nearly choked on his coffee. "Yes, that is easily done."

"So, is there any reason why this alliance cannot be struck?"

"I must discuss it with my superiors," Pablo cautioned, "but on the surface I see no reason why our interests should be in conflict."

"Excellent. How may we communicate further?"

"My boss prefers to meet those with whom he does business."

Mohammed thought that over. Travel made him and his associates nervous, but there was no avoiding it. And he did have enough passports to see him through the airports of the world. And he also had the necessary language skills. His education at Cambridge had not been wasted. He could thank his parents for that. And he blessed his English mother for her gift of complexion and blue eyes. Truly he could pass for a native of any country outside of China and Africa. The remains of a Cambridge accent didn't hurt, either.

"You need merely tell me the time and the place," Mohammed replied. He handed over his business card. It had his e-mail address, the most useful tool for covert communications ever invented. And with the miracle of modern air travel, he could be anywhere on the globe in forty-eight hours.

CHAPTER 2

JOINING UP

HE CAME in at a quarter to five. Anyone who passed him on the street would not have given him a second look, though he might have caught the eye of the odd unattached female. At six-one, a hundred eighty or so pounds—he worked out regularly—black hair and blue eyes, he wasn't exactly movie star material, but neither was he the sort of man that a pretty young female professional would have summarily kicked out of bed.

He also dressed well, Gerry Hendley saw. Blue suit with a red pinstripe—it looked English-made—vest, red-and-yellow-striped tie, nice gold tie bar. Fashionable shirt. Decent haircut. The confident look that came from having both money and a good education to go with a youth that would not be misspent. His car was parked in the visitors' lot in front of the building. A yellow Hummer 2 SUV, the sort of vehicle favored by people who herded cattle in Wyoming, or money in New York. And, probably, that was why . . .

"So, what brings you here?" Gerry asked, waving his guest to a comfortable seat on the other side of his mahogany desk.

"I haven't decided what I want to do yet, just sort of bumping around, looking for a niche I might fit into."

Hendley smiled. "Yeah, I'm not so old that I can't remember how confusing it is when you get out of school. Which one did you go to?"

"Georgetown. Family tradition." The boy smiled gently. That was one good thing about him that Hendley saw and appreciated—he wasn't trying to impress anyone with his name and family background. He might even be a little uneasy with it, wanting to make his own way and his own name, as a lot of young men did. The smart ones, anyway. It was a pity that there was no place for him on The Campus.

"Your dad really likes Jesuit schools."

"Even Mom converted. Sally didn't go to Bennington. She got through her premed up at Fordham in New York. Hopkins Med now, of course. Wants to be a doc, like Mom. What the hell, it's an honorable profession."

"Unlike law?" Gerry asked.

"You know how Dad is about that," the boy pointed out with a grin. "What was your undergraduate degree in?" he asked Hendley, knowing the answer already, of course.

"Economics and mathematics. I took a double major." It had been very useful indeed for modeling trading patterns in commodities markets. "So, how's your family doing?"

"Oh, fine. Dad's back writing again—his memoirs. Mostly he bitches that he isn't old enough to do that sort of book, but he's working pretty hard to get it done right. He's not real keen on the new President."

"Yeah, Kealty has a real talent for bouncing back. When they finally bury the guy, they'd better park a truck on top of his headstone." That joke had even made the *Washington Post.*

"I've heard that one. Dad says it can only take one idiot to unmake the work of ten geniuses." That adage had *not* made the *Washington Post.* But it was the reason the young man's father had set up The Campus, though the young man himself didn't know it.

"That's overstating things. This new guy only happened by accident."

"Yeah, well, when it comes time to execute that klukker retard down in Mississippi, how much you want to bet he commutes the sentence?"

"Opposition to capital punishment is a matter of principle to him," Hendley pointed out. "Or so he says. Some people do feel that way, and it is an honorable opinion."

"Principle? To him that's the nice old lady who runs a grammar school."

"If you want to have a political discussion, there's a nice bar and grill a mile down Route 29," Gerry suggested.

"No, that's not it. Sorry for the digression, sir."

This boy is holding his cards pretty close, Hendley thought. "Well, it's not a bad subject for one. So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm curious."

"About what?" the former senator asked.

"What you do here," his visitor said.

"Mainly currency arbitrage." Hendley stretched to show his weary relaxation at the end of a working day.

"Uh-huh," the kid said, just a slight bit dubiously.

"There's really money to be made there, if you have good information, and if you have the nerves to act on it."

"You know, Dad likes you a lot. He says it's a shame you and he don't see each other anymore."

Hendley nodded. "Yeah, and that's my fault, not his."

"He also said you were too smart to fuck up the way you did."

Ordinarily, it would have been a positively seismic faux pas, but it was obvious from looking in the boy's eyes that he hadn't meant it as any sort of insult but rather as a question . . . or was it? Hendley suddenly asked himself.

"It was a bad time for me," Gerry reminded his guest. "And anybody can make a mistake. Your dad even made a few himself."

"That's true. But Dad was lucky to have Arnie around to cover his ass." That left his host an opening, which he jumped at.

"How's Arnie doing?" Hendley asked, making the dodge to maneuver for time, still wondering why the kid was here, and actually starting to get a little uneasy about it, though he was not sure why he should feel that way.

"Fine. He's going to be the new chancellor for the University of Ohio. He ought to be good at it, and he needs a calm sort of job, Dad thinks. I think he's right. How that guy managed not to have a heart attack is beyond me and Mom both. Maybe some people really do thrive on the action." His eyes never left Hendley's through the entire discourse. "I learned a lot talking to Arnie."

"What about from your father?"

"Oh, a thing or two. Mainly, I learned things from the rest of the bunch."

"Who do you mean?"

"Mike Brennan for one. He was my Principal Agent," Jack Jr. explained. "Holy Cross graduate, career Secret Service. Hell of a pistol shot. He's the guy who taught me to shoot."

"Oh?"

"The Service has a range on the Old Post Office Building, couple of blocks from the White House. I still get to go there occasionally. Mike's an instructor in the Secret Service Academy now, up at Beltsville. Really good guy, smart and laid-back. Anyway, you know, he was my babysitter, like, and I used to ping on him about stuff, ask him what Secret Service people do, how they train, how they think, the things they look for while they're protecting Mom and Dad. I learned a lot from him. And all the other people."

"Like?"

"FBI guys, Dan Murray, Pat O'Day—Pat's the Major Case Inspector for Murray. He's getting ready to retire. Can you believe it, he's going to raise beef cattle up in Maine. Funny damned place to punch cattle. He's a shooter, too, like Wild Bill Hickock with an attitude, but it's too easy to forget he's a Princeton grad. Pretty smart guy, Pat is. He taught me a lot about how the Bureau runs investigations. And his wife, Andrea, she's a mind reader. Ought to be, she ran Dad's detail during a very scary time, master's degree in psychology from University of Virginia. I learned a shitload from her. And the Agency

people, of course, Ed and Mary Pat Foley—God Almighty, what a pair they are. But you know who the most interesting one of all was?"

He did. "John Clark?"

"Oh yeah. The trick was getting him to talk. I swear, compared to him, the Foleys are Desi and Lucy. But once he trusts you, he will open up some. I cornered him when he got his Medal of Honor—it was on TV briefly, retired Navy chief petty officer gets his decoration from Vietnam. About sixty seconds of videotape on a slow news day. You know, not one reporter asked what he did after he left the Navy. Not one. Jesus, they are *thick*. Bob Holtzman knew part of it, I think. He was there, standing in the corner, across the room from me. He's pretty smart for a newsie. Dad likes him, just doesn't trust him as far as he can sling an anchor. Anyway, Big John—Clark, I mean—he's one serious honcho. He's been there, and done that, and he has the T-shirt. How come he isn't here?"

"Jack, my boy, when you come to the point, you do come to the point," Hendley said, with a touch of admiration in his voice.

"When you knew his name, I knew I had you, sir." A briefly triumphant look in the eyes. "I've been checking you out for a couple of weeks."

"Oh?" And with that, Hendley felt his stomach contract.

"It wasn't hard. It's all on the public record, just a question of mix and match. Like the connect-the-dots things they give to little kids in their activity books. You know, it amazes me that this place never made the news—"

"Young man, if that's a threat—"

"What?" Jack Jr. was surprised by the interruption. "You mean, blackmail you? No, Senator, what I meant to say is that there's so much raw information lying around out there, that you have to wonder how reporters miss it. I mean, even a blind squirrel will find an acorn once in a while, y'know?" He paused for a moment before his eyes lit up. "Oh, I get it. You handed them what they expected to find, and they ran with it."

"It's not that hard, but it's dangerous to underestimate them," Hendley warned.

"Just don't talk to them. Dad told me a long time ago: 'A closed mouth gathers no foot.' He always let Arnie do the leaks. Nobody else said anything to the press without Arnie's guidance. I swear, I think the media was scared of that guy. He's the one who lifted a *Times* reporter's White House pass and made it stick."

"I remember that," Hendley responded. There had been quite a stink about it, but soon enough even the *New York Times* realized that having no reporter in the White House Press Room hurt in a very tender spot. It had been an object lesson in manners which had lasted

for almost six months. Arnie van Damm had a longer and nastier memory than the media, which was quite something in and of itself. Arnold van Damm was a serious player of five-card-draw poker.

"What's your point, Jack? Why are you here?"

"Senator, I want to play in the bigs. This here, I think, is the bigs."

"Explain," Hendley commanded. Just how much had the boy put together?

John Patrick Ryan, Jr., opened his briefcase. "For starters, this is the only building taller than a private residence on the sight line from NSA Fort Meade to CIA Langley. You can download satellite photos off the Internet. I printed them all up. Here." He handed a small binder across. "I checked with the zoning offices, and I found out that three other office buildings were planned for this area, and all were denied construction permits. The records didn't say why, but nobody made a fuss about it. The medical center down the road, however, got really nice finance terms from Citibank on their revised plans. Most of your personnel are former spooks. Your security people are all former military police, rank E-7 or higher. The electronic security system here is better than they have at Fort Meade. How the hell did you manage that, by the way?"

"Private citizens have a lot more freedom negotiating with contractors. Go on," the former senator said.

"You never did anything illegal. That conflict-of-interest charge that killed your Senate career was a crock of shit. Any decent lawyer could have had it tossed right out of court on a summary judgment, but you rolled over and played dead on it. I remember how Dad always liked you for your brains, and he always said you were a straight shooter. He didn't say that about all that many people on The Hill. The senior people at CIA liked working with you, and you helped with funding for a project some other folks on The Hill had a conniption fit over. I don't know why it is, but a lot of people there hate the intelligence services. Used to drive Dad nuts, how every time he had to sit down with senators and congressmen over that stuff, had to bribe them with pet projects for their districts and stuff. Jeez, Dad *hated* that. Whenever he did it, he'd grumble for a week before and after. But you helped him a lot. You used to be pretty good working inside the Capitol Building. But when you had your political problem, you just caved in. I thought it was pretty hard to believe. But what I really had trouble swallowing was how Dad never talked about it at all. He never said a single word. When I asked, he changed the subject. Even Arnie never talked about it—and Arnie answered every question I ever hit him with. So, the dogs didn't bark, y'know?" Jack leaned back, keeping his eyes on his host at all times. "Anyway, I never said anything either, but I sniffed around during my senior year at

Georgetown, and I kept talking to people, and those folks taught me how to look into things quietly. Again, it's not all that hard."

"And so, what conclusion did you reach?"

"You would have been a good president, Senator, but losing your wife and kids was a big hit. We were all busted up about that. Mom really liked your wife. Please excuse me for bringing it up, sir. That's why you left politics, but I think you're too much of a patriot to forget about your country, and I think Hendley Associates is your way of serving your country—but off the books, like. I remember Dad and Mr. Clark talking over drinks upstairs one night—my senior year of high school, it was. I didn't catch much of it. They didn't want me there, and so I went back to watching the History Channel. Coincidence, they had a show about SOE that night, the British Special Operations Executive from World War Two. They were mostly bankers. 'Wild Bill' Donovan recruited lawyers to start up the OSS, but the Brits used bankers to screw over people. I wondered why, and Dad said bankers are smarter. They know how to make money in the real world, whereas lawyers aren't quite as smart—that's what Dad said, anyway. I guess he figured that's what he did. With his trading background, I mean. But you're a different sort of pirate, Senator. I think you're a spook, and I think Hendley Associates is a privately funded spook shop that works off the books—completely outside the federal budget process. So, you don't have to worry about senators and congress-critters snooping around and leaking stuff because they think you do *bad* things. Hell, I did a Google search and there's only six mentions of your company on the Internet. You know, there's more pieces than that about my mom's hairstyle. *Women's Wear Daily* used to like clobbering her. Really pissed Dad off."

"I remember." Jack Ryan, Sr., had once cut loose in front of reporters on that issue, and paid the price of being laughed at by the chattering classes. "He talked to me about how Henry VIII would have given the reporters some special haircuts for that."

"Yeah, with an ax at the Tower of London. Sally used to laugh about it some. She needled Mom about her hair, too. I guess that's one nice thing about being a man, eh?"

"That and shoes. My wife didn't like Manolo Blahniks. She liked sensible shoes, the sort that didn't make her feet hurt," Hendley said, remembering, and then running into a concrete wall. It still hurt to talk about her. It probably always would, but at least the pain did affirm his love for her, and that was something. Much as he loved her memory, he could not smile in public about her. Had he remained in politics, he'd have had to do that, pretend that he'd gotten over it, that his love was undying but also unhurtful. Yeah, sure. One more price of political life was giving up your humanity along with your manhood.

And it was not worth that price. Even to be President of the United States. One of the reasons why he and Jack Ryan, Sr., had always gotten along was that they were so alike.

"You really think this is an intelligence agency?" he asked his guest as lightly as the situation allowed.

"Yes, sir, I do. If NSA, say, pays attention to what the big central banks are doing, you are ideally located to take advantage of the signals-intelligence they gather and cross-deck to Langley. Must give your currency-trading troops the best sort of insider information, and if you play your cards carefully—that is, if you don't get greedy—you can make a ton of long-term money without anybody really noticing. You do that by not attracting investors. They'd talk way too much. So, that activity funds the things you do here. Exactly what it is you do, that I have not speculated on very much."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes, sir, that is a fact."

"You haven't talked to your father about this?"

"No, sir." Jack Jr. shook his head. "He'd just blow it off. Dad told me a lot when I asked, but not stuff like this."

"What did he tell you?"

"People stuff. You know, dealing with politicians, which foreign president likes little girls or little boys. Jeez, a lot of that going around, especially overseas. What sort of people they were, how they think, what their individual priorities and eccentricities are. Which country took good care of its military. Which country's spook services were good, and which ones were not. A lot of things about the people on The Hill. The sort of stuff you read in books or the papers, except what Dad told me was the real shit. I knew not to repeat it anywhere," the young Ryan assured his host.

"Even in school?"

"Nothing I didn't see in the *Post* first. The papers are pretty good about finding stuff out, but they're too quick to repeat damaging things about people they don't like, and they frequently don't publish stuff about people they do like. I guess the news business is pretty much the same as women trading gossip over the phone or the card table. Less a matter of hard facts than sniping at people you don't care for."

"They're as human as everybody else."

"Yes, sir, they are. But when my mom operates on somebody's eyes, she doesn't care if she likes the person or not. She swore an oath to play her game by the rules. Dad's the same way. That's how they raised me to be," John Patrick Ryan, Jr., concluded. "Same thing every dad tells every son: If you're going to do it, do it right or don't do it at all."

"Not everybody thinks that way anymore," Hendley pointed out, though he'd told his two sons, George and Foster, exactly the same thing.

"Maybe so, Senator, but that's not my fault."

"What do you know about the trading business?" Hendley asked.

"I know the basics. I can talk the talk, but I haven't learned the nitty-gritty enough to walk the walk."

"And your degree from Georgetown?"

"History, strong minor in economics, kinda like Dad. Sometimes I'd ask him about his hobby—he still likes to play the market, and he has friends in the business, like George Winston, his Secretary of the Treasury. They talk a lot. George has tried and tried to get Dad to come inside his company, but he won't do anything more than go in and schmooze. They're still friends, though. They even hack away at golf together. Dad's a lousy golfer."

Hendley smiled. "I know. Ever try it yourself?"

Little Jack shook his head. "I already know how to swear. Uncle Robby was pretty good. Jeez, Dad really misses him. Aunt Sissy still comes to the house a lot. She and Mom play piano together."

"That was pretty bad."

"That redneck racist fuck," Junior observed. "Excuse me. Robby was the first guy I ever knew who got murdered." The amazing thing was that his murderer had been taken alive. The Secret Service detail had been half a second behind the Mississippi State Police in getting to him, but some civilian had tackled the bastard before anyone could get a round off, and so he'd gone to jail alive. That fact had at least eliminated any conspiracy nonsense. It had been a Ku Klux Klan member, sixty-seven years old, who just couldn't abide the thought that Ryan's retirement had brought his black Vice President to the position of President of the United States. His trial, conviction, and sentencing had gone off with startling speed—the assassination had all been on videotape, not to mention there'd been six witnesses all within two yards of the killer. Even the Stars and Bars atop the State House in Jackson had flown at half-staff for Robby Jackson, to the dismay and disgust of some. *"Sic volvere Parcas,"* Jack observed.

"What's that?"

"The Fates, Senator. One spins the thread. One measures the thread. And one cuts the thread. 'So spin the Fates,' the Roman adage is. I never saw Dad so broken up about anything. Mom handled it better, really. I guess docs are used to people dying. Dad—well, he just wanted to whack the guy himself. It was pretty tough." The news cameras had caught the President weeping at the funeral service at the Naval Academy Chapel. *Sic volvere Parcas.* "So, Senator, how does my fate spin out here?"

It didn't catch Hendley short. He'd seen this question coming a quarter mile away, but it was not an especially easy question even so. "What about your father?"

"Who says he has to know? You have six subsidiary corporations that you probably use to hide your trading activities." Finding that out hadn't been all that easy, but Jack knew how to dig.

"Not 'hide,'" Hendley corrected. "'Disguise,' maybe, but not 'hide.'"

"Excuse me. As I told you, I used to hang out with spooks."

"You learned a lot."

"I had some pretty good teachers."

Ed and Mary Pat Foley, John Clark, Dan Murray, and his own father. Damned Skippy, he's had some pretty good teachers, Hendley thought.

"What exactly do you think you'd do here?"

"Sir, I'm pretty smart, but not that smart. I'll have to learn a lot. I know that. So do you. What do I want to do? I want to serve my country," Jack said evenly. "I want to help get things done that need doing. I don't need money. I have trust funds set up from Dad and Granddad—Joe Muller, Mom's dad, I mean. Hell, if I wanted, I could get a law degree and end up like Ed Kealty, working my way toward the White House on my own, but my dad isn't a king and I'm not a prince. I want to make my own way and see how things play out."

"Your dad can't know about this, at least not for a while."

"So? He kept a lot of secrets from *me.*" Jack thought that was pretty funny. "Turnabout is fair play, isn't it?"

"I'll think about it. You have an e-mail address?"

"Yes, sir." Jack handed across a card.

"Give me a couple of days."

"Yes, sir. Thanks for letting me in to see you." He stood, shook hands, and made his way out.

The boy had grown up in a hurry, Hendley thought. Maybe having a Secret Service detail helped with that—or hurt, depending on what sort of person you happened to be. But this boy had come from good stock, as much from his mother as his father. And clearly he was smart. He had a lot of curiosity, usually a sign of intelligence.

And intelligence was the only thing there was never enough of, anywhere in the world.

"SO?" Ernesto asked.

"It was interesting," Pablo replied, lighting a Dominican cigar.

"What do they want of us?" his boss asked.

"Mohammed began by talking about our common interests, and our common enemies."

"If we tried to do business over there, we would lose our heads," Ernesto observed. With him, it was always business.

"I pointed that out. He replied that theirs is a small market, hardly worth our time. They merely export raw materials. And that is true. But he can help us, he said, with the new European market. Mohammed tells me that his organization has a good base of operations in Greece, and with the demise of international borders in Europe that would be the most logical point of entry for our consignments. They will not charge us for their technical assistance. They say they wish to establish goodwill only."

"They must want our help very badly," Ernesto observed.

"They have their own considerable resources, as they have demonstrated, *jefe.* But they seem to need some expertise for smuggling weapons in addition to people. In any case, they ask little, and they offer much."

"And what they offer will make our business more convenient?" Ernesto wondered.

"It will certainly make the *Yanquis* devote their resources to different tasks."

"It could create havoc in their country, but the political effects could be serious . . ."

"*Jefe,* the pressure they put upon us now can scarcely get worse, can it?"

"This new *norteamericano* president is a fool, but dangerous even so."

"And so, we can have our new friends distract him, *jefe,*" Pablo pointed out. "We will not even use any of our assets to do so. We have little risk, and the potential reward is large, isn't it?"

"I see that, but, Pablo, if it is traced to us, the cost could be serious."

"That's true, but again, how much additional pressure can they put on us?" Pablo asked. "They're attacking our political allies through the Bogotá government, and if they succeed in producing the effect they desire then the harm to us will be very serious indeed. You and the other members of the Council might become fugitives in our own land," the Cartel's intelligence chief warned. He didn't have to add that such an eventuality would take much of the fun out of the immense riches the Council members enjoyed. Money has little utility without a comfortable place to spend it. "There is an adage in that part of the world: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. *Jefe,* if there is a major downside to this proposal venture, I do not see it."

"You think I should meet with this man, then?"

"*Sí,* Ernesto. There should be no harm. He is more wanted by the *gringos* than we are. If we fear betrayal, then he should fear it even more so, shouldn't he? And in any case, we will take proper precautions."

"Very well, Pablo. I will discuss this with the Council with a

recommendation that we hear him out," Ernesto conceded. "How difficult would it be to set up?"

"I would expect him to fly through Buenos Aires. Surely he knows how to travel safely. He probably has more false passports than we do, and he truly does not look conspicuously Arabian."

"His language skills?"

"Adequate," Pablo answered. "Speaks English like an Englishman, and that is a passport all its own."

"Through Greece, eh? Our product?"

"His organization has used Greece as a sally port for many years. *Jefe,* it's easier to smuggle our product than a group of men, and so on first inspection their methods and assets seem to be adaptable to our purposes. Our own people will have to examine them, of course."

"Any idea what his plans for North America might be?"

"I did not ask, *jefe.* It does not really concern us."

"Except insofar as it tightens border security. That could be an inconvenience"—Ernesto held up his hand—"I know, Pablo, not a serious one.

"As long as they help us out, I don't care what they want to do to America."

CHAPTER 3

GRAY FILES

ONE OF Hendley's advantages was that most of his assets worked elsewhere. They didn't have to be paid, housed, or fed. The taxpayers paid all of the overhead without knowing it, and, indeed, the "overhead" itself didn't know exactly what it was. Recent evolution in the world of international terrorism had caused America's two principal intelligence agencies, CIA and NSA, to work even more closely than they had in the past, and since they were an inconvenient hour's drive apart—negotiating the northern part of the D.C. Beltway can be like driving through a shopping mall parking lot during Christmas week—they did most of their communication via secure microwave links, from the top of NSA's headquarters building to the top of CIA's. That this sight line transited the roof of Hendley Associates had gone unnoticed. And it ought not to have mattered anyway, since the microwave link was encrypted. It had to be, since microwaves leaked off their line of transmission due to all manner of technical reasons. The laws of physics could be exploited, but not changed to suit the needs of the moment.

The bandwidth on the microwave channel was immense, due to compression algorithms that were little different from those used on personal computer networks. The King James Version of the Holy Bible could have flown from one building to another in seconds. These links were always up and running, most of the time swapping nonsense and random characters in order to befuddle anyone who might try to crack the encryption—but since this system was TAPDANCE encrypted, it was totally secure. Or so the wizards at NSA claimed. The system depended on CD-ROMs stamped with totally random transpositions, and unless you could find a key to atmospheric RF noise, that was the end of that. But every week, one of the guard detail from Hendley, accompanied by two of his colleagues—all of them randomly chosen from the guard force—drove to Fort Meade and picked up the week's encryption disks. These were inserted in the jukebox attached to the cipher machine, and when each was ejected after use, it was hand-carried to a microwave oven to be destroyed, under the eyes of three guards, all of them trained by years of service

not to ask questions.

This somewhat laborious procedure gave Hendley access to all of the activity of the two agencies, since they were government agencies and they wrote everything down, from the "take" from deep-cover agents to the cost of the mystery meat served in the cafeteria.

Much—even most—of the information was of no interest to Hendley's crew, but nearly all of it was stored on high-density media and cross-referenced on a Sun Microsystems mainframe computer that had enough power to administer the entire country, if need be. This enabled Hendley's staff to look in on the stuff the intelligence services were generating, along with the top-level analysis being done by experts in a multitude of areas and then cross-decked to others for comment and further analysis. NSA was getting better at this sort of work than CIA, or so Hendley's own top analyst thought, but many heads on a single problem often worked well—until the analysis became so convoluted as to paralyze action, a problem not unknown to the intelligence community. With the new Department of Homeland Security—for whose authorization Hendley thought he would have voted "Nay"—in the loop, CIA and NSA were both recipients of FBI analysis. That often just added a new layer of bureaucratic complexity, but the truth of the matter was the FBI agents took a slightly different take on raw intelligence. They thought in terms of building a criminal case to be put before a jury, and that was not at all a bad thing when you got down to it.

Each agency had its own way of thinking. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was composed of cops who had one slant. The Central Intelligence Agency had quite another, and it did have the power—occasionally exercised—to take some action, though that was quite rare. The National Security Agency, on the third hand, just got information, analyzed it, and passed it on to others—whether those individuals did anything with it was a question beyond Agency purview.

Hendley's chief of Analysis/Intelligence was Jerome Rounds. Jerry to his friends, he had a doctorate in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. He'd worked in the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research—I&R—before moving on to Kidder, Peabody as a different sort of analyst for a different sort of paycheck, before then-Senator Hendley had personally spotted him during lunch in New York. Rounds had made a name for himself in the trading house as the in-house mind reader, but though he'd made himself a goodly pile of money, he'd found that money faded in importance once your kids' education was fully guaranteed and your sailboat was paid off. He'd chafed on Wall Street, and he'd been ready for the offer Hendley had made four years earlier. His duties included reading the

minds of other international traders, which was something he'd learned to do in New York. He worked very closely with Sam Granger, who was both the head of currency trading at The Campus and also chief of the Operations Department.

It was near closing time when Jerry Rounds came into Sam's office. It was the job of Jerry and his staff of thirty to go over all the downloads from NSA and CIA. They all had to be speed-readers with sensitive noses. Rounds was the local equivalent of a bloodhound.

"Check this out," he said, dropping a sheet of paper on Granger's desk and taking a seat.

"Mossad lost a—Station Chief? Hmmph. How did that happen?"

"The local cops are thinking robbery. Killed with a knife, wallet missing, no sign of a protracted struggle. Evidently, he wasn't carrying heat with him at the time."

"Civilized place like Rome, why bother?" Granger observed. But they would now, for a while at least. "How did we find out?"

"Made the local papers that an official at the Israeli Embassy got whacked while taking a leak. The Agency Chief of Station fingered him for a spook. Some people at Langley are running around in circles trying to figure what it all means, but they'll probably fall back on Occam's razor and buy what the local cops think. Dead man. No wallet. Robbery where the crook got a little carried away."

"You think the Israelis will buy that?" Granger wondered.

"About as soon as they serve roast pork at an embassy dinner. He was knifed between the first and second vertebrae. A street hood is more likely to slash the throat, but a pro knows that's messy and noisy. The Carabinieri are working the case—but it sounds as though they don't have dick to work with, unless somebody at the restaurant has a hell of a good memory. I wouldn't want to wager much on that one."

"So, what's it all mean?"

Rounds settled back in the chair. "When's the last time a Station Chief of any service got killed?"

"It's been a while. The Agency lost one in Greece—that local terrorist group. The COS was fingered by some prick . . . one of their own, defector, skipped over the wall, drinking vodka now and feeling lonely, I imagine. The Brits lost a guy a few years ago in Yemen . . ." He paused. "You're right. You don't gain much by killing a Station Chief. Once you know who he is, you watch him, find out who his contacts and sub-officers are. If you whack one, you lose assets instead of gaining any. So, you're thinking a terrorist, maybe sending a message to Israel?"

"Or maybe eliminating a threat they especially disliked. What the hell, the poor bastard was Israeli, wasn't he? Embassy official. Maybe

just that was enough, but when a spook—especially a senior spook—goes down, you don't assume it's an accident, do you?"

"Any chance Mossad will ask for our help?" But Granger knew better. The Mossad was like the kid in the sandbox who never, ever, shared toys. They'd ask for help only if they were, A, desperate, and, B, convinced someone else could give them something they'd never get on their own. Then they'd act like the returning prodigal son.

"They won't confirm that this guy—named Greengold—was Mossad. That might be a little helpful to the Italian cops, might even get their counter-spook agency involved, but if it's been said, there is no evidence of it that Langley knows about."

But Langley would not think in such terms, Granger realized. So did Jerry. He could see it in his eyes. CIA didn't think in those terms because the intelligence business had become very civilized. You didn't kill off the other guy's assets, because that was bad for business. Then he might do something to your assets, and if you were fighting a guerrilla war on the streets of some foreign city, you were not getting the actual job done. The actual job was to get information back to your government, not to carve notches on your pistol grips. So, the Carabinieri would think in terms of a street crime because any diplomat's person was inviolable to the forces of any other country, protected by international treaty and by a tradition that went all the way back to the Persian Empire under Xerxes.

"Okay, Jerry, you're the man with the trained nose," Sam observed. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking there's a nasty ghost out on the street, maybe. This Mossad guy is at a gilt-edged restaurant in Rome, having lunch and a glass of nice wine. Maybe he's making a pickup at a dead drop—I checked the map, the restaurant is a brisk walk from the embassy building, a little too far for a regular lunch place, unless this Greengold guy was a jogging type, and it was the wrong time of day for that. So, unless he was really hot for the chef at Giovanni's, even money it's a dead drop or a meet of some sort. If so, he was set up. Not set up to be ID'd by his opposition, whoever that may be, but ID'd to be whacked. To the local cops, it may look like a robbery. To me, it looks like a deliberate assassination, and expertly done. The victim was instantly incapacitated. No chance to resist in any way. That's how you'd want to take a spook down—you never know how good he might be at self-defense, but if I were an Arab, I'd figure a Mossad guy for the bogeyman. I would not take many chances. No pistol, so he left nothing behind in the form of physical evidence, no bullet, no cartridge case. He takes the wallet to make it look like a robbery, but he killed a Mossad *rezident,* and he delivered a message, probably. Not that he dislikes Mossad, but that he can kill their people as easy as

zipping his pants."

"You planning a book on the subject, Jerry?" Sam asked lightly. The chief analyst was taking a single factoid of hard information and spinning it into a complete soap opera.

Rounds just tapped his nose and smiled. "Since when do you believe in coincidences? Something smells about this one."

"What's Langley think?"

"Nothing yet. They've assigned it to the Southern Europe Desk for evaluation. I expect we'll see something in a week or so, and it won't say much. I know the guy who runs that shop."

"Dumb?"

Rounds shook his head. "No, that's not fair. He's smart enough, but he doesn't stick his neck out. Nor is he especially creative. I bet this doesn't even go as far as the Seventh Floor."

A new CIA Director had replaced Ed Foley, who was now retired and reportedly doing his own "I Was There" book, along with his wife, Mary Pat. In their day, they'd been pretty good, but the new DCI was a politically attractive judge beloved of President Kealty. He didn't do anything without Presidential approval, which meant it had to be run through the mini-bureaucracy of the National Security Council team in the White House, which was about as leaky as RMS *Titanic,* and hence beloved of the press. The Directorate of Operations was still growing, still training new field officers at The Farm in Tidewater, Virginia, and the new DDO wasn't a bad man at all—Congress had insisted on someone who knew how to work the field, somewhat to Kealty's dismay, but he knew how to play the game with Congress. The Directorate of Operations might be growing back into proper shape, but it would never do anything overtly bad under the current administration. Nothing to make Congress unhappy. Nothing to make the freelance haters of the intelligence community get loud about anything other than their routine complaints about historical wives' tales and grand conspiracy theories, and how CIA had caused Pearl Harbor and the San Francisco Earthquake.

"So, nothing will come of this, you figure?" Granger asked, knowing the answer.

"Mossad will look around, tell its troops to stay awake, and that'll work for a month or two, and then most of them will settle down to their normal routines. Same with other services. Mainly, the Israelis will try to figure how their guy got fingered. Hard to speculate on that with the information at hand. Probably something simple. Usually is. Maybe he recruited the wrong guy and it bit him, maybe their ciphers got cracked—a bribed cipher clerk at the embassy, for example—maybe somebody talked to the wrong guy at the wrong cocktail party. The possibilities are pretty wide, Sam. It only takes one little slip to

get a guy killed out there, and the best of us can make that sort of error."

"Something to put in the manual about what to do on the street, and what not to do." He'd done his own street time, of course, but mainly in libraries and banks, rooting around for information so dry as to make dust look moist, and finding the occasional diamond in a pile of it. He'd always maintained a cover and stuck to it until it had become as real to him as his birthday.

"Unless some other spook craps out on the street somewhere," Rounds observed. "Then we'll know if there really is a ghost out there."

THE AVIANCA flight from Mexico touched down at Cartagena five minutes early. He'd flown Austrian Air to London Heathrow, and then a British Airways flight to Mexico City before taking Colombia's flag carrier to the South American country. It was an old American Boeing, but he was not one to worry about the safety of air travel. The world had far greater dangers. At the hotel, he opened his bag to retrieve his day planner, took a walk outside, and spotted a public phone to make his call.

"Please tell Pablo that Miguel is here . . . *Gracias."* And with that he walked to a cantina for a drink. The local beer wasn't all that bad, Mohammed found. Though it was contrary to his religious beliefs, he had to fit in to this environment, and here everybody drank alcohol. After sitting for fifteen minutes, he walked back to his hotel, scanning twice for a tail, which he did not see. So, if he was being shadowed, it was by experts, and there was little defense against that, not in a foreign city where everyone spoke Spanish and no one knew the direction to Mecca. He was traveling on a British passport that said his name was Nigel Hawkins of London. There was indeed a flat at the indicated address. That would protect him even from a routine police stop, but no cover legend went forever, and if it came to that . . . then it came to that. You could not live your life in fear of the unknown. You made your plans, took the necessary precautions, and then you played the game.

It was interesting. The Spanish were ancient enemies of Islam, and this country was composed mostly of the children of Spain. But there were people in this country who loathed America almost as much as he did—only *almost,* because America was to them a source of vast income for their cocaine . . . as America was a source of vast income for the oil of his homeland. His own personal net worth was in the hundreds of millions of American dollars, stored in various banks around the world, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and most recently, the Bahamas. He could afford his own private plane, of course, but that

would be too easy to identify, and, he was sure, too easy to shoot down over water. Mohammed was contemptuous of America, but he was not blind to her power. Too many good men had gone unexpectedly to Paradise for forgetting that. It was hardly a bad destiny, but his work was among the living, not the dead.

"HEY, CAPTAIN."

Brian Caruso turned to see James Hardesty. It wasn't even seven in the morning. He'd just finished leading his short company of Marines through their morning routine of exercise and the three-mile run, and like all his men he'd worked up a good sweat in the process. He'd dismissed his people to their showers, and was on his way back to his quarters when he'd encountered Hardesty. But before he could say anything, a more familiar voice called.

"Skipper?" the captain turned to see Gunnery Sergeant Sullivan, his senior NCO.

"Yeah, Gunny. The people looked pretty sharp this morning."

"Yes, sir. You didn't work us too hard. Good of you, sir," the E-7 observed.

"How did Corporal Ward do?" Which was why Brian hadn't worked them too hard. Ward had said he was ready to get back into the swing, but he was still coming off some nasty wounds.

"He's puffing some, but he didn't cave on us. Corpsman Randall is keeping an eye on the lad for us. You know, for a squid, he isn't too bad," the gunny allowed. Marines are typically fairly solicitous to their Navy corpsmen, especially the ones tough enough to play in the weeds with Force Recon.

"Sooner or later the SEALs are going to invite him out to Coronado."

"True enough, Skipper, and then we're gonna have to break in a new squid."

"What you need, Gunny?" Caruso asked.

"Sir—oh, he's here. Hey, Mr. Hardesty. Just heard you were down to see the boss. Beg pardon, Captain."

"No problem. See you in an hour, Gunny."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sullivan saluted smartly and headed back to the barracks.

"He's a pretty good NCO," Hardesty thought aloud.

"Big time," Caruso agreed. "Guys like him run the Corps. They just tolerate people like me."

"How's about some breakfast, Cap'n?"

"Need a shower first, but sure."

"What's on the agenda?"

"Today's class work is on comms, to make sure we can all call in air

and artillery support."

"Don't they know that?" Hardesty asked in surprise.

"You know how a baseball team does batting practice before every game, with the batting coach around? They all know how to swing a bat, right?"

"Gotcha." The reason they were called fundamentals was because they really were fundamental. And these Marines, like ballplayers, wouldn't object to the day's lesson. One trip into the tall weeds had taught them all how important the fundamentals were.

It was a short walk to Caruso's quarters. Hardesty helped himself to some coffee and a newspaper, while the young officer showered. The coffee was pretty good for a single man's making. The paper, as usual, didn't tell him much he didn't already know, except for late sports scores, but the comics were always good for a laugh.

"Ready for breakfast?" the youngster asked, all cleaned up.

"How's the food here?" Hardesty stood.

"Well, kinda hard to screw up breakfast, isn't it?"

"True enough. Lead on, Captain." Together they drove the mile or so to the Consolidated Mess in Caruso's C-class Mercedes. The car marked him as a single man, to Hardesty's relief.

"I didn't expect to see you again for a while," Caruso said, from behind the wheel.

"Or at all?" the former Special Forces officer asked lightly.

"That, too, yes, sir."

"You passed the exam."

It was enough to turn his head. "What exam was that, sir?"

"I didn't think you'd notice," Hardesty observed with a chuckle.

"Well, sir, you have succeeded in confusing me this morning." Which, Captain Caruso was sure, was part of today's plan.

"There's an old saying: 'If you're not confused, you're misinformed.'"

"That sounds a little ominous," Captain Caruso said, turning right into the parking lot.

"It can be." He got out and followed the officer toward the building.

It was a large single-story building full of hungry Marines. The cafeteria line had racks and trays of the usual American breakfast foods, Frosted Flakes to bacon and eggs. And even some—

"You can try the bagels, but they aren't all that good, sir," Caruso warned as he got two English muffins and real butter. He was clearly too young to worry about cholesterol and the other difficulties that came with increasing years. Hardesty got himself a box of Cheerios, because he *had* gotten that old, rather to his annoyance, along with low-fat milk and non-sugar sweetener. The coffee mugs were large, and the seating permitted a surprising amount of anonymity, though

there had to be four hundred people in here, of various ranks from corporal to full-bull colonel. His host steered him to a table in a crowd of young sergeants.

"Okay, Mr. Hardesty, what can I do for you?"

"Number one, I know you have security clearances, up to TS, right?"

"Yes, sir. Some compartmented stuff, but that doesn't concern you at all."

"Probably," Hardesty conceded. "Okay, what we're about to discuss goes a little higher than that. You cannot repeat this to anyone at all. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, sir. This is code-word stuff. I understand." In fact, he didn't, thought Hardesty. This was actually beyond code word, but that explanation would have to wait for another venue. "Please go on, sir."

"You've been noticed by some fairly important people as a prime recruit prospect for a rather . . . a rather special organization that does not exist. You've heard this sort of thing before in movies or read it in books. But this is quite real, son. I am here to offer you a place in that organization."

"Sir, I am a Marine officer, and I like that."

"It will not prejudice your career in the Marines. As a matter of fact, you've been deep-dipped for promotion to major. You'll be getting that letter next week. So, you'll have to leave your current billet anyway. If you stay in the Marine Corps, you'll be sent to Headquarters Marine Corps next month, to work in the intelligence/special-operations shop. You're also going to get a Silver Star for your action in Afghanistan."

"What about my people? I put them in for decorations, too." It was the mark of this kid that he'd worry about that, Hardesty thought.

"Everyone's been approved. Now, you'll be able to return to the Corps whenever you wish. Your commission and routine advancement will not suffer from this at all."

"How did you manage that?"

"We have friends in high places," his guest explained. "So do you, as a matter of fact. You will continue to be paid through the Corps. You may have to set up new banking arrangements, but that's routine stuff."

"What will this new posting entail?" Caruso asked.

"It will mean serving your country. Doing things that are necessary to our national security, but doing them in a somewhat irregular manner."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Not here, not now."

"Can you be any more mysterious, Mr. Hardesty? I might start

understanding what you're talking about and spoil the surprise."

"I don't make the rules," he replied.

"Agency, eh?"

"Not exactly, but you'll find out in due course. What I need now is a yes or a no. You can leave this organization at any time if you find it not to your liking," he promised. "But this isn't the proper venue for a fuller explanation."

"When would I have to decide?"

"Before you finish your bacon and eggs."

The reply caused Captain Caruso to set his muffin down. "This isn't some sort of joke, right?" He'd taken his share of razzing due to his family connections.

"No, Captain, it isn't a joke."

The pitch was deliberately designed to be nonthreatening. People like Caruso, however courageous they might be, often regarded the unknown—more properly, the not-understood unknown—with some degree of trepidation. His profession was dangerous enough already, and the intelligent among us do not blissfully go seeking after danger. Theirs is usually a reasoned approach to hazard, after first making sure their training and experience are adequate to the task. And so Hardesty had made sure to tell Caruso that the womb of the United States Marine Corps would always be available to take him back. It was almost true, and that was close enough for his purposes, if not, perhaps, to the young officer's.

"What's your love life like, Captain?"

The question surprised him, but he answered it truthfully. "No attachments. There's a few girls I date, but nothing very serious yet. Is that a concern?" Just how dangerous might this be? he wondered.

"Only from a security point of view. Most men cannot keep secrets from their wives." But girlfriends were a different question altogether.

"Okay, how dangerous will this job be?"

"Not very," Hardesty lied, not skillfully enough to be entirely successful.

"You know, I've been planning to stay in the Corps at least long enough to be a light colonel."

"Your evaluator at Headquarters Marine Corps thinks you're good enough to make full-bull someday, unless you step on your crank along the way. Nobody thinks that's likely, but it has happened to a lot of good men." Hardesty finished his Cheerios and returned his attention to the coffee.

"Nice to know I have a guardian angel up there somewhere," Caruso observed dryly.

"As I say, you've been noticed. The Marine Corps is pretty good at spotting talent and helping it along."

"And so have some other people—spotted me, I mean."

"That's correct, Captain. But all I am offering you is a chance. You'll have to prove yourself along the way." The challenge was well considered. Capable young men had trouble turning away from one. Hardesty knew he had him.

IT HAD been a long drive from Birmingham to Washington. Dominic Caruso did it in one long day because he didn't much like cheap motels, but even starting at five in the morning didn't make it any shorter. He drove a white Mercedes C-class four-door much like his brother's, with lots of luggage piled in the back. He had been stopped twice, but on both occasions the state police cars had responded favorably to his FBI credentials—called "creedos" by the Bureau—and pulled away with nothing more than a friendly wave. There was a brotherhood among law-enforcement officers that extended at least as far as ignoring speeding violations. He arrived at Arlington, Virginia, just at ten that night, where he let a bellman unpack his car for him and took the elevator to his room on the third floor. The in-room bar had a split of a decent white wine, which he downed after the needed shower. The wine and boring TV helped him sleep. He left notice for a seven o'clock wake-up call, and faded out with the help of HBO.

"GOOD MORNING," Gerry Hendley said at 8:45 the next morning. "Coffee?"

"Thank you, sir." Jack availed himself of a cup and took his seat. "Thanks for calling back."

"Well, we looked at your academic records. You did okay at Georgetown."

"For what it costs, you might as well pay attention—and, besides, it wasn't all that hard." John Patrick Ryan, Jr., sipped at his coffee and wondered what would be coming next.

"We're prepared to discuss an entry-level job," the former senator told him right away. He'd never been one for beating about the bush, which was one of the reasons he and his visitor's father had gotten along so well.

"Doing what, exactly?" Jack asked, with his eyes perked up.

"What do you know about Hendley Associates?"

"Only what I've already told you."

"Okay, nothing of what I'm about to tell you can be repeated anywhere. Not anywhere. Are you clear on that?"

"Yes, sir." And just that fast, everything was clear as hell. He'd guessed right, Jack told himself. Damn.

"Your father was one of my closest friends. I say 'was' because we can't see each other anymore, and we talk very rarely. Usually

because he calls here. People like your dad never retire—never all the way, anyway. Your father was one of the best spooks who ever lived. He did some things that were never written down—at least not on government paper—and probably never will be written down. In this case, 'never' means fifty years or so. Your father is doing his memoirs. He's doing two versions, one for publication in a few years, and another that won't see the light of day for a couple of generations. It will not be published until after his death. That's his order."

It stuck hard at Jack that his father was making plans for after his own death. His dad—dead? It was a lot to grasp except in a distant, intellectual sense. "Okay," he managed to say. "Does Mom know this stuff?"

"Probably—no, almost certainly not. Some of it may not exist even at Langley. The government occasionally does things that are not committed to paper. Your father had a gift for stumbling into the middle of stuff like that."

"And what about you?" Junior asked.

Hendley leaned back and took a philosophical tone. "The problem is that no matter what you do, there's somebody who won't like it much. Like a joke. No matter how funny it is, somebody will be offended by it. But at a high level, when somebody is offended, instead of calling you on it to your face, he goes off and cries his eyes out to a member of the press, and it goes public, usually with a great big disapproving tone attached to it. Most often that's careerism raising its ugly head—getting ahead by backstabbing somebody senior to you. But it's also because people in senior positions like to make policy in accordance with their own version of right and wrong. That's called ego. Problem is, everyone has a different version of right and wrong. Some of them can be downright crazy.

"Now, take our current President. In the Senate Cloakroom, once Ed told me he was so opposed to capital punishment that he couldn't even have abided executing Adolf Hitler. That was after a few drinks—he tends to be verbose when he's been drinking, and the sad fact is that he drinks a little too much on occasion. When he said that to me, I joked about it. I told him not to say it in a speech—the Jewish vote is big and powerful and they might see it less as a deeply held principle than as a high-order insult. In the abstract a lot of people oppose capital punishment. Okay, I can respect that, though I do not agree with it. But the drawback to that position is that you cannot then deal decisively with people who do harm to others—sometimes serious harm—without violating your principles, and to some people, their consciences or political sensibilities will not let them do it. Even though the sad fact of the matter is that due process of law is not always effective, frequently outside our borders, and, on rare

occasions, inside them.

"Okay, how does this affect America? CIA doesn't kill people—ever. At least not since the 1950s. Eisenhower was very skillful at using CIA. He was, in fact, so brilliant at exercising power that people never knew anything was happening and thought him a dullard because he didn't do the old war dance in front of cameras. More to the point, it was a different world back then. World War Two was recent history, and the idea of killing a lot of people—even innocent civilians—was a familiar one, mainly from the bombing campaigns," Hendley clarified. "It was just a cost of doing business."

"And Castro?"

"That was President John Kennedy and his brother Robert. They had a hard-on for doing Castro. Most people think it was embarrassment over the Bay of Pigs fiasco. I personally think it might have come more from reading too many James Bond novels. There was a glamour in murdering people back then. Today we call it sociopathy," Hendley noted sourly. "Problem was, first, that it's a lot more fun to read about than actually to do it, and, second, it's not an easy thing to accomplish without highly trained and highly motivated personnel. Well, I guess they found out. Then, when it became public, somehow the involvement of the Kennedy family was glossed over, and CIA paid the price for doing—badly—what the sitting President had told them to do. President Ford's Executive Order put an end to it all. And so, CIA doesn't deliberately kill people anymore."

"What about John Clark?" Jack asked, remembering the look in that guy's eyes.

"He's an aberration of sorts. Yes, he has killed people more than once, but he was always careful enough to do it only when it was tactically necessary at the moment. Langley *does* allow people to defend themselves in the field, and he had a gift for making it tactically necessary. I've met Clark a couple of times. Mainly, I know him by reputation. But he's an aberration. Now that he's retired, maybe he'll write a book. But even if he does, it'll never have the full story in it. Clark plays by the rules, like your dad. Sometimes he bends those rules, but to my knowledge he's never once broken them—well, not as a federal employee," Hendley corrected himself. He and the elder Jack Ryan had once had a long talk about John Clark, and they were the only two people in all the world who knew the whole story.

"Once I told Dad that I wouldn't want to be on Clark's bad side."

Hendley smiled. "That's true enough, but you could also trust John Clark with the lives of your children. When we met last, you asked me a question about Clark. I can answer now: If he were younger, he'd be here," Hendley said revealingly.

"You just told me something," Jack said at once.

"I know. Can you live with it?"

"Killing people?"

"I didn't say that, exactly, did I?"

Jack Jr. put his coffee cup down. "Now I know why Dad says you're smart."

"Can you live with the fact that your father has taken a few lives in his time?"

"I know about that. Happened the night I was born. It's practically a family legend. The newsies made a lot of it while Dad was President. They kept bringing it up like it was leprosy or something. Except there's a cure for leprosy."

"I know. In a movie it's downright cool, but in real life people get the heebie-jeebies about it. The problem with the real world is that sometimes—not often, but sometimes—it's necessary to do that sort of thing, as your father discovered . . . on more than one occasion, Jack. He never flinched. I think he even had bad dreams about it. But when he had to do it, he did it. That's why you're alive. That's why a lot of other people are alive."

"I know about the submarine thing. That's pretty much in the open, but—"

"More than just that. Your father never went out looking for trouble, but when it found him—as I said, he did what was necessary."

"I sorta remember when the people who attacked Mom and Dad—the night I was born, that is—were executed. I asked Mom about it. She's not real big on executing people, you see. In that case, she didn't mind very much. She was uncomfortable with it, but I suppose you'd say she saw the logic of the situation. Dad—you know, he didn't really like it either, but he didn't cry any tears over it."

"Your father had a gun to that guy's—the leader, I mean—his head, but he didn't squeeze off the round. It wasn't necessary, and so he held back. Had I been in his position, well, I don't know. It was a hard call, but your father made the right choice when he had ample reason not to."

"That's what Mr. Clark said. I asked him about it once. He said the cops were right there, so why bother? But I never really believed him. That's one hardcase mother. I asked Mike Brennan, too. He said it was impressive for a civilian to hold off. But he would not have killed the guy. Training, I guess."

"I'm not sure about Clark. He's not really a murderer. He doesn't kill people for fun or for money. Maybe he would have spared the guy's life. But no, a trained cop is not supposed to do anything like that. What do you think you would have done?"

"You can't know until you're there," Jack answered. "I thought it through once or twice. I decided Dad handled it okay."

Hendley nodded. “You’re right. He handled the other part right, too. The guy in the boat he drilled in the head, he had to do it to survive, and when you have that choice, there’s only one way to go.”

“So, Hendley Associates does what, exactly?”

“We gather and act upon intelligence information.”

“But you’re not part of the government,” Jack objected.

“Technically, no, we’re not. We do things that have to be done, when the agencies of the government are unable to handle them.”

“How often does that happen?”

“Not very,” Hendley replied offhandedly. “But that may change—or it might not. Hard to tell right now.”

“How many times—”

“You do not need to know,” Hendley replied, with raised eyebrows.

“Okay. What does Dad know about this place?”

“He’s the guy who persuaded me to set it up.”

“Oh . . .” And just that fast it was all clear. Hendley had kissed off his political career in order to serve his country in a way that would never be recognized, never be rewarded. Damn. Did his own father have the stones to try this one? “And if you get into trouble somehow . . . ?”

“In a safety-deposit box belonging to my personal attorney are a hundred presidential pardons, covering any and all illegal acts that might have been committed between the dates that my secretary will fill in when she types up the blanks, and signed by your father, a week before he left office.”

“Is that legal?”

“It’s legal enough,” Hendley replied. “Your dad’s Attorney General, Pat Martin, said it would pass muster, though it would be pure dynamite if it ever became public.”

“Dynamite, hell, it would be a nuke on Capitol Hill,” Jack thought aloud. It was, in fact, something of an understatement.

“That’s why we’re careful here. I cannot encourage my people to do things that might end them up in prison.”

“Just lose their credit rating forever.”

“You have your father’s sense of humor, I see.”

“Well, sir, he *is* my dad, you know? Comes along with the blue eyes and black hair.”

The academic records said that he had the brains. Hendley could see that he had the same inquisitive nature, and the ability to sort the wheat from the chaff. Did he have his father’s guts . . . ? Better never to have to find out. But even his best people couldn’t predict the future, except in currency fluctuations—and on that they cheated. That was the one illegal thing he could get prosecuted for, but, no, that would never happen, would it?

"Okay, time for you to meet Rick Bell. He and Jerry Rounds do the analysis here."

"Have I met them before?"

"Nope. Neither has your father. That's one of the problems with the intelligence community. It's gotten too damned big. Too many people—the organizations are always tripping over themselves. If you have the best hundred people in pro football on the same team, the team will self-destruct from internal dissension. Every man was born with an ego, and they're like the proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Nobody objects too much because the government isn't supposed to function too efficiently. It would scare people if it did. That's why we're here. Come on. Jerry's office is right down the hall."

"CHARLOTTESVILLE?" Dominic asked. "I thought—"

"Since the time of Director Hoover, the Bureau has had a safe house facility down there. Technically, it doesn't belong to the FBI. It's where we keep the Gray Files."

"Oh." He'd heard about that from a senior instructor at the Academy. The Gray Files—outsiders never even knew the term—were supposed to be Hoover's files on political figures, all manner of personal irregularities, which politicians collected as other men collected stamps and coins. Supposedly destroyed at Hoover's death in 1972, in fact they'd been sequestered in Charlottesville, Virginia, in a large safe house on a hilltop across the gentle valley from Tom Jefferson's Monticello and overlooking the University of Virginia. The old plantation house had been built with a capacious wine cellar, which for more than fifty years had held rather more precious contents. It was the blackest of Bureau secrets, known only to a handful of people, which did not necessarily include the sitting FBI Director, but rather controlled by only the most trusted of career agents. The files were never opened, at least not the political ones. That junior senator during the Truman administration, for example, did not need to have his penchant for underage females revealed to the public. He was long dead in any case, as was the abortionist. But the fear of these records, whose continuation was widely believed to be carried on, explained why Congress rarely attacked the FBI on matters of appropriations. A really good archivist with a computerized memory might have inferred their existence from subtle holes in the Bureau's voluminous records, but that would have been a task worthy of Heracles. Besides, there were much juicier secrets than that to be found in the White Files squirreled off in a former West Virginia coal mine—or so an historian might think.

"We're going to detach you from the Bureau," Werner said next.

"What?" Dominic Caruso asked. "Why?" The shock of that

pronouncement nearly ejected him from his chair.

"Dominic, there's a special unit that wants to talk to you. Your employment will continue there. They will fill you in. I said 'detach,' not 'terminate,' remember. Your pay will continue. You'll be kept on the books as a Special Agent on special assignment to counterterrorism investigations directly under my office. You'll continue to get normal promotions and pay raises. This information is secret, Agent Caruso," Werner went on. "You cannot discuss it with anyone but me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir, but I cannot say I understand."

"You will in due course. You will continue to investigate criminal activity, and probably to act upon it. If your new assignment turns out to be not to your liking, you can tell me, and we'll reassign you to a new field division for more conventional duties. But, I repeat, you cannot discuss your new assignment with anyone but me. If anyone asks, you're still a Special Agent of the FBI, but you are unable to discuss your work with anyone. You will not be vulnerable to any adverse action of any kind as long as you do your job properly. You will find that the oversight is looser than you're used to. But you will be accountable to someone at all times."

"Sir, this is still not very clear," Special Agent Caruso observed.

"You will be doing work of the highest national importance, mainly counterterrorism. There will be danger attached to it. The terrorist community is not a civilized one."

"This is an undercover assignment, then?"

Werner nodded. "Correct."

"And it's run out of this office?"

"More or less," Werner dodged with a nod.

"And I can bail out whenever I want?"

"Correct."

"Okay, sir, I'll give it a look. What do I do now?"

Werner wrote on a small pad of paper and handed it across. "Go to that address. Tell them you want to see Gerry."

"Right now, sir?"

"Unless you have something else to do."

"Yes, sir." Caruso stood, shook hands, and took his leave. At least it would be a pleasant drive into the Virginia horse country.

CHAPTER 4

BOOT CAMP

THE DRIVE back across the river to the Marriott allowed Dominic to collect his bags—with a twenty-dollar bill to the bellman—and then punch in his destination on the Mercedes's navigation computer. Soon he was southbound on Interstate 95, leaving Washington behind. The skyline of the national capital actually looked pretty good in his rearview mirror. The car drove well, about what you'd expect of a Mercedes; the local talk radio was pleasingly conservative—cops tended to be that way—and traffic wasn't too bad, though he found himself pitying the poor bastards who had to drive into D.C. every day to push paper in the Hoover Building and all the other government-grotesque buildings surrounding The Mall. At least FBI Headquarters had its own pistol range for stress management. Probably well used, Dominic thought.

Just before hitting Richmond, the female voice on his computer told him to take a right onto the Richmond Beltway, which presently delivered him to I-64 west toward the rolling, wooded hills. The countryside was pleasant, and green enough. Probably a lot of golf courses and horse farms. He'd heard that the CIA had its safe houses here from back when they had to debrief Soviet defectors. He wondered what the places were used for now. Chinese, maybe? Frenchmen, perhaps. Certainly they hadn't been sold. The government didn't like letting go of things, except maybe to close down military bases. The clowns from the Northeast and Far West loved to do that. They didn't much like the Bureau either, though they were probably afraid of it. He didn't know what it was about cops and soldiers that bothered some politicians, but he didn't much worry about it. He had his rice bowl, and they had theirs.

After another hour and fifteen minutes or so, he started looking for his exit sign, but the computer didn't need him.

"PREPARE TO TURN RIGHT AT THE NEXT EXIT," the voice said, about two minutes ahead of time.

"Fine, honey," Special Agent Caruso replied, without getting an acknowledgment. A minute later, he took the suggested exit—without so much as a VERY GOOD from the computer—and then took some

ordinary city streets through the pleasant little town and up some gentle hills to the north wall of this valley, until finally:

"TAKE THE NEXT LEFT AND YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT YOUR DESTINATION . . ."

"That's nice, honey, thank you," he observed.

"YOUR DESTINATION" was the end of an entirely ordinary-looking country road, maybe a driveway, since it had no lines painted on it. A few hundred yards farther and he saw two redbrick abutments and a white-rail gate that was conveniently swung open. There was a house another three hundred yards off, with six white pillars holding up the front part of the roof. The roof appeared to be slate—rather old slate, at that—and the walls were weathered brick that hadn't been red in over a hundred years. This place had to be over a century old, maybe two. The driveway was recently raked pea-sized gravel. The grass—there was a *lot* of grass here—was a luscious golf-course green. Someone came out of a side door and waved him around to the left. He twisted the wheel to head behind the house, and got a surprise. The mansion—what *did* you call a house this big?—was larger than it first appeared, and had a fairsized parking lot, which at the moment held a Chevy Suburban, a Buick SUV, and—another Mercedes C-class just like his, with North Carolina tags. The likelihood of this coincidence was too remote even to enter his imagina—

"Enzo!"

Dominic snapped his head around. "Aldo!"

People often remarked on their resemblance, though it was even more apparent when they were apart. Both had dark hair and fair skin. Brian was the taller by twenty-four millimeters. Dominic was perhaps ten pounds heavier. Whatever differences in mannerisms they'd had as boys had stayed with them as they'd grown up together. Since both were partly Italian in ancestry, they hugged warmly—but they didn't kiss. They weren't *that* Italian.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dominic was the first to ask.

"Me? What about you?" Brian shot back, heading to help with his brother's bags. "I read about your shoot in Alabama. What's the story?"

"Pedophile," Dominic replied, pulling out his two-suiter. "Raped and killed a cute little girl. I got there about half an hour too late."

"Hey, ain't nobody perfect, Enzo. Papers said you put an end to his career."

Dominic looked right into Brian's eyes. "Yeah, I managed to accomplish that."

"How, exactly?"

"Three in the chest."

"Works every time," Captain Brian Caruso observed. "And no

lawyers to cry over his body."

"No, not this time." His words were not the least bit jolly, but his brother heard the cold satisfaction.

"With this, eh?" The Marine lifted his brother's automatic from its holster. "Looks nice," he said.

"It shoots pretty good. Loaded, bro, do be careful."

Brian ejected the magazine and cleared the chamber. "Ten millimeter?"

"That's right. FBI-issue. Makes nice holes. The Bureau went back to it after Inspector O'Day had that shoot-out with the bad guys—you know, Uncle Jack's little girl."

Brian remembered the story well: the attack on Katie Ryan at her school shortly after her dad had become President, the shoot-out, the kills.

"That dude had his shit wired pretty tight," he said. "And you know, he's not even an ex-Marine. He was a Navy puke before he turned cop. That's what they said at Quantico, anyway."

"They did a training tape of the job. I met him once, just shook his hand with twenty other guys. Son of a bitch can shoot. He talked about waiting for your chance and making the first shot count. He double-tapped both their heads."

"How did he keep his cool?" The rescue of Katie Ryan had struck home for both Caruso boys. She was, after all, their first cousin, and a nice little girl, the image of her mother.

"Hey, you smelled the smoke over there. How did you keep yours?"

"Training. I had Marines to look after, bro."

Together, they manhandled Dominic's things inside. Brian showed the way upstairs. They had separate bedrooms, next to each other. Then they came back to the kitchen. Both got coffee and sat at the kitchen table.

"So, how's life in the Marine Corps, Aldo?"

"Gonna make major soon, Enzo. Got myself a Silver Star for what I did over there—wasn't that big a deal, really, I just did what they trained me to do. One of my men got shot up, but he's okay now. We didn't bag the guy we were after—he wasn't in a mood to surrender, so Gunny Sullivan sent him off to see Allah—but we got two live ones and they talked some, gave us some good information, the Intel guys told me."

"What did you get the pretty ribbon for?" Dominic asked pointedly.

"Mainly for staying alive. I shot three of the bad guys myself. Weren't even hard shots, really. I just took 'em. Later they asked me if I had any nightmares about it. The Marine Corps just has too many doctors around—and they're all squids."

"Bureau's the same way, but I blew it off. No bad dreams about that

bastard. The poor little girl. I should've shot his dick off."

"Why didn't you?"

"'Cause that doesn't kill your ass, Aldo. But three in the heart does."

"You didn't shoot him on the spur of the moment, did you?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"And that's why you're here, Special Agent Caruso," a man said, entering the room. He was over six feet, a very fit fifty, both of the others thought.

"Who are you, sir?" Brian asked.

"Pete Alexander," the man answered.

"I was supposed to meet you last—"

"No, actually you weren't, but that's what we told the general." Alexander sat down with his own cup of coffee.

"So, who are you, then?" Dominic asked.

"I'm your training officer."

"Just you?" Brian asked.

"Training for what?" Dominic asked at the same time.

"No, not just me, but I'm the one who'll be here all the time. And the nature of the training will show you what you're training for," he answered. "Okay, you want to know about me. I graduated Yale thirty years ago, in political science. I was even a member of Skull and Bones. You know, the boys' club that conspiracy theorists like to prattle about. Jesus, like people in their late teens can really accomplish anything beyond getting laid, on a *good* Friday night." His brown eyes and the look in them hadn't come from a college, however, even an Ivy League one. "Back in the old days, the Agency liked to recruit people from Yale and Harvard and Dartmouth. The kids there have gotten over it. They all want to be merchant bankers now and make money. I worked twenty-five years in the Clandestine Service, and then I got recruited by The Campus. Been with them ever since."

"The Campus? What's that?" the Marine asked. Alexander noticed that Dominic Caruso did not. He was listening and watching very closely. Brian would never stop being a Marine, and Dominic would never stop being FBI. They never did. It was both good and bad, in both cases.

"*That* is a privately funded intelligence service."

"Privately funded?" Brian asked. "How the hell—"

"You'll see how it works later, and when you do, you will be surprised how easily it's done. What concerns you right here and right now is *what* they do."

"They kill people," Dominic said immediately. The words came out seemingly of their own accord.

"Why do you think that?" Alexander asked innocently.

“The outfit is small. We’re the only people here, judging by the parking pad outside. I’m not experienced enough to be an expert agent. All I did was whack somebody who needed it, and next day I’m up in Headquarters talking to an assistant director, and a couple of days after that I drive to D.C. and get sent down here. This place is very, very special, very, very small, and it has top-level approval for whatever it does. You’re not selling U.S. Savings Bonds here, are you?”

“The book on you is that you have good analytical ability,” Alexander said. “Can you learn to keep your mouth shut?”

“It’s not needed in this particular place, I should think. But, yeah, I know how, when the situation calls for it,” Dominic said.

“Okay, here’s the first speech. You guys know what ‘black’ means, right? It means a program or project that is not acknowledged by the government. People pretend it doesn’t exist. The Campus takes that one step further: We really do not exist. There is not a single written document in the possession of any government employee that has a single word about us. From this moment on, you two young gentlemen do not exist. Oh, sure, you, Captain—or is it Major already?—Caruso, you get a paycheck that’s going to be direct-deposited into whatever bank account you set up this week, but you are no longer a Marine. You are on detached duty, whose nature is unknown. And you, Special Agent Dominic Caruso—”

“I know. Gus Werner told me. They dug a hole and pulled it in after them.”

Alexander nodded. “You will both leave your official identification documents, dog tags, everything, here before you leave. You can keep your names, maybe, but a name is just a couple of words, and nobody believes a name in this business anyway. That’s the funny part about my time in the field with the Agency. Once on a job, I changed names without thinking about it. Damned embarrassing when I realized it. Like an actor: All of a sudden I’m Macbeth when I’m supposed to be Hamlet. No harm came of it, though, and I didn’t croak at the end of the play.”

“What, exactly, will we be doing?” This was Brian.

“Mostly, you’ll be doing investigative work. Tracking money. The Campus is particularly good at that. You’ll find out how and why later. You will probably deploy together. You, Dominic, will do most of the heavy lifting on the investigative side. You, Brian, will back him up on the muscle side, and along the way you’ll learn to do what—what was it you called him a little while ago?”

“Oh, you mean Enzo? I call him that because he had a heavy foot when he got his driver’s license. You know, like Enzo Ferrari.”

Dominic pointed to his brother and laughed. “He’s Aldo because he

dresses like a dweeb. Like in that wine commercial, Aldo Cella: 'He's not a slave to fashion'? It's a family joke."

"Okay, go to Brooks Brothers and dress better," Pete Alexander told Brian. "Your cover mainly will be as a businessman or a tourist. So, you'll have to dress neatly, but not like the Prince of Wales. You'll both let your hair grow out, especially you, Aldo."

Brian rubbed a hand over his head stubble. It marked him anywhere in the civilized world as a United States Marine. It could have been worse. Army Rangers were even more radical in the hair department. Brian would look like a fairly normal human being in a month or so. "Damn, I'll have to buy a comb."

"What's the plan?"

"For today, just relax and settle in. Tomorrow we wake up early and make sure you two are in decent physical shape. Then there's weapons proficiency—and the sit-down classwork. You're both computer-literate, I presume."

"Why do you ask?" This was Brian.

"The Campus mainly works like a virtual office. You'll be issued computers with built-in modems, and that's how you'll communicate with the home office."

"What about security?" Dominic asked.

"The machines have pretty good security built in. If there's a way to crack them, nobody's found it yet."

"That's good to know," Enzo observed, dubiously. "They use computers in the Corps, Aldo?"

"Yeah, we have all the modern conveniences, even toilet paper."

"AND YOUR name is Mohammed?" Ernesto asked.

"That is correct, but for now, call me Miguel." Unlike with Nigel, it was a name he'd be able to remember. He had not begun by invoking Allah's blessing on this meeting. These unbelievers would not have understood.

"Your English is—well, you *sound* English."

"I was educated there," Mohammed explained. "My mother was English. My father was Saudi."

"Was?"

"Both are dead."

"My sympathies," Ernesto offered with questionable sincerity. "So, what can we do for each other?"

"I told Pablo here about the idea. Has he filled you in?"

"*Sí,* he has, but I wish to hear it directly from you. You understand that I represent six others who share my business interests."

"I see. Do you have the power to negotiate for all of them?"

"Not entirely, but I will present what you say to them—you need

not meet with them all—and they have never rejected my suggestions. If we come to an agreement here, it can be fully ratified by the end of the week."

"Very well. You know the interests I myself represent. I am empowered to make an agreement, as well. Like you, we have a major enemy nation to the north. They are putting ever-greater pressure on my friends. We wish to retaliate, and to deflect their pressure in other directions."

"It is much the same with us," Ernesto observed.

"Therefore, it is in our mutual interests to cause unrest and chaos within America. The new American president is a weak man. But for that reason he can be a dangerous one. The weak are quicker to use force than the strong. Even though they use it inefficiently, it can be an annoyance."

"Their methods of intelligence-gathering concern us. You also?"

"We have learned caution," Mohammed replied. "What we do not have is a good infrastructure in America. For this we need assistance."

"You don't? That's surprising. Their news media is full of reports about the FBI and other agencies busily tracking your people within their borders."

"At the moment, they are chasing shadows—and sowing discord in their own land by doing so. It complicates the task of building a proper network so that we can conduct offensive operations."

"The nature of those operations does not concern us?" Pablo asked.

"That is correct. It is nothing you have not done yourselves, of course." *But not in America,* he did not add. Here in Colombia the gloves were all the way off, but they'd been careful to limit themselves in the U.S., their "customer" nation. So much the better. It would be entirely out of character with anything they'd done. Operational security was a concept both sides fully understood.

"I see," the senior Cartel man noted. He was no fool. Mohammed could see that in his eyes. The Arab was not going to underestimate these men or their capabilities . . .

Nor would he mistake them for friends. They could be as ruthless as his own men, he knew that. Those who denied God could be every bit as dangerous as those who worked in His Name.

"So what can you offer us?"

"We have conducted operations in Europe for a long time," said Mohammed. "You wish to expand your marketing efforts there. We've had a highly secure network in place for over twenty years. The changes in European commerce—the diminution of the importance of borders, and so forth—works in your favor, as it has worked in ours. We have a cell in the port city of Piraeus that can easily accommodate your needs, and contacts within the transnational trucking companies.

If they can transport weapons and people for us, they can surely transport your products easily enough."

"We will need a list of names, the people with whom we can discuss the technical aspects of this business," Ernesto told his guest.

"I have it with me." Mohammed held up his personal laptop computer. "They are accustomed to doing business in return for monetary considerations." He saw his hosts nod without asking about how much money. Clearly, this was not a matter of great concern for them.

Ernesto and Pablo were thinking: There were over three hundred million people in Europe, and many of them would doubtless enjoy the Colombians' cocaine. Some European countries even allowed the use of drugs in discreet, controlled—and taxed—settings. The money involved was insufficient to make a decent profit, but it did have the advantage of setting the proper atmosphere. And nothing, not even medicinal-quality heroin, was as good as Andean coca. For that they would pay their Euros, and this time it would be enough to make this venture profitable. The danger, of course, was in the distribution side. Some careless street dealers would undoubtedly be arrested, and some of them would talk. So, there had to be ample insulation between the wholesale distribution and retail sides, but that was something they knew how to do—no matter how professional the European policemen were, they could not be all that different from the Americans. Some of them would even happily take the Cartel's Euros, and grease the skids. Business was business. And if this Arab could help with that—for free, which was truly remarkable—so much the better. Ernesto and Pablo did not react physically to the business offer on the table. An outsider might have taken their demeanor for boredom. It was anything but that, of course. This offer was heaven-sent. A whole new market was going to open up, and with the new revenue stream it brought, maybe they could buy their country entirely. They'd have to learn a new way of doing business, but they'd have the money to experiment, and they were adaptable creatures: fish, as it were, swimming in a sea of peasants and capitalists.

"How do we contact these people?" Pablo inquired.

"My people will make the necessary introductions."

Better and better, Ernesto thought.

"And what services will you require of us?" he finally asked.

"We will need your help to transport people into America. How would we go about this?"

"If you mean physically moving people from your part of the world into America, the best thing is to fly them into Colombia—right here to Cartagena, in fact. Then we will arrange for them to be flown into other Spanish-speaking countries to the north. Costa Rica, for

example. From there, if they have reliable travel documents, they can fly there directly, via an American airline, or through Mexico. If they appear Latin and speak Spanish, they can be smuggled across the Mexican-American border—it is a physical challenge, and some of them might be apprehended, but if so, they'd simply be returned to Mexico, for another attempt. Or, again with proper documents, they could just walk across the border into San Diego, California. Once in America, it's a question of maintaining your cover. If money is not an issue—"

"It isn't," Mohammed assured him.

"Then you retain a local attorney—few of them have much in the way of scruples—and arrange the purchase of a suitable safe house to serve as a base of operations. Forgive me—I know we agreed that such operations need not concern us—but if you gave me some idea of what you have in mind, I could advise you."

Mohammed thought for a few moments, and then explained.

"I see. Your people must be properly motivated to do such things," Ernesto observed.

"They are." Could this man have any doubt of that? Mohammed wondered.

"And with good planning and nerve, they can even survive. But you must never underestimate the American police agencies. In our business we can make financial arrangements with some of them, but that is very unlikely in your case."

"We understand that. Ideally, we would want our people to survive, but sadly we know that some will be lost. They understand the risk." He didn't talk about Paradise. These people would not understand. The God they worshipped folded into their wallets.

What sort of fanatic throws his people away like that? Pablo asked himself. His men freely took their risks, measuring the money to be gained against the consequences of failure, and made decisions out of their own free will. Not these people. Well, one couldn't always choose one's business associates.

"Very well. We have a number of blank American passports. It is your job to be certain that the people you send us can speak proper English or Spanish, and can present themselves properly. I trust none of them will partake in flying lessons?" Ernesto meant it as a joke.

Mohammed did not take it as one.

"The time for that is past. Success rarely succeeds twice in my field of endeavor."

"Fortunately, we have a different field," Ernesto responded. And it was true. He could send shipments in cargo container boxes via commercial vessels and trucks all over America. If one of them was lost, and the programmed destination discovered, America had many

legal protections for his downstream employees. Only the foolish ones went to prison. Over the years, they'd learned to defeat sniffer dogs and all the other means of discovery. The most important thing was that they used people who were willing to take risks, and most of them survived to retire back to Colombia and join the upper middle class, their prosperity the result of something in the distant, fading past, never to be repeated or spoken of.

"So," Mohammed said. "When can we commence operations?"

This man is anxious, Ernesto noted. But he would accommodate him. Whatever he managed to accomplish would draw manpower away from America's counter-smuggling operations, and that was good. The relatively minor cross-border losses he had learned to endure would shrink to even more trivial levels. The street price of cocaine would drop, but demand would increase somewhat, and so there would be no net loss in sales revenue. That would be the tactical profit. More to the point, America would become less interested in Colombia, and shift her focus of intelligence operations elsewhere. That would be his strategic advantage from this endeavor . . .

. . . and he always had the option of sending information to the CIA. Terrorists had appeared unexpectedly in his backyard, he could say, and their operations would be understood to be beyond the pale even for the Cartel. While that would not gain him the affection of America, it would not hurt him, either. And any of his own people who'd provided assistance to the terrorists could be dealt with internally, as it were. The Americans would actually respect that.

So, there was a real upside, and a controllable downside. On the whole, he decided, this had the makings of a valuable and profitable operation.

"Señor Miguel, I will propose this alliance to my colleagues, with my recommendation that we undertake it. You can expect a final decision by the end of this week. Will you remain in Cartagena, or will you be traveling?"

"I prefer not to remain in one place too long. I fly out tomorrow. Pablo can reach me via the Internet with your decision. For the moment, I thank you for a cordial business meeting."

Ernesto stood and took his guest's hand. He decided then and there to consider Miguel as a businessman in a similar but not competitive field of endeavor. Not a friend, certainly, but an ally of convenience.

"HOW THE hell did you manage this?" Jack asked.

"Ever hear of a company called INFOSEC?" Rick Bell asked in return.

"Encryption stuff, right?"

"Correct. Information Systems Security Company. The company's

domiciled outside of Seattle. They have the best information-security program there is. Headed by a former deputy head of the Z-Division over at Fort Meade. He and three colleagues set the company up about nine years ago. I'm not sure NSA can crack it, short of brute-forcing it with their new Sun Workstations. Just about every bank in the world uses it, especially the ones in Liechtenstein and the rest of Europe. But there's a trapdoor in the program."

"And nobody's found it?" Buyers of computer programs had learned over the years to have outside experts go over such programs line by line, as a defense against playful software engineers, of which there were far too many.

"Those NSA guys do good code," Bell responded. "I have no idea what's in there, but these guys still have their old NSA school ties hanging in the closet, y'know?"

"And Fort Meade listens in, and we get what they dig up when they fax it to Langley," Jack said. "Anybody at CIA good at tracking money?"

"Not as good as our people."

"Takes a thief to catch a thief, eh?"

"Helps to know the mind-set of the adversary," Bell confirmed. "It's not a large community we're dealing with here. Hell, we know most of them—we're in the same business, right?"

"And that makes me an additional asset?" Jack asked. He was not a prince under American law, but Europeans still thought in such terms. They'd bow and scrape just to shake his hand, regard him as a promising young man however thick his head might turn out to be, and seek his favor, first because of the possibility he might speak a kind word into the right ear. It was called corruption, of course, or at least the atmosphere for it.

"What did you learn in the White House?" Bell asked.

"A little, I suppose," Jack responded. Mostly, he'd learned things from Mike Brennan, who'd cordially detested all the diplomatic folderol, to say nothing of the political stuff that happened there every day. Brennan had talked it over with his foreign colleagues often enough, who saw the same things in their own capitals, and who thought much the same of it, from behind the same blank faces when they stood post. It was probably a better way to learn all this stuff than his father had, Jack thought. He hadn't been forced to learn to swim while struggling not to drown. It was something his father had never spoken about, except when angry at the whole corrupting process.

"Be careful talking to Gerry about it," said Bell. "He likes to say how clean and upright the trading business is by comparison."

"Dad really likes the guy. I guess maybe they're a little alike."

"No," Bell corrected, "they're a *lot* alike."

"Hendley got out of politics because of the accident, right?"

Bell nodded. "That's it. Wait until you have a wife and kids. It's about the biggest hit a man can take. Even worse than you might think. He had to go and identify the bodies. It wasn't pretty. Some people would eat a gun after that. But he didn't. He'd been thinking about a run for the White House himself, thought maybe Wendy would make a good First Lady. Maybe so, but his lust for that job died along with his wife and kids." He didn't go further. The senior people at The Campus protected the boss, in reputation at least. They thought him a man who deserved loyalty. There was no considered line of succession at The Campus. Nobody had thought that far forward, and the subject never came up in board meetings. Those were mainly concerned with non–business matters anyway. He wondered if John Patrick Ryan, Jr., would take note of that one blank spot in the makeup of The Campus. "So," Bell went on, "what do you think so far?"

"I read the transcripts they gave me of what the central bank heads say back and forth to each other. It's surprising how venal some of that stuff is." Jack paused. "Oh, yeah, shouldn't be surprised, should I?"

"Any time you give people control of that much money or power, some corruption is bound to happen. What surprises me is the way their friendships cross national lines. A lot of these guys profit personally when their own currencies are hurt, even if it means a little inconvenience for their fellow citizens. Back in the old-old days, the nobility frequently felt more at ease with foreign nobility than with the people on their own estates who bowed down to the same king. That characteristic hasn't died yet—at least not over there. Here the big industrialists might work together to lobby Congress, but they don't often hand freebies to them, and they don't trade secrets. Conspiracy at that level isn't impossible, but concealing it for a long time is pretty tough. Too many people, and every one has a mouth. Europe's getting the same way. There's nothing the media likes better than a scandal, here or there, and they'd rather clobber a rich crook than a cabinet minister. The latter is often a good source, after all. The former is just a crook."

"So, how do you keep your people honest?"

It was a good question, Bell thought, and one they worried about all the time, though it wasn't spoken about much.

"We pay our people pretty well, and everyone here is part of a group investment plan that makes them feel comfortable. The annualized return is about nineteen percent over the last few years."

"That's not bad," Junior understated. "All within the law?"

"That depends on the lawyer you talk to, but no U.S. Attorney is going to make a big deal about it, and we're very careful how we manage it. We don't like greed here. We could turn this place into the biggest thing since Ponzi, but then people would notice. So, we don't flaunt anything. We make enough to cover our operations and to make sure the troops are well provided for." They also kept track of the employees' money, and the trades they made, if any. Most didn't, though some worked accounts through the office, which, again, was profitable but not greedy. "You'll give us account numbers and codes to all of your personal finances, and the computers will keep track of them."

"I have a trust account through Dad, but it's managed through an accounting firm in New York. I get a nice allowance, but no access to the principal. What I make on my own is mine alone, however, unless I send it into the CPAs. Then they build it up and send me a statement every quarter. When I turn thirty, I'm allowed to play with it on my own." Turning thirty was a little distant for young Jack to concern himself about at the moment, however.

"We know," Bell assured him, "it's not a question of lack of trust. It's just that we want to make sure nobody's developed a gambling habit."

Probably the best mathematicians of all time were the ones who'd made up the rules for gambling games, Bell thought. They'd provided just enough illusion that you had a chance to sucker you in. Born inside the human mind was the most dangerous of drugs. That was called "ego," too.

"So, I start out on the 'white' side of the house? Watching currency fluctuations and stuff?" said Jack.

Bell nodded. "Correct. You need to learn the language first."

"Fair enough." His father had started off a lot more humbly than this, as a junior accounting manager at Merrill Lynch who'd had to cold-call people. Paying one's dues was probably bad for the ego but good for the soul. His father had often lectured him on the Virtue of Patience. He'd said that it was a pain in the ass to acquire, even after acquiring it. But the game had rules, even in this place. *Especially in this place,* Jack realized on reflection. He wondered what happened to people on The Campus who crossed over the line. Probably nothing good.

"BUON VINO," Dominic observed. "For a government installation, the wine cellar isn't half bad." The year on the bottle read 1962, long before he and his brother had been born . . . for that matter, so long ago their mom had just been thinking about Mercy High School, a few blocks from their grandparents' place on Loch Raven Boulevard in

Baltimore . . . toward the end of the last Ice Age, probably. But Baltimore was a hell of a long way from the Seattle they'd grown up in. "How old is this place?" he asked Alexander.

"The property? It goes back to before the Civil War. The house was started in seventeen-something. Burned down and rebuilt in 1882. Government got hold of it just before Nixon was elected. The owner was an old OSS guy, J. Donald Hamilton, worked with Donovan and his crowd. He got a fair price when he sold it, moved out to New Mexico and died there in 1986, I think, aged ninety-four. They say he was a mover and shaker in his day, stuck it out pretty far in World War One, and helped Wild Bill work against the Nazis. There's a painting of him in the library. Looks like a guy to step aside for. And, yeah, he did know his wines. This one's from Tuscany."

"Goes nicely with veal," Brian said. He'd done the cooking.

"This veal goes well with anything. You didn't learn that in the Marine Corps," Alexander observed.

"From Pop. He is a better cook than Mom," Dominic explained. "You know, it's an old-country thing. And Grandpop, that son of a bitch, can still do it, too. He's what, Aldo, eighty-two?"

"Last month," Brian confirmed. "Funny old guy, travels the whole world to get to Seattle, and then he never leaves the city for sixty years."

"Same house for the last forty," Dominic added, "a block from the restaurant."

"This his recipe for the veal?"

"Bet your bippy, Pete. The family goes back to Florence. Went up there two years when the Med FMF was making a port call in Naples. His cousin has a restaurant just upriver from the Ponte Vecchio. When they found out who I was, they went nuts feeding me. You know, Italians love the Marines."

"Must be the green suit, Aldo," Dominic said.

"Maybe I just cut a manly figure, Enzo. Ever think of that?" Captain Caruso demanded.

"Oh, sure," Special Agent Caruso replied, taking another bite of the Veal Francese. "The next Rocky sits before us."

"You boys always like this?" Alexander asked.

"Just when we drink," Dominic replied, and his brother laughed.

"Enzo can't hold his liquor worth a damn. Now, we Marines, we can do anything."

"I have to take this from somebody who thinks Miller Lite is really beer?" the FBI Caruso asked the air.

"You know," Alexander said, "twins are supposed to be alike."

"Only identical twins. Mom punched out two eggs that month. It had Mom and Dad fooled until we were a year old or so. We're not at

all alike, Pete." Dominic delivered this pronouncement with a smile shared by his brother.

But Alexander knew better. They only dressed differently—and that would soon be changing.

CHAPTER 5

ALLIANCES

MOHAMMED TOOK the first Avianca flight to Mexico City and there he waited for British Airways Flight 242 to London. He felt safe in airports, where everything was anonymous. He had to be careful of the food, since Mexico was a nation of unbelievers, but the first-class lounge protected him from their cultural barbarism, and the many armed police officers ensured that people rather like himself did not crash the party, such as it was. So, he picked a corner seat away from windows and read a book he'd picked up in one of the shops and managed not to be bored to death. He never read the Koran in such a place, of course, nor anything about the Middle East, lest someone ask him a question. No, he had to live his cover "legend" as well as any professional intelligence officer, so that he did not come to an end as abrupt as the Jew Greengold in Rome. Mohammed even used the bathroom facilities carefully, in case someone tried the same trick on him.

He didn't even make use of his laptop computer, though there was ample opportunity to do so. Better, he judged, to sit still like a lump. In twenty-four hours he'd be back on the European mainland. It hit him that he lived in the air more than anywhere else. He had no home, just a series of safe houses, which were places of dubious reliability. Saudi Arabia was closed to him, and had been for nearly five years. Afghanistan was similarly out-of-bounds. How strange that the only lands where he could feel something close to safe were the Christian countries of Europe, which Muslims had struggled and failed to conquer on more than one occasion. Those nations had a nearly suicidal openness to strangers, and one could disappear in their vastness with only modest skills—hardly any, in fact, if you had money. These people were so self-destructively open, so afraid to offend those who would just as soon see them and their children dead and their entire cultures destroyed. It was a pleasing vision, Mohammed thought, but he didn't live within dreams. Instead, he worked *for* them. This struggle would last longer than his lifetime. Sad, perhaps, but true. But it was better to serve a cause than one's own interests. There were enough of those in the world.

He wondered what his supposed allies from yesterday's meeting were saying and thinking. They were certainly not true allies. Oh, yes, they shared enemies, but that was not the summation of an alliance. They would—might—facilitate matters, but no more than that. Their men would not assist his men in any real endeavor. Throughout history, mercenaries had never been really effective soldiers. To fight effectively, you had to *believe.* Only a believer would risk his life, because only a believer had nothing to fear. Not with Allah Himself on his side. What was there to fear, then? Only one thing, he admitted to himself. Failure. Failure was not an option. The obstacles between him and success were things to be dealt with in any way that was convenient. Just things. Not people. Not souls. Mohammed fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. In this sense, at least, Mexico was a civilized country, though he refused to speculate on what the Prophet would have said about tobacco.

* * *

"EASIER IN a car, isn't it, Enzo?" Brian teased his brother as they crossed the finish line. The three-mile run wasn't a big deal for the Marine, but for Dominic, who had just maxed out his PT test for the FBI, it had been a bit of a stretch.

"Look, turkey," Dominic gasped out, "I just have to run faster than my subjects."

"Afghanistan would've killed your ass." Brian was running backward now, the better to observe his struggling brother.

"Probably," Dominic admitted. "But Afghans don't rob banks in Alabama and New Jersey." Dominic had never in his life traded toughness to his brother, but clearly the Marines had made him maintain greater fitness than the FBI did. But how good was he with a pistol? At last it was over, and he walked back toward the plantation house.

"Do we pass?" Brian asked Alexander on the way in.

"Easy, both of you. This isn't Ranger School, guys. We don't expect you to try out for the Olympics team, but, out in the field, running away is a nice ability to have."

"At Quantico, Gunny Honey liked to say that," Brian agreed.

"Who?" Dominic asked.

"Nicholas Honey, Master Gunnery Sergeant, United States Marine Corps, and, yeah, he probably took a lot of razzing because of his name—but probably not from the same guy twice. He was one of the instructors at the Basic School. They also called him 'Nick the Prick,'" Brian said, grabbing a towel and tossing it to his brother. "He's one

bad-ass Marine. But he said that running away is the one skill an infantryman needs."

"Did you?" Dominic asked.

"I've only seen combat once, and that was just for a couple of months. Mostly, we were looking down at mountain goats who had heart attacks from climbing those fucking hills."

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse." Alexander joined in. "But fighting wars is for kids, not sensible adults. You see, Agent Caruso, out in the weeds you also wear sixty-five pounds on your back."

"That must be fun," Dominic said to his brother, not without respect.

"Big time. Okay, Pete, what other pleasant things are on the plan of the day?"

"Get cleaned up first," Alexander advised. Now that he was certain that both were in reasonable physical shape—though he'd had little doubt of that, and it wasn't all *that* important anyway, despite what he'd said—they could look into the hard stuff. The important stuff.

"THE BUCK is going to take a hit," Jack told his new boss.

"How bad?"

"Just a scratch. The Germans are going to short the dollar against the Euro, about five hundred million worth."

"Is that a big deal?" Sam Granger asked.

"You're asking me?" Jack responded.

"That's right. You have to have an opinion. It doesn't have to be correct, but it has to make some kind of sense."

Jack Ryan, Jr., handed over the intercepts. "This guy Dieter's talking with his French counterpart. He makes it sound like a routine transaction, but the translator says the tone of his voice has some nastiness to it. I speak a little German, but not well enough for that sort of nuance," the young Ryan told his boss. "I cannot say that I understand why the Germans and French would be in any sort of conspiracy against us."

"It suits current German interests to cozy up to the French. I do not see a long-term bilateral alliance of any sort, however. Fundamentally, the French are afraid of the Germans, and the Germans look down on the French. But the French have imperial ambitions—well, they always have. Look at their relations with America. Kind of like brother and sister, age twelve or so. They love each other, but they can't get along very well. Germany and France, that's similar but more complex. The French used to kick their ass, but then the Germans got organized and kicked the French ass. And both countries have long memories. That's the curse of Europe. There's a lot of contentious

history over there, and they have trouble forgetting it."

"What does that have to do with this?" the young Ryan asked.

"Directly, nothing at all, but as background maybe the German banker wants to get close to this guy to make a future play. Maybe the Frenchman is letting him think he's getting close so that the French central bank can score points on Berlin. This is a funny game. You can't clobber your adversary too hard because then he won't play with you anymore, and, besides that, you don't go out of your way to make enemies. All in all, it's like a neighborhood poker game. If you do too well, then you make enemies, and it's a lot less fun to live there because nobody will come over to your house to play. If you're the dumbest at the table, the others will gang up on you in the nicest possible way and steal from you—not enough to hurt you but enough to tell themselves how smart they are. So what happens is that everyone plays a touch under his game, and it stays fairly friendly. Nobody over there is any farther than a general strike away from a major national liquidity crisis, and when that happens you need friends. I forgot to tell you, the central bankers regard everyone else on the continent as peasants. That can include the heads of the various governments."

"And us?"

"Americans? Oh, yeah. Meanly born, poorly educated—but exceedingly lucky—peasants."

"With big guns?" Little Jack asked.

"Yeah, peasants with guns always make the aristocracy nervous," Granger agreed, stifling a laugh. "They still have that class crap over there. They have trouble understanding how badly it holds them back in the marketplace, because the big shots rarely come up with a really new idea. But that's not our problem."

Oderint dum metuant, Jack thought. One of the few things he remembered from Latin. Supposedly the personal motto of the Emperor Gaius Caligula: *Let them hate so long as they fear.* Hadn't civilization advanced any further than that in the past two millennia?

"What is our problem?" he asked.

Granger shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way. They don't like us much—they never have liked us, really—but at the same time they can't live without us. Some of them are starting to think they can, after the death of the Soviet Union, but if they ever try reality will bite them on the ass hard enough to draw blood. Don't confuse the thoughts of the aristocracy with those of the people. That's the problem with them. They really do think that people follow their lead, but they don't. They follow their own wallets, and the average guy in the street will figure things out all by himself if he has enough time to think it through."

"So, The Campus just makes money off their fantasy world?"

"You got it. You know, I hate soap operas. Do you know why I hate them?" He got a blank look. "Jack, it's because they reflect reality so precisely. Real life, even at this level, is full of petty bullshit and egos. It isn't love that makes the world go 'round. It isn't even money. It's bullshit."

"Hey, I've heard cynicism in my time, but—"

"Granger cut him off with a raised hand. "Not cynicism. Human nature. The one thing that hasn't changed in ten thousand years of recorded history. I wonder if it ever will. Oh, sure, there's the good part of human nature, too: nobility, charity, self-sacrifice, even courage in some cases—and love. Love counts. It counts a lot. But along with it comes envy, covetousness, greed, all the seven deadly sins. Maybe Jesus knew what He was talking about, eh?"

"Is this philosophy or theology?" *I thought this was supposed to be the intelligence business,* the young Ryan thought.

"I turn fifty next week. Too soon old and too late smart. Some cowboy said that a hundred or so years ago." Granger smiled. "Problem is, you're too damned old when you realize it to be able to do anything about it."

"What would you do, start a new religion?"

Granger had himself a good laugh as he turned to refill his coffee cup from his personal Gevalia machine. "No, none of the bushes around my house burn. The trouble with thinking deep thoughts is that you still have to cut the grass, and put food on the table. And, in our case, protect our country."

"So, what do we do about this German thing?"

Granger gave the intercept another look and thought for a second. "Nothing, not right now, but we remember that Dieter has earned a point or two with Claude, which he may cash in on in six months or so. The Euro is still too new to see how it's going to play out. The French think that the financial leadership of Europe will slide to Paris. The Germans think it'll go to Berlin. In fact, it'll go to the country with the strongest economy, the most efficient workforce. That won't be France. They have pretty good engineers, but their population isn't as well organized as the Germans are. If I had to bet, I'd bet on Berlin."

"The French won't like that."

"That's a fact, Jack. That's a fact," Granger repeated. "What the hell. The French have nukes, and the Germans don't—for now, anyway."

"You serious?" the young Ryan demanded.

A smile. "No."

"THEY TAUGHT us some of that at Quantico," Dominic said. They were in a medium-sized shopping mall that catered to the college

crowd due to the proximity of UVA.

"What did they say?" Brian asked.

"Don't stay in the same place relative to your subject. Try to alter your appearance—sunglasses, like that. Wigs if they're available. Reversible jackets. Don't stare at him, but don't turn away if he looks at you. It's a lot better if it's more than one agent on a target. One man can't track a trained adversary for very long without being made. A trained subject is hard to tail under the best of circumstances. That's why the big offices have the SSGs, Special Surveillance Groups. They're FBI employees, but they're not sworn, and they don't carry guns. Some guys call them the Baker Street Irregulars, as in Sherlock Holmes. They look like anything except a cop, street people—bums—workers in coveralls. They can be dirty. They can be panhandlers. I met some at the New York Field Office once, they work OC and FCI—organized crime and foreign counterintelligence. They're pros, but they're the most unlikely-looking damn pros you ever want to meet."

"Hardworking people like that?" Brian asked his brother. "Surveillance, I mean."

"Never tried it myself, but from what I've heard, it takes a lot of manpower, like fifteen or twenty, to work one subject, plus cars, plus aircraft—and a really good bad guy can outfox us even then. The Russians especially. Those bastards are trained pretty well."

"So, what the hell are we supposed to do?" Captain Caruso asked.

"Just learn the basics," Alexander told them. "See the woman over there with the red sweater?"

"Long dark hair?" Brian asked.

"That's the one," Pete confirmed. "Determine what she buys, what sort of car she drives, and where she lives."

"Just the two of us?" Dominic demanded. "You're not asking much, are you?"

"Did I tell you this was easy work?" Alexander asked innocently. He handed over two radios. "The earpieces go in your ears, and the microphones clip to your collars. Range is about three kilometers. You both have your car keys." And with that he walked away, toward an Eddie Bauer store to buy himself a pair of shorts.

"Welcome to the shit, Enzo," Brian said.

"At least he gave us a mission brief."

"It was brief, all right."

Their subject had walked into an Ann Taylor store. They both headed down that way, each getting a large cup of coffee at the Starbucks as a jackleg disguise.

"Don't throw the cup away," Dominic told his brother.

"Why?" Brian asked.

"In case you gotta take a piss. The perversity of the world has a way

of impinging on your carefully made plans in situations like this. That's a practical lesson from a class at the Academy."

Brian didn't comment, but it seemed sensible enough. One at a time they donned their radios and made sure they worked properly.

"Aldo to Enzo, over," Brian called on Channel 6.

"Enzo copies, bro. Let's switch off on visual surveillance, but we'll stay within sight of each other, okay?"

"Makes sense. Okay, I'll head toward the store."

"Ten-four. That's roger to you, bro." Dominic turned to see his brother draw off. Then he settled down to sipping his coffee and looking off the subject—never directly at her, but about 20 degrees to the side.

"What's she up to?" Aldo asked.

"Picking a blouse, looks like." The subject was thirty or so, with shoulder-length brown hair, fairly attractive, wearing a wedding band but no diamond, and a cheap gold-colored necklace probably purchased at Wal-Mart on the other side of the road. Peach-colored blouse/shirt. Pants rather than a skirt, black in color, black flat "sensible" shoes. Fairly large purse. Did not appear overly alert to her surroundings, which was good. She appeared to be alone. She finally settled on a blouse, white silk by the look of it, paid for it with a credit card, and walked out of Ann Taylor.

"Subject is moving, Aldo."

Seventy yards away, Brian's head perked up and turned directly toward his brother. "Talk to me, Enzo."

Dominic raised his coffee cup as though to take a drink. "Turning left, coming your way. You can take over in a minute or so."

"Ten-four, Enzo."

They'd parked their cars on opposite sides of the shopping mall. That turned out to be a good thing, as their subject turned right and headed for the door out to the parking lot.

"Aldo, get close enough to make her tag," Dominic ordered.

"What?"

"Read her tag number to me, and describe the car. I'm heading for my car."

"Okay, roger that, bro."

Dominic didn't run to his car, but he walked as fast as circumstances allowed. He got in, started the engine, and lowered all his windows.

"Enzo to Aldo, over."

"Okay, she's driving a dark green Volvo station wagon, Virginia tag Whiskey Kilo Romeo Six One Niner. Alone in the car, starting up, turning north. I'm on the way to my wheels."

"Roger that. Enzo is in pursuit." He got around the Sears

department store that anchored the east end of the mall as quickly as traffic allowed, and reached in his coat pocket for his cell phone. And called information to get the number of the Charlottesville FBI office, which the phone company dialed for him for an additional charge of fifty cents. “Heads up, this is Special Agent Dominic Caruso. My creed-o number is one six five eight two one. I need a tag number run, right now, Whiskey Kilo Romeo Six One Niner.”

Whoever was on the other end of the phone typed his credentials number into a computer and verified Dominic’s identity.

“What are you doing this far from Birmingham, Mr. Caruso?”

“No time for that. Please run the tag.”

“Roger, okay, it’s a Volvo, green in color, a year old, registered to Edward and Michelle Peters, at Six Riding Hood Court, Charlottesville. That’s just inside the city line on the west side of town. Anything else? Do you need backup?”

“Negative. Thank you, I can handle it from here. Caruso out.” He killed his cell phone and relayed the address to his brother over the radio. Both then did the same thing, and entered the address into their navigation computers.

“This is cheating,” Brian observed, smiling as he did so.

“Good guys don’t cheat, Aldo. They just get the job done. Okay, I have eyeballs on the subject. She’s heading west on Shady Branch Road. Where are you?”

“About five hundred yards back of you—shit! I have a red light.”

“Okay, sit it out. Looks like she’s heading home, and we know where that is.” Dominic closed his target to within a hundred yards, keeping a pickup truck between himself and the subject car. He’d rarely done this sort of thing before, and he was surprised at how tense it was.

“PREPARE TO TURN RIGHT IN FIVE HUNDRED FEET,” the computer told him.

“Thanks, honey,” Dominic grumbled.

But then the Volvo turned at the corner suggested by the computer. So, it wasn’t so bad after all, was it? Dominic took a breath and settled down some.

“Okay, Brian, looks like she’s going right home. Just follow me in,” he said over the radio.

“Roger, following you in. Any idea who this broad is?”

“Michelle Peters, so says the DMV.” The Volvo turned left, then right, into a cul-de-sac, where it pulled into a driveway that ended at a two-car garage attached to a medium-sized house of two stories and white aluminum siding. He parked his car a hundred yards up the street and took a sip of his coffee. Brian showed up thirty seconds later, doing the same half a block up.

“See the car?” Dominic called.

“That’s affirmative, Enzo.” The Marine paused. “Now what do we do?”

“You come on down for a cup of my coffee,” a female voice suggested. “I’m the broad in the Volvo,” the voice clarified.

“Oh, shit,” Dominic whispered away from the microphone. He got out of his Mercedes and waved to his brother to do the same.

Upon joining up, the Caruso brothers walked to 6 Riding Hood Court. The door opened as they came up the driveway.

“Set up all the way,” Dominic said quietly. “Should have figured that one out from the beginning.”

“Yep. Color us dumb,” Brian thought.

“Not really,” Mrs. Peters said from the door. “But getting my address from the DMV really was cheating, you know.”

“Nobody told us anything about rules, ma’am,” Dominic told her.

“There aren’t any—not very often, anyway, not in this business.”

“So, you listened in on the radio circuit the whole time?” Brian asked.

She nodded as she led them to the kitchen. “That’s right. The radios are encrypted. Nobody else knew what you were talking about. How do you boys like your coffee?”

“So, you spotted us all the way?” This was Dominic.

“Actually, no. I didn’t use the radios to cheat—well, not all that much.” She had an engaging smile, which helped to soften the blows to her visitors’ egos. “You’re Enzo, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You were a little close, but only a really sharp-eyed target would have noticed, given the limited time frame. The make of the car helped. A lot of those little Benzes in this area. But the best choice of car would be a pickup—a dirty one. A lot of the yokels *never* wash them, and some of the academics at the school have adopted the same sort of behavior to fit in, like. Out on Interstate 64, well, you’d better have an aircraft, of course, and a Porta-Potti. Discreet surveillance can be the toughest job in the business. But now you boys know that.”

Then the door opened and Pete Alexander came in. “How’d they do?” he asked Michelle.

“I’ll give them a B.”

And suddenly Dominic thought that was generous.

“And forget what I said before—calling the FBI to get a DMV on me was pretty smart.”

“Not cheating?” Brian asked.

Alexander took that one. “The only rule is to accomplish the mission without being compromised. We don’t tally up style points at The Campus.”

"Just body count," Mrs. Peters confirmed, to Alexander's evident annoyance.

That was enough to make Brian's stomach contract a little. "Uh, guys, I know I've asked it before, but what exactly *are* we training for?" Dominic leaned in visibly as well.

"Patience, fellas," Pete cautioned.

"Okay." Dominic nodded submission. "I'll give you that this time." But not too much longer, he didn't have to add.

"SO, YOU'RE not going to exploit this?" Jack asked at closing time.

"We could, but it's not really worth the time. We'd only turn a couple of hundred thousand at best, probably not that much. But you did okay spotting it," Granger allowed.

"How much message traffic like this comes through here on a weekly basis?"

"One or two, four in a really busy week."

"And how many plays do you make?" Junior asked.

"One in five. We do so carefully, but even so, we always run the risk of being noticed. If the Europeans saw that we were outguessing them too much, then they'd look into how we were doing it—they'd probably shake down their own people, looking for a human leaker. That's how they think over there. It's a big place for conspiracy theory, you see, because of the way they operate themselves. But the game they play regularly sort of militates against it."

"What else do you look into?"

"Starting next week, you'll have access to the secure accounts—people call them numbered accounts because they're supposedly identified by code numbers. Now it's mainly code words, because of computer technology. They probably picked that up from the intelligence community. They often hire spooks to look after their security—but not good ones. The good ones stay away from money-management businesses, mainly out of snobbery. It's not important enough for a senior spook," Granger explained.

"The 'secured' accounts, do they identify the owners?" Jack asked.

"Not always. Sometimes it's all done via code word, though sometimes the banks have internal memoranda that we can tap into. Not always, though, and the bankers never speculate internally about their clients—at least not in written form. I'm sure they chat back and forth over lunch, but you know, a lot of them, they really don't care very much about where the money comes from. Dead Jews in Auschwitz, some Mafia capo in Brooklyn—it's all money fresh off the presses."

"But if you turned this over to the FBI—"

"We can't, because it's illegal, and we don't, because then we'd lose

a way to track the bastards and their money. On the legal side, there's more than one jurisdiction, and for some of the European countries—well, banking is a big moneymaker, and no government ever turns its back on tax revenue. The dog doesn't bite anybody in their backyard. What it does down the block, they don't care about."

"I wonder what Dad thinks of that?"

"Not much, I'll bet," Granger opined.

"Not hardly," Jack agreed. "So, you track the secured accounts to follow the bad guys and their money?"

"That's the idea. It's a lot harder than you might imagine, but when you score, you score big."

"So, I'm going to be a bird dog?"

"That's right. If you're good enough," Granger added.

MOHAMMED WAS almost directly overhead at that moment. The Great Circle Route from Mexico City to London passed close enough to Washington, D.C., for him to look down from thirty-seven thousand feet and see the American capital laid out like a paper map. Now, were he a member of the Department of Martyrdom, he might have climbed the spiral stairs to the upper level and used a gun to kill the flight crew and dive the aircraft . . . but that had been done before, and now the cockpit doors were protected, and there might well be an armed policeman up there in business class to spoil the show. Worse yet, an armed soldier in civilian clothes. Mohammed had little respect for police officers, but he'd learned the hard way not to disregard Western soldiers. However, he was not a member of the Department of Martyrdom, much as he admired those Holy Warriors. His ability to seek out information made him too valuable to be thrown away in such a noble gesture. That was good, and that was bad, but good or bad, it was a fact, and he lived in the world of facts. He would meet Allah and enter Paradise at the time written by God's Own Hand in God's Own Book. For the moment, he had another six and a half more hours of confinement in this seat.

"More wine, sir?" the pink-faced stewardess asked. What a prize she might be in Paradise . . .

"Ah, yes, thank you," he replied in his best Cambridge English. It was contrary to Islam, but not to drink would look suspicious, he thought again, and his mission was much too important to risk. Or, at least, so he often told himself, Mohammed admitted to himself, with a minor chink in his conscience. He soon tossed off the drink and then adjusted the seat controls. Wine might be contrary to the laws of Islam, but it did help one sleep.

"MICHELLE SAYS the twins are competent for beginners," Rick Bell

told his boss.

"The tracking exercise?" Hendley asked.

"Yeah." He didn't have to say that a proper training exercise would have entailed eight to ten cars, two aircraft, and a total of twenty agents, but The Campus didn't have anything approaching those assets. Instead, it had a wider latitude in dealing with its subjects, a fact which had advantages and disadvantages. "Alexander seems to like them. He says they're bright enough, and they have mental agility."

"Good to know. Anything else happening?"

"Rick Pasternak has something new, he says."

"What might that be?" Gerry asked.

"It's a variant on succinylcholine, a synthetic version of curare, shuts down the skeletal muscles almost immediately. You collapse and can't breathe. He says it would be a miserable death, like taking a bayonet through the chest."

"Traceable?" Hendley asked.

"That is the good news. Esterases in the body break the drug down rapidly into acetylcholine, so it is also likely to be undetectable, unless the target happens to croak right outside a primo medical center with a very sharp pathologist who is looking for something out of the ordinary. The Russians looked at it—would you believe it, back in the 1970s. They were thinking about battlefield applications, but it proved to be impractical. It's surprising KGB didn't make use of it. It'll look like a big-time myocardial infarction, even on a marble slab an hour later."

"How'd he get it?"

"A Russian colleague was visiting with him at Columbia. Turned out he was Jewish and Rick got him talking. He talked enough that Rick developed a delivery system right there in his lab. It's being perfected right now."

"You know, it's amazing that the Mafia never figured it out. If you want somebody killed, you hire a doc."

"Goes against the old school tie for most of them." But most of them didn't have a brother at Cantor Fitzgerald who'd ridden the ninety-seventh floor down to sea level one Tuesday morning.

"Is this variant better than what we have already?"

"Better than what anyone has, Gerry. He says it's almost a hundred percent reliable if used properly."

"Expensive?"

Bell shook his head. "Not hardly."

"It's tested, it really works?"

"Rick says it killed six dogs—all big ones—pretty as you please."

"Okay, approved."

"Roger that, boss. Ought to have them in two weeks."

"What's happening out there?"

"We don't know," Bell admitted with downcast eyes. "One of the guys at Langley is saying in his memos that maybe we hurt them badly enough to slow them down, if not shut them down, but I get nervous when I read stuff like that. Like the 'there's no top to this market' shit that you get before the bottom falls out. *Hubris ante nemesis.* Fort Meade can't track them on the 'Net, but maybe that means they're just getting a little smarter. There's a lot of good encryption programs out on the market, and two of them NSA hasn't cracked yet—at least, not reliably. They're working on that one a couple of hours every day with their big mainframes. As you always say, Gerry, the smartest programmers don't work for Uncle anymore —"

"—they develop video games." Hendley finished the sentence. The government had never paid people well enough to attract the best—and that would never be fixed. "So, just an itchy nose?"

Rick nodded. "Until they're dead, in the ground, with a wood stake through the heart, I'm going to worry about them."

"Kinda hard to get them all, Rick."

"Sure as hell." Even their personal Dr. Death at Columbia couldn't help with that.

CHAPTER 6

ADVERSARIES

THE 747-400 touched down gently at Heathrow five minutes early at 12:55 P.M. Like most of the passengers, Mohammed was all too eager to get out of the Boeing wide-body. He cycled through passport control, smiling politely, availed himself of a washroom, and, feeling somewhat human again, walked to the Air France departure lounge for his connecting flight to Nice. It was ninety minutes to departure time, and then ninety minutes to his destination. In the cab, he demonstrated the sort of French that one might learn in a British university. The cab driver corrected him only twice, and on checking in to the hotel he surrendered his British passport—reluctantly, but the passport was a secure document which he'd used many times. The bar-code strip found on the inside of the cover page of the new passports troubled him. His didn't have that feature, but when it expired in another two years he'd have to worry about some computer tracking him wherever he went. Well, he had three solid and secure British identities, and it was just a matter of getting passports for all three of them, and keeping a very low profile so that no British police constable would check into those identities. No cover could ever stand up to even a casual investigation, much less an in-depth one, and that bar code could someday mean that the immigration officer would get a flashing light on his panel, which would be followed by the appearance of a policeman or two. The infidels were making things hard on the faithful, but that was what infidels did.

The hotel did not have air-conditioning, but the windows could be opened, and the ocean breeze was pleasant. Mohammed hooked up his computer to the phone on the desk. Then the bed beckoned him, and he succumbed to its call. As much as he traveled, he had not found a cure for jet lag. For the next couple of days, he'd live on cigarettes and coffee until his body clock decided that it knew where he was at the moment. He checked his watch. The man meeting him would not be there for another four hours, which, Mohammed thought, was decent of him. He'd be eating dinner when his body would be expecting breakfast. Cigarettes and coffee.

IT *WAS* breakfast time in Colombia. Pablo and Ernesto both preferred the Anglo-American version, with bacon or ham and eggs, and the excellent local coffee.

"So, do we cooperate with that towel-headed thug?" Ernesto asked.

"I don't see why not," Pablo replied, stirring cream into his cup. "We will make a great deal of money, and the opportunity to create chaos within the house of the *norteamericanos* will serve our interests well. It will set their border guards to looking at people rather than at container boxes, and it will not do any harm to us, either directly or indirectly."

"What if one of these Muslims is taken alive and made to talk?"

"Talk about what? Who will they meet, except some Mexican *coyotes*?" Pablo asked in reply.

"*Sí,* there is that," Ernesto agreed. "You must think me a frightened old woman."

"*Jefe,* the last man who thought that of you is long dead." That earned Pablo a grunt and a crooked smile.

"Yes, that is true, but only a fool is not cautious when the police forces of *two* nations pursue him."

"So, *jefe,* we give them others to pursue, do we not?" This was potentially a dangerous game he was entering into, Ernesto thought. Yes, he'd be making a deal with allies of convenience, but he was not so much cooperating with them as making use of them, creating straw men for the Americans to seek after and kill. But these fanatics didn't *mind* being killed, did they? They *sought after* death. And so, by making use of them, he was really doing *them* a service, wasn't he? He could even—very carefully—betray them to the *norteamericanos* and not incur their wrath. And besides, how could these men possibly harm him? On his turf? Here in Colombia? Not likely. Not that he planned to betray them, but if he did how would they find out? If their intelligence services were all that good, they would not be needing his assistance in the first place. And if the *Yanqui*—and his *own*—governments had not been able to get to him here in Colombia, how could these people?

"Pablo, how exactly will you communicate with this fellow?"

"Via computer. He has several e-mail addresses, all with European service providers."

"Very well. Tell him, yes, it is approved by the council." Not too many people knew that Ernesto *was* the council.

"Muy bien, jefe." And Pablo went to his laptop. His message went out in less than a minute. Pablo knew his computers. Most international criminals and terrorists did.

IT WAS in the third line of the e-mail: "And, Juan, Maria is pregnant.

She's having twins." Both Mohammed and Pablo had the best encryption programs commercially available—programs which, the vendors said, could not be cracked by anyone. But Mohammed believed in that as much as he believed in Santa Claus. All those companies lived in the West, and owed allegiance to their own homelands and to no other. Moreover, using programs like this only highlighted his e-mails for whichever watcher programs were being used by the National Security Agency, British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and French Director General Security Exterior (DGSE). Not to mention whatever additional unknown agencies might be tapping into international communications, legally or not, none of whom had any love for him and his colleagues. The Israeli Mossad would certainly pay a lot to have his head atop a pike, even though they didn't—couldn't—know of his role in the elimination of David Greengold.

He and Pablo had arranged a code, innocent phrases that could mean anything, which could be couriered around the world to cutouts who would then deliver them. Their electronic accounts were paid by anonymous credit cards, and the accounts themselves were in large and completely reputable Europe-based Internet Service Providers. In its way, the Internet was as effective as Swiss banking laws in terms of anonymity. And too many e-mail messages transited the ether every day for anyone to screen them all, even with computer assistance. As long as he didn't use any easily predicted buzzwords, his messages should be secure, Mohammed judged.

So, the Colombians would cooperate—Maria was pregnant. And she was having twins—the operation could begin at once. He would tell his guest this evening over dinner, and the process would begin immediately. The news was even worth a glass of wine or two, in anticipation of the merciful forgiveness of Allah.

THE PROBLEM with the morning run was that it was more boring than the society page of an Arkansas newspaper—but it had to be done, and each of the brothers used the time to think . . . mainly about how boring it was. It only took half an hour. Dominic was thinking about getting a small portable radio, but he'd never do it. He never managed to think about such things when he was in a shopping mall. And his brother probably enjoyed this crap. Being in the Marines had to be bad for you.

Then came breakfast.

"So, boys, are we all awake?" said Pete Alexander.

"How come you don't break a sweat in the morning?" Brian asked. The Marines had many inside stories about the Special Forces, none of them complimentary and few of them accurate.

"There are some advantages to getting old," the training officer replied. "One of them is taking it easy on the knees."

"Fine. What's today's lesson plan?" *You lazy bastard,* the captain didn't add. "When are we getting those computers?"

"Pretty soon."

"You said the encryption security is pretty good," Dominic said. "How good is 'pretty good'?"

"NSA can crack it, if they direct their mainframes to it for a week or so and brute-force it. They can crack anything, given the time to apply. Most commercial systems they can already break. They have an arrangement with most of the programmers," he explained. "And they play ball . . . in return for some NSA algorithms. Other countries could do it, too, but it requires a lot of expertise to understand cryptology fully, and few people have the resources or time to acquire it. So, a commercial program can make it hard, but not too hard if you have the source code. That's why our adversaries try to relay messages in face-to-face meetings, or use codes instead of ciphers, but since that is so time-inefficient they're gradually getting away from it. When they have time-urgent material to transfer, we can often crack it."

"How many messages going across the 'Net?" Dominic asked.

Alexander let out a breath. "*That's* the hard part. There're billions of them, and the programs we have to sweep them aren't good enough yet. Probably never will be. The trick is to ID the address of the target and key in on that. It takes time, but most bad guys are lazy about how they log on to the system—and it's hard to keep track of a bunch of different identities. These guys are not supermen, and they don't have microchips wired into their heads. So, when we get a computer belonging to a bad guy, the first thing we do is print up his address book. That's like striking gold. Even though they can sometimes transmit gibberish, which can cause Fort Meade to spend hours—even days—trying to crack something that isn't supposed to make any sense. The pros used to do that by sending names from the Riga phone book. It's gibberish in every language *but* Latvian. No, the biggest problem is linguists. We don't have enough Arab speakers. It's something they're working on out at Monterey, and at some universities. There are a lot of Arab college students on the payroll right now. Not at The Campus, though. The good news for *us* is that we get the translations from NSA. We don't need much in the way of linguistics."

"So, we're not here to gather intelligence, are we?" Brian asked. Dominic had already figured that one out.

"No. What you can scare up, fine, we'll find a way to make use of it, but our job is to act upon intelligence, not to accumulate it."

"Okay, so we're back to the original question," Dominic observed.

“What the hell is the mission?”

“What do you think it is?” Alexander asked.

“I think it’s something Mr. Hoover would not have been happy about.”

“Correct. He was a nasty son of a bitch, but he was a stickler for civil rights. We at The Campus are not.”

“Keep talking,” Brian suggested.

“Our job is to act upon intelligence information. To take decisive action.”

“Isn’t the term for that ‘executive action’?”

“Only in the movies,” Alexander replied.

“Why us?” Dominic asked.

“Look, the fact of the matter is that CIA is a government organization. A whole lot of chiefs and not enough Indians. How many government agencies encourage people to put their necks on the line?” he asked. “Even if you do it successfully, the lawyers and accountants nibble you to death like ducks. So, if somebody needs to depart this mortal coil, the authorization has to come from up the line, up the chain of command. Gradually—well, not all that gradually—the decisions went to the Big Boss in the West Wing. And not many presidents want that sheet of paper to turn up in their personal archives, where some historian might find it and do an exposé. So, we got away from that sort of thing.”

“And there are not many problems that can’t be solved by a single .45 bullet at the right time and place,” Brian said like a good Marine.

Pete nodded again. “Correct.”

“So, we are talking political assassination? That could be dangerous,” Dominic observed.

“No, that has too many political ramifications. That sort of thing hasn’t happened in centuries, and not very often even then. However, there are people out there who rather urgently need to meet God. And sometimes, it’s up to us to arrange the rendezvous.”

“Damn.” This was Dominic.

“Wait a minute. Who authorizes this?” Major Caruso asked.

“We do.”

“Not the President?”

A shake of the head. “No. As I said before, there aren’t too many Presidents with the stones to say yes to something like that. They worry too much about the newspapers.”

“But what about the law?” Special Agent Caruso asked, predictably.

“The law is, as I’ve heard one of you once say, so memorably, if you want to kick a tiger in his ass, you’d better have a plan for dealing with his teeth. You guys will be the teeth.”

“Just us?” Brian wondered.

"No, not just you, but what others there might or might not be, you do not need to know."

"Shit . . ." Brian sat back in his chair.

"Who set this place—The Campus—up?"

"Somebody important. It's got deniable authorization. The Campus has no ties to the government at all. None," Alexander emphasized.

"So, we'll be shooting people technically on our own?"

"Not much shooting. We have other methods. You will probably not be using firearms much. They're too hard to move around, with airports and all."

"In the field naked?" Dominic asked. "No cover at all?"

"You will have a good cover legend, but no diplomatic protection of any kind. You will live by your wits. No foreign intelligence service will have any way of finding you. The Campus does not exist. It's not on the federal budget, even the black part. So, nobody can trace any money to us. That's how it's done, of course. That's one of the ways we have of tracking people. Your cover will be as international businessmen, bankers and investment stuff. You'll be educated in all the terminology so that you can carry on a conversation on an airplane, for example. Such people don't talk much about what they're up to, to keep their business secrets close. So, if you're not overly talkative, it will not be seen as unusual."

"Secret Agent Man . . ." Brian said quietly.

"We pick people who can think on their feet, who are self-starters, and who don't faint at the sight of blood. Both of you have killed people out in the real world. In both of your cases, you were faced with the unexpected, and both of you handled the situation efficiently. Neither of you had any regrets. That will be your job."

"What about protection for us?" The FBI agent again.

"There's a get-out-of-jail-free card for both of you."

"My ass," Dominic said again. "There isn't any such thing."

"A signed presidential pardon," Alexander clarified.

Fuck . . . Brian thought for a second. "It was Uncle Jack, wasn't it?"

"I can't answer that, but if you wish you can see your pardons before you go into the field." Alexander set down his coffee cup. "Okay, gentlemen. You'll have a few days to think this one over, but you'll have to make your decisions. This is not a small thing I'm asking of you. It's not going to be a fun job, nor will it be easy or pleasant, but it will be a job which will serve the interests of your country. It's a dangerous world out there. Some people need to be dealt with directly."

"And if we whack the wrong guy?"

"Dominic, there is that possibility, but, no matter who it is, I can promise you that you will not be asked to kill Mother Teresa's little

brother. We're pretty careful about who we target. You'll know who it is, plus how and why we need to deal with him or her before we send you out."

"Kill women?" Brian asked. That was not part of the Marine ethos.

"It's never happened, as far as I know, but it's a theoretical possibility. So, if that's enough for breakfast, you guys need to think it over."

"Jesus," Brian said after Alexander left the room. "What's lunch going to be like?"

"Surprised?"

"Not completely, Enzo, but the way he just said it like that..."

"Hey, bro, how many times have you wondered why we couldn't simply take care of business ourselves?"

"You're the cop, Enzo. *You're* the guy who's supposed to say *Oh, shit,* remember?"

"Yeah, but that shoot of mine in Alabama—well, I kinda stepped a little over the line some, y'know? All the way driving to D.C., I thought over how I'd explain it to Gus Werner. But he didn't blink even a little."

"So, what do you think?"

"Aldo, I'm willing to listen some more. There's a saying in Texas that there's more men need killin' than horses need stealin'."

The reversal of roles struck Brian as more than a little surprising. After all, he was the gung ho Marine. Enzo was the guy who was trained to give people their constitutional rights before he slapped the cuffs on.

That they were both able to take a life without having bad dreams later was obvious to the brothers, but this went a little farther than that. This was premeditated murder. Brian usually went into the field with an exquisitely trained sniper under his command, and he knew what they did wasn't far removed from murder, either. But being in uniform made it different. It put some sort of blessing on it. The target was an enemy, and on the battlefield it was everyone's job to look after his own life, and if he failed to do it, well, that was his failing, not that of the man who killed him. But this would be more than that. They'd be hunting individual people down with the deliberate intent of killing them, and that wasn't what he'd been brought up and trained to do. He'd be dressed in civilian clothes—and killing people under those circumstances made him a *spy,* not an officer of the United States Marine Corps. There was honor in the latter, but damned little in the former, or so he'd been trained to think. The world no longer had a Field of Honor, and real life wasn't a duel in which men had identical weapons and an open field on which to make use of them. No, he'd been trained to plan his operations in a way that

gave his enemy no chance at all, because he had men under his command whose lives he was sworn to preserve. Combat had rules. Harsh rules, to be sure, but rules even so. Now he was being asked to set those rules aside and become—what? A paid assassin? The teeth of some notional wild beast? The masked avenger from some old movie on Nick at Nite? This didn't fit into his tidy picture of the real world.

When he'd been sent to Afghanistan, he hadn't—hadn't what? He hadn't disguised himself as a fishmonger on a city street. There'd been no city street in those goddamned mountains. It had been more like a big-game hunt, one in which the game had weapons of its own. And there was honor in such a hunt, and for his efforts he'd gotten the approval of his country: a combat decoration for bravery that he might or might not display.

All in all, it was a lot to consider over his second cup of morning coffee.

"Jesus, Enzo," he breathed.

"Brian, you know what the dream of every cop is?" Dominic asked.

"To break the law and get away with it?"

Dominic shook his head. "I had this talk with Gus Werner. No, not to break the law, but just once to *be* the law. To be God's Own Avenging Sword, was the way he put it—to strike down the guilty without lawyers and other bullshit to get in the way, to see justice done all by yourself. It doesn't happen very often, they say, but, you know, I got to do it down in Alabama, and it felt pretty good. You just have to be sure you're bagging the right mutt."

"How can you be sure?" Aldo asked.

"If you're not, you back off the mission. They can't hang you for *not* committing murder, bro."

"So, it is murder?"

"Not if the mutt has it coming, it isn't." It was an aesthetic point, but an important one to someone who had already committed murder under the shelter of the law, and had had no bad dreams about it.

"IMMEDIATELY?"

"Yes. How many men do we have already?" Mohammed asked.

"Sixteen."

"Ah." Mohammed took a sip of a fine French white from the Loire Valley. His guest was drinking Perrier and lemon. "Their language skills?"

"Sufficient, we think."

"Excellent. Tell them to make preparations to travel. We'll fly them in to Mexico. There they will meet with our new friends, and travel to America. And once there, they can do their work."

"Insh'Allah," he observed. God willing.

"Yes, God willing," Mohammed said in English, reminding his guest of what language he should be using.

They were in a sidewalk restaurant overlooking the river, off to one side, with no one nearby. Both men spoke normally, two well-dressed men over a friendly dinner, not huddled or conspiratorial in their demeanor. This took some amount of concentration, since some degree of conspiratorial posture came naturally to what they were doing. But neither of them was a stranger to such meetings.

"So, how was it to kill the Jew in Rome?"

"It was very satisfactory, Ibrahim, to feel his body go slack as I cut his spine, and then the surprised look on his face."

Ibrahim smiled broadly. It wasn't every day they got to kill a Mossad officer, much less a Station Chief. The Israelis would always be their most hated enemies, if not the most dangerous. "God was good to us that day."

The Greengold mission had been a recreational exercise for Mohammed. It hadn't even been strictly necessary. Setting up the meet and feeding the Israeli juicy information had been . . . fun. Not terribly difficult, even. Though it would not soon be repeated. No, Mossad would not let any of its officers do anything without overwatch for some time. They were not fools, and they *did* learn from their mistakes. But killing a tiger had satisfactions all its own. A pity he had no pelt. But where would he hang it? He had no fixed home anymore, only a collection of safe houses that might or might not be totally safe. But you couldn't worry about everything. You'd never get anything done. Mohammed and his colleagues didn't fear death, only failure. And they had no plans to fail.

"I need the meeting arrangements and so forth. I can take care of travel. Arms will be provided by our new friends?"

A nod. "Correct."

"And how will our warriors enter America?"

"That is for our friends to handle. But you will send in a group of three at first, to make sure the arrangements are satisfactorily secure."

"Of course." They knew all about operational security. There had been many lessons, none of them gentle. Members of his organization peopled many prisons around the world, those who were unlucky enough to have avoided death. That was a problem, one which his organization had never been able to fix. To die in action, that was noble and courageous. To be caught by a policeman like a common criminal was ignoble and humiliating, but somehow his men found it preferable to die without accomplishing a mission. And Western prisons were not all that terrible for many of his colleagues. Confining, perhaps, but at least the food was regular, and Western nations did not violate their dietary rules.

These nations were so weak and foolish regarding their enemies, they showed mercy to those who gave them none in return. But that was not Mohammed's fault.

"DAMN," Jack said. It was his first day on the "black" side of the house. His training in high finance had gone very rapidly, due to his upbringing. His grandfather Muller had taught him well during his infrequent visits to the family home. He and Jack's father were civil to each other, but Grandpa Joe thought real men worked in the trading business rather than in the dirty world of politics—though he had to admit, of course, that his son-in-law had worked out fairly well in Washington. But the money he could have made on Wall Street . . . why would any man turn away from that? Muller had never said that to Little Jack, of course, but his opinion was clear enough. In any case, Jack could have gotten an entry-level job in any of the large houses, and probably worked up the line pretty fast from there. But what mattered to him now was that he had skipped through the financial side of The Campus and was now in the Operations Department—it wasn't actually named that, but that's what it was called by its members. "They're that good?"

"What's that, Jack?"

"NSA intercept." He handed the sheet across. Tony Wills read it.

The intercept had identified a known associate of terrorists—exactly what function he performed was not known yet, but he'd been positively identified from voiceprint analysis.

"It's the digital phones. They generate a very clean signal, easy for the voiceprint computer to ID the voices. I see they haven't ID'd the other guy." Wills handed the sheet back.

The nature of the conversation was innocuous, so much so that one might wonder why the call had been placed. But some people just liked to chat on the phone. And, maybe, they were talking in code, discussing biological warfare, or a campaign to set bombs in Jerusalem. Perhaps. More likely, they were just passing the time. There was a lot of that in Saudi Arabia. What impressed Jack was that the call had been picked up and read in real time.

"Well, you know how digital phones work, right? They're always broadcasting the HERE I AM signal to the local cell, and every phone has its unique addressing code. Once we identify that code, it's just a matter of listening in when the phone rings, or the phone holder makes a call. Similarly, we can ID the number and phone of the inbound caller. The hard part is to get the identity in the first place. Now they have another phone ident for the computer to monitor."

"How many phones do they keep track of?" Jack asked.

"Just over a hundred thousand, and that's just in Southwest Asia.

Nearly all of them are dry holes, except for the one in ten thousand that counts—and sometimes they can show real results," Wills told him.

"So, to bag a cold call, a computer listens in and keys on 'hot' words?"

"Hot words and hot names. Unfortunately, so many people are named Mohammed over there—it's the most popular given name in the world. A lot of them go by patronymics or nicknames. Another problem is that there's a big market in cloned phones—they clone them in Europe, mainly London, where most of the phones have the international software. Or a guy can get six or seven phones and use them once each before tossing them. They're not dumb. They *can* get overconfident, though. Some of them end up telling us a lot of things, and occasionally it's useful. It all goes in the big NSA/CIA book, to which we have access on our terminals."

"Okay, who's this guy?"

"His name is Uda bin Sali. Rich family, close friends of the king. The big daddy's a very senior Saudi banker. He has eleven sons and nine daughters. Four wives, a man of commendable vigor. Not a bad guy, supposedly, but he's a little too doting with his kids. Gives them money instead of attention, like a Hollywood big shot. Uda here discovered Allah in a big way back in his late teens, and he's on the extreme right of the Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam. Doesn't like us very much. This boy we keep track of. He might be a gateway into their banking arrangements. His CIA file has a picture. He's about twenty-seven, five-eight, slender build, neatly trimmed beard. Flies to London a lot. Likes the ladies he can purchase by the hour. Not married yet. That's unusual, but if he's gay he conceals it well. The Brits have gotten girls into his bed. They report that he's vigorous, about what you'd expect for his age, and fairly inventive."

"Hell of a thing for a trained intelligence officer to do," Jack observed.

"Lots of services enlist the help of hookers," Wills explained. "They don't mind talking, and for the right wad of cash they'll do just about anything. Uda here likes chicken-in-a-basket. Never tried that myself. Asian specialty. Know how to call up his dossier?"

"Nobody taught me," Jack replied.

"Okay." Wills frog-walked his swivel chair over and demonstrated. "This is the general index. Your access password is SOUTHWEST 91."

Junior duly typed in the password, and the dossier came up as an Acrobat graphics file.

The first photo was probably from his passport, followed by six more, in a more informal format. Jack Jr. managed not to blush. He'd seen his share of *Playboy*s while growing up, even in Catholic schools.

Will continued the day's lesson.

"You can learn a lot from how a guy does it with women. Langley has a shrink who analyzes that in great detail. It's probably one of the annexes on this file. At Langley, it's called 'Nuts and Sluts' information. The doc is named Stefan Pizniak. Harvard Medical School professor. As I recall, he says this kid is normal in his drives, given his age, liquidity, and his social background. As you'll see, he hangs out a lot with merchant bankers in London, like a new kid learning the business. The word is that he's smart, affable, and handsome. Careful and conservative in his money work. He does not drink. So, he is somewhat religious. Doesn't flaunt it or lecture others about it, but lives in accordance with the major rules of his religion."

"What makes him a bad guy?" Jack asked.

"He talks a lot to people we know about. There's no word on who he hangs with in Saudi. We've never put any coverage on him in his own backyard. Even the Brits haven't, and they have a lot more assets in place. CIA doesn't have much, and his profile isn't high enough to merit a closer look, or so they think. It's a shame. His daddy's supposed to be a good guy. It'll break his heart to find out his son's hanging with the wrong crowd at home." With that wisdom imparted, Wills went back to his own workstation.

Junior examined the face on his computer screen. His mom was pretty good at reading people from a single look, but it was a skill she hadn't passed along to him. Jack had trouble enough figuring women out—along with most of the men in the world, he comforted himself. He continued to stare at the face, trying to read the mind of someone six thousand miles away, who spoke a different language and adhered to a different religion. What thoughts circulated behind those eyes? His father, he knew, liked the Saudis. He was especially close to Prince Ali bin Sultan, a prince and senior official in the Saudi government. Young Jack had met him, but only in passing. A beard and a sense of humor were the only two things he remembered. It was one of Jack Sr.'s core beliefs that all men were fundamentally the same, and he'd passed that opinion along to his son. But that also meant that, just as there were bad people in America, so there were also bad people elsewhere in the world, and his country had recently had some hard lessons from that sad fact. Unfortunately, the sitting President hadn't quite figured out what to do about it yet.

Junior read on through the dossier. So, this was how it began here at The Campus. He was working a case—well, kinda working some sort of case, he corrected himself. Uda bin Sali was working at being an international banker. Sure enough, he moved money around. His father's money? Jack wondered. If so, his daddy was one very wealthy son of a bitch. He played with all the big London banks—London was

still the world's banking capital. Jack would never have guessed that the National Security Agency had the sort of ability to crack this kind of thing.

A hundred million here, a hundred million there, pretty soon you were talking about real money. Sali was in the capital-preservation business, which meant not so much growing the money entrusted to him as making sure the lockbox had a really good lock. There were seventy-one subsidiary accounts, sixty-three of which were identified by bank, number, and password, so it seemed. Girls? Politics? Sports? Money management? Cars? The oil business? What did rich Saudi princelings talk about? That was a big blank spot in the files. Why didn't the Brits listen in? The interviews with his hookers hadn't revealed very much, except that he was a good tipper for those girls who'd shown him an especially good time in his house in Berkeley Square . . . an upscale part of town, Jack noted. He mainly got around by taxi. Owned a car—a black Aston Martin convertible, no less—but didn't drive it much, the British information revealed. Did *not* have a chauffeur. Went to the embassy a lot. All in all, it was a lot of information that revealed not very much. He remarked on this to Tony Wills.

"Yeah, I know, but if he turns up hinky, you can be sure there're two or three things in there that ought to have jumped off the page at you. That's the problem with this damned business. And, remember, we're seeing the processed 'take.' Some poor schlub had to take really raw data and distill it down to this. Exactly what significant facts got lost along the way? No way to tell, my boy. No way to tell."

This is what my dad used to do, Junior reminded himself. *Trying to find diamonds in a bucket full of shit.* He'd expected it to be easier, somehow. All right, so what he had to do was find money moves that were not easily explained. It was the worst sort of scut work, and he couldn't even go to his father for advice. His dad would probably have flipped out to learn that he was working here. Mom would not be overly pleased, either.

Why did that matter? Wasn't he a man now, able to do what he wanted to do with his life? Not exactly. Parents had power over you that never went away. He'd always be trying to please them, to show them that they'd raised him the right way, and that he was doing the right thing. Or something like that. His father had been lucky. They'd never learned about all the things he'd had to do. Would they have liked it?

No. They would have been upset—furious—with all the chances he'd taken with his life. And that was just the stuff his son knew about. There were a lot of blank spots in his memory, times his father hadn't been home, and Mom hadn't explained why . . . and so, now,

here he was, if not doing the same thing, then sure as hell heading in that direction . . . Well, his father had always said that the world was a crazy place, and so here he was, figuring out just how crazy it might really be.

CHAPTER 7

TRANSIT

IT STARTED in Lebanon, with a flight to Cyprus. From there, a KLM flight to Schipol Airport in the Netherlands, and from there to Paris. In France the sixteen men overnighted in eight separate hotels, taking the time to walk the streets and exercise their English—there had been little point in having them learn French, after all—and struggle with a local population that could have been more helpful. The good news, as they saw it, was that certain female French citizens went out of their way to speak decent English, and were very helpful indeed. For a fee.

They were ordinary in most details, all in their late twenties, clean-shaven, average in size and looks, but better dressed than was the average. They all concealed their unease well, albeit with lingering but furtive glances at the cops they saw—they all knew not to attract the attention of anyone in a police officer's uniform. The French police had a reputation for thoroughness which did not appeal to the new visitors. They were traveling on Qatari passports at the moment, which were fairly secure, but a passport issued from the French Foreign Minister himself would not stand up to a directed inquiry. And so they kept a low profile. They had all been briefed not to look around much, to be polite, and to make the effort to smile at everyone they encountered. Fortunately for them, it was tourist season in France, and Paris was jammed with people like them, many of whom also spoke little French, much to the bemused contempt of the Parisians, who in every case took their money anyway.

THE NEXT day's breakfast hadn't concluded with any new explosive revelations, and neither had lunch. Both Caruso brothers listened to their lessons from Pete Alexander, doing their best not to doze off, because these lessons seemed pretty straightforward.

"Boring, you think?" Pete asked over lunch.

"Well, none of it's earthshaking," Brian responded after a few seconds.

"You'll find it's a little different in a foreign city, out on the street in a market, say, looking for your subject in a crowd of a few thousand.

The important part is to be invisible. We'll work on that this afternoon. You had any experience in that, Dominic?"

"Not really. Just the basic stuff. Don't look too directly at the subject. Reversible clothes. Different ties, if you're in an environment that calls for a necktie. And you depend on others to switch off on coverage. But we won't have the same backup we have in the Bureau for a discreet surveillance, will we?"

"Not even close. So, you keep your distance until it's time to move in. At that point, you move in as quickly as circumstances allow—"

"And whack the guy?" Brian asked.

"Still uneasy about it?"

"I haven't walked out yet, Pete. Let's say I have my concerns, and leave it at that."

Alexander nodded. "Fair enough. We prefer people who know how to think, and we know that thinking carries its own penalties."

"I guess that's how you have to look at it. What if the guy we're supposed to do away with turns out to be okay?" the Marine asked.

"Then you back off and report in. It's theoretically possible that an assignment can be erroneous, but to the best of my knowledge it's never happened."

"Never?"

"Not ever, not once," Alexander assured him.

"Perfect records make me nervous."

"We try to be careful."

"What are the rules? Okay, maybe I don't need to know—right now—who sends us out to kill somebody, but it would be nice to know what the criteria are to write up some fucker's death warrant, y'know?"

"It will be someone who has, directly or indirectly, caused the death of American citizens, or is directly involved in plans to do so in the future. We're not after people who sing too loud in church or who have books overdue at the library."

"You're talking about terrorists, right?"

"Yup," Pete replied simply.

"Why not just arrest them?" Brian asked next.

"Like you did in Afghanistan?"

"That was different," the Marine protested.

"How?" Pete asked.

"Well, for one thing we were uniformed combatants operating in the field under orders from legally constituted command authority."

"You took some initiative, right?"

"Officers are supposed to use their heads. My overall mission orders came from up the chain of command, however."

"And you don't question them?"

"No. Unless they're crazy, you're not supposed to do that."

"What about when *not* doing something is crazy?" Pete asked. "What if you have a chance to take action against people who are planning to do something very destructive?"

"That's what CIA and FBI are for."

"But when they can't get the job done, for one reason or another, then what? Do you just let the bad guys move ahead with their plans and handle them afterward? That can be expensive," Alexander told him. "Our job is to do the things that are necessary when the conventional methods are unable to accomplish the mission."

"How often?" This was Dominic, seeking to protect his brother.

"It's picking up."

"How many hits have you made?" Brian again.

"You don't need to know."

"Oh, I do love hearing that one," Dominic observed with a smile.

"Patience, boys. You're not in the club yet," Pete told them, hoping they were smart enough not to object at this point.

"Okay, Pete," Brian said, after a moment's thought. "We both gave our word that what we learn here stays here. Fine. It's just that murdering people in cold blood isn't exactly what I've been trained to do, y'know?"

"You're not supposed to feel good about it. Over in Afghanistan, did you ever shoot anybody looking the other way?"

"Two of them," Brian admitted. "Hey, the battlefield isn't the Olympic Games," he semiprotested.

"Neither is the rest of the world, Aldo." The look on the Marine's face said, *Well, you got me there.* "It's an imperfect world, guys. If you want to try to make it perfect, go ahead, but it's been tried before. Me, I'd settle for something safer and more predictable. Imagine if somebody had taken care of Hitler back in 1934 or so, or Lenin in 1915 in Switzerland. The world would have been better, right? Or maybe bad in a different way. But we're not in that business. We will not be involved in political assassinations. We're after the little sharks who kill innocent people in such a way that conventional procedures cannot handle them. It's not the best system. I know that. We all know that. But it's something, and we're going to try to see if it works. It can't be much worse than what we have already, can it?"

Dominic's eyes never left Pete's face during that discourse. He'd just told them something that maybe he hadn't meant to tell them. The Campus didn't have any killers yet. They were going to be the first. There had to be a lot of hopes riding on them. That was a lot of responsibility. But it all made sense. It was plain that Alexander was not teaching them from his own real-world experience. A training officer was supposed to be somebody who'd actually gone out and

done it. That was why most of the instructors at the FBI Academy were experienced field agents. They could tell you how it felt. Pete could only tell them what had to be done. But why, then, had they picked him and Aldo?

"I see your point, Pete," Dominic said. "I'm not leaving yet."

"Neither am I," Brian told his training officer. "I just want to know what the rules are."

Pete didn't tell them they'd be making the rules up as they went along. They'd figure that one out soon enough.

AIRPORTS ARE the same all over the world. Instructed to be polite, they all checked their bags, waited in the correct lounges, smoked their cigarettes in the designated smoking areas, and read the books they'd purchased in the airport kiosks. Or pretended to. Not all of them had the language skills they would have wished. Once at cruising altitude, they ate their airline meals, and most of them took their airline naps. Nearly all of them were seated in the aft rows of their seating sections, and when they stirred, they wondered which of their seatmates they might meet again in a few days or weeks, however long it took to work out the details. Each of them hoped to meet Allah soon, and to garner the rewards that would come for fighting in their Holy Cause. It occurred to the more intellectual of them that even Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, was limited in his ability to communicate the nature of Paradise. He'd had to explain it to people with no knowledge of passenger jet aircraft, automobiles, and computers. What, then, was its true nature? It had to be so thoroughly wonderful as to defy description, but even so, a mystery yet to be discovered. And they would discover it. There was a degree of excitement in that thought, a sort of anticipation too sublime to discuss with one's colleagues. A mystery, but an infinitely desirable one. And if others had to meet Allah, too, as a result, well, that also was written in the Great Book of Destiny. For the moment, they all took their naps, sleeping the sleep of the just, the sleep of the Holy Martyrs yet to be. Milk, honey, and virgins.

SALI, JACK found, had some mystery about him. The CIA file on the guy even had the length of his penis appended in the "Nuts and Sluts" section. The British whores said he was grossly average in size but uncommonly vigorous in application—and a fine tipper, which appealed to their commercial sensibilities. But unlike most men, he didn't talk about himself much. Talked mainly about the rain and chill of London, and complimentary things about his companion of the moment, which appealed to her vanity. His occasional gift of a nice handbag—Louis Vuitton in most cases—sat well with his "regulars,"

two of whom reported to Thames House, the new home of both the British Secret Service and the Security Service. Jack wondered if they were getting paid by both Sali and H.M. Government for services rendered. Probably a good deal for the girls involved, he was sure, though Thames House probably wouldn't spring for shoes and a bag.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, Jack?" Wills looked up from his workstation.

"How do we know if this Sali is a bad guy?"

"We don't for sure. Not until he actually does something, or we intercept a conversation between him and somebody we don't like."

"So, I'm just checking this bird out."

"Correct. You'll be doing a lot of that. Any feel for the guy yet?"

"He's a horny son of a bitch."

"It's hard to be rich and single, in case you haven't noticed, Junior."

Jack blinked. Maybe he had that coming. "Okay, but I'll be damned if I pay for it, and he's paying a lot."

"What else?" Wills asked.

"He doesn't talk a hell of a lot."

"What's that tell you?"

Ryan sat back in his swivel chair to think it over. *He* didn't talk to his girlfriends much, either, at least not about his new job. As soon as you said "financial management," most women tended to doze off in self-defense. Did *that* mean anything? Maybe Sali just wasn't a talker. Maybe he was sufficiently secure that he didn't feel the need to impress his lady friends with anything but his cash—he always used cash, not credit cards. And why that? To keep his family from knowing? Well, Jack didn't talk to Mom and Dad about his love life, either. In fact, he rarely took a girlfriend to the family home. His mom tended to scare girls away. Not his dad, strangely enough. The M.D. Dr. Ryan struck other women as powerful, and while most young women found it admirable, many also found it intimidating as hell. His father dialed all the power stuff way back and came off as a slender and distinguished gray-haired teddy bear to family guests. More than anything else, his dad liked to play catch with his son on the grass overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, maybe harkening back to a simpler time. He had Kyle for that. The littlest Ryan was still in grammar school, at the stage where he asked furtive questions about Santa Claus, but only when Mom and Dad weren't around. There was probably a kid in class who wanted to let everybody know what he knew—there was always one of those—and Katie had wised up by now. She still liked to play Barbies, but she knew that her mom and dad bought them at the Toys R Us in Glen Burnie, and assembled the accoutrements on Christmas Eve, a process his father truly loved, much as he might bitch about it. When you stopped believing in Santa

Claus, the whole damn world just started a downhill slide . . .

"It tells us he's not a talker. Not much else," Jack said after a moment's reflection. "We're not supposed to convert inference into facts, are we?"

"Correct. A lot of people think otherwise, but not here. Assumption is the mother of all fuckups. That shrink at Langley specializes in spinning. He's good, but you need to learn to distinguish between speculation and facts. So, tell me about Mr. Sali," Wills commanded.

"He's horny, and he doesn't talk much. He plays very conservatively with the family's money."

"Anything that makes him look like a bad guy?"

"No, but he's worth watching because of his religious—well, extremism's the wrong word. There are some things missing here. He's not boisterous, not showy the way rich people his age usually are. Who started the file on him?" Jack asked.

"The Brits did. Something about this guy tweaked the interest of one of their senior analysts. Then Langley took a brief look and started a file of their own. Then he was intercepted talking to a guy who's also got a file at Langley—the conversation wasn't about anything important, but there it was," Wills explained. "And you know, it's a lot easier to open a file than it is to close one. His cell phone is coded in to the NSA computers, and so they report on him whenever he turns it on. I've been through the file, too. He's worth keeping an eye on, I think—but I'm not sure why. You learn to trust your instincts in this business, Jack. So, I'm nominating you to be the in-house expert on this kid."

"And I'm looking for how he handles his money . . . ?"

"That's right. You know, it doesn't take much to finance a bunch of terrorists—at least not much by his reckoning. A million bucks a year is a lot of money to those people. They live hand-to-mouth, and their maintenance expenses aren't that high. So, you're supposed to look at the margins. Chances are he'll try to hide whatever he does in the shadows of his big transactions."

"I'm not an accountant," Jack pointed out. His father had gotten his CPA a long time ago, but never used it, even to do his own taxes. He had a law firm for that.

"Can you do arithmetic?"

"Well, yeah."

"So, attach a nose to it."

Oh, great, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., thought. Then he reminded himself that actual intelligence operations weren't about shoot-the-bad-guy-and-bang-Ursula-Undress while the credits rolled. That was only in the movies. This was the real world.

"OUR FRIEND is in that much of a hurry?" Ernesto asked in considerable surprise.

"So it would seem. The *norteamericanos* have been hard on them of late. I imagine they want to remind their enemies that they still have fangs. A thing of honor for them, perhaps," Pablo speculated. His friend would understand that readily enough.

"So, what do we do now?"

"When they are settled in Mexico City, we arrange for transport into America, and, I presume, we arrange for weapons."

"Complications?"

"If the *norteamericanos* have our organizations penetrated, they might have some prewarning, plus whispers of our involvement. But we have considered this already."

They'd considered it briefly, yes, Ernesto reflected, but that had been at a convenient distance. Now the knocker on the door was rattling, and it was time for further reflection. But he couldn't renege on this deal. That, too, was a matter both of honor and of business. They were preparing an initial shipment of cocaine to the E.U. That promised to be a really sizable market.

"How many people are coming?"

"Fourteen, he says. They have no weapons at all."

"What will they need, do you suppose?"

"Light automatics should do it, plus pistols, of course," Pablo said. "We have a supplier in Mexico who can handle it for less than ten thousand dollars. For an additional ten, we can have the weapons delivered to the end users in America, to avoid complications during the crossing."

"*Bueno,* make it so. Will you fly to Mexico yourself?"

Pablo nodded. "Tomorrow morning. I will coordinate with them and the *coyotes* this first time."

"You will be careful," Ernesto pointed out. His suggestions had the force of an explosive device. Pablo took some chances, but his services were very important to the Cartel. He would be hard to replace.

"Of course, *jefe.* I need to evaluate how reliable these people are if they are to assist us in Europe."

"Yes, that is so," Ernesto agreed warily. As with most deals, when it came time to take action, there were second thoughts. But he was not an old woman. He had never been afraid to act decisively.

THE AIRBUS pulled up to its gate, the first-class passengers were allowed to deplane first, and they followed the colored arrows on the floor to immigration and customs, where they assured the uniformed bureaucrats that they had nothing to declare, and their passports were duly stamped, and they walked off to collect their luggage.

The leader of the group was named Mustafa. A Saudi by birth, he was clean-shaven, which he didn't like, though it exposed skin that the women seemed to like. He and a colleague named Abdullah walked together to get their bags, and then out to where their rides were supposed to be waiting. This would be the first test of their newfound friends in the Western Hemisphere. Sure enough, someone was holding a cardboard square with "MIGUEL" printed on it. That was Mustafa's code name for this mission, and he walked over to shake the man's hand. The greeter said nothing, but motioned them to follow him. Outside, a brown Plymouth minivan waited. The bags went in back, and the passengers slid into the middle seat. It was warm in Mexico City, and the air was fouler than anything they'd ever experienced. What ought to have been a sunny day was ruined by a gray blanket over the city—air pollution, Mustafa thought.

The driver continued to say nothing as he drove them to their hotel. This actually impressed them. If there was nothing to say, then one should keep quiet.

The hotel was a good one, as expected. Mustafa checked in using the false Visa card that had been faxed ahead, and in five minutes he and his friend were in their spacious room on the fifth floor. They looked around for obvious bugs before speaking.

"I didn't think that damned flight would ever end," Abdullah groused, looking in the minibar for bottled water. They'd been briefed to be careful drinking the stuff that came out of the tap.

"Yes, I agree. How did you sleep?"

"Not well. I thought the one good thing about alcohol was that it made you unconscious."

"For some. Not for all," Mustafa told his friend. "There are other drugs for that."

"Those are hateful to God," Abdullah observed. "Unless a physician administers them."

"We have friends now who do not think that way."

"Infidels," Abdullah almost spat.

"The enemy of your enemy is your friend."

Abdullah twisted the top off an Evian bottle. "No. You can trust a true friend. Can we trust these men?"

"Only as far as we must," Mustafa allowed. Mohammed had been careful in his mission brief. These new allies would help them only as a matter of convenience, because they also wished harm to the Great Satan. That was good enough for now. Someday these allies would become enemies, and they'd have to deal with them. But that day had not yet come. He stifled a yawn. Time to get some rest. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

JACK LIVED in a condo in Baltimore, a few blocks from Orioles Park at Camden Yards, where he had season tickets, but which was dark tonight because the Orioles were in Toronto. Not a good cook, he ate out as he usually did, alone this time because he didn't have a date, which was not as unusual as he might have wished. Finished, he walked back to his condo, switched on his TV, and then thought better of it, went to his computer instead, and logged on to check his e-mail and surf the 'Net. That's when he made a note to himself. Sali lived alone as well, and while he often had whores for company, it wasn't every night. What did he do on the other nights? Log on to his computer? A lot of people did. Did the Brits have a tap on his phone lines? They must. But the file on Sali didn't include any e-mails . . . why? Something worth checking out.

"WHAT YOU thinking, Aldo?" Dominic asked his brother. ESPN had a baseball game on; the Mariners were playing the Yankees, to the current detriment of the former.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of shooting some poor bastard down on the street, bro."

"What if you know he's a bad guy?"

"And what if I whack the wrong guy just because he drives the same kind of car and has the same mustache? What if he leaves a wife and kids behind? Then I'm a fucking murderer—a contract killer, at that. That's not the sort of thing they taught us at the Basic School, y'know?"

"But if you *know* he's a bad guy, then what?" the FBI agent asked.

"Hey, Enzo, that's not what they trained you to do, either."

"I know that, but this here's a different situation. If I know the mutt's a terrorist, and I know we can't arrest him, and I know he's got more plans, then I think I can handle it."

"Out in the hills, in Afghanistan, you know, our intel wasn't always gold-plated, man. Sure, I learned to put my own ass on the line, but not some poor other schlub's."

"The people you were after over there, who'd they kill?"

"Hey, they were part of an organization that made war on the United States of America. They probably weren't Boy Scouts. But I never saw any direct evidence of it."

"What if you had?" Dominic asked.

"But I didn't."

"You're lucky," Enzo responded, remembering a little girl whose throat had been slashed ear to ear. There was a legal adage that hard cases made for bad law, but the books could not anticipate all the things that people did. Black ink on white paper was a little too dry for the real world sometimes. But he'd always been the passionate one

of the two. Brian had always been a touch cooler, like Fonzie on *Happy Days.* Twins, yes, but fraternal ones. Dominic was more like his father, Italian and passionate. Brian had turned out more like Mom, chillier from a more northerly climate. To an outsider, the differences might have appeared less than trivial, but to the twins themselves it was frequently the subject of jabs and jokes. "When you see it, Brian, when it's right there in front of you, it sets you off, man. It lights a fire in the gut."

"Hey, been there, done that, got the T-shirt, okay? I whacked five men all by myself. But it was business, not personal. They tried to ambush us, but they didn't read the manual right, and I used fire and maneuver to fake 'em out and roll 'em up, just like they taught me to do. It's not my fault they were inept. They could have surrendered, but they preferred to shoot it out. That was a bad call on their part, but 'a man should do what he thinks is best.'" His all-time favorite movie was John Wayne's *Hondo.*

"Hey, Aldo, I'm not saying you're a wuss."

"I know what you're saying, but, look, I don't want to turn into one of them, okay?"

"That's not the mission here, bro. I got my doubts, too, but I'm going to stay around and see how it plays out. We can always kiss it off whenever we want."

"I suppose."

Then Derek Jeter doubled up the middle. Pitchers probably thought of *him* as a terrorist, didn't they?

ON THE other side of the building, Pete Alexander was on a secure phone to Columbia, Maryland.

"So, how are they doing?" he heard Sam Granger ask.

Pete sipped at his glass of sherry. "They're good kids. They both have doubts. The Marine talks openly about it, and the FBI guy keeps his mouth shut about it, but the wheels are turning over slowly."

"How serious is it?"

"Hard to say. Hey, Sam, we always knew that training would be the hard part. Few Americans want to grow up to be professional killers—at least not the ones we need for this."

"There was a guy at the Agency who would have fit right in—"

"But he's too damned old, and you know it," Alexander countered at once. "Besides, he has his sunset job over across the pond in Wales, and he seems to be comfortable in it."

"If only . . ."

"If only your aunt had balls, she'd be your uncle," Pete pointed out. "Selecting candidates is your job. Getting them trained up is mine. These two have the brains and they have the skills. The hard part is

temperament. I'm working on that. Be patient."

"In the movies, it's a lot easier."

"In the movies, everybody is borderline psychopath. Is that who we want on the payroll?"

"I guess not." There were plenty of psychopaths to be found. Every large police department knew of several. And they'd kill people for modest monetary considerations, or a small quantity of drugs. The problem with such people was that they didn't take orders well, and they were not very smart. Except in the movies. Where was that little Nikita girl when you really needed her?

"So, we have to deal with good, reliable people who have brains. Such people think, and they do not always think predictably, do they? A guy with a conscience is nice to have, but every so often he's going to wonder if he's doing the right thing. Why did you have to send two Catholics? Jews are bad enough. They're born with guilt—but Catholics learn it all in school."

"Thank you, Your Holiness," Granger responded, deadpan.

"Sam, we knew going in that this was not going to be easy. Jesus, you send me a Marine and an FBI agent. Why not a couple of Eagle Scouts, y'know?"

"Okay, Pete. It's your job. Any idea on timing? There's some work piling up on us," Granger observed.

"Maybe a month and I'll know if they'll play or not. They *will* need to know the why in addition to the who, but I always told you that," Alexander reminded his boss.

"True," Granger admitted. It really *was* a lot easier in the movies, wasn't it? Just let your fingers do the walking to "Assassins R Us" in the Yellow Pages. They had thought about hiring former KGB officers at first. They all had expert training, and all wanted money—the going rate was less than twenty-five thousand dollars per kill, a pittance—but such people would probably report back to Moscow Centre in the hope of being rehired, and The Campus would then become known within the global "black" community. They couldn't have that.

"What about the new toys?" Pete asked. Sooner or later, he'd have to train the twins with the new tools of the trade.

"Two weeks, they tell me."

"That long? Hell, Sam, I proposed them nine months ago."

"It's not something you get at the local Western Auto. They have to be manufactured from scratch. You know, highly skilled machinists in out-of-the-way places, people who don't ask questions."

"I told you, get the guys who do this sort of thing for the Air Force. They're always making up clever little gadgets." Like tape recorders that fit in cigarette lighters. Now, *that* was probably inspired by the

movies. And for the really good things, the government almost never had the right people in-house, which was why they employed civilian contractors, who took the money, did the job, and kept their mouths shut because they wanted more such contracts.

"They're all being worked on, Pete. Two weeks," he emphasized.

"Roger that. Until then, I have all the suppressed pistols I need. They're both doing nicely with the tracking and tailing drills. Helps that they're so ordinary-looking."

"So, bottom line, things are going well?" Granger asked.

"Except for the conscience thing, yeah."

"Okay, keep me posted."

"Will do."

"See ya."

Alexander set the receiver back down. Goddamned consciences, he thought. It would be nice to have robots, but somebody might notice Robby striding down the street. And they couldn't have that. Or maybe the Invisible Man, but in the H. G. Wells story, the drug that made him transparent also made him mad, and this gig was already crazy enough, wasn't it? He tossed off the last of his sherry, and then on reflection, went off to refill his glass.

CHAPTER 8

CONVICTION

MUSTAFA AND Abdullah arose at dawn, said their morning prayers, and ate, and then hooked up their computers and checked their e-mail. Sure enough, Mustafa had an e-mail from Mohammed, forwarding a message from someone else, supposedly named Diego, with instructions for a meeting at . . . 10:30 A.M. local time. He sorted through the rest of his electronic mail, most of it something the Americans called "spam." He'd learned that this was a canned pig product, which seemed entirely appropriate. Both of them walked outside—but separately—just after 9:00, mainly to get the blood moving and examine the neighborhood. They checked carefully but furtively for tails and found none. They got to the planned rendezvous point at 10:25.

Diego was already there, reading a paper, wearing a white shirt with blue stripes.

"Diego?" Mustafa asked pleasantly.

"You must be Miguel," the contact replied with a smile, rising to shake hands. "Please be seated." Pablo scanned around. Yes, there was "Miguel's" backup, sitting alone and ordering coffee, doing overwatch like a professional. "So, how do you like Mexico City?"

"I did not know it was so large and bustling." Mustafa waved around. The sidewalks were crowded with people heading in all directions. "And the air is so foul."

"That is a problem here. The mountains hold in the pollution. It takes strong winds to clear the air. So, coffee?"

Mustafa nodded. Pablo waved to the waiter and held up the coffeepot. The sidewalk café was European in character, but not overly crowded. The tables were about half occupied, in knots of people meeting for business or socially, doing their talking and minding their own business. The new coffeepot arrived. Mustafa poured and waited for the other to speak.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"All of us are here as requested. How soon can we go?"

"How soon do you wish?" Pablo asked.

"This afternoon would be fine, but that might be a little soon for

your arrangements."

"Yes. But what about tomorrow, say about thirteen hundred hours?"

"That would be excellent," Mustafa responded in pleasant surprise. "How will the crossing be arranged?"

"I will not be directly involved, you understand, but you will be driven to the border and handed over to someone who specializes in getting people and certain goods into America. You will be required to walk about six kilometers. It will be warm, but not greatly so. Once in America, you will be driven to a safe house outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. There you can either fly to your final destinations or rent cars."

"Weapons?"

"What exactly will you require?"

"Ideally, we would like AK-47s."

Pablo shook his head at once. "Those we cannot supply, but we can get you Uzi and Ingram submachine guns. Nine-millimeter Parabellum caliber, with, say, six thirty-round magazines each, fully loaded for your purposes."

"More ammunition," Mustafa said at once. "Twelve magazines, plus three additional boxes of ammunition for each weapon."

Pablo nodded. "That is easily done." The increased expense would be only a couple of thousand dollars. The weapons would have been bought on the open market, along with the ammunition. They were technically traceable to their origin and/or purchaser, but that was only a theoretical problem, not a practical one. The guns would be mainly Ingrams, not the better-made and more accurate Israeli Uzis, but these people wouldn't care. Who knows, they might even have religious or moral objections to touching a Jewish-made weapon. "Tell me, how are you set for traveling expenses?"

"We have five thousand American dollars each in cash."

"You can use that for minor expenses, like food and gasoline, but for other things you need credit cards. Americans will not accept cash to rent cars, and *never* to buy airplane tickets."

"We have them," Mustafa replied. He and each member of the team had Visa cards issued to them in Bahrain. They even had consecutive numbers. All were drawn on an account in a Swiss bank, whose account held just over five hundred thousand dollars. Sufficient to their purposes.

The name on the card, Pablo saw, was JOHN PETER SMITH. Good. Whoever had set this up hadn't made the mistake of using explicitly Middle Eastern names. Just as long as the card didn't fall into the hands of a police officer who might ask Mr. Smith where exactly he came from. He hoped they had been briefed on the American police and their habits.

"Other documents?" Pablo asked.

"Our passports are Qatari. We have international driver's licenses. We all speak acceptable English and can read maps. We know about American laws. We will keep within the speed limits and drive carefully. The nail that sticks up is hammered down. So we will not stick up."

"Good," Pablo observed. So, they had been briefed. Some might even remember it. "Remember that one mistake can ruin the entire mission for all of you. And it is easy to make mistakes. America is an easy country in which to live and move about, but their police are very efficient. If you are not noticed, you are safe from them. Therefore, you must avoid being noticed. Fail in that, and you could all be doomed to failure."

"Diego, we will not fail," Mustafa promised.

Fail at what? Pablo wondered, but did not ask. *How many women and children will you kill?* But it didn't really matter to him. It was a cowardly way to kill, but the rules of honor in his "friend's" culture were very different from his own. This was business, and that was all he needed to know.

THREE MILES, push-ups, and a coffee chaser, and that was life in southern Virginia.

"Brian, you used to carrying a firearm?"

"Usually an M16 and five or six extra mags. Some fragmentation grenades, too, go in the basic load, yeah, Pete."

"I was talking about side arms, actually."

"M9 Beretta, that's what I'm used to."

"Any good with it?"

"It's in my package, Pete. I qualified expert at Quantico, but so did most of my class. No big deal."

"You used to carrying it around?"

"You mean in civilian clothes? No."

"Okay, get used to it."

"Is it legal?" Brian asked.

"Virginia is a shall-issue state. If you've got a clean record, the commonwealth will grant you a concealed carry permit. What about you, Dominic?"

"I'm still FBI, Pete. I'd feel kinda naked out on the street without a friend."

"What do you carry?"

"Smith & Wesson 1076. Shoots the ten-millimeter cartridge, double action. The Bureau's gone to the Glock lately, but I like the Smith better." *And, no, I didn't carve a notch in the grips,* he didn't add. Though he had thought about it.

"Okay, well, when you're off-campus here, I want you both to carry, just to get used to the idea, Brian."

A shrug. "Fair enough." It beat the hell out of a sixty-five-pound rucksack.

THERE WAS a lot more to it than just Sali, of course. Jack was working on a total of eleven different people, all but one of them Middle Eastern, all in the money business. The one European lived in Riyadh. He was German, but had converted to Islam, which had struck someone as odd enough to deserve electronic surveillance. Jack's university German was good enough to read the guy's e-mails, but they didn't reveal very much. He'd evidently gone native in his habits, didn't even drink beer. He was evidently popular with his Saudi friends—one thing about Islam was that if you obeyed the rules and prayed the correct way, they didn't much care what you looked like. It would have been admirable except for the fact that most of the world's terrorists prayed to Mecca. But that, Jack reminded himself, wasn't the fault of Islam. The night he himself had been born, people had tried to kill him while he was still in his mother's womb—and they'd identified themselves as Catholics. Fanatics were fanatics, the world around. The idea that people had tried to murder his mother was enough to make him want to pick his Beretta .40. His father, well, his dad was able to look after himself, but messing with women constituted a big step over the line, and that was a line you could cross only once and in one direction. There was no coming back.

He didn't remember any of it, of course. The ULA terrorists had all gone off to meet their God—courtesy of the State of Maryland—before he'd entered first grade, and his parents had never talked about it. His sister Sally had, though. She still had dreams about it. He wondered if Mom and Dad had them, too. Did events like that go away eventually? He'd seen things on the History Channel to suggest that World War II veterans still had images of combat return to them at night, and that had been over sixty years ago. Such memories had to be a curse.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, Junior?"

"This guy Otto Weber, what's the big deal? He's about as exciting as vanilla ice cream."

"If you're a bad guy, do you suppose you wear a neon sign on your back, or do you think you try to hide down in the grass?"

"With the snakes," Junior completed the thought. "I know—we're looking for little things."

"Like I told you. You can do fourth-grade arithmetic. Attach a nose to it. And, yes, you're looking for things that are *supposed* to be damned near invisible, okay? That's why this job is so much fun. And

innocent little things are mostly innocent little things. If he downloads kiddie porn off the'Net, it's not because he's a terrorist. It's because he's a pervert. That's not a capital offense in most countries."

"I bet it is in Saudi."

"Probably, but they don't chase after it, I bet."

"I thought they were all puritans."

"Over there, a man keeps his libido to himself. But if you do something with a real live kid, you're in big trouble. Saudi Arabia is a good place to abide by the law. You can park your Mercedes and leave the keys in the ignition and the car'll be there when you get back. You can't even do that in Salt Lake City."

"Been there?" Jack asked.

"Four times. The people are friendly as long as you treat them properly, and if you make a real friend over there, he's a friend for life. But their rules *are* different, and the price for breaking them can be pretty steep."

"So, Otto Weber plays by the rules?"

Wills nodded. "Correct. He's bought all the way into the system, religion and all. They like him for that. Religion is the center of their culture. When a guy converts and lives by Islamic rules, it validates their world, and they like that, just like anybody would. I don't think Otto's a player, though. The people we're looking for are sociopaths. They can happen anywhere. Some cultures catch them early and change them—or kill them. Some cultures don't. We're not as good at that as we ought to be, and I suspect the Saudis probably are. But the really good ones can skate in any culture, and some of them use the disguise of religion. Islam is not a belief system for psychopaths, but it can be perverted to the use of such people, just like Christianity can. Ever take psych courses?"

"No, wish I had," Ryan admitted.

"So, buy some books. Read them. Find people who know about that stuff and ask questions. Listen to the answers." Wills turned back to his computer screen.

Shit, Junior thought. This job just kept getting worse. How long, he wondered, before they expected him to turn up something useful? A month? A year? What the hell was a passing grade at The Campus . . .

. . . and what, exactly, would happen when he did turn up something useful?

Back to Otto Weber . . .

THEY COULDN'T stay in their room all day without having people wonder why. Mustafa and Abdullah left just after eating a light lunch in the coffee shop, and took a walk. Three blocks away they found an art museum. Admission was free, but inside they found out why. It

was a museum of modern art and its painting and sculpture were well beyond their comprehension. They wandered through it over a period of two hours, and both of them concluded that paint must be cheap in Mexico. Nevertheless, it gave them the chance to burnish their covers, as they pretended to appreciate the garbage hanging on the walls and sitting on the floors.

Then they strolled back to their hotel. The one good thing was the weather. It was warm to those of European extraction, but quite pleasant to the visiting Arabs, gray haze and all. Tomorrow they would see desert again. One last time, perhaps.

IT WAS impossible, even for a well-supported government agency, to search all the messages that flew through cyberspace every night, and so the NSA used computer programs to screen for key phrases. The electronic addresses of some known or suspected terrorists or suspected stringers had been identified over the years, and these were watched, as were the server computers of Internet Service Providers, or ISPs. All in all, it used up vast amounts of storage space, and as a result delivery trucks were constantly bringing new disk storage devices to Fort Meade, Maryland, where they were hooked up to the mainframe computers so that if a target person was identified, then his e-mails dating back for months or even years could be screened. If there were ever a game of falcon and mouse, this was it. The bad guys, of course, knew that the screening program looked for specific words or phrases, and so they had taken to using their own code words—which was another trap in itself, since codes gave a false sense of security, one that was easily exploited by an agency with seventy years of experience reading the minds of America's enemies.

The process had its limits. Too free a use of signal-intelligence information revealed its existence, causing the targets to change their methods of encryption, and so compromising the source. Using it too little, on the other hand, was as bad as not having it at all. Unfortunately, the intelligence services leaned more to the latter than the former. The creation of a new Department of Homeland Security had, theoretically, set up a central clearinghouse for all threat-related information, but the size of the new superagency had crippled it from the get-go. The information was all there, but in too great a quantity to be processed, and with too many processors to turn out a viable product.

But old habits died hard. The intelligence community remained intact, a superagency overtop its own bureaucracy or not, and its segments talked to each other. As always, they savored what the insiders knew as opposed to those who knew it not . . . and wished to keep it that way.

The National Security Agency's principal means of communication with the Central Intelligence Agency was essentially to say *This is interesting, what do you think?* That was because each of the two agencies held a different corporate ethos. They talked differently. They thought differently. And insofar as they acted at all, they acted differently.

But at least they thought in parallel directions, not divergent ones. On the whole, CIA had the better analysts, and NSA was better at gathering information. There were exceptions to both general rules; and in both cases, the really talented individuals knew one another, and, among themselves, they mostly spoke the same language.

THAT BECAME clear the next morning with the interagency cable traffic. A senior analyst at Fort Meade headed it as FLASH-traffic to his counterpart at Langley. That ensured that it would be noticed at The Campus. Jerry Rounds saw it at the top of his morning e-mail pile, and he brought it to the next morning's conference.

"'We will sting them badly this time,' the guy says. What could that mean?" Jerry Rounds wondered aloud. Tom Davis had overnighted in New York. He had a breakfast meeting with the bond people at Morgan Stanley. It was annoying when business got in the way of business.

"How good's the translation?" Gerry Hendley asked.

"The footnote says there's no problem on that end. The intercept is clear and static-free. It's a simple declarative sentence in literate Arabic, no particular nuances to worry about," Rounds declared.

"Origin and recipient?" Hendley went on.

"The originator is a guy named Fa'ad, last name unknown. We know this guy. We think he's one of their midlevel operations people—a plans rather than field guy. He's based somewhere in Bahrain. He only talks on his cell phone when he's in a moving car or a public place, like a market or something. Nobody's gotten a line on him yet. The recipient," Bell went on, "is supposedly a new guy—more likely an old guy on a newly cloned phone. It's an old analog phone, and so they couldn't generate a voiceprint."

"So, they probably have an operation running . . ." Hendley observed.

"Looks that way," Rounds agreed. "Nature and location unknown."

"So, we don't know dick." Hendley reached for his coffee cup and managed a frown best measured on the Richter scale. "What are they going to do about it?"

Granger took that one: "Nothing useful, Gerry. They're in a logic trap. If they do anything at all, like upgrading the color on the threat rainbow, they're sounding the alarm, and they've done that so much

that it's become counterproductive. Unless they disclose the text and the source, nobody'll take it seriously. If they do disclose anything, we burn the source for fair."

"And if they don't sound the alarm, Congress will shove whatever ends up happening right up their ass." Elected officials were much more comfortable being the problem rather than the solution. There was political hay to be made from nonproductive screaming. So, CIA and other services would continue to work at identifying the people with the distant cell phones. That was unglamorous, slow police work, and it ran at a speed that grossly impatient politicians could not dictate—and throwing money at the problem didn't make it any better, which was doubly frustrating to people who didn't know how to do anything else.

"So, they straddle the issue, and do something they know won't work—"

"—and hope for a miracle," Granger agreed with his boss.

Police departments all across America would be alerted, of course—but for what purpose, and against what threat, nobody knew. And cops were always looking for Middle Eastern faces to pull over and question anyway, to the point that cops were bored with what was almost always a nonproductive exercise in doing something the ACLU was already raising hell about. There were six Driving While Arab cases pending in various federal district courts, four involving physicians, and two with demonstrably innocent students whom the local police had hassled a little too vigorously. Whatever case law resulted from those incidents would do far more harm than good. It was just what Sam Granger called it, a logic trap.

Hendley's frown got a little deeper. It was echoed, he was sure, at a half-dozen government agencies which, for all their funding and personnel, were about as useful as tits on a boar hog. "Anything we can do?" he asked.

"Stay alert and call the cops if we see anything unusual," Granger answered. "Unless you have a gun handy."

"To shoot some innocent clown who's probably taking citizenship classes," Bell added. "Not worth the trouble."

I should have stayed in the Senate, Hendley thought. At least being part of the problem had its satisfactions. It was good for the spleen to vent it once in a while. Screaming here was totally counterproductive, and bad for the morale of his people.

"Okay, then, we pretend we're ordinary citizens," the boss said at last. The senior staff nodded agreement, and went on to the remaining routine business of the day. Toward the end, Hendley asked Rounds how the new boy was doing.

"He's smart enough to ask a lot of questions. I have him reviewing

known or suspected stringers for unaccountable money transfers."

"If he can stand doing that, God bless him," Bell observed. "That can drive a man crazy."

"Patience is a virtue," Gerry noted. "It's just a son of a bitch to acquire."

"We alert all of our people to this intercept?"

"Might as well," Bell responded.

"Done," Granger told them all.

"SHIT," Jack observed fifteen minutes later. "What's it mean?"

"We might know tomorrow, next week—or never," Will answered.

"Fa' ad . . . I know that name . . ." Jack turned back to his computer and keyed up some files. "Yeah! He's the guy in Bahrain. How come the local cops haven't sweated him some?"

"They don't know about him yet. Tracking him's an NSA gig so far, but maybe Langley will see if they can learn some more about him."

"Are they as good as the FBI for police work?"

"Actually, no, they're not. Different training, but it's not that removed from what a normal person can do—"

Ryan the Younger cut him off. "Bullshit. Reading people is something cops are good at. It's an acquired skill, and you also have to learn how to ask questions."

"Says who?" Wills demanded.

"Mike Brennan. He was my bodyguard. He taught me a lot."

"Well, a good spook has to read people, too. Their asses depend on it."

"Maybe, but if you want your eyes fixed, you talk to my mom. For ears, you talk to somebody else."

"Okay, maybe so. For now, check out our friend Fa'ad."

Jack turned back to his computer. He scrolled back to the first interesting conversation they'd intercepted. Then he thought better of it and went back to the very beginning, the first time he'd attracted notice. "Why doesn't he change phones?"

"Maybe he's lazy. These guys are smart, but they have blind spots, too. They fall into habits. They're clever, but they do not have formal training, like a trained spook, KGB or like that."

NSA had a large but covert listening post in Bahrain, covered in the American Embassy, and supplemented by U.S. Navy warships that called there on a regular basis, but were not seen as an electronic threat in that environment. The NSA teams that regularly sailed on them even intercepted people walking the waterfront with their cell phones.

"This guy is dirty," he observed a minute later. "This guy's a bad guy, sure as hell."

"He's been a good barometer, too. He says a lot of things we find interesting."

"So, somebody ought to pick him up."

"They're thinking about that at Langley."

"How big's the station in Bahrain?"

"Six people. Station Chief, two field spooks, and three sundry employees, signals and stuff."

"*That's all?* There? Just a handful?"

"That's right," Wills confirmed.

"Damn. I used to ask Dad about this. He usually shrugged and grumbled."

"He tried pretty hard to get CIA more funding and more employees. Congress wasn't always accommodating."

"Have we ever taken a guy up and, you know, 'talked' to him?"

"Not lately."

"Why not?"

"Manpower," Wills answered simply. "Funny thing about employees, they all expect to be paid. We're not that big."

"So why doesn't CIA ask the local cops to pick him up? Bahrain's a friendly country."

"Friendly, but not a vassal. They have their ideas about civil rights, too, just not the same as ours. Also, you can't pick a guy up for what he knows and what he thinks. Only for what he's done. As you can see, we don't know that he's actually done anything."

"So, put a tail on his ass."

"And how can CIA do that with only two field spooks?" Wills asked.

"Jesus!"

"Welcome to the real world, Junior." The Agency ought to have recruited some agents, maybe cops in Bahrain, to help out with such tasks, but that hadn't happened yet. The Station Chief could also have requested more people, of course, but Arabic-speaking and -looking field officers were a little thin over at Langley, and those they had went to more obviously troublesome postings.

THE RENDEZVOUS took place as planned. There were three vehicles, each with a driver who spoke scarcely a word, and that in Spanish. The drive was pleasant, and distantly reminiscent of home. The driver was cautious; he didn't speed or do anything else to attract attention, but they moved right along in any case. Nearly all of the Arabs smoked cigarettes, and exclusively American brands, like Marlboro. Mustafa did as well, and wondered—as had Mohammed before him—what the Prophet would have said about cigarettes. Probably nothing good, but he *hadn't* said anything, had he? And so, Mustafa could smoke as much as he wished. The issue of dangers to his health was a

distant concern now, after all. He expected to live another four or five days, but little more than that, if things went according to plan.

He'd expected some excited chattering from his people, but there was none. Hardly anyone spoke a word. They just looked blankly out at the passing countryside, speeding past a culture about which they knew little, and they would not learn more.

"OKAY, BRIAN, here's your carry permit." Pete Alexander handed it over.

It might as well have been a second driver's license, and it went into his wallet. "So, I'm street-legal now?"

"As a practical matter, no cop is going to hassle a Marine officer for carrying a pistol, concealed or not, but better to dot the I's and cross the T's. You going to carry the Beretta?"

"It's what I'm used to, and the fifteen rounds make for security. What am I supposed to carry it in?"

"Use one of these, Aldo," Dominic said, holding up his fanny pack. It looked like a money belt, or the kind of pouch used more often by women than by men. A pull on the string ripped it open, and revealed the pistol and two extra magazines. "A lot of agents use this. More comfortable than a hip holster. Those can dig into your kidneys on a long car ride."

For the moment, Brian would tuck his into his belt. "Where to today, Pete?"

"Back to the mall. More tracking drills."

"Great," Brian responded. "Why don't you have invisibility pills?"

"H. G. Wells took the formula with him."

CHAPTER 9

GOING WITH GOD

JACK'S DRIVE to The Campus took about thirty-five minutes, listening to NPR's *Morning Edition* all the way because, like his father, he didn't listen to contemporary music. The similarities with his dad had both vexed and fascinated John Patrick Ryan, Jr., throughout his life. Through most of his teenage years, he'd fought them off, trying to establish his own identity in contrast to his button-down father, but then in college he had somehow drifted back, hardly even noticing the process. He'd thought he was just doing the sensible thing, for instance, to date girls who might be good wife candidates, though he'd never quite found the perfect one. This he unconsciously judged by his mom. He'd been annoyed by teachers at Georgetown who said he was a chip off the old block, and at first taken some offense at it, then reminded himself that his father wasn't all that bad a guy. He could have done worse. He'd seen a lot of rebellion even at a university as conservative as G-Town, with its Jesuit traditions and rigorous scholarship. Some of his classmates had even made a show of rejecting their parents, but what asshole would do something like that? However staid and old-fashioned his father surely was, he'd been a pretty good dad, as dads went. He'd never been overbearing and let him go his own way and choose his own path . . . in confidence that he'd turn out okay? Jack wondered. But, no. If his father had been that conspiratorial, Jack would have noticed, surely.

He thought about conspiracy. There had been a lot of that in the newspapers and pulp-book media. His father had even joked more than once about having the Marine Corps paint his "personal" helicopter black. That would have been a hoot, Jack thought. Instead, his surrogate father had been Mike Brennan, whom he'd regularly bombarded with questions, many of them about conspiracy. He'd been hugely disappointed to learn that the United States Secret Service was one hundred percent confident that Lee Harvey Oswald had assassinated Jack Kennedy, and all by himself. At their academy at Beltsville, outside Washington, Jack had held, and even shot, a replica of the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle that had taken the former President's life, and been fully briefed on the case—to his own

satisfaction, if not that of the conspiracy industry that so fervently and commercially believed otherwise. The latter had even proposed that his father, as a former CIA official, had been the final beneficiary of a conspiracy that had gone on for at least fifty years for the express purpose of giving CIA the reins of government. Yeah, sure. Like the Trilateral Commission, and the World Order of Freemasons, and whoever else the fiction writers could make up. From both his father and Mike Brennan, he'd heard a lot of CIA stories, few of which bragged on the competence of that federal agency. It was pretty good, but nowhere near as competent as Hollywood proposed. But Hollywood probably believed that Roger Rabbit was real—after all, his picture had made money, right? No, the CIA had a couple of profound shortcomings . . .

. . . and was The Campus a means of correcting them . . . ? That was a question. *Damn,* Junior thought, turning onto Route 29, *maybe the conspiracy theorists might be right after all . . . ?* His own internal answer was a snort and a grimace.

No, The Campus wasn't like that at all, not like the SPECTRE of the old James Bond movies, or the THRUSH of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* reruns on Nick at Nite. Conspiracy theory depended on the ability of large numbers of people to keep their mouths shut, and as Mike had told him so many times, Bad Guys couldn't keep their mouths shut. There were no deaf-and-dumb people in federal prisons, Mike had told him many times, but criminals never quite figured that one out, the idiots.

Even the people he was tracking had that problem, and they were, supposedly, smart and highly motivated. Or so they thought. But, no, not even they were the Bad Guys of the movies. They needed to talk, and talking would be their downfall. He wondered which it was: Did people who did evil things need to brag, or did they need others to tell them they were doing good in some perverse way upon which they all agreed? The guys he was looking at were Muslims, but there were other Muslims. He and his father both knew Prince Ali of Saudi Arabia, and he was a good guy, the guy who'd given his dad the sword from which he'd gotten his Secret Service code name, and he still stopped by the house at least once a year, because the Saudis, once you made friends with them, were the most loyal people in the world. Of course, it helped if you were an ex-President. Or, in his case, the son of a former President, now making his own way in the "black" world . . .

Damn, how will Dad react to this*?* Jack wondered. *He's going to have a cow. And Mom? A real hissy fit.* That was good for a laugh as he turned left. But Mom didn't need to find out. The cover story would work for her—and Grandpa—but not for Dad. Dad had helped set this place up.

Maybe he needed one of those black helicopters after all. He slid into his own parking place, number 127. The Campus couldn't be all that big and powerful, could it? Not with less than a hundred fifty employees. He locked his car and headed in, remarking to himself that this every-morning-to-work thing sucked. But everybody had to start somewhere.

He walked in the back entrance, like most of the others. There was a reception/security desk. The guy there was Ernie Chambers, formerly a sergeant first class in the 1st Infantry Division. His blue uniform blazer had a miniature of the Combat Infantryman's Badge, just in case you didn't notice the shoulders and the hard black eyes. After the first Persian Gulf War, he'd changed jobs from grunt to MP. He'd probably enforced the law and directed traffic pretty well, Jack thought, waving good-morning at him.

"Hey, Mr. Ryan."

"'Morning, Ernie."

"You have a good one, sir." To the ex-soldier, everybody was named "sir."

IT WAS two hours earlier outside Ciudad Juárez. There, the van pulled into a vehicle-service plaza and stopped by a cluster of four other vehicles. Behind them were the other minivans who'd followed them all the way to the American border. The men roused from their sleep and stumbled into the chill morning air to stretch.

"Here I leave you, *señor,*" the driver said to Mustafa. "You will join the man by the tan Ford Explorer. *Vaya con Dios, amigos,*" he said in that most charming of dismissals: Go with God.

Mustafa walked over and found a tallish man wearing a cowboy-type hat. He didn't appear very clean, and his mustache needed trimming. "*Buenos dias,* I am Pedro. I will be taking you the rest of the way. There are four of you for my vehicle, yes?"

Mustafa nodded. "That is correct."

"There are water bottles in the truck. You may wish to have something to eat. You can buy anything you like from the shop." He waved to the building. Mustafa did, his colleagues did much the same, and after ten minutes they all boarded the vehicles and headed out.

They went west, mostly along Route 2. Immediately, the vehicles broke up, no longer "flying formation," as it were. There were four of them, all large American-made SUVTYPE vehicles, all of them coated with a thick coating of dirt and grit so that they did not appear new. The sun had climbed above the horizon to their rear, casting its shadows onto the khaki-colored ground.

Pedro appeared to have spoken his piece back at the plaza. Now he said nothing, except an occasional belch, and chain-smoked his

cigarettes. He had the radio on to an AM station, and hummed along with the Spanish music. The Arabs sat in silence.

"HEY, TONY," Jack said in greeting. His workmate was already on his workstation.

"Howdy," Wills responded.

"Anything hot this morning?"

"Not after yesterday, but Langley is talking about putting some coverage on our friend Fa'ad—again."

"Will they really do it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. The Station Chief in Bahrain is saying that he needs more personnel to make it happen, and the personnel weenies at Langley are probably batting that back and forth right now."

"My dad liked to say that the government is really run by accountants and lawyers."

"He ain't far wrong on that one, buddy. God knows where Ed Kealty fits in that, though. What does your dad think of him?"

"Can't stand the son of a bitch. He won't talk in public about the new administration because he says that's wrong, but if you say something about the guy over dinner, you might end up wearing your wine home. It's funny. Dad hates politics, and he really tries hard to keep his cool, but that guy is definitely not on the Christmas card list. But he keeps it quiet, won't talk to any reporters about it. Mike Brennan tells me the Service doesn't like the new guy, either. And they *have* to like him."

"There are penalties for being a professional," Wills agreed.

And then Junior lit up his computer and looked at the night traffic between Langley and Fort Meade. It was a lot more impressive in its volume than its content. It seemed that his new friend, Uda, had—

"Our pal Sali had lunch with somebody yesterday," Jack announced.

"Who with?" Wills asked.

"The Brits don't know. Appears Middle Eastern, age about twenty-eight, one of those thin—well, narrow—beards around the jawline, and mustache, but no ident on the guy. They spoke in Arabic, but nobody got close enough to overhear anything."

"Where'd they eat?"

"Pub on Tower Hill called 'Hung, Drawn and Quartered.' It's on the edge of the financial district. Uda drank Perrier. His pal had a beer. And they had a British ploughman's lunch. They sat in a corner booth, made it hard for whoever was watching to get close and listen in."

"So, they wanted privacy. It doesn't necessarily make them bad guys. Did the Brits tail him?"

"No. That probably means a single-man tail on Uda?"

"Probably," Wills agreed.

"But it says they got a photo of the new guy. Not included in the report."

"It was probably someone from the Security Service—MI5—doing the surveillance. And probably a junior guy. Uda isn't regarded as very important, not enough for full coverage. None of those agencies have all the manpower they want. Anything else?"

"Some money trades that afternoon. Looks pretty routine," Jack said, scrolling through the transactions. *I'm looking for something small and harmless,* he reminded himself. But small, harmless things were, for the most part, small and harmless. Uda moved money around every day, in large and small amounts. Since he was in the wealth-preservation business, he rarely speculated, dealing mostly in real-estate transactions. London—and Britain in general—was a good place to preserve cash. Real-estate prices were fairly high but very stable. If you bought something, it might not go up very much, but it sure as hell wasn't going to have the bottom drop out. So, Uda's daddy was letting the kid stretch his legs some, but not letting him run out and play in the traffic. How much personal liquidity did Uda have? Since he paid off his whores in cash and expensive handbags, he must have his own cash supply. Maybe modest, but "modest" by Saudi standards wasn't exactly modest by many others. The kid *did* drive an Aston Martin, after all, and his dwelling was not in a trailer park . . . so—

"How do I differentiate between Sali's trading his family money and trading his own?"

"You don't. We think he keeps the two accounts close, in the sense both of being covert and near to each other. Your best bet on that is to see how he sets up his quarterly statements to the family."

Jack groaned. "Oh, great, it'll take me a couple of days to add up all the transactions, and then to analyze them."

"Now you know why you're not a real CPA, Jack." Wills managed a chuckle.

Jack nearly snarled, but there was only one way to accomplish this task, and it *was* his job, wasn't it? First, he tried to see if his program could shortcut the process. Nope. Fourth-grade arithmetic with a nose attached. What fun. At least by the time he finished, he'd probably be better at entering numbers into the numeric keypad on the right side of the keyboard. *There* was something to look forward to! Why didn't The Campus employ some forensic accountants?

THEY TURNED off Route 2 onto a dirt road that wound its way north. The road had seen a good deal of use, some of it recent, judging by the tracks. The general area was somewhat mountainous. The real

peaks of the Rocky Mountain chain were off to the west, far enough away that he couldn't see them, but the air was thinner here than he was accustomed to, and it would be warm walking. He wondered how far that would be, and how close they were to the U.S. border. He'd heard that the American-Mexican border was guarded, but not well guarded. The Americans could be lethally competent in some areas, but utterly infantile in others. Mustafa and his people hoped to avoid the former and to make use of the latter. About eleven in the morning, he saw a large, boxy truck in the distance, and their SUV headed toward it. The truck, he saw as they came closer, was empty, its large red doors wide open. The Ford Explorer came to within a hundred meters and stopped. Pedro switched off the engine and got out.

"We are here, my friends," he announced. "I hope you are ready to walk."

All four of them got out, and as before they stretched their legs and looked around. A new man walked in their direction, as the other three SUVs parked and disgorged their passengers.

"Hello, Pedro," the new Mexican greeted the lead driver, evidently an old friend.

"*Buenos dias,* Ricardo. Here are the people who want to go to America."

"Hello." He shook hands with the first four. "My name is Ricardo, and I am your *coyote.*"

"What?" Mustafa asked.

"It is just a term. I take people across the border, for a fee. In your case, of course, I have already been paid."

"How far?"

"Ten kilometers. A modest walk," he said comfortably. "The country will mostly be like this. If you see a snake, just walk away from it. It will not chase you. But if you get within a meter, it can strike you and kill you. Aside from that, there is nothing to fear. If you see a helicopter, you must fall to the ground and not move. The Americans do not guard their border well, and, oddly enough, not as well in daylight as at night. We have also taken some precautions."

"What is that?"

"There were thirty people in that van," he said, pointing to the large truck they'd seen coming in. "They will walk in ahead of and to the west of us. If anyone is caught, it will be them."

"How long will it take?"

"Three hours. Less, if you are fit. Do you have water?"

"We know the desert," Mustafa assured him.

"As you say. Let us be off, then. Follow me, *amigo.*" And with that, Ricardo started walking north. His clothes were all khaki, he wore a military-style web belt with three canteens attached, and he carried

military-style binoculars, plus an Army-style floppy hat. His boots were well worn. His stride was purposeful and efficient, not overly fast for show, just to cover ground efficiently. They fell in behind him, forming a single file to conceal their numbers from any possible trackers, with Mustafa in the lead, about five meters behind their coyote.

THERE WAS a pistol range about three hundred yards from the plantation house. It was outdoors, and had steel targets, a set just like those at the FBI Academy, with headplates, circular and roughly the size of a human head. They made an agreeable *clang* when hit, and then they fell down, as a human target would do if hit there. Enzo turned out to be better at this. Aldo explained that the Marine Corps didn't emphasize pistol shooting too much, whereas the FBI paid particular attention to it, figuring that anybody could shoot a shoulder weapon accurately. The FBI brother used the two-handed Weaver stance, while the Marine tended to stand up straight and shoot one-handed, the way the services taught their people.

"Hey, Aldo, that just makes you a better target," Dominic warned.

"Oh yeah?" Brian rippled off three rounds and got three satisfying *clang*s as a result. "Hard to shoot after you take one between the running lights, bro."

"And what's this one-shot/one-kill crap? Anything worth shooting is worth shooting twice."

"How many did you give that mutt in Alabama?" Brian asked.

"Three. I didn't feel like taking any chances," Dominic explained.

"You say so, bro. Hey, let me try that Smith of yours."

Dominic cleared his weapon before handing it over. The magazine went separately. Brian dry-fired it a few times to get used to the feel, then loaded and cycled the action. His first shot *clanged* a headplate. So did his second. The third one missed, though number four did not, a third of a second later. Brian handed the weapon back. "Feels different in the hand," he explained.

"You get used to it," Dominic promised.

"Thanks, but I like the extra six rounds in the magazine."

"Well, it's what you like."

"What's with all the head-shot stuff, anyway?" Brian wondered. "Okay, shooting sniper rifle, it's the surest one-shot stopper, but not with a pistol."

"When you can do a guy in the head from fifteen yards," Pete Alexander answered, "it's just a nice talent to have. It's the best way of ending an argument I know."

"Where did you come from?" Dominic asked.

"You didn't scan, Agent Caruso. Remember that even Adolf Hitler

had friends. Don't they teach that at Quantico?"

"Well, yes," Dominic admitted, somewhat crestfallen.

"When your primary target is down, you scan the area for any friends he might have had. Or you get the hell out of town. Or both."

"You mean run away?" Brian asked.

"Not unless you're on a track. You make your way clear in such a way as to be inconspicuous. That can mean walking into a bookstore and making a purchase, getting a coffee, whatever. You have to make your decision based on circumstances, but keep your objective in mind. Your objective is *always* to get clear of the immediate area as quickly as circumstances allow. Move too fast and people will notice. Move too slow and they might remember seeing you and your subject close together. They will never report the person they didn't notice. So, you want to be one of those. What you wear out on a job, the way you act out in the field, the way you walk, the way you think—all of that must be designed to make you invisible," Alexander told them.

"In other words, Pete, you're saying that when we kill these people we're training for," Brian observed quietly, "you want us to be able to do it and walk away so that we can get away with it."

"Would you prefer to be caught?" Alexander asked.

"No, but the best way to kill somebody is to pop him in the head with a good rifle from a couple of hundred meters away. That works every time."

"But what if we want him dead in such a way that nobody knows he was killed?" the training officer asked.

"How the hell do you manage that?" This was Dominic.

"Patience, lads. One thing at a time."

THERE WERE the remains of some sort of fence. Ricardo just walked through it, using a hole that did not look recent. The fence posts had been painted a rich green, but that had mainly rusted off. The fencing material was in even worse shape. Getting through was the least of their problems. The coyote went a further fifty meters or so, and selected a large rock, then sat down, lit a smoke, and took a drink from his canteen. It was his first stop. The walk had not been difficult at all, and clearly he'd done this many times. Mustafa and his friends did not know that he'd brought several hundred groups across the border along this very route, and had only been arrested once—and that had not amounted to very much, except for stinging his pride. He'd also forfeited his fee, because he was an honorable coyote. Mustafa went over to him.

"Are your friends okay?" Ricardo asked.

"It has not been strenuous," Mustafa replied, "and I have seen no snakes."

"Not too many along here. People usually shoot them, or throw rocks. No one cares much for snakes."

"Are they dangerous—truly, I mean?"

"Only if you are a fool, and even then you are unlikely to die. You will be ill for a few days. No more than that, but it can make walking rather painful. We will wait here for a few minutes. We are ahead of schedule. Oh, yes, welcome to America, *amigo*."

"That fence is all there is?" Mustafa asked in amazement.

"The *norteamericano* is rich, yes, and clever, yes, but he is also lazy. My people would not go there except that there is work the gringo is too lazy to do on his own."

"How many people do you smuggle into America, then?"

"I, you mean? Thousands. Many thousands. For this, I am well paid. I have a fine house, and six other coyotes work for me. The gringos worry more about people smuggling drugs across the border, and I avoid doing that. It is not worth the trouble. I let two of my men do that for me. The pay for that is very high, you see."

"What kind of drugs?" Mustafa asked.

"The kind for which I am paid." He grinned and took another swig from his canteen.

Mustafa turned as Abdullah came up.

"I thought this would be a difficult walk," his number two observed.

"Only for city dwellers," Ricardo replied. "This is my country. I was born of the desert."

"As was I," Abdullah observed. "It is a pleasant day." Better than sitting in the back of a truck, he didn't have to add.

Ricardo lit up another Newport. He liked menthol cigarettes, easier on the throat. "It does not get hot for another month, perhaps two. But then it can be truly hot, and the wise man takes a good water supply. People have died out here without water in the August heat. But none of mine. I make sure everyone has water. The Mother Nature, she has no love and no pity," the coyote observed. At the end of his walk, he knew a place where he could get a few *cervezas* before driving east to El Paso. From there, it was back to his comfortable home in Ascensión, too far from the border to be bothered with would-be emigrants, who had a bad habit of stealing things they might need for the crossing. He wondered how much stealing they did on the gringo side of the line, but it was not his problem, was it? He finished his cigarette and stood. "Three more kilometers to go, my friends."

Mustafa and his friends fell in and restarted the trudge north. Only three kilometers more? At home, they walked farther to a bus stop.

PUNCHING NUMBERS into a keypad was about as much fun as

running naked in a garden of cactus. Jack was the sort to need intellectual stimulation, and while some men might find that in investigative accounting, he was not one of them.

"Bored, eh?" Tony Wills asked.

"Mightily," Jack confirmed.

"Well, that's the reality of gathering and processing intelligence information. Even when it's exciting, it's pretty dull—well, unless you're really on the scent of a particularly elusive fox. Then it can be kinda fun, though it's not like watching your subject out in the field. I've never done that."

"Neither did Dad," Jack observed.

"Depends on which stories you read. Your pop occasionally found his way to the sharp end. I don't imagine he liked it much. He ever talk about it?"

"Not ever. Not even once. I don't even think Mom knows much about that. Well, except the submarine thing, but most of what I know about that comes from books and stuff. I asked Dad once, and all he said was, 'You believe everything you see in the papers?' Even when that Russian guy, Gerasimov, got on TV, all Dad did was grunt."

"The word on him at Langley was that he was a king spook. Kept all the secrets like he was supposed to. But he mostly worked up in the Seventh Floor. I never made it that high myself."

"Maybe you can tell me something."

"Like what?"

"Gerasimov, Nikolay Borissovich Gerasimov. Was he really the head of KGB? Did my dad really drag his ass out of Moscow?"

Wills hesitated for a moment, but there was no avoiding it. "Yeah. He was the KGB chairman, and, yes, your dad did arrange his defection."

"No shit? How the hell did Dad arrange that one?"

"That is a very long story and you are not cleared for it."

"Then why did he rat Dad out?"

"Because he was an unwilling defector. Your father forced him to bug out. He wanted to get even after your dad became President. But, you know, Nikolay Borissovich sang—maybe not like a canary, but he sang anyway. He's in the Witness Protection Program right now. They still bring him in every so often to get him to sing some more. The people you bag, they never give you everything all at once, and so you go back to them periodically. It makes them feel important—enough that they sing some more, usually. He's still not a happy camper. He can't go home. They'd shoot his ass. The Russians have never been real forgiving on state treason. Well, neither are we. So, he lives here with federal protection. Last I heard, he took up golf. His daughter got married to some old-money aristocrat asshole in Virginia. She's a real

American now, but her dad will die an unhappy man. He wanted to take the Soviet Union over, by which I mean he *really* wanted that job, but your father screwed that one up for all time, and Nick still carries the grudge."

"I'll be damned."

"Anything new with Sali?" Wills asked, bringing things back to reality.

"There's some little stuff. You know, fifty thousand here, eighty thousand there—pounds, not dollars. Into accounts I don't know much about. He goes through anywhere from two to eight thousand pounds a week in what he probably considers petty cash."

"Where does that cash originate?" Wills asked.

"Not entirely clear, Tony. I figure he skims some off his family account, maybe two percent that he can write off as expenses. Not quite enough to alert his father that's he stealing from Mom and Pop. I wonder how they'd react to that?" Jack speculated.

"They wouldn't cut his hand off, but they could do something worse—cut his money off. You see this guy working for a living?"

"You mean real work?" Jack had himself a brief laugh. "Somehow I don't see that happening. He's been on the gravy train too long to like driving spikes into the ties. I've been to London a lot. Hard to figure how a working stiff survives there."

Wills began humming. "'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they seen Paree?'"

Jack flushed. "Look, Tony, yeah, I know I grew up rich, but Dad always made sure I had a summer job. I even worked construction for two months. Made life hard for Mike Brennan and his pals. But Dad wanted me to know what it was like to do real work. I hated it at first, but, looking back, it was probably a good thing, I guess. Mr. Sali here has never done that. I mean, I could survive in a real-world entry-level job if I had to. It'd be a lot harder adjustment for this guy."

"Okay, how much unexplained money, total?"

"Maybe two hundred thousand pounds—three hundred thousand bucks, call it. But I haven't really pinned it down yet, and it's not all that much money."

"How much longer to narrow it down?"

"At this rate? Hell, maybe a week if I'm lucky. This is like tracking a single car during New York rush hour, y'know?"

"Keep it up. Isn't supposed to be easy, or fun."

"Aye, aye, sir." It was something he'd picked up from the Marines at the White House. They'd even said that to *him* once in a while, until his father had noticed and put an immediate end to it. Jack turned back to his computer. He kept his real notes on a pad of white lined paper, just because it was easier for him that way, then transferred

them to a separate computer file every afternoon. As he wrote, he noted that Tony was leaving their little room for a trip upstairs.

"THIS KID'S got the eye," Wills told Rick Bell on the top floor.

"Oh?" It was a little early for any results from the rookie, regardless who his father was, Bell thought.

"I put him on a young Saudi living in London, name of Uda bin Sali—money changer for his family's interests. The Brits have a loose tail on him because he called somebody they found interesting once."

"And?"

"And Junior has found a couple of hundred thousand pounds that can't be accounted for."

"How solid is that?" Bell asked.

"We'll have to put a regular on it, but, you know . . . this kid's got the right sort of nose."

"Dave Cunningham, maybe?" A forensic accountant, he'd joined The Campus out of the Department of Justice, Organized Crime Division. Pushing sixty, Dave had a legendary nose for numbers. The trading department at The Campus mainly used him for "conventional" duties. He could have done very well on Wall Street, but he'd just loved bagging bad guys for a living. At The Campus, he could pursue that avocation well past government retirement rules.

"Dave'd be my pick," Tony agreed.

"Okay, let's cross-load Jack's computer files to Dave and see what he turns over."

"Works for me, Rick. You see the take-report from NSA yesterday?"

"Yeah. Got my attention," Bell answered, looking up. Three days before, message traffic from sources that the government intelligence services found interesting had dropped by seventeen percent and two *particularly* interesting sources had almost completely stopped. When radio traffic in a military unit did that, it often meant a standdown prior to real operations. The sort of thing that made signals-intelligence people nervous. The majority of the time, it meant nothing at all, just random chance in operation, but it had developed into something real often enough that the signal-spooks frequently went into a tizzy about it.

"Any ideas?" Wills asked.

Bell shook his head. "I stopped being superstitious about ten years ago."

Clearly, Tony Wills had not: "Rick, we're due. We've been due for a long time."

"I know what you're saying, but we can't run this place on that sort of stuff."

"Rick, this is like sitting at a ball game—dugout seats, maybe, but

you still can't go on the field when you want."

"To do what, kill the umpire?" Bell asked.

"No, just the guy planning to throw a beanball."

"Patience, Tony, patience."

"Son of a bitch of a virtue to acquire, isn't it?" Wills had never quite learned it, despite all his experience.

"Think you have it bad? What about Gerry?"

"Yeah, Rick, I know." He stood. "Later, man."

THEY'D SEEN not another human being, not a car, not a helicopter. Clearly, there was nothing of value out here. No oil, no gold, not even copper. Nothing worth guarding or protecting. The walk had just been enough to be healthy. Some scrubby bushes, even some stunted trees. A few tire tracks, but none of them recent. This part of America might as well have been Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter, the Rub' al-Khali, where even a hardy desert camel would have found it grim going.

But clearly the walk was over. As they crested a small rise, they saw five more vehicles sitting all alone, with men standing by them talking among themselves.

"Ah," Ricardo said, "they are early, too. Excellent." He could dump these morose foreigners and get on with his business. He stopped and let his clients catch up.

"This is our destination?" Mustafa asked, with hope in his voice. It had been an easy walk, far easier than he'd expected.

"My friends there will take you to Las Cruces. There you can make your travel plans for the future."

"And you?" Mustafa asked.

"I go home to my family," Ricardo answered. Wasn't that simple enough? Maybe this guy didn't have a family?

The remaining walk took only ten minutes. Ricardo got in the lead SUV after shaking hands with his party. They were friendly enough, albeit in a guarded fashion. It could have been harder to get them here, but illegal-immigrant traffic was far thicker in Arizona and California, and that was where the U.S. Border Patrol had most of its personnel. The gringos tended to grease the squeaky wheel—like everyone else in the world, perhaps, but still it was not terribly farsighted of them. Sooner or later, they'd realize that there was cross-border traffic here, too. Just not the dramatic sort. Then he might have to find a new way to make a living. He'd done well the past seven years, however—enough to set up a little business and raise his children into a more legitimate line of work.

He watched his party board their transport and motor off. He also headed in the general direction of Las Cruces, then turned south on I-10 toward El Paso. He'd long since stopped wondering what his

clients planned to do in America. Probably not tending gardens or doing construction work, he judged, but he'd been paid ten thousand dollars in American cash. So, they were important to someone . . . but not to him.

CHAPTER 10

DESTINATIONS

FOR MUSTAFA and his friends, the ride to Las Cruces was a surprisingly welcome break, and though they didn't show it, there was obvious excitement now. They were in America. Here were the people they proposed to kill. The mission was now somehow closer to fulfillment, not by a mere handful of kilometers, but by a magical, invisible line. They were in the home of the Great Satan. Here were the people who had rained death upon their homeland, and upon the Faithful throughout the Muslim world, the people who so fawningly supported Israel.

At Deming, they turned east for Las Cruces. Sixty-two miles—a hundred kilometers—to their next intermediate stop, along I-10. There were billboards advertising road hotels and places to eat, tourist attractions of types routine and inconceivable, and more rolling land, and horizons which seemed far even as the car ate up the distances at a steady seventy miles per hour.

Their driver, as before, looked Mexican, and said nothing. Probably another mercenary. Nobody said anything, the driver because he didn't care, his passengers because their English was accented, and the driver might take note of it. This way he'd only remember that he'd picked up some people on a dirt road in southern New Mexico and driven them someplace else.

It was probably harder for the others in his party, Mustafa thought. They had to trust him to know what he was doing. He was the mission commander, the leader of a warrior band about to divide into four parts that would never reunite. The mission had been painstakingly planned. The only future communications would be via computer, and few enough of those. They'd function independently, but to a simple timetable and toward a single strategic objective. This plan would shake America as no other plan had ever done, Mustafa told himself, looking into a station wagon as it passed them. Two parents, and what appeared to be two little ones, a boy about four, and a smaller one perhaps a year and a half. Infidels, all of them. Targets.

His operational plan was all written down, of course, in fourteen-point Geneva type on sheets of plain white paper. Four copies. One for

each team leader. The other data was in files on the personal computers that all of the men had in their small carry-bags, along with spare shirts and clean underwear and little else. They would not need much, and the plan was to leave very little behind in order to further befuddle the Americans.

It was enough to generate a thin smile at the passing countryside. Mustafa lit up a cigarette—he only had three left—and took a deep breath of tobacco smoke, and the air-conditioning blew cold air on him. Behind them, the sun was declining in the sky. They'd make their next—and last—stop in the darkness, which, he considered, was good tactical planning. He knew it was only an accident, but, if so, it meant that Allah Himself was smiling on their plan. As He ought to do, of course. They were all doing His work.

* * *

ANOTHER DULL day's work done, Jack told himself on the way to his car. One bad thing about The Campus was that he couldn't discuss it with anybody. *Nobody* was cleared for this stuff, though it was not yet evident why. He could, surely, kick this around with his dad—the President was by definition cleared for anything, and ex-Presidents had the same access to information, if not by law, then by the rules of practicality. But, no, he couldn't do that. Dad would not be pleased by his new job. Dad could make a phone call and screw all of that up, and Jack had had enough of a taste to keep himself hungry for a few months at least. Even so, the ability to kick a few things around with *somebody* who knew what was going on would have been a blessing of sorts. Just someone to say, yes, it really *is* important, and, yes, you really *are* contributing to Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

Could he really make a difference? The world worked the way it worked, and he couldn't change it much. Even his father, for all the power that had come to him, had been unable to do that. How much less could he, a junior prince of sorts, be able to accomplish? But if the broken parts of the world were ever to be fixed, it would have to be at the hands of someone who didn't care if it were impossible or not. Probably someone too young and dumb to know that impossible things were . . . impossible. But neither his mother nor his father believed in that word, and that's the way they had raised him. Sally was graduating medical school soon, and she was going into oncology —the one thing their mother had regretted not doing with her own medical career—and she told everyone who asked that she was going to be there when the cancer dragon was finally slain once and for all. So, believing in impossibility was not part of the Ryan creed. He just

didn't know how yet, but the world was full of things to learn, wasn't it? And he was smart and well educated, and having a sizable trust fund meant that he could go forward without fear of starving if he offended the wrong person. That was the most important freedom his father had bequeathed him, and John Patrick Ryan, Jr., was smart enough to know just how important it was—if not to grasp the responsibility that such freedom carried with it.

INSTEAD OF cooking their own dinner, they decided to go to a local steak house that night. It was full of college kids from the University of Virginia. You could tell—they all looked bright, but not as bright as they thought they were, and they were all a little too loud, a little too confident in themselves. That was one of the advantages of being children—much as they would have detested that appellation—kids whose needs were still looked after by loving parents, albeit at a comfortable distance. To the two Caruso boys, it was a humorous look at what they'd themselves been only a few short years ago, before harsh training and experience in the real world had turned them into something else. Exactly what, they were not yet sure. What had seemed so simple in school had become infinitely complex after leaving the academic womb. The world was not digital, after all—it was an analog reality, always untidy, always with loose ends that could never be tied up neatly like shoelaces, and so it was possible to trip and fall with every incautious step. And caution only came with experience—with a few trip-and-falls that brought pain, only the worst of which taught remembered lessons. Those lessons had come early to the brothers. Not as early as they'd come to other generations, but still soon enough for them to realize the consequences of errors in a world that had never learned to forgive.

"Not a bad place," Brian judged, halfway through his filet mignon.

"Hard to mess up a decent piece of beef, no matter how dumb the cook is." This place obviously had a cook, not a chef, but the steak fries were pretty good for nearly raw carbohydrates, and the broccoli was fresh out of the freezer bag, Dominic thought.

"I really ought to eat better than this," the Marine major observed.

"Enjoy it while you can. We're not thirty yet, are we?"

That was good for a laugh. "Used to seem like an awfully big number, didn't it?"

"Where old age starts? Oh yeah. Well, you're pretty young for a major, right?"

Aldo shrugged. "I suppose. My boss liked me, and I had some good people working for me. I never did take a liking to MREs, though. They keep you going, but that's about all I can say for them. My gunny loved the things, said they were better than what he'd grown

up in the Corps with."

"In the Bureau, you tend to live on Dunkin' Donuts and—well, they make about the best industrial coffee in America. It's hard to keep your belt loose on that kind of diet."

"You're in decent shape for a deskbound warrior, Enzo," Brian observed rather generously. At the end of the morning run, his brother occasionally looked as though he was about to drop. But a three-mile run was just like morning coffee for a Marine, something to open the eyes. "I still wish I knew exactly what we're training for," Aldo said after another bite.

"Bro, we're training to kill people, that's all we need to know. Sneak up without being seen, and then get the hell away without being noticed."

"With pistols?" Brian responded dubiously. "Kinda noisy, and not as sure as a rifle. I had a sniper with my team in Afghanistan. He did some bad guys at damned near a mile. Used a Barrett .50 rifle, big mother, like an old BAR on steroids. Shoots the .50 round from the Ma Deuce machine gun. Accurate as hell, and it makes for a definitive hit, y'know? Kinda hard to walk away with a half-inch hole in you." Especially since his sniper, Corporal Alan Roberts, a black kid from Detroit, had preferred head shots, and the .50 *really* did the job on heads.

"Well, maybe suppressed ones. You can silence a handgun fairly well."

"I've seen those. We trained with them at Recon School, but they're awful bulky for carrying under a business suit, and you still have to take them out and stand still and aim them at the target's head. Unless they send us to James Bond School to get courses in magic, we're not going to be killing many people with handguns, Enzo."

"Well, maybe we'll be using something else."

"So you don't know, either?"

"Hey, man, my checks still come from the Bureau. All I know is that Gus Werner sent me here, and that makes it most-of-the-way kosher . . . I think," he concluded.

"You mentioned him before. Who is he, exactly?"

"Assistant Director, head of the new Counter-Terrorism Division. You don't fuck with Gus. He was head of the Hostage Rescue Team, got all his other tickets punched, too. Smart guy, and tough as hell. I don't think he faints at the sight of blood. But he's also got a real head on his shoulders. Terrorism is the new thing at the Bureau, and Dan Murray didn't pick him for the job just because he can shoot a gun. He and Murray are tight, they go back twenty-plus years. Murray ain't no dummy, either. Anyway, if he sent me here, it's gotta be okay with somebody. So, I'll play along until they tell me to break the law."

"Me, too, but I'm still a little nervous."

LAS CRUCES had a regional airport for short hauls and puddle jumpers. Along with that came rent-a-car outlets. They pulled in, and it was time for Mustafa to get nervous. He and one of his colleagues would hire cars here. Two more would make use of a similar business in the town itself.

"It is all prepared for you," the driver told them. He handed over two sheets of paper. "Here are the reservation numbers. You'll be driving Ford Crown Victoria four-door sedans. We could not get you station wagons as requested without going to El Paso, and that was not desirable. Use your Visa card in there. Your name is Tomas Salazar. Your friend is Hector Santos. Show them the reservation numbers and just do what they tell you to do. It is very easy." Neither man struck the driver as overly Latin in appearance, but the people at this rental office were both ignorant paddies who spoke little Spanish beyond *"taco"* and *"cerveza."*

Mustafa got out of the car and walked in, waving for his friend to follow.

Immediately, he knew it would be easy. Whoever owned this business, he hadn't troubled himself with recruiting intelligent people. The boy running the desk was hunched over it, reading a comic book with attention that looked a little too rapt.

"Hello," Mustafa said, with false confidence. "I have reservation." He wrote the number down on a pad and handed it to him.

"Okay." The attendant didn't show his annoyance at being diverted from the newest Batman adventure. He knew how to work the office computer. Sure enough, the computer spat out a rental form already filled out in most details.

Mustafa handed over his international driver's license, which the employee Xeroxed, and then he stapled the photocopy to his copy of the rental form. He was delighted that Mr. Salazar took all of the insurance options—he got extra money for encouraging people to do that.

"Okay, your car is the white Ford in slot number four. Just go out that door and turn right. The keys are in the ignition, sir."

"Thank you," Mustafa said in accented English. *Was it really* this *easy?*

Evidently, it was. He'd just got the seat in his Ford adjusted when Saeed showed up at slot number five for a light green twin to his sedan. Both had maps of the state of New Mexico, but they didn't need them, really. Both men started their cars and eased out of their parking slots and headed off to the street, where the SUVs were waiting. It was simple enough to follow them. The town of Las Cruces

had traffic, but not all that much at the dinner hour.

There was another rental car agency just eight blocks north on what appeared to be the main street of Las Cruces. This one was called Hertz, which struck Mustafa as vaguely Jewish in character. His two comrades walked in, and, ten minutes later, walked back out and got in their leased cars. Again, they were Fords of the same make as his and Saeed's. With that done, perhaps the most hazardous mission they had to accomplish, it was time to follow the SUVs north for a few kilometers—about twenty, as it turned out—then off this road onto another dirt one. There seemed to be a lot of those here . . . just like home, in fact. Another kilometer or so, and there was a house standing alone, with only a truck parked nearby to suggest residency. There, all the vehicles parked and the occupants got out for what would be, Mustafa realized, their last proper meeting.

"We have your weapons here," Juan told them. He pointed to Mustafa. "Come with me, please."

The inside of this ordinary-looking wood-frame structure appeared to be a virtual arsenal. A total of sixteen cardboard boxes held sixteen MAC-10 sub-machine guns. Not an elegant firearm, the MAC is made of machine-steel stampings, with a generally poor finish on the metal. With each weapon were twelve magazines, apparently all loaded, and taped together end-to-end with black electrician's tape.

"The weapons are virgins. They have not been fired," Juan told them. "We also have suppressors for each of them. They are not efficient silencers, but they improve balance and accuracy. This gun is not as easily handled as the Uzi—but those are also more difficult to obtain here. For this weapon, its effective range is about ten meters. It is easily loaded and unloaded. It fires from an open bolt, of course, and the rate of fire is quite high." It would, in fact, empty a thirty-round magazine in less than three seconds, which was a little *too* fast for sensible use, but these people didn't seem overly particular to Juan.

They weren't. Each of the sixteen Arabs lifted a weapon and hefted it, as though to say hello to a new friend. Then one lifted a magazine pair—

"Stop ! *Halto!*" Juan snapped at once. "You will not load these weapons inside. If you wish to test-fire them, we have targets outside."

"Will this not be too noisy?" Mustafa asked.

"The nearest house is four kilometers away," Juan answered dismissively. The bullets could not travel that far, and he assumed the noise could not either. In this, he was mistaken.

But his guests assumed he knew everything about the area, and they were always willing to shoot guns off, especially the rock-and-roll

kind. Twenty meters from the house was a sand berm with some crates and cardboard boxes scattered about. One by one, they inserted the magazines into their SMGs and pulled back the bolts. There was no official command to fire. Instead, they took their lead from Mustafa, who grasped the strap dangling from the muzzle and pulled his trigger back.

The immediate results were agreeable. The MAC-10 made the appropriate noise, jumping up and right as all such weapons did, but since this was his first time and this was just range shooting, he managed to walk his rounds into a cardboard box about six meters to his left front. In seemingly no time at all, the bolt slammed shut on an empty chamber, having fired and ejected thirty Remington 9mm pistol cartridges. He thought of extracting the magazine and reversing it to enjoy another two or three seconds of blazing bliss, but he managed to control himself. There would be another time for that, in the not-too-distant future.

"The silencers?" he asked Juan.

"Inside. They screw on the muzzle, and it's better to screw them on —easier to control how they spray their bullets, you see." Juan spoke with some authority. He'd used the MAC-10 to eliminate business competitors and other unpleasant people in Dallas and Santa Fe over the years. Despite that, he looked on his guests with a certain unease. They grinned too much. They were not as he was, Juan Sandoval told himself, and the sooner they went on their way, the better. It would not be so for the people at their destinations, but that was not his concern. His orders came from on high. *Very* on high, his immediate superior had made clear to him the week before. And the money had been commensurate. Juan had no particular complaint, but, as a good reader of people, he had a red light flashing behind his eyes.

Mustafa followed him back in and picked up the suppressor. It was perhaps ten centimeters in diameter, and half a meter or so long. As promised, it screwed onto the thread on the gun's muzzle, and on the whole, it did improve the weapon's balance. He hefted it briefly and decided that he'd prefer to use it this way. Better to reduce muzzle climb, and make for more accurate shooting. The reduction in noise had little bearing on his mission, but accuracy did. But the suppressor made an easily concealed weapon unacceptably bulky. So, he unscrewed it for now, and replaced the silencer in its carry-bag. Then he went outside to gather his people. Juan followed him back out.

"Some things you need to know," he told the team leaders. Juan went on in a slow, measured voice: "The American police are efficient, but they are not all-powerful. If, during your driving, one pulls you over, all you need to do is to speak politely. If he asks you to get out of the car, then get out as he says. He is allowed by American laws to

see if you have a weapon on your person—to search you with his hands—but if he asks you to search your car, simply say no, I do not wish you to do that—and by their laws he may *not* search your car. I will say this again: If an American policeman asks to search your car, you need only say no, and then he may not do it. Then drive away. When you drive, do not go faster than the number on the highway signs. If you do that, you will probably not be disturbed in any way. If you go faster than the speed limit, all you do is to give the police a reason to pull you over. So, *do not do that.* Exercise patience at all times. Do you have any questions?"

"What if a policeman is too aggressive, can we—"

Juan knew that question was coming. "Kill one? Yes, it is possible to do so, but then you will have many more police chasing you. When a police officer pulls you over, the very first thing he will do is radio his location, and the license number of your car, and a description, to his headquarters. So, even if you kill him, his comrades will look for you in a matter of minutes—and in large numbers. It is not worth the satisfaction of killing the policeman. You will only invite more trouble on yourselves. American police forces have many cars, and even aircraft. Once they start looking for you, they *will* find you. So, your only defense against that is to escape notice. Do not speed. Do not break their traffic laws. Do that and you will be safe. Violate those laws, and you will be caught, guns or not. Do you understand this?"

"We understand," Mustafa assured him. "Thank you for your assistance."

"We have maps for all of you. They are good maps, from the American Automobile Association. You all have cover stories, yes?" Juan asked, hoping to get this over as quickly as he could.

Mustafa looked at his friends for additional inquiries, but they were too eager to get on with their business to be sidetracked now. Satisfied, he turned to Juan. "Thank you for your help, my friend."

Friend be damned, Juan thought, but he took the man's hand and walked them around to the front of the building. Bags were quickly transferred from the SUVs to the sedans, and then he watched them pull off, heading back to State Route 185. It was only a few miles to Radium Springs, and the entrance onto I-25 North. The foreigners gathered one last time, to shake hands—and even share a few kisses, Juan was surprised to see. Then they split up into four teams of four men each and entered their rental cars.

Mustafa settled in his car. He set his cigarette packs on the seat next to him, made sure that the mirrors were properly aligned for his eyes, and buckled his seat belt—he'd been told that not buckling was as likely as speeding to get himself pulled over. Above all things, he didn't want to be pulled over by a policeman. Despite the briefing

instructions he'd received from Juan, it was a risk he felt no desire to run. Passing by, a cop might not recognize them for what they were, but face-to-face was something else again, and he had no illusions about how Americans thought of Arabs. For that reason, all copies of the Holy Koran were tucked away in the trunk.

It would be a long time, Abdullah would spell him at the wheel, but the first stint would be his. North on I-25 to Albuquerque, then east on I-40 almost all the way to their target. Over three thousand kilometers. He'd have to start thinking in miles now, Mustafa told himself. One point six kilometers to a mile. He'd have to multiply every number by that constant, or just disregard metric altogether as far as his car was concerned. Whatever, he drove north on Route 185 until he saw the leaf-green sign and the arrow for I-25 North. He settled back in his seat, checked traffic as he merged, and increased speed to sixty-five miles per hour, setting the Ford's cruise control right on that number. After that, it was just a matter of steering, and watching all of the anonymous traffic which, like him and his friends, was headed north to Albuquerque . . .

JACK DIDN'T know why it was hard to go to sleep. It was past eleven in the evening, he'd seen his nightly take of TV, and had his two or three—tonight it had been three—drinks. He should have been sleepy. He *was* sleepy, as a matter of fact, but sleep wasn't coming. And he didn't know why. Just close your eyes and think happy thoughts, his mom had told him as a little boy. But thinking happy thoughts was the hard part now that he wasn't a kid anymore. He'd entered into a new world that had few enough of those in it. His job was to examine the known and suspected facts concerning people he'd probably never meet, try to decide if they wanted to kill other people he'd never meet, then pass the information on to other people who might or might not try to do something about it. Exactly *what* they would try to do he did not know, though he had his suspicions . . . and ugly suspicions they were. Roll over, refluff the pillow, try to find a cool spot in the pillowcase, head back down, get some sleep . . .

. . . it wasn't happening. It would, eventually. It always did, seemingly half a second before the clock radio went off.

God damn *it!* he raged at the ceiling.

He was hunting terrorists. Most of them believed something good—no, something heroic—about themselves as they went about their crimes. To them it wasn't a crime at all. For Muslim terrorists, it was the illusion that they were doing God's work. Except the Holy Koran didn't really say that. It particularly disapproved of killing innocent people, noncombatants. How did that really work? Did Allah greet suicide bombers with a smile, or something else? In Catholicism,

personal conscience was sovereign. If you truly believed you were doing the right thing, then God couldn't slam you for it. Was Islam the same in its rules? Besides, since there was only *one* God, maybe the rules *were* the same for everybody. Problem was, which set of religious rules came closest to what God really thought? And how the hell did you tell which was which? The Crusades had done some pretty vile things. But that was a classic case of someone giving a religious title for a war that was really about economics and simple ambition. A nobleman just didn't want to appear to be fighting for money— and with God on your side, there was nothing you couldn't do. Swing the sword, and whatever neck you severed was okay. The bishop said so.

Right. The real problem was that religion and political power made a shitty mix, though one easily adopted by the young and enthusiastic, for whom adventure was something that just pulled at your sleeve. His father had talked about that, sometimes, over dinner on the Residence Level of the White House, explaining that one of the things you had to tell young soldier and Marine recruits was that even war had rules, and that breaking them carried stiff penalties. American soldiers learned that pretty easily, Jack Sr. had told his son, because they came from a society in which undisciplined violence was harshly punished, which was better than abstract principle for teaching right and wrong. After a smack or two, you kinda picked up the message.

He sighed, and rolled over again. He was really too young to think about such Great Questions of Life, even though his degree from Georgetown suggested otherwise. Colleges typically did not tell you that ninety percent of your education came after you hung the parchment on the wall. People might ask for a rebate.

IT WAS past closing time at The Campus. Gerry Hendley was in his top-floor office, going over data that he hadn't been able to fit into the normal working day. It was the same for Tom Davis, who had reports from Pete Alexander.

"Trouble?" Hendley asked.

"The twins are still thinking a little too much, Gerry. We should have anticipated it. They're both smart, and they're both people who play within the rules, for the most part, so when they see themselves being trained to violate those rules it worries them. The funny part, Pete says, is that the Marine's the one who's worrying so much. The FBI one is playing along much better."

"I would have expected it to go the other way."

"So did I. And Pete." Davis reached for his ice water. He never drank coffee this late at night. "Anyway, Pete says he's unsure how it's going to play out, but he has no choice other than to continue the training. Gerry, I should have warned you more about this. I figured

we'd have this problem. Hell, it's our first time. The sort of people we want—like I said, they're not psychopaths. They *will* ask questions. They *will* want to know why. They *will* have second thoughts. We can't recruit robots, can we?"

"Like when they tried to whack Castro," Hendley observed. He'd read into the classified files on that mad, failed adventure. Bobby Kennedy had ramrodded Operation MONGOOSE. They'd probably decided over drinks, or maybe after some touch football, to play that game. After all, Eisenhower had used CIA for similar purposes during his presidency, so why shouldn't they? Except that a former lieutenant in the Navy who'd lost his command to ramming, and a lawyer who'd never practiced law, did not instinctively know all the things that a career soldier who'd gone to five stars fully understood from the very beginning. And besides, they'd had the power. The Constitution itself had made Jack Kennedy Commander in Chief, and with that sort of power invariably came the urge to make use of it, and so reshape the world into something more amenable to his personal outlook. And so, CIA had been ordered to make Castro go away. But CIA had never had an assassination department, and had never trained people to perform such missions. And so, the Agency had gone to the Mafia, whose commission members had little reason to admire Fidel Castro—who had shut down what had been about to become their most profitable venture ever. It'd been so sure a thing that some of the organized-crime big shots had invested their own, personal, money in the Havana casinos, only to have them closed down by the communist dictator.

And did not the Mafia know how to kill people?

Well, in fact, no, they had never been very efficient at it—especially at killing people able to fight back—Hollywood movies to the contrary. And even so, the government of the United States of America had tried to use them as contractors for the assassination of a foreign chief of state—because CIA didn't know how to make such a thing happen. It was, in retrospect, somewhat ludicrous. Somewhat ? Gerry Hendley asked himself. It had come within an inch of exposure as a government-engineered train wreck. Enough to force President Gerry Ford into drafting his executive order that made such action illegal, and *that* order had lasted until President Ryan had decided to take out the religious dictator of Iran with two smart bombs. Remarkably, the time and circumstances had disabled the news media from commenting on the killing. It had been done, after all, by the United States Air Force, with properly marked—albeit stealthy—bomber aircraft in a time of an undeclared but very real war in which weapons of mass destruction had been used against American citizens. Those factors had combined to make the entire operation not only legitimate

but laudable, as ratified by the American people at the following election. Only George Washington had garnered a larger plurality at the polls, a fact which still made the senior Jack Ryan uneasy. But Jack had known the import of the killing of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, and so, before leaving office, had talked Gerry into establishing The Campus.

But Jack didn't tell me how hard this would be, Hendley reminded himself. That was how Jack Ryan had always operated: Pick good people, give them a mission and the tools to accomplish it, then let them do it with minimal guidance from on high. It was what had made him a good boss, and a pretty good president, Gerry thought. But it didn't make life much easier on his subordinates. Why the *hell* had he taken the assignment? Hendley asked himself. But then came a smile. How would Jack react when he found out his own son was part of The Campus? Would he see the humor of it?

Probably not.

"So, Pete says just to play it out?"

"What else can he say?" Davis asked in reply.

"Tom, ever wish you were back on your dad's farm in Nebraska?"

"It's awful hard work, and kind of dull out there." And there was no way you were going to keep Davis down on the farm after he'd been a CIA field officer. He might be a pretty good bond trader now in his "white" life, but Davis was no more white in his true avocation than he was in his skin color. He liked the action in the "black" world too much.

"What do you think of the Fort Meade stuff?"

"My gut tells me we're due for something. We've stung them. They'll want to sting us back."

"You think they can recover? Haven't our troops in Afghanistan bit into them pretty hard?"

"Gerry, some people are too dumb, or too dedicated, to notice being hurt. Religion is a powerful motivator. And even if their shooters are too dumb to know the import of what they're doing—"

"—they're smart enough to carry out missions," Hendley agreed.

"And isn't that why we're here?" Davis asked.

CHAPTER 11

CROSSING THE RIVER

THE SUN rose promptly at dawn. Mustafa was startled awake by the combination of bright light and a bump in the road. He shook his head clear and turned to see Abdullah smiling at the wheel.

"Where are we?" the team leader asked his principal subordinate.

"We are half an hour east of Amarillo. It has been a pleasant drive for the past three hundred and fifty miles, but I will soon need petrol."

"Why didn't you wake me hours ago?"

"Why? You were sleeping pleasantly, and the road has been almost completely clear all night, except for those damned big trucks. These Americans must all sleep at night. I do not think I have seen more than thirty real automobiles in the past several hours."

Mustafa checked the speedometer. The car was only doing sixty-five. So, Abdullah was not speeding. They hadn't been stopped by any policemen. There was nothing to be upset about—except that Abdullah had not followed his orders as precisely as Mustafa would have preferred.

"There." The driver pointed at a blue service sign. "We can get petrol and some food. I was planning to wake you up here anyway, Mustafa. Be at ease, my friend." The fuel gauge was almost on the "E," Mustafa saw. Abdullah had been foolish to let it get that low, but there was no sense in berating him for it.

They pulled into a sizable travel plaza. The gas pumps were labeled Chevron and were automated. Mustafa took out his wallet and inserted his Visa card in the slot, then filled up the Ford with over twenty gallons of premium gasoline.

By that time, the other three had cycled through the plaza's men's room and were examining the food options. Looked like doughnuts again. Ten minutes after pulling the car off the interstate highway, they were back onto it, heading east for Oklahoma. In another twenty minutes, they'd entered it.

In the back of the car, Rafi and Zuhayr were awake and talking, and, as he drove, Mustafa listened in without joining the conversation.

The land was flat, similar to home in its topography, though far greener. The horizon was surprisingly far away, enough so that

estimating distance seemed impossible on first glance. The sun was above the horizon, and it burned into his eyes until he remembered the sunglasses in his shirt pocket. They helped somewhat.

Mustafa remarked to himself on his current state of mind. He found the driving pleasant, the passing terrain pleasing to the eye, and the work, such as it was, easy. Every ninety minutes or so, he saw a marked police car, usually passing his Ford at a good clip, too fast for the policeman inside to eyeball him and his friends. It had been good advice to cruise right on the speed limit. They moved along nicely, but people regularly passed them, even the big trucks. Not breaking the law even a little made them invisible to the police whose main business was to punish those in too great a hurry. He was confident that their mission security was solid. Had it not been the case, they'd have been followed, or pulled over on a particularly deserted stretch of highway into a trap with guns and many, many enemies. But that hadn't happened. An additional advantage of driving right on the speed limit was that anyone tailing them would stand out. It was just a matter of checking his mirror. No one lingered there for more than a few minutes. Any police shadow would be a man—it would have to be a man—in his twenties or thirties. Maybe two of them, one to drive and one to look. The men would be physically fit looking, with conservative haircuts. They'd tail for a few minutes before breaking contact, as someone else took the surveillance job over. They'd be clever, of course, but the nature of the mission made their procedures predictable. Some cars would disappear and reappear. But Mustafa was fully alert, and no car had appeared more than once. They might be tailed by aircraft, of course, but helicopters were easy to spot. The only real danger was a small fixed-wing aircraft, but he could not worry about everything. If it were written, then written it was, and there was no defense against that. For the moment, the road was clear and the coffee was excellent. It would be a fine day. OKLAHOMA CITY 36 MILES, the green road sign proclaimed.

NPR ANNOUNCED that it was Barbra Streisand's birthday, a vital piece of information with which to begin the day, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., told himself as he rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. A few minutes later, he saw that his clock-controlled coffeemaker had functioned properly and dripped two cups into the white plastic pot. He decided to hit McDonald's this morning and get an Egg McMuffin and hash browns on the way to work. It wasn't exactly a healthy breakfast, but it was filling, and at twenty-three he wasn't overly worried about cholesterol and fat, as his father was, courtesy of his mother. Mom would already be dressed and ready to be driven to Hopkins (by her principal agent of the Secret Service) for her

morning's work, without coffee if she was operating today, because she worried that caffeine might give her hand a slight tremor—and drive her little knife into the poor bastard's brain after skewering the eyeball like the olive in a martini (that was his father's joke, which usually resulted in a playful slap from Mom). Dad would go to work on his memoirs, assisted by a ghostwriter (which he detested—but the publisher had insisted). Sally was in the pretend doc stage of medical school; he didn't know what she was doing at this moment. Katie and Kyle would be dressing for school. But Little Jack had to go to work. It had recently occurred to him that college had been his last real vacation. Oh, sure, every little boy and girl wants nothing more than to grow up and take proper charge of his or her life, but then you get there—and it's too late to go back. This work every-day thing was a drag. Okay, fine, you got paid for it—but he was *already* rich, the scion of a distinguished family. The money, in his case, was already *made,* and he wasn't the kind of wastrel likely to piss it all away and become a self-unmade man, was he? He set his empty coffee cup in the dishwasher and went to the bathroom to shave.

That was *another* drag. Damn, a teenybopper was so pleased to see the first bunch of peach fuzz turn dark and bristly, and then you got to shave once or twice a week, usually before a date. But every damned morning—what a pain in the ass that was! He remembered watching his father do it, as young boys often do, and thinking how neat it was to be a grown man. Yeah, sure. Growing up just wasn't worth the hassle. It was better to have a mom and dad to take care of all the administrative bullshit. And yet. . .

And yet, he was doing important stuff now, and that did have its satisfactions, sort of. Once you got past all the housekeeping that accompanied it. Well. Clean shirt. Pick a tie and tie tack. Slide the jacket on. Out the door. At least he had a fun car to drive. He might get himself another. A ragtop, maybe. Summer was coming, and it would be cool to have the wind blowing in your hair. Until some pervert with a knife slashed the canvas top, and you had to call the insurance company and the car vanished into the shop for three days. When you got down to it, growing up was like going to the shopping mall to buy underwear. Everyone needed it, but there wasn't much you could do with it except take it off.

The drive to work was about as routine as driving to school, except he didn't have to worry about an exam anymore. Except that if he screwed up, he'd lose the job, and *that* black mark would follow him a lot longer than an "F" in sociology would. So, he didn't want to screw up. The problem with this job was that every day was spent in learning, not in applying knowledge. The whole big lie about college was that it taught you what you needed to know for life. Yeah, right.

It probably hadn't done that for his dad—and for Mom, hell, she *never* stopped reading her medical journals to learn about new stuff. Not just American journals, either, English and French, too, because she spoke pretty good French and she said that French docs were good. Better than their politicians were, but, then again, anyone who judged America by its political leaders probably thought the U.S. of A. was a nation of fuckups. At least since his dad had checked out of the White House.

He was listening to NPR again. It was his favorite news station, and it beat listening to the current brand of popular music. He'd grown up listening to his mom on the piano, mostly Bach and his peers—maybe a little John Williams in a gesture toward modernity, though he wrote more for brass than the ivories.

Another suicide bomber in Israel. Damn, his dad had tried awfully hard to settle that one down, but despite some earnest efforts, even by the Israelis, it had all come undone. The Jews and Muslims just could not seem to get along. His dad and Prince Ali bin Sultan talked about it whenever they got together, and the frustration they displayed was painful to see. The prince hadn't been screened for the kingship of his country—which was possibly good luck, Jack thought, since being a king had to be even worse than being President—but he remained an important figure whose words the current king listened to most of the time . . . which brought him to . . .

Uda bin Sali. There'd be more news on him this morning. Yesterday's take from the British SIS, courtesy of the CIA pukes at Langley. CIA pukes? Jack asked himself. His own father had worked there, had served with distinction before moving up in the world, and had told his kids many times not to believe anything they saw in the movies about the intelligence business. Jack Jr. had asked him questions and mainly gotten unsatisfactory answers, and now he was learning what the business was really like. Mostly boring. Too much like accounting, like chasing after mice in Jurassic Park, though at least you had the advantage of being invisible to the raptors. Nobody knew that The Campus existed, and so long as that remained true everyone there was safe. That made for a comfortable feeling, but again, boring. Junior was still young enough to think excitement was fun.

Left off U.S. Route 29 and on to The Campus. The usual parking place. Smile and a wave at the security guard and up to his office. It was then that Junior realized he'd driven right past McDonald's, and so he picked two Danish off the treat tray, and made a cup of coffee on his way to his cubbyhole. Light up the computer and go to work.

"Good morning, Uda," Jack Jr. said to the computer screen. "What have you been up to?" The clock window on the computer said 8:25

AM. That translated to early afternoon in London's financial district. Bin Sali had an office in the Lloyd's insurance building, which, Junior remembered from previous hops across the pond, looked like a glassed-in oil refinery. Upscale neighborhood and some very wealthy neighbors. The report didn't say which floor, but Jack had never been in the building anyway. Insurance. Had to be the most boring job in the world, waiting for a building to burn down. So, yesterday Uda had made some phone calls, one of them to . . . aha! "I know that name from somewhere," the young Ryan told the screen. It was the name of a very rich Middle Eastern fellow who also had been known to play in the wrong playground on occasion, and who was also under surveillance by the Brit Security Service. So, what had they talked about?

There was even a transcript. The conversation had been in Arabic, and the translation . . . might as well have been instructions from the wife to buy a quart of milk on the way home from work. About that exciting and revealing—except that Uda had replied to a totally innocuous statement with "Are you sure?" *Not* the sort of thing you said to the wife when she said to get a quart of skim milk on the way home.

"The tone of voice suggests hidden meaning," the Brit analyst had opined gently at the bottom of the report.

Then, later in the day, Uda had left his office early and entered another pub and met with the same guy he'd been talking to on the phone. So, the conversation hadn't been innocuous after all? But, though they hadn't managed to overhear the conversation in a pub booth, neither had the phone chat specified a meeting or a meeting place . . . and Uda didn't spend much time in that particular pub.

"'Morning, Jack," Wills greeted as he came in and hung up his suit jacket. "What's happening?"

"Our friend Uda is wiggling like a live fish." Jack punched the PRINT command and handed the printout across to his roomie even before he'd had a chance to sit down.

"It seems to suggest that possibility, doesn't it?"

"Tony, this guy is a player," Jack said with some conviction in his voice.

"What did he do after the phone conversation? Any unusual transactions?"

"I haven't checked yet, but if there is, then he was ordered to do it by his friend, and then they met so that he could confirm it over a pint of John Smith's Bitter."

"You're making a leap of imagination. We try to avoid that here," Wills cautioned.

"I know," Junior growled. It was time to check out the previous

day's money-moving.

"Oh, you're to be meeting somebody new today."

"Who's that?"

"Dave Cunningham. Forensic accountant, used to work for Justice—organized-crime stuff. He's pretty good at spotting financial irregularities."

"Does he think I found something interesting?" Jack asked with hope in his voice.

"We'll see when he gets here—after lunch. He's probably looking over your stuff right now."

"Okay," Jack responded. Maybe he'd caught the scent of something. Maybe this job really did have an element of excitement to it. Maybe they'd give him some purple ribbon for his adding machine. Sure.

THE DAYS were down to a routine. Morning run and PT, followed by breakfast and a talk. In substance, no different from Dominic's time at the FBI Academy, or Brian's at the Basic School. It was this similarity that distantly troubled the Marine. Marine Corps training was directed at killing people and breaking things. So was this.

Dominic was somewhat better at the surveillance part of it, because the FBI Academy taught it out of a book the Marines didn't have. Enzo was also pretty good with his pistol, though Aldo preferred his Beretta to his brother's Smith & Wesson. His brother had whacked a bad guy with his Smith, whereas Brian had done his job with an M16A2 rifle at a decently long range—fifty meters, close enough to see the looks on their faces when the bullets struck home, and far enough that a returning snapshot would not be close enough to be a serious worry. His gunny had chided him on not grabbing some dirt when the AKs had been turned in his direction, but Brian had learned an important lesson in his only exposure to combat. He'd found that, in that moment, his mind and his thinking went into hyperdrive, the world around him seemed to slow down, and his thinking had become extraordinarily clear. In retrospect, it had surprised him that he hadn't seen bullets in flight, his mind had been operating so fast—well, the last five rounds in the AK-47 magazine were usually tracers, and he *had* seen those in flight, though never in his immediate direction. His mind often went back to that busy five or six minutes, critiquing himself for things he might have done better, and promising that he would not repeat those errors of thinking and command, though Gunny Sullivan had been very respectful to his captain later during Caruso's after-action review with his Marines at their firebase.

"How was the run today, fellas?" Pete Alexander asked.

"Delightful," Dominic answered. "Maybe we should try it wearing fifty-pound backpacks."

"That could be arranged," Alexander replied.

"Hey, Pete, we used to do that in Force Recon. It ain't fun," Brian objected at once. "Turn down the sense of humor, bro," he added for his brother.

"Well, it's good to see you're still in shape," Pete observed comfortably. *He* didn't have to do the morning runs, after all. "So what's up?"

"I still wish I knew more about our goal here, Pete," Brian said, looking up from his coffee.

"You're not the most patient guy in the world, are you?" the training officer shot back.

"Look, in the Marine Corps we train every day, but even when it isn't clear exactly what we're training for, we know we're Marines, and we aren't getting set up to sell Girl Scout cookies in front of the Wal-Mart."

"What do you think you're getting set up for now?"

"To kill people without warning, with no rules of engagement that I can recognize. It looks a lot like murder." Okay, Brian thought, he'd said it out loud. What would happen next? Probably a drive back to Camp Lejeune and the resumption of his career in the Green Machine. Well, it could be worse.

"Okay, well, I guess it's time," Alexander conceded. "What if you had orders to terminate somebody's life?"

"If the orders are legitimate, I carry them out, but the law—the system—allows me to think about how legit the orders are."

"Okay, a hypothetical. Let's say you are ordered to terminate the life of a known terrorist. How do you react?" Pete asked.

"That's easy. You waste him," Brian answered immediately.

"Why?"

"Terrorists are criminals, but you can't always arrest them. These people make war on my country, and if I'm ordered to make war back, fine. That's what I signed on to do, Pete."

"The system doesn't always allow us to do that," Dominic observed.

"But the system does allow us to waste criminals on the spot, *in flagrante delicto,* like. You did it, and I haven't heard about any regrets, bro."

"And you won't. It's the same for you. If the President says to do somebody, and you're in uniform, he's the Commander in Chief, Aldo. You have the legal right—hell, the duty—to kill anybody he says."

"Didn't some Germans make that argument back in 1946?" Brian asked.

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. We'd have to lose a war for that to be a concern. I don't see that happening anytime soon."

"Enzo, if what you just said is true, then if the Germans had won

World War Two, nobody'd need to care about those six million dead Jews. Is that what you're saying?"

"People," Alexander interrupted, "this isn't a class in legal theory."

"Enzo's the lawyer here," Brian pointed out.

Dominic took the bait: "If the President breaks the law, then the House of Representatives impeaches him and the Senate convicts him, and he's out on the street, and *then* he's subject to criminal sanctions."

"Okay. But what about the guys who carry out his orders ?" Brian responded.

"That all depends," Pete told them both. "If the outgoing President has given them presidential pardons, what liability do they have?"

That answer jerked Dominic's head back. "None, I suppose. The President has sovereign power to pardon under the Constitution, the way a king did back in the old days. Theoretically, a president could pardon himself, but that would be a real legal can of worms. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land. In effect, the Constitution is God, and there is no appeal from that. You know, except when Ford pardoned Nixon, it's an area that has never really been looked into. But the Constitution is designed to be reasonably applied by reasonable men. That may be its only weakness. Lawyers are advocates, and that means they're not always reasonable."

"So, theoretically speaking, if the President gives you a pardon for killing somebody, you cannot be punished for the crime, right?"

"Correct." Dominic's face screwed in on itself somewhat. "What are you telling me?"

"Just a hypothetical," Alexander answered, backing up perceptibly. In any case, it ended the class on legal theory, and Alexander congratulated himself for telling them an awful lot and nothing at all at the same time.

THE CITY names were so alien to him, Mustafa remarked quietly to himself. Shawnee. Okemah. Weleetka. Pharaoh. That was strangest of all. They were not in Egypt, after all. That was a Muslim nation, albeit a confused one, with politics that didn't recognize the importance of the Faith. But that would be turned around sooner or later. Mustafa stretched in his seat and reached for a smoke. Half a tank of gas still. This Ford surely had a capacious fuel tank in which to burn Muslim oil. They were such ungrateful bastards, the Americans. Islamic countries sold them oil, and what did America give in return? Weapons to the Israelis to kill Arabs with, damned little else. Dirty magazines, alcohol, and other corruption to afflict even the Faithful. But which was worse, to corrupt, or to be corrupted, to be a victim of unbelievers? Someday all would be put right, when the Rule of Allah spanned the world. It *would* come, someday, and he and his fellow

warriors were even now on the leading wave of Allah's Will. Theirs would be martyrs' deaths, and that was a proud thing. In due course their families would learn of their fates—they could probably depend on Americans for that—and mourn their deaths, but celebrate their faithfulness. The American police agencies loved to show their efficiency after the battle was already lost. It was enough to make him smile.

DAVE CUNNINGHAM looked his age. He was pushing sixty pretty hard, Jack judged. Thinning gray hair. Bad skin. He'd quit smoking, but not soon enough. But his gray eyes sparkled with the curiosity of a weasel in the Dakotas, seeking after prairie dogs to eat.

"You're Jack Junior?" he asked on coming in.

"Guilty," Jack admitted. "What did you make of my numbers?"

"Not bad for an amateur," Cunningham allowed. "Your subject appears to be warehousing and laundering money—for himself, and for somebody else."

"Who is somebody else?" Wills asked.

"Not sure, but he's Middle Eastern, and he's rich, and he's tight with a buck. Funny. Everybody thinks they throw money around like drunken sailors. Some do," the accountant observed. "But some are misers. When they let go of the nickel, the buffalo screams." That showed his age. Buffalo nickels were a thing so far in the past that Jack didn't even get the joke. Then Cunningham laid some paper on the desk between Ryan and Wills. Three transactions were circled in red.

"He's a little sloppy. All his questionable transfers are done in ten-thousand-pound slugs. It makes them easy to spot. He disguises them as personal expenses—it goes into that account, probably to hide it from his parents. Saudi accountants tend to be sloppy. I guess it takes over a million of something to get them upset. They probably figure a kid like this can cut loose ten thousand pounds for a particularly nice night with the ladies, or at a casino. Young rich kids like to gamble, though they're not very good at it. If they live closer to Vegas or Atlantic City, it would do wonders for our balance of trade."

"Maybe they like European hookers better than ours?" Jack wondered aloud.

"Sonny, in Vegas you can order up a blond, blue-eyed Cambodian donkey and it'll be at your door half an hour after you set the phone down." Mafia kingpins had their favorite activities as well, Cunningham had learned over the years. It had originally offended the Methodist grandfather, but with the realization that it was just one more way to track criminals, he'd learned to welcome such expenditures. Corrupt people did corrupt things. Cunningham had also

been part of Operation ELEGANT SERPENTS, which had sent six members of Congress to the federal countryclub prison at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, using methods just like this one to track his quarry. He figured it made for high-class caddies for the young fighter pilots who flew out of there, and probably good exercise for the former representatives of the people.

"Dave, is our friend Uda a player?" Jack asked.

Cunningham looked up from his papers. "He surely does wiggle like one, son."

Jack sat back in his chair with a great feeling of satisfaction. He'd actually accomplished something . . . maybe something important?

THE LAND got a little hilly as they entered Arkansas. Mustafa found that his reactions were a little slow after driving four hundred miles, and so he pulled off at a service plaza and, after filling the car, let Abdullah take the wheel. It was good to stretch. Then it was back onto the highway. Abdullah drove conservatively. They passed only elderly people, and stayed in the right lane to avoid being crushed by the passing truck traffic. In addition to their desire to avoid police notice, there was no real hurry. They had two more days to identify their objective and accomplish their mission. And that was plenty. He wondered what the other three teams were doing. They'd all had shorter distances to cover. One of them was probably already in its target city. Their orders were to select a decent but not opulent hotel less than an hour's drive from the objective, to conduct a reconnaissance of the objective, and then to confirm their readiness via e-mail, and sit tight until released by Mustafa to accomplish their missions. The simpler the orders, the better, of course, less chance for confusion and mistakes. They were good men, fully briefed. He knew them all. Saeed and Mehdi were, like himself, Saudi in origin, like himself children of wealthy families who'd come to despise their parents for their habit of bootlicking Americans and others like them. Sabawi was Iraqi in origin. Not born to wealth, he had come to be a true believer. A Sunni like the rest, he wanted to be remembered even by the Shi'a majority in his country as a faithful follower of the Prophet. The Shi'a in Iraq, so recently liberated—by *unbelievers*!—from Sunni rule paraded about their country as though they alone were the Faithful. Sabawi wanted to show the error in that false belief. Mustafa hardly ever concerned himself with such trivia. For him, Islam was a large tent, with room for nearly all . . .

"My ass is tired," Rafi said from the backseat.

"That cannot be helped, my brother," Abdullah replied from the driver's seat. As driver, he deemed himself to be in temporary command.

"I know that, but my ass is still tired," Rafi observed.

"We could have taken horses, but they would be too slow, and they can also be hard on the ass, my friend," Mustafa observed. This pronouncement was greeted by laughter, and Rafi went back to his copy of *Playboy*.

The map showed easy going until they reached the city of Small Stone. They'd have to be fully awake for that. But for now, the road wound through pleasant hills covered with green trees. It was quite a change from northern Mexico, which had been so much like the sandy hills of home . . . to which they would never return . . .

For Abdullah, the driving was a pleasure. The car was not so fine as the Mercedes his father drove, but it sufficed for the moment, and the feel of the wheel was sweet in his hands, as he leaned back and smoked his Winston with a contented smile on his lips. There were people in America who raced cars like this on great oval tracks, and what a pleasure that must be! To drive as fast as you could, to be in competition with others—and to defeat them! That must be better than having a woman . . . well, almost . . . or just different, he corrected himself. Now, to have a woman *after* winning a race, *that* would be pleasurable indeed. He wondered if there were cars in Paradise. Good, fast ones, like the Formula One cars favored in Europe, hugging the corners, then really letting it go on the straightaways, to drive as fast as car and road allowed. He could try that here. The car was probably good for two hundred kilometers per hour—but, no, their mission was more important.

He flipped his cigarette butt out the window. Just then a white police car went zipping by, with blue stripes on the side. Arkansas State Police. Now *that* looked like a fast car, and the man inside had a splendid cowboy hat, Abdullah thought. Like every human being on the planet, he'd seen his share of American movies, including the cowboy sort, men on horseback herding cattle, or just shooting it out with handguns in their drinking saloons, settling issues of honor. The imagery appealed to him—but that was what it was supposed to do, he reminded himself. One more attempt by the infidel to seduce the Faithful. To be fair, though, American movies were made mainly for the American audience. How many Arab movies had he seen showing the forces of Salah ad-Din—a Kurd, of all things—crushing the invading Christian Crusaders? They were there to teach history, and to encourage manhood in Arab men, the better to crush the Israelis, which, alas, had not yet happened. So it was, probably, with American Westerns. Their concept of manhood was not all that different from the Arabs', except that they used revolvers instead of the manlier sword. The pistol did, of course, have superior reach, and so Americans were practical fighters, in addition to being very clever at

it. No braver than Arabs, of course, just cleverer.

He'd have to be careful of Americans and their handguns, Abdullah told himself. If any of them shot like movie cowboys, their mission could come to a premature end, and that wouldn't do.

He wondered what the policeman in the passing white car carried on his belt—and was he a proficient shot? They could find out, of course, but there was only one way to do that and it would endanger their mission. So, Abdullah watched the police car pull ahead until it faded from view, and he settled down to watching tractor-trailers whiz past while he cruised eastward at a steady sixty-five miles and three cigarettes per hour, plus a grumbling stomach. SMALL STONE 30 MILES.

"THEY'RE GETTING excited over at Langley again," Davis told Hendley.

"What did you hear?" Gerry asked.

"A field officer got something strange from a source agent over in Saudi. Something about how some suspected players were out of town, so to speak, location unknown, but he thinks Western Hemisphere, like ten or so of them."

"How solid is that?" Hendley asked.

"A 'three' in terms of reliability, though the source is ordinarily well regarded. Some headquarters puke decided to downgrade it, reason unknown." That was one of the problems at The Campus. They were dependent on others for most of their analysis. Though they had some particularly fine people in their own analysis offices, the real work was done on the other side of the Potomac River, and CIA had blown its share of calls in the past few years—make that decades, Gerry reminded himself. Nobody hit 1.000 in this league, and a lot of CIA bureaucrats were overpaid even with meager government salaries. But as long as their filing was properly done, nobody really cared or even noticed. What was significant was that the Saudis had a way of deporting their own potential troublemakers by allowing them to go elsewhere and do their crimes, and if they suffered for it, the Saudi government would be cooperative as hell, thus covering all of its bases quite easily.

"What do you think?" he asked Tom Davis.

"Hell, Gerry, I'm not a gypsy. No crystal ball, no Delphic Oracle." Davis let out a frustrated breath. "Homeland Security has been notified, and so that means FBI and the rest of their analytical team, but this is 'soft' intelligence, y'know? Nothing to hang a hat on. Three names, but no photos, and any bonehead can get ID in a new name." Even popular novels told people how to do it. You didn't even need all that much patience, because no state in the union cross-referenced

birth and death certificates, which would have been an easy thing, even for government bureaucrats to accomplish.

"So, what happens?"

Davis shrugged. "The usual. Airport security people will get another notice to stay awake, and so, they'll hassle more innocent people to make sure nobody tries to hijack an airliner. Cops all over will look for suspicious cars, but that'll mostly mean that people driving erratically get pulled over. There's been too much wolf-crying. Even the police have trouble taking it seriously, Gerry, and who can blame them?"

"So, all of our defenses are neutralized—by us?"

"For all practical purposes, yes. Until CIA has a lot more field assets to identify them before they get here, we're in a reactive mode, not a proactive one. What the hell," he grimaced, "my bond trading has been going great the last two weeks." Tom Davis had found the money business to be rather to his liking—or, at least, easily mastered. Maybe going into CIA right out of the University of Nebraska had been a mistake? he asked himself every so often.

"Any follow-up on the CIA report?"

"Well, somebody over there has suggested another talk with our asset, but it hasn't cleared the Seventh Floor yet."

"Jesus!" Hendley swore.

"Hey, Jerry, why are you surprised? You never worked there like I did, but down on The Hill, you must have seen this sort of thing before."

"Why the *fuck* didn't Kealty keep Foley as DCI?"

"He has a lawyer friend he likes better, remember? And Foley was a professional spook, and therefore unreliable. Look, let's face it—Ed Foley helped some, but a real fix will take a decade. That's one of the reasons we're here, right?" Davis added with a smile. "How are our two hitmen trainees doing down at Charlottesville?"

"The Marine is still having a conscience attack."

"Chesty Puller must be rolling over in his crypt," Davis opined.

"Well, we can't hire mad dogs. Better to ask questions now than out in the field on an assignment."

"I suppose. What about the hardware?"

"Next week."

"It's taken long enough. Testing phase?"

"In Iowa. Pigs. They have a similar cardiovascular system, so our friend tells us."

How appropriate, Davis thought.

SMALL STONE turned out to be not much of a navigation problem, and after dipping southwest on I-40, now they were going northeast.

Mustafa was now back at the wheel, and the two in back were dozing after filling up on roast beef sandwiches and Coca-Cola.

It was mostly boring now. Nothing can remain captivating for more than twenty hours, and even dreams of their mission a day and a half in the future could scarcely keep their eyes open, and so Rafi and Zuhayr were sleeping like exhausted children. He motored northeast with the sun behind his left shoulder and started to see signs indicating the distance to Memphis, Tennessee. He thought for a moment—it was hard to think very clearly after being in a car so long—and realized that he had only two more states to go. Their progress was steady, if slow. It would have been better to take a plane, but getting their machine guns through the airports would probably have been difficult, he thought with a smile. And as overall mission commander he had more than one team to worry about. That was why he'd selected the most difficult and distant target of the four, to set the example to the others. But sometimes leadership was just a pain in the ass, Mustafa told himself, as he adjusted himself in the seat.

The next half hour passed quickly. Then came a bridge of considerable size and height, and a sign that announced the Mississippi River, followed by a sign that welcomed them to TENNESSEE, THE VOLUNTEER STATE. His mind wandering from so much driving, Mustafa started to wonder what that might mean, but the thought died aborning. Whatever it meant, he had to cross Tennessee on the way to Virginia. Rest would not come for at least fifteen more hours. He'd drive about a hundred kilometers east of Memphis, then turn the car over to Abdullah.

He'd just crossed a great river. His entire country had no permanent rivers, just wadis that flooded briefly with a rare passing shower and soon went dry again. America was such a rich country. That was probably the source of their arrogance, but his mission, and that of his three colleagues, was to take that arrogance down a few pegs. And that, *Insh'Allah,* they would do, in less than two more days.

Two days to Paradise, was the thought that lingered in his mind.

CHAPTER 12

ARRIVING

TENNESSEE PASSED quickly for those in the back, only because Mustafa and Abdullah shared the wheel for the three hundred fifty kilometers from Memphis to Nashville, during which Rafi and Zuhayr mainly slept. One and three quarters kilometers per minute, he calculated. It translated to another . . . what? Twenty more hours or so. He thought about speeding up, to make the trip go faster—but, no, that was foolish. Taking unnecessary chances was always foolish. Hadn't they learned that from the Israelis? The enemy was always waiting, like a sleeping tiger. Waking one up unnecessarily was very foolish indeed. You only woke up the tiger when your rifle was already aimed, and only then so that the tiger could know that he'd been outsmarted, and unable to take action. Just to be awake long enough to appreciate his own foolishness, enough to know fear. America would know fear. For all their weapons and their cleverness, all these arrogant people would tremble.

He found himself smiling into the darkness now. The sun had set again, and his car's headlights bored white cones into the darkness, illuminating the white lines on the highway that dashed in and out of his vision as he drove eastward at a steady sixty-five miles per hour.

THE TWINS were now rising at 0600 and going out to do their daily dozen exercises without Pete Alexander's supervision, which, they'd decided, they really didn't need. The run was getting easier for both of them, and the rest of the exercises had also mutated into a routine. By 7:15, they were done and heading in for breakfast and the first skullsession with their training officer.

"Those shoes need some work, bro," Dominic observed.

"Yeah," Brian agreed, taking a sad look at his aging Nike sneaks. "They've served me well for a few years, but it looks like they need to go off to shoe heaven."

"Foot Locker in the mall." He referred to the Fashion Square shopping mall down the hill in Charlottesville.

"Hmm, maybe a Philly cheesesteak for lunch tomorrow?"

"Works for me, bro," Dominic agreed. "Nothing like grease, fat, and

cholesterol for lunch, especially with cheese fries on the side. Assuming your shoes will last another day."

"Hey, Enzo, I like the smell. These sneaks and me been around the block a few times."

"Like those dirty T-shirts. God damn it, Aldo, can't you ever dress properly?"

"Just let me wear my utilities again, buddy. I *like* being a Marine. You always know where you stand."

"Yeah, in the middle of the shit," Dominic observed.

"Maybe so, but you work with a better class of guys there." And, he didn't add, they were all on your side, and they all carried automatic weapons. It made for a feeling of security rarely found in civilian life.

"Going out to lunch, eh?" Alexander said.

"Tomorrow, maybe," Dominic answered. "Then we need to arrange a proper burial for Aldo's running shoes. We got a can of Lysol around here, Pete?"

Alexander had himself a good laugh. "I thought you'd never ask."

"You know, Dominic," Brian said, looking up from his eggs, "if you weren't my brother, I wouldn't take this crap off of you."

"Really?" The FBI Caruso tossed him an English muffin. "I swear, you Marines are all talk. I always used to whip him when we were kids," he added for Pete's benefit.

Brian's eyes nearly popped out of his head: "My ass!"

And another training day got started.

AN HOUR later, Jack was back on his workstation. Uda bin Sali had enjoyed another athletic night, with Rosalie Parker again. He must like her a lot. Ryan wondered how the Saudi would react if he knew that after every session she gave a play-by-play to the British Security Service. But for her, business was business, which would have deflated a lot of male egos in the British capital. Sali surely had one of those, Junior thought. Wills came in at quarter to nine with a bag of Dunkin' Donuts.

"Hey, Anthony. What's shakin'?"

"You tell me," Wills shot back. "Doughnut?"

"Thanks, buddy. Well, Uda had some more exercise last night."

"Ah, youth, a wonderful thing, but wasted on the young."

"George Bernard Shaw, right?"

"I knew you were literate. Sali discovered a new toy a few years back, and I guess he's going to play with it till it breaks—or falls off. Must be tough duty for his shadow team, standing out in the cold rain and knowing he's getting his weasel greased upstairs." It was a line from the *Sopranos* on HBO, which Wills admired.

"You suppose they're the ones who debrief her?"

"No, that's a job for the guys over at Thames House. Must get old after a while. Pity they don't send us all the transcripts, though," he added with a chuckle. "Might be good for getting the blood flowing in the morning."

"Thanks, I can always buy a *Hustler* at the magazine store if I feel scuzzy some night."

"It's not a clean business we're in, Jack. The kind of people we look at, they aren't the kind you invite over for dinner."

"Hey, White House, remember? Half the people we hosted for a State Dinner—Dad could hardly shake hands with them. But Secretary Adler told him it was business, and so Dad had to be nice to the sunzabitches. Politics attracts some really scummy people, too."

"Amen. So, anything else new on Sali?"

"I haven't gone over yesterday's money moves yet. Hey, if Cunningham stumbles over anything significant, what happens next?"

"That's up to Gerry and the senior staff." *You're way too junior to get your panties in a wad about that,* he didn't add, though the young Ryan got the message anyway.

"WELL, DAVE?" Gerry Hendley was asking upstairs.

"He's laundering money and sending some of it off to persons unknown. Liechtenstein bank. If I had to guess, it's to cover credit card accounts. You can get a Visa or MasterCard through that particular bank, and so it could well be to cover credit card accounts for persons unknown. Could be a mistress or a close friend, or somebody in whom we might have direct interest."

"Any way to find out?" Tom Davis asked.

"They use the same accounting program most banks do," Cunningham answered, meaning that with a little patience, The Campus could crack their way inside and learn more. There were firewalls in the way, of course. It was a job better left to the National Security Agency, and so the trick was to get NSA to task one of its computer weenies to do the cracking. That would mean faking a request by CIA to do the job, and that, the accountant figured, was a little harder to accomplish than just typing a note into a computer terminal. He also suspected that The Campus had someone inside both intelligence agencies who could do the faking so that no discernible paper trail would be left behind.

"Is it strictly necessary?"

"Maybe in a week or so, I can find more data. This Sali guy might just be a rich kid playing stickball out in the traffic, but . . . but my nose tells me he's a player of some sort," Cunningham admitted. He'd developed good instincts over the years, as a result of which two former Mafia kingpins were now living in solitary cells at Marion,

Illinois. But he didn't trust his own instincts as well as his former and current superiors did. A career accountant with a foxhound's nose, he was also very conservative in talking about it.

"A week, you think?"

Dave nodded. "About that."

"How's the Ryan kid?"

"Good instincts. He found something most people would have missed. Maybe his youth works for him. Young target, young bloodhound. Usually, it doesn't work. This time . . . looks like maybe it did. You know, when his dad appointed Pat Martin to be Attorney General, I heard some things about Big Jack. Pat really liked him, and I worked with Mr. Martin enough to respect him a lot. This kid may be going places. It'll take about ten years to be sure of that, of course."

"We're not supposed to believe in breeding over here, Dave," Tom Davis observed.

"Numbers is numbers, Mr. Davis. Some people have a good nose, some don't. He doesn't yet, not really, but he's sure heading that way." Cunningham had helped start the Justice Department's Special Accounting Unit, which specialized in tracking terrorist money. Everyone needed money to operate, and money always left a trail somewhere, but it was often found after the fact more easily than before. Good for investigations, but not as good for active defense.

"Thanks, Dave," Hendley said in dismissal. "Keep us posted, if you would."

"Yes, sir." Cunningham gathered his papers and made his way out.

"You know, he'd be a little more effective if he had a personality," Davis said fifteen seconds after the door closed.

"Nobody's perfect, Tom. He's the best guy they ever had at Justice for this sort of thing. I bet when he fishes, there's nothing left in the lake after he leaves."

"No argument here, Gerry."

"So, this Sali gent might be a banker for the bad guys?"

"It looks like a possibility. Langley and Fort Meade are still in a dither over the current situation," Hendley went on.

"I've seen the paperwork. It's a whole lot of paper for not much hard data." In the business of intelligence analysis, you got into the speculation phase too rapidly, the point when experienced analysts started applying fear to existing data, following it to God knew where, trying to read the minds of people who didn't speak all that much, even to each other. Might there be people out there with anthrax or smallpox in little bottles in their shaving kits? How the hell could you tell? That had been done once to America, but when you got down to it *everything* had been done once to America, and while it had given the country the confidence that her people could deal with damned

near anything, it had also given Americans the realization that bad things could indeed happen here and that those responsible might not always be identifiable. The new President did not convey any assurance that we'd be able to stop or punish such people. That was a major problem in and of itself.

"You know, we're a victim of our own success," the former senator said quietly. "We've managed to handle every nation-state that ever crossed us, but these invisible bastards who work for their vision of God are harder to identify and track. God is omnipresent. So are His perverted agents."

"Gerry, my boy, if it was easy, we wouldn't be here."

"Tom, thank God I can always count on you for moral support."

"We live in an imperfect world, you know. There isn't always enough rain to make the corn grow, and, if there is, sometimes the rivers flood. My father taught me that."

"I always meant to ask you—how the hell did your family ever end up in goddamned Nebraska?"

"My great-grandfather was a soldier—cavalryman, Ninth Cavalry, black regiment. He didn't feel like moving back to Georgia when his hitch ran out. He'd spent some time at Fort Crook outside of Omaha, and the dumbass didn't mind the winters. So, he bought a spread near Seneca and farmed corn. That's how history started for us Davises."

"Wasn't any Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska?"

"No, they stayed in Indiana. Smaller farms there, anyway. My great-grandfather shot himself some buffalo when he got started. There's the biggest damned head over the fireplace at home. Damned thing still smells. Dad and my brother mainly hunt longhorn antelope now, the 'speed-goat,' they call it at home. Never got to like the taste."

"What's your nose say on this new intel, Tom?" Hendley asked.

"I'm not planning to go to New York anytime soon, buddy."

EAST OF Knoxville, the road divided. I-40 went east. I-81 went north, and the rented Ford took the latter through the mountains explored by Daniel Boone when the western frontier of America had scarcely stretched out of sight of the Atlantic Ocean. A road sign showed the exit for the home of someone named Davy Crockett. Whoever that was, Abdullah thought, driving downhill through a pretty mountain pass. Finally, at a town named Bristol, they were in Virginia, their final major territorial boundary. About six more hours, he calculated. The land here, in the sunlight, was lush in its greenness, with horse and dairy farms on both sides of the road. Even churches, usually white-painted wooden buildings with crosses atop the steeples. Christians. The country was clearly dominated by them.

Unbelievers.

Enemies.

Targets.

They had their guns in the trunk to deal with them. First, I-81 north to I-64. They'd long since memorized their routing. The other three teams were surely in place now. Des Moines, Colorado Springs, and Sacramento. Each a city large enough to have at least one good shopping mall. Two were provincial capitals. None were major cities, however. All were what they called "Middle America," where the "good" people lived, where the "ordinary," "hardworking" Americans made their homes, where they felt safe, far from the great centers of power—and corruption. Few, if any, Jews to be found in those cities. Oh, maybe a few. Jews like to run jewelry stores. Maybe even in the shopping malls. That would be an added bonus, but only something to be scooped up if it accidentally offered itself. Their real objective was to kill ordinary Americans, the ones who considered themselves safe in the womb of ordinary America. They would soon learn that safety in this world was an illusion. They'd learn that the thunderbolt of Allah reached everywhere.

"SO, THIS is it?" Tom Davis asked.

"Yes, it is," Dr. Pasternak replied. "Be careful. It's fully loaded. The red tag, you see. The blue one is not charged."

"What does it deliver?"

"Succinylcholine, a muscle relaxant, essentially a synthetic and more potent form of curare. It shuts down all the muscles, including the diaphragm. You can't breath, speak, or move. You're fully awake. It'll be a miserable death," the physician added in a cold, distant voice.

"Why is that?" Hendley asked.

"You can't breathe. Your heart rapidly goes into anoxia, essentially a massive induced heart attack. It won't feel very good at all."

"Then what?"

"Well, the onset of symptoms would take about sixty seconds. Thirty seconds more for the full effects of the drug to present themselves. The victim would collapse then, say, ninety seconds after the injection. Breathing stops completely about the same time. The heart is starved for oxygen. It will try to beat, but it's not delivering any oxygen to the body, or to itself. Heart tissue will die in about two or three minutes—and will be extremely painful as it does so. Unconsciousness will happen at about the three-minute mark unless the victim had been exercising beforehand—in that case, the brain will be highly infused with oxygen. Ordinarily, the brain has about three minutes' worth of oxygen in it to function without additional oxygen infusion, but at about the three-minute mark—after onset of symptoms, that is; four

and a half minutes after being stuck—the victim will lose consciousness. Complete brain death will take another three minutes or so. After that, the succinylcholine will metabolize in the body, even after death. Not entirely, but enough so that only a really sharp pathologist will pick it up on a toxicology scan, and then only if he's prepped to look for it. The only real trick is to get your test subject in the buttocks."

"Why there?" Davis asked.

"The drug works just fine with an IM—intramuscular—injection. When people are posted, it's always faceup so that you can see and remove the organs. They rarely turn the body over. Now, this injection system does leave a mark, but it's hard to spot under the best of circumstances, and then only if you're looking at the right area. Even drug addicts—that will be one of the things they check for—don't inject themselves in the rump. It will appear to be an unexplained heart attack. Those happen every day. Rare, but not at all unknown. Tachycardia can make it happen, for example. The injector pen is a modified insulin pen like the kind Type I diabetics use. Your mechanics did a great job of disguising it. You can even write with it, but if you rotate the barrel, it swaps out the pen part for the insulin part. A gas charge in the back of the barrel injects the transfer agent. The victim will probably notice it, like a bee sting but less painful, but inside a minute and a half, he won't be telling anybody about it. His most likely reaction will be a minor 'Ouch' and then rub the spot—if that much. Like a mosquito bite on the neck. You might slap at it, but you don't call the police."

Davis held the safe "blue" pen. It was a little bulky, like a third-grader might use on his first official introduction to a ballpoint pen after using thick-barrel pencils and crayons for a couple of years. So, as you approached your subject, you took it out of your coat pocket, and swung it in a reverse stabbing motion, and just kept going. Your backup hitter would watch the subject fall to the sidewalk, maybe even stop to render assistance, then watch the bastard die, and get up and go on his way—well, maybe call an ambulance so that his body could get sent to the hospital and be properly dismantled under medical supervision.

"Tom?"

"I like it, Gerry," Davis replied. "Doc, how confident are you about this stuff dissipating after the subject goes down for the count?"

"Confident," Dr. Pasternak answered, and both of his hosts remembered that he was professor of anesthesiology at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. He probably knew his stuff. Besides, they'd trusted him enough to let him in on the secrets of The Campus. It was a little late to stop trusting him now. "It's just

basic biochemistry. Succinylcholine is made up of two acetylcholine molecules. Esterases in the body break the chemical down into acetylcholine fairly rapidly, so it is very likely to be undetectable, even by someone up at Columbia-Presbyterian. The only hard part: to have it done covertly. If you could bring him into a doctor's office, for example, it would just be a matter of infusing potassium chloride. That would put the heart into fibrillation. When cells die, they give off potassium anyway, and so the relative increase would not be noticed, but the IV mark would be hard to hide. There are a lot of ways to do this. I just had to pick one that is applied relatively conveniently by fairly unskilled people. As a practical matter, a really good pathologist might not be able to determine the exact cause of death—and he would know that he didn't know, and that would bother him—but that's only if the body is examined by a really talented guy. Not too many of them around. I mean, the best guy up at Columbia is Rich Richards. He really hates not knowing something. He's a real intellectual, a problem solver, and genius biochemist in addition to being a superb physician. I asked him about this, and he told me it would be extremely difficult to detect even if he had a heads-up on what to look for. Ordinarily, extraneous factors come into play, the specific biochemistry of the victim's body, what he's had to eat or drink, ambient temperature would be a huge factor. On a cold winter day, outside, the esterases might not be able to break down the succinylcholine because of a diminution of chemical processes."

"So, don't do a guy in Moscow in January?" Hendley asked. This deep science stuff was troublesome for him, but Pasternak knew his stuff.

The professor smiled. Cruelly. "Correct. Also Minneapolis."

"Miserable death?" Davis asked.

He nodded. "Decidedly unpleasant."

"Reversible?"

Pasternak shook his head. "Once the succinylcholine is in the bloodstream, there's nothing you can do about it... well, theoretically you could put the guy on a ventilator and breathe for him until the drug metabolizes—I've seen that done with Pavulon in an OR—but that would be a stretch. Theoretically possible to survive, but very, very unlikely. People have survived being shot right between the eyes, gentlemen, but it's not exactly common."

"How hard do you have to hit your target?" Davis asked.

"Not very, just a good poke. Enough to penetrate his clothing. A thick coat might be a problem because of the length of the needle. But ordinary business wear, no problem."

"Is anyone immune to the drug?" Hendley asked.

"Not to this one, no. That would be one in a billion."

"No chance he'd make noise?"

"As I explained, it's like a bee sting at most—more than a mosquito, but not enough to make a man cry out in pain. At most, you'd expect for the victim to be puzzled, maybe to turn around and see what caused it, but your agent will be walking away normally, not running. Under those conditions, without a target to yell at, and since the initial discomfort is transitory, the most likely reaction is to rub the spot and walk on . . . for about, oh, ten yards or so."

"So, rapid-acting, lethal, and undetectable, right?"

"All of the above," Dr. Pasternak agreed.

"How do you reload it?" Davis required. *Damn, how has CIA* not *developed something this good?* he wondered. Or KGB, for that matter.

"You unscrew the barrel, like this"—he demonstrated—"and take it apart. You use an ordinary syringe to inject a new supply of the drug, and swap out the gas charge. These little gas capsules are the only hard part to manufacture. You toss the used one into a trash can or the gutter—they're only four millimeters long and two millimeters wide—and reinsert the fresh one. When you screw in the replacement, a little spike in the back of the barrel punctures it and recharges the system. The gas capsules are coated with sticky stuff to make them harder to drop." And just that fast, the blue one was "hot" except for the absence of succinylcholine. "You want to be careful with the syringe, of course, but you'd have to be pretty stupid to stick yourself. If you cover your man as a diabetic, you can explain away the presence of syringes. There's an ID card to get insulin refills that works just about anywhere in the world, and diabetes has no outward symptoms."

"Damn, Doc," Tom Davis observed. "Anything else you could deliver this way?"

"Botulism toxin is similarly lethal. It's a neurotoxin; it blocks nerve transmissions, and it causes death by asphyxia, also fairly rapidly, but it's readily detectable in the blood during a post-, and kind of hard to explain away. It's available fairly readily around the world, but in microgram doses, because of its use in cosmetic surgery."

"Docs shoot women in the face with that, don't they?"

"Only the dumb ones," Pasternak replied. "It takes wrinkles away, sure, but since it kills the nerves in the face, it also takes away your ability to smile much. That's not my field, exactly. There are a lot of toxic and lethal chemicals. It's the combination of rapid action and difficult detectability that made this a problem. Another quick way to kill someone is to use a small knife at the back of the skull, where the spinal cord enters the base of the brain. The trick is getting right behind your victim and then hitting a fairly small target with the knife, and not having the knife jam between the vertebrae—at that

range, why not a silenced .22 pistol? It's fast enough, but it leaves something behind. This method can easily be misdiagnosed as a heart attack. It's just about perfect," the physician concluded, in a voice sufficiently cold as to sprinkle snow on the carpet.

"Richard," Hendley said, "you have earned your fee on this one."

The professor of anesthesiology stood, checking his watch. "No fee, Senator. This one's for my little brother. Let me know if you need me for anything else. I have a train to catch back to New York."

"Jesus," Tom Davis said, after he left. "I always knew docs had to have evil thoughts."

Hendley picked up a package on his desk. There were a total of ten "pens" in it, with computer-printed instructions for this use, a plastic bag full of gas capsules, and twenty large vials of succinylcholine, plus a bunch of throwaway syringes. "He and his brother must have been pretty close."

"Know him?" Davis asked.

"Yeah, I did. Good guy, wife and three kids. Name was Bernard, Harvard Business School graduate, smart guy, very astute trader. Worked on the ninety-seventh floor of Tower One. Left a lot of money behind—anyway, his family's well taken care of. That's something."

"Rich is a nice guy to have on our side," Davis thought aloud, suppressing the shiver that came along with the opinion.

"That he is," Gerry agreed.

THE DRIVE ought to have been pleasant. The weather was fair and clear, the road not at all crowded and mostly straight northeast. But it was not pleasant. Mustafa kept getting "How far now?" and "Are we there yet?" from Rafi and Zuhayr in the backseat, to the point that more than once he considered pulling the car over and strangling them. Maybe it was hard sitting in the backseat, but he had to *drive this Goddamned car!!!* Tension. He was feeling it, and they probably were, too, and so he took a deep breath and commanded himself to be calm. The end of their journey was hardly four hours away, and what was that compared to their transcontinental trek? Certainly it was farther than the Holy Prophet ever walked or rode from Mecca to Medina and back—but he stopped that thought at once. He had no standing to compare himself with Mohammed, did he? *No, you do not.* One thing he was sure of. On getting to his destination, he was going to bathe and *sleep* just as long as he could. *Four hours to rest* was what he kept saying to himself, as Abdullah slept in the right-front seat.

THE CAMPUS had its own cafeteria, whose food was catered from a variety of outside sources. Today it was from a Baltimore deli called Atman's whose corned beef was pretty good, if not quite New York

class—saying that might result in a fistfight, he thought, as he picked up a corned beef on a kaiser roll. What to drink? If he was having a New York lunch, then cream soda, but Utz, the local potato chips, of course, because they'd even had them in the White House—at his father's insistence. They probably had something from Boston there now. It was not exactly a renowned restaurant town, but every city has at least one good eatery, even Washington, D.C.

Tony Wills, his normal luncheon mate, was nowhere to be seen. So, he looked around and spotted Dave Cunningham, not surprisingly eating alone. Jack headed that way.

"Hey, Dave, mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Take a seat," Cunningham said, cordially enough.

"How's the numbers business?"

"Exciting," was the implausible reply. Then he elaborated. "You know, the access we have into those European banks is amazing. If the Department of Justice had this sort of access, they'd really clean up—except you can't introduce this kind of evidence into a court of law."

"Yeah, Dave, the Constitution can really be a drag. And all those damned civil-rights laws."

Cunningham nearly choked on his egg salad on white. "Don't you start. The FBI runs a lot of operations that are a little shady—usually because some informant lays stuff on us, maybe because somebody asked, or maybe not, and they spin that off—but within the rules of criminal procedure. Usually it's part of a plea bargain. There are not enough crooked lawyers to handle all of their needs. The Mafia guys, I mean."

"I know Pat Martin. Dad thinks a lot of him."

"He's honest and very, very smart. He really ought to be a judge. That's where honest lawyers belong."

"Doesn't pay very much." Jack's official salary at The Campus was well above anything any federal employee made. Not bad for entry level.

"That *is* a problem, but—"

"But there's nothing all that admirable about poverty, my dad says. He toyed with the idea of zeroing out salaries for elected officials so that they'd have to know what real work was, but he eventually decided that it would make them even more susceptible to bribery."

The accountant picked up on that: "You know, Jack, it's amazing how little you need to bribe a member of Congress. Makes the bribes hard to identify," the CPA groused. "Like being down in the weeds for an aircraft."

"What about our terrorist friends?"

"Some of them like a comfortable life. A lot of them come from moneyed families, and they like their luxuries."

"Like Sali."

Dave nodded. "He has expensive tastes. His car costs a *lot* of money. Very impractical. The mileage it gets must be awful, especially in a city like London. The gas prices over there are pretty steep."

"But mainly he takes cabs."

"He can afford it. It probably makes sense. Parking a car in the financial district must be costly, too, and the cabs in London are good." He looked up. "You know that. You've been to London a lot."

"Some," Jack agreed. "Nice city, nice people." He didn't have to add that a protective detail of Secret Service agents and local cops didn't hurt much. "Any further thoughts on our friend Sali?"

"I need to go over the data more closely, but like I said, he sure acts like a player. If he was a New York Mafia subject, I'd figure him for an apprentice consiglieri."

Jack nearly gagged on his cream soda. "That high up?"

"Golden Rule, Jack. He who has the gold makes the rules. Sali has access to a ton of money. His family's richer than you appreciate. We're talking four or five billion dollars here."

"That much?" Ryan was surprised.

"Take another look at the money accounts he's learning to manage. He hasn't played with as much as fifteen percent of it. His father probably limits what he's allowed to do. He's in the capital-preservation business, remember. The guy who owns the money, his father, won't hand him the whole pile to play with, regardless of his educational background. In the money business, it's what you learn *after* you hang your degrees on the wall that really matters. The boy shows promise, but he's still following his zipper everywhere he goes. That's not an unusual thing for a rich young kid, but if you have a few gigabucks in your wallet, you want to keep your boy on a leash. Besides, what he appears to be funding—well, what we suspect he's funding—isn't really capital-intensive. You spotted some trades on the margins. That was pretty smart. Did you notice that when he flies home to Saudi, he charters a G-V?"

"Uh, no," Jack admitted. "I didn't look into that. I just figured he flies first-class everywhere."

"He does, same way you and your father used to. *Real* first class. Jack, nothing is too small to check out."

"What do you think of his credit card usage?"

"Entirely routine, but that's noteworthy even so. He could charge *anything* if he wanted to, but he seems to pay cash for a lot of expenditures—and he spends *less* cash than he converts to his own use. Like with those hookers. The Saudis don't care about that, so he's paying cash there because he *wants* to, not because he *has* to. He's trying to keep some parts of his life covert for reasons not

immediately apparent. Maybe just practice. I would not be surprised to find out that he's got more credit cards than the ones we know about—unused accounts. I'll be riffling through his bank accounts later today. He doesn't really know about how to be covert yet. Too young, too inexperienced, no formal training. But, yes, I think he's a player, hoping to move into the big leagues pretty soon. The young and rich are not known for their patience," Cunningham concluded.

I should have guessed that myself, Junior told himself. *I need to think this stuff through better. Another important lesson. Nothing too small to be checked out. What sort of guy are we dealing with? How does he see the world? How does he want to change the world?* His father had always told him how important it was to look at the world through the eyes of your adversary, to crawl inside his brain and *then* look out at the world.

Sali is a guy driven by his passions in women—but was there more to it? Was he hiring the hookers because they were good screws or because he was screwing the enemy? The Islamic world thought of America and the U.K. as essentially the same enemy. Same language, same arrogance, damned sure the same military, since the Brits and Americans cooperated so closely on so many things. That was worth considering. *Make no assumptions without looking out through his eyeballs.* Not a bad lesson for one lunchtime.

ROANOKE SLID off to their right. Both sides of I-81 were composed of rolling green hills, mostly farms, many of them dairy farms, judging from all the cows. Green highway signs telling of roads that, for his purpose, led nowhere. And more of the white-painted boxy churches. They passed school buses, but no police cars. He'd heard that some American states put highway police in ordinary-looking cars, ones not very different from his own, but probably with additional radio antennas. He wondered if the drivers wore cowboy hats here. That'd be decidedly out of place, even in an area with so many cows. "The Cow," the Second Sura of the Koran, he thought. If Allah tells you to slaughter a cow, you must slaughter it without asking too many questions. Not an old cow, nor a young one, just a cow pleasing to the Lord. Were not all sacrifices pleasing to Allah, so long as they were not sacrifices founded in conceit? Surely they were, if offered in the humility of the Faithful, for Allah welcomed and was pleased by the offerings of the truly Faithful.

Yes.

And he and his friends would make more sacrifices by slaughtering the unbelievers.

Yes.

Then he saw a sign for INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 64—but it was to

the west, the wrong one. They had to go east, to cross the eastern mountains. Mustafa closed his eyes and remembered the map he'd looked at so many times. North for about an hour, then east. Yes.

"BRIAN, THOSE shoes are going to come apart in the next few days."

"Hey, Dom, I ran my first four-and-a-half-minute mile in these," the Marine objected. You remembered and treasured such moments.

"Maybe so, but next time you try that, they're going to come apart and beat the shit out of your ankle."

"Think so? Bet you a buck you're wrong."

"You're on," Dominic said at once. They shook hands formally on the wager.

"They look pretty scruffy to me, too," Alexander observed.

"You want me to buy new T-shirts, too, Mom?"

"They'll self-destruct in another month," Dominic thought aloud.

"Oh, yeah! Well, I outshot your ass with my Beretta this morning."

"Luck happens," Enzo sniffed. "See if you can make it two in a row."

"I'll put five bucks on that."

"Deal." Another handshake. "I could get rich this way," Dominic said. Then it was time to think about dinner. Veal Piccata tonight. He had a thing for good veal, and the local stores had nice stuff. Pity about the calf, but he hadn't been the one to cut its throat.

THERE: I-64, next exit. Mustafa was tired enough that he might have given the driving over to Abdullah, but he wanted to finish himself, and he figured he could handle another hour. They were heading for a pass in the next range of mountains. Traffic was heavy, but in the other direction. They climbed up the highway toward . . . yes, there it was, a shallow mountain pass with a hotel on the south side—and then out onto a vista of a most pleasant valley to the south. A sign proclaimed its name, but the letters were too confusing for him to get them into his head as a coherent word. He did take in the view, off to his right. Paradise itself could scarcely have been more lovely—there was even a place to pull over, get out and take in the sight. But, of course, they had not the time. It was fitting that the drive was gently downhill, and it changed his mood entirely. Less than an hour to go. One more smoke to celebrate the timing. In the back, Rafi and Zuhayr were awake again, taking in the scenery. It would be their last such opportunity.

One day of rest and reconnaissance—time to coordinate via e-mail with their three other teams—and then they could accomplish their mission. That would be followed by Allah's Own Embrace. A very happy thought.

CHAPTER 13

MEETING PLACE

AFTER TWO thousand–plus miles of driving, the arrival was entirely anticlimactic. Not a kilometer off Interstate 64 was a Holiday Inn Express, which looked satisfactory, especially since there was a Roy Rogers immediately next door and a Dunkin' Donuts not a hundred meters uphill. Mustafa walked in and took two connecting rooms, paying with his Visa card out of the Liechtenstein bank. Tomorrow they'd go exploring, but for now all that beckoned was sleep. Even food was not important at this moment. He moved the car to the first-floor rooms he'd just leased, and switched off the engine. Rafi and Zuhayr unlocked the doors, then came back to open the trunk. They took their few bags in, and under them the four submachine guns still wrapped in thick, cheap blankets.

"We are here, comrades," Mustafa announced, entering the room. It was an entirely ordinary motel, not the more luxurious hotels they'd become accustomed to. They had one bathroom and a small TV each. The connecting door was opened. Mustafa allowed himself to fall backward on his bed, a double, but all for him. Some things were left to be done, however.

"Comrades, the guns must always be hidden, and the shades drawn *at all times.* We've come too far for foolish risks," he warned them. "This city has a police force, and do not think they are fools. We journey to Paradise at a time of our choosing, not at a time determined by an error. Remember that." And then he sat up, and removed his shoes. He thought about a shower, but he was too tired for that, and tomorrow would come soon enough.

"Which way to Mecca?" Rafi asked.

Mustafa had to think about that for a second, divining the direct line to Mecca and to the city's centerpiece, the Kaaba stone, the very center of the Islamic universe, to which they directed the Salat, verses from the Holy Koran said five times per day, recited from the knees.

"That way," he said, pointing southeast, on a line that transected northern Africa on its way to that holiest of Holy Places.

Rafi unrolled his prayer rug, and went to his knees. He was late in his prayers, but he had not forgotten his religious duty.

For his own part, Mustafa whispered to himself, “lest it be forgotten,” in the hope that Allah would forgive him in his current state of fatigue. But was not Allah infinitely merciful? And besides, this was hardly a great sin. Mustafa removed his socks, and lay back in the bed, where sleep found him in less than a minute.

In the next room over, Abdullah finished his own Salat, and then plugged his computer into the side of the telephone. He dialed up an 800 number and heard the warbling screech as his computer linked up with the network. In another few seconds, he learned that he had mail. Three letters, plus the usual trash. The e-mails he downloaded and saved, and then he logged off, having been online a mere fifteen seconds, another security measure they’d all been briefed on.

* * *

WHAT ABDULLAH didn’t know was that one of the four accounts had been intercepted and partially decrypted by the National Security Agency. When his account—identified only by a partial word and some numbers—tapped into Saeed’s, it was also identified, but only as a recipient, not an originator.

Saeed’s team had been the first to arrive at its destination of Colorado Springs, Colorado—the city was identified only by a code name—and was comfortably camped out in a motel ten kilometers from its objective. Sabawi, the Iraqi, was in Des Moines, Iowa, and Mehdi in Provo, Utah. Both of those teams were also in place and ready for the operation to commence. Less than thirty-six hours to execute their mission.

He’d let Mustafa do the replies. The reply was, in fact, already programmed: “190, 2” designating the 190th verse of the Second Sura. Not exactly a battle cry, but rather an affirmation of the Faith that had brought them here. The meaning was: *Proceed with your mission.*

BRIAN AND Dominic were watching the History Channel on their cable system, something about Hitler and the Holocaust. It had been studied so much you’d think it’d defy efforts to find something new, yet somehow historians managed every so often. Some of it was probably because of the voluminous records the Germans had left behind in the Hartz Mountain caves, which would probably be the subject of scholarly study for the next few centuries, as people continued to try to discern the thought processes of the human monsters who’d first envisioned and then committed such crimes.

“Brian,” Dominic asked, “what do you make of this stuff?”

"One pistol shot could have prevented it, I suppose. Problem is, nobody can see that far into the future—not even gypsy fortune-tellers. Hell, Adolf whacked a bunch of them, too. Why didn't *they* get the hell out of town?"

"You know, Hitler lived most of his life with only one bodyguard. In Berlin, he lived in a second-floor apartment, with a downstairs entrance, right? He had one SS troop, probably not even a sergeant, guarding the door. Pop him, open the door, go upstairs, and waste the motherfucker. Would have saved a lot of lives, bro," Dominic concluded, reaching for his white wine.

"Damn. You sure about that?"

"The Secret Service teaches that. They send one of their instructors down to Quantico to lecture every class on security issues. The fact surprised us, too. A lot of questions on it. The guy said you could walk right past the SS guard on your way to the liquor store, like. *Easy* hit, man. Easier'n hell. The thinking is that Adolf thought he was immortal, that there wasn't a bullet anywhere with his name on it. Hey, we had a President whacked on a train platform waiting for his train to arrive. Which one was it? Chester Arthur, I think. McKinley got shot by a guy who walked right up to him with a bandage around his hand. I guess people were a little careless back then."

"Damn. It'd make our job a lot easier, but I'd still prefer a rifle from five hundred meters or so."

"No sense of adventure, Aldo?"

"Ain't nobody paying me enough money to play kamikaze, Enzo. No future in that, y'know?"

"What about those suicide bombers over in the Mideast?"

"Different culture, man. Don't you remember from second grade? You can't commit suicide because it's a mortal sin and you can't go to confession after. Sister Frances Mary made that pretty clear, I thought."

Dominic laughed. "Damn, haven't thought of her in a while, but she always thought you were the cat's ass."

"That's 'cause I didn't screw around in class like you did."

"What about in the Marines?"

"Screwing around? The sergeants took care of that before it came to my attention. *Nobody* messed with Gunny Sullivan, not even Colonel Winston." He looked at the TV for another minute or so. "You know, Enzo, maybe there are times when one bullet can prevent a lot of grief. That Hitler needed his ticket punched. But even trained military officers couldn't bring it off."

"The guy who placed the bomb just assumed that everybody in the building had to be dead, without going back inside to make sure. They say it every day in the FBI Academy, bro—assumptions are the mother

of all fuckups."

"You want to make sure, yeah. Anything worth shooting is worth shooting twice."

"Amen," Dominic agreed.

IT HAD gotten to the point that Jack Ryan, Jr., woke up to the morning news on NPR expecting to hear about something dreadful. He guessed that came from seeing so much raw intelligence information, but without the judgment to know what was hot and what was not.

But though he did not know all that much, what he did know was more than a little worrying. He'd become fixated by Uda bin Sali—probably because Sali was the only "player" he knew much about. And that had to be because Sali was his personal case study. He had to figure this bird out, because if he didn't he'd be . . . encouraged to seek other employment . . . ? He hadn't seen that possibility until now, which by itself did not speak well for his future in the spook business. Of course, his father had taken a long time to find something he was good at—nine years, in fact, after graduating Boston College—and he himself had not yet lived one whole year past his Georgetown sheepskin. So, would he make the grade at The Campus? He was about the youngest person there. Even the secretary pool was composed of women older than he was. Damn, *that* was an entirely new thought.

Sali *was* a test for him, and probably a very important one. Did that mean that Tony Wills already had Sali figured out, and he was off chasing data already fully analyzed? Or did it mean that he had to make his case and sell it after he'd reached his own conclusions? It was a big thought for standing in front of the bathroom mirror with his Norelco. This wasn't school anymore. A failing grade here meant failing—life? No, not that bad, but not good, either. Something to think about with coffee and CNN in the kitchen.

FOR BREAKFAST, Zuhayr walked up the hill, where he purchased two dozen doughnuts and four large coffees. America was such a crazy country. So many natural riches—trees, rivers, magnificent roads, incredible prosperity—but all in the service of idolaters. And here he was, drinking their coffee and eating their doughnuts. Truly, the world was mad, and if it ran on any plan at all, it was Allah's Own Plan, and not something even for the Faithful to understand. They just had to obey that which was written. On returning to the motel, he found both TVs tuned in to the news—CNN, the global news network—the Jewish-oriented one, that is. Such a pity that no Americans watched Al-Jazeera, which at least tried to speak to Arabs, though to his eyes it had already caught the American disease.

"Food," Zuhayr announced. "And drink." One box of doughnuts went into his room, and the other to Mustafa, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes after eleven hours of snoring slumber.

"How did you sleep, my brother?" Abdullah asked the team leader.

"It was a blessed experience, but my legs are still stiff." His hand shot out for the large cup of coffee, and he snatched a maple-frosted doughnut from the box, downing half of it in one monstrous bite. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the TV to see what was happening in the world this day. The Israeli police had shot and killed another holy martyr before he'd been able to trigger his bodysuit of Semtex.

"DUMB FUCK," Brian observed. "How hard can it be to pull a string?"

"I wonder how the Israelis twigged to him. You gotta figure they have paid informants inside that Hamas bunch. This has got to be a code-worded Major Case for their police, lots of resources assigned, plus help from their spook shops."

"They torture people, too, don't they?"

Dominic nodded after a second's consideration. "Yeah, supposedly it's controlled by their court system and all that, but they interrogate a little more vigorously than we do."

"Does it work?"

"We talked that one around at the Academy. You put a bowie knife to somebody's dick, chances are he'll see the wisdom of singing, but it's not something anybody wanted to think much about. I mean, yeah, in the abstract it can even seem funny, but doing it yourself—probably not very palatable, y'know? The other question is, how much good information does it really generate? The guy's just as likely to say anything to get the knife away from his little friend, make the pain stop, whatever. Crooks can be really good liars unless you know more than they do. Anyway, we can't do it. You know, the Constitution and all that. You can threaten them with bad jail time, and scream at them, but even then there're lines you can't cross."

"They sing anyway?"

"Mostly. Interrogation's an art form. Some guys are really good at it. I never really had much of a chance to learn it, but I did see some guys play the game. The real trick is to develop a rapport with the mutt, saying stuff like, yeah, that nasty little girl really asked for it, didn't she? Makes you want to puke afterward, but the name of the game is getting the bastard to fess up. After he gets into the joint, his neighbors will hassle him a lot worse than I ever would. One thing you don't want to be in a prison is a child abuser."

"I believe it, Enzo. That friend of yours in Alabama, maybe you did him a favor."

"Depends on if you believe in hell or not," Dominic responded. He

had his own thoughts about that.

WILLS WAS early this morning. Jack saw him on his workstation when he came in. "You beat me in, for once."

"My wife's car came back from the shop. Now she can take the kids to school for a change," he explained. "Check the feed from Meade," he directed.

Jack lit up his computer, sat through the start-up procedures, and typed in his personal encryption code to access the interagency traffic download file from the downstairs computer room.

The top of the electronic pile was a FLASH-priority dispatch from NSA Fort Meade to CIA, *and* FBI, *and* Homeland Security, one of whom would have surely briefed the President on it this morning. Strangely, there was almost nothing to it, just a numeric message, a set of numbers.

"So?" Junior asked.

"So, it might be a passage from the Koran. The Koran has a hundred fourteen suras—chapters—with a variable number of verses. If this is such a reference, it's a verse with nothing particularly dramatic in it. Scroll down and see for yourself."

Jack clicked his mouse. "That's all?"

Woods nodded. "That's all, but the thinking at Meade is that such a dull message is likely to denote something else—something important. Spooks tend to use a lot of reverse English when they hit the cue ball."

"Well, *duh*! You're telling me that because it appears to have no importance to it, it may be important? Hell, Tony, you can make that observation about anything! What else do they know? The network, where the guy logged on from, that sort of thing?"

"It's a European network, privately owned, with 800 numbers all over the world, and we know some bad guys have used it. You can't tell where the members log in from."

"Okay, so, first, we do not know if the message has any significance. Second, we do not know where the message originated. Third, we do not have any way of knowing who's read it or where the hell they are. The short version is that we don't know shit, but everybody's getting in a flutter about it. What else? The originator, what do we know about him?"

"He—or she, for all we know—is thought to be a possible player."

"What team?"

"Guess. The NSA profilers say that this guy's syntax seems to indicate Arabic as a first language—based on previous traffic. The shrinks at CIA agree. They've copied messages from this bird before. He says nasty things to nasty people on occasion, and they're time-linked with some other very bad things."

"Is it possible that he's making some signal related to the bomber the Israeli police bagged earlier today?"

"Possible, yes, but not terribly likely. The originator isn't linked to Hamas, as far as we know."

"But we don't really know, do we?"

"With these guys you can't be totally sure about anything."

"So, we're back to where we started. Some people are running around over something they don't really know shit about."

"That's the problem. In these bureaucracies it's better to cry wolf and be wrong than to have your mouth shut when the big gray critter runs off with a sheep in his mouth."

Ryan sat back in his chair. "Tony, how many years were you at Langley?"

"A few," Wills answered.

"How the hell did you stand it?"

The senior analyst shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder."

Jack turned back to his computer to scan the rest of the morning's message traffic. He decided to see if Sali had been doing anything unusual over the last few days, just to cover his own ass, and in thinking that, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., started thinking like a bureaucrat, without even knowing it.

"TOMORROW IT'S going to be a little different," Pete told the twins. "Michelle is your target, but this time she'll be disguised. Your mission is to ID her and track her to her destination. Oh, did I tell you, she's really good at disguises."

"She's going to take an invisible pill, right?" Brian asked.

"That's *her* mission," Alexander elucidated.

"You going to issue us magic glasses to see through the makeup?"

"Not even if we had any—which we don't."

"Some pal you are," Dominic observed coldly.

BY ELEVEN that morning, it was time to scout the objective.

Conveniently located just a quarter mile north on U.S. Route 29, the Charlottesville Fashion Square Mall was a medium-sized shopping mall that catered to a largely upscale clientele of local gentry and students at the nearby University of Virginia. It was anchored by a JCPenney at one end and a Sears at the other, with Belk's men's and women's stores in the middle. Unexpectedly, there was no food court per se—whoever had done the reconnaissance had been sloppy. A disappointment, but not all that uncommon. The advance teams the organization employed were often mere stringers, for whom missions of this sort were something of a lark. But, Mustafa saw on going in, it would do little harm.

A central courtyard opened into all four of the mall's main corridors. An information stand even supplied diagrams of the mall, showing store locations. Mustafa looked one over. A six-pointed Star of David leaped off the page at his eyes. A synagogue, here? Was *that* possible? He walked down to see, halfway hoping that it was indeed possible.

But it wasn't. It was, rather, the mall's security office, where sat a male employee in a uniform of light blue shirt and dark blue pants. On inspection, the man did not have a gun belt. And that was good. He *did* have a phone, which would undoubtedly call the local police. So, this black man would have to be the first. With that decided, Mustafa reversed directions, walked past the restrooms and the Coke machine, and turned right, away from the men's store.

This was a fine target place, he saw. Only three main entrances, and a clear field of fire from the Central Court. The individual stores were mainly rectangular, with open access from the corridors. On the following day, at about this time, it would be even more crowded. He estimated two hundred people in his immediate sight, and though he'd hoped all the way into this city that they'd have the chance to kill perhaps a thousand, anything over two hundred would be a victory of no small dimension. There were all manner of stores here, and unlike Saudi malls, men and women shopped on the same floor. Many children, too. There were four stores listed as specialty children's goods—and even a Disney Store! That he had not expected, and to attack one of America's most treasured icons would be sweet indeed.

Rafi appeared at his side. "Well?"

"It could be a larger target, but the arrangement is nearly perfect for us. All on one level," Mustafa replied quietly.

"Allah is beneficent as always, my friend," Rafi said, unable to conceal his enthusiasm.

People circulated about. Many young women were pushing their little ones about in strollers—he saw that you could rent them from a stand just by the hair salon.

There was one purchase he had to make. He accomplished it in the Radio Shack next to a Zales Jewelers. Four portable radios and batteries, for which he paid in cash, and for which he got a brief lecture on how the radios worked.

All in all, it could have been better, in a theoretical sense, but it wasn't supposed to be a busy city street. Besides, there would be policemen on the street with guns who would interfere with their mission. So, as always in life, you measured the bitter against the sweet, and here there was much of the sweet for all of them to taste. The four of them all got pretzels from Auntie Anne's and headed out past the JCPenney back to their car. Formal planning would take place

at their motel rooms, with more doughnuts and coffee.

JERRY ROUNDS'S official job was as head of strategic planning for The Campus's white side. This job he performed fairly well—he might have been the very Wolf of Wall Street had he not chosen to become an Air Force intelligence officer on leaving the University of Pennsylvania. The service had even paid for his master's degree from the Wharton School of Business before he'd made full-bull colonel. This had given him an unexpected master's degree to hang on the wall, which also gave him a superb excuse to be in the trading business. It was even a fun diversion for the former chief USAF analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency's headquarters building at Bolling AFB in Washington. But along the way he'd found that being an "unrated weenie"—he'd never worn the silver wings of a USAF aviator—didn't compensate for being a second-class citizen in a service completely run by those who did poke holes in the sky, even if he were smarter than twenty of them in the same room. Coming to The Campus had seriously broadened his horizons in a lot of ways.

"What is it, Jerry?" Hendley asked.

"The folks at Meade and over across the river just got excited about something," Rounds replied, handing some papers across.

The former senator read the traffic for a minute or so and handed it all back. In a moment, he knew he'd seen most of it before. "So?"

"So, this time they may be right, boss. I've been keeping an eye on the background stuff. The thing is, we have a combination of reduced message traffic from known players, and then this flies over the transom. I spent my life in DIA looking at coincidences. This here's one of them."

"Okay, what are they doing about it?"

"Airport security is going to be a little tighter starting today. The FBI is going to set people at some departure gates."

"Nothing on TV about it?"

"Well, the boys and girls at Homeland Security may have gotten a little smarter about advertising. It's counter-productive. You don't catch a rat by shouting at him. You do it by showing him what he wants to see, and then breaking his goddamned neck."

Or maybe by having a cat spring on him unexpectedly, Hendley didn't say. But that was a harder mission.

"Any ideas for us?" he asked instead.

"Not at the moment. It's like seeing a front move in. There may be heavy rain and hail in it, but there's no convenient way to stop it."

"Jerry, how good is our data on the planning guys, the ones who give the orders?"

"Some of it's pretty good. But it's the people who convey the orders,

not the ones who originate them."

"And if they drop off the table?"

Rounds nodded immediate agreement. "Now you're talking, boss. Then the real big shots might poke their heads up out of their holes. Especially if they don't know that storm's coming in."

"For now, what's the biggest threat?"

"The FBI is thinking car bombs, or maybe somebody with a C-4 overcoat, like in Israel. It's possible, but from an operational point of view, I'm not so sure." Round sat down in the offered chair. "It's one thing to give the guy his explosives package and put him on a city bus for the ride to his objective, but, as applied to us, it's more complicated. Bring the bomber here, get him outfitted—which means having the explosives in place, which is a further complication—*then* getting him familiar with the objective, *then* getting him there. The bomber is *then* expected to maintain his motivation a long way from his support network. A lot of things can go wrong, and that's why black operations are kept as simple as possible. Why go out of your way to purchase trouble?"

"Jerry, how many hard targets do we have?" Hendley asked.

"Total? Six or so. Of those, four are real, no-shit targets."

"Can you get me locations and profiles?"

"Any time you say."

"Monday." No sense thinking about it over the weekend. He had two days of riding all planned out. He was entitled to a couple of days off once in a while.

"Roger that, boss." Rounds stood and headed out. Then he stopped at the door. "Oh, there's a guy at Morgan and Steel, bond department. He's a crook. He's playing fast and very loose with some client money, about one-fifty worth." By which he meant a hundred and fifty million dollars of other people's money.

"Anybody on to him?"

"Nope, I ID'd this guy on my own. Met him two months ago up in New York, and he didn't sound quite right, and so I put a watch on his personal computer. Want to see his notes?"

"Not our job, Jerry."

"I know, I shorted our business with him to make sure he didn't dick with our funds, but I think he knows it's time to leave town, like maybe a trip overseas, one-way ticket. Somebody ought to have a look. Maybe Gus Werner?"

"I'll have to think about that. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Roger that." And Rounds disappeared out the door.

"SO, WE just try to sneak up on her without being noticed, right?" Brian asked.

"That's the mission," Pete agreed.

"How close?"

"Close as you can get."

"You mean close enough to put one in the back of her head?" the Marine asked.

"Close enough to see her earrings," Alexander decided was the most polite way of putting it. It was even accurate, since Mrs. Peters wore her hair fairly long.

"So, not to shoot her in the head, but to cut her throat?" Brian pressed the question.

"Look, Brian, you can put it any way you want. Close enough to touch her, okay?"

"Okay, just so's I understand," Brian said. "We have to wear our fanny packs?"

"Yes," Alexander replied, though it wasn't true. Brian was being a pain in the ass again. Who'd ever heard of a Marine with conscience attacks?

"It'll make us easier to spot," Dominic objected.

"So, disguise it somehow. Be creative," the training officer suggested a little testily.

"When do we find out what all of this is for, exactly?" Brian asked.

"Soon."

"You keep saying that, man."

"Look, you can drive back to North Carolina whenever you want."

"I've thought about it," Brian told him.

"Tomorrow's Friday. Think about it over this weekend, okay?"

"Fair enough." Brian backed off. The tone of the interplay had gotten a little uglier than he'd actually wanted. It was time to back down. He didn't dislike Pete at all. It was the not knowing, and his distaste for what it *looked* like. Especially with a woman as the target. Hurting women was not part of his creed. Or children, which was what had set his brother off—not that Brian disapproved. He wondered briefly if he might have done the same thing, and told himself, sure, for a kid, but without being quite sure. When dinner was finished, the twins handled the cleanup, then settled in front of the downstairs TV for some drinks and the History Channel.

IT WAS much the same the next state up, with Jack Ryan, Jr., drinking a rum and Coke and flipping back and forth between History and History International, with an occasional sojourn to Biography, which was showing a two-hour look at Joseph Stalin. *That guy,* Junior thought, *was one seriously cold motherfucker.* Forcing one of his own confidants to sign the imprisonment order for his own wife. Damn. But how did that physically unprepossessing man exercise such

control over people who were his own peers? What was the power he'd wielded over others? Where had it come from? How had he maintained it? Jack's own father had been a man of considerable power, but he had *never* dominated people in anything like that way. Probably never even thought about it, much less killing people for what amounted to the fun of it. Who were these people? Did they still exist?

Well, they had to. The one thing that never changed in the world was human nature. The cruel and the brutal still existed. Perhaps society no longer encouraged them as they had in, say, the Roman Empire. The gladiatorial games had trained people to accept and even to be entertained by violent death. And the dark truth of the matter was that if Jack had been given access to a time machine, he might—he *would*—have journeyed back to the Flavian Amphitheater to see it, just once. But that was human curiosity, not blood lust. Just a chance to gain historical knowledge, to see and *read* a culture connected to, yet different from, his own. He might even toss his cookies watching .. . or maybe not. Maybe his curiosity was that strong. But for damned sure, if he ever went back, he'd take a friend along for the ride. Like the Beretta .45 he'd learned to shoot with Mike Brennan. He wondered how many others might have taken the trip. Probably quite a few. Men. Not women. Women would have needed a lot of societal conditioning to want to look at that. But men? Men grew up on movies like *Silverado* and *Saving Private Ryan.* Men wanted to know how well they might have handled such things. So, no, human nature didn't really change. Society tended to stomp on the cruel ones, and since man was a creature of reason, most people shied away from behavior that could put them in prison or the death chamber. So, man *could* learn over time, but the basic drives probably did not, and so you fed the nasty little beast with fantasies, books and movies, and dreams, thoughts that walked through your consciousness while waiting for sleep to come. Maybe cops had a better time. *They* could exercise the little critter by handling those who stepped over the line. There was probably satisfaction in that, because you got both to feed the critter and to protect the society.

But if the beast still lived in the hearts of men, somewhere there would be men who would use whatever talents they had to—not so much control it as harness it to their own will, to use it as a tool in their personal quest for power. Such men were called Bad Guys. The unsuccessful ones were called sociopaths. The successful ones were called . . . Presidents.

Where did all this leave him? Jack Jr. wondered. He was still a kid, after all, even though he denied it and as a matter of law he was a grown man. Did a grown man stop growing? Stop wondering and

asking questions? Stop seeking after information—or, as he thought of it, *truth*?

But once you had *truth,* what in hell did you do with it? He didn't know that one yet. Maybe it was just one more thing to learn. Surely he had the same drive to learn as his father, else why was he watching this program instead of some mindless sitcom? Maybe he'd buy a book on Stalin and Hitler. Historians were always digging into old records. Problem was, then they applied their own personal ideas to what they found. He probably really needed a shrink to look things over. They had their ideological prejudices, too, but at least there was a patina of professionalism to their thought processes. It annoyed Junior that he went to sleep every night with thoughts unresolved and truths unfound. But that, he figured, was the whole point to this thing called life.

THEY WERE all praying. All quietly. Abdullah was murmuring through the words of his Koran. Mustafa was running through the same book in the sanctity of his own mind—not all of it, of course, just the parts that supported his mission for the coming day. To be brave, to remember their Holy Mission, to accomplish it without mercy. Mercy was Allah's business.

What if we survive? he asked himself, and was surprised at the thought.

They had a plan for this, of course. They'd drive back west and try to find their way back to Mexico, and then fly back home—to be welcomed with great rejoicing by their other comrades. In truth, he didn't expect this to happen, but hope was something no man sets completely aside, and however Paradise might beckon, life on earth was all that he actually knew.

That thought startled him, too. Did he just express doubt in his Faith? No, not that. Not that, exactly. Just a random thought. *There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger,* he chanted in his own mind, expressing the *Shahada,* which was the very foundation of Islam. No, he couldn't deny his Faith now. His Faith had brought him across the world, to the very location of his martyrdom. His Faith had raised and nurtured his life, through childhood, through the anger of his father, into the very home of the infidels who spat upon Islam and nurtured the Israelis, there to affirm his Faith with his life. And his death, probably. Almost certainly, unless Allah Himself desired otherwise. Because all things in life were written by Allah's Own Hand . . .

THE ALARM went off just before six. Brian knocked on his brother's door.

"Wake up, G-man. We're wasting sunlight."

"Is that a fact?" Dominic observed from the far end of the corridor. "Beat ya, Aldo!" Which was a first.

"Then let's get it done, Enzo," Brian responded, and together they headed outside. An hour and a quarter later, they were back and at the breakfast table.

"It's a good day to be alive," Brian observed with his first sip of coffee.

"The Marine Corps must brainwash your ass, bro," Dominic observed, with a sip of his own.

"No, the endorphins just kick in. That's how the human body lies to itself."

"You grow out of it," Alexander told them. "All ready for your little field exercise?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major," Brian replied with a smile. "We get to whack Michelle for lunch."

"Only if you can track her without being spotted."

"It would be easier in the woods, you know. I'm trained in that particular skill."

"Brian, what do you think we've been doing here?" Pete inquired gently.

"Oh, is that what it is?"

"First get new shoes," Dominic advised.

"Yeah, I know. These are just about dead." The canvas uppers were separating from the rubber bottoms, and the bottoms were pretty shot, too. He hated doing it. He'd put a lot of miles in his running shoes, and a man can be sentimental about such things, which was frequently a matter of annoyance to his spouse.

"We'll hit the mall early. Foot Locker right next to the place they rent strollers," Dom reminded his brother.

"Yeah, I know. Okay, Pete, any advice on Michelle?" Brian asked. "You know, if we're out on a mission, we usually get a mission brief."

"That's a fair question, Captain. I'd suggest you look for her at Victoria's Secret, just across from The Gap. If you get close enough without being spotted, you win. If she says your name when you're more than ten feet away, you lose."

"This isn't strictly fair," Dominic pointed out. "She knows what we look like—especially height and weight. A real bad guy wouldn't have that information in his pocket. You can fake being taller, but not being shorter."

"And my ankles can't take high heels, y'know?" Brian added.

"You don't have the legs for it anyway, Aldo," Alexander needled. "Who ever said this job was easy?"

Except we still don't know what the fucking job is, Brian didn't

respond. “Fair enough, we improvise, adapt, and overcome.”

“Who are you now, Dirty Harry?” Dominic asked, finishing off his McMuffin.

“In the Corps, he’s our favorite civilian, bro. Probably would have made a pretty good gunny.”

“Especially with his .44 Smith.”

“Kinda noisy for a handgun. Kinda tough on the hand, too. Except maybe the Auto-Mag. Ever shot one of those?”

“No, but I handled the one in the gun locker at Quantico. Damned thing ought to come with a trailer to haul it around with, but I bet it makes nice holes.”

“Yeah, but if you want to conceal it, you better be Hulk Hogan.”

“I hear that, Aldo.” As a practical matter, the fanny packs they used didn’t so much conceal a pistol as make it more convenient to carry. Any cop knew what it was on first sight, though few civilians recognized it. Both brothers carried a loaded pistol and a spare magazine in their packs, when they wore them. Pete wanted them to do so today just to make it harder to track Michelle Peters without being spotted. Well, you expected such things of training officers, didn’t you?

THE SAME day began five miles away at Holiday Inn Express, and on this day, unlike the others, they all unrolled their prayer rugs and, as one man, said their morning Salat for what they all expected to be the last time. It took but a few minutes and then they all washed, to purify themselves for their task. Zuhayr even took the time to shave around his new beard, neatly trimming the part he wanted to wear into eternity, until, when satisfied, he dressed.

It wasn’t until they were completely ready that they realized it was hours short of the proper time. Abdullah walked up the hill to Dunkin’ Donuts for breakfast and coffee, this time even returning with a newspaper, which circulated its way around both rooms while the men drank their coffee and smoked their cigarettes.

Fanatics they might seem to their enemies, but they remained human, and the tension of the moment was unpleasant, and getting only worse by the minute. The coffee only pumped more caffeine into their systems, making hands shake and eyes narrow on the TV news. They checked their watches every few seconds, willing unsuccessfully for the hands to turn faster around the dials, then drank more of the coffee.

“NOW WE’RE getting excited, too?” Jack asked Tony at The Campus. He gestured at his workstation. “What’s here that I don’t see, buddy?”

Wills rocked back in his chair. “It’s a combination of things. Maybe

it's real. Maybe it's just a coincidence. Maybe it's just a construct in the minds of professional analysts. You know how you tell what it really is?"

"Wait a week, look back, and see if anything actually happened?"

That was enough to make Tony Wills laugh. "Junior, you *are* learning the spook business. Jesus, I've seen more predictions go wrong in the intelligence business than they have on Preakness day at Pimlico. You see, unless you do know, you just *don't* know, but people in the business don't like to think that way."

"I remember when I was a kid, Dad used to get in shitty moods sometimes—"

"He was in CIA during the Cold War. The big shots were always asking for predictions that nobody could really give—at least not that meant anything. Your father was usually the guy who said, 'Wait awhile and you'll see for yourselves,' and that *really* pissed them off, but, you know, he was usually right, and there weren't any disasters on his watch."

"Will I ever be that good?"

"It's a lot to hope for, kid, but you never know. You're lucky to be here. At least the Senator knows what 'don't know' means. It means his people are honest, and they know they're not God."

"Yeah, I remember that from the White House. It always amazed me how many people in D.C. thought they really were."

DOMINIC DID the driving. It was a pleasant three or four miles down the hillside into town.

"Victoria's Secret? Suppose we'll bag her buying a nightie?" Brian wondered.

"We can only dream," Dominic said, turning left onto Rio Road. "We're early. Get your shoes first?"

"Makes sense. Park by the Belk's men's store."

"Roger that, Skipper."

* * *

"IS IT time?" Rafi asked. He'd done so three times in the past thirty minutes.

Mustafa checked his watch: 11:48. Close enough. He nodded.

"My friends, pack your things."

Their weapons were not loaded, but placed inside shopping bags. Assembled, they were too bulky and too obvious. Each man had twelve loaded magazines, with thirty rounds each, taped together in

six pairs. Every weapon had a large sound suppressor tapped to screw onto the barrel. The purpose of these wasn't so much silence as control. He remembered what Juan had told him back in New Mexico. These weapons tended to jerk off target, climbing high and right. But he'd already gone over the weapons issues with his friends, and they all knew how to shoot, had all shot these things when they'd gotten them, and so they should know what to expect. Besides, they were going to what American soldiers called a target-rich environment.

Zuhayr and Abdullah carried out their travel things, locking them into the trunk of their rented Ford. On reflection, Mustafa decided to put the guns there, too, and so all four of them, each carrying his shopping bag, walked out to the car and set the bags standing up on the floor of the trunk. With that done, Mustafa got into the car, unthinkingly bringing the room key in his pocket. The drive was not a long one. The objective was already in sight.

The parking lot had the usual entrance points. He chose the northwest entrance, next to the Belk's men's store, where they could park close in. There, he switched off the engine and said his last prayer of the morning. The other three did much the same, getting out and walking to the back of the car. Mustafa popped the trunk. They were less than fifty meters from the door. Strictly speaking, there was little point in concealment, but Mustafa remembered the security desk. To delay police response, it had to begin there. So, he told them to keep their weapons in the shopping bags, and, bags dangling from their left hands, they walked to the door.

It was a Friday, not so busy a shopping day as Saturday, but close enough for their purposes. They came inside, passing the LensCrafters, which was busy—most of these people would probably escape unhurt, which was regrettable, but the main shopping area was still before them.

BRIAN AND Dominic were in the Foot Locker store, but Brian didn't see anything he liked. The Stride Rite next door was only for kids, so the twins proceeded forward, turning right. American Eagle Outfitters would doubtless have something, maybe in leather, with high tops that would be easier on the ankles.

TURNING LEFT, Mustafa passed a toy store and various clothing businesses on his way to the Center Court. His eyes were sweeping the area rapidly. Perhaps a hundred people in his immediate sight, and judging by K*B Toys, the retail stores would all be well peopled. He passed the Sunglass Hut and turned right for the security office. It was conveniently located, just a few steps from the restrooms. All four went into the men's room together.

A few people had noted their presence—four men of identically exotic appearance was unusual—but an American shopping mall is the nearest thing to a zoo for humans, and it took a lot for people to take much note of anything unusual, much less dangerous.

In the men's room, they all took their weapons from the shopping bags and assembled them. Bolts were pulled back. Magazines were inserted in the pistol grips. Each man slipped the five magazine pairs into pants pockets. Two screwed the lengthy suppressors onto their weapons. Mustafa and Rafi did not, deciding after rapid reflection that they preferred to hear the noise.

"Are we ready?" the leader asked. The replies were only nods.

"Then we shall eat lamb together in Paradise. To your places. When I shoot first, you will all begin."

BRIAN WAS trying on some low-top leather boots. Not quite the same as the boots he wore in the Marine Corps, but they looked and felt comfortable, and they fitted his feet as though custom designed. "Not bad."

"Want me to box them up?" the clerk—a girl—asked.

Aldo thought for a moment and decided: "No, I'll break them in right away." He handed her his disreputable Nikes, which she put in the box for the boots, and led him to the cash register.

MUSTAFA WAS looking at his watch. He figured two minutes for his friends to get in place.

Rafi, Zuhayr, and Abdullah were walking into the main concourse of the mall now, holding their weapons low, and, amazingly, largely escaping notice from the shoppers who bustled along and minded their own business. When the sweep hand reached twelve, Mustafa took a deep breath and walked out of the men's room, and to the left.

The security guard was at his chest-high desk, reading a magazine, when he saw a shadow on the desktop. He looked up to see a man of olive complexion.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked politely. He had no time to react after that.

"Allahu Ackbar!" was the shouted reply. Then the Ingram came up.

Mustafa held the trigger for but a second, but in that second, a total of nine bullets entered the black man's chest. The impact of nine bullets pushed him backward half a step, and he fell, dead, to the tiled floor.

"WHAT THE hell was that?" Brian instantly asked his brother—the only person nearby—as all heads turned to the left.

* * *

RAFI WAS only twenty-five feet to their right-front when he heard the gunfire, and it was time for him to start. He dropped into a half crouch and brought his Ingram up. He turned right toward the Victoria's Secret store. The customers there all had to be women of no morals even to look at such whorish clothing, and perhaps, he thought, some would serve him in Paradise. He just pointed and held the trigger down.

The sound was deafening, like a colossal zipper of explosions. Three women were immediately hit and went down at once. Others just stood still for a second, their eyes wide with shock and disbelief, not taking any action at all.

For his part, Rafi was disagreeably surprised by the fact that more than half of his rounds had not hit anything. The poorly balanced weapon had jerked in his hand, spraying the ceiling. The bolt closed on an empty chamber. He looked down at it in surprise, then ejected the first magazine and reversed it, slapping it back into the port and looking for more targets. They'd started to run now, and so he brought the Ingram to his shoulder.

"FUCK!" Brian said. *What the hell is going on?* his mind shouted.

"Fuckin' right, Aldo." Dominic swiveled his fanny pack to the front of his belly and jerked at the string that opened the two-zipper closure. A second later, his Smith & Wesson was in his hands. "Cover my ass!" he commanded his brother. The shooter with the SMG was a bare twenty feet away, on the other side of a jewelry kiosk, facing away, but this wasn't Dodge City, there were no rules about facing down a criminal.

Dominic fell to one knee, and bringing the automatic up in both hands, he loosed two ten-millimeter hollow points into the center of the man's back, and then one more into the center of the back of his head. His target dropped straight down, and judging by the red explosion from the third shot, wouldn't be doing much else. The FBI agent jumped to the prostrate body and kicked the gun away. He noted immediately what it was, and then he saw that the body had extra magazines in its pockets. The immediate thought was *Oh, shit!* Then he heard the crackling roar of more gunfire to his left.

"More of 'em, Enzo!" Brian said, right at his brother's side, his Beretta in his right hand. "This one's all gone. Any ideas?"

"Follow me, cover my ass!"

MUSTAFA FOUND himself in a low-end jewelry store. There were six

women in view, in front of and behind the counter. He lowered his weapon to his hip and fired, emptying his first magazine into them and feeling the momentary satisfaction of seeing them fall. When the gun stopped shooting, he ejected the empty magazine and reversed it to reload, cocking the bolt as he did so.

BOTH TWINS came to their feet and started moving west, not fast, but not slow either, with Dominic in the lead and Brian two steps back, their eyes mainly going to where the noise was. All Brian's training came flooding back into his consciousness. *Use cover and concealment wherever possible. Locate and engage the enemy.*

Just then a figure came left to right from Kay Jewelers, holding an SMG and spraying to his left into another jewelry store. The mall was a cacophony of screams and gunfire now, with people running blindly toward exits instead of first looking for where the danger was. A lot of those went down, mostly women. Some children.

Somehow this all passed the brothers by. They scarcely even saw the victims. There just wasn't time for that, and what training they'd had took over completely. The first target in view was the one standing there hosing the jewelry store.

"Going right," Brian said, darting that way with his head down but looking in the direction of his target.

* * *

BRIAN ALMOST died that way. Zuhayr was standing at Claire's Boutique, having just turned away from dumping a full magazine into it. Suddenly unsure of which way to go next, he turned left and saw a man with a pistol in his hand. He carefully shouldered his weapon and squeezed the trigger—

—two rounds fired off uselessly, then nothing. His first magazine had been expended, and it took two or three seconds for him to realize it. Then he ejected and reversed it, ramming it back into the bottom of his machine gun and looking back up—

—but the man was gone. Where? Without targets, he reversed direction and walked with a measured pace into the Belk's women's store.

BRIAN CROUCHED by the Sunglass Hut, peeking around the right side.

There, moving to the left. He brought his Beretta into his right hand and squeezed off one round—

—but it missed the head by a whisker when the man ducked.

"Fuck!" Brian then stood and put both hands on the pistol, leading just a hair and firing off four rounds. All four went into the thorax, below the shoulders.

MUSTAFA HEARD the noise but didn't feel the impacts. His body was full of adrenaline, and, under such circumstances, the body simply does not feel pain. Just a second later, he coughed up blood, which came as quite a surprise. More so, when he tried to turn to his left, his body didn't do what his mind commanded. The puzzlement lasted just another second or two when—

—DOMINIC WAS facing the second one, gun up and aimed. Again, he fired, as trained, for center-of-mass, and the Smith was on single-action, barking twice.

So good was his aim that the first round hit the target's weapon—

—THE INGRAM jumped in Mustafa's hands. He barely held on to it, but then he saw who'd attacked him and took careful aim and squeezed—but nothing happened. On looking down, he saw a bullet hole in the steel side of the Ingram, just where the bolt was. He took another second or two to realize that he was now disarmed. But his enemy was still before him and he raced toward him, hoping to use his gun as a club if nothing else.

DOMINIC WAS amazed. He'd seen at least one of his rounds take him in the chest—and the other one had broken his weapon. For some reason, he did not fire again. Instead he clubbed the bastard in the face with his Smith and headed forward, where there was more gunfire.

MUSTAFA FELT his legs weaken. The blow in the face did hurt, even though the five bullets had not. He tried to turn again, but his left leg would bear no weight, and he fell, turning to land on his back, where, suddenly, breathing came very hard indeed. He tried to sit up, even to roll, but as his legs had failed him, so the left side of his body was useless.

"THAT'S TWO down," Brian said. "Now what?"

The screaming had abated, but not by much. But the gunfire was still there, and it had changed character . . .

ABDULLAH blessed fate for putting the suppressor on his weapon. His shooting was more accurate than he'd ever hoped.

He was in the Sam Goody music store, which was filled with students. It was also a store with no rear exit, because it was so close to the westernmost entrance. Abdullah's face was grinning broadly as he walked into the store, firing as he went. The faces he saw were full of disbelief—and for an amused moment he told himself that *dis*belief was the reason he was killing them. He emptied his first magazine quickly, and indeed the suppressor allowed him to hit with half his shots. Men and women—boys and girls—screamed, stood still and staring for a few precious, deadly seconds, and then started running away. But at less than ten meters, it was just as easy to hit them in the back, and they really had nowhere to run. He just stood there, hosing the room, letting the targets select themselves. Some ran up the other side of the CD racks, trying to escape out the main door. These he shot as they passed, hardly two meters away. In seconds, he'd emptied his first magazine pair, and dumped it, pulling another from his pants pocket and slamming it home and cocking the bolt. But there was a mirror on the store's back wall, and in it he saw—

"**JESUS,** another one!" Dominic said.

"Okay." Brian darted to the other side of the entrance and took position against the wall, bringing his Beretta up. This put him on the same pseudo-corridor as the terrorist, but the setup didn't benefit a right-handed shooter worth a damn. He had to choose between shooting weak-hand—something he didn't practice as much as he should have done—or exposing his body to return fire. But something in his Marine mind just said *Fuck it* and he stepped to his left, pistol up in both hands.

Abdullah saw him and smiled, bringing his weapon to his shoulder —or trying to.

Aldo fired off two aimed shots into the target's chest, saw no effect, and then emptied his magazine. More than twelve rounds entered the man's body—

—ABDULLAH FELT them all, and he felt his body jerk with each impact. He tried firing his own weapon, but he missed with all of his shots, and then his body was no longer under his control. He fell forward, trying to recover his balance.

BRIAN EJECTED his empty magazine and pulled the other one from his fanny pack, slapping it in and dropping the slide-release lever. He was going on autopilot now. The bastard was still moving! Time to fix

that. He walked over to the prone body, kicked the gun aside, and fired one round right into the back of his head. The skull split open—blood and brains exploded out onto the floor.

"JESUS, ALDO!" Dominic said, coming to his brother's side.

"Fuck that! We got at least one more out there. I'm down to one clip, Enzo."

"Me, too, bro."

Amazingly, most of the people on the floor, including the shot ones, were still alive. The blood on the floor could have been rain in a thunderstorm. But both brothers were too wired to be sickened by what they saw. They moved back out into the mall and headed east.

The carnage was just as bad here. The floor was defiled by numerous pools of blood. There were screams and whimpers. Brian passed a little girl, perhaps three years old, standing over the body of her mother, her arms fluttering like a baby bird's. No time, no damned time to do anything about it. He wished Pete Randall were close. He was a good corpsman. But even Petty Officer Randall would be overwhelmed by this mess.

There was still more chatter from a suppressed submachine gun. It was in the Belk's women's store, off to their left. Not all that far off by the sound of it. The sound of automatic-weapons fire is distinctive. Nothing else sounds quite the same. They split up, each taking one side of the short corridor leading past the Coffee Beanery and Bostonian Shoes into the next combat area.

The first floor of Belk's started off with perfumes and makeup. As before, they ran to the sound of the guns. There were six women down at perfume, and three more in makeup. Some were obviously dead. Others were just as obviously alive. Some called out for help, but there was no time for that. The twins split up again. The noise had just stopped. It had been off to their left front, but it wasn't there now. Had the terrorist run away? Was he just out of ammo?

There were expended cartridge cases all over the floor—nine-millimeter brass, they both saw. He'd had himself a good old time here, Dominic saw. The mirrors affixed to the building's internal pillars were nearly all shattered by gunfire. To his trained eye, it seemed as though the terrorist had walked in the front, sprayed the first people he'd seen—all women—and then worked his way back and to the left, probably going to wherever he saw the most potential targets. Probably just one guy, Brian's mind told him.

Okay, what are we up against? Dominic wondered. *How's he going to react? How does he think?*

For Brian it was simpler: *Where are you, you motherfucker?* For the Marine, he was an armed enemy, and nothing else. Not a person, not a

human being, not even a thinking brain, just a target holding a weapon.

ZUHAYR EXPERIENCED a sudden diminution of excitement. He'd been more excited than at any moment in his life. He'd had only a few women in his life, and surely he'd killed more women here today than he'd ever fucked . . . but to him, here and now, somehow it felt just the same.

And all that struck him as very satisfying. He hadn't heard the shooting from before, none of it. He'd scarcely heard his own gunfire, so focused was he on his business. And good business it had been. The look on their faces when they saw him and his machine gun . . . and the look when the bullets struck . . . *that* was a pleasing sight. But he was down to his last two magazine pairs now. One was in his gun, and the other in his pocket.

Strange, he thought, that he could hear the relative silence now. There were no live women in his immediate area. Well . . . no unwounded women. Some of those he'd shot were making noise. Some were even trying to crawl away...

He couldn't have that, Zuhayr knew. He started walking toward one of them, a dark-haired woman wearing whorish red pants.

BRIAN WHISTLED to his brother and pointed. There he was, about five-eight, wearing khaki pants and a similarly colored bush jacket, fifty yards away. A playground shot for a rifle, something for a boot at Parris Island to do, but not quite so easy for his Beretta, however good a marksman he was.

Dominic nodded and started heading that way, but swiveling his head in all directions.

"TOO BAD, woman," Zuhayr said in English. "But do not be afraid, I send you to see Allah. You will serve me in Paradise." And he tried to fire a single round into her back. But the Ingram doesn't allow that easily. Instead he rippled off three rounds from a range of one meter.

BRIAN SAW the whole thing, and something just came loose. The Marine stood up and aimed with both hands. *"You motherfucker!"* he screamed, and fired as rapidly as accuracy allowed, from a range of perhaps a hundred feet. He fired a total of fourteen shots, almost emptying his weapon. And some of them, remarkably, hit the target.

Three, in fact, one of which got the target right in the belly, and another in center chest.

* * *

THE FIRST one *hurt.* Zuhayr felt the impact as he might have felt a kick in the testicles. It caused his arms to drop as though to cover up and protect from another injury. His weapon was still in his hands, and he fought through the pain to bring it back up as he watched the man approach.

BRIAN DIDN'T forget everything. In fact, a lot came flooding back into his consciousness. He had to remember the lessons of Quantico—and Afghanistan—if he wanted to sleep in his own bed that night. And so he took an indirect path forward, dodging around the rectangular goods tables, keeping his eyes on his target and trusting Enzo to look around. But he did that, too. His target didn't have command of his weapon. He was looking straight at the Marine, his face strangely fearful . . . but smiling? *What the hell?*

He walked right in now, straight at the bastard.

FOR HIS part, Zuhayr stopped fighting the suddenly massive weight on his weapon, and stood as straight as he could, looking in the eyes of his killer. *"Allahu Ackbar,"* he said.

"THAT'S NICE," Brian replied, and fired right into his forehead. "I hope you like it in hell." Then he bent down and picked up the Ingram, slinging it over his back.

"Clear it and leave it, Aldo," Dominic commanded. Brian did just that.

"Jesus, I hope somebody called 911," he observed.

"Okay, follow me upstairs," Dominic said next.

"What—why?"

"What if there's more'n four of 'em?" The reply question was like a punch in Brian's mouth.

"Okay, I got your six, bro."

It struck both of them as incredible that the escalator was still working, but they rode it up, both crouching and scanning all around. There were women all over the place—all over meaning as far from the escalator as possible—

"FBI!" Dominic called. "Is everybody okay here?"

"Yes," came multiple, separate, and equivocal replies from around the second floor.

Enzo's professional identity came back into full command : "Okay,

we have it under control. The police will be here shortly. Until they get here, just sit tight."

The twins walked from the top of the "up" escalator to the top of the "down" one. It was immediately clear that the shooters hadn't come up here.

The ride down was dreadful beyond words. Again, there were pools of blood on a straight line from perfume to handbags, and now the lucky ones who were merely wounded were crying out for help. And, again, the twins had more important things to do. Dominic led his brother out into the main concourse. He turned left to check the first one he'd shot. This one was dead beyond question. His last ten-millimeter bullet had exploded out through his right eye.

On reflection, that left only one, if he was still alive.

HE WAS, despite all of his hits. Mustafa was trying to move, but his muscles were drained of blood and oxygen, and were not listening to the commands that came through the central nervous system. He found himself looking up, somewhat dreamily it seemed, even to him.

"You have a name?" one of them asked.

Dominic had only halfway expected an answer. The man was clearly dying, and not slowly, either. He turned to look for his brother—not there. "Hey, Aldo!" he called, to no immediate response.

BRIAN WAS in Legends, a sporting-goods shop, taking a quick look. His initiative was rewarded, and he took it back to the mall corridor.

Dominic was there, talking to his "suspect," but without getting much of a response.

"Hey, raghead," Brian said, returning. Then he knelt down in the blood beside the dying terrorist. "I got something for you."

Mustafa looked up in some puzzlement. He knew that death was close, and while he didn't exactly welcome it, he was content in his own mind that he'd done his duty to his Faith, and to Allah's Law.

Brian grabbed the terrorist's hands and crossed them on his bleeding chest. "I want you to carry this to hell with you. It's a pigskin, asshole, made from the skin of a real Iowa pig." And Brian held his hands on the football as he looked into the bastard's eyes.

The eyes went wide with recognition—and horror at the moment's transgression. He willed his arms to move away, but the infidel's hands overpowered his efforts.

"Yeah, that's right. I am Iblis himself, and you're going to my place." Brian smiled until the eyes went lifeless.

"What's that about?"

"Save it," Brian responded. "Come on."

They headed for where it had all started. A lot of women were on

the floor, most of them moving some. All of them bleeding, and some quite a lot—"Find a drugstore. I need bandages, and make sure somebody called 911."

"Right." Dominic ran off, looking, while Brian knelt next to a woman of about thirty, shot in the chest. Like most Marines, and all marine officers, he knew rudimentary first aid. First he checked her airway. Okay, she was breathing. She was bleeding from two bullet holes in her upper left chest. There was a little pink froth on her lips. Lung shot, but not a bad one. "Can you hear me?"

A nod, and a rasp: "Yes."

"Okay, you're going to be okay. I know it hurts, but you are going to be okay."

"Who are you?"

"Brian Caruso, ma'am, United States Marines. You're going to be fine. Now I have to try'n help some others."

"No, no—I—" She grasped his arm.

"Ma'am, there's other people here hurt worse than you. You *will* be fine." And with that he pulled away.

The next one was pretty bad. A child, maybe, five years old, a boy, with three hits in his back, and bleeding like an overturned bucket. Brian turned him over. The eyes were open.

"What's your name, kid?"

"David," came the reply, surprisingly coherent.

"Okay, David, we're going to get you fixed up. Where's your mom?"

"I don't know." He was worried about his mother, more fearful for her than for himself, as any child would be.

"Okay, I'll take care of her, but let me look after you first, okay?" He looked up to see Dominic running toward him.

"There ain't no drugstore!" Dominic half shouted.

"Get something, T-shirts, anything!" he ordered his cop brother. And Dominic raced into the outfitters store where Brian had gotten his boots. He came out a few seconds later with an arm full of sweatshirts with various logos on the front.

And just then the first cop arrived, his service automatic out in both hands.

"Police!" the cop shouted.

"Over here, God damn it!" Brian roared in return. It took perhaps ten seconds for the officer to make it over. "Leather that pistol, trooper. The bad guys are all down," Brian told him in a more measured voice. "We need every damned ambulance you have in this town, and tell the hospital that they got a shitload of casualties coming. You got a first-aid kit in your car?"

"Who are you?" the cop demanded, without holstering his pistol.

"FBI," Dominic answered from behind the cop, holding his

credentials up in his left hand. “The shooting part is over, but we got a lot of people down here. Call everybody. Call the local FBI office and everybody else. Now get on that radio, Officer, and right the hell now!”

Like most American cops, Officer Steve Barlow had a portable Motorola radio, with a microphone/speaker clipped to the epaulet of his uniform shirt, and he made a frantic call for backup and medical assistance.

Brian turned his attention to the little boy in his arms. At this moment, David Prentiss was the entire world for Captain Brian Caruso. But all the damage was internal. The kid had more than one sucking chest wound, and this was not good.

“Okay, David, let’s take it real easy. How bad does it hurt?”

“Bad,” the little boy replied after half a breath. His face was going pale.

Brian set him on the countertop of the Piercing Pagoda, then realized there might be *something* there to help—but he found nothing more than cotton balls. He crammed two of them into each of the three holes in the child’s back, then rolled him back over. But the little boy was bleeding on the inside. He was bleeding so much internally that his lungs would collapse, and he’d go to sleep and die from asphyxiation in minutes unless somebody sucked his chest out, and there was not a single thing that Brian could do about it.

“Christ!” Of all people, it was Michelle Peters, holding the hand of a ten-year-old girl whose face was as aghast as a child could manage.

“Michelle, if you know anything about first aid, pick somebody and get your ass to work,” Brian ordered.

But she didn’t, really. She took a handful of cotton balls from the ear-piercing place and wandered off.

“Hey, David, you know what I am?” Brian asked.

“No,” the child answered, with some curiosity peering past the pain he was feeling in his chest.

“I’m a Marine. You know what that is?”

“Like a soldier?”

The boy was dying right in his arms, Brian realized. *Please, God, not this one, not this little boy.*

“No, we’re a lot better than soldiers. A Marine’s about the best thing a man can be. Maybe someday when you grow up, maybe you can be a Marine like me. What do you think?”

“Shoot bad guys?” David Prentiss asked.

“You bet, Dave,” Brian assured him.

“Cool,” David thought, and then his eyes closed.

“David? Stay with me, David. Come on, Dave, open those eyes back up. We need to talk some more.” He gently set the body back on the

counter and felt for a carotid pulse.

But there wasn't any.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit, man," Brian whispered. With that, all the adrenaline evaporated from his bloodstream. His body became a vacuum, and his muscles slack.

The first firefighters raced in, wearing khaki turnout coats and carrying boxes of what had to be medical gear. One of them took command, directing his people into various directions. Two headed to where Brian was. The first of them took the body from his arms and looked at it briefly, then set it on the floor, and then he moved away without a word to anyone, leaving Brian standing there, with a dead child's blood on his shirt.

Enzo was nearby, just standing and looking, now that professionals —mainly volunteer firefighters, actually, but proficient for all that— were assuming control of the area. Together they walked out the nearest exit into the clear noontime air. The entire engagement had lasted less than ten minutes.

Just like real combat, Brian realized. A lifetime—no, many lifetimes had come to their premature ends in what was relatively a blink of time. His pistol was back in his fanny pack. The expended magazine was probably back in Sam Goody. What he'd just experienced was the nearest thing to being Dorothy, sucked into a Kansas tornado. But he hadn't emerged into the Land of Oz. It was still central Virginia, and a bunch of people were dead and wounded behind them.

"Who are you guys?" It was a police captain.

Dominic held up his FBI ID, and that was enough for the moment.

"What happened?"

"Looks like terrorists, four of them, came in and shot up the place. They're all dead. We got 'em, all four of them," Dominic told him.

"You hurt?" the captain asked Brian, gesturing to the blood on his shirt.

Aldo shook his head. "Not a scratch. Cap'n, you got a lot of hurt civilians in there."

"What were you guys doing here?" the captain asked next.

"Buying shoes," Brian answered, a bitter edge on his voice.

"No shit . . ." the police captain observed, looking at the mall entrance, and standing still only because he was afraid of what he was going to see inside. "Any ideas?"

"Get your perimeter set up," Dominic said. "Check every license plate. Check the dead bad guys for ID. You know the drill, right? Who's the local SAC?"

"Just a Resident Agent here. Nearest real office is Richmond. Called there already. The SAC's a guy named Mills."

"Jimmy Mills? I know him. Well, the Bureau ought to send a lot of

troops here. Your best move is to secure the crime scene and stand by, get the wounded people clear. It's a fucking mess in there, Cap'n."

"I believe it. Well, I'll be back."

Dominic waited for the police captain to walk inside, then he elbowed his brother and together they walked to his Mercedes. The police car at the parking lot entrance—two uniforms, one of which held a shotgun—saw the FBI ID and waved them past. Ten minutes later, they were back at the plantation house.

"What's going on?" Alexander asked in the kitchen. "The radio said __"

"Pete, you know about the second thoughts I've been having?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, but what—"

"You can forget about them, Pete. Forever and always," Brian announced.

CHAPTER 14

PARADISE

THE NEWS crews flocked to Charlottesville like vultures on a fallen carcass—or started to until things got more complex.

The next news flash came from a place called Citadel Mall in Colorado Springs, Colorado, then came one from Provo, Utah, and finally Des Moines, Iowa. *That* made it a colossal story. The Colorado mall hit involved six dead cadets from the U.S. Air Force Academy—several more had been pulled outside to safety by their classmates—and twenty-six civilian deaths.

But word of Colorado Springs had gotten quickly to Provo, Utah, and there the local police chief, with a good cop's instinct, had dispatched radio cars to every shopping center in town. At Provo Towne Center, they scored. Each car carried the mandatory police shotgun, and an epic shoot-out developed between four armed terrorists and six cops—all of whom knew how to shoot. That produced two badly wounded cops, three dead civilians—a total of eleven local citizens had joined in the pitched battle—and four very dead terrorists in what the FBI would later term a bungled attack. Des Moines might have turned out the same, except that the local city police were slow to react, and the final score there was four terrorists dead, but thirty-one citizens to keep them company.

In Colorado, two surviving terrorists were holed up in a retail store with a police SWAT team just fifty yards away, and a company of National Guard riflemen—activated with alacrity by the state's governor—on the way and champing at the bit to live out every soldier's fantasy: to use fire and maneuver to immolate the invaders and set their remains out for cougar bait. It took over an hour for this to come to pass, but aided by smoke grenades, the weekend warriors used enough firepower to destroy an invading army and ended the lives of two criminals—Arabs, as it turned out, to no one's surprise—in spectacular fashion.

By this time, all of America was watching TV, with reporters in New York and Atlanta telling America what they knew, which was little, and trying to explain the events of the day, which they did with the accuracy of grammar-school children. They endlessly repeated the

hard facts they had managed to gather, and hauled in "experts" who knew little but said a lot. It was good for filling airtime, at least, if not to inform the public.

THERE WERE TVs at The Campus, too, and most work stopped as the troops watched them.

"Holy Jesus," Jack Jr. observed. Others had murmured or thought much the same, but it was somewhat worse for them, since they were technically members of the intelligence community, which had not provided strategic warning against this attack on their home country.

"It's pretty simple," Tony Wills observed. "If we do not have human-intelligence assets in the field, then it's hard for us to get any kind of warning, unless the bad guys are really loose on how they use their cell phones. But the news media likes to tell people how we track the bad guys, and the bad guys learn from that. The White House staffers, too—they like to tell reporters how smart they are, and they leak data on signals intelligence. You sometimes wonder if they're stringers for the terrorists, the way they give away code-word-sensitive information." In reality, the staff pukes were just showing off to the reporters, of course, which was about the only thing they knew how to do.

"So, the rest of the day the newsies will be screaming about 'another intelligence failure,' right?"

"Bet on it," Wills responded. "The same people who trash the intelligence community will now complain that it can't do the job—but without acknowledging their own role in crippling it every chance they get. Same thing from Congress, of course. Anyway, let's get back to work. NSA will be looking for a little cheering on the part of the opposition—they're human, too, right? They like to thump their chests some when they pull off an operation. Let's see if our friend Sali is one of them."

"But who's the big kahuna who ordered this one?" Jack asked.

"Let's see if we can find out." More important, Wills didn't add at the moment, was determining *where* the bastard was. A face with a location attached to it was a lot more valuable than a face without one.

UPSTAIRS, Hendley had his senior people together in front of *his* TV set.

"Thoughts?"

"Pete called up from Charlottesville. Care to guess where our two trainees were?" Jerry Rounds asked.

"You're kidding," Tom Davis responded.

"No, I'm not. They whacked the bad guys for fair, without outside

assistance, and they're back at the house now. Bonus: Brian—the Marine—had been having second thoughts about his function. That, Pete reports, is a thing of the past. He can't wait to go out on some real missions. Pete thinks they're just about ready, too."

"So, we just need some solid targets?" Hendley asked.

"My people will be checking the feed from NSA. You gotta assume that the bad guys will be talking back and forth now. Their downtime in chatting back and forth should be coming to an end even now," Rick Bell thought aloud. "If we're ready to go active, then we can go active, and soon."

That was Sam Granger's department. He'd kept quiet to this point, but now it was time to speak.

"Well, guys, we have two kids ready to go out and service some targets," he said, using a phrase the Army had invented twenty years before. "They are good kids, Pete tells me, and from what happened today I think they will be properly motivated."

"What is the opposition thinking?" Hendley asked. It wasn't hard to figure out, but he wanted additional opinions.

"They wanted to sting us cleverly. The objective here manifestly is to strike at Middle America," Rounds led off. "They think they can strike fear in our hearts by showing us they can attack us anywhere, not just at obvious targets like New York. That was the element of cleverness in this operation. Probably fifteen to twenty total terrorists, plus some support personnel, maybe. That's a fairly large number, but not unprecedented—they maintained good operational security. Their people were well motivated. I would not say that they were particularly well trained, though, they just decided to toss a mad dog in the backyard to bite some of the kids, as it were. They've demonstrated their political willingness to do some very bad things, but that's not a surprise; also to throw dedicated personnel away, but that's not a surprise either. The attack was low-tech in nature, just some bad guys with light automatic weapons. They have demonstrated viciousness, but not real professionalism. In less than two days, the FBI will have them tracked down to their point of origin, probably, and maybe their routes of entry. They did not learn to fly or anything like that, so they probably have not been in-country all that long. I'd be interested in learning who scouted out their objectives. The element of timing suggests some pre planning, but not much, I'd guess—it's not hard to read the time off a wristwatch. They didn't plan on getting away after doing their shooting. They probably came in with their objectives already identified. At this point, I'd bet a few bucks that they've only been inside our borders for a week or two—even less, depending on their method of ingress. The Bureau will have that one nailed down pretty soon."

"Pete reports the weapons were Ingram submachine guns. They look pretty—that's why they show up in TV and the movies," Granger explained. "But they are not really efficient weapons."

"How did they get them?" Tom Davis asked.

"Good question. Figure the FBI already has the ones from Virginia, and is busy tracking them down by serial number. They're good at it. We should have the information by tonight. That will give them leads on how the weapons got into the terrorists' hands, and then the investigation will get going."

"WHAT'S THE Bureau going to do, Enzo?" Brian asked.

"It's a major case. It'll have a code word assigned, and every agent in the country can be called in to work on it. Right now, first thing they're looking for is the car the bad guys used. Maybe it's stolen. More likely it's rented. You have to sign for those, leave a copy of your driver's license, credit card, all the normal stuff you do in order to exist in America. It can all be followed. It all leads somewhere, bro. That's why you chase them all down."

"How are you guys doing?" Pete asked, entering the room.

"A drink helps," Brian answered. He'd already cleaned his Beretta, as Dominic had done with his Smith & Wesson. "It wasn't fun, Pete."

"It isn't supposed to be. Okay, I just talked with the home office. They want to see you guys in a day or so. Brian, you had some qualms before, and you say that's changed. That still true?"

"You've trained us to identify, close on, and kill people, Pete. And I can live with that—just so's we're not doing something completely off the reservation."

Dominic just nodded agreement, but his eyes didn't leave Alexander.

"Okay, good. There's an old joke in Texas about why the lawyers are so good down there. The answer is, there's more men who need killin' than horses that need stealin'. Well, those who need killing, maybe you two can help them along some."

"Are you finally going to tell us who we're working for, exactly?" Brian asked.

"You will find that out in due course—just a day or so."

"Okay, I can wait that long," Brian said. He was doing some quick analysis of his own. General Terry Broughton might know something. For damned sure that Werner guy in FBI did, but this former tobacco plantation they'd been training on didn't belong to any part of the government he knew about. CIA had "The Farm" near Yorktown, Virginia, but that was about a hundred fifty miles away. This place didn't feel like "Agency," at least not in accordance with his assumptions, wrong though they could be. In fact, this place didn't

smell “government” at all, not to his nose. But one way or another, in a couple of days he’d know something substantive, and he could wait that long.

“What do we know about the guys we whacked today?”

“Nothing much. That’ll have to wait awhile. Dominic, how long before they start finding stuff out?”

“By noon tomorrow they’ll have a lot of information, but we don’t have a pipeline into the Bureau, unless you want me to—”

“No, I don’t. We might have to let them know that you and Brian aren’t the new version of the Lone Ranger, but it ought not to go very far.”

“You mean I’ll have to talk to Gus Werner?”

“Probably. He has enough juice in the Bureau to say you’re on ‘special assignment’ and make it stick. I imagine he’ll be patting himself on the back for talent-scouting you for us. You two did pretty damned well, by the way.”

“All we did,” the Marine said, “was what we’ve been trained to do. We had just enough time to get our shit together, and after that it was all automatic. They taught me at the Basic School that the difference between making it and not making it is usually just a few seconds’ worth of thinking. If we’d been in the Sam Goody when it all started instead of a few minutes later, it might have been different in the final outcome. One other thing—two men are about four times as effective as one man. There’s actually a study about it. ‘Non-Linear Tactical Factors In Small-Unit Engagements,’ I think the title is. It’s part of the syllabus at Recon School.”

“Marines really do know how to read, eh?” Dominic asked, reaching for a bottle of bourbon. He poured two stiff ones, handing one to his brother and taking a pull on his own.

“The guy in the Sam Goody—he smiled at me,” Brian said in reflective amazement. “I didn’t think about it at the time. I guess he wasn’t afraid to die.”

“It’s called martyrdom, and some people really do think that way,” Pete told them both. “So, what did you do?”

“I shot him, close range, maybe six or seven times—”

“Far side of ten times, bro,” Dominic corrected him. “Plus the last one in the back of his head.”

“He was still moving,” Brian explained. “And I didn’t have any cuffs to slap on him. And, you know, I’m not really all that worried about it.” And besides, he would have bled out anyway. The way things had worked out, his trip into the next dimension had just happened sooner.

“B-3 AND bingo! We have a bingo,” Jack announced from his

workstation. “Sali is a player, Tony. Look here,” he said, pointing to his computer screen.

Wills punched up his “take” from NSA, and there it was. “You know, chickens are supposed to cackle after they lay an egg, just to let the world know how good they are. Works with these birds, too. Okay, Jack, it’s official. Uda bin Sali is a player. Who is this addressed to?”

“It’s a guy he chats on the ’Net with. He mainly talks to him about money moves.”

“Finally!” Wills observed, checking the document on his own workstation. “They want photos of the guy, a whole spread. Maybe Langley is finally going to put some coverage on him. Praise the Lord!” He paused. “Got a list of the people he e-mails to?”

“Yep. Want it?” Jack keyed it up and hit the PRINT command. In just fifteen seconds, he handed the sheet over to his roomie. “Numbers and dates of e-mails. I can print up all the interesting ones, and the reasons I find them interesting, if you want.”

“We’ll let that sit for the moment. I’ll get this up to Rick Bell.”

“I’ll hold the fort.”

DID YOU SEE THE NEWS ON TV, Sali had written to a semi regular correspondent. THIS OUGHT TO GIVE THE AMERICANS A STOMACHACHE!

“Yeah, it sure will,” Jack told the screen. “But you just tipped your hand, Uda. Oops.”

SIXTEEN MORE martyrs, Mohammed thought, watching a TV in Vienna’s Bristol Hotel. It was only painful in the abstract. Such people were, really, expendable assets. They were less important than he, and that was the truth, because of his value to the organization. He had the looks and the language skills to travel anywhere, and the brainpower to plan his missions well.

The Bristol was an especially fine hotel, just across the street from the even more ornate Imperial, and the minibar had some good cognac, and he liked good cognac. The mission had not gone all that well . . . he’d hoped for hundreds of dead Americans, instead of several dozen, but with all the armed police and even some armed citizens, the high end of his expectations had been overly optimistic. But the strategic objective had been achieved. All Americans now knew that they were not safe. No matter where they might live, they could be struck by his Holy Warriors, who were willing to trade their lives for the Americans’ sense of security. Mustafa, Saeed, Sabawi, and Mehdi were now in Paradise—if that place really existed. He sometimes thought it was a tale told to impressionable children, or to the simpleminded who actually listened to the preaching of the

imams. You had to choose your preachers carefully, since not all the imams saw Islam the way Mohammed did. But they did not want to rule all of it. He did—or maybe just a piece of it, just so long as it included the Holy Places.

He couldn't talk aloud about matters like this. Some senior members of the organization really did believe, they were more to the conservative—reactionary—side of the Faith than were those such as the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. To his eyes the latter were just the corrupt rich of that hideously corrupt country, people who mouthed the words while indulging their vices at home and abroad, spending their money. And money was easily spent. You could not take it to the afterlife, after all. Paradise, if it truly existed, had no need of money. And if it did not exist, then there was no use for money, either. What *he* wanted, what he hoped to—no, what he *would* have in his lifetime—was power, the ability to direct people, to bend others to his will. For him, religion was the matrix that set the shape of the world that he would be controlling. He even prayed on occasion, lest he forget that shape—more so when he met with his "superiors." But as the chief of operations, it was he and not they who determined their organization's course through the obstacles placed in their path by the idolaters of the West. And in choosing the path, he also chose the nature of their strategy, which came from their religious beliefs, which were easily guided by the political world in which they operated. Your enemy shaped your strategy, after all, since his strategy was that which had to be thwarted.

So, now, the Americans would know fear as they'd not known it before. It was not their political capital or their financial capital that was at risk. It was all of their lives. The mission had been designed from the beginning mainly to kill women and children, the most precious and most vulnerable parts of any society.

And with that done, he twisted the top off another small bottle of cognac.

Later, he'd light up his laptop and get reports from his underlings in the field. He'd have to tell one of his bankers to put some more currency into his Liechtenstein account. It wouldn't do to tap that account dry. Then the Visa accounts would be eliminated, and vanish forever into the ether-world. Otherwise, the police would come after him, with a name and perhaps with photos. That would not do. He'd be in Vienna another few days, then back home for a week to meet with his seniors and plan future operations. With such a success under his belt, they'd listen more closely now. His alliance with the Colombians had paid off, despite their misgivings, and he was riding the crest of the wave. A few nights more of celebration and he'd be ready to return to the rather less lively nightlife of his home, which

was mostly coffee or tea—and talk, endless talk. Not action. Only through action could he achieve the goals set for him . . . by his seniors . . . and himself.

"MY GOD, Pablo," Ernesto said, turning his own TV off.

"Come now, it's not that much of a surprise," Pablo responded. "You didn't expect them to set up a table to sell Girl Scout cookies."

"No, but this?"

"That is why they are called terrorists, Ernesto. They kill without warning and attack people unable to defend themselves." There had been a lot of TV coverage from Colorado Springs, where the presence of National Guard trucks made such a dramatic backdrop. There the uniformed civilians had even dragged the two terrorist bodies out—ostensibly to clear the area where the smoke grenades had started some fires, but really to display the bodies, of course. The local military in Colombia liked to do similar things. Soldiers showing off. Well, the Cartel's own *sicarios* often did the same, didn't they? But it wasn't something he'd point out in this setting. It was important to Ernesto that his identity be that of a "businessman," and not a drug dealer or terrorist. In his mirror, he saw a man who provided a valuable product and service to the public, for which he was paid, and to protect which he had to deal with his competitors.

"But how will the *norteamericanos* react?" Ernesto asked the air.

"They will bluster and investigate it like any street murder, and some things they will find out, but most things they will not—and we have a new distribution network in Europe, which," he reminded his boss, "is *our* objective."

"I did not expect so spectacular a crime, Pablo."

"But we discussed all this," Pablo said in the calmest of voices. "Their hope was to commit some spectacular demonstration"—he did not say *crime,* of course—"which would strike fear into their hearts. Such rubbish is important to them, as we all knew beforehand. The important thing to us is that it will direct their troublesome activities away from our interests.

Sometimes he had to be patient explaining things to his boss. The important thing was the money. With money, you could buy power. With money, you could buy people and protection, and not only safeguard your own life and the life of your family, but also control your country. Sooner or later, they would arrange the election of someone who would say the words the *norteamericanos* wanted to hear, but who would do little, except maybe deal with the Cali group, which suited them fine. Their only real concern was that they might buy the protection of a turncoat, one who would take their money and then turn on them like a disloyal dog. Politicians were all made of the

same cloth, after all. But he'd have informers inside the camp of such people, backup security of his own. They would "avenge" the assassination of the false friend whose life he'd have to take in such circumstances. All in all, it was a complex game, but a playable one. And he knew how to maneuver the people and the government—even the North American one, if it came to that. His hands reached far, even into the minds and souls of those who had no idea whose hand was pulling their strings. This was especially true of those who spoke against legalizing his product. Should *that* happen, then his profit margin would evaporate, and, along with it, his power. He couldn't have that. No. For him and his organization, the status quo was a perfectly fine *modus vivendi* with the world as a whole. It was not perfection—but perfection was something he could not hope to achieve in the real world.

THE FBI had worked fast. Picking out the Ford with New Mexico tags had not been taxing, though every single tag number in the parking lot had been "run" and tracked down to its owner, and in many cases the owner had been interviewed by a sworn, gun-toting agent. In New Mexico, it had been discovered that the National car rental agency had security cameras, and the tape for the day in question was available, and, remarkably, it showed another rental that was of direct interest to the Des Moines, Iowa, field office. Less than an hour later, the FBI had the same agents back to check out the Hertz office just half a mile away, and that, too, had TV cameras inside. Between printed records and the TV tapes, they had false names (Tomas Salazar, Hector Santos, Antonio Quinones, and Carlos Oliva) to play with, images of their equally false driver's licenses, and cover names for four subjects. The documentation was also important. The international driver's licenses had been obtained in Mexico City, and telexes were fired off to the Mexican Federal Police, where cooperation was immediate and efficient.

In Richmond, Des Moines, Salt Lake City, and Denver, Visa card numbers were queried. The chief of security at Visa was a former senior FBI agent, and here computers not only identified the bank of origin for the credit accounts, but also tracked four cards through a total of sixteen gas stations, showing the paths taken and the speed of advance for all four terrorist vehicles. Serial numbers off the Ingram machine guns were processed through the FBI's sister agency, the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. There it was determined that all sixteen weapons had been part of a shipment hijacked eleven years earlier in Texas. Some of their sisters had turned up in drug-related shootings all across the country, and *that* piece of information opened a whole new line of

investigation for the Bureau to run down. At the four major crime scenes, fingerprints were taken of the dead terrorists, plus blood for DNA identification.

The cars, of course, were removed to the FBI offices and thoroughly dusted for fingerprints and also sampled for DNA evidence to see if perhaps additional persons had been in them. The management and staff of each hotel were interviewed, and also the employees of the various fast-food establishments, as were employees of local bars and other restaurants. The phone records of the motels were obtained to check out what, if any, telephone calls had been made. These turned up mainly Internet Service Providers, and the laptop computers of the terrorists were seized, dusted for prints, and then analyzed by the Bureau's in-house techno-weenies. A total of seven hundred agents were assigned exclusively to the case, code-named ISLAMTERR.

The victims were mostly in local hospitals, and those who could speak were interviewed that evening to ascertain what they knew or could remember. Bullets from their bodies were taken for evidence and would be matched with the weapons seized and taken to northern Virginia, site of the brand-new FBI Laboratory, for testing and analysis. All of this information went to the Department of Homeland Security, which, of course, forwarded every bit of it to CIA, NSA, and the rest of the American intelligence community, whose field intelligence officers were already pinging their agents for any relevant information. The spooks also queried those foreign intelligence services thought to be friendly—this was an exaggeration in most cases, of course—for feedback and information relating to the case. All of the information thus gleaned came to The Campus via the CIA/NSA link. All of the data intercepted found its way to The Campus's enormous central computer room in the basement, where it was classified as to type and set up for the analysts who'd arrive in the morning.

UPSTAIRS, everyone had gone home for the night, except for the security staff and those who cleaned up after every day. The workstations used by the analysis staff were protected in several ways to make sure they could not be turned on without authorization. Security was tight there, but it was kept low-key, the better to maintain it, and monitored by closed-circuit television cameras whose "take" was always under electronic and human scrutiny.

IN HIS apartment, Jack thought about calling his father, but decided not to. He was probably getting bombarded by TV and print newsies, despite his well-known practice of saying nothing about anything in order to give the sitting President, Edward Kealty, free rein. There *was*

a secure and very private line that only the kids knew about, but Jack decided to leave that one to Sally, who was a little more excitable than he was. Jack let it go with sending his dad an e-mail that essentially said *What the hell* and *I sure wish you were still in the White House.* But he knew that Jack Sr. was most likely thanking God that he wasn't, maybe even hoping that Kealty would listen to his advisers for a change—what good ones he had—and think before acting. His father probably *had* called some friends abroad to find out what they knew and thought, and maybe passed on some high-level opinions, since foreign governments mostly listened to what he had to say, quietly, in private rooms. Big Jack was still somewhat inside the system. He could call friends left over from his presidency to find out what was really going on. But Jack didn't think that one all the way through.

HENDLEY HAD a secure telephone in his office and at his home, called an STU-5, a brand-new product of AT&T and NSA. It had come to him through irregular means.

He was on it at that moment.

"Yes, that's right. We'll have the feed tomorrow morning. Not much point in sitting in the office and staring at a mostly blank screen right now," the former senator said reasonably, sipping at his bourbon and soda. Then he listened to the following inquiry.

"Probably," he responded to a rather obvious question. "But nothing 'hard' yet... about what you'd expect at this point, yes."

Another lengthy question.

"We have two guys right now, just about ready . . . Yes, we do—about four of them. We're taking a close look at them right now—tomorrow, that is. Jerry Rounds is thinking hard on the subject, along with Tom Davis—that's right, you don't know him, do you? Black guy, from other side of the river, both parts of the building. He's pretty smart, has a good feel for financial stuff, and also the operational side. Surprising that you never crossed paths with him. Sam? He's hot to trot—believe it. The trick is picking the right targets . . . I know, you can't be a part of that. Please pardon my calling them 'targets.'"

A lengthy monologue, plus a tag question.

"Yes, I know. That's why we're here. Soon, Jack. Soon . . . Thanks, buddy. You, too. See ya sometime." And he hung up, knowing that he wouldn't actually be seeing his friend anytime soon ... maybe never again in person. And that was a goddamned shame. There weren't many people who understood things like this, and more was the pity. One more call to make, and this on a regular phone.

CALLERID told Granger who it was before he picked up.

"Yeah, Gerry?"

"Sam, those two recruits. You sure they're ready to play in the bigs?"

"Ready as they need to be," the chief of operations assured his boss.

"Get 'em up here for lunch. You, me, them, and Jerry Rounds."

"I'll call Pete first thing in the morning." No sense doing it right away. It was barely a two-hour drive, after all.

"Good. You have any misgivings?"

"Gerry, the proof of the pudding, you know? We have to see sooner or later."

"Yeah, right. See you tomorrow."

"'Night, Gerry." Granger hung the phone back up and went back to his book.

THE MORNING news was particularly sensational all over America—all over the world, for that matter. The satellite feeds from CNN, FOX, MSNBC, and every other agency that owned TV cameras and an uplink truck provided the world with a lead story that could not be buried by anything less than a nuclear detonation. The European papers expressed ritual sympathy with America for its newest travail—soon to be forgotten and retracted, in effect if not in particulars. The American news media talked about how frightened American citizens were. Not with any poll numbers to back it up, of course, but across the country citizens were suddenly buying firearms for their own personal protection, which purpose would not be served well, or at all. Police knew without being told to take a close look at anyone who might have come from a country east of Israel, and if some dumbass lawyers called that ethnic profiling, then to hell with him. The crimes of the previous day had not been committed by a tour group from Norway.

Church attendance was up, a little.

All across America, people went to work and did their jobs, with a "What do you think of all this?" aimed at coworkers, who invariably shook their heads and went back to the business of making steel, automobiles, or delivering the mail. They were not terribly fearful, in fact, because even with four such incidents, it had all happened far from where most of them lived, and such events happened very rarely, and not enough to be a seriously personal threat. But all the working men in the country knew in their hearts that somebody, somewhere, really needed to have his ass kicked.

Twelve miles away, Gerry Hendley saw his papers—the *New York Times* was delivered by special messenger, while the *Washington Post* had arrived by a normal pickup truck. In both cases, the editorials could have been written by the same clone, urging calm and

circumspection, noting that the country had a President to react to these dreadful events, and calmly instructing the President to think before acting. The Op-Ed pieces were somewhat more interesting. Some columnists actually reflected the average citizen. There would be a national cry for vengeance on this day, and for Hendley the good news was that he might just be able to respond to it. The bad news was that no one would ever know, if he did it right.

All in all, this Saturday would not be a slow news day.

And The Campus's parking lot would be full, which would escape the notice of those who drove past the place. The cover story, if one were needed, was that the four massacres of the previous day had caused some instability in the financial markets—which, it turned out later in the day, was true.

Jack Jr. correctly assumed it would be a casual-dress day, and drove his Hummer 2 into work wearing jeans, a pullover shirt, and sneaks. The security people were fully uniformed, of course, and as stone-faced as ever.

Tony Wills was just lighting up his computer when Jack came in at 8:14.

"Hey, Tony," the young Ryan said in greeting. "What's the traffic like?"

"See for yourself. They're not asleep," Wills told his trainee.

"Roger that." He set down his coffee on the desk and slid into his comfortable swivel chair before lighting up his computer and getting through the security systems that protected what was on it. The morning "take" from NSA—that outfit *never* slept. And it was immediately clear that the people he kept track of paid attention to the news.

It was to be expected that the people in whom NSA had so much interest were not friends of the United States of America, but, even so, Jack Jr. was surprised—even shocked—by the content of some of the e-mails he read. He remembered his own feelings when the United States Army had charged into Saudi Arabia after the forces of the now defunct United Islamic Republic, and the *rush* of satisfaction when he'd seen a tank explode from direct fire. He hadn't thought for a moment about the three men who'd just perished within their steel tomb, rationalizing that they had taken up arms against America, and that was something that bore a price, a wager of sorts, and if the coin came up tails, well, that was why they called it gambling. Partly that had been his youth, since for a child everything seems directed to him as the center of the known universe, an illusion that takes time to discard. But for the most part the people killed the day before had been innocent civilians, noncombatants, mostly women and children, and to take pleasure in their deaths was just plain barbarism. But here

it was. Twice now, America had expended blood to save the mother country of Islam, and some Saudis were talking like *this*?

"Damn," he whispered. Prince Ali wasn't like this. He and Jack's father were *friends.* They were *pals.* They'd visited each other's homes. He himself had spoken with the guy, picked his brain, listened closely to what he'd had to say. Okay, sure, he'd mostly been a kid then, but Ali wasn't this sort of guy. But neither had his own father ever been Ted Bundy, and Bundy had been an American citizen, had probably even voted. So, living in a country did not make you a roving ambassador.

"Not everybody loves us, kid," Wills said, looking over at his face.

"What have we ever done to hurt them?" Junior asked.

"We're the biggest, richest kid on the block. What we say goes, even when we don't tell people what to do. Our culture is overpowering, whether it's Coca-Cola or *Playboy* magazine. That sort of thing can offend people's religious beliefs, and in some parts of the world religious beliefs define how they think. They do not recognize our principle of religious freedom, and if we allow something that offends their closely held beliefs, then in their mind it's our fault."

"Are you defending these birds?" Jack Jr. demanded.

"No, I am explaining how they think. To understand something does not mean approval of it." Commander Spock had said that once, but evidently Jack had missed that episode. "Your job, remember, is to understand how they think."

"Fine. They think fucked-up. I understand that. Now I have numbers to check out," and Jack set the e-mail transcripts aside and started looking into money moves. "Hey, Uda is working today. Hmm, he does some of this from his home, doesn't he?"

"That's right. Nice thing about computers," Wills said. "He doesn't have the lash-up at home he has at the office, though. Any interesting moves?"

"Just two, into the Liechtenstein bank. Let me run this account . . ." Ryan did some mouse work and came up with an ID on the account. It wasn't an especially big one. In fact, by Sali's standards it was downright tiny. Just half a million Euros, used mostly for credit card expenditures, his own and . . . others . . .

"Hey, this account supports a bunch of Visa cards," he said to Wills.

"Really?"

"Yeah, like a dozen or so. No, it's . . . sixteen, aside from the ones he uses . . ."

"Tell me about the account," Wills ordered. Sixteen suddenly seemed a very important number.

"It's a numbered one. NSA got it because of the trapdoor in the bank's accounting program. It's not big enough to be very important,

but it is covert."

"Can you pull up the Visa numbers?"

"The account numbers? Sure." Jack selected the account numbers, cut-and-pasted them to a new document, and printed it. Then he handed it across.

"No, you look at this," Wills said, handing across a sheet of his own.

Jack took it, and instantly the account numbers looked familiar. "What's your list about?"

"Those bad boys in Richmond all had Visa cards, used'em to buy gas across the country—looks like their trip originated in New Mexico, by the way. Jack, you tied Uda bin Sali to yesterday. It looks like he's the guy who bankrolled their expense accounts."

Jack looked at the sheets again, comparing one list of numbers with the others. Then he looked up.

"Fuck," he breathed.

And Wills thought about the miracle of computers and modern communications. The shooters from Charlottesville had used the Visa cards to purchase gas and food, all right, and their little friend Sali had just pumped some money into the bank account that paid the bills. He'd probably act Monday to kill off the accounts, to drop them off the face of the earth. But he'd be too late.

"Jack, who told Sali to drop money into the bank account?" *We got us a target,* Wills did not say. *Maybe more than one.*

CHAPTER 15

RED COATS AND BLACK HATS

THEY LET Jack do the computer work, cross-referencing the e-mails to and from Uda bin Sali that day. It was actually fairly miserable work, since Jack had the skills but not yet the soul of an accountant. But he soon learned that the notice to fund the account came from someone named 56MoHa@eurocom.net, who'd logged in over an 800 line from Austria.

They couldn't track him down any more closely than that, but now they had a new name on the Internet to keep track of. It was the cyber identity of somebody who gave orders to a suspected—*known*—banker for terrorists, and that made 56MoHa@eurocom.net very interesting indeed. It was up to Wills to twig NSA to keep track of that one, in case they had not already made it a "handle of interest," as such identities were known. It was widely believed in the computer community that such handles were largely anonymous, and largely they were, but once they became known to the proper agencies they could be pursued. It was usually by illegal means, but if the line between legal and illegal conduct on the Internet could operate in favor of teenaged pranksters, the same was true for the intelligence community, whose computers were difficult to locate, much less to hack. The most immediate problem was that Eurocom.net did not maintain any long-term storage of its message traffic, and once they fell off the server RAM—by being read by the intended recipient—they were essentially gone forever. Maybe NSA would note that this mutt had written to Uda bin Sali, but lots of people did, for money-changing purposes, and even NSA didn't have the manpower to read and analyze every single e-mail that crossed its computerized path.

THE TWINS arrived just before 11:00 A.M., guided by their in-car GPS computers. The identical C-class Mercedes sedans were directed to the small visitors' parking lot located directly behind the building. There Sam Granger met them, shook hands, and walked them inside. They were immediately issued lapel passes to get them past the security personnel, whom Brian immediately typed as former military NCOs.

"Nice place," Brian observed as they headed for the elevators.

Bell smiled. "Yeah, in private industry we can hire better decorators." It also helped if you happened to like the decorator's taste in art, which, fortunately, he did.

"You said 'private industry,'" Dominic observed at once. This was not, he thought, a time to enjoy the subtlety of the moment. This was the agency he worked for, and *everything* here was important.

"You'll get fully briefed today," Bell said, wondering how much truth he had just relayed to his guests.

The Muzak in the elevators was no more offensive than usual, and the lobby on the top floor—where the boss always was—was pretty vanilla, though it was Breyers vanilla instead of the Safeway house brand.

* * *

"SO, YOU tumbled to this today?" Hendley was asking. This new kid, he thought, really did have his father's nose.

"It just jumped off the screen at me," Jack replied. About what one would expect him to say, except that it had not leaped off anyone else's screen.

The boss's eyes went to Wills, whose analytical ability he knew well. "Jack's been looking at this Sali guy for a couple of weeks. We thought he might be a minor-league player, but today he moved up to triple-A status, maybe more," Tony speculated. "He's indirectly tied to yesterday."

"NSA twig to this yet?" Hendley asked.

Wills shook his head. "No, and I don't think they will. It's too indirect. They and Langley are keeping an eye on his guy, but as a barometer, not a principal." *Unless somebody at one place or the other has a lightbulb moment,* he didn't have to add. They happened, just not very often. In both bureaucracies, an off-the-reservation insight often got lost in the system, or was buried by those to whom it did not immediately occur. Every place in the world had its own orthodoxy, and woe betide the apostates who worked there.

Hendley's eyes swept over the two-page document. "Sure wiggles like a fish, doesn't he?" Then his phone buzzed, and he picked up the receiver. "Okay, Helen, send them in . . . Rick Bell is bringing in those two guys we talked about," he explained to Wills.

The door opened, and Jack Jr.'s eyes popped somewhat.

So did Brian's. "Jack? What are you doing here?"

Dominic's face changed a moment later. "Hey, Jack! What's happening?" he exclaimed.

For his part, Hendley's eyes twisted into a hurt expression. He hadn't thought this all the way through, a rare error on his part. But the room had only one door, unless you counted the private washroom.

The three cousins shook hands, momentarily ignoring the boss, until Rick Bell took control of the moment.

"Brian, Dominic, this is the big boss, Gerry Hendley." Handshakes were exchanged in front of the two analysts.

"Rick, thanks for bringing that up. Well done to both of you," Hendley said in dismissal.

"I guess it's back to the workstation. See you, guys," Jack said to his cousins.

The surprise of the moment didn't fade immediately, but Brian and Dominic settled into their chairs and filed the happenstance away for the moment.

"Welcome," Hendley said to them, leaning back in his chair. Well, sooner or later they'd find out, wouldn't they? "Pete Alexander tells me that you've done very well down at the country house."

"Aside from the boredom," Brian responded.

"Training is like that," Bell said in polite sympathy.

"What about yesterday?" Hendley asked.

"It wasn't fun," Brian said first. "It was a lot like that ambush in Afghanistan. Ka-boom, it started, and then we had to deal with it. Good news, the bad guys weren't all that bright. They acted like free agents instead of a team. If they'd been trained properly—if they'd acted like a team with proper security—it would have gone different. As it was, it was just a matter of taking out one at a time. Any idea on who they were?"

"What the FBI knows to this point, they seem to have come into the country through Mexico. Your cousin ID'd the source of their funding for us. He's a Saudi expatriate living in London, and he may be one of their backers. They were all Arabian in origin. They've positively ID'd five of them as Saudi citizens. The guns were stolen about ten years ago. They rented the cars—all four groups—in Las Cruces, New Mexico, and probably drove independently to their objectives. Their routes have been tracked by gas purchases."

"Motivation was strictly ideological?" Dominic asked.

Hendley nodded. "Religious—their version of it, yes. So it would seem."

"Is the Bureau looking for me?" Dominic asked next.

"You'll have to call Gus Werner later today so he can fill out his paperwork, but don't expect any hassles. They have a cover story all cooked up already."

"Okay."

This was Brian: “I assume that this is what we’ve been training for? To hunt down some of these people before they can do any more bad things over here?”

“That’s about right,” Hendley confirmed.

“Okay,” Brian said. “I can live with that.”

“You will go into the field together, covered as people in the banking and trading business. We’ll brief you in on the stuff you need to know to maintain that cover. You’ll operate mainly out of a virtual office via laptop computer.”

“Security?” Dominic wondered.

“That will not be a problem,” Bell assured him. “The computers are as secure as we can make them, and they can double as Internet phones for times when voice communications are required. The encryption systems are highly secure,” he emphasized.

“Okay,” Dominic said dubiously. Pete had told them much the same, but he’d never trusted any encryption system. The FBI’s radio systems, secure as they were supposed to be, *had* been cracked once or twice by clever bad guys or by computer geeks, the kind who liked to call the local FBI field office to tell them how smart they were. “What about our legal cover?”

“This is the best we can do,” Hendley said, handing a folder across. Dominic took it and flipped it open. His eyeballs widened immediately.

“Damn! How the hell did you get this?” he asked. The only presidential pardon he’d ever seen had been in a legal textbook. This one was effectively blank, except that it was signed. A blank pardon? Damn.

“You tell me,” Hendley suggested.

The signature gave him the answer, and his legal education came back. This pardon was bulletproof. Even the Supreme Court couldn’t toss this one out, because the President’s sovereign authority to pardon was as explicit as freedom of speech. But it would not be very helpful outside American borders. “So, we’ll be doing people here at home?”

“Possibly,” Hendley confirmed.

“We’re the first shooters on the team?” Brian asked.

“Also correct,” the former senator answered.

“How will we be doing it?”

“That will depend on the mission,” Bell answered. “For most of them, we have a new weapon that is one hundred percent effective, and very covert. You’ll be learning about that, probably tomorrow.”

“We in a hurry?” Brian asked further.

“The gloves are all the way off now,” Bell told them both. “Your targets will be people who have done, are planning to do, or who

support missions aimed at causing serious harm to our country and her citizens. We are not talking about political assassinations. We will only target people who are directly involved in criminal acts."

"There's more to it than that. We're not the official executioners for the state of Texas, are we?" This was Dominic.

"No, you are not. This is outside the legal system. We're going to try to neutralize enemy forces by the elimination of their important personnel. That should at the least disrupt their ability to do business, and we hope it will also force their senior people to show themselves, so that they can be addressed, too."

"So this"—Dominic closed the folder and passed it back to his host —"is a hunting license, with no bag limit and an open season."

"Correct, but within reasonable limits."

"Suits me," Brian observed. Only twenty-four hours earlier, he remembered, he'd been holding a dying little boy in his arms. "When do we go to work?"

Hendley handled the reply.

"Soon."

* * *

"UH, TONY, what are they doing here?"

"Jack, I didn't know they'd be in today."

"Nonresponsive." Jack's blue eyes were unusually hard.

"You've figured out why this place was set up, right?"

And that was enough of an answer. Damn. His own cousins? Well, one was a Marine, and the FBI one—the lawyer one, as Jack had thought of him once—had well and truly whacked some pervert down in Alabama. It had made the papers, and he'd even discussed it briefly with his father. It was hard to disapprove of it, assuming the circumstances had been within the law, but Dominic had always been the sort to play by the rules—that was almost the Ryan family motto. And Brian had probably done something in the Marines to get noticed. Brian had been the football type in his high school, while his brother had been the family debater. But Dominic wasn't a pussy. At least one bad guy had found that out the hard way. Maybe some people needed to learn that you didn't mess with a big country that had real men in its employ. Every tiger had teeth and claws . . .

. . . and America grew large tigers.

With that settled, he decided to go back looking for 56MoHa@eurocom.net. Maybe the tigers would go looking for more food. That made him a bird dog. But that was okay. Some birds needed their flying rights revoked. He'd arrange to query that

"handle" via NSA's taps into the world's cyber communications jungle. Every animal left a trail somewhere, and he'd go sniffing for it. Damn, Jack thought, this job had its diversions after all, now that he saw what the real objective was.

MOHAMMED WAS at his computer. Behind him, the television was going on about the "intelligence failure," which made him smile. It could only have the effect of further diminishing American intelligence capabilities, especially with the operational distractions sure to come from the investigative hearings the American Congress would conduct. It was good to have such allies within the target country. They were not very different from the seniors in his own organization, trying to make the world coincide with their vision rather than with the realities of life. The difference was that his seniors at least listened to him, because he did achieve real results, which, fortunately, coincided with their ethereal visions of death and fear. Even more fortunately, there were people out there willing to cast away their lives to make those visions real. That they were fools mattered not to Mohammed. One used such tools as one had, and, in this case, he had hammers to strike down the nails he saw across the world.

He checked his e-mails to see that Uda had complied with his instructions on the banking business. Strictly speaking, he could have just let the Visa accounts die, but then some officious bank employee might have poked around to see why the last set of bills had not been paid. Better, he thought, to leave some surplus cash in the account and to leave the account active but dormant, because a bank would not mind having surplus cash in its electronic vault, and if *that* account went dormant, no bank employee would do any investigation into it. Such things happened all the time. He made sure that the account number and access code remained hidden on his computer in a document only he knew about.

He considered sending a letter of thanks to his Colombian contacts, but nonessential messages were a waste of time and an invitation to vulnerability. You didn't send messages for fun or for good manners. Only what was strictly necessary, and as brief as possible. He knew enough to fear the American ability to gather electronic intelligence. The Western news media often talked about "intercepts," and so his organization had sworn completely off the satellite telephones they'd used for convenience. Instead they most often used messengers, who relayed information they'd carefully memorized. It was inconveniently slow, but it had the virtue of being completely secure ... unless the messenger was corrupted somehow. Nothing was totally secure. Every system had its weaknesses. But the Internet was the best thing going.

Individual accounts were beautifully anonymous, since they could be set up by anonymous third parties, and their identities relayed to the real end users, and therefore they existed only as electrons or photons—as alike as grains of sand in the Empty Quarter, as secure and anonymous as anything could be. And there were literally billions of Internet messages every day. Perhaps Allah could keep track of them, but only because Allah knew the mind and heart of every man, a capability He had not granted even to the Faithful. And so Mohammed, who rarely stayed in the same location for more than three days, felt free to use his computer at will.

THE BRITISH Security Service, its headquarters located at Thames House, upriver from the Palace of Westminster, maintained literally hundreds of thousands of wiretaps—the privacy laws of the United Kingdom were a lot more liberal than those of the United States . . . for the agencies of the state, that is—four of which applied to Uda bin Sali. One of those was for his cellular phone, and rarely developed much of anything valuable. His electronic accounts at work in the financial district and at home were the most valuable, since he distrusted voice communications and preferred electronic mail for all of his important contacts with the outside world. This included letters to and from home, mostly to reassure his father that the family money was secure. Strangely, he didn't even trouble himself to use an encryption program, assuming that the sheer volume of message traffic on the 'Net would preclude official surveillance. Besides, there were many people in the capital-preservation business in London—a lot of the city's valuable real estate was actually titled to foreigners—and money-trafficking was something that even most of the players found boring. The money alphabet had only a few elements, after all, and its poetry did little to move the soul.

But his e-mail line never chirped without an echo chirp at Thames House, and those fragments of signals went to GCHQ—Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, north and west of London, from which they were relayed via satellite to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and from there to Fort Meade, Maryland, via fiber-optic cable, for inspection mainly by one of the supercomputers in the headquarters buildings' enormous and strangely dungeon like basement. From there, material regarded as important went to CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters, after transiting a certain building's flat roof, after which the signals were digested by yet another set of computers.

"Something new here, from Mr. Fifty-six," Junior said almost to himself, meaning 56MoHa@eurocom.net. He had to think for a few seconds. It was mostly numbers. But one of the numbers was the

electronic address of a European commercial bank. Mr. 56 wanted some money, or so it appeared, and now that they knew that Mr. 56 was a "player," they had a new bank account to look at. That would happen the following day. It might even develop a name and a mailing address, depending on the individual bank's in-house procedures. But probably not. All the international banks were gravitating toward identical procedures, the better to maintain their competitive advantages, one over the other, until the playing field was as flat as a football pitch, as everyone adopted the most depositor-friendly procedures possible. Every person had his own version of reality, but everyone's money was equally green—or orange in the case of the Euro, decorated as it was with buildings never built and bridges never crossed. Jack made appropriate notes and shut his machine down. He'd be having dinner tonight with Brian and Dominic, just to catch up with family stuff. There was a new seafood restaurant on U.S. 29 that he wanted to check out. And his working day was done. Jack made a few notes for the next Monday morning—he didn't expect to be in on Sunday, national emergency or not. Uda bin Sali merited a very close examination. Exactly how close, he wasn't sure, though he'd begun to suspect that Sali would be meeting one or two people he knew well.

"HOW SOON?" It had been a bad question from Brian Caruso, but coming from Hendley's mouth it had rather more immediacy.

"Well, we have to put a plan of some sort together," Sam Granger replied. For everyone here, it was the same. What had been a slam dunk in the abstract became more complex when you had to face the reality of it. "First, we need a set of targets who make sense, and then a plan for servicing them in a way that also makes some sort of sense."

"Operational concept?" Tom Davis wondered aloud.

"The idea is to move logically—from our point of view, but to an outsider it should appear random—from target to target, making people stick their heads up like prairie dogs so's we can take them one at a time. It's simple enough in concept, but more difficult in the practical world." It was a lot easier to move chess pieces around a board than it was to manage people to move, on command, to the squares desired, a fact often lost on movie directors. Something as prosaic as a missed bus connection or a traffic accident, or the need to take a piss, could play hell with the most elegant theoretical plan. The world, one had to remember, was analog, not digital, in the way it operated. And "analog" actually meant "sloppy."

"So, you saying we need a psychiatrist?"

Sam shook his head. "They have some of those at Langley. It hasn't helped them very much."

"Ain't that the truth." Davis laughed. But this was not a time for humor. "Speed," he observed.

"Yes, the faster the better," Granger agreed. "Deny them the time to react and think."

"Also, better to deny them the ability to know anything's going on," said Hendley.

"Make people disappear?"

"Too many people have apparent heart attacks, and somebody'll get suspicious."

"You suppose they have any of our agencies penetrated?" the former senator wondered aloud. The other two in the room winced at the suggestion.

"Depends on what you mean." Davis took the question. "A penetration agent? That would be hard to arrange, absent a really juicy bribe, and even then it would be hard to set up, unless the Agency had a guy who went to them looking for a bankroll. Maybe that is a possibility," he added after a moment's reflection. "The Russians were always niggardly with money—they didn't have that much hard currency to toss around. These people, hell, they have more than they need. So . . . maybe . . ."

"But that works for us," Hendley thought. "Not too many people at the Agency know we exist. So, if they start thinking CIA is offing people, they can use their penetration agent, if any, to tell them it's not happening?"

"So then their expertise is counterproductive to them?" Granger speculated.

"They'd think 'Mossad,' wouldn't they?"

"Who else?" Davis asked in return. "Their own ideology works against them." It had been a ploy rarely—but sometimes successfully—used against KGB. Nothing like making the other guy feel clever. And if it made it tough for the Israelis, nobody in the American intelligence community would lose much sleep over it. "Ally" or not, the Israelis were not entirely beloved by their American counterparts. Even the Saudi spooks played with them, because national interests often overlapped in the most unlikely of ways. And for this series of plays, Americans would be looking out only for the mother country, and doing so completely off the books.

"The targets we have identified, where are they?" Hendley asked.

"All in Europe. They tend to be bankers or communications people. They move money around, or they handle messages, do briefings. One seems to gather intelligence. He travels a lot. Maybe he scouted locations for yesterday, but we haven't been on him long enough to know. We have some targets who do comms, but we want to leave those alone. They're too valuable. The other concern is to avoid

targets whose demise will tell the opposition how we twigged to them. It has to appear random. I think for some we set it up in such a way that the opposition think they've gone over the hill. Took the money and bugged out—grabbed a piece of the good life and dropped off the earth. We can even leave e-mail messages like that behind."

"And if they have a code to show it's their messages, and not somebody who's taken charge of their computers?" Davis asked.

"That works for us as much as it works against us. It's a natural play, to arrange your disappearance in such a way as to suggest you've been whacked. Nobody's going to come looking for a dead man, right? They must have that kind of concern. They hate us for corrupting their society, and so they must know that their people can be corrupted. They will have brave ones, and they'll have cowardly ones. These people are not unified in their outlook. They're not robots. Some will be true believers, sure, but others are in it for the ride, the fun, the glamour of what they're doing, but when it comes to the nut-crunching time, life will be more attractive to them than death." Granger knew people and motivations, and, no, they were not robots. In fact, the smarter they were, the less likely they were to be motivated by the simple. Most of the Muslim extremists, interestingly enough, were either in Europe or had been educated there. In a comfortable womb, they'd been isolated by their ethnic background—but also liberated from the repressive societies from which they'd sprung. Revolution had always been a creature of rising expectations—not a product of oppression, but of proto-liberation. It was a time of personal confusion and a time for seeking after identity, a period of psychological vulnerability when an anchor was needed and grasped at, whatever the anchor happened to be. It was sad to have to kill people who were more lost than anything else, but they'd chosen their path freely, if not intelligently, and if that path led to the wrong place, that was not the fault of their victims, was it?

THE FISH was pretty good. Jack tried the rockfish, the striped bass of the Chesapeake Bay. Brian opted for the salmon, and Dominic the crusted sea perch. Brian had chosen the wine, a French white from the Loire Valley.

"So, how the hell did you get here?" Dominic asked his cousin.

"I looked around, and this place interested me. So, I looked into it, and the more I found out, the less I could figure out. So, I came over and talked to Gerry, and I talked my way into a job."

"Doing what?"

"They call it analysis. It's more like mind reading. One guy in particular. Arabian name, plays with money in London. Mainly family money, dicks around with it, mainly trying to protect his father's pile

—it's a nice pile," Jack assured his companions. "He trades real estate. Nice way to preserve capital. The London market isn't going down anytime soon. The Duke of Westminster is one of the richest guys in the world. He owns most of central London. Our little friend is emulating His Grace."

"What else?"

"What else is that he's fed money into a certain bank account that's the source of payment for a bunch of Visa cards, four of whose owners you guys met yesterday." It wasn't a completed circle yet, but that wouldn't take the FBI much longer to close it up tight. "He also talked in his e-mails about the 'wonderful events' of yesterday."

"How did you get access to his e-mails?" Dominic asked.

"I can't say. You'll have to get that from somebody else."

"About ten miles that way, I bet," Dominic said, pointing northeast. The spook community tended to work on lines that were ordinarily forbidden to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In any case, Cousin Jack just maintained a fairly blank look that would not have won him any money at a high-stakes poker table.

"So, he funds bad guys?" Brian asked.

"Correct."

"That does not make him a good guy," Brian developed the thought a little further.

"Probably not," Junior agreed.

"Maybe we'll meet him. What else can you tell us?" Brian continued.

"Expensive place, a town house on Berkeley Square—nice part of London, couple of blocks from the U.S. Embassy. Likes to use whores for his sexual recreation. He especially likes one girl named Rosalie Parker. The British Security Service keeps an eye on him, and they regularly debrief his main squeeze—the Parker girl. He pays her top dollar, in cash. Miss Parker is supposed to be popular with rich people. I suppose she slings it pretty good," Jack added with distaste. "There's a new photo on the computer file. He's about our age, olive complexion, a sort of beard—the kind a guy might have to look sexy, you know? Drives an Aston Martin. Hot car. Usually goes around London in cabs, though. He doesn't have a place in the country, but he takes country trips on weekends to getaway hotels, mostly with Miss Parker or another rent-a-broad. Works downtown in the financial district. Has an office in the Lloyd's of London building—third floor, I think. He makes three or four trades per week. Mainly, I think he just sits there and watches the TV and stock tickers, reads the papers, stuff like that."

"So, he's a spoiled rich kid who wants some excitement in his life?" Dominic summarized.

"Correct. Except maybe he likes to go out and play in the traffic."

"That's dangerous, Jack," Brian pointed out. "It could even get somebody Excedrin Headache number three-five-six." Brian was wearing his game face, in anticipation of meeting the guy who had financed the death of David Prentiss.

And suddenly Jack thought that Miss Rosalie Parker of London might not be getting all that many more Louis Vuitton bags. Well, she probably had a nice retirement plan already arranged if she was as smart as the Security Service and Special Branch thought she was.

"How's your dad doing?" Dominic asked.

"Writing his memoirs," Jack answered. "I wonder how much he'll be able to put in? You know, even Mom doesn't know much about what he did at CIA, and the little bit I know—well, there's a lot of stuff he can't write about. Even the things that are sort of out in the public eye, he can't confirm they really happened."

"Like getting the head of the KGB to defect. That's gotta be some story. That guy's been on TV. I guess he's still pissed at your dad for keeping him from taking the Soviet Union over. Probably thinks he could have saved it."

"Maybe so. Dad has a lot of secrets, all right. So do some of his pals from the Agency. One guy in particular, named Clark. Scary guy, but him and Dad are pretty tight. I think he's in England now, boss of that new secret counterterrorism bunch that the press talks about every year or so, the 'men of black,' they call 'em."

"They're real," Brian said. "Out at Hereford in Wales. They're not that secret. The senior guys from Force Recon have been out there to train with 'em. Never been there myself, but I know two guys who have. Them and the Brit SAS. They're serious troops."

"How far inside were you, Aldo?" his brother asked.

"Hey, the special-operations community is pretty tight. We cross-train, share new equipment and stuff. Most important part is when we sit down with beers and share war stories. Everybody has a different way of looking at problems, and, you know, sometimes the other guy has a better idea than you have. The Rainbow team—that's the 'men of black' the newsies talk about—they're very smart, but they've learned a thing or two from us over the years. Thing is, they're smart enough to listen to new ideas. The boss man, this Clark guy, he's supposed to be very smart."

"He is. I've met him. Dad thinks he's the cat's ass." He paused before going on. "Hendley knows him, too. Why he isn't here, I don't know. I asked the first day I came here. Maybe because he's too old."

"He's a shooter?"

"I asked Dad once. Dad said he couldn't say. That's how he says yes. I guess I caught him at a weak moment. Funny thing about Dad, he

can't lie worth a damn."

"I guess that's why he loved being President so much."

"Yeah, I think that's the main reason he quit. He figured Uncle Robby could handle it better than he did."

"Until that cracker bastard wasted his ass," Dominic observed. The shooter, one Duane Farmer, was currently sitting on death row in Mississippi. "The last of the Klan," the newspapers called him, and so he was, at age sixty-eight, just a damned-by-everybody bigot who could not abide the thought of a black President, and had used his grandfather's World War One revolver to make it so.

"That was bad," John Patrick Ryan, Jr., agreed. "You know, except for him, I wouldn't have been born. It's a big family story. Uncle Robby's version of it was pretty good. He loved telling stories. Him and Dad were pretty tight. After Robby got wasted, the political pukes were running around in circles, some of them wanted Dad to pick up the flag again, like, but he didn't do it, and so, I guess, he helped that Kealty guy get elected. Dad can't stand him. That's the other thing he never learned, how to be nice to people he hates. He just didn't like living at the White House very much."

He was good at it, being President, Dominic thought.

"You tell him that. Mom didn't mind leaving, either. That First Lady stuff wrecked her doctor work, and she *really* hated what it did with Kyle and Katie. You know that old saying, the most dangerous place in the world is between a mom and her kids? It's for real, guys. Only time I ever saw her lose her temper—Dad does that a lot more than Mom does—was when somebody told her that her official duties required her not to go to Kyle's pageant at his day-care center. Jeez, she really came unglued. Anyway, the nannies helped—and the newspeople hammered her about that, how it wasn't American and all that. You know, if anybody had ever taken a picture of Dad taking a piss, I bet someone would have said he wasn't doing it right."

"That's what critics are for, to tell you how much smarter they are than the person they're criticizing."

"In the Bureau, Aldo, they're called lawyers, or the Office of Professional Responsibility," Dominic informed the table. "They have their sense of humor surgically removed before they join up."

"The Marines have reporters, too—and I bet not one of them ever went through boot camp." At least the guys who worked in the IG had been through the Basic School.

"I guess we should cheer up," Dominic announced, holding up his wineglass. "Ain't nobody going to criticize us."

"And live," Jack added with a chuckle. *Damn,* he thought, *what the hell is Dad going to say when he finds out about me?*

CHAPTER 16

AND THE PURSUING HORSES

SUNDAY WAS a day of rest for most people, and at The Campus it was much the same, except for the security people. Gerry Hendley believed that maybe God had had a point, that seven-day schedules accomplished a lot less than adding 16.67 percent to a man's weekly productivity. It also dulled the brain by denying it free-form exercise, or just the luxury of doing nothing at all.

But today it was different, of course. Today they'd be planning real black operations for the first time. The Campus had been active just over nineteen months, and that time had mostly been spent in establishing their cover as a trading and arbitrage business. His department heads had taken the Acela trains back and forth to New York many times to meet their white-world counterparts, and though it had seemed slow at the time, in retrospect it had been very quickly indeed that they'd made their reputation in the money-management community. They'd hardly ever shown the world their real results, of course, from speculating on currencies and a few very carefully chosen stock issues, sometimes even insider trades on companies which themselves didn't know the business that was coming their way. Staying covert had been the overall objective, but since The Campus had to be self-supporting, it also had to generate real income. In World War II, the Americans had peopled its black-operations establishments with lawyers, while the Brits had used bankers. Both had proven to be good for screwing people . . . and killing them. It had to be something about the way they looked at the world, Hendley thought over his coffee.

He gazed at the others: Jerry Rounds, his head of Strategic Planning; Sam Granger, his chief of Operations. Even before the building had been completed, the three of them had been thinking about the shape of the world, and how a few of the corners could best be rounded off. Rick Bell was here, too, his chief of Analysis, the one who spent his working days sorting through the "take" from NSA and CIA, and trying to find meaning in the flood of unrelated information —aided, of course, by the thirty-five thousand analysts at Langley, Fort Meade, and other such places. Like all senior analysts, he also

liked to frolic in the operations playground, and here that was actually possible, since The Campus was too small to have been overtaken by its own bureaucracy. He and Hendley worried that it might not always be so, and both made sure that no empires were being built.

To the best of their knowledge, theirs was the only institution in all the world like this. And it had been set up in such a way that it could be erased from the landscape in a matter of two or three months. Since Hendley Associates did not invite outside investors, their public profile was low enough that the radar never spotted their machinations, and, in any case, the community they were in did not advertise. It was easy to hide in a field in which everyone did the same, and nobody ratted on anyone else, unless very badly stung. And The Campus didn't sting. At least not with money.

"So," Hendley began, "are we ready?"

"Yes," Rounds said for Granger. Sam nodded soberly and smiled.

"We're ready," Granger announced officially. "Our two boys have earned their spurs in a way we never anticipated."

"They earned 'em, all right," Bell agreed. "And the Ryan boy has identified a good first target, this Sali fellow. The events of Friday have generated a lot of message traffic. They turn out a lot of cheerleaders. A lot of them are stringers and wanna-bes, but even if we pop one of them by mistake it's no great loss. I have the first four all lined up. So, Sam, do you have a plan for dealing with them?"

That was Davis's cue. "We're going to do reconnaissance by fire. After we whack one or two, we'll see what reaction, if any, results, and we will take our guidance from there. I agree that Mr. Sali looks like a profitable first target. Question is, is his elimination going to be overt or covert?"

"Explain," Hendley ordered.

"Well, if he's found dead on the street, that's one thing. If he disappears with his daddy's money and leaves behind a note saying that he wants to stop what he's doing and just retire, that's something else," Sam explained.

"Kidnapping? It's dangerous." The Metropolitan Police in London had a closure rate on kidnappings that nibbled at one hundred percent. That was a dangerous game to play, especially on their first move.

"Well, we can hire an actor, dress him up right, fly him to New York Kennedy, and then just have him disappear. In fact, we dispose of the body and keep the money. How much does he have access to, Rick?"

"Direct access? Hell, it's over three hundred million bucks."

"Might look good in the corporate exchequer," Sam speculated. "And it wouldn't hurt his dad much, would it?"

"His father's money—all of it? Try the sunny side of three billion,"

Bell answered. “He’ll miss it, but it wouldn’t break him. And given his opinion of his son, it might even develop as good cover for our operation,” he hypothesized.

“I am not recommending this as a course of action, but it is an alternative,” Granger concluded.

It had been talked about before, of course. It was too obvious a play to escape notice. And three hundred million dollars would have looked just fine in a Campus account, say in the Bahamas or Liechtenstein. You could hide money anywhere that had telephone lines. It was just electrons anyway, not gold bricks.

Hendley was surprised that Sam had brought this up so soon. Maybe he wanted to get a read on his colleagues. They were clearly not overcome with emotion at the thought of ending this Sali’s life, but to steal from him in the process pushed some very different buttons. A man’s conscience could be a funny thing, Gerry concluded.

“Let’s set that aside for the moment. How hard will the hit be?” Hendley asked.

“With what Rick Pasternak gave us? It’s child’s play, so long as our people don’t make a complete hash of it. Even then the worst thing that can happen is that it’ll look like a mugging that went wrong,” Granger told them.

“What if our guy drops the pen?” Rounds worried.

“It’s a pen. You can write with it. It’ll pass inspection with any cop in the world,” Granger replied confidently. He reached in his pocket and passed his sample around the table. “This one’s cold,” he assured them.

They’d all been briefed in. To all appearances, it was an expensive ballpoint, gold-plated, with obsidian on the clip. By depressing the clip and turning the nib cover, you switched the point from a real pen to a hypodermic with a lethal transfer agent. It would paralyze the victim in fifteen to twenty seconds, and kill him in three minutes, with no cure, and a very transient signature in the body. As the pen went around the conference table, the executives invariably felt the hypo point, and then experimented with using it for a simulated hit, mostly as an ice-pick strike, though Rounds handled it like a diminutive sword.

“It would be nice to try it on a dry run,” he observed quietly.

“Anyone here want to volunteer as the victim?” Granger asked the table. No heads nodded. The mood of the room didn’t surprise him much. It was time for a sober pause, the sort of thing that comes over a man when he signs his application for life insurance, a product that is valuable only if you are dead, which rather takes the fun out of the moment.

“Fly them to London together?” Hendley asked.

"Correct." Granger nodded, and turned back to his business voice. "We have them scout out the target, pick their moment, and make their hit."

"And wait to see the results?" Rounds asked, rhetorically.

"Correct. Then they can fly off to the next target. The whole operation should not take more than a week. Then we fly them home and await developments. If somebody taps into his money pile after his demise, we'll probably know, right?"

"We ought to," Bell confirmed. "And if anyone purloins it, we'll know where it goes."

"Excellent," Granger observed. After all, that was what "reconnaissance-by-fire" meant.

THEY WOULDN'T be here long, the twins both thought. They were quartered in adjoining rooms at the local Holiday Inn, and this Sunday afternoon they were both watching TV with one guest.

"How's your mom?" Jack asked.

"Fine, doing a lot of stuff with the local schools—parochial ones. A little more than a teacher's aide, but not actually teaching. Dad's working some new project—supposedly Boeing is back looking at an SST, supersonic airliner. Dad says they'll probably never build it, unless Washington coughs up a lot of money, but with the Concorde retired people are thinking about it again, and Boeing likes to keep their engineers busy. They're a little nervous about the Airbus people, and they don't want to be caught with their pants down if the French start getting ambitious."

"How was the Corps?" Jack asked Brian.

"The Corps is the Corps, cuz. It just rolls along, keeping busy for the next war that'll come along."

"Dad was worried when you went to Afghanistan."

"It was a little exciting. The people there, they're tough, and they're not dumb, but they're not trained that well, either. So, when we bumped heads with 'em, we came out ahead. If we saw something that looked hinky, we called air in on it, and that usually took care of things."

"How many?"

"How many did we take out? Some. Not enough, but some. The Green Berets went in first, and the Afghans learned from that that a stand-up fight was not in their interest. Mostly, we did pursuit and reconnaissance, birddogging for the airedales. We had a CIA guy with us, and a signals-intelligence detachment. The bad guys used their radios a little too much. When we got a hit, we'd move in to about a mile or so and give it a look-see, and if it was interesting enough we'd call in air and scramble the hell out of it. Scary to watch," Brian

summarized.

"I bet." Jack popped open a can of beer.

"So this Sali guy, the one with the girlfriend, Rosalie Parker?" Dominic asked. Like most cops, he had a good memory for names. "You said that he was jumpin' up and down about the shootings?"

"Yup," Jack said. "Thought they were just swell."

"So who was the cheerleading with?"

"Pals he e-mails to. The Brits have his phones tapped, and the e-mails—well, as I said, I can't tell you about the e-mails. Those European phone systems aren't anywhere near as secure as people think—I mean, everybody knows about intercepting cell phones and stuff, but the cops over there pull stuff we can't do here. The Brits especially, they use intercepts to track the IRA guys. I heard that the rest of the European countries are even freer to act."

"They are," Dominic assured him. "At the Academy, we had some in the national Academy program—that's like a doctoral course for cops. They'd talk about that sort of thing after you got a few drinks into them. So, this Sali guy liked what those mutts did, eh?"

"Like his team won the Super Bowl," Jack replied at once.

"And he bankrolls them?" Brian asked.

"That's right."

"Interesting," was all Brian had to say after getting that question answered.

HE COULD have stayed another night, but he had things to do in the morning, and so he was driving back to London in his Aston Martin Vanquish, Bowland black. Its interior was charcoal, and its handmade twelve-cylinder engine was pushing out most of its 460 horsepower as he headed east on the M4 at a hundred miles per hour. In its way, the car was better than sex. It was a pity Rosalie wasn't with him, but—he looked over at his companion—Mandy was an agreeable bed warmer, if a little too skinny for his usual tastes. If only she could put some meat on her bones, but European fashion did not encourage that. The fools who determined the rules of women's bodies were probably pederasts who wished them all to look like young boys. Madness, Sali thought. Pure madness.

But Mandy enjoyed riding in this car, more than Rosalie did. Rosalie, sadly, was fearful of driving fast, not as trusting of his skills as she should have been. He hoped he could take this car home—he'd fly it there, of course. His brother had a fast car of his own, but the dealer had told him that this four-wheeled rocket topped out at over three hundred kilometers per hour—that was 196 miles per hour—and the Kingdom had some fine, flat, straight roads. Okay, so he had a cousin who flew Tornado fighters for the Royal Saudi Air Force, but this car

was *his,* and that made all the difference. Unfortunately, the police here in England would not allow him to exercise it properly—one more traffic ticket and he might lose his driver's license, the spoilsports—but at home there would be no such problems. And after seeing what it could *really* do, he'd fly it back to Gatwick and use it to excite women, which was almost as good as just driving it. Certainly Mandy was properly excited by it. He'd have to get her a nice Vuitton bag and have it messengered to her flat tomorrow. It didn't hurt to be generous with women, and Rosalie needed to learn that she had some competition.

Racing into town as rapidly as the traffic and the police allowed, he zoomed past Harrods, through the vehicle tunnel, and past the Duke of Wellington's house before turning right onto Curzon Street and then left onto Berkeley Square. A flash of his lights told the man he paid to guard his parking place to move his car, and he was able to park just in front of his three-story brownstone town house. With continental manners, he got out of the car and raced around to open Mandy's door and gallantly escorted her up the steps to the huge oak front door, and, smiling, held it open for her. In a few minutes, she'd be opening an even nicer door for him, after all.

"THE LITTLE bugger's back," Ernest observed, making the proper note of the time on his clipboard. The two Security Service officers were in a British Telecom van parked fifty yards away. They'd been there for about two hours. This young Saudi madman drove as though he were the reincarnation of Jimmy Clark.

"I suppose he had a better weekend than we did," Peter agreed. Then he turned to punch the buttons to activate various wiretap systems in the Georgian town house. These included three cameras whose tapes were collected every third day by a penetration team. "He is a vigorous little bastard."

"Probably uses Viagra," Ernest thought aloud, and somewhat enviously.

"One must be a good sport, Ernie, my lad. It will cost him two weeks of our pay. And for what she is about to receive, she will surely be truly grateful."

"Bugger," Ernest observed sourly.

"She's thin, but not *that* thin, boyo." Peter had himself a good laugh. They knew what Mandy Davis charged her "tricks," and, like men everywhere, they wondered what special things she might do to earn it, all while holding her in contempt. As counterintelligence officers, they did not quite have the degree of sympathy a seasoned police constable might have had for relatively unskilled women trying to earn their way. Seven hundred fifty pounds for an evening's visit, and

two thousand pounds for a complete night. Exactly what her custom was for a full weekend, no one had asked.

They both picked up the earphones to make sure the microphones worked, switching channels to track them through the house.

"He's an impatient sod," Ernest observed. "Suppose she'll stay the night?"

"I'll wager she doesn't, Ernie. Then maybe he'll get on the bloody phone and we can get something useful off the bastard."

"Bloody wog," Ernest muttered, to his partner's agreement. They both thought Mandy was prettier than Rosalie. Fit for a government minister.

THEY WERE correct in their judgment. Mandy Davis left at 10:23 A.M., stopping at the door for one last kiss, and a smile certain to break any man's heart, and then she walked downhill on Berkeley Street heading toward Piccadilly, where she did not turn right at the Boots drugstore for the Underground station on the corner of Piccadilly and Stratton, but rather caught a cab that took her downtown, to New Scotland Yard. There, she'd be debriefed by a friendly young detective whom she rather fancied, though she was too skilled in her profession to mix business of the business sort with business of the pleasure sort. Uda was a vigorous john, and a generous one, but whatever illusions existed in their relationship were his, not hers.

THE NUMBERS came up on the LED register, and were saved and time-stamped in their laptop computers—there were two of them, and at least one more at Thames House. On each of Sali's phones was a pin register that noted the destination of every call he made. A similar device did the same for all incoming calls, while three tape machines recorded every word. This one was an overseas call, to a mobile phone.

"He's calling his friend Mohammed," Peter observed. "I wonder what they'll be talking about."

"At least ten minutes of his adventure this weekend, I'll wager."

"Yes, he does like to talk," Peter agreed.

"SHE'S TOO skinny, but she is an accomplished harlot, my friend. There is something to be said for unbelieving women," Sali assured his colleague. She and Rosalie really liked him. He could always tell.

"I am glad to hear that, Uda," Mohammed said patiently from Paris. "Now, to business."

"As you wish, my friend."

"The American operation went well."

"Yes, I saw. How many in total?"

"Eighty-three dead and a hundred forty-three wounded. It could have been more, but one of the teams made an error. More importantly, the news reports were everywhere. All they had on TV today was coverage of our holy martyrs and their attacks."

"That is truly wonderful. A great blow for Allah."

"Oh, yes. Now, I need some money transferred into my account."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand British pounds should do for now."

"I can have that done by ten in the morning." In fact, he could have done it an hour or two faster, but he planned on sleeping in the following morning. Mandy had tired him out. Now he was lying in bed, drinking French wine and smoking a cigarette, watching the TV without getting too involved. He wanted to catch Sky News at the top of the hour. "Is that all?"

"Yes, for now."

"It shall be done," he told Mohammed.

"Excellent. Good night, Uda."

"Wait, I have a question—"

"Not now. We must be cautious," Mohammed warned. Using a mobile phone had its dangers. He heard a sigh in reply.

"As you wish. Good night." And both killed their respective phones.

"THE PUB out in Somerset was rather nice—the Blue Boar, it was," said Mandy. "The food was decent. Uda had turkey and two pints on Friday night. Last night we dined at a restaurant across from the hotel, The Orchard. He had Chateaubriand and I had the Dover Sole. We went out to shop briefly on Saturday afternoon. He really didn't want to go out much, mostly just wanted to stay in bed." The cute detective was taping it all, plus making notes, as was another policeman. They both were being as clinical as she was.

"Did he talk about anything? The news on TV or in the papers?"

"He watched the news on TV. But he didn't speak a word. I said that it was appalling, all that killing, but all he did was grunt. He can be the most heartless chap, though he's always nice to me. We've still not had a cross word," she told them, caressing both with her blue eyes.

It was hard for the cops to regard her with professionalism. She had the looks of a fashion model, though at five foot one she was too short for it. There was also a sweetness about her that must have stood her in good stead. But inside was a heart of pure ice. It was sad, but not really their concern.

"Did he make any telephone calls?"

She shook her head. "None at all. He didn't bring his mobile phone

this weekend. He told me that he was all mine and I wouldn't have to share him with anyone else this weekend. That was a first. Other than that, it was the usual." She thought of something else: "He does bathe more now. I had him shower both days, and he didn't even complain. Well, I helped. I went into the shower with him." She gave them a coquettish smile. That pretty much ended the interview.

"Thank you, Miss Davis. As always, you've been very helpful."

"Just doing my bit. You think he's a terrorist or something?" she had to ask.

"No. If you were in any danger, we'd give you fair warning."

Mandy reached into her Louis Vuitton purse and pulled out a knife with a five-inch blade. It wasn't legal for her to carry such a thing concealed, but in her line of work she needed one sure friend to accompany her, and the detectives understood. She probably knew how to make proper use of it, they surmised. "I can look after myself," she assured them both. "But Uda isn't like that. He's actually rather a gentle man. That's one thing you get to know in my business, reading men. Unless he's a bloody fine actor, he's not a dangerous sort. He plays with money, not guns."

Both cops took that pronouncement seriously. She was right—if there was anything a hooker was good at, it was reading men. Those who couldn't often died before reaching twenty.

After Mandy took a cab home, the two Special Branch detectives wrote up what she'd told them, and then e-mailed it to Thames House, where it became another entry in the Security Service files on the young Arab.

BRIAN AND Dominic arrived at The Campus at 8:00 A.M. on the dot. Their newly issued security passes allowed them to take the elevator up to the top floor, where they sat and drank coffee for half an hour until Gerry Hendley showed up. Both of the twins sprang to attention, especially Brian.

"Good morning," the former senator said on his way past, then he stopped. "You want to talk to Sam Granger first, I think. Rick Pasternak will be here at around ninefifteen. Sam should be in any time now. I have to see to my desk right now, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Brian assured him. What the hell, the coffee wasn't bad.

Granger came out of the elevator just two minutes later. "Hey, guys. Follow me." And they did.

Granger's office was not as large as Hendley's, but it wasn't a trainee's cubbyhole, either. He pointed to the two visitors' chairs and hung up his coat.

"How soon will you be ready for an assignment?"

"How does today grab you?" Dominic asked in reply.

Granger smiled at the reply, but overly eager people could worry him. On the other hand, three days before . . . maybe eagerness was not so bad a thing after all.

"Is there a plan?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. We worked on it over the weekend." Granger started with the operational concept: reconnaissance by fire.

"Makes sense," Brian observed. "Where do we do it?"

"On the street, probably. I'm not going to tell you how to perform a mission. I will tell you what we want done. How you do it is going to be up to you. Now, for your first target we have a good crib sheet on his location and habits. It will just be a matter of identifying the right target and deciding how to do the job."

Do the job, Dominic thought. Like something from *The Godfather.*

"Who is he and why?"

"His name is Uda bin Sali, he's twenty-six, he lives in London."

The twins exchanged amused looks. "I should have known," Dominic said. "Jack told us about him. He's the money puke who likes hookers right?"

Granger opened the manila file he'd picked up on the way in and handed it across. "Photos of Sali and his two girlfriends. Location and photos of his house in London. Here's one of him in his car."

"Aston Martin," Dominic observed. "Nice wheels."

"He works in the financial district, has an office at the Lloyd's insurance building." More photos. "One complication. He usually has a tail. The Security Service—MI5—keeps an eye on him, but the troop they have assigned seems to be a rookie, and there's only one. So, when you make your hit, keep that in mind."

"Not using a gun, are we?" Brian asked.

"No, we have something better. No noise, nice and covert. You'll see when Rick Pasternak gets here. No firearms for this mission. European countries don't like guns much, and hand-to-hand is too dangerous. The idea is that it looks like he just had a heart attack."

"Residue?" Dominic asked.

"You can ask Rick about that. He'll give you chapter and verse."

"What are we using to deliver the drug?"

"One of these." Granger opened his desk drawer and took out the "safe" blue pen. He handed it across and told them how it worked.

"Sweet," Brian observed. "Just stab him in the ass, like?"

"Exactly right. It transfers seven milligrams of the drug—it's called succinylcholine—and that pretty much takes care of business. The subject collapses, is brain-dead in a few minutes, and all-the-way dead in less than ten."

"What about medical attention? What if there's an ambulance just across the street?"

"Rick says it won't matter unless he's in an operating room with doctors standing right at his side."

"Fair enough." Brian picked up the photo of their first target, looking at it, but really seeing young David Prentiss. "Tough luck, buddy."

"I SEE our friend had a nice weekend," Jack was saying to his computer. This day's report included a photo of a Miss Mandy Davis, along with a transcript of her interview with the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. "She's a looker."

"Not cheap, either," Wills observed from his workstation.

"How much longer has Sali got?" Jack asked him.

"Jack, it's better not to speculate on that," Wills warned.

"Because the two hitters—hell, Tony, they're cousins of mine."

"I do not know much about that, and I do not want to find out. The less we know, the less problems we can have. Period," he emphasized.

"You say so, man," Jack responded. "But whatever sympathy I might have had for this prick died when he started cheerleading and funding people with guns. There are lines you can't cross."

"Yeah, Jack, there are. Be careful that you don't step too far yourself."

Jack Ryan, Jr., thought about that for a second. Did he want to be an assassin? Probably not, but there were people who needed killing, and Uda bin Sali had crossed over into that category. If his cousins were going to take him down, they were just doing the Lord's work—or his country's work, which, to the way he'd been brought up, was pretty much the same thing.

"THAT FAST, Doc?" Dominic asked.

Pasternak nodded. "That fast."

"That reliable?" Brian inquired next.

"Five milligrams is enough. This pen delivers seven. If anyone survives, it would have to be a miracle. Unfortunately, it will be a very unpleasant death, but that can't be helped. I mean, we could use botulism toxin—it's a very fast-acting neurotoxin—but that leaves residue in the blood that would come out in a postmortem toxicology scan. Succinylcholine metabolizes very nicely. Detecting it would take another miracle, unless the pathologist knows exactly what to look for, and that is unlikely."

"How fast again?"

"Twenty to thirty seconds, depending on how close you get to a major blood vessel, then the agent will cause total paralysis. Won't even be able to blink his eyes. He will not be able to move his diaphragm, so no breathing, no oxygen through the lungs. His heart

will continue to beat, but since it will be the organ using the most oxygen, the heart will go ischemic in a matter of seconds—that means that without oxygen, the heart tissue will start to die from lack of oxygen. The pain will be massive. Ordinarily, the body has a reserve supply of oxygen. How much depends on physical condition—the obese have less oxygen reserves than the slender among us. Anyway, the heart will be the first. It will try to continue beating, but that only makes the pain worse. Brain death will occur in three to six minutes. Until then, he'll be able to hear but not see—"

"Why not?" Brian asked.

"The eyelids probably will close. We're talking total paralysis here. So, he'll be lying there, in enormous pain, unable to move at all, with his heart trying to pump unoxygenated blood until his brain cells expire from anoxia. After that, it's theoretically possible to keep the body alive—muscle cells last the longest without oxygen—but the brain will be gone. Okay, it's not as sure as a bullet in the brain, but it makes no noise, and leaves virtually no evidence. When the heart cells die, they generate enzymes that we look for in a probable heart attack. So, whatever pathologist gets the body to post will think 'heart attack,' or 'neurological seizure'—a brain tumor can cause that—and maybe he'll carve the brain up to look for one. But as soon as the blood work comes back, the enzyme test will say 'heart attack,' and that should settle matters right then and there. The blood work will not show the succinylcholine because it metabolizes even after death. They will have an unexpected massive heart attack on their hands, and those happen every day. They'll run his blood for cholesterol and some other risk factors, but nothing will change the fact that he's dead from a cause they'll never figure out."

"Jesus," Dominic breathed. "Doc, how the hell did you get into this business?"

"My little brother was a vice president at Cantor Fitzgerald," was all he had to say.

"So we want to be careful with these pens, eh?" Brian asked. The doc's reason was good enough for him.

"I would," Pasternak advised them.

CHAPTER 17

AND THE LITTLE RED FOX, AND THE FIRST FENCE

THEY FLEW out of Dulles International Airport on a British Airways flight, which turned out to be a 747 whose control surfaces their own father had designed twenty-seven years earlier. It occurred to Dominic that he'd been in diapers then, and that the world had turned over quite a few times from that day to this.

Both had brand-new passports in their own names. All other relevant documents were in their laptops, fully encrypted, along with modems and communications software, also fully encrypted. Aside from that, they were casually dressed, like most others in the first-class section. The stewardesses fluttered about efficiently, giving everyone munchies, along with white wine for both of the brothers. As they got to altitude, the food was decent—about the best thing that can be said about airline food—and so was the movie selection: Brian picked *Independence Day* while Dominic settled for *The Matrix*. Both had enjoyed science fiction since childhood. In the coat pockets of both were their gold pens. The reload cartridges were in their shaving kits, packed away in their regular luggage somewhere below. It would be about six hours to Heathrow, and both hoped to get some sleep on the way.

"Any second thoughts, Enzo?" Brian asked quietly.

"No," Dominic replied. "Just so it all works out." The prison cells in England lacked plumbing, he didn't add, and, no matter how embarrassing it might be for a Marine officer, it would be positively humiliating for a sworn special agent of the FBI.

"Fair enough. 'Night-night, bro."

"Roger that, jarhead." And both played with the complex seat controls to settle back to a nearly flat surface. And so the Atlantic passed beneath them for three thousand miles.

BACK IN his apartment, Jack Jr. knew that his cousins were gone overseas, and though he hadn't exactly been told why, their mission didn't require a spectacular leap of imagination. Surely Uda bin Sali would not live out the week. He'd learn about it from the morning message traffic out of Thames House, and he found himself wondering

what the Brits would be saying, how excited and/or regretful they might be. Certainly, he'd learn a lot about how the job had been done. That excited his curiosity. He'd spent enough time in London to know that guns were not done over there, unless it was a government-sanctioned killing. In such a case—if the Special Air Service dispatched someone especially disliked by No. 10 Downing Street, for example—the police knew not to press too deeply into the case. Maybe just some pro forma interviews, enough to establish a case file before slipping it into the UNSOLVED cabinet to gather dust and little interest. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure those things out.

But this would be an American hit on British soil, and *that,* he was sure, would not be pleasing to Her Majesty's Government. It was a matter of propriety. Besides, this was not an action by the American government. As a matter of law, it was a premeditated murder, upon which all governments frowned rather severely. So, whatever happened, he hoped they'd be careful. Even his father couldn't run much interference for this.

"OH, UDA, you are a *beast*!" Rosalie Parker exclaimed as he finally rolled off her body. She checked her watch. He'd gone late, and she had an appointment just after lunch the next day with an oil executive from Dubai. He was a rather dear old fellow, and a good tipper, even if he had told her once that she reminded him of one of his favorite daughters, the nasty old bugger.

"Stay the night," Uda urged.

"I can't, love. I have to pick up my mum for lunch and then take her shopping at Harrods. Good Lord, I must be off," she said with well-feigned excitement, springing to an upright position.

"No." Uda reached for her shoulder and pulled it back.

"Oh, you devil!" A chuckle and a warm smile.

"He is called *'Shahateen,'"* Uda corrected. "And he is not part of my family."

"Well, you can wear a girl out, Uda." Not that it was a bad thing, but she had things to do. So she stood and got her clothes off the floor, where he tended to throw them.

"Rosalie, my love, there is only you," he moaned. And she knew that was a lie. It was she who had introduced him to Mandy, after all.

"Is that so?" she asked.

"Oh, that one. She is far too skinny. She doesn't eat. She's not like you, my princess."

"You're so nice." Bend over, kiss, then put the bra on. "Uda, you are the best, the very best," she said. It was always good for the male ego to be stroked, and his ego was bigger than most.

"You just say that to make me feel good," Sali accused her.

"Do you think I'm an actress? Uda, you make my eyeballs pop out. But I have to go, love."

"As you say." He yawned. He'd buy her some shoes the next day, Uda decided. There was a new Jimmy Choo store close to his office that he'd been meaning to check out, and her feet were a spot-on size 6. He rather liked her feet, in fact.

Rosalie made a quick dart into the bathroom to check the mirror. Her hair was a fright—Uda kept messing it up, as though to mark his property. A few seconds with a brush made it almost presentable.

"I must be off, love." She bent down to kiss him again. "Don't get up. I know where the door is." And a final kiss, lingering and inviting . . . for the next time. Uda was as regular as regular could be. And she'd be back here. Mandy was good, and a friend, but she knew how to treat these wogs, and, best of all, she didn't have to starve herself like a bloody runway model. Mandy had too many American and European regulars to eat normally.

Outside, she hailed a cab.

"Where to, dear?" the cabby asked.

"New Scotland Yard, please."

IT'S ALWAYS disorienting to wake up on an airplane, even in good seats. The window shades went up and the cabin lights came on, and the earphones played news that might or might not be new—since it was British, it wasn't easy to tell. Breakfast was served—plenty of fat, along with no-shit Starbucks coffee that was about a six on a one-to-ten scale. Maybe a seven. Through the windows to his right, Brian saw the green fields of England instead of the slate black of the stormy ocean that had passed during his thankfully dreamless sleep. Both twins were afraid of dreams right now, for the past they contained, and the future they feared, despite their commitment to it. Twenty more minutes and the 747 touched down gently at Heathrow. Immigration was a gentle formality—the Brits did it much better than the Americans, Brian thought. Baggage was on the carousel quickly enough, and then they walked out to the cabs.

"Where to, gentlemen?"

"Mayfair Hotel on Stratton Street."

The driver took this information with a nod and headed off east toward the city. The drive took about thirty minutes with the start of the morning rush hour. It was the first time in England for Brian, though not for Dominic. The sights were pleasant for the latter, and both new and adventurous for the former. It seemed like home, Brian thought, except that people drove on the wrong side of the road. On first inspection, drivers also seemed more courteous, but that was hard

to gauge. There was at least one golf course with emerald green grass, but aside from that, rush hour here wasn't all that different from the one in Seattle.

Half an hour later, they were looking at Green Park, which was, indeed, itself beautifully green, then the cab turned left, two more blocks, and right, and there was the hotel. Just on the other side of the street was a dealership for Aston Martin cars, looking as shiny as the diamonds in the window of Tiffany's in New York City. Clearly an upscale neighborhood. Though Dominic had been to London before, he hadn't stayed here. European hotels could teach lessons to any American establishment in terms of service and hospitality. Six more minutes had them in their connecting rooms. The bathtubs were large enough to exercise a shark, and the towels hung on a steam-heated rack. The minibar was generous in its selection, if not in its prices. Both twins took the time to shower. A check of the time made it a quarter to nine, and since Berkeley Square was only a hundred yards away, they took the moment to leave the hotel and head left for the landmark where nightingales sang.

Dominic elbowed his brother and pointed left. "Supposedly MI5 used to have a building that way, up Curzon Street. For the embassy, you go to the top of the hill, go left, two more blocks, then right, and left to Grosvenor Square. Ugly building, but that's the government for you. And our friend lives right about—there, on the other side of the park, half a block from the Westminster Bank. That's the one with the horse on the sign."

"Looks pricey here," Brian observed.

"Believe it," Dominic confirmed. "These houses go for a ton of money. Most of 'em are broken up into three apartments, but our friend Uda keeps the whole thing for himself, a Disneyland for sex and dissipation. Hmm," he observed, seeing a British Telecom van parked about twenty yards ahead of them. "I bet that's the surveillance team . . . kinda obvious." There were no people visible in the truck, but that was because the windows were plastic treated to keep the light inside. It was the only inexpensive vehicle on the street—in this neighborhood, everything was at least a Jaguar. But the king of the hill, auto-wise, was the black Vanquish on the other side of the park.

"Damn, that's one bad-ass automobile," Brian observed. And indeed it looked as though it were doing a hundred miles per hour just sitting in front of the house.

"The real champ is the McLaren F1. Million bucks, but it only seats one up front, I think. Fast as a fighter plane. The one you're looking at is quarter-mil' worth of car, bro."

"Fuck . . ." Brian reacted. "That much?"

"They're handmade, Aldo, by guys who work on the Sistine Chapel

in their off-hours. Yeah, it's a lot of wheels. Wish I could afford it. You could probably put the engine in a Spitfire and shoot down some Germans, y'know?"

"Probably gets lousy mileage," Brian observed.

"Oh, well . . . Everything has its little price—shit. There's our boy."

And just then the door to the house opened, and a young man walked out. The suit he wore was three-piece, and Johnny Reb gray in color. He stood in the middle of the four stone steps and looked at his watch. As though on cue, a black London cab came down the hill and he walked down the steps to hop in.

Five-ten, 155 to 160 pounds, Dominic thought. *Black beard down the line of his jaw, like from a pirate movie. Sucker ought to wear a sword... but he doesn't.*

"Younger than us," Brian observed, as they continued to walk. Then, on Dominic's initiative, they crossed over the park and headed back the other way, slowing for a covetous look at the Aston Martin before heading on their way. The hotel had a coffee shop, where they got some coffee and a light breakfast of croissants and marmalade.

"I don't like the idea of having coverage on our bird," Brian said.

"Can't be helped. The Brits must think he's a little hinky, too. But he's just going to have a heart attack, remember. It's not like we're going to pop him, even with a suppressed weapon. No marks, no noise."

"Okay, fine, we check him out downtown, but if it doesn't look good we blow it off and step back to think it over, okay?"

"Agreed." Dominic nodded. They'd have to be clever about it. He'd probably take the lead, because it would be his job to spot the guy's police tail. But there was no sense in waiting too long, either. They'd looked at Berkeley Square just to get a feel for it, and hoping to eyeball the target. It would not be a good place to make a hit, not with a surveillance team camped out thirty yards away. "The good news is that his tail is supposed to be a rookie. If I can ID the guy, then, when I get ready, you just bump into him and—hell, I'll ask directions to something or other. You'll only need a second to make the pop. Then we both keep on going like nothing happened. Even if people yell for an ambulance, nothing more than a casual turn, and you keep on going."

Brian thought his way through that. "We have to check out the neighborhood first."

"Agreed." They finished breakfast without another word.

* * *

SAM GRANGER was already in his office. It was 3:15 A.M. when he got in and lit up his own computer. The twins had gotten to London at about 1:00 A.M. his time, and something in the back of his head told him that they would not dally on their mission. This first mission would validate—or not—The Campus's idea of a virtual office. If things went according to plan, he'd get notification of the operation's progress even faster than Rick Bell's news over the intelligence network's wire service. Now came the part he always knew he'd hate: waiting for others to effect the mission he'd drawn up in his own mind, here at his own desk. Coffee helped. A cigar would have helped even better, but he didn't have a cigar. That's when his door opened.

It was Gerry Hendley.

"You, too?" Sam asked, with both surprise and amusement.

Hendley smiled. "Well, first time, right? I couldn't sleep at home."

"I hear you. Got a deck of cards?" he wondered aloud.

"I wish." Hendley was actually pretty good with a deck of cards. "Any word from the twins?"

"Not a peep. They got in on time, probably at the hotel by now. I imagine they got in, freshened up, and went out for a look-see. The hotel is only a block or so from Uda's house. Hell, for all I know they might have popped him in the ass already. The timing's about right. He'd be going to work about now, if the locals have his routine figured out, and I think we can depend on that."

"Yeah, unless he got an unexpected call, or he saw something in the morning paper that caught his interest, or his favorite shirt wasn't properly pressed. Reality is analog, Sam, not digital, remember?"

"Don't we know it," Granger agreed.

THE FINANCIAL district looked exactly like what it was, though somewhat homier than New York's tower targets of steel and glass. There were some of those, too, of course, but they weren't as oppressive. Half a block from where they got out of the cab was a portion of the original Roman wall that had surrounded the legion town of Londinium, as the British capital had originally been known, a place selected for its good wells and large river. The people here were mostly well dressed, they noticed, and the shops all upscale in a city where few things were low scale. The bustle factor was high, with crowds of people moving about with speed and purpose. There was also a good supply of pubs, most of which had chalkboards near the doors to advertise their food. The twins picked one in easy sight of the Lloyd's building; agreeably, it had outside tables, as though it were a Roman restaurant near the Spanish Steps. The clear sky belied London's wet reputation. Both twins were sufficiently well dressed not to appear too obviously to be American tourists. Brian spotted an ATM

machine and got some cash, which he split with his brother, and then they ordered coffee—they were too American to get tea—and waited.

IN HIS office, Sali was working on his computer. He had a chance to buy a town house in Belgravia—a neighborhood even more upscale than his own—for eight and a half million pounds, which wasn't quite a bargain, but neither was it excessive. Certainly he could rent it out for a good sum, and it was a freehold, meaning that in buying the house he'd also own the land, instead of paying ground rent to the Duke of Westminster. It wasn't excessive, either, but it did add up. He made a note to go look at it this week. Otherwise, the currency valuations were fairly stable. He'd played with currency arbitrage on and off for a few months, but he didn't really think he had the education to delve deeply into it. At least not yet. Maybe he would talk to a few people skilled in that game. Anything that could be done could also be learned, and with access to more than two hundred million pounds, he was able to play without doing his father's money too much damage. In fact, he was up this year by nine million pounds, which wasn't too bad. For the next hour, he sat at his computer and looked for trends—the trend is your friend—trying to make sense out of it. The real trick, he knew, was spotting them early—early enough to get in low before bailing out high—but, though he was closing in on it, he hadn't learned that particular skill yet. Had he done so, his trading account would have been up by thirty-one million pounds, instead of a mere nine. Patience, he thought, was a damnably hard virtue to acquire. How much better to be young and brilliant.

His office had a TV, too, of course, and he switched it to an American financial channel that spoke of a coming weakness in the pound against the dollar, though the reasons for it were not entirely convincing, and he thought better of buying thirty million dollars on speculation. His father had warned him about speculating before, and since it was his father's money he had listened attentively and granted the old bastard his wishes. Over the previous nineteen months, he was only down three million pounds, and most of those mistakes were a year behind him. The real-estate portfolio was doing very nicely. He was mostly buying property from older Englishmen and selling a few months later to his own countrymen, who usually paid cash or its electronic equivalent. All in all, he considered himself a real-estate speculator of great and growing talents. And, of course, a superb lover. It was approaching noon, and already his loins were aching for Rosalie. Might she be available this evening? For a thousand pounds, she ought to be, Uda thought. So, just before noon, he lifted his phone and hit the number 9 speed-dial button.

"My beloved Rosalie, this is Uda. If you can come over tonight,

about seven-thirty, I will have something nice for you. You know my number, darling." And he set the phone down. He'd wait until four or so, and if she did not call him back, he'd call Mandy. It was a rare day indeed when both of them were unavailable. He preferred to believe they spent such time shopping or having dinner with friends. After all, who paid them better than he did? And he wanted to see Rosalie's face when she got the new shoes. English women really liked this Jimmy Choo fellow. To his eye, the designs looked grotesquely uncomfortable, but women were women, not men. For his fantasies, he drove his Aston Martin. Women preferred sore feet. There was no understanding them.

BRIAN GOT bored too easily to just sit and stare at the Lloyd's building. Besides, it hurt his eyes. It was more than undistinguished, it was positively grotesque, like a glassed-in DuPont plant for making nerve gas or some other noxious chemical. It was also probably bad field craft to stare at any one thing for any length of time. There was some shopping on this street, again none of it cheap. A men's tailor shop and similarly nice-looking places for women, and what appeared to be a very expensive shoe store. That was one item he didn't bother with much. He had good black leather dress shoes—he was wearing them now—a good pair of sneaks that he'd bought on a day best forgotten, and four pairs of combat boots, two black and two the buff color the Marine Corps was heading to, except for parades and other official stuff that did not often concern the snake-eating Marines of Force Recon. All Marines were supposed to be "pretty" troops, but the snake-eating ones were thought to be from the side of the family that you didn't talk much about. And he was still coming to terms with the shoot-out of the previous week. Even the people he'd gone after in Afghanistan hadn't made any overt attempts to kill women and kids, at least that he knew about. They were barbarians, sure, but even barbarians were supposed to have limits. Except for the bunch of people that this guy played with. It wasn't manly—even the beard wasn't manly. The Afghans' were, but this guy just looked like some sort of pimp. He was, in short, unworthy of the Marine's steel, not a man to be killed, but a cockroach to be eliminated. Even if he did drive a car worth more than a Marine captain made in ten years, *before* taxes. A Marine officer might save up for a Chevy Corvette, but, no, this POS had to have the grandson of James Bond's car, to go along with the whores he rented. You could call him a lot of things, but "man" was definitely not among them, the Marine thought, subconsciously working himself up for the mission.

"Tallyho, Aldo," Dominic said, putting cash down on the table to cover the bill. Both stood and walked *away* from the target at first. At

the corner, both stopped and turned as though looking around for something. There was Sali...

. . . and there was Sali's tail. Dressed as a working man, expensively. He'd also appeared out of a pub, Dominic saw. He was indeed a rookie. His eyes were too obviously fixed on the subject, though he did stay back, fifty yards or so, clearly unconcerned about being spotted by his target. Sali was probably not the most alert of subjects, unschooled in counter surveillance. He doubtless thought himself perfectly safe. Probably thought himself pretty clever, too. All men had their illusions. This one's would prove to be more serious than normal.

The brothers scanned the street. Hundreds of people were in direct view. Lots of cars moving on the street. Visibility was good—a little too good—but Sali was presenting himself to them as though it were deliberate, and it was just too good to pass up . . .

"Plan A, Enzo?" Brian asked quickly. They had three plans thought out, plus the wave-off signal.

"Roger that, Aldo. Let's do it." They split up, heading in opposite directions in the hope that Sali would turn toward the pub where they'd endured the bad coffee. Both wore sunglasses to hide the direction of their gaze. In Aldo's case, this meant the spook who was tailing Sali. It was probably routine as hell for him, something he'd been doing for a few weeks, and you couldn't do anything that long without settling into a routine, anticipating what your subject was going to do, fixing on him and not scanning the street as you were supposed to do. But he was working in London, maybe his home turf, a place where he figured he knew all that was knowable and had nothing to fear. More dangerous illusions. His only job was to watch a not very intriguing subject in whom Thames House had some unexplained interest. The subject's habits were well established, and he was not a danger to anyone, at least not on this turf. A spoiled rich kid, that was all. Now he was turning left after crossing the street. Shopping today, it looked like. Shoes for one of his ladies, the Security Service officer surmised. Better presents than he could afford for *his* significant other, and he was *engaged,* the spook groused within his own mind.

THEY HAD a nice pair of shoes in the window, Sali saw, black leather and gold hardware. He hopped boyishly up onto the curb, then turned left toward the store entrance, smiling in anticipation of the look Rosalie would have in her eyes when she opened the box.

Dominic took out his Chichester map of central London, a small red book that he opened as he walked past the subject, without taking so much as a glance, letting his peripheral vision do the work. His eyes

were fixed on the tail. Looked even younger than he and his brother were, probably his first job out of whatever academy the Security Service conducted, assigned to an easy target for that very reason. He'd probably be a little nervous, hence his fixed eyes and balled-fist hands. Dominic hadn't been all that different only a year or so before, in Newark, young and earnest. Dominic stopped and turned quickly, gauging the distance from Brian to Sali. Brian would be doing exactly the same thing, of course, and his job was to synchronize movement with his brother, who had the lead. Okay. Again his peripheral vision took over, until the last few steps.

Then his eyes fixed on the tail. The Brit's eyes noted this, and his gaze shifted as well. He stopped almost automatically and heard the Yank tourist ask stupidly: "Excuse me, could you tell me where . . ." He held up his map book to illustrate how lost he was.

BRIAN REACHED into his coat pocket and pulled out the gold pen. He twisted the nib and the black point changed to an iridium tip when he pressed down on the obsidian clip. His eyes locked on the subject. At a range of three feet, he took half a step right as though to avoid someone who wasn't there at all, and bumped into Sali.

"THE TOWER of London. Why, you go right there," the MI5 guy said, turning to point.

Perfect.

"EXCUSE ME," Brian said, and let the man pass with a half step to his left, and the pen came down in a backward stabbing motion, and caught the subject square in the right ass cheek. The hollow syringe point penetrated perhaps as much as three millimeters. The CO_2 charge fired, injecting its seven milligrams of succinylcholine into the tissue of the largest muscle on Sali's anatomy. And Brian Caruso kept right on walking.

"OH, THANKS, buddy," Dominic said, tucking the Chichester's back into his pocket and taking a step in the proper direction. When he was clear of the tail, he stopped and turned—this was bad tradecraft, and he knew it—to see Brian putting the pen back into his coat pocket. His brother then rubbed his nose in the prearranged signal of MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

SALI WINCED ever so slightly at the bump or stick—whatever it was—on his ass, but it was nothing serious. His right hand reached back to rub the spot, but the pain faded immediately, and he shrugged it off

and kept heading for the shoe store. He took perhaps ten more steps and then he realized—

—his right hand was trembling ever so slightly. He stopped to look at it, reaching over with his left hand—

—that was trembling, too. Why was—

—his legs collapsed under him, and his body fell vertically down to the cement sidewalk. His kneecaps positively bounced on the surface, and they hurt, rather a lot in fact. He tried to take in a deep breath to ward off the pain and the embarrassment—

—but he *didn't* breathe. The succinylcholine had fully infused his body now, and had neutralized every nerve muscle interface that existed in his body. The last to go were his eyelids, and Sali, his face now rapidly approaching the sidewalk, didn't see himself hit. Instead, he was enveloped by blackness—actually, redness from the low-frequency light that penetrated the thin tissue of his eyelids. Very rapidly, his brain was overwhelmed first by the confusion that had to come before panic.

What is this? his mind demanded of itself. He could *feel* what was happening. His forehead was against the rough surface of semi-finished cement. He could hear the footsteps of people to his left and right. He tried to turn his head—no, first he had to open his eyes—

—but they did not open. *What* is *this?!!!*—

—he wasn't breathing—

—he commanded himself to breathe. As though in a swimming pool underwater, and coming to the surface after holding his breath for an uncomfortably long time, he told his mouth to open and his diaphragm to expand—

—*but nothing happened!*—

—*What is this?* his mind shouted at itself.

His body operated on its own programming. As carbon dioxide built up in his lungs, automatic commands went from there to his diaphragm to expand his lungs to take in more air to replace the poison in his lungs. But nothing happened, and, with that bit of information, his body went into panic all by itself. Adrenal glands flooded the bloodstream—the heart was still pumping—with adrenaline, and, with that natural stimulant, his awareness increased and his brain went into overdrive . . .

What is this? Sali asked himself urgently yet again, for now the panic was beginning to take over. His body was betraying him in ways that surpassed imagination. He was suffocating in the dark on a sidewalk in the middle of central London in broad daylight. The overload of CO_2 in his lungs did not really cause pain, but his body reported the fact to his mind as such. Something was going very wrong, and it made no sense, like being hit in the street by a lorry—

no, like being run over by a lorry in his *living room.* It was happening too fast for him to grasp it all. It made no sense, and it was so—surprising, astonishing, astounding.

But neither could it be denied.

He continued to command himself to breathe. It had to happen. It had never *not* happened, and so it must. He felt his bladder emptying next, but the flash of shame was immediately overcome by the building panic. He could *feel* everything. He could *hear* everything. But he couldn't *do* anything, nothing at all. It was like being caught naked in the King's own court in Riyadh with a pig in his arms—

—and then the pain started. His heart was beating frantically, now at 160 beats per minute, but in doing so it was only sending unoxygenated blood out into his cardiovascular system, and in doing that the heart—the only really active organ in his body—had used up all of the free and reserve oxygen in his body—

—and denied of oxygen, the faithful heart cells, immune to the muscle relaxant that it had itself infused throughout its owner's body, started to die.

It was the greatest pain the body can know, as each separate cell started to die, starting at the heart, the danger to which was immediately reported to the body as a whole, and the cells were now dying by the thousands, each connected to a nerve that screamed into the brain that DEATH was happening, and happening now—

He couldn't even grimace. It was like a fiery dagger in his chest, twisting, pushing deeper and deeper. It was the feel of Death, something delivered by the hand by Iblis himself, by Lucifer's own hand...

And that was the instant Sali saw Death coming, riding across a field of fire to take his soul, to Perdition. Urgently, but in a state of internal panic, Uda bin Sali thought as loudly as he could the words of the Shahada: *There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger... There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger . . . There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger—*

—Thereisnogodbutallahandmohammedishismessenger.

His brain cells, too, were deprived of oxygen, and they, too, started to die, and in that process the data they contained was dumped into a diminishing awareness. He saw his father, his favorite horse, his mother before a table full with food—and Rosalie, Rosalie riding him from on top, her face full of delight, that somehow became more distant . . . fading . . . fading . . . fading . . .

. . . to black.

People had gathered around him. One bent down and said, "Hello, are you all right?" A stupid question, but that's what people asked in such circumstances. Then the person—he was a salesman of computer

peripherals heading to the nearby pub for a pint and a British ploughman's lunch—shook his shoulder. There was no resistance at all, like turning over a piece of meat in the butcher's shop . . . And that frightened him more than a loaded pistol would have done. At once he rolled the body over and felt for a pulse. There *was* one. The heart was beating frantically—but the man wasn't breathing. Bloody hell . . .

Ten meters away, Sali's tail had his cell phone out and was dialing 999 for emergency services. There was a fire station only blocks away, and Guy's Hospital was just across Tower Bridge. Like many spooks, he had started to identify with his subject, even though detesting him, and the sight of the man crumpled on the sidewalk had shaken him deeply. What had happened? Heart attack? But he was a young man . . .

BRIAN AND Dominic rendezvoused at a pub, just uphill from the Tower of London. They picked a booth, and scarcely had they sat down when a waitress came to them and asked what they wanted.

"Two pints," Enzo told her.

"We have Tetley's Smooth and John Smith's, love."

"Which one do you drink?" Brian shot back.

"John Smith's, of course."

"Two of those," Dominic ordered. He took the lunch menu from her.

"Not sure I want anything to eat, but the beer's a good idea," Brian said, taking the menu, his hands shaking ever so slightly.

"And a cigarette, maybe." Dominic chuckled. Like most kids, they'd experimented with smoking in high school, but both had sworn off it before getting hooked. Besides, the cigarette machine in the corner was made of wood, and was probably too complex for a foreigner to operate.

"Yeah, right," Brian dismissed the thought.

Just as the beers arrived, they heard the dissonant note of a local ambulance three blocks away.

"How you feel?" Enzo asked his brother.

"Little shaky."

"Think about last Friday," the FBI agent suggested to the Marine.

"I didn't say I regretted it, dumbass. You just get a little worked up. You distract the tail?"

"Yeah, he was looking right into my eyes when you made the stick. Your subject walked maybe twenty feet before he collapsed. I didn't see any reaction from the stick. You?"

Brian shook his head. "Not even an 'ouch,' bro." He took a sip. "This is pretty good beer."

"Yeah, shaken, not stirred, Double-Oh-Seven."

In spite of himself, Brian laughed aloud. “You asshole!” he said. “Well, that’s the business we’ve fallen into, right?”

CHAPTER 18

AND THE DEPARTING FOXHOUNDS

JACK JR. found out first. He was just starting his coffee and doughnuts, and had lit up his computer, navigating his way first to the message traffic from CIA to NSA, and at the very top of the electronic pile was a FLASH-priority alert for NSA to pay special attention to "known associates" of Uda bin Sali, who had, CIA said the Brits had reported, evidently dropped dead of a heart attack in central London. The Security Service FLASH traffic, included in the CIA-gram, said in terse English prose that he'd collapsed on the street before the eyes of their surveillance officer, and had been rushed by ambulance to Guy's Hospital, where he "had failed to revive." The body was now being posted, MI5 said.

IN LONDON, Special Branch Detective Bert Willow called Rosalie Parker's apartment.

"Hello." She had a charming, musical voice.

"Rosalie, this is Detective Willow. We need to see you as soon as possible here at the Yard."

"I'm afraid I am busy, Bert. I have a client coming any minute. It will take two hours or so. I can come directly after that. Will that be okay?"

At the other end of the line, the detective took a deep breath, but, no, it really wasn't that urgent. If Sali had died of drugs—the most likely cause that had occurred to him and his colleagues—he hadn't gotten them from Rosalie, who was neither an addict nor a supplier. She wasn't stupid for a girl whose entire education had been in state schools. Her work was too lucrative to take that risk. The girl even attended church occasionally, her file read. "Very well," Bert told her. He was curious about how she'd take the news, but didn't expect anything important to develop there.

"Excellent. Bye-ee," she said before hanging up.

AT GUY'S Hospital, the body was already in the postmortem lab. It had been undressed and laid face up on a stainless steel table by the

time the senior duty pathologist came in. He was Sir Percival Nutter, a distinguished academic physician, and chairman of the hospital's Department of Pathology, sixty years of age. His technicians had already drawn 0.1 liter of blood for the lab to work on. It was quite a lot, but they'd be running every test known to man.

"Very well, he has the body of a male subject approximately twenty-five years of age—get his identification to get the proper dates, Maria," he told the microphone that hung down from the ceiling, which led to a tape recorder. "Weight?" This question was directed to a junior resident.

"Seventy-three point six kilograms. One hundred eighty-one centimeters in length," the brand-new physician responded.

"There are no distinguishing marks on the body, on visual inspection, suggesting a cardiovascular or neurological incident. What's the hurry on this, Richard? The body is still warm." No tattoos and so on. Lips were somewhat bluish. His nonofficial comments would be edited from the tape, of course, but a body still warm was quite unusual.

"Police request, sir. Seems he dropped dead on the street while being observed by a constable." It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough.

"Did you see any needle marks?" Sir Percy asked.

"No, sir, not a hint of that."

"So, lad, what do you think?"

Richard Gregory, the new M.D. doing his first pathology rotation, shrugged in his surgical greens. "From what the police say, the way he went down, sounds like a possible massive heart attack or a seizure of some sort—unless it's drug-related. He looks healthy for that, and there are no needle-mark clusters to suggest drugs."

"Rather young for a fatal infarction," the senior man said. To him, the body might as easily have been a piece of meat in the market, or a dead deer in Scotland, not the remaining shell of a human being who'd been alive—what?—as little as two or three hours earlier. Bad bloody luck for the poor bastard. Looked vaguely Middle Eastern. The smooth, unmarked skin on the hands did not suggest manual labor, though he did appear reasonably fit. He lifted the eyelids. Eyes were brown enough to appear black at a distance. Good teeth, not much dental work. On the whole, a young man who appeared to have taken decent care of himself. This was odd. Congenital heart defect, perhaps? They'd have to crack his chest for that. Nutter didn't mind doing it—it was just a routine part of the job, and he'd long since learned to forget about the immense sadness associated with it—but on such a young body, it struck him as a waste of time, even though the cause of death was mysterious enough to be of intellectual

interest, perhaps even something for an article in *The Lancet,* something he'd done many times in the preceding thirty-six years. Along the way, his dissection of the dead had saved hundreds, even thousands, of living people, which was why he'd chosen pathology. You also didn't have to talk to your patients much.

For the moment, they'd wait for the blood-toxicology readings to come out of the serology lab. It would at least give him a direction for his investigation.

BRIAN AND Dominic took a cab back to their hotel. Once there, Brian lit up his laptop and logged on. The brief e-mail he sent was automatically encrypted and dispatched in a matter of four minutes. He figured an hour or so for The Campus to react, assuming nobody wet his pants, which was unlikely. Granger looked like a guy who could have done this job himself, fairly tough for an old guy. His time in the Corps had taught him that you read the tough ones from the eyes. John Wayne had played football for USC. Audie Murphy, rejected by a Marine recruiter—to the everlasting shame of the Corps—had looked like a street waif, but he'd killed more than three hundred men all by himself. He'd also had cold eyes when provoked.

It was suddenly and surprisingly lonely for both Carusos.

They'd just murdered a man they didn't know and to whom neither had spoken a single word. It had all seemed logical and sensible at The Campus, but that was now a place far away in both linear distance and spiritual vastness. But the man they'd killed had funded the creatures who'd shot up Charlottesville, killing women and children without mercy, and, in facilitating that act of barbarism, he'd made himself guilty as a matter of law and common morality. So, it wasn't as though they'd wasted Mother Teresa's little brother on his way to Mass.

Again, it was harder on Brian than on Dominic, who walked over to the minibar and took out a can of beer. This he threw to his brother.

"I know," Brian responded. "He had it coming. It's just that—well, it's not like Afghanistan, y'know?"

"Yeah, this time we got to do to him what they tried to do to you. It's not our fault he's a bad guy. It's not our fault he thought the mall shoot was almost as good as getting laid. He did have it coming. Maybe he didn't shoot anybody, but he damned sure bought the guns, okay?" Dominic asked as reasonably as circumstances allowed.

"I ain't going to light a candle for him. Just—damn it, this isn't what we're supposed to do in a civilized world."

"What civilized world is that, bro? We offed a guy who needed to meet God. If God wants to forgive him, that's His business. You know, there're people who think anybody in uniform is a mercenary killer.

Baby-killers, that sort of thing."

"Well, that's just fucked up," Brian snarled back. "What I'm afraid of is, what if we turn into *them*?"

"Well, we can always back off a job, can't we? And they told us they'll always give us the reason for the hit. We won't turn into them, Aldo. I won't let it happen. Neither will you. So, we have things to do, right?"

"I suppose." Brian took a big pull on the beer and pulled the gold pen from his coat pocket. He had to recharge it. That took less than three minutes, and it was again ready to rock and roll. Then he twisted it back to a writing instrument and put it back in his coat pocket. "I'll be okay, Enzo. You're not supposed to feel good about killing a guy on the street. Though I still wonder if it doesn't make sense simply to pick the guy up and interrogate him."

"The Brits have civil-rights rules like ours. If he asks for a lawyer—you know he's been briefed to do that, right?—the cops can't even ask him the time, just like at home. All he has to do is smile and keep his trap shut. That's one of the drawbacks of civilization. It makes sense for criminals, I suppose, most of them, but these guys aren't criminals. It's a form of warfare, not street crime. That's the problem, and you can't hardly threaten a guy who wants to die in the performance of his duty. All you can do is stop him, and stopping a person like that means his heart has to discontinue beating."

Another pull on the beer. "Yeah, Enzo. I'm okay. I wonder who our next subject is."

"Give 'em an hour to chew on it. How about a walk?"

"Works for me." Brian stood, and in a minute they were back out on the street.

It was a little too obvious. The British Telecom van was just pulling away, but the Aston Martin was still in place. He wondered if the Brits would put a black-bag team into the house to toss it for interesting things, but that black sports car was right here, and it sure looked sexy.

"Wish you could get it in the estate sale?" Brian asked.

"Can't drive it at home. Wheel's on the wrong side," Dominic pointed out. But his brother was right. It was felonious for such a car to go to waste. Berkeley Square was pretty enough, but too small for anything except letting the infants crawl around on the grass and get some fresh air and sun. The house would probably be sold, too, and it would go for a large sum. Lawyers—"solicitors" over here—to tie things up, taking their cut before returning the residuary property to whatever family a snake left behind. "Hungry yet?"

"I could eat something," Brian allowed. So they walked some more. They headed toward Piccadilly and found a place called Pret A

Manger, which served sandwiches and cold drinks. After a total of forty minutes away from the hotel, they headed back in and Brian lit up his computer again.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED CONFIRMED BY LOCAL SOURCES. MISSION CLEAN, the message from The Campus read, and went on: SEATS CONFIRMED FLIGHT BA0943 DEPART HEATHROW TOMORROW 07:55 ARRIVE MUNICH 10:45. TICKETS AT COUNTER. There was a page of details, followed by ENDS.

"Okay," Brian observed. "We have another job."

"Already?" Dominic was surprised at the efficiency of The Campus.

Brian wasn't. "I guess they're not paying us to be tourists, bro."

"YOU KNOW, we need to get the twins out of Dodge quicker," Tom Davis remarked.

"If they're covert, it's not necessary," Hendley said.

"If somebody spots them somehow or other, better that they should not be around. You can't interview a ghost," Davis pointed out. "If the police have nothing to track, then they have less to think about. They can query the passenger list on a flight, but if the names they look for —assuming they have names—just go about normal business, then they have a blank wall with no evidence hanging on it. Better yet, if whatever face might or might not have been spotted just evaporates, then they have *gornischt,* and they're most likely to write it off as an eyewitness who couldn't be trusted anyway." It is not widely appreciated that police agencies trust eyewitnesses the least of all forms of criminal evidence. Their reports are too volatile, and too unreliable to be of much use in a court of law.

"AND?" SIR Percival asked.

"CPK-MB, and troponin are greatly elevated, and the lab says his cholesterol was two hundred thirteen," Dr. Gregory said. "High for one his age. No evidence whatever of drugs of any sort, not even aspirin. So, we have enzyme evidence of a coronary incident, and that's all at the moment."

"Well, we'll have to crack his chest," Dr. Nutter observed, "but that was in the cards anyway. Even with elevated cholesterol, he's young for a major cardiovascular obstruction, don't you think?"

"Were I to wager, sir, I think prolonged QT interval, or arrhythmia." Both of which left little postmortem evidence except in a negative sense, unfortunately, but both of which were uniformly fatal.

"Correct." Gregory seemed a bright young medical school graduate, and like most of them, exceedingly earnest. "In we go," Nutter said, reaching for the big skin knife. Then they'd use the rib cutters. But he was pretty sure what they'd find. The poor bastard had died of heart

failure, probably caused by a sudden—and unexplained—onset of cardiac arrhythmia. But whatever caused it, it had been as lethal as a bullet in the brain. “Nothing else on the toxicology scan?”

“No, sir, nothing whatever.” Gregory held up the computer printout. Except for reference marks on the paper, it was almost entirely blank. And that pretty much settled that.

IT WAS like listening to a World Series game on the radio, but without the color-commentary filler. Somebody at the Security Service was eager to let CIA know what was going on with the subject about which Langley clearly had some interest, and so whatever dribs and drabs of information came in were immediately dispatched to CIA, and thence to Fort Meade, which was scanning the ether waves for any resulting interest from the terrorist community around the world. The latter’s news service, it appeared, was not as efficient as its enemies had hoped.

“HELLO, DETECTIVE Willow,” Rosalie Parker said with her customary want-to-fuck-me smile. She made love for a living, but that didn’t mean that she disliked it. She breezed in wearing her visitor’s badge and took her seat opposite his desk. “So, what can I do for you this fine day?”

“Bad news, Miss Parker.” Bert Willow was formal and polite, even with whores. “Your friend Uda bin Sali is dead.”

“What?” Her eyes went wide with shock. “What happened?”

“We’re not sure. He just dropped down on the street, just across the street from his office. It appears that he had a heart attack.”

“Really?” Rosalie was surprised. “But he seemed so healthy. There was never a hint that anything was wrong with him. I mean, just last night . . .”

“Yes, I saw that in the file,” Willow responded. “Do you know if he ever used drugs of any sort?”

“No, never. He occasionally drank, but even that not much.”

To Willow’s eyes, she was shocked and greatly surprised, but there wasn’t a hint of tears in her eyes. No, for her, Uda had been a business client, a source of income, and little more. The poor bastard had probably thought otherwise. Doubly bad luck for him, then. But that wasn’t really Willow’s concern, was it?

“Anything unusual in your most recent meeting?” the cop asked.

“No, not really. He was quite randy, but, you know, some years ago I had a john die on me—I mean, he came and went, as they say. It was bloody awful, not the sort of thing you forget, and so I keep an eye on my clients for that. I mean, I’d never leave one to die. I’m not a barbarian, you know. I really do have a heart,” she assured the cop.

Well, your friend Sali doesn't anymore, Willow thought, without saying it. "I see. So last night he was completely normal?"

"Entirely. Not a single sign that anything was amiss." She paused to work on her composure. Better to appear more regretful, lest he think her to be an uncaring robot. "This is terrible news. He was so generous, and always polite. How very sad for him."

"And for you," Willow said in sympathy. After all, she'd just lost a major source of income.

"Oh. Yes, oh yes, for me too, love," she said, catching up with the news finally. But she didn't even try to fool the detective with tears. Waste of time. He'd see right through it. Pity about Sali. She'd miss the presents. Well, surely she'd get some more referral business. Her world hadn't ended. Just his. And that was his bad luck—with some thrown in for her, but nothing she couldn't recover from.

"Miss Parker, did he ever give you any hints on his business activities?"

"Mostly, he talked about real estate, you know, buying and selling those posh houses. Once, he took me to a house he was buying in the West End, said he wanted my opinion on painting it, but I think he was just trying to show me how important he was."

"Ever meet any of his friends?"

"Not too many—three, maybe four, I think. All were Arabs, most about his age, perhaps five years older, but not more than that. They all looked me over closely, but no business resulted from it. That surprised me. Arabs can be horny buggers, but they are good at paying a girl. You think he might have been involved in illegal activity?" she asked delicately.

"It's a possibility," Willow allowed.

"Never saw a hint of it, love. If he played with bad boys, it was out of my sight entirely. Love to help you, but there's nothing to say." She seemed sincere to the detective, but he reminded himself that when it came to dissimulation, a whore of this class could probably have shamed Dame Judith Anderson.

"Well, thank you for coming in. If anything—anything at all—comes to mind, do give me a call."

"That I will, love." She stood and smiled her way out the door. He was a nice chap, this Detective Willow. Pity he couldn't afford her.

Bert Willow was already back on his computer, typing up his contact report. Miss Parker actually seemed a nice girl, literate and very charming. Part of that had been learned for her business persona, but maybe part of it was genuine. If so, he hoped she'd find a new line of work before her character was completely destroyed. He was a romantic, Willow was, and someday it might be his downfall. And he knew it, but he had no desire to change himself for his job as she had

probably done. Fifteen minutes later, he e-mailed the report to Thames House, and then printed it up for the Sali file, which would in due course go to the closed files in Central Records, probably never to be heard from again.

* * *

"TOLD YOU," Jack said to his roomie.

"Well, then you can pat yourself on the back," Wills responded. "So, what's the story, or do I have to call up the documents?"

"Uda bin Sali dropped dead of an apparent heart attack. His Security Service tail didn't see anything unusual, just the guy collapsing on the street. *Zap,* no more Uda to swap funds for the bad guys."

"How do you feel about it?" Wills asked.

"It's fine with me, Tony. He played with the wrong kids, on the wrong playground. End of story," Ryan the younger said coldly. *I wonder how they did it?* he wondered more quietly. "Was it our guys helping him along, you think?"

"Not our department. We provide information to others. What they do with it out of our sight is not for us to speculate upon."

"Aye, aye, sir." The remainder of the day looked as though it would be pretty dull after such a fast beginning.

MOHAMMED GOT the news over his computer—rather, he was told in code to call a cutout named Ayman Ghailani whose cell phone number he had committed to memory. For that purpose, he took a walk outside. You had to be careful using hotel phones. Once on the street, he walked to a park and sat down on a bench, with a pad and pen in his hand.

"Ayman, this is Mohammed. What is new?"

"Uda is dead," the cutout reported somewhat breathlessly.

"What happened?" Mohammed asked.

"We're not sure. He fell near his office and was taken to the nearest hospital. He died there," was the reply.

"He was not arrested, not killed by the Jews?"

"No, there is no report of that."

"So, it was a natural death?"

"So it appears at this time."

I wonder if he did the funds transfer before he left this life? Mohammed thought. "I see . . ." He didn't, of course, but he had to fill the silence with some words. "So, there is no reason to suspect foul play?"

"Not at this time, no. But when one of our people dies, one always __"

"Yes, I know, Ayman. One always suspects. Does his father know?"

"That is how I found out."

His father will probably be glad to be rid of the wastrel, Mohammed thought. "Who do we have to make sure of the cause of death?"

"Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali lives in London. Perhaps through a solicitor . . . ?"

"Good idea. See that it is done." A pause. "Has anyone told the Emir?"

"No, I don't think so."

"See to it." It was a minor matter, but, even so, he was supposed to know everything.

"I shall," Ayman promised.

"Very well. That is all, then." And Mohammed thumbed the kill button on his cell phone.

He was back in Vienna. He liked the city. For one thing, they'd handled the Jews here once, and many Viennese managed to control their regrets over it. For another, it was a good place to be a man with money. Fine restaurants staffed by people who knew the value of skilled service to their betters. The former imperial city had a lot of cultural history to appreciate when he was of a mind to be a tourist, which happened more often than one might imagine. Mohammed found that he often did his best thinking when looking at something of no importance to his work. Today, an art museum, perhaps. He'd let Ayman do the scut work for now. A London solicitor would root about for information surrounding Uda's death, and, being a good mercenary, he'd let them know of anything untoward. But sometimes people simply died. It was the hand of Allah, which was not something easily understood, and never predicted.

* * *

OR MAY BE not so dull. NSA cross-decked some new message traffic after lunch. Jack did some mental arithmetic and decided it was evening on the other side of the pond. The electronic weenies of the Italian Carabinieri—their federal police, who walked about in rather spiffy uniforms—had made some intercepts, which they'd forwarded to the U.S. Embassy in Rome, and which had gone right up on the satellite to Fort Belvoir—the main East Coast downlink. Somebody named Mohammed had called somebody named Ayman—they knew this from the recorded conversation, which had also mentioned the death of Uda bin Sali, which had caused an electronic "Bingo" on

various computers, flagging it for a signals-intelligence analyst, and causing the embassy puke to squirt the bird.

"'Has anyone told the Emir?' Who the hell is the Emir?" Jack asked.

"That's a nobleman's title, like a duke or something," Wills answered. "What's the context?"

"Here." Jack handed a printed sheet across.

"That looks interesting." Wills turned and queried his computer for EMIR, and got only one reference. "According to this, it's a name or title that cropped up about a year ago in a tapped conversation, context uncertain, and nothing significant since. The Agency thinks it's probably shorthand for a medium-sized hitter in their organization."

"In this context, looks bigger than that to me," Jack thought aloud.

"Maybe," Tony conceded. "There's a lot about these guys that we don't know yet. Langley will probably write it off to somebody in a supervisory position. That's what I would do," he concluded, but not confidently.

"We have anybody on staff who knows Arabic?"

"Two guys who speak the language—from the Monterey school—but no experts on the culture, no."

"I think it's worth a look."

"Then write it up and we'll see what they think. Langley has a bunch of mind readers, and some of them are pretty good."

"Mohammed is the most senior guy we know in this outfit. Here, he's referring to somebody senior to himself. That is something we need to check out," the younger Ryan pronounced with all the power he possessed.

For his part, Wills knew that his roomie was right. He'd also just implicitly identified the biggest problem in the intelligence business. Too much data, too little analytical time. The best play would be to fake an inquiry to CIA from NSA and to NSA from CIA, asking for some thoughts on this particular issue. But they had to be careful with that. Requests for data happened a million times a day, and, due to the volume, they were never, ever checked—the comm link was secure, after all, wasn't it? But asking for time from analysts could too easily result in a telephone call, which required both a number and a person to pick up the phone. *That* could lead to a leak, and leaks were the single thing The Campus could not afford. And so, inquiries of this kind went to the top floor. Maybe twice a year. The Campus was a parasite on the body of the intelligence community. Such creatures were not supposed to have a mouth for speaking, but only for sucking blood.

"Write your ideas up for Rick Bell, and he'll discuss it with the Senator," Wills advised.

"Great," Jack grumbled. He hadn't learned patience yet. More to the point, he hadn't learned much about bureaucracies. Even The Campus had one. The funny thing was that if he'd been a mid level analyst at Langley, he could have picked up a phone, dialed a number, and talked to the right person for an expert opinion, or something close to it. But this wasn't Langley. CIA was actually pretty good about obtaining and processing information. It was doing something effective with it that constantly befuddled the government agency. Jack wrote up his request and the reasons for it, wondering what would result.

* * *

THE EMIR took the news calmly. Uda had been a useful underling, but not an important one. He had many sources of money for his operations. He was tall for his ethnicity, not particularly handsome, with a Semitic nose and olive skin. His family was distinguished and very wealthy, though his brothers—he had nine—controlled most of the family money. His home in Riyadh was large and comfortable, but not a palace. Those he left to the Royal Family, whose numerous princelings paraded about as though each of them were the king of this land and protector of the Holy Places. The Royal Family, whose members he knew well, were objects of silent contempt for him, but his emotions were something buried within his soul.

In his youth, he'd been more demonstrative. He'd come to Islam in his early teens, inspired by a very conservative imam whose preachings had eventually gotten him into trouble, but who had inspired a raft of followers and spiritual children. The Emir was merely the cleverest of the lot. He, too, had spoken his mind, and as a result been sent off to England for his education—really to get him out of the country—but in England, in addition to learning the ways of the world, he'd been exposed to something entirely alien. Freedom of speech and expression. In London, it is mostly celebrated at Hyde Park Corner, a tradition of spleen venting that dates back hundred of years, sort of a safety valve for the British population, and which, like a safety valve, merely vents troublesome thoughts into the air without letting them take much hold anywhere. Had he gone to America, it would have been the radical press. But what had struck him as hard as the arrival of a spaceship from Mars was that people were able to challenge the government in any terms they pleased. He'd grown up in one of the world's last absolute monarchies, where the very soil of the nation *belonged* to the king, and the law was what the reigning monarch said it was—subject in name if not in substance to the Koran

and the Shar'ia, the Islamic legal traditions which dated back to the Prophet himself. These laws were fair—or at least consistent—but very stern indeed. The problem was that not everyone agreed about the words of the Koran, and therefore about how the Shar'ia applied to the physical world. Islam had no pope, no real philosophical hierarchy as other religions understood the concept, and therefore no cohesive standard of application to reality. The Shi'a and the Sunni were often—always—at each other's throats over that question, and even within Sunni Islam, the Wahabis—the principal sect of the Kingdom—adhered to a stern belief system indeed. But for the Emir this very apparent weakness of Islam was its most useful attribute. One only had to convert a few individual Muslims to his particular belief system, which was remarkably easy, since you didn't have to go looking for those people. They identified themselves virtually to the point of advertising their identities. And most of them were people educated in Europe or America, where their foreign origin forced them to cleave together just to maintain a comfortable intellectual place of self-identity, and so they built upon a foundation of outsiderness that had led many of them to a revolutionary ethos. That was particularly useful, since along the way they'd acquired a knowledge of the enemy's culture that was vital in targeting his weaknesses. The religious conversions of these people had largely been pre installed, as it were. After that, it was just a matter of identifying their objects of hatred—that is, the people to be blamed for their youthful discontent—and then deciding how to do away with their self-generated enemies, one at a time, or as a grand coup de main, which appealed to their sense of drama, if not their scant understanding of reality.

And at the end of it, the Emir, as his associates had taken to calling him, would be the new Mahdi, the ultimate arbiter of all of the global Islamic movement. The intrareligious disputes (Sunnis and Shi'a, for example) he planned to handle through a sweeping fatwa, or religious pronouncement of tolerance—that would look admirable even to his enemies. And, after all, weren't there a hundred or more Christian sects who had largely ended their own internal strife? He could even reserve to himself tolerance of the Jews, though he would have to save that for later years, after he had settled into the seat of ultimate power, probably with a palace of suitable humility outside the city of Mecca. Humility was a useful virtue for the head of a religious movement, for as the pagan Thucydides had proclaimed, even before the Prophet, of all manifestations of power, that which most impresses men is restraint.

It was the tallest of orders, the thing he wanted to accomplish. It would require time and patience, and its success was hardly

guaranteed. It was his misfortune that he had to depend upon zealots, each of whom had a brain, and the consequent strong opinions. Such people could, conceivably, turn on him and seek to replace him with religious outlooks of their own. They might even believe their own concepts—they might be *true* zealots, as the Prophet Mohammed had been, but Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, had been the most honorable of men, and had fought a good and honorable fight against pagan idolaters, while his own effort was mainly within the community of Faithful. Was he, then, an honorable man? A difficult question. But didn't Islam need to be brought into the current world, and not remain trapped in antiquity? Did Allah desire His Faithful to be prisoners of the seventh century? Certainly not. Islam had once been the center of human scholarship, a religion of advancement and learning that had, sadly, lost its way at the hands of the great Khan, and then been oppressed by the infidels of the West. The Emir *did* believe in the Holy Koran, and the teachings of the imans, but he was not blind to the world around him. Nor was he blind to the facts of human existence. Those who had power guarded it jealously, and religion had little to do with that, because power was a narcotic all its own. And people needed something—preferably *someone*—to follow if they were to advance. Freedom, as the Europeans and Americans understood the concept, was too chaotic—he'd learned *that* at Hyde Park Corner, too. There had to be order. He was the man to provide it.

So, Uda bin Sali was dead, he thought, taking a sip of juice. A great misfortune for Uda, but a minor irritation to the Organization. The Organization had access to, if not a sea of money, then a number of comfortably large lakes, a small one of which Uda had managed. A glass of orange juice had fallen off the table, but thankfully it had not stained the carpet under it. It required no action on his part, even at second hand.

"Ahmed, this is sad news, but not a matter of great importance to us. No action need be taken."

"It shall be as you say," Ahmed Musa Matwalli responded respectfully. He killed his phone. It was a cloned phone, bought from a street thief for that one purpose, and then he tossed it into the river Tevere—the Tiber—off the Ponte Sant'Angelo. It was a standard security measure for speaking with the great commander of the Organization, whose identity was known to but a few, all of whom were among the most faithful of the Believers. At the higher echelons, security was tight. They all studied various manuals for intelligence officers. The best had been bought from a former KGB officer, who had died after the sale, for so it had been written. Its rules were simple and clear, and they did not deviate from them a dot. Others had been careless, and they'd all paid for their foolishness. The former

USSR had been a hated enemy, but its minions had never been fools. Only unbelievers. America, the Great Satan, had done the entire world a favor by destroying that abortion of a nation. They'd done it only for their own benefit, of course, but that, too, must have been written by the Hand of God, because it had also served the interests of the Faithful, for what man could plot better than Allah Himself?

CHAPTER 19

BEER AND HOMICIDE

THE FLIGHT into Munich was silky smooth. German customs were formal but efficient, and a Mercedes-Benz cab took them to the Hotel Bayerischer.

Their current subject was somebody named Anas Ali Atef, reportedly an Egyptian by nationality, and a civil engineer by education, if not by profession. Five feet nine inches or so, 145 pounds, clean-shaven. Black hair and dark brown eyes, supposed to be skilled at unarmed combat and a good man with a gun, if he had one. He was thought to be a courier for the opposition, and also worked to recruit talent—one of whom, for certain, had been shot dead in Des Moines, Iowa. They had an address and a photo on their laptops. He drove an Audi TT sports car, painted battleship gray. They even had the tag number. Problem: He was living with a German national named Trudl Heinz, and was supposedly in love with her. There was a photo of her, too. Not exactly a Victoria's Secret model, but not a skank, either—brown hair and blue eyes, five feet three inches, 120 pounds. Cute smile. Too bad, Dominic thought, that she had questionable taste in men, but that was not his problem.

Anas worshipped regularly at one of the few mosques in Munich, which was conveniently located a block from his apartment building. After checking in and changing their clothes, Dominic and Brian caught a cab to that location and found a very nice *Gasthaus*—a bar and grill—with outside tables from which to observe the area.

"Do all Europeans like to sit on the sidewalk and eat?" Brian wondered.

"Probably easier than going to the zoo," Dominic said.

The apartment house was four stories, proportioned like a cement block, painted white with a flat but strangely barnlike roof. There was a remarkably clean aspect to it, as though it was normal in Germany for everything to be as pristine as a Mayo Clinic operating room, but that was hardly cause for criticism. Even the cars here were not as dirty as they tended to be in America.

"Was darf es sein?" the waiter asked, appearing at the table.

"Zwei Dunkelbieren, bitte," Dominic replied, using about a third of his

remaining high-school German. Most of the rest was about finding the *Herrnzimmer,* always a useful word to know, in any language.

"American, yes?" the waiter went on.

"Is my accent that bad?" Dominic asked, with a limp smile.

"Your speech is not Bavarian, and your clothes look American," the waiter observed matter-of-factly, as though to say the sky was blue.

"Okay, then two glasses of dark beer, if you please, sir."

"Two Kulmbachers, *sofort,*" the man responded and hurried back inside.

"I think we just learned a little lesson, Enzo," Brian observed.

"Buy some local clothes, first chance we get. Everybody's got eyes," Dominic agreed. "Hungry?"

"I could eat something."

"We'll see if they have a menu in English."

"That must be the mosque our friend uses, down the road a block, see?" Brian pointed discreetly.

"So, figure he'll probably walk this way . . . ?"

"Seems likely, bro."

"And there's no clock on this, is there?"

"They don't tell us 'how,' they just tell us 'what,' the man said," Brian reminded his brother.

"Good," Enzo observed as the beer arrived. The waiter looked to be about as efficient as a reasonable man could ask. "*Danke sehr.* Do you have a menu in English?"

"Certainly, sir." And he produced one from an apron pocket as though by magic.

"Very good, and thank you, sir."

"He must have gone to Waiter University," Brian said as the man walked away again. "But wait till you see Italy. Those guys are artists. That time I went to Florence, I thought the bastard was reading my mind. Probably has a doctorate in waitering."

"No inside parking at that building. Probably around back," Dominic said, coming back to business.

"Is the Audi TT any good, Enzo?"

"It's a German car. They make decent machines over here, man. The Audi isn't a Mercedes, but it ain't no Yugo, either. I don't know that I've ever seen one outside of *Motor Trend.* But I know what they look like, kinda curvy, slick, like it goes fast. Probably does, with the autobahns they have here. Driving in Germany can be like running the Indy 500, or so they say. I don't really see a German driving a slow car."

"Makes sense." Brian scanned the menu. The names of the dishes were in German, of course, but with English subtitles. It looked as though the commentary was for Brits rather than Americans. They still

had NATO bases here, maybe to guard against the French rather than the Russians, Dominic thought with a chuckle. Though, historically, the Germans didn't need much help from that direction.

"What do you wish to have, *mein Herrn*?" the waiter asked, reappearing as though transported down by Scottie himself.

"First, what is your name?" Dominic asked.

"Emil. *Ich heisse Emil.*"

"Thank you. I'll have the sauerbraten and potato salad."

Then it was Brian's turn. "And I'll have the bratwurst. Mind if I ask a question?"

"Of course," Emil responded.

"Is that a mosque down the street?" Brian asked, pointing.

"Yes, it is."

"Isn't that unusual?" Brian pushed the issue.

"We have many Turkish guest workers in Germany, and they are also Mohammedans. They will not eat the sauerbraten or drink the beer. They do not get on well with us Germans, but what can one do about it?" The waiter shrugged, with only a hint of distaste.

"Thank you, Emil," Brian said, and Emil hurried back inside.

"What does that mean?" Dominic wondered.

"They don't like 'em very much, but they don't know what to do about it, and they're a democracy, just like we are, so they have to be polite to 'em. The average Fritz in the street isn't all that keen on their 'guest workers,' but there's not much real trouble about it, just scuffles and like that. Mainly bar fights, so I'm told. So, I guess the Turks have learned to drink the beer."

"How'd you learn that?" Dominic was surprised.

"There's a German contingent in Afghanistan. We were neighbors—our camps, like—and I talked some with the officers there."

"Any good?"

"They're Germans, bro, and this bunch was professionals, not draftees. Yeah, they're pretty good," Aldo assured him. "It was a reconnaissance group. Their physical routine is tough as ours, they know mountains pretty good, and they are well drilled at the fundamentals. The noncoms got along like thieves, swapped hats and badges a lot. They also brought beer along with their TO and E, so they were kinda popular with my people. You know, this beer is pretty damned good."

"Like in England. Beer is a kind of religion in Europe, and everybody goes to church."

Then Emil appeared with lunch—*Mittagessen*—and that, they both learned, was also okay. But both kept watching the apartment house.

"This potato salad is dynamite, Aldo," Dominic observed between bites. "I never had anything like it. Lots of vinegar and sugar, kinda

crispy on the palate."

"Good food isn't all Italian."

"When we get home, gotta try to find a German restaurant."

"Roger that. Lookie, lookie, Enzo."

It wasn't their subject, but it was his squeeze, Trudl Heinz. Just like the photo on their computers, walking out of the apartment house. Pretty enough to turn a man's head briefly, but not a movie star. Her hair had been blond once, but that had changed in her midteens, by the look of her. Nice legs, better-than-average figure. A pity she'd linked up with a terrorist. Maybe he'd latched onto her as part of his cover, and so much the better for him that it had side benefits. Unless they were living platonically, which didn't seem likely. Both Americans wondered how he treated her, but you couldn't tell something like that from watching her walk. She went up the other side of the street, but passed the mosque. So, she wasn't heading there at the moment.

"I'm thinking . . . if he goes to church, we can poke him coming out. Lots of anonymous people around, y'know?" Brian thought aloud.

"Not a bad concept. We'll see how faithful this guy is this afternoon, and what the crowd's like."

"Call that a definite maybe," Dominic replied. "First, let's finish up here and then get some clothes that'll fit us in better."

"Roger that," Brian said. He checked the time: 14:00. Eight in the morning at home. Only one hour of jet lag from London, easily written off.

JACK CAME in earlier than usual, his interest piqued by what he took to be an ongoing operation in Europe, and wondering what today's message traffic would show.

It turned out to be fairly routine, with some additional traffic on Sali's death. Sure enough, MI5 had reported his death to Langley as having been the apparent result of a heart attack, probably caused by the onset of fatal arrhythmia. That's what the official autopsy read, and his body had been released to a solicitors' firm representing the family. Arrangements were being made to fly him home to Saudi Arabia. His apartment had been looked at by the London version of a black-bag team, which had not, however, turned up anything of particular interest. That included his office computer, whose hard drive had been copied and the data carted off. It was being examined bit by bit by their electronic weenies, details to follow. That could take a lot of time, Jack knew. Stuff hidden on a computer was technically discoverable, but, theoretically, you could also take the pyramids of Giza apart stone by stone to see what was hidden under them. If Sali had been really clever about burying things into slots

only he knew about, or in a code to which only he knew the key . . . well, it would be tough. Had he been that clever? Probably not, Jack thought, but you could only tell by looking, and that was why people always looked. It'd take at least a week, to be sure. A month, if the little bastard was good with keys and codes. But just finding hidden stuff would tell them that he'd been a real player and not just a stringer, and the varsity at GCHQ would be assigned to it. Though none of them would be able to discover what he'd taken away to death with him inside his head.

"Hey, Jack," Wills said, coming in.

"'Morning, Tony."

"Nice to be eager. What have they turned on our departed friend?"

"Nothing much. They're airmailing the box home later today, probably, and the pathologist called it a heart attack. So, our guys are clean."

"Islam pretty much requires that the body be disposed of quickly, and in an unmarked grave. So, once the body's gone, it's all-the-way gone. No exhumation to check for drugs and stuff."

"So, we did do it? What did we use?" Ryan asked.

"Jack, I do not know, and I do not want to know what, if anything, we had to do with his untimely death. Nor do I have any desire to find out. Nor should you, okay?"

"Tony, how the hell can you be in this business and *not* be curious?" Jack Jr. demanded.

"You learn what is not good to know, and you learn not to speculate on such things," Wills explained.

"Uh-huh," Jack reacted dubiously. *Sure, but* I'm *too young for that shit,* he didn't say. Tony was good at what he did, but he lived inside a box. So did Sali right now, Jack thought, and it wasn't a good place to be. *And besides, we* did *waste his ass.* Exactly how, he didn't know. He could have asked his mom about what drugs or chemicals there might be that could accomplish this mission, but, no, he couldn't do that. She'd sure as hell tell his father, and Big Jack would sure as hell want to know why his son had asked such a question—and might even guess the answer. So, no, that was out of the question. All the way out.

With the official government traffic on Sali's death, Jack started looking for NSA and related intercepts from other interested sources.

There was no further reference to the Emir in the daily traffic. That had just come and gone, and previous references were limited to the one Tony had pulled up. Similarly, his request for a more global search of signals records at Fort Meade and Langley had not been approved by the people upstairs, disappointingly but not surprisingly. Even The Campus had its limits. He understood the unwillingness of

the people upstairs to risk having somebody wonder who'd made such a request, and, not finding an answer, to make a deeper query. But there were *thousands* of such requests back and forth every day, and one more couldn't raise that much of a ruckus, could it? He decided not to ask, however. There was no sense in being identified as a boat rocker this early into his new career. But he did instruct his computer to scan all new traffic for the word "Emir," and, if it came up, he could log it and then have a firmer case for his special inquiry the next time, if there was a next time. Still, a title like that—to his mind, it was indicative of the ID for a specific person, even if the only reference CIA had about it was "probably an in-house joke." The judgment had come from a senior Langley analyst, which carried a lot of weight in that community, and therefore in this one as well. The Campus was supposed to be the outfit that corrected CIA's mistakes and/or inabilities, but since they had fewer people on staff, they had to accept a lot of ideas that came from the supposedly disabled agency. It did not make all that much logical sense, but he hadn't been consulted when Hendley had set the place up, and therefore he had to assume that the senior staff knew their business. But as Mike Brennan had told him about police work, assumption was the mother of all screwups. It was also a widely known adage of the FBI. Everybody made mistakes, and the size of any mistake was directly proportional to the seniority of the man making it. But such people didn't like to be reminded of that universal truth. Well, nobody really did.

THEY BOUGHT the clothes off the rack. They were generally like what one would buy in America, but the differences, while individually subtle, added up to an entirely different look. They also got shoes to match the outfits, and, after changing at their hotel, they went back out on the street.

The passing grade came when Brian was stopped on the street by a German citizen asking directions to the *Hauptbahnhoff,* at which time Brian had to respond in English that he was new here, and the German woman backed away with an embarrassed smile and buttonholed somebody else.

"It means the main train station," Dominic explained.

"So, why can't she catch a cab?" Brian demanded.

"We live in an imperfect world, Aldo, but now you must look like a good Kraut. If anyone else asks you, just say *Ich bin ein Aüslander.* It means 'I'm a foreigner,' and that'll get you out of it. Then they'll probably ask the question in better English than you'd hear in New York."

"Hey, look!" Brian pointed to the Golden Arches of a McDonald's, a more welcome sight than the Stars and Stripes over the U.S.

Consulate, though neither felt like eating there. The local food was simply too good. By nightfall they were back at the Hotel Bayerischer, enjoying just that.

"WELL, THEY'RE in Munich, and they spotted the subject's building and mosque, but not him yet," Granger reported to Hendley. "They eyeballed his lady friend, though."

"Things going smoothly, then?" the Senator asked.

"No complaints to this point. Our friend is not being looked at by the German police. Their counterintelligence service knows who he is, but they're not running any sort of case on him. They've had some problems with domestic Muslims, and some of them are being covered, but this guy hasn't popped up on the radar screen yet. And Langley hasn't pressed the issue. Their relations with Germany aren't all that good at the moment."

"Good news and bad news?"

"Right." Granger nodded. "They can't feed us much information, but we don't have to worry about fooling a tail. The Germans are funny. If you keep your nose clean and everything's *in Ordnung,* you're reasonably safe. If you step over the line, they can make your life pretty miserable. Historically, their cops are very good, but their spooks are not. The Soviets and the Stasi both had their spook shop thoroughly penetrated, and they're still living that down today."

"They do black ops?"

"Not really. Their culture is too legalistic for that. They raise honest people who play by the rules, and that's a crippling influence on special operations—those they do try occasionally crater badly. You know, I bet the average German citizen even pays his taxes on time, and in full."

"Their bankers know how to play the international game," Hendley objected.

"Yeah, well, maybe that's because international bankers don't really recognize the concept of having a country to be loyal to," Granger responded, sticking the needle in slightly.

"Lenin once said the only country a capitalist knows is the ground he stands on when he makes a deal. There are some like that," Hendley allowed. "Oh, did you see this?" He handed over the request from downstairs to root around for somebody called "the Emir."

The director of operations scanned the page and handed it back. "He doesn't make much of a case for it."

Hendley nodded. "I know. That's why I denied it. But . . . but, you know, it caused his instincts to twitch, and he had the brains to ask a question."

"And the boy's smart."

"Yes, he is. That's why I had Rick set him up with Wills as a roommate and training officer. Tony is bright, but he doesn't reach outside very much. So, Jack can learn the business and also learn about its limitations. We'll see how much he chafes from that. If this kid stays with us, he just might go places."

"You think he has his father's potential?" Granger wondered. Big Jack had been a king spook before going on to bigger things.

"I think he might grow into it, yes. Anyway, this 'Emir' business strikes me as a fundamentally good idea on his part. We don't know much about how the opposition operates. It's a Darwinian process out there, Sam. The bad guys learn from their antecedents, and they get smarter—on our nickel. They're not going to offer themselves up to get a smart bomb in the ass. They're not going to try to be TV stars. Good for the ego, maybe, but fatal. A herd of gazelles doesn't knowingly head toward the lion pride."

"True," Granger agreed, thinking back to how his own ancestor had handled obstreperous Indians in the Ninth U.S. Cavalry Regiment. Some things didn't change much. "Gerry, the problem is, all we can do about their organizational model is to speculate. And speculation is not knowledge."

"So, tell me what you think," Hendley ordered.

"Minimum two layers between the head of it all: Is it one man or a committee? We do not and cannot know right now. And the shooters: We can get all those we want, but that's like cutting grass. You cut it, it grows, you cut it, it grows, ad infinitum. You want to kill a snake, best move is to take off the head. Okay, fine, we all know that. Trick is finding the head, because it's a *virtual* head. Whoever it is, or are, they're operating a lot like we are, Gerry. That's why we're doing a recon-by-fire, to see what we can shake loose. And we have all of our analytical troops looking for that, here, and at Langley, and Meade."

A tired sigh. "Yeah, Sam, I know. And maybe something will shake loose. But patience is a mother to live by. The opposition is probably basking in the sun right now, feeling good about stinging us, killing all those women and kids—"

"Nobody likes that, Gerry, but even God took seven days to make the world, remember?"

"You turning preacher on me?" Hendley asked, with narrowed eyes.

"Well, the eye-for-an-eye part works for me, bud, but it takes time to find the eye. We have to be patient."

"You know, when Big Jack and I talked about the need for a place like this, I was actually dumb enough to think we could solve problems more quickly if we had the authority to do so."

"We'll be quicker than the government ever will, but we're not *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Hey, look, the operational end just got under

way. We've made only one hit. Three more to go before we can expect to see any real response from the other side. Patience, Gerry."

"Yeah, sure." He didn't add that time zones didn't help much, either.

"YOU KNOW, there's one other thing."

"What's that, Jack?" Wills asked.

"It would be better if we knew what operations were going on. It would enable us to focus our data hunt a little more efficiently."

"It's called 'compartmentalization.'"

"No, it's called horseshit," Jack shot back. "If we're on the team, we can help. Things that might look like non sequiturs appear different if you know the context that appears out of nowhere. Tony, this whole building is supposed to be a compartment, right? Subdividing it like they do at Langley doesn't help get the job done, or am I missing something?"

"I see your point, but that's not how the system works."

"Okay, I knew you'd say that, but how the hell do we fix what's broke at CIA if all we do is just to clone their operation?" Jack demanded.

And there wasn't a ready answer for that which would satisfy the questioner, was there? Wills asked himself. There simply wasn't, and this kid was catching on way too fast. What the hell had he learned in the White House? For damned sure, he'd asked a lot of questions. And he'd listened to all the answers. And even thought about them.

"I hate to say this, Jack, but I'm only your training officer, not the Big Boss of this outfit."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. I guess I got used to my dad having the ability to make things happen—well, it looked that way to me, at least. Not to him, I know, not all the time. Maybe impatience is a family characteristic." Doubly so, since his mom was a surgeon, accustomed to fixing things on her own schedule, which was generally *right the hell now.* It was hard to be decisive sitting at a workstation, a lesson his dad had probably had to learn in his time, back when America had lived in the gunsights of a really serious enemy. These terrorists could sting, but they couldn't do serious structural harm to America, though it *had* been tried in Denver once. These guys were like swarming insects rather than vampire bats . . .

But mosquitoes could transmit yellow fever, couldn't they?

SOUTH OF Munich, in the port city of Piraeus, a container was lifted off its ship by a gantry crane and lowered to a waiting truck trailer. Once secured, the trailer went off, behind the Volvo truck driving out of the port, bypassing Athens, and heading north into the mountains

of Greece. The manifest said it was going to Vienna, a lengthy nonstop drive over decent highways, delivering a cargo of coffee from Colombia. It didn't occur to the port security people to conduct a search, since all the bills of lading were in good order and passed the bar-code scans properly. Already men were assembling to deal with the part of the cargo not intended to be mixed with hot water and cream. It took a lot of men to break down a metric ton of cocaine into dose-sized packets, but they had a single-story warehouse, recently acquired, in which to accomplish the task, and then they would be driving individually all over Europe, taking comfort in the lack of internal borders the continent had adopted since the formation of the European Union. With this cargo, the word of a business partner was being kept, and a psychological profit was being recompensed by a monetary one. The process went on through the night, while Europeans slept the sleep of the just, even those who would soon be making use of the illegal part of the cargo as soon as they found a street dealer.

THEY SAW the subject at 9:30 the following morning. They were having a leisurely breakfast at another *Gasthaus* half a block from the one that employed their friend Emil, and Anas Ali Atef was walking purposely up the street, and came within twenty feet of the twins, who were breakfasting on strudel and coffee, along with twenty or so German citizens. Atef didn't notice he was being watched; his eyes looked forward and did not discreetly scan the area as a trained spook would have done. Evidently, he felt safe here. And that was good.

"There's our boy," Brian said, spotting him first. As with Sali, there was no neon sign over his head to mark him, but he matched the photo perfectly, and he had come out of the right apartment building. His mustache made an error in identification unlikely. Reasonably well dressed. Except for his skin and mustache, he might have passed for a German. At the end of the block, he boarded a streetcar, destination unknown, but heading east.

"Speculate?" Dominic asked his brother.

"Off to have breakfast with a pal, or to plot the downfall of the Infidel West—we really can't say, man."

"Yeah, it'd be nice to have real coverage on him, but we're not conducting an investigation, are we? This mutt recruited at least one shooter. He's earned his way onto our shit list, Aldo."

"Roger that, bro," Brian agreed. His conversion was complete. Anas Ali Atef was just a face to him now, and an ass to be stuck with his magic pen. Beyond that, he was someone for God to talk to in due course, a jurisdiction that didn't directly concern either of them at the moment.

"If this was a Bureau op, we'd have a team in the apartment right now, at least to toss his computer."

Brian conceded the point. "Now what?"

"We see if he goes to church, and, if he does, we see how easy it might be to pop him on the way in or out."

"Does it strike you that this is going a little fast?" Brian wondered aloud.

"I suppose we could sit in the hotel room and jerk off, but that's hard on the wrist, y'know?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Finishing breakfast, they left cash on the table but not a large tip. That would too surely mark them as Americans.

THE STREETCAR wasn't as comfortable as his car, but it was ultimately more convenient because of the necessity of finding a parking place. European cities had not been designed with automobiles in mind. Neither had Cairo, of course, and the traffic jams there could be incredible—even worse than they were here—but at least in Germany they had reliable mass transportation. The trains were glorious. The quality of the lines impressed the man who'd had engineering training a few—was it really just a few? he asked himself; it seemed like a complete lifetime—years before. The Germans were a curious people. Standoffish and formal, and oh so superior, they thought, to all the other races. They looked down on Arabs—and, indeed, on most other Europeans as well—and opened their doors to foreigners only because their internal laws—imposed upon them sixty years earlier by Americans after World War II—said that they must. But because they were compelled to do so, they did, mostly without open complaint, because these mad people obeyed the law as though it had been delivered to them by God's own hand. They were the most docile people he'd ever encountered, but underneath that docility was the capacity for violence—*organized* violence—such as the world hardly knew. Within living memory, they'd risen up to slaughter the Jews. They'd even converted their death camps into museums, but museums in which the pieces and machines undoubtedly still worked, as though standing ready. What a pity they could not summon the political will to make it so.

The Jews had humiliated his country four separate times, in the process killing his eldest brother, Ibrahim, in the Sinai while he'd been driving a Soviet T-62 tank. He didn't remember Ibrahim. He'd been far too young then, and only had photographs to give him an idea of what he'd looked like, though his mother still wept for his memory. He'd died trying to finish the job these Germans had started, only to fail, killed by a cannon shot from an American M60A1 main battle tank at

the battle of the Chinese farm. It was the Americans who protected the Jews. America was ruled by its Jews. That was why they supplied his enemies with weapons, fed them with intelligence information, and loved killing Arabs.

But the Germans' failure at their task hadn't tamed their arrogance. Just redirected it. He could see it on the streetcar, the brief sideways looks, the way old women scuttled a few steps away from where he stood. Someone would probably wipe down the overhead bar with disinfectant after he got off, Anas grumbled to himself. By the Prophet, these were unpleasant people.

The ride took another seven minutes exactly, and it was time to get off, at Dom Strasse. From there, it was a one block walk. Along the way, he saw more of the glances, the hostility in the eyes, or, even worse, the eyes that took note of his presence and just passed on, as though having seen a stray dog. It would have been satisfying to take some action here in Germany—right here in Munich!—but his orders were specific.

His destination was a coffee shop. Fa'ad Rahman Yasin was already there, dressed casually, like a working man. There were many like him in this café.

"Salaam aleikum," Atef said in greeting. Peace be unto you.

"Aleikum salaam," Fa'ad said in return. "The pastry here is excellent."

"Yes," Atef agreed, speaking softly in Arabic. "So, what is new, my friend?"

"Our people are pleased with last week. We have shaken the Americans badly," Fa'ad said.

"Not enough for them to disown the Israelis. They love the Jews more than their own children. Mark my words on this. And they will lash out at us."

"How?" Fa'ad demanded. "Lash out, yes, at whomever their spy agencies know about, but that will only inflame the faithful and drive more to our cause. No, our organization they do not know about. They do not even know our name." This was because their organization did not really have a name. "Organization" was merely a descriptive word for their association of the Faithful.

"I hope you are correct. So, do I have more orders?"

"You have done well—three of the men you recruited chose martyrdom in America."

"Three?" Atef was agreeably surprised. "They died well, I trust?"

"They died in Allah's Holy Name. That should be good enough. So, do you have any more recruits ready for us?"

Atef sipped his coffee. "Not quite, but I have two leaning in our direction. This is not easy, as you know. Even the most faithful wish to

enjoy the fruits of a good life." As he was doing himself, of course.

"You have done well for us, Anas. Better to be sure than to be overly demanding of them. Take your time. We can be patient."

"How patient?" Atef wanted to know.

"We have additional plans for America, to sting them worse. This time we killed hundreds. The next time, we shall kill thousands," Fa'ad promised, with a sparkle in his eye.

"How, exactly?" Atef asked immediately. He could have been—*should* have been—a plans officer. His engineering education made him ideal for such things. Didn't they know that? There were people in the organization who thought with their balls instead of their brains.

"That I am not at liberty to say, my friend." Because he didn't know, Fa'ad Rahman Yasin did not say. He wasn't sufficiently trusted by those higher in the organization, which would have outraged him had he known it.

The son of a whore probably doesn't know himself, Atef thought at the same time.

"We approach the hour of prayer, my friend," Anas Ali Atef said, checking his watch. "Come with me. My mosque is only ten minutes away." It would soon be time for the Salat. It was a test for his colleague, to make sure that he was truly faithful.

"As you say." Both rose and walked to the streetcar, which fifteen minutes later stopped a block from the mosque.

"HEADS UP, Aldo," Dominic said. They'd been checking out the neighborhood, really just to get a feel for the area, but there was their friend, walking down the street with what had to be a friend of his own.

"Who's wog number two, I wonder?" Brian said.

"Nobody we know, and we can't freelance. You packin'?" Dominic asked.

"Bet your bippy, bro. You?"

"Hang a big roger on that," Dominic answered. Their target was about thirty yards off, walking right at them, probably heading to the mosque, which was half a block behind them. "What do you think?"

"Wave off, better to bag him on the way out."

"Okay." And both turned right to look into the window of a hat shop. They heard—they damned near *felt*—him pass by. "How long you suppose it'll take?"

"Damned if I know, man, I haven't been to church myself in a couple of months."

"Super," Brian growled. "My own brother's an apostate."

Dominic stifled a laugh. "You always were the altar boy in the

family."

* * *

SURE ENOUGH, Atef and his friend walked in. It was time for daily prayers, the Salat, the second of Islam's Five Pillars. They would bend and kneel, facing Mecca, whispering favored phrases from the Holy Koran, affirming their faith as they did so. On entering the building, they removed their shoes, and, to Yasin's surprise, this mosque suffered from a German influence. There were individualized cubbyholes in the wall of the atrium for their shoes, all of them properly numbered, to prevent confusion . . . or theft. That was a rare offense indeed in any Muslim country, because the Islamic penalty for thievery was very harsh, and to do so in Allah's Own House would have been a deliberate offense to God Himself. They then entered the mosque proper and made their obeisance to Allah.

It didn't take long, and with it came a kind of refreshment for Atef's soul, as he reaffirmed his religious beliefs. Then it was over. He and his friend made their way back to the atrium, collected their shoes, and walked outside.

They weren't the first out the large doors, and the others had served to alert the two Americans. It was really a question of which way they'd go. Dominic was watching the street, looking for a police or intelligence officer, but didn't see any. He was betting that their subject would head toward his apartment. Brian took the other direction. It looked as though forty or so people had gone in for prayers. Coming out, they scattered to the four winds, singly or in small groups. Two got into the fronts of taxicabs—presumably their own—and drove off to catch fares. That did not include any of their coreligionists, who were probably working-class schlubs who walked or took public transportation. It hardly made them seem villainous to the twins, both of whom closed in, but neither too fast nor two obviously. Then the subject and his pal came out.

They turned left, directly toward Dominic, thirty yards away.

From his perspective, Brian saw it all. Dominic removed the gold pen from the inside pocket of his not-quite-a-suit jacket, furtively twisting the tip to arm it, then holding it in his right hand like an ice pick. He was heading on a close reciprocal course to the subject...

It was, perversely, a thing of beauty to watch. Just six feet away, Dominic appeared to trip over something, and fell right into the Atef guy. Brian didn't even see the stick. Atef went down with his brother, and that would have covered the discomfort of the stab. Atef's pal helped both of them up. Dominic made his apology and headed on his

way, with Brian following the target. He hadn't seen Sali check out, and so this was interesting in a grim sort of way. The subject walked about fifty feet, then stopped in his tracks. He must have said something, because his friend turned as though to ask a question, just in time to see Atef fall down. One arm came up to protect his face from the fall, but then the entire body went limp.

The second man was clearly dumbfounded by what he saw. He bent down to see what was wrong, first in puzzlement, then in concern, and then in panic, rolling the body over and speaking loudly to his fallen friend. Brian passed them about then. Atef's face was as composed and unmoving as a doll's. The guy's brain was active, but he couldn't even open his eyes. Brian stood there for a minute, then wandered off, without looking back, but he gestured to a German passerby to provide assistance, which the German did, reaching into his coat and pulling out a cell phone. He'd probably call for an ambulance. Brian walked to the next intersection and turned to observe, checking his watch. The ambulance was there in six and a half minutes. The Germans really were well organized. The responding fireman/paramedic checked the pulse, looked up in surprise, and then with alarm. His coworker on command pulled a box from inside the vehicle, and, as Brian watched, Atef was intubated and bagged. The two firemen were well trained, clearly going through a process they'd practiced in the station and had probably used on the street many times. In their urgency, they did not move Atef into the ambulance, but instead treated him as best they could on the spot.

Ten minutes since he'd gone down, Brian saw by his watch. Atef was already brain-dead, and that was the name of that tune. The Marine officer turned left and walked to the next corner, where he caught a taxi, fumbling through the name of the hotel, but the driver figured it out. Dominic was in the lobby when he got there. Together they headed for the bar.

The one good thing about wasting a guy right out of church was that they could be reasonably certain that he wasn't going to hell. At least, that was one less thing to trouble their consciences. The beer helped, too.

CHAPTER 20

THE SOUND OF HUNTING

MUNICH AT 14:26 in the afternoon translated into 8:26 A.M. Eastern Standard Time at The Campus. Sam Granger was in his office early, wondering if he'd see an e-mail. The twins were working fast. Not recklessly so, but they were certainly making use of the technology with which they'd been provided, and they were not wasting The Campus's time or money along the way. He'd already set up Subject No. 3, of course, encrypted and ready to go out on the 'Net. Unlike with Sali in London, he could not expect any "official" notice about the death from the German intelligence service, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst,* which had taken scant notice of Anas Ali Atef. It would be, if anything, a matter for the city police in Munich, but more likely a case for the local coroner's office—just one more fatal heart attack for a country in which too many citizens smoked and ate fatty foods.

The e-mail arrived at 8:43 from Dominic's computer, reporting the successful hit in considerable detail, almost like an official investigative report to the FBI. The fact that Atef had had a friend close by was probably a bonus. That an enemy had witnessed the killing probably meant that no suspicion would be attached to the subject's demise. The Campus would do its best to get the official report on Atef's departure, however, just to make sure, though that would have its elements of difficulty.

DOWNSTAIRS, RYAN and Wills did not know anything about it, of course. Jack was going through his routine tasks of scanning message traffic within the American intelligence services—which took over an hour—and after that, a scan of Internet traffic to and from known or suspected terrorist addresses. The overwhelming majority of it was so routine it was like e-mails between a husband and wife over what to pick up at the Safeway on the way home from work. Some of those e-mails could easily be coded messages of significant import, but there was no telling that without a program or crib sheet. At least one terrorist had used "hot weather" to mean heavy security at a location of interest to his colleagues, but the message had been sent in July,

when the weather was, indeed, warmer than was comfortable. And *that* message had been copied down by the FBI, and the Bureau hadn't taken particular notice of it at first. But one new message positively leaped off the screen at him this morning.

"Hey, Tony, you want to look at this one, buddy."

The addressee was their old friend 56MoHa@eurocom. net, and the content reconfirmed his identity as a nexus for bad-guy message traffic:

ATEF IS DEAD. HE DIED RIGHT BEFORE MY EYES HERE IN MUNICH. AN AMBULANCE WAS SUMMONED AND THEY TREATED HIM ON THE SIDEWALK BUT HE DIED IN THE HOSPITAL OF A HEART ATTACK. REQUIRE INSTRUCTIONS. FA'AD. And his address was Honeybear@ostercom.net, which was new to Jack's computer index.

"Honeybear?" Wills observed with a chuckle. "This guy must surf for women on the 'Net."

"So, he does cybersex, fine. Tony, if we just whacked a guy named Atef over in Germany, here's confirmation of the event, plus a new target for us to track." Ryan turned back to his workstation and used his mouse to check sources. "Here, NSA picked up on it, too. Maybe they think he's a possible player."

"You sure like making leaps of imagination," Wills observed tersely.

"My ass!" Jack was actually angry for once. He was beginning to understand why his father had often been so pissed off at intelligence information that arrived in the Oval Office. "God damn it, Tony, how much clearer do things have to be?"

Wills took a deep breath and spoke as calmly as usual. "Settle down, Jack. This is single-source, a single report on something that might or might not have taken place. You don't throw your hat over the barn about something until it's confirmed by a known source. This Honeybear identity could be a lot of things, few of which we can certify as a good guy or a bad guy."

For his part, Jack Jr. wondered if he was being tested—again!—by his training officer. "Okay, let's walk through it. MoHa Fifty-six is a source that we're highly confident is a player, probably an operations officer for the bad guys. We've been sweeping the 'Net for him since I've been here, okay? So, we sweep the ether and this letter turns up in his mailbox at the same time we believe we—us—have a kill team in the field. Unless you're going to tell me that Uda bin Sali really did have a myocardial infarction while he was daydreaming about his favorite whore in downtown London. And that the Brit Security Service found the event highly interesting only because it's not every day that a suspected terrorist banker drops dead on the street. Have I missed anything?"

Wills smiled. “Not a bad presentation. A little thin on the evidence, but your proposition was well organized. So, you think I should walk it upstairs?”

“No, Tony, I think you should run it upstairs,” Ryan said, easing back on the obvious anger. *Take a deep breath and count to ten.*

“Then I guess I’ll do it.”

FIVE MINUTES later, Wills walked into Rick Bell’s office. He handed over two sheets of paper.

“Rick, do we have a team at work in Germany?” Wills asked. The response was not the least bit surprising.

“Why do you ask?” Bell had a poker face that would have impressed a marble statue.

“Read,” Wills suggested.

“Damn,” the chief of analysis reacted. “Who pulled this fish out of the electronic ocean?”

“Take a guess,” Tony suggested.

“Not bad, for the kid.” Bell looked very closely at his guest. “How much does he suspect?”

“At Langley, he’d sure as hell be getting people nervous.”

“Like you are?”

“You might say that,” Wills replied. “He makes good leaps of imagination, Rick.”

Bell made a face this time. “Well, it’s not exactly the Olympic long-jump competition, is it?”

“Rick, Jack puts two and two together about as fast as a computer tells the difference between one and zero. He’s right, isn’t he?”

Bell took a second or two before replying. “What do you think?”

“I think they got that Sali character for sure, and this is probably mission number two. How are they doing it?”

“You really do not want to know. It’s not as clean as it looks,” Bell answered. “This Atef guy was a recruiter. He sent at least one guy to Des Moines.”

“That’s a good enough reason,” Wills judged.

“Sam feels the same way. I’ll turn this over to him. Follow-up?”

“This MoHa guy needs a closer look. Maybe we can track him down,” Wills said.

“Any idea where he is?”

“Italy, looks like, but a lot of people live on the boot. Lots of big cities with lots of ratholes. But Italy is a good place for him. Centrally located. Air service everywhere. And the terrorists have let Italy alone lately, and so nobody’s hunting down the dog that isn’t barking.”

“Same in Germany, France, and the rest of Central Europe?”

Wills nodded. “Looks that way. They’re next, but I don’t think they

fully appreciate it. Heads in the sand–like, Rick."

"True," Bell agreed. "So, what do we do with your student?"

"Ryan? Good question. Sure as hell, he's a quick learner. He's particularly good at connecting things," Wills thought out loud. "He makes big leaps of imagination, sometimes too far, but, still, it's not a bad quality for an analyst to have."

"Grade to this point?"

"B-plus, maybe a low A, and that's only because he's new. He's not as good as I am, but I've been in the business since before he was born. He's a comer, Rick. He'll go far."

"That good?" Bell asked. Tony Wills was known as a careful conservative analyst, and one of the best Langley had ever turned out, despite the green eyeshade and the garters on the sleeves.

Wills nodded. "That good." He was also scrupulously honest. It was his natural character, but he could also afford to be. The Campus paid far better than any government agency. His kids were all grown—the last one was in his final year at the University of Maryland in physics, and, after that, he and Betty could think about the next big step in life, though Wills liked it here and had no immediate plans to leave. "But don't tell him I said so."

"Big head?"

"No, that wouldn't be fair. But I don't want him to start thinking he knows it all yet."

"Nobody with half a brain thinks that way," Bell said.

"Yeah." Wills stood. "But why take the chance?"

Wills headed out, but Bell still didn't know what to do with the Ryan kid. Well, something to talk with the Senator about.

"NEXT STOP. Vienna," Dominic informed his brother. "We got another subject."

"You wonder how steady this job will be?" Brian wondered aloud.

His brother laughed. "Man, there's enough mutts in America to keep us busy for the rest of our lives."

"Yeah, save money, fire all the judges and juries."

"My name ain't Dirty Harry Callahan, you jarhead."

"And I'm not Chesty Puller, either. How do we get there? Fly, train —maybe drive?"

"Driving might be fun," Dominic said. "I wonder if we can rent a Porsche . . . ?"

"Oh, great," Brian grunted. "Okay, log off so I can download the file, will ya?"

"Sure. I'll see what the concierge can set up for us." And he headed out of the room.

"THIS IS the only confirmation we have?" Hendley asked.

"Correct." Granger nodded. "But it tallies exactly with what our guys on the ground told us."

"They're going too fast. What if the other side thinks, 'Two heart attacks in less than a week' . . . ? Then what?"

"Gerry, the nature of this mission is recon-by-fire, remember? We halfway want the other side to get a little nervous, but soon their arrogance will set in and they'll write it off as random chance. If this were TV or the movies, they'd think CIA was playing hardball, but it isn't the movies, and they know that CIA doesn't play that kind of game. The Mossad, maybe, but they're already wary of the Israelis. Hey"—a lightbulb went off in Granger's brain—"what if they're the guys who offed the Mossad officer in Rome?"

"I don't pay you to speculate, Sam."

"It's a possibility," Granger persisted.

"It's also possible that the Mafia hit the poor bastard because they mistook him for a fellow mafioso who owed money to the mob. But I wouldn't bet the ranch on it."

"Yes, sir." Granger walked back to his office.

MOHAMMED HASSAN AL-DIN was in Rome at the moment, at the Hotel Excelsior, drinking his coffee and working on his computer. It was bad news about Atef. He was—he'd been—a good recruiter, with just the right mix of intelligence, plausibility, and commitment to persuade others to join the cause. He'd wanted to enter the field himself, to take lives and be a Holy Martyr, but though he might have been good at it, a man who could recruit was more valuable than a man willing to throw away his own life. It was simple arithmetic, something a graduate engineer like Atef should have understood. What was it with him? A brother, wasn't it, killed by the Israelis back in 1973? A long time to hold a grudge, even for men in his organization, but not without precedent. Atef was with his brother now, though, in Paradise. That was good fortune for him, but bad fortune for the organization. So it was written, Mohammed comforted himself, and so it would be, and so the struggle would go on until the last of their enemies were dead.

He had a pair of cloned phones on his bed, phones he could use without fear of interception. Should he call the Emir about this? It was worth thinking about. Anas Ali Atef was the second heart attack in less than a week, and in both cases they'd been young men, and that was odd, statistically very unusual. Fa'ad had been standing right next to Anas Ali at the time, though, and so he hadn't been shot or poisoned by an Israeli intelligence officer—a Jew would probably have killed *both* of them, Mohammed thought—and so with an

eyewitness right there, there seemed little cause to suspect foul play. For the other, well, Uda had liked the life of a whoremonger, and he would hardly have been the first man to die of that weakness of the flesh. So, it just seemed like an unlikely coincidence and thus unworthy of an urgent call to the Emir himself. He made a note of the dual incidents on his computer, however, encrypted the file, and shut down. He felt like a walk. It was a pleasant day in Rome. Hot by most European standards, but the very breath of home for him. Just up the street was a pleasant sidewalk restaurant whose Italian food was only average, but the average here was better than in many fine restaurants across the world. You'd think that all Italian women would be obese, but, no, they suffered from the Western female disease of thinness, like West African children, some of them. Like young boys instead of mature, experienced women. So sad. But instead of eating, he crossed the Via Veneto to get a thousand Euros from the cash machine. The Euro had made European travel so much more convenient, praise Allah. It was not yet the equal of the American dollar in terms of stability, but, with luck, it might soon become so, which would ease his travel convenience even more.

Rome was a difficult city not to love. Conveniently located, international in character, awash with foreigners, and full of hospitable people who bowed and scraped for cash money like the peasants they all were. A good city for women, with shopping such as Riyadh could scarcely offer. His English mother had liked Rome, and the reasons were obvious. Good food and wine and a fine historical atmosphere that antedated even the Prophet himself, blessing and peace be upon him. Many had died here at the hands of the Caesars, butchered for public enjoyment in the Flavian Amphitheater, or killed because they had displeased the emperor in one way or another. The streets had probably been very peaceful here during the empire period. What better way to ensure it than to enforce the laws ruthlessly? Even the weak could recognize the price for bad behavior. So it was in his homeland, and so, he hoped, it would remain after the Royal Family had been done away with—either killed or chased abroad, perhaps to the safety of England or Switzerland, where people with money and noble status were treated well enough to live out their lives in indolent comfort. Either alternative would suit Mohammed and his colleagues. Just so that they would no longer rule his country, filled with corruption, kowtowing to the infidels and selling them oil for money, ruling the people as though they were the sons of Mohammed himself. That would come to an end. His distaste for America quailed before his hatred for the rulers of his own country. But America was his primary target because of its power, whether held to its own use or parceled out for others to use in

America's own imperial interests. America threatened everything he held dear. America was an infidel country, patron and protector of the Jews. America had invaded his own country and stationed troops and weapons there, undoubtedly with the ultimate objective of subordinating all of Islam, and thus ruling a *billion* of the Faithful for its own narrow and parochial interests. Stinging America had become his obsession. Even the Israelis were not as attractive as targets. Vicious though they might be, the Jews were merely America's cat's-paws, vassals who did America's bidding in return for money and weapons, without even knowing how cynically they were being used. The Iranian Shiites had been correct. America was the Great Satan, Iblis himself, so great in power that it was hard to strike decisively at it, but still vulnerable in its evil before the righteous forces of Allah and the Faithful.

THE CONCIERGE at the Hotel Bayerischer had outdone himself, Dominic thought, securing a Porsche 911 whose forward-mounted trunk barely held their bags, and that only with a little squeezing. But it was enough, and better even than a rented small-engine Mercedes. The 911 had balls. Brian would get to fumble with the maps as they went southeast through the Alps to Vienna. That they were going south to kill someone was beside the point for the moment. They were serving their country, which was about as big as loyalty got.

"Do I need a crash helmet?" Brian asked, getting in, which in the case of this car almost meant sitting on the pavement.

"Not with me driving, Aldo. Come on, bro. It's time to rock and roll."

The car was a horrible shade of blue, but the tank was filled, and the six-cylinder engine was properly tuned. The Germans did like things *in Ordnung.* Brian navigated them out of Munich and onto the autobahn southeast to Vienna, and from there Enzo decided to see how fast this Porsche could really go.

"DO YOU think maybe they need some backup?" Hendley asked Granger, whom he'd just called into his office.

"What do you mean?" Sam responded. "They" had to be the Caruso brothers, of course.

"I mean they do not have much in the way of intelligence support," the former Senator pointed out.

"Well, we've never really thought about that, have we?"

"Exactly." Hendley leaned back in his chair. "In a sense, they're operating naked. Neither one has much in the way of intelligence experience. What if they hit the wrong guy? Okay, they probably won't get bagged doing it, but it won't help their morale, either. I

remember a Mafia guy, in the Atlanta Federal Pen, I think. He killed some poor bastard he thought was trying to kill him, but it was the wrong guy, and he came unglued as a result. Sang like a canary. That's how we got our first big break on the Mafia and how it was organized, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, it was a Mafia soldier named Joe Valachi, yeah, but he was a criminal, remember?"

"And Brian and Dominic are good guys. So, guilt could hit them worse. Maybe some intel backup is a good idea."

Granger was surprised at the suggestion. "I can see the need for better intelligence evaluation, and this 'virtual office' stuff has its limitations, I admit. They can't ask questions, like, but if they have one, they can still e-mail us for advice—"

"Which they haven't done," Hendley pointed out.

"Gerry, they're only two steps into the mission. It's not time to panic yet, y'know? These are two very bright and very capable young officers. That's why we picked them. They know how to think on their own, and that's precisely what we want in our operations people."

"We're not just making assumptions, we're *launching* assumptions into the future. You think that's a good idea?" Hendley had learned how to pursue ideas on Capitol Hill, and he was deadly effective at it.

"Assumptions are always a bad thing. I know that, Gerry. But so are complications. How do we know we're sending the right guy? What if it just *adds* a level of uncertainty? Do we want to do that?" Hendley, thought Granger, was suffering from the deadliest congressional disease. It was too easy to oversight something to death.

"What I'm saying is that it's a good idea to have somebody out there who thinks a little different, who takes a different kind of approach to the data that goes out there. The Caruso boys are pretty good. I know that. But they are inexperienced. The important thing is to have a different brain out there to take a different view of the facts and the situation."

Granger felt himself being backed into a corner. "Okay, look, I can see the logic of that, but it's a level of complication that we don't need."

"Okay, so look at it this way—what if they see something for which they are not prepared? In that case, they need a second—whatever you call it—opinion of the data at hand. That will make them less likely to make a mistake in the field. The one thing that bothers me is that they make a mistake, and it's a fatal mistake for some poor schlub, and that the error affects the way they carry out their missions in the future. Guilt, remorse, and maybe then they start talking about it, okay? Can we completely discount that?"

"No, maybe not entirely, but it also means that we just add an

additional element to the equation that can say no when a yes is the right way to go. Saying no is something anybody can do. It isn't necessarily right. You can take caution too far."

"I don't think so."

"Fine. So, who do you want to send?" Granger asked.

"Let's think about it. Ought to be—*has* to be somebody they know and trust . . ." His voice trailed off.

Hendley had made his operations chief nervous. He had an idea fixed in his head, and Hendley knew all too well that he was the head of The Campus, and that within this building his word was law, and there was nobody to appeal it to. So, if Granger was to select a name for this notional job, it had to be somebody who would not screw everything up.

THE AUTOBAHN was superbly, even brilliantly, engineered. Dominic found himself wondering who'd set it up. Then he thought that the road looked as though it had been there for a long time. And it linked Germany and Austria . . . maybe Hitler himself had ordered this road built? Wasn't that a hoot? In any case, there was no speed limit here, and the Porsche's six-cylinder engine was purring like a stalking tiger on the scent of some warm meat. And the German drivers were amazingly polite. All you had to do was flash your lights, and they hustled out of your way as though having received a divine edict. Definitely unlike America, where some little old lady in her overage Pinto was in the far-left lane because she was left-handed and *liked* holding up the maniacs in their Corvettes. The Bonneville Salt Flats could scarcely have been more fun.

For his part, Brian was doing his best not to cringe. He closed his eyes occasionally, thinking back to nap-of-the-earth flying in the Recon Marines through mountain passes in the Sierra Nevada, often enough in CH-46 helicopters older than he was. They hadn't killed him. This probably wouldn't either, and, as a Marine officer, he wasn't allowed to show fear or weakness. And it *was* exciting. Rather like riding in a roller coaster without the safety bar across the seat. But he saw that Enzo was having the time of his life, and he consoled himself with the fact that his seat belt *was* attached, and that this little German car was probably engineered by the same design crew that had done the Tiger tank. Getting through the mountains was the scariest part, and when they entered farm country, the land got flatter and the road straighter, thanks be to God.

"The hills are alive with the sound of myoosikkkk," Dominic sang, horribly.

"If you sing like that in church, God'll strike your ass dead," Brian warned, pulling out the city maps for the approach to Wien, as Vienna

was known to its citizens.

And the city streets were a rat warren. The capital of Austria—Osterreich—predated the Roman legions, with no street straight for a longer distance than would be needed by a legion to parade past its *tribunus militaris* on the emperor's birthday. The map showed inner and outer ring roads, which probably marked the former site of medieval walls—the Turks had come here more than once hoping to add Austria to their empire, but that trinket of military history had not been part of the official Marine Corps reading list. A largely Catholic country, because the ruling House of Hapsburg had been so, it had not kept the Austrians from exterminating its prominent and prosperous Jewish minority after Hitler had subsumed Osterreich into the Greater German Reich. That had been after the *Anschluss* plebiscite of 1938. Hitler had been born here, not in Germany as widely believed, and the Austrians had repaid that loyalty with some of their own, becoming more Nazified than Hitler himself, or so objective history reported, not necessarily the Austrians' now. It was the one country in the world where *The Sound of Music* had fallen flat at the box office, maybe because the movie had been uncomplimentary toward the Nazi party.

For all that, Vienna looked like what it was, a former imperial city with wide, tree-lined boulevards and classical architecture, and remarkably well-turned-out citizens. Brian navigated them to the Hotel Imperial on Kartner Ring, a building that looked to be an adjunct to the well-known Schonbrunn Palace.

"You have to admit they put us up in nice places, Aldo," Dominic observed.

It was even more impressive inside, with gilt plaster and lacquered woodwork, every segment of which appeared to have been installed by master craftsmen imported from Renaissance Florence. The lobby was not spacious, but the reception desk was impossible to miss, manned as it was by people wearing clothing that marked them as hotel staff as surely as a Marine in dress blues.

"Good day," the concierge said in greeting. "Your name is Caruso?"

"Correct," Dominic said, surprised at the concierge's ESP. "You should have a reservation for my brother and myself?"

"Yes, sir," the concierge replied with enthusiastic subordination. His English might have been learned at Harvard. "Two connecting rooms overlooking the street."

"Excellent." Dominic fished out his American Express black card and handed it across.

"Thank you."

"Any messages for us?" Dominic asked.

"No, sir," the concierge assured him.

"Can you have the valet attend to our car? It's rented. We're not

sure if we'll be keeping it or not."

"Of course, sir."

"Thank you. Can we see our rooms?"

"Yes. You are on the first floor—excuse me, the second floor, as you say in America. Franz," he called.

The bellman's English was just as good. "This way, if you please, gentlemen." No elevator, but rather a walk up a flight of red-carpeted steps directly toward a full-length portrait of somebody who looked very important indeed, in his white military uniform and beautifully combed-out chin whiskers.

"Who might that be?" Dominic asked the bellman.

"The Emperor Franz Josef, sir. He visited the hotel upon its opening in the nineteenth century."

"Ah." It explained the attitude of the staff here, but you couldn't knock the style of this place. Not by a long shot.

In another five minutes, they were settled into their accommodations. Brian came wandering into his brother's room. "God damn, the Residence Level at the White House isn't this good."

"Think so?" Dominic asked.

"Dude, I *know* so. Been there, done that. Uncle Jack had me up after I got my commission—no, actually it was after I came through the Basic School. Shit, this place is something. I wonder what it costs?"

"What the hell, it's on my card, and our friend is nearby at the Bristol. Kinda interesting to hunt rich bastards, isn't it?" That brought them back to business. Dominic pulled his laptop out of his bag. The Imperial was used to guests with computers, and the setup for it was very efficient indeed. For the moment, he opened the most recent file. He'd only scanned it before. Now he took his time with every single word.

* * *

GRANGER WAS thinking it through. Gerry wanted somebody to baby-sit the twins, and it seemed as though his mind was fixed on it. There were a lot of good people in the intelligence department under Rick Bell, but as former intelligence officers at CIA and elsewhere, they were all too old to be proper companions for the twins, young as the Caruso kids were. It wouldn't look right to have people in their late twenties chumming around Europe with somebody in his middle fifties. So, better somebody younger. There weren't many of those, but there was one . . .

He picked up his phone.

FA' AD WAS only two blocks away on the third floor of the Bristol Hotel, a famous and very upper-crust accommodation known particularly for its superior dining room and its nearness to the State Opera, which sat just across the street, consecrated to the memory of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had been the court musician for the House of Hapsburg before dying an early death, right here in Vienna. But Fa'ad wasn't the least bit interested in such history. Current events were his obsession. Watching Anas Ali Atef die right before his eyes had shaken him badly. That had not been the death of infidels, something you could watch on TV and smile quietly about. He'd been standing there, watching the life drain invisibly from his friend's body, watching the German paramedics fight vainly for his life—evidently doing their very best even for a person they must have despised. That was a surprise. And, yes, they were Germans just doing their job, but they'd *done* that job with obstinate determination, then they'd raced his comrade to the nearest hospital, where the German doctors had probably done the same, only to fail. A doctor had come to him in the waiting room and sadly told him the news, saying unnecessarily that they'd done everything that could have been done, and that it had looked like a massive heart attack, and that further laboratory work would be done to make certain that this indeed had been the cause of death, and finally asking for information on his family, if any, and who would see about the body after they were done picking it apart. Strange thing about the Germans, how precise they always were about everything. Fa'ad had made what arrangements he could, and then boarded a train for Vienna, sitting alone in a first-class seat and trying to come to terms with the dreadful event.

He was making his report to the organization. Mohammed Hassan al-Din was his gateway for that. He was probably in Rome at the moment, though Fa'ad Rahman Yasin was not quite sure. He didn't have to be sure. The Internet was a good enough address, formless as it was. It was just so very sad for a young and vigorous and valuable comrade to fall down dead on the street. If it served any purpose at all, only Allah Himself knew what it might be—but Allah had His Plan for everything, and it was not always something for men to know. Fa'ad took a minibottle of cognac from his minibar and drank it right out of the glass container instead of pouring it into one of the snifters on top of the cabinet. Sinful or not, it helped steady his nerves, and anyway he never did it in public. Damn such bad luck! He took another look at the minibar. Two more cognacs remained, and after that, several miniatures of Scotch whisky, the favorite drink of Saudi Arabia, Shar'ia or not.

"GOT YOUR passport?" Granger asked as soon as he'd sat down.

"Well, sure. Why?" Ryan asked.

"You're going to Austria. Plane leaves tonight from Dulles. Here's your ticket." The director of operations tossed the folder across the desk.

"What for?"

"You're booked into the Imperial Hotel. There you will link up with Dominic and Brian Caruso to keep them advised of intelligence developments. You can use your regular e-mail account, and your laptop is equipped with the proper encryption technology."

What the hell? Jack wondered. "Excuse me, Mr. Granger. Can we go back a couple of steps? Exactly what's going on here?"

"Your father asked that question once or twice, I bet." Granger managed a smile that would chill the ice in a highball. "Gerry thinks the twins need backup on the intelligence side. So, you are detailed to provide that backup, kind of a consultant to them while they're in the field. This does not mean that you'll actually be doing anything but keeping an eye on intel developments through the virtual office. You've done some pretty good work on that. You have a good nose for tracking things on the 'Net—damned sight better than Dom and Brian. Getting your eyes in the field might be useful. That's why. You can decline the job, but in your place, I'd take it. Okay?"

"When's the flight?"

"It's on your ticket folder."

Jack looked. "Damn, I'll have to hustle."

"So, hustle. There'll be a car to take you to Dulles. Get going."

"Yes, sir," Jack replied, coming to his feet. Just as well he had a car service heading his way. He didn't like the idea of leaving his Hummer in the Dulles parking lot. Thieves had fallen in love with the things. "Oh, who is cleared to know this?"

"Rick Bell will let Wills know. Aside from that, nobody, I repeat, *nobody.* Clear?"

"Clear, sir. Okay, I'm out of here." He looked in the ticket folder to find an American Express black card. At least the trip was on the company dime. How many of these things did The Campus have sitting around in its file drawers? he wondered. But for damned sure it was all he needed for this day.

* * *

"WHAT'S THIS?" Dominic asked his computer. "Aldo, we've got company coming over tomorrow morning."

"Who?" Brian asked.

“Doesn’t say. It says to take no action until he links up with us, though.”

“Jesus, who do they think we are, Louis the Fish? It’s not our fault the last guy jumped right into our lap. Why fuck around?”

“These are government types. If you get too efficient, they get scared,” Dominic thought aloud. “What about dinner, bro?”

“Fine, we can check their version of Vitello Milanese. You suppose they have any decent wines here?”

“Only one way to find out, Aldo.” Dominic picked a tie out of his suitcase. The hotel dining room looked about as formal as Uncle Jack’s old house.

CHAPTER 21

STREETCAR NAME DESIRED

IT WAS a new adventure for Jack in two different ways. He'd never been to Austria before. He'd damned sure never gone into the field as a spook to join up with an assassination team, and while the idea of terminating the lives of people who liked killing Americans seemed quite a good thing at a desk in West Odenton, Maryland—in seat 3A of an Airbus 330, thirty-four thousand feet over the Atlantic Ocean, it was suddenly a dicey state of affairs. Well, Granger had told him he wouldn't really have to do anything. And that was fine with Jack. He still knew how to shoot a pistol—he regularly went shooting at the Secret Service's range in downtown D.C., or sometimes at their academy at Beltsville, Maryland, if Mike Brennan was around. But Brian and Dom weren't shooting people, were they? Not according to the MI5 report that had come to his computer. Heart attack—how the hell did you fake a heart attack well enough that a pathologist took the bait? He'd have to ask them about that. Presumably, he was cleared for it.

In any case, the food was better than average for airline slop, and even an airline can't ruin the booze when it is still in the bottle. With enough alcohol in him, sleep came fairly easily, and the first-class seat was the old-fashioned kind instead of the new gollywog with a hundred moving parts, none of which were comfortable. As usual, about half the people up front watched movies all night. Every person had his own way of dealing with travel shock, as his father invariably called it. Jack's was to sleep through it.

THE WIENER schnitzel was excellent, as were the local wines.

"Whoever does this needs to talk to Granddad," Dominic said, after the last bite. "He may know something that Pop-Pop can learn from."

"He's probably Italian, bro, or at least somewhere along the line." Brian finished off his glass of the excellent local white the waiter had recommended. About fifteen seconds later, the waiter took note of it and refilled the glass before vanishing again. "Damn, a man could get used to this eatery. Beats the hell out of MREs."

"With luck, you may never have to eat that crap again."

"Sure, if we just continue this line of work," Aldo responded dubiously. They were essentially alone in a corner booth. "So, what do we know about the new subject?"

"Courier, supposedly. He carries messages in his head—the ones they don't send via the 'Net. Would have been useful to pick his brain some, but that's not the mission. We have a physical description, but no photo this time. That's a little worrisome. He doesn't sound all that important. That's worrisome, too."

"Yeah, I hear you. He must have pissed the wrong people off. Tough luck." His pangs of conscience were a thing of the past, but he really wanted to bag one closer to the top of the food chain. The absence of a photo for ID was indeed worrisome. They'd have to be careful. You didn't want to hit the wrong guy.

"Well, he didn't get on the list by singing too loud at church, y'know?"

"And he ain't the Pope's nephew." Brian completed the litany. "I hear you, man." He checked his watch. "Time to hit the rack, bro. We have to see who's coming tomorrow. How are we supposed to meet him?"

"Message said he'd come to us. Hell, maybe he's going to stay here, too."

"The Campus has funny ideas about security, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it's not like the movies." Dominic had himself a quiet laugh. He waved for the check. They'd pass on dessert. In a place like this, it could be lethal. Five more minutes and they were in their beds.

"THINK YOU'RE clever, eh?" Hendley asked Granger over the secure phones in both their homes.

"Gerry, you told me to send an intel weenie, right? Who else can we spare out of Rick's shop? Everybody's been telling me how sharp the kid is. Okay, let him prove it at the sharp end."

"But he's a rookie," Hendley protested.

"And the twins aren't?" Granger asked in reply. *Gotcha. From now on, you'll let me run my shop* my *way,* he thought just as loudly as he could. "Gerry, he's not going to get his hands wet, and this will probably make him a better analyst. He's related to them. They know him. He knows them. They will trust and believe what he has to say, and Tony Wills says he's the brightest young analyst he's seen since he left Langley. So, he's perfect for the assignment, isn't he?"

"He's too junior." But Hendley knew he was losing this one.

"Who isn't, Gerry? If we had any guys available with experience in this line of work, we would have put 'em on the payroll."

"If this blows up—"

"Then I go up in smoke. I know that. Can I watch some TV now?"

"See you tomorrow," Hendley said.

"'Night, buddy."

HONEYBEAR WAS surfing the 'Net, chatting with somebody named Elsa K 69, who said she was twenty-three years old, 160 centimeters in height, and fifty-four kilograms in weight, with decent but not exceptional measurements, brown hair, blue eyes, and a nasty, inventive mind. She also had good typing skills. In fact, though Fa'ad had no way of knowing it, it was a man, fifty years old, half drunk and rather lonely. They chatted in English. The "girl" on the other end said "she" was a secretary in London. It was a city the Austrian accountant knew well.

"She" was real enough for Fa'ad, who soon got deeply into the perverse fantasy. It wasn't as good as a real woman by a long shot, but Fa'ad was careful about indulging his passions in Europe. You never knew if the woman you rented might be someone from the Mossad, who'd be just as happy to cut it off as to take it inside. He didn't fear death much, but like all men he did fear pain. In any case, the fantasy lasted almost half an hour, which left him sated enough to take note of the "handle" in case "she" showed up again. He could not know that the Tyrolean accountant made a similar notation in his Buddy File before retiring to a cold and lonely bed.

WHEN JACK woke up, the window blinds were raised to reveal the purple-gray of mountains about twenty thousand feet below. His watch showed that he'd been aboard about eight hours, and had probably slept for six of them. Not too bad. He had a mild headache from the wine, but the wake-up coffee was good, as was the pastry, which combined to get him semi-awake as Flight 94 cruised in for landing.

The airport was hardly a large one, considering it was the flagship port of entry for a sovereign country, but Austria had about the same population as New York City, which had *three* airports. The aircraft thumped down, and the captain welcomed them all to his homeland, telling them that the local time was 9:05 A.M. So, he'd have one day of heavy jet lag to deal with, but with luck maybe he'd be approximately okay tomorrow.

He cleared immigration easily—the flight had only been about half full—recovered his bags and headed outside for a cab.

"Hotel Imperial, please."

"Where?" the driver asked.

"Hotel Imperial," Ryan repeated.

The driver thought for a moment. *"Ach so,* Hotel Imperial, *ja?"*

"Das ist richtig," Junior assured him, and sat back to enjoy the ride.

He had a hundred Euros, and assumed that would be enough, unless this guy had attended the New York City school of taxi driving. In any case, there'd be ATM machines on the street.

The drive took half an hour, fighting the rush-hour traffic. A block or two from the hotel, he passed a Ferrari dealership, which was something new for him—he'd seen Ferraris only on TV before, and wondered, as all young men wonder, what it might be like to drive one.

The hotel staff greeted him like an arriving prince, and delivered him to a fourth-floor suite whose bed looked very inviting indeed. He immediately ordered breakfast and unpacked. Then he remembered why he was here, and picked up the phone, asking for a connection with Dominic Caruso's room.

"HELLO?" It was Brian. Dom was in the gold-encrusted shower.

"Hey, cuz, it's Jack," he heard.

"Jack who—wait a minute, *Jack*?"

"I'm upstairs, Marine. Just flew in an hour ago. Come on up, so we can talk."

"Right. Give me ten minutes," Brian said, and headed into the bathroom. "Enzo, you ain't gonna believe who's upstairs."

"Who?" Dominic asked, toweling himself off.

"Let it be a surprise, man." Brian went back to the sitting room, not sure whether to laugh or barf as he read the *International Herald Tribune*.

"YOU GOTTA be fucking kidding," Dominic breathed as the door opened.

"You ought to see it from my side, Enzo," Jack answered. "Come on in."

"Food's good in Motel 6, isn't it?" Brian observed, following his brother.

"Actually, I prefer Holiday Inn Express. I need to pick up a Ph.D. for my curriculum vitae, y'know?" Jack laughed and waved them to the chairs. "I got extra coffee."

"They do it well here. I see you discovered the croissants." Dominic poured himself a cup and stole a pastry. "Why the hell did they send you?"

"I guess because you both know me." Junior buttered his second. "Tell you what. Let me finish breakfast and we can take a walk down to the Ferrari dealership and talk about it. How do you like Vienna?"

"Just got here yesterday afternoon, Jack," Dominic informed him.

"I didn't know that. I gather you had a productive time in London, though."

"Not bad," Brian answered. "Tell you about it later."

"Right." Jack continued his breakfast while Brian went back to his *International Trib.* "They're still excited at home about the shootings. Had to take my shoes off at the airport. Good thing I had clean socks. Looks like they're trying to see if anybody's trying to leave town in a hurry."

"Yeah, that was pretty damned bad, man," Dominic observed. "Anybody you know get clobbered?"

"No, thank God. Even Dad didn't, with all the people he knows in the investment crowd. What about you guys?"

Brian gave him a funny look. "Nobody we knew, no." He hoped that little David Prentiss's soul would not be offended.

Jack finished the last croissant. "Let me shower and you guys can show me around."

Brian finished the paper and turned the TV on to CNN—the only American station the Imperial had—to check on the news at 0500 in New York. The last of the victims had been buried the previous day, and the reporters were asking the bereaved how they felt about their loss. *What a dumbass question!* the Marine raged. You were supposed to leave twisting the knife to the bad guys. And politicians were ranting on about What America Has to Do.

Well, Brian thought, *we're doing it for you, guys.* But if they found out, they'd probably foul their silk drawers. But that just made him feel better about it. Somebody had to play a little catch-up ball, and that was his job now.

AT THE Bristol, Fa'ad was just waking up. He, too, had ordered coffee and pastry. He was scheduled to meet a fellow courier the next day to receive a message that he'd then pass on in due course. The Organization operated with great security for its important communications. The really serious messages were all passed exclusively by word of mouth. The couriers knew only their incoming and outgoing counterparts, so that they were organized in cells of three only, another lesson learned from the dead KGB officer. The inbound courier was Mahmoud Mohamed Fadhil, who'd be arriving from Pakistan. Such a system could be broken, but only through painstaking and lengthy police work, which was easily foiled if only one man removed himself from the ratline. The trouble was that the unexpected removal of a rat from the line could prevent a message from reaching its destination entirely, but that had not yet happened, and was not expected to. It was not a bad life for Fa'ad. He traveled a lot, always first-class, resided only in top-of-the-line hostelries, and, all in all, it was rather comfortable. He occasionally felt guilty for this. Others did what he thought were the dangerous and admirable things,

but on taking the job he'd been briefed that the organization could not function without him and his eleven comrades, which was good for his morale. So was the knowledge that his function, while of great importance, was also quite safe. He received messages and passed them on, often to the operatives themselves, all of whom treated him with great respect, as though he had originated the mission instructions himself, of which he did not disabuse them. So, in two days, he'd receive more orders for transfer, whether to his nearest geographic colleague—Ibrahim Salih al-Adel, home-based in Paris—or to an operative currently unknown. Today he would find out, and make such communications as were necessary, and act upon developments. The job could be both boring and exciting at the same time, and with the comfortable hours and zero risk to his person, it was easy to be a hero of the movement, as he sometimes allowed himself to think of himself.

THEY WALKED east on Kartner Ring, which almost at once angled northeast and changed its name to Schubertring. On the north side of it was the Ferrari dealership.

"So, how are you guys doing?" Jack asked, out in the open, and with the traffic noise beyond the reach of any possible tapping device.

"Two down. One more to go, right here in Vienna, then off somewhere else, wherever it is. I kinda thought you would know," Dominic said.

Jack shook his head. "Nope. I haven't been briefed on that."

"Why did they send you?" This one came from Brian.

"I'm supposed to give you second guesses, I think. Back you up on the intel side and be some sort of consultant. That's what Granger told me, anyway. I know what happened in London. We got lots of inside stuff from the Brits—indirectly, that is. It was written off as a heart attack. Munich I do not know much about. What can you tell me?"

Dominic answered. "I got him coming out of church. He went down on the sidewalk. Ambulance arrived. The paramedics worked him over and carted him off to the hospital. All I know."

"He's dead. We caught that on an intercept," Ryan told them. "He was accompanied by a guy named 'Honeybear' on the 'Net. Saw his buddy go down and reported it in to a guy with the handle Fifty-six MoHa, somewhere in Italy, we think. The Munich guy—his name was Atef—was a recruiter and courier. We know he recruited a shooter in the mess last week. So, you can be sure he earned his way onto the hit list."

"We know. They told us that," Brian said.

"How are you doing these people, exactly?"

"With this." Dominic pulled his gold pen from the suit jacket

pocket. “You swap the point out by twisting the nib and stick them, preferably in the ass. It injects a drug called succinylcholine, and that ruins the subject’s whole day. The drug metabolizes in the bloodstream even after death, and can’t be detected easily unless the pathologist’s a genius, and a lucky one at that.”

“Paralyzes them?”

“Yep. They collapse, and then they can’t breathe. Takes about thirty seconds for the drug to take hold, and then they drop down, and, after that, it’s just a matter of mechanics. It *looks* like a heart attack afterward, and it tests out like that, too. Perfect for what we do.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “So, you guys were in Charlottesville, too, eh?”

“Yeah.” This was Brian. “Not much fun. I had a little boy die in my arms, Jack. That was pretty tough.”

“Well, nice shooting.”

“They weren’t very smart,” Dominic evaluated them. “No smarter than street hoods. No training. They didn’t check their backs. I guess they figured they didn’t have to, with automatic weapons. But they learned different. Still, we were lucky—Son of a bitch!” he observed, as they got to the Ferraris.

“Damn. They are pretty,” Jack agreed at once. Even Brian was impressed.

“That’s the old one,” Dominic told them. “575M, V-twelve, five hundred–plus horses, six-speed transmission, two hundred twenty big ones to drive it away. The really cool one’s the Ferrari Enzo. That baby’s the fucking bomb, guys. Six hundred sixty horses. They even named it after me. See, back in the far corner.”

“How much?” Junior asked.

“The far side of six hundred thousand bucks. But if you want to get something hotter, you gotta call Lockheed Burbank.” And sure enough, the car had twin openings on the front that looked like jet intakes. The entire machine looked like personal transportation for Luke Skywalker’s rich uncle.

“Still knows his cars, eh?” Jack observed. A private jet probably got better mileage, too, but the car was sleekly pretty.

“He’d rather sleep with a Ferrari than with Grace Kelly,” Brian snorted. His own priorities were rather more conventional, of course.

“You can ride a car longer than a girl, people.” Which was one version of efficiency. “Damn, I bet that honey moves pretty fast.”

“You could get a private pilot’s license,” Jack suggested.

Dominic shook his head. “Nah. Too dangerous.”

“Son of a bitch.” Jack almost laughed out loud. “As compared with what you’ve been doing?”

“Junior, I’m used to that, y’know?”

“You say so, man.” Jack just shook his head. Damn, those were

pretty cars. He liked his Hummer at home. In the snow he could drive anywhere, and he'd win any collision on the highway, and, if it wasn't exactly sporty, what the hell? But the little boy in him could understand the list on his cousin's face. If Maureen O'Hara had been born a car, maybe she'd be one of these. The red body color would have gone nicely with her hair. After ten minutes, Dominic figured he'd drooled enough, and they walked on.

"So, we know everything about the subject except for what he looks like?" Brian asked half a block up the street.

"Correct," Jack confirmed. "But how many Arabs do you expect there to be in the Bristol?"

"A lot of them in London. Trick is going to be to ID the subject. Doing the job right on the sidewalk ought not to be too hard." And, looking around, that seemed likely. Street traffic wasn't as thick as in New York or London, but it wasn't Kansas City after dark either, and doing the job in broad daylight had its own attractions. "I guess we stake out the hotel's main entrance, and whatever side entrance there is. Can you see if you can get more data from The Campus?"

Jack checked his watch and did the mental arithmetic. "They should be open for business in two hours or so."

"Then check your e-mail," Dominic told him. "We'll wander around and look for a likely subject."

"Right." They walked across the street and headed back to the Imperial. Once back in his room, Jack flopped onto the bed and grabbed a nap.

THERE WAS nothing he had to do right now, Fa'ad thought, so he might as well get some air. Vienna had plenty of things to look at, and he hadn't exhausted them all yet. So, he dressed properly, like a businessman, and walked outside.

"BINGO, ALDO." Dominic had a cop's memory for faces, and they had practically walked into this one.

"Isn't he—"

"Yep. Atef's pal from Munich. You wanna bet he's our boy?"

"Sucker bet, bro." Dominic cataloged the target. *Middle Eastern as hell, medium height, five feet ten inches or so, light build at about hundred fifty pounds, black and brown, slightly Semitic nose, dresses well and expensively, like a businessman, walks around with purpose and confidence.* They walked within ten feet of him, careful not to stare, even with their sunglasses. *Gotcha, sucker.* Whoever these people were, they didn't know dick about hiding in plain sight. They walked to the corner.

"Damn, that was easy enough," Brian observed. "Now what?"

"We let Jack check it out with the home office and just be cool, Aldo."

"Roger, copy that, bro." He unconsciously checked his coat to make sure the gold pen was in place, as he might have checked his holster for his M9 Beretta automatic in uniform and in the field. It felt as though he were an invisible lion in a Kenyan field full of wildebeest. It didn't get much better than that. He could pick out the one he wanted to kill and eat, and the poor bastard didn't even know he was being stalked. *Just like they do it.* He wondered if this guy's colleagues would see the irony of having such tactics used against them. It wasn't how Americans were conditioned to act, but then all that stuff about showdowns on main street at high noon was something invented by Hollywood, anyway. A lion was not in the business of risking his life, and as they'd told him in the Basic School, if you found yourself in a fair fight, then you hadn't planned it very well beforehand. Fighting fair was okay in the Olympic Games, but this wasn't that. No big-game hunter walked up to a lion making noise and holding a sword. Instead, he did the sensible thing: He took cover behind a log and did it with a rifle from two hundred yards or so. Even the Masai tribesmen of Kenya, for whom killing a lion was the passage into manhood, had the good sense to do it in a squad-sized unit of ten, and not all of them teenagers, to make sure it was the lion's tail they took back to the kraal. It wasn't about being brave. It was about being effective. Just being in this business was dangerous enough. You did your best to take every element of unnecessary risk out of the equation. It was business, not a sport. "Do him out here on the street?"

"Worked before, Aldo, didn't it? I don't figure we can hit him in the hotel saloon."

"Roge-o, Enzo. Now what do we do?"

"Play tourist, I suppose. The opera house looks impressive. Let's take a look.... The sign says they're doing Wagner's *The Valkyries.* I've never seen that one."

"I've never seen an opera in my life. I suppose I ought to someday—part of the Italian soul, ain't it?"

"Oh yeah, I got more soul than I can control, but I'm partial to Verdi."

"My ass. When you been to the opera?"

"I have some of the CDs," Dominic answered, with a smile. As it turned out, the State Opera House was a magnificent example of imperial architecture, built and executed as though for God Himself to attend a performance, and bedecked in scarlet and gold. Whatever its faults might have been, the House of Hapsburg had shown impressive taste. Dominic thought briefly about checking out the cathedrals in town, but decided it wasn't fitting, given the reason they were here. In

all, they walked around for two hours, then headed back to the hotel and up to Jack's room.

"**NO JOY** from the home office," Jack told them.

"No problem. We saw the guy. He's an old friend from Munich," Brian reported. They walked into the bathroom and opened the faucets, which would put out enough white noise to annoy any microphones in the room. "He's a pal of Mr. Atef. He was there when we popped him in Munich."

"How can you be sure?"

"A hundred percent sure, we can't be—but what are the odds that he just happened to be in both cities, and the right hotel, man?" Brian asked reasonably.

"Hundred percent certainty is better," Jack objected.

"I agree, but when you're on the right side of thousand-to-one odds, you put the money down and toss the dice," Dominic responded. "By Bureau rules, he's at least a known associate, somebody we'd take aside to interview. So, he probably isn't out collecting for the Red Cross, y'know?" The agent paused. "Okay, it's not perfect, but it's the best we got, and I think it's worth going with."

It was gut-check time for Jack. Did he have the authority to give a go-no-go on this? Granger hadn't said so. He was intel backup for the twins. But what, exactly, did that mean? Great. He had a job without a job description, and no assigned authority. This did not make much sense. He remembered his father saying once that headquarters people weren't supposed to second-guess the troops out in the field, because the troops had eyes, and were supposed to be trained to think on their own. But in this case his training was probably at least as good as theirs. *But* he hadn't seen the face of the supposed subject and they had. If he said no, they could just as easily tell him where to stick his opinion, and, since he had no power to enforce it, they'd win the day and he'd just stand around with his dick in his hand, wondering who was right on the call. The spook business was suddenly very unpredictable, and he was stuck in the middle of a swamp without a helicopter to lift his ass out.

"Okay, guys, it's your call." This seemed a lot like taking the coward's way out to Jack, and even more so when he said, "I'd still feel better if we were a hundred percent sure."

"So would I. But like I said, man, a thousand to one constitutes betting odds. Aldo?"

Brian thought it over and nodded. "It works for me. He looked very concerned over his pal in Munich. If he's a good guy, he has funny friends. So, let's do him."

"Okay," Jack breathed, bowing to the inevitable. "When?"

"As soon as convenient," Brian responded. He and his brother would discuss tactics later, but Jack didn't need to know about that.

HE WAS lucky, Fa'ad decided at 10:14 that night. He got an instant message from Elsa K 69, who evidently remembered him kindly.

WHAT SHALL WE DO TONIGHT? he asked "her."

I'VE BEEN THINKING. IMAGINE WE ARE IN ONE OF THE K-LAGERS. I AM A JEWESS, AND YOU ARE THE KOMMAN-DANT . . . I DO NOT WISH TO DIE WITH THE REST, AND I OFFER YOU PLEASURE IN RETURN FOR MY LIFE . . . "she" proposed.

It could scarcely have been a more pleasant fantasy for him. GO AHEAD AND BEGIN, he typed.

And so it went for a while, until: PLEASE, PLEASE, I AM NOT AN AUSTRIAN. I AM AN AMERICAN MUSIC STUDENT TRAPPED BY THE WAR . . .

Better and better. OH, YES? I HAVE HEARD MUCH ABOUT AMERICAN JEWS AND THEIR WHORISH WAYS . . .

And so it went for nearly an hour. At the end, he sent her to the gas anyway. After all, what were Jews good for, really?

PREDICTABLY, Ryan couldn't sleep. His body hadn't yet acclimated to the shift of six time zones, despite the decent amount of sleep he'd had on the plane. How flight crews did it was a mystery to him, though he suspected they simply stayed synchronized to wherever they lived, disregarding wherever they happened to be at the time. But you have to stay constantly mobile to do that, and he wasn't. So, he plugged in his computer and decided to Google his way into Islam. The only Muslim he knew was Prince Ali of Saudi Arabia, and *he* was not a maniac. He even got along well with Jack's shy little sister, Katie, who found his neatly trimmed beard fascinating. He was able to download the Koran, and he started reading it. The holy book had forty-two suras, broken down into verses, just like his own Bible. Of course, he rarely looked at it, much less read it, because as a Catholic he expected the priests to tell him about the important parts, letting him skip all the work of reading about who the hell begat what the hell—maybe it had been interesting, and even fun, at the time, but not today, unless you were into genealogy, which wasn't a subject of dinner-table conversation in the Ryan family. Besides, everyone knew that every Irishman was descended from a horse thief who'd skipped the country to avoid being hanged by the nasty English invaders. A whole collection of wars had come out of that, one of which had come within a whisker of preventing his own birth in Annapolis.

It was ten minutes later that he realized that the Koran was almost a word-for-word clone of what all the Jewish prophets had scribbled

down, divinely inspired to do so, of course, because they said so. And so did this Mohammed guy. Supposedly, God talked to him, and he played executive secretary and wrote it all down. It was a pity there hadn't been a video camera and tape recorder for all these birds, but there hadn't, and, as a priest had explained to him at Georgetown, faith was faith, and either you believed as you were supposed to, or you didn't.

Jack *did* believe in God, of course. His mom and dad had instructed him in the basics, and sent him through Catholic schools, and he'd learned the prayers and the rules, and he'd done First Communion, and Confession—now called "Reconciliation" in the kinder, gentler Church of Rome—and Confirmation. But he hadn't seen the inside of a church for quite a while. It wasn't that he was against the Church, just that he was grown up now, and maybe not going was a (dumb) way of showing Mom and Dad that he was able to make his own decisions about how he'd live his life, and that Mom and Dad couldn't order him around anymore.

He noted that there was no place in the fifty pages he'd skimmed through that said anything about shooting innocent people so that you could screw the womenfolk among them in heaven. The penalty for suicide was right on the level with what Sister Frances Mary had explained in second grade. Suicide was a mortal sin you really wanted to avoid, because you couldn't go to confession afterward to scrub it off your soul. Islam said that faith was good, but you couldn't just think it. You had to live it, too. Bingo, as far as Catholic teaching went.

At the end of ninety minutes, it came to him—rather an obvious conclusion—that terrorism had about as much to do with the Islamic religion as it did with Catholic and Protestant Irishmen. Adolf Hitler, the biographers said, had thought of himself as a Catholic right up until the moment he'd eaten the gun—evidently, he'd never met Sister Frances Mary or he would have known better. But that bozo had obviously been crazy. So, if he was reading this right, Mohammed would probably have clobbered terrorists. He had been a decent, honorable man. Not all of his followers were the same way, though, and those were the ones he and the twins had to deal with.

Any religion could be twisted out of shape by the next crop of madmen, he thought, yawning, and Islam was just the next one on the list.

"Gotta read more of this," he told himself on the way to the bed. "Gotta."

FA'AD WOKE up at eight-thirty. He'd be meeting Mahmoud today, just down the street at the drugstore. From there, they'd take a cab

somewhere—probably a museum—for the actual message transfer, and he'd learn what was supposed to happen, and what he'd have to do to make it so. It really was a pity that he didn't have his own residence. Hotels were comfortable, especially the laundry service, but he was approaching his tolerance limit.

Breakfast came. He thanked the waiter and tipped him two Euros, then read the paper that sat on the wheeled table. Nothing of consequence seemed to be happening. There was a coming election in Austria, and each side was enthusiastically blackguarding the other, as the political game was played in Europe. It was a lot more predictable at home, and easier to understand. By nine in the morning, he had the TV turned on, and he found himself checking his watch with increasing frequency. These meetings always made him a little anxious. What if Mossad had identified him? The answer to that was clear enough. They'd kill him with no more thought than flicking at an insect.

OUTSIDE, DOMINIC and Brian were walking about, almost aimlessly, or so it might have seemed to a casual observer. The problem was, there *were* a few of those around. There was a magazine kiosk just by their hotel, and the Bristol had doormen. Dominic considered leaning against a lamppost and reading a paper, but that was one thing they'd told him in the FBI Academy *never* to do, because even spies had seen the movies where the actors were always doing that. And so, professional or not, realistic or not, the whole world was conditioned to be mindful of anyone who read a newspaper while leaning on a lamppost. Following a guy already outside without being spotted was child's play compared to waiting for him to appear. He sighed, and kept walking.

Brian was thinking along the same lines. He thought about how cigarettes might help at moments like this. It gave you something to do, like in the movies, Bogart and his unfiltered coffin nails, which had eventually killed him. *Bad luck, Bogie,* Brian thought. Cancer must have been a bitch of a disease. He wasn't exactly delivering the breath of spring to his subjects, but at least it didn't last months. Just a few minutes, and the brain winked out. Besides, they had it coming in one way or another. Maybe they would not have agreed with that, but you had to be careful about the enemies you made. Not all of them would be dumb and defenseless sheep. And surprise was a bitch. The best thing to have on the battlefield, surprise. If you surprised the other guy, he didn't have a chance to strike back, and that was just fine because this *was* business, not personal. Like a steer at the stockyards, he walked into a little room, and even if he looked up he'd just see the guy with the air hammer, and after that it was off to cattle heaven,

where the grass was always green and the water sweet, and there weren't any wolves around...

Your mind is wandering, Aldo, Brian thought to himself. Both sides of the street served his purpose just fine. So he crossed over and headed for the ATM machine directly across from the Bristol, took out his card, and punched in the code number, to be rewarded with five hundred Euros. Checked his watch: 10:53. Was this bird coming out? Had they missed him somehow?

Traffic had settled down. The red streetcars rumbled back and forth. People here minded their own business. They walked along without looking sideways, unless they were interested in something specific. No eye contact with strangers, no instinct to greet people at all. A stranger was supposed to stay that way, evidently. He appreciated it here even more than in Munich, just how *in Ordnung* these people were. You could probably eat dinner right off the floor in their houses, as long as you cleaned up the floor afterward.

Dominic had taken up position on the other side of the street, covering the direction to the opera house. There were only two ways for this character to go. Left or right. He could cross the street or not. No more options than that, unless he had a car coming to pick him up, in which case the mission was a washout. But tomorrow was always another day. 10:56, his watch said. He had to be careful, not look at the hotel's entrance too much. Doing this made him feel vulnerable . . .

There—bingo! It was the subject, all right, dressed in a blue pinstriped suit and a maroon tie, like a guy going to an important business meeting. Dominic saw him, too, and turned to approach from the northwest. Brian waited to see what he was going to do.

FA' AD DECIDED to trick his arriving friend. He'd approach from across the street, just to be different, and so he crossed over, in the middle of the block, dodging the traffic. As a boy, he'd enjoyed entering the corral for his father's horses and dodging among them. Horses had brains enough not to run into things unnecessarily, of course, more than could be said for some of the cars heading up Kartner Ring, but he got across safely.

THE ROAD here was curious, with one paved path like a private driveway, a thin grass median, then the road proper with its cars and streetcars, then another grass median, and the final car path before the opposite sidewalk. The subject darted across and started walking west, toward their hotel. Brian took up position ten feet behind and took out his pen, swapping out the point and checking visually to make sure he was ready.

MAX WEBER was a motorman who'd worked for the city transit authority for twenty-three years, driving his streetcar back and forth eighteen times per day, for which he was paid a comfortable salary for a workingman. He was now going north, leaving Schwartzenberg Platz, turning left just as the street changed from Rennweg into Schwartzenberg Strasse to go left on the Kartner Ring. The light was in his favor, and his eye caught the ornate Hotel Imperial, where all the rich foreigners and diplomats liked to stay. Then his eyes came back to the road. You couldn't steer a streetcar, and it was the job of those in automobiles to keep out of his way. Not that he went very fast, hardly ever more than forty kilometers per hour, even out at the end of the line. It was not an intellectually demanding job, but he did it scrupulously, in accordance with the manual. The bell rang. Somebody needed to get off at the corner of Kartner and Wiedner Hauptstrasse.

THERE. **THERE** was Mahmoud. Looking the other way. Good, Fa'ad thought, maybe he could surprise his colleague, and have a joke for the day. He stopped on the sidewalk and scanned the miniroad for traffic before dashing across the street.

OKAY, RAGHEAD, Brian thought, closing the distance in just three steps and—

OUCH, **FA'AD** thought. It was quite literally a slight pain in the ass. He ignored it and kept going, cutting through a gap in the traffic on the street. There was a streetcar coming, but it was too far away to be a matter of concern. Traffic was not coming from his right, and so . . .

BRIAN JUST kept walking. He figured he'd go to the magazine stand. It would give him a good chance to turn and watch while he ostensibly made a purchase.

WEBER SAW the idiot making ready to dash across the tracks. Didn't these fools know only to do that at the *Ecke,* where he had to stop for the red lights like everyone else? They taught children to do that at the *Kindergarten*. Some people thought their time was more valuable than gold, as though they were Franz Josef himself, risen from the hundred-year dead. He didn't change his speed. Idiot or not, he'd get well clear of the tracks before—

—FA'AD FELT his right leg collapse under him. What was this? Then his left leg, and he was falling for no reason at all—and then other things started happening faster than he could understand them, and as though from an outside vantage point he saw himself falling down—and there was a streetcar . . . coming!

MAX REACTED a little too slowly. He could hardly believe what his eyes told him. But it could not be denied. He tromped his foot down on the brakes, but the fool was less than two meters away, and—*lieber Gott!*

The streetcar had a pair of bars running horizontally under its nose to prevent exactly this, but they hadn't been checked in several weeks, and Fa'ad was a slender man—slender enough that his feet slid right under the safe bars and his body then pushed them vertically upward and out of the way—

—and Max felt the dreadful *thump-thump* of his passage over the man's body. Somebody would call for an ambulance, but they would be far better off calling a priest. This poor schlemiel would not ever get to where he was going, the fool, saving time at the cost of his life. The fool!

ACROSS THE street, Mahmoud turned just in time to see his friend die. His eyes imagined more than saw the streetcar jump upward, as though to avoid killing Fa'ad, and just that fast his world changed, as Fa'ad's world ended for all time to be.

"JESUS," BRIAN thought, twenty yards away, holding a magazine in his hands. That poor fucker hadn't lived long enough to die of the poison. He saw that Enzo had moved down the opposite side of the street, perhaps figuring to pop him if and when he'd gotten across, but the succinylcholine had worked as advertised. He'd just picked a particularly bad place to collapse. Or a lucky one, depending on your point of view. He took the magazine and crossed the street. There was an Arab-looking guy by the drugstore whose face was even more upset than the citizens around him. There were screams, a lot of hands to mouths, and, damned sure, it was not a pretty sight, though the streetcar had stopped directly over the body.

"Somebody's going to have to hose down the street," Dominic said quietly. "Nice pop, Aldo."

"Well, I guess a five-point-six from the East German judge. Let's get moving."

"Roger that, bro."

And they headed right, past the cigarette store, toward

Schwartzenberg Platz.

Behind them there was a little screaming from the women, while the men took it all more soberly, with many turning away. There was not a thing to be done. The doorman at the Imperial darted inside to summon an ambulance and the *Feuerwehr*. They took about ten minutes to arrive. The firemen got there first, and for them the grim sight was immediate and decisive. His whole blood supply, so it seemed, had spilled out, and there was no saving him. The police were there, too, and a police captain, who'd arrived from his station on nearby Friedrichstrasse, told Max Weber to back his streetcar off the body. It revealed much—and little. The body had been chopped into four irregular pieces, as though ripped apart by a predatory creature from prehistory. The ambulance, which had come, was stopped not quite in the middle of the street—the street cops were waving the cars along, but the drivers and passengers took the time to look at the carnage, with half of them staring with grim fascination and the other half turning away in horror and disgust. Even some reporters were there, with their cameras and notepads—and Minicams for the TV scribblers.

They needed three body bags to collect the body. An inspector from the transit authority arrived to question the motorman, whom the police already had in hand, of course. All in all, it took about an hour to remove the body, inspect the streetcar, and clear the road. It was done rather efficiently, in fact, and by 12:30 everything was back *in Ordnung*.

Except for Mahmoud Mohamed Fadhil, who had to go to his hotel and light up his computer to send an e-mail to Mohammed Hassan al-Din, now in Rome, for instructions.

By that time, Dominic was on his own computer, composing an e-mail for The Campus to tell them of the day's work, and ask for instructions on the next assignment.

CHAPTER 22

SPANISH STEPS

"YOU'RE KIDDING," Jack said at once.

"God, grant me a dumb adversary," Brian responded. "That's one prayer they teach at the Basic School. Trouble is, sooner or later they're going to get smart."

"Like crooks," Dominic agreed. "The problem with law enforcement is that we generally catch the dumb ones. The smart ones we rarely even hear about. That's why it took so long to do the Mafia, and they're not really all *that* smart. But, yeah, it's a Darwinian process, and we'll be helping to breed brains into them one way or another."

"News from home?" Brian asked.

"Check the time. They won't even be getting in for another hour," Jack explained. "So, the guy really got run over?"

Brian nodded. He'd gone down and been run over like the official Mississippi state animal—a squashed dog on the road. "By a streetcar. Good news is that it covered up the mess." *Tough luck, Mr. Raghead.*

* * *

IT WASN'T even a mile to the St. Elizabeth's *Krankenhaus* on Invalidenstrasse, where the ambulance crew carried in the body parts. They'd called ahead, and so there was no particular surprise at the three rubberized bags. These were duly laid on a table in pathology—there was no point in their going to casualty receiving, because the cause of death was so obvious as to be blackly comical. The only hard part was to retrieve blood for a toxicology scan. The body had been so mauled as to be largely drained of blood, but internal organs—mainly the spleen and brain—had enough to be drawn out with a syringe and sent off to the lab, which would look for narcotics and/or alcohol. The only other thing to look for in the postmortem exam was a broken leg, but the passage of the streetcar over the body—they had his name and ID from his wallet, and the police were checking the local hotels to see if maybe he'd left a passport behind, so that the appropriate embassy

could be notified—meant that even a broken knee would be almost impossible to discover. Both of his legs had been totally crushed in a matter of less than three seconds. The only surprising thing was that his face was placid. One would have expected open eyes and a grimace of pain from the death, but, then, even traumatic death had few hard-and-fast rules, as the pathologist knew. There was little point in doing an in-depth examination. Maybe if he'd been shot they could find a bullet wound, but there was no reason to suspect that. The police had already talked to seventeen eyewitnesses who'd been within thirty meters of the event. All in all, the pathology report could just as easily have been a form letter as a signed official document.

"JESUS," GRANGER observed. "How the hell did they arrange that?" Then he lifted his phone. "Gerry? Come on down. Number three is in the bag. You have to see this report." After replacing the phone, he thought aloud, "Okay, now where do we send them next?"

That was settled on a different floor. Tony Wills was copying all of Ryan's downloads, and the one at the top of the download file was impressive in its bloody brevity. So, he lifted his phone for Rick Bell.

IT WAS hardest of all for Max Weber. It took half an hour for the initial denial and shock to wear off. He started vomiting, his eyes replaying the sight of the crumpled body sliding below his field of vision, and the horrible *thump-thump* of his streetcar. It hadn't been his fault, he told himself. That fool, *das Idiot,* had just fallen down right before him, like a drunk might do, except it was far too early for a man to have too many beers. He'd had accidents before, mostly fender work on cars that had turned too abruptly in front of him. But he'd never seen and hardly heard of a fatal accident with a streetcar. He'd *killed* a man. He, Max Weber, had taken a life. It was not his fault, he told himself about once a minute for the next two hours. His supervisor gave him the rest of the day off, and so he clocked out and drove home in his Audi, stopping at a *Gasthaus* a block from his home because he didn't want to drink alone this day.

JACK WAS running through his downloads from The Campus, with Dom and Brian standing by, having a late lunch and beers. It was routine traffic, e-mail to and from people suspected of being players, the majority of them ordinary citizens of various countries who'd once or twice written magic words that had been taken note of by the Echelon intercept system at Fort Meade. Then there was one like all the others, except that the addressee was 56MoHa@eurocom.net.

"Hey, guys, our pal on the street was about to have a meet with

another courier, looks like. He's writing our old friend Fifty-six MoHa, and requesting instructions."

"Oh?" Dominic came over to look. "What does that tell us?"

"I just have a Internet handle—it's on AOL: Gadfly097@aol.com. If he gets a reply from MoHa, maybe we'll know something. We think he's an operations officer for the bad guys. NSA tagged him about six months ago. He encrypts his letters, but they know how to crack that one, and we can read most of his e-mails."

"How quick will you see a reply?" Dominic wondered.

"Depends on Mr. MoHa," Jack said. "We just have to sit tight and wait."

"Roger that," Brian said from his seat by the window.

"I SEE young Jack didn't slow them down," Hendley observed.

"Did you think he would? Jeez, Gerry, I told you," Granger said, having already thanked God for His blessings, but quietly. "Anyway, now they want instructions."

"Your plan was to take down four targets. So, who's number four?" the Senator asked.

It was Granger's turn to be humble. "Not sure yet. To be honest, I didn't expect them to work this efficiently. I've been kinda hoping that the hits so far might generate a target of opportunity, but nobody's prairie-dogging yet. I have a few candidates. Let me run through them this afternoon." His phone rang. "Sure, come on over, Rick." He set the phone down. "Rick Bell says he has something interesting."

The door opened in less than two minutes. "Oh, hey, Gerry. Glad you're here. Sam"—Bell turned his head—"we just had this come in." He handed the rough printout of the e-mail across.

Granger scanned it. "We know this guy . . ."

"Sure as hell. He's a field ops officer for our friends. We figured he was based in Rome. Well, we figured right." Like all bureaucrats—especially the senior ones—Bell enjoyed patting his own back.

Granger handed the page across to Hendley. "Okay, Gerry, here's number four."

"I don't like serendipity."

"I don't like coincidences either, Gerry, but if you win the lottery you don't give the money back," Granger said, thinking that Coach Darrell Royal had been right: Luck didn't go looking for a stumblebum. "Rick, is this guy worth making go away?"

"Yes, he is," Bell confirmed, with an enthusiastic nod. "We don't know all that much about him, but what we know is all bad. He's an operations guy—of that we are a hundred percent sure, Gerry. And it feels right. One of his people sees another go down, reports in, and this guy gets it and replies. You know, if I ever meet the guy who

came up with the Echelon program, I might have to buy him a beer."

"Reconnaissance-by-fire," Granger observed, patting himself very firmly on the back. "Damn, I knew it would work. You shake a hornet's nest, and some bugs are bound to come out."

"Just so they don't sting your ass," Hendley warned. "Okay, now what?"

"Turn 'em loose before the fox goes to ground," Granger replied instantly. "If we can bag this guy, maybe we can really shake something valuable loose from the tree."

Hendley turned his head. "Rick?"

"It works for me. Go-mission," he said.

"Okay, then it's a go-mission," Hendley agreed. "Get the word out."

THE NICE thing about electronic communications was that they did not take very long. In fact, Jack already had the important part.

"Okay, guys, Fifty-six MoHa's first name is Mohammed—not great news; it's the most common first name in the world—and he says he's in Rome, at the Hotel Excelsior on the Via Vittorio Veneto, number one twenty-five."

"I've heard of that one," Brian said. "It's expensive, pretty nice. Our friends like to stay in nice places, looks like."

"He's checked in under the name Nigel Hawkins. That's English as hell. You suppose he's a Brit citizen?"

"With a first name of Mohammed?" Dominic wondered aloud.

"Could be a cover name, Enzo," Jack replied, pricking Dominic's balloon. "Without a picture, we can't guess about his background. Okay, he's got a cell phone, but Mahmoud—that's the guy who saw the bird go down this morning—must be supposed to know it." Jack paused. "Why didn't he just call in, I wonder? Hmm. Well, the Italian police have sent us stuff that came from electronic intercepts. Maybe they're watching the airwaves, and our boy is being careful . . . ?"

"Makes sense, but why . . . but why is he sending stuff out over the 'Net?"

"He thinks it's secure. NSA has cracked a lot of the public encryption systems. The vendors don't know that, but the boys at Fort Meade are pretty good at that stuff. Once you crack it, it stays cracked, and the other guy never knows." In fact, he didn't know the real reason. The programmers could be, and often had been, persuaded to insert trapdoors either for patriotism or for cash, and, often enough, for both. 56MoHa was using the most expensive such program, and its literature proclaimed loudly that *nobody* could crack it because of its proprietary algorithm. That wasn't explained, of course, just that it was a 256-bit encryption process, which was supposed to impress people with the size of the number. The literature

didn't say that the software engineer who'd generated it had once worked at Fort Meade—which was why he'd been hired—and was a man who remembered swearing his oath, and, besides, a million dollars of tax-free money had been a hell of a tiebreaker. It had helped him buy his house in the hills of Marin County. And so the California real-estate market was even now serving the security interests of the United States of America.

"So, we can read their mail?" Dominic asked.

"Some of it," Jack confirmed. "The Campus downloads most of what NSA gets at Fort Meade, and when they cross-deck it to CIA for analysis, we intercept *that.* It's less complicated than it sounds."

Dominic figured a lot out in a matter of seconds. *"Fuck..."* he breathed, looking up at the high ceiling in Jack's suite. "No wonder..." A pause. "No more beers, Aldo. We're driving to Rome." Brian nodded.

"Don't have room for a third, right?" Jack asked.

"'Fraid not, Junior, not in a 911."

"Okay, I'll catch a plane to Rome." Jack walked to the phone and called downstairs. Within ten minutes, he was booked on an Alitalia 737 to Leonardo da Vinci International, leaving in an hour and a half. He considered changing his socks. If there was anything in life that incurred his loathing, it was taking his shoes off in an airport. He was packed in a few minutes and out the door, stopping only to thank the concierge on the way out. A Mercedes taxi hustled him out of town.

Dominic and Brian had hardly unpacked at all and were ready to go in ten minutes. Dom called the valet while Brian went back to the outside magazine kiosk and got plastic-coated maps to cover the route south and west. Between that and the Euros he'd picked up earlier in the day, he figured they were set, assuming Enzo didn't drive them off an Alp. The ugly-blue Porsche arrived at the front of the hotel, and he came over as the doorman forced their bags in the tiny forward-sited trunk. In another two minutes, he was head-down in the maps looking for the quickest way to the Sudautobahn.

JACK GOT aboard the Boeing after enduring the humiliation that was now a global cost of flying commercial—it was more than enough to make him think back to Air Force One with nostalgia, though he also remembered that he'd gotten used to the comfort and attention with remarkable speed, and only later learned what normal people had to go through, which was like running into a brick wall. For the moment, he had hotel accommodations to worry about. How to do that from an airplane? There was a pay phone attached to his first-class seat, and so he swiped his black card down the plastic receiver and made his first ever attempt to conquer European telephones. What hotel? Well, why

not the Excelsior? On his second attempt, he got through to the front desk and learned that, indeed, they had several rooms available. He bagged a small suite, and feeling very good about himself, he took a glass of Tuscan white from the friendly stewardess. Even a hectic life, he'd learned, could be a good life, if you knew what your next step was, and for the moment his horizon was one step away at a time.

GERMAN HIGHWAY engineers must have taught the Austrians everything they knew, Dominic thought. Or maybe the smart ones had all read the same book. In any case, the road was not unlike the concrete ribbons that crisscrossed America, except that the signage was so different as to be incomprehensible, mainly because it had no language except for city names—and they were foreign, too. He figured out that a black number on a white background inside a red circle was the speed limit, but that was in kilometers, three of which fitted into two miles with parking room left over. And the Austrian speed limits were not quite as generous as the German ones. Maybe they didn't have enough doctors to fix all the screwups, but, even in the growing hills, the curves were properly banked and the shoulders gave you enough bailout room in case somebody got seriously confused with left and right. The Porsche had a cruise control, and he pegged his to five klicks over the posted limit, just to have the satisfaction of going a little too fast. He couldn't be sure that his FBI ID would get him out of a ticket here, as it did all across the U.S. of A.

"How far, Aldo?" he asked the navigator in the Death Seat.

"Looks like a little over a thousand kilometers from where we are now. Call it ten hours, maybe."

"Hell, that's just warming-up time. May need gas in another two hours or so. How you fixed for cash?"

"Seven hundred Monopoly bucks. You can spend these in Italy, too, thank God—with the old lira you went nuts doing the math. Traffic ain't bad," Brian observed.

"No, and it's well behaved," Dominic agreed. "Good maps?"

"Yeah, all the way down. In Italy, we'll need another one for Rome."

"Okay, ought not to be too hard." And Dominic thanked a merciful God that he had a brother who could read maps. "When we stop for gas, we can get something to eat."

"Roger that, bro." Brian looked up to see mountains in the distance—no way to tell how far off they were, but it must have been a forbidding sight back when people walked or rode horses to get around. They must have had a lot more patience than modern man, or maybe a lot less sense. For the moment, the seat was comfortable, and his brother was not quite being maniacal in his driving.

THE ITALIANS turned out good airplane drivers in addition to good people for race cars. The pilot positively kissed the runway, and the rollout was as welcome as always. He'd flown too much to be as antsy about it as his father had once been, but, like most people, he felt safer walking or traveling on something he could see. Here also he found Mercedes taxicabs, and a driver who spoke passable English and knew the way to the hotel.

Highways look much the same all over the world, and for a moment Jack wondered where the hell he was. The land outside the airport looked agricultural, but the pitch of the roofs was different than at home. Evidently, it didn't snow much here, they were so shallow. It was late spring, and it was warm enough that he could wear a short-sleeve shirt, but it wasn't oppressive in any way. He'd come to Italy with his father once on official business—an economic meeting of some sort, he thought—but he'd been ridden around by an embassy car all the time. It was fun to pretend to be a prince of the realm, but you didn't learn to navigate that way, and all that stood out in his memory were the places he'd seen. He didn't know a single thing about how the hell he'd gotten there. This was the city of Caesar and a lot of other names that identified people whom history remembered for having done things good and bad. Mostly bad, because that was how history worked. And that, he reminded himself, was why he was in town. A good reminder, really, that he was not the arbiter of good and bad in the world, just a guy working backhandedly for his country, and so the authority to make such a decision did not rest entirely on his shoulders. Being president, as his father had been for just over four years, could not have been a fun job, despite all the power and importance that came with it. With power came responsibility in direct proportion, and if you had a conscience, that had to wear pretty hard on you. There was comfort in just doing things other people thought necessary. And, Jack reminded himself, he could always say no, and while there might be consequences, they would not be all that severe. Not as severe as the things he and his cousins were doing, anyway.

Via Vittorio Veneto looked more business than touristy. The trees on the sides were rather lame looking. The hotel was, surprisingly, not a tall building at all. Nor did it have an ornate entrance. Jack paid off the cabdriver and went inside, with the doorman bringing his bags. The inside was a celebration of woodwork, and the staff were welcoming as they could be. Perhaps this was an Olympic sport at which all Europeans excelled, but someone led him to his room. There was air-conditioning, and the cool air in the suite was welcoming indeed.

"Excuse me, what's your name?" he asked the bellman.

"Stefano," the man replied.

"Do you know if there is a man named Hawkins here—Nigel Hawkins?"

"The Englishman? Yes, he is three doors away, right down the corridor. A friend?"

"He's a friend of my brother's. Please don't say anything to him. Perhaps I can surprise him," Jack suggested, handing him a twenty-Euro note.

"Of course, signore."

"Very good. Thank you."

"Prego," Stefano responded, and walked back to the lobby.

This had to be dumb operational art, Jack told himself, but if they didn't have a photo of the bird, they had to get some idea of what he looked like. With that done, he lifted the phone and tried to make a call.

"YOU HAVE an incoming call," Brian's phone started saying in low tones, repeating itself three times before he fished it out of his coat pocket.

"Yeah." Who the hell was calling him? he wondered.

"Aldo, it's Jack. Hey, I'm in the hotel—the Hotel Excelsior. Want me to see if I can get you guys some rooms here? It's pretty nice. I think you guys would like it here."

"Hold on." He set the phone down in his lap. "You'll never believe where Junior's checked in to." He didn't have to identify it.

"You're kidding," Dominic responded.

"Nope. He wants to know if he should get us a reservation. What do I tell him?"

"Damn..." Some quick thought. "Well, he's our intel backup, isn't he?"

"Sounds a little too obvious to me, but if you say so"—he picked the phone back up—"Jack, that's affirmative, buddy."

"Great. Okay, I'll set it up. Unless I call back and say no, you come on in here."

"Roger that one, Jack. See ya."

"Bye," Brian heard, and hit the kill button. "You know, Enzo, this doesn't sound real smart to me."

"He's there. He's on the scene, and he's got eyes. We can always back out if we have to."

"Fair enough, I guess. Map says we're coming up on a tunnel in about five miles." The clock on the dash said 4:05. They were making good time, but heading straight at a mountain just past the town or city of Badgastein. Either they needed a tunnel or a big team of goats

to clear that hill.

JACK LIT up his computer. It took him ten minutes to figure out how to use the phone system for that purpose, but he finally got logged on, to find his mailbox brimming with bits and bytes targeted at him. There was an attaboy from Granger for the completed mission in Vienna, though he hadn't had a thing to do with it. But below that was an assessment from Bell and Wills on 56MoHa. For the most part, it was disappointing. Fifty-six was an operations officer for the bad guys. He either did things or planned things, and one of the things he'd probably done or planned had gotten a lot of people killed in four shopping malls back at home, and so this bastard needed to meet God. There were no specifics about what he'd done, how he'd been trained, how capable he was, or whether or not he was known to carry a gun, all of which was information he'd like to see, but after reading the decrypted e-mails he reencrypted them and saved them in his ACTION folder to go over with Brian and Dom.

THE TUNNEL was like something in a video game. It went on and on to infinity, though at least the traffic inside wasn't piled up in a fiery mass as had happened a few years before in the Mont Blanc tunnel between France and Switzerland. After a period of time that seemed to last half of forever, they came out the other side. It looked to be downhill from here.

"Gas plaza ahead," Brian reported. Sure enough, there was an ELF sign half a mile away, and the Porsche's tank needed filling.

"Gotcha. I could use a stretch and a piss." The service plaza was pretty clean by American standards, and the eatery was different, without the Burger King or Roy Rogers you expected in Virginia—the men's room plumbing was all *in Ordnung,* however—and the gas was sold by the liter, which well disguised the price until Dominic did the mental arithmetic: "Jesus, they really charge for this stuff!"

"Company card, man," Brian said soothingly, and tossed over a pack of cookies. "Let's boogie, Enzo. Italy awaits."

"Fair enough." The six-cylinder engine purred back to life, and they went back on the road.

"Good to stretch your legs," Dominic observed as he went to his top gear.

"Yeah, it helps," Brian agreed. "Four hundred fifty miles to go, if my addition's right."

"Walk in the park. Call it six hours, if the traffic's okay." He adjusted his sunglasses and shook his shoulders some. "Staying in the same hotel with our subject—damn."

"I've been thinking. He doesn't know dick about us, maybe doesn't

even know he's being hunted. Think about it: two heart attacks, one in front of a witness; and a traffic accident, also with a witness he knows. That's pretty bad luck, but no overt suggestion of hostile action, is there?"

"In his place, I'd be a little nervous," Dominic thought aloud.

"In his place, he probably already is. If he sees us in the hotel, we're just two more infidel faces, man. Unless he sees us more than once, we're down in the grass, not up on the scope. Ain't no rule says it *has* to be hard, Enzo."

"I hope you're right, Aldo. That mall was scary enough to last me a while."

"Concur, bro."

This wasn't the towering part of the Alps. That lay to the north and west, though it would have been bad on the legs had they been walking it, as the Roman legions had done, thinking their paved roads were a blessing. Probably better than mud, but not that much, especially humping a backpack that weighed about as much as his Marines had carried into Afghanistan. The legions had been tough in their day, and probably not all that different from the guys who did the job today in camouflaged utilities. But back then they'd had a more direct way of dealing with bad guys. They'd killed their families, their friends, their neighbors, and even their dogs, and, more to the point, they were *known* for doing all that. Not exactly practical in the age of CNN, and, truth be told, there were damned few Marines who would have tolerated participating in wholesale slaughter. But taking them out one at a time was okay, so long as you were sure you weren't killing off innocent civilians. Doing that shit was the other side's job. It was really a pity they could not all come out on a battlefield and have it out like men, but, in addition to being vicious, terrorists were also practical. There was no sense committing to a combat action in which you'd not merely lose, but be slaughtered like sheep in a pen. But real men would have built their forces up, trained and equipped them, and then turned them loose, instead of sneaking around like rats to bite babies in their cribs. Even war had rules, promulgated because there were *worse* things than war, things that were strictly forbidden to men in uniform. You did not hurt noncombatants deliberately, and you tried hard to avoid doing it by accident. The Marines were now investing considerable time, money, and effort in learning city fighting, and the hardest part of it was avoiding civilians, women with kids in strollers—even knowing that some of those women had weapons stashed next to little Johnny, and that they'd love to see the back of a United States Marine, say two or three meters away, just to be sure of bullet placement. Playing by the rules had its limitations. But for Brian that was a thing of the past. No,

he and his brother were playing the game by the enemy's rules, and as long as the enemy didn't know it would be a profitable game. How many lives might they have saved already by taking down a banker, a recruiter, and a courier? The problem was that you could never know. That was complexity theory as applied to real life, and it was *a priori* impossible. Nor would they ever know what good they'd be doing and what lives they might be saving when they got this 56MoHa bastard. But not being able to quantify it didn't mean it wasn't real, like that child killer his brother had dispatched in Alabama. They were doing the Lord's work, even if the Lord was not an accountant.

At work in the field of the Lord, Brian thought. Certainly these alpine meadows were green and lovely enough, he thought, looking for the lonely goatherd. *Odalayeee-oh . . .*

"HE'S WHERE?" Hendley asked.

"The Excelsior," Rick Bell answered. "Says he's right up the hall from our friend."

"I think our boy needs a little advice on fieldcraft," Granger observed darkly.

"Think it through," Bell suggested. "The opposition doesn't know a thing. They're as likely to be worried about the guy who picks up the wash as about Jack or the twins. They have no names, no facts, no hostile organization—hell, they don't even know for sure that anybody's out to get them."

"It's not very good fieldcraft," Granger persisted. "If Jack gets eyeballed—"

"Then what?" Bell asked. "Okay, fine, I know I'm just an intel weenie, not a field spook, but logic still applies. They do not and *cannot* know anything about The Campus. Even if Fifty-six MoHa is getting nervous, it will be undirected anxiety, and, hell, he's probably got a lot of that in his system anyway. But you can't be a spook and be afraid of anybody, can you? As long as our people are in the background noise, they have nothing to worry about—unless they do something real dumb, and these kids are not that kind of dumb, if I read them right."

Through all of this, Hendley just sat in his chair, letting his eyes flicker back and forth from one to the other. So, this was what it must have been like to be "M" in the James Bond movies. Being the boss had its moments, but it had its stresses, too. Sure, he had that undated presidential pardon in a safety-deposit box, but that didn't mean he ever wanted to make use of it. That would make him even more of a pariah than he already was, and the newsies would never leave him alone, to his dying day, not exactly his idea of fun.

"Just so they don't pretend to be room service and whack him in the

hotel room," Gerry thought aloud.

"Hey, if they were that dumb, they'd already be in some German prison," Granger pointed out.

THE CROSSOVER into Italy was no more formal than crossing over from Tennessee into Virginia, which was one benefit of the European Union. The first Italian city was Villaco, where the people looked a lot more German than Sicilian to their fellow Italians, and from there southwest on the A23. They still needed to learn a little about interchanges, Dominic thought, but these roads were definitely better than they'd run for the famous Mille Miglia, the thousand-mile sports car race of the 1950s, canceled because too many people got killed watching it from the side of the country roads. The land here was not distinguishable from Austria, and the farm buildings were much the same as well. All in all, it was pretty country, not unlike eastern Tennessee or western Virginia, with rolling hills and cows that probably got milked twice a day to feed children on both sides of the border. Next came Udine, then Mestre, and they changed highways again for the A4 to Padova, switched over to A13, and an hour more to Bologna. The Apennine mountains were to their left, and the Marine part of Brian looked at the hills and shuddered at the battlefield they represented. But then his stomach started growling again.

"You know, Enzo, every town we pass has at least one great restaurant—great pasta, homemade cheese, Vitello Francese, the wine cellar from hell . . ."

"I'm hungry, too, Brian. And, yeah, we're surrounded by Italian soul food. Unfortunately, we have a mission."

"I just hope the son of a bitch is worth what we're missing, man."

"Ours is not to reason why, bro," Dominic offered.

"Yeah, but you can stick the other half of that sentence up your ass."

Dominic started laughing. He didn't like it, either. The food in Munich and Vienna had been excellent, but all around them was the place where good food had been invented. Napoleon himself had traveled with an Italian chef on his campaigns, and most of modern French cuisine had evolved directly from that one man, as racehorses were all linear descendants of an Arabian stallion named Eclipse. And he didn't even know the man's name. Pity, he thought, passing a tractor-trailer whose driver probably knew the best local places. Shit.

They drove with their lights on—a rule in Italy, enforced by the Polizia Stradale, who were not renowned for their leniency—at a steady 150 kilometers per hour, just over ninety miles to the hour, and the Porsche seemed to love it. Gas mileage was over twenty five—or

so Dominic guessed. The arithmetic of kilometers and liters against miles and gallons was too much for him while concentrating on the road. At Bologna, they joined up with the A1 and continued south toward Firenze, the city of origin for the Caruso family. The road cut through the mountains, going southwest, and was beautifully engineered.

Bypassing Florence was very hard. Brian knew of a fine restaurant near the Ponte Vecchio that belonged to distant cousins, where the wine was *bellissima,* and the food worthy of a king, but Rome was only two more hours away. He remembered going there by train that one time in his undress greens with the Sam Browne belt to proclaim his professional identity, and, sure enough, the Italians had liked the United States Marines, like all civilized people. He'd hated taking the train back to Rome and thence to Naples and his ship, but his time had not been his own.

As it wasn't now. There were more mountains as they headed south, but now some of the signs proclaimed ROMA, and that was good.

JACK ATE in the Excelsior's dining room, and the food was everything he'd expected, and the staff treated him like a prodigal member of the family come home after a protracted absence. His only complaint was that nearly everyone here was smoking. Well, perhaps Italy didn't know about secondhand smoke dangers. He'd grown up hearing all about it from his mother—who'd often aimed the remarks at Dad, who was always struggling to quit the habit once and for all, and never quite made it. He took his time with dinner. Only the salad was ordinary. Even the Italians couldn't change lettuce, though the dressings were brilliant. He'd taken a corner table to be able to survey the room. The other diners looked as ordinary as he did. All were well dressed. The guest services book in his room didn't say a tie was required, but he'd just assumed it, and, besides, Italy was the world headquarters of style. He hoped to get a suit while here, if time permitted. There were thirty or forty people here. Jack discounted the ones with wives handy. So, he was looking for someone about thirty years old, eating dinner alone, registered as Nigel Hawkins. He ended up with three possibilities. He decided to look for people who didn't look Arabic in their ethnicity, and that weeded one out. So, what to do now? Was he supposed to do anything at all? How could it hurt, unless he identified himself as an intelligence officer?

But . . . why take chances? he asked himself. *Why not just be cool?*

And with that thought, he backed off, mentally at least. Better to ID the guy another way.

ROME WAS indeed a fine city, Mohammed Hassan al-Din told

himself. He periodically thought about renting an apartment, or even a house. You could even rent one in the Jewish Quarter; there were some fine kosher restaurants in that part of the city, where one could order anything on the menu with confidence. He'd looked once at an apartment on the Piazza Campo di Fiori, but while the price—even the tourist price—had not been unreasonable, the idea of being tied down to a single location had frightened him off. Better to be mobile in his business. The enemies couldn't strike at that which they could not find. He'd taken chance enough killing the Jew Greengold—he'd been tonguelashed by the Emir himself for that bit of personal amusement, and told never to do anything like it ever again. What if the Mossad had gotten a picture of him? How valuable would he be to the Organization then? the Emir had demanded angrily. And that man was known by his colleagues for his volcanic temper. So, no more of that. He didn't even carry the knife with him, but kept it in a place of honor in his shaving kit, where he could take it out and inspect the Jew blood on the folding blade.

So, for now, in Rome, he lived here. Next time—after he went back home—he'd return and stay at another, maybe that nice one by the Trevi Fountain, he thought, though this location suited his activities better. And the food. Well, Italian food was richly excellent, better in his estimation than the simple fare of his home country. Lamb was good, but not every day. And here people didn't look at you like an infidel if you had a small sip of wine. He wondered if Mohammed, his own eponym, had knowingly allowed the Faithful to drink spirits made from honey, or simply hadn't known that mead existed. He'd tried it while at Cambridge University, and concluded that only someone who desperately needed to be drunk would ever sample it, much less spend a night with it. So, Mohammed was not quite perfect. And neither was he, the terrorist reminded himself. He did hard things for the Faith, and so he was allowed to take a few diversions from the true path. If one had to live with rats, better to have a few whiskers, after all. The waiter came to take away his dishes, and he decided to pass on dessert. He had to maintain his trim figure if he was to maintain his cover as an English businessman, and fit into his Brioni suits. So, he left the table and walked out to the elevator lobby.

RYAN THOUGHT about a nightcap at the bar, but on reflection decided against it and walked out. There was somebody there already, and he got in the elevator first. There was a casual meeting of the eyes, as Ryan moved to punch the 3 button but saw it already lighted. So, this well-dressed Brit—he looked like a Brit—was on his floor . . .

. . . wasn't *that* interesting . . . ?

It took only a few seconds for the car to stop and the door to open.

The Excelsior is not a tall hotel, but it is an expansive one, and it was a lengthy walk, and the elevator man was heading in the right direction, Ryan slowed his pace to follow from a greater distance, and sure enough, he passed Jack's room and kept going, one . . . two . . . and at the third door he stopped and turned. Then he looked back at Ryan, wondering, perhaps, if he was being tailed. But Jack stopped and fished out his own key, then, looking down at the other man, in the casual, stranger-to-stranger voice that all men know, said, "G'nite."

"And to you, sir," was the reply in well-educated *English* English.

Jack walked into the room, thinking he'd heard that accent before . . . like the Brit diplomats whom he'd met in the White House, or on trips to London with his dad. It was either the speech of someone to the manor born, or who planned to buy his own when the time came and who'd banked enough pounds sterling to pretend to be a Peer of the Realm. He had the peaches-and-cream skin of a Brit, and the upper-class accent—

—and he was checked in under the name of Nigel Hawkins.

"And I got one of your e-mails, pal," Jack whispered to the rug. "Son of a bitch."

IT TOOK almost an hour to navigate through the streets of Rome, whose city fathers may not have been married to the city mothers, and none of whom had known shit about city planning, Brian thought, working to find a way to Via Vittorio Veneto. Eventually, he knew they were close when he passed through what may once have been a gate in the city walls designed to keep Hannibal Barca out, but then a left and a right, and they learned that in Rome streets with the same name do not always go straight, which necessitated a circle on the Palazzo Margherita to return back to the Hotel Excelsior, where Dominic decided he'd had quite enough driving for the next few days. Within three minutes, their bags were out of the trunk and they were at the reception desk.

"You have a message to call Signor Ryan when you get in. Your rooms are just next to his," the clerk told them, then he waved at the bellman, who guided them to the elevator.

"Long drive, man," Brian said, leaning back against the paneled walls.

"Tell me about it," Dominic agreed.

"I mean, I know you like fast cars and fast women, but next time how about a damned airliner? Maybe you can score with a stew, y'know?"

"You friggin' jarhead." Followed by a yawn.

"This way, signori," the bellman suggested, with a wave of his arm.

"The message at the desk, where is he?"

"Signor Ryan? He is right here." The bellman pointed.

"That's convenient," Dominic thought aloud, until he remembered something else. He let himself get moved in, and the connecting door to Brian's room opened, and he gave the bellman a generous tip. Then he took the message slip out of his pocket and called.

"HELLO?"

"We're right next door, ace. What's shaking?" Brian asked.

"Two rooms?"

"Roger that."

"Guess who's just down from you?"

"Tell me."

"A British guy, a Mr. Nigel Hawkins," Jack told his cousin, and waited for the shock to subside. "Let's talk."

"Come right on over, Junior."

That took no more time than Jack needed to slip into his loafers.

"Enjoy the drive?" Jack asked.

Dominic had poured his minibar wine into a glass. There wasn't much left. "It was long."

"You did all the driving?"

"Hey, I wanted to get here alive, man."

"You turkey," Brian snarled. "He thinks driving a Porsche is like sex, except better."

"It is if you have the right technique, but even sex can wear a man out. Okay." Dominic set his glass down. "Did you say . . . ?"

"Yeah, right there." Jack pointed at the wall. And moved his hand to his eyes. *I've seen the mutt.* The reply was just nods. "Well, you guys get some sleep. I'll call you tomorrow, and we can think about our appointment. Cool?"

"Very cool," Brian agreed. "Ring us up about nine, okay?"

"You bet. Later." And Jack headed for the door. Soon thereafter, he was back on his computer. And then it hit him. He wasn't the only guy here with one of those, was he? That might be valuable . . .

EIGHT O'CLOCK came earlier than it should have. Mohammed was up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and on his machine checking his e-mail. Mahmoud was in Rome as well, having arrived the previous night, and near the top of 56MoHa's mailbox was a letter from Gadfly097, requesting a meeting site. Mohammed thought about that and then decided to exercise his sense of humor.

RISTORANTE GIOVANNI, PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, he replied: 13:30.

BE CAREFUL IN YOUR ROUTINE. By which he meant to employ countersurveillance measures. There was no definite reason to suspect foul play in the loss of three field personnel, but he hadn't lived to the age of thirty-one in the business of intelligence by being foolish. He had the ability to tell the harmless from the dangerous, he thought. He'd gotten David Greengold six weeks earlier, because the Jew hadn't seen the False Flag play even when it bit him on the ass—well, the back of the neck, Mohammed thought with a lowercase smile, remembering the moment. Maybe he should start carrying the knife again, just for good luck. Many men in his line of work believed in luck, as a sportsman or athlete might. Perhaps the Emir had been right. Killing the Mossad officer had been a gratuitously unnecessary risk, since it courted enemies. The Organization had enough of those, even if the enemies did not know who and what the organization was. Better that they should be a mere shadow to the infidels . . . a shadow in a darkened room, unseen and unknown. Mossad was hated by his colleagues, but it was hated because it was feared. The Jews were formidable. They were vicious, and they were endlessly clever. And who could say what knowledge they had, what Arab traitors bought with American money for Jewish ends. There was not a hint of treachery in the Organization, but he remembered the words of the Russian KGB officer Yuriy: Treason is only possible from those whom you trust. It had probably been a mistake to kill the Russian so quickly. He'd been an experienced field officer who'd operated most of his career in Europe and America, and there'd probably been no end to the stories he could have told, each of them with a lesson to be learned. Mohammed remembered talking to him and remembered being impressed with the breadth of his experience and judgment. Instinct was nice to have, but instinct often merely mimicked mental illness in its rampant paranoia. Yuriy had explained in considerable detail how to judge people, and how to tell a professional from a harmless civilian. He could have told many more stories, except for the 9mm bullet he'd gotten in the back of the head. It had also violated the Prophet's strict and admirable rules of hospitality. *If a man eat your salt, even though he be an infidel, he will have the safety of your house.* Well, the Emir was the one who'd violated that rule, saying lamely that he'd been an atheist and therefore beyond the law.

But he'd learned a few lessons, anyway. All his e-mails were encrypted on the best such program there was, individually keyed to his own computer, and therefore beyond anyone's capacity to read except himself. So, his communications were secure. He hardly looked Arab. He didn't sound Arabic. He didn't dress Arabic. Every hotel he stayed at knew that he drank alcohol, and such places knew that Muslims did not drink. So, he ought be completely safe. Well, yes, the

Mossad knew that someone like him had killed that Greengold pig, but he didn't think they'd ever gotten a photo of him, and unless he'd been betrayed by the man whom he'd hired to fool the Jew, they had no idea of who and what he was. Yuriy had warned him that you could never know everything, but also that being overly paranoid could alert a casual tail as to what he was, because professional intelligence officers knew tricks that no one else would ever use—and they could be seen to use them from careful observation. It was all like a big wheel, always turning, always coming back to the same place and moving on in the same way, never still, but never moving off its primary path. A great wheel . . . and he was just a cog, and whether his function was to help it move or make it slow down, he didn't really know.

"Ah." He shook that off. He was more than a cog. He was one of the motors. Not a great motor, perhaps, but an important one, because while the great wheel might move on without him, it would never move so quickly and surely as it did now. And, God willing, he would keep it moving until it crushed his enemies, the Emir's enemies, and Allah's Own Enemies.

So, he dispatched his message to Gadfly097, and called for coffee to be delivered.

RICK BELL had arranged for a crew to be on the computers around the clock. Strange that The Campus hadn't been doing that from the beginning, but now it did. The Campus was learning as it went, just as everyone else did, on both sides of the scrimmage line. At the moment it was Tony Wills, driven by his personal appreciation that there was a six-hour time difference between Central Europe and the American East Coast. A good computer jockey, he downloaded the message from 56 to 097 within five minutes of its dispatch and immediately forwarded it to Jack.

That required fewer seconds than it took to think it. Okay, they knew their subject and they knew where he was going to be, and that was just fine. Jack lifted his phone.

"You up?" Brian heard.

"I am now," he growled back. "What is it?"

"Come on over for coffee. Bring Dom with you."

"Aye, aye, sir." Followed by *click.*

* * *

"I HOPE this is good," Dominic said. His eyes looked like piss holes in

the snow.

"If you want to soar with the eagles in the morning, buddy, you can't wallow with the pigs at night. Be cool. I ordered coffee."

"Thanks. So, what's up?"

Jack walked over to his computer and pointed to the screen. They both leaned down to read.

"Who is this guy?" Dominic asked, thinking *Gadfly097 . . . ?*

"He came in from Vienna yesterday, too."

Across the street somewhere, maybe? Brian wondered, followed by, *Did he see my face?*

"Okay, I guess we're up for the appointment," Brian said, looking at Dom and getting a thumbs-up.

The coffee arrived in a few more minutes. Jack served, but the brew, they all found, was gritty, Turkish in character, though far worse even than the Turks served. Still, better than no coffee at all. They did not speak on point. Their tradecraft was good enough that they didn't talk business in a room that hadn't been swept for bugs—which they didn't know how to do, and for which they did not have the proper equipment.

Jack gunned down his coffee and headed into the shower. In it was a red chain, evidently to be pulled in case of a heart attack, but he felt reasonably decent and didn't use it. He wasn't so sure about Dominic, who really did look like cat puke on the rug. In his case, the shower worked wonders, and he came back out shaved and scrubbed pink, ready to rumble.

"The food here is pretty good, but I'm not sure about the coffee," he announced.

"Not sure. Jesus, I bet they serve better coffee in Cuba," Brian said. "MRE coffee is better than this."

"Nobody's perfect, Aldo," Dominic observed. But he didn't like it either.

"So, figure half an hour?" Jack asked. He needed about three more minutes to be ready.

"If not, send an ambulance," Enzo said, heading for the door, and hoping the shower gods were merciful this morning. It was hardly fair, he thought. Drinking gave you a hangover, not driving.

But thirty minutes later, all three were in the lobby, neatly dressed and wearing sunglasses against the bright Italian sun that sparkled outside. Dominic asked the doorman for directions and got pointed to the Via Sistina, which led directly to the Trinità dei Monti church, and the steps were just across the street, and looked to be eighty or so feet down—there was an elevator serving the subway stop, which was farther down still, but going downhill was not too outrageous a task. It hit all three that Rome had churches the way New York City had

candy stores. The walk down was pleasant. The scene, indeed, would be wonderfully romantic if you had the right girl on your arm. The steps had been designed to follow the slope of the hill by the architect Francesco De Sanctis, and was the home of the annual Donna sotto le Stelle fashion extravaganza. At the bottom was a fountain in which lay a marble boat commemorating a major flood, something in which a stone boat would be of little use. The piazza was the intersection of only two streets, and was named for the presence of the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See. The playing field, as it were, was not very large—smaller than Times Square, for example—but it bustled with activity and vehicle traffic, and enough pedestrians to make passage there a dicey proposition for all involved.

Ristorante Giovanni sat on the western side, an undistinguished building of yellow/cream-painted brick, with a large canopied eating area outside. Inside was a bar at which everyone had a lighted cigarette. This included a police officer having a cup of coffee. Dominic and Brian walked in and looked around, scoping the area out before coming back outside.

"We have three hours, people," Brian observed. "Now what?"

"We want to be back here—when?" Jack asked.

Dominic checked his watch. "Our friend is supposed to show up at about one-thirty. Figure we sit down for lunch about twelve forty-five and await developments. Jack, can you ID the guy by sight?"

"No problem," Junior assured them.

"Then I guess we have about two hours to wander around. I was here a couple years ago. There's good shopping."

"Is that a Brioni store over there?" Jack asked, pointing.

"Looks like it," Brian answered. "Won't hurt our cover to do some shopping."

"Then let's do it." He'd never gotten an Italian suit. He had several English ones, from No. 10 Savile Row in London. Why not try here? This spook business was crazy, he reflected. They were here to kill a terrorist, but beforehand they'd do some clothes shopping. Even women wouldn't do that . . . except maybe for shoes.

In fact, there were all manner of stores to be seen on the Via del Babuino—"Baboon Street," of all things—and Jack took the time to look in many of them. Italy was indeed the world capital of style, and he tried on a light gray silk jacket that seemed to have been custom-made for him by a master tailor, and he purchased it on the spot, for eight hundred Euros. Then he had to carry the plastic bag over his shoulder, but was this not beautiful cover? What secret agent man would hobble himself with such an unlikely burden?

MOHAMMED HASSAN left the hotel at 12:15, taking the same

walking route that the twins had done two hours earlier. He knew it well. He'd walked the same path on his way for Greengold's killing, and the thought comforted him. It was a fine, sunny day, the temperature reaching to about 30 degrees Celsius, a warm day, but not really a hot one. A good day for American tourists. Christian ones. American Jews went to Israel so that they could spit on Arabs. Here they were just Christian infidels looking to take photographs and buy clothes. Well, he'd bought his suits here as well. There was that Brioni shop just off the Piazza di Spagna. The salesman there, Antonio, always treated him well, the better to take his money. But Mohammed came from a trading culture as well, and you couldn't despise a man for that.

It was time for the midday meal, and the Ristorante Giovanni was as good as any Roman restaurant, and better than most. His favorite waiter recognized him and waved him to his regular table on the right side, under the canopy.

"THAT'S OUR boy," Jack told them, waving with his glass. The three Americans watched his waiter bring a bottle of Pellegrino water to the table, along with a glass of ice. You didn't see much ice in Europe, where people thought it something to ski or skate on, but evidently 56 liked his water cold. Jack was better placed to look in his direction. "I wonder what he likes to eat."

"The condemned is supposed to have a decent last meal," Dominic noted. Not that mutt in Alabama, of course. He'd probably had bad taste anyway. Then he wondered what they served for lunch in hell. "His guest is supposed to show at one-thirty, right?"

"Correct. Fifty-six told him to be careful in his routine. That might mean to check for a tail."

"Suppose he's nervous about us?" Brian wondered.

"Well," Jack observed, "they have had some bad luck lately."

"You have to wonder what he's thinking," Dominic said. He leaned back in his chair and stretched, catching a glance at their subject. It was a little warm to be wearing a jacket and tie, but they were supposed to look like businessmen, not tourists. Now he wondered if that was a good cover or not. You had to take temperature into account. Was he sweating because of the mission or the ambient temperature? He hadn't been overly tense in London, Munich, or Vienna, had he? No, not then. But this was a more crowded—no, the landscape in London had been more crowded, hadn't it?

There are good serendipities and bad ones. This time, a bad one happened. A waiter with a tray of glasses of Chianti tripped on the big feet of a woman from Chicago, in Rome to check out her roots. The tray missed the table, but the glasses got both twins in the lap. Both

were wearing light-colored suits to deal with the heat, and—

"Oh, shit!" Dominic exclaimed, his biscuit-colored Brooks Brothers trousers looking as though he had been hit in the groin with a shotgun. Brian was in even worse shape.

The waiter was aghast. *"Scusi, scusi, signori!"* he gasped. But there was nothing to be done about it. He started jabbering about sending their clothes to the cleaners. Dom and Brian just looked at each other. They might as easily have borne the mark of Cain.

"It's okay," Dominic said in English. He'd forgotten all of his Italian oaths. "Nobody died." The napkins would not do much about this. Maybe a good dry cleaner, and the Excelsior probably had one on staff, or at least close by. A few people looked over, either in horror or amusement, and so his face was as well marked as his clothing. When the waiter retreated in shame, the FBI agent asked, "Okay, now what?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Brian responded. "Random chance has not acted in our favor, Captain Kirk."

"Thanks a bunch, Spock," Dom snarled back.

"Hey, I'm still here, remember?" Jack told them both.

"Junior, you can't—" But Jack cut Brian off.

"Why the hell not?" He asked quietly. "How hard is it?"

"You're not trained," Dominic told him.

"It's not playing golf at the Masters, is it?"

"Well—" It was Brian again.

"Is it?" Jack demanded.

Dominic pulled his pen out of his coat pocket and handed it across.

"Twist the nib and stick it in his ass, right?"

"It's all ready to go," Enzo confirmed. "But be careful, for Christ's sake."

It was 1:21 now. Mohammed Hassan had finished his glass of water and poured another. Mahmoud would soon be here. Why take the chance of interrupting an important meeting? He shrugged to himself and stood, walking inside for the men's room, which had pleasant memories.

"You sure you want to do this?" Brian asked.

"He's a bad guy, isn't he? How long does this stuff take to work?"

"About thirty seconds, Jack. Use your head. If it doesn't feel right, back away and let him go," Dominic told him. "This isn't a fucking game, man."

"Right." *What the hell, Dad did this once or twice,* he told himself. Just to make sure, he bumped into a waiter and asked where the men's room was. The waiter pointed, and Jack went that way.

It was an ordinary wooden door with a symbolic label rather than words because of Giovanni's international clientele. *What if there's*

more than one guy in there? he asked himself.

Then you blow it off, dumbass.

Okay...

He walked in, and there *was* somebody else, drying his hands. But then he walked out, and Ryan was alone with 56MoHa, who was just zipping up and starting to turn. Jack pulled the pen from his inside jacket pocket and turned the tip to expose the iridium syringe tip. He resisted the instinctive urge to check the tip with his finger as not a very smart move, and slid past the well-suited stranger, and then, as told, dropped his hand and got him right in the left cheek. He expected to hear the discharge of the gas but didn't.

Mohammed Hassan al-Din jumped at the sudden sharp pain, and turned to see what looked like an ordinary young man—Wait, he'd seen this face at the hotel . . .

"Oh, sorry to bump into you, pal."

The way he said it lit off warning lights in his consciousness. He was an American, and he'd bumped into him, and he'd felt a stick in his buttocks, and—

And he'd killed the Jew here, and—

"Who are you?"

Jack had counted off fifteen seconds or so, and he was feeling his oats—

"I'm the man who just killed you, Fifty-six MoHa," he replied evenly.

The man's face changed into something feral and dangerous. His right hand went into his pocket and came out with a knife, and suddenly it wasn't at all funny anymore.

Jack instinctively backed away with a jump. The terrorist's face was the very image of death. He opened his folding knife and locked onto Jack's throat as his target. He brought the knife up and took half a step forward and—

The knife dropped from his hand—he looked down at his hand in amazement, then looked back up—

—or tried to. His head didn't move. His legs lost their strength. He fell straight down. His knees bounced painfully on the tile floor. And he fell forward, turning left as he did so. His eyes stayed open, and then he was faceup, looking at the metal plate glued to the bottom of the urinal, where Greengold had wanted to retrieve the package from before, and . . .

"Greetings from America, Fifty-six MoHa. You fucked with the wrong people. I hope you like it in hell, pal." His peripheral vision saw the shape move to the door, and the increase and decrease of light as the door opened and closed.

Ryan stopped there and decided to go back. There was a knife by

the guy's hand. He took the handkerchief from his pocket and grasped the knife, then just slid it under the body. Better not to dick with it anymore, he thought. Better to—no, one more thing entered his mind. He reached into 56's pants pocket and found what he sought. Then he took his leave. The crazy part was that he felt a great need to urinate at the moment, and walked fast to make that urge subside. In a matter of seconds, he was back at the table.

"That went okay," he told the twins. "I guess we need to get you guys back to the hotel, eh? There's something I need to do. Come on," he commanded.

Dominic left enough Euros to cover the meal, with a tip. The clumsy waiter chased after them, offering to pay for laundering their clothes, but Brian waved him off with a smile, and they walked across the Piazza di Spagna. Here they took the elevator up to the church, and then walked down the street toward the hotel. They were back to the Excelsior in about eight minutes, with both twins feeling rather stupid to have red stains on their clothes.

The reception clerk saw this and asked if they needed a cleaning service.

"Yes, could you send somebody up?" Brian asked in reply.

"Of course, signore. In five minutes."

The elevator, they felt, was not bugged. "Well?" Dominic asked.

"Got him, and I got this," Jack said, holding up a room key just like theirs.

"What's that for?"

"He's got a computer, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

When they got to MoHa's room, they found it had already been cleaned. Jack stopped off in his room and brought his laptop and the FireWire external drive that he used. It had ten gigabytes of empty space that he figured he could fill up. Inside his victim's room, he attached the connector cable to the port and lit up the Dell laptop Mohammed Hassan had used.

There was no time for finesse; both his 'puter and the Arab's used the same operating system, and he effected a global transfer of everything off the Arab's computer into the FireWire drive. It took six minutes, and then he wiped everything with his handkerchief and walked out of the room, wiping the doorknob as well. He came out in time to see the valet taking Dominic's wine-stained suit.

"Well?" Dominic asked.

"Done. The guys at home might like to get this." He held up the FireWire to emphasize his point.

"Good thinking, man. Now what?"

"Now I gotta fly home, fella. Get an e-mail off to the home office,

okay?"

"Roger that, Junior."

Jack got himself repacked and called the concierge, who told him there was a British Airways flight at Da Vinci Airport for London, with connecting service to D.C. Dulles, but he'd have to hurry. That he did, and ninety minutes later was pulling away from the Jetway, sitting in seat 2A.

MAHMOUD WAS there when the police arrived. He recognized the face of his colleague as the gurney was wheeled out of the men's room, and was thunderstruck. What he didn't know was that the police had taken the knife and made note of the bloodstains on it. This would be sent to their laboratory, which had a DNA lab whose personnel had been trained by the London Metropolitan Police, the world leaders in DNA evidence. Without anyone to report to, Mahmoud went back to his hotel and booked passage on a flight to Dubai on Emirate Airways for the following day. He had to report today's misfortune to someone, perhaps the Emir himself, whom he'd never met and knew only by his forbidding reputation. He'd seen one colleague die, and watched the body of another. What horrendous misfortune was this? He'd consider this with some wine. Allah the Merciful would surely forgive him for the transgression. He'd seen too much in too little time.

* * *

JACK JR. got a mild case of the shakes on the flight to Heathrow. He needed somebody to talk to, but that would take a long time to make happen, and so he gunned down two miniatures of Scotch before landing in England. Two more followed in the front cabin of the 777 inbound to Dulles, but sleep would not come. He'd not only killed somebody but had taunted him as well. Not a good thing, but neither was it something to pray to God about, was it? The FireWire drive had three gigabytes off 56's Dell laptop. Exactly what was on it? That he could not know for now. He could have attached it to his own laptop and gone exploring, but, no, that was a job for a real computer geek. They'd killed four people who had struck out at America, and now America had struck back on their turf and by their rules. The good part was that the enemy could not possibly know what kind of cat was in the jungle. They'd hardly met the teeth.

Next, they'd meet the brain.

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